



Gunn's Mission

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Category: Romance, Adult, Action

Description: After surviving a catastrophic helicopter accident that left him scarred and unable to continue serving on the Teams, former Navy SEAL Gunnar "Gunn" Nielson is settling into life as a Brotherhood Protector in the Yellowstone, Montana, office.

When a request from the U.S. government arrives for a protection detail for someone with extensive cold-weather experience, Gunn, born and raised in Minnesota, is tapped for the job. He soon discovers that he will be the lone protector for a group of scientists working at a research facility on a floating island in the Arctic Ocean.

After discovering that one of her team members was murdered, Facility Chief Maddie Russo is grateful for Gunn's expertise. Thinking the murder might have been committed by someone trying to interfere with a military-sponsored study, she and Gunn have to keep her team safe as the work continues.

Maddie and Gunn grow closer as the weather turns colder and the threats to the facility and its inhabitants continue.

Total Pages (Source): 53

CHAPTER1

“Maddie,” the radio squawked. “Maddie, you there?”

Eric Knapp’s familiar voice had Madeline Russo rushing to the radio. She’d been waiting for the teams she’d sent out to provide updates. His team was the first to report in.

“I’m here, Eric. Have you found anything?” She glanced at the map where she’d stuck pins for each team’s destination. He and Perry Hughes were searching the north edge of the ice floe, the lowest point where some of the station’s crew liked to launch their kayaks when weather—and light—permitted.

“No, but there are a couple of polar bears sunning themselves on the beach. Do you think...?”

The “beach” was the actual launch point and not Mateo Schild’s stated destination. “They’re more interested in the seals than any human. Besides, what would Mateo be doing there? His drill site is nowhere near there. I just wanted us to do our due diligence and check every inch of this place.”

“It’s weird, for sure,” Eric said. “Why would he say he was going to gather data and then not? Where the hell else would he go?”

They’d all been asking that question since they’d determined he was missing. It made no sense.

“Do me a favor and follow the edge of the floe to the east before heading back. We don’t want to miss anything. And stay the hell away from the bears.”

“Will do. Out.”

Maddie shook her head. Since she’d taken a headcount that morning at breakfast, the knot in her belly hadn’t eased. Mateo knew better than to head out to check his platform on his own. Not just because the weather was so unreliable but because the ice in some places on their floating island was growing increasingly unstable. The company that employed them, Polardyne Incorporated, had already reduced the size of their staff in preparation for abandoning the site entirely after one final winter mission. Minimal staffing meant Maddie’s job description had stretched from Facility Chief to Jill-of-All-Trades. Although they had established a schedule for facility maintenance, more often than not, she was the one left to pick up the slack when corporate wanted the scientists on the island to do the “real” work. Most days, she didn’t mind. Being needed—and trusted—to run an outfit like this on the top of the world, with all its inherent challenges, was deeply satisfying and undoubtedly different from field project management jobs she’d had in the past.

With that sense of foreboding weighing heavy on her shoulders, she knew she couldn’t sit in the warmth of the station while everyone else was out on the ice. Carrying a portable radio, she headed to the locker room to don the layers she’d need in the ten-degree cold, first stripping to her thermal underwear, pulling on a fleece shirt and pants over that, then donning the outer layer of wind and weatherproof shell jacket and pants, and stepping her sock-covered feet into her well-insulated boots. The last item she took up was a rifle because one never knew when a polar bear might walk through the camp, searching for an easy meal.

Outside, she glanced up at the sky. The forecast was for flurries, and the thick cloud cover was darkening the sky. Although each team was equipped with GPS and had lights on their snowmobiles, she didn’t like the fact they might not make it back

before nightfall. Polar bears weren't the only things to fear. The harsh, ever-changing terrain could be just as deadly.

"What were you thinking, Mateo?" she muttered as she made another round, searching inside and around the outbuildings. Her feet crunched on yesterday's snowfall, but still, she had to watch her footing because the thick ice slab beneath it was slick. She moved to the modular building that housed their vehicles, sleds to haul around their equipment, and kayaks. They called it the "garage." She checked beneath and inside the vehicles and boats and behind the shelving. Then she circumnavigated the building, looking for anything out of place, looking beyond the tamped-down snow to the rougher terrain beyond it for anything out of the ordinary.

Then, she moved on to the building that housed their power plant. The hum of the generator was deafening, but she called out anyway. However, the building was unoccupied, and its surroundings were free of any sign of life.

Then she trudged toward the satellite dish, farther away from the buildings, out of habit, letting her hand trail along the rope that was tied to the corner of their main building because, in the dark or a sudden blizzard, the rope was a lifeline, leading the way back to safety.

Most days, when she walked the site, she enjoyed the isolation. The sight of the barren ice floe, their floating island drifting in the Arctic Ocean, left her feeling at peace and more than a little proud. They were doing hard, important work, studying changes in the environment and weather patterns to pass their findings on to scientists working in far-flung places who shared their concerns for the future.

Today, she felt horribly alone. She moved to the makeshift wind shelter that hid the antenna and protected it from being overtaken by snowdrifts. Inside the enclosure, which was open to the sky, she swept off the operations panel to clear it and verified the settings. There was no sign that anyone had been inside the shelter recently.

She stepped outside and closed the chain-link door, then moved around the perimeter, searching for any footprints that might not have been filled by drifting snow. Again, nothing. Then she stood, staring beyond the enclosure. The terrain here was relatively flat, which was why they'd chosen that spot to erect the antenna. She glanced across the frozen expanse to the highest point of the floe, a low, jagged ridge of ice, the peaks shining in rays of sunlight that broke through the clouds. Too soon, they'd be living in nearly constant darkness. Not that she minded. She'd survived her first dark winter by doing the work—keeping her crew busy with tasks during the day, then organizing game nights and movie nights, or even cringing and laughing through karaoke nights.

She gave her surroundings one last glance and started to turn away when she saw a rounded shape on the otherwise flat slab. Pulling her neck warmer up to cover her chin because the wind was picking up, she shuffled the thirty yards to investigate. As she drew closer, her heart began a dull thud because the shape was distinct.

Covered in a dusting of snow, the body was lying on its side. She dropped her rifle beside her, then knelt next to the body and rolled it toward her. She stared at Mateo's frozen eyebrows and beard, his partially closed eyes, then bent closer, placing her cheek against his to feel for warmth, although the stiffness of his body told her what she already feared.

Mateo Schild was dead. Straightening away from him, she took a moment to close her eyes and say a prayer for her friend. Then she pulled her radio from her pocket and raised it to her face. She hit the talk button. "Guys, Maddie, here. I found him."

Eric was the first to respond. "Since you didn't say he was okay..." he said, his voice sounding strained.

She swallowed burning bile and shook her head before responding, "He's dead. I'm just past the satellite antenna. I'll need a sled to get him back to the station." She

paused to hear a response.

“On my way,” Nate Holcomb said.

“I’ll meet you there, too,” Eric said. “But we may have another problem.”

Maddie cursed under her breath. “What is it?”

“It appears a craft, maybe a small boat or kayak, was dragged onto the floe. I see a long groove. It’s deep and straight, and snow hasn’t filled it yet, so I can tell it’s not naturally occurring.”

When he paused, she hit talk. “You think someone else was here?”

“Can’t think of anything else that could’ve made this groove. Had to be a kayak or boat.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Get the sled and meet me here. The rest of you,” Maddie said, “head back to the station. Let ops at Polardyne know that we found him.”

It was dusk by the time Nate arrived, pulling a sled behind his snowmobile. Eric was trailing behind him.

The two men worked in silence to transfer the body to the sled and tie it down. Afterward, Maddie rode behind Eric back to the station. The rest of the crew were standing outside when they arrived.

“What the hell happened out there?” Emily Raskin asked, walking up beside the sled as Eric and Nate removed the bungee cords from around Mateo’s body. Her gaze lingered over Mateo’s face. Her mouth trembled.

“Don’t know yet,” Maddie said, trying not to let her grief keep her from doing what needed to be done. “But we should check him out before we put him in the garage.” Heating in the garage kept the vehicles just warm enough that the engines didn’t freeze, but the back of the building was cool enough to store a body throughout the winter. A grisly contingency that had been planned for.

“Em,” Maddie said a little sharply to pull the woman’s attention away from her dead boyfriend, “clear the table and put down a tarp.” She didn’t have to say for what.

Darkness fell quickly. The outside floodlight popped on. Nate and Eric carried Mateo inside, others preceding them into the kitchen area to flip on lights. When Mateo lay on the table, Em gave a little sob and waved a hand in front of her face, her distress plain to see.

“You don’t have to be here,” Maddie said. She glanced around the group. “In fact, I only need Nate here since he’s our team medic. I’ll need someone to get a fresh set of clothes for Mateo. Leave it outside the door. The rest of you, please wait in the common area.” She turned to Eric. “I need you to find the body bag in our emergency supplies in the garage.”

Eric’s jaw tightened, but he gave Mateo’s body a quick glance, then gave her a nod and turned away.

When the kitchen emptied, she turned to Nate. “We’ll need to cut away his clothing, but we’ll bag it to preserve it. We do this by the book.”

Nate gave her a nod; his expression was grim.

Working silently, they began removing his clothing—first his jacket, then his knit cap.

Nate felt around his skull. “I don’t feel any lumps. He didn’t hit his head.” He bent over his face and spread his thawing eyelids. “What the fuck?” He backed away, then waved her over. “Have a look.”

Maddie bent over Mateo and forced down bile as she spread one eyelid. There were red spots on the white part of his eye. She frowned and shot Nate a glance.

Together, they cut away his jacket and T-shirt to expose his neck.

“He was fucking strangled,” Nate ground out.

As she stared at the thick band across the front of his neck, which rose to just beneath his ears, she shook her head. “This is unbelievable,” she whispered.

“What do we do?”

She frowned. “I’ll need to talk to Polardyne.”

He snorted. “They’ll say contingencies already exist.”

“For natural, unexpected deaths, not murders,” she hissed, not wanting the others to be alarmed just yet. Not until she was ready. She was in charge. She needed a plan. “I’ll use the satphone. Perhaps they’ll be able to get a helicopter out here to pick up the crew.”

“They’ve got millions tied up in the research, some of it coming from foreign governments. This is our last winter on the island. Do you think they’ll give that up?”

“We aren’t safe. Either one of us is responsible for this—”

“No way. Don’t forget what we found.”

“A groove,” she said, her mouth twisting. “We were invaded? Who’s going to buy that?”

“I’d rather believe it wasn’t one of us. We’re friends,” he said, his dark brown eyes growing glassy with tears.

“Is it okay if I come in?” Eric said from beyond the doorway.

Maddie shared a charged glance with Nate. “Yeah, come in. We need that bag.”

When Eric stepped inside, his gaze went straight to Mateo, and his eyes widened. He strode straight for the table and stared down. “Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Maddie said. “Mateo was murdered.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Murdered?” Em cried from the doorway.

Maddie sighed. She’d hoped for a minute or two to regroup her thoughts. “Go back to the common area. We’ll be with you when we’re done in here.”

She glanced at Nate. “We need a camera. We’ll have to upload images.”

Nate nodded and left the room, herding Em away from the doorway.

An hour later, Maddie walked into the common area where her team of researchers was whispering among themselves.

“Is it true?” Hanna Weber asked before Maddie took her seat.

Nate kept silent as he took a seat on the well-worn sofa beside Maddie and rubbed a hand over his face.

Maddie faced the group. “Mateo was strangled to death,” she said quietly. “His only wound was a ligature mark around his neck. We assume that was the cause of his death.”

Eric raised a finger. “When Perry and I were searching the northern edge of the floe, we discovered a track mark, like the hull of a small boat or kayak. Something was pulled out of the water onto the floe.”

Everyone was silent. The idea that anyone else would be out here in one of the most remote locations on the planet was preposterous. But Maddie couldn’t help wishing it

were true. More unthinkable was the possibility that one of the six remaining members of her crew was a murderer.

“I contacted Polardyne,” she said. “They’re going to send a helicopter to retrieve Mateo’s body. They’ll have Canadian law enforcement officials here as well.”

“Are they evacuating us?” Em asked. “I mean, I’m certainly unsettled by all this, but our work here is unfinished. It would be such a waste. Mateo wouldn’t want our work to end.”

Maddie drew a deep breath. “They offered to take back anyone who wants to leave, but they will also be sending someone—a security expert of some sort, who will augment our team, at least until we find whoever is responsible.”

Everyone shared glances. Eric rubbed a hand over his face and sat back with his arms stretched across the back of the sofa. “I’m staying. The core samples and the temperature readings from the ocean below are too important. This is bigger than us.”

Nate leaned over, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped. “The data from my deep-sea drags have already noted a definite surge in plankton population. Until someone gets research vessels that can withstand the ice out here to provide a platform for research, we’re all there is. I’m staying.”

All around the room, one by one, the members of her crew declined Polardyne’s offer to remove them from their floating island, but then everyone’s attention went to Em.

Tears leaked down her face. “I can’t. You know Mateo and I...” She swallowed hard. “This was our last winter in the north. We were heading back to the University of Colorado to unpack everything we’ve learned. We had research positions lined up; we were joining the faculty as adjunct instructors...” She shook her head. “I can’t stay.”

Maddie was saddened, but she understood. “I’ll let Polardyne know.” She glanced around at those scientists who would stay behind. “It’s going to be a few days before the helicopter arrives. In the meantime, we continue our work, but no one goes out alone. You don’t leave without letting me know exactly where you’re heading and for what reason. And we go armed. Do you understand?”

Eric cleared his throat. “Mateo’s research...?”

Part of Mateo’s research had been highly classified. She didn’t have a clue what he’d been doing, and as far as she knew, no one else here did either. Maddie glanced at Em.

She shrugged. “His work was need to know. He didn’t discuss it with me. All I know is it was funded by the Pentagon.”

“I have his office key,” Maddie said. “I took it from his pocket. Tomorrow, Eric, I’ll need your help downloading his data and removing his hard drive from his computer. Both of those are going back to HQ in Nunavut.”

She stood. “It’s getting late, but you were all on the ice today. You need to eat.”

There were groans.

“I don’t know if I can,” Em said.

“You’ll try,” Maddie said, her tone firm. “We’re going to look after each other. If anyone’s struggling, let someone know. The kitchen has been thoroughly sanitized, and there’s a huge pot of stew in the fridge. Even if you think you can’t eat, you must. We can’t have anyone getting sick out here.”

Nate pushed up. “We can eat out here in the common area. I’ll heat it up and let you

know when it's ready."

Maddie gave him a grateful smile. She figured it would be a while before anyone could contemplate sitting at the kitchen table without the image of Mateo's lifeless body haunting them.

CHAPTER2

"Gunn, you're from Minnesota, right?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

Gunnar Neilson hadn't been paying close attention to the meeting Stone Jacobs had called that morning, but the question pulled him back from the dark place his mind had gone. He relaxed his hand, which was squeezing a stress ball as part of his therapy. "Yeah. Northern Minnesota. Why?"

The corners of Stone's mouth curved slightly, and his eyes narrowed. "I had a call from Hank Patterson. He has a job and is looking for the right guy..."

Since Stone was staring intently at him, he wondered what made Stone think he was the right guy. But he played it cool. "Yeah, I was raised in Minnesota, but why does Hank think that guy is me?"

"Well, we've all had cold weather training of some sort, but this... This will be challenging—even for you."

Intrigued, Gunn studied Stone. He wasn't sure he liked that hint of a smile on his new boss's face. Then he glanced around the large table in their headquarters where everyone who wasn't already on some mission elsewhere had gathered. By their curious looks, they were equally intrigued.

Booker Hayes, one of Yellowstone office's new flight team pilots, part of the newly formed Team Eagle, raised a single eyebrow as he stared back at him. "I don't have a clue what this is about." He turned to Stone. "I'm assuming you won't need one of our planes since you haven't checked with me about availability..."

Stone shook his head.

Hunter “Wolf” Black, who had spent time with Gunn at the burn center at USAISR in San Antonio, Texas, after the horrific accident that had ended military careers of two helicopters full of men heading into battle, shrugged as well. “Now, I’m beginning to feel a little relieved I’m not on the roster for this mission. They need cold weather creds?”

Stone tapped the table. “Hank has a friend at the Pentagon who asked if we had someone we could send up north—to a research facility in the Arctic. I can’t tell you anything more about why the Pentagon is interested, but I can tell you where you’ll be heading—if you decide to take this job.” He turned to Kyla, who was sitting in front of a monitor in a row of computer monitors. “Sweetheart, would you bring up the map?”

She smiled, clicked a couple of keys, and a map of the Arctic Ocean appeared on the large screen mounted on one wall.

She used her mouse to move the cursor arrow. “I have the coordinates,” she murmured. The cursor moved to a point north of Canada, in the middle of the sea, and stopped. “That’s where this facility is right now—or at least, where it was last night.”

The facility’s location moved? Gunn sat forward. “I’m heading to a boat?”

Kyla glanced over her shoulder, and a wide grin stole over her face. “Not a boat, Gunn.”

Stone chuckled, likely because Gunn hadn’t done a good job hiding his confusion. “The facility is located on a floating ice floe.”

“The fuck you say,” Wyatt Bixby said, slapping Gunn’s chest with the back of his hand. “You’re heading to an iceberg?”

“They call it a floating island,” Stone said.

“What’s the mission?”

“You keep everyone alive.”

Gunn sat back in his chair, still staring at that cursor pointing at the blue sea. “From what? Polar bears?”

There were chuckles, but those quickly died down.

Gunn blew out a breath that filled his cheeks. “I’m assuming it’s not polar bears. They could hire a hunter to take care of any predation.”

Stone frowned. “Hank mentioned there had been a death on the floe. A murder. There’s a very small group of scientists stationed on the floe, mostly collecting data on climate change and weather patterns.”

“And the Pentagon cares...why?” Gunn asked.

“That I can’t tell you, but once you get to the main research center in Cambridge Bay, Canada, you’ll be briefed by a military guy embedded with the operations center at Polardyne Incorporated. They’re the ones coordinating the funding for the research team, which is providing data to think tanks around the world.”

“And the Pentagon is just one of the agencies providing that funding?” Gunn asked.

“That’s my guess.”

“How long will I be there? I can’t imagine getting off an ice floe in the dead of winter would be easy.”

Stone shook his head. “I can’t tell you that either. All I know is that until they determine who’s responsible for their scientist’s death, they need a guy to oversee security to keep the remaining six personnel safe.”

To Gunn, it sounded like a boondoggle. One complicated by the extreme weather but not something that required the particular skills of a highly trained warrior. “You don’t think this is overkill? Sending a SEAL?”

“Apparently, the Pentagon was considering sending a small team of their own but decided against it because they didn’t want too much attention paid to the deployment and didn’t think they’d need more than one operative.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

Bubba Yates, one of Stone's original hires, cussed softly. "Damn, sounds like a boondoggle to me, man. I don't envy you. You're gonna freeze your balls off."

Chuckles sounded again.

Stone lifted his chin. "What do you say? Are you ready for your first solo mission?"

Gunn was more than ready. He'd been feeling a little cooped up and underutilized. So what if this would be a simple security detail? The idea of heading to an ice floe in the middle of one of the most unforgiving environments on the planet sounded like the kind of challenge that might get him out of his head. He'd spent too many months since the carrier accident feeling sorry for himself and everything he'd lost. He'd loved being on the teams. The adjustment to civilian life was killing him inside.

"I'm in," he said. "When do I leave?"

Stone grinned. "Now. Go change into the warmest clothes you have. I'll drop you at the airport. Hank already has his jet sitting on the tarmac."

Gunn frowned. He didn't have the right gear for an Arctic deployment. "I need to do a bit of shopping—"

Stone waved a hand. "I had your stats. His wife, Sadie, already has everything you'll need, clothing-wise, waiting in a duffel for you on the plane. Hank has your equipment ready, too."

"He was that sure I'd say yes?"

Stone shrugged. “Hank knows who he hires. Even though we’re growing, he has his finger on the pulse. Now, go get changed.”

Gunn pushed up and looked around the table at his Team Eagle buddies and then at his new Brotherhood teammates. “Guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

Late that same afternoon, Gunn stared out the window of the helicopter. He was glad they were almost there. He’d been white-knuckled throughout the flight, memories of the carrier disaster playing in his mind.

Below, there were swaths of ice and blue ocean. As they descended, patches of ice separated by blue water became visible. One larger than the rest was where they were heading. When he’d been briefed at Polardyne, he’d learned that the “floating island” was only approximately five square miles. As they got closer, he noted that this particular floe was unremarkable, other than its size compared to the floes floating nearby and a long scar-like ridge on the east side of this particular hunk of ice. The rest of the floe looked flat. A grouping of buildings of modular construction was slightly south and west of the center on the floe. And yes, despite that scant evidence of civilization, his new duty assignment appeared to be the most inhospitable place he’d ever been. Not that he found that unappealing.

As they set down, stirring up snow that obscured the view of the buildings, he made out figures approaching the helicopter. One of the crew members opened the door, and they stepped out onto the ice. “Watch your footing,” the man warned. “The snow on top is only so deep. What’s under it is slick from frequent thawing and refreezing.”

Warning taken, Gunn shouldered his two large duffel bags and stepped off behind the Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, who was there to investigate the death, the Polardyne executive who’d accompanied them, and a man in non-descript cold-weather clothing, who’d identified himself to Gunn as Lieutenant Commander

Anthony Navarro of the U.S. Navy. Two members of the helicopter crew exited behind them.

As the rotary wings slowed, the snow settled. Two figures, whose sex was impossible to tell from a distance due to the amount of snow gear they wore, stepped toward them.

The first figure paused in front of the Polardyne executive and the RCMP officer. They spoke quietly for a moment, and then the Mountie turned to the two crewmembers and spoke briefly with them. They left the larger group and followed the second person who'd come to meet them to what looked like a warehouse building. The remaining member of the research facility's staff indicated they should follow and turned to lead the group to the largest of the buildings.

Once inside, everyone began removing clothing in an anteroom. As soon as the person who'd led them inside removed their outer jacket, Gunn realized she was female and likely Madeline Russo, the project manager in charge of the site. He quickly shrugged off his outer jacket and toed off his boots. Walking in his thick thermal socks, he followed the group from the small outer room to a larger area filled with sofas, armchairs, and a large television. The woman settled onto a couch beside two of her team members. Gunn and Lieutenant Commander Navarro settled into armchairs while the RCMP officer and the Polardyne executive shared a small sofa. Gunn placed his two bags on the floor beside his feet.

The Polardyne executive, Clive Patton, cleared his throat. "We were alarmed to hear about Mr. Schild's death."

The black man sitting beside Ms. Russo snorted.

Ms. Russo put her hand on his arm. "We're all disturbed." She turned her attention to the Mountie. "We preserved the clothing we removed. It's stored beside his body."

The officer nodded. “I’m presently having his body moved to the helicopter. I’ll need to interview everyone on site individually.”

She nodded. “I’m making my room available to you while you’re here. We don’t have a private office here. I’ve placed two chairs inside. You’ll have privacy.”

Gunn noted that even without makeup and her dark hair tied back with a rubber band, Madeline Russo was a very attractive woman.

“You know we think someone else was on the ice floe, right?” the blond man sitting to her other side said.

The officer gave a curt nod and pulled a notepad and pen from a buttoned pocket on his cold-weather pants. “I heard that a groove was found on the edge of the ice.” He raised his eyebrows. “Did anyone think to take a picture of it?”

The blond man blinked and then shook his head.

“And I’ll assume it’s likely filled with snow now...”

“Yes, but I wasn’t the only one to see it,” the blond said. He tilted his chin toward a man with long hair and a scruffy beard. “Perry saw it, too.”

