

fruit of the spirit

by Jim Hamlett

Love

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*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.
1 John 4:18 ESV*

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his
life for the sheep.
John 10:11 ESV*

*Greater love has no one than this....
John 15:13 ESV*

The wolves returned at dusk—three grays and one larger black.

In the pearl light of a full moon, John Shepherd stopped when he spotted them at the edge of the tree line. They regarded him a moment, and then melted into the forest. He continued through the snow to the woodpile stacked near the cabin.

“Beautiful creatures,” his grandfather had said during John’s many boyhood visits.

Indeed, they were.

“But wild, John. Don’t forget that.”

He saw them near the cabin earlier and told his children to stay inside. The winter had been harsh, even for Alaska, and filled every living thing with desperation. The wolves were merely hunting for an easy meal. He was glad he’d taken Doc Weston’s advice and repaired his grandfather’s old kennel for the dogs’ safety.

At the woodpile, he leaned his M1 carbine against the stack and loaded logs into the cradle of his left arm. When he had all he could carry, he picked up the rifle and scanned the tree line. His breath froze into ice crystals, glittering in the moonlight as they fell to the ground. And through the glitter, an ugly memory flashed.

The Alaskan forest became the Ardennes. The bitter cold of the Battle of the Bulge pierced him to the bone. He heard the screams and pleas of wounded men, terrible voices that

still woke him some nights.

John shook himself free of the memory and hurried toward the cabin. He stopped briefly by the kennel to check the gate. His Huskies paced back and forth, stopping occasionally to glance at the tree line through the narrow slats of the fence.

Once in the cabin, his body soaked up the warmth. He tossed the logs into the wood bin, but held back a few to stoke the stove. Luke sat at their small meal table and read a book by lantern. As John passed, he tussled the boy's hair. He was proud of his son, who loved the outdoors as much as he did. Luke took quickly to hunting, fishing, and trapping. At thirteen, the quiet, mild-mannered boy could empty a clip into a three-inch bull's eye at fifty yards.

Hearing his wife moan, John pulled the curtains aside that gave him and Anna Kate some privacy at night. Propped up with pillows, she sat in bed with her eyes closed and knees drawn up. She was on the verge of birthing their third child, the product of a lovely spring and the renewed passions of surviving a war. Next to her sat Erica, a nine-year-old copy of her mother, the same dark red hair and hazel eyes.

"How ya holdin' up, Babe?"

"I can't get the baby turned." She grimaced. "There's no way I can do a breech delivery here."

He rubbed his face and stared at the floor a moment. "Okay, let's leave for Doc Weston's at first light." He sat down beside her. "Can you ride in the sled? I trust the dogs more than I trust granddad's old pickup."

"I'll go any way you can get me there."

"You know I'll do my best."

She patted his face. "You're the only man I've ever trusted, John Shepherd."

He kissed her forehead, and then turned to his daughter. “Help your mother get her things together.”

Erica cocked her head and smiled. “I already have.”

“Aren’t you the big girl? Good job.”

He walked back to the table and sat down beside his son.

“I heard,” Luke said. “Want me to start packin’?”

“Only the basics. We need to be light.” He clapped the boy on the shoulder. “And load an extra clip for the carbine. Heaven help us if we run into a moose.”

“Yes, sir.”

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John roused Luke before dawn. They ate together silently. Afterward, John grabbed his rifle and followed his son to their small shed. They trudged through snow that glistened and sparkled in the early light. After they pulled the sled into the open, John lifted the narrow tick mattress from it.

“While you lay out the gangline, I’m gonna put this by the stove and let it warm up.” He slid the M1 into the scabbard he’d rigged on the sled. “The rifle is here if you need it.”

Luke smiled.

“I know what you’re thinkin’. When am I gonna get a pistol?”

“Yeah.”

“Soon.”

“That’s what you said three months ago.”

John sighed. “Soon.”

