

# CUT OFF!

*WHEN ILLUSIONS SURVIVE*



**C. DESCRY**





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*Every time when creatures out of Africa moved to survive and thus explored the surface of Earth, those with luck and skills passed their genes on. Those who found the trails too steep, the pathways too narrow, their interactions too volatile, and nothing to eat but each other, became evolutionary dead ends. To imagine we can sit on a pinnacle bolstered by support systems we have no control over, and survive without the ability to provide for our basic needs, indicates we are so far out on a tangent from the reality of human experience that we are near our end.*

Dr. Carl Denoyer

*We lay for weeks in torpid, dormant states and became one naked, seething organism waiting for light to be a mirage on the horizon. The nights and days melded together. Infrequently, when the sky cleared and starlight lit our icy world, we went out into the bitter cold and listened to the wind howling wolf.*

Jane Mary Tundra

**ILLUSION** ... Something, such as a fantastic plan or desire, that causes an erroneous belief or perception.

***A unique study of human dynamics and the seeds of hope and destruction built in to every person, group and culture.***



Books by C. Descry

Spirit Series:

- The Spirit of the Sycamore
- The Spirits in the Ruins
- The Spirit of the Estuary
- Raven's Chance
- Cut Off! When Illusions Survive

Education series:

- Crow Canyon: Pioneering Education and Archaeology on the Southwestern Frontier. (Dr. Edward F. Berger)
- Unscrewed: The Education of Annie
- I Went To School To Him. (for release in 2009)

Spy series:

- The Daughters of Onoto
- The Brothers Shikoku
- The Fallout Solution

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This is a work of fiction based on the archaeological record and historical fact. It is an examination of human survival over a million years of human migration and travail. The names and descriptions of humans and events are fictitious and solely the creation of the author. References to specific persons living and dead are intentional. References to public and private agencies and to orders and assemblies of people for government, religious or other means are fictitious. Geographical setting have been mingled to enhance this work of fiction.

Descry, Conun ( Edward F. Berger) 1939 -

### **Cut Off! When Illusions Survive**

1. Alaskan archaeological and anthropological commentary
2. Alaska adventure / suspense / commentary
3. History
4. Action / adventure / reality
5. Social pathology



## Chapter ONE

*Face and hands leathered from exposure. Hunched shoulders from a life spent looking at the ground. A round wooden trowel handle protrudes from his hip pocket. He's an archaeologist.*

Onion Portage. Kobuk River, Alaska:

Debra concentrated on the pineal body near the center of her brain. She let loving, beautiful thoughts flow through her. The clenching apprehension, lacings pulled tight from her groin to her throat, eased. She stood straighter letting her eyes play across the gently rolling tundra to the sinuous oxbows of the Kobuk. Breathing deeply, she took in the sweet oxygen and tannic acid smell of Arctic vegetation.

Andy Passco, for all his five foot eight, two-hundred pounds, was a small dark shade standing downriver in his usual fishing place. "Far enough away," she whispered, "I can bathe now." She heated water on the camp stove and stripped off in layers. Through her bare feet the permafrost, lying hundreds of feet thick beneath the land, sucked her heat into dead cold. When the water was warm, she carried the pan to the river's edge and balanced it on the float plane's pontoon. She soaped and rinsed. Then she splashed her face and body with biting cold river water. Focusing, she assured herself Andy was too far away to see her naked ... or care about what she was doing.

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Almost endless days made dealing with Andy out of the question. From first light at 3:30 a.m. to dark at 1:00 a.m. he left the camp to fish, returning every few hours for food and naps - too often to use her - always abusive, angry, demanding.

She lost her peace and concentration. Tears welled up against her will. "Alaska!" she shivered, "I'm paying for my stupidity. This is my self-imposed sentence to be with this creep who is everything I despise in a man. What am I doing up here? I can't stand the tundra. I can't live in Fairbanks any longer either ... so flat, rough ... and so cold. I can't connect with this raw State. I need to get back home and find sanity. They will have forgotten how I was ... why I left."

The river gurgled and formed eddies as it fought to undermine the beached pontoons and carry the plane west to Kotzebue Sound and the Chukchi Sea. A cold zephyr tightened her skin. She shivered, dried off, and balancing on the water-rounded gravel, struggled into her last clean pair of panties. The direct sunlight was warm, but she needed her silk underwear and sweater. There was no time to wash them and get them dry. She sniffed, puckered her face, and pulled them on. Dressed, she turned and observed Passco as he made his way along the river to the place where he could cut across the gravel bar toward camp. She put willows on the coals and blew the fire to life. "If I feed the bastard, stuff him, maybe he'll sleep. I can get through two more nights if I'm careful."

"Hey Forte. Get the hell up! Debra Forte. Damn it, get out here! Where's my pepper bear spray? Where'd you hide my knife? You wash my sox like I told you? At least you could pull your own damned weight. It's light enough. Get your fat ass out here!"

Debra gasped. Her gut tightened. “Andy, we’re out of coffee. I don’t have corn meal to bread your fish. We’re almost out of bottled gas ... and when we were looking for places to camp, before we found Onion Portage, we used a lot of AV gas. It’s a long way back to Fairbanks. Shouldn’t we leave?”

*Got to re-direct him. I’ve got to con him until we’re out of the wilderness and I’m safe with other people. Then he can go to hell where he belongs. Andy Passco may be a great bush pilot, but he’s cruel and vindictive. I sensed how dangerous he is and still I agreed to fly out here to the Arctic Circle and camp with him in this remote place. Stupid move, Debra. You are your worst enemy.*

“That shit makes no never mind to me,” Passco screwed his face into a sneer of contempt. “What the hell, I can get AV-gas at any one of the river villages between here and Kotzebue. I know my way around out here. I get what I need when I need it. I ain’t goin’ back yet. I said we’d be out a week. I meant it. We leave when I’m damn good and ready. After Kotzebue, we’ll hop down to Nome, top-off the tanks, and easily make Fairbanks.”

*You stupid Bitch. Don’t pretend you know about my plane. I’d like to bust your damned smug face. You owe me ... like all the rest. I should leave you here ... have a little more fun and then let the bears play with what’s left of you.*

“We stay. I got more fishin’ to do.”

*First he slept in. Now he’s rushing around and telling me it’s my fault. He’ll probably fish till twilight. Then he’ll come back reeking of sweat, insect repellent, and fish. I’ll feed him. Then, goddamnit, he better crash in the tent and not make any demands on me. If I can survive one more night I’ll be free of this jerk.*

Debra was relieved when their last night on the Kobuk passed without incident. The next morning the sky overhead

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was unusually clear. She began packing leftover food, water, clothes, tent, and gear.

“Hey Forte, what the hell did you do to my radio? I need a weather report and all I get is static. But you better believe I know exactly what to do,” he bragged as he shut off the plane’s ignition. “There’s a boat stored over in the shed. Belongs to the university. They keep it here for the summer crews, but what the hell, I need its radio more than those worthless archaeologists do.”

Passco found the boat and ripped the radio out mounting bracket and wires. Hooked into the plane’s electrical system and antenna it received nothing but static and popping sounds.

“Maybe it’s sunspots. Both radios can’t be out. Wait, here’s something, very faint. Debra, get your dumb ass up here and hold this damned antenna connection! Listen! This guy is a total loser. He didn’t even follow protocol.”

The speaker rattled a faint voice. “Hey, I thought I heard ... can you hear me? Hey, can anyone hear me? Jerry? Damn!”

Andy Passco smiled. “We’re too far out. I wonder who he is?” He clicked the mike three times then held the button down to send.

“I can hear you. Who are you? Identify.”

The speaker cackled background static. Passco squelched it. No one responded.

“Well, at least we know the radios work. I’ll keep this boat radio just in case. Shit, whoever it was shut off.”

“What the hell...? See that over there? There’s a storm coming in ... looks bad. We can stay over in Kotzebue, but I don’t want to be out here. You see that shit moving in? We got to get out. I knew we shoulda left yesterday. It’s your damn

fault for talking me into staying. Hurry it up. We need to get my Beaver in the air.”

Passco took off up river, the floats cutting wakes in the gray water. He made a gentle turn back toward the west, fiddling with the radio as he gained altitude.

“Damned thing is old as the plane. One of these days I’m going to replace it with one of them new digital ones. Here, don’t just sit there like an ass, keep trying.”

“We’re clearing a thousand feet. Look at that, black night in the south. Jeez, the lightning it’s like lace woven in tar; fills the sky. Overhead and north the sky is deep blue. I don’t get it.”

“Andy, there aren’t any contrails.”

“Air’s probably warm or something. Seems like we would see some. What the hell do you know about contrails anyway?”

The speaker rattled.

“Hey, anybody hear me? This is Carl Denoyer. My radio may not be working. Jerry, can you hear me? Jerry, you were supposed to pick me up. Hey, this is Doctor Denoyer. Archaeologist. Old Portage site. Where the hell are you? Can anybody hear me? I need out!”

Passco pushed her hand away and adjusted the squelch. “Hello Doc. I hear you. This is Bush 99704AK. Where are you?”

“I hear you. Thank God, I thought my radio was broken. I’m at the Old Portage. Wikasel River.”

“You say you’re having trouble with your radio?” He gave Debra a raised eyebrow look.

“All I get is static. Now I hear you clearly. It’s either broken or there is one hell of a sunspot affecting my signal.”

“What you need, Doc?”



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"I'm here alone. I see a hell of a storm coming. I need to get to Kotzebue as soon as possible. Can you contact Bering Air?"

"Our radio's out too. Can't raise nobody. Want a lift? You'll have to pay."

"Who are you? Hell yes, I need a lift if you can."

"Name's Andy Passco. I'm out of Fairbanks, been fishin' on the Kobuk. Heading to Kotzebue. You alone?"

"Alone," the signal was stronger, "...have some very important things to get out. I can leave my other gear if you want."

Passco unfolded the map and studied it.

"Hey Doc, we're north and east of you. I can cut over and pick you up. How's the water there?"

"Good. Floatplanes in and out all summer."

"Give me fifteen minutes. Got to be quick, I'm low on fuel and that storm's coming fast. The lighter you travel, the better. Can you pay?"

"Whatever's fair. Glad for the lift."

"Over and out."

He banked the plane to the southwest.

"Yippee! I just found a sucker to pay my gas, but you're not off the hook for it so don't get your shorts in a knot. You owe me big."

*So this is the Wikasel River ... the water reflects the cloudless sky ... the area looks like archaeologists took their cues from prairie dogs - or a bunch of foxhole diggers. The sandbar is a junk yard. Only one man, as he said. Tall, over six feet - very lean. Moves smoothly like the gymnasts in college.*

"Okay, I'll cut the engine and drift in. If he can't grab the plane be ready to jump out like you done before."

*“Wow, interesting guy - a maze of character wrinkles, no smile. Mid-fifties. Seems assured, serious - but a natural presence. His hands are large and powerful, almost too large to fit through his windbreaker sleeves. Now Passco will have to leave me alone.”*

Denoyer grabbed a strut, jumped onto the pontoon, and swung a heavy olive-green duffel bag up to Debra.

Passco didn't offer to help. “Put his damned duffel behind the back seat. So? It's not that heavy. Quit your straining and grunting. Stop the act. Get your ass forward Debra. Get in Denoyer!”

*Face and hands leathered from exposure. Hunched shoulders from a life spent looking at the ground. A round wooden trowel handle protrudes from his hip pocket. He's an archaeologist.*

“You have a trowel in your pocket, it could puncture the seat.”

“Oh, I'm so used to it. I won't need it now.”

“Shit, man,” Passco said, “is that duffel bag full of rocks? What about all that stuff on the beach? You planning to take it?”

“Just this. The other stays.”

*His grin warms his features - now concentration regained control. He's focused ... distinguished looking even though he hasn't shaved for days. Washes his hair in the river ... tousled. Dull and mousey-brown like mine.*

*He doesn't fit back there. He's cramped ... we all are. He studies everything. His eyes spark reflections. He doesn't miss a thing.*

“Well, you said you would travel light. You bringing rocks instead of gear?” Passco mocked.

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“Sent most of my stuff with the crews two weeks ago, leaving lots here. These artifacts are really important.” *They can't guess how important.* His chest tightened, breathing became difficult. He fought panic. *I've got to get out. I've got to get back and report my finds. I'm only days away from changing the face of new world archaeology forever. No bush pilot would leave me stranded in the Arctic wilderness. Something happened to Jerry. Something is wrong. It's only late morning, yet to the southwest the entire sky is black.*

“That electrical storm's moving toward us at unbelievable speed! The jet stream must be shifting north.” He leaned forward, touching Debra's seat back. The noise of the powerful radial engine made it difficult to be heard.

“I kept searching the western sky. I tried the radio again and again. Static, I got nothing but static. And, did you notice? There are no contrails. The last time that happened was back on 9/11 when they grounded air traffic. Something is terribly wrong. My pilot wouldn't have abandoned me.”

“Wrong? Hell yes something is wrong! Got a damned headwind now,” Passco complained as winds buffeted the plane. “Damn, I never saw a storm close so fast. Must be riding the jet stream, but it's been way south. Wish I could get a weather report, but nothing, zip, nada.”

“We're plowing into a head wind. No radio. No planes. A black monster storm is moving toward us. It's like the end of the world,” Debra shouted as she turned, trying to gauge Denoyer's reaction.

“Hey, that's not so far-fetched. I've played with the idea that a cataclysm could destroy civilization and force survivors into another stone age. When I dig up villages of the Ancients, I learn how they survived. It's the way we would have to survive up here if we lost contact with the outside world.”

“We have to scream to be heard. Please lean forward when you talk.” *There is no way we will beat this storm.*

“Hey Doc,” Passco yelled. “What’s the next town? Where can we get fuel? You know this region?”

“We’re following the Wikasel. There’s a village, Whitefish. Not too far, maybe ten miles. It’s the only town.”

“They got AV-gas?”

“I think so, we go there for supplies.”

“The fuel gauges read empty, and less than a quarter, see? It’s the thickness of the needle from E.”

“Look, the glint of metal buildings. We made it!” Passco’s voice was barely heard over the roar.

“We caught up with the storm, too,” Denoyer felt his body tighten with fear.

“Nasty! Nasty. Black as... Holy shit! Look at that lightning! I’ve never seen lightning like it. It’s like veins, like a...”

As Passco doglegged and lined-up over the river on his final they were in the cloud. Grit blasted the windscreen opaque making it impossible to see ahead. The engine labored. Passco gave it fuel, but it seemed starved for air and quit.

“Are we out of fuel?” Debra panicked as the plane dropped. *The engine quit, yet the noise is deafening. It’s the raindrops - they’re filled with grit - hitting the Plexiglas and aluminum. Black grit is running in rivulets across the wings.*

Andy’s breath released as a terrifying grunt when the Beaver hit the water. The force threw them all forward, held only by their belts. She was leaning to the side and watching the pontoon bury itself in the waves. It went deep and the plane nosed over. The prop and engine dug into the water. She heard herself screaming as the belt dug into her waist and shoulder. Denoyer let out a loud gasp as he hit the back of her seat. The Beaver seemed to stand on its prop and hesitate. Without thinking they threw their weight back against their seats. The little plane spun and settled back with a force that seemed impossible on water.

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“We’re okay,” Debra exclaimed as her pontoon resurfaced. Flashes of lightning coursed around them. Then all she could see was swirling black.

“Everyone okay?” Passco asked. “I put her down right, you can’t blame me for this.”

Debra turned and caught Denoyer’s nod. “We’re okay. Hurts where the belt caught me.”

In moments the force of the storm reversed their course and they were drifting backward, driven by violent gusts. The plane’s tail struck the bank. The fuselage swung around in an arc. Debra’s side window was blasted opaque. The floatplane turned on its tail. They felt it give before the wind then bash into something. The sudden collision threw them hard to the left. Passco cried out in terror, his hands frozen on the wheel.

“We hit the dock. We’re jammed against it. My plane! My beautiful Beaver ... de Havilland doesn’t make these any more.”

## Chapter TWO

*Doc, if the satellites are way the hell up there - 22,000 miles above the equator, I think - and Kotzebue was clear ... well, you know. Doesn't that mean something else happened? Otherwise, you would have been receiving something other than the screen message: Acquiring Signal. Please Wait.*

The storm raged around them. They couldn't see out. The stench of sulfur seeped in. Fearing poison gasses, they were afraid to open the door. Thunder shook rivets loose and lightning flashed continually, filling the cabin with blue light, revealing nothing outside. The wind rattled as it pressed the floatplane against the wooden dock, the aluminum squealing against wood. Black grit ran in rivulets from tiny cracks where the door and window seals leaked.

"We've got to seal the cracks," Passco ordered.

Denoyer thought a moment. "No, we can't. We have to have oxygen."

Passco sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose, and twisted around in his seat. "You think this shit coming in is oxygen? It's sulfur gas. What makes you think we can breathe it?"

"We don't have a choice. If we use up the oxygen in here, we're through."

"So you're saying we're dead either way? I'm not planning to stay in here. I'm out as soon as this storm breaks. We seal up now, open it if we start having trouble breathing."

"I agree, Passco. But just in case, we better let some air in."

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“Can we switch seats, Denoyer? If I could get into the back seat I could have some privacy.”

“I can’t get this lanky frame of mine over the seatback. Let’s rig a blanket so you can have a little privacy ... and hide when we need some.”

To pass the time they explained themselves, assuring each other their lives were important in the greater scheme of things. The blacked-out day passed, with the dashboard chronometer their only measure of night and day. They napped to the cacophony of metal screeching against wood and blasted particles driven into aluminum. Hours passed. They were cold, cramped and miserable, but alive.

“It will end soon,” Denoyer assured them, but nothing changed.

*The storm will stop raging. Knees hurt. I’m getting stiff - we all are. Passco can barely move in his limited space. Debra has the most room, but... The air stinks, and not just of sulfur. If we cut our rations we will have enough food for a few days, but we won’t have enough water.* “We can’t survive in here. First opportunity we have to get out and get into the school. It’s the only building that’s modern.”

“Yes but ... we can’t survive in the plane, and we can’t leave its protection.” Debra complained.

“Okay, this is the third morning. I see weak light. That must mean the storm is breaking. Where are we? Tell me again. And what the fuck will we find here? If it weren’t for rescuing you, we’d have been safe.” Passco verbally probed and jabbed at Denoyer.

*So, the bastard is tired. His rage is festering. Three days of being out of control of everything and everyone have made him even more dangerous.*

“Denoyer, I want to go over this again.”

“Not again,” Debra groaned and gave Passco a bored look.

“Was it a volcano? That’s the best bet, isn’t it? A volcano caused all this black shit, don’t you think? Or maybe it was atomic war? Maybe a tidal wave came in from the Chukchi Sea? The volcano theory makes the most sense, that’s what you said, but we won’t know until the storm passes and we get out of the plane.”

“Yeah, a volcano is my bet, and for the fifth time, here is what I remember about the village and school.” *You consummate ass!*

“I think we can count on help here. I know the principal, Doctor Lightman, and the people who keep things operating will help us. They have maintenance shops here.”

“He damned well better! My plane may be ruined. I don’t have enough insurance. I have to be back. Whatever happened, I’m tired of it.”

“You’ll like Jan Lightman. He’s big, like a giant. He’s brighter than most, always deals straight, a good leader.” Denoyer kept eye contact with Debra as he spoke. “He’ll know what’s happened and help you get this plane back in the sky.”

“I can repair fuselage damage. Hell, I can fix anything. Tell me again how many times you been here,” Andy Passco demanded.

“Don’t remember for sure. Dozens I guess. I’ve been coming to these parts for almost thirty years. He’s been here at least seven, as I’ve said.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine it. Why would a guy like that stick himself out here? This big shot thinks God put him in charge. He’s an authority prick, right? A religious nut? Saving souls? I’ve had my fill of them.”

“No. You’ll have to ask him. He’s a man you can’t help but respect. If his motives are based on getting brownie points from God, he never lets on. You know Andy, you might like



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him more than you think. He can hold his own with any man or woman I've ever worked with."

"It's mid-day. The sky is lighter. Get that door open Debra!" Passco slammed his fist against the instrument panel. Debra recoiled, nerves too raw not to react.

"The latch seems rusted."

The hinges squealed as Debra put her weight against the vinyl upholstery. The lock gave and she almost tumbled into the river. Even under the wing, gray ash dusted her body. Sulfur-stinking air filled the cabin.

"We can't go," Debra pleaded.

"We're going, now!" He pushed her the rest of the way out as he moved across her seat to the doorway.

She barely caught the edge of the step with her right foot, awkwardly jumped toward the shore, landed short, and splashed to her knees in the ash-blackened, freezing water.

"Three days is enough. We can't stay here. We're going. Come on Doc follow me out. Lead the way to this school you're so damned fired-up about."

"Denoyer, you've got to see this fucking ash!"

The black grit formed a new earth. Storm-shaped ash was a foot deep in places. Gray ash fell from the sky, icing on a cinder cake, burning their eyes. Denoyer couldn't see the boardwalk that led from the dock up to the village. Thunder reverberated like kettledrums. The sky was lit with nets of lightning ... like fluorescent lights with berserk transformers.

Each step crunched through at least two inches of volcanic grit. It was difficult to breathe through the handkerchiefs they tied over their noses. The cloth barely kept the falling ash out of their mouths and lungs. Nothing stopped the grit scratching their eyes. It was the middle of the day, but visibility was less than fifty feet in any direction. Daylight was filtered twilight - an ugly darkness lay thick on the land.

“Okay, we’ve got to follow the boardwalk; make our way into the village.”

The ash muffled the sounds of cinders crunching beneath their boots. Just ahead, low mounds appeared like wrinkles. Denoyer reached out and took Debra’s arm, holding her back.

“Passco, those mounds, I think they’re bodies. Stay here with Debra. I’ll check.”

“Five mounds. Adult size, child size, cinder and ash covered.”

*A face. A man’s face. An Eskimo face, blackened, probably died of suffocation or poison gas. Of course, volcanic eruptions fill the air with malignant gases.* “Pass by quickly! We gotta get inside. For all I know, there are pockets of poison gas out here.”

Eyes scratched and raw, bleeding tears, noses clogged, lungs laboring, bodies covered with fine gray ash, they stumbled along the boardwalk. Debra began wheezing. Denoyer put his arm around her helping her forward. He saw something dark in the ash occlusion to his right. The boardwalk turned ninety degrees and ... he forced his way forward. The walkway ended at a flight of steps. Up and beyond, he saw doors. He led past a centered flagpole, knowing the school.

“The entry has three pairs of doors. Look, the farthest door to the right, someone taped cardboard over broken glass.” Denoyer tried opening the center door. Passco tried the doors on the left. All locked. The door with the cardboard was locked, but Denoyer was able to push away a corner of the paper and reach in. Fumbling around inside, he found the panic bar and pushed it. The bar wouldn’t move. He felt around and touched the smooth wooden handle of what he imagined was a broom. It was stuck through the panic bar to keep it from disengaging the lock. He forced it up, to the side, then down and out of the way. The panic bar was free. The lock released.

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“Look, grit footprints on the red-orange carpet, no gray ash. These footprints were made before the gray ash fell. That had to be yesterday,” Denoyer whispered. “No one walked here lately. Maybe no one survived. Look, the emergency lights are on, but really dim. They’ve been on a long time. How long do their batteries last? It’s cold in here, like a walk-in freezer.”

Debra shivered. “Look, on the left is the office and cluttered workstations. They were abandoned in a hurry. Inside, the principal’s office. Eerie.”

