



Chapter 1

PEERING OUT THE WINDOW, Neiva nervously tapped her fingers against the glass. Storms raged outside and gloomy clouds hovered overhead. The wind and rain distorted Neiva's view, making the town look like something out of a Picasso painting. Pressing her face against the window, she searched for her friend's black truck, but there was no sign of him—only darkness.

She peeked down at her hand. The wound was slowly healing. The bird had broken the skin and the cut was deep enough to leave a little scar, almost in the shape of a heart. *Thank goodness the scar wasn't any bigger*, she thought. How would she explain the attack? Her story would sound unbelievable, and everyone would laugh at her. In fact, she still couldn't believe what had transpired on the boat. Did it really happen?

With a deep sigh, Neiva got up from her perch by the window and walked toward her bathroom. Halfway across the room, she noticed the stack of postcards littering the top of her desk. They looked like leaves covering the ground on a fall day, reminding everyone that the warmth of summer was over and winter was on its way. A sudden rush of sadness briefly

washed away the nervousness and excitement burning deep in her stomach.

The postcards were from her parents, wishing her good luck on her new adventures and encouraging her to have a great time at her new school. She loved receiving the postcards, but they did not fill the gaps of loneliness or the anger she felt about being left behind. They only reminded her of what she was missing out on—an adventure—and how she would rather be in Europe exploring the sights than living on this island.

Her eyes flashed over to the object next to the postcards. It was a new journal. Once her grandmother learned of the demise of Neiva's old journal, she bought Neiva a new one. Three weeks had passed since the attack and nothing strange had happened. It almost seemed like it was a dream. Sometimes she wished it was a dream and everything would be normal.

Neiva rushed into her bathroom before the tears started to form in her eyes. Usually when she got angry, she cried. Her mother said it was just hormones, but Neiva knew she was holding back a ferocious temper, one similar to a volcano waiting for the right elements to explode. Wanting answers and missing her parents more than she thought made her even more sensitive than normal. And who wants to go to a new school during their senior year?

With a deep breath, she peered into the mirror to reassure herself that she was ready for the day. Her platinum-blond hair lay in thick waves down her back, landing just above her waist. Her eyes were lined with black liner and mascara, emphasizing the intensity of her gray eyes. It was the only makeup she allowed herself to wear. She believed in focusing on her strongest features, and to Neiva, they were her eyes, the windows to the soul. She could tell a lot about someone just by catching a glimpse of the emotions burning within their eyes. She could even catch someone in a lie just by the way the person's eyes flickered off to the side, avoiding eye contact.

Neiva's eyes were not a normal gray color but rather a

grayish blue similar to the freezing Arctic Ocean. The strange thing about her eyes, other than the color, was that they seemed to change color when she was moody. She considered them a curse because her parents could easily tell what mood she was in by the color of her eyes. If Neiva was angry, her eyes would turn the color of storm clouds; if she was sad, the blue in her eyes became more prominent. So, when her parents asked if she was okay, she couldn't use the typical teenagers' response of "I'm fine." Her parents would call her bluff, and she would have to tell them the truth. Like most teenagers, Neiva didn't like talking about her feeling with her parents.

With one final look at herself, she headed for her closet. Quickly reaching in, she grabbed a heavy black sweater, which was fitting for the mood she was in, and a pair of ripped jeans. She pulled the jeans over her black leggings, tucking them into her knee-high combat boots. Laced all the way to the top, the boots landed just below her knees, making her legs feel like they were encased in armor.

"Neiva! Neiva!" Her grandmother shouted from downstairs. "Nate is here! You better hurry or you're going to be late!"

Neiva was about to dash out of the closet, but froze. Out of the corner of her eye she could see a strange shadow floating near the ceiling. Long tentacles spread out from its center, like octopus arms moving from an unseen current. Whatever the thing was, it was alive and moving toward her.

Paralyzed by shock, she shut her eyes. This might be her second encounter with the island's sinister secrets. She shouldn't be afraid. She had to be brave. As if a switch turned on inside her, Neiva relaxed. This is what she wanted, what she needed to prove her first encounter was real. Taking a deep breath and readying herself for what she might see, she opened her eyes.

Dumbfounded, Neiva stared at the wall. Her eyebrows furled in puzzlement. Nothing was there. The sudden excitement of another discovery evaporated and the doubt

seeped back into her thoughts. Maybe she was getting her hopes up.

“Damn,” she hissed.

“Neiva! Hurry up!” Her grandmother’s stern voice echoed throughout her room.

