

~ Stolen Souls ~

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This story is published in *Undercover Tales*, a collaboration with authors Blayne Cooper and Susan X. Meagher. The book is available at Starcrossed Productions (please use link <http://www.scp-inc.biz/index.asp?PageAction=VIEWPROD&ProdID=412>).

"Welcome to the Denver International Airport. Please keep a close watch on your belongings at all times. Unattended bags will be ..."

From her vinyl-covered chair near the exit, Lorna watched as the throng of passengers arriving from San Francisco walked stiffly toward the baggage claim area. Mentally, she crossed off her list those who were greeted by family or friends, along with the businesspeople who carried briefcases or hanging garment bags. That left a handful of stragglers, one of whom was her quarry.

This run to town, which Lorna made twice a week, usually took her to the bus station or along the highways in search of hitchhikers. Those lost souls were what Astrid called the "low-hanging fruit," people down on their luck, looking for friendship and a way to get by. Lorna herself had come to Sky Ranch after hitching west to Denver from Chicago four years ago. But people arriving via the airport were a different breed, smarter and emotionally stronger, and they tended to have more access to cash than those coming to the ranch by other means. They were trickier to score, but worth it in the long run. Quality over quantity, Astrid said.

Lorna kept her vigil as passengers plucked their bags from the carousel. When the crowd began to thin, she zeroed in on a woman in her mid-thirties dressed in tight jeans, a blazer, and boots. Her straight auburn hair was cut short and tucked behind her ears, and she was without makeup. It was a no-nonsense look that said she couldn't care less about styles of the day. She hefted a large blue duffle bag on her shoulder like it weighed nothing at all and marched toward the exit with a confident gait. Astrid was right-this kind of person was quality.

Careful not to arouse suspicions, Lorna hung back, watching through the window as her target waited on the curb. Again and again, the woman checked her watch, her growing impatience apparent. The Copper J Ranch shuttle bus was now thirty minutes late. The bus would not be coming at all, Lorna knew-because there was no Copper J Ranch. *Heh.*

Finally, the woman gave up her wait, pulling a few printed pages from her pocket as she trudged back inside the baggage claim area to a payphone.

Lorna smiled to herself as she noted the exasperated look. *The number you are calling is not in service at this time.*

After slamming the receiver down, the woman dropped her bag and stomped angrily over to the monitor that announced departing flights.

That was Lorna's cue. She rose from her seat and approached the flustered traveler. "Excuse me, miss. Your name wouldn't happen to be Hickman, would it?"

"No," the woman answered gruffly, walking back to her bag.

"Sorry. I just thought for a minute you might be the woman I was supposed to meet. She signed up to spend a couple of weeks on our ranch. You looked-

"Wait! Are you with the Copper J Ranch?"

"Oh, no! Not another one for the Copper J." Lorna shook her head. "I thought the state had finally closed them down."

"What do you mean?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but they're a scam. I bet you found them on the Internet, right?"

The woman nodded.

"Then I guess they're still at it. Bet you paid by check, too."

"Yeah ... and they already cashed it." The woman scowled and glanced back at the monitor. "So they're not even for real?"

"Afraid not."

"Goddamnit! How could I have been so stupid?" The woman slapped the phony documents against her palm and spun around to check the monitor again. "And the flight back to San Francisco just left."

Lorna let her fume for a few more seconds before extending her offer. "Look, if you're still up for working on a ranch for a couple of weeks, it looks like this Hickman woman isn't going to show. She already paid, and we're short three hands this week. You can have her spot if you want it."

The woman looked at her skeptically. "What kind of work you got?"

"Whatever you want. Range work ... corral ... mess hall. Do you ride?"

She shook her head. "Not much. But I'd be willing to give it a shot."

"I think we can find you something, and we'll be sure to get you some time in the saddle too."

The woman sighed in resignation. "How much will it cost me? I already paid those assholes almost three thousand dollars."

Lorna shook her head. "You'd be in Hickman's spot, and like I said, she paid already. Besides, we sometimes have to pick up extras from town when we're short of hands. We have to pay them a salary, so it works out for both of us if you want to just come along."

"You sure it's okay?"

Lorna held out her hand for a shake. "Anybody who's willing to work is welcome at Sky Ranch. I'm Lorna Pierce."

The woman took it with a firm grip. "Vonne Maglio."

Lorna stole another glance at her brooding passenger. They had been riding deeper into the canyons west of the flatirons for almost an hour and she had barely said a word. "You might as well get over it, Vonne. You were snookered, but at least you landed on your feet."

Her passenger snorted.

"Besides, I think you're going to like Sky Ranch even better than you would have a place like the Copper J. We're not like those other ranches." The elaborate ruse was necessary, Astrid said, so the new hands would arrive without expectations ... and so no one on the outside would be able to track them, at least not easily.

"How so?"

"Most of the others cater to tourists. They let you sleep in while the real hands do all the hard work, and they have these big barbecue cookouts at the end of the day. It's phony."

"So now you're telling me that there's no barbecue? How bad does this get?"

Lorna laughed. "We're a real working ranch, and everybody at Sky has to pull their own weight. Some people grumble about it at first, but when their time's up, they feel good about it because they've worked so hard."

"I can handle the work ... but the barbecue would have been a nice touch."

"Sorry. But I think you'll like us anyway. You look like somebody that's not afraid of a little

work." Sky Ranch could use more hands like Vonne Maglio, Lorna thought. "Some people like it so much they hire on for good. They don't want to go back to wearing a tie or high heels, and sitting behind a desk all day."

"They just stay there?"

"Some of them do. Of course, not everybody gets to stay-just those that work hard and contribute."

"I'll do my share, but you don't have to worry about me wanting a job when my two weeks are up. I'm just here to get away from the city for a while ... take some time to think about what I want to do with my life."

"They all say that at first," Lorna answered with a chuckle. "What kind of work do you do now?" She already knew this from the application form Vonne had filled out on the Internet for the fictitious Copper J Ranch. Astrid used the information to pick which ones she wanted. She looked for people who lived alone, who worked at dead-end jobs, and especially who had money to drop on a trip like this.

"I'm sort of between jobs right now. I got out of the navy not long ago."

"Ready to have your feet on dry land, eh?"

"I'll say."

Lorna pointed to a turn up ahead, a narrow dirt road that disappeared into the trees. "This is where the ranch starts." A few hundred yards down the road, they reached a gate plastered with warning signs about trespassing and the dangers of the electric fence. She fingered a remote hooked above her visor and the gate opened automatically, closing behind them once they drove through.

"Is that really an electric fence?"

"You want me to stop so you can go find out?" That was her standard answer, and she had yet to have any takers.

"I guess I'll take your word for it."

"We've had a little trouble with teenagers coming out here looking for places to drink and smoke dope."

Vonne chuckled. "Looks like the perfect spot."

"We don't allow any illegal drugs on the property. That won't be a problem, will it?"

Vonne backpedaled immediately. "No, of course not. I had my fill of all that in the navy ...

drinking too. I was just thinking back to when I was a teenager. I would have been looking for a place like this too."

"Yeah, I guess we all had those years. By the way, we don't allow cell phones or laptops or things like that either. If you brought that kind of stuff, we'll check it for you and give it back when you leave." The phony Copper J website had spelled out those restrictions as well.

"No, I came out here to get away from that shit."

"I hear you."

After another mile, they came to a pasture, where a few hundred head of cattle grazed as a half dozen hands milled around on horseback.

"How big is the herd?"

"Couple of thousand ... pretty big for a ranch like this. It brings a good dollar out of the slaughterhouse, and we eat well. We also sell a lot of breeding stock."

Vonne nodded as they drove past. The road ended at the mouth of a canyon, where several buildings were clustered beneath two towering walls of rock.

"This is beautiful," Vonne said.

"The property runs way back into those canyons. We've got about forty working hands. Six of them are women on their own like you, but we have a few families too," Lorna explained. "Right now, we've got four visitors, counting you, but one of them has already asked about staying on." She parked the van beside the large barn and they both got out. "Let's stow your gear and I'll give you a quick tour."

They stopped at one of the smaller buildings, designated as the women's bunkhouse, and dropped off Vonne's duffle bag and blazer. Despite the open windows and doors, the room felt stuffy. When they stepped back outside, Lorna then pointed out the larger bunkhouse for the men, and the shared bathhouse out back. Vonne excused herself for a quick trip to the women's latrine, which was attached to the bathhouse but opened to the outside near the women's bunkhouse. When she returned, they continued on past several smaller cabins set aside for the families on the ranch, and then around the main house, easily the largest building on the property.

"Back here is the mess hall," Lorna said, indicating a side door. Inside the large room were five long tables with a dozen chairs each, and a pass-through to the kitchen. Several women ranging in age from late teens to fifties were working, tending ovens and stovetops. The smell of dinner already filled the air. "Most of the women on the ranch work here in the kitchen or in the main house."

Vonne looked from one woman to another, smiling her greeting. "What do they do in the main house?"

"Laundry, teaching ... taking care of the kids. I think one of them is Astrid's housekeeper."

"Who's Astrid?"

"Astrid Becker. She owns the place. Sky Ranch has been in her family for generations, but she's the last of the line. You'll meet her tonight at dinner."

Vonne nodded. Keeping her voice low, she said, "I don't think I could stand working in the kitchen all day. You got any jobs outside?"

"Most of the range work means riding every day, but there's a lot to do around the yard."

They exited the mess hall on the other side, where a dusty courtyard led to the barn and an adjacent corral. A wiry woman a couple of inches shorter than Vonne was unloading feedbags from a pickup truck, stacking them neatly just inside the barn door.

"This is Liza. She works the yard."

The woman looked up and nodded in their direction before turning back to her work. Like Vonne, she was dressed in tight jeans and boots. Her sleeveless denim shirt bore a sweat stain down the center of her back, and a tan Stetson hid most of her curly brown hair from the sun.

"She doesn't talk much," Lorna whispered as they walked past the woman into the barn. "There's a lot to be done out here every day. Liza sees to the supplies for the whole ranch ... keeps the kitchen and the barn stocked ... runs lunch out to the range hands, that kind of stuff. She could sure use some help if you're up for heavy lifting." She looked back at the subject of their conversation. "Don't know how she'd take to working with somebody, though. She seems to like being by herself."

"I could do that kind of work, I guess. Better than peeling potatoes."

"Or there's always working in the barn."

They stopped just past where Liza had stacked the supplies. Vonne's eyes went immediately to a scruffy-looking man who emerged from a stall, his pants covered to his knees with horse manure. Tobacco spittle dribbled off his chin onto a western shirt that probably had been white at one time.

"That's Clint. He handles the horses. He has a couple of helpers, but he's about to lose one of them ... Dominick is the one I told you about that wants to stay on, but only if he can get out of the barn and do some real ranch work."

Lorna waited as though watching the wheels turn inside Vonne's head. The new arrival looked first at Clint, then back over her shoulder at Liza, who had stopped working to watch them. The women's eyes held for several seconds before Liza turned back toward the truck, stretching to

pull a large burlap sack from the bed.

"I think I'll take my chances with Liza." Vonne said as she hurried back to the barn entrance. She reached alongside her into the truck, grasping the other end of the sack. Together, they carried it into the barn and heaved it onto the neat pile.

"Thanks," Liza muttered.

"No problem."

Pleased at Vonne's choice, Lorna joined them. "Liza, this is Vonne. She's going to be working with you for a couple of weeks. Think you can show her the ropes?"

Liza pushed the brim of her hat up to get a good look at the new hire. "Sure," she answered, her voice flat but not unwelcoming.

"Vonne Maglio," she said, holding out her hand.

Liza took it in a dusty grip. "Liza Wingate."

Lorna smiled with satisfaction. "Don't kill her on the first day, all right?"

"You should have told me there were three more truckloads like this before I took this job." Vonne stopped to massage her aching shoulder.

"You can always go back and work in the horseshit." Liza had loosened up practically the minute Lorna disappeared.

"I'd feel better if you didn't act like you enjoyed my misery so much."

"Too bad. That sympathy train left the station-along with your ride back to town."

