

# One

As we hitch our horses to a lodgepole pine, shouts and laughter float over on the night breeze. Teenagers partying in the forest. At their age, I'd longed to be invited to a party like the one we hear. I didn't yearn for the beer kegs or the drug buffet or the awkward couplings in the bush. What I'd wanted was something deeper: the fantasy of sitting on a log, a boy's arm casually slung over my shoulders, the warmth of his leg against mine. A crackling fire filling the air with the smell of woodsmoke as it spiraled into a star-blazed sky. Charred, sticky marshmallow on my lips. The laughter of friends, telling stories I've heard a million times, and I don't laugh because they're funny—I laugh because they are a shorthand between us, warm and comforting.

Getting back to nature is at the core of that fantasy. Leave the world behind and connect with others on a level impossible to find in busy lives. Abandon the cell phones and the laptops and the tablets, and sit around a fire, drinking and talking and feeling heard. Finally feeling heard.

At a teenager, I might have fantasized about that lifestyle, but if asked to consider it for more than an evening party, I'd have laughed. By the end of the night, I'd be scratching my bug bites and blinking smoke out of my eyes and dreaming of a hot shower to wash away the grime.

Now, at thirty-three, I have lived that life for nearly two years, with no end in sight, and I

have never been happier.

As I tie up my horse, Cricket, she nickers. It's an idle complaint. They're tied to sapling pines, easily broken, meant only to convey the message that they are not to wander. We would never secure them firmly in these woods. That's staking out dinner for grizzlies.

I give Cricket an apple and one last pat. Then we're off, and I'm walking toward the sound of laughter with a guy's arm loosely over my shoulders, a mirror of that long-ago fantasy. Of course, what mattered even then wasn't the pride of having a boyfriend but this feeling, like wearing a favorite pair of jeans, a perfect fit, deeply satisfying and comfortable.

In my teen fantasy version, there would also be a dog. I was never allowed pets growing up, so if I pictured that bonfire party, I'd show up with my dog, who'd race through the forest, getting her fill of freedom before dropping in exhaustion at our feet.

I have the dog now, too, a Newfoundland gifted to me by the guy at my side. The guy who makes sure I get what my soul needs most, no matter how much I protest.

When the smell of smoke wafts over, I think my imagination is in overdrive, supplying all required elements of that adolescent fantasy. Beside me, Dalton sighs and shakes his head.

"Is the ice still thick enough for a bonfire?" I ask.

"If it's not, they're gonna find out."

The trees open to a scene that even my teen imagination would have dismissed as too fanciful. Which is silly really. The point of fantasies is to dream big, imagine things beyond our reality. Yet I'd always edited my dreams into the realm of possibility. Reach high . . . but not too high. Keep yourself safe from the inevitable disappointment of wanting too much. That was the message my parents imparted to their younger daughter.

Before me lies a bonfire on a frozen lake, against a backdrop of evergreens and snow-

topped mountains. Yet the four teens wear short sleeves as the sun beats down, though it's nearly nine at night. It makes no logical sense . . . unless you're in the middle of the Yukon wilderness, during an unseasonably warm spell in early May.

We had snow just last week, and the remains still frost the treed edges of the lake. The sunny side is thawing fast, the ice so dark it looks black. The kids stay close to the shady side as they lounge on storm-felled logs. A makeshift fish rack shows off the day's catch of Arctic grayling and lake trout. Three of the teens hold beer bottles, while the fourth sips water.

From here, they look like ordinary kids, a day of fishing serving as a fine excuse for the beer and bonfire. Obviously the fourth is abstaining to drive the group home. Yet there's no need for designated drivers here. No cars, and no roads to drive them on.

Draw closer, and something about the group seems odd. One boy wears a T-shirt, jeans, and hiking boots, with a plaid jacket around his waist for when the sun drops. One girl also wears jeans . . . paired with a hide shirt and homemade knee-high boots. The other girl is dressed in hide trousers, moccasins, and a modern sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up. And the remaining boy is completely in homemade garb, all gorgeously tanned and decorated hides. It also becomes apparent why the second girl isn't drinking—she holds a baby on her lap.

Three of these teens have never set foot in a clothing store. Never shopped online. Never seen a computer or a cell phone or even flicked on a switch and had light fill the room. They were born out here, raised out here, and, as far as I can tell, intend to die out here.

Some people would look at these kids, happy and laughing, and credit lives free from the evils and burdens of the modern world. That's bullshit. You can walk into any park and find teens just as happy and carefree, with cell phones tucked in their back pockets. The modern age brings seemingly endless sources of anxiety, but this life has its own worries and dangers, set at

the base level of “Will I survive the winter?”

We find our joy where we can, and it doesn’t matter whether kids are taking a break from hunting for food or from studying for exams, they will find happiness in those moments of peace and freedom.

