

Silverskin

By Caitee Cooper

Prologue

Kukahi leaned against the rough bark of the tree, cradling his shattered arm, surrounded by the bodies of the dead, and marveled. He stared down the blood-darkened beach to where the indifferent water rose and fell, waves upon unending waves. It was odd that the moon and the sulking red light of the brush fire behind him made the blood and water look the same. Just dark stains on the sand.

The life of men and the life of the world ... indistinguishable.

In times past, he would have worried about the villages that lay in the fire's path. Not anymore. There was nothing left to destroy.

I was dead to myself before I entered this battle, and all my warriors with me. And yet I stand here, still with breath in my chest ... our people victorious. He smiled. And they will rebuild.

The gentle breeze shifted, and he wrinkled his nose, gagging at the mingled stench of blood, burning, sea-brine, and death. If there had been anything left in his stomach, he would have emptied it then. Instead, he just hacked, weak and shaking from the pain in his arm and the worsening throb in his chest. He slid down the tree trunk, leaned his head back against it.

"Father?"

Kukahi turned his head and sighed. "Ikaika. Who went in?"

"Kekoa." Two wet lines trailed down Ikaika's cheeks, but his voice was strong.

Kukahi closed his eyes. "May he find peace with the gods. And did you accomplish your task?"

The great warrior nodded.

"The warning is clear?"

"Yes. Though no one will venture into that accursed place for generations." Ikaika spat on the ground.

Kukahi closed his eyes. "It is not the next few generations that I worry about. For now, I am grateful simply that they will come to be." He paused, bending all his considerable will to drawing his next breath. "But the earth will change. Our home will change. This night will be lost to time."

He pushed against the tree, the rough bark digging against the flesh of his back, forcing him upright. Perhaps he should be concerned that the pain was becoming so distant, that his vision was blackening around the edges, that he felt so dizzy, so tired. But he just ... wanted ... to *sleep*.

Ikaika knelt beside him. "Father?"

Strong fingers probed Kukahi's bruised flesh where the Crusher had smashed into him. He had known in that moment that something inside him was broken. Kukahi let his good hand fall to the spear at his side, its pitch-soaked tip still smoldering with embers that were dying as slowly and inevitably as he was. Far away, Ikaika's curse floated through his ears.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone your wounds were this bad?” Ikaika made to get up. “Lie still, I will find a healer—”

Kukahi let go of the spear and caught Ikaika’s fingers, his battle-callused hand quick and sure even in the midst of his own death. “No. I, too, go to the gods. Do not waste any of our precious resources on me when there are others who can be saved.”

The feeling drained out of Kukahi’s limbs, the strength out of his muscles, and he sagged. Ikaika caught him and laid him gently on the soft earth, the young warrior’s face contorted by pain that wasn’t from his wounds and would heal far less quickly.

“Father ...”

His stricken whisper pierced Kukahi, and he fumbled until he found the young man’s hand again. “Lead them. Teach them, *make sure* they remember.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I will watch over you, my son. I will watch over you all—your sons, your daughters, granddaughters ... and I will watch over this place, our home. Now leave me, Ikaika ... let me go ...”

Part I: The Ghost

Chapter 1

Ellie's book lay untouched on the seat beside her. She'd intended to finish it during the forty-five-minute ferry ride across the bay, but Alaska had other plans.

She gawked out the boat's window, in awe of the savage beauty and sheer wildness of the place. The Kenai Peninsula was so ... *green*. She'd imagined a landscape more like her home in the Rocky Mountains, not this twisting snarl of undergrowth, laden with berries; a cold, harsh northern land that was shockingly fat with life. This wilderness had a raw intimidation factor she'd never experienced anywhere else. In Colorado, the Rockies didn't care if you lived or died. In Alaska, the mountains seemed to judge a person.

And, she thought with a shiver, she didn't want to find out what happened to those they found unworthy.

Snap out of it, Ellie, she thought as the hum of the ferry ratcheted down a notch. She felt as much as heard the pitch of its huge motor change as it drifted toward the dock. *You're here to reconnect with the person you used to be. The cool girl who did cool stuff. Remember her?*

Of course she did. She'd been the girl who wasn't afraid of anything, who was tough enough to keep up with Sam and his friends even though they were two years older, whose love of adventure couldn't be dampened even by freak mountain rainstorms that soaked her to the bone and left her shivering.

But freak accidents that upend your whole world in an instant? Those change people.

She shook the bitter thought away as her dad poked his head around the corner, where he'd been standing with Sam, chatting with one of the ferry workers. She cracked a tiny smile. Those two were peas in a pod. Both great conversationalists, both interested in the lives of the people around them, and both as genuine and good as the day was long.

Her dad nodded toward her book. "I see you didn't finish that."

"I ... nope. I sure didn't."

"I didn't think you would." A wide grin split his face, crinkling the corners of his gray eyes, the same color as her own.

Sam's voice issued from around the corner. "You should've bet her something on it!"

Their dad laughed as he stooped and picked up his hard-sided rifle case. “As if any of us are going to have time in the next week to settle bets.”

Ellie stood, stretching. “I guess you could have bet me a fresh moose steak.” She stuffed her book into her backpack and swung it over her shoulder, then grabbed the handle of her suitcase and tugged it after her father.

“The problem with that is, if you’d lost, then *you’d* have to provide the moose steak,” her dad said over his shoulder. “And if I’d lost, well, it’s not really much of a punishment for me, is it? Given that tracking down Henry’s legendary world-class bull is the whole reason we’re up here. Huh. In hindsight, it seems like a bet I should have made.”

“You are *such* a lawyer,” Ellie said. “Also, I’d never be able to pull the trigger, and you know it.”

Her dad turned and looked at her, a kind smile on his face. “I do know that.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with it, either. There’s nothing wrong with being squeamish,” Sam added, stumping over to where they waited to disembark. He had slung his heavy duffel over his shoulder, carrying it with an ease and grace that verged on inhuman.

“I know there’s not,” Ellie said. “I’m perfectly secure in my lack of desire to kill things, don’t worry.”

Sam let out a quiet chuckle, then looked out across the frigid water toward the tiny town of Seldovia. Ellie followed his gaze. The houses and storefronts huddled together as if for protection from the deep, primeval backcountry that surrounded them.

She looked back at the boyish grin on Sam’s face, and on their father’s face, and shook her head at the pair of them. *Five days sleeping in a tent, without a hot shower, ‘going’ in the woods, and they act like it’s Christmas morning.*

“So, Henry should be here already, right?” she asked, craning her neck to try and get a better view of the dock.

“He’s right down there,” Sam said. “I can see him. At least, I think it’s him. It’s been a decade since we’ve been up here—”

“That’s him,” their dad said, and waved in the direction of the dock.

Ellie thought about edging over to wave at Henry herself, but decided against it as the wind gusted, ruffling through Sam’s sandy-blond hair, and lifting the ends of her own to swirl around her face in a coffee-colored flurry. She spit out strands of it, wishing she’d had the sense earlier to tie it back in a ponytail.

The line moved.

“A decade,” Ellie muttered as they walked down the gangplank.

Her dad glanced at her. “What was that?”

“I just can’t believe it’s been that long. I was, what . . . ten?” *And Mom and Lily were here.*

She nearly stumbled to a stop. Instead, she gripped her suitcase’s handle more tightly and set her jaw, the words of her old high school counselor echoing in her head. *They’d want you to heal, move forward, enjoy life.*

“You were only ten. And so small.” Her dad chuckled. “Remember that huge Sockeye you hooked? He nearly dragged you right into the ocean.”

Sam burst out laughing. “I remember that! Who really caught who?”

“Hey, I won that fight,” Ellie sniffed. “It just took me a minute.”

“And some help from Mom.”

Ellie swallowed. “Yes.”

They didn’t speak again until they’d reached the dock. Next to Ellie, her father scanned the dissipating crowd.

“*I just* saw him, and he’s so huge you’d think he’d stand out—”

“Robert Forth!”

Ellie turned in the direction of the voice as a tall, broad man with a well-trimmed beard and bright green windbreaker shouldered around a pocketful of people in front of them.

Her father’s face split in a huge grin and he stepped forward. “Henry Call!”

They shared a quick embrace with much backslapping before Henry turned to Ellie and Sam.

“And if it isn’t little Samuel and Eleanor. You two’ve grown right up!”

Henry held out a hand and Sam took it, pumping it up and down with enthusiasm. “But we still go by Sam and Ellie. We’re not nearly pompous enough to use our fancy names.”

Henry smiled as he shook Ellie’s hand. “Sam and Ellie it is, then.” He gestured down the dock. “Well, let’s load up these bags of yours and get home before we’re late for dinner.”

They threw their bags in the bed of Henry’s pickup and clambered in. Ellie rested her elbow on the sill, gazing out the open window as they drove. Her memories of Seldovia were hazy but two things clearly hadn’t changed: its tiny population and extreme isolation.

Still, she found herself enjoying the drive. Seldovia had the look of a place that had been built by people who knew exactly what mother nature could throw at them and had shown up anyway. The houses were sturdy but beautiful in their own way, the streets narrow, the people dressed in functional outdoorwear. Ellie counted all of one stop sign, and there were no traffic lights in sight.

As they turned off the main road onto a long, hard-packed dirt driveway, Ellie started to catch flashes of a structure through the gaps in the trees: a boxy log home with a red metal roof. A thin trail of smoke rose from the chimney at its top.

“It’s good to be back here,” her father said.

“We’re glad you came back. We were beginning to wonder why we went to all the effort to keep the guest rooms clean when only your family and Helen’s sister ever came to visit us. We were about ready to give up.”

Robert chuckled. “Good thing I drew my moose tag, then.”

Henry looked over at him. “It is. There’s a world-class bull kicking around up there, I’ve seen him.”

“I’ll bet. I just hope he isn’t like that Sasquatch you promised we’d see last time.”

Frown lines creased the part of Henry’s forehead Ellie could see in the rearview mirror.

“Meaning the moose really *exists*,” her dad said.

Henry shook his head with an indulgent smile. “Oh Robert, my skeptic friend. *Both* can exist. And do. You’ll see.”

“Uh, I think I could do without a Bigfoot encounter,” Ellie said.

“Oh, come on, Ellie.” A teasing grin spread across Sam’s face as he spoke. “You could use a little excitement in your life. Something outside of school, work, practicing your violin for hours and hours—”

Ellie smirked. “Why do you think I’m here?”

Their dad twisted in his seat to look back at them. “I’m glad you decided to come with us, El. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And one that I’m excited I get to share with both of you.”

Ellie sighed but smiled. If it had been her choice, she would have picked a sea plane tour, or kayaking, or something that didn’t involve the death of a beautiful, wild animal. But she’d grown up around hunting, and though she never wanted to pull the trigger herself, she did love the excuse it gave her to get out in the woods with family. Plus, after what he’d been through in the last few years, her father deserved the trip of a lifetime. With *both* of his surviving children.

Henry pulled up next to the house and threw the truck into park. The sweet scent of wood smoke enveloped them as they clambered out and Ellie closed her eyes. It was a smell that reminded her of home.

“Helen?” Henry called as he opened the sturdy wooden door, and the Forths stepped in after him. The smell of roasting meat wafted over Ellie as she took in the cabin with delight; it was even cozier than she remembered. The main floor was open, spacious, and warm. She

glanced up, admiring the gorgeous antler chandelier that hung from the high ceiling. It probably did a magnificent job of illuminating the room during the darker months, but they'd never visited during those. Plaid curtains with little moose and bears on them framed the windows, outside of which were beautiful views of the forest and, beyond that, the ocean.

Ellie placed a hand on the back of the couch, the fabric soft beneath her fingers, and wished for a moment that she was going to have more time to read on this trip, if only because this was the perfect place for it. And if the couch was occupied, then any one of the armchairs that surrounded the coffee table would do nicely as well.

Or ...

She peered more closely at the table; several board games and decks of cards rested in the nook below it. A grin crossed her face. Maybe tonight she'd see if anyone wanted to join her in a card game. Between their father's travel-heavy work schedule, Sam's coursework and practices, and her own college courseload, it was rare that they got to do that these days. She had to take all the opportunities she could get.

To Ellie's right, several doors opened into various rooms. If she craned her neck, she could see into the guest room her parents had stayed in last time they had been here. In front of her, a beautiful log staircase led up to an open loft above the kitchen, and a wistful smile touched her lips as she remembered the shenanigans that she, Sam, Lily, and Oliver—the Calls' nephew—had gotten into up there the last time they'd visited.

"Henry?"

A strong-looking woman emerged from the laundry room behind the kitchen, her arms held awkwardly away from her body. Ellie blinked; between the powdery-white cast to her forearms and the odd little bumps on her hands, it almost looked like Helen had caught a weird skin disease since she'd last seen her.

"Hello, Forths!" Helen said. "What a great time for you to show up!" She turned to Henry. "The damn dryer's doing that thing again, but I'm covered in flour so all I could do was hit stop—"

"I'll take a look at it," Henry said, striding forward. He crossed the room and swept her up in his arms, planting a firm kiss on her lips. She laughed as he released her, the corners of her bright eyes crinkling, and swatted him on the shoulder, leaving a powdery handprint on his flannel shirt. "Be careful! You'll get flour all over my kitchen!"

She turned to the Forths, her eyes meeting and holding each of theirs in turn. "It's so wonderful to see you all again. I'd give you hugs but, well—" She shrugged, holding up her dough-covered hands.

“Not a problem,” Robert said. “It smells amazing in here. We wouldn’t want to mess up whatever dinner magic you’ve got going on.”

Sam and Ellie caught each other’s eyes and grinned. Their dad was a famously terrible cook. Now that he lived alone, Ellie was reasonably sure he lived on takeout and Chef Boyardee.

“Robert and Sam, you’ll be staying up in the loft,” Henry said. “There’s a futon and a fold-out couch up there, and a bathroom.”

“So, the futon *did* survive our last trip,” Sam muttered just loud enough for Ellie to hear. She snickered. “No thanks to you. It’s poetic that you have to sleep on it now.”

“Ellie, you’ll be in this room,” Henry said, gesturing to the door to her right. “Our nephew Oliver is living with us for the moment and the room upstairs is his, so—”

“Wait, Oliver’s here too?” Sam interjected.

Henry blinked. “You know Oliver?”