Snatching up her pink backpack and brown bomber jacket from the bed, she flew out of her room. She stumbled down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. In a last attempt to pull her jacket on, she ended up bumping into the couch and knocking a lamp over.

“No!” Neiva exclaimed as she dove to the floor. She caught the lamp just before it hit the ground.

“Are you okay, Neiva? I thought I heard a noise?” Her grandmother asked from the kitchen.

“Oh! Everything’s fine. I’m just lacing up my boots!” Neiva lied as she hastily got up.

Fumbling with the lamp for several seconds, Neiva finally placed it back on the side table. She examined it doubtfully, expecting the lamp to fall over. There was something mysterious about the lamp. It was an antique with faded pictures of polar bears and hunters etched onto its glass. It was supposed to be the story of her family and how they came to Alaska. The story told of her family’s clan battling polar bears and Vikings before settling in the town of Spirit. Neiva didn’t know whether she believed the story or not. Stories tend to be exaggerated as they’re passed down from generation to generation. But the lamp was her grandmother’s favorite and she would’ve been devastated if anything had happened to it.

Feeling satisfied the lamp was secure, Neiva’s eyes scanned the room. The living room was sparsely furnished. Two brown leather couches formed an L shape with an ivory coffee table sitting in the center. The walls were decorated with photos of the Alaskan wilderness and her family. It made the room homey and inviting. On the far wall rested a huge fireplace with a fifty-six-inch flat-screen TV hanging above the mantel. Her grandmother’s pride and joy. Every Friday night Neiva

would pick a movie to watch with her grandmother. It was their girls' night together, and Neiva enjoyed the time with her grandmother.

With one last look at the lamp, Neiva bolted for the kitchen. She found her grandmother by the oven, keenly watching the timer. Quickly giving her a kiss on the cheek, Neiva ran for the front door. She was almost down the hallway when her grandmother called out her name.

"I'm going to be late," Neiva huffed. Turning around, she saw her grandmother standing at the end of the kitchen. A huge smile lit her face as she held a single chocolate cupcake in her hand.

"Happy birthday," she sang sweetly.

Neiva's eyes grew large. It was her birthday. With all her thoughts focused on finding the island's secrets, she had forgotten her own birthday. She wondered if she would have eventually remembered—probably not. Her mind was too preoccupied. Starting a new school didn't help the situation either. Just the thought of school made her want to throw up all over the kitchen floor.

Walking over to her grandmother, Neiva watched her light the candle with a single match. Once lit, Grams quickly threw the match into a glass of water, killing the flame. She lifted the cupcake up to Neiva's five-ten frame. Her grandmother was petite and shorter than Neiva by six inches. Her skin was lined with age and her black hair was dusted gray. She looked every bit of her seventy-two years, but it was her eyes that made her young. They sparkled all the time, like she knew a secret the rest of the world didn't know.

"Make a wish," Grams whispered.

That was easy. Neiva only ever had one wish: to know the island's secret. She exhaled, lightly blowing out the candle. "Thanks, Grams."

"You've had a lot of things on your mind lately." She stared at Neiva intently, as if she knew what her granddaughter was thinking. Placing a hand on Neiva's shoulder, she continued.

“It was a last-minute decision for your parents to go to Europe and leave you here for the school year, but they needed too. Your parents had a great opportunity.” She gave Neiva a comforting squeeze, then turned to pack the cupcake up in a plastic bag and handed it over.

Yeab, Neiva thought. Usually she visited her grandmother every other summer and then headed back to Anchorage to be with her parents. This year, her mother and father were five to six thousand miles away, and she wouldn’t see them till the end of the school year. It was her first birthday without her parents, and she was stuck in Spirit.

Neiva gently placed the cupcake in her backpack and gave her grandmother another kiss on the cheek. “Thanks. I just miss them and it’s hard to start a new school without them.”

“I know, Tanaraq. It will get easier as time passes. You’ll adjust. And remember, you’re a very special girl,” she replied, winking at Neiva.

Neiva’s heart melted and pride swelled throughout her chest. Given to her on her sixteenth birthday by her grandmother, Tanaraq meant granddaughter of the tundra, free-spirited, and at one with nature. A wild child. The name made her feel more connected to her Eskimo heritage, making her feel less of an outsider and more a part of her family’s culture.

Grams took something out of her pocket and handed it to Neiva. “This is a birthday gift for you. You will need it for tonight.”

Her grandmother didn’t give Neiva time to ask questions before she rushed Neiva to the door. “Well, you better get going. Nate is waiting, and you don’t want to be late for school!” Grams gave her a soft push out the door. “Have a great first day!”