As for the fourth member of the group, he may have grown up with all the modern amenities, but in his way, he’s as lost down south as the other three would be. At the age of eleven, Sebastian went to prison for murdering his parents. He got out when he turned eighteen.

Sebastian is a sociopath. He lacks that little thing we call a conscience. He wanted a normal life, and his solution was to poison his parents and stage it as a suicide in which they realized the emptiness of their lives and ended them, bequeathing most of their fortune to charity and leaving their son just enough to get by on.

Say what you want about the penal system, but sometimes, it does what it’s supposed to: rehabilitates. Sebastian is the poster boy for that. Years of therapy—and a genuine desire to change—means he’s learned tricks to overcome what he lacks.

Sebastian sees us first and comes running like an eager puppy. Bouncing at his heels is an actual puppy—year-old wolf-dog Raoul. A fitting companion for a boy who is part feral himself. Raoul spots Storm—our dog—and gallops in for a greeting.

“Is everything okay?” Sebastian asks as we head onto the ice.

“Everything’s fine,” I say as I scoop up the baby from Sidra.

The dogs head off to explore. As I cuddle Abby, Dalton hoists a case of soda pop.

“We come bearing gifts,” I say.

“Bribes.” Dalton looks at Sidra and her husband, Baptiste. “Casey likes bacon.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Sebastian says.

“Point is,” Dalton continues, “that the venison variety, while perfectly serviceable, does not make our detective happy, and it is in my best interests to keep her happy. You two apparently know where to find our local herd of wild boar. So she’s bribing you with soda pop.”

“Oh, I have more than that, but we will start negotiations with this.” I hand Abby to Dalton and tear open the case. It’s a variety pack—orange and grape and root beer and cream soda—and I hold out two cans to Sidra. “An alcohol-free alternative for the nursing mother.”

“Take the orange,” Sebastian says.

“What does it taste like?” Sidra asks as I hand her a can.

“Oranges,” he says with a grin. When none of the other three respond, he must realize they’ve never had citrus fruit. “It tastes sweet. Really sweet.”

Sidra turns the can over, trying to figure out how to open it. I do it for her. She takes a gulp and sputters.

“It *bites*,” she says, staring into the can with suspicion.

“It’s fizzy,” Sebastian says. “Carbonated water.” He grabs a root beer, and they all take a can.

“This is disgusting,” Felicity says, holding hers at arm’s length. “Almost as bad as beer.”

“Uh, you’re drinking the beer,” Sebastian says.

“Because you didn’t bring whiskey. I like whiskey.” She looks over at me. “If you want to know where those boars are, you’re going to need a better offer.”

Others would say this with a teasing lilt. Not Felicity. If this group has a leader, she’s it. She’ll negotiate for the boar location on Sidra and Baptiste’s behalf, and she’ll drive a hard bargain.

I reach into the backpack for a Dairy Milk bar and waggle it at her. She plucks it from my

hand with a sniff and “That’s a start,” and everyone laughs. It’s been about six months since Felicity tried chocolate for the first time, and it may be the greatest leverage I hold over her. Of course, Dalton would say the same about me.

I dump the backpack of chocolate bars and chips onto the ice. “In addition to treats, we have a box of more practical supplies in town.”

Those supplies—including condoms—won’t be part of the negotiation. As much as Sidra and Baptiste love their baby, they’re in no hurry to have a second one. So they’ll get as many condoms as they want, plus baby supplies and basic health-care products. We keep an eye on them, making sure they’re okay. They spent last winter with Felicity at the First Settlement, but now that spring’s here, they’re moving into the bush again.

“You kids mind if we crash your party?” Dalton says as I take Abby again. “Looks like Casey needs a bit of baby time.”

“She’s getting so big,” I say as Abby gives me her one-toothed grin.

“You just saw her last week,” Sebastian says.

“As an honorary auntie, I’m allowed to say that every time I see her.”

I sit on a log with the baby. Storm lumbers over and sniffs her, her black nose nearly as big as the baby’s head. Abby shrieks in delight, and Raoul tears off like he’s being dive-bombed by eagles. Storm stands there, the model of patience as the baby grabs handfuls of black fur and squeals, her chubby legs pedaling furiously.

“I think someone wants to ride the doggie,” Dalton says and sets Abby on Storm’s wide back, which makes the baby convulse in delight, heels banging the dog’s sides. Storm remains as unperturbed as if a feather drifted onto her back.

“I can see why they used a Newfie in *Peter Pan*,” Sebastian says. “That dog is a freaking

saint. I had nannies who weren't nearly as—”

His gaze swivels as bushes ripple at the forest's edge. Abby stops shrieking long enough for the sound to hit us—the crashing of something barreling through the trees. Baptiste snatches the baby, and Storm plants herself in front of me, growling, as Raoul races to protect Sebastian. Neither dog does more than growl, though, and Dalton and I only rest our hands on the butts of our holstered guns.

