

MORGAN RICE

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ARENA

BOOK #1 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

Morgan Rice
Arena One: Slaverunners
Серия «Survival Trilogy», книга 1

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Аннотация

“From Morgan Rice, #1 Bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comes a new trilogy of dystopian fiction.

New York. 2120. American has been decimated, wiped out from the second Civil War. In this post-apocalyptic world, survivors are far and few between. And most of those who do survive are members of the violent gangs, predators who live in the big cities. They patrol the countryside looking for slaves, for fresh victims to bring back into the city for their favorite death sport: Arena One. The death stadium where opponents are made to fight to the death, in the most barbaric of ways. There is only one rule to the arena: no one survives. Ever.

Deep in the wilderness, high up in the Catskill Mountains, 17 year old Brooke Moore manages to survive, hiding out with her younger sister, Bree. They are careful to avoid the gangs of slaverunners who patrol the countryside. But one day, Brooke is not as careful as she can be, and Bree is captured. The slaverunners take her away, heading to the city, and to what will be a certain death.

Brooke, a Marine's daughter, was raised to be tough, to never back down from a fight. When her sister is taken, Brooke mobilizes, uses

everything at her disposal to chase down the slaverunners and get her sister back. Along the way she runs into Ben, 17, another survivor like her, whose brother was taken. Together, they team up on their rescue mission.

What follows is a post-apocalyptic, action-packed thriller, as the two of them pursue the slaverunners on the most dangerous ride of their lives, following them deep into the heart of New York. Along the way, if they are to survive, they will have to make some of the hardest choices and sacrifices of their lives, encountering obstacles neither of them had expected – including their unexpected feelings for each other. Will they rescue their siblings? Will they make it back? And will they, themselves, have to fight in the arena?

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Morgan Rice

Arena One: Slaverunners

*“Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There’s nothing serious in mortality.”*

Shakespeare, Macbeth

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely

coincidental.

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series **THE SORCERER'S RING**, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS**, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series **KINGS AND SORCERERS**, comprising six books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan's new epic fantasy series, **OF CROWNS AND GLORY**, will publish in April, 2016, beginning with book #1, **SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN**.

TURNED (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals), **ARENA ONE** (Book #1 of the Survival Trilogy) and **A QUEST OF HEROES** (Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring) and **RISE OF THE DRAGONS** (Kings and Sorcerers – Book #1) are each available as a free download!

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“Shades of THE HUNGER GAMES permeate a story centered around two courageous teens determined to buck all odds in an effort to regain their loved ones. But the true strength in any story lies not so much in its setting and events as in how the characters come across, come alive, and handle their lives – and it's here that ARENA ONE begins to diverge from the predictable and enters the more compelling realms of believability and strength... ARENA ONE builds a believable, involving world and is recommended... for those who enjoy dystopian novels, powerful female characters, and stories of uncommon courage.”

Midwest Book Review

D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer

"I will admit, before ARENA ONE, I had never read anything post-apocalyptic before. I never thought it would be something I would enjoy... Well, I was very pleasantly surprised at how addicting this book was. ARENA ONE was one of those books that you read late into the night until your eyes start to cross because you don't want to put it down... It is no secret that I love strong heroines in the books I read... Brooke was tough, strong, un-relentless, and while there is romance in the book, Brooke wasn't ruled by

that... I would highly recommend ARENA ONE.”

Dallas Examiner

Books by Morgan Rice

OF CROWNS AND GLORY

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)

RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)

THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)

A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)

A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)

NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)

A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)

A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)

A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)
A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)
A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)
A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)
AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)
A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)
A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)
THE GIFT OF BATTLE (Book #17)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)
ARENA TWO (Book #2)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

TURNED (Book #1)
LOVED (Book #2)
BETRAYED (Book #3)
DESTINED (Book #4)
DESIRED (Book #5)
BETROTHED (Book #6)

VOWED (Book #7)

FOUND (Book #8)

RESURRECTED (Book #9)

CRAVED (Book #10)

FATED (Book #11)

OBSESSED (Book #12)

KINGS AND SORCERERS



THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals



Catskill Mountains

HUDSON

POUGHKEEPSIE

The island once known as
New York City

Part I

One

Today is less forgiving than most. The wind whips relentlessly, brushing clumps of snow off the heavy pine and right into my face as I hike straight up the mountain face. My feet, crammed into hiking boots a size too small, disappear in the six inches of snow. I slip and slide, struggling to find my footing. The wind comes in gusts, so cold it takes my breath away. I feel as if I'm walking into a living snow globe.

Bree tells me it's December. She likes to count down the days to Christmas, scratching off the numbers each day on an old calendar she found. She does it with such enthusiasm, I can't bring myself to tell her we're nowhere near December. I won't tell her that her calendar is three years old, or that we'll never get a new one, because they stopped making them the day the world ended. I won't deny her her fantasy. That's what big sisters are for.

Bree clings to her beliefs anyway, and she's always believed that snow means December, and even if I told her, I doubt it would change her mind. That's a ten-year-old for you.

What Bree refuses to see is that winter comes early up here. We're high up in the Catskills, and here, there's a different sense

of time, a different turn to the seasons. Here, three hours north of what was once New York City, the leaves drop by the end of August, scattering across mountain ranges that stretch as far as the eye can see.

Our calendar was current once. When we first arrived, three years ago, I remember seeing the first snow and then checking it in disbelief. I couldn't understand how the page read October. I assumed such early snow was a freak. But I soon learned it wasn't. These mountains are just high enough, just cold enough, for winter to cannibalize fall.

If Bree would just flip back the calendar, she'd see it right there, the old year, in big, tacky letters: 2117. Obviously, three years old. I tell myself she's just too caught up in her excitement to check closely. This is what I hope. But lately, a part of me is beginning to suspect that she really knows, that she's just chosen to lose herself in fantasy. I can't blame her.

Of course, we haven't had a working calendar for years. Or cell phone, or computer, or TV, or radio, or internet, or technology of any kind – not to mention electricity, or running water. Yet somehow, we've managed to make it, just the two of us, for three years like this. The summers have been tolerable, with fewer hungry days. We can at least fish then, and the mountain creeks always seemed to carry salmon. There are also berries, and even a few wild apple and pear orchards that still, after all this time, bear fruit. Once in a while, we even manage to catch a rabbit.

But the winters are intolerable. Everything is frozen, or dead, and each year I am certain we will not make it. And this has been the worst winter of all. I keep telling myself things will turn around; but it's been days now without a decent meal, and winter has just begun. We are both weak from hunger, and now Bree is also sick. It doesn't bode well.

As I trudge up the mountain face, retracing the same luckless steps I took yesterday, searching for our next meal, I am beginning to feel our luck has run out. It is only the thought of Bree lying there, waiting at home, that urges me forward. I stop pitying myself and instead hold her face in my mind. I know I can't find medicine, but I am hoping it's just a passing fever, and that a good meal and some warmth are all she needs.

What she really needs is a fire. But I never light fires in our fireplace anymore; I can't risk the smoke, the smell, tipping off a slaverunner to our location. But tonight I will surprise her, and just for a little while, take the chance. Bree lives for fires, and it will lift her spirits. And if I can just find a meal to complement it – even something as small as a rabbit – it will complete her recovery. Not just physically. I've noticed her starting to lose hope these last few days – I can see it in her eyes – and I need her to stay strong. I refuse to sit back and watch her slip away, like Mom did.

A new gust of wind slaps me in the face, and this one is so long and vicious I need to lower my head and wait until it passes. The wind roars in my ears, and I would do anything for a real winter

coat. I wear only a worn hoodie, one I found years ago by the side of the road. I think it was a boy's, but that's good, because the sleeves are long enough to cover my hands and almost double as gloves. At five-six I'm not exactly short, so whoever owned this must have been tall. Sometimes I wonder if he'd care that I'm wearing his clothing. But then I realize he's probably dead. Just like everybody else.

My pants aren't much better: I still wear the same pair of jeans, I'm embarrassed to note, that I've had on since we escaped the city all those years ago. If there's one thing I regret, it's leaving so hastily. I guess I'd assumed I'd find some clothes up here, that maybe a clothing store would still be open somewhere, or even a Salvation Army. That was stupid of me: of course, all the clothing stores had long ago been looted. It was as if, overnight, the world went from a place of plenty to a place of scarcity. I'd managed to find a few pieces of clothing scattered in drawers in my Dad's house. These I gave to Bree. I was happy that at least some of his clothes, like his thermals and socks, could keep her warm.

The wind finally stops, and I raise my head and hurry straight up before it can pick up again, forcing myself at double speed, until I reach the plateau.

I reach the top, breathing hard, my legs on fire, and slowly look around. The trees are more sparse up here and in the distance is a small mountain lake. It's frozen, like all the others, and the sun glares off of it with enough intensity to make me squint.

I immediately look over at my fishing rod, the one I'd left the

day before, wedged between two boulders. It sticks out over the lake, a long piece of string dangling from it into a small hole in the ice. If the rod is bent, it means Bree and I will have dinner tonight. If not, I'll know it didn't work – again. I hurry between a cluster of trees, through the snow, and get a good look.

It's straight. Of course.

My heart sinks. I debate walking out onto the ice, using my small axe to chop a hole elsewhere. But I already know it won't make a difference. The problem is not its position – the problem is this lake. The ground is too frozen for me to dig up worms, and I don't even know where to look for them. I'm not a natural hunter, or trapper. If I'd known I'd end up here, I would have devoted my entire childhood to *Outward Bound*, to survival techniques. But now I find myself useless in most everything. I don't know how to set traps, and my fishing lines rarely catch a thing.

Being my father's daughter, a Marine's daughter, the one thing I am good at – knowing how to fight – is useless up here. If I am helpless against the animal kingdom, at least I can handle myself against the two-legged ones. From the time I was young, like it or not, Dad insisted I be his daughter – a Marine's daughter, and proud of it. He also wanted me to be the son he never had. He enrolled me in boxing, wrestling, mixed martial arts... there were endless lessons on how to use a knife, how to fire a gun, how to find pressure points, how to fight dirty. Most of all, he insisted I be tough, that I never show fear, and that I never cry.

Ironically, I have never had a chance to use a single thing he taught me, and it all couldn't be more useless up here; there is not another person in sight. What I really need to know is how to find food – not how to kick someone. And if I do ever run into another person, I'm not going to be flipping him, but asking for help.

I think hard and recall that there is another lake up here somewhere, a smaller one; I saw it once, one summer when I was adventurous and hiked farther up the mountain. It's a steep quarter-mile, and I haven't tried to go up there since.

