

Part 1

I can't look away.

Her body is cold and stiff. She's wearing a black dress that she always wore on special occasions. Memories flood my mind, unwanted but unstoppable. The way she laughed, how our home felt full with her in it, the scent of her perfume that lingered even after she left a room. The scarlet roses on the kitchen windowsill are always fresh, always her.

Even in death, she is elegant. Peaceful.

A warm hand rests on my shoulder. Her father. His face is hard, unreadable- the face of a man who has seen too much, and learned to bury his grief deep.

"C'mon," he says, voice low, "Let her rest now,"

My eyes burn. I sniffle, rubbing at them with the sleeve of my jacket, then turn to follow him outside. The air is sharp, with a cold breeze. A crowd of people linger in the yard, offering condolences. I don't hear them. I don't acknowledge them. I keep walking until we reach the truck.

"Are you gonna be okay to drive?" he asks.

"Yeah,"

I move to shake his hand, but he pulls me into a hug instead. I don't stop him. My body trembles, my throat tightens, and when we step back, his eyes are red too.

"You're a good man," he says.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

I climb into the truck, gripping the steering wheel like it's the only thing tethering me to reality. I take a deep breath, letting it stretch through my chest. Then, I turn the key. The engine rolls, then roars, and I pull away from the house.

The road winds through the thick forest surrounding my hometown. The tires hum against the pavement, the occasional vehicle breaking the silence. The highway narrows into a single lane, cutting against the pavement, cutting through the trees like a scar.

I ease off the gas as I coast down a hill, passing over a small bridge where a creek runs below. At the other side, something moves.

A large brown shape lifts its head.

I slow the truck, eyes locking onto it- a bull moose, standing at the edge of the road. Its antlers are rough, jagged, red-streaked where the velvet has shed. It watches me, unmoving. The weight of its gaze follows me home.

When I get home, the air feels stale, the space hollowed out. I close the door behind me, letting my eyes drift over the quiet rooms. The color seems muted, drained. The only thing still full of life are the small roses on the kitchen windowsill. The last thing she cared for.

I grab the watering can and pour just enough to moisten the soil. My fingers graze over the soft petals.

I sigh.

The fridge is empty, its content reduced to three eggs, some butter and a single slice of cheese. I make do, scrambling the eggs, toasting some bread. I eat in front of the TV, flipping through channels until I settle on a cartoon, bright and ridiculous. It doesn't make me laugh, but it distracts me for a little while.

I wake up to static.

The room is dark, the only light coming from the faint glow of the television. A stiffness sits in my neck from sleeping at an awkward angle. I shift, feeling the empty plate slide off my lap.

I blink, groggy, wiping away the dried drool on my cheek. My eyes flick to the clock on the wall.
2:53 AM.

I push myself off the couch with a heavy sigh, stretching my arms overhead. I gather the plate and fork, placing them on the counter. I'll deal with them tomorrow.

As I move to shut off the kitchen light, something catches my eye.

The roses.

They're wilting. Only slightly, but enough to notice. The petals droop, their edges curling inward, browning. That wasn't how they looked earlier.

I frown. Maybe I overwatered them. Maybe they're just dying.

I decide to deal with them later, flicking off the lights. Climbing into bed, I hesitate before lying down. The mattress feels too cold. The space beside me feels wrong. I roll onto my side, squeezing my eyes shut.

Sleep finds me quickly.

Knocking pulls me from my dreams.

It takes me a moment to process where I am. The morning light seeps through the gap in the curtains, flooding the room with warmth.

Another knock.

I throw on a shirt and stumble toward the door, rubbing at my eyes, "Coming!" I call.

I swing it open to find two familiar faces waiting on the other side.

"Hey, bro," Manny says, "How you holding up?"

"Hey, guys," I yawn, "I'm alright. What time is it?"

"Quarter past eleven," Jude says. He raises a brow, "You just getting up?"

I glance over at the clock and realize he's right. I slept longer than I meant to.

"Yeah..." I step aside, "Come in. Coffee?"

I set down three mugs on the tables, letting the warmth of the drink wake me up. The conversation is light, easy, until Manny shifts the topic.

"We were thinking," he says, "That you could use a break from... all this,"

I look at him.

"A change of scenery," Jude adds, "get away for a bit, clear your head,"

I already know where this is going.

"Camping," I say.

Jude nods, "Just a few days. The outpost. You know, the one I fixed up last summer,"

I stare into my coffee. I haven't left the house for anything but the funeral. Haven't wanted to. But sitting here in silence, I feel the weight of everything pressing in.

Maybe a break wouldn't be the worst thing.

"Maybe," I say.

Jude grins, "Don't think too hard about it,"

They stand, grabbing their coats.

"See you around," Manny says.

With my friends gone, the house is quiet again. I sip the last of my coffee, staring at the roses on the window sill. The petals seem duller, the edges curling in. I run my fingers over one of the stems

absentmindedly, and a sharp sting makes me wince. I pull my hand back. A red balloon beads up on my fingertip. I curse under my breath and press my thumb over the wound.

As I wash it off under the sink, a cold breeze creeps up my spine and I shiver. I glance over my shoulder to see the front door is cracked open. I could have sworn I closed it, but maybe the latch was frozen and didn't catch. I dry my hands and move to close the door. The air outside is brisk and fresh, it fills my lungs and sweeps the room. *Maybe I should get outside*, I recall my conversation with Manny and Jude. The house is too quiet and I can't sit here all day.

I pull on my boots, slip into a winter coat and head to the truck. The engine rumbles to life, fighting against the cold. I wait with my hands on the wheel, letting the heater push out the stale air.

When the engine is warm, I pull out of the driveway, the snow crunching under the tires. The sky is a washed-out shade of blue, the kind that makes winter feel endless. The trees blur past, tall and bare, stretching toward the sky like skeletal fingers.

The drive is uneventful. I stop at the grocery store, picking up the essentials- eggs, bread, coffee, and a few canned goods. I find myself lingering by the butcher longer than necessary, staring at the fresh cuts of meat without really seeing them. The cashier scans my items in silence, offering a polite nod as I pay.

On the way back I keep my eyes on the road, but my mind drifts. I pass the turnoff that leads to the cemetery. For a second, I consider stopping, but I keep driving.

Then, up ahead, the road bends. I know this curve too well. My knuckles turn white as I grip the wheel.

This is where it happened.

