

# THE LONG WAY HOME

A composite image featuring a man in the foreground and a soldier in the background. The man in the foreground is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark jacket and a patterned scarf, looking slightly to the right. The soldier in the background is wearing a military helmet and a red jacket, holding a rifle. The background is a snowy, mountainous landscape under a blue sky with light clouds.

Sometimes  
the only way to survive  
is to surrender.

BY MORGAN DAWN  
& JUSTINE BENNETT

---

# THE LONG WAY HOME

A Vecchio/Fraser "Due South" Slash Novel

By Morgan Dawn  
&  
Justine Bennett

Cover by Laura Shapiro

Available From:  
K Resch

Copyright © February 2002 by K Resch for the authors and artist. This copyright is not intended to infringe upon nor conflict with other holders of copyrights. No reprints of any type are permitted without written permission from the publisher and authors/artist.

---

---

## **Dedication:**

Thanks to Shoshanna for her painstaking copyedits. Any mistakes are ours alone.

Thanks to Laura Shapiro for the cover art.

And thanks to K Resch for helping us keep the tradition of zines alive.

Feedback and all comments are welcome. Please send them to or by mail to the publisher  
K Resch at

---

# PART ONE –THE LAST GENERATION

*"Every generation thinks it has the answers, and every generation is humbled by nature."*

—Phillip Lubin

---

## Chapter 1: The Empty Road

*"Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,  
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,  
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands."*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

---

"Hey, Benny, you know what the best part of this whole wilderness experience is?"

"What, Ray?"

"Going home."

Ray, in the lead for this section of the trail, shifted his pack straps and took a deep breath. It was actually a lovely morning. The trail was reasonably level and dry, the mosquitoes had, thank God, thinned in number to mere occasional annoyances, and the air was still summer-warm. He imagined that he could actually smell the difference between the spruces and the firs among the green and spicy scents. Not that he could tell them apart. But something in the air seemed to have a direct connection to his sense of well-being. And if he felt this good, he could just imagine how Fraser must be feeling.

"Ray, you don't really mean that," came Fraser's voice from behind him, with only the slightest trace of reproach.

"Yes, I do. After six weeks out here, even your old neighborhood in Chicago is going to look luxurious. You know, it'll be like the feeling you get when you stop beating your head against a wall." Ray resisted the temptation to look back and see Fraser's reaction.

"I think it's been a very pleasant month already," Fraser said stoutly, as Ray knew he would. Fraser picked up the pace, forcing Ray to speed up in turn. They had been playing this form of tag all morning. Even without looking back, Ray could picture Fraser perfectly. The bright red flannel would be peeking out from under his open jacket. His tousled brown hair

and his well-browned face with its open look would present the image of a man perfectly content and at home.

Fraser nipped at his heels again. "Only you, Fraser," Ray announced to the empty path in front of him. "Only you would consider sleeping on rocks, communing with bugs, and eating stuff from unknown food groups as *pleasant*. Not to mention the joy of home construction in the middle of the howling wilderness. Other people go to gyms when they want a little healthy exercise, they don't travel three thousand miles to go and chop down trees to do it."

Ray swung under an overhanging snag, neatly gauging the space needed for his pack to clear. The trail had entered another washout and gone steep and stony underfoot. Ray slowed, rock-hopping down the polished granite boulders. He could hear Fraser behind him, negotiating the terrain with somewhat less noise and effort.

"It was your idea, Ray."

"It was my idea three, no, four years ago now. I didn't think it would become our life's work every summer. At this rate we'll still be rebuilding at the end of the next millennium."

"Well, if you really *prefer* to sleep outside we could always stop." Fraser's voice held just the right touch of patient long-suffering. "It probably won't snow quite so heavily this winter as last and most of the rafters aren't sagging too much. At least, not the ones we've stripped the shingles off. And I'm sure the out-house is still perfectly functional."

Ray smiled to himself, and then stomped deliberately through the boggy spot at the foot of the slope they had just descended, raising a cloud of late-season bugs. Diefenbaker, having decided that the two men were going to be at this for a while, trotted stiffly on ahead, carefully choosing the easiest path on the uneven ground.

"Inside, outside, when you're this far from civilization it hardly makes a difference where you sleep," Ray said, beginning to let himself exaggerate a little. "Your privacy can still be invaded at any moment by winged and four-footed wildlife. At least in Chicago the only kind of wildlife we have to worry about is out running around on the streets where it belongs. And when you want a meal you don't have to do the Daniel Boone routine with a bowie knife, you just hit the fast food joints; and when you want to go somewhere you can *drive*, instead of doing it the slow, scenic, and painful way on foot."

"I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't realize you were still so out of shape. Do you want to rest for a while?" There was a definite note of teasing glee in Fraser's voice. Ray mentally kicked himself for letting his rhetoric get away from him. Point to Fraser.

"No, no, not unless you do. I am anticipating that cup of coffee at the general store way too much to stop now. This time we're gonna get twice the usual coffee supply. I don't want to go through another week again of caffeine withdrawal."

"Well, you know, Ray, there are several shrubs in the forest here that make perfectly adequate coffee substitutes. The leaves of ephedra make a very stimulating tea and I believe the roots of the kinickinick, when dried, have a flavor similar to coffee, though I admit I've never tried it."

"Just keep it up, Fraser. You're making the big city look more appealing by the minute."

They walked along for a while in companionable silence. It had been a good idea to take such a long vacation this year, Ray thought. Total absence of anything remotely resembling police work, or undercover work, or consulate work; plenty of opportunities for complaining and teasing and being teased as they stretched their competencies in the chores of rebuilding; time to try to re-establish and re-

tune their friendship; time to get the world in proper perspective, before returning to the violence, speed, danger, and sordid tedium of their professional lives. Another couple of weeks of this, and Ray knew he might half regret leaving it behind for the real world.

As for what Fraser felt, well, that was a little harder. He was always happy to return home to the Yukon, but it was clear to Ray that that happiness was still darkened with yearning, and probably would be until the day came, if it ever did, when he was recalled home for duty. But Fraser's critics in the Territorial RCMP still blocked his return. Each success at the consulate made it only more certain that the only way his career could advance now was in administration. And that meant, if anything, another city, another desk job, and Fraser's slow, progressive transformation into just another desk-bound bureaucrat.

What a horrible vision.

But for the moment Fraser seemed happy as a clam. A particularly apt expression for him, Ray thought, stealing a glance over his shoulder, since Fraser was usually about as expressive as the average mollusk. But there was more eagerness in his eyes and freedom in his movements than he ever showed in Chicago. He could only imagine what Fraser could see and understand of the forest and mountains around them that Ray couldn't. Fraser caught his eye and quirked the corner of his mouth in what passed for him as a grin.

"I really think you're being a bit hard on the wildlife, Ray," he said, picking up the argument. "I don't think that chipmunk meant to bite you when you tried to feed it—"

"See, that's just what I mean." Ray didn't miss a beat. "Back home you wouldn't have chipmunks barging through the windows and panhandling in your kitchen. And remember the wolves howling that we heard last night?" Ray was glad Fraser couldn't see the growing glee on his face.

"Well Ray, you have to admit that's an experience that Chicago can't match."

"I wouldn't want it to. I don't need to go all the way to the armpit of the North to see nature red in tooth and claw. Don't you think that cranked-out junkies screaming abuse and shooting random Joes for twenty bucks for the next hit bear a striking resemblance to the

wild?"

"Not at all, Ray. You have a common misconception about the nature of wolves. They are not vicious, pointless killers, they are highly cooperative, intensely social animals, with a community structure that optimizes survival for the maximum number."

Ray made a vaguely skeptical sound, preoccupied by picking his way down a steep bouldery bit. Fraser, naturally, chose to take that for encouragement.

"The entire pack is organized around ensuring sufficient food for the breeding pair and their pups, the alpha pair, as they are called, and around minimizing social stress between the pack members, because the individual wolf cannot reliably survive in this harsh environment."

"Harsher than the streets of Chicago?"

"Much harsher. Only in a pack are they able to hunt and kill enough large prey to survive. And each wolf knows its place and function in the hierarchy. The alpha leads the hunt and gets first feeding at the kill; the beta mediates between the other wolves, almost like a policeman, if you will."

"A place for everyone and everyone in his place. Nature must abhor a democracy."

"Even the lowest rank, the omega wolf, is important. He is not only a scapegoat for aggression, protected against abuse by the beta wolf, but also serves the function of breaking societal barriers in encouraging the pack to play. You know play is one of the signs of an evolved species—"

Fraser was really warming to his subject, and showing all the signs of wandering off into other, even more tangential fields. Ray ruthlessly nipped him in the bud.

"Fraser, do I look like I care about the social lives of wolves?"

"Well, I don't know, Ray, as I can't see your expression..."

"Trust me, I do not look interested. The only wolf whose social life interests me is Diefenbaker, and that's because it coincides with mine, especially the lazing around and mooching jelly donuts part."

"Ah, but Diefenbaker is only part wolf. And five years in Chicago seem to have dulled his wolfish instincts somewhat. Still, I'm sure that he would know what to do if ever he

returned to the wild."

"Yeah, get some other dumb wolf to do all the work for him."

As if hearing his name, Diefenbaker turned around and trotted back, with a pathetically lolling tongue and a considerably more exaggerated limp than he'd displayed five minutes previously. Fraser got out a treat from his pocket and Dief snapped it up.

"I'm afraid so."

The wolf looked inquisitively at Ray, who made a show of keeping his hands well away from his pockets. Dief snuffled in disappointment and went back to ambling along beside the two men.

"He's moving a lot slower these days, isn't he?"

"Well, he's over ten years old. That's approaching old age for a wolf. And the fact that he's spent the last five years in Chicago hasn't helped his fitness at all."

"He's just disappointed that out here we have to get places the slow way on foot, instead of sitting in the back seat and letting me *drive*. And have I told you that I'll never forgive you for letting the Riv blow up that third time?"

"Yes, Ray. About five hundred and eighty-seven times, so far."

"Oh. Well, just so long as you're counting."

"Somebody has to," Fraser muttered, but Ray pretended not to hear.

Ray paused and glanced back at Fraser. The trail was ending and Ray was feeling generous, so he stepped aside to let Fraser pass.

The trail looped one last time, angling sharply down to the highway. Well, actually it was a road. Chicago had highways. Canada—well, southern Canada—had highways, if one wanted to be charitable. The Yukon had crumbling roads. Ray stepped roughly onto the pavement and grunted in irritation. His legs were tired and his thigh muscles sent tight complaints through his lower back. Not that he'd ever admit it.

Fraser was scanning up and down the road. "I wonder if we can find out what's happened to the road crew? They were supposed to have fixed that washout weeks ago." Fraser sighed. "I suppose I'll have to get Carey to drop a couple truckloads of gravel for me. Dad used to do it every other year."

Ray groaned theatrically. "And are they going to *spread* the gravel? No, of course not. That's for the idiots in the only cabin up the road, who have nothing better to do every summer than find more ways to do other people's work for them."

As they headed up the road Fraser commented, "Quiet, isn't it?" They had been walking for almost twenty minutes, and not a single car had gone by.

Ray sighed. "Never thought I'd say it, but it's kinda nice without the RVs barreling by. Even if it means we can't get a lift."

"Hmm. This time of year they're usually like a herd of starving caribou hurtling south."

"Well, I guess there's a road break somewhere. Must be why the road crew isn't working on ours."

"Probably."

Another few minutes passed while they walked side by side. Insects buzzed in the cotton grass that filled the drainage cuts with white fluff. "Okay, I can tell you're listening to something. What?"

"Nothing, Ray. Everything's just so—normal."

"Nothing wrong with normal. I'm all for normal. Normal is what civilization is all about."

This far north, even the midday sun slanted in the sky, glinting brightness off Fraser's dark hair, highlighting the worn denim and leather and flannel. Here in his native country, even grunge favored him, Ray thought, with more admiration than envy. "So, Fraser, why did your Dad build so far from the road? It'd make the resupply so much easier to be closer in. Not to mention cheaper."

Fraser's head turned slightly as he scanned the trees. His voice skipped backward, fading in and out between the sounds of Ray's boots kicking gravel. "Well, actually, the distance is quite right. Close enough for a one-day trip there. Far enough—"

"Far enough to forget the neighbors. Yeah, I know, Fraser. Only you'd think that twenty-five miles is a reasonable neighborly distance." Ray shifted the backpack as he adjusted to the leveling path. "And of course mountains just don't factor into this neighborly distance, do they?"

Fraser turned his head forward and Ray

pressed ahead to catch his reply. "These aren't mountains, Ray. They're just foothills to the Mackenzie range."

Ray grinned, keeping his mouth shut. He trod closer to Fraser, egging the pace along. He really needed that coffee.

He was glad to see the first buildings edge into view. Carey Klafter's Blue Heron Café was just a general store and eatery, but to Ray it had the allure of civilization. It even had a neon "Open" sign. And it sold the only coffee, gas, and propane for seventy miles.

The "town" scrunched next to the café, a few cabins and a small motel, and the open field across the road that was kept cleared for a landing strip. Someone had planted quick-growing summer vegetables among the fireweed where the gravel shoulder petered out. Ray stepped past a zucchini the size of a small car with amusement. Everything was big in the Yukon.

The empty road curved away from them toward the café, then back out again into the distance. Fraser crossed without pausing and Ray hurried to catch up. Fraser had kept moving, his shoulders bunching as he increased speed.

*What's his hurry?* Ray thought. The town was quiet, no one in sight. The sunlight, falling in the midday haze, softened the weathered wood and peeling paint of the storefront. The café's neon "Open" sign hung there in the window, dark and unlit. *Carey's going to be pissed it's not working. He just bought that thing. Said it'd draw truckers like bugs at night.*

Fraser clumped up the café steps quickly, pausing at the top. Ray stopped at the bottom, automatically scraping the mud off his boots, while Diefenbaker trotted back and forth along the frontage, nose to ground. Fraser stood on the porch, scanning the mountains behind them with a puzzled air. Diefenbaker, having found a scent of major interest, took off around the side.

Something wasn't right. Ray could feel it now, that cop's sense that the pieces were out of order. It pricked him between the shoulder blades and made him move a little quicker, lighter on his feet. He wished automatically for his gun, then tried to shake the feeling away. This was Canada, for God's sake.

"I don't see it, Fraser. Just more moun-

tains, same as last month."

"That's not it, Ray. It's something..." Fraser shook his head and turned abruptly into the café. Ray lurched forward, catching the screen door before it slammed.

The store was cool and dark, unusually dark. And quiet.

Ray stopped sharply, his inner voice flaring. Fraser's tense movements showed the same awareness. Ray watched Fraser's silent motion behind the counter.

Scanning right, then left. No lights. The cash register was dark. "Power outage," he breathed in discovery. Fraser nodded, still alert. "Probably all through town."

Fraser carefully eased out of his pack and leaned it against the wooden counter. Ray followed suit, shrugging his muscles loose and ready.

"Mr. Klafter?" Fraser called, leaning over the counter to get a view into the back rooms. After a moment, Fraser walked around behind the counter and called again through the door. Fraser turned and looked directly at Ray. His mouth was taut, his face floating palely above his flannel shirt. He looked almost ghostly in the dim silence. It really was quiet, even for such a small town.

Moving loudly, he stamped to the counter. Carey's latest toy was still sitting where Ray had left it after their last visit: a plastic outhouse with the words "Charity Piggy Bank." *Can't believe I let a man named Klafter fool me with this thing.* Ray fished out a penny from his jeans pocket and slid it into the piggy bank.

The outhouse exploded with a loud *crack!*, pieces scattering to reveal a butt-naked occupant caught mid-stream. Ray snickered and knelt to pick up a loose piece.

"Ray—" he heard Fraser whisper and glanced back over his shoulder. Carey Klafter stood shadowed in the doorway, the light spilling around him like a halo. Diefenbaker slunk around his feet and took up a watchful position in front of the counter. Fraser whispered to Dief and Ray focused more closely. Carey's shoes were covered with mud up to his ankles. Blinking, Ray rose to his feet. Actually, Carey was covered in mud. His face was blank, his eyes closed. He stood, rooted, his upper torso shaking, hands clutching a dirt-encrusted shovel. It banged against his right knee rhyth-

mically.

Ray's hand shot to his waist in a reflexive grab for the gun he did not carry. Keeping his hands low, he signaled over his left shoulder to Fraser with his chin.

Fraser nodded once. "Hello, Carey," he said softly. "We wanted to pick up a few supplies but were having some difficulty locating the red beans. Could you show them to us?"

The shovel kept banging rhythmically. Carey's bearded face was pale, his black hair matted. Ray felt his chest tighten. He inched closer on Carey's left. Fraser kept talking: "And Ray's been asking for more coffee. Do you still have that Nicaraguan blend?"

Carey's mouth finally moved, his voice paler than his face. "Couldn't wait to bury her. It still gets warm during the day."

Ray and Fraser exchanged glances. Ray swallowed and moved closer. "Where's Rose, Cary? We brought some late-season blackberries for her. The ones she likes."

Carey's mumbling increased in speed. "I told her we'd be fine. We're safe here, I said. No matter what caused the power to go out, silenced the radios, deadened the phones—we're safe here." His right leg began jerking stiffly in counterpoint to the shovel. Ray angled further to the left, eyes fixed on Carey's hands. Always watch the hands, he remembered. Safer bet than the eyes.

He was almost close enough when Fraser spoke again. "Well, I guess we can do without the beans and coffee for now. But we'll need some more flour. That's an essential building block—"

Ray had tensed to reach out when Carey's voice exploded. "But Lavelle—Tom, the pilot—he decided to fly into Whitehorse to see what was up. When he came back he landed right here on the road. Didn't even make it to the strip. Not surprising—there was blood everywhere. From his mouth, his skin, his eyes. But God, oh God, he was still alive. Bleeding everywhere and he was still moving. And talking. Kept saying, over and over: they're dead. They're all dead."

Carey choked, tears running down his bearded face. Ray kept still.

"Rose—Rose—she wanted to leave. Said it was too dangerous. I told her we'd be fine. No need to run to a place where we'd only be



strangers. But then Barry died that night. Bled to death in his own kitchen. His wife Essen died the next day. By the end of the night they all bled."

He paused, staring straight into Ray's face, awareness unfolding in his eyes like a crumpled piece of paper. "You can't stop the bleeding once it starts. Rose only had a nosebleed. She used to get those before. A little ice, pinch the nose, and it'd stop."

"And this one didn't," Fraser said gently, moving around the end of the counter next to Ray.

Carey's hands stilled. The shovel's point clunked gently on the floor.

"This one did. We were fine. Just like I told her. We were fine. Everybody else was gone but us. I told her we'd leave in the morning." His voice became thick with tears. "And when I woke this morning, I found this."

He reached out with his left hand, a note clenched tightly in his fingers. Fraser eased it gently from him, his arm resting around Carey's shoulder. Ray took the shovel out of the other hand, holding it out of reach. His chest hurt and he forced himself to breathe.

Fraser's lips moved silently and then he handed the note to Ray. "Come on over here, Carey, let's sit you down." Tugging, Fraser shifted the man into a shambling, wide-legged walk. Ray stood in the pale light, dust flowering in the air, his throat closing as he read the note.

*Carey—It's not fine. It will never be fine again. We've unleashed hell and can never go back. I can't wait for it to eat away at me. I love you dearly. Don't wait too long.*

Love, Rose.

Ray raised his eyes to the sweat-stained man moving hesitantly toward the back rooms, shepherded by Fraser. He breathed once, deeply. Then again. Oh, God, he thought. It must be contagious. He threw the shovel and note away with both hands and rubbed them on his jeans. How was it transmitted? Could it be airborne? What was the latency period? What *was* it?

Oh, God, Fraser had touched Carey. Fraser's hands had touched the sweat- and mud-soaked shoulder. He had to get them away from here. To someplace safe.

His boots echoed loudly through the store. He ran around the counter, crunching plastic

pieces. The back rooms were littered with clothing, suitcases, and shoes. Stumbling, he heard Fraser before he saw him: "Close your eyes and rest. We'll take care of you."

"Why?" Carey's voice was thick with tears. Ray paused in the doorway. The windows faced west, casting a reddish glow over Fraser kneeling beside Carey's bed. He held a limp hand, tucking it gently under a blanket.

"Why what, Carey?"

"Why take care of me? It'll be over soon. Why bother? Why bother with any of it?"

Fraser sighed. His eyes, charred with sadness, were abstract, distant. "It's what we do, Carey. Now rest." Carey closed his eyes tightly and curled himself on his side, tense and motionless. Fraser crouched watchfully beside the bed. Carey lay like that for only a few minutes, until exhaustion tricked him into sleep. Fraser rocked back on his heels and closed the nightstand drawer. Then he pulled an empty bottle off the nightstand, tossing it to Ray. Holding the bottle up to the fading light, Ray read its label: digitalis.

"If she took these—"

Fraser shook his head, motioning them both into the hall. Diefenbaker remained in the bedroom, lying on the rag rug by the bedside like a watchful sphinx. Fraser pulled the bedroom door halfway shut. "If she took them, then she died quickly." Fraser took the bottle back, rolling it between his fingers, his face brittle, cold and white as bone, unseeing.

"I don't believe it," Ray said fiercely. "It's crazy. Carey's gone nuts from his wife's suicide and imagined the whole thing." He put all the conviction he could into his voice, willing Fraser to agree with him.

"I don't think so, Ray. A mass epidemic explains a lot: the emptiness, the lack of power, the absence of traffic. We need to see if anyone else is still around, what information they might have, and find the evidence of what's happened." The sad look was gone. Fraser's voice was decisive and calm, though a little too quick.

"Okay, fine, I'm on it." Ray couldn't wait to get out of the claustrophobic back rooms, out into somewhere cleaner and alive.

"Ray, wait." Fraser's voice sounded oddly muffled in the hallway. Concerned, Ray turned back. Fraser's silhouette had faded in the

gloom. The faint ticking of a clock, the wind whistling through the front door, and his harsh breathing filled the silence. "I think you should go straight to the post office. If any phone line is still up, it'll be that one."

Ray frowned. "Sure, Benny."

"Then maybe the Hensons'. They have a CB, I think."

Ray opened his mouth and then closed it. "See you in about an hour, Benny." Ray reached for the flashlight kept under the stove and clicked it on. Shining the light, he saw the newspaper racks and grabbed a handful.

They came out of the dark store onto the porch, into the sunlight, and looked out again over the empty road, the silent buildings, and the dark forested hills surrounding it all. Quiet. Not a sound in the still air. Ray held his breath with the intensity of listening. He could hear the soft creak of Fraser's leather jacket, the minute rustle of cloth, the faintest squeak of the floorboards shifting under their weight. But beyond the circle of their bodies there was only a vast dumbness.

"Christ, Benny," Ray muttered. "Jesus Christ." He heard his breathing increase, could feel his legs tremble.

Fraser pressed his hand to Ray's shoulder and let it lie there, a link of stability and permanence. "We don't know anything yet, Ray. They could all have fled."

Ray nodded, grateful for the solid feel of Fraser, the press of him along his side, the direct gaze. "Right. What you don't know will hurt you. Right." He spun his fear and anger into his words, felt the flush of adrenaline clearing his thinking. "Okay. We'll start the door-to-door. But let's assume Carey's right. That makes this a fatality without survivors or witnesses."

"And neither of us are trained in forensics, and the crucial evidence of the origin could be far away. As least as far as Whitehorse."

"That's if Carey was right about Lavelle being the first. So there might be a mention in the newspapers of the beginnings of unexplained illness." Ray's brain was working again, going through the familiar stages of talking out a case strategy with Fraser. The vertigo receded.

"Who's got a radio or TV?" Fraser spoke abruptly, washing away the last of Ray's fuzzi-

ness.

"Right. I'll check the radios and phones again. Maybe the problems have cleared up." Ray pushed away, eager to have clear directions. Fraser strode off in the opposite direction, toward the small clustering of cabins near the road. His eyes flicked back and forth in constant watch for any sign of movement.

Ray crossed the road to the cabin that doubled as post office, campground office, and airstrip terminal. A couple of RVs were parked in the back. The Canadian flag hung limp over the door. The tiny shack, hardly bigger than a mailbox, was usually crowded with people arranging deliveries, or storing supplies, or just shooting the breeze with Essen and Barry. It didn't take more than a glance to show the room was empty. The bodies weren't here. Ray felt relieved, and then embarrassed. He was a cop. Bodies didn't faze him.

The phone was dead. Ray poked behind the tiny desk and found a mailbag, not even unsealed. Inside, the letters' postmarks were all over two weeks old.

Out the back door the illusion of normality was abruptly lost. On the edge of the gravel RV lot was a large blackened patch, where someone had apparently been burning garbage. As Ray drew nearer a small breeze picked up, carrying a sickly garbage smell as of a rancid barbecue. A couple of the ubiquitous ravens flew up and landed in the trees just behind the lot, their croaks breaking the silence as nerve-shatteringly as a sonic boom.

Ray didn't need to go closer. He could see the bodies now, charred but still grotesquely recognizable as human. It was a lot more difficult than most people thought to reduce a body to ash, and even soaking the corpses in aviation fuel hadn't raised the heat high enough to do more than consume the clothing, hair, and skin. There were at least a half dozen, probably more, but Ray had no intention of going close enough to count. The barbecue smell was making him gag. He started to skirt the edge of the burn, startling a coyote preoccupied with gnawing on something.

"Get away! Get! Get out of here!" Ray yelled, but the coyote just looked at him, then unhurriedly trotted off into the trees.

Ray knew he should check out the RVs, but just at this moment he didn't think he

could. He went back around the front of the post office and pulled a few more newspapers from the rack. The breeze was picking up and the flag overhead flapped at tired intervals. He sat on the steps and began skimming the papers. Weather, local sports, inept politicians. He checked the date. The paper was three weeks old. Tossing it aside, he sorted for a more recent date.

*"Flu-like outbreak" floods emergency room with patients.* This one, from the *Vancouver Sun*, was dated fifteen days ago. He kept digging.

*"Flu" more serious than originally reported. Authorities investigating. Curfews and health advisories will be announced this afternoon.* He could not find any later news.

Reading the newspapers again for greater detail he discovered that the "flu" had been detected on the eastern seaboard first, spreading west and north. Early reports also indicated that Europe and Asia had been equally affected. International updates were difficult to come by due to an unprecedented travel and media clamp-down. Within Canada, early reports downplayed the symptoms, vaguely described as "increased temperature, followed by a coma, and possible blood loss." Ray snorted. Blood loss didn't seem to begin describing it.

He kept reading. *Disease is characterized as highly contagious.* He checked the date. This was the last report, from the *Whitehorse Gazette*. He leafed determinedly through the rest of the papers, Edmonton, Vancouver, Fairbanks, Anchorage, but he could not find anything more specific. He was not the only reader who must have been alarmed by this news. The authorities, anticipating a panic, had closed major roads, to prevent wide-scale evacuation.

He dropped the papers. He knew what that meant. He thought of his colleagues, holding the barricades back. You could not hold back a city of half a million. In Chicago it would have been worse, three million panicked citizens and every one of them and their brother with a gun.

The gunshot reverberated across the dusty road, slicing into his awareness. He scrambled for the flashlight and sprinted to the store. As he slid into the hallway, he slowed, training and instinct extinguishing the flashlight. Crouching low, he called softly, "Fraser?" He

waited a few seconds and then edged closer to the partially open bedroom door: "Fraser?"

"It's all right, Ray. You can come in."

Still cautious, he stepped into the dark room, keeping a low profile. He could barely make out Fraser. But the smell of cordite and blood was unmistakable.

"Are you...?" he asked, still holding the unlit flashlight.

"I'm fine." Fraser spoke slowly, distantly.

Ray flicked on the light and scanned the room. Carey had half-fallen off the bed. Blood dripped from his skull, pooling on the wood floor. Ray swung the light in circles, looking for the gun.

"Where did he get it?" he wondered aloud. Then he saw the opened nightstand drawer and nodded. "Right. I guess we should have checked before we left him alone."

Fraser stood quietly in the middle of the room, holding the revolver firmly in his hand. With a smooth motion, he released the trigger guard and put the weapon back in the drawer. "I did check."

"Hey, he could have kept it under his pillow, for all we know. You can't keep a man from killing himself. Not out here, anyway." Ray picked up the blanket and covered the body. "Come on, let's get some air." He moved toward the door, pulling Fraser in his wake. He thought he could see an unfamiliar expression flicking across Fraser's face, but it was too dark to be sure. "Come on, Fraser," he urged, uneasy in this dark room filled with the smell of blood.

The long afternoon twilight stretched around them, peppered with the faint chirps of the last surviving insects. Fall was approaching and the air had become biting. Suddenly tired, Ray slumped on the porch steps and leaned into his knees. "So..." he said.

Fraser did not answer. He slowly rolled down his sleeves, buttoning them and smoothing the fabric. His face was unreadable.

"The motel was empty, cleaned out. It looks like only the Klafters stayed behind," he said at last.

"The RV park is empty too—I guess when it got here they all took off." Fraser must have caught something in Ray's voice, and turned to look at him with a clear-eyed acceptance that made it easier somehow. Ray went on, "There's

a pile of bodies on the edge of the airstrip. Someone must have collected them and tried to burn them. Didn't do too good of a job."

"How many?" Fraser asked thinly.

"I don't know. Not enough to account for everyone who lives here."

"I found a government quarantine notice on the motel door, listing the symptoms and ordering three weeks' isolation, but not suggesting any treatment."

Ray tried again. "The papers weren't much help. Whatever it is, it's big. Worldwide." He looked up at Fraser, standing still in the dimness. "And contagious." He felt his remaining strength flowing out into the emptiness.

"The symptoms described sound like a type of hemorrhagic fever, but more virulent. Almost as if it were artificially enhanced. It could be a variant of Lassa, or Ebola, or dengue, or..."

"Oh, shut up, Fraser! Just shut up!" Ray yelled, all patience with Fraser long forgotten. "It doesn't matter. We don't know how it's transmitted or incubated; even corpses could still be infectious. Shit, shit, shit! We're probably dying already."

"It'll be fine, Ray." Fraser kept staring into the distance, scanning the dark.

"No, it won't, Benny. We're cut off, we don't know the incubation period, and we don't know if there's any hope of outside contact. Or help."

The silence stretched between them, magnifying the tension. Ray let it build and then forced himself to speak: "I want to go home. I want to see my family and hold them and make them safe." He turned his head toward Fraser's shape. "It's what I do, Fraser. It's what I'm supposed to do."

Fraser sighed and then cleared his throat. "I know. We're two hundred miles from

Whitehorse, and over three thousand from Chicago. And how much death in between? We have no idea if we can find vehicles, or fuel, and if we have to go on foot, the weather—"

"It doesn't matter. It's never mattered to you when you had someone to protect." His jaw was hurting now.

"I didn't say it didn't matter. Your family matters to me too, Ray. But what if we are contagious? What if they have it contained and we reintroduce it? Or we bring back a mutated version?"

Ray clenched his fists, the nails biting into his palms. He wasn't thinking clearly. Of course, who would be, but he should have thought of that. "How long until we know?"

Fraser stepped down, moving carefully around Ray. "Three weeks. One month. How long before we're willing to risk their lives?"

Ray clamped down again on his knees, forcing himself to think. "You're right. So we keep checking the phone and radio."

"Yes." Fraser sounded relieved. Hard to tell sometimes. Strange how the dark could make you feel closer to someone—an intimate connection of sound and sensation. "And start preparing in case we have to winter here."

"Right." Wintering seemed so remote. They'd know within a few days at most, if Carey was right. Until then, he wouldn't let Fraser down. He could handle this. They could handle it.

The wind picked up, blowing briskly across the road. Leaves rustled in the darkness, rasping across the pavement, and beneath their trembling chatter, he heard the silence of the dead. Ray leaned his forehead on his knees. "Shit," he whispered. "Shit." The porch door banged sharply, rattling loosely in answer. It wouldn't take too much time. Before they had an answer. Before they knew.

---

## Chapter 2: The Village

*"Our ability to delude ourselves may be an important survival tool."*

—Jane Wagner

---

The ground was wet and muddy, but Diefenbaker did not hesitate. His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth, and his paws slipped on the wet stones cascading down to the river. The ground was firmer there. The river was still white and frozen shut, ignoring the onslaught of spring in the green unfurling along its banks. Sharp shrieks and laughter ricocheted between the houses above the river, as three children chased Diefenbaker between the trucks and stacks of wood. Even at his age, he could still outrun them—at least as far as the river. There, he dropped the muddy rag he had been carrying and wagged his tail in victory.

"Go, Dief," yelled the smaller boy, in the lead. His blond hair was plastered with sweat and he'd lost his cap as he passed the Nelsons' cabin. It was his only one and he'd have to go back and pick it up before returning home. "We're the best," he cried, sliding down the last few feet and throwing his arms around the wolf.

"Not fair. We'll beat you next time when he's on our team." The older boy jumped the bank and reached over to tousle Dief's ears. "We always win, when he's on the team." His brown face crinkled with amusement as Dief tried to snatch the rag back. His dark black hair swung loose and tangled over his shoulders as he wrestled for ownership of the dirty piece of cloth.

"Well, of course we win when he's on the team, Ussak. He's Fraser's dog." Jason stood up, rubbing pebbles and twigs off his pant legs.

"He's a wolf, not a dog, you aglu." Ussak rolled his eyes in irritation.

"Yeah, well, you're a ig- igluvigaq." Jason stuttered over his best Inuit insult and Ussak snickered. Jason stood as tall as his ten-year-old frame would allow him and went on regardless. "Ray says he's part dog. No way he could be a real wolf and live in Chicago all those years."

"Why not?" Ussak argued.

Jason frowned. Sometimes Ussak could be so dense. "'Cause in cities they don't allow wolves to run free in the streets. 'Cause there they belong in zoos."

"Ah! Well, that's it, then!" said Victor. The two other boys turned to look at Ussak's brother. He was almost as tall as Ussak, except he didn't squint. Ussak had lost his glasses two months ago and scrounging nearby settlements hadn't yet turned up a replacement. "We're here now. So he's a wolf and not a dog." Jason and Ussak both pondered this for a moment and then Jason nodded in agreement.

"Okay. But he's a special wolf." That compromise settled all differences.

Ussak tossed the muddy rag over to his brother, who caught it left-handed. Victor stuffed it into a pocket of his oversized jacket. Like almost everything the Nunigaq brothers wore, it had been scavenged from somewhere else. They hadn't had anything when they got here, not even parents. Jason envied Victor the jacket. It had pockets all over it and real wolverine fur trim on the hood. And who cared how the owner had died.

Jason rocked back and forth, then pushed his bangs back up against his forehead. "I think losers should have to go out on the ice." Ussak was always bragging he could do anything, just because he was Inuit. "You can take Dief with you," he added magnanimously.

Ussak sneered and loomed over Jason. "No, I think winners should have to do it." He grabbed Jason's coat and pulled hard. Jason refused to be intimidated and dug his heels into the mud.

"No one should go on the ice," Victor said sharply, abruptly edging between them. Both boys stepped back in surprise. "Fraser said break-up is probably going to be tomorrow. You wanna be out there when it gives? It's a long way to the ocean."

Ussak frowned. "This river doesn't go to the ocean. It runs into the Yukon and that runs

into the Mackenzie and then—ouch!" He peered down at Diefenbaker, who had nipped his knee.

"See?" Jason said, stepping further back from the bank. "Even Dief knows it's not safe."

Ussak looked fiercely at his brother, who only smiled in agreement. Red-faced, he headed up toward the slope, not waiting to see if the others would follow. "Well, if Fraser says it's break-up..." he muttered.

Victor and Jason scrambled after him, Dief rising leisurely off his haunches. "What should we do next?" Jason offered when they reached the top. They stood there, the crisp breeze carrying the sounds and smells of the nearby houses across the water.

"How about we build a mud fort?" Victor loved playing war and making battle plans. His mother had even made him a small war-feather band to weave into his braids. "We could use Jason as a spy and have him infiltrate the enemy camp."

"Yeah," Jason piped up. "And they can torture me, but I won't give out any secrets." His blue eyes flashed dark with imaginary heroics.

Ussak pounded Jason on the shoulder with a bit more force than necessary. "You'd better not. But we'll need more players." They headed back toward the small encampment, Diefenbaker following even more slowly, rooting among the woodpiles for an interesting scent.

"Well, we can always ask the Dunlaps. They never play fair, so we can cheat too." The voices faded as they scooted ahead.

From his perch on the hood of one of the rusted trucks, Ray watched the children clatter by. Kids were everywhere and always the same, he thought, no matter what; up at the crack of dawn, even here, where even in May dawn started sometime in the middle of the night; and getting into as much danger and trouble as possible before the adults got up to stop them. He shifted the rifle loosely against his arm, yawned, and squinted against the glare of the sunrise, finally clearing the hills across the river. He should have another talk with their parents, or Fraser should. It just wasn't safe for little kids to be out alone, not even with Diefenbaker. They'd lost half a dozen dogs this winter to wolves that over-

night seemed to have abandoned their fear of man. The smell that once meant danger to them now only meant a source of dead meat. And now that it was spring, the bears had begun appearing, hungry after the long winter.

Ray slid off the hood and began making one more round of the settlement. He was getting pretty tired of doing the early morning watch. Not that there weren't others willing to share the load. But somehow everyone seemed to assume that Fraser and Ray, as policemen, would naturally take the most difficult assignments. And Ray had to grudgingly agree that there were certain people who didn't seem to know one end of a gun from the other. He just wished Fraser were with him now so he could complain about it.

Fraser had been gone nearly ten days, on another snowmobile trip down the frozen river with Istas. "Scout and scavenge patrol," he called it: scouting for more survivors and scavenging for more supplies, especially fuel. It would be the last trip before the ice broke up. And then, finally, they could get ready to leave and go back home.

Ray picked his way across the junkyard of broken, but still possibly useful, machinery that littered the perimeter of the village. Every rural community he had ever seen, from Florida to the frozen north, had to have one, and Stewart Junction was no different. Except that here it seemed to be at least a hundred years of junk, dating back to gold-rush days and before. The village itself was a makeshift conglomeration of log cabins and buildings of weathered planks and new pressboard, strung out along the bluff above the river where the old steamboat moorings rotted. Ray turned his back on the river and headed out toward the cleared flats that edged up against the forest, skirting the gravel road that was the village's hopeful connection to the rest of the world.

The road looked good from here. Thaw had begun a couple of weeks ago, but the surface already looked almost firm enough to support the weight of a car. Ray paused and looked longingly down the road, to where it darkened and disappeared in the trees curving up the surrounding hills. Not yet. He turned and walked back along the road, scanning for what Fraser called "scat" and had been lecturing him about for what seemed like months.

Yeah, like that. Too big for dog, or even human. Damn. Ray wasn't sure if Fraser and the others hadn't been taking him on the equivalent of a snipe hunt with all this talk of bears, but nobody who had lived here, unlike the tourists, seemed to want to go very far without a rifle or shotgun.

The road didn't so much end as spread out into muddy fingers that wandered down to the river between the houses. Past the tidy new building that had been the tourist visitor center and general store and was now guarded by Susan's team of staked-out huskies. They knew Ray, of course, but they set up a ferocious barking and heaving on their chains regardless. Further on was the empty ground that he'd been told was the Zusis' garden, pride of the Yukon. He'd only ever seen it as a flat expanse of snow. Today, under the cold morning light, barely imaginable hints of green colored the emergent muddy patches. Spring. And, annoyingly, just when Fraser had predicted it. That was okay, though. They had survived, the plague was over, and it was spring. Not the horror that Ray had feared six months before.

Gasoline would continue to be an important commodity—trucks and equipment they had plenty of. Although the wilderness population was sparse, most homesteads had turned out to be well equipped. Self-reliance was the norm in the Yukon. Which was good. He'd only had to handle one petty theft, a few fistfights, and one early onset of paranoid delusion all winter. It was bad enough he had to play cop in this wilderness, but at least real criminal behavior hadn't been in evidence. It was too cold to have the energy to really make trouble. Though it hadn't been too cold for some things. Ray avoided thinking about the man he'd found one morning who had taken Carey Klafter's way out.

The smell of Ilene's cooking reached him as he passed her cabin. He saw Diefenbaker nuzzling at the door, and debated calling him back. Not that Diefenbaker listened any better out here than he had in Chicago. Ilene Zusi, recently widowed, opened the door to let the animal inside and waved to him as he passed.

"Hey, Ilene," Ray nodded in greeting.

"Morning, Ray," she smiled. "Have you seen Jason? He took off with Diefenbaker before breakfast." She had wrapped a heavy

brown jacket around herself, but her bare feet stuck out and were turning blue in the cold.

"Yeah, he was headed down to the Dunlaps' about half a hour ago."

Ilene pursed her lips. "Well, since I don't expect they'll feed him he should be back soon. You been up all night again?"

"Naw, only half the night. It's just like being on a stakeout, only more boring."

She was a small woman but looked strong. Her son Jason clearly had inherited her blond hair and plump round face. Her husband—Ray strained to remember him—had had red hair. He'd been the last plague victim. They hadn't known it at the time. Had kept her and her son in quarantine for at least a month. By then they had figured out that the plague had a two-week incubation period. You either got it or you were immune. But no one had wanted to take any more chances.

He and Fraser had stayed there at the Blue Heron Café for over a month. They buried Carey next to his wife, then moved themselves into the café. One of them always kept an eye on the road, hoping and fearing that someone would come through. They inventoried every building, every corner and cupboard, anything to keep busy and not think about what might happen. They found enough batteries to run the radio nonstop, but the only thing they heard was the buzz of static. The weeks passed and they were still healthy, but there was nothing they could do. No one came down, or up, the highway. The aspens turned red and gold, and then naked, and termination dust whitened the hills, before they saw another survivor.

It was Istas Makah, from the Tutchone village up the Stewart River. The plague had burned itself out there and he had come down to the highway to look for survivors and supplies before snowfall blocked the roads. The village was larger and better built than the truck stop, and so Fraser and Ray joined the diverse group of survivors who had been found or straggled in, clustering together for the winter.

Once the euphoria of surviving and discovering other survivors had cleared, Ray had wanted to head straight back south. It was so obvious a decision that Fraser's hesitation felt like a joke.

"Ray, I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Not a good idea? Going home? What's not good about it?"

A brief expression flashed across Fraser's face, almost a grimace. "Look at these people here. Half of them are just tourists, caught in a strange environment by this catastrophe. They probably want to go home too, but how will they get there? Nobody has enough food to travel with, or clothes for the winter; there aren't enough vehicles and we don't even know if there will be fuel along the way. They'll have to stay here, and the same constraints will apply. I can't just leave them to fend for themselves."

"Fraser, not everybody is your responsibility," Ray began, but the words died in his throat. Plainly, they were Fraser's responsibility. He was still a Mountie, and this was still Canada, at least by some definition. Ray would have done the same thing in Fraser's position. Hell, that's what he *was* trying to do: get home to the U.S. and Chicago and his family and his job to take care of them. If they were still alive. If anyone else was still alive. The intolerable, unacceptable thought ambushed him and for a moment he thought he might be sick. Fraser's strong hand on his shoulder pulled him back to himself.

"Ray, Chicago is a major city. Anything that can be done will be done there. The government and other authorities will make cities a priority for health, for supplies, and for safety. But out here there's really not much infrastructure and not a lot of reason for any authority to make taking care of survivors a priority, if they even realize we exist. We can do a lot of good right here, for now."

"You can. I can't see what difference I'm going to make. I've got responsibilities of my own." His voice sounded thin to his ears.

Fraser's expression switched to compassion and acceptance. "Then you should go, Ray. My duties shouldn't stand in the way of what you feel you must do." It wasn't as if, after all these years, Ray didn't know what Fraser was doing. His mental hackles rose every time Fraser got that slightly noble look on his face, but it never seemed to change the outcome, just the residual pool of resentment Ray had to deal with afterward.

"So you're just going to let me take off without you? You think I'd leave you here without a thought?"

"I need to stay over the winter. Just the winter. If you can wait till next spring, then I can come with you."

It was a brief and unhappy struggle in Ray's conscience. Fraser was probably right. Ray did not look forward to driving three thousand miles alone across a devastated North America in winter. Who knew what he might run into, what he might find? And he could be useful here. And Fraser wanted him to stay. Though Ray tried to keep it secret from himself, he knew that that was what tipped the scales, and he hated the resentment that boiled through him because of it.

"Okay, maybe you're right. Just for the winter then. But in the spring we're getting out of here and back to where civilization comes from."

He inhaled appreciatively. The warm smell of bread rose into the early morning air. Ilene had been living in the Yukon for two years and knew a lot about using local plants for food. Not that they'd had much need of this skill this winter—food, canned and dried, they had been able to find in plenty. The supplies on the surrounding homesteads, supplemented by Fraser's hunting skills, made this an easy winter.

And by next winter they'd all be back in Chicago—or Edmonton, or Vancouver—where camping trips and Boy Scouts wouldn't matter as much. Ray tugged on his wool cap, pulling it lower over his ears. How could they stand the cold? It was spring, the newly rising sun was shinning weakly through the trees, and he still felt like someone had dipped him in the frozen river.

He picked up the pace, circled around Ilene's cabin, and headed back toward the village "center." Just a few large boulders and the "totem." Ray paused in front of the object and shook his head skeptically. Why a bunch of New Age Indians would leave the cities to come here and set up an "authentic" fishing camp was beyond him. You'd never catch him trying to reconnect to his roots. There was only so much pasta and tales of Sicilian revenge he could stomach, before enlightened American reason kicked in.



He stamped his feet a few times and waited. He felt sometimes that that was all he was doing. Waiting for spring. Waiting for the right time to go home. Waiting for someone to relieve him from his post. Waiting for Fraser to return from his weekly wanderings.

A hand clapped his shoulder, and he jerked abruptly around. "Christ, Danny, don't do that!"

Danny stepped back, laughing. "You say that every time. I know you know I'm here. Those cop instincts, I guess." His features had a blunt, honest look to them. He still wore the wire-rim glasses so popular a few years before.

Ray grudgingly returned the smile and shifted his rifle to the safety position. He didn't mind Danny. And, it was an old joke between them. "You know I can't tell when you're sneaking up on me. I don't have half of your instincts."

Danny's brown eyes crinkled with amusement. "Yeah, right. Born and bred in Toronto, taught mathematics for four years, and then I move up here to reconnect with my heritage, give my kids a chance to build self-esteem. An honest-to-goodness native warrior, I am." He glanced down self-deprecatingly at his clothes: a thick green coat over a baggy plaid shirt and a comfortable pair of old Levi's.

Ray leaned back, his hip resting on the larger boulder. "Don't knock it, Danny. None of us were born into this life. Nothing could have ever prepared us for any of this."

His face sobering, Danny joined Ray on the boulder, laying his rifle beside him. "Well, some of us were prepared. And we're all damn grateful for it. Without you two—well, I don't know."

Ray stared at his muddy boots, feeling his face grow warm. "Well, what, Danny? All we did was tell you what you already knew: hunker down, wait for the spring, keep the peace and morale up."

Danny shook his head. He gestured vaguely around him. "It meant a lot to have a cop and a Mountie here. We're pretty good at managing the normal ups and downs. But disaster management, well, having that kind of training is really helpful. And when it comes time to organize our trip to Whitehorse—well, we've pretty much agreed that you two should take the lead."

Ray shifted uncomfortably. He hadn't thought of it that way.

"Well, I need to run. Nothing much to report—keep an eye out for Fraser, will you?" Ray clapped Danny on the back and pushed off the boulder. "Hate for him to miss the big day tomorrow—having predicted it and all."

Danny shook his head. "We've always had a betting pool on the break-up day. This year, no one wanted to bet against Fraser. So we'll channel the energy into the festival instead."

"I doubt even Benny could predict the exact day, over a week before it happens." Ray jiggled a bit in the mud, scraping a pebble from his boot. "But I am always up for a party. Even one with booze." He nodded knowingly at Danny.

Danny blushed and turned away to pick up his rifle. He'd graciously bowed out of the moonshine business after the rest of the village threatened to tie him to a chair, pour his concoctions over him, and set him on fire. "I said I was a mathematician, not a chemist."

Ray smiled. "Hey, no sweat. Besides, there was more than enough beer lying around for the winter. And when we hook up again with the outside world, well, we'll never need that particular skill set again. So we're safe." Waving one-handed, he started back toward the cabin he and Fraser shared.

The light peeked above the tops of the trees, offering a new day. As he sloshed his way through the square he nodded to the early risers. The people hereabouts took their sunlight hours seriously. He, used to his Chicago nightlife, had found it annoying. But he had adjusted.

Turning the corner, he saw Larry Dene and angled sharply to the left. No luck; the old man barreled toward him with a straightforwardness that Ray had always found somewhat frightening.

"Hey, you! Why you still here hanging around? I thought you were leaving." Larry never closed his jacket; he'd lived all of his life in the Yukon, and never seemed to see the need to button his coat—or his mouth. He had a wiry build and deeply weathered face that was permanently flushed and veined. His cropped hair, once blonde, had faded into a dull white.

Ray looked down at the old coot, with the benefit of his height, and yawned. "Sure I'm

leaving. I'm going back to bed."

Larry rooted himself in Ray's path. "I'm going with you when you get out of here. Gonna need somebody to keep an eye on you. Teach you how to shit in the woods." Larry laughed and poked Ray's arm to make sure he got the joke.

The smell of whiskey wafted into Ray's face and his irritation turned into active annoyance. "Fraser and I will be just fine without your help. If you want to hurry us up why don't you help move the wood stacks so we can get at the trucks? Now that it's spring we won't need to keep so much wood all over the place."

Larry looked at him suspiciously. "Some people think you're full of it. It'd be a good thing if you left sooner rather than sticking your dumbass nose into everything."

*And I stayed here because Fraser thought these people needed our help?* Ray thought as he stepped around Larry. Some people could not handle the isolation. Others could not live without it. Larry always seemed to cope better when he was away from others. Still, of all the drunks he'd had to handle this winter, Larry was the most constant.

"Fine. Go talk to Dunlap. He wants to start clearing the road already. I just thought making a stab at seeing that we don't have to *walk* out of here might appeal to you."

Larry narrowed his eyes and shook his head with an exaggerated effort. "What do you think I am? Stupid? I'd rather shovel shit than that dirt. The wood can sit and rot." He swagged off quickly before Ray could answer.

Ray made it back to the cabin he shared with Fraser before being waylaid by anyone else. Once inside, Ray pulled off his leather gloves and scraped the mud off his boots before pulling them off. The cabin was small; housing was scarce, as the village had been designed for only six families. In fact, it had been built as a summer fishing cabin and was intended primarily for short sleepovers. Furnishings were very sparse: a stove, a small table, and the bed. Stacked in one corner were the various projects he and Fraser had been toying with over the winter. But he had a bigger project to deal with. Danny had the right idea; he and Fraser still had a lot of planning to do. First Whitehorse, then back on the Alcan

south. Edmonton, Calgary, and Chicago. Most likely, they'd have communications and transport restored in Whitehorse. He shoved a couple of pieces of wood into the stove, yawned again, and sat on the bed, running over the comforting future again. Normalcy. Just a matter of time. He didn't bother to undress. The covers were clammy but he fell asleep quickly.