“Yeah! He was here last time we visited! That kid was a blast. We all got along great.” Sam nudged Ellie with his elbow. “Remember, Ellie?”

Ellie nodded. *More like you two really hit it off and then tolerated Lily and me.* “Yep, I remember. Best afternoon of the whole trip.”

It had been a ships-in-the-night encounter; Oliver and his mother had arrived just as Ellie and her family were leaving, and their visits had only overlapped by a few hours. But as was typical, that was all the time Sam had needed to make a friend.

Henry grunted. “Well, you probably won’t see much of him on this trip. He works long hours on a commercial fishing boat.”

Sam looked disappointed and for a moment, Henry looked like he wanted to say more, but then the big man cleared his throat. “Anyway, go get settled in so we can relax for the rest of the evening.”

Ellie didn’t need to be told twice. The polished hardwood floor squeaked under her feet as she beelined for her room. She opened the door with a soft creak and flipped on the light. Above and behind her, she heard Sam and their dad clunking up the stairs.

Her room was small but cozy, with a log-framed queen bed covered by a gloriously soft-looking plaid quilt. Ellie reached out to touch it; it was thick and lined with fluffy sherpa fabric on the inside. She turned away, kicked her shoes off, then padded out of the room in stocking-clad feet.

Ellie closed the door and turned to the kitchen just in time to see Helen heft a heavy-looking cast iron pan into the oven. Then she straightened, shaking wisps of hair out of

her bright blue eyes, and grinned as she noticed Ellie. Helen slapped her oven mitts down on the counter and came toward her, arms held out, and Ellie stepped into them.

“It is *so* good to see you again,” Helen said.

Ellie’s heart warmed; this was the closest thing she’d had to a mom hug in a long time. “It’s good to see you too,” she said, releasing Helen. “Can I help with anything?”

Helen shook her head, though Ellie got the sense she was pleased to be asked. “No. You relax and put your feet up for a bit. All I have to do is get my pressure cooker going on these mashed potatoes and everything will be right on track.”

Ellie slid onto one of the barstools that faced the kitchen. Above her, she heard the bathroom door close and a moment later Sam came bounding down the stairs in lounging pants that were sprinkled all over with caricatures of moose and bears.

“Your pants match the curtains,” Ellie said.

Sam burst out laughing. “Why are you studying music? Your true calling is clearly interior design. Literally no one else would have ever noticed that.”

“I bet plenty of people would have,” Ellie said. “You just happen to have no design sense. Oh, and speaking of interior design, I was going to ask you, Helen ...”

The older woman looked over at her, hand on the sink’s handle.

“I was wondering where you got that quilt on the bed in there. It’s so cute and looks so warm. I think I might need to get one when I get home.”

Helen smiled, crossing her arms and leaning back against the counter. “I got that from a gift shop in Anchorage. I can get you the name of the shop if you think you’ll have time to go there before your flight home.”

“That would be great! Thank you,” Ellie said.

Helen pulled out one of the large wooden chairs around the dining table and sat down. “So, Sam, you’re getting married in only a few weeks. Are you excited?”

The smile that transformed Sam’s face was positively radiant. “Excited doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel about marrying Darien. Did you get our invite?”

Helen beamed. “I did, and we’ll be there. Tell me about her.”

“Well, she’s perfection walking, for a start.”

“Ha! That is a great start. I know your dad really likes her.” Helen leaned forward, resting her chin in her hand.

“Everyone likes Darien,” Ellie said. “She’s great.”

Sam nodded. “We met in our freshman orientation class and bonded over how boring it was. Then we found out we shared some other classes together. She’s studying to be a vet and

I'm in pre-pharmacy, so we helped each other through a lot of the early biology and chemistry stuff."

"So, you already know you work well together," Helen said. "That's good."

Sam nodded. "Anyway, we found out pretty quickly that we both love the outdoors, went on a couple hikes together, one thing led to another and now we've been dating for pretty much all of college. Almost three years. I proposed on New Year's." He grinned. "We'll take the week before school starts and honeymoon in Hawaii."

Helen's smile was warm and genuine, crinkling the corners of her blue eyes. "That's wonderful, Sam! I'm so happy for you. And you're still playing football?"

"Yep. I'm a running back."

"A starting running back," Ellie said. "He could probably go into the NFL if he wanted."

Sam shook his head. "Nah. There are way better players than me out there."

"Stop. You're way too modest," Ellie said.

"Not really. It'd be fun, don't get me wrong, and I've thought about just going for it. But it's a pretty tough world and Darien and I want a family. Not that that can't be done if you're in the NFL, lots of guys do both successfully. But, well ..." He scratched his head. "I'm good being a pharmacist, where I know I can make good money and won't end up breaking all my bones doing it."

A small smile creased Helen's face. "I think that's very wise, Sam. It shows that you know yourself and what you want."

"Why thanks, Helen. And it helps that ..." A faint tinge of pink appeared in his cheeks.

"Well, it helps that money won't really be an issue for us in the future."

"Sam, there's no need to be embarrassed by your good fortune. Both your parents worked hard, and you kids are working hard. You've earned it."

Sam smiled, and Helen returned it before turning to Ellie.

"And you're studying music, I hear?"

"Yep! Violin performance, specifically."

"Honestly, classical music world might be crazier than the NFL," Sam muttered.

Ellie grinned. "In some ways."

The faint squeak of the upstairs bathroom door echoed down to them, followed by her dad's heavy, sure footfalls on the stairs.

Even his footsteps sound like lawyer footsteps, Ellie thought.

"These two aren't bothering you too much, are they?" Robert asked.

Helen waved a hand. "Not at all. We've just been catching up."

The front door slammed, and Ellie turned to see Henry tromping through the living room, carrying a load of wood. A split second later, the Instant Pot beeped. Helen jumped up and opened the release, shooting a jet of steam into the air that was loud enough to effectively stifle their conversation.

“Food will be on shortly!” she called over the noise. “This is where I’ll need helpers.”

After laying out Helen’s beautifully cooked meal on the table, they settled down to eat. Helen had set one extra place for Oliver, who had yet to show up or answer any text messages, but neither she nor Henry acted like his lateness was anything other than perfectly normal.

“Mind if we say grace?” Henry asked, taking Helen’s hand.

Robert shook his head. “Not at all.”

He bowed his head and Ellie uncomfortably followed suit as Henry said a short prayer. She’d never gone to church and didn’t really know how to handle ... religion. Anything about it, really. But just as they had many times before, her brief thoughts on the subject evaporated as the prayer ended and her stomach growled.

“Dig in, folks,” Helen said, reaching for a roll.

Ellie followed suit, piling her plate high with mashed potatoes, tender asparagus shoots, rolls slathered with raspberry jam, and finally, a hunk of roast moose. The meat was savory and slightly gamey, deliciously seasoned, and tender. She looked up to see Helen smiling at her from across the table.

“Like it?”

Ellie nodded, her mouth too full to manage anything but a muffled “mmm-hmm!”

Twenty minutes later, Ellie slumped over the table on her elbows, barely suppressing a groan. Beside her, Sam stretched out in his chair, his hands crossed over his stomach, which was somehow still as flat as the tabletop in front of him.

“I have to say I’m impressed by how much you two can put away,” Henry said. “We’ll have to get that moose early on just so that we have enough to feed you.”

“Sam’s an athlete,” Robert said, standing up to take his plate to the sink. As always, he had been far more judicious with the amount of food he put in his body than his offspring were. He could actually *move* comfortably. All Ellie could think about were her pajamas with the stretchy waistband that were waiting for her in the guest room. If she could just roll herself in there ...

“And Ellie’s got a fast metabolism or something,” Sam said.

Ellie's groan finally escaped as she forced herself to stand. "We've been over this. I run, Sam. Maybe even as much as you do." She scooped up both Sam's plate and her own and waddled over to the kitchen sink with them.

"Thanks, sis," Sam said.

"No problem," Ellie said over her shoulder. Behind her, she heard the front door open and close. A wave of cool air washed over her, raising goosebumps on her arms.

"Hey Oliver," Helen called. "Nice of you to join us."

A new voice, a cheerful baritone, answered her. "Hey. Sorry I never texted you back. We caught our limit early and decided to do most of the processing this afternoon. I didn't want to touch my phone with goopy hands."

"You coulda *washed* them, you know," Helen chided. Ellie glanced over at her; the smile on her face held no bite. "Anyway, we're glad you decided to come home instead of just working through the night."

"Me too. I'm still tired from my last twenty."

Ellie finished rinsing the last dish and set it in the open dishwasher, then turned to study Oliver. Her eyebrows went up. Last time she'd seen him he'd been an awkward eleven-year-old, all elbows and knees, wearing baggy secondhand clothes. Now he was tall, lean, with tousled black hair and bright, alert eyes. Handsome. *Very* handsome.

"Oliver, Sam here told me that you all have met before," Henry said.

"We have." Oliver smiled as he reached out to shake Robert's proffered hand. "Mr. Forth. Sam." Then, he looked over at Ellie, his keen eyes politely interested. "Ellie."

He cocked his head, a quizzical expression crossing his face, then shrugged and held out a hand. She rounded the counter and shook it firmly, trying not to wrinkle her nose at the smell of fish that rose off him.

"Nice to see you again," she said. "You got taller. And smellier."

"You too. Got taller, I mean. Not smellier."

Ellie smirked. "Good save."

"Thanks." Oliver released her hand, turning back to the room at large. "Anyway, I apologize for my lateness. I work long hours on a commercial fishing boat." He shrugged. "Sometimes it means I'm late."

Sam waved a hand. "It's fine. We forgive you."

"So, here's the real question," Ellie broke in. "Are you any good at hearts?"

Oliver looked surprised. "You mean the card game?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "I haven't played since high school, but I think I remember most of the rules."

"Perfect," Ellie said with a nod.

"Great, then. But before we play, I really need a shower."

"Yes," Helen said, bustling across the room. "Here, let me hang your jacket up in the back."

"I got it, Helen. Really," Oliver replied, but she marched toward him with the look of a woman who wouldn't take no for an answer. Obediently, he slipped off his blue windbreaker and handed it to her.

She turned away, holding the windbreaker at a distance. "It's no problem. I'll do whatever it takes to get you cleaned up as soon as possible. You smell like fish."

Oliver smiled sheepishly. "Occupational hazard. I'll be right back." He crossed the room but stopped at the base of the stairs, just as Helen re-emerged from the laundry room and picked up the dish towel. He caught her eye and opened his arms. "Sure you don't want a hug, Helen?"

She flung the wet dish towel at his head in response. He caught it, laughing out loud.

"Get out of here, you rascal, before I make you sleep in the shed!" Helen threatened.

Oliver chuckled quietly as he ascended the stairs, his footfalls much softer than her dad's had been. And Ellie, sensing an opportunity, turned toward her room. "I'm going to go change."

Upstairs, she heard the shower turn on as she rummaged through her suitcase for her pajama pants and smiled as the memories of eleven-year-old Oliver rose to the surface of her mind. He'd been so ... nondescript then.

Incredible how time can change a person, she thought.

She tossed her soft flannel pants onto the bed and reached for her T-shirt. Changing would only take her about thirty seconds. Then, she fully intended to spend the rest of this blissful, glorious moment alone with her book.

What seemed like a pitifully short time later, Ellie was startled out of the pages by a loud banging on the door. "Ellie! Did you fall asleep in there?"

Heart still pounding, Ellie crossed the room and yanked it open with a squeak, revealing Sam's athletic frame. "Why? Afraid I'd go to bed without beating you? You know me better than that!"

She elbowed past him, poking him in the ticklish spot in his side on her way out the door. He doubled over with an involuntary bark of laughter, then followed her.

"So, you were reading," he said.

“Just a little,” she admitted, sinking down on the soft leather couch. “I’m at a really intense part.” She looked around the room at large. “So, who else is playing cards with us? We’ve got me, Sam, and Oliver. We need one more person.”

Helen had disappeared into the master suite a few minutes ago but Henry and her dad were discussing guns and other man things by the fire.

“Henry? You want in?” her dad asked.

The big, bearded man shook his head. “You go for it. I’ll referee.”

Upstairs, a door squeaked open, followed immediately by footsteps on the stairs. Ellie glanced up briefly and then did what she hoped wasn’t too obvious of a double take. Oliver had changed into a gray Henley shirt and comfortable lounging pants—the kind that somehow managed to look both chill and masculine at the same time. His dark hair, still wet from the shower, was just long enough to reach his ears, and his blue eyes lit up as he saw that they’d left a place for him. The smile that followed was positively dazzling.

“Is that my spot?” he asked.

“Yep!” Sam answered.

“Excellent.” Oliver sat and picked up the hand Ellie had dealt him, examining it with a pensive frown. He looked like he belonged in a magazine, with those high cheekbones and effortlessly tousled hair—

Ellie jerked her eyes down to her own cards. *Stop. Just stop it, Ellie. There’s no point in starting down this road with a guy who lives three thousand miles away from you.*

She stole a glance in Oliver’s direction as he laughed at something Sam had said, then returned her stare to her hand. *Odds are, he’s already got someone anyway. And you’re not exactly in the market.*

Her heart gave a little twist as she remembered her last breakup, and she let out an involuntary sigh. *Best to just enjoy the eye candy, then move on with your life.*

As the four of them began their game, however, it was difficult for Ellie to stay wistful, and before she knew it, she was laughing and joking along with the others. Thirty minutes later, after Ellie had absolutely obliterated Sam, their dad suggested that they table the game and finish their preparations for the hunt the next day. Reluctantly, the three young people agreed.

“That was fun,” Oliver said, standing and stretching. “We should do it again if we get the chance.”

Ellie eyed him with what she hoped wasn’t too open of curiosity. He’d seemed reserved at first but had let his guard down somewhere around the halfway point, when his endearing, dry

wit had emerged. He met her eyes as she stood and smiled at her. She grinned back, then followed her dad and Sam to the door. Oliver fell into step beside her, and she glanced at him.

“Figured one more set of hands would only make it that much easier,” he said.

“Well, thanks.”

He waved a hand. “It’s no problem.”

“That’s what young, strapping lads are for,” Henry said as he pulled open the heavy front door and strode out onto the porch.

“This coming from a man the size of a grizzly bear,” Oliver muttered.

Sam chortled. Henry appeared in the doorway, his face peeking around a heavy-looking duffel bag, cheeks red from exertion.

