

OUR DAUGHTER IS six months old, and our dog is still clearly convinced that we have no idea what we're doing and, without her intervention, our child will crawl into the woods and be devoured by wolves. We'd been hiking for an hour, with Rory happily bouncing along in the carrier on Dalton's back. I'd walked behind him, so I can ensure she's okay . . . and make faces at her.

We've stopped in a clearing, taken her out, and put her on the ground, and Storm is in full herding mode. Despite the fact that Newfoundlands are not herding dogs. Despite the fact that Rory is crawling around gurgling gleefully. Also despite the fact that we walk this route once a week and put Rory down in the *exact same spot* every time.

When Storm's anxious growls turn to full-throated Newfie woofs, I cover my ears and shout to be heard over the noise. "One of these days, we are leaving you behind, dog."

She keeps barking. We keep wincing. And Rory grins up at her massive black-haired mop of a big sister.

I order Storm to lie down, which makes barking impossible, so she resorts to loud grumbling as she watches Rory, ready for . . . I don't know, our baby to leap to her feet and make a run for it?

I drop to the ground beside Rory, which seems to calm Storm.

Dalton roots around in my pack and pulls out the water canteen, granola bars, and one digestive cookie for our red-cheeked teething baby.

"See, Casey?" he says as he hands me the canteen. "She just needed a distraction from her teeth. Long walks always work. Now, the trick is to tire her out so she falls asleep on the way back and then we can ease her into her crib and really enjoy our day off."

I stretch out in the long grass. "I'm enjoying *this*."

His brows rise. "And that's all you want for a very rare shared day off when the baby is actually sleeping?"

I smile. "No, I'll take whatever you're offering. I just mean that I like this. And not just because she's finally quiet."

"Rory? Or Storm?"

"Both."

I lay my head on Storm's flank as I watch our daughter grabbing at a grass strand. My miracle baby. A miracle in the sense that I didn't think I'd ever be able to have children. And a miracle because I never thought I'd find someone I wanted to have them with.

Dalton and I wouldn't have dared try for a child until the town was fully functional, but nature intervened and gave us Rory. As for Haven's Rock, it's been chugging along uneventfully for six months, and *uneventful* is exactly how we like it. The town continues to fill with people seeking refuge, and we're growing confident in our ability to provide that refuge.

It's early September now. In southern Canada, it'd still be summer, with fall on the horizon. Up here, it's been autumn for a few weeks, the world turning golden and quiet as we begin the descent into another long winter.

Dalton finishes his bar, stretches out in front of Rory, and prods things for her to explore—twigs, rocks, a bug. He grew up in the wilderness and has never left, and I smile as I watch him engaging our daughter in her environment. Storm might not like seeing Rory crawling about on the ground, but this is the life she

will lead, and she's already happiest here, in the sunshine watching a bug crawl up a twig.

When Storm leaps up, unceremoniously dumping me to the ground, I barely have time to recover before she resumes barking.

"Really?" I say. "What's wrong *now*? Rory hasn't moved from . . ."

I trail off as I realize Storm is looking into the forest. Of course, my husband has already realized this and is on his feet, scanning the trees, fingers resting on the butt of his gun.

Yes, Dalton carries a sidearm. So do I. In Rockton, he was the sheriff and I was his detective, and we continue those roles in Haven's Rock, mostly because we've learned it makes people feel safe, and when the majority of our residents are victims, feeling safe is critical.

We no longer wear the guns around town—that was a Wild West affectation the Rockton council insisted on. But we usually wear them when we leave Haven's Rock. Dalton doesn't take his out, though. Just rests his fingers there. We're not readying our weapons when the "danger" is almost certainly a fox or moose.

Newfoundlands aren't known to be vocal, and Storm never was . . . until we brought a baby into the house. Last week, she went into a barking frenzy at a vole that snuck into our chalet. Apparently, it wasn't only wolves that could devour our child.

As she barks, I lay my hand on her head, telling her we've got this. It's not until I scoop up Rory that Storm quiets. She moves beside Dalton, who's listening intently. Something's out there. Big enough that he can hear it moving.

Dalton surveys the clearing. He's trying to decide whether it's safe to leave me here while he investigates. If Storm's barks didn't send the animal fleeing, it's not small, and at this time of year predators may actually come closer when they hear her. Snow on the mountaintops warns that winter is coming. Sick or elderly predators can become desperate. That goes double for bears, looking to store up fat to get them through hibernation. Stories of unavoidable grizzly attacks often happen at this time of year, and

that's why I'm not only carrying my sidearm—I also have a rifle on my back. We have a baby now. We are ridiculously careful.

