

Prologue

The longer Penny works on building this strange little town, the more obvious it becomes that the company is lying. Lying about everything. They say this tiny community deep in the Alaskan forest, is owned by a private firm conducting climate and environmental research. It's both valuable and potentially controversial, given the political divide over climate change.

The owners want to conduct this potentially very lucrative research unhindered, and they were willing to pay a small fortune for the construction crew's discretion. Every member of the crew had been hand-selected from across North America. They'd signed ironclad NDAs and been provided a "working on an oil rig" cover story for family and friends. All electronic devices had been confiscated at the airport. They'd been flown out in a private plane with darkened windows.

The others didn't care what the reason was. Research, climatology, environmental engineering, it was all so deathly dull. As far as they were concerned, any company willing to pay a year's wages for a quarter's work could insist the crew work wearing clown noses.

While Penny had accepted the story herself, there was a reason she'd grown up in a bedroom filled with cats. It was her mother's joke—and a not-so-subtle reminder. *Curiosity kills the cat, Penny. Be a little less curious, and you'll live a lot longer.*

That was like telling Penny to breathe less air. She thrived on mysteries and puzzles, especially when it came to houses. Yes, most people don't think of "houses" as puzzles, but that's because they aren't architects. A new client comes to you, eyes glittering with the dream of their perfect home, and you need to make it a reality, even when everyone has told them that their vision won't work. Penny's specialty is making it work.

That's why she's here—to take this company's dream and make it a reality. They wanted to minimize their town's footprint while maximizing both function and comfort. The last part sold her. This wasn't a firm trying to stuff worker bees into the smallest hive possible. While they did need to be small—to keep others from investigating—they didn't want to sacrifice livability. That made them good people, right? At least decent as far as corporations went.

The budget ignited the first whisper of doubt. Not that they were asking her to cut corners. She expected that, and she expected to discover that their insistence on “maximum livability” was mostly advertising for the scientist and technicians who'd live here. No, the problem was that they *didn't* amend her plans, even when she warned it'd take the project over budget.

She'd run a test asking for something ridiculous. If they'd agreed, that would mean they were fleecing investors with a fake project, which would be disappointing but none of her business. Instead, they balked at the overage and asked her to scale it back.

Something was going on, and after nearly twenty years in the business, she thought she knew all the scams and tricks, and she couldn't figure this one out, which had her cat whiskers tingling.

She'd started sneaking into places she shouldn't be. Listening to conversations she wasn't supposed to hear. And all she caught were tidbits that made her more suspicious without answering any of her questions. For a curious kitty, that was catnip.

Penny had just finished eavesdropping on a conversation when the participants stormed off. That happened a lot between these two: Bruno, the engineer, and Yolanda, the contractor. Yolanda was trying to keep things on schedule, while Bruno kept finding issues that needed to be addressed. Tonight's argument had been different.

When it broke up with both participants storming off, Penny was left musing in her hiding spot, idly watching Yolanda stalk across the jobsite. Now Yolanda stops, peers into the gathering dark, and then slips into the forest.

That gets Penny's attention. They aren't allowed into the forest. That's been made *very* clear. It's dangerous and untamed Alaskan wilderness, filled with grizzlies and wolves and killers. Okay, no one said "killers" but they all know Alaska is where serial killers run when they need to escape the police.

The person who enforces the "no forest" rule, with strict penalties? The same person who is going in there now.

Penny jogs to a building on the edge of town, ducks into the shadow of it, and peers around the corner. When Yolanda turns to peer back, Penny's heart stops, but after a slow and careful look around, Yolanda disappears into the forest.

Penny counts to five and then takes off in pursuit. She tracks the whisper of branches brushing Yolanda's nylon jacket, the crack of a twig under her work boots, the sudden explosion of a startled bird taking flight. Penny has never been what anyone would call outdoorsy—she once rolled in poison ivy to get sent home from summer camp—but she's pleased with herself here, picking up those sounds and tracking Yolanda without getting close enough to be caught.

Admittedly, Yolanda is on a path—one hacked out for the approved "group walks"—so it's easy enough to follow her. And it's also easy for Penny to keep on that path and let her mind wander and fail to realize that the sounds up ahead stopped a while ago.

When Penny finally does notice it, she stops to listen . . . and realizes just how silent it is out here. Not just silent either. It's dark.

She peers around the gloom and shadows. It'd been dusk when she set out. Yes, noticing

that, she'd realized she should have grabbed a flashlight, but her eyes had adjusted easily enough, and it wasn't as if it was fully dark.

Now it is fully dark.

How is that possible? She left the town just a few moments ago, right? Well, no, it's been more than a few moments. Once she'd realized Yolanda was following a path, she'd focused on piecing together the bits and pieces she'd accumulated in her quest to solve the town's mystery.

So how long has she been gone?

And when did she stop hearing Yolanda?

It is at that moment that Penny realizes her mother was right. Curiosity is dangerous, and not just when it leads her to listen in on private conversation. It's even more dangerous when it leads her into the goddamn Alaskan wilderness, at night, with no flashlight and no weapon sharper than the mechanical pencil in her back pocket.

She takes a deep breath. There's moonlight, and she can see the path well enough. She just needs to follow it back to town.

