

# WHITEWATER RENDEZVOUS

by

Kim Baldwin



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## CHAPTER ONE

### Chicago, Illinois

Megan Maxwell pressed the first two fingers of her right hand firmly against the throbbing in her temple, as she pushed open one of the thick glass double doors that led from the World News Central newsroom to the executive offices. As soon as the door whooshed shut, blissful quiet enveloped her, the first respite in a stressful and very long day. It was 7:15 p.m. and the management wing was dark, but for the light spilling out from under her office door at the end of the hallway.

She made it halfway there before the BlackBerry on her left hip vibrated. Sighing, she reached beneath the tailored jacket of her navy pantsuit for the handset. The display read *911 control room*.

“Maxwell,” she answered in a clipped voice as she returned to the newsroom.

“A small plane has entered the restricted air space around Camp David.” The voice belonged to the executive producer of the sportscast currently on the air.

“Page Shelley to the studio,” she told him. “Extension 7892. She’s probably in makeup. I’m headed your way.” Shelley Vincent and Ted Gilliam were her 8 p.m. anchor team, and of the two, Shelley was by far the better ad-libber with breaking news.

Megan strode briskly past the noisy assignment desk and the four large U-shaped communal writing pods where teams of writers, editors, and producers were preparing for upcoming new shows. She made a point of appearing oblivious to the eyes that glanced her way as she breezed through toward the control room, but she was well aware of the effect she had on her staff. No one had better appear to be idle when the vice president of news was around.

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As soon as she entered the dimly lit control room with its intimidating array of monitors and switchboards, the executive producer she'd just spoken to wordlessly vacated his chair so she could slip into it. There were two rows of seats in the futuristic control center, both facing a wall of monitors. The operations personnel who controlled the massive switchboards, a mind-boggling array of lighted buttons and switches, occupied the front row: audio operator, technical director, robotics camera operator, Chyron and graphics operator.

In the second row, set on risers, were seats and computer terminals for the producer, executive producer, and director. The wall behind them was made of glass. On the other side was the studio, with its wide mahogany anchor desk and blue chroma-key wall for weather.

Megan quickly scanned the Associated Press bulletin on the computer in front of her. It said only that a small plane had violated the no-fly zone and was approaching Camp David, and that the Air Force had dispatched two F-16 fighters to intercept it.

"Two minutes out," the director announced.

Megan glanced at the monitors to make sure the other networks hadn't beaten them to air with the story, then swiveled around in her chair to see her anchor just entering the studio.

She punched the button that would key her mike to the studio speakers. "Less than two minutes, Shelley," she informed the anchor. "Get your IFB in so I can brief you."

The anchor took her seat and fumbled for her earpiece. The interruptible feedback system allowed on-air talent to hear both program sound and instructions from the control room.

Megan, meanwhile, keyed her mike to a small speaker on the assignment desk. "Nick, do we have confirmation?"

The disembodied voice of the evening desk manager answered, "Yes, but nothing beyond what AP has."

"What about a live shot?" she asked.

"From the Pentagon, roughly ten minutes away," he answered.

"One minute out," the director announced. "Camera two, tight on Shelley."

Megan keyed her mike to the anchor's IFB. "Another small plane has entered the restricted air space around the nation's capitol," she told Shelley, glancing at the monitor where the anchor's image was being framed up and brought into focus. "This one is approaching Camp

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David, where the president is spending the weekend. Two F-16 fighters have been sent to intercept. We'll have a live shot from the Pentagon shortly."

The anchor nodded and began jotting down the information.

"Thirty seconds," the director said. "Coming back on camera two."

"Since nine-eleven, hundreds of small planes have violated Washington's restricted air space," Megan spoke quickly into the anchor's IFB. "Such incidents have become so routine that most go unreported. Four, however, have forced evacuations of lawmakers and others, the most recent of which was just two weeks ago, on April 18th. The so-called Air Defense Identification Zone comprises some two thousand square miles around the three D.C. area airports."

"Ten seconds," the director announced. "Ready camera two. Shelley's mike."

"Toss back to sports when you're done," Megan told the anchor as the floor director counted down the seconds.