“Yeah,” Perry said, “it looked like the grooves our kayaks make when we pull them onto the ice. Long and narrow.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Who all has handled the clothing you removed from Mr. Schild?”

Ms. Russo raised her hand, as did the black man sitting beside her.

“And you are Ms. Russo?” the officer asked.

She nodded.

His gaze went to the black man.

“Nate Holcomb,” he murmured.

“I’ll need everyone to remain inside this building until I’m finished,” the officer said.

“I’ll try to do this quickly because we’ll leave as soon as I finish. If someone will show me where I can set up...?”

Ms. Russo turned to the blond man, who swiftly pushed up from the couch and led the officer away.

Everyone seemed to let out a sigh.

Ms. Russo drew a deep breath and leaned back against her seat. Her gaze flickered over Gunn and the two bags lying on the floor beside him, then rose to meet his.

Her hazel eyes locked with his for a moment. “You must be our security guy.”

Gunn nodded. “I am.”

“Do you have any experience living in extreme cold?”

“I’m from northern Minnesota, ma’am. Raised on a lake. I know cold.”

“That’s a relief.” She twirled a finger around to indicate the people in the room. “We all went through some things learning to adapt, but we’ve all had at least one winter on the island.”

“I’m told this is the last one you’ll spend here.”

She nodded. “Yeah, the ice has been getting more unstable every summer. We’ve been here seven years—not me, personally—but Polardyne.”

“I’m Gunnar Neilson,” he said. “But call me Gunn.”

Her mouth twitched. “Seriously?”

Gunn smiled. “As a heart attack.”

“Well, welcome. When the officer is done, we’ll talk.”

He nodded, wondering if he’d still be needed when the officer was finished with his interviews. If he determined who was responsible and apprehended them, Gunn’s job would be done. However, odds were that one of the scientists in this building was the killer.

“You’ll be needed,” she said, apparently reading his mind. “I don’t believe my people were involved.”

“You believe someone accessed the island and killed your guy?”

“What reason would anyone here have for killing Mateo? We’re all friends. We’ve all worked together at one time or another. They’re all researchers; they breathe science.”

“They. Not you?”

She huffed a breath. “I’m the babysitter.”

“Stop,” Nate said. “She’s integral to the team. She keeps everything running. She’s our site project manager. Without her, we’d freeze or starve to death. She speaks ‘corporate,’” he said, using air quotes.

The Polardyne rep nodded. “She’s our point of contact. She keeps them to a schedule, makes sure the reports come into HQ, orders resupplies... She even assists when these guys need another set of eyes or hands.”

“Like I said, the babysitter,” she said, grinning.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

She had a slight gap between her two front teeth, which made her even prettier. Earthier, somehow. She said she'd worked a few winters here, and now he wondered how old she was and what she'd done before this gig that had qualified her for such a rare opportunity.

"Nate," she said, turning her head, "why don't you show Gunn where he'll be staying." Turning back to him, she said, "Hanna made stew for tonight. We'll eat after we do a perimeter check to make sure all the gear is stored and the heater's working in the garage. We eat well, even if we do have to get creative with our limited variety of foodstuffs."

There were two other females in the room. A redhead lifted a finger. "I'm Hanna Weber." She tilted her head toward the other, a slim blonde, and put her arm around her shoulders. "Em is catching a ride back to HQ."

Em laid her head on Hanna's shoulder. "I'll miss you guys."

"We'll miss you, too," Hanna said.

Clive from Polardyne pulled back his sleeve to check his watch. "Maddie, we have some things to discuss before I head back."

She stood. "We can use my Nate's quarters to talk." Her gaze swept her team members. "We'll likely be doing our chores after dark. The officer said not to leave the building, but we have to safeguard our equipment. Maybe once he's finished with some of you, we can rotate out to check on the sites. When you do go, remember, you go out in groups of two, and—"

“Go armed,” Nate finished. He looked at Gunn and tilted his head toward the corridor. “We were always supposed to—polar bears, you know. We have rifles in the mudroom locker.”

Gunn nodded and followed Nate out of the room. “Good to know. Do you have many problems with polar bears?”

“I ran over one, went right over his back but didn’t know it. I thought the ice was breaking up beneath me, but it was just the damn bear who didn’t take it very well. They’re fast, but they only run in spurts, so I throttled down and got the hell out of there.” He chuckled as he strode down the hallway.

Gunn trailed after him but looked back to see Lieutenant Commander Navarro signal to Ms. Russo to follow him. Now, that was a conversation he likely needed to hear. He hurried after Nate, determined to drop his gear and rejoin the pair. He had yet to hear the whole story of what business the U.S. government had been conducting on this floating island.

CHAPTER3

Maddie’s gaze followed the retreating back of Gunnar Neilson as Nate led him to his quarters. Something about him was unsettling. Perhaps it was the fact she hadn’t been around a guy built like him in a while, which wasn’t something she ought to be noticing, but his shoulders were broad and his arms thickly muscled—both appealing and...again, unsettling.

She turned back to Commander Navarro, whom she’d met during her team's orientation before departing Cambridge Bay for their current deployment. “Don’t you think we should wait for Gunn to join us so you don’t have to repeat yourself? Shouldn’t he know what this is all about, too?”

“We’ve given you a provisional clearance so I can brief you, and yes, he should probably hear this, too. The Navy approved bringing him in the loop. He’s prior service—a former SEAL—so as trustworthy as they come.”

Her eyebrows rose. “We need a SEAL?”

His dark eyes narrowed. “While the RCMP is likely leaning toward one of your team being the murderer, the Pentagon won’t rule out that Mateo was killed because of what he was collecting for us. Your site might have been transgressed.”

She drew a deep breath. While she’d hoped a friend wasn’t responsible, the idea of someone invading their floating island undetected to commit murder seemed farfetched.

Footsteps sounded from the hallway, and she turned to watch Gunn as he approached, his gaze narrowing on the commander as he drew nearer. “Am I going to find out what this is all about?” he asked quietly.

The commander turned to Maddie. “Let’s head to Mateo’s office. You’ve been keeping it locked, right?”

“Of course. I have the only key; I retrieved it from Mateo’s pocket.”

She led the way to the office corridor, stopped at the third door to unlock it, and held open the door for the two men to file inside.

After she closed the door, the commander stared at the computer. “You removed the hard drive?”

“Yes, after dumping the data onto a flash drive.”

“I’ll take the flash, but I’ll need to reinstall the hard drive.”

Maddie frowned. “Who do you think is going to collect your data now that Mateo is gone?”

“You will. And you’ll maintain the equipment he has on the ice. The two of you will,” he said, including Gunn in his sweeping gaze. “The cone is already in the water. You don’t have to perform analysis on the data. Just stick the SD card in the slot on the box on his drill tripod, and the device will start copying the data. The light will change from red to green to let you know it’s done.”

She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s this all about?”

The commander blew out a deep breath. “Mateo,” he said, lowering his voice, “installed a Magnetic Anomaly Detection device under the floe.”

Her mouth tightened. “English, please.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“He was tracking submarines. Russian submarines,” Gunn said. “Am I right?”

The commander gave a curt nod. “None have been detected in this area, but he didn’t send a data file in a week—and he routinely uploaded every night. When I asked him about it, he said something about needing to replace the battery on the box, but that’s a quick fix. I was already planning a visit when your call came, telling us he’d been murdered.”

“I was unaware of this...detection device,” Maddie said. “Our guys have been all over his equipment that’s studying salinity and dissolved oxygen in seawater. Nate’s up for taking over those observations.” She turned to Gunn. “That work is important. Studying the changes that occur, the mix of ice to seawater will help us figure out what happens as we lose more of the ice cap. It’s complicated, but nothing Nate can’t add to his very full plate. I have folks already doing the work of two or three scientists since we had to trim our staff.”

Gunn nodded. “I don’t doubt that what they’re doing is important, but perhaps the stress of working two or three people’s jobs led to what had happened to Mateo, not some Russian conspiracy theory.”

Maddie turned back to the commander. “Is this magnetic detection device attached to the same cable as his other device?”

Commander Navarro nodded. “Same cable, and it uses the same computerized collection device on the tripod. It produces two separate files. One that you’ll be unable to open without the password.”

“But Mateo could open it.”

“He reviewed the data and knew how to interpret certain spikes. I won’t require that of you. It would take too long to train you anyway. Just collect the data from his platform and plug the card into the reader on this device,” he said, pointing at the computer, “and we’ll be back in business. And I don’t want Nate touching the device. You can retrieve both disks and give Nate the disk for the salinity study. You’ll upload the MAD data onto this computer to send it to me yourself.”

Maddie sighed. “Okay. I can do that. Do you think someone knew about him taking readings for you?”

“I don’t know how, but it’s possible.”

“If I continue the work, won’t I be placing myself, and possibly my team, in more danger?”

The commander’s mouth pursed. “It’s why we’ve hired Mr. Neilson here.” He opened the door. “If I could have a few minutes alone, I’ll reinstall the hard drive and run some diagnostics to make sure everything’s working optimally. Before I leave, I’ll show you how to upload the data you’ll be collecting.”

Maddie and Gunn stepped into the hallway, and the doorway closed.

Gunn’s brow rose, and he indicated with a sweep of his hand that they should return to the common area.

When they were several feet from Mateo’s office, she reached out to grab Gunn’s forearm. “I don’t like this,” she whispered. “But you’re used to this, aren’t you? Doing things without knowing everything you need to know...?”

Gunn nodded. "I knew what the objective on the ground was but not always how it fit in the big picture of the overall battlefield strategy. What we can assume here is that the military thinks Russians are running their submarines in this region. They want to track them because they could be outfitted with nuclear weapons, and we like knowing where they are in order to calculate how deep into our country they can reach with a nuke."

"I get that. But was Mateo's role so important someone had to kill him?"

He shrugged. "If his death has something to do with the data he collected for the commander...maybe."

When they returned to the common area, Eric was back and looking angry. He stood beside Em, whose eyebrows were lowered and cheeks were red.

"Was the interview rough?" Maddie asked Eric.

"Since we don't know the time of death for sure," Eric said, "I had to account for every hour since we all headed to bed after the movie last night."

Em shook her head. "We're more upset about the fact Mateo's room is being emptied out. I don't like the idea of strangers doing that."

Maddie sighed. "Are you packed?"

Em nodded. "The commander said I won't be released from HQ for a while if I don't want to stay here. I'm thinking I should stay. It's been hard since Mateo was found, but I have my work. I'd rather be busy than sitting around there with everyone thinking I killed my boyfriend."

"No one here thinks that," Maddie said.

Em arched an eyebrow. “Someone killed him. None of us are off the hook—except you,” she said, looking at Gunn.

Maddie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was starting to get a headache. “So, is Eric the only one the officer has interviewed?”

“Eric, Perry, and I are done. Nate’s in there now,” Em said.

She looked at Eric. “You and Perry still need to check your equipment and take your readings. We’re burning daylight, which is in short supply these days.”

Eric nodded. “It’ll be a relief to get out of here.” Maddie started to open her mouth, but Eric quickly added, “I’ll take a rifle.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

She gave him a smile. “Don’t take too long. I’m sure the RMCP guy will be pissed I’m sending you out, but it’s not like we can risk our equipment.”

“Yup, we’d be as useless as tits on a boar.”

Em groaned and rolled her eyes.

Eric popped a salute to Maddie, turned on his heel, and headed straight for Perry, who quickly rose from the couch and followed him out into the mudroom.

Maddie looked at Gunn. “As soon as the helicopter departs, I’ll give you a tour, although if they don’t leave before nightfall, we’ll have to wait until morning. We get around in the dark okay, but you should see it in the light the first time.”

“How long do we have daylight up here?”

“Right now, we have just over eight hours a day. As soon as the sun’s up, we hustle out to the platforms, which aren’t really platforms. We have tripods set up above deep holes we’ve drilled in the ice to get to the ocean below.”

“Why not drill closer to the edge? Wouldn’t the ice be thinner?”

“Yeah, but it’s also the least stable. You don’t want to be standing on an edge when it breaks off. You’d be stranded out in the middle of the ocean.”

“That happen to anyone here?”

She arched an eyebrow. “No—because we drill closer to the center. Part of what Hanna does is monitor the condition of the ice, both on top of the floe and beneath it.”

Nate stepped into the common area and headed to Hanna. “You’re next,” he said loud enough for everyone to hear, then leaned closer to Hanna.

Hanna nodded and headed down the hallway.

“Wonder what that was about?” Gunn said.

“They’re sleeping together,” Maddie said. “They think the rest of us don’t know.”

“So, he’s got an alibi,” Gunn said.

“Or maybe he needs one?” Maddie shook her head. “Now, I’m the one dreaming up conspiracies.”

“You’re on edge. You probably haven’t rested much since it happened.”

Maddie met his pale blue gaze. “I am tired. Two days ago, I thought we’d be packing up to leave. No one should want to be this isolated and face this kind of threat. We’re on our own.”

“I’ll make it a goal to see that you rest easier,” Gunn said, his lips curving into a soft smile.

Her gaze went to the patch of mottled skin on his right cheek. Something she hadn’t noticed before. When she flicked back to his gaze, his expression was more remote. Had she somehow offended him by noticing the scar?

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked. “I should’ve offered you something.”

“I’d like a cup. Yeah.”

She turned toward the kitchen, and he walked beside her. “We have coed latrines and showers. Two separate rooms. Two stalls in each. Not very luxurious. They’re at the end of the corridor where our quarters are. If you need to use the facilities...” She felt her cheeks warm when she could discuss latrines and showers with anyone else in the facility without a hint of embarrassment. She wasn’t sure she liked the fact she was intensely aware of his masculinity, to the point that he flustered her.

He cleared his throat, drawing her attention to his face. “I’m fine for now. Though I would like coffee.”

There was a hint of laughter in his eyes, and she felt her mouth curve as she turned toward the kitchen.

When she reached the kitchen, she immediately wondered how old the coffee was in the large urn they used to brew their coffee. They usually had to make coffee twice a day since it was the beverage of choice for everyone except Em, who preferred tea.

“I can’t swear how good the coffee will be,” she said, grimacing. “If you don’t get a cup first thing in the morning, you’re likely drinking sludge.”

“I’ve had my share of sludge.”

“Cups are in the cabinet,” she said, pointing toward the cabinet to the left of the sink.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

He reached and pulled down a cup, then handed her one and took another for himself. “You get your cup first,” he said. “If you make a face when you drink it, I’ll know to steer clear.”

She grinned, set her cup below the nozzle, and flipped the lever. “Smell’s good. That’s always a good sign.” When she took a sip, she exaggerated a wince. “It’s great,” she croaked.

He chuckled, poured himself a cup, and raised it to sip. “Not bad sludge.”

They made their way back to the common area and sat on a sofa. She angled her body toward his so she didn’t have to crane her neck to speak to him. “I noticed the scars on your face and hand,” she said, indicating his right hand with her chin. “Those look pretty recent.”

He flexed the hand and let it rest on his thigh. “It was a helicopter accident when we were at sea. Two helicopters. We lost team members. I guess I was lucky. I was burned by fuel in the explosion. I’ve got burns on my hand, all the way up to my shoulder, and this bit on my face,” he said, pointing at his cheek. “The scarring on my hand was enough to get me mustered out on a medical discharge. I’ve lost strength in the hand, and I have to exercise it to keep the scarring from tightening up and rendering my fingers useless. But like I said, I was one of the lucky ones.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. When you sign up to be a SEAL, you know you’ll face danger. I just didn’t figure I’d go out that way.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. I guess we need you.”

One side of his mouth quirked up. “I’ll try not to get in the way of your work.”

“Maddie, you’re the last one,” Hanna called from the end of the hallway.

“Guess I better go talk to the officer. The sooner they leave, the sooner my folks can get back to work.” Yeah, she needed to keep busy—especially now that Gunn was here. She could already see that he was going to be a big distraction—for her, anyway.

CHAPTER4

While Maddie was gone, Gunn roamed throughout the building, pulling open unlocked doors and tugging on windows. There were no locks on the windows or most of the doors, which he guessed made sense because they’d never been needed before. However, now, it meant there was no way to secure them without replacing them, which wasn’t going to happen.

When he returned to the common area, Eric strode toward him. “She’s with the military dude now. What’s with that anyway?”

Gunn shrugged. That information was need to know, and Eric didn’t need to know. “Can’t tell you that.”

Eric’s eyes narrowed as he studied Gunn’s face. “You military, too?”

“No. Not now, anyway. I was in the Navy.”

Eric’s gaze swept over Gunn, down and up. “You see action?”

Gunn nearly laughed. He got that question from civilians quite a lot, as if they wanted him to confide all the gory details. “Some,” he said, his tone indicating that was all he would say about it.

Eric nodded. “I can see that.” He held up a hand and gave him a thumbs up. “Before a couple of days ago, I wouldn’t have imagined being happy to have someone with those skills here.”

When he walked away, Gunn shook his head. He could already tell it was going to be an interesting assignment.

Nate stuck his head around the corner of the kitchen door. “Stew’s hot if anyone wants to get something to eat.”

Gunn hadn’t thought of food in hours, but the mere mention had his belly rumbling. He headed into the kitchen. The helicopter pilot and crew members were already seated at the table. Some of the scientists were standing around, holding their bowls in their hands but strangely not even looking at the table.

He headed to the stove, picked up one of the bowls beside the burbling pot, filled it, then grabbed a spoon from a drawer and sat at the table.

Eric took an empty chair across from him but grimaced slightly as he set his bowl gently on the surface.

Gunn frowned across at him.

Eric wrinkled his nose. “Last time we used this table, it wasn’t food laid out on its surface.”

That explained a lot.

Eric shrugged. “It’s just a damn table. Besides, I didn’t want you to eat alone.”

The pilot looked up and grunted.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“No insult intended, man,” Eric said.

“Stew’s good,” one of the crewmen said.

“Bread’s in the oven,” Eric added. “Nate made it. With everything going on today, he left it to rise in the fridge and forgot to get it out in time. It’ll be ready in about twenty minutes.”

When he went silent, Gunn felt as though he ought to continue the conversation. Odd, really, since he wasn’t one for small talk. “Ms. Russo was telling me about some of the things you all study out here.”

Eric nodded. “Maddie...” he said, “everyone calls her Maddie. None of us stands on ceremony here. There’d be too many ‘doctors’ to keep track of. As to what I work on... Mostly, I take temperature readings of the ocean at different depths. Doesn’t sound so interesting, but it’s critical to understanding what’s happening with global warming.”

Nate shuffled from the stove, sighed, and sat beside Eric. “Fuck it,” he said under his breath as he placed his bowl on the table. “It’s just a table.”

Eric cleared his throat. “I was just telling him what my focus is on—workwise.”

Nate’s gloomy expression brightened. “I study plankton—phytoplankton and zooplankton. You know, the foundation of life in the ocean, forests under the sea...”

When Gunn raised his eyebrows, he continued. “Phytoplankton are single-celled

organisms, algae really, that produce most of the oxygen in our atmosphere. Zooplankton are larger and feed on phytoplankton. Then zooplankton, in turn, are consumed by other ocean dwellers, from very small fish to whales. Phytoplankton, the tiny plankton, are found in sea and freshwater, but here in the Arctic, there's been a huge increase in the plankton population due to the loss of ice—more sunlight getting through and all.”

“More oxygen and food for the fish is good, right?” Gunn said, doing his best to follow the long-winded explanation.

Nate shrugged. “Depending on who you're talking to—and where. You have to weigh that benefit against the overall rise in ocean temperature. Did you know the Gulf of Mexico was so hot fish were starved for oxygen and washed up on shore by the thousands?”

“Stop with the geek talk,” Eric said, then turned back to Gunn. “Nate's just happy he has someone new to wax on about his plankton. We've all heard it before.”

Nate shook his head. “You're just jealous because plankton is sexier than ocean temperatures.”

Eric chuckled, then glanced across at Gunn, who was still frowning, thinking about asphyxiated fish.

“Sorry about that,” Eric said. “We don't get out much.”

That comment had Gunn grinning. He turned his attention to the stew that wasn't half bad and certainly filling.

At last, Ms. Russo, Clive, the RCMP officer, and the commander trailed into the kitchen.

“As soon as we’re done eating, we have to take off,” the commander said. “It’s nearly dusk.”

The pilot stood. “I’m done. I’ll go ahead and do my pre-flight checks.” He lifted his chin to his crew, and they stood and headed to the sink with their empty bowls.

Everyone else sat at the table with fresh bowls of savory stew. Ms. Russo stared at the table for a long moment but then sat, her face tightening before she lifted it and gave Gunn a small smile.

She was seated at Nate’s side, across the table diagonally from Gunn. “I think a tour of the outer buildings and the platforms will have to wait until tomorrow. Night falls quickly here.”

“I took a tour through this building. There aren’t locks on the windows and most of the doors.”

She grimaced. “Never needed them before.”

The RCMP officer glanced up but didn’t have to say anything. They all knew the killer might be sitting right in the room.

After the helicopter left, the atmosphere inside the facility lightened. The seven current residents split into two groups. Three played poker for toothpicks at the kitchen table. The other four occupied the common area.

Em and Eric were watching a movie, some sci-fi flick with seven-legged aliens who squirted ink like octopuses to communicate during their first contact with humans.

Maddie sat on a sofa, pretending to read a book she’d brought with her, a romance of all things, while she pretended not to watch their newest resident as he cleaned a

handgun at one of the working tables on the far side of the room.

Gunnar Neilson wasn't anything like the keen-witted, clever spy in her book. Not that he didn't seem intelligent, but he wasn't one to use dialogue to disarm. When Gunn spoke, the words mattered. She rather liked that, but it was frustrating trying to figure out what she could talk to him about. And she wanted to get to know him because who knew how long he'd be here, protecting them.

Again, she thought about the hero in her book, comparing him to Gunn. Gunn wasn't built lean, so he'd look ridiculous in a frock coat. No, Gunn looked good as he was dressed now, in sweatpants and a T-shirt that hugged his chest and arms. Every movement produced a ripple across his muscles. It was utterly fascinating to watch.

His head rose, and he speared her with a glance. "Does this bother you?" he asked, raising the barrel of his disassembled weapon.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“No. Of course not. We clean our weapons, too. Polar bears...” she said, trailing off because she felt foolish being caught staring at him.

He nodded and ran a patch through the barrel. “There something you want to talk to me about?” he asked, not looking her way.

Eric glanced over, one eyebrow raised. Then, a smirk curved his mouth. She glared at him and stood, stuffing her book under the seat cushion. They’d spent three winters together. He knew her well and likely recognized her interest in the newcomer.

She strode over to Gunn’s table and pulled over a chair to sit beside him. “Are you unpacked?”

He nodded. “Didn’t take five minutes.”

“Both bags?”

“My clothing bag. I have equipment in the other, but I’ll wait to pull everything out when folks aren’t underfoot.”

“What kind of equipment did you bring? More of this?” she asked, nodding toward his weapon, which he was busy applying oil to.

“I brought some surveillance equipment,” he said quietly.

“Cameras?”

“And motion detectors.”

“Will you need a computer to connect them?”

“They’re wireless. I can use my phone or my tablet.”

She nodded. “Guess it’s a good thing we have site comms and a satellite uplink then.”

“Yeah. Good thing.” He wasn’t looking at her, but she could see his smile.

She let out a deep breath. “Talking with you is work.”

He chuckled and in a blur of movement completed reassembling his weapon in seconds, setting it on the table and then turning his chair to face her. “What do you want to talk about, Ms. Russo.”

“It’s Maddie.”

“Maddie,” he repeated, his gaze sweeping over her face. “How did you get this job? You a scientist, too?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m a project manager. I know how to facilitate.” She shrugged. “I’ve worked with Doctors Without Borders, assembling teams for special initiatives. I meet people in strange places. Get job offers out of the air—in Africa, South America—wherever there’s a disaster. Polardyne was looking for someone who could handle a challenging environment, and my name somehow made it to the HR department there. I got an offer when I was working in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria... There’s still lots of work to be done on the island, but I was kind of tired of the heat.”

