Frozen Fears

# Chapter 1

Channing Durant lay in her bed, blanket pulled up to her ears, shivering. God, it was cold. She wasn’t sure if it was weakness from her morning sickness—she couldn’t remember how long it had been since she had kept a meal down—or just the fact that it was so damn cold outside. Regardless, she just couldn’t seem to get warm. She had kept all her clothes on tonight, not the flimsy cotton nightgown they’d given her, but still shivered.

Durant was on her back, staring at the ceiling. Not that she could see anything—it was too dark and the ceiling too high. The bit of light finding its way in through the small, draped windows lining the wall of the building seemed to dissolve like it had been sucked into some giant void. Still, she could hear the hum of the fans on the ceiling high above, a constant background noise that helped to diffuse the snoring of some of the other girls. The sound made her sleepy, along with her chills, but she fought to keep her eyes open. She needed to stay awake tonight.

The building where Durant lay was part of a compound of buildings. She wasn’t certain how long she had been staying in this building, possibly the whole time she had lived at the compound, but she couldn’t be sure, couldn’t remember. She had tried to go back to those early days at the compound, and bits and pieces had come to her, but she did not know if the memories were even real.

That was because of the drugs. The reason she had come in the first place, with Toni. Toni had set it all up.

Channing had met Toni the summer before when she had been taking summer classes at a small college in the town of Ballston, in Western Minnesota. She had signed up for them, anyway. It had been an excuse so that she wouldn’t have to spend the summer with her father and his new wife, who wanted to be Channing’s “buddy.” And they might have become buddies in another world—the woman was barely older than Channing and seemed nice, even liked some of the same music. She gave Channing wine when her dad wasn’t around, even though she was still underage.

So, Channing had stayed in Ballston, and on a trip to town had run into Toni. Actually, Toni had approached her, said she lived in this farm close to the school where everyone just kind of did their own thing and got free room and board just for doing a few chores each day. Nothing too hard—cleaning, gardening, sewing. Easy stuff. Then Toni had said something else that had caught Channing’s attention.

Durant liked her drugs. She had only used marijuana and cocaine in high school but had been introduced to other drugs, including meth, when she had gotten to college. By the time the summer of her freshman year had rolled around, she had developed a healthy taste for it, one that was expensive. She would con her rich father and even his stupid wife out of what she could to pay for the drugs, but they had discovered what she was doing and had cut her off. By the time she’d met Toni, Channing had been desperate.

Channing had asked Toni about drug use on the farm, and Toni had smiled. She’d said that was one of the best things about the place—the drugs were free.

It didn’t hurt that Channing found Toni attractive. She dressed funny, like a farmer, but there was a nice body under the T-shirt that she wore under her farmer jeans, and she had big, brown eyes and full lips. Durant had dated another girl for a short time in her freshman year, but the girl had left school. It had been her first relationship of any length with a woman and convinced her she would not waste her time on boys from that point forward.

Toni had spent a good deal of time visiting Channing at school; it didn’t hurt that Durant’s roommate spent most of her time in her boyfriend’s room. Despite encouragement from Toni, Channing balked at leaving school and moving to the farm, but then her funds had dried up.

The farm seemed like a utopia at first. Everyone was smiling and friendly, the food was good, the chores were easy and, just like Toni had said, the drugs were free. They were like something Channing had never experienced.

Sometimes, during the early days at the farm, Toni had just sort of drifted away, out of her life, but that had been okay, too. There were other girls who were as nice as Toni, and they all seemed to be as attractive. Then there was Presser.

Presser was unlike any man she had known. The words that came out of his mouth just seemed to be musical. Just the sound of his voice made her feel happy and warm, and everything he said made her feel cared for and loved. He had told her how much he loved her and how important she was to him, and when he made love to her, it had her begging for more. She would see him walking around the compound, sometimes with other girls, but he would just smile at her, and she would feel warm all over and know everything was fine.

Until a tampon in the bathroom made her think that something wasn’t fine.

She wasn’t sure how long it had been, but she was certain that her period should have happened long ago. At first, Channing thought she might have just forgotten about it, but the feeling that she had missed it wouldn’t pass, and so she began counting the days. It wasn’t easy. She would stop taking the drugs for a day or two, then the cravings would return, but she still managed to fold over the corner of a page of a book she had failed to read each day that she had no period. And soon, she knew.

The drugs at the farm were administered like medication—pills given each morning with breakfast. Channing would pretend to take them, sliding them into her pocket then dumping the pills when the opportunity presented itself, often when she was working in the garden.