As he trudged back to the cabin with the mattress, he chided himself for not buying a

sidearm during the summer. Of all the things his grandfather left him—the homestead, a beat-up truck, a sled with ten Siberian Huskies, and a shed full of junk—the .45 caliber M1911 went to Doc Weston. During the war, the Army offered M1911s to medics who wanted to carry one, but he'd declined. It would have caused more problems than it solved. After the war, he could have bought one, but he chose the M1 instead. Better for hunting. Still, he wished he had one of those pistols now.

When he returned, Luke had the gangline laid out. He'd also set the ice hook so the team wouldn't run off with the sled.

“Well done, son. Let's harness the dogs. Hold 'em tight. They're gonna be hot to trot.”

“Yes, sir.”

Together they hooked up the team of Huskies, one at a time. The dogs howled and pulled on their lines. John walked down the gangline and double-checked the rigging. Satisfied, he turned to his son.

“Mind the dogs. I'll fetch the girls.”

John entered the cabin and called his daughter. “Erica, can you carry the bag and head for the sled?” Then he knelt down by his wife. “I'll be right back.”

“I think I can walk.”

“No, I'll carry you. Just sit tight.”

He threw the warmed mattress over a shoulder and grabbed several furs and blankets. He followed Erica, who hauled the duffel bag with both hands as she struggled to keep it from dragging in the snow. John set the mattress in the bed and tossed the furs and blankets in the front of the sled. Then he stood the duffel bag upright in the back so he could prop the girls against it. When he returned for Anna Kate, she was standing in the doorway, holding another set

of blankets.

“I can make it,” she said.

“Nope. I’m carrying you.”

“What if you slip?”

“Then you’ll have a cushion.”

She smiled and put an arm around his shoulder. “I wonder how many women have been carried over the threshold going *out* the door?”

“Only you would think of the question.” He lifted her and grunted. “Man, you’ve gotten heavy.”

She punched him lightly in the chest. “Be careful of your lamb, John Shepherd.”

When they reached the sled, Luke accepted the blankets held out by his mother. Then John gently laid Anna Kate in the sled. He told Erica to climb in front between her mother’s feet. He covered them with the remaining furs and blankets.

“You two ready?” he called over the howling dogs.

Anna Kate nodded. Erica hollered, “Ready!”

“Hang on, then.”

He moved to the back of the sled where Luke had already mounted the footboards. John mounted behind him and freed the ice hook.

“Give the commands, son.”

“Line out,” Luke called. The lead dogs pulled tension on the gangline. “Hep, hep, hep,” his son yelled, and they shot down the trail.

After a short distance, John instructed Luke to lead the team onto the small frozen lake by their cabin. The shortcut would save time and give Anna Kate a smoother ride for a bit. In the

distance, a white-capped backbone of mountain turned to an icy blue in the rising light. High cirrus hung in the sky like tatters of cloth. They morphed from a deep salmon to pale amber as the sun mounted its throne. He urged the dogs along. As they crossed the lake, the Huskies settled into the task and quit howling, as though in a sacred place, a temple beneath the great expanse of blue and amber. All was quiet save for the muffled sound of the dog's paws and the hiss of skids on the ice.

John lifted his head. Overcome by the depth of the sky, he felt a momentary vertigo. He held tightly to the sled and prayed. *Please help us make it, Father.*

When they reached the other side of the lake, he called the team to a halt and had Luke stand on the brake. He stepped to the side of the sled.

"You okay?" he asked Anna Kate.

Her teeth were clenched, brow furrowed. She shrugged. "I'm okay."

"This is fun!" chirped Erica.

John touched his wife's cheek. "We're gettin' back on the trail. The ride's gonna be rougher."

She clutched his hand and nodded.

He tucked the blankets tighter around her, and returned to the back of the sled.

"Help me push it up the hill, son."

Luke released the brake. John called on the dogs. With both of them off the footboards and pushing, the sled went up the hill with ease. The front thudded onto the trail when they crested the hill.

Erica whooped, but Anna Kate let out a cry. Before he could stop the sled, she freed a hand from the covers and waved it forward as if calling for a charge.

