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# SUSAN MAY WARREN SUNRISE



SKY KING RANCH  
BOOK 1



**ALSO BY SUSAN MAY WARREN**

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SKY KING RANCH

*Sunrise*



# SUNRISE

SUSAN MAY  
WARREN



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Warren, Susan May, 1966– author.

Title: Sunrise / Susan May Warren.

Description: Grand Rapids : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] |

Series: Sky King ranch

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020276 | ISBN 9780800739829 | ISBN 9780800741143

(casebound) | ISBN 9781493434244 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Romantic suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A865 S86 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020276>

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Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# ONE

**B**y the time Dodge got to the hospital, he'd already broken his first promise.

It was a Saturday, the same day the sun turned the Copper River into blades of ice, lethal and brilliant as they shoved and jockeyed out of Denali's shadow south into the Gulf of Alaska. The dawn had broken at the respectable hour of 7:42 a.m., and with it, the sunrise not only brought a southerly gust of warm air that cracked the freezing point and turned the starting line of the Iditarod to mush and grime but also laced the air with the scent of spring.

A balmy 37 degrees in Anchorage, nearly a heat wave this time of year.

Which only brought out the crazies.

As he stalked through the waiting room of Alaska Regional and punched the elevator button, Dodge shot a look at the flat-screen where the news recapped yesterday's celebration, aka the parade through Anchorage of the fifty-seven or so mushing teams. People dancing on icy berms, high-fiving the mushers, tailgaters wearing board shorts along with fur caps and mukluks, children wanting to pet the dogs. Outsiders from the Lower 48 were trying to grab selfies with local celebrities.

The mushers would be starting on their thousand-mile journey from Willow Lake later today, and with that information from the reporter, Echo Yazzie slipped into Dodge's mind.

He wondered—

*No.* He shook her away, got on the elevator, and rode it to the third, med-surg floor. As he got off, he recognized the

smells of a hospital, not that different from Walter Reed, and his insides clenched.

He wouldn't stay long.

Of course, the old man hadn't died in the accident, and maybe that was crass of Dodge, but if he had, maybe it would all be over, the burn in Dodge's gut finally extinguished.

He spotted his sister, Larke, standing at the end of the hall, staring through the window at the blue sky, the muddy streets. She stood with her back to him, so he only guessed it was Larke, her long blond hair in a singular braid down her back. But she also wore a Sky King Ranch flight jacket, the words emblazoned on the back, so that seemed a dead giveaway.

A man sat in a nearby molded chair, his hair cut military short. He considered Larke with worried eyes.

Probably Riley McCord, her SEAL husband. *Perfect*. With Dodge's luck, his brother Range and Riley would have met on some classified SEAL mission, become best of pals, and Riley would have gotten an earful of family dirty laundry over a post-mission debriefing.

Dodge, of course, starring as the villain of the story.

He braced himself. "Larke?"

She turned, and of course she looked older—the last time he'd seen her she'd been eighteen and joining the Army.

And he'd been sixteen and just stupid enough to think that he had his life buttoned up.

"Dodge?" She wore trauma in her eyes, probably fatigue and worry, but also residue from the years she'd served as a medic. Still, he wondered if she had been the one to find the wreckage of their father's DHC-3 Otter bush plane. His friend Moose had been sketchy on that part when he'd called to tell Dodge about the accident.

Glancing at the man in the chair, who rose, Larke put her coffee on the ledge of the window. "Wow. I didn't think . . . I mean . . . how did you find out?"

Dodge wished she'd finished her first thought. She didn't think . . . *what?* That he cared about the old man? That he'd ever return? That he didn't think about his choices nearly every day, especially recently?

"Moose Mulligan, down at Air One Rescue," Dodge answered.

Larke wore a pair of jeans, Sorels, and a wedding ring on her left hand, but he knew that, too, thanks to the *Copper Mountain Good News's* online portal.

He just kept his subscription for the obits. And maybe the police report. Really. The fact that it listed her engagement to a Navy SEAL a couple years ago was just a bonus line item.

"Have you been in Anchorage all this time?" She seemed to be working her words, trying not to accuse.

He felt it anyway.

"How'd it happen?" He glanced at the other man—Riley—now standing. Big enough, built like a linebacker, he stepped close to Larke and put his arm around her.

Dodge met his eyes even as Larke spoke.