Vonne snorted. "And I distinctly remember Lorna telling you not to kill me on my first day."

"I won't. But all bets are off tomorrow."

Vonne shook her head and grabbed another sack. After just a few hours, she realized she was in for an interesting two weeks. From only their brief conversations, it was obvious Liza was well-spoken and smart, and she had a wicked-if not downright evil-sense of humor. They had already fallen into a playful rapport, surprising since Lorna had described her as a loner.

As they were hauling the last of their load into the barn, Vonne looked up to see a column of men on horseback emerging from the woods behind the main house. Clint and a man Liza said was Dominick met them to lead the horses into the barn. "That's a big job, taking care of all those horses."

"Yeah, Lorna's trying to hire some more help. I think she was hoping you would do it." She looked at Vonne with a smirk. "One more load of dry goods to the kitchen and we're done for the day. Then you can rest your poor little muscles."

"Lorna told me you were the quiet type."

Liza huffed. "That's because I don't talk to her."

Vonne wanted to ask why, but figured it would be a pretty nosy question coming from someone who had been there all of four hours. "I'll have to ask her how she got you to do that."

Rest couldn't come soon enough for Vonne, and after their last load they finally headed back to the bunkhouse. Liza pointed out the top bunk next to the window.

"You'll thank me tonight."

Vonne reached into her duffle bag and pulled out shorts and a T-shirt. "What's the shower schedule?"

"The men have it before dinner, we get it after. But the toilets on the right side are ours all the time."

"Yeah, I found those earlier." Vonne spread out a blanket and crawled up onto her bed, relishing the chance to finally relax.

"Don't get too comfortable. Dinner's in about ten minutes."

For an instant, Vonne entertained the idea of skipping dinner and getting some rest. But she wanted to meet this Astrid Becker, the owner of Sky Ranch.

"That one's Astrid-the woman in the gold shirt."

Vonne would have known that anyway, even without Liza pointing it out. Astrid Becker was a handsome woman, tall and muscular, with graying curls held back on both sides with barrettes.

She easily commanded the room with a manner that was almost regal. And if that weren't evidence enough, everyone in the room came to their feet until she was seated at the center of the head table.

"Wow! Do people always stand up when she comes in?"

"Just at dinner," Liza explained. "She doesn't require it or anything. I think it's just to show respect for her."

The buffet dinner-pot roast, stewed vegetables, and bread-was filling, but a poor substitute for barbecue, Vonne thought. She ate heartily, though, knowing the next day's work would require all the energy she could muster.

"Where's our new hand?"

Vonne looked up to see Astrid standing and scanning the room.

"Right here." Vonne stood slowly and smiled. "Vonne Maglio."

"Welcome to Sky Ranch, Vonne. I hope you enjoy your time here. Lorna says you were looking for a working vacation, and I have a hunch you've found it."

Vonne chuckled along with everyone else.

"If there's anything we can do to make your stay more uncomfortable ..."

They laughed again, louder this time.

"But for tonight, why don't you sit back down and relax. We always finish dinner with a lively discussion, just to make sure our brains get a workout too."

Vonne sat mesmerized for the next thirty minutes as Astrid tossed out philosophical questions to generate mild debate and discussion among the hands as they all finished their meal. It was clear she was held in high regard-perhaps even reverence-by the men and women of Sky Ranch. As the evening progressed, Vonne began to see why they found her so gripping. She obviously was very intelligent, and she had a way with people that seemed to make them strive to please her.

Finally, Astrid stood and cleared her throat. At that time, the room fell quiet and she excused the temporary workers-Vonne, Dominick, and a man and woman who Liza said were husband and wife-saying she had business to discuss with the permanent help. She wished them all a good night's rest.

"I guess this means we get a head start on going to sleep," Vonne said casually to Dominick as they walked outside. The married couple were walking together ahead toward the bunkhouses.

"Don't worry, Vonne. The first couple of days are the hardest, but then on the third day you wake

up and can't wait to get started. And it's like that every day after."

"Then I sure am looking forward to Monday."

"Except Mondays are usually pretty tough because there's extra to do."

"Then Tuesday."

"That's the day we load up for the slaughterhouse."

"Level with me, Dominick."

"Okay, you're going to feel like this every night, and you're always going to dread getting up." He laughed at his own joke.

"That's what I was afraid of."

"But you're going to love it here, Vonne. Wait and see." He bid her goodnight and disappeared in the shadows toward the men's bunkhouse.

She reached the women's bunkhouse, walking in to find the married woman, Crystal, getting ready for the shower.

"It's good she lets us go early sometimes," Crystal said. "I like having a little privacy in the bathhouse instead of being in there with everybody at once."

Vonne had peeked in the bathhouse earlier this afternoon and knew it consisted of three small changing rooms, one private shower, and a large communal shower. "Do you want me to wait here while you go?"

Crystal shook her head. "No, that's all right."

"You like Sky Ranch?" Vonne made conversation as they walked to the bathhouse.

"Not me. We just came here to work for a little while so we could earn the money to get all the way to Ohio. Our bus ticket ran out in Denver and Lorna picked us up. I'm ready to move on as soon as we get enough money, but Philip-he's my husband-he likes it here and wants to stay."

"How come you don't like it?"

"I don't like sleeping in a bunkhouse with a bunch of women!" She said it as though it was the most ridiculous question ever asked. "And besides, there ain't no way for us to get to church on Sunday. Astrid don't have no use for church."

"How long before you have enough money?"

"Should be any day now. I sure will be glad to get back on that bus." They entered the bathhouse together and Crystal went straight for the private shower and pulled the curtain closed.

Vonne continued into the larger room, stopping at the showerhead closest to the door. After a few minutes, the hot water reached the muscles in her shoulders and neck, and she knew she had found the one thing she needed more than sleep. It took all the willpower she could muster to turn it off after she rinsed, figuring there would be hell to pay if the others ended up taking cold showers.

She and Crystal returned to the bunkhouse just as the other women were coming back from the after-dinner meeting. Vonne stowed her gear and climbed up to stretch out while the others went off to bathe. Liza lagged behind in the bunkhouse for a few minutes, leaving for the showers as the other women began to return. She came back a full half hour after the others had turned in for the night.

As a gentle breeze wafted through the bunkhouse, Vonne said a silent thanks for the tip about sleeping next to the window. Liza slept directly beneath her and the other five women-four of them kitchen workers, and one who she learned handled all of the laundry-occupied bunks at the far end of the room. The bunkhouse clusters seemed more practical than cliquish, since only a few of the beds were adjacent to windows. Vonne supposed they all shifted near the big stone fireplace in the winter.

These women led an interesting life, she thought. Working from dawn to sundown and sharing a bunkhouse and showers with others was a lot like being in the navy. She wondered if the hands at Sky Ranch got anything like shore leave. She doubted it.

She rolled her head from side to side, still trying to loosen the knots in her neck. Getting up at dawn wasn't going to be easy, especially with the one-hour time difference from the west coast. Despite her fatigue, she had lain awake for forty-five minutes, listening as her bunkmates fell asleep. She envied their soft snores and deep breathing. She would join them soon in Dreamland-but not yet.

Careful not to make a sound, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and slid quietly to the floor. Checking one last time to make sure everyone was asleep, she tiptoed to the door and pushed the screen softly. Holding it so it wouldn't slam, she allowed it to close before stepping off the porch in the direction of the bathhouse.

As she approached the latrine, the odor of disinfectant grew stronger. That explained why Liza had come back a half hour after the other women had turned in. She had probably been the one who stayed behind and cleaned up. Once inside the dark latrine, Vonne closed and locked the door with the barrel bolt. Carefully, she climbed onto the toilet seat to retrieve the cell phone she had stashed in the eaves when she first arrived at Sky Ranch. Her suspicions had paid off, since someone-probably Lorna-had searched her bag while she was out working with Liza. She turned on the phone and waited for it to come to life. With her speed dial, she was connected at once.

"Hey, Jerry. I'm in ... but it's not the Copper J. They pulled a switch at the airport ... Yeah, she's

here. And your buddy was right-it's Astrid Becker." Vonne unlocked and cracked the door so she could peer out at the women's bunkhouse. "This place is called Sky Ranch." She could see a woman emerge from the bunkhouse and start toward the bathhouse. "I don't know yet. Find out what you can on your end ... I'll call you when I figure out what she's doing to these people. I gotta go."

Vonne turned off the phone and stepped onto the toilet seat to set it in the corner out of sight. It was too risky to keep it in the bunkhouse. She flushed the toilet and walked outside in time to greet the woman, one of the ones she had met earlier in the kitchen. Then she continued back to her bunk where she quietly climbed into bed. Sleep came instantly.

Liza backed the pickup truck up to the door of the kitchen. "Everything should be ready by now. We just have to load it and haul it out to the range hands."

Vonne hopped out and joined Liza at the rear of the truck, where they lowered the tailgate in anticipation of their load. Inside, they found the kitchen crew hard at work on dinner. Four large insulated containers-lunch for the thirty-some range hands-were stacked by the door.

"These all go out to the pasture?"

"No, just the green one. We have to take the others up to the canyon. That's where most of the hands are."

Vonne stepped over to help with the load and was surprised to see Liza hoist a packed container on her own. For someone so lithe, she was deceptively strong. Vonne had noticed the muscle definition in her upper arms. That was only one of the many things she noticed on pretty women.

"Ungh!" Vonne grunted as she lifted one by herself.

"Let me help."

"No way! You think I'm going to let you show me up?"

Liza laughed. "I hope this means you'll be too proud to whine tonight."

"You're evil all the way through, aren't you?"

"Hey! This is me being nice," Liza countered.

"Now you're scaring me."

In only a few minutes, they loaded the truck and set out on a rutted dirt road that zigzagged up the hillside. Periodically, a trail crossed the road and continued on up.

"What's that trail I keep seeing?"

"That's the horse trail. The hands go straight up from the back of the house on horseback, but it's too steep for us to go that way."

When they reached a level clearing near the top of the ridge, Liza stopped and killed the engine. In the center of the clearing sat a wooden frame building with a wide covered porch. Several picnic tables were positioned underneath the awning. The women got out and hauled three of the containers to the porch.

"What's in there?" Vonne nodded toward the building.

"Supplies, I guess. It's always closed up."

And the windows are covered so no one can peek inside.

"We just unload it and leave it here," Liza said.

"Where is everybody?"

Liza pointed toward a continuation of the horse trail that led into more rugged terrain. "Through that pass. We can't get the truck any farther, so they have to come down here to eat. We just leave it and come back in a few hours to pick up the empties."

"So you don't even see them?"

"Nope."

Peculiar.

Two rifle shots pierced the air, causing Vonne to jump. "What was that?"

Liza shrugged, seemingly impervious to the noise. "Coyote or something, I guess. You hear a lot of that up here." She got back into the truck and started it up. "Now we have to drop this one off at the pasture."

"What's back up there in the canyon?"

"I think it's a big herd, because most of the hands go up there every day."

The herd in the lower pasture numbered about three or four hundred and took only six hands to manage, Vonne remembered. Lorna had said there were a couple of thousand head, so most of

them had to be in the canyon.

They followed the zigzag road back down the way they came, and twenty minutes later pulled up to a second building similar to the one near the canyon but not as large. Here, the half dozen hands who managed the lower herd were already gathered on the front porch waiting for their lunch. Vonne recognized one as Philip, the temporary helper who was married to Crystal.

"I can get this one. Just sit here and rest your tired old bones," Liza said. When she returned, she set a smaller cooler on the seat between them. "This is for us. I usually stop down at the creek and eat."

"Good! Or is it considered whining if I act like I'm hungry?"

"Nah, you've worked hard this morning. I won't begrudge you a bite to eat."

"Wow, a compliment from Miss Hard Ass! I'm all misty-eyed."

Liza chuckled. "Yeah, me too."

In a few minutes, Liza pulled the truck under a stand of trees where a small creek trickled down from the canyon pass. She grabbed the cooler and walked to a seat on a boulder near the water. "This is my favorite part of the whole day."