She gets about five paces before the moon disappears behind cloud cover. Penny blinks to clear her vision and continues walking, feeling her way, trees close enough to touch on either side, pressing on—

Her foot sinks in snow, and she pulls back. There were no snowy patches along the path. She'd have noticed that. There *is* still snow here and there, in dark crevices, but she definitely hadn't stepped in any. Therefore, she is no longer on the path.

She bends and squints at the ground, only to see a half dozen large canine prints in the large patch of snow.

Wolves.

She backs up fast and tries to retreat to the path, but she gets turned around and ends up back at the snowy patch. Or is this *another* snowy patch? With *more_wolf_prints*?

Deep breaths as she calms her racing heart. She's fine. She can't be more than a half mile from town. She just needs to find—

There! She spots a clear path through the undergrowth and sets out on it, walking resolutely back to town. She's fine, just fine. A bit of an adventure, that's all.

When her watch says thirty minutes have passed, she starts peering ahead for signs of the town. Then she remembers she's not going to see any at this hour. There are strict light rules past sundown. You can use a penlight to get from building to building, but indoor lights are only allowed if the blackout blinds are drawn.

She keeps going. Ten minutes pass. Then twenty.

Did she miss the town? No, the path goes straight to it.

Is this definitely the path?

It has to be, doesn't it?

She looks around. The path does seem narrower than she remembered, with branches poking her as she walks. But it has to be the one. She just isn't there yet.

Penny takes ten more steps. Then something crackles behind her. She wheels to see a figure stepping onto the path, a dark shadow against the night.

"Thank God," she says with a small laugh. "I thought I heard something in here, and I was only going to take a peek, and I wandered off the path."

The figure doesn't move.

"I went farther than I thought," she says. "Can I head back with you?"

The figure snorts, and it's an odd noise, one that has her squinting. The shadow moves,

and she catches sight of flicking animal ears . . . two feet above her own head.

Penny falls back with a yelp. Her foot catches on a root and twists, and then she's falling for real, the ground flying up as she crashes onto her back.

I am dead.

That's all she can think. A grizzly found her, and now she's dead.

The creature snorts again, and she looks up as the moon peeks out just enough for her to see the animal. It's not on two legs. It's on four. Four impossibly long legs, like a giraffe's. The head looks like a horse's. Then she catches sight of massive thick antlers.

Moose.

A memory flashes. A magazine photo of a majestic moose grazing in a twilit bog. That's the one animal she wanted to see up here. A moose. Now she is seeing one, and holy shit, she had no idea how big it would be.

If she'd spotted it through a car window, she'd have gazed in wonder and awe. Seeing it standing a few feet from her—while she's flat on her back—is nothing short of terrifying. It might not be a grizzly, but one wrong move, one moment of fear and panic, and those massive hooves will trample her to a pulp.

Penny slides backward as she rises. The moose only watches. She keeps backing up. When it snorts and shakes its antlers, she turns and runs. Runs blindly, even as an inner voice screams that she's overreacting, it's a moose for god's sake. A giant *deer*.

She doesn't care. She runs until she is certain it's not charging after her. Then she stops to catch her breath, looks around, and realizes she's left the path far behind.

Penny squares her shoulders and heads back the way she came. Back toward the path. But after a few strides, she hits a solid wall of trees. This isn't the way she came.

She's lost. She's completely—

Calm down. Look around. Get your bearings.

The moon has slid free of its cloud cover. Use that as her guide. Where was the moon before? Uh, overhead?

Wait, there's moss on the trees. That only grows on the south side, right? Or is it the north? Is that even true? She vaguely recalls some online trivia saying it wasn't.

Breathe deeply. Gather her thoughts. There has to be something she remembers seeing. Mountains. Of course. There are mountains to the west of the town, which makes the sun set earlier than it usually does, but leaves spectacular sunsets that had her itching for her camera.

She looks up . . . and sees trees. Pines rocket into the night sky and block any mountains she might see behind them.

All right, but she can see the mountains from the jobsite, which means she needs to get to a clearing. Pick a direction and start walking.

She does that, and twenty minutes later, she's blind again, the moon disappearing. She's walking with her hands in front of her face while she tells herself everything's fine. It's getting too dark for predators, right? And while it's hardly the warm spring evening she'd be enjoying at home, Alaska in May isn't nearly as cold as she expected. She's warm enough in her jacket and boots and gloves. Worst case, she'll need to hunker down until morning and then find her way back.

When she hears a noise to her left, she veers right and starts to jog, hands out in front of her face. Then she stops. It sounds like water. The burble of a stream.

Where there's a stream, there could be a clearing, right? Also, where there's a stream, there is eventually a lake, and there's one right beside the town, which means she could follow

the stream back.

She picks her way in that direction. It's slow going as the trees get thicker. Then she stops as she catches an odd metallic sound. A faint tinkling, as if the water is running over something metal. That's a definite sign of civilization.

She moves faster as the clouds thin, allowing a filtering of moonlight. Too fast, too confident, and when her foot hits a taut wire, she pitches onto her hands and knees. A trap. She's been snared in a trap.

