

Mining technology is loosed on Adelphi. Her pain is real and must be overcome, no matter the danger, and the cost.

Saving Power of Hope

By Renee W. Peek

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Saving power of hope

BOOK 4



Renee W Peek

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Chapter 1

Katie ran to meet the land transport. “Noni, Tama!”

Jimmi and Tam arrived in style with Noah and Nadia. Jimmi had taken a fall and was not up to riding her horse. But there is nothing that would keep either of them from a chance for a gathering. So Noah broke out the vehicle for them.

Tam jumped out and hugged the child running toward her. Jimmi grumbled and struggled to get out. Nadia and Noah ran to her aide, gently easing the short round woman out. Maddison and Zon were ready to assist her to a chair that would allow her to see everything and because it was Jimmi put her in a position to command everyone.

This had become an annual celebration, preparing the wild rice. The community gathered for fun and to keep in touch. With families growing, lives get busy but the history of these people taught them their power was in their connection.

Everyone brought food, trade goods and stories. It was a time to catch up on all the news. Not that Tam or Jimmi needed a reason to visit Maddison, Zon and little Katie, that was a common event.

There were many changes in these last few years. Alexis was moving out on her own, building her house with the help of the Boutin brothers Caleb and Beau. Seka and Bailey have become a couple, they spent years working

together. When they finally let down their walls and sought out some joy, they found it in each other. They have been so busy exploring they have yet to move out of their tent into a house.

Luca and Gavin were together, they banded with Willa, Parker and Landon setting up a little tent community of their own. They all have been just having fun enjoying the freedom and finding new challenges for themselves. They climb, paddle, run and hike. They have taken their recreational activities to an exciting level. Maddison was glad to focus their youthful energy on getting the rice parched, they were happy to learn and they had the stamina to stick with it.

The children were making the rounds getting all the attention they could manage. Hope was nearly five now and showing herself to be her mother Jedda's daughter, gathering all the creatures she could find. Dembe had his mother's good looks and his father's shyness, he was happy to follow Hope.

Katie was as willful and independent as her mother, but she was devoted to Tam and Jimmi. Of course they spoiled that child at every opportunity, their devotion to her was just as intense. Gathering all the kids together just amplified their different personalities, at the same time demonstrated and strengthened their unity and connectivity with Adelphi, their bond was strong.

Maddison made her way down to the lake to watch Tam and Katie play in the water. Alexis was sitting in the sand

viewing the show too. Maddy took a seat next to her. “Katie does love an audience.”

Alexis jumped, “Sorry you startled me.”

Maddison could see Alexis’s thoughts were elsewhere. “You look like a woman with a lot on her mind, anything I can do to help?”

Alexis took a serious tone. “That depends, can this just be between you and me?”

Maddison felt the gravity of her statement. “You know you can always come to me with anything. Is there a problem?”

Alexis physically tensed. “No, you know never mind, I don’t know what I’m saying everything’s great.”

Maddison took the girl by the hand. “Come with me little missy, I know that tone better than most people, because I have used it more than most people. I know just the place for us to talk.”

Maddy led them both to a small stream leading from the lake. There were large boulders next to the flowing water perfect for sitting. Maddison situated herself on one of the stones and invited Alexis to do the same. “Do you remember the first time you hollered at me? It was in a place kind of like this. I say the first time because you have yelled at me many times since. Not as many times as Jimmi but more than a few.”

Alexis relaxed a bit. Maddy continued, "I'm here for you, you can tell me anything."

Alexis took several deep breaths. "It's Caleb, everyone keeps asking me if we're together? If he'll be living with me when the house is finished? If we'll get married?"

Maddy apologized, "Those were the exact questions I asked earlier, sorry, but you seemed to be okay with all of it. What's going on?"

An exasperated Alexis let loose. "I just want to be me, or at least find out what *me* is. You all have treated me as Anna's daughter, or Adelphi's voice, or the llama girl, or the crazy animal girl. I just want to be me, not Caleb's girl, not anyone's girl, just me."

Maddy hugged the agitated young woman. "I understand, I mean I really understand. What can I do to help? Have you told any of this to Caleb? I know he'd get it."

That increased Alexis' trepidation. "I'm afraid to tell him. I really do care for him, so maybe I should just forget all this. I feel like I'm just being selfish. I have to think about him not just me."

Maddison embraced the girl. "No absolutely not, you are the least selfish person I know. This is about more than just you. It's about the future, yours as well as everyone that cares for and depends on you. When I was younger than you, I wanted to break away from my family. They were all amazing people, loved by all. I was nothing more than a sister or daughter or granddaughter. I wanted to

make a name for myself and I did. I was the bad sister, the troubled daughter and the ungrateful granddaughter.

