

Expect the Sunrise



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Prologue

Stirling McRae should have known he couldn't escape his duty, even deep inside the forests of northeastern Alaska, a hundred miles from civilization.

No, it found him in the form of a grimy terrorist in an orange hunting vest and cap. Only, said terrorist hadn't a prayer of escaping the McRae brothers. At least that's what Mac told himself as another branch slapped him across the face and he plowed through a bramble of thistle.

So much for having some hang time with his brother. Brody would probably deck him the next time Mac suggested they go fishing together.

He heard Brody behind him, thundering like a bulldozer through the forest, occasionally yelling his name.

Mac didn't stop. Couldn't. He'd been hunting Ari Al-Hasid and members of his cell for nearly three years. It seemed sheer dumb luck that he happened upon Al-Hasid now at the height of the summer pumping season and near one of the weakest points in the pipeline that was scheduled for replacement.

The river of black gold inside a forty-eight-inch-wide, double-steel-walled pipe, referred to as the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS), stretched eight hundred miles from the northern slope of Alaska to Valdez. Difficult to monitor, even

harder to protect, it was one of the most vulnerable terrorist targets in all of America.

A target that Al-Hasid and his group had been plotting to attack for years, according to the maps and sketchy intel that littered Mac's office at the FBI.

Perhaps this wasn't dumb luck but good hunting. For months Mac had suspected that Al-Hasid and his cell would launch their attack this summer. He just never expected it during his annual fishing trip with Brody.

Okay, maybe a little, which was why he had guided Brody near a salmon stream that ran parallel to the pipeline. Just to follow his gut and keep an eye out, despite his boss's skepticism. After all, Bureau Chief Tanner Buchanan had ordered him out of the office . . . not out of his skin.

And bingo. Just as he and Brody were motoring south toward a promising run of chinook salmon or arctic grayling, they had startled Al-Hasid checking his weapon only thirty feet from the pipeline. He'd looked up, guilt on his face, and bolted.

Now Mac could barely make out Al-Hasid's form, a sickly orange blur between a stand of bushy black spruce. If Mac caught him, he might be able to breathe a little deeper, sleep more than two or three hours at a stretch, and rip down one of the many mug shots and wanted posters clipped on the office bulletin board.

He needed to get out into the open and close the distance between them. But he knew Al-Hasid carried a .338 Winchester, a weapon that could blow a nice hole through a bear and lay waste to a man. Mac needed the trees for protection, even if he was picked off like a Lakers forward.

"I'll cut him off!" Brody yelled.

Mac glanced behind him, saw Brody heading for the clearing. His brother didn't know the first rule about suspect appre-

hension: don't announce your intentions to the enemy. For the second time in ten minutes, he wondered if he should stop, call the sighting in, and let the on-duty heroes handle Al-Hasid.

No, not if it meant Al-Hasid escaped.

Mac parted the brush with his gloved hands.

A gunshot.

Mac froze. *Not around the pipeline!*

A scream rent the air.

He whirled and felt his pulse in his throat when crows scattered into the sky.

Mac dived after Al-Hasid, blood pounding in his ears. More than fifty hunters had accidentally hit the pipeline over the years without puncturing it, but a shot from a .338 just might—

Another shot. It pinged against metal.

Mac ducked, plowing nearly headfirst into a tree. "Stop shooting!"

He crouched behind the larch and peered out, feeling sweat bead under his woolen cap. His feet felt clunky and chapped in his hiking boots; his body trembled under the layers of wool.

"Get away from me!" Al-Hasid shouted into the trees. "I ain't done nothin'!" He sounded drunk, his accent slurred. No doubt Al-Hasid had perfected redneck lingo after living in the country for the past ten years under an assumed name.

"Throw down your weapon! I'm a federal agent."

Nothing.

Mac peeked out, saw Al-Hasid searching the forest. Peeling off his vest, Mac crept along a fallen log, then angled toward the terrorist. He schooled his breath and heard Al-Hasid's labored breathing just ahead.

Al-Hasid scanned the forest where Mac had been, then beyond toward the pipeline clearing. The sun glinted off the metal, rays of heat rippling the air surrounding it.

A branch cracked.

Mac stiffened. He glanced toward the sound, and his stomach dropped when he spotted Brody hunkered down, sneaking along the pipeline, peering into the forest.

Al-Hasid raised his gun.

"No!" Mac launched himself at Al-Hasid just as the gun reported. The recoil knocked him in the face even as he tackled Al-Hasid.

The terrorist elbowed him, thrashing.

Mac hung on, fighting to clear his head. He tasted blood running from his mouth or maybe his nose. Al-Hasid took out Mac's breath with a jab to the ribs.

The gun went off again.

Gulping for air, Mac grabbed the barrel and ripped it from Al-Hasid's grip.

Al-Hasid rolled to his knees and swung at Mac's face.

Mac dodged and muscled Al-Hasid into a guillotine hold, one arm locked around his neck, squeezing off the blood supply to his brain. If Mac could hold him, in a moment Al-Hasid would pass out. Mac wasn't a fan of UFC wrestling for nothing.

Al-Hasid slapped at Mac's head, wringing his ears.

Mac gritted his teeth and held on.

Al-Hasid started wheezing. Still the man kicked, wasting the last of his energy on flimsy punches. He finally slumped atop Mac, his body heavy.

Mac let him go, checked his breathing, then whipped off his bootlace and tied the terrorist's hands. He heard rain begin to fall softly, wetting the leaves, the ground.