The cut-in went smoothly, the anchor reciting the information Megan had fed to her as effortlessly as if it had been typed on the teleprompter.

They met two minutes later in the hallway outside the control room.

"Nice job," Megan said. "You should stick close. That live shot should be up soon."

"You know, it never ceases to amaze me," Shelley responded, as she plucked a dark brown hair from the front of her taupe designer suit with a frown.

"What does?"

"How you can recite off the top of your head the background information on just about any story that crosses the wires. Names. Dates. Places. Context. And you're *never* wrong."

Megan shrugged. "I've always had a pretty good memory."

"Phenomenal is more like it. I bet you can recite the names of every teacher you ever had, can't you?" Shelley studied Megan's face, clearly awaiting a response.

She considered the question a moment. "Honestly? I could probably name every classmate, too, if I had to."

"We really should do a story on *you*."

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“No, what we *really* should do is get back to work. You have a newscast to prep for.” She started to leave, but Shelley’s voice stopped her in her tracks.

“By the way...” The anchor was looking at her with an impish smile and a sparkle in her pale blue eyes, like a child with a secret. “You...have some ink...” She pointed to Megan’s right cheek.

“Ink?” Megan touched two fingers to her face as though she could feel the mark. “Is it bad?” She glanced around for a reflective surface: glass, chrome. Nothing.

“You have a blue Sharpie...” Shelley drew a short jagged streak in the air with a perfectly manicured index finger. “Kind of like that Harry Potter—Lord Voldemort scar thingie.”

“Sharpie?” Megan asked, aghast. “I haven’t had a Sharpie in my hand since...” She trailed off as she focused inward, remembering. *Since my department head meeting.* She knew immediately what had happened. She had nearly fallen asleep listening to the head of the sales department drone on and on about the latest ad revenues. Had sat at the conference table with her hand propped against her cheek, fighting back a yawn. Taking notes. *Oh, crap. That meeting was at four and it’s after seven.*

“Since...?” Shelley’s voice interrupted her mental recounting of everywhere she’d been and everyone she’d seen in the intervening hours.

“Never mind,” she grumbled, but she felt her expression soften when she looked at the anchor. “Thanks, Shelley.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She took the long way back to her office to avoid the newsroom and to make a stop in the expansive ladies’ lounge adjacent to the bookings unit. Designed for visiting celebrity guests, it was the nicest of the restrooms on the floor, and, best of all, it was deserted at this hour.

The faint floral scent of hair spray assaulted her nostrils as she flicked on the lights and headed toward the long mirror where the hair and makeup artists worked. Her green eyes narrowed as she winced at her reflection. In addition to the three-inch-long jagged Sharpie tattoo, her normally impeccable façade was marred by an errant blond strand of hair that stood straight out of the side of her head.

“And no one bothered to tell me,” she griped aloud. *No one* dared

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*tell me. Grace had already gone home.* Her assistant certainly would have told her how foolish she looked. *And maybe a handful of others.*

The fact irritated her greatly. When she'd moved up the corporate ladder and starting making six figures, she began spending a good bit of money on her appearance, and as with everything else in her life, she paid attention to the details. Nice jewelry. Understated makeup. A \$400 salon stop every five weeks for a trim from Ritchie and a touch-up to the blond highlights she added to her straight, shoulder-length medium brown hair. A pedicure, manicure, and massage twice a month. A designer wardrobe of suits—twenty-four in all—size eight, except the pants always needed to be shortened slightly to fit her five foot six height because she refused to wear heels.

*Not a single person said anything.* Megan had learned to have a thick skin in her position, but it rankled to think that no one cared enough about her personally to spare her the embarrassment. *At least no one you ran across in the last couple of hours,* she tried to console herself. *Whose fault is that?* The question came and went like a whisper. She didn't dwell on such things.

