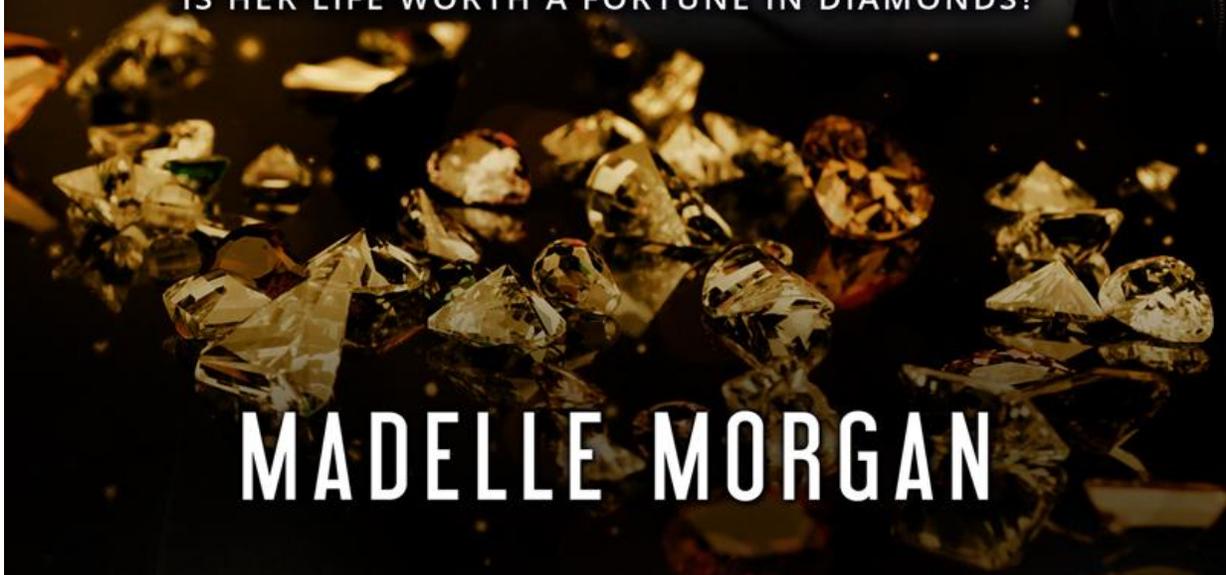




DIAMOND
HUNTER

IS HER LIFE WORTH A FORTUNE IN DIAMONDS?



MADALLE MORGAN

Diamond Hunter

Chapter One

"We need you in the back." The burly aboriginal's thick thumb jerked toward the aircraft cabin behind him.

Seth removed his headset and, with a nod to the other pilot, unstrapped and bent to follow him down the aisle between men trying to make themselves heard above the battering thrum of two propellers slightly out of phase. The Twin Otter was older than its nineteen passengers. Hell, it was older than most of their fathers.

A small man lay curled across two seats, his thin face gray and beaded with sweat. No deep tan like the others, Seth noted. No calluses on his hands. Must be one of the processing plant operators.

"What's his problem?" Seth shouted over the din.

The aboriginal patted the gut that stretched his clean white T-shirt with the Ptarmigan Lake Mine company logo. "Started five minutes ago. Thought he was going to puke on me. He's not just airsick. This is worse."

Seth agreed. The flight was as smooth as they get. Too cool and overcast for thermals. Besides, these guys were used to turbulence. They'd been flying in and out of the remote northern diamond mine site on a two-week rotation for almost a year.

He moved closer to loosen the man's belt and unbutton his denim shirt. "What's your name?"

"I'm fine. Just gas," he managed before his eyes rolled back and his jaw sagged.

Gas, my ass. The man was in serious pain and going into shock. "Put a jacket over him and don't move him," Seth shouted over the engine roar at the aboriginal hunched awkwardly in the aisle. "And return to your seat."

As he hurried back to the copilot's seat he ignored the other passengers' questions. If his suspicions were correct, they didn't have much time to save the fool's life.

After slipping on his headset, he flipped the rocker switch on the control yoke to "intercom" and shouted into the boom microphone bobbing at lip level, "We've got a medical situation. I'm calling ATC to request Medevac Priority and an ambulance to stand by our arrival."

"What's his condition?" responded Jason White, unfazed. At thirty-five, he was Northern Lights Air's most senior pilot, and a veteran of countless emergencies arising from bad weather and mechanical failures.