The door slammed shut, and Neiva was suddenly outside, promptly getting drenched. As the rain poured down, her hair started to curl. Grimacing, Neiva ducked as she ran toward Nate’s truck. She bounded awkwardly through the yard, trying to avoid the mud puddles. Even with the obstacles in

her way, Neiva was practically flying across the yard. She had one mission and that was to save her hair, because starting the first day of school with a fro would be devastating. Warm air greeted her as she entered the truck. The air felt wonderful against her cold, wet skin and was a small comfort on a dreary morning. She directed the vents to blow against her face and hair. Once satisfied, she put her backpack down on the floor and turned to look at her friend, who was looking right at her with the biggest smile on his face.

Long black hair fell to his shoulders, slightly blowing in the vent breeze. His white teeth glistened against his tanned skin, while his caramel-colored eyes gleamed at Neiva. Looking like he just jumped out of a romance novel, the sight of Nate made Neiva's heart skip several beats, and she tried to keep her mouth from dropping to the floor. When did Nate get so cute?

"Happy birthday, Neiva!" he exclaimed. His smile slowly faded when he saw the look on her face. "What? Do I have something stuck in my teeth?"

While Nate was checking his teeth in the rearview mirror, he didn't notice the blush creeping across Neiva's face. She couldn't help but stare at Nate's lips. They looked luscious and sensuous, making her wonder what it would be like to kiss them. Would his kiss be gentle and passionate, or would he be rough and demanding? Shocked at her new feelings, Neiva bit her cheek trying to kill the enchantment.

"You're fine, Nate. I was just noticing your braces are gone, and thanks. I'll let you know how happy my birthday is once school's over," she grumbled. Just saying the word "school" brought back the excitement and nervousness she felt when she first woke up. Pointing to his jeans, she asked, "Are those new? They look nice."

Nate slyly brushed the jeans with his hands. "Yeah, they look good on me, don't they?"

"Yeah, they look really comfy," Neiva gawked.

Tight and very form-fitting, the jeans showed the muscle

definition in his legs. Did Nate recently take some extra testosterone or growth hormone? When Neiva last saw him, he was a scrawny little boy with braces and acne. Now he looked like a Greek god.

Neiva bit her cheek again.

“What’s that in your hand?” Nate asked, backing the truck out of the driveway.

“Oh, Grams gave it to me. She said it was a birthday gift for tonight!” Neiva exclaimed. She unrolled the item from the cloth. In her hand was a piece of wood, about two inches long and one inch wide. It had a thin strip of leather looped through the top, and by the way it caught the light, it reminded her of a tiger’s-eye.

“Is this supposed to be a necklace or something?” Neiva asked, turning the wood over in her hand. She lifted it up to get a closer look. It was unlike any other kind of wood she had ever seen before. When she ran her index finger against the edges, it was soft to the touch. The wood looked ancient, almost magical.

“Oh yeah,” Nate replied, shifting the truck’s gears. “That’s for your birthday tonight. Every Native gets one when they turn seventeen. It’s sort of a ritual of passing into adulthood.”

Nate paused briefly, seeing the confusion in Neiva’s eyes.

“You give it to Old Lady Gertrude, and she’ll carve out your totem. Every person in Spirit receives one on their seventeenth birthday,” Nate patiently explained.

Neiva didn’t know the town’s customs. Her father didn’t want her to be a part of any traditions related to the island. No one could comprehend his reasoning, but at least her grandmother refused to keep Neiva completely in the dark.

Still confused, Neiva stared hard at the wood. “Why does everyone receive a totem? I thought totems were usually in front of a house or placed in town squares.”

Nate let out a long exasperated breath as he drove the truck forward onto the road. “Totems are considered guardians. Each person receives a totem for protection. It’s

known as their spirit guide. It connects the owner to nature, and some people believe it helps them control the spirit of the totem when it's needed the most. The legend is when you turn seventeen, you will need the spirit guide for guidance into adulthood."

"So what's your totem, Nate? You turned seventeen a couple months ago."

"Mine is a fox," Nate replied proudly as he lifted his necklace to show her. It was carved from the same kind of wood that Neiva held in her hand. "It's a small animal. But it's swift and cunning. Old Lady Gertrude carved it for me on my birthday. Once you receive one, you should never stop wearing it."

"How come I've never seen anyone in town wearing them?" Neiva asked as she rolled the wood back and forth in her hand.