“And over here,” Passco grabbed Denoyer’s arm, turning him away from the office, “two corridors that branch off the entry foyer, there’s tracks, but no signs of life ... anywhere.”

“At least there aren’t any bodies in here,” Debra whispered.

“That’s a good sign. They went some fucking place,” Passco replied. “We’ve got to be careful. We’ve got to assume that if some survived they won’t welcome us. From the look of that entry door, someone tried to break in.”

“You mean you’re worried about....” Denoyer heard a noise. “Hear that?”

“Yeah,” Passco replied. The three stood, listening. “Denoyer, I know that sound.”

“Well?”

“It’s the pressure whisper of a generator. You know, the ones Coleman produces that use LP canisters. We use them in our shops.”

Debra moved forward, listening.

“It’s coming from that way.” She pointed down the main corridor, into the cold blackness.

“Okay, brush off,” Denoyer ordered. “Here, let me help. Debra, get that ash off Andy. Are your eyes okay? Okay, let’s move that way. If you smell fumes - have trouble breathing - stop and get back out. The poison may be odorless. Be careful!” *She’s really neat. What’s she doing with that asshole loser? The corridor is lined with student lockers as far as I can see in this*

*dim light. The battery system is failing. The lights are glowing eyes - pupils - red tungsten spots.*

“Look at those tracks and marks coming from ... off there to the right, the cafeteria and kitchen? Look in there, dolly wheel tracks. Someone’s been pulling stuff out of the kitchen and down this corridor.” Passco pointed as he shouldered Denoyer to the side, signaling he was in charge. “Debra, women have the best ears. You lead.” *Hell yes. Women go first, just in case...* he smiled at his private joke.

“Debra, you go around me. I’ll stay close to you.”

“Thanks Denoyer. It looks like the hallway goes left and then right at the end of this main corridor. I’ll take the left ... wait! Stop!”

“Listen! Not a sound. The generator stopped.” Her whisper cut the silence. “The passageway feels eerie like a tomb. The eyes of the dimming emergency lights are like wolves’ eyes at the edge of a campfire.”

They stood, holding their breaths, letting the deathly quiet brush through their ears. Somewhere ahead a latch turned. A door opened. They heard babbling sounds like voices in a tiled bathroom, muffled coughing, then nothing. A faint outline of a doorway flashed and was gone. They dared not move. Minutes passed.

“There are people in there,” Debra whispered.

“Did they hear us, Denoyer?” Passco questioned.

“Maybe. Maybe someone just came out to get something. Let’s go ... easy.”

“Prepare to hit the floor if...”

“I don’t think they will, Andy. Hear anything else, Debra?”

“It may be the wind and thunder outside.”

“You hear something?”

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She was inching forward when a door far down the end of corridor opened, dim daylight flashed, and evil sulfur smelling wind gushed in before it closed with a loud “click”.

“Get down! Move over against the wall,” Denoyer whispered as he dropped to his hands and knees. “Don’t make a sound!”

The corridor echoed footfalls. Maybe two people coming toward them in the dark. Near where the first door opened, a rifle cocked. They knew the sounds as a shell slid into the breach. Someone caught a quick breath. The intruders stopped. The corridor was aching quiet. They monitored each other’s breathing; afraid their own was as loud.

Denoyer, eyes watering, sore, scratched from the ash, blinked tears away as he strained to see down the hallway.

“They’re moving toward us,” Debra whispered close to his ear.

“I can’t hear them.” He felt Passco lean forward.

Someone knocked on a door, knuckles on wood. A signal?

A woman’s voice, loud and harsh, cut through the silence.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

A man’s voice, weak, begging, whiny, echoed, “It’s me, Joe. We wuz drunk. Let us in.”

“You know me too. Gurtta. Gurtta Ambler. Don’t hurt me.”

“*Aaqqaa* (something smells). You sober? Where are the others?”

“Lost ... off somewheres. Weren’t with us long.”

“After what you tried to do, why should we trust you *Kinnaq?* (fool).”

“Cuz we would die. No way we can survive. We waz just drunk, you know that. Now we ain’t. Can’t live out there. Not in none of them houses neither.”

A latch clicked, the door opened. Dim light - flickering candlelight - outlined the jam. A shadowy form moved quickly into the hallway. From their position along the opposite wall, they caught a glimpse into the room. Bedding covered the floor. In the back, furthest from the door, people stood, backs to the wall - men, women, a few children.

“Stay quiet. Don’t move.” Denoyer hissed.

A man’s voice: “If we let you in, you’ve got to agree to do what you’re told. No problems. No drinking. You pull your weight.”

“I will.”

“So will I,” Gurtta answered.

“You armed? If so, put the guns on the floor. Knives too. Do it! I’ve got a rifle on you. I’m watching every move.”

Clinks as weapons hit the floor.

“Only knives. We dropped them.”

“Okay, now come forward real slow.”

“Listen, Jane Mary. We don’t want troubles. We ain’t like them others that tried to rob the school.”

Another shadow in the doorway, coming out as the others went in.

They heard the whir of the generator. Light streamed from the room, exposing them as they lay along the far side of the corridor.

“Who the hell are you?” the man’s voice again, not as curt as the woman’s.

“We landed on the river just as the storm hit. Been trapped in the plane until today. Had a little food, ran out of water.” Denoyer paused, something about the man’s voice was familiar.

“You should remember me. I’m Doctor Carl Denoyer. I work the archaeological site up the Wikasel. I’m with a pilot, Andy Passco and his lady, Debra Forte. We’re stranded. Need help.”

### C. Descry

“Denoyer? I recognize your voice. Why are you on the floor? Get the hell in here so we can shut the door and keep what little heat we have.”

Jan Lightman led them into the room, ignoring the silence their entry caused.

“This is the home economics area. You can see why I gathered everyone here. We think we can get the big generators back on line when this ash stops. Two weren’t running at the time, thank God. The one ran almost a day before it quit. It’s probably damaged beyond repair. The emergency lights lasted till today. Actually, we’re in pretty good shape, considering.” He paused, aware he needed to introduce them.

“Hey everybody! We have visitors.”

Everyone started talking at once. The energy level in the room surged. Lightman realized he said the wrong thing.

“No, not like that. They landed on the river just as the first storm hit. Sorry, if you thought they just arrived. They didn’t. They’ve been here three days.”

There were some moans and expletives. The room quieted again as Lightman raised his hand. He was obviously the leader.

“Some of you may know Doc Denoyer here. He’s the archaeologist that works up river. This is ... well, you introduce yourselves.”

Passco nodded and gave a brief of himself. Everyone understood bush pilots.

Debra looked around the room, smiled, “I’m a secretary in Fairbanks, you know, at the University?”

A young Eskimo woman, the one who had been outside the door with the rifle, questioned them.

“How come you aren’t dead *naluagmius* (white people)? Everybody caught out when the storm hit died, we think. You’re alive. Maybe there are more survivors, kids. Doctor

Lightman ... we should be out looking for them. We know there are adults out there, but what about our kids?"

"We stayed in the plane, that's all I know." Denoyer responded.

"Yeah, but air is air, and poison gas gets inside," someone shouted across the room.

Passco responded. "When we were in the plane, we smelled sulfur. We let some air in last night. I think the plane was sealed enough to keep the gases out, or maybe the gas wasn't everywhere."

"So there could be more survivors from the first days ... if they were in their houses or with their families in the fish camps *iqsi* (frightened)."

"You're probably right, Jane Mary." Lightman smiled down at her. "Is it safe to go look now?" He waited. Jane Mary shrugged her shoulders. He turned to Denoyer.

"What do you think, Carl? You just came through the stuff."

"There could be pockets of gas. How would we know before it was too late? When we came up from the river, we saw people down on the boardwalk - five - but visibility was so bad we saw little else. Wouldn't survivors try to come to the school?"

"A few did. Some of them, like those two who just came back, got drunk. They tried to break into the school. We didn't let them in if they were drinking. There are survivors out there, and they'll probably end up here. If they're still drinking ... well, they're dangerous. We're ready in case they do something stupid. We have to assume they need food and water." He paused.

"Jane Mary, as soon as we can we'll go looking for kids - any survivors. If we go out now, we may die. Then what chance would they have?"



### C. Descry

Denoyer looked around the room - actually, two connected home economics classrooms and a number of work areas off them. He did a quick count.

“Jan, this village has about six hundred people. Houses - about fifty of them - clustered together in a block and connected by boardwalks. I remember the government buildings, storage sheds, generator shed and ... the big water tanks.”

“One water tank. The other is for fuel oil,” Lightman corrected. “The whole village looks like an electrical circuit board from the air. The water and sewer lines are like wires connecting little square chips. Except for the school which is the biggest building and the newest. The village covers about five acres.”

Debra and Andy were listening and trying to imagine their surroundings. *Of course*, Lightman thought, *visibility has been fifty feet or less since they arrived.*

“I count only about thirty here, mostly adults. What gives?” Denoyer continued.

“School wasn’t in session when the first storm hit. Most of my staff and I were in Kotzebue for in-service training. I came back early - almost an hour before the storm - because communications went down and ... I came back to.... Well, anyway, the students were out at fish camps. Most of the village leaders are at a conference down in Anchorage ... as it happened, we were in the building when it hit. A few others managed to get here.”

“A lot of people were out at their fish camps,” Jane Mary added, “drying fish before freeze-up.”

Denoyer was getting the picture. “So Jan, did any elders get in here? We’ll need their experience.”

“Yes. Yes, two elders, both *aanas* - grandmothers.” Lightman continued, “Look, this thing will pass in a few days, then we’ll get out and know a lot more. For now, we need to get you three settled in. We have water, but go easy.” He paused, looking over to the row of stoves. “As you can smell, dinner

is cooking. It's slow. The little generator puts out 2,500 watts, only enough for two electric burners and the lights. We have, oh, maybe ten canisters of hydrogen. We'll be okay until we get the big diesel generators back on line. I'm hoping it hasn't been cold enough to freeze the pipes. If they froze, we'll have water problems. When do you think this ash will stop falling?"

"Doctor Lightman," Debra asked, "What do you think happened? Do you know, I mean?"

"Well, it's volcanic for certain. It's a major eruption, probably down near the Aleutian Range. Or maybe over on the Kamchatka Peninsula. There are forty or more active volcanoes southwest of Anchorage. More in other areas. My guess is, based on the time between when communications went down, to the time the big storm hit here, we got hit about six hours after the eruptions. The jet stream probably carried most of the ash to the southeast; it would this time of year. I think we're lucky the jet stream was south of us. If the problem is as big as it seems to be, and the magnitude of the storm suggests a series of eruptions ... well, the dust in the atmosphere could change the climate for a long time."

"And all the lightning? That's why the radio wouldn't work? Am I right?" Passco needed to confirm his conclusion.

Lightman nodded. "It could be. In Kotzebue, west of here on the Chukchi Sea, we lost satellite and radio at the same time. I was worried because the village leaders were also away. I came back here thinking I would catch hell from the Superintendent for leaving the meeting without a clear-cut emergency. The sky was clear. Everything looked normal. The Bering Air pilot dropped me and headed back."

"Out on the Kobuk, we got static, but I was able to hear Denoyer. That means that before the storm hit here, local signals weren't affected," Passco said as he got up and looked around, hoping to find someone with more information. "Doc, if the satellites are way the hell up there - 22,000

### *C. Descry*

miles above the equator, I think - and Kotzebue was clear ... well, you know. Doesn't that mean something else happened? Otherwise, you would have been receiving something other than the screen message: Acquiring Signal. Please Wait. Unless something wiped-out all the ground stations, everywhere?"

Lightman hunched his shoulders and shook his head. "God help us if it did."

Sometime after dark the electrical charges became more intense. Spider web lightning, sheet lightning, and brilliant strikes lit the sky, accompanied by competing cascades of thunder. Clouds of grit descended again from volcanic eruptions to the west. Instead of morning light breaking through the clouds, lightning flashes and booming concussions announced the new day. By noon, weak sunlight penetrated the density, the ground had another inch of black volcanic grit, and the outside temperature hovered just below freezing. Violent, searing-blue lightning strikes continued. No one dared go out. The survivors lay around the room passing the endless hours in quiet states of panic; desperately hoping the storms would pass and everything would return to normal.

Three days later, as patience edged toward desperation and mild hysteria, the mid-day sun peeped from the southern horizon. Sunrays formed long eyelashes of orange light that exposed a land covered with a foot of grit and ash. The zapping lightning strikes were less frequent, but the clouds, bound by angry electrical hairnets, never ceased rumbling.

They imagined the worst.

Five long days and September passed. Now, particulates sifted down like fine snow from the black clouds. The October sun barely rose before it set. Days were short. Each sunrise and sunset was spectacular, but the oppressive murkiness blocked the sun's orb from view. The sky glowed as if a great city lay

below the horizon. Networks of never ending lightning veined the clouds, lighting a land alien to all. The temperature stayed a few degrees below freezing. Gray vileness lay, death on Earth.

“I called this meeting to get us all up to speed,” Jan Lightman explained as he stood before the chalkboard. “It’s obvious this thing is not going to pass as we hoped. So far, what we have done has worked. We’ve survived and we’re doing okay ... oh, I know some of you think we should be doing more.”

He looked across the room at Andy, leaning against a preparation counter, the only other person standing. “That’s what this meeting is about. I’ve talked to each of you, taken input, put together this plan. It’s not set in concrete, so anyone who has a suggestion ... well, this is the time.”

Passco didn’t wait to hear what others thought. “Listen Doc, I’m not being critical however you choose to underestimate me. I have experience too, you know. We need to get my plane ready to fly so I can scout Kotzebue and.... Well, when it clears, I can get the lay of things. Right?”

Lightman nodded. “Right. But you’ve said the engine is ruined, the Plexiglas is completely scarred, and the plane was damaged when it hit the dock. But you also say you can fix it. Well, here’s what I want you to do.” He looked across the room at Andy, trying to catch his eye. Passco looked down, shifting his feet. He looked up, angry.

“Look Doc, it’s not up to you to tell me what to do. It’s my plane. I’m the only pilot here. I know what to do.”

“I believe you do. What I’m suggesting is that as soon as this clears a little more, you go down to the plane, assess the damages. If you can repair it, maybe we can get it up to the maintenance shed where you can work on it. Is that a problem?”

“Hell no! That’s exactly what I’ve been saying.” He paused and looked around the room. “Folks, I can get us out of here. Believe me. All we have to do is get the plane back in the air.”

### C. Descry

Denoyer nodded. Debra wasn't sure.

"Andy, we were out of fuel. What are you going to do about that?"

"Damn it Debra, you're always so negative. I'll find fuel. I can adjust the carbs to run on regular gas if necessary. Don't try to undermine me, okay!"

Debra wilted back away from him.

"He's such an ass," she whispered to Denoyer.

Lightman looked around the room. "Okay, if that's settled, let's get to other concerns." He scanned the group. Jane Mary raised her hand.

"Doctor Lightman, we know there are others out there, right? I mean, they broke into the storage room and ... well, we need them. Especially the men who know the river and can take a boat to Kotzebue when the break-up comes in the spring. We have to have them. We have to be planning now."

Passco stared at her and made a sound like he was clearing his throat.

"Get real! By spring I'll have already brought help."

"I hope so, pilot." Jane Mary kept her voice soft. "What I'm saying is that either way we have to contact the others. You don't know my people. They're survivors. They know the value of cooperation."

Susan Target, one of the older Eskimo women, struggled to her feet. "We have to be ready for a rescue, but not all of us plan to leave here. The people outside, they know we're here. What if they send a plane full of supplies? We've got to keep the landing strip clear. They bring stuff in and those who want can leave."

Lightman chalked her suggestion on the board.

Denoyer planned to let the others speak before he did. He knew from experience good suggestions would come from those who would not take leadership positions. His thoughts were dominated by his own desperation, not group solutions. *My proof is still in the plane, I have to get it. What if the plane*

*sinks? What if I can't prove what I found? My whole life will be meaningless.*

Lightman continued. "This is great. We're getting it together. As we make the list, we need someone for each task. Okay, Passco is in charge of all things related to the plane. Susan, when this clears will you get some help and see what it will take to clear the runway and taxi areas? I think you can use the drags behind ATVs. Tom Wind, you know the river. When you can get out safely, will you start getting boats and crews? Figure out what to take? Make sure the motors are winterized and ready." He stood up straighter, smiled a nervous smile, and looked at Denoyer.

"Denoyer, you're the man to prepare us for the worst case scenario. What will we do to survive if we can't contact the outside world? What resources can we use? Make an inventory of what we have. Determine how long the stuff here will last, and try to estimate the time until we will be dependant on this environment. After you do that, come up with a survival plan."

He paused, obviously finding the subject distasteful. He looked around the room, studying faces and reactions, then continued.

"I know no one wants to even think we're stranded here indefinitely, but Denoyer - everybody - we have to plan for every eventuality."

No one disagreed.

"Denoyer, you work with Jane Mary and the other families. Our long-term survival may depend on how much they remember, and how much you know about the ancient people and how they survived."

"Doctor Lightman, I'm on maintenance." Joe said. "I can go over to the power sheds and see why ... well, we know why, the generator quit. Maybe just the filter to keep the bugs out got clogged. Maybe I could rig a filter or something ... you

### C. Descry

know, I got to go over there, but I need help. Can't do it alone. When can I go?"

Lightman smiled. "Great idea, Joe. I think you're the man to determine when you can go outside. I'll work with you. Maybe we can get over there soon."

One of the cooks, still wearing her green and white school uniform, stood and raised her hand. Lightman nodded to her.

"Mister...I mean Doc. *Kaniqsivich*? (Do you understand?) They're out there dead. My family, I mean, and them others I know didn't make it. Well, Sir, and everybody, don't you see? We can't just leave them out there. We have to bury them before they bring the bears in. But..." She stood, hunched over, sobbing, unable to continue."

"You are absolutely right Sarah. Folks, we will need a burial detail, that's for sure. Thank God it's staying below freezing. Sarah, the bodies will be safe until we can get to them. I don't think the wolves or bears will be out in this either."

Everyone started talking at once, becoming louder as people raised their voices over the din. Lightman smiled and sat on a stool waiting. Then he led a group to the foyer to evaluate their chances if they left the building.

Denoyer brushed his worries about proving his archaeological finds aside, and with effort, focused on and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the group. *The Iñupiaq - Jane Mary - is strong and dependable. I understand why Jan picked her as his assistant. I have to find out if she knows the old ways of survival. She uses Iñupiaq words. Maybe she knows? I'm gaining respect for Debra Forte, and confirm her negative opinion of Andy Passco. Others, like Sarah the cook, and especially Susan Target, the aana, the grandmother who suggested clearing the landing strip, the fisherman Tom Wind, and Joe, the maintenance guy, can be counted on.*

He studied Kathryn, the beautiful teacher who sat by herself, removed - perhaps unable to connect with others. *Lightman said she had only been at the school a month. She wasn't willing to help. She will be a burden. Damn, I hope I don't have to deal with her. She's too delicate to survive here. If we aren't rescued, what will I do with her? I have to know the viability of each person trapped here, just in case. Gurtta is hard and seems bitter! She goes out of her way to make people uncomfortable. She's trouble. But, I can count on the teenagers. They pitch in and help. Especially Charlie and Nate. The girls - Madonna and Janet - help without being asked. Maybe we could survive if worse comes to worse. No, not a chance. Not here in the high arctic.*

That afternoon, Denoyer moved over to where Jane Mary staked-out her territory and sat on the floor next to her. *She couldn't be much over five feet. She's built like a fireplug with the beautiful open face of her people. It's obvious she's a leader with good qualities.* "I couldn't help but notice that you respect Doc Lightman a lot. He's put me in charge of things to do if we don't get help. I'll do my best, but I need you. Tell me about Lightman. Tell me about yourself."

She stared at him, not letting her curiosity betray her. She'd heard about this digger guy. Lots of Inupiaq people worked for him and liked him.

"Doctor Lightman was the first outsider to ask me about what I know. No one ever asked me before. When I told him I'd grown up in a fish camp, far from neighbors or services of any kind, he listened. That's what I liked about him, so I told him what growing up was like.

"I never heard of electricity, electric lights ... not until I was twelve, I guess. I learned the old ways from my mother, my father, and my brothers. We lived on the edge of the river. We saw few other people. Do you know what that kind of isolation is?"

He nodded, and urged her to go on.



### C. Descry

“Then our men disappeared. Mother brought me into Whitefish and left me with strangers from down below. They called me Jane Mary Tundra. I was *tupak* - terrified.

“From the missionaries and at school, I learned English. I was good at writing and words, but not arithmetic and science. Who needs those things? I like Doc, because he talks straight with me and doesn’t take anything in return. He is the most powerful man in the village. He’s concerned about me. He gave me a job helping the custodians. That means I can stay in the school when everybody else goes home. I get all I want to eat. The teachers respect me. It’s the perfect life, then this happened. Because I know the old ways, people turn to me for advice, like you. You must know that none of us think about leaving here. We’ll stay and we will survive. I think we need to help you people go back home. You don’t belong here. *Aachikaan!* (watch out).”

Denoyer’s thoughts answered. *If I can’t get back home I’m as good as dead. Lady, what you want is what I want.*

Sally and her helpers served dinner - pasta salad with fresh frozen peas and carrots. She told him the school freezers held enough staples to keep their small group fed for months.

“That is if the others don’t come in again. They ruin more than they take.”

“What’s the chance of that, Jan?” Denoyer turned to Lightman.

“Good chance. I think they’re out there somewhere, probably in one of the government buildings that has insulation and water. They took enough food for days. I worry they’ve taken over the generator shed. If so, we can’t get the power back on without dealing with them. It’s strange we haven’t heard from them ... only the two who came in when you arrived. I want to get outside and scout.”

“Weapons?”

“Hell yes. They’re armed ... have to be. No shortage of guns in this village. We have some here in the school, a few. I don’t want to think of using them.”

“We got in easily. What keeps them out?”

“Don’t know, except they probably think we’re standing guard.”

“Should we be?”

“Jane Mary, Tom, and Joe go around the halls every few hours. They haven’t seen any sign.”

“You said they were crazy drunk. That was eight days ago - no, ten. We came inside eight days ago. They can’t have stayed drunk. Why haven’t they come in peacefully?”

“I hope they will. We need them. What I fear is they are laying in wait. They’re used to living off the land. They don’t want to deal with me or any outsider. They tolerate me, but never trust me. We need to go out and find them... three or four of us. I can talk to them. First we do a quiet look around. Want to go, Denoyer?”

“I’ll go. I’ll need warm clothes. We need some way of protecting ourselves from poison gas and the ash.” *Maybe I can get my stuff out of the plane.*

“Funny thing, it’s not that cold out there. The clouds evidently hold the heat in. Okay, you’ll go if you’re game. I’ll talk to Tom and ... let me think about who goes with us, the fewer the better. This afternoon?”

“I want to go armed, Jan. I think we all should.”

“I agree. We take only cool heads. What we want out of this is a uniting of forces and resources.”

“Four of you going? I would have gone.” Jane Mary was obviously hurt that Lightman didn’t asked her to join them.

“I need you here. Tom and Joe know those guys. I think they’ll respond better to their buddies.”

“Okay, but tell me exactly where you plan to go. If I need to find you, where will I look?”

### *C. Descry*

“Good idea. First, we’ll scout toward the river and the generator sheds. Then I want to see if they’ve holed-up in one of the government buildings. Next, I want a look at the store. Then, on the way back I’ll look in a house or two.”