“You wisecracking in there, boy?”

“Absolutely,” Oliver said immediately.

The six of them made short work of loading their gear. Afterward, Ellie wandered a few paces away to a place where the trees opened up, revealing a view of the glittering ocean. She squinted up at the sky, more than a little bemused by the fact that the sun still shone brightly in the southwest even though it was nearly nine o’clock at night. It was bizarre, disorienting.

“You get used to it, living here.”

Her reverie broken, Ellie turned to see Helen picking her way across the dirt driveway.

“We just buy blackout curtains,” Helen said. “And nobody around here pays much attention to what time it is.”

“Except when it’s hunting time. Then it’s absolutely imperative that we’re up by 4 a.m. exactly,” Ellie said ruefully.

Helen chuckled. “Yes, except for hunting.”

They stood in silence for a minute, taking in the beautiful view together.

It was a shock when the sadness hit Ellie. It had been over four years since the accident; *four years!* It was unfair how the wound could still reopen with such sudden, tearing pain. She took a deep, quiet breath and let it out just as silently. Where had all this emotion *come* from? She’d thought her dark days of being ravaged by grief were long over. Was it just because she knew how much fun her mom and Lily would have had on this trip? Was it because of Helen’s motherly aura?

“I go as often as I can,” Helen said, apparently lost enough in her own thoughts that she hadn’t noticed Ellie’s sudden melancholy. Ellie glanced uncertainly at her, wondering if she’d missed the beginning of her sentence.

“On hunting trips with Henry, I mean,” Helen clarified. Her eyes were so kind. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be than with him. I cook, man the boat, read. Sometimes I walk out with them if Henry needs another person. A second guide. Being that immersed in the natural world is an incredible experience. It’s humbling.”

Ellie looked down, not trusting herself to speak. *It’s no wonder Mom loved her.* They stood, silent for a minute while Ellie tried to get her feelings under control.

“I haven’t been hunting since I was twelve,” Ellie finally said. “I wanted to go with Dad on his yearly deer hunt and I actually had tons of fun until ... well, until he shot the deer. He was such a beautiful buck, he didn’t know we were there and was just standing broadside, almost at the top of a hill. He looked like he was sunning himself, just living his best life.”

She swallowed, trying to force the tremble out of her voice. “Anyway, it was a perfect shot. He was dead before he hit the ground, but it was really hard for me to watch. Such an amazing creature and his life snuffed out just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

On what seemed like an impulse, Helen put her arm around Ellie and gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Death is hard, and dealing it out is harder. It’s not a weakness that you don’t enjoy hunting.”

“The weird thing is that I do! Up until something, you know, *dies.*” Ellie laughed ironically. “I love to be outside. I loved adventure. We grew up in Colorado. The *mountains* of Colorado! We had so much fun together as a family in those mountains.”

Ellie looked away, trying to hide the trembling of her traitorous lower lip. It was unbelievable how fast Helen’s motherly witchcraft was dismantling the wall she’d built between herself and the grief. She took a deep breath, willing the tears not to come.

“Everything changed when my mom died,” she said softly. Helen drew in a sharp breath, but Ellie didn’t dare look at her, not when she herself was retaining such a tenuous grasp on her emotions. She didn’t know why she was still talking.

“There was a bad accident. A twenty-car pileup on I-25. We’d had a big blizzard a few days before but we’re Coloradans. We’re *used* to driving in the snow, and they’d cleared the roads ...” Ellie gave a sad little lift of her shoulders. “I guess there was still enough ice to cause a wreck. Lots of people died in that pileup, Mom and Lily included.”

Helen put her arm around Ellie again and this time, she didn’t take it away.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie whispered. “I forgot that you already know what happened; I shouldn’t be—”

But Helen pulled her into a hug. “It’s all right. Clearly you need to talk. I’m here, Ellie, and I’ll stay here and listen for as long as you need me to. And to whatever you need me to.”

Ellie's tears spilled over as Helen released her. "I just haven't been as ... I don't know ... *brave* since then. If something like that can happen just coming home from dance lessons, if almost half of our family's lives can end that easily ..."

She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and took a deep, shuddering breath. "But I'm fighting back. That's why I'm here, Helen. I won't let fear rule the rest of my life."

Ellie finally got up the courage to look over at Helen. The older woman's eyes—eyes that Ellie realized were the same color as her nephew's—were also full of tears. Without a word, Helen put her arms around Ellie again, who buried her head in her shoulder and let out a sob.

"Ellie, your mother would be so proud of you."

Another sob tore out of the void in Ellie's chest before she could stop it, and Helen went on in that same quiet, compassionate tone.

"I don't know if you recognize it, but you're doing something extraordinary. You lost nearly half your family in a situation that's reasonably safe. It's natural that going out with all that's left of your family into a situation that's a lot *less* safe is going to really push your limits. You're still working through an unexpected loss and how it changed you, and yes, time heals, but some hurts never really go away. It's okay to still feel a little shaky sometimes."

Ellie pulled away, wiping her eyes again. "Are you sure you're not secretly a therapist, Helen?"

Helen snorted. "No, but I might as well be. I lost my sister Autumn to breast cancer about four years ago, too." She nodded toward the house. "Oliver's mom. His dad wasn't in the picture; the scumbag ran out on them just after Oliver was born. So, Oliver was orphaned halfway through his senior year of high school. A friend of his in Anchorage took him in so he could finish his last few months, and then he packed his bags and took off on his own.

"We didn't hear anything from him until almost a year and a half later. Out of the blue, he showed up on our doorstep in terrible shape. No money, no job, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. He still doesn't talk much about that time. But Henry and I got to help him come back to himself. It helped that *he* wanted to be helped. He's become an amazing young man despite what he's been through."

Ellie looked over at Helen, who was smiling fondly even though her eyes still glistened.

"So no, Ellie. You're not the first young person who's suffered a horrible loss that I've given a pep talk to. And you're not the only one here who's still coping with grief. We can do it. We already have for years, and in my experience, every day gets a little bit better."

"Thank you, Helen," Ellie whispered.

They stood in silence for a moment longer before Helen turned back to the house, patting Ellie gently on the shoulder as she passed. Ellie stared out across the ocean; her heart was still heavy, but the pain had become a little less sharp.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter 2

Four in the morning came earlier than Ellie thought it would.

She groaned as her phone's alarm stabbed into her scattered dreams, dissipating them like fog on a sunny morning. Blindly, she rolled over and whacked the bedside table; her blow sent the phone clattering to the floor.

She flopped an arm over her face. "Serves you right, you jerk."

Ellie had been right in her assumptions the night before—the queen bed was almost inescapably cozy and the quilt made her want to hibernate in it all winter long. Alaska was a cold place, but that just made the warmth more enjoyable by contrast.

Upstairs, the water turned on in the bathroom, but Ellie didn't open her eyes. Almost simultaneously, heavy footsteps thumped down the stairs and a couple seconds later, a knock sounded at her door.

"You awake in there, El?" a gruff voice said.

Ellie dragged herself into a sitting position. "Define awake, Dad."

"Talking is good. Upright is better," he chuckled. "Helen is making biscuits and gravy if that's any motivation at all."

"It is." Gathering her courage, Ellie threw back the pile of blankets and swung her bare feet to the cold hardwood floor. Back home she usually slept in a tank and shorts, but she'd gone out and bought warm flannel pajamas for this special occasion. They were a lovely sky-blue color that contrasted rather well with her long, chocolate-brown hair while also bringing out the blue tones in her gray eyes.

Or at least, that's what she had thought when she bought them. When she was awake. And well-rested. And hadn't just dragged herself out of bed at four a.m. to go *hunting*.

Let no one ever question how much I love my family, she thought as she slouched out the door.

She scanned the room for people, squinting as the bright, artificial lights in the kitchen assaulted her tired eyes, but found only Oliver sitting at the bar. He held a steaming mug in one hand and twirled a pencil in the other, a pensive frown on his face as he stared down at what might be a crossword puzzle. He looked irritatingly alert and unfairly handsome. Ellie felt like a

waif by contrast; her hair was a tangled mess and she likely had bags under her eyes the size of Henry's equipment duffel.

She let out a silent breath and shuffled toward the bar. *It's a good thing I'll probably never see him again after this.* She frowned. *Then again, that's what I thought last time.*

Beneath her feet, the floor creaked and Oliver looked up. A smile spread across his face, and he raised a hand in a little wave. "Morning, sleeping beauty."

"Have we known each other long enough for me to tell you that I hate you?" Ellie grumbled back but couldn't help the corners of her mouth from turning up in a grudging grin of her own.

Oliver shrugged. "If it makes you feel better, sure."

He pressed the mug to his lips as Ellie plopped down on the stool next to him.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Wassail."

"Isn't that a holiday thing?"

Oliver's eyebrows lifted. "Only if you want to live eleven months of the year sad and deprived. Helen makes a killer wassail, so we drink it all the time. There's no alcohol in it though, or else we'd all be constantly drunk."

"That's probably smart of her."

Oliver held out his mug and she took it, sipping the hot liquid gingerly. It tasted like apple cider with hints of citrus, ginger, and nutmeg. She stole another sip, then handed the mug back.

"Wow, that *is* good. So, is the recipe a closely guarded secret or can I ask Helen how she makes it?"

Oliver's smile came back, and Ellie felt something thud in her chest. She shook the feeling away. It was too early in the morning for flirting; she'd probably land flat on her face if she tried. Especially since she looked like a street urchin.

"You can ask her," Oliver said. "I'll bet she'll write it down for you."

"Yes!" Ellie leaned her head forward onto her hands and closed her eyes. Just as quickly, she sat up again. "I better not do that, or I'll fall back asleep."

"I find that getting dressed helps with the grogginess."

Ellie wondered how cold her hunting clothes would feel in contrast to the warm flannel of her pajamas and winced. Too late, she realized she should have shoved them in bed with her so her body heat could have warmed them. Inwardly, she sighed. It couldn't be helped now, and waiting wouldn't make it any easier.

“Wise words.” She slid off the stool. “And I’d better do it now before everyone starts buzzing around like they’re hornets whose nest has just been stomped on.”

“How about some incentive? If you don’t hurry, I’m going to drink the rest of the wassail.”

Ellie turned at the door to her room, staring at him with one eyebrow raised. “There’s got to be a gallon and a half left in that pot, Oliver.”

He stared back, his glacier-blue eyes inscrutable. “I stand by it. And if I don’t drink it, Henry will.”

“Whatever,” Ellie said, a smile rising to her lips. She caught sight of his grin just before she closed the door and shook her head. He couldn’t really drink all of that. There was no way, not even with Henry’s help.

But if her dad and Sam showed up ...

Ellie dressed, and quickly. Dumping her flannel pajamas unceremoniously in her bag, she pulled out her hairbrush and went back into the kitchen, intending to work out the snarls while sitting protectively in front of her *own* mug.

“You were right. I do feel more like a human being,” she mumbled to Oliver as she hopped onto her stool again. She looked down and blinked. On the counter in front of her was a steaming cup of wassail.

“Did you get this for me?”

“I did,” he grunted, still frowning down at his crossword.

“Well, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Do you have any idea what a ‘genetic building block’ could be?”

“DNA?” Ellie leaned over to look. He had filled out all the puzzle but one section, and the word he was looking for ran tantalizingly through its middle.

Oliver looked up into her eyes. “That was my first thought too, but as you can see, it’s way too short.”

Sam’s voice drifted from the loft above them, and Ellie blinked and sat back. “How many letters is it?” He appeared at the top of the stairs, hair still tousled.

“Eight,” Oliver replied.

“Cytosine.” Sam thumped down the stairs, rounded the banister, and looked over Oliver’s shoulder. “C ... Y... T...”

He finished spelling out the word as Helen pulled the biscuits from the oven.

“Is your dad still in the shower?” she asked Sam.

“Yep. He didn’t want to go slay a moose without smelling good first, the weirdo.”

Henry laughed. “None of us are going to smell good by the time we get back, especially if we stay out for the full four nights.”

“So next time I tell you you smell, I’ll really mean it,” Oliver muttered to Ellie.

She snorted and Sam cackled at her. At least there was a functioning toilet on Henry’s boat. She’d live. She just kept telling herself that.

“Well, let’s say grace so Oliver can get out the door,” Helen said. She crossed her arms over her chest, nodding at Henry.

A short prayer later, Ellie piled her plate with buttery, flaky biscuits drizzled in steaming sausage gravy. They all ate quickly but Oliver positively wolfed his—she’d watched his eyes widen in dismay minutes before when he’d looked at the clock. Stepping quickly, he set his plate in the sink and pulled on his jacket and boots.

“Well, best of luck to you all,” he said, waving a hand at Sam, Ellie, and their father, who was stomping down the stairs. “Thanks for the company and the game of hearts. Hopefully, I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“We hope so too,” Sam said through a mouthful of biscuit.

“With a big moose,” Robert added.

Ellie nodded soberly. “The biggest moose.”

Oliver’s face split in a grin and he shook his head. “Don’t have too much fun,” he said and stepped out the door. The cold draft he left behind in his wake swirled over Ellie a few seconds later. She shivered and reached for her wassail.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. They heaved the food and some things Henry had forgotten into Henry’s massive dually pickup, and Helen drove them to Seldovia’s docks.

The trip by boat to their hunting area was going to take several hours, according to Henry. Ellie couldn’t help but laugh when she read the letters stamped onto its side: the *Poor Buoy*. But despite its self-deprecating name, the boat was surprisingly comfortable, with cushioned benches in the cabin, a spacious deck, and even a partitioned-off bathroom with a primitive toilet. The benches could double as beds in a pinch, though Ellie was glad they had Henry’s big canvas tent to sleep in instead. There was something she really liked about having good, solid ground under her feet.

Henry regaled them with stories of big moose he’d guided hunters to in this area over the years, as well as other adventures he’d had. At one point, their dad half-jokingly asked him what they should do if they ran into Sasquatch.

“Apologize to him, then run like hell,” Henry answered. Everyone laughed, but Ellie got the feeling Henry was more serious than he was letting on.

“Okay, real talk,” she said once Sam had stopped hooting. “*Is there something up there?* Because I remember going to Homer for fish and chips last time we visited, and there were some guys in the next booth over who were talking about an encounter they had with ... *something* near Portlock.”