It's not a grizzly. We're making too much noise for any predator to target us. It must be a moose or a caribou, perhaps running from a winter-hungry wolf pack. That's when I remember the horses, and I stiffen, whispering, “Cricket.”

A figure crashes through the last bit of brush. It's a person, staggering through and dropping to their knees before falling face-first to the ice.

Sidra lunges forward with a cry of concern. Sebastian's arm flies out like a roadblock. She smacks into it and glares at him, her dark face flushed with annoyance. He only shakes his head and keeps his arm raised.

Dalton nods my way, telling me to run point on this.

I motion for Sebastian to accompany me and then I nod for Felicity to do the same, knowing she is almost as unlikely to let empathy override common sense. I don't give Dalton orders—he's my superior officer, and he'll do what he thinks is best. As we start forward, he falls in behind, covering me with his weapon out. I let my own gun hang to my side, unthreatening, as I approach the fallen figure.

Ten paces away, I slow. The figure's shape and the long hair splayed over the ice suggest it's a woman. That doesn't hurry my steps. It's merely data to be processed.

The woman coughs, the sound racking her body. I stop and assess. The cough is too

obvious a ploy.

*See, hack-hack, I'm sick. No threat at all.*

I watch the rise and fall of her back. Seeing it shudder on each labored exhale, I motion for Sebastian and Felicity to stay back as I move closer. Dalton follows. So does Storm, the growl in her throat dissolving into a whine and then back to a growl, as if she, too, can't decide whether to be concerned for the woman or concerned *about* her. The dog's dark eyes cut my way in search of answers I can't give.

"Are you injured?" I call.

The woman just keeps drawing raspy breaths. There's no sign of blood on the ice. We're in the shade, and I can tell only that she's dressed in dark clothing. Brown, like tanned hides. That could make her a settler or a hostile.

I glance at Felicity. She's frowning at the woman, that frown telling me she doesn't recognize her—at least not from what we can see. Pale skin. Dark blond hair. Brown clothing. I crane to see her footwear—the surest sign of a person's origin out here—but her feet are tangled in the undergrowth.

"If you understand me, nod," I say.

No answer.

I bend beside the woman's head. She's facedown on the ice. Still breathing those shallow, labored breaths, each one shuddering through her.

"I'm going to turn you over," I say. "If you can understand me, nod."

Nothing.

I glance at Dalton as I keep one eye on the woman. He shifts his weight in discomfort. Part of me screams that this poor woman could be dying, damn it, and I need to help her. The




other part screams a very different message. Danger. Threat. Trap.

I slowly start to holster my gun. I hate doing that, but I can't turn her over while holding a weapon. My gun's halfway in when Dalton grunts, "Sebastian?"

"Yes, sir." Sebastian moves forward and drops to his knees. "Let me flip her."

I should have thought of this solution. Proof that, as calm as I might seem, my heart slams against my chest, my brain firing twenty instructions at once.

Sebastian crouches, and I motion for him to take hold of the woman's shoulder and carefully lift her toward him. He does . . . and her hand snaps out and grabs my wrist.



# Two

The gun jerks, and I yank away, but she has my wrist in an iron grip. Dalton lunges, barking, “Raise your fucking hands!” but the woman doesn’t seem to see him. She’s staring at me, blue eyes impossibly wide. She hisses a harsh stream of foreign language, as if she’s uttering a curse.

Storm’s right there, growling, Raoul at her shoulder. I order them back. Storm retreats a few reluctant steps, and Raoul moves to Sebastian’s side, still growling.

I shift my gun to my left hand, letting the woman keep hold of my right. Her fingernails dig in, blood welling up. Dalton snarls again for her to let me go, but she just stares, eyes locked with mine.

“It’s okay,” I say, as much for him as her.

I hand Sebastian my gun, and Dalton inhales sharply, but I ignore his disapproval. My gaze holds the woman’s feverish one. I reach down and peel her fingers from my wrist, and she just keeps talking, a stream of frantic babbling that my gut identifies as Germanic.

Her babble acts like an adrenaline pause button, giving me time to pull back and assess. I’d jumped to conclusions about her clothing. Yes, it’s brown—the color and texture of tanned hide—but it’s modern. Expensive hiking wear. Tourist wear.

That’s almost certainly what she is. A tourist on a backwoods excursion. During my time

in Rockton, we haven't seen so much as an abandoned campsite, but Dalton says it happens, people pass through the area, never realizing a town of two hundred people lies a few kilometers away.

Right now the important thing is that we have a woman in distress, collapsed on the ground, her fingers digging into my hand, raspy voice telling me . . .

I have no idea what she's telling me, do I?