“How long?”

Tom thought a moment. “Give us plenty of time. We’ll be back before it’s too dark to see.”

“Jane Mary, have someone at the front and side door - just in case we need to get in fast. Okay?”

Andy Passco crossed the room pushing others aside and faced Lightman. “Why the hell are you leaving me out? I know guns. I know my way around. Why did you plan this without talking to me?”

“You were asleep. Besides, it is very dangerous out there and you’d have to go without a rifle.”

“What? You mean you’d send me out there without protection?” He paled and slowly moved back. “What were you thinking of? Is this a set-up? I ain’t going without a rifle, and that’s final.”

Debra smirked as Passco moved back to the rear of the room. She turned to Denoyer and whispered, “He’s also yellow.”

Kathryn, the blond teacher who had appeared to be in a stupor, had come out of it to organize the children. She jumped up, crossed the room, and grabbed Lightman arm. “Don’t leave. Don’t go out there. What if something is out there? What if you get hurt? What if you don’t come back? We would all die.”

“Kathryn, we haven’t got a choice. We’ll be back. Keep the kids occupied and happy. Help prepare food. We’ll be hungry as bears when we return.”

Lightman pulled away and led his team into the corridor.

“Listen you guys. We have to stay on the boardwalk. Even then, with this covering of ash and cinders, we could step into a hole or ... I go first. We don’t want to bunch up. If they are

waiting ... if they shoot at us, we need to be about ten feet apart. Any problems, we get back here fast. Agreed?"

He got eye contact with each man.

"Okay then, out we go."

Spaced about fifteen feet apart they went single file through the door into the afternoon gloom.

Denoyer found it difficult to walk. The cinders had packed down, but not enough to make a firm base for a boot. It was like walking on crusty snow with ice beneath. They found it almost impossible to push off and step forward. Denoyer tried to place his boots in the holes made by the men in front. They progressed slowly.

Lightman scanned the ash in front for signs of footprints. The sulfurous mass was unbroken. They made their way about three hundred yards, more than half way to the generator shed, when Lightman saw disturbed ash ahead. Visibility was about one hundred feet. He wasn't worried about shooters, not here at least. He motioned for the others to join him.

"See up there?" He pointed to the messed up area. "Let's check it out."

As they approached, Denoyer studied a large area on the boardwalk. It looked as if something had been dragged off across the tundra into the gloom. They stood at the edge of the disturbed area.

"Tracks all around," Tom whispered. "But in this stuff you can't tell who made them. Can't be animals, they wouldn't be out in this ash."

"Looks like a lot of people walked around here." Joe observed.

Lightman stepped forward to the area where the layer was broken.

"For the love of God!"

Denoyer saw it then ... or parts of it. It was plain a body had lain there. It had been torn up or butchered as evidenced

*C. Descry*

by scraps of clothing, bone, and black stains ... what must be blood.

“My God, cannibalism?” Lightman couldn’t hide his shock.

Tom Wind responded. “Looks that way. Bunch of footprints. Must have been several here who cut up the body. But ... no! Hell no! Men wouldn’t tear clothing that way ... would they?”

Joe bent down to study a bone fragment. He carefully removed his glove and picked a splintered femur out of the gore. “Teeth marks. An animal chewed this.”

“Animal? You mean like a wolf or wolverine?” Lightman asked.

“Well, could be ... but...but it was a bear. I know this sign. Big brown. Grizzly.”

“And the ash doesn’t hold footprints. These are bear tracks all around?”

“That’s so. Now I see how they look like something on all fours made them.” Joe stood up and took a step back to give Tom access.

“You’re right. I was wrong about animals not being out. How could they survive in this? Shit, don’t tell me. This is how.”

Jan Lightman was feeling weak. “But the bears are hibernating, aren’t they? They couldn’t survive out here.”

Tom looked away. “It’s too early for them to be in. They was caught out. Everything covered. No food. They come here and find bodies. That’s what. ‘Sides, it’s too warm for them to want to go in.”

“Looks to me more than one was here. That’s strange, them eating together.” Joe pointed to the depressions in the ash.

“Maybe a sow and her cubs?”

Denoyer forced himself to think.

“How long ago, Joe?”

“Can’t have been too long, this flesh is still pink. Frozen, it gets white and covered with frost. Yesterday maybe?”

“Will these guns stop a big brown?”

Joe nodded. “Mine will, yours is a .30-30. You’d have to hit him just right and close.”

“Mine’s not accurate at distance,” Tom said, “but Doctor Lightman, you need more bore. You’d just make a bear mad.”

“Then what should we do?” Lightman asked. “Can we go on?”

“Me and Tom go first. We got the stopping power if we need it. My guess is they found lots to eat. Ain’t hungry right now. This changes things. We got to find them others and save them.”

“Let’s go as far as the generator shed, see what’s there. I don’t have to tell you to keep a sharp lookout.”

It was gloomier now, even though nets of sheet lightning continued to light the sky. The day was almost over. Each shadow looked like a living thing. Tracks were everywhere here, and they could read bear sign even though there were no identifiable paw prints. The generator shed crouched dark and foreboding. Exhaust stacks stuck out of the roof like necks with hats. The large bug screens on the three air intakes had been ripped off and bear sign was everywhere below them. The screens lay on the ash, licked clean of gnats, mosquitoes, and flies.

“We can fix the filter screens easy. I think the generators are okay.”

“The door is closed.” Lightman put his ear close and listened.

“Nothing. Not a sound.”

“Open it and get back. We’ll cover you.”

The grit penetrated hinges and rusted them with its noxious sulfuric acid blood. The metal screamed as he pulled the door open.

### *C. Descry*

“Look at the floor. Nothing been in here. Not even ash got in. It’s the same as when we left.”

“Let’s go through and come out that way. We can see out the window on that side. Scout the lay of things.”

Tom covered them as they went in and pulled the complaining door closed. It was dark inside, but safe. They made their way along the side of a giant cast iron generator. The smell of diesel was strong and familiar.

The far window looked out on the ash between the shack and the river. The men deferred to Lightman and gave him first look. He reached up and wiped grime and oily film from the glass. Then, standing on a box, he looked through.

He jumped down, scaring them, scaring himself.

“They’re out there! My God, the bears are out there.”

The entire flat area on the river side of the generator shed was torn up like an army camped there. Brown bears were feasting on the remains of people who had fallen and been buried by ash.

“When I flew in from Kotzebue, there were a lot of people down along the river. People drying fish, working on boats, kids playing. This is the way they would have tried to get to the school when the storm hit.” Lightman stared out through the grimy window, remembering the sudden force of the storm that dropped people in their tracks.

“They never had a chance.” Joe leaned against the wall, tears coursing down his cheeks. “I’ll kill those bears, God-damn ‘em, I’ll kill them.”

Lightman nodded. “I count five. And there’s one coming up from the river.”

“We could shoot them from here. Kill them all.”

“Maybe, if we all had big bores. Shoot now, and we might get two or even four, but we’d never get back.”

“That big sow over there. She’s heard us. She getting up and moving this way.”

Lightman moved aside. Tom stepped up and looked out.

“She is! My God, look at her. There’s shiny, crusty stuff all around her eyes. She may be blind from the grit and ash. All the bears have crust covering their eyes. She has sores all over, too. She may have heard us, but ... so much man smell out there, she won’t smell us, but if she hunts, she could tear this wall apart with one slap.”

“Move away from the wall! Quiet now.” Joe whispered as he moved back toward the generator.

Movement translated fear into an urging panic. They moved quickly toward the far door. Denoyer held them back, picked up an oilcan, and doused the hinges to quiet them. As a man, they moved out fast, closed the door, and headed back to the school.

The bears came after them, at least in each of their minds.

Before entering the building, Lightman stopped and turned toward the others.

“No sense telling it all. We saw bears, sick bears suffering from the grit and ash. No reason to tell them about the bodies. Agreed?”

The others nodded.

“We just say the bears are out there and that nobody can move about until they leave, is that what we should say?” Joe asked.

“Good enough ... for now at least.”

Jane Mary didn’t believe them, but she was wise enough to know they were withholding information for a reason. She got her boss alone.

“Doctor Lightman, the bears found our people, right?”

“I didn’t think it would serve any purpose to tell that.”

“Yes, but what are we going to do about them?”

“For now? I don’t know. We start planning. If there are others holed-up out there, then we have to get rid of the bears.



### *C. Descry*

When they run out of food - horrible as that sounds - they might go.”

“*Aiy* (ugh). We’re food. They know we’re in here. I don’t think there’s anything for them to eat away from here ... unless, maybe some dead caribou, but there weren’t many around when it hit.”

“Tom says we have two rifles with enough bore to stop a bear. One is a .270 and the other is a 1940 Garand .30–06 with a worn barrel. He and Joe want to go to their houses and get their rifles. I think it’s too dangerous right now. What do you think?”

“I thought you said the bears’ eyes were all crusted over.”

“Those we could see. The big sow swung her head from side-to-side like she was navigating by scent. There was another big one coming up from the river. He was walking funny - also swinging his head from side-to-side. If they can see, they can’t see very well, not that they have good eyesight to start with. The grit and ash have scarred their eyes and there is nothing they can use to wipe the grit out of them. If they use a paw, it’s full of grit.”

“If they’re blind, that’s important. If they.... I don’t think we should wait. We haven’t had bad storms for several days. Maybe it’s over. Daylight is almost gone. Another three weeks and we’re in darkness for three months. I think the bears have to hibernate, but we need to rescue anyone trapped out there now. We should hunt them down and kill them.”

“Tom, Joe and I agree. Denoyer has never handled a rifle, never hunted. He said it was our decision.”

Lightman called a meeting that night.

“We want to find out if anybody is holed-up out there, afraid to come in because of the bears.”

The room was quiet. Andy Passco stood.

“These here people have lived with bears all their lives. Bears is bears, nobody’s that scared of them. We get guns and

we shoot the damn things. Then the issue is my plane. I don't think there's anyone out there anymore. Forget them. They'd be here if they could. What I need is my plane in the shops and the electricity on so I can fix it."

Nobody responded. Andy Passco stood, looking, waiting for agreement or argument. Everyone had him figured-out. None saw an advantage in dialogue with him.

"Well, you're all a real committed lot. I'm right, aren't I?"

No one responded.

"Hell yes! When you going for the guns, Lightman?"

Jan smiled, "Why I thought you were going Andy. We've been out there and its nasty. It's your turn. You going in the morning?"

"Sure. I'm the best choice. I know what I'm doing. I'm the only one here who has a plan that makes sense." He looked around the room, unsure of what was happening.

"I'm going out in the morning to get them guns. I ain't going alone. Who's got guts enough to come with me?"

Tom caught Joe's eye, nodded, and smiled.

"Guess that's me and Joe. We know where the guns are."

## Chapter THREE

*They heard panting, an animal breathing through its mouth. The Brown came around the house unaware they were waiting for him. His eyes were matted closed. His nose was red-raw, covered with globs of ash-mixed snot.*

Morning came, brightening the black, rumbling, lightning-lit volcanic sky. The semi-dark murkiness they had come to hate remained. The wind blew from the west stinking of sulfur. The temperature at 9:00 a.m. hovered around 24 degrees, about where it stayed, day and night, since the storm.

“I did some thinking last night,” Andy Passco announced. “I ain’t about to go out there with Tom and Joe only. When they go in to get the guns, I’ll need someone to cover me.”

Jane Mary stood and stared at him. “I don’t understand. They both won’t go in at the same time. You’ll always be covered by one.”

“You want to debate? I didn’t call for a debate. I told you what I want. I’m in charge. Now who’s going to cover me?”

Jane Mary smiled. “I’ll go, little man.”

“You? You’re a woman. I need someone who can cover my back. I couldn’t trust a woman to do that.”

“Pick someone!” Lightman commanded.

“Good. I pick you. I get the .270. You get the .30–30. Tom and Joe share the –06.

Tom was on his feet, angry. “No way! If I go, I take my .270. Tom takes his –06. If Lightman goes to cover you, he takes the .30-30. You get a rifle when we get to my house.”

“Then what the hell, I should trust you bozos? I ain’t going.”

Lightman shook his head as if to clear Passco from it.

“Tom. Joe. What say we leave now? It’s not far and we’ll be back before we know it.”

Jane Mary watched as the three made their way down the boardwalk toward the junction that would take them to the housing units. Visibility was less than one hundred feet. In minutes, they were out of sight. She turned to Andy Passco.

“Coward! You were afraid to go out there and do a simple thing. Bears get to you? Afraid of the dark? Maybe I should have gone and held your hand *kinnaq* (crazy person).”

“What are you talking about? If I had a rifle, I would be leading the way. I’m no fool. I wasn’t going to let them trick me into going out there without a rifle.”

“Coward!”

“Hey scaredycat Passco,” Charlie, one of the junior high boys, taunted. “I know where a rifle is. You could prove you’re not chicken.”

Passco turned and slapped at Charlie, who jumped back in time.

“Hitting kids make you feel powerful? Jane Mary teased.

“Get me the rifle and I’ll show you.”

“It’s down in the shops. Teacher was supposed to drill it for a new scope. It’s my uncle’s .270.”

“Get it!”

Five minutes later, Charlie returned with the rifle. Passco looked it over, loaded it, and stuck extra shells in his pocket.

“I’m out of here, like I said. I’ll show you who’s chicken.”

### *C. Descry*

Joe led, Lightman followed and Tom covered their rear. Yesterday's experience taught them how to walk in the ash and grit. Progress was slow, but steady. There were no signs anything disturbed the ash. They relaxed and moved into the twilight gloom of morning. Nearing the first row of houses, they saw disturbed ash. On close examination, it was plain something walked around the houses. From the drag marks and the position of the tracks, it was a bear. Two houses down, they came to Tom's walkway. There were tracks all around his house and up to the door.

"I think these tracks are old. I hope so. Some bear probably trying to find food. Door's closed. Nothing could have gotten in."

"Check first. Try looking in the window."

"Okay Joe. Looks safe, I'm going to try the door."

"Wait! Those tracks lead up there. Do they turn and come back?"

"Can't tell. Maybe ... yeah! Yes they do. Cover me."

Tom opened the door slowly, studying the floor for signs of prints.

"Nothin' been here. Jan, you cover from the doorway. Joe, keep the outside covered, I'm going in. Be right back with my rifle."

Lightman felt the cold, dead air from inside the house as it drained out past him. He followed Tom's footfalls as he disappeared into the blackness.

"Found it," Tom's voice echoed in the empty house. "I'm going to look out the back window while I'm here. See if anything... Shit!"

"What is it? Joe called from his position on the boardwalk.

Tom's boots made loud clumping noises. He did not reply, but motioned Lightman out of the way and followed him out, closing the door behind him. He carried a rifle in each hand.

“Bear in back. Prowling I think. He’s headed around the side.” He pointed to the far side of the house.

“One? See any others?” Joe asked as he checked that the safety was off.

“Only saw one, looked sick, but hard to tell in this light.”

Tom handed Lightman the .270 from the school and checked his own. Put that little bore up against the house. We’ll pick it up on the way back. Shoot for the upper chest. Wait, though, I’ll get him.”

They heard panting, an animal breathing through its mouth. The Brown came around the house unaware they were waiting for him. His eyes were matted closed. His nose was red-raw, covered with globs of ash-mixed snot. He moved his head from side-to-side, trying to use his sense of smell to guide him. He cleared his nose with a loud blow, caught fresh scent, and in a move so quick it wasn’t anticipated, came erect on his back legs, scything his long claws in front of him. The length of his belly was raw, pus-ridden, infected.

Bam! Joe’s rifle whopped, sending a shock wave against the house and men. The bullet hit heart and severed the spine. The bear grunted and collapsed. A perfect shot.

“Look out for others,” Tom warned. Rifles ready, they covered each other and waited. A burping sound came from the dead bear’s wound.

“Okay, on to my house.” Joe took the lead and broke trail down the boardwalk.

Andy Passco heard the shot as he followed the men’s tracks. He crouched, fear painfully gripping his bowels. All was quiet. He checked his rifle. The safety was off. He couldn’t see the school. He could see the men’s tracks leading away into the dismal morning. Light white ash sifted down on them. He stood, looked around, and followed. The sooner he caught up, the safer he would be. “That damned woman tricked me,” he

### C. Descry

complained under his breath. “Dumb! She got me out here alone.”

Joe’s house stood between two empty lots. The house next to his had burned. The other lot was empty. There was bear sign in both lots. The path to the house was undisturbed.

“I’ll go in. Same as before, you cover me from the doorway Doc. Tom, there’s a hole where the next house burned. Permafrost melted and so there’s a depression there. Good hiding place, man or bear.”

The door squealed open and he disappeared inside.

“Stinks in here. Not sulfur, bear.”

Lightman stood in the doorway wondering why the house wasn’t dark like Tom’s had been. He looked down at his rifle just as Joe screamed a curse.

A shot concussed against his eardrums. He heard a horrible bellowing growl, and something heavy thud against a wall. There was more growling. Rifle against his hip, he crept into the room.

The light came from an opening in the far wall where a back door should have been. To his right, he saw Joe, his head barely attached to his body. *Joe is dead, focus. Where is the bear?* He took slow, short skating steps forward, fingering the trigger, expecting the creature to come at him. As he came in enough to see around the wall, he saw the bear. *Joe’s bullet killed it, but not before it ripped him and threw him against the wall.*

He heard Tom calling from the yard. In shock, he turned and stumbled toward the door, yelling, “Joe’s dead! Joe’s dead, so’s the bear.”

Passco moved fast following the men’s tracks. He saw the dead bear, and the .30-30 leaning against the house. The footprints went on. “So Lightman is hiding in the house. He chickened out.” He laughed. “Who’s the coward now Jane

Mary? Not me. Come on out, Lightman, I'll protect you." He didn't try to lower his voice.

As he came up on the house in the open space, he saw Tom covering the yards. *Joe must have gone in to get his gun.*

Just then he heard the shot and the vicious animal scream. He raised his rifle toward the door as he heard Tom calling.

Something moved in the doorway. He saw a humped over shape, raised the rifle and fired.

The bullet tore out Jan Lightman knee with such force it almost dislocated his hip. He fell into the room.

Tom saw Lightman at the doorway, heard the shot, saw Lightman thrown back into the house, and turned to see Andy Passco, rifle pointed. "Why you son of a bitch!" He swung his .270 and squeezed the trigger. Passco fell back, his self-satisfied grin frozen on his face.

Tom, knowing that Joe was dead, ran for Lightman, assessed the damage, and ripping his belt from his waist, put a tourniquet around the leg above the horrible wound. *Act fast. Lightman's bleeding to death. Our shots will attract bears.* He hoisted the big man into a fireman's carry, picked up his rifle, and headed back to the school, passing Andy Passco with no more notice than a pile of trash. He couldn't stop to pick up Passco's rifle. Had he retrieved it, he would have seen the stock had been shattered by his bullet.

They hadn't heard the shots. There was no indication anything was wrong. Jane Mary leaned against the door, staring into the muddy gray morning, waiting.

"They're coming. I see ... wait, I only see one ... he's carrying something, one man carrying another. I can't see who...."

She hit the panic bar and the door flew open. As she ran toward the form emerging out of the dimness, she gasped. *Tom is carrying Lightman over his shoulders. Lightman's leg is flopping, loose.* Tom stumbled as she got to him. He handed her his rifle. She braced him and helped him to the bottom of



*C. Descry*

the steps. Others came out and took Lightman dead weight from Tom. Panting and complaining, they got them both inside and down the corridor to the home economics rooms.

Tom was unable to respond to their questions. He collapsed in a corner gasping for breath. His eyes stared out of an ash-covered face, red rimmed, and blank. The two aanas took over and knelt beside him, helping him out of his parka and wiping ash from his face.

## Chapter FOUR

*Oh, and one more thing. There's a trail through the ash now. You'll be able to know where you're going and move fast ... especially coming back. But never run. Never run!*

Jane Mary had them place Lightman's unconscious form on the long table. Denoyer used his pocketknife to cut the jeans and long johns away from the shattered leg.

"There's nothing but tendon holding it on," Jane Mary whispered, afraid Lightman might hear. "The bone is gone."

"No way to save it." It was a statement not a question. Denoyer had treated injuries before, but none like this. "It's almost off, but ... now what do we do?"

Susan Target left Tom's side and came over to study Lightman's leg. "Cut this off. Then we have to get inside the stump and remove all the bone fragments. Then we make a clean cut at the end of the bone. Then we roll the muscle around the end and sew it shut."

"How do you know this?" Jane Mary was surprised.

"Before. It has happened before and that is what the doctor did. I helped."

Denoyer stared at the shattered flesh and bone, visualizing what the woman advised. "What about sanitation? Infection?"

"He washed it with that clear alcohol that comes in flat bottles."

*C. Descry*

Jane Mary didn't waste time. "Okay, someone get to the nurse's office and grab everything that looks like ... no. Susan, you better go. Bring back everything you think we'll need."

Denoyer added: "Bandages. Thread. Any antibiotic stuff. Painkillers. Wait, I'll go with you." He turned and followed her out. Jane Mary moved to Lightman head, checking to see that he was breathing.

Tom caught his breath as he overcame shock.

"Joe's dead. Bear in his house. Damned fool Andy Passco shot Lightman. I took care of him. Got to go back..."

He tried to get up.

Gurtt Ambler put a hand on his shoulder and held a cup to his lips.

"Sip this! Don't get yourself so up and at 'em. Sit quietly and tell us what you need. We needed Joe. I can't believe he was stupid enough to let himself get killed."

"He wasn't stupid! He was my friend. We went for rifles. Now we only got mine. Left two in Joe's house, plus maybe his own, and the little bore is still leaning against the side of the house. Where did Passco get a rifle? That SOB shot Doc. I killed him for that, and for Joe. It ain't like the others, we got to mourn him. No one will miss that bastard Passco."

"Charlie knew one was in the shop. Passco took it. We may not survive without Joe."

"It's out there 'side his body. Probably already 'et by acid. Got to go get them rifles now." He tried to rise, his legs cramped. He didn't have the strength.

"We'll get them. The ones inside, are they safe from the acids?"

"Maybe for now. But... The bears use houses like dens. Bears won't let us get them if we wait."

Gurtt looked around at her people. No hunters. Two young boys, Charlie and Nate had been out for caribou with the men. Both could shoot. No women - well, maybe Janet

and Madonna, they spent summers at fish camp and knew about guns.

Gurtta stood, motioning another woman to help Tom. She pointed with her nose at Charlie, Nate, and then Madonna. They came to her.

“Madonna, get Janet. Meet me in the kitchen.”

They were too young - well, maybe not. There had never been teenagers before the missionaries invented them. Young men and women were children, then adults. They had to be in those days.

“You know Joe’s house?”

They all nodded.

“He’s dead in there. But you must go in and get the rifles he and Doc had. Bear dead or wounded in there too. May be other bears. Can you do this thing?”

Wide eyes, blank stares, slow nods - obvious surprise at being asked.

“And on the way, Tom Wind’s house? You know? The .30-30 Lightman left here with? It’s leaning by the door. Get it on the way.” She checked to see if they were going to help. She smiled.

“Somewhere near Joe’s place is Andy Passco’s body. Get his rifle. Then, you have three before you go into Joe’s. You all know about rifles. You know how to check them, safety on or off. You know how to aim. Get ready. Then, before you go out, you talk to Tom.”

