

HOSTILE TERRITORY

P A U L G R E C I

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

NEW YORK



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*For my father, Joseph Greci (February 4, 1927–September 5, 2018),
an Army and Navy veteran, and a person who cared deeply
for his family and his community.*

C H A P T E R 1

I UNZIP MY TENT, SCOOT forward through the door, and slowly stand up. The breeze blowing down from the high mountains keeps the mosquitoes away. Clouds stained pink block the early morning sun and give the landscape a reddish tinge. I put my binoculars up to my eyes to check on the others. Derrick is a couple of miles away on a rocky ridge, higher than the one I'm camped on. I can't make out his tent, but I can see a green triangular flag flying close to his campsite—just like the flag at mine.

Derrick's on the same side of Simon Lake that I'm on. The two girls are on ridges that rise above the lake on the opposite side. I guess it's the camp director's way of keeping us from hanging out together while we're supposed to be by ourselves. I look up and across the lake and spot Brooke's flag, and then a couple of miles beyond hers I see Shannon's flag, too. Both green, which means everything is okay.

Below us all, at the head of Simon Lake, sits the main complex of the Simon Lake Leadership Camp. I can't see the camp's flag right from this spot, but I can from where I've got my food stored about a quarter mile away, and last time I checked it was green, too. We haven't even had one red flag, which orders everyone back to camp immediately.

After this solo experience ends tomorrow and the four of us hike down to the camp and join up with everyone else, we've got a few more days until the floatplanes come to haul us all back to civilization. Back to the land of buildings and roads—and people. And back to the trees. Living above the tree line this past month has been cool. It's like there

are no obstructions. You can see forever. And if you want to see farther, all you need to do is climb higher.

Part of me wishes I could stay in the mountains. That I could take my backpack and keep hiking deeper into the wilderness. But another part of me is ready to go back to Fairbanks. Ready to start my senior year of high school. Ready to run cross-country and see if we can take State this year just like we did last year. My coach was concerned about me missing a month of summer training by doing this Simon-Lake-Leadership-Camp-thing, but I've been running up and down steep mountainsides to stay in shape so I'll be ready for the season. You can't run up the slope right from the camp because it's so rocky and almost vertical, but if you jog down the lakeshore for a mile or so then you can go up. One of the counselors, Theo, runs college cross-country, and I'd been running with him almost every day until it was my turn for a solo experience. Theo's pushed me hard, but I like that because it's the only way to get faster.

I set my binoculars down just inside my tent and bounce on my toes a couple of times. I could take off running right now, but part of the solo experience is staying put and seeing what comes up in your head. Instead of filling your time with activities, you're supposed to fill it with silence. Besides clothes, food, and binoculars, I've got a journal to write in and that's it. So far, I've written *Josh Baker*—that's my name—on the inside cover, plus a list of things I've been thinking about.

Running. How can I get faster and stronger?

My parents. How can I keep them from splitting up?

Brooke. How can I get to know her better?

Control. What do I really have control over?

I added that last one because of Theo. Not only does he push me to run faster, he really gets me thinking and challenges me to, as he says, *go deeper*.

On our last run, Theo said, “Josh, you can’t change other people. You can only change yourself.”

“But I can do things that will make other people change, right?” I asked.

“Someone might change,” Theo said. “Like your mom might decide to stay with your dad. But that’s still her choice. It’s an illusion to think you can control her. You can only control your own actions—not what other people do in response to them.”

Now I’m thinking about control and what Theo said. I mean, I don’t really want to control anyone. I just want them to do certain things.

Like I want my parents to stay together. But that doesn’t mean I want them to be unhappy. I want them to be happy together. I want them to stay together because *they* want to stay together.

I want Brooke to like me. But I want that to come from her. I don’t want her to pretend she likes me. She hasn’t been that easy to get to know. Out of everyone in camp, she’s probably been the most reclusive. Besides being beautiful, there’s something about her that makes me want to get to know her better. What is going on in her head when she’s silent? Or when she chooses to sit by herself instead of with the group? What’s she thinking about? There’s this mystery there that I want to solve. I mean, she lives in the same town that I live in, but I’d never met her until now.

I want to be the fastest cross-country runner in Alaska. I don’t want other people to slow down so I can win. I want them to run their best and still beat them.

None of those things, like Theo said, are things I can control. I can still want them, but all I can do—all I can control—is what I do and how I do it.

When Theo says it, it sounds easy to remember, but it isn't.

I reach my arms over my head to stretch, and that's when I lose my balance, when my feet are swept out from under me and I fall on top of my tent, which is bouncing up, down, and sideways. I'm tossed off the tent onto the ground and feel a stab of pain, like a knife has been shoved into my calf. I roll onto my stomach and grip the ankle-high tundra plants, trying to ride out the earthquake, but the shaking grows stronger. Then the ground starts to split apart directly under me.

C H A P T E R 2

I ROLL TO THE RIGHT, toward my tent, which is tipped upside down, and reach for it. Now I'm lying on my side with my hand wrapped around the base of one of the tent poles. Another jolt pitches me forward—like the earth is a trampoline that I've just made contact with. I grab the base of another pole of my inverted tent and hang on, draping my body on top of the flimsy nylon.

Then the ground is still. I let go of the tent and slowly stand up, keeping my knees bent in case I have to ride out another wave. I turn and look behind me. There's a gap in the ground, about five or six feet wide and seven feet deep, that didn't used to be there. My flag is still upright, but it's in the gap so only the top foot of my flagpole is aboveground. There's no way anyone else could see it now.

I reach for it and feel this pain in my calf, like someone hit it with a hammer. I can still move but it hurts. I remember the stab I felt when the quake threw me to the ground, so I twist my body around and work my pant leg up to my knee. There, in the middle of my calf, is a black bruise about as big around as a silver dollar. It'll heal, I think, in time for the first cross-country meet of the season. It'll have to.

I set my flag up so it's flying again. Then I flip my tent over. I fish my binoculars out of the mess and peer across the lake. Both Brooke's and Shannon's flags are flying. I turn and search behind me and see Derrick's flag flying as well.

I walk a few steps, testing out my calf. It throbs but I can tell it'll be

okay for the few miles I'll need to hike down to camp. I keep walking, picking my way through the rocky tundra for a quarter of a mile, until I get to my food cache. We keep our food in these black plastic bear-proof canisters that screw closed. Down at Simon Lake we've got camp stoves to cook on, but on our solos we only bring simple food. Raisins, peanuts, dried fruit, cheese, and tortillas.

