

UP THE RIVER

By Sam Ruskin

Chapter I

The pre-dawn mist hovered over the river as the tall beauty made her way to where she had tied the small rowboat. Hiking her brown harness boots onto the middle rail of the five-foot post, she took another look around. It would be daylight soon but the nightmare was only beginning. The hair on the back of her granite tight neck told her this and she had long since learned not to question such things. She reached into her faded jeans pocket, searching for a band to pull the dark brown, golden glinted tresses back and away from her face. Keeping her hair long was a choice she never regretted, but she hated when it crept into her pale blue-gray eyes, interfering with her work. So, she pulled it back at every opportunity. Feeling the lingering chill, she flashed for a moment on her father's face as she snapped closed the chestnut leather jacket that once belonged to him. The Deputy U. S. Marshal looked back at her companion and took a deep breath. It promised to be a very long morning.

Alex tucked the last of the gear into the small rowboat and motioned her smaller charge into the boat.

He looks to be all of 145 pounds soaking wet and wearing lots of clothes, she mused. Maybe if he stood on his tippie toes he would be all of 5'6".

The nearly six-foot woman silently shook her head. His well-worn Sports Coat was clean and pressed and matched his slacks and shoes almost to perfection. It was strange, she thought, the things that people give importance in their lives. She wondered how many things like that she had in her own folder of repetitive activities.

"Oh yeah," she grinned. "O.C.D. and proud of it." It was survival plain and simple. She had to laugh at something or the nightmare of the last twenty-four hours would overwhelm her. "Well at least my paranoia will get put to good use," she mumbled, not intending the offhand remark to be heard.

Stanley P. Wheaton had never been as frightened in his entire life as in the last day. Even witnessing the triple murder in his Drive-In Theater had not been as personally terrifying as the events of the previous day. He looked at the tall Marshal again, wondering how she had managed to pull it off; why they were even still alive. Had she somehow known just before the bomb went off? Did she recognize the waiter when the other three Deputy Marshals didn't? How had she managed to get them out the window and to safety before the motel room burst into flames? Then he remembered she hadn't. Not really.

"Stoner? D'ju guys order food up there?" asked the small box on the Marshal's shoulder.

"Yeah," she answered. "Wainright's stomach thinks his throat's been cut and our star witness is looking a bit green around the gills. It's coming in from one of the sites Mosley cleared last week. Location Bravo. Waiter was cleared at the same time. Delivery Tango. Advance team took care of it. Photo should be coming through now. Can you see it?"

"Alex, you're breaking up. The photo's coming in now. Let me call you back on the land-line."

"Gotcha."

"When's that food gonna get here, Alex? I'm starving, I tell ya." Deputy Thomas Wainright complained.

A shorter man with graying brown hair stepped out of the bathroom, still drying his hair from a quick shower. He walked over to the small table and picked up his watch, giving it a fleeting glance.

"It's only been ten minutes, Tom. The restaurant said 45 minutes to an hour. Why don't you just go down the hall and get some chips or something? It's your turn for the shower anyway. Alex and I can handle things here for a couple minutes. Right, Alex?"

"Not likely," Alex grinned. "You get in the shower. I'll go grab some chips or something. It's kinda stuffy in here. I could use some fresh air anyway." She nodded at the phone and then looked back at Deputy U. S. Marshal Alvin Mosley. "Jack's gonna call on the land-line as soon as he gets the pic of the waiter for a comparison. I'll only be a minute."

The tall brunette had never been one to waste time and she made short work of the long hallway that led to the elevators and snack machines. Quickly feeding in three crisp dollar bills, she selected from the limited variety of junk food and traced her steps back toward the room. About three quarters of the way back she heard the elevator chime. Trained habit turned her head in time to see a waiter emerge with what appeared to be a loaded cart. He was tall and stocky and looked more like a player for the Rams than a waiter but college kids needed jobs too, she reasoned. Delivery Charlie. She recognized him; though he had shaved his beard, she noted. When the waiter turned in the opposite direction, Alex continued her journey back to the room.

Closing the door behind her and turning the deadbolt, she nodded toward the phone and lifted her brow. Wainright shrugged, having only just stepped out of the shower. Mosley shook his head. The phone inside the hotel room had not rung. Something wasn't right. Alex could feel it. She began to run through the list that was always at the ready, just insidr her head; all the while, her eyes scanned the hotel room.

Curtains drawn. Doors secure. No lights were flashing on the motion detectors. No vibrations from the silent alarm that would alert the team leader of an intruder. No phone call or radio static...that was it. Just as she reached for the white desk phone it hit her. The smell. Wordlessly she signaled her team.

"TROUBLE. Get him out!"

Wainright took one look at his team leader and knew they were in deep shit. Alex Stoner never panicked. If she motioned

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trouble, they'd been had. He pulled the gun from his shoulder harness and moved toward the door. Mosley grabbed his gun from where his belt lay on the table and crouched behind the small sofa. They'd done this a thousand times in drills. He didn't remember hearing his heartbeat in his ears then or feeling sick at his stomach the way he did now. When Deputy Stoner and their witness moved in fuzzy slow motion toward the window where she lifted a chair and tossed it into the heavy drapes, he smiled.

It was the cold snap, he wanted to tell them. It was that damned cold snap that made them not notice the smell. Heaters always smelled funny when they had to be turned on so early in the season. That's what had fooled them. Alex had noticed it, he wanted to shout. It wasn't stuffy. It was gas. His eyes darted about the room, helplessly wondering how they were going to ignite it. He shook his head numbly, trying to clear his mind so he could think.

When the door burst open, he and Wainright did exactly what they had been trained to do. They fired at the intruder who was attempting to kidnap or do bodily harm to a federal witness.

*Mosley's eyes grew wide and both men knew immediately **they** had provided the spark. The door had been wired to burst open when keyed with a remote control. They never even had time to see that Alex had thrown Stanley and herself from the window just as the room went up. Mercifully, although they **knew** what hit them, they never really felt it.*

For Alex, the events of the previous day still played out in her analytical mind. She tried to sort it all out. She needed to understand where she had gone wrong. What had she missed? They had done everything by the book. Everyone had been checked out and cleared. The building had been secured. Or so they had thought. No one could possibly have predicted that early cold snap. Was it just a fluke? Had fate somehow served to help the killers? How many civilians had died in the explosion and the chaos that followed? She didn't know yet. Her team was gone. The entire team had been wiped out and she had been able to do nothing to stop it. Her superiors had congratulated her for keeping the witness secure. Well who the fuck was this Stanley P. Wheaton that he was alive and three good men were dead? Would their wives and children congratulate her? Damn it! How the hell did this bastard keep getting away with this shit?

It was five long years since Anna's murder. That was five years without a reflection in the mirror of her soul, five years with no one to complete her sentences or keep her confidences.

Alex missed her twin beyond anything she'd ever thought possible. Now, for the first time since her father died trying to stop a jewelry store heist twelve years ago, she was being given a chance to stop the monster who was responsible.

Mickey Lawton had finally drawn the short straw. Alexandra Abigail Stoner was assigned to keep **this** witness alive. Deputy United States Marshal Alex Stoner. Daddy would have liked that. And Anna? Well, Anna would have smiled that quiet smile of hers and said: "You go girl. Kick some bad-guy butt for me, today." Alex smiled.

"Something funny here, Deputy Stoner? Because if there is, I think I missed it. And, I'm just asking, but wouldn't it be easier to row DOWN this river? I mean, I'm no expert, Lord knows, but this looks like damned hard work. No offense, Deputy."

Alex turned her head just enough to roll her eyes skyward without offending Mr. Stanley P. Wheaton, witness of the hour. She reminded herself that, unlike her, he had not been trained for any of this and that until a few days ago had never even met a U.S. Marshall.

"None taken. Nothing funny either. Just remembering something pleasant. A rarity for me lately. I'm afraid, Mr..."

"Enough. I can't take this stiff formality in a bleedin' rowboat. It's Stanley. OK? Not Mr. Wheaton. Not Wheaton. Just Stanley. And I'm sorry to be such a pain. I know you think I'm a coward and maybe I am.

I guess I'm just city boy at heart. Take this river, for instance: I always thought the water in rivers and oceans was a pretty blue. This stuff is a horrid combination of mucky brown, puke yellow and slime green. And that smell! It smells like something died here."

"It did. It does. Things live and die here every day, Stanley. Let's just pick up the pace a bit so you aren't one of them. Okay?"

He searched her face for a sign. Some tiny indication she was joking. Nothing. Not a crease in her brow or an upward lift of her lip. No, she definitely was not kidding. He remembered the last time he had seen her face grow silently serious. He rowed faster.

"Sorry. I'll do whatever you ask. Just tell me and I'll do it. But this is not an average day for me." He looked again at the area around him and made a small sound that to Alex sounded irritatingly like a whine. "Everything seems to be going the other way, Deputy. Wouldn't it be easier...?"

Alex snatched the oar out of his too soft hands. "Yes, Stanley. Of course it would be **easier** to row **down** the river. Unfortunately where we are going is **Up** the river. It may not be the easiest route. It may not be the scenic route. It may not even be the **best** route, but may I be so bold as to point out your head?"

"My head?"

"Yes, the one that still sits atop your shoulders."

"Point well taken. I guess I'm just scared and, well, like I said, I'm a city boy. This is like rowing down the Amazon for a guy like me."

"**Up** the Amazon, Wheaton. **Up** the Amazon."

They laughed. It wasn't that funny, really. But they laughed anyway. They needed to laugh or the fear would take hold. The terrifying reality of the situation would overwhelm them, if they let it. So, instead they laughed."

"I can't believe I agreed to this. My God, this is a damn wilderness. And this rowing looked a lot easier in the movies. Right. That's me, Drive-In Movie manager and bookkeeper. Mr. Good Guy, right? Maybe. More likely Mr. Dumb Ass. I just **had** to stay late that night and catch up didn't I? Well, look where it got me-eyewitness to three cold-blooded murders. Great. Just flippin' great."

Alex sighed as the little man whined on.

"Something amusing here, Deputy? I like a good joke. Hell, I AM a good joke."

She chuckled softly. "Just thinking Wheaton. I still have a few memories that evoke a smile or two. It's only another hour or so of rowing. Think you can make it?"

"You mean I have a choice?"

"There is always a choice, Mr. Wheaton. Unfortunately, in this case, the choices are not wonderful."

What remained unsaid spoke volumes. Alex knew more about this than Stanley P. Wheaton could have conjured in his worst nightmares. Lots more.

Somewhere in Colorado, in the past six months two other witnesses of crimes by the same defendant had been murdered while in police custody. Now, Alex moved into place because the United States Marshals had been called. It was not unusual for them to be called upon to protect a witness, especially in a case involving organized crime or the murder of police officers. In this case, the Marshals had been working for a few years as part of a task force and the local chief of detectives had called in a favor. He knew they needed someone he could trust; someone who was beyond bribery. He knew just the detective for the job. Of course, she wasn't a detective any more. Now she was a United States Marshal. For reasons he didn't feel obligated to share, he believed she was one law officer who would be beyond bribery. She was dedicated to justice -- period. It also helped her motivation that one of the first known victims of the madman in question was her identical twin sister, Anna.

Now, she was on her own. There was only one way this was going to work, Alex was certain of only one thing: Someone had betrayed her team. Someone with access to top level information. Someone who had given murderers access to a federal witness and those officers assigned to protect him. Alex would keep this witness alive and deliver him to the Grand Jury hearing no matter what it took. She owed it to her team.

No one was told where Alex would keep Stanley. Not even the chief or the Marshall Service knew where they would be.

Alex owned a cabin in a remote area, accessible almost exclusively by the river. There were no roads at all within thirty miles of the place. Alex liked it that way. So had Anna. Alex bought the cabin nearly a decade earlier, with her sister. They told no one about it. The cabin was their secret, their special place where they could escape the world. Life being what it is, they only got to go there (together) twice before Anna was murdered. She would take Stanley there.

The only communication with the outside world was the new, unlisted cell phone she bought earlier the day they left. Only the chief knew the phone number. And even he didn't know it, yet....."Chief? It's Alex. Just listen, okay?"

Alexandra couldn't take any chances and she knew it. Otherwise, she would never be so curt with Chief Bartoni. He was more than a great chief of detectives. He was a good friend. But a lot of people were dead including two witnesses who were killed while in custody and she was determined Mr. Stanley P. Wheaton would not be number three.

"Go ahead Alex. I take it this is not a secure line." Michael Bartoni was remembering the promise he'd made to Alex's father when she and her twin sister, Anna, were only sixteen. He wondered if this really qualified as "looking after my girls".

"A cell phone is never a secure line. You know that, chief. You're worrying again. Put down the donut and listen."

She smiled thinking of how the chief always nibbled when he worried, and he worried about her a lot. She knew that he took the promise he'd made to her dad very seriously. It tore him apart, losing his best friend and partner all in one fell swoop. Then, five years ago, Mickey Lawton had murdered Anna. The bastard even did it himself. Bragged about it. No witnesses. He knew there wouldn't be. After that, Chief Bartoni watched her like a hawk. He had been the one to encourage her to join the Marshals Service, too. She had only been in the Marshal Service for a year when Anna was murdered. It was only in the past eighteen months or so, working with her on the task force, that he'd come to see just how good a cop Alex was. It helped her, knowing he was there. It wasn't the same as Anna, but it helped.

Chapter II

Alex could feel Stanley P. Wheaton watching her every move as she rowed the small boat up the river. She couldn't help wondering where this frightened little man was finding the courage to stand up to Mickey Lawton. No matter. She'd already experienced enough in life to know he must have his reasons, and she could not possibly care less what they were. Her job was to keep him alive until he could testify, and then it would be up to the courts and the law machine. Well, sort of, she gritted silently. The law, Alex thought, and the godsbedamned lawyers with their dumbass little loopholes. If people in biblical times thought it was something to see a camel pass through the eye of a needle they ought to get a gander at the murderers, rapists and sundry other monsters and demons who slip through loopholes so small it takes a whole team of paralegals just to find the things. The irritated half sigh, half groan was more audible than had been intended.

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“You all right, Deputy?” Stanley could not keep the fear from his trembling, baritone.

Noting the stand of trees that signaled the end of the rowing, Alex grinned. She could already see Mr. Wheaton’s expression when he learned of the long hike that lay ahead of them.

“Oh,” Alex tilted. “I suspect I am a bit more ‘all right’ than you will be when I tell you we’re about ready to park this boat.”

Stanley barely reminded himself not to stand up, so excited was he. “Thank God. I thought we would never get there.”

Alex stepped into cold water up to her knees and pulled the boat onto shore before smirking at the waiting witness. While Stanley P. Wheaton fumbled onto the grass, gingerly trying not to get his shoes wet, Deputy Stoner dragged the small rowboat behind a clump of trees and covered it with the carefully selected cloth. Alex was no dummy. She had gone to the trouble to purchase the tarp at the Army/Navy store, years before. At the time she hadn’t considered its ability to HIDE the boat would ever be so critical a matter. Satisfied the small craft was safely out of sight, she turned to her witness.

Stanley was lifting and resetting his feet, noting with disgust the dampness seeping into his shoes. He made a quick scan of the area and returned his gaze to his pretty guardian. “So where’s the house? I don’t see it.”

“Nope. Not likely you will either, standing four inches from shore. Keep looking for a ‘house’ and you never will see it.” Alex rolled her gray blue eyes skyward, muttered something about it forever being her lot to protect morons, and grabbed the gear. “You joining me or you want to just stand here till Lawson’s goons blow your ass off?”

Alexandra barely moved forward five strides but the city boy found himself practically running to catch up.

“Geez. I thought you said earlier it was only a couple hours to the hou...cabin,” Wheaton whined.

“Nope,” smirked the tall woman. “Said it was only a couple more hours ROWING. Not my fault you assumed. Got a good three hour’s hike ahead of us,” she looked at the man struggling to keep up. In truth she never let him out of her sight, but she liked watching him working up a sweat for a change. *So far, she had done all the work and he did all the whining*, she remarked to herself.

“Three HOURS?” Poor Stanley looked like he wanted to cry but knew he dared not.

“Well, three if we hustle.” Deputy Stoner couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. This guy was a riot. One would think, she reasoned to herself, he would be all but running his short legs off to get to a safe place. Well, as safe as possible with that prick Mickey Lawton out to get him. “Look, Stanley. A lot of people have died to help keep you alive. Some of them were damn fine Marshals and cops. People died yesterday who never heard of you or me of Mickey Asshole Lawton. Let’s just get to the cabin. I promise to listen to you moan, groan, belly ache and whine once we get there. How’s that?”

The slightest hint of a smile braved its way onto the man’s face. “Why is it, do you suppose, I doubt that will happen? You listening, I mean.” He pulled long strides from his legs as he managed to stay closer to his rapidly moving protector.

Glancing over her left shoulder, Alex grinned at the sight. Wheaton was actually keeping up - sort of. “Oh I’ll listen, Stanley. I make a point of keeping my promises.” Then, to herself, she added: ‘I ain’t’ sayin’ how **long** I’ll listen but I *will* listen.’

Nearly stumbling over a protruding tree root, the tenderfoot muttered to himself. ‘Yeah, I’ll just bet. How long you gonna listen Ms. I’m Too Tough To Kill? Two minutes?’ Without warning, the man chuckled to himself. ‘I wish,’ he mentally confessed.

Great, thought Alex. *Just great. Please tell me this little jerk isn’t starting with the fantasies.*

The next two hours were relatively devoid of human conversation. That is, unless you count the occasional grunt, moan, whine or curse word. Stanley was too busy trying to keep up and Alex was mentally sorting every sound, every unfamiliar tree or log. Twice, she put her hand out to halt Mr. City, Born and Bred, to check out something that didn’t seem quite right to her. Finding all was still in order, she motioned with a tilt of the head and they were off again.

“That’s it, just over the next rise.” She finally informed the travel weary tenderfoot.

“Huh? But it’s only been just over two hours. You said Three and only if we hustle.” Stanley checked and rechecked his five hundred dollar watch. It was completely out of sync with the rest of him and had been a gift from his previous employer.

Alex grinned. “It ain’t broke. Your fancy schmancy watch works fine, Wheaton. I lied about the time it was gonna take. I thought it would make you feel better when I let you stop; which we will do once we are inside and not one moment before.”

The exhausted man nodded. “No problem. I didn’t think we were gonna grab a log and have a weenie roast. And I’m glad the watch isn’t busted. My boss gave it to me and....” He nearly fell into a tall oak as Alex snatched the watch off his arm.

“Shit! You could have just asked me what time it was!”

Blue eyes narrowed to slits and a strong jaw clenched and unclenched several times. Tossing the expensive timepiece to the ground, Alexandra Abigail Stoner very nearly spat at her witness.

“You stupid son of a bitch! You don’t have the brains of dilapidated amoebae.” Bringing the heel of her harness boot down onto the watch, she glared at the idiot she was assigned to protect for the next three days.

“What the hell are you doing? That is an expensive watch and it was a gift for years of loyal service.” Stanley was stunned.

“**Was** an expensive watch. Men like Mickey Lawton don’t give gifts for loyalty you little pip-squeak. Haven’t you learned anything from what you saw him do? Who the fuck do you think arranged the impromptu bonfire yesterday? Jesus! How the fuck did you get that past all the...never mind. Just never fucking mind!! Bastard’s probably been fucking tracking us the whole time.”

Wheaton gasped as the gravity of his mistake hit home. “God. I am so sorry. I didn’t even think.... God.” Stanley was afraid to tell her that Deputy Wainright had just winked at him and passed him on through without even checking him with the wand like he did the others. At the time he thought the Marshal was just trying to be nice. Now he shivered wondering what else he had misinterpreted or screwed up.

Thumbing through the costly debris, Alex pulled a plastic bag from her coat. Using a nearby twig she scooted everything,

including some dirt and leaves, into the baggie and zipped it shut. "Well, looks like we might have lucked out on this one. I don't see anything," she stood. "Won't know for sure till I can check it with the glass in the cabin. You got any other **gifts** I should know about, Wheaton?"

The color started to return to his face. "No. Nothing. That was it." He wondered if the new shoes counted but shrugged it off.

"Mind if I ask when Mickey gave you that little gem?"

"Last month. Why? Does it matter?"

Alex considered what he just said. "Last month. That would be **after** you witnessed the murders but **before** you came to us. Right?"

"The day after, as a matter of fact." Stanley answered her question.

"Shit." Alex brushed her pants off and lifted the backpack. Moving in the direction of the next rise with even more speed and determination than before, she said it again. "Shit."

Chapter III

Alex spat out a variety of creative and colorful words as she stomped toward the cabin she and her sister Anna had bought so long ago. She needed to put some distance, even a few feet, between herself and the man she was protecting.

"Little idiot," she muttered to herself. "I ought to kill him myself and be fucking done with it."

"I heard that," rasped the gasping man, struggling to match her long strides.

"You know, Wheaton. Just to satisfy my strange sense of curiosity, why don't you tell me when exactly you decided to go to the cops with what you knew."

"Oh," he replied. "It was the following Wednesday when I found out the guy who'd done clean up the week before was dead. I kinda figured that left only me who had actually seen him kill those three men. I figured I stood a better chance of staying alive by going to the cops." He answered honestly.

Alex stopped. Taking in a deep breath and carefully considering what would be safe to say at this point, she closed her tired eyes. It was less than two weeks since she officially took the job of protecting this eyewitness, but it was starting to feel like a year. A long year. One with a thousand days. At least. Her mouth opened but no words tumbled out. This made the deputy smile. "Al, old girl, I do believe you're learning."

"You talking to me?" asked Wheaton.

Gunmetal blue eyes rolled toward the tops of the surrounding pines. Realizing anything she gave voice to now would be regretted later, or at least, apologized for; she shook her head and remained silent. Snatching the stumbling movie manager by the back of his britches, she kept him from falling face first into a leg-hold trap. Squinting her eyes to angry slits, she mumbled something about spineless assholes with guns and traps and how the fucking woods might be better off if things were the other way around. He got the message: animals good, hunters bad. He spared another glance at the cruel-looking trap that had very nearly captured his face and shivered. After that, they moved on in silent understanding. She was silent and he understood. He'd screwed up, made his first serious mistake and he knew it had nothing to do with his near encounter with the rusted jaws left behind by some poacher. He'd pissed off Deputy United States Marshal Alexandra Abigail Stoner. He only hoped he would live to tell about it.

Tears sprang unbidden to her blue eyes as she came over the last rise and beheld the cabin anew. She didn't wipe them away. Truth be told, she barely noticed them; so caught up was she in the vision before her. Alex didn't come here as often as she'd like, and each time she did it made her feel the loss all over again.

Damn it. Why had she loaned her car to Anna that day? OK, sure, Anna's was in the shop but she could have used the rental. Right? Oh yeah, like they ever did that. No. She knew loaning Anna the car wasn't the reason she was dead. That cowardice bastard Mickey Lawton was to blame. He bragged all over the state how he blew Alex Stoner to smithereens. Then when it came out that it was Officer Anna Stoner who was killed in her sister's precious 1993 Mazda RX-7, Lawton never missed a beat. He sent a note to the slain woman's mother and sister by private courier. The three-dozen roses that accompanied it went directly into the garbage can out back. They didn't even want the fragrance/stench in their modest home. The words in the note still held the ability to make the powerful woman's fists clench in impotent rage.

Mrs. Stoner and Alexandra,

It is with deep regret I send these roses. I am sorry for your loss. It must be very difficult having police officers in the family. They are forever being killed, are they not? Unless I am very much mistaken that would be two down and one to go for the Stoner family. Perhaps Alexandra would like to rethink her career choice now? Being a Deputy United States Marshall is, after all, still being a cop. At the very least, Alexandra, I would imagine you are reconsidering digging up old bones. Again, please accept my sorrow at Anna's being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sincerely,

Mickey Lawton

P.S.

Alexandra,

Damn shame about the Mazda. That was one fine machine. I hated to see it burn. The green went nicely with the flames though, don't you think?

"Bastard." Alex muttered to herself for the trillionth time. No one but the chief and a few close friends and family knew Anna wasn't even supposed to be in that car at the time, or that she kept Alex's appointment at the gym that morning. Only the killer could have known that. Lawton wanted the remaining Stoners to know that it was personal, that **he** was responsible. Worse. He wanted them to know he wasn't finished.

"Is that the cabin?" Stanley P. Wheaton's question jerked Alex from her momentary lapse.

"Yeah, that's it. Wait," the deputy's brow crinkled and her head nodded to one side as if she were giving something serious thought. Wheaton didn't care. He was sore, tired, irritable and hungry. He started to move past her and into the open area that was the most direct route to the large log cabin. A large, strong hand snatched him back. "I said WAIT!" Alex slammed his butt into the dirt beside her.

"Some protector you are," muttered the man whose pride was injured far more than his derriere.

"Shut up, you idiot. Don't you smell that?"

Stanley crinkled his face as he sniffed loudly at the air. "Smells nice; like my Grampa's fire place. What's wrong with that, if I may be so bold without getting smacked yet again."

"Bold I can handle, just try doing it a little more quietly. This may be *your* day to die but it sure as hell ain't mine."

"But..."

"It smells like your grampa's fireplace for a very good reason, Wheaton. There is a fire burning."

"So?"

"Gods, man. Do you take lessons or are you just naturally stupid?"

"Hey!" complained the city boy.

"Stanley, think about it man. There is a fire in the fireplace of a cabin no one is supposed to be in or know the location of..." she raised her left brow for emphasis.

"Oh," came the moaned response.

"And up till a short time ago you were sending out a damned homing beacon to the man who most wants you dead, I'll pert near bet."

The eyewitness dropped his weary head into dirt-smudged, sweaty hands. "Oh God. I'm gonna die out here, aren't I?"

Slim fingers clamped over his mouth. "No, Wheaton. No, you are not gonna die out here. And neither am I. Now do as I say and tie something around that mouth of yours if you can't keep it shut. Whoever it is doesn't know we're here yet, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Stanley removed his bandanna and tied it around his mouth. Alex grinned and shook her head to keep from laughing at the sight. "Hah phfoou u noooo?"

The deputy snorted softly at the question. "We aren't dead yet. That's how I know," she whispered. Pressing his body low to the ground she showed him how to crawl beside her until they were outside the unusually large log cabin with the huge front porch. Alex remembered building their dream porch with her sister many summers ago. It was one of the few times they came there together. The tall beauty motioned for Stanley to stay put as she moved toward the window. Alex knew the window would give her a fairly wide view of the living area and reasoned it was her best chance of seeing whoever was inside. Once on the ground beneath it, she looked around cautiously and listened intently. Being somewhat assured of her temporary safety she pulled herself up to peer inside. The look on her face as she crawled back toward Wheaton left the man more than a little puzzled.

Has she lost her mind, he wondered? What in tarnation could be humorous about this situation?

"Stay here." Alex instructed Stanley.

"Noh phrobaahlem," he assured her with a concerned look on his face.

The tall officer duck-walked past the partially uncovered window, then stood to her full height before she carefully, and completely without sound, moved to the doorway. Wheaton was impressed. Even on the wooden porch he heard nary a single footstep. Then, she silently lifted the latch, stepped back and kicked the door in with a loud thud. This was followed by the crashing sound as it hit the wall and bounced halfway shut again.

"What the..." a small figure hunched near the roaring fire leapt to her full 5'4" stature, reaching for a poker the whole while.

Poor Stanley knew he was a goner now for sure. Alex began to laugh. LAUGH! Wheaton tried to burrow into the ground beneath him.

"You planning to hit me with that or use it to tickle me to death?" Deputy Alexandra Stoner smiled. It nearly took the hiding witness' breath away.

"ALEX!!" came the enthusiastic and melodic cry from within the cabin walls.

Suddenly the tall Deputy Marshal found herself with an armful of what most the world called "the blonde bombshell." Planting her feet firmly, she knew it was too late to stop the launch.

"Rhonnie, don't..." Alex laughed again. "You never did listen to me, did you?"

“Nope,” the woman smirked as she hugged Deputy Stoner around the neck and waist.

Stanley kept shaking his head to see if it rattled. Was that the same woman who only minutes before nearly bit his head off for wearing a watch? OK. So the watch might have been bugged. He didn't know that. And who was that little blonde now attached to his deputy? Why did she look familiar, even from this distance?

Alex carefully put her strong arms around the blonde's waist and carried her inside with a few long strides. Setting her down near the stone hearth, blue eyes searched jade green.

“Rhonnie, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Hawaii doing a photo shoot? Or was it a movie? Sorry. I forget.”

Straightening her jeans and shifting things back into place inside her sweater, the smaller woman chuckled. “Me too, most of the time. This was to be a movie. I quit. Fired my agent. All hell broke loose, and I decided to use Anna's gift. You don't mind, do you?”

“Never. Well, almost never. I'm working Rhonnie, and it isn't safe here for you right now. Sorry I scared you. Couldn't resist.”

“You never could resist making me jump, Alligail.” Before the stern-faced Marshal could respond, her friend continued. “What do you mean, not safe for **me**? How did you know it was me? And who is that mud-covered man?”

“I'm working, Rhonnie. Protecting a murder witness for a few days till we can get him before the Grand Jury. You're still the only person I know who wears a black fedora, not to mention the hot pink backpack with Wonder Woman on it. Gods. How old is that thing anyway? What mud-covered man?”

“That mud-covered man, in the doorway.” Rhonnie nodded toward the still open door.

Alex had forgotten Stanley for all of half a minute. She motioned him to get up and come inside, wondering how long it would take him to recognize her oldest friend in all the world. He did not disappoint her.

Chapter IV

“My God in heaven! You're Rhonda Reynolds!” breathed an awestruck Stanley, still holding the recently freed bandana in his trembling hand.

“Yes, she is. Now shut up and get in here before Lawton's men and every hunter within twenty miles know she's here.” Alex jerked the little man through the doorway, closing and bolting the door. Then she went and got the large timber that sat beneath the nearby window and slid it into place as well. “You can close your mouth now, Wheaton. She won't bite.”

“Even if I pay extra?” he quipped. It was not a smart thing to do.

Nose to nose, Alex growled: “What did you just say, little dead man?”

The swallow was louder than the door thump only minutes before. Rhonnie had to turn to keep from laughing in his dirt-smudged face.

