

This Fallen Prey

Chapter One

The season may have officially started two months ago, but it isn't truly spring in Rockton until we bury our winter dead.

Dalton and Anders are digging the shallow grave. I'm wandering, trying to calm Storm. As a future tracking dog, Storm needs to know the smell of death. I've read books on cadaver dogs that said some can't do it for long because every "success" leads to a dead body. I dismissed that as anthropomorphism, until I showed Storm the corpses . . . and she promptly set about trying to wake the dead. Her growing distress isn't making this task any easier.

We're walking in ever-growing circles around the grave, Dalton's occasional "Casey?" warning me to stay close, while Storm's insistent tugs at the lead beg me to let her go farther and explore, forget what she's seen. The tugs of an eight-month-old Newfoundland dog are not insubstantial, particularly when she weighs nearly as much as the person holding the leash.

"Switch?"

Anders walks through the trees and holds out a hand. Storm isn't the only one who needs a break from this task. Every year, Dalton orders his deputy to remain in Rockton. Every year Anders ignores him. As a former soldier, Anders might prefer to stay away, but being a former soldier also means he refuses to grant himself that reprieve.

I give his hand a quick squeeze as I pass over the leash. "Remember, you gotta show her who's boss."

“Oh, she knows who’s boss.” The dog yanks suddenly, nearly toppling Anders. “And it’s not me.” He plants his feet. “Fortunately, I’m still a whole lot bigger. Go help Eric. We’ll be fine.”

I find Dalton standing beside one hole, dug down to the permafrost. Three bodies lay beside it. Two are long dead, partly mummified from having been stashed in a cave by their killer. The third looks as if she really could be sleeping. Sharon was the oldest resident in Rockton, until we found her dead of a heart attack this morning, prompting Dalton to declare the ground soft enough to bury our winter dead.

A shallow grave. Unmarked. The kind of final resting place that, as a homicide detective, I should be finding, not creating. But this is Rockton. These three women came here in secrecy, fleeing threats from elsewhere. They came to the Yukon to be safe. And we failed them.

One can argue it wasn’t our fault. The first two snuck into the forest and were taken by a killer. Both pre-date me. Dalton *had* been sheriff during the second disappearance, but he’d only stopped searching when he found a body intentionally set up to look like the missing woman. And Sharon’s death wasn’t murder, misadventure or even accident. Just time claiming an old woman.

Yet we accept responsibility. To say “we did our best,” is a slippery slope in Rockton. Even with Sharon, we spent an hour on the satellite radio this morning arguing with the council, saying that maybe she had symptoms and would have sought help if we had a fully trained doctor.

We lay the corpses in the grave. We don’t say anything. I wasn’t brought up in any religion, and our sheriff was raised right here, in this forest. I’m sure, if pressed, we could find a few lines of half-remembered poetry for the dead. But that isn’t our way. We stand there, and we remember, and we regret.

Then we fill in the hole.

When we're done, Dalton rubs his face. He stops and looks at his hands, as if remembering what they just handled. I reach into my pocket and pass him a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer. He snorts at that and takes it, and when he's done, I lean against his side for a moment as he puts his arm around my shoulders. Then we both straighten, job done, moment passed, time to get back to work.

"Will?" Dalton calls. There's exactly one heartbeat of silence, and Dalton's face tightens as he calls, louder, "Will?"

"Over here," Anders calls back. "Pup found herself a rabbit hole and—" A grunt of exertion. "And she really wants bunny for dinner."

We walk over to find him only lightly tugging on the leash, big biceps barely twitching. I sigh and yank the lead with a "Hut!" that tells Storm to leave the rabbit hole alone. She gives me a look, not unlike a sullen teen, and walks over to brush against Dalton.

Anders chuckles. "If Mommy gives you shit, suck up to Dad. Nice try, pup but—"

He stops, as we all hear the whine of a small plane engine.

Dalton shields his gaze to look up.

"Does that sound way too close to Rockton?" Anders says.

"Fuck."

"That'd be yes. Come on, pup. Time for a run."

We kick it into high gear. Dalton scans the sky as he tracks the sound. It's not a supply delivery—it's exceedingly rare for anyone other than Dalton to handle those, and he's scheduled to head out later today, releasing a few residents and returning with supplies. But from the sound, that plane is heading straight to our airstrip.

The pilot shouldn't be able to *see* our airstrip. No more than he should be able to see our town. Structural and technological camouflage means that unless the plane practically skims Rockton, we should remain invisible.