I unscrew the top half of the canister from the bottom half, pull out the peanuts, and munch down a couple of handfuls. I screw the two halves back together, and then I look down toward the lake, scanning with my binoculars, but I don't see the camp's green flag. It could've fallen like mine did and they just haven't put it back up yet. I limp a little farther along the ridge, knowing that eventually the whole camp complex will come into view, the outdoor kitchen with the low blue tarp and the dome tents for sleeping.

I keep walking and looking, walking and looking, but when the end of the lake comes into view all I see is a massive pile of boulders and smaller rocks and a brownish-gray dusty haze. When I scan the slope above the pile, I see a monstrous scar on the mountainside.

And then I realize that somewhere under that massive pile of rocks lies the Simon Lake Leadership Camp.

Four staff. Twenty participants—minus us four on our solos, which makes sixteen.

I scan the boulder pile, searching for movement, for a color of clothing different from the gray-brown of the rock. And then I notice the rock slide is so huge that the bottom end of it is actually in the lake. Like a new peninsula has been created from the slide.

And the camp had been thirty or forty feet back from the lake-shore.

I let my binoculars hang from my neck, and I take a breath. I swallow the peanuts that are trying to come back up. I jog back to my food

canister, unscrew it, and stuff my binoculars inside. I can't take them with me right now because I need to move as fast as I can.

Then I start picking my way down the mountain. The wind is blowing from behind me. A dull ache settles into my calf but doesn't stop me from pushing on. At this pace, in a couple of hours I'll be down there, searching for survivors.

CHAPTER 3

NOW THAT I'M AT THE lakeshore and walking toward it, the rock pile from the avalanche is even bigger than I imagined. It's as long as two or three football fields and a couple of stories high.

"Josh," I hear a faint voice call. "Josh."

I scan the massive mound of rocks and dirt but see no one.

"I'm coming!" I yell back, and pick up the pace. My calf throbs but doesn't slow me down. Now I can see a person scrambling down the mountain of rock toward me. If there's one survivor, I think, there must be more. But as we approach each other at the base of the slide, I shake my head.

"Brooke," I say. "I thought maybe you were, you know, someone who was actually in the camp." Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to see Brooke. But I figured she was okay since she was up high in a mostly flat area and I saw her green flag.

"I've been screaming your name," Brooke says, "since we both started walking toward the lake. Didn't you hear me?"

"No," I say. "The wind was at my back the whole way down. It was pretty strong up there."

Brooke nods. "The wind. Duh. I didn't even think of that." She points behind her to the ocean of rock. "What are we going to do?"

We're standing next to each other now, staring at the slide. The scar on the mountainside above it—where it all came from—is like the inside of a huge brown bowl that's been tipped on its side.

I turn to Brooke. "We need to search for survivors. Maybe people are trapped under there. Maybe when the rocks settled there were

spaces left." I pause, trying to picture it in my mind. "You know. If two huge rocks ended up like this." I put the tips of my fingers together to form an inverted V. "If a tent was squished between them, and then more rocks piled on top, then the tent and whoever was in it would get buried but not squished."

"Josh," Brooke says. "Are you looking at the same thing I'm looking at?" She makes a sweeping motion with her hand, and that's when I notice that it's all cut up. "The pile is like thirty feet tall. And, it's long." She points. "It's sticking into the lake. The camp might be underwater *and* covered with rocks." She shakes her head. "How are we going to search?"

I look her in the eye and say, "We crawl all over the rock pile. We yell. We listen. If we hear something, we try to move the rocks."

"And if we don't hear anything?" Brooke asks.

"Then we move the rocks we can move and keep searching," I say softly. "If there's someone alive under there, we need to find them. They might be injured. They might die if we don't get to them in time."

"Josh, I'm just trying to be real." Brooke brushes her hair back, and I see a bruise on her forehead and scratches on her cheek. "I climbed over that rock pile to get to you and there's not one scrap of clothing or a food canister or anything visible. Nothing."

"With Derrick and Shannon there'll be four of us to move rocks," I say. "Their camps are farther away than ours, but they've got to be on their way down by now."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Brooke says. "My tent was swallowed into a crack that opened up, and I was inside it. While I was clawing my way out, a rock fell and hit me on the forehead. I thought I was going to die right then."

"I saw your flag flying, so I knew you were okay," I say. "I saw Derrick's and Shannon's, too."

Brooke shakes her head. "I never touched my flag. It stayed up

through the whole quake. I could still be in that hole, but my green flag would be flying. This little flag system only works if someone can actually get to their flag to change the color.”

I start telling Brooke about how I almost got swallowed as the ground split beneath me when I hear a humming noise in the distance. I stop talking and we both look skyward.

We yell and wave our arms when we realize what we’re seeing, but the planes are so high up we must look like specks of dust to them down here. The camp buried under a pile of rocks must make us an even harder target to spot.

“I counted twelve planes or jets or whatever they were,” I say.

“Who cares?” Brooke says. “They didn’t see us.” She’s got her arms crossed over her chest like she’s angry.

“It must mean lots of people are helping out,” I say. “Think about places where people actually live. The quake probably caused a lot of damage. Maybe whole houses were swallowed like your tent was.”

Brooke shivers. “I hear you, Josh. I just want to get out of here and see if my parents are okay.”

“Our parents will make sure someone comes for us. But right now, we’ve got to search for more survivors.”

The wind is starting to chill me now that we’ve been standing around talking. I glance up the ridge. I have warmer clothes and rain gear up there, but it’ll take at least three hours to get back up. Maybe longer with my injured calf.

I turn my attention to the rock slide. “Let’s crawl around on top of it and listen. And yell into the rocks and see if we hear anyone yell back or make a noise.” Last night I kept trying to think about a way to stay in touch with Brooke after the Leadership Camp ends, a way to have her want to spend time with me once we’re back in Fairbanks, but right now all I can think about is Theo and everyone else buried under this enormous pile of rocks.

Brooke and I walk side by side and then start climbing on top of the rock slide. Brooke puts her face into an opening between two giant rocks and yells, “*Hello*,” and then puts her ear into the opening and listens. After several seconds she shakes her head and moves on.

We spread out, each yelling into small openings and then turning to listen for responses. Every time I have to use my right foot to boost myself up higher, my calf throbs, but I keep going. I’m starting to warm up from the movement but my voice is going hoarse from all the yelling.

My mind jumps to Derrick and Shannon. Their solo camps were at least twice as far away as mine and Brooke’s, but if they’re okay they should be showing up soon. I stand up straight and turn toward the high ridge where Derrick’s camp is. I put my hand above my forehead to shield my eyes from the glare of the sun, which is growing brighter by the minute.

