

NOWHERE WILD



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For Lisa



# PART I





## CHAPTER 1



# Izzy

*(Winter)*

In the cold light of morning, Izzy Chamberlain began to tremble. Three strangers blocked the bottom step of the ransacked house. From behind her sister, Izzy eyed the knives in their hands, their sallow cheeks, and their long, uncombed hair. Broken pieces of wooden furniture fell from her arms and clattered onto the concrete porch.

One of the men lurched toward them. Angie tossed her load of firewood at his chest. She pulled at the strap of the shotgun looped over her shoulder with one hand, while shoving Izzy back into the house with the other.

“Run, Izzy!” Angie yelled.

Izzy ran—through the house, and away from those men. Away from Angie.

The screen door slammed behind Izzy as she vaulted down the three steps and into the backyard. She leaped through the neighbor’s stripped-down fence. Her malnourished legs could still run fast when necessary. Less than a year ago, shortly after her thirteenth birthday, she had run 10K races with her mother for fun. Now fear drove her legs.

She paused only to see if Angie had followed. The door to the house she had just escaped opened with a squeal, and, for an instant, a mat of tangled hair appeared to be Angie’s long auburn locks. But

from within the house, the voice of her older sister screamed again, before abruptly falling silent. Izzy's illusion vanished, replaced by a weasel-faced man in a camouflage parka. The blade of a long hunting knife glinted in his right hand.

Izzy bolted. She hopped a split-rail fence, turned north, and looped around the next block. Her legs found their own way to the two-story apartment building within sight of their home base, where Angie and Rick had told her to wait if they were separated or threatened.

She wriggled through the broken front door of a town house, then tiptoed up carpeted stairs to the back windows from which she could watch the house she had fled moments before. Shapes moved by darkened windows. Cackles of terrifying laughter broke the silence of the neighborhood. Izzy could do nothing but wait. Warm vapors from her lungs fogged the frigid air as the relentless cold seeped into her muscles.

She, Angie, and Rick had swept this apartment block two days before for food and supplies. There was nothing to eat here—there was never anything to eat. There had, however, been clothes in the closets that would fit her, and at that moment, she needed a new jacket. She had removed her old one when they began breaking the furniture for kindling. It remained on the counter of the house where Angie was trapped. Izzy raided a pile of clothes, grabbing a coat two sizes too big and a mismatched pair of mittens. She zipped up the coat, pulled on the gloves, and flexed her fingers. No frostbite. Not this time anyway. An hour without protection from this cold and this wind, and she wouldn't just have frostbite; she'd be dead.

She crept from one bedroom to another, then raised her eyes above the windowsill. The rear entrance to the house they had been looting loomed tantalizingly close. She waited and she watched and

she listened. The numbing realization that Angie might not make it out rose like the northern-winter sun: cold and distant.

Not even a glimmer of heat came from the hot-air register in front of her feet. She wiped her nose on her new sleeve. The smell of musty fabric made her cough. She'd find a better coat later. There were lots of clothes her size available. Few teenagers had survived long enough to see the winter. She had seen others in the early days, but eventually they had either succumbed to starvation or had vanished to the roads and the bush like everyone else.

Clothes were easy to find now.

People were not.

Izzy searched the room for something, anything, she could use as a weapon. The men had knives, and there were three of them. Nothing here would help her overcome those odds. Angie had a gun, but she hadn't fired it—oh, why hadn't she fired it? The men's faces wore that desperate look that Izzy had seen before on others they had met on the road: the look of men who had lost touch with what made them human. Not quite animals. Animals had fear, and for the most part, animals did reasonable, rational things. These men had abandoned rationality.

To her right, across the parking lot behind the apartment complex and four houses down from where Angie was—*captive? fighting for her life?*—the door on a different house opened and a figure emerged. He was taller than the three men who had attacked Izzy and Angie. Izzy recognized his ice-studded beard instantly. Rick had returned early from his hunt. He looked up and down the narrow stretch of open yards, apparently unaware of the threat just a few doors over, then disappeared back inside.

Izzy flew out of the apartment and sprinted around the block to the house they had called home for the past week.

"Rick!" Izzy's voice cracked with fear as she careened through

the back door. "Rick! They got Angie!" The warmer air from the kitchen, liquid and luxurious after her time in the freezing-cold apartment, weighed heavy in her throat.