“I can’t believe you remember that, El,” Sam said. “All I remember are the fish and chips.”

Ellie ignored him. “That’s where we’re going, right? Portlock?”

Henry nodded. “Yes. And it’s true, there are rumors about it, though I personally don’t think it’s any different from any other stretch of backcountry.”

Robert cocked his head, looking at his old friend with an incredulous expression. “All right, let’s get to the bottom of this. Because you sound like you really do believe there’s some sort of creature up here, and that’s a bit of a 180 from the Henry I went to college with. Did you have an experience or something?”

Henry sat back, one hand on the boat’s wheel, looking thoughtful. “Not really. I do think there’s something out there we haven’t explained, and so does pretty much everyone else around here. But no, I haven’t personally encountered it. The most I’ve seen are some funky tracks.”

Silence greeted his words.

“But whatever it is has always left me alone,” Henry said quickly. “So, I just don’t worry too much about it. We’re armed, we’re competent ...” He shrugged.

It was a weird answer, and not completely to Ellie’s liking. “So ... Bigfoot does live up here? But he’s not ... threatening?”

“Pretty much. The tribes call it the Nantinaq, and it’s definitely hairy, smelly, and ape-like by all accounts. Again, I’ve never seen him.”

“But you’ve seen the tracks,” Ellie said.

“I’ve seen *something’s* tracks,” Henry hedged. “With as much rain as the area gets, though, they could’ve been a grizzly’s that had gotten rained on for a few days.”

Henry glanced around at them all and Ellie watched his expression shadow when he caught sight of Sam’s face. Her brother was working as if he was trying to hold back a smirk, and though her father wasn’t as openly skeptical, Ellie could tell he didn’t believe it, either.

But then Henry shrugged again, turning his eyes back to the navy expanse of ocean in front of them. “I stand by it: there’s something out there. Lots of people I trust have seen it. But the wild stories about why Portlock was abandoned are just that: stories. Helen and I have spent

plenty of time up here and been just fine. I wouldn't bring you if I didn't think it was safe. Or, at least, as safe as anywhere else in the Alaskan bush."

"Well, if we do see Bigfoot up here, I'll be sure to get a good picture," Robert said. "For how ubiquitous he is, there's a conspicuous lack of video or photographic evidence for his existence."

Sam clapped their father on the back. "Aaahhh, *there's* Lawyer Dad. I was afraid he'd died of levity sometime during our card game last night."

"Lawyer Dad will never die," Robert said somberly. "He is eternal, like the sea, and the laundry."

Ellie chuckled as the tension in the cabin evaporated. "*Laundry?* Really?"

"It's true." He held up his hands. "We'll all die someday, and there will *still* be one final load of laundry left to do. It's part of the human condition."

"Your dad jokes are getting really bad," Sam muttered. Beside him, Henry guffawed.

They spent the rest of the trip chatting, admiring the scenery, and, in Ellie's case, finishing her book. In the rare moments when everyone fell silent, she sometimes found her thoughts turning unbidden to her conversation with Helen.

I can do it, she thought, staring out at the snow-crowned mountains that loomed above the shoreline. A grim smile lifted one corner of her mouth. *Bring it on*.

If Henry hadn't pointed it out, Ellie wouldn't have been able to distinguish Portlock's bay from any of the other natural bays in the coastline, except that it was bigger than many they passed. They followed it inward until they reached its tip, where the ocean bowed to the soaring mountains, carpeted with mossy, green trees. Henry anchored the *Poor Buoy*, then called them together to make a plan.

"This canyon is where I've seen that massive bull during my scouting trips, and I think there's a chance we might be able to find him tonight. Moose or no moose, we'll come back and make camp around ten." The big guide stood and stretched. "I hope you three are in good shape!"

"I've been training for this for months," Robert said, also rising. "And if all else fails, Sam can probably drag us all out."

Sam nodded. "I drag 300-pound dudes all the time. I got your backs."

Ellie chuckled along with the others, but as she settled into the rowboat, her spirits faltered. She forced her gaze up, choosing to focus on the view instead of the butterflies in her stomach. In front of her, two snow-capped peaks reached down toward the water with ridges like

arms, enfolding a heavily forested canyon in their embrace. It was so beautiful that it felt surreal, and Ellie felt its allure despite her nerves. One lone squirrel scolded them as the boat crunched onto the gravelly bank, and then all was silent.

This is it, she thought. This is the moment.

“Here’s my thought,” Henry whispered once they all had their feet firmly on dry ground. “Robert, I figure if you and Ellie go up that ridge, Sam and I will go up the other, and we’ll meet where the two ridges come together at the top of the canyon. That way if *we* bump into your bull, he’ll come toward you.”

Ellie’s father nodded, his expression eager, and Henry went on.

“Normally I’d stay with you, but I want to get up on top of that ridge and do some glassing in case the big bull has dropped into the canyon on the other side. Because if he has, then that’s where we’ll want to go tomorrow. With this setup, we can hunt and scout at the same time. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” Robert said.

Henry handed him a two-way radio. “This won’t be a long hunt. We’ll want to be back before dark to finish up some last-minute camp stuff and eat some dinner. If you need something or get a moose on the ground, let me know with this.”

Her father took the radio and nodded, grinning like a kid who had just found his parents’ secret candy stash.

Henry returned his grin and slapped him on the back. “Let’s get going.”

Ellie followed her father into the shadows of the trees. Behind her, Henry and Sam’s soft, rustling footfalls faded away as they hiked toward the opposite ridge. She straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath, and hurried forward to catch up to her dad.

She had spent her childhood years playing in the Rocky Mountains, which were daunting in their own right. They were steep, their woods thick and dark, their slopes treacherous when blanketed in snow, and the wind swept across their open faces like a razor-sharp blade. When it came to hiking, she was no slouch, and had anticipated being reasonably well-equipped to deal with the rigors of bushwhacking through Alaska’s remote wilderness.

But she hadn’t counted on it being so ... *soggy*.

It was only now that she fully appreciated that the Kenai Peninsula qualified as a rainforest. A high-latitude, bleakly cold rainforest, it was true, but a rainforest nonetheless. There was no place in the bottom of the canyon that was fully dry, and sucking mud stuck to her boots. Raised tussocks of grass made the footing treacherous, and shaggy moss covered every tree, downed log, and rock like ragged coats woven as if to deliberately clothe the wood. Thick, green

bushes sprouted in clumps, some of which were covered in noxious and irritating spikes. They gave those a wide berth.

Her breath came faster as they started up the side of the ridge, but with the incline also came dry ground. Overall, she thought she preferred the climb to the quagmire they'd just slogged through.

Ellie looked up, breathing in the cool, misty air. In front of her, her dad marched steadily upward toward the ridgetop, where a stumpy line of rocks cut a jagged figure against the sky. She glanced to their right; the rocks may not look like much now, but she could see that they quickly grew into true cliffs, cratered with small depressions.

She squinted. Were those *caves* she could see further down?

A crash sounded to their right, followed by what sounded like a whuff of air being blown from a giant bellows. Her father whirled, unslinging his gun from across his shoulders in one smooth movement. Ellie scrambled to get behind him so that he could take his shot unimpeded.

She crouched behind her father, hands over her ears, waiting with bated breath as he brought the rifle to his shoulder and sighted through the scope at the brown shape flitting through the bushes below them. The animal stepped out into a clear spot and stopped, pausing to look behind it.

It was a moose—the biggest moose Ellie had ever seen. But it had no antlers. A female. Behind it, a smaller shape trotted on too-long legs, displaying all the awkwardness of adolescence. The mother moose fixed her eyes on them as if daring them to make a move, and Ellie's dad lowered his rifle. Thoroughly unconcerned about the human intruders, the calf bumped his mother insistently in the belly, searching for food.

For a moment, the four of them stared at each other. Then the cow moose thumped the calf with her snout, and he turned obediently up the canyon. They trotted away, only mildly ruffled, and Ellie marveled at how easily the animals navigated the swampy canyon bottom. It had taken her and her father a quarter of an hour to cross what the baby moose had bounded across in mere moments.

Ellie's father met her eyes, a look of awe on his face. "Wow."

"No kidding," Ellie breathed. It hadn't been the fabled monster bull and part of her was grateful. The savage wonder of this place was starting to take hold of her; perhaps *one* night roughing it in a tent would be worth it after all.

"Maybe I'll move here," her father whispered.

Ellie grinned. "I'd support it. As long as you pay for my plane ticket at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

“Done.” Her dad chuckled quietly and turned back up the canyon. He seemed, if possible, more eager than ever.

Tips of cloud tendrils brushed over the shaggy green landscape as the two of them climbed higher onto the ridge. Ellie followed her father’s shape up the slope as it passed in and out of the mists. The fog seeped over the tops of the cliffs and down into the valley below, like a punch bowl full of dry ice on Halloween. She peered down into the valley; it was still mostly unobscured. They should be able to see animal movement down there relatively easily.

As if on cue, the mother moose and her baby flashed through a clear spot at a swift trot. They were moving much more quickly now. Ellie smiled as she watched them go.

And then an unearthly howl shattered the peaceful mountain air.

Ellie’s father stopped, suddenly tense, and took a few protective steps in her direction. Ellie shrank toward him, mentally running through a list of all the animals she knew of that lived in these woods. A bear wouldn’t have made a sound like that, would it? Perhaps a wolf? Chills ran down her spine as she looked at her father and saw the expression on his face: equal parts confused and worried.

He motioned for her to stay quiet. They stood in the silent fog for several minutes, looking back the way they had come, in the direction of that horrible shriek. Finally, Robert looked down at Ellie. She met her father’s eyes, hoping that he could offer some explanation—*any* explanation—of what they’d just heard, but he dashed her hopes immediately.

“I’ve never heard anything like that before,” he whispered.

“Me neither.” She shivered from cold and fear. That *fear*. It was growing, as if it had taken on a life of its own.

Her father’s eyes scanned the treeline behind her, and a deep scowl creased his face. “Damn this fog. Let’s keep moving forward, meet up with Henry and Sam. It was probably a bird of some kind and the echo off the cliffs made it sound weird.”

Ellie swallowed and nodded, squaring her shoulders again. He was probably right. Still, the mist-shrouded mountains now looked far less beautiful and much more menacing. Suddenly, all she wanted was to put as much distance as possible between herself and the thing that had screamed.

They went at a quicker pace, hugging the base of the cliffs. The slight depressions in the rock had turned into hollows of no small size; a few even opened into larger caves beyond. Under different circumstances, Ellie would have had to fight her explorer’s instinct to crawl inside and take a look. Now, she just wanted to find Sam and Henry and get out of here.

So much for being brave, she thought.

Ellie stumbled over slick rock as the fog thickened around them. She could see her father's figure through the mists, but everything beyond that was a wall of swirling white. Gritting her teeth, she tried to push away the fear that was still growing noxiously in the back of her mind.

And ... the nausea. In the last few minutes, it had snuck into her gut, raising her lunch in her throat. There was no reason for it; she didn't feel truly *sick*.

She just felt ... wrong.

Ellie stopped. That was just it. There was a wrongness about how cold the air had become, about the fog that ghosted eerily around them. About that scream that had destroyed the canyon's peace more effectively than any hunter's shot ever could. The very air seemed oppressive; it had thickened like soup left out for too long.

"Dad," she choked out.

He turned. Shock and concern filled his eyes, and he jogged back toward her.

"Dad, I think something's really wrong here. We should go back." Ellie's heartbeat was accelerating, her chest tightening, and she fought down a retch.

Don't do this. Don't have an anxiety attack, she pleaded with her body, even though she knew it was too late.

Her father frowned. "We're almost to the top of the pass. We should be out of this fog soon. We'll find Sam and Henry. Or we'll be able to sit down, take a breather, and wait for them." He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry you don't feel good. Can you make it another quarter of a mile?"

Ellie searched his face. It held concern, worry, but no trace of the terrible, sickening fear that clawed at her insides. Squeezing her eyes shut, she nodded.

Her dad moved around to the lower side of the incline, ducking under her arm. "Here, let me help you."

"What if your moose—?"

"I'm not worried about the moose anymore. Let's get out of this fog so we can see, and then I'll radio Henry. They can come to us. We just need to get you someplace you can rest."

They shuffled forward. Ellie felt terrible, and not just because the place itself felt terrible. What if she was imagining it all?

Her father lurched to a stop.

Ellie stumbled and hauled her eyes upward, but it took her mind several long seconds to process the strange sight in front of her. In the mists just ahead of them was the figure of a lone woman, growing more distinct as she drew closer to them. Her long hair became visible,

streaming out behind her head, and—Ellie blinked—it looked like she was wearing a long, flowing *dress*. Ellie shivered in sympathy. She must be *freezing*.

“Hello there!” Robert called, abandoning his hunting whisper. It was a universal outdoorsman’s rule: if you found someone in need of help, you gave it, regardless of your original agenda.

But the woman didn’t respond.

Robert released Ellie, and when she proved steady on her feet, he took a few steps forward. Ellie followed tentatively.

“It’s okay.” He set his rifle carefully against a rock and stepped away from it in a gesture of peace. “We can help you if you need it. Our boat isn’t far away and there’s food, water, and heat.”

It bothered Ellie that they couldn’t see the woman more clearly. Why wouldn’t she turn? Why was she up here alone in a dress, woefully unprepared for the cruel Alaskan chill?

Then, all clear thought was driven from her mind by another unearthly howl, as if from the depths of hell itself. It echoed across the clifftops and pierced Ellie with a cold shard of panic.

It had come from just behind them.

“*Dad!*” Ellie cried, whirling around, but she could see nothing. The fog was too thick, her panic too strong—

“Audrey.”

Only the sheer unexpectedness of hearing her mother’s name could have captured Ellie’s attention. Despite the peril behind them, despite the frigid fog, and her cold, and her sudden and complete hatred of this place, Ellie froze in shock, the howls forgotten.

Mom?

All logic deserted her. She sprang toward her father, her heart in her mouth, her thoughts a confused jumble of joy, fear, and anger. The fog swirled around the figure, broken up by a gentle breeze, and then Ellie, too, saw the woman.

This time, she couldn’t stop the scream that tore from her throat. She staggered backward, smacking against the cliff wall.

