

Sample chapter, *Eagle in Flight: The Jessie Morgan Series, Book 3*

(Wrangell, Alaska in Spring 1975)

Chapter 7

As Jess made her way to Wrangell's public dock in the gray early morning, fishermen and bush pilots were already plying the glassy channel waters, headed out to who-knew-where. According to a phone message from Nad, Jess needed to be there at six a.m.

She spotted him on the stern of an aluminum boat with a small, glassed-in cabin. Nad waved, and she waved back. The purple lettering across the transom said *Lady Stikine*. Jess was leaping out of her skin, thrilled to be on her way.

"Good morning." She smiled at him, handing over her pack but keeping her purse securely strapped across her chest.

"Morning. Ready for this?" He grinned back, helping her board.

"Can't wait!" She joined the others in the cabin. A pale young man sat behind Teresa.

"This is Ralph," Nad said. "Ralph, this is Jessie."

Jess wondered if Ralph was a college kid. He had a firm handshake and a friendly face.

"Hang on," Nad mumbled, going out to stow Jessie's pack.

Teresa smiled at her and sipped something hot from a red plastic cup.

She had to be the quietest person Jess had ever met.

"OK, let's sit," Nad said. "You don't need passports to go into Canada, but you each have one, right?"

They both nodded.

“I’ll take your passport information, to give to the Canadians. There’s no one at the Boundary House these days.”

Jess found her passport and gave it to Nad, who scribbled on papers attached to a wooden clipboard.

“How long will you be in Canada?” Nad asked her.

“I’m not sure,” she replied.

“A rough idea?”

“Maybe a month or two.”

“You’ll come back to Wrangell?”

“I think so.”

“OK.” He scribbled, checked off boxes, and gave Jess her passport.

“Ralph? Same questions.”

“About a week, and probably coming back downriver. I might find someone to take me down the Grand Canyon of the Stikine.”

Nad whistled and Teresa shook her head.

“I know,” said Ralph. “It probably won’t happen.”

Nad finished the paperwork and cleared his throat. “A reminder: This trip is for me to re-learn the river channels. The Stikine is a wild river, with no markers. We have to see how the river has shifted.” He paused, looking at Ralph and then at Jess. “This is the fastest navigable river in North America.”

Jess swallowed hard, aware that she was entrusting her life to strangers. But she sensed that they were good people, smart and solid.

“Rule Number One: No one takes off their life jacket on the river. Rule Number Two: No one loosens their life jacket on the river. She’s high and fast and crazy. The Stikine is a real river with a powerful current.”

They nodded.

The four of them put on their orange life jackets, and Nad checked both of his passengers to check the fit. He tightened a couple of straps on Jessie's.

"I don't have business brochures yet, so here goes: The Stikine is three hundred eighty miles long, one of the last truly wild rivers. It cuts through the Boundary Ranges of the Coast Mountains. In Tlingit 'Stikine' means "great river." The Stikine Delta, at the mouth, is seventeen miles across and the river is navigable a hundred thirty miles upstream. There are no roads except near Stickeen. Watch for moose, mountain goats, Stone sheep, brown bear, black bear, wolves, otter, and lynx. Questions?"

They shook their heads.

Nad settled into the driver seat and turned the key. The engine growled to life. Jess sat behind Nad and Ralph was next to her, behind Teresa. As the sun cleared the mountains, Teresa jumped out to untie them. She threw the lines to her husband and jumped back onto the stern, pushing the *Lady Stikine* away from the dock. Nad, back in the driver seat, eased them away slowly. Once out of the harbor, he lay on the power and they skimmed across the water. It took no time to reach the river's mouth.

"Stikine Flats!" Nad pointed out a low area of mud and grass. The silty water was as opaque as creamy tea, massive driftwood piled onto gravel bars and islands. At least a hundred bald eagles were fishing the delta, perched among a chaotic mess of logs and branches and roots sticking up in the air like spiders' legs. Jess spotted four golden eagles resting on driftwood snags above geese, ducks, and flashy white swans gliding on a channel. As the noisy boat approached, they rose in a fluttering cloud of wings. A pair of sandhill cranes stayed put, though, standing in the shallows watching the boat go by. Harbor seals lounging on a muddy bank lifted their heads as if surprised by the commotion.

