

DRAGONS OF
FROST AND FIRE

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ONE

The floatplane touched down on Silver Lake, spewing sheets of water into the air. Pressing her icy hands against the passenger window, Kit Soriano tried to force back a shudder. This far north, the Rocky Mountains peaks thrust into the sky like teeth – old teeth, cruel teeth, with glacial lips pulled back into a snarl.

“Silver Claw,” the pilot called over his shoulder. “Last stop of humanity.”

David Soriano peered out his own window, then reached his hand across the seat to grip his daughter’s cold fingers. Silently they stared at this terrible place where they had come to find answers. Beyond the narrow beach, a few weather-beaten buildings made up the town. Past that, mountainous ice caps blended into clouds in every direction. At the north end of the lake, a glacier hundreds of feet high lay between the mountains like a mythic sleeping monster. Aqua and blue ice shone translucent in the sunlight.

“This is what mom tried to describe....” Kit gripped the dragon-shaped knife hidden in her pocket – she was going to need every ounce of magic her mother had said it possessed. There was nothing else left for her to believe in.

The pilot eased the plane to the dock and cut the engine. Kit’s ears still thrummed with the vibrations, when a series of rumbles and cracks rolled across the lake and through the skin of the plane. An ice monolith slowly split from the glacier and crashed into the water. Spray shot a hundred feet into the air. Shock waves raced across the lake, rocking the plane.

When Kit gasped and clutched the armrests, the pilot laughed.

“That’s Silver Snake Glacier.” He pointed to the ice cliff. “In spring it breaks up some — calving, it’s called. But you’ve never heard anything like the roars and howls that come from that ice snake in winter. I was holed up here one year when an early blizzard rolled in. I swear I thought the noise alone would kill me.”

Kit forced herself to stare impassively at the forbidding Alaskan landscape. “I’m not afraid of noise.” She would not, *would not* let this place defeat her.

The pilot shrugged. “Hope you’re not planning to stay too long,” he warned. “Once winter gets her talons into this country, it can cost you your life to go outside of town.”

“We’ll be back in New York by winter,” her father said. “We’re only staying a couple of weeks.”

Until we find her, Kit vowed.

The pilot heaved himself out of his chair, wrestled with the door, and showed them how to scramble down to the pontoon and then jump onto the dock. Kit shivered. Even though it was mid-August, the Alaskan air was cold through her fleece vest. She warmed up a little as they unloaded their gear.

A dozen of the town’s residents drifted down to the dock, but Kit kept her eyes off the kids. Those kids had lured her mother to Silver Claw — nearly a quarter of them were albino, a genetic mutation. Dr. Nora Reits had been a genetics researcher. Nearly a year ago she had disappeared without a trace in an early fall storm in Silver Claw.

Kit again touched the silver pocketknife nestled in her pocket. *Magic find her*, she prayed silently. Warmth tingled against her skin — the connection was still strong. Relieved, Kit turned her energy to separating their gear from the supplies ordered by the residents.

A lot of folks were on the dock now. In spite of herself, Kit sneaked a look under her lashes. The albino kids had snow-white hair and glacier blue eyes. Unlike some albino people, their sparkling glances showed good eyesight and they glowed with health.

“Dr. Soriano?” A big man with red hair stuck out his hand to Kit’s father. “I’m Pat Kelly, mayor of this place. I wish I could welcome you here under better circumstances.”

Dr. Soriano shook hands with the mayor. “We appreciate your willingness to let us get some closure on my wife’s disappearance.”

The mayor nodded. “I understand your feelings. We lost one of our own boys in that blizzard. This is a hard land – beautiful, but hard.”

“Yes,” Dr. Soriano said gazing at the ring of jagged peaks. “But I’m hoping the clinic will be a useful return for your hospitality.”

“My mother-in-law will keep you busy, even if no one else does,” Pat replied with an easy smile. “It’s a long flight to Anchorage when the problems are the aches and pains old folks feel every time the weather changes.”

As Kit reached up to grab the rest of their bags, she drew a deep breath. After all the setbacks and problems, she could hardly believe they were really here.

It had taken her father weeks to work out their journey. Getting to Silver Claw would be no problem – a regular flight from New York City to Anchorage and then they could book seats on the floatplane that delivered supplies to the town every couple of weeks. But inquiries about where to stay had been discouraging. There was apparently no reliable Internet connection that far north, and so all communication was by snail mail. A letter from the town council, signed *Mary McGough, Secretary*, had been brusque. The council regretted there was no hotel in Silver Claw.

Dr. Soriano’s lips had thinned as he read the letter aloud to Kit.

“Isn’t she the person Mom rented a room and office from? Wasn’t it above a store or something?” Kit had asked.

“Yup,” her dad said. “Let’s try this one more time.” That evening, he wrote back politely requesting that he and his daughter rent the room that his wife had previously occupied.

Three weeks later a second response from the town secretary stated that she was using the space Dr. Reits had rented for storage and so it was no longer available.

“I don’t think they want us,” Dr. Soriano had told his daughter over macaroni and cheese.