The guardrail is still dented, the impact twisted into the metal like a scar. Snow has piled up along the edges, softening the scene, but I see it clearly in my mind- the flashing lights, the shattered glass, the dark stain on the pavement before the snow covered it.

I force my gaze forward, my throat tightening. The truck keeps moving, carrying me past the place where my world ended.

By the time I get home, my body feels heavy, like I've been carrying something unseen. I put the groceries away, moving on autopilot. As I pass the kitchen window, I glance at the roses. They are becoming pale. My finger pulses at the sight.

Shaking my head, I pull off my coat and settle in, waiting for the silence to become normal again.

As the sun sinks below the trees, the shadows stretch long and thin across the snow, creeping like ink bleeds into fabric. The dim light filtering through the window casts jagged shapes on the wall, twisting as the wind stirs the naked branches outside. The house settles around me with faint creaks, the kind I used to ignore. Now, they feel loud.

I sit on the couch, half-watching the evening news, my hand resting on my knee, the sore spot on my finger throbs, a dull, irritating ache. I rub it subconsciously, but every touch sends a small stab up my arm. Annoyed, I bring it closer to my face. The skin around the prick is red and slightly swollen, a thin scab forming over the wound. It's just a scratch, nothing serious, but it refuses to stop aching.

With a sigh, I stand and head to the kitchen, flicking on the light. The roses sit glumly, their petals now curling inward like clenched fists. I frown. *They weren't this wilted earlier, were they?* Maybe I did overwater them. Maybe they were already dying, and I just hadn't noticed.

The kitchen faucet grinds as I turn it on, the pipes rattling before releasing a stream of cold water. I rinse my hand under it, watching the scab darken under the moisture. The sting fades for a moment, only to return as soon as I dry my hands.

I glance at the clock, nearly ten. The day is dragging. The quiet feels heavier at night, pressing in from all sides. I consider calling Manny or Jude, but what would I even say? That I feel restless? That the house feels too empty, even though I lived in it alone before? That my wife's favourite flowers are dying too fast?

I brush off the thought and return to the living room, flipping through channels until I find something mindless. A sitcom with a laugh track, the artificial joy grating against the silence. I try to focus, but my hand still stings. I run my thumb over the sore again, feeling the rough skin. Small, but persistent.

Eventually, exhaustion tugs at me. The clock reads midnight when I turn off the TV and stretch, rolling my shoulders to shake off the stiffness. The house groans again, the way old houses do.

I make my way down the hall, flicking off lights as I go. The bedroom is cold and as I slide under the blankets, I reach out instinctively to the other side of the bed. Empty. Cold.

I close my eyes and exhale, waiting for sleep to take me. But the last thing I'm aware of before drifting off is the pulsing ache in my fingertip.

Darkness stretches in every direction, thick and endless. At first, there is only silence. A void so deep it swallows every thought, every breath.

Then- a voice.

Soft, familiar, just a whisper.

"Come find me,"

I turn. There is nothing.

"Please,"

I take a step forward. My feet make no sound. The ground beneath me is not solid, not soft. *Just there.* I walk, though I don't feel the motion.

Shapes begin to take form, shadows stretching upward into thin, spindly trunks. A forest. Tall, skeletal pines rise around me, their blackened bark twisting into the sky. Snow coats the ground, untouched, smooth as glass.

But I am not cold.

I reach out, and the air is empty. I can't *feel* anything- not the wind, not the bite of winter, not the weight of my own body. It's like I don't exist here, not fully.

"Over here,"

Her voice again. Closer. A whisper through the trees.

I quicken my pace, stepping deeper into the forest. The pines are so tall they blot out the sky, their trunks packed so close together, closing me in. The snow beneath me should crunch, should sink under my weight, but it doesn't. I don't even leave footprints.

The air is still. No wind, no distant rustling. Just silence. And yet, the trees seem to shift when I'm not looking. The spaces between them stretch, narrow, rearrange. It's like the forest is breathing.

"Please, I need you,"

I freeze, and the hair on my neck stands on end. The voice is just ahead, beyond the tangled limbs of two ancient trees. The bark twists and splits as if something has clawed deep into them.

A shape flickers between the trunks. A figure. Just out of reach.

I move toward it, weaving through the trees, but every time I think I'm close, it slips away, swallowed by the shifting shadows.

The branches seem to stretch lower now, as if reaching for me. Some are stripped bare, their ends jagged, splintered like broken ribs. Others are draped in something dark and heavy, swaying gently without any wind.

I keep walking, following the voice. But the further I go, the thinner the trees become, until suddenly, they end.

I step into an open field, vast and white, stretching out forever. The ground is featureless, an unbroken sheet of snow beneath a sky so black it feels alive, pressing down, smothering. There are no stars, no moon, just a void overhead, shifting, consuming.

I stop.

A sound reaches me, distant but growing. A dull, rhythmic pounding. Like hooves on frozen earth.

My breath quickens.

I hear it again, closer this time.

Then- a shape, tearing through the darkness.

A massive figure, galloping out of the void, its eyes hollow pits of shadow. Antlers jagged and dripping with something dark, something wet. Its breath comes in heavy, rasping clouds, curling into the air like smoke.

"I NEED YOU!" The voice screams.

It's coming straight for me.

I try to move, but my legs won't obey. The moose barrels closer, faster, its hooves hammering the ground, its twisted form growing larger and larger until it fills my entire vision-

I wake with a sharp gasp, heart pounding against my ribs. The room is dark, the air still, but I feel like something was just *here*, lingering at the edges of my mind, watching.

I sit up, breath unsteady, running a hand through my hair. The ache in my finger flares, a sharp sting that makes me wince.

The house is unnervingly quiet. I peek through the hall and into the kitchen, the flowers are *dead*.

Part 2

The morning sun streams through the bedroom window, golden light spilling across the blankets. I blink against the brightness, feeling groggy and disoriented. My heart still beats a little too fast, a lingering rhythm from the dream that refuses to fade.

That damn dream.

I sit up, rubbing my hands over my face, the memory of it clings to me like a damp chill. The endless forest, the sound of her voice, the way the sky seemed to close in like a living thing. And the moose- charging from the darkness, its empty eyes locked onto me.

I exhale sharply, trying to shake it off. Just a dream. Just stress, exhaustion, grief- whatever. It doesn't *mean* anything.

I glance longingly at the roses on the window sill. The dry, fragile petals that just a few days ago were full of life. I frown but push the thought away.

