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“*26 Below* is an action-packed page-turner that I couldn’t put down. I’ve always enjoyed Kimberley Woodhouse’s writings, but this one blew me away. If you like stories of intrigue, action, romance, and biblical hope, this is the story for you. I can hardly wait for the rest of the series.”

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over 100 books

“This book holds you in its clutches as the terrifyingly real scenario ticks down to a cold-blooded ending. Who will survive the arctic dark shadow and who will die in its frozen grip?”

JANYRE TROMP, best-selling author of *Shadows in the Mind's Eye*

“In *26 Below*, Kimberley Woodhouse plunges readers into a chilling scenario that will keep them flipping the pages and turning up the thermostat. Highly recommended.”

NANCY MEHL, award-winning author of the
Quantico Files series

26
BELOW

ALASKAN CYBER HUNTERS

26 Below

8 Down

70 North

ALASKAN CYBER HUNTERS | BOOK ONE

26 BELOW

KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

26 Below

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to
my husband of thirty-one years,
JEREMY.*

Without you, this book wouldn't be here.

You are my best friend.

You are my very own Superman.

*You are an inspiration, encourager, brainstormer,
life partner, and so much more.*

*I could write a million words about you,
and it wouldn't be enough.*

I love you more.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

PREFACE

DEAR READER,

This series started in my mind back in December of 2009. My husband said, “Here’s an idea . . . what if when the temperature hits twenty-six below, all the power goes out.” From there, my mind took off. A thousand different scenarios were hashed out and brainstormed. But it all goes back to Jeremy’s original thought. He even titled the book—which I love.

Never would I have guessed that a decade later, I would have a conversation with the man who would become my son-in-love and that he would assist me in adding the final element. Steven helped me to make this story what it is.

I don’t know how well versed you are in all things cybersecurity, but the more I learn, the more I am grateful for men and women like him who work to keep our country safe. Steven is a West Point graduate who, at the writing of this book, has been posted at the ACI—Army Cyber Institute—at West Point for a few years. He has faithfully served his country in many postings and deployments around the world. But seeing him back at West Point, where he got engaged and then married to our daughter, has been a joy. The Cyber Research Project that he’s had the opportunity to work on is brilliant. Again, I’m so thankful for the people who work so diligently to protect us. For more information on the project, please check out the “Note from the Author” at the end of the story.

Preface

You'll see the Fairbanks Police and Alaska State Troopers mentioned a lot in the story. The city of Fairbanks has an incredible police department as well as an established presence of the state troopers. These two work separately and together. I don't go into great detail explaining who does what because that isn't necessary for you to follow the story, but please join me in respecting and honoring these two agencies and the men and women who keep Alaskans safe.

Emergency Managers and Emergency Operations Centers are valuable mainstays of our cities. They work behind the scenes to save lives every day. They prepare for disasters, try to prevent the ones they can, and respond whenever needed. I was shocked to learn that so many people have no idea these positions even exist—until they go through a disaster and then are thankful for the foresight of the authorities.

One thing I learned doing research for this series is that most attacks and disasters (especially natural ones) *can't* be prevented. That's why we need people who know how to respond and how to get us through.

As you read, please know I have done a tremendous amount of research to ensure the story is accurate and applicable. Our technology is always rapidly changing, so differences will occur over time. Any mistakes/differences are my own or intentional for the story.

If you have been one of my readers for a while, you understand that I am a research junkie. I love it. Sadly, 95 percent of the cool tidbits I find don't get used, but I still love it. For security purposes, I intentionally fictionalized a lot of the protocols in this book. Names of schools are also intentionally fictionalized.

For more details on what is real and what is fictionalized, see the "Note from the Author" at the end.

Finally, Alaska is my favorite state. After living there for several years—on a remote island in the Aleutian chain (what some people would consider the bush) and then also in Anchorage (the big city)—it has been my goal to accurately portray the largest state in the United States. I have more than a dozen books that take place there.

Alaskans are amazing people. They are tough. They are loyal.

Preface

They love their state. And they really dislike when people don't get things about Alaska or their way of life accurate.

So here's to all my Alaskan friends, family, and readers.

