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Sam's Folly

Midnight Sons – Book One

Carmen DeSousa

A Romantic Suspense Series

Sam's Folly
A Midnight Sons Novel

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The Midnight Sons

Men as Wild and Rugged as The Last Frontier Itself

Five brothers risk their lives to rescue those caught in the death grip of the Alaska wilderness ... and risk losing their hearts to women as tough as the Land of the Midnight Sun.

Series Description

The siren call of Alaska's untamed wilderness, vast mountain ranges, and majestic glaciers draw thrill-seekers from around the globe. But with more unsolved missing person cases than anywhere else in the world, the Alaska Triangle has an ominous reputation. Enter the Midnight Sons, a team that risks their own lives to rescue those in peril.

Being a hero isn't all it's cracked up to be, though. The pay sucks, as does the fact that the team leaders must be ready to spring into action 24/7, 365 days a year — a lifestyle not conducive to a healthy love life. Worse, while the brothers are experts in their individual fields, they each harbor inner demons and secrets that threaten to tear their family apart... and jeopardize any chance of finding the women who could complete them.

Book Description

When a bigwig fight promoter needs someone to search for his missing fiancée, he hires expert tracker Sam Belgarde and his search dogs. Sam is more than a little reluctant. His family's company, Search and Rescue Alaska, is in financial trouble, though, so if searching for a spoiled socialite will save it, then he's willing to break the rules — just this once.

After witnessing a murder, Nora Molina needs to get away — fast — and her best hope to escape without her passport is Alaska. A native of Argentina, Nora's accustomed to harsh winters and high elevation, so she gets more than a little irritated when some tracker thinks she needs rescuing. Even if he is get-out sexy. And even if he's the guy she stood up before leaving town. It's going to be a long few days.

When an unexpected storm rolls in, Sam and Nora find themselves in each other's arms — to keep warm. Things get a little too hot when it's clear someone wants the two of them to stay lost — permanently.

Sam's Folly

A Midnight Sons Novel

Chapter 1

~ *Nora* ~

I should have worn a thicker coat ...

Nora Molina shivered, her teeth chattering as she tugged her hoodie farther down on her forehead and over her ears, doing her best to shield her face from the brisk Alaska air. Sure, she was in The Last Frontier, but it was May, for God's sake. According to her research, Alaska's summer season started in two weeks, which was the reason she needed to get on the trail quickly, ahead of the other hikers. Maybe it was the humidity. The damp air penetrated her cotton pullover, making her feel as if she'd hopped out of a shower and onto the tundra without enough sense to dry off.

"Layers," said the backpack instructor, his critical gaze picking her out among the class. "It may feel like summer here in Falcon Run, but on Denali, temps can fall below zero in hours. You have to be prepared for anything."

Feel like summer, she thought, *at fifty degrees?* Why was he even giving this demonstration outside? She must have become more accustomed to the temperate weather in Los Angeles than she'd realized over the last seven years. Her hometown of El Chaltén, Argentina certainly hadn't been warm. She had to get used to the temperature here, though, the reason she'd left her blasted third *layer* in the rental car. She needed to save room in her backpack so she could pack enough food to last her a month, long enough that authorities would stop searching. She didn't have space for long johns. If she could just stop shivering, maybe the instructor would stop focusing on her as if she didn't belong among all these male backpackers.

Not that she needed training, per se; she'd spent her childhood hiking with her father. But she'd chosen this refresher course because the instructor, Sam Belgarde, ran the highest-

rated search-and-rescue team in Alaska. If anyone knew what to expect in the Land of the Midnight Sun, it'd be him, and she had to be prepared. She couldn't risk failing.

Sam ... such an all-American name, a name that conveyed trust and confidence. If those qualities were really possible in a man. *Get real, Nora! Remember the last man who promised to help you.*

I'll take you to America, Sergio had said. Get you a job. You can send lots of money back to your mother. It'll be great.

Yeah. Right! If it'd been *great*, she wouldn't be freezing her ass off right now. In Alaska, of all places.

Still, if she pushed her cynicism aside for a second, she had to admit that she'd been taken aback by Sam's boyish good looks, which were in stark contrast to his solid body. His broad shoulders and muscular arms — the exact build she'd hope a rescuer would have if she ever needed rescuing — filled out his plain black shirt. His warm chocolate eyes and tousled brown hair softened his hard lines. But then he'd turned those dusky eyes on her.

As he lay out the contents of his backpack, explaining the importance of each item, he scanned the twenty-some backpackers who had gathered around the six-foot utility table. Each time, though, his gaze drifted to her, and his dark brows would sink, shadowing those inquisitive eyes. Why was he staring at her? She'd always been good at hiding her feelings, showing more courage than she felt. Living in Buenos Aires from the time she was fourteen had taught her that.

He can't possibly recognize me.

She'd worn the largest, darkest sunglasses she owned. Even if he'd seen her before she shielded her long dark hair beneath the hoodie, he shouldn't have recognized her. When she was in the ring, her hair had been blond — because her manager claimed that men preferred blondes. And her trainer had always applied dark shadow around her eyes to make her look meaner, more intimidating. When she viewed the playbacks, she hardly recognized herself.

Not anymore. The previous morning, when she'd packed to leave L.A., she'd dyed her hair to match her natural color and left behind her makeup bag. As she'd stared at her reflection this morning, she'd seen a brief glimpse of the girl she'd been seven years ago, before Sergio had *rescued* her from the streets of Buenos Aires. Nora had wanted to help her mother, so that she wouldn't have to continue working as a maid in her senior years.

Following Sergio to the United States had seemed safe ... smart, even.

Hindsight's a bitch!

Her thoughts returned to the guide; she didn't have time to dwell on the past.

Sam systematically returned all the items to his backpack, then reached beneath the table, pulling up snowshoes and a bear canister. The crowd groaned, and one of the men closest to the table whined, "Snowshoes in May? How we even supposed to have room for extra clothes for layering if we have to make room for a bear canister and snowshoes? Thought we're in season, Sam."

Sam grinned. "You won't be bellyachin' when you're post-holing up to your hips, or when a grizzly decides he's still hungry after finishing off your snacks." Thankfully, Sam now focused on someone other than her. "Just recently," he continued, "we saw the most snowfall since the early 1960s. The point is, you never know, so you have to be prepared."

With the instructor's attention elsewhere, she decided it was time to slip away unnoticed. Besides, she had received all the info she needed.

The cloud cover had cleared some over the last hour, providing a stark break between the blue skies and white mountains. She stared off to the west, at the vast mountainous region that rested beyond the highway. The mountain range looked like a giant barrier blocking off an alien land that forbade outsiders. From the moment she'd landed in Anchorage, she'd been mesmerized by the snowcapped mountains that reminded her of her youth in El Chaltén ... of her father. Of a time when she'd felt safe and loved.

A wave of longing and grief swept over her, as unexpected as the snow Sam had just mentioned. Even though the tops of the mountains were white, evergreens and birch trees lined the highways and trails. She gritted her teeth to push back the heartache before a stupid tear slipped out. She refused to cry. Like her mother had said, *Mi'ja, you must forge forward and keep it all inside*. And she had. For the last seven years, Nora had ignored the truth. She wouldn't ignore the lies and deceit anymore.

She took a deep breath. Life was what it was. Crying about what fate had dealt her and the poor choices she'd made wouldn't change anything. Only she could alter her path — literally. She shook her head and turned to leave. Over the next two days, she'd stock up at a couple different stores, and then head out, hopefully long before Sergio sent someone to find her.

~ *Sam* ~

Sam couldn't keep his gaze from wandering to the only woman in his class. Unlike most of the women who attended his crash course on backpacking — typically large groups of ladies who wanted to mark off one of the adventures on their bucket lists — she appeared to be all alone. She hadn't spoken with any of the men in the group. And instead of crowding around the table, she'd stood back about twenty feet, arms folded.

Did that mean she intended to hike Denali solo? As much as he enjoyed peace and quiet, even he didn't climb The Great One on his own. And showing up to this course wearing nothing but a cotton hoodie ... what was that all about? Was she trying to get attention? Well, technically, he didn't look dressed for Alaska either, since he'd chosen to wear just a long-sleeve T-shirt. But that's because he lived in Falcon Run. Fifty-five degrees felt like heaven after four months of temperatures in the single digits. And the sun ... God, how he missed the sun during the winter months. He wanted to soak in as much vitamin D as possible after the long winter, when he had been lucky to see four or five hours of sunlight daily.

Most people freaked this time of the year when they looked out their window at midnight and it was still light out. He loved it.

As he droned on about rules and requirements for backpacking Denali, he glanced to where the woman had been standing. She had walked away from his lesson and was staring out at the mountains. Her shoulders lifted and fell, as if she were upset. Then she strolled toward the parking area.

Of all the nerve. Walking out on my class. He didn't even charge for his refresher course. The least she could do was give him the entire thirty minutes.

She suddenly stopped, then batted at an invisible assailant. She launched backward, nearly falling over the split-rail fence that marked the property line.

"DEET!" he barked, attempting to hold back a laugh. The woman wanted to hike Denali and she was afraid of a blasted mosquito. "If you hadn't dropped out of my class, I was getting to that part."

The woman turned. *Ab ... guilt. Good!* He'd take it. Obviously, she realized he'd been calling out to her. Maybe she didn't really intend to hike Denali, but had just happened upon his class. Either way, he had an uncontrollable desire to meet her. Any woman who gazed at the majestic Alaska Range with as much longing as she had was a woman he wanted to get to know.

Her only response was to furrow her dark brows. At least he assumed she drew them together based on the small crease above her blacked-out sunglasses.

He challenged her glare with one of his own. "You plan to hike Denali, ma'am?"

The woman crossed her arms, offering him a stiff nod.

"I was just getting to my ropes refresher course. Knowing how to tie the correct knot can be the difference between life and death. You know how to tie a half hitch?"

She twisted her mouth, then huffed when the other spectators turned to acknowledge her as well.

"Yes," she said curtly, jaw clenched.

"Come on up, then." He flashed a wide grin, something he hadn't done in what seemed like forever. "Show these men how it's done."

The woman forced a smile. "I'm sure you're quite capable of showing them."

Her voice held just the slightest of accents. South American, maybe? Yes, definitely. What little he could see of her face revealed exquisitely bronzed skin. Not the bottled-orange look, as many women here ended up with. And the few stray hairs that whipped her face were black as midnight.

Intrigued, he crooked his finger for her to come up. "Please," he said. "I've already been challenged a couple times today. It's time someone else steps up. Besides, I must be boring, since I have folks walking out on me."