I need to get out of here.

Reaching for my phone, I scroll through my contacts and tap Jude's number. It barely rings twice before he picks up.

“Yo, what’s up?”

“Hey, I’ve been thinking. About the trip,”

“Yeah?”

“I’m in,”

A pause, then a grin in his voice, “Hell yeah, man. That’s what I like to hear. Manny’s gonna be stoked,”

We set the plan. Leaving Friday morning, back by Tuesday. Just a few days away from everything- maybe enough time to clear my head.

I try not to think about how much I need it.

The truck hums beneath us as we wind down the snow-packed road, the snowmobiles hitched up behind us. Outside, the forest is a mix of white and dark green, the morning sun making the snow shimmer.

Jude is driving, humming along to some song on the radio. Manny is in the passenger seat, flipping through his phone. I sit in the back, staring out at the endless trees, my mind still clouded by the dream.

The moose.

Its eyes were empty. But more than that, there was *something* in them.

Something *watching* me.

It doesn’t make sense, and I shake the thought away.

“Man, I can’t wait to get out there,” Jude says, snapping me out of it, “Haven’t been to the outpost since fall. Gonna be nice to have the place to ourselves,”

“Yeah,” I murmur.

Manny glances back at me, “You good, bro?”

I force a nod, “Yeah, just thinking,”

Jude smirks, “Well, don’t think too hard. You might hurt yourself,”

I manage a chuckle, but my mind keeps drifting.

The drive to the boat launch takes a little over an hour. We unload the sleds, strap down the last of our gear, and double-check our supplies. The lake stretches out before us, frozen solid, a vast sheet of ice cutting through the landscape. Beyond it, the treeline rises, dark and endless.

Jude pulls on his gloves and grins, “Ready to go?”

I nod, tightening my helmet.

The engines roar to life, cutting through the silence. We take off across the ice, the sleds kicking up a flurry of powder behind us.

The trip is long, deep into the wilderness, far from any roads or towns. The trail winds through thick woods, over frozen creeks, across open stretches of snow-covered lakes. The cold bites at my skin, but I don’t feel it.

I just focus on the ride.

Hours pass. The sun drifts lower in the sky, casting long shadows through the trees. My hands are numb by the time the outpost finally comes into view, nestled against the edge of a frozen bay.

The cottage is in good shape, just as Jude said. A sturdy log cabin, its roof heavy with snow. No footprints. No disturbances. Just untouched wilderness.

We park the sleds and stretch out our stiff muscles.

Jude unlocks the door and a wave of cold, stale air greets us, "Home sweet home," he mutters, stepping inside.

Manny starts getting the fire going, stacking logs into the old woodstove. I drop my gear near the door, taking in the space. It's small but solid, with wood-panelled walls, a few bunks, a table and chairs. A couple of old hunting photos nailed up near the fireplace.

The fire crackles to life, warmth and the smell of wood smoke filling the room. I rub my hands together and try- *really* try- to relax.

But no matter how much I tell myself I'm fine, the image of the moose is still there.

Lurking.

Watching.

The fire crackles and pops in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the room. We've settled in for the night, each of us with a cold beer in hand. The cabin feels warm and alive now, the sound of laughter and conversation filling the space where silence had reigned. The heavy weight of the wilderness outside seems distant, muted by the laughter and the clink of bottles.

Jude digs through his bag and pulls out a deck of cards, "Alright, who's ready to lose?" he grins, shuffling the cards with expert hands.

Manny raises an eyebrow, taking a swig of beer, "I'll let you win tonight, just so you don't cry about it later," he teases.

We settle into a game of poker, the cards slapping against the wooden table. It's light, fun and nothing more than a distraction. The stakes are low- bragging rights, mostly. As the night drags on, we drink more and slip into comfortable banter. The outside world, the stress, the grief, all seem to fade away. For just a while, it almost feels normal again.

I don't mention the moose, or the nightmare. I don't think anyone notices the flicker of unease that passes through me whenever I hear the wind howl against the windows, or the sudden shift in the shadows when I catch myself zoning out. I don't want to admit it, but I still feel off.

However, the night passes uneventfully. We finish the beer, throw a few more logs on the fire, and settle into a deep quiet. Even the wind outside softens to a murmur. It's peaceful, the kind of peace I didn't know I could still feel. I lie on the couch, my legs stretched out, and finally close my eyes.

I wake up to the soft hum of the morning, the sun already pushing its way through the windows.

For a moment I forget. I forget the dark feeling that clung to me like a shadow in the night. The house. The roses. The dream. For a moment, it's just me, the warmth of the cabin and the faint smell of wood smoke in the air.

"G'morning, sleepyhead," Manny's voice cuts through the haze of sleep as he steps into the room, "We're heading to the lake for a bit of fishing. You coming?"

I stretch, feeling the stiffness in my body. The three of us suit up, pulling on our winter gear. The snow is brighter in the morning light, the sky a pale blue above us, stretching forever. We grab our supplies and make our way to the snowmobiles, the cold biting at exposed skin as we race across the frozen lake.

The ice is thick, the world quiet except for the hum of our engines and the crunch of snow beneath our sleds. It's beautiful, in a way, though the silence feels like it's pressing in on me, the vast emptiness around us somehow too loud.

We stop at a good spot, unload the equipment and set up. Manny immediately gets to work on drilling the holes while Jude sets up the rods. I stand off to the side for a moment, gazing out across the ice. It's just a white expanse, but for some unknown reason, it feels weird?

I'm telling myself off when a gust of wind hits my face-
And that's when I hear it.

A whisper. A faint voice, calling out from somewhere far off across the lake. It's too soft to be clear, and for a moment, I wonder if it's just the wind.

"Did you hear that?" I ask, turning to the others, my voice tight.

"Hear what?" Manny asks, not looking up from his work.

I pause, squinting across the endless white, "I swear... it was a voice," I mutter.

Jude looks at me, skeptical, "You're hearing things, man. There's nobody out here except us,"

I give my head a shake, "Yeah, maybe... never mind,"

But the noise lingers, soft and distant, just on the edge of hearing. It's not clear, but it's there, and I can't help but feel it pulling me.

"Alright, let's fish!" Jude says, slapping me on the back as he hands me a rod.

I try to focus on my task, but the thoughts keep going back to the sound. Was it just the wind? Or was it something else?

