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SUSAN MAY WARREN SUNDOWN



SKY KING RANCH
BOOK 3

A small, stylized logo of a propeller airplane, colored in a golden-yellow hue, is positioned at the bottom right of the cover. It is a simple silhouette of the aircraft, facing right.

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BOOK 3



SUNDOWN

SUSAN MAY
WARREN



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Warren, Susan May, 1966– author.

Title: Sundown / Susan May Warren.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2022] | Series: Sky King Ranch ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2022001769 | ISBN 9780800739843 (paperback) | ISBN
9780800742249 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493438839 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A865 S843 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220114

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022001769>

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

ONE

Colt Kingston was in worse shape than he thought. One good look at himself in the mirror said that he probably shouldn't be climbing at seven thousand feet, where the air became a whisper in his lungs, where his heart had to work double time, and where every movement turned his muscles into a fist.

But the view. Oh, the view from atop Avalanche Spire, just south of Denali National Park, could just about stop his heart anyway.

Colt scanned the area with his binoculars.

From the north, the massive Denali range rose, rugged and magnificent, its hulking mass thundering across the horizon. A blue-gray shadow fell upon the mountains below, sweeping down to the rich greens of a pine and fir forest, the deep blues of valley lakes set in pockets inside the rising peaks of the foothills.

Snow and ice still capped a number of low-lying peaks, glaciers running off the edge like frosting. The air smelled of the summer wildflowers, and the sunlight hung long upon the day.

"I see the plane," he said, his gaze dropping to a small white-and-red-striped crumple of metal caught in one of those glaciers, about a half mile down from the cliff where they stood. "Right where you left it, Tae."

He lowered his binoculars and shot a glance at Taylor—Tae—Price. She wore her blond hair in a singular braid, had on a pair of Gore-Tex hiking pants, a warm jacket, and a wool hat against the still-crisp Denali wind.

Her mouth tightened at the edges. “It wasn’t there when I left it.”

Colt’s brother Dodge had walked over and now gestured for the binoculars. Colt handed them over.

“Looks like the plane slid,” he said. “I can see the trail where the melt carried it.”

“They must have landed in the valley above it, and the glacier carried it down the slope,” Echo, Dodge’s fiancée, said. She had put down her backpack and was taking a drink of water. Two golden-brown braids stuck out of her knit hat. She glanced at Tae. “I still can’t believe you survived.”

They stood on a ridge just above where they’d landed the Piper Super Cub that Dodge had flown, searching for the downed plane. Even the chopper wouldn’t have been able to put down closer to the wreck, so taking the plane gave them more reach to confirm, well, that Tae hadn’t been lying.

Not that Colt thought she was outright lying, per se, but with the position of the plane, it seemed a little far-fetched that the story went down the way she’d told it. The one that included a kidnapping, her attempts to crash the plane, surviving not only the crash that killed the pilot and her kidnapper but also a late-season blizzard.

“I can’t believe I survived either,” Tae said, maybe realizing that no, none of it really added up. Still, here she stood, daring him not to believe her words even as he stared at the crumpled evidence. Dodge and Echo had found her in a gully nearly ten miles away, so maybe . . .

“We need to get to the plane,” Tae said. “My backpack is inside. It has my research and . . .” She looked at Colt, her pale blue eyes on him, a small glare headed his direction.

Fine. Whatever. He’d sort of thought there might be a little something between them over the past few weeks. She had, after all, sat by his bedside during those early days after his extrac-

tion from an op-gone-south in Africa. Heard his nightmares. And he'd witnessed one of her own, so . . .

But after he'd cornered her, forced her story out two weeks ago, something had changed between them. The big chill.

He should have expected that, maybe. No one liked being interrogated.

"We'll have to traverse the glacier," Dodge said, "and then ice climb down to the plane. It looks pretty precarious." He glanced at Colt. "You sure you're up for this?"

Colt didn't want to bristle at his brother's question, but still, it burned through him. "Of course."

If it hadn't been for the beating Colt had suffered while being held hostage by a group of terrorists in Nigeria, he would have been out here two weeks ago. Right after local sheriff Deke Starr had turned up with the proof that someone *was* after Tae—someone meaning some Russian mafia group.

And now he sounded crazy, even to himself.

Clearly, Colt was desperate to put a little hero back into his reflection in the mirror. The one that stared at him with reddened eyes and fading bruises. He didn't go to sleep every night without replaying that moment when the truck of jihadists pulled up in a Nigerian village and forced him and his fellow security officer to their knees. When, for the first time in years, he prayed that God hadn't completely abandoned him. Maybe, maybe not, because somehow most of them survived, including Noemi, his brother Ranger's wife, who had been an humanitarian aid worker in Nigeria.

