

I WAKE BURIED under a hundred and forty pounds of dog. Storm knows she's not allowed on the bed, so I lie there, brain slowly churning, until I remember I'm not *in* bed. I'm on the ground. Cold, hard winter ground—the floor of a tent that is definitely not big enough for two adults and a Newfoundland dog. Which tells me one adult is gone.

I lift my head. Sure enough, there's no sign of Dalton. I peer at the glow of sunrise seeping through the canvas. I've slept in. It's December in the Yukon, when dawn means it's about . . . I lift my watch. Yep, 10 A.M.

I groan. Storm echoes it as she tries to stand, an impossible feat within the confines of this tent.

"Where's Eric?" I ask.

Shockingly, the dog doesn't answer. I blink back the fog of a night that started with tequila and ended with . . . Well, it ended strenuously enough to explain why I'm still in bed at ten, though apparently my partner had no trouble rising early.

We'd left Storm outside last night. That wasn't cruel. It's hovering around the freezing mark, positively balmy for this time of year. Storm has her thick coat and her companion, a wolf-dog named Raoul. We'd brought them on our weekend getaway both for company and for training, Storm as a tracker and Raoul as hunter. Raoul's master doesn't hunt. Not animals, at least.

If Storm is in the tent with the flap closed, that means Dalton let

her in. It also means he's taken Raoul. I rub my eyes and spot a note pinned to the tent flap.

When I push Storm, she grunts and shifts enough for me to scabble over her and pluck off the note.

Hunting. Back for lunch. Coffee in thermos. Don't wander.

The note is the model of reticent efficiency, and I would say that fits our sheriff to a tee, but I've also read his near-poetic academic and philosophical musings, ones that shouldn't come from anyone without a Ph.D., much less a guy with zero formal schooling. That is also our sheriff. Two sides to the same coin. Only I get to see the second one.

I find not only coffee but breakfast in a dog-proof pouch at the end of the bed. Scrambled eggs with venison sausage, and bannock with . . . I lift the hard bread, still warm from the fire, oozing gooey brown dots. Bannock with chocolate chips. I laugh and take a bite. I won't say I'm a bannock fan, but chocolate makes everything better.

I happily munch the bannock and wash it down with coffee. I don't toss any scraps to Storm. Honestly, at her size, she'd never even taste them. Instead, she gets one of my sausages. As for the "don't wander" part of Dalton's note, I'm interpreting that as a suggestion rather than the imperative it seems. Oh, naturally he hopes I'll take it as a command, but he knows better than to expect that. He means for me to stay close, and I will. I'm not about to stay in the tent for two more hours, though.

When I finish breakfast, I open the flap, and Storm clambers out to romp in the snow. She's fourteen months old, which means she's outwardly a full-grown dog, but inside she's still a pup. At thirty-two, I understand the feeling. Or, I should say, I've regained the feeling after sixteen months in Rockton. Before that, while I remember a girl endlessly on the move, endlessly into mischief, that girl vanished when I was eighteen, shoved into hiding by the kind of mistake that banishes one's carefree inner child. Out here, I've found her again . . . at least, when I'm not on duty as Detective Casey Butler.

Dalton and I are on vacation, which means we're taking an entire two days off. Down south, we'd call that a weekend. Up here, with a police force of three, we take time off where we can find it.

Things have been slow in Rockton. The holidays are approaching, and it's as if people decided to cut us slack as a seasonal gift. No assaults. No robberies. No murders. In a town of under two hundred people, the last should be obvious, but this is Rockton. Murder capital

of the world, someone used to say. That someone knew exactly what she was talking about, having turned out to be a killer herself.

Rockton is special. For better or worse. Mostly better, but the crime rate is one of those “worse” parts. We can’t expect otherwise, really. We are a town of fugitives. Everyone here is running from something. Some are victims, on the run from ex-partners, stalkers, anyone who might want them dead through no fault of their own. This is the true purpose of Rockton—a refuge for those fleeing persecution. It’s also home to white-collar criminals, whose misdeeds pay our bills. Then there are those whose mistakes—often violent ones—brought them to Rockton under expensively bought cover stories given even to Dalton. So it’s no surprise that we have a murder rate.

For now, it’s quiet, and has been for six months. Which means Dalton and I can take an actual weekend off.

Storm and I play in the snow for about an hour before I realize that I should have stoked the fire first. While Dalton had left it blazing for me, he’s obviously been gone awhile, and by the time Storm and I collapse, exhausted, the fire is down to embers. I add another log, but it’s not going to take. We need kindling.

