

WELCOME TO SKAGWAY, KID

CALVIN

WITH A LONG, weary sigh, Calvin hucked the last of the black luggage into the back of the '89 Cessna Caravan 208 seaplane, kicking the rear door of the old thing shut from the rickety wooden dock he was standing on with a finality that bordered violence.

Those bags had just kept coming. One after another, and he eyed his plane uneasily now as it floated lower than he felt it should in the water, undoubtedly due to the bloated cargo he had just fed it.

Fucking influencers, he thought to himself angrily, huffing his way back up the dock ramp to the parking lot of Skagway, Alaska's quaint little harborfront.

The late September air had long ago let go of the brief heat of the tundra's short summer, falling lazily into a cool chill that would surely deepen as the season progressed.

He noted then with concern that the sky had begun to cloud up over the past hour while he'd worked, dark coal plumes of storm roiling in low and heavy on the darkening

horizon, lacing their fingers between the jagged volcanic peaks that ringed the small, oceanfront town, menacing the upcoming flight with the promise of unwanted wind and turbulence.

Calvin zipped up the front of his yellow wax-canvased jacket anxiously, wishing he'd grabbed something warmer to wear. *Too late now*; he resigned to himself sourly.

His sole passenger, some influencer out of Los Angeles, was filming a tik-tok or a Youtube or whatever the fuck kids did to pretend to make a living these days in a corner of the little asphalt lot, holding what to Calvin's beleaguered 37-year-old eyes looked like the dumbest contraption he'd ever seen: a selfie stick.

The scrawny, raven-haired guy was yapping loudly away about something he couldn't be bothered to decipher, throwing up hand gestures ostentatiously for his camera, spinning this way and that, apparently taking in a panorama of the rustic town Calvin had always dreamed of escaping but never entirely managed to leave.

The guy had brought at least three times as many bags as he'd been instructed, insisting each was "really super important" in a youthful voice Calvin felt oozed with entitlement. Calvin's look had grown from severe to deadly at those words, transitioning from one state to the other as bag after bag had continued to flop out of the little taxi the Californian had rolled up in.

He already knew without a doubt that this would be a *very* long flight. The guy hadn't even offered to help him load, choosing instead to do well...whatever all of this bullshit

was...for nearly sixty minutes, and Calvin judged him harshly for it.

“Hey, do you mind? I wanna get a shot of you before we take off!” The influencer-tik-tocker-*whatever* was yammering in his general direction now, eyes still glued to his stupid camera and continuing to spin around this way and that, setting Calvin up to be just another prop in what he assumed was a very egocentric existence.

“No.” He said gruffly, grabbing his green Jansport backpack from where he’d left it on the ground and slinging it over one of his muscular shoulders, preparing to march his way right back towards the waiting seaplane.

“Absolutely. Fucking. *Not*.” He reiterated forcefully as the kid started walking over to him, reorienting the selfie stick so that Calvin knew he was now unwillingly in the shot. “Not unless you plan on paying me extra.” And he meant it. He needed the money. He was beyond broke. And he made up his mind then and there to charge this little dweeb for the fuel that extra luggage and the hassle of his personality would cost him.

“Aw, come on, dude, it’s fun! You’ll be internet-famous; I’ll even tag your user handle! You’ll get a shitload of followers!” The kid insisted. Calvin fought a violent urge to grab the fucking stick and throw it, and maybe the kid too, bodily into the ice-cold Alaskan water shimmering behind him. He gritted his teeth, somehow holding his temper back, something he didn’t always succeed at doing.

“No mean’s no, kid. And I said fucking *no*.” He held his hand out in front of himself, blocking the camera lens with his palm and pointing up at the approaching storm clouds

with his forefinger, indicating up toward the blackening heavens prophetically.

“If you want to get to Fort Yukon in one piece, I suggest you put that thing away and get your ass on the plane. *Now*. Otherwise, we’ll be waiting until tomorrow when this blows through. Hotel is across the street. Your choice.” He gestured dismissively toward the old inn.

He didn’t wait for an answer, turning his back on the guy and returning down the dock to the seaplane. And to his satisfaction, the sound of footsteps trailing sheepishly behind him on the marina’s wooden boardwalk assured him that he’d made his point.

He swung open the door to the cockpit, the second of two access portals on the little Cessna, before turning back to the dark-haired kid—no, not a kid, on second glance—young-looking but probably in his mid-20s. The guy was also a bit taller than Calvin had first noticed, standing almost eye-to-eye with his own 6’3 frame as the two leveled their gaze at one another appraisingly now.