It didn't mean that God was actually looking out for Colt. He attributed God's favor to Noemi and Selah, the other humanitarian aid worker, and maybe even the doctor Colt had been tasked to protect.

Thankfully, the doc had survived, but no thanks to Colt.

Bottom line, he'd failed.

Sometimes, before he dropped off into his sweaty nightmares,

he backed all the way up to the moment they'd found the dead bodies of the villagers in the church. In that moment, he listened to his gut instincts that said, *Run*.

Or he shot first and then threw his body in front of the doctor, taking the bullet.

Instincts he'd honed during his years as a Delta Force operator. Except he wasn't that guy anymore. Wasn't even a security pro for Jones, Inc., at least not until he healed up from his broken bones and bruised insides.

Which meant he had plenty of time to focus on Tae and her crazy story about being chased by international terrorists all the way to his backyard in Alaska.

"While you were learning to fly, I was climbing and rappelling," Colt said now to Dodge. "And don't forget that one year I actually worked at the Denali Base Camp, coordinating Sky King Ranch flights."

"I remember," Dodge said as he pulled out crampons from his pack and hooked them to a carabiner. "Dad was afraid you were going to actually attach to one of the climbing crews and head up the mountain."

Colt also dug out his crampons and hooked them to the outside of his pack. The snow was soft, but it didn't mean it wasn't lethal. "I was seventeen. I wasn't allowed up."

"Since when do you follow the rules?" Dodge handed Echo the rope, one end already affixed to his harness. She clipped in.

Colt hiked up his own harness. "When it matters." He turned to Tae, who was struggling with her rig. "You could wait here . . ."

"I know how to climb. I used to climb the wall back at my gym in Seattle." She stepped away from him when he reached to help. "Besides, I want to be there when you see that I'm telling the truth."

"I never said you weren't telling the truth." He glanced at Dodge, whose eyebrows rose.

“Really?” She rounded on Colt. “When I told you my story, you stared at me so long, I thought maybe you were suffering from a hit on the head.”

Yeah, well, he was, a little. “It’s just . . . the whole thing sounds like something out of a Brad Thor novel. You being kidnapped off your cruise ship by your boyfriend—”

“A Russian spy!”

“Right.” He held up a hand. “A Russian spy named Sergei. Who then forced you on a plane to hijack you to some secret lab in Russia.”

“I never said that.” Her mouth tightened. “I said that I thought he might be taking me to Russia. And that’s why I freaked out. Why I opened the door to the plane—”

“Because you were *trying* to crash.”

“Wouldn’t you?” She was tightening her harness. “Isn’t that part of your oath as a soldier? Escape, survive—or something like that?”

“But you’re not military.”

“My father was. And . . . well, I wasn’t going to . . .”

And then she stopped. Again. Right where she always stopped—before she told him the *why* behind everything.

Secrets. Tae was full of them, and he wasn’t going to let them get him, or his family, killed.

“See, you don’t believe me, again.”

“What?”

“It’s your face.” She moved her open palm in a circle before him. “You think I’m crazy.” She turned to Dodge. “Do you think I’m crazy? That I dreamed all this up?”

Dodge held up his hand in surrender. “I think we’re wasting time.”

Probably. Because although the sun was still high, Colt’s chest was really starting to ache from the lack of oxygen.

He took the rope from Echo, tied a figure eight knot and attached a carabiner to it. Turned to Tae. “It’s not that I don’t

believe you, Tae. It's that you're not telling me everything, and I know it."

Her mouth tightened, and he had interrogated enough people to know he'd hit on truth. "Do you know how to—"

"Yes." She took the carabiner from him and attached it. Met his eyes. "You'll see. We'll get down to that plane and you'll see two dead bodies. And then I'll get my backpack and prove that it's all true. I'm not crazy."

"For the last time, I never called you crazy."

She hiked an eyebrow at him.

Okay, when he'd first heard her story, he might have paused for a long moment, let it sink into his head, let the what-ifs surface.

What if her story was true—that she *had* been kidnapped by the Russian mob? Why? And sure, he'd tried to pry that bit of truth from her, but she'd clammed up.

Almost as if she didn't trust *him*.

So maybe their little trek out to the bush to confirm her story had as much to do with her trusting him as it did with him trusting her.

He clipped the tail end of the rope to his harness.