She flips over fast, and there's a crack and a snap, and a billowing sheet drops onto her. Penny flails, struggling to get out from under the sheet that dropped over her. Her hands touch clammy fabric. She yanks it off and finds herself looking down at a canvas tent. She tripped over a guyline and brought the whole tent down.

She goes still, listening. If there is a tent here, there is a person here. Every story about serial killers in the Alaskan wilderness slams back. She carefully extricates her feet from the guyline. Then she rises, peering around. The clouds have passed enough for her to see that she's in the middle of a campsite.

A hidden campsite.

As soon as she thinks that, she wants to dismiss it as fear and paranoia. But as she looks around, she realizes it's more than that. She just left a town that's being specially constructed to disappear into the landscape. Someone has also tried to hide this camp. That's why she didn't see it until she literally tripped over it.

The tent is dun brown with splotches of green for camouflage. There's a box that must hold supplies, and it's painted the same colors.

She peers around again and then makes her way to the box. It's locked, but someone has

forgotten to fasten the lock. She bends and twists it open, and the squeak of the metal almost—but not quite—drowns out the crackle of dead leaves behind her.

Penny spins, arms going up to protect herself. When she sees who it is, she lowers her hands.

“You,” she says. “What the hell are you—?”

A burst of pain, exploding through her skull. And then . . . nothing.

Chapter One

I'm pressed against the glass of an airplane window, looking for a dream come true, and I'm absolutely terrified. I don't have dreams. Ambitions, yes. Plans, certainly. Get a degree. Go to police college. Become a detective. Get on the homicide squad. Very practical aspirations, devoid of people or places. Get a dog? Have a circle of good friends? Fall in love? Move into the countryside? Nope. I excised all that from my life plans at eighteen, when I took a gun to confront a guy who put me in the hospital, and I pulled the trigger, and I spent the rest of my life waiting to be caught for it. I didn't dare live a life where others might get hurt. Where *I* might get hurt, when the inevitable end came. I couldn't afford dreams.

Now I have one. I have so damn *much* these days that it scares the life out of me. Good friends. A husband. A life focus. Even a dog. All of that swirls together around the nexus of a place that has been born from my idea, shaped by our shared dream, now taking form in the Yukon wilderness. Taking form somewhere below me.

Haven's Rock.

I shouldn't be able to see it from here. If I can, then it's not hidden, and we've paid a lot of money for nothing. That doesn't keep me from peering into the endless forest, straining for a glimpse of a roof, a glitter of metal, something that doesn't quite fit in this vast forest.

"See it yet?" drawls a voice through my headset.

I glance over at Dalton sitting beside me. One leg bounces, his fingers tapping against it, and I have to smile at that. My husband is used to being in the pilot's seat, and that leg has been bouncing since we boarded the plane in Dawson City.

“Just give me the damn coordinates,” he’d said when Yolanda said someone would fly us out. She’d refused, and I saw the power play there. The latest in a series of them. This will be our town when it’s finished. Until then, it’s hers, and we’d better damn well get used to that.

“One more month,” I say over our private channel. “Then construction will be done, and we can say thank you very much and put her on a plane.” I catch his expression. “All right. *I’ll* say thank you very much, and *you* can put her on a plane.”

That makes him snort. Our dog, Storm, lifts her huge, black Newfoundland head, and Dalton gives her a pat as he leans over to look out my window, hand going to my knee.

His gray eyes squint. Then he says, “Right there,” and points.

I peer out the window and see nothing but trees and lakes and mountains—in other words, I see the Yukon. He directs my attention, but I shake my head. There’s nothing there. Just one of hundreds of small lakes and the endless green of the boreal forest.

When the plane veers in the direction he’s pointing, I say, “No way. I don’t see . . .”

And then I do. We’ve flown low enough that I can make out the buildings. Or what I know are buildings, though the structural camouflage makes it look like a rocky clearing. A little lower, and my breath catches.

Dalton’s hand tightens on my leg. “Just like you imagined it?”

I bite back the urge to say “like *we* imagined it.” It’s my nature to deflect when attention turns my way. I’m not shy—it’s just how I was raised. Share credit; accept blame. But when Dalton tenses, waiting for me to correct him, I smile and say, “It’s perfect, isn’t it?”

He brushes a kiss over my cheek. Haven’s Rock was my idea first, but it was *our* dream, and now I see it unfolding below, and my chest clenches so hard I have to fight to draw breath.

I throw my arms around Dalton’s neck. There’s a moment of surprise. Again, this is one

hundred percent *not* Casey Butler behavior. But after that spark of shock, he hugs me back and whispers in my ear, “We did it.”

I hug him tighter. “We did.”

Haven’s Rock. The town may be new, but its roots go down into the permafrost. Even the name is significant. Rock for Rockton, the town where I went to work as a detective four years ago and met a hard-assed sheriff and fell in love—with him and the town and the Yukon itself. Rock for stability, too, a bedrock foundation, the thing we lacked in Rockton.

And Haven? Well, that’s the most important part. Haven’s Rock is a sanctuary for those in need. It’s a place to hide when the law isn’t enough to protect you from persecution for your beliefs or lifestyle, or from a stalker or abusive partner. Rockton was supposed to be that, and it was for some, but for the owners, it was a purely financial investment. This will be different. This time, we’re in charge.