Before I can really focus, Brooke shouts, “Josh, I think I found something!”

C H A P T E R 4

I SCRAMBLE ACROSS THE ROCK slide to where Brooke is. She's lying on her stomach and peering into a small opening.

I sit next to Brooke. "What is it?"

She pushes up into a sitting position and her shoulder brushes mine. "Just look." Frowning, she points toward the opening.

I lie down and press my face into the gap but it's too dark to see anything, so I shift backward to let some light in, and then I see it. Several feet down, but it's there. "Okay, I see the flag." I sit up and face Brooke. "It was on the highest point down here, so it makes sense it'd be closest to the surface."

Brooke shakes her head. "It's more than just the flag. Didn't you see the orange pole? Didn't you—"

"Yeah," I say. "I saw the pole, too."

Brooke turns her head sideways, then thrusts her face back into the gap with her shoulder pressing against my thigh. "There," she says. She pulls on my arm. "Look."

I scoot in next to her, and she shifts her head away from the hole to make room for mine.

Now I'm looking down the hole.

"Okay," she says. And I can feel her breath on my ear. "Look just below the flag. You see the orange pole, right?"

"Right," I say.

"Then you see a little break or space, and then more orange pole. Right?"

“Right,” I say.

“Look at that space.”

I focus on the dark space between the two segments of orange, and at first all I see is nothing. Like maybe a rock smashed the pole. But then I see something else. Movement. A dark-skinned hand is barely opening and closing around the pole. There’s only one person at the camp whose hand that could be.

“Theo!” I shout. “Theo. We’re here. Are you okay?” I press my ear to the hole and listen but hear nothing, and my heart sags. Maybe he’s unconscious. Or maybe his face is so trapped that he can’t yell. But his fingers—they moved—so he’s got to be alive.

I sit up and turn to Brooke. “Help me. We’ve got to get him out of there.”

“Brooke. Josh.”

Brooke and I turn toward the voice, and there’s Shannon, almost on top of us.

I stare at the side of her face. “Are you okay?” Some of her hair, which is usually tied back in a ponytail, is plastered to her cheek—anchored there by blood.

“I’m fine. I took a fall and landed on my face.” She motions at the buried camp with her hand. “I’ve got nothing to complain about.”

When I look closely at Shannon’s eyes, I can see that she’s holding back tears, just like I was when I first took in the quadrillion tons of rock that now cover the camp and everyone who was down here.

I point down and say, “Theo’s under there. Brooke spotted his hand through this hole. We’ve seen it move. We’ve got to get these rocks off him now.”

“I’m surprised there’s no one else here,” Shannon says. “With all the planes and helicopters flying around, I was sure that a helicopter would’ve landed down here.”

“Helicopters?” I say, looking at Brooke. “All we saw were planes flying super high.”

“There were helicopters lower down. Lots of them. You probably didn’t see them,” Shannon explains, “because of the steep slopes surrounding the lake.”

“Helicopters or no helicopters,” I say, “we’ve got to help Theo.”

For the next few minutes we work together, trying to move the smaller of the two rocks on either side of the opening. If only there were some trees around, we could use a big branch to create some leverage. Instead, Shannon and Brooke are pulling on the rock from behind and I’m pushing on it. We’ve gotten it to move maybe a foot, but it keeps sliding back to its original spot whenever we let up. It must weigh at least two hundred pounds, and it’s mostly wedged in place.

If Derrick were here, it might make a difference. He’s the biggest of the four of us. And that gets me wondering where he is and if he’s okay. I mean, his camp is about as far away as Shannon’s.

“What if we all push it?” Shannon says. “But not in the direction we’re trying right now.” She points. “Let’s push it down the hill instead of across.”

Brooke says, “There’s not much space for all of us on the uphill side, but it’s worth a try.”

We regroup so we’re three across on the uphill side. I’m in a half squat, and I’ve got my arms and chest pressed up against the rock like I’m trying to tackle it. Shannon and Brooke are on either side of me, pushing on the rock above where I am, their sides pressing into the tops of my shoulders.

“Okay,” Shannon says, “on the count of three.”

But she doesn’t even get to *one* before the ground starts to shake with a strong aftershock.

“Hang on.” I hug the rock and feel Shannon and Brooke collapse

onto it as well. My feet slide backward, and now I'm on my knees and my head is being jostled between Shannon's and Brooke's hips, but we're all leaning onto the rock, riding out the aftershock. I don't know if it's because of the aftershock or in spite of it, but I can feel the rock starting to give. Starting to slide downhill.

C H A P T E R 5

HIS GRIP IN MY HAND is weak. “Theo,” I shout. “Theo. Hang on. We’re going to get you out.” I drop his hand and turn to Shannon and Brooke, who are moving smaller rocks away from where we think Theo is buried, based on the angle and position that his hand is in. We’re trying to clear where we think his head is in case he’s having trouble breathing. The big rock that slid during the aftershock has made removing other rocks easier, but there’s no telling what got rearranged under the surface.

“Help me with this one,” Shannon says, her hands under one side of a rock the size of a daypack.

I squat and put my hands under the opposite side of the rock, and on *three* we lift it enough to tip it out of the way.

“I need both of you for this one,” Brooke says. The rock she’s working on is easily twice as big as the one Shannon and I just barely moved.

The three of us work at it and manage to move it about a foot and a half, and by doing that we can see another part of Theo.

Only it’s not the part I was expecting.

“He must be curled up or twisted or something,” I say.

I touch his newly exposed knee but don’t feel any response. I grab his hand and feel his weak grip in return, so I know he’s still with us.

“Maybe his head is over there.” Shannon points a few feet away and back from his knee. “Maybe his leg was slammed forward. Picture him in a lying position instead of standing straight up.”

“The quicker we expose more of him the better,” I say. My mind scans the rock pile, picturing twenty people buried under here. We

haven't heard one voice. But we didn't hear Theo's either, and right now he's alive, so maybe more people are, too. Maybe everyone is.

We keep moving more rocks, concentrating on his hand because his arm will eventually lead to his shoulder, which has to be close to his head. I don't know if his body is vertical, horizontal, or something in between.

After we remove a bunch of medium-sized rocks the size of shoeboxes and expose Theo's arm up to the elbow, Brooke says, "It looks like his arm is going straight down, but with his knee right there, it's like he's lying down but holding his arm straight up."

"Theo," I yell. "We're coming. Hang on."