The loud knocking took a moment to penetrate his sleep. He rolled onto his side and called out, "Yeah?" The knocking continued and Ray stumbled out of bed and opened the door.

"Sorry to bother you, Ray," Istas said. "It's Alain."

Ray winced. "Oh God. What's he done this time?" he said, running his hand through his hair and forcing his brain awake. "When did you guys get back? Where's Fraser?"

Istas followed Ray back inside. Ray sat down on the bed and looked up at him, feeling the crick in his neck. Tall, he was in his early thirties, already graying his black hair at the temples, neither plain nor particularly attractive, but he carried himself well. His face was square, with a straight nose, a stubborn chin and a well-defined jaw. He wore his dark hair tightly braided and looked every inch the competent woodsman. His two brothers and father had purchased the river land six years ago and had worked hard to establish their alternative settlement. They had worked even harder this last year to keep the unexpected population fed.

Istas looked soberly at Ray. "Couple hours ago. Fraser stopped off at Ilene's for breakfast. I went straight home and Elu told me she found him in with the snowmobiles. He had smashed the front of one with a sledgehammer and was working on the back half. Luckily, he stopped when she came out."

Ray breathed in sharply. "Where's he now?"

Istas sighed. "She's making him breakfast. He looks awfully thin." He pushed back his heavy parka hood impatiently.

Ray began rooting on the floor for his boots. "Well, why isn't he cooking for himself? We've left him with enough supplies." He bent his head to rebutton his shirt. Istas shifted awkwardly in the silence. Ray sighed. "Don't

tell me. He thinks that cooking causes the plague?"

Istas tossed Ray his gloves as he stood up. "No, it's radios that cause the plague, remember? The virus spreads through the ether and enters your home through your radio."

Ray stepped forward and noted a slight tugging at his waist. He looked down and saw that he had misbuttoned his shirt. He fumbled with the first button, then let his hands drop. He was dealing with a paranoid delusion, not running for a beauty contest. "Yeah, yeah, I remember. I was the one who found the radios smashed. Every damn one of them. Never say insanity isn't methodical."

He pulled a scarf up off the floor and jammed it around his throat. He had just warmed up nicely now. The cold would be even more noticeable.

Istas shrugged. "Elu said this time he was ranting about the 'mobiles being dangerous. They can glide over the snow and help carry the virus."

Snorting, Ray slapped his jacket closed. "Well, if that's the cause, then why did he wait until spring to start smashing them?"

"Maybe because we've been using them fairly nonstop all winter," Istas said, reaching for the door.

Ray motioned Istas ahead and hopped over the sill into his boots. "Or maybe he's just crazy. Oh well, it's just Alain. I've handled more schizos than you can count. Chicago's full of them."

Once he was outside, his nonchalance vanished into the brisk wind that curled around his face. Istas led the way silently, leaving Ray to follow. Just after the first snowfall, Alain had wandered into their lives, haggard with grief and exposure. His family had homesteaded fifty miles north. After the first news reports, they'd isolated themselves completely. Anyone approaching the cabin had been warned away or shot. It would have worked, too. Just a few weeks more and the plague would have burned itself out. But a crazed tourist, desperate to find help for his dying family, had driven his SUV into the cabin. Alain shot the survivors and the family fled the contaminated bodies. Three days later his wife and two daughters died.

Ray slipped in the mud, almost turning his

ankle. Alain had been fine at first. As fine as anyone could have expected. But he had begun to obsess about the plague. Took so many cold snow plunges that he almost caught pneumonia. Then, after the Christmas celebration, they'd returned to find all their radios smashed. While they'd celebrated the holiday, Alain had entered the unlocked cabins and storage sheds and smashed every radio he could find. Hadn't even tried to hide it afterward. Was eager to explain to all how he'd saved them from the plague. It was all, in Ray's opinion, utterly pathetic. And even more pathetic was Ray's own sympathy for the man, which left him unable to just write him off as a typical loony. No, he had to make sure he was the one on call to deal with Alain's increasing oddities.

Nodin's cabin came into sight. Smoke wafted through the front yard, hazing the weak sun. Ray signaled to Istas that he was going to the back of his brother's cabin to check on the 'mobiles. Istas nodded and scraped his shoes clear of mud before knocking.

Satisfied that Alain had had time to damage only one of their snowmobiles, Ray soon followed. Nodin and Elu had managed to divide their limited space into a very comfortable seating area and curtained-off sleeping quarters.

Alain was sitting at the kitchen table. Istas had joined him and was sipping coffee. Elu stood with her back to the door, flipping pancakes at the stove. Ray's stomach grumbled.

"Morning, Elu. Can I join you?"

She turned, her face crinkling in a smile. Her hair had just started to show gray, the silver strands giving her slender figure a distinguished air. The smile did not reach her eyes. They glanced anxiously over to the table. "Please come in, Ray. I am certain you must be hungry."

"Thanks," Ray said. "Hey, Alain," he added as he settled to the table.

Alain looked up from his plate and nodded automatically. His attention quickly returned to the food he had been wolfing down. Ray studied him. His short, compact figure had thinned. His brown hair was matted and his eyes were rimmed with red. He had stopped shaving and his beard had started curling over his chin. On his way to being the

village's first street person.

Elu placed a mug on the table and handed Ray a spoon. "I'm sorry, we're out of sugar. Nodin was supposed to bring me some back before he and his father left."

"No problem, Elu. I was on the graveyard watch. Unsweetened is fine. So when will they be back?"

Istas nodded to Elu, who turned back to the stove. "Sometime today. They went out the same time Fraser and I left."

"They'd better scrub when they get back." Alain mumbled. "Can't be too careful. Never can be too careful." His eyes fixed on Ray and he swallowed hard. "Don't want to lose them."

"We'll be careful, Alain." Ray accepted the plate of pancakes from Elu with a smile of thanks, though his appetite had suddenly vanished. "So how have you been doing?"

More mumbling as Alain turned his attention back to his plate. Ray took a stab with his fork and tried another tack. "Alain, do you remember what I told you when we gave you your own cabin?"

This caught Alain's attention, and he looked up. "No."

Ray refused to be sidetracked. "Yes, you do. We told you that the cabin was a special clean zone. And that you had to stay there. Did something happen? Did you have any trouble?"

Alain was silent for a moment, then picked up his fork again. "No."

Frustrated, Ray reached for his mug and took a swallow. He met Istas's gaze and shook his head.

"Alain." Elu walked over from the stove and stood next to the table. "Are you sure everything is fine? I know you didn't forget your promise." Her soft voice reached across the space and stilled Alain's mechanical eating. He looked up at her, his eyes suddenly focusing on her as if he were seeing her clearly for the first time.

"I don't want anything to happen to you. You have to be more careful. All of you," he added, looking over to include Ray and Istas. "I have to make certain nothing happens to you."

The coffee tasted suddenly bitter and Ray pushed the cup away. Madness he could handle. Compassion was too difficult to distance

himself from.

Elu placed her hand on Alain's shoulder and squeezed it gently. "We know you worry, Alain. But so do we. We need you to stay in your cabin. Right?" She looked over to Istas for confirmation.

He nodded somberly, his black eyes steady. "Elu's right. You can help keep watch. If you see anything wrong, you need to use the flare and signal. Do you still have the flare Ray gave you?"

Alain nodded, patting his jacket pocket. *Great*, thought Ray. *He's carrying it around like a wallet. Talk about letting children play with matches.* He kept his misgivings to himself, however. Alain had bigger problems to worry about.

Istas continued. "Well, then, all you have to do is set off the flare and then hide. Ray and Fraser will know what to do."

Ray nodded encouragingly. "So remember your promise. Stay in the cabin. One of us will check in on you each week. And use the flare if you have an emergency. Okay?"

Alain hesitated. His eyes seemed to be pleading for something that Ray knew he could not give. This was the best they could do. Their community was not equipped to handle nut cases. The incident with the radios had disturbed more than one person. If this had been Chicago, Alain would have been safely committed and treated. All they had was a few courses in first aid and a native healer. Hardly experts in traumatic shock.

Alain finally nodded and sank back into his chair. "I understand, Ray. I am sorry. Sometimes it gets lonely out there. You know." For a brief moment, another person sat in the kitchen, a man Ray recognized and understood too well. A tired man, bowed with grief, grimly holding on to the fragments of his self in a cruel and merciless world.

Ray shoved his chair back from the table. "Thanks, Elu. I'll let myself out." Istas stood up and followed Ray back out into the cold air.

"Thanks, Ray." Istas stood on the porch, his breath misting in the cold air. Ray buckled his jacket tighter and then crammed his cap onto his head. "Not a problem. You'll see him back to his cabin?"

"Yes. I'll bring a few extra supplies with me. And I'll check around the cabin to make

certain there's nothing else he needs." Ista's calm, competent manner made him a pleasure to work with. No surprise that Fraser hunted with him.

Ray trudged back down the muddy track for what seemed like the hundredth time this endless morning. He glanced at the sun, then at his watch, and stumbled over a still frozen rut. Barely eight a.m. and all he could think about was finally catching a few hours' sleep. Not even the jarring thunks of early morning wood-chopping could keep him from falling instantly asleep.

It was the soft strike of a match and the muted clatter of a coffee pot that roused him. Fraser was lighting the stove, his movements quiet and economical. Ray uncurled from against the wall and rolled over. "Mhmm. Good trip?" he muttered into the pillow. The soft sounds of Fraser moving about were causing a feeling of warmth and contentment to slowly start to grow.

"Yes, we found more caribou and deer sign. The migration is beginning." Fraser's voice seemed to come from far off and Ray felt himself slipping back into sleep. There were more muted noises, but no welcome sag to the bedsprings. He rolled over again and poked his nose out to check on Fraser.

"Yeah? God, it's cold."

"The fire's gone out," Fraser explained patiently. Master of the obvious. Ray rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his fist and turned to untangle his feet, annoyed without reason.

"It's spring, Fraser. We should be dancing amongst the daffodils. Not freezing our balls." He kicked the covers loose, then tried to smooth them back. Fraser was still puttering around at the stove and did not answer. Not going to bed, then.

The midday sun leaked through the curtain. "God, what time is it?" Fraser stood up and brushed his hair back. It had grown long and curled over the neck of his sweater. He looked tired. No wonder, after over a week in the bush, even bushier than this place. But there was more; he looked, maybe, depressed. Ray sat up.

"Not that late. I'll have coffee ready soon. Did you manage to sleep?" Fraser sat down at the table and started unlacing his boots.

"Like a baby. How else am I supposed to

sleep—I was up before dawn trudging through mud, looking at birds, twigs, and stones. Just like I've been doing for the past four months." Ray tumbled to the edge of the bed.

"You didn't have to volunteer for all of the morning duty, Ray. There's plenty who would be happy to share the load." Fraser scratched the chair as he leaned back to close the stove door. Ray shot him a skeptical look, which Fraser ignored.

"I didn't volunteer. No, I stood there one morning, while you raised your hand when Nodin said, 'Hey, let's set up a few patrols,' and the next thing I know, I'm standing waist deep in the drifts waiting for a snowplow that will never come. You're the Boy Scout, not me."

"Well, no, Ray. I never joined the Boy Scouts. I don't think there was a troop in Inuvik when I was growing up. But I thought you said something once about your experiences as a Cub Scout..."

"Oh, just shut up, Fraser. I'm not awake enough yet." Ray felt around under the bed for his socks while Fraser carefully poured out the boiling coffee into mugs. *Works like a charm every time*, Ray thought, *and I really should be immune to it by now*. Fraser's talents for nagging and teasing put his mother and sisters to shame. After six months of close quarters they had settled on a morning ritual of Ray complaining and Fraser being the annoying voice of reason.

Ray sipped his coffee gratefully. "How much coffee have we got left?"

Fraser was rummaging in the box he kept his clothes in. "About five pounds from the supplies we brought from Carey's store," he said over his shoulder. "I just opened a new bag."

"Oh. About a month's worth, then. I keep telling you, Fraser, you don't want to know me in the morning without coffee."

Fraser found what he was looking for and settled into the chair. "Oh, I don't think so, Ray. I've think I've got a pretty good picture of what you're really like already," and he looked up with that twitch to his mouth again.

"Oh, gee, thanks. Still... Well, we'll just have to find some more. Damned if I'm going to try kinnykinny or whatever it is grows locally."

Fraser was busy with something in his lap and didn't answer.

"Anyway, we'll be gone from here by then, probably," Ray said, more to himself than Fraser. Trying out the words, trying to make his hopes come real. "It's almost like real spring here, and things have to be better back home and down south of here." He sat for a few moments in moody contemplation, then looked up. "Fraser, what *are* you doing?"

"Unraveling my old socks, Ray."

"O-kaay, let me guess, this is part of some local spring celebration, isn't it? When the ice breaks up everybody stands on the river bank and throws shredded socks into the air?"

"Of course not, Ray. You know, I sometimes wonder if you come up with these ideas just to annoy me. 'Canadian' isn't synonymous with 'eccentric,' you know." Ray just looked at him. "I'm just saving the yarn."

"Oh." That sounded reasonable. "Why?"

"We may need it." Just like Fraser, all practicality. Prudent, resourceful, frugal.

"What would we need it for?" Ray persisted. "What possible use will we have for old, threadbare bits of sock yarn?"

Fraser looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, it can come in handy for darning socks."

"What socks? You're unraveling them."

"And re-knitting."

"Do you know how to knit?"

"Ah, no. Do you?"

"Don't change the subject. So when are you going to re-knit those socks you're taking apart? Why save the yarn?"

All amusement left Fraser's face. "Because things have changed, Ray."

"No, they haven't," Ray contradicted automatically. "You're just exactly the same, and still the most annoying man in the world."

Fraser just gave him a sad look. "The world's a lot smaller than it was."

"I don't believe that. We don't know for sure because we're stuck here in a frozen backwater that nobody cares about coming to check on." Ray could hear his voice getting louder, trying to drown out the doubt that grew with Fraser's silence.

"We're going to leave here, Fraser. We're going to find out what's happened in the rest of the country and we're going to find someplace safe and civilized and then go home. We are

going to go home to a place that has coffee and socks and indoor plumbing. We are not going to need to save worn-out socks!"

"And what if we can't do that?"

It was the old argument between them, the one they had been thrashing out, off and on, all winter. "Well, we can't stay here, Fraser. Look at this place. We've got to go somewhere better suited."

"I don't know, Ray. There are worse places."

"Oh? Name three."

Fraser just looked at him, and Ray repented the facetiousness. "Yeah, okay, sure it could be worse, but sitting around here waiting for god knows what is going to *make* it worse."

Fraser sighed. "I belong here, Ray," he said simply.

"Right. And I don't. So I have to go home. You're in your element. All this Sergeant Preston stuff must be what good little Mounties dream of. It's not like you have any real family you need to take care of."

Fraser stiffened slightly, just enough for Ray to tell that the wisecrack had hurt. "Aw, I'm sorry, Benny. That was dumb of me. Forget I said it."

"Ray, I love your family too. There are people I love in Chicago. But we can't go back. Seriously. I don't think we have the supplies to make it."

"We'll find stuff," Ray said, but he knew he was being obstinate.

"Ray, you can't do this."

"Do what?"

Fraser's strong fingers were still picking at the sock in his hands, little jerks as each row unraveled, but his eyes were fixed on Ray. "You have to be *here*. You have to be *now*. You have to take care of the living, and you have to be alive to do that, and you can't survive in the North if you keep thinking it's something it's not."

"I *know* what it is. It's cold, and barren, and full of trees and annoying animals, and you have to scrape the bottom of every barrel to get enough to get by on. I'm a survivor, Fraser, and I'm not stupid. I just don't believe that we have to stay here living like hippies when there's a possibility that civilization is *not* dead!"

Someone knocked again, derailing Fraser's reply. Ray looked at the door, the length of the

cabin elongating suddenly. Sighing, he pushed the covers aside.

"I'll get that, Ray." Fraser stepped quickly over to the door and cracked it open. Susan's voice boomed into Ray's exhaustion. "Hey, guys, we've got a problem at the washhouse. Looks like the ice has heaved the well pipes."

Fraser nodded and immediately turned to put his boots back on. Ray flopped back down on the bed with a thump of disgust.

"I don't believe this..." Ray moaned.

"Aren't you coming, Ray?" Fraser fumbled with the laces of his boots. Ray sternly refused to be moved.

"Let someone else help out on this one, I already did my good deed for today."

Fraser nodded silently, tucking his pants into the boots. His face went quiet and still. "I heard about what Alain did. I ran into Ista walking him back to his cabin. We've actually been fortunate that there haven't been more like him. It's a good thing you were there."

"Thanks, Fraser," Ray muttered as he hauled on his pullover. "That is so encouraging, knowing that we're the only ones around here capable of dealing with psychos." Ray sighed as he rose from the warm bed. "I guess I just don't understand why we always get stuck with everything."

Susan poked her head around the door. "You guys decent yet? Even if you're not, you better get the hell over there. Greg Nelson has started to organize." She was a tall woman with wavy brown hair that fell to her shoulders. Her hands were constantly in motion and her fingernails worn and splintered with hard work. She had come to the Yukon ten years ago following her boyfriend. He had quit after one winter. Susan stayed and spent her time picking up odd jobs at fisheries in the salmon season and plumbing during the off seasons.

Seeing they were finally moving, Susan nodded and withdrew, stomping her way back down the path with Fraser close on her heels.

By the time Ray had followed Fraser to the pump house he was tired and cold and wet and muddy and deeply depressed. Somewhere between the well pump and the river valve, just outside the old washhouse that held the water storage tank, the main water supply line had burst. A small mud geyser was boiling

over and spreading freezing water into the rotten snowdrifts that dotted the open ground running down to the river. Almost everyone in the small settlement had come out to look at the mess. Half of them were running around pointlessly under the direction of a hefty middle-aged man who was, bizarrely, wearing sunglasses and shorts, and half of them were standing around looking deeply thoughtful. *Great help either group is, Ray thought. Me and Fraser included. We're just part of the standing-around group.*

The settlement's water supply was obtained from a combination of well water and intake from the river. Keeping the pump generator going had been first priority all winter for their gasoline supplies. If it had failed then they would have to melt snow or haul buckets, and now, Ray thought savagely, some know-it-all bozo had gone and wrecked the whole contraption by turning on the river pump, even though the line was still frozen. *I will not think about what will happen if we don't get more fuel for the generators. If we can't fix it then goodbye running water, it's back to buckets from the river, boiling your own water, and god knows what diseases.*

Mud, icy mud, icy water, more mud. *Jeez, you'd think nobody here had ever seen indoor plumbing before.* Brian at least had a pipe wrench and length for cap, though he didn't seem to know exactly what to do with it. He started toward the location of the break, but when he sank knee deep into the mud he just stopped.

One of the bystanders detached from the group and made her way over to Fraser and Ray. She was slightly stooped and her hair was gray, but Ray thought that Naomi had only yielded the barest minimum to age, and that probably after a mean fight. She addressed them directly, somehow managing to look both of them straight in the eye. She reminded Ray way too much of the sisters back in school, making him feel that he was responsible for things he hadn't even thought of yet. *Why doesn't she go dump on the Nelsons? We're just tourists stuck here, same as them.*

"There are spare fittings for the water system in the back of my garage," Naomi said without preamble. "I asked the construction crew to leave us what they didn't need."

"Why, is this what usually happens every

spring?"

"No, it hasn't happened before. We just put in the central water source last year. The engineer from Whitehorse swore that the intake pipes were deep enough that no break-up ice could touch them."

"Government man, I'll bet."

She stopped and looked expressionlessly at the growing pool of icy mud. They all did. "Things like this are bound to happen." She smiled suddenly, big amusement, and then it was gone. Ray was reminded of Fraser, and sure enough, he had that faint twitch of his lips. *Great, Ray thought, that's all I need right now, more of that knock-'em-dead Canadian humor.*

"I'll go with you and see what we can use. Ray?"

"Nah, I'm going to try and get the valve shut off. I suppose it's too much to hope for that there's a plan of the water system somewhere?"

"There might be," said Naomi, and she and Fraser shared another of those looks.

And he thought he'd been depressed before. Ray started off down to the river, collecting Ista and Danny along the way.

When they got to the riverbank, ice was building up against the valve platform. Words failed him. Which was a good thing, because he would have wasted a lot of energy expressing them and he needed every bit to work the valve. It took all the strength of the three of them together to get it turned off, after they had improvised a lever to work against the resistance in the slowly deforming valve stem.

They trudged back to the pump house. Fraser was there with Nodin and Susan, laying out lengths of iron pipe.

Their course of action was clear. Dig out the break and fix it. There was still water in the tank. Then figure out a way to deal with that ice jam at the valve platform. Ray didn't know much about ice. Fraser did not look happy when he told him about the jam.

"Didn't anybody plan for ice jams? Everybody's been telling me for months just how spectacularly destructive they can be, and nobody thought about it?"

It wasn't all that different from the time the water main blew out between the main line in the street and the house. Except the volume was about ten times greater and there was no

easy way to shut off the flow from the river. Ray's old man had stood on the sidewalk that time, screaming at the city water crew, the plumber, the neighbors, and Ray, while Maria and Franny had made boats to float down the flood in the gutter, and Ray had grabbed some old bricks and boards and channeled the flow away from the basement windows, across the front yard, and down the driveway to the street.

God, that memory hurt. No one to laugh with about it any more, no one who remembered with him.

By yelling only a little bit Ray got most of the bystanders to grab a shovel and start digging out the break. It was miserable work handling shovels full of mud and slush.

"Where do you want us to put the slush?" Greg asked.

"Hunh? Put it where it won't get in the way."

Greg looked vaguely around at the well-trodden area.

"Put it where it won't melt into the hole. *There,*" Ray pointed, where Brian was dumping it.

Greg Nelson was a nice enough guy, probably, maybe, in his place, wherever that was. Taking a long trip in an RV up the Alcan highway from Boulder with his family, wife Debbie and two teenagers. Wife had the sense to refuse to move from their campsite when the news of the plague came, and they all showed up here a month later. Greg wanted to know first thing what everybody did in the real world, in order to maximize the human potential, he said. Naomi finally told him to shut up one day and Ray had silently cheered.

Susan was the only person who had actual plumbing experience. "Look, you don't do it that way, because then this won't work. See?" Earnest faces nodded and everyone carefully began modeling themselves on Susan's actions. *Geez, can't anybody here think for themselves?* Ray wondered. *Some of them, probably not. I probably wouldn't do so well if I didn't have Fraser pointing out little things to me, if I hadn't spent a few summers up at the cabin. They weren't made to be self-sufficient. Nobody is, not really.* But that thought was too faint and was swallowed up in the mud.

The umpteenth time Greg came up to him



to ask which direction the threads went and shouldn't they use plumber's tape (not that they had any) or solder (ditto) and shouldn't they wait and go scrounge for them, and why didn't this pipe wrench fit, he really needed a different size, and was Ray sure the broken heat tape was safe, Ray had had it. "Look, why are you asking me?" Greg looked taken aback. "I don't know anything about well plumbing."

"But I thought you were, uh, uh..."

"You're some kind of manager, right? Well, you go manage. I'm just a cop. You see any kind of crime, call me." And Ray stomped off into the well house to get the hell away from everybody.

Fraser had shut down the tank intake line and was working on wrenching off a capped valve on the tank. From the amount of effort he was putting into it and the lack of apparent progress, the installation guys must have used a hydraulic wrench to close it. The futility of it all lit Ray's anger again.

"Fraser, I swear this is it. I don't know what more proof you want that we need to get out of here. I don't know a damn thing about what we're doing. I don't know why we're even here, and I am not going to sit here and wait for some Canadian bureaucrat to finally show up and bail us out."

Fraser gave up on the cap for the moment and sat down on an upturned bucket. He let the wrench drop and flexed his hand, rubbing the strain out of the tendons. He was sweating even in the cold, and his cheeks were flushed with exertion. Ray found another bucket, flipped it over, and sat down next to Fraser. He only then realized that he was soaked nearly to the hip with icy, gritty mud, and his gloves were so sodden as to be useless. *What a pair.*

"We're not doing any good here babysitting a bunch of tourists who can't find their ass in a hole in the ground, and locals who know more about living in the Yukon than we do. And if we do stay here, Fraser, they're going to work you to death. And me too."

"Somebody has to lead, Ray. To be visible and available, and point in roughly the right direction in a crisis. You know that. It's why people listen to police officers. Even if they think you're wrong, it makes people feel secure enough to begin to think for themselves."

"I don't think this bunch will ever learn to

think for themselves."

"Then we have to stay. We're all they have."

"That's bullshit. We're not indispensable."

"And what if they are all that we have?"

"Well, they're not, so you'll have to come up with a better reason."

Fraser got a strange look on his face, but before he could speak Ray burst out, "So help me God, Fraser, if you start telling me an Inuit story I'm gonna brain you with this piece of pipe!"

That actually made Fraser smile. "No, it wasn't an Inuit story, Ray."

"Good. I'm too tired to fight over this again." Ray pried himself up off his bucket and gave a hand to Fraser to pull him up. "I just want to get this fixed before something else breaks down."

It took the rest of the day to fix the break. By sunset the only thing left was to figure out how to get the river intake bypassed, and the layouts for the initial design were still back in Naomi's garage. Ray went off to take a look at them, glad to stretch his legs a bit at last.

Glancing at the gathering dark, he walked to her cabin. Naomi's cabin had been here before the rest of the settlement had been built, and was furthest away from the road. There was a footpath shortcut from the river and Ray took that way, instead of the track that approached it from the muddy flat.

It was funny how much he didn't like the dusk anymore. The sky overhead was still deeply blue, and the dark seemed to rise up from among the trees. The footpath was more uneven and overgrown than it ought to be. The stubby dead twigs of the spruces snapped as he passed, too loud in his ears. The gray knobby trunks seemed deliberately to block his way. Ray felt intensely stupid for going this way without some kind of light, and more stupid for the unease that crept between his shoulder blades. He was only a hundred yards from the settlement, but the world was reduced to cold, and dark, and rustling shadows tracing his movement just beyond his range of sight.

And then the footpath dodged a clump of willows, and there was the light in the window of Naomi's cabin.

He knocked politely, restraining the urge to pound for admittance, and a voice called

from inside, "Come in." Naomi was sitting by her stove, peeling a few wrinkled potatoes. They were the last they'd see unless they managed to seed some this spring.

Naomi looked quizzically at Ray, then down at his feet. Hastily, he stepped back onto the porch and pulled off his mud-caked shoes and then stepped back inside.

"Hi, Naomi, how's it going?"

"Fine, Ray." She peeled another strip then let it fall into the compost bucket at her feet.

Ray waited but Naomi kept working. His mother's hair had been snow white, but she had started to dye it after her friends had told her she looked old. Ray doubted any of Naomi's friends would have dared comment on her hair color.

"Sorry to bother you, but we're going to need the plans for the well pump after all."

"Oh, of course. They're in one of those boxes over there by the window. Can't remember which one."

She placed a peeled potato in the bowl next to her. The paring knife flashed briefly in the light of the lamp.

The boxes were grimy and had cobwebs trailing from the rotting cardboard. Ray thought of offering to do the potato peeling if Naomi would just find the damn plans. But the gleam of the knife stopped him short. On second glance, it wasn't a paring knife. More like a boning blade.

"Right. Okay, I'd better get on with it while I can see what I'm doing."

"Well, make yourself useful before you go. Shove the couch back under the window. It sticks out too far into the middle of the room."

Naomi pointed to the corner with her blade. The couch looked perfectly fine where it was. It was covered in a multi-colored knitted blanket. Ray leaned closer and saw that a film of fine gray hair had settled over the wool. Wolf hair. He looked suspiciously around but Diefenbaker was nowhere in sight. Somehow it didn't surprise him the two would hit it off. They were similar—gray-haired, opinionated, and certain they were the center of the world.

He shoved experimentally against the couch and nearly bounced back. The thing felt like it was made of concrete. His stocking feet slipped on the wood floor and he tried pulling the sofa in the opposite direction.

As he was puzzling over the sofa's lack of movement, Naomi pointed out helpfully, "My husband used to slip it on a rug and then slide the rug across the floor." No one could even remember Naomi's husband, but Ray was certain he had not died of natural causes. "So have you been reading the Inuit storybook *Ussak* lent you?"

Ray tried looking under a pile of blankets for a throw rug, but only found a bag of rags. "No. I mean yes, I just haven't finished it." *Shit*, he thought. *I hoped she'd forgotten*. He caught sight of the tail end of something woven underneath the coffee table and knelt down.

"Should've finished it by now. Was written for third graders."

Bright red and yellow magazines spilled over the floor. He began stacking them off to the side so he could reach the rug.

"Well, never mind. They never put the best stories in there. Wouldn't dare, too afraid of their real heritage. Gotta live in a white man's world, or at least in a white-flavored world. Soon you start to even like Wonder Bread." She snorted and tossed another potato into the bowl. Ray wondered who the hell she could be cooking for. She lived alone.

The magazine pile slid again, spilling *Popular Mechanics* and *National Geographic* into a fan of slick paper. They must have been twenty years old—yellowing water stains wrinkling the covers.

"Well, my favorite is the one called—Itovitaggi. The young mother who faces her first famine. She has one child—her first born—and he has only reached two years..."

Ray nodded politely. *Oh God, what is it with Canadians and Inuit stories?* With the magazines out of the way he began inching the coffee table off the rug. A pile of papers slid off the coffee table and he snatched them before they could cover the magazine pile.

"But food is scarce and the village decides to ration. They choose her son to receive half-rations. He is the only child under six. When he dies, they sing a song to honor her sacrifice. The youngest can always be reborn—but if grown men and women can live to the next season, they can create more life and hunt to feed the rest."

He tossed the papers into a corner, not caring where they landed. Savagely he jerked

the rug loose and stood, allowing it to trail behind him. "That's a load of crap, Naomi," he said and resisted the urge to sneeze. Dust and short gray hairs floated through the room.

"Really?" Naomi's eyes were cold. "I thought the same thing when I tasted my first Big Mac."

Ray stifled the urge to drop the rug and walk out of the cabin. Smiling tightly, he lifted one sofa leg and crammed the edge of the rug under the sofa. The leg skidded and pinched his hand. Swearing, he sat down abruptly.

Naomi watched him closely, her hands still, the knife balanced loosely between her wrinkled fingers. Suddenly breathless, he snapped his mouth shut. Naomi leaned forward, her face shadowed. The sun had set and the room had moved past gray into a darkening blue. Only her eyes glittered, flicking back and forth like black pebbles in her small face. Uneasy, Ray rolled to his knees. The damn sofa could wait.

"I think the sofa can wait," her voice said tersely. Ray jumped awkwardly to his feet, heart pounding. She had moved in the dark, and was standing next to the kitchen table. The gas lamp flared weakly and light fluttered across the fully darkened room.

Ray blinked rapidly, wondering how she'd known what he was thinking. This was getting too creepy. Swallowing past the lump, he edged toward the door.

"But, Ray, you're not right about Fraser." She seemed smaller and more bird-like in the dim light. The door slid further into the distance. He felt over-warm.

"What do you mean? What's not right?"

He panted, startled to feel the knob to the cabin door sliding under his hand. One turn, that was all he'd need.

Naomi sighed and he felt a feather soft touch brush past his face. The cool night air was waiting for him on the other side. Just one more turn. "Son, you act like Fraser has all the answers. Well, he doesn't."

The door cracked open, and Ray focused on the solidity of the metal knob, its connection to the door, and the escape that lay beyond. But Naomi's voice held him back. Breathing heavily, he peered over his shoulder like a child squinting at something he couldn't bear to see.

"You want to know what Fraser's real fear

is?" Her voice had tightened, each word exploding into the room like a sharp caw. "I think he's afraid you won't make it here. A man can lose only so much before he loses himself." The doorknob turned and he lurched down the steps. He stumbled into the dark, half blinded by the hammering of his heart.

"What the hell, what the hell," he heard himself mutter. The air cleared his head enough for him to realize he had left his shoes on the porch. His mouth was dry. Overhead, the stars gleamed faintly. Steeling himself, he faced the cabin. The kitchen light glowed warmly and the door was firmly shut. Nothing sinister here. Nothing that could explain the hammering in his chest, the tang of sweat. As he grabbed his boots, he decided someone else could hunt for the plans tomorrow.

He returned to the cabin and peeled off his clothes. Too tired to even fold them, he left them in the middle of the floor in a muddy heap. The stove was alight, but there was no sign of Fraser. This time the bed felt warm, not clammy, and he crashed gratefully into the middle of it, curled up, and fell asleep like the stunned.

He awoke in the dark to the knowledge that Fraser was lying next to him. His presence was comforting in a way that Ray had given up trying to explain to himself, beyond the reassurance of warmth and life. He rolled over, trying to get himself a little more room without waking Fraser, and shuddering at the contact of the cold sheet. Fraser stirred, and shifted, and laid his hand on Ray's shoulder, pulling him back into shared warmth.

When he next awoke, a weak light was beginning to wash the opposite wall of the cabin. Ray got up carefully and hunted silently for his clothes. A fresh pair of jeans and a flannel shirt sat on the dining-room chair. Sighing, he put on Fraser's peace offering and glanced back at him, noticing without surprise how tired he looked, even in the relaxation of sleep. Ray stepped out into the chill dawn, lacing up his boots and heading off to take advantage of the next hour or so.

Danny's cabin had been built early on in the life of the village. The crudeness of its décor was made up for by the fact that it was unusually large—it even had a small workshop attached to the back.

Danny looked up as he slipped through the door and greeted him. "Glad you could make it. Sleep well?"

"Hmmm," Ray grumped and pulled up a chair. "Now that Fraser's back, maybe someone else will take the graveyard shift. At least until the mud dries up and the pipes stop bursting." His stomach growled and he thought hopefully of breakfast.

Danny shook his head and handed the wires to Ray. "There'll always be something else, Ray. Here, take this. I'll see if Steph has something extra left over."

Ray nodded his thanks and gingerly angled the shortwave radio toward the light. Wire the scrounged receiver in place, connect up the power source, and maybe this one would work. It hadn't been easy cannibalizing the spare parts from the bits that Alain had left behind. There'd been only two shortwave radios in the camp. Some of the surrounding homesteads had had radios, but radio manufacturers had stubbornly refused to standardize. However, Danny had done some ham radio fiddling in his youth and Ray was willing to experiment endlessly with parts and connections.

Once the decision had been made, finding the time to repair the radio in secret had been the hardest task. Ray and Danny had decided to surprise the village on Break-up Day, which meant they spent most of their time cramped in the small workshed.

Ray held the copper wires steady and squinted into the dim light. "Don't slip," Danny interrupted cheerfully from the doorway. In the background, Ray could hear Ussak and Victor shouting as they ran out the front of the cabin.

"Shit," Ray swore, biting his lip in frustration. "If I slip, it'll be you who treks out into the wilderness and finds another one." Deftly, he twisted the wires in place for a few more seconds and then pulled back to analyze his handiwork.

"It looks fine, Ray," Danny answered. His hands full, he kicked the door shut. The slamming cut off Victor's shouting. "And eat something, will you? You're making me nervous with all that grumbling."

"My stomach or my mouth?" Ray answered wryly, but pushed back and reached

for the plate. The rice dish was simple, but it set off another round of noisy complaint from his stomach.

Danny shook his head and a companionable silence fell. A sheet of window glass lay against the far wall, picking up the rising sun and casting a golden shadow across Danny's face. Steph had cut his hair short and it stood up ragged like stubble in a cornfield.

Ray swallowed the last bite and put the plate down. "Thanks. Tell Steph I appreciate the meal."

"You know," Danny smiled, "she makes extra for you and Fraser. Just in case you get stuck hauling broken pipe or wading through mud. Makes her feel useful."

"She's raising two kids not her own, keeping us fed, and learning how to fix snowmobiles, and thinks she's not being useful?" Ray retorted with amusement. Steph reminded him of his mother—without the constant nagging. Danny was lucky.

"Well, you try telling her that. She won't listen to me." Danny wrinkled his face in thought. "She likes you. And Fraser." Another pause fell, while Ray positioned the battery bay for the next step.

"Almost there," Ray muttered and gripped his wrist to hold his right hand steady. Without the battery connections in place, there'd be no power. Unless they rigged something from the generator. Which would take at least another week, the rate things were going.

"I mean," Danny continued, "there's something about Fraser. I've never known anyone like him before."

Ray wriggled the wires, hoping Danny would focus on what he was doing. "What do you expect? He's a Mountie." He watched narrowly as Danny released the pin and held his breath.

"No, that's not it. I've seen a lot of Mounties, but he's really...reassuring."

A wave of exasperation swept over Ray. Sighing, he tried to focus on what Danny was saying. "So he's reassuring. He's also irritating. You haven't lived until you've seen him tasting mud." He peered at the radio for a minute. "Got it!" he exclaimed. "Damn, that was tricky."

Ray slipped his hands out from under the radio and wiped his damp palms on his pants.

Give it a few more minutes and they could pop in the batteries for testing.

Danny placed the iron on the bench and glanced at Ray. "Well," he said, clearing his throat, "all I know is that you're now officially 'partners.'"

"Fraser and I are partners. We've been partners for years. What are you talking about?"

Danny's eyes hovered between amusement and soberness. "You survived a winter together in a cabin and not only didn't shoot each other, you remained friends. In the gold-rush days here that was taken as a sign that the partnership could survive anything."

Ray shook his head. "Oh, I don't know. I have to say that I was sorely tempted a few times." But he felt the corner of his mouth twitch into a smile.

"Well, whatever the two of you have together, it shows. We're damn lucky to have both of you here." Amusement had been replaced by something more serious. Ray shifted uncomfortably.

"Look, Danny, you know we're moving on." Danny nodded. "If you want, you're welcome to come. It'll be a hard trek, but I can talk to Fraser and we can work out the logistics."

"Thanks, Ray. But I'll have to talk it over with Steph. She doesn't want to upset the kids too much. Them having lost their parents so recently and all." He paused again. "There's just been so much happening lately. Sometimes

I don't know if we're coming or going. I guess that's what I was getting at."

Ray lifted the batteries and slipped them into the bays. "Getting at what?" he asked absently.

"About Fraser. It's like he's a magnet always pointing north. You know? Or like those directional finders that they use in the fog on the seas."

Ray flipped the switch and heard the soft rustle of static fill the air. Both men fell silent for a few moments, listening to the hissing, striving to shape words out of the formless sounds. But the bands were quiet, and after a few rotations, Ray switched off the power.

"Well, you can't expect to pick up a broadcast the first try," Ray explained. "Besides, if we keep running it, the kids will hear. And then where'll be the surprise?"

Danny nodded somewhat disappointedly. Together they carefully covered the radio with a cloth and cleaned up the workbench. Danny pressed him to stay, but Ray declined. As much as he liked Danny, sometimes he needed to get away from him, from his doubts, his fears, and his need for reassurance. Never mind that these were the same feelings that would creep into Ray's mind as he lay in the dark, listening to the sound of Fraser's soft breathing and the gentle movements of the sleeper beside him. Like last night, as he fell asleep in the empty room, hearing the silent radio static that swept him into his unremembered dreams.

---

### Chapter 3: The Difference

*"THE DIFFERENCE between despair  
And fear, is like the one  
Between the instant of a wreck,  
And when the wreck has been.  
The mind is smooth,—no motion—."*

—Emily Dickinson

---

Break-up day was sunny, filled with cooking, the energetic arranging of chairs, tables, and housewares, and the excitement that only a crisp spring day could provide. The path to the river was trodden over and over. The children kept a frenzied pace, running back to the visitor center with hourly reports.

Elu and Steph had decorated the center with ribbons and wreaths they had made over the long winter nights. Balloons were now a thing of the past. The card tables grew crowded as more families piled more food haphazardly. The smell of roasting venison tickled the air, mingling with the aromas of baking fish and bread.

Ray had decided to take the day off. He sat comfortably in the center, watching the bustle with amusement. Ilene, worrying over the delay in the baking, had dragooned the Nelsons into retrieving more wood for the stoves. Her hair, piled in two neat braids, had slipped during the course of a frustrated exchange with Elu. Small bits of curls stood edgily away from her forehead. Ray tipped his chair back, balancing the legs in midair, and listened. She sounded like a bird, feathers ruffled, chasing two squirrels around and around her nest.

His contentment was marred only by the fact that he had awakened alone. Fraser had been there; the warmth of his body had still been noticeable, seeping into Ray's limbs when he rolled to the other side of their bed.

Two years since they'd come home from a celebratory bust. Since Fraser had turned in the middle of Ray's drunken recitation of their success and pulled him into a hug. And Ray, swept away by the moment, had responded to Fraser's touch, flowing into the deepening embrace, the feathering caresses, culminating

in the deeper kiss. Ray had allowed himself to be led into that night, allowed the sensations and emotions to wash over him and draw him into the velvet darkness. But when he'd awakened, lying loosely in Fraser's arms, the moment, the sensations, the emotions were gone. The man beside him was only a man. And because he was a man, they could go no further.

Because in the world Ray inhabited—the world of Catholic guilt, overbearing mothers, and family scrutiny, as well as professional impossibilities—in his world, men loving other men had no place. Whatever feelings he might have had for Fraser, in his world they had no place, and with no place he could not give them form or shape or life. In his world, Ray learned to live within the rules of others.

And so he muttered his apologies, feigned drunken confusion, and stepped out the door as quickly as he could. And Fraser had let him go. And that had been the end of the matter. Or so had Ray had thought.

He wasn't sure what Fraser thought. Sometimes he thought he caught regret in Fraser's eyes. Sometimes when he felt Fraser's arm drape companionably around his shoulders, or when their hips and elbows brushed as they maneuvered in their tiny bed, he wondered if Fraser missed something. If that was why he kept himself further from Ray, inside.

The chair wavered and Ray reached out to steady it. Now that he thought about it, he realized that Fraser had managed to be somewhere else for some time. And when they were together, one of them was either asleep or exhausted. Or responding to another crisis or an urgent request for something that someone just

could not live without. The chair slipped again and fell forward with a thud. Ray rested his hands on his thighs and stretched. Well, he didn't have to just sit here. The chair skidded back and he strode into the kitchen.

The heat washed past him, a blast of disagreement quickly on its heels. "You don't start the pies now. The temperature has to be much higher." Ilene tilted her head back at Elu in frustration. Elu bore a patient, well-worn air that threatened to spill into mutiny. She held an uncooked pie in one hand, a potholder clutched in the other like a talisman to ward off evil humors. Ray decided his interruption was perfectly timed. "Hey, Ilene, where's Fraser? He's been up since morning and I haven't seen him."

Both women turned, startlement, irritation, and relief flowing between them almost interchangeably. Ilene finally settled on irritation. "I haven't seen him. I've been in here since before dawn." She snipped out the last sentence and turned back to Elu, opening her mouth to resume her directions. Elu studiously ignored her and smiled in Ray's direction. "He and Iostas went out early."

"Doing what?" Ray felt the heat batter against him more acutely. No wonder they were fighting.

Elu shrugged. Ilene reached out, plucked the pie from her hands, and marched it back to the counter. Elu followed, her face pursing with disapproval. "Ilene, we need to start the pies now. Fraser said break-up would start by ten."

Sighing, Ray scuffled back into the main hall. Greg Nelson entered at the same time, dragging his two sons. Protestations filled the air and Ray quickly exited through the side door.

Outside, the sun had reached its mid-mark. Ray scanned the area, looking for someone who was not caught up in the mindless frenzy. Was he the only one who thought the idea of designing a celebration around Fraser's break-up prediction ridiculous? But the square was empty. Apparently not. Giving in to the inevitable, he started down the path to the river. The many feet had only deepened the mud, leaving Ray to hop from side to side for secure footing. The path opened as it curved toward the river. Near the bend, a crowd stood,

gathered in small clumps. The sloping riverbanks could barely hold the group; almost all of Stewart Junction seemed to have turned out for the show. Ray noted with approval that no one had spilled over onto the ice. Using his height, he scanned for Fraser. Elu's family was there, but Iostas was missing. So was Fraser.

He caught sight of Danny and Steph, who waved him over. Winding his way through the press of bodies, he caught a whiff of alcohol. Even Larry had managed to make it. Where the hell was Fraser?

He nodded hello to Steph and stood next to her. She held Ussak's shoulders firmly, her face tight with anticipation. A scattering of flour rested on her cheek. Danny stood next to her, holding Victor. Both boys squirmed with embarrassment at being kept so far back. Ray looked inquiringly at Danny.

"They wanted a closer look at the ice," his friend answered. Ussak rotated in Steph's grip in protest. "Did not," the young boy said. "We just wanted to stand next to Fraser when he gets here." Steph smiled and brushed the hair away from the boy's face. Ussak turned a dusky shade in embarrassment and fell silent. *Me too*, thought Ray, gazing down at the boy.

"Hey, there's Dief." Victor pointed abruptly, dropping Danny's hand. Ray caught the younger boy as he surged forward. "Hold on. Look, he's coming over. No need to rush off." Victor shrugged him off and knelt to embrace Diefenbaker. Ussak followed and Ray took advantage of the distraction to scan again for Fraser.

Danny's voice interrupted him. "He'll be here, Ray." Ray glanced over and smiled back reassuringly. "Sure he will. But don't you think you all are taking this a bit too seriously? I mean, it's just ice." Danny shook his head and opened his mouth as if to contradict him.

A loud, explosive crack whipped across Ray's nerves. Instinctively, he crouched slightly as if seeking cover. The noise repeated and he shifted his attention to the river. A large crack split the width of the channel, traveling in a straight line from side to side. Ray stared and another crack shot a spray of ice particles explosively into the air. The light passed through the miniscule pieces, turning the spray into a sparkling curtain. More and more cracks appeared, swiftly creating a web until the ice dis-

solved into sound and motion.

The river shimmered, trembling, and then the first chunk broke free. Smaller pieces slipped under the ice plate, undermining the stability of the whole. An eerie moaning rose into the air. Ray froze, and then realized it was the ice groaning as it died. He suddenly realized he was holding his breath and tried to shake himself free.

A cheer went up as a large mass of ice the size of a truck slipped past. Piece after piece of ice cascaded into the next, further breaking the solid surface and shifting the entire body of frozen water slowly downriver. A chill slithered down Ray's spine. It had happened so quickly. He could almost feel the ground beneath his feet pick up the rippling, could sense the footing give way as he fell. He breathed deeply again and shut his eyes. After a moment he forced them open but the sense of disorientation remained. He looked to his right, but Danny was clapping, his wife leaning into him as she excitedly pointed to a large chunk of river ripping itself apart. The two boys stood on tiptoe, jostling for a better view. Biting his lip, he wandered through the crowd, the disconnectedness growing. There was something uncanny about the reverence, the unity of the awe emanating from the onlookers. It had an almost primitive air: the natives gathering to worship the ice gods.

Turning his head, he glimpsed Fraser near the treeline at the edge of the crowd, the same look of veneration flickering on his face. Ray blinked in confusion, but by then Fraser had noticed his gaze. He smiled back, a calm and bland mask replacing the unfamiliar expression. The sudden alteration set Ray's teeth on edge even as it unnerved him. He didn't know what Fraser was up to, but now wasn't the time or place to find out. He looked away quickly, finding the river filled with chaos and destruction. No, this wasn't the time or place, he thought, listening to the sounds of merriment around him. Besides, Ista was close by. Obviously they'd just come from another tête-à-tête about caribou or the best method for making stone tools from river rocks. Something shot up high into the air, glittering in the sun, and the crowd murmured. Then the chunk of ice came crashing down like a breaching whale. Ray looked again for Fraser but he was gone,

so he turned reluctantly back to the river.

The crowd wandered slowly back toward the settlement. Victor and Ussak chattered excitedly ahead, repeating endlessly their descriptions of the size of each ice floe. Echoes of other conversations floated back: the Nelsons wondering how long it'd take the river to clear, Susan asking Nodin when they could expect the river to be ready for net fishing. The unity of opinion irritated Ray. These people were like sheep sometimes. It was just ice breaking. A spectacular sideshow next to the real thing: spring was here and he and Fraser could finally get the hell out of here. He looked sourly around at the crowd as it bunched at the turn. Even Danny and Steph were stepping blindly along the path with the rest, patiently waiting hand in hand until Naomi cleared a boggy spot on the trail. Ray trudged silently behind them all.

As he approached the center, the smell of cooking revived him a little. By the time he pushed through the doors, the normalcy of the surroundings lifted his spirits. The milling faces now beamed with excitement, not blind wonder. The conversations drifted away from the ice: Spring was here, warmer weather, easier living. Rescue would not be that far behind.

Ray snagged a plate and joined Danny and his family. Each table boasted a mismatch of chairs, assembled through donations from every household. He finished his first helping and headed back to the buffet for more. As he approached, Fraser suddenly stood up from Ista's table and strode over to join him. Ray quietly handed the serving spoon to his partner. He took a moment to observe Fraser more closely. No sign of the weirdness he'd seen earlier at the river. Fraser just looked tired, tense, and introspective. Ray picked up the soup ladle and spooned chowder into a bowl. Some of the soup spilled over his fingers and he shook his hand.

"So where were you this morning?" he asked, licking the fingers clean.

"I had some things I needed to talk to Ista about." Fraser reached out and handed him a napkin. Ray juggled the plate, soup bowl, and cloth until finally settling into a precarious balance.

"So, like what?" asked Ray as Fraser



reached out again, rescuing a slice of bread that had started to creep over the edge of Ray's plate.

"We're thinking of getting together a hunting party to shoot caribou during their migration." Fraser began loading his plate. Ray turned his attention back to the buffet, annoyed. The same blankness had crept over Fraser's face, the slight downward turn of the mouth, the shielded eyes. Fraser was not being straight with him.

"Why?" he drawled, shrugging his shoulders with just enough dismissiveness. "Is this another Canadian spring ritual, like watching chunks of ice floating down a river?"

Fraser's eyes flashed, catching the point, but his blankness held. "No. Care for some yams?" He held out the serving spoon. Ray looked down, the soup bowl in one hand and the plate in the other, and then looked up again. "No, I wouldn't. I hate yams."

Fraser nodded and put the spoon down. "Ah, yes, I should have remembered that."

An awkward silence fell as each man stared at his plate, then back at the buffet table. Ray smiled pointedly and nodded over to Danny's table. "So, I hope you'll stick around today. Danny and I have a surprise ready. Something really interesting."

Fraser frowned and opened his mouth as if to speak but Ray interrupted him. "Don't ask what, Fraser. It won't be a surprise if you ask what it is."