"What?" Rick's gruff voice practically rattled the plates in the cabinets. "Goddamn it!" He slammed a mug down on the counter. Four months of near starvation had changed his weight, but not the way he carried himself. He still towered over her like he always had. He pulled the Glock from the pocket of his coat. Izzy took an involuntary step back.

"Where?" His boots fell like pile drivers onto the hardwood floor as he paced the room.

"Four houses down. Three of them. We were getting firewood, and—"

"Stay here." Rick pushed her aside and stepped out the door.

Izzy choked down a sob as she watched him leave. Three against one—three against two if she helped him. *I should help him.* Her feet refused to move. The tears began then, hot and burning against her frozen cheeks, like cinders from a campfire falling into fresh snow, sizzling all the way down to her chest. The first weeks after this had all started had seen her cry often. When Angie had been there, she would help stem the flow. Now the tears ran freely, and alone, Izzy could not stop them.

It was only then that Izzy noticed the dead deer lying on the kitchen table: a young doe, skinny, most likely born too late the previous spring to have put on enough fat to survive the winter. Izzy could count its ribs. In the old days, no hunter of any repute would have wasted a bullet on it.

She rested her hand on the side of the animal. Food. Real food. The creature was cold but not quite frozen—the kind of cold that creeps into something that was alive and moving just a few hours

before. The house grew quiet, save for the rumbling of her empty stomach. The floor floated away. The tiny kitchen spun as if the walls had flown outward, filling the air with swirling snow. The deer began to feel warmer—almost alive. The faintest beat of a pulse nudged her fingertips. Izzy tried to pull her hand back, but it stuck firm.

The deer's nostrils flared.

*Run, Izzy. Run now.*

Izzy sprang back from the deer. It lay there as before, still cold and still dead.

The crack of Rick's handgun made her jump again. Then three more shots. She pulled a knife out of the butcher block—a chef's knife with a short, sharp blade. A tang of cold steel ran through the wooden grip, sucking heat from her hand like a vein of ice. She adjusted her grip to prevent her fingers from touching the metal.

A fifth shot.

The window over the kitchen sink provided a partial view of their backyard and the neighbor's. Her eyes darted back and forth across the snow to the drifts clustered around trees and shrubs. The ground had been scalloped by the same gusts that had driven them out of the bush and back into town. Crisp brown grass showed through the thin white crust. The frozen blades rustled in the breeze.

Another shot and Izzy ducked, the grip on her knife tighter still. The deer's hollow voice echoed in her mind.

*Run, Izzy. Run now.*

Hunched low, she moved toward the back door, ready to flee, but as she reached for the door handle, an unseen force ripped it from her grasp. She tumbled onto the patio, dropping the knife to the concrete. A rough hand grabbed the back of her coat and lifted her up.

"Get your stuff, Iz. We have to go." Rick set Angie's shotgun on the table, patted the stock once, then turned his eyes toward the

sink. Izzy caught a glimmer of a tear sliding down his cheek. She gazed at the gun. Her eyes flicked to the door, then back to the gun.

"Where's Angie?"

"She's dead, honey. She's . . . dead." He left the room before she could ask anything else.

*Dead?* Izzy grabbed the counter to steady herself. The blood in her veins stopped moving, packed hard by a single word, like the wind had packed the snow outside.

*Dead?*

Rick returned a minute later, his backpack in hand. The pack was always ready to go with essentials, but he searched the kitchen for more things to stuff into it. A box of table salt. A pepper grinder. A dishcloth. He pulled the Glock from his pocket and began feeding fresh cartridges into the magazine.

"I need you to get your stuff, Iz. Now."

"I need to see my sister," she said after a moment.

A glimmer of pity crossed Rick's face. "No, darling. You don't want to see her like that."

He grabbed Izzy before she collapsed and brushed his hand over her blond hair as he hugged her close.

"We're going back into the bush. It's not safe here."

Rick lifted the deer from the table and threw it over his shoulder. He gave Izzy a gentle push toward the room where she kept her pack.

Izzy did as ordered, in a daze, her thoughts swirling around the horrible, impossible idea of never seeing Angie again. As her mind spun, the deer's words—imagined, surely, but imprinted in her brain nonetheless—returned: *Run, Izzy. Run now.* But she had nowhere to run, nowhere safe to go. Angie was gone. Everyone she loved was gone.