"We must always keep them hidden underneath our clothes, so the totem lies close to our hearts," Nate replied.

It sounded like a cool ritual, different from anything she had ever heard of, and maybe this was one of the secrets linked to the island. She wrapped the piece of wood back up and put it into her backpack. Once it was nestled inside, she stared out the window and watched the houses quickly pass by.

Unease filled her stomach, then anxiousness, and finally she became sick with dismay. They were almost at the school. Spirit was a small place, and by car it took only ten minutes to get from one end of town to the other.

"Well . . . we're here," Nate whispered as he pulled into a parking space directly in front of school. He shut the engine off and turned to Neiva. "Ready?"

"Yes . . . no," her voice quivered as they grabbed their backpacks and jumped out of the truck. Following Nate as he led her toward school, Neiva couldn't help but notice how his backside equally matched his front side. Tight and well-defined. Oh dear, she was in trouble.

Neiva shook her head several times before glancing up

at the school. Raven Heights was nothing extraordinary. The building was gray with no windows, and cameras were stationed at every corner and at every angle. Great, my new school is a prison, Neiva thought.

It had stopped raining by the time Neiva and Nate reached the front doors. There was a flurry of movement as a group of students rushed to get into the building. Nate grabbed the door before it closed and ushered Neiva inside. The inside was as dull as the outside, with black lockers lining the beige walls and dark brown tile covering the floor. A pair of double doors at the end of the hallway led to more hallways. There were no posters up and no color or liveliness except for the students themselves mingling in the hallway.

The setting made Neiva think of her old school, Ridge Manor, and how different things were there. Bright and cheerful, Ridge Manor could bring a smile to anyone's face as they walked down its corridors. The landscaping around the school was lush and beautiful. Its grassy knolls were a rich green and soft to the touch. When the weather permitted it, she ate outside and enjoyed sitting in the sun laughing with her friends. She was going to miss that. But she felt grateful to at least have Nate.

"C'mon, relax," he said, breaking her reverie. "Our lockers are over here."

Neiva glanced back at him uneasily but followed him down the hall toward a row of lockers.

Nate pointed to the locker at the very end. "That's yours. Be careful," he said as he swiftly played with the combination to his own locker. "Those hallway doors swing inward and you could get hit by students coming in."

Too late. One of the doors slammed into Neiva's shoulder as a student rushed into the hallway. Dark honey-colored eyes grew large as the student caught sight of Neiva. He briefly muttered an apology, and then scurried away to join a group of friends down the hall. Neiva didn't get a good look at the boy's face. The encounter was quick, but she thought

it was Nate's buddy Chad. She had briefly met him once and remembered the scar over his upper lip.

"Come on, Neiva. The bell is going to ring soon." Nate slammed the door to his locker shut, spun around, and whisked her through a sea of students.

"Your first class is with me. English . . . it's over here. Room 3-B," Nate quickly said as they entered the classroom. Rushing toward the back of the room, Nate grabbed two chairs near the corner and slammed his body into the chair, causing it to squeak in protest. A look of relief washed over his face.

Casually scanning the room, Neiva noticed it was a stark contrast to the hallway. The room was full of color and personality, with posters of Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and other authors lining the green walls. An old blue recliner sat in the corner by a shelf stacked with a variety of books. At the front of the room was a large dark desk with a fishbowl on top of it. Behind the desk, the chalkboard had a quote written on it by William Shakespeare: "And since you know you cannot see yourself, so well as by reflection, I, your glass, will modestly discover to yourself, that of yourself which you yet know not of."

"What's the hurry, Nate?" Neiva asked as she slid into the desk beside him.

She turned to face him, but he wasn't paying attention to her. His eyes were clearly focused at the front of the room. His neck was at a slight angle and he looked hypnotized with his mouth slightly open. A strange noise gurgled out of his mouth.

Looking to the front of the room, Neiva instantly saw the source of the problem. The girl was five-eight with beautiful long black hair. Her face was molded like an angel and she moved with such grace she reminded Neiva of a ballerina on stage.

Icy-blue eyes locked onto Neiva's stare, sending tingles down her back. Goose bumps started to form on her arms causing her body to shiver. The temperature felt like it had dropped ten degrees.

“So, you’re the new girl?” she asked. Her voice was smooth and carried like the wind rushing over the housetops on a cold winter’s day. The girl reminded Neiva of a gorgeous block of ice.

Glancing at Nate from the corner of her eye, Neiva could see she wasn’t going to get any help from him. He was in a trance, unable to speak. Suddenly feeling jealous, she had the urge to tell this girl to mind her own business, but she promised Grams she would try to be nice and make friends. Her temper wasn’t going to get the best of her, yet.