The sound filled Mac's ears even as he propped Al-Hasid up, slapped at his face. He stood, dread pooling in his stomach as realization rushed him.

No, not rain.

He held out his hand, and the blood of the earth fell from the sky. One drop, two—black, thick, and sticky.

The pungent smell turned Mac's stomach as he tasted his worst fears. Running toward the clearing, he saw that the ground had already turned black and soggy. A geyser of oil plumed into the sky from a gash in the side of the pipeline.

He needed his radio.

He needed his four-wheeler.

He needed to get to the nearest pumping station and tell them to close the valves.

"Brody!" Mac turned as he yelled his brother's name. The fact that Brody hadn't appeared to jump Al-Hasid suddenly felt odd. . . . "Brody?" *Oh, Lord, please—*

His gaze caught a shadow on the ground just inside the rim of forest.

Brody.

"No!" Mac nearly fell as he scrambled toward his brother. He hit his knees as he knelt and turned him over.

Brody groaned, blood-drenched hands pressed against his gut.

Oh no. Mac's breaths thundered in his chest, panic shutting out every scrap of training. He pulled off his hat and pressed it against Brody's wound. "Why did you follow me?"

Brody closed his eyes, leaned back onto the ground. "I'm in a bit of a barney here, Mac." His voice sounded strangely weak, and it took another swipe at Mac's calm.

"I gotta get you some help." Mac reached out awkwardly, not sure how he'd carry his younger brother now that the man had surpassed him in size. Like true Scots, they weren't small men, but Brody had taken from the McRae side, warriors down the line. His girth and muscle had made him the grappling champ of Deadhorse High.

Mac pulled Brody's arms over his shoulder. Oil rained down around them, and he fell trying to get Brody into his embrace.

Brody cried out in a burst of agony. "I can't. Go . . . go get the four-wheeler." His face had turned chalky white. "Go." He nearly pushed Mac.

Mac stumbled back, blinking at Brody. "Brody, I'm so—" "Go!"

Aye. Mac raced back to their encampment. His breath felt like razors inside, but fear pressed him through the pain. He slipped once, then twice, and fell face-first in the oil. He spit out a mouthful of filth as he scrambled to his feet.

Mac found the four-wheeler right where he'd sprung off it. In seconds he had it turned around and gunned it back toward Brody. He dug out his high-frequency, two-way radio while he drove, now thankful he'd packed it, despite Brody's ribbing.

"Hello, anyone!" He couldn't remember the EMS channel or even pipeline security. He scanned the channels. "Hello? Please!"

"Pipeline Security here. Identify please. Over."

"Agent Stirling McRae, FBI. I have an injured camper just north of the Kanuti River. Need assistance. Out."

Crackle came over the line.

Mac slowed as he reached the oil-slicked area but plowed through, shielding his eyes as the oil continued to rain from the sky. "Hello?"

"Roger that. We'll send assistance. Over."

"No! I'm coming to you." He braked and leaped off the ATV, stumbling toward Brody.

Thank the Lord, he was still breathing.

"Be advised that the nearest ranger station is at Cross Creek, seventeen clicks northwest of the line. Over."

Seventeen miles. Mac crouched beside Brody. Oil slicked his face, and his breathing seemed labored. Blood mingled with oil, and Mac hadn't the first clue how much blood Brody had lost. He'd never make seventeen miles.

"Negative. He'll never make it. We need an emergency extraction." He glanced at the plume of oil. "And be advised that there is a leak in the pipeline at my position."

Silence.

Mac could imagine the security agents spilling their coffee on their jumpsuits.

"Say again? Over."

"A leak. Terrorist shot the pipeline. But I need medical assistance."

"Give us your exact position. We'll find you. Out."

Mac glared at the two-way, wishing he could somehow reach through it to throttle the dobbers on the other end of the line. "Need medical—"

Overhead, he heard a buzz, a low hum that anyone who'd lived in the bush for longer than a week would know immediately.

A plane. A beautiful white-hulled bird with red stripes floating in the sky like a gift from heaven. Such a bird could land on the Dalton Highway, just a skip away.

If God was on his side, that beautiful little bird would already be turned to the Fairbanks Airport frequency, the same one he'd used during his flight-training days.

"Hello? I'm talking to the plane flying over Cross Creek. Come in, please."

Static.

"Please! Come in."

"Sir, this channel is authorized by the FAA for air-traffic control—"

“My brother’s been shot!” Mac felt himself unraveling. “Please, will the plane overhead come in—?”

“This is November-two-three-seven-one-Lima; how can I help you?”

Yes, yes! “I have an injured man here. He’s in bad shape. I need a life flight to Fairbanks. Please, can you land on the Dalton? I’ll meet you.” Mac held the two-way against his forehead, trembling.

Static. Then, “That’s a negative. November-two-three-seven-one-Lima is en route with another life flight. I’m sorry but I—”

“Please!”

The line went static. The plane came into view. He stared at it as it flew over, a long moment when his heart stopped beating and turned to a singular gripping pain in the center of his chest.

Then it vanished.

No. He felt sick, hollow. His knees buckled.

“Mac?” His brother opened his grease-covered eyes, reached out, and curled his fist weakly into Mac’s jacket. “Get me outta here.”

Mac nodded, grabbed Brody by the collar, and dragged him over the slick ground to the four-wheeler. He could still hear the sound of hope dying in the distance.