"I'm no doctor, but I'd say the guy's in deep trouble." In more ways than one. After Seth radioed Yellowknife Air Traffic Control, he checked their position. The desolate treeless plain rolled out like a carpet beneath them as far as the eye could see, dotted

with small blue lakes that all looked the same to him. Unlike Jason, who'd been flying this route into the Canadian subarctic for eight months, Seth relied on the plane's satellite navigation system to determine their location. At their current airspeed, they'd arrive at their destination, Yellowknife, with the only hospital in a thousand miles, in forty minutes.

"Let's see how fast this old bird can fly."

* * * * *

Two hours later Seth paced the airport cargo area. The passengers had long since piled their duffel bags into pickups and headed into town to blow their paychecks in the northern capital's many bars. Not one had accompanied the unconscious man to the hospital. A bad sign. Seth speculated that the guy's workmates must know something about the cause of his condition and backed off so as not to be implicated. The cause would land the sick mine employee and his associates in jail for a very long time.

The cell phone at his waist vibrated. He quickly flipped it open.

The voice on the other end didn't bother with preliminaries. "He didn't survive the surgery. Perforated colon."

"You were there?"

"Yeah. Plink, plink, plink onto a tray. You were right."

Rough diamonds.

Seth's contact at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters wouldn't say more. Cell phone calls could be intercepted. By prior agreement he knew the RCMP detective would drop off the details, including the name of the unlucky diamond smuggler, in a keyed box at the Yellowknife post office.

He snapped the phone closed and resumed pacing. It helped him think. Finally, a break in the month-long undercover investigation. He didn't expect official interviews to pry any information out of the coworkers. He understood the mentality. When you're holed up in an isolated open-pit mine camp with no way out except by air, you don't want to piss off any of your four hundred roommates.

The background files on each of the employees indicated that new trade school graduates and their older male relatives from tiny northern communities made up the majority of the heavy equipment operators and mechanics. The drillers, blasters and process plant operators came from other mines in southern Canada. He'd taken a close look at those with gambling and alcohol addictions and support payment arrears, but nothing connected any of them to an international diamond smuggling operation.

He sensed the brains behind the operation were spooked and in a hurry to ferry out their stash. Otherwise they wouldn't have risked drawing more attention by recruiting a man to stuff himself with rock. The miners weren't talking to cops, so he had to get to them unofficially. Tonight he'd hit the bars. Early tomorrow he'd fly in the replacement crew for its two-week rotation.

Seth scanned the filmy clouds threaded across the sky. Ten o'clock on an early July evening and it was as bright as late afternoon in his hometown on the US-Canada border between Washington State and British Columbia. This time of year in the far

north, the sun merely dipped to paint the horizon a glorious mess of reds and oranges for an hour or two before rising again. No darkness meant no excuse to overnigh at the mine site.

He needed to find a way into the camp before another man lost his life.

* * * * *

Petra scanned the cold drink menu on the dispensing unit. Yellowknife bottled the best water she'd ever tasted. Ah...there it was. She dug around for Canadian dollar coins and purchased two plastic bottles.

A speaker crackled with the announcement that the jet she'd arrived on minutes ago was accepting passengers for the return flight to Edmonton, where she'd spent the worst Wednesday night of her life. A DJ in the atrium adjacent to her hotel room had tortured her until 3 a.m. with the chicken dance, polkas and schmaltzy wedding reception standards. Unfortunately, changing her room hadn't been an option. Wedding guests had fully booked the no-star hotel. Who got married mid-week? Civilization had given her this headache. She'd take a tent pitched on Godforsaken tundra thick with black flies and hungry bears any day. For the few precious moments until luggage appeared on the conveyor belt, she slumped forward in the chair and rested her forehead on the frame of the big backpack propped between her legs.

"Petra Paris?"

Raising her thousand-pound head slowly, she tracked a male body that seemed to go on forever—beat-up safety boots, muscular tanned legs and scarred knees under baggy shorts, a worn black leather jacket hanging open to frame a flat stomach and solid chest, determined chin, even white teeth in a tanned clean-shaven face and eventually intelligent eyes fixed on her beneath a thick forelock of straight black hair. She blinked. Blinked again. Men in the boonies weren't allowed to be that handsome. She liked them smelly and grubby, with at least a week's facial growth. That way she could keep her mind on her work.

But then again, she wasn't working yet.

She pushed the backpack aside with one foot, stood, and extended her hand. "Call me Petra. And you are..."

His strong fingers gripped hers a fraction longer than necessary. "Seth Cooper, your pilot for the charter to Ptarmigan Lake Mine." His rumbling baritone sent a shiver down her spine.