"I can see why." Vonne followed, soaking up the sensation of being so close to nature-and so far from the commotion of the city. A part of her wished this wasn't a job, but a real vacation instead. It was easy to understand why some people came to a place like this and didn't want to leave.

All morning, Vonne had peppered Liza with questions about life on the ranch. At first, she had been interested in learning more about Astrid, but the more she talked with Liza, the more she wanted to understand why she had chosen a life like this. "How long have you worked at Sky Ranch?"

"About six months."

"So what's it like here in the winter?"

Liza chuckled. "You don't want to know."

"That bad, huh?"

"Nothing changes as far as the work's concerned. The range hands go out every day, and all the supplies still have to move."

"Wow. I guess I never thought of it that way."

"Just because there's two feet of snow on the ground doesn't mean the animals or the hands don't have to eat."

"That must be hard work."

"It's all right. You just do it."

"Do you like it here?"

Liza shrugged noncommittally. "It's as good a place as any, I guess." She picked up her sandwich and walked downstream, crossing the creek to take a seat on a sunny ledge.

Vonne followed her, stripping down to her tank top so she could soak up the sun. From behind her sunglasses, she saw Liza watching her intently, and it was a look that Vonne recognized. She flipped up her glasses to look Liza in the eye. "So where are you from?"

Liza hurriedly looked away, obviously embarrassed about being caught checking Vonne out. "Orange County."

"Disneyland."

Liza snorted. "Now you see why I don't want to go back." She poured cold water from a thermos and handed a cup to Vonne. "What about you?"

"I'm from the Bay Area ... Sausalito."

"It's pretty up there."

"Yeah, but not like this." Vonne leaned back against the warm rock. "Lorna might be right. She said two weeks up here and I wouldn't want to go back."

"Sure beats ledgers and spreadsheets."

"So you're a number cruncher?"

"Used to be. But I'm not going back to that. I'd rather be homeless." Liza finished off her sandwich with one last bite.

"That would be pretty boring compared to this."

"Not to mention crooked," Liza mumbled before swallowing. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I just got out of the navy. Hard to say what I'll do next. Something where I get to be outside a lot, I guess."

"I hear you." Liza began to gather their trash, her signal that their break was over. "It's time to go

back and pick up the empties. You ready?"

Vonne nodded and pulled on her denim shirt. She assumed most of the hands at Sky Ranch were as cynical as Liza about the world outside. What she wanted to know was why, and what Astrid Becker was offering them instead.

"So ... let's see, where is the greenhorn?" Astrid looked around the room from her seat at the head table, finally spotting Vonne at the table farthest away. "Vonne, how was your first full day?"

"It was great, thanks. My blisters have already started to turn into calluses."

The other hands laughed in unison, nodding in understanding.

"I'm glad to hear it," Astrid said, smiling. "Why don't you start us off with the discussion tonight? I think these folks get a little tired of listening to me"-she looked around the room and smirked-"but they're all too polite to say so."

Vonne laughed along with the others, already racking her brain to come up with something to talk about.

Astrid saw her hesitation and rescued her. "I'll make it easy. Here's a question to get the ball rolling."

Vonne glanced briefly at Liza, who gave her an encouraging nod.

"Why don't you tell us what you think is the most important thing a government should do for its people?"

Vonne set down her knife and fork and swallowed the last of her roast beef. Astrid's question was in the vein of those she had tossed out last evening, but as a newcomer, she hadn't been asked to participate in that debate. Her grace period was over, it seemed, and she stood to address the leader.

"Provide justice, I think."

"Why is that?" Astrid frowned, as though disappointed with the answer.

"Justice gives us a set of common rules to live by. It's what separates us from barbarians and anarchists." Vonne was sure she saw Astrid flinch.

"But what if justice isn't fair?" Astrid barked. "What if it favors one race over another? Or one class over another? What if it favors men over women?"

"Justice isn't perfect. Few things are. But that doesn't diminish its importance, since without it none of the other contributions of government would matter. People wouldn't be safe to come and go, or to keep what they earn. Families wouldn't be secure ... and the people who take advantage of others would do so with impunity."

"I think you make a mistake to assume that only the government can hold people accountable for violations of acceptable behavior." Astrid looked around the room and softened her tone. "Maybe we should go back to the days of the Old West, when justice was worn on the hip."

The other hands laughed and nodded again, mumbling to one another in agreement. Vonne decided it was all in fun and joined in.

"Don't be too bothered about Astrid's questions tonight," Liza said as they returned to the bunkhouse. "You held your own. She respects that."

"I don't know about holding my own. She had some pretty good points about justice being uneven."

"Yeah, but you had good points too. Astrid doesn't challenge people to put them down. She wants to make people think. That's one of the things I really like about her."

Vonne knew there was more to it than that. In just two days at Sky Ranch, she could tell Astrid's sway over these people was powerful, much stronger than she had suspected at first. That could be dangerous if Astrid ever asked them to do something illegal, or something that put them at risk.

When they reached the bunkhouse, Liza pulled off her boots and stretched out on her bed.

Vonne opened her duffle bag and took out clean underwear, a fresh T-shirt and the shorts she usually slept in. "Aren't you going to the showers?"

"I usually wait until the others are finishing up so I can clean the bathhouse."

"Yeah, I noticed when I got up last night that the place had been disinfected. You should have told me. I would have helped."

Liza waved her hand in dismissal. "Not a big deal. It's not my favorite job, but it has to be done."

It doesn't take that long. Besides, you whined so much I hated to ask."

"If I really thought whining would help, I would do it more." Vonne sat down on the empty lower bunk across from Liza's. "But I don't mind helping. I came here to work, and if I pitch in, it'll go even quicker."

"Okay, thanks." Liza sat up and pulled her shorts and T-shirt out from under her pillow. "What I was trying to say about Astrid is that she's really good at getting people to understand complex things. I mean, look at some of the people here." She lowered her voice as the last of the women left for the showers. "Most of them are drifters, dropouts ... people who can't hold a job somewhere else. And she's got them thinking about things like the Constitution and the structure of a republic. The other night, she read from Thomas Paine and got everybody to talk about it."

"Why does she do that?"

"She likes that stuff. She says living out here away from everybody and working together the way we do, we have to be our own government. She wants us to understand the right principles, because we all have responsibilities to each other. In a place as small as this, we can't afford to have problems like the ones they have everywhere else, like drugs or crime ... or people using too much of something."

"That's interesting."

"It really is, especially when you get to see it played out on a small scale like here on the ranch. She's got some books in the house if you ever want to read something." Liza reached under the bed and pulled out a tattered paperback. "I've been reading this one, but it took me awhile to get through it."

"John Locke."

"Yeah, it's a bunch of essays about things like religion, taxes ... stuff like that."

Vonne recognized the title as one she had read in a political science class during her freshman year at Annapolis. "You're finished with it?"

Liza nodded. "But I've been hanging on to it because as soon as I turn it in, Astrid will ask me to talk about it at dinner. I don't want to do that until I know it cold. You know what I mean?"

Vonne nodded, astounded to realize just how much Astrid's opinion mattered to Liza, and probably to all the others. "Why don't you practice on me? You can tell me all about Locke when we're cleaning up."

"Sure you don't mind?"

"Nah, it'll be interesting."

When the other women began to return from the bathhouse, Liza put her book away, indicating it was time to go clean. They walked over to the bathhouse and she showed Vonne the storage closet where the supplies were kept and they started on the latrines. As they worked, Liza explained as much as she could remember and understand from Locke's book, while Vonne interjected questions and comments to mimic how Astrid might respond.

"I actually think all this talk is helping," Liza proclaimed as they finished up by mopping the communal shower. "Who knew you'd turn out to be so useful?"

"Always the smartass."

Liza gave Vonne a genuine smile and held out her hand for the mop, which she stowed back in the closet. "Now comes the best part. We get to be the first ones to use the clean bathhouse."

"I've been looking forward to this all day, ever since you handed me that sack with the horseshit all over it." Vonne pulled off her shirt and tossed it onto the bench next to her clean clothes.

Liza too began to get undressed. "I didn't know it had horseshit on it. It was just on that one side."

"Yeah, my side." By this time, Vonne was naked and headed into the shower room. "Which one of these is the best?" she asked, looking at the eight showerheads that protruded from the concrete block wall.

"This one," Liza answered, arriving just in time to claim the space in the right-hand corner.

"That wasn't very nice." Vonne tested each of the showerheads for pressure, settling on one two spaces down from Liza. "God, this feels good."

"Yeah, that's another thing about waiting until last. There's more water pressure and the water heats up again while we're cleaning."

"You know all the tricks, don't you?" Vonne began to massage her head with shampoo from one of the dispensers. From the corner of her eye, she could see Liza watching her ... studying her body as the steamy water poured over it. She didn't mind-except that with Liza watching her, it was hard to watch Liza.

When they finished, they toweled off and got dressed, their discussion of Locke apparently done for the night. The long day of hard work was catching up with both of them.

"I don't know about you, but I'm beat," Liza said as they walked out of the bathhouse.

"If you're beat, you can imagine how I feel ... being a tenderfoot and all." Vonne laughed, looking up just in time to see a dark figure exit the bunkhouse and disappear into the shadows by the main house. "Who was that?"

"Where?"

"Somebody just came out of the bunkhouse and went around the corner."

"It was probably Lorna," Liza answered, her voice giving away her irritation.

"What would she be doing in the bunkhouse? I thought she had a room of her own in the main house."

"She does, but she comes in to spy on everybody."

"What kind of stuff is she looking for?"

"Who knows? I don't have anything to hide. I just don't like her being so sneaky all the time."

"I guess Astrid feels like she needs another set of eyes to keep up with everyone." Paranoia was a common characteristic of cults-and with every new piece of information, that's what Sky Ranch was beginning to look like.

"She doesn't have to worry about any of us. I just think Lorna likes to be nosy, and she uses her position with Astrid to justify it."

"Some people are like that." Vonne was tempted to mention her suspicions that Lorna had searched her bags, but she didn't want anyone to know that she knew. It was becoming obvious Lorna was a major player in whatever Astrid was doing at Sky Ranch.

All in all, Vonne was pleased with how much she already had learned about the workings of this place. The more details she could put together about Astrid and the ranch, the easier Jerry's job would be. Whatever was going on in the canyon was probably the key, and she was relieved that Liza didn't seem to be a part of it-at least not knowingly. From what Vonne could gather, only a couple of dozen hands were involved in the canyon activities, and that was a manageable number if Jerry needed to call in help to head off any problems.

No matter what happened in the end, Vonne was committed to making sure innocent people like Liza didn't get hurt. There were probably lots of people at the ranch like her, workers who were unwittingly caught in a web of manipulation.

Vonne stood in the breakfast line behind Liza, barely aware she was studying a threadbare patch beneath the back pocket of Liza's jeans. She had gotten a sneak peek at the whole picture last night in the shower, but that wasn't nearly as tantalizing as seeing this naked sliver of skin. She

hadn't meant to let her thoughts wander down that path, but ever since she caught Liza checking her out, she couldn't seem to get it out of her mind.

Of course, Jerry would tear her a new asshole if she didn't behave herself.

"You should try one of these," Liza said, interrupting her prurient thoughts. They were last in line after making an early morning run to the supply shed so they could stock the vegetable bins.

"What are they?"

"Fruit turnovers. I think these have blackberries inside."

Vonne put one on her plate. "How come Astrid doesn't eat breakfast with us?" After their talk in the bathhouse last night, Liza seemed more eager to talk about the ranch's owner. Vonne was careful to frame her questions so they sounded casual rather than like an investigation-which is precisely what they were.

"I don't know. She just never does." Liza looked around to see if anyone was listening. "I heard somebody say that she takes breakfast early in her library."

"What does she do all day?"

"She usually rides out to the pasture first. Then she goes up to the canyon around ten o'clock. She spends a lot of time up there."

Vonne didn't bother to press for more about the canyon. Liza was convinced it held another herd, and there was no need to arouse her suspicions about what else could be going on up there. The last thing she wanted was for Liza to call attention to herself by asking around. Vonne needed to find a way to investigate without raising suspicions, and she also wanted to have a look at that library Liza had talked about. "So what are we doing today?"