His smile stretched. “And you thought the Arctic was a great change of pace.”

She shrugged. "I didn't figure I'd still be here three years later."

"What do you do when you pack it up in the spring?"

"Last summer, I headed to Tibet. I tried some climbing. It's not really my thing, though. I didn't make any high peaks, but I enjoyed the country."

"No family pulling you home?"

"No family," she said, shaking her head. "My parents were killed in a house fire ten years back. So, no family and no home to go back to."

"I'm sorry."

"You? Do you not have family waiting for you at home?"

He shook his head. "Foster kid. I have no clue where my mom is. She was an addict. When I joined the Navy, I left Minnesota and never looked back."

"Well, aren't we a sad pair?" she said, easing back in her seat.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“And we ended up on a floating island in the middle of freaking nowhere.”

Her mouth slid into an easy grin. “You can say the F-bomb here. No one will be offended. Nate’s quite fluent in cusswords. When he gets going, it becomes an art form.”

“Thank fuck.”

She liked his smile. The deep grooves beside his mouth were there from years in the sun, as were the wrinkles beside his pale eyes. His teeth were lovely, too. Bright white... Why was she admiring the man’s teeth?

She widened her eyes and pushed up from her seat. “I think I’m heading to bed. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“You showing me around?”

She’d planned to let him shadow Eric and Perry, but she changed her mind. “Yeah. We have to hit Mateo’s platform anyway. I’ll be sure you make it around to every place we’re doing data collection. You’ll get a better feel for what we do. And you’ll get to see the ocean. Makes you feel really small and insignificant when you stand on the ridge and gaze out. We’re surrounded by smaller ice floes, and we get polar bears. You might see bears or seals on the edge of the ice. We all have to keep an eye out for them and be sure we don’t leave anything behind, like sandwich wrappers or food scraps, to attract them.”

“Sounds fun,” he said. “It’s been a long day for me, too. I think I’ll turn in as well. I

was in Yellowstone this morning. Feels like forever ago.”

“Yellowstone? That where your agency is based?”

“One of the groups is there. We have offices in Eagle Pass, Montana, Fool’s Gold, Colorado, and West Yellowstone. I just signed on to work there. You’re my first assignment.”

“Well, hopefully, it won’t be too memorable,” she murmured. “I’m hoping whoever killed Mateo is long gone, although thenotknowing makes me uneasy.”

“If we don’t figure out who it was, I could be here all winter.”

Her gaze fell away as she considered that. Then she looked back at him. His gaze was locked on her. “Would it be so bad? Being stuck on an ice floe all winter?”

Gunn cleared his throat. “The thought is...intriguing.”

Maddie headed over to Em and Eric to let them know she was heading to bed. Then she went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water.

Perry yawned and laid down his cards. “It’s been a long damn day,” he said. “I’m out.” He pushed three toothpicks toward the center of the table.

Nate sat in front of a healthy stack of toothpicks. “Guess we should all hit the sack. Maddie, who’s got breakfast in the morning?”

She moved to the fridge. “It’s Saturday tomorrow.”

Perry groaned. “My turn. How do you want your powdered eggs? Scrambled or omelets?”

“You making biscuits?” Nate asked.

“You going to lend me a hand? You know I’m not good at multitasking.”

Nate chuckled. “Get me out of bed, and I’ll help you.”

Maddie glanced around the table. Hell, she really liked these guys. She hoped like hell one of them wasn’t a killer.

CHAPTER 5

Gunn woke at 6:45—late for him, but he’d stared at the dark ceiling of his room until after midnight the previous night.

This research site had a strange vibe. Maybe it was the atmospherics—the constant wind, the clear, wide horizon, the muffled sound of the generator that powered the site, and the cutting cold—that were different and unsettling. Likely, it was the isolation and forced proximity with a group of people who were completely alien to him. Obviously highly intelligent, they were also kind of stunted, almost childlike in their excitement about their work. They seemed to celebrate their geekiness. Except for Maddie. She was down-to-earth, a stabilizing presence inside the facility.

And pretty in an understated way. She wore her dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and no makeup to enhance her pale skin. Her cheeks were perpetually pink like they were slightly, constantly wind-chapped. Her hazel eyes were framed with thick, dark lashes, and her eyebrows were wonderfully expressive of her thoughts, arching when she was amused, pulling together when she was carefully studying something, like his scarred face and hand.

Gunn had been cautious the first time her gaze had stilled on his cheek, but she hadn’t seemed put off by his scar. And her face had only reflected curiosity when she’d

noted the back of his hand with its rippled red scar.

Gunn liked her and trusted her instinctively, while he held reservations about the rest of her crew—although, he had to tell himself that any one of the other six inhabitants could be a killer. It was far more likely that one was, given where they were. The thought of an enemy intent on hiding the presence of a submarine seemed much less likely. But what would be the motive for killing Mateo Schild?

He rubbed a hand over his face and flipped back his bedsheet and blanket to sit on the side of his bed, which was nearly as narrow as a cot.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

In his mind, he went through possible scenarios. Was it personal? Had Mateo run crosswise with another of his team? The only motive Gunn could imagine that would drive a person to kill would be jealousy. Had it been a lover's quarrel? Or had someone been jealous of Mateo's interest in someone here?

Or it could've been related to his work. He'd been running a secret project for the military. Was it possible someone else was working with the Russians to prevent Mateo from sending his data to Navarro because there was a sub in the area?

Gunn wasn't here to investigate. He was here to prevent another attack. Still, he would keep his eyes open. The best way to keep everyone safe would be to identify the threat.

He stood and reached to turn on the lamp on the small bedside table.

Lord, he needed to get out of this room. Prison cells were more spacious, and his room had no window. He stood and went to the small cupboard where he'd stored his clothing. He dressed in fresh thermal leggings and a long-sleeved top, then pulled on a fleece shirt and pants over that because Maddie had promised him a tour of the site, and he wanted to be ready. Lastly, he donned thick thermal socks before heading out the door.

The scent of coffee led him down the hallway to the kitchen. Perry and Nate were busy preparing breakfast while Maddie sat at the table, drinking coffee and working on a tablet.

"Good morning," he called out as he entered the room.

“Mornin’,” Nate said, waving a large spoon. “I’ve got the first batch of biscuits in the oven. Should be done in a minute.”

“You’re an early bird,” Perry said with a yawn as he whisked eggs in a metal bowl.

“Grab some coffee,” Maddie said, pointing her stylus toward the pot. “It’s fresh. Not sludge-like at all.”

He retrieved a cup from the cabinet and poured fresh coffee. Casting a glance outside at the darkness, he noted a faint gold rim on the far horizon.

“You won’t see the sun peek out for a while,” Maddie said, following his gaze. “Not that we’re going to wait until we have full sun to head out. We have headlights on the snowmobiles.”

He sat opposite her. “I’ll want to go over this camp and where you found Mateo in full daylight,” he said quietly.

“You figure to search for something we didn’t find? We were pretty thorough. I showed the RCMP guy where we found him, but he didn’t have time to do more than interrogate us and have his belongings—everything but his computer—carted back to Cambridge Bay.”

“I need to familiarize myself with the site, and while I do that, I’ll keep an eye out. Just in case something was missed.”

She gave a little nod and turned off her tablet. “I was just finishing writing yesterday’s daily report to send to operations at Polardyne. All the excitement put us all behind schedule.” She picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. “I know you have to have questions now that you’ve seen a little bit of this place.”

Gun leaned his elbows on the tabletop. “Tell me about comms here. How do we communicate with the outside world?”

“Well, we have a satellite dish I’ll show you that’s on the perimeter of our camp. It’s connected by a coax cable to a router in this building. Our devices,” she said, tapping her tablet, “connect with the router via Bluetooth.”

“Phones?”

“Our cell phones use the Wi-Fi capability provided by the satellite dish, and I have a satellite phone in case the satellite itself goes down.”

“You found him near the satellite dish...”

She nodded. “Yes, outside the enclosure. I don’t have a clue why he was out there. It makes no sense.” Her lips pursed for a moment. Then she shook her head as though shaking away dark thoughts. “We also have radios, which is how we communicate with each other when we’re away from this facility.”

“All good to know,” he said with a small smile.

Her gaze fell to his mouth, then quickly darted back up. “I’m assuming you have cold weather gear...?”

“I do. Minnesota boy, here, remember?”

The pink in her cheeks deepened. “If we had to medevac anyone out of here for frostbite or whatever, it could take time to organize. Helicopters can make it out here in the dead of winter, but it requires a lot of coordination, and the weather has to cooperate.”

“Do you have a medic on site?”

“That’d be me,” Nate said as he placed a plate of steaming hot biscuits on the table.

“I wasn’t always a science geek. I was a combat medic in the Army before I used my GI bill to further my education.”

“We’re lucky to have him,” Maddie said.

Gunn glanced up at Nate, internally acknowledging that the information gave him new respect for the man. Which he knew was a prejudiced view, but they’d shared similar training and experiences. He’d have an ally if he needed him in a fight—if he wasn’t the killer. “Army, huh?”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Yeah, and I spent time in the sandbox, same as you, I’d guess.”

Gunn raised his coffee cup in salute. “Navy SEAL.”

“Army Ranger.”

Gunn nodded. “Good to know.”

Perry brought two plates with scrambled eggs and placed them in front of Maddie and Gunn. Then he pulled a bottle of Tabasco from his pants pocket and set it on the table. “Makes everything taste better.”

Maddie laughed. “I like powdered eggs.”

“Says no one,ever,” he said, then walked away.

Nate dropped forks, knives, a butter dish, and a bottle of honey on the table.

Gunn twisted the cap off the Tabasco and sprinkled it liberally on his eggs. Then he plucked two biscuits from the plate.

“Don’t be shy about the biscuits,” she said. “He’ll make plenty. We all burn a lot of calories in the cold.”

He plucked up two more, split them open, and then applied butter and honey before he picked up his fork.

“Meat is something we leave for the main dish at dinner, so the protein from the powdered eggs has to tide us over until then,” she said. “We had all our foodstuffs and supplies delivered by boat at the start of the season. We keep it all in the warehouse. Mostly canned and dried goods.”

“Canned meat,” Nate said. “Yum.”

“We do have some preserved, non-canned meats, like summer sausage and some dried jerky, but yeah, lots of canned meat.”

“Unless we have good weather,” Nate said, “and then a couple of us go out in kayaks to fish.”

Gunn raised his eyebrows. “You go out on the open water...in winter?”

Nate grinned. “If you’re here long enough, we’ll take you with us.”

Perry shook his head. “Him and Eric. Crazy bastards. They’ve lost catches to seals before. And where there are seals...”

“There can be polar bears,” Maddie said. Then she turned to Gunn. “All we’re waiting for is for the sky to get a little lighter, and then we can head out. I know you’re probably antsy and used to people who work at a faster pace. Our pace slows in the dark, but when we have daylight, we speed up so we can make full use of those precious hours.”

“We do have work when we come back inside,” Nate said, “but there are hours and hours left after the work to fill. If you don’t play games, love movies, or have a hobby, it can be deadly dull.” Nate shrugged. “I paint.”

Gunn grinned. “Seriously?”

Nate shrugged. “Yeah, gouache and watercolors. Very portable and not so messy. I’ve done some landscapes of the ice, but mostly I paint places I’ve traveled—old ruins, beaches—whatever I have saved in my phone.”

“He’s getting really good,” Maddie said.

Nate’s smile was a little embarrassed but also pleased.

“Yeah, you can actually tell what it is he’s painting now,” Perry said. “Used to look like something my little sister did in grade school art class.”

Nate pulled the towel off his shoulder, twirled it, then popped Perry in the ass. What followed was a duel of the towels that had Maddie and Gunn grinning.

At last, Maddie stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled. “Children, enough! There are still some folks sleeping.”

“Not anymore,” Eric said, coming into the room wearing a very dark frown. “Fucking hell.”

On his heels were Em and Hanna.

“I smelled biscuits,” Hanna said. “I hope you guys didn’t eat them all.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“I should have enough left over for you to stuff a few in your pockets when you head to your site,” Nate said, giving her a wink. “All of you,” he said, addressing the larger group.

Hanna’s smile was soft. Gunn remembered that Maddie had told him that the two were involved romantically.

Which pushed them down the list of folks who might be jealous of Em and Mateo.

Gunn checked his watch, then pushed up from the table. “I should probably check in with my boss back in Yellowstone. He asked me to keep him updated.”

Maddie nodded. “So long as you’re in the building or within a hundred feet of the building, you should be able to connect to the Wi-Fi.”

Gunn headed back to his room. He’d have enough privacy there, seeing as everyone else was in the kitchen.

He quickly dialed Stone.

“I was wondering when you’d give us a call,” Stone said. “I’ve got you on speakerphone. I’ve got Kyla, Booker, and Wolf with me now.”

In the background, he heard a chorus of greetings.

“How’s it going?” Stone asked.

“Well, I arrived yesterday, along with a Mountie investigating the murder, a Polardyne rep, and Lieutenant Commander Anthony Navarro, who’s embedded with Polardyne. Apparently, our victim was doing some work for him. He installed and monitored a Magnetic Anomaly Detection device under the ice floe and uploaded data from the device daily—of course, depending on the weather.”

“Well, that explains the Pentagon’s involvement,” Booker said. “They’re looking for subs.”

“I’ve met everyone working on site,” Gunn said. “You already have the list of names I sent before I left Cambridge Bay. Has Swede had time to run background checks?”

“He’s still working on it. He did find that you have a former Ranger there.”

“Nate Holcomb. Seems solid.” Even if he does love to paint.

“Yeah, good record. Bronze Star. Honorable Discharge. So far, no red flags.”

“I’m heading out for a sightseeing tour with the project manager today. We’ll see the work sites. Shouldn’t take long since we’ve only got to cover five square miles. But at least I’ll have a feel for the terrain and can assess how likely it is that someone snuck on the floe to kill Schild. When we get back, I’ll install the surveillance equipment, which will give you all a view of who’s moving around the site.”

“Well, I hope something breaks soon,” Booker said. “You are missed. I’d hate for you to be stuck there through the winter.”

“Thanks, man. It could get pretty damn monotonous if I’m here too long. There’s not much of a nightlife here.”

“As if you were ever a party guy,” Wolf said, then chuckled.

“What do you think of the project manager, Madeline Russo? She’s worked in some sketchy places,” Stone said.

Gunn’s back stiffened. “She seems all right,” he said when he knew he couldn’t say that he felt drawn to her. That he instinctively trusted her. That wasn’t his head thinking. He was attracted.

“We haven’t found anything derogatory,” Kyla said. “She seems to be a typical save-the-world kind of do-gooder. But she did spend some time in Syria before most of the U.S. forces withdrew—and before she took the job with Polardyne, she worked in Puerto Rico, organizing relief on the ground after the big hurricane.”

“If she’s on the up-and-up,” Stone said, “she sounds very competent. Keep close to her, but also keep your eyes open. Someone killed a scientist on a floating island. It’s weird. It’s a weird environment for people to want to be there in the first place. Maybe someone snapped. Maybe someone’s been bought.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open. If I learn anything more, I’ll contact you.”

“Keep warm, man,” Booker said.

“Out here,” Gunn said, then ended the call.

A knock sounded on his door.

“Hey, Gunn?”

It was Maddie. “Door’s not locked,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

She cracked open the door. “You finish your calls?”

“Just had the one.”

She wagged her eyebrows. “You ready to head out and see what we’re actually doing out here?”

He rose and walked toward her. “More than ready.”

CHAPTER6

Maddie glanced over her shoulder to ensure Gunn was still close behind her. Not that she could lose him on such a tiny island.

Then she remembered losing track of Mateo. Logically, she knew his death wasn’t her fault, that he’d broken the rule about letting the rest of them know where he was going when he’d decided to make a trip outside in the dark, alone.

When she’d discovered he was missing, she’d hoped he’d fallen and injured himself and had simply been waiting for someone to notice he was gone so that searchers could rescue him. She’d feared he’d been eaten by a polar bear.

What had actually happened hadn’t been a scenario she could’ve imagined.

When she looked back again, Gunn gave her a wave. He was probably annoyed that she kept glancing back like she was his mom, making sure he was following closely enough. Not that she could read his expression. In the darker part of the morning, the

cold felt heavy, and both of them had covered their lower faces to keep warm. They also wore goggles to protect their vision from the cold and the brightening light. Plus, she carried her rifle for a different kind of protection angled over her back, the strap across her front.

They used their headlights, but the sun was filling the horizon, giving the morning that eerie gray light that lasted only a short span in the lower latitudes before the brilliance of daylight arrived. Twilight lingered here.

She led him first due west, where the neighboring floes were numerous. The pale sunlight painted the sea a luminescent gray around the stark white floes. She stopped her snowmobile and waited for him to pull up beside her.

She pulled down her neck cover to expose her lower face. “What do you think?”

He pulled his down as well and looked out over the ocean. “I’ve never seen anything like this. They’re like stepping stones or the interlocking pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle.”

“They’re what the bears and seals use to rest. Sometimes, you can see whales push up between the floes to get air. You’ll see little plumes of water while they clear their blowholes.”

“Can’t wait to see that for myself,” he said.

“I’ll show you where the polar bears tend to gather. It’s like an ice ramp. When it’s clear of critters, Eric and Nate launch their kayaks from there. It’s not far.” She pulled up her covering and restarted her vehicle, and off they went.

She showed him the ramp, which was free of bears or seals. Then, they moved along the perimeter toward the north before heading toward the center of the floe. They

stopped at Hanna's site, where she had a series of holes cut to take ice samples, some drilled deep, and which she circled with yellow tape tied to tall stakes so the others knew where she'd dug.

Then they headed farther east to where Nate and Eric had their tripods poised over their drilled-out holes.

Gunn stood and glanced down into an iced-over hole where Nate's long cable disappeared. His hole was wider than Eric's, and Maddie explained that he had to excavate around the top of it every time he came out to keep it clear for when he used the winch to drop and bring up the "bucket" he used to sample the water for plankton at different depths. He glanced at the thick wheel with the cable. "How long is the cable?"

"I think it can go down about a hundred-fifty feet," Maddie said. "He brings out jars, transfers water samples to them, then drops the capsule again—at different depths."

"So, he has to clear it every time he comes out to sample the water?"

She nodded. "He covers the top, but the bottom gets plugged. Because he has to clear out the hole every time, he takes samples every three days. It's a pain in the ass to cart the drill back and forth, but we don't have a ton of spare equipment. Eric or Perry will help him. Any of us, really, will pitch in, especially when the weather gets rough."

By the time they worked their way around to Em and Perry's platform, the sun had emerged. The sky was a brilliant blue, with gray clouds on the far horizon.

"Em and Perry drop a camera with lights attached to attract curious creatures," Maddie said. "The cable stays put, but they retrieve and replace the data card once a day, then spend hours reviewing footage to catalog the types and numbers of species

they observe.”

Then, at last, they arrived at Mateo’s platform. It didn’t look any different from the others. A sturdy tripod perched above a narrow hole with a single cable disappearing into the depths, attached to a black box. When she turned the screw-type knob to open the panel on the box, she discovered two slots. One for Mateo’s scientific readings of ocean currents, the other for the data Commander Navarro needed.

She bit the finger of her right glove and pulled it off with her teeth, then reached into her pocket for the small case that held two fresh cards and pressed the notches beside the cards in the black box to pop them out. When the cards were transferred to the case, the new cards were inserted, and the box closed, she stepped back to examine the exterior. The lights indicating the box was operating as it should were lit up. She checked the depth indicator. It read two hundred feet. As Navarro hadn’t said anything about changing the depth of the equipment hanging on the cable under the ice, she was done.

“That’s it?” Gunn said.

“Yeah, we’re done.”

“I can handle changing out cards and examining the box every day if you need to be somewhere else.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“We travel in pairs anyway,” she said. “But thanks.”

The radio clipped to her jacket squawked. “Maddie, Eric here.”

She unclipped her radio. “You all heading out?”

“Sun’s out. We’re all hitting the ice. Is Gunn enjoying the sightseeing tour?”

Maddie grinned at Gunn, whose smile stretched. “We’re almost done. I’m just going to let him take in the view from the ridge before we come back to base.”

“Roger that. See you two later.”

She clipped the radio to her jacket and raised her eyebrows. “Ready to see our mountain?”

Gunn glanced into the distance and laughed.

Gunn stood on the edge of the ridge that ran north and south on the floe. Or north and south today, anyway. It was hard to remember that the floe was drifting and turning in the ocean, albeit slowly.

The ridge wasn’t very high, but it did serve as a good landmark.

“Everywhere else looks pretty flat,” he said, gazing out over the floe. “What’s up with this ridge?”

“Ice floes bump and, sometimes, smoosh together. One can get pushed up over another, and that’s how the ridges form. As more ice forms over where they meet, it glues them together.”

“Is smoosh a technical term?” he asked, a smile lifting one side of his mouth.

“It is for me. Remember, I’m not the ice specialist. That’s Hanna.”

From his vantage, he could see all the platforms and some neighboring floes in the sea. “Makes you feel small, doesn’t it?”

Maddie nodded.

His gaze went to the far horizon. “We have clouds rolling in,” he said. “Anything we need to be concerned about?”

She sighed. “Winter is coming. It’s nice when the weather’s like it is now. Getting around is easier. The darker it gets and the murkier the sky...” She gave a little shudder. “We depend on each other and our GPS devices to get us back home.”

“You check the forecast?”

She aimed a glare at him. “Every morning. The storm will hit sometime tonight and will linger for days. It’s a big system and might bring a blizzard.” She wrinkled her nose. “No maybe about it. It will bring a blizzard. We’ll have limited visibility, which means we have to be extremely careful when we’re moving around outside.”

“Must be easy to get turned around.”

“That’s right, Minnesota boy. And if you don’t know where you are, what do you do?”

“I stay in place until I do know or someone finds me.”

She drew in a deep breath. “I guess we should head back. We’re wasting precious daylight, and I still need to show you our outbuildings.”

Gunn followed her back down to where they’d parked their snowmobiles. Soon, they were flying across the terrain. He followed Maddie’s slim form as she ably sped along. Everything about her fascinated him. She was curious about everything. Noticed everything. She wasn’t some lazy management type who spent her time counting beans. She was in the field, understood her team’s assignments, and figured out ways to keep them safe and on task.

Someone with her skills could find work anywhere in the world. And she had. But he still didn’t get why she’d accepted a job here on the top of the world.

To Gunn, this was an interesting assignment, but the monotonous scenery and relentless cold would eventually take their toll, and she’d had several rotations on this site.

The camp came into view long before they arrived. He felt a relief all out of proportion to the reality. The open ice could easily cause some unease in people. This hint of civilization was a very welcome sight.

She parked in front of the garage warehouse. He quickly dismounted and rushed to help her raise the garage door of the building. They drove closer and quickly used a dolly to move the machines inside before bringing down the door to preserve the meager heat.

Then they reviewed the items that were stored there—the vehicles and kayaks, the foodstuffs neatly stacked on shelves in large boxes, packed nearly to the rafters. She said they’d be left with a single long shelf of food by the end of the season.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“We keep track of our usage. Nothing pisses off HQ more than having to bring out supplies when they plan our menus for us. It’s all down to science. We can move around meal plans, depending on what we’re craving at the moment, but we can only have so many spaghetti nights.”

When she brought him to a small room with a door in the back of the warehouse, she pointed to the medical supplies shelved there. “This is also where we stored Mateo’s body. We have a couple of body bags left,” she said, patting the plastic-wrapped packages on the shelf. “Not that I foresee us having to use another because we have you here now, but just in case...”

