

the mountains bow down

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SIBELLA
GIORELLO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Summary: "Even Alaska can't give Raleigh Harmon a vacation from her job as an FBI forensic geologist. A cruise to Alaska sounds like the perfect vacation; it's a geologist's dream and will give Raleigh space to sort out her feelings about her recent engagement. But before the ship even reaches its first port, a case manages to find her. The producer of a movie that's being filmed onboard goes missing and is then discovered hanging from the railing. Suicide seems to be the cause, but Raleigh quickly realizes the pieces don't add up. When the Seattle field office sends Jack Stephanson to assist her in the investigation, her personal uncertainty skyrockets. Why is it that she forgets to even call her fiance back in Virginia. And Jack seems to know her as well as she knows herself. She'll have to wait to sort out those feelings, though, because she and Jack only have five days before the cruise ends to solve this case." — Provided by publisher.

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For my grandmothers,
Belle Goldstein Simpson
and
Frances Kennan Connor Worobec
Beauty with perseverance: Alaska pioneers

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,
And the rivers all run God knows where;
There are lives that are erring and aimless,
And deaths that just hang by a hair;
There are hardships that nobody reckons;
There are valleys unpeopled and still;
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will.

—from “The Spell of the Yukon,” Robert Service

Chapter One

With the trajectory of launched missiles, the mountains soared from the ocean. Smothered with evergreens, the steepes pointed to a sky so blue it whispered of eternity. Though it was June, snow on the granite ridges refused to melt despite almost twenty-four hours daily of sunlight. And where a liquid silver sea lapped the rocky shore, a bald eagle surveyed the cold water for fish.

First week of June: 5:00 AM in Ketchikan, Alaska.

It felt like falling in love.

That was a feeling I should've been familiar with, being newly engaged. That delicious sense of wonder, the dizzying sensations that came with standing on the threshold of new life—all that should have reminded me of my fiancé.

Instead, I was thinking, *Why doesn't my heart flutter like this when I think of him?*

Not the best thought for future marital happiness.

But it's part of the reason I was taking this cruise to Alaska *sans fiancé*. Hoping to get some perspective. Hoping to remember why, six months ago, I agreed to marry my high school sweetheart, a really nice guy named DeMott Fielding.

Only I wasn't gaining perspective on this ship. I was losing what remained of my mind.

We left the Seattle dock fifty-two-and-a-half hours ago—but who was counting?—and I was suddenly surrounded by two thousand strangers, each of whom lacked any normal sense of personal boundaries. These people were crowders. Constant talkers.

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Swarmers and gatherers, they turned my dreams of solitude into a desperate need, like food or water. Among the passengers were my mother—never quite stable but not exactly getting sea legs—and my Aunt Charlotte, who genuinely believed rocks healed spiritual wounds, and my aunt's friend Claire, a self-professed psychic known as “Claire the Clairvoyant.”

From day one, Claire made me want to jump ship, literally. But I was trying to be nice. Claire was my aunt's closest friend, and my aunt had given us these cruise tickets. Free. A gift.

Gifts always come with obligations. Always.

But on this morning as we sailed into the town of Ketchikan, I stole an opportunity to escape. Standing on the top deck, I took a deep breath of the freshest air ever tasted and scanned the mountains beyond the bow. The cruise's first port of call, Ketchikan was my first chance to get off the ship and I felt hope returning, sneaking back into my heart like a repentant runaway. My plans for today included a hike. Take in the view, collect some local rocks. Sit somewhere, alone.

It's all going to work out, I told myself. The cruise, the engagement. Everything's fine.

I lifted my hand to the sleepless sun and searched Deer Mountain. I was going to hike the trail that led to its summit, where a panoramic view displayed Tongass Narrows and these leviathan islands that broke through the Alaskan waters like pods of humpback whales. The town's dock was within sight, and that surveying eagle had landed on the pier, awaiting our arrival.

But then I heard three long bellows, blasting from the ship's stack. Low and ominous, like warnings.

In the silence that followed, I held my breath and stared at the tiny houses snuggled against the mountainsides. Their windows glinted like burnished gold. When an amplified crackle shattered the still air, the eagle took flight.

A man's voice blared across the water, bouncing back from the granite steepes.