“I don’t care. You promised me...” Kit looked challengingly into his eyes.

“And I keep my promises,” he’d said. “Have some salad. It’s only a little brown.”

After dinner, while Kit had loaded the dishwasher and then tackled physics homework, he had written a third letter to the town council.

Dear Members of the Council,

I am hoping that we will still be able to work out the details of my daughter's and my visit. We are coming to Silver Claw. As east coast city people we don't have a lot of experience with wilderness camping, but we will come with tents and backpacks and set up on the glacier itself, if necessary.

However, I have a proposal for you. I am a medical doctor and I'm willing to operate a free clinic for the residents of the area in return for accommodation and supplies while my daughter and I are in town.

We will be arriving on August 12th, with or without a place to stay.

Sincerely,

David Soriano, M.D.

The next response came from Pat Kelly instead of the secretary and it was a lot friendlier. A new cabin had been built for his family and he was willing to let Kit and her dad use it for a couple of weeks. He sympathized with the Soriano's need to see the town where Dr. Reits had spent her last few weeks. The residents of the town would be pleased to welcome them.

Kit and her dad flew from New York on August 11th, spent the night in Anchorage and the next morning boarded the small floatplane.

After all her thinking and worrying, it seemed to Kit that she was in a dream as she stood at the edge of the dock and gazed across the wild landscape. The glacier glistened, shifting colors like a living, crystal animal.

Mayor Kelly turned from Dr. Soriano to the people standing on the dock behind him. "Here, you kids give a hand. Kirsi...Dai...grab some of the bags."

Two of the older albino teenagers, a girl and boy, left the group. Both were tall and strong, their white-blond hair ruffling in the steady breeze. They radiated health and were incredibly good looking. Mesmerized, Kit realized with a small shock that they were better than

good looking – they were the most beautiful teens she had ever seen. They were graceful, perfectly proportioned, and there wasn't even a zit to be seen. Kit thought she could hate them just for that.

As Kirsi leaned down to pick up luggage, she turned cold blue eyes toward Kit. "You shouldn't have come here," she hissed. "You soft city people don't belong." She hoisted the heavy pack over her shoulder with ease and strode away without a backward glance.

The breeze off the lake quickened. Kit shivered.

"You'll get used to the temperatures," Dai said beside her. He appeared about seventeen, a year older than she was. Up close, Kit thought his looks alone could warm her up.

Kit made a grab for her peace of mind and shrugged. "I'm not afraid of the cold."

"That's good because sometimes we get a lot of it. I'm Dai Phillips." He stuck out his hand to shake.

Kit hesitated a split second, then shook his hand. It was so very warm and firm. A responding flash of heat shot through her. This was not normal for her at all.

"I'm Kit." At home the kids either didn't touch or did hand slaps and fist bumps. Nobody under forty shook hands.

Patrick Kelly picked up one of Dr. Soriano's medical cases. "We do appreciate your willingness to run a health clinic even for two weeks, Doc," he said. "Hey there, Jancy. You, Mikey. Help the doctor with his bags." Two red-haired children each picked up a suitcase. "Dai, are you going to stand around all day or are you going to help that little girl out?"

Hot color flushed Dai's face. "Yes, Uncle Pat," he said under his breath. He reached for a duffel. "This yours, Kit?"

"I'll get it," she said. "I packed it. I can carry it." She hoisted it up and over her thin shoulder. "And I'm sixteen...not a little girl." She knew she looked too young and fragile to be in the wilderness. But she also knew that her slender bones were connected to tough muscle.

"Okay," Dai said. "But it's a bit of a hike to the cabin and I'm used to the path."

"Whatever." Kit slid the bag back to the dock, refusing to allow even a flicker of relief to cross her face. She'd jammed it with everything she thought might be useful – survival gear, guidebooks, contour maps, compass, and a Swiss Army knife.

Dai's deep blue eyes searched her own.

"What?" Kit demanded. His intense gaze unnerved her.

Dai leaned over and lifted the bag like it weighed six ounces instead of sixty pounds. "It's good you've come to us — you're the kind that's called."

"Called? Called what?"

"Called by the mountains and wilderness. By the heart that beats up there." Again, his eyes pierced her own. "Your mother was the same. You both belong here. I feel it."

Kit felt a lump rise sharply in her throat so she turned away and stared at the town as though fascinated by the worn clapboard structures. Kirsi stood at the top of the path, arms folded, looking stonily down at the people on the dock. Kit stared back defiantly.

"My mother didn't belong here and I don't either," she turned and told Dai. "I'm going to find out what happened to her and then you'll never see me again."

She picked up a bag and marched up the path toward Kirsi. Other men and children took the rest of the luggage. The remainder of the people finished unloading boxes of supplies from the plane and began hauling them up the hill toward town. Dai strode after her, whistling off-key. Kit glanced back at him. She had never seen anyone so vibrantly alive. And he had talked about her mother. Had he gotten to know her? Would he have information that would lead Kit to her?