“Keep going,” she hollered.

As the Huskies continued pulling, Luke jumped on first. John mounted behind him and encouraged his dogs. “Good job, good job. Let’s go, go, go.”

They entered a stand of bare-branched hardwoods salted with spruce, whose green arms drooped under loads of snow. Images of the Belgian Ardennes danced at the edge of his mind. John’s world tightened around him as memories threatened him again. Thankfully, the threats were fewer now. He’d come a long way in the two years he’d been home. And he owed it all to his family, who’d borne him on that wretched litter of war into their own aid station and bathed his wounds in the waters of their love.

When he returned from Europe, Anna Kate hardly recognized him. He’d left full of vigor and joy, but returned empty as a gourd. The horror had reamed the life out of him. She’d seen it in the creases etched into his stubble-covered face as he lumbered off the ship, dazed and hollow-eyed.

But God put balm in the arms of Anna Kate and his children.

With her first kiss, love fell like a monsoon into the dry, cracked ground of his soul. The fierceness of her embrace quickened him. The great lake of grief he’d damned up inside himself released. He wept and wept. The children latched onto each leg. Their vibrant spirits thumped the tuning fork of life in him and with its tingling hum, he knew he’d live again.

Yet, the horrors still came, day or night. Anything could trigger them. He remembered men who were whole one minute, and the next they were crippled for life—or gone. Many soldiers went to sleep in their foxholes never to waken. Some died in the violent explosion of an incoming shell. Others died quietly when they froze to death. He could see their gray faces in quiet repose. Few men planned for death.



John urged the dogs on. Then an eagle cried out from above, and in it he heard the calls of wounded men—*Medic, Medic*. He'd held many heads in his lap while men cried for their mothers and begged him to save them. He did all he could, but all was often not enough.

*I'll do enough this time—anything to get Anna Kate to Doc Weston's clinic.*

In the frigid air, tears ran down his cheeks and froze. As the dogs followed the winding trail through birch, spruce, and balsam poplar, his mind drifted. He saw himself on the back of a jeep, riding beside a litter with a wounded soldier.

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The jeep careened through tall, snow-laden pines on its way to the aid station. John grabbed tightly with one hand while he held up an IV bottle with the other. When they skidded to a halt at the station, two men came and lifted the litter out. He walked beside them with the IV bottle. After they situated the soldier, he asked around for extra supplies. He replenished his kit and put together another box to take back. When he stepped outside, a new young Lieutenant from his company called.

“Doc, need a ride back?”

“Thanks.” He set his box in the jeep, hopped in, and they hurried away.

Snowflakes large as coins fell quietly in the forest and muffled all sounds save the jeep and its slipping, spinning wheels. When they arrived back at the front, he made rounds to the other medics, passing out the supplies he'd scrounged. As he handed out his last materials, the young Lieutenant he'd ridden with walked up, slapping his arms around himself to stay warm.

“You speak French, I hear.”

“Pretty well,” John said.

“German?”

“Passable.”

“I hate to do this, but I need you on patrol. We gotta get more info on where the Germans are. We’ll try to get it from some locals, if any are still in the area. Or maybe capture some prisoners. Get your stuff.”

“Yes, sir.”

In less than thirty minutes, their nine-man patrol set out. By John’s reckoning, they’d gone about a mile when they came upon a couple of buildings with a curved stone wall in front. The men crouched in the snow behind the center of the wall, which formed a horseshoe-shaped border around a forgotten garden. The Lieutenant peeked through a hole in the wall. John found another hole and scanned the scene. Beyond the open area stood a modest stone cottage cloaked in mist. Its thatched roof drooped over its walls as though the cottage had gathered itself against December’s numbing cold. Smoke trickled from the chimney and vanished into the gray Gallic fog that draped the tops of the pines. To the right, a small barn sat with a sagging roof and doors lopsided on their hinges. The buildings looked lonely and fragile in the lightly falling snow. On any other day, the scene would have been idyllic.

