COLD
LIGHT
OF DAY
MISSING
IN ALASKA
ELIZABETH GODDARD

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Missing in Alaska

Cold Light of Day

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MISSING IN ALASKA • 1

COLD LIGHT OF DAY

ELIZABETH GODDARD

Revell
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Dad:
long ago you took us on adventures in the mountains,
and that's where my heart remains.

The mountains are calling, and I must go.

—*John Muir*

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To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8 NIV

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PROLOGUE

Southeast Alaska
May

never should have come.

What was he even doing here? What had he been thinking?

I'm an idiot!

He wasn't so stupid that he couldn't admit he was lost. Dusk was almost on him, and if he didn't find his way back to civilization soon, he could very well die.

Kenny thought back to his uncle's open invitation to find refuge at his place in the mountains. The man often bragged about "wild" Alaska. Eagles. Bears. Bigfoot. Spawning salmon. Whatever. Kenny wasn't much of a fisherman, but he could learn to fish. What better place than Alaska? Or he could hike on a glacier. Take up dog mushing.

"You can escape what holds you back, son. Here in Alaska—the world is at your feet," his uncle had said.

And like the proverbial fool on an errand, Kenny had finally decided to take his uncle up on that offer and purchased a one-way ticket to surprise him. With its record-breaking snowfall, his hometown of Sault Ste. Marie in Michigan's Upper Peninsula couldn't be that different than Southeast Alaska. Could it?

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And since Kenny had spent half his life on a snowmobile, he could make his way around the snow-covered Tongass National Forest, a temperate rain forest, the same way.

He'd worked up a sweat hiking, and the cold wind whipped around him, cutting between the layers of his fleece-lined winter jacket. With the lush evergreens covered in fresh snow, early May seemed like winter. The frosted forest closed in around him as he hiked on the snowshoes he'd brought from Michigan.

He'd taken the snowmobile up the road and thought he could continue up the trail, but the vehicle had gotten stuck.

Stuck!

Of all the stupid things to happen. He couldn't believe it. That was on him. He shivered and glanced at his cell phone. No signal, but he hadn't expected one.

Still . . . he should have made it to his uncle's by now. Had he missed an important marker? The man had sketched him a map, for crying out loud. Kenny pulled the drawing out of his pocket and clumsily held it in his gloved hands. All he'd had to do was follow the trail. And *that* was the problem. The path had kind of disappeared with the heavy snowfall today. Another blast of wind whipped over him along with huge flakes, reminding him that his life was in jeopardy if he didn't find his way back—and soon.

A sliver of fear slid through him, cutting deep.

If he backtracked down the mountain, he might run into the main road again. And if he died out here?

Mom is going to kill me.

Now, too late, he could easily see the big mistake he'd made. He'd allowed emotions to drive his decision to come to Alaska, but this wasn't the first time he'd been impulsive.

A gunshot cracked the air.

He stopped in his tracks. That sounded close. Heart pounding, he stood perfectly still. A hunter out looking for dinner?

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He started hiking again and picked up his pace, hoping he'd run into someone who could help.

Then, through the trees, he spotted a man in a black ski mask. Nothing unusual about the cold-weather garb . . . except . . . he stood over a woman in a bright-pink parka.

She lay on her back. The man pointed a pistol at her head and shot her point blank. Instantly, her blood turned the white snow crimson.

And Kenny's blood turned to ice.

Move, move, move.

Panic exploded in Kenny's chest, the glacial air knifing through his lungs.

I have to get out of here.

Kenny headed away from the killer.

Except . . . oh no! His tracks would give him away if the killer spotted him.

I can do this. I can survive. He willed himself to believe. He picked up the pace, going deeper into the forest. A glance over his shoulder sent dread blasting through him.

The killer was tracking him.

Legs shaking, Kenny powered through the fear before it paralyzed him. Keeping to the thickest trees for protection, he snow-jogged. Outlasting the killer, giving him reason to give up the hunt, was the only way to lose him.

Except Kenny had already been out here for too long. His lungs ached. Muscles burned.

Pressing his back against a spruce to rest, he sucked in cold air.

Kenny pulled out his Buck 50th anniversary–edition Ranger knife in case he had to face off with the man who had a long gun as well as a loaded pistol. What did the hunter want with him? Dumb question. Kenny had witnessed him commit murder. But he hadn't seen the man's face. He'd just have to do what a lot of people came to Alaska to do—vanish.

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Pushing from the tree, he tried to keep up the pace as he jogged through the snow toward higher elevation. Another possible mistake, but he wanted to lose this guy.

He hadn't gone far before he couldn't catch his breath, which meant he couldn't keep going.

Even if his life depended on it.

The temperature was dropping fast. He stumbled forward and out of the tree line . . . just a little farther . . . and spotted the lights shining from the town below.

He should be sitting next to the fire at his uncle's cabin and eating moose stew instead of running for his life.

A shout brought him around. Standing twenty-five yards away, he spotted the killer. The man aimed his rifle right at Kenny and looked through the scope.