“Well, I’m not really new to the area. I’ve visited my grandmother a bunch of times over the years.” Neiva answered, inspecting her nails. “I’m just attending school here until my parents get back from Europe.”

“Oh, yes. The Blonde Eskimo,” she paused to look Neiva up and down, “Well, my name is Miranda. I look forward to getting to know you this semester.” She abruptly ended the conversation with a turn of her head, sending her hair flying around her like a cape.

“My name is Neiva. Nice to meet you too . . . not,” Neiva watched sourly as Miranda took a seat in the front row. She could already see Miranda was going to be trouble, and the fact she had Nate’s attention made Neiva’s insides flare with anger.

“Hey, Neiva!” a musical voice chirped.

A small figure bounded down the aisle and sat in front of Neiva. She was Nate’s friend Brie, aka Breezy. Long brown hair fell over her shoulder blades with messy waves angling around her face, showcasing her high cheekbones. Her eyes were emerald green with specks of yellow floating around the irises. She was very petite, only coming up to Neiva’s armpits.

Neiva had gotten to know Breezy over all the summers she had spent in Spirit. She was sweet-tempered and very patient. They instantly hit it off from the very beginning and became great friends.

“Oh, no. Nate’s in his robot mode,” Breezy snapped her fingers in front of Nate’s face.

Pointing to Miranda at the front of the class, Neiva hissed, “I met the lovely girl at the front of the class. Such a charmer. And she apparently has some kind of effect on Nate.”

A deep laugh erupted from behind Neiva. Spinning around in her seat, she locked eyes with Vivian, who was casually leaning against the back wall. She was just as tall as Neiva, with long, black hair down to her waist that was always kept in a single braid. Black tribal tattoos graced both arms from her wrists to her shoulders. Always silent and secretive, Viv was a complete mystery to Neiva.

“Nate is enamored with the Ice Queen,” Viv said, full of disdain. “He’s been crazy about her since preschool. Kind of sad really. She treats him like dirt on the bottom of her shoe, and he would still do anything for her.”

Neiva’s lip curled. She didn’t like Miranda at all, and to hear how Miranda has been treating Nate made Neiva’s temper rise to the surface. Suddenly, she felt like she had some competition.

Viv peeled her back off the wall and sat to the right of Neiva. Stretching her long legs into the aisles and leaning back with her arms crossed over her chest, she turned to Neiva, her amber eyes sparkling with playfulness. “So, your birthday ceremony is tonight. You excited?”

What was so big about turning seventeen? Neiva didn’t understand. Wasn’t sixteen the big celebration because that’s when teens get their licenses? That’s when she received her Eskimo name. And eighteen was when teens officially became adults. Seventeen was just stuck in the middle, just another birthday. But Neiva liked the idea of getting a totem made just for her.

“I don’t know what to be excited for. And there’s a whole ceremony? What’s the big deal about turning seventeen?” Neiva leaned forward, hoping to get some answers out of Viv.

Feeling the excitement emanating from Neiva, Viv’s voice deepened. “Well, it’s a turning point in your development. Seventeen is a critical age because that’s when—”

In the blink of an eye, Nate appeared in front of Viv, clamping a hand over her mouth. His eyes blazed with both fear and anger. “Neiva, stop asking questions. You will eventually learn the answers. Viv, shut up and mind your own business. You know the rules.”

“What?” Neiva opened her mouth, but was abruptly quieted when Nate waved his finger in front of her face.

Knowing not to push the issue further, Neiva kept her mouth shut and didn’t ask any more questions. She wasn’t going to get any answers from him. She would be patient. The truth always revealed itself in the end. She figured if there was nothing she could do about it, why push the issue? Plus, this could lead to unraveling the truth about the island and its secret. She needed to be patient.

Glaring at both Viv and Neiva, Nate slowly removed his hand from Viv’s mouth. He threw his hands up in frustration as he stomped back to his desk.

Neiva wanted to apologize to Viv for Nate’s behavior, but their English teacher walked in. He was pleasantly plump and balding on top, with thick, wire-rimmed glasses and a smile that lit up the entire classroom. “Welcome to English. My name is Mr. Perry and I have many journeys to take you on during this semester. Let’s get started.”

Viv sat silently for the rest of the class with her arms crossed. Not once did she glance in Nate’s direction. Miranda, on the other hand, kept glancing back at Neiva, as if she too were sizing up the competition.