

Timberline Trail

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Timberline Trail

by

Loren Lockner

Prologue

(November 16th, 2003)

Andrew Carson stumbled blindly through garbage littered puddles, banging into several overflowing trashcans as he staggered groggily down a dim back alley near the brightly lit streets of Hollywood and Vine, blood streaming from a graze upon his forehead. The attacker approached steadily, the Glock handgun that had been secreted only minutes before in his briefcase now raised at chest level to inflict the final shot needed to silence his too-knowledgeable foe forever. Andrew Carson backed against a huge green trash bin and held his arms up defensively to shield his face from the inevitable bullet.

“Please, please! I promise not to tell anyone about *Timberline Trail!* Don’t hurt me. Please!”

When the fatal shot made contact, it was as a direct blow to the chest, not face that caused the fifty-five year old executive to drop to his knees, his mouth still open as he tried to continue his desperate plea before his cloudy hazel eyes rolled upwards and he dropped face down onto the damp pavement.

His assailant quickly removed all traces of fingerprints from the still-hot gun with a white linen handkerchief before tossing the weapon into the dumpster. With a gasp of supreme effort the murderer lifted his now lifeless opponent upwards with one mighty jerk and heaved the body into the trash bin after the gun, slamming the metal lid down with grim finality. The merriment of the strip continued unabated, as lowriders cruised, short-skirted women strutted, and hawkers tried to encourage the tourists to buy their guides to all the Hollywood sights. Tinsel town remained oblivious to the demise of yet another one of her native sons. A cool dark rain began falling and didn't cease for another three days, content to delay the discovery of the corpse of one California's finest crumpled within the stinking interior of a dumpster located behind an adult movie theatre. The newspapers had a field day with this one.

Chapter One

(September 11th, 2004)

To some, Alaska seems a remote, even desolate place, but to Tia Heath the very wildness and absence of others was exactly what she craved. Alaska is a huge vast wilderness comprised of broad leaf evergreens in the south which gradually gives way to the bent and struggling trees of the midlands before finally leveling out to miles of endless tundra whose persistent icy winds sweep down from the Arctic Circle. Tia had traveled all over Alaska, enjoying the charm of Skagway, the incredible wildness of Kodiak Island, and the endless, slightly humid terrain of the northlands where one can become confused as to direction and place names during the short summer, or if one's truly adventurous, the

endless winter. The Alaskan Peninsula, with its long archipelago of islands, illustrated to its new occupant how land and sea often meet with violent confrontation causing a result truly rugged and spectacular.

This earthquake-prone wilderness exhibited an amazing variety of landscapes. To the north was Seward's Peninsula named after the simple-minded politician who dared suggest to the US Congress that they buy the vast wilderness called Alaska from Russia for a mere 7.2 million dollars. Thus, because of his foresight, the richness of this immense land is still to this day called Seward's Folly. It was at the base of the majestic mountains to the northwest of Anchorage in the vast open wilderness that separates the Alaska Range from the Wrangell Mountains that Tia found a peaceful place to recuperate and reflect on the tumultuous events that had made up her life over the past year. Not that far north of her rustic log cabin lay the great reserve of the Denali where the awesome Mt. McKinley peaked through the clouds, towering over twenty thousand feet.

In this vast land of extremes Tia discovered and accepted that she was only small and insignificant after all, her problems nothing compared to the incredible cycle of nature. At twenty-nine years of age, single, and seemingly free from all those who sought to con-

trol and manipulate her, she slowly healed. A successful children's book author, Tia hid from the modern world, licking her wounds and contemplating a future without duplicitous men or the aimless society of the crowded Los Angeles' basin where she'd previously been held a voluntary captive.

