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WORK SAMPLE: 5k words

Genre: M/F Adventure Romance

CHAPTER ONE

EVA

It only takes about sixty minutes to get from my helicopter port out at the Larsen Ranch to the regional airport. A bit longer, maybe, if the wind is good. But I've given myself two hours, because I wanted to spend some time flying over the gorgeous Kootenai Valley before I have to pick up my next client. It might just be my last "me-time" for a while, and I've got to make the most of it.

Don't get me wrong, I love client work. Whether it's chauffeuring some wealthy newlyweds to their "glamping" site or taking some law partners and their favorite client on a hunt to celebrate a big win, I always love a chance to share the adventure of helicopter flight. Some of the people I meet are pretty fascinating, too, though I don't like to get too close to a client. I've got all I need back at the ranch, with my best friend Chloe and her big bLarsener Alex.

Clients sometimes get too caught up in the excitement of it all, forgetting that for me, being a helicopter pilot is just my day job. And that eventually, they'll have to get back to theirs. So it's not worth it to let my guard down and actually make friends, even though plenty of people who hire me try to flirt. I just call on my old Navy

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training, give a polite but stern nod, call everyone "sir" or "ma'am," and most people get the picture.

I head up, high enough that the noise of my rotor won't disturb any wildlife but low enough that I can see the lush green trees of the Kootenai Valley. I always love this view. It's one of the main reasons I moved out here - that and the fact that Alex and Chloe built me space for a landing pad and a hangar for my copter in the winter months.

One more looping turn, a route that's so familiar to me by now that I could do it with my eyes closed, and there's the deep blue ribbon of the Kootenai River. It's freezing cold, even in the summer, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to dive right in. I take a few moments to indulge in the view, then pull a hard turn toward the Lincoln County Regional Airport, where I'm meeting my next client.

Marco Salzar. I don't usually learn much about a client before they climb into my helicopter, but this guy was pretty memorable. He called me a few weeks ago, with a story about buried treasure somewhere in the area. My job is to act as a pilot and a wilderness guide while he treks around in the forest looking for some kind of document connected to his father's disappearance.

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So, yeah. Pretty weird gig. But he certainly had the money, and I don't turn down clients just because they're a little kooky. In fact, one of my regulars is an old eccentric who hires me twice a year to fly around and search for Bigfoot. Sometimes he brings his daughter, who likes to ask me questions about the copter controls and always tries to offer me some of her snacks.

Once I'm in range, I radio down to the Lincoln County Regional control tower, letting them know I'm on my way. Landing goes smoothly and I hop out, flashing a grin at the mechanic, Justin. He's my favorite - knows just how I like my baby to be treated when it's here.

"Hey, Justin." I tug off my headset and shake out my long brown hair. I don't like to wear a standard flight suit anymore - spent too many years in one of those back in my Navy days - so instead I fly in a black leather jacket, custom made for me, with my flight patches sewn on. Add a pair of rugged green pants and some all-purpose boots, and I'm geared for the skies, the trails, and anything in between.

"Hi, Eva. She need any work done today?"

"No thanks. Just a fuel top-up. Put it on my tab."

"You here to pick up a client? Anyone interesting this time?"

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"You know I can't say." I wink at Justin. He always loves to hear about the helicopter rides of the rich and famous - especially which socialites from the tabloid pages get sick or refuse to look out the window. "Anyone here for me yet?"

"I dunno." Justin starts hauling out the heavy rubber pipe for the fuel line. "Some guy just showed up in a private jet, could be him."

"Has to be." Not many private jets make their way to the Lincoln County Regional Airport. I roll my eyes. He couldn't have just flown in through Billings Logan and hired a driver? "He inside?"

"Yep." Justin grins. "He asked for the *lounge*."

I have to laugh. Lincoln County Regional doesn't exactly have a lounge. Unless he was hoping for some stale coffee in styrofoam cups, Mr. Salzar should probably have just stayed on his jet.

I turn to make my way across the blacktop toward the little building that makes up the entirety of Lincoln Regional, but the door opens first, and someone starts walking toward me.

"Miss Farrier?"

I raise my hand and wave. "You must be Mr. Salzar."

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"Marco, please." He's wearing a perfectly tailored pinstripe blazer over a crisp white shirt, dark jeans, and some kind of all-black sneakers. Between the jeans and the sneakers, he must think he's dressing down - but I guarantee there's not another man wearing a blazer within thirty miles of us.

"Then I'm Eva." I smile and reach out my hand, which he takes for a firm shake.

"So this is your helicopter?" He turns and eyes the copter behind me, and I feel oddly defensive of my bird.