I look up and sigh. The sun is already going down, a morose winter sunset cast in a reddish hue, and I'm already weak, tired, and frozen. It will take most of what I've got just to make it back down the mountain. The last thing I want is to hike farther up. But a small voice inside me urges me to keep climbing. The more time I spend alone these days, the stronger Dad's voice is becoming in my head. I resent it and want to block it out, but somehow, I can't.

Stop whining and keep pushing, Moore!

Dad always liked to call me by my last name. Moore. It annoyed me, but he didn't care.

If I go back now, Bree will have nothing to eat tonight. That lake up there is the best I can come up with, our only other source of food. I also want Bree to have a fire, and all the wood down here is soaked. Up there, where the wind is stronger, I might find wood dry enough for kindling. I take one more look straight up

the mountain, and decide to go for it. I lower my head and begin the hike, taking my rod with me.

Each step is painful, a million sharp needles pulsing in my thighs, icy air piercing my lungs. The wind picks up and the snow whips, like sandpaper on my face. A bird caws way up high, as if mocking me. Just when I feel I can't take one more step, I reach the next plateau.

This one, so high up, is different than all the others: it is densely packed with pine trees, making it difficult to see more than ten feet. The sky is shut out under their huge canopy, and the snow is covered with green needles. The huge tree trunks manage to shut out the wind, too. I feel like I've entered a small private kingdom, hidden from the rest of the world.

I stop and turn, taking in the vista: the view is amazing. I'd always thought we had a great view from Dad's house, halfway up the mountain, but from here, up top, it is spectacular. Mountain peaks soar in every direction, and beyond them, in the distance, I can even see the Hudson River, sparkling. I also see the winding roads that cut their way through the mountain, remarkably intact. Probably because so few people ever come up here. I've never, in fact, seen a car, or any other vehicle. Despite the snow, the roads are clear; the steep, angular roads, basking in the sun, lend themselves perfectly to drainage, and amazingly, much of the snow has melted off.

I am struck by a pang of worry. I prefer when the roads are covered in snow and ice, when they are impassable to vehicles,

because the only people who have cars and fuel these days are slaverunners – merciless bounty hunters that work to feed Arena One. They patrol everywhere, looking for any survivors, to kidnap them and bring them to the arena as slaves. There, I’m told, they make them fight to the death for entertainment.

Bree and I have been lucky. We haven’t seen any slaverunners in the years we’ve been up here – but I think that’s only because we live so high up, in such a remote area. Only once did I hear the high-pitched whine of a slaverunner’s engine, far off in the distance, on the other side of the river. I know they are down there, somewhere, patrolling. And I don’t take any chances – I make sure we keep a low profile, rarely burning wood unless we need to, and keeping a close eye on Bree at all times. Most of the times I take her hunting with me – I would have today if she weren’t so sick.

I turn back to the plateau and fix my eyes on the smaller lake. Frozen solid, shining in the afternoon light, it sits there like a lost jewel, hiding behind a copse of trees. I approach it, taking a few tentative steps on the ice to make sure it doesn’t crack. Once I feel it’s solid, I take a few more. I find a spot, remove the small axe from my belt and chop down hard, several times. A crack appears. I remove my knife, take a knee and strike hard, right in the center of the crack. I work the tip of the knife in there and carve a small hole, just big enough to extract a fish.

I hurry back to shore, slipping and sliding, then wedge the fishing rod between two tree branches, unravel the string, and run

back out and drop it in the hole. I yank it a few times, hoping that the flash of the metal hook might attract some living creatures beneath the ice. But I can't help feeling it's a futile endeavor, can't help suspecting that anything that ever lived in these mountain lakes died long ago.

It's even colder up here, and I can't just stand here, staring at the line. I have to keep moving. I turn and walk away from the lake, the superstitious part of me telling me I might just catch a fish if I don't stand there staring. I walk in small circles around the trees, rubbing my hands, trying to keep warm. It does little good.

That's when I remember the dry wood. I look down and search for kindling, but it is a futile task. The ground is covered in snow. I look up at the trees, and see the trunks and branches are mostly covered in snow, too. But there, in the distance, I spot a few wind-swept trees free of snow. I make my way over to them and inspect the bark, running my hand along it. I am relieved to see that some of the branches are dry. I take out my axe and chop one of the bigger branches. All I need is an armful of wood, and this large branch will do perfectly.

I catch it as it comes down, not wanting to let it hit the snow, then brace it against the trunk and chop it again, clean in half. I do this again and again, until I have a small stack of kindling, enough to carry in my arms. I set it down in the nook of a branch, safe and dry from the snow below.

I look around, inspecting the other trunks, and as I look closer,

something gives me pause. I approach one of the trees, looking closely, and realize its bark is different than the others. I look up, and realize it's not a pine; it's a maple. I am surprised to see a maple so high up here, and even more surprised that I actually recognize it. In fact, a maple is probably the only thing in nature I *would* recognize. Despite myself, a memory comes flooding back.

Once, when I was young, my Dad got it into his head to take me on a nature outing. God knows why, but he took me to tap maple trees. We drove for hours to some godforsaken part of the country, me carrying a metal bucket, him carrying a spout, and then spent hours more roaming the woods with a guide, searching for the perfect maples. I remember the look of disappointment on his face after he tapped his first tree and a clear liquid oozed out into our bucket. He had been expecting syrup.

Our guide laughed at him, told him that maple trees didn't produce syrup – they produced sap. The sap had to be boiled down to syrup. It was a process that took hours, he said. It took about 80 gallons of sap to make a single quart of syrup.

Dad looked down at the overflowing bucket of sap in his hand and turned bright red, as if someone had sold him a rotten bill of goods. He was the proudest man I'd ever met, and if there was anything he hated more than feeling stupid, it was someone making fun of him. When the man laughed, he threw his bucket at him, barely missing him, took my hand, and we stormed off.

After that, he never took me out into nature again.

I didn't mind, though – and actually enjoyed the outing, even though he fumed silently in the car the whole way home. I'd managed to collect a small cup of the sap before he'd taken me away, and I remember secretly sipping it on the car ride home, when he wasn't looking. I loved it. It tasted like sugar water.

Standing here now, before this tree, I recognize it as I would a sibling. This specimen, so high up, is thin and scrawny, and I'd be surprised if it holds any sap at all. But I've got nothing to lose. I take out my knife and strike the tree, again and again, in the same spot. Then I burrow the knife into the hole, pushing deeper and deeper, twisting and turning. I don't really expect anything to happen.

I'm shocked when a drop of sap leaks out. And even more shocked when, moments later it turns into a small, trickling stream. I hold out my finger, touch it, and raise it to my tongue. I feel the sugar rush, and recognize the taste immediately. Just as I remembered. I can't believe it.

The sap leaks out at faster now, and I'm losing much of it as it drips down the trunk. I look around desperately for something to hold it in, a bucket of some kind – but of course there is none. And then I remember: my thermos. I pull my plastic thermos out of my waistband and turn it upside down, emptying it of water. I can get fresh water anywhere, especially with all this snow – but this sap is precious. I hold the empty thermos flush against the tree, wishing I had a proper spout. I cram the plastic against the trunk as close as I can, and manage to catch much of it. It fills

more slowly than I'd like, but within minutes, I've managed to fill half the thermos.

The flow of sap stops. I wait for a few seconds, wondering if it will start again, but it doesn't.

I look around and spot another maple, about ten feet in the distance. I rush over to it, raise my knife excitedly and strike hard this time, envisioning myself filling the thermos, envisioning the look of surprise on Bree's face when she tastes it. It might not be nutritious, but it will sure make her happy.

But this time, when my knife strikes the trunk, there is a sharp splitting noise that I don't expect, and this is followed by the groaning of timber. I look up to see the entire tree leaning, and I realize, too late, that this tree, frozen over in a coat of ice, was dead. The plunging of my knife was all it needed to tip it over the edge.

A moment later the entire tree, at least twenty feet, falls over, crashing down to the ground. It stirs up an enormous cloud of snow and pine needles. I crouch down, nervous I might have alerted someone to my presence. I am furious with myself. That was careless. Stupid. I should have examined the tree more carefully first.

But after a few moments my heartbeat settles, as I realize there's no one else up here. I become rational again, realize that trees fall by themselves in the forest all the time, and its crash wouldn't necessarily give away a human presence. And as I look to the place where the tree once stood, I do a double-take. I find

myself staring in disbelief.

There, in the distance, hiding behind a grove of trees, built right into the side of the mountain itself, is a small, stone cottage. It is a tiny structure, a perfect square, about fifteen feet wide and deep, built about twelve feet high, with walls made of ancient stone blocks. A small chimney rises from the roof, and small windows are set into the walls. The wooden front door, shaped in an arch, is ajar.

This little cottage is so well camouflaged, blends so perfectly with its surroundings, that even while staring at it, I can barely pick it out. Its roof and walls are covered in snow, and the exposed stone blends perfectly into the landscape. The cottage looks ancient, as if it were built hundreds of years ago. I can't understand what it's doing here, who would have built it, or why. Maybe it was built for a caretaker for a state park. Maybe it was home to a recluse. Or a survival nut.

It looks like it hasn't been touched in years. I carefully scan the forest floor, looking for footprints, or animal prints, in or out. But there are none. I think back to when the snow started falling, several days ago, and do the math in my head. No one has been in or out of here for at least three days.

My heart races at the thought of what could be inside. Food, clothing, medicine, weapons, materials – *anything* would be a godsend.

I move cautiously across the clearing, checking over my shoulder as I go just to make sure no one is watching. I move

quickly, leaving big, conspicuous footprints in the snow. As I reach the front door, I turn and look one more time, then stand there and wait for several seconds, listening. There is no sound but that of the wind and a nearby stream, which runs just a few feet in front of the house. I reach out and slam the back of my axe handle hard on the door, a loud reverberating noise, to give any animals that might be hiding inside a final warning.

There is no response.

I quickly shove open the door, pushing back the snow, and step inside.

It's dark in here, lit only by the last light of day streaming in through the small windows, and it takes my eyes a moment to adjust. I wait, standing with my back against the door, on guard in case any animals might be using this space as shelter. But after several more seconds of waiting, my eyes fully adjust to the dim light and it is clear that I'm alone.

The first thing I notice about this little house is its warmth. Perhaps it is because it is so small, with a low ceiling, and built right into the stone mountain itself; or perhaps because it is protected from the wind. Even though the windows are wide open to the elements, even though the door is still ajar, it must be at least fifteen degrees warmer in here – much warmer than Dad's house ever is, even with a fire going. Dad's house was built cheaply to begin with, with paper-thin walls and vinyl siding, built on a corner of a hill that always seems to be in the wind's direct path.