I motion for Dalton to take the rifle and investigate. Then I hold Rory in one arm as I tug the bear spray from my pack and put it in my jacket pocket. Usually, if I saw a bear, I'd go for the spray first. With Rory, I'll make that judgment call when the time comes. Bear spray is very effective under normal circumstances, but a desperate bear does not behave normally.

It's only after Storm and Dalton are gone that I realize I have too much to juggle here—baby, bear spray, gun.

Storm may have a point. As careful as we are, we're still new parents.

I look around and then back against a thick pine.

Rory fusses. She was happily on the ground, playing with Daddy, and now Mom is awkwardly holding her in one arm, and Dad and Storm are gone, and it's boring. Really boring. Which reminds her that her mouth hurts where her first tooth is breaking through.

I bounce her and put my other arm around her, while keeping it ready to grab my gun or spray. I whisper to her under my breath, singing "Itsy Bitsy Spider," which is one of three nursery songs I know, and I'm probably getting the words wrong, but she's six months old—it doesn't matter. And it really doesn't matter right now, as I try to keep her quiet—

Rory roars. She came into the world that way, and she's never stopped. It's even the joking version of how she got her name. I kiss her cheeks and her forehead and she roars in rage and the remembered pain of her teething, her round face going beet red up to the roots of her wild black hair.

"Shh, shh, shh," I say as I bounce her faster.

Crashing sounds in the bushes. A dark shape appears maybe ten feet beyond the clearing.

My hand drops to my gun. Screw the spray. I have a baby, and I am not taking chances—

"Hey!" Dalton shouts. "Back the fuck up! Now!"

It is a testament to my fear that, for a moment, I think he might actually be talking to me.

When a human voice answers, I stop, hand on my gun. It sounds like a woman. It's not Lilith, the wilderness photographer who lives out here. There's also a mining camp, but there aren't any women among the miners or staff.

Could it be one of our residents? We have thirty-three women in town now, and unless I know them well, I'm not going to recognize their voice when they're freaking out . . . which they would be if Dalton caught them on a secret hike.

Rory has stopped, too, as she turns toward the voice. Something new. Something interesting. I move in that direction slowly, listening until I can make out words.

"—husband was trying to see where we are, and he slipped and fell. His ankle's twisted. I heard the dog barking and came running. Then I heard a baby. Is there a town here? A settlement?"

I keep walking toward the voices as Dalton says no, there isn't a town for a hundred kilometers or more. When I step out onto the path, he glowers my way, but I shake my head. It's not as if she didn't hear the baby.

I also see the reason for her panic. Dalton has his gun out. His finger isn't anywhere near the trigger, but all she sees is a man with a gun and a very large dog. When she spots me, she makes a noise almost like a yelp of relief and hurries in my direction.

"Stop, please," I say calmly. "I understand you're in some trouble, but this isn't a campground. We don't expect to bump into anyone out here, so we're naturally going to be cautious."

"O-okay," she stammers. "Right. Yes. Sorry. But that's why I came running. We didn't think we had a chance of finding anyone out here. Especially this time of year. I know it's off-season for hiking, but this is when my husband had vacation time, and a friend said it was gorgeous here, and the forecast was good and —" She stops and takes a deep breath and then puts out her hand. "I'm Gretchen. We're from Whitehorse."

I don't move close enough to shake her hand. "You said your husband is hurt."

"Not badly hurt. It's just . . . We lost our GPS the other day. It was a really stupid . . ."

She trails off and catches her breath again, trying to calm herself. I use the pause to get a better look at her. She's average height, slender, white with light brown hair in a ponytail. Weathered tan skin and blue eyes. Maybe late thirties. Dressed for back-country hiking.

"We were crossing a creek," she says. "I slipped on a rock and fell in. I was wearing the equipment belt—with our sat phone, GPS, compass, maps, wallets . . . I must not have fastened it right because it came off and went downstream. Blake—my husband—went after it, but the water was running too fast. We spent all day following the creek, which emptied into a lake. There was no sign of the belt. Everything we had to navigate with was in there."

"So you're lost."