“Still my champion, eh Alex?” Jade searched the familiar and very much missed gunmetal blue.

“Yep,” was the only reply.

Stanley could feel his heart reaching for his throat when something drifted into his nostrils and got his attention. So surprising and overpowering was the attack to his senses that he completely forgot the tall brunette glaring down at him. “That smells incredible! What is it? Where's it coming from?”

If Wheaton's words had not already stopped her, the sizzling sound would have been more than enough to do the job.

“Oh crud!” cried Rhonnie, darting toward the fireplace.

“What!?” was all Alex said as she quickly drew the Glock 9mm from its place snugly in the holster over her left breast and inside her now open jacket.

Rolling gorgeous green eyes. “Really Alex! I know it may not be the burgers of a king but I don't think it will kill you.”

Stanley P. Wheaton gathered all the courage he could find and, taking a chance, laughed out loud. In less than a heartbeat he felt the hot, angry breath of his protective custodian in his face.

“Something funny, little mud-covered, quivering man? Hmmmm?” The snickers from across the room made the deputy spin around and glare at the drop dead gorgeous woman stirring the black kettle hanging over the still sputtering fire. “Rhonda Renee Reynolds, you would not be laughing at me, now would you?”

“Moi? Laugh at the same woman who once tossed me into a frozen lake, clothes and all? Not me. Nope. Huh-uh. Me...I'm just tending my rabbit stew.”

Blue eyes perked up. “Rabbit stew? How long have you been here, Rhon? When did you have time to get a rabbit? Oh, let me guess. Miss, I travel the world and have money to burn bought a rabbit on the way in.”

“Pah. You always did underestimate me, Ms. Tough as Nails but don't tell the witness I sleep in Woodstock PJ's. And,” she winked at Stanley nearly making the poor man faint dead away, “I don't mean the concert.”

“HEY!” Alex complained. “That was ages ago. I don't sleep in those any more.”

Rhonnie opened green eyes that twinkled, “Really? And what, pray tell, do you sleep in now?”

Wheaton was now sitting, cross-legged on the floor near the fire, and watching the scene much like a tennis match. It beat the crap out of the trip through Hades it took to get there. But he was definitely beginning to think it had been worth it.

Dark tresses fell alongside golden blonde as Alex leaned over Rhonnie from behind, peering into the boiling brew inside the still dripping pot. “Wouldn't you like to know?”

The warm breath eased across her ear and neck making the world famous model-turned-movie star shiver.

Up The River, revised edition

“As a matter of fact,” she practically whispered just as the kettle threatened to boil over again, hissing its demand for her immediate and full attention. “Crud. Crud, crud, crud.”

Now it was the deputy’s turn to snicker. “Crud? You say crud now? What happened to the potty mouth I knew and loved?”

“I got class.”

“Oh yeah, I can see that.” Alexandra swatted the patch behind of the well-worn, faded jeans for which the actress was famous and smirked.

“HEY!” Rhonda deftly moved aside in mock complaint. “You hungry or not?”

Alex couldn’t resist. She knew it was risky but she did it anyway. Wagging dark brows at the small beauty, she smiled: “Oh yeah.” Licking her lips suggestively, she answered. “I’m hungry all right.”

Crinkling her brow, Rhonda wondered if she took that the way her friend intended but said nothing of her curiosity. “The bowls are in the sink. And don’t worry. I washed ‘em.”

“Mmm,” replied the learned officer.

“Stanley? You hungry or sleepy?” asked Rhonda.

The witness half smiled from his warm spot only two feet away. “Both, to be honest and right now it’s a crap shoot which will win out. But that smells positively divine. Is it really rabbit stew? I’ve never eaten rabbit before.”

“It is and thanks. I hope you like it.”

“Oh, he will. Stanley, my man, forget all you have ever heard or believed of supermodels. This one eats. And she cooks like an angel sent directly from the pearly kitchen.”

Watching the interplay between the two women as the model filled the oversized bowls that looked suspiciously like gigantic coffee mugs with steaming morsels, Wheaton couldn’t help but wonder what their story was. *Clearly*, he thought, *they have known each other nearly forever*. The heat from the bowl Alex handed him penetrated his palms, and he quickly set it on the stone hearth beside him. “Thanks, Alex.”

“Welcome,” muttered the blue-eyed beauty as she took her own bowl and Rhonnie’s to the battered old sofa. Watching until the blonde settled in and tucked her naked feet beneath her, Alex handed the bowl over.

Warm eyes smiled into cool ones that looked more gray than blue and showed distinct signs of the tiredness Rhonda knew her friend would try to hide.

“Thanks Alex. And the rabbits are fresh. I got ‘em on my way up. I knew there would be plenty of herbs and veggies from Anni...I mean, from the garden. And I was pretty sure there would be a surplus of canned goods. So I figured a few rabbits would be perfect. Hope you like it.”

“It’s great, Little Bit. Just like always. Better maybe. Can’t believe you got even better but I think ya did. Mmmm. But, why three rabbits? You thought it would be just you, right?” Alex looked up from her bowl toward evasive orbs.

“Um, Deputy?” Stanley was finished with his own large bowl and now could barely hold his eyes open.

“Oh. Right. OK, here’s the deal Stanley. You can go into the room right over there and lie down. Get some sleep but do not open the curtains and do not close the door. Got me?”

“No problem. I think I could almost sleep standing up against the wall at this point.”

Alex smiled.

“Well, I said I was a city boy. I wasn’t lying. If yesterday was the worst day of my life then this has to be my hardest - in years. Maybe ever. And you did most of the work. Deputy?” Stanley questioned.

“Yeah?” Alex asked.

“Thank you for putting your life on the line to save my sorry ass.” He looked from one woman to the other. “And I’m really sorry your friend got involved.”

Alex winced, knowing he was right. Rhonnie **was** involved now. There was no way she could leave tonight, and morning would be way too risky. By then, Lawton’s men would be covering the woods and the river too, most likely. Hell, Alex thought silently, they’re probably out there now. Of course, by now the chief would have narrowed her location down to the general area, too. They wouldn’t know as much as Lawton if he **had** been tracking them, but they wouldn’t be far behind. If Rhonda had found her that meant Anna had told her mother too, most likely. If her mother knew, Bartoni could get it out of her.

Thank God she had the area around the cabin rigged. The devices were cleverly hidden but they were there. She had used the cabin as a kind of high tech, all or nothing, personal training ground. Truth be told, she was surprised Rhonda hadn’t noticed her checking things out when she first entered. Shrugging, she guessed it had been worth all those big bucks she’s spent, after all. Of course, she smiled inwardly, not everything she had prepared for any unwanted visitors was high tech. Hidden: yes. High tech: no. Grinning, she returned her attentions to the present.

“It’s okay, Wheaton. Get some sleep while you can. I have a feeling you’re gonna need it.” She hoped she was wrong but knew she wasn’t.

The eyewitness groaned his goodnights and made his way to the bedroom quietly. He was asleep almost before his body met the firm mattress, and long before he thought of discarding his shoes.

Alex followed him to make sure the room was secure and smiled as the exhausted man began to snore, loudly. She’d already checked the perimeter for security without anyone even noticing. The inside had been easier to do without drawing attention to what she was doing. The location was secure – for now. This was just habit, but, she reasoned, it was a good one. So, she did her usual sweep and double-checked all the windows. Another quick glance told her what she needed to know: all was secure.

Sam Ruskin

On her way out of the room she paused to remove Stanley's shoes and pulled the heavy quilt over his soundly sleeping form, resetting the silent alarm with a brush of her hand, just as she had practiced hundreds of times. Maybe thousands, she had lost track. As the efficient and professional marshal slowly backed toward the door she felt something.

"Sorry," whispered Rhonda. "I like to watch you work."

"Oh. No problem," whispered Alex. "Didn't do anything yet."

"Sure you did. And that was sweet, Alex. You really are the same as ever aren't you?" Rhonnie spoke very softly as they returned to the sofa.

"No, Rhon. I'm not the same at all. But it's nice that you think so." Alex wondered what her friend would think if she knew she had not done it to be sweet but rather to reset the security devices and make sure there were no unwanted surprises. After all, this was her job. And never had it been so important or meant so much to the deputy.

Rhonnie sprinkled golden warmth as she smiled directly at her long time friend, "I do. I probably always will."

"Thanks. Little Bit? How did you know I would be here? You did, didn't you? That's why you got the extra rabbits. Dreams again?" Alex questioned.

"More like impressions, Al. They come when I'm wide-awake now. Does it still bother you? We don't have to talk about it." Rhon shifted uncomfortably.

Without thinking, Alex reached over and put her large hand on the smaller one resting on Rhonda's knee.

"No. It's okay Rhonnie. I know you couldn't have done anything to stop what happened. Even if you'd phoned the moment you woke with the dream, it would have been too late. We all have to stop beating ourselves up. It's been five years. Anna is gone and none of us was to blame. Only one person can wear that hat, and Mr. Mickey Lawton will wish he'd never touched my sister. I swear that, Rhonnie. By all that is holy to me, I swear it."

Soft hands caressed larger ones. "Thank you, Al. I needed to hear that. I miss you. I miss you so much."

Leaning in slightly, Al whispered. "Do you? Because I wondered, you know? I mean I haven't heard from you in so long and then here you are."

"Sorry..."

"No! I was never so glad to see anything in my life as when I saw that damn Fedora and Wonder Woman Back Pack."

"Really?" asked Rhonda.

Hot breath draped itself across the model's ear, "Oh yeah. Really."

"Alex, I.....what the....."

Suddenly the small blonde found herself on the floor with one fast moving, trembling deputy atop her. Alex was reaching into the back of her waistband and pressing her cheek against her friend's lips. "Shhh baby. Don't move."

Holding her tall friend's body in place above her, keeping her from losing balance, Rhonnie sighed. "Al, not that I'm complaining mind you, but what are you doing?"

Pulling the Colt Defender free, Alex slid the barrel back until it clicked and grinned at the model. "You're not huh? Isn't that just my luck? I finally get you where I want you, and there's a goon squad outside." The cruel irony of the situation was not lost on the deputy.

"You finally what? Alex did you just say...oh my god. They're out there?"

"Yep. Two, at least. Damn fools lit a cigarette; thank the gods. Rhon, honey, I need you to do something for me - without questions or arguments. Can you do that? Please."

The look in Alex's eyes frightened Rhonda. "Okay, Al. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. We can argue later, K?" She winked, hoping to lighten what she knew was a horrible moment for her overly responsible friend.

Alex smiled, and then grew stone serious. "Rhon, I want you to crawl, and I do mean crawl, into the bedroom and reach up from the floor and wake Stanley. I don't care how you do it, but do **not** stand up. Got me?"

"Yes. What else?" asked a frightened superstar.

"Once he stirs, drag him onto the floor with you. Don't let him stand up. And he will if you let him, Rhon. I tell you, the man is a fucking lightning rod for trouble. His stupid switch is stuck in the on position. Remember. No standing up."

"Gotcha. Then what?"

"Then pull the mattress off the bed and on top of the two of you. Can you do that hon?"

"Consider it done. Never thought I'd hear you ask me to get into bed with Stanley though," came the struggling attempt at levity.

"Under the bed, love. Under it. And Rhonnie?"

"Yes Alex?" frightened green eyes looked deeply into concerned blue.

"No matter what you hear, do not come out until I say to come out. And even then don't come out unless I use the secret words, Okay?"

"Al, you haven't used the secret code...."

"Promise me."

"I promise." Rhonda knew in that instant her vision was about to happen and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Shit, she thought. Not again.

Chapter V

Rhonnie felt her heart pounding against the floor as she crawled toward the room where Wheaton slept. It took every ounce of restraint she could muster not to look back in the direction of her life-long friend. Sliding through the open doorway and

alongside the bed, the model whispered as loudly as she believed the situation allowed.

“Stanley. Wake up, Wheaton.” Reaching up from the floor she grasped the waistband of the sleeping man’s pants and began to edge him off the bed. The snoring never lost its rhythm. “Stanley, damn it, I said wake up.” With this, the blonde spitfire braced her feet against the railing near the floor and, in one long grunt, tugged the sleeping form onto the cold, hard floor...and her.

Startled, sleepy eyes opened into a smiling, slightly embarrassed face. “Well, hello. Wouldn’t we be more comfortable **on** the bed?”

Rhonda rolled jade eyes at the man’s total failure to catch a clue. “I don’t know about comfortable, Stanley. But dead is a definite possibility. Now help me drag this mmmmmmmattress.” She groaned at the unhandy way she was being forced to accomplish the task at hand. Having to do it all this from the floor meant using mostly upper body strength, and, despite her rigorous work out routines, it was just not her best feature.

“You want the mattress on the floor? Why?” asked a still groggy and quite bewildered movie theater manager.

“Alex said pull it onto and over us while we crawl under the edge of the bed.” She watched the words forming in his mouth. “No questions, Stanley. Just stay on the floor, grab that handle and tug.”

The witness was not only a city boy, he was a clumsy, Jello for muscles, city boy, and Rhonda knew he was very lucky to be in this situation with her and not her tall outspoken friend.

With one enormous final pull, the king sized mattress slid off the edge of the bed forming a makeshift cave and swallowing the two tuggers in darkness. Rhonnie strained to hear any sounds coming from beyond the room that might indicate to her what was happening. She blinked her eyes, not so much against the darkness as against the memory of her earlier vision.

Alex stood with her back to the bedroom door. She reset both handguns and returned them to their respective resting places, one in the shoulder holster and the other inside her belt about mid-back. Quietly she strode to the closet next to the kitchen and opened the heavy wooden door. She removed the weighted, ammo-loaded vest and put it on over her shirt. Next, she did a quick examination of the powerful crossbow, placed there after her last visit to the cabin. Tossing the quiver over her shoulder, she made a show of moving to the front door, grabbing the bright orange cap on the way out. Looking to all the world like a hunter about to sack a deer, Alex exited the cabin just as the cell phone chirped.

“Anyone ever tell you that your timing is lousy lover?” asked the smirking deputy. “No. I won’t be home tonight. Well, cook your own dinner. I plan to do my own cooking here in a little while. Yep, I’m about to bag me a big un’. Yeah, yeah. I’m always careful. Yeah. I’m wearing the goddamn orange hat so back the hell off. Go cook some dinner. I’ll see you soon. I love you, too.” Alex was clearly irritated as she used her entire arm to flip the phone shut.

The beautiful brunette turned to move deeper into the woods and in the direction of the small lake when a megawatt light descended from the suddenly noisy heavens. The artificial sun began a slow sweep of the surrounding area but not before the volley of bullets began. There was no time to do anything but empty the crossbow in the direction of the rapid bursts of light, duck for cover and curse.

*“I thought this was **my** witness, Goddamnit. This is not by the fucking book. At no time in my training did it say the cavalry comes in and turns on all the fucking lights in the world and shows the enemy exactly where the fuck you are. I don’t remember calling in for back-up. Damn fools’ll be sitting ducks up there like that. Shit!”*

Hitting the ground with another round of choice profanity, Alex scrambled to find cover while pulling both handguns. It was too late.

Three gunmen emerged from hiding on the west side of the cabin. One held what looked to Wheaton like a portable torpedo bay. Aiming it into the sky, he shouted: “Bye-bye birdie!” The sky exploded into hissing pieces of flame and metal.

One of the remaining two men placed the barrel of the large handgun at the deputy’s temple and sneered. “Be sure to tell Anna, Mickey says hey.”

It was hard to tell for certain, which gun went off first. Maybe it didn’t matter. Alex slumped into a pool of her own blood across the lifeless body of the heartless killer the law could never seem to touch.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

“No. No. No. No. No,” whimpered the blonde over and over into the mattress, determined to keep her word.

“Jesus,” muttered Wheaton. “You looked like something out of a Stephen King movie. What was that all about?”

A small hand slapped itself across the mouth of one Stanley P. Wheaton. “I get visions. Now shut the hell up while I try and figure out what to do...if there’s anything **to** do.” Even in the blackness the man could tell she was crying.

“You don’t watch movies much, do ya?” The lips moved against the soft restraint.

“I said....shut.....up,” Rhonda gritted as anger edged its way alongside terror. “I’m about to lose someone I love more than you could ever know, little man. It’s not the first time, either. So unless you want to meet your maker underneath a heavy, smelly, musty, god forsaken mattress..... shut the fuck up.”

Stanley considered what the small beauty had just said. Then he considered the probable outcome and decided his options stunk like a cornered polecat. “Change something,” he mumbled.

“I said shut u.....what did you just say?” Her eyes had gone so wide in amazement that even in the darkness the movie manager could see them clearly.

Sam Ruskin

“Change something. Anything. Some small detail in the vision. Change it.”

Rhonnie’s brain started running scenarios rapid fire, mentally comparing each with the horror in her vision. No. There was nothing she could do. Alex was in the other room. She promised to stay put no matter what. Alex knew her stuff. She was a damn good deputy. If she didn’t do exactly as she had been told she could end up being the cause of a disaster. With hot tears stinging her swollen eyes she peeked from around the fallen mattress. Her friend was just reaching the heavy closet door. Wait a minute. What was it Alex had said earlier? ‘Even if she had called right away.....’

“That’s it!”

“Huh?” whispered the befuddled witness.

“Don’t move. No matter what happens, do not move a hair on your head.” Without waiting for a responding promise, Rhonda Renee Reynolds swallowed hard, prayed to the deity she often doubted and broke her promise. Sliding her body out from beneath the burdensome bedding she called softly, “Alex?”

Blue eyes froze in wide horror as Deputy Stoner fearfully peered around the heavy closet door. “I told you....You promised...What...” Alex never saw Rhonda break a promise in all the years she’d known her.

“Alex, toss me the phone.”

“Huh?” The tall woman was very nearly speechless wondering how the hell Rhonda even knew there **was** a phone.

“Come on, Al. At least I’ll be able to call for help that way....if I need to, I mean.” Shit, Rhonnie thought. Now she thinks I don’t trust her to protect me.

“Oh. Good idea. Here ya go, sexy.” Alex was relieved by the simple logic of the request. Quietly she reached into her back pocket, removed the small cellular phone and tossed it toward the mattress. “And git back under that thing ‘fore I kick that cute behind o’ yers.” She punctuated the tense moment with a wink and returned to the closet to retrieve her crossbow from its hiding place.

Rhonnie slid back into place and Alex kept casting glances toward the room that held her witness, and more. She knew she had to do something to keep Lawton’s hired goons from doing what they came to do.

The model turned actress clung to the small appliance in her surprisingly small hand. What if it didn’t work?

“Please God, not Alex. I’ll believe in you again. Honest I will. Please, ask anything of me. I’ll do it. Just not Alex.” Rhonnie tried to plead and bargain with a Lord she was no longer even convinced could hear her.

Out of the blackness and uncomfortably close to her neck came the breathy whisper. “You and Deputy Stoner must have been friends a very long time for you to be so worried. You seem very close. Are you?”

Alex removed the weighted, ammo-loaded vest and put it on over her shirt. Next she did a quick examination of the powerful crossbow, placed there after her last visit to the cabin. Tossing the quiver over her shoulder she made a show of moving to the front door. The laughing face of a 9-year-old blonde skittered across her mind. The tall officer shook her mind clear, grabbing the bright orange cap on the way out the front door. Looking to all the world like a hunter about to sack a deer, Alex exited the cabin just as the cell phone chirped.

“Huh?” Rhonnie stared at the sounding instrument in her small hand. “Oh My God!” she quietly gasped. “It worked.” Flipping the phone open quickly Rhonnie spoke into the mouthpiece.

“Who is this?”

“Rhonnie? What are you doing on this line? Where’s Alex?”

“Chief?” Rhonnie recognized the voice of an old friend.

“Rhonnie, is she all right?”

“Chief, whatever you had planned, DON’T DO IT!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about young lady...”

“Chief Bartoni, I’ve had another vision. If you send in that chopper there’s gonna be a blood bath and Alex will die. I’m begging you. Believe me. I know you had someone follow her. I also know you think you’re protecting her... and Stanley. Please. Just trust Alex, chief. Call off the plan before it’s too late. Please....” Rhonnie paused to draw a quick breath, fully prepared to continue.

“Hold on there, Little Bit. I believe you. If you need me just punch any of the speed dial numbers. They’re all set to my toy here.”

Rhonnie breathed a slow, deep breath just as Alex tossed two mud soaked goons through the door. They were wearing handcuffs and looking none too happy. The blonde grinned at the brunette who winked and smiled back in her direction.

“You can come on out - for now - Wheaton. These two are just the opening act. Lawton is toying with us. The real firepower is still out there somewhere. It’s not like him to do this. I don’t know why he didn’t just pull out all the stops and blow us all to Jupiter and back.”

Rhonnie looked at the two muck-covered men who lay in a heap, practically at her feet. “Um.

“Oh yeah,” the deputy smirked. “Meet the Ball twins. This here’s Skuz Ball and this one over here is his retarded brother, Skum Ball.”

Rhonnie very nearly relieved herself right then and there. One thing stopped her. The voice coming from her left hand. “Alex! Deputy Stoner, you pick up this phone right now! Alex! Rhonnie! Pick up, I tell you!”

The tall, seemingly fearless woman looked at the offending hand and back to her friend. Then she visibly winced. “Ooooooooooooo. Rhonnie, he sounds pissed. You answer it.”

“Me!? I’m a guest here, Ms. Stoner. It’s your cell phone.” The blonde snickered, extending her hand.

About that time the Ball Brothers decided to wake up and take in their surroundings, including one very famous model-turned actress.

“Wow. Brian, wouldja lookit that? It’s the blonde bombshell and she’s even more delicious in person.”

“No shit, Teddy. Damn, honey. You look good enough to....” The strike and thump of the body hitting the floor echoed into the communication device.

Crackling from the floor where the stunned friend dropped it, the device got eerily quiet. Making a childlike face of fearful hesitation, Alex lifted it to her ear.

“Alexandra Abigail Stoner! Tell me you did not just strike a perpetrator.” Chief Bartoni knew the Deputy United States Marshal could not see the wide, proud grin he now wore in the privacy of his own home.

“Uhhhh. Sorry chief. He said...uh...well, I uh....oh hell, chief. You know I can’t stand anyone saying crap like that about Rhonnie.”

“Oh look, Brian. The blonde bombshell has a dyke friend.”

Alex spun and grabbed at the blur moving past her but it was too late. One very well sculpted, powerful leg met its twin marks and the Ball Brothers were out for the night.

“Uh, chief....”

“Never mind,” groaned the smiling father figure. “They fell out of a tree sitting out there in the dark, right?”

“Right chief. A very BIG tree.” Alex winked and Rhonnie shrugged.

“Well try and keep the tree from doing it again, please? I only have a few years till retirement.”

“Right chief,” the deputy promised.

“Right chief,” the model repeated.

Chapter VI

Green eyes searched the floor, the walls, the ceiling and finally the threads being pulled from her sweater, but there was no escape. She lost it and she knew it. Visibly cringing at the sight, Rhonda Reynolds forced herself to look at the two men she’d just assaulted. The bruise already forming covered nearly the entire right side of Skum Ball’s face and head and, if one looked closely, the shape of her foot could almost be seen along a dirty cheekbone. Skuz Ball didn’t fare any better. In fact, it looked to the hot-tempered beauty as if he may have broken his nose when Skum Ball’s hard head smashed into it. The blood mingled with dirt, mud, and slime as it soaked the front of his heavy flannel jacket. It was an incredibly disgusting sight and oddly satisfying at the same time, Rhonnie thought.

“Here,” Alex interrupted her musings by tossing her a thick roll of gray duct tape.

Rhonda looked at the roll of tape, lifted her eyebrows and smiled into waiting eyes. “You’re kidding, right?” She told herself Ms. Do The Right Thing couldn’t possibly mean for her to tape their mouths shut on top of everything else.

“Nope. And do it before they wake up and start whining again, please.” Alex smirked into the fireplace as she added more wood in preparation of what she knew would be a very long night.

“But Al, I think I broke the one man’s nose.” She tried to see if her friend was angry with her for losing her cool and assaulting the...what was it Anna told her they were? Perpetrators.

“Wrong,” Alex turned and smiled into concerned green orbs. “His partner in crime broke it. You,” the deputy added, “only broke **his** jaw.”

“Oh my god! I did? Alex, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to kick them, honest I didn’t. He called you....I hate that....I guess I just lost it. I’m really sorry. When we get back I’ll make a full statement and accept whatever consequences the Chief chooses to give me.”

Alex turned her head for only an instant as she felt the words strike her soul. *I hate that.* Well, that pretty much answered that age-old question; the tall woman mentally berated herself.

“Alex? You’re mad aren’t you?” Rhonnie had put the shiny tape across both faces after wiping the worst of the grime away with their own filthy sleeves.

“Huh? Oh. No, Rhon, not at all. I was just thinking is all.” Deputy Stoner looked around the room at the odd assortment of ‘guests’. Stanley was wisely keeping his mouth shut while clearly listening to every word being passed between the two beauties. Snapping herself back to fully alert status, Alex strode to the door and reset the timber across the closed framework.

“You don’t think it’s over, do you?” Rhonnie moved to her friend’s side. “Alex, I really am sorry.”

The tall servant of the peace draped a long arm around uncharacteristically slumping shoulders. “Hey, it’s all right. I hit one too, remember? The hell with em, Rhon. They’re the least of our problems tonight. And no, it most definitely is **not** over.”

“Al, I’m....”

“Scared?” The deputy waited for the lowered eyes and gentle nod. “Hey, who isn’t?” Leaning down, Alexandra kissed the blonde head. “We’ll make it honey. I promise.”

Rhonnie felt Alex kiss her on the head and closed her eyes for an instant, absorbing the gentle gesture of friendship. The softly spoken term of endearment surprised her, though. Alex was usually more guarded than that, and she’d slipped several times since arriving. The blonde knew her friend was a lot more worried than she chose to say. Needing to reassure the tall beauty of her complete and unwavering trust in her, Rhonnie simply took Alex’s hand and squeezed it. “I know,” was all she said.

Stanley watched the interaction between the two females with tired fascination. He wondered what their story was and just knew it must be a doozy. Here he was, hiding and hoping just to stay alive long enough to testify about what he witnessed

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less than thirty days ago. He was a quiet man, for the most part. He had a good job, which he did reasonably well, and while he'd heard all the stories about his boss, he did not believe them. At least, five weeks ago he didn't believe them. Now belief no longer played a role in the matter. He knew the stories were true. Mickey Lawton was as cold a human as he'd ever seen and he was a murderer too. Stanley saw that for himself the night his boss showed up early for the weekly meeting held in the drive-in movie's back office. Wheaton never questioned the somewhat unusual habit of having the meetings here when he knew his boss' downtown offices were far more comfortable. Stanley always figured it was something to do with security, and no one suspecting such a wealthy man would hold financial strategy meetings in an old drive-in movie office.

The events of the evening remained as clear in Stanley's mind as if they were burned onto the back of his eyes by some new cinematic process.

"Evening boss," Stanley said as Mickey Lawton stepped through the doors right on time, just as he did every Wednesday evening.

"Evening, Stan. Got a nice crowd tonight for August. Glad I didn't listen to all those people who told me Drive-Ins were dead and gone."

"Me too, boss. I like Drive-Ins. Always have. Part of America dies with every one that closes down." Stanley shrugged, knowing his boss could not care less about what he thought. Mr. Lawton was just being polite, making conversation.

As was the usual routine, the concession stand was closed during the weekly meeting. When the four couriers arrived Stanley noticed his boss seemed agitated, on edge. The shorter, red headed courier seemed to Wheaton to be passing looks back and forth between himself and the boss man. The movie manager brought the drinks into the small office, sat them down, and moved toward the door.

"You have any problems with delivery Teddy? How about you, Frankie?" Lawton asked the tall courier with the beard and the shorter man to his left.

"No boss. It's all there and the packages were all delivered on time." Stroking his beard absently, Teddy seemed distracted.

"Everything went just like it was supposed to boss." Frankie lied without missing a beat.

"How 'bout you, Rusty? Your contracts all delivering on time too?" questioned the man in charge.

The stocky man in the torn jeans jacket lit another cigarette off the one he had just smoked down to his fingers. "Yeah boss. All on time. What's up?"

Mickey Lawton stood slowly and smiled with a brilliance that chilled the manager to the bone. He almost sensed it before he actually saw his boss open his expensive jacket and withdraw the powerful handgun with something attached to the end of it.

"You're all lying to me. Two of those hits were hours behind schedule. The third was botched badly and they all cost me. Now they will cost you."

"B..b..bb...but boss..." the men stammered in frantic unison.

"No second chances here, fellas. I told you when I hired you. Never lie to me because I always know. Always." With that, the cool eyed mogul stepped forward, placed the gun against first one head and then the other.

The sound was not at all what Stanley had expected and he swallowed hard to keep from vomiting as the bodies crumpled to the floor, one after the other.

Mickey Lawton calmly removed the silencer, put the weapon back into its holster and turned to the fourth courier.

"Lock the door and clean up this mess. Stanley, you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost." He laughed at his own sick joke and slapped his manager on the back. "So, Stan my man, tell me....does Redford get the girl in this one or not?"

"Uhm, not really boss." Wheaton struggled to breathe without vomiting. Taking deep breaths through his mouth seemed to be working for the moment. He knew he had to answer the question, however insignificant it seemed. "I mean, not really. He gets to bed her but he doesn't get to keep her. So he loses, I guess."

Mickey Lawton took the nearly empty tray from Stanley's hand where the few items rattled in response to the poor man's trembling limbs. Disgusted with what he considered nothing more than a useful coward, he sneered and sat it down. "Don't worry about this Stan. Someone else will clean things up in here tonight. You go open the concession stand and Stan?"

"Yeah boss?" croaked the still shaken Stanley P. Wheaton as he forced his eyes to look in another direction, at anything other than the human debris at his feet.

"If I say Redford got the girl, Redford got the girl."

"Yes boss," was all he could think of to say.

"Stanley? You all right? Stanley?" The deputy noticed her witness going very pale, then a kind of yellowish gray color, looking like he would hurl at any moment.

"Alex? What's wrong with him? Is he hurt?" asked a concerned blonde.

"Hurting's more like it. He's remembering, Rhonnie, just remembering."

"How do you know?" questioned Rhonnie.

Alex considered her answer. "Recognize the signs is all."