Sexy voice. Fantastic body. Now this was a perk she hadn't expected. Fatigue shed like a second skin. "How'd you know who I am?"

"You're the only woman in the terminal with steel-toed boots and Excelsior Exploration & Mining Co. plastered across your back. You had to be the geologist."

"Oh yeah." His grin was doing bad things to her insides. Bad things.

He was no less attracted. She knew men. She recognized the sudden awareness, the instant animation of his even features that meant he'd been pleasantly surprised.

He didn't move for a long moment. Just stared, that cocky grin fixed. She had the impression of a whirring and clicking of circuits behind calculating smoky emerald eyes.

"Hello?" She waved a hand in front of his nose. "Anybody home?"

He returned from the ether and focused on her. "Right. Are you ready to go? Where's your baggage?"

She had lots of baggage, for sure, but he meant the physical kind. "Over there." She pointed to the two long aluminum cases rotating around the massive stuffed polar bear guarding the luggage carousel.

He maneuvered them off the belt. "They feel empty."

She nodded. For now they were. In three days she'd need assistance to lift them, despite muscles honed by weight training.

He strode toward her, each big hand gripping a case. "The plane's outside one of the hangers. Want to grab something to eat before we take off?"

She nodded again. Sitting across from a gorgeous pilot for a half hour sounded good. She liked looking at him. He was a welcome contrast to the geriatric seatmate on the flight from Denver who'd hit on her, and the pimply teenager with the nose ring who sniffed beside her continuously for the hour and a half from Edmonton. Maybe her luck with the male half of the species was changing. She hoisted the backpack straps onto her shoulders hopefully.

When he led her to the food machines, disappointment pushed out her bottom lip.

"Salmon or tuna," he asked as they surveyed the meager selection of cellophane-wrapped sandwiches.

"Salmon, I guess."

At her tone, he chuckled. "Don't worry. I hear the camp food is terrific," he said, misinterpreting her disappointment. "We have to recalculate the passenger weight every time we bring a crew out at the end of their rotation."

"You fly the scheduled flights in to Ptarmigan Lake?" Her mood jacked up a notch. Maybe she'd see him again over the next few days. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm co-piloting the skeds, but I've only been flying for Northern Lights Air a month." He inserted coins and retrieved sandwiches and coffee. "Should I know you?"

She took a sip of bitter coffee and grimaced, wishing for more sugar. "I was on the drilling team three summers ago that did the bulk testing and delineation mapping of the Ptarmigan Lake kimberlite pipes."

"Kimberlite?"

"You really are new up here. Kimberlite is the type of rock that contains diamonds. A kimberlite pipe is a carrot-shaped funnel with the wide end at the surface. We found two at Ptarmigan Lake." Pride suffused the words.

"Maybe I should have let you buy lunch." His green eyes crinkled at the corners, teasing.

She stiffened. "I'm an employee, not a major stockholder." A frosty echo hung in the air between them. She caught him searching her expression, and quickly suppressed unsettling thoughts about Excelsior's major stockholder that served no purpose at the moment. "Let's get a move on. I have work to do."

Seth Cooper led the way through the terminal, onto the tarmac and over to the Northern Lights Air private hanger. Instead of approaching the four-seater Cessna 185

waiting on the apron, he ducked under the wing and headed for another C-185 parked inside.

“Balloon tires?” Petra cocked an eyebrow at the thick oversized tires on the second tiny plane. “My last trip, the Ptarmigan Lake air strip was in good shape.”

“This plane has been hauling fishermen and supplies into various lodges. We needed the tundra tires,” he said as he relieved her of the backpack.

“Why not take the other plane? It’s obviously prepped to go.”

“You ask a lot of questions.” His broad back to her, he arranged the pack beside the metal cases.

“Well, why not?”

Sighing, he turned. “We’re running flat out this month. All our other planes are booked.” He waved toward the back of the hanger. “I forgot to ask. Do you need to use the facilities?”

She flashed him a frown. “I’ve been flying up here five seasons. I certainly know what to expect.”

“Got your pilot’s license?” Consternation briefly ruffled his smooth expression.

“No. I meant I’ve been flown to various exploration camps in helicopters, single engine prop planes like this, you name it. Besides,” she opened the door to the passenger side, “it’s only two and a half hours to Ptarmigan Lake in this little baby.”

“Whatever you say.”

