

WATCHER IN THE WOODS

A ROCKTON NOVEL

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I HAVE NOT SEEN my sister, April, in two years. Nine months ago, I called her before I fled to a hidden town in the Yukon, where people like me go to disappear. I didn't tell her where I was going. I only said that I had to leave, and she might not hear from me for a few years. Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought I heard relief in her voice.

After our parents died, I would call before April's birthday, before Thanksgiving, before Christmas, and I'd suggest getting together. For the first year, she made excuses. Then she stopped bothering, and I stopped calling. I worked through every holiday and pretended it didn't matter. Of course it mattered.

Late last night, I called from a pay phone in Dawson City and told April that I needed her help, that a man's life depended on it. She hung up on me.

Now I'm outside the Vancouver hospital where she works. She's a neuroscientist, but also has her medical degree and consults on neurosurgery. According to her assistant, she's been here all night on an emergency call and should be leaving at any moment.

I'm standing by the parking garage. I've confirmed there's a car in her spot. Now it's just a matter of waiting.

"Looks like good weather today," says a voice beside me.

I slant my gaze to a guy about four feet away. He's six feet tall, with dark blond hair in a buzz cut. He's got a few days' worth of beard scruff, and he's wearing a ball cap, a T-shirt, and shades. He leans against the building, a paperback novel in his hand.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you not to speak to strangers?" I say.

"Nah. She told strangers not to speak to me. And I won't be a stranger after you come back to my hotel room tonight."

I laugh. "Does that line ever work?"

"Never tried it." He lifts the shades. "I can offer further incentives, if you'd like."

"Like a room-service dinner?"

"Sure . . . eventually."

I slide over and lean my head against his shoulder before putting space between us again. Eric Dalton, the sheriff in Rockton, that hidden town where I've been living. Also the guy I've been living *with*. April doesn't know Dalton, so we're keeping our distance until I introduce him. Dalton can be a tad intimidating when he wants to be. And given the runaround I'm getting from April, he *really* wants to be.

"You could just wait at her place," he says.

"That would require knowing her address," I say. "She moved here a few years ago, and I only realized it when my birthday gift for her bounced back. I called, and she said she'd gotten a job here. She didn't provide an updated address."

"Bitch."

I shrug. "Maybe I did something to piss her off."

"Yeah. It was definitely you, Casey. You're such a pain in the ass." He lifts his glasses again, so I don't miss his eye roll.

“Your sister is a bitch, and if this wasn’t Kenny’s best chance, I’d say fuck it. If she doesn’t want to know you, that’s her loss.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

He starts to answer and then quickly lifts his book and murmurs, “I’m gonna guess that’s her coming out now.”

I look up. Dalton has never seen a photo of April, and if asked, I would have said there isn’t much of a resemblance between us. Our mother was Filipino and Chinese, our father Scottish. April can pass for white, where I cannot, and to me that has always meant that we look very different. She’s a few inches taller than my five two. Her skin is lighter. Her eyes are blue, their shape more Caucasian.

But we have the same straight dark hair, the same heart-shaped face, the same cheekbones and nose, all inherited from our mother. When I see April through Dalton’s eyes, the similarities outweigh the differences. It’s just that the differences have always loomed larger in my mind, wedged in by every acquaintance who met my sister and commented on the fact that she “looked white.”

It always seemed like one more way we were different. One more way that she was “better,” and I feel a flare of outrage thinking that now. I am proud of my heritage. I wouldn’t want to be able to “pass” for anything but what I am. Yet I cannot deny that when I was young, looking like April seemed better. Easier.

April spots me and slows. Her lips compress, and I am flung back to my childhood, seeing that same look from every time I careened or bounced into a room. A moue of distaste for the wayward little sister who was always causing trouble, always disrupting April’s orderly life. I’m only five years younger, but that gap always felt huge. Insurmountable.

“No,” she says as she walks straight past me.

“I just want to talk.”

“Did I say no last night?” April doesn’t even glance over her

shoulder. “Go back to . . .” She flutters a hand over her shoulder. “Wherever you went.”

Dalton surges forward, but I stop him as I follow her into the garage. “I need your help, April.”

“If you’ve frittered away your inheritance, I’m not lending you money.”

If anyone else said this, I’d snap back a response. We both inherited seven figures from our parents, and mine has done nothing but grow since their death. Anyone who knows me—*at all*—wouldn’t be surprised by this. Yet the person who should know me best is the one thinking I’d blow through a million bucks and come to her for a handout.

But I don’t snap. I don’t even feel the urge. With April, I am forever that little girl scabbling up a mountain to get her attention. Forever trying to win her approval.

“I haven’t touched my inheritance,” I say evenly. “As I tried to explain on the phone, I need your medical assistance. For a friend who’s been shot in the back.”

She slowly pivots to stare at me. “What kind of trouble are you in, Casey?”

“None. Someone else—”

“A friend of yours has been shot, and you’re coming to me instead of taking him to a hospital? Did you shoot him?”

I flinch. I can’t help it. Thirteen years ago, I shot and killed a man. But April knows nothing of that, and it isn’t connected to the current situation.

Before I can answer, she turns away again. “Get this man to a hospital. Drop him off at the door if you need to. Then go away, Casey. Just . . .” Another hand flutter over her shoulder. “Go away again. Please.”

Dalton strides past and plants himself in her path. “Your sister is talking to you. Turn the hell around and listen to her.”