I look up to see a small plane on a perfect trajectory with our landing pad.

Dalton curses again.

"Has anyone ever found the airstrip before?" I ask.

"Ten years ago. Guy was lost. Navigation failed. Rookie pilot. I fixed his nav, gave him fuel and pointed him to Dawson City. He was too shaken up to question. I just told him it was an air strip for miners."

Having anyone stumble over Rockton even by land is exceedingly rare, but we have a pocketful of cover stories. Dalton opts for "military training base." We're all physically fit. Anders keeps his hair stubble short, and Dalton recently reverted to his summer look—his hair buzzed, his beard down to a few day's growth. Suitable for a backwoods military camp.

Anders pushes his short sleeves onto his shoulders, his US Army tattoo more prominently displayed. Dalton snaps on his shades. I put on my ball cap, ponytail tugged through the back. And we have our guns in hand.

We arrive just as the propellers creak to a stop. The pilot's door opens. A woman gets out. When I see her, I slow, the guys doing the same. We've donned on our best quickie military costuming; hers looks like the real thing. Beige cargo shorts. Olive tank top. Dark aviator shades. Boots. Dark ponytail. Thigh holster. Arms that make mine look scrawny.

She doesn't even glance our way, just rolls her shoulders and acts like she has no idea three armed strangers and a very large dog are coming toward her. She knows though. She waits until we're ten feet away. Then she turns and says, "Sheriff Dalton?"

Her gaze crosses all three of us. Rejects the woman. Rejects the black guy. Settles on the white one. Says, “Sheriff?” again. I could be offended, but she’s actually right in this case, and the certainty on her face tells me she’s been given a physical description.

She doesn’t wait for confirmation, just steps forward and extends her hand. “Sir. I have a delivery for you.”

Dalton shakes her hand. He’s doing a good job of hiding his uncertainty, but I can see the tightness in his face. I joke he’s like the dictator of a small country—in Rockton his word is law and he knows it. But he’s only thirty-one years old, two months younger than me, and new situations can throw him off kilter.

“We weren’t informed of any deliveries,” I say.

She takes an envelope from her pocket and hands it to me. “The details are in here, ma’am. I’m just the courier.”

Dalton walks over to the plane. A hand smacks against the glass. Storm and I both jump. Anders says “Shit!” Dalton just looks inside. A man’s face appears. A man wearing a gag.

Dalton turns to the woman. “What the hell is this?”

“Your delivery, sir.” She opens the cargo door and disappears inside, with Dalton following. We wait. A moment later, Dalton comes out, pushing the man ahead of him. He’s blond, younger than us, wearing a wrinkled linen shirt, trousers and expensive loafers, and looks like he’s been pulled off Bay Street midway through his stock broker shift. He’s gagged with his hands bound in front of him; a cable binds his legs so he can’t do more than shuffle.

“I was told not to remove the cuffs,” the woman says as she follows them out. “I was also told to leave the gag on. I didn’t listen, but I put it back on fast. I have no idea what he’s in for, but he’s a nasty son of a bitch.”

“In for?” I say.

“Yes, ma’am.” She looks around. “There is a detention facility out here, isn’t there? Some kind of ultra-maximum security?”

“Privileged information,” Anders says. “Sorry, Private.”

The woman smiles. “These days, the only ‘private’ in my job title comes from my employer. Private security. But thank you, sir.” She nods at his tat. “Cross-border job shopping?”

“Something like that. I appreciate you bringing the prisoner. We weren’t expecting anyone new, so we’re a bit surprised.” Anders peers into the cargo hold. “You wouldn’t happen to have any beer in there, would you?”

She laughs. “No, sir.” She reaches in and pulls out a duffle. When she opens the zipper, it’s full of coffee bags. “Just this.”

“Even better. Thank you.”

I look at the prisoner. He’s just standing there, with Dalton behind him, monitoring his body language as Anders chats with the pilot.

“Thank you for bringing him,” I say. “If you’re flying back to Dawson City, skip the casino and check out the Downtown Hotel bar. Ask for the sour toe cocktail.”

“There’s an actual toe involved, isn’t there?”

“It’s the Yukon.”

She grins. “I’ll have to try that. Thank you, ma’am.” She tips her hat and then motions to ask if she can pat Storm. I nod, and Storm sits as she sees the hand reach for her head.

“Well trained,” she says.

“At her size, she needs to be. She’s still a pup.”

“Nice.” She gives Storm a final pat. “I’ll head on out. You folks have a good day. And remember, keep that gag on for as long as you can.”