

THE FORGOTTEN ROAD

BY

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Prologue

The blaze burned for two months, pushed by the wind through Jack pines and brush that hadn't seen fire for sixty years. Man had doused every flame that had threatened to get out of control here, but man wasn't around to fight this one.

It roared up one valley and down the next, spreading until it was stopped by the shore of a lake to the east. To the south, it continued to assault the land, engulfing cabins and houses as it charred mile upon mile of ground. The structures were no match for the destruction its wrath brought.

It approached the village, and still no one offered a challenge. It wrapped its arms around the town -- surrounded it with walls of flame fifty feet high. Embers floated on the hot wind it created, and settled on the roofs of a few sheds and one house, and set them alight. And still no one came out with so much as a cup of water.

On the west side of the village, a single bulldozer sat silently awaiting an operator, ready to make a new fire break. But it hadn't moved in over a month. Dozer tracks not yet eroded by wind or water led back to a shallow depression in the ground where it had last worked.

Thirty five crosses edged the depression. Names written in black magic marker matched the names of families on numerous houses in and around the town. At least someone had made an effort to pay that tribute to the dead. But no effort was made against the fire. There was no one left to fight it.

The fire turned as it reached the grave, briefly kissed the blade of bulldozer, and was pushed back by a swirl of wind from the east. The blaze skirted the village, and resumed its march southward. Thibodaux was saved for its ghosts.

Chapter 1

It was time to go. Jake stood at the end of the weathered dock, and gazed out over the lake he had called home for the past fifteen months. He shuffled his feet on the gray wood, and kicked a splinter into the water. Behind him was a cabin, built by his father and grandfather nearly twenty summers before. A look back pulled at his heart. He would never see this place again. Beyond the beach, forty yards to the west of the cabin, were two crude wooden crosses, stuck deep into the rocky Manitoba soil. The fresh grave on the right was for his grandfather, Amos, whom sixteen year old Jake had buried just the day before. The grave on the left was less than a year old. Beneath that cross lay the body of his mother, Emily.

Common sense told him that his father would have done everything possible to get back to the cabin. That he hadn't come back after nearly a year, meant that he was likely dead too. That was reality, Jake knew. But he held out hope that beyond the next peninsula, or across the next portage, he would find his father or his father would find him. It was a slim hope that died a little more with each sunset. Now, Jake just wanted to find his way back to civilization, to leave this cabin and all its memories, before he too succumbed. There was no one left to dig his grave.

Jake glanced back at the cabin one more time, stepped carefully into the canoe, and released the line that held the stern to the dock. He picked up the worn paddle, and tested its weight. While the paddle was in his calloused hands, he had a goal and a sense of purpose. There was comfort in that.

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

Chapter 2

The lake was a narrow, four-kilometer long body of water cut by massive glaciers between two small promontories thousands of years before. Lowlands edged the basin where a multitude of minor streams fed water into the lake. Through a valley to the south, the dry remains of a river meandered to the next lake in a long chain that eventually flowed into Hudson Bay. In late summer, the flow into the lake from the streams was barely noticeable, and the river outflow nonexistent.

Jake set a steady pace southward down the lake, his brown eyes shaded by a worn, camouflage cap. The headband of the cap was already soaked with sweat. White salt stains higher on the cap remained from previous days of hard labor. He was used to the outdoors, and enjoyed the rhythm of a well-timed paddle stroke. His arms and back had been strengthened by repetition of this motion over the years, and though he was very slender, he knew how to use the power of leverage to make the green canoe hum across the still water.

Jake focused his mind on his paddling and breathing and pushed the memories of the previous day's backbreaking, heartbreaking tasks out of his thoughts. Throwing the dirt onto his grandfather's grave had been tear filled task, and Jake was determined to let no more tears flow.

In an empty canoe, with no wind, when he had been at the peak of his physical fitness, he might have been able to coax six kilometers per hour out of the fiberglass boat. In his current condition, at least twenty pounds lighter than he had been at the end of the previous summer, and with a burdened canoe, he averaged three kilometers per hour down the lake. That was still a fast pace, and a pace he couldn't sustain forever. His grandfather had warned him many times

about overexertion, but he just needed to put some distance between himself and the cabin and its graves.