“Late one night when, let’s just say, the authorities, brought me home, my mom and I had a heart-to-heart talk about the path I had chosen. She said she was proud that I had taken control of my life but perhaps I may want to rethink the direction I was traveling. I’m going to share with you what she told me that night, remember where you come from, it’s what got you here, then dream of where you want to go and build a road to get there.”

“Your mom sounds like a smart lady.”

“My mom was a wise, and thank goodness, a wonderfully patient woman. Now you young lady seem to be in the process of building your road. You are a powerful force and anyone that knows you, can see that power growing in you. Take the time you need to figure out how to use it and how to make it part of your joy and your life, *your* life Alexis, no one else’s. This world and everyone on it is here for you, any time, any place, no one more than your mom. Never ever forget that.”

“Thanks Maddison, I needed to hear that. You always help me see things clearer, and you’re right, I know Caleb, I’m sure he’ll be okay with letting me have some time.”

Maddy wanted to catch up on the house build. “How far along are you on the house now?”

That perked Alexis up, “It’s great, you know it isn’t that far from here. It’s on a stream, by a tiny short water fall where

the stream bellies out. And it's not just a house, there is a stable and a clinic."

Maddison was surprised by that. "A stable and clinic, that sounds interesting."

Alexis was happy to explain. "Many of the llamas have followed me up there, it's nice for them to have a place to come during the rainy season. Plus I can use it for any of the bigger critters I'm treating. Jedda and Ethan helped me design the clinic. It'll be so cool to actually have a place to treat them, keep them comfortable, and not have to give up my bed for them. I actually have my first patient in there right now, Sasha."

That shocked Maddy, "My god what's wrong with Sasha, Jimmi must be beside herself?"

Alexis eased her fears, "Nothing bad, I hope. It seems one of the other dogs walked for days to visit Sasha, and long story short, she's pregnant."

Maddy was curious, "Which dog?"

Alexis elaborated, "You remember Riley?"

Maddison thought for a moment, "That blue eyed Border Collie Lab cross? If I remember right, he was a bit bigger than Sasha."

Alexis agreed, "And there lies the possible problem. Sasha is older and never had puppies before, so she's staying with me just to be sure there are no issues with the delivery."

Maddy was apprehensive, “That’s a hugely worrisome first case, Jimmi has to be driving you up the wall. She’s bonded to the crazy little dog.”

Alexis agreed, “It has been hard, but it’s because she loves Sasha so much, so you can’t be mad at her for calling ten or twenty times a day.”

Maddy grinned at the young woman. “You, my dear, are on a well-constructed, amazing road, thanks for inviting me along for the ride. Now let’s get back to the gathering before Jimmi sends out a search party.”

Erin had arrived and was looking for Maddy and Alexis. Finding the two she just about knocked them down trying to get in hugs. “It has been way too long. I’ve missed you guys. What’s new around here? Is Caleb here too? I have to see Katie, or is she napping? Did you know Seka and Bailey are together? They came and visited Collin and me. They see a lot of Isabella she likes all the sciency stuff they know. Is there food somewhere, I’m starving. Is Nadia here? I have to talk to her too, and then Sophia and Jimmi and Tam, and Willa. Wow I hope I have time to see everyone.”

Maddison couldn’t help from smiling. “I’ve missed you too Erin. Where’s Collin? Didn’t he come?”

Erin was more than happy to share. “He went on one of his bird adventures, he has been out for almost a week. I knew if I went, I would miss all this, so I sent him off on his own. He’s watching one of the water birds mating stuff. He’s been trying to see these guys for a while now. I hope

he catches them this time. When he comes back after one of these, where he got to see what he wants he's so excited and then he wants to, you know, do some mating stuff of his own."

Alexis just smiled and took Erin to find something to eat. Maddy made her way back to check on her worker bees. She was surprised to find an entirely different crew working the paddles. Seka, Bailey and Willa were keeping the fire going and the rice moving.

Maddison was impressed, "You guys look like pros. How did you end up doing this?"

Bailey wasn't sure. "We just came over to see how the others were doing and before you know it, we were holding the paddles, so I'm really not sure."

Maddy grabbed one of the paddles and hollered for Zon. Her husband came running with Daniel in tow. The two men helped relieve the weary crew. Seka pulled up a chair and sent Willa off to get some beverages.

Others gathered to watch as the last batch of rice was parched. Maddison's skill with the activity was beautiful to witness. Her motions were smooth and deft, she didn't have to think, her actions came naturally. The process was dear to her, participation in the event put a sparkle in her eye.

The fact that the community was drawn together for this made it all the more endearing. Her emotions permeated the gathering. Katie ran to her mom, Maddy let her

daughter hang on to the paddle as she finished, passing her joy on to the next generation.