The sun continues to edge closer to the west, but the nagging sense of unease follows me. I just can't shake it. It feels like someone is watching, like someone is trying to get my attention from the treeline.

But the other guys don't seem to hear it. They don't notice anything wrong.

Maybe it's just me.

The air is still, punctuated only by the occasional groan of the ice beneath us and the faint whistle of the wind. The sun crawls westward, stretching shadows across the frozen lake. Every now and then, Manny lets out a triumphant curse, reeling in a fish with practiced ease. Jude follows suit, whooping as he lands his first of the day. I manage to catch a few, but my mind is far away.

The ice is thick, firm, an unyielding wall between us and the darkness beneath. But something about it unsettles me, the way it stretches out in every direction, vast and untouched.

"Not bad, boys," Jude grins, holding up a decent-sized fish, "Gonna eat good tonight,"

Manny nods in approval, setting another fish into the bucket beside him, "Yeah, think we got enough to call it a day soon,"

I glance up from my hole, my fingers stiff with cold, about to agree- when in the distance, beyond the treeline, the sky is shifting. The horizon, once a pale winter blue, is now a churning mass of gray. Ominous clouds stretch across the sky, swallowing the light as they march forward.

A strange hush settles over the lake. The wind dies down completely. Even the air seems heavier, stagnant.

"You guys see that?" I ask, my voice quiet, uncertain.

Jude follows my gaze and lets out a low whistle, "Damn... that storm came outta nowhere,"

Manny scowls, "We should pack up,"

No one argues. There's something unnatural about the way those clouds shift, the way the light dims so rapidly. We reel in our lines, gather the gear and start loading the sleds. As we work, the first snowflakes begin to fall- soft, delicate things that drift lazily to the ice.

Then the wind returns.

A sudden gust howls across the lake like a wolf, kicking up powder and sending an icy shiver down my spine. The sky darkens further, the stormfront rolling in faster now, as if something is pushing it forward. I don't like it. None of us do.

"Let's move!" Jude shouts over the wind.

We pull on our helmets and fire up the snowmobiles, the engines battling the wind to be the loudest. The ice beneath us vibrates faintly as we take off across the lake, racing against the storm. The wind tears at us, the snow growing heavier, blurring the world into a shifting mass of white and gray-

Manny's snowmobile suddenly revs like a jet engine.

"SHIT!"

I snap my head around just in time to see his sled lurch violently, its skis sinking in thick slush. His machine loses speed fast, wobbling as the front end dips. He tries to gun the throttle, but it's too late.

The ice is giving way beneath him.

I barely have time to register what I'm seeing before the crack expands outward, spiderwebbing across the surface. Water surges up, swallowing the front of his sled. In an instant, Manny is sinking.

"JUMP!" Jude yells.

Manny doesn't hesitate. He throws himself from the sled just as the machine disappears beneath the surface, vanishing into the frigid abyss. His body slams into the ice with a heavy thud, half of him still submerged in the freezing water.

"Hold on!" I swerve my sled around, sliding to a stop near the broken ice. Jude is already off his machine, running toward Manny.

He's struggling, his arms clawing at the slick surface, but the ice won't hold his weight. Every time he tries to pull himself up, more cracks splinter outward, the water dragging at him like grasping fingers.

"Grab my hand!" Jude shouts, dropping to his stomach and extending an arm.

Manny reaches, his soaked glove slipping against Jude's. He's shivering violently, his breath coming in harsh gasps. I lunge forward, grabbing on to Jude's jacket and anchoring him as he stretches further, "Got him!" Jude grits his teeth, his muscles straining.

With one last effort, we haul Manny out of the water, dragging him onto solid ice. He collapses onto his side, coughing and shuddering.. His face is pallid, his lips already tinged blue.

"We gotta go, NOW!" I say, my pulse hammering in my ears.

Jude helps Manny to his feet, but he can barely stand. His clothes are soaked through, ice forming at the edges of his jacket. Hypothermia is setting in fast.

I grab him, hauling him onto my sled behind me, "Hold on," I tell him, but he barely nods, his body weak against mine.

Jude guns his engine, and I do the same. The roar of the snowmobiles cuts through the storm as we race back toward the outpost.

The wind is relentless now, slamming into us, thick sheets of snow cutting visibility down to almost nothing. I lean forward, my grip tight on the handlebars, my heart pounding. I don't look back at the ice, at the crack that shouldn't have been there.

Something tells me, *we shouldn't have been there.*

By the time we reach the cabin, Manny is barely conscious. His skin is ashen, breathing is shallow. We drag him inside, slamming the door against the howling wind. Jude rushes to get the fire going while I strip off Manny's soaked jacket, wrapping him up in blankets.

The fire crackles to life, filling the cabin with much-needed warmth. The storm rages outside, the wind wailing like a wounded animal.

Manny shivers violently, his teeth chattering, but his eyes flutter open.

"You're alright," I tell him, though I don't know if that's true.

Jude kneels beside him, shaking his head, "Too close, bro, almost had me goin' in after you,"

Manny tries to laugh, but it comes out weak, breathless, “No... kidding...”

The wind screams against the walls. I glance toward the window, my reflection staring back at me. But behind it, beyond the glass, is a flicker.

Something is watching from between the trees.

I tear my gaze away, clenching my jaw, *just an animal*.

We’re safe. We made it back. That’s all that matters.

But my gut tells me something isn’t right.

And I don’t think the storm is the only thing out there.

The world is cold.

It’s the first thing I feel as it seeps into my skin, burrowing deep into my bones. A biting, real sensation that wasn’t there the first time. The snow is solid beneath my boots now, not that empty, weightless void from before. When I breathe, I can see it- a thin wisp of white curling into the air.

But the silence is the same.

I know this place.

The trees loom around me again, stretching impossibly high, shifting at the edges of my vision like they’re watching, listening. I turn in slow circles, scanning the darkness between the trunks. This time, the fear isn’t as immediate. My thoughts aren’t as tangled.

Because I hear her.

Soft. Distant. A whisper in the still air.

“*Come find me,*”

My throat tightens. I swallow, then wet my lips.

“... Isla?”

The name leaves me before I can stop it, fragile and raw.

The forest shifts. The trees stretch taller, closing in, but the voice remains.

Calling. Leading.

I start walking. My steps crunch in the snow and it’s so stark against the silence it makes my ears ring. I don’t know where I’m going, but I know I have to keep moving. The path is unfamiliar, but the pull in my chest is the same.