Her gaze flicks over him. Then she looks back at me. “Tell your fuck toy to move, Casey.”

“Hey!” I say, my voice high, part outrage and part shock. My sister is never vulgar. Even the mention of sex usually has her flushing bright red.

She looks up at Dalton. “Yes, that’s what you are. If you haven’t realized it yet, take a tip from me. My sister doesn’t date men. She just screws them.”

“Huh,” Dalton says. “Well, then I don’t know who I’ve been living with for the past six months, but I guess it’s not your sister. Or maybe I’m just special.” He looks over at me. “Tell me I’m special.”

I mouth an apology, but he dismisses it with a head shake. My sister isn’t far off, as he knows. Until Dalton, I hadn’t had a “boyfriend” since I was eighteen, and the reason for that had nothing to do with personal preference and everything to do with the fact that the guy I shot and killed *was* my last boyfriend.

April tries to walk around Dalton. He blocks her. He has his hands in his pockets, a clear signal that he will not physically stop her, but he’s not about to let her pass him easily either.

“This isn’t about me,” he says. “It’s about your sister. Who needs your help, and believe me, she wouldn’t be here if she didn’t.”

April opens her mouth. Then a woman in a nurse’s uniform enters the garage, and April straightens so fast I swear her spine crackles.

“Yes, I understand,” she says, in her most businesslike voice. “Let’s discuss this outside.”

She leads us through a side door to a grassy area. It’s empty, but she surveys it twice to be sure.

“If you wish to speak to me, I can spare . . .” She checks her watch. “Ten minutes. Then I have a salon appointment.”

Dalton snorts a laugh before catching her expression. “Fuck, you’re serious.” He shakes his head. “Are you sure you two are related?”

“Yes, we are,” April says coldly. “We simply don’t share the same sense of responsibility.”

“Yeah,” Dalton says. “You could learn a few things from Casey.”

She looks at me. “Please tell your guard dog he’s using up your ten minutes.”

I explain Kenny’s situation, as fast as I can. I’m a homicide detective, but I grew up in a family of doctors and had been expected to take a career in medicine, so I know enough to give April a decent assessment of the damage and the treatment so far.

“You have doctors treating him,” she says.

“No, we have me, plus an army veteran who received some medic training, and a psychiatrist with an MD but no on-job experience.”

“This man needs a doctor. A hospital.”

“The situation . . .” I glance at Dalton.

He nods, telling me to continue.

“The situation is not criminal,” I say. “Let me clear that up right now. I’ve been working in a remote community. Very remote. We’re more than willing to take the patient to a hospital, but he refuses to leave. He fears that if he goes, he won’t be allowed back. The community is . . . a safe haven.”

“Witness protection?”

“Something like that. It’s complicated. That’s all I can say, April. I am not asking you to do anything illegal. I wouldn’t.”

She’s eased back, her guard still up but flexing. “I can’t go on-site, Casey. I can recommend someone, but you really should get him to a hospital.”

“We know that. And we aren’t asking you to go on-site. Just consult. The two guys working with him are excellent medics. Steady hands. Steady minds.” I force a tiny smile. “Which was always what Mom and Dad said made a good surgeon.”

She flinches, and I realize maybe I shouldn't bring up our parents. She was always much closer to them than I was.

"We just need a consult," I say. "Lead them through the process of removing the bullet."

"Fine. We'll go to my place and video-link them in."

"It's not a video link." I reach into my bag and hand her a satellite phone.

She stares at it. Then she looks at me. "You're kidding, right?"

"Our town *is* very remote." I pull pages from my bag. "But we have the medical equipment." I flip through the stack. "Here are photos and X-rays . . ."

She flips through them and then slows for a second pass before slapping the pages back into my hand.

"This can't be done by a satellite phone, Casey."

"It's that bad?"

"No, it's . . ." She throws up her hands. "It's actually *not* that bad. The problem is the location of the bullet. It's a tricky extraction, and I don't care how steady your psychiatrist's hands might be, you need someone on-site who knows what she's doing." She consults her cell phone. "I can give you three days. Possibly four."

"What?"

"It's Thursday. I was planning to work in the lab today and tomorrow, but that's not necessary. I need to be back for Tuesday, when I'm consulting on a surgery. You can have me until then."

I HAVE no idea how we got from “I can’t spare fifteen minutes for you, Casey” to “I’m yours for the next four days.”

My sister is coming to Rockton, and I can’t quite wrap my head around that.

Dalton made the call to let her come, his excuse being that he doesn’t want to “bother” the council with it. The council is Rockton’s governing body, though they never set foot in the town. Two weeks ago, they sent us a serial killer for safekeeping. We aren’t equipped for that, and he escaped. During the ensuing chase, Kenny got shot in the back, which is why we need April. We also lost our de facto town leader, Val. A few days ago, the council sent us Phil, who used to be our radio contact for communicating with them. That means the communication system is a bit of a mess, and Dalton decides to skip it, which makes a very fine excuse.

There’s an old saying about it being easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. That’s what Dalton decides to do here. We don’t trust the council to let us bring April in, and if we don’t bring April in, Kenny will spend his life in a wheelchair. So, we’ll sneak April into Rockton. She’ll treat Kenny, and then

we'll spirit her out of there. If we do this right, the only people who'll know are those who *have* to know—all people we trust.