"Otto Smith saw him go down and called it in. Dad was low, coming in for a landing at the Copper Mountain airfield, and his wing clipped a tree. Otto wasn't sure but he thought the wing might have detached before it hit."

"A faulty wing attachment?" His gaze went back to Larke, having found some solid ground in his silent face-off with Riley. Riley loved her—he would protect her, and Dodge appreciated that. Larke might be two years older than him, but she was still his sister.

"It's the only way we can figure it." Her gaze flitted toward the closed door that Dodge guessed was the old man's room. "He's been flying for forty-nine years. He doesn't make mistakes."

"It doesn't have to be a pilot error for accidents to happen, Larke. Weather. A wind gust. Anything can happen in the bush."

Her jaw clenched and her husband tightened his grip on her. He finally held out his hand to Dodge. “Riley McCord.”

Dodge met it. “Dodge Kingston. When did you two finally hitch up?”

“Before my first tour,” he said. “About a year ago.”

Dodge didn’t ask if he knew Ranger, figured it would come up if it needed to. “Congrats. Sorry I wasn’t there.”

“We eloped,” Larke said. “You and the boys were too hard to track down, and Dad already gave his blessing, so . . .”

She was being kind with her words. Truth was, he hadn’t a clue where Ranger, and especially Colt, had landed on the globe. And he didn’t ask. Just because they were triplets didn’t mean they were close. At least, not anymore.

“How bad is it?” He gestured with his head toward door number one.

“Dislocated shoulder, broken arm, a couple cracked ribs. One of them nicked his lung, though, and it collapsed. Moose and a team from Air One Rescue flew in to the crash site. Took them forever, but they did save his life.” She frowned. “But you know that. What, are you flying for them now?”

Dodge wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. Not really. Maybe. “Moose has my number and he called me.”

He left out the part where he’d gotten on a plane in DC and flown eight-plus hours before he’d let his brain kick in.

It wasn’t like his father wanted him around. Or like Dodge would swoop in and save the ranch, walk back into the life he’d longed for once upon a time.

Pick up where he left off with the girl he left behind.

Clearly, he needed a shower, breakfast, and coffee—although he’d given up the last one during his stint in Walter Reed, so maybe just tea. He’d promised his docs to keep his heart rate at a reasonable tick going forward.

Still, maybe he needed to offer Larke something of an explanation because she just looked at him, through him, clearly

not believing him. But if he kept going with his explanation there'd be more judgment, questions, and who knew what else. He might even end up doing something he swore he'd never do.

Like return home.

Nope. His stupid impulses had done enough damage. "How long are you in town?"

"We've been here about ten days. Riley has about a week left on leave." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I should have gone with Dad."

"Larke," Riley said quietly, "he's been flying by himself for years."

Maybe he didn't mean the indictment, but Dodge's chest tightened anyway.

She glanced at Riley. "What? I know what I'm doing up there."

A muscle ticked in Riley's jaw.

Behind them, the door opened, and Dodge turned just as a doctor in her midforties walked out. She seemed no-nonsense, with short brown hair, seasoned eyes, and a lean frame. She wore a jacket over a pair of scrubs and held out her hand to Larke.

"I'm Doctor Madison. I operated on your father. He's going to be pretty sore, and we're going to keep him here for another day or two, but he's a tough one. He'll be okay."

Dodge's throat thickened with her words.

"Thanks, Doc," Larke said for them both. "Can we see him?"

Doc Madison nodded, and Larke headed for the door.

Dodge didn't move.

Larke stopped, turned. "Really?"

"It's been ten years, Larke. I know you weren't around, but . . . it was bad. He doesn't want to see me."

Her mouth tightened around the edges. "Don't be stupid. You're here. Come in with me."

He held up his hand. “He’s wounded. Maybe now’s not the time to—”

“See his oldest son? Confirm that you’re not dead in some Taliban-occupied valley in Afghanistan? Yeah, you’re probably right. He wouldn’t want to know that you’re okay and standing in the hallway afraid to walk in and say hi to your father.”

Oh, she could light him up. He clenched his jaw.

Riley looked away and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“What are you afraid of, Dodge?”

“I’m not afraid, Larke.”

She met his gaze, and in hers he saw a woman who’d been through her own trauma and survived. So not the girl who needed to be protected, not anymore.

Fine. “I left for a reason, and that reason hasn’t changed.”

