



A REBEL'S SHOT

ALASKAN REBELS



SARA BLACKARD

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PRONUNCIATIONS

Tiikâan - tea-con (like Genghis Khan)

Utqiagvik - Oot-kee-arg-vick

Tok - Toe-k

ONE

The unrelenting rain patted on Tiikâan's hat.

Its subtle *tap-tap-tap* blanketed the woods, blurring his surroundings and cocooning him in the cleansing scent of spruce resin and musky moss. Sure, it wasn't the best weather to hunt in, but he loved the isolating peacefulness.

He shifted on the old school bus seat screwed into the tree stand and scanned the woods for any sign of bear.

He shouldn't be here.

Not with his checklist lengthening faster than items were crossed off.

But when he'd arrived at the stand where he hunted bears to dismantle it and found tracks so big his boot fit in them, he couldn't resist climbing up to the tree stand and sitting awhile.

Awhile turned to three hours, and he still couldn't bring himself to climb down the rungs and pack out.

This was the best part of the Alaskan summer.

All winter he dreamed of snow-free woods where his only conversations happened with squirrels. Of preying on the predator and filling both his freezer and his spirit before he started flying paid clients to his secret spots to help them scratch their own hunting itch.

However, this time he'd miss out on his favorite part of the year, exchanging it to play air taxi for some highfalutin oil exec all summer.

Why the heck had he agreed to the job?

Was the ridiculous amount of money worth missing out on all of this? He scanned the forest, watching the branches playfully dance with the rain and second-guessed his decision.

More like hundredth-guessed it.

He growled low and yanked a bite off his caribou jerky. Resentment made his jaw hurt more than the tough meat.

Not that he didn't love flying as much as he did hunting. But the thought of carting this guy back and forth from the mine site to Barrow day in and day out for the next two to three months sounded more torturous than his tour in the Air Force.

Just remember the money.

He had to think of how much closer to his dream the summer of doom would get him. How instead of teetering too close to everything crashing down in a pile of debt, he could not only get back in the black but also start building the hunting cabin he'd wanted for more years than he could remember.

He closed his eyes and pictured the clear lake deep in the Alaskan bush he owned.

His hands squeezed the grip of the bow like he would the yoke of his Maule M-7-235c and pictured himself easing the plane onto the flat water. He pattered up to the dock jutting out from shore, the small hunting cabin of his dreams framed perfectly in the windshield.

That's what this sacrifice would get him.

The money he'd make over the next months would be enough to get him out of debt, build his cabin, *and* buy the boat needed to take clients up the river that fed the lake. One summer of misery would set his business up for life.

He could handle that.

He'd just have to return here in his mind whenever his pretentious cargo or the monotony got to him.

A soft scratching sounded below. A breeze blew through the tight clearing, sending the off-putting scent of dog food coated in fryer grease and cheap syrup up to him. Okay. So, he wouldn't miss the smell of the mixture they used to lure the bears in.

He pulled his collar up to bury his nose in the front of his coat. The air shifted, and he paused.

Another scent tainted the air.

The hair rose on his neck.

Leaning forward in the tree stand, he slid his jerky into his pocket and peered below. Beady black eyes stared up at him from right beneath the stand. A giant grizzly stood on his hind legs, stretching his front paws up the tree toward him.

Fear balled in Tiikâan's throat, but he swallowed it down.

As he stood, he pulled an arrow from his quiver, drawing the string back as the bear's meaty claws dug into the side of the platform. This beast had to be a record if he could reach the tree stand nine feet up the tree's trunk.

The stand tipped with the bear's weight. The screeching of metal nails yanking from the tree sent a million spiders racing down Tiikâan's spine. The snap of the supports fired loudly into the forest, and he toppled into open air.

He slammed into the ground, his bow tumbling away from him. His diaphragm spasmed. He opened his mouth, but no air came in. Before he could recover, the slash of claws swept his side, throwing him like a rag doll across the muddy ground.

He scrambled to get his legs beneath him. His hands and feet slipped, and he couldn't gain purchase. The bear was on him again, the stench from its breath thick in Tiikâan's nose. Teeth sank into his bicep, yanking him up enough to get his knees beneath him.

With a shout, he pounded his fist into the bear's nose. The bear dropped him, shook its head, and roared. Tiikâan scrambled back, desperate to put space between him and those teeth. As the bear charged, Tiikâan grabbed his sidearm from

his belt. The force of the giant grizzly ramming him knocked him back a dozen feet.

He fired, but the bear kept coming.

Fired again.

It still didn't stop.

He unloaded the magazine into the beast. When it teetered and collapsed two feet from him, Tiikâan tripped away from the animal.

Heart trying to pound out of his rib cage, he hid behind a cluster of scrawny willows, his gaze glued to the bear. His hands shook violently as he reloaded, dropping several bullets that disappeared into the moss. He left them there. No way was he taking his eyes off the bear.

The wind rushed through the clearing, rustling the golden-tipped fur on the bear's back and bending the treetops. A snap cracked in the forest behind him. Tiikâan whipped around. His head spun as his adrenaline spiked.

He scanned the trees, cursing the steady rain that blurred his vision and his pulse's *boom-boom-boom* drowning out all other sounds.

Tear down the bait. Get the bear. Don't die.

He didn't need to wait around for another predator to slink in.

Holstering his gun, he weaved through the forest along the edge of the clearing. He wasn't ready to get up close and personal with the animal yet.

Grabbing the fifty-gallon drum holding the bait, he tipped it to dump out the mess of dog food, restaurant fryer grease, and maple syrup. Sharp pain sliced up his arm, and the barrel clattered to the ground.

Now that the adrenaline ebbed, his bicep throbbed. He cringed as he pulled his right arm from his blood-drenched jacket sleeve. Bile rose at the first look of torn flesh and flannel.

A branch cracking to his left snapped his gaze to the thick woods. Enough wasting time. Between the bear, the barrel of bait, and his own wound bleeding, his hunting spot had just become a predator's heaven.

TWO

Merritt stared out the window of her dad's office at the expanse of ice-capped blue ocean that stretched farther than she could even imagine. Any other time she'd probably find the view beautiful. Now the stark, lifelessness magnified her despair.

Barrow, Alaska.

More like barren. Empty. Just like her heart.

Her dad was gone.

Dead.

And his last disjointed voicemail left her doubting the timing of his death was a coincidence. She closed her eyes, hugging herself tighter as grief, fear, and disbelief swamped her. His last words hadn't stopped replaying since she first listened to the message three weeks before.

"Merri, don't trust anyone."

She'd woken up with the notification on her phone. Her desert-heated skin chilling at her dad's troubled voice that cut in and out. Now, here she was at the top of the world, freezing and floundering.

She wasn't cut out for this. Why couldn't she stay at the refugee camp helping those poor, orphaned children? Why'd her family drama have to yank her from the work she loved again?

Wow.

Selfish much?

Tears stung her eyes, and she sucked in a harsh breath. Her dad's possible murder was not drama.

She turned from the partially frozen ocean and sat at her dad's desk. His warm scent of leather and cinnamon candies enveloped her, making sorrow overwhelm her again. She shook her head and pushed the tears away.

She'd keep them at bay, just like she did at the refugee camps and orphanages she traveled to. She could wait to fall apart where she could smother her heartbreak in her pillow.

With mechanical precision, she filtered through the paperwork on the desk. Handwritten notes of drilling procedures, names, and government divisions mingled with invoices, board meeting notes, and environmental reports.

She had no clue what any of it meant, but she scanned each piece of paper, praying a clue would jump out at her.

As she set the last paper on top of the pile of items she'd already gone through, bright red flashed in the doorway. She jerked her eyes up, pushing back in her chair with a jolt. Her heart threatened to pound out of her chest.

Joni, her stepmother, leaned against the doorframe. Her arms crossed over her slinky red top better suited for the Caribbean than the Arctic, even if it was summer. Her long, manicured fingernail tapped rhythmically against her fake-tanned skin.

The small lift of the corner of her glossy lips was the only indication she delighted in startling Merritt. Other than that, Joni's face held its usual dismissive expression when it came to her stepdaughter.

“So, the Precious One decided to grace us with her presence.” Joni arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow over her ice-blue eye. “What? No more babies to rock or world to save?”

Merritt's mouth dropped open as her stomach clenched.

How dare she?

Did Joni have such little regard for Merritt that she'd slap her with her normal complaint? Did she really love Merritt's dad so little that she couldn't even say one word of comfort?

"Dad's will didn't leave any other choice." Merritt crossed her own arms and watched Joni closely.

Joni's body tensed and her lips pinched, but only for a second. If Merritt hadn't been paying attention, she'd have missed it. Her stepmother's eyes blinked, then she pushed off from the doorframe.

"Quite the surprise there." Joni stalked into the room, lifting the stone heart paperweight Merritt had given her dad years ago and tumbling it in her fingers. "Clay—controlling and manipulative, even from behind the pearly gates."

She slammed the paperweight back in place, and Merritt flinched.

"Well, more likely the fiery pits, but who am I to judge?" Joni shrugged nonchalantly.

Merritt clenched her teeth to keep the sharp retort in.

The hateful woman slipped into the chair across from Merritt with an inhale through her nose, her cue she was calming herself down. Merritt had seen her do that often when she lived at home. Joni and her father arguing about something, usually money, and Joni sucking in air like she was counting to ten.

Did she know it made her nostrils constrict in a very unattractive way?

Probably not. Otherwise, she'd curb the habit just like she cultivated the rest of her image with exact precision. Merritt hated who her stepmother had become.

"So, why'd Clay do it?" Joni's eyes bored into Merritt. "Why'd he up and change his will to leave everything to you? Even Nolan hadn't known."

Merritt stifled her cringe, the guilt of her dad leaving even his brother out of the will skimming along her skin. The will was clean and simple. She got everything.

When her dad did something, he went all the way or not at all. She was just thankful Nolan wasn't spiteful, unlike Joni.

Merritt shrugged. "I don't know."

"Oh, I doubt that." Joni sneered. "You two and your precious messages back and forth. There's no way he didn't tell you."

"No. He didn't." Not exactly. "I'm just as surprised as you."

"Doubt it."

"It's true."

"You don't deserve to head this company." Joni's fingers dug into the chair's arms. "You're clueless. An idiot do-gooder with your head in la-la land."

"Did you spend the last fifteen years learning everything there is to know about drilling and government regulations and land contracts and oil production and then have to do it all over again when your dad decided graphite was the new oil? No."

Joni's glacial tone and flushed neck had all of Merritt's muscles tight.

"That was me." Joni cursed. "I'm the one who put up with Clay, bending to every demand and jumping through his stupid hoops while you were off gallivanting the world without a care about anything or anyone else. All because 'Oh, Daddy. We just have to take care of the needy people of the world.'"

Joni's mocking falsetto and hatred for Merritt's dad snapped something in Merritt. The cold distance she'd used as a shield in her teens against a stepmother who didn't want her and a stepsister who loved to terrorize her slid into place.

Merritt leaned back in the chair, crossed her arms over her chest, and cocked her head to the side. "I'm sorry you're disappointed, Jo."

Joni's eyes narrowed to slits at the use of the nickname she couldn't stand. Merritt stifled her smile before continuing.

“I guess you didn’t understand the part of the prenup that said you wouldn’t get Dad’s business or anything that came from it.”

Merritt *tsked* and gave Joni a pitying look. “Maybe you should’ve thought about what that meant instead of just focusing on getting the ring and lifestyle you were chasing.”

“Why you—”

“If you had, you’d realize that meant you weren’t entitled to anything but what Dad left you. No matter how much you think you deserve more.” Merritt unwrapped her arms and sat forward.

“Now the question is if I should keep you on as the press manager or not? I’d hate for you to lose that inflated salary you’re earning, but I’m just not sure you have the company’s best interests at heart.”

Joni shot to her feet and slammed both hands on the desk. “You don’t want me as your enemy.”

“Oh?” Merritt played up the forced confusion. “I thought that was the role you set years ago?”

Joni stared Merritt down, her jaw clenched so tight her veins popped out in her forehead. Merritt didn’t want Joni around. In fact, if she never saw the woman’s over-botoxed face again, Merritt would be thrilled. But she couldn’t keep an eye on her if the witch left.

Merritt sighed and sat back in the chair. “Listen, Joni. Neither of us expected this, and we can’t change it.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Why don’t we call a truce?” Merritt ignored Joni’s words, but she tucked the threat in the back of her mind. “We both want what’s best for the business. Until we can figure things out, let’s agree to not be at each other’s throats, shall we?”

Joni straightened slowly, her arms dropping to her sides. She picked up the *tap-tap-tap* against her leg she’d had when she leaned against the doorway. She was calculating,

considering all the angles. Merritt could practically see the evil plots lining up in Joni's head.

Finally, Joni forced a sunny smile that sent a shiver down Merritt's spine.

“What a perfect way to honor your dear father. The wife he chose and the disappointment he was stuck with hashing out his legacy together.” Joni turned and sashayed out of the room. “It'll be delightful.”

Merritt closed her eyes and listened to stilettos clicking away on the hardwood floor. She wanted to throw everything off the desk and rail. Wanted to cry out to her dad and ask him why he left her with such a horrible mess.

Instead, she took a breath and reached for her old façade she'd abandoned when she'd taken over the philanthropy part of her dad's legacy. With her next breath she pulled on the frigid, distant woman she'd made herself into when life in her dad's house had turned into a soap opera.

She shivered as that part of herself settled on her shoulders and almost yanked it off.

But she couldn't.

The hard, unapproachable person she used to be was the only way she could survive this mess without cracking. The only way she could get to the bottom of her dad's death.

And when she was done and had answers, she could go back to the real her. The woman she'd found in the refugee camps filled with joyful kids with distended bellies.

As long as she didn't freeze solid this time.

THREE

A rusty bright-purple hatchback sputtered and wheezed as it came to a stop in front of Tiikâan as he grabbed his frame hunting backpack and the large McDonald's to-go bag filled with hamburgers from the cockpit. His childhood best friend Declan unfolded out of the tiny car, a smile stretching across his bearded face.

“Welcome to Utqiagvik, buddy.” He circled the car and wrapped Tiikâan in a crushing hug that lifted him off the ground.

“Easy, BFG.” Tiikâan thumped Declan on the back. “I’m still recouping from that bear trying to make me dinner.”

Declan put Tiikâan down, his eyes wide with concern. “I didn’t hurt you more, did I?”

“Nah.” Tiikâan rubbed his side, then rotated his shoulder, the stitches in his arm pulling.

He was fortunate walking away from a bear encounter with only four cracked ribs, twenty stitches, and some gnarly bruising.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think about you almost becoming bear bait.” Declan’s concerned expression turned back to excitement. “I’m just so stinking excited to have you rooming in the Barrow Bachelor Bunk for the summer.”

That was Declan, the Big Friendly Giant. He was everyone’s friend, and not just on the surface. He didn’t care if you were the jock, the punk rocker, or the loner. If you got

within his long reach, you were caught. It's what made him such a great teacher and football coach.

"You don't really call your place that, do you?" Tiikâan shook his head in amusement.

"Not when it's just me. Sounds kind of pathetic then." Declan clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "But now that there's two fully eligible and sexy guys? Absolutely."

Tiikâan rolled his eyes.

Declan grabbed the McDonald's bag and lifted it in a salute. "Thanks for these."

"No problem. There're thirty burgers in there."

"No pickles or condiments, right?"

"Of course."

"You're the best. These babies make the perfect freezer snack. Pop them in the microwave, and it's almost like freshly made. But the pickles and ketchup would ruin them."

"Only in Alaska would people freeze McDonald's burgers."

"Only in Alaska, baby!" Declan banged his hand on the top of the car. "Get in, and I'll give you a tour."

Tiikâan threw his pack in the back and folded himself into the passenger seat. The interior was surprisingly clean given the condition of the outside. It still was way too small for someone as tall as Declan. Shoot. Tiikâan was only five-ten, and he felt cramped.

"What's with the Barney mobile?" Tiikâan set the seat as far back as it could go, which only gave him three more inches. "Figured you'd have something bigger to haul all your kids in."

Not wanting anyone to be left out, Declan often became an unofficial taxi for any of his students who needed a ride.

"I do." He ran his hand along the dash that was a shade darker than the purple paint. "This beaut is yours for however long you need her."

He gave Tiikâan a wicked smile.

“Seriously?”

“It’s all I got at the moment.” His laugh filled the cab. “Your brothers are gonna flip.”

Tiikâan scanned the car in a new light. A crystal unicorn was superglued to the dash. Fake gemstones lined the rungs of the steering wheel. The seat covers had cartoon unicorns in various colors flying through rainbows and pink clouds. It was hideous.

“Seriously, man?” Tiikâan asked again, praying Declan was joking.

As the only Turo operator in town, Declan’s options were thin, but he had to have something better than this monstrosity.

“I wish I could say that I’m giving you this on purpose, but it’s all I’ve got left.” Declan winked at Tiikâan. “Don’t worry. It’s like a chick magnet.”

“It’s something.” Tiikâan reached for the crystal unicorn on the dash, but Declan slapped his hand away.

“Car’s got to remain as is. Its owner is a junior counselor at a remote camp this summer, and she’d go banshee if you changed anything.”

“I think I could take her. She’s probably, what? Ninety pounds soaking wet?”

“Yeah, but you don’t want to mess with her. She may still be in high school, but she’s got the woman-in-charge vibe down. Practically runs the place.” Declan gave him a look that bordered on scared. “For my safety, please, please don’t change a thing.”

“Fine.” Tiikâan would be walking anytime he could.

Declan took him around town, pointing out the seven restaurants and what to order. The man always had food on the brain, but Tiikâan had to admit the variety would be a nice change from the two restaurants back in Tok. Declan drove by the Inupiat Heritage Center, urging Tiikâan to check it out if he had time.

The dirt roads and weathered houses with bikes and car parts and fishing gear for yards made him feel right at home. They even had a decent-sized grocery store.

The only part of the area that might make him itchy was the lack of mountains. Flat tundra stretched for miles south, disappearing into the horizon. Blue ocean headed north. Being surrounded by two-dimensional land when jutting mountains called to him could break his spirit.

Not that he wasn't already expecting this job to do that very thing.

Declan slowed as he drove past a new massive two-story house overlooking the ocean. It stood out like an eyesore. Must've cost a fortune to build.

"This is where your meeting is." Declan's voice got serious for the first time. "Clayton Harland, the owner of the oil company, had it built a few years ago when he started spending a lot of time up here researching. Ran the business out of the place."

Declan tapped the palm of his hand on the steering wheel, sighed, and sped up.

"Shame about him dying in the plane crash. Decent guy, if a bit hard-nosed. Kind of reminded me of John Dutton from that show *Yellowstone*. Hat and everything. Take-no-prisoners patriarch, but he sure didn't mind greasing the bureaucratic wheels with the cha-ching. I got new uniforms and equipment for the team from the guy."

Tiikâan hadn't heard that Harland had died. He probably should have done more research before he came up here.

Any research, actually.

But he'd wanted to get the most out of what little time he had and didn't really care. In this type of job, money was money. Didn't matter who he got it from, as long as he got it.

"When he or his family are up here, they live and work from there."

"Good to know."

Since Tiikâan was meeting this Merritt guy there, did that mean he was family? Tiikâan had the impression he would be flying a manager around, not the oil heir. A manager was one thing. Mostly levelheaded, they were just a guy doing a job.

A member of a dynasty? From his experience guiding, those people were on a different level of demanding.

Declan drove up to a twenty-by-forty single-story on stilts. “The Barrow Bachelor Bunk awaits.”

He tossed Tiikâan the car keys as they approached the steps leading to the door. Tiikâan rolled his eyes at the sparkly purple unicorn hanging from the loop. One thing’s for sure. He’d have a hard time misplacing the bright key ring.

The house was exactly what he expected to find. Sturdy laminate flooring. Living room with a small kitchen lining the wall. Two matching bedrooms on one end of the house had enough space for a queen bed, a side table, and a plastic three-drawer dresser in the cramped closet. Used dressers were harder to find in Alaska than gold.

The bathroom between the bedrooms had a shower stall, toilet, and tiny sink. The living room window with the view of the ocean was a nice touch. When everything cost an arm and a leg, it didn’t make sense to fancy up a place.

“Well, I should head back to the mansion and get this meeting over with.” Tiikâan really didn’t want to.

Declan nodded and sat at the table, firing up his computer.

“Working on the next bestseller?” Tiikâan scanned the bookshelves of familiar spines.

Declan had been writing thrilling mysteries set in Alaska since they were in high school. Tiikâan was glad Declan had moved forward with indie publishing. The awards stacking up hadn’t surprised Tiikâan at all.

“Yep. This one’s set down Dutch Harbor way, but it’s giving me fits.” Declan’s face scrunched at his computer, then his head snapped up. “Oh, hey. When you get back, I want to introduce you around. I have some hunter friends you’d like to chat with. I thought since you’ll be here for Nalukataq, the

festival of the whale, you'd want to get in on the tradition. You won't be able to hunt being Athabaskan instead of Inupiat, but I'm sure I can get you on a boat."

"Man, that would be killer."

Surely, this Merritt guy would want to experience a true tradition of Alaska that had been going on for centuries. Tiikâan would just have to sell the festival hard. Make it so the guy couldn't refuse.

"All right. I'm out." Tiikâan swirled the key ring on his finger.

Declan saluted without looking up from the screen. Being in Barrow for the summer wouldn't be so bad with him around. They hadn't had time to hang out since high school.

Tiikâan folded himself back into the Purple People Eater and headed through town. The second impression of the house was even worse than the first. The fancy—probably handcrafted—trim and large picture windows that would leak heat faster than a cracked door screamed wasteful.

Well, if they weren't wasteful, he wouldn't have this contract. This Merritt could easily stay in the man camp at the drilling site just like all the other workers. One person's extravagance was another man's gain. Tiikâan didn't mind being on the receiving end of the frivolity.

As he walked up to the door, he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. Where the heck were the nerves coming from? He'd guided rich folk before. This wasn't any different.

Except before, that was in his domain. Here, he was out of his element. This was a bad idea.

He rang the doorbell, scanned what he could see through the window on the door, and shifted on his feet when no one answered. After waiting a good four minutes, he rang again. And waited.

Looked like he'd get to put the torture off for one more day. Just when he was about to turn back to the car, a person moved toward the entrance.

Dang.

No such luck.

A woman in her late twenties with a haughty expression on her beautiful face answered the door. Her phone was pressed to her ear, and she lifted a perfectly plucked eyebrow over her rich brown eyes at him while continuing her conversation.

He cleared his throat. "I'm here to see Merritt."

She waved him in and headed back through the house. He stepped inside, trying not to gawk at the over-the-top interior. It was like a Texas dude ranch and the Taj Mahal got caught up in a tornado and the resulting decoration was the outcome.

It was just so ... Wow.

He couldn't even come up with a word to describe how ostentatious the interior was. The woman gave an annoyed clearing of her throat, motioning him to follow her.

As she led him down the hallway, he couldn't help but notice the thick Fjallraven fleece hoodie even though it was summer, the bright scarf wrapped around her neck, the expensive cut of her tight jeans, and the silver and turquoise cuff bracelet that matched a ridiculously large turquoise ring. Everything about her screamed money.

He tipped his head.

Everything except the well-worn leather hikers.

Those didn't fit the image at all.

But the fact that she ignored his existence did. She led him to an office overlooking the ocean, and the longer she talked on the phone, the more irritated Tiikâan became.

Was the call important?

Probably.

But still, out of all the uppity hunters he'd had, none of them had been this blatantly rude.

If this was how he'd be treated all summer, he might as well leave now. No amount of money was worth putting up

with being viewed as dirt.

Tiikâan scanned the office, his gaze landing on a painting of a bush plane resting on a lake. A small cabin tucked in the woods in the background. His dream captured on canvas.

Okay.

Maybe some things were worth it.

“I’m sorry for keeping you.” The woman turned from staring out the window, put the phone in her pocket, motioned for him to take a seat, and lowered herself into the leather chair behind the desk. “What can I do for you?”

Each movement was measured. Crisp and efficient. And it bugged the heck out of Tiikâan. He forced himself to relax into the chair.

“I’m Tiikâan with Rebel Air Service. I’m here to meet with Merritt.”

“You found her.” She smirked and leaned back in her chair with an air of satisfaction as dread swamped over him in a cold rush from head to toe.

Well, nuts.

That was definitely unexpected.

FOUR

Tiikâan Rebel might possibly be the most fascinating man Merritt had ever met. He screamed capable and a little wild, right down to the bandage wrapped around his bicep that peeked out of his t-shirt sleeve.

Something about the relaxed set of his muscles or the fact that he hadn't bothered with dressing better than a black t-shirt and worn jeans to meet his new boss gave a natural air of confidence Merritt wished she had.

But if Merritt didn't do some fast talking, he would two-step right back out the front door.

The phone call from her stepbrother, Silas, yelling at her about a budget Rachel, his sister and CFO of Harland Global Resources, Inc., wouldn't increase, hadn't put Merritt in the right mindset for this interview.

She'd already been nervous about meeting the Alaskan who occasionally flew his YouTube influencer sister around. That call set her completely off-balance.

"I kind of get the impression you weren't expecting a woman." She hoped her tone was teasing and kind, but from the way he clenched his jaw and the spark of challenge in his eyes, she bet she missed the mark.

"Honestly, I didn't have time to research who I'd be flying around, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised." He lounged in the chair like he didn't have a care in the world.

Merritt envied that.

No.

That wasn't correct.

She loved the responsibilities she had in her philanthropy work. It was tiring and, at times, heartbreaking. Still, her soul screamed to be back where warmth and love flowed despite the circumstance. She pressed her body more rigidly against the chair and her arms on the rests so she didn't fidget or bounce her legs.

"I appreciate you putting a hold on your normal summer ventures to fly me—"

"Merritt!" Rachel's banshee screech was punctuated with the slam of the front door.

Merritt flinched, and Tiikâan's eyes went wide as he looked over his shoulder, then back at her.

What little thawing she'd allowed of herself since opening the door to Tiikâan quickly hardened. She couldn't show weakness in front of her family, not if she didn't want them to pounce on her like a pack of wolves and rip her to shreds.

"Merritt, how could you?" Rachel stomped into the doorway, her blue eyes that matched her mom's burning cold.

"If you don't mind, I'm with someone." Merritt shuddered at how easily the bored tone she'd adopted as a teen came from her mouth.

"Oh, I do mind, and this Podunk bush man can wait."

Tiikâan's entire body stiffened, and Merritt's face and neck tingled. Could Rachel be any more stuck-up? Definitely. But Merritt refused to allow Rachel to spew her false sense of elitism on anyone.

"Rachel, I am in a meeting with one of the state's most renowned pilots." Merritt kept her voice even, cool, though she wanted nothing more than to shout her displeasure. "You will not waste his time nor mine with whatever problem you think you have. We will talk when I am done."

Did her stepsister take the clue?

Of course not.

Classic Rachel.

“Oh, we’ll talk now, renowned pilot or not.” Rachel was building up so much steam, Merritt swore any second Rachel’s head would explode. “You think you can just walk in here after being away for nine years, plop into Dad’s chair, and do whatever you like? We’d all just bow down? All hail the uneducated Queen Merritt on her stupid high horse?”

Merritt never understood how Dad hadn’t seen this side of Rachel. Maybe that was what made mean girls so effective at what they did.

She should just follow her dad’s example and truly cut off all of her stepfamily. Sure, she’d be left with a multibillion-dollar business with no experience in mining and none of its executive officers, but it might be worth the stress if she didn’t have to deal with any of them ever again.

“We will talk when I am done.” Merritt leaned forward in the chair, praying Rachel would just leave.

“No. I—”

“I’d be very careful with what you are about to say right now.” Merritt leaned back in the chair and stared down her stepsister with all the frigid emotion she’d always given Merritt.

“I—”

“Your next five seconds decide your future, Rachel.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You wouldn’t.”

Merritt lifted her eyebrow in challenge. Rachel’s eyes narrowed, and her chest heaved. Finally, she spun and stomped to her office down the hall. The door slammed, and Merritt barely contained her flinch.

The silence in the room settled heavily on Merritt. A palpable bubble that shrank around her, threatening to suffocate her. Knowing that her father was truly gone and that all she had left in the world was a family who hated her and a business she had no clue how to run would crush her.

Surely it would.

She looked up and was met with dark-gray eyes assessing her. Exposing her for the fraud she was. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat.

“Sorry, Mr. Rebel. I’m afraid your introduction to Harland Global Resources hasn’t been the best.” Merritt scooted forward on her chair and forced herself to hold his gaze.

“It’s one that’ll be hard to forget, that’s for sure.”

Tiikâan tipped his head and raised his eyebrows in an expression she couldn’t place as entertained or surprised. Maybe a bit of both.

“And it’s Tiikâan. Alaska’s just one small community spread across a lot of land. Formalities don’t have much need among friends.”

Friends? When was the last time she had one of those?

Colleagues, yes. But friends? She honestly couldn’t remember.

He was just making a point about the chasm between his world and hers, not actually offering friendship, but her eyes stung with tears nonetheless. She nodded, kept her smile small, and blinked a few times so he hopefully couldn’t see the emotion building beneath the surface.

“Merritt.” She cleared the roughness out of her voice. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tiikâan.”

Something crashed from down the hall. Of course, Rachel wouldn’t quietly stew. No. She’d want the world to know she was upset.

There’d be no escaping her, not with the house being their workspace and living quarters. Merritt would be stuck in this prison for God knew how long.

The feeling of suffocating was so overwhelming she wanted to beg Tiikâan to fly her to Fairbanks so she could get the first flight out of Alaska. She didn’t even care where it flew to. She just needed to be far from there.

Yet she couldn't.

Not if she wanted to figure out how her dad died.

And why.

Another crash, and Merritt had to get out of there. She stood so abruptly the chair rammed into the windowsill behind her.

“Can I buy you dinner?” It was an awkward invitation and not the words she wished to say.

Now that they were out, she realized just how much being with someone normal somewhere other than there called to her.

He pressed his lips together, glancing out the window behind her like he wanted to escape, and she knew she had to talk fast. “We could talk about the details of the job, and even if you decide not to take it, you'd get a good meal out of it.”

His gaze slowly came back to hers. The unwavering sense that he was measuring her and finding her lacking filled her. Or maybe that was her own doubts speaking.

She held his stare, even though all she wanted to do was disappear. Vanish from the life she'd pretended didn't exist and reappear in the life she enjoyed.

The left corner of Tiikâan's mouth tipped into the first genuine almost smile she'd seen from him. “Sure. I'll drive.”

She grabbed her purse from the desk drawer and the folder with the information he'd need and followed Tiikâan back out through the house. As she watched him confidently stride through the gaudy living room, she realized it was a trait she'd noticed in the little interactions she'd had around town. Everyone seemed to know who they were.

Sure, she hadn't met everyone, and Alaska had the third highest suicide rate in the nation, so they couldn't all be content. Yet there was an ease with a lot of them, an acceptance of their circumstances and making the most of them. She'd seen it in so many of the orphans and refugees over the years, too.

Joy despite the pain.

So why, when she had the world at her fingertips, was she so miserable?

A cold sea breeze hit her face the instant she stepped outside and snaked its way down her collar, knocking her to her senses. There wasn't time to be melodramatic. She had an empire to run and a murder to solve. Whining about her lack of joy was pointless.

Tiikâan sauntered to a hideous hatchback that looked like an eggplant with rust. A giggle escaped before she could swallow it. Biting her lip to keep her grin contained, she opened the passenger door and almost lost it.

Someone had taken a Bedazzler and gone to town. Settling into her seat, she couldn't help but scan the decorations.

"I know. It's an assault on masculine pride." Tiikâan shrugged his shoulder. "Guess it's a good thing mine is overinflated."

He shot her a smile and a wink. She laughed and shook her head. This was by far the strangest interview she'd ever conducted.

Granted, she hadn't done many, but she doubted future employees flirted with their employers. Though he wouldn't really be an employee. As a contractor, he'd just be a fellow entrepreneur.

Which meant he was totally fair game.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye as he backed down the drive. Good-looking didn't begin to describe him. Ruggedly handsome? Closer.

Something about his dark beard, toned body that she bet was honed in the mountains, and calm dark gray-blue eyes that reminded her of the ocean out her office window when the sky was clear gave her the impression he could handle himself in any situation. Even being demeaned by spoiled socialites.

She cleared her throat. "I'd like to apologize again for Rachel's behavior. I wish I could say it's because of Dad's

death that she acted that way, but she's always been..."

How do you describe someone who put the TV and movie caricatures of rich brats to shame?

"An odious little monster?" He glanced at her with a lift of an eyebrow, then turned back to the road with a shake of his head. "Sorry. I just kind of felt like Epimetheus for a moment back there."

Her breath hitched, and a smile stretched across her lips. "You've read Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*?"

"Guilty." He tipped his head to the side. "My mom read it aloud to us when I was around nine. Can't tell you how many times I've thumbed through my copy just to read a story over again. Anyway, we'd always joked that kids throwing tantrums were odious little monsters, but I shouldn't have said that about your sister."

"Stepsister and it correctly describes her."

In fact, Pandora's box was the perfect analogy for Merritt's life. More than one ugly Trouble swarmed her. Though she doubted Hope was left in the box.

FIVE

“Hello. Hello!” A smiling older Asian woman came out from the kitchen as Tiikâan led Merritt through Sam and Lee’s Restaurant.

He waved at the friendly woman. Man, did it feel good to be out of the Mansion of Mayhem and back in the land of normal people. Tiikâan breathed in the amazing smell of fried food, picked a booth in the back corner, and sat so he faced the door.

He tipped his head as he peered across the table at Merritt who sat ramrod straight in the vinyl booth. Well, mostly normal. His ruling on her was still out.

After dropping food off at a table, the cheerful woman came over. “Welcome to Sam and Lee’s. I’m Kim. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Pepsi, please.” He smiled back at her.

Kim wagged her finger at him, her forehead scrunching over her eyes. “I know you. How do I know you?”

His smile broadened. That was Alaska for you. Small community spread over lots of land.

“I haven’t been lucky enough to come up here before.” He shrugged. “Have you made it over to Tok?”

Her face lit up. “You’re Sunny’s brother. Tiikâan, the bush pilot, yes?”

He shrugged and laughed. “Guilty.”

“Yeah. I watched you on her channel. So nice to meet you.” Kim gave him a quick side hug before she crossed her arms with a sigh. “That Sunny. Such a nice girl. What’s she up to now?”

“I just dropped her off in the bush of the 40-Mile gold district north of Chicken. She’s trekking her way back to civilization.”

“That girl and her adventures. Makes me wish I was younger. You tell her Kim says hi next time you talk to her, okay?”

“I will.”

Kim turned to Merritt who watched the exchange with her mouth slightly open like she wasn’t sure what was happening. “And you, honey. What can I get you to drink?”

“Oh, um, hot tea, please?” There definitely was a hesitancy in Merritt’s voice that wasn’t there in her office.

“Be right back.” As Kim left, Merritt’s shoulders pushed back a little more and her neck lengthened, like her armor was clicking back into place.

Tiikâan sprawled his legs out and leaned back into the booth. “Smells amazing in here.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes widened as she scanned the menu.

“Sunny raved about the food. Declan, too.”

He surveyed the menu. Jeez. There were so many options that sounded amazing.

“Who’s Declan?” Merritt finally glanced at him.

“He’s a buddy that I grew up with in Tok. He’s the English teacher and the football coach at the high school.” Tiikâan grimaced. “And the local Turo.”

“He gave you that purple monstrosity?” Her smile, a genuine one that showed her straight teeth and made her eyes sparkle, hit him like a punch to the solar plexus.

This one could be dangerous if she ever let that smile loose for good.

“Yeah. He partners with the kids in town who end up working somewhere else for the summer or go off to college. He does all the work, then gives the kids most of the income. Not a very good business deal if you ask me, but he’s always been like that.” Tiikâan leaned forward. “He claims the Purple People Eater is the only vehicle he has available, but I have my doubts.”

Her smile faded to just a pleasant, practiced expression and her shoulders went back. “I believe we have cars here for use. I can see if one’s available.”

Why did the offer feel calculated?

“Nah. Renting it helps the girl out. Plus, it’s just a car. Doesn’t really matter what it looks like as long as it gets me from point A to point B.”

He smiled at Kim as she headed over from the kitchen with their drinks, though he could feel Merritt’s gaze on him. Studying him like he was some sort of new species she’d never met before.

“You ready or you need more time?” Kim asked as she put the drinks in front of them.

“Definitely more time. I haven’t even read through the first column.” He grabbed his soda and thanked her.

When she’d left, he scanned the menu and whistled. There had to be a hundred options. His gaze zeroed in on the unique pizza combos. He loved it when restaurants got adventurous.

“Kung Pao Chicken pizza? Oh, the Genghis Khan with beef, chicken, and a special sauce sounds good. Wonder what the special sauce is?”

“Hmm.” Was all the response Merritt gave as she fiddled with her necklace and scanned the menu with a crease in her forehead.

What? The rich girl doesn’t do pizza, burgers, and Chinese?

“We should get a Scampi Shrimp pizza. Shrimp in a special garlic, parsley, and butter sauce on a pizza? It’s like 5-

star dining meets hometown diner. Sounds like a good match to me.” He wagged his eyebrows at her when she glanced up.

She cringed and bit her bottom lip. “While that sounds like it might be interesting, I’m a vegetarian.”

Of course, she was. She did realize that his primary source of income was guiding hunters to harvest meat, right? Would he have to spend the summer with looks of disdain every time he gnawed on a jerky stick?

Not that they’d be eating together often, but between her family’s obvious snobbery and their different lifestyles, the job he’d already been dreading could turn downright hellish.

Only one way to find out.

“Well, they have a garden vegetable pizza. I bet that would be good with the garlic sauce instead of marinara. We could have shrimp on one side and veggies on the other.”

He really should just drop it and order what he wanted without caring about her, but for some reason, her response mattered.

She sat back, her head nodding slightly. “That actually sounds amazing.”

“Okay.” Relief washed over him, and he relaxed into the booth. “Pizza it is.”

Kim came back, and Merritt ordered the pizza and fried wontons and onion rings to go with it. She twisted her teacup back and forth, tugging on the paper and string. She was nervous.

Why would a socialite, CEO of a massive mining company be nervous interviewing a “Podunk” bush pilot?

“I can’t wait to watch your sister’s latest adventure.” Merritt’s statement was the last thing he thought she’d start with.

“Really? You watch the channel?”

“Guilty.” Her smile wasn’t as bright as the earlier one, but her eyes still danced. “They’re kind of my escape. I’d love to

someday go on a trek like what she does. I mean, I've been to lots of places around the world, but it's rarely fun."

Her expression dimmed.

"Why?" Wouldn't someone with her kind of money have nothing but fun?

"Well... I've spent the last nine years growing HGR's philanthropic branch of the business, focusing on helping orphans and widows in not ideal situations."

So not your run-of-the-mill spoiled brat. This day was getting more interesting by the second. Tiikâan's mind spun with possibilities.

"What kind of situations?" He leaned forward, suddenly intensely interested in the woman across from him.

"We were one of the first relief crews in the Nepal earthquake." She started toying with her tea again. "I've been to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, Za'atari in Jordan, and others. We've been to Kutupalong in Bangladesh several times when the monsoons destroyed the makeshift orphanages.

"But the worst were definitely the al-Hol and Roj camps in Syria a few years ago when the violence there escalated. Those kids—" She swallowed, her voice thick. "That was scary."

She shook her head and took a deep breath.