"We've got to make the area wider," Shannon says. "If he's hurt, we can't just yank him out of there."

"Let's get to his head"—I point to the spot where I think it should be—"in case he's having trouble breathing. Then we can make the hole wider to ease him out."

The next rock we dislodge is red and sticky on the bottom side.

I get this sick feeling in my stomach. Not like I'm going to puke, but more like dread. How are we going to deal with injuries, with bleeding, when we've got nothing? I think of the small first aid kit back up in my tent, hours away. We each have one, but none of us brought it down here.

Shannon's voice snaps me back to the bloody rock cradled in my arms. "We've got to be careful," she says. "The rocks may be keeping him from bleeding because of the pressure they're exerting."

"We still have to get him out of there," I respond.

"I know," Shannon says. "But we might have to try to stop some bleeding along the way. I think—"

"How?" Brooke breaks in.

"Pressure." Shannon pauses. "Clothing for bandages."

I toss the rock aside, rip my pile jacket off, and then pull my T-shirt

over my head. “We can start with this.” I set my T-shirt down and put my pile jacket back on.

Shannon kneels next to Theo’s exposed forearm. “I can’t see where the blood came from.”

Brooke and I dislodge a large rock and haul it away while Shannon holds Theo’s forearm.

“I think I see his shoulder,” Shannon says. “His arm got twisted behind him. I see where he’s bleeding. Just above the elbow. Josh, hold his arm just like I am.”

I take Theo’s arm, and Shannon reaches into the small opening Brooke and I created by moving that large rock.

“Brooke,” Shannon says, “hand me the shirt.”

Brooke picks up the shirt. “Couldn’t he get infected? This shirt is all sweaty. Gross.”

“Can’t be too choosy right now,” I say, keeping my grip on Theo’s arm. Brooke doesn’t say anything back. We both keep our eyes on Shannon.

After a minute Shannon says, “I’ve almost got it. I just have to make it a little tighter.”

She does something, and I feel Theo’s grip tighten.

“It’s okay, Theo,” I say. “We’re just patching you up.” I don’t know if he can hear me, but after I say it, his hand relaxes a little bit. I wish he would say something, anything. Even a muffled groan so we’d know where his head is.

Shannon shifts her body and tilts her head toward me. “I should keep putting pressure on this wound while you and Brooke move more rocks.”

“Is it bad?” I ask softly, not wanting Theo to hear.

“It’s not good,” Shannon responds. “But keeping pressure on it will slow down the bleeding.”

I nod, and as I'm gently releasing Theo's arm, Brooke says, "You guys, there's something moving along the edge of the rock slide."

I stand up and see a big grizzly bear walking on all four legs, coming our way.

"I left my bear spray in my tent," I whisper.

"So did I," Shannon says.

Brooke takes a step toward me and says softly, "Me too."

CHAPTER 6

THE MASS OF BROWN FUR is about two hundred yards away from us. I don't know if it came down the mountainside like I did or if it came up from the lowlands and walked the lakeshore. Either way, here it is—way too close for comfort.

We watch as the bear climbs up on the landslide. It keeps stopping and sticking its face into the rocks. Then it starts pawing at the rocks, like it's trying to dig.

I glance down at Theo's arm and knee. He'd be an attractive meal for a grizzly.

We talk quietly about what to do.

Brooke wants to yell and scream at the bear to try to scare it away before it comes any closer. "We should let it know we're here."

Shannon thinks that since the bear is still pretty far away we should just keep working on getting Theo out.

And I think we should do a little bit of both.

I say, "What if the bear is digging toward a person who is alive, like Theo? We can't let that happen. I—"

Brooke cuts me off. "Didn't you see all that blood on Theo? And now, with that bear so close, we're risking our lives for a lost cause. You really think he has a chance?" She shakes her head.

"Yeah, I do. He's alive," I say softly, staring her down, when really I want to shout into her face. "What if it were you?"

"Look," Shannon says, pointing toward the bear.

More rocks clatter as the bear digs. Now it has its whole head in the

landslide, and all we can see are its massive shoulders and body straining as it pulls and tugs.

Some orange starts to show, and then the bear stumbles backward with a big orange dry bag in its jaws. At the bottom of the rock slide the bear drops the bag and starts pawing at it.

“The bear found our kitchen,” I say, “or, at least part of it.”

We had an electric fence around the kitchen area, powered by a couple of batteries hooked up to some small solar panels, but that system must be smashed up.

In no time the bear has shredded one side of the dry bag and is now pulling out smaller bags with its jaws.

Shannon says, “Let’s keep working on Theo while the bear is busy.”

I try to forget about the bear and what Brooke said about Theo and just focus on digging him out.

We all keep moving rocks, and we uncover Theo’s other elbow and then the rest of his arm. And under his bent arm, we get the first glimpse of the top of his head.

“Careful,” I say as we move small rocks and uncover the rest of Theo’s head. I put the back of my hand in front of his mouth and nose and feel a tiny stream of air run across my skin. “He’s breathing.”

“That’s great,” Shannon says, “but he’s still bleeding. It’s hard to tell how much, but there’s more blood since I stopped applying pressure and started moving rocks again.”

Shannon kneels and then sits beside Theo’s arm and applies pressure to the wound.

I glance at the bear. Luckily, it is still busy devouring our food.

Brooke starts moving more rocks, and I do the same. We work in silence. I’m still pissed that she thinks Theo is as good as dead. She was here when he squeezed my hand. Clearly he was alive then and still is now.

We uncover his torso. He's got a pile jacket on, and we don't see any blood seeping through it. It appears that he's in a sitting position with one leg scrunched up. Shannon is supporting him with her body while keeping pressure on his arm wound.

"We need to free his other leg," Brooke says, acting like it was her idea to dig him out.

I don't argue with her because I agree. As I move more rocks, my mind pounds away.

Maybe she's figured out that she was wrong.

Maybe I should drop the whole thing.

But how could she even question whether we should try to dig him out?

We're going to need to deal with that.

If there's one thing they drilled into us at this camp, it's that you need to deal with the big things.

But right now, the biggest, most immediate thing is getting Theo out of the rocks.

Still, at some point, we've got to talk about what Brooke said. Her words—*we're risking our lives for a lost cause*—replay in my brain.

We keep working in silence and now have most of Theo uncovered. Just one leg from the knee down remains trapped, but one of the rocks over it is a big one—too big for just the two of us.

Brooke is already reaching under the rock, trying to get a firm hold.

"Shannon," I say. "We're going to need your help with this one."