"Mondays are pretty busy. We need to go around to the bunkhouses and pick up the laundry bags. Then we take lunch out to the hands and come back. Lorna should be back by then with the fuel truck."

"Fuel truck?"

"Yeah, she goes into Denver once a week to get fuel. We have to fill up all the generators and vehicles, then drive the truck up to the canyon."

"What do they need gas for up there? Aren't they all on horseback?"

"Yeah, but I guess maybe they have generators up there too." Liza shrugged. "Maybe that's what's in that building. I just know that I leave it out there on Monday and pick it up on Tuesday. Clint used to follow me up there in the pickup so I could ride back with him. He'll be glad you're doing it instead because he'd rather stay in the barn. And I'll be glad because you smell better."

"I won't if you keep handing me horseshit."

"Hey, here comes Astrid now. I hardly ever see her in here in the morning."

"Her ears must have been burning."

All conversations stopped as the hands turned their attention to their leader.

"Good morning, everyone. I have two announcements to make before we all head out today."

She nodded in the direction of the couple who had stopped at Sky Ranch on their way to Ohio.

"First, Philip and Crystal will be leaving us today, continuing on their journey. We wish them well and thank them for sharing the last three weeks with us. Let's give them a big sendoff, shall we?"

All the hands stood and applauded in the direction of the departing couple.

"And the other announcement is one I'm sure you'll think is good news. Dominick will be staying on here at Sky Ranch and joining us today up in the canyon. He said to tell you that he's not going to handle your horses up there, so don't even think about it."

The canyon hands chuckled and Dominick smiled. It was obvious he was a welcome addition to the permanent staff, and Vonne wanted to know how he had gotten into Astrid's inner circle in only two months.

Vonne reached into the truck bed for the last hay bale and lugged it to the stack just inside the barn door. Liza was right about Mondays-they were murder! Skipping dinner and going straight to her bunk had a lot of appeal.

"Hey, here come the guys," Liza said. "Looks like Dominick went through some sort of initiation."

Vonne looked up to see the men riding toward the barn on horseback, laughing raucously at the newest canyon hand, who was covered in mud from head to toe and laughing along with his tormentors.

Clint walked out of the barn to greet the horses. "What the hell happened to you?"

"These guys thought it would be funny to roll me in the mud on my first day," Dominick explained.

Vonne looked at the others and made a startling observation-they were clean. Not just cleaner than Dominick, but clean as though they hadn't worked all day. At first she thought she must be imagining it, but she watched them all as they dismounted and turned their horses over to Clint.

Whatever it was these guys did in the canyon all day, it didn't have anything to do with ranching.

As the first week wore on, Vonne settled into the routine of the ranch, and her back and neck became accustomed to the physical labor. The work went faster, which gave her and Liza more time to relax and talk as they went about their chores. There were plenty of chances for Vonne to ask about Astrid and life at Sky Ranch, but it was growing clear she had gotten just about all the information Liza had to give. Though she had been accepted as a permanent hand, Liza wasn't privy to the secrets of this place, so the only chance Vonne had to interact with the hands who knew about the canyon was at dinner. Since it was obvious that the canyon's activities were meant to be secret, no one would be talking about it, and she might even call unwanted attention to herself by asking questions.

Also during that week, Vonne had found herself enjoying Liza's company more than she liked to admit, and it wasn't just because her hormones were flying off the scale. Liza was fun to work with and she could talk about practically anything and sound intelligent. The only bit that bothered Vonne was Liza's almost unconditional deference to Astrid, and all the beliefs she espoused. She had seen that sort of over-the-top devotion before, and knew it could be dangerous under the wrong influence.

"You ready for dinner?"

"Sure," Vonne answered, hopping down from her bunk. "You nervous?"

"What do you think?"

After two more days of talking about the Locke book, Liza had finally gotten the nerve to return it to Astrid. The rancher had been pleased, and indicated she was looking forward to discussing Locke at dinner.

"Don't worry about it. You know it. And I'd say you're right about the main theme being natural law. I think that's why Astrid wanted you to read it."

They went through the line and filled their plates. Liza expected the questions to begin as soon as everyone was settled with their food. Suddenly, all eyes turned to the head table, where Astrid abruptly stood and tossed her napkin onto her plate.

"We do not discuss private matters here!" Astrid retreated immediately into the main area of the house, with the canyon hand who had come to her table close on her heels. A few moments later, a woman stood with her toddler and followed.

"What was that all about?" Vonne whispered. The room was deathly quiet.

Liza frowned and shook her head. Like the other hands, she kept her face down as she hurried to finish her meal. One by one, the workers rose and returned their trays to the kitchen, seemingly eager to leave the uncomfortable silence.

Not a soul had spoken of the events from last night's dinner. In fact, the whole ranch had taken on a pall, as though Astrid's outburst had them all afraid to speak.

At the side of the main house, Vonne and Liza loaded the pickup with laundry and clean linens bound for the men's bunkhouse. From their position, it was impossible to avoid the scene in the courtyard, where Lorna was helping load suitcases for the family that had created the commotion at dinner the night before.

"Looks like they're leaving," Vonne said.

"Don't stare, Vonne." Liza handed her a stack of sheets from the large pile. "Astrid says we shouldn't stick our noses in people's business. She says we all deserve our privacy."

Despite the warning, Vonne continued to steal glances at the courtyard. One of the range hands, a burly man named Ray who usually sat beside Astrid at dinner, had joined them to finish loading the van as the couple climbed in with their child. "I was just-"

"Eyes here-now!" Liza said sharply. "You need to stay out of stuff that doesn't concern you."

All day, the scene played over and over in Vonne's head, but she held back from asking more. Liza was barely talking and she didn't want to make things worse. If her hunches about Sky Ranch were true-that it was a cult in every sense of the word, and that something sinister was going on in the canyon-it was indeed extraordinary that people were being sent away or simply allowed to leave. It was different with Philip and Crystal. They were just temporaries like Vonne, and they apparently didn't fit into Astrid's plans. Letting them go wasn't a risk, since they weren't privy to the secrets of Sky Ranch. But that wasn't the case with this couple, since the man worked up in the canyon.

Vonne had experience with dangerous cults. Last year in Florida, she had kidnapped a teenage

boy from a religious cult, only to discover that he was wired with explosives. The bomb was dismantled, but the leader had to be taken down in order to break his psychological hold on the boy and others.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier," Liza offered out of the blue as they stopped for lunch at the creek. "I just didn't want you to get into trouble."

"Who would I get in trouble with?" Her question was met with silence. "Astrid?"

Liza sighed. "Not trouble, really. Just ... she can really make you feel bad about stuff like that. One time, I went into the main house because I heard somebody crying. I just wanted to see if there was something wrong and if I could help." She frowned and looked down at her hands, obviously upset by the memory.

"What happened?"

"Astrid came in right when I did and yelled at me to leave. She said I had no right to interfere, that people didn't want others to see them cry."

"But you were only trying to help."

"I shouldn't have, though. We're always told to ask for help only when we really need it. Astrid says it makes us try harder to do things on our own, and that makes us stronger."

Astrid says ... Vonne wanted to speak her mind, to say that Astrid's behavior was bizarre and even abusive, but she figured Liza would only defend her.

"Anyway, I felt bad for what I did, and I didn't want the same thing to happen to you."

Astrid seemed to have a firm grip on all of the hands, easily controlling their behavior through guilt and manipulation. She hated to think what that couple who left had gone through.

"I appreciate you looking out for me, Liza. I'll try not to do anything that Astrid won't like." Vonne could almost see the tension drain from Liza's face. "So what's for lunch today?"

It was early afternoon when the van returned to the ranch and the truth came to light, at least for Vonne. She watched from behind the pickup as Lorna got out with the small child and Ray began to unload all of the suitcases they had packed just this morning. The man and woman who left had probably met an unfortunate fate.

Vonne watched the bunkhouse through the crack in the door. From her vantage point in the latrine, she could also see the lights on upstairs in main house. That was uncommon for this late hour, but everything about today had been different.

There was none of the usual discussion at dinner tonight. Instead, Astrid had stood to announce that Greg, one of the canyon hands, and Susan, a kitchen worker who lived in the women's bunkhouse, would be married the next evening and would take up residence in the small house vacated by the other family. A ceremony would take place in the courtyard after dinner, with a reception in the main house to follow. When dinner was over, Vonne, who was now the only temporary worker remaining on the ranch, was excused. The others remained for a meeting.

Liza hadn't shed much light on things today, keeping to herself, seemingly lost in her thoughts. Only when they were finishing in the shower that night did she loosen up, breaking her solemn mood with a genuine laugh when Vonne discovered a field mouse in her towel. The tension finally broken, they began to talk again, but as though the day's incident hadn't happened at all. Liza fell asleep right away and that gave Vonne the chance to get away and make her call.

"Hey ... I'm fine. As far as I can tell, nobody suspects a thing." She kept her voice low. "I'm starting to think this place is really bad news, Jerry. Something creepy happened today." She went on to describe the events of the day, underscoring her suspicions that the couple in question had been taken out and killed. "There's something going on up in the canyon near here, but I haven't had a chance to check it out. Give me a few more days ... No, I'll be okay. But right now, I need to hit the sack. This ranching is hard work ... Talk to you later."

Vonne returned the phone to its hiding place. She had nine days left before her scheduled time at Sky Ranch was up. If she didn't get to the bottom of what was going on by then, she would have to ask to stay, at least for a couple more weeks. That might at least get her more access to the ranch and to the meetings, but in light of today's tragic events, she didn't want to risk letting this drag out. Astrid Becker needed to be stopped before this got even more out of hand.

Vonne stood back from the crowd, intrigued by the change that had taken place in the last twenty-four hours. Gone was the group's somber mood, the departed couple seemingly forgotten. Instead, the ranch was abuzz with the typical cheerfulness that surrounded wedding festivities.

Astrid took her place on the third step of the front porch and spread her arms in invitation. Greg and Susan moved forward and joined hands. After solemn vows of faithfulness to family and one another, she pronounced them united and opened the large double doors to the main house.

"That didn't take long," Vonne remarked to Liza, mindful to hide her cynicism. They were back to their easy camaraderie, the discomfort of yesterday's events now in the past. She followed

Liza through the double doors for her first look at the inside of the main house.

"It was just like the last one, when David and Ann got married."

"Are they the ones that are having the baby?"

"Yeah. They got married the first week I was here."

Vonne wondered what had happened then to trigger a vacancy in family housing, but she knew such a question would sound facetious. No one here seemed to think the timing of these events was bizarre.

As they walked into the now-crowded living room, the toddler who had returned with Lorna the day before ran past. Hot on his heels was Ann, the pregnant woman they were just talking about.

"Say, Liza?" Vonne kept her voice low so no one else would hear above the din of the crowd. "I know I'm not supposed to ask questions, but that little boy there ... his mom and dad were the ones who left yesterday. How come he's still here?"

Liza's eyes darted about nervously to see if anyone had heard. "I'll tell you later. Just don't ... don't say anymore to anyone, okay?"

Vonne nodded. She was startled by the urgency in Liza's voice, as though she truly feared being overheard.

"So Vonne, what do you think of ranching?" Lorna appeared out of nowhere, prompting Liza to excuse herself suddenly and skitter through the crowd to the other side of the room.

"You were right about Sky Ranch. It's definitely not a tourist resort." Vonne fought hard to remain casual. Her natural inclination was to retreat from people like Lorna, just as Liza had. Despite Lorna's calm and friendly manner, Vonne was sure she was involved in the disappearance of that couple, and that made her someone to fear.

"I told you so. That Hickson woman doesn't know what she's missing."

Hickman. "Did you ever hear from her?"

Lorna shook her head. "Nah, she'll probably call in a week or so saying that she had it marked wrong on her calendar. We'll work something out for her."

"Make sure it includes cleaning the latrines. You never told me about that part."

Lorna laughed. "If I had, would you have stayed?"

"No."

"Well, there you go."

"So that bit about getting some saddle time ... was that one of your tricks too?"

"We still might be able to work that out. Let me talk with Astrid and see what we can do."

"Thanks."