But this place is different. The stone walls are so thick and well-built, I feel snug and safe in here. I can only imagine how warm this place could get if I shut the door, boarded up the windows, and had a fire in the fireplace – which looks to be in working shape.

The inside consists of one large room, and I squint into the darkness as I comb the floor, looking for anything, anything at all, that I can salvage. Amazingly, this place looks like it's never been entered since the war. Every other house I've seen had smashed windows, debris scattered all over the place, and had clearly been picked clean of anything useful, down to the wiring. But not this one. It is pristine and clean and tidy, as if its owner just got up one day and walked away. I wonder if it was before the war even began. Judging from the cobwebs on the ceiling, and its incredible location, hidden so well behind the trees, I am guessing it was. That no one's been here in decades.

I see the outline of an object against the far wall, and I make my way towards it, hands in front of me, groping in the darkness. When my hands touch it, I realize it is a chest of drawers. I run my fingers over its smooth, wood surface and can feel them covered in dust. I run my fingers over small knobs – drawer handles. I pull delicately, opening them one at a time. It is too dark to see, so I reach into each drawer with my hand, combing the surface. The first drawer yields nothing. Neither does the second. I open them all, quickly, my hopes falling – when suddenly, at the fifth drawer, I stop. There, in the back, I feel something. I slowly pull

it out.

I hold it up to the light, and at first I can't tell what it is; but then I feel the telltale aluminum foil, and I realize: it's a chocolate bar. A few bites were taken out of it, but it is still wrapped in its original wrapping, and mostly preserved. I unwrap it just a bit and hold it to my nose and smell it. I can't believe it: real chocolate. We haven't had chocolate since the war.

The smell brings a sharp hunger pang, and it takes all my willpower not to tear it open and devour it. I force myself to remain strong, carefully re-wrapping it and stowing it in my pocket. I will wait until I am with Bree to enjoy it. I smile, anticipating the look on her face when she takes her first bite. It will be priceless.

I quickly rummage through the remaining drawers, now hopeful I'll find all sorts of treasure. But everything else comes up empty. I turn back to the room and walk through its width and breadth, along the walls, to all four corners, looking for anything at all. But the place is deserted.

Suddenly, I step on something soft. I kneel down and pick it up, holding it to the light. I am amazed: a teddy bear. It is worn, and missing an eye, but still, Bree loves teddy bears and misses the one she left behind. She will be ecstatic when she sees this. It looks like this is her lucky day.

I cram the bear in my belt, and as I get up, I feel my hand brush something soft on the floor. I grab it and hold it up, and am delighted to realize it's a scarf. It's black and covered in dust,

so I couldn't see it in the darkness, and as I hold it to my neck and chest, I can already feel its warmth. I hold it out the window and shake it hard, removing all the dust. I look at it in the light: it is long and thick – not even any holes. It is like pure gold. I immediately wrap it around my neck and tuck it under my shirt, and already feel much warmer. I sneeze.

The sun is setting, and as it seems I've found everything I'm going to, I begin to exit. As I head for the door, suddenly, I stub my toe into something hard, metal. I stop and kneel down, feeling for it in case it's a weapon. It's not. It's a round, iron knob, attached to the wooden floor. Like a knocker. Or a handle.

I yank it left and right. Nothing happens. I try twisting it. Nothing. Then I take a chance and stand off to the side and pull it hard, straight up.

A trap door opens, raising a cloud of dust.

I look down and discover a crawlspace, about four feet high, with a dirt floor. My heart soars at the possibilities. If we lived here, and there was ever trouble, I could hide Bree down here. This little cottage becomes even more valuable in my eyes.

And not only that. As I look down, I catch sight of something gleaming. I push the heavy wooden door all the way back and quickly scramble down the ladder. It is black down here, and I hold my hands in front of me, groping my way. As I take a step forward, I feel something. Glass. Shelves are built into the wall, and lined up on them are glass jars. Mason jars.

I pull one down and hold it up to the light. Its contents are red

and soft. It looks like jam. I quickly unscrew the tin lid, hold it to my nose and smell it. The pungent smell of raspberries hits me like a wave. I stick a finger in, scoop it and hold it tentatively to my tongue. I can't believe it: raspberry jam. And it tastes as fresh as if it were made yesterday.

I quickly tighten the lid, cram the jar into my pocket, and hurry back to the shelves. I reach out and feel dozens more in the blackness. I grab the closest one, rush back to the light, and hold it up. It looks like pickles.

I am in awe. This place is a gold mine.

I wish I could take it all, but my hands are freezing, I don't have anything to carry it with, and it's getting dark out. So I put the jar of pickles back where I found it, scramble up the ladder, and, as I make it back to the main floor, close the trap door firmly behind me. I wish I had a lock; I feel nervous leaving all of that down there, unprotected. But then I remind myself this place hasn't been touched in years – and that I probably never would have even noticed it if that tree didn't fall.

As I leave, I close the door all the way, feeling protective, already feeling as if this is our home.

Pockets full, I hurry back towards the lake – but suddenly freeze as I sense movement and hear a noise. At first I worry someone has followed me; but as I slowly turn, I see something else. A deer is standing there, ten feet away, staring back at me. It is the first deer I've seen in years. Its large, black eyes lock onto mine, then it suddenly turns and bolts.

I am speechless. I've spent month after month searching for a deer, hoping I could get close enough to throw my knife at it. But I'd never been able to find one, anywhere. Maybe I wasn't hunting high enough. Maybe they've lived up here all along.

I resolve to return, first thing in the morning, and wait all day if I have to. If it was here once, maybe it will come back. The next time I see it, I will kill it. That deer would feed us for weeks.

I am filled with new hope as I hurry to the lake. As I approach and check my rod, my heart leaps to see that it's bent nearly in half. Shaking with excitement, I scurry across the ice, slipping and sliding. I grab the line, which is shaking wildly, and pray that it holds.

I reach over and yank it firmly. I can feel the force of a large fish yanking back, and I silently will the line not to snap, the hook not to break. I give it one final yank, and the fish comes flying out of the hole. It is a huge Salmon, the size of my arm. It lands on the ice and flip-flops every which way, sliding across. I run over and reach down to grab it, but it slips through my hands and plops back on the ice. My hands are too slimy to catch hold of it, so I lower my sleeves, reach down, and grasp it more firmly this time. It flops and squirms in my hands for a good thirty seconds, until finally, it settles down, dead.

I am amazed. It is my first catch in months.

I am ecstatic as I slide across the ice and set it down on the shore, packing it in the snow, afraid it will somehow come back to life and jump back into the lake. I take down the rod and line

and hold them in one hand, then grab the fish in the other. I can feel the mason jar of jam in one pocket, and the thermos of sap in the other, crammed in with the chocolate bar, and the teddy bear on my waist. Bree will have an abundance of riches tonight.

There is just one thing left to take. I walk over to the stack of dry wood, balance the rod in my arm, and with my free hand pick up as many logs as I can hold. I drop a few, and can't take as many as I'd like, but I'm not complaining. I can always come back for the rest of it in the morning.

Hands, arms, and pockets full, I slip and slide down the steep mountain face in the last light of day, careful not to drop any of my treasure. As I go, I can't stop thinking about the cottage. It's perfect, and my heart beats faster at the possibilities. This is exactly what we need. Our Dad's house is too conspicuous, built on a main road. I've been worrying for months that we're too vulnerable being there. All we'd need is one random slaverunner to pass by, and we'd be in trouble. I've been wanting to move us for a long time, but had no idea where. There are no other houses up here at all.

That little cottage, so high up, so far from any road – and built literally into the mountain – is so well camouflaged, it's almost as if it were built just for us. No one would ever be able to find us there. And even if they did, they couldn't come anywhere near us with a vehicle. They'd have to hike up on foot, and from that vantage point, I'd spot them a mile away.

The house also has a fresh water source, a running stream right

in front of its door; I wouldn't have to leave Bree alone every time I go hiking to bathe and wash our clothes. And I wouldn't have to carry buckets of water one at a time all the way from the lake every time I prepare a meal. Not to mention that, with that huge canopy of trees, we would be concealed enough to light fires in the fireplace every night. We would be safer, warmer, in a place teeming with fish and game – and stocked with a basement full of food. My mind is made up: I'm going to move us there tomorrow.

It's like a weight off my shoulders. I feel reborn. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I don't feel the hunger gnawing away, don't feel the cold piercing my fingertips. Even the wind, as I climb down, seems to be at my back, helping me along, and I know that things have finally turned around. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I know that now, we can make it.

Now, we can survive.

Two

By the time I reach Dad's house it is twilight, the temperature dropping, the snow beginning to harden and crunch beneath my feet. I exit the woods and see our house sitting there, perched so conspicuously on the side of the road, and am relieved to see that all looks undisturbed, exactly as I left it. I immediately check the snow for any footprints – or animal prints – in or out, and find none.

There are no lights on inside the house, but that is normal. I would be concerned if there were. We have no electricity, and lights would only mean that Bree has lit candles – and she wouldn't without me. I stop and listen for several seconds, and all is still. No noises of struggle, no cries for help, no cries of sickness. I breathe a sigh of relief.

A part of me is always afraid I will return to find the door wide open, the window shattered, footprints leading into the house. Bree abducted. I've had this nightmare several times, and always wake up sweating, and walk into the other room to make sure Bree is there. She always is, safe and sound, and I reprimand myself. I know I should stop worrying, after all these years. But for some reason, I just can't shake it: every time I have to leave Bree alone, it's like a little knife in my heart.

Still on alert, sensing everything around me, I examine our house in the fading light of day. It was honestly never nice to

begin with. A typical mountain ranch, it sits as a rectangular box with no character whatsoever, festooned with cheap, aqua vinyl siding, which looked old from day one, and which now just looks rotted. The windows are small and far and few between and made of a cheap plastic. It looks like it belongs in a trailer park. Maybe fifteen feet wide by about thirty feet deep, it should really be a one bedroom, but whoever built it, in their wisdom, carved it into two small bedrooms and an even smaller living room.

I remember visiting it as a child, before the war, when the world was still normal. Dad, when he was home, would bring us up here for weekends, to get away from the city. I didn't want to be ungrateful, and I always put on a good face for him, but silently, I never liked it; it always felt dark and cramped, and had a musty smell to it. As a kid, I remember being unable to wait for the weekend to be over, to get far away from this place. I remember silently vowing that when I was older, I would never come back here.

Now, ironically, I am grateful for this place. This house saved my life – and Bree's. When the war broke out and we had to flee from the city, we had no options. If it weren't for this place, I don't know where we would have gone. And if this place weren't as remote and high up as it is, then we would have probably been captured by slaverunners long ago. It's funny how you can hate things so much as a kid that you end up appreciating as an adult. Well, almost adult. At 17, I consider myself an adult, anyway. I've probably aged more than most of them, anyway, in the last

few years.