The plane lands, and Dalton’s still opening the door when a woman strides into the hangar. Yolanda. We’ve never met, but I know her cousin, Petra, and her grandmother, Émilie, and there is enough of them in her that I know her on sight. She’s taller than her cousin and grandmother, with dark curls and skin a couple of shades darker than mine, but her expression is one I know well—it’s Émilie or Petra on a mission and ready to do battle.

Great. We aren’t even out of the plane yet, and we’re already the enemy, even after dropping everything and flying a thousand kilometers to help her.

Dalton climbs out as I snap a leash on Storm. The dog sighs at that, jowls quivering, and thumps her bulk back onto the floor of the plane.

I laugh under my breath. “Yes, it’s a leash. Don’t worry, we’re not in a city.”

When we take her to Dawson City or Whitehorse, she only needs her leash in a few

places. To her, a leash means a big city, like Vancouver, which she likes as little as Dalton does.

“Sheriff Eric Dalton,” Yolanda says outside.

I turn to peer through the open door. She’s striding toward him, her expression a little smug, as if she’s pleased that Dalton is nothing more than the cowboy she imagined. A modern-day Wild West sheriff, complete with boots and faded jeans and flannel shirt and even a Western-style brimmed hat. He has the rangy build, the steel-gray eyes, and the gun at his side. Tanned white skin and close-cropped dark blond hair complete the look. If there’s anything she might not expect, it’s his age, and he’s actually younger than she probably thinks—three days of beard scruff masks smooth skin, and he has crow’s feet on his eyes, from squinting into the sun. He’s thirty-four, a year younger than me and about ten years younger than Yolanda.

They shake hands as I bring Storm out the door. Yolanda’s gaze goes straight to the dog, with a frown of puzzlement. When it rises to me, that expression doesn’t change.

Dalton might have been what she expected. Evidently, I am not. It could be that my name led her to expect someone whiter. It could be that my job title led her to expect someone more physically intimidating. I’m neither. I’m a slightly built, five-foot-two woman who takes after her Asian mother more than her Scottish father.

“Casey Butler,” I say as I walk over with my hand out.

“What’s with the dog?” she says.

My brows rise. *Good to meet you, too.*

I don’t say that. I’m the good cop in this relationship—the reasonable one that everyone prefers to talk to. Everyone who doesn’t know us well, that is. Dalton and I have learned the benefits of this particular game, and so I bite back anything even mildly sarcastic and only smile.

“This is Storm,” I say.

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s our dog.”

“I see that.”

Dalton’s jaw flexes. “She’s our dog,” he says, in a tone that tells her nothing else should need to be said.

Our dog. Our town. Yes, her grandmother invested in Haven’s Rock, but the majority of the money came from my inheritance and my sister’s, and even that is none of her business. Yolanda was hired to oversee construction of our town. We can bring in an elephant if we want.

So far, I’ve been calm, even conciliatory, in recognition of the fact that Yolanda is a damn fine builder, even if, like so many experts, she’s a pain in the ass. I guess, if you’re at the top of your game, you have that luxury and the confidence to use it, and I completely respect that . . . it just doesn’t make her any *less* of a pain in the ass.

We’d expected to be up here, helping build our town and getting a sense of this corner of the wilderness as we did. Yolanda vetoed that. If we wanted her, we had to stay away. She wouldn’t work with the “homeowners” peering over her shoulder.

“I have two missing crew members,” she says. “I called you in to find them. This isn’t a site visit.”

Dalton points at Storm’s nose. When Yolanda narrows her eyes, he says, “The dog is here for that thing on the end of her snout.”

“Her nose?”

“Yep.”

“She’s a tracking dog,” I say.

Yolanda’s look says this is a very fine excuse. We don’t argue, because she’s fifty

percent right. Newfoundlands are water-rescue dogs. Dalton used the tracking-dog justification as an excuse for buying me my dream breed and pretending it was a practical choice.

“May we go into town and talk?” I ask.

“No.”

My head jerks up. “Excuse me?”

“I said ‘no,’ because once you’re in town, you’re going to want to look around, and I need my people back.”

Dalton’s jaw tenses, and his gaze shifts my way, lobbing this grenade in my direction.

“While we are certainly interested in seeing the town you built for us,” I say, trying hard not to emphasize those last four words, “the missing people are our priority, and we’re quite capable of focusing on that.”

“Not being easily distracted children,” Dalton mutters.

Yolanda turns to him. “You built a town in the middle of the Yukon wilderness for people in need of sanctuary, and you’re convinced it’ll work out, despite it failing spectacularly the last time.”

“Rockton didn’t fail,” I say, as evenly as I can manage. “It saved hundreds, thousands even. Which you well know, being the descendant of some of the people it saved. Your grandparents believed in it enough to devote themselves to keeping it alive for as long as possible.”

“And all it got them was heartache and disappointment. No, you aren’t children. You’re something worse. You’re idealists.” She waves away any protest. “Which is none of my business. It’s your money and Gran’s. My concern is my missing people, and I need you out there now, looking for them.”

I glance at Dalton. His expression is dark, but he says nothing. My call.

“I’ll need scent markers,” I say. “Recently worn clothing for both your architect and your engineer.”