She nods. "We still thought we could handle it. We've been doing this for decades. We met when we came to the Yukon for summer jobs as students. We fell in love with the north and moved up here after graduation. We go out every year, exploring some new corner. We know what we're doing. Blake thought if he could get some elevation, he might see where we needed to go. We climbed that mountain over there"—she points—"but when he tried to get a better vantage point, he slipped and twisted his ankle."

"Where is he now?"

"Back at camp." She waves. "Maybe a ten minute walk? We heard the barking, and I set off running. It went quiet, so I slowed down. Then the baby started crying." She exhales. "I know I freaked you out, appearing from nowhere, but I am so glad to see you."

"He twisted his ankle?" I ask.

"Not too badly. We were able to keep moving. But if there's a

settlement nearby, we could get medical attention, maybe map out a route to our pick-up spot."

Map out their route? If her husband is hurt, wouldn't they be looking for an exit strategy that doesn't involve walking on a sprained ankle?

I keep my expression impassive, as does Dalton. We'd encountered a badly injured hiker once in Rockton. Turned out they *were* actually injured . . . but *not* actually a hiker.

One of the reasons we chose this region is that hikers are exceptionally rare. Placer miners and hunters and trappers are a little more common, but that still means we're only likely to see signs of one a year. This isn't the middle of the Arctic, but it's not Banff National Park either. There are no trails, much less facilities.

I've been cool because I'm suspicious, but it's time to warm up, at least seem as if I buy her story.

"We're camping ourselves," I say, waving in a direction that does *not* lead to Haven's Rock. "Running trap lines before winter sets in. We were just out hiking for the day. We can certainly look at your husband's foot, though. We're both first-aid certified, with wilderness medical experience." The certified part is a lie, but living out here means we're fully prepared for both first aid and wilderness medical emergencies.

"We can help you find your way," Dalton says. "Got a compass we can spare. But we have a sat phone back at camp. Could call for a flight out."

"Oh, I hope it doesn't come to that. We're still hoping to make it up to the ridge and camp for a few days. Our friend said it was amazing."

"Ridge?" I say.

She points to a mountain maybe ten kilometers west. "On the south side of that. If we can make it there, Blake can get a few days of rest before we rendezvous with our pick up, maybe another twenty kilometers on. That's in a week, so we have plenty of time. The pick up is prearranged. We don't need to call anyone, thankfully."

We must look skeptical, because she says, “It really is just a twisted ankle. Not a break or a sprain. We still have our route plan. We just need directions so we can get back on track.”

A twisted ankle *is* a sprained ankle, but I don’t say that. It isn’t in our best interests to openly question this story any more than necessary.

“Wait here,” Dalton says, and starts walking in the other direction.

Her brows shoot up.

“He means give us a few minutes,” I say. “It’s getting late, and we need to discuss how we’re going to do this—whether I come along with the baby or go back to camp.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Take your time.”



DALTON LEADS me about five hundred feet down the narrow game trail we've been using as a path. Then he stands there, gazing back in the woman's direction and saying only one word.

"Fuck."

We're quiet for a few minutes, working it through. We don't like this scenario, and we know we'll be on the same page with that.

Is her story an obvious fabrication? No, but it waves red flags in every direction. Hiking past summer, and in an area where you'll be trail-blazing through rough terrain during hungry-bear season. A woman alone, her husband left behind, because we're liable to respond better to a woman in distress. Guy's injured, which will make him seem less of a threat. He's twisted his ankle, but they plan to keep moving even when we offered to arrange a pick up.

Here's the main reason we did not intend to have a baby right now. Because protecting Haven's Rock must be our main priority. A year ago, we wouldn't have walked away to discuss it. We'd have followed "Gretchen" with extreme caution because we need to deal with potential threats immediately.

But decent parents are not going to walk into danger with a

baby. Yet what's the alternative? Send me back to town with Rory? Haven's Rock is over an hour away. Also I'd never let Dalton face this alone.

We wouldn't have brought Rory if we expected trouble. But one does not expect to encounter hikers off-season in an area where we have never even seen a single hiker since we built the town.

"Thoughts?" Dalton says finally.

"I don't want you going with her. If it's trouble, Rory and I are the weak point. Her partner could circle back for an ambush."

"Agreed."

"My best suggestion would be that you stay here with Rory while Storm and I go with her."

"Don't like that."

"I know."

He exhales and stares off into the distance, crow's feet deepening around his eyes.