"Yep." I reach behind me and pat the warm metal. "That's her. *Vita*."

"I'm sorry?" Marco looks confused, his dark eyes narrowed.

"That's her name," I explain. "Means 'life.' *Vita* here is all I need."

"Ah. I see." He turns his gaze from the helicopter to me, giving me the same once-over. "And you are the guide?"

"Yep." I cross my arms, letting him see all the flight patches that cover my jacket's sleeves. "Pilot and guide."

Just then, Justin shouts over that the fueling is done. I see him rolling up the heavy fuel line, and figure that's as good a time as any to cut this blacktop conversation short and get back into the air.

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I walk around the side of the copter with him, intending to show him how to climb up in, but it's obvious he's ridden in a helicopter before. He easily hops into the passenger seat, settling the headset on his thick black curls and reaching behind him for the seatbelt.

Once we're in the air, we can talk. I adjust my microphone - I usually keep it tucked back up in my headset when I'm flying alone - and ask him how his flight in was.

"You are a helicopter pilot, are you really curious about a private jet?" There's a playful, teasing edge in his voice that I can hear even through all the noise of the helicopter. I glance over, and he's smirking at me.

"Fair enough," I say. He's right - I'm not all that interested in his flight - but it's a standard question to ask clients when they've just gotten in. I'm trying to think of another question to start making small talk when he rescues me by speaking first.

"You don't want to know about my flight. What you really want to ask about is my mission."

He's right, but I don't appreciate how cocky he is about it. It's not like he can read my thoughts or anything. It's what would be on any

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wilderness guide's mind if they were hired for this kind of treasure hunt.

"Yes," I say. "I do."

"So why don't you?" His voice is quiet, confident. Most people shout into the mics, thinking they have to be loud enough to be heard over the helicopter noise, not realizing the mic goes directly into my earpiece. But for him, I actually have to tap the volume up a few times on my headset.

"Why don't I what?"

"Ask me."

I'm distracted for a moment by radio chatter about some suspected trespassers in the National Forest. Rangers are asking anyone flying to keep an eye out for some suspicious individuals that may be in the area. I swerve slightly, deciding to take a longer route that gives me a better view of the acreage next to the Larsen Ranch. Then I turn my attention back to Marco.

"Usually we make plans for expeditions once we're back at the ranch," I say.

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As we make our way over the mountains and valleys, it's clear he's growing more interested in the scenery outside the windows. I'm quiet for a while, letting him take in the views. People almost always go silent once we get out of the flatter, suburban areas surrounding the regional airport and they start to see the majesty of the Kootenai.

Finally, Marco speaks again, pointing out the window without actually touching the heavy plexiglass. Despite myself, I'm a little impressed that he knows how to behave himself in my bird. "Is this where we're going?"

"Yep. We'll map out the specific route later, based on your information, but that's the general area."

He continues to peer down, and I take the opportunity to get a better look at him without him noticing. Olive skin, thick black curls with some kind of product in them, and deep brown eyes. He's handsome, in that city-boy kind of way, and the pinstripe blazer doesn't help. I wonder how he'll look after a few days in the wilderness.

I look away before he turns around and catches me staring.

"And is that the ranch?" I can't see what he's pointing at, but there's no other structure out here he could be referring to.

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"Big red roof, just off the river? Yep, that's the ranch. There's a cabin all set up for you, and we can pack out any time tomorrow."

"Excellent." He leans back in his seat, turning to me and smiling.

I smile back. Privately, I'm coming up with the right wager to make with Alex and Chloe - how long he'll make it in the backcountry before deciding that this wild goose chase isn't fun anymore and he'd rather sleep on a real bed, air conditioning and all.

MARCO

I'm bored.

Now, I know that's not the kind of thing someone usually says, when they're on a private jet flying to another country. Don't get me wrong, I love to travel, and I'm grateful for my jet and the crew that let me go wherever I like. But usually when I fly I like to kick back, have a gin and tonic, take a nap - that sort of thing.

Today, though, I'm meeting the wilderness guide as soon as I get off the plane, so I want to be sharp. If I'm going to be trusting my life to her out in the Montana forests, I need my first impression of her to be clear-eyed. So that means no alcohol, and no napping the day away. I scroll through my tablet, looking at the various movies I

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downloaded before takeoff. None of them seem too interesting now that I'm up in the air.

I sigh and lean back, taking a sip of my plain seltzer water with lime. At least my travel bags include a bottle or two of my favorite diamond-label gin. I'll have a cocktail once we get to the ranch.