The younger man was slight and wiry—compact compared to Calvin’s hulking frame, with a hint of some east-Asian ancestry that was difficult to pinpoint apparent on the features of his handsome, youthful face. His brown eyes glittered with excitement and anticipation as he eyed the floating machine.

“Zayne, by the way.” The guy was saying suddenly, smile no longer extending all the way up to his eyes, throwing a huge hand out to Calvin in the way of greeting, focus still lingering on their ride with equal parts fear and wonder.

“*In.*” Calvin gestured with finality, waving the idiot along into the interior of his sole piece of property, not bothering with the frivolity of a smile or an introduction.

He’d been left the aging plane by his late father a few years prior, relying on the thing as his main source of income. He knew it likely didn’t have much life left in it. Rust and a general lack of servicing had taken a toll on the poor thing, along with his bank account, and he hadn’t ever managed to save up the funds to service the now-antique adequately.

Regardless of all that, Calvin fought the hint of a smile as he climbed into the nostalgic space behind his passenger, recalling for some reason the glorious day he and his dad had flown it back, brand new, from Anchorage.

He’d never been happier in his life than he had been sitting next to his dad, soaring through the clouds, nothing but air and the *thwmp-thwmp-thwmp* of the plane’s single turbine engine propelling them ever-onward, splashing down in this distant harbor or on that far-flung lake, ferrying tourists to and fro. He’d grown up in this plane, and the thought of losing it so soon after his father—the only parent he’d ever known—wasn’t something he wanted to think about. Now, or ever.

He slammed the aluminum door shut, clicking the manual lock into place and buckling his seatbelt in a smooth, automatic motion before reaching over and roughly yanking Zayne’s seatbelt across his slight chest, whipping the thing into its catchment a little more forcefully than he maybe needed to, sinching the straps tighter than he maybe needed to as well, fighting back that smile even harder as he heard a little *oomph* escape Zayne as he did so.

“Now then. Let’s fly.” He said, flipping the set of switches that first primed, then ignited the Cessna’s engine, backing them out into the water and swinging the plane around expertly, lining them up for takeoff in the choppy waves of the bay.

The clouds had continued to close in all the while, the first of which appeared poised to overtake the town at any moment, and Calvin eyed them uneasily as he pulled back the yoke of the flight control system, throttling them up to maximum and hurling them skyward.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his finally silent passenger gripping his armrest so tight Calvin couldn’t help but chuckle audibly. He threw the plane around in an arc more violent than necessary, wobbling it side to side a bit for effect, and then circled back away from the open ocean, directing the plane northward toward Central Alaska’s great, wild interior, amusing himself as the kid’s grip tightened even more. Luckily, the engine’s roar drowned out the sound of Calvin’s now-rumbling laughter.

ALASKAN THUNDER

ZAYNE

ZAYNE WASN'T sure what this guy's problem was. He'd shown up on time, he'd been polite, he'd even tried to do him the favor of connecting him with some of his followers—but nothing seemed to make a chink in the big man's frigid persona.

Regardless, his concern had been forcibly shifted away from the hulking pilot and directly to the dubious safety of the rickety plane the moment they'd transitioned from bouncing along the water to soaring over the mountainous hinterlands of Alaska's unpopulated interior. The fear he'd always had of flying in such a small plane distracted him from childish thoughts of wanting to succeed at being liked.

The turbulence had started to get to him after only an hour or so of the six-hour flight, bumping him up and down in his seat, shaking him side to side, the creaks and groans of the plane disallowing him from ever relaxing, he himself not knowing which sounds were normal and which might be worth his concern.

He fought the urge to puke and glanced nervously at the pilot for reassurance, but the man didn't seem to notice or care. The pilot hadn't spoken a single word to him, hadn't even *looked* at him since they had taken off.

Asshole. Zayne allowed himself the thought. He usually tried to get along with everyone as best he knew how in order to keep things positive. Things were just easier that way. But his career as a social media influencer also provided him the rare opportunity to travel the globe from a young age, and in doing so, he discovered that you genuinely could not befriend everyone. No matter how hard you try.

And sometimes, the harder you tried, the worse you made things for yourself. He resigned to abandon any thoughts of making small talk or even attempting to fill the noisy cabin of the plane with anything but the tension and awkwardness that seemed to make its home in the dilapidated thing.

The view outside his window—once entertaining him with glimpses of snow-capped mountain peaks and never-ending boreal forests, interwoven here and there with rocky outcroppings and wide, snaking rivers—had fallen dark as the approaching storm and night blotted it out.