She nods and eases Theo into a lying position, and then lets go of his arm where she's been applying pressure.

As she starts to stand up, I hear a clattering sound from the bear's direction.

We all turn and look. I can feel the wind directly on my face, blowing up from the valley.

And below the bear, about a quarter mile down the lakeshore, we see him. "That's got to be Derrick," I say.

"He must not know about the bear," Brooke says.

The bear is now standing on two legs and facing Derrick's direction. I think about the wind hitting my face and say, "It knows about him."

Then the bear drops back down onto four legs, turns, and starts running away from Derrick and directly toward us.

CHAPTER 7

“BROOKE, SHANNON,” I SAY. “STAND with me in front of Theo. We have to appear big.”

We’ve all been taught what to do in case we encounter a bear. It was drilled into us the first couple of days of camp, but now that it’s happening, my mind is racing and my body is shaking.

We’re bunched up shoulder to shoulder. I’m guessing Shannon and Brooke are both wishing they hadn’t left their bear spray behind just like I am. We were taught to never go anywhere without it. *Got to get out of your tent to take a leak, well, don’t forget your bear spray.*

The bear is already agitated. Catching Derrick’s scent obviously spooked it, but because of the direction the wind is blowing, there’s no way it’d catch ours. Will it feel trapped between the three of us and Derrick? Will it fight or flee? Luckily, the rock slide is so jagged and slanted that even a bear can’t run full speed across it—but the bear is moving in our direction.

“If it doesn’t back off,” Brooke says, “we may have to.”

We were taught to back away slowly from a bear but to stand your ground if it was pursuing you—but that didn’t take into account protecting an injured person.

“We can’t back off,” I counter. “Only three of us can walk.”

“What would Theo want you to do?” Brooke asks. “Get mauled because of him?” She shakes her head.

“I don’t care what Theo would want me to do,” I say. “I know what he would do if the situation were flipped. He wouldn’t abandon us.”

Shannon doesn't say anything, which I take to mean that she's not planning on leaving Theo.

The bear has halved the distance to us—it's only one hundred yards away—but has slowed down. Still, with Derrick continuing his forward push to get here, the bear isn't going to be turning around.

"Would Theo want you to die defending him while he has almost no chance of survival himself?" Brooke says. "He's lost a lot of blood. He can't talk. He's barely breathing, and he's still stuck in the rocks. He's—"

"Hello. Hello." Derrick's voice echoes off the steep mountain walls surrounding the lake and seems to come at us from all directions. But the bear can smell where he is and keeps moving away from the smell. I still don't know if Derrick knows there's a bear. I don't know if he's even spotted us yet.

"We need to make some noise," Shannon says. "The bear might not know we're in its path."

"You two can yell and shout all you want," Brooke says. "I'm moving out of the way."

"And what if the bear comes at you?" Shannon asks.

Brooke scowls. "Why can't we all move out of the way?" She takes a step sideways, like she's going to abandon us, but doesn't go any farther.

Maybe she's mustered up an ounce of compassion for Theo. Maybe she's realized that his life is worth just as much as hers. Or, maybe it's the thought of being alone and confronting the bear that is just too freaking scary for her. Maybe she realizes she has more of a chance of saving herself if she stays put.

"Hey, bear," Shannon yells, just like we were taught. I join in and so does Brooke, and now we're all yelling the phrase in sync.

Maybe it's the strong headwind that keeps the bear from noticing our voices.

Maybe it's Derrick's scent that keeps pushing it forward.

Or maybe it's the smell of Theo's blood.

Whatever's driving it, the bear just keeps on coming like it's set on autopilot.

CHAPTER 8

THE THREE OF US KEEP yelling. I pick up the orange wand that used to hold the green flag—the pole that Theo’s hand was clutching when the landslide buried him—and start waving it in front of me. It’s flexible but it’s also strong; it will bend a lot but not break easily.

The bear pulls up about thirty feet from us and stands on its hind legs. It wags its head back and forth a couple of times, drops back down on four legs, comes forward about ten feet, and then stands up again.

We’ve all stopped yelling because the bear obviously knows we’re here. If it weren’t for Theo, right now we would all take a step or two backward, and if the bear stayed put, we would continue to slowly back away. If the bear advanced, we would stop retreating so we wouldn’t look like prey.

“Don’t look it in the eye,” I whisper. Standing our ground is definitely challenging it, but staring it down could make the situation worse. The end of the wand is bouncing gently. I’ve stopped waving it, but it’s still extended toward the grizzly.

I hear some rocks clattering, and so does the bear because it turns in the direction of the noise. Derrick is at the edge of the landslide now, where the bear had been tearing through one of our food bags.

I don’t know if he sees the standoff we’re in, but now he’s yelling, “Hey, bear,” just like we were.

My mind is a confused fog. None of the bear encounter training has prepared me for this. Do we continue to shout? Do we remain quiet? Do we wait to see what the bear does now that Derrick is yelling? But if we wait and the bear charges, it’ll be on us in less than a second.

I wonder what Shannon and Brooke are thinking. I glance at each of them and raise my eyebrows.

“Rocks,” Shannon mouths, then points down. I don’t know if Brooke can see what Shannon said, but she definitely saw where she pointed because she quickly bends forward and picks up a fist-sized stone. Shannon and I do the same. Now I’ve got the wand in one hand and a rock in the other.

Do we throw them while the bear is focused on Derrick? Is that Shannon’s plan? Or do we use them only if the bear advances on us?

Shannon cocks her arm back and waits for us to do the same. Derrick is still yelling, “Hey, bear,” and the bear continues to look in his direction. And the wind is still blowing in our faces.

Shannon lets her rock fly, and Brooke and I follow with ours. Shannon’s rock hits the bear square in the back, and as the bear turns, Brooke’s rock nails it in the side of the head and my rock hits its shoulder.

The bear drops to all four legs and scrambles straight over the rock slide toward the lake. When the bear gets to the edge of the lake, it splashes into the water and starts swimming toward the opposite shore, which is steep and shaded, with pockets of last winter’s snow still present.

I drop the wand and let out a breath that I didn’t know I was holding. Brooke takes a couple of steps in Derrick’s direction.

Then I hear Shannon’s voice behind me. “Theo. Theo. Stay with us.”

CHAPTER 9

“HEY,” DERRICK SAYS.

I look up from where I’m kneeling next to Theo and shake my head. Shannon and Brooke are sitting on either side of me.

Shannon says, “We lost him.”

Derrick takes off his pack and sets it down. “Did a bear get him?”