"But don't come crying to me the next day because you're too sore to walk."

"I won't. I promise." Vonne watched as Lorna returned to take her place alongside Astrid and the newlyweds. Just past where they stood was a tall door that was slightly ajar, enough so Vonne could see bookshelves-the library Liza had told her about. She had been eager to get a glimpse of Astrid's collection, thinking it might reveal more about her philosophies and objectives.

Vonne scooted around the clusters of revelers, finally reaching the door. She stepped inside and pushed it closed. A quick perusal of titles revealed nothing out of the ordinary, just the primers of democracy one might read in college, including the Locke book Liza had returned. But as Vonne walked the length of the room, the titles became more radical in nature, from the revolutionary writings of the Bolsheviks to works by Emma Goldman to an historical account of the Haymarket Affair. Vonne wasn't familiar with all of the texts, but those she recognized had a common theme-anarchy, a rejection of governmental authority.

"Find anything interesting?"

Vonne whirled around to find herself face to face with the ranch's matriarch.

"I wanted to peek at your library. I hope you don't mind."

"Were you looking for something in particular? Maybe I can help you."

"You have quite a collection. Liza was telling me about the book she just finished, the one about religion and taxes."

"John Locke."

"Right. I remember studying about him in college. He was one of the writers they say helped shape our democracy."

"Our republic," Astrid countered. "The United States is a republic, not a democracy."

"Right ... because we have branches, and ..."

"And we're led by elites who call themselves representatives. The real truth is they represent only themselves," she said, her tone bitter. "Are you interested in government, Vonne?"

"Mmmm ... a little," she said, careful not to give away how much she knew. "I enjoy the talks we have at dinner."

"The best part of the day, if you ask me. It's nice to be surrounded by people who are eager to learn about the principles that rule their lives." She plucked a book from one of the shelves, eyeing the spine. "Do you know anything about the Levelers?"

Vonne shook her head as she reached out and took the offered book. She vaguely recalled the Levelers as British agitators, a thorn in Cromwell's side.

"You might find this interesting," Astrid said. "And thanks for reminding me about Locke. I'll have to remember to have Liza talk to us at dinner about what she read."

Astrid held the door open and waited, a clear indication she wished for Vonne to leave.

"Thanks for the book."

"You're welcome. Perhaps we can sit and discuss it when you're finished."

Vonne sat leaning against the side of the house, one knee bent, the other dangling off the front porch. Her long-neck beer was warm, but she didn't know when she would get another one, so she vowed to drink it anyway.

The party inside was starting to break up, the hands heading on to the bunkhouse because, as Liza had pointed out, the work on a ranch never stopped. Vonne hoped to catch her on the way out, thinking it would be a good place to ask her again about that toddler before they got back to the bunkhouse with everyone else around. Just then, the object of her thoughts emerged.

"Hey!"

Liza turned toward her voice, her eyes not yet adjusted to the darkness.

"It's just little ol' me."

Liza walked over.

"Want a sip of beer? It's nice and warm," she joked.

"I think I'll pass. What are you sitting out here for?"

Vonne shrugged. "No reason."

"What's that you've got?"

Vonne held up her book. "Oh, Astrid caught me snooping in her library and she gave me homework."

Liza chuckled. "Serves you right."

Vonne pushed up from her seat. "Want to take a walk?"

"That's not always a good idea in these parts. There are coyotes and mountain lions out there. And even bears."

"You should be all right if you stick close to me."

"What are you ... like Grizzly Adams or something?"

"No, but I'm sweeter than you, so they'll eat me instead and give you time to get away."

"Ha ha." They stepped down from the porch. "I guess we can walk if we don't go too far."

When they reached a safe distance from the house, Vonne asked her earlier question again. "You were going to tell me something about that little boy."

Liza nervously looked over her shoulder. "We're not supposed to talk about things, Vonne. That's why Astrid sent you out at dinner last night."

"So you're not going to tell me?"

"When your time's up, you leave. Astrid wouldn't want somebody going and giving people the wrong idea about Sky Ranch."

"So what's the right idea?"

"The couple that left ... they weren't good parents. She explained it all at dinner last night after you left."

"Do you know that for sure? Did you ever see it?"

"I didn't, but Lorna said she did. Besides, why would Astrid lie about something like that?" she said defensively. "Last night, she talked to us about our responsibilities. She said we're all supposed to act like good parents because the children we raise are going to have a voice in our future."

"I'll buy that, but why the secrecy?"

"Because there are laws against just giving your child to someone else, but that's what needed to be done. Astrid was afraid they wouldn't take care of their little boy when they left so she talked them into letting him stay."

Vonne was completely sure Liza believed every word she was saying. Even though she wanted to believe it too, it didn't explain why the boy had left in the van with his parents if they were giving him up. Nor did it answer why Ray and Lorna returned with all of the family's suitcases, something she bet Liza didn't know.

"I thought it was probably something like that, but I wasn't sure." They were past the barn, out of sight of the house. "Thanks for telling me."

"Sure ... just don't say anything, okay? You're not supposed to know."

"Okay." They stopped when they reached the corral and leaned on the fence. Their sudden presence sent the horses closest to them scurrying to the other side. "You don't seem to like Lorna very much. Is that my imagination?"

"No, probably not." Liza looked away for a second, then back. "I don't dislike her. I just ... I don't know. Like I said the other night, I don't like that she checks up on everybody so she can report back to Astrid. The people here would do anything Astrid wanted. They don't need Lorna looking over their shoulder."

Anything Astrid wanted. Liza was probably right about that, and that's what made Astrid Becker so dangerous.

"Astrid must feel like she needs that. She seems to trust Lorna ... and that guy named Ray. Why do you think that is?" Vonne knew she was pushing it, but she needed to take advantage of Liza's willingness to talk. And while she felt guilty for her deception, there was probably much more at stake than hands like Liza realized.

"I don't know. But I guess that's how she found out those people weren't taking care of their kid, so something good came from it."

This was the pattern Vonne had come to expect-Liza would somehow justify Astrid's decisions and the way things were done. Few people in places like this were capable of seeing it any other way. She decided not to press her luck further by asking more questions. The last thing she wanted was for Liza to get defensive, so she changed to a more benign topic.

"That beer went straight to my head. I can't believe I got buzzed on just two."

"It's the altitude. The same thing happened to me when I went to that other wedding I told you about."

"You guys are lucky I didn't try to karaoke."

Liza laughed. "I would have paid to see that. Your navy pals must have had a good time with you."

"I didn't drink much with my shipmates. One stumble and you're in the ocean."

"I guess the equivalent on a ranch would be one stumble and you're in horseshit."

"Save me from myself," Vonne said with a chuckle. She really enjoyed Liza's humorous side.

"By the way, I told Lorna I wanted to do some riding while I was here. She said tonight she'd try to set it up."

"Who's going to do all the work while you're out playing Calamity Jane?"

"Smarty pants." Vonne chuckled her hip playfully into Liza's side. "I'll get up really, really early and do my work first. Do you ever ride?"

"No, I missed my chance by not asking about it when I first got here. I got settled into this job and I hate to bring it up now. I don't want Astrid to think I'm just goofing off."

Everything's about Astrid. "Too bad. Because if I fall off and bust my ass, you won't be there to see it, and that's a loss you'll really regret."

"No, but I'll get to poke the bruises on your butt," Liza answered with a sneer. "That would be better than watching you fall."

"You're in an awfully good humor tonight. How many beers did you have?"

"Two. But look who's talking! You've finally stopped asking a million questions and checking everything out. It's like you're writing a report for school or something."

Liza's tone was teasing but Vonne's stomach dropped with panic. All along she had been careful to ease off when she thought she was pushing for too many details, but obviously she had gone to the well too many times with Liza. Now she needed to back off completely or risk exposure.

"As a matter of fact, I am writing a report. How do you spell impudent?"

"Use cheeky instead."

"Good idea. That describes you perfectly tonight." She looked at Liza and grinned. "Can I ask you one more question for my report?"

"Sure."

"How come you don't really talk to anyone else, but with me, you hardly shut up? What did I do to deserve that?"

Liza punched her arm. "I like you better, smartass. Though I don't know why."

Vonne rubbed her arm as though mortally wounded. "I wasn't complaining. I like you too." She suddenly felt the urge to blurt out everything she knew and plead with Liza to leave tonight. She had enough information for Jerry, and Liza definitely wasn't a part of the sinister happenings at Sky Ranch. The most important thing was getting out without getting hurt.

"I really don't have all that much in common with the other women here. They're nice enough, but they're all like Susan-all they want is to marry a cowboy."

"No cowboys for you, huh?" Vonne grinned. "Why's that?"

"I think it's my turn for a question," Liza said.

"Okay, but I'm not finished with the stuff for my book." She folded her arms on the top rail of the corral so their shoulders were touching.

"How come you don't ever talk about yourself?"

"Not much to say, I guess."

"Don't you have a life back in Sausalito? Friends? Somebody special?"

"Yes, yes ... and no." Vonne turned, bringing them face to face. "Now you, same question."

"I have no life back in Sausalito-"

Now it was Vonne delivering the punch. "And you call me a smartass!"

"Okay, okay ... the answers are not anymore, no, and no."

"You just left everything for good?"

"Nothing to go back for," she answered without emotion. "But I want to hear more about you. Tell me about life in Sausalito."

"All right." Vonne called up the bare bones version, but with enough meat to make it credible. "I grew up there. My dad was in the navy, too. When he got out, he and mom bought a sailboat and took off. They fell in love with the Caribbean, so if I want to see them, that's where I have to go. But they left me a nice house."

"And why is it you don't have someone special? Are you defective?"

Vonne chuckled at the gentle, almost flirtatious, teasing. "I don't think so, but maybe I'm not the best judge about something like that."

"What else could it be?" Liza asked as though she dared Vonne to answer.

"Maybe I just haven't met the right girl yet."

A satisfied smile crossed Liza's face. "What's that going to take?"

"That's too many questions for you. It should be my turn again." She ducked her head to make sure she had eye contact. "How come you don't have someone special?"

"Because I'm defective."

Vonne smiled slowly. "If you have a defect, I sure haven't found it."

"You just haven't been looking close enough." Their voices had dropped to barely a whisper and their faces were moving closer.

"Oh, I've been looking, believe me." Vonne leaned forward to meet Liza's lips for a gentle kiss. "I've definitely been looking."

"Something tells me hooking up with Vonne Maglio might be more than I can handle."

"There's only one way you're going to find out."

Vonne relaxed in the truck's passenger seat, her elbow resting on the door so it hung out the open window. "You really think you could be satisfied with a life like this?"

"Probably not in the long run," Liza admitted, jamming the truck into low gear for the climb back up to the mouth of the canyon to collect the lunch containers. "I just needed some time away from life, and Sky Ranch is a pretty good refuge. I'm sure I'll go back out there eventually and start acting like an adult again."

"Things must have gotten pretty bad back home."

Liza nodded. "Yeah, kind of all the way around. I was working at my father's company and saw some things I didn't like ... things about the business, and things about him. I didn't want to be a part of it."

"The company or your father?"

"Both. You hate to admit that your own father's a crook, but when you're the one doing the

books, it's pretty hard to miss. My mom would roll over in her grave if she knew what I knew." They pulled into the clearing and stopped.

"So your mom's gone?" This wasn't Vonne pumping Liza for information anymore. This was genuine interest, a rush of emotion to catch up with all the feelings that had made her want to kiss Liza last night. She felt overwhelming compassion at a loss of faith in family so great that it drove Liza to leave them all behind. Too often, that was how people ended up in places like this.

"Yeah, she died about four years ago. The company still had a conscience back then, before they went public and started doing everything to please the analysts and stockholders." As they talked, they hopped out of the truck and grabbed the empty containers. "Are you going to put all this in your report?"

Vonne didn't answer, distracted now by something that lay beneath one of the picnic tables.

"What is it?"

"Where did this come from?" She reached down and picked up a camouflage cap. "I thought all of the hands wore hats like yours." She indicated the Stetson.

Liza walked over to look at it. "I don't know. I've never seen anybody here wear one of those."

