

THE WILD LANDS

P A U L G R E C I

{Imprint}
MADE YOUR MARK
NEW YORK



A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018944992

ISBN 978-1-250-18358-3 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-18359-0 (ebook)

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Book design by Heather Palisi

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2019

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This book stays in the owner's hands.
Steal it and you'll be banished to burnt-out lands.
With nothing to eat and nowhere to hide,
You'll be in for a grim and ghastly ride.

For my wife, Dana

PART
ONE

C H A P T E R

1

“WITH ANY LUCK, WE’LL BE gone by tomorrow,” Dad says.

I nod and keep stuffing the tent into its sack, looking forward to getting out of this ash bucket but not to the four-hundred-mile walk north. And not to cramming my six-foot frame into a small tent with my mom, dad, and sister.

We’ve been living in the cement basement of a burnt-out house for about a year now in the hills above what used to be Fairbanks, Alaska.

An expanse of gray runs to the horizon—ash from the fires that ravaged this place the past two summers. The first fires, which the government set intentionally after classifying Interior Alaska as a “Sacrifice Area,” burned Fairbanks and the two military bases east of town, but spared most of the houses in the hills. It used to be that only places the military had trashed were labeled as Sacrifice Areas, but now the government was using the term for places it couldn’t support anymore. And it was destroying those places so other countries couldn’t benefit from what was left behind.

But no one knows who started the fires the second summer. Those fires reburned the town, blazed through the hills, and scorched the land as far as the eye can see.

Trees are memories. Buildings are memories. We inferno

survivors, however many or few, are all living in basements. Tiny ribbons of green, spindly stalks of fireweed pushing through the ash, spaced far and wide, are the only signs of plant life I can see from our place.

I wanted to leave three years ago, when most everyone else fled this wreck of a place, when the United States government said they could no longer support Alaska due to the scarcity of resources worldwide. They'd been pulling back for years now, ever since the oil ran dry up here. They couldn't keep pumping energy into a far-away place that wasn't giving any back. Never mind that they'd sucked every ounce of oil from the ground and shipped it south.

But they offered everyone an out three years ago when they withdrew statehood status: a bus ride north from Fairbanks to the Arctic Coast on the last road that was actually drivable with the last gas available. Then a journey in a ship east across the Arctic Ocean and then south to the Maine coast, where evacuees would be resettled.

Way back, it used to be that heading north meant heading into a wilderness where you'd bump up against an ocean that was frozen most of the year. But for years now, the Arctic Ocean has been ice-free in the summer.

But if you stayed, you were on your own.

"Travis," Dad says, "how's the cache coming?"

I pull the drawstring tight on the tent's stuff sack. "I should have it finished today."

Dad stops cleaning his shotgun, his three remaining slugs lined up on the floor. "Should have?" The edge to his voice makes my stomach go raw. "You better have it finished today."

I want to tell him to finish it himself if he's not happy with how long it's taking me, but I know he's under a lot of pressure.

Pressure he could've avoided if he wasn't so freaking stubborn. And it's not like digging the cache is the only thing I'm doing. Every time I breathe he gives me something else to do. "It's just taking a little longer than I thought," I tell him.

"I'll finish packing up in here," he says. "Just go. Finish that cache. Christ."

My head slumps. Whatever I do, and however fast I do it, it's never enough.

The cache is just a big hole about a quarter mile from our basement. Six feet deep, six feet long, four feet wide. Coffin-sized. Our plan is to bury some of what we can't take with us in case we have to come back. Food, clothing, tools, packs. But we'll leave some stuff out in the open so when the looters come, hopefully they won't look any farther. And if they do discover evidence of something buried, hopefully they'll think it's a grave and leave it alone.

Yeah, looting is standard practice. Whenever anyone leaves or dies, their stuff is up for grabs. Not that there's much of anything left since the fires.

There was lots of food that first winter because all the people who'd abandoned their houses and taken the government up on getting the hell out of here left it behind. They left everything.

Now I don't even know how many people are still in the area. Walking is the only way to get anywhere, and with miles of burnt land separating you from the next family living in the basement of a burnt-out house, you might not see anyone for days, and when you do see someone, you don't know how dangerous they are, how desperate they are.

* * *

“Jess,” I say to my little sister, “hand me another jar.” I could do the job myself, but I want Jess with me at the cache. I want her to see where it is and what’s in it. Embed the location in her mind in case something happens to me or Mom or Dad—or all three of us. My mom has an endless amount of energy, which she’s poured into our survival, but somehow it hasn’t hardened her like it has my dad.

I take the quart jar of salmon from Jess and place it in the cache. We’re on the back side of a hill behind our basement in the remains of a stand of birch trees—charred, lifeless snags poking up from the ash and ready to be blown down by the next big wind.

Jess is ten years old. Seven years younger than me, and only seven herself when the government decided it could no longer support Alaska at all. They’d pulled their support from the western and northern parts of the state a few years before that, which brought a wave of people into Fairbanks. And the southern coast had been wracked by a couple of big earthquakes with no help to rebuild. Rumor was that a lot of people had starved on the coast after the quakes, and Anchorage had been pretty much leveled, but we didn’t know for sure what went on down there.

Most people up here got on the buses headed north, and we never heard from them again.

Others walked south, attempting to cross the mountains and then the endless forest to the coast, looking to start a new life down there despite the destruction from the quakes.

My girlfriend, Stacy, and her family walked south. I don’t know if they made it or died along the way, but they never came back.

I cried and cried the day they left. No phones. No email. No regular mail. Stacy was as gone as gone could be, and so were all my other friends, too.

Used to be you could drive south from Fairbanks to Anchorage,

and to the small town of Valdez, too. But even way back, before the oil ran out, the shifting ground and melting permafrost kept destroying sections of road. Then the glaciers in the Alaska Range, that's the mountain range south of here, went on a melting rampage and that caused the rivers they fed to spill their banks and cut new channels, and the routes the roads took pretty much became memories.

But we'd stayed, obviously. My dad was already paranoid about the government. He loved Alaska because he felt like Uncle Sam wasn't looking over his shoulder all the time, telling him what to do.

Now Uncle Sam's a memory.

Jess hands me another jar. "Trav, I'm hungry."

"Sorry, but you're gonna have to wait until dinner. You know the rules."

"But look at all this salmon." Jess sighs. "We should at least be able to have a jar. We're doing all the work and we'll probably never see this food again." She smiles at me, and her rosy cheeks, spotted with ashy fingerprints and framed by her blond hair, make me smile, too. My sister is beautiful.

Then she sucks her cheeks in and pretends she's a fish and says, "Feed me. Feed me." I let out a laugh. Right now the only thing I want is to protect her and make her happy.

And she has a point: We probably won't see this food again. But if word gets back to Mom and Dad that I broke into the supplies, they'll be pissed. I want them to be able to count on me, even though it's their fault we're still here.

Really, it's mostly Dad's fault. He wanted to stay, Mom wanted to go. Maybe if she'd threatened to leave without him, he would've caved and we all would've left on the buses. I still would've been

separated from Stacy, but at least we wouldn't be trapped here on the brink of starvation.