26 Below.

Enjoy the journey,
Kimberley Woodhouse

TERMINOLOGY

the mountain is out—Denali is allowing himself to be seen and is not covered in clouds. Since the High One is so massive, he creates his own weather. All mountains do that a little bit, but Denali does it in a much more dramatic way. Probably because his rise is so abrupt and high.

chasing the mountain—Denali is out and people will “chase” him up and down the Parks Highway to try to get the best photos before he shrouds himself again in clouds.

moose—These guys are everywhere. There are more moose than people. In Anchorage it was a normal occurrence to have a huge bull moose walk across five lanes of traffic without a care in the world. Oh, and they ate my shrubs. All. The. Time. Sigh.

reindeer (caribou)—They are prevalent. There’s even a reindeer farm you can visit, and many of them live up at the Santa Clause House in North Pole. And yes, Alaskan restaurants serve reindeer sausage.

snowmachine—If you call it a snowmobile in Alaska, they might kick you out.

PROLOGUE

75 Degrees Above Zero
August 12—7:00 p.m.
Fairbanks, Alaska

THE WARMTH OF THE SUMMER wouldn't last. After all, this was Alaska. Termination dust was sure to fly soon. That first dusting of snow on the mountaintops was almost always by the end of August. And when the heat faded and the snow flew, then everything would be in motion.

For devastation. Destruction. The end of the power of the government.

And he couldn't wait.

They would be that much closer to the culmination of all his efforts. Years of investment. But it would be worth it. His plan was brilliant. His boss respected him now. Brought him into the inner circle. They were a team. And their future plans were much bigger than just this one strike. But *this* would show those responsible that they were serious.

He paced a trail of flower petals. Back and forth. The couple getting married across the field was focused on love and happiness. When they should be focused on the plan. His plan. But he could let them have their day. They were useful. For now.

Genius, really. How he'd gotten all the different members on board. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. At least not at this moment.

To think that his family thought he was crazy. Needed help. Wanted him on controlling medications. Wait until they heard. No one would call him that anymore. They'd see how powerful he'd become. How he'd overcome the illness, banishing it by the sheer force of his will.

It was time for people to listen to what he had to say.

Only one way to get a point across. Take away what people thought they needed to survive.

Men and women alike crumbled at their own mortality.

The time was coming.

They'd do whatever he said for the simple chance to stay alive.

* * *

62 Above Zero

August 21—7:34 a.m.

Somewhere Along the Chena River

Natalie ran through a field of magenta fireweed, just as she had when she was young.

Wait . . . Her feet stilled, and she studied the sky. White clouds moved across the blue background as if the world was spinning faster and faster. She closed her eyes and opened them once more. She *was* young again. Glancing down at her hands, she watched them transform from wrinkled and aged back to smooth and firm. Young for now. Wherever she was.

Thump, thump, thump.

The field changed. Fireweed and blue sky morphed into floor and walls. Her home. The one where she'd raised six children and buried Tito. The home she lost after he died.

Thump, thump.

With a blink, she now fought the Alaskan wind. Struggled against the blinding snow. A small part of her brain recognized she was dreaming. The people at the clinic in Anchorage had warned her

the disease would ravage her brain. The most frustrating part was not always recognizing what was real and what was a dream or a memory. The dreams and memories were places she begged to stay. Reality much harder to swallow.

Where would her mind take her now? The wind bit through her sweater and sent a chill up her arms.

Shelter. That's what she needed. Before she froze. Shelter . . . Where had she found shelter? A glimpse of hope at the tip of her mind wouldn't materialize. What could she do? Where could she go?

Cold. So cold.

Thump, scrape.

A little jolt took her breath away. She blinked several times. Where was she now? Wait . . . she wasn't cold anymore.

Her favorite blanket was around her. A soft pillow under her head. Blinking several times, she looked at the wood planks above her head.

That's right—she'd found shelter in a tiny cabin about three miles from Fairbanks.

Slivers of light through the floorboards above where she lay didn't help her concentrate. Her breathing was shallow. Then the fog at the edges of her mind cleared away. That's right. She'd found the cabin early yesterday—wasn't it yesterday?—before the diminishing sun had faded behind the mountains in the distance. Before the sky went black. After that moose tore a hole in her old tent. This shelter was better and would last her through winter too. That would save her the trouble of finding another place and working so hard to remember where it was.