To aid in her healing transformation Tia followed a simple routine each and every morning until the weather restricted her ritual. She dressed in black sweat pants with a matching top, tied her long blonde hair into a tight ponytail and pulled on her stained and well-worn running shoes before adding a short necklace of jangling musical bells for protection. Tia stretched out for fifteen minutes before heading out the sturdy front door of her small cabin, her eyes scanning the forest before starting a slow jog down the trail that wound through the wooded region near her cabin. Tia quickly picked up her pace and for a full thirty minutes ran joyfully through the beautiful forest of her adopted home. Every new day saw a noticeable difference in the season for the days were getting shorter and the morning air contained a crisp edge indicating Tia would soon have to abandon her morning jog. But until the first snow fell, Tia rose like clockwork each morning to greet the day and enjoy the exhilarating freedom

of her morning jog as well as the mental rejuvenation it provided.

Tia didn't notice that both human and non-human eyes watched her movements intently. It was not her nature to be suspicious or wary in this sanctuary where she'd retreated. Upon the conclusion of this morning's excellent jog Tia returned and showered, afterwards pulling on her normal uniform of warm blue jeans and a red-checked flannel shirt, its sleeves rolled up for comfort and freedom of movement. She finally added brown hiking boots scuffed by the rough terrain and her constant fidgeting, ready to continue her morning routine.

Tia scarcely looked into the mirror as she combed out her long blonde hair after her shower, braiding the still damp locks into a simple French braid. Her eyes were that clear dark gray of poetry, but she would scoff at anyone hinting at their beauty, certain they were being ridiculous or more likely desiring something from her. They were simply a physical attribute she'd inherited from her father, Anthony Heath. His eyes and hair the color of the California sun were the only two things she'd inherited from him in appearance, but Tia had also acquired his no-nonsense attitude towards life as well as his stubbornness. She'd also managed to

inherit his ability, which so many others lack, of enjoying himself and what life has to offer even while alone. That trait was probably the chief motivation behind Anthony's decision to build a remote cabin hide-away only a few short years ago. Here, he could retreat from the high-powered corporate life he'd led for so many years, and 'recharge his batteries' as Anthony liked to say.

The rest of Tia's looks had been passed on to her by her gentle mother Tanya. It was her mother's slim frame, straight nose, and superb intelligence that dominated her lovely delicate face. She so resembled her mother that people who'd known the deceased Tanya would still gasp when Tia walked into the room, only recovering as they realized the dark-blond hair and silver eyes belonged to the daughter not the mother. Even her father had difficulty with their incredible resemblance and many times Tia noticed pain flicker over his steel gray eyes as he gazed at his only daughter. Tanya Heath had been so vibrant and deeply in love with her successful husband that her death of ovarian cancer at age 48 nearly caused the senior Heath to throw away his life and his career.

It had only been Tia's undying devotion and determination, as well as the turmoil surrounding her

brother's inborn stubbornness and subsequent precarious relationship with his father that had caused Anthony Heath to recover his sanity and innate business sense as he vowed to whip his wayward son, RK into shape. Tia secretly blessed her obstinate brother who'd absolutely refused to take over his father's business, seeking instead to start his own company independent of his successful father. She wisely remained on the sidelines during the bloody fray that followed when her twenty-five year old brother announced he was going his own way.

Tia had been barely twenty and immersed in studies and a new beau. She was quickly learning that while many men would flatter and woo her because of her beauty and money, few were truly sincere. So Tia shrugged off her beauty as an unnecessary fact of her life, just as she did the money and unwanted notoriety of being the daughter of a rich man.

Tia Heath simply was and didn't care if others found her appealing or intellectual. Their opinions regarding her lifestyle were their problem not hers. One thing she'd certainly learned from her father was to carefully analyze what information and emotions were absolutely essential for her well-being and to discard the rest just as she had all those problems sur-

rounding her back in LA. Tia had finally regained the confidence she needed to function and was now entirely certain of her abilities and future. The false glamour surrounding the LA social circles were deemed unnecessary and pretentious and she now despised any aspect of her former life that had tarnished the real Tia Heath.

So here in this beautiful corner of Alaska, Tia finally healed, at last recognizing she held the key to her own happiness, not someone else. Tia readily admitted she would find it difficult to trust others again, in particular men, but placed this glaring fault of hers at the very bottom of her self-improvement list. She preferred to be wary since the ability to trust had flown right out of her life, just like her ex-fiancé.