"Oh," came the quiet reply. "Stanley. Stanley you're all right. It's Rhonda. Stanley," she wiped the man's forehead with a

cool cloth.

Weary hazel eyes looked up at the two women and Stanley wondered for a moment where he was. Taking a quick visual tour of the main room of the cabin, he saw the Ball Brothers still slumped together on the floor and it all came back to him. Damn. He so hoped it was just a horrible nightmare (which of course it was). The trouble was, **this** nightmare had flesh and bone....and wanted him dead. *Correction*, thought the city boy, *wants us ALL dead.*

Chapter VII

Deputy Marshal Alexandra Abigail Stoner slowly drew in and blew out one deep, cleansing breath. Looking around the room of the cabin she and her twin had bought so long ago, she almost laughed. *Anna would enjoy this*, she thought. *What an assortment of human beings to have in one spot.* That, of course, did not even begin to count whatever persons lay unseen **outside** the cabin. *Oh yeah.* Alex smirked. *Anna would never let me live this down-and the duct tape...gods, but she did love her duct tape.*

The brow photographers loved to capture crinkled above curious green eyes. "Um, Alex, are you **smiling**?"

Drawn from her musing, the dark haired woman lifted a brow. "Was I?"

Rhonnie laid the sleeping witness' head on a cushion pulled from the sofa and rose up on her knees. Then she knee-walked the few feet to where her friend sat tending the fire. "You were. At least, I think you were." The small hand reached out and touched the larger one, pausing it in mid-air, on its way to the slowly burning flames. "Thinking about Anna?"

Alex closed her eyes briefly and nodded gently. "You always know, don't you? How do you do that, Rhonnie? I mean, you've done that since as far back as I can remember. Funny how none of us ever talked about it much."

Soft laughter warmed the room more than the fire ever could. "Oh no, we never talked about it much. We, as in you and I, didn't but Anna and I always did. I think by the time I was nine Anna understood more about my so-called gift than I did."

"Well, she **was** your best friend Rhon. I mean, you and I have always been close but not like you and Anna. It was so great the way she was with you. She loved you very much. I hope you know that."

Alex paused to take another look around the room, quickly checking all the hidden gadgets for any sign of more trouble.

"Yeah, I was thinking about her and how much she would have enjoyed the ridiculousness of today. Just look at us Rhonnie. What a crew." The marshal laughed in spite of herself.

Rhonda Reynolds tried not to but she couldn't help laughing when she glanced around the room with her best friend in mind. "Gods!" A small hand smacked the resident guardian on the leg. "You're so right. This would have cracked her up. Alex, you wouldn't be caught dead with these people on your worst day. Look at them. It's pitiful."

"So," asked the eyebrow waggling woman, "what other deep, dark secrets did you and Anna have? HMMMMMMMM?" Alexandra leaned over and whispered directly into the ear that she thought looked invitingly soft. "You can tell me. I'm a cop. I know how to keep a secret."

At that the blonde lost it and burst into laughter so loud the marshal quickly covered the coral lips with her strong hand. Blue-gray eyes widening was explanation enough, and Rhonnie bit down on the inside of her cheeks while taking deep breaths and swallowing until she regained control.

"Sorry. I'm okay now. That was just so funny Alex. You know how to keep a secret. That's a good one, Alligail."

Suddenly serious eyes narrowed to near slits and a perfect jaw line tightened. "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean, Ms. Reynolds." With that Alex stood and stretched her tall frame out. She walked over to check on the Ball Brothers who were sound asleep half lying, half sitting on the sofa she bought with her sister when they were only twenty. "Remind me to burn that when this is all over," she groaned to the blonde.

"Not a chance. Anna would haunt me forever. I'll have it sanded, cleaned, reupholstered and repainted." Rhonnie reasoned.

Alex went into the bedroom and got a comforter that she draped across Stanley P. Wheaton. Noting the smile sneaking onto her friend's face, the officer remarked: "Hey! If he catches a cold and loses his voice I'm in big trouble."

Rhonnie grinned, taking care to face the fireplace and not in the direction of Miss I Don't Really Care, I'm Just Doing My Job.

The tall deputy crouched near the window and lifted the sash just enough to peer out into the darkness. Everything looked eerily normal, quiet even. The nearly full moon turned the trees into dancing shadows with the crickets and bullfrogs providing the music. She could feel the blonde looking at her and wished the circumstances were different, much different.

"Anyone out there?" came the query so close to her she could feel the soft, warm breath.

The shiver came unbidden and she hoped Rhonnie wouldn't notice.

"Alex? Do you see anything?"

"Yeah. Trees dancing in the moonlight while the stars look on in envy."

Rhonnie almost pinched herself. "What did you say? I can't believe you even remember that. God almighty, Alexandra. I wrote that poem ten years ago."

Replacing the sash, Deputy Stoner sat down against the wall beneath the window. "Ten years and three months, actually. It was the first time we came up here, the three of us. I remember it as if it were this morning. Gods, sometimes I wish it were."

Rhonnie touched Alex's cheek with her fingertips, claiming the escaping tear. "Tell you a secret, Alligail. Sometimes I do, too. Fame and fortune be damned. I'd trade the whole of it to have us all sitting here together again, watching those dancing trees and drinking hot cider."

Alex looked deeply into the jade eyes she loved more than anyone knew. *Anyone but Anna that is and*, Alex regretted, *she's gone now.* "You mean that don't you? About fame and fortune being damned and all?"

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Rhonnie looked her directly in the eyes. "Yes, Alex. I mean it. That's why I'm here. Well, part of why I'm here anyway. I really did quit. I can't do it anymore. I just can't. I want to come home, Alex."

The setting was completely wrong. The surrounding "crowd" didn't fit at all. The timing sucked rotten eggs, no question about that. Still, all in all, it was the answer to a prayer. It was a prayer that had been repeated so many times it could almost say itself. Two strong arms reached around the woman most of the world knew only as the blonde bombshell. "You **are** home, Rhonnie. You are home."

Alexandra gently stroked her friend's golden hair until she fell asleep in her protective arms. It must have been all of ten minutes, smiled the detective. What a day it had been and, saints protect them, there were still two more to go. She carefully lifted Rhonnie's sleeping form and carried her over to the sleeping bags she had tossed next to the fireplace earlier. Using her booted foot, Alex spread the heavy bags out and scooted them together next to the hearth.

Rhonnie opened her eyes slightly while Alex kicked at the bags and then leaned into her friend's embrace and went back to sleep, worried but too exhausted to keep her eyes open any longer.

Carefully lying the smaller woman onto the bag nearest the fire Alex then pulled the other sleeping bag onto Rhonnie. The brunette then slid herself into place so she could hold her friend's head in her lap. It would be a long night, and Alex knew Lawton well enough to know he wouldn't do anything for at least another few hours. He liked to make his victims stew in their own fear. 'Not this time,' the detective thought. 'I've got your number you bastard, and I have no intention of letting you win. Not this time. You lost any chance you had the second I saw that Fedora, you prick. You're not hurting someone I love...never again.'

Closing her eyes for a few minutes was a matter of training as much as survival. Falling asleep, however, was not part of the tall deputy's plan. With sleep, more often than not, came the dreams.

..... Alex had been up nearly all night. She'd gone to bed just before midnight and, as usual, nodded right off. It hadn't been more than forty-five minutes or so when she was jerked awake by the icy sensation of absolute terror. She'd washed her face and tried to remember what she'd been dreaming. She couldn't seem to recall dreaming anything at all, though. Thinking that maybe Anna was having a nightmare, she dialed her number. There was no answer. She left a message and hung up, telling herself she was just being silly. But she couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong. A few minutes later she was sure she heard Anna call out to her. Again she dialed the number to Anna's townhouse. There was still no answer. When her right hand began to ache and burn she took some ibuprofen and laid down, ready to try again to get some sleep. Sleep would not come so when her phone rang about an hour later, she was wide-awake.

Alex rushed into the small office of her former Chief of Detectives. She'd been with the Marshal Service for just over a year now and was finally being transferred to the task force here. On the short drive over she'd heard something about a car bombing in a parking lot in Northglenn. Maybe that was what this was about. They must have told the Chief and he's calling me in on this right away. She had intended to tell him during the big barbeque later that night but didn't really mind if the Marshal Service or her mother stole her thunder, so to speak. Northglenn wasn't all that far away. Damn; lucky it's so late. The parking lot would have been nearly empty at this hour. Probably only cleaning people and security for the most part.

She heard the horn from the car behind her and realized she had missed the light changing. It was the third one since she'd left the house. She turned the radio off, thinking it must be distracting her. She reached for her mobile phone and dialed Anna's number again. Still no answer. Where the fuck was she at this hour?

Rushing into her former Chief's office a few minutes later, she found him sitting quietly at his desk. It was nearly two thirty in the morning.

"I got your message. Sorry it took me so long to get here. I had to crank up the truck and then I seemed to be spacing out a bit on the drive in. Anyway, sorry I'm late." Alex explained. Something didn't feel right. Was this why she hadn't been able to reach Anna all night? Was she already on this case and that was why she hadn't answered the phone? No, Alex thought. She would have called me. Unless. "No," Alex scolded her rambling mind. "Nothing is wrong with Anna. She's just working or off with some new sweetie or something. Nothing is wrong," she insisted. But already she knew it was a lie. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Chief Bartoni offered her a chair with a nod of his head. Alex noted, with curiosity, that he looked oddly upset, like he was about to cry. She hadn't seen him look like this in a very long time.

"Chief, you're gobbling Skittles. You hate Skittles. What's up? Is it the car bombing I caught on the radio on the way over? And do you happen to know where my sister is?"

Alex was pacing now. Her hand hurt, her gut was tightening and the niggling feeling in the pit of her stomach was making her anxious. The Chief hadn't said a word yet but Alex could feel herself striding across the floor of the small office. She was getting frantic now. The warm, safe feeling she always had was fading. Something was very wrong. What the fuck was going on? She always had that warm, safe feeling. It was some kind of link between she and Anna. A never-quite-alone feeling. It was hard to explain but it was part of who she was and she couldn't remember ever being without it before. She stepped closer to the Chief and waited, impatiently, for an answer.

The man rubbed a large calloused hand across his face and sighed. "Alex. Please. Try to sit down."

Alexandra was getting more agitated by the second. "Okay. I'm sitting. Well, I'm perching but it's the best I can do.

What's up? Where's my sister?" Even as she heard the words she wondered why she had asked the questions that way. What did one have to do with the other? And why was her heart racing in her chest?

There was no easy way to say the words. He'd gone over them hundreds of times since he made the call. No matter how he strung them together they were the worst he'd ever had to say. So, in desperation and watching the door for his other guest to arrive, he just blurted them out.

"Anna is dead, Alex. It happ...Hey, the chair's over here." He reached out for her but it was too late. She hit the floor next to the chair with a thud and didn't even seem to notice. In all the years he'd known the Stoners, he had never seen Alex do anything even remotely clumsy. She made no visible effort whatever to move but just sat there, motionless, on the linoleum.

He heard the inane words leave his mouth, as if some unseen auto-pilot were in control of his speech center. "You all right?"

He waited for a reply of some kind but none was immediately forthcoming. Instead she just sat on the floor, not even seeming to notice her position or anything around her. Chief Bartoni called out to her several times but if she heard him, she gave no outward indication of it.

Finally, after several minutes had passed, the woman gently shook her head and looked around. She opened her mouth to say something but suddenly couldn't remember how to form words.

Taking her arms and gently lifting his god-daughter to her feet he asked the stupid question again. "Alex, are you all right?"

Alex took her arm back with more force than she'd intended. "Shit no! Of course I'm not all right." The tall deputy was pacing again. "Anna's dead? How? When? What happened? Are you sure it's Anna? Dear God, Mom. I have to go to Mom."

The Chief offered the chair again, knowing she would not take it. "I've already sent for your Mom," he reminded Alex. "I didn't want her to be alone when heard. I was afraid she might hear it on the news or radio and figure out who it was. She should be here any minute now."

Alex Stoner sank into the hardback chair on the other side of the cluttered desk.

The large man sat on his desk, next to the young deputy marshal who was also his god-daughter, the only remaining child of his best friend and, just as important: a friend.

"I got a call at 1:15 this morning that a car had exploded with what looked on the videotape like your tags on it. I immediately asked if the car itself could be identified. By the time I arrived, they'd managed to get the vehicle number and had positively identified the car as yours. It was only then that they officially informed me that someone had been in the car." Chief Bartoni looked at Alex questioningly before continuing.

Alex felt sick but she had to hear the rest. She nodded for him to go on, to tell her the rest. As much as she did not want to hear it, she needed to hear it all. She had to know the whole story. "Go on," she managed to say.

"The coroner said the body was well beyond a visual identification. She insisted that it would be pointless and cruel to even ask the family to attempt it. The team is going over the whole thing now and you know it will take a while before we can say anything with absolute certainty. But, from what we can tell so far, the job was definitely done by a pro. Triple trigger. Primary device, of course, was under the driver's seat. No big surprises there. It was triggered by her weight when she sat down. It was on a fucking delay though and it was the trigger to set off the other two triggers. Secondary was a series of very small pinholes in the gas tank. This probably wasn't even felt from inside the vehicle, as you know from your training in counter-terrorism. The leaks were at the bottom of the tank near both front and back as best as we can tell so far. There appear to have also been holes in the top of the tank causing fuel to spill onto the vehicle itself. We don't know yet if the gas cap was part of all that or if it was thrown by the explosion itself. The guys are still checking that out. Third trigger had a delay timer set to allow maximum fuel coverage without allowing the driver time to escape. This thing was designed so that a trained officer such as yourself..."

"Or Anna," Alex interrupted in a hushed tone.

"Yes," Bartoni agreed. "Or Anna."

Alex nodded, a silent request for him to continue. He complied.

"This thing was designed so that the driver would most likely realize what was happening but not have enough time to escape. Any movement could easily set off the actual explosion. That is what the victim was intended to believe."

"Would it? Would it have set it off?"

"It wouldn't have mattered at that point, Alex. By then the vehicle and the ground beneath it were saturated with gasoline. The timed trigger was linked to the package beneath the engine, which was linked to the package beneath the driver's seat. From the moment the driver sat down, there was no escape. Even if she had called the Bomb Squad, they'd never have been able to disable all three triggers in time to save her."

"Fuck." Alex mumbled, the pain evident in her strained breathing pattern.

"Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"She knew."

"Huh?"

Chief Bartoni walked over and sat beside his friend. "I'm telling you, Alex. As sure as I know your Daddy loved you girls, Anna knew. I'm not sure how she knew. Maybe she smelled the fuel and then placed the tiny clicks she heard when she first got in. I doubt we will ever know. But she did know. And I'll tell you what else."

"What?"

"She knew we would think it was you. In those last minutes she took action to make certain we would know it was Detective Anna Stoner and not Deputy Marshal Alex Stoner in that vehicle." He didn't even try to hide the tears that slid down his ruddy cheek.

"Why do you say that, Chief?" Alex already knew it was true. It had to be. That must have been when she woke with the icy

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terror. Anna had reached out for her. Alex knew it. Now she needed to know what the others knew.

"Her badge Alex. Anna pulled her badge off her belt buckle, gripped it in her hand, tucked her hand inside her uniform and pressed it against her body. Alex, she did everything she could in those last precious moments to preserve her badge. The one thing that would tell us with an absolute certainty who was in that car."

"Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"Anna's badge."

"It's evidence in an ongoing investigation. It's locked up."

"Bullshit Chief. No fucking way have you let them lock up Anna's fucking badge. I want it. Where is it?"

"Alex," the voice was gentle, caring. "It's not been released by the Coroner yet." He grimaced, waiting for understanding to penetrate the shock and grief.

"Well, when they're done with my sister's badge and whatever evidence they need to gather from it, I want it." She looked directly into his face, eyeball to eyeball. "Don't fuck with me on this one. I want my sister's badge and I **will** have it!"

He nodded, sadly. "I've already made arrangements Alex. I take it you will want it preserved as near to how they found it as possible?"

"Yes." She paused. "You won't get in trouble for this will you?"

He showed the slightest trace of a grin, however fleeting. "Ya think?"

The matter was settled between them. She would have Anna's badge. He would do whatever it took to secure and guarantee its delivery and Alex would never question how he accomplished it.

There was a thick silence in the room while the chief waited. He knew there would be more questions. It didn't take long.

"How? How did they do it? When did they have access to my car? Shit. Never mind. I parked it in the fucking garage at her townhouse yesterday. I grabbed a ride with a friend and left my fucking car in a goddamned parking garage so any mother fucker would have access to it."

"Stop it, Alex." You did nothing wrong. You didn't even know you were a target, did you?"

"No but that's not the point. I should have known. I should have been more careful."

"No one can be that careful Alex. Anna was a good detective. One of my best, in fact. But she had no reason to suspect a car bomb and neither did you."

"Did she suffer, Chief? How did it get her?"

"She had the sun roof open. She was burned severely, as you already know, and the coroner suspects she was dead before she hit the pavement."

Alex gripped the edge of the seat, her knuckles turning white almost immediately.

Reaching over and prying the fingers of her right hand away from the hard chair, he enveloped them in both of his own.

"Alex, when they examined Anna's body they noticed she had something clutched in her right hand, pressed tightly against her breastbone. With the fire and all, it was overlooked on site. When they freed it from her fingers, what remained was her shield. It was charred, the clip was totally burned away, and part of it had even melted, but the raised numbers were still there. I believe, as I said earlier, that in what must have been only a few remaining seconds, Anna grabbed her shield and clung to it. She wanted us to know it was her, Al. God bless that quick mind of your sister's. I loved her so much, Alex. You know that." Chief Bartoni was openly weeping as he struggled to continue. "Her sweet smile. Stolen. What in God's Heaven will I ever tell your mother?"

The mirror image of the officer, god-child, and friend he'd just lost squeezed his puffy hands.

"We'll tell Mom together. Right now," she stood, straightened to her full height, pressed her shoulders back and set her jaw. She was running all kinds of questions in her head. Like what the fuck was she doing in that damned parking lot at one in the morning. But that could wait. There was another question demanding to be answered. "I want to know who did this. Any clues?"

The answer came in a gruff whisper. "One. And you're going to hate it."

He reached behind him to a large, manila envelope. Opening it, he removed the contents and handed them to the still shaken woman he loved as he would his own child.

Red, puffy eyes gazed upon the item and then back at her boss. "A cassette? Tell me someone is going to confess and make it easy for us."

Brown eyes avoided blue ones to no avail. "Yes. And no. As I said, you're gonna hate it."

... "Mickey Lawton here. Well, which bitch did I get? No matter. I warned you to get 'em off my ass. One down. One to go. Or is that two down? Naturally, this tape is sterile and there will be nothing of any consequence left of that lovely little Mazda. A rather nice little British Racing Green RX 7, was it not? Damn that color looked good highlighted in orange and red. Back off or beautiful bitch #2 is next..."

Alex was fuming. "Why that arrogant son of a bitch! Can we hold him with this?"

"No," he sighed. "The tape's clean. The voice is altered. Their lawyers will say it's been tampered with and the judge will be forced to throw it out. He's right about the car, too. The bomb left no identifiable signature, per se. The guys are checking though because something about the whole thing is still setting off their radars. They just aren't sure yet what it is they're remembering. Yet. But, Alex. This bastard is a dead man."

Up The River, revised edition

"You got that right, Chief. He's too sure of himself. Sooner or later, he's gonna make a mistake. When he does, I am gonna be there. He's going down. He may not know it yet, but he torched the wrong Sister. Trust me, Chief. This bastard is going down. He's stolen the sweetest smile on the planet and he is going down. " Just then the door to the office opened. "Mom..."

Jade green eyes flew open as long fingers tightened painfully in her tangled hair.

"Alex. Alex, what's wrong?" The look on her friend's face jerked her awake from the soul outward. Never in their entire lives had she seen Alex in so much pain. Even at the memorial service her beloved friend wore less agony upon her face than in this moment. Rhonda knew she was witnessing something her friend would not have shared voluntarily. She also knew that she would never be able to wipe this picture from her mind. Never.

Deputy Stoner was lost. Her body sat there with Rhonnie, but her heart and mind were in a cluttered office, five long years past.

"Alex," Rhonnie whispered, frantically trying to wake the woman she'd known nearly all her life. "Alex wake up. I'm right here, Al. Wake up. Please wake up."

Slowly, as if from another dimension, the voice took form inside the head of Alexandra Stoner. It was a voice she knew so well and yet it seemed different somehow. Searching her catalog of memories she identified the voice and opened her eyes to find Rhonda looking at her with concern, and something more. The next thing Alex became aware of was a cramp in her right hand. "Oh my God, Rhonda!" she gasped. "I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

When Alex tried to remove her hand from the golden tresses, Rhonnie took it into her own and kissed the palm.

"It's all right. You scared me, Alex. I couldn't wake you and I could see you were in so much pain. Where were you, Al?"

Looking into the face of an angel, Alex closed her eyes momentarily to file the vision away for later viewing. "It was just a dream, Rhon. I'm fine now. Besides," she tapped her friend's nose with a finger from the hand Rhonnie wasn't still kissing, "I thought you knew all about my dreams."

"Well, I know you headline all of mine. Does that count?" The blonde hoped she had not dropped one of her own bombshells with that little revelation.

"You're kidding?" Alex could barely believe what she was hearing.

"Nope. You wanted to know earlier if Anna had any deep, dark secrets of mine. I don't know how deep or dark it is but that's the one she always kept. That I had it bad for her sister." Rhonda already wished she could take the words back, as she saw the stunned look in Alex's eyes.

"Oh my living Gods. That's the same secret she always kept of mine. That I had it bad for her best friend-even before she was legal. That little bra..."

Alexandra Stoner found the last of her words swallowed by a kiss. It was a kiss she told herself would never be hers. Rhonda Reynolds found that she could wait no longer for her tall friend to catch the clue she kept throwing. The logs in the fireplace next to them dwindled to smoldering embers but the fire inside these two hearts could have warmed a dozen cabins.

Somewhere in the woods outside, a murderous egomaniac lay in wait to kill them all. In this one moment, frozen in time, that didn't matter. Two men slept on a sofa a few feet away, tied, duct taped and bruised after attempting to murder the eyewitness to a triple homicide. That didn't matter now either. On the other side of the room a frightened little man dreamed of a night he wished was a dream instead of a nightmare. Even that didn't matter. All that mattered was the kiss. It was soft and warm and full of promise.

"That little brat," smirked the detective. "She knew all along."

"Alex?"

"Hmmm?"

"Shut up and kiss me again. Please," the blonde grinned.

"No problem," sighed Alex. "No problem at all."

Chapter VIII

Never in all her imaginings, and there had been many long years of them, could Alex Stoner have envisioned this moment. The beauty and wonder of the first time Rhonda Reynolds, the love of her life, actually kissed her exceeded all the dark haired beauty's fantasies.

When Alexandra's lips were fully captured, Rhonda felt first the warmth and then the incredible softness. Lifting herself upward into the tentative embrace, the small blonde pressed her trembling lips against the mouth she had wanted to taste since before she hit puberty. Gently she moved their lips together as the fire in her belly grew.

Rhonnie's tender mouth moving against hers made the detective want more, perhaps too much more, she feared. When she broke free long enough to joke about Anna being a brat, and knowing of their feelings for one another all along, the look in those beautiful eyes nearly took her breath away.

The smile Alex gave Rhonnie when she asked the detective to kiss her again was enough to send a shiver up the spine of the blonde bombshell. Circling her arms around strong shoulders just above her own, Rhonda pulled their mouths together more firmly. Softly and shyly, the tip of Alex's tongue sneaked past her own lips to barely caress Rhonnie's. Moaning into the opening cavern, Rhonnie moved her own lips to match those of her greatest love. Two powerful hands slid from the small waist, up the surprisingly muscular back until they rested on strong shoulder blades and pulled the famous body more fully into the embrace they'd both longed for nearly all their lives. Warm, nervous tongues introduced themselves to one another and began a dance neither woman wanted to end.

Sam Ruskin

Alex felt the small hand slip from behind her neck, down her back until it found her backside and fingertips began to make slow, loving circles. ‘*Good gods,*’ thought the detective, ‘*does she even know what she’s doing to me?*’

Lips began to move in a different way as Rhonnie drawled, “I always knew you would be a good kisser, Alex. I just never knew **any** kiss could feel like this.”

As the words reached the brunette’s center of thought, a smile crawled across her tingling lips. “Shhhh, you’ll wake me. I’m having the best dream.”

Small fingers slipped around slim hips, toying their way across a muscular thigh, moving teasingly toward a rising heat at the detective’s very core. “Bet I can make the dream better. What do you think?”

“Oh God,” Alex moaned as her hips took on a life of their own, pressing into the small hand.

Rhonnie pushed her tongue back into Alex’s mouth and whimpered at the feel of the detective moving against her fingers. Just as Rhonda began to feel the rest of her tall friend’s ever-present guard slip away, something moved outside the cabin.

Unceremoniously dumping the world famous blonde on her equally famous derriere, Alexandra leapt to her feet. Then, just as quickly, she dropped to her knees pulling Rhonda to her with one hand and lifting the blind a few centimeters at the same time.

“Shit!” The detective scolded herself. “Shit, woman. What the hell were you thinking? Okay, so you’ve wanted her all your life and she **is** finally in your arms. Great. Is that any reason to get everyone killed? Come on, Alexandra Abigail Stoner. Get a fucking grip or you’ll lose her before she’s even yours.”

A soft, warm hand touched the cursing lips. “Not a chance of that happening here, Alligail.”

Blue eyes turned briefly from the darkened window. “Huh?”

Emerald promises reached out into the night. “You can’t lose me before I’m yours, Alex. I’ve always been yours. You just never knew it before.” Soft lips brushed the detective’s protective shoulder.

Allowing herself a moment’s gaze into the eyes of her eternal love, Alex spoke in a near whisper. “Rhonnie, if I die right here, right now, I die happy. I want you to know that.” Before her friend could argue, as the detective knew she would, Alex reached into her back pocket and retrieved the forgotten cell phone.

“Don’t tell me. Pepperoni, Sausage, Mushroom, Onions and extra cheese.” Rhonda joked in a strained voice that betrayed her terror.

“Ha. Ha.” Deputy Stoner leaned over and brushed her lips across the sweet smelling locks. “Rhonnie, they’re on the move. Call the Chief for me. I’m gonna try and get a better look.” As soon as she spoke, Alex began to crawl toward the back door. Remembering something, she turned to tell Rhonda which number to punch. It was too late.

“...Hi. If you’re hearing this you’ve either dialed a wrong number or you’re one of three people...” Both women gasped at the same time.

“Al, I thought all the numbers on here called Chief Bartoni? What is my machine doing on this thing? What possible...”

Deputy Stoner knew there was no time for a creative untruth. She studied the hardwood floor for a second or two.

“Well, Alex? You’re out here in the middle of the woods, guarding a witness, no one on earth is supposed to know where you are. Only the Chief is supposed to be on this thing, right? So why is my...Oh my sweet Jesus! You didn’t expect to come home from this...God damn you, Alex Stoner!”

“Shit!”

“Not a bad answer, Alligail, but not a good one either.” The blonde bombshell was about to demonstrate how she REALLY got her nickname but one look into those blue crystals, glistening in the firelight, was all it took. She crumbled even before the brow was fully lifted. “Oh, all right. Go on. But I’m warning you Alligail, you had damn well better come back. You hear me, woman?”

Pulling the weapon from her holster, she rechecked it and slid the gun across the floor toward her friend. “I hear you, Rhonnie. I’ll be back. Keep this and use it if you need to. You know the signal. Anyone comes through a door or window without it, kill em.”

“KILL em?” Green eyes shot wide open.

“Damn right. And do it with the first shot, Rhonnie. No pissing around.”

One look told her Alex meant every word. “All right. Just make sure YOU’RE the one coming through the door, please.”

“Do my best,” winked the tall woman as she slid nearer the kitchen and the rear door. Peering one last time at the worried woman, the words just floated out, unplanned. “I love you, Rhonda.”

Hair glimmering in the firelight shook slightly. Jade colored eyes filled with tears. Trembling fingers lifted the gun, sliding the barrel back as the frightened woman braced herself against the wall near the fireplace. This gave her a clear view of every possible entrance into the room. “I love you too,” was all she could say as Alex slipped out the back door and into a nightmare five years in the making.

Chapter IX

They were out there. Alex knew they were out there. She had hoped they would sit tight for a few more hours, but it looked like that wasn’t going to happen. Well, at least she could thank God for bad habits; theirs, that is. Not only did these idiots smoke but, apparently they had no clue how far the tiny flame from a Bic could be seen on a dark September night.

Crawling on her churning belly, the young deputy was glad Anna insisted on putting in the back door all those years ago. Alex could still hear her twin explaining to the carpenter how she wanted the door **not** to look like a door from the outside.

"No, not like that," the woman chastised her friend.

The young man, who also happened to be a gifted carpenter, wiped his hand across his handsome face. 'How,' he wondered to himself in silence, 'do I get myself into these things?'

"Oh, come on, Tommy. How hard can it be?" Anna stamped her eighteen-year-old foot and slapped her hands firmly onto slim hips. Her good-looking friend watched the young woman with clear fascination. "Just don't put a window in the door and don't put a handle on the outside. Well, not one you can identify anyway. How hard is that? YOU could do it, couldn't you, Alex?"

"Oh no you don't," chuckled the woman's mirror image. "I helped build the porch but I'm not cutting the damn back wall out to put in some INVISIBLE door."

Tommy laughed out loud. "It's okay, Alex. Anna's right. I can do it. Only I can't do it before nightfall." Looking at Anna's pose, the carpenter winked at Alexandra. "If you don't mind, I can just stay here and finish it this week. I think I know what Ms. Einstein there has in mind, and I need to pick up a few things first. I'll be back up in the morning, and it'll be done before the week is out. The handle on the outside will look like a knot in the wood. That okay with you, Annie?"

"Don't call me that!" scowled the flashing blue eyes.

"Bless your heart, Anna." Alex whispered into the earth beneath her.