Once we land, I head for the lounge to freshen up - only to discover that this "airport" is really nothing more than a runway with a convenience store attached. I splash some water on my face in the bathroom while my crew move my bags off the plane and, presumably, onto the helicopter I'll be taking to the Larsen Ranch.

Eva, the pilot and guide, is waiting for me on the blacktop. She looks pretty badass, in a leather jacket covered in badges. Cute, too, with curly brown hair and blue eyes, which are squinting at me. It's sunny out here, but not that bright. She's sizing me up.

I'm not worried. Everyone judges me before they get to know me. If you believe the magazines, I'm nothing but a Brazilian billionaire playboy squandering his Daddy's fortune on pretty models and overpriced champagne.

Well. I won't say I haven't enjoyed a model's company, or indulged in expensive drinks from time to time, but there's a bit more to me than

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money and parties. And I don't have much time for people who can't see past the gossip. Fortunately, most people who get to know me figure out pretty quickly that I'm not who the rest of the world thinks I am.

This ex-Navy helicopter pilot, though? She seems like a tough nut to crack. Fine with me - I doubt she'll still be able to see me as a pampered princeling after a few days out in the backcountry.

We hop into the helicopter and she takes off, leaving the provincial little airport shrinking into the landscape behind us. I try out a bit of teasing chatter, wondering if she wants to talk about the strange job I've hired her for, but she isn't having any of it. It doesn't seem wise to continue needling the person currently in charge of the machine that's keeping me from plummeting to my death in the middle of nowhere, Montana, so I shut up and just watch out the window.

I've taken more than a few helicopter rides in my day, but none like this. Most are plush, short-term trips; investors and their lawyers moving from one skyscraper roof to another. This is rougher, longer, more practical than posh. And the landscape below is gorgeous. Golden fields turn into thick green forests where I can't see a single indicator of human civilization. I'm so used to seeing roads and buildings; to flying over cities and driving through developed or developing areas.

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I wonder whether my father ever came out here. I know his killer did, or at the very least, someone working for him. Eva might not believe me - I could tell she didn't when we first spoke on the phone - but I know there's something buried in these mountains that will help me finally close the case and hold the man responsible for his death accountable.

When my dad disappeared during a trip to America ten years ago, I had just turned twenty. Some people thought I'd be thrilled: an inheritance of over six billion dollars, suddenly all mine. I quickly let those 'friends' go. Anyone who thinks money is more important than family isn't someone I need around. The tabloids even tried to imply that I had a hand in his death, but my lawyers shut that down pretty fast.

Truth be told, I didn't see a dime of the fortune until I was twenty-six; that's how long it took to get everything sorted out. Turns out that when a tycoon disappears, everything gets really complicated for a while. I focused on myself for those years, figuring out who I was behind all the money and apart from being the son of billionaire Luis Salzar. Mostly, I traveled. Learned to sail, hiked in the Andes, helped found a monkey sanctuary in Thailand. They still name a baby monkey after me every season. Last I heard, Marco 6 had

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been released back into the jungles, sending signals to the researchers via a little radio transmitter he wore like a backpack.

Now I'm thirty, with my wanderlust days behind me. I spend most of my time in my office in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where I organize philanthropic work and help manage the remainder of my father's businesses. But I try to make at least one trip a year to investigate my dad's case, ending up in small American towns chasing down whatever leads I've managed to collect.

This time will be different. For the first time, I'm not just working off a hunch or some hopeful feelings. One of my dad's biggest rivals died recently, and his whole estate went up for auction. All I needed to do was hire someone to anonymously bid on some old family memorabilia, pretending it was for some museum of industry titans, and now I have some real evidence. Nothing certain enough to take to the press or the police. Not yet. Just some maps and letters, but it's more than I've ever had before.

Finally, I have some real evidence, and it's pointed me here. To America, to the middle of the Montana woods, to this Navy helicopter pilot, with her blue eyes and closed-off attitude.

And, apparently, to the Larsen Ranch, which I have to admit is nicer than I expected it to be. When we land on the helipad, I see a handful

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of wood cabins and a main building, with the same red roof I saw on the flight in. Two people come out to greet us - a man a bit older than me, with hair that's starting to grey at the temples, but otherwise looking fit and rugged. He must be Alex Larsen, I figure, the owner of the ranch. And a woman, with short curly blonde hair, who runs over and hugs Eva while Alex unloads my bags and hauls them toward one of the cabins. Eva and her friend are chatting and laughing. They're too far away for me to hear what they're saying, but based on the other woman's glances toward me, it's not hard to figure out.

"Dinner's in the main ranch house," Alex says to me as he passes by.

"Unless you want something brought to your cabin."

"No, the ranch house is just fine," I say.