Then she forced a smile at him. "Anyway, now I get to be in Alaska with a whole new adventure. One I hope I can convince you to be a part of."

She spent the next thirty minutes efficiently explaining to him about the new graphite mine about to begin production, how she'd need to be flown to and from the site most days until the excavation started and all the wrinkles were ironed out, and that, out of all the pilots she'd researched, he came highly recommended.

He had a hard time believing the last bit. There were a lot of amazing pilots in Alaska. But the hook his mind snagged on the most was how different the cool, put together boss lady

was to the woman whose voice trembled when she talked about orphans.

One he wouldn't mind spending the summer with.

The other?

Not so much.

And, if he went by this meeting, he couldn't tell which version of Merritt would show up.

SIX

Tiikâan glanced at Merritt in his copilot seat of his Maule M-7-235 as he prepared to taxi and inwardly sighed, knowing if he outwardly sighed, she'd feel it with her arm pressed against his.

Looked like he'd be stuck with the Ice Queen all summer. She'd hardly said a word to him since she arrived with her shoulders pinned back in her designer coat.

Who in their right mind would wear a white Gucci jacket to a mine site?

Not anyone he knew. His world was Carhartt and bunny boots. Not jackets that probably cost more than his truck.

Though, to be fair, he drove an old beater for a reason. Hard to care about scratching the paint when it was already dented.

As he turned at the end of the tarmac to take off, movement off to his right caught his eye. A polar bear and two cubs meandered onto the runway in front of his plane.

"BRW, this is Rebel Air 6532. Over." He called into the airport as he slowed to a stop.

Merritt jerked her head up from her phone and glared at him.

"Rebel Air, this is BRW, go ahead."

"We have polar bears on the runway. Mom and two cubs. Over."

“Copy that. Thanks for the heads-up. Over.”

Merritt’s head snapped forward, and she pushed her feet against the floorboard like she was trying to disappear into the seat.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Tiikâan sat up straighter to get a better view of the bears.

“No. Not cool.” She fumbled with her buckle.

He put his hand over hers. “Hey. It’s okay. She can’t get us in here.”

“Right.” Merritt dropped her chin to her chest and closed her eyes.

With a huff, she lifted her phone back up and clicked on a new message. He rolled his eyes and returned his gaze out the windshield. This was probably a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and she’d rather check email?

“Can’t you just, I don’t know, honk a horn or rev the engine or something to get her to move on?” Her annoyed tone grated on him.

“And miss this experience? Nah.”

If she was going to be all business, he would lean into his laid-back Alaskan roots. You can’t change nature, so might as well just go with it. Besides, it wasn’t like the bears would stay there long.

“But we need to get to the mine.”

“And we will. But Alaska has its own timeline and forcing it to bend to yours is pointless.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“That’s Alaska.”

She muttered something under her breath he didn’t catch. She’d traveled the world helping in refugee camps and orphanages. Wouldn’t those experiences have taught her that life didn’t always toe the line? Maybe if he explained the situation to her, she’d loosen up.

“If it was just a lone animal, revving the engine might work. Though I’ve seen animals dig in and dare you to make them move almost as much as I’ve seen them take off. But if I try to scare these three, there’s a good chance the mom will go one way and the cubs another, and then what do we have?”

Merritt shrugged. “Two less bears to grow to adults that terrorize the town?”

Wow. Talk about coldhearted.

If she had such little regard for life, he was out of there. He clenched his teeth together and stared at her, lifting one eyebrow when she finally looked his way.

“Sorry. That was...” She cringed before continuing. “Callous.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“It’s just I’m not a big fan of bears.” She shivered. “I don’t actually want the cubs to die. I just don’t want them anywhere close to where I am.”

“And they aren’t. That mama isn’t going to attack the plane, unless she views us as a threat. Sure, revving the engine could make them leave. But it could also separate them, and then we’re creating an even more dangerous situation for the people here at the airport and in town. A mama polar bear will go to great lengths to find her cubs.

“I’m not willing to do something that could potentially send the mom right into town searching for her babies. Children are playing there, children that are easy pickings for a grown polar bear. Heck, most adults can’t take them on. So, get comfortable, boss lady. We’re waiting these three out.”

Merritt nodded and returned to scrolling through her phone, but she wasn’t as forceful about it. Not a minute later, the bears meandered off the runway. Tiikâan called the information in to the airport as he throttled up the engine.

Once in the air, he marveled again at how different the terrain was from Tok. The ocean stretched unending to one side, the flat tundra to the other. At least the mine was located

close to the mountains. He might go crazy seeing nothing but flat every day.

Merritt tucked her phone into her purse and stared out the side window. Her fingers toyed with her necklace like they had the day before.

She muttered something that sounded like a list or procedures, almost like he used to do when he first started flying. If he hadn't repeated them out loud, he would have forgotten a step.

The difference in her attitudes still confused the heck out of him. Did she turn into the cold woman who offhandedly talked about dying cubs because she was stressed from suddenly being the person in charge of such a huge operation? Or was that who she really was?

He didn't know how she was in her philanthropy work. She could've been just as cold and efficient then, too. Running a nonprofit division as big as the one Harland must have didn't need heart to operate. In fact, not having one would make it easier to decide who got help and who didn't.

He shook his head as he checked his instruments and then scanned the mountains they approached. It didn't really matter what she was like. Heart or heartless didn't matter as long as he got paid and she didn't spew too much attitude his way.

As he entered the Brooks Range, he sighed in relief. It felt right to be among the peaks that jutted from the earth. He lowered his altitude so he could fly through the mountains instead of over.

A small glacier sat between two peaks. At the bottom of the valley, an ice cave beckoned from the glacier's folds to be explored. He veered closer to get a better look.

"See that?" He tipped the wing of the plane so Merritt could see the glacier from her seat. "Now, that cave would be fun to check out."

"Under the glacier?" Finally, there was a bit of awe in the boss lady's voice.

“Yeah. They’re the coolest.” He winked at her as he flattened out the plane and circled the glacier.

She shook her head and chuckled. “That joke was horrible.”

“Maybe one evening after work we’ll have to plan a mini adventure. We could land in the creek bank right there.” Tiikâan pointed to the flat area along the creek the glacier had left as it retreated. “Then we can hike up and check it out.”

“Really?” She leaned closer to the window like it would give her a better look.

“Sure. It won’t be as epic as what Sunny does, but it’d be fun.” He straightened the plane out and pointed the nose back toward the mine. “Sometimes those caves aren’t much past the mouth, but sometimes they can weave way up under the glacier. And since we’re in the Land of the Midnight Sun, going after work wouldn’t be an issue.”

“I’d really like to do that.” She watched out the window until the glacier disappeared, then turned to him. “But you might have to force me to do it. I’ll probably get a little tunnel-visioned in the next few weeks. I’ll give you a bonus or something.”

“No bonus necessary. I’ll be itching to get into the mountains soon anyway.”

She smiled her tight-lipped smile, then looked out the window, her fingers searching out her necklace. Her response made his worry a bit lighter. Maybe it was just the stress of her dad dying and taking over the business that was making her remind him of Cruella at times.

If she could be civil to him, he could help keep her grounded.

And the Alaskan wilderness could keep a person humble better than anything else.

SEVEN

Merritt stared out the side window as the plane banked around the mining camp before lining up for landing. If not for the bright-orange hard hats, she could almost imagine the scene below her as a refugee camp in the African mountains.

The makeshift office buildings and barracks made from shipping containers were so similar to what she'd seen in other parts of the world that she expected to see children darting out to watch the plane approach at any minute.

Too bad the only person stepping from the office was her stepbrother, Silas.

Even from her position flying above, his tension as he crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the plane screamed contentious. How had the two of them gotten to this?

They used to be friends. Best friends, really. Aside from her dad and her uncle Nolan, Silas had been her only supporter in their family.

The only one who truly saw her.

Leaving had been the best thing she could've done for herself, but she hadn't realized how much it would change everything.

She slid her fingers along her necklace and closed her eyes. As silently as she could, she took a deep breath to calm herself before she had to engage yet another family member who'd rather she be anywhere but there.

Probably preferably six feet under.

The tires jolted on the ground, snapping her eyes open and her shield up. She hated the icy cold that settled in her gut. Hated how it twisted her into someone she didn't recognize. But she didn't know who she could trust, especially in her family.

"Thank you for flying Rebel Air." Tiikâan's cheeky voice came through the headset, startling a huff of laughter out of her. "Your captain asks that you remain in your seat with your seat belt on until we come to a complete stop."

He turned to her and winked. She rolled her eyes, but warmth melted the ice in her gut. She shouldn't allow it to, but something about him made her comfortable.

"We hope you'll enjoy your stay in..." He pretended to look around confused before continuing. "The middle of nowhere Alaska."

"Thanks, Mr. Rebel."

"Um... I didn't know my dad was here." He glanced into the back seat.

Did he not take anything seriously?

"It's Tiikâan or Rebel, but definitely not Mister, remember?" He shook his head as he pulled the plane into the designated spot.

"Thanks, Tiikâan." He nodded at her emphasis of his name. "Why don't you follow me to my office so I can put my things down, then I'll give you a tour. Unfortunately, I'm afraid you're going to be a little bored."

He shrugged off her comment, though a muscle ticked in his cheek like he was gritting his teeth. "I brought a book."

And now she wanted to know what kind of books this provocative man read. Was it all classics like Hawthorne's *Tangled Tales*? Whatever it was, it probably had a lot of adventure. He didn't seem like a man who would do anything tame.

Her stepbrother's form stomping toward the airstrip forced her to refocus on why she was there—saving her father's

legacy and unraveling the mystery of his last message.

Even if she just wanted to tell Tiikâan to fire up the engine and take her anywhere but the Alaskan Brooks Range.

Her phone chimed the text and email sounds almost one right after the other, and she wished the mine site didn't have such good Wi-Fi. She glanced at her screen, smiling at the text that came in from her uncle Nolan, the company's chief operating officer.

Nolan: Remember to tell Greg in safety that he still owes me a beer next time I'm up there and that he needs to pick a better team to back.

The corners of her mouth twitched as she responded.

"Merritt," Silas hollered as he got close.

Why couldn't all her family be as easy to get along with as Nolan?

Her hands shook as she shoved the phone back in her purse, and she clenched them to hide the trembling that coursed through her. To stuff down the need that filled her to let her dad's dynasty crumble. But she'd never been able to let her dad down, even in death.

"Morning, Silas." See, she could be friendly.

"Did you get the latest request for funds I sent over? We're falling behind schedule because you and Rachel keep stonewalling me at every turn. It's almost like you want this mine to fail, despite it being Dad's dream."

Well, good morning to you too, brother.

Merritt barely refrained from rolling her eyes and stepped around him toward the offices. In truth, part of what Silas said might be true. Between her grief and trying to figure out if his death was the accident it appeared to be, she couldn't conjure up any excitement for her dad's last venture.

Rachel was a nightmare to work with, and Merritt still hadn't gotten a grasp on everything that had to happen to keep the mine moving forward. Not that Silas had been much help with that.

“I’m still getting up to speed, Silas.” She turned to him as he stepped up beside her and matched her pace. “But some of these cost projections seem off, and there are concerning gaps in the environmental impact report. I need full transparency before releasing more company funds.”

He clenched his jaw, looked off to the side, and angrily mumbled something too quiet for her to hear. Heat filled her chest. Now she knew how her dad had felt when Silas would get in trouble in high school and he’d do the exact same thing.

Annoyed and apprehensive.

Though probably the last was just her. She couldn’t imagine her dad anxious about much. She needed to get over that quickly if she had any chance of finding out the truth.

“Silas, I need you to level with me. These numbers aren’t adding up, and there are gaps in the environmental reports. What’s going on with this mine?”

“You’ve been gone for years, Merritt. Things have changed. I’ve been the one here, making sure this mine gets up and running. It’s not my fault if you can’t keep up.”

Merritt bit back the sharp retort as she stopped, placed a hand on Silas’ arm, and prayed he’d get over himself enough to help her out.

“I know I’ve been away, but I’m here now.” She softened her voice, hoping he couldn’t hear the hurt she couldn’t push down. “We used to be a team, Silas. Can’t we work together on this? For Dad’s sake?”

“For Dad’s sake?” Silas scoffed, his resentment and bitterness clear. “That’s rich, coming from you. You think you can just waltz back in and take over, no questions asked? I’ve been the one living up to Dad’s impossible standards while you were off playing hero.”

Merritt bristled.

“You think this is easy for me?” She took a breath so she wouldn’t yell. “I’m doing the best I can, Silas. I didn’t ask for this, but I’m here now. I need your support, not your attitude.”

“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Silas muttered under his breath as he charged ahead of her.

“Do you think it’s what I want to be doing? You haven’t had to uproot your life. I have. Me. So a little understanding and patience from you would be appreciated.”

“Patience?” Silas paced away, then spun back.

“Do you know how many years I’ve worked under Dad, bending to his will, learning how he expects the business to run to have all that ripped from me and given to you? Do you know what it was like feeling like everything I did fell short of his expectations when you could do nothing wrong?”

“Silas, I didn’t—”

“So excuse me if my patience is thin for the one person who wanted nothing to do with the family legacy that gave her the ability to do whatever she wanted.”

For a second, Silas’ face fell before he stiffened and stomped off with a quick, jerky step without a look back at her. She stared after him. Was there any way she could repair their relationship? Could she trust him enough to?

“You okay?” Tiikâan’s soft question startled her.

“Yeah.” She forced her shoulders back and nodded toward the office. “Let’s get you that tour.”

And get her heart rate settled. If all her days started out with bears and growly brothers, she wasn’t sure she’d survive long enough to find out the truth about her father.

EIGHT

Tiikâan held in his sigh of relief as Barrow came into view. The day had been an absolute bore. He'd finished the latest Bristol North audiobook but had quickly realized that normally when he listened to books, he had something else to keep himself busy.

He'd sketched, paced, and scanned the surrounding area for animals—there were none.

Even the creatures of the wild ran from the mine site.

He wouldn't have minded taking a hike and exploring, but apparently, he wasn't allowed.

His hands tightened around the yoke as he circled to line up with the runway. He'd have to talk to Merritt about the latter. There was no way he'd make it through the summer if he couldn't stretch his legs.

But first she'd have to get her cute nose out of her computer.

He glanced over at Merritt.

She scanned an Excel sheet, shook her head, and muttered under her breath, then toggled over to another document and ran her finger along the screen. Her lips moved as she silently read. She let out a little growl and toggled back to the spreadsheet.

He smashed his lips together to keep his chuckle in and turned his attention back to the approach. She reminded him a

lot of his sister Astryde—determined, stubborn, and relentless as the day was long.

And the days were never-ending this far north.

It was clear that Merritt was in way over her head. But she hadn't once let it slow her down. In fact, her stepbrother's little tantrum seemed to fuel her to prove she could do the whole CEO thing.

During the tour, she hadn't known much of anything about what was going on. But she had this amazing way of snagging a worker by calling out their name and building them up until they were an expert in whatever it was they were looking at.

No one seemed to catch on that she was clueless. And if they did, her billowing them full of accolades made them more than happy to explain what some piece of machinery did.

He got the impression that she hadn't been there long. So how had she remembered so many people's names? And not just the supervisors or the workers in the office. Some of the people he'd met today were just normal Joes like him.

Grunts.

And she had talked with them like they were the most important person at the site.

All while maintaining this cool façade of control.

Was that something rich people trained into their kids? Or did it come with the knowledge that anything they wanted was within their grasp?

Anything.

Because with the type of money the Harland family was made of, buying spots on Elon Musk's Mars colony wouldn't even put a dent in their bottom line.

He shook the thought off and focused on the landing procedure. The sun glittered off the Arctic Ocean. A humpback breached in the distance, levitating out of the water and crashing down with a splash. The plane vibrated with energy under him and filled him with peace.

That's what he loved about flying.

Creation's proclamation of a creator was never more evident than while soaring through the sky. It was the same with hunting. High in the air and deep in the bush, Tiikâan could just be.

No comparing.

No shortcomings.

Just himself.

"Well, how was the first day?" Merritt's cool question crashed into his peace, and in that half dreamlike state he spewed the first thing that popped in his head.

"Life swings like a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom." He inwardly groaned as he turned his face away, pretending to check gauges.

He'd found the Arthur Schopenhauer quote in middle school and had used it every time he had to do something mind-numbing in school. It'd spilled into his daily thoughts during his service in the Air Force.

But saying it to the person who with one word could make sure his clawing out of the pit of bankruptcy didn't happen probably wasn't smart.

A startled laugh jumped from her. "That bad?"

He shrugged it off. "I'll figure it out."

"Well, a pendulum of pain and boredom certainly isn't good." She shook her head, her fingers going to her necklace like they seemed to do when she was nervous.

He slid the plane onto the runway and kept the conversation up while he made his way to his rented spot.

"I found that quote by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer when I was eleven. Shocked the heck out of Mom when I used it during my grammar lesson one day."

"I bet." She turned her face toward him.

“The next time I said it, she came back with ‘Only boring people get bored.’” He cringed.

“Ouch.” Merritt chuckled.

He looked at her with a mock expression of offense and waved his hand up and down his body. “Do I look like a boring person to you?”

The way her fingers froze on her necklace as she scanned him had him straightening his spine. When her cheeks pinkened and her muscles tensed before she turned to pack her computer in her bag, he inwardly preened.

“No.” The word whispered out all airy, and Tiikâan’s own breath snagged in his chest.

Nope.

He would not let his restlessness create more trouble. He couldn’t afford to look at Merritt any other way than as his boss.

If he let his mind loose on this thread of attraction swirling in his gut, he had copious amounts of time to dwell and dream and come up with all kinds of possibilities that were inconceivable.

She cleared her throat as she finished closing her worn leather satchel. “Would you want to come out to dinner?”

Inconceivable.

You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means, Inigo Montoya from Princess Bride said in Tiikâan’s head.

He shook it to shut his imagination up.

Merritt’s eyes widened.

“Not like friends, but a business meeting,” Merritt quickly added. “We could figure out something to keep you from a summer of drear. Maybe guard duty? That’s kind of like hunting, right?”

She tried to put her crisp business voice on that he’d heard her use all day, but it didn’t hit right. There was too much

emotion trembling in it. If she thought guarding a mine in the middle of nowhere was anything like hunting, Tiikâan wasn't even sure he could explain the difference.

"It's been a long day." He took the keys out of the ignition. "You aren't ready to go home and relax?"

She shuddered as she reached for the door.

"Uh, no. You've met my family." She yanked on the door handle, her voice sharp. "There is nothing relaxing about that house."

"Hold up." He placed his hand on her arm, and she sagged against the seat. He softened his voice. "Let me come around and help you out."

He hopped out and rushed around the plane. Through the windshield, she took a deep breath and lifted her chin. Another breath and her shoulders rolled back.

By the time he made it to her door and reached up to help her out, the crack in the ice princess' façade was shored up. She didn't look at him as she spoke.

"You're right. It's been a busy day. I think I'll—"

"Have you been to Osaka yet?" he interrupted her.

"What?" Her perfectly shaped brows furrowed together.

"The sushi restaurant on Stevenson?"

"Um... no. I haven't."

"They have a teriyaki tofu dinner plate, some vegetable sushi rolls, and tempura vegetables."

Now why'd he say that like he'd scoped out the menu with her in mind.

Because he hadn't.

Not really.

More like he was curious if a vegetarian could survive in an Alaskan meat-based village.

He guided her from the plane, then reached around her to grab her satchel. Which was a mistake. He was close.

Too close.

The soft citrus scent from her hair filled his system. Warning lights flashed and buzzers blared in his head.

Mayday!

This pilot was going down.

Her fingers brushed his as she took her bag from him. She stared up at him, his throat drying at the vulnerability flooding from her brown eyes. He took a step back and swallowed.

“What do you say?” He put on a casual air he didn’t feel. “Up for seeing if we can get good Japanese this far north?”

If he could gloss over his obvious Merritt-induced research, maybe she’d forget he ever mentioned it.

“It’ll take me about thirty minutes or so to get Darth Maule here tucked in for the night.” He patted his plane’s wing. “Meet you at Osaka then?”

She nodded and stepped toward her car. “Okay.”

She took another step away, opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, then spun on her expensive heel and marched to her black Escalade.

He needed to take this time to get his priorities straight.

Too bad he finished his post-flight checklist faster than ever.

NINE

Merritt pulled up to the teeny red building with pallets lined along the foundation as a makeshift sidewalk. Her heart sped up in her chest at the thought of seeing Tiikâan again. There definitely had been something electric between them back at the plane.

Or maybe magnetic?

Whatever force had been at work had her hands sweating buckets and lungs gasping for breath like a vapid romance novel heroine.

Sure, the rugged man had looked up the vegetarian options at the restaurant. That didn't mean he had more in mind than just being considerate.

Though, to be fair, she'd never once looked at dining options for someone else. Didn't that seem extra?

It seemed extra to her, which brought her right back to the unnamed force that had her checking in her mirror at home to make sure her jeans and flannel shirt looked down-to-earth enough for the no-nonsense pilot.

How long had she been looking through the windshield at the front of the restaurant, staring like it was a Goliath she had to conquer? With a huff, she rolled her eyes, wiped the gallon of sweat on her palms off on her jeans, and yanked the car door open.

For extra measure, she pushed back her shoulders and chanted Elsa's line from *Frozen* in her head as she made her

way to the entrance.

Conceal. Don't feel.

Except one look at Tiikâan squeezed into a table pushed up against the wall and a fridge, chatting lively with a kid at the table next to him, melted all the cold shell she'd gathered in a rush of heat. She was surprised there wasn't a puddle at her feet.

He looked over the packed, cramped restaurant, his eyes lighting up when he spotted her. He raised his hand, like her eyes hadn't latched on to him like a heat-seeking missile the instant she'd stepped through the door.

She was in so much trouble.

There was no way feeding the crush of hers would be beneficial at the moment. Not with the mine starting up and her dad's possible murder looming over her.

But having a friend could be.

Having someone she could let down her guard with, even for an hour over a meal, could keep her from shattering into a million shards. Because, let's face it, she hadn't been coping very well, but these moments with Tiikâan helped.

She just had to keep her attraction in check.

Which would be a whole lot easier if the man didn't look like the model for Brawny paper towels and Chris Pratt in his *Jurassic Park* phase had their genes spliced together for the ultimate male specimen.

Gah.

Not helping.

She took another breath and threaded her way to him as he tipped his head at her in a nod.

"Hey." He smiled and the slight impression of dimples showed in his beard.

Double gah.

He wasn't making her determination to keep it together easy. Darn the man for being so affable.

"Hey." She pulled out the seat across from him, pausing when she noticed he'd given her the spot with more room.

He looked cramped wedged in the tight space between the table and the fridge.

"Do you want this spot?" She motioned to the two feet separating her chair from the one behind it. "There's more space."

"Nah. I like to see the door."

The man wasn't going to give her a break, was he? It was like protective chivalry was baked into his being, what with his insistence to help her in and out of his plane and the need to watch the door for what?

Madmen with guns?

Rabid polar bears?

The last one made her shudder. She'd take the men with guns over bears any day.

He pushed on the table, making a loud scraping noise as it moved a few inches away from the fridge. "See. We're all good now."

"All right." She took the seat and wiped her hands again on her jeans once her legs were hidden under the table.

"Paka here was just telling me that the miso soup is the bomb." Tiikâan leaned across the aisle and gave the cute little Iñupiat girl he'd been talking to a high five. "And that the agedashi tofu is... how did you put it?"

"To die for." The girl couldn't be more than four years old.

Tiikâan looked up at Merritt with a smile playing at the corner of his lips and a raised eyebrow. "You heard it. To die for."

He widened his eyes and pressed his lips together.

Speaking of to die for. Her ribs were about to crack wide-open, letting her heart flop out into his lap. She pressed her hand over her chest to keep her heart in place and smiled at Paka.

“Thanks for the tip.” Merritt shrugged, feigning seriousness. “I always have such a hard time deciding what to eat. You just helped me out a lot.”

Paka nodded sagely. “And the apple pie on the moat is the best in the whole world.”

Merritt looked at Tiikâan for a translation, but his forehead scrunched in confusion, too.

“She means *à la mode*.” Paka’s mom sitting next to her shook her head.

“Aah.” Merritt focused back on Paka. “I’ll be sure to save room.”

For pie, but she’d hold the moat.

Unless there was a nondairy option.

“All right. It’s time to go, girlie.” Paka’s mom stood and the rest of the table called out goodbyes to other customers as they left.

“Well, she was adorable.” Merritt smiled at Tiikâan.

“Completely.” He chuckled. “Started chatting my ear off the instant I sat down. We’re now BFFs. I’m sure we’ll catch up later on Snapchat.”

He said it all with such seriousness as he scanned the menu that Merritt wondered if his laid-back attitude ever got ruffled.

“Hmm.” Her eyes roamed the menu, not really reading the words. “Never took you as a Snapchat kind of guy.”

“No?” He put his elbows on the table and threaded his fingers together like she was about to spout something he really wanted to hear.

“You seem more of an Insta influencer.” She shrugged one shoulder. “You know, setting up cameras in your plane for just

the right angle of you in your aviators to catch all the ladies' attention.”

He settled back in his chair with a cocky, exaggerated casualness.

She swallowed her laugh and continued. “Or it’s probably more like putting the camera at just the right angle to make your hunting and fishing successes look like trophies instead of barely legal to lure more clients in.”

He nodded and leaned forward.

“So, it’s the aviators that draw the ladies in? Good to know.” He rubbed his beard. “I always figured it was my rugged, chiseled jaw.”

She rolled her eyes and chuckled. “It’s something.”

In truth it wasn’t just one thing about him that attracted her. His entire presence was a wrapped package of confident masculinity she’d always been drawn to.

Not alphahole toxic.

But a calm presence that broadcasted competence and trustworthiness. That whatever situation came up, he could handle it.

She’d witnessed men like him in the heart of the refugee camps and disasters. They were the ones she put in charge. They weren’t without fault, but when things fell apart, they could hold it together long enough to shore up the cracks.

The friendly Korean owner took their order. Over dinner, Merritt convinced him that since he was already at the mine all day, getting paid extra to do guard duty was a no-brainer.

Tiikâan told Merritt funny hunting stories about getting chased by moose and dive-bombing ducks. She recounted her work abroad.

Over two hours and amazing tempura and hot pie with melting dairy-free ice cream later, the frigid loneliness that had chilled her blood since she landed in Barrow thawed, leaving her mind quieter than it had been in years.

Tiikâan scratched at the bandage on his arm.

“What happened?” She pointed her apple pie loaded fork at his arm, then fairly moaned when she took the bite.

Paka was right. The pie was the best she’d ever had.

“A grizzly mistook me for the bait at my stand.”

The pie turned to gravel in her mouth. She swallowed, but it almost didn’t make it down her throat. Her hand shook as she set the fork down with a clatter.

“What?” she wheezed out through tight lungs.

“I was at my bear bait stand. Planned on taking it down, but ended up in the tree, hunting one last time before this new contract flying an uppity oil heiress started. You know, one last go before the pendulum of pain and boredom.”

He winked, shoved a bite of pie in his mouth, and talked around it. “I was just getting ready to climb down when a scratching noise sounded right below me. When I looked over the edge of the tree stand, a big ol’ boy stared right up at me.”

“No.”

“Yeah.”

Then he told her the most horrific, unbelievably insane story she’d ever heard.

She pushed herself into the chair like the bear was going to come stalking out of the kitchen behind Tiikâan. Her body trembled from head to toe. A tingling spread through her chest. She tried to take a deep breath to calm the heck down, but she couldn’t.

Which pissed her off.

She didn’t want to be this damsel in distress. It wasn’t even like the bear was there stalking her. Sure, polar bears would wander Barrow’s streets and everyone would get inside, but that wasn’t the case at the moment. She was just—how had her dad always put it?

Your mind is like a wild well right now, gushing fear and panic. It’s time to cap that well and get your head straight.

She could hear her dad's voice clear as day in her head, and tears blurred her vision. She blinked and gritted her teeth.

"Hey." Tiikâan reached across the table and placed his hand over her clenched fist. "What's going on?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry," she said. "I just... don't like bears."

He rubbed the back of her hand. "Seems more than a dislike."

"Yeah." She laughed, but it was almost a sob. "More like a crushing, irrational fear."

"Okay." He nodded. "Can you tell me about it?"

He leaned forward, his warm hand still wrapped around hers.

She took a deep breath and forced out the story she'd tried to forget. "When I was eleven, I went to a wilderness camp in Montana. One night, me and two of the girls decided to sleep under the stars instead of in the tents."

She gulped, but the fear didn't go down. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to get control. She really didn't want to break down crying or, worse, pass out in this busy restaurant. Tiikâan's hand slid up her arm and squeezed.

"You don't have to tell me." His thumb ran across the inside of her forearm.

She curled her hand around his arm, mirroring his hold on her, and opened her eyes. His gaze never left her face and had no disdain or impatience on it.

Just concern.

Like he really wanted to understand why.

Maybe talking about it would help. If nothing else, he'd know why she tried to climb through her seat that morning when the bears crossed the runway.

"I woke up to a crunching noise and bloodcurdling screams." She gulped down the bile that rose up her throat. "The three of us had slept lined up. The bear had chomped on the head of my friend in the middle."

She shuddered, and he squeezed her arm. “Thankfully, it crushed her skull and killed her instantly, and me and the other girl were able to scramble away. But I’ll never forget the sound of teeth on skull for as long as I live.”

“Wow.” Tiikâan swallowed, his lips pressing into a tight line as he shook his head, and she didn’t feel like her fear was such an abnormal thing. “I’d say that would cause anyone to have a phobia of bears.”

“Your story sounds just as bad, maybe even worse, but you don’t seem to be cowering at the thought of the beasts.”

“Yeah, but I’ve spent my life in the woods and around bears.” He exhaled a laugh. “Heck, we had several books detailing stories of surviving bear attacks growing up that’d we’d read on camp trips around the fire.”

“That’s just wrong.”

“That’s just life, at least up here,” he countered with a shrug. “Honestly, I think my dad did it so that we’d not only have an understanding of the predators around us, but also have stories in our memories of how to survive.

“Maybe some kickback to the warriors of old telling stories of their encounters. Who knows, but if something like what had happened to you had happened to me, I probably wouldn’t be hunting bear in the woods alone.”

“Yeah, but you aren’t even fazed by your experience.” She pushed her trembling fingers of her free hand through her hair.

“It’s not that I wasn’t scared. Believe me, I’m surprised I didn’t have to change my underpants when it was all done. And the entire time I was getting everything loaded and out of there, I was paranoid by every little sound.”

He leaned forward like he really wanted her to hear the next part. “But I also know that baiting bears is dangerous. I’m practically begging them to come to me. And what happened to you was probably the same.

“The food from the campout, even the toothpaste the girl used, could’ve acted as bait, especially if that was a regular camp area. But most bears in the wild steer clear of humans

and only really attack if their cubs are there or there's food to protect."

He was probably right.

Maybe.

She still didn't think if she were him, she'd pop back into the woods after being attacked by a grizzly, but it felt like he got why she'd be afraid. While her dad had taken her to counseling, he never quite understood how she couldn't control her fear.

Even a trip to the zoo would induce panic. To him, his philosophy of "Fear is just a four-letter word. You've got to face it head-on and show it who's boss" extended into every single aspect of life.

Mostly, she'd been able to live up to that motto. It helped there weren't bears where she went. But Alaska wasn't like everywhere else, and the one part of life she hadn't ever gotten a handle on was seemingly around every corner.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't end up dinner." She smiled and released her death grip on his arm. "It would've been a hassle finding another pilot on such short notice."

Talking had helped.

"Thanks for listening," she whispered.

"Anytime."

"Sorry I kind of ruined the conversation with my freak-out."

"Merritt, trust me. You didn't ruin anything." The deep timbre of his voice and his steady stare made her believe him.

Tiikâan paid with an insistence that it was his turn. "You'll get the next one."

Merritt's smile hurt her cheeks as they weaved their way out of the small restaurant. She liked the idea of there being a next time. Maybe they could circle through every restaurant in town. There couldn't be that many.

“Want to know what I learned tonight?” Tiikâan asked as he held the door open for her.

“Other than my flight response to even the mention of bears?”

His low chuckle spooled in her gut like warm caramel.

“I can tell you really miss what you’ve been doing overseas. Have you considered how much good Harland’s philanthropy could do in Alaska?” Tiikâan’s soft question as he followed her to her car had her turning around and leaning on the driver’s door.

“How’s that?”

He shoved his hands in his Chris Pratt-esque cargo vest that was even sexier in real life. “I’m not sure how much you know about Alaska, but it’s not the easiest place to live.”

He took a deep breath like he needed to bolster himself to continue. “Drugs and alcohol in rural communities like here and Tok, where I’m from, are a massive problem. Alaska is the most dangerous state for women with fifty-nine percent of adult women experiencing domestic violence. Our sexual abuse rate is four times the national rate. Trafficking is on the rise. Suicides among teens are on the epidemic level. It’s just—”

He cut off his words and stared across the street to the ocean. Tears pricked her eyes. She had known Alaska had a high suicide rate, but she had no clue about all of this. He clenched his jaw and rocked back on his heels before looking back at her.

“I’m not saying what you do overseas isn’t needed. Lord knows it is, but maybe you being here has a bigger purpose than getting the mine up and running.” He shrugged and shook his head.

“I honestly have no clue what can be done to help, and I know that one organization would never be able to fix everything that leads to these problems. I mean, even things like modern water and sewer are a problem for a lot of rural communities. But I feel like with all your work you’ve done in

other places, you might have a unique perspective that could lend some insight and change.”

“I don’t know if I—” Her throat closed as all her family’s jabs at her being useless rushed her mind, and she reached up to finger her necklace.

“And I’m not saying you have to. But after watching you work today and listening to you tonight, I think you might hold the answer to a lot of people’s prayers.” Tiikâan’s unflinching gaze quieted the doubt.

Not completely, but enough that she could see the truth of his words.

She swallowed. “Okay. I’ll look into it.”

His smile hit hard and almost buckled her knees.

“All right, boss.” He walked backward toward the street. “See you in the morning.”

On the short drive home, her gaze bounced from the weathered houses to the kids playing in the streets and the elderly visiting on lawn chairs in front yards. A seed of purpose embedded itself in her heart.

She did have resources others didn’t, and helping children and women fueled something deep inside her. But with her responsibilities at the mine and trying to figure out why her dad left her that warning, being overwhelmed was an understatement. There was no way she could take on any more.

TEN

Merritt skimmed her dad's operations journal for the fifth time, hoping that she'd find some clue among the meticulous daily notes of business to why he'd left that message. Reading the summaries of what he did each day battered her already bruised heart.

It shouldn't have. It wasn't like the entries contained any personal information. But with each bullet point, she saw her dad.

Efficient with no muss.

There were times growing up that she'd wanted muss. Just a little bit of coddling to soften the blows of childhood. She understood now that his suck-it-up attitude didn't mean that he hadn't cared.

He just couldn't see the need to nurture hurts.

He'd always listen to her problems and woes, intently and without distraction, something she'd never seen him do with anyone else. Then, after the problem was out, he'd talk through solutions with her. There was never any pandering to make her feel better, just solid advice on paths forward.

If he was there, she'd thank him for that. She liked to think that, aside from her irrational fear of bears, she had ended up a strong person, able to objectively look at a situation and figure out a solution, whether it was personal or not.

She missed him so much. She set the book down on the desk and closed her eyes. A tear escaped to race down her

cheek just as stomping sounded in the hall outside.

She quickly wiped her cheek, shoved the journal under a pile of reports on her desk, and pulled up the latest update on the safety protocol just as Silas stormed into her office.

“We have a problem.” He slammed his laptop onto her desk, making her cringe.

Good thing it was military-grade and practically indestructible.

“Nolan just messaged that he wants both of us on a teleconference with him, Mom, and Rachel.” Silas opened his laptop and typed in his password.

Merritt glanced at her phone. She didn’t have any messages from Nolan.

“I don’t have a message.”

“Yeah. Apparently, I not only got shafted in the will, but I’m also now your assistant.” He cursed and muttered under his breath that he didn’t have time for problems.

Merritt could see how he’d consider her a problem, but she didn’t need or want him to be fielding calls for her, especially when she didn’t know if she could trust him.

She straightened in her chair, pulling her pen and pad closer, ready to take notes. She’d realized early in being dumped in the CEO seat that she had to take detailed notes of almost every conversation so she could study what she hadn’t understood, which was a lot.

It was honestly scary that she was in charge of a multibillion-dollar corporation she knew very little about. What had Dad been thinking?

“What’s this about?” she asked, scratching the date and time on her pad.

“No clue. Nolan didn’t say.” Silas growled as he pulled up the conference app, dropping the f-bomb for good measure. “Crazy old man and his secret spy tendencies.”

While Merritt's sentiments toward her only living relative were the opposite of Silas' obvious dislike, it was annoying how Nolan never messaged or called when it pertained to business. His insistence that all communication about the corporation be "secure and safe" was a major pain in the butt.

"Old, huh?" Nolan's voice and face appeared on the screen.

He ran his hand down the front of his custom-tailored suit, while she silently calculated how many weeks an entire refugee camp could have been fed with its cost.

"I'd say more like robust. Matured like a fine wine. Some might even say a silver fox." He wagged his eyebrows at the screen as Joni and Rachel popped on from Joni's office in the Barrow house.

That's why she loved Nolan.

Nolan had been an operative for the CIA before Dad convinced his brother to work for him. Always said Nolan's contacts in just about every part of the world came in handy.

Even with his spy background and being the chief operating officer of Harland, he loved to joke. Where her dad had never coddled, Nolan had been her soft place to land when she needed to be cheered up.

"What's with the summons? I've got things to do." Silas leaned on the credenza behind her chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Impatience and anger fairly pulsed against her back. When had he turned from the troubled, yet protective boy he'd been in high school to this bitter man who oozed discontent?

She wished she could go back and not have been so focused on her mission that she cut herself from him for the sake of production.

Maybe she was more like her dad than she cared to admit.

"I just got off a call with a contact in the EPA. Apparently, there are concerns from the villages in the area. Water

contamination issues.” Nolan’s switch from jokester to serious always jolted her.

The hard clench of his jaw could rival her dad’s.

Silas shook his head. “We’ve got clearance from the EPA that we’re good to go.”

“Supposedly, some geologist sent Clay concerns about the AMD risk.” Nolan lifted his hand in a frustrated gesture.

“AMD?” Merritt hated asking.

“Acid Mine Drainage.” Rachel’s tone clearly said she thought Merritt was an idiot. “The fact that you don’t know the basic mining term is just more proof you have no right leading this company. Seriously, what was Dad thinking leaving the village idiot in charge?”

Guess Merritt didn’t have to wonder what Rachel really thought.

“Rachel, watch your tone,” Nolan snapped. “Your petty jealousy of Merritt doesn’t have a place here.”

“Rachel has a point.” Joni’s cool, collected counter almost had Merritt snorting.

Of course, the evil stepmother would back her daughter.

Crossing his arms, Nolan scowled. “Merritt may need catching up on some things, but she’s not an idiot. The success of our nonprofit sector proves that.”

Nolan leaned forward on his desk. “AMD is a problem that happens sometimes when the rocks the graphite is surrounded by contain sulfide minerals like pyrite, such as schist and gneiss. When these rocks are exposed to air and water during the mining process, sulfuric acid is created which then can seep into groundwater, streams, and rivers. Apparently, our graphite is surrounded by schist.”

Well, schist.

She cringed and opened her mouth to ask more, but Silas bulldozed over her.