The woman released an exasperated sigh but walked forward. The men stepped back, immediately making way for the shapely and apparently irritated woman.

As she approached the table, she removed her leather gloves, revealing more of her beautiful skin. "Here, hold these."

Sam accepted the gloves with one hand, handing her a 550 line with the other.

She dropped her head a notch, staring above the frame of her sunglasses. Dark green eyes, the color of jade, held his. Without shifting her intense gaze from him, her long fingers had already started working the knot.

The woman handed him the half hitch, then held out her hand. "Give me another line." He obeyed, and with her eyes still holding his, she proceeded to tie a bowline knot with one hand. She dropped the paracord then raised a brow, as if challenging him to another test. Her full pink lips quirked up. "Give me something hard next time." She'd spoken so low

that he doubted anyone else had heard her. She turned and strolled off as he stared, dumbfounded.

What a woman! He gulped, licking his suddenly dry lips.

Sam stared out at the stupid grinning faces of the men who had parted once again, making a way for her to escape. Just as quickly as they'd separated, the men gravitated back, filling the empty space the woman had left.

"All right," he muttered hastily. "Make sure you grab a safety manual before you leave. The booklet contains great emergency info if you find yourself in a bind." He skirted the table, nearly hopping it as he tried to intercept the woman before the others inundated him with questions.

"Sam?" said the man who'd challenged him about snowshoes.

Sam held up a finger. "Just a sec." The woman was already hustling toward the parking lot. Nearly all of the people who attended his refresher course on backpacking had additional questions. Why was she running off? Because she'd shown him up?

"Sir?" The eldest gentleman in today's class stepped in front of him. "You said that your company leads a trip. Is there a sign-up form? I think you're right. I'm not sure I want to challenge Mount McKinley on my own."

Sam forced a smile. "Good idea. There's a clipboard on the table. My brother's leading a group in a couple weeks."

Another man held out his hand. "I heard you were the youngest boy to climb Denali."

Sam craned his head around the additional men closing in on him. "I heard that rumor too." He chuckled. "I was twelve the first time my father took me up, but we didn't care about telling folks. Climbing was just part of our daily life. An eleven-year-old boy recently summited Denali, though, so either way, I'm out."

The man laughed. "Ah ... so maybe it's not as hard as you make it out to be."

"Maybe not." Sam forced a laugh, irritated. "I'm getting old, I guess. Excuse me just a second, gentlemen; there's someone I need to speak with."

The line of men finally shuffled out of the way, the synthetic material of their insulated jackets swishing as they moved. Seemed everyone was dressed for Alaska except him and the mysterious woman.

Finally free of the group, Sam stared forlornly at the retreating bumper of a Ford Taurus with Anchorage plates. More than likely a rental. If a new woman had moved to town, he

would have already heard. News traveled fast in Falcon Run, but no news traveled faster than word of a new resident, especially a female resident when you were one of five single brothers. If his mother didn't inform him that a prospective wife just moved to town — or back, which was more common — one of the older women who'd known him since he'd been in diapers definitely would.

Oh well, such was life in Falcon Run. He turned back to the men, ready to answer their questions, and pushed away thoughts of the beautiful woman who'd stared out at the mountains as if she were lost.

As he walked, he looked down at his hands. She'd forgotten her gloves.

Chapter 2

~ *Sam* ~

Sam allowed the fusion of country-rock music to fade into the background as he soaked in the sights and sounds of the local tavern and its patrons.

He hadn't wanted to come to Grizzly's. The bar, though familiar, was a dive, and he was apt to get into trouble. He'd wanted to hit up one of the *civilized* bars in Talkeetna. One of the establishments that roughnecks — and his family — usually steered away from. He certainly wouldn't find his mysterious woman here. But the youngest member in his family wanted to have his 21st birthday at Grizz's, where all the Midnight Sons had celebrated coming of age.

As long as it'd been since Sam had come here, nothing had changed. He'd swear that even the regulars screaming every time their team scored were the same folks who'd caterwauled *Happy Birthday* to him seventeen years ago, on his twenty-first birthday.

Everything in the bar was either stained or painted a deep rustic brown. Soot-colored pine timbers made up the walls. Boot-scuffed planks served as the floor. And the heavy door, as slick and black as Alaska oil, kept out the bright sunlight and frigid winds. With twenty hours of sunlight daily, the dive bar was the only place in Falcon Run to experience a real nightlife.

Soccer fans drummed their feet and fists, screaming, "Gooooool!" Many launched themselves from barstools. Most of the year, hockey or football dominated the screens, but this was May. Even Alaskans cheered their favorite teams, excited to see which ones would advance to the World Cup. The establishment was broadcasting the game on nearly every TV, but the real devotees were huddled at the bar.

One of the Pipeline workers — Sam had seen the roughneck around town — staggered backward, causing the waitress to swerve and splash Sam.

Her front teeth biting her lower lip, she dabbed at Sam's black shirt with a cocktail napkin. "Sorry, Sam."

Sam winked at her as he nudged the man back toward the bar. “No worries, Gina. It was only a few drops.” He’d gone out with Gina a few times. Years ago ... maybe ten; he wasn’t sure exactly. He’d been in a bad place then, he remembered. Of course, seeing someone he *hadn’t* dated was unusual. With less than two thousand year-round residents, single people tended to make the rounds. At thirty-eight, he’d dated more than his share of locals, though, and he wasn’t one to repeat past mistakes. Dating visitors wasn’t smart either, but he couldn’t help thinking about the woman who’d taken off earlier. He’d hung her gloves over his rearview mirror, hoping he’d see her again. At least he’d have an excuse to approach her if he did.

Gina handed out the drinks. Only two of the five mugs held drafts, one for his mother and one for the birthday boy. The other three were just water. One of the downsides to running a search-and-rescue team was that, other than a sick day or vacation, he was on-call 24/7, 365 days a year. For him and his team, that meant no drinking. Not even one light beer. And since it’d been forever since Sam had taken a sick day, even longer since he’d actually gone on vacation, he’d been dry for several years. Not all rescue workers felt the same way, especially in Alaska where drinking was pretty much a required pastime.

Alex, the next eldest and Sam’s only full brother, accepted his mug of water from Gina and wrapped his arm around the birthday boy’s neck. “So, your first drink, Daire —” A few coughs and a loud guffaw had Alex scanning the faces around the bar. Even their mother was doing her best not to spew out the sip she’d just taken. “Okay, your first *legal* drink,” he said. “What should we drink to?”

“HMMMM ...” Daire stared up at the exposed rafters as though he was contemplating an answer. “Got it! I’m gonna drink to the fact that now that I’m twenty-one, Sam will stop treating me like a kid and start treating me like the expert whitewater rescue guide I’m gonna be.”

Erik, their adopted brother from the time he was five, smacked Daire’s back. “Gotta earn that one, baby brother. I’m older than you, and I’m still fightin’ that battle.”

“You’re only six years older —” Daire set down his mug without taking a sip, shifting his beleaguered look to their mother. “*Baby* brother. See how they treat me, Mom?”

Claire Belgarde tipped back her mug. “It’s okay, honey. You know you’ll always be my favorite.” Although their mother still worked in the family business, she no longer worked search and rescue, so she tended to indulge in a drink or two. Made the nights shorter and kept the nightmares at bay, she’d confessed once. Claire had been an expert climber, one of the few team members who could spider any rock face. But she’d retired her climbing gear and boots after his father died. Now, Erik

led the mountaineering expeditions and rescues. With his trim but amazingly strong frame, there wasn't a crag he couldn't scale.

Claire had brushed off Daire's words, but Sam couldn't. Sam didn't know if he could ever stop treating Daire like a kid — his kid. Although his parents had raised Daire as their child, and he'd tried to treat Daire the same as he did his other brothers — blood and adopted — he couldn't. He also couldn't figure out how to tell Daire that he was his father and that the woman Daire had called *Mom* from the time he uttered his first word was actually his grandmother.

"Well," Daire continued, "that's what I'm drinking to. Oh, and that Vince makes it home tonight. It's been way too long since I've seen his goofy grin."

"When he gets off the boat," Alex grumbled under his breath, "he might go away permanently for murdering his wife after he finds out what she did."

Sam started to admonish Alex for his snide comment, especially when Vince wasn't even there to defend himself, but a stirring of the crowd caught his attention.

"Make way," a resonant, raspy voice sliced through the throng of chattering drinkers, parting them like the Red Sea. "I got a party to attend."

The entire family lowered their mugs and scanned the bar. That familiar booming voice belonged to their brother Vince. Not really a brother. Not even adopted. As if he'd been a lost pup, Vince had followed Erik home in grade school and had been a family member ever since.

"Vince!" Daire set down his untouched mug and rushed to the man who was as much of a brother as any man could want. The two men, although separated by more than seven years, embraced each other like long-lost twins reuniting. "I didn't think you were gonna make it."

"Miss my baby brother's most important birthday? Never!" Vince leaned back, appraising the younger man's enhanced physique. Daire had been pounding protein and working out like an Olympiad. In the last few months, he'd gone from a scrawny adolescent to a strapping man. Vince, a hulk of a man himself, squared off with Daire, squeezing both of his shoulders. "I see you've been getting ready."

"Hell, yeah! Been waiting years for this day." Daire tossed a grimace over his shoulder. "Ridiculous that I had to wait until I turned twenty-one to join the team when I've been paddling white water and climbing mountains nearly ten years."

Sam cast his gaze upward. "Rules are rules, Daire." He circled the table, and Vince stepped back so the family could take turns hugging the brother they hadn't seen in several months. As Sam backed away, he searched for any indication that Vince knew about his wife.

Vince narrowed his eyes as he took in everyone's serious gazes. The family had always been able to read one another's thoughts with little more than an eyebrow raise, an invaluable skill when you didn't have time to talk on a rescue.

He obviously saw their sympathy because anger mottled his face. "You knew!"

Sam offered Vince a solemn nod. "At first, Karen was discreet. We only suspected something might be going on. But in the last few weeks, she's gone public. Word on the street is that she and her new beau are heading south."

Vince straddled a barstool. "Yeah ... with my money! Why didn't someone tell me?"

Sam's shoulders lifted and dropped. "Would you really have wanted us to radio the boat when there was nothing you could do? We tried talking to her, but honestly, I don't know what happened. Karen has become —"

"A royal bitch," Vince finished.

The family gathered closer, encircling Vince. Everyone had known. Everyone but Vince, since he'd been offshore all season.