Abruptly she slowed down, matching her steps to his. But with a cool glance, he trudged faster away from her, still whistling. Kit's eyes narrowed, but she followed without comment. In a moment she had reached Kirsi. The girl looked her over like she was a dead fish washed onto the shore.

"Stay away from Dai. He has no use for your kind," Kirsi mocked.

"What kind is that, Kirsi?" Kit demanded.

The girl's lips curled into a sneer. "A weak outlander. You'll be very sorry you ever came here." She shoved past Kit, knocking her off balance.

Regaining her footing, Kit glared after her. "I think you will be surprised." She made no effort to catch up, waiting instead for her dad and the others.

"The house is this way, Doctor." Mayor Kelly gestured along an overgrown dirt road that edged the lake. "The clinic building is in

town, but this cabin has an incredible view of Silver Snake.”

The cabin sat on a rounded hill overlooking the lake. The building was made of shaped logs, with a fresh look about them. Shuttered windows along the sides were wide and evenly spaced. A long porch was angled to face the glacier.

Everyone trooped through the screen door, but Kit dropped her bag and leaned on the railing, looking towards mountains and ice. Behind her, voices filled the cabin. But out here, the stillness folded into a sense of being on the edge of another world. Kit breathed deeply, tasting the tang of wilderness, and another acrid scent — sweet and bitter mingled. She tossed her head to let the clean air wash over her. After the long despair, she was coming alive again. Kit remembered how her mother had described this place in her letters...

Silver Snake Glacier drapes the mountains like a huge sleeping animal. It really seems alive, shifting with every color that ever existed. I hope you get to see it some day – it must be one of the wonders of the world! I am going to hike up there and see if I can fathom its secrets. Something that otherworldly must have secrets, Kit. Devin tells me the glacier is riddled with crevasses and caves – a beautiful but deadly creature, I guess. It wakes when the winter storms howl over the mountains....

Dai came out on the porch and stood beside her. Despite herself, Kit was too aware of the warmth he radiated. Of those broad shoulders and lithe build. She'd never been this aware of the boys at home. Pheromones. He must be radiating mutated pheromones and she was feeling every one of them.

Another crack shattered the quiet of the town.

“Loud, isn't it?” Kit said turning to him. She froze. His eyes were a deeper blue. She'd swear they had darkened. Ridiculous. Even weird eyes, genetically mutated eyes, shouldn't change color. It had to be a trick of the light.

“This is a great time of year to be in Silver Claw.” Dai's expression once again lightened to an easy smile. “There's hiking, hunting and fishing during the day and bonfires and get-togethers at night. Mary

McGough at the general store gets in movies now and then.”

“Sounds terrific,” Kit said, “but I already have plans.” She forced herself to turn away from those hot, mesmerizing eyes and look back at the cold waters of the lake. Her mother had said native legends put some kind of mythic beast in those cold depths.

Then Dai’s hand, hot and strong, gripped her arm. “There are no other plans in Silver Claw,” Dai told her. “You’ll be smart to listen to me.” The warning in his voice was unmistakable.

“Or what?” Kit challenged. How friendly or how dangerous was this guy? He was like fire and ice. Already this place was freaking her out, all beauty and danger.

His eyes shifted even darker, making that weird sense of warmth flare through her again. She didn’t know whether he would have answered or not because they were interrupted by the door swinging open. The moment bled away.

“Kit,” her dad called. “Which bedroom do you want?”

“Excuse me,” Kit stepped past Dai and followed her father.

Inside, several men and women had settled on the sofas and chairs. Dai came in after her and crossed over to Kirsi who leaned against the far wall. As they stood talking in quiet voices and sometimes glancing in her direction, Kit felt another surge of anger. Were they talking about her? And why should she care?

In the meantime, two women were opening and shutting the cupboard doors in the kitchen area, calling on Dr. Soriano to admire how thoroughly they had stocked up for him.

“My wife is bringing some lasagna over,” the mayor said. “A bit of a welcome to let you get yourself unpacked and settled tonight.”

“Dr. Soriano,” Dai struck in, “my mother said I’m to ask you for dinner tomorrow at seven, if you don’t have other plans....” He glanced mockingly at Kit.

“Great,” Dr. Soriano said. “That’s very kind. We’ll be there. Now Kit, what about that bedroom?”

Three bedrooms opened off the kitchen-dining-living area, so Kit chose one where the window faced the glacier. While her dad chatted with the people who had helped bring their belongings up, Kit hauled in her bags. Methodically, she unpacked her clothing and filled the drawers of the wooden dresser. She left all her survival gear in the duffel bag, zipped it up, and pushed it far under the bed.

“Kit!” her dad called. “The most marvelous dinner is being spread out here for us!”

The main room was packed with big, loud strangers. It seemed like everyone who had come down to the dock had migrated up to the cabin and brought a few friends along. Did any of those open, friendly faces hide the secret of her mother’s disappearance? She wanted to shout at them, demand they tell her what they knew, but instead she forced herself to paste on a fake smile.

“Please, you must stay,” her father was urging.