As he draped Brody over the back of the ATV, wincing as he groaned, Mac made a promise.

If his brother died, he would never forgive that pilot.



“Brother of FBI Agent Killed in Freak Accident.”

Andee MacLeod read the headline slowly. And again.

Then closed her eyes, feeling a wave of guilt. Choices. Her life felt defined by them, by regret and confusion.

She scanned the article, wincing at the mention of an aborted possible rescue. She folded the newspaper, picked up her cold coffee, and dumped them into the trash as she exited the hospital cafeteria. What that reporter didn't know was that she'd been responsible for two deaths that day . . . indirectly at least.

The woman she'd been life flighting had bled out while Andee circled the airport for a third time, waiting for the weather to clear.

She hadn't had a choice to answer the panicked call for help, not really. But there were times when her decisions seemed to rise up and strangle her.

Andee stopped in at emergency services, waving to the night nurse. "I'm going home. I've got my pager."

The nurse nodded.

Andee stepped into the cool night air. June's eternal sun and energy would eventually mellow into normal days of sunrise and sunset. By late September the sun would turn reluctant to crest over the terra firma of Alaska, and night would steal into every nook and cranny of life. Before the deep freeze of winter, Andee would head south toward sunshine and her mother. And her *real* family—Micah, Dannette, Sarah and Hank, Conner, Lacey, and maybe someday, Will. The memory of her friend Dannette—who now referred to herself as Dani—and Will at Lacey and Micah's wedding last week filled her with a sweet warmth.

Team Hope. Her search-and-rescue pals *were* family—the kind who loved her despite her weaknesses or failures.

Brother of FBI agent . . . the memory of the man's panicked voice over the radio hovered in her thoughts, slicing through

quiet moments to bring her back to that moment when she'd had to choose. She'd landed on the Dalton Highway a number of times before. But the life of the dying mother of four had been ticking away—and she'd kept altitude.

But what if it had been Sarah or Conner down there . . . hurt and dying? What if it had been her on the other end of the squawk begging for help? Would she ever forgive the pilot who'd turned his back?

Andee felt hollow as she walked to her Jeep in the parking lot, the midnight sun pooling on the hood.

According to the newspaper, the agent thought he'd been chasing a terrorist. Instead, he'd captured a drunk hunter with a Magnum rifle who managed to spill over two hundred thousand gallons of oil on the ground. She had to cringe at that as she opened her door and slid into her vehicle. Doomsdayers said the sabotage of TAPS could happen. In the new age of Homeland Security, it felt far-fetched. Not now.

She, as well as every other citizen of Alaska, knew the importance of the pipeline to the way of life in the Lower 48, even the war on terror. During 9/11, panic had flowed from one end of Alaska to the other, putting every security agent, cop, and pipeline affiliate on high alert. In Valdez, they'd stopped loaded tankers and simply sent them out of port. It was a well-known fact that even a small disruption in the flow of oil would cause it to cool, slow, and stop, costing millions of dollars in repairs, not to mention a shortage of oil across the nation and the return of the long gas lines of the early eighties. What was worse, her life flights north would grind to a standstill. Lives—at least in her neck of the woods—would be lost.

Andee had to wonder at the real story behind the so-called accident. She didn't put it beyond the FBI to concoct a cover story to stave off public panic. Still, the agent's brother had

died, even if it hadn't been part of a terrorist plot. She guessed that was something that might haunt the man on the other end of her radio into eternity.

Just like it haunted her.

She started the engine, pulled out, and headed to her efficiency apartment in Earthquake Park.

The entire story didn't make sense. It had probably been a hunter, just as the news had reported. If some terrorist was going to sabotage the pipeline, it wouldn't be a lonely hunter with a Magnum rifle.

And it would take a lot more than a desperate FBI agent to stop him.

Chapter 1

Three Months Later

NO MATTER WHICH route she took, Andee MacLeod always found herself headed straight for Disaster. She didn't have to circle her destination on her aerial chart to know what awaited her in the hamlet with a population of thirty that was tucked under the shadow of the North Slope of the Brooks Range.

Heartache. Regret. To be precise, her father, Gerard MacLeod. A fifty-five-year-old bush pilot who refused to budge from his life in the wild, who'd survived so many Alaskan winters that she'd started to wonder if the cold had begun to reach his heart also.

Not that he didn't love her. But the very fact that he refused to move south, even to Fairbanks, seemed a metaphor for their relationship. As if when he stepped outside the woods that he'd hidden in for nearly two decades, he might find himself stripped and defenseless. Dependent on someone other than himself.

Not the way of the MacLeods.

"Emma, do you copy?" Doug's raspy voice from dispatch filtered through the static on Andee's radio.

She set the map on the opposite cockpit seat and reached for the handset. "Emma here. What's up, Doug?" She could see

the control tower from her plane's position on the tarmac and nearly waved at him.

"Are you heading to Disaster after your stop at Prudhoe Bay?"

"That's affirmative." When *didn't* she stop at Disaster on her trips north? Her airplane practically flew itself.

"Please check on Maricel Fee. She's due any day now."

"Roger that." Andee replaced the radio mike and climbed out of her Cessna. *Please don't let Maricel go into labor on my watch, Lord.* She still had nightmares from the last pregnant woman she'd flown into Fairbanks. She'd taken off from Anaktuvuk Pass with one passenger and landed with two.