Daylight had revealed what the fog had hidden. Instead of her beautiful mother with her long, flowing, auburn hair, this thing was a corpse. Bulbous eyes bulged from the sockets of its sickly, pale face, glittering with evil intelligence. Its greenish skin stretched over the jutting bones of its skull and wrinkled where it sunk into its cheeks. A tattered black dress hung loosely

off its skeletal frame, hip bones jutting where soft curves should have been. It lifted its arms, holding them out for her father as if to embrace him, bony hands beckoning.

“Audrey! Oh, my Audrey!”

Ellie stared at him in disbelief as he started *scrambling toward it*. “No! Dad, that’s not her!”

She forced herself forward as the *thing* backed slowly into the mist, her father following like a lost toddler who had, beyond all hope, been found.

“*THAT’S NOT HER!*” Ellie screamed as her father’s figure started to fade into the fog. A blaze of hot courage exploded in the pit of her stomach. She would *not* stand by and let this thing take him away.

She sprang up the hill after him. A cry tore from her throat as the mist swirled to reveal him again, stumbling with arms outstretched toward the grotesque specter who had somehow tricked him into thinking it was his wife. It glided unnaturally back toward the mouth of the widest cave she’d seen yet.

“NO!” Ellie seized her father’s wrist, wrenching him off balance. For a moment, they teetered precipitously, but he was a full-grown man and in excellent physical condition. He recovered his balance and threw her roughly and she fell, the crown of her head striking rock.

She lay stunned, betrayed, and nearly sick with terror. Her father had always been so kind, so gentle. He would *never* throw away one of his children like an unwanted rag doll.

Ellie’s head spun but she staggered to her feet. Her father wasn’t—couldn’t be—in control. This thing, whatever it was, had him in its grasp; he still followed it with a vacant, entranced expression. An expression that didn’t change when Ellie, bleeding and deathly pale, stepped between him and the specter. She could feel blood pulsing down her jaw now, but she didn’t care. He was almost to the cave’s threshold and her every instinct screamed that if the specter enticed him inside, it would all be over.

“Daddy!” she half sobbed, holding her hands up to stop him. “Daddy, please! Mom is gone and this ... *thing* ... isn’t her. You still have Sam and me. Don’t leave us! We need you! Please ...”

Her father stopped. Just for a second. She held her breath.

It was enough.

He blinked and finally, his eyes seemed to clear, focusing on his daughter’s battered face. His jaw dropped. “Ellie! What happened to you? Here, sit down, we need to stop the bleeding and I’ll radio Henry. We’ll get you out of here—”

“Dad, we have to get out right now. We have to go. There’s something here that’s trying to take you away and I don’t understand what’s happening—”

Ellie stopped short. She felt as much as heard the slither of the specter’s ruined black dress upon the ground behind her. Robert took his eyes off her face and Ellie knew the specter had locked him in its grasp again. His face suffused with joy, his eyes shining with tears, he stood, forgetting his daughter who shivered, bleeding and nearly incoherent, on the ground. He started to step away, calling his wife’s name.

“No, no, no, no.” Ellie crawled after them, too dizzy to stand, heedless of the bruises the rocks left on her skin through her layers of clothing. In front of her, her father crossed the cave’s threshold.

“Dad,” she moaned one more time.

Once again, he stopped, half-turning, brow furrowing as if he were trying to fight off the trance.

But the specter had had enough.

It turned its sunken, glittering eyes on Ellie. Terror spiked through her mind like an icicle, melting and seeping through her veins. Her limbs weakened and her jaw went slack; she was utterly helpless, unable even to cry out. All that existed in the world was the awesome fear the creature wielded against her. She was sure it would freeze the very beating of her heart and she would die, right here, with her father.

The specter raised its emaciated arm toward Ellie and squeezed its fingers shut. An incredible pressure seized her throat; somehow it was choking her. Reflexively, her body bucked, trying to free itself. She reached up, her fingers scrabbling at her neck, but they found only her own bloodied skin, and in front of her, her dad was stepping down into a pool of water at the back of the cave and there was nothing, *nothing* she could do.

Ellie thrashed desperately. Stars winked against the swirling fog and blackness began to creep in from the edges of her vision.

Her father disappeared, entirely underwater. She couldn’t save him. She couldn’t even save herself.

Another horrible howl echoed in her ears as if from a long way away, and she thought she saw black shapes bounding over her head into the cool air. Hundreds, thousands, so many that they blotted out the sky. The awful specter screeched in what seemed like triumph, its skeletal arms raised. Ellie’s battered head hit the cold earth. She wanted to cry out in relief as the terror finally released her, but oblivion took her before she could make a sound.

Chapter 3

Ellie was floating. She was sure she was dead.

But still, her self glimmered on somehow. She was aware, more or less, and so must still be *something*.

So, there was life after death after all.

But if she was dead, why did she still feel pain? Why did her head hurt, her body ache, her throat throb where that monster had strangled her, crushing her windpipe and squeezing the life from her body? Why did the memory of her last moments still send her into a mind-numbing, animal panic?

That didn't seem fair.

With sudden and startling clarity, Ellie realized she wasn't floating. Instead, she was lying on her back on a soft mattress, her head cushioned on a fluffy pillow. Air whooshed in and out of her lungs.

Oddly, it was that realization that made her panic become complete.

She snapped her eyes open, taking in a stark white ceiling. The dull ache in her head, her throat, the bony parts of her arms and legs, her ribcage, the back of her hand—it all became an insistent throb, roaring to life, flooding her senses. She looked down and gasped as she saw the IV sticking out of the skin on the back of her hand, its tube stretching like a long, thin snake to a bag full of liquid on a rack by her bed.

A wave of nausea rose in her belly, and she tried to cry out, but all that escaped her dry, cracked lips was a piteous moan. She closed her eyes again, shoulders shaking, tears beginning to drip from the corners of her eyes as her breath became shuddering sobs.

She was afraid of everything—the IV, the sterile white lights, her wounds—but most of all, she was terrified of the memories. Because between the hospital bed and the injuries, all signs were pointing to those memories being real. That terrible, rotting creature with its bulbous eyes and tattered black dress had been real. Her father's death by drowning in a lonely cave with her as the sole witness had been real.

But even as Ellie sobbed, she felt a warm hand slip over her own—the one that didn't have that revolting thing stuck inside it. She opened her eyes, blinking to clear her vision,

sending more tears cascading down her cheeks. The person holding her hand wiped them away gently with a thumb and Ellie's first instinct was *Mom*.

But as her vision sharpened, she saw that it was Helen, not her mother, who sat beside her bed.

"Sam?" Ellie managed to croak. "Where's Sam?"

Confusion crossed Helen's face. Whatever she had expected Ellie to say first, it apparently wasn't that.

"He's with Henry. They're still in Portlock with Search and Rescue, looking for your father."

"They won't find him. He's ... he's gone." Ellie began to sob in earnest, barely keeping herself from howling.

"Oh, Ellie ..."

Helen trailed off, still holding her hand. Ellie squeezed it, clinging to it until the sobs subsided, then took a deep breath. "How long have I been here?"

"You landed last night. It's almost ten thirty now."

Ellie's eyes widened. "In the *morning*? How long have *you* been here?"

One corner of Helen's mouth lifted in a small, sad smile. "Since about eight. I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep, so I caught the early ferry over and ran a couple errands. Then I came here." She let out a sigh. "I figured the best thing I could do to help in all this mess was take care of you."

Ellie's lip trembled again. She felt caught between her enormous gratitude for this kind woman and guilt for wishing that her mother was there instead.

Helen released Ellie's hand; she wiped at her eyes and, while she was at it, her streaming nose. Might as well. It wasn't like she had any dignity left, anyway. "So, Sam's still up there, and Henry, too?"

Helen nodded. "And a group of professional Search and Rescuers, and a couple volunteers from the community, including Oliver. Not as many volunteers have turned out as usual, but I think there'll be more than enough to find your dad, Ellie."

Ellie squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head.

"Ellie ..." Helen sighed deeply and shifted in her chair. "I'm going to shoot it to you straight. Here's what's going on. Everyone on the search has been told to operate with extreme caution. With the circumstances being what they are, they're afraid there might be a violent person in the area. Also ..."

The older woman grimaced, as if steeling herself for what she was going to say next. “Ellie, please understand that I’m not throwing out accusations. I’m not. But you were found alone, unconscious, bleeding from a head wound, and with horrible bruising on your throat. And your father is missing. They, well ... your dad ... he doesn’t exactly look innocent right now.”

Ellie’s jaw dropped. “Are you kidding? No, that’s not what happened at all! It—”

“Ellie,” Helen cut in, her voice gentle, her face pained. “I’ve known your family for years. I don’t think there’s any way your father would have done this to you.”

“He didn’t! It wasn’t him!”

“I believe you. I truly do. But you ... you need to be prepared to answer a lot of questions in the coming days, and maybe even to delay your flight back to Colorado depending on how long it takes to resolve things.”

Ellie covered her eyes with her hand; all she wanted to do was bury her face in her pillow and scream, but she forced herself to nod.

“I’ll be here for you, Ellie. I’m so ... I’m *so* sorry this happened. Henry and I, we’ll do everything we can to help, to be here for you and Sam.”

“Thanks,” Ellie forced out. “I—”

At that moment the door opened and a nurse walked through, followed by a middle-aged doctor. Grimly, they approached her bed. Helen stood up and moved to the side but kept a gentle hold on Ellie’s hand.

The doctor looked down at Ellie, sympathy etched in the lines of his face. She looked back with eyes that she was sure were red-rimmed, her chest heaving spasmodically as she tried to regain control of herself.

He leaned down, scrutinizing her eyes. “Can you tell me your full name?”

“Eleanor Forth. No middle name. And I go by Ellie.”

“Do you know what day of the week it is?”

“T-Tuesday. Right? If I’ve only been here for a night?”

The doctor nodded, then gestured to Helen. “Do you know this woman here?”

Ellie nodded. “Helen. Helen Call. She’s a family friend. And I’d like for her to stay if she can, I mean, if you want to, Helen—”

The doctor put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Ellie. She can most definitely stay.”

“That’s good,” Helen said. “You would have had a hell of a time trying to get me out of here.”

One corner of the doctor’s mouth quirked up. “I believe it.” He turned back to Ellie. “Well, Ellie, *you’re* probably not glad you’re here, but *we* are. You were pretty beat up. You were

lucky it wasn't raining when you had your accident, or hypothermia probably would have killed you before you'd had a chance to wake up. But the good news is that, overall, you're in far better shape than we thought you were when you first landed."

Ellie felt the tension in her shoulders ease as she focused on her breathing, her body relaxing slightly, though she still trembled.

"We're just going to check your vitals and have a look at your head one more time."

He crossed to the other side of the bed and Helen finally let go of Ellie's hand, stepping back. Ellie let her hand drop limply onto the mattress; moving it anywhere other than where it had fallen was too much effort. She felt like she might pass out if she looked at the IV again, so she watched the doctor instead. The nurse attached a blood pressure cuff to her IV arm. Ellie still didn't look.

"You have some minor to moderate bruising down the right side of your body, but that should take care of itself as you rest and recuperate," the doctor said. "When you first got here, the bruising across your throat was ... significant. We were afraid your trachea might have sustained severe damage. But imaging of the area came back perfect, and those bruises in particular are healing, well, *unnaturally* fast. I've never seen anything like it."

The doctor frowned at the bruises on her throat. Ellie shifted, aware for the first time that she was dressed only in a hospital gown.

The doctor gave a little shake of his head and looked back into her eyes. "You needed four stitches in that head wound. It was a fairly big gash, but luckily it wasn't too deep. And it seems to be healing nicely, no signs of infection. With a bump that size, we were sure you'd have a concussion, but your CT scan looked fine. And that's truly amazing. You're very lucky, Ellie.

"Anyway, we're going to check your reflexes and your vision. Then if you pass all the tests, you're free to get up and move around, shower if you'd like. We'll bring you a meal, and if everything still looks good, we'll get rid of that IV and you can go. We're going to be really cautious because of your head, though. If the pain ever worsens, or you have changes in vision or hearing or feel dizzy or ... *off* in any way, you tell one of us immediately, okay?"

Ellie nodded, feeling nervous and more than a little squeamish. That probably didn't count as the kind of *off* he was talking about. Did it?

"Once we feel comfortable letting you go, Helen has agreed to monitor you in case signs of a concussion start to manifest. Based on how you're doing so far, I'm optimistic that they won't, though. Like I said, I'm pleasantly surprised."

He smiled down at Ellie. She didn't have it in her to smile back. On her arm, she felt the rest of the air rush out of the blood pressure cuff.

“How’s it look, Hailey?” the doctor asked.

“138 over 81. Not bad, all things considered.”

The doctor nodded. “We’ll check it again before discharging you. I’d like to see that top number come down a little.”

“And your blood oxygen looks great,” the nurse—Hailey—said with an encouraging smile.

“All right, can you sit up for me?” the doctor asked.

Gingerly, Ellie pushed herself upright, wincing as her bruises throbbed. She felt the coldness of the doctor’s stethoscope on the bare skin of her back.

“Take a deep breath in ... very good. Now exhale.” He shifted the stethoscope to the other side. “Now again, deep breath ... good.” The doctor stood and peered down at Ellie. “You still feeling all right? No lightheadedness or anything?”

“No.”

“Very good. Now if you’ll stay sitting up, I want to take a look at your neck.”

He leaned down again, and Ellie stiffened as his fingers probed the bruised flesh.

“No swollen glands and the swelling from your injuries has reduced significantly, very good.” He straightened, that thoughtful frown back on his face. “I cannot *believe* how quickly those bruises have healed. And no deeper damage ...”

He shook his head. “Anyway, you’re clearly very active and healthy, all your bloodwork came back looking great, and your injuries are all superficial.” He smiled at her again. His teeth were very white. “I’m going to let you stand up now. Ready?”

Ellie nodded and pushed herself over to the side of the bed, letting her legs dangle off its edge. Her feet brushed the floor’s cold linoleum.

“Go slow,” the doctor said.

“Okay.”

Ellie was aware of the doctor and Helen on either side of her, both watching carefully, and she wished once again that she was wearing real clothes. At least her head still felt fine. Cautiously, she stood, her legs stiff.

“Still good?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah. I really do feel pretty good.” The words dropped out of her mouth automatically because they were the easiest thing to say. Because nothing could describe the numbness that paralyzed her on a soul-deep level, so why bother trying?