*"Ich spreche kein Deutsch,"* I say. *I don't speak German.* As I cop, I learned variations on those words in a half dozen languages along with a few more, like: *"Sprechen Sie Englisch?"*

*Do you speak English?*

The woman doesn't even stop babbling to listen to me. I say it again, louder, and then I try *"Je parle français"*—*I speak French*—in hopes of commonality there, but I still can't be certain she even hears me.

As cruel as it seems, I block out her words and lift her chin for a better look at her face. She doesn't fight me. If anything, her words only come faster, hoarse with excitement at this sign that I'm paying attention.

Her eyes are fever-bright, her skin hot to the touch. I don't see any blood. I run my hand over her head, and she leans into it, eyes closing, as if I'm stroking her fevered brow. Instead, my fingers palpate her skull while I watch for a flinch of pain.

My hands are all the way around the back when she shrieks, convulsing and slamming her fists into my chest. I grab her wrists, and she writhes and bares her teeth. The dogs both lunge forward, Sebastian grabbing Raoul to restrain him.

Dalton wordlessly restrains the woman's hands as he motions for Felicity to grab her flailing feet. The woman bucks and writhes and spits, as if delirious, and I part her hair but see

no sign of injury.

“Blood,” Sebastian says.

“What?” My head jerks up.

I realize he still has my gun, and he’s training it on the woman. Letting the sociopath hold the gun may not seem the best strategy, but he’s actually the least likely to freak out and pull the trigger. When you struggle to empathize, seeing others in danger barely raises your heartbeat, and while we’ve been fighting with a madwoman, he’s been assessing her from his vantage point. He nods at her stomach, where her shirt has pulled up in her struggles, and I see a long strip of blood-soaked cloth around her midsection.

“Shit,” I mutter.

That explains why she lashed out—not from the pain of a head injury but because, in lifting her, I’d engaged her injured stomach muscles.

The woman suddenly goes still, panting, and Felicity eases back.

“Don’t—” I begin.

The woman kicks, foot flying up to smack Felicity under the jaw. It’s the woman who screams in pain, though, gnashing her teeth as she rasps something, her bloodshot eyes fixed on Felicity.

I glance Felicity’s way, and she nods abruptly. Her eyes simmer with annoyance, half at the woman, half at herself. It’s only then, as Felicity grabs the woman’s legs, that I see her feet are bare. Bare and bloodied.

I motion for Dalton to take my spot, and I creep down to Felicity. I take one of the woman’s ankles firmly, ignoring her kicks and howls. The soles are filthy, her feet and ankles crisscrossed with scratches.

Running through the forest. *Barefoot.*

I glance at the bloody bandage around her waist. It's crimson now, fresh blood seeping through. I move up the woman's side.

The bandage is only roughly tucked in, a haphazard job. As the others hold the woman still, I unravel the dressing, blocking out her screams and curses. I don't even have it halfway open before the smell hits me.

"What is that?" Sebastian says, hand flying to his nose.

Rotting flesh.

Infection.

I wheel to Sebastian. "Get April. *Now.*"

<#>

Sebastian is gone, Baptiste accompanying him. It's five kilometers to Rockton and the paths are too narrow for the horses to gallop. I remember running that far to school rather than wait for the bus. Twenty minutes easily. That's in the city. This is forest, where even paths aren't flat or free of trip hazards.

It'll be over an hour before April can return on an ATV. My dirt bike would be faster, and I have argued—strenuously—that my sister needs to learn to ride it, as a matter of practicality. She refuses, saying that 95 percent of her work is in town, and 4 percent in remote spots that my bike couldn't reach anyway. She accused me of playing the "emergency services" card as an excuse to "force" her to do something I consider fun.

Yes, my sister and I have very different definitions of the word fun. Honestly, I'm not sure it's in her vocabulary. I could blame her workaholic ways, but part of that is her nature. She's brilliant and driven and almost certainly on the autism scale. Saying she doesn't know the meaning of fun is unfair. Also untrue. I bought her a new label maker on this morning's supply

trip—replacing the one she wore out—and she practically vibrated with excitement.

As we wait for April, we deal with the mystery woman and her injuries. There's no doubt she's delirious, from the fever or the sepsis or both. I can only guess what she imagines us to be in her delusions. Predators, perhaps, who attacked in the forest. Or human monsters, mad scientists pinning her down to conduct horrible experiments.

I should have told Sebastian to be sure April packed a sedative. The best thing we could do for this woman would be to knock her out. It takes all our power to restrain her without injuring her more, and I'm not even sure we accomplish that.

I always carry a first-aid kit as part of my pack. Dalton also has one in his saddlebags, and he's delivered them both now, as I work on the woman.

Sidra has put Abby in her basket, and she's with Felicity bringing snow from the shady edge of the lake. I tried to get water into the woman, but most of it ended up seeping into the ground. I save the rest for cleaning her stomach wound, but even if I could harden my heart to her shrieks of agony, I wouldn't know where to begin.

