

After the Chill

by Rachael Harbourne

Victoria stared at herself in the mirror as she pulled the thick woolen cap over her auburn hair. Her hair was the only thing that stood out nowadays amid the blinding white landscape; if anyone were to see her from a distance, she would project the image of a scorching flame. Her green eyes seemed to radiate in the dim light, flecks of red and gold splattered like paint across her irises. Her cheeks had a permanent wintry glow to them; not the rosy complexion of Christmas legends that children clung to, but the glow of a bitter frost, ever so slowly etching its way across her features, delving into her pores and freezing her blood vessels as they burst under her skin. Her eyes were the only part of her that truly looked like her father, and as Victoria stared into the mirror, the image of him exploded across her vision. She squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again, he was washed away through the blur of tears.

Victoria walked over to the dining room table and did one last inspection on her Browning bolt action .308 rifle, checking her ammo and making some last minute adjustments to the scope. It had been her father's rifle, and he had cherished it almost as much as he had cherished Victoria and her mother. She remembered the day her father had taught her how to shoot – it was eight years ago, a crisp autumn morning on her eleventh birthday. They went out to the lake together, and he taught her everything about it: where the safety was, how to hold it, where to rest her cheek. He taught her to aim using her naked eye first, because he had always believed that a hunter was only ever as strong as her eyesight was sharp. Eventually though, he taught her how to shoot with the scope, because it was the more practical approach.

Victoria took it over to the couch and stood it up against the armchair as she sat down. She pulled on her black leather steel-toed boots, and laced them up so tight she could barely feel her feet – but not feeling her feet was better than letting the ice wrap around and numb them for

hours. She picked up her gloves and squeezed her hands into them, securing the leather around her wrists with a thick layer of duct tape, trapping the ice out. She snatched her Bowie tactical hunting knife off the coffee table in front of her, the blade screeching against the glass. Tucking the blade into her boot and grabbing her rifle, she stood up and walked to the door. Victoria set the rifle against the doorframe as she tugged her fur-lined coat off its hook and shrugged it on, zipping it up just above her nose.

Before opening the door, she grabbed the Smith and Wesson 1911 pistol off the wooden bench sat by the entrance. Her father had given it to her before they left for town.

That was 136 days ago.

“We’re just going into town real quick to get some provisions before the storm. They say it’s gonna be the worst snow storm Vernal has seen in 70 years. Isn’t that right Marshall?”

Victoria glanced up from the television to look at her mother as she swept into the kitchen in search of her father.

“Cities across Utah are bracing for the storm, which is set to come in from the west end of Colorado, first hitting Jensen, Naples, Vernal and Maeser, and continuing west from there.”

The weatherman gestured to the green-screened map behind him, obviously trying to keep his cool as anxiety shook his voice, edging through the professionalism of his crisp blue suit.

“An evacuation plan has been put in place, but at the rate this storm is moving, it might be safer to hunker down, stay warm, and ride out the blizzard. Let’s pray this cold front passes as quickly as it appeared.”

Victoria rolled her eyes and looked back down at her magazine. People always freaked out about snowstorms and they never turned out as bad as they said it was going to be. After all,

her mother had just said that the last massive snowstorm that hit Vernal had been 70 years ago. That was back when TV shows were still black and white. Victoria wasn't worried in the slightest. She looked up as her father crouched down in front of her.

“If anything happens, you know where my gun is.”

“Oh Marshall come on, it's only a thirty-minute drive into town.”

“I know Cindy, just let me do my overprotective father thing.”

Victoria and her mother laughed as her father looked back at her and winked, a soft smile spreading across his face as his green eyes stared into hers. Victoria glanced up at her mother, who was wrapping her favorite cashmere scarf around her neck.

“Are you sure you don't want me to come with you guys?”

“Yes hun, don't worry about it. Marshall, I'm going to go start the car.”

Victoria's mother blew her a kiss before she turned and walked out of the door. Her father stood up and placed a gentle kiss on top of her head.