Fraser shook his head. "It won't be a surprise if you tell me, Ray, not if I ask."

Ray grinned sharply. "You're so right, Fraser. But it wouldn't be fair to spoil it now, would it? Kinda like eating dessert before the main meal." He nodded to Fraser and strode back to Danny's table, observing his partner's confusion with satisfaction.

As the meal wore on, the trips to the food tables slowed. Gauging the right moment, Ray tapped Danny on the elbow. They rose and sauntered slowly out of the center. It took only a few minutes to retrieve the radio and carry it into the center. Jason saw it first and craned to see it better. As he turned to tug on his mother's arm, Ray put a finger to his lips and winked. Jason winked back and nodded in head in agreement. Ray caught Danny's eye and they grinned. You had to know how to

handle kids.

After depositing the radio, still covered, on the table, Danny clambered on his chair and called for attention. The diners, sleepy with food, ignored him at first, but they soon caught on that someone was speaking and swiveled their heads. Danny waited until he thought his voice could be heard clearly.

"Well, thank you. I think." His face was slightly flushed as he bounced gently on his chair. Ray steadied it with one hand and removed Victor's fingers from beneath the blanket with the other.

"Anyway, Ray and I wanted to do something special for break-up day. You all remember what happened to the radios this December?"

Several people sitting nearest to Ray grumbled. The rest waited expectantly for Danny to make his point. Danny raised his hand, the chair teetering even more. Ray pressed down harder, hoping he wouldn't fall. "Well, anyway," Danny continued, "it wasn't easy. Considering the fact that neither one of us is an engineer."

"Hey, Danny. This'd better not be some more moonshine. God knows what a new batch'll do to us," Nodin yelled with amusement. His table laughed and Danny hesitated, turning a brighter red. Ray coughed into his free hand in amusement.

"No, no. Nothing like that. No, we've managed to pull together another shortwave radio."

A loud cheer went up. Several tourist families sitting near the Nelsons rose en masse and started to head toward them. Jason bounced up from his seat, nearly tripping over Victor to reach the table first. "Can I?" he asked, touching the cloth covering the radio.

"Sure, go ahead," Ray answered, matching the blond boy's eagerness with a grin. He rose, helping Danny slide back down to the floor, and then stood on his own chair. By now the press of bodies around their table was thick, but he wanted to make certain everyone in the center could hear.

"Hold on, folks. To be fair, we just finished jury-rigging the radio last night. It works, but we haven't been able to pick up any signals yet. Please keep in mind that we can't transmit yet. That part we couldn't fix. Oh, and the anten-

na—well, the antenna is not the best," he said wryly, looking down at the coat hanger they'd twisted for the purpose. "We haven't even been able to get KOFY."

"Thank God," shouted Susan, and several other locals laughed. KOFY was the only AM station that could reach the settlement. Its unique blend of weather reports, a call-in show, and bad '70s music made it universally unpopular. But it had been owned and funded by a retired millionaire who couldn't be bothered to change.

Ray waited for the laughter to die down. "Well, Susan aside, any objections to us turning it on and scanning during dessert?"

Several loud voices shouted no. Ray hopped down and nodded to Danny. He felt a hand tug on his elbow and turned slightly. Fraser leaned against him, his eyes dark and serious. "Ray, I don't think this is a good idea." Ray shrugged off Fraser's touch. "Come on. Just relax. It'll work. Danny and I tested it last night." Danny looked up nervously and nodded in confirmation. Fraser shook his head unhappily, but before he could add anything more, Greg Nelson shoved his way to the table.

"Come on, Ray. Don't leave us standing here. Turn the damn thing on." Murmurs of agreement rippled through the onlookers. Ray raised his hand for quiet and they complied. Danny plugged his headphones into the jack and began twisting the dial. Ray could feel Fraser hesitate behind him, move slightly forward as if in protest, and then move away.

Danny scanned slowly, his mouth pursed in concentration. Steph kept shushing the three boys and finally threatened to send them outside if they were not quiet. The adults were more manageable. Although a few turned away after the first few minutes of static, most kept their eyes on Danny and Ray.

Danny's fingers nimbly traced each band. With each click, the crowd grew even more silent. The air felt thick, the smell of food and people pushing to the back of Ray's throat. He looked around, but the press of bodies around the table made it hard to see. A few more people moved and he caught a glimpse of Ilene sitting with her head tilted to the side, straining to listen. Her disheveled hair fell about her face, framing her concentration. The crowd shifted and he saw Susan sitting next to her,

eyes wide, mouth slightly open, staring across the room at an empty wall. Listening. They were all listening. Each twist and only the faint hiss, the periodic stutter as each band was tested and then discarded. Ray began to sweat and swore inwardly. He hadn't thought the silence would have such an effect on them. He looked involuntarily around for Fraser, who had returned to his seat next to Ista. Ray was struck by the similarity in the way they leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, eyes fixed on their empty plates. He swore again and reached for the dial to stop the scanning.

Danny's hand shot up and Ray's hand froze. Danny had closed his eyes and was flicking the dial minutely back and forth. A faint hum and the voice threaded through the air. Tinny, filled with static, it faded a few times before settling into their ears:

"...the weather today. In more news, we're calling on all citizens to donate any extra canned goods to the recovery efforts. Portable tools and warm-weather clothing are also desperately needed." The man's voice raised a quiet cheer, quickly hushed. His American accent lifted Ray's spirit and he shut his eyes in thanks. "In other news, another three deserters and their families have been executed by the Fairbanks Regional Government. This brings the total number of deserters to thirteen this spring. Citizens are reminded that due to ongoing quarantine efforts, no entry into or exit from the Regional Territory is permitted. All dissidents will be treated as contaminants and will be dealt with appropriately. The survival of the Territory cannot be compromised." The speaker paused, clearing his throat.

Ray could hear the shock echoing throughout the center. Ilene covered her mouth, Danny's eyes, dark, met his in confusion. Ray shook his head fiercely, motioning him to hold the dial steady.

"The Fifth Expedition returned last week, confirming early reports. No signs of survivors below the 60th parallel. The mortality rate in areas that did not fall below -15 degrees this winter is estimated at 100%. Further analysis will be necessary to confirm these findings, but it is expected that the mutation rate in northern climates has been considerably reduced due to unfavorable climatic conditions. The Fifth Expedition voluntarily underwent euthanasia last

night to reduce the risk of transmission of any new mutations."

Debbie Nelson began weeping, a harsh, wet, and raw sound. Ray stared blankly for a moment, before remembering she had family in Fairbanks. Ray looked back at the radio, noting that Danny's hands had fallen into his lap. He sat, hunched forward, his eyes brimming. Ray breathed once deeply, leaned forward over the table, and spun the dial. The harsh squeal of static filled the room, slicing through the stunned silence, but Danny remained frozen in place, seemingly unaware of the noise. Ray glanced around the room. Paralyzed pale faces looked up, away, down, anywhere but at each other. Tears spilled over Susan's face, tracking their course painfully into the silence. Naomi bowed her head, her gray hair dull in the afternoon light. She reached blindly for Susan's hands and they held each other tightly. Grimly, Ray punched the power button and the radio stopped squealing. He swallowed, his throat dry and heavy. Dumb. He had been so dumb. He heard the soft beating of wings in the rafters and forced himself to turn to meet Fraser's eyes. His partner's face hung pale in the room, surrounded by darkness, bordered by painful awareness. *He knew*, Ray's mind whispered, before the silence broke into a wave of voices.

Greg Nelson, his face red and square, had the loudest voice: "See, I told you. We should have left months ago." His wife clutched their daughter tightly, the child's terror more a reaction to her mother's weeping than from any understanding of what had just happened.

"And what?" Susan stood to be heard over Greg's anger, trying to drown out the other voices. "Move to Fairbanks and be slaughtered? Head south and die?"

Greg paled and jumped up, knocking the chair to the floor with a loud clatter. Susan took an involuntary step backward.

Fraser's broad shoulders blocked Greg, forcing the man to the side. "People, please," Fraser said and then bent to retrieve the chair, placing it in the middle of the aisle. He gently escorted Susan to her seat and stood behind her, hands resting firmly on her shoulders. Greg swayed indecisively on the balls of his feet, looking around for support. He got none. Naomi glared, Ilene shook his head, and Fraser

stood quietly, as if waiting for him to make the next move. He swallowed deeply and backed up a few steps before turning to walk stiffly to his table. Fraser dismissed him and turned to scan the crowd, keeping his hands on Susan's shoulders. As he assessed each in turn, his composure was evident in the levelness of his gaze, his unflinching expression, and his relaxed bearing. Ray felt Fraser's gaze rest briefly on him and closed his eyes. He took a few deep breaths in order to slow his rapid heartbeat. He could not afford to give into the adrenaline that flooded him like a drug. Breathing slowly, he heard the quiet ripple through the center, heard the sounds drop away until he could hear his own breathing and the softer rustle of Steph's skirts as she shifted in her seat. He opened his eyes and saw she had raised her hand to speak.

"Fraser?" Her voice started hesitantly, cracked, and then reformed. "What does it mean? I'm not sure what I heard."

Fraser opened his mouth as if to answer but two hands shot up in response to her question. He nodded to Iestas first, then to Greg Nelson. *He's handling this like a damn New England town meeting*, Ray thought numbly. But since he couldn't think of a better method to deal with the churning emotions, he kept his mouth tightly shut.

Iestas stood, flicking his braids over his shoulders. He had woven feathers into his dark hair and his vest had been decorated with embroidery. His face was marked with a network of sun lines and weathered by the outdoors. He looked every inch the native spokesman. "Fraser and I—in the weeks we've been traveling, we've seen no more sign of new survivors. We even traveled all the way to Dawson and saw nothing. Just fire-damaged houses, dead bodies, and packs of wild dogs. Not even signs of looting. This makes it three months since the last group of survivors came in."

"Well, maybe they're just holed up somewhere. Waiting for better weather like we are," Greg boomed. He stood again, waving his hand at Fraser. "No, wait, Fraser. You said it was my turn next, so let me speak." He turned to face the table next to him, and lowered his voice slightly. "I say we leave now—this week—and head south. We can't just sit here

and wait until these nuts come to find us."

Istas glanced at Fraser, asking to speak again. Fraser nodded back. "There's more," Istas continued. "Not only did we not see any tracks or sign, but we saw and heard no aircraft. No lights. And when we tried the radios and phones in Dawson, we heard nothing. By now we should have heard or seen something." He nodded to Fraser and sat down again, his face set and unhappy.

Fraser lifted his left hand from Susan's shoulder and called on himself. "Istas is right. We have to assume we are alone. It's safest," he glanced around for emphasis, "to assume we are alone."

"Except for Fairbanks," Greg muttered. Fraser's eyes flashed and Greg palely sank back to his seat. "Except for Fairbanks," he agreed solemnly.

Silence fell while Stewart Junction absorbed the impact of Fraser's words. Immediate rescue seemed a distant possibility. A few snuffles circled the room. Ray lifted his head. Danny was clenching the headset, threatening to snap the plastic bands. He turned to meet Jason's eyes. The boy sat trembling, confused and frightened by the adults' weeping. Something flared inside Ray, a hard, icy sensation. He slid his hand into the air and followed it until he stood stiffly. Fraser turned to face him, then parted his lips, sighed, and acknowledged his partner.

"Excuse me." Ray's voice broke the grim reflections. Danny jerked his head up and dropped the headset. "Excuse me," Ray repeated, gathering a few more strands of attention from the crowd. "Have none of us thought this is some nut? Sitting in his cabin, stoned out his mind, drunk as a skunk, whatever? I only heard one voice."

The tourists next to the Nelsons nodded in agreement. Susan still looked skeptical. Ray pressed on. "So I suggest we shouldn't panic or get depressed. We don't know anything for sure. Just one radio broadcast." A few more heads nodded. Ilene looked more hopeful. "It's not like we have to decide anything right now. I suggest that Danny and I spend some time—a few days—scanning the airwaves. Maybe we can boost the receiver strength and pick up something further south. Maybe even Ottawa or Calgary."

He shot a look over to Fraser, challenging. But Fraser only nodded slowly back. Istas hesitated, then raised his hand in agreement.

"Ray's right," Istas said, addressing the entire room. "We should take the time to sit down and decide our options. But for now, we still have something to celebrate. We're here. We're alive. And," he paused, gathering in the soft murmurs of agreement, "we still have dessert. Right?" He spoke directly to Ilene, who started in her seat. She looked up, alarmed, and then recollected herself. "Yes," she said, standing up and smoothing back her hair. "We do. Elu, Steph. Would you join me in cutting the pies?"

Elu rose from her husband's table and circled around toward the serving tables. Susan faltered and sank back into her chair. Fraser bent over her shoulder and whispered something into her hair. A weak smile appeared on her face and she rose, wiping away her tears. A few other people followed and soon a line had formed for dessert.

Ray watched them go with confusion. A few minutes ago they had been ready to storm out the door, and now they were peacefully handing out slices of pie. Calming the crowd had been part of his goal. Nelson had been on the edge of stampeding them all into a panic.

He blinked and turned to find Danny, but their table was empty. He looked again and saw that Danny had joined his wife in line. He felt a dreadful sinking sensation low in his stomach. He knew he had been manipulated, but as usual, when dealing with Fraser, he could not see how. Or why. Istas and Fraser were up to something. And if he was the only one who could still think clearly, then he'd have to deal with it—as usual. And with Fraser. The ice broke loose in his chest, battering into his stomach like a lead weight. Grimacing thinly, he shoved his way past the line and into the open air. When he reached the steps, he nearly tripped over Larry, sitting slumped in a drunken stupor. He resisted the impulse to kick at the slobbering face and headed back to their cabin to wait. Sooner or later Fraser would have to talk to him.

The cabin grew incrementally darker, the evening light shading the corners until only a dim glimmer fed the small room. Ray lit the lamp and stove and returned to the cabin's

single remaining chair. The second chair, along with their table, had been donated to the celebration. Ray picked up the book on radio repair he'd been reading and searched the index. There had to be some way to boost the reception. Some way to verify—or discredit—the Fairbanks broadcast. He shuffled the pages, his fingers sliding over their surfaces aimlessly, before snapping the book shut and tossing it to the floor. He folded his arms and settled into the chair. *Fraser*, his mind whispered, and then he blanked all thought and watched the darkness deepening around him.

He did not look up when the door clicked open. But he heard Fraser enter, heard him knock off his boots then shuffle across the sill in moccasined feet. Ray unfolded his arms and leaned forward, gripping the sides of the chair. The floorboards had been stained several times and the smooth contours swirled in the dim lamplight. He heard Fraser take a deep breath and finally looked up.

Fraser met his eyes soberly, his broad shoulders squared, feet firmly planted. Only the slight tilt of his head to the right, the small tic underneath his left jaw betrayed him. Ray bared his teeth in a smile and began.

"Was the pie good?"

Fraser blinked, the tic increasing. "The pie was fine, Ray. You should have stayed."

Ray tightened his grip on the chair, his fingers digging into the wood. He thought he heard a trace of reprimand but refused to be baited.

"I had had enough."

Silence fell, neither man wanting to give the other an opening. But Fraser suddenly shifted, clearing his throat, and walked past Ray as if he hadn't been sitting there all evening. "I see," Fraser said and casually knelt to add wood to the stove. It was such a familiar, domestic act that said, 'see, there's nothing wrong here.' But it was the wrong thing to say.

"No, you don't see," Ray barked, the rasping sound of his voice startling them both. "You stand there acting like you know what the hell you're doing, but you don't see." He snapped his mouth shut, feeling his teeth grind together in frustration. He never could talk to Fraser when he was like this.

Fraser continued kneeling, his back to Ray. The wood seemed to fascinate him as he care-

fully examined each chunk.

The pain in Ray's chest returned with full force. He felt cold, his body shivering as if a chill breeze had swept through the cabin. "So, I ask myself, why do I have to hear about your little 'discovery' second-hand? You've been back for two days. Even I could see something was bothering you. But no, I have to learn the hard way." He paused, catching his breath.

Fraser angled his head to the left as if listening to some distant sound, then resumed sorting the wood. "Ray," he said calmly, "if I'd known it was so important to you to learn it first, I would have told you much earlier." He sounded as though he were discussing the duty roster.

"Well, if you had told me, we could have avoided the whole radio mess."

Fraser swiveled away from the stove. "Ray, we had no idea about Fairbanks. How could we? We heard nothing on the Dawson radios." His faint puzzlement, the gentle reprimand in his voice bit into Ray.

"Hell, you didn't even tell me about Dawson!" Ray exploded. Gesturing with his hands, he knocked over a small vase sitting on the nightstand and heard it shatter.

Fraser's eyes held his again, too clear for expression; blind, Ray thought, in the space between the dark and the light. "What did you want me to say?" Fraser asked, his voice cracking a little, allowing anger and frustration to seep through. "'Oh, good morning, Ray, just got back from scouting out the nearest city, and by the way there's nothing there, there's no help, there's none of that future you've been talking about and hoping for all winter?'"

"Well, yeah. Why not? Instead I get a lotta bullshit about caribou migrations, like we're living in the middle of a goddamn nature documentary!"

Fraser had stopped fiddling with the stove. His expression did not change, but Ray felt the sudden shift of his thoughts. "Remember what you said to me once about how the city changes people? The same thing happens here too. People change, even when times are good. And hope is the most dangerous thing to use to stay alive here. The wrong kind of hope can kill you."

"Fraser, I'm not some little kid. I stopped believing in Santa Claus a long time ago."

There was something else he wanted to say, and it hurt to force his voice to say it, but Fraser was so impassive, so unreachable across the few feet of scuffed boards that separated them. "You don't trust me." Fraser winced and his eyes flicked away, though whether that meant agreement or disappointment, Ray didn't know.

Fraser shook his head minutely and rose to his feet. Ray realized he had been holding his breath and inhaled deeply. He opened his mouth to continue, then stopped, his throat hoarse. Fraser stood immobile, his face smooth and blank. His eyes glittered in the lamplight, taut with pain. Ray blinked, swallowing the anger that threatened to spill into the space between them. He heard the sharp intake of breath, a soft gentle sound, then silence. Fraser stumbled forward only to quickly turn away. His hands busied themselves with the quilt, folding and refolding the corners neatly.

"Ray," Fraser said finally, being very tender, "you know they're probably dead."

A helpless terrible despair rose in him. Ray's blood pulsed through him, then slowed unbearably with the dull pounding of his heart. "I don't accept that. I know you're probably right, but I don't accept it. Don't ask me to." He faced away from Fraser, who had blurred suddenly in his gaze. He forced his scattered thoughts toward something safe. The feel of the boards beneath his feet. The smell of wet wool. The sound of Fraser's breathing.

Looking up, Ray studied his partner, seeing the unspoken tenseness, the unshed words and emotions. Why did they have to argue? He knew Fraser cared for him, knew he trusted him, had known it the first time he had followed this stranger north to the Yukon to stand with him against his father's killers. Had known it every day in the two years they had spent together in Chicago. He'd held to that knowledge the year he'd spent undercover, losing himself in self-hatred. He'd never questioned his faith in that knowledge. He'd be damned if he'd start now.

Ray rose and, stepping over the broken vase, reached forward and tugged at Fraser's right shoulder. "Here. Leave that." Fraser angled his head, their eyes meeting briefly before turning away. Ray's heart contracted, the beating echoing through his chest into the

silence. Ray reached out and smoothed the quilt, his fingers brushing against Fraser's in passing. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Fraser nodded once, then fell still. His face still carried the careful blankness that he tried to present to the world. Ray shut his eyes, pressed on. "I don't know why. But I feel like I am being squeezed. Like everything I know or believe is being gripped inside me until there's nothing left. And when you leave me out—when you shut me out—I don't know. It—" He paused, struggling for words.

Fraser faced him now, his dark eyes expressive and solemn. "It hurts. I know." He stood loosely in spite of the tenseness in his shoulders and mouth. The sadness, the fierceness in his face refused to fade.

"Ray, sometimes I make mistakes. Sometimes I have to make a decision. And sometimes it's not the right one." Ray thought he heard a plea for understanding, and beneath it all, an undercurrent of fear. Fraser's simple declaration brushed the last of his anger aside. Fraser was no superman, no matter what the rest of the world pretended. Besides, it was only a small thing. It wasn't as if Fraser had deliberately withheld important information. Ray had. Or misdirected him. Ray had. So Fraser hadn't told him he'd suspected that help might be a long time coming. Not the end of the world.

He reached out and patted Fraser's shoulder, forcing a smile. "I know. And ditto."

Ray looked closely at Fraser. His face was still unhappy. Ray hesitated, puzzled, troubled by what Fraser did not say, but then the Mountie sighed, his face loosening, and Fraser knelt to pass his hands over the shards of the vase. "I can repair the vase," he announced simply.

There was a question in the words, Ray realized; he tried to answer it, but found only confusion.

"I wouldn't bother, Fraser. It's not like we have a lot of opportunity for flowers out here." Ray, ever practical, didn't point out that they would be long gone before the brief flower season had even started.

"Hhmm," was all Fraser replied, holding a largish piece up against two smaller shards. "It's like a puzzle. Each piece has to fit against the right one or the vase will never be water-tight again." He stood, carrying the bits over to

the table and laying them out in a neat row.

Ray nodded, still confused. "Look, Fraser, I really am sorry about the radio thing."

Fraser finished sorting the pieces. The mask of his smile frayed to reveal a bitter weariness. "I know you and Danny had no idea, but it will take time for people to recover."

Ray winced at the criticism. "Yeah, I know." He sat down slowly, suddenly tired beyond words.

Later, as he lay next to Fraser in their bed, he listened to the evening sounds filtering

through the cabin walls. The hypnotic crackling of the wood in the stove, the whine of the wind through the cracks, the distant rustle of the spruces in the night should have lulled him past any residual awkwardness into sleep. But Ray strained for those other sounds he kept missing: the rattle of the El, the whine of the police sirens, all counterpoints to the soft insomniac tread of his mother as she passed by his door. And when he finally slept, Ray's dreams were filled with dark figures and sharp teeth and an uneasy howling.

---

## Chapter 4: The Strangers

*"There is no security on this earth, there is only opportunity."*

—General Douglas MacArthur

---

The afternoon air hung hazy between the trees, its light sifting through the limbs. The sound of a chain saw struggled against the afternoon somnolence before sputtering silent. Larry could feel a knob of wood pinching his back and rolled over, blinking in the light. His eyes seemed constantly bleary. Must be allergies, he thought, and took another slug from his favorite bottle.

He inched himself upward to rest against a tree. Nothing but trees around him. And silence. The way he liked it. Much better this way. Not crammed full of people—outsiders—trying to boss him around. "Larry, go cut some wood. Larry, go shovel some shit." He was twice their age, knew more about these woods than they did. Certainly more than that damn Mountie and cop. One gone soft, the other born and bred that way.

He scratched his stubble and grinned. Soft, all right. Letting him take the afternoon watch. Too stupid to guess he'd been stashing Danny's castoff moonshine all over the perimeter. So no matter when they sent him off he'd be ready. Yeah, almost perfect.

He heard the faint sound of movement and rolled to the ground. He kept his bottle clutched in his hand and tried to quiet his breathing. They were close, very close. Voices floated through the hazy air.

"...Small community, mainly Canadian. Goodly portion is urbanized natives."

"Good." Larry heard another, deeper voice and squinted to see how many there were. They were still too far away and the trees shadowed them. "The more of a mix the better, overall. We've always supported ethnic diversity. No need to stop now."

The other man murmured something and the deeper voice replied sharply, "That's enough. It was that kind of thinking that led us to where we are today. It will not be tolerated."

The speakers moved into view. Two men, one in front and the other lagging behind. They

were armed, their rifles clasped loosely in their arms. Larry dug deeper into the ground, hoping they would pass him by.

The first man spoke again. "And what if they won't agree right off? How much debate can we afford?"

The deeper voice replied calmly, "As much as it takes to survive."

Larry yelped as a hand fell on his shoulder. Gasping, he struggled to his feet, knocking his bottle into the dirt. "God damn fucking idiots!" he shouted, whirling to face his attacker. It was a woman, her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, her rifle carefully pointed away from him. He flushed red. He hadn't heard her approaching.

The woman backed off a few feet. Larry whirled around to face the approaching men; his feet tangled and he nearly fell. He felt her arm steady him. Larry squinted in the dim light. The men were both clean-shaven. Not like him. And they probably smelled better than he did. He pulled away from the woman, hugging his arms to his chest.

"Leave off, Cam, he's drunk." The taller man moved forward and held out his hand. "My name is Dennis O'Reilly. We're representatives of the Canadian government. Are you American?" His was the deeper voice.

Larry bristled at the suggestion. "I may be drunk but I'm no God-damned American." He didn't realize he was shouting until the first birds fled into the nearby trees. He could feel his face flushing.

"No," the man replied, assessing Larry. "Of course you're not. Are you all right?" The voice was calm, non-judgmental. Larry looked at their faces and saw no condemnation. Only concern. He shifted his stance and nodded.

"Good. I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?"

"Larry. Larry Dene."

"And you live here by yourself?"

Larry blinked again, trying to process the question. "Of course I'm not. You said you had



scouted—" He stopped, his head making a painful turn. He looked around wildly to escape, but could only see faces. Strange faces. He started to shake.

"Easy, Larry." Dennis moved forward and patted his shoulder. "Like I said. No need to be afraid. We're here to help out." The woman came around his other side and smiled. He nodded hesitantly back at her.

"The reason I asked," Dennis continued, his hand pressing gently into Larry's shoulder, "was to confirm our scouts' reports. You can't be too careful nowadays." Larry kept his mouth shut, but his heart slowed its frantic pace.

"We left Yellowknife several months ago and have been looking for survivors. Most of the time we've used the main roads, but when we came across Sandy at Nelson Station, he mentioned there was a good-sized group over this way and we decided to stop by. Do you need any help?"

Larry shook his head.

"I thought so." Dennis turned and waved one of the men over. "Jim, you want to help Larry here? After all, it must have been quite a shock finding us like he did. He's still shaking!"

"Finding you?" Larry looked around for Cam but she had moved away.

"You're a hero, Larry. We'd have been wandering for some time if you hadn't shown us the way back to the encampment. Once we'd gone off the main road—well, you know how all trees look alike."

The men laughed and Larry reflexively joined in. Jim slung a friendly arm around his shoulder. He felt steadier already. As they passed the tree where he had spent his watch, he saw Cam kicking his bottle under the roots and needles. He flushed again and smiled gratefully at her.

Diefenbaker was the first to greet them, growling deeply before running back along the muddy path. Ilene came out from her cabin, saw the guns, and ran back inside. Within seconds, Ray and Fraser had appeared, signaling to Danny and Nodin to keep themselves ready and out of sight.

Ray felt his breath come hard. He'd been working on the water pump with Fraser. They'd seen strangers before. But not with

what amounted to a hostage. And the Fairbanks broadcast had caused the villagers to increase their normal precautions. Ray still thought they were overreacting, but he didn't take strangers at face value and proceeded with care. He looked over at Fraser and signaled his readiness. He kept his revolver cocked behind his back.

"Good day. My name is Benton Fraser of the RMCP. May we help you?"

A thin gray-haired man handed his rifle to Larry and stepped forward. "Glad to meet you. My name is Dennis O'Reilly," he said, reaching out to shake Fraser's hand "We're representatives of the Canadian government. Can we be of assistance?" His hand hung in the air expectantly. It was smooth and uncalloused but he carried himself with confidence. His lean frame and angular face had the appearance of solidity.

Ray saw Fraser narrow his eyes and then move forward to shake the other man's hand. "Yes, we'd be glad for any help. How many are you? And where are you from?" Ray relaxed slightly and lowered his revolver.

Dennis replied quickly, "Well, before you get your hopes up too much, this is all we were able to pull together on short notice. We're from Yellowknife. We've been surveying the area looking for survivors, trying to bring limited relief."

"I am sorry," Fraser said. "I didn't catch all of your names." Ray mentally gave the point to Fraser.

"I'd be happy to introduce us. Gather around." A few more villagers had moved cautiously forward. Ray tensed. Fraser shook his head and Ray relaxed again.

"As I said." Dennis raised his voice so he could be heard clearly. "We're government representatives from the Northwest Territories. My name is Dennis O'Reilly. I am acting superintendent for health and services. This is Cam Gundelfinger. She joins us from Fort Providence, where she served as a city supervisor. The other gentleman is Jim Kardach. He is a paramedic from Jean Marie River."

Several people murmured approvingly at the mention of medical training. Fraser nodded shortly. "Well, won't you please come in. I think we can offer some refreshments and you can tell us what you know."

"Yeah, like how you all happened to be traveling together, happen to all be public officials, and what you're doing out here?" Ray raised his gun and deliberately slid it into his shoulder holster. Dennis's eyes flashed at the movement and he looked inquiringly at Fraser.

"Oh, I am sorry." Fraser spoke quickly. "Detective Ray Vecchio. Chicago police department." Dennis nodded again and then swept past Ray without comment. Ray ignored him back and waved Nodin off to one side. "Can you walk the perimeter," he asked quietly, "while we start the I-Am-The-Government love fest inside?" Nodin grinned back. "No problem, Ray. Save me some of whatever they're serving inside."

"Sure." Ray scanned the square before entering the visitor's center. Whatever the "officials" had to say, he hoped it wouldn't slow down his efforts to get Fraser back home.

The center was crammed with too many people to fit comfortably now. Ray stood in the back, keeping his distance. Glancing at Fraser, he noticed the man's tight shoulders and watchful air, and allowed himself to relax. Polite Fraser might be, but he wasn't dumb. Surveying the hopeful faces, he nodded to Ilene. The town wasn't dumb either. Just too damn desperate. If bug-eyed aliens had arrived claiming to be "government representatives" they'd invite them in and serve them tea.

Fraser nodded and then stood. The room quieted. Dennis rose to stand near Fraser, facing the crowd.

"Well, let's begin. I understand from Constable Fraser here that you've managed quite well over the winter." Several heads near the front nodded.

"Excuse me." Elu stood, spilling her dark hair over her shoulder. "Can we talk about the...the..." She paused, fumbling for words.

"The recent disorder? I am sorry. Of course, I should have started with that first. You must forgive us, but we're quite excited. Stewart Junction is the largest group we've found so far."

The crowd murmured. If they were the largest group, it must be bad. Ray leaned back against the wall. This could take a long time. Danny got up and joined him at the back of the room.

Susan's hand shot up. "What towns have

you passed through? How many survivors have you found?"

Dennis cleared his throat. "I started in Yellowknife. We stopped in Fort Providence, Jean Marie River, and Fort Nelson. So far, I would say we've assisted another eighty people in all. Roughly speaking, that is."

The murmurs grew. The population of the Yukon had reached 100,000 in the peak tourist summer months. When the plague hit in late fall, there should have been at least 30,000 in the Territory.

Dennis continued. "We know very little about how it started. But whatever it was, it seems to have burned out. I trust you've seen no new cases since last November?" Heads shook. Dennis looked relieved. "Good. Then the worst is behind us."

Greg Nelson arrived huffing, out of breath. He elbowed his way to the front and sat down.

Dennis nodded to him and continued. "We've seen scatterings of small groups between here and Yellowknife. This area had always been somewhat sparsely settled and we think that has helped keep our mortality rate down. The towns fared worst. The disorder spread so fast that most were not able to isolate themselves or put effective quarantines in place."

"Not that would have helped any," Danny muttered cynically under his breath. Ray nodded in agreement.

"So far we've rendered some basic first aid, helped clear some roads, and set up a staging area. I have a small team of another six following us a day behind. They should arrive by tomorrow morning. We're recommending that survivors gather in Whitehorse on August 15."

"Wait, I thought you said the towns were hit hardest. And what about the disease—I mean disorder—won't it come back? Is it safe to go back to the towns? And what about Fairbanks? Have you seen anyone from Fairbanks?" Greg's agitation was evident as he shifted in his seat.

"Please, please. Give me a moment. As I said, it has burned itself out. No one we've met has reported any new cases since November. And if it weren't safe to gather—well, wouldn't you have noticed it first? You're the largest group we've met till now and I understand you haven't had any problems?"

Relieved murmurs swept through the crowd. Dennis raised his hand for quiet. "So don't worry. We wouldn't be recommending this if we didn't think it was safe. And as for Fairbanks—well, I'm sure you've picked up the same broadcast as we did. Something seems to be interfering with the radio signals from the rest of the country. But rest assured, we're looking into the Fairbanks question." He paused to cough and Fraser signaled Jason, at the back of the room, to fetch a glass of water. Dennis smiled in thanks and took a deep breath. "But as I started to explain, we're here primarily to see what type of assistance you might need. Do you have an action committee?"

Ray snorted. "Here it comes. Put two bureaucrats in a room and what do you get?" Danny grinned back. "A bunch of baby bureaucrats?" Ray elbowed him sharply and turned his attention to the front.

Fraser was nodding and various hands were being raised. Now for the really boring part. He turned to Danny. "Want to help me with the water pump? Fraser seems to have them under control. And if they're going to hand out projects, I'd like to get the pump fixed before they start having us fill out forms to use the outhouse."

"God, you're so cynical." Danny laughed as he followed Ray into the town square.

"No, just practical. We're not alone. And that means—"

"Coffee. Hot running water. Good beer." Danny stepped around a mud hole and caught up with Ray.

"I was thinking more of mortgages, taxes, and annoying bosses. But I'll start with your suggestions and work my way up." He glanced up at the light. "We'd better hurry or we won't have any water. Let alone hot." They picked up their pace, both lost in their thoughts.

He didn't hear Fraser come in until late in the night. Rolling over, he saw Fraser kneeling to undo his boots before entering the cabin. "Everything okay?" he mumbled.

"Yes, it went well. We've drawn up a complete list and we'll start discussing it tomorrow." Fraser sat down on the bed and began to unbutton his shirt.

Ray yawned. "Well, good. Glad someone is taking charge of this crowd. They need to get

moving."

"We haven't been sitting around idly these last months." Fraser kept his voice quiet and soft.

"Of course not, Benny. Didn't mean that. It's just that—" He yawned again. "It's just that they haven't really been focused on what needs to get done to get everyone moving again. You know, back to normal." His eyes started to feel heavy and he closed them.

"Like Fairbanks?" Benny's voice came from the window that he had just shut. Ray felt a wave of annoyance wash through him. Trust Fraser to remind him and ruin a perfectly good night of sleep.

"I'm not going to argue with you about that, Fraser. But not everyone who shows up is some crazed Nazi freak pushed over the apocalyptic edge. Dennis seems all right. And I am sure they need us as much as we need them." Sleep was dragging him down and he could feel the lead creeping into his thinking.

"I am sure you're quite correct, Ray." There was a pause, as if Fraser wanted to continue. "Good night, Fraser," Ray mumbled pointedly and turned on his side. With a sigh, Fraser leaned over the small table that served as their eating table and blew out the light. "Good night, Ray."

Fraser left the next morning before Ray woke. Skipping on breakfast, Ray went in search. He found Fraser in the visitor's center, the "Committee" and Dennis in attendance. Ray scraped his boots on the metal bars and entered. As he walked up to the table he heard Nelson blurt out, "But if we do that we won't have enough—" He was hushed by Dennis. All heads turned to look at Ray.

Ray kept walking, refusing to be intimidated. He eyed Fraser—his shirtsleeves were open and he had not shaved. That was unusual. He certainly had risen early enough.

"Hi, Greg. Hi, Fraser. Is that coffee I smell?" He moved forward, the familiar aroma spreading gently into the air.

Dennis's face went smooth and then he smiled. "Yes. We found a small cache over at Sandy's Station and thought to put it to good use for the Committee. Being that we've been up since five making plans."

Ray smiled back, willing to forgive even Dennis for a coffee, and waited expectantly.

The faces turned back to the table. Curious, he moved forward and leaned over Greg Nelson's shoulder. "Ah, Whitehorse. How many days do you think it'll take?"

Greg shifted uncomfortably and then moved his chair back, bumping Ray in the shin. He winced and sauntered around to Fraser's side.

"Well, don't all answer me all at once," he commented into the silence. "And when is someone going to offer me some coffee?" Everyone seemed to have a full cup. Except Fraser. And Ray.

Fraser took him gently by the arm. "Dennis feels, and the Committee agrees, that it is better to present the plan to the community in its entirety rather than piecemeal."

Ray shifted his gaze irritably to Dennis and opened his mouth to speak. He felt Fraser's hand squeeze his arm gently and looked back at his friend. Circles appeared under his eyes and his mouth was firmly lined. Fraser's fingers felt clammy and he tried to pull away, but Fraser only gripped tighter. Ray shook off the feeling that Fraser was asking for help. So Dennis was a prima donna. Let Fraser keep an eye on the Committee. They'd straighten this out at the next meeting.

"Sure. Makes sense. But there'll be rumors flying either way. Just thought I'd mention that Fraser and I will be leaving, ourselves."

Dennis's head shot up, his full attention on Ray. "Then you'll understand the care we need to take to plan the evacuation properly. Constable Fraser is being of great assistance in our plans. But you can tell the community that we'll be making an announcement this evening at six p.m."

Ray nodded and turned to leave. Fraser still had not released his arm and he paused in surprise. Covering, Fraser quickly addressed the table: "I have a few things I need to discuss with Ray. The water pump." Puzzled, Ray allowed himself to be led out the front door.

Fraser pushed them both along until they were well out of earshot of the visitor center's doors. Ray felt the porch railing press against his back and braced himself against going over. "What's going on?" he asked his brows rising. "We finished with the pump last night. Don't tell me it's broken again?" He kept his voice low.

"No, that's not it." Fraser looked back starkly. "But I was told that when he stopped by Alain's last night, he became agitated. Can you check on him this morning? He responds to you."

Ray sighed. "Sure, Fraser. But when are you going to stop trying to do it all? When are you going to let these people learn to help themselves? Look, they're already on their way—you've even got another set of busybodies to help out."

Fraser shook his head, his face shifting oddly, and for yet another moment Ray felt he didn't know him at all.

"Fine, fine." Ray sighed. "I don't mind checking on Alain. The poor guy's so scrambled he'd make an omelet look like it had its act together. But those others..." He trailed off and opened the door. As he turned to close it, he saw Fraser turn and slowly walk back to the table. His back stiff and unyielding. So Fraser hadn't told Dennis they were leaving. *And who would blame him*, he thought, looking at Dennis waving his arms energetically, cutting off Dunlap again in mid-utterance. *Prick hadn't even offered Fraser coffee.*

Alain was not in his cabin. Ray walked around the back and headed for the treeline. Alain sometimes hid in the undergrowth, watching the cabin with a pair of old binoculars. He said he was lying in ambush for the plague.

Ray stomped loudly a few times and walked up the deer trail. After all, he didn't want to make the poor man more paranoid. He heard a soft rustle to his left and turned to face a large dogwood bush.

"Hello, Alain." Five years of partnering with Fraser had eased his embarrassment at addressing trees and other forms of vegetation.

"Are you clean?" Alain's voice whispered back. Ray peered again and caught a faint outline against the dark leaves.

"Yes, and how about you?"

"I've been careful. But I don't think it's been around for a few days. The woods have been quiet." Leaves rustled vigorously and Alain crawled out from under the brush and onto the narrow trail. Dirt and broken twigs covered the front of his jeans and sweater. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"Well," Ray said in greeting. "That's good

news. So what's up?"

Alain slipped the binoculars under his arm and rummaged in his front jeans pockets. "Is it true they're from the government?" he asked, fishing out a handkerchief.

Ray cocked his head to one side and watched with fascination as Alain proceeded to form a facemask with the cloth. The man was clearly a nut. Harmless, but a nut.

"Who?" he asked, watching Alain struggle to tie the ends of the handkerchief in place.

"The strangers. Istas said they were from the government."

"Well, that's what they say." Alain raised his head, the mask crookedly in place over his mouth and nose. He looked like a street person pretending to be Lawrence of Arabia. His eyes, once clear with intelligence and awareness, now seemed perpetually clouded and frightened.

"Did you have them wash?" The mask fluttered as he spoke.

"Yes, Alain, we did." Ray looked back down the path impatiently. He really had better things to do.

"But I thought the pump was broken." Alain's voice sharpened, drawing Ray's attention.

"Alain, have you been in town again? I thought we agreed—"

"No, I haven't forgotten." Alain shook his head angrily. "I said, Istas told me. I remember what we agreed." He fell silent, his eyes brimming with hurt.

Ray sighed and patted him gently on the arm. "I know. I know. Look, do you need anything?"

"No. Like I said, Istas came yesterday."

Ray smiled gently and turned to go. "Ray," Alain called, and he stopped to look back. "If something happens, I am supposed to call you?"

"Right, Alain. Use the flare and Fraser and I will come."

Alain adjusted his mask and coughed. "If I need help..."

"Right. See you. Okay?" He waited a few seconds, until Alain had raised his hand in acknowledgment, and headed back to town.

He spent the rest of the day scanning on the radio, helping Ilene move some firewood, and listening to the rumors. Everything from

"the government will send in relief troops next month" to "complete evacuation by morning."

The last bit had been offered by Larry. Ever since he had "rescued" Dennis in the woods, he'd been boasting. He spent most of his time glued to Cam's side, unless he was running errands for Dennis's crew, checking on the state of their supplies or making lists of the inhabitants. At least it kept him from drinking.

Ray had to admit Dennis's little group was very efficient. Dennis's second team had arrived on schedule: a few of them were long time residents of the Territories and had joined Dennis between Watson Lake and the Carmacks. The newcomers had spent the day meeting almost everyone in Stewart Junction. Pitching in without being asked, and offering helpful suggestions. The paramedic was a god-send. Without any real medical care, numerous little ailments had been self-treated or left untreated. It had been particularly hard on the tourists, who had no experience in self-treatment.

He grabbed a bite at Ilene's and headed back to the visitor center. This time he angled his way to the front to get a good view of the proceedings. And to be ready to help Fraser straighten Dennis out when the time came.

Surveying the crowd, he saw they had turned out again in full force. He nodded to Makah, Istas's father and one of the few elders born in the area. He had handled the influx of survivors into "his" village with grace. But his family held the crucial votes. Them and Fraser.

He leaned against the wall and had just started munching when Istas appeared at his elbow. "I found Alain," he said and pointed to the front of the room. Alain sat scrunched in his chair, a heavy coat wrapped over his knees. His eyes darted back and forth, before settling nervously on Dennis.

Ray sighed and swallowed more of his sandwich. "Well, tell Nodin to keep an eye on him."

Istas frowned and shook his head. "We don't have time for this. We should send him away."

Ray sharpened his expression. He knew Istas was tired of babysitting Alain. He had very little patience with people.

"No," he replied firmly, taking another bite of his sandwich. "It takes time to walk him

back. And we can't spare anyone right now. Just keep an eye on him and when we end the meeting you or Elu can walk him back." Ista left to whisper Ray's instructions in Nodin's ear.

Ray settled back into the wooden folding chair while Dennis rose to his feet. He grinned at Fraser, who was sitting with the Committee at the front. Fraser had found time to shave and had put a clean shirt on. Although he nodded briefly back in greeting, his face was taut and he looked away quickly.

Ray sighed and listened.

"I want to thank you all for coming," Dennis began, gesturing to the entire room. "We have a lot of ground to cover. As I explained last night, this region has been very fortunate. You have managed to regroup nicely, survived the winter with a minimum of casualties, and have set aside a very impressive store of supplies to tide you over next winter. I'd like you to take a moment to thank the people who made it possible. Will the Committee please rise?"

Applause and a few cheers rang out. Ray sat in puzzlement. The Committee had only been around for one day. Most of the real work had been done by other people in the center—Ilene, Susan, and Ista. Looking around at the beaming faces, he chalked it down to short-term memory loss and joined in the applause.

"Thank you, thank you. But now we're ready to proceed to the next phase of recovery. We're moving the town into Whitehorse to regroup with the rest of the region's survivors. We anticipate that it will take us fifteen days and have set August 15 as the rendezvous date. We'll be able to pick up more vehicles once we reach Highway 2. Since gas will be in short supply, we'll have to take as much as we can carry. We can also then transport the bulk of your other supplies to Whitehorse."

The crowd erupted. Susan stood and shouted, "Evacuation? You've got to be kidding." Another voice called out, "What'll we do for food supplies in Whitehorse?" More voices interrupted. "What's in Whitehorse? How do you know what's in Whitehorse? No one's been able to make it there this winter." Cam moved toward the front of the crowd. Before Dennis could respond, Fraser stood and raised his voice. "One at a time. Susan, Greg,

please sit down. One at a time. If you have something to say, raise your hand and we'll call on you."

Eventually the crowd settled. Dennis, without waiting for Fraser, continued. "I know it sounds like a big step. But once we get to Whitehorse, we'll have all the resources we need to start rebuilding."

More murmurs. Dennis remained at the front of the crowd. Somehow, during the excitement, he had been flanked by two of his men. Ray's eyes narrowed and he looked over at Fraser questioningly. Fraser shook his head, so he sat back in his seat. *He's right. Let them talk them this out.*

Makah stood and the murmuring ceased. "Rebuilding from the bones of a diseased civilization. That is not why we came here. Plague or no plague, why should we go back?"

Danny nodded in agreement, along with several others. Makah turned and addressed the crowd. "But if any want to go, we'll be happy to give you supplies and provisions. We welcomed you into our community and we'll help you as long as we are able. It is—" he paused and turned back to Dennis, "—the civilized thing to do."

His ironic tone caused Dennis to flush red. His mouth tensed and he moved quickly to the front row.

"You all must understand," he said, looking aggressively at Makah. He paused, took a breath, and stepped back. "You must understand," he continued in a more reasonable tone, "how important each and every one of you is. You—we—represent the remainder of our country. All of us will be needed in the rebuilding. Each of you has skills and talents that our new community will need to survive."

Makah said nothing and sat down. A few voices murmured agreement. Scanning to his left, Ray could see more faces shaking their heads in disagreement. A wave of annoyance flashed through him. What was wrong with these people? Staying and hiding here was no answer.

Ilene rose and raised her hand. Fraser nodded encouragingly. "I think you both have good points. But why do we all have to move now? Can't we send a small group to Whitehorse to get things started? You know, to see if it's safe." She brushed her blond hair

back nervously.

"Yeah," Susan called out, "and to clear away all of those dead bodies."

Silence fell. An unbidden image of his family flashed through Ray before he refocused on the discussion.

"...after all, if we do this in stages we can also pick up more communities along the way." Ilene was gaining support, her practicality always an asset to the community.

She looked toward Dennis expectantly. His face had darkened. He rested his hands on the back of an empty chair. He raised his head and took a deep breath.

"You don't understand." The tautness of his voice quieted the crowd. "There are no communities left. Yours is the largest gathering we've seen in three months of travel. With the exception of a few individuals, we—" he gestured to his companions, "—are the only survivors of the Northwest and Yukon territories. If we don't start rebuilding right away, there will be no Canada left."

Makah rose again. "Dennis," he began. "If what you say is true, then we face a terrible time ahead. The winters will not be any easier in town. Diseases and contagion may creep back into our lives like old enemies. Here at least we have a good beginning and enough stores to last through one more winter. This will give us the time we need to set up smaller communities. The more we spread, the lighter the burden on the land. The better the chances of survival. The old paths will not work again." He paused and a sad light flooded his eyes. "You are welcome to join us. And any who wish to leave may do so with our blessing." He sat down heavily.

Ray could barely restrain himself. Bad enough to have to listen to Dennis, but now Makah had to start with the speeches too. Makah really did look upset, though, and Ray eased up a bit. It wasn't as if Dennis were asking them what to do. No, he seemed well equipped to make the decisions for all of them with no help from anyone else. God, Ray was surrounded by idiots. He glanced over at Fraser, hoping to share his resignation, but Fraser was intently focused on crowd control. His pale skin was flushed, Ray saw; his eyes held a brighter sheen; in the depths, expression struggled to form.

Dennis raised his voice. "And will you let Fairbanks take over the world? I know you have radios. I know you've listened to their hate and madness. How long do you think we'll survive if you hide yourselves away in the woods? How long before they come hunting you down? Killing you and taking what you have?" He paused and took a deeper breath. "You can't guard against an organized assault force determined to take what you have. You can't even guard against sabotage. And you can't stay here and turn back the clock."

Ilene looked pale and finally sat down. Danny sat with his head bent forward. Ray touched his arm, but Danny just shook his head. Glaring, Ray finally stood up and raised his hand.

"I've heard enough." Dennis's rant stopped abruptly. He seemed surprised that anyone was still willing to disagree. *He must have been a joy to work with in Yellowknife*, Ray thought. *No doubt his employees quickly learned how to ignore his big ego and get on with the job at hand.* "Last I heard," Ray drawled the words out, "this was a free country. And nothing anyone has said seems to have changed that." Ray picked up momentum and swept on. "So I suggest that instead of trying to move en masse, let's get some more information. Send a small party over to Whitehorse to check it out. This'll take—" he turned to Fraser, "—what—two weeks at most?" Fraser nodded as if in agreement. "And in the meantime, we go on doing what we have been doing." His words had the desired effect; they shut up Dennis and gave everyone a chance to actually think. The room broke into smaller groups, animatedly discussing their options.

Ray pushed his way through the crowd and joined Fraser. He pulled him away from the knot of people gathering and headed for the nearest empty table.

"Fraser, what's going on here? Why aren't you leading the Whitehorse effort? What's this bullshit about Dennis trying to take charge?"

Fraser shrugged a little; he would not let Ray see his eyes. Words failed and he wrestled with them while Ray watched impatiently.

The room grew hot under the press of bodies. Sweat trickled under Ray's shirt, cold as ice water. He sighed and tried again. "Look,

Fraser, there's nothing wrong with the core of Dennis's plan. Whitehorse will have more resources, more buildings, and a better infrastructure. It's the largest city in the area and the logical place to start rebuilding. But you and I both know—" Ray lowered his voice to a whisper. "Dennis is the wrong man. You should be leading this."

Fraser met Ray's gaze then, his tired eyes holding no bitterness or anger, only an expression of enduring despair, the look of a man who didn't expect things to ever be good again. "It's the wrong plan," he heard Fraser say softly, as if the room held only the two of them.

Ray puzzled over this for only a minute before the meaning sank in. "Shit. That's just shit," he said, his voice rising. Heads turned and he stepped back from Fraser. He snapped his mouth shut and stepped further back. It was the same old argument and it hurt too much to go over it again. Fraser shook his head; his mouth tightened.