But I want Jess to be able to count on me as well. I don't want to be the one to tell her "no." She's hungry. She isn't faking it. I mean, she's not asking for a candy bar. Not that there are any candy bars, except in our memories. She's begging for nasty, spawned-out salmon that my mom boiled until it turned even more mushy than it was when we caught it. Lucky for us, we fished and fished a couple years ago, because last summer the salmon didn't return, and so far this summer our nets have turned up nothing. Not one fish. Our one reliable source of protein—gone. And there's no way to know if it'll ever be back. That's why we're finally leaving.

* * *

"You see that?" Dad points.

Me and my mom both look. She takes a step closer to me so we are standing shoulder to shoulder. I hear her take a deep breath and exhale.

Down in the flat land below our place, about a mile away, ash is puffing up from the ground.

"You think they're coming this way?" I ask. Luckily, I've just finished the cache and brushed out the footprints leading to it. My mom puts her arm around me, but says nothing.

When goods started getting scarce after that first winter, some people banded together while my dad took us farther from town, isolating us. Then, after surviving the second summer of fires, we found this basement of a small house that had burned and moved in. Our place sits on top of a hill, and since the trees are all gone we can see for miles across the valley.

When we first got here, we roamed the area, looking for aban-

doned houses. Places where goods may have survived in a basement or a crawl space.

If we came upon a place that was occupied, sometimes the people would just tell us to move on. Or sometimes they'd wave hello and we'd talk from a distance. And they'd say, *You won't find anything around here.*

"Just keep an eye on them," Dad says, nodding at the rising ash. "If they start coming up our hill . . ." Dad pauses. "Damn, I think they just turned our way." He turns to my mom. "Time for you and Jess to hide."

My mom says softly, "I know." Then walks to the doorway and disappears down the stairs.

When she's gone, my dad turns to me and says, "If only you'd finished that cache on schedule, we could've left yesterday."

I want to tell him that it takes more time than he thinks to dig a grave-sized hole and then fill it back in and make it look like the ground hasn't been disturbed. I want to tell him that just because he thinks something should be a certain way or take a certain amount of time that doesn't mean it will. But there's no time to argue right now. Someone is coming and we need to be ready.

C H A P T E R

2

WE CAN MAKE OUT INDIVIDUALS now, six of them in single file snaking their way through the ash and approaching the base of the hill. Soon they'll be out of sight, and then if they keep coming they'll probably pop up about fifty yards down from our place.

"Dad," I say, "what are we gonna do?"

My dad shifts his shotgun from one hand to the other. "We'll see what they do."

"But what if they have guns?" I ask. "Or knives. Or whatever. What happens if we let them walk all the way up here and they turn out to be bad people?"

Dad chews on his upper lip, then says, "I can't just shoot someone because they're walking this way. Maybe they're nice, like us. Or at least reasonable. And if they are, I don't want to waste ammo that I could use for hunting, much less kill someone who doesn't deserve it."

"But Dad, I—"

"Just let me do the talking," Dad says. "And don't show your knife. If we do need it, then it'll be more effective if they don't see it right off the bat."

I pull my shirt out so it covers the knife in the sheath on my

belt. I've never stabbed anyone. A raw spot forms in my stomach and I taste salmon at the back of my throat.

Then we wait. And wait some more, but no one piles over the hill. I scan the valley to see if the group changed course but don't see anything. They have to be just below us. My eyes sweep the edge of the hillside. We expect them to come up the center because that's the way they've been moving, but now I realize they can come up anywhere in a 270-degree arc.

Dad's voice echoes in my head: *If only you'd finished that cache on schedule, we could've left yesterday.*

I see a little movement, some ash puffing off to the right. Then some more off to the left. Then straight on. And all of a sudden there are six heads poking up in a semicircle, surrounding us.

"What do you people want?" Dad says. He's holding the shotgun forward but pointed down.

I can feel my arms shaking. I watch their shoulders appear. Then they're fully in view, all men, covered in ash from the crawl up the hill.

"What does anyone want?" the man straight ahead says. "Food. You got any?"

I hear Dad take a breath. "Just enough for me and my boy." He nods his head toward me.

I'm not a boy. I'm seventeen years old and tower over Dad by a few inches. I even have a beard. But I know what he means.

My eyes are darting from man to man. Six on two. This is going to suck, especially if they have any guns.

"I got mouths to feed." The man sweeps his arm left, then right.

The two guys on the ends look young, about my age, but the

other three are older than the guy doing the talking, who is maybe Dad's age, in his forties or fifties. Stocky build and bald.

"We've all got mouths to feed," Dad says. "Maybe the salmon will come back this year. Summer's not over yet."

The man spits. "And if they don't?"

"Look," Dad says. "I don't want any trouble. I don't want to shoot anyone, but I will if I have to. Now just move on."

Some thunder rumbles in the distance.

"You know what it's like to watch your own kids starve?" the man asks. "To feed your family a few fireweed sprouts that you know will make no difference? To watch your wife die because you can't provide for her?"

The man takes a step forward and Dad raises his gun ever so slightly. "I don't want any trouble," Dad repeats. "I don't like to kill, but I'll protect what I've got. I've had to do it before."

"I'm not out to rob anyone." The bald man smiles. "I just want to feed my people." He holds his hands up, palms out at shoulder height.

"Travis," Dad says. "Go get two jars of salmon. Now."

I hate leaving my dad out there alone, but I can't start arguing with him. Can't do anything to distract him. I run down the stairs and hear movement from Mom and Jess's hiding spot.

"Not yet," I whisper to them.

An arm reaches out from behind a curtain and a warm hand strokes my beard. "Be careful," my mom whispers. Then she withdraws her hand.

I can hear Dad and the man talking but can't make out what they are saying. I grab two jars of salmon from one of the backpacks and run back upstairs.

Without turning, Dad says, “Trav, set the salmon down about halfway. And nobody moves until he’s back with me.”

I walk forward, a quart jar of salmon in each hand, my feet puffing in the ash. Another rumble of thunder fills my ears.

I stop about halfway, set the jars down, then back up until I’m next to Dad.

The man moves forward, scoops up the jars, and just holds them. “Not much for six.”

“Time for you all to be on your way,” Dad says. “I’ve been more than generous.”

The man just stands there. “You must have quite a supply if you’ve got salmon from two summers ago.”

We shouldn’t have given them anything. But Dad, he helps people if he can do it without putting Mom and Jess in danger. And I agree with that. But it’s hard to tell what might put them in danger.

“Time to be on your way,” Dad repeats, then raises the shotgun to shoulder level.

“Four more jars,” the man says.

The first drops of rain sink into the ash. I feel my stomach tighten. The guy on the far right puts his hand into his sweatshirt pocket. In an instant everyone but the guy holding the fish has a baseball-sized rock in his hands.

“You might be able to kill a couple of us,” the man says. “That is, if that gun’s got any bullets.”

“Slugs,” Dad says. “Blow a hole in your chest as big as your heart.”

“Prove it,” the man says. “Fire one into the air.”

“If I shoot,” Dad says, “it’ll be to kill.”

I've never seen Dad kill a man, but he's done it before. At the last place we lived, I heard the shot and came running. The guy had attacked him with a knife. Dad used the last bullet in his pistol from close range.

My eyes jump from person to person, trying to see if there are any more surprises, but they all just stand there like they've rehearsed this a thousand times and are now playing it out.