It took a large dollop of cold cream, a couple of squirts of liquid soap, and vigorous scrubbing to erase the marking pen. Her cheek was beet red, like someone had slapped her, but that would pass. A spritz of hair spray tamed the unruly tuft of hair, and she felt almost presentable again. *Not too shabby. Back to business.*

A loud groan escaped her lips when she opened her office door. The chaos awaiting her was far worse than she'd expected. Her massive oak desk was piled high with anchor audition tapes, employee contracts awaiting her signature, the latest ratings, reports from her department heads, and a vast number of other scripts, tapes, documents, and letters. *Great. Just great. I'll be lucky to get out of here by midnight.*

She slipped off her shoes and sank into her high-backed leather chair, automatically reaching for her remote to turn on the six monitors set into the opposite wall. The one tuned to WNC she left barely audible; those showing the competition were muted.

It was only then that she noticed a space carefully cleared in the center of her desk so that her eyes would be drawn to the travel brochure placed there, isolated from the bedlam surrounding it—an enticing island in a hostile sea of paperwork. A yellow Post-it note on

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top relayed a message penned in the familiar backhand slant of her best friend Justine Bernard, a reporter with WNC.

*Give it up, already. You are coming along.  
I'm going to nag you until you do.*

Megan smiled for the first time that day. Justine was so damn persistent. *But that is why you're such a good reporter. Never take no for an answer.*

She started to toss the brochure into the trash, but stopped herself when she caught the picture on the back. It was breathtaking, a wide-angle photo of an endless caribou herd, tens of thousands of animals, set amidst a landscape of snow-topped mountains and lush, vibrant green valleys. She turned the brochure over and pulled off the Post-it note, revealing the words *Discover Alaska, Land of Endless Adventures*. Surrounding the header was a collage of happy tourists enjoying all the possibilities: dogsledding, whitewater kayaking and rafting, backpacking, fishing, whale watching.

Opening the brochure, she saw that Justine had circled the trip she'd been chattering about for the last several days. *Kayak the remote and scenic Odakonya River as it cuts through canyons in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and journeys across the coastal plain to the sea. Witness the magnificent spectacle of the annual migration of the Porcupine caribou herd. Fish for Arctic char and grayling. Explore the grandeur of the last great American frontier. An unforgettable experience that will change your life.*

There was a quote from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas about the refuge that read, "This is the place for man turned scientist and explorer; poet and artist. Here he can experience a new reverence for life that is outside his own and yet a vital and joyous part of it."

*Those are some pretty hefty promises.* She had to admit they really were striking photographs. And as a child, she had dreamed about traveling through an untamed wilderness, like the early explorers she had read about. But that had been too many years ago, and she'd long since given up her childhood fantasies. And her only real experience with the out-of-doors had been a nightmare. *Besides, there's no way in the world this place could get along without me for two whole weeks. Even one week would be disastrous.*

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The phone on her desk rang. She snatched it up. “Maxwell.”

It was the evening assignment desk manager. “I wanted to let you know the plane turned out to be nothing, as usual. Just a guy with a new pilot’s license who was showing off to his girlfriend. She, apparently, was not amused.”

“Okay, Nick. Thanks.”

Almost as soon as she’d hung up the phone, it rang again. *I’m never going to get out of here.* This time she put the call on speakerphone.

“Why aren’t you here?” Justine’s usual velvet-smooth, reporter-trained voice was strained—she had to shout to be heard above the cacophony of raucous laughter in the background.

“Can’t make it tonight,” Megan said, her eyes skimming the mayhem of work on her desk, looking for a place to start.

“You haven’t made it in weeks. We’re going to revoke your membership card.”

A chorus of voices chimed in. It sounded like a goodly number of the gals had managed to make tonight’s impromptu gathering of Broads in Broadcasting. Megan could picture them tucked into one of the big circular booths at the Cool Breeze Tavern, a popular spot for local journalists and politicians.

“C’mon, Meg!”

“Party pooper!”

“Don’t make us come kidnap you!”

“There’s a cute brunette here that’s just your type!”

She couldn’t help smiling. It *had* been a long time since she’d seen most of the “Broads.” After the marking pen incident, she could use some time with her friends. And the thought of maybe hooking up for a quickie wasn’t altogether unpleasant, either. Maybe she *had* been working too hard.

“All right, already. I’ll be there in a while. Someone keep an eye on the brunette for me—and don’t let Elise anywhere near her!”

