

The Edge of Tomorrow

Louisa Swann

I've seen a lot of weird things in my travels through space, but I never thought I'd bear witness to my own kidnapping.

Didn't know it was me being kidnapped, of course. Not at the time.

Things'd been quiet out here on the Edge. Too quiet. Old Man Winter was about to change that. He'd been brewing a pot full of wicked weather ever since last week and the pot had finally reached maximum capacity.

Wind howled through the canyons, bending low trees that were never meant to bend, and finding ways through a person's outer gear that prompted immediate thoughts of revenge on the manufacturer. I had on three layers of protection – inner shell, outer shell, and over shell – all Company-made and promising to be warm and weatherproof, yet breathable enough a person didn't drown in her own sweat.

The only promise my new gear had fulfilled to date was the breathable part and I still wasn't too sure about that.

Typical Company product.

Granted, the thin atmosphere on this planet not only made it tough to acclimatize, it created teeny, tiny little snow pellets that could blast the skin right off a human if he or she were dumb enough to wander outside without any form of protection. Worse than a desert sandstorm and I'd been through plenty of those.

No, this was definitely not the kind of planet you could soak buck naked in a hot spring, then leap out and go for a pleasant – though icy – roll in the snow. You try a stunt like that here on the Edge and there'd be nothing but bones jumping back in that water.

Nice for soup, but not much else.

Wrapped up like a butterfly waiting to hatch, I was tired of smelling my own breath and ready to get home. But getting home wasn't quite that easy. A hundred meters from my little chalet I spotted a burly guy who looked more Sasquatch than human towering over a squirrely little guy with a nose that looked like Sasquatch had used it for a chair. Between them dangled a

people-size bag, kicking and yowling louder than the wind.

I knew who was in the bag. My assistant, Annie. I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

But who was doing the snatching? And why?

I turned my team of borrowed sled mutts back into the trees and pulled the team to a stop. "Okay, boys," I whispered as I unhooked the harness and waved at them to lie down. If something happened to me, I wanted the team to be able to fend for itself. After all, I did promise to keep them safe. "Stay and keep quiet."

The lead mutt licked his lips like he had something to say, but the entire team remained quiet.

I reached under the sled blanket, grabbed hold of a long, thin package, and pulled the package free. The soft leather wrapping fell away, revealing the hand-polished sheen of an antique rifle barrel. I love antiques – the older, the better – and this was one of the best. A Remington Over-and-Under, circa 1962. The finest shotgun ever created far as I was concerned.

Without wasting time, I located the box of shells and loaded the rifle, stuffing extra rounds into my parka pockets for that just-in-case moment it never hurt to plan for. Time to stop standing around waiting for my feet to freeze. My poor assistant had taken enough abuse for one day.

A low moan lifted on the air, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand at attention. Native dog sounds. Creepy stuff. I glanced at the mutts. I'd run sled dogs before, what seemed like eons ago, but the native canines on this planet reminded me more of bears than dogs. They pulled like huskies, though, and were friendlier to boot, so I figured, what the heck?

But that moaning. Sounded worse than a puppy with the runs.

"I'll be fine. Just stay here and keep your heads low."

All three licked their massive jowls. I shook my head and headed back through the trees to scope out the situation. "Take good care of 'em, Kitty," my friend had said. "These guys are still babies."

I'll tell you right now – if those mutts were babies, I was never having kids.