The rain comes harder, and I can feel it starting to soak through my shirt. If this had been the first year after the mass exodus, we would've invited these guys in and fed them. Maybe we even shared a meal with them a couple of years ago. Maybe I went to school with the two guys on the ends—back when there used to be school. But it seems like everyone is the enemy now.

I hear the sneeze behind me, muffled through the basement walls. Damn it, Jess.

The man smiles. "You're hiding more than salmon."

"And I'll kill for them," Dad says. "Count on it."

"I don't want your women," the man says. "Just more food. Four more jars and we'll leave and never come back."

Bullshit, I think. I know that the more we give, the more they'll press us for.

I also know that none of these guys want a hole in their chest or their head completely blown off. Dad has three slugs, and he really does want them for hunting in case we do see a moose or a bear, or some caribou up north.

That first year after the government pulled out, everyone was hunting. Even before that, when the shipments of food became sporadic, more people turned to the land for moose and bear. And then the fires came through, which usually meant you'd eventually have more moose habitat, but these fires burned so hot that

the plants were slow to come back. We haven't seen a bear or a moose in over a year. Not even tracks.

Lightning flashes from the hills on the other side of the valley, followed by thunder. The ash is turning to mud at our feet.

"We'll set our rocks down," the man says. "Just have your boy get four more jars."

Dad keeps the gun at shoulder height and pans the group with it. The man with the fish takes a step back. Everyone else drops their rocks in the mud and does the same.

"Trav," Dad says. "Get the fish."

I want to grab the gun and fire it, show these people that they can't do this. That they don't have this kind of power, but if I struggle with Dad that'd just give them a chance to attack. And even though it'll take less than a minute to get the fish, I don't want to leave him alone. And four more jars—that's a lot of our food for our trip. And if we give it to them, what will they ask for next?

I run down the steps and grab four more jars out of the pack. As I turn around, the blast of a shotgun slams my ears.

"Dad," I yell as I take the stairs two at a time, cradling the jars against my chest.

Out in the rain Dad stands with his head bowed, the gun at his side. From the edge of the hill, I see five figures running toward the valley through the ashy mud.

The kid on the far right, the first one to pull out his rock, lies crumpled on the ground.

We walk over to the body. I feel my heart pounding against the jars of salmon.

"He left me no choice. He pulled a pistol on me." Dad reaches down, picks up the pistol, clicks it open, and spins the cylinder.

"Empty," he says. Then he slams it on the ground.

C H A P T E R

3

“COME ON, JESS,” I SAY. “We’ve got to keep walking.” Truth is, I’m growing tired of coaxing her along, but Dad assigned me the task of keeping her moving.

At least now we can feel the surface of the old road under the ash.

We went cross-country to get to the road because we wanted to steer clear of everyone, especially the guys who threatened us with rocks. A neighbor from five years ago could be your worst enemy now.

The crumpled, bloody body of the kid Dad shot, the rain soaking him, ash splattering on his face, keeps popping into my mind. Why would he point an empty pistol at someone holding a shotgun? Maybe he was calling Dad’s bluff. He thought if Dad hadn’t fired already, then he probably didn’t have any bullets. And maybe they could muscle more food from us with the pistol.

The thing about Dad is he’ll only hurt someone as a last resort. These days, most people would’ve pulled that trigger when the rocks came out, or before.

We aren’t the first people to walk north this summer; there’re some tracks on the road. The people who headed north on foot the second summer never came back, so that gives me hope that if we

can get ourselves up to the Arctic Coast something good could happen. That the boats are still running or sailing across the Arctic Ocean, going wherever they go. I'm pretty sure it's already July, but I'm not certain. I had a watch that showed the date, but it stopped working a couple of winters ago.

"I just want to rest a little longer," Jess says. "My feet hurt." I look for that sparkle in her eyes, but it's not there.

I'd carry her partway, but I have a pack on that weighs ninety pounds, just like Dad's. And Mom's pack is at least sixty pounds. Jess has a smaller pack, but I bet it weighs thirty.

Mom and Dad have stopped just up the road. Talking too quietly to hear. They turn and keep going up the road.

"Let's catch up to Mom and Dad," I say, "and see if we can have a real rest, with some food." The one nice thing about traveling the road north is that the farther from Fairbanks we get, anyone we do run into will most likely be searching for a better life like us, not just roaming around looking for someone to rob.

Since the sun is up practically all the time, we're just resting for a couple of hours here and there, not stopping to sleep a whole night. Even at home when we slept, someone was always up—keeping watch.

I don't know what we'll find up at the coast. What if there are no boats? Four hundred miles is a long way to walk, not even counting the possibility of having to turn around and walk back.

The farther north we go, the more we start seeing little stands of trees that escaped the fires. Most of them are in the middle of swamps, but it gives me hope that maybe there'll be some game soon. A moose or a bear, or beaver, or caribou. Even if the boats don't show up, it might be a lot easier to live off the land up north, since it probably isn't a burnt-up wasteland like Fairbanks.

Jess finally pushes herself up from the ground, her clothes covered in ash, her blond hair coated with gray. I'm just glad she stood up on her own without any more arguing.

On top of the next hill, Mom and Dad stop and we catch up.

Jess plops down in the ash next to them. "I'm hungry. And my feet hurt." She puts an oversized frown on her face.

Mom smiles. Her blond hair has turned completely white these past couple of years. "We'll just rest here awhile." She takes her pack off and squats next to Jess, then touches her beneath the chin. "Where's that pretty smile?" Mom pulls a jar of salmon out of her pack. "We'll have a little snack."

Jess makes her fish face but you can still see the frown in her eyes.

Dad slips out of his pack. I copy him and just stand there. I hope this plan to head north is going to work.

* * *

"It looks deep," I say. We've just crossed a boulder field and are standing on the bank of a river. A silty creek really, only fifty feet wide. If I had a map I'd know what its name was, not that it matters. And it's tiny compared to what's coming. But still, it's cruising along, cutting a swift path through the ashy hills, running like it's in a race.

"I don't want to cross another river," Jess says.

"Jess, honey," Mom says. "Sometimes we do things we don't want to do." She glances at Dad, but he doesn't say anything. "Sometimes we have to."

I hear Jess sigh.

"Jess," Dad says. "It'll be fun. I'm going across first, and I'm gonna carry a rope and Trav is going to have the other end. Then

when you cross, you get to hang on to the rope. The only rule is that you can't let go."

"But I'm dry," Jess says. "And I want to stay dry." She crosses her arms over her chest.

Jess has really come through. She's already walked for five or six days, working her way across some slower-moving streams in water up to her armpits. And I can see it in her eyes: She isn't scared of getting wet, she's scared of that fast-moving water.

"Make a deal with you, sis," I say. "You can cross right in front of me. One hand on the rope and one on my arm. And if you make it without putting your head under, I'll give you a piece of my salmon next time we eat."

Jess rubs her feet in the ash. "Okay, but my head's gotta go all the way under for me to lose." She makes a quick fish face.

I laugh. "You drive a hard bargain, but okay. Deal." Mom mouths the words *thank you* to me and I nod in acknowledgment.

Dad unstraps the waist buckle on his pack and hands me one end of the rope. "Keep it tight." Then he steps into the current. When he's in up to his knees, he turns and yells, "I might drift downstream a bit, but just keep giving me the line little by little."