The only view out of it now was the lonely *blink-blinking* of the plane's tiny running light, adorning the tip of a dimly lit wing that seemed to be flexing more than he imagined it should against a vast field of nothingness.

Zayne closed his eyes, regretting having chartered this specific plane over the hundreds of others available online when he'd looked. If he were honest with himself, which he

had no problem being, he'd picked it because the pilot had looked rather hot in his little photo on the website, which he knew was a terrible reason to pick something like a pilot, but he hadn't thought much more about it than that. Not until right this moment.

He snuck another nervously appraising look at the man beside him, flannel-clad and wearing Carhart work pants, neck thick and corded with muscle, a huge vein tracing its way up the side and disappearing into a sharp jaw. He seemed competent enough at his job.

He is handsome, Zayne allowed guiltily, a total prick, but handsome. And he found himself involuntarily noting then the way the man's big, exposed forearms flexed and tensed as he guided the plane through a particularly rough patch of turbulence, the way his biceps and chest bulged and swelled out of the tight green and blue flannel shirt, the way his long, powerful legs filled out the tight-fitting pants...

Ok...he's really fucking hot; Zayne's hormones threatened to get the better of him, overtaking even his nerves about flying. But then, with the aid of a bit of choppy turbulence, he managed to redirect himself, a slight blush having crept up on his tanned face, readily hidden by the darkened interior of the cockpit. He looked away now, his anxiety forcing his attention back out the window.

Behind him, his luggage was vibrating to and fro, *clanking* from one side of the plane's cargo cabin to the other, banging loudly here and there against the aluminum skin of the craft, each sound causing Zayne to jolt uneasily in his seat.

Was that supposed to happen? He wondered nervously, worrying himself a bit, frantically hoping that this guy knew what he was doing. But what did Zayne know? He'd never flown a plane, only *in* them. He hoped, somewhat naively then, for the best, all the while fending off suspicions taunting him with the worst.

Just then, out the front windshield of the plane, an arc of lightning burst out of the darkness, closer than Zayne felt at all comfortable with. It was jagged, brilliant, and for a moment, it seemed to split the entire world in two, blinding him nearly totally.

And then there was the crackle of thunder, louder than anything he'd ever heard. The sound was all around him, *in* him, and he fought the urge to rip off his seatbelt and run from the noise, but he had nowhere to go.

A riot of rain and wind blasted across the little airplane with tremendous force then, sending the craft tumbling downward, only for the pilot to miraculously pull them back level for a moment, muscles straining on the yoke as he did so, jaw clenched tight.

But it was the turbulence they flew into next that was undoubtedly the most violent moment of flying Zayne had ever experienced. He closed his eyes reflexively and began to mentally count down from one hundred, trying to center himself, trying not to let out the terrified scream that was lodged in his throat at present and nearly failing to do so. His eyes were squinted shut so hard they ached.

He'd made it to ninety-three when he felt a rough tug at his chest, then another brutal pinch along his waist, binding him

to the seat even tighter. The pilot hadn't taken his eyes off his instruments, adjusting Zayne's seat without splitting his focus. Zayne didn't feel the least bit safer as the gesture concluded, wondering what the pilot knew that he didn't that would make such an act necessary, unable to budge in the slightest now.

And then they were diving again, another burst of turbulence rocketing them so hard the rear cargo door had swung open, ice-cold wind whipping instantly through the cabin and worsening their already compromised state considerably. Zayne swung his head around in blind fear, watching helplessly as one after another of his bags slid toward the open door and then out into the void, lost forever to all that nothing.

"Hold the fuck on!" The pilot was screaming over the din, arms still rigidly locked to the flight control, face a mask of equal parts determination and rage as he fought a battle Zayne didn't know the exact physics of.

But he knew enough to realize they were losing. Badly. The plane's dim headlight now illuminated the sentinal treetops of a neverending carpet of firs—grey-green as it sparked in and out of focus not even a dozen feet below the bottom of the plane. And it would have been almost beautiful had it not been completely horrifying.

A scrape as they clipped the first of those very trees, a shudder as the plane attempted one final time to lift itself impotently skyward, and then suddenly, they were grinding horrifyingly along a rocky hillside that had emerged out of the darkness in front of them—the sound of metal shearing against rock sending shockwaves of fear resoundingly

through Zayne's entire being—a blood-curdling shriek finally erupting out of him as he raised his arms to shield himself from now-certain doom the were surely hurtling towards...