The need for decent medical services in Alaska never stopped, even when the temperature dipped into the minus-thirty range—and lower—during the coldest months of winter. Thankfully, for the past few years Andee had escaped the clench of Alaskan cold that could about-face a cheechako and send him hustling back to the Lower 48. She could hardly be called a tenderfoot after being raised in the bush, twenty miles from Disaster on the Disaster Creek, but sometimes she wondered just what brought her back here every summer.

Maybe it was the sunrise climbing over Doonerak Peak, the aurora borealis over the North Slope, or the purple moss campion that carpeted the taiga. Maybe she returned to see the caribou migrate or an occasional moose rubbing his back on the bracings of the Alaska pipeline as she flew her Cessna 185 supplied with medicines and foodstuff to remote villages north of the Arctic Circle.

No, it was probably the chance to see Gerard MacLeod again. Her daughterly responsibilities pushing her past the hurt. This year she hoped to convince him to move to Disaster township, which would mean she wouldn't have to trek into the

backwoods, armed with supplies and extra gas for his four-wheeler. Andee barely kept away the nightmare that someday she'd knock on the door to his two-room cabin, not receive an answer, and find him frozen stiff, too injured from some hunting accident to carry in the wood.

Then again Gerard would probably prefer it that way. MacLeods didn't ask for help.

If only her mother had stuck around, maybe Andee wouldn't have to live like a nomad, babysitting a stubborn Scotsman every summer and her driven doctor-mother every winter.

Andee finished her preflight cabin check on the new Cessna Stationair, then got out and did her preflight walk around, checking the flaps and ailerons, the tires, prop, cowl-ing, nose wheel, and fuel drains.

Glancing at her watch, she marched back to the North Rim Outfitters hangar at the Fairbanks International Airport, where the five passengers for this excursion to the north waited inside for her all okay. Most of them were tourists, although she'd read that one was a missionary heading to serve in the Inupiaq community of Resurrection, Alaska. She wondered if a missionary in her own little town might have prevented the heartache of watching her parents fight over her, separate, and tear their only daughter in half.

"*Choose.*" Her mother's stiff voice still stung her ears, especially on days like today when the fall air felt heavy and had a snap to the breeze that lifted her jacket collar. That moment so many years ago on this very tarmac haunted her still.

She stopped, looking northward, and she didn't like what she saw. Oppressive, gray clouds, although high, had the potential to ground her if she didn't get airborne soon. The last thing she needed was another delay in Fairbanks. One more trip and

she'd have enough to jump-start her mutual fund. Then she'd pack her Jeep and head south to her mother's home in Iowa or farther to the Galloway ranch in Kentucky. She wondered how Lacey and Jim Micah were handling being newlyweds.

"I *really* do," Micah had said on their wedding day. Andee had all but burst into tears at her friend's happy ending after rescuing Lacey's daughter from a kidnapper/murderer/traitor nearly a year ago. Seeing Micah holding little Emily in his arms at the wedding had tugged at all Andee's private longings. A family. A home. A man who might give her a reason to stop chasing her dreams around the Northern Hemisphere. Or rather a man who might drop his own dreams and follow *hers*. Wouldn't that be a miracle?

But heroes didn't magically materialize, especially here in the frozen north. Besides, she didn't need a knight in shining armor. She had different dreams. An airplane. A medical operation to the northern villages. Lives saved. She didn't usually bother to think about someone to share it with. Because, really, who would she find who might want to eke out a life in this barren wilderness with her? He'd have to be hardy, stubborn, romantic, and loyal . . . and she wouldn't mind if he also had strong arms that could protect her just a little.

Oh, brother. Maybe she'd read one too many fairy tales.

She went inside and picked up the passenger manifest. The austere vinyl chairs and cement walls of the lobby gave adequate warning of the travel ahead.

Andee hoped the passengers had packed well—warm clothes and sleeping bags. Weather in the Brooks Range changed hourly, especially this late in September. More than a few times she'd landed on a lonely strip of meadow to wait out the moods of the ceiling. And with the new restrictions on flying over Dalton Highway and the nearby pipeline, she'd have to veer

west over the peaks and smack-dab into the dark weather. Hopefully she'd make it to Disaster by nightfall, reading to her father while he fried up a griddle of sourdough flapjacks.

She skimmed the passenger list, then glanced at the group assembled. Five total. Two sat in the chairs. One leaned against the reception counter, looking at brochures. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood by the window, his duffel bag between his feet, as if someone might run by and grab it. She shook her head. Tourists—they suspected trouble everywhere. Or maybe the restlessness came from all the flights and security checks and cautions they had to endure to get to Alaska from the continental U.S.

"Nina Smith?" Andee read the name and saw a large-boned woman rise, her long black hair in a braid down her back. She wore a red fleece-lined jacket and cap, well dressed for her excursion to the North Slope. Her overstuffed, external-frame backpack leaned against the chairs. Probably headed out for some late-season hiking. Her dark brown eyes pinned Andee's, and she smiled. "That's me."

Andee nodded. "Floyd Dekker?"

"Hey, y'all." Mr. Bo Duke with a goatee and about ten years of padding waved two fingers at her. He wore a brown, flannel-lined, canvas coat and tugged on a Take Back America baseball cap. "Call me Flint," he said with a Southern drawl.

Andee guessed his itinerary included hunting. While the moose and bear season had just started, the weather hadn't cooperated and a number of game hunters had trudged home without their kill. Usually Andee made a practice of refusing to fly in hunters to the northern regions after September 20, right after moose season. The temperamental weather could leave them stranded, unable to be flown out before their supplies were exhausted. But winter seemed to be taking her time this

year, and when North Rim Outfitters offered her a bonus, she felt her dreams of purchasing her own plane nearly attainable.