Para-military activity in the canyon was the worst-case scenario, as far as she was concerned. But if these guys were changing into uniforms every morning, that sure explained how they managed to keep their clothes clean. Vonne looked inside the cap. "It says Collins."

"That's Billy."

"Which one is he?"

"He's the one that got all flustered the other night when Astrid was asking him questions about one of the books she gave him. He didn't understand it. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I know which one he is." From what Vonne could gather, he wasn't held in high regard by Astrid.

She looked around for more clues. Besides the hat, there was nothing unusual. The containers had been left in a stack, as always, and the area policed for trash. She set the cap on the table and started to walk back to the truck.

"Wait. Maybe you should put it back where it was under the table."

"Why? If I leave it out here, he'll see it and pick it up on the way back to the barn."

"I know. But they already give Billy a hard time about stuff. If somebody else sees it first, they'll just tease him even more about losing his hat. This way, maybe he'll remember it and pick it up

before somebody else finds it."

Vonne nodded and dropped the cap back underneath the table. Liza was probably right-Billy would catch hell if the others realized she had found his cap-but the consequences might be more severe than just teasing.

She climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door, shooting one last look at the cap under the table. What other sorts of paramilitary gear did these ranch hands have? And why? All the more reason to find out what was in that canyon.

"You did all right," Vonne said, slapping Liza on the back as they walked out of the dining hall. Astrid had grilled her for almost thirty minutes after dinner about Locke's essays.

"It's a good thing you helped me practice. I was hoping she had forgotten about it though."

Vonne looked away sheepishly, knowing it was her mention of the book to Astrid that had triggered the rancher's memory. "Look at it this way-it's behind you now, and I think you really impressed her."

"Hey, Vonne!" Lorna caught up with them just outside the door. "You still want to do some riding?"

"Sure!"

"Great. Come to the barn tomorrow morning at nine-thirty. I'll have Clint saddle you up a mount."

"Thanks. I look forward to it." Vonne turned back to Liza as Lorna walked away. "Sure you don't want to take a ride? Maybe we can get lost in the woods again or something." After lunch, they had walked along the creek until they were obscured by the thick summer foliage. There, they had picked up where they left off the night before, with kisses that started slowly at first, but quickly grew deeper and more intense. Things heated up so fast it was all they do to keep themselves under control.

"I don't think you'll want me to tag along for this one. If you're going at nine-thirty, you're probably going with Astrid."

Vonne stepped under the spray and soaked her hair, simultaneously rinsing away the soap from her freshly-washed body. With her eyes closed, she jabbed at the shampoo dispenser until the liquid trickled into her hand. In no time, she turned it into a rich lather.

She could hear Liza turn on the shower in the corner. There was a different atmosphere in the bathhouse tonight, at least in her mind, and probably in Liza's too. Now that they had kissed, they weren't just friends sharing a communal shower anymore. They were two women attracted to one another and they were naked and alone-an electric combination.

Vonne rinsed her hair and pushed it straight back, finally opening her eyes. She looked to her right, not surprised to find Liza facing away. Finally, she had the chance to gaze without trepidation at Liza's naked body.

Suddenly, Liza looked over her shoulder, boldly returning Vonne's gesture with a lust-filled look of her own.

That was all the encouragement Vonne needed. She released a dollop of the liquid soap and rubbed it into her hands. Then she closed the distance between them and pressed both hands against Liza's shoulder blades. She felt Liza stiffen then relax as she flattened her palms and swirled the soap generously all over her back. She marveled at the strong muscles, hardened by the physical labor of the ranch. Up and down, she gently stroked, finally sliding her hands lower over the round cheeks. She cupped Liza's bottom and leaned closer.

"If you want me to stop, you're going to have to tell me," she whispered from behind.

Liza started to turn, but Vonne brought one arm around her waist to hold her in place. Her other hand continued its gentle massage, dipping lower into the slippery crack. Over and over, she stroked it softly with her fingers, from its Y-shaped top to the tender flesh between Liza's legs.

Vonne could feel Liza begin to lose her equilibrium. "Put your hands on the wall."

Liza did, gradually opening her legs to encourage more of Vonne's touch. The water sprayed unnoticed, a constant lubricant for Vonne's explorations.

She pushed one, then two fingers inside, moving closer to press her center against Liza's hip. With her other hand, she found a breast, where her pinch of a nipple elicited a greedy moan.

She thrust harder, spurred on by the rhythm of Liza jerking up and down against the fingers inside her. Vonne squeezed the breast one last time and swept her palm across Liza's stomach, into the hair at the top of her legs, and finally onto her center. Her fingers found the hard clitoris, prompting a new jolt as Liza gripped the showerhead.

Vonne intensified her touch, hearing her own ragged breaths as she drew closer to climax from

the friction of her body grinding against the wet skin. She came just as she felt the velvet walls clench. Liza's weight fell into her arms and Vonne dropped to one knee, carefully guiding her to the concrete floor.

Liza rolled over and looked into her face. "You should at least kiss me now," she said breathlessly.

Vonne surged forward and crushed the eager lips, her mouth open as if to devour. Far from sated, her fingers once again found the pulsing clitoris, and she teased it to a second climax and a third.

"I think this is where I'm supposed to tell you to stop," Liza rasped.

The water had gone tepid and Liza was physically spent. Vonne helped her to her feet and they turned off the spray. Soon, they were dressed and sitting side by side on the bench outside the showers.

It was Liza who spoke first. "That was ..." She waved her hand in the air, finding no words to finish.

"Oh, it was way better than that." Vonne nodded and rubbed her hand along Liza's thigh. "I can't wait to do it again."

"No, it's my turn next, so don't think you're going to come back from that ride tomorrow and whine about being sore. There will be no mercy."

"You've got yourself a deal." Vonne leaned over for one last kiss before standing up and holding out her hand. "Let me walk you home, little girl."

From her upper bunk that night, Vonne listened as Liza's breathing slowed. Her head was filled with erotic images, her body overflowing with warm sensations. For the first time in over a week, she fell asleep without thinking of Jerry, or of Astrid and the strange goings-on at Sky Ranch.

"Don't let him get away with that," Astrid said sharply. "You have to show him who's boss."

Vonne jerked the reins to the left and dug her heels into the stubborn horse's ribs, putting a stop to his grazing spree.

"I think Clint gave you the rowdiest horse in the barn. He'll test your patience, but he can sure run."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

Astrid laughed. "There's a flat stretch up here where you can push him a little. You've got insurance, right?"

"Just catastrophic."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Vonne leaned forward in the saddle as they started up a steep hill. She was curious about how far they would ride, fairly certain she would be turned back before they reached the canyon. But she figured that would give her about half an hour to double back and see if she could learn more about what lay beyond the narrow pass. There were all sorts of side trails, and she could always claim she got lost if she were discovered. If she was gone longer than a half hour, though, she might be missed.

"Lorna tells me you spent some time in the navy."

"I got my six years in."

"And now I suppose you're ready for that great career they promised."

Vonne wasn't surprised by the sarcasm in the rancher's voice. She seemed to be skeptical about most things having to do with the U.S. government. "Yeah, but there doesn't seem to be much demand for someone who knows how to catch a plane on a carrier deck."

"Typical. Empty promises from Uncle Sam." They reached a washed-out gulley, where the trail widened in a slight grade for a quarter-mile. "Here we go. Give him a kick and hold on!"

Vonne slapped the stirrups into the horse's belly and he took off, pulling even with Astrid's mare when they reached the crest of the next hill. The painful bouncing when the horse trotted now became a comfortable glide.

"Good job, Vonne," Astrid said, obviously pleased that a beginning rider would show such poise in the saddle. They brought the horses to stop.

"That was easier than I thought it would be." Vonne smiled with satisfaction and patted the horse's neck. Looking around, she tried to get her bearings. This was the same view they got on the last turn toward the lunch site, so that meant they would cross the road soon.

"So you aren't working right now?"

"That's right. I'll need to get off my ass and get a job when I get back, though."

"Any idea what you'll do?"

"Not really. I have a friend at one of those overnight shipping places. He said he might be able to get me on there." Vonne had expected questions like these, sure this ride had been orchestrated to give Astrid an opportunity to find out where she stood. She hoped her answers would set up an invitation to stay on at Sky Ranch.

"You strike me as somebody who likes that sort of thing ... the physical work."

"Yeah, I can't imagine sitting behind a desk all day. I like to be outside. That's what's so nice about being here at Sky Ranch."

Astrid looked straight ahead as they started up what Vonne thought would be the last hill before they reached the lunch site. "A lot of people come here and fall in love with this place."

"Easy to see why. It's beautiful."

"It is that." Astrid pulled ahead to lead her horse through a narrow part of the trail. "What about the rest of it? Do you enjoy the other hands? Do you like working with Liza?"

"Liza's great. I don't really see much of the others except at dinner." That was the segue Vonne had been hoping for. "But I like the dinner discussions a lot. You really know a lot about that kind of stuff. And you always make it so interesting." *Stroke that ego.*

Astrid turned in the saddle to face her, their horses still plodding up the hill. "What do you find interesting about it?"

"Practically everything. I was sitting there the other night trying to imagine talking about that kind of stuff with my shipmates and I almost laughed out loud."

Astrid snorted. "You probably wouldn't have gotten much debate in a place like that anyway. Everyone in the military is told *what* to think. Nobody learns *how* to think."

That's what Liza had said was different about Astrid and Sky Ranch, almost verbatim. But Astrid's trick was even better-she knew how to get people to think what she wanted them to think.

"I can't argue with that," Vonne said. "I think I was different because I went to college for a couple of years first. And I've always liked to read."

"How are you coming on that book?"

"I'm about halfway through it. I'm starting to think the Levelers got a bum rap."

"How so?"

"Well, a lot of people just considered them troublemakers. But if you look at what they stood for-

things like natural rights that we're all born with-those are some of the principles our government is founded on."

"Pffft! Hardly." Astrid shook her head in disgust.

"What? Am I reading it wrong?"

"No, you're not reading the Levelers wrong at all. But you're mistaken if you think our government here respects principles of natural law. We're worse than any monarchy could ever be. At least you can kill the king and be done with the line."

They finally crested the last hill, emerging into the clearing that served as the lunch site. Vonne was frustrated to see a hand sitting at one of the tables on the porch, his horse tied nearby. Obviously, he was here to escort her back to the barn.

"You're very good at that," Vonne said, pulling Liza up from the floor to straddle her lap on the bench in the dressing room.

"I skipped dessert tonight"-Liza kissed her, her lips soft and moist from what she had been doing-"because you told me you were sweet."

"Was I right?"

"I'll say."

Vonne hugged her tightly around the waist. "I've been thinking about you all day. How about coming back with me to Sausalito?" Astrid's persistent secrecy this morning about the canyon underscored the likelihood that Sky Ranch was not only a cult, but a volatile one at that. Vonne wanted Liza out of here, along with all of the innocents. *Make this easy, please.*

"I have a better idea. How about you staying here?"

Vonne sighed. If she appeared too desperate, Liza might get spooked enough to pull away. "I can't just stay. I'm only here on vacation."

"So was I when I first got here. But I liked it, and I asked Astrid if I could stay and work and she let me. I bet she'd let you too. There's plenty to do, and I know she likes you."

"I don't know, Liza. I like it here, but I don't think ranching is what I want to do with my life."

"Nobody says you have to do it your whole life. But we could do it for a couple of years. I'm just not ready to leave yet."

Vonne sighed and put her head on Liza's shoulder. "I know. But I don't want to leave you."

"Then stay for a while longer."

"For what? Sex in the bathhouse? We deserve better than that."

"You weren't complaining a few minutes ago," Liza said, her feelings obviously hurt.

"Liza-" Vonne squeezed her shoulders and groaned in frustration.

"I know what you're saying, and you're right. We do deserve better." Liza kissed the tip of Vonne's nose. "I just ... I can't leave right now. Astrid took me in when I had no place else to go, and it wouldn't be right just to walk out on her. Nobody else here knows how to do my job."

Vonne sighed. "I guess I could talk to her about staying a while longer."

"Now that's what I wanted to hear!"