Jess wondered how Nad knew where to go in the maze of braided channels. They sped up the massive, brown-gray river, tall cottonwoods on the bank standing in June floodwater. On a sandbar, three sea lions slept. She slid her window open, figuring they were going too fast for the mosquitoes. There were no cabins, no roads, no people, and no other boats. Just the four of them powering up this roiling waterway that tumbled to the sea like an express train. God help anything that got in the way of the churning Stikine. Jess sent up a quick prayer that Nad knew what he was doing.

The river snaked through a brushy tangle of spruce-hemlock rainforest. Jess put her face in the open window and inhaled the woodsy scent, noticing a patch of Devil's Club and ferns growing around mossy rocks. Where the river had undercut the bank, carving new channels, grass and tree roots dangled in the water, waving in the current. Suddenly the sun streamed through a hole in the clouds, lighting up the lime-green cottonwood leaves.

Soon they were surrounded by soaring snow-and-ice mountains, the glaciers stretching down to the water's edge. Jessie's jaw dropped as she caught her first glimpse of the craggiest peaks she'd ever seen. Up here, the Coast Range was a jumble of towering slopes and pinnacles, the Stikine slicing a bold path right through them. She held one hand over her heart, awed.

Nad steered around a gigantic log that was bobbing its way down the milky channel. He dodged a barely visible snag. Mountains piled on top of mountains and when the sun emerged again, cloud shadows raced across the lofty slopes. Jess gawked at it. This was the most incredible place she'd ever seen – and probably the most perilous one, too. She could smell the danger. If they got dumped, how long could a person survive, life jacket or not? If the icy cold of the water didn't get a person, the tearing current would. How could a life jacket help, if the formidable river pinned you under a log jam?

Nad and others had warned her about the swollen river. Now it was sinking in. But Jess still didn't fear the Stikine the way she feared Twisty. Why? Here she was, her life in these strangers' hands on a ferocious river. Was she fatalistic? In the mood to take huge risks? Maybe she was so depressed she didn't care.

On the other hand, this insane trip could help Jess heal. It could show her that she was still fearless, at least in some ways. That not only had she survived Twisty's drug-fueled violence, so had her sense of adventure, her passion for experiencing new places.

Why was she so afraid of Twisty? Why did she imagine him lurking in dark corners? He'd traumatized her. Jess would never forget the piercing black hatred in his eyes as he'd pressed his thumbs down, cutting off her air. Those murderous eyes, those strong hands crushing her throat, had wounded her spirit and scarred her brain. Now and then his eyes flashed into her mind, taking her back to that trapped place, and his hatred washed over her like a burning wave.

Jess stared at the swirling river. Hell, yes, she was afraid of it. But a different kind of afraid.

Now they passed a meadow ringed with cottonwood, birch, willow, and pink-blooming wild roses. The sun came out again, shining on a waterfall gushing over a mossy cliff. Eight bald eagles perched in the cottonwoods on the bank. As the boat approached, the regal birds took off over the water, their seven-foot wingspans casting flapping shadows on the river.

Nature was brutal but indifferent. If something terrible happened to Jess on this river, it would be an accident. The mighty Stikine didn't care whether she died here or not. Jess loved feeling small, like how she felt in Montana. In that way, the raw power of the river soothed her. What a relief, to feel insignificant. The river and mountains took her out of herself, out of her anxiety. Being infinitesimal in the big picture grounded her.

The wilderness was about physical survival, not mental games. Twisty was man-made, contorted, the sharpened point of a knife. He had targeted Jess, and it was personal. Deliberate. Even if he were back in prison, he could hire someone like Carl to find her. He'd done it once and could do it again.

"Look!" Nad pointed across the river, where a moose and her calf were swimming. They'd almost reached the opposite bank. The moose walked out of the water, turned to look at the calf, and the two dripping animals disappeared into the jungle-like brush and cottonwood. Jess could smell the fresh cottonwood leaves. She smiled at Teresa, who grinned back.

The clouds were high, which made it possible to see the mountain peaks. It would have been too bad if the dramatic, jagged summits had been hidden in clouds. A tall cascade roared down one rocky slope.

"Hole in the Wall Mountain," Nad yelled over the engine, pointing. "And Kate's Needle. Some call it Boundary Peak."