They left the building and headed to the smaller building that housed their generator. “The fuel tanks are behind the building,” she said, “and the line to the generator is well-insulated. We’ve never had problems. The generator itself is well-maintained. They had an industrial HVAC guy out before we arrived. Eric knows things, too, in case it ever has problems. Usually, he can be walked through any minor repairs via Zoom.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No. We haven’t had any outages we didn’t plan for maintenance purposes for the past couple of years. When we do bring down the system, it gets a bit chilly in the facility, but the building’s well-insulated.”

They left the building, and she locked the door.

When he raised an eyebrow, she shrugged. “No one but Eric and I have any business

being in there, and the door latch is soft and opens easily, so it's best to keep it locked. We wouldn't want bears getting in there, looking for a warm place to rest."

"You keep talking about those bears..."

She grinned. "Don't be disappointed you haven't seen one yet. Your time will come, and then you'll be done. No more fascination."

"Anyone ever have a close encounter?"

"You heard Nate's story about running over a bear. Perry had an encounter, too. He was taking the trash out to the bin behind the facility. Someone hadn't turned the latch to lock the lid, but he didn't think anything about it until he raised it and found a bear staring right back at him, waiting for him to toss more trash into the bin."

"What did Perry do?"

"He handed him the bag."

Gunn laughed. When he quieted, he asked, "Have you ever had a close call?"

Maddie's hazel eyes glinted with humor. "I was once chased by one when I was riding my snowmobile. I didn't know he was there—you know, he was the same color as the snow. I rode past him just as he raised his head. My heart nearly stopped when he started to chase me, but they can only run for short distances. I just had to focus on not wrecking my vehicle. After that, I found religion," she said, patting the strap attached to her rifle. "I never leave home without it."

She glanced around the site. "The last thing I have to show you is the satellite dish."

They passed the facility, and then she pointed to a rope tied to a tall stake struck into

the ground at the corner of the building. “At night or during snow conditions, keep your hand on this rope.”

They followed the rope to a small enclosure that was open on the top. She unlatched the gate on the enclosure and stepped inside. A broom stood propped in one corner, and she took it and began to brush snow that gathered around the base of the satellite dish in the center of the enclosure. “We’re supposed to clear it every day. We can’t let snow accumulation get packed down. I haven’t been out here since... Well, you know.”

Gunn stepped forward. “Let me do that,” he said, taking the broom and brushing the snow outside the enclosure.

There was already some deeply encrusted ice around the base, so he turned the broom around and hit it with the handle to break it and then brush it away. While moving around the satellite dish, he saw something dark in the ice and quickly broke more ice away to clear it. Then he knelt and tugged at a black-coated wire. It came away free but seemed to be stuck beneath the base of the dish, so he continued to chip away.

“What did you find?” she asked, coming up to stand beside him.

“Not sure.” He struck the ice again, then pulled on the wire, bringing a small black box with it. He held it up to her and then stood. They both peered down at it.

She turned it over. “It has slots for SD cards,” she said softly. The box itself was crushed in the middle like someone had deliberately smashed it. She raised the end of the wire and found a USB connector. Then she walked to the satellite dish, opened the panel on the side, and found a USB port inside.

“Do you think Mateo was using it to relay data to Navarro?” Gunn asked.

“Why would he need to?” she asked. “He could do it from his computer.”

Gunn shrugged. “Maybe he thought his computer might get hacked. If the data he studied before that night didn’t show any sub activity, he’d feel safe enough sending it through the router.”

“Damn. That was why he was out here,” she whispered. “He found something.”

Gunn nodded. “Someone didn’t want him sending that data. Someone who might have been monitoring what he’d uploaded to his computer to check.”

Her gaze met his. Her expression looked haunted. “We’re not talking about someone coming in from outside to murder him. They’d have to be near enough to use Bluetooth. It was someone here. One of my team.”

He drew a deep breath and nodded. “You can’t trust anyone.”

“You can’t even trust me,” she said.

Gunn blinked but then nodded again. “Although,” he said, letting the corners of his mouth rise a little, “you’re not a nerd. Checking his data and knowing what he found isn’t exactly in your wheelhouse.”

She handed him the box and the wire. “You keep it safe. If we can get Navarro or the RCMP back out here, we’ll give it to them to see if whoever smashed it left anything behind.”

Gunn snorted. “I doubt they’ll pull fingerprints or find any DNA.” He raised his gloved hand and wiggled his fingers.

Her shoulders fell. She’d hoped beyond hope that the killer wasn’t one of her team. “I hate this.”

Gunn’s hand smoothed along her jacket sleeve in clumsy consolation. “Let’s get back inside. I’ll tuck this away. Then I’ll use my satphone to contact Navarro.”

“Smart. We don’t want to use any device that might be hacked to let whoever is responsible know we’ve ruled out some foreign agent attacking Mateo.”

CHAPTER7

Gunn was irritated at having to remove his boots just to walk to his room to stash the broken box and then head back to the mudroom to put them back on, but he needed to make this call outside. Who knew if there were surveillance devices, visual or audio,

inside the facility? He didn't want to tip off anyone that they'd found something. Later, after he made his call, he'd search for any devices while he was installing his own equipment.

Before calling Commander Navarro, he called the number for the headquarters office at Yellowstone.

Kyla picked up the line. "Hey, Gunn. Is it cold enough for you?"

"Getting there."

"I saw the forecast. Looks like a storm is rolling in."

"We know," he said, perhaps a bit too briskly.

"Whatcha got? I know you didn't call to hear me tell you how your weather is."

He explained what he'd found, including a short description of the box.

"Yeah, if he was the one using it, he was likely trying to circumvent that router. I wonder why he thought he might get hacked. That crew has worked together before. I wonder if he found a reason not to trust one of them."

"I don't know. Maybe he was just using his due diligence. Something might have spooked him."

"Like finding a sub big enough to carry nuclear weapons? That would spook the shit out of me."

"You find any red flags in your background checks?"

“Nothing that stands out. Most of your crew are scientists who work grant to grant, so they’re always looking for funding, but none of their bank accounts have had any big infusions of money that can’t be explained.”

“Yet. Maybe they’ll get paid for producing results.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll keep digging. In the meantime, Swede is looking at the folks who are funding their studies to see if anything jumps out—any associations with big money outside the U.S., for example.”

“Thanks, Kyla. Tell the Team Eagle guys hello from me.”

“Will do. Out.”

After ending that call, Gunn called Commander Navarro, who said that the data he’d uploaded from the flash they’d taken from Mateo’s computer had old data he’d already sent. So, it was a bust. He also said he’d given Mateo the device they’d found at the base of the satellite in case the router ever went down.

Gunn promised to keep in touch and ended that call. Then he went to his room and got his duffel filled with surveillance equipment. He spent the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon installing it around the outside of the buildings. He then went to work hiding cameras inside the building—in the common area, the kitchen, both hallways, and the doors to the mudroom and back.

When he was done, he sat with his tablet, making sure the signals coming from each camera were strong.

When he was done, he headed to the kitchen, where he’d seen on his tablet that Maddie was busy preparing food. “Need a hand?” he asked as he walked inside.

She laughed. “There’s not much to food prep here. I opened some canned minced beef, ground some of Nate’s biscuits in the blender to make breadcrumbs, and added dried spices and onions to make meatballs. They’re already browned, so I poured in some canned sauce. And voila! Not the best you’ll ever eat, but give it a few weeks, and you’ll die for some not-so-fresh-made spaghetti.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

She placed a lid over the simmering sauce, checked the pot filled with boiling water and noodles, then poured herself a cup of coffee. “You finish with the installations?”

“I did.”

She leaned closer to whisper, “Am I going to be able to see the cameras?”

Gunn’s mouth twitched as he leaned toward her. “No more than you’ve seen the cameras that were already there.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously?” she hissed.

“As a heart attack.”

“Where?”

“Same places I put mine,” he said, then sat back and gave her a look that said that was all he was going to say. But he was teasing her.

Her frown as she sat back in her chair was fierce but made him grin. After a couple more sips of coffee, she leaned forward again, then arched an eyebrow to tell him silently that their whispered conversation was far from over.

When he bent closer, she asked, “Did you remove the old ones?”

“No.”

She blinked. Then she leaned in again. “Because you don’t want them to know that you know?”

He gave her an approving nod.

“Can they hear us?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t touch their devices because I didn’t want them to know I found them.”

“So, how are we supposed to talk? Will we have to wait until we’re outside every time?”

“Or in the shower,” he said.

She snorted. “That would look weird.”

He kept a smile from stretching his mouth. Weird to whom? Any man watching would completely understand the desire for a little private time with Maddie.

She eased back in her chair again, and her fingers drummed the table. She appeared irritated. And he could sense her thoughts were racing a hundred miles per hour.

He drank his coffee and waited her out because he knew she wasn’t done with questions. And since he had all the time in the world with no place to go, he waited, enjoying the quiet and the little game they played.

Then he wondered why he’d thought that. What game were they playing?

Well, he was pretending not to be amused and focused on her reactions...to everything. He’d seen the way her face had been alight with pride as she’d shown

him around her little icy fiefdom. Pride had shown through in the way she'd talked about the research they were conducting. Maddie was definitely an activist at heart, ready to sign on to causes that would help people and the planet. He had to admire someone with that kind of dedication.

As for the game...? He suspected she might be as interested in him as he was in her. The glances he caught when she didn't think he was looking had him believing that at least she was attracted to him in a physical sense. So, was all this handholding, the private sightseeing tour, just a way to get to know him better?

The drumming stopped, and she leaned forward again. "Maybe we need an excuse in case someone discovers us in the shower together—when we're talking privately," she added quickly.

He pressed his lips together to stop a bark of laughter. Instead, he nodded. "Good idea. What kind of excuse do you have in mind?"

She gave him a baleful glare. "Anyone here, well, the women, anyway, would completely understand why I'd want some alone time with you."

"Ah," he said, pretending to have just caught on to her suggestion. "That would work. Any guy would get it—from my perspective—too."

Her blink told him she hadn't expected him to find her equally attractive.

The distant sound of the outside door slamming echoed through the building.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“We’ve got company,” he said. Then he gave her a wink.

A pretty pink blush filled her cheeks, and she jumped up to return to the stove, giving him and the door her back.

In a few minutes, the room filled with voices as the team headed to the coffee pot and then settled at the table.

“So, what did you think of our site?” Perry asked, his bushy eyebrows rising.

“It’s interesting,” he said noncommittally.

“Interesting?” Perry snorted. “You’ll have to see the film we’re going to review.”

“Yeah,” Em said. “It’s like a wonderland below the surface.”

Nate sat and gave Gunn a steady look. “You stay busy?”

“I did. Lots to see.”

“Nothing to do?” he asked, giving a surreptitious waggle of his eyebrows.

Nate likely knew precisely what Gunn had been up to, which made Gunn wonder whether the ex-Ranger was aware of the other devices hidden around the building.

“I finished up just in time,” Gunn murmured.

“So, how are you going to fill your time while you’re with us?” Eric asked.

Gunn had been wondering the same thing. Daily rounds of the platforms to help out and keep an eye on the inhabitants of the site only filled the waning daylight hours.

“There’s an old set of hand weights in the garage,” Hanna said.

“Good to know,” Gunn said. He could work out anywhere, but again, that would only fill so many hours. His gaze found its way to Maddie, who had just turned to get large pasta bowls from the cupboard.

Eric coughed, drawing his attention. “Maddie likes to crochet. Maybe she could teach you how to make a scarf or something.” Then he grinned, which told Gunn he’d noticed how he’d checked out Maddie.

Maddie gave Eric a narrow-eyed glance, but her look was much more open when she met Gunn’s gaze. “It’s not hard. I could show you some things.”

There was just a hint—a tiny hint—of flirtation in her tone.

But it was enough for Eric and Nate to hoot laughingly.

Maddie and Gunn shared grins. They’d established their “cover.”

After dinner, Maddie brought out crochet hooks and two balls of yarn. As she approached him, she arched an eyebrow.

He groaned but made room for her to sit beside him.

She tried not to notice how good he smelled. He’d showered after dinner and donned fresh clothing—thermal leggings and a shirt that lovingly clung to his well-muscled

form.

They shared the sofa while she showed him how to form the first loop on his hook, then demonstrated on her own hook how to build the rows he'd need to make his first scarf.

"My rows are leaning," he complained, leaning into her shoulder.

"This is your first piece. It's going to look wonky. Just go with it. And remember to count how many loops you crochet into. If you miss one, your scarf will get skinnier and skinnier."

"How long's this gonna take?" he grumbled, trying to insert his hook into a tight loop.

She chuckled. "I can finish a scarf in an evening if I want, but when I started, it was more like a week because I kept shortening my rows and pulling them out to start all over again."

"I think my hands are too big for this skinny hook."

“They’re not too big.”

“How do you know?” he said with a little growl.

Which caught her attention. He liked the blush that flooded her cheeks.

“I’m pretty sure you’re good at working with...large things.”

Gunn chuckled softly, then stuck the curved hook into another loop, pulled the yarn through, looped some more thread over the hook, and tried not to pull too hard because he’d need more room when he turned and started on the next row. He’d completed three rows so far. He might finish this thing in a year. But then, who would he give it to? She’d given him a pink ball of yarn.

While she worked on her scarf, which was already a foot long, and he pretended to be engrossed in creating his next row, he kept track of where everyone was inside the building. Nate, Eric, Perry, and Hanna were playing poker in the kitchen. Em had disappeared down the hallway, saying she was tired. When she’d made that announcement, Maddie had given her a sympathetic look and wished her a good night’s sleep. The others had looked sad and uncomfortable.

Gunn had studied Em’s expression, and as far as he could tell, she looked genuinely sad. Like the girlfriend of a man who’d died only days ago would. The others seemed... He didn’t know. Watching the group in the kitchen, he noted they were very competitive. Even though they were playing for matchsticks, which was a rule Maddie had put into place because she wouldn’t tolerate issues arising among them regarding money, there was tension in their shoulders. Cards slapped the table when

someone triumphed. The groans were loud when someone lost.

He shook his head. They were no different from SEALs he'd known who'd played for money. He was trying to see problems where there weren't any.

But someone had murdered Mateo.

"Did you give up?"

Maddie's soft voice drew his gaze. "Just trying to figure it out," he said softly.

"It's going to drive me nuts, too," she whispered. "It just doesn't make sense."

Something banged from the direction of the roof.

"It's the wind," Maddie said. "It's picking up. Sometimes, a panel lifts a bit."

"Are you talking about the roof?"

"Yeah. It happens."

"Do you lose sections of the roof?"

She shrugged. "One bent last year, and we had to get up there to screw it back down."

"Think we've got snow?"

She glanced across at him and smiled. "Want to go see?"

They pushed up from the sofa, stuffed their scarves and yarn balls into the bag Maddie had set between them, and headed to the mudroom to don their outerwear.

Gunn placed his Glock in his pocket, just in case.

When they stepped outside, Gunn raised his head to the sky.

Snow shone in the light from the floodlight attached to the edge of the roof. He smiled down at Maddie, who stood beside him. She stepped off the single-step porch and stood on the ground to turn in circles, opening her mouth and sticking out her tongue to catch flakes.

“It’s effing cold,” Gunn said, raising his neck cover over his nose.

She laughed. “So, the Minnesota boy thinks this is cold.”

He chuckled, enjoying watching her turn, her arms outspread. The woman knew how to enjoy the small things.

Behind them, the door opened. The rest of the team, minus Em, tumbled outside in their heavy jackets.

Nate grinned. “The fun begins,” he said.

Eric laughed. “Fuck. Tomorrow’s going to be bitch.”

“I’ll keep an eye on the forecast,” Maddie said. “Hopefully, we’ll get a break in the snow so we can go out to the sites.”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Guess it’s oatmeal with maple syrup for breakfast, huh?” Perry said. “Everyone loves comfort food when the weather turns to shit.”

Nate placed his arm over Hanna’s shoulder. “Anyone up for hot chocolate?”

“Can we have marshmallows?” Hanna said, smiling up at him.

Nate pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. “Let me go scare up a bag in the warehouse. You get the pot boiling.”

Gunn gave Maddie a wink. “I’ll head out there with you, Nate, just in case a polar bear figures he wants some marshmallows, too.”

Maddie turned back to the door, but not before giving one more glance before she headed inside.

The look on her face left him feeling warm inside. Yes, they had rules about not wandering around by themselves, but she liked that he was looking out for her team, too.

CHAPTER8

A couple of days later, Gunn sat at the kitchen table near Em and Perry as they reviewed footage their camera had captured from underneath the ice floe. They fast-forwarded, stopping when their sharp eyes caught objects moving, then kept a tally on a piece of paper of the creatures they observed.

There was a variety of fish, but they didn't get excited until they spotted larger creatures like a small group of ringed seals, a bowhead whale, and even a pair of narwhal whales. Then they'd freeze the screen and turn it his way to share their excitement. Gunn had to admit they had the coolest jobs of anyone on the site, and he told them so.

"Hear that?" Perry said when Nate wandered in to pour a coffee. "Gunn thinks we have the coolest job."

Nate's smile stretched wide. "I can't believe he doesn't think plankton are cool."

"You know, as miserable as the weather is, I hate that this will be my last winter on the ice," Perry said.

Nate blew out a deep breath. "Yeah, it sucks." His glance went to Gunn. "It's not often a scientist gets a chance to do pure research. And this kind of gig?" He shook his head. "Gives you some serious street cred, man."

"What will you all do when this is over," Gunn asked, "this being the last year this site operates out here?"

"Teach," Perry said, wrinkling his nose. "It's what I do when I'm not out here. I'd love to see someone outfit a boat so we can do this job when the ice is gone."

Em nodded. "The Russians will have one soon. It'll be able to break the ice to get them where they need it to be. They can stay in place when the ice freezes around them, and then all they have to do is drop equipment over the side. No having to move buildings if they need to set up someplace else the next winter. But I'll be back in the classroom in late spring, too."

Nate shrugged. "I'm applying for a position with the EPA to study climate change.

I'm hoping I can do fieldwork, maybe in northern Canada. We'll see. Kind of depends."

"On Hanna?" Perry asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Nate's smile was small, but he shrugged again.

Gunn laughed and pushed up from the table. "I'm going to wander around."

Nate chuckled his chin upward. "Getting cabin fever already?"

"Yeah, something like that." He left the kitchen and went in search of Maddie, who was busy typing away on her computer.

Not for the first time, he admired her profile. Her nose was a little on the long side but perfectly straight. Her chin was rounded and had a stubborn tilt. Today, her hair was loose around her shoulders, and the overhead light, though harsh fluorescent, caught hints of blue and red in her dark, glossy strands. He wondered how it would feel to comb his fingers through them.

She looked up at him as he approached. "We've got a break in the weather. It should last a couple of hours anyway before it hits hard again. Want to make a trip out to Mateo's site?"

He nodded. "Meet you outside." The only person he hadn't seen this morning so far was Hanna. He headed down the hallway toward their rooms and knocked on her door.

"Coming," came her call.

She opened the door a crack, and her eyes widened. "Thought you were Nate," she

said. “Can I help you?”

“Just hadn’t seen you today. Wanted to make sure all was well.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Just working on some reports,” she said, opening her door wider to reveal her laptop lying closed on her bed.

He noted that her room was a mess.

She laughed softly. “Yeah, I know. Nate always says a messy room is a sign of a disordered mind.”

“Or a sign of someone who has better things to do.”

She grinned. “Someone who gets it. Nate thinks I’m a slob—which is why we keep separate rooms. I’d drive him nuts.”

“Well, Maddie and I are heading out. Be sure to stay safe.”

She snapped a salute. “Will do.”

Gunn grabbed his holster and satphone from his room and headed to the mudroom to don his cold-weather gear.

When he was finished, he waited outside the door, taking in the changing landscape. The last couple of days’ snowfall had laid a blanket of fresh powder over the buildings and ground—a little over a foot, by his reckoning. The door behind him opened, and he glanced back.

Maddie smiled then pulled up her neck cover to shield her nose and cheeks. “I told the others we were heading out and how long I estimate we’ll have before conditions worsen.” She held up her radio, then stuffed it into her jacket pocket.

“No rifle?” he asked.

“Not today. You’ve got my back, right?”

He nodded and followed her out to the garage. She went to the snowmobile she’d used the previous day, and he would’ve gone to the one beside her, but she wagged a finger. “We all claim our own; maintain our own.” She pointed to the one behind hers. “That was Mateo’s, and you used it yesterday.”

He watched as she got the snowmobile dolly, then stepped forward to take it from her. He slipped it under the chassis of her machine, lifted the skis off the ground, then pushed it out onto the snow and returned to move his as well.

When he pulled down the garage door, she was already seated with her hood up and goggles in place. “You know, I’m perfectly capable of moving my own machine.”

He shrugged. “Have to do something to earn my keep, or I’ll feel completely useless.”

They rode straight to the site, keeping an eye on the clouds overhead. Although the sun had risen, the clouds kept the day looking like twilight. The snow seemed thicker and fluffier than the snow around the camp as they moved across the floe. The tracks Maddie’s machine made were the only evidence of humanity until they neared the site with the yellow tripod standing tall against the horizon.

Gunn dismounted to follow her to the platform, his boots sinking deep with every step and crunching on the older, underlying snow.

She lifted her goggles and removed her glove to pull out the case and transfer the data cards. Then, she checked the display. “Looking good,” she said.

Because he wasn’t keen to go back to the facility immediately, he asked, “Do you want to swing by the others’ sites and see if they need any help?”

She glanced at the sky. “I’ll let them know we’re on the way.” Maddie quickly radioed Eric that they were heading their way.

When they arrived, Nate and Eric were wrestling the drill over Nate’s hole. Maddie and Gunn walked up beside Eric.

“Hanna didn’t come out with you?” Maddie asked.

Eric shook his head. “She said she had paperwork to catch up on.”

“A hand...?” Nate grumbled as he bent over the drill, getting ready to lift it across to the hole.

Gunn joined them, and soon, the drill was widening the walls enough that he could drop his “bucket.” After Nate took several samples, Gunn helped Nate load the drill back on the sled.

Maddie kept giving worried glances at the sky. “Are you two heading straight back?” she asked Nate and Eric.

“We have no desire to be caught out here in a blizzard,” Eric said.

Gunn climbed over his machine while Maddie called Em and Perry on the radio, but they didn’t respond.

When she glanced back at Gunn, he shrugged. “We should swing by.”

Twenty minutes later, they arrived to find Em and Perry arguing beside their platform. Em’s arms moved in expansive gestures while Perry stood leaning toward her, his hands on his hips.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

They both glanced toward Gunn and Maddie as they drew nearer.

“What’s up?” Maddie asked as she strode toward them.

“Our line’s gone,” Perry said.

“We don’t know that,” Em said. “It could be the box.”

Perry gave Maddie a baleful look. “We can’t get a signal.” He tapped the small gray metal case that stood on a stand beside the tripod with the cable attached. “It’s not receiving a signal. Something’s happened to the camera.”

“We can’t already be down a camera,” Em said. “We should bring the box back to camp and test it out with another camera before we cut the cable we have. If it’s the box, we can repair it. It’ll be so much easier than digging a new hole. We’d lose days.”

Maddie drew a deep breath. “I don’t know why you two are arguing. It makes sense to check the box. It’s the easiest fix. If it’s not the problem, you’ll bring back the box, the drill, and a new cable.”

The pair continued to glare at each other.

“Is there something else wrong here?” Maddie asked. “We’re still early in the season. You have to work your shit out.”

Perry was the first to break the stare-down. He nodded at Maddie. Then, without

looking at Em, he said, “We’ll test the box tonight and then figure out our next steps.” He turned back to Maddie and Gunn. “We’re just frustrated because we won’t have any new film to review.”