Though the cottage was obviously occupied, John saw no one. But caution was the order of the day. The German army had charged out of the fog and mist the week before and caught them all flatfooted in the Ardennes. Now there was a huge bulge in the Allied line. Christmas was only a few days away with no promise of enjoying it. Worse, a report about a massacre of captured Americans near Malmédy made everyone angry and edgy—a formula for disaster.

The Lieutenant whispered to his sergeants. One of them took two men and followed the wall to the left flank. The other went right with his men. The Lieutenant and a corporal with a BAR—Browning Automatic Rifle—remained in the center. John stayed with them. The men at

the flanks had barely settled into position when he heard approaching vehicles. The Lieutenant motioned everyone down. John peeked through his opening.

A Kubelwagen roared around a corner of the barn followed by a small transport with a driver and six soldiers in the rear. An officer dressed in the uniform of the Waffen SS rode in the back of the Kubelwagen. Beside his driver sat a soldier manning a machine gun mounted to the front. When they stopped, the SS officer stood up, looked toward the wall, and uttered several commands. The Lieutenant pulled away from the hole and looked at John.

“Something about standing guard, sir, and checking the barn.”

Both drivers now stood on the far side of their vehicles. Each had another soldier with him. As they chatted, three soldiers cautiously approached the barn. The officer and two others walked toward the cottage.

Before they reached the door, a thin old man in an overcoat and black beret opened it. The officer and his men pushed past him and entered the cottage.

The young Lieutenant backed away from his hole, leaned against the wall, and stared into the woods. He wore a grimace which left no doubt in John’s mind that the young officer didn’t know what to do.

The corporal with the BAR scooted next to him and whispered. “What now, sir?”

The Lieutenant put a finger to his lips. The corporal’s eyes hardened, and he slid away.

The barn door opened and the soldiers emerged trying to herd three sheep toward the transport. The sheep bleated and darted away. As the men chased them, the other soldiers laughed and taunted. Then the cottage door opened. The officer and his men came out with arm loads of goods. The old man came after them, pleading in French. When he saw his sheep darting about, the old man hurried after them. He pleaded further with the SS officer. Though John

wasn't asked for an interpretation, he gave one anyway.

"He's begging them not to take all his food or his sheep. He's lost everything, his wife, daughter, son. Can't they leave him just one sheep?"

The corporal slid closer. "Aren't we gonna do anything, sir?"

The Lieutenant rubbed his hands together.

In a few moments, the farmer quit pleading and walked to the barn's entrance. He turned and called to his sheep. They trotted to him and scurried into the barn. As the old man stood in the doorway, the SS officer approached him, shouting and waving for him to move away.

"Non."

The officer slapped the old man. He staggered back but held his ground.

"Non."

The officer shouted again, drew his pistol, and fired twice. As the old man slumped to the ground, the officer spun and returned to the Kubelwagen, calling commands as he went. The drivers jumped behind the wheels of their vehicles while all the soldiers from the transport entered the barn.

The corporal grabbed the Lieutenant's coat sleeve, but the young officer pulled it free. "Wait until they come out of the barn."

Soon the soldiers returned, carrying the sheep, which they hoisted into the back of the transport. As the soldiers climbed up, the Lieutenant finally gave the word.

In a single fluid motion, the corporal set the BAR on the wall. The driver of the transport saw the gun. He shouted an alarm, but the BAR erupted and silenced him. Then both of John's flanks opened fire. The driver of the Kubelwagen tried to turn it around. A short burst from the vehicle's machine gunner raked the stone wall before a fusillade of bullets struck him and he fell

backward out of the vehicle. As the Kubelwagen spun in the snow, the SS officer held to one side and fired his pistol.

In the back of the transport, the sheep ran amok. Soldiers faltered and stumbled over them as they tried to take cover and shoot. Caught in a hail of crossfire, the Germans succumbed quickly. The Kubelwagen slid to a halt with both the driver and officer slumped in their seats. Nothing moved in the transport.

