

CHAPTER ONE

Madeline Saari Skurbic sat ten feet above the frozen ground of northeastern Minnesota. Her eyes were closed. Her face was snuggled into the fleece lining of a blaze orange hunting jacket. Her adolescent body was tucked against the cold bark of a yellow birch and her rump was firmly planted on frosted plywood that served as the seat in her deer stand. Though she was napping, Maddie wasn't in danger of falling out of her perch: descent was thwarted by an aspen railing spiked to three birch trees defining the limits of the crude platform Maddie and her father, Herman "Budd" Skurbic, had built. Crisp November air stirred leafless branches but the forest's subtle whispers did not wake the girl. Madeline cradled an ancient Winchester 30-30, a rifle that once belonged to her maternal grandfather, Joseph Saari, in her arms. The girl's hands were covered in the same vibrant orange as the rest of her; the synthetic fabric of her hunting gloves buttressed against penetrating chill by Thinsulate inserts. Maddie's feet, warm and toasty in a pair of SmartWool socks inside her fleece-lined Sorels, the brown leather uppers sprayed with silicon to resist water, rested on stout aspen logs forming the platform's floor. Despite the swaying of the trees supporting her deer stand, the girl did not wake. Fragile snowflakes sashayed from an overcast sky and imperceptibly covered the snoring girl in a thin mantle of white.

Before that day, the fifteen-year-old had never carried a rifle in the field. But she was persistent in her pleas to her parents. Maddie had accompanied her dad's only brother, Oscar Skurbic, a wiry wisp of a man who'd worked the Merritt Pit Mine—an open pit taconite mine located across Birch Lake from Maddie's deer stand—as an unarmed apprentice on previous hunts. In her fourteenth year, Maddie completed the state-mandated firearms education course, and under the weight of her petitions, Alice (Maddie's mother) and Budd given in and allowed their only child to hunt the quarter section of land that defined the Skurbic Farm.

The Farm was a tangle of black alder, overgrown hayfields, second-growth forest, occasional white pines, and modest marshland laced together by Kangas Creek: a trickle of water flowing through the property from Little Lake towards Kangas Lake. Kangas Creek exited its namesake, a eutrophic bowl of black water populated by perch and hammer-handle northern pike, before flowing south into Birch Lake. There was nothing notable about Kangas Creek: no babbling discourse, no falls or rapids, no magnificent drops; just the slow meander of tannin-stained swampy discharge oozing its way through tired land. In reality, the property—known as "The Skurbic Farm" to locals—was actually the ancestral home of Maddie's mother, Alice Saari Skurbic. The old Finnish farmstead had been cleared and built with sweat and blood by Alice's grandfather and Maddie's great grandfather, Juha Saari, during the labor unrest of the early 1920s when many Finns were blacklisted from the iron ore mines and took to subsistence farming to survive.

Throughout the intervening decades defining Ely as a boomtown, Maddie's maternal grandfather, Joe Saari, maintained both the farm and a three-bedroom bungalow in town on East Camp Street, displaying the chest puffing self-satisfaction of knowing he'd worked the earth as a miner just as his immigrant father had. When he died, Joe's Ely home and the ancestral farm were passed down to Alice, his only child.

This was the personal history that surrounded Madeline Skurbic as she dozed in her deer stand, the hood of her jacket pulled tight against November cold, her inky black hair tied in a pony tail

and tucked inside an orange watch cap drawn tight against her scalp, her eyes closed, her breathing soft and measured. As Maddie napped, she dreamed not of family history or the immigrant saga of ancestors, but of Calvin Johnson, a shy seventeen-year-old geek who'd asked her to the hunter's ball. She'd said "yes" despite her girlfriends' decrying Calvin's attributes; his lack of athleticism, his quiet, reserved demeanor. An image of Calvin's gangly arms around her waist, her head resting on his shoulder as they slow danced in the Ely High School gymnasium, their eyes closed, their hearts beating a nervous cadence, occupied Maddie's mind as she dozed.

Boom!

An explosion startled the girl. The ground shuddered. The forest shivered. Madeline's eyes jetted open. The girl dropped her rifle onto the floor of the deer stand and hugged the trunk of the nearest birch in appreciation that something horrific had occurred.

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