“The avalanche did,” I say. “It might’ve gotten everyone”—I pause because I can feel my voice starting to crack—“except us.”

The wind is still blowing, and now that we’re just sitting and not moving around, I’m starting to cool off. A shiver runs up my spine.

“What do you mean, everyone?” Derrick asks.

“Look around,” Brooke says. “The whole camp is buried under tons of rock. It took forever to dig Theo out. And it was all for nothing. We almost got mauled by a bear, too. You chased it right toward us.” Brooke frowns.

“I didn’t know there was a bear until I saw the mess down there.” Derrick points to the edge of the landslide where the bear tore into the food bag. “Even then, I didn’t know it was still around. Don’t blame me.”

“No one is blaming you.” *Except maybe Brooke*, I think but don’t say. “I—”

“We have to bury him,” Shannon says softly. “Or else scavengers will get him. Ravens. Wolverines. Bears.”

“No way. We just unburied him,” Brooke says. “I don’t want—”

“You are so sick,” I shout. “Don’t you care about anyone but yourself?”

"I worked for hours moving rocks when he was barely alive," Brooke shouts back. "I stayed here when the bear approached. I put his life before mine just like you did. But now that he's dead, what's the point?"

"The point," Shannon says softly, "is that the more scavengers are attracted to this spot where the camp used to be, the more likely that we'll keep having encounters like we just had."

"Plus," I say, "it's the respectful thing to do. Eventually his body is going to get hauled out of here. His parents are going to see it."

"Dudes," Derrick says, "let's quit wasting time and energy arguing and get the job done." He sets his bear spray down. "Now, how do we want to do this?"

We decide to cover Theo with small rocks and use the wand as a marker for where he's buried. As we work, Derrick recounts what happened to him during the earthquake, which is pretty different from what happened to the rest of us.

"I was finally asleep after being awake most of the night when the quake rolled me around and threw me up toward the ceiling of my tent," Derrick explains. "I thought maybe a bear was batting me around. I was fighting to get out of my sleeping bag so I could reach for my bear spray. Then I thought I should just stay in my bag because it'd offer a layer of protection against the bear, so I curled up and pulled the drawstring tight. The ground kept rolling under me, and that's how I figured out it was an earthquake."

After the rolling stopped, Derrick stuck his head out of the tent and then stood up. The ground hadn't gotten all split up around his campsite like it had at mine and Brooke's. Through his binoculars he saw that all three of our flags were still flying green. Since he was dead tired from last night, he went back to sleep for a while. He remembers hearing some jets and maybe some helicopters while he tried to get back to sleep. When he finally got up and hiked to the spot where he could see

the camp, he saw the monstrous collapsed mountainside of rocks, so he packed up as fast as he could and headed down.

We are all sharing a moment of silence around Theo's temporary grave when it starts to rain lightly. Derrick is the only one with his pack and bear spray.

"We need to get our supplies," I say, "before we freeze."

Brooke points across the lake and up toward her camp. "I'm beat. I don't want to hike all the way back up there right now. Besides, someone will rescue us. Our parents will make it happen."

I think about having Brooke stay here while we pack up her camp, but we've got one canister of bear spray among the four of us and we know there's at least one bear in the area. Plus, with the rain, it'd be easy to freeze to death even in the summer if the temperature dropped.

"We all need to go," I say. "You stay here with nothing, and they could be recovering your body instead of rescuing you."

"Easy for you to say," Brooke responds. "You live to run."

"He's right," Shannon says. "Right now, without any of our gear, we need to move to just stay warm."

"Let's do it this way," Derrick says. "We all hike to Brooke's camp. Once we have her bear spray, two of us hike to Shannon's camp and two of us hike to Josh's camp. And then we all meet back here."

"I'm game for that." I nod once. The rain is starting to chill me, and I want to get moving.

"Good idea," Shannon says. She stands up.

"Whatever," Brooke mumbles. "Like any of us have a choice."

We are about halfway across the rock slide when a set of jets screams across the sky. Then in the distance both to the left and right of the jets we see squadrons of helicopters. They are far enough away that we can't see how many there are, but they make that unmistakable *whop-whop-whop* helicopter noise. Then another set of jets flies overhead.

“The quake must’ve been pretty widespread,” Derrick says, “for the military to be getting involved.”

“See,” Brooke says, “we’re going to be rescued. They’re already out looking for people.”

“Maybe my dad is flying one of those choppers,” Derrick says. “But if he is, that means they’re already coming back from somewhere, because they’re flying west to east.” Derrick takes his pack off, wrestles out his binoculars, and scans the horizon. “They’re too far away for me to tell what kind they are, but they don’t look like the kind my dad flies.”

CHAPTER 10

WE REACH THE EDGE OF the landslide and walk single file on the narrow trail along the lakeshore in the spitting rain. After a mile or so, we start heading up the ridge toward Brooke's campsite.

The pain in my calf is knotted, and stings with every step. If I were home, I'd need to rest it for a few days to let it heal so I could be at my best for cross-country races, but now I'm probably doing more and more damage, not that I have a choice. Even with the pain, I could go for miles and miles. I'm starting to outdistance everyone on the climb, so I stop on a flat spot and wait. With one canister of bear spray among the four of us, we need to stay close to each other.

When we're all together, Shannon says, "When we get back down to the landslide, we should try to find the satellite phone. Then we could just call for help."

"How are we going to know where to dig?" Derrick asks.

"We know where the flag was. And, thanks to the bear, we know where the kitchen was," I say. "So, we should be able to map it all out. Plus, they put our cell phones in with the satellite phone. Maybe they would work, too. You know, from a high spot."

"I doubt it," Shannon says. "We are way out here. Hundreds of miles from nowhere."

"Then why would they collect the phones from us?" I ask. "If they didn't work, then they wouldn't have bothered collecting them."

Derrick responds, "They didn't want us listening to music, looking at pictures, playing video games. All the crap my parents said it'd be good for me to get away from."

Brooke hasn't said anything for a while. The rain has washed most of the blood off her face, exposing the scratches that were bleeding. They look like they sting. Maybe because she can tell I'm looking at her, she turns toward me.

Then she says, "Cell phones." She brushes her hair out of her eyes. "I've still got mine."

"You snuck it back?" I ask. "Gutsy."

"I never turned it in," she responds. "Well, I turned in *a phone*, it just wasn't *my phone*. And they only work up high, and even up there"—she nods toward where we are going—"just barely."

"Bringing two phones," Derrick says. "I wish I'd thought of that."