“Which we’ve addressed. In detail.” Silas slammed his hands on her desk next to her, leaning toward the computer. “We’ve had multiple geologists out here and revised our waste management procedure with their input *and* the EPA’s. The schist is minimal and any AMD formed is easily contained.”

“I understand, but if someone is tickling the right ears at the EPA, then our little schist issue becomes a major schisting problem.” Nolan’s lip twitched at his pun.

Merritt tilted her head, barely containing the urge to raise her hand. “Who is the geologist bringing the concerns?”

“I haven’t been able to get that information from my contact.” Nolan shrugged. “It’s pretty hush-hush, but the warning was there. If enough ruckus is made, drilling will get delayed... again.”

Merritt pulled up the report she’d read the other day from her memory. “What about the backing of the governor and the president and being designated as a High-Priority Infrastructure Project? Won’t that overrule any setbacks, especially with the approval from the EPA?”

Nolan shook his head. “Not if there’s enough evidence that the claim is correct, which apparently the local villages have.”

Silas swore and pushed off her desk to pace. “We can’t have any more setbacks. We’re weeks away from drilling. Any delay now will put us into winter. Then any kinks we have will be magnified by ten at least from the cold.”

Merritt gently tapped her finger against the desk. “What if we go to the villages and explain the safety procedures we’ll have in place and reinforce the EPA’s clearance?”

She remembered her dad always insisting that influencing public opinion was better than gold.

“With your experience in kumbayaing with the unfortunate, you might actually be of help to the mine.” Silas came back to look at the screen. “I say we send Mother Theresa here to sweet-talk the locals.”

Rachel cackled. “Have you been drinking the idiot juice or something, Silas?”

“That’s a horrible idea,” Joni interjected. “She knows nothing about the process. She’ll just make the situation worse.”

“And you think you’d be better?” Merritt couldn’t keep the venom from her voice.

“As the head of public relations, it is my job.”

“Yeah, but sending you into the villages would be like sending Cruella into a puppy store.”

“Why you little—”

“Silas is right.” Merritt cut off Joni and sat forward in her seat. “I’ve spent the last eight years calming problems in situations a lot more dire than this. And unlike you, I actually care about these people and their concerns.”

Merritt nodded as a plan formed. “I’ll visit each of the villages along the Kobuk River. Joni, I want two community meetings a day over three days, starting with Kobuk and ending in Kotzebue. Be sure to communicate that HGR’s commitment to the minimal environmental impact has always been a priority, including ensuring the concerns of the communities affected are addressed.”

“Unlike you, I know how to do my job,” Joni snapped back.

“Joni.” Nolan’s tone warned Joni to drop it.

She raised one eyebrow at him and cocked her head in challenge.

Nolan shuffled papers on his desk. “I’m heading up there as soon as I get off this call to clean up this mess and will be in Barrow by tonight.”

Merritt’s heart dropped. She didn’t need a babysitter. And she definitely didn’t need him swooping in to rescue her.

She shook her head. “That’s not necessary.”

“We’ve got it covered,” Silas added, surprising the heck out of Merritt.

“Obviously, you don’t.” Nolan’s rebuke snapped through the computer, and Silas’ jaw clenched. “And even though I’ve got all the oil assets of the company to take care of, I have to come up there to make sure this silly experiment of Clay’s doesn’t destroy everything we’ve built. I refuse to let all my hard work collapse over schist rocks.”

The online meeting room abruptly closed. Guess the meeting was over. Silas slammed his computer closed and stormed out with muttered curses about stupid geologists. She slumped into her chair with a long exhale.

What was she doing there? As much as she hated to admit it, Joni and Rachel were right. She didn’t know nearly enough about oil or graphite mining to be in charge. She definitely didn’t have the knowledge needed to ease the concerns of the locals.

Maybe she should turn the company over to Nolan so she didn’t accidentally destroy everything. He was a better choice for CEO with him being with her dad for years. He’d helped Dad expand from just drills in the Texas desert to rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, then later up to Alaska’s waters and the North Slope.

Aside from Dad, Nolan knew everything there was regarding mining and their business. Yet the thought of giving up and disappointing her dad turned her stomach into a heavy pile of schist.

ELEVEN

Patrol duty in the middle of the Brooks Range with nothing around for miles but trees and mosquitoes was by far one of the most boring things Tiikâan had ever done.

It might not even be worth the extra money Merritt was paying him to stand there.

Long hours of waiting for prey to venture into the zone while hunting had nothing on patrol duty. At least while hunting there was the possibility of catching a quick nap in the sun and whispered conversations with his clients.

He didn't know what exactly he was patrolling against. The likelihood of a person showing up there was thin.

The only landing area within walking distance was at the mine, unless someone was willing to hike for days through mountain valleys, thick forest, and marshy tundra. It could be done, but it would be arduous.

He would not want to be that person.

Since the likelihood of someone wandering into the mine was nonexistent, that left him with nothing to do but stand there and swat at the mosquitoes that seemed to think he was an all-you-can-eat buffet. He'd have to remember to bring some bug spray tomorrow.

Maybe he could convince Merritt to let him do a few sweeps of the area in Darth Maule. At least then he'd have something to do other than be a human sacrifice to the Alaskan state bird.

A shout punched the air, and Tiikâan straightened, his senses on high alert. He scanned the area, trying to pinpoint where the sound had come from. There it was again, and this time he recognized the voice.

Silas.

Tiikâan moved toward the commotion, careful to stay out of sight. As he neared the back of a nearby storage trailer, the voices grew louder, more heated. He pressed his back against the cool metal siding and inched closer to the corner.

Peering around the edge, he spotted Silas in a face-off with another man. The stranger wore a hard hat and a vest with HEAS printed on the back in bold letters.

Tiikâan's brow furrowed. What had Merritt said about HEAS during his tour? Something about environment and safety, maybe?

He shook his head. She'd thrown so many acronyms and information at him that day, and really, at the time, he hadn't thought most of it important to remember.

Silas jabbed a finger at the man's chest, his face twisted in anger. "How can there be sudden concerns about the mine's environmental impact? We already have the green light from the EPA."

The HEAS representative held up his hands in a placating gesture, but Silas wasn't having it. "I just got blindsided at a board meeting because apparently there's a risk of being shut down. Explain that to me."

Tiikâan's eyes widened. Shut down? He leaned in closer, straining to hear the HEAS guy's response.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harland, but new information has come to light. We have to investigate these claims thoroughly. If there's any truth to them, we'll have no choice but to halt operations until the issues are resolved."

Silas raked a hand through his hair, his jaw clenched tight. "This is unacceptable. Do you have any idea how much money we've invested in this project? How many jobs are on the line?"

Tiikâan's heart hammered in his chest. His job? His chance to prove himself. To finally prove that his business could soar and he could be successful, too. It couldn't all be ripped away now. Not when he was so close.

The HEAS representative, visibly frustrated, ran a hand over his face. "Look, Mr. Harland, the geologist your father hired raised serious concerns about the potential for AMD."

Tiikâan's stomach churned. He'd heard about the effects of AMD from his brothers during their time in the military. Entire villages left uninhabitable, the water too toxic to drink, the land barren and lifeless. But that was overseas in third world countries. Would that really happen here?

Silas shrugged. "We have safeguards in place. This is just a bunch of environmentalist bull trying to shut us down."

The HEAS representative shook his head. "I'm sorry, but we can't ignore this now, especially if the EPA is aware. We need to conduct a thorough investigation into the geologist's claim and develop a plan to mitigate any potential risks. Until then, I'm afraid I have no choice but to recommend a temporary halt to mining operations."

Tiikâan strained to hear as Silas' demeanor suddenly shifted. The mine overseer lowered his voice, forcing Tiikâan to lean in closer, his ear nearly pressed against the cool metal of the trailer.

The HEAS representative's response was muffled, but Tiikâan could sense the tension in his voice. He risked a glance around the corner, just in time to see Silas grab the other man by the collar and yank him close.

"Listen to me carefully," Silas growled, his face mere inches from the representative's. "You're going to make this go away. I don't care how you do it, but you will. Or else."

The HEAS representative, his face pale and hands trembling, tried to stand his ground. "Mr. Harland, ignoring the environmental risks is not an option. If we don't address this now, it could lead to catastrophic consequences down the line."

Silas cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand. “I don’t want to hear it. You were supposed to take care of the geologist, so... Take. Care. Of. It. We can’t let this guy get to Merritt or anyone else. He’s already created enough of a problem.”

Tiikâan’s mind reeled. Merritt didn’t know about the geologist? She was the CEO, for crying out loud. And what about the people living downstream? The wildlife? The land itself?

Silas jabbed Mr. HEAS in the chest. “We’re done here. Remember what I said.”

Silas spun on his heel and stormed away. Tiikâan barely had time to conceal himself between two stacks of barrels before Silas passed by, his face twisted in fury.

As soon as Silas was out of sight, Tiikâan darted to the corner to see if the HEAS representative was still there. He stood alone, his shoulders slumped in defeat. The man yanked off his hard hat and ran a shaky hand through his hair, looking troubled and conflicted.

He glanced around before heading toward a nearby office trailer.

Tiikâan’s mind raced. The environmental concerns were serious enough, but Silas’ comment about having “taken care of” the geologist sent a chill down his spine. What exactly did that mean? And why was Silas so determined to keep this information from Merritt?

Tiikâan needed to find out more. Not just for the sake of the mining project, but for Merritt’s safety as well. If Silas was willing to go to such lengths to keep this under wraps, there was no telling what else he might be capable of.

But what could Tiikâan do? He was just a pilot, a hired hand. Going up against someone like Silas Harland was a losing battle that could cost Tiikâan everything. And yet the thought of staying silent, of being complicit in this cover-up, made his stomach churn.

TWELVE

As the airplane bounced down the short runway, Merritt pressed her fingers into her eyes. Exhaustion pulled at her limbs like she had a thousand-pound monster squid dragging her deep into the Arctic Ocean. Ever since the meeting, she hadn't been able to warm up.

Joni had called multiple times, obnoxiously asking about every minute detail of the community meetings with her fake "you're the boss, Merritt, what do you think?"

Should a woman in her sixties be allowed to act like a spoiled child? Because that's what her calls were, her pissy and offended because Nolan backed Merritt up.

And of course, Rachel had to add her drama to the mix. Where Joni was patronizing through false placating, Rachel was a downright witch.

All afternoon, Rachel called Merritt with more problems with the budget. The preliminary numbers for implementing testing for schist and containment procedures if the levels proved to be high enough to cause problems were staggering.

And Rachel took every chance she could on the many, many calls she made to Merritt to emphasize that "the idiot running things" didn't have a hope of saving them from ruin and the company from failure.

The idiot obviously being Merritt.

And Rachel was right.

Merritt didn't have a clue what she was doing.

She could organize a four-ton food drop to the remote Himalayan mountains, could convince the leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces to allow medical personnel into the al-Hol camp during a typhoid outbreak despite the increased aggression from ISIL, and could build makeshift shelters during the monsoon season in Bangladesh when the previous makeshift orphanage was swept away.

Yet keeping her family's legacy from imploding and thousands of employees from losing their jobs might be too much for her to tackle.

She was so brittle, if one more crisis got thrown on her plate, she'd break.

She pushed a little harder on her eyes, then slid her fingers up and over her eyebrows, hoping the pressure would relieve the headache she hadn't gotten rid of since she got the news her father had died. It didn't help. Nothing helped.

"Rough day?" Tiikâan bumped his arm already pressed against hers with a soft jab.

"Yeah," she replied with a humorless laugh. "You could say that."

As she scanned the snow-capped mountains they flew through, she took a deep breath and pulled her cracking edges back around her. She was letting Joni and Rachel's pettiness get to her. Yes, if the graphite mine failed, the company would struggle, but it wouldn't collapse.

Her dad was all about taking big risks for even bigger rewards, but he was smart. He wouldn't have risked everything. He was too calculating for that.

With that reminder, she let the doom of the world slide to the back of her mind and focused on what she had to do next, at this moment, to move toward a solution. She pulled the note with the list of villages she needed to visit out of her satchel pocket.

"I'm going to need you to take my uncle Nolan and me to the villages Kobuk, Shangnak, Ambler, Klana, Noovik, and Kotzebue Thursday, Friday, and Saturday." She folded and

unfolded the paper. “We’ll visit two each day starting with the Shangnak and end out at Kotzebue.”

“Sure thing.” His reply came quick, but his voice was hesitant. “Why the meet and greet?”

“Some of the communities have raised concerns about the safety of the mine. I’m going in to let them know we’ve done a ton of testing, have every safety measure in place and the approval of the EPA, at least at the moment, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

She sighed. “I’m flying in blind, though. I don’t really know anything about the villages, their customs, or dynamics. I’ve got two days to learn all I can about them *and* create a presentation that eases their concerns.”

“Is there?” Tiikâan’s voice lowered. “Something to worry about, that is?”

“That’s just it. I haven’t been able to figure it out.” She turned with her back against the door so she could face him in the tight space.

“Supposedly, my dad hired a geologist, and he’s got concerns he’s telling the villages. The only problem is I can’t find any documents, emails, nothing between my dad and this geologist. I don’t even know who the man is.”

She huffed out a frustrated breath and focused her rant. “What I do have are multiple reports from other geologists and the EPA saying we’ve done what is needed and are good to go.”

“So, that’s what you’re going to tell the villages?” He darted his eyes to her, then back out the windshield.

“Yeah. I mean, until I get more information or the EPA makes us shut down, we move forward with the mine.” She sighed and faced forward. “There’s just too much at stake to push back drilling based on rumors when we’ve got evidence that we’re good to go.”

An uneasy quiet settled between them, and she mentally ran through what she just said. Had she offended him with her

determination to move forward? Was that the right decision when there were allegations that the mine wasn't safe?

She'd seen firsthand the devastation pollutants in the water could cause. Did she really want to risk it? Could she afford not to?

Dad, why did you put the company's future up to me?

"So... I overheard a conversation between Silas and the HEAS guy." Tiikâan's cautious tone had all the muscles in her neck and shoulders tensing.

"What about?" She hated the tremble in her voice.

He glanced at her, an apology in his gaze. "Silas wanted to know why the geologist that was supposed to be 'taken care of' was suddenly making problems."

Tiikâan's use of air quotes made her want to vomit.

What the heck did that mean?

Had Silas wanted the geologist taken care of the same way her dad had been? Had the man she once considered her best friend changed so much he was willing to do anything to make money, including killing the only father he'd ever known?

"I don't know what to do," she whispered and clutched her fingers around her necklace.

Tiikâan squeezed her knee before quickly jerking his hand back to the yoke. "Maybe it's not as bad as it sounds."

"How do you suppose that?"

"Well, what if this mystery geologist's claim is bogus or overblown? Maybe he's anti-mining and is grasping for any excuse to shut the operation down." Tiikâan shrugged. "That kind of stuff happens all the time."

"Maybe."

That would make Silas' reaction more valid. Though she still couldn't shake the question of why her dad had hired the geologist and where all that documentation went. Calling her dad meticulous about detailing everything was an understatement.

“If that’s the case, it would make sense Silas would be upset, and maybe the taken care of is nothing more than making sure the mine had everything up to par.” Tiikâan shook his head. “I don’t know much of anything about mining, but would the EPA give you the okay to proceed if there was concern?”

Maybe. She wasn’t so naive to not realize that there were often corners cut or wheels greased when it came to mining.

Some operations had so many lawsuits they should be shut down, but they weren’t. In fact, the lawsuits seemed not to have any negative consequences on future ventures.

Was that what was happening with HGR?

She shook her head.

As much of a bull as her dad had been in getting his way, he also prided himself on having the most environmentally conscious company in the world. He’d made great strides and sacrifices in improving mining practices so that not only was the impact less destructive, but also regenerative.

Maybe Tiikâan was right and the AMD claim was not genuine.

“Okay. So, until I have evidence to the contrary, I need to assume the mine is safe, which means I need to hold these community meetings in places I know next to nothing about.”

“I think I know someone who could help with that.” He banked the plane to line up for landing.

“You do?”

She shouldn’t be surprised. He had told her that Alaska was just one big small town. He flashed her a smile that gave her a jolt of energy that burned away her exhaustion better than any caffeinated drink ever had.

He winked. “How do you feel about Mexican takeout?”

THIRTEEN

The warm, sudsy water relaxed the tension in Tiikâan's shoulders. Declan and Merritt's laughter eased the stress even more.

It was odd that having her in the Barrow Bachelor Bunk felt natural. She hadn't balked at the small space or Tiikâan's large, obnoxious friend. She'd just slid right into the environment like she'd always belonged.

Like a chameleon.

Tiikâan's hand stilled on the plate, and he tipped his head to study Merritt talking to Declan on the couch as they studied a map of Alaska. She totally gave off chameleon vibes, changing and adapting to the situation.

The person he first met who had eviscerated her stepsister with a handful of frigid words was not the same woman who wore indifference in front of her stepbrother nor the commanding boss presence as she interacted with the employees at the mine. And with him, a completely new person emerged, one filled with warmth and worry for others.

Who was the real Merritt Harland?

Did she even know?

Declan ran his finger along the map. "So, you're sure the mine is safe and won't give the fish three eyes or turn the caribou carnivorous? I don't want to give information about these villages to further the grasping reach of the insidious capitalist."

Tiikâan rolled his eyes and slid the plate into the drying rack. Leave it to Declan to get straight to the point.

“No secret motives here.” Merritt chuckled, but her eyes darted to Tiikâan. “I have report after report stating that the containment procedures of the mine will keep any dangerous side effects handled. Honestly, my father was a nut about safety and responsibility. He wouldn’t have moved forward if there was a possibility of contamination.”

Her forehead creased, and she shot another look Tiikâan’s way. He gave her a nod of encouragement.

In truth, her hesitance eased his worries. She wouldn’t let the mine move forward if legitimate concerns were raised.

Tiikâan hadn’t exactly lied to Merritt when he’d suggested that the geologist had ulterior motives and Silas’ fury could be from that. Tiikâan had spent hours staring at the forest surrounding the mine, thinking about the different angles and nuances for the conversation he’d overheard.

Really, it came down to two options: either Silas’ frustration was born out of injustice or he was as guilty as a bear stealing from a fish wheel and as evil as a rabid wolverine.

Either way, there wasn’t anything Tiikâan could do to find out. That was way over his pay grade. And his intelligence, if he was being honest.

He wasn’t sure exactly who could find out. If he said anything to the authorities, then the mine definitely would get shut down.

Maybe laying low and keeping his ears open was the better plan for now. His guard duty could be more of a reconnaissance spy mission. At least waiting would give Merritt time to find out more information.

Tiikâan dried the last dish and set it in the rack, his gaze drifting back to Merritt and Declan poring over the map on the coffee table. Declan’s brow was furrowed as he traced a finger along the coastline.

“The villages you’ll be visiting—they’re all small, tight-knit communities. The elders are highly respected, and the people have a deep connection to the land and the water.” Declan’s voice was laced with concern. “If there’s even a hint of pollution or environmental damage from the mine, they won’t take it lightly.”

Tiikâan’s stomach twisted. The more Declan spoke, the more his unease returned. These weren’t just faceless communities—they were people’s homes, their livelihoods. If the geologist’s warnings about acid mine drainage proved true, the consequences could be devastating.

Merritt’s brow furrowed as she studied the map. “I understand their concerns. My father was adamant about environmental responsibility, but...” She glanced up at Tiikâan, her eyes filled with uncertainty. “What if the geologist is right?”

Tiikâan’s heart clenched at the vulnerability in her gaze. This wasn’t just about the mine’s bottom line or her family’s legacy—it was about the well-being of an entire region.

Declan leaned back, his expression grave. “Then you’d better be prepared for a fight. These people won’t go down without a battle. Their way of life is at stake.”

Tiikâan’s jaw tightened. Declan was right. The community meetings could easily turn ugly, and the fallout from the geologist’s findings could be catastrophic. But Merritt was determined to do the right thing.

As he watched her study the map, Tiikâan felt a surge of admiration. She was in way over her head, but she was willing to face it anyway. Tiikâan pulled up a chair next to the couch, his gaze shifting between Merritt and Declan.

Declan leaned forward, his expression earnest. “The key is to approach them with respect and humility. These communities have been on this land for generations. Listen to their concerns, acknowledge their expertise.”

“So... approach them just like the Syrian officials, the Bangladesh orphans, basically anyone in the world, with

respect.” Merritt folded up the map while Declan’s eyes widened at her experience. “Thanks, Declan. I feel better going in knowing more about them.”

“No problem. If you have time, you should visit the Iñupiat Heritage Center. It’s always good to know the history of people. Gives you a better understanding of where they are coming from.”

Declan paused, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Like our buddy Tiikâan here. Knowing his impressive history with porcupines could be useful.”

Tiikâan groaned, already anticipating the embarrassing story. “Declan, don’t you dare—”

Declan’s grin widened as he launched into the story. “Okay, so we were out in the woods, right? Tiikâan was convinced he could track a porcupine, capture it with nothing but a leather strip, and prove he was the ultimate wilderness man.”

Tiikâan groaned, already feeling the heat rise to his cheeks, but Declan barreled on. “We’re creeping through the underbrush, and Tiikâan spots this porcupine up in a tree. Without a second thought, he starts climbing up after it.”

Merritt’s eyes went wide, a delighted smile spreading across her face as she listened intently. Tiikâan couldn’t help but be captivated by the way her eyes danced with mirth.

“So Tiikâan’s up there, trying to snag this porcupine around the leg, when suddenly it starts thrashing around. Next thing we know, Tiikâan’s raining down from the tree, his arm covered in quills.”

Tiikâan cringed, but Merritt’s laughter bubbled up, filling the small space with its warmth. He’d take a thousand embarrassing stories if it meant hearing that joyful sound.

“Oh my goodness, how horrible.” Merritt gasped between giggles. “How on earth did you get them all out?”

Declan chuckled. “Well, let’s just say it took tweezers, a very patient mother, and a lot of salve.”

Tiikâan shook his head, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. At least I was out there trying to prove my wilderness skills, unlike someone who was content to just sit back and watch. I still can’t believe you put that into your book.”

Tiikâan motioned to the bookshelf full of Declan’s bestsellers. “It didn’t really fit in the story at all.”

“That’s why they call me a creative genius.” Declan wagged his eyebrows. “You’ve given me so much inspiration over the years that I’ve got ways to embarrass characters for at least fifty more books.”

Tiikâan snorted. “You’re a menace.”

Merritt’s laughter slowly subsided, and she fixed Tiikâan with a warm gaze. “Well, I’m glad you had Declan there to document your, uh, adventures.”

Tiikâan felt a cinch in his chest at the way she looked at him, and he knew in that moment that he’d willingly endure a thousand porcupine attacks if it meant seeing her smile like that again.

“How long have you known each other?” Merritt settled onto the couch with her water, curling her legs up like she planned on staying awhile.

He hadn’t seen her this relaxed since he’d met her.

“Unfortunately, we were kind of neighbors.” Tiikâan played up his annoyed groan.

“How can you kind of be neighbors?” Her forehead furrowed.

“We both lived about forty miles south of Tok.” Declan snagged a tortilla chip from the bowl, dragged it through the restaurant’s homemade salsa, and popped it in his mouth.

Tiikâan was so full from the enchiladas verdes he’d just eaten, he couldn’t imagine how Declan could still be hungry.

Declan continued talking around the bite. “There’s a place where the original highway cuts away from the new one and meets back with it about fifteen miles south.”

“Manners, dude.” Tiikâan tossed a balled-up napkin at Declan when he went for another chip. “We don’t want to see you smacking on your cud.”

“Right, sorry.” He cringed and dropped the chip. “I think I might hang with teens too much.”

“It’s okay.” Merritt bit her bottom lip, her eyes twinkling.

“Anyway, the old highway used to go all the way through until the Rebels got all territorial and blew it up.”

Tiikâan burst out laughing. “That’s not what happened, and you know it.”

“You all got tired of people driving down there and invading your place,” Declan countered.

“No. The bridge over the creek was crumbling, and the state wasn’t doing anything about it.”

Declan shook his head. “Nope. I distinctly remember while your dad attached the dynamite to the bridge that he grouched about tourists buzzing about bothering him and how he was going to take care of it if the DOT wasn’t.”

Remembering Dad ranting about the inefficiency of the government and always being prepared to take care of things on your own while Tiikâan and his siblings handed Dad the duct tape, containers of tannerite, fuses, and anything else he needed brought a smile to Tiikâan’s lips.

“Your dad really blew up a highway bridge with dynamite?” Merritt’s eyes widened. “How the heck did he get dynamite?”

Tiikâan shrugged. “His family used to use it gold mining sometimes.”

“And he just kept that around the house?”

Merritt’s incredulous tone made his lip twitch. She’d probably blow a gasket if she knew all the stuff Dad kept around “just in case.”

“You never know when it might come in handy.” Tiikâan took a sip of water to keep from laughing at Merritt’s

disbelieving face.

Her mouth opened and shut twice before she asked, “Did he get in trouble?”

“Nah.” He set his water on the coffee table. “We all cleaned it up so it wasn’t a hazard, helped Dad weld a barrier on both sides from guard rails we had lying around, and put signs both on the bridge and where the roads turned off the main highway to warn travelers.”

“How could he blow up government property and not get in trouble?”

“Well, technically the bridge was ours. The road wasn’t maintained by the state anymore, and we owned the property on both sides of the creek—”

“And pretty much the entire mountainside and all the way to the highway,” Declan interrupted.

Tiikâan rolled his eyes and continued. “The DOT guys were relieved they didn’t have Dad hounding them anymore and another project to add to their never-ending list of projects they couldn’t keep up with. So, I think it just never got mentioned to anyone who would raise a stink.”

“Unbelievable.” Merritt huffed out a breath.

“That’s small-town Alaska for you.” Tiikâan’s phone rang his dad’s ringtone, a funny 80s-style jingle about dad that ended in “boogie woogie woogie.” “Speak of the devil.”

“Dude, that ringtone is ridiculous.” Declan snorted, then leaned over to Merritt and whispered, “It’s the exact opposite of Arne Rebel.”

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, bud.” The strain in Dad’s voice caused Tiikâan to sit up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sunny hasn’t checked in.” Dad’s worried announcement shot Tiikâan to his feet.

Darn his headstrong sister and her solo wilderness “adventures.” He’d told her he had a bad feeling about her trekking through the 40-Mile area north of Chicken. It was too remote. Too vast and crappy terrain for her to just walk through.

“What do you mean she hasn’t checked in?” He paced the small, suddenly quiet living room.

“We haven’t heard from her in two days.”

Tiikâan froze, his stomach threatening to spew the enchiladas verdes. So much could go wrong in two days when out in the wilderness. And the area was so vast, finding her without some pinpoint to go by would be nearly impossible.

“What’s wrong?” Declan stood and came around the coffee table.

“Sunny’s missing.” Tiikâan’s hand shook as he tapped the speaker icon on his phone so Declan could hear. “What’s the plan, Dad?”

“Bjørn and Gunnar are here. We’ve set up a search grid off of her last check-in location, and Bjørn and some of the guys from 40-Mile Air have been out. It’s just—”

Tiikâan met Declan’s worried gaze.

“A lot of dense forest to cover.” Tiikâan’s words felt like pushing boulders out of his throat.

“Yeah.” Dad sighed.

Tiikâan looked at Merritt. Her fingers rubbed her necklace, and her eyes were so wide she might not have blinked since he stood. He had to go and help find Sunny, but he didn’t want to leave Merritt in the lurch.

“You don’t need to come down,” Dad said, yanking Tiikâan’s gaze to his phone. “Bjørn and the 40-Mile boys have a tight system going, and you’re needed there. I just wanted you to know what was going on.”

Of course they had it covered. Bjørn with his special ops helicopter skills and Gunnar’s entire military existence being

saving soldiers from extreme places could probably narrow Sunny's course to within a few-mile radius.

They didn't need another bush pilot. Tiikâan would just be in the way.

He swallowed down the sharp ache of jealousy that he wasn't needed. "You sure?"

"Yeah. For now, at least." Dad sighed again. "There's really not much more that can be done."

"Yeah. Okay." Tiikâan could hardly get the words out.

"You'll keep us updated, right, Arne?" Declan had his hands speared in his hair and looked as powerless as Tiikâan felt.

"I'll keep you updated."

Tiikâan swallowed. "Thanks, Dad."

"We'll find her, T." The determination that epitomized Arne Rebel was back in his voice.

"Okay." Tiikâan's voice wavered, so unlike his dad's.

"Love you, bud. Stay safe."

"Love you, too."

The call ended, and Tiikâan stared at his phone. Declan pulled on his hair with a growl of frustration. Tiikâan was too numb to react.

"You should go." Merritt's soft whisper from the couch dragged his stare from his phone to her.

She sat on the edge of the cushion, poised to jump into action. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. The freckles across her nose stuck out since her skin paled more than usual. He shook his head.

Her forehead furrowed. "Seriously. You really should go."

"No. Dad's right." Tiikâan shoved his phone in his pocket. "My brothers are practically Avenger-level heroes. If anyone can find her, it's them."

Declan nodded and clapped Tiikâan on the shoulder. Merritt pressed her lips together and shook her head. If his family needed him, which he doubted, they'd let him know.

FOURTEEN

As the small plane approached Shungnak, Merritt's nerves twisted her stomach into a tight knot. The closer they got to the remote Alaskan village, the more the walls of the cramped cabin seemed to close in on her.

Tiikâan's muscular arm pressed against hers, radiating a searing heat that made it hard to breathe. She shifted in her seat, desperate for some space, but there was nowhere to go.

While it hadn't bothered her before, the confines of the cockpit forced an intimacy that overwhelmed her, especially since it was getting harder and harder to ignore the way her pulse raced with a single glance from him.

She focused on the view out the windshield, hoping to distract herself from feeling suffocated. The vast wilderness stretched out before them, a breathtaking expanse of pristine lakes, winding rivers, and lush green forests.

In the distance, the village of Shungnak came into view, a small cluster of buildings nestled along the banks of the Kobuk River.

Merritt's heart raced as she realized the magnitude of the task ahead of her. She had to convince these people, whose way of life depended on the very land her father's company planned to mine, that HGR had their best interests at heart.

Responsibility drummed into her shoulders like the building *thrum-thrum-thrum* of an oil drill, and she fought the urge to crumble under the pressure.

Behind her, Nolan shifted in his seat, the hair on her neck moving with his huff. His presence was both a comfort and a source of frustration.

While she appreciated his support, a part of her bristled at the idea that he thought she needed his help. She was determined to prove herself capable of leading the company, even if it meant facing her fears head-on.

Tiikâan adjusted a knob on the control panel, then reached over and squeezed Merritt's knee. The unexpected touch sent a jolt of electricity through her, and she snapped her gaze to him. His warm brown eyes held hers, and he winked reassuringly.

"You've got this," he murmured, his voice low and soothing through the headset.

Merritt took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves as the plane began its descent. Through the windshield, she took in the brightly painted houses and buildings of the village below. Children played in the streets, pausing to watch the plane's arrival, and Merritt felt a pang of doubt.

What if the rumors were true?

What if the mine hadn't properly accounted for the risk of AMD? The possibility of polluting the pristine waters that sustained this community's way of life made Merritt's stomach twist with unease.

She had to believe that her father and his team had done their due diligence, that the mine was safe. Too much was at stake if it wasn't.

The company.

Her dad's legacy.

The villages along the Kobuk River.

Until she was shown evidence of the contrary, she had to move forward with the reports she had.

Tiikâan brought the plane to a smooth stop, shut down the engine, and came around to help Merritt out. As he offered his

hand, she felt herself slipping back into the cold, professional persona she'd adopted around her family.

The need to project confidence had her building up those walls, even as a part of her longed to let her guard down.

“Remember, these folks are a lot more mellow than the Iranian government,” Tiikâan said with a squeeze of her hand. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Just be yourself, and they’ll listen.”

Merritt nodded, but the uncertainty must have shown on her face.

Which version of herself was she supposed to be? The poised, analytical CEO? The compassionate humanitarian who had spent years working in crisis zones? Or the vulnerable young woman who was in over her head, desperately trying to live up to her father’s legacy?

As Merritt scanned the land surrounding the airstrip, she inhaled deeply, the crisp, clean air filling her lungs. The scent of fresh spruce and wildflowers mingled with the earthy aroma of the tundra, a stark contrast to the recycled air of the plane.

A mama moose and her calf grazed in the pond next to the airstrip, their massive forms seemingly at peace in the untouched wilderness, and she gasped at the sight. The two seemed completely unconcerned with the plane that had just landed.

She had to drag her attention away as two Iñupiat men drove up in a side-by-side ATV. The driver, a man in his thirties with a scowl etched on his face, brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop. His companion, a much older man, leaned heavily on his cane as he climbed out of the ATV.

The elder’s friendly weathered face was lined with wrinkles. His eyes, dark and knowing, seemed to pierce through Merritt’s carefully constructed façade.

Nerves rushed back, threatening to overwhelm her, but Merritt pushed them down. She approached the older man with reverence, recognizing the wisdom and authority he carried.

Extending her hand, she introduced herself, hoping that her voice didn't betray the uncertainty she felt. "Hello, I'm Merritt Harland, CEO of Harland Global Resources. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today."

The elder's smile was warm and genuine, and Merritt felt the swarm of nerves settle in response.

"I am Aklaq, and this," he said, thumping his cane on the younger man's arm, "is my grandson, Tulok."

Merritt nodded, then gestured to her companions. "This is my uncle Nolan, our company's COO, and Tiikâan, our pilot."

Aklaq acknowledged them with a slight tilt of his head. "We are here to escort you to the school. The people have many questions they want answers for."

Merritt took a deep breath, forcing a smile as she nodded. She climbed into the back seat of the ATV, swallowing down the suffocating feeling as Tiikâan and her uncle sandwiched her in.

As they drove through the village, Merritt took in the colorful houses and the curious faces of the kids who stopped their playing to watch the ATV's progress. Several of them yelled in greeting, running after them with laughter, and her heart melted.

She knew that the next few hours would be crucial in determining the future of her father's company, but more than anything, she had to protect the lives of the people who called this place home.

As they pulled up to the school, Merritt's heart raced at the sight of the crowd gathered outside. She scanned their faces, trying to gauge their emotions and prepare herself for the confrontation ahead. Some looked curious, others skeptical, and a few openly hostile.

Aklaq led them through the school, explaining that it housed students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Merritt's eyes were drawn to the display cases lining the open common room, showcasing a variety of cultural art and tools.

Black-and-white photographs of the village's past hung alongside vibrant children's artwork depicting scenes of fishing and hunting, another reminder to the subsistence lifestyle that sustained the community.

As they entered the gym, Merritt's stomach churned at the sight of the crowded bleachers and clusters of people talking. Children weaved in and out of the adults, their loud laughter and shrieks of joy in discordance with the tidal wave of nerves rolling in her stomach.

Akmaq motioned for them to wait by the wall as more people filtered in behind her. In the center of the gym stood a microphone and stand. The setup amplified her sense of isolation, and she fought the urge to shrink back against the wall.

Merritt's gaze drifted to Tiikâan as he sat in the front row on the bleachers. He met her eyes, offering a reassuring nod and a small smile. She drew a breath and nodded back.

Nolan leaned in close, his voice low and insistent as he rattled off a list of technical points she needed to cover. "Make sure you emphasize the EPA approval and the geologists' reports. Highlight the economic benefits and the company's commitment to environmental responsibility. If they bring up the AMD concerns, redirect the conversation to the safety measures we've implemented."

His words were sharp and precise, a stark contrast to the mask of calm and soft smiles he wore as he nodded at the people who glanced their way. Merritt's nerves were wound tighter with each passing second, and Nolan's instructions only increased her unease.

She had a cursory understanding of mining, at best. The intricacies of the process, the jargon, and the endless acronyms felt like a foreign language she'd barely begun to grasp.

Why had she thought she could do this? Why hadn't she brought any of their biologists who specialized in this field?

Merritt's gaze darted around the room, taking in the sea of faces, each one representing a life that could be irrevocably

changed by the decisions made in this gym. She fought the urge to bolt for the door.

Instead, she closed her eyes for a moment, picturing her father's face. He had believed in her, had trusted her to carry on his legacy. She couldn't let him down.

Akmaq stepped forward, his presence commanding the room's attention. He raised his hands, and a hush fell over the crowd. "Let us settle in and offer a prayer for guidance and wisdom."

As Akmaq began to pray in his native tongue, the melodic words washed over Merritt, and she felt a sense of peace settle in her heart. She closed her eyes, adding her own silent prayer, asking God to calm her racing thoughts and give her the strength to serve the people gathered before her.

When Akmaq switched to English, goosebumps erupted across her skin.

"Heavenly Father above and Creator of all, we ask for Your guidance and wisdom as we gather here today. Help us to listen with open hearts and minds, to speak with honesty and compassion, and to find a path forward that honors our land, our people, and our future. Give us the courage to ask the difficult questions and the grace to work together toward a solution. Amen."

A chorus of "Amen" echoed through the room, and Merritt felt a renewed sense of purpose. She opened her eyes, meeting Akmaq's gaze with a nod before he turned to face the crowd.

"Today, we welcome Merritt Harland, the CEO of Harland Global Resources, to our community. She is here to listen to our concerns and to share her company's plans for the mine. Let's give her our attention and respect as she speaks."

Akmaq stepped back, motioning for Merritt to take her place at the microphone. She squared her shoulders and stepped forward, putting what she hoped was a friendly smile on. Merritt rubbed her first two fingers and her thumb together on her right hand to keep from wiping her damp palms on her pants.

If only there was a podium to hide behind, instead of the skinny microphone pole.

“Thank you for welcoming me into your community and giving me the opportunity to speak with you today.” Her voice echoed through the gym, and she paused, taking in the sea of faces before her.

“I’ve been to many places around the world, but I have to say, I’ve never been greeted with a view quite as stunning as the moose and her calf that I saw when I arrived.”

A murmur of appreciation rippled through the crowd, and Merritt felt a flicker of connection.

“It’s a reflection of the beauty and importance of this land, and I want you to know that I understand that. I promise you that protecting this environment is a top priority for me and for Harland Global Resources.”

Someone scoffed, and her perfectly memorized speech flew out of her mind.

A scuffle sounded behind her, and she turned. Two teen boys pushed against each other as they made their way into the gym, reminding her of the boys in the refugee camps on the other side of the world.

Merritt looked back at the bleachers, meeting the eyes of a woman in the front row who held a baby on her lap. The child’s wide, curious gaze seemed to see right through her, and Merritt drew strength from that innocence.

“We’ve put extensive safety measures in place to ensure that the mine will not harm the environment or the people who depend on it. Our waste management procedures have been designed to contain any potential acid mine drainage, and we’ve had multiple geologists assess the site to confirm that the risk is minimal.”

The words flowed more easily now, buoyed by the nods of encouragement from Aklaq and Tiikâan.

“Furthermore, the Environmental Protection Agency has thoroughly evaluated our plans and given us their approval to proceed. We would not be moving forward with this project if

we weren't confident that it was safe for the land, the water, and the people.”

Merritt paused, her gaze sweeping over the room. “I know that you have questions and concerns, and I'm here to listen and address them to the best of my ability. Your input is valuable to me, and I want to work together to find a way forward that benefits everyone.”

Questions flowed for almost an hour. When she didn't know the answer, Nolan jumped in. His easygoing demeanor, good ol' boy smile, and extensive mining knowledge made any resentment she had at him being there melt away.

Several people asked about a claim coming from Fairbanks stating the mine was a danger. Her heart clenched as she promised that they were looking into it.

She had to find out who the geologist was and if the claim was true. After looking in their faces and hearing their concerns firsthand, she knew she couldn't let them down.