“Hasn’t it?”

A beat passed, and he still didn’t move.

She opened the door and went inside.

Riley gave him a thin-lipped smile and followed.

Dodge walked to the end of the hallway and stared out the window.

With the break in the freeze, blackened snowdrifts edged the parking lot, muddy with thawing rivers of ice. Cars splashed mud, and ice floated in the Knik Arm waterway. The view looked out over Merrill Airfield and the hundred or so parked Beavers, Otters, Cessnas, and Piper Cubs that roamed the skies, then extended past the airfield to Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson, to the north. Beyond it, the ridge back of the Alaskan range razored across the sun-soaked blue sky, bold and white and impressive. Denali and Huntington, Foraker and Russell, were tucked in there, each glacial runnel and granite ridge imprinted in him like the lines of his palm.

The mountains called to him like an old familiar song, a tune embedded in his bones.

One he was trying to forget.

Though he couldn't see it from here, Sky King Ranch was nestled in the foothills of the range, perched on a lake that hosted cabins and a lodge for the family.

They also ran thirty or so head of cattle and a handful of horses.

Barry Kingston, his father, was one of few remaining born and bred Alaskans in Copper Mountain. And his sons were supposed to carry on the legacy.

Dodge crossed his arms, glued there because, of course, Larke was right.

He *was* afraid. Afraid of the memories that still broke free sometimes. And most of all, afraid of the words that he longed to hear and never would.

He should leave. He'd made himself promises, and he'd already broken the first one by standing in this corridor. Yes, stupid impulses.

"Oh, thank God, Dodge, you're here."

The voice jolted him, made him turn.

Winter Starr. Daughter of the legendary bush pilot Sheldon Starr. Her family ran Starr Air Service, northwest of Copper Mountain. She wore her dark hair in two long braids and had on a pair of boots and a Starr Air sweatshirt. She probably ran her own plane by now.

He had no words when she walked right up to him and pulled him down in a hug. "I'm so sorry about your dad."

She'd beat him out for valedictorian by a half point and that had intrigued, if not irked, him enough to like her. But she'd also been Echo's best friend, so that was as far as his interest went.

"Thanks."

She let him go. "I was coming up to talk to Larke, but I'm so glad you're here. We can divvy up his charters, but I can't do his mail route, Dodge. I just can't."

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve already got the mail run to Paxton, plus every homestead east of the Copper River, and if I add the western mail, that fills me right up.”

“You’re running the mail?”

“And medical and groceries for most of the east side north of Susitna. Your dad has the western run, over the range, to Nikolai and Stony River, and even out to Russian Mission.”

Of course he did. An area that would probably keep him in the air for days.

“He also checks in on the homesteads in the area—he’s got a schedule.”

“I know it.” He’d flown that route more times than he could count.

She cut her voice down. “They’re talking pilot error.”

“No. Otto Smith said his wing was coming off.”

“Ernie Wright just did a hundred-hour inspection on the plane. It was cleared.” She sighed. “I don’t know how much you know, but your dad has had a few close calls lately. Nearly clipped another plane in the Copper Mountain airfield during taxi, and I heard he spooked a recent group by flying too close to one of Huntington Mountain’s spires.”

“Aw, that’s just Barry Kingston showing off.”

“The National Air Transportation Board is coming in to do an investigation, and depending on what they find, he could be shut down. At the very least, he can’t fly, not for a while, right?” She gestured to his room.

“Larke is here. She knows the routes—”

“In her condition? I’m surprised that Riley let her get in a plane with me to fly them down.”

*Condition?* So that’s what the look between them was about.

Winter’s expression portrayed concern. “I get it—high-risk pregnancy and all that, but he’s a little overprotective, if you ask me. But that’s a SEAL for you.” Her voice turned sweet. “Where’ve you been, anyway? Someone said Air Force.”

“Something like that.”

“Afghanistan?”

“Sometimes.”

“I heard your brothers are big-shot military guys too. Ranger made the SEALs.”

Dodge nodded.

“And Colt, some sort of special forces in the Army?”

Delta Force, according to Ranger. Dodge lifted a shoulder.

“All a bunch of overachieving heroes, aren’t you?” Her eyes shone, maybe a little of their untried past in them. “Glad you’re back.”

“I’m not back,” he said, the words just slipping out.

Winter frowned.