“Cease fire!” the Lieutenant shouted.

The light snowfall had stopped, the idyllic scene gone. Smoke from the skirmish hung near the ground in the dense moist air. Riddled with bullets, the vehicles sat askew in mud and blood-stained snow. After a few moments, the Lieutenant signaled his flanks to approach.

One of the sergeants called, “Clear.”

As they approached, the same sergeant tossed the Lieutenant a leather map case. “This might be useful, sir. Found it on the officer.”

“Casualties?”

The sergeant pointed to one of the men with him. “Frank’s got a crease in his helmet. That’s it for us, sir.” He turned to John. “You got off easy, Doc.”

“Any prisoners?”

“Sorry, sir. They’re all dead. The sheep, too.”

Someone called from the other side of the vehicles. “Doc, we could use you over here.”

John walked around the rear of the transport and saw the old man on the ground. He knelt in the snow beside the man and spoke softly in French. “Be still, my friend. I will help you.” The old man stared back with eyes sunken in a gaunt and jaundiced face. John picked up the man’s beret from the snow and placed it back on his head. Then he opened the man’s blood-drenched

jacket and shirt. Around his neck was a silver chain with a small cross which lay in a pool of blood on his chest. John inspected the wounds and held little hope for the man. Still, he opened his kit.

The Lieutenant joined them. As he folded the German maps back into the case, he spoke to one of his sergeants. “Get everyone together. We need to get out of here. Make a litter for the farmer.”

John sprinkled sulphur powder into the wounds and pressed his largest bandages over them. He pulled out a morphine syrette, but before he could administer it, the old man reached up and took him lightly by the arm.

“Je suis un bon berger,” he whispered. “J’ai donné ma vie pour les brebis.”

“Oui, mon ami,” John answered. “Vous êtes courageux. Vous êtes un bon berger.”

The old man’s chest rose and fell in a long, final sigh, and his eyes surrendered their life.

For a moment, John stared at the brave old man and the blood-stained cross on his chest. He wanted to cry but couldn’t. Death had become so commonplace.

“What did he say?” the Lieutenant asked.

Though there was no life left to warm, John closed the man’s shirt and coat over his wounds. He then looked up at the Lieutenant. “He said, ‘I am a good shepherd. I gave my life for the sheep.’”

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John wept now for the old man, a cathartic cry long overdue. His tears ran freely and joined those already frozen to his cheeks and beard. He wiped his nose with the back of a glove and looked up again at the canopy of sky. Its blue was so crisp and vibrant he thought he could touch it. As they rode between green monuments of spruce, he thanked God for his family,

especially his wife. When John returned from Europe, he learned his grandfather had died and left him the homestead. Without reserve, Anna Kate embraced the perverse notion of moving his little flock to this wilderness. She understood his need for peace and quiet after the horrors of war. And she wanted her husband back—at any cost.

Had they found what they wanted?

Yes.

For all the danger, the wilderness had forged them into a family again, singular in their love for one another. Of necessity, they did everything together. Thanks to Anna Kate, Erica could recognize every edible plant in the woods. He'd taught Luke to fish and hunt and trap, as his grandfather had taught him. They were one in their lives together. And now they were about to add another to their little flock.

As they started up a slope, a distant wolf howled, a long and low aria that rose in pitch and volume. A second answered, and then a third. He urged the dogs up the slope with kissing sounds and calls.

“C'mon, c'mon. Let's go.”

The Huskies leaned into the task. When they crested the hill, he called them to a halt. He set the ice hook and jumped from the rear.

“Pass me the binoculars, son.”

Luke fetched them from a pouch hanging on the sled.

“Stay with the dogs,” John added. “Don't let them get tangled.”

He took the binoculars and slogged to the edge of the trail. Through an opening in the tree line, he glassed the valley—their valley—white and peaceful. The four wolves he'd seen earlier were milling in front of the cabin. The black one, clearly the leader, picked up the scent

and broke into a run. The three grays followed.