“Good. In that case, you’re free to move around. Keep being slow about things, though. Don’t pass out and hit your head. It doesn’t need that.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ellie said, attempting a halfhearted smile.

The doctor returned it, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Last thing before we leave you alone for a bit; I’m going to have to let the sheriff’s office know you’re awake. I’ll tell them to give you an hour to put yourself together, but they’ll probably have someone over here shortly after that. I wanted to make sure you knew so you could prepare yourself.”

Ellie stood rooted to the spot. She looked at Helen, who shrugged helplessly. With a sigh, Ellie turned her gaze back to the doctor’s grave face. “Okay. Thanks for telling me.”

The doctor shrugged. “It’s the least I can do. I’m ...”

Ellie waited, but he blew out a long breath and started to move toward the door. Hailey followed him, stepping out into the hallway as he opened it.

“You take care of yourself and pay attention to what your body’s telling you. We’ll be in again soon.”

Ellie suppressed a groan as the door clicked shut, pressing a hand over her face. The thought of reliving that awful experience again made her want to sit down and cry until her eyes ran dry.

A soft rustling sound interrupted her thoughts. She cracked one eye open and saw Helen rummaging around in the bag at her feet.

“I bought some clothes for you before I got here this morning. They’re not fancy. They’re just what was available at Homer’s thrift shop, but—”

Ellie felt her tears rise again. “Oh, Helen. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem. If I hadn’t, you’d be stuck in that hospital gown until a boat can come back with your luggage. I mean, can you imagine trying to talk to the police in *that*?”

Ellie shook her head, the side of her mouth lifting in a weird, trembly smile. “No. That would be even more awful than it’s already going to be.”

“And I’m still happy to stay if you want me to, at least until you’ve talked to the officer.”

“That would be great.” Ellie clutched the clothes to her chest, feeling the tiniest glimmer of excitement at the prospect of feeling clean again. “I think I’ll go shower. That’ll probably help me feel better before I have to get interrogated.”

Helen gave her an encouraging nod. “I think that’s a good idea. Remember what the doctor said, though. Pay attention to how you’re feeling. And if you get lightheaded, you sit down *immediately* and call for me, okay?”

“Okay.”

Ellie closed the door behind her, set the clothes down on the lid of the toilet, and turned on the shower. She felt dirty, grimy, and exhausted, and breathed a sigh of relief as the warm

water ran down her body. She scrubbed gently at her scalp with coconut-scented hospital shampoo, avoiding her wound. Unlike the bruises on her neck, which continued to heal at a rate that was almost alarming, the cut on her head appeared to be doing what all normal injuries did: heal annoyingly slowly.

Well, at least it isn't infected. Could be worse, she thought tiredly as she tipped her head back. Up until now, she'd managed to hold back the awful memories of the day before, but as the water ran over her face, a terrible thought began to form in the back of her mind.

What did drowning feel like?

By the time she got out of the shower, she was gasping with sobs again.

Helen was waiting on the other side of the door and Ellie, hardly able to see where she was going, nearly crashed into her. She buried her face in Helen's shoulder, who simply held her some more as she sobbed.

"I kept imagining Dad drowning in that pool. I couldn't help him, Helen. I ... I just wanted to do something brave but when the time came, I failed so badly and now he's *gone* ..." Her last word dissolved into a sob.

Helen rubbed Ellie's shoulder gently. "Ellie, whatever happened up there, it was *not* your fault. Don't take this on yourself."

Ellie pulled away, hiccupping, face blotchy and pink. She noted with some embarrassment the wet spots on the shoulder of Helen's shirt.

"Sorry about ... *hic* ... that."

Helen waved away her apology. "Don't worry about it. You can cry on my shoulder all you need. They did bring you some food. It's on the bedside table. It's still warm."

Ellie stared at the food, sniffing and hiccupping. She couldn't tell whether she wanted to stuff her face or throw up, but she figured that she should at least give eating a try.

She sat down on one of the chairs next to the bed and pulled the tray toward her. It smelled good—good enough to suddenly make her very aware of how empty her stomach felt. Tentatively, she took a bite, then another and another. She glanced at Helen and saw a relieved look on her face.

And then there was a knock at the door.

This time, Ellie couldn't suppress her groan. "Come in."

The door squeaked open and through it filed the doctor, Hailey, and a police officer. She was only a little shorter than Ellie but the uniform lent at least six inches to her height, as did the cool distance in her eyes and the grim set of her rather square jaw. Ellie set down her fork.

"Hello again, Ellie," the doctor said. "You're eating, I see."

Ellie lifted one shoulder in an uncertain shrug. “I like to do that. Eat.” She closed her eyes, wanting to shrivel and then go lie down somewhere. Preferably somewhere dark, quiet, and above all, *private*. Dread crept over her as she looked at the officer.

“This is Officer Donolly from the Sheriff’s office,” the doctor said. “She’s here to ask you a couple questions and then you can rest some more. If you keep doing as well as you have been, we’ll discharge you tonight.”

“Okay. Sounds good.” The words felt like wood in Ellie’s mouth.

The doctor nodded and took a seat in a chair by the door, and Hailey followed suit. Officer Donolly stepped forward.

“Eleanor, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Officer Donolly, or you can call me Christie. Whatever makes you feel more comfortable.”

Ellie nodded. “Sounds good.” It wasn’t the right phrase at all, but it was the easiest one to get out, so she was sticking with it.

The officer gestured to the one hard-backed chair at the table that wasn’t occupied. “Mind if I ...?”

“No.”

Christie pulled the chair up to the table and settled down in it, crossing her legs. Ellie glanced over at Helen, who met her eyes with an expression that looked like it was trying to be comforting. Ellie swallowed and forced her gaze back to the officer’s.

“I know that this won’t be comfortable for you, and I’ll try to be as brief as possible. Truly, I’m sorry to have to make you relive things so soon after they happened, but we need information and the sooner we can get it, the better in this situation.”

Ellie nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay, then. Can you please start by telling me why you came to this area?”

With a deep breath, Ellie began. At Christie’s surprisingly gentle urging, she told her everything relevant about herself, her father, even Sam. She told of their travel plans, their family history, the loss of their mother and sister—all of it.

“All right,” Christie said. Her brown eyes filled with an odd, detached sympathy. “Now for the hard part. Can you tell me everything you remember about the hunting trip and what caused your injuries?”

Ellie’s breath seized in her chest, the now-familiar trembling starting again in her hands. For a moment, she was silent. Then, she shook her head. There was nothing for it; she’d just have to say it.

“Christie, do you believe in ghosts?”

The officer rocked back. For a moment, she just stared at Ellie, an odd expression on her face. Then, she uncrossed her legs and leaned forward.

“You were injured at Portlock,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

Christie nodded slowly, looking Ellie in the eyes with an expression that was suddenly very shrewd, as if she was trying to decide what to say next. “To answer your question, yes, I do. But I don’t believe they could do *this* to a person.” She gestured to Ellie’s injuries.

“Well, maybe you should rethink what you believe about them,” Ellie said flatly. She knew she sounded absolutely crazy, but Christie *had* asked for the truth.

“Tell me what happened,” Christie said. “What you saw, what you heard, everything.”

Nervously, Ellie began. She didn’t want to look at Helen; she was sure her willingness to take Ellie in was dropping by the second, so instead she focused on the officer.

Ellie told of the plan for the hunt, how she and her father had separated from Henry and Sam and gone up along the ridge, how the mists had swirled down from the clifftops and engulfed them. She shuddered uncontrollably as she described the terrible howls and screams they had heard from behind. Even their memory still held awful power over her.

“Take your time,” Christie said as Ellie put a hand over her face. “I understand this is extremely difficult to talk about.”

Ellie sniffed, the shakes spreading up her arms, but there was no way through but forward. She took a deep breath and plunged on, describing the encounter with the ghost, how it, somehow, had enough power to physically *hurt* her without touching her, how it led her father into the cave while she writhed helplessly on the ground. The only thing she left out was her dad shoving her away; instead, she made it sound like she’d hit her head as the apparition throttled her.

“Then, I woke up here,” Ellie said unsteadily. She peered across the table at Christie through eyes that felt raw and puffy. Her head hurt and the shakes had continued to spread; now her entire torso shuddered.

The officer sat facing her, hands laced together under her chin, brow furrowed. “And you have no idea how you got back to the beach.”

“No.”

Ellie heard a noise from behind—either the doctor or Hailey must have stood, but she didn’t dare look at them, either. She didn’t want to see the looks on their faces. The shaking became even worse, and her chest started to tighten—the beginning signs of another anxiety attack.

They were going to ship her to Anchorage to a mental institution, she just knew it. Maybe they thought *she* was responsible for her father's disappearance. And worst of all, what would she say to Sam? How could she explain *any* of this to him?

"Ellie." Christie had rested her chin in the palm of her hand and was rubbing it, brow furrowed. "I've heard lots of stories about that place. *Lots* of stories. And more come out of there every year, mostly from locals but occasionally from tourists, the few we get up here, anyway. But I've never heard one like yours."

"You ... so you don't believe me?"

The officer stood up, pushing her chair back into its place. Ellie jumped as kind hands draped a warm blanket around her shoulders.

"It's all right," came Hailey's reassuring voice from behind her. "This will help with the shivering."

"Thank you," Ellie mumbled. She turned back to Christie, who stood looking at her with her arms crossed and her head cocked.

"I don't think you're crazy," she finally said.

Ellie sighed in relief, pressing her face down against the warmth of the blanket as something in her chest loosened. She looked up again as Christie went on.

"Again, you're far from the first person I've talked to who's reported supernatural phenomena in the Portlock area. It's common knowledge that weird things happen up there. Some people blame it on the Nantinaq, some on ghosts, some on aliens, and late nights at the bars just make the stories wilder."

Her voice softened. "If it makes you feel better, I'm personally sure *something's* up there. But we have no reason to believe it's ever hurt anyone, and we can't put down 'Bigfoot' on a police report, especially where a death is concerned."

"But it wasn't Bigfoot, it was a ..." Ellie clenched her teeth, willing herself to find the words. "Like a banshee, or a specter. Or a phantom, I don't know."

Christie frowned, and Ellie fought the urge to drop her eyes. *I know what I saw.*

Finally, the officer looked over at the doctor. "What's your opinion of all this, medically speaking?"

For a moment, the doctor just chewed his lip. Then he straightened and turned to Ellie. "Ellie, I think you've been through significant trauma but are surprisingly medically sound despite it all. As for your mental health ..."

He frowned, as if considering his next words carefully. Then, he sighed. "For my part, *I* think that you witnessed a traumatic accident and your mind pieced together a narrative to help

make sense of what happened. I'm not saying you're weak-minded, not by a long shot. The brain does strange things when confronted with extremely traumatic situations. I strongly encourage you to meet with a therapist when you get back home, but for now, you just need to rest and heal."

The doctor shot a look at Christie, who nodded briskly.

"Point taken, doc. Well, Ellie, I think I've gotten all I need for now. Thank you for being so cooperative. We may need to contact you again, but for now, you rest. I wish you luck."

Christie squeezed her shoulder gently as she walked past. Ellie watched as they crossed the room, and the doctor opened the door.

"Wait," she said. "So, you're *not* going to institutionalize me?"

The doctor turned, giving her a strange, flat look. "Ellie, if we were to institutionalize you just for saying you saw something up there, then we'd have to send half the people who live in this area with you."

And with that, he followed the others out the door, leaving Ellie and Helen alone.

Mustering her courage, Ellie dragged her eyes up to meet Helen's, which were full of concern. "So, after hearing all that ..." Ellie looked away. "Helen, I'm telling the truth, I swear. And I know they're not going to find my dad. Not alive." The tears welled over and she choked on a sob. "I know what I saw, Helen."

For a moment, Helen said nothing, and Ellie lowered her head into her hands and began to sob brokenly. Then, Helen pulled up a chair, sat down next to her, put her arm around her shoulders, and let her cry.

It took twenty minutes before Ellie was calm enough to talk rationally again.

"So ... do you think I've lost it?" she asked, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

Helen regarded Ellie for a moment before she spoke. "No. I don't." She leaned back in her chair, lips pursed in a deep frown, staring at the fluorescent lights as if deep in thought.

"When the doctor said they'd have to institutionalize half the people in this area if they locked you up, he was right. There have been books written and shows made about Portlock. That's how widespread the belief is that there's something up there that we can't explain. Every year people go out there—tourists, locals, hunters, campers. And some of them always come back with stories of having seen or heard some sort of creature."

"On the way there, Henry mentioned it drove out an entire town. Is that true?" Ellie asked.

“Nobody knows for sure, but I personally doubt it. The *stories*—” Helen put a delicate emphasis on the word— “say that several people were killed while alone in the woods near Portlock. One man was supposedly hit from behind with logging equipment that no man, no matter how strong, could have lifted. Apparently partially dismembered bodies of hunters would wash up on shore or be found in the bay days after they disappeared.

“All these incidents were blamed on a creature that the natives call the Nantinaq, and based on what people say, he’s still up there and always has been. People who have heard him say he howls and shrieks like the most hellish banshee imaginable.”

“That about sums it up,” Ellie said weakly. “But that doesn’t explain the ... the ghost.” She hid her eyes in her hands. That horrible, rotting face, those evil, glittering eyes—they haunted her, and would until the day she died.

“We don’t have to keep talking about this.”

With effort, Ellie lifted her head. “No. I need to know. I need to understand.”

Helen just looked at her with heartbreaking sympathy.

Ellie’s throat constricted, pain lancing through the bruised flesh, edging her words with desperation. “Tell me what you know about her. *Please!*”

Helen sighed. “Well, that’s the other rumor, but it’s much less substantiated.” She shifted in her seat, scratching the skin of her arm absently. “The townspeople and natives tell stories of a ghost that would emerge near the cliffs above the town sometimes. Not a lot of people saw her, but those that did say she was ... fearsome. They called her the ‘Lady in Black’ or the ‘Dark Lady.’ But as far as I know, she’s never harmed anyone. In fact, she hasn’t been seen in decades, and most people don’t think she really exists. It’s the Nantinaq that’s far more feared.”