With only a brief show of reluctance, everyone dug into the lasagna, salad, bread and meat that all seemed to have magically appeared. Kit picked among the dishes and settled in the remotest corner of the sofa. Dai left Kirsi and perched on the arm beside her. Ignoring him, Kit took a bite of the dark meat. Flavor exploded in her senses.

“Backstrap,” Dai said. “The tenderest and tastiest part of a moose.”

Kit put her fork down but chewed on. It was good — different from anything else she’d tasted. “Great!” she mumbled through her full mouth.

“You’re honored,” Dai said. “That’s probably the last of Uncle Pat’s winter store. He’s the best hunter in town, but we try to only hunt moose in the fall and winter.”

Kit cut another piece of meat and popped it in her mouth. “The only moose I ever saw for real was in a zoo. It was big and sad looking so it seems cruel to hunt them.”

“We have to eat and there aren’t many fast food restaurants in the wilderness,” Dai replied. “Besides, those hamburgers don’t come from carrots.”

Kit took a big bite of her bread to avoid answering. She knew he was right, but she didn’t want to acknowledge that the rules were different here in Silver Claw. With mountains, lakes and glaciers surrounding them, they hunted to eat. They killed to survive.

A burst of laughter filled the cabin. She tried another bite of backstrap. It tasted fine on her tongue. Kit looked around at all the handsome, strong faces. She would learn what they knew, she vowed. And if they had secrets, she would find them.

Despite their protests about letting the Sorianos unpack, the townspeople didn’t leave for hours. By the time Kit could finally get to bed, she was too wound up to sleep.

Outside, twilight had eased over the land, casting the mountains into dark relief. The luminous hands on her watch read 11:03 but the sky still shone dusky blue. Kit sat on her bed, wrapped in a quilt, looking out toward Silver Snake Glacier.

It drew her, called her, just as Dai had said it would. Her mom's letters had described the hours she spent hiking by the glacier. She wrote that the sight and sound of the ancient ice relieved her frustrations when the townspeople refused to cooperate with her research.

And that's how I'll start, Kit decided; she would go to the places her mother had described, try to find some kind of clue her mother may have left behind. Looking out the open window at the immense distances and peaks, Kit wondered with a sinking heart whether she would be able to find the places from the descriptions in the letters. In New York, hemmed in by buildings and streetlights, she had not been able to grasp the vastness of the landscape.

Her father came in, set a lantern on the table beside her bed and sat down.

"They seem like nice people around here," he said at last.

Kit rolled her eyes. "That's what Mom said...until they found out what she was doing."

Her hand slipped under her pillow to touch the knife and the packet of letters. In the last one, Nora Reits had written in an excited scrawl from her office over the general store. She had said she would try to slip the letter into the outgoing mail sack before the floatplane arrived. This flight, she was sure, would bring lab results for the blood samples she had coaxed from one albino boy. Kit got the letter two days after her mother disappeared.

"Kit, it was a simple hiking accident," her dad said. "You know she hiked up there alone, even though the weather was threatening."

"Then why did the lab results disappear?" Kit demanded. "And the searchers didn't find a body. They're keeping her somewhere. I know it! My knife...."

"Kit, don't start about that knife again." Her father rubbed his hand over his face; his eyes were exhausted. Kit fell silent.

If only he would believe what Kit knew against all reason was true. Her mother was alive.

Another crack reverberated through the air. The lantern flickered. Somewhere, out there, Kit knew her mother was alive.

TWO

Her father went to bed. Kit heard him moving around, then a sharp creak of bedsprings and a sigh as he settled in. A few moments later, soft snores drifted through the cabin.

Wide awake, Kit stared out at the far northern twilight remembering the last conversation she had had with her mom.

Their Upper West Side apartment had been warm for New York in late May, but Kit had woken up with the blankets wound around her shoulders as though shielding herself from icy winds. The nightmare of ice and muffled screams had left her shaking. Her mom had heard, and as always, had come to comfort her. Except for the faint bloom of streetlights, the room was dark.

“Mom, don’t go to Silver Claw,” Kit pleaded. She knew she sounded childish, but with the nightmare still throbbing through her, she didn’t care. “I have a terrible feeling about it.”

Dr. Reits unpeeled her daughter from the mound of blankets and held her hands tightly. “Kit, I have to go. I’m a scientist and I received a research grant because an adventurer up there claimed a quarter of the kids in Silver Claw show signs of genetic mutation.” She grimaced. “That sounds like a bad science fiction movie, doesn’t it? No wonder you’re spooked. But it won’t be like that, really – and you’re too old to need me around all the time.”

“It isn’t that,” Kit insisted. “It feels...cold.”

“That far north, it’ll be cold all right. Snow caps, glaciers and mountain peaks.” She startled as the roar of a motorcycle reverberated like a gunshot from the street below.

“Don’t go, mom,” Kit repeated. “Or let’s all go. You and me and dad. He’d like to do research on this too.”

“I know. First time he’s been jealous of me. But you know he’s committed to that lecture series. And you have the state track meet. You have a great shot at winning.”

“I don’t care. We can cancel.”

