



Chapter I

Wolverine River, Alaska, 1920

Mabel had known there would be silence. That was the point, after all. No infants cooing or wailing. No neighbor children playfully hollering down the lane. No pad of small feet on wooden stairs worn smooth by generations, or clackety-clack of toys along the kitchen floor. All those sounds of her failure and regret would be left behind, and in their place there would be silence.

She had imagined that in the Alaska wilderness silence would be peaceful, like snow falling at night, air filled with promise but no sound, but that was not what she found. Instead, when she swept the plank floor, the broom bristles scritchd like some sharp-toothed shrew nibbling at her heart. When she washed the dishes, plates and bowls clattered as if they were breaking to pieces. The only sound not of her making was a sudden ‘caw, cawww’ from outside. Mabel wrung dishwater from a rag and looked out the kitchen window in time to see a raven flapping its way from one leafless birch tree to another. No children chasing each other through autumn leaves, calling each other’s names. Not even a solitary child on a swing.



There had been the one. A tiny thing, born still and silent. Ten years past, but even now she found herself returning to the birth to touch Jack's arm, stop him, reach out. She should have. She should have cupped the baby's head in the palm of her hand and snipped a few of its tiny hairs to keep in a locket at her throat. She should have looked into its small face and known if it was a boy or a girl, and then stood beside Jack as he buried it in the Pennsylvania winter ground. She should have marked its grave. She should have allowed herself that grief.

It was a child, after all, although it looked more like a fairy changeling. Pinched face, tiny jaw, ears that came to narrow points; that much she had seen and wept over because she knew she could have loved it still.



Mabel was too long at the window. The raven had since flown away above the treetops. The sun had slipped behind a mountain, and the light had fallen flat. The branches were bare, the grass yellowed gray. Not a single snowflake. It was as if everything fine and glittering had been ground from the world and swept away as dust.

November was here, and it frightened her because she knew what it brought – cold upon the valley like a coming death, glacial wind through the cracks between the cabin logs. But most of all, darkness. Darkness so complete even the pale-lit hours would be choked.

She entered last winter blind, not knowing what to expect in this new, hard land. Now she knew. By December, the sun would rise just before noon and skirt the mountaintops for a few hours of twilight before sinking again. Mabel would move in and out of sleep as she sat in a chair beside the woodstove. She would not pick up any of her favorite books; the pages would be

lifeless. She would not draw; what would there be to capture in her sketchbook? Dull skies, shadowy corners. It would become harder and harder to leave the warm bed each morning. She would stumble about in a walking sleep, scrape together meals and drape wet laundry around the cabin. Jack would struggle to keep the animals alive. The days would run together, winter's stranglehold tightening.

All her life she had believed in something more, in the mystery that shape-shifted at the edge of her senses. It was the flutter of moth wings on glass and the promise of river nymphs in the dappled creek beds. It was the smell of oak trees on the summer evening she fell in love, and the way dawn threw itself across the cow pond and turned the water to light.

Mabel could not remember the last time she caught such a flicker.

She gathered Jack's work shirts and sat down to mend. She tried not to look out the window. If only it would snow. Maybe that white would soften the bleak lines. Perhaps it could catch some bit of light and mirror it back into her eyes.

But all afternoon the clouds remained high and thin, the wind ripped dead leaves from the tree branches, and daylight guttered like a candle. Mabel thought of the terrible cold that would trap her alone in the cabin, and her breathing turned shallow and rapid. She stood to pace the floor. She silently repeated to herself, 'I cannot do this. I cannot do this.'

There were guns in the house, and she had thought of them before. The hunting rifle beside the bookshelf, the shotgun over the doorway, and a revolver that Jack kept in the top drawer of the bureau. She had never fired them, but that wasn't what kept her. It was the violence and unseemly gore of such an act, and the blame that would inevitably come in its wake. People would say she was weak in mind or spirit, or

Jack was a poor husband. And what of Jack? What shame and anger would he harbor?