Lightman was groaning, his head moving from side-to-side to escape the pain.

Denoyer made eye contact with Jane Mary. She acknowledged him. He turned to the people surrounding the table. “He’s unconscious, lost a lot of blood. Probably in shock. Cover him with blankets. Hold him tight while we work.” *Shit, now this! I needed him to get back. He understood why I have to get back.*

### *C. Descry*

When he turned back, Jane Mary had already pulled on latex gloves. She handed him a pair and picked up a long blade, white handled kitchen knife and examined the ropes of tendon and flesh that connected the lower leg.

“Susan, how close do I cut them?”

“Close as you can. Take any flesh that’s damaged. It all has to go.”

With the skill an Eskimo woman has with a blade, she severed the strings of flesh and trimmed the purple mush of damaged muscle away. “Leave that part of the muscle, we’ll use it to wrap around the end of the bone. Cut away the damaged parts, but save the skin. I’ll pick out the bone fragments. Denoyer, wash it while we work!”

“Now comes the hard part,” Susan said. “Feel up inside. Feel the bone? Find where it’s shattered. Careful, you know how sharp splintered bone is.”

“Then we have to saw the bone off?” Jane Mary asked as she probed.

“First, we’ll have to cut up and expose it all around so we can cut it square. Make a clean slice between the big muscles. Denoyer, just keep sprinkling that alcohol. Madonna, go to the shops and get a hacksaw. Blade with the finest teeth.”

“I feel it. It’s not too far up, maybe an inch. Hey, there’s big blood vessels, we should tie them off. I’ll tie them like fishing lures. What about the small ones?”

Denoyer remembered western movies where they seared wounds with a hot knife to stop bleeding. He had an idea. “Someone go to the place where you store crafts stuff. Bring me a wood burning kit - at least the iron. Get an extension cord and run it over here so we can plug it into the generator. If you can’t find a wood burning iron, get me a soldering iron from the shops. Fast. Make it fast!”

At the first sound of the hacksaw blade on bone, the area around Lightman cleared. Susan remained to hold down the

unconscious form. The room filled with gasping and choking noises. No one was unaffected. Jane Mary gritted her teeth. Denoyer couldn't stand the sound - or the thought of it - or the stench of cut bone, but he had to hold back the flesh. Each cut went through him like high frequency pain.

They worked as fast as they could. It seemed to take forever for the wood burning iron to heat up, but when it did it stayed hot as Denoyer touched it to the severed end of every small vein and capillary he could find. It took time, but something told him it was the right thing to do. The stench of burning flesh filled the room.

Susan was sweating. A hand reached around her and wiped her forehead. "We sew the cuts up ... the ones you made to get to the bone. Then we wrap the muscle and skin over and sew it all around."

They were so focused on their work they forgot Lightman. When he moved his stump, they jumped back.

"He is still unconscious. I'm holding him as tight as I can," Susan said.

"Then hold him, damn it!" Denoyer snapped. "Isn't there something we can give him for pain? Aspirin? Acetaminophen? Maybe alcohol? No, alcohol will make him sick. What we have to do is force fluids down him. He'll need lots of warm water. Add sugar."

"There's nothing stronger in the school, Denoyer. What if we grind up Aspirin pills? Pour that on the raw flesh?"

"It's worth a try, Susan. But first, grind five of each and mix them with warm water. Get it down his throat. All of it," Denoyer ordered. "Please hold him. Hold this upper leg too."

Tom's advice didn't make the young people's task to retrieve the rifles any less dangerous. "You shoot a bear and stop him or he'll get to you before he dies. You do that with a shot that hits the heart and spine ... or just the spine. A straight in, mouth shot will work, but it's too hard to make. No back

### *C. Descry*

shots if you can help it. No side shots. Wait till he rears up then shoot. If he charges, he'll stop and come up. You've got to wait.

"Most dangerous time is when you first go out, before you get to the .30-30. When you have it, you have a backup rifle. Then find Passco's body. Get his rifle. Clean it off and check it, but I think it'll be okay this short of time. Now you have protection, especially if there's more than one bear." Tom stopped to catch his breath. His voice was weak.

"Joe's house sits between two empty lots. The one on the right has a depression in it where a bear could hide. Be aware! Be careful going into Joe's house. One bear in there we know of. Maybe more, especially now there's fresh blood. Lightman probably dropped his gun by the door. Get it. Then go in for the one Joe had - the old .30-06. If it's safe in there, find the rifle he went in after. Get any boxes of shells. Now you're all armed."

He was out of breath, but raised his hand when they thought he was through.

"Not yet. Cover each other. Go slow. You're not hunters, you are the hunted. Don't forget that." He sagged back against the wall, sucking in air but still holding them with a pointed finger.

"Oh, and one more thing. There's a trail through the ash now. You'll be able to know where you're going and move fast ... especially coming back. But never run. Never run!"

Denoyer sat down heavily next to Jane Mary. Susan was covering the stump with Neosporin. Then, she put pads in place and wrapped gauze to hold them.

"I'm releasing the tourniquet now, real slow, little-by-little. It'll bleed, but hopefully we got most of it contained. Thankfully, Jan is still unconscious. "

Jane Mary was exhausted. “We’ll need those guns the kids went for. I think we’ll find pain killing stuff over in the clinic. And maybe a needle ... you know, a way to get fluids in his veins. Dehydration and pain could kill Lightman. Wouldn’t it be something if the nurse was hiding over there?”

“They’re just kids,” Denoyer said, “I should have gone. I thought you said the nurse wasn’t here that day?”

“She’s in Kotzebue Mondays. Comes back Tuesdays. You ever fired a rifle? Been faced with a bear?”

“No.”

“You’re a better nurse.”



## Chapter FIVE

*Nate raised the .270 to his shoulder, checked the sights, and held it at ready. He thumbed the safety on and off then decided to leave it off.*

Charlie offered the .270, barrel pointed toward the black sky. Nate took it and adjusted his grip to the weight.

“It’s heavier than you would think. Cover me while I get the .30–30. Then you lead. Janet, Madonna, stay in back of Nate. Give him room to swing around if he needs to. Watch for bears. Soon as I get the rifle, I’ll cover the rear.”

Nate raised the .270 to his shoulder, checked the sights, and held it at ready. He thumbed the safety on and off then decided to leave it off. It was a little after noon, the lightest time of day. The falling ash cut visibility and made it difficult to keep from squinting. He could see ahead, he guessed about a fourth of the length of the taxiway at the landing strip. Beyond that, the occlusion made it seem as if nothing was out there.

Charlie pointed to the carcass of the bear Joe killed. He reached the porch, grabbed the rifle Lightman left against the wall, and came back fast. Nate said something they couldn’t make-out and began moving down the boardwalk following the tracks the men made earlier.

The depression made by Andy Passco’s body, told them where he had fallen. One set of tracks went around it. Another set, Passco’s, led away toward the river. Nate had been holding

his breath, expecting to find bears feeding on Passco's body. "There's not much blood. Look here, the bullet hit Passco's rifle stock. Tom didn't kill him. Passco took off that way, toward the river. Look over the rifle, see if it still works."

"What should we do about him?" Janet stood over the depression made by Passco's body, studying the tracks leading to the far end of the village.

"Nothing. Let the bears have the creep. He won't last a hour."

She nodded and followed close to Madonna for protection. She was the only one without a rifle.

Charlie tugged at Nate's coat. "Hold up a minute. We're passing my house, I'm going in to see what happened to..."

"Not until we get the guns at Joe's. Are you sure you want to go in?"

"Got to, I need to know."

Janet came up. "We all need to know what happened to our families. But I don't want to know they are ... dead. Don't go in there, you'll regret it."

"Got to. I'm going in after we're all armed."

They stood in front of Joe's house. Charlie took charge.

"Janet, you cover Nate and me from here. Nate goes in first. Here Nate, trade guns. Take the .30-30, it's best at close range. I'll cover you. Madonna, you keep a lookout for bears back of us. Keep behind Janet. Soon as we find Lightman's rifle, you come up and get it. Then go over there and cover that side."

"What are you going to do, Charlie?"

"I'm right behind Nate. Bear in there killed Joe. May be others."

Lightman's rifle lay inside the door about three feet to the right of a pool of coagulating blood. Nate motioned Charlie in. Charlie crept forward, got the rifle, turned, and went back out, a rifle in each hand.

*C. Descry*

“Stay put Nate. Wait till she gets this.”

Madonna was coming. He looked across the yard at Janet. She had turned and was kneeling, rifle pointed toward the empty lot beside the house. From the doorway, he couldn't see where she was aiming. Madonna took Lightman's .270 and began familiarizing herself with it.

“Get back and help Janet!” Charlie's voice communicated his concern.

She turned, saw Janet kneeling, released the safety, and started back the way she came. As she cleared the house, she looked where Janet's rifle pointed and saw hump-like shapes in the half-light. There were three shapes moving, but not toward them.

“They're out there,” Janet whispered. “Keep my back covered. I'll watch them.”

The house smelled rank of bear, blood and the ever-present stench of sulfur. Nate wanted to wipe his face, but fine ash covered his glove. He squinted, blinked, and cleared his eyes. Joe's body lay as Tom described. His rifle was somewhere inside the room. He inched forward. The bear lay dead on its belly, long muzzle flat on the floor. The rifle was near the far wall. He moved carefully and picked it up.

“Charley?”

“Hurry Nate. They see bears.”

“Take this rifle. I'm looking for the one Joe came in after.”

He saw it on pegs over the window. A box of shells, plastic, bright yellow, sat on the sill.

He handed the .30-06 to Charlie and took Joe's rifle down, checked to see if it was loaded, confirmed it was, and reached for the shells. He saw movement through the window. Something outside. He focused. Twenty feet from the house, he saw the rear of a big brown.

“Bear. Let's get out of here.”

Charlie was already at the door, a rifle in each hand. Nate followed, wondering which rifle he would drop if he had to shoot.

Whup! Whap! Whap!

The concussions hurt. They slapped against them, were eaten by the ash and gloom, and blended into the rumbling thunder that hadn't ceased since the onset of the storm.

Janet was up, pointing the rifle, backing toward Madonna.

"Come on! Get out of here."

It took seconds for Charlie and Nate to extend the leather slings on their extra rifles and slip them over their heads. They pointed the rifles they carried in the direction Janet shot, and followed the retreating girls.

"Stay together!"

"Keep up then."

"What did you shoot?"

"Killed one. Had to. He was coming toward me."

"Long shot. Are you sure you killed him?"

"Pretty sure. He went down."

"That's my house. I'm going in." Charlie pushed ahead and turned toward the unpainted, water-stained front of his house.

"But what about the bears?"

"Any following? I don't see any. I've got to go in."

"Wait! Bears are using houses as dens. What if they got in from the back like at Joe's?"

"Right. Will you check?"

Nate shook his head, trying to get some of the ash off his nose. "I will. Give me a minute."

"Don't let him go alone. Madonna? Go look!"

"Okay, give us a minute."

They inched around the house, following the tracks of a bear that scouted the place before them. The back door was

*C. Descry*

closed. There was no sign anything had gotten in. "All clear. But go in carefully." Madonna warned.

"Nothing in back, Charlie, but let me go in first."

"No, Nate. If my people are in there, I want to find them."

"Nothing. No sign they were here at the time, but they were! I don't understand. Where would they have gone? Where did they go when the storm hit?" Charlie leaned back against the kitchen wall, thinking. "You know, this may mean they're alive somewhere."

"Believe that, Charlie. Believe that."

They made their way back to the school, entering confident and proud: Successful.

"Doc Lightman is bad. We need to go to the clinic and find painkillers. You guys rest, and we'll plan it. Great job!" Jane Mary complimented them, sure that her people would survive with young people like these.

"Yeah," Charlie said, "but there is something else we found. Tom's bullet hit Passco's rifle stock and knocked him out. Chunks of splintered wood on the ground. He got up and his tracks led away from there like he was going to the far side of the village or to the river, to his plane."

## Chapter SIX

*Jane Mary knew Tom, knew when he lied. She bit down hard on her lip and mustered anger to give her strength.*

Medical Clinic. Late afternoon:

Nate took point and Charlie covered their rear. Jane Mary and Tom covered left and right as they made their way down the boardwalk toward the clinic. The first shot slammed into a post in front of them. The post split and splinters flew. The muffled report seemed to come seconds later. Nate crouched, waving the others back.

“They’re shooting at us! Maybe it’s Passco.”

The second shot passed through the padded shoulder of his parka. He felt the tug and then heard the distant crack. They were exposed on the boardwalk. The shooter had their range.

“Run!” Jane Mary commanded. Get up there behind the shed.”

A bullet zinged by Charlie’s head. He ducked and ran after the others, kicking up ash as he broke a new trail.

They pushed their bodies against the plywood side of the shack just as another bullet struck. The whup of the bullet striking wood and the muffled report of the rifle came instants apart. Splinters flew.

Nate motioned stay low. “Shots came from the clinic. Second floor window. I saw a flash.”

### *C. Descry*

Tom stood, searching for a way to retreat. "I can't see a safe way back."

Charlie, crouching, peered around the right side of the shack. "We've got some cover this way."

Jane Mary pushed around him so she could see. "We'd have to get across the tundra to the other boardwalk. Then we'd have cover all the way to the clinic."

"Can we? How deep do you think the water is?" Nate didn't like the idea of sloshing across in the sights of the shooter.

Tom studied their route. "Slow going across there. No other way. We need to distract whoever's shooting."

"Like what Tom?" Jane Mary asked.

"He's in the second story window. I can barely see it. Do you think the shooter - maybe it's Passco - thinks we're bears?"

"No way."

"Well, okay, I'll cover then. When I start shooting, you all get across fast. I'll shoot until you're safe. Then you find cover and shoot at the window while I cross."

Nate jumped first, wondering what was below the layers of grit and ash. His feet plunged down to the uneven hillocks of tundra plants, slid off them, and came to rest on the frozen bottom. Water rushed into his boot tops soaking his legs up past the knees. He gasped, caught his balance, and sloshed his way across. The others followed, in time with the shots from Tom's rifle. They helped each other climb onto the boardwalk, and stood shivering.

Jane Mary eased her way around the building. At the far end, she peeked around until she could see the window. Raising her rifle, she took aim. Charlie called for Tom. She got off a shot, then another. She heard Tom's feet hit the boardwalk as Charlie and Nate pulled him up. She stared at the window. The bad light and fine ash filtering down covered anyone

there. She thought of shooting again, but decided to save ammunition.

“If the shooter is there now, his head is down. We can move through this storage shed and cross to the clinic. There’s no window on this side. They’ll be at the door.”

“Keep a watch for bears!” Nate reminded.

“Hold up for a minute or two!” Tom commanded, “We need to think this through.”

Shivering, their feet squishing in their boots, he led them inside the storage building.

“No bears around here. Isn’t that strange? And there are no tracks leading to the clinic. Passco can’t be the one shooting.”

“What do you think?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know. It’s strange. Every time out, we found bears. Why aren’t they on this side of town?”

Jane Mary took off her right glove and wiped ash from her face. “Food. They’re after food. Maybe there aren’t any bodies on this side of town. Maybe everyone over here got inside the clinic building.”

Nate followed her reasoning. “And maybe the poison gas wasn’t everywhere - maybe just pockets of gas, else how could the bears have survived? Jane Mary, who was over here? I mean, do you know?”

“I know.” Tom gave Jane Mary an apologetic look as he cut in. “People always lined up outside the clinic waiting for the nurse. That day was a Tuesday. Mondays, the nurse went to Kotzebue for meetings. They would have been waiting in line for her to return. She always brought medicine and supplies.”

“But Lightman was the only passenger on the plane”

“She planned to come back later in the day. If so, she never got here.”

Nate nodded. “So what you’re saying is that people would have been in line waiting to get in to see the nurse. Not many,



*C. Descry*

couldn't have been. Most were out on the river or away at meetings."

Jane Mary nodded. "Old people. Mothers with young kids. They had time to get in out of the storm."

"So," Charlie asked, "could they survive in there this long?"

Tom thought a moment. "Well, you know downstairs is where they store survival rations and rescue gear. There's also four-wheelers stored there."

"Yeah, but they're useless in the ash," Nate observed. "Anything that takes in air, including us, is ruined by the ash."

Tom stamped his feet, hoping to drive water out of his boots.

"Okay so we think we know they could survive in there. We think they didn't die, and there aren't any bears here because there are no bodies. Did they ... I mean, are they the ones who tried to break into the school? The drunks? Are you sure Andy Passco didn't make it here?"

Jane Mary gave him a strange look. "You really think it's the drunks?"

"No I don't, not really. But those guys may have tried to break into the clinic. Maybe that's why they shot at us. They think we're part of that bunch."

Charlie put his finger in the bullet hole drilled through the shoulder pad of Nate's parka. "They shot to kill! Besides, that break in was almost two weeks ago."

"Look," Jane Mary took over, "Doc Lightman needs pain killers. I know what to look for. We can get over to the door and talk to them, tell them who we are. I'm freezing. So are you. We should go now. Besides it will be dark soon."

"We cover each other. No windows in front. They can only shoot from the door. First, we study the doorway. Maybe get a shot into it?"

"No shooting. Who knows who we might hit. Nate, go back out the way we came and cover me. When we tell you,

shoot at the window. Then get back here fast. Charlie will wait for you. We'll cover from the front of the clinic. You come across fast. Then, we split and cover the front and back." Tom paused to see if anyone objected. "Then, Jane Mary, they know you. You call out to them. Get us in."

Nate studied the black rectangle high in the wall. Jane Mary's cover shots blew out the glass. Part of the frame hung across the hole like a crooked cross. As he waited for the command to fire, he searched for movement inside. Nothing. He aimed low, beneath the windowsill. Tom yelled, "Okay fire." He pulled the trigger and splinters of wood showered out and were lost in the gray. He was up and running to catch up with Charlie.

"Nate and Charlie, you ease around and cover the back door. Careful, they may have someone posted." Tom felt the weight of command. These boys were too young, too inexperienced to be in this battle. Charlie was carefree, always happy. Nate could be serious, but... Both were just boys. But, their mothers were gone ... their families were gone. Everyone was dependent on them now.

"It's clear," Jane Mary relayed to Tom.

"Then talk to them."

She inched toward the door, tight against the wall. Reaching around the jam, she found the knob, turned it and pushed. The door opened a few inches and was caught by the safety chain. She put her mouth near the jam.

"Uvlaalluataq (good morning). Hello? It's me, Jane Mary Tundra. We're over at the school. It's Tom and Nate and Charlie with me. We need to survive this thing together. Doc Lightman lost his leg. We need painkillers. Let us in. Please!"

Faintly, from inside the clinic she heard high, keening, screeching laughter - a terrifying sound. She motioned Tom to come close and listen.

"*Kinnaq* (crazy person). It's crazy laughter. Hear it?"

*C. Descry*

Tom leaned in, placing his ear as near the opening as he could without exposing his head.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“I heard someone.”

“The door is chained?”

“I think so.”

“Maybe we can get in the back.”

“The laughter came from upstairs, I think.”

“Okay. Cover here. I’ll go around with Nate and Charlie and check the back.”

Jane Mary put her ear against the jam, listening. She heard shuffling sounds and coughing, a hacking, drowning cough full of phlegm. An upstairs door squealed on its hinges. She heard footsteps. Someone pushed the front door shut. The loosened chain rattled against the wood.

“Jane Mary, we’re in. There are noises upstairs in the clinic.”

“You almost got shot! You should have ... sorry, I didn’t know it was you.” She hadn’t thought of her rifle. “Tom, I heard someone up there. Must be sick.”

“Okay, now we all take cover behind these crates here. Jane Mary, call up to them again.” Tom couldn’t see well in the dark, but light filtering in from the open door reflected off a jumble of crates. “Get behind something. Aim at the stairs.”

“This stuff looks like an earthquake hit.”

“My thoughts exactly, Charlie. They sure broke stuff up.”

“Hello upstairs. We’re friends. You know us. Don’t shoot at us.” She paused, waiting. “Okay? We’re not leaving until we talk.”

No answer.

“I’m Tom Wind. We’re holed up in the school. We never attacked you. We want to join forces.”

Weak laughter. Not happy, not rousing. Then coughing again. They heard the creak of the floorboards overhead. Someone was moving.

“You Eskimos?” The voice was weak, but they each heard it.

“We are. All of us,” Jane Mary replied.

“You won’t get me.”

Someone moved across the upstairs room, coughing. Slow steps. A dragging sound like a chair being moved.

“Careful! Stay behind something,” Tom warned.

They were straining to hear. Outside, the rolling thunder growled. Nate held his breath, listening.

The report shook the building and hurt their ears. There was no flash from a barrel, no whop of lead hitting around them. Seconds later, they heard the sound of a body hitting the floor. Then nothing.

“What the hell?”

“Hello? Hey, why did you shoot?” Jane Mary moved away from the large wooden crate she had crouched behind.

“Did he shoot himself?” Charlie asked.

No sound from above. Nate became aware his pants legs were covered with a film of ice ... the building they were in was freezing cold.

“We going up?”

“Not yet.” Tom replied.

They listened. Nothing.

“I’m going up. Cover me, but stay down here.”

“Careful Tom, there’s stuff all over the stairs. Like someone dumped trash.” Charlie, closest to the stairs, warned.

“No way to be quiet. We can’t cover you very well. Maybe...”

Before Jane Mary could finish, Tom was up and moving. The junk piled at the bottom of the staircase blocked the first three steps. He found a place to put his boot and pulled himself up by the rail, using his rifle like a stick. He moved up quickly, as close to the inside wall as possible. A can rattled down two steps before it caught in the junk. A Styrofoam cup squealed as his boot mashed it. There was no sound above.

### *C. Descry*

“Hey,” Tom whispered, “There’s a closed door.”

They heard a click as the lock disengaged. Tom pushed things down the stairs, clearing the upper landing. He lowered his body and pushed the door open. There was minimal light, but from the staircase, he could see into the room. Every piece of furniture, shelf, and storage cabinet had been tossed about and splintered into a mess. He stared through the door, waiting, listening, praying.

Nothing. No one moved. An acrid odor made him gag. He recognized the smell of death, the bite of gasses from bodies long dead. He had to go in. Someone was waiting.

Tom ignored their whispered questions. The door was back against the wall, wide open. Broken glass, ripped paper and pieces of ... gauze, bandages, scatterings of colored pills, dark scabs of dried blood, covered the floor.

He inched forward. The body lay next to a chair by the window, rifle grasped tightly in the stiffening hand. A man in his forties. Next to the suicide, a large Bible lay propped open. He kicked it shut, not wanting to know the man’s last message. He looked around, gagging. Across the room, stacked one on the other, were bodies. His people, old men, women, and children. Charlie’s mother. Nate’s. Joe’s and...

“Tom?” Jane Mary yelled up at him.

“You don’t want to come up here. Stay down there! The shooter’s dead. The clinic has been torn apart. There must be thirty dead. Been dead a while. There’s no one ... nothing here to save.”

“We’re coming up.”

“No, I mean it. Don’t come up here!”

“What about the shooter? Who is it? It’s Passco, isn’t it?” Charlie asked.

“Not one of our people. He’s that Preacher they sent. I recognize him. Don’t know his name. Wasn’t here long. Killed his self. There’s lots of others. Looks like someone brought them up here. Had to be early on.”

“If I can’t come up, how will I find the pain medicine Lightman needs?”

“Believe me, there is nothing left up here of any use. This place was torn apart, everything smashed or ripped to shreds. Believe me!”