"I could handle her leaving. But my boat ..." Vince sighed as Daire sat down beside him. "Apparently she hasn't been making the payments. When I got home, I found a letter stating that as soon as I docked, the bank would repossess it. 'Course, that was the only thing she left: past-due letters. She took everything, didn't leave as much as a roll of toilet paper. Hell, she even took my underwear. What on God's great earth is she gonna do with my tifty-whities?" He mimed holding them up. "Here, babe, I even took his briefs. They're only slightly used.' That's nasty."

Sam covered his mouth. It wasn't funny, but it was hard to hold back a laugh when Vince told stories. Even sad ones.

Vince tried to maintain his somber expression, but burst out laughing. "Go ahead and laugh, my brothers. I deserve it. Every single one of you warned me."

Daire slid his draft in front of Vince. "Here, you need this more than I do."

"Damn straight!" Vince tipped back the mug, draining it. "Nuff about my sorry ass. Let's get this party started." He ruffled Daire's thick dark hair, the same color and defiant curls as Sam's, except Sam kept his hair cropped short. "When you gonna cut this mop, kid?"

Daire laughed off Vince's comment, causing another kick to Sam's gut. How come everyone else could call Daire *kid* and *baby brother*, and Daire didn't get upset? Maybe Sam did treat Daire like a kid. Maybe he did need to let him grow up without always worrying that he'd die ... like Sam's father had.

With that thought, Sam stared at Alex. He hated that he blamed Alex for their father's death. It had happened, and that was that. He couldn't change the past. No one could cheat death forever, especially when you navigated churning white water, razor-edge cliffs, and wildlife nearly every day. If only he knew the truth, he could probably move on, but it always felt as though Alex was hiding something.

Alex lifted his eyebrows when he caught Sam staring, but then nodded toward Vince. Sam cocked his head, immediately reminded how his search dogs would do the same thing when he gave them an order they didn't understand.

Alex deliberately mouthed the words *a job*.

Oh ... yeah, Sam mouthed back. The business wasn't doing well. He wasn't sure he could add another salary. But the company rescue boat was just sitting in dry dock, which wasn't cheap. With an expert captain manning the boat again, they could pick up more search-and-rescue jobs, which would bring in more donations. Especially this time of the year, when novice fishermen flocked to Alaska. Too often, storms would pop up out of nowhere, and boats would capsize, leaving unsuspecting vacationers holding on for dear life. "You know, Vince," Sam started, "we haven't replaced a boat captain since Chris left, but with summer coming up fast —"

"I'd love to captain it," Vince said before Sam could finish his sentence. "I'll take it. Thanks!" Vince flagged down Gina, and the waitress smiled at the only fair-haired brother in the family. Even though Vince came off as raucous and was built like his Russian father, with massive hands that would make a polar bear envious, he had a bigger heart. "Let's get this young man good and drunk, so he'll never want to drink again. Drinking'll kill ya, Daire! Better to stick to women and song — ah ... scratch that. Women'll kill you, too. Or at least they'll take your last penny and clean pair of undershorts and run."

Erik tapped the back of Vince's head. "Cut your whining. You'll have another woman faster than the ink dries on your divorce papers. Just like high school. One woman the entire four years. Face it, Vince, you don't like being alone. Not like ol' Sam here." Erik raised his chin as if challenging Sam to refute his statement.

"What?" Sam scowled. "Why're you dragging *me* into this conversation?"

"I'm just sayin'. Unlike Vince, you haven't had a real relationship in ... what ... twenty years?"

Twenty-one years obviously, Sam thought, *but who's counting?* "I date."

"Since when?" Daire cut in. "When's the last time you've gone out?" Sam started to answer, but Daire interrupted his reply. "You can't lie, bro. We live in the same house, remember?"

“There was ... uh ... you know. That, ummm ... firefighter ...” He snapped his fingers. “Evie!”

“Oh, yeah. The woman you went out with twice and then said it was too difficult to work a relationship around your schedule.”

Sam blew out a breath. “I’m going to start dating again. I was waiting —” The entire family gawked at him. “It’s not like there are a lot of choices in Falcon Run. I know practically everyone, and the women I don’t know are usually only here long enough to visit Denali. That’s not really conducive to establishing a relationship.”

Daire raised the new mug to his lips but paused. “No one said you had to sign a marriage license. I just think you might not be so grouchy if you got laid once in a —”

“Daire Belgarde!” his mother screeched.

“Sorry, Mom.” Not looking contrite in the least, Daire peered over Sam’s shoulder, then pointed to something — rather, someone, Sam assumed — behind him.

All his brothers — and their mother too — surveyed the area behind Sam, their eyebrows rising in unison. A few mouths even fell open.

“I don’t know what you’ve been waiting for, Sam,” Alex crooned. “But I challenge you to start now.”

“You better move fast,” Erik chuckled. “Vince is already trying to push by me.”

“Am not!” Vince snorted. “For her, I’ll crawl under the table.”

Perfunctorily, Sam turned to see what all the fuss was about. After seeing no one of interest nearby, he checked out the three ancient videogames at the opposite end of the bar. Okay, maybe not ancient, but twenty years old if they were a day.

Fate, you old fool ... What are you thinking? Chills ran down his arms. He didn’t have to see her eyes; he’d recognize those curves from a mile away. The woman from the backpacking class was playing the boxing game, the one where the player punches until the virtual opponent drops. She was his kind of sexy. Not too short, not too tall, curvy in all the right places, and obviously athletic based on her mad air-boxing skills.

He didn’t need his brothers to challenge him; he’d been thinking all day about what he’d say if he saw her again. His legs were already transporting him across the worn wood floor. Once within a few yards of the woman, he paused and watched as she knocked out one simulated challenger after another. *Note to self: don’t come on too strong. The chick’s got a wicked right hook.*

He glanced back at his family, irritated at their concern for his love life ... and the way they were hanging on his every move. Just out of spite he thought about heading back. *But hell, isn’t that called*

cutting off your nose to spite your face? Or cutting off another part, he thought with a snort. Besides, a new woman in the local dive bar was unusual. Attractive *and* new was nearly unheard of. Was it possible that since she was here, and not on the *touristy* side of the river, that she *was* a new resident? Didn't matter. He wasn't stupid enough to pass up a second opportunity to meet her. Sure, they'd kind of met earlier, but maybe he shouldn't be thinking that way. Maybe he should act as if she hadn't showed him up in front of twenty men.

All of the lines he'd rehearsed sounded stupid now that he was within feet of her. It'd been too long since he'd approached a woman. He wasn't sure how to start. Play it cool? Clumsy? Funny? Common interest?

The woman dropped the handles and stepped back, smiling at her high score.

He didn't have time to come up with a game plan. If he waited for her to notice him, some horny local might swoop in. Abe, the resident meth-head, was already eyeing her as if she were a big juicy steak.

Ignoring his palpitating heart and sweaty palms, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "You up for taking on a real opponent?"

The woman turned, and she was even more striking than he'd remembered, especially now that she'd discarded the sunglasses and hoodie. Dark brows and lashes, matching her espresso-colored hair, framed those brilliant green eyes.

"You want to fight me for real?" Her narrowed eyes sized him up from his cap to his boots.

Sam blinked. Had she just checked him out? Or ... wait. She thought he was seriously challenging her to a physical fight? Apparently so, from her rigid stance and very fit bod that seemed ready for an altercation.

He held up his hands, the ancient sign that he held no weapons, and added a chuckle for good measure. "Oh, God no. You misunderstood. I may be the eldest of my brothers, but if I ever lifted a hand to a woman, they'd kick my ass from here to the North Pole. Not that that's far from here, but it's a cold and bitter place. I was thinking of something a little tamer." He indicated the pool table behind her. "Are you as good at shooting pool as you are at air-boxing and tying knots?"

The woman raised one of her perfectly sculpted dark brows. "Not sure. I've never played."

"Wanna learn?"

"Depends." She cocked her head. "Are you better at shooting pool than keeping people's interest?" Obviously toying with him, the woman's lips turned up slightly. But then she peered around him, scanning the bar.

“I’m okay.”

“You’d teach me, then? Without that I-know-everything swagger?” she added playfully.

“Sure.” He’d love to teach her a few moves. Based on her one-handed knot tying and boxing skills, though, she might be able to teach him a few.

The cheeky expression disappeared as she peered past him again, her gaze darting around the bar.

He instinctively peeked over his shoulder to see what she was looking at. No one stood out. Mostly just his family gawking in his direction — and Abe’s sorry ass, as if he stood a chance with this physically fit woman. All parties quickly stopped their rubbernecking and started talking amongst themselves as though they hadn’t been spying.

Great. Not only would his family be shamelessly watching him, so would every single man in the establishment who had wanted to approach the green-eyed beauty.

Sam tested the weight of several pool sticks, then handed her one.

Her fingers grazed his as she wrapped both hands around the stick. “Now what?”

He reached for a square of chalk, his gaze locked on hers. Holding it out to her, he realized that he heard nothing but his own breathing. It was as if the entire tavern had gone silent.

She accepted the chalk. “Like this?” She twisted her wrist back and forth, applying chalk to the tip.

Dear God. He gulped, then busied himself by gathering up the balls, hoping she couldn’t see his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, as if he were a hormone-filled teenager. “What’s your name?” The words came out rougher than he’d intended. But that’s how women roped him in. Funny and sexy ... and then *BAM!* He’d anted up his heart once, and the girl took off, leaving him and his newborn son. Better to guard his heart from the start. *Wow! Where had that come from?* He hadn’t been mad at Daire’s mom in years.

Green eyes stared at him. “Does it matter what my name is?”

“Guess not,” he matched her casual tone as he racked the balls. “I could just say *hey you* when it’s your shot or call you Cat.” He motioned to the cue ball. “Ladies first.”

“You can go first.” She leaned back against the wall, crossing her legs at her ankles. The familiar wheat-colored Timberland boots had never looked sexier. Adding to her casual look, her bronze knee poked out from the shredded threads of her painted-on jeans. “Why Cat?” she asked.

Sam held back his answer while he lined up the cue ball. Not wanting the game to end too quickly, he performed a token break that didn’t drop any balls.

He looked up at the sexy woman as he stood upright. “Your eyes ...” He inhaled a deep breath as she held his gaze. Most people got uncomfortable maintaining eye contact for more than a second or two, but she just waited for him to continue. “Your eyes are stunning. They look like cat’s eyes.”

Appearing momentarily disarmed, she smiled. “Is it my turn?”