Sudden rage boiled in Ellie’s stomach, and she fought to keep from grinding her teeth. *Decades? It’s been decades since the ghost was seen?*

Helen sighed, seeming suddenly older, the lines on her face deepening. “I’m so sorry, Ellie. You know all that I know now. I’m not sure why this happened, but we’ll help you and Sam in any way that we can. We’re partially responsible for this mess.”

Even through her own turmoil, Ellie winced at the pain on Helen’s face. “No. It’s like you said. You’ve had no problems until we showed up.”

They sat together in silence, and Ellie ruminated until she couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Why would she have attacked *us*, Helen? If she hasn’t been seen in decades, then what did we do wrong? Lose my mom in a freak accident? How is *that* fair?”

Tears pooled in Helen’s eyes. “I wish I knew, Ellie. I wish I knew.”

Chapter 4

By the time Ellie was discharged from the hospital, the former hunting camp had been turned into a full-blown Search-and-Rescue operation.

Or so she'd heard.

After leaving the hospital, the two women came home to a Crockpot full of slow-simmered chicken noodle soup, which they ate in near silence. Ellie didn't miss the grave concern on Helen's face, nor the way her eyes sometimes darted to the bruises on Ellie's neck, now mottled green as if they were a week old.

Sometime around midnight, when Ellie was sobbing softly in the guest room, Helen came in, dressed in fuzzy pajamas and slippers. She sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked Ellie's hair until she slipped back into a fitful slumber.

Three hours later, Ellie was up again, and this time she couldn't go back to sleep. She huddled in front of the stove, her hands clasped around a cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. She felt wired, taut, as if every nerve in her body was fraying to breaking point.

Absently, she reached up and rubbed her throat; the only time it hurt now was when she touched it, and when she'd looked in the mirror, she'd been shocked to see that the bruises were starting to fade around the edges. They seemed to have somehow done two weeks' worth of healing within the span of two days.

It was amazing. Miraculous, even. But it had made her so very, very tired. More tired than she had ever been in her life. She knew she was lucky. None of her wounds were severe; she never manifested signs of a concussion and the cut across her scalp was healing with no sign of infection.

Her emotions, however, were a different thing entirely.

All that day, she waged an inner war just to keep herself from reliving the nightmare in the canyon. Sometimes she cried. *That* part was like being sick with the stomach flu: inevitable and striking with little to no warning. Other times she just sat, staring unseeingly into the fire.

It was a little before five o'clock when Helen got a call from Henry. They had docked in Seldovia. The search was over.

Immediately, Helen left to pick them up. Ellie had asked no questions about her terse phone conversation, and Helen had offered no information. There was no point. They both knew what the team had found.

Twenty minutes later, the truck pulled into the yard and out of it stepped a very tired, grungy, and defeated Henry, Oliver, and Sam. Ellie knew her father wouldn't be with them; she'd tried to steel herself for what was coming.

Still, her heart wrenched in her chest at his absence.

None of the men said anything as they came through the door. Henry sat heavily down in the big recliner without bothering to take his shoes off, and Oliver turned his back to the room at large, pulling off his boots and jacket, his face hidden.

But it was Sam's desolate expression that captured Ellie's attention. His face was white as a sheet, he looked unsteady on his feet, and dark circles framed his normally merry and inquisitive eyes. He shambled toward the stairs, pausing just long enough to halfheartedly return Ellie's hug. Ellie watched him disappear into the loft through blurred eyes.

"Oh, Sam," she whispered as the first of the tears started to spill down her cheeks. Dealing with her own anguish was bad enough, but seeing her brother like this ...

"Ellie," a gentle voice said from behind her. Henry's voice. It quivered a little.

Ellie looked up at the big man, whose eyes were bleak with misery.

"They found your father's body this morning. I'm so sorry."

The news was not news at all, so Ellie was surprised when her head grew light, the feeling draining out of her limbs. She swayed, her legs nearly buckling, but luckily, Oliver was still on his feet. He ran to her in three quick steps, gathering her shaking frame into his arms and pulling her to him as heaving sobs tore from her throat.

Ellie didn't know how long it was before strong hands took her shoulders from behind and pulled her gently but firmly away from Oliver, who quickly wiped his own eyes and nose on the long sleeves of his shirt, now wet with Ellie's tears.

"I've got her," she heard Sam say in a strained voice. She hadn't even heard him come down the stairs. "Thank you. You go take care of yourself."

Ellie's breath continued to hitch as she turned and looked up into her brother's face. His eyes were swollen and red, the corners of his mouth trembling. Still holding her gently by the shoulders, he steered her toward the couch, where they both collapsed. She drew her knees up, curling against him, and laid her head on his shoulder. He put his arms around her, and they cried together for everything they'd lost.

Some time later, once they'd regained a faint sense of composure, Helen pressed steaming mugs of cocoa into their hands, which they both took mutely.

"Sam," said Henry, "I know you know what happened, but I'd like to tell Ellie if both of you are up for that."

Sam nodded, his jaw tightly set. Ellie simply said, "Yes."

Henry sat back in his chair, his expression hollow, haunted. "We searched everywhere, starting with where we found you on the beach. Normally things would have progressed a lot faster, but we didn't have the help we usually would've because too many people are afraid of Portlock. With good reason, it turns out."

He leaned forward and pressed a hand to his face, dragging it downward over his mouth and chin. "Add to that that the Sheriff insisted we treat it like a manhunt ... we wasted so many resources searching for a damn fugitive when we didn't need to."

Ellie looked up at the big hunting guide. "You don't have to justify yourself to me, Henry. You were the ones who were out risking your lives looking for him. I didn't ..." She bit off the end of the bitter sentence. *I didn't even have it in me to go back and help. I can't judge anyone.*

Henry shifted in his seat, somehow managing to look both relieved and uncomfortable at the same time. "Well, that's where we found your dad. Clear up there. It looks like he drowned in one of the pools but there was no sign of a struggle or foul play. They're going to rule it an accident."

He paused, then looked at Helen. "Oliver was with the team that found the body. He's pretty stoic, but I'm sure he's more shaken than he's letting on."

Helen's head bobbed up and down, warning him with her eyes that he'd better not say any more on the subject. Ellie gulped and looked down at her hands.

"Ellie," Sam said.

Something in his voice sent a shiver of foreboding down her spine. She forced her eyes up to his.

"We found you on the beach," he said. "And Dad ... and Dad in the cave. How did you get back ...? It doesn't make any sense."

Ellie flopped back against the couch cushions, frowning. The fact that they'd found her on the beach had disturbed her for almost two days now; she'd strained her memory trying to recall *something*, some clue as to how she'd gotten there. Had she stumbled, perhaps even crawled, all the way there before collapsing? How could she have no memory of a feat like that?

"I know," she whispered.

“So ... okay,” Sam shifted to face Ellie. He talked as much with his hands as he did with his voice, a habit that became even more pronounced when he was emotional. “You were hurt pretty bad. I mean, I saw the state you were in. How did you get back sooner than Henry and I did? Ellie, *none of this makes any sense*. What happened up there?”

Ellie took a deep breath, her mind flickering back to the day of their ill-fated hunt. She suppressed a wave of nausea. Sam deserved to hear the full story.

But will he believe me?

Oliver’s steps on the stairs jarred her back to focus and she sighed. She supposed he and Henry might as well hear it too.

“Sam, you *must* know that I’m not making anything up here. It’s going to sound like absolute madness, but it’s the truth, I swear.” She dragged her palms down her face, willing her tired mind to cooperate, to dredge those terrible memories to the surface again. Then, she began to speak.

Dimly, she was aware of Henry, Helen, and Oliver all listening to her story with rapt attention. She couldn’t bear the look she saw on Sam’s face, so she spoke haltingly to her hot pink, fuzzy socks instead. After Helen’s declaration of belief in her, she had the smallest hope Henry might decide she was telling the truth as well.

But Sam and Oliver? Her brother had always been a skeptic, and Oliver ... well, she supposed there was no point in caring what Oliver thought. In light of her father’s death, any half-formed girlish fantasies she’d had about the handsome fisherman had disappeared like smoke on the wind.

When she finally finished her story, desperately hoping it was the last time she’d ever have to tell it, she peeked up into her brother’s face. His mouth hung open in shock, his skin paper-white, which only served to darken the already profound shadows around his eyes.

He was looking at her like she had gone mad, like he barely knew her.

“It’s the *truth*, Sam!” The sentence exploded out of her in a rush, angrier than she had intended it to be.

“I ... Ellie ...” He dropped his face into his hands, holding his temples as though he suddenly had a terrible tension headache. “Ghosts? Like, an evil banshee? They checked you for head trauma, right? Hallucinations can happen when you’re under extreme stress—”

“Did you hear the howling? Or did I make that up too?”

Sam flopped back against the couch cushions. “I did.”

“Henry?”

Wordlessly, Henry nodded.

“Then what was it, Sam?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t, either.” Ellie leaned back as the exhaustion hit her again. She felt limp and frayed, like a used paper towel ready for the trash can. “But if whatever *that* was can exist, then the Dark Lady can too.”

“Oh, so it has a name now?” Sam said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“Not one that *I* gave her,” Ellie snapped. This was as bad as she’d feared. She glanced in Oliver’s direction, but his face was inscrutable as he studied her.

“For what it’s worth,” Helen broke in, “Ellie told me the exact same story when she woke up in the hospital. I heard her repeat it to the officer who interviewed her. This is the third time I’ve heard her story and it’s never deviated. Hard to believe or not, there’s no question in my mind that Ellie’s telling the truth.”

Ellie shot a strained smile in Helen’s direction, which she returned.

“The Dark Lady hasn’t been encountered by anyone in years,” Henry said, fiddling with the buttons at the end of his flannel shirt.

Sam looked up, consternation written all over his face. “Wait, are you telling me you believe in the ghost too?”

“I honestly hadn’t thought about her in a long time. She’s a local legend, along with the Nantinaq, who’s what I suspect made the howls.”

“And they *kill people*? And you *still* took us up there?”

Henry’s hands jerked up like he was warding off an attack. “No, they don’t kill people, Sam! At least, they haven’t in my lifetime.”

“Then why is Dad dead?” Ellie asked miserably.

Henry hid his eyes in one hand. “I don’t know, Ellie. I swear if I’d *ever* thought it was unsafe, I wouldn’t have taken you up there. We’ve been hunting and fishing there for years and nothing like this has ever happened. Not even close.”

There was a brief pause, then when it became clear that Henry needed a moment to compose himself, Helen took up the torch.

“I’ve already told Ellie all this, but I feel you should know it too, Sam.” Helen’s voice, calm and even, brought Ellie back to the conversation at hand. She listened halfheartedly as Helen told Sam about their local legends, how many of their friends and acquaintances believed in the Nantinaq. How the Dark Lady was something of a local bogeyman but not one to be taken seriously; she was mostly just a good story for scaring away annoying tourists.

Until now, that was.

“Henry and I have both had experiences up there that make us pretty certain the Nantinaq is a real creature, but one that just wants to be left alone. The stories of him killing and dismembering unfortunate townspeople are just stories. There are no names, no death certificates, no family who can attest to those incidents actually taking place.

“The Dark Lady, on the other hand, is just a campfire story. Everybody thought she was made up by the local tribes to keep people out of there. It’s worked. Lots of people hear about Portlock’s ‘gruesome’ past and stay far away. But not for one second did any of us believe she might actually exist until Ellie came out of that canyon with her story and those injuries.”

She looked directly into Sam’s eyes now. “Lots of good, intelligent people here believe in the Nantinaq, Sam. Many have seen him themselves. And your sister makes a good point. If he exists, then something like the Dark Lady might too.”

“Forgive me if I’m not comforted by that,” Sam mumbled. “I just might need to sleep on this. *If* I can sleep.”

“I have melatonin,” Oliver offered. Ellie realized it was the first time he’d spoken that evening.

“Does it help?” Sam asked. He’d never had trouble sleeping in his life, not even when they’d lost their mom and little Lily.

Oliver shrugged. “It’s helped me before.”

“I’ll take some. I’m exhausted.”

Oliver stood, took the stairs two at a time, and returned a moment later with the little bottle in his fist. Sam twisted the cap off and dry-swallowed one of the pills even though it was barely six o’clock. Ellie raised her eyebrows, but her brother ignored it and pulled her into a hug.

“I have no idea what to make of your story, but I think Helen’s right and you’re telling the truth as you know it. I’m sorry if I was a jerk, it’s just . . . a lot to take in.”

“It’s okay. I love you. We’ll get through this,” Ellie said, feeling surprisingly clear-headed. This was how it had been last time; they had all taken turns breaking down and being pillars of strength. If there was a god of grief, then this coordinated oscillation was, apparently, the one mercy he could grant them.

“I’m going to make dinner, but I suspect you’ll be out cold before it’s ready to eat,” Helen said. “We’ll save you some.”

Sam smiled at her gratefully. “Thank you, Helen. It’ll give me something to look forward to when I wake up.”

After Sam disappeared into the loft, Henry and Helen busied themselves in the kitchen. Ellie thought about offering to help, but something about the way that Henry moved, his unusual

quietness, made her think maybe she should just go find a peaceful spot outside to be alone with her thoughts and leave him to Helen's calming ministrations.

She pursed her lips, considering her options. A walk would help clear her head, but she was afraid of bears; she didn't want to go alone. She stared out the window. There was that lovely, cushioned bench out on the porch, and she'd found a copy of a *Harry Potter* book in the loft earlier—

At that moment, Oliver sat down in Helen's recliner, holding a dusty pair of tennis shoes. Their eyes met.

"Looks like we both had the same idea," he said.

"Looks like it. I was going to find a quiet spot to read. And maybe, you know, blubber. But if you were with me, I'd brave the bears and go on a walk."

His jaw tightened, and he swallowed. "I'd also love a walk."

Ellie remembered what Henry said earlier about him being with the team that had found her father's body. She suppressed a shudder. Yes, Oliver could probably use some fresh air too.

"Excellent. Let's do it, then. But I'll warn you, I might start crying with no warning."

"That's okay," Oliver said to his shoes as he tied the laces.

"You two going on a walk?" Helen asked.

"Yeah," Oliver said.

"Take the bear pistol with you."

"I was planning on it." Oliver stepped to the fireplace and reached up to the mantle. A flash of steel gray disappeared into an inside pocket in his jacket.

"That's the most Alaskan thing I've ever seen," Ellie muttered.