Shapes flicker between the trunks. I catch glimpses of something moving just ahead, slipping through the gaps in the trees. It’s fast, too quick for my eyes to track, but I *know* it’s there. It never strays far, just out of reach, just beyond the veil of shadows.

A figure.

Dancing between the trees.

Leading me.

I push forward, calling her name again, louder this time. My breath is visible, the air thick with cold. The trees are thinning. I can see beyond them now, the dark sky opening up, the color leeching from the world as the forest gives way to a field.

Just like before, it stretches endlessly in all directions, untouched snow beneath a sky so black it looks like a wound in the world. The horizon doesn’t exist. There is only black and white, and the thing standing between them.

The moose.

It's here again, only this time, it's still as stone. Its massive head is tilted back, as if drinking from the sky. Thick, wet strands hang from its antlers, trailing down in sluggish ribbons, dripping onto the snow. The same dark, pulsing material.

But this time, I hear *it*.

Not the wind. Not the cracking of trees.

The voice.

Isla's voice.

Coming from *its mouth*.

I freeze. The moose doesn't see me. Not yet. Its breath leaves in slow, heavy clouds, curling into the air as it calls out, whispering in her voice.

"*Come to me,*"

My stomach twists. My hands shake. I don't want to move. I don't want to step out into that field. But I do.

The moment my boot touches the open snow, the voice stops.

The moose lowers its head. The hollow, empty eyes find mine.

A bolt of ice shoots through me. It's the same as before- that feeling, that unnatural weight pressing against my chest, like something looking through me, like something behind those black, depthless pits isn't just watching, but knowing.

We stare at each other. The only sound is my own breath, uneven and shallow. The moose is massive, the biggest I've ever seen, its shadow stretching long across the snow.

Then, it speaks again.

"*Come to me,*"

The voice is softer now, coaxing. I can see the way it's breath fogs when it speaks, steam curling from its mouth like smoke.

I swallow hard, taking a slow, cautious step forward. Then another.

The moose doesn't move.

I call out, barely above a whisper, "Isla...?"

It reacts.

The moose turns to face me completely, lowering its head again, exhaling sharply. A burst of white from its nostrils. Then, it steps forward.

I stiffen. My pulse hammers in my ears. I don't know if it's going to charge again, if its waiting for something, if it is *her* or just wearing her voice like a mask.

It keeps coming. Slow. Deliberate.

Its antlers drip. Its matted fur is thick and dark, coated in something slick, something rotten. The smell hits me- not strong, but present. Faintly metallic.

I don't move.

The moose lowers its head further, leveling its gaze with mine, stopping just a few feet away. Close enough that I can see the wet glint in its empty sockets.

Then, in the softest whisper, in *her voice*, it speaks.

"*I need you,*"

I stop breathing.

Silence hangs between us, stretching thin. The moose doesn't blink, doesn't move, just watches.

Then, without warning, something bursts.

A wet, violent rip splits the air. Something hot and wrong splashes across the snow, steaming in the cold.

I stumble back. My breath catches in my throat. My stomach clenches.

The moose collapses.

Its body hits the ground in a massive, lifeless heap, entrails spilling across the pristine white, the dark fluid seeping outward in slow tendrils.

I recoil. The stink floods my lungs, bile rises in my throat. I scramble backward-

I wake up with a gasp.

The air in the cabin is thick and heavy. My skin is clammy, my shirt damp with sweat, yet the cold bites at my exposed arms. My breath comes in short, panicked bursts, and my heart slams against my ribs, trying to keep up with the fading nightmare.

The dream lingers, the field, the moose, the voice. Isla's voice.

I blink rapidly, trying to push it away, to convince myself it was just another dream. But the pull is still there. Stronger this time. Not just an echo in mind, but something tangible, pressing against my chest. Calling.

The Forest.

I sit up, rubbing my arms, trying to shake the unease crawling under my skin. The fire in the stove is barely embers now, the warmth fading. The storm outside still rages, the wind wailing through the trees.

A rustling sound from across the room pulls my focus. Manny.

I force myself to move, my legs stiff, my body sluggish. Jude is already awake, kneeling beside him.

"How's he doing?" My voice comes out hoarse.

Jude doesn't answer right away. His face is drawn tight, eyes shadowed. He looks like he hasn't slept, or if he did, it was anything but restful.

Manny's face is pale, his breath slow, shallow. His lips are tinged blue. The blankets we wrapped around him seem to do little against the deep cold that still grips his body.

Jude runs a hand down his face, exhaling through his nose, "He's bad, man. Fever's high. He keeps mumbling in his sleep,"

I crouch next to them, pressing the back of my hand to Manny's forehead. He's burning up. The kind of fever that chills a person from the inside out.

"We have to keep him warm," I mutter, voice tight, "Get more wood on the fire. He needs heat,"

Jude hesitates for a second, like he didn't hear me. Then he nods slowly and stands, moving toward the small pile of logs near the stove. I adjust Manny's blankets, tucking them tighter, trying to ignore the way his breathing sounds thinner than before.

I tell myself that he'll be okay. That he just needs time.

But the doubt is already creeping in.

And through it all, the pull toward the forest doesn't fade.

Hours pass. Manny doesn't get better, but he doesn't get worse. He stays on that knife's edge, drifting in and out of restless sleep, muttering words that don't make sense.

Jude and I keep checking the supplies, trying to ration what little food we have left. The storm is relentless, hammering the cabin, threatening to trap us here for good.

At some point, I step outside.

I tell myself it's just to clear my head, to get a breath of air that isn't heavy with sickness and wood smoke.

But I know it's more than that.

The second I step on to the porch, I'm wrapped up in freezing wind and the pull tightens around my chest.

The forest looms ahead, the trees dark, reaching. The wind is sharp, cutting against my skin, but I barely feel it. My breath mists in the air, curling toward the treeline like it belongs there.

I blink hard, dragging my gaze away.

Then I see it.

The blood.

It's smeared across the snow in front of the cabin- deep red, stark against the white.

No footprints. No signs of an animal. Just scattered drops, leading toward the trees.

My stomach clenches. The sight is too familiar.

The moose. The field. The dream.

A gust of wind kicks up the snow, sending a shiver through me.

I glance over my shoulder at the door, my mind already racing with excuses. Maybe it's from an animal we didn't hear. Maybe it's nothing.

But I know better.