“Nope. We keep our promises in this family,” her mom said. “Besides, it’s an honor your dad was offered those lectures and another that I was awarded this grant. And your team is counting on you.”

“What about our family?” Kit demanded. “Stay mom...please.”

“Kit, we stick together and take care of our own. But that doesn’t mean we don’t change or grow. Time apart won’t matter if we love each other.” She hesitated, then took a thin chain from around her neck and held it up. From the end hung a slim folded knife worked in the shape of a dragon. A small red gem, the dragon’s heart, shone in the weak light. “I wasn’t going give this to you yet, Kit, but maybe you need it. It’s very special. It’s supposed to be magic.”

“I’m not a baby, mom.” Kit hunched the blankets back up over her shoulders. I only feel like one, she thought bitterly.

The knife twisted slowly, suspended in air. The silvery reflection seemed to grow, to throw more and more light around the room.

“This came from my great-grandmother, Joanna MacLachlan,” her mom said. “She headed north to make her fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush in 1899. When she came out of the bush into Skagway two years later, she brought a baby – your grandmother – and this knife. She would never say what happened, who she had been with or who gave her the knife. But she did say it was northern magic – a native shaman’s artifact for connecting two worlds. The dragon will keep the fire of life in your heart and the silver will find the souls of the people you love.”

“Yeah, right.” Kit muttered. “And the native mythology is full of dragons.”

Her mother half-smiled. “You’d be amazed what the legends say – that there are worlds apart in the sky, earth and sea. But the right artifact and a gifted shaman can connect them all.”

Her mom continued to hold the knife in the half-light, letting the silver shimmer like a beacon.

Kit resisted the urge to reach for it. “How does it work?” she asked finally.

“I don’t know,” her mom said. “But my grandmother claimed that as long as the dragon’s heart is warm, you’ll know the people you care about are alive.”

With a quick flick of her wrist she caught up the knife, letting the chain loop and dangle through her fingers. Opening Kit’s hand, she pressed the knife and chain into it.

“Here, Kit. It’s yours now. Until you pass it on to your own daughter. Keep it near you. When you touch the dragon’s heart, the heat will tell you I’m still safe up there in the frozen north.”

Kit opened her hand slowly. The knife lay across her palm, about six inches long, with the blade folded in — larger, stronger than a standard pocketknife. The silver handle was embossed with intricate symbols and whorls that coalesced into the form of a dragon. Beautiful. Delicate. Deadly.

“It looks old,” Kit said. “Older than your great-grandma would have been.” She turned it over, watching the light play across the design, and then touched the heart etched in the dragon’s chest. Warmth spread from the handle to her hand. Hotter than her own skin temperature.

“Is it working?” her mom asked.

Kit nodded. “Why? How?”

Her mom touched the knife with her fingertip. “I’m a scientist, Kit. I’ve thought of every scientific theory I know and every time I come up blank. It shouldn’t work — but it does. Grandma said it was a shaman’s magic for finding lost souls. There were so many things she knew that people don’t bother with any more. She said this magic came from the silver and that the silver had been given by someone who had loved her more than the world itself.” She paused watching the hypnotic spin of light. “So long as the dragon’s heart is warm, you’ll know I’m fine. I can’t explain, but I promise it’s true.”

She kissed Kit on the forehead. “Slide it under your pillow,” she advised, “and check it each night. Then you’ll know everything’s okay...and that Dr. Nora Reits, geneticist extraordinaire, is making the discoveries of a lifetime. You know how much I want this, Kit.”

Kit nodded, slipped the knife under the pillow and slid down under her blankets. “Well, if you take too long, I’ll come find you. That’s a promise.”

“I’ll be counting on it.” She tucked the blankets around her daughter. “Two months — three at the most. With all the things you have planned this summer, you’ll hardly know I’m gone...”

Except her mom hadn’t come back.

Three weeks after school began, Kit’s world disintegrated. First her dad had been in a head-on that left him cut, bruised and unable to walk. Then there had been the night of the phone calls. Alaskan state troopers reported Nora Reits had been lost in an early blizzard. It seemed to Kit she did not sleep for days after that, though she supposed she must have. Her friends looked at her in stricken silence and clumsily tried to comfort her. And then as the weeks spun past Halloween, everyone gave up hope. On the December night of the memorial service for her mom, she had her first dream.

She stands on a mountain overlooking a town. The sun fades and she is wrapped in cold night, dark as a tomb.

“Mom!” she shouts. “Mom!”

An old lady dressed in the clothes of a century before trudges up the mountain path. Kit doesn’t even wonder why she can see when the night is so black. Closer and closer the old woman comes.

“Well, d’you have a light?” she asks crossly.

Kit reaches into her pocket and holds out the knife. Light glows from the handle, stronger and stronger, until it gleams like a star. The dragon etched in the silver begins to move, beating its wings, bursting into life before Kit.

“Ah, Devin, my love,” the old lady croons. But she isn’t old, any longer. She is young and laughing as she climbs on the dragon’s back and flies away into the night.