As the meeting drew to a close, Merritt thanked everyone for their time and promised to keep them updated on any developments. She shook hands with Aklaq and several other elders, their weathered palms rough against her own.

As she turned to leave, a young man stepped forward, his dark eyes intense. “You say you want to protect our land, but how can we trust you? Your father's company has a history of putting profits over people.”

Merritt's heart skipped a beat, and she felt Nolan tense beside her.

The man's eyes narrowed, his voice dropping to a low, menacing tone. “Anyone who questions Harland's reputation is either paid off or disappears. Coincidence? I think not.”

“What?” Nolan stepped forward, disbelief on his face. “No way. I can assure you that's not how HGR operates. Any business as large as ours is bound to have rumors circulating. That's all they are—rumors.”

But Merritt wasn't so sure. Her father's cryptic message to trust no one echoed in her mind, mingling with the memory of

Silas' hushed words to the HEAS guy about making the geologist problem go away, no matter what. A chill ran down her spine, and she fought the urge to shiver.

She forced a smile, her voice steady despite the unease churning in her gut. "I assure you, we take all concerns seriously. If there's any truth to these rumors, I will personally investigate and take appropriate action."

The man scoffed, shaking his head. "Pretty words from a pretty face. But we'll see if you're still standing when the truth comes out."

With that, he turned and stalked out of the gym, leaving a heavy silence in his wake. Merritt's heart raced, and she could feel every gaze on her. She had to act fast to uncover the truth before it was too late.

As she made her way out of the school, Tiikâan fell into step beside her, his presence a comforting warmth in the chilly Alaskan air.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low and concerned as he nodded at people they passed.

"I will be, once I get to the bottom of this." Her own words sounded hollow in her ears.

She climbed into the ATV, her mind racing with questions and possibilities.

As they drove back to the airstrip, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She fished it out, her heart skipping a beat when she saw the message on the screen. It was from an unknown number, and the words made her blood run cold.

Stop digging, or you'll end up like your father.

FIFTEEN

The stench of crude oil hung heavy in the humid jungle air, clinging to Merritt's skin like a suffocating blanket. She stood beside her father at the makeshift wash station, her small hands trembling as she tried to hold the struggling, oil-coated bird still.

Tears streamed down her face, mingling with the sweat and grime, as the bird's pitiful cries pierced her heart.

"Daddy, why are we here?" she asked, her voice quivering. "It wasn't our company that did this."

Clay Harland's jaw clenched, his eyes hard as he surveyed the devastation around them. He gently took the bird from Merritt's much smaller hands, his touch surprisingly tender as he worked to clean the sticky oil from its feathers.

"Look around, Merritt," he said. "Really look."

She blinked away her tears and took in the scene before her. A village of rickety houses clung to the edge of the jungle, their tin roofs gleaming dully in the oppressive sunlight.

People moved about in a daze, their faces etched with grief and despair as they packed up what meager possessions they could carry on their backs. Some wept openly, their sobs carried on the heavy breeze.

"It's our responsibility to do better." His words weighed heavy with conviction. "By protecting the earth when we drill, we protect the people. We can't trust others to do it."

He turned to face her, his gaze boring into hers with an intensity that made her heart race. “Don’t trust anyone, Merritt.”

Merritt jolted awake, her father’s words echoing in her mind as her heart pounded against her rib cage. She blinked rapidly, trying to orient herself in the harshly lit office.

The dusty scent that coated everything at the mine and the ring of metal followed by a shouted command brought her from the South American jungle to the Alaskan wilderness.

The nightmare clung to her like a second skin, the memory of the oil-soaked bird and the devastated village blurring with the cryptic warning that had haunted her since her father’s death.

She pushed herself up from the desk, wincing as her stiff muscles protested the sudden movement. Papers scattered beneath her elbows, and she stared down at the chaos of geologist reports and safety audits that littered her workspace.

The discrepancies glared up at her, taunting her with their secrets.

Merritt rubbed her temples, trying to ease the throbbing headache that had become her constant companion. She’d been searching for answers, desperate to unravel the mystery of her father’s last message and the nagging doubts that plagued her about the mine’s safety.

But the more she dug, the more the inconsistencies piled up, until she felt like she was drowning in a sea of contradictions. The official findings painted a picture of a safe, compliant operation, but the raw data told a different story.

One of cut corners and hidden dangers lurking beneath the surface.

Merritt’s stomach churned as she reached for another report, her fingers trembling slightly. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong, that the truth was just out of reach.

She had to find answers, had to protect the land and the people who depended on her, both the employees of the mine

and the people she'd promised in the villages.

But as she delved deeper into the tangled web of secrets and lies, Merritt couldn't shake the growing dread that the truth might shatter everything she thought she knew. The nagging suspicion that her father's insistence on no-harm mining was nothing more than a carefully crafted illusion gnawed at her.

Merritt sank back into her chair, the leather creaking beneath her weight as she tried to bring order to the chaos before her. She methodically sorted through the papers, her eyes scanning the notes and reports for what felt like the hundredth time. Each word, each number, was seared into her memory, but still, the truth eluded her.

She cross-referenced their company geologist's findings with the safety audits, her brow furrowed in concentration as she searched for the missing piece that would make everything fall into place. The inconsistencies teased her, like a splinter beneath her skin that she couldn't quite reach.

Merritt was so lost in the labyrinth of data and discrepancies that she didn't register the footsteps approaching her office until the door burst open. She jumped, her heart leaping into her throat as her head snapped up.

Tiikâan stood in the doorway, his broad frame filling the space as he stared at her.

For a moment, Merritt forgot how to breathe. The sight of him, so solid and real amidst the swirling uncertainty that surrounded her, made something deep within her ache with longing. She wanted to escape into the calm he provided.

Would confiding in him be so wrong? He hadn't known her father, didn't have a play in this confusing game she found herself in.

But reality came crashing back in. Sure, she was certain she could rely on him, but telling Tiikâan would put him in danger. No matter how much she respected him and was drawn to him like she'd never been before, she couldn't risk him getting tangled in her mess.

Merritt straightened in her chair, trying to compose herself as she took in the worry in Tiikâan's gaze. "What's wrong?"

She braced herself for his answer, anticipation coiling in her gut.

What else could go wrong?

"They found Sunny." His voice cracked with emotion as he paced in front of the desk. "She's alive, Merritt. She's in the hospital, but she's going to make it."

Merritt's heart leaped with joy at the news, a smile spreading across her face. But as she took in Tiikâan's agitated state, the smile faltered.

"What happened?" she asked, a sense of foreboding creeping up her spine.

"She was shot." His words came out in a rush. "Sunny stumbled upon the murder of a friend and spent days running from the people who killed him."

Merritt's brow furrowed in confusion. "Wait, what? Wasn't Sunny in the middle of the bush, miles away from people?"

Tiikâan nodded, his expression grim. "I know. It's crazy." He took a deep breath, as if steeling himself for what he had to say next. "She found our friend's gold mine, and apparently, some terrorist group had been up in the area testing some kind of weapon."

Merritt stared at him, her mind reeling. A terrorist group? A weapon? In the remote Alaskan wilderness? It seemed so unbelievable, like something out of a thriller novel.

She pushed herself up from her chair, her legs feeling unsteady beneath her. Her own problems suddenly seemed insignificant in the face of what Tiikâan's sister had endured.

Merritt crossed the room to him, her hand reaching out to rest on his arm. She could feel the tension thrumming through his body, like barely contained fear and anger simmered beneath the surface.

"I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine what Sunny must have gone through, what you must be feeling."

He looked down at her, his dark eyes searching her face. For a moment, the rest of the world fell away, and it was just the two of them, connected by a shared sense of disbelief and a desperate need for answers.

Merritt's heart ached for him, for Sunny, for their friend who had lost his life. She knew all too well the pain of losing someone, the gnawing emptiness that came with unanswered questions.

As she stood there, offering silent comfort to the man who had become her champion, she couldn't help the desire to lean in and press her lips to his. Merritt's heart raced as she tilted forward, drawn to Tiikâan like a moth to a flame.

The air between them crackled with tension, a heady mix of comfort and desire that made her pulse quicken and her skin tingle. She could feel the warmth radiating from his body, could smell the faint scent of pine and fresh air that clung to his skin.

Time seemed to slow down as she inched closer, her gaze dropping to his lips. They looked so soft, so inviting, and she wondered what it would feel like to press her own against them.

Would he taste like the wilderness he loved so much? Would his kiss be gentle and reassuring, or fierce and passionate?

Merritt's eyelids fluttered closed, her breath hitching in her throat as she surrendered to the magnetic pull between them. His hand gently, cautiously slid from her shoulder to just above her elbow.

Every nerve in her body was alive, humming with anticipation and longing. She couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted something, someone, so badly.

His breath warmed her lips as the shrill ring of the phone shattered the moment. Merritt jerked back, her eyes flying open as reality came crashing down around her. She stared at Tiikâan, her cheeks flushed and her heart pounding, as the phone continued to ring insistently on her desk.

What was she doing?

She wanted to ignore the phone, to lose herself in Tiikâan's arms and forget about the rest of the world, if only for a little while.

But the moment was gone, the spell broken. Merritt stepped back, her hand falling from Tiikâan where her fingers gripped the front of his shirt. She couldn't even remember doing that.

She *shouldn't* be doing that.

With a shaky breath, Merritt turned away, her feet carrying her toward the phone. Each step felt like a mile, a painful distance between her and the man who made her feel things she'd never experienced before.

Life sure had a way of sucking. She reached for the phone, her hand trembling slightly as she lifted it to her ear.

"Hello?" Merritt's voice sounded breathless, even to her own ears.

"Is this Merritt Harland?" The man's voice on the other end of the line was deep, with a slight rasp that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Yes, who is this?" She glanced over her shoulder at Tiikâan, who was watching her with concern and curiosity.

"I'm Dr. Ethan Erikson. I'm a geologist your father hired to investigate the safety of the mine."

Merritt's heart skipped a beat, her grip tightening on the phone. "My father hired you?"

"Yes, we were supposed to meet, but he never showed." Dr. Erikson's voice was tinged with regret. "When I found out about his death, I... I decided to lay low."

Merritt closed her eyes, a wave of grief washing over her.

"Why are you calling now?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"When I heard the mine was moving forward, I knew I couldn't stay quiet." Dr. Erikson's tone grew urgent, almost

desperate. “Merritt, there are things you need to know, things your father wanted to discuss with me.”

Her eyes flew open, her heart pounding in her chest. “What things?”

“Not over the phone.” Dr. Erikson’s voice dropped, as if he were afraid of being overheard. “We need to meet in person. It’s not safe to discuss this any other way.”

Merritt’s mind raced, a thousand questions swirling in her head. What had her father discovered? Why hadn’t he mentioned it in his journal? And why did Dr. Erikson sound so afraid?

She glanced at Tiikâan again, her gaze locking with his. In that moment, she knew she couldn’t keep this from him. Not after everything they’d been through, not after the almost-kiss that still lingered on her lips like a promise unfulfilled.

“I’ll meet you in Fairbanks on Saturday,” Merritt said, her voice steady despite the fear that coiled in her gut. “Where and what time?”

Dr. Erikson rattled off an address and a time, his voice low and urgent. “Come alone, and make sure you’re not followed.”

“I’ll be there.” Merritt ended the call, her heart racing as she slowly lowered the phone from her ear. She stared at it for a long moment, trying to process the bombshell that had just been dropped on her.

Her father had hired a geologist to investigate the mine’s safety. The same mine that was now her responsibility. The same mine that appeared more and more like it led to her dad’s death.

“Merritt?” Tiikâan stepped closer to the desk. “You all right?”

She turned to look at Tiikâan, seeing the unspoken question in his eyes. He had been there for her through everything. But could she trust him with this? With the truth about her father’s message and the threats she’d received?

The words were there, hovering on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to tell him everything, to unburden herself of the secrets that were slowly eating away at her. But something held her back, a fear that telling him would put a target on his back.

The safest thing would be to keep him from this mess.

She schooled her features and pulled on her icy façade, the muscles in her face feeling stiff and unnatural.

“Everything’s fine.” The lie tasted bitter on her tongue. “Just some business I need to take care of.”

Tiikâan studied her for a long moment, his gaze searching her face. “Okay.”

She tipped her head, raised one eyebrow, and took on the tone she used with Joni. “Anything else?”

His eyebrows furrowed as he shook his head. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Noted.” She turned from him and rounded her desk, focusing on papers stacked on her credenza.

A few seconds passed before he huffed. The door closed with a soft click. Merritt’s shoulders sagged, her vision blurring with unshed tears.

As she turned back to her desk, her gaze fell on the scattered geologist reports, the pages seeming to mock her with their secrets. She knew that nothing would be fine until she uncovered the truth.

But as she gathered the papers with trembling hands, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the price of that truth might be higher than she ever could have imagined. The question was, was she willing to pay it?

SIXTEEN

Tiikâan dramatically moaned in delight around the bite of sandwich, hoping to get a reaction from Merritt.

Yet Merritt stabbed her fork into her salad and didn't even look at him. Thank goodness the restaurant in the hotel wasn't that busy. No one to see her practically ignore his existence.

With her shoulders pulled back and the rod rammed where the sun didn't shine, she was even worse than their first meeting. She'd been distant since that phone call in her office two days before, not talking to him and going home the minute they touched down in Barrow.

He didn't get it.

One minute he was sure she was going to kiss him, and the next she'd huddled into that shell of icy indifference she'd been hiding in when they'd first met.

He hated it.

He wanted to crack it open and pull her out. Bring that vibrancy and determination back, which was a joke since he really didn't know her. Not after only two weeks and her ping-ponging between two versions of herself.

Did she even realize she did it? Which version of Merritt was the truth, the caring, want to save the world and everyone in it one or the frosty CEO who didn't need anyone and could cut a person down with a few sharp words?

He'd finally gotten her to come back out to dinner with him. If he could just get her to open up again, then maybe he

wouldn't feel like she was disappearing, transforming before his very eyes into someone he knew beyond a doubt that she wasn't.

She put down her fork across her half-eaten dinner and pushed it to the edge of the table. He motioned to the server for the check.

He needed to get her somewhere they could talk, that night, before they left for Fairbanks in the morning. If he could melt some of her aloofness, then maybe while they were gone from her family and the mine, he could break the rest of the way through.

He may just be a Podunk nobody who'd rather spend time outdoors than with people, but Merritt had weaseled her way under his skin. He didn't think he wanted to root her out.

He stood and pulled three twenties from his wallet, handing them to the server as she walked up. Merritt jolted, her eyes darting to him as if just realizing he was there.

She recovered quickly, her surprise morphing to a blank mask with one heave of her chest. He clenched his teeth to keep his frustration in.

"Come on." He tipped his head to the windows facing the beach and extended his hand to her. "Let's go for a walk."

She swallowed, then slid her hand in his. The soft brush of her fingers against his palm caused every hair on his arms to stand at attention like the one time he was stuck in the woods during an electrical storm.

When she stood, he threaded his fingers through hers and pulled her toward the exit. He couldn't let her go, not yet. He took her not pulling away as a good sign.

When they stepped onto the sand, she pulled him to a stop. Her hand tightened in his, and her gaze darted up and down the beach. He stepped closer and squeezed her hand.

"Is it safe?" The anxiety in her voice crushed him.

He'd do everything within his power to keep her from danger. "Safe?"

“Polar bears.” She swallowed, her answer barely a whisper.

“We’ll keep our heads on a swivel, just like you do anytime you’re outdoors in Alaska.” He pulled up his shirt to reveal his shoulder holster and handgun. “And if we need it, which I doubt we will, I’ll make sure it doesn’t get anywhere near you.”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. “You always have that on?”

“Never leave home without it.”

She shook her head. “That’s a huge violation of mine policy.”

“Good thing I’m not a mine employee.” He winked and pulled her to walk.

She rolled her eyes but allowed him to lead her to the beach. His lips twitched. Let the melting commence.

Only, now that he had her reacting, he didn’t know what to say. His mom’s ringtone chirped from his phone in his pocket. He wasn’t sure if the throbbing in his chest was relief or frustration at being interrupted.

He shot Merritt a smile and tapped on the speaker icon. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetheart. How’s the top of the world?” Hearing his mom’s voice made his muscles relax.

“Well, I’m walking on the beach with a beautiful lady, so it can’t be all that bad.”

Merritt scoffed and shook her head, but she bit her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Really?” Mom dragged the word out with such hope he had to laugh.

“Yep.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re finding time to have some fun. I know you weren’t too excited about flying some stuffy bigwig around all summer.”

“Yeah, stuffy bigwigs are the worst.” Tiikâan’s shoulders shook in silent laughter as Merritt whacked him on the arm with a glare.

“I won’t keep you, but well, do you think you might be able to come home tomorrow at two, even if it’s just for a bit?”

“What’s up?”

“Well... you know Sunny.”

He groaned. She’d just gotten out of the hospital. There was no way his sister could already be in trouble again.

“What’s she doing this time?” He held his breath.

“She’s getting married.” Mom tossed out.

Tiikâan blew out a breath in a whoosh. “What?”

Merritt covered her mouth to stifle her giggle.

“Yeah, well, after what she and Davis just went through, she’s not willing to wait another day.” Mom’s voice warbled at the end, and Tiikâan imagined her eyes welling up.

“I didn’t realize she knew him that well.” He rubbed between his eyebrows with the edge of his phone to relieve the worry.

“With their time together last summer and the last two weeks, they both realized how much they mean to each other.” Mom sighed. “It’s sweet, really. Davis is all growly and short with everyone but her. With her, the man is one hundred percent cinnamon roll wrapped up in an overprotective warrior shell.

“He lights up whenever she’s near, and he hasn’t let her out of his sight since they’ve been rescued. It’s like she’s his sunshine. Guess it’s a good thing we named her Sunny.”

Jealousy tainted the happiness he had for his sister. He didn’t realize how lonely he was. He’d been so focused the last six years on getting his guiding license, his planes, and building his business that he hadn’t had time to worry about his lack of love life.

But being with Merritt and suddenly having a ton of time to think had him longing for a future with soft curves and sweet touches instead of just smelly men and long, hard days.

“She tends to make life brighter.” Tiikâan cleared his throat. “You and Dad okay with this?”

“Well, it’s fast, but when you know, you know.” Her words had him glancing at Merritt.

But how did one know for sure, without a doubt, who they were supposed to be with? He had all kinds of emotions jumbling up his mind when it came to Merritt, stuff he’d never experienced with anyone before.

Did that mean there was something special there he should pursue with more zeal?

Should he take a clue from his sister’s boldness and stop tiptoeing around his obvious attraction to Merritt? She still hadn’t pulled her hand from his, so she wasn’t opposed to him.

“So, can you make it?” Mom asked.

“Hold on a sec, Mom.” He put his hand over the phone’s microphone and glanced at Merritt.

She was already nodding.

“Yes. Absolutely, you should go,” Merritt whispered without missing a beat.

Her insistence had his insides warming like one of Mom’s fresh-out-of-the-oven sourdough cinnamon rolls, and he suddenly understood why his mom called Davis that. Looking into Merritt’s expressive face made Tiikâan all soft and squishy.

Cinnamon rolls reminded him of home, comfort, a safe place to unload life’s troubles. He wanted to be that for Merritt.

Dang it.

That so didn’t go with his mighty hunter persona.

“You sure?” He studied her for any hesitation.

“Positive.” She glanced off toward the ocean. “I’m going to be in a meeting most of the day, so you’d just be waiting around, bored out of your mind.”

Something in her tone didn’t ring true. He stared at her, trying to decipher the tightness in her shoulders and press of her lips. When she met his gaze, she smiled, but the expression didn’t erase the worry in her eyes.

“If you’re sure. I’ll be back to Fairbanks by four, five at the latest.” He lifted his eyebrow in a silent question, and she nodded.

He held her gaze as he took his hand off the mic. “Mom, I’ll be there. Just don’t tell Sunny. I’d like to surprise her.”

“Oh great, sweetheart. I think everyone is going to be able to make it.” Someone called to Mom in the background. “I’ve got to run, but I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He stuffed the phone back into his pocket and pulled Merritt down the beach. “We’ll fly out early. It’ll only take us about two and a half hours to fly to Fairbanks. Do you have a vehicle there?”

“I’ve rented a car.”

“Okay. Good.” Though it wasn’t good. He didn’t like just leaving her there. “The flight to Tok is just over an hour, so if you need me back earlier, call.”

“It’s fine. You should spend time with your family.” She sighed beside him. “Sunny really is as adventurous in person as she is on her YouTube, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. She’s always kept us on our toes.” He chuckled. “I guess we all kind of did that growing up.”

“So, I know Sunny’s done all kinds of crazy things from her channel, and I know your brother Gunnar was a pararescueman for the Air Force from her videos of their expedition to the North Pole. I didn’t know anything about that arm of the military until then, but, wow, being a PJ is no joke.”

Tiikâan cringed at the awe in Merritt's voice. Yes, his brother Gunnar was practically a real-life superhero without the powers. All of his siblings were bigger than life, yet somehow Tiikâan ended up lacking the extraordinary gene.

"Your dad mentioned a Bjørn when he called to tell you Sunny was missing. Who's that?" Merritt pointed to a breaching whale off in the distance.

"He's another brother. He was a helicopter pilot for the special ops division of the Army called the Night Stalkers."

He shrugged like it wasn't the big deal it was. "Basically, his missions were always the most dangerous and extreme flying conditions possible. He goes into situations very few pilots would even consider. Elite of the elite."

"Jeez, and your other siblings?"

He might as well just dump it all on her, then she'd know just how much he didn't measure up to his family.

"My other brother Magnus is on a Hotshot Crew and travels the US and abroad fighting high-priority wildfires. My sister Lena was a medic in the military. She often went in with special ops. After she got out, she joined a private security firm as a bodyguard. And finally, Astryde was a state trooper for about eight years. She's now commercial fishing for salmon, captains her own boat and everything."

"That's kind of a jump, isn't it? From trooper to fishing?"

"We had an uncle who had a permit. Before becoming a trooper, Astryde spent every summer since she was thirteen on the boat. When he retired, he passed the permit on to her."

"How can you pass a fishing permit on? Don't you just, I don't know, go to Fish and Game?"

"Not for commercial. It kind of works like mining claims. They only have so many permits available, so when someone is wanting off the boat, they either pass it to someone like an inheritance or sell it. They hardly ever come up for sale."

He bent down and scooped up a handful of sand. "It kind of surprised us when she got out of law enforcement. She was

a trooper in the Child Abuse Investigation Unit of the Bureau of Investigation and seemed to be moving up. Then when she got the permit, she just up and quit.”

“I can understand that. Working in child abuse would be devastating.”

“Yeah. It’d be hard.”

A bright-red piece of sea glass peeked out from the sand. He let the sand filter through his fingers, tossing away the broken, useless shells until just the glass remained. The edges were smooth and the surface beautiful from being battered around.

Glass transformed with life’s tribulations, turning into something that created joy and purpose, while shells broke until there wasn’t much resembling a shell anymore.

Every single one of his siblings’ hardships had transformed them like this glass. While they tumbled among the waves crashing over them, they’d let their faith and strength carry them to shore where they had found new life.

And what had he done?

He shook his head in disgust at himself, handed the glass to Merritt, and shoved his hands in his pockets as he continued down the beach. He’d barely gotten his feet wet before he ran back to safety, hiding in the wilderness from anything that might stretch him beyond what was comfortable.

He couldn’t even succeed at that, not with how his business was one season away from bankruptcy.

No, he was like the shells ... broken and useless.

SEVENTEEN

Coming out to meet Dr. Erikson on her own had to be the most idiotic decision of Merritt's life to date.

She liked to think of herself as an intelligent woman.

Her experience around the world and even over the last weeks running HGR proved that she had smarts.

So why had she ever thought that driving thirty miles away from Fairbanks into the remote Alaskan wilderness by herself to meet a man who had disappeared after her father's mysterious death was a good idea?

Sure, the two-lane drive along the Chena Hot Springs Road was gorgeous with the way the river snaked along beside it. Towering birch swayed along the roadside while spruce, so dark they almost looked black, covered the mountains that stretched up on both sides of the road.

Even the section of forest that had suffered a recent wildfire was beautiful.

None of that helped lessen the anxiety that crawled further up her throat the farther she drove.

She was freezing, even though she had the heater cranked and her hooded sweatshirt on. Her entire body trembled from the inside out, and if she didn't pull herself together, she was liable to shake herself right off the road.

The computer voice told her to turn in a hundred feet, startling a squeak from her.

She turned onto the dirt drive lined by trees that tunneled over the road. Her heart pounded harder and harder against her ribs until she thought it might bust through.

About a quarter mile in, the forest opened up to a small metal building in a clearing. A few dump trucks and a backhoe parked against the trees, but from the look of the small cleared area behind the building, the equipment hadn't really been put to work.

Parking the car at the door, she took one more fortifying breath before she jerked her door open and marched to the door.

“Okay, Lord. Clear my mind. Make it sound and keep my fear from overrunning me.”

As prayers went, it wasn't eloquent, but it was what she had. Her rap on the metal door echoed eerily around her.

A raven took off from a tree with a violent flapping of wings and creepy squawking. A gust of wind rushed past her, ripping at her hair, and she almost booked it for the car to speed away.

The door screeched open just enough to see in, cutting her thoughts of retreat short. The only thing she could make out in the dark gap was movement. Every muscle in her body tensed. She was a sitting duck.

“Merritt Harland?” The raspy voice barely reached her as another gust of wind howled through the clearing.

“Yeah.” She clenched her hands into fists so she wouldn't cross her arms and curl in on herself.

“Come. Hurry.”

The door swung open, and a disheveled man gripped her arm tight and yanked her into the building. She yelped as darkness surrounded her, and the door slammed shut.

Light flooded the room, causing her to blink against the sharp, painful brightness. Metal scraping against metal, she whipped her head to where the man turned the deadbolt.

He slumped against the door, heaving out loud, raspy breaths. When he jerked his gaze to her, she couldn't stop her step backward. His eyebrows winged beneath his unkempt hair, and he lifted his hands in front of him like she was a spooked horse.

Considering the last few minutes, the sentiment wasn't far from the truth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm just... scared." He huffed out a laugh, then cringed.

Merritt's heart pounded in her chest as she stared at the disheveled man before her. She swallowed hard, trying to find her voice amidst the fear that wanted to consume her.

"Are you Dr. Erikson?" she asked, her words coming out in a breathless whisper.

He nodded, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for hidden dangers. "Yes, I'm Dr. Erikson. I'm sorry for the abrupt introduction, but we can't talk here."

Dr. Erikson's obvious agitation did little to calm Merritt's frayed nerves. She watched as he ran a trembling hand through his unkempt hair, his movements jerky and uncoordinated.

"Follow me," he said without checking if she followed. "There's something you need to see."

He led her toward the back of the building, his footsteps echoing off the metal walls. Merritt's hands slicked with sweat as they approached a sloping tunnel that led underground. The darkness seemed to reach out and grab her, pulling her into its depths.

Each step on the metal flooring sent a shiver down her spine, the sound reverberating through the narrow passage. Merritt's anxiety began to creep up again, its icy fingers wrapping around her throat and squeezing the air from her lungs.

She tried to focus on her breathing. But as they descended deeper into the earth, the walls pressed down on her, threatening to crush her beneath its suffocating embrace.

Merritt's mind raced with possibilities, each more terrifying than the last.

What if this was a trap?

What if Dr. Erikson was leading her down the tunnel of doom because it would be easy to hide her body?

She shook her head, trying to banish the dark thoughts that swirled in her mind.

As they walked deeper into the tunnel and metal turned to packed dirt, Dr. Erikson's voice broke through the silence. "This is one of our research facilities. We study how underground mining affects the flora and fauna topside."

Merritt listened intently, her anxiety slowly lessening with each step. Dr. Erikson's passion for his work was evident in the way he spoke, his hands gesturing animatedly as he described the various tunnels that branched off from the main one and the studies they conducted.

"Unfortunately, budget cuts have forced us to suspend our research this summer," he said, a note of bitterness creeping into his voice. "Guess the idiocy of the financial department worked in my favor for once. After I saw the news about your father's plane crash, I knew I had to stay here. It was the only place I felt safe."

Merritt's heart clenched at the mention of her father, the pain of his loss still raw and fresh. She swallowed hard, trying to push down her grief.

"You think my father's death wasn't an accident?" she asked, her voice loud in the silent tunnel.

Dr. Erikson stopped walking and turned to face her, his eyes intense and serious. "I know all about cover-ups, Merritt. I've seen it happen before."

He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Have you ever watched *The Conspiracy Files*? That show opened my eyes to the truth behind so many so-called accidents and coincidences."

Merritt's mind raced as she tried to process Dr. Erikson's words. Could her father's death really have been a cover-up or was this man a nut? The thought made her stomach churn, bile rising in the back of her throat.

She looked at Dr. Erikson, searching his face for any sign of deception or madness. But all she saw was a man who genuinely believed what he was saying, a man who had been willing to risk his life to uncover the truth.

"What do you think happened to my father?" Her voice trembled slightly.

Dr. Erikson's expression grew somber, his eyes filled with sympathy. "I think someone didn't want him to meet with me. Someone who had something to hide."

Merritt's pulse rushed in her ears as the implications of Dr. Erikson's words sank in. If he was right, then her father's death was no accident.

It was murder.

And she would find out who was responsible.

Dr. Erikson led Merritt into a small office, the space as disheveled as the man himself.

Papers and books were strewn everywhere, covering every available surface in a chaotic mess. The air was thick with the musty scent of old paper and dust, and Merritt had to navigate carefully to avoid stepping on the piles that littered the floor.

Erikson rummaged through one particularly precarious stack, muttering to himself as he searched for something specific. After a moment, he pulled out a sheaf of papers, his eyes lighting up with triumph.

"Here," he said, thrusting the papers into Merritt's hands. "This is what your father and I were supposed to discuss."

Merritt's heart raced as she scanned the documents, her eyes widening with each line she read. The papers detailed the potential for AMD at the mine site, and the numbers were far worse than anything she'd seen in the official reports.

“The mine’s current plans for mitigating the drainage are woefully inadequate,” Dr. Erikson explained, his voice tight with barely contained anger. “The acidity levels in the surrounding water sources could be catastrophic, not just for the environment, but for the people living downstream.”

He pointed to a series of graphs and charts, his finger trembling slightly as he traced the projected levels of contamination. “The mine’s own initial study shows that the drainage could be up to ten times worse than what they’ve publicly disclosed. You’re gambling with people’s lives.”

Merritt’s stomach churned as she absorbed the implications of Dr. Erikson’s words. If he was right, then the mine was not only putting the environment at risk, but also the health and safety of countless innocent people.

Why hadn’t she seen this study in all the reports she’d been scouring through the last two weeks?

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen any of this. These reports aren’t in any of the paperwork that I have.”

Dr. Erikson nodded, his expression grim. “That’s why your father wanted to meet with me. He knew something was wrong, and he was determined to make the mine safe, even if that meant putting the mining on hold.”

Merritt’s heart ached at the mention of her father. But she knew that she couldn’t let his death be in vain. She clutched the papers tightly in her hands, the evidence grounding her in the moment. She wasn’t about to let her father’s legacy be tainted by lies and greed.

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders as she met Dr. Erikson’s gaze. “Tell me everything,” she said, her voice steady and strong. “I need to know it all if I’m going to fix this.”

Dr. Erikson leaned back against the cluttered desk, his eyes narrowing as he studied Merritt’s face. “I suspect that either the geologists were paid off or they were already on the payroll to ensure their reports came back clean. It’s the only

explanation for why the official findings are so different from what I've discovered.”

Merritt's heart sank as she considered the implications of Dr. Erikson's words.

The thought of HGR's own employees, people her father had trusted, being involved in a cover-up made her feel sick to her stomach. He had always prided himself on running an ethical company, but now she couldn't help but wonder if that had all been an illusion.

“What needs to be done to make the mine safe?”

Dr. Erikson sighed, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

“There are a few key steps that need to be taken before the mine can move forward. First, you need to conduct a thorough, independent assessment of the potential for AMD. No more relying on in-house geologists or third-party companies with questionable loyalties.”

Merritt nodded, her mind already racing with the logistics of arranging such an assessment. It would be costly and time-consuming. Her family was going to freak.

“Second,” Dr. Erikson continued, “you need to develop a comprehensive plan for mitigating any potential drainage issues. That means making sure the water treatment facilities can handle the toxic load, implementing strict monitoring protocols, and being transparent with the public about any risks or challenges.”

He fixed Merritt with a piercing stare, his eyes burning with a fierce determination. “And finally, you need to hold those responsible for the cover-up accountable. No more secrets, no more lies. The truth must come out, no matter how painful or damaging it may be.”

Merritt swallowed hard. She knew he was right, that the only way forward was through transparency and accountability. Yet she had no clue whom she could trust.

By his last message, her dad hadn't either.

The people behind this could be anyone, even those closest to him. Taking on the very people who had been her father's closest confidants, the ones who had stood by her side at his funeral, made her heart ache with a deep sense of betrayal.

She could trust Tiikâan.

That much she knew.

If she could convince Dr. Erikson to help with the environmental side of the mystery, maybe she could talk Tiikâan into helping her with the rest. He had contacts in Alaska that would help her find out if her father was truly murdered or if the plane crash was just an unfortunate accident. She'd text him as soon as she got to her car.

But first, she had a skittish scientist to convince to venture out of his burrow.

Merritt took a deep breath, her gaze locking with Dr. Erikson's. "I need your help. I want you to lead the environmental team, to make sure that we do this right."

Dr. Erikson's eyes widened, surprise etched across his face. He shook his head, taking a step back.

"I... I can't," he stammered, his hands coming up in a defensive gesture. "I'm not cut out for that kind of responsibility. I'm just a researcher, not a leader."

Merritt stepped forward, her hand reaching out to rest on his arm. She could feel the tension thrumming through his body.

"You're the expert here, Dr. Erikson," she said, her voice soft but insistent. "I don't have a clue who else could help me make this right. But you do. You know the science, you know the risks, and you know what needs to be done."

Dr. Erikson stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching her face as if looking for any sign of deception or manipulation. He sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Okay. I'll do it."

Merritt's heart soared, relief washing over her in a dizzying wave. She squeezed his arm, a small smile tugging at

the corners of her mouth.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

She snagged a notepad and pen from the desk and scratched the address to the hangar Tiikâan parked his plane in, talking as she wrote.

“I’ll be heading back to Barrow in the morning. If you’ll meet me here, we’ll get started fixing this right away.”

Dr. Erikson’s nod turned to a shake of his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“I never imagined I’d be here either.” Merritt headed back toward the surface.

Dr. Erikson huffed a humorless laugh from behind her, then muttered, “Let’s just hope it doesn’t get us both killed.”

EIGHTEEN

Tiikâan's brother Magnus climbed up to sit next to Tiikâan on the picnic table where he watched his family and friends.

“Hey, man.” Magnus nudged Tiikâan's shoulder before settling his arms on his knees. “How's the Barrow Bachelor Bunk treating you?”

Tiikâan laughed, shaking his head. “I can't believe Declan actually tells people that.”

“Dude, he couldn't hold his excitement in when you agreed to stay there.” Magnus chuckled. “Something about reliving old times or some sentimental junk like that.”

“It's been good, though I haven't been around to hang out all that much.”

He kind of felt bad about ditching out on Declan to go to dinner so often with Merritt now. Not a very good friend. He'd have to do better after he got back north.

“So, who's the kid?” Tiikâan pointed his red Solo cup at the blond boy hanging out with his sister Lena's stepson, Carter.

Magnus' sigh sounded like it came all the way from his toes. “He's with me. That's Oliver. He's... a friend's son.”

Since when did Magnus take on kids?

Must be serious.

“Just a friend?” Tiikâan couldn't help asking.

“Yeah.” The hardness in his brother’s voice turned Tiikâan’s gaze to him. “Friend.”

Magnus’ muscle in his cheek popped as he clenched his teeth.

“Everything okay?” Tiikâan asked.

“Just peachy.” Magnus forced a smile as Oliver ran up.

“Carter said there are toads in the pond. Can we go see them?” The kid’s hands opened and closed beside him, his gaze widening before he looked at the dirt in front of his shoe.

“Absolutely.” Magnus climbed down from the picnic table.

Oliver’s mouth fell open as his head snapped up. “Really?”

“Of course.” Magnus clapped Tiikâan on the shoulder. “Catch you later.”

Tiikâan nodded, wondering just what Magnus’ deal was with Oliver. His life was wildfire fighting in the most dangerous situations.

Babysitting was the last thing Tiikâan imagined Magnus doing.

Tiikâan shook his head and glanced at his watch for the tenth time. Rolling his shoulders, he tried to let the festivities of his sister’s reception settle over him.

The upbeat oldies music his sister Sunny loved and the laughter as family and friends made fools of themselves on the makeshift dance floor should have been more than enough to distract Tiikâan from the nagging worry he’d made a mistake in leaving Merritt by herself.

He didn’t know why the trepidation had buried beneath his skin and settled in a rolling mass in his gut. It wasn’t like he was one of these special ops friends of Sunny’s groom from Stryker Security.

Rafe, the tech guru of Stryker, broke out into a sprinkler dance move, then shouted, “Everyone, line up!”

He grabbed Eva, the head of Stryker’s daughter’s hand, and pulled her into the Electric Slide, even though the half-

century-old music didn't suit. She fell into step with Rafe, her seven-year-old knobby elbows and knees cuter than a newborn moose calf.

"Come on, guys." Rafe beckoned to the onlookers with his hands, then pointed to the groom. "Davis, let Sunny go before you suffocate her and come slide with your brother-in-law."

"Nope." Davis didn't even tear his gaze from Sunny's as he slow danced with her.

"Coop?" Rafe stood on his tiptoes and scanned the yard.

"No way, dude," the giant named Cooper called from the buffet table.

"*Eres loco.*" Sosimo pulled his very pregnant wife June into a slow dance, his hand affectionately cupping the side of her belly.

Tiikâan's eyebrows furrowed as he climbed from the table before he got dragged onto the dance floor.

What would it have been like to have the type of unbreakable connection like the Stryker team had? Those guys—shoot, even his brothers—could probably sniff out trouble with just one faint hint.

Blindfolded.

Unlike him.

Tiikâan was good at two things, flying and sitting around waiting for hours on end.

Okay, fine.

He was decent at knowing where animals might be, but that only led him to more sitting.

Bailing from the Air Force just proved he'd been left out when the hero gene had been passed down. There was a reason it was nicknamed the Chair Force. Yet even it had put too much pressure on him.

Nope. Having his head in the clouds and his butt in the dirt had always been his preferred mode of operation.

Less chance of falling short.

Yet he'd somehow managed to do just that, if his bank account balance had a say. Even there, he'd taken the easy way out, playing air taxi for a ridiculous fee that had him putting his *sit around and wait* skills to the test.

"How's it going up in Barrow?" Astryde asked from behind him, causing him to jerk and spill the punch he held all over his hand.

"Jeez, could you not sneak up on people?" He shook punch off his fingers. "This is a wedding, not a drug raid."

"On edge, little brother?" Her laugh and teasing smile pulled the corner of his mouth up.

She'd always called him and Magnus little brother, even though both of them had shot past her five-four frame by the age of thirteen. She'd been bossy, too. Kind of decided she was their second mother, even when Mom had been around.

"Besides, my raiding days are over." She averted her gaze and took a drink from her glass.

Tiikâan tilted his head to the side. Her pained expression made him wonder if she regretted leaving her investigator job with the troopers when she had.