She looked back at Rick as she shouldered her pack. He bent low outside the door, picked up the knife she had dropped, studied it for a moment, and then held it out to her. It looked ridiculously small in his huge hands.

Rick was all she had left now. He would protect her. She took the knife from him, pocketed it, and followed him out the door.



## CHAPTER 2



### Izzy

*(Winter)*

Rick led Izzy northwest through Thompson. An invisible rope pulled her reluctant feet across wind-drifted snow, down streets that had once been familiar. There were some footprints in the white, but they were far too rare. Ice crusted over a body-shaped lump in the alley between two houses. Izzy looked away. Her sister was now one of the countless dead, and she didn't want to imagine Angie like that.

Rick slowed as they turned past a park. Swings on rusty chains swayed in the breeze. A low groan crawled across the open ground with each oscillation. Izzy kept her eyes to the street. She knew these places too well. She had grown up three doors down from the park. She wanted to tell Rick not to turn onto that street, but she knew where he was going, and it wasn't a coincidence they had ended up back here.

"Nineteen years, Iz," he said as they stopped in front of a white-sided bungalow beside the two-story house she had called home for most of her life. He moved off the center of the street, toward a tree at the edge of the sidewalk. His gloved hand stroked the maple as if it were a favorite pet.

"I planted this tree nineteen years ago—the day Lois and I brought Brian home from the hospital."

Brian had taught Izzy how to spit and how to skate; how to play cards and how to shoot a basketball; how to get into—and

out of—trouble on a routine basis. Though more than five years separated them, they had bonded. He became the big brother she never had.

Their families had been close, too. Before Rick and Lois divorced, Rick and Izzy's father had spent evenings on the screened-in porch talking fishing during the summer and watching hockey in the winter. In the backyard they built an ice rink that covered both properties. All the neighborhood kids hung out there when the ice was set. Rick kept the rink smooth and fast for months. Everyone in the area knew Big Rick.

They wouldn't recognize him now.

"That was a long time ago," Izzy said. She focused her eyes on her boots, denying the temptation to look at her old home. Without Angie, there would be no one to pick up the pieces if she broke down.

Her heart burned. Three hours ago, Angie had been alive. Three hours had changed everything. Izzy turned back in the direction they had come. The wind had already blown granular snow into their tracks. Soon, there would be no trail left for anyone to follow. Once they left the town and hit the edge of the woods, the world would be the same in every direction: cold and white.

"You remember that party we had a few years ago? When he turned sixteen?" Rick wiped his face with his glove. Izzy nodded but stayed quiet. The urge to look for Angie one last time swelled. She shuffled a step and stopped.

Angie was dead.

"We got him that old Chevy half-ton. Put that big bow on it. You remember that, Iz?" She remembered it. She had helped put the bow on. It looked ridiculous and lopsided, but they had laughed the whole time. When Brian saw it, he jumped off the porch with such pure joy. He picked up Izzy and tossed her into the air. Izzy, then just eleven years old, had squealed with delight. Brian was almost as

big as his father, and she had been as light as a feather to him. She was nearly lighter now than she had been then.

Two years after that party—just over a year ago—Brian headed to British Columbia for college. She hadn't seen him since. Before the storm that knocked the power out in Thompson for good, he had been trying to return home. Three months—a lifetime—had passed since the phones last rang. Rick held out hope that Brian was still alive somewhere, but Izzy knew that he was probably dead. They were all dead now. Her father. Her mother. Rick's ex-wife, Lois. *Angie*. Everyone except her and Rick. Two families. Two survivors.

A patch of compacted snow crossed part of the sidewalk by the front porch. Izzy wondered how many times in the past week Rick had come here while he claimed to be out hunting. He stopped just short of the patch.

"I miss them, Iz," he said in a low voice.

Izzy nodded and fought back more tears. It had been four months since her parents died. Four months? When had the count gone from days to months? She looked up, finally, at the white house with the blue trim to her left, and remembered "that day." The flu hit the town like an F5 tornado. Her father died first. Her mother, less than twenty-four hours later. *Angie* had taken Izzy outside, and they sat on the steps, huddled together, scared and shaking from fever. Lois had seen them and taken them in. She had been healthy then. Forty-eight hours later, she was dead. Rick stumbled back to his ex-wife's house the next day, sick with it, too. Then it was just the three of them, weak and dehydrated, but spared by an immune response that graced a precious few. The girls hadn't been apart for more than an hour since. *Angie* had always been there.