Kit stands alone on the mountaintop, holding the knife. Her grief freezes her blood and mind, beyond tears. She looks down at the knife in her hand...

Three nights in a row, Kit awoke from the same dream of the old woman on the mountain before she remembered the knife. Magic. Magic that might find her mother. Frightened, desperate, Kit searched

through her drawers until her hand touched cold metal. Where the streetlight below cast a beam of light through her bedroom window, Kit held up the knife, watching it twist this way and that on its silver chain. Light flickered off the etching, giving the illusion that the dragon wings were beating. Remembering what her mother had said, Kit at last touched the heart of the dragon.

Instantly, heat glowed through her fingertip.

“Mom,” she whispered, willing it to find her mother. But then the air around the sides of the knife misted with cold. And the knife itself, all but the dragon’s heart, frosted with crystals of ice.

“No!” Kit cried and dropped it. In the time between when the knife left her hand, and the handle touched the floor, the ice disappeared. The knife bounced under her bed.

“Kit! What is it?” Her father, disheveled from sleep leaned on the door. “Nightmares again?”

Blinking tears, she had nodded. He had hugged her, offered her hot chocolate and then tucked her in as he had done when she was a child. Then, with the meager comfort of that gone, he had sat beside her, head in hands while tears silently ran down his cheeks. Leaning against his shoulder, she had said nothing then about the knife. But the next day, in full afternoon sun, she had hunted under the bed, held up the knife, and again touched the heart of the dragon. Once again, a jolt of warmth shot through her hand, while hoar frost spiked the knife’s silver edges.

Heat and ice.

So long as the dragon’s heart is warm, you’ll know I’m fine.

But the ice? What did it mean?

The dragon’s heart is warm...

The ice...

She’d made a promise...

She would go find her mother...

It took Kit months of planning and pleading. The nightmares solved it. Desperate her father took her to a psychologist, and surprisingly, she sided with Kit.

“Your daughter believes her mother is still alive because she’s had no closure,” Dr. Fiske had said to Kit’s father. She leaned forward. “Going to the place where her mother disappeared may help.” Kit sat up straight, willing her father to agree.

Dr. Soriano sighed deeply, like the air going out of a balloon. “Last week my sister said I should start dating again and I felt like she’d suggested I cheat on my wife. Maybe going to Silver Claw for a couple of weeks will help us both. When Nora disappeared...when we got that phone call...it was two days after I’d been in the car accident. I couldn’t even go help the searchers...”

“Dad,” Kit took his hand, “I know mom’s alive and I have to look for her.”

“Kit, it’s impossible. It’s been almost a year!” Their eyes locked over the old argument.

“I promised,” Kit had said. “I know it sounds crazy, Dad. But I promised.”

Her father’s exhausted eyes had filled up, too much to speak. But he had nodded yes.

That had been in May, but because of the letters from Mary McGough, it had taken Dr. Soriano weeks to finalize their travel plans.

In a fret of impatience, Kit packed, repacked and again and again checked her research. She had stopped answering her friends’ calls and texts, and the parties that had seemed so important a year before were forgotten. All winter long, when she told her father she was doing homework, she had been searching for information about the town and area — or trying to. She had entered keyword after keyword – nothing. The internet carried more tidbits of facts than the world could use, but all Kit could find out was that Silver Claw had begun as a mining town over a hundred and twenty years before. Unexplained accidents and bitter weather had wrecked the venture. Local tribes claimed that legendary monsters were responsible and avoided the area. Other than the original settlers, only a few people stayed after the mine closed.

Now, all these years later, the town would have been forgotten, Kit guessed, if that adventuring journalist hadn’t mentioned the genetic albinism in a travel article. Kit’s mom had seen the article, connected native legends, applied for and then gotten a grant to research the phenomenon.

Three months after they put her on the plane to Alaska, Kit and her dad got the call from the state troopers that Dr. Nora Reits had disappeared in an early fall blizzard. Townspeople searched by

snowmobile and snowshoe. State troopers searched by air. There was no trace of the woman or the teenager who was with her. And when Dr. Reits' personal belongings were sent home, her research notes had vanished.

Each night and each morning, Kit's fingers searched out the silver knife on its thin chain. Each time it was the same. The rim hoared with frost, but the red gem still glowed warm to her touch. The center was her mother's heart — and it was warm.

Kit had known, *known* that her mother was not dead.

THREE

Drifting through vast empty chambers that shimmer with hues of aqua and blue, Kit stretches and swirls into cracks and crevices. Great white shapes half-open blue eyes and gaze at her in mild curiosity, as if she is part of their dreams. She flows on, silent and without purpose until she is in a small ice cave. She sees her mother, encased in a column of ice, her frozen hands pressing against the sides. A great shape, all claws and dull scales, curls around the column, sleeping.

“Mom!” Kit cries.

“Mom!”

The sound of her own voice woke Kit. Gasping, she pressed the knife close, willing warmth to stream from her own heart to her mother’s in that cold, cold place.