He reached the landing for the first portage before lunch, and quickly pulled the canoe from the water. The portage had been a well-used trail during the many years the cabin had operated. It was three kilometers long, fairly straight and level, zigzagging only slightly between impassible bogs while it bypassed the rocky riverbed in favor of more even footing. In most years, the trailhead would have been obvious to even an untrained eye, but it was now overgrown with two seasons worth of weeds. Jake's father, Leland, had been the last one to come this way nearly a year before. He hadn't been seen since.

Jake ate a quick snack of dried venison, and topped off his canteens with water from the lake. From here on, he would boil enough water each night and at each stop to get him through the day. He hoped that each day would start with a canoe leg so that he would not have to haul a full day's supply on his back. The portages would already be difficult enough.

He carried two canteens; one on his hip, and one in a mesh pocket on his backpack. Both were filled to the brim. His pack was ideally suited for his five foot nine inch frame and he had practiced, with his grandfather, how to pack it, and repack it quickly. The load had been reviewed a dozen times, and the balance checked. He had lugged its forty pounds around the camp and on short spring hunting trips, and dragged field dressed kills, often a hundred pounds or more, back to the cabin. Still, that was different than carrying the sixty pounds of canoe and paddle hoisted over his head while navigating up and down some of the most unforgiving landscape in the world.

He tightened the straps on his pack, slid his paddle into the struts of the canoe, and tipped the canoe onto its side. He knelt, put one hand on the center brace and one on the outer edge, and flipped the canoe up over his head. It took a moment for the canoe to stop its pendulum motion before Jake could gather his breath and heave to a standing position. A quick double-check of the ground around where he had snacked ensured nothing was left behind. With another deep breath, Jake marched into the thick woods.

The air was scented with pine, and cool in the shade of the trees. Jake wore a light, long sleeve shirt, thick enough to keep the bugs off his skin, but thin enough to not overheat in the late summer temperatures. It was not unusual to reach eighty degrees at this latitude, but it was rare to go any higher than that, and never did for very long. It also wasn't unheard of to see snow before Labor Day. The cabin was two hundred and sixty kilometers north of Thompson, Manitoba, and nine hundred kilometers south of the Arctic Circle. Good weather was to be used productively.

Jake picked his steps carefully, and tried not to shuffle. A year ago, he would have vaulted across the rocks as if they were the playground jungle gyms of the school yard from his childhood, where he was always first to the top and unquestioned king of the mountain. Until the last year, fear had been a stranger. Fear was now unwelcome company, like relatives who had stayed a week too long. It blended in with his memories, images of two deaths he had already witnessed, and dreams of death and starvation that were jacked up on true, horrible hunger. Fear lurked under every loose rock that tried to grab his ankle to twist it, and swatted branches at him and attempted to take out his eyes. Fear was always there now. It hovered. It imposed on Jake's peace of mind, and took over what had been a very happy life.

His view was limited to what was in his immediate vicinity. The bow of the canoe obscured anything beyond thirty or forty feet, unless he tipped the canoe backwards, a dangerous act on the narrow trail that could cause an irreversible loss of balance. Berry bushes ripped at his pants. The tough fabric, already frayed by a year of non-stop use, showed many small tears and threadbare patches that he would need to fix at some point. He knew better than to wear shorts or jeans on a trip like this. His father didn't even let him bring anything denim into the woods. "Urban trash" he called it. "Useless in the bush." Jake smiled as he recalled those words, and said them aloud, doing his best imitation of his father's deep voice. He trudged on and his mind wandered back to the last time he had seen his father as he began to let his feet find their own way. It was hard to believe it had been eleven months.

It had been later in the season and much colder when his father left to get help. Jake's mother, Emily, was inside the cabin, a fever raging, and delirium near constant. Amos and Jake helped Leland to load their other, smaller canoe with supplies.