I tell him okay and he keeps going. When he gets into the middle, the water is waist-high and pulling him downstream. I can tell he's working hard to stay upright, driving into the current. Without the rope he'd be bouncing downstream. I keep paying the line out, straining against his weight, trying to give him just enough so he can move forward but not so much that he doesn't have a pivot point. The outside of my forearms are starting to burn and my upper arms are shaking, but I keep it steady.

Then Dad slips, and I'm yanked in up to my shins. Dad disappears underwater and my heart jumps to my throat. I keep

pulling on the rope, my shoulders and wrists screaming for relief. Mom and Jess are shouting. Dad's head pops up once but then he's back down.

I haul harder, my whole body straining against the weight and the current, and Dad pops up again closer to our shore but downstream about thirty feet. Then he's on his hands and knees, his pack halfway on top of his head, and he's crawling out of the water.

He makes it to the shore. I let out a breath that I don't even know I'm holding. I don't agree with Dad about how he does things a lot of the time, but I don't know what I'd do without him.

Dad takes his pack off, sets it in the ash, and stands up.

"Clipped my knees on a big rock and lost my footing," Dad says. "Would've made it otherwise." I see him starting to shake from the cold.

Jess has her arms wrapped around Mom's waist. She's tough but she's only ten. Mom's stroking her hair.

"You ready for round two?" Dad asks. Before I can answer, he grabs his pack.

We start downstream from the last spot, and this time he makes it across.

I hand the rope to Mom and she pulls it tight with Dad on the other end.

I lift Jess's pack and sling it over my shoulder until it bumps into my pack. I wink at her. "You're next, kiddo." And she gives me this tiny smile that makes me smile.

Then I grab the rope and step into the water. The cold starts working on me right away, chilling my feet. About halfway across, I suck in a breath when I dip in over my waist but just keep going. I drop the packs on the bank and then recross. I grab the shotgun, carry that across, and go back again.

“Time for a swim.” I smile at Jess, but this time she doesn’t smile back. “Forget the bet. How about you just ride piggyback while I hang on to the rope?”

Jess jumps on my back and off we go. The thing about the cold water is once I’m in, I’m in, and as long as I keep moving I’m okay, especially since I know that the quicker I get everything across, the sooner I can get out of the water and warm up. Jess has her legs scrunched up, trying to keep her feet out of the water. If it wasn’t such a fast-moving stream, I would’ve put her on my shoulders. I used to carry her around like that for fun. I’d ask her, “How’s the view from up there?” And she’d tell me what she saw.

I drop Jess on the bank, tickle her ribs until she squeals, then go back across before Mom can argue. I don’t want her coming across on the loose rope.

The wind chills me some as I hold the rope for Mom. She’s moving slow since she has a pack on, but she makes it across no problem.

I step into the water, staring at the silty swirls, and start going hand over hand on the loose rope. I’ve got to work harder to keep my footing because the current is dragging me downstream.

Jess screams my name and I jerk my head up. Dad drops the rope just as Mom grabs it, and I stumble back a step. Then Dad has the shotgun pointed right at me, and I know there has to be someone behind me, so I drop the rope and dive headfirst into the water and hear the muffled report of the gun.

The current carries me downstream. I know I should be going down feetfirst and try shifting my body. My lungs are screaming for air. Now I’m sideways with the current. I feel my fingers touch the air. Then my side slams into something. My ribs are on fire and I’m stuck, the water piling up and flowing around me. I push away

from the huge rock that presses against my ribs, get my head above the surface, and suck air.

“Trav,” I hear Jess call. “Trav, Trav, Trav!”

I turn toward the bank and catch a glimpse of her and Mom. Then something slaps my cheek.

“Grab it,” Dad yells. “Now. Christ.” He must be behind me because I can’t see him. I grip the rope with both hands, and my legs are swept downstream and I feel my arms being pulled from my shoulder sockets as Dad reels me in like a snagged fish.

Onshore, kneeling, I cough up some water, then lie down and grab my throbbing side. My mind is a jumble of thoughts. The gun pointed at me, the blast, bashing my ribs into the rock.

I feel a hand on my back. “I had to do it,” Dad says. “He was coming at you. Would’ve grabbed you if I hadn’t shot him.”

I turn and stare up at my dad. He looks me in the eye and says, “I don’t think I could live with myself if something happened to you.”

C H A P T E R

4

ABOUT FIVE DAYS LATER WE'RE standing on a hill overlooking the half-mile-wide yellow-brown highway of water called the Yukon River, our first major obstacle. Rumors flew about what had happened to the bridge, the most popular one being that the government blew it up after the last bus going north crossed it. Another was that some of the people who stayed behind destroyed it to keep the government from coming back.

I don't know what to believe. And it doesn't really matter. What matters is right now. How are we gonna cross the river?

The people who headed north on foot the second summer never came back, so somehow they'd made it across. And even after we cross we have to walk another two hundred freaking miles, so we need to start working on this problem now.

On the far side of the river, trees stretch out in deep green like they used to on this side. "We've got to be extra careful by the river," Dad says.

"Anyone who makes it this far has to want the same thing we want," I say.

"Any people we see," Dad says, "I'll make the call."

"What Travis says makes sense," Mom responds. "Whatever we do, we'll have to talk things over." Before Dad can respond, Jess

starts to whine about her feet hurting and my mom turns toward her. Jess throws her arms around my mom's waist and buries her head in my mom's chest, and they walk a few paces away from me and Dad.

We haven't seen anyone since that guy tried to grab me at the creek crossing, and that was still close to Fairbanks. Just some desperate person trying to take whatever he could. We watched two guys dressed in light blue jackets dragging him away from the bank while two more stood and watched, their guns at their sides.

I'm just glad it was me and not Mom who swam that creek last and that those guys didn't shoot back. My ribs have mostly settled down. I still feel a sharp jab every time I lift a heavy pack off the ground, but the bruise is fading.

The last three years, the tougher things got, the more of a dictator Dad became. And that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It's probably what's gotten us up the road this far. And I know he feels bad about not leaving when Mom wanted to, when it would've been easy.

But still, people aren't made to live so isolated. We have to meet up with someone at some point whether we get across the river or not. What would be the point of the four of us living in isolation until we died? I guess it'd be better than nothing, but I want more out of life than that. Put me on a freaking boat and take me to a safe place. To a place where there'll be people my age. Girls my age. And Jess, she needs kids her age to play with. To be a kid before she grows up.

Maybe there's a better world across the sea. I want to find out. I'll do whatever I can to get out of this burnt-out land. Before it burned there'd been a chance at a good life. But so many people

died in the burn, and of the ones who were left, we hadn't met many we could trust.

"Dad," I say, pointing to the Yukon, "it's a big river. How are we going to cross the damn thing?"

"We're gonna study the situation and then make a plan. Build something. A raft, probably, unless we find an abandoned boat on the shore."

One of the good things about Dad is that when he focuses on a problem, he doesn't let it go until he solves it. After Mom agreed to stay, he threw himself into surviving in the new conditions when suddenly, the only thing your money was good for was starting fires. The new playing field demanded you bring your brain, your heart, and your physical strength, and luckily for us Dad scored big in all three.