She knew the pre-flight drill. She waited patiently while Seth secured the cargo and walked around the plane for the visual check. After the requisite run-through of the fuel, fluid and equipment checks, he taxied out to the runway. In short order they soared into a powder blue sky.

“Should be a smooth trip.”

Petra didn’t bother to answer. As the plane climbed and banked sharply, she became absorbed in the view vertically under her window. The modern City of Yellowknife, with its multistory office buildings and housing for twenty thousand inhabitants, sprawled along the north shore of Great Slave Lake. Indigo water, stunted trees, scrub bush, and rocky outcrops splashed with muted silver-gray, gold and orange lichens framed the government hub and mining town. A mile beneath the downtown core, worked out stopes criss-crossed gold-bearing Precambrian rock. They used to say the gold was paved with streets. In the new century, diamonds, not gold, drove the current economic boom. Her heart swelled. Though she loved the Colorado mountains, the deceptively monotonous terrain north of the sixtieth parallel was her spiritual home.

She’d once seen a painting in a local gallery that captured her love and respect for the north in a way she could not articulate. A Gulliver-sized naked woman reclined on pink and gray granite under a limitless sapphire sky. Miniature evergreens spiked into her underside. That was the subarctic – incomparably beautiful yet harsh without mercy underneath.

As they approached the tree line, low brush began to predominate. For a while she watched the pilot competently handle the controls. The engine drone, familiar and

comforting, softened the edges of her thoughts until her head lolled and she slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

The plane touched down with a tooth-loosening thunk. Petra bounced into lucid and cranky awareness.

"What the hell!" she shrieked as the plane imitated a kangaroo for several hundred feet.

"Sorry about this," the pilot shouted over the bellowing noise.

No stranger to rough landings, this one felt different. Panic thickened her throat as she braced herself and watched him fight to maintain control on the uneven ground. When the plane eventually joggled to a stop, she sucked in a deep breath and released the fear in a torrent of words.

"This is the absolute worst landing I've ever experienced. You missed the runway entirely. You're a menace to Canadian aviation! Who'd you bribe to get your pilot's license? Didn't NLA test your skills before hiring you on?"

Without waiting for answers, she unbuckled, pushed open the door and slid down onto not so firm ground. Her boots sank into spongy moss. Wobbling legs distracted her for a second while she found her balance. But only a second.

She peered left then right. Empty, undulating tundra extended to the horizon in every direction. This was no mine camp.

"Hey!" She fought down a bubble of hysteria. "Where are we? What happened?"

The pilot from hell came up beside her, slightly unsteady on his feet himself. "The ground looked relatively flat from the air."

He seemed surprised. Her temper spiked. "How many times have you landed on the tundra?"

"This is the second," he admitted.

She smacked her forehead. A green pilot. Her luck with men was holding big time. The next question had to be asked. "Is there a mechanical problem?"

"No."

Relief quieted her for a moment. They were safe. The plane was fine. Then fury that he'd risked their lives for nothing took over. "Are you insane?" she seethed between clenched teeth. "What are we doing here? Why did you land?"

He threw up his arms, palms facing her, in a placating gesture. "Relax. I'll explain everything."

She gasped. Was that a gun holster she spied under the flap of his open jacket? A sickening dread squeezed aside the anger. Adrenaline spurted. Her heart pistoned blood. Man oh man, how did she get herself into these situations?

She peered into the "too damn cute to be good news" face of Seth Cooper, if that was even his real name. Crazy, dangerous men often appeared normal, even exceptionally handsome men. Blast it all, she'd walked right into this abduction. Mustn't

hyperventilate. She drew one deep breath and then another. If she lost control of her emotions, couldn't think, she was done for.

Breathe. Think. Her satellite phone was safely tucked in her pack. She took one step backward. Slowly. Then another. Two more steps and she'd reach the point where she could hitch herself up into the plane.

The pilot advanced step for step. "I'm not going to hurt you. Give me a minute."

She abandoned the stealthy retreat, scrambled up into the plane and slammed the copilot-side door closed. Before she could secure the other, he wrenched it wide.

"I-I don't have much money. A few credit cards and a return plane ticket. That's all."

"I don't want your money." He kept his distance.

"You want to have sex with me?"

"Jeez no! Listen—"

"You lie! You want my body."

He reddened. "Okay, maybe I do. But not here, not now, and for sure not against your will. I've never forced a woman in my life."

Petra's thoughts spun. "Who's paying you?"

"Northern Lights Air."

He was toying with her. She leaned over and slammed a fist into the pilot's seat. "Why in Heaven's name did you land this plane in the middle of Godforsaken nowhere?"