"Three weeks, tops. I'll be back in three weeks." Leland had said it a hundred times, though he had never done the hundred and fifty kilometer trip from their camp to Thibodaux by canoe. They had always flown in. Three weeks was an estimate, but Leland knew what he was doing in the woods. He had been venturing out in this part of Manitoba going on twenty years. He and Amos operated Clarke Expeditions, a hunting and fishing guide service, and took every chance they could get to go to one of their many camps. This had been one of their favorites, secluded and pristine, with excellent fishing, hunting and wild berries by the bucketful. It was, as Leland often described it, a little piece of Heaven on Earth.

Heaven had turned into purgatory when the planes stopped coming and Emily got sick. What little reception they could get on their 2-way radio crackled with static instead of familiar voices. They were used to reception that came and went with the strength of the Aurora Borealis, but by the end of the first month, there was nothing but the low hiss of static, not even a clipped twang of an announcer from some far off AM radio station in Dallas-Fort Worth whom they had often picked up on previous trips.

“You sure I shouldn’t come with you?” They had had this discussion before.

“Jake, you need to stay and take care of your mother.” Leland, his tanned and weathered face framed by military surplus jungle hat, looked Jake straight in the eye, to emphasize how deadly serious he was.

Jake briefly looked at Amos, as if to imply that Amos could care for Jake’s dying mother. A look back at his father, whose eyes had changed to a pleading ‘*Help me here, Jake*’ look, reminded Jake the real reason he needed to stay. Amos was eighty years old. This was to have been his last trip to the cabin. Years of hard living, and harder drinking, had taken a toll on the old man’s body.

“Dad...” There was a lilt to his voice, a crack of emotion and nerves from a boy barely out of adolescence.

“Jake, I’ll be back in three weeks.” Leland repeated it as if saying it again would make it true. Jake just nodded and gave him a hug.

Leland turned to Amos. The look between them was different. It was a final parting. Somehow both of them knew that. They had been through a lot together, and a lot apart. But here, on this dock, with everything at stake, they were never closer.

“Take care of him, Pop.” Leland hugged him tight and whispered into his ear. “Love you, Dad.” He had to lean down slightly to wrap his arms around his frail father. But Amos hugged back with a strength that Leland had not seen in years.

“Love you, too.” There were tears in his eyes as they separated. “Be careful.” His hand stayed on Leland’s shoulder, and Amos took a long look at Leland’s face. There was so much to say, things that had never been said before and things that had to be said again. But there was no time.

“I will.” Leland stepped down into the canoe, and took the paddle in his large hands.

“I’ll be back in three weeks.” he said once more. With a single sweep of the paddle the canoe was turned, and the path straightened. Jake and Amos watched him go until they heard Emily, awake and delirious again. Jake tapped Amos on the arm, and directed him back to the cabin. Jake saw the tears on Amos’ cheeks, and bit his lower lip to stop the emotions from cracking his teenage stoicism.

Jake remembered all this as he looked for signs of his father’s track, but the weeds and the bushes obscured any hint of recent travelers. He returned his focus to the trail as he stepped through a particularly thick patch of vines, and scanned for any edible fruit that might remain. Even after a sizeable snack, he was still hungry. He was always hungry.

The sweat poured down Jake's face, chest and back. The mosquitoes hounded him, buzzed around his face, and flew into his mouth whenever he inhaled. The warm carbon dioxide of his exhalations was a lure to the incessant clouds of bugs. His shoulders burned with the weight of the pack and the yoke of the canoe. His legs ached with the combined weight of it all. He focused on taking each step, picked a tree he could see thirty feet in front of him, reached that point, and then picked the next goal. "*Just keep walking, Jake*", he reminded himself. He grimaced and took another stride.

He covered nearly a kilometer and a half that way before he stumbled over a vine that wrapped itself around his foot. He tipped the canoe to the right as he went down, but his paddle vaulted forward and struck him in the back of the head as the canoe jolted to a stop with a dull thud. Jake's face was driven into the ground, and the impact left him with a series of shallow, ugly scrapes on his nose and forehead. He grunted, yelped in pain, and let out a short stream of cusswords.