“We'll be back before you know it sweetie.”

Victoria tucked the gun into the holster on the waistband of her pants, and shouldered her backpack. In it were her usual provisions: a second set of clothes, binoculars, a compass, a box of ammo, freeze dried food – mac and cheese with vegetables this time – and a camelback full to the brim with water. She slung the rifle over her shoulder as she turned towards the door.

Bracing herself, Victoria yanked it open, and the air immediately sent a shock wave through her body that she had yet to become accustomed to – after all this time, she didn't think she would ever adapt to it. The damp air chilled her to the core, tendrils of ice coating the blood surging through her body. She slammed the door shut behind her, careful not to let too much heat escape.

Victoria shivered as she wrapped her arms around herself. She looked up at the sky as small flurries began to trickle down, and she stuck her tongue out to catch one. She sighed and looked back down across the lake. Patches of ice had already begun to form across portions of the lake, and Victoria knew it wouldn't be long before the entirety of the lake was frozen shut. It was only a few weeks ago that the ducks had been out playing in the lake, and Victoria giggled at the memory of their tiny legs flailing about above the water as they dove beneath the surface in search of food; but her laughter quickly stuck in her throat as she thought about her parents. They always fed the ducks pieces of bread together during the fall, but now the landscape was barren, and not a single sign of life was present on the icy lake. She took a shaky breath and shoved the memory out of her mind – she had more important things to think about. Victoria pulled her phone out of her pocket, lighting up the screen as she flipped it open. She raised it into the air and spun in a slow circle – still no signal. She sighed and snapped the phone shut, frustrated as she shoved it back into the pocket of her jeans.

Victoria blew into her hands, the heat warming them for a few seconds. Rubbing them together, she trudged up the path that led to the road, the gravel crunching under her boots. Looking down, Victoria noticed that the small patches of grass that hadn't died off during the snowstorm had started to become icy. They glistened in the sunlight, frozen droplets of dew covering the blades. The pansies her mother had planted a few weeks ago had already died off from the freeze; they laid drooped along the icy ground, the frost spider-webbing along the edges of the purple and pink petals.

It had been a week and a half since the storm had hit Vernal. The winds had ripped across her little cabin and whistled through the windows. Snow flurries flew down the chimney in heaps, collecting in little mountains until they melted away into puddles of water. Victoria

placed buckets along the opening of the chimney, but she still mopped the hearth three times a day. She crossed off each day her parents had been gone on her calendar with a thick red marker; the tally was up to 8 by the time the snowstorm finally calmed down. Two more days had passed by the time the snow had melted enough for Victoria to budge the door open, and her parents still hadn't come back. This was the first day the majority of the snow had melted since the storm had stopped, and Victoria decided it was time to brave the cold; she kept telling herself that her parents were just helping with the damage the storm must have wreaked on the town, but she couldn't help but be worried that something worse might have happened.

Her bones cracked as she stepped farther from the warmth of her cabin and out onto the frozen landscape. The edge of the lake was barely visible and the forest of pine trees beyond that were entirely non-existent to those who didn't already know of its whereabouts before the chill. Victoria shoved her hands into her coat pockets as she circled around to the side of the cabin and began to climb up the snowdrift. It had gotten so high over the past couple of weeks that it was beginning to tower over her little lodge, forming a hill of frozen snow so thick that it might as well be a new mountain. By the rate the snow was falling, she had no doubt it would become the size of one within the next six months – at least. She didn't want to think about what would happen to her then.

She shrugged off her backpack and rifle and set them in the snow, careful not to let too much of the fresh powder into the barrel of the gun. She crouched down to unzip the bag, rummaging around for a second until she found what she was looking for. Standing back up, Victoria slung the strap of the binoculars around her neck and flipped open her compass. She turned until she was facing northwest and the icy wind was blowing across her face, delicate snowflakes swirling past her vision and sticking to her eyelashes. She had learned from her

father that walking upwind was vital for hunting, because if the deer can't smell you, they won't ever know you're coming.