Ray walked stiffly away, shoving chairs out of his path. To his right he saw Dennis had corralled the Nelsons and the other two tourists and begun earnestly lobbying for his plan. Istas and his father worked the other half of the room. He looked back and saw Fraser moving gently, gracefully, giving out spare, brittle smiles, mediating between the two groups. The center became thick with voices and strategies; words and accusations flew back and forth. But beneath it all, there was a real pain, a fear, unspoken, that nothing would ever be normal, nothing would ever be right again. The fear could overwhelm, rob you of reason and humanity. He'd seen it before in Chicago. He'd never thought he'd be living the nightmare himself. A cool waft of air floated inside through the open door and he felt the breeze like silk, like the hands of the dead on his face, on his wrist. He pushed his way into the night. It was still a free country and he was going to leave as long as he had a choice.

He was glad Fraser waited a few hours before finding him. The night was cool, but not unpleasant. He sat on a felled log in the clearing for the new cabin. He had remembered to bring his rifle, but he wasn't really on patrol. The stars, so thick in the night sky, had occupied his attention. His mind felt curiously empty, almost blank.

He did not turn when Fraser entered the clearing. Staring skyward, he felt the log shift as Fraser settled next to him.

The night was so still. It soothed the raw places and masked the pain. He needed its anonymity.

He let his gaze wander unfocused into the darkness. "It's done, then?"

"Yes. Most have gone home. Istas is watching the rest who decided to stay and talk." Fraser's voice fell velvet soft, mirroring the quiet.

Ray clasped his hands. The fingertips felt numb and he realized he still gripped his rifle. He unclenched his grip and angled the rifle down next to him.

"You know—" He paused and then cleared his throat. "I knew. Right after Carey took his life, I knew. But somehow..." He took a deep breath, looking down at Fraser's feet, and paused again. "Well, somehow, I couldn't accept it. Does that make sense?"

He sensed Fraser's nod.

Ray drew breath, soundlessly, he thought, but Fraser heard even that; Ray felt his regard like a touch. "Why it took some loony bureaucrat to make it clear, I don't know. But when he stood there and told us that it was a choice between him and Fairbanks it all became...real?"

"You know, Ray," Fraser replied, "sometimes the big things take time to process. Sometimes you can only hold on to what you know until you have time to really think."

"Think? Christ, Fraser, it's not thinking that's the problem." Ray kept his eyes on the ground. Even in the dark, he didn't want to see Fraser's expression.

"What do you mean?" Fraser leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. Ray looked over and then looked away.

He gripped his hands together. They were still numb.

"What kind of man can't cry for his own mother? His sister? You tell me that, Fraser." He blinked, a searing pain shooting down his side. He gasped for air. Numbness. Yes, his hands were still numb.

"There are many ways to cry, Ray. Thirty years later and I still cry for my mother. And my father." Fraser stood very still, so still Ray would have not known he was there but for his



voice.

"Yeah, well, with very few exceptions, Fraser, I am not you." The pain throbbed. He breathed again and then again.

Fraser stirred slightly. "You know, when my mother died it took me years to believe it. I used to make a cup of cocoa for her in the evening before she went to bed. And for years afterwards, I would make it every night and leave it out for her. Every morning I would find it still there, undrunk, and it kept hurting me. I think it must have killed my father every time he saw it. And one night, I just didn't do it anymore."

Ray felt Fraser's arm go around his shoulder and he trembled under its weight. *Relax. Breathe.* It would pass.

Slowly his breathing steadied. He smelled the damp spruce trees and the raw scent of fresh-cut wood. Rubbing his face, he cleared his throat and lifted his head. "The stars are bright away from the city. Have they always

been that way?" His voice sounded echoey in the night.

Fraser slowly moved his arm away, reaching down to retrieve Ray's rifle. "Sometimes they're even brighter. On summer nights they seem so close you can pick them like apples from the sky." He stood and moved away. "Coming, Ray?"

Ray glanced over at his friend and forced a smile. "No, I'd like to...think a bit more. I'll be in later."

"Good night, Ray." He could almost hear Fraser's thoughts, a high distant keening of wind over a barren world. And underneath the wind, he caught the undertone of a voice softly whispering his name, full of fear and anguish. Then he heard Fraser turn for real and walk away, picking his path among the stones and roots. Amazing how quiet the night out here could be and how much it could reveal. Or conceal.

---

## Chapter 5: Nature's Law

*"Nature's laws affirm instead of prohibit. If you violate her laws, you are your own prosecuting attorney, judge, jury, and hangman."*

—Luther Burbank

---

The evening chill deepened and finally carried him back to their cabin. He slipped under the covers, still clothed, grateful for Fraser's even breathing. The transition to sleep came abruptly and he rested uneasily until dawn flooded the cabin. Fraser had already risen and greeted him, reaching for a pot on the stove. Ray sniffed and then rolled out of bed quickly. "Coffee. You got coffee. Oh, what will the Committee say?" He sat down and sipped deeply, his tired eyes wandering about the cabin. He felt thick and weighed down. Why bother sleeping if you still felt like shit afterward?

Fraser shrugged and replaced the pot on the stove. "This is the last of it. Thought you could use some after last night." He moved around the table and knelt down next to Ray. Ray stared stupidly, his exhaustion filtering the fact that Fraser had started to lace his boots.

"Christ, Benny. What are you doing?" He tried to rise from the chair but Fraser's hand pushed him back down.

"I am helping you. Stop wiggling."

"I can lace my own boots." He shoved Fraser's hands away. "I may be tired but I'm not helpless," he added, annoyed. "Besides, you don't look like you've slept either. Want me to help with your shoes?" He leaned forward, only then noticing that, as usual, Fraser's boots were firmly in place on his feet.

Fraser opened his mouth and Ray added hurriedly, "Never mind. I can see you have your footwear situation under control. But I haven't had anyone tie my shoes since third grade. And I don't need you to mother me." He stopped abruptly. Taking a deep breath, he sipped the coffee determinedly.

Fraser bent forward, one hand resting on the floor. Something flashed brightly in his eyes. Reacting like a swimmer resisting the undertow, Ray averted his face and peered into the mug. "Any more left in the pot?" he mut-

tered.

Nodding, Fraser rose gracefully to reach for the pot. Ray closed his eyes, letting his shoulders sag. The cabin was warm and if he could just find the right position, he was certain he could be comfortable.

The knocking startled him, causing the mug to shake and spill. Swearing, he rubbed his pants. His head felt huge, and he tried to ignore the sounds coming from outside the cabin. They echoed slowly at first through his exhaustion, until he stood sharply, his heart racing. He ran for the door, nearly tripping over the unlaced boot.

"...Oh my God, Fraser. It's all gone. All of it."

Danny and Susan stood, tightly bunched together. Their faces were pale. Danny's rifle was cocked and ready. Susan had blood streaming down the left side of her face.

Fraser looked quickly over at Ray. "Start from the beginning, Danny."

"Why would the fuck would they do something like this?" Danny's voice cracked, and he waved his rifle in agitation.

Ray stepped forward and pushed the rifle down to the safety position. "Fraser's right, Danny. We need all of the information from the beginning. Who did what?" His hand closed on the rifle, and he pulled it away.

Danny fell silent, his chest heaving with an effort to stay calm. Susan jumped in. "I was at the storage shed. Ran out of sugar. Steph and Danny were there too. They've taken it all."

"Who did you see?" Ray encouraged her.

"Well, we didn't actually see them. But it was the newcomers. All of them—Dennis, Cam."

"And Larry," grated Danny.

"Okay. So you think they did what?"

"They poured gasoline on the center. They were going to burn our supplies."

Ray's hands went numb, Danny's face

blurring. "Our winter supplies? They burned the supplies?"

"No, we stopped them."

"Well, that's something." Ray felt the blood rushing back into his face and exhaled explosively.

"You don't get it. We were too late." Danny's voice thickened.

"What else did they do?" Fraser's voice fell softly into the early morning air.

Danny swallowed. "They poured all of our kerosene and gasoline into the supplies. All of the food is contaminated. They broke open the medical supplies and soaked those too."

"And the canned goods?" Ray remembered the long hours combing through nearby settlements and houses.

"Oh, they didn't burn those," Susan spat out angrily. "Those they dumped in the river."

"All of it?"

Susan nodded grimly. "Well, what they could carry. The rest they punctured."

Ray exploded. "Who the fuck was on watch? How could they have done all that in one night and no one hear them?"

Susan went white and dropped her head. Danny glared back at Ray. "That's not fair. And look at her. At least she's still walking. Steph had to go home. One of the bastards hit her in the face."

"Ray." Fraser tugged on his arm. "We post only a light watch. There are no houses between the center and the river."

"And they had inside help," Susan added, lifting her eyes gratefully to Fraser.

Ray bit into her, careless of his target. "It's always easier to blame the next guy, isn't it." He turned away to hide his own chagrin and headed back into the cabin. "Ray," Danny called after him. "You don't need to hurry. We have them under guard at Susan's place. The main center was too public."

"Just great," Ray shouted back over his shoulder. "But I'll still need to get my gun." Once in the cabin, he moved swiftly, pulling an extra handful of ammunition into his pocket. He slipped his switchblade into the back of his belt for good measure. Stepping briskly, he rejoined the group.

Fraser was still trying to calm Susan. "Danny, can you take her over to Elu's? She should have that patched up as soon as pos-

sible."

Danny nodded and then grimaced. "One of them is a paramedic. How could he do this? We could have used his medical skills!" His hands still shook in shock.

Ray gritted his teeth and silently agreed. But it wouldn't do to add more fuel to this fire. And in fact, the situation might need some calming down. "Danny," he asked casually, "can you lend us your rifle?" The question was merely perfunctory, as he had already slipped the rifle to Fraser for safekeeping.

As the two men walked, Ray turned to Fraser. "How many did Danny say are guarding them right now?" They hurried down the path to Susan's.

"At least two—Makah and Istas." Fraser opened the rifle and checked to see if it was loaded. He then left the safety off.

"Good," Ray muttered. "At least we won't have a mob on our hands. God dammit, though. Who the fuck do they think they are? Who the fuck made them God? Fuck them to hell." Smarting, he started off at a brisk run, Fraser at his side.

For once, Fraser did not contradict him. Or point out that they had been probably sitting on a damp log moping in the darkness while their lifeline was being sliced by Dennis the Menace and his cronies. Ray snuck a glance at his friend. Fraser moved with his usual combination of grace and purpose, jogging purposefully. Ray tugged his jacket over his holster more tightly and kept moving. Fraser was right. There had been no need to post a real watch over their supplies. Now they knew better. How many more mistakes could they not afford to make?

They curved around Elu's house and Susan's cabin stood, starkly washed in the morning light. Someone had knocked a drying rack over and it leaned crookedly against the front steps. A few townspeople milled in place, tousled hair and rumpled clothing lending the gathering a chaotic quality that Ray did not like. He moved in closer on Fraser's right, almost brushing him with his elbow. Too many variables to know how to play it right. Best to approach it head-on.

"Morning, Greg," he called out, catching their attention.

"They won't let us in," Greg shouted over

the rapidly shrinking space between them and the crowd. "What's going on?" His hands were empty, but his face flickered between anger and fear.

"Let us look into it," Fraser interjected. "We'll let you know as soon as we have it sorted out." He eased his way between the Nelsons and the rest of the men. None were armed, but several looked at the weapons Fraser and Ray carried with interest. Ray could almost see the thoughts scurrying through their minds. It wouldn't be long before they would be a real mob.

The kitchen was dark, the curtains, normally open to catch the light, pulled shut. Someone had cleared out unneeded furniture to make room for the prisoners. Dennis sat in a high-backed chair with his arms tied behind his back. His shirt was bloodied from the slow drip down the side of his face. Cam sat next to him, her face stone white. Larry and two more of Dennis's men, Gary and Carl, crouched on the floor with their hands on their heads. They eyed the men guarding them with wary guile that Ray recognized from a thousand punks. Little men who thought they could beat the system if they could run far enough or shoot fast enough.

He took a deep breath and slowed to match Fraser's sudden halt. Fraser's hair was damp with sweat and he ran his hands through it to comb it back down. "Who else have you sent for?" he asked Ista directly, ignoring the prisoners.

"Naomi and I sent for Ilene." His flannel shirt was dark blue, but Ray could detect bloodstains on it.

"That should be enough," Fraser replied. "Nodin," he added, addressing Makah's youngest son. "Could you please bar the door after they arrive and then help keep the community calm?" He brought his rifle up to cover the seated men as the young man left.

Ray moved over to the prisoners, pulling his badge and placing it on the kitchen table. He ignored Carl's flinch as he reached behind Cam to adjust her ropes. He ignored Gary's muttering and moved past Dennis as if he were a ghost. Keeping his eyes studiously unfocused, he swung one of the empty chairs around to face the empty living room. Then he pulled out his revolver and checked the ammunition.

The soft clicking of the chambers was the only sound inside the room. Outside, they could hear voices and a few snatches of words. Inside, they waited, the dust motes floating in the dim light. Carl's breathing became harsher. Ray clicked the chamber shut and began.

"Who wants to go first?" He saw Cam shift uncontrollably and angrily met his eyes. Ray passed over her. She was not the weak link.

Dennis shook his head forcefully, but kept silent. His face was swelling on one side and it gave his features a lopsided look. Without ice he'd look like a mashed sculpture in a few hours.

"That's all right. We don't expect you to talk in the first go-round." He pulled out his switchblade and flicked it open. Carl started to wheeze, his arms trembling madly above his head.

Ray inched his chair closer, bending at the waist as if to hear better. Carl choked. His mouth opened but no sound emerged. As Ray leaned even closer, he almost lost his balance when Dennis spoke.

"A bit theatrical, aren't we?" His bruised mouth struggled to form the words, but his muscles seemed to loosen as he continued. "And here I thought you American cops did that only on TV."

Ray wheeled the chair around to face Dennis. "This is not a fucking movie," he shouted, his voice slamming into the walls. Cam flinched and kept her face lowered.

"I know it's not," Dennis continued smoothly. "But you don't seem to know it. What the hell is going on? We didn't do it."

"And what didn't you do last night? Couldn't get your way, so you thought you'd steal the ball and run home." Ray put the sneer of thirty years of Chicago streets into his words.

"Why are you blaming us? I already said we didn't do it. Or is it my politics you don't approve of? Kill the opposition, is that it?" Ista jerked and glared, moving menacingly closer. "So where intimidation does not work, threats and violence will? Look," Dennis continued, swallowing deeply. "It's not a question of 'my way.' This is a question of survival." He turned his head to glare back at Ista. "And I am not talking about the survival of a handful of pig-headed fishermen and refugees. I am talking about the survival of our nation."

"So that gives you the right to destroy our winter supplies? Our medical supplies? Our future?" Fraser's voice was flat, equally void of both warmth and condemnation.

"We—did—not—do—it. How many times do I have to say this before you idiots listen?" Dennis tested his jaw, moving it gingerly forward, and fell stubbornly silent.

The front door opened and then shut loudly. Ray's head shot up quickly. Ilene and Susan were standing quietly in the living room. Their faces were pasty-white. Between them they held Alain by the arms, breathing heavily. From the set of their expressions, Ray gathered they had heard every word.

"Thank you, Dennis. That is what we all needed to hear," was Fraser's only response. He looked at Alain without surprise, silently. Fraser's face had gone hollow and gaunt.

Susan gathered herself and stepped forward, dragging Alain with her. "Hold on," she said. "There's something else you should hear."

Alain stumbled as they forced him toward the kitchen. He looked wildly around, then, catching sight of Ray and Fraser, relaxed bonelessly in her grip.

"Tell them what you just told us, Alain." Susan shook him harshly and he nearly fell again.

"I did it," Alain mumbled into his beard. Susan shook him again and he jerked himself free. "Let me go. I told you I'd tell them."

"Tell us what, Alain?" Fraser's voice floated gently into the cabin. Ray remained seated; he could only stare with unfolding horror.

"It was poisoned. The food was poisoned. I had to protect you. Didn't any of you see?" Alain asked, growing agitated again.

Ray blinked, trying to clear away the confusion. "Wait. Are you saying you poured the gasoline over the supplies? You punctured the cans?"

Fraser approached Alain and sniffed. "Ray, he's covered in gasoline. Did you search him?" he asked Susan.

"Yeah." She winced, the blood seeping down her face as her head wound broke open again. "Shit," she muttered, wiping at the blood. "I mean, yes, he had grabbed a rifle from the storeroom but he didn't have a chance

to use it." By her expression she left it unspoken that it was only a matter of time before Alain escalated to killing them all.

"Get that seen to, Susan," Fraser said, tugging Alain's arm away from her grip. "We'll take it from here." She winced again and released Alain. Nodin unbolted the door to let her leave and shouting filled the cabin. Fraser listened to the voices, stripped of all expression, his eyes unfathomably dark.

Ray glanced involuntarily outside, the light breaking his momentary paralysis. He stood and joined Fraser, disturbed by the look in Fraser's eyes. "Alain," he breathed softly. "Why did you do it?"

"I told you. They poisoned it. I had to protect you. I wasn't sure. Not until he spoke last night." He pointed to Dennis tied to the chair, his eyes glittering. Alain leaned forward and whispered loudly, "He's from the government, you know."

"That's great," Dennis shouted back, pulling against the ropes. "A madman sabotages your stores and you blame us. I told you couldn't take care of yourselves. Now will you please release me?"

Fraser nodded to Makah, who stepped forward to untie the ropes. "I still think we should keep an eye on them," Ray muttered to Fraser. Fraser looked sharply at Istas, who smiled grimly back. "I don't think that'll be a problem, Ray."

Ray sighed and turned to Ilene and Naomi. "We should also have someone keep an eye on Alain. Can you organize a twenty-four-hour shift? Two at a time?"

Ilene looked at Fraser confusedly. "Is that it?" she asked angrily. "He leaves us to starve and that's it?" Fraser turned and studied Ilene out of dark eyes so still they looked inhuman. She fell abruptly silent.

Annoyed, Ray stepped forward. "No, that's not it. But we've got to take inventory. Decide how much is salvageable. He can't have gotten to all of the supplies. He's just one man."

Ilene considered the idea and then looked nervously at Fraser again. "Go ahead, Ilene," Fraser prodded her. "Istas and I will pass what's happened on to the rest. Would you and Naomi join us tomorrow after we've inventoried? Say three p.m.?"

"Come on, Alain. Let's get you cleaned up." Naomi gently put her arm around Alain, who shrank back. "No, don't worry. I'm okay. See?" She held up her hands to her face. Alain nodded slowly and turned to face Fraser. "I couldn't let anything happen to you. You're all I have left," he said, only then allowing Naomi to pull him toward the front door. Fraser bowed his head and closed his eyes.

"So what are you going to do?" Dennis stood, rubbing his wrists.

"None of your business," Ray grated, irritated. "I suggest you head out the side door as well and hightail it back to your camp."

"Oh, and get lynched? No, thanks. You owe us more than that. Dammit, man, we could have used those supplies. How are we going to make it to Whitehorse without them?" Ray bristled. The man just didn't know when to quit. He acted like he had been the only one affected by what Alain did. Time to let Dennis know the world did not revolve around him. He took a deep breath to put Dennis in his place.

"He's right," Fraser interrupted and Ray closed his mouth with a snap. For all he cared, Dennis and his followers could freeze in hell. But not on his watch. Ray rubbed his face tiredly and nodded.

"Istas," Fraser continued, "go with them. I'll start talking to the rest." His face was oddly stiff; its expression, brittle as glass, might have broken at a touch. He walked slowly out the door and into the crowd.

After they left, Ray turned to Danny. "Are you up for organizing the inventory detail? I'll even volunteer." His joke fell flat. Danny stared hopelessly, his face lined and ancient. "Ray, I really thought they'd done it. I was so sure."

"Well, would it help to know that I thought they did it too? Look, we all make mistakes. All we can do is try not to make any more. Right?" He felt exhaustion settle over his shoulders like a heavy coat. He couldn't spare much sympathy for Dennis right now.

Danny rubbed his chest painfully. Cam had kicked him several times before he wrestled her to the ground. "Right," he said, his voice lacking any conviction.

The inventory went slowly and took the rest of the day and most of the night. The damage had not been as great as Danny had

originally reported. In all, Alain had contaminated only half of their supplies. The canned goods were marginally affected. The greatest loss was the gasoline he'd poured liberally throughout the building. That could not be easily replaced. And of course, they would have to build another storage cabin. The wood had been so thoroughly soaked that it could not be cleaned.

Outside, Ray stretched his aching back and examined the tally sheet. Two of the other tourists had volunteered to help and they had just taken a break. They sat on the cabin steps, drinking water from a bucket someone had left for them. They were talking anxiously and although Ray tried to concentrate on his counting, their voices carried.

"So that's it, then." Ron Shinn had driven his RV all the way from Seattle to give his kids the real wilderness experience. They had not survived it. He had spent most of the winter in a drunken stupor and had only recently rallied with the spring.

"Yeah, well, it's not too bad. We still have enough to make it to Whitehorse." The other man tossed the excess water from his cup and rolled his head in order to release the kinks. Tom Dunlap and his wife and two kids had managed to survive the initial onslaught. Like the Nelsons, they'd hidden for months before starting on their way back home to Montreal. He had a wiry build and prematurely graying hair. He also had a dour personality to match.

"Well, that's if we make it." Ron kicked a stone away from the sill of the cabin and frowned.

"What do you mean? If there's a large enough group, we should be fine. And of course, we won't all go at once." Tom had very little patience for any pessimism but this own.

"I wasn't talking about Fairbanks. I'm talking about Alain. What if he decides that we're poisoned, contaminated, infected, whatever, next? Do you feel comfortable taking him along to Whitehorse? Or leaving him behind to slaughter your kids in their beds one night?"

The men fell silent. The day was warming, but Ray felt chilled. He looked at the tally sheet, but the pages kept blurring. Ron was right. It wasn't as bad as they'd originally feared. He looked up, across the short path separating them from Susan's cabin, his eyes

blinking in the afternoon glare. But it was bad enough. And if his numbers were right, Stewart Junction would not make another winter without outside help.

He snapped the notebook shut and told the men they could head home. Even Danny trudged down the path without a word. The numbers were clear. Ray knew it would be only a matter of hours before the entire community knew.

The visitor's center was empty when he first entered, the afternoon sunlight falling through the open door, hazing the dust motes in the air as he walked to the podium. He heard the soft murmur of voices and followed the sound.

The "war" room had originally been designed as a small storage room. Someone had appropriated a card table and chairs that filled the room. Ray squeezed past Susan and nodded to Naomi and Ilene.

Naomi smiled and moved a chair so he could sit down. "Fraser and Iostas will be here shortly. We can go over your report then."

Ray sat down, allowing himself to relax for the first time all day. He didn't want to ask them where Fraser had gone. He had awoken that morning to find the bed empty and that Fraser had never made it back to their cabin.

Susan sat next to him, rolling a piece of paper into a tube over and over again. "Hey, how's it going? You all right?"

She looked up and smoothed the paper, placing it flat on the table. "Yeah, just a nasty bruise. I got Jim—the paramedic, you know—to sew up the cut."

"So how're our friends doing? Still ranting about the mix-up?"

Ilene and Naomi shook their heads. "We don't know. Iostas will report on that when he gets here, I guess," Ilene said, looking over to Naomi. "We spent most of this morning setting up the watch schedule over Alain."

"So how that'd go?" Ray shifted in his seat, the tension returning.

Naomi pursed her lips and glanced at Ilene. "As well as could be expected. He doesn't understand what he did. And of course, it was hard to find people to watch him."

"You mean without wanting to pummel him? Yeah, I can relate. Who's on duty right now?"

"Elu. He likes her. I gather she reminds him of his wife. She was a Dene too, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." They fell silent, the only sound Susan's folding and refolding of her piece of paper.

Ray watched her and then finally gave up. "What is that?" he asked, pointing to the paper.

Susan dropped the sheet and pushed her chair back a little. It scraped against the wall and stopped. "A letter."

"From who? Don't tell me a postman made it through this mud." He reached out and slid the paper around to see.

It was hastily scribbled and he had to squint in places. Someone was demanding to be allowed to leave for Whitehorse. He could barely make out the signature.

"So they want to leave." He grunted before shoving it away. "I don't remember that being an issue."

"It isn't," Iostas called from the partially open door and squeezed his way past a chair. He sat down heavily and tossed his rifle on the table. "But if you read on, they're asking for a half share of our supplies to make the trip."

"Dennis." Ray divided his scowled between the letter and Iostas.

"And Greg Nelson. And the Dunlaps. Most of the tourists. Larry and the medic—thank God—are staying, however." Susan looked like she was about to add more, but Naomi raised her hand for silence. "I think we should wait for Fraser before discussing this."

"So who else? How many?" Ray asked, ignoring her.

"Who cares," Iostas interrupted, leaning forward in his chair. "Good riddance. They're a waste of our resources."

"Well, they're going to waste even more if we let them go." Ray pulled out his own sheet of paper and fingered it nervously. "Where's Fraser?"

"He was right behind me. Had to stop off at your cabin to pick up a few things." The fact that Iostas always knew Fraser's whereabouts still irritated Ray. He tried to let it slide, but another night of falling asleep while his partner was anywhere but where he was wore thin.

The door creaked and Fraser entered. He nodded courteously to Susan and Naomi, then neatly stepped behind Ray to sit in the remain-

ing chair. His revolver flashed through his open coat as he sat. He leaned his rifle against the wall. "Anything up?" Ray asked quickly, nodding at the weapons.

"No, but I thought with emotions running high, we should be prepared." His chair creaked under him like a comment.

Satisfied, Ray pointed to Susan's letter. "You heard about this?"

"Yes. So the question is, how many supplies can we spare?" Fraser spoke abruptly, his face cold and white as bone.

Ray dropped the tally sheet flatly on the table. "What, no discussion? No 'hey, maybe we shouldn't let them go with any of our supplies'?"

"That depends on how much we have left."

He could tell when Fraser was being reasonable and hated it.

"Based on the caloric numbers we've been using this winter, we've got enough canned goods and other food supplies to reach through two months of winter. After that, either we cut our numbers in half or we cut our caloric intake in half." He paused to clear his throat. "But the worst is the gasoline. While we can hand-pump it from Carey's underground tanks, we don't know how much is left. And even if we can get to the next tank in Mayo, transportation will be a problem."

Fraser took a deep breath and nodded firmly. "Well, then, we take the number of people who want to leave, give them half of what they need to get to Whitehorse. The rest they can forage on their way."

"Okay, okay. Let me calculate." Ray ran the numbers, his pencil scratching. He'd never really missed a calculator until he arrived in the Yukon.

"They would actually balance each other out," he finally answered and frowned. "But we're still short. Even with reduced numbers, we won't make it through the next winter without additional supplies."

"Fine," Fraser said. "Susan, you want to do the rationing?" Susan scowled but agreed. "Istas, I think they should leave as soon as possible."

"We can always make up the difference by shortchanging them on the supplies." Istas smiled thinly. Fraser considered him soberly until the man flushed slightly and looked

away. Ray sat back, enjoying the exchange.

"So how will we deal with the winter? Fraser, what do you recommend?" Naomi exasperatedly cut into the male posturing.

Before Fraser could answer, Susan jumped in eagerly. "We should start by drawing up a list of all the surrounding cabins and then check off the ones we've already visited. We've pretty much cleaned out Carey's store, so we'll probably need to head over to Mayo."

"Good, then, Susan, you're in charge of organizing the resupply." Fraser smiled brightly.

"Teach me to volunteer next time," Susan chuckled, answering him with a sardonic grin.

Istas, still sulking, added, "And we had agreed to organize a hunting trip. The caribou should be here in the next few weeks."

"Good, I'll be happy to work with you on that." Fraser spoke easily, without any trace of reprimand or criticism. Istas brightened. Ray always admired how he could shift people so easily from irritation to good will. *Must be another survival tactic he learned from some weird book.*

"Good, then," Fraser said. He had somehow slipped into the role of moderator. "So that leaves us with the last issue." His gray eyes swept the table piercingly. "What are we going to do about Alain?"

Ray sat back, wrinkling his brow. He should have seen this coming, but somehow the inventory and Dennis had made it such a secondary issue. Well, nuts were one thing he knew how to handle.

"We do what we've been doing. We guard him. He's clearly not all here."

Istas stared at him and snorted. "What, twenty-four hours a day? And how will we do that? We'd have to restrain him. Are you suggesting we tie him up like a wild animal in the back yard?"

Ray rolled his eyes in irritation. "No, Istas, not that. We can build a jail. We've already secured his cabin. We just need to make it more secure. Come on, have you never had to build jails in the Yukon before?"

Istas's face flooded again, and he raised his voice. "We've already tried that and he keeps getting out. More bars and locks won't fix the problem. What he needs is someone to guard him. And we don't have the manpower. We need everyone here to pull their own weight,



not sit on their asses watching some nut. And even if we did assign him a twenty-four-hour guard, there's no guarantee we can keep him secure."

"This is not Ted Bundy we're talking about. It's Alain. I know you don't want to take care of him, but maybe Dennis will."

Istas laughed harshly. "I doubt that, Ray. You know what he called Alain last night? A 'saboteur.' He wouldn't have him even if we gave Dennis *all* of our supplies."

Stumped, Ray looked angrily around the table for support. Naomi held his gaze, reflecting back only calm determination. Susan's face was more easily read: Alain was too dangerous. Istas was equally transparent, his impatience with Ray's reasoning visible in the tight line of his shoulders and the narrowed eyes. Ray looked over to Fraser, hoping for some show of support.

Fraser studied him wordlessly, his eyes filling with sadness. "You know, Ray," Fraser offered heavily after what seemed like minutes of silent reflection. "Alain is as dangerous to all of us as if he were carrying a loaded gun."

Ray stared. Fraser sounded so reasonable. Almost dispassionate. "You can't really think that, Fraser," he finally managed to say, hearing the flatness in his own voice.

Fraser sighed and leaned into the table. He had rolled his coatsleeves up above the elbows in the warm room. "He has already made it likely that some of us will not survive the next winter."

The absolute conviction in Fraser's voice shook him. Ray had done the math. He'd been doing the math all night and day. He had even dreamed about it last night, sleeping alone in the cabin—the cold winter snow floating over their bodies, the sound of wolves and carrion birds descending. He'd already gone through one winter in the Yukon under less than desirable conditions. And he also knew it would be a long time before relief or rescue. If ever.

Scanning the table again, he realized that the others had already come to the same conclusion. They were old hands at living in this god-forsaken place. For the first time in his life he understood what it meant to exist—to survive—on the edge of subsistence. The room closed around him, the air stale in his lungs. He forced himself to breathe.

"So what do you want to do?" He meant to

sound defiant, but the words came out weakly.

No one offered anything for a few minutes. A small trickle of sweat rolled down the back of his neck.

"We could make it look like suicide, I suppose," Susan finally offered, studying her sheet of paper with great intensity. Stunned, Ray swept the room with his eyes, demanding some response to Susan's suggestion. He waited for someone to look back, to show they still had some sense. Some reason. But the floor, the table, even the outside wall seemed to be the only interesting objects in the room.

Finally, Istas raised his eyes. "Yes, I agree." Naomi followed. All eyes turned inquiringly to Fraser. "Yes," Fraser said, his voice ringing with a solidity that couldn't be disagreed with.

Ray exploded. "I don't believe this. Here we are, civilized people, discussing the murder of a neighbor like we were deciding what to order for dinner."

"Ray, do you really want to allow more of your neighbors to die? And if we don't do something, that's what's going to happen." A hard, set look spilled across Fraser's face, but his voice gentled. Ray felt he was facing a stranger.

"This isn't going to happen," he insisted. Numbness spread downward from his mouth, across his face, settling in his chest. "I didn't become a cop for this."

Naomi reached across the table and picked up his limp hand. "Ray, you don't understand. When you've been here longer you'll see what's demanded." She looked sincere and for a moment her weathered face flickered with what might have been compassion. Ray pulled his hand away and shoved it under the table. He felt dirty.

"I don't care if I live a thousand years, what is wrong is wrong. I don't want to live in a world like this. And you—" He turned on Fraser, whipping his words with venomous force. "You're the last man I'd ever think'd agree to this." Fraser's face paled, his mouth tightened, and for a moment he looked as though he wanted to speak. But the moment passed, and with it Ray's last chance to reason with him. Ray looked across the table and saw a unity of purpose. They had decided. They had shut him out. His vision blurred and he clenched his fists beneath the table, digging

fingernails into his palms.

Istas stirred restlessly into the resulting silence. "We should do it now, you know."

Fraser nodded, once. "I agree. I'll do it." Ray saw his eyes then, so dark they had no color, powerful in their directness. More glances around the table, the sense of relief palpable. The world spun again, the center slipping away into darkness. "No, Fraser," he began, his voice hoarsely gaining strength. "I don't believe you are going to do this."

Istas growled at him. "Shut up, Ray. We've made our decision." The faces around the card table were suddenly swept with the same uniform coldness. Susan smiled, showing her teeth. The way the world smiles, Ray thought numbly. Showing teeth. He felt surrounded by a pack of wolves, waiting for him to make the wrong move, the wrong gesture.

Fraser stood up, pulling the room's attention away from Ray. Istas shrank back into his chair and only then did Ray realize his hand had been resting on his gun. Fraser reached behind his chair, picked up his rifle, and strode toward the door. He passed by his partner without another word or a reassuring gesture, not even acknowledging Ray's disbelief. The door creaked open, then slowly closed, leaving Ray alone, facing silent, hostile gazes. They had not listened. They did not care. But he'd be damned if he'd let them drive Fraser into doing something he'd regret.

Carefully, keeping his eye on Istas's hands, he followed his partner out the door. Crossing the hall, he hurried his steps. By the time he reached the mudroom, he was running. The outer door slammed open and he hurtled down the dirt path. Fraser had almost reached the center of the square. His rifle was slung over his arm as he hiked purposefully toward Elu's cabin.

Ray shouted and grabbed him by the shoulder. It was like pulling against a tree. Fraser did not even break stride. Ray tightened his grip, digging painfully into flesh.

Fraser slowed, then turned to face him. His face had the same untamed look he'd seen earlier by the river. Fraser caught his eyes in an animal's wide, expressionless gaze, and he felt as if Fraser had reached suddenly into him and plucked a deep, taut string. Ray's stomach tightened. He desperately needed to talk Fraser

out of this. He heard the sound of voices. His shouting had already drawn a knot of on-lookers. He didn't care.

"Fraser, you don't have to do this." His voice cracked. "I don't care what these fucking loonies think. This is not your job. Alain doesn't have to die, okay?" He could have been talking to stone.

"Ray, this has to be done." Fraser paused, as if this statement would be enough. As if all of Ray's objections, his words, their shared past could be erased by this simple declaration. The gathering crowd murmured, a wall of faces lending Fraser their support and approval. And then he was looking at Ray without seeing him. Again, Ray had the eerie feeling that some creature whose name he did not know peered out of Fraser's eyes.

Something flashed across Ray's mind and he froze. He remembered Fraser sighting down a rifle at Diefenbaker, willing to kill an animal that had been closer to him than most people. And he remembered Carey. "The gun," he whispered. "The gun wasn't in the bedstand. You put it there." He knew then that Fraser would carry it through at all costs. Even if the cost was Ray himself. He felt small tremors race through his legs. The ice ran into heat, a blinding blaze of memories and fears racing ahead of thought until instinct and reaction took over. Dimly, he could see Fraser reach out, trying to steady him.

He struck the hand away. His movement carried him forward and he used it to his advantage. His right fist smashed into Fraser's nose and he put all his weight and pain into the blow. Blood sprayed and Fraser dropped his rifle. His hand ached. He struck again, this time with the left, a weaker blow, and caught Fraser on the temple. Pain shot through his arm. He slipped in the mud and went down on one knee.

Fraser's knee caught him in the chest, knocking him onto his back into a stagnant pool of mud. The air filled with dark spray and blinded him. He felt a boot crush into his side. Rolling, he pushed himself up and away from the next kick. He regained his feet, clutching his side, and charged blindly, head down. The impact pulled them both over, and he landed heavily on top of Fraser. He jabbed his knee at Fraser's groin, but missed, striking the thigh instead. Fraser heaved and Ray tried to lever his

elbow against his opponent's throat. But Fraser lashed out with both hands, painfully wrenching Ray's head and neck. Numbing pain seared his spine and his vision dimmed briefly, and then Fraser's fist exploded into his face, rocking him up and back.

He caught another glimpse, this time of Fraser's eyes, flashing, with a fierce and feral expression that shook him deeply. He fell onto his side, rolled away, and slid nervelessly off of Fraser. His legs seemed thick and uncoordinated, hindering his efforts to stand. Fraser was faster, regaining his feet in one smooth snap of muscle. Horrified, Ray felt himself lifted by the shoulders, his jacket pulled upward in Fraser's tight grip. Then Fraser's knee smashed into his chin and the agony took away all thought. Something dark, warm, and metallic filled his nose and mouth and he choked. He was falling, then still. Motion replaced by sound, sight replaced by touch. His fingers scrabbled, hands flailing as he tried to grab Fraser's boot, tried to stop him, tried not to let go.

The pain was sharp, deep, and biting. It pulled him back into awareness only to batter his senses until he wanted to scream. He opened his eyes, the light harsh, peeling back all layers of consciousness in one painful jolt. He rolled onto his back and bared his throat in

surrender. "Please, no more." he heard his voice thick with blood and pain.

Fraser bent down to retrieve his rifle. His knuckles were bloody and he breathed harshly through his mouth. He found Ray's eyes, held them so long that Ray thought Fraser saw through him, saw through dark and blood and bone into their future. Then Fraser made a small, soft, inarticulate sound. He stood up and walked slowly, purposively toward Elu's cabin. The crowd of onlookers rolled back from him as he passed. Ray blinked and saw Danny, Susan, Greg, and Naomi. Even Dennis had come to watch the show. They were all there. Some wore faces of horror. Some wore masks of approval. But they all had watched. And done nothing.

He choked again, rolled, and buried his face in the mud. He had failed. By now, Fraser must have reached Elu's door. He could see Alain's eyes, trusting and then filled with confusion as the rifle was positioned. He could see him pleading for someone to help him. But there was no one there to stop Fraser. Ray heard a rifle crack in the distance, felt his body jerk, and then willed himself into muteness. The image of Fraser cradling the rifle burned, like a quick glimpse of the sun, behind his eyes.

---

## Chapter 6: Broken Walls and Sunken Sills

*"THEY are all gone away,  
The House is shut and still,  
There is nothing more to say.  
Through broken walls and gray  
The winds blow bleak and shrill;  
Why is it then we stray  
Around the sunken sill?  
They are all gone away."*

—Edwin Arlington Robinson

---

Ray stumbled over the sill of their cabin and clutched at the door frame. His left eye was swollen and a deep throbbing pulsed at the back of his head. Nausea swelled inside him in counterpoint and he kept swallowing over and over again. He raised one trembling leg and took another step into the dim room.

The cabin was chilly, the stove unlit. The weak sun poured in through one small window. He lurched forward again, feeling his muscles stiffening into a mass of bruises. He was almost there. He had come a long way; only a few steps further until he could rest.

He crashed into the chair and watched it tumble, slowly, as his right eye blinked the room in and out of view. He couldn't sit down, he thought dimly, and turned to their bed. It swayed and then steadied. *No*. He shook his head slightly until the pain swelled and then stopped. If he lay down he would never get back up.

The afterimage of Fraser's fist flashed across the room, followed by the echo of his boot crunching into Ray's side. For a moment, Ray was plummeting backward into the mud and then the cabin rotated again into view. He jerked and nearly doubled over with pain. How had he even got up in the first place? No, if he slowed down now, he'd never get up. He'd lie there, slipping into the silence, until the pain carried him away. Or until Fraser came back.

The thought brought explosive retching, and he forced himself forward, until he rested face first against the wall. The wood was splintery under his fists, as his body convulsed with the effort of not vomiting. He could feel

sweat rolling past his eyes, stinging the left. The patches they'd made to the cabin had held through the winter. Something to marvel at. But now he could see a small chink had reappeared, and soon the air would be pouring in. But this time he wouldn't be around to fix it.

He rolled carefully, using the wall as a backrest, and took a few deep, steadying breaths. First, he had to wash up. Just enough so he wouldn't be too much a mess when he showed up at Danny's door. Steph had some good first-aid stuff, so he'd get patched up there. There was still water left in the basin and he slapped it over his face and hands until he could see the skin, faintly. He didn't look in the mirror—nothing much he could do about his face.

Grimacing, he moved to the next task—packing. His service revolver and the rounds of ammunition. His parka and warm clothes went into a duffel bag. The book he'd been reading. Everything else—his good eye rolled painfully across the room—everything else could burn, for all he cared. His eye lingered on the kerosene lamp before he forced the thought away. He wouldn't stoop to Fraser's level.

He had just reached for the duffel bag when the cabin door swung open, and light flooded across the bed. Ray froze and then stiffened. Carefully, he turned toward the door, his gaze sweeping across Fraser leaving him unseen. Then, grimly, he lurched forward, daring Fraser to stand in his way.

To his surprise, Fraser stepped inside and then moved out of his way quickly to stand next to the kitchen table. As Ray stepped forward again, his ribs stabbed him, and he felt

his breath leave in an erratic rush. He saw Fraser make a stillborn gesture toward him, almost too small to see. As if he still wanted to help. As if Fraser still had some right to be there, offering his hand. The cabin faded into a burst of white and dimly Ray could feel his face flame as the pain miraculously flooded away in a burst of adrenaline.

"That's even sicker, Fraser." His voice sounded harsh, almost croaking. "Don't try to touch me, help me. I can't believe it. Can't believe it," he kept repeating. "You killed Alain. You actually shot him. Alain is *dead*."

"And you're alive, Ray." Fraser's face came back into view as he spoke. His eyes looked almost owl-like, wise and so solemn. Ray wanted to drop the duffel bag and smash them in.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ray could feel the pain seeping back, finger by finger, muscle by bruised muscle. "I should be grateful you didn't beat me to death or shoot me too?"

"It had to happen." Fraser stood loosely, his arms relaxed. But Ray could still see the bloody knuckles. He could still see the mud, caking Fraser's boots. And for a brief moment, he could smell the cordite, hanging around Fraser.

Something broke loose inside him, tearing the words from his throat in a frenzy. "No, it didn't. I don't believe it. You don't believe it. What the fuck happened? No, don't feed me any more of your bullshit, Fraser. I've had to listen to that all winter long. I don't know you, Fraser. I don't know this place or these people or what's happened to the world, but mostly, really, I don't know you. And you wanna know something—I don't care to know you. I can't get away from you fast enough." His voice rose until he could hear the rawness of his emotion pound against the cabin walls.

"Ray..." Fraser seemed to sway back, then forward. "Haven't you thought before of what we might have to do to protect this community, here and now? We're officers. We're sworn to protect."

"You weren't protecting Alain. Dammit, Fraser!" Ray could feel his legs trembling and forced himself to speak slowly. "I swore to protect everyone, not just the few. So don't 'Ray' me! I can't live like this." He shook his

head to clear it and then pushed on. "You saw to that," he said and then fell silent. Fraser jerked at the last line and Ray smiled thinly.

"Ray..." said Fraser, and this time the dark brokenness of Fraser's voice caught Ray's attention, and he looked squarely at Fraser. There was something trapped inside of Fraser's face. A familiar expression, but one that Ray had never understood. Like the time Fraser stood watching the ice break up. Or the time they'd stood on Carey's shop porch and listened to the night fall on a dead world. It was both fierce and yearning and it frightened Ray into silence.

Fraser took a deep breath and moved slowly closer. "Ray, please." His voice fell almost to a whisper. "There is nothing I would not do, *nothing*, to keep you alive."

The noise Ray made actually frightened him, before he distantly identified it as a kind of laughter. "That is the lowest thing you've done to me yet. 'I did it for you'! Even wife-beaters come up with far better lines than that."

Fraser slammed his hand down on the kitchen table, rocking the plates and cutlery. Ray flinched reflexively and jerked back, his heart pounding. Then he flushed and deliberately moved forward to close the space between the two of them. Two could play this game.

"No." He kept his voice low and even. "No, you're something worse. You were a Mountie. And now—who the hell knows *what* you are now. I sure don't." He edged closer, forcing himself into Fraser's personal space. Daring him. Making him react.

But Fraser broke eye contact, turning slightly away. His hand trailed across the table, shifting the plates back to their positions. His voice became distant, lecturing. "You don't know anything, Ray. You don't know what it takes to survive here." He turned to face Ray with the same curious expression, except this time it seemed directed inward, as if he were talking to himself. "You don't know me. You don't know the kind of man I was brought up to be. Here..." He gestured vaguely as if he could somehow gather the last few months, their isolation, and the plague into some justification.

Resentment swelled inside Ray. Damn Fraser. Damn them all. At least he knew the difference between what made a man, and

what turned you into Zuko.

"Well," he drawled out, sneeringly, "I'm not sticking around to have you teach me like you just did out there. Like you did Alain."

The point drove home. He could see Fraser's entire body grow silent and stiff, his lips white. And felt exhaustion and pain slowly creeping past his own anger, draining away the intensity. He had to leave now, while he still could.

He stepped back slightly and turned to leave. But something caught his ear—a half-drawn breath, or a soft rustle—and he swung back, half in fear and half in anger.

"You know something, Fraser?" Fraser had not moved from the table, but as Ray spoke he raised his head and met Ray's gaze evenly. Swallowing, Ray continued. "You know, it doesn't take a genius to survive. And last time I checked, Fraser, it doesn't take a murderer. So stay the fuck outta my way."

For a minute Ray hoped that Fraser would try to stop him. That they could finish what Fraser had started in the town center. That they could end the pain and fury right now, in this cabin where they'd spent their last days together. But Fraser only nodded once, sharply. Maybe he wanted to end it too, but didn't know how. The thought confused Ray, so he almost missed the next words.

"You're right." Fraser spoke each word with brittle precision. Ray blinked his one good eye, feeling his confusion grow. "It doesn't take a genius, Ray. Or a murderer. It takes a lot more than you think you know to survive. Do you know how many nights I've sat up wondering just how we're going to make it here? And what I was going to do if you couldn't make it." Fraser's voice had gone thready and bare. "And then I would spend the rest of the night wondering if you could still care for the kind of man I would have to become." A tremor ran through Fraser. He wanted something from Ray, wanted something that Ray could not give.

For a minute Ray could almost hear the faint trickle of painful truth seeping past his defenses. For a minute he wanted to know—what did it really take? What had Fraser seen at the river? On Carey's front porch? At the moment he pulled the trigger and changed their lives forever?

But only for a minute. That was all the luxury of understanding Ray could afford. Trembling, he felt he had just walked through a field of invisible landmines. And Fraser was still on the other side. Quickly, before he could stop, he turned away and thrust himself out into the light.

He stepped up to Danny's door and dropped his pack before knocking. He heard shuffling, then Steph shouted for him to come in. She was sitting at the table, frowning at her plumbing repair book. The right side of her face was covered with a large ugly bruise where Dennis's man had hit her. She glanced up and her face went still. "Danny," she called sharply and then rose to walk to Ray's side. "Here. Sit," was all she said, and then she turned away to the sink.

Ray felt the warmth of the cabin loosen his muscles and his eyes started stinging. He heard the door to the back shed slam shut and then the sound of Danny's feet clattering to a halt in front of him. Ray looked up and for a minute the two men stared at each other silently. Then Danny moved gently forward and patted Ray's shoulder. "Hang on, we'll get you fixed up." Ray thought he could hear pity and a touch of fear. For a minute he wanted to get up and walk out, leave them all behind. Just get up and go and never stop walking. But then Steph clattered back into view. Danny stepped aside and she was kneeling with antiseptic and cloth in her hands. Too late, he thought briefly before becoming distracted by the inevitable pain.

"Well," Steph said after a few minutes, "it could have been worse."

Danny's eyes flashed at his wife and he opened his mouth before a warning grimace from Ray silenced him. "I don't think it's broken," Ray replied stiffly, gesturing at his nose. It had swollen into a misshapen match to his left eye. "But my ribs..."

"I'll get to that. First we need to look at the eye," Steph interrupted brusquely. "Danny, bring the flashlight over." She splashed some more water on the cloth and rubbed at Ray's cheek. He tried not to wince.

Danny came back into the room carrying the flashlight. He stood helplessly for a minute, then, seeming to recollect himself, nodded toward the door. "I'll get your stuff and put it in the shed. I'll fix up the cot there too."

For a moment, Ray thought Steph would object. But she only nodded and rose to refill her basin with more water. Danny looked relieved and hurried out the door.

Ray watched her wring out the cloth in the sink. He wondered what they'd do for antiseptic when their supply ran out. Steph would probably know, but he felt awkward and confused, too tired to ask. His eye slid shut.

"Wake up," he heard and then Steph was unbuttoning his shirt. "You probably have a concussion and we'll need to keep an eye on you. I'll ask Ussak to check on you every hour." She had more bandages and some plastering tape. Ray started to agree but his head spasmed and he shut his mouth tightly. Trying to ignore the stabs, he focused across the room. The boys had left their schoolbooks open on the side table and one notepad was teetering over the edge.

"Where are the boys?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

"Out." Her voice had grown curt, her words clipped. For a minute, Ray wondered if they'd gone out to watch Fraser kill Alain, like people had in the Old West. Picnics at the hanging, hawkers at the scene of execution. But there'd been so little time between Fraser's decision and the gunshot that he doubted anyone had had a chance to follow Fraser, let alone stop it. He wondered what Steph thought of it all, but, seeing her bruised face, thought better than to ask.

Danny clattered by, distracting him, and then Steph was done, washing her hands, sitting back down to her book. Hesitantly, he rose from his chair, thanked her, and walked toward the shed. It faced north and the afternoon light was dim. The small wood stove had not been lit, so the room had a chill that ate into him. Danny had placed his pack at the foot of the cot and had lit a cigarette.

"I thought you'd quit?" Ray commented and sat down heavily on the bed.

"I did. This is my last pack. I was saving it for..." Danny's voice trailed off and he took a deep breath and looked away.

Ray stared back, almost too tired to speak. But somehow he couldn't let it rest. He had to know.

"Why didn't you try to stop him?" He had no energy for niceties.

Danny took another drag and then coughed. "I can't believe these are the last cigarettes I'll be able to smoke. I mean, we invented tobacco. Well, we were the first to cultivate it. And now it took some white fucker's medical marvel to wipe it all away. I wonder how many of us are left after this last genocidal gasp."

"Sure. And your people were all pacifists who never hurt anybody. So don't tell me. What do I care? Don't tell me you were afraid. And don't tell me that you didn't know. I mean, gosh, what else would a man be doing walking up a path with a rifle in his hand and his best friend lying bloody in the mud." He hated the words seconds after he uttered them. He hated self-pity.

But Danny only smiled, sadly, bitterly. "No, I won't tell you that. It was pretty quick. And yes, I was afraid. But you know, at the end, all I could think of was Steph. And Victor and Ussak. You know, I never got the tribal bullshit until now. But it is us versus them. And when there's nothing left, it'll be us and whatever is waiting for us out there." He made that same, all-encompassing gesture that Fraser had used only an hour before. Ray wanted to climb up from the cot and crush him along with the cigarettes into the dirt.