If Astryde missed her work with the Alaska Bureau of Investigation, he hoped she didn't go back. He'd hated how her work in the Child Abuse Investigation Unit had dragged her down until she was a cynical shell of herself.

Which just reinforced his lack of hero genes.

He forced a smile. "How's the fishing?"

"Slow. Salmon aren't up here yet."

"Yeah. Life of an outdoorsman. A lot of waiting followed by a lot of work."

She huffed a laugh. "It's the waiting part that's driving me nuts."

And yet that was the part of the hunt that settled him.

“So... you never answered my question.” She glanced at him over the rim of her cup.

“About?” He set his drink on a table and tipped his head toward the house. “I’m a little distracted by my fingers sticking together.”

“How’s it going in Barrow?” She stepped up next to him as he made his way inside.

“Slow.” He shot her a smile.

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s pretty much exactly like I expected. I fly Merritt to the mine site in the morning, wait around all day for her to be done, then fly back to Barrow in the evening.” He shrugged, then held the screen door open for Astryde.

“That’s got to be boring.” She beelined for the kitchen and flipped the water on. “What do you do all day, then?”

“Merritt took pity on me and gave me guard duty.”

He pumped two squirts of hand soap into his palm and sudsed up. “Though patrolling the perimeter of a remote mine might actually be worse than just twiddling my thumbs. It’s pretty much a guarantee nothing but the occasional moose or bear is venturing there, and even that’s slim with all the noise and activity constantly happening.”

“I’ve read the articles about the villages raising questions. With all that waiting around, have you seen anything off?” Astryde’s tone was casual, but there was a thread of something tight in it he couldn’t place.

The conversation he’d overheard with Silas and the safety guy popped into Tiikâan’s head, but should he say anything about that?

He ran his hands under the water, flipped the faucet off, then grabbed the towel hanging from the cabinet. Leaning his backside against the counter, he took his time drying his hands while he thought of an answer. He didn’t want to put a bad light on Merritt if his perception of the conversation was wrong.

“Not really.”

He tossed the towel onto the counter, then quickly picked it up and hung it on the hook. Mom would give him the stink eye if her kitchen wasn't in order.

He turned to Astryde. “I wouldn't know what I was looking for, even if there was.”

Astryde shrugged. “You'd know.”

Her immediate belief in him filled his lungs like he'd been drowning, but he pushed the air out in a slow, controlled breath. The Rebel family wore support and unshakeable devotion to each other like a badge.

He hadn't done anything to deserve the faith.

Far from it.

He cleared his throat. “I do know that Merritt, the new CEO, is working around the clock to find out if the claims have any legitimacy.

“Supposedly, her dad spent his life making sure that HGR left as little impact on the land as possible. I watched a YouTube video of him at some conference adamantly declaring that clean mining wasn't just a possibility, but their responsibility.”

“Yeah, but saying it in front of a crowd and actually doing it in the middle of the wilderness where no one would know are two different things.”

“You're right, but I really don't think that's the case, at least not with Merritt.” He shook his head. “She wouldn't do that.”

Astryde stared at him, her gaze penetrating into his brain and making him want to shift. He held still.

Barely.

“Ah, I see,” she finally said with a small, sad smile that made him bristle. “Don't let a pretty face lull you into complacency, little brother.”

“It's not like that.”

Except it totally was.

Astryde snorted. She could see right through his lie. She hadn't been awarded top investigator in the state three years in a row for nothing.

"So, nothing's happened?" She raised one eyebrow, a smug smile twitching her lips.

He ran his hand through his hair. "We almost kissed."

"I knew it." Astryde's smile broke free.

"Okay, so we've hung out after work a few times, and we may have almost kissed, but it doesn't mean anything. I definitely admire what she's done both before taking over HGR and after, but there won't be anything between us."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm a Podunk bush pilot who'd rather be in the wilderness than around people, and she runs a multibillion-dollar business and is from one of the richest families in America." He looked down at his scuffed boots. "We couldn't get any more opposite on the spectrum."

"Right." Astryde drew out the word in disbelief.

"Besides, once she has the mine up and running, I doubt she'll be staying in Alaska. And we both know I'd shrivel and die in the city, especially somewhere hot like Texas."

He sighed and looked out the window at Sunny and Davis still slow dancing even though Rafe had somehow convinced others to line dance. For the first time ever, the mention of marriage didn't send him running to the woods.

But no matter what angle he looked at the possibility of him and Merritt, it never added up to equal together. Pursuing her would end as a tragedy, not a happily ever after.

"Yeah, but at some point, losing something you love for *someone* you love makes the loss worth it." She eased against the counter flush next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Maybe not hiding in the wilds, taking smelly men to hunt even smellier animals, and instead, chasing down the

only person who has interested you in years would be the better road forward?”

Or it could plummet him further down the path of loneliness.

His phone vibrated his alarm in his pocket. Time to go. Wrapping his arm around Astryde’s shoulders, he moved her with him as he headed outside to say his goodbyes.

“I have to get going.” He pressed a kiss to Astryde’s hair. “The life of an air taxi pilot is at the beck and call of others.”

She squeezed him tight when he went to let go. “Just... be careful, okay? I know that people like to protest mines and everything, but sometimes the claims are right. And something just seems off to me.”

“I promise I’ll keep on my toes and my head on a swivel.”

Her eyes darted from one of his eyes to the other like she was searching for the truth of his words.

“Good.” She pushed to her toes and kissed his cheek. “Stay safe.”

“You, too.”

She might not be an investigator anymore, but commercial fishing held its own and many dangers. Astryde jogged to the dance floor to a round of cheers as she joined the line dancing.

Tiikâan heaved a sigh and headed to his parents talking with Bjørn and his fiancée, Sadie.

“I’ve got to get back.” Tiikâan pulled his mom into a hug.

“So soon?” She held him tight.

“Yeah.” He kissed her on the top of the head and let go to hug Sadie and shake Bjørn’s hand. “I promised I’d be there to take the boss lady back to Barrow this evening.”

“The job going okay?” Dad shook Tiikâan’s hand and pulled him into a crushing hug.

“Eh, it’s all right.”

He didn't want to elaborate and have his family worry. They'd just gone through hell and back with Sunny's disappearance and brush with death. Him telling them about the possibility of trouble, both at the mine and with him personally, would just make them anxious all over again.

Besides, he was just a glorified taxi in the air and patrol guard. None of the drama the company was dealing with had to affect him.

He'd just keep his head down, fly Merritt back and forth to the mine site, keep alert to any bears wandering close, and keep his heart firmly in check.

A text dinged on his phone as he crossed the field to his airplane. He waved one last time to his family as he pulled his phone from his pocket. His steps stalled to a halt at the words.

Merritt: I need to talk to you in private when you get back. I need help, and I don't know who else to trust.

NINETEEN

Merritt's heart raced as she paced the hotel room, her mind reeling from the revelations of the day. The late evening sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains, casting an eerie glow on the disheveled state of the room.

She glanced at her phone, checking for the hundredth time if Tiikâan had texted that he had made it to Fairbanks. The low hum of the air-conditioning unit filled the room, a constant drone that did little to soothe her frayed nerves.

A soft knock at the door made her jump, her heart leaping into her throat. Peering through the peephole, relief washed over her at the sight of Tiikâan's impatient face. She opened the door, her hand trembling slightly as she ushered him inside.

His brow furrowed as he took in her appearance, his gaze sweeping over her.

She brushed a hand over her skin to make sure the tears that had refused to stop falling were dried on her cheeks. Glancing in the mirror over the desk, she cringed at her red-rimmed eyes and chaotic hair sticking out from a lopsided, messy bun.

She probably should've made an effort to hide her turmoil.

"Merritt, what's going on?" His voice was tinged with an undercurrent of urgency.

The words poured out of her in a rush. "I think my father was murdered."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy and oppressive. Tiikâan's eyes widened, but he remained silent, allowing her to continue. Merritt's heart ached with her suspicions, the grief and anger and fear all tangled together in a knot that threatened to choke her.

"I met with Dr. Erikson, the geologist my father hired to investigate the mine's safety. He had evidence, Tiikâan. Evidence that the mine's plans for mitigating acid mine drainage are inadequate, that the risks are far greater than what's been publicly disclosed."

She began to pace again, her hands gesturing wildly as she spoke, the rough texture of the hotel carpet beneath her feet grounding her in the moment. "My father was supposed to meet with Dr. Erikson, but he never showed up. And then the plane crash happened, and I just ... I can't shake the feeling that it wasn't an accident."

Tiikâan stepped forward, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders, the warmth of his touch seeping through her blouse and calming her frayed nerves. "Okay, let's take a breath. What exactly did Dr. Erikson say?"

Merritt took a shuddering breath, the scent of fresh air and spruce that always surrounded Tiikâan filling her nostrils. She recounted her meeting with Dr. Erikson, the evidence he'd shown her, and his suspicions about a cover-up.

As she spoke, Tiikâan's intense focus on her both unnerved and reassured her.

"He thinks someone didn't want my father to meet with him. Someone who had something to hide." Merritt's voice broke, the reality of her words hitting her like a physical blow.

Her father's death being anything other than a tragic accident was almost too much to bear, but she couldn't ignore the evidence that stared her in the face.

Tiikâan's jaw clenched, his eyes hardening. "We need to be careful who we trust with this information. If your suspicions are correct, then whoever is behind this will stop at nothing to keep the truth buried."

Merritt nodded, her mind racing with the implications. She knew he was right, but the thought of keeping this secret made her feel like she was suffocating.

“I know. But I can’t just sit back and do nothing. I have to find out what really happened to my father.”

His grip on her shoulders tightened. “And we will. But we need to be smart about this. Who do you think we can trust?”

Merritt considered the question, her brow furrowing in concentration. She thought of her family, of the people who had stood by her side at her father’s funeral, their faces etched with grief and sympathy.

“Uncle Nolan,” she said after a moment, her voice barely above a whisper. “He’s always been there for me, and he and my father practically raised each other. But I don’t think we should tell him everything, not yet. He’ll be heartbroken if Dad was murdered. There’s no way I can trust the rest of my family.”

Tiikâan nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Okay, that’s a start. What about Dr. Erikson? Can he be trusted?”

Merritt hesitated, the doubt that had been gnawing at her since their meeting rising to the surface once more.

“I think so,” she said, though her voice wavered with uncertainty. “He seemed genuinely concerned about the safety of the mine and the people living downstream. But he’s also scared. Scared of what might happen to him if the truth comes out.”

Tiikâan grimaced. “That’s understandable. But we can’t let fear stop us from doing what’s right.”

Gratitude rushed through her toward the man standing before her. She reached out, her hand coming to rest on his chest, the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her palm.

“Thank you. For being here, for believing me. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

His hand came up to cover hers, his calloused fingers intertwining with her own. “I’m not going anywhere, Merritt.”

The words hung between them. The heaviness of them settled over her like a warm blanket, chasing away the chill that had seeped into her bones.

Merritt's breath caught in her throat as his hand slid up her arm, his touch leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. His eyes, dark and intense, bored into hers, and she drowned in their depths. The air between them crackled with tension, a magnetic pull that drew her closer, until the heat radiated from his body to hers.

Her heart raced as his hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing over her bottom lip. She parted her lips, a soft gasp escaping as he leaned in, his breath warm against her skin.

Time seemed to stand still, the world narrowing down to this moment, to the feel of his touch and the anticipation building in her veins.

When his mouth finally met hers, a flood washed over her. His kiss was gentle at first, a tender exploration that made her toes curl and her heart ache with longing. But as she melted into him, her hands fisting in his shirt, the kiss deepened, becoming more urgent, more demanding.

Merritt's hands slid up Tiikâan's shirt, her fingers tangling in the soft hair at the nape of his neck. She poured every ounce of gratitude and longing into the kiss, trying to convey with her actions what she couldn't put into words.

In this moment, with Tiikâan's arms around her and his lips on hers, all that had consumed her mind during the last several weeks quieted. There was just him and her.

When they finally broke apart, both of them breathing heavily, Tiikâan rested his forehead against hers, and her eyes fluttered closed. She savored the feeling of his arms around her and the way his heart raced beneath her palm.

"So, what's our next move?" he asked, his rough voice breaking through her thoughts.

Merritt took a deep breath and pushed back just enough to see his face.

“We need to find out more about the geologist’s report, see if we can corroborate his findings. He’s meeting us at the hangar tomorrow morning. I’m thinking we’ll drop him off at the mine, get him set up, then head up to Barrow. Uncle Nolan is still there, but he’s planning on heading back to Texas tomorrow afternoon.”

Tiikâan nodded, his expression determined. “You’ll want to put security on Dr. Erikson, just to make sure nothing happens to him.”

Her eyes closed on a swallowed sob, and she went to step away. Tiikâan held her hand tight against his chest and wrapped his free hand around her hip, anchoring his fingers in her belt loop.

“Hey. What’s running through your head?” he whispered.

“I hadn’t thought of security for him.” She shook her head and rested her forehead against Tiikâan’s shoulder. “I feel like I’m throwing him into the lion’s pit. What if I’m dragging him into something that gets him killed, too?”

“We’ll make sure he’s safe.” He leaned his cheek against her head. “Besides, if he didn’t want to help, he would’ve stayed hidden.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, but the reassurance didn’t ease her worry.

“I can reach out to some of my contacts, see if they’ve heard anything about the mine or your father’s death. My sister was a trooper in the investigation unit. Maybe she can dig a little. And I’ll keep a close eye on things at the mine site, see if I notice anything suspicious.”

“Okay.” But even as they made their plans, a nagging fear tugged at the back of her mind.

She straightened, fiddling with the soft collar of his t-shirt. “Tiikâan, what if... what if we’re wrong? What if my father’s death really was just an accident, and we’re chasing ghosts?”

His grip on her hand tightened, his gaze unwavering. “Then we’ll know the truth, and you can put this behind you. But if we’re right, if there is something more to your father’s

death, then you owe it to him to find out what really happened.”

Merritt nodded, the lump in her throat making it hard to speak. She knew Tiikâan was right, that the truth was worth fighting for, no matter how painful it might be.

As if sensing her unease, he wrapped both his arms around her, his embrace strong and steady. Merritt melted into his touch, the warmth of his body chasing away the chill that had settled over her.

For a moment, she allowed herself to forget about the danger that lurked just beyond the door, the secrets that would tear her world apart even more than it already was. At the moment, she felt safe... protected.

“I should probably try to get some rest.” She sighed. “We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

He nodded, his hand coming up to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. “I’ll stay here tonight, keep an eye on things. Make sure you’re safe.”

Merritt’s eyes widened and darted to the one bed in the room, her heart skipping a beat at the thought of Tiikâan staying with her.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, even as a part of her longed for him to stay, to keep the monsters from crawling out from under the bed.

“I want to,” Tiikâan said, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument. “I’ll sleep on the floor. You just focus on getting some rest.”

“But—”

“Merritt, I’m used to sleeping outside on the ground.” His mouth tipped up on one side, making her stomach flip like a fish on a line. “Trust me. I’ll be fine.”

Merritt nodded, but she wanted to argue. She watched as Tiikâan grabbed a spare pillow and blanket from the closet, setting up a makeshift bed on the floor beside her own, and pushed the guilt aside.

The king bed was more than big enough for both of them. But she also knew that she'd long for the comfort of his arms, and she just didn't have the strength at the moment to fight the desire.

As she climbed into bed, the soft mattress enveloping her like a cocoon, she couldn't help but steal glances at Tiikâan, his form illuminated by the soft glow of the midnight sun finding its way through the spaces between the heavy drapes he'd pulled shut.

He looked so peaceful, so at ease...capable.

Yeah, but Dad had been, too.

TWENTY

The heaviness of the past few days' discoveries and the challenges ahead bore down on Merritt like the oppressive, cloudy, Alaskan sky as she stepped into the family home back in Barrow.

The familiar scent of her father's favorite coffee blend mingled with the overpowering scent of Joni's perfume, giving her an instant headache.

As she made her way through the living room, her gaze fell on the family photos that lined the side table, snapshots of a time when things were not necessarily happy, but were simpler, when her father's presence filled her life and held things together.

She could imagine him there, in that ridiculously big house he'd built on the edge of the earth, his voice and influence booming to the walls and rafters. He was never just in a space. He consumed it. Without him, the rooms felt cold and empty.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence." Joni's sharp voice cut through the silence, jolting Merritt from her thoughts.

She turned to see her stepmother standing in the doorway, her arms crossed and her lips pursed in a thin line of disapproval.

"Joni, I don't have time for this." Merritt pushed past Joni to the hallway. "I have a lot of work to do."

Joni scoffed, her eyes narrowing. “Really? Because while I’ve been here in this godforsaken sinkhole of a town your father forced me to, slaving away to save the image of the business I helped your father built, you’ve been what? Taking in a ‘guided’ tour of Alaskan scenes with that Podunk pilot who’s been panting for a bit of attention?”

Merritt bristled at the accusation, her hands clenching into fists at her sides.

She wanted to lash out, to tell Joni exactly what she thought of her constant criticism and belittling remarks. But she knew that engaging would only make things worse, that it would give Joni the satisfaction of knowing she’d gotten under her skin.

“Wow, Jo. Your Cruella meter needs to be turned down a few notches there.”

Merritt held her finger and thumb up and pretended to adjust a knob before dropping her hand to her side. “Not that I need to fill you in, but I was meeting with people to help us with the environmental problem. I’m trying to save this company.”

Joni let out a harsh laugh, the sound grating against Merritt’s nerves. “You’re trying? That’s rich, coming from you. You don’t have a clue what you’re doing, Merritt. You’re in over your head, and everyone knows it.”

Merritt felt the sting of Joni’s words like a physical blow. She knew that she was out of her depth, that she was struggling to navigate the complex web of politics and power plays that surrounded the mine. But she also knew that she couldn’t give up.

Without another word, Merritt turned and walked away, leaving Joni to stew in her own bitterness and resentment.

She made her way to her office, the one place in the house where she could stand being, surrounded by her father’s journals, the maps, and reports that held the key to unlocking the truth about her father’s death and the mine’s future.

As she settled into her chair, a knock rapped on the doorframe. Nolan stood in the doorway, his expression a mix of concern and something else she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Joni's in fine form this morning," Nolan said, his tone light and teasing as he stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. "I see she's rolled out the welcome wagon for you."

Merritt groaned, rubbing her forehead as the headache turned into a migraine behind her eyes.

"She's always been a delight, hasn't she?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "I don't know how Dad put up with her for so long."

Nolan chuckled, settling into the chair across from Merritt's desk. "Your father had a talent for dealing with difficult people. It's what made him such a successful businessman."

Merritt sighed, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes for a moment.

She knew that Nolan was right, that her father had been a master at navigating the treacherous waters of corporate politics and family drama. But she also knew that she was not her father, that she had neither his experience nor his ruthless streak.

"So, who did you meet with in Fairbanks?" Nolan asked, his voice cutting through her thoughts. "Anyone who can help us with the mine?"

Merritt sat up straighter, her eyes snapping open. She studied Nolan for a moment, weighing her options. She knew that she needed allies, that she didn't have enough knowledge in mining to confront the problem on her own. But her dad's warning blared in her head.

She swallowed and chose to trust. "I met with Dr. Erikson, the geologist Dad hired to investigate the mine's safety. He had evidence that the mine's plans for mitigating AMD are

inadequate, that the risks are far greater than what's been publicly disclosed.”

“What kind of evidence?” Nolan leaned forward, his voice sharp.

Merritt took a deep breath, her heart racing as she pulled out the folder containing Dr. Erikson's findings. She slid it across the desk to Nolan, watching as he flipped through the pages, his expression growing more and more grave with each passing second.

“This is serious, Merritt,” he said, looking up at her with worry. “If this information gets out, it could destroy the company.”

Merritt nodded, her stomach twisting. “I know.” She let out a sigh in a whoosh. “But we can't ignore it, Nolan. We have to do something.”

Nolan sat back in his chair, his fingers steepled beneath his chin as he considered her words. “What did you have in mind?”

Merritt leaned forward. “I took Dr. Erikson out to the mine to work with the HEAS team.” Her voice grew stronger with each word. “I want him to conduct a thorough, independent assessment of the potential for AMD and develop a plan to take care of it.”

Nolan's eyebrows shot up, surprise flickering across his face. “That's a bold move. Are you sure you want to take that risk? If word gets out that we're bringing in an outside expert, it could raise a lot of questions.”

Merritt shook her head, her jaw set with determination. “I don't care about the questions. I care about doing what's right.”

Nolan studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face, a glimmer of pride shining in his eyes.

“You're just like your father, you know that?” His voice, warm with affection, eased some of the worry she'd had in telling Nolan. “He would be so proud of you, Merritt.”

Merritt felt a lump form in her throat, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. She blinked them away, determined not to let her emotions get the best of her.

Nolan reached across the desk, his hand covering Merritt's. "Your father made the right decision, leaving you in charge. It shocked the heck out of everyone, but maybe that's exactly what this company needs right now."

Merritt looked up at him, surprise etched across her features. She had always assumed that Nolan, like the rest of her family, doubted her ability to lead.

"You really think so?"

Nolan nodded, his grip on her hand tightening. "I know so." His tone left no room for doubt. "You have a strength and an integrity that's rare in this business, Merritt. You're not afraid to do what's right, even when it's hard."

A surge of emotion washed over her, a mix of gratitude and relief that pushed the tears right out of her eyes before she could stop them. She had been carrying the weight of her father's legacy on her shoulders, fighting against the tide of doubt and criticism that seemed to come from every direction.

To hear Nolan, one of the few people whose opinion truly mattered to her, express his faith in her was like a balm to her battered soul.

"Thank you, Nolan." She swallowed, her voice thick with emotion. "That means more to me than you know."

Nolan smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm just speaking the truth, pumpkin. Your dad knew what he was doing when he chose you."

Merritt took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she knew she had to do next. "I'm heading out to the mine as soon as Tiikâan gives me the heads-up he's ready. I need to make sure we're doing everything we can to get this fixed."

Nolan's expression grew serious, his brow furrowing with concern. "Merritt, I know you feel like you need to handle this on your own, but I can't let you go out there alone. Not with everything that's at stake."

Merritt opened her mouth to protest, to insist that she could take care of herself, but Nolan held up a hand to stop her.

“I know you’re capable. But this isn’t just about the mine anymore. If what Dr. Erikson says is true, then there are people out there who will do anything to keep this information from getting out. People who might be willing to hurt you to protect their interests.”

A chill ran down Merritt’s spine at Nolan’s words. Should she tell him about her suspicions surrounding her dad’s death? She had been so focused on uncovering the truth about the mine, on doing what was right, that she hadn’t fully let it sink in that she might share his fate.

But as much as she wanted Nolan’s comforting presence, she needed him to keep his focus where it needed to be. With Dr. Erikson’s help, she could sort through the research.

“I appreciate your concern, but you’re needed back at headquarters. You have to keep the rest of the company running while I deal with this.”

Nolan shook his head. “I can run the company just fine from wherever I am. I have years of experience dealing with these kinds of situations. I know how to navigate the politics. If we don’t approach this the right way, instead of just setting us back, we’ll get closed down completely.”

Merritt hesitated, torn between her desire to handle things on her own and the undeniable sense of relief that came with having Nolan by her side. She knew that he was right. His knowledge and experience could be invaluable in the days ahead.

“Okay. We’ll go together.” She tapped on the desk. “But I need you to promise me something.”

Nolan leaned forward, his eyes locked on hers. “Anything.”

“Promise me that we’ll see this through to the end. That we won’t stop until we’ve uncovered the truth and made things right.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I promise, Merritt. I won’t stop until I’ve made this right.”

Gratitude and affection rushed through her for her uncle, the man who had always been there for her, even in her darkest moments. Telling Nolan was the right move. Why she ever doubted was beyond her.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Nolan’s jaw clenched, and he reached across the desk, his hand clasping hers. “You’ll never have to find out, pumpkin. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

She gathered her belongings, shoving Dr. Erikson’s reports back into her satchel. Nolan’s gaze lingered on her movements, then scanned the maps and reports scattered across her desk with a scowl.

The expression was fleeting, a momentary flicker of upset that vanished as quickly as it had appeared, but it left her feeling unsettled.

She wasn’t the only one dealing with grief along with the trouble regarding the mine. Maybe being together would help them both work through their mourning and save their family’s legacy.

It definitely wouldn’t hurt to have her uncle close.

TWENTY-ONE

Tiikâan eyed the darkening sky as it rumbled and barreled toward the mine. He rolled his tight neck and rechecked the weather app. His head pounded and muscles ached from being on edge since Merritt told him the mess she was in.

All night and throughout the day, he'd waited for the boogeyman to jump out and attack. He couldn't imagine the stress she'd been under dealing with the mine and a possible murderer.

Looking at the weather on his phone, he cringed. If they headed back within the next few minutes, they should beat the storm. Wind tugged at his hair. The scent of rain hung in the air. He shook his head and glanced at the black clouds. It'd be close.

Too close.

He walked around the plane one more time, triple-checking it, then climbed into the cockpit. As he meticulously finished his preflight checklist, he kept one eye on the horizon.

Doubt filled his chest like an overblown balloon, making it hard to breathe. Yet he'd been like that since the night before.

Was it simply his worry over Merritt flooding his system? He closed his eyes, took a deep breath in, and prayed for direction. His hands settled on the yoke, the familiar shape soothing, releasing some of the pressure building in him.

Opening his eyes, he took another look at the sky. He could make it. They might have to adjust their course to

outmaneuver the storm, but he'd eluded countless storms. The only difference with this one was how precious the cargo was.

Merritt rushed toward the plane as her hair whipped around by a fierce gust. Nolan followed close behind her.

If it wasn't for the meeting with their engineers back in Texas they couldn't miss and the inconsistent internet at the mine all day, Tiikâan would push for them to just sleep in the bunkhouse. But Nolan had insisted the two of them couldn't push this meeting off, not with everything going on.

Stroking the primer pump three times, Tiikâan turned the key and pushed in the throttle to open the throttle valve. As the engine caught, he adjusted the throttle to maintain a smooth idle and checked the oil pressure gauge and instruments to make sure everything was running right.

His eyes found Merritt, and she smiled and waved.

Tiikâan hated that Merritt was caught up in the tragedy and corporate race to save everything her father built, especially since Tiikâan knew how little she wanted to do with it.

The temptation to snatch her up, fly her to a remote cabin, and keep her safe constantly played in his head.

Was legacy worth more than happiness?

He certainly wasn't one to ask. Not with how he'd abandoned his family's duty to greatness the first chance he could and hightailed it back to the safety of his Alaskan wilderness.

Merritt opened the door, ushering a frigid slap of wind with her. They needed to leave... five minutes ago.

"We gotta go." He hollered as she tumbled into the front seat beside him and Nolan climbed in the back seat. "Buckle up. This is going to be a bumpy ride."

Releasing the parking brake, he applied the throttle and moved to the opposite end of the short runway so he'd be taking off into the wind.

At the end of the dirt strip, he increased the throttle for a run-up, checked the magnetos, carburetor heat, and that all the

engine instruments were green for go, then ensured the transponder was set to the appropriate code.

Tiikâan lined up Darth Maule on the centerline of the runway as wind gusts shook the plane. He gripped the yoke firmly, feeling the resistance from the turbulent air.

Applying full throttle, the engine roared to life, vibrating through the frame of the aircraft. The wind pressed against the nose, like a powerful unseen hand pushing against them.

The airspeed indicator came alive, the needle climbing rapidly. Despite the headwind, Tiikâan sensed the plane wanting to lift off the ground sooner than usual. The increased lift raised the front wheels, and he gently pulled back on the yoke, bringing the aircraft's nose up.

Darth Maule eagerly climbed, the headwind shortening the ground roll. Wind howled around the cockpit, a reminder of nature's raw power threatening to toss them.

Tiikâan's knuckles whitened as he steadied the aircraft against turbulent air currents. The plane's tires left the ground, transitioning from the rough runway to the smooth embrace of the air almost abruptly.

Climbing out, he adjusted the controls, feeling the wind buffet the wings. With the headwind allowing for a steeper angle, he maintained a steady climb rate.

Senses on high alert, every vibration and noise amplified in the enclosed cockpit. The control inputs felt more responsive, the plane's movements sharper and more immediate.

The horizon tilted and shifted as he maneuvered the plane, each gust of wind requiring quick, precise adjustments. The altimeter spun upward, and the ground rapidly fell away beneath him. He kept a close eye on the instruments, ensuring the engine performed flawlessly under the strain of the climb.

As the plane ascended, the wind continued to challenge him, but he found a rhythm, a dance between man and machine against the forces of nature. The sky darkened up

ahead, and he pointed the nose toward the light sky to the west of the storm.

The race was on.

Tiikâan's eyes darted between the instruments and the ominous sky ahead.

The jagged peaks of the Brooks Range loomed beneath them, their snow-capped summits disappearing into the encroaching darkness. His jaw clenched as he fought to keep Darth Maule steady against the increasingly violent gusts.

A flash of lightning illuminated the cockpit, followed by a bone-rattling crack of thunder. Merritt gasped beside him, and he longed to reach over and squeeze her hand reassuringly. Instead, he gripped the yoke tighter, his knuckles white with tension.

"How's it looking up there?" Nolan's voice crackled through the headset, a hint of worry breaking through his usual stoic demeanor.

Tiikâan swallowed hard, his throat dry.

"It's... challenging," he admitted, not wanting to alarm them further. But the truth was, the situation was deteriorating rapidly.

He banked the plane slightly, trying to skirt around the worst of the storm. But with each passing minute, the dark wall of clouds seemed to close in around them, like a predator circling its prey. The altimeter fluctuated wildly as updrafts and downdrafts battled for dominance.

A bead of sweat trickled down Tiikâan's temple. The smart move would be to turn back, to retreat to the relative safety of the mine. His instincts screamed at him to do just that.

But as he glanced over his shoulder, his heart sank. The storm had outflanked them, cutting off their escape route with a menacing wall of pitch-black clouds.

"Tiikâan?" Merritt's voice was soft, laced with concern.

Her hands gripped her seat belt, and she squeezed her eyes shut as the plane lurched. Her palpable fear strengthened his

resolve to get them through this safely.

He drew a deep breath, forcing calm into his voice. “We’re going to have to push through,” he announced, his tone leaving no room for argument. “It’s going to get rough, but I need you both to trust me. Can you do that?”

“Always,” Merritt replied without hesitation, her faith in him both a comfort and a terrifying responsibility.

Nolan grunted his assent. With a silent prayer, Tiikâan pointed Darth Maule’s nose toward the heart of the storm. The plane shuddered as they hit the first wall of turbulence, and the world outside the cockpit windows turned into a swirling maelstrom of angry clouds and stinging rain.

They were committed now. There was no turning back.

Tiikâan’s hands moved with practiced precision, easing the yoke forward. Darth Maule’s nose dipped, and they began a controlled descent. The altimeter spun backward as they dropped, searching for clearer air beneath the storm’s fury.

“Hang on,” he called out, his voice tight. “We’re going lower to get below the storm.”

The clouds enveloped them, transforming the world outside into a gray soup. Visibility dropped to zero. Tiikâan’s eyes darted between the instruments, relying solely on their readouts to navigate. The artificial horizon tilted and swayed as turbulence buffeted the plane.

Merritt’s skin was white, her breath coming in short gasps. Nolan muttered something that sounded like a prayer.

Suddenly, a shrill beeping cut through the drone of the engine and howling wind. Tiikâan’s blood ran cold. The proximity alarm.

“Crap!” He yanked the yoke to the left.

A dark mass materialized out of the clouds, rushing past the starboard wing. The mountain slope was so close Tiikâan could make out individual rocks and patches of snow. His heart hammered in his chest as adrenaline surged through his system.

“Too low,” he muttered, fighting to regain altitude. “The storm pushed us too low.”

As if in response to his words, the clouds ahead parted. A sliver of visibility opened up, revealing a familiar landscape. Tiikâan’s eyes widened as he recognized the massive ice formation jutting from the mountainside.

“The glacier cave,” he muttered, not quite believing what was before him.

Merritt leaned forward. “The one you promised to show me?”

Tiikâan nodded, a grim smile tugging at his lips. “Looks like you’re getting that tour sooner than we thought.”

He banked the plane toward the glacier, its blue-white face a beacon in the storm, and called in a mayday with their location. The cave’s maw gaped open, offering shelter from the tempest. It was their only option now.

“Hold on tight,” Tiikâan warned, lining up for approach. “This landing’s going to suck.”

Tiikâan’s eyes narrowed, focusing on the faint outline of the glacier’s base through the swirling mist. He knew there was a smooth stretch of silt down there—perfect for landing—if only he could find it in this soup.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered, willing the clouds to part just a little more.

There! A flash of gray against the white. Tiikâan aimed for it, his hands steady on the controls despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

“Brace for landing!” he shouted over the roar of the engine and wind.

The ground rushed up to meet them. Tiikâan pulled back on the yoke, leveling out Darth Maule’s nose. The wheels hit the ground with a jolt that rattled his teeth. They bounced once, twice—too fast, they were coming in too fast.

Tiikâan’s foot slammed down on the brakes. He fought the yoke, using every trick he knew for short-field landings. The

plane shuddered and groaned under the strain, but slowly, agonizingly their speed decreased.

They were slowing. They were going to make it. Tiikâan let out a long exhale, his shoulders sagging with relief.

“We did it,” he breathed, turning to flash a triumphant smile at Merritt.

Without warning, Darth Maule lurched violently forward. Tiikâan’s stomach dropped as the plane’s back side raised.

“No, no, no!” Tiikâan yelled, fighting the controls.

But it was too late.

The plane’s nose careened forward. With a sickening lurch, the plane tipped up vertically on its prop and flipped over.

TWENTY-TWO

Sharp pain pierced Merritt's head. Her ears rang so loud it muted everything else. The acrid smell of burnt oil coated her nose and throat. Frigid wind and sleet pelted her as she tried to lower her arms from above her head.

The fuselage shifted, and her body jolted to the side, snapping her eyes open. Dirty snow piled in front of her beyond the space where the windshield should be. Suspended upside down not only disoriented her, but the harness dug into her shoulder.

She blinked and shook her head to clear her vision, causing a spike of pain to drill through her skull and down her spine. She couldn't stop the cry that ripped from her throat.

"Merritt?" Tiikâan groaned beside her.

"I'm okay." She turned her head, tears blurring her vision even more at the blood running down the side of Tiikâan's face into his beard.

Wide, worried eyes scanned her. His hand reached up to her cheek and pushed into her hair to wrap strong fingers along her scalp. The touch steadied her, and she leaned into it.

"I'm okay," she repeated, though she really couldn't tell beyond the agonizing ache building in her head. "You're bleeding."

She reached out to touch his forehead. He captured her hand and kissed her fingers.

“It’s fine.” He pressed his lips to her palm, closing his eyes, pressing his nose against her wrist and inhaling. He kissed her wrist, then speared her with a determined look. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m good with that plan.” She forced a chuckle but cut it off with a groan.

Tiikâan braced one hand on the ceiling and released his harness. He collapsed to the ceiling with a groan, but quickly wiggled the rest of his body so he was on his knees. Merritt reached for her buckle, but he held his hand out for her to wait.

“Nolan?” Tiikâan asked, peering into the back seat as he maneuvered his body under Merritt’s.

The only response was a groan. Merritt prayed her uncle was okay. She didn’t think she could handle losing him as well.

“He’s breathing.” Tiikâan knelt on the plane’s ceiling below her. “Let’s get you out, then we’ll get your uncle.”

Tiikâan’s eyes locked with Merritt’s. Without warning, he surged upward, his lips capturing hers in an urgent, upside-down kiss. The world tilted on its axis as his mouth moved against hers, desperate and demanding.

Merritt’s heart thundered in her chest, matching the frantic pace of Tiikâan’s. She tasted the metallic tang of blood on his lips, felt the tremor in his touch as his fingers tangled in her hair. The kiss was a lifeline, an anchor in the chaos surrounding them.

She clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she returned his fervor with equal intensity. Their breaths mingled, hot and ragged, momentarily disappearing in the biting cold seeping into the wreckage.

When they finally broke apart, gasping, Tiikâan sat back on his heels and rested his forehead against hers.

“I thought I’d lost you.” His voice, usually so steady, now trembled raw and broken with barely contained emotion.

Merritt swallowed hard, her own guilt and worry threatening to choke her.

“I’m right here,” she breathed, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. “We’re both here.”

“I’m sorr—”

“No. Nolan and I shouldn’t have pushed so hard to get back to Barrow.”

Tiikâan shook his head. “But I shouldn’t have even taken off.”

“So, since all of us were idiots, no one is taking the blame.”

He huffed, his skin bunching around his eyes. “Let’s get you out of here.”

She slid her fingers through his beard, threaded them in his hair, and pulled him in for another searing kiss. When he pulled away, both their chests heaved. She smiled at him.

“I always wanted my own Spiderman hanging kiss.” She winked at Tiikâan.

“Oh, really?” He stifled a smile as he positioned himself under her and reached for her buckle.

“Didn’t think I’d be the one hanging, but my hero is definitely sexier than Tobey Maguire.”

Tiikâan scoffed as he wrapped her arm over his shoulders. “Be prepared to hold on to me.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on ever letting you go.”

He froze, his gaze capturing hers. Her eyes didn’t waver from his, willing him to see the truth of her words. He was embedded in her soul, so he’d better get used to the idea of them together.

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Good.”

With his one-word answer, giddiness swamped her. She hung from a wrecked fuselage, sleet pelted her face, and pain radiated through her body, but she couldn’t stop her ridiculous

smile from pushing her cheeks up. He rolled his eyes, his pressed lips tipping at the corners.

“Ready?”

“Cut me loose, Spidey.” She squeezed her arm across his shoulders, but her hands tingled. Would her muscles even hold her with the loss of circulation?

“Nope. You’re not landing that nickname on me.” He reached for her buckle.

“Why not?” The pressure on her shoulders released, and she gasped as she fell.

Her downward motion jolted to a halt as Tiikâan deftly caught her, cradling her in his arms. She tightened her arm around him, pressing her face into his neck as a wave of lightheadedness crashed over her. Her body trembled with residual fear and adrenaline.

He squeezed her against his chest, then pushed back, gently setting her beside him. “Well, I’m not flexible at all. I can’t scale walls or shoot webs.”

“But you’re strong.” She wrapped her hand around his bicep and wagged her eyebrows when it flexed. “The way you flew us through that storm, missing mountains we couldn’t see clearly proves you have spidey sense.”

He shook his head and pushed on the door to get out. “Instruments did the work there.”

The door held, so he slammed his shoulder into it, his back muscles rippling beneath his t-shirt. It gave way with a crunch, but only opened an inch.

“And you’re more flexible than you think.” She crawled into the other side of the cockpit to give him more room, peeking back at Nolan who grumbled from his upside-down position about banging and his headache, and relief rushed through her that he was waking up. “You practically pretzeled when you let yourself loose from the buckle.”

Tiikâan’s laugh was abrupt, and the smile that stretched across his face was exactly what she hoped to pull out.

“Could we focus here and get me out?” Nolan’s annoyance rumbled like the thunder still filling the sky.

Tiikâan shoved his shoulder into the door again. “Working on it.”

With the next hit, the door swung open. Tiikâan barely caught himself from tumbling out. He eased out, then went to work on the passenger door.

Merritt crawled along the ceiling—or was it considered the floor? She shook off the unnecessary question and squeezed her way to the back where Nolan hung like a trapped bandit.

“You okay?” She ran her hands over his head and shoulders.

“Yeah. Just banged up.” He mumbled, his face red from being suspended. “You?”