“I’ll bring it.”

“Once we find your missing people, we will do a site visit. Then we’re staying.”

“We’re not—”

“Ready for that? We accept that our home may not be ready, and we’ve brought supplies to avoid using yours. We need to stay and get things ready, since we apparently have residents moving in next month, a year ahead of schedule.”

Yolanda grumbles under her breath. For once, those grumbles aren’t directed at us. They’re for her grandmother, the one pushing the timeline forward. She’s found people in urgent need and convinced us to open our doors right away, rather than living in the town for a year on our own, as planned.

“We’re staying,” I say. “After we find your missing crew members.”

Dalton mutters, “Who failed to obey the first fucking rule of this town.”

“Rules one through three, I think,” I say to Dalton. “Stay out of the forest. Stay out of the damn forest. Goddamn it, what part of ‘stay out of the forest’ did you not understand?”

Yolanda stares as if we’re speaking a foreign language. We are, in a way, though it’s one anyone who spent a week in Rockton would have understood.

Finally, she says, “I did not fail to impart that rule. Imparted it, reinforced it, and *enforced* it. But short of an electric fence, you can’t keep people from sneaking out.”

“Electric fences don’t work either,” Dalton drawls. “We tried that. Course, they probably work better if you have electricity.”

I snort a laugh. Yolanda doesn't crack a smile.

"We know exactly how hard it is to keep people in," I say. "Especially if they're the outdoorsy type, surrounded by the fabled wilderness of the north. So tell us a bit more about who we're looking for. Your engineer and architect. A man and a woman who went missing at night. The obvious answer is that they were hooking up. Any sense of that?"

"I would have no idea," she says. "My crew's social lives are their own."

"All right," I say. "Then I'm going to need to talk to someone who actually knew them. There are a dozen possible scenarios here, and knowing which is most likely will help us find them."

"How? You're tracking them. You don't need to know *why* they're out there."

"It helps if we do," I say calmly. "Tracking isn't a perfect science. Storm will do her job, and Eric will do his, but there will be times when they lose the trail, and we need to make a guess. Being able to making an *educated* guess will help."

I brace for an argument, but she nods. "Understood. All right then. We have two missing people. One is Penny, the architect. Early forties. Single. Sexual orientation unknown, as you were asking about a possible entanglement. She's never shown any interest in the forest or in Bruno, who is my foreman, and the other missing person. Late forties. Married to a woman."

"Has anyone mentioned seeing them together in a social setting?"

She pauses long enough that I add, "I know people are here to work, and they're being paid extra to work long hours, but I'm presuming there's still some social scene, even if it's only hanging out around a campfire with beers and marshmallows."

"I wouldn't know."

I glance at Dalton and then say, "I'm not asking whether you've noticed who participates

in social gatherings. I'm just wondering whether there's someone I can speak to about them."

"I presume there are social gatherings, but when my workday finishes, I'm in my office, working some more."

In other words, she'd hesitated because she's honestly not sure how her crew socializes, much less who hangs out with whom.

"Did Penny and Bruno seem to get along in a professional sense?" I ask.

"As well as can be expected for an architect and engineer."

Dalton rocks, a subtle show of frustration, and she says, "The architect has the vision and the engineer has to make it work. There is always conflict, but it was minimal, as far as I know."

"Have either of them been known to go into the forest for any reason?" I ask.

"Bruno joined the guided walks that you two suggested. I allowed them, recognizing that while they're an inconvenience, they might cut down on people wandering off on their own."

"And Penny?"

"She never joined them. Before you arrived, I asked the young woman in charge of the walks. I also reviewed our initial interviews." She's relaxing now, on familiar ground. "Bruno mentioned he'd love to work in Alaska again—we've told them it's Alaska, not the Yukon. He'd worked in the north before and enjoyed it. Penny said nothing about the environment. The setting seemed inconsequential to her."

"Two last questions before we take off. Was there any evidence they took anything with them? Clothing or other equipment?"

"I had people check their lockers as soon as they were reported missing. All clothing is accounted for except for what they would have been wearing. Each crew member was issued a high-powered penlight and a utility tool with a knife. Penny's are in her bunk. Bruno's are not.

However, I have seen Bruno carrying his on the job.”

“Meaning if they’re missing, that doesn’t necessarily mean he prepped for a trip into the forest. Penny definitely didn’t, which brings me to the final question. Is there any evidence that either of them was taken by force?”

Yolanda shakes her head. “No. Both their beds show no signs of being slept in. Several people saw Penny earlier in the evening. The last person to see Bruno seems to have been me. We were discussing the schedule, and we parted at around nine. No one reports seeing him after that.”

I’d rather ask around myself. I’d also rather get a look at their sleeping quarters myself. But we have a trail that’s growing cold, and if I’m being truly honest, even my focus might waver once I see our new town.

“All right,” I say. “If you can bring those scent markers, we’ll set out.”

Chapter Two

As we're heading out of town, I spot a small house nestled in the forest, and my breath catches.

"Is that our—?" I cut myself off and wrench my gaze away, as if I've caught a glimpse of my presents before Christmas morning.

Dalton leans to my ear without breaking his stride. "I think it is. Do you want to take a peek?"