Tom slammed the door behind him as he made his way down to them. He was shaking, still gagging at the smell that seemed to stick to the back of his throat.

“Believe me. Believe me. My God, he was insane.”

“Did you see my mother? Nate’s mother?” Charlie asked.

“No,” he said weakly. “they weren’t here. Only old people.”

Jane Mary knew Tom, knew when he lied. She bit down hard on her lip and mustered anger to give her strength.

## Chapter SEVEN

*“Denoyer, you’re thinking there’s no one left down there?”*

*Denoyer said nothing, but his sad eyes said yes. Nothing I worked for matters if they are gone. Then what? I have no reason to go on.*

The task of repairing the filters on the generators fell to Tom. He asked Janet and Madonna to help him. Nate and Charlie guarded them as they worked.

“Look over there!” Charlie whispered.

“I see it. It knows enough not to leave the boardwalk. Even blind, it seems to know where it is.”

“Watch it. I’ll check for others.” Nate moved to the other side of the walkway, keeping the workers in sight.

“We’re moving in now,” Tom said. “Keep us covered. When we start number two, the bears might do something.”

Nate checked his watch. “It’s eleven, Charlie. How long do you think we’ll be out here? I don’t like just standing around.”

At eleven-fifteen, they heard the small gasoline starter motor come alive with a “pop.” A minute later, as Tom engaged the clutch, the small engine bogged down as it cranked the big diesel. Black smoke poured from the middle roof stack. The filter snapped tight into its frame. The generator roared to life. Lights strung over the walkways glowed.

“I’m watching the bear. He must think it’s just more thunder. It doesn’t seem to bother him.”

The door opened. Janet and Madonna came out.

Janet smiled. "Tom says to come back for him in two hours. He's needed here. You can take us back, gentlemen."

Tom watched from the doorway. *Charlie and Janet, Madonna and Nate. They paired up. Hope springs eternal*, he thought as he watched the kids go arm-in-arm back down the boardwalk.

Two months passed. It wasn't winter, not as it should have been. The river didn't ice over. The cold arctic storms hadn't come. Instead, the heavens rumbled and sparked. Ash still sprinkled down from the clouds. The sun lay below the horizon. The bears, trying to hibernate in houses, awoke often to wander the village smelling out cadavers. The aurora borealis made the heaven glow with vibrant colors.

Susan knew what elders did - what aanas did. She led, nurtured, and helped the others put things in perspective. "The river water became so sulfuric the fish died. I think the bears followed the river eating dead fish, found protection and food in our village and gathered here. And, do you know what else I think? I think something drove these bears up river, not just the storm. That's why there are so many of them here - and lots died - remember how many lived along the river? How often we saw them from the air when we flew to Kotzebue?" Susan looked around the circle of faces, heads nodding they agreed.

Gurttá cleared her throat. "We will all live to tell these things to our children. We are the survivors. We must remember these times."

"And do you think we will have to go back to the way the old ones lived, Gurttá?" Janet asked.

"When this storm ends we will find our people and get things back the way they were. That is the way we should live."



*C. Descry*

“But the...the people from down below ... they want to leave.”

“This is not their land. This is our home. We don't need them here. They shouldn't be here, they have only brought us grief.”

“But they have all the good things.” A young Inupiaq boy said.

“We will trade with them, but these people here will be gone. We will be in charge of our lives again.”

Susan shook her head. “I do not blame them - anyone. We must love one another and work together. We are all together here. Beware of division amongst us, it will hurt everyone.”

The dark months passed. The clouds changed - got whiter - and then dirty rains came. Violent electrical storms raged within the torrential downpours that sent torrents of ash-laden muck into the river. Water filled the boats, flooded the plane, and undermined the boardwalk. Rainstorms trapped them inside as the ash had.

“There is no ice to break-up. There are no fish to catch. The sun can't get through to start the spring and burn the sickness from the land and from our people. The tundra can't bloom. That is why so many are sick. Pray for summer.” Gurtta Ambler lowered her eyes, giving them time to absorb her words.

“But aana, grandmother, where did the sickness come from? We didn't do anything wrong. God shouldn't be punishing us.”

“It's evil. Evil spirits. Our ancestors knew them. We had ways to deal with them until these others came to change us.”

“But, don't you know the ways?”

“The old ways were forgotten before I was born. The missionaries stole them from us. These spirits are not ours anyway.

They came from down below. They were brought here by the invaders.”

Jan Lightman listened and cold shivers ran his spine. He changed his position in the padded chair, his butt sore from sitting. His hip ached from keeping the stump of his right leg up. He was still too weak to move about, but his mind was sharp enough to know what was happening.

“Gurta, we have to work together to survive. It’s true we want to go home to our families. But it’s not true that we brought sickness to the village. The sickness will pass. We’ve always had fevers and rashes.”

“Doctor Lightman, this disaster is not of our making. It’s you people who have bombs and wars and...”

“Stop it! This misery is from volcanic eruptions. No one makes the volcanoes. We can’t control them. There is no one to blame. It’s Nature.”

She got up and walked away, a smirk twisting her mouth in disgust.

“Jan, we have heat and power as long as the diesel fuel holds out. We have enough food for another year, at least. People will get well. What bothers me is that there’s still no satellite TV. We can explain the lack of radio contact - the storms, the clouds, the electrical charges in the atmosphere. But, the satellite TV went out while you were in Kotzebue, right? We’ve had clear days - clear enough for the dish to receive a program. Nothing! All we get is that damned message: Acquiring Signal. Please Wait. That means the satellite is up there, but no one is sending programs from Earth.”

“Denoyer, you’re thinking there’s no one left down there.”

Denoyer said nothing, but his sad eyes said yes. *Nothing I worked for matters if they are gone. Then what? I have no reason to go on.*

### *C. Descry*

“But we survived. Others had to. If we get to Kotzebue, we’ll know,” Jan continued. “They got the big boat out of the river. It’s in the shop. They have the motors that were under cover. The store burned, but the shed with the gas tanks didn’t. There’s plenty of fuel.” Lightman became energized. “We can go out by boat. If only these blasted rains would end.”

“Most of the Inupiaq want to go to the coast with you.” Denoyer said. “Their ancestors always went to the sea when things got bad. There was always food along the sea. A few, maybe five, want to go to their camps and look for family. Gurtta says her people are waiting out there, but most everyone assumes they’re dead. Most want to go to Kotzebue. They’d all be gone from here if they could leave. Jan, lead them to Kotzebue and send help back. With you in charge, I’m confident you’ll get help.”

“No use talking about that now. Maybe by fall things will settle down.”

“We’ll keep signaling and listening. Some clear day we may see a contrail. I’m optimistic,” Denoyer said.

“Me too, my friend. Me too. You haven’t been out, but I can tell you the rains aren’t as dirty as they were. I think the sky’s clearing up. So’s the land. The rains have washed the ash and grit into the tundra and into the river. It will take the river longer to clear.” He studied Lightman’s face. The man was a skeleton. The loss of the leg and weeks enduring horrible pain turned his hair gray. “If it clears, you should be on the river soon.”

## Chapter EIGHT

*Jan, in this reality the dead are of little importance. They're just gone. It hurts, but the issue is our survival. If we survive, our seed goes on. That's the truth we have to accept.*

Denoyer came awake and looked into Debra's eyes. Kathryn's pale face was above hers.

"What...? Why are you shaking me?"

"Bobby and Joseph are gone. Suzie won't last. It got worse after midnight."

"Gone? You mean?"

"Dead!" Kathryn said, her voice flat with choked emotion.

"How could bad colds and rashes kill?"

"It's like the flu or some awful lung thing. It's killing the youngest and oldest. They're all sick. I don't know how Susan holds on. She won't last until morning."

"You got a few minutes Carl? Let's go into the kitchen where we can talk. I need help understanding what I need to do."

Denoyer got up and followed him, suspecting that Jan was fighting the same reality he was.

"Carl, I'm having a hard time gathering my thoughts. Tomorrow, I have to conduct the funeral. I mean, before, if one

### *C. Descry*

of the people died the whole village mourned. Now I have to give one service for all those we lost.”

“And you feel kind of numb. You feel we haven’t mourned enough, but the protection and survival of those here makes that impossible.”

“You know, then?”

“Jan, in this reality the dead are of little importance. They’re just gone. It hurts, but the issue is our survival. If we survive, our seed goes on. That’s the truth we have to accept. We survive if we maintain the critical mass necessary to provide food, clothing, and shelter, and if we can breed without genetic consequences. These Inupiaq people ... their history is one of population growth and then dying back. Many groups were too small to survive. They died out. Dead ends we call them. Survivors merged with others and grew their populations again so that they could provide for their needs. Here, in this unforgiving world, the archaeological record is full of successes and failures. It’s not the story of individuals, it’s about groups. That’s what we have to accept.”

“And we lost individuals who could have helped the group survive. Now we’re too few. We have natives who fear us and people like Passco to deal with, if they are out there. We have.... I’m not sure what we have.”

“If there are others out there ... I don’t necessarily mean this village but other survivors near enough or with the technology to contact us, then we will rebuild and have time to mourn the dead. If not? Well I guess the issue will be if a few Adams and Eves can start over.”

“You want me to tell them that, tomorrow?”

“Painful Reality. We are vital alive, soon forgotten and unimportant dead. No, hell no, you can’t tell them that.”

“But there was so much love for those we lost.”

“Love. Maybe that goes on regardless. Maybe that’s the energy of heaven you need to tell them exists, Jan. We all want to believe that. Even as we observe nature and see it’s not so.

Species, in Nature's scheme of things, survive through numbers, not because they love or think or have a high opinion of themselves. But of course, you can't tell them that, either. That's just the anthropologist in me talking."

"I'd like some help from God. Suppose he's listening now?"

"Sure, Jan. That's why we created him."

They sat together examining their thoughts. Jan Lightman broke the silence.

"Carl, I need to have a service for the living. I know you're trying to get me to deal with our reality, and I am. But I need to help heal if I can."

"Remember what Pericles said in his Funeral Oration?" Denoyer raised his hands, palms up. "Pericles said, 'If you are young enough to have other children, then do so. If not, try to live with your grief.' That was truth. We don't have to deal with the truth. Tell a lie they will be comfortable with. You have to tell them what they want to hear, Jan. Tell them God called them to his side. Tell them that they are still here in spirit. Tell them we will never forget those who have gone over, because we keep them in our hearts."

"You're cynical, Carl. Worse, I think you bask in your pain."

"What good is pain if you don't go with it? Maybe pain is what cleanses. Maybe pain is what it's all about. No, you're right. Ease the pain."

Denoyer poured coffee.

"I dream of my thirty-six acres of aspen trees in Colorado; being with my family again." He stared down at his missing leg and scowled.

"That's where you wife and kids are?"

"If I had listened to her, we'd have faced this thing together. My service tomorrow is about her too, you know. I'll be talking to myself."

### *C. Descry*

With the protection of guards posted to shoot bears, the procession went to the clinic building. Gasoline was sloshed on the walls. The dead were interred inside. A single torch was lit and thrown through the open door.

The fire caught and razed the clinic. Heat rising took with it the spirits of the dead. The aurora borealis lit the roiling clouds.

Jan Lightman pressed his clenched fists against his chest. “And there is no suffering where God has taken them. He saw them here, alone, listened to their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and brought them to be with them in heaven. They are in a better place. They are no longer alone.” He paused, adjusted his crutches and stood more erect. “They are gone, but we are here to carry on. Our focus is our future. We leave them here, knowing they are in a better place. For them, we will rebuild and see to it that they go on through us. If we stay together and see this thing through, we will honor them and that will be their greatest contribution.”

## Chapter NINE

*He looked across the room, counting. He knew the numbers, but he counted again to make sure. Twenty-two people. No young children.*

Gurtta Ambler sat surrounded by her Iñupiaq people. All but Jane Mary Tundra and Tom Wind.

“Aachikaan! Aachikaan! (Danger. Watch out). How many more do we have to lose for their sins? Their kind is trying to destroy us - our world. Now the children are dead, but our hope for the future did not die with them if we go out and find the rest of our people. How much longer will it take before you understand that this whole thing is a way of freeing us from the people who came from down below? Don't you see?”

She tuned her back to the group, rejecting them because they questioned her.

Jane Mary lay on her blankets, observing Gurtta. She was afraid of the hatred in the woman's heart and the message of discord she spread.

“Doctor Lightman, we need to stop her. She preaches fear and dissension in the way the stories say the old shaman used to control. She's dividing us.”

“Talk to them. Explain what Gurtta is doing. They're smart. They won't listen to her when they understand.”

“It may be too late. She knows enough about how the old shaman worked to make what she says believable.”



### C. Descry

The rains continued. Electrical storms raged. The earth shook with quakes that seemed to roll under them like waves. They suffered through two more intense volcanic storms. The grit clouds passed, but there was no way they could travel by boat while storms threatened. People were near the breaking point, unable to tolerate being packed into the small rooms with the sick and dying. Unable to get away from each other, some walked the cold halls, seeking space and time for themselves. Death left with the souls of the old and the young. Then weeks passed and no one died. "Perhaps the illness is over," Lightman announced at a meeting he had called to cheer people up. Hang on, this weather will let us go. Just hang on."

Denoyer ripped the page from the calendar. "July," he announced to the room. "We've been trapped in the school since late September." He looked across the room, counting. He knew the numbers, but he counted again to make sure. Twenty-two people. *No young children. Jan, Debra, Kathryn ... and me.. We're the only outsiders. Four of us, eighteen of them. Damn! It's not Us vs. Them. We are not their enemy as Gurtta preaches. Tom and Jane Mary, they're with us. I don't know how many others.*

## Chapter TEN

*Yeah, I know how they lived. People survived on the Old Portage Site for thousands of years. Well, not the same cultures, different cultures, but they survived, and I know how they made their livings.*

September:

*Almost a year. A terrible year. The bears are coming back. Why?*

“Jane Mary, what’s happening with the bears? Why are they coming back here?”

“Bears remember places where food is available, places to den. Their natural food sources are gone. Maybe something . . . like rising water is pushing them our way. Maybe their dens are covered or flooded. We have to expect them, Denoyer. We can handle them.”

“Why don’t they die?”

“A lot have. The survivors know we’re here. They’ve acquired a taste for us. We need to get out of this village.”

“Do you agree with Tom? Can the boat navigate the river now?”

“I think now’s the time to go.”

“Jan agrees with you. I don’t know.”

“They have the boat and plenty of supplies. Enough gas. We tested the radios, they all work. They’ll be in constant contact. They’re armed and self-sufficient.”

### C. Descry

“It may be too early to try ... maybe the wrong time of year, but there’s no way they will stay here another winter.”

“And if the river is blocked?”

“They’ll come back. There’s time before the river freezes. At least they will have tried to find help.”

“And you, Jane Mary? You want to stay here?”

“Doc Lightman wants me here.” She hunched her shoulders. “I understand.”

“So who goes?”

“Everyone who wants to, I guess. A few, Gurtta’s converts, are planning to go out to their camps. They’ll stay here for now. The boat will hold all who want to go to the coast.”

Denoyer thought, *Not everyone. I’m stuck here ... I agreed. It should only be a short delay anyway. They’ll find help and I’m out of here..*

Better weather encouraged them. The storm clouds became individual anvils, black and lit with electrical energy, but not as threatening. The river cleared somewhat, running black with volcanic grit. The wind shifted often, then blew steadily from the northwest. Lightman noted the powerful jet stream had moved south.

“Why leave anyone here? What if everyone goes in the boat?” Tom asked.

“Safety. If we leave this place unattended, the food will spoil and the bears will take over. We would never get things started again. If the boat can’t get through, we need a place to return to.”

He was getting around easier now. He used the crutches Jane Mary found in the wreckage of the clinic. He could put his stump down without the excruciating pain that kept him immobile for months. His energy was high with anticipation.

“Denoyer, before we leave I have some things I’d like to...” He paused, searching Denoyer’s face to make sure he

had his attention. "Remember when I asked you to plan for the worst-case-scenario?"

Denoyer sat back against the wall. "You asked me, 'What would an archaeologist who spent his career studying the ancient men of the arctic do to survive?'"

"Well?"

"You mean if you don't find help?"

"That, and if we don't make it and only a few of you are left. What are your plans if that happens?"

"Not a nice thought. I don't think that could happen, but if it did, Gurttta and the others would probably try to take over."

"Now do you see why I asked Jane Mary to stay?"

"Really? That's why she agreed?"

"I didn't give her a choice. Carl, listen. I've thought this through. If we don't make it, you have enough food and fuel for another winter. Watch out for Gurttta, she's full of hate. In the spring, I think she'll lead any who follow out to the fish camps. She believes there are others out there."

"I've been listening to her. She believes survivors are waiting, waiting for us to leave or die."

"They'll go. That will probably be the end of them, but you have to go too. You can't stay here. You have to get out on the river and survive as the ancients did. The bears will take over here, it's in their memory now. You should assume that Passco is out there. He probably teamed up with others. They'll try to take over when we leave. Besides, when the fuel oil is gone this building will be a deepfreeze; uninhabitable. Every system we depend on will break down. This is not a good location for survival. It's too far from the caribou migration trails. Tell me where you will go."

"I've done some planning. I agree about not staying here. If there are others out there, they'll come back and sack the place like they did the clinic. We would have that threat over us. You're right, this is not a good place to make a living as

### C. Descry

their ancestors did. The only place I know is the site up river. I know the Old Portage site. I left gear there and... Well, that's where I'd go."

"I agree. You've known that place for thirty years. Without a leg I could not survive on the land. I can captain the boat, walking won't be necessary. You know how to survive, that's why you're the logical person to stay."

"Yeah, I know how they lived. People survived on the Old Portage site for thousands of years. Well, not the same cultures, different cultures, but they survived, and I know how they made their livings." *I can prove that man survived there during the Pleistocene. What ever difference that could possibly make now. Damn!*

"Debra wants to stay with you. I understand. Kathryn is the problem. I don't think she will pull her weight on the boat - besides, she and I would be the only non-Inupiaqs. I think when she learns that Debra is staying with you and Jane Mary, she'll choose to stay here. She knows this place. She'll side with safety."

"Denoyer, we'll fix the best of the remaining boats up for you before we leave. There's plenty of gas if we don't come back and you have to go upriver. If we get delayed or lose contact - any reason - I'll know where to find you. I'm going to write this information in my notes, mark your location on the maps. Someone will find you if we don't make it."

"You'll get out. I'll keep things running here all winter. Come back for us as soon as you can. Don't get lost my friend. I'm going to retire and live next to you in your Colorado aspen forest. Count on it Jan Lightman!" *God damn it! How did I let this happen? Now I'm saddled with three damned women. Debra and I could probably make it to Nome. But Kathryn? Jane Mary will probably end up going with Gurtta. I'm supposed to nursemaid them?*

## Chapter ELEVEN

*Jane Mary, I pretend they're out there. We all pretend, but that doesn't make it so. We go on, that's all we can do. We don't have the information we need. This eternal processing will drive us crazy.*

“What happened Kathryn?”

“I wasn't going to wake you, but ... lots of static. We lost contact with Doctor Lightman and the boat. We kept trying. Then Doc came on again.”

“When?”

“Just a few minutes ago. I was talking to Doc. He said they were almost to Kotzebue and there was a lot of haze and patches of dense fog on the river. Then he said, ‘Wait a minute, there's a lot to tell you,’ then...then that's when all we got was static. Maybe a minute, it seemed longer.”

“And...?”

“When he got through again, his voice was different ... controlled, urgent, if you know what I mean. He said the river was blocked by muck and ash. They were starting to pack stuff and wade through it. He said the muck was like quicksand, but they had found a ridge where they would be able to walk. Then, he asked us to wait. That's when I called you.”

“Kathryn, can you receive?” The radio focused them.

“I'm here Doc. So is Denoyer.”

“Listen, there is a buckled-up volcanic flow like a ridge we can follow. We're packing our gear. The boat is useless. We'll

### C. Descry

leave it here so if we return ... but it's useless. The muck ruined the motor. It's stuck – I mean really jammed into the muck. I need to get us out of the boat and on the ridge so we can get to Kotzebue and the Sea. I'll contact you from the flow ... if we can get to it. Denoyer, don't try to come this way, it's just thick muck, down to the permafrost. The Wikasel turned into a lake of muck. We have to wade to get to the flow. Some places it may be too deep. Give me half an hour, at least. I have to focus on getting us across to the ridge."

"He's shut it off," Kathryn's voice was strained.

Denoyer's face showed his fear. He rubbed his eyes to push away the last crusts of sleep. "We can't do anything but wait. It will take them a while to pack up and get to the ridge."

Everyone stood around Kathryn and Denoyer. Kathryn held the mike, her finger poised to hit the send button. A long hour passed.

"Okay, send every five minutes." Denoyer nodded his head.

"Their radio must have gone out. They'll hook up one of the spares."

"How can he make it to the ridge with one leg?" Debra asked, not expecting an answer. "They'll get another radio on line. Don't worry. He'll tell us if something happened."

"I know, but it's been over an hour." Kathryn sobbed.

He studied her as she bent over the radio.

*Still dresses as if she were going to a dinner party. She takes care of her clothes and grooming. Not a hair out of place. So delicate. Her skin is almost translucent, so white. Full body - a model's body. How did she get up here? She's like a hot house flower. Sincerely trying to please me. In shock at first. Came out of it on her own. Spent her time with the kids until they were gone. Lightman said she's a new teacher. She stares at me, pouts, when Debra and I spend time together. She and Debra are complete opposites. Jane Mary thinks she's weak. She goes out of her way to do everything I*

*ask, but she's a liability.* "Look Kathryn, we know they are doing all they can to be safe. Let's give them time."

*Color in the sky. A good sign.* Denoyer stared out the window, across the snowfields to ... darkness; nothing. *More than a month since we lost contact. Damn you Jan, where are you?*

"This was the time I always liked best," Jane Mary came to his side and stood looking across the tundra. "It was the time we could travel. The tundra froze over and the river became a strip of ice. That's when we could go visiting. In my grandfather's time, they had dogsleds. Here at the school we had motor sleds. We went for miles. Teams came and went over the ice to play basketball. We put them up. Sometimes a blizzard came and they were stuck here for days. It was fun."

"The temperature is dropping. I hope things are getting back the way they should be," Denoyer said. *Debra and I could make it out of here with a sled. If it weren't for...*

"That's what Gurtta is saying. She will wait until break-up to leave. Will you give them supplies? She's been so nasty. I think she would kill us if she could."

"Of course. She can take what she needs. She might be right."

"I wish I could go out now." Jane Mary stared out the window.

"No, it's too dangerous. Wait, the bears will hibernate. They're hungry, but they'll go down."

"We should kill them in their dens."

"Maybe. For now it's important to stop them from getting in. They've broken into every wood building where they could rip a door open."

"They're trying. I'm not worried, we're prepared. You never stayed here in the winter. Where did you go, Denoyer? What was it like?"



### *C. Descry*

“My home in Tucson, that’s where the university I work for is. It’s probably eighty degrees down there now. I’d be walking around the desert in shorts. The U of A campus would be an oasis. I’d have presented my findings - the discoveries I made just before the Cut Off that would have changed the way we think of homo erectus in the Pleistocene - and I’d be ... well, Jane Mary, that’s not going to happen for a while. I don’t like it, but I’ve accepted that comes later. And I know in my heart that our people are lost. Jan would have contacted us by now.”