We cannot tell April where she's going. In this, Dalton treats her like a new resident. She gets the usual spiel. Don't ask where you're going. Don't try to figure it out. Leave your cell phone and all electronics behind. Make one call to the person others will phone if they can't contact you. Tell him or her that you're taking the weekend off. I suggest she say she needs a stress break, an offline sabbatical. Dalton wouldn't understand the concept. April will.

She balks at leaving her tech behind. I explain that we don't have cellular or Wi-Fi access, and even recharging her batteries would mean plugging into a generator. She doesn't care. She argues that she needs her laptop, even if it's offline. I can tell Dalton's frustrated—we need to get her on a plane ASAP—but I work it out. She can take the laptop, nothing more.

We escort April to her condo to pack. She doesn't much like that either, but we're taking a huge chance here, one that could blow up with a slip of the tongue when she makes that call. I overhear it. It's brief, and I don't ask who she called. I have her put an autoreply on her email and a message on her voicemail, explaining the offline weekend.

Then we're gone.

ROCKTON IS IN THE YUKON. It might seem like it'd be wise to hide that—fly commercial into northern British Columbia, and then take a small plane. That's pointless, really. No one is going to find it.

Rockton is a wilderness town of two hundred, hidden by both technological and structural camouflage. The Yukon is roughly the size of Texas with a population of thirty-eight thousand people. When Dalton first told me that, I thought he was misspeaking. He had to be. In a place that size, even tacking on a

zero would make it sparsely populated. Dalton never misspeaks when it comes to facts. There are indeed thirty-eight thousand people, three-quarters of them living in the capital, Whitehorse. The rest is wilderness. Glorious, empty, achingly beautiful wilderness.

As the plane begins its descent, I'm like a kid, with my nose pressed against the glass. I see the mountains, the tallest still drizzled with snow. And I see trees, endless waves of green in more shades than I ever thought possible. Beside me, Dalton reaches for my hand. Across the aisle, April sees me staring out the window, and I catch her frowning reflection in it.

"What do you see?" she asks when I turn.

Home. That's what I want to say. I see the only place I've ever truly considered home. She'd grimace at that, so I only say, "We're in the Yukon."

There's no one in the seat beside her, and she leans to peer out her window for exactly two seconds before straightening with, "Trees."

"Yep," Dalton says. "That's what you get in a boreal forest."

She ignores him and returns to working on her laptop. I think back to the first time I flew in. Even then, while I'd never consider myself outdoorsy, I'd been transfixed by the view. April has granted it only a fleeting glance, and with that, I'm five years old again, showing her an anthill or a turtle, waiting for a flicker of interest, and instead getting that two-second glance before she moves on.

We have a couple of hours before our connection to Dawson City, so I suggest popping into Whitehorse. Dalton's quick to agree—sitting in the tiny airport really isn't his idea of fun. April objects. It's only a two-hour wait. Leaving the airport is unwise. We'll need to go through security again. And really, what's the point?

"The point is that your sister wants a cookie," Dalton says. "And probably a cappuccino."

April stares, as if he's obviously kidding. He waves her to the exit and then prods her along, like a shepherd with a balking sheep.

I talk too much on the cab ride. I can't help it. I want April to see the incredible views and be stunned. To see the Yukon's "wilderness city" and be charmed. We go to the Alpine Bakery, and I know she's always been pro-organic, pro-natural-foods, and I want her to be impressed at finding that here. I want her to get a cup of locally roasted coffee and a freshly baked cookie and relax.

Instead, she frets. Is it really safe to let the cab leave? Shouldn't we just grab my snack and go? My God, is that loaf of bread actually seven dollars?

"It's the north," I say. "Everything's expensive."

Dalton proceeds to buy a bagful of baked goods—bread and scones and cookies—and a few pounds of coffee. We get our snack and chat to an athletic senior couple who retired here after a chance visit. That is the story I hear, over and over, people who came to the Yukon for a work trip, for vacation, on a temporary placement, and never left.

The Yukon isn't an easy place to live—with long, dark winters that never seem to end—but it is a place that people *choose*. A place that seduces. I don't need my sister to be seduced, but I want her to see the magic. As Dalton and I talk to the couple, she picks at her scone and keeps checking her watch. We still have an hour to go—plenty of time for the five-kilometer drive to the airport and the nonexistent security line—but her anxiety is contagious, and finally, with regret, I surrender to it.

THE FIRST TIME I came to Rockton, we drove from Whitehorse to Dawson City. Dalton and I have made that trip a couple of times since, when he needs supplies he can't get in Dawson. If he's picking up newcomers, he'll usually fly that leg, if only to

avoid being in a car with a stranger for six hours. That's what we do today. We fly into the tiny Dawson airport, and then we head into the hangar, where our bush plane awaits.

"Are you going to be okay with a small plane?" I ask.

She stares, uncomprehending, and I remember my first walk to this hangar, when Dalton handed me a couple of pills. Mild anti-anxiety meds for the flight. The former town doctor had known my background and sent the pills. I'd given Dalton a look not unlike April's, as I'd tried to figure out why anyone would think I needed medication.

"Your parents?" he'd said.

Because my parents died in a small-plane crash. I'd been walking to a small plane without even thinking about that. Ashamed, I'd hurried to cover it up, to not be the cold bitch unaffected by the tragic death of her parents.

When April gives me that look, I realize she's not making the connection either. I won't make it for her. I won't put her through that discomfort. So I just say, "Bush planes aren't for everyone."