Rhonda listened to Alexandra crawl out the hidden door and press it shut with her harness boot. She silently thanked her dearly missed best friend for the stroke of genius that insisted on the making of that door. Worried green eyes scanned the room until they fell, briefly, upon the two Ball Brothers. One look at the two of them, crumpled against one another on the old sofa was enough to make the blonde grin. Noting the drool falling from Skuz Ball onto Skum Ball's neck very nearly made her laugh out loud. From the depths of her heart, the blonde bombshell hoped these were among Mickey Lawton's finest.

Taking a deep breath, Rhonda Reynolds checked to be certain the clip was full, for the seventh time.

Digging the toes of her brown boots into the cool soil beneath her, Alexandra used her powerful legs to move herself along the ground. Never lifting her head until she pulled alongside the woodpile, the deputy listened to every sound in the night. She could hear the slight crackling as tiny sparks escaped the chimney and met the crisp evening air. Crickets, bullfrogs and the occasional owl provided the inhabitants of the wooded lakeside a symphony to match the Philharmonic she heard as a child. For a heart-melting moment she almost swore she could hear Rhonda's heartbeat, but quickly dismissed this notion with a smile. Closing her eyes to concentrate her focus, the twice-decorated deputy listened harder. There it was, just as she knew it would be. Gods but she loved the acoustics of this place.

"Now," she whispered to the woodpile, "let's see if we can tell how many are out there."

Alex leaned into the surrounding darkness until she identified three distinct voices. One of the voices made her blood run cold and boil, simultaneously. It was all she could do not to stand up and 'Go for the Gusto', but she thought of a small blonde whose lips she could still feel against her own and slipped the gun back into place. That was when she heard it: the call of a whippoorwill.

When Alexandra managed to get her heart started again, she made her move. Pushing her long body back onto the very cold ground, the worried deputy quickly and quietly made her way back to the cabin. Not only was it nighttime in September but she was pretty sure that there **were** no whippoorwills in these parts, and that could mean only one thing: Rhonnie.

The chirping of the cell phone interrupted the ninth checking of the clip. Rhonda snapped it open, startled by the tiny sound.

"Good evening, Ma'am." The deeply masculine voice obviously belonged to Chief Bartoni but there was something there that made the hair on the back of Rhonnie's neck stand up.

"Yes?" The frightened celebrity remembered just in time what Anna and Alex had taught her about cell phones never being **safe** phones.

"We're very sorry ma'am but it seems the return tickets we sent you have expired." Chief Bartoni waited to see if the little spitfire he used to give piggyback rides would understand what he was telling her.

It wasn't long at all before the realization filtered into her weary mind. They were dead. The Chief was telling her the officers following Alex were dead. Blinking hard and swallowing harder, she nodded as she spoke barely above a whisper. "I'm very sorry to hear that, sir. We were counting on...those...tickets." Rhonda desperately searched her thoughts for what to say or do next. "Sir? Does the Airline have any alternative suggestions, given the time constraints of our vacation?"

'*Good girl,*' beamed Bartoni. "Yes Ma'am, we do. We would suggest you consider **calling** another **bird**."

"Oh," mumbled the blonde.

The Chief could almost see the blonde brows lower and the jaw set as Rhonnie inwardly cursed him and his 'code'.

"Oh!" came the repeated reply, only this time the Chief pictured the brows going in the opposite direction.

"Yes, ma'am." He supplied. "There are lots of birds flying and maybe you know of a favorite you can **call**."

Now, Rhonnie smiled. "Yes sir, as a matter of fact I do. I'll hang up and call right now."

'*That's it, Little Bit, play the part.*' Chief Bartoni was as proud as he was worried. "We realize timing is critical when you're on vacation. Good luck and again, we're very sorry." Brown eyes misted over with sincere regret as well as the dread he

felt over the calls he would be making next.

"I understand. Thank you." Rhonnie hung up the phone, leaned into the stone wall warmed by the fire and prayed she remembered how to do the damn birdcall.

Once back inside the cabin Alex pushed the door closed and rose up on her knees, which were seriously aching from the cold ground they had just spent over an hour hugging. Gritting her teeth against the discomfort, the tall woman carefully walked on the offending joints until she could see Rhonda leaning against the far wall.

Rhonda lifted her eyes to watch the doorway again just as the detective shook her head and stood up.

"Alexandra Stoner! Get back down this instant! You **trying** to get yourself killed?" Green fire shot across the room, punctuating every word.

"Damn!" Groaned the dark haired woman as she dropped back onto screaming knees. "You scared hell out of me, Rhonnie. What's with the damn birdcall? Very good job, by the way. I didn't think you remembered that."

Lifting the now silent cell phone Rhonda almost whimpered. "Seems our tickets have been canceled, Alex."

Alex slid in next to Rhonnie. "Canceled? What tickets?"

"Our return tickets? The ones they sent automatically...remem..."

Rhonnie saw understanding pass across the tanned face as Alex closed her eyes against the pain of losing a fellow officer...again.

"Damn. That bastard must have stock in a mortuary." Alex quipped, fighting the tears battling their way toward stinging tired eyes.

"Come here," the small blonde reached out and took her hurting friend into her arms.

"Rhonnie we can't," complained Alex even as she allowed herself to slip into the warm embrace. "They're out there, Rhonnie. I have to do something."

Tightening the hug, Rhonnie kissed the top of Alex's head. "Jesus, Al. You're freezing!"

Secretly touched by her friend's concern, the detective nonetheless tried to be tough and in control. "Rhonnie, there are men out there waiting to kill us. My being cold is of no concern here."

"Bull fucking shit, Alexandra!"

Alex laughed out loud. "Thought you got class, Little Bit?"

Taking the strong chin in her small hand, Rhonnie forced blue eyes to peer into green. "YOU are of great concern to ME, Alexandra Abigail Stoner. You can't protect us if you're a goddamned Popsicle, and there's not enough class in the universe to keep me calm when you are in danger, so just shut up and do as I say."

"Oh my. You goin' butch on me now?" Alex teased.

"Thought you were the butch one," Rhonnie teased right back.

"That mean you won't wear the leather outfit for me?"

Rhonnie searched her memory. "What leather outfit? Which layout?"

Dark eyebrows waggled and blue eyes danced. "I'll never tell."

Rhonnie giggled quietly, glancing around the room to be certain the three men were still asleep while marveling at their ability to snore through the night from Hell.

"Won't it be hard to get me to wear it if you don't tell me where you saw it?"

Passing eight fingertips along the softest skin Alex thought ever existed, she whispered: "My mother's living room. My 21st birthday party. Crimson leather mini-skirt with a matching crimson v-necked vest. No blouse underneath. Brown high heeled boots. Golden hair, cascading across the sexiest shoulders God ever made. Emerald pools I knew I could lose myself in for the rest of my life. Lips that made me ache inside and legs I would have killed to...Oh God, Rhon. I'm sorry." Alex pulled her hands away and started to turn out of Rhonda's warm arms.

Quickly grabbing two large hands and pulling them to her lips where she tenderly kissed them, Rhonnie pulled Alex against her. "What exactly are you apologizing for my love?"

Trembling hands cupped Rhonnie's face as the detective looked directly into green eyes. "God in heaven, Rhonnie. You were only a child, and I wanted you. I wanted you more than anything."

Both women froze as Stanley spoke but breathed again when he rolled over, and it became clear the witness was only talking in his sleep.

"Rhonnie, I..."

"No, Alex. Don't apologize to me again. I spent months picking that outfit. You were away so often with training and work, trying to be the best cop in Denver. I was determined to **make** you notice me. You say I was just a child, but by the time I was seventeen I'd already been in love with you for years. You spent every day with all those good looking guys who wanted you and it made me insane, Alex." The words were stopped when the marshal captured Rhonda's lips.

Pulling back slightly to look into damp eyes, Alexandra kissed the small nose. "Rhonda Reynolds, those men never stood a chance. I have loved you since Anna first brought you into the back yard to play in the sprinkler. You were five years old and the most adorable thing I'd ever seen. You still are."

"I love you, Alex. Do you know how old I was the first time I told Anna I was going to marry her sister?" Green eyes twinkled in the firelight as Rhonnie waited to hear Alex's reply.

"You told her you were going to **marry** me?"

"Yep."

“What did she say?” asked the grinning deputy.

Laughing through her own hand, the blonde mumbled. “Well, Alex, she was only nine years old at the time. She said she wasn’t sure her Momma would ‘llow you to marry me but she’d ask.”

“Good gods.”

“Exactly. I don’t think the Chief ever quite forgot what he overheard that day.” Rhonnie snickered.

“The Chief?” asked Alex.

“Yeah. Remember he and his wife were there that day for a cookout or something? He’s the one who told Anna she didn’t have to ask her Momma unless her little friend still felt that way in another ten or fifteen years. Anna never admitted it, but she was very relieved,” Rhonnie recalled.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Alexandra shook her dark hair and closed her eyes for a moment.

“What?” asked the blonde snuggling into the solid frame.

“That must have been what he meant, when he warned every partner he ever put me with ‘*don’t go fallin fer this one. She’s taken.*’”

“That old sneak. I had no idea he said that to your partners. Those are the exact same words he used on the photographer I introduced him to when he visited me on a set a few years ago.”

Both women laughed at the craftiness of the long-time friend and father figure.

They looked at the orange streaks making their way across the floor of the cabin. “Sun’s coming up. We made it through the night, Rhon. Only two more to go and we can put this behind us.”

“Alex?” Rhonnie looked deeply into eyes she trusted with her very soul. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now, but I’m scared.”

Gently brushing her lips across the famous brow, Alex spoke low: “Me too, but I’ve never had a better reason to survive. Now give me the cell and let me see if I can get us out of this mess.”

X

“Alex,” questioned Rhonda, “what are you going to do?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m going to get us a ride home.” The tall woman winked at her bewildered friend.

“Hello,” came the noncommittal voice on the other end of the cell phone.

‘*Good man,*’ thought the deputy. Then Alex remembered she and Rhonnie already referred to the man on the other end of the line as ‘Chief’ several times, and shrugged. “Hi Chief. How’d ya like to do me and my buddy here a big favor?” Smiling, Alex could almost see her stout friend reaching for the Milky Way stash in the bottom, left hand drawer.

Peeling back the wrapper from the fun size candy bar, the chief of detectives grinned into the tiny phone. “Depends. What’s the favor and what’s in it for me?” Worried into another ten pounds and barely a gnat’s wing from an ulcer, he could play this little game too.

Rhonnie remained silent, though it was taking more than a little determination on her part to do so. Despite her best efforts, Rhonnie couldn’t hold back the sigh when Alex kissed the tip of her fingers, and then pressed them tenderly into world famous lips. The detective smiled, winked and drew them closer together.

“Need a ride home, Chief. How’s about it? Remember that great spot where you got so high last time? Wanna meet me for some fun and gimme a lift at the same time?”

“Young lady, I most certainly...” the indignation was almost up to three fun bars when Anthony Bartoni caught on. “That is to say, I most certainly hope you aren’t having too much fun without me. Job being what it is, I don’t get the chance to get high much anymore. How does a couple of hours from now sound?”

‘*Uh-oh,*’ thought Alex as green eyes looked on with more than curiosity. “Um, actually Chief, I need to score first. So how’s day after tomorrow about this time?”

“At sunrise!?” came the unbelieving reply.

“Come on, my man. You haven’t lived till you’ve seen a Colorado sunrise with yer head in the clouds, so to speak. You game, or you want me to share with someone else?” Alex wanted to tell him to get his hand out of the damn candy bag but figured he was gonna need all the help he could get to make it through the next forty eight hours. By now her father’s most beloved friend had figured out what she planned to do, and if there was anything left in that drawer when she got back she would damn well hand feed it to him and restock it herself.

“Alex,” Rhonnie half whispered, half groaned. “You can’t be serious.”

“Course I’m serious, sweetheart. We sure as bloody hell can’t get back the way I came in. Lawton’s men will pick us off before Stanley can hike his pant legs.”

“But...” Rhonnie was thinking of Stanley too, but Alex motioned for her to wait a minute and she complied.

“So, it’s a date then? I bring the goods and you bring the ride?” Alex asked.

“A date, eh? That what’s in it for me? I bet I know a cute little green-eyed blonde who might have something to say about that.” Bartoni wished he could see the face he was certain was turning several shades of red about then. ‘*Gotcha,*’ he thought to himself as he switched to Hershey Kisses.

“Um,” Alex fumbled and brushed her face with her hand. She glared at the laughing green eyes, but their owner was not the least bit intimidated. “Yeah, well, um. Sunrise, day after tomorrow then. See ya.”

“You hung up on him?” asked the Rhonnie, disbelieving.

“We were done. He’ll be there. He was enjoying the code a little too much I think. Wouldn’t want someone to intercept the call and...” the detective was stopped by the sensation of cool fingers slipping beneath the edge of her shirt, sliding to the small of her strong back. “Rhonda, we can’t. Not now.”

“Alex, I only want to touch you, feel you close to me. I’m not going to do anything else. I’m not a total slave to my desires, you know?” The smaller woman punctuated the sentiment with waggling brows and dancing eyes.

“Gods. That makes **one** of us,” groaned Alex,

“Not what I heard, Alexandra Stoner. I heard you were controlled as they come.” Rhonda hadn’t really meant to say it, but that **was** what she heard.

Alex wanted to ask the woman she loved just exactly whom she had been talking to, she really did. It just wasn’t the time or place for it. Right now they had a couple of backpacks to load.

“Rhonnie, we’re gonna have to get the back packs loaded and wake Stanley. We don’t have long before Lawton will move on the cabin and we need to get out of here.”

Rhonda’s eyes grew wide with astonishment, then twinkled with a hint of mischief. “You can’t be serious. He’ll never make it, Alex. He barely made it up the river, and that is a friggin’ line dance compared to the hike out of here by way of that damn mountain. Geez, Al. That’s even tougher than the way I came in, and it took me most of the day. You’re still pissed about the watch aren’t you? Or is it the way he called out my name in his sleep a while ago?”

Mischievous eyes caught the morning’s light, making the rich laughter all the more delightful. “The watch was an honest, albeit stupid, mistake. As for calling your name in his sleep....well, he is going to have to pay for that, my love. Now help me load these backpacks and wake Prince Charming.”

“Alex?” Rhonnie touched the large hand.

“What is it?” Alex turned, after starting toward the packs.

“I’m not Snow White, and I **never** dreamed of Prince Charming.”

“No?”

“No. For as long as I can remember I only dreamed of one person and I’m looking at her right now.”

“Rhonnie?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t ever wake me, okay?” Alex leaned in to kiss Rhonnie’s cheek.

“You are awake Alex. We both are. The truth is, I don’t think I’ve ever been so completely awake.” Then she turned her face and caught the kiss on her soft lips instead of a cheek. “Now...” she looked at her tall protector.

“Yes?” Alex.

Nodding in the direction of the sleeping, drooling, snoring Ball Brothers, the blonde asked: “What about them?”

Alexandra Stoner smiled a wicked little smile. “What about ‘em?”

Chapter XI

Alex could no more remove the grin from her face than she could still the coming December winds. Just thinking about the two henchmen explaining their predicament to Lawton brought laughter.

“You’re not really gonna leave em like that, are you?” managed the smaller woman between stifled snorts.

Up went the dark brow. “And why not? I think Skum Ball looks quite fetching in his BVD’s. At least they’re clean. Musta had a good Momma. As for Skuz Ball being barefoot and duct taped to his partner...Hey! I asked him to shut up. I asked him real nice, Rhonnie. Is it my fault he copped an attitude?” Alex was putting on her best *‘it’s not my fault’* face.

The partially clad, half bootless, completely silenced and duct taped hoodlums slumped against the wall, near the fireplace. They weren’t really related, despite the detective’s tag for them. Still, they might as well be because, sure as you can see the smog from Lookout Mountain, they were about to share a grave. Mickey Lawton had no sense of humor about such things as this and did not suffer fools gladly. Nope. The Ball Brothers were as good as dead, and they knew it, which was probably why they made no fuss about having clothing and footwear removed and given to the man, ironically, that they had been sent to kill.

Stanley P. Wheaton emerged from the bedroom attired in Skum Ball’s thick jeans and heavily lined flannel jacket. The ensemble was nicely completed with the heavy-duty hiking boots of Skuz Ball. As per usual, Stanley was less than satisfied.

“The blue jeans are too loose, deputy; not to mention filthy. This jacket has blood on it and smells like something I’d wipe off my shoes. Are you sure I absolutely **have** to wear this stuff?” asked the once again awake and whining witness.

“Yes,” was all Alex said as she continued to gather supplies.

“How do the boots fit, Stanley?” inquired Rhonda, hoping they were a fairly good fit. She knew he was going to need them.

The man with the ill-fitting clothes mentally compared the woman before him to the life size cutout he had in his bedroom at home. The pressboard came up short. “Actually, believe it or not, they fit perfectly. It seems we wear the same size boot. Thank God for small favors.”

Rhonnie gently shook her head and smiled. “You won’t think it’s such a small favor this time tomorrow, Stanley.”

Alex flashed a look at the blonde bombshell, her eyes darting to the Ball Brothers next to the fireplace and back. Rhonnie closed her eyes briefly and nodded her understanding.

“Really?” came the worried expression. Stanley looked first at the detective and then at the woman of his fantasies. Predictably, he directed the next query to the blonde. “Why? Where am I going?”

Alex interceded. “Depends how you’ve lived your life.”

“Oh, very funny deputy. I was thinking of something a little more immediate.”

“What makes you think I wasn’t?” came Alex’s quick retort.

Rhonnice could see this was going to be trouble so she decided to change the direction of the conversation; all the while she continued packing her backpack. “Al, what’s this?” Lifting a small plastic bag containing dirt, leaves, a twig and what looked to be a busted timepiece, Rhonnice looked puzzled.

“Shit,” groaned Alex. “I nearly forgot about that. Rhonnice, can you bring that over here to the fire, so I can get a better look?”

“Sure,” came the quick response. Rhonnice carefully carried the item to her friend who reached under the sofa to get a very large, powerful, battery-operated magnifier with a series of tiny lights surrounding the glass.

Stanley fidgeted guiltily while Alex spread the offending pieces of metal and glass onto a clipboard. While the servant of the people studied each tiny fragment, Rhonnice tossed the witness a length of rope.

“Huh?” questioned Stanley.

“Your pants,” motioned Rhonnice. “You said they were too big. Use it like a belt.”

“Oh. Good idea,” Stanley was honestly hearing of this technique for the first time and thought it quite inventive. Rhonnice rolled green eyes and sighed quietly before turning back to Alex.

“Damn.” Alex had hoped she was wrong and the watch was just a very expensive way to impress an employee. She wasn’t. “There it is. Big as life - if you know what to look for. Shit,” she wiped a strong hand across her face. “Fucker’s still sending.”

“Oh my God, Alex! Are you sure?” Rhonnice was by the detective’s side and looking at she knew not what.

Alex put an arm around the suddenly frightened woman. “Yeah, I’m sure; but it’s okay. Not like we didn’t already know the prick was out there, right?”

Somehow, crazy as it was, that made Rhonda feel better. “What now?” she asked.

The naughty grin in the taller woman’s dancing eyes made the witness feel at once, relieved and uncomfortable.

“Now,” said Alex, “we give Mr. Lawton back his watch.”

Rhonnice giggled a little, knowing her friend only too well. Mickey Lawton may not have slept in a bed last night, she thought, but whatever he slept in or on...he got up on the WRONG side of it.

The detective proceeded to add as many logs to the fire as she could safely fit. Then she went to the bedroom and grabbed a couple pillows and an old jacket. Stanley and Rhonda watched in curious and amused silence, respectively.

“There, that ought to about do it.” Alex crawled back a little and looked at the pillow person she’d just made and put next to the window where she had been sitting only a short time ago.

Wheaton still looked bewildered but Rhonnice understood perfectly. Alex wanted Mickey Lawton to believe he had won, that he had the detective and her witness trapped, helpless in the lonely cabin. It would buy them precious time. Looking over at the man her friend would give her all to protect, not because she liked him but because it was her duty, the former cover girl closed her eyes and prayed. She didn’t pray often anymore. In fact, she thought to herself, she’d prayed more in the last 24 hours than during the last five years. Still, getting this whiney, starry-eyed, city boy to the pick up point would take all the help they could get. *A little divine intervention would definitely be welcomed here*, Rhonnice thought to herself - and hoped someone was listening.

Chapter XII

Stanley mumbled and cursed into the earth beneath him as he was forced to crawl along his belly for what he swore was at least a couple dozen miles. The witness felt further confined by the strict instructions of his protector, who made the man hold onto her right boot the entire time. On the other hand, feeling Rhonda’s strong grip on **his** right boot was nothing short of heaven, in Stanley’s mind. *‘Well, all right,’* he admitted silently, *‘so it isn’t really my boot. It is now. I may even have it bronzed.’*

Rhonnice knew the boot holding, at this point, was entirely unnecessary and was just her tall friend’s way of letting Stanley know who was in charge. Alex could be such a control freak at times. Spending years traveling and becoming world famous had not dimmed her memory on that score. Knowing Alex would almost certainly be in her own zone as she guided them along the ground and away from the cabin, Rhonnice braved a glance or two at the tight jeans covering even tighter muscles. The blonde was so completely absorbed in the view before her that the frozen ground went totally unnoticed by her. Unfortunately, she also failed to catch the hazel eyes that kept stealing glances and foolishly thought the stars in her eyes were for him.

Alex pulled herself along the ground, gradually moving farther and farther away from the cabin and Lawton’s hired killers. Straining to catalog every sound, she was certain they were not being followed. Mentally cussing the little wus who gripped her Harness Boot as if his life depended on it, she fought the urge to let it slip just once. *‘Naw,’* Alex grinned into the frozen ground. *‘Rhonnice would be upset if I did that and the little shit ain’t worth putting sadness into those gorgeous green eyes.’* Shaking her head slightly, the detective returned her focus to the task at hand: staying alive.

When Alex saw the **marker** Anna left on the tall Pine, she knew they could safely get off their tummies. Beyond this point, it would be near impossible to see them from the cabin, even with a good set of binoculars. She knew this because that was why Anna marked the tree in the first place. It was part of a game they played, all those years ago. *‘Grown up Hide and Seek’* Anna had called it. Alex closed her eyes for only a moment, savoring the memory. Then it was back to business.

“All right. We can get up now. But we still need to be very quiet and,” she looked directly at Wheaton, “stay together.” Alex spoke softly as she pointedly retrieved her foot and stood up, brushing herself free of frozen debris, frost and snow.

Rhonnice released Stanley’s borrowed hiking boot and stood up as well. She did a little shimmy kind of movement that made most of the snow, leaves and twigs fall back onto the ground where, to the blonde’s way of thinking, they belonged.

Sam Ruskin

Blue eyes smiled at the trademark shimmy she knew so well until Alex noticed another set of fascinated peepers.

"You gonna get off the ground, Stanley? Or have you decided to just sit on your frozen ass and ogle Rhonnie?" Alex spoke quietly but the intent was clear.

Rhonnie blushed and wondered which she found more surprising: Stanley watching her innocent movement or the fact that Alex was obviously pissed at him for watching. Shrugging, she looked around for somewhere else to rest. That was when she saw the tiny bit of teal cloth hanging from the pine. How in the world had Alex seen that from the ground? What was it now, seven? No. It was eight years since Anna tied that there and oh, how angry Al had been that morning to find her favorite scarf missing a couple of tassels from the end.

"You know," Rhonnie said, "Anna felt real bad about messing up your favorite scarf, Alex."

Never missing a beat, Alex looked at the gentle face. "I still have it, you know? She could be such a brat." The smile betrayed the secret and it was clear her words held nothing but love.

"Well," Rhonnie giggled softly. "What did you expect? You were **identical** twins."

Stanley found himself once again watching the two women in curious wonder. Something inside told him there was more to these two than he knew, but he couldn't quite figure it out. Yet. Besides, he reminded himself, he was only a few feet away from the blonde bombshell. The witness was gathering data for future nights of fantasy. Nights when it would be just him and his life size cut out. That was when the Deputy United States Marshal caught him studying the form of her beloved, from the ground up, slowly. Wheaton could have sworn he heard a growling sound and turned toward what he feared was a wild animal of some sort. Foolishly, he was relieved to see Alex standing beside him.

"OK, let's get going," Alexandra said, looking directly at her witness. "Unless **Stanley** would rather make notes on the medical examination his eyes just gave you."

'*Uh-oh,*' thought Rhonnie. "Hey, Alex. Remember that word game we used to play sometimes when we went hiking?"

"No." The answer was too curt and Alex regretted it immediately. "I'm not sure, Rhonnie. Which one do you mean?"

The brunette knew right away what her friend was doing and loved her for it. Truth was, Alex knew she was being too touchy but something inside her just snapped every time the little weasel looked at Rhonnie.

Stanley could care less what the game was called. If Rhonnie wanted to play a word game then, by God, that was fine with him. Besides, he could use a distraction from what looked to him, as he glanced ahead and around the small opening they stood in, like a very boring day. As per usual, he could not have been more mistaken.

"Well, it's just a list game really. Each of us takes a turn, starting with the letter A and we go through the alphabet until we get to Z." Rhonnie explained.

"Yeah, I remember that one." Alex winked. "We're going on a picnic, right?"

Rhonnie smiled at the detective. "That's right." Looking at Wheaton, Rhonnie explained the rest of the game. "See Stanley, each person gets a letter with each turn. You have to use the letter that comes next in the alphabet and you must use it twice. The second word tells what you will bring to the picnic and the first tells something about it. Like extra eggs or baked bologna. Get it?"

Stanley flashed his pearly whites at the woman of his dreams. His and a million other guys, that is.

"Oh, I think I can do that. Does it have to be food?"

Alex adjusted the backpack and nodded for them to begin moving as they played. "No, Stanley. It doesn't **have** to be food. Just whatever you want to bring on the picnic. Get it?"

Taking his place in the center of the group as they began the journey to wherever the mysterious pick up point was, Stanley grinned again. "Yeah. I think I get it. Who starts?"

Rhonnie could almost feel Alex staring at the sometimes irritating little man. "I'll start us off. All right, then," she said. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple. Your turn, Stanley."

Stumbling over a protruding root, Stanley nodded as Alex caught him before his knee hit the ground. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple and a beautiful blonde." He grinned up at Alex. Well deputy, I have the beautiful blonde. What are you bringing?"

'*Oh shit,*' thought the blonde.

Alex drew in a long breath and blew it out slowly. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, and some cold cokes." Then the lips curled slightly, "bottled cokes. That way I have a handy weapon...should I need to clobber someone."

"We're going on a picnic," said the beautiful blonde who now wished she'd decided to name animals instead. "On this picnic I will bring an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes and dainty dates." '*There,*' she thought, '*that ought to be safe enough.*'

Stanley turned to look again at the woman who had graced so many magazine covers. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates and enchanting ears."

Alex stopped walking. "Enchanting ears? What is enchanting about..." Turning as she spoke she could almost feel the snow dusted ground beneath her witness melting. "We're going on a picnic and I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, and a frenzied fan."

"Huh?" Stanley wondered what they would need a fan for in September. Then he realized **he** was the fan and began thinking of h's.

Rhonnie might have enjoyed this little word play a lot more if the hairs on the back of her neck weren't standing straight up.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates," sigh, "enchanting ears, a frenzied fan and three giant gyros. I don't know about you two but I like to **eat** on a picnic."

Up The River, revised edition

"Oh me too," winked Stanley before turning back to the trail which was definitely becoming more difficult at this point. "We're going on a picnic and I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, and very Hungry Hips."

Teeth could be heard gritting as Alex lifted the fallen witness out of the small gully he'd stepped into.

"We're going on a picnic and I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, and an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch!"

"Hey!" cried the city boy. "Can she do that?"

Rhonnie held her sides and laughed out loud, dodging the rocks Stanley had carelessly knocked loose just above her.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, and some Jolly Jello."

Still irritated by Alex's last entry, Stanley decided to up the ante. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello and a Kickass Kiss!"

Her eyes went wide as Rhonnie watched Alex stop in her tracks, shoulders squared. She never so much as turned around before taking her turn.

Alex spoke slowly and clearly. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, and a Leather Lasso."

Rhonnie blew her bangs out of her eyes and noticed the perspiration beading on her forehead. The trail hadn't even started to get tough yet, not really. The light filtering in through the trees told the blonde they had been walking for only a few hours, but it was starting to feel like days.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, and Much Milder Manners."

Wheaton was trying to keep from falling again and busily thinking up cute and, to his mind, flirtatious, things to say.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, and a Nifty Naughty Navel."

"We're going on a picnic," gritted Alex, "and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, and an Overtly Obtuse Ogler."

That made Rhonnie smile at the strong back of the woman she loved. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, and a Purely Precious Pal."

Never catching the clue, Stanley continued. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, and a Quest for Quality Quenching."

Dark hair fell forward as Alex, once again, pulled the moron out of a gully; this time she had to kick aside another animal trap in the process.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, and a Rapidly Rising Rage."

Rhonnie sighed. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, and a Sympathetic Silly Sister."

Stanley was shaken by his close encounter with the rusted trap, but nonetheless oblivious.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, and a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso."

Alexandra paused to bend down and lift a stone the size of a large fist. She slowly examined it, rolling in around in first one hand and then the other. Glancing back to look briefly into hazel eyes, she sharply drew back her arm and released the stone with such force it was pulverized against the tall tree at which she had aimed it.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some

Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso, and an Ungrateful Undead Underling."

Rhonnie wanted to hug her friend so badly but knew she didn't dare. Words would have to do this time.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso, an Ungrateful Undead Underling, and a Veritable Vision of Venus."

Alex felt her heart skip a beat but Stanley already had his next entry prepared. "We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso, an Ungrateful Undead Underling, a Veritable Vision of Venus, and a Wildly Whimpering Wench."

Alex knew the little brainless wonder would never know what she said next so she stopped, stepped directly into his path, stood nearly nose to nose with the irritating flirt, bore icy blue eyes into his soul and made her final entry.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso, an Ungrateful Undead Underling, a Veritable Vision of Venus, a Wildly Whimpering Wench, and a pissed off warrior with an X-rated Xyster. Don't make me use it, little man."

Rhonnie didn't care any more. She stepped up beside the two and took Alex's hand, forcing her to pause and look at her.