I glare up at him, and he laughs, easing back into himself now that Yolanda is gone and he can drop the steel-eyed sheriff act. He throws his arm around my shoulders.

"I could take a peek and report back," he says. "Since you're the detective assigned to the case."

"We're tracking . . . and you're the tracker."

"You have Storm. Don't worry. I'll catch up in a few hours. Just give me time to check our new home, sneak into town and explore, maybe—"

I poke him in the ribs, hard enough to make him yelp.

"You deserved that," I say.

"Just trying to be helpful."

"You know what would be really helpful? Picking up the damn trail and finding these two before they become bear chow."

"Nah, wrong time of year for that. Grizzlies have been out of hibernation long enough not to be starving, and it's too far from autumn for the old ones to get desperate. While we could be getting some sows with cubs, the biggest danger these two are going to face is their own

foolishness.”

“By which you mean ‘lack of wilderness survival skills.’ ”

I get a hard look for that, which I accept. Dalton might have little patience for fools, but he understands the difference between being careless and being clueless, and he excuses the latter as a lack of opportunity. He really does mean foolishness—the issues that come when people *think* they know what to do in the forest, because they read survival tips in an online article once.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s hope they didn’t do anything *too* foolish.”

“They went into the Yukon wilderness at night. That suggests we’re starting at foolish, and just hoping we don’t work our way down.”

I shake my head and lift two bags, each containing a sample of clothing. “Let’s give Storm a sniff of these and then we’ll circle the perimeter and try to figure out where they went into the forest.”

Dalton points down. I frown at him.

He gestures at the faint trail we’ve been following. “They went this way. At least one of them did.”

“Someone went this way,” I say. “Multiple someones, it seems. They’ve been using this when they need to go into the forest.”

“Yep. And someone used it last night.”

I look along the path. Like a game trail, it’s lightly trodden, with the undergrowth parted, leading the way deeper into the forest.

I glance down at the ground. Shoe prints and boot marks, mostly scuffs, from multiple treads.

“Nope,” he says. “The ground’s been dry for days, so those don’t mean anything except that it’s been used.”

I peer at broken twigs.

“Nope,” he says. “Those are old breaks, at least a week ago.”

“So how can you tell the trail was used last night? By one of our targets?”

“Lucky guess?”

I shake my head and open the back with one of Penny’s shirts. Storm takes a good sniff, and then lowers her head to the ground and looks back up at me.

“Seems I’m a good guesser,” he says.

When I narrow my eyes, he says, “You want a clue?”

“What’s it going to cost me?”

“The temporary irritation of realizing, as the detective in this duo, you should have figured it out yourself.”

I ignore him and take out the second piece of clothing—the shirt belonging to Bruno. Storm sniffs it, and this time, she gives the trail a harder sniff, walking along it and then back to me before lying down, which means she doesn’t smell Bruno on this particular trail.

“Huh,” Dalton says. “That’s not what I expected.”

I understand then that he was making an educated guess when he said they took this trail . . . because there aren’t going to be many trails from Haven’s Rock into the forest. This isn’t Rockton, where we organized hunting and fishing and logging trips as well as recreational hikes. These people are here to work and work fast. Everything they need has been flown in. Except for those hikes, they have no reason to enter the forest. They’ll have carved out this one trail, and anyone who ventures in will use it, knowing that otherwise they take the very real risk of getting

lost.

I peer around. It's thick woods and brush here. That's part of the reason we chose the building site—it's in part of the forest that won't attract visitors. The Yukon might be a popular tourist spot, but it's hardly the Appalachian Trail. In over fifty years, no more than a dozen people—hunters and miners mostly—stumbled onto Rockton.

If Bruno went off-path, he had to either follow a creek or chop his way through.

“Your call,” Dalton says.

Do we follow Penny's trail or go back and find Bruno's? I weigh the options. Two people went missing on the same night. It's unlikely these two trips *aren't* connected.

The obvious answer is a romantic liaison. The uglier answer is a stalking situation—or a luring one. Another possibility is that they were meeting for a non-romantic purpose, maybe a job-related discussion they didn't want others overhearing.

All that boils down to one thing: it is almost certain that they went into the forest for a shared purpose. Even if Bruno's trail isn't here, he would have met up with Penny.

“We'll track Penny,” I say.

Before I came to the Yukon, I presumed one section of forest was the same as another. Oh, I knew there were different types of forest—though in my vocabulary, that'd have been “evergreen, hardwood, and jungle.” But if you were in the same geographic zone, unless you had specific landmarks—like lakes or mountains—it'd all look alike. Even with those landmarks, well, a lake is a lake, and a mountain is a mountain.

I came to understand that areas of forest are like urban neighborhoods. If you aren't from

the city, they all look like endless rows of houses. Even if you are, one neighborhood built in the same era looks like the next. But *your* neighborhood is always different. Your neighborhood is unique. There's the fire hydrant you tripped over as a kid and needed three stitches. There's that house with the garden gnomes that always gives out full-size chocolate bars at Halloween. There's the perfect climbing tree in the Millers' backyard—just don't get caught on their property. Dozens of markers and memories that make that neighborhood yours, and when you move, you need to start the process over as you're plunked down in a neighborhood that looks like all those other soulless replicas.