"Here's how this will work," Dodge, always the boss, said. He also wore a Gore-Tex outfit and a wool hat. The fact that Dodge had agreed to come along on this crazy search . . . well, maybe things were going to be okay between him and Colt, after all. "The climb down isn't terrible, but once we reach the glacier, walk only in my steps. I'll test the snow, but this time of year, the ice can give and then—"

"You could fall a thousand feet to your death," Colt said.

Dodge gave him a look.

Well, maybe someone, and he wasn't saying who—ahem, *Tae*—should think about what she was getting into.

"If that happens," Echo said, rolling her eyes at Colt's words, "hit the ground with your ice axe, and hold on. You're the only

one stopping said person from”—she gestured at Colt—“what he said.”

He shot Tae a final look.

“Please. I hiked through the wilderness, alone, for five days. Survived a blizzard.”

“Barely,” Dodge said, probably remembering that day when he and Echo had found her, nearly frozen, in the snow near a ranger cabin.

Tae gave Dodge the same look she’d given Colt. Gone was the quiet, sweet girl who’d made them all soup.

Colt’s fault, really, and for a moment he was back at the cabin two weeks ago, after he’d seen her picture taken from an assassin’s phone, targeting her. He’d practically ran her down, shoved his hand over her shoulder, holding the cabin door closed so she couldn’t escape, and said, his tone tight and serious, “*Spill.*”

She’d morphed right in front of his eyes from quiet, hidden Florence Nightingale—his nickname for her—to Marie Curie, fierce, determined, and brave.

Even, maybe, a little bossy.

“*You sure you want to know?*” she’d asked.

Maybe he should have said no. Because now, as they prepared to climb down the mountain, he sort of missed Florence.

“Let’s go,” Colt said.

Dodge was right. The boulders created a natural stairway down the mountainside, into the valley where the glacier spilled over the side of the cliff.

Colt watched as Echo trekked in front of him. She had also grown up in Alaska and had the sure steps of a mountain goat.

But Tae handled herself just fine, holding on, checking her steps, careful.

Deliberate.

The sun still hovered high, although by Colt’s guesstimation, it might be nearly six in the evening. Maybe they should

have camped on the ridge after their hike from the valley floor where Dodge landed. But Colt was as eager to prove Tae right, or wrong, as she was.

He was rooting for wrong. Because the idea of some terrorist after her—and as a by-product, his family—had Colt's gut in all manner of knots.

Then again, if she'd made it up . . .

So maybe right wasn't such a bad option.

Dodge reached the edge of the glacier field. Maybe a thousand feet across, the glacier was a quietly moving river, with thousands of tributaries running through cracks in its gnarled, veiny blue surface. The frozen river fell from the top of the valley down to the edge of a cliff that dropped another thousand feet to a glacial lake below.

Working its way over the cliff, maybe ten feet from the edge, sat the mangled six-seater Beechcraft Bonanza, its wings shorn off, the fuselage twisted. When it landed, it had dragged the tail, which broke off, spinning the aircraft so that it then cartwheeled, taking off the wings.

It had ended up on its back, a fallen albatross, wheels up.

A stiff wind caught Colt's jacket, slipped down his back. He sat on a boulder and attached his crampons, then unhooked his ice axe from the pack.

"Maybe just Colt and I should go," Dodge said.

Colt nodded, brutally aware of the way his heart had started to hammer. Sheesh. He wasn't scared, but the sweat down his back and his hard breathing had him thinking that if someone went down . . . he might not be able to pull them back up.

So, if Dodge fell, they would both die.

"No," Echo said, saving him. "We go together."

Dodge's mouth made a grim line, but he nodded.

"My steps, your steps," Dodge said and started out.

Echo followed, then Tae, and finally Colt, his chest tight.

Quiet. Footsteps crunching in the snow. Dodge pressed the

handle of his ice axe into the snow, testing for strength, step by step.

They edged out—ten feet, twenty, thirty.

“Stop,” Dodge said, and Colt froze.

“There’s a bridge here. We’ll need to go around.”

An ice bridge. The kind that spanned a crevasse. The kind that could disintegrate with weight and bring them all down.

Dodge backtracked while they stayed put, and rerouted. He found where the crevasse ended, and they crossed over.

The pain in Colt’s chest had started to ease. See, they’d be just fine.

“It looks like the door is missing,” Dodge said as they drew closer to the plane. “Is that how you got out, Tae?”

“I don’t know. I woke up outside, strapped to my seat.”