He lay there for a moment, inventoried his aches and pains, and checked to see if any of them indicated something worse than a scrape or a bruise. A foot to his right the canoe rested on the large raspberry bush that had tackled him. Jake forced back a groan of self-pity, and the tears that would have come with it. He had cried enough in the last 24 hours.

There in the bushes, the weight of the pack held him glued to the ground. He took a deep breath, rolled onto his side, and pushed himself into a sitting position. A quick flip of a clasp loosened his pack straps, released the heavy plastic hip buckle, and let the pack slide to the ground. He pulled the flask of water from his hip, drank deeply, wiped the sweat from his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, and noticed that it too, was now torn. He shook his head,

straightened his legs and laid back on his pack. The self-pity was replaced by a flare of anger, and he cursed the vine again, then forced a deep, calming breath into his lungs.

The stunted trees provided little shade on this rocky knoll. The soil was thin and barely deep enough for the bushes that grew around him. But the spot got more light than some of the other areas he had just passed through. The sun felt good to him, and combined with a refreshing breeze from the west, helped to push the bugs back into the shade.

He stood slowly, and stretched his already aching muscles. Ahead, the trail dropped back down towards the next lake, and passed through a thick line of trees. The next lake wasn't visible from where he was, but Jake knew it was there, and he figured he was at least half way to it.

He checked his pack, made sure everything was secure, and surveyed the canoe for damage. The fiberglass was strong and light, and showed only a small fresh scratch on the bow. Since this particular canoe had made many trips in the years they had owned it, it was not the first scratch, nor would it be the last.

He pulled a map out of a pocket on his pack, and used his compass to do a quick check of his position and direction. They called it orienteering in school. *Survival*, his father had called it. Jake had been reading maps since before he could read books, had led trips at each one of the outfit's camps, and picked his way through forest, mountains and swamp with nothing more than a compass and a topographic map.

Satisfied that he was on course, he stowed his gear, took another sip of water and did another quick stretch.

The bush that had tripped him offered some compensation in the form of a few over-ripe raspberries that Jake wolfed down. The animals and birds had already cleared most of the bushes of their fruit, but Jake was able to find a handful that clung to hidden vines. He washed those down with another swig of water.

His body agreed to continue on, and with a quick series of motions, Jake picked up his pack, flipped the canoe up onto his shoulders and returned to the trail. The fall amounted to nothing more than a brief diversion from the monotony of the walk. It was oddly invigorating. The scratches on his face would heal. He could get back up and go on. He reminded himself to stop more often to allow himself to get water, rest his arms and legs, and to take a breath. He had a long way to go, but if he was smart, and kept his wits about him, he could do it. Panic was his real enemy. So was bad weather, he reminded himself, but right now, the weather was pleasant. He continued his march down the trail, with fresh air in his lungs and a renewed spirit.

The descent down the short hill left him next to small spring fed stream that barely flowed at this time of year. The brambles were thick and grew fast where their roots were able to suck water from small pools left behind from the wetter days of the early summer. It took him two hours to go half a kilometer, and he sometimes needed to set the canoe down to take out a bush machete and hack his way through the growth. There were a few more ripe berries he snatched as he went, but the majority had already been picked over. He ate what he could find, even some of the half eaten ones the bugs had partially destroyed, and enjoyed the sweet juice and the surge of glucose.

The taste reminded him of his mother and the jams she made every year. The freezer was always stacked to the top by October and empty by spring when the strawberries came into

season. Jake consumed an unhealthy amount of the sugar infused jams and jellies, topping everything from bread to pancakes to ice cream and yogurt with the concoctions whipped up on his mother's stovetop. The memories were pleasant, and he was able to think about his mother without breaking down in tears. That, a few months ago, would have been impossible.

As he got closer to the lake, the ground softened and the vines stayed on the firmer, drier ground. The ground cover changed to thin willows and thick reeds while the stream widened and turned into a small delta. Where the water didn't flow continuously, the years of vegetation stacked up to form a thick, stinking, peat bog. It clung to his hiking boots, and tried to pull them from his feet. The trail disappeared completely. He could see the water a few hundred yards ahead, and pushed on through the muck. In May, the water would have been higher, and at this point of the trail, he would have been safely paddling.