After more good food and good conversation the attendees started drifting off home. Maddison and Zon were helping Jimmi back into the land transport, when Seka approached. “Maddison we were wondering if you and Zon wanted to join us on an adventure?”

Maddy was intrigued, “What kind of adventure?”

Bailey jumped in, “We think we have found another place of power up high in the hills and rumor has it, traveling to the heights is a passion of yours. It would take a few days to get there, and Nadia and Noah are coming so we can take the transport most of the way.”

Maddison got Jimmi settled in and looked at Zon. “We would love to go but Katie is a handful right now, that’s not the kind of trip she could handle. She has become quite fond of the word *no* these days.”

Tam jumped in. “Leave Katie with us, we would love to have her for a few days.”

Zon just shook his head. “There is no way we could do that to the two of you. She is exhausting, a day maybe, but four or five is asking too much of you ladies.”

Anna was listening to the encounter. “Let Ro and I help. If it’s okay with Jimmi and Tam we could stay over and tag team the little one. Four empty nesters should be able to handle one two-year-old child.”

Katie held up her fingers to correct that. “I am going to be three.”

Anna apologized, “Forgive me Katie, the four of us should be able to care for a nearly three-year-old child.”

Maddison looked to her husband. “What do you think, it’s been a while since we’ve had an adventure?”

Zon verified with the care givers. “If you guys are sure you want to do this, I say we go.”

Seka was thrilled, “This will be so much fun. It’ll take Bailey and me a day or two to finalize a route and get our gear together. I’ll be in touch when we have things set and give you a timeline.”

Jimmi wanted to get started too. “Come on Noah, get us home. Tam and I need to start Katie proofing the house.”

Chapter 2

Through pretty serious grunting and groaning the wall was lifted into place. Caleb secured it as Alexis and Beau held it firm. Once they could let loose, all three worked to fasten it until it was solid.

Alexis moved the door into the frame and started to attach the hinges. “Once this is done, I’m going to have to go and check on Sasha, she’s really close now.”

Caleb took over from her. “You go ahead. We can finish here. Once we get this door on and finish that last wall you can move your bed out of the clinic and into the house. I would like to get that done for you today. You just focus on your patient.” Alexis struggled these days with being told what to do but she was worried about Sasha, so she let it go.

When she arrived at the clinic Sasha appeared to be in labor, but Alexis felt there was something not right. She laid her hands on the anxious dog and knew she had to do something. She called for the brothers to help her and pulled out her comm.

Caleb and Beau ran in, Alexis handed the comm to Beau. “Get me Jedda and Ethan, make sure you lock it on them, Jimmi doesn’t need to hear any of this. Caleb, I need you to gently bring Sasha in here and lay her on the table. I am going to get things ready, I have to take these puppies out now.”

Jedda was trying to keep her voice calm. “Do you have everything you need?”

Alexis attempted a chuckle. “I have the tools but I’m not sure I have the skills.”

Jedda put a stop to that. “Don’t you dare go there girl, you have more skill and ability already than I will ever have. Confidence is key here, you got this, do you hear me?”

Alexis tried to shake the doubt out of her head. “Yes, yes I know what I’m doing here and the boys are able to help. Caleb can keep tabs on her respiration and heart rate, and Beau can take care of the puppies as I remove them. She is nearly under, I’ll do a play by play if you guys could just listen in, in case there’s trouble.” Both Jedda and Ethan agreed to her plan.

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Maddison was handing Katie off to Tam. “This is harder than I thought.”

Jimmi tried to calm her. “She couldn’t be in better hands, and you know that. Other than you and Zon, there’s no one that loves her more and Tam and I. You also know, as much as we spoil her, we would never let her do anything that would be dangerous in any way. Now give your daughter a hug and get on your way.”

Maddy picked up her little girl and gave her a hug and a kiss as Zon embraced them both. When she let her down, Katie joyfully ran into the house looking for some sweet treats, leaving Maddy standing next to Zon.

He took his wife's hand as she leaned into him. "She's growing up way too fast."

Zon lifted his wife and carried her to the transport. "Our girl is having an adventure, let's get on to ours now."

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Alexis was able to concentrate better on what she was doing by describing each move she made, Jedda and Ethan were listening intently. "I have clamped things off and am removing the uterus. I am cutting it open. There are three huge pups in here. My god they are enormous. She could never have delivered them. I've handed off the puppies to Beau and Caleb and I'm going to stitch our brave girl up. I should have her awake soon. Jedda what do you think about pain meds?"

Jedda was quick to answer. "Go gentle with that, she's a slight girl and she'll need to nurse her little ones. Ethan any advice?"