The forest in the same. I knew Rockton's forest, in a way that I don't think I realized until I left it. I knew the trails Storm liked best. The trails where my horse—Cricket—could break into a gallop. The trails with just the right hills for my dirt bike to launch airborne. I knew the best spots to hunt or fish or gather, and I could find them without trails. The tree where Dalton first kissed me. The cave systems I'd crawl through with our deputy, Will Anders. The places where people I cared about laughed and lived. The places where people I cared about had died. And the places where they'd betrayed us.

I miss Rockton, but I think I miss *our* forest more. And if I ache for it, I cannot imagine how Dalton grieves. Compared to him, I was a newcomer to the neighborhood. He was born there, grew up there, lived there his entire life.

Now we are in new forest. We've been here many times as we scoped out the area, but it isn't ours yet. We haven't memorized landmarks, and certainly haven't made memories. As Storm follows the trail, Dalton and I are both quiet, looking around, taking it in, excited by the promise of this new home but, deep down, feeling like children who've been moved, scuffing around the new neighborhood, grumbling that it's not the same, not the same at all.

We will make this forest ours. It's not the same as being tossed into a new neighborhood. We chose this one. Painstakingly chose it to have everything we loved about Rockton's environment and everything Dalton would have done differently. We border a lake now—one with fresh water and fish. Underground springs provide fresh water. We're perfectly positioned to have access to mountains for hunting, while being in the sun's southern path all day for better solar power.

We will love this place as much, if not more, than Rockton. It's just going to take some time.

The official town path ended after a kilometer or so. Dalton had rolled his eyes at it. Yolanda's idea of a trail was apparently a straight line into the woods and then you turn around and march back to town. The path didn't wend around the lake or pass by a beaver dam or head up an incline for a lookout. You could get the same experience walking into a patch of forest inside a city.

When the trail ended, Penny kept going, through a section of sparse trees and brush. Had she not realized the path ended? There's safety tape marking a tree, but she'd been out at night and might not have seen it.

According to Storm, Bruno didn't join Penny at any point on the official path, which seems to make it unlikely they were meeting up. A thousand meters isn't far in the city, but it's a thirty-minute hike through dense forest. If it was a rendezvous, they'd have united by then.

So what was Penny doing in here at night without her penlight? If she left at dusk, she might not have thought she needed one. Maybe ventured in the forest, not for the forest itself, but for the privacy it afforded. Working through a problem and needing some peace and quiet. She's walking and thinking, and doesn't realize she went beyond the path until it's dark and she tries to

get back to . . . and the path is gone.

Where is Bruno in that scenario? I have no idea, and I can't worry about it. We have Penny's trail. Once we find her, we can focus on Bruno.

We've gone about a half kilometer past the end of the trail when Penny seems to realize she's no longer on the path. She hit a patch of snow. It's May, and there are shaded hollows where the snow hasn't yet melted. She stepped into one of these, her boot prints clear. Another thing is clear too: wolf tracks.

There's a wolf pack in the area, which doesn't worry us. Oh, we'll need to be careful, but there's plenty of game, and if we stay out of each other's way, all will be fine.

Penny wouldn't know that. She'd crouched here, seen big canine prints, and decided she was getting her ass back to town, fast. Except it was night, and probably dark, and she'd been trailblazing without realizing it. There was no path to get back on, and she seems to have wandered a bit before resolutely striking out . . . in the wrong direction.

What Penny followed is a game trail. To a newcomer, the forest seems blazed by endless trails from all the people who came before and surely those trails all lead somewhere interesting, right? Well, that depends on whether you consider "a stream" or "a safe clearing for resting" or "a nice patch of vegetation for grazing" to be someplace interesting. These aren't human trails. They're made by animals, often moose and caribou here, the herd carving paths between all the spots they consider interesting—or at least useful. The roadways of the forest.

Penny got on one of these and decided she was obviously back on the trail to town, only she was heading in the same general direction she'd been going before. In other words, she was getting deeper and deeper into the woods.

Since she's following game trails, Storm is able to follow *her* easily. We continue on for

a kilometer and then a second kilometer. Here she seems to start to realize she should have reached the town by now, as she meanders a bit, as if looking for it.

When Dalton stops, Storm's hackles rise in a low growl, as if she noticed something a split second after he did.

"And we have a moose," Dalton says, walking forward and dropping to a crouch. He pulls back undergrowth to reveal one massive hoofprint in soft ground.

"Woman versus moose, to be exact," he says as he points out a boot print just behind us.

Two boot prints, I see now. As if Penny had stopped short, seeing the moose.

Dalton pokes about, examining the ground.

"She went that way," he says, pointing slightly off the game trail we've been following.

"Moose came out behind her. She spun around, saw it, and decided to get the hell out of its way . . . by continuing in the direction she'd been already going."

"Farther from town."

"Yep. Only she panicked and ran off the game trails. There are running footprints through a softer area just to the left, along with a sign that she fell at some point—there's a handprint in the dirt."

He pauses and mutters a curse. "And now that I say that I see she fell here, too." He points out the marks. The ground here is harder than where the moose stood, but there's a scuff mark right behind those two clear footprints. She saw the moose, and it must have done something to make her stumble back. She fell, got up, and then ran.

