



He crawled on his stomach through the snowdrift and lifted his head over the edge of the riverbank, just enough to see the first few houses, charred black and dislodged from the wood blocks and tall steel pilings meant to hold them off the tundra's permafrost. Below the bank, the girl sat in a plastic orange toboggan, waiting. Her eyes stared back at him as white as the wisps of snow covering the thin river ice beneath her.

"They're all gone here, too?" she asked.

He stopped short of shaking his head and half slid down the hard frozen embankment, holding the rifle on his lap.

"I'm going to check it out," he replied. "Maybe stay for a few nights and rest. Let the ice firm up. Find shelter. Hopefully something to eat."

She pointed her brown fur mitten upstream. "The riverbank is not so steep a little ways up. You can pull me up there. By the school," she said, and then asked, "Are there any more tracks?"

He surveyed the light blanket of white covering the river, searching for the two strange snakelike lines he'd encountered at the river's edge three days earlier. "No," he said.

"Good," she said. "I don't like those tracks."

"Me either."

He reached down, wrapped the yellow rope around his waist and began pulling her up the river of ice. His feet were numb with cold. He slipped with each step, the fresh snow making the going slick and

dangerous. He knew better than to be walking on the river ice so early, but they had to keep travelling. They had to beat the colder weather on the way, and he didn't feel safe if they weren't moving.

"Do you see the graves yet?" she asked.

He did. High up on the river's bank a cluster of leaning and listing white wooden crosses poked out from the long straw-coloured grass that the snow hadn't completely covered.

"That's where you can pull me up," she whispered, "between the graveyard and the school." She turned her head away from the village, as if she could see the sweeping flat expanse of white nothing. "You know, I never liked coming to Kuigpak, for basketball games, or for anything, really. Even now, I don't like it."

The cut in the high dirt wall of riverbank was right where she said it would be. He strained to pull her up the embankment, imagining what life had once been for her, the sounds of a basketball game, sitting at the edge of the court with her legs crossed, her head following the hollow twang of a bouncing ball against the gym floor, a player dribbling, driving toward a hoop, silence as the ball floated up, the swish of the nylon netting against the leather, the small gym choked with cheering, with life. He wondered why, of all villages, this one she openly disliked.

"You smell that?" she asked.

He stopped halfway up the fifteen-foot-high bank. He crouched and turned back toward her. She lifted her chin; her small nostrils quivered and her milky eyes seemed to search the grey sky.

"Not like that evil smoke," she whispered. "This is just wood, drift-wood smoke. I think there's someone good here, John! Someone safe."

He pulled the rifle off his shoulder and bear-crawled, with the sled in tow, toward the top. Just before he reached the crest he dropped down and pressed his body into the hard frozen mud, the rifle in his right hand, the toboggan line in his left. Her weight, what little there was, tightened the thin rope wrapped around his glove.

"It's coming from over that way," she mouthed, pointing to her left.

He chambered a round while his eyes scanned the few remaining chimneys of the houses on the north side of the trail that cut the lifeless village in two. The carnage was the same as in the other villages. The shack houses had been burned or pilfered and what remained made little sense. Out of the broken window of one house dangled a large black television, its cord running up and into the darkness beyond the window frame, as if somehow holding on.

THE JOB INTERVIEW took all of twenty minutes, with the questions geared more toward whether they were serious about teaching in the middle of Nowhere, Alaska, than whether they were competent educators. Gary Brelin, the personnel director, a handsome, fit runner type in his late forties, looked the two of them over, tugged at his earlobe for a moment, and scanned their resumé's one final time.

"Impressive," he said. "Your reference letter from your mentor teacher nearly brought a tear to my eye, Anna. 'The kind of spirit all teachers should have.' For first-year teachers, you both have striking resumé's. You know, we get three types who apply to teach on the tundra. Teachers no one else will hire. Teachers looking for an adventure. And then those who are running from something. You running from something?"

"I'm in it for the adventure. John here? We figured Alaska was the only place anyone would hire someone as goofy looking as him," Anna joked.

Gary laughed. "Let me ask you, have you, as a couple, experienced anything like this, remote living, like Alaskan Bush life?" he asked.

"We've travelled abroad quite a bit," Anna replied. "And my husband likes to go on the cheap, so we know all about zero-star accommodations. We're open to adventure and cultural experiences. We're tired of the whole urban sprawl thing. Plus, this guy here isn't

a fan of confined places. The open tundra will be perfect for him. I think it's in his blood. He's already part Alaskan."

John shook his head at Anna's attempt at humour. She often tried to make light of his not knowing.

Gary took the bait. "I saw you marked 'other' on the application, but I'm not supposed to ask about those things, of course. You're Alaska Native?" he asked.

John shrugged. "I don't know, that's why I just check 'other.' My father was a product of the war, I think. My grandfather was stationed somewhere up here during the Japanese occupation of the Aleutians. He stayed here for a while afterwards, doing studies for the Atomic Energy Commission. I never met my grandmother."

Gary nodded, as if this was commonplace. "Probably not Amchitka. I wonder if you were a Project Chariot baby?" He turned to Anna. "Does he glow in the dark?"

"Project Chariot?" John asked.