The river, though – that was something different. Not a soul to blame, not even her own. It would be an unfortunate misstep. People would say, if only she had known the ice wouldn't hold her. If only she'd known its dangers.



Afternoon descended into dusk, and Mabel left the window to light an oil lamp on the table, as if she was going to prepare dinner and wait for Jack's return, as if this day would end like any other, but in her mind she was already following the trail through the woods to the Wolverine River. The lamp burned as she laced her leather boots, put her winter coat on over her housedress, and stepped outside. Her hands and head were bare to the wind.

As she strode through the naked trees, she was both exhilarated and numb, chilled by the clarity of her purpose. She did not think of what she left behind, but only of this moment in a sort of black-and-white precision. The hard clunk of her boot soles on the frozen ground. The icy breeze in her hair. Her expansive breaths. She was strangely powerful and sure.

She emerged from the forest and stood on the bank of the frozen river. It was calm except for the occasional gust of wind that ruffled her skirt against her wool stockings and swirled silt across the ice. Farther upstream, the glacier-fed valley stretched half a mile wide with gravel bars, driftwood, and braided shallow channels, but here the river ran narrow and deep. Mabel could see the shale cliff on the far side that fell off into black ice. Below, the water would be well over her head.

The cliff became her destination, though she expected to drown before she reached it. The ice was only an inch or two

thick, and even in the depths of winter no one would dare to cross at this treacherous point.

At first her boots caught on boulders, frozen in the sandy shore, but then she staggered down the steep bank and crossed a small rivulet where the ice was thin and brittle. She broke through every other step to hit dry sand beneath. Then she crossed a barren patch of gravel and hiked up her skirt to climb over a driftwood log, faded by the elements.

When she reached the river's main channel, where water still coursed down the valley, the ice was no longer brittle and white but instead black and pliant, as if it had only solidified the night before. She slid her boot soles onto the surface and nearly laughed at her own absurdity – to be careful not to slip even as she prayed to fall through.

She was several feet from safe ground when she allowed herself to stop and peer down between her boots. It was like walking on glass. She could see granite rocks beneath the moving, dark turquoise water. A yellow leaf floated by, and she imagined herself swept alongside it and briefly looking up through the remarkably clear ice. Before the water filled her lungs, would she be able to see the sky?

Here and there, bubbles as large as her hand were frozen in white circles, and in other places large cracks ran through. She wondered if the ice was weaker at those points, and if she should seek them out or avoid them. She set her shoulders, faced straight ahead, and walked without looking down.

When she crossed the heart of the channel, the cliff face was almost within arm's length, the water was a muffled roar, and the ice gave slightly beneath her. Against her will, she glanced down, and what she saw terrified her. No bubbles. No cracks. Only bottomless black, as if the night sky were under her boots. She shifted her weight to take another step toward the cliff, and

there was a crack, a deep, resonant pop like a massive Champagne bottle being uncorked. Mabel spread her feet wide and her knees trembled. She waited for the ice to give way, for her body to plunge into the river. Then there was another thud, a *whoompf*, and she was certain the ice slumped beneath her boots, but in millimeters, nearly imperceptible except for the awful sound.

She waited and breathed, and the water didn't come. The ice bore her. She slid her feet slowly, first one, then the other, again and again, a slow shuffle until she stood where ice met cliff. Never had she imagined she would be here, on the far side of the river. She put her bare palms to the cold shale, then the entire length of her body, until her forehead was pressed to it and she could smell the stone, ancient and damp.

Its cold began to seep into her, so she lowered her arms to her sides, turned from the cliff face, and began the journey back the way she had come. Her heart thudded in her throat. Her legs were unsteady. She wondered if now, as she made her way home, she would break through to her death.

As she neared solid ground, she wanted to run to it, but the ice was too slick beneath her boots, so she slid as if ice-skating and then stumbled up the bank. She gasped and coughed and nearly laughed, as if it had all been a lark, a mad dare. Then she bent with her hands on her thighs and tried to steady herself.

