

Prologue

As Tom watched the moonlight reflect off the ice-covered lake, he had a reflection of his own: the world really needed more snow.

Sure, people paid lip service to the threat of global warming, tsking and tutting and pointing at the glaciers receding right over in Kenai Fjords. But in their hearts, they weren't convinced that a warmer climate was such a bad thing, especially at this time of year, late March, with harsh months of Alaskan winter behind them, and weeks more to go.

But Tom liked snow. God's Ajax, he called it. Divine cleansing powder. When spring thaw came, this lake and field would be one big swamp, nothing but mud and mosquitoes and the decaying corpses of every beast that hadn't survived the winter. For these few months, though, it was as pristine a wilderness as any poet might imagine.

A field of unbroken white glittered under a half-moon. The air was so crisp it was like sucking breath mints, and the night so silent Tom could hear mice tunneling under the drifts and the howling of wolves ten miles off.

Tom liked wolves even more than he liked snow. Beautiful, proud creatures. Perfect hunters, gliding through the night, silent as ghosts.

The first animal he'd ever trapped had been a wolf cub. He still remembered it, lying in a halo of blood on the newly fallen snow, lips drawn back in a final snarl of defiance, its leg half-chewed off as it had tried to escape. Even as a boy, Tom had respected that defiance, that will to survive. When his dad had said the pelt was too damaged to sell, Tom had asked his mother to make him mitts out of it.

He still had those mitts. He'd planned to pass them on to his son but . . . well, forty-six wasn't too old yet, but there just weren't enough women to go around up here. Anchorage wasn't as bad as Fairbanks, but when you were a trapper with an eighth-grade education, living in a cabin thirty miles from town, you'd better look like Brad Pitt if you hoped to get yourself a wife.

Another wolf pack's song joined the first, and as Tom listened, he wondered whether one of those was *his* pack, the one that used to run in this field. For twenty years, he'd been able to count on pelts from them. Not many—he didn't trap wolves anymore, only shot them, being careful to target the old and sick, like a proper scavenger should.

He'd hear them when he came to empty his traps, their howls so close he'd grip his rifle a little tighter. They never bothered him, though—just let him go about his business.

He'd see their tracks, crisscrossing through the snow, and he'd find their kills picked clean to the last bone. Now and then, he'd even catch a glimpse of them, silently slipping through the trees. Once, on a winter's night just like this, he'd watched them playing out on the ice, even the old ones tumbling and sliding like puppies.

But then, a few months back they'd left this little valley.

Now, those distant wolf howls stopped, and when they did, Tom realized how quiet it was. Unnaturally quiet. Folks talked about the silence of the Alaskan wilderness, yet anyone who

spent any time there knew it was anything but silent, with the constant rush of wind and running water, the scampering of feet over and under the snow, the call of predators and the cries of prey. Right now, though, Tom could swear even the wind had stopped.

And if you've been out here long enough, you know this too—that true silence means only one thing: trouble.

Tom lowered his pack to the ground and lifted his rifle, gripping it with both hands like a Samurai with his sword. Not that Tom fooled himself into thinking a gun made him a warrior. Out here he was just another predator, and a pitiful one at that.

When a shadow rippled between the trees, he held perfectly still and tracked it by pivoting slowly, his rifle rising a few more inches.

The two worst mistakes you could make in the forest were complacency and panic. As hard as he looked, though, he caught only a glimpse of a big shape, hunched onto all fours. Then it was gone.

A bear? They rarely bothered with humans outside of cub season. And when they took off, they made a helluva racket, especially when they just came out of hibernation. Tom hadn't heard a thing.

The hair on his neck rose as old stories and legends crept through his mind. There were parts of this forest you couldn't pay some of the Inuit elders to hunt in. This was Ijiraat territory, they'd say, the hunting grounds of shape-shifters who took the form of wolf and bear, and protected their land against all comers. Tales for children, Tom told himself. Old men trying to frighten the young.

He took a step, his boots crunching in the snow. A shape moved in the trees, closer now and Tom brought his rifle all the way to his shoulder, gloved finger to the trigger.

Clouds slid over the moon and the forest went black. A twig cracked to his left and Tom swore he felt hot breath on the back of his neck. When he spun, nothing was there.

He took one hand off of the rifle and fumbled in his pocket for the flashlight. It caught in the folds and when he wrenched, it flew out and sailed into the surrounding darkness.

The brush crackled to his right now. He spun again, finger still on the trigger, and this time he saw a faint shape. He was about to fire when he thought of Danny Royce. Another trapper, Danny had been spooked by shadows in this same valley just last summer and he'd fired his gun, only to find that he'd shot some kid, a wild-haired teen, probably a hiker or camper. Danny had buried the body and no one ever found it, but Danny hadn't been the same since—not sleeping, drinking too much and talking too much, blabbing his story to Tom like a sinner at confession, swearing the boy's ghost was stalking him. Tom knew the only thing stalking Danny Royce was guilt, but still, the story kept him from pulling the trigger.

The shape had vanished. Tom held his breath, scanning the woods for any change in the shadows. Then he saw it, at least twenty feet away now, a huge shape between two trees. The cloud cover thinned enough for the moon to glimmer through and he could see the shape too pale for a bear.

Tom hunkered down as slowly as he could, and with his free hand, began feeling around for the flashlight with his free hand. He allowed himself one glance at the ground and saw it there, dark against the snow. He scooped it up. His finger found the switch. The click sounded harsh against the silence. Nothing happened. He whacked the flashlight against his thigh and tried again. Nothing.

Something landed on his back, hitting him so hard that at first he thought he'd been shot. He lost his grip on the rifle. A blast of hot breath seared his neck, and a weight on his back pinned him to the snow.

As the thing on his back flipped him over, the flashlight flew from his hand, bounced off a tree and flicked on, just as fangs tore into his throat. Tom caught a glimpse of yellow fur and glittering blue eyes, and his last thought was *That's not one of my wolves.*