Dodge stepped up to the empty metal carcass, looking through the open tail.

“Any dead bodies?” Colt asked, catching up. Dodge had left about twenty feet of rope between them. Echo caught up to him, then Tae.

“I think so,” Dodge said.

Tae started inside.

“Wait.” Dodge held his arm up. “This plane is sitting on ice. One wrong move and this whole thing could break free, go over the cliff.”

“I need my pack,” Tae said.

“I’ll get it.” Colt shot a look at Dodge. “Anchor in?”

Dodge nodded and pressed his ice axe into the glacier. Echo wedged hers in too, and then they both unclipped their carabiners and affixed them to the axes. The rope from their anchors stretched out to first Tae, then Colt.

“I’m going with you,” Tae said.

“Stay here.” Colt looked at her. “I promise to get your pack.”

She opened her mouth, closed it. “Please don’t die.”

Huh. Well, well. He gave her a smile.

She drew in a breath. “You’ll see I’m not lying.”

Right. He turned to the wreckage.

The back seats had been ripped from the body of the plane, one of them gone—probably Tae’s, given her story. The two middle seats had fallen and lay mangled on the ceiling-now-floor. Colt eased up, through the wreckage, to the front. An odor of gas hinted the air.

Wind whistled through the cockpit window, but as he drew closer, he spotted a corpse hanging from a seat in front. The pilot.

“I have a body!” he shouted. He came closer, pulling up his scarf. The man had frozen, clearly, but with the thaw, had started to decompose.

“What about Sergei?” Tae shouted to him.

He grabbed a dangling seat belt, listing in the wind. “Where was he sitting?”

“He wasn’t— He was . . .”

The hiccup in her voice made him look at her. She had turned a little wan. “He was trying to strangle me.”

The quietness, the horror of her words simply ripped through him.

“I had opened the door, was trying to wreck the plane.” She offered a tiny smile, a hint of Florence. But he was starting to like Marie. She *was* brave.

“Maybe he was thrown out, like you,” Echo said.

Tae nodded. “Do you see my pack? It’s purple and has my name on it.”

He searched the front compartment. “Not here.”

“I shoved it under one of the seats,” Tae said and stepped inside the plane.

And that’s when it started to give.

“Tae, stop moving,” Colt said, climbing back toward her.

“That pack has all my research in it.” She hit the floor, searching under the mangled seats.

The plane moved again, this time a bit more, as if trying to break free.

“I see it!” She lay prone, reaching out under a fallen seat. “It’s wedged in here!”

He reached her, grabbed her harness. “Tae, we gotta get out of here!”

“Colt!” Dodge shouted.

And with a crack, the entire plane rocked.

“Tae!” Colt tugged at her.

“I can almost reach it!”

The plane began to slide. Slowly, but, “Tae, c’mon!”

“I’m stuck!”

The plane started to pick up speed. The rope that tethered them to Dodge’s ice axe was coiling out, twenty feet of it that would stop Tae first, then Colt.

And if she didn’t get unstuck . . .

He yanked on her jacket, hard. She shrieked but landed against him. They fell against the wall, and the entire plane shuddered.

He wrapped his arms around her. “Hold on!”

And then, the plane sailed over the edge into the bright blue of the Alaskan sky.



Tae should have gone right on pretending she couldn’t speak, couldn’t remember who she was, and quietly slipped away in the night.

Kept running.

Because then no one else would die.

She screamed as the plane dropped out around her.

“Hang on!” Colt held on to her rope, tucking her against him as they fell with the momentum of the plane.

Her rope caught them, jerking them to a stop just below the lip of the cliff. Below them, the plane dropped, the crunch of

metal echoing as it bounced. It hit the lake, some thousand plus feet below, and Tae just barely stopped herself from screaming again.

Above them, a shout lifted. Probably Dodge, trying to keep the axe from jerking free.

Then, silence. Just Colt's heavy breathing as she lay in his embrace. His arm tightened around her as he gripped the rope, his feet scrabbling for purchase against the icy wall.

"I got you," he said. "You're okay."

They hung maybe five feet below the lip of the glacier, the rope pressed into the ice, their feet dangling in air.

Her grip burned, her hands just above his. But really, her harness held her.

Colt, however, had twenty feet of slack between them.

He was a strong man. She knew that from watching him recover over the past three weeks from the kind of beating that should probably permanently disable a man. When he'd arrived home to his family's lodge in Alaska, she hadn't known the story of how he'd been captured, beaten, threatened with execution. All she'd seen was a man who refused to give up, despite the demons that he wrestled.