Because when I look back at the trees, I swear something moves.

Just at the edge of my vision.

Watching. Waiting.

Part 3

The storm hasn't let up in days.

It howls outside, hammering against the cabin walls, rattling the windows. The world beyond the glass is nothing but white, an endless, shifting blue. The snowdrifts pile higher, swallowing the trees, making the outside world feel smaller.

Inside, the air is thick with smoke, with sweat, with something heavy and unseen.

The cabin is too quiet between gusts of wind.

Too tight.

The walls feel closer than before.

Jude is hunched over near the fire, arms wrapped around himself. The flames crackle against the silence, casting jagged shadows across the log walls. His breathing is slow, uneven.

I move toward him, about to speak-

Then I see it.

A scratch.

Deep red, jagged, stretching down his ribs like *claw marks*. The skin around it is angry, irritated, the edges darkening like it's festering overnight.

"Shit, man," I crouch beside him, "That looks bad,"

Jude blinks, *is he ignoring me?*

His eyes flicker to my face, then down to his side. His expression stays blank.

"Oh... yeah," he mutters, shifting slightly, "Just... must've done it in my sleep,"

I stare at him. Something is off.

"Does it hurt?"

Jude pauses. Too long.

Then shrugs, "Not really,"

I don't believe him.

The food isn't lasting.

We rationed everything, counted every can and every piece of bread. But no matter how much we eat, we're always hungry.

It sits in the gut like an emptiness that won't close. Even after eating, the hollow feeling lingers- a deep, gnawing ache.

Jude doesn't mention it, but I see the way his hands clench into fists when he finishes his meal. Like he's forcing himself to be full.

Manny eats the least. He barely eats at all...

Maybe that's why he's getting worse.

I step outside to clear my head.

The wind cuts through me, biting and sharp. Snow swirls across the porch in restless waves. The pull tightens as I step forward.

The forest.

It doesn't feel empty anymore. It almost feels... welcoming.

The trees move when I don't look at them. Just slightly. The spaces between them shift, stretching, closing.

Then I hear her.

"Come find me,"

My stomach twists. My breath fogs the air. The voice is gentle, almost teasing. A whisper carried on the wind.

I step forward.

I don't even realize I'm moving at first. My body acts on instinct, like I *need* to be there.

A hand on my shoulder.

I flinch. Jude.

He stands behind me, staring past me into the trees. His face is pale, unreadable.

"Thinking of going somewhere?" he asks.

I swallow, shaking it off, "Just getting some air,"

Jude doesn't blink.

Then, slowly, he smirks.

"Yeah," he murmurs, "Sure,"

I don't say anything. I just turn back toward the cabin, forcing my legs to move, to step away from the forest. The pull resists- like an unseen hand pressing against my spine, urging me forward.

But Jude's still watching me.

I can feel his eyes on the back of my neck as I step inside, shaking the cold from my skin. When I glance back, he's still standing in the doorway, looking out at the trees.

He doesn't follow me in right away.

The fire crackles, but it barely makes a dent against the creeping cold. The storm hasn't stopped. The wind batters the cabin, a relentless, howling thing, pressing against the walls like it wants to get in.

Jude sits by the fire, staring into the flames. He hasn't said much today.

Manny stirs weakly in his bunk, his breathing shallow, skin slick with sweat despite the frigid air. We're wrapping him in blankets, but it's not enough. Nothing is enough.

I watch Jude out of the corner of my eye. He's been zoning out more. I'll talk to him, and he won't respond right away. Sometimes he blinks too slowly, like he's waking up from somewhere far away.

His fingers twitch against his knee..

I think about the forest. About how it felt when I stepped outside.

It felt so safe.

I push the thought down.

Jude moves, shifting in his seat. I see it then, his sweater lifting just slightly, exposing the scratch. The skin around it is infected, veins spreading out from it like cracks in ice.

"That's not good," I say.

Jude looks at me like he forgot I was here. His eyes flick to his ribs, then back up.

"Oh," He shrugs, pulling his sweater down, "It's fine,"

"It doesn't *look* fine,"

He doesn't answer. He just stares at the fire.

The flames flicker in his pupils, the light stretching long across his face, making his features look hollow. He doesn't blink.

I shift, uneasy, "Jude,"

He snaps out of it. Blinks rapidly, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah," he mutters, "Tired,"

I nod, even though I don't believe. I decide to get some sleep.

I wake up in the dark.

A sound pulling me from sleep, a low murmur, slipping through the stillness.

I don't move at first. I just listen.

The fire is dying. The shadows stretch long across the walls. The embers pulse softly, casting the room in a dull, fading glow.

Jude is speaking.

I sit up slowly, my breath shallow. I don't understand the words he speaks, they slither together, unnatural, too many sounds at once. Not English-

I can see him, he's sitting on his bunk, facing the wall, his lips are moving, muttering softly.

"Jude?"

Silence.

Then, slowly, his head turns toward me. His face is in shadow, but his eyes-

His eyes catch the firelight.

His pupils are dilated and his lips twitch, curling into a slow, lazy smile.

Neither of us speak.

I can hear my pulse, a deep, thudding beat in my ears.

Then, finally, he closes his eyes and lays down.

I don't get any sleep.

Morning comes in a dull, grey haze. The storm still hasn't stopped. The hunger is getting worse, every meal feels smaller. No matter how much I eat, I feel empty. Hollow.

I glance at Manny. His breathing is ragged, he still hasn't woken up since last night.

We need to leave.

I look at Jude as I say it, waiting for a reaction.

"We should pack up today. Get out before we get buried in," I say.

He doesn't respond right away.

Then, he nods, "Yeah,"

That's it, no argument.

Something about the way he says it makes my stomach twist. I start gathering supplies, Jude moves slowly, like he doesn't want to leave. We haul the gear onto the porch, where the wind slams into us like a wall.

It's colder than before.

The cold isn't just a temperature anymore. It's something else. It seeps into my bones, digs in deep. I flex my fingers, trying to shake it off.

Jude stands behind me, watching.

I brush the snow off my sled and turn the key. The engine whines, sputtering weakly.

I try again.

Nothing.

Jude steps closer.

"They're frozen," he says. His voice is flat. Distant, "The cold probably drained the batteries,"

I clench my jaw, "We can fix it,"

But, even as I say it, I know we can't. The cold isn't normal. It's creeping into everything. The air, the fuel, our lungs. The wind shrieks.