Now she was gone.

Izzy couldn't hold back the sobs. Rick turned and caught her as her knees gave way.

"It's okay, darling," he said, holding her close. "We've made it this long. We'll make it through the winter. I know where we can go. We'll be safe there. You'll be safe with me." He rubbed her back.

"You want to come in? I need to grab the skis."

Izzy shook her head. "I'll be fine right here." She glanced back over her shoulder. Going into the house where her parents had died was not an option. Not today. Not ever. Even though Rick had hauled their bodies away—he wouldn't say where they were now—she had not been able to cross that threshold since the day they died.

"I'll be right back. Holler if you see anything." Rick patted her head, checked up and down the street, then disappeared around the side of his old house. Izzy leaned up against the tree and watched the snow swirl through the air. Rick returned a few minutes later, his arms loaded with supplies.

"You remember how to use these?" he asked as he held up two pairs of cross-country skis and poles.

"Sure."

"Good." He handed her the smaller set, and a pair of boots. The boots fit, but just barely. Her feet had grown since last winter. Rick ran back to the house and returned with two sets of aluminum snowshoes. "We'll carry these, just in case."

He strapped one set of snowshoes to the outside of his pack, atop the carcass of the deer, then tied the other set to her pack. Rick was standing and clipped into his skis before she finished with her final buckle.

Izzy glanced at the house she had grown up in one last time. Wherever they were going had to be safer than this place. Of course, they had thought that last house was safe. And now . . .

"Come on, honey. We need to get out of town before dark." He nudged her shoulder and led her down the street: down the street, into the woods, and away from the dead city.

## CHAPTER 3



# Jake

*(Spring)*

Jake Clarke put down the battered frying pan and stopped digging. The hole didn't even reach his knees. From the pile of gravel he had already excavated, he grabbed the ax, hefted it one more time, and wearily banged it against the permafrost. A few bits of ice and rock flew off in odd directions, but not enough to even bother picking up the pan again to scrape them up.

Behind him, to the southeast, the sun began its arc through the northern sky. He had been standing in this shallow trench for what seemed like hours. His calloused hands, equipped with only the crudest of tools, had torn away the leaves and the grass, and burrowed into the gravel shore of the lake. Jake tossed the ax aside and stepped out of the hole. Dirt covered his face. His black hair had worked its way free from the rawhide tie securing his ponytail. It fell against his sweat-and-tear-marked cheeks. He pushed the loose strands back from his face. His grandfather had told him not to cry. That was like telling the rivers not to run, or the wind not to blow.

Jake stumbled back to the cabin. He hesitated at the door, staring out at the dock and the lake beyond. In a perfect world, now would be the moment the plane would finally arrive and save him from this next horrible step, but the sky remained silent and empty, as it had been for the past eleven months. And his father, who had left

the cabin all those months ago with a promise to return in three weeks, was still nowhere to be seen.

Inside, on the cot to Jake's right, sat his backpack, fully loaded and ready to go. On the cot to the left, beside the now-cold stove, lay the body of his grandfather. Jake bent close to the old man's face, paused, and kissed him on the forehead. Jake smoothed strands of Amos's gray hair back into place, then zipped the sleeping bag closed, till only his grandfather's face remained exposed to the light.

Jake slid his arms under Amos's shoulders and legs. A year ago, Jake wouldn't even have tried to lift Amos. But after months of wasting away, giving whatever extra food there was to Jake to keep him strong, Amos had been reduced to a shell of the proud Cree warrior he had once been.

Jake maneuvered through the narrow door, then across the ground back to the grave. He didn't look at the discolored ground a few paces to the south. His mother, Emily, lay buried under that mound.

Jake stepped down into the shallow hole and, as carefully as he could, set his grandfather into place. Despite his labors, the grave was too short. Jake struggled to bend Amos's knees, but they were as frozen by rigor mortis as the ground was by the winter not so long past. Jake picked up the pan and extended the trench until his grandfather's feet finally slid below the surface. Before exiting the hole for the last time, Jake bent low and straightened the cowl of the mummy bag around Amos's head.

Amos deserved more than this, Jake knew. He deserved to be buried like a warrior: with a celebration of his life, his trials and his victories. He had overcome so much. Certainly, dying out here was better than dying in some hospital bed and being buried in some city cemetery. He had told Jake as much a dozen times. Jake was to bury him here—to return him to the ground so he could meet his

ancestors who had roamed this frozen land for centuries before the white man had even dreamed such a place existed. Amos's memories and lessons would live on through Jake. And that, Amos had said, would make his people happy to welcome him into the spirit-world.