And what was he going to say? That not only had he vowed to never return to Sky King Ranch but he wasn’t keen on getting in the cockpit again either?

He shouldn’t be here, for so many reasons. But Winter was the last person who should know that. Mostly because if Winter knew, then her sister Shasta knew . . . and if Shasta knew, well it wouldn’t take long for the entire town to buzz with the news.

So he found a benign smile. “Never mind. Good to see you, Winter.”

“Your dad keeps that yellow Piper 14 you used to fly tuned up. I saw him out in it a few weeks back. You flew that thing like it was a part of you. Like you had wings.”

He’d forgotten that. But yes, she was right. Once upon a time, the sky felt like home. Maybe it would again—he just had to get back on the proverbial horse-slash-cockpit.

Or not.

“Well, like I said, I’m glad you’re back.” She looked at him, paused. Then, “She will be too.”

His smile faded. “I didn’t ask.”

“Sure you did.” She winked and walked away, and his heart slammed like a fist in his chest.

*“She will be too.”*

The door to the room opened and Riley stepped out. “Going for more coffee. Your dad is still sleeping. Larke didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He didn’t move down the hall, however, and again Dodge braced himself.

“Listen,” Riley said. “I don’t know what went down, and she doesn’t talk about it, but she can’t stay, Dodge.” He took a breath, looked past Dodge to the window, his mouth tightening. “She lost our first baby about six months ago, so this one is higher risk. I can’t have her up there, doing . . . well, I’m well aware of the perils of being a bush pilot.” He shook his head. “We met the summer of the Copper Mountain fire. The one that took out your grandparents’ house. She was a daredevil, even then. I can’t—”

Dodge held up his hand. “Stop. I get it.”

Riley turned his gaze on him. “Get this, then. If you don’t fly, he loses his contracts. And if he loses his contracts—”

“He could lose the ranch. I can do the math, Riley. Once upon a time, I was planning on taking over Sky King Ranch.”

Silence fell between them.

“You weren’t planning on going home, were you?” Riley asked.

Maybe the guy was an interrogator, but Dodge had no secrets, not really.

The entire town knew why he’d left. He shook his head.

“Why are you in town?” Riley asked.

What could it hurt? “I have a job offer with Air One Rescue flying choppers.” He’d been sitting on his answer for a while now, not sure of the wisdom of saying yes to a job that might be doomed, but what else could he do?

His answer seemed made when Moose called him.

“I see. So nearby, but not all the way home.” Riley raised an eyebrow.

“You should stop right there, because you don’t know anything about it.”

“I know that I wish, with everything inside me, that I had a second chance to show my pop that I turned out okay. That I finally became the person he knew I could be.”

“My father couldn’t care less how I turned out.” And that came out exactly as bitter as it felt in his chest.

“He has your picture on his mantel,” Riley said.

“He probably has my brothers’ pictures up there too.”

Riley nodded slowly.

Dodge drew in a breath. Managed not to put his fist in the wall. Instead, he sighed and said, “Okay, here’s the bottom line. Nothing has changed since the day I walked into the recruiter’s office and enlisted. I’m not back. I’ll fly his routes until he can take over, but you tell Larke not to mistake any of this for a happy ending. There’s no sunrise of hope here.” He glanced out the window at the slush and rivers of melting snow. “This winter isn’t over, and everyone should just calm down. We have at least one more deadly blizzard ahead of us.”

Riley gave a slow nod. “Okay. So how do you like your coffee?”

Dodge looked at him. Right. So much for promises. “Black and bracing.”



Echo picked the wrong day to emerge from hiding.

Not only had the temperatures soared to nearly the forties, turning the snow to mush, the roads to mud, and the rivers dangerous, but this day, of all days, her dreams turned out to mock her.

“Who are you rooting for?”

The question came from Vic, who handed her a mug of hot cocoa and a basket of greasy fries as Echo sat at the bar of the Midnight Sun Saloon, trying to ignore the broadcast of the

annual start of the Iditarod, the famous thousand-mile trek on dogsled from Anchorage, or thereabouts, to Nome, Alaska.

Outside, the sun fell along the backside of the day, still three hours from darkness but low enough for shadows to lurk along the main street of Copper Mountain. The heat wave had brought out the locals and other homesteaders, and around her, the saloon was hopping. The Bowie brothers, all four of them, played foosball in the back, and Goodwin Starr was holding an arm-wrestling contest near the front. The booths were filled with gold miners, climbers, and homesteaders, not to mention local mushers, who'd arrived to watch the flat-screen.