"Okay, Flint." She hid a smile at his nickname. What was it about coming to Alaska that made people adopt new personas? Then again, up here when she was flying she went by Emma, her call name and the only pet name her father had ever given her. A term from the old country, it meant "lady," according to Gerard. The name gave her purpose, identity, and inclinations toward strength.

But probably like Flint, Emma was an illusion, a poor cover for a woman who never seemed settled in her own skin.

"Martin Ishbane?" She scanned the room.

No answer.

"Maybe he's the one outside," Nina said, nodding toward a man standing with his back to the windows.

Andee opened the door, leaned out. "Mr. Ishbane?"

The man turned and blew out a stream of smoke.

Andee recoiled slightly, not trying to offend. At least he'd chosen to smoke outside. She found a smile for him. "I'm the pilot, just trying to track down my passengers."

"I'm Ishbane," he said quietly as he glanced at her with gray, expressionless eyes. He held a briefcase in his gloved hand. Under his thin leather jacket, he wore a black turtleneck, and the wind tangled his long hair, held back into a ponytail. She hoped he owned a hat—he definitely wasn't outfitted for a jaunt into the north woods. After dropping the cigarette, he crushed it under his hiking boot.

Andee stifled her comments and returned inside, followed by Ishbane. "Jake Phillips?"

The man who was leaning against the counter nodded at her, a smile on his chiseled, square face. He had dark eyes and dark, tightly curled hair, and he wore a down parka and a wool

cap. With his barrel chest and muscular arms, he looked like he played defensive end for some pro football team or maybe squared off on center ice for the Stanley Cup. He reminded her of an oversized Jim Micah in a way.

She smiled at him in return. Then the other man, standing arms akimbo, one shoulder holding up the wall, and a pair of sunglasses hooked low on his nose must be— “Stirling McRae?”

The man glanced at her, a hardness in his eyes that rattled her for a moment. He stood about six feet three. With broad shoulders, slightly long, curly brown hair tucked behind his ears, and reddish stubble, he seemed unexpected, rumped, yet with a quiet power about him that sizzled just below his unassuming stance. He wore faded jeans and an open fleece-lined canvas jacket. He looked as if he needed a good meal and a few hours of shut-eye. And warmer clothes, where they were heading.

She sighed. Why did tourists assume they could dress like they might on a January day in Tennessee instead of September on the north side of the planet? The higher areas already had snow, even if Fairbanks had yet to be dusted. Still, winter could swoop down without warning, and even now her airplane hardly kept the interior temperature above forty.

“Aye,” the man answered finally.

Oh, terrific. A Scot. He probably had arrogance to match that slightly accented deep voice and warrior build. Good thing they had only a five-hour flight ahead of them. She knew this type—bullheaded, cantankerous, with way too much confidence for anyone’s good. And she should know—having been accused of the same by her Scottish father on more than one occasion.

“Okay, we’re all here.” Andee grabbed her sunglasses and added her flight plan and weather update to the clipboard. “Call me Emma. I’ll be your pilot. We’re flying in a six-seater,

nearly new Cessna Turbo Stationair, courtesy of North Rim Outfitters.” She nodded at Flint, the outfitter’s client. The other passengers paid a higher price for the charter-flight service, but it made up for the cost of flying one client nearly four hundred miles.

“We have a scenic flight for you today over the Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Brooks Range. Hopefully, out of the west passenger windows you’ll catch a glimpse of Doonerak Peak.”

She checked her watch. “We have a storm front moving in, and I’d like to get into the air and out of reach of those winds. Let’s load your gear.” She held open the door as the passengers filed out.

Nina’s backpack caught on the door. Andee winced when she heard a tearing.

Nina made a face. “Guess I’m about due for a new rig.” She forced the pack through, and Andee wondered how she would manage on whatever backpacking trip she had scheduled.

Flint followed her, his duffel bag slung over one shoulder, his gun packed in a padded and locked leather case, regulation for airplanes these days. He’d had to fill out a form and have an extra security check from here to Fairbanks, and Andee had a special locked compartment in the back of the plane to store it. The only gun allowed aboard was the one she kept hidden and secured under her seat—a .40-caliber Glock she used for protection from bears.

When Ishbane passed, she swung into step with him. “I’m assuming you know this, but there’s no smoking on the plane.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Andee detected an East Coast accent.

“Thanks,” she said and jogged toward the plane.

Unlatching the belly pod between the landing gear, she squatted beside it to stow the passengers’ luggage. Nina’s pack nearly

sent her to her knees. “How much does this weigh?” she asked Nina as she shoved it deep inside.

“Oh, nearly a hundred pounds. I’m bringing home gifts for my children.”

“Where are you from?”

“Prudhoe Bay. My husband and two children are there. I’ve been overseas on an assignment.” She tapped a lumpy bag slung crosswise over her shoulder. “I’m a photographer.” She climbed into the plane.

Andee tossed Flint’s duffel into the pod, then reached for his hunting rifle. “I have to ask you to stow that, sir. Regulations.”

“You worried I’m going to hijack the plane, sweetheart?” Flint asked.

Andee gave him a mock glower. “Should I be?”

Flint winked at her. “Depends on whether I can throw off the other passengers, maybe fly away with you to Hawaii.”