But somehow he could understand Danny's position more easily. Maybe it was because he was a man with a wife and children. Ray had seen this before—the families of the victims crying for protection from the hurt of the world. And the cops standing like a thin blue line between the rule of law and the rule of the street. Oh, he couldn't fault Danny for wanting to protect his family. He was only doing what husbands and fathers had always done.

Fraser had no such excuse.

Sighing, Ray held out his hand. "I could use one too, I guess."

"I thought you didn't smoke." Danny tapped the pack and leaned forward with his arm outstretched. He seemed relieved at the change in topic.

"I don't. But I guess it's never too late to start."

The old joke rolled between them for a minute and then Danny smiled back, hesitantly at first, then with genuine warmth. "Yeah," he

finally said, tossing the lighter to Ray. "But it looks like we picked the wrong week to stop sniffing glue."

"Surely you can't be serious!" Ray fired back, taking a drag and trying not to smile. It hurt.

"I am serious." Danny paused, hesitating for the rest of the quote. "And don't call me Shirley."

They spent the rest of the evening sorting through old movies and bad jokes until Steph irritably called them into the cabin for dinner. At least, Ray thought later that night as he fell asleep, some things hadn't changed. But was it really worth sticking around and fighting for the rest? Uneasily, he rolled himself tightly against the evening chill and let the painful sleep overwhelm him.

He felt at loose ends all the next day. Danny was up early, helping out with sorting the remaining supplies. Steph grumpily told him to stay put and rest. Which he did, popping between the cabin and the back room, wanting company and then retreating whenever he heard the cabin door open. He tried his hand again at fixing a truck alternator Danny had left behind in the workshop, but his eyes kept blurring. He threw down the wrench in disgust, wincing as the clatter bounced back through the open door. It was pointless: his face was screwed up, his ribs hurt, and he really needed to take the thing outside to test it properly. But he sat, rooted on the bench, feeling the pain settle in his gut. He bent down to retrieve the wrench and yelped.

A loud rattle bounced back from the main cabin and Ray froze, his fingers brushing cold metal. "Steph," he called out softly, keeping his breathing even against the stabbing ache. He heard her mutter something, another loud crash, and then her voice rang out, sharply. "Are you going to mope in there all day?"

Puzzled, Ray stood up and peered through the entryway. "Well, I thought you wanted me to..." His voice trailed off as he entered, watching Steph pulling on her muddy boots, each movement tight and fierce. He sighed, softly. "Yes, I think I'll rest a bit more. Is there anything you need done in the cabin?"

She met his eyes quickly, sharply. Ray saw something flash there, annoyance at first, and then it smoothed itself out. "No, I just to get out

a bit. The stew needs to be stirred and the bread comes out in thirty minutes. The boys can feed themselves. Tell Danny I'll be at Ilene's." And with that, the door swung open and she was gone.

Ray stood in the doorway, watching the dust dance in the light slipping through the glazed windows. Dust seemed to filter into everything, dulling the world into a fine shade of brown. When it snowed, it mixed into a dirty gray; when it rained, the world turned to mud. And no matter how hard Steph tried, it seeped past her and into every corner of her family's life.

He sighed again and picked up the broom. But the handle hung between his fingers as he stood, mesmerized by the light. Closing his eyes, he felt rapid-fire flickering, overwhelming him. He shoved the broom away and forced himself to open his eyes, forced his thoughts to turn away from the blood-red images. He circled the room, running his hand over the pine table, brushing the walls, evening his breath with each turn. He almost missed the soft scrape of feet against the horseshoe that served as a mud wipe outside. He jerked himself to face the door, his heart pounding.

Dennis shoved past him, tromping more dust and mud into the cabin. His gray hair stuck out at angles, his flannel shirttails had been hurriedly tucked into his pants, and his parka was unbuttoned. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

Frowning, Ray turned to watch Dennis as he checked the cabin before seating himself heavily at the kitchen table. Dennis looked around again and then settled expectantly. "How long will we be alone?" he barked.

Ray didn't answer. Shrugging, he headed toward the stove. The stew needed stirring. And if he ignored Dennis, he might go away.

But Dennis was, as usual, oblivious. "Long enough, I guess; it'll have to do. I waited until she left. Shit, you look like...well, shit."

Ray winced, keeping his back to the kitchen table. Trust Dennis to overstate even the obvious. He kept stirring.

"Well, never mind. Actually, maybe it was all for the best. I mean, who would have thought...if he would do this to a fellow officer, God knows what the rest of us could expect." Ray could hear Dennis struggling out of his



parka and sighed. Ignoring Dennis wouldn't work, not if he was settling in for a long whine. Drooping the spoon onto the stove, he poured himself a glass of water and stood next to the stove, watching Dennis's eyes circling the cabin. Looking anywhere but at his battered face.

"So did you have a purpose in mind or were you just going to scrape your mud all over someone else's floor, Dennis?" Ray asked harshly. He watched Dennis flush slightly and shove his boots quickly under the table. Ray shook his head. Man couldn't even remember to remove his boots when he came into a cabin.

"I think you should listen to what I have to say, for once. I think—" Dennis paused, waving his hands for emphasis. "I think that after what happened, you might want to hear what I have to say. This is, after all, a free country. In spite of what Fraser and this town think."

Ray could feel the resentment building. God, Dennis was such a pompous ass. He should toss him back into the mud from which he'd crawled.

His anger must have shown because Dennis's face became thoughtful, his tone lowered, conciliatory. "I'm sorry, Ray. I've been under stress. We've all been under stress. I didn't come there to rehash the same old tunes. Or pick a fight." He ran his hands through his hair and rested his elbows on Steph's table. He looked old.

Ray looked away, covering his thoughts under the guise of pouring more water. Dennis was right. There was no point in chewing over what had happened. No point at all. The dust motes returned, dancing in the light, swirling through the room, in aimless circles.

His eyes must have clouded because he almost missed Dennis's next words. "I know we've not gotten along. But in spite of it all, I respect you. You did what no one was willing to do. You did what was right. And if no one has said this to you, then let me say it now. You stood between us and the dark yesterday. Between us and anarchy. Madness. Whatever the hell it is that's swept this town."

Ray felt a lump grow in his stomach. *Oh yeah?* he wanted to say. *If I did what was right, then why do I feel like shit?* But he didn't trust Dennis.

"Right, Dennis, spit it out. We both can

skip the patriotic bullshit." He slammed the mug back onto the stove and pushed his way into the center of the room. His stomach hurt like hell and he wanted to rest before Steph came back.

Dennis looked up sharply and smiled. "You're absolutely right. I do get carried away. Well, that can't be helped." He smiled again, wryly. It was the first genuine smile Ray had ever seen on him.

"Ray, I'll be honest with you. I couldn't have stood up to Fraser like you did. You know, we're heading off to Whitehorse. It was just a matter of time. Well, yesterday we realized that *now* is the time. And we'll need a cop like you. Will you come with us?"

Ray studied Dennis. The swelling on Dennis's face had gone down considerably, but his bruises would remain for at least a few more days. Ray could feel a twin ache in his nose, his eye sockets, the bones in his jaw and mouth. Lost in the sensation, he jerked back to the conversation.

"Why?" The question fell into the air, filling the silence. Dennis shook his head and lowered his gaze. Carefully, as if parsing out some great truth, he finally answered. "I know it won't be easy. I know we'll have a hard road. But we can't live...like this." His gesture swept the cabin, the village, and carried into the woods. "We have to rebuild. We have to restore our faith in an ordered world. That when we wake every morning, there will be a tomorrow. You can make a difference with us. Here..." His voice trailed off.

And with a sinking sense of horror, Ray knew he could finish Dennis's sentence for him. Here there was no place for him. Here he could make no difference. Here there'd be only the feel of blood slipping under his feet, the taste of bile, and the image of Fraser's white face as he cradled the rifle.

He took a sharp breath, deliberately seeking out the pain of his aching ribs. If he held his breath long enough, he could remain poised between one moment and the next, and lose himself in the sensation. As colors washed behind his closed eyes, he could feel himself slip again. And before he could stop himself, the decision was made. "You're right, Dennis." The words sounded far away and he opened his eyes, half surprised. The motes were dancing,

agitating their way across the room as the light shifted. "I'll come with you."

A look of satisfaction flashed across Dennis's face. Ray closed his eyes again. He heard Dennis scrape back from the kitchen table and cross the room. Something pulled at his hand, and he felt Dennis's clammy fingers pressing his own in a handshake. "I'll tell the others. We have a lot to do before we can go. We've drawn up a list of supplies we'll need. Could you requisition them from storage? I'll get Greg and Carl to help with the transportation." Dennis shoved a piece of paper into Ray's hand.

Ray squinted painfully at the writing. It was a blur. "Yeah, I can do that. But why the hurry? It could have waited until later." He asked the question automatically, without thinking.

Dennis's glare almost made him wince again, but he controlled his reaction. "Well, Ray, I thought we'd better get cracking. Before *they* changed their mind about letting us go." Dennis paused, hesitating, as if wanting to add more, but turned to leave. "I'll have the men swing by storage about ten a.m.? That should give you enough time to sort it all out with the others."

Nodding, Ray barely stirred as Dennis clattered through the front door. He listened to it flap against the latch, then spring partially open. Steph would be furious if he left it ajar, letting the heat leak out into the still chilly afternoon air. She would be furious over the mud, the stew that even now he could smell burning on the bottom of the pan. But what was the point? Like Dennis said, it was not like he was of much use around here any more.

Ray's stared tiredly out the open door. He could see Dennis walking quickly, merging into the woods to the side of the cabin. For a moment he thought he saw a shadow move in the trees, as if someone had been watching them. As a chill skittered down his spine, he angrily shut the door. If he weren't careful, Dennis would have him looking for enemies until he couldn't see straight. He had to watch out for paranoia. With that in mind, he slammed the door shut.

His chest and head had moved from throbbing into a deep, hungry pounding. The room felt dark, close. It wasn't until he stumbled toward the back room that he realized his eyes

had swollen shut. Lying in his bunk, he tried to ignore the return of Steph and the rest of her family. But he kept tossing restlessly until he heard the cabin quieting and knew they had bunked down for the night.

The next day he woke to an empty cabin. He'd overslept, and he pushed himself quickly through his morning routine. Moving gingerly, he walked the half mile to the storage area. As he made his way across the town center, he watched himself grow more and more invisible. Eyes slid over his face and past him without acknowledgment. Hellos were spoken around him with great care. People could be predictable, he thought as he shouldered his way past the men gathered to rework the pipe. They were just like lemmings. And they ran away when they thought you were in trouble. He'd seen it before in the streets of Chicago. The woman screaming on the ground, crying for help. Ignored until she bled to death. The child brutalized behind a locked door. Don't look, don't hear, don't get involved. Oh yeah, they were no different here. And he'd be damned if he'd lift a finger to help one of them ever again.

As the path turned sharply toward a storage area, he caught sight of Ron walking back to the town center. The man stepped off the path and pretended he was angling over to Rita's cabin. Ray smiled and put thirty-five years of Chicago muscle into his gaze. Ron started nervously and sped up. Ray grunted in satisfaction. Yeah, they were lemmings all right. Like lemmings, one day they'd follow the wrong man to their deaths. Thank goodness he wouldn't have to stick around to see them fall.

The storage area was a mess. The new shed was too small, so the supplies had been assembled in front. Steph and Ilene must have separated out the spoiled supplies first, and then reassembled and inventoried what was left. Ray stepped carefully around a box of powdered milk before realizing that the supplies had been arranged alphabetically on each side of the path. Milk after flour. Canned beans ahead of both of them. He sighed and shook his head. Ilene could really be a pain sometimes.

His feet slid a bit in the mud as he approached the shed. Too many feet and too much traffic had churned up the pathway. In-

side, Steph was holding a clipboard, frowning fiercely at a can of sauerkraut. Ray almost felt sorry for the can. He could hear Ilene swearing behind a stack of boxes.

"I told them. Didn't I tell them? They can't count worth a damn. We have three boxes left, not seven."

Steph nodded, then tossed the can back into a box. She glanced at Ray, and then pulled the pencil from behind her ear. "Never mind that. How much of the other stuff do we have left?" She started scratching, turning away from the door. Ignoring Ray.

"What other stuff?" Ilene called from the back. "Oh, you mean the canned fruit? I was going to create subcategories. You know peach, pear..." As the conversation continued around him, Ray felt his face grow warm. But he controlled his reaction and took a deep breath.

"Steph. I have a list of supplies. Dennis asked me to collect them for him." He thrust Dennis's list in her general direction. She started, as if seeing him for the first time.

"What? Oh, hi, Ray." She stared at his hand, at the paper clenched tightly in his fist. "What's that?" she asked. Ilene mumbled something from the back and she moved toward the back. "What'd you say, Ilene? No, we don't need to categorize the subtypes, whatever. It'll take too long. Fruits is fine."

Ray tried again. "I know you're both busy. But I need to collect the supplies for Dennis." He paused, watching Steph's tense back, her awkward scribbling. No need to make this any more difficult. "Dennis and a few others are leaving," he explained. "They've asked me to collect their share of the supplies."

The back of the room fell silent. Poor Ilene, always hating confrontations. Steph put down her pencil and looked over her shoulder. "Oh. I see. Uhhm, I'll have to talk to Fraser and Dennis about this."

Ray frowned, feeling his plaster pulling painfully. "Dennis asked me to pick up the supplies. His men have worked out the numbers. And I checked them this morning." He kept his voice calm.

She shook her head in disagreement. "I really think this has to be worked out by Dennis and Fraser, Ray."

Ray breathed deeply again. "Steph, I am sorry. I've decided to go with Dennis. And he

asked me to pull the supplies they need to make it to Whitehorse." There, it was out in the open.

But Steph looked away, fidgeting with her pencil. "I figured you might. That's not it, Ray. I gotta make sure Dennis won't kick up a fuss. You know..." Her voice trailed away, and she gave him an expectant glare. Like he should know what she was saying. Like he was supposed to read between her lines.

He shoved the list into her jacket pocket before she could object. He'd be damned if he'd run to Fraser over this. She was just like the rest of them. Only cared about their own kind. Fuck the outsiders. Fuck anyone but herself and her family. Well, fuck her too. Nodding once, he backed out and stood in the path, silently counting to ten. The supplies weren't going anywhere. They would still be sitting there, probably still in alphabetical order, after he'd had a chance to work this out with Dennis.

Except Dennis had already arrived. Striding up the muddy path, with Greg and Carl in tow. Looking neither to the right or left, Dennis clearly had only one idea in mind. The pick-up truck that followed was only to be expected. Ray closed his eyes and then turned back to the shed. Dennis followed at his heels.

Steph left the shed to stand in the early morning light, arms crossed over the clipboard. She looked tense, almost scared. Ray could see Ilene also moving hesitantly toward the door. Behind him, he could hear Dennis gearing up for an argument and moved to cut him off.

"Steph and I were just working out the details. She just got the list, so—"

Dennis stopped abruptly, sliding in the mud, and grabbed Ray's elbow for support. "Shit, this place is a pigsty. What's the hold-up, Ray? This isn't rocket science."

Over his shoulder, Ray saw Carl grab a box of powdered milk and throw it into the truck. Steph swore and started forward. Reflexively, Ray reached out to stop her, to slow things down before they got out of hand. She wrenched free and threw her clipboard into the mud. "Get your hands off that stuff," she yelled and then lurched at Dennis.

"Hell's bells, lady," Greg called suddenly. "Most of my stuff is missing. I had seven cases of canned chili when I got here. I see only three. Where's the rest?"

Ray felt a sudden wave of exhaustion rise and then fall. He reached around Steph, into her coat pocket, and retrieved the list. "Let's check the list first, Greg, before we make any assumptions." As he unfolded the crumpled paper, Dennis snatched it away.

"There's nothing to look over," Dennis said definitively.

Ray resisted the urge to snatch the list back. Instead, he leaned back on his heels and lowered his voice. "I am sure we all want to find a fair resolution. Let's step over to the side and pool our information." He turned, expecting Dennis to follow. Expecting Steph to pick up her clipboard, glare at him, but also follow. Instead, he heard the sound of another box hitting the bed of the pick-up truck and more shouting. He lowered his head, feeling the pain kicking in his jaw, a counterpoint to his aching ribs. When he raised his head again, he saw Ilene, standing in the shed doorway, looking at him with awkward pity. He flushed. What the hell was he doing here?

"Hello, Dennis. I see you're helping Steph and Ilene separate out the supplies. That's good." Fraser's voice cut through the noise. Slowly, Ray turned to face him.

Fraser stood between Dennis and Steph. Dennis clutched the crumpled list nervously. Steph wielded her clipboard like a shield. Greg knelt beside a box and was grumbling his way through a recount of chili cans. Carl stood on the flatbed, frozen. And all eyes were on Fraser.

"We're taking our supplies, Fraser," Dennis said argumentatively. His voice had an unpleasant squeak of fear. Still, he pressed on, looking to Greg and Carl for support. "But it looks like someone is trying to shortchange us." Ray stepped automatically forward. Fraser eyed him once, then dismissed him. Ray stopped moving.

Fraser reached for the list. Dennis almost dropped it into the mud. His hands were shaking so hard that the list flapped back and forth in the air. "Ray even checked the numbers. And since he's coming with us, I doubt he'd make a mistake," he said loudly, pointing toward Ray. Fraser tensed slightly at the news, his surprise imperceptible to anyone who did not know him well. Lightning flickered behind his eyes, a dry distant storm, but they never

wavered. Ray might have been invisible.

Fraser lifted his arm and rubbed his nose. Carl jumped and dropped the case he'd been holding. Greg Nelson simply stood there mute. Fraser was wearing his undershirt and a pair of old trousers. Both were caked in mud. Fresh mud. His hands were covered in it. He looked as dirty as Ray felt.

"I am certain we can work something out, Dennis," Fraser said. "I believe you and Susan discussed you getting enough for half the trip there. You'd scrounge for the rest." He moved among them; they watched Fraser, uneasy yet entranced. A few more awkward moments passed in which no one spoke. The silence seemed to embolden Dennis and he waved the list vehemently. "We don't have to work anything out. We agreed that we'd get all the gas we'd need, and full supplies."

Fraser looked over to Steph, who shook her head. "No, we did not," he said flatly. Dennis began to rock back and forth and Ray had to still the impulse to grab his arm and shake him still.

"Murder not good enough? Have to steal from us? Starve us out?" This time Ray did push himself forward and placed his arm on Dennis's shoulder. And was promptly shaken off.

"I don't care what you and Dennis agreed to." Greg weighed in from behind Fraser. He seemed to have found his voice. "Some of that stuff is mine. I am taking everything I brought with me, right down to those five rolls of TP."

Fraser stared expressionlessly at Dennis, ignoring Greg as if he too did not exist. "I am afraid I can't let you do that." His voice was measured, even. Ice flashed behind his eyes, sharp and deadly.

Dennis made a small choking sound and lowered his hand. The list hung loosely in his fingers. Over Fraser's shoulder, Greg glanced fearfully at Carl. It was over. No one wanted to cross Fraser. Not after Alain.

Looking at Dennis's gray hair, still poking crookedly out from under his cap, Ray couldn't see him ever sticking up for anyone but himself. Greg was no better, bullying Steph like he was God's own gift to creation. God knew why he'd ever agreed to go with them. They were all bullies. Or cowards. Or murderers.

Disgusted with himself, Ray chose to walk

away. They could all sort it out without him. It wasn't as if he was doing anything there. Or as if anyone really saw him. Years ago, Fraser had barely listened to him when he'd decided that Diefenbaker had to die. He could still remember the sight of the long stock nuzzling up to Fraser's cheek as he aimed at Dief running across the snow. He wondered if the dog had felt the same sense of terror and despair, knowing that nothing could stop Fraser from pulling the trigger. Or was he like Alain, dumb and uncomprehending of his own imminent death? Ray's stomach lurched as he made his way back to the civic center. Once he'd been so eager to have Fraser as his friend. Except now he knew that Fraser could pull that trigger. He had no illusions left.

He headed back toward Greg's camper. At least he could start tuning it up before they left for Whitehorse. Greg had parked his RV up a slope, where it was barely visible through the brush. Pushing through the undergrowth, he nearly tripped and fell. The smell was overpowering; Greg had unloaded his sewage right next to the path. Gingerly, he tried to pick his way back. But everywhere he turned, the sewage spread. It would only grow worse as the days warmed up. Gagging, he turned and forced his way back to the RV. The man had no idea of even basic sanitation. And these were the people he was going to travel with?

He pulled up the hood of the RV and stared blankly at the engine. Well, the oil would need to be changed. But that could wait. First he should rev the engine, see how it sounded. His father always said the only way to really tell how a car ran was to listen to the engine running. Greg kept the door latched, but Ray jiggled the handle to release the hook. The keys were kept in the ignition and he twisted the engine to life. It coughed and sputtered, caught and then coughed rhythmically. Sighing, he turned it off. Clean the spark plugs. Something mindless and easy.

As he shuffled around to the front of the camper, he heard the call of geese overhead. Fraser had said some would keep flying past until they reached the lakes. But some would stay on the riverbanks and would be a good meat source. He wondered when the geese would return to Whitehorse. How long it'd take for the wildlife to reclaim what little was

left of civilization.

Ray opened the driver's door and slid the keys back into the ignition. As he bent down, he saw something bright red peeking out behind the driver's seat. He tugged and three cans of canned chili tumbled out of the cloth bag. Ray stared at the bright red labels. How many cans to a case? At least twenty-four. And if he kept rummaging through the RV, he bet he'd find at least three times that many.

He felt short of breath, but then took a deep breath. Well, Greg might be a thief and Dennis a bully, but both were just as big cowards as Frank Zuko. Lots of talk, but not much there. He shoved the can back into the bag. Well, at least he knew how to handle the Zukos of the world.

As he straightened, his elbow jammed into the door. The pain shot through his hand and radiated up through his arm into his chest. Stunned, he shut his eyes, giving the pain time to fade away. He could still feel the pain of the final punch that had slammed Zuko onto the floor of the basketball court. Could still see the blood smearing the bastard's pale face. Staining Ray's Armani clothes. Ray's eyes opened and for a moment the scene hung before him, reflecting faintly inside the windshield. Or was that his blood gushing as he fell into the mud, and Fraser's pale face staring coldly down at him?

He blinked, and the only reflection was the light shivering faintly through the spruce trees. Oh, he was a damn fool. Going off with Dennis wouldn't solve anything. There were Dennises everywhere. And there'd be more and more of them as time went on, as more and more of civilization was stripped away. His problem wasn't just Fraser. No, it was the world. It had changed—or maybe it was still the same. Whether Chicago or the Yukon. Or Whitehorse. Without some kind of law, there really was no place to hide.

Sliding from behind the seat, he slammed the door shut. He missed his revolver, the weight of his badge. He missed the certainty of his old life. But he doubted he'd find that certainty in Whitehorse.

This time, when he reached the path, he hesitated. He really had no place to go. Not back to Danny's cabin. It was too soon. Not back to the sorting shed. And he sure as hell

was not going to fiddle with Greg's shit-mobile any more.

Overhead, a few geese straggled toward the river, calling again. He shrugged and stepped off the path, following them on a deer trail, faint and overgrown. But it was better than standing in the middle of nowhere. He heard the sound of a pickax striking the ground faintly at first. He ignored it and moved on. Elu's cabin was nearby, so he angled a bit to the left, hoping to miss it. The pickax sounded louder, thudding into the ground heavily. Ray turned away from the sound, then froze. Now he understood why Fraser was wearing the undershirt. And where all the mud had come from. And why he was sweating on this cool morning.

As if hypnotized, Ray followed the fluid upward arc and the rush of the downward swing. He watched the pickax eat deeply into the soil, biting into the clay next to Alain's body. There was surprisingly little blood seeping through the sheet. Ray started horrified as the ax thudded again. The grave was too shallow. The permafrost was still too thick. Fraser would have to use rocks to keep the predators at bay.

Fraser's muscles gathered powerfully as he swung the pick again; the rising blade cut upward through the sunlight. His hair was damp, his t-shirt soaked and caked with mud. Even from a distance, Ray could see the tightness in Fraser's neck muscles, the painful rigidity of each swing.

The pick bounced on a rock and nearly sprang from Fraser's hand. He released it and then gripped it even more tightly. As he bent forward, Ray thought he paused, as if listening. Reflexively, Ray froze, but the ax resumed its steady swing. Fraser looked like a man doing penance. As if each blow were his last. As if by tearing into the frozen earth he could bury his sins.

Ray waited for the heat—the anger—for something to feel. But he felt as numb and as unyielding as the soil. He had stopped praying years ago. Franny was the one who had pretended to believe. His mother had never lost faith, not even when her husband died. But Ray had always known better. If there still was a God, Fraser would pay. But if there had been a God, he'd stopped listening long ago. Surely

God wouldn't care about one more murder among the millions who had died? Now all that was left was rocky soil that bitterly refused to shape itself into a grave.

Fraser's shoulders twitched and he lifted his face, the lines on it etched mercilessly in the sunlight. Ray knew Fraser had seen him. But Fraser turned his back to Ray and swung the pickax again, and Ray understood that Fraser really couldn't see him. Fraser couldn't talk to him. Fraser couldn't afford to reach out to him. And neither could Ray.

Ray watched for as long as he could bear it. He left quietly; the path he randomly chose led down the hill. Above the trees, threads of smoke frayed into the wind. He smelled it; his throat tightened. A sudden drift of smoke stung his eyes. He closed them and saw a raven flying.

He knew Steph was angry the minute he walked into the cabin. She was slamming pots in the sink.

"You're late. Don't expect me to fix you anything. If you want to eat, you'll be here on time."

Ray decided now would not be a good time to mention he hadn't known what time she'd be serving dinner. He nodded politely and moved into the main living area. Victor and Ussak were sitting on the floor working on a puzzle. The picture was an old sailing schooner. Danny looked up as he entered. "Hey, Ray. Want to join us?"

"No, thanks. Never been really good at puzzles. Besides, if Victor is playing, you know he'll hide the best pieces."

Victor grinned and held up a fistful. "I only keep the center ones until the very end. Makes the puzzle last longer that way." His eyes sparkled. He loved building things; puzzles were just another chance to figure out structures.

Ray smiled, his face still creaky and bruised. "No, thanks." He nodded at Danny and took a deep breath. "Dan, you know what we talked about last night?"

Danny looked up from the game. "Yeah? Do you need something?"

Ray smiled; this time it felt almost real. "Yeah, I need a place to bunk for the next few days. Maybe weeks. Maybe longer."

He heard the clattering stop in the kitchen.

Danny's eyes flicked quickly behind Ray, then snapped back. "You're staying." His voice was flat, almost expressionless. For a second, Ray thought he'd misunderstood. Then Steph spoke.

"So what's this shit? You're staying now?" Ray turned slowly to face her. He felt suddenly exhausted, as if someone had switched him off. The pain in his face and ribs roared dully.

"Yes, Danny and I talked earlier. He said—"

Steph shook her head and tossed the drying towel onto the kitchen table. "I know what you talked about. Danny told me. So you've decided this place is okay. What is up with you? First this is not the kind of place to raise kids. Now it's good enough for you?"

Ray shook his head dumbly. But he knew if he'd didn't answer, she'd press him until he finally gave her the answer she wanted. "I thought about it some more, but there doesn't seem any point, you know. There's no difference." Steph looked at him silently, then exchanged glances with Danny. Ray felt miserable. They were shutting him out, even worse than before.

Steph nodded, then picked up her towel. "Well, that's just great. You're pathetic." She walked back to the sink and tossed the frying pan into it.

Ray looked down. Victor and Ussak were staring, openmouthed. Victor was still clutching his puzzle pieces. It had been his turn, but the grownups were more entertaining than a puzzle.

Danny sighed and then stood up. "Come on, Ray. Don't take it personally. She gets like that. Can't stand indecisiveness."

He smiled at the boys and they grinned back. Another in-joke. Just great. "I hadn't noticed," Ray replied, trying to ease the tension.

"No problem." Danny grinned. "You may have to spend more time in the shed until she calms down."

Ray forced himself to nod pleasantly. But the joke fell flat. He doubted Steph would let up on him so easily. And why should she? He was pathetic. He might as well be a ghost.

His room was freezing, so he stripped quickly. He heard Victor and Ussak arguing over where to put the next piece and then he began to drift. He was walking through a forest

in snow. It was the park where he used to play as a child, in the old Chicago neighborhood. Ahead were paw prints. He looked around, expecting Dief. He must be out here playing too. The snow crunched pleasantly beneath his boots. Looking down, he could see that the paw prints filed off steadily deeper into the park. As he studied them, he remembered. No, not Dief, he was too old now and he didn't run far from home and den. It was Fraser. Of course.

Ray began to follow the tracks. Fraser must be on his way home. He needed to catch up with Fraser. He had to tell him he had found the park where he had played. But the snow grew deeper and deeper and each step became harder and harder. Fraser's tracks were still just lightly impressed into the snow, though, like perfect paw marks. Ray paused and saw two big black birds, ravens, perched in a bush just ahead. One flew up at his face, armed with beak and claws. He flinched and plunged away into the snow, but the other raven joined the attack, pecking at his eyes. He floundered through the snow, snapping futilely at the ravens with his jaws, until he was exhausted, up to his hocks in the drifts. The ravens settled just out of reach of his paws. He couldn't see Fraser's tracks anymore. But it was okay, because he was cold and would fall asleep soon, and then the ravens could use his flesh and fur for themselves. Soon.

The morning light was barely noticeable when Ray woke. The room was freezing, and there was no wood left. He pulled on his clothes and shouldered the door open. Blinking blearily, he stared until the wood beyond came into focus. He might as well as make himself useful. Chop some wood.

But he could only lean tiredly in the doorway. It must be around four a.m. Sun's rhythm was really off this far north. Just another example of how fucked up this place was. Thin smoke rose stiffly from each building, and the white dawn sky contrasted with the dark forest. "I'll die here," he thought, and still could not find the energy to leave the doorway. He should split more wood. It might be the only job left to him as Denny and Steph's lodger, in the only place he had now, without a home. But the door was as far as he could make it.

The day swirled more and more into focus. The light was shifting low across the muddy space between the lodge and the treeline. He heard the sounds of wood chopping and realized dully that Danny must have risen. There wasn't really much point in them both chopping wood. Besides, he was certain Danny could do it much faster anyway.

He briefly thought of packing his gear and heading into the deep woods. But what was the point? There was nowhere to go. The steps were bitter beneath him—the morning sun had not reached behind the shed. Forcing himself, he rested his head on his arms, shutting his eyes, listening to the rhythmic chopping.

The wood smoke grew thicker, and Ray realized that Steph had fired up the cabin stove. The faint smell of freshly chopped wood wafted on the air. Ray breathed it in, but his chest felt tight and he hugged his knees. Christ, his mind was racing nowhere. Ray felt himself sinking. Breathing heavily, he leaned forward to rest his head on his knees. He could feel the sun flashing through the trees, bypassing the shed and touching the top branches lightly. Sitting alone in the shade, Ray couldn't help but think that maybe the dream was right. Maybe it was good that Fraser went ahead and left him behind to die. Alone with the ravens. Alone in the snow.



# PART TWO – NATURE

*"In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments—there are consequences."*

—Robert Green Ingersoll

---

## Chapter 7: Treading Water

*"Nothing happens to anybody which he is not fitted by nature to bear."*

—Marcus Aurelius

---

It was late, and Jason knew he really was supposed to be in bed. It was still the long twilight of late summer. The river rushed far below its dry gravel banks while Jason skidded down through the shingle and turned upstream. He'd left his favorite matchbox car down on the bank past the willows that morning and he had to get it before something happened to it.

It had been so boring for the past week, nobody doing anything but building and laying fish traps, and then hauling them out and cleaning the fish. Nobody had time for him, even when he tried to help. It wasn't fun. The traps were too heavy for him to move, and when they were dragged out of the river they were full of writhing silver bodies that looked like giant slimy slugs. And when they were dumped on the ground the fish kept flopping and twitching with their big scared eyes bugging out, until somebody came along with a stick and whacked them on the head. Jason had tried to help the other kids carry the fish over to the boards where they were being gutted, but he dropped the first one he picked up when he felt it throb in his arms and realized it wasn't dead yet. His mom had yelled at him then, and he'd tried not to cry, but nobody had wanted to let him help after that. Today he had run away to his secret place under the willows. Jason's mom had been gutting salmon all day and Jason couldn't wait to get away from all those shiny dead eyes. Even his constant hunger could not make those dead eyes go away.

The still air was hazy with smoke, drifting

in curls over the river from the smoking fires up on the bank. Ray was still down there, sitting on a driftwood log fixing a broken trap. There was a pile of them along the shore. Jason felt a little shy of Ray these days. He wasn't the same man Jason had known last winter. Back then he had shown Ray his car collection and Ray had been impressed. He told Jason lots of cool stuff about cars. But then he stopped coming over and got just as short with Jason as Mr. Snyder next door. And he never seemed to talk to anybody else either. Maybe he was as lonesome as Jason was these days.

"Can I help?" he asked tentatively, prepared to run.

Ray looked up at him and didn't say anything for what was an awfully long time for a grownup. Jason knew he'd made a big mistake.

"Sure. Hand me that twine." Jason found the spool and held it out. "Thanks." Okay, so maybe he wasn't going to bite. He didn't tell Jason to get lost either.

"Why do we have to keep killing fish? I'm tired of it."

"Yeah, me too." Ray wound a length of twine around a slat and cut it with his pocketknife. "But we don't have a lot of food right now, and we'll need the fish this winter."

Oh, Jason thought, that's what Mom meant about Alain.

"You want to help, you can hand me the slats."

Jason found a trap in the pile that was half unbroken and wiggled a slat out to hand to Ray. This was great. Somebody finally wanted him around, even if it was only Ray. Jason

didn't quite know what to think about Ray. Ussak said he was a wuss 'cause he didn't have any guts, and he'd overheard Mr. Snyder telling Mom that it would have been better if Ray had left with the other losers. And he sure acted like a loser. He never yelled at anybody any more, no matter what, just walked away. Jason hoped Ray wasn't going to get really weird, like Alain had been. Jason peeked over at Ray—he didn't look crazy. He looked grumpy and tired and thin. He smelled of fish and wood smoke. Jason rubbed his nose; they all smelled. He missed hot baths. And he was so tired and hungry all the time.

He kept handing slats of wood to Ray, hoping he'd talk some more. But he didn't, and they just kept working steadily, silently, until Jason grew bored. Ray really wasn't much fun any more. He waited as long as he could and made his escape when the sun fell below the riverbank. As he scrambled up the path he saw something looming tall in the dark, brown and huge like a grizzly. He yelped and stumbled, his heart racing. Then it moved and he saw it was only Fraser, his heavy brown coat wrapped tightly around him, his head bare to the cooling night. He cradled his rifle to him in the safety position, just like Jason's dad had shown him. Jason's heart kept thumping and he felt a little wheezy, but Fraser nodded and Jason nodded warily back. He was always uncertain around Fraser and never knew what to say. Fraser wasn't looking at him, Jason realized with relief. He was staring down toward the river. Jason craned back, trying to see what Fraser was seeing, but he only saw Ray, still working alone in the gathering night. The chill began to nibble on Jason's hands and he nodded breathlessly at Fraser and scrambled up the last rise. He had forgotten all about his matchbox car.

The light was too far gone to work now. Ray put down the trap and rolled and stretched his shoulders. The ache never went away any more. He hunched again and stood slowly, easing out the cramp and tension in his back, putting off the time when he had to go back to interacting with people, even with someone so easygoing as Danny. The wind was coming down the river now, blowing the wood smoke away, clearing out room to breathe. Jason was a good kid. Curious, but not loud

about it. Ray pocketed his tools and made his way along the riverbank, taking the long way around through the alders to avoid any chance encounters in the center of the village.

In a patch of sand washed around the tree roots was a spot of color, bleached out in the twilight but still garishly out of place. A toy car. Ray smiled to himself in mock pain. *So that's what Jason came down here for. Not to talk to me at all.* He'd drop it off on the way. He climbed the bank and headed around the back toward Ilene's cabin. There was still a faint light from the window, and Ray was suddenly immensely tired. He couldn't talk to Ilene now, make conversation about fish and supplies and kids and toy cars. He left the car on the side of the wooden step, where nobody would walk on it accidentally, and headed off. The tiredness lifted a little with another social encounter successfully avoided.

Danny and Steph were still up when he got in, making inventory lists. Steph was big on lists, which she kept tacked all over the cabin, listing contents and giving directions and ticking off things to do. Ray wondered what she was going to do when they ran out of paper.

Danny at least looked up and smiled when Ray came in. "Hey, Ray. Did you get them all fixed?"

"Nah, there must be half a dozen left. I don't know if we'll need them before the spawning's over."

"What do you know about fish?" Steph said. "The spawning usually lasts at least another three days."

Danny looked at Ray over Steph's bent head and shrugged slightly. Ray didn't mind Steph too much. She didn't like him, but it didn't feel personal. She didn't like anybody much, except Danny. She snapped at Ray when given the slightest opportunity, but he mostly tuned it out. It only hurt when she reminded him of Francesca.

"There's some stew left on the stove," Danny said. "And at least it doesn't have fish in it."

Ray made himself a space at the table, away from Steph's tally sheets, and mechanically ate his share of the stew. He couldn't have said what it tasted like, since nothing tasted like anything to him any more. Still, he forced himself to eat; his stomach had shrunk over the

winter and even now the rations were barely enough to keep up his energy levels.

"Ray, you want to, uh, let me know what..." Danny began, then actually looked up at Ray and stopped. "Never mind." He shoved aside the page he was working on and tried again. "You decided about going with me and Brian up to Keno after the spawning?"

Ray shook his head and kept eating. He had put the issue off as long as he could. He really wasn't needed for the trip—just an extra pair of hands and shoulders. He knew Danny had only asked him along because he was worried about him. Danny was trying hard, but it had to be exhausting, living with a ghost in his own house.

Ray shoved his bowl away from him. Or something worse than a ghost, he thought; how about a black hole that shared your food, your supplies, your living space, yet never tried to connect? He would have hated it if he'd had to put up with someone like himself. Funny how things could change.

"Yeah, sure," he heard himself say, in the husky voice that still surprised him when he heard himself speak. He forced himself to keep talking. "Is he back yet from hunting?"

Danny smiled, pleased. "Not yet. But we have to get one of the trucks running first. We only have a few weeks before the weather starts to go bad." He glanced over at Steph, but she kept working on her lists.

"You need me to work on one?" Ray asked reluctantly. Now he was going, he might as well pull his fair share.

"Yeah. Susan said we can use her Ford. It's got a winch and chain already and she said it was at least turning over when she started it in the spring."

"The carburetor's probably fouled by now, then," Ray said. "But that shouldn't take too long to fix and Susan always took good care of it."

Danny looked away from Ray's blank face and started doodling with his pencil. "After the council meeting, I talked to Fraser and he said we can have whatever gas we need for the trip, since it's important. So we can leave when Brian gets back."

"Okay." Ray made to get up, but Danny was still talking, trying to keep the conversation going. Ray settled back into his chair, ex-

hausted at even this minimal conversation. "I'd help but you know I'm not that good with cars. I've got to get the supplies and then Fraser asked me to work on the watermill plans. I think if we can deal with the inconsistent water flow we can generate maybe three hundred watts per month. Fraser thinks..."

Ray kept nodding, wondering when Danny would finally give up on trying to include him. Ray really wasn't interested in listening to what Fraser thought. He really wasn't into listening to any of this, but he owed Danny and he paid his debts. Ray looked over at Steph, her brown eyes finally lifting from her list, considering him briefly before turning to her task, ignoring him. Danny started sketching his mill design with a finger on the table, his worn hands tracing the air in widening patterns. He had thinned—they all had, under the hard work and shortened rations—but his face still carried an openness between the sun and windburn. His hair spilled over his shoulders, now that he had given up on trimming the ends. Too much work, he'd said, no need to bother Steph to cut it for him, but Ray suspected it held a deeper meaning, a slow return to his roots. Still, when the evening fire burned down and Ray slipped off to his cot, he could not fault Danny for his desire for stability, for some sort of connection to the rest of their little community. There was very little connecting Ray to anything in Stewart Junction, and sometimes he wondered why he didn't just pack up and go off on his own.

He shifted on the cot, tugging the wool blanket down over his stocking feet. Well, he had had his chance with Dennis. That wasn't much of a choice. And going off alone in the winter would be suicidal. He wasn't quite there yet. Ray smiled grimly in the dark. He knew Fraser had been watching him, keeping an eye on him when he thought he wasn't looking. He probably thought Ray would off himself. Feeling his own thinness shiver under the blanket, Ray shut his eyes. No need for suicide when starvation was just as easy.

He began to drift as exhaustion pulled him under. Now that the fall was almost here, he doubted he'd leave. No point in trekking thousands of miles through the wilderness when you still had no place to go. It would be good to get away with Danny, though. And

maybe he could get out from under Fraser's eye. *Yeah*, he thought, just before he slipped into sleep. *Pity it isn't a one-way trip.*

Susan wasn't in her yard when Ray stopped by the next day. He skirted the large mounds of scrap metal she had been collecting, and knocked on the cabin door. Only the soft hiss of the wind through the spruces answered his calls and he shrugged his shoulders. Her Ford was parked in the back and it was never locked, so he might as well get started. Lifting the hood, he pulled out the air filter and held it up to the pale yellow light. It would need replacing, but he was certain he could scrounge the necessary parts. Assuming, of course, no one had any better need for them. Or had promised them to someone else.

A few hours later, he heard Susan banging in the cabin and stood to stretch. He could hear her laughing as she opened and then shut the front door. "...so then he said, 'Well, why don't we connect the pipe fitting to the big line?' And before I could point out it was the septic line, he unscrewed it and shit came flying up everywhere."

Someone's voice—a man's, it sounded like—snorted in response and the door banged closed again, cutting off the voices. Ray leaned forward, almost unconsciously trying to make out the conversation. The pipes had given way again? Surely not, after all the repair work he and Fraser had put into them that spring. He found himself standing next to the cabin before realizing it. The voices were a bit clearer; he could almost make out the words now. But he didn't want to hear, or be caught lurking around the edges of the cabin like a peeping Tom. Stiffly, he returned to the truck and resumed working. So intent was he on tuning out all other distractions, he did not hear the shouting until Larry had almost reached the cabin.

His training took over and he dropped the wrench and reached the cabin so efficiently he startled Larry with his speed. Larry's eyes were red-rimmed, his coat open, and his cap was sliding off his head. Ray focused sharply and saw blood on Larry's shirt and reached out a hand to steady him. But Larry plunged forward, past Ray and up the steps. Ray, still moving quickly, caught up with him just as the cabin door was flung open.

"What the hell's up with you?" Susan's voice seemed suddenly too large for the clearing. Larry froze, his hand still reaching for the door latch, and then blurted in one breathless gasp, "Brian sliced his leg and it's down to the bone and he's bleeding hard. Is the medic with you?"

Susan, startled, looked over Larry's head and up the road. Automatically, Ray looked over his shoulder but saw no one. "No," she said, stepping out and reaching down to pull her boots on, "I haven't seen him. He may be over at Rita's checking on Mary. She's just about due."

"God dammit." Larry's voice cracked. "He's fucking bleeding. It's dark and heavy and...fuck, what are we going to do? I can't stop the bleeding and I left him by the smokehouse alone."

Ray stepped forward and tried to catch Susan's eye. But she turned away, grabbed her coat, and shoved past them both. "Then you'd better get moving and grab Jim." With that she jogged out of sight and was gone.

For a moment, Ray and Larry eyed each other. Ray nodded slowly, and saw an answering gleam of helplessness in the man's eye. Then Larry paled further and ran heavily away in the opposite direction. As silence fell, Ray could still smell the sharp tang of blood and glanced down at the smears Larry's boots had left on the porch. His fists curled into themselves.

*Fuck*, he thought. How many more of them would they lose? The young tourist couple from Ottawa—the Latteaus—had shot themselves last month. From Danny's description it sounded like a murder-suicide. But with no note, only dead bodies, they could only speculate. Stepping off the porch, Ray looked at the overcast sky. Well, whatever their reason, they'd been damned lucky it had worked on the first try. Too many people thought it was easy to shoot themselves. Usually they botched it and were found still breathing with bits of jaw hanging out and fragments of eye splattered all over themselves. No, if you wanted to off yourself all it took was a plastic bag, two rubber bands, and a handful of sleeping pills. Assuming you could find any pills now.

The day grew chilly and he decided it was too dark; he'd finish the truck later. He con-

sidered heading back to Danny's but felt restless. He turned right and walked slowly toward the center. As he passed the bend in the path, he saw Larry's cap, which had fallen off in his rush to find the medic. Larry sure had changed in the past few months. It had helped that they'd run out of alcohol and no one wanted to spare the potatoes to make more. But sometime after Canada Day, Larry had pulled himself out of his stupor and started helping. Danny had laughed and said that Larry had even stopped muttering about how soft everybody else was. Steph had said that when Larry stopped whining, he'd started teaching useful stuff about living up north. She'd sounded almost respectful when she said it.

He continued past the cap without picking it up. *Well, just great*, he thought. *So the town drunk reforms and everyone rejoices. Hurrah.*

Smoke curled from the civic center but no lamps had yet been lit. He heard the faint sound of scraping from the back, and caught a sharp unpleasant smell. They were tanning hides, a messy and disgusting process. He walked around the building and found Istas working alone. He had removed his coat and was wearing his dirtiest sweater. Istas had several hides at various stages—scraping, soaking, and stretching. The small shed had been converted into an enclosed charcoal pit with smoldering rotten wood to color the hides.

Ray paused, shrugged, and kept approaching. Istas barely looked up from his scraping. Ray blinked against the smell and then nodded at Istas and waited.

Istas kept scraping, his arms swinging the scythe in rhythmic arcs. His dark ponytail lay flat against his back and his face was well browned. He liked to work outside and alone. After waiting a few more awkward moments, Ray nodded again. "So how's Brian?" he asked.

Istas shook his head. The scythe flew down the hide, removing more sinew in an even stroke. "What about Brian?"

Ray winced and then let it go. So no one had told Istas. "Don't know the details," he said reluctantly. "Brian hurt himself—cut himself—and Larry and Susan went to get Jim."

"Ah," Istas said, stepping closer to reach a particularly troublesome knot of flesh. "Well, sounds like they have it well in hand."

The scraping noise sent a chill down Ray's back. *Well, if it had been me Fraser had left in charge, I'd double-check to make sure everything really was okay. I wouldn't just sit there pulling some pointy stick over a dead animal skin.* But he wasn't in charge, and Ray felt a heavy wave of weariness and hunger wash over him. He watched Istas working a few more minutes in silence and then walked to the center's back steps. As he knelt to remove his boots before entering, he heard the back window edge open and a voice drifted out.

"Who put green wood on the stove? Christ, it smells like crap in here." It was Barney Dunn. He had been hunting with a few buddies when the plague hit. He was the only survivor.

"Close that damn window. I can live with the smoke. It's the cold that'll kill you." Ray recognized George Meeker, a naturalist who had come to the Yukon on a university grant in the '70s. He had stayed and started raising huskies for sled racing.

"In a minute. So, you hear about Brian?"

Ray paused on the steps and listened to the two men moving about the center.

"Yeah, sounds bad. Hope he'll make it." George was standing next to the window and his voice carried.

More rustling and clinking noises as the two men started lighting the lamps. The soft light spilled out the opened window and fell across the snow.

"So you think that boiler project is still on?" Barney asked.

"I dunno. Danny may have enough info. But if he's just going to take Ray, I'd think not. He's not the most reliable." George replied.

*What do you mean, not reliable*, Ray thought and sat down heavily on the steps. *I pull my fair share.*

"Well, he does pull his fair share." Barney's voice came faintly as he moved away. "But he does it on his own time and at his own pace."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I had a husky like that once. Good dog, just didn't pull with the rest of the team." George had regaled them one night with exploits of his prize-winning sled dogs.

"Wasn't that Tag? I thought he was one of your best?" The floor creaked under Barney's

feet as he crossed the room toward the back door. Ray began to rise from the steps.

"He was. He could outrun any dog in the pack. But he just wouldn't follow the team lead, and you know what that spells on a sled run." George sounded irritated, as if the dog had insulted him personally.

"Yeah." He heard Barney's voice end abruptly as the window slammed down.

Absently Ray looked for his boots, found them on his feet. The cement steps were cold beneath him and his body was growing numb. He looked around to see if anyone else was about but he only saw Ista picking the hide off the rack and stacking it on the pile. Well, there was no point hanging around here. He might as well go back to Danny's.

Rattling from the kitchen woke him and Ray realized he had fallen asleep. His sleep was intermittent, and some nights nonexistent. He had exhausted the village's limited book collection before guilt at wasting their batteries and candles had put an end to nighttime reading. Now he spent a good portion of most evenings listening to the wind and the sounds from the main cabin.

Sliding into his indoor shoes, he pushed open the door and ran his hand across his face. Steph always had a pot of something on the stove, even if it was just a watery stew of wrinkled potatoes and dried fish. Tonight, even the smell of cooking food couldn't make him hungry. He blinked a few times, trying to clear his head, and then the room snapped painfully into focus.

Fraser stood next to the kitchen table, his dark head bent over the map covering it. Ray still couldn't get used to the beard—it seemed to harden his face into something unrecognizable. Danny was measuring the distance between two points. Ray could probably just slip away, back into his corner, before they noticed him, but he hesitated, his eyes returning to Fraser. He seemed smaller somehow, his thin body stretched and angular. Fraser nodded once at Danny's muttered calculations and then bumped awkwardly into the table. Fraser's arm was in a sling, his fingers wrapped in gauze. From the way Fraser dipped his shoulder each time he moved, Ray could tell it hurt.

Ray stepped further into the kitchen and waited for them to finish their calculations. He

could see what Danny was trying to do—how many miles to Keno and back, how much fuel, how much time before the weather turned. Information that he, Danny, and Brian were supposed to discuss today. He wondered how Brian was doing. Looking at Fraser's arm, he decided not to ask.

"Shit," Danny finally muttered and then tossed his pencil aside. "I was a math teacher; you'd think I could do this." Danny slumped into the chair and frowned down at the map.

"I think your numbers are correct. Three days there by truck, two days to select and load the boiler, and then three back. That gives us a four-to-five-day window before the freezes begin. It's doable." Fraser paused and looked up, seeing Ray for the first time. He nodded in greeting and began fumbling with his left hand to fold the map. Ray felt an overpowering urge to leave the two of them. He forced himself to stay in place.