"I've been trying to tell you. Will you give me five minutes? Out here?" He indicated the rocky outcrop to the left of the plane.

She wasn't ready to put herself in a more vulnerable position. "I'm calling for help. I have a satellite phone."

"Not anymore." He pulled her phone out of his jacket pocket and waggled it.

Her stomach dropped to her knees. The creep. He'd been one step ahead of her the whole time. He'd even searched her pack. "I'll use the radio then," she muttered, scanning the controls and gauges on the console. She'd watched pilots tune in to air traffic control dozens of times from the adjacent seat. Or she'd take off out of here. Surely she'd manage. How hard could it be?

"Don't even think about it!" He growled, closer now. "You told me you don't have a license."

"Doesn't mean I can't fly." She clambered into the pilot's seat.

The man cursed. "Woman, you're testing my patience." He reached in, wrapped one long, muscled arm around her waist and hauled her down out of the plane.

"I'll get your license revoked for abducting me," she swore, legs kicking as he carted her toward the outcrop. She thumped her fists against his chest, then stilled when she hit the hard bulge near his armpit. "Kidnapping is a felony offense."

"This is Canada. The laws are different. Besides, I didn't kidnap you." He set her down fifty feet from the plane and swept one arm toward the horizon. "You're free to go."

A trek across the bleak, lonely tundra days from the nearest settlement with no phone, no food and only two bottles of water did not appeal to her.

“Or you can listen to what I have to say.”

“Fine.” She squatted on springy moss and bent her head. She didn’t want to die. People were counting on her to come through for them. The company stockholders. Members of the board of directors. They trusted her to drill new kimberlite cores and carry them to Colorado to be analyzed before the stockholders’ meeting in eight days. Her dad’s reputation and millions in stockholder equity depended on her collecting diamond-studded core.

The pilot squatted opposite. “That’s more like it. First, I want to apologize for scaring you.”

She observed him through slitted eyelids. Sincerity dripped from him like slime. She remained unconvinced. Her breathing hitched, jerked. She was a sitting duck, ready to be plucked.

“An idea occurred to me, and landing here to discuss it seemed like another good idea.”

“How so?”

He shifted to plant his boots more firmly in the soft ground. “Well, no one can overhear us.”

“You got that right,” she said dryly. “What’s wrong with a nice chat during the flight?”

“I didn’t want to discuss it via headset.”

“Nor could you coerce me into doing whatever it is you want me to do. Instead you kidnapped me.”

“I’m an RCMP undercover cop—” he began.

“Yeah, right.” Just like the so-called cop who’d tried to detain her at the Denver airport. At the check-in counter, the uniform had demanded to see her ticket and passport. His scuffed shoes gave him away. Not standard issue. She’d threaded through the crowded departure level at a jog and made it to the customs area before he caught up. “Let’s see your I.D.”

He extracted his wallet from a back pocket. She scanned the Northern Lights Air photo card identifying him as Seth Cooper. “If what you say is true, that’s your fake ID. What kinda proof of anything is that?”

“I’m an undercover investigator attached to the Diamond Protection Unit,” he continued, ignoring her. “We ran a background on you. Twenty-nine, single, now living in Boulder, Colorado and employed by Excelsior since graduating with a geology degree from the University of Colorado. Your father is Edward Paris, the head of the Denver assay lab that confirmed the economic viability of the Ptarmigan Lake diamond mine. Excelsior’s stock price sank like a stone a month ago when it became public that the diamond yield from the mine is well below forecasts. You flew up here to supervise the collection of new core samples. Shall I continue?”

“Do you know my landlady’s name?”

“Jessica Harper. You live in an apartment at 14 Cougar Drive.”

Dizziness hazed her vision. Either Excelsior's Chairman and CEO Tony Athlone had briefed his hit man exceptionally well, or Seth was telling the truth.

"I still only have your word as to who you are. Not good enough."

He reddened. With anger? She wasn't taking any chances. As she half-rose in an attempt to make a run for it, he grabbed her upper arm.

There was no better place than the subarctic tundra to dispose of a body. Only ravens could ever find it. She decided she'd rather know his intentions and get it over with. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Jeez." He dropped his arm and swatted at the low scrub between them. "No, I'm not going to kill you." He ground his teeth. "I want to be your boyfriend."

Petra scabbled backward, crab-like. "You landed to have your way with me?" Better raped than dead, she supposed, but he wouldn't lay a hand on her without a fight. "Touch me and you'll regret it! I bite."