She forced her shaking legs to thrust out of the blankets and walk out onto the porch. Leaning against the railing, she stared upward at the mountains and Silver Snake Glacier. As the clean air rippled into her body, her shuddering muscles relaxed.

Above, the skies flashed with wheeling birds, their trills, whistles and squawks filling her ears. Distant valleys and ravines showed as deep purple slashes against the mountains. Trees carpeted the lower slopes in inky emerald. Farther up, the color changed to luminous green where moss and grass took over. Finally toward the summits, the mountains darkened to bare rock, capped with year-long snow. Kit spotted half a dozen white dots moving against the steep slope — mountain goats or sheep. High above, a bald eagle screamed and dodged a black and white magpie. Kit’s eyes were pulled back to the

lake by a flicker and splash — fish jumping in the early light.

Beautiful. Beyond beautiful. But even as her heart lifted with the splendor and peace of it, her knuckles whitened on the railing. Her mother had disappeared in this place. Kit touched her knife. The edges were still cold but the center warmed hotter than ever before.

I'm coming, Mom, she promised. I'm coming for you soon.

An hour later Dai arrived. Whistling shrilly, he hammered on the door. Reading over breakfast, Kit and her dad looked up from their books and grinned at each other.

“Not exactly like New York,” her dad murmured.

“Are you up, Kit?” Dai called through the screen into the shadows.

Kit downed a last gulp of milky coffee and opened the door.

“Morning,” Dai said. The sun glinted off his hair. He was dressed as yesterday in a tee shirt, faded jeans, and scuffed hiking boots. A backpack hung over one shoulder. “Hi, Dr. Soriano! Mrs. Stone wants to know when you’ll have your clinic open. Her knees are swollen up bad again, so she wants you to look at them. And Uncle Pat said to tell you the office is set up. You just have to hang out your shingle.”

Dr. Soriano spread another glob of homemade blueberry jam on his toast. “Thanks, Dai. I can take a look at her knees this afternoon. But if there’s any real problem, she’ll have to fly out to Anchorage to the hospital there.”

“Oh, she knows that,” Dai replied. “Kit, Uncle Pat asked me to show you around. We don’t want you getting lost on your first day, do we?” His voice only mocked slightly.

She smiled brightly. “Don’t do me any favors. I’m just fine on my own.”

“No you aren’t,” he replied. “The wilderness is no place for soft, city girls.”

Kit’s temper flared. “Sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Yes ma’am.” His eyes shimmered with amusement. “If we were in New York, I would follow your advice. I’d be the soft one then.”

Uncertainly Kit eyed him. “I don’t think soft is the word I’d use. Stupid maybe.”

His mouth widened to a grin. An irresistible grin, Kit thought resentfully. Of course he deserved to be snubbed, completely crushed in fact. But then, she might need him. And he was very easy on the

eyes. Regardless, there was no way she was going to meekly fall in line at his orders. She dropped her eyes for an instant, then resolutely lifted her chin. “Sorry. I told you I have plans.”

Dai glanced at Dr. Soriano. Her father cleared his throat. “Kit, why don’t you spend the day with Dai?” he asked. “You’ll have more fun being with someone who knows the area.”

“I’m not here for fun,” Kit replied flatly.

“We know this is a dangerous place,” her father said. “You aren’t so foolish as to wander around these mountains like it was some kind of theme park. Dai is an experienced outdoorsman.”

“Dr. Soriano,” Dai interrupted, “if she doesn’t want me, that’s okay. I have other things to do.”

“I don’t want you!” Kit snapped. Frustration, hurt and anger struggled for supremacy in her. Didn’t her father get it? Dai would be spying on her for the town, for the people that she was sure had conspired to cause her mother’s disappearance.

“Kit,” her dad said sharply, “this is a kind gesture. The mayor explained that the residents didn’t want us to come because your mother...” he took a breath and went on. “...your mother’s inexperience with the way of life here caused her to take such...risks.” His face was pale. “We...I can’t expose you to the same dangers.”

“Dad! I know the risks!” Kit cried. “And mom had that other boy, Devin with her!”

“Dev should’ve known better.” Dai’s voice smoldered, and now his eyes were nearly navy. “He wasn’t a great woodsman, but he should’ve known the weather was turning. He should’ve felt it in his blood.”

“The point is,” Kit’s father said, “either you accept Dai as a guide or you spend your time helping me in the clinic.”

“Fine!” Kit snapped. She turned to Dai. “I’d like to see the library, please. My mother wrote me that it’s the oldest building in the town. If visiting a library isn’t too dangerous around here!”

“Kit,” her father said warningly.

Dai said nothing but his eyes went smoky at her rudeness. In spite of herself, Kit felt a flush creep over her cheeks. This guy was getting under her skin and she didn’t like it. Not even a little bit.

She refused to look at either of them as she slung her own backpack over her shoulder and strode out the door ahead of Dai.

A tour of historic Silver Claw had not been part of her plan and she chafed with frustration. Before breakfast, she had packed her bag with a guidebook, folded survey map of the region, beef jerky, a full water bottle and compass. In the pocket she'd stashed waterproof matches, a Swiss army knife, four energy bars and a feather-light Mylar survival blanket. All her reading about the wilderness had taught one important lesson — be ready for disaster.