Every echoing word confirmed my sense of doom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain, Oliver Roberts. We have encountered a situation that necessitates our immediate return to sea.” He sounded British, his voice as clipped as a Bristol wind. “We will be sailing for an indefinite period of time—”

I leaned over the deck rail. As an FBI agent, I knew of only one “situation” that merited an immediate return to sea. I watched the water below as it churned into a milky froth, washing against the hull. The deck shuddered with vibrations, and when I looked up again, Ketchikan was receding, the golden windows slipping into the emerald trees. And my heart tumbled down, down, down.

No, no, no.

“We will be traveling south along the Inside Passage,” the captain continued. “Please do not be alarmed by the helicopters.”

Helicopters?

“We hope to return to our scheduled itinerary as soon as possible. In the meantime, thank you for your patience. As updates become available, I will endeavor to pass along the necessary information. On behalf of the entire staff of the *Spirit of Odysseus*, we appreciate your cooperation.”

A raven crossed the sky, following the eagle’s retreat, and the oily blackbird cawed happily at our misfortune. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself from the deck rail and headed for the doors that led back inside the ship.

Back to the crowds. Back to the chattering noise.

“What kinda scam is this?” asked a man, hurrying beside me. He wore a baseball cap that declared his membership to the Phillumenists of Phoenix. “This cruise is a rip-off.”

A petite woman gripped his arm and stared into his face with a tremulous expression. “Honey,” she said with a tentative voice, “they did say something about icebergs. Maybe we hit one last night. You know, like the *Titanic*.”

“Bitty, if we was sinking we wouldn’t go back to sea.” His aggrieved tone made clear he was burdened by the company of lesser minds. “They said we’d see Ketchikan. Guess what? We just did. Now we’re leaving. Getting off the boat must be some technicality.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t think—”

Before I could grab the door, he caught the handle and spun toward me. “What d’you think?” he asked.

Several things, actually. None good. But my most insistent thought was, *My marriage better not be like this.*

Instead, I said, “The captain would rather dock than leave.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

I hurried inside.

“Hey, I asked you a question.”

The air inside the sunroom was warm and smelled of chlorine, a sharp condensation coming from the nearby swimming pool. Picking up my pace, I hoped to lose the guy. But he stuck to my heels like tar.

“Don’t you get it?” he persisted. “Now they don’t gotta pay dock fees. We’ll float around the ocean and they’ll take our money and then dump us back in Seattle.”

Conspiracy theories seemed to be fueled by everything but logic, which was why they were impossible to kill. Here was an obvious case: logic would say no self-preserving captain would bring two thousand people within kissing distance of Alaska, a lifelong dream destination for many, only to turn around and remain at sea with a village of now-mutinuous passengers. The idea was idiotic. Ridiculous.

And one more reason why I craved solitude.

“Don’t you got anything to say?” he demanded.

I zigzagged through the empty lounge chairs. “I’m sure the captain would like nothing more than for you to get off the ship.”

“That’s what *you* think,” he replied, as if he’d never asked.

Once again the woman was clutching his forearm, her small shoes pattering across the tile floor by the hot tubs.

He told her, “Watch. They’ll make us cough up more money to get on land.”

Following me all the way to the elevators, he punched a tight fist into the Down button six or seven times and continued bolstering his crazy theory—“Notice how they even charge us for soda?” I

was looking around for an escape route when my cell phone started playing “Ode to Joy.”

I pulled it off my belt clip and stared at the caller ID. It was the ship’s head of security. The bad feeling in my stomach tightened, and the elevator *binged* open. The angry man and timid woman stepped inside. Once again he held the door. “Aren’t you coming?” he asked, annoyed.

I shook my head.

As the door closed, I sensed a sad certainty.

My vacation was officially over.



“What happened?” I asked.

Geert van Broeck only shook his head. It was a bald head, shiny and pink. Perhaps to compensate, he had grown an extravagant mustache that consisted of two long handlebars the color of snow. With the bald pate, his mustache made him look like a vandalized pumpkin.

“No questions here,” growled the ship’s head of security.

We had walked away from the elevators and now headed into the Salt Spray restaurant. A buffet-style eatery, it was perched on Deck Fifteen, the ship’s top floor, and it smelled of scrambled eggs and fried ham, onions and potatoes. My stomach growled but otherwise I kept quiet and followed the man who had taken my gun from me at the Seattle dock. Ship rules. No firearms. Not even for FBI agents, though Geert assured me my Glock would be returned whenever we came to American soil. I was going to retrieve the gun this morning. I promised my fiancé I wouldn’t hike without protection. Already DeMott had left three messages on my cell phone, worrying about aggressive bears.