She probably should have headed straight home after filling her grocery order and propane tanks, but her father wanted to order parts for his 1978 Ford pickup, so while he talked with Otto at his shop, she'd headed over to the Midnight Saloon.

She hoped that was *all* her father was doing. He'd been dry for nearly sixty days now, so maybe it would take.

It might have been better for both of them if they'd stayed home, but she needed to pick up seeds to start under the grow lights. And besides, they were running out of a few staples—flour and sugar, and she'd indulged in a box of Lucky Charms.

Just because.

But with the racers whooping across the television screen, it just dug a trail through her chest.

Once upon a time . . .

"I don't follow the race," Echo said to Vic's question.

Vic wore a Midnight Sun sweatshirt over her bulky body, her thin blond hair tied back. Echo had once seen Vic leap the bar and break up a massive all-bar fight with a baseball bat and her bare hands. A true Alaskan woman, although they came in all sizes and shapes.

Sometimes she wished she was as tough as Vic. A former cop, Vic had come up from the Lower 48 some thirty years earlier and opened up her tiny bar and grill on the road leading into

Denali State Park, the last outpost of food and drink before hikers, climbers, and all manner of tourists lost themselves in the last frontier.

Vic was hearty, brave, and tough. Most of all, she knew how to survive.

She grabbed a glass and held it under a tap to fill it with a foamy brew. “I remember when you and your dad came in and camped out here nearly every day during the race. You were such a Susan Butcher fan.”

“Along with every woman in Alaska,” Echo said. “Only woman to win the race four times.”

Vic put the glass on a tray. “You even named one of your dogs after hers, right? Granite?”

“Her lead dog. Did you know that when he was born, he was the runt of the litter?”

Vic grinned at her. “Don’t follow it, huh?”

“Not anymore.” Echo picked up a bottle of ketchup and doused her fries.

“I remember when you and Dodge used to run your dogs up and down Main Street for the Copper Mountain Summer Mush.”

And this was why she didn’t come to town much. Or talk about mushing or Dodge or frankly any of the Kingston brothers.

“Young and stupid, Vic. Why anyone would run the Iditarod is beyond me—eight to thirty days in the wilderness, with wind chills down to minus forty, freezing off your fingers and toes, trying to keep your dogs alive and away from moose and grizzlies, and most of all, alone that entire time? No, thank you.”

Vic added another beer to the tray. “So, I’ll just turn up the volume on the TV, then?”

“Gimme the remote. I’ll do it.”

Vic put the final glass on the tray.

“Need me to bring that out to a table?” Echo asked. “I think

your waitress is a little occupied.” She glanced over to Shasta Starr, who was collecting money for her brother’s arm-wrestling gig.

“Hey, Shasta!” Vic yelled, but it didn’t carry over the crowd. Echo got up. “I got this.”

“Take it to the guys from Remington Mines over in the booth.”

Echo carried the beers over and set the tray down on the table of the modern-day miners. They, too, appeared like they hadn’t been out of the wilderness since October, wearing beards, their hair matted, their jackets grimy. At least she’d taken a bath and washed her clothes.

It earned her a couple of suggestions and one actual compliment as she unloaded the beers.

“Struck gold yet, fellas?” she asked as she tucked the tray under her arm.

“There’s always gold. It’s just how much. You should come out to the mine sometime, let us show you around.” This from Jude, the youngest of the Remington brothers, a man in his midtwenties.

“I’ve panned for enough gold in my time,” Echo said, “trust me. My dad has a claim near our homestead. Can I interest you in fries?”

She took their order because, well, why not? Then she headed back to Vic.

On the way over, the door opened, and Otto Smith came in. He still wore his greasy coveralls. “Vic. We have trouble. Call Hank and get him over here.”

Hank Billings worked for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and that had Echo putting down the tray and following Otto outside, her heart thumping.

Because it wasn’t only the spring thaw and the day of the Iditarod, but big-game hunters were arriving in swarms to hunt the hungry grizzlies and black bears who would soon start emerging from hibernation.