We aren't getting out.

I swallow hard, turning back toward the cabin.

"We need to keep the fire going," I say, "We'll freeze without it,"

Jude just nods, his expression doesn't change.

When we load the fire, it burns hotter, but the heat doesn't last. We go through the wood too fast. No matter how much we burn, the warmth doesn't stay.

The cold is pressing in, suffocating. It soaks into the walls, the floor, our skin.

Jude sits too close to the fire. His hands are outstretched, fingers stiff. He doesn't move. He just stares into the flames.

Outside, the storm wails.

Inside, Jude tilts his head slightly and then, softly, he speaks.

"We're not getting out, are we?"

His voice is too calm. I keep my eyes on the fire without answering.

Jude lets out a slow, easy breath.

"There's no way out," he says.

I don't look at him, I just feed another log into the fire.

After an hour, or, roughly an hour, I stand up and declare that we will walk out of here.

The wind tears at my face, seeping through every layer of clothing. The snow is thick, dragging at my boots, pulling me down with every step. It's slow going, but we don't have a choice. The sleds are dead. The food is nearly gone. If we stay, we starve. I'd rather face the cold, even if it means freezing to death.

Jude trudges ahead, shoulders hunched, breath curling in the frozen air. I pull Manny behind me in the makeshift sleigh, his body limp beneath the blankets.

He hasn't spoken in hours.

Jude laughs suddenly- a sharp, broken sound, muffled by the storm.

I glance at him, "What's funny?"

Jude grins, teeth bared in the cold, "There's no way out," he says.

I ignore him. I *have* to.

We keep walking

The trees close in around us, skeletal and black against the white. The storm isn't letting up. The world is shrinking.

Jude snaps at me, voice sharp over the wind, "This is pointless. You know that, right?"

I grit my teeth, "Shut up and keep moving,"

He chuckles, shaking his head. He doesn't slow down, but he doesn't stop talking, either.

"You don't get it, do you?"

I don't answer. The cold is getting worse.

We walk for hours.

Or maybe just ten minutes.

Time means nothing out here. Just the wind, the snow, the endless white.

Then, through the haze, is a shape.

A building.

Relief floods through me- until my stomach drops.

It's the cabin.

We're back.

I stare at it, my pulse hammering.

"No," I mutter. I turn in a slow circle, looking for our tracks. They should be behind us, leading back to where we came from.

There's nothing.

The snow is untouched.

Jude lets out a long, breathy sigh and laughs.

I whip around, growling, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He smirks. Shrugs.

"Told you,"

We try again. This time I keep my eyes on the trees. I watch for anything that might give me a landmark. But as we walk, everything starts to look the same.

Jude starts humming under his breath. It makes my teeth grind.

"Would you stop that?" I snap.

He tilts his head, mock innocent, "What?"

"The humming. The talking. The- whatever the fuck this is,"

Jude just grins.

I hate that damn grin.

We keep going. Through the trees. Through the storm.

And then-

The cabin appears again. My stomach turns.

No... No...

This isn't possible.

I drop the sled and grab Jude by the front of his jacket, shoving.

"What did you do!?" My voice shakes, "How the fuck are we back here again?"

Jude just laughs softly.

I shove him harder, "Answer me!"

His smile falters. Just slightly.

His eyes are dark.

The fire in my gut fizzles out. I let go of him.

"We have to go inside," I say, my voice hollow, "We're freezing,"

Jude doesn't argue.

The fire is weak. The cabin is colder than before.

I pull Manny from the sled, dragging him to the bunk, tucking the blankets around him.

I shake his shoulder, gently.

"Hey," I whisper, "We're inside now. We'll get warm, okay?"

He doesn't react.

I stare at him. A sinking feeling claws at my stomach.

I press my fingers against his throat. *Wait.*

No pulse.

The air leaves my lungs.

Manny is dead.

Part 4

The ground is frozen solid, and it takes too much effort to dig any deeper. My hands are raw, fingers aching, but I keep shoveling snow over Manny's body. Jude stands beside me, silent.

We don't say a prayer.

We don't say anything.

There's nothing left to say.

The wind howls over the trees as we turn back toward the cabin, our footsteps erased within seconds.

Manny is gone, and the hunger remains.

I don't know how it happened so fast. We planned, we rationed, we should've had more. But now the cupboards are empty, the cans are gone and my stomach is a hollow, gnawing pit.

Jude sits by the fire, his face is unreadable, his hands resting against his knees.

His finger nails are black.

I stare too long before looking away. The cold is inside me now. Inside us both. I feel it settling beneath my skin, dragging me down... down... down...

Jude exhales slowly.

"We're out of options," he says.

I already know what's coming.

I shake my head, "Not a chance,"

Jude looks up, his face calm. Too calm.

"What else are we supposed to do?" he asks, "We'll die,"

I clench my jaw. The room is spinning, limbs heavy, my thoughts slow. The hunger is making it hard to think.

Jude watches closely.

I stand up, trying to shake the feeling off. I move to the door, open it slightly. The wind rushes past me, pulling at my clothes.

The trees sway, the forest whispers.

"Do it,"

The words slide through me, gentle, coaxing.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"You have to. You need to..."

I step back, slamming the door.

Jude raises an eyebrow, "Something wrong?"

I swallow the bile rising in my throat. *Manny wouldn't want this.* I shake my head and turn away.

"I'm going to sleep,"

The dream comes again.

But this time, the moose is nowhere to be seen. The trees are the same- black silhouettes against the endless white. The snow is solid beneath my feet, the sky a deep, swallowing void. My finger starts aching and I see a drop of blood fall from the infected prick.

And I am not alone.

Something is watching me.

A figure stands between the trees, too tall, too thin. It moves when I blink, shifting unnaturally, as if the space between each step doesn't exist.

Then I see it.

The antlers.

The moose's skull, its empty sockets' black holes, endless, stretching.

And when it speaks-

It's Isla's voice.

"Come to me,"

I stumble backward. My breath is thick in my throat.

The figure tilts its head, *"You're so hungry,"*

Its voice is soft now, comforting, *"You know what you have to do,"* I turn and run.

I hear it behind me, not footsteps, but a shifting, crawling sound, like something moving through the cracks in the world.

The trees twist, rearrange, stretch.

I can't escape.

The voice grows closer, *"Come back to me,"*

I trip.