"If you're referring to Mom and Dad's crash, I am well aware of the statistical unlikelihood of perishing under the same circumstances. I am many times more likely to die in a car accident, and yet I don't see people swearing off motor vehicles when a loved one passes that way."

Sorry I mentioned it.

I want to mutter that, as I would have when I was young. Instead, I stick to my adult method of dealing with April: I ignore her.

As we fly, the noise of the plane makes conversation difficult. Dalton and I still manage it, mostly in gestures, him pointing out something in the forest or me doing the same. April doesn't say a word. By the time we land and taxi into the hangar, I've forgotten she's even there, and I jump when she says, "Where are we?"

“Nowhere,” I say. Then I grin at Dalton. “Everywhere.”

April rolls her eyes. “I know I’m not supposed to ask for details. I simply didn’t realize it was quite so . . .” A scrunch of her nose. “Remote.”

“Yep,” Dalton says. “That’s why we warned you. No Wi-Fi. No cell service. We’ve got electricity, but it’s strictly rationed.”

“You’ll be able to use whatever you need with Kenny, though,” I say.

I haven’t used his name before, and I expect her to comment. She only waits for the door to open.

As I help Dalton unload the plane, April wanders outside. I hear the thump of running footsteps and then a happy bark that makes me grin.

Storm must circle past April, wide enough that my sister doesn’t notice a charging eight-month-old Newfoundland pup. The dog skids to a stop at my feet and dances with excitement until I give her the command. Then she jumps on me, front legs planted on my shoulders. After I hug her, she takes off to greet Dalton.

I step outside. April is about twenty feet away, at the edge of the clearing. I’m about to move away from the dark hangar when Anders jogs up behind April and pulls her into a hug.

“Didn’t go well with your sister, huh?” he says.

April jumps like she’s been knifed.

Anders falls back fast. “Shit. You’re not . . .”

“Not the sister who allows strange men to hug her?” she snaps.

I jog out from the hangar.

“So you let strange men hug you?” Anders calls to me. “Guess that explains how you ended up with the sheriff.”

I shake my head. “Will, this is my sister, April.”

“Yeah, I figured that.” He extends a hand. “Will Anders. Local deputy and the remaining third of the police force.”

She gives his hand a perfunctory shake. Then she sees Storm and startles.

“Not a bear,” Anders says. “Well, supposedly. Eric says she’s some fancy purebred, but I’m still convinced someone conned our sheriff and sold him a black bear cub.”

“She’s a Newfoundland,” I say, rubbing Storm’s neck. “She’s big, but she’s well trained. You just need to watch out for flying fur and slobber.”

“Isn’t that . . .” April peers at her. “Didn’t Aunt Becca’s boyfriend have a dog like that?”

I light up in a grin. I can’t help it. “He did. Nana—named after the Newfoundland in *Peter Pan*. I kinda fell in love with that dog, so Eric bought me this one.”

She mutters something under her breath. It sounds like “Of course he did,” but when I look up, she’s only shaking her head.

“Her name’s Storm,” I say. “Because of . . .”

I rumple her white-streaked ear. April looks at me blankly.

“X-Men,” Anders says. “Your sister is not afraid to let her geek flag fly. She’s even got us playing D&D.”

“Which was *your* idea,” I say.

April stares at Anders. Admittedly, he is kind of stare-worthy. Her look, though, is pure confusion. If there’s a stereotype of a guy who knows every rule in the D&D handbook, it is not Will Anders. He’s six foot two, with a military buzz cut and a US Army tat on one bulging black biceps.

“Do you have an actual patient that I’m supposed to see?” April says finally.

“Casey and Will were waiting for me,” Dalton says as he walks out of the hangar. “We have to sneak you into town, and I needed to put the plane to bed first. Now, let’s talk about how we’re going to do this.”

DALTON and I have already discussed how we'll manage this situation. As we walk to town, we let Anders in on the plan.

If we play this right, we'll get April in and out of Rockton, and the only other person who'll know she was here is Mathias, our psychiatrist-turned-butcher. There's a reason Anders mistook April for me. Before we boarded the bush plane, I had her change into my spare clothing. She's wearing my T-shirt and jeans, and after we left the plane, I gave her my jacket and ball cap, too. I had her pull her hair into a ponytail and tug it through the back of the cap, the way I wear mine.

No one will walk up to April face-on and presume it's me. The thing about Rockton, though, is that there are no strangers. As long as people only spot her in passing, they'll see who they expect to be wearing that ball cap and jacket.

We don't take her through town, of course. As soon as we draw near, she's in Anders's custody. Then Dalton and I continue on with Storm. Dalton marches into Rockton and straight to the first gaggle of residents he sees.

"Where's Phil?" he says.

They all turn with blank looks.

“The council guy,” I say. “Val’s replacement.”

“I think he’s holed up in her old place,” one says.

Dalton grunts a thanks and strides in that direction.

People tag along, hoping for scraps of information about Kenny. I promise an update soon. That would usually be enough to placate them, but Dalton uses the excuse to snarl and curse and make a whole lotta noise about how if the “fucking council found us a fucking new doctor, Kenny wouldn’t be in this fucking mess.” It’s pure theater—getting people’s attention while Anders spirits April around to the clinic. Fortunately, the town is accustomed to seeing their sheriff on a rant, and no one thinks twice about it. They just draw closer in hopes of some real entertainment once Dalton reaches Val’s house.