“You know us Harlands.” She pressed a quick kiss to her uncle’s cheek. “We’re hard to knock down.”

He exhaled a humorless laugh. “That’s the truth.”

The screeching of metal as Tiikâan opened the passenger door made her cringe. Tiikâan climbed in beside her, focusing on getting Nolan loose.

As he helped Nolan out, his muscles bulging from his neck as he kept her uncle from crashing, her hero image of Tiikâan solidified. Her uncle wasn’t a small man.

Nolan slumped against the seat, his hand shaking as he pushed it through his disheveled graying hair. “What now?”

Tiikâan took a deep breath and pushed it out with a huff. “We gather what we can and head for the ice cave at the bottom of the glacier. We’ll have more room there and be out of the weather.”

“Then what?” Merritt leaned on the back of the pilot seat.

“Then we wait for the storm to pass, come back to the plane, and wait some more for the rescue.”

He shrugged. “The plane has an emergency beacon that’s signaling our location, and we’ll call out with the radio before

we leave to let the cavalry know where we are holing up and that we need to be rescued.”

“When will they come to get us?”

“The storm should blow out by morning.”

“Okay.” That didn’t sound so bad. “What do you need me to do?”

“Grab anything up front that you need. I’ll get the survival packs from the back.” Tiikâan climbed out the door.

She crawled back to the front. Relief rushed the air from her lungs when she found her satchel wedged under the pedals.

If she’d lost her computer, all the research she’d done into her father’s death and the inconsistency of the mine reports would be lost. The bag ripped at the seam as she yanked it from the cramped space, leaving a collection of pens and receipts behind.

Tiikâan set a pack beside her, then one next to Nolan. “Here are your go-bags. They have a change of clothes, food, and some survival gear.”

“You packed one for each of us?” She fingered the strap of hers.

“Of course.” He swung his off his shoulder and set it on the snow.

“Of course,” she whispered, once again impressed by the unassuming man.

Tiikâan waved her toward him. “Why don’t you climb on out? I’ll make sure the emergency beacon is firing, get that call in that we need to be picked up once the storm passes, then we’ll head to the cave.”

His warm hand enveloped hers as he helped her out. She leaned into his side. She wanted to hold on tightly, but they had more important things to do.

Like surviving.

As he climbed into the plane, she quickly opened the pack and shoved her torn satchel in before pulling the pack on. She

didn't want to take any chance of something important falling out and getting lost. Nolan grunted as he climbed out and stood next to her.

“Quite the prepared man you've got yourself.” Nolan's eyebrows bunched together. “Though he shouldn't have put us in this position to begin with.”

“No. Stop.” She slashed her hand through the air and leaned in so only Nolan could hear her. “You are not placing this on him, not with how bullish you were about getting to Barrow.”

Nolan narrowed his eyes at her. She raised one warning eyebrow at him. With a humph, he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Here. Hold this.” Tiikâan shoved something toward her, drawing her attention away from her uncle.

She took the harness swinging toward her. When she realized a pistol hung in it, her eyes widened. Was he worried they'd run into bears?

Bears liked caves, didn't they?

Panic galloped in her chest, and her hands trembled.

“Let me take that, pumpkin.” Nolan eased the harness from her fingers, patted her on the back, then put the shoulder harness on.

Did he even know how to use the gun? Of course, he did. He'd been in the CIA, and he and her dad went shooting at the range every week.

She pushed the heel of her hand against her forehead to try and slow the feeling like she might faint. Spiraling into a panic attack now would not only be ridiculous but would be dangerous.

“There aren't bears in the cave, are there?” She hated how weak her voice sounded.

“No. The opening is too large. Bears like dark, hidden holes.” Tiikâan pushed a small case into her hand and crawled from the plane. “Besides, with it being summer, it'll be cold

and damp from the glacier melting. Nothing would want to be there on purpose.”

“Sounds cozy.” She mumbled into his chest as he pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

“Five stars, all the way.” He forced a smile, then dug into his pack.

He pulled out a headlamp and put it on. Next, he grabbed a coil of rope from the cockpit and draped it over his shoulder so it rested across his body. Every movement was sure and strong.

She bit her bottom lip, her cheeks heating despite the cold wind. Alaskan tough was sexy as all get out.

Swinging his pack on with a grunt, he grabbed her hand. “Stay close behind me. I want us in a tight, single file line so we know that our steps are safe.”

“Safe?” Nolan asked.

“The ground might break away.” He pointed off to the side where a section of snow had caved in a large hole. “There’s a river of runoff flowing from the glacier under us. There’s no telling how far ice covers the river. We want to avoid falling in.”

That possibility doused any heat she had. She squeezed his hand, worry for him crashing over her.

“If the ground is unstable, how are you going to keep safe?” She hated the tremble in her voice.

Maybe they should just stay at the plane. It seemed stable enough.

Tiikâan let her hand go and yanked on a busted wing support. It broke the rest of the way free with a pop. He grinned at her, lifting his makeshift staff in hand.

“I’ll test the ground before I step.”

Right. Okay. He had everything under control. All she had to do was follow.

The entire way to the cave, she stuck as close to his back as possible without stepping on his feet. The wind snapped around them, driving the sharp snow into her face. Tears streamed from her eyes. Her fingers burned with cold.

Her leather jacket protected her torso from getting wet, but it did nothing to keep her warm. Between the weight of her pack, the shifting snow beneath her feet, and the shivers convulsing her muscles, exhaustion quickly zapped her body.

Wasn't that a sign of hypothermia? How fast did that set in? She clearly needed to do more research into cold weather survival because she came up empty. She just prayed the cave was warmer, and they could find a dry place to wait for a rescue.

After what seemed like hours and her feet going numb in her hikers, the cave appeared through the sideways snow. The huge opening spanned a good twenty-five feet across and fifteen feet high.

She followed Tiikâan in and had an eerie feeling of Luke Skywalker on planet Hoth when the white snow beast tried to eat him. Tiikâan popped a flare, lifted it high, and when the end of the cave couldn't be seen, dropped it ten feet inside the entrance.

He shrugged off his pack and turned to them. "Your packs have water in the right side of the big pocket and a headlamp in the front. Let's hydrate before we go any farther, but don't drink too much. We need our water to last."

"Is it safe?" Nolan asked with a groan as he stripped off his pack.

Tiikâan shrugged, not giving Merritt the boost of confidence she was hoping for. "If we can, I'd like to get out of the wind. Sometimes, there are places where the ground below has been exposed through the ice. Hopefully, we find some and can set up camp."

He took two gulps, put the cap on, and stowed the canteen in his pack. He wasn't joking about conserving water.

She did the same, then found the headlamp. When she attempted to turn it on, she blinded herself. So much for acting like she knew what she was doing. She scanned the cave with the light. Ice sparkled against the dark shadows, but it did nothing to lessen the overall creepy atmosphere.

A gust of wind blew a wave of snow over them. She jerked the headlamp on with trembling hands and swung the pack on. At least it offered some protection against the wind.

“Let’s go.” Tiikâan tipped his head toward the back of the cave.

She caught up to him. With the cave as big as it was, they could walk side by side. Heck, they could park the plane in here, if it wasn’t flipped on its roof.

She cringed.

She hadn’t even considered that Tiikâan had lost his livelihood. Did he have another plane? She’d buy him one and make sure it was in Alaska as fast as possible. The cave groaned, jerking her off her rabbit trail.

“So... what’s your thoughts on Sasquatch?” Her voice wavered. “I’m getting a whole *Luke hanging from the ceiling as the yeti space monster prepares the fire* kind of vibe here.”

Tiikâan’s laugh echoed off the walls. Nolan muttered something behind them too low to hear. Tiikâan scanned the area, the light shining off ice stalactites and stalagmites before them.

“If there are such a thing, they could easily hide behind any one of these columns.” His smile widened as he shifted his gaze over to her. “You better stay close.”

“Noted.” One step the ground was crunchy ice, the next slick as snot. Her feet slipped out from under her. “Whoop!”

Tiikâan grabbed her arm.

“Whoa.” He pulled her close to his side. “Let me help you.”

“How much farther?” Nolan grumbled from behind them.

“Let’s get past this set of pillars.” Tiikâan pointed to a jagged row of tall ice teeth in front of them. “They’ll help block the wind.”

“It’s perfect.” She led the way, determined to be the positive opposite of what her uncle was being.

She made her way between two of the columns. Once through, the light from her headlamp still disappeared into the dark belly of the cave. Just how far did it reach?

As she walked, she scanned the walls and ceiling. The temperature felt warmer back there. Definitely not warm, but not frigid, either.

Her next step met air. She pinwheeled her arms as she fell forward toward rushing water.

“Whoa!” Tiikâan jerked her to a halt by the backpack and swung her backward into his arms.

“Holy cow.” She trembled as she burrowed into his chest. “Where the heck did that water come from?”

“It’s the snowmelt.” Tiikâan rubbed her back before holding her in a tight squeeze against him. “Basically, every summer there’s probably an underground river from the heat. Another month and we might not even be able to walk in here.”

“That’s scary.”

“Yeah. Fall in and who knows how long it will take before you come out from under the ice.”

She shivered, and he held her tighter.

“I guess your perfect was the right word after all,” Nolan said.

Merritt turned to him, confused by his tone. She froze when the light from her headlamp glinted off the pistol pointed at her.

“Nolan?” Her voice trembled at her uncle’s sneering face.

His twisted smile made her knees weak. “I couldn’t ask for a more perfect place to get rid of you.”

TWENTY-THREE

Tiikâan stared at the gun pointing between him and Merritt and tightened his grip on Merritt's backpack strap. Why had Merritt given the weapon to Nolan? Oh yeah, because who would've guessed the uncle was the psychopath?

Tiikâan clenched his jaw and raised his gaze to meet Nolan's. If he was going to die, he wanted death to look him in the eye. Sure, he'd always thought his battle with life would be with a grizzly or a plane crash.

He never imagined it would be looking in the wild eyes of a crazed lunatic.

"I'm sure you're wondering why." Nolan's bored voice shot anger through Tiikâan, especially when the man continued in a false whining tone. "Why are you doing this?"

Merritt sucked in a sob, her body trembling against his hand holding her pack strap. Tiikâan moved closer. Everything in him wanted to put himself between the gun and her.

Nolan shook his head. "Stay."

Tiikâan stopped.

Nolan smirked. "Good dog."

Tiikâan's eyes narrowed, and he barely stifled the growl in his throat. He wanted to rip into Nolan's throat and tear his gloating head from his shoulders.

But if Tiikâan didn't figure out a solution and fast, both he and Merritt would end in the same fate as her father. At least

now they knew who had betrayed her.

He darted his eyes around the cavern. There wasn't anywhere he could push her behind, not with Nolan positioned in front of the columns of ice they'd just passed through.

Tiikâan doubted he could charge Nolan and get the gun. His hold on the weapon was too steady and sure.

Nolan took a step forward. Merritt stumbled back. Tiikâan followed, pulling her to a stop before she slipped into the water. He tried to scan the water's edge to see if there was something they could hide behind like the columns, but all he saw was black.

"Now, because I think you deserve to know the truth before you die, I'm going to answer the insipid question." Nolan waved his free hand like a magnanimous ruler.

"You mean your insipid question." Merritt's voice trembled, but it was more anger than fear. "I know why you did it, you greedy ba—"

"Ahh, ahh, ahh. Language, pumpkin." Nolan paced in front of them, and Tiikâan watched for an opening. "Your sanctimonious father—"

"You mean, your brother? The one who would do anything for you?" Merritt shot back.

"Had become so wrapped up in his 'clean mining' high horse." Nolan continued like Merritt hadn't interrupted him. "It was becoming a problem, especially when he realized that the reports on the graphite mine might have been tampered with."

So, Dr. Erikson had been right. Nolan turned away from them as he paced, and Tiikâan prepared to charge.

When Nolan turned back around with a gleam in his eye as he looked at Tiikâan and a smirk on his lips, Tiikâan knew there'd be no getting a drop on Nolan.

"And once he looked into those, it was just a matter of time before he looked elsewhere, and that would've been

detrimental to me. Joni and I had worked too hard to have everything ruined.”

Nolan shrugged. “It seems a plane crash in Alaska isn’t all that difficult to arrange, though I had planned on your demise to be different. Can’t have questions raised with two similar deaths, now can we?”

Nolan held his arms wide as he took in the area. “The crash and this cave are so much better than I could have planned. Hard to be suspicious of the grief-stricken survivor.”

Maybe Tiikâan couldn’t get the drop on Nolan, but he could give Merritt time to run. Or he could wrestle the gun from Nolan, even with a bullet wound.

He knew better than most that animals don’t die right away.

Unless they’re shot through the heart.

Then he’d be useless, and Merritt would definitely be dead. He glanced behind him at the water, his heart thrashing against his ribs and up his throat.

“So, what?” Tiikâan focused back on Nolan. “You just planned to hold your breath and wait for the right time to pounce?”

He pushed his hand against Merritt’s collarbone on each word of “hold your breath” and prayed she got the clue.

“I’m trying to have a conversation with my niece.” Nolan glared, then pointed the pistol at Tiikâan’s chest. “Why don’t you see your way out?”

In one motion, Tiikâan pinned Merritt tight against him and fell backward off the edge, into the icy water as the explosion from the barrel echoed through the cavern. Piercing cold surrounded him with a splash, and the need to gasp almost had him sucking water into his lungs.

He pushed his arm between the strap and Merritt’s collarbone and gripped the other strap so that he wouldn’t be pulled from her.

They broke the surface, Nolan's yell of rage the only sound as the water rushed them away. Tiikâan's headlamp bounced off the edge of the cavern where the water disappeared beneath the glacier, giving him only a split second to warn Merritt.

"Big breath." He filled his lungs and was swallowed by the deep.

Darkness engulfed them as the glacial water swept Tiikâan and Merritt beneath the ice. His muscles screamed in protest as he fought to keep his grip on her backpack straps, the current threatening to tear them apart.

The freezing water stabbed at his skin like a thousand needles, each second stealing more of his warmth. His lungs burned, desperate for air.

Tiikâan's heart pounded against his ribs, each beat a warning of their dwindling time. He pulled Merritt closer, wrapping his arm around her waist. If they were going to die, they'd go together.

A faint glow appeared ahead. Hope surged through him as they burst into a small air pocket. Tiikâan gasped, dragging in precious oxygen. He felt Merritt's chest heave against him as she did the same.

"Hold on," he managed to rasp before the current yanked them under once more.

The relentless flow battered them against jagged ice formations. Tiikâan's body absorbed most of the impacts, shielding Merritt as best he could. Pain blossomed across his back and shoulders, but he refused to let go.

Another air pocket.

Another desperate gulp of air.

Then back into the frigid depths.

Time lost all meaning as they tumbled through the watery labyrinth. Tiikâan's limbs grew numb, his movements sluggish. Still, he clung to Merritt.

His vision began to dim, black spots dancing at the edges. The need for air became all-consuming, threatening to

override his instincts. Just as he felt his grip on consciousness slipping, a larger opening appeared above them.

Tiikâan burst through the surface, gulping in air as he pulled Merritt up beside him. The roar of the river filled his ears as they were swept downstream, icy banks rushing past in a blur.

“Kick!” he shouted, his voice hoarse.

Merritt didn't answer. He angled them toward the shore, fighting against the current with every ounce of strength he had left.

A dark shape loomed ahead. Before Tiikâan could react, they slammed into a submerged boulder. Pain exploded across his side, and he nearly lost his grip on Merritt. Gritting his teeth, he tightened his hold and pushed off the rock, propelling them closer to the bank.

His muscles screamed in protest, each movement a battle against the numbing cold. Tiikâan's strokes became weaker, less coordinated. Just as despair began to set in, he spotted a fallen tree stretching into the river.

“There!” he gasped, using the last of his strength to maneuver them toward it.

They crashed into the branches, the impact nearly knocking the wind out of him. Tiikâan's fingers, stiff and unresponsive, scrabbled for purchase on the slick bark. He dragged himself and Merritt along the trunk, inch by agonizing inch.

The shore was so close now, but his body threatened to betray him. His arms shook violently, muscles on the verge of giving out. Tiikâan clenched his jaw, forcing himself to keep moving. He couldn't let go. Not now. Not when Merritt's life depended on him.

With one final, herculean effort, Tiikâan hauled them both onto the muddy bank. He collapsed onto his side, chest heaving, the world spinning around him as exhaustion threatened to pull him under.

Tiikâan rolled to his side, his heart seizing when he saw Merritt lying motionless beside him.

“No,” he rasped, yanking his arm free from her backpack strap. He tore off his own pack, his frozen fingers fumbling with the clasps.

“Merritt!”

His voice cracked as he lifted her limp form, quickly removing her backpack. Her lips were blue, her skin deathly pale. No breath stirred from her parted lips.

Panic clawed at his throat as he positioned her, ready to start CPR. But before he could begin, Merritt’s body jerked. She sucked in a startled gasp, her eyes flying open. Relief flooded through him as she rolled to her side, violently expelling water from her lungs.

Tiikâan’s hand shook as he brushed her wet hair back from her face, his muscles trembling from a combination of exhaustion and bone-deep cold. The storm had subsided, but a biting wind whipped around them, chilling him to his core.

Merritt continued to cough and retch, her body racked with spasms as she purged the river water from her system. Tiikâan murmured soft words of encouragement, his hand never leaving her back.

When the last of her heaves subsided, Tiikâan gently pulled Merritt into his lap, cradling her against his chest. She shivered violently, her teeth chattering.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. “You’re safe now.”

He hated lying to her.

TWENTY-FOUR

Merritt was far from safe.

She was shivering in Tiikâan's arms on the side of a river in the middle the Alaskan wilderness. Granted, the arms were nice and did give her a sense of assurance. Yet Merritt and Tiikâan were so far from safe she'd laugh at the word if she wasn't frozen.

Tiikâan took a deep breath, his chest pushing against her back, then huffed it out with a groan. "We gotta get moving."

"Where?"

Merritt tried to push from the comfort of his arms. She really did, but her muscles refused to move. She'd never been this weak or cold in her entire life.

Guess almost dying didn't agree with her body.

Tiikâan lifted her, placing her on the muddy ground next to him. He groaned long and loud as he rolled to his knees and pushed to his feet. He tipped his chin to the forest that loomed over them as he pulled his pack on.

"This area is a rescue nightmare."

He pointed to the cliffs jutting up from the river on the other side to the tree-lined banks on the side they were on, the trees practically bowing over the river. "No landing space for a plane, and even the hotshot helicopter pilot brother of mine wouldn't be able to get his bird in that tight area."

She crawled to her knees, but when she went to stand, her legs collapsed. “I don’t... I can’t.”

Tears burned her eyes and closed her throat. How could her uncle, her dad’s only relative aside from herself, do this? Had Dad known it was Nolan and that was why he said to trust no one?

She bent over her knees and put her forehead on the cold mud, the urge to vomit having nothing to do with swallowing gallons of water. She attempted to rein in the emotions threatening to drown her, just as the river had tried. But her deep breaths caught and stuttered with silent sobs.

A large, warm hand settled on her back, rubbing in slow circles. Tiikâan didn’t tell her to suck it up. He didn’t.

He simply kneeled beside her, like he knew there was no holding back the tide within her. Each circle of his palm loosened the tightness in her chest, making breathing easier. Each deep breath calmed her mind a bit more.

Maybe riding out the tsunami of emotions instead of fighting it would help her cope. Because struggling against everything building in her since her dad’s death—shoot, since her mom’s death when she was seven—dragged her to a place and into a person she didn’t want to be.

With the ability to breathe again, she prayed for strength, not only of body but of mind. If she didn’t want Nolan’s betrayal to destroy her, she needed both. Otherwise, the now-tainted memories rushing through her mind would make her tenuous hold snap.

“I’m fine.” Her trembling voice called her a liar. She took another deep breath and sat up. “I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not.” Tiikâan stood and held out his hand to help her up. “But you will be. Mom always said it’s okay if you need a breather when you get the wind knocked out of you. But getting it knocked out of you and letting it knock you down are two different things.”

“I’d love to meet your mom.” The image of a home filled with love and the scent of fresh cinnamon rolls took place in

her mind.

“Oh, you will.” He wrapped his hand around her arm. “As soon as we get out of here, I’m taking you home.”

“Really?”

“We’re not letting go, remember?”

Oh, she remembered all right. She swore her lips still tingled.

“Though, knowing my family, as soon as they realize we’re missing, even if they think it’s just our bodies, they’ll all be in Barrow with a hotel room as their base. Maps with search grids will be tacked to the walls, and no stone will be left unturned.”

As he talked about the type of family she’d always fantasized about growing up, she got her feet under her. Her legs shouldn’t feel so heavy. When she pushed to stand, even with Tiikâan pulling her, her knees buckled.

“I’m sorry. I just... I don’t—” A tear slipped from her eye.

“Hey. Your body’s toast. Tapped out.” He cupped her cheek with his chilled hands and wiped the tear with his thumb. “That tends to happen when you survive not only a plane crash but almost drowning.”

He grabbed her pack and handed it to her. “Hold this in front of you.”

When she had it in her lap, he bent and scooped her into his arms like a baby... or a bride. His arm muscles trembled beneath her thighs and across her back. He took a step, adjusted his hold on her, then continued through the woods.

“Tiikâan, no.” She tried to shift to have him put her down, but he tightened his hands. “I can walk if you help me. You’ve got to be close to exhaustion, too.”

“I’m good. At least for a bit.” He turned sideways to push them through some tightly woven willow branches. “We don’t need to go far. We just need to find a place to bunk down.”

Merritt nestled against Tiikâan's chest, her heart racing at the closeness. His steady breathing and the rhythmic crunch of his footsteps on the forest floor lulled her into a trancelike state. She fought to keep her eyes open, watching the moss-covered ground and gnarled roots pass beneath them.

With each step, she expected him to set her down, but he pressed on, his muscles trembling beneath her. The urge to protest bubbled up in her throat, but she swallowed it back. There was something comforting, almost primal, about being carried like this through the wilderness.

"What exactly are we looking for?" she finally thought to ask.

Her legs may be spent, but her eyes still worked.

Tiikâan's chest rumbled as he spoke. "Somewhere with dry ground. We need to get out of these wet clothes before hypothermia sets in."

Merritt's cheeks flushed thinking about changing clothes in front of him, but she pushed the thought aside and focused on their surroundings.

The Alaskan wilderness seemed determined to thwart their efforts. Every patch of earth glistened with moisture, and the air itself felt heavy with humidity from the storm. Or maybe that was the constant atmosphere of the Brooks Range.

She scanned the landscape, desperation growing with each passing moment. Tiikâan's breathing had grown labored, and she could feel the tremors in his arms increasing.

Just as she was about to insist he put her down, Merritt spotted a rocky outcropping jutting from the mountainside.

"There!" She pointed toward the formation. "Those rocks look dry."

His pace quickened, his grip on her tightening as he navigated the uneven terrain. Merritt clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as they approached what she hoped would be their sanctuary in this unforgiving wilderness.

Tiikâan gently set Merritt down on the first flat rock, his hands lingering on her waist for a moment longer than necessary. He plucked her pack from her grasp, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her breath catch.

“I’ll be right back.”

Before she could protest, he turned and began scaling the jumble of rocks that lined the mountainside. Merritt watched, her heart in her throat, as one minute he was clambering up the rock and the next he dropped from sight.

“Tiikâan?” she called out, her voice wavering.

Silence answered her.

Panic clawed at her chest. She pushed herself to her feet, her legs trembling beneath her. Had he fallen into a hole? Cracked his head against a rock?

“Tiikâan!” she yelled again, louder this time.

Still no response.

Fear propelled her forward. She climbed up the rocks, her weakened muscles screaming in protest. The rough surface of the rocks bit into her palms and knees as she crawled upward, each movement a battle against her exhaustion.

“Please,” she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. “Please be okay.”

She was about halfway to where he’d disappeared when movement caught her eye. His head popped out from between the rocks, looking like a meerkat she’d seen in Africa. His eyes widened when he saw her.

Relief flooded through Merritt, so intense it made her dizzy. She sagged against the nearest boulder.

He scrambled down the rocks toward her, his movements quick and sure. He reached her side in seconds, his warm hands cupping her face.

“Hey, I’m here.” His thumbs brushed away tears she hadn’t realized she’d shed. “I found us a place to camp for the night. It’s not perfect, Merritt, but we’ll be safe there.”

His words washed over her like a soothing balm, and she leaned into his touch, allowing herself a moment to soak up his presence.

Tiikâan's arm slid around Merritt's waist, supporting her as they made their way up the remaining rocks. His touch was both steadying and electrifying, sending shivers through her that had nothing to do with the cold.

"Almost there," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

They reached a large fissure in the ground, nestled between two massive boulders. He released her gently, then lowered himself into the opening. He turned back to her, arms outstretched.

"Come on," he said softly. "I've got you."

Merritt hesitated for a split second before allowing him to guide her down. His strong hands gripped her waist, lifting her effortlessly into the shelter. As her feet touched the ground, she found herself pressed against his chest, her face coming to rest in the crook of his neck.

She should step back, she knew. But her body refused to move. Instead, she leaned into him, drinking in his warmth, his strength. His arms tightened around her, one hand splaying across her lower back, the other cradling the nape of her neck.

For a long moment, they stood there, clinging to each other in the dim light of their rocky refuge. Merritt could feel his heart pounding against her cheek, matching the frantic rhythm of her own. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to linger.

In that moment, surrounded by his warmth and the solid presence of his body, Merritt realized she never wanted to let go.

Tiikâan's lips brushed against the side of Merritt's head, sending a wave of warmth through her despite her sodden clothes. He eased away, his hand finding hers as he guided her deeper into the fissure.

The narrow opening widened into a small cave-like space, barely big enough for two people to lie down. Their packs

rested against one rocky wall. He leaned her gently against the opposite side, his touch lingering before he bent to rummage through his large pack.

Merritt surveyed their shelter. The walls stretched about six feet high, with another rock forming a partial roof at the highest end of the cave. She swallowed hard, pushing away the irrational fear that the rocks might collapse on them at any moment.

“It’s not the Ritz,” Tiikâan said, straightening up with a tarp and hatchet in his hands, “but it’ll keep us dry.”

He moved to the entrance, shaking out the tarp. “I’m going to stretch this across the top for a roof, then go search for some firewood. While I’m gone, you should change out of those wet clothes.”

Merritt’s eyes widened. “You’re leaving me?”

His expression softened. “I’ll be quick. Promise.”

She nodded, suddenly acutely aware of how her clothes clung to her skin and how far from anywhere they were.

“Good,” he said, his voice gentle. “I’ll announce myself before I come back in. Don’t worry, you’re safe here.”

With that, he ducked out, leaving Merritt alone in their makeshift shelter. The sound of the tarp snapping from above barely audible over her pounding heart.

She jumped when he appeared on the edge of the fissure and started shoving the tarp under the overhanging rock. His hands trembled as he worked, and he stopped every now and then to shake them out.

He was freezing, just like her, and if she didn’t snap out of it, he’d have to take care of her before he could take care of himself. Not that she’d expect it. That was just the type of man he was. She didn’t want to be any more of a burden than she already was.

With that thought firmly in mind, she plopped down near her pack, unclipped the sides, and unrolled the top, then pulled items out, carefully lining them up.

There was a gallon-sized ziplock bag with a map and compass in it, a small portable stove hidden inside a camp mug, another ziplock with twigs and what looked like little paper bag packets, six energy bars, and four freeze-dried meals, all vegetarian.

She swallowed the lump in her throat that he considered her preference, even in an emergency. Next came a small stuffed bag she assumed was a sleeping bag.

When all of that was out, she saw a long flat bag made out of the same ram head logo and waterproof rubberlike nylon material the backpack was made out of. Unzipping it revealed a warm hat, gloves, thermal underclothes, a pair of jeans, and a flannel shirt. Under that were wool socks.

Her cheeks and neck heated as her eyes blurred. He'd truly thought of everything.

"I'm going to look for firewood now. I won't be long." Tiikâan's voice jerked her gaze to the bright-blue tarp stretched over the opening above.

How had he gotten a roof over their heads, and she hadn't even unfolded her clothes?

"Okay," she called back, rolling her eyes when her voice cracked.

So much for being strong.

She scrambled to unzip her jacket, her numb fingers fumbling with the zipper. The ache in her muscles as she pulled off her clothes felt like she'd been thrown into a meat grinder. Every movement sent shards of pain through her body, her bones replaced with broken glass.

Peeling off her shirt was like ripping off a layer of skin, the wet fabric clinging stubbornly to her body. She gasped at the purple and blue bruises mottling her skin.

Her fingers, stiff as icicles, fumbled with the buttons of her jeans. Each attempt to undo them sent jolts of pain up her arms, as if she were trying to bend frozen twigs.

As she struggled out of her pants, her legs trembled. The simple act of standing made her feel like Atlas, the weight of the world pressing her down into the ground. Her teeth chattered, a staccato rhythm that filled in the small space.

The cold air hit her damp skin, raising goosebumps that felt like a thousand tiny needles pricking her flesh. Merritt reached for the dry clothes with the desperation of a drowning person grasping for a lifeline.

Each piece she put on was a battle against her uncooperative body, but also a small victory against the cold that had seeped into her very bones. When she was fully dressed, she hugged herself.

She couldn't just sit there waiting. If Tiikâan could push through the cold, not even stopping to change into dry clothes, she could, too.

Snatching up the sleeping bag, she yanked it out of the tiny holder, completely out of breath when she finished, and laid it out in the widest space beneath the tarp. Next, she dug through Tiikâan's much larger pack, completely amazed at the meticulously chosen gear, until she found his sleeping bag and stretched it out beside hers.

She grabbed the little metal Bushbuddy stove, no bigger than a small paint can. With the cold frying her braincells, she cursed as she turned the two-piece stove this way and that, frustration mounting with each second.

Before she tossed the infuriating thing against the stone wall, she set it down, grabbed her sleeping bag, and unzipped it so she could sit on the bottom and wrap the top around her shoulders. Slightly warmer, she took a deep breath and figured out the way-too-simple setup for the stove.

“Okay. I've got this.”

She placed one of the paper bag packets in the bottom of the stove and loosely stacked some of the twigs around the packet. Her hand shook so hard as she struck the first match against the metal container she found them in that it snapped in half.

The next one did the same, and her vision blurred with tears.

“Come on.” The third match went in the stove with the other two broken ones. “Please, Lord, help.”

She tucked her hands under her armpits and closed her eyes against the tears leaking relentlessly from them. Who was she kidding?

She wasn't strong.

Definitely not capable.

She was nothing but a pampered socialite. Sure, she'd gone to troubled areas, but even there she was a fraud. She always had her private tent. Always had supplies and food, little necessities that were nothing more than comforts, while the people suffered around her.

She was a fake.

Changing to what was expected. Not solid in herself. Definitely not having any worthy skills.

She couldn't even start a freaking fire. Tiikâan would've had a better chance at surviving if he would've just let her drown.

TWENTY-FIVE

“Find wood. Get warm. Don’t die.” Tickâan’s teeth chattered so hard any minute he’d break a tooth.

He scanned the undergrowth of fallen branches, snapping limbs down along the way. Bending to pick up a branch, it crumbled to rotted pieces. He growled and chucked the useless piece aside. Of course, the river had to spit them out where the trees grew along with the moss.

Stupid river. Stupid Alaskan moss.

A root snagged his boot, tripping him to the ground. The small pile of wood he’d gathered scattered. He smashed his lips and teeth together to keep from bellowing in anger. Merritt would freak even more if he started screaming like a madman.

“Okay. You’re not stupid,” he told the forest as he got to his feet and picked up the twigs he’d gathered. “I love the wilderness. I just could use a little help here.”

He stumbled farther along, his feet heavy as if his boots were caked in clay. The twigs in his arms might as well have been redwoods with how hard it was to keep his arms around them. He wouldn’t last much longer without heat.

“Find wood. Get warm. Don’t die.” Snapped another twig. Stepped one more step. “Find wood. Get warm. Don’t die.”

Snap. Step. Repeat.

Except the ground beneath his next step disappeared with a crack. He groaned as pain shot through his knee when he

jerked to a halt. He leaned against the downed tree covered in moss, his leg was tangled in, and closed his eyes.

His brain was toast. If he didn't get back to the shelter, he was going to break something.

It'd be a heck of a lot harder to stay alive then. He'd just gather twigs the entire way back. The fire wouldn't last, but it'd get enough of the chill off for both him and Merritt to sleep a few hours. Plan made, he pushed off the tree and opened his eyes.

When he inspected his leg, he chuckled. "Found wood."

The branches crisscrossed around his leg were as thick as his wrist. The twigs had been sheared off in the fall, leaving almost perfect four-foot lengths.

He set his pile aside and pushed against a branch. It creaked in protest, then splintered away from the trunk. The next one gave with a pop. He continued breaking off branches until he had all he could carry and his leg was free.

He patted the trunk, then glanced to the gray sky. "Thank you."

His knee ached as he climbed back to the shelter. But then again, everything ached.

Even his hair.

When he got to the base of the rock slope, he set his pile on the ground. There was no way he could scramble up the rocks with all of it. His gaze snagged on a print in the mud.

The hair on the back of his neck rose, and he scanned the trees before examining the print. The grizzly that left the massive impression hadn't been through that long ago, not with the way the soft mud collected around the edge of the impression without much water in it.

Tiikâan stood and searched the trees where the bear went to. When he didn't see anything, he widened his scan. Nothing.

He glanced back up the slope at the bright-blue tarp stretched out. It wasn't impossible for the bear to hike up it,

just not probable.

The gap between the rocks was too small for a bear that size to squeeze into. It was as safe a location as they would get in the circumstance. Besides, the bear was probably miles away by now.

Grabbing the twigs, he scrambled up the rocks. “Merritt, I’m coming in.”

“Okay.” Her faint answer almost didn’t float above the sounds of the forest.

He held his bundle close to his chest as he jumped down into the crevice with a grunt. Hopefully his knee didn’t swell up. They did not need another thing against them.

He stopped short at the sight of Merritt sitting completely bundled in a sleeping bag, only her face and hands clutching a steaming mug. Small flames flicked out of the Bushbuddy stove and around his TOAKS pot.

This woman...amazing.

“Good job, Merritt.” He set the bundle of twigs next to the packs against the wall. “This will make starting the fire a cinch.”

“I used all the kindling.” Her trembling voice pulled his attention to her.

“That’s fine. Lots of forest around to replace it.”

Her chin quivered and eyes turned bright with tears. “And I wasted eight matches before I could get it started.”

“It’s okay.”

He crawled over to her and cupped her cheek. Dried tears covered her skin. He rubbed his thumb across the tear track. She stared into the fire with a despondency that scared him.

“I have a few Bic lighters, so we’ll be okay.” He tipped her chin so she looked at him. “You did really good, Merritt. This will save me so much time, and I’ll be able to warm up faster. Thank you.”

One tear broke free and rushed down her still too pale cheek. He caught it with his lips, kissing her softly. She leaned into his touch.

“We’re going to be okay.” He kissed her cold cheek again. “Promise.”

He pulled away. The doubt in her eyes gutted him, but he’d prove he was right. He was more at home in the woods than anywhere else. He’d get them out, then they’d get her scumbag uncle behind bars.

Tiikâan’s muscles protested as he hauled himself out of the crevice. The cold air bit through his still damp shirt, not that he didn’t need the reminder to hustle. He glanced back at Merritt, her small form huddled by the fire, before setting his jaw and getting to work.

He ferried the branches to their makeshift shelter. Each trip felt longer than the last, his body screaming for warmth and rest. But the image of Merritt’s tear-stained face drove him forward. He’d promised her they’d be okay, and he’d do anything to keep that promise.

A nearby boulder caught his eye, its jagged surface offering the perfect tool. Tiikâan wedged a branch into a deep crack and leaned his weight against it.

The wood groaned, then snapped with a satisfying crack. He repeated the process, his movements becoming more fluid as he found a rhythm.

As he worked, his mind wandered to Merritt. Her resourcefulness in getting the fire started had impressed him. It wasn’t easy to start a flame in the little firebox when your fingers shook. She was tougher than she looked, his city girl.

His?

Rightness filled him. Yeah, as barbaric as it was to claim her as his own, he did. One hundred percent.

With each log he stacked under the tarp at the edge of the opening, Tiikâan felt a little more in control. This was his element. He might not be able to protect Merritt from her

uncle's schemes, but here, in the wilderness, he could keep her safe.

Finally satisfied with the pile of firewood, Tiikâan climbed back into their shelter. His body ached, but a sense of accomplishment warmed him from the inside. He'd done what needed to be done. Now it was time to tend to Merritt and figure out their next move.

Tiikâan's teeth chattered as he stumbled toward their gear. His hands shook so violently he could barely grip the straps of his backpack. He needed to move everything.

Now.

Before his muscles seized up completely.

"What are you doing?" Merritt's voice was muffled by the sleeping bag cocoon.

"F-fire needs to be on the upslope end. Don't want to... to get smoked out."

The pack slipped from his trembling fingers, spilling its contents across the rocky floor. Tiikâan cursed under his breath, frustration warring with bone-deep cold. His body was crashing.

A rustle of fabric caught his attention. Merritt emerged from her warm nest, determination etched on her face. "You need to change into dry clothes. I'll move the gear."

"I've got it. It'll just take a sec," he protested, reaching for the scattered items. His fingers felt like useless blocks of ice, but he didn't want her to get any colder.

"Stop." Merritt's hand on his arm halted him. Her touch sent a jolt of warmth through the shirt material to his frozen skin. "I'm not some helpless princess, Tiikâan. Let me help."

He looked into her eyes, seeing not pity, but a fierce resolve that matched his own. Something inside him softened, even as another violent shiver racked his body.

"Okay," he conceded, his voice barely above a whisper. "Th-thank you."

Merritt thrust the dry clothes bag into his hands and turned away, busying herself with the scattered gear.

Tiikâan fumbled with the zipper, his frozen fingers clumsy and uncooperative. When he finally managed to peel off his sodden shirt, a groan of pain escaped his lips before he could stop it.

He felt Merritt's gaze on him and looked over. Her eyes widened as they traveled across his exposed torso, a blush creeping up her cheeks. Any other time, he might have enjoyed her obvious appreciation, maybe even flexed a little for her benefit.

But right now, he was too darn cold to care.

Merritt's expression suddenly shifted from awe to confusion, then alarm. "Tiikâan, you're shot!"

Before he could process her words, she was at his side, her warm hands ghosting over his skin. He hissed as her fingers grazed a spot just below his armpit.

Tiikâan glanced down, surprised to see a gash the width of his pinkie along his side. The cold had numbed him so completely he hadn't even felt it.

"It's bleeding," she said, her voice tight with worry. "Must have opened up when you were gathering wood."

"It's just a graze," he muttered, though the sight of his own blood made his stomach lurch.

Merritt's face was inches from his, her breath warm on his chilled skin. "Just a graze? You should have told me you were hurt!"

The concern in her eyes made his chest constrict. He opened his mouth to reassure her, but another violent shiver cut off his words. She glared at him.

"Get dressed. As soon as we get the fire built, I'm tending that." Her eyes narrowed. "No argument."

Tiikâan nodded, too exhausted to argue. He fumbled through his pack, locating the first aid kit with numb fingers.

Pressing a wad of gauze against the wound, he winced at the sting. At least the pain meant he was starting to regain feeling.

Changing clothes became an epic battle. His wet pants clung to his legs like a determined octopus, refusing to release their icy grip. By the time he'd wrestled them off and pulled on dry clothes, he was panting from the effort.