That’s life up here. Constant work just to survive. Heat doesn’t come at the flick of a switch. Food isn’t the nearest fast-food joint away. Water isn’t a simple matter of turning on a faucet. In Rockton, we simulate modern living as best we can—there are restaurants in town, and water does come from taps through a pump system—but everyone needs to work to put food in that grocery, to fill the water tanks when the stream runs low. One quickly develops a healthy respect for our pioneer ancestors.

Storm and I head out to gather kindling. Soon, though, I realize that new-fallen snow is going to complicate the task. Even if I unearth sticks, they won’t be dry. That’s fine—the best source of winter kindling is dead trees. I’m maybe a few hundred feet from the camp when I find a brown-needled pine that’s been crowded out by sturdier siblings.

I start breaking off twigs. Storm dances about, her second wind gale-force strong. When I throw a stick, she chases it, only to notice I’m still snapping off branches. She shoots me a sullen scowl.

“I’m not Eric,” I say. “I play fetch properly.”

More scowling. Then she flings herself to the ground with a flounce and a sigh.

“Fine,” I say with a laugh. “Once and only once.”

I take another branch and hold it over my head. She stays where she is, watching me, refusing to fall for this again. I throw it, and she doesn't move until I take off after the branch. Then she bolts up and runs for it.

I'm one pace ahead, Storm right on my heels. She veers to pass me, and I throw myself down in a home-plate slide. I grab the stick, flip onto my back, and fist-pump it in the air . . . giving me two seconds of victory before I have a Newfoundland on my face for the second time this morning.

Sputtering and laughing, I shove her off. Then, punctuating my own noise, I hear something that makes me go still. Storm lumbers off with the stick as I rise slowly, listening.

It wasn't what it sounded like. Couldn't be.

The noise comes again, a plaintive wail, like a baby's cry.

Storm catches it. She stops and pivots, ears perking. She glances at me as if to say, *What is that?*

"I don't know," I answer, as much for myself.

The morning has gone quiet again, and I'm straining to listen and figure out what it really was. I mentally run through my list of "animals that aren't hibernating right now." I've heard a similar sound from a bear cub, but it's the wrong season for that. We have cougars—a female who wandered north of their usual territory and now has grown cubs. The cry didn't sound right for a big cat. Not a wolf or a feral dog, either.

Bird? That seems most likely, and I've decided that must have been what it was when the noise comes again, and it is not like a bird at all.

A fox? They make some truly bloodcurdling sounds. There's a vixen who lives near our house in Rockton, and I've heard her scream and bolted upright, certain someone was being murdered horribly right outside our window.

I'm still standing there pondering when I catch a glimpse of running black fur and realize it's my dog.

"Storm!" I shout as I bolt after her.

She stops, and I exhale in relief. This spring, I had to shoot a young cougar she chased. Thus ensued six months of special training to be sure no wild animal would ever lead her off again.

I jog to catch up.

"We'll go check it out," I say, and she may not understand the

words, but I only need to take a step toward the sound for her to bark with joy.

I motion for her to heel, and she does. Dalton and I have spent countless hours training her, and it's paid off. She's not only blossoming into a first-rate tracker, but she's more obedient than I'd dared hope. That's a necessity when your dog is bigger than you.

Storm stays at my side. When a tree prevents that, she falls behind me, as she's been taught.

The wail comes again. It's weak enough that if the forest weren't winter-quiet, I'd miss it. It sounds so much like a baby that I have to pause and ask myself "Why couldn't it be?"

There are people living out here besides us. Rockton has been around since the fifties, and over the years, residents have relocated into the wilderness for various reasons. Their term ran out in Rockton, and they didn't want to go home. Or they disagreed with the politics—as the town became less an asylum for the innocent and more a pay-to-play escape for the desperate—but they still needed the refuge of the forest. Most of these are what we call settlers. True pioneers of the north, some in communities and some living independently, as Dalton's parents did. Then there are the hostiles, and that is . . . a complicated subject that becomes more complicated the longer I'm here and the deeper I dig.

When I arrived, I was told that hostiles were residents who'd left and reverted to something primitive and dangerous. I'm no longer convinced that all of them chose that reversion. But that's a topic for another time. What matters now is that people do live out here, so I might very well be hearing a human infant.