Before Kenny could react, the ground rumbled and shook, and the snow shifted under his feet. He glanced up at the peak above.

A new terror gripped him as realization dawned.

The hunter would kill him to make sure he didn't climb out from the avalanche racing toward him. Alaska would make him disappear forever.

No one would miss him—no one who cared even knew he was here.

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ONE

Southeast Alaska
August

Autumn Long had no plans to give up without a fight, even though it might be killing her a little every day.

As the bush plane sank lower, her view of the glacier spilling into the valley behind a forest exploding with reds, oranges, and browns fell away. Lofty mountains on each side of the fjord filled her vision.

"Hold on, Chief. We're almost there." Pilot Carrie James flew her bush plane straight up the Lynn Canal—one of the longest, deepest fjords in the world. The snowcapped Kakuhan Mountains rose lofty on the right, the Chilkat Range near Haines to the left. And across from Haines to the west—Glacier Bay National Park.

Autumn ignored the mounting dread she felt and focused her thoughts. She had better get her act together and earn back the trust of the city council and the people she swore to protect in the small town of Shadow Gap, one of many communities dotting the Inside Passage of the Alaska Panhandle.

She'd stayed overnight in Anchorage for a meeting that left her drained to her bones. She'd taken an Alaska Airlines flight

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to and from Juneau, and now Carrie was delivering her up to the northernmost part of the Panhandle. Wearing her brown bomber jacket and a headset, sitting in the cockpit of her Helio Courier—the ultimate bush plane—Carrie was a bush pilot poster child.

The plane flew lower, following the Chilkoot Inlet until Carrie banked east, flying over the Lewis Inlet that branched off. "That's why I'd better say this before I lose the chance."

Autumn wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

Carrie angled her head toward Autumn and arched a brow. "I know you didn't ask for my opinion." Carrie looked forward again. "But you didn't do anything wrong. Out here we take care of our own. The land is harsh. Brutal in ways the lower forty-eight can't imagine. We have to watch out for each other, and that's all you've ever done for the people of Shadow Gap."

"Yeah, well . . . thanks, Carrie." *Tell that to Wally*. He'd had it out for her from the first day she took her position as police chief.

Carrie waved a hand in mock incredulity. "Shadow Gap isn't even classified as a town, much less an organized borough, so who needs a city council anyway?"

Or a police department, some might say.

Autumn cracked a smile. "Glad to know at least some people still want me around."

Despite the many limitations of a small-town budget, they'd at least equipped their chief and three officers with loaded Ford Police Interceptor SUVs. After all, her officers were trained to carefully collect and preserve evidence as well as to tend a wounded moose in the road. They had to know how to do it all in small-town Alaska. Because, yeah, she thought of Shadow Gap's community of 1,252 people as a town. Shadow Gap was just outside of the Haines and Skagway Boroughs. Alaska didn't have counties, so there were no sheriffs.

Best of all—or worst of all, depending on which side of the

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law you were on—Shadow Gap had lost their Alaska State Trooper. Not enough crime to support one or budget to afford one if there was enough crime.

Autumn had nothing to complain about, except the results of her trip to Anchorage left a—

"What's that?" Carrie drew Autumn's attention to the water. "Someone's out there, floating in Lewis Inlet. I saw hands waving, signaling."

"Have you got—"

"Here." Carrie handed off binoculars.

"Fly in close, Carrie. I want to get a better look. We have to help if we can." Autumn peered through the binoculars and struggled to find what she was looking for, instead only capturing the deep, dark waters. Then . . . "I see the hands. But, oh no, whoever is out there is going under."

"But look! Someone's swimming out to them. So maybe there's a chance."

"They won't last long. Those waters are cold." Autumn adjusted the binoculars, searching, searching . . . there. "I see what looks like the rescue swimmer." Was that . . . Grier? "How close can you land?"

"Close enough. Once on the water, I can angle in closer."

"If he can get to the woman, we'll take them both the rest of the way to get help."

Because there was no way the woman wasn't going to suffer from hypothermia in these temps, unless she had on the appropriate attire. Same for Grier.

Come on, Grier . . . save the girl.

Shadow Gap needed a hero. A ray of hope shot through her, and though maybe she shouldn't have the thought, it popped into her head all the same. She didn't mind that a town hero would take the attention away from the police chief's long list of transgressions.

Though, if she were choosing heroes, she would have chosen

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a longtime resident over an outsider—or as the locals liked to call them, cheechakos, and meant in a negative way. She wouldn't go so far as to use that term for this particular man. Grier had shown up in Shadow Gap a few months ago to fish in the Shadow Gap Salmon Derby. A tourist who decided to stay. Wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last.

Autumn dropped the binoculars as Carrie skillfully landed the plane on the water. The pontoons smoothly connected, and Carrie guided the plane, heading toward where they'd last seen the woman in need of a rescue.

Her struggle could well be over.

Please don't drown . . . don't die.

But Autumn didn't see her anywhere. A fist squeezed her heart.

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