The abdomen is one of the worst spots for infection susceptibility and infection leading to sepsis. The wound has been bound, but it's a makeshift bandage, presumably to stop the bleeding.

What caused the wound? I have no idea. I can't even unwrap the last layer of bandage. It's grafted to infected flesh, and the slightest tug has her howling in pain.

I need to ignore the wound and concentrate on lowering her temperature *while* keeping her warm, knowing the sepsis is far enough advanced that her body temperature could plunge at any moment.

Eventually, she calms down, which may only be exhaustion. She continues to thrash, her

words so mumbled that I doubt I could understand them even if I did speak the language.

As she lies on a bed of jackets and blankets, she stares glassy-eyed at the sky, her lips moving. Storm and I sit beside her as I absently pet the dog and look at the woman.

*What happened to you?*

Even if she could tell me, it's almost inconsequential at this moment. Yes, it would help to know how she sustained her injuries—and I have no doubt my sister will chastise me for not getting that information—but the biggest threat is her infection, and her story doesn't affect that. I just want to know it. I desperately want to know it.

I glance at her clothing. Dalton has built another fire, rather than risk moving her closer to the first, and in the light of it I see colors in the woman's outfit. An emblem on the breast. A bit of black in the pants, as part of the design. All that, though, is hidden under a layer of dust and dirt.

It's definitely expensive. My parents were successful medical professionals and in their world, people will drop a grand on hiking gear to join a cushy two-day guided hike along the Appalachian Trail. While some of that gear is trendy and overpriced, some is worth the money. In Rockton, I have accumulated my first rack of expensive designer footwear: hiking shoes and boots for every occasion. The newfound indulgence of a trust-fund baby who had never actually dipped into her trust fund.

I pride myself on being a sensible and informed shopper. I ignore labels and designs and do my research. I can devote an hour to weighing options as we shop high-end outfitters in Vancouver. Which gets me exactly the same results as just handing two articles of clothing to Dalton and having him declare one "a piece of shit" and the other "good enough, but that one over there is better." There is no substitute for experience. I'm gaining that, though, at least

enough to look at this woman's clothing and declare it "a piece of shit."

Germanic speaker wearing overpriced outdoor gear.

My memory shuffles through images and stops at one from today's supply run. We'd been walking along the wooden sidewalks of Dawson City. It's so quiet at this time of year that it reminds me of a Wild West town at high noon, and I half expect tumbleweeds rolling down the dirt roads. When we did hear voices, they rang as loud as church bells. It'd been a quartet speaking in a Germanic language, all dressed in expensive outdoor wear as they prepared for a trip to Tombstone Park.

"Guess we didn't beat tourist season after all," I'd said to Dalton.

There can be a cultural component to tourism. Go to Prince Edward Island, and you'll find crowds of Japanese tourists on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Anne of Green Gables. Come to the Yukon, and you find crowds of Germans looking to explore our fabled wilderness. Some are expert explorers . . . and some just want an adventure. From the look of this woman's outfit, she falls into the latter category.

An adventure is what she wanted. What she got, I fear, is a true taste of what it means to be dropped off in the wilderness a hundred miles from the nearest community.

This morning, Dalton and I had sat on a patio, enjoying a coffee and a pastry in what felt like summer sunshine. Another group of tourists had walked by, American weekend warriors in full gear, talking about their plans for backwoods camping up in Tombstone. Dalton had tracked their progress down the street and muttered, "Fucking climate change."

A local sitting nearby had chuckled and said, "And here we thought we had another two weeks of peace and quiet."

What Dalton meant, though, was that climate change is a trickster, luring outsiders into



the wilderness before Mother Nature is ready to receive them. According to today's weather reports, by midafternoon, Dawson City would be the warmest place in Canada, which is truly insane. Yet when we left our beds predawn to hike the Ninth Avenue Trail, we'd layered up with fleece. Those hikers were about to head into the wilderness, expecting gorgeous weather, when the truth was that they could be buried under a foot of snow tomorrow. At the very least, they'd encounter frozen lakes and muddy bogs.

As we wait for my sister, I cannot help building a potential story for this woman. She's in good shape. Maybe thirty. Probably has some experience with the outdoors. Comes to the Yukon for her Canadian adventure. Dropped off in the wilderness. Then something goes wrong. The abdominal injury is almost certainly a freak accident. She slipped on mud or ice coming down the mountainside and impaled herself on a branch.

The next step should be to turn on your satellite phone and call for help. Had she underestimated the severity of her injury? Realized how much an emergency pickup would cost and decided she'd "tough it out"? I'd love to say that no one who bought this brand of outdoorsman wear would risk their life to save a rescue charge, but people are not always rational.