What month was it? July? But the sun went down around 10:00 p.m. Couldn't be July. This was August. Wasn't it? Was this real?

She touched the dirt floor beneath her. It was real.

Details from the day before floated into her mind's eye and pieced back into memory.

Yesterday she'd walked the length of the cabin looking for signs of habitation. She'd made the mistake thinking an abandoned cabin would stay that way once before and couldn't risk it again.

When she heard the echoing emptiness by the small table, she'd smiled. Moving aside a few chairs, she'd intended to pry up a loose floorboard to see if the space underneath was large enough, only to find an actual hatch a few inches over. That made things much easier. It creaked and groaned from disuse, which meant she should be safe to take shelter beneath. It was a large area. Perhaps it had been a cellar at one point. No matter. It suited her just fine.

"Welcome, men."

The voice. Where was it coming from? Where was she?

Oh, that's right. The cabin. The hatch. She was safe.

They couldn't see her . . . could they? Natalie closed her eyes, as though her lack of sight would hide her better. Men didn't like her. *People* didn't like her. Not anymore. Sometimes she couldn't remember her own name let alone what happened five minutes ago. Sometimes things were clear, like they seemed to be now, but those moments were becoming more and more rare.

"It's time to ramp things up. Time for everyone to pay attention. We are not the government's pawns. We will not go quietly. They need to listen to what we have to say. And to do that . . . Well, they will know we are serious." That voice. Commanding. Decisive.

It made her open her eyes again and drew her gaze to the sliver of light. Natalie dared to peek through the slats.

Something in the man's words and the way the others agreed with him made her skin crawl. It wasn't right. It was dark. Frightening.

Whatever they were speaking of was important. She felt it in her bones. But all she could see were blobs of darkness where feet or chairs blocked the light. The fog edged its way in again. No! She couldn't let it take her away. Not when there was something significant happening above her.

Significant . . . What did that word mean again?

"Time to put our plan into action."

She squinted. A plan. There was a plan. Remember the plan. *God, please help me to focus. To remember.*

"We only have a few more weeks of summer, so use this time to

get everything in place before the snow flies. Every contingency has been covered, so there is no room for mistakes. Double-check and triple-check to make sure you leave no signature.”

Plan. Before snow. Remember! The rest confused her.

“Once it hits twenty-six below . . .” Laughter. The mean kind. From more than one throat. More harsh words. Ugly words. Hateful words. Words that made her want to curl into a ball and hide. They scared her.

She shook her head against the fear. No—she wouldn’t hide. She could do something. She could.

Plan. Twenty-six below. *Remember, Natalie. Remember!*

“Any questions?”

“Yeah.”

This voice had a deeper timbre. Like Tito’s voice. How she’d loved that man. He was a good man, not like the ones above her now.

“What are we going to do about that new chick they hired? Someone needs to get rid of her.”

Chicks were fluffy and cute. Once, a long time ago, she’d held one in her hand. Fluffy. She liked fluffy things. They were soft.

Soft.

She had a soft bed back at home where Tito waited for her. He was a good man.

“Don’t worry about her. Just because the media is praising the governor for his new appointees doesn’t mean we should go into a panic. I’ll take care of it.”

The commanding voice kept talking, but she couldn’t grab onto the words. Everything faded.

She was so tired.

. . . *take care of it* . . .

Take care. Yes, taking care was good. Tito always took good care of her. The fog surrounded her now, and she laid back on the ground, pulled her blanket around her, and curled into a ball.

Natalie closed her eyes and sighed. The blue sky filled with warm sunlight beckoned her.

She reached a hand toward it. The wrinkled, bent, arthritic fingers transformed before her eyes.

Home. This was where she longed to be. Forever.

Her young legs ran through the tall grass, magenta fireweed greeting her fingertips.