The woman had seemed surprised to see me. Had she mistaken Dalton for some kind of mountain man? I can't imagine that. My own first impression of him had been "cowboy," and that's still what he looks like, slightly taller than average, rangy, tanned white skin, weathered for thirty-six, light brown hair cut short with a close-trimmed beard.

My own looks lean a little more toward "environmentally conscious tourist." I'm half white, half Asian, just skimming five foot two, stronger than I look, with clothing choices that are a little more, er, high-end than Dalton's.

If the woman was surprised to see me, is that because I don't look like anyone she'd picture roughing it in the Yukon wilderness? That would add credence to her story—if she came here for Haven's Rock, she'd know who she was looking for. We're always on the alert for someone connected to Rockton tracking us down and causing trouble. However, being a town of refugees means we are even more concerned about someone coming for one of our

residents, and those people would not know who to expect running the town.

"What are the odds, you think?" I say.

"Twenty-five percent that it's legit," he says without hesitation. "Forty percent Rockton council spy, ten percent tracking down a resident, twenty-five percent unknown."

"Already worked it all through, huh?"

"Yep." He pauses. "No, I should reassess. Not twenty-five percent legit. More like ten percent, fifteen tops. The rest would be that they're looking for something other than Haven's Rock."

"Lilith or the mining camp." I shift my weight and Dalton immediately reaches for Rory, who is awake and quiet. I hand her over and stretch my shoulders. "I might put those odds a bit above that. If they're here for Haven's Rock, wouldn't they ask to come back with us?"

"Don't want to overplay their hand. That could be why she insists they'll be fine without an airlift."

"Waiting until we examine her husband, and then they'll agree that maybe he does need actual medical care. Back at our so-called camp."

Dalton only grunts, and when Rory fusses, he gives her his knuckle to chew. "I agree you should go on with Storm, and I should hang back with Rory. But I'll follow along, stay close enough to listen in."

"That would have been my suggestion."

"Can you help get Rory strapped to my back? I'd like both my hands free."

"Good idea."



IF THE WOMAN—GRETCHEN—is surprised that I'll be coming alone with Storm, she gives no sign of it. I also watch for her to signal to anyone nearby. She doesn't. Yes, there's part of me that feels guilty suspecting her, and if it turns out that she's just a hiker with

an injured spouse, I'm going to feel like a cold bitch for begrudgingly offering to help. But that doesn't mean I'd be less suspicious next time.

We have earned our paranoia, and I'll continue to embrace it, no matter how it might make me feel. Our residents deserve that paranoia. It's what they came for—to be someplace where those in charge are hypervigilant, putting their safety above all else.

Even above the safety of their own daughter? No. That's never going to happen, and Dalton and I have accepted that while our residents are our priority, we are not martyrs. No one who works in Haven's Rock is.

Dalton and I have our little family, and we have our wider family in Haven's Rock, from literal family—my sister—to friends who comprise our family of choice. They come first, along with our daughter.

As I walk, I try to relax as if I've lowered my guard. Gretchen is friendly and chatty—*very* chatty, and if her story is true, that would be the chattiness of relief at having found help. My responses land somewhere between polite and friendly, which is the territory where I live.

I act like someone who is happy enough to help but isn't tripping over herself to be sociable. Again, that's me.

I don't look back for Dalton, even surreptitiously. He'll have left the game trail to slip closer. Of course, with a teething baby, stealth might not be an option. He knows that. If Rory wails, he'll need to join me and say he changed his mind.

We go pretty much exactly as far as Gretchen said before I spot a man sitting on the ground. He's about her age, which fits the "college sweethearts" part of her story. He has brown skin, dark hair salted with silver and a beard. He's holding a hat between his hands, kneading it as if in boredom. Then he sees us and starts vaulting to his feet before stumbling a bit and wincing. An exaggerated stumble? An exaggerated wince? I can't be sure.

"Hello, there," he calls. "That must be the dog we heard. Wow. He's a big one. Newfoundland?"

I nod.

He gives a soft laugh. "Don't see many of those in the Yukon. Mostly husky crosses up here."

"True," I say. The north *is* full of various sled dogs and crosses, which could support their story of living in Whitehorse.

"This is my husband, Blake. Blake, this is—" Gretchen stops. "Oh, I didn't even get your name."

"Katie."

Blake thrusts out a hand. "Very happy to see you, Katie. I'm, uh, guessing you aren't out here alone? I thought I heard a baby."