“Yes.” He pointed to a solid. “Tap the cue ball here.” He lined up the shot, mock shooting, showing her exactly where to hit the cue ball. “Let’s see what you got.” He directed her body exactly to the spot, his hand resting on her back.

Without a word, she bent over the table. Her faded gray sweatshirt rode up, revealing a tattoo on her hip that he couldn’t quite make out. She gave the stick a quick, smooth jerk, sinking the ball, then shimmied out of his teaching embrace with a coy smile. “Like that, Mr. Instructor? Or should I call you *el gato*?” She smiled. “Perhaps, Tomcat?”

Gato, the Spanish word for cat, if he remembered correctly. “I definitely wouldn’t refer to myself as a tomcat. But with that sexy accent, you can call me anything you want.” He grinned. “Especially if you say it in Spanish.”

As though she approved of his comment, a broad smile lifted her heart-shaped face. “My name is Nora.”

He dipped his head. “Nice to officially meet you, Nora. I’m Sam, but you already knew that. And I think you’re ready to play. Now the only question is ... how good are you?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Guess you’ll just have to find out.”

Let the games begin, he thought.

Over the next hour, they continued with their playful banter and swapped a few heated looks and a lot of flirtatious hints. But every once in a while, he’d catch Nora scanning the room. Each time her eyes darted to and fro, the action was sudden, as if she’d forgotten something. When she caught him watching her, she’d mask her apparent distress with a smile.

In the last minutes of their third game, Sam realized he needed to get back to the family. It was, after all, Daire’s birthday.

As she’d done for nearly every shot, Nora circled the table like a green-eyed panther stalking its prey.

“Wait,” Sam said, “You’re missing the kill shot.” When she didn’t seem to see it, he approached her. As much as he didn’t want their game to end, he liked the idea of *showing* her the shot. Moving behind her, he placed his hands on either side of her sensually curvy hips and edged her to the side.

He applied gentle pressure to her left shoulder, nudging her forward so she could see the shot. He wrapped his other arm around her, pointing. “See it? The cue ball will bounce back, lining you up to drop your last ball. Then you’ll easily sink the eight ball.”

“Oh, I see ...” She leaned farther over the table. “Like this?”

God help him, as she bent over, her backside pressed up against him. He was certain she hadn’t planned to grind her ass against his crotch, but without warning, his relaxed-fit Levi’s suddenly felt like skinny jeans.

Abruptly remembering where he was, he straightened up. One look at his mother and Daire eyeing him, and his size thirty-four jeans were no longer fitting like a cheap hotel.

Seemingly not noticing how her move had affected him, Nora took her next shot and dropped the eight ball. At once, she performed a sexy hip-shaking victory dance. “Two wins for me, *cariño!* Want to play again, Sam?”

The only thing sexier than her Spanish was his name on her lips. The way she said it sent his blood rushing through his body. He needed to say goodnight before he did something irrational like sweep her up into his arms and carry her to his truck.

“I should probably get back to ...” A slow song started, disrupting his thoughts. Couples made their way to the seldom-used dance floor. Without a thought, he wrapped his hand around Nora’s and led her to the dance floor. Thankfully, she didn’t question his bold move. Then again, with the moves she had just pulled on him, maybe she wouldn’t be opposed to slipping out the back door.

“So ... you’re from Argentina,” he said, determined to get his mind off the crazy thought of taking home a complete stranger. That wasn’t his style — not anymore. Not since he’d had to take over the family business. Funny how, when he stopped getting drunk, a lot of his other bad habits had gone away too.

Nora tilted her head up and fluttered her long lashes. “Yes ... I’m from Argentina. That fact has not changed since you asked me an hour ago. Small talk doesn’t suit you, Sam.”

She was one tough cookie, this one. But he rallied. “It wasn’t lame small talk. Think of it as an anchor in the rock above you, helping you to reach the next level. I want to know more about where you’re from.”

“Oh. Sorry, I guess I’ve been a little hard on you.”

“A lot hard.” He lifted a shoulder. “But I can take it.”

Her appraising look actually made his body tingle. With a nod, she said, “I imagine you can.”

Several verses of the song passed, and he realized she wasn't going to offer any information on her birth country. As nice as she felt in his arms, with his hands lightly resting on her lower back, he found that he really wanted to know more about her. "So ... Argentina, huh?"

They both laughed.

"I was born in El Chaltén, but then moved to Buenos Aires when I was fourteen."

Sam smiled. He knew it was probably ninety percent physical at this point, but he liked this woman. He liked that she spoke her mind. A rare thing, especially when you first met someone. Usually it seemed like there was a breaking-in period, a time when both parties were on their best behavior. Then, after a few dates, the real you — or them — would come out. Well, Nora was already cocky and challenging. He wondered what secrets she harbored, though. Most people didn't end up in Alaska alone ... unless they were hiding from someone.

"Let me clarify where I was going with that question," Sam said. "Why have you come all the way from Argentina to Alaska?"

"Actually, I've lived in L.A. for the last seven years. But ... why would that be unusual? Americans travel to the Andes. Even a clothing line bears the name Patagonia. So why would it be unusual for someone from Argentina to come here?"

"True ..." He sighed, pulling her closer. She was about five inches shorter than his six-foot height, so her head rested perfectly on his shoulder. He wished he could drop his interrogation, but he was well aware why many people came to Alaska. Not those on cruise liners; those tourists were happy seeing the sights from the balcony of a cruise ship. But a woman on her own? There had to be more to her story. "Why are you in Denali, Nora?" he whispered into her ear.

She peered up at him again, her emerald eyes holding him hostage as if an electric current connected them. "To hike. Why else?" Her words sounded flippant, but there was a hint of conflict in her eyes. As though she wanted to tell him the truth but couldn't.

"People come to Alaska for many reasons," Sam said. "For some, hiking is just a good excuse."

Her muscles tensed beneath his hands. "I've come to hike, Sam. That's all."

"Okay." He tightened his arms around her. She'd waved off his question, but the way she'd said his name told him she wasn't upset. Maybe he was overreacting. Perhaps he wasn't as good at reading people as he thought. He shrugged off his concern. Just having her in his arms felt good. Familiar, somehow, as if she'd been a missing part of him.

Her breath against his neck caused a surge of warmth to rush through him, something he hadn't felt in what seemed like a lifetime. It *had* been a lifetime actually. Daire's lifetime. He looked over her

shoulder to see his family smiling. Were they right? Had he been grouchy lately? Well, he certainly didn't feel grouchy right now. How could he, when he was dancing with a woman who played videogames, shot pool, and liked to hike? Maybe she'd fall in love with Denali and not want to leave. He could see himself with Nora, getting to know each other while hiking.

Maybe she'd fall in love with *him* and not want to leave ...

Before he could suggest accompanying her on her hike, the song ended, and his mother waved him over. Time to sing *Happy Birthday* and cut the cake, she pantomimed. "Hey ... I have to do family stuff. I'll be back in a few minutes, okay? Unless ... would you like to come with me?"

She stepped back, breaking their intimate contact. "No ... no ... thank you, though. I understand family time. You should go alone," she said with her lips, but her eyes looked sad. She blinked and smiled, shaking it off. "I'll go beat up the bald man in the machine again. Meet me there when you're finished."

He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them. Her slight accent was so cute that he felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her. But no. They'd just met. He couldn't — shouldn't — kiss a woman he'd known for a little more than an hour. He shook his head to remove the ridiculous thoughts creeping into his mind. "Sounds like a plan."

As he approached his family's table, Gina carried out the cake his mother had brought to the bar earlier. Vince, the only smoker in the family, pulled out his lighter. Twenty-one candles. It was nearly impossible to believe that it had been twenty-one years, but it was. His son was a man. A man who wanted to risk his life saving others, just like the rest of the family. Just like the father Sam had lost.

The family and practically the entire bar joined in singing *Happy Birthday*. With one long breath, Daire blew out the candles.

Then the phones went off in unison.

Instinctively, Sam, Alex, and Erik reached for their phones at the same time.

"Water rescue," Alex spoke first.

Daire darted his gaze from Alex to Sam. "Cool! My first rescue is on my birthday."

Sam shook his head. "Not tonight, Daire. You've been drinking."

Daire lifted his glass with a smug grin. "Not a sip. You thought you were gonna hold me back again by getting me drunk. Not this time, Sam!"

Erik smacked Sam on the back. "Gotta let Daire grow up some time, you know."

Sam looked to his mother for backup, but she just shrugged. "This is my fifth time through this, Sam. What can I say? Your dad and I raised a brood of superheroes."

Defeated, Sam ran his hands over his head. “All right, everyone pack up.” Hey, if his son was grown up, that meant he was free to carry on with his life. And right now — well, after he stopped everything he was doing to save someone’s life — he knew exactly the path he wanted to pursue. He turned to find Nora, explain why he had to leave, and hopefully to get her number . . . but she was gone.

~ *Nora* ~

Nora had just dropped four quarters into the boxing game when her phone buzzed.

No one ever called her but *him*.

She glanced toward Sam’s table. His back was to her as he stood with his arms around two men. All of the people at the table, along with most of the people around the bar, were singing to the young man who had to be Sam’s relation. The boy had the same chestnut-colored hair and eyes. And even though the younger man didn’t have the distinguished laugh lines around his eyes and mouth that Sam had, his face held the same hard angles. *Determined*, she decided. Even when Sam had smiled at her, his face maintained an intent expression, as though he was attempting to solve a problem — her problem. Although she hadn’t said anything that should have given him the impression she was in trouble, he’d implored her to tell him why she’d come to the top of the world.

And damn, she’d wanted to.

She shivered as she thought about the way Sam had wrapped his arms around her at the pool table. He’d made her think of things she had no business thinking. Not now, anyway. Definitely not now. Not when her life — and possibly any person’s around her — could be in danger. He’d also made her forget to check her environment. A risky distraction.

Nora pulled out her phone as she rushed toward the exit. She glanced down at the caller ID at the same time she pushed through the heavy door. She had to get outside before the fourth ring. If she didn’t answer, he’d get suspicious.

As soon as the solid door closed behind her, drowning out the laughter and music from the tavern, she clicked *Accept*.

“*Hola, amor! Lo siento. Me atrapaste en un mal momento. Estaba en la ducha.*” She tapped *Mute*, knowing Sergio would berate her for her use of Spanish, which would give her a chance to reach the car and catch her breath.

“English, Nora! I’ve asked you a thousand times to only speak to me in English. Why do I always have to remind you?”