Ethan was trying to remember what drugs she had. "I think you have the anti-inflammatory meloxicam. That would be the best and as Jedda says go gently, titrate up rather than down. She's a tough one our Sasha, how are the puppies doing?"

They could hear Caleb laughing in the background. "They're active for sure. All breathing and kicking. There is no way these are Reilly's, whoever the father is, that has to be one big papa."

Alexis's voice came back. "Last stitch is in and I'm waking her up now. Thanks you guys for helping me get through this."

Ethan laughed, "I did absolutely nothing, you are a pro young lady. I don't know if I could have done any better or even done it at all. Unfortunately, now comes the hard part."

Jedda agreed, "He's right, now you have to tell Jimmi you cut her little girl open."

Alexis realized what they were saying. "Maybe one of you might...?" Both Jedda and Ethan signed off, and the comm was silent. Alexis was sure putting that call off was the best idea.

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Spending a night under the stars was amazing up in the hills, they seemed close enough to touch. The shield protecting their world didn't stop shooting stars, there was quite a show. Maddy promised herself to remember the date, perhaps this was a yearly event like some of the meteor showers back on Earth.

She was reconnecting with the world she called home now, and friends that had helped save them both. Zon built a small fire while they shared some of the fermented beverage Noah made. It was a bit smoother than Jimmi wine.

Seka had a little more of the drink than she should have, and her tongue was loosed. "Who would ever have

thought I would be sitting by a fire with Timo freaking De Wees? I mean seriously, in what universe was that a smart move.”

Noah started to say something, but Nadia stopped him. “You’re right Dr Horvat, who would ever have imagined such a thing.”

Bailey tried to stop her partner. “Seka you’ve had enough, maybe you should just turn in for the night.”

Seka would not be stopped. “Oh no, have I hurt your feelings Timo, we can’t have that now can we. No. no. no we have to tiptoe around so as not to rock the boat. The waterlogged sinking boat.”

Maddison stepped in, “Seka I have to agree with Bailey I think it’s time for all of us to turn in.”

Seka just changed her focus. “This is all on you *Madds*, you are the bringer of pain and death. You brought these people here, then the ship, then all hell broke loose. I had friends up there you know, good friends, there were innocent kids barely out of their teens and now they’re dead.” Seka passed out. Noah and Zon helped Bailey get her into her tent.

Bailey came back and tried to apologize for her partner. “I’m so sorry you had to hear that. She has really been struggling lately. I think she’s been pushing for us to do all this traveling to keep from dealing with everything. She never really did that. With all the urgency and terror, it was

easy to think she handled it, but you can see that really isn't the case."

Nadia tried to accept her explanation. "Bailey I appreciate your apology, from what you're saying, it seems we have a lot of work to do before Seka can really be a part of things here. Maybe we should just head back tomorrow."

Bailey was adamant that not happen. "Please don't do that. Seka needs to be around you, both of you. When I said she's struggling I meant that. These last month's I've really been worried about her, doing something, something to herself."

Maddison was appalled. "My god Bailey, why didn't you come to us? You know we care about her. What can we do?"

Bailey shared her anxiety. "Just let her be around you, I think it's helping to bring things to the surface. She has spent a lifetime being a reclusive solitary person, dealing openly with feelings is foreign to her. This has to be on her terms, or it won't work. Please, please be patient, I know she cares about you, she just has all this pain she's holding in."

Nadia was having difficulty keeping her emotions at bay. "Let's be very clear here, I care for her, and I want to help. So I'm happy to keep going, just know I'm not going to stand by and let her hurt herself because we don't want to upset her. I want that to be absolutely understood." Nadia got up and joined Noah setting up their sleeping rolls.

Maddison echoed her sentiments. “I agree with Nadia, I’m happy to back off and let her have her space but that woman is obviously hurting. We can’t let that go untreated for long.” Bailey hugged Maddy and headed off to her tent.

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Alexis was practicing sounding calm and in control. It had been two days since she took the puppies. Sasha was doing excellent, and her pups were growing fast. It would be essential to wean them early, Sasha couldn’t keep up with these monsters. Jimmi’s calls had been fewer since they were taking care of Katie, that busy little girl was occupying all their time. Alexis hoped Jimmi would be exhausted when she answered the comm.

She opened the unit and waited. “Alexis what news do you have about my precious girl?”

Alexis took a deep breath, “Frist I want you to know Sasha is happy and healthy.”

Jimmi jumped on that. “What do you mean first, what happened, are the puppies here, are they alive, what happened, talk to me Alexis what’s wrong?”

Alexis took charge of the conversation. “Just stop and let me tell you. Everything is fine all are healthy and happy. There are three ginormous puppies. You were wrong, Reilly was most definitely not the father. Your brave girl went into labor, but I knew something was wrong, so I took the babies out to make sure they were all safe.”

