

BREAKING THE ICE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

*October 21, 9:30 a.m.
North of Bettles, Alaska*

Bryson Faulkner jerked up the collar of her coat as she stepped off the porch of her cabin. She lingered there, basking in the amber light of the late-morning sunrise, surveying her surroundings for any hint of change. Beneath the rough-hewn table she'd lashed for cleaning fish and game, she spotted fresh wolf tracks in the mud, the animals no doubt lured there by the lingering scent of the sockeye salmon she'd had for dinner. There was no sign of the lurking predators now. Nothing stirred except the large raven that took off from a black spruce twenty feet away and zigzagged past her in an amazing display of aerial acrobatics to land on the porch railing.

The bird studied her with intelligent black eyes and let out a raucous croak that ruffled the shaggy ebony feathers of his throat.

"Mornin', Bandit." Even before she reached into her pocket he was in the air again, beating his wings slowly to hover a moment before lighting on her shoulder. She held up her hand and he gobbled the offered raisins, nuts, and sunflower seeds, careful to avoid pinching the callused skin of her palm with his stout bill.

As he ate, she looked past him to the white-capped mountains that surrounded her cabin. Mathews Dome, due north, was the most photogenic peak in her part of the endless Brooks Range. A rounded granite crest 4,600 feet high, it was set off from its neighbors by the Wild River, curving west, and Flat Creek, forking around its base to the east.

But she used an unnamed mountain three hundred feet higher to the northwest, a jagged and fiercely sharp pinnacle, as her weather gauge. The roiling slate gray nimbostratus clouds blowing past the top confirmed the news she'd just received on her satellite phone. A fierce storm was headed her way, fast.

The one-room cabin she'd built with her own hands was nestled in the taiga forest that lined the Wild River at its confluence with Flat Creek. The valley floor between the mountains was wide here, nearly a mile across. Built on a rise to shield it from the high water of spring breakup, the log structure had a matching outbuilding for her snowmachine and tools, an outhouse, and a small cache on high stilts to keep her winter supply of game and salmon out of reach of opportunistic wolves, grizzlies, and other predators of the far north.

She regretted not refueling the plane after her last hop, but she'd barely made it home before dusk. Though Bryson had memorized every boulder and stump that littered her makeshift airstrip, it was still suicidal to take off or land in the dark. The gravel bar was less than a hundred feet long. Any slight mistake and she'd end up in the swift, icy currents of the Wild River.

Once the river froze and she could land on skis, she'd have a longer, wider runway, but the daily window of opportunity to land at her homestead would be frustratingly narrow. The days were shortening fast. In another two months, at the winter solstice, daylight would last only two hours in her little piece of paradise above the Arctic Circle. Almost any job she might take would require her to remain overnight at the nearest improved and illuminated runway thirty miles away in Bettles.

She dropped the few remaining seeds on the ground, and as the raven hopped off her shoulder to go after them, she headed down the trail to her red Piper Super Cub. While the plane warmed up, she freed it from its lashings and carefully inspected the exterior for damage before beginning her preflight checklist. Though she needed to leave soon, she refused to be rushed through her meticulous and methodical preparations.

The high wings of the Super Cub allowed her to taxi close to uprooted trees and boulders as tall as she was, and the model was one of the best at handling impossibly short runways and uneven terrain. Like many other bush pilots, she'd had it specially outfitted for the

punishment it endured on a daily basis, with long, heavy-duty struts, reinforced axles and springs, and a dual landing apparatus that allowed her to set down on skis or oversized tundra tires.

The trip to the Bettles airstrip took less than a half hour. Flying low, she followed the river south as it curved through steep canyons, the clearance to the cliff faces on either side of her wingtips a mere twenty feet or so. Though she knew nearly every mountain, boulder, and tree en route, she was always hyperalert when in the cockpit, because no matter how clear the sky above, the geography of the mountain ranges made the wind a constant and unpredictable threat to small aircraft.

The proprietor of the Den jogged out to say hello as she filled her wing tanks. The Den was the center of all socializing in Bettles, with a bar and restaurant on the ground floor and twenty rooms upstairs to accommodate the hunters, fishermen, hikers, photographers, and other adventure-seekers who used the village as a jumping-off point for forays into the bush. Most were headed to the nearby Gates of the Arctic National Park or Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which together covered more than twenty-seven million acres.

“Hey, kiddo, what’s shakin’?” Jerome Hudson was known by all as Grizz, and it was immediately obvious how he’d come by the nickname. A big brute of a man with massive shoulders, he’d had the unkempt silver-tipped brown beard and swept-back, shoulder-length hair for half his sixty-two years, and his dark eyes and slightly pointed incisors completed the resemblance to his wild ursine cousins. Since the death of Bryson’s father, Grizz had taken it upon himself to look out for her. “Real ball-breaker coming in.”