"But we're going to have to find a place a little more romantic than this."

"How about near the creek where we eat lunch?"

"A nooner?"

"Yeah."

"Then we better get to bed. I think I have a very important luncheon engagement tomorrow."

"Hey, Jerry. What did you find out?" It was almost three a.m. and Vonne was dead on her feet. Liza had tossed and turned before falling asleep, no doubt replaying the conversation from the bathhouse, and Vonne had no choice but to wait her out.

"Can you get one of your pals to fly over and get some pictures? The canyon is about three miles northeast of here. You got the phone signal, right? ... I think they might be running some kind of military games up there." She told him about finding the hat.

"Look, I might have to stay on a few more days to make sure everybody gets out that should ... I

know it's not, but I can't just leave these people here. Not all of them are part of this-they're just caught up in it."

Vonne stifled a yawn.

"Okay, I'll call you in a couple of days. Try to get the pictures during the daytime. That's when they're all up there."

"Damn! I forgot we have to drive the fuel truck back today," Vonne said as they reached the clearing and spotted the small tanker. "There go my lunch plans."

Liza chuckled. "I forgot about it too. That's because you're distracting me from my work, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But I don't care." Vonne hopped out of the truck and leaned into the bed for one of the containers, which she hefted effortlessly. She was pleased at the strength she had gained from only one week of strenuous labor. "But don't think I'm going to forget that we have an appointment."

The sound of horses coming down the trail from the canyon pass startled them. Astrid emerged into the clearing, followed by Ray, who led a horse with a body draped over its saddle.

"There's been an accident," she declared, sliding down from her mare.

"Oh, my God! What happened?" Liza rushed over as the body was removed from its perch and rolled over. The white shirt was covered with blood. "It's Billy."

Vonne pushed past and leaned down, pressing her fingers to the man's neck in a futile attempt to locate a pulse.

"He's dead," Astrid said, her voice giving away no emotion. "We were chasing a mountain lion up a ridge and he caught a stray bullet."

Right in the heart. The blood stains covered his chest, but the shirt wasn't pierced, Vonne noticed. Someone had taken the time to change his clothes as he lay dying.

"Take him back to the ranch in the truck. Ray, you ride on ahead and tell Lorna to get the van ready. Go with her to take care of this."

As Ray disappeared down the steep horse trail, Vonne moved behind the dead man and lifted his

shoulders, gesturing for Liza to grab his feet. Together, they carried him to the truck and set him on the tailgate. Vonne climbed into the bed and dragged him forward, while Liza closed the gate.

Astrid mounted up and turned back into the canyon without another word.

"Let's go," Liza said quietly.

Vonne tamped down her anger and jumped over the side of the bed. She felt sick that she hadn't moved quickly enough in her investigation of Sky Ranch to save Billy Collins. That was because she had let her feelings for Liza distract her. She couldn't afford to make that mistake again.

Dinner was a quiet affair. One of the women had made the poignant gesture of setting an empty place at Billy's usual seat.

As they finished eating, Astrid stood and cleared her throat. One by one, the ranch hands set down their utensils and turned to face her.

"I know we're all feeling very sad tonight. These tragedies, unfortunately, are a part of any family. But we'll see one another through this terrible loss."

Vonne could hear sniffing from a few of the women around her. The men who had been in the canyon were impassive, not giving away what they knew about Billy's fate.

"But it would be even more tragic if we didn't take a lesson to heart from this horrible accident." She looked into the eyes of her workers, her family. "Billy Collins was a fine young man. He enjoyed his work here, and he tried very hard to do his best. Sadly, his enthusiasm worked against him sometimes. Billy often got caught up in things and became careless."

She shook her head vehemently as if both angry and frustrated. "Ladies and gentlemen ... my family"-her voice softened-"this is a dangerous way of life we've chosen for ourselves. We must make good decisions-smart decisions. We can't afford these sorts of tragic errors in judgment."

Vonne felt a chill up her spine, even before Astrid's final words.

"Please take care that nothing so unfortunate befalls one of you."

Vonne eased out of her bunk to the floor, leaning over to check on Liza, who was finally asleep. Everyone was still upset about Billy, and some of the women in the bunkhouse had continued to cry softly after going to bed.

It was time for answers, and Vonne knew Jerry was on the case because she had caught a glimpse early this afternoon of a private plane turning over the canyon. With any luck, the chaos of the day had squelched any curiosity about who might have been flying over.

She tiptoed to the bathhouse and entered the latrine, where she stood on the toilet to retrieve her phone. When the phone came to life, she dialed and was connected right away.

"Jerry, we need to move soon. I don't think I'm going to be able to wait this out." She told the story of Billy's death and how she suspected he had been killed for too many screw-ups. "Could you see what was in the canyon?" She listened as he described the results of the flyover.

"That's what I was afraid of ... You need to get some people in here to take this woman down, and soon!"

Vonne reached to open the door to the latrine so she could keep an eye on the bunkhouse. The instant her hand touched the handle the door was flung open, banging hard into her shoulder. She was momentarily blinded when the light switch was thrown.

Liza stood in the doorway, her face contorted in fury. "Who are you talking to?" she demanded.

Vonne pulled the phone back and held up her other hand to stop Liza's advance. "Something's going on here, Liza ... something dangerous."

Liza shoved her hard, causing her head to slam against the concrete wall of the small room. Immediately, a gash opened behind her ear and blood began to pour down her neck.

"I heard what you said. You came here to hurt Astrid. And I'm not going to let you do it." Liza grabbed the phone from her hand and flung it onto the concrete floor, shattering it into small pieces.

"I didn't come here for Astrid!" Vonne pressed the heel of her hand against the gaping wound and leaned into the wall to steady herself, finally looking up to meet Liza's steely eyes. "I came here ... to get you."

"We can't just sit here, Liza. Jerry's working with somebody in the FBI and he probably called them already to get out here and see what's going on."

"Shut up!" Liza perched on the bench of the changing room, fully in command of the situation, as Vonne sat at her feet on the concrete floor holding a towel to her still-throbbing head.

Vonne had known all along that Liza would feel betrayed-most cult members did once they discovered why she was there. They resisted deprogramming efforts out of both anger at being taken away and loyalty to the cult. But Liza wasn't brainwashed, at least not in the classic sense. She had merely fallen victim to her own naïveté and need for escape.

"You have no idea how dangerous this is, Liza." Vonne's biggest concern was that Liza would hand her over to Astrid, who would deal with her the same way she had with other threats to her plans.

"So how much did my father pay you to come here and fuck me?"

"It's not like that."

"Then why don't you tell me what it's like, Vonne? Fill my pretty head with more of your lies."

"Your father's dead." Vonne saw a flash of disbelief, then shock in Liza's angry eyes. "It was stomach cancer ... it happened very fast."

Liza didn't say anything for several long moments; then her face finally returned to its cold, dispassionate state. "Figures the bastard would find one last way to cheat his investors."

"Your brother's cooperating with the SEC. He wants to make things right, but he needs your help to do that."

"Now I know you're lying. All Robb ever thinks about is himself, just like Dad. He probably can't get his inheritance until I show up for the reading of the will."

"That's not how it is. He knows you're the one who turned your father in. He didn't believe what you said at first, but then he found all the information on your computer after you disappeared." Vonne checked the towel again and was relieved to see the bleeding had finally stopped.

"Besides, when the SEC gets finished, there probably won't be any inheritance. He knows that, and so do you."

"Who were you were talking to on the phone?"

"My friend Jerry. He runs a clinic in San Francisco. We worked together in the navy as psychologists. Jerry helps people who have been ... who are being unduly influenced by other people."

"So Robb hired a couple of shrinks because he thinks I'm being brainwashed." It wasn't a

question, just a resigned statement of fact.

"I don't have anything to do with that part. I teach psychology at a college in San Francisco. I'm here because Jerry asked me to help get you out safely."

"And you had to lie to me to do that?"

"I couldn't tell you the truth. I needed to know what kind of place this was."

"So your friend could fix my brain in case I was under some kind of spell."

"So I wouldn't get myself killed, Liza. I never know what kind of situation I'm going to find when I go in."

"All of this is ridiculous." Liza waved her hand dismissively. "I'm not being held against my will. I'm just here to work on a ranch. I don't need my father's money or my-"

"Listen to me! You're not working on just any old ranch. Surely you can see that. Most of the men spend all day up in that canyon. Jerry flew over it today. He saw tents-military tents, Liza-and a firing range. And all the horses were corralled. There isn't any livestock up there, so no way this is just a ranch."

"That still doesn't prove anything."

"What about Billy? Do you honestly think someone accidentally shot him right here?" She pointed to the center of her chest. "I've seen bullet wounds before, and that one came from close range. His shirt didn't even have a hole in it, because he was probably wearing military fatigues when it happened."

Vonne could see Liza was finally starting to listen, giving at least some credence to her version of events. She went on to relate her suspicions that the couple who left had been killed, citing the fact that the van had returned with their suitcases.

"It's still just innuendo. Besides, how can you expect me to believe any of what you say when everything about you is a lie?"

Vonne shook her head and sighed. "It isn't a lie that I care about you."

"Don't you dare say that!" She clenched her teeth and glared at Vonne with a look that bordered on disgust.

"I do. And no matter what happens here, what I want most of all is for you to get out of this without getting hurt." It was obvious Liza was too furious to consider any of Vonne's personal reasons. She would have to appeal to her sense of logic and concern for the others. "The authorities are going to come-they're probably on the way right now. No matter what you decide to do, they want to talk to Astrid. You and I need to find a way out of here first." She knew Liza

well enough by now to know she didn't want to see anyone get hurt. She just had to convince her it would happen.

"I don't want to leave!"

"Neither did the people at Waco! Do you remember those pictures? That building burning with all those people inside? Everybody died-women, children, even little babies."

"Astrid wouldn't let something like that happen."

"You don't know how she'll act if they back her into a corner. She may feel like she has nothing left to lose."

"You don't know her at all! She cares about us."

"She cares about herself."

"You're wrong. She's made Sky Ranch into a place where things are fair, where right and wrong isn't decided by the almighty dollar."

"No, because right and wrong is decided by Astrid Becker."

"Why not Astrid Becker? We all have a better life here because of her. She takes care of us and teaches us to think for ourselves."

"No, she doesn't. She manipulates you," Vonne argued. "What happens when you give an opinion that's different from hers? I've seen it-she withholds her approval. And you feel awful because you've disappointed her. So you work harder to adjust your thoughts, and the next time, you try to give her what she wants. That's not teaching people to think, Liza. That's called brainwashing."

Liza bristled and slumped back against the wall, her arms folded defiantly across her chest.

"Astrid is an anarchist. You know what that means, don't you?" Liza gave her an uncertain nod. "She's anti-government. Lots of people feel that way, and there's nothing wrong with it-except when they carry it too far. Then you end up with people like Timothy McVeigh and the Unabomber."

"Astrid isn't like that."

"She's raising a militia that trains up in the canyon. And she's killed people-that couple who tried to leave, and Billy, who didn't measure up."

"You don't know that for sure."

"How did you end up at Sky Ranch?" Before she could respond, Vonne continued. "Let me

answer that, because it's the same way I got here. Robb found the Copper J Ranch on your computer. We couldn't locate it anywhere, so I filled out the same questionnaire you did and sent it back. I said I was single, between jobs, and I was willing to pay money up front. She tricked us both into coming here."

"So what!" But it was clear the circumstances were adding up and Liza was having difficulty explaining it all away in her head. "I know she isn't like those other people."

Vonne put her hand on Liza's knee. "You aren't like those people either. That's why you turned your father in. You knew people were going to get hurt. Now you need to help me see that these people don't get hurt." She could see the anguish in Liza's face as she finally faced the truth. "We have to stop them now-tonight."

It was several agonizing minutes before Liza finally spoke, her voice low and weak. "How?"

Relieved beyond measure, Vonne pushed herself up off the floor. "The first thing we need to do is get you out of here. If I know Jerry, the shit could hit the fan at any minute. We should walk down to the gate right now and meet them so we can tell them where everyone is ... and who's not involved in this. Maybe they can come in fast and it will over before anybody knows--"

"You won't be going anywhere."