### **Fairbanks, Alaska**

Chaz Herrick was having an impossibly difficult time keeping her mind on the pile of paperwork in front of her, despite the fact that it was the only thing standing between her and her liberation for the

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summer—her return to the wilderness that fed her soul and enriched her spirit.

The halls outside her office were empty, the students scattered. She'd traded in her professorial khakis and button-down oxfords for the flannel shirt and jeans that comprised the bulk of her wardrobe. Already, in spirit, she was far from this place.

Her gaze kept straying to the fully loaded backpack in the corner of her office and then to the wall above it, crowded with photographs she'd taken during previous excursions into the backcountry of her adopted state. Some were of trips she'd taken with her parents: cross-country skiing near Denali, kayaking in Glacier Bay, hiking in the Brooks Range. Many solo adventures were represented as well—along with a number of more recent photographs taken during her summers as a senior guide with Orion Outfitters. One particularly striking picture she'd taken of the caribou migration had been chosen for Orion's brochure this year.

Gareth Rosenberg, the head of the Biology and Wildlife Department at the University of Alaska, stuck his head in Chaz's door. He was a big, barrel-chested bear of a man, with an untrimmed beard and long hair, held back in a braided ponytail. "I can't believe you're still here. I thought you'd be long gone."

"Well, I would've been, if it wasn't for all this administrative shit you give us to fill out. I swear you come up with a dozen new forms every year solely to irritate me."

He laughed. Although he was technically Chaz's boss, they were close friends, and they both knew he had been offered the job only after Chaz had turned it down.

"Boy, do you ever get antsy these last few days." He glanced up at her wall of photos. "So where's it to be this year? You doing your guide thing again?"

"Yeah, I'm leading a couple of backpack trips at Denali, and some kayak trips. One on the Odakonya River, and a couple on the Kongakut."

"The Odakonya? Where's that?" he asked.

"It's within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Doesn't get much river traffic except us, because it's pretty inaccessible along a good portion of it."

"Sounds like your kind of place."

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She smiled. “Yeah, actually it’s the trip I’m most looking forward to. I went there by myself at the end of the season last year, to scout it out. Beautiful stretch of river. Great views. Lots of wildlife. We can do a day hike from there and have a pretty good chance at seeing the caribou herd.”

Gareth heaved a great sigh. “Every year I understand a little better why you didn’t want this job,” he said, sounding envious. “Take lots of pictures?”

“You got it. Now get out of here and let me get back to it. You know I’ll go crazy if I have to spend another night in the city.”

“The *city*, she says, like it’s New York or L.A.” He studied her quizzically. “You can drive five minutes out of Fairbanks and be in the wilderness.”

“Not wild enough for me,” she said.

### **Chicago, Illinois**

They had lied to her. There was no cute brunette. It wasn’t even a bona fide gathering of the Broads in Broadcasting, though all those present were members of the group.

No, this was just her and the five of them. They’d lured her to the Cool Breeze for the sole purpose of getting her drunk and ganging up on her so she’d go on this wilderness thing with them. After a few too many tequila shots, they had produced another one of those damn brochures with all the pretty pictures and a sign-up form already half filled out for her, with her name and address and the other stuff that Justine knew off the top of her head.

“You’ve been promising for years that you’d go with us,” Linda Ferris, a photojournalist with WNC, said from Megan Maxwell’s left. “Fearless” Ferris, they called her, for her award-winning footage under fire from a variety of war zones.

“Last year, as I recall, you swore you’d *absolutely* go this year, no matter *what* the destination,” Justine reminded her from across the booth. Although she appeared in millions of homes every evening on the news, the WNC reporter was rarely recognized in public. Without makeup and with her flyaway auburn hair untamed by network stylists, she looked like a distant cousin of her on-air persona.

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“At the time you were all talking a lot about seeing Paris next, as I recall,” Megan mumbled.

“You’re always bragging about how good your staff is,” Pat Palmer reminded her. Pat was Linda’s lover and a photographer as well, with TV station WGN. “Don’t you trust them enough to leave everything in their capable hands?”