Victoria lifted the binoculars to her eyes and checked her surroundings. Nothing in sight for miles around but snow and dead trees. Every time she looked through those lenses she hoped to see another living soul, flesh and blood like herself. But she knew better than to hope for things like that. She hadn't seen another person since the storm hit, after the chill had blanketed her little town and the ice had made the roads too thick to salt. Vernal seemed frozen in time and in a sense, it was.

Victoria pulled out her cellphone and glanced at the small square screen. *2:17 pm*. She'd be walking for over 2 hours and had felt like she'd barely gotten anywhere – she still had another 8 hours to go before she reached the town. The snow was getting thicker the longer she walked, and the tip of her nose felt numb. She reached up and pushed her finger into her nose, wiggling it around to get the blood flowing, but it was no use. Victoria shoved her hands back into her pockets and marched along, the icy wind blowing flurries into her face. She looked down as her feet clomped over the gravel, crunching and scraping the rocks under the soles of her boots. She noticed that the farther she walked, the more frost coated the ground, incasing the pebbles in little balls of ice. Victoria kicked her foot along the road, sending up myriad of rocky ice balls into the air and skidding along the road – they softly *clinked* against the icy road before rolling to a stop. She looked up as a team of Canada geese flew overhead in a lopsided V-formation, their black wings beating against the grey sky; an occasional honk sounded from the back of the team as the geese flew farther away from her. The sign of the Canada geese above her gave Victoria hope that things weren't as bad as her imagination had told her.

Victoria took out her phone again and shoved it into the air, swinging it back and forth in front of her. The words *No Signal* kept flashing in the upper left-hand corner of the screen and Victoria let out an exasperated grunt. She frantically clicked the buttons on the keypad and smacked the back of the phone into her palm, trying to force a signal into it. Victoria stopped walking and turned the phone over, sliding off the plastic backing and yanking the battery out as she mumbled her frustrations. “There has to be some sort of signal out here for god’s sake.”

Victoria blew into the cavity of the phone and wipe the battery with the sleeve of her sweater. After a few seconds, she shoved the battery back into the phone and slapped the cover back on. She flipped it open, desperately hoping for a single bar to appear on the screen – *No Signal*. Victoria screamed and stamped her foot on the ground. She closed her eyes, breathing hard through her nose. She tilted her face towards the sky, letting the snowflakes fall like a blanket over her face as she took in a couple of deep breaths. She exhaled loudly, listening to the wind whooshing past her frozen ears.

Victoria’s eyes snapped open.

She looked down the road, and though she couldn’t see anything, the faint sound of a car alarm was blaring in the distance. Victoria started running.

Snapping the compass closed, she shoved it into her pocket and pulled off the binoculars. After unceremoniously stuffing them back in, she hoisted the backpack onto her shoulders and picked up her rifle. A few snowflakes had collected on the brim of the barrel and she blew them off as she trekked towards the forest.

The snow crunched under her boots as she walked down the hill, the wind whistling past her ears. Every now and then, a soft rumble shook the snow under her boots, but Victoria paid

no attention to it. A few weeks after the chill set in, a soft vibration began to resonate across the earth. It seemed to reverberate up through the snow, but no matter how many times Victoria pressed her ear to the icy ground, she could never pinpoint its exact location – nor could she begin to fathom exactly what it was. At times, the vibrations grew stronger and shook the walls of her cabin and the soot from the chimney, but it never lasted any longer than a minute. Now, the constant shaking was as familiar to her as the endless snowfall.

Victoria scanned the treetops. Many of the birds hadn't had time to migrate before the storm came, and because it was too early on their natural clocks, they had died within a matter of days. A few of them had survived though, and every now and again, she could hear the high-pitched cry of an osprey or the erratic song of a belted kingfisher. Victoria had never realized just how loud the world was until the sounds of life were quenched in a frozen dream.