Tia devised a routine that suited her and enhanced her creativity and writing and for now she was content and not the least bit lonely or melancholy. Alaska had become her new home and she meant to remain here for a while, basking in the huge state's majestic beauty and tranquility. Life was finally good again and Tia wasn't about to let another person take away her newly gained independence and serenity.

When not writing Tia often walked, taking photos of the abundant bird and animal life. She enjoyed the

simple chatter of the gray squirrel as well as the chase and the scream of the occasional bald eagle which she felt exceptionally privileged to view. The waters were full of trout and occasionally even salmon and on her long walks she wore her bear bells, the warning system of all Alaskans who recognize that the large grizzly and brown bears of the region will avoid confrontation with humans if forewarned, but attack if not.

Still, even wearing her bells, Tia had glimpsed the shaggy huge beasts many times on her treks into the forest, even snapping a magnificent photo of one large carnivore slapping at a struggling salmon before lying down on his haunches to tear at the tender pink meat inside. During the summer the mosquitoes and flies were a constant annoyance, but now as summer neared its rapid end all creatures fed in unrestrained frenzy to store up the additional fat they needed to maintain their strength throughout the long cold winter making the flying insects wonderful pickings. The mosquitoes were now food for the small birds of the area and Tia blessed their lovely diet as she scratched the annoying bites, thankful that fall was approaching and the flying pests were rapidly disappearing.

Tia soon planned to take a short three-day trip to Glacier Bay just north of the capital city Juneau in a

week or so to view the fantastic blue-white glaciers that grew and receded at their own leisurely pace. Her major goal was to observe and photograph the comical looking Puffin with its topsy-turvy body and bright red beak. The bird was incredibly clumsy on land, but unlike the equally awkward penguin, had not lost its ability to fly and was also an accomplished swimmer. Tia hoped to make one of these funny birds a friend to her newest hero, a little Inuit boy who traveled the length of Alaska searching for his lost father.

It was during Tia's jogs and walks that she day-dreamed about this beautiful land and its varied people, developing the characters she needed for her popular children's books. After a brisk jaunt into the forest Tia felt fired up to work, her mind tumbling with ideas, exotic settings, and outlandish scenarios. She then would retreat to the front room of her beloved wilderness home and sit before her laptop to write. Her small and sturdy cabin, having been built by her father and uncle some six years earlier as a perfect getaway from the stresses of Los Angeles and the hectic lives they lead as co-owners of Heath Enterprises, was perfect for writing. Both men had studied statistics during the seventies when computer technology had been born and subsequently took their degrees and hands-on ex-

perience to create a computer company that sold both hardware and innovative software.

Tia had respected their business, but shown no interest in it personally and at an early age had chosen to wrestle the written word instead of the business world. After a degree at UCLA and an apprenticeship as an editor and copywriter for a local magazine, Tia had finally decided to go freelance. Luck had been with her and her children's book, *Rosie Frankel's Unexpected Adventure* had given her a first publication and a desire to write even more. Her father at first laughed at her hobby, but had gradually grown to respect and admire her craft after her third children's book was published.

Tia now worked on the fourth, about a little Inuit boy who makes friends with the animals of the tundra as they fight against a common enemy, the despoilers of the environment while searching for his tardy father. This morning, as always, the moment the computer hummed and the pages of her novel appeared, Tia forgot the peaceful and simple layout of the cabin as Endu's story took her to the barren treeless tundra.

The heavy cedar door to her home opened into a small hall where a low wooden bench hugged the left-hand side of the wall. Here, her foot apparel, ranging from running shoes to heavy sorrels, was arranged

neatly under the bench. Her cross-country skis rested inside the square wooden box next to her ski poles along with a hefty walking stick and two heavy-duty black umbrellas. Above, a series of wooden pegs jutted from the wall and her jackets, slicker, and parka hung neatly, ready for any of the abrupt seasonal weather changes so often swooping down upon this region of Alaska.