There's another reason her sat phone might have failed, though I cringe to consider it. Our own radios barely work, and the council—who run our town from the safety of civilization—blame all kinds of environmental factors, but we think they employ technology that interferes with the signals, ensuring residents are truly cut off from the outside world.

Whatever the reason, this woman failed to get help, and what started as a coolheaded search for civilization would have turned into a panicked run, as fever set in. She keeps running until she loses her shoes and is too far gone to care. Finally hears voices, laughter even, and races

toward the sound, only to collapse the moment she sees salvation.


It's a reasonable story, and I'm sure it bears at least a superficial resemblance to the truth. There's only one element missing. One element that tells me this is more than a woman whose adventure went horribly awry.

She is alone.

No reputable bush plane operator would drop off a solitary tourist in the forest. That means she came with at least one other person.

So how did she wind up here, injured and alone?

I'm not sure I want the answer to that.



# Three

Seventy minutes after sending the boys off, we hear the roar of the ATV. It's dusk now, sliding into darkness, and the lights of the vehicle appear moments after I hear the engine. I run to meet it with Storm at my heels. The wide path ends where we left the horses, and they need to finish the journey on foot. I'm there both to direct April and to bring her up to speed.

The first person I see isn't April. Not unless my sister has turned into a guy with his sleeves pushed up to show off impressive muscles and a US Army tattoo. That would be Will Anders, our deputy, driving the ATV.

Anders leaps out as he yanks off his helmet. The woman in the passenger seat is taking her sweet time removing hers and then placing it in the back seat before climbing from the vehicle.

When Dalton first met April, he'd known instantly that she is my sister. The resemblance, obviously. Except it wasn't obvious to me. I overlook the parts we both we inherited from our Filipino-Chinese mother—high cheekbones, heart-shaped face, dark straight hair. In April, I see only ever see the things we don't share, the ones she inherited from our Scottish side—her pale skin, her blue eyes, her hourglass figure, all of which mean it's rare for anyone to ask where she came from, whether she speaks English, does she know any good local sushi restaurants . . .

April can pass for white, and I cannot, and this has always felt like a division that superseded all similarities. The world told us that this meant we did not look like sisters, and that made the gulf between us feel all the more impassable.

“Hey.” Anders throws one arm around my shoulders. “You doing okay?”

“Better than our patient.”

“Yeah, I know.” He hefts the medical bag in his hand. “I’ll run ahead and get started.”

“Did April pack sedatives? She’s going to need it.”

“Sebastian warned us. We’ve got extra. Everything’s good.” He claps a hand against my back and takes off to begin triage.

Anders was premed when he enlisted in the army. He’d gotten some medic training before his superiors switched him to MP duty. He’d have made a fine medic, but he made an even better cop. When a fight breaks out in Rockton, we send Anders first. Most times, he just needs to turn up the charm, and people forget what they were arguing about. If fists do fly, he’s got the muscle to subdue any resident and the equanimity not to throw any unnecessary punches doing it. He keeps up his medical training, though. In Rockton, we can always use more people who know how to set a broken bone or stitch a gash.

He’s halfway down the path before my sister makes her way to me.

“Come on, April,” I say. “Can we pick up the pace? This isn’t a garden party.”

“No, it’s a bonfire party. Or it was, until this woman intruded.”

I stifle a snort. “She’s in septic shock, April. I think she can be forgiven for party-crashing.”

“Septic shock is your diagnosis. You are not a physician, Casey, and I will reserve judgment until I see the patient.”

“At this rate, we won’t need a physician. We’ll need a coroner. Come *on*.”

“Running pell-mell through the forest is a sure way to end up like this woman. Sebastian says it looks as if she fell and injured herself.”

“Mmm. I could speculate, but if I do, you’ll remind me that I’m not a doctor.”

She shoots a hard look my way as we continue toward the lake. As I tell her my theory, I leave out the “fell on a branch” part. That’s where I’m most likely to be mistaken, and part of me will always be the little girl who doesn’t want to look foolish in front of her big sister.

It doesn’t help that April’s autism means she has no problem *making* me feel foolish. I know that’s not her fault, but a diagnosis thirty years late doesn’t undo the damage. I grew up with parents who always made me feel not quite up to snuff, intellectually, and a sister who didn’t realize that every time she “made allowances for my diminished mental capacity,” I felt stupid and useless. It was hard to make anyone understand that when my IQ put me well above average. I just wasn’t a genius like the rest of my family.

“Does that make sense?” she says when I finish my theory.

I tense. “Does . . . what make sense?”

“That she fell and injured her stomach.”

There are a lot of things I hate my parents for, but this tops the list—that they knew April was on the spectrum and ignored it because, to them, it meant their child was broken. Yes, if I’m being charitable, I’ll admit that maybe they thought this was best for April. Treat her as if she were neurotypical and refuse to allow her to be labeled or otherwise held back. In the end, though, it led to a woman who spent her life *feeling* different and blaming it on herself.