*Please, Dad, don't start a fight—*

She pushed her way out of the saloon, into the gravel parking lot. A small crowd had gathered around an open bed pickup truck that contained—her breath sucked in at the sight—the carcass of a full-grown grizzly. The odor of death soured the air, the bear's fur matted and grimy. It had been field dressed—its skull and claws removed from the rest of the meat. So much power destroyed. Skinned, declawed, beheaded, and harvested.

Echo might be ill.

A hunter stood nearby, fielding questions.

A tourist, evidenced by his fancy hunting gear—bright orange shell over a green printed down vest, waterproof pants, and tall boot sheaths. He posed as a friend took shots of him with the kill.

Echo pushed through the crowd to the animal. She didn't see a locking tag, but as she drew near, she spotted a tracking tag on its ear, and, oh no, a tuft of white between its ears.

And worse, it was a female.

She blew out a breath. She needed to get her dad out of here before he saw this.

“You know it's illegal to kill a sow, right?”

Too late.

The hunter turned to the voice, and Echo groaned as her father joined the crowd.

He'd been drinking. She knew him well enough to recognize the sharp, unforgiving tone. Charlie Yazzie was a gentle man, a kind man, a wise man.

A man who lived on his daily dose of pain meds. And when that mixed with some of Otto's moonshine, or even a lonely beer—

She needed to get him home, pronto.

The fading light only added to his look of menace, highlighting the thick scar that ran up one side of his face, into his wool cap, and through his scalp. He wore a dark, gray-streaked

beard—had even before the mauling, although now it served to cover up the scars on his face—and a fraying green military jacket and a pair of work boots. He stood with his hands in his pockets, without even a hint of weakness in his bearing.

Her dad might be even more Alaskan than Vic in his toughness, his ability to buck up, survive, and most of all . . . defend what he loved.

He stepped right up to the hunter. “Where are the cubs?”

“She didn’t have any cubs with her,” Trophy Hunter said.

“You don’t know that. She might have hidden them, protected them.”

His raised voice shut down the crowd, and a few moved over to watch the altercation. The sun had tucked behind the mountains, and a chill brushed through Echo.

She should probably get a closer look, see if the bear wore a collar.

“Do you have a harvest ticket for this animal?” her dad asked, and although his voice sounded calm, her insides buzzed.

Oh, buddy. He’d better have a yes to that question.

“Of course I do. It’s with my guide.”

“Who’s your guide?” her dad snapped.

Echo wanted to wince when the man named him. “Ray Kelly.”

“Dad—” She headed toward him.

But her father’s eyes had already hardened. “Idaho.”

She reached him, put her hand on his arm. “Let’s go.” The last thing she needed was for her dad to end up in the local cooler for breaking his restraining order by going after the guide from the Lower 48.

“He doesn’t even have a guiding license,” her dad said, shaking her off.

“We’re leaving now, Dad.”

His mouth pinched into a tight line of disagreement. Then he shook his head and stalked over to the bear.

She waited while he looked at the tag, at the carcass, then followed him. "It's not Elsa," she said.

"No. It's one of her cubs." He pressed his hand to the white between the ears.

"Let's go." She put her hand on his arm again, and this time he let her walk him away.

For a moment.

Then he turned and headed back to the hunter.

Someone screamed when the man hit the dirt, bleeding from the mouth.

"Dad!" Ah, shoot. She hoped Vic's extra room wasn't rented.

Her father knelt on the man's chest, his hand at his throat, his fist cocked.

"Charlie!" The voice boomed out over the crowd, and Echo wanted to weep when Hank Billings strode up. He wore his Fish and Game jacket, jeans, and Sorels. "Back off."

Her father didn't move. "He's got a grizzly sow in that truck."

"She attacked us. It was a defensive kill!" Trophy had his hands around her dad's wrist, trying to pry his grip from his neck. Blood still dribbled from his mouth.

Echo leaped forward and grabbed her dad's other wrist. "Let Hank deal with it."

"Where is Idaho?" her dad asked.

"Ray called it in, Charlie," Hank said. "Asked me to seal the kill."

Her father looked up, stared at Hank. "No."

"A defensive kill is not illegal—"

"It is when the mother is just trying to defend her cubs." Echo couldn't believe the words issued from her mouth. Even her dad looked at her, something of pride in his eyes.

And maybe that's why he let go of the hunter and got up. The man scooted away from her dad.

She grabbed his arm and managed to turn him toward their truck.