On the right hand side of the hallway rested a long narrow wooden cabinet equipped with flashlights, hurricane lamps, and other survival gear such as flares. While Tia had not often used this gear, she felt comforted by its presence. Another inner door acting as a weather buffer opened into the main room, which served as both a dining area and living room. A large gray stone fire-place hugged the far wall equipped with heatilators. These warm air vents were not only built into the fireplace and enabled hot air to circulate into the room, but Anthony Heath had also incorporated three black metal plates pushed into the river rock that could be pulled several inches out of their grooves, allowing the escaping heat from the fire to re-circulate back into room instead of rising wastefully out of the chimney. Even when the cabin was deserted and Tia and her father returned from distant parts, the heatilator

fireplace started warming the room in a matter of minutes after being sparked into life.

A wide hearth spanned the front of the fireplace and Tia had parked a large brown-checked recliner directly in front so she could enjoy the warmth of the crackling fire on long winter nights. The highly polished pine floor boards were covered in thick rag rugs whose vivid interwoven designs of brown and red complemented the beautiful golden-brown flooring. The right hand side of the room boasted a large blue and brown sleeper couch set at an angle and behind that stood a huge built in bookcase jammed so full of books that Tia could be snowbound for six months and not make a dent. A large cabinet, in which a medium sized TV and VCR was discreetly hidden behind closed doors, was pushed against the wall and inside, a lavish display of jackets indicated over four hundred videos. A plastic bag rested nonchalantly upon the floor where five new tapes waited to join their comrades inside the cabinet.

A gun case with her father's three hunting rifles and ample ammunition was locked on the remaining wall space and Tia never opened it even though her father had trained her well, since a reliable weapon is always necessary in the untamed Alaskan wilderness. Positioned next to the gun cabinet and facing incredi-

ble floor to ceiling arched window overlooking the lovely forest was her mini-gym consisting of a well-used treadmill, a stair step machine, a rowing machine, a small muscle building set with hand weights, a slanted push up bench, and her favorite, the arm and torso machine. It had been a major hassle hauling the awkward equipment to the remote cabin and her father had complained bitterly, but Tia knew it was the best method for keeping in shape and releasing cabin fever during the long, dark winter.

To the left of the small cabin nestled a good-sized kitchen installed with lovely pine cabinets and a center island. Tia admitted the kitchen seemed like a modern assault on the quaint design of the rest of the small cabin, but she loved it anyway. A large square table, hand-crafted by her uncle and accompanied by four leather-strung chairs in matching pine complemented the set. She'd placed the handsome table to the left of the entryway to minimize the draft from the front door. The cabin only had two bedrooms, if you could call the second office-sized room one. A powerful computer used by her father during his infrequent visits and a bookshelf loaded with all the trappings of the writing trade as well as a CD player filled the compact room. Anthony's pine filing cabinet stuffed with her father's

papers and ideas were a constant reminder of her Dad's preoccupation with his work.

Latch hook rugs made by her mother during the last days of her life covered the walls and one cluster of bright sunflowers reminded Tia painfully of her lovely mother lost too young to ovarian cancer. A single bed, used more like a couch hugged the wall and Tia would often lay there listening to *Enya* or *REM* or even old singers like *The Mamas and the Papas*. The master bedroom was three times the size of the office and had its own small fireplace and large French doors opening onto the forest. Designed by her father and housing triple panes and a solid cedar frame of nearly two inches thick; no bitter chill could invade the comfort of this cozy room!

A huge king-sized bed dominated the room and still retained the masculine black and brown comforter her father had personally chosen. His taste has run to the dark rustic colors and trappings, but Tia had softened the room by placing pink silk flowers into a large vase and hanging a colorful reprint of Matisse's famous bridge over the vanity. A spacious cedar walk-in closet and a very modern en-suite bathroom with a huge shower and tub warmed by a large water heater hidden behind a tasteful closet adjoined the oversized bedroom. The

lovely bathroom, tiled in pale brown and occasional sea shell squares reminded Tia of the distant Pacific Ocean. Her father had installed Scandinavian under-floor heating in both bathrooms and it was delightful to soak in the huge tub on a winter's evening. The entire cabin, powered by a propane generator, had so far weathered the fickle nature of the Alaskan winter without a hitch. While the cabin measured only twelve hundred square feet, Tia could ask for no better place to work and live. On a day like today she felt as if she would never leave.