"We're going on a picnic and on this picnic I'm bringing an appetizing apple, a beautiful blonde, some cold cokes, dainty dates, enchanting ears, a frenzied fan, three giant gyros, very hungry hips, an Idiot who is making my trigger finger Itch, some Jolly Jello, a Kickass Kiss, a Leather Lasso, Much Milder Manners, a Nifty Naughty Navel, an Overtly Obtuse Ogler, a Purely Precious Pal, a Quest for Quality Quenching, a Rapidly Rising Rage, a Sympathetic Silly Sister, a Tantalizingly Tempting Torso, an Ungrateful Undead Underling, a Veritable Vision of Venus, a Wildly Whimpering Wench, a pissed off warrior with an X-rated Xyster, and a Yearning Yen for YOU!" Rhonnie punctuated her words by taking Alex's very surprised lips with her own warm mouth.

Finally catching the clue, Stanley ended the word game. "We're going on a picnic...and I'm in Zone Zero." Looking at his fantasy kissing his protector with such passion, the city boy had to laugh at his own ignorance. "Well I hope we at least have some food in those packs because that picnic was a complete disappointment."

The words slowly filtered through passion's fog. Alex looked at Rhonnie and smiled. "Wow!"

"Yeah," Rhonnie blushed. "So much for closets, huh?"

Chapter XIII

Meanwhile, back at the cabin, the Ball Brothers were starting to stir. It was quiet enough they might have slept all day, but for the incredible discomfort that woke them. Before leaving, Alex made a point of putting several large logs on the fire and removing the amazingly efficient duct tape. She'd explained to Rhonnie at the time that this was the humane thing to do. After all, she wanted to be certain the poor fools didn't freeze to death before Lawton and his men killed them, and the duct tape might have been hard to explain later anyway. It made perfect sense to Rhonnie, and no one noticed the small gleam in the sparkling blue eyes. Placing the men against the wall, next to the fireplace was a stroke of pure, impish genius. At least in the devious mind of one of Denver's finest, as she had once been called. Even Stanley thought it quite decent of the taller woman to see to their well being so completely. He figured it was just part of the job. As if.

Skum Ball leaned against the stone section of wall, nearest the fire. While he slept, he turned his face from the fire. This had been done when, in the land of dreams, Skum found himself saving a child from a house afire. Skum had dreams like this a lot, but this time it was as though his flesh actually felt the flames reach out for him. This might have helped his face and arms but did nothing to prevent the large blisters from forming on his naked back.

Skuz Ball was faring better, in relation to the fireplace, since his *buddy* was absorbing most of the excess heat being sent their way. Still, anyone who has ever stood round a campfire knows the 'toasty on this side and frozen on the other' syndrome. Skuz Ball shivered in his sleep and unconsciously snuggled closer to his friend, who was busy having dreams of grandeur.

It was quite a sight to behold, really. It would have been even odds as to who was the more surprised when the front door was blown off its hinges.

"What the fuck?" came the query from Mickey Lawton as he burst through the still smoking doorway.

Sleepy eyes opened and blinked over and over as Skum and Skuz, the Ball Brothers, struggled to remember how in hell they came to be duct taped to one another.

"I'm freezin'," complained Skum Ball.

"You nuts? It's hotter 'n the pits of Hell in here!" bitched Skuz Ball.

Up The River, revised edition

Mickey Lawton smacked the goon next to him in the jaw with a .357 and glared hard enough to still any further laughter on the part of the hired gun. One long leg kicked the chair with the pillow person clear across the room as the furious fist snatched the blinds from the windows.

"Goddamn that bitch! Check the other rooms, you idiots. If she's in there, KILL HER. Wheaton is MINE!"

Holding his rapidly swelling jaw, the first man asked: "Shouldn't we untie...er...untape the boys first, boss?"

Smashing the man in the back of his head, Lawton swore under his breath before answering.

"What for? You don't think they survived do you?"

Struggling to stand, the man knew better than to say anything else and just moved to join his friend in searching the rest of the cabin.

Skuz and Skum looked at one another wide-eyed, finally waking enough to grasp the full impact of their situation. Frantically they tried to think of something, anything, which might be reason enough for the boss to let them live.

"No one's here, boss. They must've gone out the back."

"There ain't a back, moron. I already checked that yesterday, remember?" Mickey was losing what little patience he had and there wasn't much when it came to dealing with idiots.

"Sure there is, boss. It's in the back of the kitchen. I seen the door knob."

The dark eyes of the Crime Lord, squinted as he walked into the simply built kitchen. Putting the weapon back in its holster, next to his right armpit, he gritted angry teeth. "I know damn well that wasn't part of the original blueprints. That fucker is not visible from the outside at all. Gotta hand it to that tall, blue-eyed bitch. She's a smart one. Whole damn family's too smart for their own good." Motioning to the man who still had a good jaw, he spat. "Well, open it up, stupid! Let's see where they went."

Opening the heavy wooden door, the peon dared to think aloud. This was never a good idea around Mickey Lawton. "Um, boss. Couldn't we just radio the guys near the river to be on the lookout for em?"

Smack. A large hand hit him in the back of his head, leaving a knot where the knuckles struck bone.

"I'm surrounded by idiots. The best paid idiots in Arapahoe County, for Christ's sake. You think someone smart enough to put in that door was stupid enough to go back to the goddamned river? Jesus! Call em on the radio, boss. You morons ever listen to anything I tell ya? Why don't we just hire a plane to write it across the sky?"

Hanging his aching head, "Sorry boss. I forgot."

Lawton closed the door and studied the outside of it with an odd appreciation for the woman he intended to kill. She was a worthy opponent, he thought. It only took one look at the path of the tracks for him to make his decision.

"Get back inside. No point freezin' our asses off. No one in their right mind would chase that woman where she's headed. Shit. I might not even get the pleasure of killing her. Looks to me like she's gonna do it for me. Hell, I **heard** she was nuts."

Moving to cut the Ball Brothers free, the first man tried to speak with his jaw swelling shut. "You don't think she'd try to climb that mountain from **this** side? With that snow storm comin'?"

"Go put some snow on that. I can't understand half of what you're saying. Of course she's gonna climb from this side. She thinks she's fucking invincible! My guess is she has no clue about the damn snowstorm headed her way. Rotten shame too. Bitch is gonna die up there and I'm not even gonna be there to see the look in those baby blues when she gets it."

Skuz Ball couldn't help it. He could not have been less prepared for the thought that sneaked into his brain. *'That's cold.'* It was at that moment in his miserable life, that the 29 year old loser from Boulder fully understood the complete and utter lack of humanity in the man he called Boss. He glanced up at the fellow loser who sliced through the tape that bound him. "Thanks Jake."

"Wel..."

BOOM. Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Jesus, boss! You coulda blown my hand off." Turning to look back at his friend for seven years, Jake saw what remained of the Ball Brothers and promptly ran for the door. Thrusting it open just in the nick of time, Jake emptied the contents of his stomach. Twice.

"Oh get back in here. You've seen dead guys before. Hell, you've made em dead more times than a few. They all look pretty much the same. I said, GET IN HERE! And clean that mess up."

Closing his eyes against the horror for only a moment, the third man spoke. "I'll get it boss. I could use the fresh air. Only take a minute."

"Fine. Just hurry up about it. The damn door's letting all the heat out."

Jake managed to pull himself together by taking another quick look at his fallen comrades. If there had ever been any doubt in his mind, it was gone now. No one was above killing to The Boss. No one. "What do we do now, boss?"

"Nothing. We sit tight. No way I would climb that mountain just to kill that loser Wheaton. I wouldn't even do it to kill that Stoner bitch. No. We sit right here. The guys will be here in a few hours and I'll take care of it then. Nothing on the radio, you hear me? Not one word. Let her think she fooled us." Lawton was already laying the ambush out in his cold, calculating, murderous mind. "Just let her think she's in the clear; just in case the mountain doesn't get her. Hell, maybe there **is** a God after all and I can still do her myself."

Miles away, the trail was getting rougher and Alex decided maybe it was about time to give Stanley a break. He was looking a little worse for wear and she had to admit, all that talk of a picnic earlier was making her pretty hungry. Smiling to herself, the deputy thought about the kiss Rhonnie had ended the little game with.

'Yeah, you make me hungry too but I'm on duty here. Wonder if they'd throw me off the force for losing a witness because

of...yeah, right.' Alex laughed to herself.

"What's funny?" Rhonnie inquired.

"Huh? Oh, I'll tell you later." Alex answered, knowing full well she was not likely to share that little fantasy anytime soon.

She stopped and turned toward the others, about to tell them it was time for some lunch and give their feet a break.

"Um, Alex..." Rhonnie spoke slowly and softly.

Stanley was actually speechless. Absolute terror filled his hazel eyes as he was certain the animal moved toward him. In all his life, Stanley Wheaton had never seen anything so quietly menacing as the creature standing before him. The size of the teeth seemed to grow before his eyes as the piercing cry filled his ears.

"Don't move Stanley." Alex said the words slowly and clearly while slowly placing herself between her witness and the cougar.

"N..n..no p..p..problem," came the reply.

Rhonnie knew she would hate herself later but the smile just emerged, unbidden. It found a twin on her tall friend's face. Stanley was too busy holding his urine to notice.

With no sound made, the mountain lion found what it was after in the tree several yards away and moved on. Stanley breathed again.

Alex winked at the blonde. "Hey Stanley. If you think **that** was scary, you should see Rhonnie first thing in the morning."

The blood began to return to the city boy's face and his eyes took on an altogether different look. "Oh, I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

The low growl that filled the air around the man's ears did not come from a cougar this time and one look identified its origin.

Rhonnie grinned. "Well, I prefer looking at an angel with baby blues in the morning myself."

Crystal blues looked away from hazel and found mossy green. "Um.."

Stanley winked at the cover girl, "I think you got her, Rhonnie."

"Not yet, Stanley. Not yet," whispered the blonde. "But I'm working on it."

"Great," sighed the witness with the posters on his bedroom ceiling. "Just great."

Chapter XIV

Lunch consisted of simply made sandwiches, oranges and drinks from a nearby stream. Conversation was sorely lacking, each of the three lost in their own thoughts. Emptying his canteen for the third time during the brief respite, Stanley rose to walk the few yards to the stream and refill it as he saw the detective do twice already.

Alex stood and took the empty container. "It's okay Stanley, comes with the job. Stay here with Rhonnie and sit a while longer. Later on, you will be glad you did."

Rhonnie started to say something to her friend but realized she was right and the witness and his feet were going to need all the rest they could get. The actress had a pretty good idea where her dream woman planned to stop for the night and, knowing they would need to get there before dark, meant Mr. Wheaton was in for a rough afternoon. In fact, maybe she better check the fit of his shoes while they were stopped.

"Stanley, how are those boots feeling? Snug enough? Are they rubbing anywhere?" she asked.

Stanley Wheaton could hardly believe his ears. Maybe she had feelings for him after all, he allowed himself to think.

"Your feet, Stanley," Rhonnie asked again. "How do the boots feel? Tight enough? Any rubbing? Any sore spots, yet?"

"Yet? You mean it's inevitable?" Stanley's mind was on his feet now. He moved his toes within the confines of the borrowed hiking boots. "Nothing hurts, if that counts for anything."

Rhonnie smiled at the city boy and the look on his face as he wiggled his toes and concentrated on whether anything hurt. The blonde knew what he apparently did not: if he had to think about it, he was doing fine – so far.

"That counts for a lot Stanley and believe me, before the day is out, you will understand that too."

Stanley retied the footwear, firmly snugging the laces. "That sounds kind of ominous. Should I be worried?"

The returning brunette handed him the full, cool canteen. "If you aren't already worried Wheaton you aren't as smart as I thought you were."

Alex smiled. Rhonnie just nodded. Stanley was not amused but **was** pleased to learn his protector thought he was smart. He would have sworn she thought him a total moron.

"You think I'm smart huh?" asked the witness as he started to drink from the canteen again.

"Don't drink anymore right now, Stanley. We need to get going, and you'll need it more later." Alex lifted the pack onto her strong back and helped Rhonnie into hers. "And I didn't say **how** smart I thought you were, did I?"

Stanley took one look at the lifted left brow and tried to discern whether the woman was teasing him. Shrugging, he decided it was best to just forget it and move on. He tossed the sleeping bag she had given him to carry onto his back, wiggled his toes once more, and the three of them fell into formation again, Alex clearly in the lead.

As the trail became increasingly more difficult, an interesting thing happened. Stanley stopped whining. The man was so busy watching where he placed his foot on each and every step, for fear of stepping on another animal trap or falling on yet another tree root growing just above the ground, he actually stopped whining and complaining. He had already stumbled so many times it was embarrassing and one of the falls had very nearly broken his nose. Alex assured him it wasn't broken but it throbbed and ached and seemed to Stanley to be taking up more than its fair share of his face.

Up The River, revised edition

After falling on his swollen nose four times, the stranger to the wilderness was firmly on the lookout for up-growing tree roots and anything else that looked even vaguely suspicious or threatening.

There was only one problem with paying so much attention to where his feet went. Constantly looking in the direction of his feet left him prey to.....smack....well-furred branches as they sprang back after the detective moved past them. It was after encountering this little phenomenon more than a dozen times Stanley realized he was, in all probability, allergic to pine. He hardly noticed the soreness in the swollen nose now. It was difficult to be fully aware of anything so terribly plugged up, he thought. Besides, how could he think with his face itching so badly?

They had been hiking for several hours when Alex noticed a tiny stream a few yards away.

"Hey, tell you what, Stan. Why don't you and Rhonnie sit for a minute while I get us a cool drink?"

"Huh?" Stanley nearly ran into her when she stopped without warning and looked up in surprise at her suggestion he take a break. That was the first time Alex really saw his face in its current predicament.

"Stanley. Your nose is a mess. Are you allergic to something? I'm pretty sure I haven't seen any poison ivy, oak or sumac where we've been today." Without waiting for a reply she dropped the pack, grabbed a water jug from inside it, and nodded to the witness to sit down on a fallen log. "Sit down a minute, Stanley. Rhonnie, I'll be right back. See if you can tell if his nose is broken, okay?"

"No problem," assured the blonde as she settled her pack onto the ground and moved to Stanley's side. Softly touching the blotchy, swollen face, Rhonnie spoke: "Does this hurt?"

Watching the small hands reach toward his face, Stanley looked deeply into emerald pools. Somewhere in his brain he knew she asked a question but for the life of him he could not think what she'd said. So he just keep looking.

"Stanley," Rhonnie asked a little louder, "does this hurt?"

"Hurt? No, it feels wonderful," came the dreamy reply.

"I'll just **bet** it does," smirked Alex. Placing an icy cloth across his face, she took soft hands in her own and helped Rhonnie to her feet. "Try this. It won't feel as *wonderful*, but it will bring the swelling down and might ease the itching up a bit, too."

Looking up at her amused friend, Rhonda realized she had probably just played right into the fantasies of a certain murder witness. "Ooops. Sorry about that. I didn't think about..."

Brushing her lips against the cool fingers, Alex smiled with her whole face. "Don't worry about it. Probably the best pain killer we've got," she winked. "Think you have any Benadryl in that miracle bag of yours?"

Laughing gently, Rhonnie smiled back at Alex. "Oh, I think I can find something to help that itching of his."

Watching Rhonnie locate the antihistamine, Alex thought: '*Sure but what are we gonna do about my itching?*'

Stanley missed the entire exchange because all he could think about was the feel of Rhonda's hand on his face and the way the green in her eyes deepened with the rich green of the pine trees reflected in them. Slowly he became aware of the coolness of the cloth against his face. It was really helping, he mentally noted.

"Here, Stanley. Take these," Rhonnie handed him the two pink capsules and his canteen. "It's just Benadryl. It will help with the itching. It's probably best not to take anything for the pain, if your nose hurts, at least not until we stop for the evening. You really need to be alert. I'm sorry."

Taking the pills, Stanley nodded. "It's okay. Honest. The cloth helped. Thanks Alex." The city boy stood up and put the sleeping bag on his back again.

Alex had to admit he was not as big a wus as he seemed when push came to shove. She elected not to tell him his nose was almost certainly broken. There was little to be done about it out here and she felt it was pretty much in place when she put the cloth against his face. Knowing would not make it feel any better. Picking up the pace a bit, she knew they needed to get to where she wanted to camp soon. That nose was gonna start hurting a lot worse when the cold from the frozen cloth wore off. A **lot** worse. Meanwhile, she would put snow on the cloth every few minutes and hope for the best. There was really only one safe place to spend the night and it was at least another two hours to the cave.

Rhonnie noticed how much closer Alex was keeping their little band and knew she was right about Stanley's nose being broken. It did not escape her attention either that Alex was being painfully careful not to let the witness fall or even stumble again. When the detective pulled a large branch back to pass through an area, she waited until the others were safely past before releasing the springing branches. Ms. I'm Tough As Nails was a real softie, but her secret was safe with Rhonda.

The pretty pink capsules worked like a charm on the itching, and Stanley was grateful, especially since his nose felt like it had lost an argument with a tree. A large tree. Oddly enough, that is not so very far from what happened...repeatedly, he groaned silently.

The air was getting markedly colder and the wind was picking up slightly as the reds and oranges began to filter through the trees. Alex inwardly thanked anyone listening when she saw the break in the trees against the granite wall they would face tomorrow.

"I thought this might be where we were headed," smiled Rhonnie. "I haven't been here in years. You think it's safe?"

"Compared to what?" grinned Alex. "Yeah, I think so. Let me go in and make sure first though." She dropped her heavy pack to the ground and for the first time the witness noticed the sound as it filtered into his mind why he had been carrying only a sleeping bag. "Put some more snow on that nose, Stanley. I won't be a minute...unless the bear is awake." She couldn't resist teasing him but wide eyes made her laugh quickly. "Nah, not to worry Stanley. This cave's too small for that."

Rhonnie handed Stanley the cloth filled with fresh snow and helped him sit down with it. She began glancing about for fallen twigs and branches and found there would be plenty. She noted, pleased, there was even several larger branches about six feet away. It looked as if they were from a tree stricken by lightning, probably in the spring or summer months. The blonde made

certain Stanley was resting and then moved about gathering what she knew they would need before darkness fell, and it fell quickly in the mountains.

"Everything's fine inside," assured Alex, emerging from the small cave. "I started a fire so you can see, and there is a torch just inside the entrance. Let me get some...oh, I see someone remembers how to set up camp. Thanks, Rhon."

"Welcome, Al. Want me to get some water? I assume the stream is still behind those trees."

"It is," said Alex. "But why don't you get Stanley settled inside? Give him something for the pain and build the fire up a bit. I'll grab some fresh water and see if I can't get us something decent to eat while I'm at it." She moved close enough to put a hand on the small but strong shoulder. "You be all right for a while?"

"Well, if I'm not you'll hear me. I can promise you that," grinned the smaller woman. Stanley laughed and Alex snorted. "You do remember how well I scream, don't you?"

"Oh yeah. I remember." Leaning in close enough to whisper, Alex spoke to her friend alone. "These are **not** the circumstances under which I want to hear you scream."

Rhonnies face took on the color of her favorite rose. She meant to say something but absolutely nothing came to mind.

"Stanley, you keep an eye on her. I'm not at all sure she can scream and be speechless at the same time." Alex snickered as she checked the quiver across her left shoulder. "I won't be long. Now get on inside. You'll be warmer there."

"Alex!" Rhonnie found her voice when Alex smacked her butt.

Too late. The detective turned and was off in search of water and food, chuckling at the look she already knew was finding its way across the most beautiful face on the planet.

After a delicious meal of roast rabbit, potatoes and a variety of root vegetables Alex dug from where she had first planted them years before, Stanley was fast asleep. He was finally without pain thanks to the Tylenol with Codeine Alex kept in her back pack for emergencies.

Taking out the cell phone, Rhonda reminded Alex where they would be tomorrow. "We won't be able to use this at all once we are on our way in the morning. Weren't you gonna call the Chief, Alex?"

"Figured out where we were headed did you?" she asked.

"Like it was ever a mystery. Come on, Al. I knew the minute you realized we were trapped we'd climb the damn mountain. It's gonna be hell on Stanley here and I wish that damn storm wasn't headed our way but yeah, I figured it out." Rhonnie touched her friend's hand as she gave her the phone.

"I love you, Rhonnie. Did I tell you that yet today?"

"You know, with everything that's happened I'm not sure. Wanna say it again? Just to be sure and all?"

"Again and again. I love you, Rhonda Reynolds. I have always loved you. I'm sorry to drag you into this but incredibly glad you're here, all at the same time. Nuts, huh?" Alex asked.

Kissing a tanned cheek, "Nope. Sounds about right to me. I love you too. Now call the Chief before he eats another drawer full." Rhonnie winked at the love of her life.

They both knew the time and place was all wrong for anything else, so Alex punched the button on the cell phone.

"Where the hell have you two been? I'm down to only one drawer left and half of it's nothing more than empty wrappers." Chief Bartoni paused to take a breath and thank his God they were still alive. "Sorry. You two all right? How's Wheaton?"

"Well, gee, Chief. Why don't you send out telegrams to Lawton?" Alex smirked into the tiny device. Rhonnie's cheek practically touched her own, as they listened for a response.

"Oh. Right. Well, hell, Alex. If you're where I think you are that chicken shit can't benefit from this call. He is one cold sonofabitch but – and don't belt me for saying this – even he ain't crazy enough to be where you two are right now."

Rhonda took her turn to laugh. "She won't hit ya chief. I won't let her. Oh come on, Al. When he's right, he's right."

Alex put on her best pouty face. It did no good at all.

The chief breathed a small sigh of relief. "Girl, don't you ever lose that sense of humor. Ms Pouty Face is gonna need it."

"How does he do that?" asked the pseudo indignant deputy.

Chief Bartoni and Rhonda Reynolds enjoyed a short but needed giggle. Then Alex took the phone with a grin and a quick smooch.

"Did I just hear what I thought I heard?" asked the hopeful man on the other end.

"Must be interference chief," smirked Alex as she winked at Rhonnie. "Just checking in. We'll call again before we head out in the morning. Then we won't be able to reach you until tomorrow night. You got everything all set?"

"Working on it, Alex. It will all be ready. You have my word on it. Just be careful out there. I'm pretty crazy about you and that little blonde, ya know?" the chief assured her.

"Hey! Who's he calling little?"

"Um, Chief. Gotta go. One blonde bombshell about to explode here." Alex punched the *end call* button and pulled Rhonnie onto her lap.

"About to explode, huh?" Blonde brows waggled.

One dark brow lifted, "Well, a gal's gotta dream, don't I?"

Settling into the lap, Rhonnie snuggled in very close. "You tell me your dreams and I'll tell you mine."

"Oh lord," moaned one very cornered woman. "I might be in trouble here."

"Oh yeah," came the whispered reply. "They don't call me bombshell for nothin', ya know."

"Oh lord..."

Chapter XV

Rhonnie took the cell phone from Alex's hand and tossed it over onto the sleeping bag, a few feet away. Quiet, blue eyes watched in slight surprise. Without losing her place on the comfy lap, Rhonda leaned over to the stack of firewood and tossed one of the larger pieces onto the still roaring fire. Tiny sparks and cinders lifted, scattering into the air before floating out the small hole overhead. Green eyes turned back to blue, orange flames dancing in them as their owner smiled with her entire face.

"That ought to keep Stanley warm for a while. I'll make sure you don't get cold in my own way. That is, if you don't mind." Brushing the mouth with soft lips, Rhonda spoke in a whisper. "You don't mind, do you Alex?"

Alex allowed her mouth to be taken with the kiss as the words filtered into her mind. Feeling Rhonnie shift slightly as she moved from merely sitting on the brunette's lap to straddling it, Alex moaned into the opening mouth.

Somewhere in her brain a tiny voice, dressed in a blue uniform tried to be heard. *'You are on duty, Deputy U. S. Marshal Alexandra Abigail Stoner. You will stop this immediately.'* That was when she felt the warm muscles slide together and begin the circle of love.

"Oh Alex," Rhonda mumbled as she moved the tip of her tongue round and round it's mate. Scooting as far onto the strong thighs as she could get, the blonde bombshell pressed into the detective and moaned her name again.

The uniformed, decorated, DEPENDABLE voice grew louder and louder, much to the frustration of Deputy Stoner.

"Rhonnie, we can't do this." Even as she heard the words issue forth from her own mouth she wanted to call them back; but Alex knew the timing was all wrong. She hated it, but she knew it all the same.

Pressing tightly against the woman of her dreams, Rhonnie grinned. "Sure we can, we just need practice. Lucky girl that you are, I'm willing to keep at it until we get it right."

"Oh Baby, I want to. I really do, but we can't. It's just too risky." Alex marveled at how bad words could taste and how much she could hate the job she loved so much only hours before.

Rhonnie snickered, but released the strong tongue, regretfully. "Alex?"

"Mmm," groaned the cop while closing her eyes tightly for a moment.

Rhonda leaned in so her warm breath caressed the small ear. "I might believe you more if you weren't holding my butt so tightly. Not to mention lifting those sexy hips of yours into me in a rhythm that's about to drive me insane."

Blue eyes opened quickly. Strong hands froze against thick blue jeans and hips stilled. "Gods. I can't believe I did that. I'm so sorry, Rhonnie."

"You are?"

Reaching fingertips to catch the tears before they could slip onto blushing cheeks, Alex shook her head. "No. No, I'm not sorry at all. I love you, and I've wanted this for so long. I'm only sorry about the time and location." Placing a gentle kiss on each eyelid, she continued. "Sweetheart, Stanley could wake up, the weather could get worse, an animal could come in trying to find a warm home, anything could happen. I have to do my job, Baby. I don't want to but I have to. Please try to understand."

Kissing the worried face, Rhonnie assured her friend all was well with them. "I do understand, Alex. I love you too. Do you think it would be all right...I mean...could you just hold me for a while?"

"Nothing would please me more. Okay. Well, maybe that's not entirely true but right here, right now, I would absolutely love to do nothing more than hold you. Let's move over to the sleeping bags and you try to get some sleep," Alex suggested.

"In your arms?"

"In my arms."

The day had been a long one and Rhonda fell into a deep sleep in hardly any time at all. Alex marveled at how good it felt to hold Rhonda this way. Even the soft snore sounded like a celestial choir to the woman who always seemed so self-assured to most of the world. She drew her love closer to her and pulled one of the sleeping bags over them. Feeling the cover girl wrap one arm around her waist, Alex slid tender fingertips along flesh of the surprisingly strong arm. Rhonnie had gradually changed her position so that she lay, stretched out, onto her own sleeping bag with her head and upper body in Alex's lap. The world famous face was so calm, so relaxed, and so perfect. At least, that was what Alex Stoner thought. This was the most perfect face on the planet and it was snuggled into her left thigh.

"Alex." Rhonnie called out into the chilling night air.

"I'm here, honey." Alex soothed.

"Alex. Alex," Rhonnie called again.

Concerned, Alex stroked the gentle face. "I'm right here, Rhonnie. It's all right."

Moving in her sleep now, the blonde called out yet again. "Alex. Oh, Alex."

Blue eyes noted the body movement and opened wide, watching the small hand slip beneath the covering. Swallowing hard, Alex shifted slightly, suddenly less than comfortable.

"Alex. Oh Alex. Yes, Alex. I love you so much. Yes, baby. Right there. Alex." Rhonnie was holding Alex tightly, kissing the powerful thigh and moving against her own hand faster and faster. Her speech became more and more breathy, as her tall friend struggled to keep her own lungs functioning. Finally, the heated, writhing body went rigid as the cry filled the small cave. "Alleexx!"

Beads of perspiration rolling into blue eyes were in stark contrast to the air around the dark haired woman. Closing her eyes again, she reminded herself to breathe. When Rhonda's body relaxed into a peaceful sleep, the detective slipped out from beneath the woman and found her boots. Smiling, Alex chuckled softly. "Guess you still talk in your sleep, eh Rhon?" Leaning over to brush soft, coral lips, she whispered. "Sleep my love. I think I need a walk in the frozen wilderness. I'll resist the dip in the stream only because it would mean removing my clothes to let them dry. Then I'd be back where I started, wouldn't I?"

Two walks in the freezing air and watching her own breath did nothing to calm Alex Stoner's racing heart. It did, however, wake any part of her body that was not already at full alert. Slipping the love of her life back into her lap, she shook her dark tresses and smiled.

"It's gonna be a long night. A very long night."

Chapter XVI

Alex closed her eyes a few times, only long enough to let them rest a little, but dared not let sleep take her. It was as Rhonnie had said earlier and Alex knew it was more than unlikely Mickey Lawton would even attempt to track them into the mountains. He was ruthless, powerful in the ugliest of ways and seemed to have allegiance to no one. Still, he was not stupid and rarely acted without thinking out every angle. She hated that. An impetuous or passionate killer was so much easier to catch. No, Mickey Lawton was nobody's fool. He was far too crafty and needed to be in control way too much to trek into an area where he would be at the mercy of nature. There was little doubt in her restless mind that Mr. Lawton was, even then, setting into motion some evil plan or other.

Rhonnie moved slightly in her sleep, curling into a kind of ball and putting both arms about the detective's small waist.

"You're cold," whispered Alex. "The temperature has been dropping all night. It must be near zero out there with the wind whipping around like that. Here, let me just reach over and," Alex smiled as small arms held tightly against the slightest movement.

Rhonnie's eyes flickered slightly before relaxing again.

Alex stroked the golden hair and chuckled softly. "Like I could go anywhere with that vise-like grip of yours."

"Mmmmm. Good."

Reaching the full length of her long arms, Alex pulled two of the larger pieces of wood toward her until she could grip them well enough to put them on the fire she had been tending all night. Then she snuggled the sleeping back bag around Rhonnie and leaned back, fully enjoying the feel of the blonde holding her. Crossing her heavily socked feet at the ankles, the tall woman sighed.

"At least it isn't snowing like they said it would. We can thank that guy you don't believe in anymore for that. It's cold enough to make a polar bear consider relocating but at least we won't be sliding off the damned mountain." Alex spoke in a low whisper to no one in particular, partly because it helped her maintain focus and not fall asleep.

Only the barest blue-grays of dawn were making an entrance through the smoke hole when the chirping alerted Alex. She learned long ago the secret of nodding without allowing herself to fall into a full slumber. It was an essential skill for someone in her line of work. Unfortunately, it meant she lived with more than a little difficulty sleeping when she **did** get the chance. Part of the job, she accepted silently.