And wouldn't you know it, right then—like a spark to a fire—Ray Kelly appeared. He wore a grimy down jacket, a wool hat, and a beard, like he belonged in the bush.

“Hey, Adams,” Ray said, smirking. Her dad bristled.

Adams, as in Grizzly Adams from the old television show from the '80s. Apparently the main character had a pet bear.

So what? Bears had been known to be tamed from the days of the Wild West shows. It happened. Get over it.

Besides, she knew for a fact that Ray was from Idaho. Or had been. He'd arrived, a cheechako, three years ago. She couldn't prove it, but she'd bet he hadn't survived one full winter here, just south of Denali State Park, in the wilds north of Anchorage.

Which meant that any Alaskan hunting guide license he possessed was a fake. But she hadn't dug, and her dad couldn't prove his words. She needed to get him away before things really got ugly.

“Get in the truck, Charlie,” Hank said.

“She might have cubs, Hank,” her dad said, but he kept walking toward the truck. “It's too early for them to leave their mother.”

He climbed in and closed the door.

She put her hand on the driver's door handle.

Aw, shoot. Her dad was right. She walked over to Hank, who was now examining the carcass while Ray-slash-Idaho told him where they'd bagged it. He claimed they'd spotted the sow in 16a, a section a hundred or so miles west, very near the border of Peters Creek. “We were hunting moose, and the bear just came out of nowhere—”

Idaho pointedly cut off when Echo stepped up to Hank. “Listen. It's one of Elsa's cubs. Not a yearling but maybe three years old. She's been tagged, so we can track her movements and get a fix on where she's been and try to lock down what happened. She doesn't look like she's given birth—her teats

aren't swollen. But, if you want to take a look, we can return to the place of the kill—her cubs, if any, would probably be nearby.”

Hank pulled her aside. “If they're still alive. Cubs that young would be easy prey. That's wolf country.”

She glanced at her father, who was staring hard at her from inside the truck. She'd give him about ten seconds before he got out and tapped back in.

“If I need a guide, you're my first call, Echo.” Hank nodded at her dad. “By the way, I'll smooth things over with the hunter, but get him home before things get out of hand and we have to call Deke.”

“On my way.” The last thing she needed was Sheriff Deacon Starr showing up to haul her dad into lockup.

She climbed into the truck and looked at her dad as she fired up the engine. “How many shots did it take for you and Otto to figure out that part you needed?”

He didn't look at her as they pulled out. “She looked like Elsa.”

“But she wasn't. You gotta bring it down to DEFCON 3, Dad.”

“We already lost George.”

“We don't know that. His collar just went off the radar.”

He said nothing as she headed south, took the bridge over the river, then drove back north to their homestead in the woods. By the time they arrived it would be nearly dark, and she'd have to haul the propane tanks in alone, feed her dogs, light the stove, and start dinner.

Her dad let out a snore.

Nice.

The stars came out slowly, arching over the nightscape, the moon an eye, tracking her as she finally turned off the main road and headed along the snow-packed route toward the homestead, a half mile deeper into the woods. She followed the narrow,

ruted road until it finally led to the open space of their settlement. The wood cabin had long ago turned into an impressive lodge with two stories, a wraparound porch, a balcony that overlooked the river in the back, and a number of outbuildings. But only because her father couldn't leave well enough alone. He was a jack-of-all-trades when he wasn't under the sauce, but it was his injury that led him to drink, so she gave him grace.

After all, they had only each other now.

Their subsistence footprint had also grown in the years after her mother left. They'd added a permanent greenhouse with hot lights for a longer growing season. A chicken coop housed nearly twenty hens, with chicken wire protecting the large roaming area. She made good egg money at the farmers market during the summer.

Her father had also enlarged the sawmill shed and took in business on the side, cutting wood for a few of the locals. It supplemented his honey business and, of course, paid for the motley crew of rescued and rehabilitated animals he fostered for Alaska Wildlife Rescue. A wolf pup, separated from his pack and caught in a trap, a bald eagle with an injured wing, a coyote who'd been shot, three baby red fox pups, and a pair of black bear cubs. The foster animal pens lay beyond the barn, out of the reach of her sled dogs, who were sleeping in furry mounds in another large pen.

In the barn were their snowmobiles, an ATV, a small Alumacraft fishing boat, and, of course, her sleds.