Jess studied the icy mountain that rose above the others, almost touching the clouds. It was capped with fresh snow, and cradled a dirty glacier. Next to it, a gravelly mountain was topped by a turquoise-silver ice cliff. Here, the Stikine barreled through a narrow gorge. The accelerated current in the gorge slowed the jet boat slightly. A good-sized creek tumbled down a boulder-strewn cascade, its clear water whirling as it mixed with the main river's silty brown.

Catching a movement in the corner of her eye, Jess turned in time to see something up ahead dart into a willow thicket and vanish.

"Wolverine!" Nad bellowed.

Jess wished she'd gotten a better look, never having seen a wolverine. But she knew she was lucky to be here, and tried to memorize all of it. Nothing mattered but being right here on this river, right now.

The Canadian border was a swath of cleared forest and an empty cabin on the bank. “Boundary cabin!” Ned barely gave it a glance as they sped by.

A few miles upstream, they stopped for lunch. Teresa tied the bow to a thick-trunked cottonwood at a spot where the eddy swirled the opposite direction of the main current.

When Nad turned the motor off, the silence was stunning.

Jess went out to the bow and stood listening to the muffled roar of a distant waterfall. The river whispered, sucking on the bank as chickadees twittered among the trees. Ravens’ croaks echoed across the water. Granite peaks loomed thousands of feet over the river, glaciers hugging the slopes. One glacier stretched down to the water, where chunks of teal ice were swept into the unrelenting Stikine.

“Can’t believe that wolverine,” Nad said.

“Yah,” Teresa agreed. “They’re shy.”

They all scooted off the bow onto the bank to stretch their legs. “Look!” Ralph said. “Moose tracks!”

Jess had never seen moose tracks before. They were six inches long.

“Grizzly.” Nad pointed out more tracks in the mud. “Fresh.”

Both sets of tracks led into an alder thicket so dense it was hard to believe a big animal could move through it.

“Tons of wildlife here, but they duck into the trees when they hear us,” Nad said. “The boat is so loud, they hide early.”

Jess understood hiding. She remembered her own alarmed feeling at her uncle’s secluded Flathead Lake cabin, when she heard a car. Her first impulse had been to hide.

“Is the high water level normal?” Ralph asked.

“Yeah, for this time of year,” Nad replied. “High water is from May till August.” He swatted at the mosquitoes. “Standing water everywhere. That’s why the bugs are bad.”

The swarming mosquitoes drove them back inside the boat cabin to eat. On a small table Teresa set out two cans of smoked salmon, a box of Sailor Boy Pilot Bread crackers, and hot coffee in blue baked-enamel mugs. Jess tried her coffee, and almost burned her lips on the mug’s metal. The smoked salmon was delicious on the pilot bread, which was an oversized, unsalted soda cracker.

“Now we’re going to practice our talk,” Nad announced.

“You’re guinea pigs,” Teresa added with a smile.

“OK,” Jess said, leaning back and smiling at Ralph.

“My people, the Tlingit, are known for beautiful blankets, jewelry, and baskets,” Nad began.

“The Haida are known for canoes and woodworking because of our cedar trees.” Teresa sounded rehearsed. “Our war canoes are still carved from one great cedar tree. The canoes held fifty or sixty warriors, including women who fought hard. Some people call the Haida the ‘Indian Vikings of the Northwest Coast.’”

“This area,” Nad said, indicating the mountains, “is sacred for us. My people say the Great Glacier used to span the whole Stikine River, to the toe of Choquette Glacier. That would have been something to see.”

Teresa nodded silently.

Jess gazed at the glacier, trying to imagine it stretching across the river. As they travelled up the Stikine, they were entering a different world, stepping back into the Ice Age – into a raw landscape that was remote, untouched.

“Thousands of years ago,” Nad was saying, “the Tlingit came down this great river to settle near the ocean, where they’d heard fish were abundant. This right here is the homeland of Raven, the Creator who gave light to the world.

“The people had traveled many miles when their way was blocked by this glacier that filled the canyon. They didn’t want to go back, and could see the river flowing beneath the ice. Some braves climbed the glacier and saw water coming out the other end, emptying into a great bay. Raven whispered to the people, ‘Here, under the glacier, an ice passage waits for you.’ The people sent logs through, and saw them come out the other side.

