



CINDY HIDAY

*Iditarod
Nights*
a romance



Library Writers Project

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Iditarod Nights by Cindy Hiday (2020)

The Gifts We Keep by Katie Grindeland (2019)

This is a work of fiction. While the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is an actual event and every effort was made to keep details of the race and setting as accurate as possible, the characters and situations in this story are fictitious.

Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.



Preface

Each year on the first Saturday of March, a diverse group of passionate men and women from around the world converge with their teams of four-legged athletes in Anchorage, Alaska, for the start of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. From there, they attempt to make their way across a thousand miles of the state's most striking, challenging terrain, battling harsh weather conditions and sleep deprivation to reach the burlled arch in Nome, Alaska, on the coast of the Bering Sea. Some compete to be first; for many, the goal is simply to finish, to go the distance, no matter how long it takes—without losing a dog. The training is intense, the exhaustion extreme, the rewards life altering.



Chapter 1

“What do you mean he’s not coming?” Claire asked. The bitter smell of stale coffee assaulted her sinuses as she unzipped her parka in the heat of the cramped air taxi office. It was bad enough she’d been coerced by her matchmaker friend into driving to Talkeetna to pick up some man she’d never met; she didn’t need complications. “I saw animal carriers being unloaded when I pulled in.”

“Weren’t his,” George, the whip-thin sixty-year-old flight service owner, replied. His office chair gave a rusty squawk as he leaned across his desk and handed Claire a slip of yellow notepaper. “Got the call about ten minutes ago. Some of his dogs came down with kennel cough.”

“Oh.” Claire’s irritation gave way to concern. The canine malady was a highly contagious respiratory infection that could develop into pneumonia if not properly treated. She glanced at the note. *Antibiotics and rest. Tell Matt and Janey I’ll see them next year.*

“He apologized for not getting word to you sooner,” George said. “Guess he was hoping the dogs would pull out of it in time to make the trip.”

“He must be terribly disappointed.” Claire had put her career on hold for two years to train and qualify for the Iditarod; to have to withdraw ten days before the race would be heartbreaking. But the Alaskan bush was no place

for a sick dog. She shoved the note into the pocket of her parka. “Well then, I suppose that’s—”

The office door blew open, cutting her off. A surge of frigid Alaskan air entered on the heels of a tall figure in a forest-green parka and moose-hide mukluks laced up to the knees of his faded jeans. His dark-brown hair swept back from his face untamed. As he moved away from the door, his eyes, as clear blue as glacier ice, surveyed the small room, cataloging his surroundings: a learned habit Claire had seen before. Law enforcement would be her guess. His gaze settled on her, and an unexpected rush of heat prickled the skin beneath her thick flannel shirt.

George asked, “Can I help you?”

Those intense eyes held Claire’s a second longer, then shifted to George. “I’m looking for Ted Warren,” he said, a raw huskiness in his voice.

“You just get off the plane from Nome?” George asked.

“That’s right.”

The older man referred to another slip of paper. “You must be Dillon Cord.”

“Yes.”

George shoved his knit cap higher on his forehead, exposing a thick shock of white hair. “I’m afraid Ted won’t be showing. He’s in intensive care at Providence Hospital down in Anchorage.”

Claire drew a sharp breath. Ted and Sarah Warren were her neighbors. “What happened?”

“Heart attack, late last night,” George replied. “His wife called just a bit ago from the hospital.”

“What’s his condition?”

“He’s stabilized—that’s all Sarah could tell me.” George returned his attention to Dillon Cord. “You a friend of Ted’s?”

“No. Somebody I know put me in touch with him. I had arrangements to board my team at his place until the race.”

“Those were your dogs I saw being unloaded,” Claire said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Fatigue pulled at the lines around his mouth. “Would either of you know where I can put up sixteen dogs?”

Claire didn't waste time analyzing the feeling that some force beyond her control had taken charge of the moment. "I was supposed to pick up a musher and his team from Teller," she said, "but I just got word he won't be coming. The vacancy is yours if you want it."

She could have called Janey and Matt first, but she knew her friends well enough to have a good idea what they'd say. It helped that Ted and Sarah had been willing to take the other man in, but Claire relied on her intuition more than anything else. After seven years in criminal defense, she considered herself an accurate judge of character.

Except when it comes to my personal life, she thought bitterly.