“Philip!” Dalton shouts when we’re within fifty feet. “Get your goddamn ass out here!”

It takes a few moments before the door creaks open. When Phil sees Dalton, he seems to contemplate the possibility of retreat. Dalton’s striding toward the house, looking like he’s two seconds from putting his hand on his sidearm and challenging Phil to a duel at high noon.

When I first met Dalton, I thought he looked like a Wild West sheriff. The way he carries himself. The strong jaw. The sun-weathered skin. The crow’s-feet forming at the corners of gray eyes that have spent too long squinting into the sun. Put him into Rockton, with its dirt roads and simple wooden buildings, and he seems right at home. Today, he’s even wearing the hat, one that’s meant to keep the sun off and slow that early damage but yes, I may have picked out one that bears more than a passing resemblance to a ten-gallon hat.

Phil, on the other hand, looks like the kind of guy who, if asked to “draw,” whips out his cell phone at lightning speed. Early thirties. Impeccably dressed. Chiseled face. An Armani suit model come to life. After a few days in Rockton, he’s forgone the jacket and tie, but he still wears the white shirt,

trousers and loafers. The shirt, admittedly, is beginning to look a bit rumpled. We don't have ironing boards in Rockton.

Before Phil arrived, he'd been a faceless voice on our satellite receiver, and I'd always pictured a nebbish-y middle-aged pencil pusher with a comb-over and paunch. I was still fighting the disconnect.

Phil steels himself and walks out, his chin lifting. "Is there a problem, Sheriff?"

"Yeah. This"—Dalton waves the satellite phone—"is a fucking piece of shit."

He whips the phone. To Phil's credit, he doesn't hit the deck. He just takes a quick step back as the phone smashes into the wall, pieces flying.

"That—that is an expensive piece of technology, Sheriff."

A few of the gathering locals titter. I hear at least one whispered request for popcorn.

"No, *that* is fucking piece of useless shit," Dalton says, bearing down on Phil. "Or did you fall asleep?"

"What?"

I answer as I walk up beside Dalton. "We hoped to speak to April before she went in to work. You'd said the phone would be manned at all hours."

"It was. I had a nap, of course, but Sam was watching it while I slept. I was awake at daylight, which up here is four in the morning, apparently."

"We called at four thirty," I lie. "And five. And five thirty. And six . . ."

"The fucking phone didn't work," Dalton says. "Which is a problem when it's the only fucking way we have to get in touch."

"I'm sure there was some other way—"

"Like what?" Dalton says. "Smoke signals?"

"It's a direct-link satellite phone," I say. "If it fails, we can't

just buy a new one. This is what happens when you refuse to give us another method of communication.”

“One fucking method of communication,” Dalton says. “We had a trained neurosurgeon on hand, ready to give Kenny the best goddamn care possible, and you fucked it up.”

“The council—” Phil stops himself and straightens. “I apologize, Sheriff. Yes, the council has very strict communication protocols, as you know, but in this case, you are correct that we needed redundancy.”

“Well, you can tell that to Kenny. The lack of fucking redundancy cost him the use of his legs.”

Phil clears his throat. “Redundancy means—”

“It means a backup plan,” Dalton says. “So just *say* you didn’t have a backup plan. You decided Kenny’s future mobility wasn’t worth making an exception to your goddamn rules.”

“The rules are there for security, Sheriff. Providing an unsecured satellite phone introduces the possibility of an intercepted call. Even letting you take that phone was dangerous. We allowed it to show that we do care about Kenny’s situation. Now we’ll need to get him someplace else, which means he cannot return to Rockton.”

“Not yet,” I say. “My sister gave me detailed notes based on the X-rays and photographs. Mathias and Will will attempt to remove the bullet. My sister believes that will be enough. Then, on Monday, we’ll fly to Dawson and provide a phone update.”

“I don’t think the council will want you leaving again so soon—”

“We are,” Dalton says. “For Kenny.”

A chorus of approval from the crowd. This isn’t just about Kenny. It’s us versus them. Rockton versus the council.

Not everyone here is a fan of our sheriff. He’s tough as hell, and even those who obey our laws don’t appreciate his endless rules. But they know each of those rules is designed to ensure they are safe here and return home alive.

Dalton is the one living with them, enduring the same conditions, and he'll be here long after they return to twenty-first-century life down south. In contrast, the council represents nameless, faceless bureaucracy. They enjoy hot showers and fine dining and modern technology from their high-rise towers, while dictating our conditions here. Even when they do show up, they're like Val and now Phil, sequestered in their house, putting in time until they can flee back to civilization.

The truth is that Phil could be the nicest guy imaginable, and the residents would still side with Dalton. The fact that Phil seems like a real dick doesn't help matters at all. He isn't an idiot, though. He hears those rumblings, and he looks out over the crowd, and he's very aware that he's no longer hiding behind the safety of a satellite receiver a thousand kilometers away.

"All right," he says. "I will convince the council that, in light of this mishap, you should be allowed to return to Dawson City to consult with Detective Butler's sister. I will also authorize funds to purchase additional supplies, so long as you are making the trip."

Phil raises his voice. "If anyone has items you need purchased, please compile a list. I will ensure the council authorizes extra funds, in light of everything you've been through in the past week."

"Bread and circuses for all," Dalton mutters.

Phil frowns over at us. "Hmm?"

"Nothing," I say. Then I turn to the crowd. "I want to get working on Kenny, and I'm going to ask for minimal distractions. I know everyone is worried about him, but this is a delicate operation, without a trained surgeon. If you can give us time and space, we would appreciate it."