The man lowered his binoculars and frowned as he pulled his light-green parka closer and shivered. He already missed the heat and bustle of LA for the coolness of this early September day was as cold as it ever got in LA and the stranger understood now why he rarely left the comfort of that addictive Mediterranean climate. The cabin was too remote and too damn lonely for his cultured tastes. He observed the generator located in the small wooden shed to the south of the log cabin. The sun shone brightly upon the front door of the cabin and the girl he'd been observing for several days had disappeared inside after her jog. A movement to the far left of the cabin attracted his attention and he jerked up his head quickly, his

dark eyes frowning. A loan loafer wolf slowly circled the sturdily built cabin. It lifted its nose in the air for a moment before breaking into a run, moving effortlessly on long gray legs. The watcher shuddered and pulled his rifle closer. Only yesterday he'd heard a crashing in the bush and whirled about to witness a large grizzly bear ambling away from him, flies buzzing around his matted fur.

Just about noon and ready to make his move, an old gray pick-up truck pulled into the narrow gravel driveway fronting Tia's cabin. A Native-American woman pushed her heavy frame from the beat-up vehicle and carried two bags of groceries into the cabin. Damn! She appeared ready for a long visit so the house's observer decided to retreat determined not to invade as it got close to dark since he was uncertain of the terrain and her welcome. He trudged up the hill towards his 4 x 4 parked just off the road, feeling disgruntled and put out. Hearing a crackle in the bush to the right of him he whirled, his rifle poised.

A small wolverine-type creature faced him, its black nose twitching in the wind as it tried to identify his scent. He'd heard about the vicious wolverine of the far north and tensed, not realizing it was simply a marmot, who, while resembling the wolverine, was more akin to the woodchuck and thus inoffensive to humans. The creature crinkled its nose at the disgusting smell of

the man and backed off, flinging one last indignant look before disappearing into the underbrush. The man relaxed. He didn't like dirt or animals and could hardly wait to get home. He scratched absently at a mosquito bite and headed toward the green Kia Sorento. Flinging his rifle off his shoulder and adding his binoculars and backpack to the cluttered passenger seat, he shifted his tall body into the driver's seat. The 4 x 4 turned over with scarcely a roar before easing back onto the road as he drove off through the trees, hoping to reach his destination before dusk.

Unbeknownst to him another had watched him watching her. The lean man straightened and brushed off the dirt from his cargo pants, his keen eyes missing nothing from the license plate number to the man's reaction to the marmot. Certain the stalker's compact Kia had disappeared down the gravel road for the day he backed away, disappearing into a stand of Sitka Spruce. He wound his way down a familiar trail he'd forged only a few days previously and wondered just what Tia Heath was hiding. Whatever it was, he would find out no matter how long it took.

Tia always enjoyed visits from her friend Mary Whitebird, a native Tanaina woman of the Thabaskan speaking tribes from the interior of Alaska. Mary still lived with her family who'd settled over thirty years ago in this remote region south of the Denali Park and did quite well with her husband who made his living as a truck driver along the Trans-Canada and Alcan Highways. Joe had grown so successful he now owned three trucks and their two grown sons helped maintain his successful business. The petite Mary made their home in Timberline, using it as the base for their operations receiving all the company's orders and requests for shipping via internet.

Mary missed Joe, who she referred to as her 'driving man' as well as her two boys, Jason and Martin. Because of her loneliness she often visited Tia and the two women had formed a mutual bond of respect and camaraderie. Mary brought in two bags of supplies and set them upon the pine counter of Tia's immaculate kitchen.

"I'll never get over how much I like this place," commented Mary as she stood in the large front room, noticing the 17" screen of Tia's computer monitor glowing. "Been busy at work I see. Well you know what they say, all work and no play makes Tia a very boring girl

which reminds me, I have some juicy news. But before the tasty gossip, I want you to peek into this bag.”