"My dad," Brooke says. "He made me do it. Told me to use it just for emergencies. He gave me a solar charger, too." She shakes her head and says softly, "My dad. The *gadget guy*—that's what he calls himself—comes through."

The rain lightens up as we pick our way toward Brooke's camp. A pale outline of the sun shows through the thinning clouds, but the wind is still blowing.

We top the first ridge above the lake and stop again.

"Too bad they didn't let us use this ridge," I say, staring up to the next one, where Brooke's camp is.

"Self-reliance," Derrick says. "They didn't want us so close that we could just run back to camp if we got scared or whatever."

Shannon turns to Brooke. "Did you use your phone? Did it really work?"

"One bar. I sent my dad a text last night," Brooke says. "It was delivered, but I never heard back from him."

Another squadron of jets screams over us, just specks in the sky. "Can you call a jet on a cell phone?" I ask.

Derrick laughs. "Only if you know someone on the jet and their number."

"What about the satellite phone? Can you call a jet with that?" Shannon asks, looking at Derrick.

"I don't know," Derrick shrugs. "Just because my dad's in the military, it doesn't mean I know everything." He looks away. "He barely talks to me."

"Who cares," Brooke says. "When we get to my tent, I'll just text my dad again. He'll know what to do."

"I just hope all of our parents are okay," I say.

Everyone nods and we keep walking.

I picture our house in Fairbanks. If the quake could crumble the rocky slope above Simon Lake, it could easily collapse a house.

I just hope it wasn't as strong in Fairbanks as it was here.

When we get to the ridge with Brooke's tent on it, there's a series of cracks in the ground. I turn to Brooke. "The exact same thing happened on my ridge." I point across the lake to land approximately on the same level as where we're standing.

"At least your tent didn't get swallowed," Brooke says.

In the distance we can all see her green flag, but there's no sign of her tent. I try to imagine what it would've been like to be inside my tent and have the ground open up and swallow me. Maybe that's why she was so much more freaked out than Shannon and me. Maybe that's why she was acting so selfish, like she didn't care if Theo lived or died and didn't even want to try to save him.

Maybe.

Or, maybe that's the way she is.

"The ground split right below me," I say. "After I was tackled by the first tremor, I rolled onto my back to get away from the split. But being in a tent, that must've been scary."

"I was like a cat in a bag that had been tossed into a lake," Brooke pauses. "I was drowning. At least that's how it felt."

No one says anything for a few seconds, but then Shannon says,

“It’s hard to believe the quake just happened this morning. It already feels like a long time ago. I mean, so much has gone on since then.” A tear spills down her cheek and she wipes it away.

We all nod in silence. With digging Theo out and then facing the bear, we haven’t really dealt with the reality that there are probably a lot of dead people down there. People we were living closely with until this morning. It just as easily could have been one of us, or all of us, buried down there. Everyone had a couple of days for a solo experience, and ours just happened to fall when the quake struck.

“After we get our supplies, so we can, you know, not die,” I say, “we need to keep searching for survivors. Just because Theo died”—I can feel my voice starting to crack—“doesn’t mean everyone else did.”

C H A P T E R 11

“YOU WERE IN THAT THING when the ground opened up?” Derrick points to Brooke’s tent, which is sitting on its side at the bottom of a crack that opened up during the quake. “Unbelievable. What are the chances?”

Brooke nods. “Climbing out wasn’t easy.” She touches the bruise on her forehead.

“Let’s haul it out of the hole,” I say, wanting to keep us moving since we have my camp and Shannon’s to dismantle after this one.

I lie down on my stomach at the edge of the hole. I can feel moisture being absorbed by my shirt and pants from the wet ground, but I’ve got a set of rain gear at my camp so I don’t care. I reach into the hole but can’t quite make contact with the tent.

Derrick takes his pack off and lies next to me, which is good, because out of the four of us, he’s got the longest arms. He reaches down and grabs a corner of the tent and starts pulling. “Josh, as soon as you can, grab part of it,” he says.

“I got it,” I say. And together the two of us keep pulling.

Shannon and Brooke, who’ve each knelt on either side of Derrick and me, grab the sides of the tent as it gets higher, and before you know it, we’ve got Brooke’s tent on the ground next to us.

We roll it over so it’s sitting the way it’s supposed to, and Brooke sticks her head in the unzipped door. After a few seconds she comes out with her cell phone.

She peers at the screen. “My dad never wrote back. Or if he did, the

message didn't get to me." She types something with her thumbs, then frowns. "It didn't go through."

"Maybe the system is overloaded," Shannon says. "You know, because of the earthquake, people are probably calling and texting their families all over the state to see who is okay and who needs help."

"I guess." Brooke types something else and hits send. "It still won't go through."

"People will come for us anyway," Derrick says. "This whole leadership-camp thing was supposed to be over in like two more days. Even if we have to wait that long, they'll come."

Brooke takes all her stuff out of her tent. While she starts loading her pack, Shannon and I take the tent apart and Derrick goes to get Brooke's food, which is stashed nearby.

"I know you and Theo were close," Shannon says. "Maybe if I had kept the pressure on his wound instead of standing up and helping keep the bear away, he would've made it."

"Shannon, we all did what we had to do. He wouldn't have lasted as long as he did if it weren't for you." I keep stuffing the tent into its bag. "I still can't believe he's gone."

"I think he was with us." Shannon stops breaking down the tent poles and looks me in the eye. "The way he would squeeze your hand when you talked to him. I think he could hear you. And that probably brought him some peace. He didn't die alone. You gave him that."

A tear runs down my cheek and I wipe it away. "Thanks," I say. "His parents are going to be devastated." I think about all the others down there, and my stomach clenches up. They *all* have parents. "Let's finish this so we can get back and search for more survivors."

After Brooke's camp is all packed up, Brooke and Shannon head for Shannon's camp up to the next ridge, and Derrick and I head for mine.

We walk fast side by side on the tundra, deciding not to go down to the lake and back up, but to stay up high to circle around to my camp.

The sun is breaking through the clouds, and I'm squinting to keep it out of my eyes.

"We've got some big rocks to move down there." I point to the buried camp as we walk.

"I get what you're saying," Derrick says. "I mean, I want to find anyone who is alive, too. But think about it." Derrick stumbles on a rock but regains his balance. "Theo had the flag wand in his hand. He was on the high point of land in the camp." Derrick pauses. "Remember how that little spot was like ten feet higher than the rest of the camp?"

"Yeah," I say. "I remember."

"Dude, that means everyone else was probably ten feet lower than him when the mountainside cut loose."