Jimmi was more subdued. “You cut my little girl open?”

Alexis continued. “I did, it was the only way to save her and her pups. Jedda and Ethan were on the comms with me the whole time, Caleb and Beau assisted. I was able to get them out in a matter of minutes and have your girl stitched up and ready to nurse them right away. You can come to see them but I’m keeping them all under observation for a minimum of two weeks, is that clear?”

Jimmi was grateful. “Thank you so much Alexis, I know they can’t be in any better hands. I owe you.” Alexis nearly collapsed when the comm went off.

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The following morning was a bit strained. Seka avoided engaging Nadia and Maddison, so they did their best to maintain some sense of normalcy. Maddison called them to breakfast. “Lady’s let Zon load your gear and come eat with us.”

Bailey approached first, she took a couple mugs and poured tea for them both. Seka followed and took a seat keeping Bailey between she and the others. Nadia tried to open the door to conversation. “Is there anything special on the route today?”

Bailey responded, “It is a pretty straight shot, but there is a neat looking plateau that should have a spectacular view, we thought maybe it would be a good place for lunch.”

Seka joined in, “There’s an appropriate spot to camp tonight and then tomorrow we should be at the power

site.” The dialogue seemed a bit stiff but at least she was able to attempt to connect with them.

After the breakfast gear was packed up and loaded on the transport they were on their way. It was an easy trail, the ride was quiet. As the morning progressed Zon started to get a haunting feeling, he asked to see the map trying to locate the plateau they mentioned.

Bailey handed him the screen as he scanned the image he visibly tensed. “I don’t think this will be a good place to stop, let’s just keep going further up the hill.”

Seka disagreed, “It should be a stellar view, we have to at least look.”

Zon’s tone became almost combative. “No, Noah just keep going, do not stop.”

Maddison was confused by his vehemence, “Zon what’s got you so upset?” She took the screen from him, he tried to get it back, but it was too late.

Maddison knew what he was seeing. Nadia was watching the interaction. “Maddy you’re shaking, what’s going on?”

Maddison shouted at Noah, “Stop, Noah stop the vehicle right now, please stop.” Noah did as he was told. Maddy literally fell from the transport and ran into the woods to throw up. The rest of the passengers were demanding an explanation from Zon. His only thoughts were for the wellbeing of his wife.

When Maddison finally made her way back to the vehicle everyone was just staring, Nadia approached her. “Can you tell us what’s going on?”

Zon stepped in, “You don’t have to do anything. We can all get back in and just keep going.”

Maddison hugged her husband, “No I’ve put this off long enough, I have to do this.” She started the climb up to the plateau, with the others following.

Zon explained what was happening. “You know about Gen right?”

Everyone shook their heads except Nadia. “I’ve heard the name. She caused some trouble for you, right? There was a cell for her at the Fitzgerald.”

Zon let his head fall, “Trouble doesn’t come close to describing what she did. She stole all our food and medical supplies, she nearly killed Anna and then she staged a battle to the death with Maddison, on this very plateau. She stabbed Maddy in the heart, we nearly lost her. Then she lost herself for a long time after that. Gen took a piece of her, right here. Madds wanted to come back but we kept putting it off and putting it off, and now here we are.”

They caught up to Maddison as she stood at the edge of the clearing. Zon tried to get to her but both Seka and Nadia reached out to grab him. “She needs to do this on her own.”

They watched as Maddison walked around the grounds. The emotional turmoil was painfully obvious. She moved around as if she were following in the exact steps she took at the time. She touched the stone wall and fell to her knees. Zon tried to rush to her but Nadia and Seka held him back. Maddison stood back up and walked to the center of the plateau, kneeled down and began to weep. The women let Zon go to her.

He enveloped his wife in an embrace. Maddison returned the hug. "Thank you love, I needed to do this. I had to take control and ensure this place has no hold over me anymore. This episode can finally be closed. I can breathe easier. It's as if this place was weighing me down keeping me from moving forward. I had no idea there was still something holding me back like this. Wow I feel amazing. Let have lunch!"

Chapter 3

Jimmi and Tam were able to leave Katie with Ro and Anna so they could visit little Sasha. It was the first time Jimmi had been on a horse since her fall so it was a slow ride but good for her, and Tam too. They were more than a little tired by the time they arrived.

Alexis had Sasha and the puppies in new bigger digs, ready for their visitors. She had moved them into her now finished house. Tam helped her partner down as Alexis showed them inside. Sasha was beside herself trying to get to Jimmi, she wagged her entire body. Jimmi's joy was contagious, there was no way to keep from smiling at their reunion.