"Morning Chief," Alex whispered.

"Alex Stoner, are you whispering? I don't think I've heard you whisper in years. Is something wrong? You're not in trouble are you?"

"You're just gonna talk like it's a holiday aren't ya?" Alex chided.

"Um, Alex." The worried tone made the detective sit up straight, waking the blonde in her lap.

"Mmmmm. What's going on? Oh, the Chief?" Rhonnie began to assess the situation and rubbed tight fists into sleepy eyes.

Alex smiled. "Yeah," Alex tried to cover the mouthpiece but found the tiny device made that difficult. "You look so cute when you first wake up. Don't ever change."

"Good morning, Rhonnie." The chief of detectives grinned into the phone.

"Chief!" Alex flashed blue lightening into the phone.

"It doesn't matter anymore. He knows, Alex." Listening to the sounds of his best detective and favorite brunette breathe in and out, Bartoni opened and shut two drawers, both empty. "Damn it. Are you two all right?"

"Look in the back of the top, center drawer Chief. Yes, we're all right." Her eyes closed for a three count. "I'm okay now. Go ahead and tell me. What does Lawton know and how do you know he knows? Please tell me he didn't kill anyone else on the force."

Rhonnie sat up next to Alex and leaned into her shoulder, listening to the deep voice. She took the large hand not holding the cell phone in her own and put it in her lap. As the first rays of sunrise streamed into the cave, they smiled, hands firmly locked together.

"I love you," both women mouthed at the same time.

"A message was delivered to the station by private courier about an hour ago, Alex. It was checked with the same results as usual. It's clean but it's his." Chief Bartoni dreaded what he knew was coming.

Rhonnie watched the body shift as shoulders were squared and a strong chin lifted, jaw firmly set. She felt the hand try to gain freedom but held fast, moving it to her lips and kissing the palm. Alex smiled and nodded, pulling the hands to her own lips to return the favor.

Up The River, revised edition

"OK, Chief. We're ready. What was in the message? Did he kill anyone to deliver it?"

Anthony Bartoni opened his third Milky Way Fun Size Bar and popped it into his mouth. She was not going to like this. He would be lucky to still have his hearing in tact, he quietly groaned to himself. Rising to close the door to his office, he resigned himself to the inevitable.

"Chief, talk to me. You're scaring me here." Alex was uncharacteristically candid.

"Alex Stoner scared? Somebody quick, call Satan. Hell just froze over." He attempted to win a smile.

"Yeah and it ain't the only thing frozen this fine morning but at least it's not snowing....yet." Rhonnie tried to reassure the man who had been more a father to her than her own ever was.

"Hey, short stuff. Ooops. I mean, morning Ms Bombshell." Chief Bartoni offered.

"Green eyes throwing more sparks than the fire, Chief," Alex smiled. She wanted to laugh a little. She knew he needed to hear her laugh but her gut was in a knot and she just couldn't.

"I'll bet," came a voice so familiar Alex and Rhonnie both gasped.

"M...Mom?" Alex swallowed hard and squeezed the hands holding hers.

"Good morning, sweetheart. Hi Rhonda. You have been sorely missed by that woman you're practically sitting on, you know?" Abigail Stoner winked at her old friend who was scavenging at the back of the open drawer.

Blushing, Rhonnie started to move slightly only to find herself pulled closer. Alex shook her dark hair and whispered, "Never again, Rhon. You're staying right here...if you want to."

Hovering over trembling lips, the blonde bombshell spoke knowing she would be heard on the other end of the line. "Good morning, Abigail. I'm not sitting on her at the moment, but I've missed her too. I think we're pretty clear on that now. I'd ask how you are but if you're with the Chief you've been better. Right?"

Abigail Stoner thought she heard something but dismissed it as static on the line. "Yes, well, Tony called me about an hour ago and said I better see this. Sweetheart, I'm going to just listen now, but you two be careful out there. I love you both very much. Rhonnie, don't let Ms. I Have to Save the World take any chances. Okay?"

Rhonnie covered the mouth before Alex could argue. "Don't worry, Abigail. I plan to keep her around for a long time. A very, very long time."

Licking the palm won her release and blue eyes darkened with the next words. "All right, Chief. Let's have it. I know it must be pretty bad if you got Mom out of bed before noon - so just tell me. Let me get mad and then we will go about the business of climbing this goddamned mountain. Sorry Mom."

Stanley Wheaton stirred and started to wake, then rolled back over. Alex rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Chief Bartoni knew there was no way to avoid telling Alex about the message. She needed to know what was going on and they all had a right to know what they were going to be up against.

"Alex," the chief began. "No more officers have been hurt so far as we know. When our men got to the cabin there were two bodies, but they've been identified as Lawton's own men."

"The Ball Brothers," Alex sighed. She knew they were as good as dead but took no pleasure in the news.

"Huh?" asked the chief.

"Oh. Nothing, just a nickname. Go on," she urged.

"Well they were a mess, his usual style. The guys checked the cabin out, and you're gonna need a new door. Other than that and fumigating, I don't think anything was damaged."

"Okay. Good. Now about the message?"

"Alex you're not gonna like it."

"Well, duh!" Alex teased.

"All right. All right. I get it. Rhonda you keep a firm grip on tall, dark and bad tempered, you hear me?" The man was about beside himself when his auburn tressed friend took pity on him and gave him some bubble gum. "He just wants to rattle your cage Alex. You know that."

"Chief!"

"Oh all right. You want me to read it word for word I suppose?" asked the brown-eyed man who already knew the answer.

"Of course. But why don't you have Mom go for some coffee, okay?" Alex had read enough of Lawton's masterpieces to know she would rather her mother not have to hear another one.

"Shut up, Alexandra. I read the damn thing myself twice already. Tony just read it, and let's get it over with."

Alex started to say something, but Rhonnie shook her head, silencing her.

The chief picked up the note, carefully encased in plastic now. "Here we go, Alex.

'I have my men back. It was most generous of you to leave them gift wrapped for me. Stupid, but generous. Naturally, they paid for their failure and incompetence with their worthless lives. I guess their families can thank you for that, eh Stoner? How is wussy little Wheaton doing? Piss his pants yet? Tell him I'm taking the cost of the watch out of his next paycheck. Oh yeah, dead men don't draw paychecks. Just as well, he was wearing on my nerves anyway. Such a little coward, but you know that by now, don't you Stoner?

Hey I saw from the luggage and the journal, you have a pretty little friend with you now. You know Stoner, she's got it real bad for you, the little pervert. Maybe you

should take your time getting back into Denver. It will be a lot healthier for the Blonde Bombshell.' "

"Fuck him!" Spat Rhonnie.

Blue eyes shot hot hate into the cave wall. "You do and he's a dead man!"

Ooooooooooooo! Stanley was awake now.

Alex ground her perfect teeth, and Rhonda snatched the phone. "Read the rest, Chief. What else did the bastard have to say? Oh, sorry Abigail."

Abigail Stoner smiled and shook her head slightly. She always wondered how long it would take the little blonde to find her nerve. Lord knew her daughter would have taken the torturing secret to her grave, God forbid.

"There's just a little more. He says:

'But then you are the perfect cop, aren't you Stoner? Just like your dear old Daddy. Did anyone ever tell you it was one of my guys that blew him away? No? Well, it was. He was just too nosy for his own good. That sister of yours stumbled onto the truth, and we thought she was gonna spill her guts. I only made it look like an accident, Stoner. I figured the guilt would make a good silencer. Did it work? Well, here's the deal, bitch. No way am I climbing that dumbass mountain in a snowstorm. You have to bring him to Denver, and I will be waiting for you. Be a few hours late and your pretty friend will live. I might even convince the guys not to have too much fun with her. Deliver the witness and you **all** die...but the Blonde Bombshell, she gets to watch you die first. Personally, I hope you deliver him. I'm itching to kill me another Stoner.'

That's it, Alex. It's a trap. You both need to know that."

"Fuck him!" repeated the angry blonde.

"Don't even think about it, sweetheart. You wouldn't like it. Dead men are not very good in the sack."

Abigail covered her mouth and laughed right out loud.

"Like any man ever stood a chance, Alex. Anna knew it when I was only five. Only you kept missing the clues."

Pulling Rhonda's body firmly against her own, Alex spoke into the phone.

"Chief. You just be at the pick up point. We'll be there. Mickey Lawton has killed his last Stoner. He's a walking dead man." Then the tall detective took the smiling coral lips in a kiss that made them both tremble.

Rhonnie couldn't stop the moan from escaping.

"Well, I'll be damned." Anthony Bartoni looked at Abigail Stoner. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep," smiled the redhead. "My brilliant daughter just caught a clue...by the lips."

Chapter XVII

Everyone was up and breakfast, such as it was, had been eaten. Rhonda refilled the canteens and the spare water jugs as well as rolling and tying the sleeping bags. Alex removed three pairs of gloves from her pack and tightened the straps back down. Both she and Rhonnie had discarded any remaining packaging and buried their trash, a habit developed during childhood outings. She was burying the fire with snow from outside for the fourth time when she looked at Stanley and sighed deeply. Rhonnie knew it was time for Alex to tell the witness about the day that lay ahead of them. He was not likely to be thrilled.

"Stanley," Alex began. "I wish I could say the worst was past us, but the unpleasant truth is that yesterday was the easy part."

"Easy? That was the **easy** part?!" His eyes filled with fear just as Alex knew they would.

"Stanley, listen to me now. You can do this. Amateurs make climbs far worse than this all the time. Every year people with less experience or climbing skill than you climb all the way to the top of Pike's Peak...and many of them do it in one day, too. You have the benefit of having two very experienced climbers with you." She winked at the blonde. "Rhonnie and I have been climbing things tougher than this most of our lives. Right, Rhonnie?" Alex hoped her friend would not feel obliged to mention that those climbs had not been in sub-freezing temperatures with a homicidal maniac on their minds. She drew the lucky straw, for once.

"Really, Rhonda?" asked the still frightened man.

"Absolutely!" assured Rhonda. "Alex and I have been climbing hills tougher than this since before puberty." For her part, Rhonnie hoped calling the mountain a hill would make it seem less scary to the panic-stricken city boy.

"Good." Alex clapped her hand on Stanley's shoulder in a friendly manner. "Much as I would like to sit around this lovely home and chat till the sun was higher in the sky, we really must be on our way."

The other two campers nodded in understanding.

"Here's the thing, Stanley. It's very cold out there and I mean **very** cold. That can be a climber's worst enemy." The deputy handed the witness and her friend each a pair of lined, leather gloves.

"These will help warm your hands when you use 'em. Some people find it difficult to climb with gloves on; they say it makes

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it harder to grip. That's up to you to decide. I can only tell you what I do. I climb without them as long as I can, taking time every few minutes to blow on my fingers or warm my hands in my arm pits or between my legs." Alex flashed Rhonnie a look that told her not to even go there.

"I think I can do that," Stanley said.

"Good man," came the detective's praising response. "We'll take it as slow as possible with time to warm your hands often. I will go first. Stanley, you'll be in the middle and Rhonnie will be after you. No ropes linking us, and I'm not even gonna take the time right now to explain that, but I have my reasons. Please trust me."

Rhonnie nodded, knowing the dangers of a rope on this particular climb far outweighed the possible benefits.

Stanley smiled a weak smile. "It would be a little late in the game not to trust you, Alex. You've already saved my life more times than I care to think about right now. What else do I need to know?"

"Thanks, Stanley. I'll try not to let you down. Just a couple of things, and we'll get going. First, keep your face to the rock in front of you. Don't look up or down beyond Rhonnie or I. Just pretend the only part of the mountain that exists is the section that begins with Rhonnie's feet and extends only as far as my fingertips. Think you can do that?"

"I'll try," the worried witness answered honestly.

"Best anyone can do, Stanley." Alex knew if she said much more he might crumble. "One more thing and we go. Try to put your hands and feet where you see me put mine but never...this is important, Stanley...**never**...grab hold of a protruding root, a large rock, anything and put your weight on it without testing it first. Like this." Alex went to the cave wall and put her hand on a rock that appeared to the unlearned eye to be firmly imbedded in stone. She pulled hard on it as if using it to pull her up the wall; the result was the rock coming off in her hands, as quite a bit of loose stone and dirt around it was dislodged and scattered along the cave wall.

Hazel eyes grew wide. "That looked solid."

"Exactly." Alex patted his shoulder. "Exactly, Stanley. That's why you test every hand and foot hold first."

He swallowed. "I'll try. I will Alex...but I'm scared, and I won't pretend I'm not."

"Perfect. As long as you're honest with us and do your best, we'll be just fine. Now let's go."

The three started out slowly, just like the detective promised. It was even colder than she expected, and she found herself wearing the gloves more often than not. She was glad this was the easier part of the climb and prayed the sun would take some of the chill out of the frigid air by lunchtime. Stanley kept mumbling into the mountainside about the shortsightedness of his career choices, and Alex found it hard not to smile at his murmurings.

Rhonnie paid close attention to the wall in front of her, lifting her eyes only as far as Alex's powerful form, only a short distance above her. Constantly watching the witness carefully mimic each hand and foothold Alex took, Rhonnie saw it almost before it happened. Stanley missed. Maybe after nearly six hours of climbing, the mountain in front of him was starting to all look the same. Perhaps his eyes were tired. Cold hands might have simply missed their mark by a few inches. However it happened, Rhonnie saw it and reached up with her right hand to press Stanley's leg into the wall, warning him.

Lack of experience and panic are not a good mix. Feeling the rock pull free of the stonewall and come off in his hand, Stanley's eyes grew wide. A few small stones skittered to the ground as Rhonnie pressed her face to her chest, missing the inexperienced hand grabbing at the protruding *growth*. Green eyes lifted just in time to see the rotting limb jerked free by the weight displacement as Stanley tried to use it to lift himself up a few more inches.

"No!" Alex shouted, seeing the gloved hand reaching for the dried limb that had probably been frozen in place sometime during the night before.

"Shit!" was all the blonde had time to say before several buckets worth of rocks, ice and dirt tumbled into her face temporarily blinding her. With her right hand pressed into the witness's leg, only her left hand gripped the mountain and she began to slide downward. This side of the mountain was not known for being friendly to climbers, and it was about to earn its reputation, once again.

Rhonnie felt the rough, jagged rock wall scrape into her legs and was glad she wore long underwear beneath the heavy denim jeans as she slid several feet before feeling something grab her by the wrist.

Stanley was stunned by the swiftness of his protector. It seemed to him, he'd no more than heard the shouted "No!" when he saw Alex shove her boots into something and dive toward her friend's falling form. He still couldn't figure out how the tall woman grabbed him with one hand, practically tossed him onto a ledge barely four feet above them, and still managed to grab Rhonnie's wrist...all without falling herself. Having never seen anyone upside down against a mountainside, he watched in a breathless mix of astonishment, relief, horror and pure wonder as Alex pulled Rhonnie toward her.

"Thanks," groaned the smaller woman, already feeling the bruises forming.

"No problem," smiled Alex against the burning sensation in her left shoulder. "Didn't think you could get away that easy did ya?"

Sitting on the ledge that she knew marked the 'half way point' and catching her breath, Rhonnie let her eyes wander. Alex wasn't saying anything but the silent tears spoke volumes.

"Hey. It's all right, Alex. It's over. I'm fine. Come on honey, don't cry. I'm okay. Honest." Rhonnie slid the few inches between them and took Alex Stoner's tear streaked face in her still gloved hands.

Alex couldn't say anything coherent. She blinked madly to erase the images racing across her mind, pictures of a life without Rhonnie. The tears stopped and the trembling began.

"Alex! Hey, I'm right here. Look at me, Sweetheart." Rhonnie covered the salty face with small kisses. "I'm right here,

Alex. I'm all right. Stanley is all right. We did fine. We made it. Look, we're more than half way, Honey." Small, quick kisses grew slower and warmer as the trembling gradually subsided.

Eyes filled with unbelievable sadness opened wide. "I nearly lost you, Rhon. Jesus! What would I ever do without you. I'd have no choice but to just let go of this goddamned mountain and follow you. You know that, don't you?"

"Alex Stoner! Don't you ever say that again. You'll do no such thing. I..."

Interrupting the beautiful blonde, Alex spoke from her very soul. "Rhonnie, I'd rather be a smudge on the side of Hell Mountain than go a single day without you in my life. I love you so much it aches inside." Alex whispered as she drew the small face toward her own.

"Hell Mountain," said Stanley to no one in particular. "HELL? HELL Mountain? She said Hell Mountain," he seemed now to be conversing with the ledge itself. "Now she tells me your name." The ledge did not reply, but Stanley would have sworn he 'felt' it smirk.

Rhonda heard the witness a million miles away as she felt herself moving closer and closer to paradise. The tiny space between her lips and those she longed to feel against her was charged with so much energy the tiny hairs on her lip stood at attention.

"I love you, Rhonnie. I love you. I love you. I love you." Alex spoke more slowly and clearly than ever in her lifetime, punctuating each sentence with a kiss longer than the one before until finally, she felt Rhonda's warm tongue slip into her mouth.

Rhonnie reached into the pack lying next to her, removed an orange and tossed it to Stanley, never once releasing the kiss.

"Great," Stanley said to the blessed ledge beneath him. "Lunch on Hell Mountain. Just what I always wanted."

Chapter XVIII

"Doesn't this just about sum up my life?" Stanley asked the stone he sat upon. By now he was accustomed to the silent reply. So he rambled on, considering that if the ledge wasn't listening maybe the orange was. "Just look at them." He tossed his head to the side, indicating the two women who seemed oblivious to even the most basic of human survival laws: breathing. "I buy every magazine, poster and cut out ever made, and **she** gets the girl!"

Rhonnie giggled into Alex's mouth. She couldn't help it. Wonderful as it was, the ledge was **not** that large. The women could hear every word the disappointed man muttered. For her part, Alex grinned against the soft lips but absolutely refused to release them. *'Let Stanley get his own woman'*, was her thought.

Holding the half eaten citrus aloft, Stanley Wheaton glared at his *companion*.

"No, it's true. My apartment is a virtual shrine to the Blonde Bombshell over there. Honest. I ran out of wall space two years ago and began staple-gunning the posters to the ceiling. Let me tell you, my sweet fruity friend, **that** was a stroke of pure genius. Now when I..."

"Wheaton! Look around you. Any idea how many people accidentally fall off this here ledge every summer?" Alex bore a hole right into the man's head with two crystal blue lasers and was not surprised to find it empty.

"Um...I...they do? I..."

Rhonnie to the rescue. "Alex, you stop that. You're scaring poor Stanley half to death. Models and celebrities," Rhonnie hesitated for a moment and looked as if she had eaten bad tuna fish. "God but I hate that term. Anyway, I know that some people go a little overboard with the fan thing."

"**Overboard!** Overboard? Rhonda Reynolds! The man practically said he looks at your picture and...."

"Alexandra!" Rhonnie clapped her small, still gloved hand firmly over the words about to escape. Her eyes twinkled and danced in the sunlight. "I know what he *practically* said, Alex. I am trying to forget it. So don't you go saying it right out loud and put an image in my head that will make me lose the lunch I have yet to even consume."

Stanley felt his shoulders hit his knees. "There goes that fantasy."

"**Good!**" Possessive eyes dared either the wus on his butt or the woman in her arms to say another word.

After a long moment of silence, everyone laughed. Alex handed Rhonnie an orange and some trail mix, tossing another orange and some trail mix to Stanley with the other hand. She took the last orange for herself and sat down, wincing slightly when she forgot and reached behind her with her left arm. Rhonnie didn't see the facial expression because she was busy trying to sit down without causing her jeans to tighten against very sore limbs. Alex noticed her friend's hesitation but decided to keep her silence. There was nothing she could do at the moment. They would have to get moving again and soon. Stanley was not going to like what they had to do next, but it wasn't as though they had any good options left. The detective offered up a mental prayer that she was wrong about her shoulder. But, even as she thought it, she knew she wasn't.

Far from the frigid mountainside, Mickey Lawton threw back his fifth scotch. "Turn the goddamned heat up again and bring me another steak. See if they can get it right this time, too. If it ain't bleedin', I don't want it. Tell 'em either this next one bleeds or they do!"

"Yes, Mickey." Lawton's maid actually bowed at the knees before hurrying out the hotel room door.

"How'd you get her to do that, boss? Bow like that I mean?" asked Jake.

"Simple. I told her the last two refused."

"And that worked, boss?" Jake didn't see how that would have helped but he knew the boss usually got what he wanted. Correction, he always got what he wanted. Even in the privacy of his own mind, Jake dared not permit himself to question the

boss.

"Like a charm, Jake. 'Specially when I told her how I killed the last two and fed 'em to the mountain lions." Mickey Lawton laughed, and a cold shiver crawled up and down Jake's spinal column.

"Damn," mumbled the flunky.

"Yep. You know, Jake. I really hate all this nature shit. Let the stupid bitch have her fun in the snow. She has to bring the little prick to the courthouse tomorrow morning. Maybe we'll just have to throw her and that pervert friend of hers a welcome home party. Whadda ya say?"

Even Jake knew better than to interrupt the boss by answering.

"Yeah, I figure we'll just **all** have to go."

"All of us boss? That's a lot of firepower to get into the courthouse, boss." Jake remembered the metal detectors and cameras as well as all the extra security that came with the federal courthouse. Almost any court did that now days but especially the federal ones. He also knew this case had the law officers from anywhere near them out for blood. Mickey smacked his employee upside his already sore head. "Don't be a moron, Jake. We don't have to take the guns **in** the courthouse. We just need to get Stanley **out**. This will be the perfect time to field tests those special blades I had the guys at the crystal plant make for us. I knew having a legit business would pay off in the long run. And we still have all those miniature wooden ball bats that idiot in Pueblo couldn't **give** away last year at the goddamned flea market. You boys did kill that jackass, right?" asked Mickey.

"Yeah boss. We done him," answered Jake. He still thought killing the man for poor judgment was a bit harsh, but his was not to question why. His was to do or join the poor schmuck in the rapids.

Mickey continued planning out loud. "We stashed a .357 in the stairwell last month, and I think with the clubs and the glass gut poker, it will be more than enough. Besides, if they cover his skinny ass too good, then I'll just have to grab me a blonde bombshell. Either way, I'm home free. If we get Stanley, he's eternally mute. If we grab the blonde, Stoner will freak and do any little thing I say. See, Jake? It ain't so hard to beat a Stoner. They all have the same flaw."

"Flaw, boss?" questioned Jake.

"They love, Jake. Love eats muscle, ma boy. Leaves ya powerless and weak. I never touch the stuff myself."

He didn't know it yet but Mickey Lawton could not have been more wrong if he tried.

Chapter XIX

Alex looked over with concern and asked, "you doing all right? I know it hurts, Rhonnie. I want to have a good look and clean those scrapes where your jeans are torn, but we really have to get going if we're gonna get to the top before sunset."

Rhonnie nodded. "I'm all right, Alex. It hurts but I'll be fine once we're moving again. At least the wind has stopped and the sun feels good, too."

The words made sense but fell short of being entirely convincing.

"Alex, there is no **if** and we both know it. Besides, I'm not the real problem here. I'll tough it out. You know that. But Stanley," she whispered, "is not going to like this at all."

"I know," Alex sighed.

"Excuse me," Stanley interrupted the not really private conversation.

Alex and Rhonda looked first at one another and then at Stanley. "Yes?" they both asked.

"What exactly is it I'm not going to like? It's not like I'm in the next county, you know?" The frustrated witness was cold, tired, and sensed it was about to get even worse.

Rhonnie squeezed the hand in her lap and nodded gently. Alex returned the loving gesture and lifted her chin in half a nod.

"Stanley, I know we all had a pretty bad scare just now, but we have to keep going. We can't stay here much longer. Time is ticking by and every minute counts because we need to reach our destination **before** the sun sinks beneath that mountain." Alex indicated a tall, snow-covered peak in the distance before continuing. "No one with a brain would be where we're going to be for the next few hours after dark. It would be suicide, and since the whole point of all this has been to keep you alive, I don't think any of us are suicidal. Do you, Stanley?"

His eyes widened slightly. "No. Alex, where is it we're going? I mean, I've figured out the general direction is up, but where, exactly?"

Alex stood up and walked to the edge of the ledge, motioning for Stanley to join her. His eyes indicated his fear but, to his credit, he joined her. The deputy smiled.

"Stanley, without leaning over, I want you to look out and up. What do you see?"

The frightened man tried to do as he was instructed but, in truth, could only see limited sections of what looked like a wall of stone rising toward the sky. "More mountain, straight up," he answered and hurriedly moved back from the edge.

"Well, not totally straight up, but close enough I suppose."

"Don't panic, Stanley. You can do this," Rhonnie soothed. "Alex wouldn't have started this climb if she hadn't believed you could do it."

The worried man was not fully convinced. "Come on, Rhonnie. We all know we're here because of me and it's not like Lawton left us any other escape. That's the real truth, isn't it Alex?"

"No, Stanley that is **not** the real truth. We're here because you witnessed a crime and decided to do the right thing."

Sam Ruskin

"I decided to protect my sorry ass, you mean." Stanley finally said aloud what tortured him in silence.

"Doesn't matter." Alex moved away from the edge and squatted in front of her witness. "Stanley, you listen to me now. You are doing the right thing. That can't be diminished by your desire to stay alive, to protect your *sorry ass*, as you put it."

"So says you," spoke the man with the frozen butt and aching, itching face.

"Yes, I do. Stanley, it's not a crime to be afraid. Mickey Lawton is a cold, heartless bastard. You're right to be afraid. Hell, Stanley, **I'm** afraid."

Alex hadn't meant to reveal that last tidbit but decided that maybe he needed to hear it. She hoped Rhonnie wasn't disappointed but the small hand caressing her back banished those thoughts, almost immediately.

The pale face looked up into blue eyes. "You? I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

Alex snorted. "Wheaton, only a fool is entirely without fear. Didn't your Mamma ever tell you about courage, man?"

"What about it?" he asked.

"Hell, Stanley. Courage isn't the absence of fear. True courage can't even exist without fear. True courage is the ability to stand up in the face of fear, even terror. The right thing is still right no matter what motivates us to do it. You believe I should think less of you because you're motivated by the desire to survive. Should you think less of me because I'm only doing my job? Should you think less of me because my **real** motivation is the unbridled hatred I feel for the rotten son of a bitch who killed my sister? My beloved Anna?" Alex lifted her hand to stop the reply. "Bottom line here, Stan. We will survive. You **will** testify and we **will** get Lawton, once and for all. To do that we need to get to the top of Hell Mountain before the sun sinks behind that peak. This is going to be the hardest thing you've ever done. Make no mistake. But you **can** do it."

"Alex, I'm not so sure. Look at what I caused a few minutes ago." He shivered against the thought. "I could have gotten her killed, for God's sake."

Rhonnie stood up, stretching her sore, stiffening body before speaking. "Stanley, let it go. I'm fine. We're all fine. We don't have time for this. We're burning daylight as it is. Besides, you've learned from that. Right? You won't make the same mistake again and if it makes you feel any better, there's better places to put your hands and feet on this next section."

"There are?" asked the small voice.

"Sure are," agreed the detective. "The hard part is it's very rocky, extremely steep and because of a variety of elements, you can't see the top until you're practically there. You absolutely **must** look only at the wall directly in front of you and just keep going until you pull yourself up and the wind rushes across your face. That's the real reason they call it Hell Mountain, Stanley. Years ago, some people climbing it during a January blizzard named it that because they said it was an unending torture with no end in sight...pure hell. Hell Mountain. The name stuck."

"Oh," came the soft response as the witness considered her words.

"Well, Stanley, think about this: how scary can Hell Mountain be to a man who's already worked with the devil himself?" Rhonnie asked.

Alex lifted a brow. Stanley gave one quick chuckle and moved his head in full agreement. He had to admit she was right on the money on that one.

Standing, the witness squared his shoulders. "Okay then. Just tell me what to do, Alex. Might as well get this little troop of ours on its way."

"Good man," she said. "Look at the bright side, Stanley. This next section is very intense, and it will take the rest of the day, but when we get to the top you can relax. I promise you a good meal. Relax, my better half will cook."

Stanley grinned at the joke but Rhonnie heard something else entirely in the selected phrase.

Alex continued, all the while guiding them slowly up the wall. "Like I said, a nice hot meal and then you can get some real sleep. No one can get to us tonight Stanley. Lawton can't even reach us without our seeing and hearing him way in advance and for that reason, if no other, he won't even try. A hot meal, a good night's sleep and then tomorrow morning we fly out of here. You will testify before the Grand Jury, the feds will take you into protective custody, and give you a new name and life. This time tomorrow night it will all be over, Wheaton. Just think of every pull up this mountainside as another step toward freedom."

That's just what the man did, too. Every time a jagged rock pressed into the gloves or the cold wall he hugged made him shiver from the bones outward, he said it again.

"Freedom. I will be free of that lunatic, once and forever."

Alex glanced between her arm and the mountain every few minutes, ever watchful of both her witness and her love. She saw the unguarded grimaces Rhonnie made when she pressed too close to the stone surface and Alex knew the fall earlier was taking its toll on the blonde's body. Still, she kept climbing. When the worry threatened to distract her too much she would let her focus wander to the burning sensation in her left shoulder that was so intense it sometimes made her stomach clench with nausea.

Rhonnie tried not to think about how badly her legs ached or the sharp pain beneath her right breast. She nearly laughed out loud thinking that even her breasts hurt and wondering what her tall friend would recommend they do about that. This was a train of thought quickly banished as far too distracting so she forced herself to *just keep climbing*.

The unlikely trio had been ascending Hell Mountain for several hours when Alex felt the pain's intensity crank up a notch. Stilling against the mountain, she took deep breaths through her mouth to ward off the overwhelming urge to throw up.

"Alex?" Rhonnie called upward as they all stopped without Alex's usual warning that they needed to warm their hands or drink something. "You all right?"

Stanley sensed something was definitely not all right with his tall protector but wisely kept his mouth shut.

After several minutes, which seemed an eternity to a worried Rhonda, Alex was able to speak.

"Just needed a breather. Sorry."

"No problem. You just scared me. Are you really all right?" asked Rhonnie. Of course, she knew far better than to expect an honest answer from Ms I Can Do Anything And Ain't About To Admit It If I Can't.

