

Kelley Armstrong/ A Darkness Absolute

One

We've been tracking Shawn Sutherland for almost two hours when the blizzard strikes. That's the common phrasing. A storm hits. A blizzard strikes. Like a left hook out of nowhere. . Except that's not how it usually happens. There's always warning. The wind picks up. The sky darkens. At the very least you sense a weight in the air. When the snow starts, you might curse at the suddenness of it, but you know it wasn't sudden at all.

This blizzard is different. Deputy Will Anders and I are roaring along on our snowmobiles, following a clear set of footprints in newly fallen snow. I'm glad the idiot's prints are obvious because it's such a gorgeous day, I struggle to focus on my task. The sun glitters off snow and ice as I whip along, taking my corners a little too tight, playing with the machine, enjoying the ride on what has become a rather routine task—chasing Shawn Sutherland.

Rockton is a secret off-the-grid town, a safe haven for people in hiding. If a resident keeps his head down and doesn't cause trouble, we don't notice him. Until last month, that was Sutherland. Then the first snow came, and he snapped, declaring that he wasn't spending another goddamn winter in this goddamn town. He's run twice since then. Our boss—Sheriff Eric Dalton—warned Sutherland that if it happened again, he would spend the whole goddamn winter in the goddamn jail cell. We can't risk locals wandering the woods and being found. But more than that, protecting citizens is our responsibility, even when it means protecting them from themselves.

Yesterday, Dalton flew to Dawson City on a supply run and, yep, Sutherland bolted again. But he's too afraid of the forest to actually leave the path, which makes him very easy to track after a light snowfall. Hell, I'd have taken the horses instead if Dalton wasn't due

back before nightfall and I needed Sutherland caught by then. Given that the sun starts setting mid-afternoon, we don't have much time.

We're ripping along when I catch sight of a dark shape ahead. Anders doesn't see it—he's gawking at something to the left, and I flip up my visor to shout at him. Then I see what he does: a wall of white. It's on us before I can react, a cyclone of driving snow and roaring wind, and I hit the brakes so hard my ass shoots off the seat and nearly sends me face-first through the windshield.

The sled's back end goes into a slide—right into a tree. I curse, but on a path this narrow, striking a tree is damn near inevitable. I'm just lucky *I* wasn't the one hitting it.

I hear Dalton's voice in my head. *Stay on the sled. Get your bearings first.*

When I lift my leg over the seat, I hear him say, *Stay on the fucking sled, Butler.* I ignore him and twist to look around.

White. That's all I can see. Blinking against the prickle of ice pellets, I shut my visor. Even with it shut, I hear the howl of the wind, an enraged beast battering at me.

I slit my eyes, turn my face from the wind, open my visor and shout "Will!" but the storm devours my words. When I open my mouth to yell again, the wind whips rock-hard ice pellets into my face, and I slap the visor shut.

The first lick of panic darts through me, some primal voice screaming that I'm blinded and deafened, and if I don't move, don't do *something*, I'll die in this wasteland, buried under ice and snow.

And that's exactly the kinda thinking that'll get you killed, Casey.

Dalton's voice in my head again, a laconic drawl this time. He switches to my given name as his temper subsides, knowing all I need is a little bit of guidance from the guy who's spent every winter of his life in this forest.

I take a deep breath and then try the radio. Yes, that should have been the obvious first response, but four months up here has taught me that our radios are about as reliable as the toy versions I used as a kid. The in-helmet ones don't work at all, and the second I pull off my helmet, the driving snow has me closing my eyes, hunkering down and blindly raising the receiver to my ear.

"Butler to base," I say. "Anyone there?"

Static answers.

"Anders?" I say. "Will? You copy?"

I'm not surprised when silence answers. Unless his helmet is off, he won't hear his radio.

I squint in front of me, where he'd been only minutes ago.

He's there. He must be. I just can't see through this damn snow.

"Will!"

The howl of the wind responds.

I put my helmet back on and push the ignition button. As soon as the engine fires up, I know that's the wrong move. Anders was in front of me. I risk bashing into his sled. Or into *him*.

Dalton would tell me to stay on the sled. But if Anders is doing the same damn thing, maybe five feet away, we'll freeze to death out here.

Which is why I told you not to go chasing Sutherland. Maybe if he loses a few fingers to frostbite, that'll teach him.

Okay, so I screwed up. Live and learn. But I need to do *something*, because there's no way in hell I can sit tight and pray this blizzard ends before I die of exposure.