"My husband took her back to camp. I have the first-aid kit, and I'm more experienced using it."

"Oh, you should have seen the baby," Gretchen says. "So cute. All that black hair. How old is she?"

"Almost six months."

Is my tone a little cool? I struggle to warm it, to respond like a normal proud mom, but every enthusiastic comment—the dog! the baby!—only has my hackles rising. It feels like being lured into a van with candy. What dog-and-baby mom can resist someone who flatters their darlings?

On the other hand, the problem might be the vibes I'm giving off. Coolly polite, maybe seeming as if they've interrupted my day with their emergency. The begrudging Samaritan. Faced with that, they might trip over themselves to be friendly. They're lost and injured, their navigation and communication gone. They need me, and if talking about my dog and baby helps, that's what they'll do.

"Katie's husband gave us a compass, too." Gretchen holds out the one Dalton handed her before he left with Rory. She pulls a notebook from her pocket. "And he fixed our trail map. Showed us where we are and pointed out a few errors, plus a shortcut. I told you we shouldn't have relied on Matt's memory."

"Let's take a look at that foot," I say, lowering myself to one knee.

He starts to take off his boot.

"I'll do that," I say. "Just relax and keep your weight off it. You twisted it in a fall?"

"Yeah," Blake says. "I was being stupid. Gretchen blames testosterone. I told myself if I could get out farther on this narrow ledge, I would absolutely see a landmark we needed. I couldn't see a damn thing more than I could back where Gretchen was. Then I stumbled and fell."

At least his story matches hers, with extra detail. As a former police detective, I know what to look for in corroborating stories. I also note that she's beside him, drinking from the canteen, where she can't sneak him body-language messages. His gaze is on me. She's relaxed and making no effort to interject or add to his story.

"How far did you fall?" I ask as I remove his boot.

"We were hundreds of feet up, but it was only about an eight-foot drop to the next ledge, which is why Gretchen didn't forbid me from trying for a better look. The problem was how I landed. At first, it seemed okay. The kind of thing you can just walk off. I popped a couple of painkillers, and we got down the mountain no problem. Then we decided to call it an early day, made lunch, and when I went to put on my boot again, it wouldn't fit."

I glance at the boot . . . which had been on his foot. "This boot?"

"We found a stream," Gretchen says. "Ice-cold water."

Blake nods. "I got the swelling down enough to pull on my boot. That's when we heard your pup here." He smiles and reaches to pat Storm, who tolerates it. "At first, we weren't sure what it was. That's one deep bark. I started worrying about bears."

"'Tis the season."

He makes a face. "I know. It's the wrong time of year to be hiking. But we're careful, and we have spray. We've never had a problem."

"Yes," his wife murmurs. "That's what everyone says before they have a problem with grizzlies. And once they do, it's the last problem they have."

"It's fine," Blake says firmly. "We haven't even *seen* a grizzly on this trip."

Gretchen's expression suggests she'd been nervous about a backcountry hike at this time of year. It's a dynamic I'm always grateful Dalton and I don't have—where one partner raises concerns and the other dismisses them as overreacting.

It's a common friction point, though. Suggesting they really are a couple?

My suspicion meter dips a little. Then I see Blake's ankle. There's a bit of swelling, but no more than you might see after a long day of hiking. I palpate the foot, and he jumps as if I've stabbed him.

"Tender?" I say, my tone neutral.

"Yeah."

I try pressing my fingers in, but he pulls from my grip.

"I was checking to make sure it isn't broken," I say.

"It's not."

"Blake, let her check please."

"It's not broken. I couldn't walk on it if it was."

"That's actually a common misconception," I say as I sit back on my haunches.

"Well, it's not broken. I can tell."

Huh. Interesting. Is he afraid I'll realize he's not actually hurt?

If their goal is to get into Haven's Rock, wouldn't they play it up?

*You're right. It does seem broken. I really should get to a doctor.*

"I would like to test it for usability," I say.

"It's fine," he says quickly.

"Blake . . ." Gretchen says.

I tense, ready for him to snap something at his wife, but he sighs and drops his head.

"I'm sorry, Katie," he says. "I know you're trying to help. I'm angry with myself, and I shouldn't be snapping at you."

Gretchen clears her throat, and he looks her way with a sheepish smile. "Or at you. Sorry, hon."

"Just let Katie do her thing, okay? You don't want to be a day's walk from here, passed out from pain."