But no matter how hard he tried, Jake could not pick up the pan and drop that first scoop of dirt onto Amos's body. Though the spirit was gone—and no doubt in a better place—Jake could not mar the flesh like that. He set the pan down and ran back to the cabin, returning a moment later. In his arms was the fur of a black bear—one he and Amos had killed the previous fall. The bear meat had kept them alive for months, and the fur had kept Jake warm through the bitterest of nights. Jake couldn't take it with him—it was far too heavy for him to carry—but it could protect Amos and make the next task possible. Jake gently laid the skin over his grandfather, covering him from head to toe, then picked up the pan and began pushing the dirt back into the grave.

An hour later, with the job completed, Jake carved his grandfather's name into a crude wooden cross, and pounded the cross into the earth. He stepped back, wiping his eyes. There would be no more tears, he vowed then and there.

Back in the cabin, Jake surveyed the single room. The contents of his pack had been planned and re-planned a hundred times. *Only the essentials*, Amos had said. Amos had vetoed every extra ounce: the ax that was bigger than the little hatchet strapped to his pack; the camp stove with its empty tank that could be refilled if he could just find another cabin with a supply of propane; the spare blankets that would keep him warm if he could keep them dry. He couldn't carry all of that.

The pack was ideally suited for his lanky frame. Inside were a few extra clothes, cooking supplies, a first-aid kit, a sleeping bag, and his tent. Buckled to the right side was his prized possession: a

.308 Remington 700 rifle in its padded case. On the other side were a dismantled fishing pole and a long bush machete. Stuffed into side pockets were coils of wire for traps, and extra ammunition. To the top of his pack frame, he had strapped a large food canister containing smoked venison and fish—enough for three weeks if he rationed them. A compass dangled from the webbing of his harness, next to a can of bear spray. Both would remain close at hand while hiking.

On the wall, hanging from a hook, was Amos's old Colt pistol, a remnant of his time as a young man in the Canadian Army. Five of the .45 caliber rounds remained for it. The gun weighed a ton, and with over a hundred and fifty kilometers to go to reach Laroque, that weight would be felt with every step. Jake knew he should leave it, but it was the only tangible memory he would have of his grandfather. He couldn't leave it behind. Jake wrapped the gun in an old dishcloth, shoved it deep into his pack, and rolled the bag closed. It bulged with the extra item. He hefted the pack and headed for the dock, pulling the cabin door shut behind him.



Eleven months before, when Jake was fifteen and before everything had gone to hell, he had sat on the end of that same wooden dock, looping his toes through the cold water of the northern Manitoba lake, waiting for a fish to take the bait on the end of his line. A mosquito buzzed about his ears. He absently shooed it away, as he had done a thousand times on that trip. In early summer, the bugs were always horrible up here.

To Jake's right, on the strip of gravel that edged the water in front of their cabin, his father, Leland, and his mother, Emily, had stood together. They swayed, as if dancing a slow dance, and spoke in hushed voices. Sound, however, carried well over the short stretch of calm water.

“Bridger should have been here by now,” his father said. Even from a few dozen yards away, the concern in his voice had been obvious.

They had been at the cabin nine days—two days longer than planned. The calendar had rolled from June to July. Overhead, a large flock of geese raced north against a broken sky. Jake’s hunter eyes followed the flock and calculated the odds of reaching one of the birds with a shot from the 12-gauge in the cabin. Too far.

“He must have had problems with the plane, Leland. Every time we see him, he complains about how that engine is always costing him money. Might be waiting on a part. Or maybe he’s socked in.”

Emily wound her arms around Leland’s waist. Leland’s right arm clung to her shoulder. He brushed a strand of blond hair away from her pale cheek. Jim Bridger piloted the bush plane that had dropped them off at the start of their trip. He was normally reliable, but always at the mercy of the weather. A day or two’s delay due to a storm wasn’t unheard of.

“And the radio?” Leland’s head dipped toward the water as a small wave rolled up onto the shore. The radio had been strangely silent. That was possible up at this latitude—for a while at least—but not likely for three straight days, and not at the beginning of the summer busy season. That had not happened before.