"Yeah, but without Brian to help choose and load, can we do it in two days? I mean, he knew the most about steam boilers and which one could best be retrofitted to burn wood." Danny glanced at Fraser's arm, then looked back at Ray. Ray focused on a spot between his feet. He didn't want Fraser along. Hell, he'd hoped to get away from Fraser. But if Fraser wanted to run the show, it was up to Danny to raise the practical objections. Like how they'd lift a seven-hundred-pound boiler with a truck winch and only two able-bodied men. Clearly there were other factors to consider, but Danny didn't know how to raise them. Ray was just along for the ride. Danny was going to have to deal with Fraser.

Fraser tossed the map down as if the matter were closed. Fraser was no fool. He could ignore your objections until you could no longer remember why you had any in the first place. He could convince you north was south. Or that the word "Chicago" was no longer part of your vocabulary.

"Danny, we have Brian's list," Fraser said soothingly. "It's just a matter of picking the right boiler size. As for my arm—" He wiggled the fingers gingerly. "It's just a sprain. By the time we get here, the swelling will have gone down."

*Yeah, and if it hasn't, Danny and I will just have to make do,* Ray thought. Fraser's eyes flick-

ered toward him, and for a moment Ray wondered if he had actually spoken aloud. God, five years as partners and they could still read each other too well. The thought unsettled him and he stared at the floor until he could feel Fraser's intense gaze slide away.

Danny cleared his throat, breaking the mood. "Okay, well, I guess that's it, then. When do we head out? Ray, is the truck ready?" He clearly wanted them to move on to something else. Ray took pity on Danny and sat down at the table; besides, he was tired of not looking at Fraser.

"The truck is working fine," Ray answered. Fraser's eyes were back on him again. "I'll need some help siphoning the gas from the RV. It should take a few hours. Add a

gas cap and we're ready to go." He snapped his mouth shut. Fraser nodded at Ray, a flick of surprise in his eyes, followed by a pleased expression. Danny relaxed, and Ray felt confusion and will drain away, leaving only vague, shapeless guilt behind.

Danny returned to the boiler specs, pausing to ask Fraser for clarification from time to time. Ray saw no further need to participate and sat in silence, smoothing a discarded list into smaller and smaller folds of paper. And when Fraser left, he pointedly did not watch Fraser fumbling with his coat buttons.

That night, Ray tossed with Danny's lists and tables marching through his mind like unweary soldiers.

---

## Chapter 8: The Ravens

*"Think not disdainfully of death, but look on it with favour; for even death is one of the things that Nature wills."*

—Marcus Aurelius

---

It took nearly four days to drive the two hundred miles from Stewart Junction to Keno. It wasn't so much that the highway was in bad condition, though signs of that spring's violent thaw were evident whenever the road neared the river. But downed trees and washouts were everywhere. Sometimes it was just as fast to go forward on foot, dragging branches out of the way. In a few places near the river the road was gone entirely and they had to creep along the old bankside shoulder. Late summer had slipped briskly into autumn. But even the cool fall days would only last a few weeks under the onslaught of the Yukon snows.

"We really should have done this last winter," Danny grumbled on the second day, after they had spent almost the entire afternoon making only five miles. "We could have taken the snowmobiles most of the way up the river and not followed the road at all."

"Yes," Fraser said, while the rear wheels slipped again as Danny ground the transmission back down. "But their engines don't have the power to run the winch, let alone transport anything of size. And it would have been just as difficult to drive the highway after freeze-up. This year will probably be our last opportunity to use the road at all."

When they turned off the highway to start the climb to Keno the conditions improved. The spruce forest gave way to willow scrub and alders so that no more debris blocked the road. The road had been well graded two years before and the only thing that held them back was the skull-cracking washboard surface.

Ray grabbed the roof handle on the cab of the truck as Danny maneuvered around a pothole. Fraser sat stiffly between them, the seat belt keeping him from sliding on the worn vinyl seats. From time to time he glanced at Ray; his face seemed older, more vulnerable. Almost questioning. It disturbed Ray and he studiously avoided any eye contact.

Fraser's arm was still in a sling. He had shaved, something which Ray thought was bizarre. You spend days and days in sight of water and soap and you don't shave. But you go off for a five-day trek in the woods and suddenly facial hair is a no-no. He was probably afraid of being mistaken for a bear.

Fraser's thigh bumped against his and Ray squirmed away. It was cramped and the window Danny insisted on cracking didn't help matters. The gears ground and something hit the windshield and bounced off.

"Christ, what was that?" Ray tightened his seat belt with one hand.

"Probably just a rock falling." Fraser pointed with his good hand at the sheer wall that rose outside the window. Dark green moss covered the chalky dirt. Small waterfalls, partially frozen, cascaded down the slope and puddled across the road. They were slowly climbing higher. Overhead, the sky had turned to a dark gray. To their left, the land sloped away, slowly at first, then steeply into a deep ravine. A bank of mist absorbed the other side, merging the horizon into a large blank blur. Ray shivered and pulled up his collar.

A yellow sign squiggled in front of them and the road curved even more sharply. Danny slowed to a crawl. "Fraser, I think I'm going to need to take a break. I'm getting pretty hungry."

"Sure, Danny, just find the next level spot and we can stop and make sandwiches."

"Yummy," Danny smiled, "peanut butter and jelly. My favorite. Hey, Vecchio. What'll you have?" He accelerated into the next curve.

Ray shrugged. It was all the same to him. They could cook only when they camped. This left them with cheese and tomato sandwiches in the summer and peanut butter and jelly in the fall for lunches. They'd probably devolve to pemmican by next year. By the following year, they'd be sucking on stones or chewing leaves.



Fraser would probably be in heaven.

The cliff grew taller, more rockier. Moss had disappeared, washed away by the steadier trickles of water. The road was now completely wet. Ahead, Ray saw the yellow line curve into the deep shadow of an overhang. Fraser leaned forward, rolling to the right and pressing himself firmly into Ray to catch a better glimpse of the road. Trapped against the truck door, Ray turned his head away.

The truck slipped and began skidding, lightly angling away from the overhang and toward the edge. Ray lurched, his hands grasping at nothing.

"Steer into—" Fraser shouted and then the cabin tilted, hard. Their bodies rose and smacked into the ceiling, only to be flung against the doors as they tumbled. Green, yellow, and gray cycled past the windshield until the colors barreled over and over. Something smashed into Ray's chest and his mouth filled with blood. Coughing, he flailed and blacked out.

"Ray, Ray." He heard the voice and a hand tugged at his shoulder. He coughed and then gagged. The pain was incredible, worse than anything he'd ever known. For a second he felt nauseous as the hand tapped him again. "Yeah," he mumbled and then lost all breath. Something was wrong inside, something loose and hot and sharp. He spat but his mouth kept filling. Scared, he opened his eyes and saw dead-white sky through the windshield.

"Ray, can you reach the door latch?" Confused, he raised his right hand only to see it flop toward the top of the cabin, then realized they must be upside down. Moving slowly, he fumbled for the handle, but his fingers only brushed it.

"Mmm," he mumbled and let his arm fall back.

"Ray." Fraser's voice was slow, his breath moist on Ray's neck. "I can't reach the latch from here. Can you unlock the door on your side?" He was lying on top of—well, underneath—well, somehow next to Fraser. Their seat belts had kept them from going through the windshield.

"Fraser," he tried and coughed again. This time his mouth stayed clear. His voice was thready and trembled. "Why don't you unlock it yourself? Something broken." He ran out of air again and gasped.

"I can't, Ray. If I do—" Fraser paused and then spoke even more calmly. "Just try to lever the latch with your fingers. It's partially open already."

Fuzzily, he craned one eye and saw Fraser was right. Lucky for them the door hadn't popped all the way open or they'd've been flung out, seat belts or no. He'd seen enough traffic accidents to know what happened when you started flying without a helmet.

Gingerly, he moved his arm again and touched the handle. It gave way and the door flopped open. Puzzled, he tried to raise his head but Fraser stopped him. "Stay still. I am going to unbuckle you. I want you to slide out. Slowly."

"Like hell I will, Fraser," Ray was hurting now. Even raising his arm was painful. "No way in hell. I've got something broken."

Danny moaned then, a deep wet sound. Then he began gasping for air. Ray felt nauseous. "Danny, Danny," he shouted. And reached back across Fraser.

Fraser grabbed his arm and forced him still. "Ray, he's hurt. The cab slid on a patch of ice and we're too close to the edge of the ravine. You must keep still."

Ray stared through the windshield and realized why he had been confused. The truck was lying on its back. He could only see the sky and the mist-covered horizon through the cracked windshield. The only way out was through his door.

"Shit," he swore and nodded. Fraser fumbled with his good hand and unbuckled Ray and then himself. Breathing shallowly, Ray inched toward the door. Pain shot through him. Even his teeth hurt. He could feel a small trickle of blood forming in the back of his throat and whimpered in fear. But Fraser's hand pushed against the back of his neck, supporting him. The fingers felt cold, clammy, as he edged his way out of the cab.

The ground was soft and muddy, scraped down to rock where the truck had skidded. Ray lay heavily on the piney earth, trying to ease the pain in his chest. The sky kept swimming back and forth, in and out of focus. Danny had stopped moaning, but the air shivered with a sharp metallic whine that increased in pitch as the cab teetered against Fraser's shifting weight. First his boots, then his

legs crossed the door. The truck held steady and he gingerly lifted his torso, holding himself steady with one good arm to clear the frame.

The vehicle rocked sharply and then steadied. As Fraser slid out of the cab, Ray caught a glimpse of Danny, a flash of red, grisly white, and the shock of dark hair.

Stunned, Ray rolled his head back and allowed the sky to blanket his eyes. He tried to speak, only to find his throat had closed again. He tried to breathe, with little better results. His body began rolling with low shudders as it fought for oxygen. "DannyDannyDanny-Danny," his mind chattered into the haze that overtook him.

Fraser pulled at his face, his fingers touching his carotid before peeling back an eye. He seemed satisfied because he leaned back and began running his hands slowly down Ray's head, neck, and body. *He's checking me for injuries*, Ray thought dimly. Involuntarily, his eyes flicked back to the ravine while the air bled past his lips again. "Breathe, Ray." Fraser's voice cut through him urgently. "One breath at a time. Slowly, steadily." Fraser's fingers touched his face briefly, cupping his chin, and Ray felt warmth return to him. And with warmth came breath, and with breath came awareness and memory and pain. He took a shallow gasp of air and then focused his gaze on the nothing curling over Fraser's shoulder. Fraser kept blurring in and out of focus.

He heard dim, scraping, metallic sounds and blinked to clear his eyes. Fraser was gone and the sound was coming from the truck. He flicked his eyes to see what was happening and then looked away. He could still see Danny, hanging motionless inside the cab, pinned in place by his seat belt. Fraser's legs stuck out through the open door as he backed out gingerly. He rolled to his knees and stood, staring down at the truck before looking up and over into the ravine. He fumbled with something and then wheeled sharply and walked briskly toward Ray, breathing heavily, a dark frown between his eyes. His face was chalk white, smeared with tiny, dark droplets.

Ray closed his eyes. Danny was dead. A new pain, deep in his gut, clawed at him and his throat closed. He felt Fraser crouch down, **lift his wrist**, and start taking his pulse. Ray

squinted past blurring tears and saw that Fraser's other arm—the injured arm—was out of the sling but hanging stiffly from his shoulder. Fraser's eyes were half-closed.

They sat there silently, until the chill settled into them. Fraser released Ray's wrist and rolled back onto his haunches. Ray avoided his gaze, still staring blindly into the air. Fraser took off his coat and put it over Ray's chest. He pulled the gloves from the pocket and gently picked up Ray's hand. "Ray," he said as he inserted first the right, then the left hand into each glove. His voice was harsh, thick—almost as if he had been crying. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Ray. We need to find shelter and treat your injuries. I think I can move you—but not very far."

Numb, Ray stared at him. Danny was dead. He had been wearing a seat belt. How could he be dead? Ray opened his mouth to protest, but the breath would not come.

"Do you understand, Ray?" he heard Fraser saying from a distance. "I am going up the road a bit—the last building I saw was ten miles back and I don't think I can carry you that far safely." The cliff overhang had robbed them of the little sunlight, making it hard to see what Fraser was saying. He tried nodding but found himself paralyzed. Fraser leaned closer and spoke more precisely. "Ray, you need to keep still and stay warm. And breathe shallowly. Little breaths. I won't be gone more than an hour." He felt a soft tug on his head and Fraser's woolen cap was pulled down around his ears. As Fraser's hand flashed in front of his face, he recognized what covered Fraser's cheeks and forehead. It was the same thing that covered his hands and every other exposed part of his body: a fine brown spray of blood. Danny's blood. He swallowed and found the strength to nod, hoping it would be enough to send Fraser far away.

As the gray mists enfolded him, Ray could almost see Fraser rounding the first bend slowly, testing for icy patches. The road curved back out from the overhang and the road grew less slippery. Fraser began to jog, pulling his arm back into the sling. His feet thudded loudly in the stillness, startling a pair of ravens nesting in a twisted alder that still clung to the edge of the ravine. They flapped awkwardly, screeching, and for a moment Ray's vision

wavered, then cleared as Fraser's steady uphill slog left them behind. Mile after mile skipped by, and with each passing road marker, Fraser's breath grew more and more cloudy. The temperature was falling, the slate clouds carried the sharp tang of moisture. Soon it would rain.

The cliffs to the right soon leveled off into a range of rolling hills almost outside of Ray's vision. Below, Fraser had almost reached the crest and soon would begin the long descent into Keno. His speed had increased, so he almost missed the small turn-off. It had once been paved but now had been covered with gravel and mud. The steep path climbed, guiding them both to an old mining site. The main office had faded from its original green to a bone white-gray. Its windows had been broken long ago and the western half of the roof had collapsed under the weight of winter snows. A tool shed stood in the lee of the shaft, its doors tilting off their hinges. The site was bare, having been stripped of valuable parts, machinery, and tools when it was shut down. The surrounding hills were bare as well, stripped with the same cruel efficiency of wood or cover. Rocky shale and broken boulders littered the slopes. It would be decades before the land reclaimed itself. As the first drops of rain fell, two birds swung past Fraser's head toward the dark recesses of the ruined building. The rain glistened on their black wings and the echoes of their caws followed Ray until he sank deeper into unconsciousness.

Something clattered and then splintered. Ray jerked, feeling a sharp stab in his chest. The travois had finally given way. Blearily, he raised his head and saw they had almost reached their destination. A peeling, half-sunken building surrounded by mountains of stone. It looked vaguely familiar. He concentrated on not throwing up.

"Here," Fraser said, and helped Ray to his feet. Ray grunted with pain, then gasped.

"Shit, that hurts," he muttered as he tried to put his arm around Fraser's shoulder. "I think this is going to be a bad idea."

"It's not far, Ray. I found what might have been the old office. It will be better than the shed."

Ray figured Fraser would explain it all eventually. At the moment he concentrated on

putting one foot in front of the other without jarring his chest and making his breathing shut down from the pain.

The building was small, cabin-like, possibly built during the first survey, since it was made out of wood and not pre-fab. A battered metal desk and chair stood in the center, with empty metal shelving lining the wall behind. Dust, dirt, torn papers, dirty rags, and broken glass littered the floor. Nests of small rodents or giant insects were scattered through the wreckage.

They made their way to the back room, which was bare except for a truly filthy sofa that the rodents had torn up for nesting material and, amazingly enough, a cast-iron wood stove.

Fraser helped Ray lean gingerly against the sofa back. Ray barely noticed; his breathing had gone very shallow and he was starting to black out around the edges.

"We'll need the stove. There was some kind of well in the back but the pump was electric," Fraser informed him in that academic voice while carefully removing Ray's jacket and shirt. "Ray, you're hyperventilating; try to slow down your breathing." In a peculiar moment of clarity, Ray, realized that Fraser only got pedantic when covering something up. Graying again, he gave up on pushing Fraser just this minute. Maybe later, after he got his breath back. And the room focused again.

Ray's right side, from shoulder to waist, was swollen and purple with bruising. Fraser ran his fingers across the ribs very lightly, and Ray winced but said nothing.

"This is going to hurt, Ray. I'm going to try to probe a bit for injury."

"Fine. Whatever."

It hurt. Then it hurt more. A lot more. And then it hurt exactly like Ray imagined it would if someone stuck a hot six-inch knife into his chest and let it twist there a bit.

"Christ, Fraser," he panted, and then had to stop, because it hurt too much to speak.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I think you have at least one broken rib, and probably several cracked ones. The severity of the pain worries me, though." And then Fraser shut up suddenly.

*Christ. Wonderful,* Ray thought. *Fraser's worried.*

Fraser tried to make Ray comfortable,

messing with the awful sofa cushions, vaguely sweeping clean a bit of floor by the stove.

"I'll have to go and salvage what's left of the supplies. I may be a while." He looked at Ray steadily, almost measuring him, both waiting and wanting acknowledgment, but determined. Ray remembered that look—Fraser had stared at him the same way while waiting in the bank vault to drown. Ray looked back the same way, as best he could.

"I'll be okay."

Fraser nodded, then left.

It was a long time before Fraser returned. It was cold and boring, and as the light dimmed he grew anxious. Fraser was carrying the sleeping bags and his and Danny's duffels. He made a better nest on the floor with the bags, and explained that this was all he could salvage. The rest, in the back of the truck, had slid off the back into the ravine. They were lucky the truck was still there.

"Danny?" Ray asked.

"He's dead." Ray nodded and swallowed hard. He knew it. He'd just needed to hear Fraser say it.

Fraser was still speaking. "I buried him. It's too dangerous, otherwise."

Animals, big ones, Ray guessed. But the ground was getting too hard, so Fraser must have piled rocks over Danny. They wouldn't last long. He hated the thought of Danny lying open to the night. He fought the thought down and focused on the grim-colored wall.

More cracking, thwacking noises came from outside, and Fraser returned this time with wood: by its appearance, a broken shutter from the shed. Using the trash in the next room for tinder, he lit the stove.

Then he was out of the office again, crunching around the back, searching. When he tromped back into the room he was carrying a rusty pot and a can of something. The long twilight was ending and it had been nearly eight hours since the accident. Fraser had not stopped working all that time, and as he wrestled with the pot Ray could see how tired he was.

"So what's the therapy for broken ribs?" He found talking hurt, but the silence was even more painful.

"I don't know," Fraser replied. "Something to immobilize the chest, so the bones don't rub

so much, but I don't know that we have anything. I think you'll just have to not move as much as possible until they heal."

"I can't just lie here."

"I don't think you have a choice, Ray. You nearly blacked out several times just moving around."

Ray thought about that, unhappily. Then, "Tell me the rest of it, Fraser. I can tell when you're hiding something."

Fraser sighed. "We have no transport. We have no supplies. Winter freeze-up is due in two to four weeks. I can scrounge until then, but we'll have only traps for game after it snows. We have no weapons or ammunition. And this shelter is not weather-tight."

Silent, Ray sat, taking it all in. "Okay, so what's the bad news?"

Fraser smiled briefly at that. "I'm worried that you might have a punctured lung. Any movement could drive the rib in again, and of course there's the risk of infection. Our first-aid supplies are pretty inadequate."

Ray nodded, still finding it hard to talk to Fraser. He waited for more, but Fraser had unbuttoned his shirt and was peeling off his undershirt, his pale skin turning a deep brown where the sleeves ended. With deft hands, he ripped the undershirt lengthwise into long strips.

Kneeling next to the sofa, he maneuvered Ray gently forward, taking his weight on his left shoulder. Ray shivered in the cold air, only to feel the cold wash away in the flood of pain that followed. He had just enough control to prevent himself from biting the inside of his mouth. Fraser hesitated after tying the last strip, resting one hand gently on Ray's chest, the other stabilizing Ray from behind. He cocked his head intently, listening to the beating of Ray's heart beneath the wrappings. Fraser's hands and face were clean, all traces of Danny's blood now gone. His skin glowed brown and copper where it had tanned and his eyes were round, dark, and enormous. His face was very still, covered by tiny lines of pain. Something began to tighten in Ray's throat to a fine, dangerous precision.

The moment stretched, and then a whimper escaped from Ray. Fraser released him with exaggerated care and Ray shut his eyes in embarrassment. When he opened them

Fraser was by the stove, feeding bits of broken wood into its blackened belly. It seemed to be an absorbing task, one that required real concentration, for he said nothing more. A chill wasp of air cut across the room, wending its way through the broken slats in the floor. Ray tucked his feet up underneath him, trying to find a position that didn't hurt so damn much.

"Well," he said, finally breaking into the darkened silence. "So what's the plan?" The words startled him, but not as much as they surprised Fraser, who shot him a questioning look, only to look away, hunching closer to the stove. The shutter wood was almost gone and he'd have to round up more to keep it going through the night. Ray licked his dry lips, wanting water but afraid of pushing Fraser in this strange, silent mood.

He must have dozed because he woke hours later, when the room was pitch black and cold. The stove was still giving heat, but the house's gaps and partial roof leached its warmth away. Both sleeping bags were piled on top of him. He tried to make out Fraser's shape in the dark. He was sleeping next to the stove, lit by a dull red glow. He'd found a wooden box for firewood. Pulling the covers closer, Ray realized that he was wearing not only Fraser's coat, but also his cap and gloves. He wanted to shove off the covers and give Fraser something to keep warm but the pain trapped him in place. His eyes grew heavier, and in spite of himself he fell back asleep.

The next morning Fraser rose early, found water, and then opened the can he found. They made a quick meal and Fraser disappeared again before Ray could question him further. The pile of wood stacked in the room grew slowly all day. More boxes, probably used to store equipment; the shed door. A few wood braces from the mine. Fraser checked each piece of wood carefully for bits of metal. By midday, the pile was still depressingly small. Later, Fraser returned with some roots and spruce needles, which he boiled, and they drank the liquid. It tasted horrible, like mold with a bitter aftertaste.

"Hhmm, Yukon tea?" he asked, trying to draw Fraser out.

"Actually, these are sura roots. They are a good source of vitamin A. The needles contain vitamin C," Fraser said neutrally. He was

splintering the wood into smaller pieces. Without an axe, he had to lever the wood against the desk with his body weight.

Grateful that at least Fraser was speaking again, Ray took the conversational opening. "I bet the woods are full of stuff like that around here?" He didn't know why, but it was important to keep Fraser talking.

"Well, the immediate area is denuded. Strip mining requires a large quantity of wood. Luckily it also requires a good water supply and I was able to rig a bucket to reach into the well."

Ray hesitated and then decided not to ask how far Fraser had had to go to find even those few items. Casting about for another topic, he pointed to his chest. "So how long before we can move me?"

It seemed the wrong thing to say. Fraser's face, already remote and distant, closed even further. He answered tersely, "Assuming you receive the proper care and rest, ten days. It'll give me time to fix the truck."

Ray blinked. "Fix the truck? Fraser, the truck is lying on its back on the edge of a ravine."

"Yes, but flipping it is just a matter of leverage and basic physics. Then we just need to get it running again and we can make it back before the freeze." Fraser's voice was calm and clear, and offered no room for disagreement. No way to point out that there were no spare parts and most cars required at least some structural integrity in order to operate.

Sinking deeper into the sofa, Ray nodded wearily. There was no use arguing with Fraser when he was like this.

The next day passed and he waited for Fraser to return. The pain kept sucking him back into a gray zone, one where breathing and fear merged into a large mass inside his chest. Moisture ran down the walls of the cabin and the dampness settled into him, accentuating the pain. He couldn't move and even small things, like peeing and drinking, loomed large in his mind. He tried a few times to push himself into a more comfortable position. One time he miscalculated, pushed too hard, and passed out.

When Fraser had not returned well after sunset, he began to get worried. The cabin creaked and whistled and the lack of candles and lamps made the deepening gloom

smothering. He heard Fraser before he saw him. Footsteps traveled slowly across the outer office, stepping across debris with aching precision. He heard a soft gasp and then Fraser walked into the room. Squinting against the dark, Ray could barely see Fraser. He was moving strangely, cradling his right arm with his left hand. He put more wood in the stove and as the door swung open, the room brightened and Ray looked more closely. Fraser had hurt himself—even worse than before.

"Fraser, you okay?" he asked, tentatively. The back of Fraser's head nodded and he stood slowly, carefully, holding his arm close to his side.

"I'm fine, Ray. Just a little twinge I got when rolling the truck back up. Excuse me one moment." Fraser turned abruptly and left the room. Puzzled, Ray listened and heard the sound of flesh clunking against something hard, and a faint, sickening, crunching sound. Then Fraser came back into view, his arm hanging stiffly but more normally at his side. "See, right as rain," Fraser said and began working on opening another can for their dinner.

Ray stared at him, confused. Fraser fumbled the knife he was using to pry open the lid. His shoulders were tight and he lacked his usual grace. "You dislocated your shoulder," Ray blurted out.

"Of course, Ray. But a door jamb is a fairly effective substitute for traction." Fraser was dividing the contents—they looked like ravioli—into two portions.

"Shouldn't you put ice on that?" The words dragged out of him, unwillingly. "Or something cold," he corrected himself even more weakly.

Fraser shook his head and handed the tin cup that doubled as a bowl to Ray. "No," he said. The word bounced shapelessly back and forth in the high corners of the room. He sat there, not breathing, not blinking, as if he were something honed into shape by wind and weather. Then Fraser looked down into his bowl, moved briskly over to Ray, dumped his share of food into Ray's cup, and simply walked away. It took Ray a moment to realize he had left the cabin. Puzzled, he sat there for a while listening for Fraser. He heard cracking

noises—more wood, he guessed. He looked down at his food and lifted the cup. He really had no appetite—in fact, he really had no hunger. Nothing much could push past the pain and the growing dullness that threatened to cloud his mind. He put the cup down and allowed himself to gray out.

That night he woke, his body shivering uncontrollably. He heard a soft whimpering noise and realized with embarrassment he was making the sound. Fraser rolled to his feet and stared, his eyes night-dark, and picked his way carefully over to the couch. Ray whimpered again before firmly clamping his teeth, but even the muscles of his jaw wouldn't obey.

Fraser's hands on his arm came as a shock and he jerked his head in protest. Fraser ignored him and tried to place one arm across Ray's shoulder to pull him close. He gasped in pain, even the weight of Fraser's arm unbearable. Fraser sat back, settling on his knees and staring at him gravely. Ray finally understood; Fraser was trying to give him his body heat, but there wasn't room for them both on the sofa without moving Ray.

Fraser reached out again and began rubbing his hands slowly up and down Ray's arm. The friction warmed Ray and Fraser increased the pressure until he was rubbing vigorously. Without pausing, his hands traveled down to Ray's hands, then his thighs, his calves, and finally his feet. When that was done, Fraser worked his way methodically back up Ray's body. Ray felt his shudders slowly ease under Fraser's touch. He blinked, welcoming the small store of warmth that returned to him. After a while, Fraser drew back, one hand shaping around Ray's right wrist in the dark, and then Ray's fingers. He crouched, his head bowed, then solemnly moved away, the dim stove light melting over his face. Ray wondered suddenly if he knew Fraser at all. Puzzled, he grew still, so still he could hear the beating of his own heart until he slid beneath sleep.

More days passed; each day Fraser would rise, parcel out their little food, and disappear. He returned, every evening, looking more and more grim. When he talked about the truck repairs, he shifted from specifics to generalities. Ray stopped asking Fraser how things were going. Ray could see their food dwindling and he could feel the nights growing colder.

Fraser's face grew more and more haggard, with dark circles underscoring his eyes. His arm was still stiff and at times he fumbled even routine tasks, like stacking wood or emptying the pot that served as a bedpan.

Ray wasn't doing much better; the stove's heat kept leaking through the exposed roof and gaps in the floor. He was also unable to move to warm himself; often, when Fraser was gone, he'd find himself shaking so hard he imagined his skin would simply slide off his body. But the pain in his chest was the only marker between what was real and what he imagined. Pain tinted every moment and lay in wait for him with every small move. He hated it, hated how it trapped him in the small cabin, hated how it shaped his every interaction with Fraser.

"Fraser..." he started one evening, watching Fraser struggle with placing a plywood board over the broken cabin window.

"Yes, Ray." Fraser balanced the board on one hip and angled it into the frame. He barely spoke to Ray now—when he wasn't working on the truck, he spent his day trying to find more food. Or futilely trying to prop up the building to make it winter-tight.

"Nothing." Ray tried not to sound sullen, but knew he failed. He was so tired of hurting. He was tired of watching Fraser try so hard. He was tired of waiting to get better. He rubbed one hand gingerly across his chest and probed. The pain sang under the slightest pressure. He gasped and sagged back. He couldn't even imagine ever being pain-free or warm again.

Fraser stepped back from the window and pushed against the plywood. When he thought it would hold, he stepped back. The plywood fell with a crash. Ray had a sudden memory of Fraser trying to piece the broken vase together. He wondered how long Fraser would keep trying before he gave up.

But Fraser just knelt down, picked up the leading edge of the plywood sheet, lifted it, and shoved it back into position. Ray realized then that Fraser would never quit, that he would keep working, would keep pushing himself far past any human endurance.

*He won't stop until he's dead,* Ray thought and felt suddenly sick. Fraser had meant it when he'd said he'd do anything to keep Ray alive. And you could not even pretend to hate a man who would lay down his life for you.

Ray was good at math. He was even better at figuring things out. The truck wasn't going to be fixed. They couldn't over-winter here. Fraser couldn't build shelter and scavenge at the same time. He was strong, but even he couldn't drive the cold winter away. And if Fraser stayed here any longer, winter would be close at hand and travel on foot impossible.

He thought of Steph, and Ussak, and Victor. They had lost Danny. If Fraser didn't go back, they'd never know what happened to him. He thought of Ilene and Jason and all the rest. If Fraser didn't go back, they'd probably wouldn't survive another winter. If Ray's life was held up against their lives, his life would always come up short. He had failed his old man. He had failed his mother and sister. He had failed as a cop long before Fraser arrived. He had failed Alain. And in the end, he really couldn't blame any of it on the people of Stewart Junction.

Ray felt surprisingly calm. As long as he didn't think too hard and long, he knew he would stay calm. And wasn't that the first thing they taught you in the academy: no matter what happened, you had to stay calm?

Wetting his lips, he hooked his thumb around the tin cup Fraser had found in the tool shed and sipped some water. He opened his mouth to speak, then shivered.

"So, Fraser, how long do you think it'll take you to reach Stewart Junction?"

Grunting, Fraser shoved the plywood and then wedged it into place with a smaller piece of wood. "Two days once the truck is fixed."

"And on foot?"

Fraser stepped around the end of the sofa, tugging at his sweater. His eyes traveled across the room as though he were searching for something. "Well, it's a distance of two hundred miles. There's at least ten hours of light, so if the weather holds and the roads aren't washed out a man can cover at least sixty or seventy-five miles a day. That's four days on foot for someone with full rations and in peak condition."

"Ah well," Ray whispered, with a little catch in his voice.

*Quit stalling,* he thought and smiled crookedly. "So you'd better get started at first light then? You'll need the coat, hat, and gloves at least. It's not like I'll be the one traipsing

through the woods."

Fraser stood framed in the doorway. He must have moved, so silently that Ray had not heard him go. He couldn't see much of him; the angle was all wrong and he'd hurt himself if he twisted to get a better glimpse.

Fraser's forehead, under the curling bangs, was high and straight, and tight with unspoken words. He seemed at once real and unreal, caught between the desires to stay and to go. Then he raised one chapped hand and rubbed his eyes. It was an ordinary gesture. But it was eloquent of weariness and sorrow in a way Ray had never seen, and he was filled with shapeless melancholy.

Ray's fingers ached from clutching the cup. He pried them loose and allowed it to clatter to the floor. The sound startled Fraser and he stepped back into the room.

"I can set you up so you have food, water, and wood in reach," Fraser began, the words coming out in a rush. "You shouldn't move for at least a few weeks." He stopped, silenced by the sight of Ray's hands, knotted, clinging to the edges of the sofa.

They stared at each other, caught in their own thoughts until Fraser made a harsh, dry sound, like a crow's laugh. He was looking into the fire as if he were watching it weave a dream to an ending. He turned away from it abruptly, but not before Ray saw his eyes, black and expressionless as the eyes of the dead, eaten to the bone by the truth.

Then Fraser set to puttering around the room, clearing more of the debris, trying to seem at ease, his equilibrium recovered. It was very different from the real thing, but Ray let it slide.

He felt a wave of exhaustion overwhelm him. Time enough to sleep later. After Fraser was gone. Instead, he found the strength to respond to Fraser's stream of conversation. They would move the sofa within reach of the stove. Fraser would spend the rest of the afternoon stacking and breaking as much wood as he could find. He'd tour the site one more time and hopefully find some more cans of food. He'd also stack jugs and buckets of water, again within reasonable reach. And he'd leave by first light. Ray spent the rest of the day listening while thunderheads gathered low in the sky and threatened to surround them with the

last bleak breath of autumn.

Morning came hard and fast, shaking Ray awake with brightness. Fuzzily, he thought he heard kitchen sounds from the other room until he remembered where he was. The knowledge that Fraser was still there both comforted and annoyed him in equal measure. He pushed the thought away and reached for the bucket Fraser had considerably placed in arm's reach. They'd have to figure out a way to handle the waste before Fraser left.

He heard a tap on the doorframe and looked up. Fraser was carrying two jugs of water easily in one hand. "Good God, Fraser. If I drank all the water you're leaving I'd float away," he said, looking wryly around the cluttered room.

An expression flicked across Fraser's face and was gone before he could identify it.

"No harm having a bit of extra water. I wish I could have found more food," he said, gesturing to the three cans he'd pulled from underneath the cracked boards of the storage shed. Squinting, Ray saw a small pile of weeds lying neatly next to the warm stove.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Those are dandelion roots. Ideally, you should grind them into a paste and bake them. But you can boil them in water, along with spruce needles, which—"

"—which are an excellent source of vitamin C. Yes, I know, Fraser. I'll stick to the canned food." Fraser rearranged a few of the water bottles to make space for the new ones. He seemed preoccupied; Ray suddenly wanted to get this over so he could rest. His chest was hurting badly—the dull throbbing of the broken ribs was now matched by the burning tensions of the bruises as they swelled and stiffened.

"We need to do something about this—" He gestured at the slop bucket.

"I thought of that. We need to keep you from moving too much. So I've knocked a hole in the floor and you can dump it through there. You may want to cover it up when you're not using it to help with the smell."

"I think I can manage," Ray said dryly, gauging the distance from the sofa and thinking it couldn't be far enough away. Fraser eyed him worriedly over the kindling stacked next to the stove.



"Let it rest, Fraser. You've stacked it six ways to Sunday. Have you eaten, yet?" he asked, pulling off the gloves and then the wool cap without raising his arms.

Fraser glanced up and frowned, shaking his head.

"Sorry," Ray muttered and then reached out his hand. "You're going to have to help me with the jacket."

Fraser seemed reluctant to approach him, pushing the wood closer to the sofa.

"Fraser, come on," he growled. "If you stack anything more around the sofa, I'll roll over it and break my neck."

Fraser rose, sliding around the stacks of wood and water like a dancer. Ray blinked, his irritation fading as he was gently pulled forward and the coat unbuttoned. With some efficient tugging and mild wrestling it slipped off and draped loosely over Fraser's arm. As Fraser stepped back, sidestepping the piles without looking, Ray felt absurdly as though he were participating in a solemn ritual. The thought made him uneasy. Something unbreakable and angled, like grief, was pushing in his chest, into his throat; after a moment he realized it was not grief, but something harder, crippling and deep.

Fraser stared down at him, wearing another of his inscrutable faces, and Ray puzzled over it until he realized it was simply fear. Ray found himself looking into dark blue eyes, unnervingly close. Fraser closed his eyes and a muscle worked in his jaw. A stillness fell over Ray, and over Fraser as well, it seemed; all expression slid from his face, followed by the quick motion of Fraser's chest as he drew a breath.

Ray's chest leapt in response in an unpleasant way. Beneath the constant pain, the friction of broken bone grating against broken bone was a new sensation, heavy and depressing.

Not knowing how to end it, he yawned exaggeratedly. "Hope you don't mind," he mumbled. "Guess I am still sleepy. Didn't sleep too well last night. I think I'll nap a bit longer." He shut his eyes quickly before Fraser could respond. He waited, until finally the floor creaked. He heard the hiss of the stove as more wood was added, the rustle as Fraser donned the jacket, and finally the gravel faintly crunch-

ing beneath Fraser's boots as he faded into the bright morning. Grimly, Ray kept his eyes shut until he was certain the prickling beneath his lids had passed.

The first day passed without too much effort; he spent it dozing, eating his half-can at noon and drinking warm water to keep his internal temperature up. The bright morning sun turned out to be only a brief break in the day; soon the cabin grew dark as more rain clouds gathered. He watched it rain lightly through the broken window, where the sheet of plywood had slipped when the winds returned. The rocky hills deepened their color as they became wet, and his mood followed suit. Rain always seemed to seep into his bones; in the last few years any bad weather settled in his knees. He inched his arms slowly under the sleeping bag to rub them. His hands missed the gloves, but he firmly told them to stop complaining. He wished his ribs would shut up too, but they kept singing their chorus of pain.

"Great, talking to my body parts. First sign you're losing it." He didn't realize he had spoken aloud until he heard the crack of his voice. Pulling the covers back up, he sighed. He was bored, too.

He leaned back, against the armrest, tilting his head to study the ceiling. There were water patterns, and he amused himself trying to see figures and faces in the yellow markings. That could only pass so much time and soon he was bored again.

The first night alone was unsettling. He would hear something creak or rattle in the rising wind and shake himself awake, his heart pounding. He hadn't noticed the sounds when Fraser was here. Of course, the trick was to get any sleep at all; the pain was pretty much a constant companion.

In the morning he decided to try to move a bit. He was getting too stiff and he remembered something about inactivity being a bad thing. As he shifted the covers aside, he braced himself on the armrest and swung his legs down. Trembling, he rolled forward into a half crouch. As he bent forward, the pain burst into full force, racing around his chest in tightening circles. Before he could stop he felt himself retch and fought to keep his stomach down. He made only a few tottering steps, before he real-

ized he was not going to make it to the door. Falling would be disastrous, so he retraced his steps sweating.

Lying back on the couch, he stared about the room with new eyes. This was it. The peeling wallpaper, hanging in sheets. The stained yellow ceiling, the rotten floorboards. The four-inch gap in the window and the open door without a handle leading to the office beyond. This was where he would die.

His body shuddered as he took in the thought and tried it on for size. He would die here. Ever since that day in Carey's store, he'd known it would come to this. But at least he'd die on his own terms and not at someone else's hands. He'd die as Ray Vecchio and not screaming in fear in the mud.

A red squirrel popped its head through the plywood gap, peering nervously around the room. Something had been carting the room away bit by bit over the years, gnawing on woodwork. Given the lack of trees in the immediate area, Ray wondered how far this squirrel had traveled to get here.

"Nothing here, folks. Move along," he said, and watched its tail twitch before it disappeared. His stomach growled. If he had a BB gun he could have shot it and eaten it. Fraser had killed a number of them in the months between the salmon and caribou seasons, when even rabbits were hard to trap. He'd always refused to eat them; he drew the line at rodents. But now he found himself surprisingly flexible. Now, when it'd do him little good.

Irritated with that line of thinking, he began calling up his favorite basketball plays. He'd used this trick on boring stakeouts when he'd been saddled with partners who didn't care to even speak to him.

The squirrel's head appeared abruptly again and it made a loud chittering noise. Ray eyed it speculatively, only to see it streak into the room and head for a small pile of insulation hanging loose from the wall. It snatched a mouthful, flicked its tail insultingly, and fled through the window gap.

He fought a smile, then gave in. God, even the squirrels were giving him the finger.

Yawning, he listened to the rain return and watched it drip through the roof into the far corner of the room. The soft pattern lulled him into fitful sleep. The sullen glow of the stove

greeted him when he awoke in the evening. He swung his legs to the floor and rolled a piece of wood with his feet until he could lift it without too much effort. The sofa was perilously close to the stove, but his reach was too limited to allow any more distance. He warmed his chilled hands, and then set to heating some more water. The rain had stopped, but the utter darkness outside told him the cloud cover had remained in place. He sniffed the air and smelled the tang of ozone, which could only mean more rain. He suddenly wondered where Fraser was, if he'd been able to find shelter. There had been only a few houses in the last fifty or so miles. Maybe there were more cabins further back in, but that would mean a detour and—

He angrily shoved the stove door closed and rubbed his face. He knew what his father would say, if that bastard were still alive. Trust no one. Every man for himself. I am in it for number one. And the old tried and true: it's your own damn fault for following that Mountie.

He snorted cynically. He doubted his father would have survived the plague. No, if he had still been alive he would have died scabbling, bleeding on some barroom floor, far from his family.

And without warning the tears came. They welled up like unwelcome guests, ripping sobs from his throat. A part of him sat in shock—all this time and he'd never cried for Franny or his mother. He'd never mourned them properly. Had never said any prayers nor lit any candles. But they were gone, so long gone.

He choked and then pinched himself, trying to stop the tears. He hated crying; he refused to cry. This was stupid. He sputtered to a stop, then wiped his cheeks with his fingers. The moisture glistened in the red stove light and for a moment he thought he saw blood. His body went rigid with alarm. The adrenaline rush drove the last of the tears away and he blinked until his hands swam and then reshaped themselves into fingers, wet with only tears.

His chest hurt and he softly rubbed the bandages beneath his shirt. He gazed randomly around the room, trying to find something to distract him. The stove's glow was not bright enough to reach the walls or penetrate the

darkness beyond the door. He stared dumbly into the dark, growing more and more numb. He watched the dark until it crawled into the room to blanket him.

Ray struggled the next day to keep the fire going, to drink, and to empty the slop bucket. The can of food tasted funny and he debated throwing the rest out. He opted to leave it half-eaten for later. The rain had turned to sleet; he could hear it striking the roof and bouncing off the rocks wetly. He felt sluggish and a bit feverish and dozed off and on.

Twilight had fallen when scrabbling woke him. His lids were gummed up and he rubbed his eyes. The squirrel must have returned and he felt absurdly grateful for the sight of something living. He turned his head and froze.

A small black bear was licking the food from the open can. He could smell its damp fur, could hear its hoarse grunting as it pawed at the floor. It was barely inches from his head. He held his breath, hoping it would finish quickly and then leave. The can rattled in circles under the bear's tongue; then it lifted it up, holding it between its jaws before dropping it and snuffling the area in frustration. It batted the can and then pawed at the two remaining sealed cans.

Ray heard more scrabbling and forced himself to remain still. Oh God, not another one. Something small and red flashed at the end of the couch and the squirrel peeked around its edge. It saw the bear, peered briefly at Ray, and then fled. Ray felt a sudden urge to laugh.

A loud groan pulled his eyes back to his right and he swallowed his fear. The bear, tiring of the impervious cans, had batted them across the floor. Small clouds of dust rose behind the cans as they rolled. The bear sneezed, then shook its head. As it moved, its fur gleamed in the stove light, smoothly rustling like a flood of black water. Mesmerized, Ray stared as its bulk rotated around the cans, past the water bucket, and right into the hot stove.

A meaty roar burst into the room, jerking him up involuntarily. The stove tipped, spilling its contents onto the floor. As the flames caught, the bear half rose on its legs, claws extended, and Ray squeezed his eyes shut. The room filled with smoke, driving the bear back out into the front office and through the open

door.

Panting, Ray felt all his muscles release their tension until he was watery and soft. His heart raced and his lips tingled. The smoke thickened and he looked at the stove in alarm. The fire was still small—the leak from the roof had dampened the bits of paper and debris so they were smoldering rather than burning. But not for long.

Galvanized, Ray swung himself up without thinking. He bent forward, grabbed the bucket, and tossed it over the stove and the small fire. As the flames winked out, he felt something shift inside his chest and was filled with searing pain. He stared down, surprised, before the world blacked out and he fell. *Oh, God, no* was all he had time to think before he mercifully lost consciousness.

The smell of smoke was strong. His mouth was full of something and he spat it out. He lay face down on the floor, his hand inches away from the still-warm stove. He turned his head and listened. He was alone. He wasn't certain whether to be relieved or to cry. He tried to push himself up off the floor and blacked out again.

It was fully dark when he came to the second time. The stove was cold, still lying on its side. His body was shivering and for a moment he wondered if you could shiver if you were unconscious. This time he moved with more care, rolling onto his good side. The pain was liquefying and he tasted blood. His groans pierced the room, broadcasting his distress to the world outside. At least, that's what he imagined, and he stifled his next moan. There were worse things than bears and he didn't want to advertise his whereabouts.

He focused on the shallow breathing technique Fraser had taught him, but nothing seemed to make the pain better. Each time he tried moving he would come that much closer to blacking out. And each time he grew weaker until he finally lay there, waiting for the sun to rise.

The next few days were a blur. He could not raise himself up even to right the stove or reach the sleeping bag. His body had stopped shivering and there were moments where the cold numbed him so badly that even the pain faded away. In the afternoons he watched the sun travel across the back wall only to fade

away when the clouds returned. It was quiet; the only sounds were his occasional whimpers and gasps. Even the squirrel stayed away.

Amazingly enough, the second bucket of water had stayed upright and was within his reach. From time to time he would carefully reach his cup up and over its rim, scoop up water, and suck it down. He didn't know what he'd do when the water level fell below his reach. Somehow he couldn't think too much about that.

He dreamed, small weird disjointed dreams where he was walking in the snow with Fanny and his mother, barefoot. They kept teasing him about losing his shoes and then he was ten, again chasing after the bullies who stole his new Adidas from his locker. Each time, he jerked himself awake and listened for some sound, some hope of rescue. Fraser had been gone five days already—or was it four?—and he should be on his way back.

Ray coughed, his eyes tearing with the pain. He'd developed some sort of infection, maybe even pneumonia. Who was he kidding? Even if Fraser ran all the way from here to Stewart Junction, he wasn't coming back. Ray was just like Alain: expendable. And he was going to die like Alain—without dignity.

And there would be no one to bury him. The thought obsessed him. There had to be some way to prevent the scavengers from getting to him. Goddamn Fraser, he couldn't even stick around and do this last little thing.

The coughing prevented him from getting any rest, so the next morning the day seemed hazy and unreal. It seemed too much of an effort to even dip for water any more. He was very warm now and kept touching his face with his frozen hands to cool himself off. Pulling his fingers away from his face, he noted they were wet. *Is it raining now inside?* he thought dimly, before remembering he'd been crying. That, too, didn't seem to matter much any more.

The building creaked around him. The wind had picked up, signaling another storm, and the air had a heavy bite. It was going to snow, he could tell by the falling temperature. He licked his chapped lips, wondering how long it would take for him to die. He thought of suicide. Where were those handy sleeping pills and plastic bags now? Oh, right, he'd forgotten;

good Catholic boys don't get sleeping pills, they get nailed to the cross and die slowly, screaming for their mothers. He wondered if Christ had felt the cold, or was it warm when they strung him up?

He remembered his mother telling him not to ask questions like that. His father had laughed and told him not to worry, dead is dead no matter how you get there. His mother had yelled and there'd been another fight. She stopped attending mass with his father, which was fine by the old man.

Ray shifted on his side, stifling the coughing spasms. He hated that his father was right. The thing he had always admired about Fraser—no, loved—was that he had known so clearly what to do in any situation. Every day, Ray had lived wondering what kind of difference he could make, knowing that no one respected his caring, and constantly listening to his father's voice telling him he was no good, to shut up and sit down. But Fraser had understood his doubts and failures. And had still acted like Ray was someone worth respecting, was someone worth spending time with, was somebody worth saving. Once Fraser had even thought Ray was someone worth loving. His discomfort with Fraser touching him that way seemed remote and small now. There was so little love in his life and all he knew how to do was push it away.

The room turned icy, his breath frosting the air with each labored breath. The cold hurt his face and he groaned in irritation. But the effort shook him awake ever so slightly. The smell of his own body waste filled the room, making him sick. He wasn't going to die. Not here, inside an old rotting shack, smelling of piss like his drunken old man. He rolled onto his stomach, this time not trying to silence his cries of pain. And then, slowly, he pulled himself toward the door, to the outside. He passed out several times, each time clawing his way back to consciousness. The pain kept grabbing him and shaking him until he could have puked—but there was nothing left. He had no idea of time or space or distance. All he saw was the open door and the gray rocks and gravel beyond.

He came to feeling small wet pebbles beneath his fingers. He could barely turn his head, but fingered each stone like a gift. He

had made it. He smiled but found his face was frozen.

The rain stopped but the clouds hung low and dark. The gravel road sloped down and away from him, curving before it disappeared. Ray liked the thought that if he could just stand up he could walk down the path, turn left, and head back home.

He laughed, a soft breathless thing. He wasn't going anywhere. He was going to die. Just as the Fraser he had loved had died. He felt a wave of sympathy for Fraser. At least he'd be dead, but Fraser would have to go on living with the loss of his identity, his world, and the innocence he'd tried so hard to protect. Fraser had known this all along, from the moment they first sat in Carey's bedroom: he would have to sacrifice his compassion for their survival. And while death had a thousand doors to let out life, life had only one door you could walk through. Fraser would now have to walk through that door alone. Ray's only regret was that he hadn't realized this until it was too late.

Something wet trickled down his cheek and he blinked. It was a snowflake. He could see another one spiraling lazily down from the gray sky. Then the flakes stopped, leaving the wind to rush past the cabin and down the road.

He shuddered under its icy caress and then lay still. Their survival was what Ray had been fighting against all along. Not a battle of wrong and right. Not a fight for civilization or standing up for the little guy. No, he and Fraser had been locked in a barebones fight for existence.

He found it ironic that in telling Fraser to go he had—without really thinking about it—finally agreed to die on Fraser's terms. There was no shelter from the rockslide. You couldn't outrun it, you couldn't deflect it, you could only stand there and accept that you couldn't win. So maybe Fraser was right—only when you accept that you cannot win, only when you surrender, will you survive.

And it was somehow okay. Because nature made use of everything. The squirrel rummaging through insulation to build a nest. The bear lapping up the remains of old campsites. In the end nothing got wasted, nothing vanished; everything found its own place and purpose.

A few more flakes trickled down from the

heavens. Ray's open-mouthed, heavy breathing sounded loud in his ears. Then he heard something scratch and a soft tapping sound. He opened his eyes weakly. Two ravens stood a few feet from his head, studying him intently. One was eyeing him suspiciously, while the other bobbed its head up and down like a window-shopper angling for a better look.

"Hey," he whispered. The suspicious one rattled its wings. The curious one started hopping from foot to foot. "So whaddya say?" he asked the curious one—George, he decided to call it.

"Looks good, Barney. I think, whaddaya say, it looks good." It turned to the other, larger one and opened its beak. The second bird shook its head and peered more closely before offering an opinion. "It'll do, I guess. There's an awful lot of him."