He nods and allows me to run it through some basic usability tests. The problem with those is that they rely on self-reported pain. When he winces, is he faking it? When he doesn't react, is he suppressing it?

He'd jumped earlier when I was prodding his ankle, but now his reactions are much more muted, meaning I can't tell whether that means he's not injured or just trying to convince us he's fine enough to continue on their hike.

"May I wrap it?" I ask.

"Yes," Gretchen replies before Blake can answer. "Please."

I do that as I talk them through care. It's the basic RICE first-aid. Rest. Ice. Compression. Elevation. Compression means the bindings I put on, and I show them how to replace them and give Gretchen extras. Ice will need to mean cold streams. Elevation means raising it above his heart when he's sleeping. As for resting, since they already plan a couple of days off, I only agree that this is a good strategy.

"You have pain medication?" I ask.

"Ibuprofen," Gretchen. "It'll work on the swelling, too, right?"

"It will. But the meds and the ice are short-term measures. Even if it seems better when you get back to Whitehorse, see your doctor. Don't keep on with the ice and pills past that."

"We will."

Gretchen envelops me in a hug before I can duck it. I'm not sure I would have anyway. While I'm not really the hugging type, I know she's trying to show gratitude. I survive the hug, and Storm survives the petting. They ask if there are any good spots to camp nearby, and I direct them a little farther west, where they'll find a small meadow near a stream.

"Just check for berries," I say. "You don't want to pop your tent in the middle of a cranberry patch and have bears visit."

"We won't," Gretchen says with a smile, and I motion for Storm to set out back the way we came.



I MEET up with Dalton and fill him in as we walk back to Haven's Rock. We *are* going back, and we are aware of the risk of leading them there. But I'd stuck around long enough to see Gretchen and Blake move on, and Dalton and I walked the first twenty minutes in silence so we could listen for the sound of anyone following us. We hear nothing. Storm hears nothing. We're good. For now.

We can't lurk with a teething baby—Rory was sleeping, but now she's grumbling, ready to break into screams. Afternoon is passing into evening, and we can no longer expect sunshine until midnight. We need to get back and tell the others what we found.

Once we near town, we divert into the forest, taking a longer route on rough paths, just in case we've left too much of a trail.

Haven's Rock is bustling. Shifts are ending. People are heading to their quarters or out for dinner, and—to add confusion to the mix—the Roc doesn't seem open yet. With no prospects for a post-work cocktail hour, people mill about like automatons with their path blocked.

"What's up?" I say to one of the residents.

"Roc's closed."

"She can see that," a voice says. "She means why is it closed."

I turn as a tall woman with raked-back curls and dark brown skin walks up behind Dalton.

"Stealing your baby, Eric," she says. "Auntie Yolanda has missed her Rory time today. That was one hell of a hike you guys took."

"What's going on at the Roc?" I say. "Is Isabel okay?"

Isabel runs the Roc, as she did in Rockton. While she has help as our population grows, she's still not comfortable enough with her new staff to leave them in charge. Or maybe "comfort" isn't the right word, implying she doesn't trust them. Isabel just likes to be in control.

"Iz is fine," Yolanda says. "There's a sign on the door saying the Roc opens at seven today. You know what it's like. Everyone's so accustomed to our perfect clockwork of a town that they short-circuit when a gear breaks. I think it's a water issue. Kendra's on patrol, so they're waiting for her to get back and fix it."

I glance at Dalton, who only shakes his head. There is no water issue. Yolanda is saying that because people have shifted our way, trying to eavesdrop.

"Make way," Yolanda says as she heads for the Roc. "Teething baby coming through. She needs her whiskey gum rub."

"Uh, that's not actually done anymore," a nearby woman ventures.

"No, but it's a fine excuse to get me into the bar early."

The woman steps back, eyeing Yolanda uncertainly, as if her good mood is as suspicious as our hiking couple's story.

Yolanda's construction company built Haven's Rock, and then she decided to take a break from entrepreneurship to help us because that's the kind of woman she is, endlessly sweet and kind, like her grandmother, Émilie.

Yeah, no one who spends five minutes with Yolanda mistakes her for sweet or kind. She's here because she's fiercely loyal to Émilie. Initially she suspected we were conning an elderly billionaire. She knows better now—in the sense that she knows we're

just a bunch of bleeding-heart idealists who are liable to all die of misplaced altruism if she leaves.

As for the good mood . . .