Channing was a talented actress. She had been in drama in high school, one of the few classes that she had liked, and so she had faked being sober more than a few times when she had come home high.

Without the drugs, her attraction to Presser was gone. She was forced to fake her love-making with him, something she was sure he noticed as their time in bed became rough, Presser restraining her and beating her. Her stomach was often upset, too, forcing her to pretend she was eating.

At the same time, she had to hide the changes in her body. In the group shower, she tried to turn away from the others as much as possible, keeping covered with a towel. One girl had made a comment only a few weeks ago that Channing seemed like she was gaining some weight; Channing saying she was maybe eating too much. She tried to keep her shirt loose, wearing a flannel shirt over her T-shirt, even when it was a bit too warm. But now it was becoming impossible to hide.

And someone had noticed.

The woman in charge of her dorm had asked her if she was ill when she had caught Durant getting sick in the bathroom. The woman had helped Channing to bed, insisting she remove her flannel shirt because she looked flush and it was too warm for the shirt. Durant had complied, but her T-shirt had ridden up under the flannel shirt, and the woman had seen her belly. She had said nothing, but her eyes were enough to tell Channing that she knew. Then, a few days later, she was about to leave the dorm when she stopped at the sound of the woman’s voice just outside the door. And there was another voice, that of Presser, telling the woman he would take care of the problem.

Durant did not want to be taken care of by Presser. Other women in her dorm had been taken to Presser, usually in the evenings. The next morning, their beds would be made, their things gone.

A number of women, girls really, came and went from the farm each month. Most of them, she never got to know. She wasn’t sure why she had been allowed to stay there as long as she did, but she guessed it was because she had pleased Presser. The others rarely seemed to be there for more than a month, two at the most.

She had seen it happen. Always at night. A white van would roll in; sometimes one, sometimes two. She could tell when it was going to happen, because girls would be moved from her dorm to a smaller building the day before, and then she would never see them again. The vans would pull into the yard, and the women inside the van would file out, walking single file across the yard to another building, with Presser and another man shepherding them along. These women all seemed dazed, heads down, walking like zombies, eyes fixed on the ground. Then, not too long after, the women from the smaller building would step out. They seemed to be in much the same state as those who had just arrived.

Durant had watched it through a small window in her dorm. Sick one night, awake in her bed, lights had flashed through the window, and she had padded her way across the cold concrete to see what was happening. Women she knew disappearing, new girls showing up. Durant had continued to keep her day count in her book and marked a month between the exchanges she had witnessed.

Durant’s eyelids were heavy now. She needed to sleep, just a little sleep. Her head tipped to the side, and she caught herself, popping her eyes open wide. It had to almost be time.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, sitting up, finding the tennis shoes she had placed there with her feet, and sliding her feet inside. The shoes were thin and had holes, but they were all she had, so they would have to do.

She focused on the small window next to the exterior door. Channing had the bed closest to the door. It was strictly by chance, but it would be an advantage tonight.

There was light outside, even though it was now approaching midnight, provided by the yard light that shined every night.

Channing felt her eyes closing again, her head dropping. Jerking her head back up with a startled breath, she looked behind her to be sure she had woken none of the other women. Not that it mattered; they were all so drugged that they needed to be shaken in the morning to wake them, but she looked down the cavernous hall, anyway, for any sign of movement. Nothing.

Then the light coming through the window flashed across the wall on the opposite side of the hall, and she knew the van had arrived. There was another flash, and she knew tonight there were two.

Durant was up now, at the window, peering into the yard to her right. Presser was there, and his man, in front of the first van, talking to the driver. Then there was a door slamming, and the other driver walked up to the group. Channing watched, waiting.

She needed them to be busy with the exchange, busy so they wouldn’t notice someone exiting the dorm and moving around the edge of the yard.

Channing could feel the cold trying to seep through the glass and thought this was taking too long. Why did they continue to talk? She glanced behind her, but no one seemed to be moving. She turned back to the window, panicked to find the men gone. Where? She strained to see farther to her right, only to catch movement beside the front of the first van. The parade of women had begun.

Durant took the doorknob in her hand, cold to the touch, like a conduit to what lay outside, giving her a chill. She turned it slowly until it wouldn’t turn farther, then pulled the door open, just enough to poke her head around the frame. The men and the first group of women had just reached the building where the women would spend the night. Channing pulled the door open, stepped out, and then pulled it closed behind her. She took one more look toward the new arrivals then ran.

She had planned her route in the weeks before. There were two buildings in front of her and to her left, standing along the driveway that came into the farm. Her plan was to go behind the two buildings then down the driveway and out.