Hanging on to the handlebars, I pry my ass off the snowmobile, fighting a wind that wants to knock me into the nearest tree. My snowmobile suit billows, and threatens to send me airborne. The snowsuit is militia gear, meant for guys almost twice my weight.

I fight my way off the sled. Gripping the seat-back with one glove, I open the saddlebags and root around until I find the rope. Then I remove my gloves, and the moment I do, I can't feel my fingers and panic starts anew, every cold-weather warning about exposed skin racing back and—

As long as it's snowing, it's not actually that cold.

Dalton's voice rhymes off statistics about northern temperatures and wind chill and snow fall. I manage to tie the rope on the seat back. I stop to rub my hands briskly before double-checking the knot. Then, gloves on, I set out, hunched and hanging on to the rope, my oversized snowsuit snapping around me like a sail. A gust whips down from the treetops and the next thing I know, I'm flat on my back, staring into swirling white as I struggle to catch my breath.

Up, Butler. This isn't the time for snow angels.

I flash Dalton a mental middle finger and roll onto my stomach. Then I crawl, my head down against the gale.

They did not prepare me for this in police college.

Yeah, yeah. Move your ass.

I'm a homicide detective, not a tracking hound.

Well, then, maybe you shouldn't have tried tracking him.

I grumble and keep inching along as the rope plays out behind me. I spot an elongated dark shape ahead. Anders's snowmobile. I pick up my pace and, as if in answer, the gale picks up too, snow beating from every direction. I grit my teeth and keep going, focused on that dark shape even as snow piles on my visor. Finally I'm there and I reach out and—

Something grabs my hand. Grabs and yanks, and I fall with a yelp. I look up, ready to give Anders shit, but when I wipe my visor, all I see is the dark shape of his sled.

The wind dies, just for a second, and I hear a whining. The wind? I spot something whizzing past right in front of me, and it takes a moment to realize I'm seeing the snowmobile track running. The sled is on its side. The track is what "grabbed" my hand—I'd reached out and touched it.

Sled. On its side. Still running.

I struggle to my feet and yank open my visor, yelling, "Will!" as I stumble forward. I grab the nearest part of the sled that *isn't* the running track belt and fight that damned wind to get around the snowmobile. That's when I see the windshield. The broken windshield. And I see the tree that the sled almost skimmed past, the left side hitting just hard enough to stop the snowmobile dead and Anders . . .

Anders did not stop.

There was a six-foot-two, brawny man riding that snowmobile, without any restraints, and when it hit the tree, the force flung him through that windshield into the endless white beyond.

Two

I stumble forward, following the trajectory from the sled, trying to run, which only makes it worse. I'm staggering and I can't see a damned thing, and then I pitch forward, tripping on what I think is a branch or a root, and I go down face first, sprawled over Anders's leg.

When I look over, all I see is that one dark spot, where I tripped over his leg. Otherwise, he's covered in snow. Buried in it.

I find him and feel my way up until I'm at his helmet. He's face-down, the helmet neck opening and vents snow-covered. I clear them fast and then check the pulse in his neck. It's beating strongly, which only means his heart is pumping. Only means he's alive.

I grew up in a family of doctors, and I know I shouldn't just flip Anders onto his back, but right now making sure he's breathing is the important thing. I still try to do this with him prone. I shift position, and my shoulder hits something hard. I reach out to feel a tree, right in front of his head. Which he'd hit. Head first.

Shit, shit, shit!

I awkwardly tie the rope around my foot, so I don't lose my way. Then, equally awkwardly, I dig under his helmet, my gloves off, to unhook his chin strap—

Anders jumps as my ice-cold fingers touch his bare throat. He flails and then scrambles to sit up, sees me and blinks.

"Hold still," I say as he removes his helmet. "You hit your head." I take his chin in my hand, apologizing for my cold fingers, and check his pupils. They look normal. I examine his head next, which should be easy enough—he wears his hair buzzcut short, as if he's still in the army—but dark hair over an equally dark scalp makes looking for blood and cuts a whole lot tougher. I don't feel any, though.

"You seem okay. I'm just worried about—"

“Inter-cranial injury. Yeah. Well, I’m conscious. I can recite the Pledge of Allegiance if you like.”

“That would require me knowing the Pledge of Allegiance.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. How about Hamlet’s soliloquy.” He runs through it.

“Impressive.”

“Not really, considering I had to say it every damn night for two weeks in my junior year. Which was . . .” He looks up as he thinks. “June 1994. Proving I can access personal memories, too. How do my pupils look?”