But then, DeMott worried about most everything these days.

“It is not good,” Geert said, when we emerged from the restaurant to the open deck. His thick Dutch accent made him sound perpetually angry. Maybe he was, stuck on a cruise ship. “We got a passenger missing.”

“Missing, as in, fell overboard?” I asked. “Or missing, you suspect foul play?”

“Is this how they train FBI—ask stupid questions?”

Three days ago, when Geert took my gun, I learned that he had been trained by the Dutch elite police, the Royal Marechaussee. That tenure infected him with an enflamed sense of superiority, and his “stupid question” comment was his fourth dig at the FBI since Sunday. I tried to stop counting, but not hard enough.

“Do you have an identity for the missing person?” I asked, teeth clenched.

“Woman.” The word sounded derogatory with his accent. “Husband reported it.”

The white handlebars of his mustache twitched.

“You don’t believe the husband?”

“This is not my first trip through the tunnel of love. Husbands, they are trouble. Once, I find the wife did it. Some woman hurrying the death-do-them part.”

I was ruminating on my next stupid question when his large face suddenly broke into a radiant smile. The skin around his blue eyes crinkled, the mustache rose like a biplane.

“Nice sun we got, yah?” He stopped dead in his tracks, greeting an elderly couple coming toward us.

“Whole lot nicer if we landed on shore,” the old man said. He had a curved spine and stabbed the teak deck with a pronged cane. “What happened, somebody take a leap off their balcony?”

Geert’s forced smile completed his head’s jack-o’-lantern appearance. “We gonna get to Ketchikan, not to worry. Not to worry!”

The elderly woman leaned forward. Her navy windbreaker was from the Phillumenists of Philadelphia. *Burning with Brotherly Love*. “Are they serving breakfast?” she asked.

From the chest pocket of his white officer’s uniform, Geert pulled out a piece of paper and scrawled his name on it, handing it to them. “Bloody Marys. Free.”

The old man narrowed his eyes. “Must be bad, whatever happened.”

Geert gave a chuckle. “Nothing, nothing is wrong.”

“Now I’m really worried,” the man said.

“Coffee, danish, sunshine. Enjoy the day. We talk later, yah?”

Giving a quick wave, Geert hustled across the deck. When we were out of earshot, he muttered, “Big-time cruisers, gotta keep them loyal to the line.”

“This missing woman,” I said, redirecting. “I take it she’s an American.”

“Yah. American.”

“American” sounded worse than “woman.”

He stood at a door next to the blinding-white smokestacks and tapped a numbered code into the security keypad, pulling the heavy latch.

“We looked everywhere,” he said. “Every deck. Fore and aft. Port and starboard. We checked their cabin, their friends’ cabins, the open bars. Now we gotta turn around.”

I knew enough about the situation to know it had its own acronym, MOB. Man overboard. And I knew the laws were fairly straightforward. As soon as a passenger was officially missing, the cruise ship must immediately return to its location corresponding to when the person was last seen.

I asked where that was.

“In the bar,” Geert said.

“You know what I’m asking.”

He was walking down a long narrow corridor of painted steel. It was gunmetal gray with curved cabin doors marked by single digit numbers. Officers’ quarters, I assumed.

“Until midnight, she was in the bar with the husband,” Geert said, finally. “He stayed. She went back to their cabin.” The mustache twitched. “The husband stumbled back to their cabin around 3:00 AM. Wife not there. He went back to the bar. For a drink.”

“It was still open—at 3:00 AM?”

“Open all night. Nobody’s driving, yah? Husband has another drink, *then* comes to the concierge.” His white eyebrows were as snowy as the mustache and they lowered with contempt. “Four this

morning, we start looking. Look and look. Can't find her. I call the captain, tell him MOB, then I remember. We got FBI on board."

His last sentence dripped with sarcasm. I waited silently as he tapped two codes into two separate security pads. The sign beside the door read CAPTAIN'S BRIDGE, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

"Does this mean I can have my gun back?" I asked.

"No way." Geert pushed open the door to the bridge. "I don't trust Americans."



Oliver Roberts, the captain, was English. His teeth proved it.

I extended my hand. "Raleigh Harmon, special agent, FBI."

Captain Roberts gave a brisk shake, then clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. "Geert told me we had an FBI agent on board. Rather excellent luck, that. The Coast Guard and Civil Air Patrol have been alerted as well."