He tied a short rope to the bow, looped it over his shoulder, and towed the canoe to the water, grunting and straining at every step. The last hundred meters took an hour to cover. The mosquitoes were intense. This was their playground, and even the tiniest gnats took their turns at bullying and harassing him. His path took him through knee deep biomass that reeked of decaying plant matter and dead fish, and the mosquitoes lined up to attack any unprotected skin as if he were the ice cream man handing out popsicles made of blood.

The water deepened until he was able to pull the canoe up beside him, throw in his pack, and hoist himself in as well. He took a long draw of water from his canteen, removed his boots and socks, gave them a rinse in the water, and set them forward in the canoe to dry. He used his paddle to push the canoe through the remaining part of the reeds and into the open water. A

gentle breeze rippled the water ahead of him, and as soon as he cleared the reeds, the mosquitoes returned home, leaving him scarred, puffy and caked with dried blood.

To his right, about two hundred feet down the shore, was a small clearing with a piece of metal nailed to a nearby tree, marking the trailhead. His chin dropped to his chest. Somehow he had missed a turn in the trail, and wasted three precious hours, and a mountain of energy, as he fought his way through the bog for no good reason. It was a small mistake; a mistake of impatience and inexperience. He should have scouted the trail, and he knew it. He set the paddle across the canoe, washed his hands off in the clear, cold water of the lake proper, and dried them on his shirt. He pulled the map out of his pack, checked his direction, stowed the gear, and set off down the lake at an easy pace. His muscles were too tired to go any faster.

It was already late afternoon, and his goal now was to find a suitable place to spend the night. This lake was large, but quite narrow at this northern most tip. He found a suitable camp spot on the eastern side of the lake after half a kilometer, and pulled the canoe up onto the grassy shore.

He emptied the canoe, turned it over, and checked the bottom for any new gouges or cracks. The paddling had been easy, but the portage rough. There was no significant damage, and Jake gave the hull an appreciative tap for getting him through the first day.

Next, he turned his attention to setting up camp. He pulled a pair of worn out sneakers from a strap on the outside of his pack, and put them on to save his bare feet. His sodden boots were left on top of the canoe to dry. He rinsed out his socks again, and draped them over the bow. Debris from the muck stuck to the fibers, and no amount of rinsing could remove the smell. Jake was glad he had a few spare pairs, but resigned himself to wearing them again at some point. He

didn't have enough extra clothes to discard anything, no matter how bad it looked or smelled. At some point, these would become the cleanest and driest he would have.

Other travelers had used the clearing in the past. That much was immediately clear. There was a small fire ring, about six inches deep, surrounded by rocks gathered from a nearby streambed. A small stack of leftover wood was left not too far from the fire, and an area had been picked clean of large rocks to make an ideal place for a tent. Jake did a quick walk around the site to remove any debris that had fallen since the last time the site had been used. The odds that Leland had used this site on his trip through the previous fall were low, as Leland was a much stronger paddler, in much more of a hurry, and knew the area much better than Jake did. It was likely that he had made many more miles that first day out, and had, at the very least, waited until he got to the next portage to stop and rest. Perhaps his father or grandfather had made this site while exploring many years before. It would have been typical of them to build up camps like this within an easy day's haul from the main camp, perfect for emergencies, or just to get away for a couple of days. They had dozens of spots just like this across Manitoba, and knew what was special about every one of them. This one looked west over the lake, and Jake would have seen a terrific sunset, had he stayed awake long enough to witness it.

His tent was a small, three-person shelter that took him only a few minutes to set up and stake down. He was conscious of making fewer mistakes of impatience so he used the tent fly as an extra layer of protection, just in case. The clear sky above showed no signs of bad weather, but that was prone to change in a hurry in the middle of the night.

With dried wood from the stack built by the last occupant, and a butane lighter, he started a fire. There wasn't much fuel left in the lighter, but he would use it until it was gone. He had a

large supply of matches as a backup, protected by a double layer of Ziploc bags. The lighter was easier, and he wanted easy on this night.