Bryson glanced once more to the northwest, to assess the thick wall of charcoal clouds streaming rapidly in their direction. “Yeah, I’m headed up past Gunsight Mountain to get that photographer. He’s not equipped for a long-haul deep freeze.”

Grizz followed her gaze. “Gonna be cuttin’ it awful close to get there and back ’fore we’re socked in.”

“What else is new?” She unhooked the fuel hose and tightened the cap on the Piper’s wing. “No worries, Grizz,” she said, smiling at him reassuringly. “Probably won’t be able to get home tonight, though, so save me a bed, huh?”

“Will do.” He laid a beefy hand on her shoulder as she opened the door of the Cub. “Watch yourself up there.”

“Always.”

The photographer’s objective was Dall sheep, which kept to the higher alpine elevations, so Bryson had dropped him off at the edge of a glacier three thousand feet up the side of an unnamed mountain. As she circled above it, she cranked down her skis and checked the glacier for the subtle color changes that pinpointed the hidden crevasses that dotted its surface. The ancient ice inside the crevasses was a deep blue that often shone through the thin, fragile snow bridges that covered them. The overcast sky was a blessing, for it helped her delineate the landscape and calculate her approach. The glare off the snow on a sunny day often made it impossible to adequately judge depth of field, let alone any crevasses or other hazards.

After three passes, she chose her spot, a four-hundred-foot-long expanse of solid white near a moraine at one side of the glacier. Landing uphill, she braced herself for the impact of her skis against the uneven ice beneath the snow and set the Piper down, reducing her speed to thirty-five miles an hour. When the plane had nearly stopped, she tweaked the throttle and turned the Cub around, readying for an immediate downhill departure.

A blast of icy air flash-cooled every exposed inch of flesh and insinuated itself deep into the open collar of her jacket as soon as she opened her door. Muttering a string of curses, she zipped up and pulled on a woolen cap and extra pair of gloves before leaning out to assess the snow depth. A fine powder completely covered her skis and half her oversized tires, so she strapped her snowshoes to her boots before she exited the plane.

The photographer was nowhere in sight, but Bryson wasn’t worried. She’d seen his campsite from the air not far away, and the man had been instructed to hoof it back there, pack it up, and return immediately to their rendezvous point if he heard her plane approach before his scheduled pickup. Unless the wind was fierce and constant, the acoustics in the mountains were exceptional—you could hear the buzz of a small plane long before you could see it approaching.

While Bryson waited, she tramped out a runway with her snowshoes and inspected the exterior of the plane as thoroughly as she had just ninety minutes earlier. By the time the photographer appeared with his pack, she was done with her preflight checklist and had turned her attention to the rapidly deteriorating weather closing in on them.

Dark clouds obliterated all the highest peaks in every direction, the wind was a steady twenty-five miles an hour, and the temperature had dropped to a degree or two above freezing.

“I take it there’s a problem?” her client shouted over the wind as he neared. A fiftysomething freelancer for *Big Game Hunter* magazine, the man wore a ski mask, thermal gloves, and brand-new Carhart insulated coveralls bulging from several layers beneath. He was so horribly out of shape he was gasping for air by the time he reached the Cub.

The plane was idling, and Bryson was standing by the open door to the cargo space behind the seats. “Big storm coming in.” She gestured impatiently for his pack.

He frowned and stood his ground. “I’m not done. I need to—”

“No chance,” she replied curtly and yanked the pack roughly from his shoulders. “Climb in, we gotta get moving.” When he still hadn’t moved by the time she’d stowed his gear, she fixed him with a glare and added, “*Now*, ’less you want to be stuck inside your tent freezing your ass off for a couple weeks.”

Normally, she was nothing but polite with clients, most of whom were middle-aged businessmen from the lower forty-eight. She was used to the looks of apprehension that crossed their faces when they realized their bush pilot was a trim and taciturn five-foot-seven brunette who appeared ten years younger than her forty years, and not what they’d envisioned: some larger-than-life Harrison Ford look-alike who oozed machismo and bragged about his exploits in the air.

But most of her passengers refrained from anything more than the seemingly casual question about how long she’d been flying. This guy’s grilling on the way up had bordered on rude and chauvinistic, and she’d had to force herself to rise above it and remain professional.

They were airborne in two minutes and only fifty feet from the surface of the glacier when they got their first hint of the turbulence to come. The tiny plane shook like it was caught in a high-speed Mixmaster, then dropped twenty feet without warning, the ground rushing up at them with alarming speed.

“What the...is this normal?” the photographer shouted from his seat behind hers. Bryson could picture his expression. Even the most arrogant, macho guys went lily-white at a time like this, but she didn’t have time to confirm her suspicions in her mirror. She was too busy trying to keep the Cub in the air.