Both women jumped as Astrid stepped into the doorway of the bathhouse, flanked by Lorna and Ray, both of whom held automatic rifles.

"At least Liza's not going anywhere." Astrid looked at her coldly. "I'm very disappointed that you'd let someone turn you against me so easily."

"Astrid ..." Liza's face showed her devastation. "I didn't want anyone to be hurt."

"You know I won't let that happen. It's my job to take care of all of you, and I intend to do that." She turned to glower at Vonne. "But since you're the one bringing this fight to our doorstep, I'm not all that concerned about what happens to you."

"I didn't bring this fight, Astrid. You brought it to yourself with your twisted ideas and your Messiah complex."

"That's enough out of you." She jerked her head to the door. "Take her for a ride. Then meet us up at the canyon."

"I'll be sure and say hi to Billy ... and to all the others that didn't buy into your crap." Vonne looked one last time at Liza and saw the terror in her eyes.

Vonne wriggled in vain against the plastic tie that bound her wrists together behind her back. Lorna was driving the van. Ray rode beside her in the front seat, his rifle butt resting on the floor.

"You're not going to outrun these guys. You're better off if you just give up now before anyone else gets hurt." *Especially me.*

"We always knew this day would come, Vonne," Lorna said calmly. "We're ready for it."

"Are you ready for a hundred agents storming that gate?"

Ray chuckled. "Anyone storming that gate's going to get what they deserve."

Lorna drove to the end of a dirt side road and stopped. Ray hopped out and opened the sliding door to the back seat. "End of the line," he announced sardonically.

"For you, Ray," a male voice answered.

As Ray's gun aimed upward at the voice from the back of the van, three bullets thumped into his chest and he fell. Lorna scrambled in the front seat for her gun.

"No, Lorna!"

She ignored the command and was dropped with two bullets before she could get off a shot.

Vonne whirled around to see a familiar face rising from the row of seats behind her. "Dominick!"

"Special Agent Dominick Haynes, FBI. At your service."

"God, am I ever glad to see you!" Vonne stepped over Ray's body as she stumbled out of the van.

"Here, let me get those cuffs off." Dominick pulled out a pocketknife and cut the plastic. "We have to hurry. Those guys should be getting to the gate any minute, and I don't want them finding Ray's surprise."

Vonne ran around to the driver's seat and pulled Lorna's body out, dumping it unceremoniously on the ground. "How did you know?"

"I got a vibrating text message about an hour ago. We've been watching Astrid Becker for almost a year, ever since she started collecting munitions."

"She's probably up in the canyon preparing an ambush." Vonne spun the van around and headed back down the dusty road. At the end, she took a left toward the gate.

"I doubt she's there yet. I turned all the horses out to pasture before I left."

"Then they'll take the truck."

"Not on four flat tires."

"Damn, you're good!" She could see several sets of headlights gathered at the gate. "I'm going to let you out here and head back. I think Liza's in for trouble."

"All right. Take that last cutoff before you get to the barn. There's a horse tied behind the bathhouse, saddled and ready." Dominick took the automatic pistol from his belt and replaced the clip. "And take this, Lieutenant."

Vonne smiled at the address, one she hadn't heard for several years. "Thanks. And be careful with that gate."

"You be careful. Astrid Becker's crazy."

"Is ... that ... all you ... know ... how ... to do?" Vonne groaned as the horse bounced her mercilessly in a trot up the path to the supply shed. A quick look around the ranch had confirmed all of the hands were gone, most likely headed on foot to the canyon, where Astrid would make her stand. She had to get to Liza, no matter what.

Vonne brought the obstinate beast to a stop when she crossed the zigzag road for the third time. She was less than two hundred yards from the shed, but it would be suicide to continue on this path. She had to find another way into the canyon, and the best bet was the stream that crossed the road about fifty yards from where she was now stopped.

"You get to stay in the woods and eat all the weeds you want." She tethered the reins and hurried as quietly as she could along the road, entering the woods again at the stream to start her trek uphill.

After fifteen minutes of steep climbing, she crested the ridge. From this vantage point, she could see lights moving about, as though people were carrying flashlights or lanterns. She heard shouting, including one voice that was unmistakably Astrid's. Carefully, she picked her way down the rocky slope into the thick brush that lined the canyon wall. She could make out the shapes of vehicles, probably jeeps and trucks, moving into a broad semi-circle around the mouth of the canyon. This was where they would stage their ambush.

Vonne crept closer, straining her eyes in the dark to find Liza. She spotted a lone figure sitting at

the base of a large boulder near the entrance. Several hands worked nearby, positioning two 55-gallon drums on either side. *Gasoline bombs*. Astrid intended to blow up the agents as they stormed the canyon, and Liza would be right at the center of the explosions.

Vonne scrambled back up the ridge and down the path by the stream, frantic to stop the assault. When she reached the road, she could see the caravan zigzagging up the hillside. She waited in the woods until they reached her, six four-wheel drive vehicles, each carrying four or five agents. Then she jumped into the center of the road and waved her arms wildly.

"You can't go through the pass. She's got it rigged to blow up."

Dominick nodded and looked to his chief, who was driving the lead vehicle. "Is there another way in?"

"Follow me. You might want to drive a couple of these vehicles up that way so she won't get suspicious. But get the hell out of there when you reach the shed."

The senior agent pulled to the side of the road and relayed their strategy to two of the trailing vehicles, which continued on to the shed. Then, two dozen armed agents set out on foot behind Vonne. When they reached the top of the ridge, she showed them the lay of the land. Dominick added more information from his brief stint working in the canyon on Astrid's military drills.

"We'll take it from here," said the agent in charge. "You should go on back down to the road and wait."

"You can do whatever you want," Vonne answered. "But I'm going for Liza. It's my fault she's down there, and I'm not even sure whose side she's on. I just hope I can get her to trust me."

Dominick spoke up. "We'll cover you if we can, but look out, because things are going to get pretty wild."

"You guys too." And with a final nod, Vonne was gone, slinking through the brush around the perimeter, stopping within only a few yards of Liza's position. Even in the dim light, she could see that the woman was bound and gagged, left as bait for the would-be rescuers. "Psssstt ... Liza!"

Their eyes met, and Vonne could see her fear and desperation.

"Are you wired?"

Liza shook her head, and Vonne scrambled forward and pulled the duct tape from her mouth.

"The barrels are full of gas," Liza whispered. "Astrid's going to blow them up when somebody tries to get through."

"We need to get you out of here fast!" She worked hard to pull the ropes from Liza's wrists.

"You're clever, Vonne. I'll give you that."

Both women turned to find Astrid emerging from the shadows, her pistol aimed directly at Vonne.

"We're not part of your war, Astrid. Let us go." As she locked eyes with her assailant, Vonne reached slowly behind her for the pistol she had tucked into her belt.

"Your kind is the whole reason for this war," she practically growled. "Get away from her."

Vonne took a step backward and drew her gun. "Run, Liza!"

Her words were drowned by the retort from Astrid's pistol, a shot to Vonne's shoulder that knocked her to the ground and caused her to drop her gun. Astrid drew closer as Liza cowered, but Vonne's long leg swept her off her feet. She fell backward, striking her head against a rock.

"We have to hurry," Vonne grunted, pressing hard against her bleeding wound.

Liza worked her ropes and finally shook her hands free.

Astrid struggled to sit up, her hand going immediately to the knot on the back of her head. Liza jumped up and kicked the gun out of her reach. "Let's go!" She helped Vonne to her feet and they hobbled quickly toward the perimeter.

"Stop them," Astrid gasped, her voice not strong enough to reach the ranch hands, who were in position deeper into the canyon. "Stop them ... Now!" she shouted.

From a hundred yards away, the two hands heard the command they had been instructed to wait for. One nodded to the other, who touched the two wires together, igniting the massive fireball that would claim Astrid Becker.

Vonne opened her eyes suddenly and blinked, aware she wasn't alone in the dark room.

"Hey." It was a warm voice ... from someone sitting in the chair by her right shoulder.

"Liza?"

"Yeah, it's me." She stood and took a step closer to the bed. "How do you feel?"

"Sore." Vonne squirmed in her bed to loosen up her stiff joints. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten. You've been in and out of it all day."

"I don't remember coming here."

"You lost a lot of blood." Liza sat down on the edge of the bed. "They said you'd be all right, but it scared us all anyway." She rattled a vial. "Did anyone show you this? It's your bullet."

Vonne took the vial and turned it in her hand. "Was anybody else ...?"

"No, just you ... and Astrid, of course. The agents got the drop on the others when the bombs went off. Those guys never had a clue they were surrounded."

"I'm sorry about Astrid. I didn't want that to happen."

Liza took a deep breath and sighed. "Ironical ... she got caught in her own trap. I can't help but feel like it was my fault."

"Why? You couldn't have stopped her."

Liza shrugged. "I should have realized it, though. So many secrets ... I just didn't want to see it so I tuned it out. They're never going to believe my statement."

"Yes, they will. I'll tell them the same thing."

"But you didn't let Astrid manipulate you the way I did."

"She wasn't wrong about everything, Liza. She was a smart woman, and some of the things she believed in would make this country a better place. She just carried things too far."

"And we all helped her, whether we knew it or not."

"I always knew you weren't part of it."

An uncomfortable silence reigned as each woman gathered her thoughts about what else needed to be said. Liza scooted closer, resting her hand on Vonne's leg. "I met your friend Jerry."

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

Liza chuckled slightly. "No, he was in here with you most of the day. I felt sorry for him and let him live. But I'm not letting him inside my head."

Vonne reached up and cradled Liza's cheek with her palm. "There's nothing wrong with your head."

Liza took her hand and intertwined their fingers. "I guess I'll be heading back to Orange County day after tomorrow."

"What are you going to do?"

"I need to help Robb sort out the company's mess. We'll meet with the board and probably file for bankruptcy."

"Then what?"

Liza shrugged. "Then I'll have to start looking for a job ... or run away again to another ranch." She said the last bit with a wry smile.

"Come to Sausalito."

Liza shook her head. "I don't think I should."

"Why not?"

"Because ... I don't trust where we stand, Vonne. I don't know what parts are real for either of us."

"Everything I felt about you was real." Vonne struggled to sit up. "I admit that I took advantage ... When I asked you that night to leave with me, I thought it would be the easiest way for both of us to walk out. But everything I said about wanting you to come back to Sausalito with me was true."

Liza pulled their joined hands to her chest. "It was real for me too."

"Then give us a chance."

Soft white light flooded the room as the door was pushed open by a uniformed nurse. "You'll need to be going soon. Our patient needs her rest."

Liza nodded and looked back at Vonne. "There's something else. When Ray and Lorna took you away ..."

"Dominick-"

"I know. He told me. But ..." She shook her head and sighed.

"What is it?" Vonne took her hand and tenderly rubbed her thumb across the knuckles, finally pulling them to her lips for a soft kiss.

"How do I live with knowing that I almost got you killed?"

"You let it go because it didn't happen." Vonne's words had no effect on Liza's look of guilt. "When I saw you tied up at the canyon pass between those two barrels, I knew I was the one who had put you there. We're both going to have to live with regrets about things ... but they didn't happen, Liza."

Liza nodded solemnly.

"And it will be easier for me to forgive myself if I can look up and be reminded by your smile that everything turned out all right."

The mention of a smile was enough to soften Liza's worried look. "I'll come back tomorrow." She lowered her head and they shared a gentle kiss. As she started to leave Vonne grabbed her hand.

"Thanks for being here."

Liza squeezed her hand and dropped one more kiss on her brow. Then she was gone.

Vonne lay still for almost an hour, her mind bombarded by the brutal images from the past couple of weeks-the young couple that disappeared, Billy's lifeless body, and Astrid shrieking as she burned to death. She envisioned Liza, captive between the two deadly bombs, and imagined her screaming as the barrels blew.

Each time, she calmed herself with the memory of Liza's warm hand, her soft lips, and her promise to return tomorrow. And finally, she drifted off to a peaceful sleep.

Thanks for reading. I'd love to hear from you at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

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