One of our residents, Kenny, has an autistic brother, and when he talks to April, I swear it’s like seeing someone speak a language I never learned, a language I desperately want to

master. When April questions whether my theory makes sense, it sounds combative, and my hackles rise, even as a voice inside me says that's not how she means it.

I take a deep breath and explain that, with the rough terrain and the endless slopes—foothills and mountains and valleys—one of the biggest dangers isn't falling off an edge, but losing your footing and sliding.

“One of the residents died from that in the nineties,” I say. “He slipped on a muddy slope and impaled himself on a branch. Before that, a woman had to be rushed into emergency surgery for a punctured lung after falling on her own walking stick.”

“I am well aware of the past cases, Casey. I'm the town doctor. I have the files.”

Deep breath. “Yes, but they're very old cases, and I wouldn't expect you to read them much less remember them.”

“Others perhaps. Not us,” she says with a sniff, and I do not fail to miss that “us.” One inclusive word that has the little girl inside me dancing with glee.

We reach the lake and start across it.

“My point,” April continues, “is that I believe there are far more rational explanations for the abdominal injury.”

That inner child sags. “Uh-huh.”

“Have you considered the fact she may have been attacked by her companion?”

“Sure, that's a possibility but—”

“Shot perhaps? Or knifed?”

“Knifed?” That is not a word my sister uses. “Okay, those are possibilities, but I prefer to start with the ones that don't involve crazed companions—”

“He—or she—doesn't have to be crazed. The isolation drove them to lash out, perhaps

over the last piece of chocolate.” A glance my way. “I’m sure you could appreciate that.”

I laugh more than the joke warrants. Attempting humor is a new thing for my sister, and we may overencourage her, rather like showering Storm with praise when she picks up a difficult scent trail. April would *love* that comparison.

Before I can answer, April continues, “It might also be a mountain man, who attacked her in her sleep. Or perhaps she was part of a group, friends who had a falling-out, and she is the lone survivor. It could have been sexual jealousy. Two friends both coveting the same lover, and when one is spurned for the other, the spurned lover—”

“—massacres the group. All except her. As we’ll soon discover, though, she wasn’t the lone survivor. She was the killer.”

“That is a very good theory. We’ll have to be careful.”

I bite my lip and struggle to keep a straight face. With anyone else, I’d presume they were mocking me. My own theory sounds outlandish, so they come up with even more outlandish ones. Except mockery, like humor, is not part of my sister’s DNA. Her words can cut deeper than any sword, but they are spoken in honesty. Harsh truth.

“You’re enjoying those mystery novels you borrowed from the library, aren’t you,” I say, apropos of absolutely nothing.

“They are a much more pleasant way to pass the time than I imagined. Isabel is correct that a mental break is useful for lowering stress, but what I feared would be a frivolous waste of my time has turned into quite the mental challenge. Piecing together the clues, avoiding the trap of the red herring, identifying the killer . . .”

“A lot more fun to read about than to actually do for a living.”

She waves a hand. “That’s an entirely different thing.”

“It is.”

“The detectives in the novels always find the clues and follow a clear path to the killer. You spend far too much time dithering about, talking to the wrong people, chasing subpar leads, waiting for some vital piece of information to land in your lap. You could learn something from those books, Casey.”

“Right . . .”

“I’m not saying you’re a poor detective. You’re actually quite adept. But there is always room for improvement.”

“Oh, look,” I say, raising my voice. “We’ve reached the patient. Finally.”

Dalton takes the cue and strides over, guiding April to the injured woman, as if she could somehow miss her. Not that she’d ever snap at him for providing the obvious. To April, Dalton is competency incarnate, and there is no greater compliment she could give.

I’m heading off to speak to Felicity when April’s sharp voice cuts through the quiet.

“Casey?”

I turn, slowly, trying not to cringe.

“I am about to examine the victim. Don’t you need to be here, taking notes?”

“Victim?” Dalton mouths.

I shake my head, telling him not to ask, and I make my way back to my sister as she lowers herself beside the injured woman.

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It’s well past midnight. We’re still on the ice, the two fires lighting our makeshift emergency room. Baptiste and Sidra have left with the baby, and they’re camped nearby with Felicity.

The mystery woman is indeed in septic shock, as my sister grudgingly admits, while issuing another warning against me practicing medicine without a license. I say nothing about



her detecting without a badge.

The woman is asleep now. At first, April had been reluctant to administer the sedative—the woman had been resting, if fitfully, and as April said, we can't question her about her injuries if she's unconscious. I could point out the “can't communicate with her even when she *is* talking” language issue, but April would probably just suggest I wasn't trying hard enough.

Fortunately, we never reached that point. As soon as April tried to look at her patient's stomach, the woman demonstrated why we needed the sedative. We wrestled her down while my sister administered it, and once that took effect, we were finally able to examine that horrific wound.