Safely locked inside her rental car, she unmuted the phone. “Sorry, my love. I was apologizing that I didn’t hear your ring at first. I was in the shower.” *Grrrr* ... Only in North America would a man with the name *Sergio* not speak Italian or Spanish. Sam hadn’t minded her use of Spanish. Actually, he’d liked it. She’d seen the faint blush that had risen on his cheeks when he was trying to be smooth. He’d carried himself as though he felt assured and confident, but there was something lurking there. A hurt that he’d buried deep down ... just like she did.

“It’s okay, my darling.” Sergio’s words interrupted her thoughts about Sam. Thoughts, she reminded herself, that she couldn’t act upon. “I was starting to worry about you,” he continued in his sickeningly honeyed voice. At one time, she’d believed his words. Now she knew otherwise. “Thought maybe you found an Eskimo to keep you warm when you didn’t answer your phone.”

“Never, my darling.” She cringed on the endearment, but knew he’d expect it. Just for a little bit longer she’d have to keep up the charade. What she wanted to say was how ridiculous he sounded, assuming that all Alaskans were Eskimos, especially since most of the Alaska Natives he was referring to probably didn’t even use the term *Eskimo*. But Sergio wasn’t one to be teased. Or corrected. Maybe that’s why she’d had so much fun bantering back and forth with Sam. It’d been years since she’d felt as though she could be herself. Well, kind of herself. She’d had to lie about why she was in Alaska. But the rest of her actions — playing games and taunting, speaking in Spanish if she wanted — had felt like a part of her that had been lost in the last seven years. She’d never imagined running for her life would actually make her feel so ... *alive*.

Instead of slipping up and giving Sergio a reason to question her, she went on offense, asking him a question that would keep him talking. “So, how was your day? Any new clients?” Sergio was the most narcissistic man she’d ever known; he could talk about himself — or his business — longer than anyone she’d ever met.

“No one as good as you, babe, but yeah ... I found a few hopefuls.” Sergio went on and on about the street fighters he’d discovered in Tijuana. Just as he’d found her in Buenos Aires seven years ago. She’d been working with her mother during the day cleaning fancy hotel rooms. At night, she’d been cage fighting. Sergio had recognized her when she entered his hotel room, but she had begged him with her eyes not to say anything in front of her mother. Her mother had no idea what she had to do to earn the money they needed to fix the roof and buy their old car. Nora had even

bought a skateboard to explain her cuts and bruises. *Too many falls, Mama*, she'd had to lie. *But someday I'll be really good at it. It makes it easier to get to work.*

He hadn't given away her secret. All he'd asked for was to share a coffee with her. He'd been charming and sweet, wooing her with fancy dinners and, more meaningfully, hope. He'd promised to take her away to a life of leisure and luxury. She could find a job and send money back to her mother, who refused to leave her grandmother. At twenty-four, Nora thought her days of fighting — and struggling — were over. But instead it was her dreams that had ended. Sergio insisted that she hand over her passport for “safekeeping,” as he'd put it. And the job? He'd actually brought her to Los Angeles to fight in women's MMA. While tamer than the street fighting she'd been doing for years, it was still fighting. Thankfully, she'd been good, and few women could touch her.

And those women kept coming. Every six months he'd go on a talent search, probably using the same lines on women — and men — to lure them to the United States. She hoped he hadn't found any new women. She hated to think about the woman — girl — who'd take her place once she was gone. What some innocent teenager would go through to achieve the American Dream — Sergio's version anyway.

How can you let him keep doing this? some crazy part of her conscience asked.

Of course, she wanted to stop him. But how could she, just one woman from another country? A woman who belonged nowhere. A woman who not only feared for her life if she spoke up, but worse, her mother's and grandmother's lives.

As Sergio rambled on, Nora stared out the windshield. It was nearly ten p.m. and the sun was still shining. The door to the tavern flew open, and Nora jumped. She sank low in her seat as five men sprinted from the bar, her heart pounding until she saw that it was only Sam and his family. Sam and another man hopped into a huge Ford pickup, one of those off-road trucks that sat up high with rugged tires and a light bar on the roof. The other three men jumped into a similar vehicle. With barely enough time for the occupants to buckle up, both trucks peeled out, heading north. Some emergency must have come up.

“Nora? Did you hear me?”

She clicked off the *Mute* button. “Sorry ... I'm just so tired,” she said loudly to cover up any sounds of the trucks speeding off. “I haven't been sleeping well. My mind must have slipped away for a second. Did you know there's still daylight at midnight here? Of course, you did. Sorry, I didn't mean to ramble. I know how you hate that. What did you say?”

“I asked if you were sure about going ahead with this hike. You know, there are plenty of mountains within driving distance of L.A. I don’t like that you are so far from me.”

Abh, but that’s one of Alaska’s best features, she wanted to say. But she couldn’t. Even on *Mute*, she was afraid he might hear her. Knowing Sergio, he might have sent someone to watch her. She probably shouldn’t have carried on the way she had inside the bar. Just being near her could put Sam’s life in danger. But after scanning the clientele, she’d felt confident all the people were locals. That was why she’d chosen a dive bar and not the more popular bar listed on Yelp.

Outside though, one command from Sergio might send some thug out of the shadows. Not that Sergio would ever take responsibility for hurting her; he had never hit her with his own hands. No, he preferred to make his fighters suffer at the hands of others so the authorities couldn’t prove it. Like setting her up with a heavyweight butch, and then paying the woman to cheat. When he’d first brought Nora to the U.S., he’d shown her how he could make life hard or easy for her. And she’d seen him do the same to others. If his fighters didn’t do what he said —

She shook off what she’d witnessed for fear that her voice would shake. She had to keep up their farce love affair for a few more days. It was the one thing that had given her some freedom.

She checked her tone before answering him, remembering to let her English words drip with her Argentina inflection, the way he liked her to speak. Soft and sweet, as though she was helpless without him. “I miss you too, my darling, but I’ve wanted to hike Mount McKinley my entire life. Thank you so much for allowing me to do this on my own.” Actually, she wanted to be in the country of her birth. To hike her own beloved Andes Mountains. But without her passport, Alaska was the farthest she could go to get away from him.

“It’s the least I could do as a wedding gift for my future bride. But I won’t rest until you’re home with me, safe in my arms. Call me with your itinerary before you leave on your hike.”

Safe? She’d never be safe with him. One wrong move and he’d do the same to her as he’d done to one of his other fighters. But she kept a smile on her face so her words would ring with sincerity. “Of course, my darling. I can’t leave until next week, though. A storm is coming, so I have to wait for it to pass before heading out.”

He could easily check out her story with a click of a button on the weather app, but he wouldn’t. Sergio was too confident of his control over her — over all of the fighters that he’d so-called *rescued*. Too confident that she knew nothing of his illegal activities. By the time he figured out she was lying, she’d be lost in the Alaska wilderness, never to be seen again. She had grown up in the

mountains of Argentina, and then she'd survived the streets of Buenos Aires for ten years; she could certainly survive in Alaska.

Sergio would mourn her passing for a minute. Then he'd move on to someone else.

Chapter 3

~ *Sam* ~

Sam inspected the horizon as his team made their way down the long dirt road to the river. They still had about three hours of light, one of the few pluses of long Alaska days. Extra daylight hours meant more time to safely plan and execute a rescue.

The river, which stretched from the Alaska Range past Anchorage, froze over by November each year. Then the ice would break up between April and May for the summer. Since it was one of Alaska's premier sport-fishing streams, many people didn't wait for all the ice to melt, and even fewer had any idea how fast the water moved beneath the ice or how quickly the water could rise ... until they were fighting for their lives. In the past, he'd seen the water rise five feet in less than two hours. On one rescue, the river had been raging so fiercely in spots that it had actually been running backward.

Inevitably, on days like today, though, when the sky was clear and the temperature reached into the fifties, Sam could count on a rescue call. According to the Alaska State Trooper SAR coordinator, a boat had capsized, and the two would-be fishermen were stranded in the middle of the swift-moving water. Lucky for the men, there were enough residents on the river that someone had seen the boat capsize and had called it in.

Sam and Alex parked their trucks as close to the river as was safe. Erik and Daire had ridden to the bar with Alex, so they only had two emergency vehicles with them, Sam's and Alex's. Each vehicle was stocked with gear for four rescuers, though, as they often traveled together to calls.

Even though Vince knew he couldn't be involved with the actual rescue, he'd hopped into Sam's truck. Now the two of them worked together to set up the equipment. Vince plugged in the air compressor and connected the line to the life raft while Sam pulled on his cold-water gear and life vest.

Outfitted, Sam grabbed a safety line and picked up the back of the inflatable raft. “Daire, you’re with me!”

Already clad in a cold-water suit and life vest, Daire charged over, not asking any questions as he picked up the front. Together, the two lifted the raft and headed to the river.

Alex and Erik headed downstream, below the marooned fishermen. They worked together to secure a line across the river as Sam and Daire entered above the beached — or rather, *rocked* — men.

One of the men was lying spread-eagle on a massive boulder in the middle of the river as arctic water and chunks of ice rushed by him. At least he’d been smart enough not to try to swim to the side. The other man was in the river, hanging onto a grouping of rocks as the surging water sloshed his face. He was holding himself up, but just barely. One wrong move and he could get his foot stuck under a rock, and then the weight of the water would pin him beneath the surface. There simply wasn’t any way to fight it.

The closer Sam and Daire got, the more panic-stricken the man in the water became. “I can’t hold on much longer!” he spluttered, coughing as he took in a mouthful of water.

“Get my friend first!” bellowed the man on the rock.

Sam had planned to rescue the man who was practically drowning first, of course, but he nodded to the man who was stretched out on the rock to let him know they intended to save his friend.

Sam used the jet outboard to position the rescue sled in front of the immersed man. The last thing he wanted was some frantic rescuee pulling Daire into the water. Although Alex and Erik were set up downstream, with the safety line strung across the wide river, there were too many large chunks of ice. Too great a chance of being carried beneath one.

The nearly drowned man was wearing a cold-weather suit but not a life vest. *Idiot!* When would people ever learn? Nowadays, they made thin, barely-there vests that opened the moment you hit the water. Why anyone would go out on water like this without a life jacket was beyond him.

“It’s okay. We got you, man,” Daire said in a calm voice. “Let go of the rock with one hand and climb onto the sled.” The kid was a natural. Sam had always known that; he’d just wanted more for him.

“I ... can’t! I’ll ... slip.” The man took in another mouthful of the rushing water, choking as he talked about what he couldn’t do, instead of doing something to help himself. “If I let go ... I’ll ... drown.”