And he'd been funny. Sweet. Charming. Self-deprecating.

Once, she'd even found herself in his arms, holding on to him. Needing him more than she wanted to admit. Somehow, deep inside, she knew that if anyone could handle her secret . . . well, Colt Kingston might be that guy.

Probably he was, even though he didn't quite believe her. But at the moment, hanging off the cliff, his body holding hers up, he was struggling, his breaths coming fast, his arms shaking, despite his words.

"Don't let go," she said. "If you fall, they won't be able to stop the impact of you hitting the end of the rope from yanking out the axes."

"Tell me something I don't know," he grunted.

“Fine, how about this? I left my ice axe on top.”

“Beautiful. Listen, truth is, I can’t hold on much longer, Tae. You gotta climb up. Use my axe. It’s dangling from my wrist.”

But to take it off he’d have to let go with one of his hands. “No. You’ll fall.”

“I won’t fall.” But he let out a sound, deep in his chest, a struggle to hold on to both of them.

No. She wasn’t going to be the cause of his death. She scabbled her feet onto the overhang of ice, slamming the crampons in.

“Atta girl,” Colt said in her ear. He brought his legs up too, his body cradling her as his feet bit into the ice around them.

“We’re losing you!” Dodge shouted from above. “We can’t help you climb up!”

“Hang on!” Tae shouted. Then, to Colt, “What if I hook your carabiner to my harness? That way you won’t fall farther.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She took a breath and let go of her hold. Oops. She must have been holding more of herself than she thought because her weight settled onto Colt. He was breathing long, hard, controlled breaths.

“I can’t reach your carabiner.”

“Take my rope and tie a figure eight into it, near the top. Then, clip that in.”

Her hands shook as she took the rope and tied the figure eight into it. She reached around behind her, trying to find the loop that held his carabiner. But she was pressed too tightly to him, gravity pulling her down.

“Take the axe, Tae. Climb up.”

Tears welled in her eyes. There. She found the carabiner. “I can do this.”

His arms had really started to shake.

She couldn’t move the knot in without removing the other.

Which meant that, for a moment, he’d be unbelayed, and . . .

“I can’t! It’s too dangerous.”

“I know.” And then in a move that nearly made her scream again, he let go with one hand, grabbed the axe, and swung it up into the ice.

The axe bit into glacier wall, held.

“I’m getting my weight off the line. You’ll be fine. You’re hooked in.”

Her entire body froze as he let go and swung himself onto the axe, hanging there like Spider-Man.

Except, not quite because he needed two axes to climb. Still, the heaviness on the line eased.

And then Colt unhooked his rope from his harness.

“Are you *crazy*?”

“What’s going on?” Dodge shouted, an edge of fear to his voice.

“Nothing! We’re fine!” Colt shouted back, clearly ignoring her.

“We’re not fine! You’re not tied in.”

“If I fall, you don’t go with me.” He raised his voice. “Pull her up!”

“I’m not leaving you here!”

He grabbed the end of his rope. “When you’re up and anchored, I’ll hook back in.”

She stared at him even as her line began to move. “Seriously. You’re calling me nuts? What is *wrong* with you?”

And then, well, she could just kill him because he smiled, a little gleam in those brown eyes, and she saw something in them that she’d seen weeks ago, at his bedside.

Fight. Determination. And the reason, probably, that he just kept surviving. The man didn’t have quit or helpless or even fear in him.

His voice turned quiet. Solid. “Listen, tune out everything else—me, the drop, your fear. Just focus on the next step. Climb, Tae.”

Focus on the next step.

Fine. Yes.

“Don’t fall,” she snapped, before tears could cripple her.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Stupid, arrogant man—but she started to move, walking her feet up the ice. His rope spooled out, but as promised, he kept hold of it with one hand.

She came over the lip, dug her toes in and scrambled for her ice axe, still lying in the ice. Dodge lay on top of his axe and Echo on hers, both of them dug in with their crampons, fighting the pull of the axe from the ice.

“Come here,” Dodge said, and she scabbled to him. “Lay on this axe.”

He got up, and since Colt still hadn’t clipped in, no weight hung on the anchor. But she took Dodge’s position while he dug in her axe next to them, then transferred some of the weight with a sling through the figure eight knots to the new anchor. He dug himself back in.

“Colt! Climb up!” Dodge shouted.

“He’s not clipped in,” she said.

Dodge looked at her, something of horror in his gaze.

