

*THE FORGOTTEN ROAD*

BY

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## Chapter 1

“Go Izzy!”

The door slammed behind Izzy as she vaulted down the three steps into the backyard. The screech and bang of the aluminum frame almost covered up Angie’s last words. But Izzy heard them, and obeyed. She always obeyed her big sister. It was how they had survived this long.

She tore through the neighboring back yards, and leapt over the fence boards they had not yet used as firewood. Her eleven year old legs were short and malnourished, but she could still run fast when needed. She paused just past the second yard to see if Angie was following her. The door to the house opened with another squeal from its hinges. Izzy froze for an instant, a hallucination of hope made the man’s tangled, grimy hair look like Angie’s long, auburn locks. He took one step towards Izzy. The image vanished, and he was back to the man who had

taunted them from the sidewalk. That was enough for her to resume running. Where she was going, she didn't know. She just had to get away from that house, and those men.

Izzy hopped a split rail fence, turned north, and looped around the next block. Her legs found their own way. They had a backup house the next block over. Izzy and Angie had picked it out of a row of ransacked townhouses within sight of where they were staying. When in trouble, she was to go there. She wanted to go home – her real home – but that home was gone, a vague sense of happiness and comfort was all that was left of that life.

She ducked through the broken door of the townhouse. From the back windows it looked almost directly into the back yard of the house she had fled. She, Angie and Rick had swept this street just the day before for food and supplies. There was nothing to eat here -- there was never anything to eat -- but there had been clothes in the closets. Clothes that could fit her, and at that moment, she was shivering, and needed a new jacket. Hers had been left behind when she ran. She raided a pile of clothes thrown on the floor and picked out no more than she could wear. She searched the pile and found a mismatched pair of mittens, both right hand gloves, but better than nothing. She zipped up the coat, pulled on the mittens, and flexed her fingers. No frostbite -- not this time, anyway. Anything longer than an hour in this cold and wind without a jacket and gloves, and she wouldn't just have frostbite; she'd be dead.

She tiptoed up the staircase to the upper floor, and peered out the back window, raising only her forehead and eyes above the sill. The back entrance to the house they had been in was just a few meters away, and tantalizingly close. She waited, and she watched. The frosty realization that Angie had not, and would not make it out, rose like the early winter sun.

Thirty minutes went by, and she forced herself to move just enough to rub her hands together. It was brutally cold, without even a glimmer of heat coming from the hot air register in front of her feet. She wiped her nose on her new sleeve, and smelt the familiar odor of musty clothes. The coat had not been taken by anyone else, because, frankly, not many eleven year olds had survived the flu. She had seen others in the early days, but they had either not made it through the initial bouts of starvation, or had vanished to the roads and the bush like everyone else.

Another few minutes passed, with no activity from the house, and the thought that Angie might not escape crept deeper into her mind. Her breath caught in her chest, and she looked around the room for something, anything, that might have worked to allowed her to affect a rescue. But the men had guns, and there were three of them. Angie had a gun too, a shotgun, but that was in the house with her, and it hadn't been fired. Rick had the .45 and the .22, though he wasn't due back before nightfall. That was hours away. And Angie wouldn't survive for hours. Not if these men were like all the others they had seen on the road. Their faces had worn that desperate look; the look people got when they had lost touch with what made them human. Not quite animals. Animals had fear, and for the most part, did reasonable things. There was no fear in these men, and there was no reason behind their attack.

Another hour passed, and Izzy fought back a cold induced sleep that would kill her if she succumbed. Movement two houses down from where Angie was brought Izzy out of her near slumber. Rick was back early from his hunt. Izzy flew back down the stairs, looped around the block as fast as she could, and retraced her steps back to their house. She slowed as she

approached the door, her mind no longer so confident that Rick was the one in the house. What if it was one of the men?

She peeped into a side window near the kitchen, and watched Rick walk over to the stove, and pour a cup of hot water into mug. Izzy raced up the stairs, never so glad to see this man.

“Rick!” her voice cracked with excitement and fear. “Rick! They got Angie!” She was out of breath, and the warmer air from the kitchen seemed heavy and caught in her throat.

“What?” His gruff voice rattled the windows. “Fuck!” He pulled the .45 from the holster on his belt. “Where?”

“Two houses down. Three of them. We were out getting supplies, and...”

Rick growled and pushed her out of his way. She stumbled to the kitchen floor, and skidded to a stop next to the sink. Her eyes glared at him briefly, but he was already gone, and out the door. She sat in stunned silence, and choked down a sob. She rarely cried anymore -- not that she had been a big crier before her mother and father had died -- but the last few months had burned the tears out of her. Angie cried more, and often when there was little going on, or when things actually seemed better. She had cried a lot the first few days back in town.