"I know all that," I say. "But how do you explain the food bag that the bear found pretty close to the surface?"

"I don't know." Derrick shrugs. "Maybe some stuff got pushed along by the slide before more rocks fell on top of it?"

"So," I say, "maybe a tent with a person in it got pushed like that food bag did. Maybe that happened to more than one tent. We owe it to everyone to search. The fact that we survived is just dumb luck."

"Hey, man," Derrick says. "I'm not saying we shouldn't search. I'm just not that optimistic about what we'll find."

C H A P T E R 12

SIX DAYS LATER AND WE'VE got four more shallow graves all in a row next to where we buried Theo. We've built rock cairns at the head of each grave.

"Why hasn't anybody come?" Derrick asks. "My dad would be on this in a heartbeat if I didn't show up on time. If we *all* didn't show up."

"We don't know what it's like anywhere but here," Shannon says. "Maybe there was widespread damage. And mass casualties."

I point at the shallow graves and say, "There's no reason to stay anymore. I mean, if I thought there was still a chance that someone was alive, I'd keep digging." I feel my eyes getting hot. "We need to leave this place."

"But if we leave," Brooke argues, "and they come after we've gone, they'll just give us up for dead, too. They won't even look for us."

"We'll write them a note," I respond. "We can put it in one of the empty bear-proof food containers and we can plant all of our flags around it so there's no way they can miss it."

"What are we going to do after that?" Brooke says. "Walk out?" She shakes her head.

"There was a plan," Derrick says. "Remember? We were all briefed on the routes to follow if there was an emergency and we had to evacuate on foot. West to Talkeetna or east to Lake Louise."

"They were about the same distance," I say, remembering Theo describing part of the plan.

"Yeah," Derrick agrees. "Both long as hell."

Brooke huffs. "They spent five minutes showing us on a map,

and then they were on to where to dig the latrine. Does anyone even remember which way to go? Everything looks the same. We'll get lost if we leave."

"So," I say, "we stay here when obviously no one is coming?" I raise my voice. "That makes no sense."

Before Brooke can respond, Shannon says, "One of us has hiked up the ridge every day to try to send a message with your cell phone. None of them have gone through. We should try to send one more message, saying that we're walking out and which way we're going, and even if it doesn't go through now, it could go through as we get closer to civilization. It might save our lives."

No one says anything. I'm just waiting for Brooke to come to her senses. She's grudgingly helped dig for survivors and rebury the dead bodies we've found, but out of the four of us she, by far, complains the most. Even though Derrick made it pretty clear that this felt more like a recovery than a rescue effort from the start, he's worked as hard as Shannon and me and never complained about the work—just about being hungry, like the rest of us have.

I point at our four tents in a row in the sunshine on the lakeshore. "At least we'll have some shelter for the journey. Whichever way we go, it'll take seven to ten days. That's what I remember. But for us, it might take longer. I mean, we know generally where we're going but not exactly. I wish we had the maps."

"Shoot," Derrick says. "I wish we had the satellite phone, a GPS, the camp first aid kit, a cook stove, and a water filter so we don't all get diarrhea." He pauses, then shakes his head. "They always at least drop you a note, and maybe some supplies, from the sky. Or they'll fly low and buzz you so you'll know you've been seen. But every helicopter and jet we've seen has been flying high. It's obvious we're not on their radar. What puzzles me is why."

I nod in agreement. "This camp system seemed pretty organized.

What about the people in Fairbanks who work for the camp? They should be on this. They're four days late. I know it's a long shot to make the walk, but to stay here now is an even longer shot."

Brooke takes a step toward me. "Here's what I remember from that *walk talk*. Mountains, rivers, and swampy valleys to cross. We won't make it. I—"

"Brooke," Shannon cuts in, "I don't know why nobody came for us. Did *all* our parents die in the quake?" She makes a sweeping motion to take in the whole landslide. "There were twenty of us. Plus four adults. Are things so bad that we're a super-low priority?" Shannon shakes her head. "I don't know the answers to any of these questions. But I do know one thing. They're not coming for us anytime soon. We're on our own."

CHAPTER 13

Dear Rescuers,

on June 25th, an earthquake caused a massive landslide that buried the Simon Lake Leadership Camp. We recovered five bodies and buried them in shallow graves to keep animals from scavenging them. The graves are marked by rock cairns. An additional fifteen bodies are under the landslide. The four of us, who were away from the main camp during the earthquake, survived. It is now July 1st and no one has come to our assistance. We've decided to hike west to Talkeetna. We are in good health, but have limited supplies and no map.

The Survivors,

Josh Baker (Fairbanks, Alaska), Shannon White
(Fairbanks, Alaska), Derrick Anderson (Fairbanks,
Alaska), Brooke Simpson (Fairbanks, Alaska)

In the end, after we secure the note in the empty food canister and put the flags up, we decide to take almost everything else with us.

Not that it's that much stuff.

The camp was pretty strict about what we could take on our solo experience, and almost everything else is buried under the landslide.

We each have a backpack, a tiny one-person tent, a blue foam

sleeping pad, a sleeping bag, a raincoat and rain pants, a canister of bear spray, a pair of binoculars, a one-liter water bottle, and one set of clothing.

Brooke has a cell phone and a solar charger.

We also each started our solo experience with small blue stuff sacks. And inside the blue sacks we had the following items:

One lighter

One small bottle of insect repellent

One writing journal

One pen

One package of Band-Aids

One small bottle of water purification tablets

At camp there were three large water filters in the kitchen. And one of the jobs was to haul water from the lake and pour it into the holding tanks, which then released the water so it'd flow through the filters and be purified for drinking. On our solo trips we used the tablets, which make the water taste like liquid rust. You basically use one tablet per liter of water. And we've been using the tablets since the earthquake, so we don't have that many left.

"We're supposed to each drink about a gallon of water a day if we're hiking," I say. "I've got ten tablets left. Enough for about two and a half days."

"Some water sources are a lot more likely to be clean than others," Derrick says. "Creeks from snowmelt, or any fast-moving water, are going to be better than drinking from a lake or pond where bacteria can build up."

"Maybe we shouldn't use the tablets when we've got water that we

think is clean,” Shannon suggests. “We could save them for when we’ve got to get water from lakes or ponds or puddles.”

“I’m not drinking from a puddle.” Brooke huffs.

“You might,” I respond, “if it’s the only place to get some water.”

No one else says anything but I’m pretty sure Shannon, Derrick, and Brooke are all thinking about the same thing I am, and how little of it we have.

Food.