Tia could tell from the delighted expression on her friend’s face there was something wonderful in the sack.

“What have you got here Mary?”

“Nancy only received ten and I bought five. Two of them are for you pumpkin.” With a flourish Mary’s dark hand dipped into the paper bag and produced two large ripe cantaloupes.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Tia. “I haven’t seen a cantaloupe for at least a month. When did these arrive?”

“Only this morning and I just couldn’t resist. The blasted things were about three bucks apiece but they’re my gift for you as long as I can have some of your scrumptious iced-tea.”

Tia nodded happily, fingering the ripe melon. “This will be delicious with dinner or shall we cut one up with your tea now?”

Mary steadfastly held up a brown hand. “No, I’m limiting myself to half a cantaloupe a day and I’m not about to steal yours, but some of that tea would taste awfully good.” Within minutes Tia poured two frosty glasses of peach iced tea and placed still warm oatmeal

bread upon the golden pine table. The delicious aroma tantalized as butter melted upon the freshly baked loaf and both women sat down munch the fragrant bread compatibly together.

“I can see you’re nearly busting at the seams,” said Tia, looking at her friend shrewdly. “You might as well tell me your news before you break a blood vessel!”

A conspiratorial grin settled over Mary’s face. “I’d been at the Timberline Lodge dropping off some supplies that Gerald asked for on his last run and guess who I saw there?”

Tia took another bite of warm oatmeal bread and wiped her mouth with a napkin, “Well don’t keep me waiting,” she asked with mock impatience.

“The most handsome man my sore eyes have seen for the longest time in this little town.”

“Was he a tourist?” asked Tia good-naturedly, well used to Mary’s matchmaking efforts.

“Nancy told me he’s looking for some property up here for an investment, though I’m sure nothing in this area fits that bill. Apparently he’s tired of the city and needs a place to escape. But let me move on to the good stuff girl. He’s about six foot two, has sandy blonde hair and dark brown eyes and is enough to

make any woman start dreaming about Caribbean vacations.”

“And what do you know about the Caribbean?” asked Tia mildly. She leaned back in her chair and gazed at her friend affectionately. “And just what line of business is our new dream man in?”

“I’m certain Nancy mentioned he’s in advertising of some sort and comes from the lower northwest. He’s the best looking thing I’ve seen in town since that documentary film crew arrived a couple of years ago to make the *National Geographic* segment on that big moose near Crane Lake. Anyway I was thinking that maybe tomorrow you could come into town and stop by the hotel for lunch. We could meet around noon and just *happen* to bump into him.”

“Mary you never give up!” laughed Tia. “And I can tell you personally that good looks are *highly* over-rated. Let me think about it and I’ll ring Nancy on the short-wave if I can make it. It’s not good timing for me since I’m right in the middle of my new book.”

Mary seemed a little bit put out, but sipped her tea good-naturedly. “You work way too hard. The way you’re headed I’m never going to be a godmother. Maybe I should get rid of my Joe and set my sights on

this hunky newcomer myself.” Her face assumed a wicked glow and Tia laughed again.

“You shouldn’t get your hopes up Mary. You know how it goes in this area. As soon as the winter sets in all the summer tourists leave, not that we even get that many tourists. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if we’re going to have a really early winter since the squirrels are already topping off their hoards and I saw some trumpeter swans flying overhead just this morning. I’m certain we’re destined for snow in the next few days.”

“I’d have to agree. The Sheriff was telling me just the same thing this morning. He was hanging out at Nancy’s for who knows what reason. I swear he’s sweet on her though I can’t see why.”

“Nancy Leukowski is a perfectly nice lady and quite attractive too.”

“If you like that kind,” retorted Mary Whitebird who’d not a been a big fan of Nancy’s since Joe had discovered Nancy’s teenage son Tory tampering with one of his trucks last spring. “I would say that the behavior of the son has to be a reflection upon the mother.”