If this house wasn't built right on the road, so exposed – if it were just a bit smaller, more protected, deeper in the woods, I don't think I'd worry so much. Of course, we'd still have to put up with the paper-thin walls, the leaking roof, and the windows that let in the wind. It would never be a comfortable, or a warm house. But at least it would be safe. Now, every time I look at it, and look out at the sweeping vista beyond it, I can't help but think it's a sitting target.

My feet crunch in the snow as I approach our vinyl door, and barking erupts from inside. Sasha, doing what I trained her to do: protect Bree. I am so grateful for her. She watches over Bree so carefully, barks at the slightest noise; it allows me just enough peace of mind to leave her when I hunt. Although at the same time, her barking also sometimes worries me that she'll tip us off: after all, a barking dog usually means humans. And that's exactly what a slaverunner would listen for.

I hurriedly step into the house and quickly silence her. I close the door behind me, juggling the logs in my hand, and step into the blackened room. Sasha quiets, wagging her tail and jumping up on me. A chocolate lab, six years old, Sasha is the most loyal dog I could ever imagine – and the best company. If it weren't for her, I think Bree would have fallen into a depression long ago. I might have, too.

Sasha licks my face, whining, and seems even more excited than usual; she sniffs at my waistline, at my pockets, already

sensing that I've brought home something special. I set down the logs so I can pet her, and as I do, I can feel her ribs. She's way too skinny. I feel a fresh pang of guilt. Then again, Bree and I are, too. We always share with her whatever we forage, so the three of us are a team of equals. Still, I wish I could give her more.

She pokes her nose at the fish, and as she does, it flies out of my hand and onto the floor. Sasha immediately pounces on it, her claws sending it sliding across the floor. She jumps on it again, this time biting it. But she must not like the taste of raw fish, so she lets it go. Instead, she plays with it, pouncing on it again and again as it slides across the floor.

"Sasha, stop!" I say quietly, not wanting to wake Bree. I also fear that if she plays with it too much, she might tear it open and waste some of the valuable meat. Obediently, Sasha stops. I can see how excited she is, though, and I want to give her something. I reach into my pocket, twist open the tin lid to the mason jar, scoop out some of the raspberry jam with my finger, and hold it out to her.

Without missing a beat she licks my finger, and in three big licks, she has eaten the whole scoop. She licks her lips and stares back at me wide-eyed, already wanting more.

I stroke her head, give her a kiss, then rise back to my feet. Now I wonder whether it was kind to give her some, or just cruel to give her so little.

The house is dark as I stumble through, as it always is at night. Rarely will I set a fire. As much as we need the heat, I don't want

to risk attracting the attention. But tonight is different: Bree has to get well, both physically and emotionally, and I know a fire will do the trick. I also feel more open to throwing caution to the wind, given that we will move out of here tomorrow.

I cross the room to the cupboard and remove a lighter and candle. One of the best things about this place was its huge stash of candles, one of the very few good byproducts of my Dad's being a Marine, of his being such a survival nut. When we'd visit as kids, the electricity would go out during every storm, so he'd stockpile candles, determined to beat the elements. I remember I used to make fun of him for it, call him a hoarder when I discovered his entire closet full of candles. Now that I'm down to the last few, I wish he'd hoarded more.

I've been keeping our only lighter alive by using it sparingly, and by siphoning off a tiny bit of gasoline from the motorcycle once every few weeks. I thank God every day for Dad's bike, and I am also grateful he fueled it up one last time: it is the one thing we have that makes me think we still have an advantage, that we have something really valuable, some way of surviving if things go to hell. Dad always kept the bike in the small garage attached to the house, but when we first arrived, after the war, the first thing I did was remove it and roll it up the hill, into the woods, hiding it beneath bushes and branches and thorns so thick that no one could ever possibly find it. I figured, if our house is ever discovered, the first thing they'd do is check the garage.

I'm also grateful that Dad taught me how to drive it when I was

young, despite Mom's protests. It was harder to learn than most bikes, because of the attached sidecar. I remember back when I was twelve, terrified, learning to ride while Dad sat in the sidecar, barking orders at me every time I stalled. I learned on these steep, unforgiving mountain roads, and I remember feeling like we were going to die. I remember looking out over the edge, seeing the drop, and crying, insisting that he drive. But he refused. He sat there stubbornly for over an hour, until I finally stopped crying and tried again. And somehow, I learned to drive it. That was my upbringing in a nutshell.

I haven't touched the bike since the day I hid it, and I don't even risk going up to look at it except when I need to siphon off the gas – and even that I will only do at night. I imagine that if ever one day we're in trouble and need to get out of here fast, I'll put Bree and Sasha in the sidecar and drive us all to safety. But in reality, I have no idea where else we'd possibly go. From everything I've seen and heard, the rest of the world is a wasteland, filled with violent criminals, gangs, and few survivors. The violent few who've managed to survive have congregated in the cities, kidnapping and enslaving whoever they can find, either for their own ends, or to service the death matches in the arenas. I am guessing Bree and I are among very few survivors who still live freely, on our own, outside the cities. And among the very few who haven't yet starved to death.

I light the candle, and Sasha follows as I walk slowly through the darkened house. I assume Bree is asleep, and this worries

me: she normally doesn't sleep this much. I stop before her door, debating whether to wake her. As I stand there, I look up and am startled by my own reflection in the small mirror. I look much older, as I do every time I see myself. My face, thin and angular, is flush from the cold, my light brown hair falls down to my shoulders, framing my face, and my steel-grey eyes stare back at me as if they belong to someone I don't recognize. They are hard, intense eyes. Dad always said they were the eyes of a wolf. Mom always said they were beautiful. I wasn't sure who to believe.

I quickly look away, not wanting to see myself. I reach out and turn the mirror around, so that it won't happen again.

I slowly open Bree's door. The second I do, Sasha charges in and rushes to Bree's side, lying down and resting her chin on Bree's chest as she licks her face. It never ceases to amaze me how close those two are – sometimes I feel like they are even closer than we are.

Bree slowly opens her eyes, and squints into the darkness.

“Brooke?” she asks.

“It's me,” I say, softly. “I'm home.”

She sits up and smiles as her eyes light up with recognition. She lies on a cheap mattress on the floor and throws off her thin blanket and begins to get out of bed, still in her pajamas. She is moving more slowly than usual.

I lean down and give her a hug.

“I have a surprise for you,” I say, barely able to contain my excitement.

She looks up wide-eyed, then closes her eyes and opens her hands, waiting. She is so believing, so trusting, it amazes me. I debate what to give her first, then settle on the chocolate. I reach into my pocket, pull out the bar, and slowly place it in her palm. She opens her eyes and looks down at her hand, squinting in the light, unsure. I hold the candle up to it.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Chocolate,” I answer.

She looks up as if I’m playing a trick on her.

“Really,” I say.

“But where did you get it?” she asks, uncomprehending. She looks down as if an asteroid has just landed in her hand. I don’t blame her: there are no stores anymore, no people around, and no place within a hundred miles of here where I could conceivably find such a thing.

I smile down at her. “Santa gave it to me, for you. It’s an early Christmas present.”

She wrinkles her brows. “No, *really*,” she insists.

I take a deep breath, realizing it’s time to tell her about our new home, about leaving here tomorrow. I try to figure the best way to phrase it. I hope she will be as excited as I am – but with kids, you never know. A part of me worries she might be attached to this place, and not want to leave.

“Bree, I have some big news,” I say, as I lean down and hold her shoulders. “I discovered the most amazing place today, high up. It’s a small, stone cottage, and it’s perfect for us. It’s cozy, and

warm, and safe, and it has the most beautiful fireplace, which we can light every night. And best of all, it has all kinds of food right there. Like this chocolate.”

Bree looks back down at the chocolate, studying it, and her eyes open twice as wide as she realizes it’s real. She gently pulls back the wrapper, and smells it. She closes her eyes and smiles, then leans in to take a bite – but suddenly stops herself. She looks up at me in concern.

“What about you?” she asks. “Is there only one bar?”

That’s Bree, always so considerate, even if she’s starving. “You go first,” I say. “It’s okay.”

She pulls the wrapper back, and takes a big bite. Her face, hollowed-out from hunger, crumbles in ecstasy.

“Chew slowly,” I warn. “You don’t want to get a stomach-ache.”

She slows down, savoring each bite. She breaks off a big piece and puts it in my palm. “Your turn,” she says.

I slowly put it into my mouth, taking a small bite, letting it sit on the tip of my tongue. I suck on it, then chew it slowly, savoring every moment. The taste and smell of chocolate fills my senses. It is quite possibly the best thing I’ve ever eaten.

Sasha whines, pushing her nose close to the chocolate, and Bree breaks off a chunk and offers it to her. Sasha snaps it out of her fingers and swallows it in a single gulp. Bree laughs, delighted by her, as always. Then, in an impressive show of self-restraint, Bree wraps up the remaining half of the bar, reaches up, and

wisely places it high on the dresser, out of Sasha's reach. Bree still looks weak, but I can see her spirits starting to return.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing at my waist.

For a moment I don't realize what she's talking about, then I look down and see the teddy bear. In all the excitement, I'd almost forgotten. I reach down and hand it to her.

"I found it in our new home," I say. "It's for you."

Bree's eyes open wide in excitement as she clutches the bear, wrapping it to her chest and rocking it back and forth.

"I love it!" Bree exclaims, her eyes shining. "When can we move? I can't wait!"

I am relieved. Before I can respond, Sasha leans in and sticks her nose against Bree's new teddy bear, sniffing it; Bree rubs it playfully in her face, and Sasha snatches it and runs out the room.

"Hey!" Bree yells, erupting in hysterical laughter as she chases after her.

They both run into the living room, already immersed in a tug-of-war over the bear. I'm not sure who enjoys it more.

I follow them in, cupping the candle carefully so that it doesn't blow out, and bring it right to my pile of kindling. I set a few of the smaller twigs in the fireplace, then snatch a handful of dry leaves from a basket beside the fireplace. I'm glad I collected these last fall to serve as fire-starters. They work like a charm. I place the dry leaves beneath the twigs, light them, and the flame soon reaches up and licks the wood. I keep feeding leaves into the fireplace, until eventually, the twigs are fully caught. I blow

out the candle, saving it for another time.

“We’re having a fire?” Bree yells excitedly.

“Yes,” I say. “Tonight’s a celebration. It’s our last night here.”