“Horrific” is no exaggeration. The flesh surrounding the wound was rotting and putrid, and April had to excise dead tissue to get a look at what lay beneath. Even then, there wasn't any sign of what caused the injury. No tree splinters. No bullet burns, either. Yes, April's wild theories amused me, but that didn't mean I was set on a diagnosis of accidental injury. It was just more dangerous to leap to the conclusion that she'd been attacked, only to have her wake up later and say “Oh, no, I just fell on a branch” after we'd spent days combing the woods for her attacker.

Crime fighting in Rockton often feels like being transported back to the world of Sherlock Holmes. April can complain about me “dithering about,” but most of that is Holmesian thinking and working through the case by making endless notes.

When it comes to actual crime-scene equipment, I'm back in the Victorian age, with my fingerprint dust and rudimentary ballistics. If I need DNA testing, I can send a sample to a lab down south, but so far I haven't had a case that a modern crime-scene test would break faster than old-fashioned sleuthing.

Medicine faces similar constraints. Being off-grid means we do have power from generators and solar panels, but that goes to essentials, mostly cooking and food preservation. If April had an emergency case requiring our entire power supply, though, we'd all be eating fire-cooked food for a few days, because medical care is our priority. Yet mostly she's had to wean herself off technology the same way I have.

She works into the night using the combined light of bonfires and strong flashlights. We hold the latter as she abrades the infected wound and then assesses damage. An ultrasound may help here, and she has a portable one in Rockton, but it appears that the injury hasn't done more than nick the woman's intestines. That's what I already suspected. This woman has been alive with this wound for a few days now, which means it didn't puncture a vital organ.

The short version is that, had she gotten medical care immediately, she'd be in a hospital bed, probably arguing with the doctors to let her out of it. The issue isn't the wound as much as what happened after—days of stumbling through the Yukon wilderness, each step aggravating the injury, while infection set in.

Her feet and calves are a mess, testifying to the sheer hell of the journey that brought her to us. Two toes are frostbitten and will probably need amputation.

Besides cuts, scratches, and dehydration, there are no other obvious wounds. Or that's what April concludes. She's wrong, though, and I take no pleasure in pointing that out. Whatever our issues, proving April wrong is uncomfortable for me and always has been, even when we were children. Perhaps even then I'd realized, deep down, that she didn't point out my own flaws and mistakes to be cruel.

I glance at Anders, who's assisting April. "Can you grab me a pop? I'm getting a little dehydrated myself."

April turns a hard look on me. “If you’ve allowed yourself to get into that state, then I believe you can remain there a little longer, Casey.”

“She’s not actually asking for a soda, April,” Anders says. “She’s asking me to step away.”

“Then she should say so.”

“I was trying to be discreet,” I say.

“Asking for refreshments in the middle of a medical procedure is hardly discreet. I presume you are questioning my assessment. I do not need you to correct me in private. I’m a grown woman, capable of handling criticism.”

I’m opening my mouth to apologize when she adds, “However, since it’s unlikely I’m mistaken, if *you* wish to be corrected in private, I understand that. Your ego is more fragile.”

Off to the side, Dalton gives me a sympathetic eye roll as he holds the flashlight for us.

“I believe this scratch is significant,” I say, running my finger along a shallow cut in the woman’s side abdomen.

“She has many cuts, Casey. She was fleeing through the forest.”

“This part of her body was under several layers of bandage.”

April goes still and then blanches, just a little.

I continue. “It’s possible that this cut is unconnected, but there’s also something here.” I take her forceps and point. “This looks like part of the abdominal injury, but I don’t think it is. There’s a deeper wound over here.” I move the forceps an inch to the left. “That seems like impalement of some sort. An object that went directly in, causing a deep wound. This part here”—I pull back—“is much shallower. The infection has made it seem like it’s all one injury running together, especially after abrading the dead tissue. But if that other part is impalement,

what's this?"

"Three cuts," Dalton says. "First on the side. She avoids that and gets a shallow slice. The second blow penetrates, but not deeply. Then comes the third."

April frowns. "I'm sorry, Eric, but I don't understand. Avoids what?"

I get to my feet, forceps still in hand, and walk over to Dalton. He nods, knowing what I intend. Still, when I stab at him with the forceps, April gasps, leaping up like I've gone mad.

Dalton swings sideways, avoiding the blow, and the forceps graze his side instead.

"One," he says.

I pull back for another stab, and this time, as I make contact with his stomach, he yanks away, staggering backward. He barely has time to say "Two" before I'm on him again, and this time, the forceps hit him straight in the stomach, my hand sliding up the metal, as if they're penetrating deep.

"Three," I say as I turn to April. "Three blows. Looks like you were right after all. She didn't fall. She was attacked."