I always tried to keep up with him, especially after the buses had left and he'd taken me aside and said, *I want a good life for your mother, your sister, and you. But you, Trav, you're gonna be key in helping me make it happen.*

"Just what are we going to build a raft with?" I ask. All the trees we've seen so far have been on the other side of the river, or in the middle of swamps on this side and miles away from the riverbank.

"Downriver." Dad points. "See that bend?"

I nod. About two miles away, I guess, the river makes a sweeping bend to the north.

"There's a clump of trees," Dad says. "I think they're actually on this side of the river. Either that or they're on a gravel bar close to this side."

I squint and tilt my head side to side. I can't see what he's seeing, but I hope he's right.

C H A P T E R

5

“DAD, HOW LONG ARE WE gonna just watch?” We’ve been on this hill for at least half a day watching smoke rise from that clump of trees at the bend, so we know people are down there, but that’s where we need to be, too.

“Can’t be too careful,” Dad says.

And I think, *Yeah, you can. You can be so careful that moss will mistake your boots for tree roots and start colonizing.*

“We just need to go down there,” I say. “They’ve got to be doing the same thing we’re doing. We can help each other.”

Mom is inside the tent with Jess. I can hear her voice, telling Jess a story, probably. Mom tries her best to keep things normal for Jess. To make sure she has some playtime or story time even though we are struggling to survive.

“Trav, your optimism is gonna kill you,” Dad says. “Who have you run into in the last year who’s helped us?”

I shake my head. “You’ve kept us so isolated the only people we’ve run into have been out scavenging. There’s gotta be other people like us. But if we don’t look, we’ll never find them.”

“What if they’re short of food?” Dad says. “We can’t afford to give them any.”

“But if we just sit here, then we’ll be short of food.” I know

there's no easy answer. That it's risky either way. I step closer to him and speak softly. "You wanna see Jess going hungry? That's what'll happen if we just sit here."

"The threat of starvation changes people," Dad says. "What if they've got guns and take our food? You wanna deal with that?" He takes a breath. "We plan for the worst and go from there. That's how we've made it this far."

I sigh, but my blood is boiling inside. "Then maybe we need to sneak down there and spy on them. See just who these people are who've made it as far as us, instead of sitting here and watching our food supply shrink."

* * *

I'm surprised when Dad agrees to let me go alone, insisting I carry the hatchet for protection in addition to my knife. He would've given me the shotgun if we had another. But I don't want to look dangerous if they spot me. If they have guns, they might shoot first and ask questions later.

"Travis," Dad says, "at the first sign of trouble, you get yourself out of there."

Mom steps forward and hugs me. "You be careful," she whispers into my ear. And then she lets me go.

I point to the tent where Jess is sleeping and ask, "What are you going to tell her about where I went?"

"Don't worry about that," Mom says. "I'll think of something."

Now, I'm at the edge of the trees. Just like Dad thought, the trees are on this side of the river.

How the fires bypassed this spot, I don't know. That next summer after the buses left, some people said the government

intentionally started the second round of fires but I don't know if there's any truth to that rumor. I mean, why would they come back to torch a place again? But if the government could abandon a state, well, who knows what else they might do and why.

I stand flush with the biggest spruce I can find and just listen. I hear the plunge of an axe into wet wood, and the back-and-forth grinding of a handsaw. I peek from behind a tree but only see more trees. I take a breath. I need to move closer, but now that I'm here I'm thinking about what Dad said. How can I really know if these people are friendly?

When people kick into survival mode, they change. Dad's a gentle person, but he shot two people in the last couple of weeks. If he could pull the trigger, then just about anyone could.

I take a few steps around the tree and a squirrel starts chattering. I haven't heard one in a couple of years. The chopping and sawing stops. No way can they see me, but they know that squirrel isn't chattering for nothing. I feel my heart pounding in my ears, my stomach cramping up. Maybe Dad's right. Maybe this is a stupid idea. But then why did he let me try it?

Maybe he knows there's no other option if we want to cross the river.

I think about turning around, creeping out of the woods, and beating it back through the ash to the top of the hill, but that'd just reinforce that I was up to no good. I'm pretty sure Dad watched me enter the trees. I wonder what he's thinking now. And I wonder what he'd do if he was in my position. I wish he was here with me.

"You just turn around real slow now, and drop that hatchet," a deep voice says from behind me. "Unless you want some lead in your skull."

My heart jumps into my throat and I try to swallow it down. I let the hatchet fall, turn, and see a man holding a pistol, a beard flowing halfway down his chest, white hair pulled back in a ponytail and stretched tight.

I think about my stringy long blond hair and scraggly beard combined with the hatchet I'm carrying, and I know I must look like an axe murderer. I wait for him to say something else, but when he doesn't, I say, "Me and my family want to cross the river. We knew someone was down here. Saw your smoke."

The man glances around. "Where are they? How many?"

"Upriver, on top of a hill. Four, including me. My mom and dad, and my little sister." I wish he'd quit pointing that gun at me.

"We've got nothing to spare," the man says. "How come you're snooping around like a thief and carrying that hatchet like you're looking to use it on someone?"

I feel my legs shaking. "I didn't know if you'd be friendly. We've run into a lot of people trying to rob us lately."

"We don't take anything that's not ours," the man says, still pointing the pistol at my chest. "But we'll protect what we've got. Just turn around and walk toward the river. We'll see what Clint says."

There are three green dome tents tucked into the woods facing the river. I count six people including the guy with the gun to my back. The river is rushing by, an endless yellow-brown barrier.

"Clint," the man behind me calls out.

A short guy with a salt-and-pepper beard down to his belly, his eyes coming up to my chin, approaches me. "So you're the disturbance."

"Like I told your friend," I say, "me and my family just want to cross the river."

Clint spits on the ground. “The last person who said that tried to kill me.”

* * *

“Travis,” Clint says, “I don’t know why but I trust you. Maybe because I told you to sit down by that tree and you did it. Maybe it’s just something about your eyes that tells me you’re not lying. Or maybe I’m just stupid.”

Mark, the one with the pistol, keeps an eye on me while the others work on the raft, and now we’re all talking. There are two women. I guess one is Clint’s wife and the other is Mark’s, but I’m not sure. And there are two girls a little taller than Jess, their daughters, maybe, but I don’t really know.

One change that I like since all the fires is that there are a lot fewer mosquitoes. I remember reading that if a female mosquito has an unlimited supply of blood it can lay a couple hundred eggs every few days, but with no blood it can only lay about ten eggs every two weeks. But sitting under this tree is like old times. I’m slapping them left and right.

“I took a chance coming down here,” I say. “A chance that I’d meet some people who at the very least wouldn’t try to hurt me.” I tell Clint about the guys with the rocks and the guy who tried to grab me at the creek crossing. And I tell him again that we’re not after their food.

Clint nods. “Sounds like you’ve had to fight some battles. You march back up that hill and bring your family down here. Make a raven call when you get to the edge of the forest, and wait.”

“Okay,” I say. Ravens are one bird that we still see. Not many but they’re scrappers. If anything can survive in the Sacrifice Area, they can. Back in the day, ravens used to fly to town and feed

around dumpsters and then roost at night out in the forest. We used to see them flying over our house, going to and from.

On the way back through the forest, I grab my hatchet. My feet feel light with possibility. Jess can play with the two girls. Maybe Mom will make friends with the women, and Dad with Clint and Mark. And me, I'll take any company I can get as long as it's friendly and moves us in the right direction. I hope Dad will agree to the plan.