Izzy stood, wiped the dust off her coat, and for the first time, noticed the dead deer lying on the kitchen table. It was small -- a doe no more than eighty pounds and probably too small to survive the whole winter. It was skinny, and she could count the ribs from across the room. In the old days, no hunter would have wasted the powder on it. Today, it was a feast -- days, if not weeks, of eating well. Izzy reached out to touch its side, a memory of her first kill not so long

ago pulled back into her memory. That had been a big day for her, and a big day for the three of them. Everything had changed that day, and not for the better, despite the full pot at dinner.

Her hand rested lightly on the side of deer. The animal was cold – not quite frozen, but the kind of cold that seeps into something that had been alive and breathing just a few hours before. The world got very quiet, and for a moment, the floor floated away from her, and the tiny kitchen became bigger, as if the walls had flown outward. She could see the deer, and it felt warmer, more alive, like it might spring up and run away. The faintest beat of the heart nudged her fingertips. Izzy tried to pull her hand back, but it was stuck to animal. The doe's head came up, and it looked at her. Its eyes rolled forward in its head, until the whites disappeared and the orbs were almost their normal brown and black, mingled with specs of red. Izzy's breath caught in her throat, and though she was sure she was imagining the whole thing, fear threatened to take over her bodily functions. The pupils on the deer's eyes widened, the nostrils flared, and from somewhere deep in its chest, words escaped from its mouth.

“Run, Izzy. Run now.”

Izzy's hand leapt back from the deer, and the spell was broken. The deer lay there as before, still cold, and still dead. But the words were clear in her mind. *Run Izzy. Run now.*

The crash of Rick's .45 made her jump, and made the pictures on the wall rattle as the sound reverberated through the neighborhood. Three shots, then a fourth a few seconds later shattered the quiet of the frozen world. Her first instincts were to duck, to flee. Her next was to grab what she could – a large bread knife from the butcher's block was the first thing her fingers found on the counter. She almost laughed when she saw it. No sharper than a butter knife, and as flimsy

as cardboard, it was no tool for self-defense. She dropped it back to the counter, and pulled another knife out of the block, this one a steak knife, with ripples of serrations. The tang of steel that ran through the wooden grip was like a vein of ice, and she adjusted her grip to prevent her fingers from touching any of it.

The window over the kitchen sink provided a partial view of the backyard and west to the neighbor's yard, where the shots had originated. Her eyes darted back and forth across the thin snow. The wind had blown most of the powder into drifts around clusters of trees and shrubs, but much of the ground had been scalloped by the same winds that had driven them back into town from the bush. Brown grass showed through the thin crust of snow, and fluttered in the gusty wind.

Another shot and Izzy ducked again, the grip on her knife tighter still. Her eyes darted back to the deer. *Run, Izzy. Run now.* She hunched low and moved back towards the door. Her fingers latched onto the handle, but she hesitated for a moment. She could run. There were other houses in town to hide in -- plenty of them. But she would be alone. No Angie. No Rick. Angie was... hurt? Dead? The saliva vanished from Izzy's mouth. But what about Rick? He had saved them how many times? But Rick was... different now. Had been different, ever since the day she shot that deer. Maybe before that, but Izzy had first noticed it that day. And Angie had changed too after that day. She was colder. More protective, if that was possible. But colder, and more direct.

*Run, Izzy. Run now.*

She pressed the handle down on the latch, but it was ripped from her grasp. The knife in her other hand fell to the floor as she tumbled out onto the patio slab. A rough hand grabbed the back of her new coat, and lifted her up before she finished falling. Small pops sounded as stitches in the fabric of the coat tore and broke under the strain. Her arms came up to her face to protect herself.

“Get your stuff.” Rick tossed her back inside as easily as one might throw a bag of packing foam. “We’re leaving.”

Izzy scrambled to her feet. Six months ago, she would have protested at the rough treatment. Today, she kept her mouth closed and adjusted the look on her face. She’d seen this version of Rick before, once. And he was not a man to accept lip from anyone when he was this man. She waited a moment before moving or opening her mouth.

“Where’s Angie?”

“Dead.” He left the room before she could ask anything else. He returned a minute later, his backpack in hand. It was always ready to go with essentials, but he searched the kitchen and found a few more things to stuff into it.

“I said get your stuff. Now. Or I’ll leave without you.”

“I need to see my sister.” Her mouth hung open. Her weather-cracked lower lip quivered, and she began to sink to the floor.

For a moment, the anger on Rick's face subsided, and there was a brief glimmer of pity.

"No. you don't want to see her like that." He grabbed Izzy before she fully collapsed to the floor and brushed his hand over her blonde hair.

"Get your stuff. We're going back into the bush. It's not safe here." He gave her a gentle push towards the room where her pack was kept. She protested a bit more, and began to tear up.

"And don't cry. Tears are a waste of energy."

## Chapter 2

Jake Clarke stood at the end of the weathered dock, and gazed out over the lake he had called home for the past fifteen months. It was time to go. 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.