George leaned back, causing his chair to shriek again. "Well, Mr. Cord, looks like this is your lucky day. Matt and Janey Sommer run a top-notch operation, and they're only a couple miles down the road. Claire here's been training at their kennel. She'll be a rookie in this year's race."

"Are you sure I won't be imposing?"

Claire gave a wry smile. The musher she'd been sent to meet, according to Janey, was thirty-seven, good looking, and single. Dillon Cord appeared to be in the same age group, maybe a couple years younger, and, in her opinion, he met the second criterion. She wasn't going to ask about the third. "My friends are expecting me to bring back a musher and his dogs," she told him. "You'll be asked to help with chores and contribute a little for groceries, but the bunk in the cookhouse is free. Of course, you're responsible for your own dogs' chow."

"In that case, I accept," he said, and smiled.

Claire's breath caught. *Maybe this isn't such a good idea,* she thought. But the sensation didn't last. She was more than capable of guarding her heart against a man's attractive smile—she'd had two years of practice. A strand of hair had worked itself free from the braid at the back of her head, and she tucked it behind her ear. "As George said, I think you'll be happy with the arrangement."

"I'll help you load your dogs." George made to stand just as his telephone rang. "Darn thing. Hang on a minute."

"That's all right," Claire said. "You take care of business. I'm sure the two

of us can manage.”

The older man gave Dillon a quick sizing up, then nodded. “S’pose you’re right. Give my best to Matt and Janey.” He shot Claire a wink and reached for the phone.

“I’ll do that.” She turned toward the door. Dillon reached it first and held it open for her. “Thank you,” she said, embarrassed by how feminine his simple gesture made her feel; men had opened doors for her before.

Just not lately.

Stepping out of the overheated office, she zipped her jacket and pulled on her insulated gloves. The cold, dry air purged the smell of old coffee from her nose. A thermometer mounted to the outside of the building read fifteen degrees; the low afternoon sun shone bright against a new layer of powdery snow dusting the airstrip. Dillon’s dogs, still in their airline carriers in front of the hangar, yipped and barked when they saw him.

“It’s all right, kids,” he called. “Not much longer now.” The racket quieted to intermittent whines.

The Sommers’ truck was an old one-ton Ford pickup, its bed an enclosed wooden box divided into twenty compartments—two levels of five on each side—with space down the middle for equipment.

“Have you run the Iditarod before?” Claire asked as she helped him stow harnesses, lines, and personal gear between the compartments. The sleds—a toboggan and a lighter sprinter—went on top of the dog box.

“Twice.”

“Mind if I ask how you did?”

“I made it to Nome both times.”

Claire gave a light laugh. “I can only hope for as much.” She found a space for his snowshoes and secured the rear compartment. “Let’s get those kids of yours loaded.”

He led a blue-eyed white Siberian husky from the first airline carrier and hefted her into one of the truck’s top compartments, murmuring unintelligible endearments to the dog while he worked.

You can tell a lot about a man by how he treats his dogs, Claire thought, and felt that unexpected rush of heat again. She shifted and cleared her throat.

“Beautiful dog.”

“Bonnie’s my best leader. Not the fastest, but I can depend on her.” He nodded toward a carrier containing another Siberian, this one with a tan blaze on its muzzle. “That character over there is her brother Clyde.”

“Bonnie and Clyde?”

“When they were pups, they’d steal anything they could get in their mouths.” He shot her a half smile that made her pulse miss a beat.

“Thanks for the warning. If something comes up missing, I’ll know where to look.”

But judging by her reaction to the man—and what she suspected Janey would say when she got a look at him—Claire had a feeling Bonnie and Clyde might be the least of her worries.



Riding in the passenger seat of the Ford, Dillon gazed out the window at the frozen banks of the Susitna River and the snow-covered Alaska Range in the distance. Talkeetna was located at the end of a fourteen-mile paved spur branching off Parks Highway, the main route to Denali National Park. A brief break in the clouds shrouding the highest mountain in North America—Denali—gave him a glimpse of its sharp, arresting peaks before it slipped under cover again.

But the trees interested him more: cottonwood, birch, spruce, and alder, their branches struggling to support thick layers of snow. This was another world compared to the flat black sand beaches of Nome. He had his work cut out for him getting his team accustomed to running in dense vegetation. He should have started sooner, but money and time were tight.