Ran headlong into the darkening forest.

"What were the conditions last night?" I ask.

"Partly overcast," he says.

“Which is worse than overcast,” I say. “If there’s no moon, you know it’s dark. She heads into the forest without a light, the sun sets, but there’s enough moon to see by . . . until there’s not. She bumps into a moose, panics, and runs back the way she was going, thinking she’s heading toward town.”

“Yeah, looks like she veered—”

Dalton goes still. One hand reaches for Storm. The other drops toward his holster, and as I see that, my own hand does the same.

I touch the butt of my gun as I scan the forest. When Dalton pulls his weapon, I do, too. His gaze sweeps the woods. Then it stops. He sees something. I follow his line of sight, and I tell myself I’m just not aligned right to see whatever he does, but the truth is that whatever he’s spotted is probably right there, too camouflaged for me to make out.

Dalton raises his gun to his side. It’s a revolver. Yes, a modern one—a .357 Smith & Wesson—but still a throwback to another era. I’ve always suspected the gun is more for show than protection. He’s an excellent hunter, but handguns are not his thing, and if he takes it out, that’s more than nerves. It also means that whatever he sees is human.

An animal would have Dalton reaching for his bear spray. Oh, he’d shoot a bear—or wolf or wolverine—if he needed to, but if a predator is charging, the bear spray is more effective.

Guns are for threats that will see them and stay back. Guns are for people.

“I can see you,” he says after a moment. “You’re twenty feet in front of me, behind two pines. If you can see me, you know there’s a gun pointed at you. What you probably don’t see is the second gun, to my left. Now, I’m a fair shot. She’s a better one. Still, neither of us has any interest in pulling a trigger today. We’re looking for two people who went missing—”

The crash of undergrowth. My arm swings up, finger off the trigger, but even before it’s

raised, I know whoever is in that forest isn't running at us—they're running away.

Dalton lets out a string of curses and starts after the fleeing figure. He makes it two steps before glancing back at me.

“Go,” I say. An old injury to my leg means I'll never run as fast as I used to. “I have a gun and a dog. I'll stay right here.”

He lifts a hand in thanks, and then he's gone. I keep my gun raised, my body tensed, waiting for any sign that the person is leading him into a trap. The crashing of undergrowth says otherwise. It's a panicked run.

Penny? Bruno? Or an innocent hiker who bumped into two people armed with handguns? In their place, I'd run, too.

I'm really hoping it isn't a hiker. Oh, I'd feel bad for scaring them, of course, but I'd be a lot more concerned about us encountering tourists on our first post-build foray.

That really is our biggest fear. We surveyed the area as well as we could, making sure there were no active mining operations or hunting cabins or any sign that people—even a lone seasonal miner—used the area. That doesn't mean we couldn't find ourselves in the middle of a route that suddenly became internet famous among dedicated hikers.

Even then, the land still isn't free for the taking. It's Crown land and Indigenous land, and we're squatting on it, only hoping that our altruistic intent at least mitigates the trespass.

I survey my surroundings. It's boggy to the east, where the moose had been grazing. To the north, low mountains are barely visible through the tall pines.

Dark shadows on the mountains promise cave entrances. I consider climbing a tree for a better look, but pines really aren't as climbing-friendly as the maples and oaks of my youth. Still, I eye a possible contender, also as a way to get a better look at the landscape while I'm waiting

for Dalton.

I said I wouldn't leave this spot, and yes, I'm an adult, capable of walking twenty feet and returning to this location, but I won't give him the heart failure of returning to find my spot empty.

I'm still eyeing the tree—thinking that when he comes back, he can boost me to the lower branches—when I realize I'm alone. Oh, obviously Dalton took off, but a moment ago there'd been a Newfoundland beside me, and now there is not.

“Storm?” I say, swinging around in alarm as I scan the trees.

She whines, and that has my heart tripping faster until I finally spot her half hidden behind brush. She lowers her head and whines again.

I exhale and stride toward her, presuming she walked away to do her business, that whine telling me she knows she shouldn't wander, but she had a reason.

She's not crouched to relieve herself, though. She's snuffling the ground.

“Tell me you don't smell blood.”

She cannot, of course, tell me anything of the sort. I'm concerned because her whine tells me she hasn't just picked up Penny's scent, which is all around.

I take out the scent markers. I open Bruno's bag to ask if that's what she smells—our other missing person—but she doesn't lift her head even when I call her. She just whines another apology for disobeying.

I glance in the direction Dalton went and then over at Storm. She's about fifteen feet away, and if I can see her from here, then he'll be able to see me if I go to her.

I walk over and bend beside her. She lifts her nose and paws at the ground. A tree fell here, and the earth is covered with dead branches and moldering leaves. I dig with one hand, but

only find dirt.

I straighten and look around. Then I take a step back for a better angle, trying to see what might be bothering her, and my foot slips.

I presume I've slid on those rotting leaves, so I'm only paying half attention as I adjust my balance, but my boot keeps sliding backward, and the next thing I know, I'm falling, arms windmilling as I topple.

I don't hit the ground. I keep going, Storm giving a bark of alarm as I plummet, the earth disappearing above me.