Victoria's feet smacked along the gravel road. The blaring horn was getting louder and her eyes darted from side to side, searching through the trees for signs of people or a car – she didn't see anything. Victoria stopped running and bent over her knees, gasping for breath as her lungs burned for oxygen. She stood up, cupping her hands around her mouth and screamed into the open air.

“Hello!”

Victoria waited a moment, straining to listen for any sound of life within the trees, but still, she heard nothing. She switched back and forth between a speed walk and a jog as she scanned the trees. Tears began pouring down her face as she continued calling out. She whirled around, pulling her hands through her hair; the snow began to come down harder and faster and she knew it would only be a matter of time before she lost sight of the road completely.

Victoria let her hands fall to her sides as she glimpsed the dim glow of a flashing yellow light; that's when she noticed the path of broken trees and branches. She screamed out again as she ran towards the light, pushing through the wreckage as she made her way deeper into the forest.

“Hello? I'm here, I'm coming! It's oka—“

Victoria skidded to a halt. The tail end of a 2000 maroon Honda Passport stuck out through the trees, one tail light flashing. The alarm became a dull thrum as Victoria stumbled back, her hands pressed to her stomach as a strangled sob escaped her throat. She grabbed onto a tree as she slowly made her way to the front of the car. The hood of the car was crushed so far in that Victoria could see the engine. A portion of the tree they had crashed into was sitting on top of the hood, and some of the thicker branches had broken through the glass. A spray of blood was speckled along the inside of the windshield; Victoria turned and vomited onto the ground.

After a few seconds, she turned back around, wiping her hand across her mouth. Victoria leaned against the tree behind her as she stared at the cracked windows. She reached a shaking hand forward and pulled the door handle open with a *click*. Her father's green eyes stared out at her as a limp hand fell against the side of his seat. Victoria cried out and stumbled back against the tree as tears started to blur her vision. She glimpsed her mother in the passenger seat, slumped against the door, her forehead pressed into the window.

“*No.*”

Victoria frantically tried to unbuckle their seatbelts, but the locks were jammed in place, and no amount of yanking could pull them free. She reached across to her mom, but before she could even try to unbuckle her seatbelt, she saw her parent's hands clamped together, holding onto each other for dear life. Victoria pulled her hands back and covered her mouth as the tears continued to stream down her face. She *couldn't* move them.

She sank to the ground. Grasping onto her father's hand, she screamed into the open air until her voice became raw, and she began to rock back and forth in the snow as sobs wracked her body.

Victoria took out her compass as she neared the edge of the forest, making sure she was still walking northwest and into the wind. She looked behind her but already her footprints had been erased, the snow trying to make it look like she never existed at all. Snapping her compass closed, she turned and continued into the line of trees, scanning the ground for any sign of a deer – with the rate the snow was falling, it was going to be a difficult task.

The trees creaked and groaned as she moved through them, the wind pushing through their boughs. It was eerie listening to the trees, and they sounded as though they could come alive at any moment, uprooting themselves to revolt against the chill. But they were held in place, a thin layer of ice coating each one, sparkling in the sunlight; just like everything else, the trees too were stuck in an icy limbo.

Victoria spotted a frozen creek and slowly began to make her way down the slope, grabbing onto each tree she passed so she didn't slip down and disturb what was left of the forest. Despite the chill freezing everything in its path, the more resilient of the animals had learned to adapt to the new atmosphere; just as Victoria had become stronger, so had they. Many of the animals' fur became thicker in order to shelter them from the brutal conditions of the weather and to help accommodate for the chill seeping out through the very ground. As the fur became thicker, claws became longer and sharper to dig through the hard packed snow and thick ice. Victoria had only ever glimpsed the occasional scratch marks along the surface of the ice or puncture wounds in the snow, and she did her best to avoid those marks of nature. The creatures making those marks were not the creatures she needed to hunt. Victoria paused as she

approached a tree with long, ragged claw marks. They were deep enough to scar the tree through the layer of ice. She ran her fingers across the slashes and bits of ice and slush fell away at her touch. Victoria scanned the area, but there weren't any signs of life around her. The snow was clean and undisturbed, but she clutched her rifle closer to her body as she continued walking.