“Yay!” Bree screams, jumping up and down, and Sasha barks beside her, joining in the excitement. Bree runs over and grabs some of the kindling, helping me as I place it over the fire. We feed it carefully, allowing space for air, and Bree blows on it, fanning the flames. Once the kindling catches, I place a thicker log on top. I keep stacking bigger logs, until finally, we have a roaring fire.

In moments, the room is alight, and I can already feel the warmth. We stand beside the fire, and I hold out my hands, rubbing them, letting the warmth penetrate my fingers. Slowly, the feeling starts to return. I gradually thaw out from the long day outdoors, and I start to feel myself again.

“What’s that?” Bree asks, pointing across the floor. “It looks like a fish!”

She runs over to it and grabs it, picking it up, and it slips right out of her hands. She laughs, and Sasha, not missing a beat, pounces on it with her paws, sending it sliding across the floor. “Where did you catch it?” Bree yells.

I pick it up before Sasha can do any more damage, open the door, and throw it outside, into the snow, where it will be better preserved and out of harm’s way, before closing the door behind me.

“That was my other surprise,” I say. “We’re going to have

dinner tonight!”

Bree runs over and gives me a big hug. Sasha barks, as if understanding. I hug her back.

“I have two more surprises for you,” I announce with a smile. “They’re for dessert. Do you want me to wait till after dinner? Or do you want them now?”

“Now!” she yells, excited.

I smile, excited, too. At least it will hold her over for dinner.

I reach into my pocket and extract the jar of jam. Bree looks at it funny, clearly uncertain, and I unscrew the lid and place it under her nose. “Close your eyes,” I say.

She does. “Now, inhale.”

She breathes deeply, and a smile crosses her face. She opens her eyes.

“It smells like raspberries!” she exclaims.

“It’s jam. Go ahead. Try it.”

Bree reaches in with two fingers, takes a big scoop, and eats it. Her eyes light up.

“Wow,” she says, as she reaches in, takes another big scoop, and holds it up to Sasha, who runs over and without hesitation gulps it down. Bree laughs hysterically, and I tighten the lid and set the jar high on the mantle, away from Sasha.

“Is that also from our new house?” she asks.

I nod, relieved to hear that she already considers it our new home.

“And there is one last surprise,” I say. “But this one I’m going

to have to save for dinner.”

I extract the thermos from my belt and place it higher up on the mantle, out of her sight, so she can't see what it is. I can see her craning her neck, but I hide it well.

“Trust me,” I say. “It's gonna be good.”

* * *

I don't want the house to stink like fish, so I decide to brave the cold and prepare the salmon outside. I bring my knife and set to work on it, propping it on a tree stump as I kneel down beside it in the snow. I don't really know what I'm doing, but I know enough to realize you don't eat the head or the tail. So I begin by slicing these off.

Then I figure we're not going to eat the fins either, so I chop these off – or the scales, either, so I remove them as best I can. Then I figure it has to be opened to eat it, so I slice what's left of it clean in half. It reveals a thick, pink inside, filled with lots of small bones. I don't know what else to do, so I figure it's ready to cook.

Before I head in, I feel the need to wash my hands. I just reach down, grab a handful of snow, and rinse my hands with it, grateful for the snow – usually, I have to hike to the closest stream, since we don't have any running water. I rise, and before going inside, I stop for a second and take in my surroundings. At first I am listening, as I always do, for any signs of noise, of danger. After

several seconds, I realize the world is as still as can be. Finally, slowly, I relax, breathe deep, feel the snowflakes on my cheeks, take in the perfect quiet, and realize how utterly beautiful my surroundings are. The towering pines are covered in white, snow falls endlessly from a purple sky, and the world seems perfect, like a fairy tale. The fireplace glows through the window, and from here, our house looks like the coziest place in the world.

I come back inside the house with the fish, closing the door behind me, and it feels good to come into a place so much warmer, with the soft light of the fire reflecting off of everything. Bree has tended the fire well, as she always does, adding logs expertly, and now it roars to even greater heights. She is preparing place settings on the floor, beside the fireplace, with knives and forks from the kitchen. Sasha sits attentively beside her, watching her every move.

I carry the fish over to the fire. I don't really know how to cook it, so I figure I'll just put it over the fire for a while, let it roast, turn it over a few times, and hope that works. Bree reads my mind: she immediately heads to the kitchen and returns with a sharp knife and two long skewers. She skewers each piece of fish, then takes her portion and holds it over the flame. I follow her lead. Bree's domestic instincts have always been superior to mine, and I'm grateful for her help. We have always been a good team.

We both stand there, staring at the flames, transfixed, holding our fish over the fire until our arms grow heavy. The smell of

fish fills the room, and after about ten minutes I get a pain in my stomach and grow impatient with hunger. I decide mine is done; after all, I figure people eat raw fish sometimes, so how bad could it be? Bree seems to agree, so we each put our portions on our plates and sit on the floor, beside each other, our backs to the couch and our feet to the fire.

“Careful,” I warn. “There are still lots of bones inside.”

I pull out the bones, and Bree does the same. Once I clear enough of them, I take a small chunk of the pink fish meat, hot to the touch, and eat it, bracing myself.

It actually tastes good. It could use salt, or some kind of seasoning, but at least it tastes cooked, and fresh as can be. I can feel the much-needed protein enter my body. Bree wolfs hers down, too, and I can see the relief on her face. Sasha sits beside her, staring, licking her lips, and Bree chooses a big chunk, carefully de-bones it and feeds it to Sasha. Sasha chews it thoroughly and swallows it, then licks her chops and stares back, eager for more.

“Sasha, here,” I say.

She comes running over, and I take a scrap of my fish, de-bone it, and feed her; she swallows it down in seconds. Before I know it, my fish is gone – as is Bree’s – and I am surprised to feel my stomach growling again. I already wish I had caught more. Still, this was a bigger dinner than we’d had in weeks, and I try to force myself to be content with what we have.

Then I remember the sap. I jump up, remove the thermos from

its hiding place and hold it out to Bree.

“Go ahead,” I smile, “the first sip is yours.”

“What is it?” she asks, unscrewing it and holding it to her nose.

“It doesn’t smell like anything.”

“It’s maple sap,” I say. “It’s like sugar water. But better.”

She tentatively sips, then looks at me, eyes open wide in delight. “It’s delicious!” she cries. She takes several big sips, then stops and hands it to me. I can’t resist taking several big sips myself. I feel the sugar rush. I lean over and carefully pour some into Sasha’s bowl; she laps it all up and seems to like it, too.

But I am still starving. In a rare moment of weakness, I think of the jar of jam and figure, why not? After all, I assume there’s lots more of it in that cottage on the mountaintop – and if this night isn’t cause to celebrate, then when is?

I bring down the mason jar, unscrew it, reach in with my finger, and take out a big heaping. I place it on my tongue and let it sit in my mouth as long as I can before swallowing. It’s heavenly. I hold out the rest of the jar, still half-full, to Bree. “Go ahead,” I say, “finish it. There’s more in our new house.”

Bree’s eyes open wide as she reaches out. “Are you sure?” she asks. “Shouldn’t we save it?”

I shake my head. “It’s time to treat ourselves.”

Bree doesn’t need much convincing. In moments, she eats it all, sparing just one more heaping for Sasha.

We lie there, propped against the couch, our feet to the fire, and finally, I feel my body start to relax. Between the fish, the

sap and the jam, finally, slowly, I feel my strength return. I look over at Bree, who's already dozing off, Sasha's head on her lap, and while she still looks sick, for the first time in a while I detect hope in her eyes.

"I love you, Brooke," she says softly.

"I love you, too," I answer.

But by the time I look over, she is already fast asleep.

* * *

Bree lies on the couch opposite the fire, while I now sit in the chair beside her; it is a habit we've become accustomed to over the months. Every night before bed, she curls up on the couch, too scared to fall asleep alone in her room. I keep her company, waiting until she dozes off, after which I'll carry her to bed. Most nights we don't have the fire, but we sit there anyway.

Bree always has nightmares. She didn't use to: I remember a time, before the war, when she fell asleep easily. In fact, I'd even tease her for this, call her "bedtime Bree" as she'd fall asleep in the car, on a couch, reading a book in a chair – anywhere. But now it's nothing like that; now, she'll be up for hours, and when she does sleep, it's restless. Most nights I hear her whimpers or screams through the thin walls. Who can blame her? With the horror we've seen, it's amazing she hasn't completely lost it. There are too many nights when I can barely sleep myself.

The one thing that helps her is when I read to her. Luckily,

when we escaped, Bree had the presence of mind to grab her favorite book. *The Giving Tree*. Every night, I read it to her. I know it by heart now, and when I am tired, sometimes I close my eyes and just recite it from memory. Luckily, it's short.

As I lean back in the chair, feeling sleepy myself, I turn back the worn cover and begin to read. Sasha lies on the couch beside Bree, ears up, and sometimes I wonder if she's listening, too.

"Once, there was a tree, and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come, and he would gather her leaves, and make them into crowns and play king of the forest."

I look over and see that Bree, on the couch, is fast asleep already. I'm relieved. Maybe it was the fire, or maybe the meal. Sleep is what she needs most now, to recover. I remove my new scarf, wrapped snugly around my neck, and gently drape it over her chest. Finally, her little body stops trembling.

I put one final log on the fire, sit back in my chair, and turn, staring into the flames. I watch it slowly die and wish I'd carried more logs down. It's just as well. It will be safer this way.

A log crackles and pops as I settle back, feeling more relaxed than I have in years. Sometimes, after Bree falls asleep, I'll pick up my own book and read for myself. I see it sitting there, on the floor: *Lord of the Flies*. It is the only book I have left and is so worn from use, it looks like it's a hundred years old. It's a strange experience, having only one book left in the world. It makes me realize how much I'd taken for granted, makes me pine for the days when there were libraries.

Tonight I'm too excited to read. My mind is racing, filled with thoughts of tomorrow, of our new life, high up on the mountain. I keep running over in my head all of the things I will need to transport from here to there, and how I will do it. There are our basics – our utensils, matches, what's left of our candles, blankets, and mattresses. Other than that, neither of us have much clothes to speak of, and aside from our books, we have no real possessions. This house was pretty stark when we arrived, so there are no mementos. I would like to bring this couch and chair, although I will need Bree's help for that, and I'll have to wait until she's feeling well enough. We'll have to do it in stages, taking the essentials first, and leaving the furniture for last. That's fine; as long as we're up there, safe and secure. That is what matters most.

I start thinking of all the ways I can make that little cottage even safer than it is. I will definitely need to figure out how to create shutters for its open windows, so I can close them when I need to. I look around, surveying our house for anything I can use. I would need hinges to make the shutters work, and I eye the hinges on the living room door. Maybe I can remove these. And while I'm at it, maybe I can use the wooden door, too, and saw it into pieces.