She made it around the first building. There was a trail through the snow along the side of it, closest to her, that people had used to walk to the back of it and dump water used in cleaning the dorms. There was also an overhang on the building, front and back, the ground underneath only receiving a slight coating of the snow that had been blown in.

Channing made it around the building, to the far back corner, then dashed across the opening between the two buildings. Unfortunately, the second building ran the opposite direction from the first and the snow had been piled high against the back. Durant lost one tennis shoe as she tried to lift her foot out of her first step in the knee-deep snow. She stopped, tried to pull her other leg out to turn around and get her shoe, when that one started to come off, as well.

“Shit,” came out as a whisper between her clenched teeth. Durant could feel her foot on top of her tennis shoe where she had first stepped. She bent over in the dark, moving her hand down the indentation next to her leg, finding her lost shoe with her fingers. She gripped it by the back, pulled it out from under her foot, and out of the snow.

Now what? She was losing valuable time. A high, chain-link fence with a spiked top encircled the farm, something she could not climb. Her only chance was to get through the gate, and the only time she knew they left it open for any length of time was when the white vans were unloading and loading. That wasn’t long. She needed to hurry.

Channing reached down beside her other leg, slipped her finger into the back of her shoe, and pulled it off and up out of the snow. Then she was running again. It was difficult. The snow was deep in spots, some of it crusted over, causing her to break through, nearly losing her balance as she carried a shoe in each hand.

Durant made it around the far side of the other building and now knew this part of her plan would have to change. She was bent over, struggling for breath. Her sickness and lack of food was taking a toll. She had planned to stay in the deeper snow along the driveway, in the shadows, but that wasn’t going to work.

She looked back toward the vans. They screened her from what the men were doing. She had no idea how much time she had lost going through the snow but knew her time was now short.

Channing stepped up on the plowed bank of the cleared area in front of the building then down to the plowed drive. She took one last look at the vans then ran.

Channing was out. She stopped where the driveway met the road and bent over, working at putting on her sneakers. Her feet ached like they never had before, her fingers did not seem to work as they should, and her toe, sticking out of her sock, was numb, but at last she got them on.

Now what? She could go down the road—someone might drive by and pick her up—but it was unlikely at this time of night out here. And she wasn’t sure which way the vans would drive.

There was a plowed field across the road. She had seen a farmer working it in the fall, tilling the ground. Now it was nothing more than a white landscape with dark shadows, but across the field, there were lights. Ballston. She could see the lights of the town through the snow coming down. If she could get to Ballston, she would be safe.

Channing took another quick look back, crossed the road, climbed the snowbank left by the plow, and then went down in the ditch. She fell down the slope, lying there for a moment, wanting to rest, when she heard an engine then saw the light sweeping over the snowbank. The vans, it had to be the vans. They couldn’t be looking for her yet. Durant lay in the new snow, unmoving, the noise of the vehicles and the light seeming to linger. Then the light moved across the field to the west, a second light doing the same. She listened to them drive away until all was quiet again.

Even then, even when she knew they were gone, she found it hard to stand. How could she be so out of shape? She had been a runner in high school. And now the cold was seeping in, coming for her, telling her to just rest, to stay a little longer.

Durant pushed herself up with her numb hands and started out across the field. It was a painful trip. The ground had frozen after it had been plowed, great chunks of earth sticking up at odd angles, hard as rock. The snow had filled in around the dirt, driven by the westerly winds that made a home in the area, hiding the hazards from anyone crossing the field. In the light, it would have been a struggle. In the night, it was an impossible journey.

Channing fell more times than she could count, almost thankful that her hands had frozen so she could not feel the damage being inflicted by the pointed and brittle ground, her knees cut and bleeding, too.

The lights seemed no nearer, and she lost sight of them one time, only to figure out she had been going in the wrong direction. Still, she continued on, crawling at the end, reaching the far edge of the field where it butted up to an old railroad bed, now used as a recreational trail. There, Durant stopped, looking up at the side of the trail as if she was facing a mountain.

The snow was coming down hard now, but she couldn’t feel it on her cheeks, her face frozen. She was thirsty and tried to scoop some up to put in her mouth, but her hands no longer seemed to work and her arms would not move. Rest. She needed to rest. Just for a moment.

Durant lay back and closed her eyes, and the snow began to cover her, a blanket too cold to help, but there was no energy left to fight the fatigue.

The last thing she was aware of was an approaching sound, something she had heard before in the night—the howling of wolves.