“If you don’t climb,” Sam barked, “you *will* drown. We ain’t jumping in after you.” While his brothers had teased Sam about being grouchy, that wasn’t why he was shouting at the fisherman. He’d discovered water rescues could be the most dangerous. People freaked, then pulled you in. When a calm request didn’t work, he’d learned that being forceful was the only way. He didn’t have time to screw around.

If the guy had worn a damn vest, Daire could have dredged him out of the water by the straps. Thankfully Daire knew better than to offer a drowning person a hand.

“Come on, man,” Daire coaxed. “The raft is right beside you. Just grab it with one hand. I won’t let you fall!”

Sam was proud of Daire; he was doing precisely what he should. Once the man latched onto the sled, Daire would pull him up the rest of the way if need be. Even though he was young, Daire had upper-body strength from all the whitewater kayaking and rock climbing he did.

The man shook his head, gulping in more water. “I ... can’t ... hold on ... anymore.” His hand slipped from the rock. Instead of grabbing the sled, he tried to reach for the rock again. He couldn’t gain purchase as the water rushed around him. Then there was no rock left to grab.

Sam backed away from the rock garden, ready to move downstream. The guys had the line across the river so the fisherman could grab it. Sam noticed Daire had moved to a crouch, ready to jump. “Daire! Don’t you even think about —” Too late. The damn boy launched himself from the boat.

Within a few strokes, Daire grabbed the man from behind, wrapping his left arm around the guy’s neck. Daire hooked a carabiner to the line across the river, and Erik immediately dropped his end of the rope so the water would push Daire to the shoreline. Alex held onto the line as Daire pulled the idiot without a life vest into shallow water. Scratch that. Two idiots were now crawling up on shore.

Sam motored downstream. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he growled, wanting to propel the raft up on land so he could smack the living daylights out of Daire. But he had to help the man stranded on the boulder. Fuming, Sam motored back upstream. “No crap from you, man. You got less than ten seconds to make your way off that rock and onto the sled. You hear me?”

The man nodded and edged his way off the boulder and onto the raft. The moment he was aboard, Sam powered across the river, back to the shore.

The moment Sam was on land, he pulled the raft to the truck, allowing his brothers to tend to the fishermen. He needed to get out of there before he said something he’d regret.

“Sam ...” Daire said behind him, his inflection clear that he was going to apologize.

Sam whirled on him, ready to explode, then nearly bit off his tongue as he curbed a string of obscenities. “Not here!”

“I had to go after him, Sam,” Daire shouted above the rushing water. “The man wouldn’t have been able to hold onto the line. He would have slipped under the ice.”

Sam’s face burned. He charged forward, grabbing Daire by the shoulders. “You could have died. You want me to treat you like a man, but that was an immature move.”

Daire lifted his chin. “I saved him.”

“I’m not discussing this any further here. We’ll talk about it at home.”

“I won’t be home tonight. It’s my birthday, remember?” Daire threw up his hands then headed back to Alex’s truck.

Vince patted Sam on the shoulder. “Sam —”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Sam ran his hands through his hair. “Sorry, Vince. I just need to get out of here before I do something I’ll regret. Hell, I need to get away from everything.”

Sam slammed into the house and charged up the stairs to the room he’d had his entire life. Yeah, he sometimes felt like a loser because he still lived in the family home, which was the other reason he hadn’t had sex in longer than he could remember. But it wouldn’t have been right to leave his mother to raise *his* son on her own. Not after his father’s death.

Before that, Sam had carried on with his high-octane, no-worries lifestyle, as though Daire was the baby brother his parents had always claimed he was. After his father’s death, Daire had started acting out. Truly, Daire hadn’t done much more than the rest of his brothers — or Sam for that matter. But it was too much for his widowed mother. Sam hadn’t just taken over the business; he’d also taken over as head of household.

“Sam ...” His mother tapped on the door. “You okay?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. No, he wasn’t okay. But he didn’t feel like talking about it. She’d say the same thing: *Tell him*. But he knew Daire wasn’t ready to hear the truth. Not yet. “I’m fine.”

“Samuel Thomas Belgarde, I happen to know everything about you.”

Since she couldn't see him, he rolled his eyes. "Go ask your favorite son what's wrong. Maybe you can talk some sense into that boy. God knows I can't."

"I'm *asking* my favorite son."

Sam opened the door and leaned against the frame. He sighed, feeling like he might collapse at any second. "I don't know what I'm going to do with that boy."

"He's no longer a boy, Sam." His mother brushed by him and sat down on the edge of the bed. She motioned her hand toward his chair.

Even though he had the same room he'd had his entire life, he didn't have the same furniture. He had an office downstairs, but more often than not, he preferred to do most of his work — and brooding — up here where no one would bother him. He liked being on the second floor, where he had a fantastic view of Mount McKinley, or Denali as it was now called.

The mountains were the one place where he felt alive. As close as he lived to them, it was amazing how rarely he got to hike for fun. To get away from the phone and his brothers — even Daire. Somehow, he believed that if Daire had gone off to college — as he'd hoped — he wouldn't worry about him as much.

Exhausted, Sam collapsed into the black leather chair. "How did he get to twenty-one so quickly?"

"I asked myself that same question with each of you boys." She offered him a soft smile. "You can't keep him in the nest forever, Sam. You have to let Daire fly ... make his own mistakes. It's the only way he'll learn. It's how you learned. We had to let you boys make your own choices — right and wrong. If you're there to catch him every time he gets a boo-boo, he won't know what to do when you're not there."

Sam rubbed his hand over his face. "Yeah ... Look at how well that worked for me. If I hadn't screwed up —"

"We wouldn't have Daire," his mother finished. "Sometimes our mistakes are our greatest accomplishments. I know I wouldn't trade that boy for all the correct decisions in the world."

"Me neither." Sam shook his head as he thought about all the things Daire had put him through. Most fathers would be honored to have their sons follow in their footsteps. But when that path put Daire in life-and-death situations daily, Sam found it hard to be pleased with his son's career choice. "Why does he have to be so brave? So stupidly brave?"

His mother just stared at him. "Hmm ... I wonder."

“I can’t lose him, Mom. Especially not before I tell him the truth. I’m just not sure how to tell him. What if he asks about his mother?” He lowered his head into his hands.

“I know, honey, but you can’t make his decisions for him. He’s a man.” She stood and crossed the room, reaching to lift his chin. “You know how I feel about telling him ... that you should do it sooner rather than later, but ... that’s between you and him. You’ll know when it’s the right time.”

“I’m glad you can be so sure and calm. How can you do that after raising five boys? I’m a basket case over one, and I haven’t really even raised him. You and Dad did all the hard work.”

“Well, when you get to my age, you start to realize how silly you were to worry about the things you worried about when you were younger. The things you couldn’t change. And if you’re smart, you just start living for every day. Not wasting chances. You know, like dancing with that woman ...”

Sam peered up at his mother, wondering where this conversation had come from. He was accustomed to his brothers pushing him, not his mother.

A wide smile caused her eyes to crinkle at the edges. “You looked happy, Sam. I haven’t seen you just kick back for a long time. It was nice. You work too hard. Worry too much. You should find that girl ... ask her out. Maybe even take some time off, show her our beautiful state.” She kissed his forehead, the same way she’d done when he was a child, and then turned and left him to his thoughts.

Instead of his mind going right to thoughts about Daire, his mother had planted the seed for a ridiculously crazy idea to take root in his head: finding Nora. Tomorrow, he’d drop by the bar around the same time. Maybe he’d take a personal day and have Vince respond to his calls.

A few drinks. A few more rounds of pool. Maybe he’d even convince her to go hiking with him instead of on her own. By the end of the evening, perhaps he wouldn’t be feeling grouchy anymore.

~ *Nora* ~

Nora contemplated following Sam, but with only one main road, he’d see her.

You don’t need to worry about Sam, she reminded herself. His search-and-rescue team is the best. That’s why you attended his refresher course.

Truly, she should be happy that he'd been called off on some emergency. Otherwise, she would have been tempted to go back into the bar, and he might have pressed her for answers again. Answers she couldn't give him.

Instead, the moment she hung up with Sergio, she rushed to her cheap motel. She'd only been able to withdraw so much money from an ATM daily, so she'd made a deal with the motel manager to charge her four times the amount of the room if he'd give her half of the extra money.

My husband expects me to stay at a fancy resort, she'd explained to the man with a wink, *but I'd rather spend my money gambling*. The manager had been more than happy to oblige her. She needed to stockpile as much money as possible, because she intended to leave every credit card she had inside her rental vehicle. Next, she planned to toss her phone into the deepest crevasse she happened upon her first day, then backtrack and take a different trail. After the first few miles into Denali, Sergio wouldn't be able to figure out her circuitous route.

With her hiking skills, she was confident she could stay alive long enough to disappear from the public eye. Four to five months this time of the year in the Alaska wilderness would be easy. By October, she'd buy a sea kayak and make her way to Seattle. While researching online at the library, she'd read that one man had kayaked from Seattle to Juneau in sixty-six days. Not to be beaten by any man, she vowed to do the reverse route in sixty days. Not that she'd be able to brag to anyone. But she didn't need to. Just knowing she was accomplishing a record, and tricking Sergio in the process, would be rewarding enough for her.

From Seattle, she would make her way out of North America via the Pacific Crest Trail, which ended at the U.S. / Mexico border, just south of Campo, California. Getting out of the United States was easy; it was entering the States that required papers. If she'd thought for a minute that Sergio wouldn't have tracked her down, she would have just driven to Mexico. But she knew he would. Her only chance of escaping him was if he thought she was dead. Once she was out of the country, she'd never worry about Sergio and his murderous activities again.

Chapter 4

~ *Nora* ~

“Do it,” Sergio ordered, his voice cold and empty of any inflection.

“Please, Sergio. I beg of you. I have a wife and children. Please. I’ll never —”

*A hollow **POP** cut off the man’s beseeching.*

Nora bolted upright. Feeling as if she were on fire, she yanked at the sheet and blanket twisted around her legs, trying to escape the heat — the past. Every night she relived the man’s pleading, and every morning she knew she would have ended up in some landfill if she had interfered.

Although she hadn’t turned on the heat in the hotel room, she was damp with sweat. Because of the dream — nightmare. The nightmare that, sadly, her subconscious hadn’t made up. It’d been real, and she’d had to pretend for the last six months that she hadn’t heard Sergio give an order to kill a man. She had run to the stairwell and climbed the thirty floors back to their suite, too afraid to go into the lobby or back to the elevator. Definitely too scared to go to the police. After all, she didn’t have any real friends in the States. Her friends were Sergio’s friends. But she’d known the real reason: control.