Jimmi examined her incision. "You're amazing Alexis that will hardly leave a scar. She looks so healthy, and I have no idea where those puppies came from. How could they possibly have come out of this little girl? They are enormous, how did that happen?"

Alexis smiled, "Sasha is the only one that knows, and she isn't telling."

Alexis could see her visitors were tired, she offered them a seat and brought out some food and tea. Tam was impressed with the house. "You really have a beautiful home here and the view is amazing."

Alexis was proud. "If you're up to it later I can take you on a tour of the clinic and stables. I could use some advice

Tam. I want to create some holding pens in the little back water pool off the stream. I hope to be able to house aquatic critters that are in need of treatment.”

Tam was happy to help. “I would love to. I’ve always wanted to design holding areas with the animal’s comfort and wellbeing the main focus. Thank you so much for allowing me to help.” Alexis was glowing, being able to consult with a fellow professional, she was discovering who “me” is.

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Maddison’s catharsis at the plateau struck a chord in Seka, she was very contemplative for the afternoons journey. The group traveled as far as the land transport could take them. They made camp in a small, sheltered area with stone structures on two sides.

Concern over the deteriorating weather necessitated a quick supper, cold grain and meat wraps, with some fruit. They fled to their tents when the wind and the rains started. The simple storm became a raging electrical light show. Hearing thunder in the hills was a new experience for Maddison and Zon. The echoes and power were exciting at first but when the storm started to build, the excitement turned to worry.

Not the setting for getting a good night’s sleep, but eventually the lightening started to subside, the storm seemed to be moving on. Maddy and Zon lay back down, prepared to finally get some rest, when there was one horrific blinding flash accompanied simultaneously by a

concussive explosion of thunder, followed by silence. As soon as they both were able to catch their breath and slow their heart rate back down, they were off to sleep.

After just a few hours Maddy was awakened by Zon, he was sitting up rocking back and forth. Maddy moved to him to find out what was going on. "Are you okay?"

Zon smiled and said he was fine he just couldn't sleep. Maddison looked him in the eye. "I don't have to be a healer to know you're in pain. What's going on?"

Zon was gritting his teeth. "Strange muscle pains, maybe just cramps or something. Do you think it could be from the altitude? We are kind of high up."

Maddy was not that familiar with altitude issues. "I'm not sure, it could be dehydration, did you drink enough water today? I know that's important in altitude. I'm going to get you some water now. I have something for pain in the med kit. Lay down, when I come back, I can try to massage your muscles and see if that helps."

Maddison left the tent to gather what she needed from the transport. It took her a while to find the med kit. By the time she returned Zon was sound asleep.

Maddy had just fallen back to sleep herself when she heard Bailey outside the tent. "Maddison are you awake I need some help? I can't find the med kit."

Maddy grabbed the kit and headed out. "Sorry I had it in here, Zon was not feeling well. What's going on?"

Bailey's voice was hesitant. "I'm not really sure, I can see Seka is in pain but she's refusing to admit it."

Maddy smiled, "That is a condition in which I'm well experienced, let me see if I can help."

They made their way back to the tent. Bailey went in first, Maddy stayed at the door and asked permission to enter. "Seka it's me Maddison, I'd like to help if you will let me come in."

Seka was tense, "Bailey what did you do? I told you I'm fine."

Maddy continued, "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but that is a big load of nonsense. You're very obviously hurting, I'm coming in whether you want me to or not, for Bailey's sake, she's worried about you."

Maddy kneeled next to the anxious woman. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Seka's breaths were short and shallow, "My muscles are just aching. I've never felt anything like this before."

Maddison was concerned both she and Zon had the same symptoms. "Is it like cramps?"

Seka tried to find a comfortable position. "I guess that would be a way to describe it. But it's different."

Maddy opened the med kit. "I'm going to give you something for the pain and to help you sleep if you'll let me."

Seka was relieved. “Yes please, this is as worrying as it is painful, thank you.” As Maddison injected Seka she could see Bailey relax as well.

o o o o

Anna was pacing the floor with a fussing Katie. She had been sleeping soundly and then suddenly woke crying. Her muscles were tense, she was inconsolable. Tam, Jimmi and Ro were also feeling off, so Anna was on her own with the little one. She was finally able to lull her back to sleep, but the child still tossed and turned.

o o o o

Everyone at the camp woke up late. Noah was the first one up and started a fire. Nadia joined him and got some tea and breakfast started. It was a while before Maddison came out. She was moving slowly. “I don’t know about you, but I’m done in, there’s no way I am making it up that hill today.”

Nadia was relieved, “Thank goodness I had no idea what I was going to say to get out of it, what’s going on with us?”