C H A P T E R

6

WE'RE STILL A HALF MILE from the edge of the trees when Dad makes us stop for a conference and says, "I don't want anyone making any noise."

"But Dad," I say. "I told Clint we'd make a raven call, then wait. If we don't do that, how's he gonna trust us?"

"But why should we trust him?" Dad asks.

"They could've killed me. Had a gun to my back."

"It could still be a trap. Thanks to you, they know we have food."

Mom looks at him and shakes her head. She puts one arm around Jess. "We have to cross the Yukon. Soon. Or else we won't have enough food for the rest of the journey. We've got two weeks' worth left." She grinds one of her feet into the ashy ground.

The sun is peeking through some thin clouds. It's one of those hot, muggy days. Once we get to the trees—if we get to the trees—there'll be mosquitoes.

"Dad," I say. "What else are you going to do? What can you do?"

He looks at me, then at Mom, then at the trees in the distance. He huffs. "I don't know."

"These people seem different to me," I say. "Trustworthy."

"It could all be an act," Dad says. "Just like the guy with the knife."

Dad had met this guy who seemed friendly. He'd even offered my dad food and some of his matches, which we were in need of. Said he'd come from down the Tanana River. He'd been checking for salmon and had a place like ours, only farther out. His wife had left him when he refused to take the bus north with her. We don't know if the whole thing was a story. All we know is that he tried to kill Dad after appearing generous.

"Have you lost all faith in humanity?" Mom asks. "Look at us." She sweeps her arm in an arc. "We're not looking to hurt anyone. Why can't you believe that there are at least some other people left in this disaster area you wanted to live in who feel the same way?" Mom returns to stroking Jess's hair. Jess's eyes are closed and she's leaning her head against Mom's side. "Did you listen to what Trav said? They've got two little girls, just like Jess."

Jess opens her eyes and pushes away from her. "I'm not little."

Mom squats beside Jess. "Oh, Jess. That's not what I meant. Of course you're not little. I'm sorry."

Jess says, "I'm tired of standing here. It's too hot." Tears form in her eyes and she wipes them away before they have a chance to run down her cheeks.

I see Dad grinding his teeth together. He takes a breath and sets his pack on the ground. "You three stay here. Even if you see me wave, stay until I come back."

I nod once. At least he's going to do something.

"One more thing, Travis," Dad says. "Inside my pack is a green stuff sack with some food and a fire starter." He glances at Mom, but she looks away. "Take it out and bury it by those rocks." Dad

points to some chest-high rocks set back from the river a quarter mile or so.

“Okay,” I say. Bury this. Bury that. He always has to make things more complicated than they are. I’m about to ask why, but I don’t want to slow him down, because he might change his mind about approaching Clint at all.

Then Dad hands me the gun. “Only one slug, remember.”

I consider saluting him but don’t think he’d appreciate the humor right now. Instead, I look him in the eye and say, “You can count on me.”

He touches my shoulder and replies, “I know I can.” Then he leans in close and whispers so only I can hear. “You see any other men while I’m gone, you protect your mother and sister.”

“I will,” I say.

Dad gives Mom and Jess hugs, then turns and walks away. I swing my foot and kick a fist-sized loose rock. It plows through the ash for several feet and then stops. I can’t remember the last time he’s hugged me.

If we cross the Yukon, maybe we’ll find a moose or a caribou. Or maybe the whole place has been hunted out by all the people who headed north before us, and all the people who turned toward the land when the food shipments from the south dried up.

I watch Dad walking toward the trees, unarmed and alone. Maybe heading north was a mistake. Maybe it’s just all one big sacrifice area.

* * *

“There’s no guarantee that anyone is going to be at the coast,” Clint says. “You might walk all that way for nothing. And then have to

walk back, because you sure as hell don't want to spend the winter up there."

"Staying in Fairbanks is a death wish," Dad says. "I thought we could make it work. But after the second fire, there wasn't much left. And it seemed like the longer we stayed the only people we ran into were so desperate they'd do anything. We couldn't trust anyone. I should have listened to my wife and left on the buses."

And you should have listened to me when I told you these people were nice, I think, then I wouldn't have had to bury some of our supplies, which I'm sure I'll be told to dig up later before we leave.

Dad peels off his outer shirt so he just has his red long under-wear shirt on, and then tells Clint about the guys with the rocks, and the guy with the knife, and the guy in the light blue jacket he shot who tried to grab me at the creek crossing, and Clint tells him about the guy that tried to kill him at this very spot about a week ago. He's somewhere downriver, probably dead.

And while we talk, we work at notching logs so they'll fit together to make a solid raft. Another half day of work and Clint thinks we'll be ready to float.

Jess is a little ways away, playing with Clint's twin daughters, Sara and Molly. And Mom is with Clint's and Mark's wives, cooking something up in a big pot over an open fire.

Clint's plan is to float down the Yukon until he finds a suitable spot and then build a cabin. Just like the old days, he says. Nature's turned back the clock.

I get what he's saying, but I don't want to live that way. I want to go where people are, not just live in some cabin in the middle of nowhere. Plus, the reason we're leaving, at least according to Dad, is that he doesn't think we can make it living off the land. The land

is too tired, too abused, too burnt. It's been mistreated for so long he thinks it may never heal.

Clint is more hopeful. He thinks there's big pockets that survived the burns, and in those pockets there'll be enough fish and game and berries to support a few people who don't mind hard work and simple living. And that over time the burnt land will heal, and the moose will move in to feed on the new growth. He has some seeds for a garden, too. And Clint welcomes anyone who shares his vision and work ethic. I can tell Dad is considering it, but I know Mom would never go for it, even though Jess would have some playmates. Dad had his chance and failed. Now we're giving Mom's plan a try.

Clint can just drop us on the other side and we'll keep walking.

C H A P T E R

7

IT'S JUST BLIND LUCK THAT Jess and I are downriver when the shooting starts. Jess had a little tiff with Molly and Sara and stormed off, and at Dad's request, I followed her.

Now, I grab Jess and pull her into the river. If whoever is shooting doesn't know the two of us exist, I want to keep it that way.

I try to stay by the shore as the current sweeps us away and the bottom drops out from under me. I have one arm encircled across Jess's chest and am paddling with my other arm while kicking with my legs, just trying to keep our heads above the surface. The water is knife-stabbing cold, pricking me everywhere. I hear more shots and just keep paddling and kicking.

Jess starts to squirm and I tighten my grip. I tilt my head and speak softly into her ear. "Be still. And don't talk." She stops moving for a moment but then starts squirming again and my head goes under. I come up choking, river water spewing from my mouth. Jess coughs up some water right into my ear. At least I know she's still breathing. She's flailing her arms and I catch a pointy elbow in the eye. I turn my head and use my good eye to focus on the shore. I need to get her out of the water before she kills me.

We round a tiny bend and I kick toward shore, hoping the bank will hide us.

Jess is shivering as I pull her out of the water.

My teeth knock together and my eye burns. “We’ve got to stay here and stay quiet and stay down.”

“Trav,” Jess says, “are Mom and Dad dead?” She shivers. “Are they?”

I pull her close and say into her ear, “I don’t know.” But in my mind I know. Somehow I know.