“Well, better make it quick,” Maddie said. “Another front’s coming through. I’d feel better if you both were back inside soon.”

“We’ll be right behind you,” Perry said. “Soon as we pull the box.”

Maddie nodded and trudged back to her snowmobile. “Folks don’t usually get that testy this soon in the season,” Maddie said.

“I imagine nerves have to wear thin living on top of each other after a while.”

Maddie grimaced. “Last year, Mateo and Perry got into a fistfight over a video game.”

By the time they returned to the site, the temperature had dropped, the sky was filled with angry dark clouds, and the daylight was nearly gone. They put away their vehicles and headed back inside.

Maddie headed straight to the kitchen, where a pot of what smelled like chili was boiling. She held her fingers above the pot and leaned toward the heat. “I felt the cold today.”

Gunn headed to the coffee urn, took two cups from the shelf, and filled them. Then he walked back to Maddie and handed her one. “Wrap your fingers around this.” She took the cup and didn’t make a face when she drank down the bitter brew that had sat too long in the pot.

“There’s a blanket on the couch. Let’s go get under it.” He blinked after he said it,

realizing maybe it wasn't the most appropriate thing to say to the site boss.

She laughed. "You haven't seen Nate and Eric huddling under a blanket. We all do it when we're chilled."

They moved into the living room. She chose the smaller sofa and sat. He plucked the blanket draped over the back of the couch, sat next to her, and covered them both up. For several minutes, she shivered beside him, then slowly relaxed. Her head tilted toward his shoulder.

"Hope you don't mind," she whispered.

"It's nice," he said softly, grateful now for the blanket covering parts of him that were heating a little too well. He liked the citrus scent of her hair and the feel of her curves snuggled against his side.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "I wouldn't be comfortable. Wouldn't feel as safe. I used to take for granted that we were all friends. Now, I'm suspicious of everyone."

"Anything bother you today?"

"That argument Em and Perry were having. It was...too much. Easily solved."

"No reason for it?"

"Exactly."

"I've seen how people can snap under stress," Gunn said. "When someone has something that weighs on them, even if they think they've got it handled, it can erupt in unexpected ways."

“But Em and Perry? They’ve been partners for years.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Do you think Perry could’ve been jealous of Mateo’s relationship with Em?”

“I never saw it. Perry gets along with everyone. He’s very laid back. Plus, he has a girlfriend back in Colorado—another teacher at the same college. They Facetime quite a lot.”

Gunn nodded then lifted his arm from between them and placed it over the top of the couch.

Maddie hesitated only a couple of seconds then relaxed directly against his side. “You’re in some shape,” she said, her tone wry. A hand moved tentatively from his side to halfway across his belly before pulling away. “I’m surprised you’re not the one shivering. I have more natural insulation.”

He wondered if she was self-conscious about her curves, but he didn’t know if he’d embarrass her by reassuring her that he didn’t mind a little extra padding, so he kept quiet and took another sip of his coffee.

The sound of the outside door opening, along with the whine of the wind and voices chattering, told him they were about to have company, but he didn’t move away.

Neither did she. So, when the others came trailing into the living room, eyebrows rose but no one said anything. Except Eric, who said, “Whoopee,” and hurried toward them. He sat close to Gunn and pulled the edge of the blanket over himself.

Beside him, Maddie chuckled. “What did I tell you?” she said, grinning and giving him a sideways glance.

“Gunn, you’re a fucking furnace,” Eric said, then groaned.

Grinning, Gunn swung out his other arm and embraced Eric, pulling him against his side.

Perry walked into the room and took in the sight of the three of them huddled together under the blanket. “Damn, it’s going to be an interesting winter.”

Hanna stepped into the room just as Nate entered. Nate’s eyebrows shot up. Then he glanced at Hanna and wagged his eyebrows.

She laughed. “I’m plenty warm. You’ve got to be an ice cube. So, no! But I do have a big pot of chili and beans ready, and I just took the cornbread out of the oven, too. Come eat, everyone.”

Eric was first to rise, flipping back the blanket. “You had me at chili, Hanna.”

The others moved toward the kitchen.

Alone again, Gunn glanced down at Maddie, who sighed. “Don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Gun stood, waited for her to rise, then draped the blanket over her shoulders. Together, they entered the kitchen, stepping to the back of the line that was already forming as teammates scooped chili into bowls, sliced cornbread from a skillet to place on small plates, and headed to the table. Hanna had already set out utensils and filled cups of water.

Gunn sat beside Maddie when he had his food. He dipped his spoon into the bowl and ate his first bite. “This is really good, Hanna.”

She smiled. "Since I was here all day, I put the pinto beans on early in the crockpot. There's enough for seconds."

"You make cornbread just like my mama does," Nate said. "Flat and crispy."

And, of course, that started a debate between those who swore by a sweeter, cake-like cornbread and those who liked it as Hanna had prepared it. Gunn mused that the same conversation would've happened if he'd been sitting with his team back in Yellowstone. It felt comfortable and familiar.

By the time everyone had eaten their second helping, yawns were going around the table.

"Can't believe how much the cold sucks the life out of you," Eric said, stretching his arms over his head. "I'm heading to bed. Maybe read a book and drift off."

"Sounds like heaven," Em said.

Gunn stayed in the kitchen and helped Perry with dishes, washing while he dried.

Behind him, Maddie said, "Damn, no signal," she muttered.

He washed the last spoon and laid it on the towel beside the sink for Perry. He pulled his phone from the pocket of the sweats he wore over his thermals. "Yup, no signal." He wouldn't be calling to check in the Stone and Booker.

"Guess I'll have to wait until the clouds clear before I submit my reports." She glanced up at him, a hint of blush creeping across her cheeks. "Guess we have an evening free. Do you want to watch a movie?"

And snuggle on the couch some more?He nodded, not trusting his voice wouldn't

come off as a growl.

CHAPTER9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

Maddie made them popcorn, and again, they sat on the sofa, side by side, the blanket pulled up to their necks while they slouched down on the cushions. They'd chosen a comedy; one neither had seen, about a woman who was being romanced by two spies who were competing for her affection and using their special skills to gain an advantage over the other.

The film was fun, and they did chuckle from time to time, but Maddie was too aware of the big hulking body she rested against to really let herself get lost in the story. Not without imagining Gunn as the Chris Pine hero. Yeah, she'd make the same choice Reese Witherspoon had. With Gunn's arm wrapped loosely around her shoulders and her head resting against his chest, she felt things she shouldn't. They were working together. He'd only be here until the mystery was solved. He had a job, she had hers. They'd likely never share the same air again. What was the point?

Oh, she could think of some points she could enjoy in the here and now, but she didn't want to complicate things.

Once the credits played and they turned off the TV, the sounds made by the wind howling and the occasional thud of the roof panel, added to the sudden reminder that they weren't in the middle of civilization with its cars and conveniences, settled like another kind of blanket. They were alone on a floating island.

"Ever watched the movie *The Thing*?" she asked, angling her head toward his.

"The one with the monster in Antarctica?"

"Yeah. We have a copy of that, too. We watch it at least once a season."

He chuckled. “Why? Sitting out here in the dark with that going on overhead,” he said, pointing toward the ceiling, “wouldn’t that make you all a little uneasy?”

“Thinking about monsters from outer space is less scary than imagining a break in the ice floe.”

His eyebrows shot up. “That could happen?”

Maddie shrugged. “Although unglamorous, Hanna has the most important job out here. She’s the one who monitors the ice to let us know if we’re in trouble, but so far, so good. And it is getting colder.”

“So more ice accumulation.”

“Yup.”

They were quiet for a while, and it was a comfortable silence. Then Gunn asked, “So, we’re stuck in here until the storm passes?”

“Or at least lightens. They all have things they can work on. Charts to fiddle with. Data to deconstruct. I’ll get the transmission ready for Navarro so the minute we get satellite connection, I can shoot him the data from the card. I’ll also have my daily reports to Polardyne ready to go.”

“Is that going to fill your time?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Nope, but I’ll organize a cleanup. Post a chores chart. We can do the upkeep of the site while we’re holed up. With some folks’ tempers already flaring, it’s best to keep everyone doing something productive.”

“Where can I help out?”

“I want to do an inventory of supplies in the garage. Would you mind helping me with that tomorrow?”

“We can top off snowmobiles, too. Start them up. Just to make sure we keep everything running.”

“I’ll have Eric and Nate check out the generator. Perry and Em can make sure our water tank is filled.”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

She grinned. “Freshwater has to come from somewhere. Sure, Polardyne stocks up the water and fuel tanks when they bring supplies, but we have to thaw some ice, too, to replenish. Then the water that comes into this building is filtered to make sure any impurities are removed.”

“I can see why they need someone like you on site.”

“Someone whose head isn’t consumed with data and discovery?”

He nodded. “Someone who can think about the practicalities.”

“If something happened to me, Nate would take over. He’s pretty good with organizing, too.”

“Well, I’m glad they have you,” Gunn said, his voice deepening. “We should probably call it a night.”

She noticed that he didn’t move and that his gaze kept dipping to her mouth. “Probably,” she said softly. Was he thinking about kissing her?

The arm lying loosely around her shoulder tightened, bringing her closer. Her breaths shortened, and she tilted back her head.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Tell me if I’m out of line,” he whispered when his mouth was an inch from hers.

She licked her lips in anticipation. “Why would I do that?”

The corners of his mouth twitched, and he closed the distance between them.

The kiss began as a gentle press. Then he angled his head and suctioned softly against her mouth. Desire blossomed, tightening her belly and prickling the tips of her nipples. She opened her mouth and slid her tongue inside his.

And then everything happened fast. The kiss deepened, their tongues slid sinuously together, and their lips sealed and rubbed in delicious circles. Soon, the kiss wasn’t enough.

Their bodies turned more fully toward each other, and he pulled her over his lap. She didn’t take his direction to sit sideways. No, she straddled his lap and framed his face with her hands as she let her chest and hips sink against his.

When his hands crept under her thermal tee, she shivered.

“My hand cold?” he whispered.

She shook her head and placed her hand over his, moving it to her breast where she needed his touch. The first squeeze of his palm had her hissing between her teeth and leaning back her head because it felt so good.

His fingers searched and found the clasp at the front of her bra and deftly flicked it

open, and then his large calloused hand was cupping her, his thumb feathering her nipple, and she'd never felt anything this erotic in her life. She'd never felt like her body was on fire. A flick of his thumb had her grinding hard against the large bulge at the front of his pants.

He groaned and rubbed his cheek against hers. His hand slowly withdrew and pulled down her tee. Then he cupped her cheeks and held her face still while he pressed one last kiss against her mouth. "We both need rest," he said, his voice rasping.

"Yeah," she said, realizing where they were and that anyone might walk through the common area at any moment. She slid off his lap and turned to sit beside him.

"That was...a surprise," he said softly.

She gave him a sideways look. "I liked it. Just so you know."

"But we should go slowly."

She nodded although inside she was howling in protest. "Cool light of day and all..."

He nodded, his expression still taut with desire. She wondered if she looked like that, too.

Gunn cleared his throat. "I'm going to take a turn around the building. Outside. Just to check to see that everything's okay—and to cool off."

A smile tugged at her mouth. "You do that. But—"

"I'll have my Glock." His smile was wry, and then his gaze narrowed on her face. "I liked kissing you—and before you even start wondering about my motives—I'd have wanted to kiss you if I'd met you in the middle of downtown West Yellowstone."

“So, I’m not just convenient?”

He snorted. “I like you, Maddie—and you’re fucking hot. And this,” he said, pointing between them, “isn’t the least bit convenient.” He flipped back the blanket and stood, and yes, she should’ve been ashamed of herself, but her gaze darted to the evidence of his attraction, tenting his sweatpants.

His hand closed over it and made an adjustment, and then he tilted up her chin and shook his head in warning.

Maddie pressed her lips together to keep from grinning. She’d done that. As he strode away, she drew deep breaths to calm her fluttering heart. His “evidence” was impressive indeed.

Once outside, Gunn forced himself to walk around the perimeter of the building. Not that he had any worries about the façade. It was plenty sturdy. Circling it wasn’t easy. Snow was deeper against the west side. However, he needed to move. Needed the chill that bit through the layers of his clothing. He was so fucking hard. And her fascinated stare had nearly had him begging her to let him take her to his room. He’d been tempted, and she might have said yes, but he wanted her to be sure.

They had to share a very small space for however long his job lasted. If she had regrets, it would get awkward instantly. He wanted her sure because the second she gave him the signal, he’d be all over her.

Yeah, he was that attracted. After sitting through a movie with her sighing and laughing beside him, her warm body draped against his side, he was hooked. Damn, her scent—a mix of soap and citrus—drove him crazy. He was eager to get her naked and explore every inch of her skin.

Dammit, even the cold outside wasn’t diminishing his hard-on.

That kiss... He'd kissed plenty of women, but Maddie...? He liked the way she tasted. Liked the softness of her mouth, the way she followed his movements, entering the subtle rhythm of his swirling lips. He knew instinctively that she'd be just as responsive when they finally made love. If they made love...

He finished his circle and then stood on the stoop, gazing up at the dark sky that held no hint of a moon or stars. The cold bit the tip of his nose, and he knew he needed to get inside soon, but when he did, he'd have to strip down and then head past her door. He'd be tempted to stop there.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

Finally, he turned, entered the mudroom, and sat to remove his boots. Then he quickly shed his outer clothes and hung them. With his holster draped over his shoulder, he made his way inside the facility. His sock-covered feet passed the darkened kitchen and entered the hallway. Light shone under two doors. One of them was hers.

Like he'd imagined, he paused outside her door, tempted like never before. He heard the click of keys and knew she was working on reports. He shouldn't disturb her. She was busy.

Sighing, he moved along to his door and went inside. When he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, he counted as he inhaled and exhaled—trying to draw calm around him, but his cock was resistant. So, knowing there'd be no rest until his tension eased, he pushed down his pants and took himself in hand, all the while imagining someone else's hand on his body.

Maddie wondered if she'd imagined the shooshing sound of socked feet pausing outside her door. Had Gunn been tempted? She'd kept typing the final line of her report, her daily diary of things that had occurred and all they'd accomplished. When she'd finished, she'd paused to listen, tempted beyond all common sense to sneak to the door and open it.

But she'd lost her nerve and simply sat there, her laptop propped on a pillow atop her lap. After a tense moment, she'd closed the document and turned off her computer.

Then she'd reached the lamp on her nightstand and turned it off.

The darkness wasn't comforting. The wind, the sound of the popping roof panel, and the beat of her heart were all too noisy for her to fall gently into sleep. Worse, the thought of where she might've been had she possessed the courage to disagree with Gunn's decision to be prudent and not follow their hormones made her feel cowardly.

She was the girl who jumped into adventures. Gunn would certainly merit that designation. Everything he'd done—the kiss, the gentle handling of her breast—had told her he would be that kind of once-in-a-lifetime lover, the one whose memory a woman would sigh over in her waning years.

Tomorrow might be too late. If he woke in the morning and remembered why he was here in the first place, he might decide that sleeping with her was a bad idea.

Should she take the initiative and show up at his door? Could she be confident enough in her attraction to seduce him? The thought made her uncomfortable. Or maybe she was uncomfortable because she was still aroused just thinking about how far they'd gone on the sofa...under the blanket...where anyone might walk in on them.

At this rate, she was never going to sleep.

Maddie had never been a prude. She'd had love affairs and lust affairs. Not many, but she had never felt shame for following her hormones. A young, healthy woman was entitled. Just because she'd chosen a nomad's life and had no plans to settle and seek a long-term relationship didn't mean she had to do without.

And what woman in her right mind, when presented with the chance of having sex with a male specimen built like Gunn, would turn down that possibility?

Before she could talk herself out of the idea, she rose and headed to the shower room to brush her teeth and brush her hair in front of a mirror.

Once in the hallway with her toiletry bag, she hurried there. After she brushed her teeth, washed her face, and brushed her hair until it crackled with static electricity, she headed back, pausing outside his bedroom door.

She took a deep breath, raised her hand, then noted that no light shone beneath the door.

Her shoulders drooped with disappointment. He was likely already asleep. He'd think she was a fool if she knocked now. Plus, she might wake up the others situated up and down the hallway, and no way did she want them standing as witnesses to her foolishness.

She turned away, but then the door beside her cracked open. A hand shot out and gripped her forearm.

A sideways glance showed a shirtless Gunn, with the drawstring of his sweatpants loosened enough that the waistband sat low on his hips. And his cock—his thoroughly aroused cock—was stretching the fabric in the most thrilling way.

Her gaze shot up to his face, and he pulled on her arm, widening the opening to draw her inside his room. Once she stepped across the threshold, he closed the door then pushed her against it. He stepped closer, letting his cock prod her stomach. “What were you doing out there, Maddie?” he whispered in the darkness.

She swallowed. “Losing my nerve,” she whispered back.

“Having trouble sleeping?”

She nodded even though he couldn't see it. His cock jerked between them, and her belly trembled against it. “I was thinking...about that kiss.”

He chuckled softly, and his hand swept down her arm. He encountered the toiletry bag, tugged it from her hand, and tossed it away. Then he took her hand and slid it between them, wrapping it around his straining cock. “Think about this.”

The fabric separating her fingers from his thick staff didn’t prevent her fingers from noting his heat.

Slowly, she stroked up and down his length. “That’s...a lot to think about,” she said, her voice thin and breathless. She moved her hand upward, slipped it behind the waistband then plunged downward to hold him. He was hot satin cloaking a steel post. She moaned because, in her mind, that analogy just seemed too cliché. He was big and hot and she needed him inside her now.

“I don’t have condoms,” she whispered.

His breath tickled her ear. “I do.”

This is really going to happen!“Sure you’re not too tired?”

His chest jerked against hers. His mouth trailed from her ear to her jawline then across to her mouth. His mouth sucked at her lips then sealed their mouths while he thrust into her hand still gripped around his length. When he pulled back. “Still think I’m tired?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

She shook her head, which bumped their noses together and apart. “Too many clothes.” She pulled her hands free, pushed on his chest to move him back, then quickly began peeling away her clothing.

When she was nude, she walked in the direction of his bed and crawled onto the mattress.

His footsteps followed. He settled on top of her. “Not much room on this bed unless one of us is on top of the other.”

His long, heavy body was the warmest blanket she’d ever felt. “I’m okay with that,” she said, widening her legs and sliding back her heels to raise her knees. Now, he rested against her tender, open flesh. “That condom?”

He slid his cock once, up then down between her folds, then rested on an elbow while he reached to the side.

She heard a plastic rustling, then a tear. He raised his hips away from her.

When he returned, he dipped lower. She felt the nudge of him against her folds, and he pushed. But halted instantly.

She surmised his dilemma and smoothed her hands around his back and then lower to squeeze his buttocks. “I’m already wet, Gunn. I don’t want to be tortured with foreplay.”

He bent and kissed her nipples then pushed up on his arms, centered himself again,

and pushed inside.

CHAPTER 10

With Maddie's permission, Gunn drove slowly inside her, not stopping until she took every inch of him.

Fuck. Her pussy was so much better than his hand. Warm, wet...pulsing around him. He paused when he was fully buried, savoring the sweet pressure.

"Move," she said, moaning.

"Just a second," he whispered. He'd been on the edge of coming just before he'd seen the shadows of her feet at the bottom of his door and had quickly checked his tablet for the camera in the hallway. When he'd seen her standing there, looking so unsure, he'd leaped out of bed to snag her before she could turn away. Now, if he moved as she asked, he'd come embarrassingly fast.

"It's okay," she said, "I don't need much. I ache."

"Jesus, Maddie. Quiet," he said, gritting his teeth. "I was already hard before you came."

"Were you...touching yourself? Because of me?"

"Fuck," he breathed. "Yesss."

Beneath him, she undulated her hips, moving on his cock.

And he was done. It was impossible to hold back. He spread his knees, slipped his hands under her ass, and began to stroke, sliding on her body as he flexed his hips,

driving into her hard.

They moved together and apart; he ground against her each time he came deep.

Quickly, her breaths were tinged with whimpers, and the thighs hugging his sides trembled.

Pressure built in his balls then suddenly released, and he threw back his head as he repositioned his knees, rose on his elbows, and pounded into her.

Maddie met his thrusts, gasping each time. Then her fingers dug into his back, and she went stiff beneath him, her back arching.

He kissed her to swallow her cries and followed her over the edge.

Gunn collapsed on top of her, burying his face in the corner of her neck. Her hands smoothed over his back, lazily drifting up and down. When his breaths slowed, he lifted his head and kissed her, pausing to slide away the hair stuck to her cheek then kissing her again.

When the kiss ended, he felt her smile beneath his lips. “Liked that, did you?”

“I don’t feel like I have a bone left in my body,” she said.

“Think you’ll sleep now?”

“Can we stay like this?” she said sleepily.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Bed’s too small.” Then, because he wasn’t any more eager to leave her than she was for him to leave, he pulled free, removed the condom, and knotted it before dropping it beside the bed. Then he rolled her onto her side, lay back on the bed, and pulled her over him.

“You won’t get a wink of sleep like this,” she mumbled.

“Sure I will.” He spread her legs with his hands and placed her knees on either side of his hips. Then he reached downward and tugged until he freed the blanket and sheet and pulled them both over their bodies. “This comfortable?” he asked softly.

“For now. And it’s awfully convenient.”

He grinned. “Now, whatever do you mean?”

“Something comes up tonight, you’ll be right there.”

“I still don’t see the problem.”

“You wouldn’t.” She shifted her chest then moved it right to left.

“Something itch?”

“Yeah. I like your chest hair.”

He slid a hand between them and cupped her breast. The tip of her nipple was sprung. He couldn’t resist and plucked it. Below, she pressed her hips forward. “Not so

sleepy now?" he asked.

When her breath caught and held, he knew she was waiting for him to do something more. He rolled to his side so they were facing each other. Then he raised her thigh to ride the crest of his hip, opening her. When he scooted downward to tease her nipple with his tongue, he cupped her warm, open sex and slid a finger inside her. She squeezed around him and warm liquid flooded around his finger.

At that moment, Gunn realized neither of them was getting any damn sleep that night. He wasn't nearly done with her.

Maddie felt like she was drifting in the most sensual dream of her life. This time, she was on her back with her thighs draped over Gunn's shoulders and his mouth pleasuring her pussy.

Dear Lord, the man knew just how hard to suck her clit without moving past pleasure into an intensely uncomfortable twinge. He kept her right on that edge, his tongue alternately flicking then laving over the hardened knot.

Before he'd scooted down the bed, he'd placed her hands on her breasts with orders to keep them warm. Cupping them, just the weight of her hands atop her overly sensitized nipples, was too much. He'd spent considerable time torturing the tips, treating them as though they were the most succulent fruit or a short straw in a tasty drink. They were wildly distended and swollen. Every erogenous zone of her body pretty much felt that way, raw and engorged.

The man had stamina, but he also led her gently, fooling her with soft, wet touches until he stirred her desire so deeply that she begged him to bite the tips or fuck her hard.

She'd pay for every bit of this ecstasy tomorrow, but tonight? She didn't want it to

end.

At last, his tongue left her clit, and she breathed a relieved sigh for the respite. He licked between her folds then thrust his tongue inside her, and she mewed like a kitten, widening her thighs to coax him deeper.

His fingers entered her and swirled. Two, then three, scissoring inside her and sliding along her inner walls until he touched something that had her gasping and lifting her torso off the bed. “Gunn!”

His soft chuckle gusted against her sex. “Found it...” While he continued rubbing inside her, his thumb drifted downward, and she tried to twist away, but he wouldn’t let her, pressing on a part of her she’d never considered sexy. But his thumb swirled and pushed, and she came, drenching the fingers still stroking inside her.