“Climbing!” Colt yelled, and the line went taut, probably Colt testing it. Then she felt the tug as he used the rope to balance his weight, climbing up with the axe and his crampons.

She wanted to weep when his head, then body, lipped the edge. He crawled toward them, digging his axe in, as if he didn’t quite want to let go of that safety.

Maybe she didn’t either. Oh, she was so very tired of being brave. Of surviving. Sorry. Like she said, she wasn’t in the military like her father.

Wasn’t a hero. Not even close.

She put her head down in the crook of her arm, just breathing.

“Tae?”

Echo had gotten up and now came over to her. “You okay?”

Tae lifted her head, looked at Echo, nodded. But behind

Echo, Tae spotted Colt, still on the ice, Dodge over him, his fingers at his brother's neck.

Tae pushed herself up. "What's going on?"

Echo turned. "I don't know."

Tae hit her knees beside Colt. Dodge rolled him over. Colt was gasping for breath.

"You okay, bro?" Dodge asked.

Tae picked up his wrist. Counted the beats. "His pulse is racing."

"I . . . just need . . . a . . . minute . . ." Colt stared up at the sky.

"Sit him up," she said. "Colt, are you having any chest pains?"

Dodge pushed him up.

He looked at her, his jaw tight.

"I'm taking that as a yes." Maybe a by-product of his still-healing organs. "Okay, breathe with me." She put her hand on his chest. "In . . . out . . ." She met his eyes. So brown. They fixed on her.

In . . . out . . . in . . . out.

He slowed his breathing, then finally leaned back and blew out a final, long breath. "Wow. That's never happened before."

"You've never scared people to death?" Tae snapped. "What was that? You could have fallen."

He lay back on the ice, his eyes closed. "At least I wouldn't have taken you with me."

She just stared at him, then at Dodge. "Seriously?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Now you know why the terrorists beat him within an inch of his life." He held out a hand to Colt. "You can stop being a show-off anytime."

Colt managed a small grin as Dodge helped him up. Then, Colt turned to her. "You all right?"

Wow, just . . . wow. "Me? You're the one who can't breathe!"

"Yeah, well, I blame my near heart attack on watching you nearly *take us all down with the plane*." His smile vanished and just like that, he was back—the guy in the cabin two weeks

ago, who'd put his face in hers and practically ordered the truth out of her.

"I needed my backpack."

"Why? What was so important?"

"My journal. All my notes."

"Notes for what?"

She closed her mouth, looked away.

"Perfect." He took a step toward her. "I'm done with the games. I was nice before. Now, playtime is over. Stop lying to me and tell me what is going on." He'd lowered his voice to almost a growl, and it sent a razor under her skin.

Sure, he was a handsome man, with that dark hair, a scruff of black whiskers, those brown eyes the color of deep, rich coffee. But under all that simmered a warrior with hidden skills and the secrets to go with them.

Whoever she'd met a month ago, broken, sweet, and a little charming, had vanished.

This was the interrogator.

She took a deep breath. "You don't want to know."

His voice cut low. "I very much want to know. Just like I very much want to believe you."

"Really? You *still* don't believe me?"

"There was only one body in that plane."

"Because Sergei must have been thrown from it, like I was!"

She stopped, stared at them. "He could still be alive."

"Tae. You saw that plane," Colt said. "The fact you survived is . . . well, a miracle."

It *was* a miracle. But she knew exactly what he meant, thank you, and that was just . . . *enough*. She walked over to her axe and pulled it from the ice. Turned. "I'm telling you the truth. I was kidnapped, shoved onto a plane, and survived the crash. Either you believe me or you don't."

Colt's mouth tightened. He looked at Dodge. Then back at her.

And here it came. The same response she got back in Seattle when she went to her lab partner, Zoey, the same day that Faheem had died.

Hesitation. Maybe even disbelief.

Fine. She didn't care if he believed her or not. She stalked away.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know!"

"I believe you."

She stopped. Turned to Colt. Met his eyes, hard in hers. "You do?"

"I do."

The words swept through her, hot, bold, like a rush of summer sun, and she gasped. Stupidly, tears burned her eyes. "Really?"

He nodded. "But I would really like to know why I nearly fell to my death. What was in that backpack of yours that you so desperately needed?"

She took a breath. "You're going to wish I hadn't told you."

"Try me."

Overhead, thick, dark clouds rolled in from the west. A breeze kicked up.

She took a breath. And then said it, the one really out-of-the-box, almost apocalyptic truth that out loud sounded all-the-way crazy.

"Because I think someone is trying to poison the world, and . . . only I can stop them."