"Eva and Chloe will show you in, then." He disappears with my bags.

Dinner at the ranch house apparently means all four of us sitting around a round table in a big dining room decorated with taxidermied animal heads. The food isn't bad - in a gesture of down-home relatability, I order the local buffalo burger with cheddar cheese and roasted potatoes on the side. Chloe explains that the little

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restaurant serves the inn she manages on the property, but there's no one here but us.

"We closed it a bit early tonight, knowing you were coming," Alex says.

"I still don't think that was necessary," Eva complains, before taking a bite of her radish and arugula salad. "I doubt any of our guests are regular readers of the Brazilian tabloids."

I have a sip of my red wine - it, too, is from a local winery. There's a picture of an elk on the bottle's label. "I do appreciate the attention to my privacy. I hope your guests weren't too put out."

"They're fine." Chloe waves her hand dismissively and almost knocks over her own glass of wine. "We let them know days ago, and there's discounted room service 'til ten tonight."

"Might even order myself a slice of Nina's chocolate raspberry cake once I'm back home," Alex jokes. Chloe smacks him on the arm.

"Now, then." Chloe smiles at me again, a big toothy grin. "Since we have the room to ourselves, let's hear about this mysterious treasure hunt."

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Now it's Eva's turn to whack Chloe on the arm. I can see in the pilot's blue eyes that she's horrified at her friend's pushy breach of etiquette.

Me? I'm thrilled someone finally brought it up. This is the whole reason I'm here - it's not like it's a sensitive topic. I dab my lips with my napkin before dropping it back in my lap, then lean in close.

"Eva told you why I'm here, did she?"

Eva meets my gaze, her expression steely and professional. "Only Chloe and Alex know. I do remember that you asked for discretion when we talked on the phone, but we're all a team when it comes to planning backcountry trips."

"Fine by me," I say. "Let's get started."

EVA

I don't usually take my meals in Chloe's little restaurant. The food's good, but it's a bit too rich for me most nights, and I prefer to cook for myself in my little cabin's galley kitchen. But it's great for hosting guests and clients. I'm a little surprised to see Marco go for the burger, but then again, most visitors see the "buffalo" on the menu and get excited to try something new. Alex gets out a nice bottle

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of red, I order my usual salad, which the chef knows to add extra almonds to for me, and we all tuck in.

I'm horrified when Chloe asks Marco point-blank about his expedition plans. I always tell her about the importance of acting polite and reserved around big-dollar clients, but she never listens. The people who stay at her inn appreciate her brassy Midwestern personality, and it doesn't matter how many times I explain that wealthy east coasters don't find it as charming.

Fortunately, Marco doesn't seem put off by the direct questioning. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded sheaf of papers, most of which look old and yellowed. It's all held together by a monogrammed metal clip, which he slides off and pockets before spreading the papers out onto the table. "These are documents previously belonging to Juan Alva, one of my father's biggest rivals in his industry."

I lean forward to look, but most of them are in Portuguese. Marco draws my attention to one sheet, though, pushing it towards me and pointing at it with one finger.

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"These numbers here, see? I thought it was a bank account, but none of my accountants had ever seen anything like it. Not in Switzerland, not in Singapore, not even in Belize."

I nod my head as if that means anything to me. Different countries have different bank numbers? Sure, why not.

"When we finally figured it out, it wasn't a bank number at all. They're coordinates. Like for a GPS."

Global positioning coordinates are something I know a lot more about than offshore bank accounts. Turns out one comes up a lot more in Navy helicopter piloting than the other. "Coordinates to where?" I ask.

He looked up at me and grins. His teeth are white, straight, perfect. His eyes glimmer with excitement. "Here," he says.

"My ranch?" Alex sounds worried. "Why would someone in Brazil have coordinates to my property?"

"No, not here, exactly," Marco clarifies. "This area. These woods. The Kookynanny Forest."

"Kootenai," I correct.

"What do you think it means?" Chloe asks, her head resting on her hand, her wine glass completely empty. I knew she'd be all over this

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case. Too bad she can't be the one hiking around looking for whatever it is Marco thinks is out there.

Marco sighs, takes another long drink of his wine, and settles in to tell a story I can tell he's already gone over and over in his own mind.

"Ten years ago, my father disappeared. He was out in the Gulf of Mexico with two other industry leaders. Supposedly, it was just a fact-finding trip to understand how certain developments would impact the environment out there. My dad cared a lot about the environment, but most tycoons don't share his attitude."

"Shame," Alex says, "what corporations and the wealthy have been able to do to our planet."