I feel the sun on my back and shift, exposing Jess to some of the warmth. “We’re gonna be okay,” I say, trying to make myself believe it. And then I repeat it over and over in my mind.

We’re probably a half mile away from the patch of trees on the river. If I stand up, I’ll be the tallest thing around. All I can hear is the rush of the river and Jess’s soft weeping. I wonder if any of the shots were from our guns, if anyone even had a chance to shoot. And why didn’t Mark detect their presence and sound a warning? I wonder how many there are. The shots came so fast. There had to be more than one shooter.

I flip onto my stomach. I rub my eye and keep opening and closing it until I can see out of it.

“Jess,” I say. “You stay here. I’m going to scoot my head above the bank and see if I can see anything.” She doesn’t respond, just keeps crying softly. I touch her arm, and then crawl up on my elbows.

I poke my head over the riverbank. My right eye goes blurry again so I close it and just look with my left. I can see smoke rising from the patch of trees but that’s all. No movement by the river. I make out the raft on the shore but can’t tell if there are bodies lying beside it. I can’t see the tents from this angle either. And all I hear is the river.

I scoot back down and put my arm around Jess. “We’re gonna stay right here for now. The sun should help dry us.”

Jess sticks her face into my side and puts her arm over my chest. She was running alongside the river with Sara and Molly just a little while ago, laughing and shrieking, her hair flying behind her. I don’t know what the fight was about, but it saved her life.

As I lie there with her snuggled up against me, I catch a glimpse of an arm in a red shirt and the top of a head floating by, then the river claims them and they are gone. I feel vomit in the back of my throat and swallow it down. *Dad*, my mind screams. *Dad*. I pull Jess closer and keep peering into the river with my good eye, imagining all the bodies being sucked downriver. I feel my heart thumping through my wet shirt and Jess’s heart pounding on my side.

Every so often another shot splits the air. Then it’s quiet for a while, and then we hear another one.

We are going to need to move soon. But to where?

C H A P T E R

8

"I'M HUNGRY," JESS SAYS. THE whine in her voice causes the hairs on the back of my neck to lift.

The sun is in the northwest sky. It goes around in a circle this time of year this far north, rising in the northeast and twenty-two hours later setting in the northwest, but it never dips too far below the surface. That's why it never gets dark in the summer.

I remember the bag Dad insisted I bury. "We'll be able to get some food soon. But we've got to be careful." I hope whoever ambushed us didn't also find the bag. I still can't believe that Dad is gone. I mean, I'm pretty sure that was Dad's body I'd seen floating by. And Mom, I don't know for sure. But if she's alive, then where is she? She knew I'd followed Jess downriver.

I peek over the bank. My right eye throbs some, but at least I can use it now. There's still smoke coming from our camp. And by the raft I count four people total. All men with beards. And they're wearing blue jackets, just like the guy who tried to jump me at the creek crossing.

I crawl back down the bank. "Jess, we're gonna have to wait here a little longer and stay real still."

I thought it couldn't get any worse after the fires last summer.

* * *

A yellow-black smoke had covered the land. And the air was pasty-hot. The kind of hot where every time you took a breath your mouth dried out.

"Unnatural," Dad said. "Something about this isn't right. The color, the taste."

Back in the day we would've turned on the radio or TV or got on the internet and found out what was going on. Or made a call. But since the buses had left last summer and the fires had burned the town, everything had jumped back a couple of clicks. No power. No communication beyond talking to someone face-to-face. No transportation beyond where your feet could carry you or a bicycle could pedal you. Occasionally, you saw someone driving a car who'd either hoarded some gas or found a vehicle with some gas in it, but that was the exception. And of course there were no fire-fighters and nothing to fight fires with.

"Get your mother and your sister," Dad said. "They're in the garden."

Once we were together, Dad told us we were heading to the river to wait this out. That he had a bad feeling about the fires.

We packed up the food we had. We still had some powdered milk and tea and some pasta, remnants from before the buses pulled out and we were left to fend for ourselves—or rather decided to stay and fend for ourselves. We also had the food we'd gotten from the land, salmon and moose that Mom had pressure-canned in quart jars. Some of it we took with us, but most of it we hid in the back of the crawl space under our house.

I could tell that Mom was holding back from saying, *I told you so.*

Dad focused on what to put in the packs, barking orders at me, Mom, and Jess. He was relentless, wouldn't rest or stop, except to glance out the window. The smoke forced its way into the house, between the logs and around the windows, and soon all we saw was sulfur-yellow air. My eyes burned and my throat was raw. We tied wet bandannas around our mouths and noses.

We went down to the Tanana River and, using a big piece of Styrofoam, floated our supplies out to a gravel bar. During the worst of it, we just lay in the water to stay cool and brushed hot cinders off our skin as they landed on us.

Afterward, when the houses in the hills were just memories, and charred bodies—people who hadn't made it to a river or a lake—dotted the landscape, the few people we ran into talked about how the fires were hotter than any fires they could remember, like they were burning tall and deep, like the soil itself was getting scorched.

C H A P T E R

9

I CAN HEAR THEM YELLING, but don't know what they're saying. I see Jess's eyes go wide and put a finger to my lips. I'm pretty sure they don't have a clue we even exist, and I want to keep it that way.

A big splash and more yelling.

"Jess," I whisper. "We can't let them know we're here."

"Where are Mom and Dad?"

What am I supposed to say? I can't just tell her about Dad. But I have to tell her. "Jess," I say. "You saved my life by storming off and having a tantrum. If I hadn't followed you, I'd be dead."

Jess tilts her head and keeps her eyes on mine. I look away and then make eye contact again. I put my hand on her arm. "I'm . . . I'm pretty sure they're gone. Dead. But I'm not one hundred percent certain."

Jess just keeps those big blue eyes trained on mine, and it's all I can do to keep from breaking down and crying.

"Those voices. Those are the killers," I whisper. "We can't let them find us."

I hear another splash, then more yelling. And then a bunch more splashing. And laughter. Those murdering assholes. I feel my teeth grinding.

Their voices sound louder, like they're coming down the shore.

I grab a rock and get ready to stand up. “If they see us, just stay behind me.”

Jess just nods. Then she reaches for a rock.

The sun has set and it is as dark as it’s going to get, which isn’t dark at all.

I hear more splashes, but they sound farther away now. And more shouting, but it’s distant. Then we see them, four men crowded on the raft, with a pile of gear lashed down in the center, even with us, and about a quarter of the way across the river.

“The raft,” Jess says. “Clint’s raft. Our raft.”

I hope they flip. Flip and drown.

I nudge Jess. “We’ve got to be extremely careful. Someone—one of the bad men—might still be left onshore.”

“But we’ve got to see if anyone is alive,” Jess says. “Maybe someone is hurt and not dead. Like that guy Dad found last winter. He wasn’t dead yet.”

Dad had come across someone who’d been shot. He rigged up a sled and dragged him home, but the guy didn’t make it. He died the next day.

“You’re right,” I say. “Maybe Mom or some of the others are still alive.”

“And Dad,” Jess says.

I look away and say, “Maybe.”

The raft shrinks in the distance as they work it toward the other side while drifting downstream. Maybe they’ll ditch the raft and head north. Or maybe they’re planning on going downriver like Clint. I don’t care just as long as they don’t come back here.