“We’ll be fine, just hold tight. It’ll be over before you know it.” She fought the downdraft, pulling hard on the controls, but the plane plummeted another fifteen feet as she curved away from the glacier and over the steep, rocky face of the mountain. They were so close to it she could see the pale hint of a trail etched by decades of goat hooves.

“Fuck!” the client yelled, just before losing his breakfast in a splash of pink-speckled yellow against the right-side window.

“Not helping.” Bryson gritted her teeth against the stench as her own stomach roiled, but she kept her focus on trying to regain control of the aircraft. The wind fought back with a vengeance, however, straining the muscles of her biceps. For every few feet of hard-won altitude she gained, the wind reclaimed half of it again, in bone-jarring lurches that threatened to shake the plane apart.

Finally they reached a bit of calmer air in a wide valley between two mountains, but the low, dense cloud cover kept her flying near the treetops, which did nothing to ease the unyielding grip her passenger maintained on the strap above his head. And the reprieve didn’t last. Soon they were back in the Mixmaster, and thick, heavy sleet began to hammer the windshield.

It was now a race to get back before ice coated the wings and cowling, but the steady headwind limited Bryson’s speed and forward progress. Among the myriad of matters demanding her attention she added one more: to constantly scout for places she could safely put down in a hurry, if it came to that.

Her radio crackled to life. “BTT to A2024B Piper. Bryson, you copy?” The voice, a raspy baritone, belonged to Mike “Skeeter” Sweeney, a fellow bush pilot who worked part-time manning the minuscule FAA station at the village airstrip.

“A2024B Piper,” she replied, relaying the identification tag emblazoned in large black text on the side of the Cub. “‘Sup, Skeeter? Kinda busy here.”

“Grizz asked me to give you a shout. Really squirrely here. Ceiling’s down below two hundred feet, sustained winds thirty and better, and it’s startin’ to ice up like a sonofabitch.”

A glance at her GPS told Bryson she still had eight miles between her and the airstrip. It didn’t sound like much, but it was an eternity in conditions like this, so she kept checking the terrain below for suitable places to land. “Should be okay. Dicey, but seen worse.”

“Roger that. I’ve got the strip lights up full, and I’ll watch you on radar until you get in. Bettles out.”

She spotted another narrow canyon ahead, so she gripped the controls and risked a quick glance in the mirror at her passenger. “’Nother roller coaster coming up. Barf bag’s under your seat.” She hoped the warning would prevent any further splatters on her windows. Visibility was tough enough already, without another dose of half-digested powdered eggs and Spam.

As the man fumbled for her stash of bags, she added, “If you keep from messing up my plane again, I’ll give you a discount on future flights.” It was an easy promise, because the greenish tinge on his face made it clear this was the last time he’d set foot in any kind of bush plane.

Just as she expected, the downdraft in the narrow canyon was fierce, but she’d gained as much altitude as possible before it hit them, so when the bottom dropped out again she was able to keep the Cub from plunging into the river below. More worrisome now were the cliffs on either side of her wingtips. The wind buffeted the plane from side to side with alarming unpredictability, twice putting them within arm’s reach of the rocky façades.

She ignored the mumbled recitation of the Lord’s Prayer from her passenger but took a few deep breaths herself when a subtle change in the whirr of the propeller told her the blades were accumulating a coat of ice.

It was bare-knuckle flying from then on, a steady battle against the wind and sleet, and those last few miles tested every bit of her considerable experience in the air. By the time she lined up for her approach to Bettles, the ceiling was only thirty feet, so she was grateful for her GPS and intimate knowledge of every mile of terrain in the surrounding area.

She cranked the skis back and peered anxiously through the haze of sleet for the airstrip, holding her breath. Skeeter had supplemented the dual strip of landing lights with four blazing fires in fifty-five-gallon drums, two on each end of the runway, and it was these she saw first.

As she made a mental note to buy him a beer, she descended the final few feet and made a perfect three-point landing. Her passenger exhaled loudly in relief, and she glanced in the mirror in time to see him making the sign of the cross.

“Thank you for flying with Thrillride Airlines,” she said cheekily as the Cub rolled to a stop at the edge of the runway. “You can pick up your complimentary beverage at the Den, since our stewardess was too preoccupied to serve you during your flight.” If the eclectic group of individuals who did what she did had anything in common, it had to be their readiness to daily stare death in the face with a sense of humor.

Still clutching his barf bag, the photographer staggered from the plane and headed directly to the roadhouse without a word, oblivious to his gear or the weather. Bryson chuckled. Grizz would get a few dollars from him tonight, at least the cost of several glasses of good Scotch.