Maddison filled them in on what happened earlier. “Zon was hurting last night, and I had to give Seka some pain meds, so there’s something going on but I have no idea what it is. I’d better check on Seka.”

Bailey was pacing outside the tent. “Maddy she’s still not better, what can we do?”

Maddison sent Bailey off to get a couple containers of water while she went in. Seka was sitting up and rocking back and forth like Zon was. Maddison sat down near her. “Things still pretty bad?”

Seka continued to breathe short and shallow. “The pain is much better but I’m still struggling. Thanks for last night, I was able to get some sleep. I think that helped.”

Maddy explained about the others. “You aren’t the only one that’s not well, our whole little group is impaired. We are without a doubt heading home today. I know we’re close to our goal but I think this trip has more than filled the adventure quota.”

Seka smiled, “Agreed.”

Bailey came back with the water and handed it to Maddison, who in turn handed it to Seka. “I’m guessing food is not something you can handle but you need to drink as much of this as you can, finish at least one and as much of the second as you’re able. I’m going to get your partner to eat some breakfast before we set off. Once you get that down you, I can give you some meds to ease the pain and help you sleep on the trip home, understood?”

Seka started drinking the water. “Yes ma’am.”

Bailey tried to say she would just stay with Seka. Maddison took her hand and practically pulled her from the tent. “You need to keep up your strength too, now eat

something and drink as much water as you can handle. If you want to care for her, care for yourself first.”

Maddy could see Zon was up and appeared to be doing well. He and Noah were eating, as Nadia slowly sipped her tea. Maddison poured herself some and sat down. “I told Seka we’re heading back today, unless anyone has any objections?” Her query was met with silence. “Noah, if we didn’t make any stops how far do you think we could get today?”

Noah picked up the screen with the maps. “I think we can get to the first place we camped. I could get us home by mid-day tomorrow, the ride may be a bit rougher but absolutely doable.”

Maddy suggested they pack for speed. “Nadia and I can put together food to eat on the way, so we don’t have to stop. If we just set one tent tonight that will save time and effort. I think we need to work smart and not hard, or we may all collapse. I also think we need to see Ethan when we return, we have obviously done or contacted something.” All of them nodded in agreement.

o o o o

Alexis was trying to clean the puppy area. They were not cooperating, making the activity more challenging. Strange Aches and pains had kept her up most of the night, and she was still not feeling well. After finally finishing the cleaning, she had just collapsed on the floor when she heard Caleb calling out.

Alexis tried to sound far more energetic than she was. “I’m in here with the puppies.” She mustered the last bit of strength she had left to get up and look busy.

Caleb gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek. “That was some storm last night. How did these guys do with all the thunder?”

Alexis saw an opportunity to indirectly blame her wakeful night on the dogs. “You’re right I didn’t get any sleep, so I’m exhausted. If you don’t mind, I think I’m just going to go back to bed today.”

Caleb was disappointed, “That’s fine, I brought some dried fish and fruit for you. Maybe I can put together some lunch before you head off to sleep, it would probably be a good idea.”

Alexis was grateful for the offer. She had no energy or desire to make a meal for herself. “Caleb I’m in your debt, that would be a big help.” Alexis thought she was keeping him in the dark about how she was feeling but Caleb could see she was not well, though he knew better than to say anything.

o o o o

As the transport headed down the hill Bailey could feel Seka’s muscles relax and her breathing become deep and regular. The rest of the crew also felt an improved change in their condition. Perhaps it *was* all due to the elevation. The sense of urgency and concern dropped

away, and they were just able to look forward to getting home.

Noah guided the vehicle through some, less than open terrain, but he cut off a full day's travel. They made camp for the night expecting to be in their homes early the next day. They had time for a fire and a hot meal, Bailey was exhausted and nearly fell asleep while she was chewing. Maddison and Nadia helped Seka get her into her bed roll. The boys headed off to sleep leaving the three of them alone.

Under the cover of darkness while staring into a fire, secrets and unresolved emotions are easier to disclose. Seka took advantage of that. "I'd like to say I'm sorry for all the things I said the other night, but I'm not. I am sorry I blurted them out like I did, it goes without saying I still haven't come to terms with everything.

"I care about and trust you both, that's not in question. But the two of you are inextricably connected to a serious amount of pain in my life. Until I deal with that, seeing you two, stirs feelings that just make me ache. I know I have to fix this but in all honesty I'm afraid. I've held on to this anger for so long, I have no idea how to let go or who I'll be when it's gone."

Nadia was shocked. "I never thought of it like that, but you're right. I have some stuff that's still squatting inside me that I don't really want to let out. The object of my ire isn't here so it only comes out in those quiet moments when I let my guard down. But it's true, I kind of think of it

as a part of me, so much so that I fear I would somehow be less me, if it were gone. Man Seka, that's brilliant, and terrifying."