I slow to a walk, straining for the sounds of others. If I hear any, I will retreat posthaste. Even settlers can be aggressive if we wander into their campsites.

Yet I hear only the occasional cry of what, increasingly, I can't imagine as anything except a baby. Then Storm whines. I glance down at her, and she stops. Parks her butt in the snow and gives me a look that asks if we must continue. She follows it with a glance over her shoulder, in the direction of our camp, in case I don't understand what she wants.

She senses danger ahead. No, I suppose that's melodramatic. To be precise, she smells strangers, and she has learned, unfortunately, that not all strangers are kind. Something in the scent of whatever lies ahead worries her.

I motion for her to sit and stay, and she glowers at me. With a grunt, she lifts and then lowers her hindquarters. I'm as trained in Storm's language as she is in mine, and this odd movement tells me that she will sit and stay, but she'd rather come with me.

I hesitate. I've learned the hard way that my dog might be the most valuable commodity I own out here. Never mind how well she's trained; one look at her size gets a settler's mind turning, considering how she could be used, as protection or as a beast of burden.

Taking her with me is a risk. So is leaving her here, commanded to stay, prey for any human or beast who happens upon her.

I nod and motion for her to stay behind me. She doesn't like that but communicates her disapproval only with a chuff. Then she's right on my heels.

After another half dozen steps, there is no doubt that I am hearing a baby. The weak and plaintive cry comes from right in front of me. Yet I see nothing.

I blink hard. I'm in an open area scattered with saplings, not big enough to hide someone clutching a child. The cry comes from right in the middle of an empty clearing.

Storm whines. When I motion for her to stay behind me, she whines louder, taking on a note of irritation now. She's asking nicely, but she really, really wants the release command. I won't give it. This could be a trap, someone . . .

Someone what? Hiding a recording of a crying child under the snow?

Under the . . .

I tear into the clearing. The heap ahead looks like a buried log, and it's too large to be a baby, but that's definitely where the sound comes from. As I run, the snow deepens, with no tree canopy to block it, and I'm staggering forward in snow to my knees. I plow through, and I'm almost at the heap when my leg strikes something, and I stumble. In righting myself, I uncover a boot.

In two more steps, I'm beside the heap. The cries have stopped, and my heart stops with them. I claw at the snow. My fingers hit fabric. A woman's body. I can see that in a glance, and again, I don't stop for a better look. She is still and she is cold, and I cannot help her.

I keep digging, but there's just the woman, and for a horrible moment, I imagine the baby trapped beneath her. Then, at a whimper,

I realize the sound comes from under her jacket. I tear at it, the fabric frozen and stiff.

Blood. I see blood under the snow. I wrestle the jacket open, and there is the baby, clutched to the dead woman's chest.

I YANK the child free so fast that the momentum knocks me backward. I land on Storm, and my arms reflexively tighten around the baby.

Crushing it.

No, no, no . . .

I struggle upright as I loosen my grip . . . so much I almost drop the baby. I squeeze my eyes shut and shudder. I'm not easily rattled. I've hung off a cliff, fingers slipping, and only thought *Damn, this isn't good*. But here I am freaked out. I know nothing about babies—*nothing*—and I've just dug one out from under the snow, from the arms of the child's dead mother, and . . . and . . .

Focus, damn it! Focus!

Deep hyperventilating breaths. Then I gasp. I'm holding a baby that has been exposed to subzero temperatures. Buried under the snow with its dead mother. There is no *time* to catch my breath.

Clutching the baby, I look around. I spot the nearest object—a fallen tree. I race over, sit, make as much of a lap as I can, and settle the baby on it.

Baby. It's a baby. Not a toddler. Not even a child old enough to crawl. This is an infant so tiny . . .

I suck in a breath. Focus, focus, focus.

It's so small. I don't have nieces or nephews. Don't have close friends with children. I cannot even guess how young this baby might be. I only know that it is tiny and it is fragile, and for once in my life, I feel huge. Massive and clumsy. Even with my gloves off, my fingers fumble with the swaddling.



I'm not sure what "swaddling" should look like, but it's the word that pops to mind. The baby has been wrapped tight in a cocooning cloth. Animal hide, tanned to butter softness.

As I'm unwrapping the baby, I stop. It's freezing out here, and I'm *unwrapping* it? But I have to, don't I? To check for frostbite? Warm it up?

The panic surges on a wave of indecision. Run the baby back to our tent and unwrap it there. No, unwrap it here, quickly, and make sure it's fine.