“Sunspots?” Emily asked with a touch of hope in her voice.

“Maybe . . . but it’d have to be one hell of a storm, and the lights don’t seem much bigger this year than normal. Barely anything last night,” Leland said. Jake looked toward the horizon. Some days, when the solar storms were big, you could see the northern lights from dusk to dawn. Last night’s glow had barely been bright enough to see.

Leland glanced over at Jake, who swirled his toes in the water, careful not to create any noise that might interfere with his hearing.

“We’ll keep trying,” Emily offered in a worried voice.

Jake knew that voice. In the middle of every winter, when the money from the guiding trips of the previous summer began to run out, that same voice crept into every conversation between his parents. Emily's meager salary as a part-time teacher's assistant at one of Thompson's elementary schools barely covered the rent and the heat.

"We should have bought that satellite phone last winter when it was on sale." Jake's father bent over and picked up a rock, then skimmed it across the water. It skipped twice before it sank into the depths.

"We'll get one as soon as we get back. The credit cards can take it. Or maybe we can borrow one from Bill?" Bill Six Rivers operated another local outfitter and had helped Leland launch his own business years earlier. He had lent a hand before. He'd do it again, and not ask for anything in return.

They tried the radio until the batteries ran dead, broadcasting an SOS every few hours during daylight. They tried again in the evenings, when the radio waves traveled farther. The planes had always come. This time, no one replied and no one came.

They rationed the gasoline for their generator all the way into August. Theirs wasn't a permanent camp meant for months of occupation without resupply. By the time they realized no one was coming to rescue them, it was too late.

A simple mistake with a fillet knife turned their situation desperate at the end of August. Emily's knife slipped while she was cleaning a fish. The gash in her left palm didn't seem bad at first. They stemmed the bleeding, wrapping her hand in gauze from their first-aid kit. Leland even tried to stitch the wound closed with fishing line. Emily gutted out the pain of the surgery and said everything was fine, hiding her true state until it was too late—not that they could have done anything for her. The infection started in the

wound, and spread through her bloodstream. The fever that followed had her shaking and nauseated a few days later.

"*Sepsis*," Leland whispered to Amos and Jake while Emily lay curled up in her cot. "She needs a doctor . . . antibiotics." The nearest doctor was hundreds of kilometers away.

The next day Jake's father left to go for help. A cool breeze blew out of a gray September sky, ruffling the water next to the dock as Amos and Jake helped Leland load one of their two canoes with supplies. Leland traveled light. It didn't take long to transfer his gear.

"Three weeks, tops. I'll be back in three weeks." He had never done the hundred-and-fifty-kilometer trip from their camp all the way back to Laroque by canoe. They had always flown in. Three weeks was an estimate, but his father had been venturing around this part of Manitoba going on twenty years.

"You sure I shouldn't come with you?" Jake asked.

"You need to stay and take care of your mother."

Leland looked Jake straight in the eye, his weathered face framed by a military-surplus jungle hat, then he glanced at Amos, and his grip on Jake's shoulders tightened. Amos was eighty years old. This was to have been his last trip to the cabin. Years of hard living had taken a toll on the old man's body. Jake knew his grandfather could not care for Emily alone, not with her fever raging. Some days he could barely care for himself.

"Dad—" Jake's voice cracked.

"Do me proud, Jake. Listen to your grandfather. Do what needs to be done. Okay? I'll be back in three weeks."

Jake nodded, gave him a hug, and stepped aside to let Amos have his chance for good-byes.

Leland leaned down slightly to wrap his arms around his frail father. "Take care of him, Pop," he whispered into his ear. "I love you."

"Love you, too." Amos's eyes glistened as they separated. "Be careful."

"I will." Leland stepped down into the canoe and took the paddle in his large hands. "I'll be back in three weeks," he said one last time.

With a single sweep of the blade, he turned the canoe and straightened its path.

Now, Jake stood at the end of that same weathered dock and gazed out over the lake he had called home for the past eleven months. He shuffled his feet on the gray wood and kicked a splinter into the water.

Common sense told him that his father would have done everything possible to return to the cabin. But Leland had been gone nearly nine months, and Jake knew what that could mean. Jake's only choice was to find his own way back to civilization—to leave this cabin and all its memories—before he, too, succumbed.

No one remained to dig his grave.