She was shaking, spent. Drenched within and without. He moved up her body and folded her against him. Again, they were lying facing each other, and again, he brought her thigh over his hip and moved her closer. But this time there was comfort, a sharing of heat as her body cooled, and he pulled up the bedding to cover them. When he slipped his arm beneath her head, she cuddled against him. Restful now. At peace.

A kiss touched her forehead, and she made a sound like the pleased purr of a kitten. Where had that come from? Oh, yeah. She was happy. Exhausted but happy.

“Will it kill the mood if I tell you I’ve never had a night like this?” she whispered.

“Why should it? Feed my ego. But I’ll admit I’ve never been this inspired.”

She giggled. Giggled. So, not her. Then again, before this night, this level of eroticism had been completely beyond her comprehension.

“Think you might like to do this again?” he asked, his hand gliding over her side and hip.

“Tonight?”

Gunn laughed. “Not tonight. You’ve worn me out.”

“Ha-ha. So, you think we might spend...another night...like this?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“Well, maybe we’ll actually try getting a little sleep now and then, but yes. Another night like this.”

She tried to dredge up some reasons why it wasn’t such a good idea, but she knew if she denied she wanted to be with him again, it would just be a lie, and all she’d think about every day was being with him again. So, it would be a useless denial that would waste a lot of time and energy.

“Yeah. I want to do this again...with you.”

“Good. I wasn’t sure how I’d manage to keep out of your way if you said no. I’d have respected your decision, but I think I’d have gone a little crazy trying to ignore this thing between us.”

Us... Damn, she was part of anus.

Her breaths deepened as she fell asleep, and Gunn relaxed, willing his cock to calm the fuck down. He’d known when he’d been pleasuring her that she couldn’t take any more. She was going to be sore enough in the morning. And yes, he felt a little smug about that fact.

He also felt...possessive. Like he’d placed his mark on her. Made her his. Even though he knew that was a little misogynistic, and he had no real claim. However, he’d let himself enjoy the feeling just the same.

This was a new feeling. Not something he’d ever felt for a woman before. He’d had plenty of women in his bed, even some long-term. However, he’d never felt like he

wanted to imprint them with his body. He'd worked hard to make sure this night would be something she'd never forget and hopefully want to repeat.

He'd sure as hell never forget her. Not the feel of her body against his or the sounds she'd made as she'd come undone. And he wanted another night like this—many more nights like this—but with the light on, occasionally, so he could remember her with images in his mind to match the sounds, scents, and touches.

If circumstances were different, he could see wanting to date her and then moving her into his place. He liked her sharpness, her dedication to her work, and her courage.

He also liked how she softened against him. Clung to him. Moved with him.

And shit. He was getting hard again. Gunn turned his head and kissed her forehead. He absolutely would not touch her intimately again tonight. No matter how uncomfortable it got.

Then he breathed in the lemon and orange scent of her hair and closed his eyes. A peaceful, drifting feeling overtook him. Something about this woman lying in his arms felt right. Felt like home.

The next morning, he woke when the door snicked open and cool air swept over his skin. Maddie was gone. Likely, she wanted to sneak back to her room before everyone else was up and about. Outside, the wind wasn't quite howling; it was just a steady whine. He wondered if it was still snowing.

Although he'd only had a couple of hours of sleep, he decided to get up and make a pot of coffee. Maybe he'd walk the perimeter again to drag in some of that clean cold air and clear his head.

He showered and shaved. Then he decided it was time to do a small load of laundry

and took his laundry bag to the mudroom where the all-in-one washer-dryer stood in a corner. Luckily, it was empty so he started the load. When he went to the kitchen, he found it empty as well, but he could hear the distant sound of the shower. Maybe it was Maddie washing off their combined scent...or soothing the sore parts of her body in the warmth of the water.

No, he was not smugly smiling about it. Not even a bit.

He started the coffee then dressed in his cold-weather gear and stepped outside. Before pulling on both gloves, he checked his phone. Still no signal, but the cloud cover wasn't that dense. There were breaks in the clouds. They ought to have signal.

He decided to check the satellite dish. He was halfway down the rope when he remembered he was supposed to tell someone when he went out alone. Well, hell, he was almost there, and it wasn't snowing so thickly he couldn't see the hand in front of his face. He could still see the outline of the building behind him. And more importantly, there were no polar bears in sight.

When he reached the satellite, he unscrewed the hatch and checked to make sure it was getting power and signal. The digital indicators told him it was getting both. So, why weren't their devices working?

He checked the coax connected to the box. It wasn't loose. On a hunch, he bent and pulled up the coax cable. Then as he walked back toward the facility, he uncovered more of it and looked for any damage.

When he was three-quarters of the way back, the wire ended.

He checked the broken end, and it wasn't frayed or crushed. No, it was a clean diagonal cut. Someone had deliberately sliced through the coax.

He dropped the cable and buried it with his foot. Then he hurried back to the building. He needed his satphone.

Once inside, he cursed as he removed his boots and then, still wearing all his gear, he headed straight to his room and his equipment bag. With his satphone and Glock in hand, he returned to the mudroom and sat to put his boots on again.

“You going out?” Maddie asked from the doorway. When he looked up, he noted that her eyebrows were lowering. “Something’s happened. What’s wrong?”

He didn’t want to say anything just yet. “I need to see if I can make a call.”

“The satellite dish isn’t getting a signal; I just checked. Your satphone won’t give you a different result.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Without saying another word, he pushed outside and walked away from the building. Turning on the phone and flipping up the antenna, he dialed Strong’s number.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

After two rings, Stone answered, “I was starting to get worried about you.”

“We’ve got a problem. I don’t think whoever was responsible for Mateo Schild’s death is done yet.”

Behind him, he heard the facility door open and close. He kept turned away, knowing it was Maddie approaching.

“What’s happened?”

Quickly, he described the situation. “The weather’s been shit. We blamed the loss of comms with the outside world on the cloud cover. The clouds aren’t as thick this morning, so I thought I’d give it a try. Still no signal, so I headed outside to check the dish. The dish is working perfectly. It’s receiving signal. So, I pulled up the cable to follow it back to the facility. It’s been cut.”

“As in sliced? On purpose?”

“Yeah, as in someone took a knife to it.”

Behind him, he heard a gasp and turned slowly to face Maddie whose eyes were wide.

CHAPTER 11

“I’ll contact Commander Navarro,” Stone said. “What are you going to do?”

Gunn waved Maddie closer and angled the phone so she could hear Stone as well. “I’m not going to let the team know what I found. Not yet. Instead, I’ll have Maddie send out whomever she deems capable of checking the dish and repairing it to find the issue, then see what happens.”

“If the person doesn’t mention the cut, he might be your saboteur,” Stone said.

“I’ll then keep a closer eye on the individual until we hear how Navarro and Polardyne want to proceed. I would think they wouldn’t want to risk another death.”

“We’ll see. Navarro might be just as eager to definitively ID our guy to see who’s paying him before they pull the plug,” Stone said.

“Roger that.”

“I’ll let you know what I hear, and only over this phone. And, Gunn? You watch your back.”

“Will do. Out.”

Maddie’s mouth moved, but she didn’t speak. Her face was pale.

He pulled her close and kissed her hard. “Pull it together, Russo. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“My team...” she whispered.

“I’ll do what I can to watch over all of them. In the meantime, we have to be aware of everyone’s location and how long they’re gone when they leave the building. I’ll keep my tablet close and check the cameras throughout the day. I don’t have a camera looking toward the dish, but I’ll fix that. If the coax cable gets repaired and someone

tries to cut it again, I'll see it this time."

"During the daytime, I can keep track of where they are and how long they've been out. So long as everyone stays with a partner, they likely won't risk being observed doing something...like this."

"Unless it's not just one person," Gunn said. "We can't assume anything."

She frowned. "I don't like not telling my people. Shouldn't they know? Shouldn't I warn them now?"

"Let's see first what happens with the coax."

She nodded, but reluctantly so. "Okay, but I don't like this. I'm beginning to wonder if we should be out here at all. We're on a fucking ice floe in the middle of the Arctic Ocean. If something bad happens, we're hours, maybe days, away from rescue."

"So, we do our best not to spook our guy."

"Or gal." She locked her gaze with his. "If I were you, I wouldn't rule me out."

His mouth eased into a smile. "Now, why do you think I'm sticking to you like glue? Woman, you are dangerous."

She rolled her eyes. "So, I'm the one who's scary, says the big bad SEAL."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“I’m shivering in my boots,” he said, then dipped his head and kissed her again.

When Maddie pulled back, color was back in her cheeks—a pretty pink blush.

“We better get back inside, baby. Try to act as normal as possible. Get that chore list out, and assign someone to the dish.”

Maddie drew a deep breath and nodded. “Here we go.”

Maddie worked on a whiteboard, divvying up chores and assigning names. When she reached “Check the dish,” she paused and ran through her crew in her mind to figure out who seemed the most suspicious, which angered her because before any of this mess had happened, she’d have sworn to every member’s integrity—which just went to show what a bad judge of character she actually was.

She liked and had trusted every one of them. They’d spent months together, working and playing. Doing good work for the benefit of humanity.

In the end, she didn’t have anyone who raised any doubts but chose the person who had the most to do with the dish...Eric. Any other choice would seem weird to her team. So be it. At least, she might be able to scratch him off the list. One down.

Then she went to work cooking breakfast for everyone to keep up the façade that everything was normal—or at least as normal as it could be with them knowing one of their number might be a killer.

When the scent of bacon drew her crew from their rooms, she smiled and invited

them all to help themselves to the bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast she'd left warming on the stove.

"Meat for breakfast?" Eric said, smiling widely as he entered the room. "What's the special occasion?"

Maddie shrugged. "After days of being cooped up, I thought we might splurge. You know, for morale's sake."

Nate patted her shoulder as he passed her on his way to the stove. "You're a good boss, Maddie."

"I'm not your boss," she said, shaking her head. "I'm just the babysitter."

Perry placed his plate on the table then scratched his head and stretched his shoulders before seating himself. "Don't know about you, but I barely slept a wink with that roof panel knocking all night." His gaze went to the chart Maddie was just finishing. "Oh shit, guys. Mom's got a chore list ready."

There were groans, and Maddie relaxed a bit, smiling at their disgruntled complaints. "If we're stuck here in the camp, we might as well tackle the housework and close-in repairs."

Sitting beside Gunn throughout the meal, she felt oddly set apart. They shared a secret. And since she knew she wasn't the killer, she leaned into the feeling of connection with Gunn. She hoped he didn't have any doubts about her but would've completely understood if he did.

Then a thought sprang into her head. Was he keeping close to her because he suspected her? The old adage, "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer," played inside her head.

No, he couldn't have been with her last night if he thought that. Gunn had too much personal integrity to sleep with the person he suspected had committed a murder.

When the meal ended, everyone stopped to read the list she'd made then trudged away.

Eric glanced around at Nate. "I have the satellite, so I'll be outside." He held up two fingers. "Work in pairs?"

Nate nodded. "I have to get on the roof and check that panel that keeps rattling, so yeah. Let's tackle your dish first."

And off they went.

Gunn disappeared for a minute and then returned with his tablet. "Who all's outside?"

"Nate and Eric—satellite and roof repair. At some point, Perry and whomever he tags to accompany him will have to pull rations for the week from the garage shelves."

Gunn tapped his screen and pulled up the cameras. "I really need to install a surveillance camera pointing toward the dish."

"You'll have to wait until Nate and Eric are done. Then we can head out and top off the snow machines and slip around the back of this building with a ladder so no one sees us."

He nodded. "Sounds like a plan. In the meantime?"

"Help me with dishes."

They were just finishing drying the last of the morning's dishes when Nate and Eric

burst into the kitchen.

Maddie stiffened at their expressions, studying both their faces. Both men's brows were lowered, and their gazes locked on her.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“We’ve got a problem,” Nate said, glancing back into the common area before coming closer. He shot a look at Gunn. “You’ll want to hear this, too.”

Gunn and Maddie shared a charged glance and moved in closer.

“What’s wrong, guys?” Maddie asked although she knew what he was going to say.

Eric turned to Nate who nodded then faced Gunn and Maddie again. “I was checking the satellite,” he said softly. “The damn thing’s getting signal, but I checked my cellphone right before I went out so I knew that signal wasn’t making it into the building. So, I checked the connection on the box and then checked where it comes into the building. I thought maybe a connection had wiggled loose, but that wasn’t the problem. Then I started pulling up the coax.” He drew a deep breath before blurting, “Someone cut the fucker in half.”

Maddie took in his expression. He sounded angry. His face was taut. She glanced at Nate. His expression was a little harder to read. Yes, he was frowning, but his gaze was more troubled. Maybe worried. Neither displayed an inappropriate reaction given the problem.

They both looked at her, and then Eric’s head tilted to the side and his eyes narrowed. “You knew.”

Maddie dropped her gaze. Then firming her mouth, she glanced up again. “Gunn found the problem first thing this morning.”

Eric moved back a step. “So, you asking me to check the dish—was that some sort of

fucking test?” he asked, his voice rising a little at the end.

Gunn cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention. “It was my call,” he said softly.

Nate nodded slowly. “I get it. You’re trying to eliminate suspects.” He patted Eric’s arm with the back of his hand. “Someone took out Mateo. This isn’t about us, man. Hell, he’s lookin’ at everyone.”

“Bet he’s not looking at Maddie,” Eric said, his gaze landing on her and hardening.

Maddie blushed. They knew about last night. “He can’t rule me out. I had just as much opportunity as any one of you.”

They stood in the kitchen, and Maddie knew the weight of the discovery was dragging down their shoulders, settling in their bellies.

“So, what do we do now?” Nate asked. “No one’s safe. Our theory about someone from the outside coming in to take out Mateo doesn’t hold water. It’s one of us.”

Maddie blew out a breath that billowed her cheeks. “We have to tell everyone. Everyone needs to know so they can be watchful and keep themselves safe. That means we’re always in pairs.”

“Go in threes when we can?” Eric said. “More than one of us armed?”

She nodded.

“What did Polardyne have to say about this?” Nate asked, turning to Gunn.

“We haven’t heard back from anyone,” Gunn said. “I called the Brotherhood

Protectors and told them what happened. They're going to talk to Lieutenant Commander Navarro and Clive at Polardyne to see what they want to have happen. My guess is that they'll want to pull the plug and bring everyone in."

"In the meantime, I need you to repair the coax," Maddie said. "We need to be able to communicate and load whatever data we have. Continue as we have been until..." She closed her eyes briefly. "I hate the thought of packing up. We've only just started."

"Our last winter on the ice," Nate muttered.

"So, for now, we operate as normal? Then pull everyone together tonight?" Gunn said.

Nate and Eric gave sharp nods and left.

"Guess there's no point in hiding the fact I'm putting up a surveillance camera on the dish," Gunn said. "At this point, we need to deter whoever cut the line from trying it again."

After Gunn returned to his room to grab an extra spycam, Maddie and Gunn headed out to take care of their list; first, topping off the snowmobiles and then carrying a ladder and setting it up on the corner of the building nearest the satellite dish and within sight of Nate and Eric, who were busy splicing cable.

When they all finished, Maddie raised her cell phone. "We have signal. Good job, guys."

"You're going to tell them, right?" Eric said.

"I am. But after dinner. Go ahead and let everyone know we have connection. They'll

want to file their reports.” Maddie turned to Gunn. “You coming? I have my own data to upload.”

“Right behind you.”

They made their way to Mateo’s office. Maddie unlocked the door, then stood to the side while Gunn filed inside. Commander Navarro had said that Mateo’s computer had additional encryption software installed, but Mateo had still felt the need to upload directly to the dish. However, since the box that he’d used to plug in directly had been destroyed, this was their only option for uploading the data she’d retrieved from Mateo’s platform.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

Maddie opened the top drawer of Mateo's nightstand and pulled out the case, but when she popped it open her stomach fell. "Gunn..."

He stepped up beside her and glanced downward.

The case was empty.

Maddie shook her head, dread filling her belly. "How can this be? I have the only key to this room—his key—and I keep it on me," she whispered.

"Locks can be picked but maybe we can see who entered his room."

Gunn sat on the edge of Mateo's bed and tapped on his phone, opening up the screen that displayed the camera feeds. He tapped on the hallway feed, tapped another button to widen the view, then hit rewind, waiting as it moved back to when they'd first lost satellite connection. Then he scrolled forward, changing to normal speed when someone moved down the hallway. He tapped fast forward through the previous night.

Maddie saw what looked like a skip in the feed. "Roll it back."

"You see something?"

"Maybe."

He rolled it back again, then played the video at normal speed. The darkened hallway was visible, then went black, only to pick up three minutes later with the picture of

the empty hallway. “Son of a bitch,” he bit out.

“Someone erased it?”

“Or interrupted the feed remotely.”

Maddie placed her hand on his shoulder, needing to feel the strength of the muscle beneath her palm. “Someone interrupted the feed, then entered with their own key and stole the data cards.”

“They had to know there’d be something in the data we retrieved. Someone got through to them, communicated with them when there was a break in the clouds.”

“But how? The satellite was out for all of us. How would they receive word...?” Her gaze blurred with tears which she quickly blinked away. “Only you and I have satphones,” she whispered.

“They could have their own.” Gunn looked up at her. “I have to search their rooms.”

“Shit.”

Gunn stood and placed his hands on her shoulders. “This is on me. It’s my job. You pull them together, and I’ll tell them what has to happen now.”

CHAPTER 12

Maddie and Gunn sat side by side on the sofa in the common room when the others began to gather. Maddie had announced there would be a group meeting at seven p.m. She’d told Gunn that such an announcement wasn’t out of the ordinary. Usually, Maddie gathered them to talk about the weather or to relate news or directions from Polardyne.

Tonight's meeting would be uncomfortable to say the least.

As soon as everyone was seated, Maddie inhaled and released the breath, then swept the group with a gaze that reflected her regret.

Gunn felt for her. She considered these people her friends. They were more than co-workers. They'd shared weather and hardships most people never faced, and he understood her loyalty to them. He also understood the underlying heartbreak. Someone inside this room, a friend, was responsible for the death of another of her friends, and while it was unfathomable to her, she had accepted her responsibility to keep all of them safe. She had his back for what he was about to do.

"What's this all about?" Perry asked. "Polardyne pulling the plug?"

Nate and Eric shared a glance then both clamped their lips shut.

"Is that it?" Hanna said, frowning. "Is it because of Mateo's death?"

Maddie held up a hand. "We discovered something today. Something disturbing."

Gunn reached out to touch her arm. "This is on me," he said softly then turned to the group. His gaze swept over the group, and he made sure he could see every face because he wanted to be able to judge their reactions to what he was going to say.

"This morning, before most of you were out of bed, I went outside. The sky was clear in patches, which made me wonder why we still didn't have signal inside this building. We should have. I made the trip out to the dish and verified that it was operating, receiving power, and that it was receiving a satellite signal, which it was. I knew immediately that something else was wrong." He paused, glancing around the room, again gauging expressions and looking for anyone who seemed uncomfortable or deliberately frozen in order to hide their guilt, but he detected nothing and

continued.

“I began troubleshooting, checking the coax where it connected to the box. I found no problem there. So, I decided to check the cable and dug into the snow to free it, then kept pulling it up as I followed it back to this building. I found a break in the wire about fifty feet away from here.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:45 am

“I saw Eric and Nate working on the wire,” Perry said. “I figured something happened to the cable.”

Gunn waited a moment, not changing his expression. Perry sat back and frowned.

“The break in the wire wasn’t because it frayed or crushed. It was deliberately cut.”

It seemed no one breathed.

“But who...?” Hanna began, and then her eyes rounded and began to look glassy.

“One of us? It wasn’t some person who invaded our site?”

“Oh, fuck,” Perry whispered.

“One of us killed Mateo,” Maddie said, her voice quiet but even.

Nate and Eric remained quiet. Em’s face grew pale.

Gunn stood. “I was brought here to keep you all safe. I have to search the site.”

“What will you be looking for?” Perry said. “We all have knives. Hell, there’s a drawer full of knives in the kitchen. Any one of us could’ve cut that cable.”

“I’m not saying what I’m looking for,” Gunn said. “But while I’m searching your rooms, I’ll need for you to remain in here.”

Maddie’s crew shared glances, some wary, some annoyed.

Eric clapped his hands on the arms of the chair he was sitting on. “Since we’re stuck here, anyone up for a game of trivia?” His gaze went to Maddie, and he gave her a crooked smile. She returned a grateful one.

Gunn walked to the end of the hallway and began his search, entering every room, occupied or not, and meticulously searching under beds, in drawers, between mattresses, inside shoes, around doorframes...anywhere someone might stash something they wouldn’t want to be found.

Other than secret food stashes and a couple of porn magazines, he didn’t find anything until he examined Hanna’s room. Between her mattresses toward the foot of the bed, he found a satphone.

He continued searching her room, feeling under drawers, emptying her backpack on the bed and rifling through papers, but he found nothing else that might be considered incriminating. He put the phone in his pocket, then left the rooms off the hallway to search the mudroom and the kitchen, avoiding looking at the folks still sitting in the common room as he passed them.

After he’d exhausted his search, he decided he’d confront Hanna before he asked everyone to leave the common room so he could search there.

He entered the room and walked up beside Hanna.

She gazed up at him, a frown denting her forehead.

Gunn reached into his pocket and then handed her the phone. “I need you to open this for me.”

She stared at it then glanced up at him. “Why?”

“I found it between your mattresses. I want to see who you’ve been talking to.”

She pushed up from her seat and met his gaze, her eyes narrowing. “It’s not my phone.” She plucked it from his hand, flipped the antenna up, then tapped the screen. The screen asked her for the password. “Not my phone. I don’t know the password.”

Gunn tightened his jaw. “I’ll be passing this along to Commander Navarro. He’ll know who to send it to in order to get it opened up.”

Nate stood and moved beside Hanna. “Gunn, if she says the phone’s not hers, it’s not hers. And if you think she’s the one who cut that coax, you got it all wrong. She hasn’t set foot outside of this building since it started snowing. Not at night either, I’ll vouch for that.” He encircled her waist with his arms and pulled her back against his chest, his jaw tilting stubbornly. He was her alibi.

Gunn knew the phone wasn’t enough. He’d hoped she’d flinch and reveal herself, but her expression, the slight frown, the confusion in her eyes, seemed real enough.

“I’ll be keeping this,” he said, sliding the phone into his sweatpants pocket. “I need everyone to clear out of this room now.”

Maddie stood with the rest of them and passed him, not looking at him as she did. He knew she was angry with the way he’d confronted Hanna. If Hanna was innocent, he could understand her anger as well as Nate’s quick defense.

After they filed out, he spent the next hour searching every nook and cranny of the room and its furnishings.

At last, he sat on the sofa and squeezed the bridge of his nose because he could feel a headache coming on.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

The sofa sank beside him, and he glanced to the side.

Maddie sat, turning toward him, one foot beneath the opposite thigh. “That’s all you found? A phone?”

He nodded.

“No stray SD cards?”

“There’s likely under the snow somewhere.” Gunn stared up at the ceiling. “I need a list of everyone’s personal cell phone numbers.”

She nodded. “Why?”

“I’m going to have the tech guy at the Brotherhood Protectors headquarters check their phone records for their contacts. See if anything stands out.”

“Your guy call you back yet?”

Gunn shook his head. “I’ll get in touch with him to let him know I found a satphone, but I can’t be sure whose phone it is.”

“Even though you found it in her room?”

Gunn sighed. “Anyone could’ve put that phone in her room. If they were watching Eric and Nate today, they had to know we’d find where they cut the line. If I was trying to throw shade someone else’s way, I’d plant the phone on them.”

Maddie tilted back her head. “I’m so fucking tired of this.” Her voice rasped with strain.