One corner of Oliver's mouth turned up in a wry grin. "Hey, you never know when you're going to need a .44."

"It's true," Helen said. "We've had grizzlies in the yard before. Nobody goes for a walk around here without either bear spray or a pistol."

"And I used up the bear spray last week," Oliver said.

"You *what?* On a *bear?*"

"No, on a flying squirrel. They can be very aggressive."

Ellie searched his eyes for any hint that he was joking and found none. She whirled on Helen. "Is he being serious?"

"No," she chuckled.

Ellie slapped Oliver's arm indignantly as he walked past. "You haven't changed a bit, you know."

His solemn facade broke, and he burst out laughing. “Well, you haven’t either. It’s not my fault you’re still fun to tease.”

Despite herself, Ellie smiled. Laughing didn’t feel the same anymore, but seeing someone *else* laugh? She was surprised by the new appreciation she’d gained for that simple pleasure.

He pushed the door open. “Shall we?”

“Let’s go,” she said, and stepped out into the cool air.

The sun cast watery rays over the forest as they stepped off the porch and walked slowly up the driveway. Ellie put her hands in her pockets and kicked a pinecone, sending it skittering into the trees.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like up here when it’s dark for most of the day,” she said. “I think that would drive me crazy.”

“It’s actually not too bad,” Oliver said breezily.

Ellie looked over at him with one eyebrow raised.

He smiled. “Really, it isn’t. I’m sure part of it is that I’ve spent my whole life here. I don’t *know* anything else. But I kinda like the quiet evenings it brings. Nobody pays much attention to what time it is around here unless you’re late to work or catching a ferry, so in the summer lots of people just run, run, run. But winter slows things down. And the aurora is breathtaking.”

“Can you see it during the summer months, or are the nights too short?”

“I’ve seen it a couple times in the summer, but nowadays I’m asleep most of the time. Work keeps me pretty exhausted.”

Ellie nodded thoughtfully as they entered the shelter of the trees. Maybe next time a nightmare jolted her out of bed in the dead of night, she’d get up and poke her head outside to see if she could see the northern lights. *That’d* show her subconscious.

She looked over at where Oliver paced next to her, his gaze fixed on the driveway ahead of them. He looked pale, tired, and his eyes held a faraway, haunted look. She repressed a shudder at the thought of him finding her father in that awful cave and cast her mind around for something, anything, to say. “I was kidding, by the way, you have changed. Apart from getting taller, I mean. You’re more ... mature?”

He snorted. “I ought to be. I was eleven when we first met.” He dropped her gaze, his face shadowing. “And a lot has happened since then.”

Ellie watched him for a moment longer. He moved with an alert, easy grace, like a wolf among the trees. She shook herself. “So, what is it exactly that you do?”

“I work on a commercial fishing boat. We go out early, throw out nets or line or traps—it varies depending on what we’re after that day—and then I often help process too, which is why I usually smell terrible when I get home. But the pay’s good when we catch enough. It makes the twenty-hour shifts worth it.”

Ellie’s jaw dropped. “*Twenty-hour shifts?* They must pay you in straight-up gold!”

Oliver chuckled. “My first few weeks on the boat were exhausting. I honestly don’t remember them. It was just one big slog.”

“I’ll bet.”

“We don’t always do twenties though. Thankfully. Most days I spend about ten to twelve hours working during the summer. And Bill, the captain, is very Christian, so we don’t fish on Sundays, which is nice. Winters are also slower.”

They rounded a bend in the road. Behind them, the house disappeared from sight.

“And you’re working like a madman because you’re trying to pay for college, right?”

“Yep.”

“That really is impressive.” Ellie kicked another pinecone. It skittered across the road in front of Oliver, and he kicked it further up.

“Thanks. I . . . well, I made some stupid decisions after high school, so I’ve got some catching up to do.”

“Helen mentioned that you’d gone a little crazy after losing your mom. Which I have the *utmost* sympathy for.”

A slight frown creased his features. “What did she tell you?”

“Not much. Just that you lost your mom to cancer and your dad wasn’t in the picture, so you were functionally orphaned. Then you had a couple of rough years and bounced back.”

“Rough years.” He let out a quiet, mirthless laugh. “That’s one way to sum them up, I guess.”

“You don’t have to tell me. Unless you want to.” She had to admit she was curious. In the same way a person was curious about a car wreck on the side of the road. *Not the best of motivations when it comes to getting to know a person.*

But what was the other alternative? Talk about *her*?

She sighed. “I’ve been the center of attention *far* too much in the last few days. It’d be refreshing to hear about someone else’s life.”

They walked in silence for a moment.

“My dad, Dean Cole . . . he left a few months after I was born,” Oliver finally said, staring ahead as they walked. “Within a year he was dead of a drug overdose. So, when my mom died, I

really was alone. He had no family that cared. He came from a similar situation as I did, from what I've been able to gather. And my mom's only family was, of course, Helen and Henry. Back then they didn't have much to spare. A little bit of money here and there. They've prospered in the last few years. Both of their businesses have really taken off." He smiled.

"Anyway, I had a really good friend whose parents took me in until graduation. They were the best of people, I was really lucky. I wish I'd have let them rub off on me a little more." He let out a short, rueful laugh and shook his head. "But my friend was leaving on a mission trip right after graduation and I didn't want to be a burden to them, so I left. Struck out on my own. But the people I moved in with weren't ... well, they were the opposite of my friend's family. They were terrible." He shrugged, looking over at her. "But the rent was cheap."

"It's hard to argue with that," Ellie said. It was a common mistake people made when they assumed wealthy people were automatically lavish. She gave a tiny jerk of her head. Just because she *had* plenty of money didn't mean she enjoyed watching it leave.

Oliver smiled, but it quickly disappeared as he went on. "It wasn't long before I got drawn into their little ... *circle*. Turns out they belonged to an organized crime ring."

"Oh, of course," Ellie said lightly. "Just what we *all* look for in a roommate."

He grinned and kicked another pinecone her way. She wound up and punted it nearly to where the Call's long driveway met the main dirt road.

"Nice," Oliver said approvingly.

"I played soccer in elementary school."

"Well, it shows."

Ellie met his grin with one of her own. "So, you accidentally fell in with an organized crime ring," she prompted as they turned down the dirt road.

"Indeed, I did." He stepped around a pothole. "I think they saw me as easy prey: a young, angry kid who hated the world. They were right, of course."

He sighed, so quietly that she barely heard it. "Long story short, there was a mole on the team, and the police caught up to us. I ..." He trailed off for a moment. "I was very lucky. I got eleven months in jail and a black mark on my record. Petty theft was all they charged me with. A slap on the wrist by comparison. Most of the rest of those guys are still in prison and, as felons, their lives will be much more difficult when they do get out." He shook his head, looking troubled, but didn't elaborate.

Ellie cocked her head, memories of the thin-faced, mischievous boy he'd been when she first met him rising in her mind. A dull pang lanced through her belly at the thought of what that

boy's life had really been like. She'd had no idea then. He had been just another kid that Sam roped into his schemes, with fun results for all involved.

Except our parents. She didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or cry at the thought. She swallowed her churn of emotions as Oliver went on.

"As soon as I got out, I came straight here. I didn't have a phone, I'd emptied my bank account just to pay for the taxi, I had nothing but the clothes on my back. And Henry and Helen welcomed me without hesitation. They're angels."

"That they are," Ellie agreed. "So now you're working on the fishing boat to try and pay for college."

"Yep, basically. Henry went to Bill the morning after I showed up. I'd told him I was looking for work—*any* work—so I could make an honest living. Bill said I could come fish, and I've been part of his crew ever since. I'm close enough to being able to pay for tuition now, so I'm planning on applying at the end of the year. If the fishing stays as good as it has been, I'll have enough saved to pay for all four years. And I'm fairly confident I can find work to pay for rent and food now that I have a good job on my resume."

"That's really impressive, Oliver. Good for you."

Their conversation lapsed, and for a moment they just walked together through Alaska's feral silence.

"Earth to Ellie?" Oliver asked.

She smiled blandly over at him. "I was just keeping an eye out for flying squirrels. I hear they can be aggressive."

He laughed, full and genuine, and Ellie couldn't help it. For the first time in days, she laughed too.

When she glanced over at Oliver, he was studying her with eyes that were as kind as his aunt's. She smiled. "Thanks for telling me about your life."

"Thanks for listening. I was prepared to listen to *you*, not the other way around."

Ellie cast her eyes down to the soft dirt at her feet. "Maybe later. When I'm less of a disaster."

"Hey."

Ellie met his grave, compassionate gaze.

"You have every right to be a disaster," he said.

Ellie swallowed a lump in her throat. *Please, no. I've done so well, I'm so sick of crying—*

Oliver's phone dinged, the sound seeming incongruous with the serenity of the forest, and Ellie let out a breath of relief as he pulled it out and squinted at the screen.

"Helen says the food's almost ready."

"Already?"

"It's almost eight."

"Oh wow." Ellie cleared her throat, steadying her voice with effort. "I didn't realize we'd been out so long. No wonder I'm starving."

Oliver looked at her, a small, sad smile on his face. Ellie caught the sympathy there and was grateful when he didn't push it.

He turned forward again. "Yeah, we'd better get back. Normally I'd be scared Henry would eat it all before we got there but, well ..." He scratched the back of his head.

"I hope he doesn't blame himself," Ellie said as they passed the pinecone she'd kicked earlier. They were going at a much faster pace now that they had the lure of food to draw them home.

Oliver blew out a breath. "He does. But he shouldn't. We've been up there dozens of times and nothing like this has ever happened." He paused. "It may help him to hear you say that, though."

She nodded. "And what would help *you*?"

He blinked. "Me?"

"Yeah. I mean, it can't have been easy for you either, when you guys ... you know ... found him."

For a long moment, he was silent, and Ellie started to fear that she'd crossed into territory that should have been left alone. But then ...

"Thank you," he said quietly, stopping and turning to look at her.

"For ...?"

"For thinking of me. You didn't have to do that. I mean, you were just in a terrible accident and are grieving your father."

"I'm aware," Ellie said. "I'm also aware that you up and joined a Search and Rescue operation for someone who was basically a complete stranger to you. And in an area that people around here are terrified of. There are just some things you don't *not* thank people for."

He shrugged. "Your dad wasn't a complete stranger. We'd played cards."

Ellie let out a little noise, something between a laugh and a sob. "And that's all it takes?"

“I’ve done stupider things for worse people after spending much less time with them.” His eyes were twin points of cobalt in the light of the evening sun. “Plus, Henry was up there, too. What was I going to do? Ignore you all and go back to work?”

Ellie stared into his solemn, earnest face, then stumbled on a tree root that stuck out of the packed driveway dirt. She recovered, biting back a curse, and folded her arms over her chest as she felt her cheeks begin to burn.

“Well, it’s much appreciated, at any rate,” she said in as conversational a tone as she could muster. *Way to be poised, girl.* “And my offer stands. If you think of anything I can do for you, or if you just need to talk . . . I’m not sure if I can deal with details,” she added hastily.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“But if you need to chat, seriously, I’m here.”

Oliver smiled and pulled her into a side hug. “The thought is enough for now.”

Ellie slipped her arm around his waist and hugged him back briefly, then let him go as they rounded the corner and the house came into view. Her heart felt lighter than it had in days, and what was even better, there was one of Helen’s warm, homemade dinners waiting for them both.

Hailey ambled up the trail behind Gopher, her Labrador and most faithful walking buddy. It had been a long week, but a good one. She'd helped deliver a baby, which was always a heartwarming experience, especially when everything went right.

She rounded a bend in the trail and frowned as she remembered a very different—and much more traumatized—patient from earlier in the week. Hailey couldn't stop thinking about those weird bruises on the girl's neck that had healed so quickly. Nothing about that made any sense.

"Hailey!"

She stopped at the sound of that familiar voice and turned to see her husband John jogging down the path toward her.

"Hey, babe!" Hailey called. "I thought you didn't get off work for another hour." She stepped forward with her arms open to embrace him, but he stopped a few feet from her. She cocked her head but let her hands fall to her sides. Maybe he was self-conscious of how he smelled; his work as a logger often made him dirty and sweaty.

Not that she cared. He never smelled as bad as some of the things she faced at work, and she'd told him that. Inwardly, she shrugged as he fell into step beside her; she was happy just to see him. She'd coax that hug—plus interest—out of him later.

"I just wanted to know your thoughts on that Search and Rescue operation out by Portlock," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Oh." She frowned. That wasn't what she'd expected to hear. But the search for that hunter had been the talk of the town for the last few days. They'd all known it was only a matter of time before the creature that lived up there got someone. "Yeah, that's a sad one."

"You treated the girl, right?"

"Yep. Strange story. Really strange."

"What did she tell you?"

Hailey glanced over at him. He seemed ... flat, somehow. Cold. "Well," she said slowly, "she said she heard some howling and saw a ghost. I ... John, I can't really tell you much more about it than I already did. Patient privacy, you know?"

Gopher bounded around a twist in the trail, his huge doggy smile evident even behind the stick in his mouth but skidded to a halt as he saw John. He dropped the stick and whimpered, tucking his tail between his legs, and skittered backward in an attitude of sudden and inexplicable terror. Then, howling, he dashed back down the trail in the direction of home.

"Holy crap, John," Hailey said, her voice coming out higher than usual. "What ... did you rub shoulders with a bear or something at work?"

John stepped forward, his posture suddenly threatening, and Hailey shrank back, her eyes going wide with fright.

“John?” Her right hand fluttered down to her belt holster.

“Tell me about the girl,” he hissed. “Where is she? Where can I find her?”

“What the hell—” Hailey started, then screamed as her husband transformed. His body shrank and folded in on itself, a skeletal corpse emerging, jaw slack in a twisted leer. Hailey jerked her 9mm out of its holster, drew a bead on the thing, and fired. Over and over, six times, nine times. The creature waited until the thirteenth time she pulled the trigger.

It clicked uselessly. Hailey whimpered. The creature smiled.

Then it raised its arm toward her, its bony fingers curling. Hailey felt a pressure on her throat. Her hands fluttered to her neck, and she drew in a gasp, but the pressure only intensified. The forest around her started to whirl; she staggered and tried to run but collapsed on all fours on the ground, fingers digging into the dirt, digging into the flesh of her own neck as the edges of her vision blackened ...