He stood, all six muscular feet of him looming over her, and she flattened against the rock outcrop. "You've got it all wrong. I want to pose as your boyfriend. You don't have to sleep with me." His lips quirked. "Unless you want to."

"I'm glad one of us thinks this is funny. In your dreams, Cooper. Or whoever you are." She levered herself upright and dusted off her jeans, not tearing her gaze for a second from the jacket concealing the gun.

"We have a mutual goal. The stock price is in the toilet and we both know why."

"We do?" Three directors on the Excelsior board suspected the company chairman of manipulating Excelsior's stock price. They'd shared their suspicions with her at a secret dinner meeting prior to her trip, but to her knowledge no one else was in the loop. "Tell me."

Inner debate silenced him for several moments. "Smuggling," he blurted, watching for her reaction.

"Smuggling?" Surprise drew a hand almost to her mouth before she diverted it to tuck a curly strand of hair behind her ear. "You know about the...smuggling."

"Isn't that why you're here? To confirm the potential yield compared to the recent diamond production?" When she said nothing, he continued, "Half a dozen stolen rough diamonds were recovered a week and a half ago."

"They were?" She suspected Tony Athlone only of capitalizing on a poor production streak in order to artificially depress the stock price. The directors believed Athlone was attempting to secretly buy up thousands of bargain basement-priced Excelsior shares through an agent. They trusted Edward Paris' assay results and expected that the stock price would recover when diamond production returned to projected levels. By then Athlone, unless stopped, would control the company. The possibility of theft had never shown up on the board's radar.

Detailed feasibility studies and preliminary drilling samples provided a pretty good estimate of the potential quantity and quality of diamonds in the ore body, but there were no guarantees. Edward Paris' assay reports showed the kimberlite pipes at Ptarmigan Lake potentially contained large, superior quality diamonds. The first six months of production had validated the estimates. Lately, however, the low-grade yield had stockholders in an uproar. Rumors leaked to the media accused Edward Paris of

salting the preliminary drill core material with diamonds. Stock market analysts speculated the mine was a dud and the owners had perpetrated a fraud. Petra had her own reservations about her dad's honesty.

To prove the stockholders hadn't been bilked, the board had authorized an independent analysis of new cores. If indeed Tony Athlone aimed to seize control, he had a vested interest in delaying the results as long as possible. He meant to stop her, and he wasn't playing nice. Petra pressed a forefinger to her lips. Could Athlone be double-ending this? Manipulating the stock price as well as siphoning off the best diamonds? The greedy bastard.

Seth grew impatient at the lack of response. "Are you game?"

"For what," she said absently, still pondering the implications.

"I need access to the employees at Ptarmigan Lake."

"So? You fly in there every day."

He dragged in a heavy, chest-expanding breath. "By posing as your boyfriend, I have an excuse to sleep in the camp—"

"Over my dead body." Oops. That was probably not the most appropriate choice of words.

He took two steps, leaned forward, forced her to meet earnest eyes. "Listen. I won't disturb your beauty sleep. I plan to spend the evenings hanging with the boys, playing cards, shooting the breeze."

She bit back an involuntary grin. "Some boyfriend you are."

His brows lifted. "Does that mean you'll do it?"

"Get me proof you're really a cop. Then we'll talk." The smuggling presented a new, disturbing angle. If his story checked out, by keeping Seth nearby she'd have the opportunity to find out what he learned. Diamond lust twisted ordinary men, and Athlone was no ordinary man. He was prepared to stop her at any cost, and might have others in his pay on site. Even undercover, Seth unwittingly offered protection from her enemies.

Seth grabbed her cold, clammy hand and pumped it. "Deal." His sunny grin dazzled her, threw her off-kilter. "There's just one more thing."

"What's that?" She frowned. He had what he wanted.

"The men have to believe our relationship is real."

He hadn't released her hand. She tugged, but his grip merely tightened. "What do ya wanna do, hold hands around camp?"

"Practice."

His left arm snaked around her waist, pulling her close, tilting her into the crook of his shoulder. Firm lips swooped to cover hers, muffling her startled cry.

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Diamond Hunter

Chapter 1 Excerpt

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www.MadelleMorgan.com

About the Author

Madelle Morgan began her engineering career in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada, known as the Diamond Capital of North America. For five adventure-filled years she took charter and scheduled flights to construction projects throughout the Arctic. Years later she “mined” her experiences to write *Diamond Hunter*. The extraordinary people and places in Canada’s far north are like no others on earth.

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