“It’s like my dad and brother. They just disappeared. They should walk in the door at any time.”

“Stop letting your mind go ... it’ll make you crazy!” Denoyer grabbed her arm and squeezed. “Jane Mary, I pretend they’re out there. We all pretend, but that doesn’t make it so. We go on, that’s all we can do. We don’t have the information we need. This eternal processing will drive us crazy.”

“And we’re already crazy enough, right? I am. I should never have gone into the clinic. Tom warned me, but I... Denoyer, I can’t get it out of my mind. It’s in my sleep. I’m fighting it.”

“We have to keep busy. Gurttta could turn on us - be dangerous. Not to you, but to Debra, Kathryn, and me. We’re from down below, and that makes us evil. She might try to do something to demonstrate her power.”

“We’ve got six months. She and her two followers plan to go after break-up. Then what?”

“We can’t leave until late summer. I promised Jan. Besides, the insects would eat us alive. September, the bugs will be gone. We can get up river in three days. First, we’ll build a pit house like the ones your ancestors used. Then, we’ll fill the larder and prepare for winter. With luck, caribou will use the portage. We have to believe some survived.”

“And Doc Lightman will find us there?”

“What else can we believe?”

## **PART TWO**



## Chapter TWELVE

*He began to extract the shell from the breech when he saw the bear, a galloping blur moving toward the camp, already half the distance, maybe twenty yards.*

Hate knotting his heart, Denoyer studied the great bear in the willows. Holding the rifle steady, squinting through the scope, he focused on matted hair waiting for the beast to rise, test the air, and puzzle the noxious scents of their camp. At this time of morning air drained away from the bear, down the Wikasel River, out over the tundra sea of plant life and black earth floating on six hundred feet of permafrost.

Eddies of cool, late September air plied the river on slapdash breezes. The grizzly caught scents and came erect, almost seven feet, maybe nine hundred pounds of *ursus horribilis*.

*This bear will die. A much needed addition to our larder.* He calmed himself as the giant came closer, working the riverbank, eating berries, plowing through rotting roots, stuffing itself in preparation for months of hibernation. *The beast knows we're here. He's not concerned. No enemies, no reason to fear our camp. He's a scavenger, like the ones that came to the school.*

He imagined its grunt as it came erect. At two hundred yards, it almost filled the scope. He lowered the rifle and slowly, quietly, seated a .270 steel jacket, 180-grain shell in the chamber. I have to kill it with one shot.

### C. Descry

Jerking its head, the big brown appeared to be searching the area with its eyes - had it been a man it would have - but he knew its vision was the poorest of its senses, if it wasn't blind from the ash. It pointed its nose, reading scent particles borne on the dancing air.

Denoyer grunted, surprised. *This isn't the fat young grizzly.* Through the scope he saw a big animal, a male. *Belly's more gray than brown. Shaggy coat is hanging on its frame. Ribs show through. An upper canine is missing, no, broken off. This bear is old, scarred from the ash, unable to add fat, desperate to find food: Dangerous.*

The rifle slid butt-first to the ground. He wanted nothing of this animal. *The coat is worthless.* He thought. *The meat will be stringy and tough; taste awful. I can't take this bear. No way. It will die soon. It won't make it through the winter.*

*Where's the young grizzly I saw yesterday? There isn't much time left to get it. The freeze is overdue. Besides, I have to conserve ammunition. God knows how long before - if ever - help comes.*

He heard angry voices before he noticed the bear's reaction. *Jane Mary and Kathryn, at it again, damn them!* Denoyer turned, disgust twisting his face, and watched as they brought their latest conflict out of the tiny pit house into the cold arctic morning. Jane Mary's voice pulsated across the tundra, down to the water, up across the rectangular scars of his archaeological dig, across the lumpy tundra to the willows and the bear.

Kathryn was close behind Jane Mary, her high-pitched perfectionist's viciousness ripping everything within range.

"Goddamn it, what the hell's up now?" he cursed. "Jane Mary has to be boss, has to be in charge. She pounds her Eskimo heritage into us. And beautiful Kathryn? Self-appointed princess. She can be such a bitch, always working to improve her world. Always angry, critical, unsatisfied - stuck in one mind-set. Thinks she knows what's best for everyone else, even though her own life is screwed. Damn her! Damn these women! If it weren't for them..."

*The grizzly will be long gone.* He got up, preparing for battle. “What the hell, I have to settle their goddamn disputes.”

He began to extract the shell from the breech when he saw the bear, a galloping blur moving toward the camp, already half the distance, maybe twenty yards. He cleared his mind trying to understand. The great beast stopped, rose on its hind feet. Swinging its massive head from side to side, it caught scents and sounds. The women screeched at each other making noises like a catfight. The old bear dropped to all fours, stalking.

Puzzled, slow to comprehend what was happening, Denoyer focused. *Does it think this is an easy kill, like the story of the great bears attacking caribou when the males lock in combat?* His mind cleared. *The cartridge? Is it in the chamber or did I...?* He opened the breech, sliding it back slowly so as not to eject a bullet if it were there. The brass and dull lead showed. He slammed the bolt forward and raised the rifle, squinting as he found the bear in the scope.

The argument stopped, followed by cries of alarm. The bear stood twenty feet from them, erect, trying to scent its prey. *I have to shoot, but the angle is impossible. If I miss, the bullet will slam into ... where's Debra? It's just Jane Mary and Kathryn out there. Back-shooting a grizzly is stupid! I have no choice. I have to strike the spine, through to the heart ... impossible at this angle! The spine is my only chance.* His finger found the crescent of the trigger. His whole body shook.

“Breathe. Aim. Squeeze. Remember, calm down!” He fought for control.

The women hugged each other, screaming.

Why do women scream? *Why don't they shut the hell up and do something to protect themselves?*

The bear sensed food. He moved forward, one awkward step at a time, razor sharp claws scything the air, a wise old bear taking his time. Denoyer shook. He didn't have a good shot. He scoped the hairy back, raising the rifle slowly until

### C. Descry

the crosshairs rested just below the massive neck. He could see the cleft of the spine between the muscular mounds of shoulders. He could also see the hut and the women. *I've never fired this gun. I have no idea if the scope is sighted-in. I've got to act - even if I miss.*

*The bear might turn and come for me. I'd save the women and get another shot. But from this angle the bullet could go through the bear and hit the women.*

When she saw the bear approaching, Debra gagged on her fear, unable to stave off weakness. She dropped to the pile of hides at the mouth of the pit house entrance, eyes closed, fighting for control. "Denoyer will save me," she cried. *If he suspects I hid, quaking and crying while the bear approached... I must help him.*

She fought her fear. "I might die attacking the bear, but that doesn't matter." Picking up the only weapons at hand, she pushed the curtain door aside and ran out. *He won't know I'm a coward, not if I attack with only a pan and spatula.*

The shaking stopped. Debra gained control. *He will always respect me. The bear's blind. He's sniffing. He hears me, he's moving his head this way. Denoyer can't shoot with Kathryn and Jane Mary in the way.*

Debra ran out yelling; beating the spatula against the pan. "Get down! Get down on the ground so Denoyer can shoot! Drop! Now!"

He caught her words: "Drop down, both of you. Now!" and fired half a second after the women hit the ground. The bear jerked back, its head thrown up. It seemed to be melting, folding; collapsing. He jerked the bolt back, ejected the spent cartridge, forced another in its place, and jammed the bolt home. He raised the rifle, the giant was down, its last roar of defiance and pain escaping as a hiss through the severed wind-pipe. Spine cut, all communication between the beast and its body ceased. It never took another breath. If its brain gave the muscles commands, if it could after the shock of a 180-grain

steel jacketed chunk of lead hit with tons of force, they never got through.

It lay in its matted, stinking coat, eyes bulged out from the bullet's impact, claws curled at the end of massive limbs, blood steaming in the cold air.

They crouched, staring at the unwanted kill, the wattle and daub hut they had just completed, at their backs.

"That bear wouldn't have survived the winter," Jane Mary commented. They agreed, the four of them, the first time they all agreed on anything.

"It attacked out of desperation." Denoyer said sadly. *I should have let it get them. Damned fools. That would have simplified things. I could have saved Debra and...*

"Brown bears don't attack like that. This one has eaten human flesh," Jane Mary declared in her bossy, nasty voice of authority the others resented so much.

Denoyer glared at her, cowering her with his power.

"You two brought him in. What the hell were you thinking about? You want to catfight, you'll bring trouble ... an end to us all. It has to stop!"

Kathryn looked down, a smile hidden in her parka collar.

"I was right," she whispered to herself. *Why can't they understand that I know what we have to do to survive? Jane Mary's always wrong, and this proves it. Her anger built. She hid it. Denoyer knows I'm right. Damn Jane Mary and Debra. I'm stuck with the two of them. They're always trying to discredit me, make me the fool. Get between Denoyer and me. Jealousy rose in her, fed by anger. I'll keep him. He loves me. He needs me. I'll do what I know is right,* she thought, confident she could.

She put on her happy face. Some rigidity left her body.

"Hey guys, its over. Now we have to butcher this damned thing."

Denoyer observed her transformation and cringed.



### C. Descry

Jane Mary held the knife in both hands, pressing on the handle and the blade, wishing it were an ulu butchering tool designed for this work. She would have Denoyer make an ulu. *These knives from the school kitchen are sharp, but the design is wrong. Choosing to stay with Denoyer was the right choice, not that there was anyone else left to follow. When the bear charged, he kept calm and fired. Kathryn didn't even know - that bitch - didn't even suspect the risk. If he missed the bear or hit it in the shoulder or...or if the bullet hadn't struck bone and shattered? I've seen a caribou decapitated in one swipe, like Joe. We'd be dead, and what would Denoyer do then? What would he do if I got killed? He'd die out here. He thinks he knows the land...how could he? He isn't Iñupiaq. He didn't grow up here. He thinks his knowledge of the past - the way the old ones survived - the crap he thought he learned from his digging, will save us. Damned fool, but he was the right man to follow. Doc Lightman, crippled, gone now, lost somewhere; dead.*

“There isn't much fat in the cavity or around the organs. Not enough for light, fuel to cook with, heat. We must strip the meat and dry it.” *I'll get lazy Kathryn to pound it until it's powder. It's something worthwhile she can do when we're frozen in and have to have tasks to occupy our time.*

She cut meat from the giant's leg and began to strip it, blade held like a draw knife, knees planted, head down for power. Her stout, short body almost bear like. Her cropped black hair sticking out from under her stocking cap like burned bunchgrass.

“Watch me!” she commanded. “You have to learn how to do this. Denoyer must get another bear. The caribou will be here soon. You'll have to do this, I can't be expected to do it all.”

Jane Mary looked up to see Kathryn staring at the pile of entrails, stripped of fat and organs, now oozing partially digested brown ragout onto the ground.

“If we were really serious about surviving,” Jane Mary said in her most insulting, lecturing voice, we would save that. The contents of his stomach would taste damned good by the break-up.”

Kathryn paled. Still in control, still keeping her special smile, she hoisted the bucket containing the heart, liver, kidneys, and testicles, and went to the river to wash them.

Jane Mary felt good being in control, holding information. She had to be in charge. *Denoyer respects me and follows my lead. Kathryn started the argument. She brings me trouble. Too bad the bear didn't get her, or even Debra, although Debra was brave. Debra will follow. But with them gone, Denoyer and I can survive. He has to know that.*

Denoyer examined the hide as Jane Mary cut it free. “It isn't even worth scraping. Look, the ash ate the hair off. It isn't pliant. What should we do with it?”

He turned to Jane Mary and waited. She got up slowly, wiping gore from her hands. Her round face glowed with energy, making her very attractive.

“Take it to the pool above our fishing weirs where the water stands. Weight it down. Let it soak. In a week, we can scrape the fat and what hair remains off. We can use it on the ground. We need a young bear, Denoyer. A fat one.”

“I know. I'm going out to see if I can find the young one. This old monster probably scared him away.” He dragged the hide to the shallow pool and let it sink. Then gathered rocks and dropped them on top. The water turned crimson. The air soon cleared of stench.

Denoyer rejoined the women and checked his rifle. “I'm going for the young bear. Won't be out of sight of camp. Kathryn. Debra. You need anything; I'll just be over where I can see the willows. Thanks for helping, we're a good team when we work together. Wish me luck.”

### C. Descry

When he could see the band of willows along the river-bank, following the line of an ancient meander, a long by-passed oxbow, he sat on the capstone of the cairn his crew built years ago over a datum point. From here he had mapped the peninsula and all fourteen cultural levels. From this set point every feature and artifact was given a provenance. He knew the view as a young man gains knowledge of female anatomy, by sight and touch. To the south, the sun seemed stuck about twenty degrees above the horizon. It moved, but not as much down as across the vast southern sky. He was pleased the filter of volcanic ash was almost gone from the sky.

He hoped to see a young golden grizzly wending through the willows, rooting, hogging, stuffing. The bear wasn't there, the birds were quiet.

*Maybe the old one drove him off and he found another place to feed. Maybe some inner time clock signaled him to find his place and hibernate. He stopped to study the tundra. The blueberries and cranberries are almost gone. The leaves are turning, every russet shade graying. He knew the rich fall colors of sedges, lichens, mosses, and stunted shrubs would soon be frozen under a sea of white.*

*September, the only time I love being here.* It had always been his special time, his time alone with the ancients, the wilderness. Each year he breathed a sigh of relief as the last float-plane lifted off carrying his students and Eskimo crew back to Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Anchorage, and way southeast to Tucson. Each year, he took a week or two alone at the end of the season, time he needed to close the site, compile his notes, and sit for hours imagining the lives of those who came before.

*Fall, the short season after summer heat and misery when the air is free of biting insects, the skies occasionally clear of the dismal occlusion of arctic weather. It's good to be here.*

The fear of winter rose in him, he ignored it and focused on the beauty of the day.

The wind rose, carrying the rich fragrance of the tundra, the chill of arctic shadows, the promise of the power it would unleash when the night came. He squinted and searched the willows. No bear. He heard the women talking, wisps of sound, disconnected words. None used in anger, thank God.

*Three goddamn women as different physically, mentally and in temperament as could be. I would never have picked them, not one, well, Debra. She's a trooper, goes along without giving me grief.*

He studied her. She stood to one side of the giant carcass, long brown hair tossed back, red turtle neck showing through the open front of her parka, the slender body - small breasts - he had pressed against so many times since Andy Passco disappeared and they found strength being together. *On the campus in Tucson, she wouldn't be noticed. Others would describe her as mousey, or a "plain Jane."* Here, so many women are tough and solid like men, like Jane Mary. *Debra is lithe and feminine; softer than the land. I'm married, but...*

He watched as all three bent over the carcass of the fallen beast, harvesting. In his mind's eye, he replayed Jane Mary's glee as she stood, short legs straddling the bear stretched out on its back, and ran the knife up its belly in one razor-smooth cut. *She looked up at me, grinned as if possessed by lust, grabbed the bears genitals, cut the scrotum free of the body, dropped the knife on the gut, and with both hands peeled the sack inside-out, dropping the testicles onto the bear. The others giggled, unnaturally, afraid to look at me. Jane Mary gave me another savage look, picked up the testicles, and dropped them into the bucket Kathryn held for organs.*

The memory chilled him. He knew Jane Mary was obsessive; driven by desires she forced on others. She was the alpha female. She made that clear their first night at this camp. She would sleep on his left, between him and the others, a position she believed due her. *Nulik* (to have sex) was a word he had learned the meaning of.

### C. Descry

He thought, *it's warm enough in the pit house at night for each of us to sleep in separate piles of hides and blankets. In the three weeks since we arrived, I've been able to avoid pairing, sex - even with Debra - and those complications. It hasn't been easy. But what will happen when the outside temperature drops to thirty or forty below? When it is dark most of the time? When we sleep curled around each other for warmth, our naked bodies touching? When the three of us spend the long months trapped in the tiny hut? Oh well, it's better than having another man in our group. If Jan Lightman had come with us, the dynamics would have caused problems. I miss Jan's company, wherever he is, if nothing happened to him. I'm not sure I can get it up with anyone but Debra. Jane Mary would be like fucking a fireplug.*

Small black flies buzzed around his head. *Thank God they don't bite.* They annoyed him. *With the freeze-up they will be gone ... so will the birds and bears. The caribou will pass, dragging their coattails of wolves - why are they so late? The weather is retuning to normal. Wolverine might try to raid our storage pits. The wind will blow dry snow around the high desert, tiny cutting blades of ice, abrading our skin. The river will freeze solid, caught between permafrost and bitter air. We will begin the never-ending task of trying to light the hut and melt snow and ice for drinking as the ancients had. And, he thought, cooking. We can't eat raw or rotten meat like they did. That would be our downfall.*

He saw movement at the far end of the crescent of willows. Birds rose in the air, black specks betraying the passage of a bear too far away to make out. He hoped it was a young grizzly, not badly damaged by the ash. He'd know soon enough if it came from the west where the ash storms were worst or east, where it seemed some creatures survived without physical damage.

On the ridge where the ancient Wikasel River once raged glacier-fed fury, he saw the betraying white patches of caribou rumps. A sight he had been waiting for, praying for. *Maybe*

*these are the first small herds and the others are behind, bucked along by powerful young males. The western herd used to number almost five hundred thousand caribou. Since the Cut Off, the occlusion and warming that followed, we haven't seen the big herd. Perhaps, their carcasses lie where gas and starvation dropped them. Hopefully, the herd shifted to the east and survived. Maybe, confused by the changes in light and temperature, the animals temporarily changed their migration route. With the weather returning to normal, he prayed, migrating animals would mob the ancient portage area. He would take all they needed.*

Without using the scope, he could see a great bear cruising the riverbank. It zigzagged along, stopping to investigate what he imagined was the rotting carcass of a whitefish, then, over to something caught in the willows near the water. It headed toward the point of the peninsula and their camp. Denoyer smiled. He would get in position and shoot it. But first, he'd let it carry its bulk as near to the camp as he dared let it come. When he killed it, they wouldn't have to pack it far.

He stood, his free arm raised, waiting for the women to see him. Then he turned toward the bear, stuck both arms and the rifle in the bear's direction, pointing until he knew they understood. They would remain quiet until they heard his shot.

## Chapter THIRTEEN

*She stared at her hands. Not a nail left. Red, rough skin, black dirt embedded forever, cuticles stained. Plastering mud and weaving willows destroyed years of care.*

Debra stood back from the stripped carcass of the old bear, scanning the sky, shielding her eyes with her hand, looking for contrails.

*Two years ago, she thought, the sky was laced with contrails, but not the day Passco and I lifted off from our camp on the Kobuk River. Passco extended our stay, never knowing one extra day would completely change our lives.*

She recalled the water streaming off the pontoons as the powerful radial engine lifted them into the arctic air. She saw the black of the electrical storm off to the south, rapidly obliterating the sky. She remembered that....

“What the hell are you doing standing there like you expect me to do all the work?” Jane Mary screamed at her.

Debra jumped back, striking a willow branch protruding from the roof, ripping her parka. Jane Mary, bloody hands clenched into fists, stood over the carcass and glared.

“Hey, quiet!” Kathryn whispered. “Look! Denoyer’s going for that bear.” *This is a perfect example! They screw around, losing sight of the big picture. Jane Mary is so volatile, so bossy. Dumb bitch! But clever. She’s always getting away with things. Debra’s daydreaming. She should be hanging meat. If it weren’t for me,*

*nothing would get done right. Debra goes along with Jane Mary because she's weak. If it weren't for me...*

*It's clear I have to keep them in line. Denoyer expects that from me. He values my opinions. After all, I organized the little children and got them under control. I was the one the teenagers came to for advice. I told them not to go with Lightman on the boat. I was in charge of them, they should have listened to me. It isn't my fault they died. I could have saved them if I was in charge. I have to take charge now or we won't survive.*

*I'll write them notes. List the personal problems they need to work on. That's fair. It's better than confronting them each time they screw up. Carl will respect me for that. I can structure evening discussion time. With lists of their faults, I'll take them step-by-step and show them how to better themselves. Great plan. Only ... people like Jane Mary and Debra aren't in touch with personal growth. Obviously, that's why they have problems. Maybe Denoyer will require them to attend the meetings? No, he has enough problems. I have to come up with a way to educate them, help them.*

Kathryn smiled sweetly, letting her voice quake just a little to communicate a personal problem. "Ladies, I'm going inside for a few minutes. Do you mind?"

*It was dark in the hut. She hated almost having to crawl through the tunnel to get inside. I explained that to Denoyer. He wouldn't budge. He had to build the damned thing exactly the way he thought - assumed would be a better word - the Denbigh people built theirs. Well, they were wrong or they wouldn't be dead now. Time will prove I'm right. We have to have windows and ventilation. The storage area tunnel should have been higher. Will they ever learn? Will they ever listen to my voice of wisdom? My common sense? I understand architecture, they don't.*

*Denoyer ordered us to conserve the batteries. But this is an emergency, exactly the type of emergency we conserve for. She turned on the large lantern and opened her make-up case.*

Kathryn smiled as she imagined her image: Sweetness and light communicating her love and graciousness. She changed



### C. Descry

her smile, trying to pout, look sexy, as Smythe the photographer trained her to look for the camera. "You're a sex kitten," he said, "You want to suck the life out of a man." She pursed her lips, wet them, and tried again, imagining the way she looked, wishing for a mirror, but assured without one. *Denoyer likes that look. I'm a lady. Don't they know that? There's so much about me they don't know. I am a model. I received the Teacher of the Year award. I wouldn't be here if that bastard Smythe hadn't betrayed me.* She took her Barbie Doll out of the case and held it as she had since she was a child. The sound of her own voice gave her comfort.

"Dolly you're my confidant, my best friend. You remember how it was." She closed her eyes, fondling the doll, remembering. "Dolly, the photographic studio was a dance studio. I won the beauty pageant and was chosen as a model for Smythe, The Photographer of Fashion. I knew exactly what to do and how to act. Smythe - typical man - was so dumb. I manipulated him like putty. I can control men, Dolly.

"Just ask me what we should do next,' I had to tell him. He caught on quick. Then, after almost three hours doing fashion sets, he said he was dissatisfied with me. I never suspected it was a trick to expose my imperfections.

"He told me, 'I'm not getting your best, Kathryn.' What a mocking, superior voice he had. I blew up, he tried to cool me down with compliments. He didn't dare touch me.

"What should we do to bring out your best?' he asked me. He was so ignorant. I told him I didn't like fashion sets. I was tired of them. I needed to be active, dynamic.

"No Kathryn,' the bastard said, 'you're too stiff. You don't move well. You aren't in touch with your body.'

"I corrected him. I told him I knew how to dance and move. He tricked me, Dolly. He said something like, 'No, little girl, you're too inhibited. You don't know yourself. You're afraid to be seen. You think your body is of no consequence, maybe even dirty or...?'

“I told him, he was wrong. How dare he presume to know about me!

‘I watch you, as a photographer. That’s what I do. I photograph women. I know women and how they are with their bodies. You are not in touch with yours. You would be afraid to be naked in front of the camera, free of props, just you and nothing to hide behind.’

“That’s when I thought I could prove myself. Dolly, I didn’t know he was using me. So I told him to set the cameras, I was ready.

“The strobes flashed and all three cameras clicked away. I twisted and writhed, letting him see that my body was simply the tool of my trade and I, the master of both.

“Dolly, honey, I showed him what a professional model can do. I was more than he could deal with. He didn’t have what it took, and he knew it. That’s why he avoided me, Dolly. What did he know about art? That’s probably - in fact I’m sure of it - when he decided to hurt me.