"Exactly. According to them, he went out fishing with a local guide and fell overboard. But I've never been able to find the guide, or the boat. The whole thing was set up from the start. I knew something was wrong."

"Do you think," Chloe asks in a low voice, "he could still be alive?"

Again, I wince at her tactlessness. "Chloe, you can't just ask -"

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"No, no, it's alright." Marco actually pats my shoulder, as if to calm me down. His hand is warm and heavy. "I don't think so," he says, a sad wistfulness in his voice. "Legally, at least, he's dead - he was declared dead four years ago, six years after he disappeared. And he was a passionate man, full of love for his family and his work. I don't believe that, if he was alive, he'd have been able to stay away all these years."

There's a silence around the table, then Alex says, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Marco nods, graciously accepting the sympathies, then turns his attention back to the papers spread out across the table. "The man these documents belonged to, Juan Alva, was one of the men on that trip with my father. He has a lot of business dealings in America, and he's also known as an outdoorsman. I think he has some connection to this area, and to my father's murder."

"So your plan," I ask, "is to hike out to where these coordinates are, and see if he's hidden anything there?"

Marco smiles, the somberness from discussing his father's death having melted away. "To put it simply, yes." He sweeps the papers up, retrieving the clip - which I now see reads JA and must have belonged

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to Mr. Alva - and returning them all to his jacket pocket. "I'm assuming you are still ready and willing to accompany me?"

"Of course." I've never turned down a client except for safety reasons, and I'm not about to start now. "Alex and I can meet you in the lodge office to discuss logistics later, if you'd like."

"You and Alex?" He looks confused.

"Yes," I say. "Alex and I will be sharing the lead on this expedition. It's safer to go in groups of three."

This is technically true - the 'rule of threes' in the outdoors means that if someone gets hurt, there's always one person to go for help and one person to stay behind with the injured party. But I've gone on duo trips before. This time, though, I asked Alex to join. It's a strange job for an unfamiliar client, and I'm not sure I want to be alone in the wilderness with Marco Salzar.

"I am not sure about that," Marco says, almost petulant. "I have hired you, Miss Farrier, and no one else."

"If it's about the cost," Alex says, "there's no need to worry - Eva negotiated for both of us, we're prepared to split the agreed--"

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"No." Marco puts his hands flat on the table, palms down. "I only wish to be accompanied by Miss Farrier."

"Well that's just not going to work," I say. I don't like being bossed around at my own job, and I especially don't like rich men thinking they can buy my time like this. "For safety reasons, and -"

Marco interrupts me, standing up from the table and tossing his napkin down. "I will go with you, or I will go alone," he says, then walks off. Chloe gives me an apologetic wince and gets up to follow him, needing to make sure he gets checked into his cabin okay.

I sigh, picking at the last bit of shaved radish on my plate.

"Piece of work," Alex says. "Think he'll cool off by the morning?"

"He better." I drain what's left of my wine glass.

"What're you going to do if he tries to hike off on his own?"

I sigh. Part of me wants to just let him try - without a backcountry guide, I doubt he'd last more than a day or two. Nothing would be more satisfying than seeing him drag himself back to camp, defeated and bedraggled.

But he seems just determined enough, and so used to getting his way, that I'm worried that he wouldn't come back, and he could get really

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hurt out there, or worse. Inexperience and stubbornness are a deadly combination in the wilderness. And this area has gotten enough bad press in the last few years without some famous playboy dying a few miles from our ranch.

"We'd be liable," I say. "And it's a well-paying gig. It would be silly to turn down his money."

Truth is, as much as I'd love to see him get his ass handed to him by the Kootenai Valley, I don't actually want him to get into any real trouble. I saw the sadness in his eyes when talking about his father, saw how badly he wants to solve this case and find what he came here to look for. He doesn't deserve to be left alone to face this, even if I think it's unlikely we'll find anything.

"So you'll go? Even if he insists on leaving me behind?"

I sigh again. "Probably. We'll see what he has to say in the morning, once he sees all the gear and the hiking routes." Another bonus of having Alex come is that Marco wouldn't have to carry much in his backpack. Clients are often taken aback by just how much gear we haul out into the wilderness, and I doubt he's ever done anything with 40lbs on his back.

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"Sounds like a plan. Guess we'd better head out and let them clean up in here. I'm gonna see if they have any of that cake around."

I watch Alex, renowned for his sweet tooth, disappear into the kitchen. I wonder if the cook would package up some of these almonds for me to take back to my cabin. They're crusted with sugar and cinnamon, and I can never get enough of them. I don't usually take special treats for myself out onto the trail, but something tells me I might need a boost to get me through this next adventure.