He glanced over at the woman sitting beside him, her gloved hands wrapped firmly around the steering wheel as she squinted against the glare of the lowering sun. The truck was heavy with sixteen huskies and all his gear in the back, but Dillon had a feeling she could handle it. This may have

been her first Iditarod, but she had a certain self-assurance about her, a determined set to her chin. Though she was slender, her features suggested the kind of athletic strength that came from hours of training a team of dogs. She wore her light-blond hair in a braid that disappeared beneath the collar of her parka. When she pulled off a glove to push a strand of it behind her ear, he saw her work-roughened hand. Then, apparently deciding the cab had warmed up enough, she removed her other glove and dropped them both on the bench seat. Her gaze caught his for an instant before returning to the road.

Her dark-amber eyes reminded him of aged whiskey.

“What do you do in Nome, Dillon?”

A heartbeat passed while he put a damper on his reaction to those eyes. “I own a bar and grill: the Bering West.”

She shot him a quick look of surprise. “Oh, I thought maybe you...”

Dillon waited, already suspecting what she was going to say. He knew he retained habits from his former life that some people picked up on more readily than others. Things like hypervigilance had been trained into him and would be a part of him for as long as he lived.

“I’m sorry,” she said with a self-conscious flick of her hand on the steering wheel. “It’s not important.” She worried her lower lip between her teeth as if calculating her next question. Finally, she gave a sigh that bordered on exasperation and asked, “Are you married?”

“No.”

The abruptness of his answer earned him another quick look. “I didn’t mean to be nosy.” She muttered something Dillon couldn’t make out, then went on to explain, “It’s just that there’s something you should know about my friend.”

The strand of hair she’d tucked behind her ear came loose again, and she brushed it away from her face. A nervous habit, Dillon realized.

“Janey and I have known each other since grade school. When she married Matt and moved to Alaska, we didn’t see each other for years.” She shot him a resigned smile. “Now that I’m here, she doesn’t want me to leave.”

The truck sideslipped around a slick, shadowy curve. Dillon tensed, his thoughts flying to his dogs riding in the back. But before he could make a sound, Claire eased back on the throttle and corrected the slide with a slight turn of the wheel.

She continued without missing a beat. "Janey is set on finding me a husband while I'm here so I'll stay in Alaska after the race." Her voice reflected her irony. "I'm afraid she's going to take one look at you and have me off to Anchorage to try on wedding dresses."

Her statement was so outrageous and unexpected, Dillon couldn't contain his abrupt laugh. "Should I consider that a compliment?"

He caught her gaze again. Before she tucked her eyes away beneath lowered lashes, he saw a flash of acknowledgment that sent a bolt of something hot and alive through his body. When was the last time a woman had affected him that way?

He released a slow, thoughtful breath.

"Consider it a warning," Claire replied with a dismissive shrug. "Janey's a born matchmaker, and her determination can be indomitable. Why do you think I was sent to pick up the musher from Teller?"

"Because he's single."

"Bingo."

"But you're not interested."

"I didn't come to Alaska to get married," she stated. "I just wish I could convince Janey of that."

Dillon knew it was none of his business, but he couldn't resist asking. "Why *did* you come to Alaska?"

A slew of emotions crossed her features before she settled on one: defiance. "To run the Iditarod," she said, giving him a direct look. "You don't have a problem with women competing, do you?"

Dillon's mind detoured. As his gaze drifted to her lips, he could think of a lot of things that might become a problem between them; her choice to risk her neck in the world's toughest sled dog race wasn't one of them. "No, ma'am."

Her grin was immediate, and he felt another jolt of heat wash through

him. “Good. I’d hate to have to stop the truck and make you walk. Janey would never forgive me. And please, call me Claire.”

“Are you always this tough, Claire?”

“It has its advantages over soft and vulnerable.”

He caught himself looking at her again. He was pretty sure she’d intended the remark to sound offhanded, but he wondered if there wasn’t more to it.

After a pause, she added, “Especially if you’re an attorney.”

A dark memory stirred. “An attorney.”

“Criminal defense. I’m on a leave of absence from Stanfield, Wood, and Keller in Portland, Oregon.” She glanced over at him. “Have you ever been to Portland?”

Shit, what are the odds? He hesitated for half a beat. “No.”

He didn’t consider it much of a lie. He’d buried that Dillon Cord when he boarded a plane to Alaska six years ago. The man he’d been, the one from Portland, no longer existed.