She’d encountered a few of these types over the summer. She smiled. “We’ll run outta gas before then, land in the ocean. Sharks will have us for dinner.”

“Then maybe I’ll need it.” He grinned at her.

“Listen.” Andee lowered her voice. “I know you’re kidding, but we had an attack on our pipeline a few months back, and they’re just a little gun-shy around here, if you’ll pardon the pun. Surrender the gun or there’s no ride.”

His smile dimmed, and he handed her the weapon, climbing aboard the plane without another word.

Ishbane had only a small carry-on—a backpack on wheels—besides his briefcase. He handed Andee the carry-on and climbed in behind Flint.

Uh-oh. She recognized a man with a slipping grip on his control of aerophobia when she saw it. And flying over the Brooks Range translated to turbulence—lots of it.

Phillips tried to load his army duffel and balked when Andee reached for it. "It's too heavy, ma'am."

Ma'am? But his courtesy made her smile. "Sorry, Mr. Phillips. Rules say I have to load the bags."

He shook his head as he handed it to her.

Yes, it seemed painfully heavy.

McRae approached her last, scrutinizing her as if gauging her ability to fly the plane. He handed her his bag with a dubious look. She half expected him to ask if she was serving cocktails in first class and when the pilot would arrive.

After McRae boarded, Andee secured the passenger door, then crawled out from under the plane. The wind had picked up, and she smelled rain. Or maybe snow. Behind her, she heard a Piper Cub firing up. It would be first in line for takeoff. If she didn't move quickly, she'd be grounded.

Andee jogged around to her cockpit door, giving one last visual check before climbing inside. She adjusted her radio headset and began her pre-engine start checklist.

Preflight—complete.

Passenger briefing. Andee keyed her mike and explained the seat and belt adjustments and emergency-exit procedures and asked them to remain silent during radio calls.

Briefing—complete.

Fuel selector—on.

Avionic and electrical switches—off.

Brakes test—Andee held the brakes.

This would be her last commercial flight of the season. Besides her emergency gear and the extras she'd packed for her passengers in her own gear, she'd added a fresh supply of amoxicillin—just in case Gerard got injured or an infection—as well as a couple new best sellers, some canned meat in the event Gerard's bear supply dwindled, and a laptop computer,

with the errant hope that her father might want to figure out how to enter the twenty-first century and send her an e-mail. Last time she was in Disaster she'd discovered a satellite hookup at the township hall. If Gerard had the desire, he could take his laptop to town and keep in touch with his only daughter.

She hoped she wasn't courting heartache.

Brakes—check.

Circuit breakers—check.

“Okay, folks, we'll be in the air in a few minutes.” Andee turned the master switch on, pushed the mixture to rich, and primed the engine. Checking to see that the prop area was clear, she cracked the throttle and hit the starter.

The Cessna spit, then popped to life, its prop whirring and cutting out cabin chatter.

Making sure the magnetos were on, she pulled the throttle back to 1,000 rpm and checked the oil pressure. How she loved the sound of a well-tuned engine.

Something hit her shoulder. She jerked and turned. Phillips was leaning forward, his mouth moving. She moved her headset off her ear.

“—someone out there waving at you.”

Andee looked out the window toward the terminal. A smile gathered on her face, and for the first time in three months she felt the cloud of loneliness lift. Sarah Nation, her best friend, stood on the tarmac in a black parka, waving wildly.

Andee cut the engine and unbuckled her belt. “Hang on, everybody. I'll be right back.” She nearly leaped out the door, raced around the plane, and flew into Sarah's embrace. “What are you doing here?”

“Happy birthday!” Sarah grinned, her blue eyes lighting up. She'd shoved her blonde hair into a stocking cap, and Andee noticed fatigue around her eyes.

“Are you kidding? You came all the way from New York for my birthday?” But Andee couldn’t hide her elation.

“Your last e-mail sounded a bit blue.” Sarah shrugged, but Andee saw the faintest edging of worry. “Besides, I haven’t been to Disaster since we were in college. How’s your dad?”

“Stubborn and as friendly as a badger. Are you sure you want to trek all the way up there? It’s liable to be a cold flight.” Andee eyed the sky. “And the ceiling is dropping so we need to leave ASAP, and you look beat.”

“I’ll sleep on the flight. Is there a movie?” Sarah had always been one to seek out her friends. Only four months ago she’d helped their search-and-rescue cohort Dani search the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota for a lost teenager.

“I can’t think of a better place to spend your birthday than in Disaster,” Sarah said, turning toward the plane.

Andee caught up to her, thankful that her friend never left room for doubt about her loyalties. “Gerard will be thrilled to see you,” Andee said. “Want to ride copilot?”

“He still makes you call him by his first name?” Sarah handed Andee her bag. Andee stowed it in the belly pod as Sarah slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“I don’t get it. Like he doesn’t want anyone to know I’m his daughter or something. My mother was the same way. A free spirit, hoping to change the world. I’ll never understand what they saw in each other.”

“True love conquers all,” Sarah said before climbing into the copilot seat.

Andee grinned. No, true love had never been their problem. *She* had been their problem.

How fun was it to be her?

Andee went through the engine check again and restarted

the plane. She finished her takeoff checklist, then radioed the tower and asked permission to take off.

Andee prayed for safety as she studied the darkening ceiling, hoping this trip would be the best one of the season.