When she slowly straightened, the land was vast before her. The sun was setting down the river, casting a cold pink hue along the white-capped mountains that framed both sides of the valley. Upriver, the willow shrubs and gravel bars, the spruce forests and low-lying poplar stands, swelled to the mountains in a steely blue. No fields or fences, homes or roads; not a single living soul as far as she could see in any direction. Only wilderness.

It was beautiful, Mabel knew, but it was a beauty that ripped

you open and scoured you clean so that you were left helpless and exposed, if you lived at all. She turned her back to the river and walked home.



The lantern was still burning; the kitchen window glowed as she approached the cabin, and when she opened the door and stepped inside, warmth and flickering light overcame her. Everything was unfamiliar and golden. She had not expected to return here.

It seemed she was gone hours, but it was not yet six in the evening and Jack hadn't come in. She took off her coat and went to the woodstove, letting the heat sink painfully into her hands and feet. Once she could open and close her fingers, she took out pots and pans, marveling that she was fulfilling such a mundane task. She added wood to the stove, cooked dinner, and then sat straight-backed at the rough-hewn table with her hands folded in her lap. A few minutes later, Jack came through the door, stomped his boots and dusted straw from his wool coat.

Certain he would somehow know what she had survived, she watched and waited. He rinsed his hands in the basin, sat across from her and lowered his head.

'Bless this food, Lord,' he mumbled. 'Amen.'

She set a potato on each of their plates beside boiled carrots and red beans. Neither of them spoke. There was only the scraping of knives and forks against plates. She tried to eat, but could not force herself. Words lay like granite boulders in her lap and when at last she spoke, each one was heavy and burdensome and all she could manage.

'I went to the river today,' she said.

He did not lift his head. She waited for him to ask why she would do such a thing. Maybe then she could tell him.

Jack jabbed at the carrots with his fork, then swabbed the beans with a slice of bread. He gave no indication he had heard her.

‘It’s frozen all the way across to the cliffs,’ she said in a near whisper. Her eyes down, her breath shallow, she waited, but there was only Jack’s chewing, his fork at his plate.

Mabel looked up and saw his windburned hands and frayed cuffs, the crow’s feet that spread at the corners of his downturned eyes. She couldn’t remember the last time she had touched that skin, and the thought ached like loneliness in her chest. Then she spotted a few strands of silver in his reddish-brown beard. When had they appeared? So he, too, was graying. Each of them fading away without the other’s notice.

She pushed food here and there with her fork. She glanced at the lantern hanging from the ceiling and saw shards of light stream from it. She was crying. For a moment she sat and let the tears run down either side of her nose until they were at the corners of her mouth. Jack continued to eat, his head down. She stood and took her plate of food to the small kitchen counter. Turned away, she wiped her face with her apron.

‘That ice isn’t solid yet,’ Jack said from the table. ‘Best to stay off of it.’

Mabel swallowed, cleared her throat.

‘Yes. Of course,’ she said.

She busied herself at the counter until her eyes were clear, then returned to the table and spooned more carrots onto Jack’s plate.

‘How is the new field?’ she asked.

‘It’s coming.’ He forked potato into his mouth, then wiped it with the back of his hand.

‘I’ll get the rest of the trees cut and skidded in the next few days,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll burn some more of the stumps out.’

‘Would you like me to come and help? I could tend the stump fires for you.’

‘No. I’ll manage.’



That night in bed, she had a heightened awareness of him, of the scent of straw and spruce boughs in his hair and beard, the weight of him on the creaky bed, the sound of his slow, tired breaths. He lay on his side, turned away from her. She reached out, thinking to touch his shoulder, but instead lowered her arm and lay in the darkness staring at his back.

‘Do you think we’ll make it through winter?’ she asked.

He didn’t answer. Perhaps he was asleep. She rolled away and faced the log wall.

When he spoke, Mabel wondered if it was grogginess or emotion that made his voice gravelly.

‘We don’t have much choice, do we?’