“Same size and not dilated.”

“I should be fine then.”

Anders was pre-med when he decided to serve his country. The U.S. army had started training him as a medic before they both realized he was better suited to military policing.

The wind has died down again, falling snow entombing us in white. I retrieve the first-aid kit and a flashlight from Anders’s saddle bags. I shine the light up and down his snowsuit, looking for rips or tears, any sign of injury.

“How fast were you going?” I ask.

“I hit the brakes as soon as the snow blew in. Hit them too fast. Lost control. Skidded. Sudden stop, and I went flying. I wasn’t going more than few miles an hour by then. Just enough to send me through the damn windshield.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I’m going to be sore as hell in the morning, but it wasn’t a high-speed impact.”

I nod. That’s the biggest concern—he could have done serious damage to his spine.

He rolls his shoulders and moves his back, testing. “I should be good to go. How far are we from town?”

“About five clicks.”

“Shit.”

Under normal conditions, that’s a couple hours’ walk along the winding path. With a storm, it’ll be several times that.

I check my watch. “We’ve got less than two hours of daylight left. If you call this daylight.” I wave at the steady snowfall, the sky beyond already gray. “I’m going to say we collect our stuff from the saddlebags and find shelter for the night.”

“Yeah. Eric’ll be pissed, but it’s not like he’ll be flying home in this. With any luck, he won’t be able to radio in either.”

“We’ll start out at daybreak. Which means about, what, ten in the morning?”

A wry smile. “Welcome to the north. Okay. Let’s see if I can stand.”

I take his hand, and he’s shaking his head, mouth opening to tell me that helping him up isn’t a wise idea. I place his hand on a tree instead—it can support his weight. He chuckles, and he’s carefully rising when I say, “Down!” pushing him to the ground as I cover him, my gun drawn.

“What the—?”

I clap a hand over his mouth and gesture with my chin. There’s a figure on the path, appearing from nowhere, just like it had before the storm hit. When Anders sees, I move off him and he flips over, his gun out, gaze fixed on the figure.

The falling snow is a shimmering veil between us, blurring everything more than an arm’s length away. I’m presuming the figure is a man, given the size, but I’m on my stomach, and it’s at least twenty feet away, and all I can say for sure is it’s standing on two legs.

“Shawn?” I call. With the wind dropped, my voice carries easily. The figure doesn’t move. “Sutherland?”

“*Shawn!*” Anders snaps with the bark of a soldier, nothing like his usual laid-back tone. Every time I hear it, I jump. He gives a soft chuckle.

The figure doesn't move. I can't see a face but I can tell he's wearing a snowsuit, not unlike ours—a bulky one-piece, dark from head to toe. According to the guy who saw Sutherland run, he was wearing hiking boots, jeans, a ski jacket and Calgary Flames toque. I whisper this to Ander before I shout, "Jacob? Is that you?" Dalton's younger brother lives in these woods.

"Jacob?" I call again, and Anders stays quiet, knowing a shout from him would send Jacob running.

"Jacob?" I say. "If that's you, we've had an accident. We're fine, but we can't get back to town in this weather. We need to find shelter. Do you know of any place nearby?"

When he doesn't respond, I know it's not him. As shy as Jacob is, he knows I'm important to his brother, and he'd help me.

This might be a hostile. There are two kinds of former residents out here, those who left to live in the forest. Some we call settlers, which is what Dalton's parents were, people who moved into these Yukon woods to live off the land. They stay out of our way, like Jacob does. Then there are the hostiles, those who went out there snapped and have become the most dangerous "animal" in these woods.

"Hey!" I call. "You know I'm talking to you. Maybe you can't see through this snow, but I can see enough to know you're not holding a gun on me. There are two trained on you, though. If you think we're easy prey, just raise your hand and I'll be happy to demonstrate my marksmanship."

"That means she'll put a bullet through your damn shoulder," Anders calls, giving me a look that says I might need to take the diction down a notch. "That'll be the first bullet. Her warning shot. I don't give warning shots. I'm not good enough for that. Mine goes through your chest."

Which is bullshit, on both counts. He's a better marksman *and* more likely to aim a non-fatal shot. But he's also the big guy with the booming voice, which makes him a helluva lot more intimidating than me.

The figure takes a lumbering step forward. It's more of a shamble than a walk, and seeing that, an image flashes in my mind. Before I can speak, Anders whispers, "Are we sure that's a guy, Case?"

