

WRANGLESTONE

DARREN CHARLTON

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LAKE WRANGLESTONE



1

Peter was born into a world of unwelcome visitors. And winter on Lake Wranglestone sure as hell was one of them. Just when the bears had started to leave for higher ground, those damned dark clouds came down off the mountains, carrying something far worse inside.

Peter drove his axe into the woodpile and looked out across the water. The lake, tucked in between the Great Glaciers to the north and the Shark Tooth mountains of the south, was among the most remote of all the refuges built for the nation's National Park Escape Program. A dozen little islands, all peaked with pine, dotted the deep blue eye of the forest.

His island, Skipping Mouse, on account of it being the smallest, was down one end. Eagle's Rest, where Cooper lived, was all the way up at the top. On a clear day, you could watch him skimming stones in nothing but his undershorts, but not this morning. Fingers of icy cloud

hung so low over the water that the islands disappeared inside them. Peter steadied himself on the grip of the axe. The lake took on a special eerie feel now that the year was dying, and the air was thick with log smoke and bull elks grunting. But there was something else.

A loon bird wailed like a wolf in the night.

A canoe broke through the mist.

A moment later, it came.

“No,” Peter whispered. “Not yet. Please go away. I’ll be real good, I promise.”

A single snowflake bobbed over Peter’s head and settled on the blade of the axe. He chewed the skin around his fingernail and the snowflake dissolved to nothing. But it wasn’t nothing. It just wasn’t. Soon more snow would be on its way. More than just the snow too. Soon *they* would come.

Peter swung round, furiously scanning the shoreline. Over on the mainland, yellow leaves shimmered down from silver branches like sunlight on water. The lake clapped the rocky shore. He sighed. At least there was no sign of the ice forming yet. Their clawing hands couldn’t get to the islands for now. But the big freeze was coming and it was coming fast, and no one was going to dig out their box of sleigh bells and Christmas stockings for First Fall. Not any more. Not ever.

Peter turned back. Above him, candlelight twinkled from inside the island’s piney chamber. They were safe

in their little timber tree house. The six wooden stilts that held it up there in among the pine cones and black squirrels were built to withstand a heavy knock, even a herd. That's what his dad had always promised him anyways. Not that it made much difference. Nothing stopped those stilts from looking as flimsy as matchsticks at this time of year. But then winter was the one season every Lake Lander feared. Not because Montana was about to get colder than a bald eagle's gaze, but because the Dead could make it across the lake's frozen waters.