"Well, so much the better." George jumped onto a nearby rock and resumed his bouncing. "More for us!"

"And less for me, I guess, eh guys?" Ray muttered, feeling very light-headed.

"Well," Barney began pompously, "I see lots of nest-building opportunities there, with that coat and shirt and all. Not much use for the hair—it degrades too quickly due to its organic nature." Ray snickered; the bird sounded like Fraser lecturing on the medicinal properties of some native root.

"But the buttons, the buttons. And eyes, too!" George chirped, looking like a small child eager for Christmas. He arched his back and flapped wildly with anticipation.

"Have at them, boys," Ray said, gesturing with one hand toward his chest. The pain, which had been so dim and unreal, shot through him, choking him, and he coughed once, explosively. When he opened his eyes again, the birds were gone. The snow had picked up and a light dusting covered the gravel and his arm and hand. The pain was wonderfully absent, almost as if he had coughed the last of it away. He could smell a faint piney scent and opened his mouth. The snowflakes dissolved sweetly on his tongue. One brushed his nose, tickling him.

It was so peaceful here. His breathing slowed and he felt the light-headedness return. He floated slowly at first, then higher until he could see the caved-in roof and the worn shed

standing next to it. The hills really were denuded; only a small stand of scraggly spruces had survived the ravages. Turning, he followed the gravel road, just as he had imagined, turned left, and headed west. As his speed increased something white below caught his eyes. Swooping down, he saw three wolves chasing a herd of caribou. Curious, he leaned closer and was then running fleet-footed beside one of the stragglers. His mouth was open and he was breathing hard—but it felt good to be whole again, without pain. The doe swerved and he shot ahead to cut her off. Overestimating his speed, he found himself tangled beneath her hooves and fell to the ground, dying as she crushed his skull.

Then he was flying again, leaving the herd behind. The air was crisp and the snow flung itself into his face like sand-tossed sky. He could feel the hum of life all around him, electrifying him and pulling him along. When he came to a river he allowed himself to fall

and enter the partially frozen flow. His fins scraped on some rocks as he hugged the riverbed. The current was strong, carrying him downstream to the sea. Then jaws closed around him, grabbing him, lifting him out of the water into the sudden light that broke through the clouds and dazzled him, turning the water into white gold.

He was standing on a cliff above the Pacific Ocean, watching the setting sun turn the sky and the clouds into layer after layer of gold and red. The light bathed his face, warming him, enfolding him until he could almost taste its sweetness. He sensed someone standing beside him and turned to look. But everywhere he turned, the sun followed, filling his eyes so he could not see. He turned and turned and turned until he finally felt the brush of warm skin and heard the sound of someone breathing his name, softly, like a song so remote and clear.

---

## Chapter 9: The Price

*"Nobody is stronger, nobody is weaker than someone who came back. There is nothing you can do to such a person because whatever you could do is less than what has already been done to him. He has already paid the price."*

—Elie Wiesel

---

The smell of fish frying was what he first noticed. He couldn't be dead if there were fish frying. He tried to open his eyes, but they were too heavy and he fell back into his dreams.

One day he heard thumping nearby and the sound of a child laughing. He must have made some sound, because the thumping stopped and the child went away. As time wore on, more and more details filtered through. The smell of astringent or rubbing alcohol. The feel of cloth on his face. He swallowed something bitter once and nearly choked on it. He was still coughing but not as badly as before. He tried to remember what there was of before but that too faded into the grayness that was his dreams.

Once he thought he felt a hand touch his chest and a deep voice murmur his name. He thought he might have smiled.

When he finally came to, he was lying in a narrow bed, in a cabin that was dark. The wind howled outside and he could hear the rush of snow against the windows. He tried to be alarmed—here in this unfamiliar place—but it took too much effort to think. He rested there while his eyes adjusted to the near black. The night grayed the finer details but he could make out a man sitting in a rocking chair at the foot of the bed. He sat motionless, almost like a mannequin, watching him. It was Fraser, his eyes glittering in the dark. Frightened, Ray looked away and fought the weariness that threatened to pull him back down. It was so quiet in the room; the only signs of life were the wind and the snow. He started to tremble; his breathing sped up as a sudden thought flashed across his mind. Maybe he was dead and this was Fraser's ghost. He squinted, trying to find light where there was none, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks. But then Fraser's arm moved, and Ray realized that if he were dead it would be he who was the ghost. Not

the other way around.

Experimentally, he tried to speak, only to hear a long hiss. Startled, he looked around for the source of the sound. When he looked back Fraser was standing silently beside the bed. His fingers rested loosely on the bedcovers, and Ray remembered the touch of a hand. He tried to speak again and now Fraser crouched next to him, giving him a sip of water. He drank clumsily, spilling, and tried again: "Wherrrr—?" and then stopped, horrified at the creaking sound he made.

"It'll be fine, Ray. You're fine." Fraser's voice was low and husky. Ray nodded slightly, feeling comforted by the sound.

"We got you in time. You had a pretty bad fall and cracked a few more ribs, but nothing was punctured. You developed pneumonia but we've treated that. But you must rest." He gave Ray another sip of water and then replaced the cup on the nightstand. Ray peered around the room, trying to make out more detail in the dark; he could see quilts and dried flowers.

"I'm fine," he agreed, the words coming out clear but thready. His throat was sore and grainy but knowing he could still speak was a relief. He turned his head, seeing Fraser a bit more clearly. His face was a pale slash in the dark, with two dark glistening eyes and a steady mouth. His hair was tousled, as if he'd just awoken from a deep sleep. Crouching next to the bed, he looked like someone who had been waiting a long time and would be willing to wait even longer.

Ray closed his eyes, a sudden prayer welling automatically to his lips. He was alive, he wasn't dreaming, and neither one of them was a ghost. He felt his chest tremble as the reality gripped him. "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee..."

When he opened his eyes Fraser was still there, still waiting. "Fraser..." he started, and

then didn't know what to say. Fraser nodded and settled back on his haunches. He gazed at Ray with an odd mixture of weariness and peace, as if he had brought some great treasure safely out of danger.

"There was so much—" Ray started and then fell silent again. What could he say? That there was so much he understood now? That there'd been no hope and that he had been waiting to die? That in the end he'd believed Fraser wouldn't come back for him and that it had been okay? Looking at Fraser, he didn't know if he could say any of these things. Ever.

He listened to the wind hiss around the cabin and the silence between them, feeling the old panic seep back into his world. His clarity was fleeing and he struggled for composure. Then he heard it—the sound of his breathing, his chest rising and falling in perfect unison with Fraser's. The rhythm calmed him, centering him on the dark, silent figure next to him. He reached out and gripped Fraser's hand.

"I learned, I learned something. There were these ravens...I talked to them." Ray's voice must have been weak, because Fraser leaned closer. "I guess you'll think I was going a little nuts. No," he said, looking for the first time in a long time straight into Fraser's eyes, "no, no, I wasn't, and you know it. They said, they told me..." Ray's voice faded, with images still so sharp in his mind that the edges pained him and seemed to cut the meaning of all his words away. Fraser's mask of calm concern was slipping; his hand gripped Ray's harder, careless and desperate with something he too was mute about. "I wish, I just wish you'd told me, Benny. You know, right? You're so good with words, with stories. You should have told me." There was no accusation, only weariness and sorrow in his voice.

He waited for Fraser to judge him, and in the quiet that followed he feared he had said too much. But the dark was like a confessional, freeing them both. "Ah, Ray, I couldn't," he finally heard Fraser say. "Some people, they're born here and live here all their lives and die here, and they never know. And some people, they learn and then they, they can't deal with it. Some use drugs and alcohol and violence to deal with it, but most people just close their eyes and pull the curtain and turn on the lights and forget. And some leave here, they just, just

stop..." Fraser's voice was breaking, and something too like fear crept into his eyes.

"Hey, it's okay, Benny. Ssh, it's okay. I'm not leaving. I want to live."

He felt Fraser shudder, then pull his hand back. He resisted the impulse to tighten his grip. Fraser would stay or go at his own pace. That was something he had also learned.

Fraser stepped back from the bed, leaving an empty space behind. He walked slowly, silently, to the rocking chair and resumed his watchful position at the foot of the bed. And as Ray listened for the snow, he fell asleep to the sound of Fraser breathing.

"Mr. Vecchio. My mom wants to know when you're going to wake up?" Jason hung in the doorway, kicking his stocking feet as he swung on the roll bar. The woolen sweater Ilene had knitted herself; Ray recognized the pattern as the same as that on the quilt on his bed. Jason's hair had grown long again and it fell softly into his eyes. He was clearly bored.

Sighing, Ray pushed himself up and gestured for the boy to come in. Smiling, he ran to the bed and then slid across the wooden floor. It was hard being only ten. And cooped up in a teeny cabin for months with nothing to do.

It had been two weeks since he had woken in the dark with Fraser by his side. Ilene watched him by day, and when she was out, Jason ran and fetched for their "boarder." It gave the boy something to do. As for Ilene, she seemed to take pride in nursing him.

"Well, there, has my rug rat told you what's for breakfast?" Ilene called out from the kitchen. Jason and Ray exchanged wide grins and then Jason put his hands to his lips. Ray nodded and then said, "Sorry, Ilene. No, he hasn't. What's for breakfast?"

"It's liver cake and spinach frosting," she shouted, with Jason chiming in perfectly on cue. The little boy collapsed in giggles and slid through the door across the floor into the kitchen.

Ray shook his head. It was the morning ritual; Jason would "wake" him, his mother would ask the breakfast question, and the two of them would come up with an idiotic response. Kid humor.

Ilene carried the tray into the room, her blue eyes grinning. She wore a long white smock over her sweater and two layers of



pants. Her blond hair gleamed in the white light, a perfect match for Jason's tow head. The snow outside turned the windows into hazy white panes directing and reflecting the sunlight. The cabin was warm and cozy.

The tray held two small brown pieces of bread and something green heaped on top of them. It was rye bread and watercress—what Ilene called "egg salad watercress" sandwiches, only without the eggs. They had run out of butter and other toppings for their bread, but some greens could be found even in this weather.

"Thanks, Ilene. Have you already eaten?" he asked politely, gesturing to the chair.

She sat down. They spent many hours chatting whenever they were snowbound. "Yes, thank you. I'll fix something later in the day. I'm trying a new bean casserole."

"Mmmhm, beans." Ray bit into the sandwich. It tasted cool and peppery and was quite good. "What did you do with them the last time? They tasted like something Indian."

"Secret spices," Jason shouted from the kitchen.

"More like good cooking," Ray replied, directing his comment to Ilene. She shook her head at him.

"Really, Ray. Now I know you're getting healthy; you're shoveling it in."

Taking another bite, Ray kept talking. "Well, my mother taught me one thing: never criticize a cook in her own kitchen. No, actually, she taught me two things: one, never criticize a cook in her own kitchen, and two, always tell the cook her food tastes great. Actually, my mother taught me three things: one—"

"Your mother should have taught you not to talk with your mouth full. That's how the cook knows she's not appreciated. If they talk, they aren't eating it." She brushed her hair out of her face with one hand. Her face had a few more lines than he remembered and was much thinner. Before she had looked housewifely, edging comfortably into sedentary plumpness. Now her face and wrists showed their bones and her skin had a sallow sheen. Ray swallowed his last bite, acutely conscious of how stretched their resources were. His stomach growled, angrily demanding more.

"Thanks again. It was good," he said solemnly and handed the tray back to her. Their eyes met and she nodded back. In taking

him in, she had to work harder. He suspected Fraser was helping offset his upkeep.

Thinking of Fraser, he looked out the window. He hadn't stayed the night, having been called away to help with some emergency at Ron's house. Catching his glance, Ilene rose and turned to the kitchen. "You can stop looking for him. He stopped by earlier this morning and said he'd be here for dinner. Hope you can amuse yourself until then."

"Actually, I was thinking of going out today. It looks fairly mild and I can—" Her fierce expression stopped him. "Well, it's just that Jason has been cooped up and I thought it would be good for..." He tried for confused and innocent but withered under her skepticism. "Well, at least I can help clean up inside the cabin."

"I had been thinking of you walking Jason through his math lesson. What else did you have in mind?" Her eyebrows rose in challenge. Looking around the painfully neat cabin, Ray winced.

"I can do the dishes. That's the third thing my mother taught me. Those who don't cook, wash."

She laughed then and waved her hand at him. "It's a deal. I hate washing and I can use the weather break to visit with Rita. Just be sure to stand slowly, don't bend, and have Jason lift the buckets of water. After his math lesson."

"Yes, ma'am," he and Jason chimed, although Jason sounded a little less enthusiastic now that math was involved in the equation.

After she left, the math was "lessoned," and the dishes were washed, he and Jason sat at the kitchen table. Jason pulled out his drawing notebook and began doodling. Ray sat stiffly in the chair, his ribs still healing. Pure white light filled the room, and he looked around the cabin. Hand-knitted throw rugs, sweaters, mittens, socks were neatly arranged over every exposed surface. Ilene had found her niche: cooking and knitting. A book lay open on her sofa: *Basic Weaving and Spinning*. By next year, she'd have mastered both skills. The normalcy of it all was overwhelming. He still felt disconnected at times, lost and without purpose. He wondered whether he'd ever feel normal again.

"Mr. Vecchio—" Jason tapped his hand, interrupting him.

"Ray. It's okay to call me Ray."

"Sure, okay. Does this look right?" Jason held out a pencil drawing. It was quite startling: two ravens perched on a rock, one peering curiously at the viewer, the other looking off to the side, flapping its wings. Ray felt a chill across his back.

"What made you draw this?" he asked, holding the drawing uncomfortably between his fingers.

"You kept talking about ravens when you were—you know, when you were—deler—deler—"

"Delirious," Ray supplied and slid the picture across the table. "Have you ever seen a raven?"

"Yes, sure, lots of times. Anyway, I thought it'd be neat if I could get them right. Did I?"

Looking at the boy, his eyes open and curious, Ray shoved his misgivings away. "Sure, you did fine," he answered casually. He tried not to think of the other things he might have said while he was dreaming.

"I've got lots of other pictures, do you wanna see them?" Jason reached for the drawing book, but Ray shook his head.

"How'd you like to sneak out instead? Just for a brief walk down to the path and back."

Jason frowned, uncertain.

"Of course, I'll need your help to go slow," Ray continued. "And to lace my boots for me. Are we on?"

Still hesitating, Jason thought for a moment and then said, "And you'll need me not to tell my mom?"

"No." Ray laughed. "I wouldn't even ask Fraser to lie to your mom." Jason's face lightened. He was a good kid, conscientious and smart. He'd grow up to be a good man.

"Okay. I'll get something warm for you to wear."

He heard a trunk lid rattle open. Jason appeared, trailing a long brown coat. It smelled of mothballs and he held it reverently. Ray knew it was his father's and accepted it solemnly. Jason held his hand all the way to the path and back to the cabin.

He slept the rest of the afternoon and rose a few hours later to build up the stove. He put on Ilene's casserole to reheat, shook his head at its pitiful smallness, and set the table for four.

Ilene smiled appreciatively when she brushed into the cabin, blustery and cold. Fraser held the door open for her and kicked his boots off on the sill. Diefenbaker sailed in and started to shake his coat.

"Dief," Fraser reminded and the wolf slunk outside, shook himself thoroughly, and then trotted in quickly, tongue lolling.

"Smells wonderful," Fraser said, helping Ilene with her coat. Fraser's own long coat was wet around the hem. Snow had frosted his bare head, and as it melted it trickled in small rivulets down into his polo neck.

"You always say that, Fraser!" She flushed a bit, although with her complexion it was hard to tell. Fraser smiled back, and then neatly hung up both of their coats on the back wall. His shoulder was still a bit stiff and he favored it as he lifted the heavy coats up and over the hooks.

"Not unless he means it," Ray answered from the back of the kitchen, ladling the beans into bowls. Fraser stepped around the normal cabin clutter casually, gracefully crossing the small room until he filled the entryway into the kitchen. His nearness brushed up against Ray, leaving him flushed with warmth that lingered long after Fraser walked past him to open the cupboard. "You sit, Ilene, and rest. Ray and I will handle it from here."

She sat listening to Jason tell her about the day while the two men maneuvered around each other in the small kitchen. They never seemed to get in each other's way. Jason whispered something in her ear and she bent, frowning.

"Is this right, Ray? You left the cabin?" Ray shot a glance at Fraser and then returned to his ladling.

"We dressed warm, went slow, and only walked down to the path." Fraser was watching him carefully, looking for signs of distress, but he knew there were none to be found. "I am fine. Really, mom."

Ilene sighed and looked around her cabin. "I guess it must be hard, cooped up in here. But promise me you'll wait until I am around for anything more vigorous."

"He will," Fraser answered firmly for him. Ray raised his eyebrows and kept ladling.

They sat down and Fraser said grace. After a few moments of silence, Ray asked after the

latest news.

"There's a lot happening, or rather a lot has happened," Fraser answered after some thought. "You know there's a food shortage." Ilene shot him a surprised glance. Up to this point, their evening meal conversations had been filled with gossip and daily activities. Sensing Fraser's shift in direction, Ray simply nodded.

"So Ista and I need to decide tomorrow if we need to adjust the rationing."

Ray slowed, the food sticking in his throat. "How much?" he asked.

"It depends on the weather patterns. Even after the ice breaks it'll be a month before we can fish. Months after that before the first crops come in." He looked exhausted, his skin thin and lined with worry.

"So spring is our next vulnerable period," Ray mused. "The weather may be better, but by then we'll..." He stopped and looked down at Jason. "We'll have to deal with the mud."

Jason scowled. He hated mud, probably because he tracked so much of it into the cabin and had to clean it up. He rolled his feet against Diefenbaker, who was dozing under the table. Ilene looked grateful that they had shifted the topic slightly in front of Jason, but the news of more rationing made her look nervously at her kitchen stores.

Fraser finished his bowl and leaned back. "Thank you, Ilene. It tasted better than usual. What did you use? Cardamom?"

"Cumin, and don't be giving away my secrets, Fraser." She gestured at Ray, who was eating his meal more slowly.

"If you still have some seeds left we can try planting it this spring. It likes hot weather but if we position it on the south wall of the cabin it may get enough sun."

Ray scraped the bottom of the bowl. He recognized Fraser's forced lightness. "You know, Fraser," he continued, "since the weather is the big variable, why not factor it in? You know, like a random variable thingie in the math equation."

Fraser considered the idea thoughtfully. "You mean like the X variable."

"Yeah, Jason and I were doing algebra today. If two trains leave at the same time at a rate of fifty miles per hour, how far until they meet. Somewhere between X and Y is the range

of where they could meet, plus or minus—"

"Factors for wind, grading, and other variables." Fraser supplied.

"Right. It's not foolproof, but it'll give you—" He paused and looked down at Jason, who was following this intently. "—maximum coverage for the maximum...units."

Fraser nodded. "I'll think about it, Ray. It's the...maximum number of units I am worrying about."

"Yeah, I know it's not easy" was all Ray could find to say, but it seemed to be enough. Some of the tension faded from Fraser's face and he relaxed in his chair slightly. How long Ray stared at Fraser he did not know, only that his eyes suddenly shook and the conversation shifted to weather patterns and Ilene's knitting.

After Fraser left, Ray sat up thinking. Fraser could do reams of math in his head. He knew how to ration and calculate caloric intake, and certainly he didn't need Ray to explain basic algebra. It was something else that Fraser needed from him. Listening to Ilene's rhythmic breathing from the other bedroom, Ray had the beginnings of understanding. He blew out the last candle and made his way slowly into his room in the dark. It could wait until tomorrow.

Ray kept Fraser's word and took only short trips under Ilene's supervision. Ilene tolerated his impatience for only another week and then set him to carding wool when his constant complaints of boredom grew tiresome. He liked the simple, repetitive task of combing and recombining the wool. Once it was gone, they'd have to find a substitute—there were no sheep or goats or cotton. Ilene was studying hemp; they might be able to grow it in the short summer and it had many uses.

He was finally "released" and spent the first above-zero day walking around the town center. It bustled with activity—the weather breaks were too few and they still had to haul in firewood, clear snow, and check the traps. Most people nodded in greeting as if he hadn't been gone for months. It wasn't until he reached the civic center that he realized what was different. People were making eye contact. They were busy, preoccupied, but they no longer gazed past him as though he were a ghost. He stopped short on the center's steps before reaching the door. Sweeping the imme-

diate area, he decided to test his theory on the next random person who walked by.

He didn't have to wait long; Evan Snyder scrunched past, his dour face hardly improved by the beard he'd taken to growing. It made him look like a badger with beady eyes squinting suspiciously at the world. Claiming the porch railing, Ray raised his hand in greeting. "Hi, Evan." Evan looked up, barely breaking stride, and grunted. His hunched shoulders turned the corner and he was quickly out of sight.

*At least some things haven't changed*, he thought with relief, and entered the building. It was cluttered with books and paper piles on the tables. Makah and Ron Shinn were studying a set of blueprints while Brian sat, his leg propped up on a stool.

In the other corner Elu and Larry stared at survey maps of the area. Ray wandered over to their table and nodded in greeting.

"Hi, Ray. You're up now." Elu grabbed a large book and used it to flatten the map she was rolling out. She looked tired and, like the rest of them, much thinner.

"Yes, finally. Hello, Larry!" Larry was steadying the other end of the roll of paper and waved one hand in greeting without looking up. "Sorry, Ray, can you give me a hand here?" he asked as the overlarge paper started to slide off the table.

"Sure," he said, reaching and pulling the map back into position. "What are you working on?"

"Cropland," Larry answered. "We only have garden plots in the immediate area. We're looking for land within easy reach of the river that's already been cleared and only one day's walk from here." He traced a spot on the map with steady, sure hands. "We have to plant as much as we can—the season is too short here."

That made sense—the tribes who had lived here had succeeded because their numbers were small. But they were heavily dependent on hunting and fishing. It would take years for the fish to return. And caribou migration patterns had changed significantly since the pipeline was built.

"But what about irrigation? Don't we need—" Ray asked and then stopped. "So that's what they're doing," he observed, nodding in Brian's direction.

"Right, in the summer months we can use the river to flood the irrigation channels. But we need a steady supply of electricity to keep the water pumped into the cabins and the septic system." Larry rubbed his stubbled face. Ray studied him carefully; no sign of alcohol, no slurred words. Standing side by side with Elu, he hardly looked like the angry drunk who had threatened him a few months ago. Ray smiled wryly and realized he was hardly the same man either.

"...so we'll go back for the boiler again in the spring," Larry was continuing, and Ray pulled himself back to the land surveys. "But by then Elu and I will have a pretty good idea how much land we can plant immediately. We can plant multiple rounds of quick-growing crops later, when we have more land cleared."

"We're thinking of planting spinach and cowpeas early—the biggest bang for our buck early on." Elu waved the list she was making. "Tomatoes will be one of the things we'll have to wait until June to plant. Seedlings we'll start indoors earlier, and then transfer them under plastic, which will heat the soil."

Ray's mouth watered at the thought of tomato sauce. "But we don't have a greenhouse. How are we going to start the seedlings?"

Elu smiled and held up a finger. "Larry and I figured that one out already. We all have kitchen windowsills? Lots of light, close to the stoves? We each can start one hundred seedlings and then thin them as we go."

"So are we going for what's easy to grow or what's—you know—balanced, vitamin-wise?" His mother had been big on daily vitamins—she had once seen children with rickets when she was growing up and wanted all of her children to be strong and healthy.

Larry looked thoughtful. "We're focusing on speed and survivability. We know we want diversity and they have to breed true—you know, give seeds that we can use next year. But we haven't gotten to figuring the nutrition part yet."

"I've added it to the list already, Larry." Elu pointed to her notebook. It was filled with numbers and row after row of lines. Ray would have felt sorry for Larry but he was clearly energized and focused on his work.

The door opened and, without turning,

Ray knew Fraser had walked in. Larry stood a bit taller and Elu began searching for something among the pile of papers. Diefenbaker rose from next to the stove and walked over, his tail waving. As he watched the groups begin to converge on Fraser, he realized why Fraser was looking so tired every night. So many questions, decisions, problems to solve. And tempers to soothe, he noticed wryly, as Brian threw down his blueprint in disgust and wagged his finger at Ron.

"Look, who is the engineer? You or me? Oh, I am, aren't I?"

Fraser stepped forward and nodded at them both.

Ron looked embarrassed but stood his ground. "I know you're the engineer, Brian. But I think if we rig it that way, you'll end up blowing the whole thing sky high."

Fraser leaned over the blueprint, and then turned it around. "Oh," he said mildly, and then went silent.

They looked at him and then back at each other, waiting for Fraser to continue. He angled his head and then turned the blueprint around again. And then again.

Brian slowly started to laugh. "Okay, I take your point, Fraser. It doesn't matter which way we attach the pipe; it's the direction of the pressure that matters."

"And that," Ron interrupted, "depends on the type of boiler we end up using." The two men had the grace to look sheepish.

"I expect you're right," Fraser said, dropping the blueprint. "Glad to have you both here to help us with this project." He smiled, a graceful flash, and nodded politely to them both. As he walked away, it seemed to Ray that Fraser was smiling a bit more. Fraser put on his hat and shut the door behind him, leaving Ray to hope the smiling was not one of the things he'd been imagining.

That evening, they went over the agricultural plans in detail. It all seemed so fascinating: how much acreage they could farm, how much labor was needed, how to balance their nutritional needs, and how to store the food. For the first time, Ray understood why men— young men—were so important in farming communities. Without tractors or heavy farm equipment, every pair of strong adult arms was needed. After Jason went to bed, they used a

few more candles to go over Elu's and Larry's recommendations. Ray didn't add much to the plan—but it seemed to help to listen. And learn.

He was still bored, and finally broached the topic one evening. "Fraser," he said, after putting the last of the dishes away. "I may not be back full strength, but there's got to be more than this that I can do." He gestured around Ilene's cabin.

Ilene raised her eyebrows at this. "No offense, I hope, Ilene," he added hurriedly. Ilene shook her head and smiled.

"As much as I like having—" She paused and corrected herself. "—we enjoy having you around, I understand. I think he's right, Fraser."

Fraser sat quietly at the table, holding his cup in his hands, staring at the tablecloth. He looked up and Ray caught a glimpse of something like gratitude in his eyes, before he blinked it away. "What do you have in mind, Ray?" Fraser asked.

His question startled Ray, although he had given it some thought. It reminded him so much of their Chicago days, when they'd discuss cases and crimes. Looking down at his shoes, he felt a lump in his throat. He hadn't remembered how much he missed those conversations.

Glancing up, he saw that Fraser had noticed his confusion, and tried not to feel miserable about it. "Well, I know a lot about engines, cars, etc. We're covering electricity with the boiler project and we're working on food production. But if we're ever going to be sustainable we need to find a way to get farm equipment to move. And cars and other machinery."

"But, Ray," Ilene chimed in from her knitting. "We have no gasoline."

"But there are alternatives—ethanol, corn-based substitutes," Fraser said, his eyes never leaving Ray's face. The gaze seemed intense, intimate. It pulled at him, as though some magnetic core within Fraser's being exerted a powerful draw on his eyes and brain and heart.

"Yeah," he found himself saying. "And there's gotta be books on the subject. I can start the research alone and then bring you my findings?" Somehow it was important to leave Fraser a way out, a way to back down graceful-

ly.

But Fraser refused the opening. "No, Ray," he said firmly. "It's a good idea. I'll talk to Nodin and see if he has time to spare. The traps are hardly full this time of year and he was asking for something else to do."

A bit dazed, Ray nodded and sat down across from Fraser. The candlelight changed Fraser's face from moment to moment, flickering across his cheeks and forehead. Only his eyes remained constant, lit by some private thought. They sat there in silence until it was time to leave. And in the dark, waiting for sleep to claim him, Ray wondered if he would ever see Fraser truly happy again.

His routine changed after that. His days were spent in the civic center, poring over books and manuals with Nodin. Although Nodin hadn't finished high school, he had a good mechanical sense and seemed to enjoy the thought of developing a fuel source. He wanted to work on a heating source too, but they both agreed to focus on available raw materials and work from there.

He finally encountered Istas, too. The man walked past, nodding politely on his way to the tanning station. Istas hadn't changed either. Later, he came into the center, where he worked alone, quietly repairing shoes. Ray felt relieved to see he held no animosity toward him.

Ray grew tired quickly and often would rest at the center before heading back to Ilene's cabin. The families would take turns supplying a small lunch for the crew working at the center. Rita Manchester came in one mild day with a pot of beans and the center took a communal break to eat. Ray found himself sandwiched between Rita and Elu, politely listening to them chat about recipes.

"So, Ray," Rita asked, taking a sip of water. "Has Ilene introduced you to her Dead Fish Casserole?" Rita had been a very plump housewife before the plague hit, but now her skin hung loose on her face. Her thin brown hair had started to fall out, leaving small patches near the back.

"Don't tease him, Rita," Elu smiled. "She's just jealous. Ilene's come up with a pretty good set of recipes. Not much you can do with fish."

Ray kept eating from his small bowl, knowing better to comment on any woman's

cooking.

"That's not true, Elu." Rita laughed good-naturedly. "Am not jealous. It's just that if she makes the Dead Fish Casserole, it's official." Both women chuckled in unison. Ray had no idea what they were talking about, but his confusion didn't bother him as it had before.

"Well, at least that's an improvement on how they used to do it." Naomi's voice floated over from where she was sitting sewing. "Hang a string of dried fish on the girl's doorstep. If her family took it into the lodge, you had your answer. If they fed it to the dogs, then you had the other answer."

Ray coughed and ducked his head. It was hard, living in such a small community. Everyone saw everything and everyone had an opinion on the everything they saw. It was a lot like his old neighborhood. He was saved by Nodin, who walked over and asked him about using softwood as an ethanol source.

His evenings were split among Jason, Ilene, and Fraser. At the end of each meal, the adults would chat and then Fraser would rise, take Diefenbaker with him, say good night, and return home to his cabin. Ilene would tuck Jason into bed and then Ilene and Ray would spend a few minutes talking quietly. It was usually small things—her lesson plan for Jason, repairs she wanted to make to the cabin, idle chatter. Ray often felt she wanted to talk about other things—her husband, her life before the plague—but a silent barrier hung between them, a reticence that Ray wasn't sure was there but didn't want to test.

He finally gave up worrying about it and focused on his project and helping Ilene and Jason out. He was deeply grateful to her for taking him in, but knew better to mention it.

"What are you smiling at?" Ilene asked, interrupting his thoughts. She was sharpening her cutting and boning knives, a tiresome task that she would only do in full daylight when she could see clearly. Now, with twilight falling, she was hurrying to finish it before Fraser arrived for dinner.

"Mom, when can I use the table again?" Jason whined. He wasn't allowed at the table while the knives were sharpened. Ray shook his head warningly at the boy and he slouched back onto the sofa.

"Hm, oh, I am sorry, Ilene. I was just think-

ing of something Larry said yesterday." Now that Larry was no longer drinking, he'd actually shaped up to be a pretty funny guy. And a very hard worker.

"Well, don't let me put a damper on it," she replied primly, giving the knife a good scrape.

"Damper?" Ray asked, puzzled, watching the white light glint off the steel rod she was using.

"A damper on your smiling. It's good for you. Suits you," she said, looking up, her own face lighting up with a grin.

Ray flushed and flipped a few more pages of the cookbook he had been idly reading. Her eyes rested on him a bit longer than normal and he found himself liking it. "So where did you get all these knives?" he asked, pointing at the neat rows covering the table.

She deftly put down the vegetable knife she was holding and picked up a smaller paring knife. "They're not all mine. I'm doing them for Elu and Steph. Elu will be fixing Jason's shoes. And Steph promised to install a new pipe outlet outside the house this summer."

Ray nodded. Bartering services made sense. "I thought Susan was our pipe expert?" he asked. He tried not to think of Steph often. She hadn't been at the civic center these last few weeks.

"She is. But she and Susan decided we'd need more than just one expert. So she's been over at Susan's house all month—actually Susan's shed—learning how to weld. Can't do it in the center 'cause it's too messy."

"Ah" was all that Ray could find to say.

A quiet knock and Fraser entered the cabin. He saw the knives on the table and turned to leave. "Sorry if I am too early. I can always come back later."

"No." Ray and Ilene both spoke at the same time and smiled at each other. "It's okay, Fraser," Ilene continued. "It'll only take a moment for Ray and me to put the knives away and serve dinner. Have a seat."

Fraser stood a moment, awkwardly, shrugged off his coat, and sat down in the rocking chair. Jason sat up and began prattling but Fraser seemed preoccupied and spent some time staring down at the throw rug. His eyes kept lifting to watch Ilene and Ray chatting as

they sorted the knives. He watched them all through the clearing and setting of the table, tracking them as they criss-crossed the room, chattering easily with each other. Eventually, Jason grew tired of trying to tell him about his day and sank back into the sofa with a bored sigh. That seemed to rouse Fraser and he spent the next fifteen minutes listening to an excited rendition of the story Jason had just read about a frog-jumping contest.

Dinner was relatively normal, with the conversation light and easy. The meal was equally light; their rations had been cut again and the food barely stilled the constant ache that filled their bellies each day. They drank water to compensate. When Ray rose to start clearing dishes, Ilene shoved her chair back to join him. Fraser jumped to his feet, grabbed Ray's arm, and spun him around by the shoulders until they both faced the kitchen.

"Please don't trouble yourself, Ilene. Ray and I will handle the dishes tonight." Ray felt himself propelled across the wood floor by Fraser's smooth handling. It felt good, familiar, like a well-worn path they had walked together many times. Ilene watched them, puzzled, for a few minutes and then settled on the sofa for a brief nap. Jason was soon tucked up against her under an afghan.

Once inside the kitchen, Fraser released him, filled the sink, and moved aside to allow Ray access. Ray washed, while Fraser dried and stored the dishes and pots. When the time came to stow the casserole dish, Fraser reached around Ray, shifting him to the side to reach under the sink. His other hand steadied itself on Ray's hip as he knelt. Ray stirred under the touch, feeling peaceful in the last warm evening light. His heart began to open tentatively to something he had not felt for years.

Fraser loosed him reluctantly, then moved away. Listening to the soft bustle behind him, Ray thought he heard Fraser say something and looked over his shoulder. Fraser faced away from him, stowing the silverware. He looked relaxed: his blue shirtsleeves rolled up past his forearms, his slippered feet straightening Ilene's multi-colored throw rugs as he puzzled over the knife tray.

Gazing at Fraser, Ray wandered, beyond time, beyond memory. Then he felt Fraser's hand gently brushing against his skin and he

dropped back into time. The water was cold and he turned unwillingly back to washing. The night was dark and he could see the snow falling. The brief weather break was over and the storm had returned.

"Mom, why can't I go to the center too? It's boring here."

"Because we're using the center to work. And don't worry—when the cold weather ends we'll have lots of uses for you. This may be the only time you have to study, so get back to it."

The storm had lasted two days. It was clearing, but still very cold. Jason was supposed to be studying, but he fussed and shoved his book away. Ray wished he could do the same. There were no helpful distillation tips in Ilene's cookbooks. For the first time, he realized what an incredible asset libraries were. And how much harder their lives were going to be without their wealth of knowledge. Besides, the recipes were reminding him how hungry he was.

"Jason, you know Fraser studied a lot when he was your age. And he's found a lot of uses for what he knows."

"Oh, like what? I don't need to know this stuff—" He picked up the book on basic chemistry he had been reading.

"Well, for example, here I am looking through your Mom's cookbooks, right? Because I'm trying to distil ethanol from stuff we can grow here—potatoes, maybe. If we have ethanol, we can operate the heavy machinery and not have to work so hard. But until I understand the basics of cooking—or chemistry—how am I going to know how distillation works?"

Jason crossed his arms, stubbornly refusing to budge. Ilene glanced at him snappily. "Well, what's the point?" the boy argued. "The machines are going to break down and we won't be able to replace them."

Ray sighed. The kid was sharp and he could see Ilene starting to get upset. The last time she and Jason fought it had taken a week for them to start talking to each other. Cabin fever was no joke when you had nowhere to hide for months. "You're right, Jason. The machinery won't last forever. But while it does, we can build up our food reserves and maybe even find some better alternatives. It's kinda like running uphill—you gotta get momentum

before you can make it to the top."

Jason angled his head, considering the idea somberly. It was hard to know what a ten-year-old child could understand. But he would have to understand if he was going to survive in this new world. "So," he said slowly. "You're studying chemistry too?"

"Yep, that's what's distillation is. A chemical process."

"So maybe you can help me with my homework," he said brightly, holding out the book.

"Jason," his mom shouted, but Ray laughed. "It's all right, Ilene. I need a break from these dangerous recipes. They're making me hungry. Let's take a look."

"Is it okay, mom?" Jason asked, suddenly realizing his mom had not stopped glaring at him and he'd better fix that fast.

"It is. And if you finish the whole chapter you can go over to Steph's and help Victor and Ussak with the candle-making. We're running low again, and Steph said she was going to give them the afternoon off to melt candle stumps into more candles."

"It's a deal," Jason chirped, brightening at the thought of visiting his friends. Next year they'd work on getting a schoolhouse. But for now the children had to make do with the weekly visits weather permitted.

"I'll walk him over, Ilene," Ray found himself volunteering, somewhat to his surprise. He hadn't seen Steph since he'd returned. And he didn't think he should put it off much longer. He had finally stopped dreaming about Danny, but still felt his loss every day. In his old neighborhood, when someone died everyone gathered around to eat and tell stories and grieve together. Things must be done differently out here and it had been easier just to let it slide while he was recovering. This afternoon he felt he'd run out of excuses.

Jason ran and jumped most of the way, scampering back to Ray, who made his way steadily across the snow. Halfway there, Diefenbaker joined them, and they spent a few minutes chasing each other around in circles before Ray hauled them on to Steph's cabin.

As they approached the cabin, Ray slowed down. It looked just like it had last month—he didn't know why he thought it would've changed. And yet it did feel different. As they



climbed the steps he noticed little things—Danny's shoes were missing. His abandoned cigarette bucket was filled with gravel to toss on icy patches. He'd kept it out there for the day they'd resume trading for tobacco again.

Jason opened the door without knocking and charged in. Ray entered more cautiously.

"Hi, Steph," Jason yelled. "Where's Ussak and Victor?"

Steph was seated at the kitchen table, holding two pipe lengths and a measuring tape. The ever-present pot of stew bubbled on the stove. Ray took a deep breath and nodded hello.

"Oh," was all she said, and then she pointed Jason to the back shed. "I've got them set up back there. Try not to be too messy and follow Ussak's directions. I don't want you guys to get burned."

"Okay!" Jason shouted, disappearing into the back before the word even left his mouth.

Ray stood there awkwardly, trying to find something to say. He really wasn't certain what he was doing here—or what was expected of him.

"How long did Ilene say Jason could stay?" Steph asked quietly. She was still sitting at the table, but had put down the measuring tape.

"Um, until dark." The room smelled piney and he saw fresh-cut boughs over the bedroom door. "Jason was complaining about studying, so I think it'll be a good break for both of them." He fell into their conversational style easily.

"Hm. We really need a schoolhouse next year. Something to keep them out of our hair for a few hours."

Ray nodded, and his mind went blank. Danny had been a good friend. He'd taken him in when things went bad, laughed with him, planned with him. He had put up with Ray's black moods. And he had died horribly. The pressure built inside him, and his chest, which had been mostly pain-free, started to ache again. He inhaled sharply and remembered

that he'd told many families they'd lost loved ones. You just got through it.

"Steph, I wanted to tell you about Danny." The words hung heavily in the air; he almost winced at their leaden tone.

"Fraser told me already, Ray." This time he did wince. Of course, she had already had ample time to learn the facts from Fraser by now. And that's all he could ever give her—the facts. He couldn't tell her about the gurgling sound Danny had made after the truck crashed. Or the grisly sight of white bones, or the red blood spattered over Fraser's hands.

"Right, I am sorry. If there is anything I can do..."

"Thanks, Ray. Danny would've appreciated that. We'll be fine." She picked up the metal pipe and rotated it. She was gauging strength or grade or something like that—Ray had seen Susan do the same before starting on a pipe-refitting project.

Watching her thin, strong fingers grip the metal confidently, he realized she'd be fine. Not perfect, or even happy for a long time. But she was focusing on what she needed to focus on in order for her and her family to survive.

Relieved, he picked up his cap. "I'll head over to the center and then stop by for Jason just before dusk?"

"Okay, and I'll send a few candles back with Jason. As payment for his work."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries and Ray stepped outside and into his boots. Diefenbaker stood up eagerly and barked.

"No, sorry, Jason can't play. He'll be there for a while." Whining, Diefenbaker sank back down into the snow. The winter sun barely peeked through the gray clouds but its impact on the snow still made him squint. Rubbing his eyes, he felt them tear and brushed the moisture away. "Come on, Dief," he said, and to his surprise Dief stood obediently and followed him across the snow.

---

## Chapter 10: Nature's Light

*"Come forth into the light of things, Let Nature be your teacher."*

—William Wordsworth

---

The ice break-up was smaller this time, prompting Larry to announce it would be a warm summer. Ray stood on the embankment on the day Fraser predicted and listened to the ice creak, groan, and then shudder into pieces. They stood together silently afterward, Ray with his hands tucked securely in his pockets, Fraser twisting his cap. Diefenbaker nuzzled Fraser's leg and he knelt down in the muddy snow to pet him. "It'll only be another month, Dief. Then the fish will be easier to catch, there'll be game in the traps." Dief's coat had several bare patches, and his ribs stood out. He looked no better than the rest of them. Ray's stomach rumbled, causing Dief's ears to prick up.

"One morning I'll awake to find him on top of me, checking my vitals." Ray laughed. Fraser scratched behind the wolf's ears and he settled down. He'd been edgy for weeks and Fraser had stopped letting him wander the village. Even Jason had been told to leave the wolf alone.

Stragglers made their way clumsily through the mud. "Amazing so many still came." Ray looked across the river and back to the dissipating crowd.

"It's symbolic, Ray." Fraser stood effortlessly. He had lost his weight mainly through the hips, Ray noted critically.

"No, really?" he joked, trying to keep his face very straight and serious. Fraser glanced away, and then started back down the muddy path. Falling in step, Ray touched his shoulder. "Fraser, wait up." Fraser slowed, still staring at the ground.

It had taken all of Fraser's skill to bring as many of them alive to this moment as he had. They had stretched the rations and then stretched them again. They had taken to drinking gallons of water to deal with the ever-increasing hunger pains. He'd smoothed over countless fights and refocused their winter energy into projects for fuel, food, and power. He deserved to stop worrying, but Ray knew

the worrying was far from over. He looked tired, worn, and threadbare of spirit.

"Put on your cap," he said, reaching for the wool covering. Startled, Fraser allowed Ray to pull it from his fingers. Leaning forward, Ray anchored it firmly over Fraser's ears and nearly slipped in the mud. "Well, that's better," he said, and then continued on past Fraser, who stood there with the cap covering his eyes. Ray could have sworn he heard Dief laughing as he walked back to Ilene's cabin. It wasn't until he stood scraping his shoes that he realized that Fraser had actually smiled.

Nodin was sitting at the kitchen table, awash in piles of paper. Ilene looked flustered and had retreated to the kitchen muttering. Jason was "helping" but had only managed to make matters worse.

"Oh, hi, Ray. Stopped by with the plans. Steph and Susan have commandeered the center to lay out the pipe for the new septic hookup for Ron."

"Why do they need the center?" Ray slid on a sheaf of papers that had fallen to the floor.

"Cause they need to mark the pipe connections and it's the only place big enough not covered in mud."

"You know, Nodin, it won't be until next year that we'll be able to make use of any of this." Ray gestured at the ethanol notes.

"Yes, I know. But we don't know much land to plant in potatoes for ethanol production, so can we finalize that today?"

"What's the rush?" Ray asked, pushing Jason over to the sofa and handing him his English book. Turning, he nearly tripped over Diefenbaker and swore.

"Language," Ilene shouted from the kitchen and glared at Dief, who had sneaked in.

"He'll be coming with me next week," Fraser said from the doorway, cap once again in hand. "By then the roads will be drivable and we can try for the boiler."

Ray's stomach took a painful, sick turn and

he nodded quietly. Of course, they needed the boiler. He knew he wouldn't be going.

"So who will go with you? Brian?" His voice loosened a little at the memory of Danny's body lying beneath the calm, endless snow, the silence lying always beneath the wind.

Their eyes met in a moment of understanding. "Yes," Fraser replied, "and I thought I'd ask Ussak. Steph says there's not much he can do here now that the candles are all gone. Until we can sweat some tallow or find another fat source. And he can run errands and operate the winch," Fraser added gently.

Ray swallowed and nodded. Fraser had once mentioned to him how some tribes would hold a ceremony when someone died. It would be a good way for the boy to deal with the loss of his adoptive father. So many interlocking pieces that fell apart when a man died. Living in Chicago you didn't notice, but in a small community every loss hurt.

Which made Fraser's achievement over the winter that much more remarkable. Not counting Danny, only six people had died. That was—Ray paused to work out the math—that was only a loss of ten percent. Much better than they had ever hoped.

Still, Ray's good mood had vanished, and sensing this, Fraser stayed only a little while longer, until he left early, explaining to Ilene he wouldn't be staying for dinner. Ilene was uncharacteristically grumpy too and went to bed early. Washing the dishes alone in the light of a single candle, Ray felt as though he and Fraser were moving in a constant dance whose steps he was only beginning to learn.

Ray refused to take note of the passing days, but odd memories kept popping into his mind. Once, as he picked his way across the muddy fields marking the areas they would plant, he caught the color of light slanting onto stained yellow walls. Sitting up alone in Ilene's cabin after dark, he thought he could hear the creak of the wind against a sagging roof. He could even swear he could detect the unpleasant smell of rotting floorboards and mice droppings while stacking wood. So when Fraser returned he found himself gathering with the rest of the men to watch the "boiler team" unload their find with a sense of relief.

"Look out!" Iostas shouted as the boiler

came crashing down. Ron swore and hit the winch to take up the slack. The boiler was huge; it hung over the back of the truck, its dark metal hull still wet from the morning rain.

Ray held firmly to Diefenbaker, making certain he didn't try to get too close to the truck. But Diefenbaker was more interested in Jason, who had followed Ray from the cabin. Waving him over, he let Dief go and watched the wolf trot over to the boy. He was moving a bit better—they all were. They'd had a good catch of fish the week before and could now lay traps further afield.

Iostas shouted again, but this time the boiler did not slip. Brian stomped around the front of the truck and nodded, satisfied. "We'll leave it here for now. I'll have to study it for a week or so. It's not like it came with a manual." He sounded more excited than irritated by the idea.

Fraser stepped around the corner, wiping his muddy hands together. His jeans were caked and spatters trailed up his chest and into his hair. Ray suspected he had had something to do with the boiler not slipping any further but was glad he hadn't been able to see it. The boiler looked huge; it was as tall as Fraser and could have crushed him several times over. Watching Fraser pick his way through the mud, he wondered how hard it would be to move it again.

"Ray, I was wondering if you had time later tonight to discuss the ethanol project?" Ray nodded, brushing some of the mud from Fraser's arm before giving it up as a lost cause. "Sure, Fraser. Not much has changed since you left. Although Nodin has had another idea—"

Iostas called out to Fraser, interrupting them. Crouched next to the boiler fittings, he and Brian had discovered something. "Later, then?" Fraser called over his shoulder before sliding his way back to them. Frowning, Ray watched him go. He'd hoped that with the spring things would lighten up—that Fraser wouldn't be in a constant race from problem to problem.

After dinner, Ray and Fraser headed over to the sled dog camp to feed the huskies. Fraser had volunteered to take Evan Snyder's turn when Evan twisted his ankle that afternoon.

The dog run had been too small to house their growing collection of huskies. Since build-

ings were in short supply, they built makeshift dog houses by nailing two sheets of plywood together and then packing dirt between the boards for extra insulation. The dogs were tethered on long chains, and as the two men approached the pack came piling out, baying in eagerness.

Tossing dried salmon into the fray, Ray tried to bring the subject of Fraser's overwork up. "You know, I've been thinking. You really should have a second-in-command. Or someone delegated to handle some of the minor things. This committee stuff is only good for the big-ticket items, not day-to-day managing."

Fraser nodded, pulled off his gloves, and pushed his way through the pack to kneel down and check the paw of a red-gold husky. "I've been giving that some thought," he began. "Whoever it is will have to be good at handling personalities."

"Well," Ray snorted, "that pretty much eliminates most of us besides you, Fraser. If you haven't noticed, we've all been pretty cranky with each other."

"That's seasonal. It'll pass as the weather and food situation improve." Fraser released the dog and she whined until he patted her head.

"Will it? Improve?" Ray asked, lowering his voice. "The food situation?" They moved on to the next stand of dog houses and started parceling out the salmon. He was always amazed that the dogs never tangled their chains. A fight broke out as the pack leader nipped loudly at a smaller white dog edging in on his fish.

"Elu and Larry think it will." Fraser kicked the two dogs apart. "The seeds we pulled from the garden store at Keno will help."

Ray wondered how bad it had been at Keno. Then he decided he didn't want to wonder—his imagination was apt to fill in too much.

"Okay, so he won't need your saintly patience. But he'll need to be—you know—woods-wise and know his way around." He finally noticed that Fraser's bare fingers were raw and red from the cold and took them in his palms, absently rubbing them warm.

Fraser shook his head. "That'll come in time. A leader doesn't need to know how to do everything. He needs to lead. To be someone

they trust. And respect."

*And fear*; the thought flashed across Ray's mind. It must have shown on his face because Fraser's eyes darkened and he pulled away to bury himself in adjusting a dog's collar. *Stop it, Vecchio*, he thought angrily to himself. *Let it lie.*

Feet pounding up the path interrupted them and they both turned, relieved. Fraser reached for his rifle.

"We've got a problem." Ista's voice came low and deep as he emerged from the darkness. His hair was untied and his cotton shirt hung loose over his jeans.

Trying to disentangle himself from the dogs, Ray caught only the end of the conversation. "...he wasn't certain how many, but they've split into two groups. They know enough to keep the fires small and Makah thought they were armed." His voice was strained and tight.

"It was only a matter of time before the warm weather allowed more movement. And we're not the only ones who are having it rough." Fraser gripped Ista's shoulder, steadying him. Ray felt a surge of annoyance.

"Shit, Fraser. They have no right to be here." Ista was past fear now and edging into anger.

"Let's find out what they're up to. Ray," Fraser called without moving his head. Ray stepped closer and waited. "Start rounding everyone up. Quietly. Have them meet us at the civic center with their personal firearms."

"I'll unlock the extras. Not everyone has a rifle or shotgun." He didn't like the thought of handing out guns to people who barely knew how to use them, but it wasn't like they could call out the National Guard here.