And then everything simply ceased to be.

GROUNDED

CALVIN

IN THE FINAL, terrible moment before things *really* went sideways, Calvin had done some complicated math. There had been a part of him, a big part, actually, as they had careened over those last few trees and into that stupid fucking hillside that had debated tilting the plane toward the passenger's side, leaning into the hill, potentially protecting himself somewhat from the impact.

He found he could excuse away the selfish thought quite easily—after all, if that little piece of shit hadn't larded up the plane with all that extra cargo, they might not be in this mess.

But the better part of him, or maybe just the stupider part, knew that it had been *his* choice to take off in the first place. And in those last seconds, incredulous at his actions, he tilted the plane towards his side—hoping to spare the kid if it was at all possible.

His final thought before they'd careened into the ground, hands aching, futilely pulling at the yoke, was that maybe he should have tilted the plane the other way after all.

And then there had been the conclusive, non-negotiable impact of metal-on-dirt, the entire wing on his side shearing clean off and sending the plane cartwheeling wildly down the hillside and into a relatively flat and open stretch of what he knew was otherwise limitless forest.

There was a cacophony of noise in those few seconds, screeching and grating mixing with flashes of sparks, an arc of rock and debris scattering noisily in front of the plane like it had been a missile. And then, with a sudden and silent finality, a white-hot pain seared up from his leg so violently that it blotted out Calvin's consciousness instantly, eclipsing it into nothingness.



WHEN CALVIN, to his own surprise, finally came to hours later, the sun had begun to rise, dawn hues of pinkish-honey rippling across the landscape's surface, ushering him softly awake as they spilled out across the darkness that had begun to recede as they did so.

He had a brief and blissful moment of total amnesia, then, before being sucked painfully back into the misfortune of his reality by way of a crippling fire flaring up from his right leg. His eyes shot open, adrenaline coursing through him instantaneously at the burgeoning memory of falling, tumbling, *crashing*.

Oh god. The thought raced through his mind in abject horror.

He jerked his head towards where the passenger side of the plane should have been, a gaping maw missing from that aspect of the previously whole craft, and vomited as the implication of what he was looking at sunk in.

Somehow, the little Cessna had been split into several pieces, his small fragment here barely containing the pilot's chair and a semi-circular remnant of the aluminum hull, with nothing but the dark gray, misty sky opening up above him.

His thoughts went instantly to Zayne, to the shame of how royally he'd fucked this up, and then his leg roared again in pain so severe he threw up once more, coughing and spluttering, trying and failing to dislodge himself from the seat he was still strapped into, hands shaking too forcefully for him to unbuckle himself.

When he looked down to determine the source of his pain, he was quick to locate it: his ankle had been broken badly, the joint bent beyond its normal orientation, his boot still cladding the seemingly useless thing uncomfortably. He grimaced at the sight of it.

His shirt was covered in blood, too, as were his pants, laced with cuts and scrapes; he felt sore and tender as he searched his scalp for any additional and severe injury. Nothing. Just shallow, jagged wounds from where the safety glass of the windshield had exploded into his face during the crash.

He admittedly felt like total shit, but to his relief, he found himself imagining that he'd be alright, at least for now, choosing not to focus on the fact that he absolutely wouldn't be able to walk. That thought wasn't an option unless he

wanted to lose himself entirely to the despair creeping along the edges of his worry.

And then all over again, his thoughts were soaring back to the kid—to what the poor guy must have experienced in his final, doomed moments. At that, he felt his stomach heave for a third and final time, unable to produce anything else to expel, leaving him gagging and choking until tears of shame streamed out of his eyes, blurring his vision.

A part of him deigned to sit there, strapped into the cracked old green pleather of the pilot seat, until he just faded away—until whatever he deserved to happen to him happened. And that profound inertia kept him locked in place for some time, staring dazed through the windowless cockpit and out across the debris field of what had once been his sole connection to his past, the tears eventually subsiding, replaced by a profound silence broken only by the distant babbling of a creek somewhere nearby.

It appeared to him now that they had crashed right into the edge of a vast, rocky, and sparsely meadowed clearing in the forest the prior evening. Undoubtedly, the terrain here would be swampy; the loam of the permafrost was largely impassible in these parts this time of year, and he already felt mosquitoes landing and biting at him despite the cold rain that now pitter-pattered across it all.