No, we are not. The memory that flashed is of a walk with Dalton after a particularly rough day. There may also have been a bottle of tequila involved, and some hide and seek, the sun falling as we goofed off, me darting around a tree fall . . . and startling a grizzly pawing apart the dead timber for grubs.

I've faced armed gunmen and not been as terrified as I was when that beast reared up, all seven feet and seven hundred pounds of him. Now I look at this figure through the snow veil. It's a tall, broad shape on two legs. Dark from head to toe. Taking another lumbering step toward us.

I hear Dalton again, from that evening in the woods.

Don't move. Just stay where you are.

My first instinct is to shout, as it was back then. But I'd had the sense to whisper the idea to Dalton before I did.

It's not a black bear. Make a lot of noise, and you'll only antagonize it.

I stay stock still. Anders does the same, both of us straining to see, but the thing is only a dark shape against a quickly darkening backdrop.

Just don't move, Casey. You're fine. I've got my gun out. Perfect trajectory to the snout. That's where you want to hit if you have to shoot.

Dalton couldn't help turning even a stare-down with a grizzly into a teaching moment. But the reality was that he'd been calming me down. A grizzly bear less than a meter away?

No big deal. Let's take what we can from this. He'd also been calming himself down, the strain clear in his voice. Now, remembering his words, I adjust the angle of my gun, whispering to Anders, "I'll go for the upper chest. You take the head. Just wait until we can see it. We have to be sure."

He nods, but my warning is more for me than him. Stay calm. Be certain before I pull the trigger. My gun isn't meant for shooting bear—I don't haul around a .45.

But you know what's even better than shooting? That canister in your pocket. Pull it out as slowly as you can—no sudden moves.

Gun in my right hand, my left slips into my pocket and removes a small can. Pepper spray.

The problem here is that we're lying on the ground. There's no way to spray it in the bear's eyes from this position. I'm not even sure Anders can fire a bullet at its face with enough accuracy.

As long as it's upright, you're good. It's unbalanced on two legs. It's just checking you out. The trouble comes if . . .

The shape drops to all fours, and beside me, Anders lets out a hiss. We're both trying to make out the bear's head, but its whole body has turned to a dark blob. Anders backs onto his haunches, gun in one hand, the other pushing himself to a crouch. I do the same. I know not to leap up. Again, if it was a black bear, that'd be the right move—show it you're bigger. But with a grizzly, we're not.

"I'll spray first," I whisper. We will give this bear a fighting chance. That's Dalton's rule. He never hesitates to kill an animal if it's a serious threat, but he won't if he has the option.

We're waiting for the bear to charge. That's why it dropped to all fours. It's taking longer than we expect and then it rises again.

Anders makes a soft growling sound that has me nodding in agreement. The beast is toying with us. While we don't exactly want to deal with a charging grizzly, neither of us is good with just waiting, unable to see enough to be sure it's a bear, not daring to shoot if it isn't, not even particularly wanting to shoot if it is.

The sun is dropping farther with every second. We need to get to shelter before nightfall, need to be sure Anders is okay after his collision, and it's not enough that we're trapped by a freak blizzard, we're stuck in a standoff with a damned grizzly.

"Just go," Anders mutters to the bear. "Nothing to see here. Run along home."

When the bear turns around and starts ambling off, I have to stifle a snicker at Anders's expression.

"Well, that was easy," he says.

"Bears." I shake my head. This was how my last grizzly stare-down had ended, too. When that bear showed no signs of charging, Dalton advised me to take slow steps back, and as soon as I was far enough away, the bear snorted and returned to digging for grubs, satisfied that I'd been suitably intimidated.

This bear is gone but we stay crouched and watching until Anders's wince tells me his back didn't escape that collision uninjured.

"I'll stand guard," I say. "You empty the saddlebags."

He does. Then we head for my sled to do the same. The snowfall's still heavy enough that I'm grateful for the rope, guiding me through that endless white. As we near the spot where the bear stood, I spot something red under a layer of new snow. I carefully brush the snow aside and uncover a woolen hat. A bright red, gold and white one with a flaming C on the front.

Sutherland's Calgary Flames toque.

I remember the figure standing here, watching us, and then bending over.

Not a bear preparing to charge.

A man, placing this on the ground.

I turn over the hat in my hands, and as I do, something dark smears on my gray gloves. I lift one hand to my face for a better look, but even before I catch the smell, I know what it is.

Blood.