“I bested him. He never called me again. Deep inside, I suspected something was wrong. I asked myself, what had he seen? Stiffness? Awkwardness? Maybe...? Then, oh damn, I knew. How could I have been so stupid? My right breast, that stupid mound, is smaller than my left. My body isn’t perfect, like yours. I’m deformed. I learned I could never let anybody see me naked again. How could I have been so wrong, Dolly? Why did I blame my imperfections and not suspect he was using me?”

Outside, she heard Jane Mary yelling at Debra. She couldn’t make out the words, but the anger came through. She smiled and turned back to Dolly.

“Remember? I graduated from Columbia, summa cum laude with teaching certificate and took that job in that prestigious Maryland suburb? I did everything right. It paid off. I dated Dan because he was a lawyer from a major firm. He was perfect for me. I did everything I could to prepare my-

### C. Descry

self. I bought those two books someone recommended about joy, and a subscription to Architectural Digest to improve my mind. The books, *The Joy of Cooking*, and, *The Joy of Sex*, taught me the ways to a man's heart. I thought the *Joy of Sex* should really be called, *Toy of Sex*. You're so lucky, Dolly, you will never have to go through that kind of invasive stuff.

"I know I didn't talk to you much in those days. I'm sorry. I think it was difficult for me to discuss some of the things Dan made me do. It was difficult to understand back then, but I know now.

"I learned to give him my special smile and coo at him as if he sent me to the moon. But there was something wrong with him. He got angry after sex. Even my cooking didn't please him. He told me he was going to date other women. I never heard from him again and that's when I knew he was queer or something.

"I was so foolish, my little friend. He was shallow, a stuffed shirt. How blind I was in those days. It might have been depressing, would have been, I guess, if I hadn't been nominated for teacher of the year. It really wasn't a surprise. I coached my students and helped them with the nomination forms and letters. Everyone agreed I deserved it.

"My picture appeared in all the papers. But then, I learned what Smythe's evil game had been. Other pictures appeared in *Stud and Socket* magazine, including a horrible fold-out with a staple that looked like I was wearing a metal G-string. The caption read: Teacher Of The Year.

"You didn't know all that was happening. I should have told you, but.... Well, I'm telling you now. I got hired at a job fair and was on a plane to this remotest hell by the end of July. The worst part, the part I can never live down, is that sleazy SOB Smythe showed the world my deformity."

She carefully straightened Dolly's dress, smiled at her friend and kissed her.

“Dolly, it was my deformity that threatened my belief in God. Why, if I was created in His image.... No, I thought, catching a major breakthrough in my religious understanding, it must have been Her image. But then, why two? One uniform breast across the chest - cows have one udder - it could still have two nipples, that would have been much better. Why didn't She know that? That's when I knew the Goddess is fallible and there is no God.

“Dolly, when we arrived in Whitefish, I was totally blown away because there were no roads, cars, trucks, cafes or hangouts. Just a few rows of unpainted shacks, my shabby apartment, and the modern school, connected by boardwalks swaying and undulating over the swampy tundra. At night, I kept sane by reading Architectural Digest and I watched the world pass on satellite TV. A long, miserable month. I apologize, I didn't talk with you. Then the Cut Off happened. In a way, it brought out the best in me.”

She stared at her hands. Not a nail left. Red, rough skin, black dirt embedded forever, cuticles stained. Plastering mud and weaving willows destroyed years of care.

“I spent thirty dollars a week for manicures. My hair too - more like straw than silk now. Years of careful grooming wasted. Years of....”

“Kathryn, he's getting ready to shoot. Get the hell out here!”

“Damn it Jane Mary, don't you think I know?” She carefully placed Dolly back in the case, turned off the lamp, pulled on her parka, and went out.

## Chapter FOURTEEN

*His mind clouded, his muscles froze. A primeval instinct forced its way through the paralyzed passages of his nervous system. From deep within his primal brain, he felt the urgency of instinct and opened his mind to it.*

Jane Mary cleaned her hands with volcanic ash and mud, rinsed them in the river, and dried them on her pant legs. She saw Denoyer leave the cairn and move slowly toward the willows. She called quietly to the others, then remembered that Kathryn was in the hut. She went to the entrance to the tunnel and ordered Kathryn out. *Damn her. Milluks and a utchuk, that's all she is. (Breasts and a vagina).*

"Everything's so unjust," Jane Mary said under her breath. *They're so ignorant. I'm left to protect them. At least Debra is alert, even though she says she can't see Denoyer. Well, she better. There's no hope of new glasses out here. Damn, the man is in plain sight, slinking toward the willows. I understand. Being out here is strange for them, like the first time I came to Whitefish and tried to understand the culture of the lower forty-eight. They have no way of knowing the old ways, the Eskimo ways. What really pisses me off is that they don't know that they don't know and they don't care that they don't know. I know things, but they don't care. It leaves me only one way to help them. I have to bulldoze them into doing what needs to be done. Someday they will understand and*

*thank me. Denoyer understands. How strange to have ended up with him.*

She smiled, it was the right choice, Doc Lightman's choice. She looked up, searching for Denoyer.

He was making his way, crouching, toward the river.

Debra stood next to her, searching for him. "I can't see him, Jane Mary. Can you point him out?"

She attempted to point him out. "Debra, what is wrong with your eyesight?" Kathryn joined them.

"Why's he wearing black? Where did he get that blanket or whatever?" Debra asked.

"Oh, I see him." Kathryn announced. "How did he get down there?"

Jane Mary looked at them and, following the direction they were looking, saw a bear. Not a grizzly, a big black coming out of the river. She looked back toward Denoyer. He had stationed himself at the edge of the willows, focused on something to his left. She scanned that direction and saw the back of a golden. "Denoyer is unaware of the black bear. He's between the two."

The black was moving in his direction. From the way it came erect and then dropped to all fours, ran forward and came erect again, she assumed it had Denoyer's scent and was investigating. Denoyer didn't see it.

The grizzly came up on its hind legs, rolling its head around, testing the air. Denoyer got down on one knee, rifle ready, waiting for it to come closer. His back was to the black.

Jane Mary screeched, "Look out," hoping her voice would alert Denoyer. Her yell, caught the brown's attention. He dropped down.

Denoyer lowered the rifle and, highly irritated, gave a quick look back toward camp.

"Damned women. I told them to..." he saw the black.

### C. Descry

“He’s between the bears,” Debra cried. She spotted the grizzly’s back, bobbing up and down as it bashed through the willows straight for Denoyer.

“Get me the other rifle!” Jane Mary shoved Debra toward the hut. Kathryn stood, unsure what was happening. She wouldn’t wear her glasses. She barely made out shapes.

Jane Mary watched, helpless, as the bears approached Denoyer. “Shoot one, then the other,” she yelled, suspecting he was frozen with fear. The bears closed and stood. She heard their roaring challenges.

“Damn! Where’s the other rifle Debra? Get out here!”

Denoyer was kneeling between the two monsters.

“Shoot! Shoot! Denoyer, shoot!” She screamed at the top of her lungs.

The bears faced each other, maybe thirty feet apart. She knew grizzly bear behavior. Grizzlies were great at bluffing. They charged, growling, scything their claws, flailing their arms, then stopped just short of contact, waiting to see if the other would give ground. Grizzlies and blacks were enemies, competitors for the same turf, but she had never heard of them fighting each other. A brown would chase a black away ... unless the black outweighed it. Both seemed equal as they faced each other, menacing.

His mind clouded, his muscles froze. A primeval instinct forced its way through the paralyzed passages of his nervous system. From deep within his primal brain, he felt the urgency of instinct and opened his mind to it. Some of the paralysis left. His muscles loosened. He began to function. He stared up at the bears, then down at his rifle. An inner voice told him to overcome shock.

The roars were deafening. He was too close to the monsters to aim with the scope.

*Is the safety off? What if I shoot one, the other will get me. Stay low, be perfectly still. Wait.*

The bears circled, each afraid to give ground for fear of being attacked. The black brushed by him, knocking him off balance. The brown moved forward, then circled the other way. He was aware of the stench, the noise; fear.

Without warning, the black gave ground, turned, dropped down, and ran over him, knocking him onto his back. He felt stabbing pain as the black's powerful rear claws dug into his chest as it launched itself over him and into the willows. He lay flat, holding the rifle in a death grip. Time stopped.

Debra came running to Jane Mary, jammed the stubby .30-30 at her, yelling "Here!"

Jane Mary knew Denoyer was down in front of the victor. She ran toward them, placing her feet carefully, fully in control. As she moved, she cocked the lever, chambered a shell, and rested her finger on the smooth metal trigger guard. She knew about guns. She wouldn't place her finger on the trigger until she was ready to shoot.

The pain from the black's claws cut through him. The grizzly was down on all fours, grunting, pounding the ground with its front feet as it bucked its body in short jumps toward the direction the black retreated.

On his back, eyes filled with tears, he pointed the rifle and rolled toward the great hulk. It turned toward him, filled with adrenaline and anger, ready to tear him apart.

He couldn't aim. The scope was useless. He pointed the rifle and fired. There was an echo...no, another shot. The grizzly snapped erect, roaring, foaming blood gushing from its mouth. In one swift move it lunged for him. He felt his body lifted and thrown to the side. Then its hairy mass was on top of him. Brilliant white lights flashed behind his eyes.



## Chapter FIFTEEN

*In his mind he imagined the plane was on time. Jerry picked him up and within days he was back at the University of Arizona with his treasures.*

Unconscious, Denoyer drifted on his dream, seeing himself clearly, remembering his find and imagining his life as if the Cut Off had never happened:

Knees soaked from the damp earth. Back aching from leaning over the excavation, he scraped the dark soil with his trowel until he was certain he had reached undisturbed ground. The light was fading. The wind-chill sapped his strength. Clear plastic bags strewn around him held pieces of stone - lithic treasures - he had carefully removed. On each bag, he had recorded provenance data in permanent marker. The bags held evidence - a story he was the first human in at least 120,000 years to know. He stood, gathered his treasures, and made his way across the bulge of the ancient river's meander, down past the scars of sites his crews dug over the years, to the point of the peninsula and his tent. No other humans were within hundreds of miles. His beaming smile of self-satisfaction was only for himself.

'The University of Alaska geologist gave me correct information. The current course and benches of the Wikasel River were carved out or deposited at the end of the Wisconsin, within the last fifteen thousand years.

“If you’re looking for evidence of human habitation prior to the last ice age,” she told me, “you’ll have to look on the ridges a mile or so back. It’s what we discovered all along the Beringia land passage, the ridge tops weren’t glacially altered during the last ice age.”

‘I waited until the students and crew were gone before surveying the ridges. “I’m staying on to close the site, I told them.” They expected that. In two weeks Jerry Wingman, my bush pilot friend, would pick me up.

‘When everyone was gone, I walked the ridges, trained eyes searching for depressions, surface artifacts, unusual signs of any kind. I stopped to rest at a place where the ridge folded into a small knoll, brushed the ground, picked-up and examined a flake of stone the likes of which I had seen only once before. I studied it. It was identical to the hand tools I sketched as a student researching Mousterian period sites in Central Asia.’

His mind ranged as if he continued explaining his find to students: ‘The earliest human habitation site known in Alaska, is in the interior. Broken Mammoth dates to 11,800 before the present, well within the current interglacial: the Holocene. Those early hunters were not Eskimo. They were Athabascan, speakers of a language group called Na-Dene. The stone artifact I found was not related to them. Nor was it Eskimo. It was of the type used by homo sapiens, probably Neanderthal, who flourished for over 350,000 years, and died out, were eaten, or interbred with homo sapien sapien, Cro Magnon, in the late Pleistocene, before the last ice age.

‘I studied the terrain, mentally plotting how the tool eroded out and moved down to where I found it.’ He saw himself creeping up the ridge looking for more evidence of a site. ‘At the remains of an ancient bench running along the ridge from east to west, I found scattered stone, did a quick dog-leash search, and collected enough material to confirm a site. Setting a datum point and grid, I began my excavation.

### *C. Descry*

In two weeks, bagging evidence that would convince even the most rabid skeptics that I found Mousterian culture in the new world, I knew my place in history was preserved.

‘I packed up my gear and readied for the flight back to civilization and the accolades I received from my peers.’ In his mind he imagined the plane was on time. Jerry picked him up and within days he was back at the University of Arizona with his treasures.

He saw himself at the podium, Nobel medal around his neck, Louis Giddings introducing him. At his sides, along the head table, Helge and Gerda Larsen and Froelich Rainey represented Denmark. Otto Van Kotzebue represented Russia. A. E. Douglas, Emil Haury, and W. S. Stallings from the University of Arizona. Richard McNeish was there. Men and women he knew and respected represented Brown University and Canada. Dr. Carla Van West, the great Southwest research archaeologist and teacher gave him a nod. He looked out at an auditorium filled with his peers, tears running down his cheeks.

Giddings finished the introduction. “He searched for evidence of Pleistocene man in Alaska for almost thirty years. His perseverance paid off. Carl Robert Denoyer is the founder of a new branch of American archaeology.”

“Denoyer? Denoyer! Can you feel this?” Kathryn ran the splintered end of a willow twig across the palm of his hand. He jerked it back in reaction, their first sign he was regaining consciousness.

“He’s coming to,” Kathryn announced.

They were terrified. Without Denoyer, they could not survive.

## Chapter SIXTEEN

*Thank God, she thought. He's keeping me with him so I don't have to butcher the bear. He knows I'm a lady. He wants to be with me. He trusts my judgment. He knows how important I am.*

"I feel like I was run over by a herd of caribou," Denoyer complained. I ... I can't believe I'm here. I thought I ... No, just wishful thinking I guess."

"You were run over by a bear. Now lie still and let me clean those claw wounds out." Jane Mary pushed his head back down. He grimaced.

"Is it dead? Did I kill it?"

"We did. You got him dead center. I got him through the heart. He hooked your parka and threw you, then died on top of you. It looked like he squashed you."

"I feel squashed. Am I going to be okay?"

"No. I doubt you learned anything. You still think you're King Shit."

"There aren't any pretenders to the throne."

"Next time you go hunting, watch out for bears."

"I saw caribou up on the flats."

Jane Mary leaned back, grabbing the precious bottle of hydrogen peroxide before it spilled.

"Caribou? Finally. How many? What direction did they head? Could you get a shot? Do you think...?"

### C. Descry

“I don’t know what to think. It’s not too late for the start of migration. They could have been the forerunners of the main herd. I saw, maybe fifteen. Three big bucks.”

Kathryn leaned forward. “You mean bulls? They’re called bulls, Carl.”

“No, they’re deer. Bucks.” Denoyer corrected.

“Males anyway, right?” Kathryn ended the debate. “Do you care? Won’t you shoot any caribou you can? We need a bunch.”

Jane Mary glared at her. “Look you two, we have to get this bear closer to camp and butcher it. Save your energy for that. Denoyer, can you get up?”

She helped him to his feet, handed him a precious aspirin and canteen, and looked down at the bear.

“We’ll never move him. We butcher him here. Debra, get the knives! Kathryn, help Denoyer back. You sure you’re okay Denoyer?”

“I ... I’ll live. You worried about the black?”

“That’s one bear we won’t see again. If you can help, come back. Now get out of the way, we have to get this done before dark.”

“Two bears in one day,” Kathryn commented as she leaned into Denoyer pretending to help him back to the hut. “Do you know how hard this work is? I’m feeling okay, though. Those bears were really after me weren’t they? Were you scared? The claws dug in, but not too deep, I guess. Do you know how scared I was? I held up okay, didn’t I? I’m strong and I’m here for you.”

He had to assure her to quiet her. He wanted to lie down, let the aspirin work and his body heal. He was cold. His muscles quaked. Deep inside a morose sadness grew as he recalled his vision and dealt with the reality. *It will never happen, I will never stand before my peers and be recognized for my finds.*

“You’ll be okay, Kathryn. Will you make me some hot tea? I’m cold.” *She’s focused on her own needs and agendas. That’s who she is.*

“Kathryn, thank you. I’ll get in by myself. Make tea, then come visit.”

She relaxed, let go of his arm, and watched him bend painfully and enter the tunnel.

*Thank God, she thought. He’s keeping me with him so I don’t have to butcher the bear. He knows I’m a lady. He wants to be with me. He trusts my judgment. He knows how important I am.*

It was deep twilight when Jane Mary and Debra came back dragging the bearskin, using it like a sled to haul hundreds of pounds of fat, meat, and organs.

Kathryn heard them approaching, forced herself awake and hurriedly opened Denoyer’s shirt. She removed Denoyer’s bandage without waking him and was cleaning the wound and putting a new bandage in place when Jane Mary burst into the room.

“Shush,” she said, putting her finger up to her mouth. “He’s hurt worse than we thought. I couldn’t leave him.”

In the dim light, Denoyer’s color looked gray. Jane Mary got the battery lamp and came back to get a closer look.

“Is he unconscious? Did you check for other injuries? What about internal injuries? The bear fell on him.”

Denoyer’s eyes opened, he brought his hand up to shield his eyes.

“How do you feel?” Jane Mary pushed Kathryn aside and knelt down next to him.

“I gotta pee, other than that, a little sore. He lowered his hand and pressed a finger next to the claw marks.

“Sore here, not that bad.”

“Your gut hurt? Here, sit up and see if you have any other injuries.”

*C. Descry*

“Just sore all over. Nothing bad. My mouth is dry.”

Jane Mary stood, and turned to Kathryn, vexed. “Lucky for you lady, we saved the rest of the butchering for you. Go outside and tell Debra to come in! Oh, you better hurry. Strip-ping the meat could take all night.”

Kathryn went out. It was too dark to work. She found the grizzly pile on the hide. When Debra went in, she crept back to the tunnel and crouched in the entry, frantically trying to think of a way to ignore Jane Mary’s order.

Debra came in, hands and parka front covered with dried blood.

“Denoyer? You are okay! Kathryn said you weren’t hurt as bad as you were acting. You’re...?”

“He’s hurt, but okay,” Jane Mary assured her. “Kathryn used him as an excuse not to help us. What’s new?” She handed Denoyer a bucket. “You got to pee, you don’t have to go out.”

Debra lowered herself to the bed and lay back exhausted.

“What are we going to do about her? She doesn’t help unless we force her. She lies. She won’t accept your leadership. When we were building this place, she argued instead of helping. If she doesn’t change, we should...”

“What,” Denoyer injected, “get rid of her? She has problems, I agree, but we need her. I don’t like some of the things she does any more than you two do, but we need to work with her and bring her along. I don’t know how, but we have to.”

“Why?” Jane Mary asked as Denoyer stood to use the bucket. “She could be the end of us all.”

“She could be, you’re right. But what if ... I mean, what if we are the only ones left? Do we have an obligation to...to humanity to ... you know?”

“Ha!” Jane Mary exploded, “You mean breed. She might be good for that. She has big tits and wide hips. She can be your little bitch and throw litters. Me, I’m going to beat the hell out of her if she doesn’t get in line soon.”

“Me too. I mean I’ll help,” Debra said. “She either changes or we make her over.”

Kathryn crept silently back outside. *How stupid they are. I can take care of myself. It isn't my job to take care of them. They want me to be their slave. They were made for heavy work, I wasn't. Well, I see the big picture. They need my brains more than I need them. Damn them! And they threatened me. How dare they! Denoyer will protect me. If I carried his child ... that's it! I can do that. Then the others will have to treat me like I deserve.* She turned and came back into the hut, pretending she hadn't overheard them.

“Well, I’m sorry but it’s too dark out there to see anything. I can’t do anything. It will have to wait until morning.”

Jane Mary came to her feet and faced her. “Fine. That’s okay. But of course you’ll have to stay out there and guard it. Now you get back out there. We don’t want foxes, wolves or wolverines to get it, do we?”

Kathryn seemed to deflate. She fell to her knees, sobbing. “I can’t. I don’t know how. You can’t make me, I’ll freeze to death.”

“She’s right,” Denoyer came to her rescue. Kathryn looked up, a sweet smile adapted to her face. “Listen Kathryn, take that heavy blanket with you. You can keep warm if you don’t sit on the ground. Oh, and don’t worry about wolverines or wolves. They won’t come close if you’re awake. They can tell.”

Debra came to her feet facing Kathryn, dried blood caked on her hands. Jane Mary moved toward Kathryn, reached for a blanket, threw it at her, while staring hard into her eyes. Kathryn turned quickly and made her way through the tunnel.

*I'll go. I have a plan.*

“Do you think she’ll learn anything from this?” Debra asked.

“She doesn’t learn,” Jane Mary said, anger welling in her.

“She might, give her a chance. It might sink in that she’s alone unless she cooperates - pulls her own weight.”



### C. Descry

“Think about it Denoyer. You said that exact same thing when we started building this pit house. She only hears her own voice. My people would have taken her over the ridge and bashed her head in. If you want her for babies, for our survival, we’ll put up with her. If not, we’ll deal with her.”

Debra thought through Jane Mary’s condition that Kathryn was good for breeding. *Denoyer with Kathryn? Will he go with her? I must trust him. I’m only in this thing for him. If that bitch gives him a child, won’t he love her? What then? Where will I stand? What will I do?* Panic gripped her. *It’s not the right time or place, but I’ll have his baby - I’ll be his soul mate, not Kathryn.*

Jane Mary chuckled. She read Debra’s reaction and decided it was predictable. Soon they would be trapped inside the hut spending endless time in the dark. *Denoyer would....* She smiled. *I don’t have any pills left. I’ll have his baby, maybe we all will if he’s good, if he has it in him.*

“I don’t understand how this bear got so fat,” Debra complained as they finished stuffing globs of the adipose tissue into a section of gut. “I mean, what did he eat after the Cut Off? Do you think this was one of the bears that took our dead?”

“That first winter,” Jane Mary reminded her, “he must have hibernated. He was already fat. When he came out after break-up, that’s when the dead fish were thawing. I don’t think he was down at Whitefish.”

Denoyer agreed. “He had plenty to eat around here. While we were holed-up in the school parceling out food, scavengers had plenty to eat. Then, with the warming, plants recovered and the birds came back.”

“Well, doesn’t that mean the caribou are all right?” Kathryn held a tube of gut open as Debra stuffed it.

“I don’t think so,” Denoyer replied, shaking his head. “Remember when I went out with Tom just before they left? We checked for lichens, because that’s what caribou eat. Every-

thing was covered with volcanic dust. We didn't find lichens. Not around there, anyway."

"But I don't understand. Where does it grow?" Debra asked.

It's a fungus that grows symbiotically with algae. It's an unattached branching growth that rests on other plants. Without adequate sunlight, I don't think it could form. Not the first two years, anyway."

"So what did they eat?"

"Maybe they died. Maybe they left this region. There's no way of knowing, not without going north and east and looking for the herd or the dead."

"Yes, but you saw some, right?"

"If they're back, they'll come to us."

Jane Mary went over to hang thin strips of meat on the line. "And the fish? Do you think they'll come back - start coming up river to spawn again?"

Denoyer was slow to answer. "I've been thinking a lot about that. Something's wrong. The rains helped dilute the acidity. The water's not too acid now, or there wouldn't be any life. I think the outlet to the sea must be blocked. That's what Jan and the others found. I don't think ocean going fish can get up here. We would have seen the migration if they survived at sea. Instead, all we catch in the weir are fish that survived the ash. I think they're spawning, there are little fish, but one thing is certain, we can't count on fish for survival like you Eskimos did."