He looked up, blinking in surprise. While he'd been engaged in mortal combat with his wardrobe, Merritt had transformed their shelter.

The packs were neatly stacked on the downslope side, and two sleeping bags lay side by side a safe distance from where the fire would be. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of them so close together.

At the upslope end of the crevasse, Merritt knelt by a small pile of twigs arranged in a crude teepee formation. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she added another stick to the structure.

"You've been busy," he said, his voice rough.

She glanced up, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Well, one of us had to be productive while you were putting on a one-man show over there."

Despite his exhaustion and the lingering cold, warmth bloomed in his chest. He lowered himself onto the sleeping bag, his muscles protesting every movement. He reached for the TOAKS pot, relishing the heat that seeped into his hands as he lifted it to his lips. The hot tea rushed down his throat.

The teepee Merritt built listed to one side. A violent shiver racked his body, nearly causing him to spill the precious tea. Her gaze jerked to him, almost knocking her kindling down.

"I'm fine," he assured her, though his chattering teeth betrayed him. "Now, let's get this fire going before we turn into Alaskan popsicles."

He talked her through how to stack the kindling like a small log cabin so it wouldn't fall over, his voice growing steadier as the tea worked its magic. "Okay, now take some of

those smaller twigs and use the flame from the Bushbuddy to light them.”

“You mean this isn’t some elaborate Boy Scout ritual where we rub two sticks together?” she teased, following his instructions.

“Sorry to disappoint. We’re cheating today.”

As the flames caught and grew, Merritt’s face lit up with triumph. “Look at that! I’m practically a wilderness survival expert now.”

Tiikâan chuckled. “Don’t get cocky. You haven’t wrestled a moose for our dinner yet.”

“Is that on tomorrow’s agenda? I’ll pencil it in right after ‘avoid hypothermia’ and before ‘escape crazed uncle.’”

Their laughter, tinged with a hint of hysteria, echoed off the rock walls. Her laughter died down with a sniff.

“Merritt—”

She gave one hard shake of her head. “Let’s take care of that wound.”

He set the pot off to the side and lifted his shirt. A faint pink tinged the gauze, but it hadn’t bled through. He dropped his shirt.

“It’ll keep.” He shrugged.

“Oh, no. It needs to be cleaned out and probably butterfly bandaged.” Merritt grabbed the first aid kit and sat next to him.

He laughed. “What do you think the river did for the mile we tumbled down it?”

“Got all kinds of microbes and bugs in it.” She shuddered, making him laugh again.

“Right out of the glacier like that, it’s probably the cleanest water you’ve ever been in. Plus, with how much it bled, that’s better cleaning than any alcohol wipe.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. At least let me butterfly it to try and help it not break open again.”

“Fine.”

“Great.” She tipped her head like she was waiting for his next complaint.

“Would you get to it already?” He laughed and lifted his arm, pulling up his shirt. “I want to finish my tea and climb under the covers. I’m still frozen inside.”

Merritt’s trembling fingers skimmed along his skin, sending a shiver through him. Tiikâan sucked in a sharp breath, his muscles tensing involuntarily.

“Sorry,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

He shook his head, not trusting his voice. Her touch was electric, setting every nerve ending alight. When she tried to pull the edges of the wound together, he couldn’t suppress a grimace.

“Here, lie down,” she instructed softly. “It’ll be easier.”

Tiikâan complied, acutely aware of her proximity as she leaned over him. Her hair fell forward, tickling his chest. The scent of river water and something uniquely Merritt filled his senses, making his head spin.

Her touch was featherlight as she applied the butterfly bandages, her brow furrowed in concentration. The curve of her lips and the flicker of firelight in her eyes mesmerized him. His heart thundered in his chest, and he wondered if she could see it hammering against his ribs.

When she finished, Merritt leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to the bandage before pulling his layers of clothing down. Tiikâan’s breath caught in his throat, his skin burning where her lips had touched. Before he could process that, she moved higher, her lips brushing against his collarbone.

Time seemed to stand still.

The cave, the cold, the danger—it all faded away.

There was only Merritt, her warmth, her scent, the feel of her breath against his skin. Then she buried her face in the crook of his neck, her body trembling slightly.

“I almost got you killed,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

The words hit him like a physical blow.

“No,” he rasped out, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her tight against him. “You don’t get to take that on.”

“But—”

“Shh.” He pulled her sleeping bag around them. “No more talking. I need my beauty sleep.”

For a moment, he thought she’d protest, but then she melted into his hold. Within minutes, soft snores he’d make sure to tease her about in the morning vibrated against his skin.

Yet as exhausted as he was, he couldn’t give in to sleep. All the ways Alaska could prevent him from fulfilling his promise to keep her safe ran through his head right alongside all his previous failures.

TWENTY-SIX

Merritt couldn't decide if being roasted alive was a good thing or bad. Like a marshmallow kept over the flames too long, she oozed and lost shape.

But unlike the sweet treat, she was sticky with sweat. It pooled in all the normal places and even some she never imagined, like the inside of her elbows. If she didn't move, her body would likely combust.

Tiikâan groaned and pulled her tighter against his side. Despite sweating more than an armadillo in the desert in summer, she snuggled in.

Encased in her sleeping bag, which had been pulled into his, and wrapped in his arms, she felt like a burrito set on the griddle to toast up, especially with her back to the fire.

She always assumed she was claustrophobic. Wasn't everyone? So why was she willing to be roasted alive just to be held by a man?

Tiikâan's hand rubbed up her back, then softly brushed the sweaty hair from her face. She had to look a mess.

But when she leaned back enough to peek at him, his expression, as his fingers pushed paths against her scalp and around her ear, made her feel like he'd found something precious.

He wasn't just a man.

He was her safe place.

Had been from practically their first meeting. With him, after a lifetime of pretending, she could just be herself.

“Morning, Skeeter.” He kissed her forehead as it furrowed.

“Skeeter?” She pushed back and lifted an eyebrow.

“All night long you had this little wheezing snore come out with every breath.” His mouth twitched on one side as her mouth gaped with a gasp. “It was like a little mosquito buzzing near my ear.”

“Excuse me, but I do not snore.” She had a hard time holding in her smile.

“You totally do.” He pressed a quick kiss on her lips. “But it’s cute, so I won’t give you too hard a time.”

“Mosquitoes aren’t cute.” She pouted as he unwrapped himself from around her. “They’re annoying.”

“Yeah, but being snuggled up to the most beautiful woman in the world kind of overrides the annoying part.”

He shrugged as he grabbed his boots from where he’d propped them by the fire and checked the inside of them. “Though I kept smacking at my face every time your hair would tickle my nose.”

She laughed. “You did not.”

He just smiled at her, this sexy grin that made dimples visible through his beard, and a warm, electric current surged through her veins, making her pulse skip and jump like she just hit turbulence.

The urge to pull him back into their makeshift cocoon was overwhelming. Her fingers twitched with the desire to trace the lines of his face, to feel the rough texture of his beard against her palm.

She longed to press her lips against his, to lose herself in a kiss that would make the world disappear—her uncle’s betrayal, the wilderness surrounding them, all of it fading away until there was nothing left but the two of them.

But reality crashed over her like an icy wave. One didn't survive the Alaskan wilderness on kisses and wishes.

Merritt bit her lower lip, her eyes drinking in every detail of Tiikâan's face as if to memorize it. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, the strong line of his jaw, the messy hair that made her want to run her fingers through it.

He set his boots aside and closed the space between them in a breath, as if reading her mind. His fingers plunged into her messy hair, holding her captive.

Merritt's heart thundered in her chest, a wild rhythm that matched the rushing of the nearby river. Time seemed to slow as Tiikâan's face drew closer, his warm breath mingling with hers.

When their lips met, it was like coming home.

Soft and gentle at first, then deepening with a passion that made her toes curl inside her socks. The world faded away, leaving only the two of them in that moment. His beard tickled her chin, a reminder of his rugged strength that made her feel utterly safe and cherished.

Merritt melted into the kiss, her hands finding their way to his shoulders, feeling the solid warmth beneath his shirt. A tiny sigh escaped her, half contentment, half longing for more. This was what she'd been missing her whole life—this connection, this feeling of belonging.

As they parted, she kept her eyes closed for a moment, savoring the lingering sensation. When she finally looked up at him, she saw her own emotions reflected in his eyes—wonder, affection, and an abundance of protective fierceness that made her heart skip a beat.

“Come on, Skeet.” His growly voice sent a delicious shiver down her back. “We've got a long day ahead of us.”

But before Merritt could respond, Tiikâan's lips found hers again, stealing her breath and her thoughts in one swift motion.

This kiss was different—playful, almost teasing.

His mouth left hers, trailing a path of featherlight kisses along her jawline toward her ear. Each touch sent sparks dancing across her skin, and she couldn't help the giggle that bubbled up from her chest as his beard tickled her sensitive neck.

The sound of her own laughter surprised her.

How long had it been since she'd felt this light, this carefree?

In the midst of danger and uncertainty, Tiikâan had given her a moment of pure joy. Her heart swelled with affection for this man who could make her forget their perilous situation, even if just for a moment.

As his lips reached her ear, Merritt's giggles subsided into a contented sigh. He wasn't doing a very good job getting ready for their long day of surviving the Alaskan wilderness. But there was no way on God's green earth that she would stop him.

Instead, she simply leaned in, savoring the feeling of being cherished, protected, and completely understood without a single word being spoken. His lips found hers again, unrelenting in their claim of her.

With a groan, he leaned his forehead to hers. They both sucked air like they'd just almost drowned, and his heart battered against her hand.

"You're dangerous." His breath blew across her tingling lips, enticing her to lean forward and forget about ever leaving their makeshift shelter, but his words made her cringe.

Being with her almost got him killed. Because of her and her messed-up family, there was a possibility of him dying in the mountains, his body never found. If anything, she was more a danger to him than anything Alaska had to offer.

She schooled her expression and pushed him away. "What's the plan, mountain man?"

With one last peck, he sat next to her and pulled his boot on. "We eat, pack up camp, then head up and over the mountain."

“Why not follow the river to civilization?” Not that she questioned his plan, but didn’t Bear Grylls say to follow water? “Or backtrack up the river to the plane?”

“There’s no telling how far we were swept downstream, and we won’t be able to make it back to the plane in time for rescue anyway. With the storm past, I would be surprised if the search party hasn’t already arrived.”

“Too bad the only one being saved is the murderer.” Merritt pushed aside the horrible words about her uncle that wanted to spew from her lips and focused on their own survival. “So, we’re going into the mountains instead of following the river?”

“We’ll most likely follow the river, kind of.” He handed her boots to her, then dug in his pack. “I want to get to higher ground. The overgrowth along the water would be a nightmare to traverse, plus make being spotted by search parties near impossible.”

He tossed her a protein bar, then pulled his map out.

“From higher ground, we can see if there are any landmarks that will tell us where we are exactly. Just sucks that the glacier sits in a pretty isolated bowl surrounded to the west by sheer cliffs. Getting back to it might be next to impossible.”

Tapping a spot on the paper, he traced his finger along a river. “But if we follow the river up on the ridgeline, we’ll make better time, be more visible, and all water leads to civilization, right?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

But it wasn’t.

Not even close.

All she saw on the map was the sprawling space between them and the nearest village. For hundreds of miles, there was nothing but mountains and tundra.

How would they ever make it? And more importantly, how could anyone possibly find them?

TWENTY-SEVEN

Merritt's gaze pressed into Tiikâan's back as he slung his pack over his shoulders. He ignored it, along with the gnawing ache in his knee and the fresh grizzly print that had overwritten his from the night before.

No sense in worrying her with things beyond their control, especially with her fear of bears.

He'd already decided they wouldn't be following the river for long, not with the dense, almost junglelike growth lining the banks. Reaching higher ground was paramount. Not only for visibility but for their sanity.

"Ready?" he asked, not turning.

"As I'll ever be." The tremor had him smiling at her and offering her his hand.

As soon as she was steady, he squeezed her fingers.

"We're gonna be okay, Skeeter."

"I know." She smiled, but the worry in her eyes remained.

He kissed her forehead, lingering for a moment, drawing strength from her nearness. "Let's go."

Turning, he led them along the base of the mountain, searching for a break in the towering cliffs. The going was tough, the forest floor a tangled mess of deadfall and thick moss that swallowed their boots with every step.

His knee throbbed with each movement, a dull ache that intensified to a sharp stab whenever his foot landed on uneven

ground. He ignored it, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, keeping a watchful eye out for any sign of danger.

The forest was eerily silent, save for the crunch of their boots on dry leaves and the rush of the river. A shiver ran down his spine, raising goosebumps on his arms despite the exertion of their climb.

Something wasn't right.

He scanned the undergrowth on either side of the faint game trail he found. The hair on the back of his neck prickled at the lack of birdsong, the absence of any small creatures scurrying through the underbrush. Even the squirrels seemed to have deserted this part of the forest.

His eyes narrowed, searching for any sign of movement, any clue as to why this place felt so... off.

"Everything okay?" Merritt's quiet question startled him.

"Yeah, just—" He looked back at her, his breath catching in his throat. Her eyes were wide with concern, her gaze fixed on something behind him.

He whirled around, his hand instinctively going for the hunting knife sheathed at his hip. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Just... this place. It feels weird, doesn't it? Like something's watching us." Her words echoed his own unease, sending a chill racing down his spine.

He scanned the trees again but couldn't shake the feeling they weren't alone. It was one thing to be hypervigilant, attuned to every sound and movement of the forest. This was something else entirely... a primal instinct screaming at him to get Merritt out of there.

Now.

"Let's keep moving."

His voice sounded strained even to his ears. He tightened his grip on her hand, urging her onto the game trail leading up the mountain, picking up the pace.

The trail became steeper, the trees thinning slightly as they ascended. Blown over trees littered the path. Stifling his groans every time he climbed over a trunk was getting darn near impossible.

Loose rocks skittered down the incline with each step, the sound echoing as the rocks bounced down the slope. Tiikâan's heart hammered against his ribs, a drumbeat of anxiety that matched the increasing ache in his knee.

"Careful." He warned as a rock broke loose beneath his foot.

A high-pitched shriek pierced the air, followed by the sickening crunch of what had to be snapping bone and the heart-stopping thud of a body hitting the ground.

He didn't have time to react. One moment, Merritt was behind him, her hand clasped in his. The next, she was gone, swallowed by the thick tangle of branches and fallen trees that littered the game trail.

"Merritt! No!"

He scrambled toward the sound, climbing over a trunk in the way, fear lending him a burst of adrenaline that momentarily banished the pain in his knee. He didn't see her, but he heard her muffled cry, the sound coming from somewhere beneath a jumble of branches and a fallen tree trunk as thick as his torso.

"Merritt, talk to me!"

"I'm here," she gasped, her voice tight with pain. "I'm stuck."

He reached her, relieved to find her mostly intact, though a nasty scrape marred her cheek. Her legs were wedged underneath the fallen tree with the branches caging her.

"What's broken?" He eased toward her.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "Just banged up."

Tiikâan thanked God the crack he'd heard was a tree limb and not her.

“Don’t move.” He dropped to his knees beside her.

“I’m trying not to.” Her voice trembled.

He gently broke branches, trying to get enough cleared away from her body so he could pull her out.

As soon as she was clear, he’d hoist her up, find level ground, build a fire, and they’d laugh about this later.

“Okay, Merr.” He shifted closer, ignoring the groan of protest from his knee. “Tell me what’s going on. Can you crawl out?”

“Tree’s moving.” Her voice was barely a whisper as she pointed beyond him with wide eyes.

His head snapped up, his gaze darting to the trunk he’d vaulted getting to her. It rolled slowly from its anchor in the loose dirt. The thick, moss-covered wood creaked ominously above them, a deep, guttural sound that sent a surge of adrenaline coursing through him.

No time.

Think later.

“Merritt, I need you to move, now!”

She tried, straining against the branches, her face contorted with pain.

“I can’t.”

“Come on, babe.” He grabbed her hand and yanked, pulling with everything he had.

She came free in a rush, falling against his chest as the tree trunk groaned above them and shifted a final time.

“Move!” She shoved him as she scrambled to the protection of a boulder off to the side, her terror tangible.

He didn’t need to be told twice, but his knee screamed, making his world spin.

Pain exploded across his back and side as the tree splintered around him, pushing him into the rock Merritt hid

behind. The boulder dug into his ribs with bone-jarring force, stealing his breath.

The world tilted, the tree a roaring monster as it crashed down the mountainside. Merritt's terrified gasp was a whisper against the roar. He clung to the boulder, to consciousness itself as the earth shuddered beneath them.

Then, silence.

His ears rang with it, the absence of sound deafening after the roar of the falling tree. His chest ached with each shallow breath, the pain in his side a white-hot searing that threatened to buckle his knees.

"Tiikâan!" Merritt's frantic voice cut through the fog of pain. "Are you okay?"

He forced his eyes open, blinking against the dust motes dancing in the weak sunlight filtering through the trees.

Merritt's face swam into view, her skin pale with terror.

"I... yeah." His voice sounded raspy, unfamiliar.

He tried to push himself upright, but a wave of dizziness slammed into him, forcing him back against the boulder. Black spots danced in his vision, and he sucked in a sharp breath, stifling a groan as pain lanced through his ribs.

"Don't move." Merritt's hands fluttered over him, her touch surprisingly strong as she pressed him back against the rock. "You're hurt."

He tried to tell her he was fine, more worried about the fear tightening her voice and the tremor in her hands. But the words wouldn't come.

"Just stay still," she ordered, her voice firm despite the shake in it. "I've got you."

His body screamed in protest as he pushed himself upright, Merritt's hand a steadying presence on his arm. Each breath sent a searing pain through his ribs, and he hoped they were just bruised and not broken.

“We need to get up to the ridge,” he gasped out between breaths, his voice raspy.

Merritt’s eyes, wide and dark, searched his.

“I... Okay.” She straightened, squaring her shoulders with a determined set to her jaw that twisted something hot and tight in his chest.

He loved that she didn’t back down, didn’t question him, even though he knew she must be terrified.

“Stay behind me,” he ordered, ignoring the way his voice cracked with pain. “One step at a time.”

His knee throbbed, his side burned, his ribs felt like they were grinding together with every movement, but he forced himself onward. Upward. Toward the sliver of blue sky that beckoned between the trees.

Each step was agony, each breath a struggle. He lost track of time. The forest became a blur of green and brown, the air thick and heavy with the scent of pine and damp earth.

Just as he thought he could go no farther, the trees thinned. He broke free of the forest, sucking in a lungful of cool, clean air that made him dizzy.

He stood on the edge of the world.

Below him, the river wound its way through the valley floor, a silver ribbon reflecting the endless expanse of sky. To the north, a sea of peaks stretched toward the horizon, their snow-capped summits gleaming in the afternoon sun. And above it all, an impossibly blue sky, limitless and indifferent to their plight.

His gut climbed into his chest. The enormity of their situation slammed into him like a physical blow. They were nothing but specks in this unrelenting landscape.

“We made it.” Merritt’s soft words floated with the wind that whipped across the ridgeline.

“Yeah,” he said, surprised he could force out the word.

His voice sounded hoarse, strained. His jaw was tightly clenched and he forced himself to relax.

They were miles from civilization, days, maybe weeks from rescue, if it came at all.

And he was responsible for her being out there.

If he had listened to his gut about not flying and waiting the storm out, they wouldn't be stuck. Sure, they wouldn't know about her uncle's plot, but Tiikâan had vowed to keep her safe.

And he'd failed.

A wave of exhaustion, heavy and relentless, washed over him, making him sway on his feet.

A soft gasp escaped Merritt as she stumbled back from the cliff edge, her eyes wide with alarm. "Whoa! That's a long way down."

Her light tone did nothing to ease the knot of fear tightening in Tiikâan's chest. He'd been so focused on the impossible task of traversing it with a bum knee and battered ribs that he hadn't been paying attention.

"Be careful." The words came out sharper than he'd intended, fueled by the adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

He took a step toward her, wincing as pain shot through his side.

"I'm sorry. I just... I didn't realize how close I was." Merritt's gaze darted from the precipice to his face, her brow furrowed with concern. "You okay? You went white as a ghost there for a second."

He tried to shrug it off, to make light of the pain. The last thing he needed was her worrying about him.

"Just... you made me nervous." He forced a grin.

Her answering smile was shaky, unconvinced. She reached out, her fingers brushing lightly against his arm. The warmth of her touch sent an unexpected jolt through him, and he

sucked in a sharp breath, trying to ignore the way his body reacted to her nearness.

“Let me see,” she said softly, her gaze fixed on his side.

“See what?” He tried to back away, but her grip tightened, surprisingly strong.

“Don’t be an idiot, Tiikâan.” Her voice was firm, brooking no argument. “That fall messed you up worse than you’re letting on. Just let me take a look, okay?”

He stared down at her, a strange mix of emotions swirling inside him. He was used to being the protector, the one in control.

Appearing weak, vulnerable in front of her, well, it went against every instinct he possessed. But there was something in Merritt’s gaze—a combination of unwavering determination and genuine concern—that disarmed him.

With a resigned sigh, he finally relented. “Fine. But it’s probably nothing.”

“Yeah, right,” she muttered under her breath, her fingers grabbing the bottom of his shirts.

He sucked in a breath, his muscles tensing involuntarily as her cool fingers brushed against his heated skin. As she peeled up the layers, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her touch was surprisingly gentle, almost hesitant, yet he couldn’t ignore the way goosebumps spread across his skin with her proximity.

His gaze snagged on the bandage she’d applied earlier, now stained a gruesome red.

“It just broke open again.” He tried to sound nonchalant, praying she didn’t press against his side and disturb the ribs. “It’ll be fine.”

Merritt’s head snapped up, her eyes blazing with anger and worry, stealing his breath. “That’s not ‘fine,’ Tiikâan.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but the words died in his throat as she gently probed the wound, her touch sending a fresh wave of pain through him.

“Deep breaths,” she murmured, her voice low and soothing. “We need to get this cleaned up.”

Peeling off her pack, she dug out the first aid kit and opened an alcohol wipe. He hissed as the cold, stinging fabric hit his wound.

“Sorry.” She cringed and blew on the skin, taking the sting away.

She moved with a quiet efficiency that belied her initial hesitation, her touch becoming more assured as she worked. He tried to ignore the way his body thrummed with pain and focused on her ministrations.

“You’re good at this.” His voice was raspy.

“I got lots of practice in the refugee camps.” Merritt shrugged. “Though this is about the extent of my first aid skills, so don’t go testing my abilities by getting hurt worse.”

He admired her spirit, the way she found humor in even the most dire situation. It was a strength he’d rarely encountered outside of his family before.

“So,” she asked, securing the bandage with a final pat, “what now, oh fearless leader?”

He straightened, drawing in a deep breath and ignoring the way his ribs protested. “We keep moving.”

Merritt nodded, her eyes scanning the horizon. “How far do you think we need to go?”

Tiikâan followed her gaze, trying to gauge distances in the expansive landscape before them. “As far as we can before we get too tired to continue. We want to put as much distance between us and...”

He trailed off, not wanting to vocalize the danger of the bear territory they’d left behind.

“My uncle,” Merritt finished softly, her voice tight.

He reached out, squeezing her hand gently but not correcting her. “We’ll figure this out, Merritt. I promise.”

She gave him a small smile, but he could see the worry lingering in her eyes. “I know. I trust you.”

Her words sent a warmth through him that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. He tugged her hand, leading her away from the cliff’s edge.

“Come on, let’s get moving while we still have daylight.”

She rolled her eyes. “Funny, since the sun never goes down this time of year.”

They began their trek along the ridge, the wind whipping around them as they picked their way over loose rocks and scraggly vegetation. Tiikâan kept a watchful eye on their surroundings, alert for any sign of danger or any landmark that might help orient them.

The going was easier than in the dense forest below, but each step still sent jolts of pain through his side. He gritted his teeth, determined not to let Merritt see how much he was struggling. She had enough to worry about without adding his injuries to the list.

As they rounded a bend in the ridge, a sudden gust of wind caught Merritt off guard. She stumbled, her foot slipping on a loose patch of gravel.

“Whoa!” she cried out, arms swinging out as she stepped back and tried to regain her balance.

Tiikâan lunged for her, his heart in his throat. His fingers grasped empty air as the ground beneath her feet gave way.

Time seemed to slow, stretching into an eternity as he watched her eyes widen with terror.

“Merritt!” he screamed, diving forward as she disappeared over the edge.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Pain shot up Merritt's arm as her fingers clenched around the sharp edge of what had to be a rock jutting out from the cliff. If she hadn't grabbed on, she would've plummeted to the bottom of the ravine.

"Merritt!" Tiikâan scrambled to the cliff edge, his hand reaching out to hers.

She looked down. Bad idea.

The wind whipped at her clothes, the force threatening to rip her off the ledge she clung to. Trees at the bottom of the valley floor looked like miniature replicas of limbed spikes. The rush of the river echoed up like the roar of an angry beast.

The piece of ground she clung to, only the width of a deck of cards, was all that separated her from joining her parents. Except she wouldn't hit the ground, would she?

She'd be impaled on a tree like a bug in a collection—her limbs spread wide for everyone to examine. The image made her stomach roil, though whether it was from the fall or the morbid thought, she couldn't say.

"Merritt, reach up."

She shot her gaze to Tiikâan's outstretched hand. He shifted, stretching farther to reach her, and dirt rained on her face. She shook it loose and focused on how the ground under the ledge had all but disappeared, leaving only a thin shelf that he lay on.

“Get back.” She sucked in a deep breath, her chest heaving with fear and the effort it took to maintain her grip.

“Reach up, and I’ll grab you.” The desperation in his voice sliced through her terror.

“Back up.” Her words came out as a half yell, half sob. “There’s just a thin layer of ground on that edge.”

He opened his mouth, clearly about to argue, then slammed his mouth shut as he backed up. Relief, so potent it made her lightheaded, warred with the fear, turning her blood to ice water in her veins.

She squeezed her eyes shut, tears escaping only to be whipped away by the wind. Her fingers ached with the effort of holding on, her muscles screaming in protest. But she couldn’t hold on much longer. She’d plummet to her death, and he’d be there to watch it happen.

The thought propelled her to action. She had to find a way to help him help her. Opening her eyes, she scanned the cliff face, searching for any foothold, any crevice, any sign of hope in this vertical wasteland of rock and moss.

“Merritt, I’m here.” Tiikâan’s voice, closer now, but not from above, sent her gaze darting to her side.

Her heart leaped into her throat. He’d climbed down to a wide ledge a few yards to her right. He was perched precariously on hands and knees, carefully paying out a length of rope with a loop tied on the end.

“What are you doing? That’s suicide!” She wanted to scream at him, to beat on the rock until he understood the futility of his actions, but the only sound she could manage was a strangled cry. “Tiikâan—”

“I’m going to drop the loop over you, then I need you to thread your arm through so the rope’s over your chest.” He kept feeding out rope.

“And then what? I’ll pull us both down!” Her voice cracked with the beginnings of hysteria.

He paused, his gaze meeting hers with such unwavering intensity it stole her breath. “I anchored the rope to a tree, Merr. Have a little faith.”

The loop on the end of the rope swung close. With careful aim, he tried again. She jerked back as the rope brushed her cheek.

“Easy, Skeeter. Almost there.” His voice was calm, steady, as if this was an everyday occurrence.

Then it landed right over her head. Knowing what she had to do next sent a tremor through her. The only thing keeping her on the cliff was pure terror.

“Okay, thread your hand through.” He began pulling in the slack in the rope as he spoke, his gaze never leaving hers.

She shook her head, a tear breaking free. “I can’t hold on with just one hand.”

“I know you can.” How could his voice stay steady when one wrong move meant her death?

“Tii—”

“Do it, Merr. Now.” The urgency in his voice moved her.

She took a shuddering breath, preparing herself for the next step. With a silent prayer, she loosened her grip on the rock and reached for the rope. Time seemed to stretch as she fumbled with the loop, her fingers trembling so violently she thought they might snap off.

The ground above her shifted again, a cascade of pebbles and dirt tumbling into the abyss. The shriek that tore from her throat surprised even herself.

“You’ve got this, Skeeter.” Tiikâan’s voice was a lifeline, anchoring her to reality. “Just get the loop over your arm.”

She felt it brush against her shoulder, then her arm, and with a burst of adrenaline, she managed to thread her hand through.

The instant relief at having the rope around her body was quickly replaced by the terrifying realization that the ground

she clung to had all but disappeared. She pressed her cheek and chest against the cold, damp rock, spreading her weight to keep the ledge from crumbling entirely.

“Good job, Merr.” Tiikâan smiled as she stared at him. “Now hold on tight. I’m going to pull you up. Just trust me.”

Before she could respond, he scrambled up the ledge and out of sight. She slammed her eyes shut, hating the sensation of being alone. When the rope tightened around her chest, her eyes flew open.

For a second, the pressure offered much-needed security. Then the ledge she clung to gave way completely.

She dropped, a scream ripping from her throat as the world tilted upside down. Sharp pain jabbed into her back as the rope jerked her to a halt, leaving her dangling above the abyss.

Above her, she heard Tiikâan’s grunts as he pulled on the rope. Panic clawed at her throat, choking off any attempt at words. All she could do was hold on, praying that the rope, the tree, Tiikâan would hold.

The world tilted again as she was pulled onto solid ground. She collapsed onto her side, gasping for breath, tears streaming down her face. Tiikâan was beside her in an instant, his arms wrapping around her, pulling her close while he scooted away from the ledge.

When he had them a good ten feet from the ledge, he collapsed to the dirt. She clung to him, her fingers digging into his shirt, her entire body trembling. The scent of fresh air and the reassuring warmth of his body grounding her in the chaos of their near-death experience.

They lay there for a long moment, hearts hammering in unison as they recovered from their brush with death. He rolled to his side, but his arm stayed over her, his hand pushing against her back like she was something precious about to disappear.

“You okay?” His voice was rough, laced with concern.

Merritt nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat. Her voice had taken a hike to the bottom of the ravine,

along with a good chunk of her sanity. She never wanted to see the edge of a cliff again in her life.

Tiikâan's fingers traced patterns on her back. She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his touch, the solid presence of his body beside hers. And she realized, with startling clarity, that he'd not only saved her life but held a good portion of her soul now, too.

Her fingers trembled as she ran them over his beard. How was it that he hadn't been a part of her life long, yet he'd become the safest place she'd ever known? Stranded in the mountains wrapped in Tiikâan's arms, she found the place she never wanted to leave.

"I love you." The truth of the words hit her hard, and her breath shuddered with the force of it.

He fisted the back of her shirt and leaned his forehead on hers. "I love you, too."

She crashed her lips to his, her soul free-falling as he whispered her name like he was awestruck. His hand not tangled in her shirt speared into her hair, gripping as if to hold her there.

Not that she planned on leaving this spot... ever.

She wrapped her hand around his side, and he flinched away.

"Sorry." She moved her hand to his waist, wanting more than anything to continue kissing the man who owned her heart.

Yet his pain was a harsh reminder of their situation.

"We need to keep moving," he said against her lips, as if he'd read her mind. "We're not out of the woods yet, literally or figuratively."

He trailed kisses from her lips along her jaw, then down her neck until he buried his face into the crook of her neck. The trail he followed tingled and sparked through her veins like she'd been shocked back to life with his touch while his words tightened across her chest, making it hard to breathe.

He inhaled slow and long, like he wanted to savor the moment. She closed her eyes, wishing they could. His exhale was so full of regret that she had to blink away tears.

He pushed off her to his knees. When he cupped her cheek and ran his thumb along her bottom lip, she tilted her head to press a kiss into his palm. He jerked away, standing quickly as his hand opened and closed at his side.

Probably smart to put some distance between them. She sat up, her gaze meeting his.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, trying to steady her voice. “Where to now, boss?”

Tiikâan pointed farther along the ridgeline before grabbing the rope and winding it into a loose loop. “That way. We need to find a place to shelter for the night. Somewhere safe.”

She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the fear that gnawed at the edges of her composure.

Safe?

Was there anywhere truly safe in this wilderness?

Standing, legs wobbly beneath her, she grabbed her pack and followed Tiikâan as he led them farther along the ridgeline. The wind was biting cold now, the midnight sun offering little warmth as it circled the horizon.

Shadows stretched long and thin as the sun dipped low in the sky, casting an eerie glow across the alpine tundra. The wind, a constant presence since their near-death experience, whipped at their clothes, carrying with it the scent of pine and damp earth.

Merritt’s legs ached, her muscles screaming in protest with every step. Her shoulder, where the rope had dug in, throbbed with a dull, persistent pain. The adrenaline that had fueled her earlier had long since faded, leaving behind a bone-deep exhaustion.

“We need to stop,” Tiikâan said, his voice barely audible above the wind.

He'd been quiet for the last hour, his gaze fixed on the horizon. The worry lines etched on his usually carefree face mirrored her own growing unease. They had been walking for what felt like an eternity, searching for something, anything, that might offer shelter in this difficult landscape.

Merritt nodded, grateful for the respite. Her legs trembled as she lowered herself onto a moss-covered boulder. She watched as Tiikâan scanned their surroundings, his movements fluid and alert despite his obvious exhaustion.

"There." He pointed to a rocky outcrop a short distance away, nestled against the base of the ridge. "It's not much, but it'll offer some protection from the wind."

He moved to her side, his hand reaching out to help her to her feet.

"Thanks," she murmured, leaning into his touch, allowing herself a moment of vulnerability.

Together, they made their way toward the shelter. As they drew closer, a glint of metal caught Merritt's eye.

"Tiikâan..." She pointed toward the outcrop, her voice hushed with hope.

He followed her gaze, his eyes widening as he took in the sight before them. Wedged amongst the rocks, its fuselage crumpled and twisted, lay the mangled back end of an old bush plane.

"Great catch." Tiikâan's tone was grim, but his eyes glittered.

He led the way, carefully navigating the uneven terrain. Merritt followed close behind, her heart pounding. The plane was bigger than Tiikâan's and looked like it had been there for years, its once vibrant paint job now faded and peeling.

She couldn't help but wonder about the story behind its demise. How long ago had it crashed?

"Wait." He put his hand on her shoulder to stop her just before the entrance to a mangled opening, then held up a finger to her as he ducked inside.

She waited, her heart thumping in her chest. The seconds stretched into an eternity as the wind whipped around her. Why would he need her to wait? Was there an animal already inside?

She flinched as a loud bang echoed from the debris. Then Tiikâan's head popped out of the opening.

"Clear." He grinned and held out his hand for her.

She scrambled to his side, her fingers intertwining with his. He held tight as he led her through the wreckage, guiding her over twisted metal and broken glass.

The interior of the plane was a mess, filled with debris and coated in a thick layer of dust. The few seats left were torn and ripped. Cargo boxes littered the floor.

They made their way through the small plane to reach the back of the fuselage. The floor was intact, offering a flat, if narrow, space to stretch out.

"Okay, it's not the Taj Mahal, but it'll do for tonight." Tiikâan kicked debris off to the side and set his bag down.

She scanned the narrow space, relief washing over her. The roof was still relatively intact, offering protection from the elements.

"Yeah, I'm thinking it'll be five-star accommodations compared to sleeping in the open on that ridge," she replied, a small laugh escaping her lips.

"Okay, let's get a fire going and heat up some food." Tiikâan grabbed her pack's strap and helped her out of it. "We might even be able to find food in the crates."

"What about a radio?" Hope of rescue battled for dominance against the hope of more food.

"If we can find the cockpit tomorrow, yes." Tiikâan cringed. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" She looked up from a crate she was reading.

"*If* we can find the cockpit and *if* the radio still works." He shook his head and bent to open his pack. "It's a lot of ifs to

place our hopes on.”

TWENTY-NINE

The mountains hated him. Without a doubt. He shook his head at the rest of the fuselage from the crashed 208 Caravan in the bottom of the ravine and rubbed the pain in his ribs.

Scaling the rock face was the only way to it.

He sucked at climbing.

Even without being injured.

Every family trip where they'd gone climbing, he'd been the slowest, taking twice as long as his siblings to scale up. Didn't matter what line they went. There was nothing about climbing he'd ever enjoyed.

"We found it." Merritt trembled as she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into him.

"Yeah." The word was hard to choke out through the numb, hollow feeling in his chest.

"I was really hoping we'd catch a break."

She leaned further into him with a sigh. The cockpit was their only chance at radioing for help. The only chance to get Merritt to safety before her uncle could do any more harm.

And he wasn't even going to try?

Heck, no.

He was a Rebel.

His dad didn't raise no quitter.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed his shoulders back and kissed the top of Merritt's head. "I'm going to climb down, and I'll need your help."

"What?" She jerked away, her eyes wide with fear.

"We need that radio."

"We don't even know if it works." She wrapped her arms around herself.

"True. But if it works, we're rescued today." He peered over the edge of the ravine, swallowed at what had to be an eighty-foot drop, then with determination, he turned to his gear. "It's worth finding out."

"Not if you plummet to your death." She dashed around him and stood in his path.

"Come on, Skeet." He cupped her pale cheek, forcing confidence into his voice he didn't feel. "What did I say yesterday about having a little faith in me?"

She grabbed his hand and held it to her. "I trust you'll keep me safe, but we don't even have the gear for you to go down."

"We have a rope and sturdy trees." He shrugged. "That's all we need."

He stepped into her and pecked her lips. When he went to move away, she fisted the front of his shirt in her hands and kissed him like he was going off to war or something.

Fire and desperation flared from her touch, scorching a path along his veins and into his core. He speared his hands into her hair, anchoring her to him, not that she needed any help with that.

The fear that had rooted in his gut when his plane went down bloomed into torment. Every moment they remained in the wild was the possibility he'd lose her.

Alaska didn't care if they lived or died.

In fact, everything about the Brooks Range threatened their survival.

Getting to that radio meant Merritt lived.

So, he'd scale the mountain like a Dall sheep.

He loosened his hands and slowed the kiss. When he pulled away, he cupped the back of her neck, his thumbs stroking the soft skin of her throat.

"It'll be easier if you help."

She swallowed so hard he felt it against his thumbs. "Okay."

"All you have to do is hold the rope to keep the tension."

She nodded and bit her bottom lip. "I can do that."

He quickly kissed her and winked. "Let's get to it."

He marched to the gear, snatching the rope from the pile and pushing away the wish for more gear. Wishing never changed outcomes.

Action did.

Tiikâan's hands moved with practiced efficiency as he began fashioning a makeshift harness from the rope. The fibers bit into his skin as he looped the cord around his waist, the familiar motions doing little to calm the storm of anxiety brewing in his chest.

"What are you doing?" Merritt asked, her voice tight with worry.

"Creating a hasty harness. It'll distribute my weight and give you a better anchor point for belaying."

He wrapped the rope around his thighs, forming crude leg loops. The setup was far from ideal, but it would have to do. As he worked, he could feel Merritt's eyes on him, her concern palpable in the tense silence.

Tying off the final knot, Tiikâan gave the harness an experimental tug. It held firm, and he allowed himself a small nod of satisfaction. It wasn't pretty, but it would keep him from plummeting to his death—hopefully.

"Okay," he said, turning to Merritt. "Now for the belay system."

He moved to a sturdy-looking tree near the ravine's edge, the rope trailing behind him like a lifeline. With deft movements, he secured one end of the rope to the tree's base, using a figure-eight follow-through knot that would hold even under his full weight.

Next, he clipped a carabiner to the rope near the tree. The metallic click as he locked it into place seemed loud in the quiet forest.

"This will act as our belay device," he explained to Merritt, who watched his every move with wide, attentive eyes. "It'll create friction and give you more control over my descent."