Jake glanced back at the cabin as he stepped carefully into his canoe and inspected his gear, making sure he hadn't left anything behind. Then he released the line holding the canoe to the dock. He picked up the worn paddle and tested its weight. With the paddle in his hands, he had a goal and a sense of purpose. There was comfort in that.

He pushed away from the dock, swung the bow toward the center of the lake, made a quick steering stroke, and adjusted his posture. With a lean in one direction, then back to the other, he checked the balance of the craft. Satisfied that all was well, he gripped the top of the paddle with his left hand and the shaft with his right. He stuck the blade deep into the cold water and pulled.

It was time to go.

## CHAPTER 4



### Izzy

*(Winter)*

Izzy trudged through knee-deep snow, struggling to keep up with the hooded figure ahead of her. Her legs balked with exhaustion. Her feet, frozen inside her boots, felt like blocks of wood tied to the end of rubber-band legs. They were nine days out of Thompson now, headed straight north according to Rick. At yesterday's breakfast they had finished the last of the venison. Twenty-four hours had lapsed since anything but hot water or pine-needle tea had passed her lips. The snow here was too deep to ski through, and walking with snowshoes required a level of concentration she could no longer muster. The skis, strapped to her back like a giant cross, snagged every low-hanging branch. Rick set the pace. He wasn't going to slow down. They couldn't afford to be caught outside if the weather really turned bad.

Angie had been caught in a different type of storm, and now Angie was dead.

Fuzzy images of her parents flitted across her memory, their faces torqued as if the light bent to the gravity of the situation. Angie was—*had been*—her only sister, and as hard as her parents' deaths had been, losing her sister hurt more. She was alone now, except for Rick. She stumbled in the snow, distracted by her thoughts.

"Damn it—" Rick yelled. Izzy glanced up.

The deer, thirty meters ahead of them, jumped and disappeared before Rick could raise the gun to his shoulder. Thick pine trees prevented any attempt at a trailing shot. The deep snow halted Rick's chase after a few short strides. His snowshoe-clad feet were no match for the leaping, prancing deer. It vanished so quickly that Izzy thought it might have been a hallucination.

Izzy struggled to her feet. The brief thought of food—for that's what the deer represented—set her stomach growling. Her mouth felt as if it were stuffed with dried leaves and sharp twigs. She pulled her water bottle from the inside of her coat, where it wouldn't freeze, and took small sips, just like Rick had taught her.

"Should we follow it?" She coughed as she asked.

"No use. Not with the racket you're making back there," Rick snapped.

Izzy resisted the urge to respond in kind. Angie had been able to stand up to him when he got like this. Izzy wasn't Angie.

"I could carry the rifle," Izzy offered. "Then we could both try to—"

"Hell no," Rick said.

"I can shoot," she said defiantly. "I'm a good shot. I got that buck—"

That buck, huge compared to the doe Rick had killed on the day Angie died, had kept the three of them alive through September and the beginning of October. Only when the meat had run out had they come back to town. If they had been able to kill one more, they might have been able to stay out a little longer... *and Angie might still be alive.*

"We lucked out there," Rick replied. He turned from her and surveyed the forest ahead.

But it hadn't been luck. Sure, the buck had wandered into their camp while Angie and Rick were down by the river. Izzy, despite

being starved and then suddenly faced with a feast, had sat perfectly still for over five minutes. When it started to move off, she grabbed the rifle from the tent, carefully stalked the deer, waited until she had the perfect shot, and took it. It hadn't died right away. Later, Rick explained that a .22 wasn't a big enough caliber to bring down an adult buck in a single shot, but it didn't stumble far before he found it and finished it off with the pistol.

"It wasn't luck," she muttered.

"That deer was just plain stupid, wandering into the camp like that. There's a big difference between hunting and being served dinner on a plate." He shook his head. "We've only got the one rifle. We lose it, or wreck it, and we're dead." He motioned with his hand. "Come on, Isabelle. We need to make some more distance before dark."

"Don't call me that—call me Izzy. My name is Izzy."

Her mother had only called her Isabelle when she was in trouble. Angie had called her Iz-Kid when she was younger. Her father had called her Izzy from the start. That was who she was, and who she always would be.

Rick softened his voice. "Izzy's a little girl's name. Isabelle is a much better name for a young woman."

"Oh." Despite the cold, an ember of warmth flared in her chest. A short smile formed on her lips. If Rick saw her as more of an adult, maybe he would listen to her ideas. She let her eyes drift away from his face.