As she neared the end of the slope, the heel of Victoria's boot caught on something hard beneath the snow. Her vision went blurry as the ground came rushing up towards her and the creek was catapulted into the sky. A surprised shriek rang out through the forest as Victoria landed hard on her back, sliding the last few feet down the slope before coming to a stop on the flat ground. She groaned, shutting her eyes tight, as something from her backpack dug into her spine. Victoria laid on the ground as she tried to catch her breath, opening her eyes to look up at the forest of trees towering into the sky and the gentle snowfall swirling down towards her. Victoria took a shaky breath as she pushed herself up into a sitting position; she looked behind her and saw the edge of a frozen rock sticking up out of the snow. A thin layer of ice coated its smooth top, making it almost invisible under the layers of soft snow. Victoria grumbled as she pushed herself over onto her hands and knees and slowly stood up, her knees and ankles cracking as she stretched her stiff limbs. Victoria stooped to reach for her rifle when she heard a sharp *snap*; she froze, her fingers just inches from the barrel, and slowly lifted her eyes.

Standing just ten feet up the slope, Victoria rested her gaze upon a massive 10-point mule deer. He stared down at her, his powerful chest rising and falling as hot steam blew out of his nose. His face and neck were bright white, his dark forehead and black nose a startling contrast against his striking features; his thick, brown fur looked grey under the snowflakes that settled on his back. His nose twitched as the wind carried her smell up to him, and he pawed his hoof through the thick snow. The deer's antlers were massive, and each of its 10 tines curved sharply upwards. He was in the process of shedding the velvet from his antlers, and long pieces hung in

bloody strips around his face. The tines were bright red, and occasional drops of blood bloomed across the snow as the deadened tissue continued to peel away. The deer didn't seem to pay much attention to them as he gently shook his head, clearing the snow from his nose; a piece of the velvet smacked across the deer's face, and he stuck out his tongue, gentling nibbling on a corner of the strip.

Victoria quietly closed her fingers around the barrel of her rifle, keeping her eyes on the deer as she straightened her stance. She slowly unzipped the top of coat before lifting the gun to her face. The strap of the gun scuffed against the metal as Victoria slowly aligned the scope to her eye, focusing the crosshairs on the center of the deer's chest. Moving her finger around the trigger, she took a deep breath, trying to calm her beating heart. Before she could pull it, the deer whipped his head to the side, ears alerted to a sound she couldn't hear. The deer raised his head as his nose twitched, sniffing the air, and his ears gently swiveled back and forth in the direction of the sound. Victoria glanced in the direction the deer was focused on, but saw nothing of interest. Suddenly, the deer looked straight at her, eyes wide and ears pointed forward; they stared at each other for a beat before he jerked and bounced away. The deer was out of sight within a few seconds, but Victoria could still hear the sound of his hoofs crunching through the snow.

Victoria sighed and lowered the barrel of the rifle. She rested the strap of her gun over her shoulder, holding onto the base as she turned towards the creek. She stopped in front of it and tapped her toe against the thick white ice, and a thin layer of slush piled in front of her shoe. She pressed her boot flat against the frozen creek and it crunched under her weight, but still not a single crack appeared on the surface. It was as thick as it was when it first froze over almost four months ago. Victoria kicked the slush away and stepped back from the creek, eyeing the forest ahead of her. A puff of steam clouded in front of Victoria's vision as she slowly breathed out.

As a gust of wind whistled through the trees, she thought she heard the crunching of snow echoing through the forest around her. She looked up in the direction the deer had disappeared too, thinking he had come back, but there was no sign of him. She began walking to the edge of the tree line when she heard a soft grunt. Victoria felt the blood drain from her face and she slung her rifle off her shoulder and raised it up, positioning the scope in front of her eye. She quickly checked her surroundings for any threats, but the forest was empty.

