

Chapter 24

CHINK!

Falling!

The sensation sent shivers down Greyson's spine. His wingsuit's training tethers had fallen off and there was nothing between him and the deadly ground below. The trees were racing toward him, threatening to impale his exposed belly.

But he brushed the panic away and kicked with his right foot. The air pushed his right wing up and he curved away at a wide, sloping angle. He was surfing against the wave of air rushing against him, rippling his wings. He kept his chest against the wave, riding it around in a slow circle as he descended.

He couldn't help but smile, though it was dampened by the occasional spurt of fear.

[Good!] rang Forge's voice in his earpiece. [Get that LZ in sight and then straighten out. Bend your knees to slow.]

He found the LZ out of the corner of his eye and it drifted to his center. An oval prairie a few hundred yards away. Beyond the prairie he could now make out the trunks of trees and the rocky ridge.

He kicked his left foot and straightened out. *Perfect. Straight ahead.*

[Now slow, and throw your pilot chute.]

Everything went right before it went wrong.

He threw the pilot chute, it erupted, pulling out the main chute and snagging him up. He reoriented himself, punched his arms through the escape sleeves, and grabbed the risers to steer the chute. Memories of his trial landing in the Bahamas screeched in his mind, but this time he was ready. He guided himself into the middle of the prairie, kicked at the high grass, and then saw it.

The tiny brown dot had grown into a very large moose.

"Frick!"

He yanked on the risers to slow his descent, but the momentum brought him straight toward it. Just when he thought he would crash straight into its massive body, his feet hit the ground running and dug in.

He skidded to a stop.

And stared.

The moose stared back, its incredible antlers spreading beside its giant head like an evil king's throne. It grunted and snorted as its black, marble eyes locked on his from its seven-foot height. There was menace in those eyes; a trail of drool dripped from its black lip. Two others without antlers backed away, behind the large one, as if they knew the violence about to come.

His HUD told him the bull moose could be up to 1500 lbs. and reach up to 35 miles per hour.

"Guys..." Greyson began.

[Just don't provoke it,] Forge whispered.
And then the parachute floated into it.
It wrapped around its antlers like tissue paper.
For a brief moment it didn't react. Perhaps it was too surprised.
Even Greyson had frozen, knees bent, braced for the worst. But he thought quick enough to unsnap the chute.

And when he unsnapped, the moose snapped.

RUUUUUUUUHHHH!

It whipped its head around, its antlers projecting their shape through the chute. The other moose took steps back as the biggest one reared and stomped, snorting and bellowing as if possessed.

"What do I do?" he asked, looking for a place to run. Fifty yards of prairie until the nearest tree. The rock wall was closer, but behind the moose.

[Hide,] came Forge's answer.

And he ducked, just as the moose threw off the chute, stomping free and jerking its neck in search of the enemy.

Greyson held his breath to tiny whispers.

[Get out of your suit. You'll need to run.]

"Okay," he said, frantic to find the zippers as he listened for the sound of stomping hooves.

He heard its grunting just yards away. It charged one way and then another, searching. It was a matter of time.

He finally managed to pull off the wingsuit, and the grass immediately itched his legs and torso. He was in his boxers.

[We're on our way,] Forge radioed. [If he finds you, put your hands up and speak calmly.]

Gulping his fear, he peeked through the top blades of grass. The moose swiveled to his area and didn't look away. They met eyes.

Caught, Greyson rose to his feet with his hands in the air. "Hey there. G-ooooo moose."

It huffed. Its ears turned back and it lowered its head.

[It's with two females and it's mating season. It'll be protective of competitors fighting for a mate.]

Competitor? Me?

Shirking at the thought, Greyson eyed the two smaller moose without antlers. "Ew!"

The bull moose grunted, kicking at the dirt.

"Oh, I mean...sorry...I'm not into brunettes."

I've been hanging with Jarryd too much.

The HUD locked in on the moose's hooves, ears, and antlers. It flashed *Charge Imminent*.

[Greyson, run!]

He bolted toward the nearest tree, sprinting at top speed. His hand reached again for an absent fanny pack and slingshot. He was without a weapon, shoes, or pants.

When he turned, he regretted it. The beast was bearing down on him – its antlers bigger than he was, made for the singular purpose of fighting other males.

[Hang on, Greyson! Almost there!]

He heard the beating of the blades, but the moose's grunts were much closer.

A rolling drop-off loomed ahead. Not much, but it was unstable ground.

A sudden thought came to mind and he yanked off the helmet and tossed it up in the air behind him. The moose wanted something to charge, he'd give it something.

Just as the moose hit the helmet, he dodged right and rolled before the drop. The moose's legs clamored to stop, but the uneven ground made it stumble to a clumsy fall, its antlers scraping the dirt beside Greyson's knee.

He didn't stop to celebrate. With renewed hope he sprinted into the forest.

But the moose was too close behind for him to climb. If he tried, he'd get crushed between trunk and antler.

Instead, he dodged behind a pine just in time. The moose slammed into the thin trunk, breaking it in two. As the tree collapsed, he dove out of the way, sliding on his stomach in the needle-infected dirt.

Ruuugh!

The moose grunted and charged its downed competitor.

Greyson scrambled up, but it was too late.

And then the dirt exploded in three small bursts between them, spraying their faces with debris.

The moose planted itself and snorted. Confused.

Bullets.

But the bull wasn't confused long. Greyson darted behind another tree as the moose charged again, knocking its antlers on the trunk.

Weaving between two close trees, he threaded the needle as the moose slammed into them, backed off, and went around.

Greyson heaved for air, searching for a tree to climb. But their branches were too small or too high. He had to think of something!

Dirt sprang up in front of the moose again, and two bangs resounded a moment later from the field.

[Come to us!] Forge said.

He saw the heli and darted to it as the bullets delayed the beast in the forest.

Greyson reached the helicopter as it landed, smiling out of relief as Grover stepped from the cockpit with a scowl on his face and a machete in his hand.

When Greyson turned, he saw the moose had nearly caught him. But now it had stopped. Its hulking muscles tensed and its glassy eyes glared down at Grover as he planted himself between Greyson and the beast.

The moose grunted again and again. Kicked the dirt and whipped its neck. But Grover didn't move. He kept the knife at his side and one got the sense that he knew how to use it.

With one more grunt, the moose turned its shoulder, breaking the stare. Then, with a last look back, it galloped into the woods, soon joined by the two females.

Grover turned with a scoff, stopping to look down on Greyson. “Get your clothes on, boy. You look ridiculous.”

“Did I pass?” he asked, snatching his wingsuit from the grass.

“Can you land on a skyscraper’s roof eighty feet wide from 18,000 feet up?”

He thought about it. “If someone dares me, I’ll do anything.”

Grover opened the cockpit door and stepped up into it. “And you have to live.”

“Duh,” Greyson said, running back to get his helmet.

“Jump again. Two more times. Land them both, you pass.”

He joined Grover in the helicopter, a smile on his face. Forge gave him a pump of his eyebrows. Then, looking at the forest as they took off, Greyson had a thought. “Can I carry a weapon next time? You know, in case I land on a grizzly or something?”

Forge laughed. “Next jump you’ll have more than that. You’ll have your Kit.”

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For more information, connect with Tweedt on his [website](#), or through [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Goodreads](#), [LibraryThing](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

***Greyson Gray: Rubicon* is now available for pre-order exclusively on [Amazon](#). It will be available online at Barnes & Noble and iBookstore in November 2016.**