"Fine, Rhon. Pr...Fine, really. Look at the sun, sweetie. We're almost there."

Rhonnie knew then her friend was in trouble. She heard Alex edit out the word promise and that was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

"Yeah, I see that. Not much farther Stanley. You hanging in there?"

"Hanging on is more like it," Stanley quipped.

"Good man. Never lose that sense of humor," Alex replied. "Okay. Onward and upward."

Desperately needing to take her mind off her shoulder, Alex did what her father had taught them to do when they were children: Anna, Rhonnie and herself. She sang. With every note she pulled herself nearer the top with the others close behind.

...The hills are alive with the sound of music
With songs they have sung for a thousand years
The hills fill my heart with the sound of music
My heart longs to sing every song it hears.
My heart wants to run with the brook as it trips and falls
Over stones on its way....

Stanley kept climbing, but couldn't stop the breath he sucked in when the almost magical voice seemed to surround him and he realized it came from just above him. Before he could say anything another voice joined in and he wondered if he had fallen and was being greeted by the angels he'd heard about as a child.

.....I go to the hills when my heart is lonely
I know I will hear what I've heard before
My heart will be blessed with the sound of music
And I'll sing once more.....

Just when the man was absolutely certain he was in the presence of angels, Alex reached long fingertips across the last bit of Hell Mountain and felt the wind whip across her face.

"Well, all-fucking-right!! *We did it!*" shouted the deputy just before she kissed the peak and lifted her aching body onto the soil of success.

Smiling to himself, Stanley mumbled into the wall:

"It may not be your kind of angel Lord, but she's sure as Hell Mountain, angel enough for me!"

Chapter XX

Alex kissed the cold ground one more time before stretching her long body against the mountaintop and peering over the side. Smiling, she found herself nearly nose to nose with Stanley. Pressing into the rock, she reached over and took the man by the wrists. Alex hoped no one would notice she barely used her left arm as she helped him to her side and over the top. Then she grabbed the back of his belt and heaved him past her where she heard him swearing his undying love to the soil he lay upon.

"Ready Rhonnie?" Alex asked.

Snickering, the tired blonde answered. "You gotta ask?"

Taking the smaller woman by both forearms, Alex pulled Rhonnie to her lips for a quick kiss. "Guess not. Up ya go." She lifted the cover girl off the side of Hell Mountain just as the sun painted their world red and gold.

Rhonnie straightened out her stiff limbs and stretched her back making several loud, popping sounds in the process. "Mmmm," sighed Rhonnie, "that felt grrreat."

Alex rolled onto her back and grinned. "I bet. How you doing, Stanley?"

Stanley P. Wheaton was filled with surprise. "Wow. I thought it would be small up here. You know, barely any room at the top and all. This is incredible. It's huge...and beautiful."

"Yes, it is." Alex had to admit the top of Hell Mountain was somewhat unusual to most people.

Once you reached the top, it kind of stretched out against the sky. There were a few trees, scattered bushes of pine and berry, some wildflowers in the spring, and a small pool of fresh water lay nestled against the back of a small stone wall. There was no cave here, but the small wall created a shelter of sorts with its concave formation and the roof-like ledge just above it. In reality this was not the **very** top of the mountain. It was the top from **this side**. That was one reason it seemed so huge. It led to a small wall, which lifted another ten or fifteen feet to the actual peak. Alex knew from past experience that there was no shortage of

animals to be found nearby. In fact, the much larger pool above them fed the tiny pool where they were. This was not one of those mountaintops made for one person to stand upon and barely have room to plant a small flag. No, this was quite large and the mountain was not even considered particularly tall by the locals.

Dipping her cupped hands into the chilled water, Rhonnie drank deeply from the clear, clean pool.

"Oh, Alex. It's as wonderful as ever. Stanley, have a drink. You won't taste anything like this in those bottles they sell."

"Like this," Alex instructed. "Here, Stanley. Put your hands together like this. That's right. Form a sort of bowl with your palms and fingers overlapping at the edge. Hold them tightly together. Good. Now dip them just into the water and move it to your lips quickly. There ya go. Good man. So, what do you think?"

Watching the exhausted man dip into the cool liquid for the fifth time, Alex laughed and tugged lightly at his forearm. "Take it easy, Stanley. It's not going anywhere."

Joining in with a chuckle of his own, the witness dried his hands on his borrowed jeans. "So, Alex. What now?"

Rhonnie answered as she stood and stretched again. "Well, Stanley, it will be dark soon so Alex is gonna go to the neighborhood meat market and produce counter while you and I set up a camp of sorts. Right, gorgeous?"

Blue eyes blinked. It wasn't that no one ever told the dark haired woman she was good looking. They had. They did, in fact. Somehow, none of the words ever meant anything before and when Rhonnie said it, well, it took her by surprise. Alex wondered whether that would ever change.

"Weeeelllll!"

Removing her backpack long enough to empty most of its contents into Rhonnie's, Alex gave the blonde a full-face smile. "On my way, oh patient one." She double-checked the bow and quiver before starting toward the small wall. "I'll be back shortly. Don't make any passes at my woman while I'm gone now, Stanley." Alex winked at Rhonnie. "Okay. I'm off to go kill us some din-din."

Rhonnie giggled and watched Alex start up the wall.

Alex stopped about four feet up and spoke into the wall, loudly. "Rhonda Reynolds, stop staring at my ass and start a fire."

"Ooops, caught again," laughed the blonde. "No problem, Al. I think the fire's already started."

Stanley wondered if he would live long enough to tell this little story. He couldn't repress the snicker as he thought to himself: *Inquiring Minds Want To Know.*

"What's so funny?" asked the woman gathering firewood.

"Nothing. Just thinking what a great story this will be to tell...if I survive." Stanley nearly found kindling up his nose.

Flashing eyes narrowed to fiery slits. "**That**," growled the blonde, "would **not** be a good idea, Stanley."

"Absolutely. Bad Idea. Silence is Golden. Gotcha. Um...how about I get some of that firewood. I think I know how to do it now."

Rhonnie smiled. She didn't mean to frighten the man, but she was not really prepared to have every photographer and reporter in the land on her doorstep either.

"All right. That would be a big help. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm just very weary of public life, Stanley. I know I've been a disappointment to you, and I'm sorry for that. Please try to understand. I've loved Alex nearly all my life. I never dreamed I stood a chance, so I left right after graduating High School. Alex was out of college and on her own by then. Anna told me I should stay, but I was afraid if I did, I'd have to watch Alex fall in love and marry. I knew I would never survive that. So when the modeling agency asked me to move to New York; well, I just did it. I'd never really hurt you, Stanley. Just don't hurt Alex."

Stanley laid the surprisingly large bundle of wood next to the fire his dream woman had started. He gently took her trembling hands and looked into eyes with firelight dancing in them.

"Rhonda, you could never disappoint me. Not really. I've been a jerk and a loser most of my life. Whatever happens tomorrow, these last few days belong to the three of us. No one else. I owe you and Alex a lot more than my life. Even us city boys have hearts, Rhonda."

Stanley was so intent on reassuring his new friend he didn't hear the boots behind him.

Stopping right behind the man, Alex leaned down until her mouth was next to his ear. "Thought I told you not to make a pass at my woman," she purred.

Poor Stanley couldn't see the pearly smile and very nearly fell into the fire. They all giggled. Alex handed the blonde a half dozen trout, cleaned and carefully strung onto a stick.

"Sorry, no veggies tonight. Rabbits and deer beat me to whatever there was. Guess it's good I saved this, huh?" Alex beamed as she produced a large loaf of banana nut bread she managed to keep hidden until now.

"You," Rhonnie kissed the nearly freezing, rosy cheek, "are a sneak."

"Hey! I'm a cop. Being a sneak is part of the job requirements." Alex winked at her witness.

Alex and Stanley looked on in amazement as Rhonnie worked her magic with the fresh fish, a few herbs from her pack and some snow. "What?" she asked.

Alex just shook her head and lifted her brows in pure respect for the wonder that was Rhonnie.

Stanley shrugged his shoulders. "You carried that skillet all the way up this damn mountain?" Continuing, he gave no time for a reply. "And herbs too. That is just unbelievable to me, Rhonnie. Here we are on the top of Hell Mountain, dead tired, sore and battered, and you manage to prepare a feast few restaurants could top. What, indeed."

Rhonnie laughed, but was touched by the compliments she was getting; especially in light of the fact most of her body now silently screamed in pain. "Well, I've made this climb before, remember? I knew we were gonna need a good meal. Mind you, I never doubted Alex would provide the nourishment; but I don't like rabbit tartar and I **hate** sushi."

Up The River, revised edition

Stanley snickered as Alex pretended to stick her finger down her throat.

"You might want to withhold final judgment until you've at least tasted it," she advised.

"Totally unnecessary," Alex assured her. "The smell alone is to absolutely die for."

"Alex!" Rhonnie objected.

"Ooops," winked the woman with the long legs stretched out in front of her. "To live for. I'm sure I meant to say *to live for*."

The meal was wonderful. It was hot, nourishing, delicious and satisfying. In fact, it was so satisfying Stanley dozed right off without even finishing the last of his portion. Alex pulled him by his shoulders a few feet to nestle him into the sleeping bag close to the wall. She zipped him in and started a smaller fire close to where he lay. It was going to get even colder during the night and she needed to make certain he would be warm enough. Clearly the snoring man, who never so much as stirred while being moved and settled, was out for the night.

Watching Rhonnie lay out their sleeping bags near the fire, Alex sighed. If only she knew some way to get Rhonnie out of here and away from this nightmare until she could settle things with Lawton. That just wasn't going to happen though and the tall brunette knew it.

"Rhonnie, I need to go over behind the trees for a minute. I won't be far and I'll be right back." Alex explained as Rhonnie opened the bags allowing the heat from the fire to penetrate the linings.

"Okay. Don't be long." Rhonnie watched as Alex slipped behind the trees and out of view.

After several minutes Rhonnie began to think about why her friend felt the need to be so completely out of sight. Stanley was sound asleep so that couldn't be it. Hadn't she and Alex been camping together for nearly twenty years, off and on? Her eyes closed as chilled fingertips drummed a nearly perfect chin. An imaginary VCR hit rewind and played the events of the day again and again.

Alex emptied her bladder, zipped her jeans and moved a few feet to a boulder where she could sit down. Carefully removing the layers of clothing until she reached her T-shirt, the servant of justice winced and gritted her teeth against the intense pain and nausea. Leaning slightly to her right, Alex scooped a large handful of snow and pressed it against the swollen, purple joint and surrounding area. When the snow melted too much to be of any further use, Alex tossed it aside and repeated the procedure. As unpleasant as the frozen crystals were, they actually felt almost good against the fevered shoulder.

"MmmmmHmmmm. I thought so," whispered Rhonda. "You did this saving my fat ass, didn't you?"

"Watch your mouth, woman. I happen to be very fond of that...you're not fat." Seeing the worried look Alex moaned. "Oh, Rhonnie! It's just that damn shoulder that always goes out. I'll be fine. You can't seriously think I would have done anything else."

Rhonnie grimaced remembering the first time her friend had dislocated that shoulder and the whupping they'd all received for disobeying Alex's father. Even back then, she recalled, Alex did whatever it took to keep her safe. "I know. Now come on back to camp and let me have a look at that in the light."

Alex did as she was asked, especially given that she knew perfectly well it was actually a barely disguised command.

Alex watched Rhonnie carefully tend to the injured shoulder, noting how often green eyes slipped toward the V of the cotton shirt.

"Rhon. Honey if you touch that shoulder any more the fever is gonna spread."

"Huh?" She lifted her eyes. "I think the fever is letting up, Alex. It feels cool to the touch now."

Alex snickered. "Yeah, well there's two very good reasons for that. One, you've been putting snow on it for nearly thirty minutes. Two, the fever has moved now and you're touching the wrong area to feel it."

Blonde brows lowered and Rhonnie's forehead crinkled. "That's impossible Alex. The fever couldn't possibly have spread that fa...Mmmmm." The sentence was ended when Alex reached out and kissed the woman.

"Now," Alex whispered. "Drop your pants."

Rhonnie gasped. "Here? Now? Alex...I..."

The deputy kissed the cold nose. "Rhonnie, much as I like the way you think, I meant so that I could have a look at the damage done by the fall earlier."

"Oh. I knew that." She blushed.

Rhonnie stood up in front of her seated companion. She started to unbutton her jeans but felt Alex's hand on hers.

"Here," Alex interrupted. "I'll do that."

Rhonnie swallowed and took a deep breath as Alex first unbuttoned her pants and then proceeded to slide them down trembling legs. Taking a deep breath of her own, Alex slipped long fingers beneath the waist of the long johns.

"Alex, wait. There's nothing...I mean..."

"It's all right. I know. Why wear underwear under underwear, right?" She spoke softly, reassuringly, while her pulse began to pound in her ears.

"But Alex. Stanley is..."

"Asleep, Rhonnie. Stanley is sound asleep and I really need to look at those abrasions and put something on them." As she spoke, Alex began to slip the long johns toward Rhonda's knees. "Oh my gods," she breathed before swallowing loudly several times.

"What? What! Is it that bad? Alex! How bad is it?" Rhonnie pleaded as she held tightly to Alex's head for balance.

"Oh dear god in heaven," moaned Alex before she heard her friend's question. "Bad? Uh uh. No way. Del...um, no it's not so bad really, babe. Some scraping, lots of bruises and your right knee is looking kinda nasty but...here. We better get you covered up before you catch cold. I think you'll be all right till we can get you to a doc tomorrow. I know it hurts like hell but...here ya go."

Alex's hands were shaking so badly she couldn't seem to re-button the jeans. "Damn. I...babe I think my hands are too cold to finish here. Can you?"

Rhonnies looked down at the flush on Alex's face, the perspiration on her forehead and the trembling hands before realizing the full impact of the situation. She hadn't noticed before that when Alex was sitting, and she was standing, her tall friend's eyes were just a few inches shy of hip level.

"Alex, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I..."

"Yeah, well just one more reason to hate that bastard Lawton. Figures I would finally be alone with you practically naked in my arms and I'd be on fucking duty," Alex half joked. Muttering to herself, she was unaware Rhonda was still listening. "Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck..."

"I love you, Alex Stoner."

"I love you, too, Rhonnies Reynolds. Now... I need to tell you something and you won't like it, so just hear me out. Okay?"

"Listening."

"Lawton is gonna be there in the morning. We probably won't see him, but he will be there. I know this asshole, babe. If he can't get Wheaton, I think he'll go after you. He knows if he gets you, it's all over," Alex explained.

"You listen to me Alexandra Stoner. No matter what happens **you** stick to your principles. I mean it!"

"I will... but you just remember that I **have** no principles worth losing you for."

"Alex!"

"Rhonnies, no discussion. I'll get him. You have my word on it, but don't think for a moment I would **ever** choose the law, or justice, or revenge or any principle on the planet over one millisecond of your safety."

Rhonnies snuggled closer. "Well, let's just **pray** Lawton doesn't know that."

Alex smiled. "Pray?"

Rhonnies rolled her eyes. "Yes. Pray. This climb made me believe again, all right? I wonder if Anna had anything to do with that."

"Well," smiled Alex, "she always was looking out for us, wasn't she?"

Chapter XXI

Rhonnies felt strong arms pull her closer and kissed the soft, warm flesh nearest her lips. Slowly she became aware of the legs wrapped snugly around her own and breathed in the scent that was Alex Stoner. The blue-gray shades of sky signaled the approaching dawn and Rhonnies wondered, for a moment, just when they had decided to share the same sleeping bag.

Alex smiled as Rhonnies's tender mouth kissed the exposed rise of her right breast. She felt the small body press nearer and squeezed powerful legs around the lower limbs next to her own.

"Ow," came the unbidden response from the blonde with the very sore body.

Releasing her grip immediately, Alex looked into gentle sleepy eyes. "Sorry sweetheart. Hurts pretty bad, huh?"

Resting her elbows on the detective's breasts, careful to avoid the injured shoulder, Rhonnies slipped her chin into upturned palms.

"Little, yeah. Anyone ever tell you how absolutely dreamy you look in the morning, Alex?"

Wagging dark brows, Alex winked and smiled. "No one who mattered. I could get used to waking with you in my arms, though."

"I'd like that." Rhonnies pulled herself upward until she could run the tip of her tongue across the soft, pink lips of Alexandra Stoner.

After a few minutes, the cop inside Alex's head woke up and the kiss ended. When she began to sit up and look around the small campsite, Rhonnies understood perfectly. It was nearly dawn. Their ride would be there soon. Without saying anything aloud, the two women slipped into the extra layers of clothing and looked around for their boots.

A few minutes later, Stanley woke to the whipping roar of a large helicopter as dust, small rocks and snow flew about the small camp.

"No way am I getting into that thing," whined the waking witness. "Where the hell are the doors?"

Alex so did not have time for this. "I kicked em out, along with the last witness who gave me bullshit after seventy two hours of guarding his gutless ass."

Stanley boarded the chopper...quietly. Rhonnies grinned and winked at Chief Bartoni who smiled back at her.

"How ya doing there, Little Bit?" he asked.

"She's hurt, Chief. Be careful of her legs and ribs. Her knee looks pretty bad too," Alex warned.

"Thank you," glared the blonde before turning back to the worried man in the body armor. "I'm fine, despite what my tall protector says."

The surrogate father grinned at the women who had not changed all that much since they were little girls daring the world to come between them.

"Alex," he finally said. "We made quite a show of loading up and starting out and we were downright careless with our flight plans." The chief waited to see if she was getting his meaning. "No one tried to stop us, Alex. No one followed us either." He watched her face as he added the last bit of information. "Our man on the street says traffic around the courthouse is especially heavy, already this morning."

Stanley sighed in sheer relief, "Thank God! He gave up."

Up The River, revised edition

Chief Bartoni pointedly said nothing. Alex's eyes darkened with concern but she didn't flinch or make a comment. Rhonnie wondered what they knew that they weren't sharing. Whatever it was, she hoped it was good news.

The helicopter landed on the new pad at the top of the federal courthouse and was immediately surrounded by a veritable curtain of men and women in blue, armed to the teeth. Stanley's eyes opened wide and he looked to Alex, terrified.

"This means I'm still in trouble, doesn't it?" asked the witness of the person he trusted most in all the world.

"Mr. Wheaton, I assure you these fine officers will protect you with their very lives."

The Chief needed the witness to calm down. Panic could be as dangerous as Lawton's goons. Besides, the team in blue, so to speak, was clearly in the lead...this time.

"And this is only our guys. The Marshal Service may not be as visible from up here but they have things well in hand, believe me." Chief Bartoni had to grin thinking what a gross understatement that was.

Alex clasped the familiar shoulder of the man who was family to her. Not wanting it to appear as if she were taking over, which of course, she was.

"Chief, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather Stanley here stuck with me." Motioning one of the officers inside the chopper, Alex turned to her charge. "Stanley, give me that god forsaken jacket we borrowed."

Bartoni didn't argue, which told Alex he'd already been briefed by the United States Marshal Service about the plan for getting one Stanley P. Wheaton safely **inside** the courthouse.

The witness looked puzzled, but if things worked out as planned, this young cop was gonna deserve one hell of a promotion.

"Perfect," grinned blue eyes as she mussed the rookie's hair. "Part of the look. Sorry."

"Um. No problem, ma'am. Glad to be of service. Good luck, Marshal." The man pretended not to be afraid but his face betrayed him.

Deputy Stoner smiled into the frightened brown eyes. "Lancer," she read the nameplate. "Officer Lancer, meet my best friend in all the world: Rhonda Reynolds, and Stanley P. Wheaton, whose hide you're about to save. It's perfectly all right to be scared shitless, Lancer. I know I am."

She watched brown eyes fill with surprise. "Look out there, Lancer. That blue curtain is gonna wrap you up and never let you go. I'd trust em with my life. Do it every day, in fact. Now get going. Just act like the original Chicken Little and Lawton's men will never know the difference."

Rhonnie giggled. Stanley scowled. The curtain descended and the play began.

Alex turned to the chief and her soul's one true mate. "Chief, I want you to take Rhonnie and meet me back at headquarters in a bit."

"**Not a chance!**" came the stereo reply.

Alex started to explain all the reasons they should do as she requested but warm lips and soft hands silenced her speech. Stanley sighed, wondering if he would ever truly get used to seeing his dreams go up in smoke, as it were.

Chief Bartoni said one word: "Finally."

The radio sounded, alerting them to the attempt made on *'Stanley'* as the stand-in and a curtain of blue had entered the announced and well publicized courtroom.

"Attempt aborted. Witness secure."

"Damn," muttered Rhonnie.

"Rhonnie, please," Alex began.

"Don't say it, Alex. I'm not leaving your side so let's just do this and get it over with so you can take me to breakfast." Rhonnie looked at Alex making it clear there was no need for a reply.

"And a doctor," added Bartoni. Then he took Alex's arm. "Put this on, Alex and don't give me any bullshit. I may not be your commanding officer any more but I can still kick your ass. Body armor is regulation and you know it so just shut up and put it on. You too, Little Bit. Stanley, yours is behind you."

"Chief?" questioned Rhonnie.

Alex kissed her cheek. "Put it on, honey. He's right...and I don't have any candy so let's not piss him off," she winked.

Alex secured her body armor, squared her shoulders, stood to her full height of nearly six feet, and took a deep breath of Colorado air. Tightening the strap on her shoulder harness and wincing slightly she rechecked her Glock 9mm to make sure it was fully loaded. It was. She bent and pulled the Colt Defender from her backpack and, after checking it in a similar manner, placed it in her belt behind her back. She patted the front of the vest for the extra clips. All was as it should be. Slowly she pulled her badge from a pocket and pinned it to her belt. It was Deputy United States Marshal Alexandra Stoner who winked at Rhonda Reynolds, nearly taking the world famous Blonde Bombshell's breath away.

With one last look around the perimeter, she stepped away from the helicopter, clearly taking the lead. She didn't like having Rhonda in the middle of all this but, since she was, she intended to keep a close eye on her. A single nod indicated Rhonnie was to go next, taking the position nearest the deputy. Chief Bartoni urged Stanley forward as the seasoned cop formed the rear of the line.

Alex knew what the others, save the Chief, did not. The wall of blue they could see was nothing compared to the veritable ocean of law enforcement that had descended upon Denver in the last eighteen hours. She smiled thinking of the surprised look that was sure to appear on Lawton's face when he realized his precious .357 wasn't in the stairwell. He had fucked up big time. Every law enforcement officer who could walk, ride, drive, fly or buy a ticket – on duty and off – were in the Denver Metropolitan area; and they all probably had his picture on bull's eyes in their back yards, garages and rec rooms. Oh yeah, she grinned. Alex figured that, by now, even a few of the dirty cops who were in Lawton's pocket were beginning to see the light.

Stanley could hear his heart pumping in his ears. Even his vision seemed to throb in terror as his pulse rate headed into the red zone. Just when the frightened city boy thought he might bolt and run he felt the strangest thing... an odd sense of peace washed over him like a warm spring shower. Wheaton thought the events of the past three days must have been getting to him even more than he realized. Maybe he was hallucinating because he would have sworn he saw Alex hovering in the air in front of him. She was all shimmery and was smiling the gentlest, kindest, most loving smile he'd ever seen.

Rhonnie felt an oddly familiar hand on her face. She recognized the very special touch almost immediately. It was not the same as it once was but had nonetheless become quite familiar to her over the last five years. It made no difference whatsoever that, so far as the world could tell, no one was touching her. No one at all.

Alex heard the familiar voice as though it surrounded her and came from within, simultaneously. She knew instantly who it was. Wondering if Rhonnie heard it too, she turned for a quick glance into knowing green eyes.

The two women smiled at one another as they whispered the same word: "Anna?"

"Anna?" asked Stanley. "I thought you said Anna was dead." Before he could get hysterical he heard the voice. It seemed to be coming from inside his head.

"It's going to be all right, Stanley. Just trust Alex," came the soothing assurance.

Stanley stepped closer to Rhonnie and Alex as the Chief closed ranks. A door slammed somewhere nearby and footsteps could be heard moving in their direction.

Mickey Lawton was there. They couldn't see him yet, but he was there and they knew it. Chief Bartoni pressed the witness between Alex and Rhonnie, just as the quiet voice in his head commanded. The man shook his head. If he even tried to explain this day, paperwork was gonna be a real bitch.

Sometimes in police work there is a moment when you don't think. Somewhere inside you everything you ever learned leaps to the center stage and just takes over. It is a moment most cops pray they will never, ever experience. However, if and when the time for that moment arrives, it is too late to hope you paid attention during all the right moments that preceded it. Unfortunately for Mickey Lawton, Alexandra Abigail Stoner always paid attention.

Lawton and four of his hired killers burst onto the scene in the final stairwell before their destination. Several men, armed with what appeared to be very short clubs of some sort and knives about four inches long and seemingly made of heavy glass, threw open the door just as the other two leaped from beneath the concrete stairs. Alex immediately noted that Lawton himself was conspicuously absent. The others carried replicas of what may have been the most peculiar assortment of weaponry the chief had ever come across, even when he worked the inner city.

Alex pushed Stanley into the stairs and watched the chief cover the terrified man with his own body.

The scene played out much as Alex had expected. Lawton's goons were hired to stop Stanley from testifying at all cost. They'd known when things went undisturbed on the top of Hell Mountain, Lawton intended to stop them somewhere in that courthouse. The curtain of blue descended, the wave of cops of every kind covered the city and the bad guys were out-numbered, out-gunned and out-smarted before it began.

When the few hired killers appeared in the stairway, it was Rhonnie who surprised everyone. One look at the make-shift blade moving toward Alex's back while she took out the two moving on Stanley was all it took. Rhonda showed them why it is never smart to underestimate a woman. One angry shout and four quick kicks later they thunked down the stairs on their heads.

The deputy swept one thug's legs out from under him and knocked him unconscious with his own club while kicking the blade several feet away. Another attacker appeared out of nowhere and lifted his arm to release the crystal dagger in Rhonda's direction. In a heartbeat, Alex threw her body across the distance, tackling the cold-blooded murderer like a football dummy. Screaming in unguarded agony she felt her shoulder dislocate, again.

Hearing the grinding, popping, tearing sound was more than the Ronnie could stand. She kned the remaining flunky in the groin so hard he hit the wall two feet behind him before dropping, soundlessly, to the floor. Flashing, still angry eyes saw the hand reaching for what she thought was a gun and she stomped, heel first, with all her might, onto the thick fingers.

Hazel eyes peeked around the body holding him against the stone stairs to see five men in varying degrees of unconsciousness. As the chief stood up and helped the witness to his feet, nearly a dozen uniforms burst through the doorway with another ten coming from the levels just above and below them.

"Alex!" shouted the angry cover girl, breathing heavily. "You're hurt!"

“And you are one kick ass lady,” groaned the deputy through clenched teeth.

“Well that prick was gonna shoot you, goddamn it!” hissed Rhonnie.

It would be hours before anyone would explain to Rhonda that the only people inside the courthouse with guns were on their side.

Snickering could be heard in nearly all directions as the fallen men were patted down, handcuffed and taken into custody. “Should we call an ambulance, Deputy?” came the smirking but timid question from the guy with the radio.

“Yes, please. I think she hurt that one pretty badly,” blue eyes grinned as she lifted her chin in the direction of the man holding his crotch and moaning.

“Alexandra Stoner. This is not funny,” complained the surprisingly well-trained blonde.

The job, however, was not yet complete and the small box on Alex’s shoulder called her back to duty.

“Deputy Stoner?”

“Present,” Alex answered.

“They’re ready for you in the Grand Jury Room.”

“On our way,” was all she said.

Turning toward her witness she smiled. “Ready Stanley?”

“This is what we came here for, right?” Stanley asked, pretending more confidence than he possessed.

Glancing at the Chief and motioning with a nod at Rhonda, it was understood that they would follow. It was also understood that medical attention would wait until after her mission had been completed. If Rhonda questioned it, she never let on.

“Very well,” Alex gritted past the pain. “Let’s go see if we can serve up some justice today. Shall we?”

Just as they passed through the heavy doors being held open by uniformed officers, Alex leaned over and whispered. “You know, there were a couple of moments I wasn’t sure we were gonna make it. But thanks to Anna and my little blonde bombshell here, I’ll be damned if we didn’t get the bastard this time.”

“Anna? That was Anna?” asked Stanley.

“Not now,” came the reply in triplicate.

Chapter XXII

It was only with much persuasion the dignified panel agreed to allow Rhonda Reynolds, whom they all recognized immediately, to remain within the chambers of the closed hearing.

Well, to be perfectly honest Alex may have played a hand in that. It seems when she informed them: “If Ms. Reynolds goes, I go”, they paused.

This, however, prompted their star, and only surviving eyewitness to let them know in no uncertain terms: “And if she goes, I damn well go too!”

“Good man,” gritted Alex.

“Thank you,” smiled Stanley who stared at the panel, fully prepared to walk away, regardless of personal risk or outcome. Much to his own surprise, Stanley P. Wheaton had grown a spine.

The grand jury questioned Stanley for three hours before taking only forty-seven minutes to determine there was, it seemed, more than enough evidence for an arrest and speedy trial of one Michael Roland Lawton.

Alex, Rhonda and Stanley all made the same comment at the very official sounding pronouncement. “Duh!”

Bartoni took only an instant to grin at the three before he pulled the already prepared Warrant from his pocket.

“What ya got there, Chief? Looks like a warrant.” Alex asked.

The older man smiled. “Well, Alex, it’s like this. I wasn’t taking any chances. If things didn’t go as planned here I had me a back up.”

Alex wrinkled her brow in question.

“I set the home team to researching and collecting every unpaid parking ticket, traffic violation and jay-walking citation they could find. Then I issued orders to start giving him and his goonies tickets for everything from spitting on the sidewalk to crushing his stogies on the park lawn. I figured if the big boys dropped the ball at least we could put him up for a night or two. Right here local-like, ya know?”

Alex laughed. “More like a few hours but it was a damn good idea, Chief. So,” she wondered aloud. “Whatcha gonna do with it now?”

Chief Bartoni shrugged. “I don’t rightly know, Alex. Think I’ll just hang onto it for a while. Then, who knows? I might just have the damn thing framed.” They all laughed.