Everything had become eerily silent.

The rifle still clutched in her right hand, she crouched down and placed her gloved palm on the hard packed snow. She didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. She sat there a second longer while she glanced up, doubling checking her surroundings. Suddenly, Victoria's eyes went wide with fear – she didn't feel *anything*. The vibration was gone. She closed her eyes, barely breathing, as she listened to the air around her. The silence was overwhelming. She dropped her backpack to the ground and quickly stood up, whirling around as she brought the rifle up, steadying the butt firmly into her shoulder as she rested her cheek against the stock. Eyes aimed past the barrel, she slowly pivoted on her heel. She made a full circle until she was facing the creek again and slowly lowered her rifle, no sign of an imminent threat.

Victoria relaxed and let the rifle hang at her side when she heard a thick snap behind her. She whirled back around, simultaneously raising her rifle but it was knocked out of her hand. It skidded across the snow and smacked up against a tree with a sharp crack, shattering the ice at the base. Terror flooded her veins as a full grown black bear stood before her, roughly five feet away. Its thick, mangy fur was coated in a fine layer of snow and the smell of dirt and death steamed off its back. It bared its teeth, panting as it locked eyes with her. The condensation of its breath hung in the air like a cloud.

Her mind was racing, adrenaline telling her to run, but even if she wasn't frozen to the spot she knew that a black bear could run at an average of thirty miles an hour; she wouldn't be able to get more than twenty feet away before its powerful legs overtook her. Victoria flexed her fingers in the direction of the rifle, and the bear let out a growled. She knew that if she even glanced at it, the bear would tear her limb from limb, so she kept her eyes firmly locked on its own. She ran her eyes across the length of the animal and immediately knew that something was wrong. Not even the thick, mangy fur could hide the signs of starvation. The bear weakly lowered its head and Victoria watched as small puffs of air rose from its open mouth, its breaths labored and slow. She knew it could still overpower her, but the bear's obvious weakness meant she had a chance. She took a step backward and grimaced as her boot crunched into the snow.

It took everything in Victoria not to scream and cover her ears as the bear widened its jaws, a deep guttural growl ripping through its throat and piercing her eardrums. It shook its head and lowered its gaze back to her. The bear took a step forward, its eight inch claws digging into the snow, as Victoria took a tentative step back, simultaneously reaching for her pistol. The bear growled but she didn't pull back. They stared at each other and Victoria noticed the bear begin to tense, ready to charge. The air around them was completely still.

Victoria whipped the gun out of its holster, pulled the slide back, and clicked the safety off with her thumb as the bear leapt towards her, teeth bared and claws outstretched. Her finger found the trigger and she squeezed—

The bullet ricocheted off a tree behind the bear, shattering its icy trunk it into a million sparkling fragments as the bear knocked Victoria onto her back. She managed to maintain a hold on the pistol until her back collided with the ground, and she gasped as the breath was knocked out of her.

She cried out as it dug its claws into her shoulders, pinning her to the ground with its full weight – she heard a pop and screamed as her shoulder exploded in pain, stars dancing across her vision. It roared into her face, saliva spraying down onto her and the smell of rotten meat engulfing her senses. It was so rancid she could almost taste it and she gagged as the stench wafted up her nose and down her throat. The bear leveled its face with hers, long strings of saliva dripping from its jowls and onto her cheeks, snarling in the back of its throat.

The two stared at each other, and Victoria saw herself reflected back in its glossy black eyes. She blinked and suddenly, she saw her father, grinning up at her from his crouched position on the floor the day her parents left and never came back. She squeezed her eyes shut and saw her parents waltzing across her closed eyelids to Moonlight Serenade, the first song they had danced to at their wedding. She heard her mother laugh as her father strolled into the living room with his pants hiked up past his belly button and a ratty old tank tope tucked into them, a pair of gold rounded glasses perched on the edge of his nose. She let out a strangled cry as her eyes shot open, gasping as she fought back the sob building in her chest. Tears leaked down the side of her face and she blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision.