"You okay, darlin'?" His voice cracked as if he were too tired to even finish his sentence.

"Just tired." In every direction, bright white snow covered everything.

"Once we get to the cabin, we can rest. And maybe I'll teach you the right way to handle the guns. I suppose you're gettin' old enough

to learn." He tipped his head northward. "We gotta keep moving." He adjusted the straps on his pack and started forward again.

Izzy shifted her backpack. Despite being completely empty of food, it still weighed a ton. She waited for him to get farther ahead of her so she wouldn't get slapped by branches as he moved, then resumed her march. She focused on her feet, simply following Rick's trail. It saved her the effort of looking where she was going.

She seemed to have been following Rick like this for years. It had only been months, though, she corrected herself. She and Angie had fled Thompson with Rick in July when the food ran out in the city. Along with a few dozen other survivors, they followed the road south in a convoy of vehicles, hoping that Winnipeg still had food in the stores. They met the first trickle of survivors from the south less than halfway to the city. They told horror stories of how bad things were down there. At first, no one wanted to believe those tales. But as they came upon more survivors—every one of them emaciated and running for their lives—the reality began to sink in.

Then they encountered the first of the large gangs. Rick dumped their car and took Angie and Izzy off the main road and into the bush, where they watched in terror as a gang from the city descended onto the rest of their unprepared group from Thompson like a pack of wolves. Rick didn't let them hang around to see what happened next. He led them deeper and deeper into the bush, along a peaceful river filled with fish. There they remained for the rest of the summer. Rick kept them alive through what they had thought was the worst of it.

But their luck peaked with Izzy's killing of the deer. The river ran low and the fish moved to deeper water. The geese and the ducks winged their way south. Angie and Rick began to bicker about the littlest things, like camp duty and fishing techniques. One morning in mid-September, they awoke to a thin layer of ice on the water. A flurry of snow drifted through the air to confirm their fears.

When the deer meat ran out shortly thereafter, and their sleeping bags were no longer warm enough to keep them comfortable in their thin tents, they headed back to Thompson, where they had hoped to keep a low profile while surviving the winter. It should have been easy in an empty town where the few who remained were too scared of strangers to make contact. Somehow, though, after only three weeks, they had been noticed, and the consequences had been beyond terrible.

Now, as Izzy marched northward with Rick, she was sure that wherever they were going, there would be no more gangs and no more attacks. With each step, however, she grew more despondent, certain their stomachs would never be full again, and that, when all was said and done, they would still be dead, just for different reasons.

The tips of her skis grabbed a low-hanging branch like a grappling hook and stopped her dead in her tracks. She fell to her knees to break its grasp.

Rick heard her cry out and turned. He waited for her to regain her feet, an exhausted look on his own face.

"Fine. We'll stop here. Set up the tent." He pointed to a shallow depression to the left of a cedar tree.

Izzy didn't wait for him to change his mind. She set her pack down and, by shuffling with her snowshoes in small circles that gradually got larger, tamped down the snow to build a better platform. This routine she now knew by heart. She set up the tent and gathered firewood. He set the traps and lit the fire. If they were lucky they'd have rabbit or squirrel or something for breakfast.

They ate nothing for dinner, settling their stomachs with more hot water. The small fire did little to keep Izzy warm. As the cold of the subarctic night set in, they climbed into the tent and sank into their sleeping bags. Rick lay motionless, zipped deep into his mummy bag, asleep within seconds.

Izzy's body ached from her head to her toes. She had been tired before, but never this tired. After long training runs with her mother, she had routinely slept twelve hours straight. Those sleeps had been in her bed, where she didn't have to worry about the cold or where her next meal was coming from. She had never gone to bed hungry. She had taken her safety for granted. Out here, so far from anywhere, she took nothing for granted: not the next meal, not a fire to warm herself by, not even whether she would see the sun rise the next day. The snoring figure next to her was all that kept the fire burning and food in her stomach. Today, there had been no food, and the fire had barely warmed her hands. And whether she would be alive to see the sun rise in the morning remained to be seen.

The nylon walls of the tent, pitched beneath sullen skies, rattled in the breeze like bones in a tomb. She sensed Rick more by smell and sound than by sight. Before her mind drifted to tumultuous, hunger-fed dreams, she rolled away from him and pulled her sleeping bag tight around her head. She covered her mouth with her hands and forced herself not to cry.