A shadow passed over the chairs where they sat and stopped directly over the Deputy U. S. Marshal. She looked up.

“Deputy Stoner?”

“Yes. I’m Deputy Stoner.”

“Deputy Silar, Ma’am. This is Deputy Moran. We’re with W.I.T.S.E.C. Deputy Stoner. These are our papers.” He handed Alex a small folder and waited while she checked the contents.

Alex sighed. It was nearly over. “Everything looks to be in order Deputy. Take good care of him, okay?”

“Yes Ma’am. We’ve been asked to thank you for action above and beyond the call of duty, Deputy. We’ll take it from here.”

Alex looked at Stanley. “Stanley, here’s your ride into a new life buddy. Don’t look back and Stanley?”

“Yes?” He asked.

“Don’t take any gift watches, okay?” She grinned and slapped him on the back.

He smiled and nodded. They shook hands. Rhonda hugged him and the WITSEC team led him away and toward a new identity and a new beginning.

“So,” Rhonda asked. “Is it all over?”

“Not quite,” Alex and the Chief answered in unison.

An entire team of United States Marshals entered the room and officially took Lawton into federal custody. He was handcuffed and would be taken to a federal prison before the sun went down.

“Now,” the chief said. “It’s over. Let’s get you two to the doctor and some food...in that order,” he added.

“Just like that?” Rhonnie asked.

“Gee Rhonda,” Alex smile. “You sound almost disappointed.”

“Well no. Not disappointed. Just kind of surprised. After all we went through those guys walk in, show some papers and poof, no more Mickey Lawton.”

“I wish.” Alex mumbled, knowing the matter was out of her hands.

It was Federal now, and nothing she could do would change that. The U. S. Marshals had mumbled something about the trial being held at an as yet undetermined location in the not too distant future. Due to the fact the case included the cold-blooded murder of nine police officers, drug trafficking-nationwide, a missing DEA agent no one had seen fit to mention before, and an undisclosed number of federal law enforcement officers, Mickey Lawton was now wanted by very nearly every law enforcement agency in the country.

There was no place left to hide, the official announcement stated. Trial would be held in a timely manner with justice promising to be swift and sure.

“Now where have I heard that before?” asked Alex.

Chapter XXIII

Later that day

After taking his favorite duo to the hospital and staying the three and a half hours it took to be seen, treated and released, Anthony Bartoni informed the bandaged, medicated, and nearly starving women that a certain Abigail Stoner expected them for dinner.

Alex looked at Rhonnie, who barely managed to hold back the heavy tears welling up in her weary, disappointed eyes.

“Um, actually Chief, we were hoping for something a little more.....private.”

The chief smiled. He had been hoping and waiting a long time for these two to finally get together. “She’ll kill me. You do know she’ll kill me?”

Alex searched Rhonda’s eyes for the courage to say what was on the tip of her tongue.

“Um, tell her she’s not losing a dinner guest, she’s gaining a daughter.” Alex held her breath, awaiting Rhonnie’s response.

Dancing, bloodshot, green eyes never looked so good...or happy. “Right,” came the soft reply.

“But she.... oh my God, did you just?”

Chief Bartoni felt an invisible hand press the Milky Way into his palm. “All right, Anna, but she’ll still kill me.”

Alex started to say something but found her mouth otherwise occupied. Surrender was looking better by the minute, thought Alex. After all, why fight destiny? She smiled, remembering how often Anna had used those very words to encourage her to tell Rhonda how she felt.

Maybe, Alex wondered, she still was.

Chapter XXIV

Chief Bartoni had insisted on driving the two women home despite their insistence that they could easily phone a cab. He would not hear of such a thing, they were told. Rhonda and Alex knew he meant well and, in a way, was only doing his job. Still, it

had been a very long day for them. It was rapidly approaching evening and they had yet to have ten minutes alone together. Hell, Alex thought, they had even been separated in E.R. It was beginning to feel like a fucking conspiracy by the time they pulled up in front of Alex's house.

She could hear Rhonnie only a few feet behind her, telling the chief goodnight and thanking him. He pretended to be surprised by Rhonnie's decision not to be driven to her the house her parents had left her. He offered to let her stay at his place and reminded her that Abigail would be more than happy for her stay there for a while.

"No," she said. "I think I'll just stay with Alex for tonight."

Bartoni was never good at pretending and both women saw right through him. In truth, both women adored him and even appreciated his efforts, just as they had as children. They would just appreciate it a lot more if they could just say goodnight and go inside, together...just the two of them.

Whistling softly and smiling at the thought of finally being alone with the woman she loved and **off duty**, Alexandra Stoner reached deeply into her grimy jeans and retrieved her house key.

"Nice place. When did you move so close to your Mom?" Rhonnie asked, looking up and down the quiet street as Alex unlocked the door to the small house.

"Coupla years back," she answered. "I got a great deal on the house and it seemed to make Mom feel better knowing I was nearby." Alex pressed the front door open and grinned. "At least now she knows I won't starve. Not with her kitchen table within walking distance of my front door."

Rhonnie giggled and stepped in, under the arm Alex used to hold the top of the doorway. "You never did much like to cook, did you?"

Turning slightly and using her booted foot to push the door closed, Alex gently leaned into it. Since Rhonnie was still standing in front of the door, she was effectively pinned between it and a tall woman whose lower body pressed in just close enough to make itself known. One arm was secured tightly to her chest by the shoulder-immobilizing sling, and the other slid slowly down the wooden door until it was alongside Rhonda's face. Warm, soft fingers touched the famous chin and lifted it until green met blue.

"Given half the chance, I think you will find I can cook with the best of em." Alex brushed Rhonnie's lips with her own, leaving little question as to her meaning.

"Oh, I believe you Alex. Already things are heating up quite nicely and you haven't even turned the stove on yet." Rhonnie quipped as she felt Alex press in closer still.

Just as their tongues touched, tips only, just where their lips met, the phone rang. Both women groaned and looked in the direction of the intrusive ringing. Alex sighed loudly and took four long strides to the coffee table where the offender sat.

Rolling her eyes, she mouthed the words: "It's Mom." Rhonnie nodded, sighed audibly and moved to sit on the floor in front of the long dark blue leather sofa.

"Hello Mom," Alex said as she lifted the phone to her face. "Yes, she's right here. Did you want to talk to her? Well no, why should she go to her folks' place? That house has been closed up for years Mom. You have a problem with Rhonnie staying here? I mean, maybe I should walk her down to your place then and let her stay with you."

Alex was talking so fast poor Rhonnie could barely scoot over to where she sat perched on the coffee table before the entire conversation was over.

"Yes, Mom. We will come over tomorrow. I promise. Yes, Rhonnie too. Okay. But lunch, not breakfast. It's been a very long few days, all right? Yeah, I know. I didn't mean to sound rude, Mom. I think it's all catching up to me is all. I haven't really slept for the past four days. You know how that goes. I know. I will. No, I **will**. Yes, I will try to take better care of myself. Maybe you could train Rhonnie to nag me on your day off. Mom. I was kidding. Okay? Tell the chief we love him too. Yeah of course I know he's there. Where else would he be? No, don't send dinner over Mom, please. I'm gonna send out for some cheeseburgers from Saul's Place. Rhonnie hasn't eaten one in ages, and we really are exhausted. We love you too. Night now." She rolled her eyes and Rhonnie giggled. "Night Mom."

"Well for crying out loud, Alex. For a minute there I thought you were gonna walk me to your Mom's house and kiss me goodnight on the doorstep." Rhonnie spoke, with a face so straight it made Alex blink.

"I **will** go kiss you on her doorstep if you want me to, but no way am I *leaving* you there. I want you right where you are, thank you very much." Alex spoke as she scooted down onto the floor next to the blonde. "Some reason you're on the floor here, cutie?"

"Well, yeah. I like it on the floor, and I see you have a nice fireplace, and I love fireplaces and ...you want me right here?" Midstream, the blonde registered what Alex had just said.

"Right here," answered the detective as she leaned in for a better kiss. "And right now."

Before lips could meet a loud, rumbling sound proceeded to make itself heard. It was emanating from the vicinity of a certain blonde's mid-section and it made Rhonda blush and Alex roar with laughter.

"Well, maybe not **right** now then. Guess we better order those burgers now, huh?"

Rhonnie blushed brighter. "I'm sorry Alex. Really I am. I guess those chips at the hospital didn't last long, huh?"

Alex gave her a quick peck on the cheek and then used her free hand to stand, reaching for the phone and hitting speed dial. "You still like cheeseburgers with the works?"

"Does the chief like candy?"

Alex grinned into the phone and winked at her companion. "Hi, Brian. Yeah, it's me again. No no, not the usual this time. Send me four with the works, two chef salads, two spicy fries, two apple pies and two extra large strawberry shakes. And Brian, if

you don't put real strawberries in em, I am gonna personally have you inspected every two days for the next millennium."

She dodged the small hand grabbing at the phone.

"Um, very funny. No, I did not swallow the chief. I happen to have company. I **do** have company sometimes you know. Oh very funny Brian. It hasn't been **that** long."

She turned slightly to hide the pink crawling up her cheeks and mumbled into the phone, but Rhonda heard her just fine.

"Brian it has **not** been three fucking forevers, and do not go spreading that shit around and I mean it. Yeah, charge it and send it right over, please. Yeah, I like you too. I'm starving here Brian so go cook my burgers. You bet. Later then."

"Three fucking forevers, huh?" Rhonnie teased and was surprised when Alex stood without answering and walked to the fireplace.

Curious eyes watched as the taller woman quietly opened the glass doors and reached inside, opening the flue and arranging wood and kindling. It was amazing to her that none of it seemed awkward or uncomfortable to Alex. It was as if she were accustomed to working with only the one free arm. Rhonda was concerned that Alex made no reply yet to her teasing, but could feel it was somehow all right. Soon, Alex stood and took a long match from a box on the mantel. Bending once more, she dragged the long stick along the rough stone and one end burst forth in orange and blue flame. Moments later there was a beautiful fire going and the glass doors were quietly pushed closed before Alex turned toward Rhonnie and smiled slightly. It was a tired smile that spoke of pain much deeper than the aching body before her.

"It **has** been three fucking forevers, Rhonnie. Maybe four. Brian hasn't delivered anything here for more than one person in years. I won't lie to you. It's not as if I have been... celibate. I haven't been. But I haven't entertained anyone in my home, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry. I just won't lie. I love you too much."

Alex didn't walk back to where Rhonnie sat. Instead she just kind of dropped onto the floor right where she stood.

Rhonnie stood up as quickly as her sore legs would permit and went to where Alex sat, cross-legged and looking lost. She lowered herself to her knees and winced as she sucked in a quick hiss. "Damn, remind me not to do that again."

"Quite the pair, aren't we?" grinned Alex.

"Yes," affirmed the blonde as she sat next to her friend, legs out to the side, carefully avoiding rubbing her jeans against the wounds again. "Yes, Alex, we **are** quite the pair. We always have been. Alex?" Rhonnie called.

"Yeah?" answered the brunette, not really looking up.

"Look at me please." It was a gentle request, not a command.

Alex Stoner looked up into loving, accepting green eyes. "I always liked looking at you. Guess I'm not alone in that, huh?"

The billion-dollar smile made an appearance. "Alex, you still don't get it do you?"

"Get what, Rhonnie?"

Rhonnie leaned over to take the beautiful face in her small hands. "You were always the only one whose looking mattered to me. You still are. I don't care if the rest of the world looks or not. I never did."

"But you left."

There it was. She'd said it. Alex had wanted to say it for a very long time and she finally managed to do it. Wouldn't it just figure that the doorbell would ring at that precise moment? Sighing loudly, the frustrated woman stood and went to the door.

"Thanks Brian. You didn't have to bring it personally. Get outta there. You don't need to peek around me and try to see if it's someone you know. It isn't. Okay?"

"Can't blame a guy for trying, Alex. You always get all the really good ones you know?" Brian teased. "Just kidding Alex. Have a good night. Catch you next time. Night."

"Night, Brian. And I do not," smirked Alex as she opened one of the steaming bags and sniffed deeply. Locking the door and turning the bolt, she called out to Rhonnie. "Hungry? You wanna go in to the kitchen or stay in here?"

Rhonnie searched the angular face for any trace of the anger she thought she saw a short time ago. It wasn't there. Had it been there at all? She wasn't certain. Maybe she was just tired. Maybe none of what she thought she saw and heard were real.

"Rhonnie?" Alex stood in front of her friend wondering what she could be thinking about that crinkled her brow so.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking about something. I'd love to see the kitchen, Alex but could we just eat here in front of the fire tonight? It feels so nice here. The warmth is making my body feel so much better." Rhonnie stretched as she spoke and her shirt lifted just enough to show the bandages covering the worst of the scrapes on her belly.

Alex immediately grabbed the edge of the heavy table with her right foot and dragged it the two or three feet between it and where Rhonnie stretched. She bent over and began taking the sacks from where she nestled them in her sling and placed them onto the coffee table. She was pleased to see that Brian remembered the heavy plastic utensils and Ranch Dressing for the salad as well as the good straws for the shakes.

"I think we're all set here. You do still like Ranch Dressing I hope." Alex made small talk and half hoped her earlier comment had been forgotten. It hadn't been.

Opening the crinkly wrapper and carefully folding it back to reveal, as near perfect a cheeseburger as existed anywhere, Rhonnie closed her eyes in reverence. Alex grinned at the sight. Next came the nose. Alex watched for it. Once the wrapper was arranged so that it was possible to eat the burger while catching any stray dribbling, Rhonnie paused to breathe in through her nose. It was a long, slow breath with eyes closed and head tilted slightly to the right. This was accompanied by only the tiniest of appreciative sounds. Then and only then did the mouth descend upon the work of culinary delight. Still, no bite was taken. No, not yet. This was the kiss. Alex never saw anyone else do it but Rhonnie, and she really missed it. Truth be told, she would have ordered the burgers for this moment alone. Soft, near perfect coral lips barely touched the huge, sesame seed bun and then pulled back as sea green eyes took in the view as if for the first time. Alex could not help herself.

“You gonna eat it or worship it?” she asked with lifted brow.

“Both.” Rhonnie grinned. “Don’t you wish you were a cheeseburger now?” The remark had slipped out before her brain could override her mouth. Too embarrassed for words, Rhonnie opened her mouth and took a large bite. She could scarcely believe she said that out loud, and so she just sat there and ate her burger, one bite after another.

Thinking about it, rolling the idea around in her head and watching her friend consume one of her all time favorite meals, Alex began to formulate a reply. After taking a few bites of her own burger she spoke, softly and with a bright smile. “Actually,” she drawled, “I think I’d much rather be the shake.”

“Really?” Rhonnie wondered aloud, absently reaching for a drink. “Why on earth would you want to be the shake?” She asked around the straw. Light slowly dawning, she sputtered and choked at the lifted brow as the brunette licked her lips suggestively. “Oh my God. Alex Stoner! I can’t believe you said that.”

Alex scooted over to take the shake from Rhonnie and make sure she stopped choking. “Why can’t you believe I said that, Rhonnie? After what almost happened between us up on that mountain last night I thought you knew how I felt.”

“Alex, I...what I mean is I thought I knew but now we’re here and you seemed unhappy with me and...oh I don’t know what I mean,” mumbled Rhonnie.

“Maybe I can help,” suggested Alex.

“How?” asked Rhonnie?

“Like this,” answered Alex who bent over, pulled the smaller woman closer and kissed her the way she wanted to in the doorway.

Rhonnie felt Alex’s lips warm against her own. They moved slightly to open and the tip of the tongue brushed across her lower lip causing her tongue to reach out as well. The sensation of Alex’s tongue inside her mouth made her entire body shiver, and she would have sworn the bottoms of her feet tingled just a bit.

Alex felt Rhonnie’s tongue press into her mouth and marveled at the feel of it. Tiny electrical jolts shot throughout her body and she was almost certain she’d seen sparks behind her eyelids as well.

Rhonnie moved to sit in Alex’s lap and smiled when the detective’s free hand found firm hold on her backside and slid her as far forward as possible.

“I didn’t leave you Alex.”

“Hmm?” Alex felt like she was miles away and tried to decide whether to return or not. She was unwilling to fully release the mouth or tongue and she most certainly did not want Rhonnie to slip off her lap any time soon.

“I didn’t leave you Alex. Not like that. I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid you would find someone and fall in love, and I would have to watch it. I was just a kid, Alex. Only fifteen. What did I know? Then when I saw you and Chris at Thanksgiving I just gave up.” Rhonnie was talking softly, gently, between lingering kisses to Alex’s face and neck. It was hard to think with Alex nibbling her ear and tracing her hand up and down her sides the way she was.

“But you did leave me, Rhonnie. I cried for weeks, you know? Why would I fall in love and you have to watch? I’d already fallen in love but it terrified me because I was in love with a child, a fifteen year old girl and what do you mean when you saw me and Chris at Thanksgiving? What Thanksgiving? You mean my first year at college? That first year you were away? You never came home that weekend. It nearly broke my heart. Alex dragged her tongue across the warm neck to nibble the other ear for a while.

“God, Alex. That’s driving me crazy. You know that, don’t you?”

“Good. What you’re doing is making me tremble inside, Rhon. Do me a favor?” Alex whispered.

“Anything,” replied the blonde as she kissed the soft lips again.

Several long kisses later, Alex spoke again. “Rhonnie, help me out of this contraption please?” Blue eyes indicated what she meant but it was entirely unnecessary.

“Alex, I don’t know. The doctor said you were supposed to wear it all the time for the next three days. Not to even take it off in the shower.”

“Well,” Alex grinned. “I doubt the doctor intended me to make love in it.”

“Oh,” was all Rhonnie could think of to say.

When no help was forthcoming Alex stopped nibbling and looked up. Rhonnie appeared to be thinking. “What’s wrong? We don’t have to make love, Sweetheart. Just finish your dinner. We can talk and get some sleep. It’s been a long three days. Why don’t we just...”

“Alex?”

“Yeah.”

“I do want to make love with you, and I did come home that weekend. I always thought you knew. I never meant to break your heart. I should have listened to Anna. She begged me to stay. She told me to talk to you, not to go off to New York and stay there. I should have listened, but I couldn’t get the images or the sounds out of my head. I love you Alex. I have always loved you.” Rhonnie laid her head on Alex’s good arm while trembling fingers worked to remove the sling.

“Anna always knew, didn’t she? I mean she tried to tell me too, so many times. *Call her*, she would say. *You might be surprised Alex*, she would tell me. *Why don’t you just tell the woman you love her*, she pleaded so many times. I should have listened. I was too goddamned stubborn. Rhonnie?”

“Hmmm?” She answered as the last of the sling was laid aside and Alex sat, naked from the waist up. “God, you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. Now I think we need to balance things up a bit here. Don’t you?” Alex smiled as she moved to unbutton Rhonnie’s shirt. “Rhonnie, what sounds and images couldn’t you get out of your head? Your folks? I always hated that, you

know?”

“Here, let me do that. You’ll hurt your arm.” Rhonnie unbuttoned and removed the outer shirt and Alex used her good arm to lift the t-shirt up toward the blonde head, and then tugged at the sports bra before Rhonnie even fully removed the t-shirt. “Hey, in a hurry are we?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact I am. I’ve been waiting nearly all my life for this moment, and I want to see you, to touch you, to love you. And I want it right now, thank you very much.” Alex winked and smiled and then sucked in her breath as Rhonnie pulled off the bra.

“What?”

“Oh God. Rhonda, you’re so beautiful.” Alex pressed her lips to the swell of Rhonnie’s breast in near worship and felt soft hands caress her own breasts tenderly and lovingly even as her tongue circled the flesh of the woman she adored. “What images, love? I wish I could have made them go away.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm. Um, no, that would have been hard since they were images of you, Alex.”

“Me?”

“You...and Chris.”

Alex stopped licking and looked into glazed green eyes. “What about me and Chris?”

Rhonnie never meant to tell Alex. She wasn’t sure she should but now there seemed to be no turning back. Maybe it was best to get it all out in the open anyway. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt so bad this time.

“I was home that weekend Alex. I was. It’s just that my father was on another of his tears and wouldn’t let me out of my room. My Mother was terrified of him and made me wait till he passed out from all the beer before I could get past him and out the door. I spent most of Thanksgiving up in my room waiting for him to get drunk enough to go to sleep. I mean, we ate dinner and all, and I helped clean things up, but I couldn’t go anywhere or even call. He’d ripped out the phone days earlier, and I certainly didn’t have a cell phone back then.”

“I’m so sorry, Honey. I had no idea. Mom said you didn’t answer the phone, and she got no word from your folks or heard anything about you being home so she figured you must have stayed in New York. Anna kept telling me to go over and check it out, but I was so hurt and confused I just wouldn’t go. I’d brought my roommate home to meet you and everything. When you got out why didn’t you come get me?”

“I did, Alex. Or I meant to. You brought Chris home that weekend to meet **me**?” Rhonnie asked, surprised.

“Well, yeah. She. Well she kinda heard a lot about you and...well, yeah, she wanted to meet you. When did you come over? I was home all weekend.”

“It was late, Alex. Probably after midnight. Everyone was in bed, I guess. I knocked but no one answered. The door was open so I came inside. I could hear your voice upstairs so I started up to your room. When I got outside your room I realized you weren’t alone. So I didn’t knock.” Rhonnie squirmed.

“I don’t understand. You heard my voice and realized I wasn’t alone, but you didn’t knock? No one was there but Chris and I. Why didn’t you just...Oh god. What time did you say?” Alex looked like she was going to be ill.

“Alex, it’s all right. I shouldn’t have come in so late. It was my own fault. I got what I deserved, I suppose.” Rhonnie tried to make Alex feel better, realizing she’d figured out part of the truth now.

Alex sat up straight, taking Rhonnie by the hand and looking her in the eye. “What exactly did you hear, Rhonda? Tell me, please.”

“Alex, does it matter?” Rhonnie wished she had just kept quiet. This was gonna hurt, and she already hurt, there was no good reason to put herself or Alex through this.

“Yes, my dear, sweet love. It matters to me.” Alex kissed Rhonda tenderly. “Please love, tell me *exactly* what you heard...if you can.”

“I heard you and Chris, Alex. I heard you, all right?”

“No. I mean **exactly** what you heard. Do you remember?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Rhonnie was incredulous. “Do I remember? Only every syllable, every whisper, every moan and whimper.”

“Okaaaaaaaay. If you really heard everything then why did you leave? I don’t get it.” Alex said calmly.

“Huh? Now I’m confused.” Rhonnie confessed. “Alex, I heard you making love to Chris. In fact, I am embarrassed to admit, I climbed into the tree so I could see because I didn’t believe what I thought I was hearing. So I have some pretty clear images to go with the sounds here Alex. Well, it was Thanksgiving and the windows were closed so I didn’t have the images and sounds together but trust me, it was pretty obvious.”

“Somehow I don’t think it was as obvious as you believe Sweetheart. And I think I can see why, now that I hear you explain it. You heard something from outside the door, right?” She looked over and Rhonnie nodded, blushing. “When did you start **hearing** us? What I mean is did you get there soon enough to know I did **not** initiate things? Tell me the truth Sweetheart. This is very important.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Alex.”

“I know, Baby. I just want to be absolutely certain you finally know the **whole story**. Gods, I wish I’d known this before.”

“You’re not mad?” questioned Rhonnie.

“Well of course I’m mad. I’m mad I was so fucking stupid all these goddamn years. I thought you left me, not just left but left me, and I thought it was because you wanted to be a star, Rhonda. I thought you just didn’t love me the way I loved you. I was so terrified. I even wondered if you found out I liked women and ran from me, disgusted.”

Up The River, revised edition

“Oh Alex. I *never* wanted to be a star. I always loved you, and I was afraid **you** found out I wanted you and found the thought so repulsive you found someone else. I thought I wasn’t pretty enough. Then later I thought maybe it was just an experiment for you, with Chris I mean, and maybe you preferred men.”

“Ewwwwwwwwwwww,” laughed Alex. “And **you** have always been the most beautiful person I know. Now tell me exactly what you saw and heard so I can fill in the gaps. I think the **WHOLE** story will make your nightmare images go away. I hope so anyway.”

“Well, I heard muffled voices when I first started up the stairs. Then when I got to the door to knock I heard someone I didn’t know say:

Come on Alex you know you want to. You like doing it and you know it. You won’t start but you like it when I touch you, like this.... and this. But you really like it when I do this. Don’t you?

Then I heard you say:

Chris, you know how I feel about this. God. Jesus. Chris I, oh lord that feels good.

After that there weren’t a lot of words for a while, just sounds of you moaning and saying how good it all felt. I knew I should go home but I needed to see for myself. So I climbed into the tree outside your window. You know the one we use to sit in all the time?”

“Yes, I know which one. Remind me to show you tomorrow where I carved our initials in it later that winter, and the note I carved into it the year I graduated from college. Now, when you got to the tree, Love...what did you see?”

“The drapes were partly closed but I could see her between your legs, Alex. I saw you leaning back on the bed with your hand wrapped in her blonde hair and your hips thrusting into her mouth Alex.”

“Oh god. Did you look at my face at all Rhonnie? Please tell me you could see that my eyes were shut tight?”

“Yes, I saw that. I just thought it was passion.”

“Well, it was - in a way.”

“I don’t understand, Alex.”

“Rhonnie, what you **didn’t** hear because you left to go outside was me telling Chris that she knew I only liked her touching me because she reminded me of the person I really wanted, would always want.”

“Huh?” Rhonnie managed.

“Yes. What you missed was me telling Chris, for the hundredth time I might add, that I was in love with Rhonda and would probably always be in love with Rhonda but that she didn’t love me that way and that yes, I liked it when she touched me because I could close my eyes and pretend Rhonda was making love to me.”

Rhonnie swallowed loudly.

“That is why I closed my eyes so tightly, Rhonnie. So I could see **you** loving me. The sound the cold weather and closed windows kept from you was the sound of me crying out **your** name as I climaxed. It is a sound everyone I have ever been with has heard and been forced to accept or move on. They always move on.”

“Moved.” Rhonnie whispered.

“Huh?” Alex asked, confused.

“**Moved** on, as in past tense. When next you cry out my name, I want to be the one to hear it, the **only** one to hear it, Alex.”

It was Alex’s turn to swallow loudly, and repeatedly.

“And Alex?”

“Yeah?” asked the smiling brunette.

“I want to hear it soon...and a lot.”

“I love you Rhonda Reynolds.”

“And I have always loved you, Alexandra Stoner. Now, about that sound...”

Very tenderly, Alex pulled Rhonda closer to her until she could kiss the soft neck and suck an ear lobe. Rhonnie moaned as Alex slowly moved the pads of her fingers across exposed nipples.

“I love you Rhonda. Please sit in my lap so I can feel you against me.” Alex used her good hand to caress the firm breasts she had wanted to touch for so very long and felt her own body responding with it’s own brand of liquid fire.

“Alex, are you sure I won’t hurt you? Oh Gods. That feels so good.” Rhonnie straddled the strong legs, careful to leave her legs stretched out in front of herself.

Alex pulled their bodies closer as their mouths found one another again. Soon the fever within them grew hotter and Rhonda gently pressed the Deputy backward until she could lie between her legs allowing their bodies to freely move against one another.

“Jesus! Yes Baby. Right there. Harder Rhonnie.” Alex breathed between kisses as Rhonnie pumped against her with a force that drove her nearer the edge than she thought their position would allow.

“Alex. Oh God, you feel so good. I love you so much.”

“I love you Rhonda. Oh baby...”

“I didn’t think I could...oh...Alex...”

The two women clung to one another and gasped for air while their heart rates gradually returned to normal.

Some time during the night Alex crawled over to the sofa and pulled the blanket from it’s place on the back in order to cover herself and the woman she had always loved. They drifted in and out of sleep until late the next evening, both too exhausted to do more than attend to the demands of bodily functions. It would be nearly two full days before they moved into the bedroom and almost a week before they actually made it to Abigail’s for dinner. No one seemed to mind in the least and if Alex and Rhonnie noticed the smiles that passed between her mother and the chief they never let on.

Sam Ruskin

Eventually Rhonda moved her belongings into Alex's house and they put her parents' old house up for sale. The Blonde Bombshell had indeed retired from public life. Deputy U. S. Marshal Alex Stoner took an extended leave of absence while her shoulder healed properly. The two women who had known one another nearly forever used part of time to get to know one another all over again.

Abigail Stoner and Chief Anthony Bartoni knew it was only a matter of time until one or the other of their girls would finally tell them what Anna hadn't...

But it would come as no big surprise. After all, Alex had even carved it into the tree outside her window.

Alexandra Abigail Stoner
Loves
Rhonda Renee Reynolds

"Well," whispered Anna. "I promised."

Epilogue.....

Nineteen months later...

"Alex!" Rhonnie called out. "There's a phone call for you."

"Coming!" Alex called back from the back porch where she was working out with the shoulder that had not healed properly and still gave her trouble.

"She'll be right here. May I tell her who's calling?" Rhonnie asked.

The male voice on the other end hesitated. "Um. Well, I'm afraid this is for the Deputy's ears alone. Sorry Ma'am."

"No problem. Here she is now."

"Thanks Babe," Alex kissed her partner and took the phone. "Stoner here." She waited to learn who was calling and why.

Rhonda had started to leave the room when she heard Alex sit down on the floor...abruptly. She turned to see all the color drain from her partner's face as she listened to the man on the phone.

"Alex?"

Alex looked up and patted the floor beside her. "He's out," she whispered with her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Who's ou...oh my god." Rhonda joined Alex on the floor.

Alex nodded for the fifth or sixth time and pulled Rhonnie close.

"Yes. We understand. You will be relocating Wheaton then? How many did you say he killed during the escape? Yes. How many of those were law enforcement? Fuck! Yes. I understand that. When will the courier be here with the actual note for us to view? Today. Before five. I'll be here. Is Chief Bartoni...Yes, I see. And am I to understand my status has changed back to active then? No? I see. Yes sir. I appreciate the heads up and I will call as soon as we get the package. Thank you, sir." Alex pressed end call and pulled Rhonda into a hug.

"Alex?"

"Fuck."

"That good?"

"Worse."

"Fuck."

"Exactly."

Watch for the sequel to Up The River...

Paddle Without A Creek