"How was your day shadowing Will?" I ask.

"I survived. Had to keep kicking his ass to get him moving. You know what he's like. Heads out to do a task and stops to talk to five people on the way."

More like five people stop him to talk, and our deputy, Will Anders, shoulders the weight of being the sociable third of our law-enforcement trio. Everyone likes Anders. Including someone who is in a remarkably chipper mood after spending the day with him.

Yolanda shoves open the Roc front door like she's about to start a brawl.

"We're closed," someone snaps, and a woman appears from the dim interior. She's in her late forties, wearing a tailored blouse, hiking boots, and jeans that perfectly hug her curves. "Ah, the calvary has arrived. There's a toll for you, though, Ms. Yolanda." Isabel scoops Rory from Yolanda's arms. "There. Paid in full."

"Hey, that was mine."

"Actually mine," I say. "And if you fight over my child, I am taking her back."

Someone emerges from the shadows and takes Rory. "Problem solved. She's with her favorite uncle."

It's Anders. Big and brawny, with close-cropped curls and skin a shade darker than Yolanda's. He recently turned forty and has the kind of good looks that'll still turn heads at twice that age. Anders chucks Rory under the chin and, on cue, the baby smiles her biggest smile.

"Even babies fall for you," Yolanda mutters. "Unbelievable."

"They have excellent taste." Anders waves to us. "Come on in. Sit down. Have a drink. Well, you and I can have a drink, Eric. Casey's still on mocktails."

"I might actually pump and dump tonight," I say.

His brows shoot up. "Rough hike?"

"Mmm, weird and potentially concerning hike. But I'm guessing by the way Yolanda was talking about a water issue that something else has happened."

I look around and spot Phil behind the counter. Phil is Isabel's boyfriend and, unofficially, the town mayor, and the order in which I place those two roles says a lot about Haven's Rock. Or a lot about Isabel.

Phil is my age, white, handsome in a fussy, corporate way—even today, he's wearing a button-down shirt and the glasses that I won twenty bucks on when I bet Dalton they weren't prescription.

"Will, Isabel, and Phil all in one place," I murmur. "Not a town meeting if the Roc is closed. Not even a town emergency. Could be that something happened while the coffee bar was open here this afternoon, but then Brian or Devon would be here. So something happened in the interim. Or something was discovered . . ." I rock back on my heels. "Shit. Did we have another break-in?"

Anders claps me on the back with his free hand while he bounces Rory. "Took you a while, Detective. Still blaming baby brain?"

I shake my head. The last break-in at the Roc was five months ago and nothing was taken. My theory was that Carson snuck in looking for a stray beer, but wasn't about to actually break into the stockroom to steal one. We announced the so-called break-in, and no one tried again. So I wasn't exactly expecting a repeat months later.

"This time it wasn't the kid," Yolanda says. "I put a four-pack in their clubhouse. Only one was drank."

I wince. "You gave beer to a fourteen-year-old?"

"The light stuff. And I just dropped it off. Carson drank one but left the rest. A second one was opened, but then the cap was put back on—badly—after a few sips. I figure that was Max."

"The eleven-year-old. Great. Just great."

Yolanda chucks Rory under the chin. "See, this is why I will be your favorite auntie."

"This was an actual break-in." Phil walks over from behind the bar. "The last time was when the back door was left unlocked awaiting a supply run."

"And the stockroom? I presume that was their goal. Did they get in?"

"No, and I'm not sure it *was* their goal." Phil motions me to the bar. When I walk over, he points at the door leading into the stock and brewing room. "No sign of a forced entry attempt."

I examine the knob and lock, and then the door. "And the point of entry into the building itself?"

"The back door, which *was* forced open. Brian and Devon were gone, and Isabel and I hadn't arrived yet."

Anders calls over, "Back door's easy to break into."

"By design," Yolanda shoots back. "I was told that the main doors didn't require heavy security. What counted was the stockroom."

"Hey, I wasn't blaming you. I was pointing out that it's easy enough to get in the back. My guess is that they came in that way and then saw how hard it would be to get into the stockroom and left. They only had an hour max before Iz came to open up."

"But wouldn't they know that the stockroom is heavily secured?" Yolanda says as I walk to the back door. "Anyone can come into the Roc during business hours—even the kids. The stockroom is right there. They'd know they'd never break in with less than an hour, midday."