John hurried back to the sled. They had a good head start, but the wolves would come apace and close the gap quickly. Normally, he wouldn't fret, but he couldn't take any chance of the wolves interfering with the dogs. He must get Anna Kate to Doc Weston's clinic. He put the binoculars in the pouch and waved for Luke to leave the dogs and join him. Then he crouched next to his wife.

"We're gonna pick up the pace. You okay with that?"

"Of course, I am. The wolves?"

He nodded.

"Are they going to eat us?" his daughter asked.

He cupped her head in his gloved hands. "Nonsense."

"They're after the dogs," Luke said as he passed.

John glared at his son. They could have done without that explanation.

Erica pushed back the furs. "They're not gonna get Mia. I won't let them."

"You stay in the sled, little lady." Anna Kate grabbed Erica by the coat. "Your daddy isn't going to let anything happen to the dogs." She looked up, and John saw the plea in her eyes.

"Nor you." He kissed her. Then he tucked Erica back beneath the furs. "Hang on."

Releasing the ice hook, John called to the dogs. As they pulled, their ruffs stood up, their ears lay flat, and they hunkered lower to the snow. They knew.

They'd not gone far when he saw the bridge that crossed the small creek which fed their lake. Once on the other side, the trail would narrow. If the wolves caught up with them, they'd have to come from behind. They wouldn't be able to flank the sled. If needful, he could fire a warning shot at them.



When they crossed the bridge, John said a quiet, "Hallelujah." But as soon as they rounded the next bend, he saw a spruce, fallen from the ridge line, completely blocking the trail.

"No, no, no!"

The team stopped in front of the tree. The two lead dogs looked back for some guidance as did several others. John ran to the tree, followed closely by Luke.

"What're we gonna do, Dad?"

John walked up and down, and then squatted at a spot.

"There's a small opening here beneath the trunk. I think we can get the team through it, but we'll have to lift the sled over. We need to hurry."

He quickly explained to Anna Kate and Erica what had to be done and told both of them to stay in the sled. Then he and Luke unhooked the Huskies. Luke climbed over the tree to receive the dogs on the other side. When the last set of dogs went through, John hopped over the trunk and snub lined the team to the tree.

"Let's get the sled. Hang onto it as it goes over and let it down easy."

Erica and Anna Kate grabbed hold of the side rails as he and Luke lifted the front, dragged it over the limbs, and set it on the trunk. Then they lifted the rear and pushed the sled across. But just as the footboards reached the trunk, Luke lost his footing as well as his grip on the sled. John braced his thighs against the trunk and tried to slow the momentum. But the sled wrenched from his hands, slid rapidly over the limbs, and landed with a thud. He hopped over the tree and stumbled through the limbs to the sled. When he reached it, Anna Kate was moaning.

"My water broke. Please hurry."

He waved Luke over. They pulled the sled free of the tree, got it back on the trail, and set

the ice hook. Luke hurried to the front of the team.

“I’ll hold the lead dogs, Dad, while you get the gangline.”

He loved that kid. What a thinker. John released the snub line. He and Luke worked the team back to the front of the sled. John reattached the gangline and inspected the rigging. Luke was speaking to the lead dogs, encouraging them, and ruffling their necks. They pulled free of his hands and looked back. The rest of the team looked, too, almost in unison. And John could see they were not looking at him.

Around the corner trotted the four wolves. They stopped about a hundred yards in front of the fallen tree.

John hurried to the sled and pulled the carbine from its scabbard.

Luke trotted up. “You gonna shoot ’em?”

“Nope. Just scare ’em off.” Releasing the safety, he raised the carbine to his shoulder, took aim in front of the wolves, and squeezed the trigger.

*Click.*

Dumbfounded, John ejected the bad round, chambered another, and fired again.

*Click.*

A frantic third time.

*Click.*

He freed that round only to discover it was the last. He groaned and muttered, “John Shepherd, you stupid, stupid....” He released the empty clip from the rifle and reached behind him.