But none of the books had prepared her to be so thoroughly thwarted by her father.

Lips clamped shut, Kit ran down the steps. She would have liked to outpace Dai, but his long legs and easy stride made that impossible. She was aware of his steady glances as they walked.

After several minutes of stalking, seething silence, he touched her arm.

She stopped and glared up at him. “What?”

“It’s going to be a bad two weeks for you like this,” Dai remarked.

“Can’t you get it through your head that I’m not here to have fun,” Kit ground out. “In case you forgot, this is where I lost my mother. I need to do some things...” She looked down at the path, fighting for control.

“So, what are you needing to do, Kit – for your mother?” Dai spoke slowly, searching her face as if trying to look right inside her.

Kit sucked in her breath, hard. Not even Dr. Fiske had asked her what she needed to do. People talked over and around her as if all she needed was the right comfort blanket to get her to forget her mother’s disappearance. They didn’t understand that she needed to do something – not just wait to get over it.

Could Dai help her?

No, she told herself. It’s too dangerous. You don’t know why he is really here.

“I want to go to the places my mother went to,” Kit lied, barely able to keep her voice from quivering. “Mom wrote me letters that described her hikes and what she saw in detail – a lot of detail. I want to see everything she saw. It will help give me closure.” At least that’s what Dr. Fiske said, she thought bitterly.

She glanced at Dai under her lashes, looking for some kind of a reaction. His eyebrows drew together and he continued to gaze intently at her, but said nothing. Kit wondered suddenly if the mayor

had told him to keep her away from anything – to guard the town’s secrets. She would not trust him.

“So,” Kit said briskly, “are you going to show me all the sights of Silver Claw?”

“The library’s at the end of the main street,” Dai said.

“There’s more than one street?” Kit asked, pretending to be incredulous.

Dai’s thoughtful expression lightened. He gestured toward the town. “This is a thriving metropolis – we have *three* streets.”

In spite of herself, Kit laughed and was rewarded by an answering grin. Why was he so good looking? Why did the sight of his easy movements make her skin tingle with warmth? It made it so hard to remember he might be the worst person she had ever met, and she had to remember that. He might even be in on the secret of her mother’s loss. Pushing the confusion of her thoughts aside, she turned toward town, matching his long, fast strides.

“After the library, we can keep looking around, or go get a soda and burger at Mary’s store – whatever you want,” Dai said. “If you want to head out of town, we can hike up along the lake path to Dead Man’s Falls.” He hesitated. “I know Devin showed that to your mom, and she liked to picnic there.”

Kit nodded. “That would be good.”

A few minutes later, they reached the dock where the main street ran upward to the town. Kit saw that the buildings, if they had ever been painted, had lost their colors and faded to the same muted greys and browns as the boulders and snags dotting the slopes. The landscape Kit and Dai had passed was brightly splashed with alpine wildflowers. In the town’s window boxes and gardens, riots of color competed for the eye.

“Wow!” Kit exclaimed. “I thought the winters killed everything. How can they grow all this?”

Dai followed her eyes. “People spend a lot of time gardening,” he said. “It makes up for the long winter when everything’s white.”

Kit stopped by a fence where scarlet roses grew as high as her head. Beside them, bright yellow day lilies tufted out of black dirt. Kit leaned over and sniffed.

Sweet flower scents wafted through the air. Under them came another smell, earthy, like old ashes. Thoughtfully Kit brushed her

fingers over the delicate petals of a flower she didn't recognize. She remembered a paragraph in one of her mother's letters:

You should see the flowers around here. They are bigger and brighter than anything I've ever seen. I'm sure some of them are tropical, so I don't know how they get them to grow. Either they use magic or there's more genetic mutation going on here than I suspected. I'll need plant and soil samples too. The key to this mysterious genetic mutation might be embedded in the natural environment....

"What am I smelling?" Kit sniffed the sweet and smoky smell. "What do they use for fertilizer?"

"Manure and regular fertilizers, I guess," Dai said. "I don't know much about gardening. You should ask Violet Furrow or my mom."

Kit sniffed again. She strained to identify the smell...she should recognize it. Squeezing her eyes shut, she let the scent carry her... *drifting upward on the breeze, breathing gulps of the sweet smokiness as great white wings beat in the sunlight...*

Kit shook her head, to clear the vision. Was being here in this town causing her to dream while awake? The night terrors were enough; if she had to endure them during the daytime, she didn't know how she could stand it.

There had to be something in the fertilizer. Maybe a narcotic or... or some weird chemical. Or maybe the plants had been genetically altered like her mom suspected, creating a drug right in their scent. What was happening in this town that changed the living things?

Dai walked on ahead, but she lingered and sniffed again. A surge of heat flashed in the knife under her sweater. She pulled up the chain and gripped the knife. Hot. The center was hotter than ever.

What was going on? How could that smell burn a stronger link to her mother? What was feeding the magic in her knife?