CHAPTER ONE

50 Above Zero
October 1—2:00 p.m.
Fairbanks

FIRST OFFICIAL DAY ON THE job as Emergency Operations Center director, and Darcie Phillips found herself wanting to play hooky. At least to skip the meeting ahead of her. The environmentalists and preservationists were known for droning on and on about every detail of every animal and its habitat, every issue about global warming and greenhouse gases, and so forth and so on. Not that she didn't believe in taking care of the planet and animals. She *did*.

She recycled. She had even looked into a new hybrid vehicle.

But saving the environment wasn't her job. Wasn't her passion. Her job was keeping the communities safe and also resilient to emergency and disaster hazards.

Back in Juneau there were others who handled the different groups that wanted to be heard. Here though? She'd have to deal with all of it. By herself. Which had lost any and all appeal about an hour after she took the position.

No. Stop it. She needed to look at the positive side of things. So maybe she wasn't always the greatest at handling people, but this was an opportunity to share about the important work she was doing. She should think of this as a practice run . . . because she'd have to come across as convincing to far more influential people—

Wait. Was that yelling?

Light filtered through the wood blinds on the conference room's windows as she stepped through the door. Words were tossed about the room in sharp bursts and brought her feet to a halt.

With a step back, she checked the number beside the doorjamb. Yep. This was the right place. She glanced down at the folder in her hand. She'd set up this room at city hall for her presentation a half hour ago. She was supposed to be briefing a group of concerned citizens on her new position—people concerned about making sure that animals and wildlife were taken into consideration during any disasters, natural or man-made. No one wanted another *Exxon Valdez* mess on their hands. It was supposed to be a walk in the park. Easy. Right?

Apparently it was tougher than she'd thought. She certainly hadn't expected to walk into World War III. As she approached the podium, the tension increased. It sounded like the most argumentative group of people she'd ever met. And in her time working for the government, she'd dealt with a *lot* of groups. Even the gorgeous view of the southern mountains couldn't help her now.

Scanning the room for any sense of welcome or even a slight offering of a smile, she took a deep breath.

Not a warm glance among them.

The task in front of her loomed like a giant tornado ready to suck her up into its belly of dark, swirling clouds. But that's what she did best, wasn't it? Faced the beast? Six years in the Air Force as a weather specialist had given her experience after experience in that arena.

She pasted on a smile and leaned closer to the microphone. "Good morning."

All eyes darted toward her. Like hawks on prey. A few raised eyebrows, along with numerous frowns, greeted her. No introductions. Nothing. Just silence. The proverbial pin could drop and everyone would hear it.

She reached for her clicker to advance the PowerPoint presentation

to her first slide. “My name is Darcie Phillips, and I’m the new Emergency Operations director for our economic region. The governor has put together a plan for our great state to prepare for any impending disasters. It is my job to make sure that all areas work together to ensure that government, utilities, emergency services, health care, and everything in between are able to continue serving our community in light of any potential natural disaster or terrorist threat. In this age of technology, there’s a lot of updating we need to do to keep our people safe, but rest assured, I am prepared for the challenge ahead.” With a nod, she clicked to the next slide.

“Excuse me, Ms. Phillips, but I think we’ve had enough of the political mumbo jumbo. We want to know how you—and the governor’s office—are going to work with us and meet our needs. Our *demands*.” The steely eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses challenged her.

Political mumbo jumbo? She hadn’t even said anything important yet. That was just her introduction. “Exactly what needs—”

“Get real, Ms. Phillips. Why do you think we asked to meet with you?” Another sneer, this time from the other side of the room.

A man in a cowboy hat must have thought it was time to throw in his two cents. He stood, arms crossed. “We’ve had enough of the small talk and rehearsed speeches, of having people spoon-feed us what they think we want to hear. It’s apparent you’re up to the same game as everyone else who has talked to us. You may say you’re the manager or whatever, but we know that the governor has ulterior motives—he’s wanting to open ANWR now that the leasing programs are in place.” He flicked his head toward the screen.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? Her pulse kicked up a notch. Why did it always have to go back to oil and gas being the bad guys for these people? “I have no information about drilling or leasing in ANWR—”

“Yeah, right. Like we can’t see right through this little facade of *emergency manager*.”

The misuse of her title and the snide tone made her skin crawl. The room erupted into sarcastic remarks about her position.