I turn toward the trees and pull Jess down.

“Smoke,” I say. “From our camp.” I don’t know if it’s just left over or if someone is tending it.

"My feet are cold," Jess says. "And I'm hungry." She stares right into my face. "What happened to your eye? It's all black and blue."

I don't want to give her one more thing to worry about so I say, "Must've slammed into a rock when we were crawling out of the river."

She wipes her nose on her sleeve. "Does it hurt?"

"A little." I remember she's hungry and say, "We're going back to that rock where I buried the bag, but we'll have to circle around in case someone is at the camp."

"But what if that *someone* is Mom or Dad?" Jess scrunches her face. "I want Mom."

"Okay," I say. "We'll check the camp first." She's not the only one who hopes to find Mom.

We circle around a good distance from the river and stand at the edge of the trees and can smell the smoke. Jess is just a step behind me, stopping when I stop, going when I go. I cup my hands behind my ears but hear only the flow of the river muted by the trees.

I take a step forward and Jess follows. We baby-step our way from tree to tree, pausing often to look and listen. I wipe mosquitoes from my face and neck and the back of my hands. The sun pokes up again, and long golden rays filter through the spruce.

We step to the edge of the trees and spot drag marks on the shore where the raft had been. I'm scanning for bodies, hoping to steer Jess away from any I see. We haven't spoken since we entered the woods, but now Jess nudges me and points. I follow her finger and see the outline of a person sitting against a tree facing the river and smoke rising from the firepit in front of him.

C H A P T E R

10

MY HEART POUNDS THROUGH MY shirt. From where we stand I can see an arm extended toward the firepit. We can't see the person's head because it's blocked by the tree.

I keep my hand on Jess's arm and continue scanning the beach, searching for any sign of movement. I try to make out the tents in the trees off to the left, try to imagine where they are, but I can't see them.

I look Jess in the eye and point. We creep forward and to the right, toward a small clump of black spruce. Every little crunch under my feet booms in my ears like there are microphones attached to my shoes. I keep glancing toward the person by the fire ring, waiting for him to turn his head and pull out a gun.

I let out a silent sigh as we reach the clump of small spruce trees, branches hanging down to the ground. At least we've got some cover. The mosquitoes are having a feast on the back of my neck and I let them.

Then Jess grabs my arm, her nails biting through the thin fabric of my shirt. She puts her other hand over her mouth. And then I see it, see them.

Four naked bodies lying on the forest floor, facedown. Even from here it's easy to see that two are small. The other two have

long brown hair; Mark's and Clint's wives. My eyes grow hot. Then my stomach constricts and I taste vomit in the back of my throat and swallow it down. I pull Jess toward me and hold her. She buries her face in my stomach and I can feel her whole body shaking. Why'd she have to see that? Why didn't I see them first and steer her away? Why didn't I leave her at the edge of the trees? But I just couldn't leave her, not for a second. I want her with me—all the time.

There has to be a better way than dragging her through all this death. But I don't know what it is. I mean, we're living in a time of death. After the second summer of fires, we all encountered burnt-up bodies. And then the following winter and spring, people who'd died of starvation. But there's something different about finding bodies that died because of a natural disaster or starvation, and finding bodies that were murdered. Bodies of girls she was playing with just hours ago.

I turn, keeping Jess pressed against me, and peer through the branches. I can see more of the man sitting by the fire, enough to know that he probably isn't alive either.

"Jess," I whisper. "I'm sorry you had to see that." My words feel so inadequate. How will I navigate her through this horror when I can barely keep it together myself?

She keeps her head pressed against me.

"I need to go look around," I say. "The guy by the fire. It's Clint. But he's . . . just like the girls."

Jess pulls back and turns her face upward. "They wanted to follow me when I walked off, but I told them to just leave me alone. I was mad, but it was stupid. They called me *little*." Jess buries her face in my stomach again.

I put my hand on her head. "You didn't do anything wrong. Nothing. You got that?"

I can feel her shaking.

“We can’t change what happened to them, or to anyone.” I think of Dad floating down the river. The only bodies unaccounted for are Mark’s and my mom’s. I blink back some tears. If anyone did anything wrong it was me. Didn’t finish the cache in time. Convinced Dad that it was safe to come down here. And now, I’ve got Jess’s life in my hands. Out here. With next to nothing.

Like she can feel my thoughts, Jess scrunches in tighter. “I want Mom.”

I say, “Look. I need to search this place some more. Do you want to stay here while I look around?”

Jess takes a deep breath, then says softly, “I’m coming with you.”

I’m pretty sure there’s no need to be quiet but can’t be absolutely certain. From our clump of trees we walk to the fire ring. Clint is bound to the tree. I don’t know if they shot him before or after, but he’s dead. My shoulders and head collapse forward, like something from above is pressing them toward the ground. I feel empty; I know it will all hit me later—and I dread that.

All the tents—gone. Everything is gone.

How will I ever feed her?

I put my arm around Jess and turn her away from Clint and what used to be our camp.

We find Mark’s blood-soaked body at the edge of the river, the water tugging at his feet. I can’t bear to look at him. I just want to erase everything that’s happened here, so I roll him the rest of the way in and watch the current take him.

“Come on, Jess,” I say, pulling her along. “There’s nothing here for us.” I just want to dig up the stuff sack. At least that’s something

I can do, instead of exposing my sister to any more of this death and destruction.

“Wait!” Jess yells. “What about Mom and Dad?”

I stop and face Jess. I take a breath. “I saw Dad when we were hiding downriver.”

Jess scrunches up her face. “What do you mean?”

I grind my foot into the ground and just say it. “He floated by. I saw the top of his head, and his arm. Wearing that red shirt. It had to be him. Then the current pulled him under.”

“What else did you see?” Jess raises her voice. “What about Mom?”

“I was gonna tell you about Dad, but I couldn’t. I just wasn’t ready, and we had enough to worry about with just hiding.”

“What about Mom?” Jess repeats.

“I didn’t see Mom.”

“You’d tell me if you did?”

“Yes,” I say. “I told you about Dad, didn’t I?”

“Then she could still be alive.”

“Jess, I don’t think—”

“Why not? We survived.”

“We got lucky. We were out of sight thanks to you, and then the river took us.”

The sun breaks over the trees, bathing the beach in light, making this place look so inviting. It was the perfect place to build a raft.

“Maybe the river took her, too,” she says.

I don’t want to sound so negative but don’t want to give her false hope. “Mom was with the other women. She couldn’t—”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “All I know is that I don’t see her here.” And truth be told, I’m glad I don’t. If she’s dead, I don’t want Jess to see her like that.

Jess folds her arms across her chest. “But don’t you think she would’ve been with the others if they’d caught her?”

Jess has a point. It’s been hours since we hid and then worked our way back over here to check things out. She wasn’t on the raft. I don’t think it’s likely that she escaped, but it’s possible. It’s also possible that she tried to escape into the river and they shot her down and the river took her. I mean, if I hadn’t been looking at just the right place and at the right time I wouldn’t have seen Dad.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

Jess just stands there. Then the tears start flowing down her cheeks. I try to hug her but she pushes me away.

I turn to the massive river, and then to the empty forest stretching out on the other side. We’re just tiny specks, specks that don’t matter to the river or the forest. Me and Jess, all we matter to are each other.