Sometimes Stirling McRae couldn't believe the stupidity of his own decisions. Like after vowing never to set foot in a plane three months ago, here he sat, wedged into a flying tin can manned by a wisp of a woman who looked like she should be serving meals rather than pushing a Cessna up to four thousand feet.

Or maybe his stupidity began the moment he saw Ari Al-Hasid and lit out after him like a fox on a rabbit, without a thought to the future. The terrorist had blasted a hole through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System and another through his brother's gut. Mac could still see Brody's blood etched into the pores of his hands.

What was worse, however, was that Mac's impulsiveness had blown three years of surveillance, careful scrutiny, and an FBI master plan. They still hadn't discovered the whos and wheres of Al-Hasid's terrorist cell, despite three months of interrogation. To add to the horror, the FBI's only other lead—a former drug-running-murderer-turned-mercenary-terrorist named Constantine Rubinov—had vanished, and not even a 24/7 eye on his family connections in Valdez had uncovered him. At best, the cell knew they were under surveillance. At worst, Mac's knee-jerk reaction had accelerated their agenda. He wouldn't be so lucky that they'd simply pack up and leave town.

No, Al-Hasid's cohorts were still out there. Plotting. Waiting.

Mac closed his eyes slightly, bracing himself as the Cessna hurtled over the runway and slipped gracefully into the air. He never did like flying, even when he did it in an agency-procured plane. It wasn't just being crammed in with six strangers; it was the fact that he had no control, and that made him jumpy. One wrong move by the pilot and they'd crash into the jagged line of mountains in the far-off horizon.

And said pilot didn't exactly inspire confidence. He'd bit back a remark about his bag being larger than she was, but the truth lingered. He'd met his share of pilots, and the majority were levelheaded, commonsense, salt-of-the-earth types who knew how to tie down their airplanes in the middle of an ice field, make camp in fifty-below weather, and take down a bear with one shot.

How could this petite woman keep herself alive, let alone her passengers, if they crashed? Emma? He thought pilots were supposed to have names like Lucky Joe or One-Eared Butch. Not . . . Emma. He barely stopped himself from unbuckling his seat belt and diving from the plane as they began to taxi.

If he had his druthers, he'd be in the copilot's seat. Just in case they went into a steep dive and he needed to resurrect his flight training.

Mac massaged his temples. There he went again, conjuring up worst-case scenarios. *"You should write conspiracy theories on the Web the way you see diabolical plots in every situation."* His boss's voice rang in his ears. Tanner Buchanan had followed that statement with the suggestion that Mac would be better off taking a vacation from his theories—some-where very, very remote—and while he was there take a long, hard look at his future. And if he wanted the same one he'd had three months ago before Brody's death.

Mac wasn't sure what his answer might be.

Perhaps Buchanan had a point. Mac had lived this job so long he was starting to lose it . . . maybe. For example, take the man sitting next to him—Phillips, Emma had called him. He looked like Sly Stallone with a smile. Yet all Mac saw in his clenched hands and the bulge in the upper right-hand side of his jacket was Rambo hiding a weapon, ready to hijack the plane.

When Mac looked at the smoker in a leather coat behind him, he saw a decoy, someone who had a bomb in the briefcase he held on his lap.

What a dunderhead Mac had turned into. He even saw terrorism in the eyes of the dark-haired woman heading home to her children. What was that she held on her lap in the camera-shaped bag? Certainly not a . . . camera?

Clearly, he needed time off to clear his head.

After Mac had returned from Brody's funeral, his thoughts of Hasid had tangled with his personal need for revenge. He'd called the hangar and found out the pilot's name, the one who'd flown over as his brother died in his arms. How Mac longed to go toe-to-toe with Andy MacLeod, grab the man by the shirt, and ask, "Why did you let my brother die?"

An answer. That's all he wanted. Just an answer. And the opportunity to tell MacLeod all he'd cost the McRae family.

But three months of grief had worn Mac out, and his da's most recent telephone call—the one tempting him with family and a place to heal—had pushed Mac into buying a ticket north to Deadhorse, the tundra town south of Prudhoe Bay. There he could enjoy some of his mother's home-cooked haggis and oat bread, hold his sisters' babies, and captain one of his brother-in-laws' fishing boats while he figured out what to do about his future.

Maybe he'd also finally be able to shake free of the scenarios that had plagued his sleep and knotted his brain for nearly

the last three years. Scenarios that included Hasid's cell or other terrorists sneaking into Alaska and destroying America's homeland source of oil, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. The destruction of the pipeline would cause America to seek new alliances with Arab nations and Russia and even tuck tail in its relationships with dictator governments that supported terror, like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. The cost of the war on terror would skyrocket and bring the troops home in defeat. Villages like the one he'd grown up in would have to return to dog-sledding to receive supplies. If they received them at all.

Keeping the pipeline safe meant keeping the American way of life and soldiers safe. Families fed.

Yet he had to concede that maybe his bureau chief was right. Security in America had tightened since 9/11, especially around the pipeline. Hadn't they caught two attempts just the past year?

He should be focusing on the word *caught* and not *attempts*.

Paranoia only sharpened his regret when he had returned from burying his little brother in the family plot. And it fortified his inclinations to resign from the bureau. Perhaps it was time to exorcise this . . . patriotism—or whatever drove him—from his system.