“Luke, give me the other clip.” When he received nothing, he looked back to see his son, open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

“Dad—I—I’m sorry. I left it on the table.”

John stared at Luke and felt the boy’s hurt. Then he let out a long sigh. With it went all the power in him. He looked back at the wolves, who’d moved closer, and then put the empty carbine back in its scabbard. Lifting his head toward heaven, he prayed for strength. There was only one thing left to do. He pulled his son aside.

“Luke, I need you to get your mother to the clinic. Do you understand me?”

“What? What are you doin’?”

“Never mind what I’m doin’. Promise me you’ll get your mother to the clinic.”

“But, Dad—”

“Go, son! Now!” He grabbed Luke by an arm and pulled him to the sled. “Get on the footboards.”

Anna Kate raised her head. “What’s going on?”

“Momma, he’s stayin’ to fight the wolves.”

“No, John, no!” She fought the furs and blankets loose.

John freed the ice hook and stepped back. “Line out,” he hollered. The lead dogs pulled tension on the gangline.

“Please, John, no!”

“Don’t look back, Luke.” He gave his son a fatherly nod and called to the dogs. “Hep, hep, hep.”

The sled pulled away. Anna Kate was on her knees, looking back over the sled, calling to him. Luke held the sled with one hand and reached toward his father with the other. They rounded the next bend and disappeared.

John turned to the wolves. They’d closed the distance by half and were still cautiously

approaching. He climbed over the spruce, freed himself from the limbs, and stepped toward them. They stopped and the three grays spread out. John locked eyes with the black.

*I am a good shepherd.*

He freed his knife from its sheath and ran at the wolves, yelling and waving his arms. The grays took a few steps back, but the black gave no ground. Instead, he lowered his head, bared his teeth, and growled. John grabbed a loose limb as he continued. He screamed and threw the limb. The black side-stepped and growled louder. Then to John's utter amazement, the wolf charged.

John planted his feet and caught the black by the neck fur as it lunged. John held the wolf at arm's length as he struggled to keep his feet beneath him. He pulled back his right arm to stab the black, but one of the grays grabbed John's coat sleeve and pulled him down. John jerked his arm free and planted the knife in the gray. The wolf howled and backed off. The black snapped at John's head, but got only his cap. John turned the blade in his hand and ran it into the black. It, too, howled, but continued to press toward John's face. The other grays grabbed one of John's legs, one at the thigh and the other by the ankle. John kicked the one at the ankle with his free foot. He tried to spin in the snow and get on top of the black, but the wolf bit John hard in the shoulder.

He knew then his time was short. But he'd done what he'd wanted to do.

*I gave my life for the sheep.*

He held the black at bay with both arms now and turned his back to the wounded gray, who'd renewed his attack and latched onto John's other shoulder. He was losing strength fast. The two on his leg were dragging him from the trail. As they slipped through the snow, the black's fangs snapped within inches of John's face. Then a red splotch exploded on the wolf's

forehead, and the report of a rifle echoed against the walls of the trail. The black went limp. Another shot rang out and the gray on John's shoulder fell. The two on his leg released him and looked toward the sound. Then another shot dropped the gray by his thigh. The one at the ankle turned and ran, but didn't get far before another shot brought it tumbling to the snow.

John clenched his teeth against the pain as he rolled over and pushed himself onto his knees. When he looked up, he saw Luke by the spruce, slinging the carbine over his shoulder. John struggled to his feet as his son jumped the tree and ran toward him.

"Momma said we couldn't leave you."

"But the gun—"

"I told her I'd forgotten the other clip. Then Erica said she found it on the table and threw it in the top of the duffle bag. The trail was too narrow to turn the sled around, so I ran back fast as I could."

John chuckled and cried at the same time. He raised a hand toward the sky. "Thank you, God Almighty."

"I'm sorry I didn't do like you said, Dad."

In glorious pain, he crushed Luke to his chest. "Don't worry about it, son. I think I'll get over it."