"Sam?" Dalton calls into the crowd. "Jen? Nicki? Round up the militia. Those who aren't on patrol, I want them keeping a wide berth around the clinic. No one comes in or out until I say so. That includes you guys. Last thing Kenny needs is someone

slamming a door when Will's got a scalpel next to his spinal cord."

Nicole is closest to the front. "Understood. We'll maintain a twenty-foot barrier and clear the houses on either side."

"Thank you," I say, and then we head to the clinic.

APRIL IS ALREADY in the clinic when we arrive. She's assessed Kenny. Now, as he talks to her, she looks like she's wondering how soon she can anesthetize him. Of everything she's done, that pisses me off the most. While I'll be the first to admit that Kenny can be a bit puppy-dog eager, what she's doing feels like kicking that puppy, especially given his situation.

"Ignore my sister," I say as I walk in. "She's a scientist these days, and I think she's forgotten her bedside manner."

She shoots me a look of mingled annoyance and bafflement.

"Or," Anders murmurs beside me, "that's *why* she's a scientist."

Kenny gives a strained chuckle. "So it's been a while since you put someone under the knife, huh?"

"No," April says, with a glare for me now. "I have a medical license with a specialization in neurosurgery. I practiced full-time for five years before deciding my talents were better utilized in research, so I earned my Ph.D. on weekends."

"Oh, wow. That's . . ." Kenny shakes his head. "You and Casey are living proof that pretty girls can be smart, too."

I cringe, but this is typical Kenny.

"Of course they can," April says as she assesses our equipment. "The genetics required for both intelligence and attractiveness are independent. Which doesn't mean that one can achieve a medical license and Ph.D. effortlessly, regardless of IQ. I worked hard. My sister could have done the same, despite her lower intellectual starting point."

"Wow," Anders whispers. "Just . . . wow."

“I’m a slacker,” I say.

That makes Anders chuckle, but he still shoots me a concerned look, as if I might not be taking this so lightly. I am. Mostly. I grew up with this. My parents had my IQ tested as soon as possible. It’s 135. My sister’s—as theirs was—is above 140. To them, my “inferior” intellectual ability only meant I’d need to work harder. When I became a homicide detective, it proved I didn’t have the fortitude to do that extra work, to their everlasting disappointment. The fact that I’d dreamed of being a detective since I was a kid, running around with my fingerprint kit? Irrelevant.

Before anyone can speak, the door opens. In walks a slender man in his forties, carrying a wolf-dog cub.

“Uh, Mathias?” I say, pointing at the cub. “No spectators allowed.”

“He will be quiet. He is very sleepy.”

April blinks at the cub. “You can’t bring—”

“You must be the sister. It is a pleasure to meet you. *Parlez-vous français?*”

She stares at him.

“*Non?*” He looks at me and sighs. “Why did you not teach your sister French? This is most inconvenient.”

“Your English is fine, Mathias, but if you’re having trouble comprehending: *pose ce fichu chien.*”

“*Loup chien.* And his name is Raoul.”

“Did he say . . . wolf-dog?” April says.

“Ah, she does speak French. Excellent.”

“She understands it,” I say. “She won’t speak it. Now take that damn—”

He covers the cub’s ears and lays him on a blanket. “I have not yet decided upon a suitable sitter.”

“I can hold him for you,” Kenny says with a smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sadly, that would, I fear, be unhygienic. He will stay in his

corner and sleep. But when we are finished here, I would like the doctor to take a look at his leg." Mathias moves to the operating table. "It was caught in a snare. Casey did an excellent nursing job, but I would appreciate your opinion, Casey's-sister. When surgery is over, of course."

"I'm not a veterinarian," April says.

"The cub will not mind."

"Mathias?" I point to the operating table.

The cub pitches to his feet and toddles after Mathias.

Dalton scoops up the canine. "I'll take him on my rounds."

"Excellent idea," Mathias says. "He requires socialization to enhance his dog nature. Not too much, though. It would not bfit my carefully crafted personae to have a *friendly* wolf-dog."

Dalton shakes his head and leaves.

"Can we start now?" I ask.

"I will scrub in," Mathias says.

April nods at Mathias as he crosses the room. "I take it he's your psychiatrist."

"*Non*," Mathias says. "Casey does not require a psychiatrist. An occasional therapist perhaps, but we all do at times. My specialty is psychopathy and sociopathy, with the occasional antisocial personality thrown in for good measure, but only if he has committed the requisite number of atrocities. I have very exacting standards."

"Mathias?" I say. "Scrub."

"Have you ever conducted surgery?" April asks him.

"Not medically. However, I am the town butcher."

"Yeah," Kenny says. "No offense, Doc, but I think we'll let Casey's sister do the cutting."

"I cut very well," Mathias says. "And the human anatomy is not so different from—"

"Mathias?" I say. "Stop freaking out the patient. April is the surgeon. Will is assisting. You're the gofer."

"Gofer? That is rather degrading. What are *you* doing?"

“I’ll be playing anesthetist today. Unless you plan to *talk* him to sleep. Now go scrub up while I put Kenny down.”

I catch Kenny’s look.

“*Under,*” I say as Anders chuckles. “I mean put you under. Sorry.”

April sighs, and we begin.

THE BULLET IS OUT. And right now, that's all we can say.