The baby makes a noise, too weak now to be called a cry. The child's eyes are screwed shut. They haven't opened since I picked it up.

A bitter wind whips past, and I instinctively clutch the baby to my chest. That wind—and my reaction—answer my question. Get to the tent, to shelter. It's only a few hundred feet away.

I open my jacket, and as I do, I curse myself for being a spoiled brat. Last winter, I'd fumbled around in oversize outerwear, and I'd grumbled about it, and the next time Dalton did a supply run, he returned with a new jacket and snowsuit for me. Naturally, he bought me a sleek, down-filled parka that fits perfectly, meaning I have to hold the baby against my sweater, jacket stretched only partway across. A quick second thought, and I turn my coat around, leaving an air pocket at the top.

The whole time I'm fussing, Storm whines, which only fuels my panic. Her anxiety feels like a lack of trust. That's only me projecting, but I snap at her to be quiet. Guilt surges as she ducks her head, and I pat it quickly, murmuring an apology, knowing this is what she really wants: reassurance. I'm freaking out, and that's freaking her out, and she needs to know everything is okay.

Once the baby is secured, I start from the clearing. Storm woofs, and I turn to see her staring at the woman's body.

*Shouldn't we do something about that?*

Yes. Yes, I should. I am a homicide detective, and that woman is dead, blood soaking the snow. I should at least see what killed her. But I have this baby, and it needs me more than she does. I look up, noting treetop patterns and the sun's position and distant landmarks so I can find this spot again.

Then I take off.

There is a fresh surge of panic as I leave the clearing and realize

that, having been lured by the baby's cries, I'd paid no attention to my surroundings. Why the hell didn't I pay attention—

*Snow, you idiot. You walked through fresh snow.*

The path back to our campsite is as clear as a bread-crumbs trail. It might meander, and yes, a voice inside screams that I need a direct route, but this is the safe one. I take off at a lope . . . until I stumble and realize, with horror, that if I fall, I'll land on the baby. Slower then. Step by step. The baby is breathing—*was* breathing . . .

No, none of that. There isn't time to stop and check. I've left room for it to breathe, and if it managed to survive under a blanket of snow, swaddled beneath its mother's jacket, then it will live through this. As long as it wasn't already too far gone—

Enough of *that*.

I tramp through the snow for what seems like miles. Finally, I see our campsite marker high above my head, and I divert to a more direct route. The closer I get, the faster I go. When I jog across big boot prints and smaller paw prints, I stop short.

Dalton. I've been in such a blind rush that I've completely forgotten I'm not alone out here, and I nearly collapse with relief at the reminder. I don't care whether Dalton knows the first thing about babies. He's here. I am not alone.

"Eric?"

No answer. I call louder as I continue toward the campsite. I shout for Dalton. I call for Raoul. I whistle, and Storm bounds ahead, as if this means her co-parent and pack mate are back. They aren't. The camp is still and silent, and I realize the boot and paw prints are from earlier.

I check my watch to see it's not yet noon. I curse under my breath and keep going into the tent. When Storm tries to follow, a sharp "no" stops her. She whines, but only once, token protest before she collapses outside, the tent swaying as she leans against it.

I left this morning without rolling up our sleeping blankets. I brush the hides flat as quickly as I can. Then I lay the baby on them.

The infant lies there, eyes shut, body still. It hasn't moved since I left the clearing. I knew that, but I'd ignored the warning, telling myself it'd fallen asleep in relief at being found. As little as I know about babies, I realize this is ridiculous. This is a cold, frightened, hungry infant. When someone came, it should have been screaming, making its needs known now that someone finally arrived to fill them.

I lay a trembling hand on the baby's still-swaddled chest. I don't feel anything, but I'm not sure I would with the way my fingers are shaking. I check the side of its neck, and as soon as my cold fingers touch warm skin, the baby gives the faintest start.

Alive.

I fumble to unwrap the swaddling hides. The tiny body gives a convulsive shudder, and I resist the urge to re-swaddle it. The tent isn't warm, but it's sheltered, and I need to get a better look at the child.

It is naked under the cloths. A baby girl with black fuzz for hair, her face scrunched up as tight as her fists. I take a deep breath, push aside emotion, and begin an assessment of her condition. That isn't easy. I realize how cold her hands and feet are, and I panic. I notice her shallow breathing and shivering, and I panic. I see her sunken eyes, and I panic. But I keep assessing.