The more I look around, the more I begin to realize how much I can salvage. I remember that Dad left a tool chest in the garage, with a saw, hammer, screwdriver, even a box of nails. It is one of the most precious things we have, and I make a mental note to take that up first.

After, of course, the motorcycle. That is dominant in my mind: when to transport it, and how. I can't bear the thought of leaving it behind, even for a minute. So on our first trip up there I'll bring it. I can't risk starting it and attracting all that attention – and besides, the mountain face is too steep for me to drive it up. I will have to walk it up, straight up the mountain. I can already anticipate how exhausting that will be, especially in the snow. But I see no other way. If Bree wasn't sick, she could help me, but in her current state, she won't be carrying anything – I suspect I may even need to carry her. I realize we have no choice but to wait until tomorrow night, for the cover of darkness, before we move. Maybe I'm just being paranoid – the chances of anyone watching us are remote, but still, it's better to be cautious. Especially because I know there are other survivors up here. I am sure of it.

I remember the first day we arrived. We were both terrified, lonely, and exhausted. That first night, we both went to bed hungry, and I wondered how we were ever going to survive. Had it been a mistake to leave Manhattan, abandon our mother, leave all that we knew behind?

And then our first morning, I woke up, opened the door, and was shocked to find it, sitting there: the carcass of a dead deer. At first, I was terrified. I took it as a threat, a warning, assuming someone was telling us to leave, that we were not welcome there. But after I got over my initial shock, I realized that wasn't the case at all: it was actually a gift. Someone, some other survivor,

must have been watching us. He must have seen how desperate we looked, and in an act of supreme generosity, decided to give us his kill, our first meal, enough meat to last for weeks. I can't imagine how valuable it must have been for him.

I remember walking outside, looking all around, up and down the mountain, peering into all the trees, expecting some person to pop out and wave. But no one ever did. All I saw were trees, and even though I waited for minutes, all I heard was silence. But I knew, I just knew, I was being watched. I knew then that other people were up here, surviving just like us.

Ever since then, I've felt a kind of pride, felt we were part of a silent community of isolated survivors that live in these mountains, keeping to ourselves, never communicating with each other for fear of being seen, for fear of becoming visible to a slaverunner. I assume that is how the others have survived as long as they have: by leaving nothing to chance. At first, I didn't understand it. But now, I appreciate it. And ever since then, while I never see anyone, I've never felt alone.

But it also made me more vigilant; these other survivors, if they are still alive, must surely by now be as starving and desperate as we. Especially in the winter months. Who knows if starvation, if a need to fend for their families, has pushed any of them over the line to desperation, if their charitable mood has been replaced by pure survival instinct. I know the thought of Bree, Sasha, and myself starving has sometimes lead me to some pretty desperate thoughts. So I won't leave anything to chance.

We'll move at nighttime.

Which works out perfectly, anyway. I need to take the morning to climb back up there, alone, to scout it out first, to make sure one last time that no one has been in or out. I also need to go back to that spot where I found the deer and wait for it. I know it's a long shot, but if I can find it again, and kill it, it can feed us for weeks. I wasted that first deer that was given to us, years ago, because I didn't know how to skin it, or carve it up, or preserve it. I made a mess of it, and managed to squeeze just one meal out of it before the entire carcass went rotten. It was a terrible waste of food, and I'm determined to never do that again. This time, especially with the snow, I will find a way to preserve it.

I reach into my pocket and take out the pocket knife Dad gave me before he left; I rub the worn handle, his initials engraved and the Marine Corps logo emblazoned on it, as I've done every night since we arrived here. I tell myself he is still alive. Even after all these years, even though I know the chances of seeing him again are slim to none, I can't quite bring myself to let this idea go.

I wish every night that Dad had never left, had never volunteered for the war at all. It was a stupid war to begin with. I never really fully understood how it all began, and I still don't now. Dad explained it to me, several times, and I still didn't get it. Maybe it was just because of my age. Maybe I just wasn't old enough to realize how senseless the things are that adults can do to each other.

The way Dad explained it, it was a second American civil war – this time, not between the North and the South, but between political parties. Between the Democrats and Republicans. He said it was a war that was a long time coming. Over the last hundred years, he said, America had been drifting into a land of two nations: those on the far right, and those on the far left. Over time, positions hardened so deeply, it became a nation of opposing ideologies.

Dad said the people on the left, the Democrats, wanted a nation run by a bigger and bigger government, one that raised taxes to 70 %, and could be involved in every aspect of people's lives. He said the people on the right, the Republicans, kept wanting a smaller and smaller government, one that would abolish taxes altogether, get out of people's hair, and allow them to fend for themselves. He said that over time, these two different ideologies, instead of compromising, just kept drifting further apart, getting more extreme – until they reached a point where they couldn't see eye-to-eye on anything.

Worsening the situation, he said, was that America had gotten so crowded, it had become harder for any politician to get national attention, and politicians in both parties began to realize that taking extreme positions was the only way to get national airtime – what they needed for their own personal ambition.

As a result, the most prominent people of both parties were the ones who were most extreme, each trying to outdo the other, taking positions they didn't even truly believe in themselves but

that they were backed into a corner to take. Naturally, when the two parties debated, they could only collide with each other – and they did so with harsher and harsher words. At the beginning, it was just name-calling and personal attacks. But over time, the verbal warfare escalated. And then one day, it crossed a point of no return.

One day, about ten years ago, a fateful tipping point came when one political leader threatened the other with one fateful word: “secession.” If the Democrats tried to raise taxes even one more cent, his party would secede from the union and every village, every town, every state would be divided in two. Not by land, but by ideology.

His timing couldn't have been worse: at that time, the nation was in an economic depression, and there were enough malcontents out there, fed up with the loss of jobs, to gain him popularity. The media loved the ratings he got, and they fed him more and more air time. Soon his popularity grew. Eventually, with no one to stop him, with the Democrats unwilling to compromise, and with momentum carrying itself, his idea hardened. His party proposed their nation's own flag, and even their own currency.

That was the first tipping point. If someone had just stepped up and stopped him then, it may all have stopped. But no one did. So he pushed further.

Emboldened, this politician proposed that the new union also have its own police force, its own courts, its own state troopers –

and its own military. That was the second tipping point.

If the Democratic President at the time had been a good leader, he might have stopped things then. But he worsened the situation by making one bad decision after another. Instead of trying to calm things, to address the core needs that lead to such discontent, he instead decided that the only way to quash what he called “the Rebellion” was to take a hard line: he accused the entire Republican leadership of sedition. He declared martial law, and during the middle of the night, had them all arrested.

That escalated things, and rallied their entire party. It also rallied half the military. People were divided, within every home, every town, every military barracks; slowly, tension built in the streets, and neighbor hated neighbor. Even families were divided.

One night, those in the military leadership loyal to the Republicans followed secret orders and instituted a coup, breaking them out of prison. There was a standoff. And on the steps of the Capitol building, the first fateful shot was fired. A young soldier thought he saw an officer reach for a gun and fired first. Once the first soldier fell, there was no turning back. The final line had been crossed. An American had killed an American. A firefight ensued, with dozens of officers dead. The Republican leadership was whisked away to a secret location. And from that moment on, the military split in two. The government split in two. Towns, villages, counties, and states all split in two. This became known as the First Wave.

During the first few days, crisis managers and government

factions desperately tried to make peace. But it was too little, too late. Nothing was able to stop the coming storm. A faction of hawkish generals took matters into their own hands, wanting the glory, wanting to be the first in war, wanting the advantage of speed and surprise. They figured that crushing the opposition immediately was the best way to put an end to all of this.

The war began. Battles ensued on American soil. Pittsburgh became the new Gettysburg, with two hundred thousand dead in a week. Tanks mobilized against tanks. Planes against planes. Every day, every week, the violence escalated. Lines were drawn in the sand, military and police assets were divided, and battles spread to every state in the nation. Everywhere, everyone fought against each other, friend against friend, brother against brother. It reached a point where no one even knew what they were fighting about anymore. The entire nation was spilled with blood, and no one seemed able to stop it. This became known as the Second Wave.

Up to that moment, as bloody as it was, it was still conventional warfare. But then came the Third Wave, the worst of all. The President, in desperation, operating from a secret bunker, decided there was only one way to quell what he still insisted on calling "the Rebellion." Summoning his best military officers, they advised him to use the strongest assets he had to quell the rebellion once and for all: local, targeted nuclear missiles. He consented.

The next day nuclear payloads were dropped in strategic

Republican strongholds across America. Hundreds of thousands died on that day, in places like Nevada, Texas, Mississippi. Millions died on the second.

The Republicans responded. They seized hold of their own assets, ambushed NORAD, and launched their own nuclear payloads onto Democratic strongholds. States like Maine and New Hampshire were mostly eviscerated. Within the next ten days, nearly all of America was destroyed, one city after another. It was wave after wave of sheer devastation, and those who weren't killed by direct attack died soon after from the toxic air and water. Within a matter of a month, there was no one even left to fight. Streets and buildings emptied out one at a time, as people were marched off to fight against former neighbors.

But Dad didn't even wait for the draft – and that is why I hate him. He left way before. He'd been an officer in the Marine Corps for twenty years before any of this broke out, and he'd seen it all coming sooner than most. Every time he watched the news, every time he saw two politicians screaming at each other in the most disrespectful way, always upping the ante, Dad would shake his head and say, “This will lead to war. Trust me.”

And he was right. Ironically, Dad had already served his time and had been retired from Corps for years before this happened; but when that first shot was fired, on that day, he re-enlisted. Before there was even talk of a full-out war. He was probably the very first person to volunteer, for a war that hadn't even started yet.

And that is why I'm still mad at him. Why did he have to do this? Why couldn't he have just let everyone else kill each other? Why couldn't he have stayed home, protected us? Why did he care more about his country than his family?

I still remember, vividly, the day he left us. I came home from school that day, and before I even opened the door, I heard shouting coming from inside. I braced myself. I hated it when Mom and Dad fought, which seemed like all the time, and I thought this was just another one of their arguments.

I opened the door and knew right away that this was different. That something was very, very wrong. Dad stood there in full uniform. It didn't make any sense. He hadn't worn his uniform in years. Why would he be wearing it now?

"You're not a man!" Mom screamed at him. "You're a coward! Leaving your family. For what? To go and kill innocent people?"

Dad's face turned red, as it always did when he got angry.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he screamed back. "I'm doing my duty for my country. It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing for *who*?" she spat back. "You don't even know what you're fighting for. For a stupid bunch of politicians?"

"I know exactly what I'm fighting for: to hold our nation together."