“Four old women volunteered to go beneath the glacier. The men built a log raft and the women set out. The leaders climbed the glacier, watching. Then they heard the women calling from the great bay. ‘We made it, we made it,’ they yelled, waving their arms. The rest followed, with the strongest people going first. On the other side, they built large boats for going up and down the coast, looking for a safe place with good food. And that is how we came to live in Southeast Alaska.”

“Great story,” Ralph murmured.

Jess nodded.

“My people stayed in Wrangell,” Nad continued, “because they made money in the fur trade. Then it was Fort Stikine, a trading post. We were the Stikine people and our village was Shakesville, after Chief Shakes. Selling furs made the people rich, but they went crazy. The Tlingit and Haida fought each other, enslaved each other, for furs, money.” Nad nudged his wife.

Teresa nudged him back, her brown eyes full of mischief. “I’m an enslaved Haida.”

“The Hudson’s Bay Company closed the post in 1841 and Chief Shakes took it over. Twenty years later some of our people went up this river and found gold near Stickeen town. The rush was on, boy. Steamboats brought crowds up the river from Shakesville. It was over in six years, though—“

“We should go.” Teresa was already jumping out to untie them.

“Yeah, we should.” He turned to Jess and Ralph. “Our customers will hear Tlingit stories ‘cause she don’t like to talk.” Nad winked at his wife as she got back in. The jet boat snarled to life and they zoomed along the water again.

A sizable river flowed in from the right, its light color swirling in, rearing the main river into standing waves and wicked-looking eddies. The Stikine looked like it was boiling, with spinning whirlpools here and there.

“We call ‘em Stikine hippos!” Nad hollered, pointing at a whirlpool. “This is the Iskut River coming in!”

Around each bend of the river, the jagged Coast Range was more spectacular. As they zoomed along, the views changed with mind-blowing speed. Jess watched ahead, as Nad suggested, and twice spotted bulky shapes swiftly disappearing into the trees.

The boat lurched to a sudden stop when it hit a sand bar, and the engine stalled. It took one second for the rushing current to whip the bow to the right and shove the jet boat up into a sharp angle against the bar. It happened quickly and Jess was shocked, clutching the seat in front of her. Ralph and Teresa were on the boat’s low side. She could hear the high, silt-laden river hissing against the hull as it zipped by. The jet boat was so powerful, easily moving them against the current, it wasn’t until they were stuck on the bar that Jess got a real sense of the Stikine’s frightening power. Man, this was crazy-dangerous. Thankful to be wearing a life jacket, she again wondered how effective it would be in this icy current, especially with the snags and log jams.

“Sit tight,” Nad said between clenched teeth.

Did he think they’d move around right about now? They were frozen in their seats, white knuckles showing as they gripped whatever they could hang onto. Nad stayed in his seat and grabbed a wooden oar, his jaw muscle twitching. He

restarted the motor and let it idle as he used the oar to gingerly, cautiously, shove them off the bar.

They were on their way again.

Soon they came to a place Nad called “Little Canyon.” Jess didn’t think it was little. The flooded river raced through a crack in the mountains fifty yards across and thousands of feet deep. The two-hundred-yard-long canyon was walled by sheer gray rock. A multi-veiled waterfall surged over the streaked cliffs.

Upstream from the canyon, the river again splintered into braided channels separated by gravel bars and giant log jams. Massive cottonwoods had been toppled by the fast, bank-eroding water and piled up on each other, creating deadly obstacles. How did Nad figure out where to go? It was impossible to see anything in the opaque water. Sometimes the ends of trees nodded up and down in a weird river dance. Hung up on the river bottom, they were invisible except when the current pushed the free end up. Jess sent up another prayer that Nad knew what he was doing. Running aground once was more than enough for her.

On a mid-river sandbar, a bald eagle stood on a potato-colored mound and fixed its fierce eyes on the boat, as if daring it to come closer. The bird pecked at the brown thing, coming up with something red hanging from its hooked beak. Jess looked more closely and realized the brown thing was a dead grizzly, its eyeballs gone.

From Eagle in Flight: The Jessie Morgan Series, Book 3

by Maggie Plummer

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