As he fed the free end of the rope through the carabiner, Tiikâan's mind raced with all the ways this could go wrong. But he pushed those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the task at hand and the woman whose life depended on his success.

"Ready for your crash course in belaying?" he asked, forcing a smile to his lips.

Tiikâan turned to Merritt, hoping his expression concealed the apprehension racing through him. He held out the rope, his calloused hands steady despite the gravity of the situation.

"Okay, Skeeter, this is important." He could hear his dad in his voice. "Your job is to keep this rope taut at all times. It's my lifeline down there."

Merritt nodded, her face pale but resolute as she gripped the rope. Tiikâan guided her hands into the proper position, his touch lingering for a moment longer than necessary.

"If you need to stop me, just pull down sharply on this side of the rope." He demonstrated the motion. "It'll create friction against the carabiner and halt my descent."

He watched as Merritt practiced the movement, her brow furrowed in concentration. Pride swelled in his chest at her determination, even as fear gnawed at his insides.

"Remember, communication is key," he continued. "I'll call out to you, and I need you to respond. Got it?"

“Got it,” Merritt replied, her voice stronger than he expected.

Tiikâan took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. He approached the edge of the ravine, the yawning chasm below seeming to mock his resolve.

“On belay?” he called out, following the familiar protocol his dad had drilled into them despite the makeshift nature of their setup.

“B-belay on,” Merritt responded, her shaking grip visibly tightening on the rope.

With one last glance at Merritt, Tiikâan began his descent. The first few steps were the hardest, his body protesting as he lowered himself over the edge. The rock face didn’t help him out any, offering few handholds and even fewer footholds.

“Lowering,” he called out, his voice echoing off the ravine walls.

As he rappelled down, Tiikâan focused on his breathing, trying to ignore the way his ribs screamed with each movement. The makeshift harness dug into his thighs as if emphasizing how precarious his position was.

“You’re doing great, Merritt,” he called up, more to reassure himself than her. “Just keep that rope steady.”

The descent felt agonizingly slow. Each foot gained a battle against gravity and his own limitations. Sweat beaded on his brow, stinging his eyes as he blinked it away. The cockpit of the wrecked plane grew larger below him, a tantalizing goal that seemed just out of reach.

Tiikâan’s muscles trembled with exertion as he continued his descent, the rock face scraping against his hands and knees. His ribs screamed at him to stop.

He was about three-quarters of the way down when he reached a smooth section of the cliff, devoid of any substantial handholds or footholds. His heart hammered in his chest as he pressed himself against the cold stone, searching desperately for any purchase he could use climbing back up.

But he couldn't find any.

“Stopping,” he called up to Merritt, his voice tight with strain.

He closed his eyes, trying to calm his racing thoughts. He might get down there and see a line he could use to get back up. But if he got down there and the rock face truly was as smooth as it looked, he was screwed.

If Gunnar were here, he'd have scaled this cliff like it was nothing more than a ladder. His brother would probably already be on his way back up, radio in hand.

Heck, even his sister Sunny, petite as she was, would have found a way down by now. She'd always been the fearless one, tackling every challenge head-on with a grin and a quip.

Tiikâan's chest tightened with a mixture of shame and frustration. Here he was, stuck on this godforsaken rock face, while his family—any of them—would have been out there saving the day. They were the heroes, the ones who always came through when it mattered most.

And what was he? A washed-up bush pilot who couldn't even manage a simple climb to save the woman he loved.

He was supposed to be Merritt's protector, her lifeline. Instead, he was the one who needed rescuing.

With a grunt of frustration, Tiikâan began to inch his way back up the cliff face. Each movement was agony, his muscles screaming in protest as he fought against gravity and his own limitations.

“Climbing,” he called out, hating the defeat in his voice.

As he ascended, nauseating shame coursed through him.

He'd failed.

Failed Merritt, failed himself, failed to live up to the Rebel family name. The climb back up seemed to stretch on forever, each reach for a handhold a scream of his shortcomings.

“Tiikâan.” Suddenly, Merritt's voice cut through his spiral of self-pity.

He paused, looking up toward her voice. “Yeah?”

There was a beat of silence, then a trembling, “Hey, bear.”

Cold fear rushed through Tiikâan’s veins, turning his blood to ice. The world seemed to tilt on its axis as the implications of those two simple words hit him.

Merritt was in danger.

And he was too far away to help.

“Merritt?” He scrambled upward, frantic now, his own safety forgotten.

Her scream pierced the air, a sound that sliced through him like a knife, followed by the sickening sensation of the rope going slack. His breath whooshed from his lungs, the sudden slack nearly causing him to lose his footing.

He lunged for a handhold, a desperate scramble to regain his balance as his feet swung out over the abyss. Fingers skimming the rocks, Tiikâan plummeted, his hands desperately grasping for any hold on the rock face as the ground rushed up to meet him.

THIRTY

She'd killed Tiikâan.

A sob jerked from her as she raced blindly through the woods.

She needed to go back.

To help him.

A crash and roar behind her kept her feet stumbling forward. Merritt's heart pounded in her chest, a frantic rhythm that matched her desperate footfalls as she tore through the dense Alaskan forest.

The world around her blurred into a chaotic mess of green and brown, branches whipping across her face and leaving stinging trails in their wake. She could barely breathe, each gasping inhale burning in her lungs as she pushed herself harder, faster.

Oh, God.

She'd let go.

She'd let him fall.

Guilt threatened to overwhelm her, but the thunderous crash of the bear's pursuit drowned out everything but the primal need to survive.

Merritt's legs burned with exertion as she vaulted over a fallen log, her hands scraping against the rough bark. She stumbled, nearly losing her footing on the uneven forest floor.

The sound of her own ragged breathing filled her ears, punctuated by the terrifying huffs and grunts of the massive grizzly behind her.

She had to make it to the shelter from the night before.

It was her only hope.

Branches slapped against Merritt's face as she tore through the forest, each impact stinging like tiny whips against her skin. Her lungs burned, desperate for air as she pushed herself beyond her limits.

A low-hanging limb caught her across the chest, nearly knocking her off her feet. She stumbled, arms pinwheeling as she fought to regain her balance. The momentary pause allowed her to hear the bear's huffing breaths, closer now than before.

Panic surged through her veins, lending her a burst of desperate speed. She leaped over a moss-covered log, her foot catching on the edge. She tumbled forward, hands outstretched to break her fall.

Pain lanced up her arms as she hit the ground, rocks and twigs tearing into her palms.

No time to dwell on the pain.

Merritt scrambled to her feet, ignoring the warm trickle of blood down her wrists. She pushed forward, ducking under branches and weaving between trees. Her clothes snagged on thorny bushes, ripping as she tore herself free.

Every obstacle felt like a betrayal, nature itself conspiring to slow her down, to deliver her into the nightmare that had haunted her since childhood.

Merritt's eyes darted wildly, searching for any sign of the plane wreck.

It had to be close.

She couldn't have run that far, could she?

The forest seemed to stretch endlessly before her, a green labyrinth with no escape in sight.

A deafening roar shattered the air behind her, so close she could almost feel the bear's hot breath on her neck. Her heart leaped into her throat, choking off a scream. She risked a glance over her shoulder, instantly regretting the decision.

The grizzly was massive, its fur matted and eyes wild with hunger or rage—she couldn't tell which. It lumbered after her with terrifying speed, closing the distance between them with each powerful stride.

Merritt's foot caught on an exposed root, sending her sprawling forward. She tumbled through a thorny raspberry bush, its sharp spines tearing at her clothes and skin. The pain barely registered through her overwhelming terror.

As she struggled to her feet, her eyes widened in horror.

Before her was a deep fissure less than two feet wide in the earth, a jagged wound in the forest floor. Her toes curled in her boots, gripping desperately to keep her balance. She could jump across, but the mountain jutted straight up on the other side.

The crack stretched away from her, a dark gash leading toward the cliff face on one side and the forest on the other.

A crash from behind snapped her around, her breath catching in her throat as she found herself face-to-face with her pursuer. The bear reared up on its hind legs, towering over her. Its rank breath washed over her face as it let out another earsplitting roar.

Merritt's mind went blank with terror. Without thinking, she threw herself into the fissure, scrambling down into the darkness as rocks and dirt cascaded around her. Her hands clawed at the rough walls, desperate for purchase as she slid deeper into the earth.

A searing pain tore across her arm as the bear swiped at her, its massive paw catching her just before she slipped out of reach. She cried out, the sound echoing in the narrow confines of her refuge.

The bear's furious roars reverberated above her, drowning out the pounding of her own heart.

Merritt wedged herself farther down, ignoring the scrapes and bruises forming on her body as she contorted to fit into the ever-narrowing space.

She slid and scrambled downward, her fingers bleeding as they scraped against the jagged rock walls. The fissure seemed endless, swallowing her whole as she descended into its depths.

The bear's frustrated growls grew fainter, but the terror that gripped her heart showed no signs of loosening its hold.

Finally, she could go no farther. The crack had narrowed to the point where she was wedged tight, barely able to breathe in the confined space. Darkness pressed in on all sides, broken only by slivers of light filtering down from above.

As the immediate danger passed, the full weight of what had happened crashed over her again. She'd let go of the rope.

She'd dropped Tiikâan.

The man she loved, the one person who had made her feel safe, was gone.

And it was all her fault.

THIRTY-ONE

Tiikâan clawed at the rock face, fingers scraping against the jagged surface as the earth rushed past him. The ground beneath his hands crumbled, slipping away in loose gravel as he fought for any kind of handhold.

With every desperate grasp, pain coursed through his body. His ribs burned like fire. Panic crept in, a cold claw tightening around his heart.

He gained a hold, his fingers curling around a jutting rock, breath catching. Relief flooded through him, but almost immediately it crumbled away, the rock giving under the pressure of his weight.

He plummeted again.

His heart raced as he positioned himself instinctively for another hold. Complete fear took hold as he grabbed on to a nearby crag, praying that his strength would hold out. The impact rattled through him, but he anchored himself against the granite with an iron grip.

“Come on,” he gasped, forcing his body to find the strength to push up.

Bracing himself against the rock, he jammed his fingers into a crack that was barely wide enough to accommodate his hand, every nerve ending screaming as he dug in deep. It was a gamble; that narrow ledge at his feet felt precarious under his weight, but there was no choice.

If he let go now, he wouldn't survive the fall.

A gust of wind whipped at his hair, howling through the crevices around him. The rush of air filled his ears, drowning out the sounds of the forest. All he could hear was the pounding of blood in his head, a relentless drumbeat urging him onward.

Tiikâan took a deep breath, focusing on slowing his racing heart. He had to think clearly, to plan his next move.

He could do this.

Adrenaline surged through him, sharpening his senses as he scanned the rocky face above.

The bear's sudden roar echoed from high above, slicing through his resolve.

Merritt.

He couldn't waste a moment, not even to rest. Clenching his jaw against the throbbing pain in his side, he pressed on, searching for the next handhold, the next place to anchor himself.

With each agonizing motion, he clawed upward, his fingers sliding over rough stone and gritty dirt. The past family rock climbing experiences surged to the forefront of his mind, like his dad guided him as he picked his path.

Blood coated his fingers, making the rock face feel impossibly slick beneath his grip. Ignoring the stinging pain, he readjusted his hold, forcing himself to move toward the ridge.

As he climbed higher, the rope still harnessed to him tangled on an exposed root below, almost pulling him down with the weight of it. He cursed under his breath, yanking it free with a desperate tug that sent fresh waves of pain shooting through his side, but the action ignited his resolve anew.

By the time he reached the top, every muscle in his body burned, exhaustion threatening to drag him back down into the depths of despair.

But he wouldn't let it.

With one final, determined effort, he pulled himself over the edge and rolled to safety. The sparse mountain grass was a welcome relief against his worn-out body, and for a moment, he lay on the earth, breathing heavily, letting the adrenaline ebb.

His body ached, but there was no time to rest. He took two deep breaths, willing the pain to subside, then scrambled to his feet, every fiber of his being urging him forward. As he pushed off the makeshift harness, he scanned the area.

The path Merritt had taken, combined with the bear's tracks, left clear disturbances in the undergrowth. Branches had been snapped aside, leaves scattered like confetti.

He raced along the trail, heart thundering as he navigated the rugged terrain. Each second seemed to drag for minutes.

"Merritt!" he yelled, his voice echoing through the trees.

The surrounding forest swallowed the sound, reminding him how utterly alone they were out here, and it only spurred him to move faster. Every instinct screamed at him to find her.

To protect her.

He skidded to a halt at a fissure in the mountain, breaths ragged as he took in the sight before him. Blood mixed with the dirt at the edge of the crack. No sign of Merritt's tracks remained, only the massive claw marks scored into the dirt and prints of the bear leading off into the thicket.

The fear settled heavy in his gut like a stone.

"NO!" Frantic rage bubbled up as he roared into the unyielding silence of the forest. "Merritt!"

Silence answered him, a suffocating void attempting to swallow him whole. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting against the panic rising inside him.

He couldn't lose her.

Not like this.

A few deep breaths later, he forced himself back into action. Rushing forward, he scanned the ground, desperate for

any sign of her. His heart raced as he kicked aside branches, examining every inch of the area.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered under his breath, frustration boiling over as he searched. “Where are you?”

He sat back on his heels and roared her name into the air, agony and anger vying for dominance.

When he found that bear, he’d kill it.

His legs quaked as he pushed to his feet and yanked his knife from the scabbard at his waist.

“Tiikâan.” His name whispered through the wind, taunting him.

He scrubbed the tear that raced down his cheek with the back of his hand and turned to the bear’s trail.

“Tiikâan!” Merritt’s yell rushed to him from below, not from the woods.

He shoved his knife back in the scabbard, dropped to his knees, and peered down the fissure.

“Where are you?” Desperation clawed at his throat as he leaned over the edge.

His heart raced, anticipation thrumming in his chest like the wings of a trapped bird. He peered into the darkness, the cold air rushing up to meet him, biting at any exposed skin.

“I’m right here! In the fissure!” she shouted, and his stomach dropped with relief and dread.

“Are you hurt?” He scanned the rocky walls of the crevice, terrified of what he might find.

“N-no.” Even though her voice trembled with uncertainty, his breath whooshed out of him in relief.

He reached for the rope, only to groan in frustration that it wasn’t draped across his chest.

“I’ll be right back,” he hollered down to her.

He sprinted back to where he’d tied the rope to the sturdy tree, his heart pounding in his ears as he moved. Each step sent

fresh waves of pain through his body, but he pushed through it, focusing on the fact Merritt needed him.

Arriving at the tree, he quickly untied the rope and wrapped it back around his arm while he rushed back through the forest. With a firm grip, he gathered the makeshift harness in his hand and made his way back to Merritt.

Soft cries reached up from the fissure.

“Merritt?” he called as he got closer to the edge, peering down into the dark. “I’m gonna drop the harness to you. You’ll need to slip it on and climb out.”

“I’m wedged in here. I’ll have to climb up. I don’t think I can.” The last word choked out on a sob.

Her fear settled in his gut again. “I’ll get you out of there, but you have to do what I say.”

“Okay.” Her voice trembled, but resolve instantly echoed through it. “Just hurry.”

Tiikâan nodded, heart pounding as he lowered the rope into the fissure. The length of it uncoiled from his hands like a lifeline, vanishing into the darkness with a slight fluttering sound. Half of the hundred-foot length had fed down before it went slack.

“I’ve got it.”

“Step into the harness once you get it,” he called down.

“I can’t do this!” Merritt’s voice was strained, echoing with fear and disbelief.

“Yes, you can,” he urged, desperate but steady. “You have to focus on my voice. You’re strong, remember? You’ve already faced so much.”

“I’m not as strong as you,” she stammered, breath hitching. “What if I fall again? What if I let go and—”

“Merritt, look at me.” Tiikâan leaned over the edge, trying to meet her gaze through the darkness. “I need you to trust me. You are not alone here. The only way out is up, so let’s do this together. I’ll be right here.”

The moment stretched, filled with the sound of her ragged breathing and the quiet whispers of the forest around them. Tiikâan's heart pounded. He could feel the fear radiating from her—a living, breathing thing that waited to consume her.

“You can do it,” he said again, maintaining his unwavering tone. “You just need to slip into the harness and pull yourself up. I’ll hold the rope taut.”

Silence lingered, and when she didn't respond, he added in, “I believe in you. You can do this. Okay? On my count.”

“Okay.” Her whispered agreement was a wisp of hope he'd snatch from the air and hang on to with all his might.

“Three... Two... One.” He took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm. “Go!”

There was a muffled rustle, and the rope jerked in his hands, a signal she'd managed to get the harness in place.

Tiikâan's heart raced as he braced himself against the ledge, his muscles tensing with anticipation and dread. He couldn't imagine what it felt like for her to be wedged in darkness with her fears pressing down on her.

“Pull!” Tiikâan yelled, straining against the rope.

His body screamed in protest as he felt the weight shift, and he yanked back as she tried to climb. Each inch felt like a victory, and fear gripped him harder as he fought against doubt.

“Tiikâan!” Merritt's voice was filled with panic. “I can't—”

“Yes, you can! Just focus on getting to me!” He dug his heels into the ground, forcing himself to stabilize as the rope pulled against his hands.

A short, gasp of a laugh reached him.

He smiled, willing to do anything to get her mind off the danger of the climb. “I promise to make it worth your while.”

That earned him a full laugh. “Why, Mr. Rebel, what are you luring me with, exactly?”

“Whatever you want, Skeet.” He shook his head, stifling the groan of pain pulling caused in his side. “You get to the top, and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“I don’t know.” She grunted. “Sounds a little vague to me.”

Despite her words, he had to pull back on the rope faster. Tiikâan gritted his teeth, heart racing as he willed himself to continue pulling. The rope slackened, and in a moment of resolve, he yanked it taut again—this time pulling on the rope with renewed strength.

“I’m... I’m almost there!” Merritt’s voice broke through the rush of adrenaline blinding him to everything but the rope disappearing into the crack.

Every muscle in his body strained as he closed his eyes and focused solely on that effort, fighting the pain in his side, willing himself to keep going, to give all he had for this moment.

“Merritt! You’ve got this!” he called, voice hoarse with exertion, his fingers aching from holding the rope with pure desperation.

Without warning, her head popped up from the ground like a ground squirrel.

As Merritt crested the edge, Tiikâan reached out, grabbing her arms and pulling her roughly over the final lip. She landed against him with a thud, the impact sending fresh waves of pain shooting through his ribs but also grounding his emotions.

He didn’t let go, refusing to release her from his arms.

She gasped for breath, eyes wide with shock and a mixture of relief and fear. Her body trembled involuntarily against his, her eyes glassy as she stared at him.

“Merritt,” he breathed, brushing a strand of wet hair from her face.

The moment meant more than words could convey. They had survived, against all odds, and yet the lingering threat of

danger hung in the air like an ominous storm cloud.

“I’m so sorry, Tiikâan,” she stammered, her voice trembling. “I should’ve never let go of—”

“Hey,” he interrupted softly, his thumb catching one of her tears before it could slide down her cheek. “I’m here. You’re here. We both made it. That’s what matters right now.”

“No, no, I let you fall. I—”

“I promised to make it worth your while.” He wasn’t going to let her continue down her thought path. “What do you want?”

She stared at him, her eyes softening.

“You.” She smiled and shrugged. “Just you.”

Satisfaction burned through him with her declaration.

“Done.” He growled as he pushed her onto her back and captured her lips in a bruising kiss.

A branch snapped not too far away. He jerked back from her.

Right.

Danger.

Bears and mountains trying to kill them. Definitely not the time for kissing.

THIRTY-TWO

As she almost reached what had to be the two hundredth ridge of the last three days, Merritt huffed out a strained breath.

Her lungs burned.

Her calves ached.

Heck, even her toes screamed at her to stop walking.

But if they wanted to get to safety—and she really, really wanted to—she had to keep up with the brutal pace Tiikâan set. He'd get them to civilization.

Even if they had to cross a thousand mountain peaks to do it.

Oh, please let it not be a thousand.

“Almost there, Skeet,” Tiikâan encouraged her again.

He always seemed to know when she was on the verge of collapse.

“Liar.” Her retort didn't hold any heat.

The smile he sent her had all her hairs standing on end and waving for attention. It was a smile that promised reward.

She'd come to love his rewards.

She hiked faster, trying to think of a way to distract herself from the pain radiating from her head to her feet.

“If my horrible uncle hadn't tried to kill us, what were your plans after the job with me was done?” She threw the

question out that had plagued her mind during their run-in with the cliff and bear.

He stopped short, his chest heaving as he looked at her with furrowed brows. “What?”

“You heard me.”

He took a deep breath and shrugged. “Start flying hunters again.”

She shook her head and stopped next to him. “You’re a planner, Tiikâan Rebel. There was more to it than just flying hunters.”

She grabbed the water hanging from her pack and raised her eyebrows at him as she took a long drink. He rubbed his hand along the back of his neck.

Why was he so hesitant?

She knew she’d thrown the question from left field, but she also knew he’d had plans for after the summer ended. They both had.

“Come on.” She screwed the cap back on and continued up the mountain in front of him. “Over the last three days, we’ve talked about pretty much everything and anything.”

Except the future.

They had avoided that conversation. Eventually, they’d have to talk about it.

She took a breath and continued. “Why clam up now?”

Instead of focusing on the silence behind her, she concentrated on her footing, her breathing, the squirrel chittering a warning from the tree above them. Anything but the reluctant man following her.

“You know that painting of the plane in your office?” His voice was low when it finally came out.

Merritt sagged against a tree as she reached the top of the ridge. Her dad had had the painting commissioned. It was her favorite, making her feel peace every time she looked at it.

“Yeah.” She watched Tiikâan as he stared at the top of his boots.

“That’s the dream. The goal.” He finally looked at her and smirked. “Fly the hoity-toity mining exec around for the summer, pay off my debts, and hope there’s enough to build a hunting cabin on the property I own.”

“Hoity-toity?” She laughed, even though anticipation made her fingers twitch.

His smile widened. “Totally.”

“Whatever.” She tossed a spruce cone at him.

He chuckled, then uncapped his own drink.

“Why didn’t you want to tell me?” Did she really want to know?

He stared at her, the determination in his gaze making her lightheaded before he finally answered. “Dreams change.”

“To what?”

He stepped closer, pushing her back against the tree trunk. “Don’t know yet. We haven’t talked about where you’re off to next.”

Her heart pounded in her chest at his confession. He’d give up his dream to be with her.

She wrapped her hand around his arm caging her against the tree. “I think Alaska’s grown on me.”

“Has it now?” His rumbling voice curled her toes.

“The mine will need a lot of attention.” She shrugged. “Although it may be a while before I’m ready to camp again.”

He chuckled, and her knees threatened to give out. “I don’t blame you.”

“So, we’re sticking together?” She slid her hand up his arm and around his neck.

“Always.”

His quick answer had her cheeks hurting from smiling. She bit her lip and feigned seriousness.

“It’s a good thing sticking with me comes with that cabin on the lake.” She twirled her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck as he leaned toward her.

His gaze jerked from her mouth to her eyes. “What?”

“That cabin in the painting. It’s my dad’s... well, mine now. Ours, if you want.” She shrugged, but he cut her nonchalant motion off with a kiss.

His lips were hard and demanding, but his hands cupping her face were gentle. Wild, but peaceful. She loved that he was a perfect reflection of the wilderness he loved.

“Cabin and the girl? I must be dreaming,” he said against her lips.

She pulled him close, wrapping her arms around his neck to hold him to her. He broke from her lips, peppering kisses along her jaw to that sensitive spot he’d found under her ear. His beard tickled her skin, and she inhaled through her nose, trying not to laugh.

Spruce and smoke mingled in a scent she never imagined would be enticing before that summer.

Wait a sec.

She pushed against Tiikâan’s shoulder.

Smoke?

“Do you smell that?”

Tiikâan leaned his forehead against hers and shook his head. “You’re killing me, Skeet.”

He straightened and inhaled. His gaze whipped to hers, and without a word, he grabbed her hand and rushed through the woods.

They broke through the trees to an overlook of the next valley. Down below, nestled beside a creek was a cabin with smoke curling from its chimney.

And a landing strip stretching out beside it.

Tears streamed down her face, but she couldn't rip her gaze from their salvation. Tiikâan picked her up, twirled her around, then kissed her.

"You saved us," she said against his lips.

"No. We did it together." He grinned at her, then practically dragged her down the mountain.

They arrived at the cabin, chests heaving, and he banged on the door.

"What in tarnation." A man yelled from inside a moment before the door swung open to reveal a man in faded blue coveralls with white hair and beard.

His gaze darted from Tiikâan to her and back again. "Who the heck are you?"

"We're lost," Tiikâan answered before introducing them. "Do you have a satellite phone?"

"Yeah, sure." The man stepped back and motioned them into the cramped space. "Have a seat."

He motioned to the table with two chairs.

"Name's Toad." He motioned to the wood cookstove against the wall. "Coffee's on if you want. I'll go grab the phone."

He disappeared behind a curtain strung across the room, grunting as he bumped against something.

"Toad?" She whispered.

Tiikâan shrugged with a smile. "Coffee?"

She shook her head. There were so many emotions bubbling through her. Adding coffee to the mix might make her blow.

Toad came back out and handed Tiikâan the phone. He dialed, then bounced his knee as he waited.

"Astryde, it's Tiikâan."

He jerked the phone away from his ear as his sister screamed. He clicked the phone on speaker. Merritt covered

her smile with her fingertips, tears blurring her vision.

“Are you safe? Where are you?” Worry was thick in Astryde’s voice.

“Yeah, we’re safe. We’re at...” Tiikâan looked at Toad with a raised eyebrow.

Toad listed off some directions that involved a creek, an old dredge, and some peak Merritt didn’t know. Tiikâan nodded like it made perfect sense.

“Okay. Magnus and Bjørn are close. Mom’s radioing them right now.”

“Magnus? Why isn’t he on a fire?” Tiikâan rubbed his head in confusion.

“Dude, you’re the second sibling to go missing this summer. It’s all hands on deck.” Astryde sounded exasperated and ready to whack her brother upside the head.

Merritt liked Astryde already.

“Astryde, listen.” Tiikâan grabbed Merritt’s hand. “Merritt’s uncle Nolan killed her dad.”

“He did what?” Astryde’s voice turned laser focused.

“And he tried to kill us, too.”

As Tiikâan told Astryde about what happened, Merritt’s heart ached at her uncle’s betrayal all over again. How could her own flesh and blood do something so heinous?

“I knew something was off with him,” Astryde said after Tiikâan went quiet.

“Downright dirty, if you ask me.” Toad scoffed and shook his head from his recliner.

“He’s having a press release in Barrow in a few hours.” The menace in Astryde’s voice sent a shiver down Merritt’s back.

“Think Bjørn could pick us up and get us there in time?” Tiikâan lifted a questioning eyebrow at Merritt, even though the question was for Astryde.

A heady flush of warmth rushed through Merritt at the thought of confronting Nolan. The smile that she flashed at Tiikâan probably looked on the edge of wild.

The laughter that barked out of her definitely was. “I always loved a good family reunion.”

THIRTY-THREE

Wind whipped against Tiikâan's face as Bjørn's helicopter landed. Magnus leaned out the open door, pumping his fist in the air as a huge grin spread across his face.

"That's your brother?" Merritt's wide eyes and open mouth put a scowl on Tiikâan's face.

He rolled his eyes at Magnus. "Brothers, actually. Why?"

"Are all your family that... exuberant?" She swallowed, and he wondered why she was nervous.

"Only when one of us almost dies." He shrugged and smiled. "Since that's like every other week... yeah."

"Oh, dear." She stepped into him and threaded her fingers through his. "This will take getting used to."

He laughed, bringing their joined hands up and kissing the back of her fingers. "Don't worry. I'll guide you through it."

Magnus jumped from the helicopter when it was a good eight feet off the ground and landed, running to them.

Merritt flinched and gasped. "Wow."

"Show-off," Tiikâan muttered.

Didn't matter.

The relief that his family was here and Merritt was safe overrode his brother's showboating.

He dashed to meet Magnus halfway. Stumbling backward as they collided in a bear hug, Tiikâan banded his arms around

Magnus' back and ignored the way his ribs burned.

“Don't you ever do that again, man.” Magnus' gruff voice and trembling arms blurred Tiikâan's vision.

“Don't plan on it.” He thumped Magnus' back.

Magnus squeezed hard before stepping back, sniffing and brushing the back of his hand across his cheek. “You okay?”

Being the youngest two Rebels, Tiikâan and Magnus had always been close. But the display of emotion from his salty brother was unexpected.

“Yeah.” Tiikâan sniffed and cleared his throat. “We're good.”

He turned to Merritt and held out his hand for her. “Magnus, this is Merritt Harland.”

Before she could take his hand, Magnus had her in a hug, her feet lifting off the ground. Her shocked eyes took up most of her face as she looked to Tiikâan for help. He clapped his brother on the shoulder, then pulled Merritt back to his side.

“Way to make an impression, dude.” Tiikâan shook his head, then looked down at Merritt. “I promise, we aren't normally this—”

He didn't know how to describe Magnus' behavior, so he just circled his hand toward his grinning brother.

“Don't let him fool you, Merr.” Magnus pulled Tiikâan into a side hug. “Us Rebels are always a handful.”

“Don't pull us all into your realm of normal.” Bjørn hollered as he ran up to them.

“You mean my realm of awesomeness?” Magnus puffed out his chest, wagging his eyebrows for good measure.

Bjørn just shook his head, stopping in front of Tiikâan, his expression so full of concern the back of Tiikâan's throat tightened.

Bjørn placed a hand on his shoulder. “You good?”

“Yeah.” Tiikâan’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. “Thanks for looking for us.”

“We never doubted you’d make it out.” Bjørn pulled him into a hug, clapping hard on his back. “Though Mom’s been worried sick.”

Their confidence in him cracked something in his chest, and he had to swallow several times before he got the threat of tears under control. Maybe he wasn’t the screw up he’d always thought they saw him as.

“Yeah, you and Sunny definitely gave her more gray hairs.” Magnus thumped Tiikâan on the back. “Thanks for taking her attention off me, man. I appreciate it.”

“No problem.” Tiikâan laughed, then introduced Bjørn to Merritt.

He also pulled her into a hug, though his wasn’t near as obnoxious as Magnus’. Guess if she wanted to stay together, she’d have to get used to the Rebel family’s form of love.

Over-the-top and loud.

After thanking Toad, they climbed into the helicopter.

Tiikâan checked Merritt’s buckle. Not that she needed him to, but he couldn’t help wanting to be sure she was safe. She wrapped his arm over her shoulders, leaned her head against him, and fell asleep before Toad’s cabin was out of sight.

Exhaustion pulled at him, but he couldn’t close his eyes.

“The family’s waiting for us in Barrow,” Magnus said over the headset. “Astryde has her trooper friends with her.”

Tiikâan nodded and held Merritt closer. Her uncle’s confidence that he wouldn’t get caught nagged at Tiikâan. It was their word against his, and from what Merritt said, her uncle’s connections went all the way to D.C.



Merritt trembled as they waited in the hotel’s back office for the go-ahead from the troopers.

Tiikâan grabbed Merritt, pulled her to his side, and whispered in her ear. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

She nodded, not able to form a response around the lump of dread in her throat.

Could she confront Nolan after what he’d done?

She bit her lower lip so hard she tasted blood.

Tiikâan pressed a kiss to her neck. Scorching heat filled her cheeks as she darted her gaze to his entire family waiting in the office with them, as well as a few troopers and his friend, Declan. She elbowed him, hoping the quick shake of her head gave him the signal to knock it off.

He just laughed and kissed her on the temple. She closed her eyes and let the warmth of his arms pulling her against him push some of the tension aside.

The chaotic voices of so many people talking had her wondering if all the Rebel get-togethers were like that.

Bjørn and Magnus’ exuberant greeting at the cabin was overwhelming enough, but to have the entire Rebel gang waiting at the Barrow airport had had Merritt almost wishing a bear would walk across the tarmac to cause a distraction.

But when Katie Rebel had pulled Merritt into her arms, tears running down her face as she’d thanked God for bringing the two of them home to her, Merritt knew any amount of overwhelm would be worth being a part of the Rebel family.

Their love was just too big not to be sucked in.

“Ready?” Astryde’s question snapped Merritt’s eyes open.

No, she wasn’t.

But she probably never would be.

“Let’s get this over with.” She straightened her shoulders.

Part of her wanted to pull the frigid, ice queen protection back on. Slipping into that role would make what was about to happen so much easier to handle.

Tiikâan took her hand and squeezed. “You’ve got this.”

She gripped his hand and nodded. Hiding behind the façade wasn't an option for her anymore.

Strength wasn't calculating and cold like she'd assumed.

No.

True strength was honoring your beliefs and convictions, protecting those around you, and doing your best to leave the world better than when you entered.

Her father had done that.

She'd just been too blinded by her own hurt from him marrying Joni to see it.

Her father's legacy no longer suffocated her.

And she wouldn't allow Nolan to take any more from her than he already had.

Pushing through the office door, she strode confidently toward the meeting room Nolan was holding the press conference in. His voice reached her before she saw him, his words fueling her anger.

"Merritt was the daughter I never had." Nolan's voice cracked, and Merritt rolled her eyes.

Press crowded in the chairs filling the room, and cameras lined the back of the room. Her uncle stood behind a podium with the Harland Global Resources emblem hanging from it. The picture of her, her dad, and Nolan propped on an easel behind him made her blood boil.

"My brother and Merritt will forever leave a hole in my heart and in HGR."

Oh, please.

"Really?" Merritt stepped into the room and crossed her arms. "Because before you tried to kill me, you clearly said Dad and I were detrimental to you getting rich."

The cameras and reporters swiveled to her. Satisfaction tingled over her like the rush of a river as Nolan's skin paled and he stumbled backward.

“Merritt?” Silas gasped her name, and she couldn’t believe she hadn’t noticed her stepfamily standing off to the side of Nolan.

Silas pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, his head shaking as his eyes went glassy.

“How... how—” Nolan stuttered, pulling her attention back to her uncle.

“Because I think you deserve to know the truth before you rot in jail for the rest of your life, I’m going to answer the insipid question.” Merritt smirked, loving the surge of power throwing his own words back at him gave her.

Tiikâan stifled a laugh and whispered behind her, “So awesome.”

Buoyed by his support and the support she felt from his family behind her, she stepped farther into the room.

“You shouldn’t have counted me for dead so fast. You should know us Harlands are tenacious when it comes to getting what we want. And, well, I wanted to live more than you wanted me dead.”

“That’s not—”

“You aren’t going to undermine and steal Dad’s legacy,” she cut him off. “His integrity and vision will no longer be tainted by you.”

“Why, you little—”

Silas’ punch to Nolan’s face snapped his head back and shut off his words. He shook his head, weaving like he was off-balance.

“Nolan Harland, you’re under arrest for the attempted murder of Merritt Harland and Tiikâan Rebel, and for the murder of Clayton Harland.” Astryde’s trooper friend took out her handcuffs and walked down the aisle between the chairs of reporters.

Rachel gasped, and Joni stumbled against her daughter, her face white.

“Do you have any idea who I am?” Nolan gripped the podium to steady himself, his face blotched red with anger.

The trooper’s partner followed behind her with his firearm drawn and pointed down.

The trooper in charge continued over Nolan’s talking. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

She stopped in front of him and cocked her head. “Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?”

Tiikâan’s hand soothed across Merritt’s lower back, resting on her hip. She leaned into him. Her uncle could fight all he wanted, but she’d never stop until he paid for murdering her dad.

A shriek pulled her attention away from Nolan to the troopers confronting Joni.

“Joni Harland, you’re under arrest for accessory to the murder of Clayton Harland.”

“What?” Her shrill voice filled the room. “No. It was all Nolan. I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Mother? How could you?” Rachel covered her face, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed.

The room exploded into chaos as reporters shot questions at Nolan, Merritt, and Joni. Joni continued her shrieking as the troopers cuffed her, spewing Nolan’s dirty secrets faster than a drill striking oil.

Nolan’s frigid calm as he speared Merritt with a hateful glare tore her heart out of her chest.

How could the man she loved and trusted be so evil?

As the troopers led Nolan and Joni out of the room and the reporters shouted questions, Silas pushed his way through the crowd.

“Merritt!” He broke free and rushed to her.

She tensed, and Tiikâan's hand tightened on her waist. In her periphery, several of the Rebels stepped up next to her.

"Thank God, Merritt." Silas wrapped her in a hug, his shoulders shaking as he buried his face in her neck and cried. "I thought I'd lost you, too."

He held her tight, apologizing for being a jealous jerk and not noticing Nolan's actions. She sobbed as she forgave him, her heart soaring at the brotherly love pouring from him.

Why had they let so much come between them?

Silas pulled back and wiped his face on his sleeve. He turned to Tiikâan and held out his hand.

"I can't thank you enough for saving Merritt."

When Tiikâan took it, Silas pulled him into a hug and thumped Tiikâan's back. Man, how she'd missed this side of her brother.

"Burgers and brats at the Burrow Bachelor Bunk!" Declan hollered. "Let's get the heck out of here."

Several of the Rebel men groaned. Astryde rolled her eyes.

Magnus clapped Declan on the back and turned him to the exit. "Dude, you really need to stop calling your place that."

Tiikâan's dad and mom introduced themselves to Silas, inviting him to join the family. Katie even gathered a crying Rachel to her and led her from the chaos.

Hopefully, Katie could convince Rachel to join them. Merritt would have to talk with Rachel. They'd never been close, but maybe that could change, too.

Tiikâan draped an arm over Merritt's shoulders as they trailed his family from the hotel. "You doing okay?"

Her gaze darted from her brother chatting solemnly with Tiikâan's dad to his brother Magnus shaking his head at something Declan was saying while carrying a sleeping boy to Tiikâan's other siblings.

"I'm heartbroken." She leaned into Tiikâan as they walked. "But for the first time in forever, I'm also hopeful. And happy."

Very, very happy.”

He stopped her, his thumb rubbing across her cheek. “I’m glad.”

She pushed onto her toes, wrapped her arms tightly around him, and kissed him. The hoots and whistles from his brothers heated her cheeks to scorching, but she didn’t care.

Giving the Rebel in her arms a shot had been the best decision of her life.

EPILOGUE

Magnus rubbed Oliver's sleeping back as his brothers whooped like a bunch of high schoolers and cheered Tiikâan kissing Merritt.

He should be joining them.

Should be leading them in the obnoxious revelry.

But he didn't want to wake Oliver if he could help it.

And didn't that just sock one in the gut. A month ago he was carefree, just started dating Annie, Oliver's mom, something he normally avoided.

Kids didn't really fit in with his living on the edge lifestyle.

But something about Oliver had tugged at his heart.

Probably had to do with the way Oliver always seemed shocked that Magnus would give him any attention at all.

Now his life had imploded.

Magnus really should've seen the clues that Annie was a manipulative liar and run the other way.

Then he wouldn't be stuck with a guardianship of a kid he hardly knew and a thrilling career he loved, which he now couldn't risk keeping.

Not if it meant leaving Oliver abandoned again.

To get the latest updates on Magnus's story, A Rebel's Storm, and a bonus epilogue of Merritt and Tiikâan, sign up

for [Sara's newsletter](#).

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Flight of a Wild Heart
Song of a Determined Heart

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Blackard is an award-winning romance novelist who writes stories that thrill the imagination and strum heartstrings. When she's not crafting wild adventures and swoony romances that curl your toes, she's homeschooling her four adventurous boys and one fearless princess, keeping their off-grid house running (don't ask if it's clean), or enjoying the Alaskan lifestyle she and her Hunky Hubster love.



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