

He walked over to the post stuck in the dirt. Sure enough, it indicated the top of what could only in jest be called a trail. Pushki, that tall, noxious Alaskan weed whose juice could blister the skin right off your body, crowded a steep gravel slide interrupted by needle-sharp black rock outcroppings and ending in a small but murderous ridge of that same rock thrusting out onto the beach itself. For a brief moment Liam debated just how badly he wanted to see Erik's dig. He sighed and shrugged. He was here, Wy wasn't due in for another hour. What the hell.

He inched forward, almost immediately lost whatever traction he started out with, and began to slide. He hit the first outcropping of rock, tripped, barely caught himself before what would have been a truly epic face plant, skittered over the gravel rolling beneath his soles, hit the second out-cropping, and flailed his arms trying to regain his balance. Failing, his feet slid out from beneath him and he sat down hard on the trail, which wasn't any kinder to his jeans than it had been to the soles of his shoes. He might have yelled. He certainly didn't scream like a little girl. He slid down the rest of the way on his butt, working up enough velocity that he only narrowly avoided impaling himself on a sliver of rock extended invitingly from the ridge that protruded onto the beach.

He climbed gingerly to his feet. Bones intact, only a few scrapes and bruises. Nothing that Wy couldn't kiss all better. He hoped no one had been photographing his ignominious descent with a cell phone. Although it would certainly have been quite the clickbait.

"Hey! Liam!"

He looked around.

"Up here!"

The creek he'd crossed ended in a stream that spread out over the beach in a wide fan. On the trail side time or tide had carved a cave into the rock, leaving a more or less level bit of shelf behind. Erik Berglund's head poked out from the flap of a white canvas tent. He was grinning. "You believe in making an entrance, don't you?"

Liam investigated the seat of his jeans. The fabric might be a little thinner that it had been at the top of the trail, but fortunately denim was tough stuff. "It was a little more exciting than I had anticipated. You ought to post a warning sign."

"I could, but what would be the fun in that?" He waved. "Come on up."

Liam looked at the steep tumble of rocks, which to his eyes looked freshly spewed from a volcano, and sighed again, but it was nothing compared to the trail and shortly he was standing next to Erik at the door of the tent.

Three sides were rolled up halfway. The fourth side faced the cave and was rolled up all the way to the top and securely fastened with twine. There were fold-out tables, a folding stool, and

various bits of paperwork, including a roughly drawn map, pinned to the canvas just beneath the roof. A foam bed was folded in thirds, topped by a rolled sleeping bag and a small duffel.

Erik followed his eyes. "Sometimes I bunk down here."

Liam, thinking of the access trail, could see why. The tent was big enough for Liam to stand up in, which as a tall man he appreciated.

"Welcome to my lair," Erik said with another wave of his hand. "Depending on who you talk to around here, I'm bringing truth and justice back to this part of the world, or I'm figuring out how to end resource extraction in the entire state. Which of course means an end to the world as we know it."

***Excerpted from Spoils of the Dead, by Dana Stabenow. Head of Zeus, 2021. Reprinted with permission.***