"The bullet had shifted," April says as we're cleaning up. "There is still a possibility of permanent damage, and if that is the case, it is due to the movement of the bullet before I arrived."

"No one's going to blame you if Kenny isn't up and running tomorrow," Anders says. "We know how delicate an operation that was, and it went perfectly. Anything after this is because of unavoidable shifts in the bullet's location."

"They were not unavoidable," she says, and I wince behind Anders.

She continues. "The patient should have been kept immobile after the bullet struck. I realize that he had to be transported, but proper precautions were not taken."

When Anders tenses, I jump in with, "We did what we could, April. And the patient's name is Kenny."

"The fault might also be his own," she says. "He did not ensure his own immobility."

"You're blaming—?" I begin.

"April." Mathias extends his hand. "On behalf of Rockton,

we would like to thank you for your fine work. Will you be leaving soon? We can take matters from here, and I am certain you have work—very important work—to continue back home.”

April blinks, taken aback.

“Eric will fly her out Monday,” I say. “That gives Kenny time to wake up and, with any luck, the swelling will go down enough for April to evaluate his condition before she leaves.” I turn to my sister. “You’ll be staying in my old house. Will is going to escort you through the woods. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“SO YOUR SISTER’S A BITCH,” Dalton says as soon as we get home.

I laugh at that. A full-blown whoosh of a laugh, as if I’ve been holding myself tight all day and can finally relax. Which is true. Our door closes, and I am home with my guy and my dog. There’s no one I need to pretend for anymore.

“Now you see where I get it from,” I say as he follows me into the kitchen.

“Fuck, no. You’re tough, and you can be . . .” His lips purse as he searches for the word. “Reserved. That’s not a bitch.” He jabs a finger in the direction of the clinic. “That’s a bitch. You might look like sisters, but the resemblance ends there.”

“She’s smarter than me.”

He rolls his eyes. “For someone like that, IQ is just a number they hold up to make themselves feel superior. You know how many times residents announce their fucking IQ when I try to give safety instructions on chopping wood?” He shakes his head. “Like intelligence will keep them from cutting off their damned hand.”

I reach for the fridge, but Dalton stops me. He takes a bag from the counter, one that wasn’t there when we left yesterday.

From it, he pulls out the loaf of bread we bought in Whitehorse. Then he produces something even more magical.

“Is that butter?” I say. “Real butter?”

“It is.”

We get fresh bread from our bakery, but butter is a perishable we can’t afford.

Dalton waves for me to sit as he saws off four thick slices and slathers them in butter. I may start to drool. He takes out our peanut butter and adds a layer. Then he steps back and eyes the open-faced sandwich.

“Missing anything?” he says.

“Gimme.”

He pulls chocolate chips from the grocery bag. “Are you sure it’s not missing anything?”

I laugh then and say, “I think I love you.”

His brows rise. “Think?”

I stand and put my arms around his neck. Then I kiss him, a deep, long kiss that ends with me on the kitchen table, my legs around him. I’m pushing up his T-shirt when his stomach rumbles.

“Dinner first,” I say as I pull down his shirt. “Also, this confuses the dog.”

Sure enough, Storm sits by the table, her head tilted. We’ve trained her to retreat to the kitchen when things heat up elsewhere in the house. So when they heat up *in* the kitchen, she has no idea where to go. The last time, she hid under the table . . . and then went zooming out when it started rocking.

Dalton puts chocolate chips on my sandwich and on one corner of his. Then he pours glasses of water, and we sit and eat.

“I knew your family was fucked up,” he says. “But I thought it was just your parents.”

“Messed-up parents; messed-up kids.”

His lips tighten at that. He chews and then says, “She’s your

older sister. If there were problems with your parents, she should have looked out for you. That's what older siblings do."

"It's what *you* do with Jacob. But I don't get the impression there were any serious issues with your birth parents."

He takes another bite, avoiding the topic of his birth parents altogether, as usual.

"I'm not sure April ever saw issues with our parents," I say. "I was the underachiever. The disappointment."

"So April piles on and treats you like shit, too?" He shakes his head. "I knew you weren't close. I didn't know it was this bad. Otherwise, I'd have found another solution for Kenny."

"I'll be fine."

Another two bites. Then, "I still wish you'd talk about it more. Your family."

"I will when you will."

He stops mid-bite and nods, acknowledging the point. That's all he does, though. Acknowledges it and keeps eating.

"I don't talk about it because I don't want to go back there," I say. "I've moved on. I know I sometimes push myself too hard because I still hear their voices, but you make sure I don't overdo it. My life isn't all about my job anymore, and that wasn't entirely their fault."

"I know."

"I'm not the messed-up kid I used to be. April will see it and . . ." I shrug. "Even thinking that puts me right back there. When I was little, I wanted her attention so badly. More than I ever wanted my parents'. I'd do goofy things to make her smile. I'd find interesting science tidbits to make her listen. It never worked, and instead of backing off, I'd just try harder, make a fool of myself."

"You were a kid who wanted her big sister to notice her. That's normal. Remember what Jacob said, about how he'd follow me to my hideaway, go in after and play with my stuff? I

feel bad about that. He wanted my attention, and sometimes I just had to be alone.”

“*Sometimes*. That’s the difference. You needed a break from being a big brother, and April . . .” I lean back in my seat. “There was nothing to take a break *from*. There was no relationship there. I thought I’d accepted that, and then I find myself right back in that old dynamic. I want her to see what I see here. In the Yukon. In Rockton. I’m like that little kid, hoping for a reaction, and ultimately, making a fool of myself.”