Maddison wasn't sure how to respond. "I get kind of mad at Jimmi sometimes." That was able to ease the tensions and let them all move back to some kind of stability in their relationship.

The next morning no one wanted to take time to eat, they just packed up and headed home. Bailey and Seka were first to be dropped off. Maddy made sure to tell Bailey she expected to be kept updated on how Seka was doing, they needed to do a better job of keeping in touch.

Maddison was eager to get on their way again and get to Tam and Jimmi's and pick up Katie. She told Noah not to hold back on speed. When they arrived they could see some horses waiting outside. As they got closer Maddison realized the beasts belonged to Sophia and Daniel, fear shot through her. Zon tried to calm his wife but that was not possible. She didn't wait for the transport to stop before she jumped out and ran into the house.

She blew through the door and saw Katie sitting on Sophia's lap. Her voice was bordering on hysterical. "What happened, what's wrong?!"

Katie leaped up and ran to her. "Mommy, mommy you're home."

Maddison reached down and picked up her little girl as she confronted Sophia. “Why are you here, what’s wrong with Katie?”

Anna and Tam stepped between Maddy and Sophia. Tam took Katie from her, as Anna pulled Maddison back trying to calm her down. “You need to get a hold of yourself, we were just visiting. Look at me Maddison, you’re getting a little crazy here. Katie is fine.”

Zon came in and picked up his daughter as he watched Anna sit Maddison down in a chair. Sophia approached her. “What’s going on Maddison?”

Maddy was still highly agitated, “I could ask you the same thing.”

Sophia pulled up a chair next to her. “I’m going to take your hands now. I’m trying to ameliorate the adrenaline that seems to still be flooding your systems.” Sophia took Maddy’s hands and let her head fall back. Maddison relaxed back into the chair. She could finally think straight again. She looked around the room at everyone.

Then Jimmi came to life. “Maddison Bear’s Heart Navarro what in heavens name possessed you to behave like that? Your daughter is happy and healthy. I noticed you didn’t ask after Tam or me, but we’re fine too. Now perhaps you can explain to the group why the hell you are back early and screaming at us like a mad woman.”

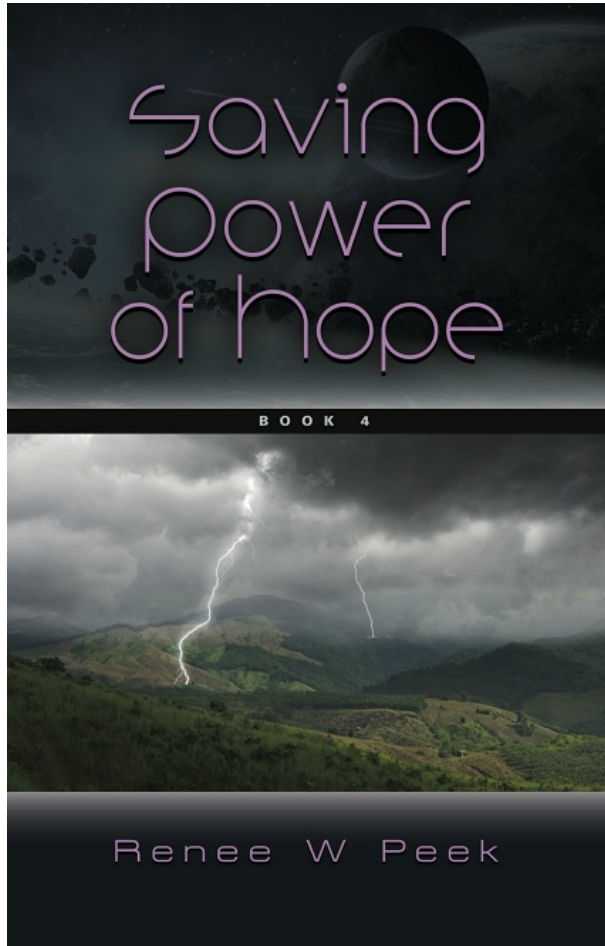
Maddison took a deep breath and tried to apologize. “Our adventure did not go to plan, and it seems it affected me

more than I thought. I'm sorry, we'll just take Katie and go."

Tam and Anna tried to follow but Nadia stopped them. "Better to give her some time. She thought she had things under control, obviously that's not the case. After coming face to face with Gen and Storm on this trip, it's possible she may come out swinging."

Sophia wanted an explanation. "You need to clarify that."

Nadia would not comply. "Sorry, that's for her to tell you, I have my own mess to deal with. Isn't it great to have us back?"



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