"Let's go, then," Fraser said, and he and Ista faded abruptly into the dark. Ray's last glimpse was of Ista reaching back to bind his hair. The flick of the ponytail reminded him of a wolf's tail slicing through the air as it hunted its prey.

It took all his crowd skills to keep people calm until Ista and Fraser returned. Larry turned out to be a great help, making certain everyone's weapon had its safety on. Naomi sat quietly at the table. Her rifle looked like something out of a movie; it was an old Winchester repeating rifle. It had been carefully cleaned and was well oiled.

Steph had volunteered to take charge of the kids at her place. Ilene had joined her, leaving every other able-bodied man and woman to fill the room. Since there weren't enough chairs to hold them all, some chose to lean against the wall or perch on tables. Counting, Ray came up with only thirty-five—most them untrained and all of them afraid. Makah and Nodin were the only two who had a clue what might be going on and they stubbornly refused to talk. Tempers were boiling.

The room fell silent when Fraser and Istas entered. They made their way through the crowd, and Ray noted that even then Fraser still took time to greet people as he passed. The tension dropped a notch and turned into watchful anticipation.

"Earlier this evening," Fraser began without preamble, "Makah came across a large group of men camped three miles east. He circled around them and found tracks leading west which led to another group of men."

"Who are they?" Evan Snyder shouted as people started to murmur.

Fraser raised his hand and the group quieted. "Istas and I scouted and confirmed Makah's report. The first group consists of twenty men. The second group—camped four miles west—has seventeen men." He paused and Ray knew from the way his eyes flicked over to him that there was something more coming. "The second group is led by Dennis."

A puzzled silence fell as people struggled to make sense. "Fraser." Rita raised her hand. Her shirt was inside out and her feet were bare. She must have dressed in a hurry. "Fraser, are they together?"

"We believe they are. Greg Nelson is in the first group."

More murmurs, flooding the room like a soft wave. Ray kept silent, knowing Fraser would tell them what they needed to know. He knew it meant nothing good.

"We don't know what they want or need. In the morning, Istas and I will visit them and discuss it with them." The crowd couldn't tell if this was a good thing, and a few people shifted on their feet. Out of the corner of his eye, Ray thought he saw Naomi nod solemnly as if she were confirming something.

"But until then, we're going to split into three groups. Istas and I will each take some of

you and position ourselves between one of the camps and us. The rest of you will set up a perimeter around the village with Makah. Stay where you are and Istas and I will assign you to your spots."

The talking grew louder. Listening carefully, Ray thought the general consensus was that Dennis and Greg were up to nothing good—but whether they were here to steal supplies or just take over the town was an even bet. Ray kept his mouth shut. He didn't know and he wasn't about to speculate.

Fraser stepped around Larry and said something to him as he passed. Larry moved over to where Istas was gathering his group. From what Ray could tell, Fraser had picked only a few people, men and women who knew how to handle a weapon and not shoot someone accidentally. The village was going to be defended by those with little experience. Ray shut his eyes and opened them to find Fraser standing only a few feet away. They both knew what this meant. Dennis was going to attack that night, or more likely in the early-morning light. And if Fraser and Istas didn't stop him earlier there really wouldn't be much the rest of the town could do.

"Ray, go with Istas." The words came out harshly. A dark smear of mud traced Fraser's jaw, highlighting a small tic that had appeared. He pressed his lips together and walked away quickly to tap Susan on the shoulder. Ray knew then it was going to be bad. He wanted to run after Fraser, touch him like he had touched Istas, and tell him it'd be all right. They'd made it through so much. But he knew it'd be a lie, and he and Fraser could only speak truth to each other. So much had been stripped from their lives, bit by bit, that sometimes the only way to survive the next crisis was to say nothing at all.

Brian, Larry, Ron, and Nodin were waiting for him and they checked their weapons. He took a shotgun, declining the rifle. He felt more comfortable with his service revolver and figured he could do enough damage with the shotgun. They loaded up on extra ammunition and grabbed some water and dried jerky.

Istas took point, leading surely through the dark. Stumbling, Ray heard Brian trip behind him and was relieved he wasn't the only one who couldn't walk through pitch-black woods

and not fall on his face. Ron was hardly better. Larry, on the other hand, walked so surefootedly that he kept treading on them both as he brought up the rear.

Istas raised his hand and they stopped. He angled them off the path and crouched down. They formed a circle and, keeping his voice low, Istas explained his plan. They would circle the campsite twenty-five yards out and wait. If the strangers started arming themselves or looked like they were going to try to enter the town, they would attack first. The first one to spot movement would fire a shot to alert the others. Given their small numbers, their best chance was to fire directly into the crowded camp. While they would be hidden in the dark, the fire would blind any shooter trying to return fire.

"Shoot to kill," Istas said, and he heard Ron shift uncomfortably. "If a man is down, move on to the next one. If he tries to get up or moves, shoot him again. Take your time and reload. And stay in your position no matter what happens."

As plans went it was probably the best they could do with so few. But something nagged at Ray. "Istas, won't they have posted watchers?"

"You mean sentries?" Ray flushed, glad the dark hid his embarrassment. He nodded, then remembered it was too dark to see and said yes.

"Fraser and I didn't see any when were scouting ourselves."

Ray still felt uneasy but decided to not press the issue.

He heard Larry shift and speak. "I think we should post one of us closer to the camp. Possibly with a clearer view of the fire. It'll backlight their movements and we can maybe hear what they're saying."

Istas seemed to like the idea. "Brian, go up the path thirty yards, you'll find a small turn-off. Use it to approach the camp from the north. There's a large group of boulders that should give you cover."

Brian moved abruptly as if to protest. Ray put out a hand and bumped into him. He squeezed his arm warningly. "Istas, maybe we should send someone with more woods skills. It'll be awfully close."

He could almost see Istas's dismissive

hand wave. "Brian will do just fine. We should be in position in about ten minutes."

The team hung back and then Ron muttered, "Christ, Istas, it's not like we're all interchangeable. Brian knows a hell of a lot about boilers and electricity but you don't see Fraser assigning Larry to build a hydroelectric plant. No offense, Larry," he said.

"None taken, Ron," Larry's disembodied voice replied calmly. It was disconcerting speaking to one another without being able to see body language or facial expressions.

"I really don't see what the fuss is all about. Let's get into our positions and remember to keep your voices down." Fraser had picked Istas, so the team hesitated only a moment longer and then obeyed.

Larry and Ray traveled a short way together. Ray tried to match Larry's movements and found it helped to reduce the noise. He knew that Ron had been right; Brian was the wrong man for the job. And Istas really couldn't see it. It wasn't as if Istas didn't care—it was just that he never could relate to people as individuals. Only Fraser was a real person to him.

Tapping Larry's shoulder, he got him to slow down. Pressing close to Larry's ear he mouthed, "Do you think you can get closer?"

Larry nodded. Taking a deep breath, Ray picked up his hand. Startled, Larry almost jerked it away but Ray held firm. He traced two points, then tapped his and Larry's chests. These were their positions. He then circled one of the positions to the far left. It would move Larry away from his assigned position, put him closer to the campfire, and provide covering fire for Brian if needed. It would also mean Ray would have to cover more area on his own.

Larry considered, and then nodded again. Ray dropped his hand and they traveled a few more yards before they separated.

Hunching beneath a spruce tree, Ray positioned himself so he could use it for cover. The campsite was just in his range. He settled down for a long wait, unpacking his ammunition and moving it to his coat pockets where he could reach it more easily. He had barely taken off his safety when he heard shouts from the campfire.

Squinting, he tried to make out what was happening, but the figures were too dim. He hoped Larry had been able to get closer to see

what was going on. Then he saw a man fall to the ground like a dead weight. Seconds later a shot rang out, another man fell, and he grabbed his shotgun and began firing into the camp. Flashes of gunfire came from the other side of the camp as Iostas and Ron joined in.

It wasn't quite a massacre, but it came awfully close to the real thing. Ray remembered standing at one point, dropping his shotgun and advancing on a survivor who had fled into the woods. His revolver bucked harshly in his hand, the muzzle flash illuminating the man's twisted face as he tried to run back to the camp. Nothing that happened after that made sense. Or rather, it made perfect sense, but only within itself. They were all in a bubble of space where killing and dying happened and disappeared. He saw terrible things, had a constant nagging feeling he was doing some of them. He had to stop once to wipe blood off his face. He didn't know where it had come from; that disturbed him more than the blood itself.

Iostas's men emerged carefully, calling out their names, afraid they'd be mistakenly shot. They gathered together by the embers of the campfire.

Ron panted and looked like he was hyperventilating. Larry looked drained. Iostas's braid had come loose again and his hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat. Ray looked down at his hands and saw he was still clutching the revolver. He slid on the safety and returned it to his shoulder holster. He couldn't remember where he had lost the shotgun.

"How did we do?" Ron asked, between gasps of breath. Larry was kneeling next to one of the bodies, gently rolling it to face the sky. It was Brian, his wide eyes gaping at the night air in hurt surprise. A long-handled knife was still sticking in his chest. Puzzled, Ray stepped over a body and knelt next to Larry.

Whether the man was shaking with rage or shock, Ray couldn't tell. His fists were clenched and his rifle cradled on his knees. Soothingly Ray put his arm around Larry's shoulders. "I saw it." Larry choked on the words. "God fucking damn, why didn't I do anything quicker? I could've saved him."

"What do you mean?" Iostas asked flatly. Ray shook his head, not understanding. He had been too far away and there'd been too much confusion.

"I could have saved him!" Larry shouted, wiping his arm across his face. With a shock Ray saw it was covered in blood too. "I saw them drag him into the camp. They asked him a few questions and then—that one—" He pointed to a red-haired man lying next to Brian. "—pulled a knife and stuck him. With no warning, they just killed him."

Ray finally understood and jerked Larry around to face him. "Larry. Larry!" he repeated sharply. "It was a good bet they'd question him, maybe tie him up. Killing him made no sense. There was no way you could've known."

"I didn't see any of this happen." Iostas moved closer, peering down at the knife and the red-haired attacker. He did not seem to notice Brian's wide open gaze or the blood still trickling from his mouth.

"I did. I was over there," Larry mumbled softly, pointing vaguely behind him. "I got as close as I could, like you said, Ray. I think Brian must have stumbled or something, 'cause I heard a loud crash just before they dragged him back in."

Iostas looked irritated, but whether it was because Larry had changed position or because Brian had been killed wasn't clear. He started counting bodies. Ray stared before realizing it was really a practical idea; they needed to see whether anyone had escaped and they would have to look for survivors. Ray hoped there would be none, and that if any had escaped they would run as far as they could and never come back.

He closed Brian's eyes and pulled off his jacket, covering the obscenely open face. Larry had stopped shaking but it was Ron he was still worried about. "What am I going to do? What are we going to do?" he kept moaning. "I don't know anything about boilers. Or electricity. Or hydro—hydro—" He broke down crying.

Iostas ignored him and kept counting bodies. "Thirteen. That leaves four unaccounted for. We should start looking for them." Ron and Larry looked up at him in shock. Quickly, Ray intervened.

"Iostas, we should send two of us back to Fraser and report what's happened. They must have heard our gunfire and maybe they've had to engage as well. I'll stay and help you look."

Iostas nodded and began stripping the

bodies of weapons. Ron and Larry looked at Istas uncertainly and Ray waved them on. "Go slowly and make certain Larry leads. Don't want you two shot by mistake." They left quickly, leaving him alone with Istas, fourteen dead men, and a deep desire to slink off into the woods, lie down, and howl into the night sky.

They found one survivor, gut-shot, lying along the path back to the highway. He was still trying to crawl, the earth dark and wet behind him. Ray did the best he could to stop the bleeding but knew it was hopeless. The man rambled, kept slipping in and out of consciousness. He had been picked up by Dennis, wandering alone. They had tried to go south past Whitehorse. Something bad had happened and they came back north, picking up stragglers along the way.

What they wanted in the village he couldn't say. Dennis would only laugh, say he had a "killer of a plan" and that each man would get his share. Looking at the emaciated body, hollow cheeks, and sunken eyes, Ray figured they'd've done anything Dennis had asked for a mouthful of food. When the man finally died, Ray wiped his hands on spruce needles and returned to looking.

They found no one else alive and no sign of the three missing men. A few hours later, as the light changed from black to gray, they headed back to Fraser's position. They were intercepted by Makah, who informed them it was all over and they should head back to the center. Fraser had had to open fire when Dennis and his men responded to the sounds of gunfire. Most of Dennis's men were dead, as well as Dennis himself, Makah added with a satisfied note to his voice. The rest had vanished into the wild. One had left his weapon behind. "He won't get far," Istas commented dryly.

Ray felt both relieved and disturbed by the conversation. Makah stared at him as he passed and he knew he still had blood on his face. He desperately wanted to stop and wash it off, but he was worried about Fraser, and followed the two men back. He didn't ask the names of those who had died and Istas did not mention Brian.

The center was full again, the mood somber and shaky. Ray swept the room and saw Fraser talking quietly to Larry and Ron. His

legs trembled as the full impact of the evening threatened to pull him to his knees. He sat down heavily in a chair and did not even look up when someone thrust a cup of hot liquid into his hand. "Thanks," he breathed into the mug and closed his eyes.

He knew it was Fraser's hand resting on his shoulder but did not move. It trembled and then steadied, holding Ray very gently, as if he were grasping something very elusive, intangible, that was beginning to shape itself under his hands. Ray breathed in one deep comforting breath, keeping his eyes closed, reveling in his touch. Fingers smoothed the nape of his neck as Fraser's second hand settled on his shoulder, completing the circuit. Ray felt a tingle between his shoulder blades travel up the base of his head and flush across his face. It was warmth, slowly returning to his body, flowing from Fraser's hands. He heard boots creaking across the worn floorboards and finally opened his eyes. Istas nodded at Fraser and put his rifle on the table in front of Ray. "Fourteen, plus Brian," was all he said. Behind him he could feel Fraser straighten slightly, then a slight squeeze on his shoulder telling him to relax. "Thanks, Istas. I know you did your best."

Istas nodded again, then picked up his rifle and left the center. Larry and Ron watched him go, unhappily silent. Looking straight ahead, Ray spoke: "They tell you what happened?"

"Yes." For a moment there was a sound of barely expressed anger in Fraser's voice.

"He did do the best he could," Ray said, feeling a sudden need to defend Istas.

"I know he did," Fraser said softly, kneading Ray's shoulders. "I am glad you're safe, Ray." Fraser's voice shifted into an odd tonelessness and he abruptly pulled his hands away. Ray rose out of the chair, needing to see Fraser's face, but Fraser was walking away, his head bowed, his dark hair sticking up sad and restless. He had lost his hat, Ray realized, sometime in the night. Watching Fraser go, he knew he would never allow anyone to disappoint Fraser again.

They found new ways to miss Brian every day. Ron did his best with the boiler and Ray and Nodin abandoned the ethanol project to pitch in. Ray learned more than he had ever wanted to about steam power. It all seemed so



effortless back in Chicago. There you flicked the switch and the light magically appeared. Steam was something that curled from underneath sidewalks and into the winter streets. Here he learned that fifty years ago, small steam engines had been part of everyday life. That the theory and practice of reciprocating steam engines were no longer taught to engineering students, and few mechanics could repair them. That it would take them years to master the principles of steam power, from basic thermodynamics through to the mechanical details of pistons, cylinders, and valves, without someone like Brian. They had only one spring.

He began interposing himself between Fraser and the rest of the community. Handling little things, like the daily schedule of who worked where and the periodic gripes and complaints. To his surprise, most people didn't push back too hard as long as he kept it to the little things.

"Elu, hold up." He sprinted across the yard. She and Larry were carrying several baskets full of seedlings to the town center. Ray had left the boiler team a few hours ago to get an update on the septic project from Susan and was on his way back.

"Hi, Ray." Larry put down the baskets and wiped his face. The early morning sun was high and he had been in the field at first light.

"They look good." Ray pointed to the seedlings. "But why aren't they in the ground?"

"Oh, that's my idea," Elu interjected. "We pulled a few samples to have Fraser look at them. We want to know if we should add more nitrogen."

"Or potassium. I think we should add more potassium." Larry's face was dripping with sweat and Ray's own face flushed in sympathy. "I think the yellow means it needs more potassium."

Ray sighed. This was the kind of thing they shouldn't be bothering Fraser with. But he had no idea what type of fertilizer each plant needed. Kneeling down, he bought himself some time.

"So this is, what—spinach, right?" Larry nodded at him with an amused expression crossing his face. Elu looked impatiently at the civic center.

He fingered the seedling, hoping he

projected the right air of competency, then brought one up to his face and held it against the light. "Hhmm," he said, and then picked up another one. Elu stopped staring at the center and began to look interested. He went through the same process with a few more and then wiped his hands on his jeans and stood up.

"Right. Did you take the plants from the same field or different ones?"

Elu looked startled and then said, "The same field."

"So why don't you treat one part with more nitrogen, one with more potassium. And one with a combination of both."

Elu wrinkled her nose at the idea at first. "Gee, Ray, that sounds like a lot of work."

"I know." He kept his voice calm. "But there's a lot of reasons plants can yellow." He remembered his sister talking about her houseplants and how they kept dying no matter what she tried. He also had been listening to the two of them for months discussing plant yields and illnesses. "So the only way to know for sure is to try to isolate the problem before you can apply the solution."

"Could work." Larry tapped Elu on her arm. "But let's keep the test areas small. We should see results in about a week and try fine-tuning from there."

Elu knelt down and picked up her basket, handing Larry his, and they started off together, chatting about proportions and fertilizer mixes.

The sky was warming considerably and Ray stepped into the cool building with relief. The bright light fell across the room, leaving white streaks on the worn floorboards.

Fraser had stripped down to his t-shirt and was standing next to the blackboard. Ron had covered it with scribbles and diagrams that Ray was slowly learning to understand. The boiler would be ready for testing tomorrow. Wood would burn, water would boil into steam, steam would be channeled through valves into a chamber to drive a piston. As the piston moved it would generate electricity that would power the water pumps.

As Ray approached, he noted that chalk dust had settled in Fraser's hair, graying it in places. He rubbed his balding head somewhat self-consciously. At least when Fraser grew old he'd still have hair.

"...maybe one day we can use our septic waste to fuel the boiler." Ron was still harping on the idea. He had read a month before that you could burn almost any material in a generator. The Saskatchewan generators had burned medical waste and even garbage. Fraser had decided to keep it simple and they went with wood instead.

"Hi, Fraser, Ron. Ron, you done here?" Ron had grown a lot in the last few months. With the weight of the boiler project resting solely on his shoulders, he had a lot to be responsible for. Fraser was really proud of him.

"Sure, Ray, just going over the last set of plans."

Ray laughed and grabbed Fraser by the elbow. "Ron, I still think you're sleeping with those plans. It just ain't natural." Fraser smiled and allowed himself to be pulled away.

"So, I spoke to Susan and she's almost done repairing the septic lines. I told her to run one more check of the water lines so we'll be ready to start the water pump as soon as it's ready."

"Thanks, Ray." Fraser neatly stacked a pile of papers into a folder and put them into a battered drawer. His eyes no longer had bags beneath them and he had regained some of the muscle he'd lost over the winter. He looked more rested and alert. The thought comforted Ray.

"So I thought I'd station myself with Susan tomorrow and keep an eye on the well pump when you light the boiler?"

Fraser shook his head, the light from the window crisscrossing the back of his head. "I'd rather have you there at the boiler. You worked as hard as any of us. Maybe harder." He looked squarely at Ray, and Ray flushed a little. Trust Fraser to notice all the little things he'd been handling. And not make a big deal out of it.

"Sure. But let's keep it to just the four of us?" They didn't want a repeat of the radio broadcast. Keeping expectations in check was key to the community's survival.

"That's why I thought we should do it very early. Before it's fully light. It'll either be up or not by the time most people wake."

"Okay, stay the night, then?" The words slipped out before he could think. "I mean, assuming it's okay with Ilene. We can leave together and round up the others."

"I doubt Ron will need to be rounded up. He'll probably be awake all night, planning." They both turned to look at Ron, who was once again scribbling on the blackboard. His shirttail had come loose and he stared, swaying at the board in deep thought.

"Right," Ray said and shook his head. "If that board was a woman, this would be positively indecent."

"Stranger things have been known to happen in the Yukon," Fraser deadpanned. His eyes crinkled only a little.

"That's it." Ray grinned back. "I am outta here. I want to put some time in the field before it gets too hot. See you at Ilene's for dinner." As he left Fraser rubbed him softly on the shoulder. The feel of his touch stayed with Ray as he sweated in the fields, weeding and hoeing.

That night they ate well. Ilene had combined some of the fresh baby greens with rabbit and the food smelled and tasted heavenly. She had a softer look now that the hollows in her face had filled. She chatted through most of the evening, discussing the clothing she was sewing and how her herbs were doing. Jason was filled with excitement about the boiler and kept asking questions about how steam worked.

The evening was warm, and for once the mosquitoes were off sucking blood somewhere else. Feeling restless, Ray invited Fraser to go for a walk. Surprisingly, Fraser accepted.

As they stepped outside, Fraser said, "Wait one moment," and headed back into the cabin. He came out carrying an old blanket Ilene had given to Fraser for Dief to lie on.

"What do you want with that? Dief isn't coming, is he?" Ray asked, looking around for the wolf.

"No, he's staying with Jason. This is for something else." His eyes were lit with anticipation, and Ray tried to suppress his curiosity. He disliked surprises, even good ones. Still, he followed Fraser.

They walked deep into the woods along one of the trapping trails, then Fraser split off from it, following a smaller path. Ray slowed. The night was dark but clear and there was no moon. He didn't see the clearing at first, so intent was he on watching his footing.

He blinked and then clambered up on the

smooth flat boulder next to Fraser. It was huge, almost oval, sticking up from the earth like a stepping stone. The blanket had been spread, cushioning the hard surface. Standing, he looked around the clearing but saw nothing.

"Okay, I don't get it. What's so special about here?"

Solemnly Fraser pointed up and Ray craned his neck to look. The clearing was a perfect circle, the tall trees molding the stars into a bowl of light. He'd seen the northern sky many times, but tonight the velvet blue sky hung so low, laden with golden stars, that it almost merged with the trees.

"Come," Fraser said, sitting and patting the blanket next to him. "You can see more comfortably if you are lying on your back."

The stone was cool but not unpleasant through the rough blanket. He could smell the spruces, the woods beyond, and a faint trace of smoke.

Overhead, the sky turned slowly, inching moment by moment. A thick band crossed the center of the sky and Ray recognized it immediately as the Milky Way. Blue stars, small fiery red ones, and thousands and thousands of warm yellow stars flickered and danced. Some stars overlapped each other, turning space into balls of color and flame. He tried to find a place for himself among them and felt lost, adrift. For a moment he felt so small and insignificant, trembling on the edge of mortality.

Fraser's voice pulled him free of his dark thoughts.

"Each culture has its own story about stars. Each is trying to find space for them in our lives."

Ray shifted, uncomfortably aware of how close Fraser had come to his own line of thinking.

"I never really thought much about stars. City lights drown them out. But these—" Ray waved one hand. "—these kind of grab you and won't let you go."

"There's a lot of things out here you can't ignore," Fraser pointed out. "This happens to be one of the nicer ones. But even so, many Indian legends recognize that while the stars are part of us, we are the ones who are always reaching out for them."

"What do you mean?" Ray felt his eyes grow sleepy. He had had a hard day and

tomorrow would be long.

"Long ago, in an earlier sacred time," Fraser began quietly. Ray opened his eyes and listened. "In a settlement near the great river, many families worked together gathering forest and garden foods during late summer. Eight boys became very close friends and went off together each evening after their work was done to dance and drum. They had grown up together and were almost like brothers in their passion for sharing time with one another."

Fraser's voice intensified, taking on an almost singsong cadence. It stirred something deep inside Ray and he found he was holding his breath to listen.

"Winter set in and most evenings the boys continued to meet together. Rations were slim and no food could be spared beyond one meal a day. They decided to hold a sacred ceremony to ask the gods for more food. They gathered and drummed and sang and danced. But the rations grew fewer and fewer each day."

Ray winced, the memories of their own cold winter still too fresh in his mind. But Fraser's voice pulled him back into the story, sweeping him along.

"One cold, clear winter night they decided they would dance through the dark and into the morning. They stole away and danced and sang with growing strength, although they grew increasingly slim and light. The sound of their music grew so powerful it reached the village, and the people became alarmed. Their parents and others from the village made their way to the distant campfire on the hill where the music was throbbing. They were amazed to see the boys dancing skyward, high above the flames of their campfire, circling and climbing even higher into the Sky World."

Ray forgot he was sitting on a rock, forgot he was listening to Fraser's voice. The image spun in front of him. He could see the light trailing after each boy as they swirled up to the heavens.

"The parents called out to them, but the boys could not hear them. Just as they were reaching the top of the sky, the smallest boy paused to look back and saw his parents, and he became a shooting star. The remaining seven boys danced even higher into the sky, where they continue to dance today, circling the Sky World. And from time to time, they

come to visit their parents, dropping like a spear of light to earth."

Abruptly Fraser's voice ended, leaving Ray staring at a starlit sky. The boulder had grown colder during the telling and it dug painfully into his back. The only warmth came from Fraser's body, lying motionless at his side.

His chest was tight and the pressure forced him to speak. He said the first thing that came to mind: "You must have missed your parents growing up." Breathlessly he waited for Fraser to change the subject or get up and leave.

Fraser's breathing stilled and he moved slightly, edging closer to Ray. "I missed my mom. My father was rarely there. But I had my grandparents." His voice was faint but clear. His hip rested pleasantly against Ray, a welcome warmth on the cooling stone.

The tightness in Ray's chest increased, until it felt as though the stone he was lying on were pressing into his chest. It coerced words from him. "Did you ever want to—find some place where you could belong? Find someone to belong to?"

"Surprisingly, I never felt alone when I was younger. It wasn't until I came to Chicago that I realized that the feelings I had were those of loneliness." The stilted phrasing disoriented Ray, and his confusion allowed him to push past the vise inside his chest.

"I've always 'belonged,'" Ray said slowly. "But never where I wanted to, to what felt right for me. Family, famiglia, neighborhood, the police, I made myself fit in or they made me, but it was never right. It always cramped me somehow, even though I needed it, to belong somewhere. Here, that's all gone. It's wide enough, but..." He waved his arm, watching it sweep across the stars like a dark band, and fumbled for words.

"You're not an outsider, Ray." Fraser's voice had grown even softer, the words dropping from his lips like small pebbles. "You do belong."

Ray's body began to shiver. *But who do I belong to?* he thought. *To you?* His chest hammered at the thought. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do with the wave of sensation flooding through him. He felt that if he made one small movement he would break loose and fly into the sky.

Silence. Only the movement of the air, the rustle of the woods, and their breathing. The moment stretched, grew thin, and then snapped, leaving Ray confused and trembling. His head cleared and his chest stopped hurting. Blinking, he looked up again and saw only stars.

"Well," he said into the night, clearing his throat. "Which one do you think is Franny?" He pointed at a thick globular cluster hanging right above a tree. "The one that's brightest and loudest, I'd guess."

"Yes, that looks like Franny. And look, she's not alone. She's surrounded by others." Fraser's arm rose and he pointed at a blue and red star twinkling by its side. Ray squinted, trying to follow the arm to the star. Fraser rolled toward Ray, his face brushing close until his arm was aligned with Ray's line of sight. Heart hammering, Ray nodded. "That one is my mother. And, next to her, my father." Fraser pointed at another star and Ray could almost see the starlight travel down Fraser's arm and leap across the space to him. "And there—" Fraser pointed further to the left, at two white stars hanging thick and low. "There—those are my grandparents." Fraser's reach brought him almost to the point where he was half resting on his side, pressed close to Ray. His weight was a comfortable certainty, pushing Ray down against the rock. It was like being held, surrounded.

A shooting star flashed across the sky, brushing overhead. "And that is someone taking the long way home," Fraser whispered in his ear, and Ray shut his eyes. Then Fraser moved away, slipping off of him like water flowing around, over, and under stone. Ray blinked drowsily and felt himself start to slide into the night haze. He barely remembered the walk back to Ilene's cabin and climbing alone into the bed. All he could see was the stars, and all he could feel was the heat of Fraser as he slept on the floor beside him.

Fraser's internal clock dragged him out well before the first spring light. The days were getting longer; by summer there'd be almost no night left. Stumbling after Fraser in the dark, Ray decided more light was just fine by him.

Ron looked like he hadn't slept, but he was alert and focused. Nodin kept rubbing sleep from his eyes and muttered when spoken to.

They worked quietly; the wood had been loaded the night before. Fraser started the fire burning, Ron double-checked the valve positions, and then the boiler door was swung shut. A small gauge—they had salvaged it from a smelting company in Keno—slowly inched higher. From time to time, Ron would open or close the valve. The pressure began to climb and then halted. They waited for it to unstick and continue its rise, but it began an agonizingly slow descent.

"Shit!" Ron swore and pulled open the boiler door. The fire was blazing hot. "It's not the heat source. There must be a leak somewhere. I'll check the valves on the back."

Fraser nodded. "I'll check the connections to the piston." Ray and Nodin stayed to keep loading wood on the fire. The morning was dark, damp, and cold. Ray's eyes began to droop as the minutes ticked by. He kept glancing at the gauge; it had stopped falling but still wasn't rising.

A scream shattered the morning and terror raked a claw across Ray's heart before he could find a word for what he feared. He shouted, "Fraser!" and ran without thought toward the cry. A higher-pitched second scream wailed and as he turned the corner he realized that Fraser was still screaming.

A large swath of smoke and steam boiled out near the piston generator. He kept moving and felt something scald him, forcing him back. He tripped and fell over Ron, who was moaning. He rolled and looked for the source of the steam—the piston connector had exploded and Fraser must have been caught in the scalding water. He jumped up and ran the other way, colliding with Nodin. "Stay back!" he shouted, shoving Nodin in front of him. His feet couldn't seem to get enough traction and each step seemed slower than the last. He reached for the release valve on the other side of the boiler and whacked it open. It stuck and he threw himself at it again. It turned and the pressure suddenly dropped.

The way back seemed shorter and by the time he made it back the steam was dissipating. Ron was sitting up, looking shocked. His face was lightly red but he was breathing.

He tapped Nodin, who reappeared by his side. "Look after Ron!" he yelled and stepped into the fading remnants of wet heat that

wafted across his path. It clung to him, sticky and moist, robbed of its deadly heat and pressure. Fraser was lying face down, his arms stretched over his head. His hands were bright red and had begun to mottle. His thin long-sleeve shirt couldn't have given him much protection.

Numbly, he knelt next to Fraser and reached out to touch his shoulder. The moans almost made him sick. He swallowed and rolled Fraser onto his side. "Airway. Breathing. Circulation," he repeated to himself. Fraser's body was heavy, limp, and heat radiated from his skin. He smelled something singed and realized that Fraser's hair was gone from one side of his head.

Then he saw something blond and small lying beneath Fraser. It was Jason, his face dry and pale. Small swellings had begun to appear and his mouth was open. He was breathing, harsh gasps racking his small frame. Ray had never seen anything like this. Fraser tried to move and this time his voice had more of an animal sound. One eye opened and flashed wildly.

"Stay put, Fraser. You've been burned." Swallowing, he reached out to check his pulse, grimly ignoring the guttural moans. The pulse was thin and thready. Fraser's breathing was steady.

Jason was another matter. When he looked back he could see Jason's skin had changed color. The swellings had begun to turn red, grow larger, marking his face.

He jerked around and yelled at Nodin to get Kardach. This was beyond anything he knew how to treat. He distantly heard the sound of running feet and Ron's retching. He focused on keeping Jason breathing and trying to ignore the sight of Fraser's fingers clutching convulsively at the empty air. And the constant sound of Fraser's moans.

They moved Fraser to Steph's, since it was closest. He stayed with Fraser all the way, talking to him until his throat threatened to close. No one told him to shut up. Jason they took somewhere else. The boy had not made any sound. Thankfully, Fraser had passed out by the time he reached Steph's.

Jim began pouring cold water over Fraser's hands and head. The shirt was stuck to his back and he simply left it on. He talked calmly as he

worked. "He's lucky. Second degree in places but mainly first degree. If it had been third degree, he wouldn't be feeling any pain; his nerve endings would be burned away."

"So that's good, then? That it hurts?" Ray dimly heard someone say.

Jim nodded as he placed sterile gauze over the exposed skin. "We'll need to give him plenty of fluids—steam burns are the worst because of the heat transfer." He looked up, his eyes grim, searching the room. Naomi stood in the doorway. Jim hesitated and then looked over at Ray. "There will be an infection. He'll need antibiotics." He shut his medical bag and stood up abruptly. "I'll be back."

Ray sat, his head bowed. He couldn't feel anything; did that mean he had been burned too? He looked at his hands and touched his face. It felt fine. He felt a hand on his shoulder and Naomi led him into the kitchen. He was handed a glass and told to drink. He did. It was whiskey.

The room was silent and it took a while to realize people were watching him. He thought he might be crying and sat up straight. His face was dry. They kept looking at him, their faces solemn and sad.

"Ray," Naomi began. Her gray hair was loose and hung down her back. She looked almost beautiful in her nightdress, her brown coat, and her bare feet. He waited for her to continue.

"We have to make a decision." He blinked uncomprehendingly. Fraser was lying there dying and they wanted him to decide on work schedules. A dark fury threatened to choke him and he swallowed more of the whiskey.

Naomi glanced away and then sighed. "It's Jason," she finally said. He stared at her, still waiting for her to make sense. "His burns are much more severe."

*Which is why he didn't scream. He had no pain,* Ray thought thinly.

"And Jim thinks his airways have been compromised." Naomi's voice ached with sadness. He shook his head disbelievingly.

"How could—" he began. "How could he? Fraser pulled him out and his burns are less severe."

Ron's voice came from the back of the room. He had been lightly burned and was splashing his hands and face with water.

"Jason had been in the steam longer. Fraser only had to dash in and pull him out. Fraser's speed probably saved him from greater injury," Ron offered.

Ray nodded and leaned back in his chair.

"Ray, I know it is hard to think about this now. But we have to make a decision." Naomi persisted and he raised his head to look at her. Her face, lined and wrinkled, was like stone. He made a small movement with his head and she continued.

"We don't have many antibiotics left. And what we have we have to ration carefully."

This time the fury did rise and he slammed the whiskey glass on the table. Ron jumped and backed away. Naomi held his gaze.

"Jim said there'd be an infection..." she began.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," Ray said tightly.

"We'll cross it now," Naomi replied. "He'll need to start treatment right away. And if Jason won't have a chance to survive, we need to think about whether to..." She hesitated and sighed deeply. "We have a few hours. Why don't you go and see Jason?"

He stood, wanting nothing more than to leave these strangers behind. He hesitated, feeling unaccountably afraid for Fraser. "I'll keep an eye on him," he heard Steph say. Their eyes met and he nodded.

He pushed his way into the morning light, blinked, and found himself standing at Ilene's door. She was sobbing at the kitchen table. Her tears eased at the sight of him; at the trust in her eyes, Ray felt a pang of guilt. He walked past her without a word and into his room. Jason lay quietly, his face covered in huge, angry red blisters. Parts of his shoulders were white and his breathing was stiff and labored. Dief sat whining at his feet.

"You should be with Fraser," he said harshly to the wolf, then regretted his words as the wolf lowered his ears and crouched down in submission. "No, stay."

He walked out and paused in front of Ilene. She looked up, her face numb and blank. "He must've sneaked out when you left," she whispered hoarsely. "He wanted to see you fire up the new boiler."

"I'll send someone over to help. Don't worry." He patted her awkwardly, not know-

ing what else to say.

At that moment Elu opened the door and nodded at him. "I'll take it from here," Elu said simply. "Naomi is waiting for you."

Ray felt trapped. He looked down at Ilene, his heart going out to her and Jason. But something else was pulling at him, low and deep in the ribs back along the path to Steph's cabin.

Only Naomi was in the kitchen when he returned. The rest had cleared out and Nodin had been posted at the front door to keep the crowd to a minimum. He nodded soberly to Ray and allowed him to pass. Ray walked straight into the bedroom and saw Jim hooking up an IV. "It's one of our last," the medic said without looking up. "I'll have to resort to oral hydration after this."

Ray sat down and fiddled with a book on the nightstand. *Basics of Water Pumps*. It was well thumbed.

"So what's this about the antibiotics?" he finally asked reluctantly.

Jim's face pinched and he looked unhappy. "I have enough to treat them both if necessary."

"So what's the fucking problem?" Ray glowered, his eyes darkening.

Jim shook his head miserably. "Jason's burns are severe. Even if I give him antibiotics, he may not recover. His airways have been burned."

"But he will die without the antibiotics."

"Yes." Jim flipped the flow regulator and the IV began to drip.

"But you'd treat him if this were a hospital?" Ray asked as the IV flowed more steadily.

"Christ, of course, Ray. What do you think I am?" Jim said miserably.

"The point is—" Naomi's voice came clearly from the other room. "—we don't have a hospital and our supplies are limited."

Ray stood, feeling his stomach lurch. "Last time I checked, Naomi, you weren't a medical doctor. So back off."

She fell silent. Ray turned back to Jim. "What's the shelf life on these antibiotics?" Jim hesitated and then looked up in relief that Ray finally understood the dilemma. "The shelf life—probably another two years."

*And that's two years of accidents and injuries and illnesses,* Ray thought. They'd need every strong and able-bodied adult to work the

fields, hunt, and do heavy labor.

He pushed the thought away hastily. He really shouldn't be making this decision. He was too close to both of them. Disgusted with himself, he glanced at Fraser, who was breathing softly, still unconscious.

Walking back into the kitchen he saw Naomi following his movement across the room as he poured a glass of water and drank it. Outside he could hear more voices. He felt like a man surrounded by a pack of dogs, hopeful and demanding at the same time.

"Where's Iostas?" he asked, surprised to see him absent. "I thought he was part of your council." The words came out sarcastically but he didn't care.

"This is something for you to decide, Ray," Naomi said bluntly. He leaned over the kitchen sink and stared blindly into the morning light. He could see people milling around, could hear the hushed tones of fear and anger. *It really shouldn't be such a surprise,* he thought. *First you answer their questions about work schedules, and then building plans. It's just a small step to people's lives.*

But deep inside, he could feel the cold hard knot of a decision forming. Unwillingly, he turned away from the window and stared at Naomi and Jim. Naomi did not flinch. Jim stood in the doorway, his hands empty and open and helpless. They had come to him because he was the only one who could make the decision. Because he was the one Fraser had chosen. And he had chosen Fraser and would stand in Fraser's place. And make the same kind of decision that Fraser would make. They had both chosen to live and to survive long ago. It had only taken this long for him to realize it.

His mouth quirked painfully. "Give Fraser the antibiotics," he said, putting the glass gently back into the sink. Jim stepped quickly back into the room. Ray did not stay to watch the rest; he dismissed Naomi and the crowd outside. He had something more important to attend to.

Inside Ilene's cabin the day wore slowly. He heard people coming and going, offering sympathy, help, and useless words of condolence. Ilene thanked them and talked about how Jason would be touched when he got better. Ray sat quietly in the rocking chair at the

foot of the bed. He accepted the food and drink handed to him, eating mechanically without appetite. Halfway through he put the plate on the floor for Diefenbaker, but the wolf only whined and refused to eat.

The night air passed coolly across his skin as he waited. Hour after hour he listened to Jason's breathing grow harsher and more labored. Ilene fell asleep on the couch and he left the room long enough to cover her with a blanket. The moonlight fell dimly into the room, tipping her hair silver-white. He turned abruptly and walked back into the room and sat down. He would miss her easy laughter.

Jason was making soft choking sounds. He was still unconscious. As the night wore on, faint stars traveled across the window. And still he waited for something to happen. It was early morning when it did. He heard Jason

wheeze loudly and then his body shuddered twice. Listening to the boy die, Ray felt overwhelmed. He had made the decision Fraser would have made. He had made the decision he had needed to make. And as he saw the light fall onto Jason's cold, still face, he knew the decision he had made would not haunt him. Because it had not been made for himself or for Fraser, but for the survival of the community. And because of that his love for Fraser would survive.

He got up and woke Ilene and held her for as long as she cried. Then he went outside and watched the stars fade one by one into the new dawn.



---

# Epilogue – Travelers

*"We are all travellers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend."*

—Robert Louis Stevenson

---

The snow fell thickly, wetly blanketing the two men. They crouched motionless, the only trace of their passing two sets of footprints in an endless expanse of white. Fraser signaled to his left, and Ray rose and cut across the small indentation that was a stream in the spring. Now it was a small dimple in the landscape, hardly recognizable. Keeping low, Ray circled for almost half a mile and then crouched again, waiting. He could see the caribou herd—only ten or fifteen; they must have split off from the larger herd that had passed by earlier that week. He waited a few more minutes, then stood and walked slowly toward the herd, waving his arms. The nearest caribou looked startled and then leapt away—toward Fraser and his rifle. Caribou could easily outrun them both and could detect their approach well before they were in gunshot range. Driving them toward the shooter was often the only way to bring one down.

Ray quickly followed, sliding after the running herd. His face was safely wrapped in one of Ilene's scarves, but the cold air made breathing difficult. He slowed to a trudge, walking now in the hoof prints the herd had left behind. As he crested the hill, he heard a deep rumbling sound and cocked his head to listen. The first caribou almost ran him down and he threw himself out of the way of the thundering hooves. As the herd retraced their steps, Ray watched stunned as the smallest and youngest calf flashed by with two wolves in tow. Reaching the flat meadow, the herd veered and picked up speed, leaving the wolves behind. They came to a panting halt and the smaller, gray one looked accusingly over its shoulder at him. "Hey," he muttered back. "It's not my fault you didn't signal." The larger one bristled at his words, only to take flight again at the sound of Fraser's approaching boots.

Fraser looked more amused than irritated.

His face was bare, although even he wore a wool cap in this type of weather. He had covered his rifle in the blanket to keep it from locking up in the winter air. He moved with economy, sidestepping down the hill and across the small stream without any sign of effort.

"Well, looks like we weren't the only ones who were hungry today."

"That's the third pair, isn't it? Not the same ones from last week?" Ray pulled his jacket tighter against the cold. Fraser reached out and adjusted a scarf that had slipped from Ray's neck.

"Yes, different ones. A mating pair, I'd say. Very young, though, if they didn't bother to check for competitors before committing themselves."

Ray nodded, feeling the air invade his lungs. Out here you couldn't waste any energy. Looking at Fraser's broad shoulders, Ray again recognized how lucky they were to have his strength and skill. And that his recovery had been almost complete.

"Let's head back." The sun, weak to start with, seemed ready to give up its final gasp of light to the arctic dark. "I doubt the herd will be back this way again."

"Could you blame them? Hardly a moment of peace, between us and the wolves." Fraser moved ahead, breaking the path. They'd spend hours like that—walking through the woods, checking traps, hunting, and talking. Ray stepped neatly in Fraser's tracks, marveling at how much better a woodsman he'd become over this last winter. It felt good to be doing his fair share of the hunting. It didn't matter how many times Fraser pointed out they had different skills; he still needed to spend this time alone with Fraser. Watching his partner crest another hill, each movement like a dancer's, gliding over the white spaces, he felt

he could never spend enough time with Fraser.

It was almost dark by the time they reached their cabin. Wood smoke hung heavily in the air and added another layer of darkness against the setting sun. They stood watching the light die between the trees in silence.

"How long are they?" Ray asked quietly.

"The days? No more than a few hours. It'll be totally dark soon."

Ray shivered. He hated the cold, endless nights. It felt as though the life had leached out of the world and only their dreams were left to wander the earth. He checked his words of complaint and bent his head, tacitly yielding Fraser the last word.

Fraser sighed and turned to enter the cabin. He started to bend down and unlace his shoes but Ray reached out and gripped his hand. Their fingers hung there, locked in a struggle, until Ray relaxed and let his fall. He knelt down and began gently untying Fraser's laces. Fraser's gloved fingers softly reached out to stroke his head. Shuddering, Ray felt a different kind of chill trace its way against his body. His mouth was bone-dry.

Then he was done and stood, kicking off his own boots. Fraser's eyes were ghostly and enormous. They pulled him along until he found himself, still shivering, in their cabin. The stove had been lit and someone had placed their dinner on the table. Ray didn't feel very hungry.

Fraser stood in the center of the room, watching Ray as he picked up the casserole lid, replaced it, removed his jacket, and fiddled with the stove. It was like being stalked. The feeling was not unpleasant. Ray circled the room and then stopped, not knowing where else to turn.

Looking at Fraser, with his windburned face and lean frame, he realized it wasn't so much that he didn't know where else to go. It was more that he had nowhere else that he wanted to go.

He waited for Fraser to make the first move. But Fraser's face was calm, smooth, and measuring. "Benny," Ray finally asked, "remember when you were hurt, I used to say there were some decisions that could wait until you were better?"

Fraser's expression took on wariness. "I remember. You also said you had finally decided to let me be right."

Ray smiled nervously. "Well, yeah, that hasn't changed. But I think I already made a decision."

Fraser's wariness was gone, replaced by something more vulnerable. "And you're afraid I won't like it?"

"I don't know," Ray breathed, almost to himself, and stepped close to Fraser. He put his hands against Fraser's shoulders and angled his head and kissed the corner of Fraser's jaw, drawing his cheek across Fraser's face, then stood back. Fraser had gone motionless. "But I finally figured out what I want to do." And Ray kissed him on the mouth this time, firm and certain. "What do you want?" he asked, licking up Fraser's chin to his lips. He kissed him again, softer and slower, before standing back and looking him in the eye.

Fraser's eyes had gone very dark, scarcely a ring of blue left. He carefully put a hand on the back of Ray's neck and pulled him forward, off balance against his chest. His mouth met Ray's and sucked the breath from him, Ray open-mouthed at Fraser's sudden assertion.

They pushed against each other and then Fraser shoved him back, releasing him. Panting, Ray stifled his impulse to grab Fraser to force the intimacy deeper. His body strained with the effort of waiting for Fraser's next signal. The firelight drew contour lines on Fraser's face. He could see the fine texture of the skin on the side that had been burned. He might have been reluctant, but Ray heard him breathe and saw his eyes close and then open. Fraser faced him, unsmiling, and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Ray slid his own shirt off. Fraser walked up to him, then past him, and then around him, circling and touching his shoulders, the back of his neck, his face. "I can manage the rest," Fraser's voice breathed softly in his ear. And he did, his hands steady and careful at Ray's waist. Ray's own hands trembled over the buttons of Fraser's pants.

Ray sat on the edge of the bed, feeling naked and awkward. Fraser stood over him, using his fingers to trace fine stripes down his back and then up again around his skull. The light was dim, flickering, painting highlights on the muscles of Fraser's chest and abdomen and down to the tight-curved hair growing over his groin. He smelled like sweat and musk. *You are mine*, his gaze reminded Ray. *You have given*

*everything to me.* Ray felt the blood pound behind his eyes.

Fraser knelt on the bed, pushing Ray back into the soft quilt. "Lie down on your stomach," he said. Ray raised his eyebrows, but obeyed.

He flexed against Fraser, enjoying the rub of skin against skin, shoulders against Fraser's chest, hips and butt against his thighs. He tried to sink deeper into the mattress, and then arched back again against the blanketing weight. Fraser tongued the back of his neck and then around his throat, wet swabs that dried under Fraser's breath to a tormenting itch all along his skin. Fraser dragged his softly stubbled jaw along the sensitized skin and Ray rolled under him, as if to dislodge him, but Fraser leaned more heavily into Ray's back and nipped at the junction of his neck and shoulder. Ray sagged and moaned at the delicate pain, turning his head to expose more of his neck to that mouth.

With every mock twist and arch of protested pleasure, Ray felt Fraser hard and eager against him. Fraser shifted down his back and began licking his left shoulder blade. Ray lay gasping for breath, letting his body refocus on nerves other than those in his neck and ass. Fraser relaxed heavily onto him, and Ray could feel the thudding of his heart as the twin of his own.

"What are you doing? I can hardly feel anything there. It just tickles a bit."

"It's the scars." Fraser raised his head enough to speak. "Damaged nerve endings." He resumed the slow, long licking.

Ray stilled at the note in Fraser's voice, somehow yearning and triumphant both. He let himself feel the soft wet tongue, the brush and kiss of lips at the end of every stroke, and shivered. Fraser could see what he couldn't, the white weals and puckers of the exit wounds, and he shivered again.

"Don't, Benny. Don't do that."

"Ssssh," Fraser said. "It's what I need." Ray closed his eyes and let the touches wash over him. He wanted to make it last. He would only have one chance to make love to Fraser like this. But Fraser was clouding his mind, channeling his heat and desires until the only things that mattered were Fraser's needs and Fraser's desires.

He whimpered into the pillow, and then Fraser nudged him lightly at his waist with one hand, and he rolled over. Fraser knelt over him

and kissed his mouth and eyelids, his ears, down his throat. He fastened both hands on Ray's hips, slid them across his shoulders and to his arms. Then he slid down Ray's chest and to his groin. Ray shuddered, feeling fingers gripping and holding him. He reached out one hand to touch Fraser's face, and felt it pushed gently back onto the bed. Then the hands returned to their touching and slipped lower, probing him, and he shut his eyes.

His breathing grew harsh and fast, and when the fingers were pulled away he opened his eyes again. Fraser was looking at him, dark and hungry and fierce. He nodded silently and Fraser rolled off the bed. Fraser's own cock was hard and rigid against his belly. His long leg muscles flexed as he crossed the room, knelt, and returned with a bowl of water and soap. He splashed the water across Ray's groin and then dipped the soap into the bowl. They spent a few moments lathering each other and then Fraser reached down again and probed. Ray arched again, this time not trying to hide his fear. Fraser stared at him gravely and then rolled his free hand across Ray's groin. The discomfort was masked by a surge of pleasure and he grabbed Fraser's hand and pressed down harder. Something like a smile crossed Fraser's face and he knelt between Ray's legs and lifted him and entered him.

The pain overwhelmed Ray and he knew he cried out several times. He pushed against Fraser's chest and felt Fraser slow to a trembling halt. Sweat beaded across Fraser's face and his eyes closed at the effort and then snapped open. He began moving, pushing deeper while rubbing Ray's cock, slowly, steadily, until the world shrank around them, until it was a tight-fitting skin that barely held the two of them. Ray's thoughts were blurred and broken and he moved by instinct, through the pain and moments of pleasure like a brewing storm. The room darkened, the light faded until he was alone with Fraser, pinned beneath him by bonds of obedience and love. And over Fraser's shoulder he saw a star fall. It was he, tracing his long way home.

As they slid into sleep, they could almost catch the whisper of their names on the wind. Outside the wolves hunted through the dark arctic night.