Dehydration. Mild hypothermia. Possible frostbite.

Her breathing is clear and steady. Heartbeat is strong and steady. Body is plump and well nourished. These findings calm and reassure me, and then I can turn my attention to the problems.

Triage. Frostbite, then hypothermia, then dehydration.

I wrap her loosely in her blankets and add a thick hide one. Then I systematically warm her hands and feet, first against my bare skin and then under my armpits. Warm, do not rub. My hands against her button nose and tiny ears as my breath warms those.

Now to replenish body fluids. I can tell she is dehydrated, but I can't determine severity.

She needs liquid. That's the main thing. I don't have any food for her. I tamp down panic at the thought that I have nothing even resembling milk. Water. Focus on getting her water.

I hurry out to grab the canteen. Then I stop. Dalton will have it, because I won't need it at camp, where I can melt snow.

Melt snow.

I snatch up the pot and stuff it to overflowing with snow and spin to the fire . . .

The fire is dead.

Of course it is. That's why I'd left in the first place: to gather kindling, which I abandoned back in the clearing where I found the baby. I've been gone long enough that the fire is reduced to ash. It'll take forever to get it going enough to melt water.

Stay calm. Stay focused. I am surrounded by water in partly frozen form. I can do this.

I empty the pot. Grab a handful of snow. Squeeze it in my fist, and watch the water run into the pot. Grab another . . . and see black streaks on my hand. It's probably soot, but it looks like dirt, and that reminds me that my hands are not clean.

Sterilize. That comes from deep memory, a single babysitting class taken with friends, before I realized I was not babysitter material.

*Then how are you going to look after an infant?*

I can do this. Clean my hands first.

With what? I showered before I came. It's one weekend with backpacks—we have no room for anything we don't absolutely need.

And this is an emergency. Am I going to let a baby die of dehydration rather than risk letting her ingest a few specks of dirt?

I wash my hands in the snow as best I can. Then I'm squeezing out water when Storm, sticking close and anxious, gives a happy bark. At a whistle, she takes off, and I nearly collapse with relief.

"Eric!" I shout. "I need help!"

He comes running so fast the poor dogs race to keep up. He bursts into the camp, as if expecting to see me wrestling a newly woken grizzly. He has a rifle over his shoulder, and he's carrying a brace of spruce grouse, which he throws into the snow as he runs toward me.

"Fire," I say. "I need the fire going. Now. I have to boil water."

"You're hurt? Or Storm?" He wheels to look at the dog bounding up behind him.

"Baby," I say, barely able to get the word out, my heart thumps so fast. "I found a baby."

"A baby what?"

The infant lets out a weak cry, and Dalton goes still.

His head turns toward the tent as he asks in a low voice, "What is that?" and I realize he doesn't recognize the sound. Or if he does, it only sparks a very old memory. His younger brother, Jacob, might very well be the only infant he's ever seen. Dalton was raised in Rockton, where there are no children.

Before I can answer, he's crouched and opening the unzipped tent flap.

DALTON GINGERLY PEELS back the tent flap. He peers inside.

Then he jerks back. "It's a baby."

"That's what I said."

He rises, looking stunned. "Where . . . ?"

"I found her with her mother, under the snow. Both of them—the mother and her child. The mother's dead, and I don't know how long the baby was out there, and I've warmed her up, but she's dehydrated, and I let the fire go out, and now I can't boil water to make it sterile and—"

He cuts off my babble with a kiss, gloved hands on either side of my face. Not what I expect, and it startles me, which I suppose is the point. His lips press against mine, warm, the ice on his beard melting against my chin, and it's like slapping someone who is hysterical. Well, no, it's a much nicer way to do it.

I'm startled at first, and then all I feel and smell and see is him, and the panic evaporates. Tears spring to my eyes. As he breaks the kiss, he brushes the tears away and says, "Everything's okay. You've got this."

I nod. "I-I don't know much . . . Anything really about . . ."

"It's more than I do." He smiles, and then that vanishes, as if he realizes that might not be what I need to hear right now.

"We have this," he says. "We can hold off on sterilizing the water. If she's dehydrated, just use what you have."

He returns to the tent, and I follow with my bit of melted snow. When the dogs crowd in, he waves them back. Storm herds Raoul off,

like a big older sister taking charge. He's seven months old, a wolf and Australian shepherd cross, heavier on the wolf, which means he understands pack hierarchy.