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On a ragged sofa in Doc Weston's bare-bones waiting room, John prayed with his children. Erica leaned into his left side. On his right, Luke sat with an arm draped over John's shoulder. As he concluded the prayer, he heard footsteps. Doc Weston walked in with his hands stuffed in his lab coat. A short and portly young native woman with a pleasant smile followed him.

“Is momma all right?” Erica asked.

“She sure is, honey.” Doc looked at John. “Smartest thing I ever did was marry an Inuit. Ahnah is a good midwife. Don’t worry about Anna Kate.” He pointed to John’s leg and shoulders. “We need to look at those wounds now.” He motioned toward the young native woman. “Kirima will sit with the kids.”

He followed Doc Weston into a sparsely equipped examining room and stripped down per his orders. As Doc examined and cleaned the wounds, he asked about the wolves.

“Any strange behavior? Foaming at the mouth?”

“I don’t think they were rabid, Doc. Just a small pack of hungry wolves. I hate we had to shoot ’em.”

“I’d be glad my son was such a good shot.”

“He is that.” John smiled. “I’m proud of him.”

Doc finished dressing the wounds. “I’d like you stay around a few days. I’m gonna send a couple of guys out to fetch those wolf carcasses. We’ll send ’em down to Anchorage and have ’em tested for rabies. Anna Kate could use the rest before you head back. The kids can stay with me and Ahnah. You can bunk with your wife. It’ll be cozy, but I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“Thanks, Doc. What about the dogs?”

Doc Weston waved it off. “They’re already taken care of. We’ll see to your dogs, John. Don’t worry about anything.” He started for the door. “You can join your kids while I check on your wife.”

For the next few hours, John and his children endured the periodic cries of Anna Kate as the sounds reached the waiting room. John hugged his children to him as they prayed and waited. When a baby’s cry sounded, Erica jumped out of her seat and started for the door. John pulled

her back.

“Hang on, young lady. They’ll come get us in a minute.”

In a few minutes, Kirima came. She glanced at John, but spoke to the children. “Want to see your new little sister?”

Erica eagerly led the way, holding Kirima’s hand. When they entered Anna Kate’s room, she was tilted up in bed, holding the latest in the Shepherd clan. She looked exhausted, but her smile and jubilant spirit triumphed. She pulled her children in for a closer look at their sister.

“What shall we name her?”

“Bill sounds good to me,” Luke said.

Erica punched him. “I like Amy. We already talked about that name.”

John nodded. “Agreed. But let’s spell it A-I-M-E-E.”

“Why like that?” Luke asked.

“Your mother knows.”

Anna Kate smiled. “It’s a French spelling. It means dearly loved.” She pulled John down for a kiss. “Aimee it is.”

In a few days, the report from Anchorage declared the rabies test negative, so he prepared his family for the return trip. Doc Weston met them at the sled as John and Luke made the final check of the dogs and rigging.

“A little going away present.” Doc handed John a cardboard box. “Sorry it ain’t wrapped.”

John passed it to Anna Kate in the sled. She opened it and retrieved a beautiful baby outfit. Then she handed the box back to John.

“The other gift is for you, I think.”

John looked in the box and saw his grandfather’s old .45. He smiled and passed the box to Luke.

“Thanks, Doc.” John offered a handshake.

“I really liked your grandfather. Amos was a good man. I saved his life once, which is why he gave me the gun. But I’m sure he wouldn’t mind you having it.” Then he clapped John on the shoulder. “You remind me a lot of him. You’re a good Shepherd, John. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise.” Doc tipped his fur cap at Anna Kate and turned toward the clinic. “Stay in touch.”

John smiled at Luke, who was admiring the gun.

“Don’t just stare at it, son. Strap it on.”

“Awright!”

As soon as Luke had the gun on his hip, they mounted the footboards.

“Give the commands, son.”

“Line out,” Luke hollered. “Hep, hep, hep.”

The sled pulled away with the Shepherd clan—stronger by one—and they headed for their valley.