The plane's engine droned in his ears, a hum that pushed into his brain, turning it numb. Below, he saw the pipeline, a metal snake winding through the lush forest. Fifty feet to the west of the pipeline, the gravel Dalton Highway furrowed the forest north, some four hundred plus miles. To the west, through the cockpit window, he saw the jagged spires of the Brooks Range, a gateway to the Arctic looming closer. Hovering like smoke, wispy gray clouds bulging with rain shrouded the peaks to the north. Taiga swathed the valleys, a boggy, half-frozen carpet that never fully thawed.

"We're climbing to four thousand feet," came the voice over the loudspeaker. "I want to get over these clouds, so we'll have to go through them. It might get a little bumpy, so prepare for turbulence."

Mac held on to his seat, wishing he'd driven his half-ton Chevy. Still, air travel, even in a small plane, made better sense than driving in the iffy weather of northern Alaska in late September without a town for two hundred miles.

He cut his gaze to the pilot. Dressed in a leather jacket, jeans, a scarf, and gloves, she wore her curly dark hair behind her ears. He'd been taken for a moment by her dark eyes. Emma. Interesting. Scottish vernacular for "lady." He'd heard his father use the name occasionally when referring to his mother. "*Aye, she's a real Emma, that one.*" He smiled as his father's brogue laced through his mind. Although Mac considered himself an American first, having become a citizen when he was in his teens, his father made sure Mac knew and appreciated his heritage.

Emma seemed confident enough. He noticed she hadn't had a problem telling Ishbane to not smoke during the trip or lifting the bags into the belly pod. She probably had to be in shape to run flights all summer long, loading and unloading cargo. But she seemed so small, even breakable. Maybe it was the way she had hugged her friend. Mac had watched out the round Plexiglas window, and as they embraced, he'd felt a pain so intense slice through him that he had to clench his jaw. He even pushed against his chest as if to massage it away.

He'd had a friendship like that with Brody. And his death left a hole inside that still took Mac's breath away sometimes.

"You need to come home, Stirling. Get a wife, start a family." Brody had sat by the fire, his legs crossed at the ankles, drinking Cragganmore.

Mac looked out the window, remembering his answer. "I don't have time for a wife. A woman would have to crash-land at my feet to get my attention."

Brody had stared into his glass, swirling the liquid, his voice dropping. "Maybe you just haven't found one worth paying attention to yet."

"No," Mac had wanted to say. "I've seen the destruction of too many marriages, the debris from trying to balance a family with a dangerous and demanding career." Besides, he just wasn't the roses, birthday-remembering, poetry-quoting, romance-hero type that a woman dreamed about.

Sleet pelleted the wings, and a flash of lightning crackled through the sky. Mac grabbed his armrest as the plane jittered in the air.

"Turbulence?" Ishbane snapped from behind him. "*This* is turbulence?"

Mac hadn't liked the skinny man from the start, and now his tone only made Mac bristle. Like they needed reminders? Mac watched the pilot. Her posture betrayed no emotion as she held the plane's yoke.

Mac had flown using his instruments only a few times, but here in Alaska, approaching the Brooks Range, it couldn't be more dangerous to fly in zero visibility. More than that, he saw a film starting to form on the wings.

Ice.

Turn around. The feeling clutched his gut as the plane's engine began to labor. The high-pitched whine sounded like a scream.

Next to Mac, Phillips closed his eyes.

The plane jerked and dropped altitude. Mac's stomach hit his ribs, and he sucked a breath.

The woman behind him screamed.

Emma didn't flinch, just levered the plane into a steeper climb.

Mac gripped his armrests, eyes on the wings. *Climb. Climb.* If they could get above the clouds, find the sunshine and better weather . . .

The plane slowed, time turning to syrup as Mac watched the ice layer the wings. Then through the whine of the engine Mac heard it. The sound that cut through his soul and stole his breath.

Stall warning.

The plane stopped climbing, and for a white-hot second of silence, simply gave up life as Mac and everyone else in the cabin sucked in a horrified gasp.

And then they were falling.

A Note from the Author

"MOMMY, IF YOU could live your life over, would you make the same choices?"

When my son asked me this question the other night, it made me ponder. Would I? Yes, for the most part. There are probably a few I wouldn't make again. Like that perm gone wild or the boyfriend with the bad breath. But really, our choices make us the people we are, and without one choice pushing me to the next, I probably wouldn't be where I am today.

Not that life has been easy. Or that I've always made the right decisions. Over the last two years, we've had big changes—in career, in lifestyle, in location. And we haven't always made the best decisions. (Case in point—the day I decided to clean out my basement and ended up accidentally burning down the garage!) But through this journey, I've discovered that in every event, every disappointment, every joy, every struggle, God is there. And that is a treasure I wouldn't have found if every decision had been wise or easy or right.

I often hear people say, when confronted with a crisis, "God doesn't give me more than I can bear." I couldn't disagree more. I've been in a number of I-can't-bear-this! situations, and over and over I see that it's when I'm swamped and going down

fast, I have no choice but to turn to God. He parts the waves, reaches down, and snatches me from death.

Sorta like what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:9-10: “In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us.”

Many times Paul must have thought, *This is it. I'm done for*. And yet he trusted in God, and God saved him.

As I journey through this life, making decisions, trusting God for guidance, I have two choices. I can look behind me and say, “*Why* did I do that?” Or I can look forward, toward heaven and God's smile, and say, “I trust You for this step and that You'll catch me if I fall.”

Thank you for reading Mac and Andee's story. I pray that their journey encouraged your own and that God uses it to remind you that blessed is the person whose hope is in the Lord their God.

In His grace,

Susan May Warren