“Well, of course they’re very capable, but—” Megan began.

“When’s the last time you took a vacation, anyway?” Yancey Gilmore interrupted. “You’re like...living in workaholicville, girlfriend. You need to chill.” Though her vocabulary and blond, pinup girl appearance seemed to belie the possibility, Yancey was a highly regarded researcher with the Oprah empire.

“Oh, I don’t know. Some say the Royal Ice Bitch is pretty frosty already,” Justine said, which touched off a gasp of shock and then a chorus of snickering among the group clustered around the plush booth. Only Justine dared to bring up the nickname that the malcontents in the newsroom had assigned to Megan.

Megan glared at her. “You’re lucky you’re not in my department,” she warned with a gruffness that was not at all convincing.

“You have only yourself to blame that I’m not,” Justine responded warmly, leaning across the booth to place a hand on Megan’s forearm. “I’d still be in the writing ranks if you hadn’t given me a shot in front of the camera.”

“Oh, shut up. You belong there. I had nothing to do with it.” Megan’s vision began to swim from the tequila. She closed her eyes and slumped against the thickly cushioned booth.

“Back to the trip,” Elise Webber reminded them, pointing to the sign-up sheet that lay on the table in front of Megan. “We have to get this in by tomorrow to get the group discount.” The youngest of the group, Elise was a graphic artist with the Discovery Channel. She was also Megan’s biggest competition if there were any prospective bed partners about—both of them liked to prowl for new faces when they went out with the group.

“Right you are,” Justine agreed. “So you’re gonna come, right, Meg?”

“I have never even *seen* a kayak, much less *been* in one. Besides, camping and I don’t mix.” Megan cracked open an eye, but the room began to tilt, so she quickly shut it again.

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“You’re athletic,” Pat said. “You’ll pick it up in no time. And I guarantee you, it’s a blast! You’ll be so glad you did!”

“It’d be all bugs and snakes, and bad food, and sleeping on the ground, and no way to take a shower...” Megan grumbled on, as if she hadn’t heard.

“Look at these pictures.” Yancey thrust the brochure at her. “The last great frontier. Unspoiled beauty. How can you miss this?”

Megan ignored her.

“You’ll come back a new woman,” Linda promised. “Relaxed, refreshed, rejuvenated.”

“I think she’s afraid,” Elise volunteered.

*Afraid?* That cut through the haze of the alcohol. “Am not,” Megan said, rousing herself.

They were all staring at her, totally united in their task of getting her to sign that piece of paper she was having trouble bringing into focus.

“Prove it,” Elise said. “*I dare* you to go.”

“*Double* dare you,” Yancey chimed in.

“*Triple-dog* dare you,” Pat added.

“What are we, back in grade school?” Megan said. Her defenses were beginning to crumble.

“Rather make it a *bet?*” Justine asked.

Megan perked up a little. There might be a way out of this after all. “I’m game for that.” She blinked several times, trying to clear her head. “How about...movie trivia. Or...current events. You ask me a question, and if I miss it, I sign on the dotted line.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Linda said.

“No *way* are we going to take a sucker bet,” Yancey agreed. “No trivia. It’s got to be left totally up to chance. A flip of the coin?”

“That’s fair,” Pat said.

“A fifty-fifty chance? That’s *not* fair.” Megan never played those odds. She only bet on a reasonably sure thing.

Justine leaned forward again to claim her undivided attention. Her gray eyes grew serious, and she used her most convincing tone of voice...the one that audience focus groups characterized as “highly trustworthy.” “You *need* this, Megan. Leave it up to fate this one time?”

*Leave it up to fate.* It was an alien concept to her. Despite the

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fact that her workday was ever changing and unpredictable—often dependent on breaking news—she had established an orderliness and routine to her life that she was reluctant to relinquish. She never left any important decisions to fate.

*You once dreamed about exploring some place like Alaska,* she reminded herself. She had to admit she did find the whole idea intriguing. Exciting, even. And not much excited her any more.

“I’m not afraid,” she repeated to no one in particular, swaying as she tried to sit up straight in the booth. “Flip the damn coin.”