Gunn reached out and lifted her onto his lap. Maddie melted against him, tucking her head into the corner of his neck. After a moment, he felt moisture dampen his skin there.

He’d never had to comfort anyone before, but he found it easy to do with Maddie. He cupped the back of her head and rubbed her back, not saying a word as he held her while she cried.

When he left Maddie in his bedroom resting, he made his way outside to place another call to the Brotherhood Protectors. Snow was falling again, fat flakes that drifted at an angle due to the wind whipping up again.

“Gunn, wait a second while I add Swede to the call,” Stone said. “I have you on speaker here. Your team’s here.”

“Hey, Gunn,” Booker said. “How you holding up, man?”

“Freezing your balls off yet?” Wyatt Bixby, another member of Team Eagle asked.

“My balls are doing just fine,” Gunn said, grinning.

“That Madeline Russo is fine,” Ty Quigley, another Team Eagle member said.

“Yeah, Maddie’s...great.”

Chuckles sounded in the background, and he knew they’d jumped to the right conclusion about his feelings about her.

A throat cleared. “Swede here.”

Gunn’s grin eased. “You have anything?”

“Not sure. Nothing stood out when I reviewed the call logs for the cell phone numbers you sent. Lots of calls to Polardyne. Mostly to Clive Patton at Polardyne, which I suppose is to be expected. Nothing pops when I look at bank records, but there’s lots of emails, back and forth with Polardyne regarding a new project that’ll be starting up when the studies on your island end. Something in northern Canada. It’ll involve Perry Hughes and Emily Raskin. There’s no mention of anyone else on the current team joining the project.

“I’ve scrubbed the email accounts of the rest of the team, too. Some folks have been sending out resumes. Your girl, Maddie, has been in contact with Doctors Without Borders.”

Gunn felt his chest tighten at that news. She was thinking ahead. She should. So why did it bother him that she’d likely be heading off to some other dangerous part of the world?

“What’s been happening on your end,” Stone said. “Tell me what happened with the coax cable. You get any clues about who was responsible for sabotaging it?”

“Eric was assigned to check on the dish. He and Nate found the break. They came straight back to Maddie and me. Both seemed shocked.”

“Did anyone react weirdly when the rest of the folks were told?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“No. Again, everyone acted as you would expect they would. But I decided to search their rooms. I found a satphone other than the one phone Maddie was assigned.”

“Who had it?”

“Hanna Weber. She couldn’t open it. Said she didn’t have the password, and I believe her.”

“So, someone planted it in her room after the coax was fixed?” Booker said.

“That’s my guess.”

“So, maybe you can cross one person off your list?” Stone said.

“I can cross off two. I know Maddie didn’t have time or opportunity to plant that phone.”

“Have you considered there might be more than one person involved?”

Gunn rubbed a gloved hand over his face. “I have. But if there’s more than one, I can’t knock anyone off the list.”

“When I talked to Polardyne,” Stone said, “they were calling a meeting to decide whether to close down the site. Clive said it would be hard given how far into October we are. If it happens, it’s going to be a few days anyway before the weather’s clear enough to get a helicopter out there.”

“So, in the meantime, all I can do is make sure no one’s left alone. I have cameras up so I can keep an eye on the rooms I’m not inside.”

“Swede will continue to monitor phones and email transmissions,” Stone said. “Something’s got to shake loose. Whoever it is must be getting nervous. You watch your back.”

After the call ended, Gunn headed back inside the building.

Maddie was waiting in the kitchen with a hot cup of cocoa ready. “Thought you might need something to warm you up.”

He reached eagerly for the cup and wrapped both hands around it, welcoming the heat entering his tingling fingers. “Thank you.”

“Any news on their end?”

He thought about mentioning the fact Perry and Em were in talks with Polardyne for a new contract, but then he’d have to mention that he knew she’d been reaching out to her former employer, too. He wasn’t ready to have that conversation. Hell, he didn’t like even thinking about what would happen if Polardyne shut down the site. Maddie would be lost to him forever, and the thought made him feel a little ill.

“Thought you were going to get some rest,” he said.

“In your room?” Her mouth curved.

“Miss me?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Guess you’ll find out,” she said, coming closer and lightly hugging his waist.

When she leaned into him, so close she couldn't miss her effect on him, he said, "Careful there."

Her hand smoothed over her cock. "Think I'm scared?"

He set his cup on the edge of the counter and reached around her to clutch both globes of her nicely rounded ass. Then he kissed her, loving how her chest rubbed against him and her body melted into him. "Tonight, I want the light left on."

Her eyes widened, but then her mouth formed a small pleased smile. "You mean I'll get to see what I've been touching?"

His gaze locked with hers. "I'm not pretty, Maddie."

She reached up and touched his scarred cheek. "I've felt them. I already know what's there—and I'm not perfect either."

"You are to me."

CHAPTER 13

They made love with the pale light from the lamp on the bedside table.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

Maddie couldn't have imagined anything more magical. Yes, the air inside the room was cool, and their skin prickled with goosebumps. Yes, the bed was too narrow, but that smallness forced them together, made them roll carefully and move with precision so they didn't find themselves on the floor. Something they joked about when they rested.

Now, Gunn lay on his back with her on her side, her thigh draped over his, her torso snuggled into him and her head resting on his left shoulder. She trailed her fingers over the scars on his shoulder and arm. They were a deep, angry pink and mottled in appearance, satin-smooth to the touch. "This must've been painful."

"I was lucky," he said, his voice gruff.

She glanced up at his face. His expression was neutral. He obviously didn't want to talk about it, but she wanted to know more. "You said you lost friends."

He gave a curt nod. "Those of us who survived the helicopter crashes went through a lengthy rehab." He held up his hand and squeezed it into a fist. "The fact I can hold a handgun and fire it with accuracy now is thanks to that rehab. Others of my friends, those who survived, lost limbs and organs. They had a harder time with their recoveries."

She brought his hand to her mouth and kissed the scars on his knuckles. "I'm thankful you're here."

His gaze left her face, following his hand as it smoothed over her shoulder and across her breast. "You're so perfect," he said, then pulled his scarred hand away.

Frowning, Maddie pushed up from his side and straddled his hips. Then she reached for his damaged hand and placed it on her breast, her own hand covering his to keep it there. “I’m far from perfect. These,” she said, squeezing on his hand to force him to plump her breast, “are okay, but when you go here...” She pushed his hand down to her belly and then over her ass. “My torso is too short, my hips too wide. I tend to gather weight in my belly, and I like food and don’t care to exercise all that much.” She sat tall on his hips. “Have a look. I have flaws. So do you. Yours...” She paused as the backs of her eyes began to burn with unshed tears. “Your scars don’t take away from your appearance, Gunn. You’re strong and built like a fucking brick house. This...” she trailed a finger along the longest scar stretching from his shoulder down to nearly his elbow, “makes me ache—not with pity, but with regret that you felt so much pain. Still, I don’t think they’re ugly. I see all of you, and I’ve never been so attracted to another man than I am to you.”

Gunn’s Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. Then he gripped her waist and raised her high enough he could fit the tip of his cloaked cock against her folds. When he brought her down, he filled her. Maddie sighed and her head tilted backward.

His hands gripped her upper arms and brought her against his chest. “You take my breath away, Maddie Russo.”

His fist in her hair forced her mouth to his, and he kissed her hard. Then he held her hips and lifted and lowered her, doing all the work. Again, she witnessed his strength and gloried in it.

After both found their pleasure, she collapsed against him. “I’m staying just like this forever.”

“Maddie,” he whispered.

She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. His expression was solemn, his gaze

steady.

“I don’t want this to end.”

Everything inside her went still. “I don’t either.”

They were the first to stir in the early morning hours. Gunn took his tablet to the kitchen table while Maddie made the coffee. He watched the feed, choosing one then the other, rolling through the previous evening’s video. Other than trips to the bathroom or the kitchen, the crew stayed in their rooms, Nate joining Hanna inside hers.

He checked the outdoor feeds, scrolling just out of curiosity. The snowfall never let up. Then around three in the morning, a large lumbering figure passed the front door, pausing to sniff, then wandering away.

“We had a visitor last night.”

He turned his tablet toward Maddie, and she gave a soft whistle. “They usually keep to the edge of the ice when they visit the floe. It’s where they hunt.”

“We’ll have to warn the others to keep an eye out.”

“We don’t want anyone surprised, and I wouldn’t put anyone unnecessarily at risk, but we have to hit the ice today. I want to grab the cards at Mateo’s site once it starts to lighten up out there. I’ll have to go through the supplies in the garage to see if I have spare cards to replace them with.”

“We’ll both go armed in case our friend is still around.”

She nodded. “And I need to remind them they all have to be armed now. It’s going to

make things awkward because everyone is going to know it's not just bear safety—it's also because we have to operate on a bit of paranoia that one of our own is a threat."

"Come sit," Gunn said.

She brought her coffee and sat opposite him at the table. When she met his gaze, a blush began to tinge her already pink cheeks.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked as if he didn't already know.

"You're better than an alarm clock."

He grinned, enjoying her blushes. Then he grew serious and rested his elbows on the table. "Have you thought about what you'll do if Polardyne shuts down the site?"

"I... Yeah. I've put out some feelers with some old friends to see if there's any work I can pick up."

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

Gunn smoothed his fingertip over the rim of his coffee cup, before glancing up at her. “Have you ever thought about looking for something stateside? You have skills that lots of places could use.”

She jogged her eyebrows up and down. “You have any ideas? Any contacts I might reach out to?”

He liked that she seemed amenable to considering a pivot in her career. “Hank Patterson, who’s the head of the Brotherhood Protectors, has friends all over the northwest region. I could put a bug in his ear. Maybe you could shoot me a resume, and I’ll pass it along to him or Stone Jacobs.”

“Is there a reason you want me...in the region?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

Gunn wrinkled his nose. “I’m being selfish,” he said. “I was serious when I said I don’t want this to end.”

Maddie’s gaze fell away but then came back, locking with his. “I’ll send you a copy of my resume. Then let’s see what happens.”

He nodded, pleased she was thinking about it and hadn’t shot him down. She had a particular niche experience that was likely pretty valuable to people who needed planners and managers who could set up and manage a worksite filled with experts needing to remain free to do their specialized work. He was asking a lot.

Doors opened and closed in the distance. Footsteps sounded, drawing nearer.

“Morning,” Nate said, the first through the door and followed by the rest of the team, who quickly filled the room. Nate walked to the list on the fridge. “It is Thursday, right?”

“Kinda lose track,” Eric said, glancing at his Smartwatch. “Yeah, it’s Thursday.” He looked over Nate’s shoulder. “Breakfast is on you, Em.”

She sighed deeply but padded to the cupboard to take down the box of powdered eggs.

“I made rolls last night,” Nate said. “Want breakfast sandwiches?”

“How about we make some white gravy to pour on those rolls, with eggs on the side,” Hanna said.

“Add some Tabasco, and I’m in,” Perry said.

Everyone laughed. Breakfast came together quickly.

As they sat finishing up their meal, Maddie cleared her throat. “We had a visitor last night.”

Everyone went instantly alert.

She shook her head. “A furry visitor.”

“We had a polar bear here?” Eric said, his eyes rounding.

“Yeah, sometime around three a.m.,” Gunn said.

“We need everyone to go armed whenever they’re outside,” she said. “And when you

work in teams, someone has to stay alert to your surroundings while the other works, just in case our buddy is still around, looking for something big to snack on. If you see him near your site, radio the rest of us. We'll head your way."

"That means, Hanna, you're with me and Eric today," Nate said, frowning. "You're a shit shot."

Hanna raised her hands. "I don't take any offense to that. I am a shit shot."

Maddie nodded. "I'll have a Navy SEAL with me. I think we'll be fine." She glanced at Perry and Em.

Em shrugged. "We're good. Both of us can shoot well."

In the gray twilight, all seven team members headed out. Maddie had found data cards in the office supplies in the garage, so she and Gunn made their way straight to Mateo's rig.

Gunn kept an eye on their surroundings, looking for any movement, while Maddie pulled and replaced cards. As soon as she was finished, she radioed the others to ask if they needed any help.

Nate responded with an "Affirmative. Have to move that damn drill into place again. I could use another strong back."

"He's got three people," Maddie said to Gunn, rolling her eyes.

Gunn shrugged. "With Eric and me, he can get finished quicker. He's probably worried about that polar bear."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

They drove straight to Nate's site. Eric and Hanna were with him. The guys were already sliding the drill and its components off the sled.

Gunn moved in to help, and they soon had it erected above Nate's hole, and the drill started doing its work.

"The top of the hole's pretty clear. Down where it hits the water, I have to make sure the sides aren't gunked up before I send down my bucket to collect my samples, or it could get stuck," Nate said. "I'd be fucked if that happened."

He connected the drill bit to the barrel and added extensions before dropping it down the hole.

Hanna had brought a big thermos of coffee and shared it with the group standing around, stamping their feet in the cold.

"I'm still bummed the snow came so soon," Eric said. "I was hoping to go fishing at least once." He looked over at Gunn. "There's nothing like fishing from a kayak in the Arctic Ocean."

A snort sounded from Nate, who was standing beside the drill, as it continued to whine. "Wouldn't catch me dead out on the water. Imagine springing a leak? Or some walrus tryin' to join you?"

In the distance, a shot rang out. Followed by two more in quick succession.

Maddie unclipped her radio. "Em, Perry, what's happening?"

When there was no response, Gunn glanced at Nate. “Let’s go.” Both men started moving toward their snowmobiles.

“You’re not leaving me behind. This is my damn site,” Maddie said, hurrying to her machine.

Over his shoulder, Nate called out, “Eric, you finish the drilling. I’ll be back to take the samples...I hope.”

Gunn glanced back at Eric and Hanna. “You both stay here, but one of you has to keep an eye out.”

The three of them, Gunn, Nate, and Maddie, rushed toward Em and Perry’s site.

Coming over a gentle rise, Gunn stood on his machine. In the distance, he saw one figure kneeling over another on the ground. The rugged tripod was lying in pieces on its side.

Knowing they had to have run afoul of the bear, he swept the area with a quick glance but found no trace of the creature.

When he drew closer, his stomach knotted. A thin trail of blood led away from the site. More blood surrounded Perry as he lay in the snow, his leg torn open and exposed to the cold. Em was using her gloved hands, pushing against the large, gaping wound to staunch the blood spraying between her fingers.

With a certainty that chilled his soul, Gunn knew Perry was dying.

Before his engine sputtered off, Gunn jumped off his snowmobile and ran toward the pair.

Perry's face was gray, his eyes unfocused. His breaths came in shallow gasps.

Gunn glanced back at Nate. "Do we have rope in one of the compartments?"

Nate nodded and headed to his machine.

Tears filled Em's eyes above the covering on her face, soaking into the material. She blinked to keep them cleared and looked at Gunn with terror in her eyes. "I was changing out cards, checking the equipment while Perry kept watch. Then he shouted and started waving his arms, running away from me. When I looked over, I saw it—the bear.

"Perry was running toward the bear. He got off a couple of shots, but the bear didn't stop. When it caught him, it shook him like he was a...doll. But Perry must've hit him because the bear dropped him and then limped away." She stared down at her hands. "I can't stop the blood."

She sobbed and leaned over Perry's leg, pushing harder to stop the blood, but Gunn knew the man's flesh was too shredded. He was bleeding out.

Maddie knelt beside Perry's head. "Perry, it's Maddie. I'm here, old friend."

Perry licked his lips. "Maddie...have to tell you something..." he said, almost too softly to hear.

She leaned closer.

Nate came up beside Gunn and handed him a length of rope. Gunn quickly drove his hand under the snow beneath Perry's leg and brought the rope around his thigh and above the injury. Then he tied the rope and tightened it to slow the blood loss.

“Em, you can stop pressing,” Nate said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

She let go and moved to the other side of Perry's head.

"What do you want to tell me?" Maddie asked, tears in her voice.

"It was me... All me..." His eyes closed, then fluttered weakly open. "I killed Mateo. Needed money. No grants left..."

"Who gave you the money?" Gunn asked.

Perry's eyelids drifted closed again. "All me... Cards... Fucking sub. Who gives a shit?"

"Who?" Gunn asked. "Who paid you?"

Perry's gaze focused for a second on Gunn, then went to Em. "Always loved...you."

"Perry..." Em sobbed, then leaned down to kiss his cheek and whisper in his ear.

Perry's chest deflated on a last wheezing breath. Then he went still.

Nate pulled off his glove and slid his hand beneath Perry's neck cover. "He's gone."

Gunn gripped Maddie's elbow and helped her stand. Nate went to Em and lifted her by the waist. "Go to your snowmobile," he said.

Em was still crying as she walked slowly toward her machine.

“We’ll need the sled at the other site,” Nate said to Gunn and Maddie.

Maddie sniffed and then squared her shoulders and turned to Nate. “Take Em with you and leave her with Eric. I’ll stay with Gunn until you get back with the sled. We’ll worry about Perry’s snowmobile and the drill later. We might have to get them tomorrow if the weather holds out.” Her breath gusted on a sob. “Shit, I can’t turn off my brain. Perry’s dead, and I’m fucking worried about the equipment...”

“You should go with Nate,” Gunn said, “and get the others back to the facility.”

She shook her head. “I’ll stay with you in case that bear comes back. We don’t know how badly it’s injured. If he’s still looking for a meal, he knows where he’ll find one.”

“I’ll be as fast as I can,” Nate said, then left.

When Nate and Em were driving away, Gunn reached out and drew Maddie against his chest. “You have to stop crying, baby.”

“I know. Eyes freezing.” She gave a sad laugh, and Gunn pushed her face inside his hood to provide her with some added warmth.

“It could be days before Polardyne can get back out here,” she said. “If he’d been injured, and we’d been able to get him back to camp...”

“If his injuries hadn’t been as terrible as they were, Nate could’ve done a lot. The way Perry was...his injuries...I don’t think he would’ve made it if we’d been in the middle of a city. He just lost too much blood. I’ve seen it happen too many times. He didn’t stand a chance.”

“I can’t believe it was Perry,” she whispered.

Gunn's jaw tightened. "I can't either."

CHAPTER 14

Maddie made the call to Polardyne with Gunn sitting beside her in the kitchen. One of their scientists being attacked and killed by a polar bear was horrifying enough, but when she'd relayed Perry's confession, Clive Patton had gone silent. "It was Perry?" he asked. "For money? We just offered him and his partner another contract here on the mainland."

"That's what he said. Maybe he made the deal before you contracted. I don't know," Maddie said. "It's hard for me to believe as well."

"How's his partner taking it?"

Maddie shook her head. "She's inconsolable. She's lost her boyfriend and her partner."

"Perry and Emily were doing good work. Important work. It's a damn shame." He cleared his throat. "I had just scheduled a meeting with the board for tomorrow to discuss whether we should close the facility early because I was concerned for your safety after Mateo's murder. I think, given that Perry has resolved that issue, I should offer you some input regarding that decision. Do you want to talk to your people? I would completely understand if they all want to come home. Morale is hard enough to sustain in that kind of isolation. To have lost two of your crew... Well, I'd like your input before we make a final decision."

Maddie swallowed. She didn't know how they'd feel. She didn't know how she felt—other than numb. "I'll speak with them and let you know."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“Does this mean your tour of duty is over, Mr. Neilson?”

Gunn leaned toward the phone. “There are still some loose ends. I’ll want to talk to Commander Navarro about that.”

“Of course. I’ll wait to hear from you both.”

After the call ended, Maddie pushed up from the table. “I need to rest for a bit.”

Gunn reached for her hand to halt her. “Nate and I are going back out.”

She frowned. “The equipment can wait.”

“From what Nate says, the drill really can’t. And unless we want to sled out that snowmobile, we’ll need to bring it back, too.”

Her gaze went to the window. “Just be sure not to linger out there. We can’t be sure how badly that bear was injured. An injured bear could be even more dangerous.” She didn’t know what she’d do if she lost Gunn, too.

Gunn gave her a nod, not wanting to say anything Maddie might consider a lie later, but wasn’t the sin of omission a form of lying, too?

Still, he didn’t want to worry or upset her. She’d already been through so much. “We’ll be careful. Promise.”

“Take a radio,” she said.

“Yes, Mom.”

Her mouth pursed, and then the tiniest of smiles curved the corners.

He stood and gave her a quick kiss. “See you later.”

After she left the room, he headed to the mudroom where Nate was waiting, his eyebrows rising as Gunn entered. “That was one long phone call.”

“Not really.”

“Then it was one long kiss goodbye.”

Gun chuckled. “Mind your own damn business.”

Nate’s cheeks billowed around a long breath. “So, we gonna do this?”

“Yeah, I think we have to.” Gunn went to the locker, picked out a rifle, checked the magazine, and then chambered a round.

“I didn’t tell Hanna. She wouldn’t understand. Circle of life shit. The bear was looking for a meal, and it was our fault for being out there.”

“I understand that,” Gunn said. “But he might be wounded and deserves to be put out of his misery. If he’s not badly hurt, he knows there are six meals waiting for him in this building. We can’t take a chance he’ll come back. He’s already proven he’s not afraid of us.”

They dressed quickly. Gunn took a radio off the charger and put it in his pocket. The other pocket held his satphone, although the cloud cover was thickening, so it might be wishful thinking that they could make use of it.

Then they rode together, pulling the sled behind them. They drove directly to Nate's site, loaded the drill, and strapped it down on the sled's bed. Eric had taken the samples for Nate and then closed the hole with a flat piece of wood earlier. So there was nothing left to do there.

Then, they headed to Em and Perry's platform. The tripod was crumpled, unrecoverable. Apparently, the bear had crushed it when he'd charged Perry, so they left it. Then, standing at the edge of the site, Gunn pointed out the shallow hollow in the snow where Perry had fallen. Blood was still visible, although crystalized. Soon, fresh snow would hide it completely.

Gunn checked the sky. The clouds were thicker, blocking more of the meager daylight. "What do you think, Nate? Should we head back?"

"That bear was at our house," he said. "Any one of us could be next if we don't end him now."

"Agreed," Gunn said.

After a couple of tries, Nate got Perry's snowmobile started. They followed what could only be bear-size pawprints, deep indentations in the snow. The animal had headed toward the edge of the ice, perhaps to the ramp which offered the easiest access on and off the floe.

Nate slowed his machine. "Don't want to run over another surly bear," he shouted over his shoulder to Gunn.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

Gunn remembered the story Nate had told him shortly after he'd arrived about his encounter with a polar bear. He raised a hand to give Nate a thumbs up to let him know he'd heard him.

No sooner had Nate turned to face forward again than a huge roar sounded to their side.

Nate veered away from the bear that charged toward his machine.

Gunn applied more pressure to the throttle and turned away as well, but he could hear the beast pounding behind him, gaining on him. Ahead of him, he saw Nate turning, halting his snowmobile, and raising his rifle.

Gunn bent over the handlebar to get out of the way of any bullets Nate would fire.

Nate fired once; the bear behind him grunted.

Gunn veered hard to the left and circled around.

The bear was slowing.

Gunn stopped his vehicle, leaped off, and brought up his rifle, slamming the butt against his shoulder. The bear was bleeding; his head was lowered, but he still bore down on Gunn.

Gunn fired, striking the bear's broad chest. Another shot rang out, this one from Nate's weapon. At last, the bear fell against the snow-covered ice.

Nate moved closer and finished the animal. By his expression, he felt the same as Gunn. Filled with remorse, but knowing it had to be done.

“This is a hell of a place you have here,” Gunn said.

“We don’t belong here. Dammit, that’s the last thing I wanted to do. I was done with death.”

The two men shared a glance filled with the tragedies they’d endured and witnessed. Somehow, killing the bear felt every bit as hollow a victory.

“We should get back,” Gunn said. “You got your GPS? It’s getting darker by the second.”