He ran through a check list in his head: shelter, fire, water and food. Those were the essentials. He had two, and his stomach tried to convince him to jump forward to number four, but he knew he hadn't drunk enough water during his day. His supply was low.

They had run out of water purification tablets while trying to treat his mother's fever. Initially they had believed her illness had been caused by something in the water, but purifying the water through treatments and boiling had done nothing. His only option now was to boil water. He took out an aluminum pot from his pack, filled it with water from the lake, and suspended it over the fire with a tripod of branches he tied together with a short nylon cord.

His stomach repeated its demand for food, and Jake obliged. He carried a large amount of dried deer and fish in his pack, along with the tools to hunt or catch more if he needed to. A dismantled fishing pole was tied to the side of his bag, and a container of hooks, spare line and lures was stuffed in a side pocket of his bag. In another pocket were coils of thin wire, ideal for trapping small game like rabbits, squirrels and perhaps raccoons.

His main tool for hunting game was a Remington 700-.308 rifle, encased in a soft, watertight case strapped to the left side of his pack. The scope was stowed in a padded pocket in the lid of his pack, and could be attached in a few seconds. He wouldn't get a quick shot at a deer with the gun stowed like this, but for the first week, he had no plans to hunt. He would try his hand at fishing and trapping first. There was also the possibility that he might stumble into a situation

that allowed him time to use the gun while out of the canoe, but with the amount of noise he made on his portages, he considered that extremely unlikely.

He had a backup gun, a Colt .45 semiautomatic pistol with just five bullets left for it, all loaded in the magazine. The gun packed a kick that had nearly broken Jake's wrist the first time he had fired it. For the last sixty years, it had been in a holster on his grandfather's belt or stored in an old army footlocker. Today, it was wrapped carefully and placed in the bottom of Jake's pack, too heavy to ride comfortably on his hip, and weighted with too many fresh memories to be anywhere easily accessible.

His bag contained his camp kit. The heaviest item was a small emergency stove with a gas canister big enough for a dozen meals. All of his cooking needs could be met by campfires, but on the coldest, nastiest mornings, the ease of fire in a bottle outweighed the extra mass in the pack. A frying pan with a lid that doubled as a plate stacked neatly over a small aluminum cook pot with a detachable handle for boiling water. Inside the pot, he stored a spoon and fork, half his supply of waterproof, strike-anywhere matches, and a cloth for cleanup.

Under the kitchen kit a thick fleece sweater and an all-weather jacket with a hood that could be pulled tight around his face were pushed in on top of his sleeping bag, and wrapped in a black garbage bag. Into the remaining gaps in the pack, they had pushed as many pairs of socks as would fit, a couple of spare T-shirts, and a single spare pair of pants. The shirts and the pants were worn thin by constant use, and if he had been at home, his mother would have forced him to discard them. But here they were the best he had. They were light, warm, and quick to dry, and all good gear when the family had arrived at the cabin, fifteen months earlier.

Strapped to the top of his pack frame was a food canister weighted with thirty pounds of smoked venison and fish. He wouldn't need to hunt or fish for three weeks if he rationed his food, but rationing would limit his ability to make good mileage every day. He needed every calorie possible to keep up the pace.

He could make better time by not spending much of it hunting right away, living off what he and his grandfather had preserved and packed until he had used up about half his stores. He would fish when he could, set some traps in the evenings, and be ready to take advantage of luck when possible, but he needed two solid weeks of travel under his belt, otherwise the trip wouldn't be done when the snow arrived. Winter was approaching and that thought loomed in the back of his mind like the blade of a guillotine over a stretched neck.

He removed a portion of the meat from the pack, closed the bag and removed the plastic wrap from his food. The exertion of the day had his stomach growling, but looking at the dried meat made him pause. The menu had been a constant conversation during the previous winter when the fresh food had long run out, and all that was left were the meager supplies they had killed or caught and been able to dry before the weather turned. Jake had never been a picky eater, but there were days where Amos had been less than patient with Jake's grumbling. Those days, Jake's humor managed to keep the two from complete cabin fever.