The bear brought its face closer and sniffed her hair. Victoria splayed her hands out into the snow and was shocked to feel the hilt of the hunting knife at the tip of her fingers – it must've slipped from her boot when the bear took her down. She tried to reach for it, but it was too far to get a firm hold on. Stretching as far as she could, she was slowly able to inch it closer and closer into her grasp; before she could grab hold of it, the bear jerked its head back and growled again. It raised its head up, widening its jaw as it prepared to end her life, and Victoria knew she only had a moment.

As the bear dove for her face, Victoria lurched for the knife. She brought her knee up into the bear's chest, catching it off guard enough for it to shift its weight off of her arm – she

swung the blade up and sunk it deep into the bear's neck, its hilt just visible above the thick fur. It grunted in surprise, and Victoria took the opportunity to lunge again for the gun that had been concealed from her view by the bear's thick forearm. The bear thrust its face back into hers, anger now flaring in its eyes and as it opened its mouth to strike one last time. Victoria screamed as she fired into the bears thick neck, blood spraying across her face. She fired, again and again, still screaming as she unloaded the magazine into the bear, barely noticing anything more than the scream bellowing out from deep within her. She continued to pull the trigger even after the bullets had all run out and the bear was long dead, the empty clicking silencing her screams into sobs. The bear had collapsed on top of her and her sobs became wheezes as her lungs screamed for air.

Victoria let the pistol fall from her hands, landing with a *squelch* into the thick red snow. She grunted as she tried to shove the bear off of her, her ribs caving under the pressure with each passing second. She shoved again, her dislocated shoulder screaming in agony. Every ounce of her muscles contracted as she used all of her strength to move the dead weight off of her, crying out in pain and frustration.

White hot anger flooded her vision and an animalistic scream ripped through her chest and out of her throat and, with one final shove, she heaved the beast off of her and collapsed back into the snow. Victoria laid there shaking, staring up at the sky as the snow swirled down around her, melting against her hot skin and trickling down the side of her face. Only then did she notice the thick red blood soaking through her shirt. She reached up to touch her face, her fingers coming back coated in the sticky stuff that had been splattered across her face. She let out a strangled moan, disgusted with herself; she felt like she was going to be sick.

With her uninjured arm, she slowly pushed herself up to a seated position. Victoria took a deep breath as she brought her hand up to her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she yanked her

shoulder up and back down, screaming as the bone popped back into place. Tears flooded down her face and she screamed again. She screamed at the world and the things it had taken from her. She screamed at herself for pretending she was okay. She screamed at the bear who should've taken her life.

The vibration slowly began again, reverberating under the frozen creek and across the ground. It built to a crescendo as it thundered through the earth, and Victoria squeezed her eyes shut as she braced the hand of her good arm against the ground. The trees shook and Victoria heard the sound of thick ice cracking and branches creaking and snapping above her. She thought she heard the sound of someone screaming, but she realized those screams were hers.

The vibrations stopped as quickly as they appeared, but Victoria continued to scream. She screamed until her vocal chords felt stripped raw and the only sound that escaped from her lips was a raspy sob, scratching against her throat like sandpaper. She hugged her knees towards her, wrapping her good arm around them as she buried her face, unable to quiet her sobs.

“Hello!”

Victoria snapped her head up. She waited, silently, until the call was repeated again, followed by a cautious question of concern. Victoria tried to yell, but all that came out was a raspy breath. She didn't know if the face behind the voice was friendly, but at this point, she didn't care. Victoria stumbled towards the bear and yanked the knife out of its neck, shoving it back into her boot. She tucked the empty pistol back into her waistband and bent to grab her rifle, gently swinging it over her head. Victoria hoisted her backpack onto her good shoulder and slowly began making her way in the direction of the voice. Behind her, blood continue to bloom across the bright white ground and fresh flurries of snow covered her tracks.