"Oh, well, excuse me, Mister America!" she screamed back at him. "You can justify this in your head anyway you want, but the truth is, you're leaving because you can't stand me. Because

you never knew how to handle domestic life. Because you're too stupid to make something of your life after the Corps. So you jump up and run off at the first opportunity – ”

Dad stopped her with a hard slap across the face. I can still hear the noise in my head.

I was shocked; I'd never seen him lay a hand on her before. I felt the wind rush out of me, as if I'd been slapped myself. I stared at him, and almost didn't recognize him. Was that really my father? I was so stunned that I dropped my book and it landed with a thud.

They both turned and looked at me. Mortified, I turned and ran down the hall to my bedroom and slammed the door behind me. I didn't know how to react to it all and just had to get away from them.

Moments later, there was a soft knock on my door.

“Brooke, it's me,” Dad said in a soft, remorseful voice. “I'm sorry you had to see that. Please, let me in.”

“Go away!” I yelled back.

A long silence followed. But he still didn't leave.

“Brooke, I have to leave now. I'd like to see you one last time before I go. Please. Come out and say goodbye.”

I started to cry.

“Go away!” I snapped again. I was so overwhelmed, so mad at him for hitting Mom, and even more mad at him for leaving us. And deep down, I was scared he would never come back.

“I'm leaving now, Brooke,” he said. “You don't have to open

the door. But I want you to know how much I love you. And that I'll always be with you. Remember, Brooke, you're the tough one. Take care of this family. I'm counting on you. Take care of them."

And then I heard my father's footsteps, walking away. They grew softer and softer. Moments later I heard the front door open, then close.

And then, nothing.

Minutes – it felt like days – later, I slowly opened my door. I already sensed it. He was gone. And I already regretted it; I wished I'd said goodbye. Because I already sensed, deep down, that he was never coming back.

Mom sat at the kitchen table, head in her hands, crying softly. I knew that things had changed permanently that day, that they would never be the same – that *she* would never be the same. And that I wouldn't, either.

And I was right. As I sit here now, staring into the embers of the dying fire, my eyes heavy, I realize that, since that day, nothing has ever been the same again.

* * *

I am standing in our old apartment, in Manhattan. I don't know what I'm doing here, or how I got here. Nothing seems to make sense, because the apartment is not at all as I remember. It is completely empty of furniture, as if we had never lived in it. I'm

the only one here.

There is a sudden knock on the door, and in walks Dad, in full uniform, holding a briefcase. He has a hollow look to his eyes, as if he has just been to hell and back.

"Daddy!" I try to scream. But the words don't come out. I look down and realize I am glued to the floor, hidden behind a wall, and that he can't see me. As much as I struggle to break free, to run to him, to call out his name, I cannot. I'm forced to watch helplessly, as he walks into the empty apartment, looking all around.

"Brooke?" he yells out. "Are you here? Is anybody home?"

I try to answer again, but my voice won't work. He searches from room to room.

"I said I'd come back," he says. "Why didn't anyone wait for me?"

Then, he breaks into tears.

My heart breaks, and I try with all I have to call out to him. But no matter how hard I try, nothing comes out.

He finally turns and leaves the apartment, gently closing the door behind him. The click of the handle reverberates in the emptiness.

"DADDY!" I scream, finally finding my voice.

But it is too late. I know he is gone forever, and somehow it is all my fault.

I blink, and the next thing I know I am back in the mountains, in Dad's house, sitting in his favorite chair beside the fire. Dad sits on

the couch, leaning forward, head down, playing with his Marine Corps knife. I am horrified to notice that half his face is melted away, all the way to the bone; I can actually see half his skull.

He looks up at me, and I am afraid.

“You can’t hide here forever, Brooke,” he says, in a measured tone. “You think you’re safe here. But they’ll come for you. Take Bree and hide.”

He rises to his feet, comes over to me, grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me, his eyes burning with intensity. “DID YOU HEAR ME, SOLDIER!?” he screams.

He disappears, and as he does, all the doors and windows crash open at once, in a cacophony of shattered glass.

Into our house rush a dozen slaverunners, guns drawn. They’re dressed in their signature all-black uniforms, from head to toe, with black facemasks, and they race to every corner of the house. One of them grabs Bree off the couch and carries her away, screaming, while another runs right up to me, digs his fingers into my arm and aims his pistol right to my face.

He fires.

I wake screaming, disoriented.

I feel fingers digging into my arm, and confused between my dream state and reality, I am ready to strike. I look over and see that it’s Bree, standing there, shaking my arm.

I am still sitting in Dad’s chair, and now the room is flooded with sunlight. Bree is crying, hysterical.

I blink several times as I sit up, trying to get my bearings. Was

it all just a dream? It had felt so real.

“I had a scary dream!” Bree cries, still gripping my arm.

I look over and see the fire went out long ago. I see the bright sunlight, and realize it must be late morning. I can’t believe I have fallen asleep in the chair – I have never done this before.

I shake my head, trying to get the cobwebs out. That dream felt so real, it’s still hard to believe it didn’t happen. I’ve dreamt of Dad before, many times, but never anything with such immediacy. I find it hard to conceive that he’s not still in the room with me now, and I look around the room again, just to make sure.

Bree tugs on my arm, inconsolable. I have never seen her quite like this either.

I kneel down and give her a hug. She clings to me.

“I dreamed these mean men came and took me away! And you weren’t here to save me!” Bree cries, over my shoulder. “Don’t go!” she pleads, hysterical. “Please, don’t go. Don’t leave me!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, hugging her tight. “Shhh... It’s OK... There’s nothing to worry about. Everything is fine.”

But deep down, I can’t help feeling that everything is *not* fine. On the contrary. My dream really disturbs me, and that Bree had such a bad dream, too – and about the same thing – doesn’t give me much solace. I’m not a big believer in omens, but I can’t help wondering if it’s all a sign. But I don’t hear any kind of noise or commotion, and if there was anybody with a mile of here, surely I would know.

I lift Bree's chin, wiping her tears. "Take a deep breath," I say.

Bree listens, slowly catching her breath. I force myself to smile. "See," I say. "I'm right here. Nothing's wrong. It was just a bad dream. Okay?"

Slowly, Bree nods.

"You're just overtired," I said. "And you have a fever. So you had bad dreams. It's all going to be fine."

As I kneel there, hugging Bree, I realize I need to get going, to climb the mountain, scout out our new house, and find us food. My stomach drops as I consider breaking the news to Bree, and how she'll react. Clearly, my timing couldn't be worse. How can I possibly tell her I need to leave her now? Even if only for an hour or two? A part of me wants to stay here, to watch over her all day; yet I also know I need to go, and the sooner I get it over with, the safer we will be. I can't just sit here all day and do nothing, waiting for nightfall. And I can't risk changing the plan and moving us during daylight just because of our silly dreams.

I pull Bree back, stroking her hair out of her face, smiling as sweetly as I can. I muster the strongest, most adult voice that I can.

"Bree, I need you to listen to me," I say. "I need to go out now, just for a little while –"

"NO!" she wails. "I KNEW it! It's just like my dream! You're going to leave me! And you're never going to come back!"

I hold her shoulders firmly, trying to console her.

"It's not like that," I say firmly. "I just need to go for an hour

or two. I need to make sure our new house is safe for our move tonight. And I need to hunt for food. Please, Bree, understand. I would bring you with me, but you are too sick right now, and you need to rest. I'll be back in just a few hours. I promise. And then tonight, we'll go up there together. And do you know what the best part is?"

She looks up at me slowly, still crying, and eventually shakes her head.

"Starting tonight, we'll be up there together, safe and sound, and have a fire every night, and all the food you want. And I can hunt and fish and do everything I need to right there, in front of the cottage. I'll never have to leave you again."

"And Sasha can come, too?" she asks, through her tears.

"And Sasha, too," I say. "I promise. Please, trust me. I'll be back for you. I would never leave you."

"Do you promise?" she asks.

I muster all the solemnity I can, and look her dead in the eyes.

"I promise," I reply.

Bree's crying slows and eventually she nods, seeming satisfied.

It breaks my heart, but I quickly lean in, plant a kiss on her forehead, then get up, cross the room, and walk out the door. I know that if I stay for just one second more, I'll never summon the resolve to leave.

And as the door reverberates behind me, I just can't shake the sickening feeling that I'll never see my sister again.

Three

I hike straight up the mountain in the bright light of morning, an intense light shining off the snow. It is a white universe. The sun shines so strongly, I can barely see in the glare. I would do anything for a pair of sunglasses, or a baseball cap.

Today is thankfully windless, warmer than yesterday, and as I hike, I hear the snow melting all around me, trickling in small streams downhill and dropping in big clumps off of pine branches. The snow is softer, too, and walking is easier.

I check back over my shoulder, survey the valley spread out below, and see that the roads are partially visible again in the morning sun. This worries me, but then I chide myself, annoyed that I am allowing myself to be disturbed by omens. I should be tougher. More rational, like Dad.

My hood is up, but as I lower my head to the wind, which grows stronger the higher I get, I wish I'd worn my new scarf. I bunch my hands and rub them, wishing for gloves, too, and double my speed. I am resolved to get there quickly, scout out the cottage, search for that deer, and hurry back down to Bree. Maybe I'll salvage a few more jars of jam, too; that will cheer Bree up.

I follow my tracks from yesterday, still visible in the melting snow, and this time, the hike is easier. Within about twenty minutes, I'm back to where I was the day before, rounding the

highest plateau.

I am sure I am in the same place as yesterday, but as I look for the cottage, I can't find it. It is so well hidden that, even though I know where to look, I still can't see it. I start to wonder if I'm in the right place. I continue on, following my footsteps, until I get to the exact spot I stood the day before. I crane my neck, and finally, I spot it. I'm amazed at how well-concealed it is, and am even more encouraged about living here.

I stand and listen. All is silent save for the sound of the trickling stream. I check the snow carefully, looking for any signs of prints going in or out (aside from mine), since yesterday. I find none.

I walk up to the door, stand in front of the house and do a 360, scanning the woods in every direction, checking the trees, looking for any signs of disturbance, any evidence that anyone else has been here. I stand for at least a minute, listening. There is nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Finally, I am satisfied, relieved that this place is truly ours, and ours alone.

I pull back the heavy door, jammed by the snow, and bright light floods the interior. As I duck my head and enter, I feel as if I'm seeing it for the first time in the light. It is as small and cozy as I remember. I see that it has original, wide-plank wood flooring, which looks to be at least a hundred years old. It is quiet in here. The small, open windows on either side let in a good deal of light, too.