"Just eat it, Jake." Amos said as he dropped a small piece of the dried venison onto Jake's plate. A storm roiled outside, and had been slamming the lake for three days. Their trap lines were hidden under a meter of fresh, windblown snow. Jake's fingers were frozen, his gloves wet and steaming by the stove after returning from a near fatal trip to the lake ice to force a hole back

open to get two buckets of water. There had been no time to fish. The fresh meat of the last large kill had been eaten a week before.

“I’d kill for some pizza.”

“Boy, there’s no use talking of such nonsense.” Amos sat at his chair, and placed a piece of dried meat, no bigger than the size of his palm, on his own plate. He cut it into tiny pieces. His teeth – never that good to begin with and long in need of a good dentist – couldn’t chew the tough meat more than a few times before his nerves rebelled, and he winced in pain.

“How about pasta? With some of Mom’s sauce? Or scrambled eggs? With salt and pepper.” Jake set his own mouth watering. Visions of a table set with orange juice and bacon made him swallow.

“Enough, Jake. Eat.” Amos shook his head. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have the same thoughts. It was just that this was an all too common conversation. And the old man was losing his patience. He looked at the shelf that had once contained their flown in supplies. There were but a few Ziploc bags they had used and reused dozens of times, a few pieces of clear plastic wrap that they carefully recycled, and a large container of dried meat, broken into pieces like they now ate.

“Don’t you miss it, Grandpa?”

“Of course I do. Don’t be daft.” He put a small piece of meat into his mouth, mashed it with two of his good teeth, and swallowed. “But there just ain’t nothing we can do about it. Not right

now. If the weather breaks, maybe we go out and get another deer, or a moose. Then we can shish-kabob it, fry it, stew it, whatever you want. Right now, this here is what we got.”

“I’m just so tired of meat. I want something green. Some beans. Lettuce. Tomatoes. Carrots. Corn on the cob.”

“This from the boy your father practically had to whup to get to eat broccoli of his plate.”

“I didn’t say I wanted broccoli.” Jake smiled. Amos looked at him, shook his head and smiled. This was their banter, their way of coping. Their senses of humor saved them, or at least it got them through the winter, and for that, Jake was grateful.

The memory evoked a small pang of loneliness that Jake swallowed with a small piece of the venison. The meat tasted the same as it did the previous winter, bland and tough, and his teeth wiggled just a bit as he chewed. The loneliness was more bitter and harsh. Amos had died of malnutrition after making it through the winter and the spring, and Jake had watched him struggled just to drink weak pine-needle tea those last few days and hours. Amos hadn’t been able to eat meat the last week, and because of that, Jake’s pack was slightly heavier than it might have been. The weight on his heart was heavier still. He finished up the venison, and stowed the food back into the container.

There was the chance for rabbit or squirrel in the morning if he got some traps set, but the sun was already disappearing over the trees, and Jake doubted if he had enough energy to set even one measly trap. He sat back in the grass, and watched trout jump for bugs that flew too close to the surface. These northern lakes were full of fish. There was a reason why people

came to these parts to hunt and fish. Success was all but guaranteed. The fish here fought over a good lure out of boredom.

He followed his meal with a long drink of water, and tossed two thick pieces of wood on the fire. He sealed the food canister back up, took it inland two hundred yards from his camp, and left it on the ground. The canister could be batted around by bears and could withstand even the most determined attacks. Some campers hung the can in a tree, but it really didn't need to be. In these parts, the black bear were very efficient climbers, and all that would likely happen was that the tree would be damaged, the rope shredded and the bear hurt. Jake marked the location of the canister with a couple of quick notches in a nearby tree, and returned to his camp.

With the food stored, and his hunger somewhat satiated, he pulled his sleeping bag out of his pack, and pushed it into his tent. He pulled his pack in with him to prevent small animals like squirrels, mice and raccoons from destroying it during the night and set a small can of pepper spray from the web harness of his pack within easy reach. His pack became his pillow, and though he debated taking the pistol out as an extra precaution, the idea was never realized, as he was sound asleep before the thought had fully formed in his head.

It had been a long day.