“Pointing out a moose is ‘making a fool of yourself’?”

I give him a look.

“I do know what you mean,” he says. “Reminds me of when you first came here. You’d show sparks of interest—in the animals, the landscape, the life—and I’d jump on it . . . and then you’d back off. I’m the one who felt like the overeager kid, tripping over myself to impress you.”

“Uh, I don’t remember anything vaguely like *tripping* over yourself. I do remember that I was worried about seeming *too* interested in Rockton and maybe . . .” I slant a glance his way. “Too interested in you.”

“I definitely don’t remember that.”

“You were fascinating and infuriating and . . . unique. I couldn’t tell what to make of you. I just knew that I wanted to get to know you better.”

“I felt the same about you. I also felt like I tripped over myself chasing those sparks of interest.”

“While I was trying to play it cool. We learn that, don’t we? Hit high school and you need to chill, tone it down, which usually means showing no interest in anything.”

“Good thing I never went to high school.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy, huh? But I didn’t come from an exuberant, expressive family to begin with, so I know I can be . . . what’s the word you used? Reserved.”

“You can.”

I look up at him. “You do know I’m happy here, right? Even if I’m not screaming it at the top of my lungs?”

“I do.”

“And you know how I feel about you.”

He hesitates, and my heart slams against my ribs.

“I’m crazy about you,” I say. “I hope you know that. I say I love you, but that always seems weak. This is . . .” I take a deep breath. “It’s miles beyond anything I’ve felt before.”

“Yeah, I know.” He eases back in his chair and smirks. “I just like to hear you say it.”

“Jerk.”

“Not ‘asshole’? Pretty sure that deserved an ‘asshole.’”

“I’m being nice to you, because I’m done.” I walk over and straddle his lap. “And I was promised dessert.”

“Pretty sure I never actually . . .” He watches as I shed my shirt and bra. “My mistake. I definitely promised dessert.”

“Just not in the kitchen.”

He laughs and then scoops me up and carries me past Storm, out of the kitchen.

WE’RE OUT FOR A WALK. Just the two of us, which feels like parents sneaking away on their kid. As much as Storm loves her jaunts, sometimes we need to take one without her, relax and enjoy the night as a couple.

It’s past midnight, the sun finally dipping below the horizon. It’s warm, too. I haven’t spent a summer here, but I’m told to expect temperatures in the low to mid twenties—Celsius, that is—which is damn near perfect for me, since I’ve never been fond of hot and humid.

Despite the romantic stroll, we aren’t completely slacking off. We’re also patrolling the town’s borders. Warmer temperatures mean residents throw off the shackles of the long, cold, dark winter, and they go a little crazy, also throwing off the rules

that keep them inside our boundaries. There isn't a fence around Rockton. The council tried that, but it just made people feel like they were in an armed camp. Better to treat them like adults. Which works better when they act like it. We've already had incidents this spring, with people sneaking off for a moonlight walk—or moonlight sex—in the woods.

When we spot a figure in the woods, Dalton opens his mouth, ready to launch a profanity-laden tirade that'll send the offender tearing back to town like a dog caught off its property. But before he can say a word, I grab his arm, my fingers tightening.

He looks down at me.

"Can you tell who that is?" I whisper.

He squints and then shakes his head. It's a figure in a dark jacket, hood pulled up. The size looks male, but even that is an educated guess.

"If you shout, you'll lose him," I say.

Most times, Dalton would be willing to just do that. It's not worth his time to punish someone for being ten feet outside town. Yet when the town's under a strict lockdown, a scare isn't enough.

Dalton slips off. I count to ten, and then I circle the other way, approaching the figure from the rear.

The man is just standing there, looking toward Rockton. Which is odd. The point of sneaking out is to put town life behind you for a while. The only reason to be on the edge looking toward it is . . .

If you're watching someone inside.

Did someone spot April? See enough in the shadowy twilight to realize she wasn't me?

Yet we aren't near my old house. Nor are we near the clinic.

My next guess is, unfortunately, a male resident paying unwelcome attention to a female one. Guys make up three-quarters of our population. At least a third of the women are

here to escape a partner—a stalker or abusive ex—which means they aren’t exactly looking to strike up a new relationship. That leaves a serious shortage of available partners for heterosexual men, which can lead to guys having trouble hearing the word “no.”

I mentally map the town. Two of the border buildings nearby are storage units, and the only house belongs to Anders. That doesn’t mean this *isn’t* a stalker. Our deputy gets his share of unwanted attention from both sexes.

I ease to the side for a better look and realize this guy isn’t behind Anders’s house. He’s looking between the two storage buildings. He has one hand raised. I didn’t notice that at first—it’s on the other side of his body—but when I move, I see he’s holding something to his face.

Binoculars. I’m trying to remember whether we have a compact pair like that when a shadow moves through the trees. A dark figure heading right for the man.

Dalton.

I swear under my breath. Of course Dalton is coming. While I’ve been trying to solve this puzzle, he’s been waiting for me to approach the guy. If I don’t, he will.

“Did you miss the goddamn announcement?” Dalton says, his voice ringing out. “We’re under a fucking cur—”

He stops. Goes completely still and then says “Casey!” as his hand flies to his holstered gun. The guy wheels, and I see his face.

A face I do not recognize.