"A genius government idea back in the fifties to detonate a nuke to create a deep-water port in Point Hope. We actually dumped radioactive waste there, just to see what the effects would be, and as you might expect, the Inupiaq villagers there have some of the highest rates of cancer in the country. Amchitka, well you'll have to research that for yourself. Let's just say that in the late sixties the government detonated three nukes in Alaska, one of which was the most powerful bomb the U.S. has ever detonated. You will appreciate, as a history teacher, John, that our state has quite a colourful record." He stood up and stretched, then walked to the window and looked out at the sweeping postcard view of the wall of mountains that buttressed the east side of Anchorage.

"You've got to understand something," he said. "We've had the most qualified of teachers refuse to get off the airplane when they arrived in their assigned villages. The place you'll be going will look as familiar as the moon to you. Flat. Barren. Not like this, I can tell

you that. The weather is usually brutal, and the housing situation, to be honest, is less than perfect. Pretty shitty, actually. The best part is you're going to be immersed within the Yup'ik culture. Really, it's one of the last places in America where children grow up speaking their Native tongue. Nicest people in the world, but like any indigenous population struggling to adapt to this world ..."

He turned back to them, sizing them up as if to pick teams for a dodge ball game in gym class.

"We've done quite a bit of research on the area," Anna said. "It fascinates us, really. The chance to live somewhere so exotic, in our own country—and help out some kids who really need it. We both love teaching. And he's excited to do some hunting and be outdoors twenty-four seven." She rolled her eyes. "That's in his blood too."

"If hunting is allowed. If not, that's fine," John added, not wanting to spoil the interview.

"Well, you're in luck, John. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta is home to one of the world's largest waterfowl refuges, and one of the last living subsistence cultures in North America—which, if you're a fan, equates to quite a bit of bird hunting and salmon fishing. So if you like fishing or plucking ducks, you'll be just a little north of heaven. Plus, you could be hunting so much you get sick of it. Last spring the National Guard unit in the area got a fifteen-month deployment to the Middle East. Over a thousand of the leaders and hunters in the villages are out in the desert somewhere. I suspect you'll be able to hunt for as many elders and hungry families as you want. Not a ton of game in the winter, though. The pickings can be pretty slim."

"And big game?" John asked.

Gary ran a hand through his hair and then stretched his lower back. "Big game hunting is another story. Moose and caribou take some serious travel, usually by boat or plane or snow machine—you guys probably call them snowmobiles. From most of our villages, you're looking at a hundred, maybe two hundred or more miles to reach big

game hunting. But sometimes a big herd of caribou can just show up, and let me tell you, that's a magical thing to witness."

"The guns are already being sent north," John said.

"Should you accept." Gary looked back toward the mountains.

Anna gasped. She turned and squeezed John's forearm.

"Let him finish, Anna. Forgive her, she's excited. We both are. We've been talking about moving to Alaska for years."

Gary laughed. "You'll have to understand that you probably won't have running water in your house or apartment, which means you'll have to use what we call a honey bucket, which is—"

"A bucket with a toilet seat. We read about those, the classic Alaskan toilet! We can live with that, Mr. Brelín."

"Gary, please," he said with a smile. "As I was saying, Anna, you'll need to realize that all of your food will have to be purchased here in Anchorage and then flown into the village. The stores in the villages, unfortunately, carry little more than junk food, really, so you'll want to plan out your meals. This will be a different winter for us with those troops gone. I suspect we'll be fine, but there will be some adjustments for villages and families, I'm sure. Speaking of government BS, there's a wheelbarrow full of paperwork, of course, but I'd like you to really discuss whether or not you can handle a nine-month commitment like this. Teaching in the Bush has put the best of marriages to the test."

Anna and John stood up and they both shook Gary's hand.

"Anna, John, it's been a pleasure talking to you, and I look forward to offering you a contract by the end of the day. Here's my number here at the hotel. I can pretty much guarantee this as a life-changing experience for you two. My wife and I started as teachers out there, with two young children. Raised them on the tundra. I can't imagine living anywhere else, really, but then again, this sort of life isn't for everyone. Thank God for that."

"Thanks, Mr. Brelín," Anna said.

“Anna, it’s Gary, please call me Gary. Last names don’t mean much in the Bush. Your students will call you Anna, just like they call the superintendent Billy. I’ll see you two this afternoon.”

ALONE, WITH ONLY the light of a candle for company, John tried to study a detailed topographic map book of Alaska he’d found in the library. The scale was too great, but he could at least see what he thought might be the best route if no one came to help. He didn’t want to believe there would be no relief, but if no one came he was going to try to walk out. He’d trek up the Kuskokwim River to McGrath, then across the Iditarod Trail toward Anchorage. A thousand-mile trip, at least.

His finger traced the route, following the wide river as it slowly narrowed, meandering hundreds of miles toward the little town of McGrath. He paused at Kalskag, noticing the Yukon River seemed to almost touch the Kuskokwim there. He was pondering the trip up that river, toward Fairbanks, when he heard the first shot.

He closed the book and held still, flat on his back. His pistol and rifle within reach.

Another shot. Then another. They sounded close. Then distant. He listened until his ears rang, waiting for the next. The shots continued through the night.

After a while he slept, and in his dream a pale, baby-faced man with piercing blue eyes and an evil smile, wearing a black cowboy hat, a long black oilskin duster, and black leather boots, roamed the village killing survivors. He carried two silver-plated six-shooters with pearl handles that glinted in the moonlight.