I scan the room in the light, searching for anything I might have overlooked – but find nothing. I look down and find the handle to the trap door, kneel down and yank it open. It opens up with a whirl of dust, which swims in the sunlight.

I scramble down the ladder, and this time, with all the reflected light, I have a much better view of the stash down here. There must be hundreds of jars. I spot several more jars of raspberry jam, and grab two of them, cramming one in each pocket. Bree will love this. So will Sasha.

I do a cursory scan of the other jars, and see all sorts of foods: pickles, tomatoes, olives, sauerkraut. I also see several different flavors of jams, with at least a dozen jars of each. There is even more in the back, but I don't have time to look carefully. Thoughts of Bree are weighing heavily on my mind.

I scramble up the ladder, close the trap door and hurry out the cottage, closing the front door tight behind me. I stand there and survey my surroundings again, bracing myself for anyone who may have been watching. I am still afraid this is all too good to be true. But once again, there is nothing. Maybe I've just become too on-edge.

I head off in the direction where I spotted the deer, about thirty yards away. As I reach it, I take out Dad's hunting knife and hold it at my side. I know it's a long shot for me to see it again, but maybe this animal, like me, is a creature of habit. There's no way I'm fast enough to chase it down, or quick enough to pounce – nor do I have a gun or any real hunting weapons. But I do have

one chance, and that is my knife. I've always been proud of my ability to hit a bull's-eye thirty yards away. Knife-throwing was the one skill of mine Dad always seemed impressed by – at least impressed enough to never try to correct or improve me. Instead, he took credit for it, saying my talent was due to him. In reality, though, he couldn't throw a knife half as well as I could.

I kneel in the place I was before, hiding behind a tree, watching the plateau, holding the knife in my hand, waiting. Praying. All I hear is the sound of the wind.

I run through in my head what I will do if I see the deer: I will slowly stand, take aim, and throw the knife. I first think I will aim for its eye, but then decide to aim for its throat: if I miss by a few inches, then there will still be a chance of hitting it somewhere. If my hands aren't too frozen, and if I'm accurate, I figure that maybe, just maybe, I can wound it. But I realize those are all big "ifs."

Minutes pass. It feels like ten, twenty, thirty... The wind dies, then reappears in gusts, and as it does, I feel the fine flakes of snow being blown off the trees and into my face. As more time passes, I grow colder, more numb, and I begin to wonder if this is a bad idea. I get another sharp hunger pain, though, and know that I have to try. I will need all the protein I can get to make this move happen – especially if I'm going to push that motorcycle uphill.

After nearly an hour of waiting, I am utterly frozen. I debate whether to just give it up and head back down the mountain.

Maybe I should try to fish again instead.

I decide to get up and walk around, to circulate my limbs and keep my hands nimble; if I had to use them now, they'd probably be useless. As I rise to my feet my knees and back ache from stiffness. I begin to walk in the snow, starting with small steps. I lift and bend my knees, twist my back left and right. I stick the knife back in my belt, then rub my hands over each other, blowing on them again and again, trying to restore the feeling.

Suddenly, I freeze. In the distance, a twig snaps, and I sense motion.

I turn slowly. There, over the hilltop, a deer comes into view. It steps slowly, tentatively, in the snow, gently lifting its hooves and placing them down. It lowers its head, chews on a leaf, then carefully takes another step forward.

My heart pounds with excitement. I rarely feel that Dad is with me, but today, I do. I can hear his voice in my head now: *Steady. Breathe slowly. Don't let it know you're here. Focus.* If I can bring down this animal, it will be food – real food – for Bree and Sasha and me for at least a week. *We need this.*

It takes a few more steps into the clearing and I get a better view of it: a large deer, it stands maybe thirty yards away. I'd feel a lot more confident if it were standing ten yards away, or even twenty. I don't know if I can hit it at this distance. If it were warmer out, and if it wasn't moving, then yes. But my hands are numb, the deer is moving, and there are so many trees in the way. I just don't know. I do know that if I miss it, it will never come

back here again.

I wait, studying it, afraid to spook it. I will it to come closer. But it doesn't seem to want to.

I debate what to do. I can charge it, getting as close as I can, then throw. But that would be stupid: after just one yard, it would surely bolt. I wonder if I should try to creep up on it. But I doubt that will work, either. The slightest noise, and it will be gone.

So I stand there, debating. I take one small step forward, positioning myself to throw the knife, in case I need to. And that one small step is my mistake.

A twig snaps beneath my feet, and the deer immediately lifts its head and turns to me. We lock eyes. I know that it sees me, and that it's about to bolt. My heart pounds, as I know this is my only chance. My mind freezes up.

Then I burst into action. I reach down, grab the knife, take a big step forward, and drawing on all my skills, I reach back and throw it, aiming for its throat.

Dad's heavy Marine Corps knife tumbles end over end through the air, and I pray it doesn't hit a tree first. As I watch it tumbling, reflecting light, it is a thing of beauty. In that same moment, I see the deer turn and begin to run.

It is too far away for me to see exactly what happens, but a moment later, I swear I hear the sound of the knife entering flesh. The deer takes off, though, and I can't tell if it's wounded.

I take off after it. I reach the spot where it was, and am surprised to see bright red blood in the snow. My heart flutters,

encouraged.

I follow the trail of blood, running and running, jumping over rocks, and after about fifty yards, I find it: there it is, collapsed in the snow, lying on its side, legs twitching. I see the knife lodged in its throat. Exactly in the spot I was aiming for.

The deer is still alive, and I don't know how to put it out of its misery. I can feel its suffering, and I feel terrible. I want to give it a quick and painless death, but don't know how.

I kneel and extract the knife, then lean over, and in one swift motion, slice it deeply across the throat, hoping that will work. Moments later, blood comes rushing out, and within about ten more seconds, finally, the deer's legs stop moving. Its eyes stop fluttering, too, and finally, I know it's dead.

I stand over, staring down, holding the knife in my hand, and feel overwhelmed with guilt. I feel barbaric, having killed such a beautiful, defenseless creature. In this moment, it's hard for me to think of how badly we needed this food, how lucky I was to catch it at all. All I can think is that, just a few minutes before, it was breathing, alive like me. And now, it's dead. I look down at it, lying so perfectly still in the snow, and despite myself, I feel ashamed.

That is the moment when I first hear it. I dismiss it at first, assume I must be hearing things, because it is just not possible. But after a few moments, it rises a tiny bit louder, more distinct, and I know it's real. My heart starts pounding like crazy, as I recognize the noise. It is a noise I've heard up here only once

before. It is the whine of an engine. A car engine.

I stand there in astonishment, too frozen to even move. The engine grows louder, more distinct, and I know it can only mean one thing. Slaverunners. No one else would dare drive this high up, or have any reason to.

I break into a sprint, leaving the deer, charging through the woods, past the cottage, down the hill. I can't go fast enough. I think of Bree, sitting there, alone in the house, as the engines grow louder and louder. I try to increase my speed, running straight down the snowy slope, tripping as I go, my heart pounding in my throat.

I run so fast that I fall, face-first, scraping my knee and elbow, and getting the wind knocked out of me. I struggle back to my feet, noticing the blood on my knee and arm, but not caring. I force myself back into a jog, then into a sprint.

Slipping and sliding, I finally reach a plateau, and from here, I can see all the way down the mountain to our house. My heart leaps into my throat: there are distinctive car tracks in the snow, leading right to our house. Our front door is open. And most ominous of all, I don't hear Sasha barking.

I run, farther and farther down, and as I do, I get a good look at the two vehicles parked outside our house: slaverunner cars. All black, built low to the ground, they look like muscle cars on steroids, with enormous tires and bars on all the windows. Emblazoned on their hoods is the emblem of Arena One, obvious even from here – a diamond with a jackal in its center. They are

here to feed the arena.

I sprint farther down the hill. I need to get lighter. I reach into my pockets, pull out the jars of jam and throw them to the ground. I hear the glass smash behind me, but I don't care. Nothing else matters now.

I am barely a hundred yards away when I see the vehicles start up, begin to leave my house. They head back down the winding country road. I want to break into tears as I realize what has happened.

Thirty seconds later I reach the house, and run past it, right to the road, hoping to catch them. I already know the house is empty.

I'm too late. The car tracks tell the story. As I look down the mountain, I can see them, already a half-mile away, and gaining speed. There's no way I can ever catch them on foot.

I run back to the house, just in case, by some remote chance, Bree has managed to hide, or they left her. I burst through the open front door, and as I do, I am horrified by the sight before me: blood is everywhere. On the ground lies a dead slaverunner, dressed in his all-black uniform, blood pouring from his throat. Beside him lies Sasha, on her side, dead. Blood pours out her side from what looks like a bullet wound. Her teeth are still embedded in the corpse's throat. It becomes clear what happened: Sasha must have tried to protect Bree, lunging at the man as he entered the house and lodging her teeth in his throat. The others must have shot her. But still, she did not let go.

I run through the house, room to room, screaming Bree's name, hearing the desperation in my own voice. It is no longer a voice I recognize: it is the voice of a crazy person.

But every door is wide open, and everything is empty.

The slaverunners have taken my sister.

Four

I stand there, in the living room of my Dad's house, in shock. On the one hand, I've always feared this day would come; yet now that it has, I can hardly believe it. I am overcome with guilt. Did last night's fire tip us off? Did they see the smoke? Why couldn't I have been more cautious?

I also hate myself for leaving Bree alone this morning – especially after we'd both had such bad dreams. I see her face, crying, pleading with me not to leave. Why didn't I listen to her? Trust my own instincts? Looking back, I can't help feeling that Dad really did warn me. Why didn't I pay attention?

None of that matters now, and I only pause for a moment. I am in action mode, and in no way prepared to give up and let her go. I am already running through the house so I do not lose any precious time in chasing down the slaverunners and rescuing Bree.

I run over to the corpse of the slaverunner and examine him quickly: he is dressed in their signature all-black, military uniform, with black combat boots, black military fatigues, and a long-sleeved black shirt covered by a tightly-fitting black bomber coat. He still wears a black face mask with the insignia of Arena One – the hallmark of a slaverunner – and also wears a small black helmet. Little good that did him: Sasha still managed to lodge her teeth into his throat. I glance over at Sasha and choke

up at the sight. I'm so grateful to her for putting up such a fight. I feel guilty for leaving her alone, too. I glance at her corpse, and vow to myself that after I get Bree back, I will return and give her a proper burial.

I quickly strip the slaverunner's corpse for valuables. I begin by taking his weapons belt and clipping it around my own waist, fastening it tight. It contains a holster and a handgun, which I pull out and check quickly: filled with ammo, it appears to be in perfect working order. This is like gold – and now it is mine. Also on the belt are several backup clips of ammo.

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