The ground gives way beneath and I am falling and falling-

I wake up to a weird noise. *Slurping?*

Chewing.

A wet, sickening crunch.

My breath stops.
The smell... its familiar.
The moose carcass... the dream.
I sit up slowly, heart pounding, my hands shaking as I reach for the door. I push it open slightly.
The dim light of the fire flickers against the walls. Shadows dance, stretching long and twisted.
Jude is hunched over something.
Manny's body.
Flesh torn open, raw, blood smeared across the wooden floor. Jude's fingers are blackened, elongated, trembling. His breathing is ragged, unnatural. His shoulders rise and fall, a deep, wet sound tearing from his throat.
I can see his hands. The nails are longer. Sharper. His cheeks are sunken.
Like something else is wearing his skin.
I clamp a hand over my mouth.
Jude stops chewing.
The breath in my lungs freezes.
He is still for a moment, his body hunched over Manny's corpse, his hands twitching. The blood smeared across his mouth is dark and thick.
Then, slowly, he turns his head.
His eyes meet mine. They are deep, hollow, like looking into something that isn't human. His lips quiver, then pull into a grin- wide... disturbingly wide.
And in a harsh voice he says, "*She needs you,*"
The sound of it shatters something inside me. I stumble back. The door creaks under my grip and the sound betrays me.
Jude lunges.
I don't think. I just react.
I grab the first thing I can reach- a log from the firewood stack- and swing. It connects with Jude's shoulder. He barely flinches.
Then he moves. Faster than he should be able to.
I turn and run.
The wind hits me like a wall. The storm has swallowed everything. Snow drives into my face, whipping and sharp. I can't see.
I keep running.
Behind me- laughter.
High and sharp, a voice that slips between tones. Jude's voice, but not really. That is not Jude anymore.
He calls my name, but I don't look back.
I push forward. My lungs burn, my legs numb from the cold, but I don't stop.
I fall.
The snow shifts beneath me, sending me crashing forward. My hands dig into the ice, scrambling for traction-
Too late.
Cold hands wrap around my throat.
I gasp, my breath stolen, my vision tunneling.

Jude's face is above me, grinning. His pupils are swallowed by darkness, his nails digging into my skin.

I choke, thrashing, fighting, but he is so strong.

His mouth opens, and in a mix of his and Isla's voice, he screams, "*COME BACK TO ME*,"

Then-

A Gunshot.

Through the storm, silhouettes emerge. The crack of another shot splits the night.

Jude screams.

Not like a man. Not like anything *human*.

His body contorts, twisting unnaturally.

His eyes snap toward the figures, and for the first time-

I see fear.

He moves.

Not running, not walking- a flickering blur, a body folding into the storm and into the trees.

And he's gone.

The wind howls in his absence.

I collapse. My body is shaking violently, breath hitching in short ragged gasps. The shadows around me step forward.

A voice, rough and low, "He's alive,"

Then, everything goes black.

Part 5

The hospital is warm. The heat seeps into my skin, but never reaches my bones. The cold is still inside me, coiled deep, settled where it can't be touched.

I answer their questions.

Over and over, but they don't believe.

"No bodies were found,"

The words hit like a truck. The search team found nothing. No outpost, no cabin, no tracks, like it was never there.

Like *we* were never there.

"You were suffering from extreme hypothermia and starvation,"

They say I was hallucinating, that my mind was breaking down, that it is common in these conditions.

They say there was no one else.

I was alone... the whole time.

Just me, a half-frozen man found raving in the snow, lucky to be alive.

I try to argue, but how do you explain something like this? How do you tell people the truth when the truth sounds like madness? When you aren't even sure yourself? Because sometimes, I wonder. Maybe they're right. Maybe I imagined all of it.

The locals say nothing, but the way they watch me... they know.

Eventually I'm sent home, back to my empty house, back to the silence, back to the cold that never leaves.

It's quiet inside. The wind howls outside, pressing against the windows, rattling the walls. The blizzard has returned, thick and endless, swallowing the world beyond the glass.

But inside, the air is still.

I sit at the kitchen table, staring at the window sill.

They shouldn't be here.

Before I left, before everything, they were wilting, fragile, fading with her absence. But now-

Now they *bloom*.

Deep, rich red. The petals are full, soft, alive. Their scent fills the room, sweet and overpowering, cloying like a memory that won't let go.

My finger twitch. The hunger coils in my stomach, gnawing, insatiable. I am always cold. My hands are numb, the tips of my fingers blackening further.

The wind whispers, "*Come*,"

My breath catches, and my heart slows. I look toward the window.

And I see *it*.

It stands at the treeline, nearly invisible, its elongated body shifting between the trees, blending with the night. The moose's skull tilts slightly, the blackened sockets sucking in the dark.

Waiting.

I know I shouldn't move, but my body betrays me.

I stand, moving toward the door. My fingers brush the doorknob, and for one last moment, I hesitate.

Then, I step outside.

The instant my foot touches the snow, the world unravels.

My childhood home, the house I created a family in... gone.

The trees behind me, the driveway, the road- all erased.

I turn, but there is nothing left. The house never existed. The world is changing. A single scarlet rose sprouts through the snow, pushing its way to the surface and freeing itself in the cold air. Then another shoots up, and another, and within moments, hundreds and thousands of scarlet roses cover the snowy fields. They burst through the snow in waves, an endless field of deep red.

The trees seem to reverse their growth, the trunks shrinking, the branches curling inward then spiraling down into saplings, sprouts then seeds- then nothing at all.

There is only white.

Only roses.

Only the creature.

It does not move. It stands perfectly still. Waiting.

It's presence is no longer horrifying, but rather comforting. It is familiar.

I walk toward it, my feet sinking into the snow and roses. My limbs are weak, but my heart is steady. The air is heavy with its scent.

Her scent.

The creature's skull tilts down.

Watching.

A cold hand brushes against my own. Not bone nor claw. Something human.

I look into the empty void where her eyes should be.

My voice is soft, almost reverent, and I whisper, "Finally, I found you, my love,"

There is no more cold.
No more hunger.
No more time.
I exist in the space between.
In the scent of roses.
In the sound of whispering trees.
In the soft, distant echo of a voice I will always follow.
Far beyond, where the real world continues, a snowstorm fades.
The wind settles.
The sky clears.
The sun rises over an empty field.
No cabin.
No footprints.
Just a single, deep scarlet rose.
Blooming *alone* in the snow.