Sergio had controlled every part of her life. Who she fought. How she dressed. Her money. And he’d planned to keep that control over her forever. So she had to play along, agree to marry him. She’d only had one request. That she be allowed one final fling, a hiking trip before they settled down. Surprisingly, he’d agreed. She didn’t even attempt to ask to hike in her home country. She knew he would have been suspicious. But Alaska ... Where could she possibly go from Alaska? Nowhere, in his opinion. His only concern had been whether his prizefighter would make it home safely so he could make more money.

Heart pounding, Nora ran to the second-floor window of the motor lodge and peered through the small gap she’d left at the edge of the window. It was already bright outside. The only vehicles in the parking lot were the same she’d seen for the last couple of nights. No new cars.

As tired as she was, today was the day. She had to get a head start. Get lost in the wilderness before Sergio even knew she was gone.

She stuffed everything she owned into the one suitcase that would stay in the rental car. It would appear as if she'd only gone on a short hike. Today she would pick up all the supplies she needed from different stores. Protein bars, she'd decided, would be her staple. But if she bought a month's worth of protein bars at one place, someone might remember her, and she didn't want there to be any evidence that she set out with the intention of disappearing.

After she took her last hot shower for what might be a month, she piled her long hair under a cap, dressed in the shabby sweatpants and sweatshirt she'd worked out in for years, and finished the outfit with her dark sunglasses. All she could hope was that no one where she shopped would recognize or remember her.

She'd purchased her backpack and hiking gear in Anchorage, but she needed a few more items — items that Sam had insisted backpackers carry, especially the DEET. She hated mosquitos, with good reason.

The log-cabin-like store was small but well-stocked. Nora inspected the protein bars, looking for the ones with the most calories, protein, and fat. While she hoped she could catch her share of fish, she had to be prepared if she didn't. The bells over the door jingled, and she instinctively looked up.

With a sharp intake of breath, she cast her eyes back on the meal bars, hoping Sam wouldn't recognize her. She couldn't help but remember him. He looked even better today than he had the previous day. As if it were seventy-something instead of fifty-something, Sam had on a short-sleeve black T-shirt today, a shirt that showed off those muscular arms. Sam looked ... *my caliente*. If she didn't know he was an all-American male, she might easily mistake him for a man from Argentina with his dark hair and dark features — and the soulful way he'd moved her around the dance floor.

Recalling how they'd been inches from a kiss the previous evening, before he'd had to rejoin his family, her mouth actually watered up. She dropped her head and stared at the food again, ordering herself under her breath, "Stop it!"

A tap on her shoulder made her jump. Instinctively, she drew her arms close to her body, preparing for a fight.

"Whoa!" Sam lifted his palms. "Remember, I wouldn't dare fight you. I just wanted to say hi. Nora, right?"

Nora removed her glasses. “Sorry.” His question irritated her, making her forget that she’d wanted to remain forgettable. “You were not sure of my name?”

Sam chuckled. “I didn’t forget your name, Nora. Not possible. It’s just something people say, I suppose.”

Tickled by his honest response, she felt her face warm. She flicked her gaze around the tiny store, making sure no one had followed him inside. “How did you recognize me?”

Sam dropped his gaze to the rough wooden floor. At least she assumed he was looking at the floor. His sun-bronzed face suddenly had a hint of pink slashing along his chiseled cheekbones. “I ... um ...”

Nora couldn’t stop her lips from turning up at his blush and stutter. “Why, Sam ... What exactly did you notice about me?”

Sam smiled as his gaze freely moved from her hips to her bust. “Not much else to do when your opponent is shooting pool or boxing but notice their ... um ... form. You have great form, Nora.”

“*Form?* I have ... great ... *form?*”

“Yep.”

She shoved his chest, but he was solid. Didn’t even totter. Maybe he’d been a scrapper back in the day, too. With the houseful of boys he said he’d grown up with, it was no wonder.

“You know,” he said, breaking her from her thoughts of a young curly-headed Sam playing outside with his friends. “I was hoping to run into you at the bar again tonight, but ... breakfast works for me. Want to grab something to eat?”

As much as hanging out with Sam appealed to her, she couldn’t put him in danger. “Umm ... I’m kind of in a hurry —”

“Breakfast is only one course,” he cut in. “Come on.” He took her by the hand, the way he’d done the previous evening.

“Hey!” She pulled free. “Can I at least pay for my supplies first?”

“Of course.” Sam walked in front of her, approaching the counter.

An elderly but trim Alaskan native greeted Sam with a wide smile, showing off layers of wrinkles. “Mornin’, Sam.”

“Mornin’, Silla!” Sam waved his thumb over his shoulder. “Nora’s one of our newest hikers. Would you please extend our discount to her?”

The man swiped his long salt-and-pepper hair over his shoulder. “Sure thing, Sam.”

Sam walked to the exit and leaned against the wall, arms crossed. He looked as if he was scanning the outside, searching for a threat. What could he possibly be concerned with? He had family and friends in the same town. People who probably had his back no matter what. How she longed for that. She'd had friends like that in Buenos Aires, but not in the States. She'd only really known one person in the last seven years, and he'd proven to be a horrible friend — and a worse person.

Nora handed the man her credit card. "Thank you, Silla."

"Any friend of Sam's is a friend of mine, young lady."

She smiled and accepted her bag, then strolled up to Sam. It didn't appear he was going to take no for an answer. And what was she worried about? If Sergio had sent someone to follow her, she would have seen him. She hadn't lied; she *was* in a hurry. But unlike California, there were twenty hours of daylight here; she could certainly take the time to eat breakfast. The more fat she could store, the better. "Where to?"

Sam took her by the hand again and led her outside to the parking lot. "We'll walk. It's only a couple blocks."

Nothing was far here. Only two roads intersected, and all the shops were huddled close to the four corners.

As the previous day, one lone mosquito buzzed near her head. To escape the flying killer, she lurched sideways, nearly knocking Sam off the sidewalk.

Sam steadied her. "You okay?"

A shiver swept through her as she batted the nasty creature away. "I hate those things."

"What things?"

She flicked her hand. "Mosquitos."

Sam laughed, but then apparently seeing her scowl, he sealed his lips. "You do know the mosquito is called Alaska's unofficial state bird, don't you?"

Nora stared up at him, her skin prickling at the thought of one of those *things* feeding on her. "What do you mean?"

"It's a joke obviously, but yeah ... come June, mosquitos — and black flies — can be irritating. Nothing to fall in the street over, though."

"Those *things*," she shrilled, "carry all sorts of deadly diseases. Malaria, West Nile ... If you'd grown up in South America, you'd hate them too."

“True, but so far, that isn’t the case here. Chances of the virus taking hold in Alaska are slim. Just make sure you pick up some DEET.” Sam stopped in front of a building that probably had been a house at one point — another log cabin. Light beige log walls made up the exterior. And the windows were trimmed with bright white paint. The white picket fence surrounding a front porch with whitewashed rocking chairs begged passersby to stop in and have a seat.

Distracted by the quaint, small-town atmosphere, Nora hadn’t noticed that Sam had opened the gate. “You’ll be safe inside from the scary mosquitos. This roadhouse is world renowned to climbers as the place to fuel up — food and rest — before tackling North America’s tallest peak. Or, for just an old-fashioned downhome breakfast.”

Sam led her into the establishment. The feel of his large warm hand wrapped around hers snapped her back to reality. It felt good. Too good. She couldn’t allow this. She slipped free, busying her hands in her purse while surreptitiously searching the interior of the restaurant for anyone who might stand out. She could only imagine what Sergio would do to Sam if he saw them together.

Inside, Sam pulled out a chair at a long table where several people were already sitting. Had he somehow planned this? The people didn’t look like the ones who’d been at the bar the previous evening. Not knowing what to do other than sit, Nora sat.

“Morning!” Sam pulled out a chair beside her but directed his salutation to the other people who were already eating. “I’m Sam, and this is Nora. Are you folks heading to Denali today?”

The man and woman smiled. “Yep. Driving through, then up to Fairbanks. We’re Carl and Leigh from Raleigh, North Carolina. Y’all plannin’ to hike it?”

“Not today. But I hope to go soon,” Sam said. He rested his hand on Nora’s forearm, then tilted his head, indicating it was her turn to answer.

“Uh, yeah. In a few days. I was planning to head that way next week,” she lied lightly. She couldn’t give any hint of her actual start time.

Sam slid his arm around her, and Nora felt instant warmth surge through her. She wanted to mentally slap herself. What was she thinking? What was he thinking? That she’d just roll over and become his *pet*? He obviously knew she was from out of town, the same way he’d known the people at the table were. Both this city and the one where the motel and bar were located had a combined population smaller than the school she’d dropped out of when she was fourteen.

Deciding to get this — whatever it was they were doing — over as soon as possible, Nora reached for a menu. “What’s good?” she asked curtly. It was the only way. Sam seemed as interested

in her as she was in him, but neither of them could act on their feelings. Not when she knew what was at stake.

“Nice meeting you folks,” Sam said. “My friend is hungry, so I guess I need to order.”

In her peripherals, she saw his head tilt, and she knew those chestnut-colored eyes were taking her in.

She cocked her head to the side, but just enough that he could see her mouth the word, “What?”

He pulled away and reached for a cup. “I’m a coffee drinker myself, but if you like hot chocolate, I highly recommend it.”

With his arm gone and the fact that he’d scooted his chair away a few inches, Nora suddenly felt cold. If she’d come off hostile, it was for the best. Even though she was done with Sergio — six months ago, actually — Sergio didn’t know that. And she knew that, just like he’d killed that man who hadn’t done what he asked him to do, he would kill her too. Still, she liked Sam. And who knew, maybe once she was safely back in Argentina, she could invite him to hike in her country.

After another quick scan of the patrons in the tiny restaurant, she rested her hand on his arm the way he’d done to her. “Hot chocolate sounds good. How about food? What do you recommend?”

At once, Sam’s posture changed. He leaned toward her, pointing out suggestions on the menu she held. “Definitely the sourdough hotcake with blueberries. And a side order of reindeer sausage —”

“Reindeer?” she said a bit too loudly. “Is that a joke, too? You don’t really eat reindeer, do you?”

Sam pressed his lips into a straight line as though he was trying to hold back a smile. “Afraid of mosquitos and reindeer ... You do know you’re in Alaska, right? Would it sound more appealing if I called it venison?”