After the dogs move, Dalton reopens the tent. Then he stops, and his breath catches.

"Fuck," he whispers. "Are they supposed to be that . . . small?" There's an odd note in his voice, part wonder and part terror, and when I nudge, he moves aside, letting me go in. Then he stays there, holding the flap open.

"I'm going to need your help with this," I say.

He nods, rubbing a hand over his mouth as he eases into the tent. He's still a meter away from the baby, but he moves as if he might somehow crush her from a distance.

"Pick her up, please," I say. "I have to get this water into her."

He inches closer. His arms move toward the baby. Then he stops. Repositions his arms, mentally trying to figure out how to do this.

"You won't break her," I say.

"Are you sure?" He gives me a smile, but worry lurks behind it. He looks back at her. "How do I . . . ?"

"One hand behind her back. The other supporting her head. She's too young to hold it up on her own. She's also too young to escape."

"Got it."

He still makes a few pantomime attempts, reconfiguring his hands in the air before he actually touches the baby. It's an awkward lift, and when she wriggles, he freezes. I lunge before he drops her. He doesn't, of course. He just tightens his grip a little and looks down at her and . . .

There are experiences I've heard women talk about that I have never had. Never even imagined, to be honest. Hearing about them, I'd inwardly roll my eyes, because if I never felt a thing, then clearly this thing does not exist. Or, as I've learned, I just never experienced it until I met Dalton. That thing they write poetry and songs and cheesy Valentine's cards about. Being in love. Being with someone that you can no longer imagine being without.

When Dalton holds that baby, I get another of those experiences. My insides just . . . I don't even know what. I feel things that I don't particularly want to feel at this moment, may not *ever* want to feel, considering this might be the one thing I can't give him.

I see Dalton holding the baby, and then he looks over at me with this little smile that . . .

Nope, not thinking about that. Tuck it away. Lock it up tight.

"Am I doing it right?" he asks.

"Yep," I say, a little brusquely. "Now I need to get the water into her. I don't know how old she is, but she definitely isn't weaned yet. She'll want something to suck on, but unless you have a clean rubber glove hidden in our packs . . ."

"Yeah, no."

I inhale. "It probably wouldn't do any good. Suckling requires strength, and she's weak. And I need to stop talking." I take a deep breath. "From wild panic to overanalyzing."

"The situation isn't critical. We're only an hour's fast walk from town. We just need to get a little water into her."

He shifts her, getting more confident in his hold. Then he stops. "She's so . . ."

"Small?"

He laughs, but it holds a touch of nervousness. "Yeah, we covered that, didn't we. I just can't believe . . ." He swallows. "All right. I'm going to try to open her mouth so you can drip water in. Just a few drops into the back of her throat, and I'll make sure she swallows it."

"Done this before, have you?"

Another laugh, still nervous. "With a two-hundred-pound man. Years ago. Guy who ran away and passed out from dehydration. I had to get fluids into him before I hauled him to town for a saline drip. This is a little trickier. She won't need as much water, though."

"True."

He puts a finger to the baby's lips. Dalton isn't a huge guy. About six feet tall. Maybe one-seventy, lean and fit, as he needs to be for life out here. That fingertip, though, seems like a giant's, bigger than the baby's pursed lips. He prods, and her mouth opens.

"Now let's just hope I don't get bit." He wriggles his finger in and then stops. "Though I guess that would require teeth. How young do you think she is?"

"Babies can be born with teeth, but they usually fall out. They don't get more until they're at least six months. She's well below that. Maybe a month?"

"Fuck." He takes a deep breath. "Okay, here goes, I'll prop—"

Her eyes fly open, and he freezes, as if he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. She looks up at him, and it is indeed a picture-perfect scene, as she stares up at Dalton, and his expression goes from frozen shock to wonder.

I want to capture it . . . and I want to forget it. I want to pretend I don't see that look in his eyes, don't see his smile.

"Hey, there," he says, and the baby doesn't cry, doesn't even look concerned. She just stares at him.

"Water," I say, and I feel like a selfish bitch for spoiling the moment, but I can't help it. I need to shatter it, and I hate myself a little for that.

"Right." He wriggles his finger into the baby's mouth. She starts to suck on it, and he laughs again, no nerves now, just a rumbling laugh that comes from deep in his chest.

"Reminds me of a marten I found, when I was a kid," he says.

"A baby marten?"