“Now now Mary, calm down. You know Tory is just going through some growing pains and at least

he's working part-time at Roy's station and trying to keep himself busy. I think half the problem is there's not a lot to do up here and after the movie theatre closed down what are young folks supposed to do in the dead of winter?"

"Well, they're certainly not supposed to fiddle with my Joe's truck." Mary said irritably and Tia shrugged. This was a no-win argument and she wisely moved on.

"Seen anything interesting lately Mary, besides the hunk in town? You'll never guess what I spotted yesterday?"

"What was it?" asked Mary interested.

"I caught a glimpse of two golden eagles south of here hovering over a large Alpine fir. I trekked to the river and I saw a large stick nest at the very top of the tree. It's a little late for the breeding season, but maybe they're preparing themselves for next spring."

"That's so great they're still here. Joe spotted a huge nest of bald eagles outside of Seward while running a load down there. That reminds me. Apparently a couple professional photographers are in the area preparing a book on the larger game found here. Last I heard they've pitched a camp near Bear Lake. Maybe

you should drive over there and tell them about the eagles.”

“Maybe,” shrugged Tia. She wasn’t about to barge in on some nameless strangers. Instead she commented. “I just love living up here Mary. I’m not sure if I could be persuaded to return south.”

“I’m so glad that you’re feeling at home after all that’s happened to you. I’m just afraid you’re going to feel a little bit too isolated up here. I think this year you should come into town for the winter now that your father’s gallivanting around and you’re all alone. It would sure keep me company with so many hightailing it out come the first little taste of bad weather. They’re like snow birds flying away for the winter, as if you can consider the weather here really that harsh.”

Tia chuckled to herself. The only time Mary ever admitted the weather was remotely harsh was after they were totally snowed in with minus forty degrees Fahrenheit temperatures.

“Would you care for some more tea Mary?”

“No, I ought to be heading back. Joe’s coming home the day after tomorrow and I promised him I’d have the new Mackenzie order set up for him. He’s taking a truckload of copper wire to Skagway and I’ve gotta make sure the orders ready in Juneau for him to

pick up on his way up north. Anyway Honey, you know how I do love to stop by.”

The heavy-set woman got up moving briskly for a woman of her size, her long dark hair swinging heavily in the one long braid centered down her back.

“You think about what I said about having lunch tomorrow. You’ve gotta get out of here while you can, particularly if the snow’s coming early. You know how hard it is to get to Timberline in the winter since they don’t always plow the road straight away to get back into town. Are you sure you’ve got enough supplies?”

“I’m pretty set though I might make one more trip into town. I need some more paraffin and I’d like to get another load of propane. My generator’s working pretty well and I’m sure I have enough for standby. Nancy’s supposed to get in some elk steaks and I thought that might be nice for some stews later on in the season. Thanks for asking after me Mary. I know you always try to take care of me since I’m such a city-slicker.”

“Not any more! You’ve survived a winter here and that practically makes you a native!” Mary smiled and placed a stout arm around the younger woman’s shoulder, giving her a brisk hug. “You know I was always a bit sad I didn’t have a daughter of my own,

though those two strapping boys sure make a mama proud. You take care now honey.”

Tia watched Mary maneuver herself into the battered old pick-up and slowly back out of the gravel driveway. Tia waved her hand in farewell noting the crisp chill in the air. Winter indeed was on its way.

That night a brisk wind swirled through the large pines located right outside her front window and Tia not only started a fire in the fireplace but one in the sturdy cast iron black stove in the corner that helped warm the front room as well. She placed an extra quilt upon her bed and speculated there would be snow by morning. However, when Tia rose, the day dawned bright and clear and while a definite chill clung to the air not a cloud dotted the sky. Tia smiled to herself as she prepared for her morning jog. Just another false alarm. She seriously considered Mary's offer about going into town and having lunch at the Timberline Lodge, but decided this was not a good time to interrupt the flow of her writing since things had been going well about the little lost boy down in Glacier Bay. Out of politeness, she short-waved Nancy and got Tory on the static-filled line.