“Nope! The hotcake will have to do. And I’m not afraid of mosquitos; I don’t like them. And I just don’t care to eat reindeer. *Papá Noel* — excuse me, Santa Claus — might not bring me any gifts.”

He chuckled as his arm moved to the back of her chair again. “You’re so cute.”

“Cute?” Nora thought about the last woman she’d fought, who left the ring bloodied and with fewer teeth after a knockout kick, which ended the fight.

Sam lowered his mouth to her ear. “Sexy ...” His warm breath grazed her neck, sending a shock of heat through her entire body.

“You folks ready to order?” asked a scratchy female voice.

Glad for the interruption, Nora turned to the woman in a white shirt and black apron. “Oh, yes! I’ll ... umm ... I’ll have the ... The ...” *Sexy guy next to me* — Damn! What was wrong with her head? She ran her finger across the menu, looking for the name of the item.

“She’ll have the sourdough hotcake with blueberries. Hot chocolate and orange juice to drink. And I’ll have the standard with cheese, substitute the bacon for —” He looked at Nora, then back at the server. “On second thought, just like it comes, and add biscuits, no gravy.”

“And to drink?”

“Coffee and juice.”

The woman strolled off, and Nora turned to Sam. “You could have ordered the sausage. I’m not squeamish. I just don’t want any.”

“No big deal. It’s more of a novelty item, and it can be gamey.” He held her eyes for a few seconds without speaking, as though he wanted to ask her something. “So ... tonight ... as I said, I was hoping to bump into you. But since we already bumped into each other, maybe we could plan a real date. Dinner?”

Nora chewed on the inside of her lip. She had to start hiking today, so she’d be gone days before Sergio sent a search party after her. And before the park got overrun with hikers. From what she’d read, it was two weeks before the summer season started. That would give her time to get lost, far away from where other backpackers hiked. And more importantly, she couldn’t allow herself to see Sam again. But she couldn’t tell him that. And she had a feeling he wouldn’t accept some lame excuse. Unfortunately, she’d have to accept and then stand him up. Damn.

“Okay,” she said.

Sam blinked. “If you have other plans —”

“No ... umm, I don’t have any plans.” That was the second time he’d read her. How could he know her body language when they’d just met? And yet Sergio didn’t know her well enough to realize she was leaving him after seven years.

“Are you sure?” Sam asked. “Because it sounded as though you’d rather not go out with me.”

Nora felt her face pull up into a smile, even as a tight knot formed in her chest. “Sam, I can honestly say there’s no one I’d rather spend an evening with.”

~ *Sam* ~

Sam heard the wonderful words that came out of Nora's beautiful mouth, but something was off. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. The same way he knew what his team members needed him to do on a rescue before they asked.

From the time he was a child, his parents had taught him to pay attention to his surroundings to stay alive. In the wilderness, his senses could be the difference between life and death. He hadn't known that reading his parents' expressions from the opposite end of a belay line would forever change the way he read people, but it had.

Instead of questioning the sincerity of Nora's statement, he followed through with his request. "Okay then. Should I pick you up?"

"No. I'd like to meet you somewhere, if that's okay."

His senses went off again, but since he couldn't push her to tell him the truth, he continued, "That'd be great. Would you like me to text you the location, or write it down?" He knew before he asked what her answer would be.

"Write it down, please." She reached for a napkin and then dug a pen out of her purse.

Sam accepted the napkin and pen. He wrote down the address for the restaurant, along with a quick note and his phone number, even though he knew she had no intention of showing up. He folded the napkin and slid it and the pen into the side pocket of her purse, then changed the subject. "So you've come from L.A. to Alaska to hike. What brought you from Argentina to L.A.?"

Nora lifted her cup to her lips. Was that because she was going to tell him another lie, so she was stalling for time? She took a sip but held the cup close to her mouth. "To be an actress."

Sam did his best to hold back the guffaw that threatened to burst out at her — was that her third? — lie. He was losing count. "Really?" Implying she was a liar would only have her running from him faster than she already wanted to. "Have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Acted in anything?"

"A few things."

Hmmm ... That didn't sound like a lie. Damn, this woman was confusing. "Anything I might've seen?"

"Probably not." She turned as the server set her breakfast in front of her. "Oh, my!"

Sam smiled as the Nora he'd met and liked returned, replacing the lying woman who'd slipped in to answer what seemed like easy questions. "Nice, huh?"

"Wow! I'm glad you only ordered me one."

The hotcake, as always, was larger than the plate they served it on. “Here.” He used her fork and knife to fold the hotcake in half, and then in half again. “Now you have a stack of hotcakes.”

“Thank you, *cariño!*” Nora stretched herself toward him, kissing his cheek.

“My pleasure.” Her back-and-forth actions were giving him whiplash. Had she not wanted to give him a movie title because maybe she’d acted in racy movies? They were sitting in a crowded restaurant with other people at the same table. Maybe that was the problem. He lowered his voice so only she could hear. “Maybe later, when there aren’t so many people around, you’ll tell me more about yourself? What you acted in.”

She took a huge bite of the hotcake. She chewed with a broad smile on her face, then washed it down with orange juice. “Yes. I will tell you more about myself *later* ... when we are alone.”

And there was Nora’s alter-ego again. He hoped he was wrong ... wished he hadn’t heard her emphasize the word *later*. But as he’d told her the previous evening, many people came to Alaska to escape. He just needed to figure out from what — or whom — Nora was trying to get away.

Sam couldn’t say with all honesty that he was upset when Nora didn’t show up for dinner. In order to be upset, he would have had to expect her to show, and he hadn’t. Even as he’d been steaming his best long-sleeve button-down shirt, he’d known he was wasting his time.

He had hoped that the note he’d written on the napkin would have persuaded her not to stand him up — or at minimum, call him so they could make other arrangements.

Oddly enough, he wasn’t taking it personally. He didn’t even tell the host that someone would be joining him. Sam knew, as sure as he was breathing, that Nora standing him up wasn’t about him. Nora was running from something. But it was clear she wasn’t going to trust him with *what*.

Tomorrow, he’d see if he could track down where she was staying. Not to stalk her, of course, but to give her an opportunity to make good on her promise. She had said she’d tell him more about herself *later*, so maybe if he met her on her own turf — in private — she’d open up to him.

“You want another beer, Sam?” Tonya asked.

“Nah, I’m good. Think I’ll call it an early night.” He’d taken off his first personal day in forever ... for nothing.

Tonya nodded, but her eyes held sadness. Sam could tell she knew he'd been expecting someone. Just the fact that he'd shown up at the restaurant dressed as he was, by himself, without a date, without his mother or brothers, would have told her he was hoping someone would join him.

One of the bad things about living in a small town. Everyone knew everyone, even though no one *really* knew anyone at all.

As much as Sam tried, he simply couldn't get Nora out of his head. He'd screwed up royally. He'd known she was hiding something, known she wouldn't show up for dinner, and yet he'd let her go. Nearly a week had passed, and he'd yet to find her. There weren't that many places to stay in Falcon Run. And he'd checked all of them. Even campsites. It was like she was a ghost. No one had seen her come or go. How was that possible?

He couldn't imagine, if she'd started her hike in Denali, that she wouldn't have told someone, so where was she? Had he read her wrong from the start? Had she really not been interested in him? No, there was something between them. He knew she'd felt it too. If Nora was running from the law, he'd back off, obviously, but he didn't get that vibe. He'd seen her scan the bar, the sporting-goods store, and then the restaurant. She'd claimed she was in town alone, and yet she'd been wary of her surroundings, as though someone might be watching her.

With that thought, he decided on a course of action. He'd planned to go hiking before the season started anyway, which was the reason he'd run into her in the outdoor store. But then, he'd spent the last few days — in between rescues — looking for her.

Now was the time to take a vacation, before summer. He texted Vince a quick message, asking when he'd be home. Since Karen had emptied their house, Vince had decided to rent it out and had moved back into the family home. Sam would go over what he needed Vince to do while he was gone, and then he'd leave.

Seven okay? Vince texted back.

Sam sent Vince a thumbs-up, and then headed for the garage — their supply room. As if his dogs had known what he'd decided, both of them hopped up from their slumber and immediately circled him, tails wagging.

Sam squatted and petted Strider, then Arwen. "You guys ready for a hike?" Strider darted out of the room and then Arwen, as always, followed her brother.

Before he made it to the first floor, the doorbell chimed. Strider changed his direction, bolting toward the door, Arwen on his heels. Sam peered over the railing, through the arched glass above the door, at the driveway. An all-black SUV sat out front.

His mother had gone to town earlier, so she obviously wasn't expecting company. "*Sitz!*" Sam ordered Strider and Arwen. One hand resting on his rifle, he opened the door. "Yeah?"

Strider growled, so Sam gave him a hand command. He didn't let strangers hear him give his dogs orders in German, as he never knew when he'd need to use them.

A man just an inch or so taller than Sam, smiled. "You Sam Belgarde?"

"Yep."

The man flashed a too-white sideways smile as he narrowed his too-dark brows over too-blue eyes. Everything about the man looked counterfeit. He actually appeared shocked that Sam hadn't invited him into the house. "Can I come in?"

"Not until you tell me who you are and why you're here." Sam didn't like unannounced houseguests. For that matter, none of his Alaskan friends did. Strangers didn't knock on residential doors in Alaska. Not if they wanted to keep their heads. Sam wasn't the only resident who kept a gun in his foyer. A firearm by the front door was as common as an umbrella. Actually, more common in Alaska.

The man smiled again, but it was too wide. Too bright. Too ... Hollywood. "I need someone who can find a missing person, and from what I understand, you're the best."

As usual, Sam offered his rote response, "All missing persons need to be reported to the nearest Alaska State Trooper Detachment."

It wasn't the first time Sam had been asked to find a missing person. But he wasn't a private detective or bounty hunter. If a man was bypassing the authorities, the person he was looking for probably didn't want to be found.

Sam moved to shut the door, but the big man moved his foot in the way. "Please ... My name's Sergio Reyna. The problem is my fiancée isn't technically missing, but I'm worried. I know she's tough and thinks she can survive in the wilderness ..." The man dropped his gaze. "But I haven't heard from her in almost a week, and I'm concerned."

Sam closed his eyes and took in a deep breath before he asked his question, even though he knew what the answer would be. "What's your fiancée's name?"

"Nora Molina. You might know her by her title, UFC Champion K.O. Molina."

Damn.

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