"That presumes someone thought this through," Anders says. "We have a few new residents. One could have an unreported alcohol dependency."

I examine the back door. "Someone desperate enough could have realized the Roc was temporarily empty and broken in with a crowbar, which we stock in the toolshed."

Anders nods. "They come to Haven's Rock, figuring they can hide their addiction, only to discover how tightly we regulate the alcohol."

I rise. "See, this is the kind of crime I like. No dead body. Not

even missing booze. A mental puzzle with no real consequences." I look at Dalton. "Hey, boss, mind if I investigate this one? You can handle the hikers, right?"

He only shakes his head. He's been quiet during all this, as he sits at the bar. Quiet because he doesn't really give a damn about a theft-free break-in at the Roc. Not when we have . . .

"Hikers?" Anders says. "You saw someone out there?"

I tell the story. By the time I'm done, Isabel has served drinks to everyone—including me—but only Yolanda and Dalton have touched theirs.

"My money is on a Rockton council spy mission," Anders says. "They've tried restarting Rockton and, from what Émilie says, it's struggling. They've already reached out to her."

Yolanda raises her hands. "They've reached out to Gran to see what you guys are all up to. They suspect you've started your own version, but they don't know it's in the Yukon again."

"Logically, though, the Yukon is the safe bet," Phil says as he fingers his beer glass.

At one time, he'd been the council's liaison with Rockton, working in a cushy office with the very uncushy job of conveying the council's word from on high, which was usually "Whatever you are doing in that town, stop it." Then he'd been exiled to Rockton himself, where he'd put in his time, waiting to be brought home.

Phil could have gone home when Rockton closed. He also could have taken his big "retirement" package and started a new career. So why is he here? The woman standing beside him. He's even stopped insisting he's only helping until we're up and running. That's another twenty bucks Dalton owes me. If Isabel isn't leaving, Phil isn't leaving, and Isabel is never leaving.

Phil continues, "If I were still working for them, I would have said to start searching right around here. That's why I argued for settling further afield. This is where you're accustomed to being—with the landscape and the climate. You also have ties in the area. Eric's brother and his wife. Sebastian's girl-

friend. Even Jen and Tyrone Cypher. Ideally, you would want to be within a day or two's hike from all of that. Which is exactly where you are."

Yolanda shrugs. "But if the council wanted you back—specifically Eric, I presume—they could just keep hassling my grandmother until she agreed to let you tell them to fuck off yourself. They're not going to track you down here for that meeting."

"No," Anders says. "They'd track us down to sabotage us so Eric has no choice but to join their venture—or let them take over here."

She sighs. "You know you're all a bunch of paranoid freaks, right? I mean, I love you for it, but that's what you need me for. To tell you that you're seeing bogeymen in shadows."

"We probably are," I say. "But we didn't come back to discuss the possibility of murdering two potential council spies in their tent. We need to decide how hard we want to lock down."

"Completely." To my surprise, that comes not from Anders or Phil, but from Isabel. "A complete lockdown with full patrols until we are certain these alleged hikers are gone. I presume you and Eric will be heading out in the morning to check on them?"

"We will. We'll take Storm for tracking. Without Rory, she won't bark. We'll find their campsite—I suggested a spot—and make sure they stayed there and then moved on in the correct direction."

I look around at the others. "Anyone think it's not enough?" I glance at Yolanda. "Notice I don't ask if anyone thinks it's too much."

"I actually don't," Yolanda says. "While I'm certain you're all panicking over two innocent hikers, at worst, we can consider it a lockdown drill." She points to my beer. "Now drink up."

"Actually, no." I push it aside. "Any chance of getting one of your fancy mocktails, Iz? If we're going to be away from Rory all day tomorrow, I need to pump and *not* dump."

Isabel takes my beer and pulls out a glass as Yolanda pats my back. "Sorry, Case. If it's any consolation, we're all very happy for

your sacrifice. We get a baby, and you get the enforced sobriety, sore boobs, sleepless nights . . .”

“Oh, just wait until we drop her off at dawn tomorrow. Don’t forget, she’s teething.”

Anders peers at me and then Dalton. “So are there really hikers in the woods? Or are you guys just saying that to get another day off . . . this time leaving the baby behind?”

“Well, you’re about to find out, since you’ll be joining us tomorrow. Go home and get some sleep. We’ll take the evening shift. It’ll be a very early start. Ideally, we’d like to get there before they break camp—so we can watch them leave.”