“Keep close on my tail. Snow’s beginning to fall hard.”

By the time they made it back to camp, the snow was thick as they moved the snowmobiles into the garage. Standing at the doorway, Gunn couldn’t see the main building, it was falling so hard, but Nate picked up Gunn’s hand and placed it on his shoulder.

“I’ll lead you back. I know this site like the back of my hand.”

When they reached the building, Nate leaned close to be heard over the sudden howling of the wind. “Maybe we shouldn’t mention exactly what happened out there.”

Gunn raised his voice, “Agreed. Perry’s shot killed the bear.”

“Do you think that’s a chicken-shit thing to do? Like it’s lying?”

“Telling them would only add another burden on them because they’d know we did it to keep them safe.”

They stepped into the kitchen just as dinner was being served, the line forming in front of another bubbling pot.

“Everything okay out there?” Eric asked, passing them plates. “You see that bear while you were out there?”

The women turned to study Gunn and Nate.

Gunn sighed. “We looked for him after we loaded the equipment. He almost made it to the ramp before he went down. He won’t be bothering us again.”

“Damn shame about that bear,” Hanna said. “They’re already suffering because the ice is disappearing. They’re losing habitat. And then we come along...”

Nate and Gunn shared a glance. Nate’s mouth twitched at the corners, although his gaze was filled with bitter remorse. Yeah, the less she knew...

As they ate their stew, Maddie talked to the group about her conversation with Clive at Polardyne.

“He wants our input.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“Do you really think they’ll take our opinions into account?” Hanna asked.

“I’d think they’d be about ready to cut their losses,” Nate said. “We’re two down now. We’ll be working our butts off to accomplish everything we’re charged with doing.”

Maddie shrugged. “I guess it depends on how strongly we’d oppose a decision to leave. Every one of us would have to agree to stay. Take tonight to think about what you want to do.”

“Don’t take anyone else into your consideration,” Nate said, looking at Hanna. “Do what’s right for you. There will be no judgment.”

Nate went to a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out a small flat box, paintbrushes, and then half-filled a glass of water. When everyone stared, he shrugged. “Choose your own way to meditate on this.”

The room emptied, everyone threading through the doorway, most heading down the hall to their rooms.

Gunn followed Maddie, who headed to Mateo’s office. Once inside, he closed the door behind them and leaned against the wall as she uploaded the data she’d retrieved earlier today.

“You must think I’m some kind of robot,” she said.

“Nope. You’re going through the motions. Anything to keep your mind from

dwelling on what happened out there.”

“I can’t imagine the pain Perry suffered...the fear...”

Gunn remained silent.

When she finished her upload and pulled the data card from the computer, she turned in her chair. “Did you find the bear dead?”

Gunn shook his head.

“I understand. Thank you.”

He cleared his throat. “Do you buy it? Perry’s confession.”

“Why would he lie?” Her eyes widened. “You think it was Em.”

“Perry seemed to be...easy-going.”

“He was an environmentalist, through and through,” Maddie said. “And not a blow-up-the-earthmovers kind of tree hugger. But...Em?”

“Something about her never felt quite right to me,” he said. “After Mateo died, she was quick to decide to stay when she’d appeared so devastated at first. It was almost like she was waiting for someone to talk her into staying, but when that didn’t happen, she pivoted on her own.”

Maddie frowned. “Do you think she had the strength to strangle Mateo?”

“If she surprised him somehow, coming up behind him. Think about the amount of clothing he wore. The gloves. Could he get his fingers under whatever she used to

strangle him? All she had to do was keep behind him while he tried to get his feet under him...”

“So, it’s entirely possible.”

“And Perry loved her. If he figured it out, he used his last breath to give her an alibi.”

“How do we prove it?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know if we can. Polardyne will be happy to close that chapter. Any evidence, if there was any, will be lost in the snow and the melt-off.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to vote tomorrow. I don’t know if it’s my place. I’m just the babysitter, but I don’t feel comfortable knowing it’s possible she’s behind all of this.”

Gunn sighed. “And how can we tell anyone else when all I have is...suspicion?”

Maddie rubbed a hand over her face. “I’m going to shower, then head to bed.” She glanced up at him. “Join me?”

CHAPTER15

Long after Maddie fell asleep, Gunn lay there holding her while he stared at the dark ceiling. He had some thinking of his own to do.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

If the team decided to stay, and Polardyne decided to salvage what they could of the work they were contracted to do, Gunn doubted they'd want to entertain any half-cocked suspicions he might have regarding Emily Raskin's guilt.

Was it fair, if Em was innocent, to tell the rest of the team? If he told Navarro, would he be able to convince his higher-ups that Gunn needed to stay on-site for the duration? It couldn't be cheap to keep him there. If he offered to stay on his own dime, would they allow it, given he'd be expending their resources?

After seeing how his own headquarters operated, he didn't think the Brotherhood Protectors would mind if he stayed. They'd likely continue to provide him support should he need it. That wasn't an issue.

But that was all dependent on the folks on this site deciding they wanted to face the winter on the floe after everything they'd already been through.

They might. They were a dedicated bunch.

If they learned tomorrow that they had to prepare to abandon the site, he wondered if he had enough time left to convince Maddie that their relationship was worth pursuing. Yes, she'd said she was willing to float a resume with Hank or Stone, but would she really give up the life she'd been leading to follow him back to Montana?

Gunn drew a deep breath and willed his mind to shut off. He needed to rest, or he wouldn't be worth a shit to anyone tomorrow.

Just as he was drifting off, he heard a noise. It was distant, muffled by the wind, but it

sure sounded like an engine firing up.

Frowning, he slipped his arm from underneath Maddie and sat on the side of his bed, patting the bedside table until he found his tablet. Then he opened the feed from the monitors, tapped on the one to the garage, and stared at the open door. From the angled view from under the eave of the roof, he could see one snowmobile was missing.

He reached behind him and shook Maddie's arm. "Maddie, wake up."

"What?" she mumbled. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Wake up, Maddie. Someone took a snowmobile out."

He put down the tablet and moved in the direction of the door to feel for the light switch and turned it on. Then, he began picking up his clothes and dressing.

Beside him, Maddie flipped off the covers and stood. She, too, dressed quickly. "You saw someone leave on your spy cameras?"

"I heard an engine in the distance. When I checked the feed, I could see the open garage and one empty space where Nate's snowmobile was parked last night. I didn't take the time to rewind and see who it was. I need to get out there."

"Nate's snowmobile? Do you think he went out in this weather?" She shook her head like she was trying to make it make sense, but she was likely too tired to jump to the conclusion he had.

"It wasn't Nate, but we'll check on our way outside."

"Who then?"

“Em. I think it was Em.”

“How—”

“A feeling, baby. My gut’s rarely wrong.”

Dressed, they moved into the hallway and began knocking on doors.

Nate swung open the door to Hanna’s room. “What’s up?”

“Someone left the site,” Gunn said, moving to the next door and knocking.

“Jesus, fuck,” came a muffled voice inside Eric’s room. When his door opened, his gaze widened at seeing Gunn, Maddie, and Nate standing at his door.

Maddie moved onto Em’s door and didn’t bother knocking. She turned the handle and pushed inside.

Over her shoulder, Gunn saw that her bed was neatly made, and an envelope rested on her pillow.

Maddie moved quickly, snatched it off the pillow, and pulled a single sheet of paper from inside. Her gaze scrolled down the page, then looked up at Gunn. “You were right. Em killed Mateo.”

Eric stepped around Gunn and grabbed the letter from Maddie. “Jesus, fucking hell. This is a suicide note. ‘I can’t live with the guilt. After I killed Mateo, at least I still had Perry.’” He glanced up at the group. “What did you mean, Maddie? Gunn was right about what?”

Everyone looked at Maddie.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“Something didn’t smell right about his confession,” Gunn said. “Perry didn’t strike me as being capable of murder. But I wasn’t going to share my suspicions with the group because that was all they were—my suspicions.”

“And now, Em’s out there in the dark...” Nate said, his eyebrows lowering. “In a fucking blizzard.”

“I think I might know where she’d go,” Gunn said. Looking at Nate, he said, “I’ll need your GPS.”

“No fucking way. I know this iceberg better than you. I won’t get lost or flip my machine. Tell me where you think she is or come with me.”

Gunn glanced at Maddie. “Before you say a thing—you aren’t coming. We don’t need to risk more than Nate and me to the elements. We’ll bring her back.”

Maddie scowled but gave him a sharp nod. “Take a radio—”

“And a rifle,” Nate finished.

The two men returned to their rooms to dress in their thermals. Then they sped to the mudroom to finish dressing. Both pulled rifles from the locker. Gunn grabbed a charged radio.

Maddie stood next to the door leading outside as first Nate and then Gunn stepped through. Gunn turned in the doorway and gave her a quick, hard kiss before he shut the door behind him.

“Let’s take two snowmobiles,” Nate said, once again leading the way.

“Still got that GPS?”

“In the compartment on my snowmobile.”

“Man, I hate to break it to you, but she took your machine. It was closest to the door.”

They strode through the open garage door and searched until they found another GPS. Then, they dollied the machines out onto the snow and closed the garage behind them.

“So where is she going?” Nate asked.

“Back out to her platform. Back out to where Perry died.”

Nate nodded. “Let’s hope we get there fast. If she’s decided to end herself...”

They started their machines, and Gunn followed Nate into the darkness.

The darkness around them felt heavy, nearly suffocating. With the only sound being the hum of the engines, Gunn felt as though everything narrowed to the space lit by their headlights. Remembering how the polar bear had surprised them from the side earlier that night, he had to fight the urge not to stare into the darkness. He had to keep his focus on Nate’s machine, or he’d collide when he slowed or lose him if he moved too far ahead, cut off from sight by the snow swirling around them.

If they didn’t find Em where Gunn thought she might have gone, it wouldn’t make sense to look elsewhere. They couldn’t see a wide enough area in front of them. They’d be hunting in endless straight lines, perhaps passing by her within mere feet and never knowing it.

But the GPS devices had their sites programmed. Hopefully, Em had used hers to get to her destination.

Ahead of him, Nate raised his right hand in a closed fist and slowed.

Gunn slowed to a stop behind him.

Both men vaulted off their machines. Gunn came alongside Nate's, which still had its headlight beaming to cut through the darkness. Dead ahead, he could see a figure sitting in the snow.

Em's outer cold-weather gear sat in a neatly folded pile beside her as she sat cross-legged next to the spot where Perry had died.

Gunn and Nate arrived by her side. Although sitting, she was unconscious. For a second, Gunn feared she was frozen in place, already dead.

Nate picked her up and turned her to face the light. Her eyes were closed, her skin blue-tinged. He felt for a pulse on the side of her neck.

"Her heart's still beating," Nate said loudly, "but it's slow."

"We need to get her dressed."

The men began pulling on her clothing, a difficult task requiring them to remove their own gloves. But at last, they had her dressed and pulled on their gloves over their quickly freezing hands.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“There’s rope in my compartment,” Gunn said, lifting Em and draping her over his shoulder. “You’ll have to tie her to me so we can get her back to camp.”

Nate moved as swiftly as he could through the thick snow, Gunn on his heels. Gunn waited while Nate searched the compartment behind the seat. Then Nate held up the rope, Gunn placed Em’s feet in the snow for Nate to hold until Gunn stepped over his snowmobile and started the engine. Then Gunn placed her behind Gunn on the seat and began to tie her arms to Gunn’s arms, and then looped the rest of the rope around both their middles to hold her in place.

Gunn radioed the camp to tell them they were heading back and to turn on the stove, open the door to warm the kitchen, then gather every blanket they had and ready the table for Em.

“Stay on my ass,” Nate said unnecessarily before climbing on his machine.

The return trip felt like it would never end. All the while, Gunn worried that she was already too far gone, that he’d be delivering another dead body to Maddie.

Maddie saw the headlights just before both snowmobiles halted in front of the door to their facility. Together, Eric and Maddie untied Em and carried her into the building. The snowmobiles moved away, likely to the garage, but Maddie had too much else to worry about.

Inside the kitchen, the room was warming, and a thick layer of blankets was spread over the table. More were piled on a chair. They carried Em to the table and quickly began pulling off her snow-encrusted outer gear down to her thermals, which were

slightly damp.

“These have to come off, too,” Maddie said,

Hanna moved in to take Eric’s place, and the two women stripped Em to her panties and bra. Maddie glanced at Em’s dark fingers and toes, but didn’t have time to worry about her extremities, she had to save her life. They threw blankets over her body.

“She needs body heat. You’re the only one not in winter gear, Hanna. Get in there with her,” Maddie said, holding up the blankets. Hanna slipped between the blankets and snuggled close to Em’s body.

Maddie stripped off her gloves and jacket and tossed them away, then went to the kettle she’d already heated. Four hot water bottles, every one that she could find, were lined up on the counter, and she filled them with the warm liquid, handing them to Eric, who placed them between the layered blankets, not directly on either of the women, to speed the warming of the blankets.

Nate and Gunn strode into the kitchen.

“Good work,” Nate said, his gaze going to Hanna who gave him a little wave. He went straight to Em’s head and felt for a pulse. “It’s stronger than it was. That’s good. Got my kit?”

Maddie went to the first aid kit she’d retrieved from the mudroom and handed it to Nate. He removed a digital thermometer and lifted the blankets to place it under Em’s arm. When it beeped, he removed it. As he studied the reading, he frowned and handed the thermometer to Maddie.

It read ninety-two degrees. Low, but Maddie had expected worse.

Nate pulled out his stethoscope, warmed the disc in his hands, and then slid his hand under the blankets to listen to Em's heart. "She's improving," he said, "less sluggish, but not an irregular beat."

"I'm going to get out of this gear," Maddie said and left the room. Once outside the kitchen, she headed straight to the mudroom. Her movements were jerky as she flung off her jacket, kicked off her boots, and pushed down her cold-weather pants. When she had them off, she wadded them in her hands and threw them against the wall.

"Here," came a voice beside her.

A hand appeared in front of her, holding a jacket. She grabbed it and tossed it at the wall, too.

"Feel better?"

She shook her head, determined not to look back at Gunn. Her eyes were quickly filling with tears.

But Gunn had another idea. Hands landed gently on her shoulders, turning her. A finger tipped her chin upward. She couldn't clearly see his dear face through the shimmer of tears.

"Baby, it's okay to cry," he said, pulling her against his chest.

Maddie sobbed and clutched his T-shirt in her hands.

Kisses landed on her forehead, her temple, her hair. She slipped her arms around him and clung to him while he smoothed his hands up and down her back.

When she quieted, hiccupping now and then, he bent and picked her up, then carried

her to a bench and held her on his lap.

“I can’t do this. I can’t be here.”

“You have a choice,” he whispered.

She rested her forehead against his chest. “I should go back inside.”

“Only when you’re ready. You don’t have to be strong all the time.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

“Her fingers and toes; she’s got frostbite. She was really going to do it. Kill herself.”

“Yeah. We found her sitting in the snow next to where Perry fell.”

“She caused all this. Am I terrible for being glad she felt pain?”

“No, you’re human, Maddie. You have a right to be angry with her. They were your friends.”

She raised her face, inviting his kiss, and he gave her a sweet, soft press of his lips.

“Ready now?” he asked.

“Yes.”

They returned to the kitchen. Hanna was standing beside the table now, and Em was stirring on the table, moaning softly.

She noted that Hanna’s expression was set. Soft, empathetic Hanna looked at her friend with a hint of disgust twisting her lips.

Nate moved from where he’d been leaning on the counter. “I’m making tea. I want to get her up to drink a cup. I think she’s playing possum now.”

Maddie nodded, then glanced at her watch. “I’ll have to call Polardyne soon. We need to make our decision.”

“Like they’ll give us a choice after what we found out? After what she did?” Hanna

said.

“Let’s vote,” Maddie said, not responding. “In this moment, we decide our own fates. Who wants to leave this place? Raise your hand if you vote to get the hell off this island.”

Nate, Eric, and Hanna raised their hands. As did Maddie.

“I think it’s the right choice,” Gunn said.

“When she’s recovered enough,” Maddie said, tilting her chin toward Em, “she’s confined to her room. We’ll have to take turns watching to make sure she stays there. We’ll also have to remove anything she might use to try to take the easy way out again.”

Everyone nodded.

“Then we’ll have to start tearing down the platforms. Take your last readings. Upload them. Then, close out your reports. I want us ready to leave when the weather clears, and they can get helicopters out here.”

Nate picked up the teacup on the counter and dropped the teabag into the trash. “Gunn?”

Gunn moved toward Em and lifted her, blankets and all, and set her down on a chair.

Nate placed the cup in front of her. “Drink it down, Em. I’ll help you if you’re still shaky or if you can’t hold the cup with your hands the way they are.”

Em blinked open her eyes and swept the room with a glance before looking down at her cup. “I’ll manage,” she said, her voice sounding hoarse.

Everyone began moving around the kitchen, not paying her any mind. She didn't deserve their attention anymore.

Nate pulled out a pan from the refrigerator. "I made cinnamon rolls. Want me to heat them up?"

"I'm not waiting that long," Eric said, pulling down plates.

Everyone took a plate and then pulled a roll from the pan. Then they sat and ate their rolls, discussing how they'd organize to accomplish everything they'd need to do to get ready for their departure. They ignored Em, who sat with her shoulders hunched as she sipped her tea.

EPILOGUE

A week later, Maddie watched as the Polardyne helicopter departed, fully loaded with its precious cargo—all the site's data-gathering devices that had been carefully packed for the trip back to Polardyne. Their mission was complete.

Just the day before, the weather had finally broken. Clear skies had meant the arrival of the RCMP investigator, Lieutenant Commander Navarro, and Clive Patton from Polardyne.

The Mountie had taken Em into custody and took Em's confession letter into evidence. Over the last week, Maddie's team had heard Em's story because she hadn't been able to stop herself from talking, and they relayed everything they'd learned.

Em had been approached by a Russian who'd promised her a berth on the boat their government was sending into the Arctic the following year. Her research would be fully funded, and she could study sea creatures to her heart's content—if she'd plug a

device into her computer. That's all that was required of her.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

She hadn't realized that her little device involved Mateo's top secret work for the military until her cell phone had dinged, and a face-to-face meeting had been requested by her "handler" behind the garage the night before Mateo died. The groove at the edge of the ice that her teammates had discovered had been made by the small boat her handler had used to access the site to threaten her into compliance until she agreed to do what he wanted—stop Mateo's transmissions for the next few days while their sub moved through the area.

She'd learned that her little plug-in device had given entry into the site's network, and hackers had broken into Mateo's computer to alter his transmissions going to Navarro. Navarro had noticed the incursion into his system and asked Mateo to bypass the router to send out his next data set.

Em had been horrified by the entire situation—not because she'd betrayed Mateo and her country, but because she'd realized that she, as an American citizen, could be implicated, even imprisoned, for helping a foreign actor obstruct Mateo's effort to detect the Russian submarines. So, she'd acted, deciding the only way she could stop Mateo's transmissions was to kill him.

After learning everything, the team turned away from Em. She was left in isolation, her meals arriving at her door, but no interaction was offered other than escorted trips to the latrine and shower.

No one had watched as the Mountie led her away.

Commander Navarro had retrieved Mateo's computer and the box from Mateo's platform. He hadn't mentioned to Gunn or Maddie whether the data they'd continued

sending him had been worth it. That information was “need to know,” or so Gunn said. Maddie really didn’t care. She was glad not to have that burden on her anymore.

Clive had arrived with checks cut by Polardyne. A severance that was beyond generous for compensation for all they had suffered. He also brought glowing letters of recommendation for them to use while searching for their next jobs. A ship would arrive the following spring with workers to break down the site to recover what they could before the ice melted.

Another helicopter would arrive the following day to take the remaining team members back to Cambridge Bay.

Maddie stood looking out the kitchen window at the gray twilight.

Behind her, footsteps echoed in the distance, drawing closer.

She turned to find Eric, Nate, Hanna, and Gunn arriving, carrying boxes that they set on the table.

Curious, she walked closer and peered inside. Her eyebrows shot up.

Nate shrugged. “It’s our last night. I figured we should have a feast to celebrate going home. I rustled up canned ground beef to make some hamburgers, summer sausage and a brick of cheese for an appetizer, plus some canned peaches I thought I might use to make a giant cobbler. What do you say?”

Maddie didn’t feel the least bit hungry, but she saw the need in Hanna and Nate’s expressions to share something happy after all the tension and tragedy. Blinking away some pesky tears, she grinned. “We need some music.”

Gunn raised his phone, “Hey, Siri, play some classic rock.”

Later, after they'd gorged until they'd nearly felt ill, everyone retired to their bedrooms, ignoring the dishes in the kitchen. Maddie would get up early in the morning to take care of them herself. Her last act as the team's "babysitter."

"That was fun," Gunn said, a finger tracing the edge of her jaw.

They'd made love, and she felt a little sleepy to go along with her food coma.

"It was. I didn't think I'd be able to eat."

"They needed that. A night of normalcy."

"I'll miss them."

"I know you will. They're good people."

She came up on her elbow to look down at him. "Were you serious?" she whispered.

"I'm always serious," he said, a smile stretching his mouth.

She rolled her eyes. "About me coming to Yellowstone."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you want to?"

She frowned, not liking that he hadn't said more. Was she going to have to do everything? "Do you want me to?"

Gunn pulled her over his body and framed her face with his hands. "With all my heart, I do."

She looked away, blinking at tears. "I never cry this much."

“I’m not afraid of tears. I prefer your smiles, but you never have to hide tears, baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:46 am

She closed her eyes for a brief second. “I sent an email to your Stone Jacobs. I included a copy of my resume. He says he has a couple of ideas. One involves a certain wolf sanctuary in the area, and the other idea involves a congresswoman who lives on a nearby reservation. They both need good people, people with my skills. I thought it was a little odd he had two ideas that just seemed to pop into his head.”

Gunn grunted. “I may have mentioned I hoped you’d want to come back to Yellowstone with me and that you might be looking for work.”

She dug a finger into his side. “You do not have to arrange jobs for me. I’m perfectly capable of finding my own.”

“But they sound interesting, don’t they?”

“You mean, up my alley? Working on causes I can get behind?”

“Yeah. I like that you want to make the world a better place. I just want you to choose a place close enough we can be together.”

She pressed her lips together, then decided to take the plunge. “I’m falling for you, Gunn. Don’t ask me to come if you don’t feel the same way.”

“Well, that puts me in a bind,” he said, his tone wry. “Because I’m already in love with you, Maddie Russo.”

Relief flooded her, but before she got any weepier, she gave him a quick nod, then lay her cheek against his chest. “He mentioned they’d have a room ready for me at

the lodge in West Yellowstone.”

“That room’s mine. And it’s ready.”

“Good.”

His chest shook, and he lifted her face. “That’s it? Good?”

“What more do you want me to say?” she said, grinning back at him.

“I don’t know. You should be worried about my intentions. Ask me for a ring.”

“You want me to jump straight to that? No living in sin for a while to make sure we’re a good fit? Don’t guys like to tread more cautiously into relationships?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need more time to know I want you in my life. I want to marry you, Maddie. I want kids with you. A dog with you. I’ll even accept a cat or two.”

“That’s quite a sacrifice.”

“I thought so.”

Maddie laughed. “Well, so long as we’re both thinking along the same line. Yes.”

“You’ll marry me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, now that we have that over with...” He let out a deep, relieved sigh and then closed his eyes.

She dug her finger into his side again. “Not gonna celebrate?”

“We just ate a month’s worth of meat rations.”

Her gaze hardened.

“Oh, that kind of celebration.”

Somehow, he managed to roll them without landing on the floor. Gazing up at him, she could see every adventure she’d never known she wanted to experience there in his pale blue eyes.