He moved once more to unbuckle, steadying himself in anticipation of the coming pain he imagined he'd feel when he tried to dislodge his busted ankle when, to his surprise, he heard the *crunch-crunch* of footsteps moving haphazardly along the gravelly surface from somewhere nearby, but out of sight.

Calvin froze, his mind conjuring the image of a hungry grizzly bear picking its way through the wreckage, and he found himself beginning to smile wildly at the dark humor that he hadn't had to wait that long for karmic justice after all.

But to his shock, it wasn't a bear but *Zayne*. The wiry frame of the influencer had stumbled disorientated around the corner of the fuselage, face covered in scrapes and bruises; his shirt was torn across the chest, revealing a tanned, hairless, and surprisingly chiseled torso underneath, flecks of blood staining the neutral fabrics that had once looked breezy, clean, now appearing haggard and worn.

To Calvin's utter surprise, the kid seemed relatively unscathed. Well, not *unscathed*, but...

"Holy shit, you're alive!" Calvin blurted out coarsely, still fumbling with his buckle. Zayne's eyes landed on him, seeming to come into focus for the first time. The younger guy rubbed his eyes furiously with balled fists as if trying to wake himself from a nightmare that had just gotten infinitely worse before letting his haunted gaze return to Calvin's, his dark hazel eyes leveling at him with no attempt made to veil his anger or disdain for the man.

"I'm surprised, too." Zayne assented darkly, bending down and unbuckling Calvin from where he was still held prisoner by the pilot's seat. Calvin noted as his passenger's eyes darted down to his foot, returning to meet his look now with real worry, the hint of the smile that had briefly spread across the corner of his mouth at his dark joke absent now.

"Broken. I think. Maybe just a sprain...I...I don't know. Hey, my name's Calvin, by the way." Calvin rambled, wincing as

he tried to straighten out his foot, pulling up the cuff of his pant leg and noting the deep purple-blue-green bruise that had pooled along his badly swollen joint.

“Anyway. There’s a cabin or something on the other end of the clearing...” Zayne was explaining to him flatly, pointing toward the far end of the clearing beyond where Calvin could see from his seated position.

The big man’s heart jumped instantly at the hope those words conjured, the numbing effect of all that adrenaline causing him to attempt to pull himself upright, only to find he could not bear any weight on his wounded foot. Calvin crashed painfully back to the ground amidst a fit of swearing and cursing, thudding back into his seat as he did so, a bit of fear dashing itself against redoubled feelings of mounting helplessness.

“*Easy*. Don’t make this any worse than you already have!” Zayne chided. “We’ll need to splint that or something... hang on.” He said, seemingly more to himself than to Calvin, before disappearing back the way he had come from the rear of the plane, *crunch-crunching* his way off into the distance until the sound of his receding footsteps no longer reached Calvin’s ears.

After some time, the sound of *crunching* returned, as did Zayne, his head popping around the corner of the plane’s wrecked hull painted with a stupid smile before an arm extended, brandishing a thick stick with a Y-shaped fork on one end—a decent facsimile of a natural crutch.

“Not bad, right?” Zayne was saying, crouching down again, ripping off fabric strips from a shirt he’d retrieved from

somewhere yonder. “I think we can splint it with a couple sticks and some fabric, right?” he continued, eyeing Calvin’s ankle appraisingly as he did so.

Calvin honestly had no clue. But he could tell the kid was getting some assuredness out of being helpful, and he didn’t want to take that away from him. He felt he’d already taken enough from the poor guy.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think, maybe.” He helped assemble the make-shift splint with Zayne for a while in silence, trying not to let it show how much pain he was in as they’d tightened the support to his damaged joint as tightly as he could grit before rising unsteadily to his good foot, Zayne under one shoulder and the crutch he’d been fashioned under the other.

The rain had begun to fall in earnest now, and in the cool dampness of the September morning, it caused him to shiver as he observed the glistening wreckage of the plane strewn out across the barren space.

About a mile away, far on the other side of the field, he could barely make out the square-ish outline of what he imagined was the cabin Zayne had spotted. To his dismay, no smoke was rising out of its little chimney.

“Maybe there will be a phone in there!” Zayne was saying next to him, evidently just realizing that his cell phone had no service out here in the wilds as he stuffed the useless thing into the pocket of his tight, flimsy pants.

“I doubt it,” Calvin answered glumly, knowing it was far from likely the cabin would have any amenities to share, let alone luxuries like a phoneline or electricity.

The two stood side-by-side for a moment, each reflecting on the stretch of terrain sprawling out between them and their destination before embarking across the uneven surface of the permafrost.