The bridge had floor-to-ceiling windows and as we headed out of Ketchikan, the sun-dappled ocean looked like liquid silver. Up ahead, where mountains sliced into the pool of molten metal, three Coast Guard tugboats chugged down the channel toward our ship in a triangular formation. From ten stories above, they looked like toy boats in an enormous bathtub. Two of the tugs shifted to each side—one starboard, one port—while a third bobbed out of our path, waiting to follow aft.

"The helicopters should be joining us momentarily," the captain said.

"You were able to pinpoint the location where the woman went missing?" I asked.

Hands still clasped behind his back, the captain strode to a bank of computers split into two sections and watched by four crew members. Between the counters, a white-shirted officer stood and lightly touched the ship's wheel. I looked at the thing twice. Its diameter was no more than eight inches and seemed much too delicate for guiding a vessel whose length extended nine hundred feet. Under my feet, I felt the engines rumbling.

“Twenty-two knots, Captain,” one of the crewmen called out.

“Tell them to keep it there until we clear the channel,” replied the captain. “Then pull back to fifteen.”

The crewman picked up a black telephone and murmured something as the captain pivoted like a soldier. He pointed to a nautical chart displayed on the largest monitor. Alaska’s rugged coastline glowed like a radiated snake, bulging and shrinking around the deep coves and carved fjords of the Inside Passage. The ocean was represented by a wash of black while our ship was a small red rectangle, blinking south along the bright-yellow coast.

“The husband claims he last saw her at twenty-four hundred hours,” the captain said.

“Midnight,” Geert said, for my benefit.

“At that hour, we were in Canada, not the United States.” The captain turned to look at me. He had rheumy English eyes, clouded by years at sea. “That circumstance brings some rather complicated jurisdictional issues to this situation. Are you aware of that, Agent Harmon?”

“Yes, sir.” I felt another ladder-drop of emotion. Either nautical laws were simple—such as *MOB, turn around*—or they were as tangled as beach kelp. Suddenly I could smell the seaweed. If a person went missing within three miles of the US coastline, the case went to that state’s trooper division. But within one mile of the Canadian coast, the Mounties rode in. The FBI was supposed to investigate any missing Americans, whether in foreign or domestic waters, but our field offices were known to squabble over which city the case belonged to—port of departure; port nearest the disappearance; or the city where the missing passenger claimed residency.

And over all of it, the ship’s captain had ultimate and absolute authority. He even had authority over the United States government.

Staring at the bright flashing sea, I felt a headache coming on. “Which state is the woman from?” I asked.

Geert said, “Caw-lee-for-knee-ya.”

California sounded no better than “woman.” Worse than “American.”

“Los Angeles, specifically,” the captain said. “She’s the wife of a rather famous movie star. Milo Carpenter.”

My blood went cold.

“He’s on board shooting a movie,” the captain continued. “Are you familiar with his films?”

I nodded. More than familiar. Milo Carpenter was my ticket on this ship because my aunt was hired by . . . *oh, Lord, no* . . . Mrs. Carpenter hired my aunt. The woman. The MOB.

I turned to the captain, preparing to unravel the complications one at a time, but the bridge suddenly erupted with a loud squawk. It came from near the computer consoles.

“All stations, all stations, all stations! This is the Alaska Coast Guard, come in, *Spirit of Odysseus*. Over.”

The captain lurched, yanking a radio from the computer counter and squeezing the side button. “This is the captain of the *Spirit of Odysseus*. Over.”

“Captain, we see your MOB.”

“Stop the engines!” the captain yelled.

The crewman grabbed the black phone again.

The captain squeezed the radio button. “Coast Guard, exact location please. Over.”

I stepped closer to the picture window and felt the engines losing power until the sound dropped to a low growl, almost inaudible. Down below, to the port side, the Coast Guard tugs bobbed in our wake. A guardsman stood on the snout-nosed deck wearing an orange search-and-rescue suit. He held a set of binoculars to his eyes, then turned, yelling toward the tug’s small cab.

The radio crackled.

“Captain,” the Coast Guard said. “The MOB is not in the water. Over.”

“Say again? Over,” the captain said.

“I say again, MOB is not in the water. Over.”

The captain frowned. “Specify, over.”

“The MOB is hanging off the top rail, Captain,” the voice said. “And she’s in a noose. Over.”