"I need to check on Bo and Luke," her dad said, rousing as she parked. He had the door open before she'd turned off the truck, heading out to the large bear pen that still bore the sign HOME OF ELSA AND GEORGE.

She watched him as he walked up to the pen. The bear cubs had been deep in hibernation for the past four months, but recently, she'd seen them emerge, and her father had started putting out frozen salmon chunks.

Now it looked like they were back inside the wooden den he had built long ago.

She got out, and her breath formed in the air, a lonely wisp in the night.

Granite came off the porch, looking more wolf than Siberian husky, with his gray-black face, his ruff of white over his shoulders, the perked black ears. She crouched, rubbing him hard around the ears. He leaned into her hand.

Her other sled dogs whined and barked, penned in the massive dog run that also contained their straw-bedded shelters. Granite was the only one she trusted to stick around.

Maybe she was jaded, but a girl with her history had a right to be. Sooner or later, the ones you love leave. Which meant that maybe they never loved you at all.

Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness by the time she lugged the propane tanks to the porch. Granite stayed at her heels as she ferried in the groceries, heated water, then fed her dogs.

She had come inside and pulled off her boots and jacket and left them in the arctic entry by the time her dad finally came in.

He too shucked off his outerwear, then he came into the kitchen, leaned against the doorframe. "Sorry for the commotion in town."

"It's okay. I'll make dinner."

"There are some moose steaks left in the freezer out back."

"Yum." She thought of her unfinished fries. Oh, she liked moose. She was just grumpy.

Her dad started a fire in the stone hearth while she went out to the back pantry and opened the freezer. She pulled out a couple steaks, but it would be hours before they thawed, so she set them in the refrigerator for tomorrow and retrieved a bowl of yesterday's chicken soup.

She put it on the stove to warm, then she unwrapped the homemade bread and sliced it. She found the last of the honey

and set it all on the table. Then she put a kettle on to boil and sat at the kitchen table.

For a so-called homestead, the place still bore the impeccable taste of her mother. Her father had added the second story as an anniversary gift, using up all the sunlight one summer to finish it.

Then he'd given her the new kitchen, with a butcher block island, custom-made pine cabinets, hardwood flooring, and furniture she'd had shipped up from Anchorage.

Offerings intended, maybe, to woo her into staying.

It hadn't worked. Effie Yazzie had left him nearly twenty years ago, and yet her *Southern Cooking* magazines still filled the bookshelf, a few of them dog-eared. And pictures of their family still sat on the mantel. Her dad, Effie, and Echo bundled up to watch their first Iditarod, the one by the river with her holding a giant salmon, and one with Echo holding Granite as a puppy. But, of course, that one was taken after her mother had left.

Her own pictures also hung on the walls, photographs in unnecessary frames, but what could she do? Her dad insisted.

And she'd do anything for her father.

The soup was boiling, so she got up and ladled it into bowls.

Her dad sat and she set a bowl in front of him. "I know I shouldn't let him get under my skin."

"Idaho is a criminal, there's no doubt. And I am just as angry as you are. But short of following him into the bush and catching him red-handed, I'm not sure what you can do." She gave him a look. "Especially since you're supposed to be five hundred feet away from him."

He made a face.

"Good thing Hank is on our side," she said.

"I hate cheechakos," he said as he dug into the soup. "Especially the ones who act like they belong here."

She said nothing, because he had his reasons.

Her kettle whistled and she got up, turned off the heat. Pulled down a cup and a box of tea and added a bag of Earl Grey to the cup. Poured in the water.

Then she set it in front of her father.

He grabbed her wrist as she turned away. "Echo. I'm sorry."

She put her hand over his. "I know, Dad. I know."

"You should have left a long time ago."

"Where am I going to go? I belong here."

He picked up her hand and kissed it. "You are more of this place than I am."

She gave his hand a squeeze, and he let her go.

Fixing another cup of tea, she took it out to the back porch, the one overlooking the river, and stood, a sweater wrapped around her, her fingers absently playing with the heart charm on her gold necklace. She stared at the darkness, at the great wash of starlight, clear and bright and gleaming on the dark, jagged horizon.

Undulating ribbons of green and pink folded over each other from the light refracting off the polar ice caps, and as she watched them, she wondered if the mushers had reached the first checkpoint on their journey into the wild frontier.

And what dangers lay beyond, in the darkness.