He shrugs. "I had a bad habit of bringing home orphaned animals. My mom . . ." He trails off, and I realize it's the first time I've heard him use that word. When he speaks of Katherine Dalton, he says "my mother." That isn't who he means here. He means Amy O'Keefe, his birth mother. The parents he never talks about. The ones he can't talk about without a hitch in his words, a trailing-off, a sudden switch of subject. He lived with his parents and his brother out here until he was nine and the Daltons "rescued" him, from a situation he did not need rescuing from.

"Your mom . . ." I prod, because I must. Every time this door creaks open, I grab for it before it slams shut again.

"Water," he says, and I try not to deflate.

I lift the pot, and then realize there's no way in hell I can "drip" it from this suddenly huge pot into her tiny mouth.

"Take out one of our shirts," he says. "Dip a corner in and squeeze it into her mouth."

I'm not sure that's sanitary, but I settle for taking a clean shirt of mine, one fresh from the laundry. As I dip it in, I say, "Is this how you fed the marten?"

"Nah, it's how I fed birds. For the marten, I'd put food on my finger and hope she didn't chew it off." He looks at the baby. "You gonna chew it off, kid?"

"No teeth, remember?"

"These gums feel hard enough to do the job."

I've relaxed now. He's talking about rescuing orphaned animals, comparing them to the baby, and that eases tension from my shoulders. That's what he sees this as—the rescue of an orphaned creature.



Not picking up a baby and being overwhelmed with some deeper instinct that says, "I want this."

That would be silly, I guess. But we all have our sensitive spots, and this is one of mine: the fact that I cannot provide a child should he decide that's what he wants. It's an issue I never had to worry about because I did not foresee myself in a relationship where the question might arise. Now I do.

I wet the shirt and trickle water in the baby's mouth. I'm being careful to have it close enough, so we can see how much she gets, and suddenly she clamps down on the fabric itself. She sucks hard and then makes such a face that we both laugh.

"Not what you expected, huh?" I say.

Her gaze turns my way. I seem to recall that, at this age, babies can't see more than shapes, but she's definitely looking. Processing. I swear I can see that in her dark blue eyes. Every move, every noise, every passing blurry shape is a cause for deep consideration, her brain analyzing and trying to interpret.

I dip the fabric into the pot and press it to her lips. She opens them and sucks. Makes that same face, distaste and displeasure, like a rich old lady expecting champagne and being served ginger ale. She fusses. Bleats. But when nothing better comes, she takes the shirt again and sucks on it.

When she's finished, she fixes us with a look of bitter accusation.

"Sorry," I say. "We'll do better next time."

We aren't what she wants, though. Not what she needs.

I think of the woman in the clearing, the woman under the snow.

"We should get her back to Rockton," I say. "Can you do that by yourself?"

"What?"

"Her mother. I have to . . ." I look at the baby. "I need to get what I can from the scene."

"Scene?" He adjusts his position, making the baby comfortable in the crook of his arm. "You think she was murdered."

"Possibly. I know that isn't my crime to solve, but this baby didn't come from nowhere. She has family. She needs to go back to them."

I know that, better than anyone, because of the man sitting beside me. The Daltons found a boy in the forest, and they ignored the fact that he was well fed and properly clothed and healthy. Ignored the fact that he already knew how to read and write. They decided he

was a savage in need of rescue. There is no gentle way to put it. They stole Dalton from his parents, from his brother, from the forest.

"She needs to get back to them," I repeat, and Dalton's hand finds mine, his fingers squeezing as he says, "She does."

"So to do that—" I begin.

"We have to check out the body."

"I have to check it. You need to take her."

He passes me the baby and starts rolling the sleeping blankets.

"I'm not leaving you out here alone," he says, and before I can protest, he continues. "Yes, you can find the way back. Yes, you have a gun. Yes, I could leave you with both dogs. But an hour or two will make no difference if she's wrapped well. She survived for longer under the snow."

"Yes but—"

"Maybe I should stay and check the body," he says, tying the blankets under his backpack. "I know what to look for, and I'm better than you at tracking, especially with the snowfall. I might also be able to tell if she's from a settlement or she's a lone settler or even where she comes from." He settles onto his haunches. "Yeah, that makes sense. I'll check the body. You take the baby."

I only glower at him. He grins, leans forward, and smacks a kiss on my cheek. "Yep, I'm not sure which is the scarier prospect. We'll both go check the scene first. Wrap her up properly, and I'll break camp."