"It doesn't make sense, I mean that the river's outlet to the sea is clogged. I mean, if it clogged, then our guys would have come back somehow, even if the boat was stuck in muck they could have freed it. They would have turned around." Debra watched Denoyer's face to gauge his reaction.

"You would think so. But they didn't. That could mean ... a lot of things. If they survived, we would have heard from them. Maybe they got to Kotzebue; the Chukchi Sea.

Who knows? It's been a year. They would have contacted us. They had the best boat, food, and good radios. Something happened to them. Maybe something sudden." The thought saddened him. He had gone over and over the possibilities so many times. He tried to avoid thinking about them. "Jan Lightman knows to look for us here at the Old Portage site."

Kathryn wiped her hands and leaned back on her heels. "So, are we going to make snares and traps?"

Jane Mary nodded. "Maybe that's something you'll be good at."

"I'm good at a lot of things that really count. You going to teach us how make them?"

"When all this meat is drying... Denoyer we need more drying racks. There's nothing to tie a rope to."

"I've been thinking." He replied. "The boat oars will work. We can set them in the ground - we'll need rocks to pile around the bases to hold them in place. We'll have to put a rope around the hut and tie to that."

"The meat weighs a lot." Debra volunteered. "I'll start gathering rocks if you dig the holes."

"We must stand the boat on end!" Kathryn ordered.

"The boat has to go on the roof, remember?"

"I really don't understand why. It seems to me that it's far more valuable used my way. Why don't we try it?"

"We don't need to Kathryn. I've already thought this through and it goes on the roof." He turned and walked toward the river and the oars.

Kathryn excused herself, "For a minute," and moped her way inside.

Each night was longer. The sun lost its influence on their world as it seemed to bounce along the southern horizon, lighting the sky with daylong sunsets. The temperature dropped. Denoyer was out of the hut with first light, now around ten in the morning. He walked the snare line, rifle ready if he saw

caribou or anything he could take. Five caribou were unlucky enough to cross his path. In the past, the wildlife people allowed each Eskimo five caribou a day.

Each morning, Jane Mary came out to check weirs. One morning, the river was frozen, the ice too thin to walk on. She had to wait before she could try her luck ice fishing. A week later, she cut a hole in the ice, dropped a line in, and left it. She knew it was an exercise in futility. In two weeks, she caught ten fish.

Denoyer woke and pushed the Indiglo button on his watch. The face glowed faintly and went black. He came up out of the bed with enough commotion to awaken everybody. Fumbling with the flashlight to wind it, he slid the button up and focused the dim beam on his wrist. The watch stopped at 4:00 a.m. He had taken it for granted. The battery was at least five years old. "It's the end of time as we knew it," he complained. "The end of time."

They lay in torpid, dormant states waiting for light to be a mirage on the horizon. The nights and days melded together. Infrequently, when the sky cleared, the starlight lit their icy world. Denoyer and Jane Mary went out into the bitter cold and listened to the wind howling wolf.

As frequently as possible, Denoyer left the protection of the hut to empty the buckets. While out, he dug meat from one of the storage pits, checked the nearest snares for a rabbit, and then, chilled through, crept back into the pit house. One of the women had tea steeping over the animal fat lamp. One rubbed circulation back into his feet. All welcomed him back under the blankets where they warmed him.

The wind sang. Temperatures dropped, and they were trapped. Each fought a personal war to stay sane. Much to Denoyer's surprise, the tensions between them eased and then went away. Toilet paper, rashes, and lice became major issues.

### C. Descry

*Who'd have thought*, Denoyer mused as he came out of a shallow slumber and let his thoughts play back over the transition, *that something so small could do so much for interpersonal relations*. He chuckled, scratched at his beard, and sat up, back against the roll of hides they used to insulate their heads from the wall.

He studied his companions. Kathryn, legs on each side of Jane Mary who sat, head tilted back as Kathryn groomed her. Debra, bare to the waist as they all were, leaning over Kathryn, parting her hair and searching for the evil insects. *Mutual grooming. This ritual has united humankind since the dawn of time. Naked apes, wasn't that what I read? And the grooming order. Jane Mary at the head of the line, seldom grooming anyone but me. Debra and Kathryn changing places, depending on...?* It came to him. *They change positions based upon who is sleeping next to me. Not that it matters as we roll about nestling each other, anything happens that can. The women's cycles have coordinated. It's as if they have become one body, all focused upon ... Me! I'm their prey.*

They guessed it was December, maybe Christmas.

"Why not Christmas?" Debra asked. "It will be mid-January before the sun's rays touch our sky again. At least five more months before we can go out and start preparing for another winter."

Their routines were set. Dried meat pounded in a mortar until it powdered. Ice, melted over the oil lamp to drink, to make soup, and occasionally to clean their bodies. Buckets used and emptied. Clothing, beat until the ice fell out of it, dried and mended. Boredom. Muddied thoughts.

Denoyer prepared for a trip outside to the willows to strip bark they could use for toilet paper and sanitary purposes. *Man is a scourge on the land and we're no exception. When Giddings was here in the forties there were still birch and alder trees, even some spruce in the drainages. He was pioneering dendrochro-*

nology and gathering tree ring samples. We could sure use wood and bark now. The others wouldn't leave the darkness of the pithouse.

"We told stories," Jane Mary broke the silence in the pitch-black continuum.

Denoyer moved away from her, shaking loose, freeing his hair from her hand. "Christmas stories?"

"We didn't know about Christmas when I was a girl."

"What kind of stories, then?"

"Hunting. Fishing. Meetings with other people. Trips. Maybe about someone we once knew. Sometimes we told stories about the *Inugaqalligauraq*. Not about the dead."

"Who?" Debra asked.

"Mythical men. Small and very strong like your trolls."

"Our stories are different." He lit the oil lamp on the stand near the bed. "We should each think of a story to tell about our lives. Maybe about people we know ... I mean knew."

Kathryn pulled away from Debra. "We should tell our story. Write it down so that ... well, if we don't survive, at least they'll find our story."

"Who, aliens who visit the planet?"

"Well, maybe. But we've got to believe people will come back here someday. I believe we just got forgotten."

"I want to believe that," Debra said, snapping a louse between her nails. "I have to believe that. I agree we should write our story down, if only for our children or..."

"Or if the others survived and we connect with them," Kathryn added.

"Debra will you be secretary?" Denoyer asked.

Kathryn was agitated, unsettled for the first time in weeks. "We need paper. Did we bring paper? We forgot it, didn't we. I remember thinking we should bring some. I should have known you would forget to bring paper."

*C. Descry*

Debra became energized. “We have a notebook. You know, the one with spiral binding? It’s with that stuff over there.” She pointed to the waterproof bag near the boat motors as she got up and went over to it, her lithe naked body lustrous in the lamplight.

“It’s in here with all this stuff of yours, Denoyer.”

“We can’t write now,” Jane Mary stated the obvious. “We can’t afford to burn the lamp. It’s too cold in here to write anyway, our hands would freeze. We can tell stories, but we’ll have to wait for summer to write them down.”

Debra dropped the bag and came shivering back to bed. They pulled her in and warmed her, a survival ritual they took for granted now.

“I have a story,” Jane Mary said.

“Tell us.”

“Well, one time my father and brothers went out across the tundra in the moonlight. They loved the dark time when the land was frozen. They traveled out across the wilds to hunt, or along the water to ice-fish or get seals. Mother said they would do anything to get out. She was furious when they didn’t return. She cursed them with black anger. I understood. Mother was afraid. Without the men we couldn’t survive.”

“What happened to them?” Denoyer asked.

“We never knew what happened to them. Weeks and months passed and they never came home. We cried together, it didn’t do any good. We survived the dark time and suffered through the starving time when the ice breaks-up. It’s the worst season. We didn’t have any food. We couldn’t hunt. Ice made it impossible to fish.

We survived, lying still, slowing our body functions until we were in stupors. When we dared get out, we were almost insane. Mother knew she had to get me to Whitefish village. We were so weak; the kayak trip seemed to take forever.

“What happened to your mother?”

“Widows aren’t welcome in Whitefish. When she recovered some of her strength, she left in the kayak. I had no hope of following. She found a camp where a woman died and they needed her. We met one time after that, years later when the government required everyone to come to the village for the census. We had no connection, no reason to spend time together. We smiled in passing, both of us comforted that the other survived, I guess.

“None of you can know how hard it was to suddenly be in Whitefish. I was cared for by the ministers’ wives, passed from one couple to another as each served their time and then went back down below.”

“Why didn’t they let a family adopt you?” Debra asked.

“They were afraid for me. Besides, they felt an obligation to teach me.”

“What were they afraid of? I mean, what could happen to you in Whitefish?”

“The village, especially at night, was a war zone. Some of the people made alcohol out of potatoes, raisins, berries, juice - anything they could ferment. Drunks raged through the village, fighting, raping, abusive drunks, like the ones that tried to break in to the school. Child abuse went unquestioned. The nearest law was miles away - over an hour by plane. Kids copied the adults and formed drunken gangs of their own. All were armed. Every home had rifles, pistols, and knives. Normally we used them to hunt and fish.

“After three years, the missionaries assigned me to a converted Inupiaq family who lived in one of the government built - HUD - plywood houses. Inside, there wasn’t any furniture, just piles of hides and blankets on the floor. We cooked on a stinking diesel stove. We used buckets for toilets like we do here, when the sewer froze.

When they built the school, they installed generators. In time, our house got electricity. We paid for it, most of what we needed, with Tribal Corporation per-capita checks. When



### *C. Descry*

I was eighteen, the family pooled money and we got Satellite TV.”

“TV changed everyone. It was amazing. I miss it,” Denoyer said.

“Television changed everything. Few people were out on the boardwalks, day or night. No one wanted to be too far from his or her favorite programs. Hunters put off going out. Women stopped socializing and sat spellbound, learning about cars, palm trees, and cops. Compared to what we saw of the lower forty-eight, violence in our culture was minimal. TV showed us a strange world outside of our village. The world you three came from.”

She pulled a pillow up and crossed her legs. “You find me hard to understand? Try to understand. Don’t be judgmental like you outsiders always are. How much do you know about my people? I’ll tell you things. You can understand it all now that we’re living the same way.

“We’re trapped in this pit house. We have no privacy, few personal possessions, no space of our own. These things aren’t as important to me as they were to you. When I grew up we lived close together - mixed together as if we were one organism with many parts. Everyone’s functions were known. The toilet was in a corner of the room. People laughed when someone farted, but no one thought anything about using the toilet in plain view of everyone else. If someone crawled into my blankets at night, I could fight them off if I didn’t like them, or play along. The natural thing was to play along. No one thought that was wrong. We didn’t know about guilt until the missionaries used it to control us.”

“They thought they were saving you from the Devil, and for their God. How did it change you?” Kathryn asked.

“It confused me more than changed me. The ministers taught us about virginity - the Virgin Mary - and told us girls we shouldn’t be with men. No one believed the story. What is that all about anyway? I still don’t understand your ways.

I could have a baby any time I wanted to and no one would think anything of it. I didn't want a baby, even though I was lonely. I liked to play though. The nurse gave me birth control pills. That was the best gift I ever got. We're living the way I grew up. We're trying to have babies. We're like one organism but with only one *usruk*. (Penis)."

## Chapter SEVENTEEN

*The fierce growl was as vicious and threatening as any he ever heard.  
The wolverine's head was out of the hole, its teeth white spikes.*

There was a crunching sound over the valley, a noise Jane Mary had described.

"Is that it?" Debra came awake. She didn't know if it was day or night, and didn't care.

"That's it. The ice is finally starting to break-up. We have to wait, it will be a few weeks, but..."

Kathryn rolled onto her side. "But we will probably be dead by then. There's nothing to eat."

"We must stay very quiet and sleep. My mother and I survived that way."

Denoyer knew she was right, but couldn't accept it. "What do the animals do at this time of year?"

Jane Mary turned toward him. "I could *migliaq*. (vomit)" She was nauseous. Morning sickness haunted her day and night, but there was nothing to put in her stomach.

"There is nothing for them to eat either."

"So what did they do?"

"Like us, I guess. They waited."

"I'm going out to see."

Since mid-January, the hours of sunlight increased. He crawled up out of the tunnel and over the blown snowdrift

into the late afternoon. Weeks had passed since he had gone out.

“Of course! The ice break-up occurs late in the day.”

The sky glowed so orange-pink it scared him. He expected another terrible storm, had been expecting one for almost a year. The ground still shook with quakes, but they seemed to be centered a long ways away. This color came from sunrays on the fine ash in the upper atmosphere. He had never observed a normal spring at this latitude, but he assumed it was the ash that made the light show so spectacular.

Coming from the dark pit house, his eyes had to adjust to the twilight. Before him the familiar landscape was alien. *We were dormant for almost a month. What little warmth the sun provides glazed the snowfields, now they are as pink as the sky. The river ice is broken in places, great chunks of ice riding up over others. Breeding,* he mused, as the sounds of the bump and grind grated across the tundra.

*The land is rosy pink and every shade of orange.* He scanned the nearby drifts looking for the locations of their three meat caches. They were empty, had been for over a month now since he cleaned out the last cache, but maybe some small piece of meat remained in the first one. *We were careless then ... maybe?*

The winds had drifted snow over the cairn rocks forming a mound with descending finger-like ridges. To the side of the mound bare rocks lay out of place, black with long white beards. He checked his rifle, clicked the safety off, and walked past the first and second mounds. The wind blew, got through, chilling him. His boots made squeaky sounds in the dry snow.

*On the far side of the mound something tunneled in - something small but strong enough to kick off the large flat cairn rocks. I stacked the rocks and sealed the pit when we emptied it. The thing tunneled down into the cache. Did it find something?*

*Damn, that's our food.*

### C. Descry

He let anger energize him and keep him alert.

*Maybe it's using our pit as a den? What is it?* He raised the rifle, imaging the charge of a wolverine or wolf or ... something fierce, like everything in this land.

The ice moaned as the temperature dropped. Somewhere up river, the jam cracked its frustration, the report, more like an explosion than a shot. He looked over the river wondering how long it would be until the ice was gone.

*It will take forever.*

He moaned. His stomach hurt. He was weak and discouraged. No animals were in sight. Not even birds. He closed his eyes to warm them.

The fierce growl was as vicious and threatening as any he ever heard. The wolverine's head was out of the hole, it's teeth white spikes. The red gape of its mouth, tongue curled back inside the jaws, seemed larger than the weasel-like animal itself.

He pointed the rifle and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck with a whumpf, that reverberated in the pit. The wolverine's eyes popped out, it lurched forward almost out of the hole and then slid back inside. Out of habit, he levered another shell into the chamber.

*The wolverine is still alive.* He heard terrible, rasping growls. He waited.

Moments later, *a head of ... it has to be another wolverine. The eyes!* He fired. The bullet missed the mouth and hit the creature below the muzzle. It seemed to stop, slow motion, and stare at him. It was dead as it fell back into the cairn with its mate.

*Michigan woodsmen call them Skunk Bears. They really do stink.*

He quickly levered another round into the .30-30. His adrenaline high passed. He knelt on one knee, weak, his gut wrapped around itself, hurting.

*Food*, his thoughts caught up with his actions. *We have food.*

*Something is still alive in the pit.* He slowed his raspy breathing and listened. From the pit came the angry whining growls of kits. “I need a spear. Bullets are too precious.”

## Chapter EIGHTEEN

*You mean kill her? Are we reverting to savagery after only three years? Are we murderers?*

Jane Mary liked sharing information. “There were times of the year my mother told me never to be with a man - *Nulik* (have sex). Now I know why. She taught me, never in the dark times. Never in the times when the sun never sets.”

Kathryn rubbed her belly and moved to try to get comfortable. “I don’t understand.”

Jane Mary grimaced. “Then listen! You will be too fat to move when it is summertime, because he put the baby in you during the dark time. You will be worthless. I will be rid of my burden by June. I will be able to work and prepare food for the winter. He put the baby in me soon after we went inside, while there was still light.”

“And Debra? What about you, Debra?” Kathryn chided.

“I can wait.”

“You think this is fun? You think I like having to ... well, having this ... I mean, I have to carry until July, at least.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t take. There is so much to do if we are to survive another winter in this place.”

“Well listen to me, Debra. Don’t let him in you until September. You don’t want a baby born during the starving time.”

“You talk as if I’m not here,” Denoyer complained. “From what Jane Mary says we have to plan better in the future.”

“And what will they think when they find us?” Kathryn imagined herself with a baby and shared husband. “No one from our world will accept what we have done. Is that why you kept yourself from getting pregnant Debra?”

“They’ll understand. They’ll have to. What if we aren’t found? We have to increase our numbers to survive - Jane Mary, you’re right. We have to plan. And no, I didn’t and I don’t even know how to except by not...”

“Rutting. Go ahead, say it. We all did. We had to.”

“But none of us enjoyed it, right?” Kathryn turned away, angry that she delayed having sex with Denoyer until late November. I’ll know better next time.

“There’s got to be food out there. When did your people find food after the break-up?”

“The birds. As soon as the tundra starts to clear, the birds come to nest. Debra, when you are out with Denoyer, pick anything green. Any sprout, but not the buds of the willows or the brush. Some are poison. I remember mother telling me that some types of new leaves are poison. There was so much I didn’t pay attention to.”

Kathryn had other things on her mind, itching for one. “When can I bathe? Can’t we get enough water now?”

“We can. In fact, we all need a good scrub. As soon as Debra and I return, we can devise a way to heat water. The problem is, we don’t have a ... wait a minute. We can heat water in my duffle bag.”

“Won’t it burn? Denoyer, you know it will burn.”

“It would if we put it over the fire. What we do is heat rocks. For that, we will have to cut willows. Lots of willows. We can also burn anything from inside that is worn out.”

“I can gather the brush.” Kathryn was suddenly energized. “Jane Mary, you need to rest and be careful. The baby needs you more than anything.”



### C. Descry

Jane Mary stared across the dim pit house trying to understand what she heard. Kathryn offering to help? Kathryn concerned about her health and the baby?

*My firstborn will always have position over Kathryn's. She's changing as Denoyer claims. Perhaps she wants to help? No. What Kathryn wants is a bath. She wants to be first. If she weren't full of that child, she'd be dead. I'd see to that. Debra, it should have been your baby not hers.*

"We're going. Do whatever it takes Kathryn. Jane Mary, you're due first. Do as Kathryn suggests. Stay put."

"Denoyer, I tried to get pregnant. You understand that, don't you? I would do anything for you and giving you a son or daughter would be wonderful."

They were more than a mile from the pit house, topping a ridge that opened their view to unending tundra.

"We tried, didn't we." He looked back at her, and caught her eye. "Debra, it's not important. We can try again."

"I can't be with you, not if Jane Mary is right."

"She is. You don't want to carry in the working times. You don't want a baby to care for in the spring, before food is available. I'll see you in August and September."

"Like hell. We just won't screw. I can't believe you stick up for Kathryn."

"She might change. What choice do I have?"

"Jane Mary's choice."

"You mean kill her? Are we reverting to savagery after only three years? Are we murderers? Besides, what good would it do? Who would take care of her baby?"

"She'd be gone now if she hadn't gotten pregnant. You know that. We've had all of her we can take. She's worthless."

"I agree, she's difficult. But we must have numbers to survive. Look at the sky. No contrails. I try the radio every few days, nothing. We're alone out here. We may be the only people left alive."

"I accept that because I'm with you. I just don't like sharing you." She paused. "You enjoy being with the three of us don't you?"

"Not like I imagined it would be when I was a boy. I'm too set in my ways to be a prize bull. I need more than bodies to get into it. It's turned into a duty. I feel like I have to perform - like I'm being used."

"You whore! Do you feel that way with me?" She was teasing, but serious.

"No, thank God. I want you."

"Thanks Carl. I want you too, ever since we first ... in the school, remember?"

"Yeah. You helped me through some tough times."

"Look, bird nests with eggs."

"We survive another year."

"I want to live, I really want to. But I don't like this land. I hate winter. If we make it ... promise me?"

"What?"

"You'll take me south? We'll find a way? I know we can't go now, not until there are more of us."

"Debra, I never planned to go alone."

They gathered eggs while birds dived at them and screamed their objections.

"When do you think?"

"When there are at least ten of us who can walk and carry packs."

"If I have a baby next spring, and the others again, then ... gad! That's twelve years? Do you think we'll make it?"

"Jane Mary will not leave. This is her home."

"But ten or twelve years, right?"

"We'll go. Jane Mary will have to make her decision at that time. Let's not deal with this now. Don't talk about it."

## Chapter NINETEEN

*Six years changes everything. Six long years, it's hard to believe, eight years since the Cut Off," she said, studying the water.*

Six summers later:

"Now the sun can get to the floor," Denoyer said. "The rain won't hurt either. If that doesn't kill the bugs, then when we dig the hole bigger and deeper and burn a fire in it... We use fire anyway to harden it. Besides, I've been studying the type of pit house we need. We'll build this one different."

Jane Mary nodded. "Yes, but the nits stay in our stuff, Denoyer. We have to let the sun burn everything. My people always left their winter homes. We should be moving out."

"Jane Mary, where would we go? Everything we need is within walking distance."

"You know where. You'll have to agree, we're almost out of ammunition."

"It's a gamble. Anything left behind has probably been scavenged or it's rusted and useless."

"Scavenged? That would mean others survived. We could find them."

Kathryn stopped chewing the hide she was softening and gave them both a quizzical look. "You want him to leave us? Leave three women and eleven children alone here? What are you thinking Jane Mary? What if he doesn't come back? What if Passco is waiting there? What if he has a gang?"

Debra put down the ulu Denoyer made for her. "We should all go, right Carl?"

"I don't know ... how could we? I mean if I had that figured out we would have gone last year."

Debra gave him a hard look. "We all go or no one goes."

Jane Mary turned toward her. "Debra, it's never all or nothing. We need supplies, especially ammo. There are things in Whitefish that will make our lives easier. Denoyer, you go. I'll stay here. That way if something happens we can still survive. You can deal with Passco, although there isn't a chance he's there."

Kathryn stood, waking the baby on her lap, placing him on her hip. "We can't survive without Denoyer. Besides, what would we do, mate with each other's sons? I'm right Carl honey, right?"

"Fourteen people won't fit in the boat. There's no way we can all go. Besides, the bears and wolverines would demolish this place. Kathryn is right. If something happens to me, our children won't have a chance. There is only one solution, and it isn't to my liking."

Jane Mary hung a strip of caribou meat on the rack and turned. "I'm the only one who can go. I have to go alone. This baby and Tommy can't go with me. The others aren't nursing anyway, it won't affect them much. One of you must take care of them."

"I don't have enough milk." Debra pushed the pile of cut fish away and looked at Kathryn.

Denoyer pulled at his beard, annoyed by the grit. "You go, Jane Mary. If your people survived, they will accept you. I wouldn't be accepted, none of us would. Kathryn, you produce more milk than your babies need. You can help feed two more, and Debra, you can help. It's time to wean Jan anyway."

Jane Mary studied the other women. "All but the babies born this year can eat solid food. Tommy won't starve. Neither will yours."

### *C. Descry*

“The gas is old, Denoyer, is there enough for me to go there and back?”

“It’s been cold. Heat would have ruined it. I smelled it, it’s good. I think the oil mix stabilized it. We used almost five gallons to get here. We have three five-gallon tanks left. You should take the empty, fill it at the school and bring back all you can.”

“I’ll take the .30-30, I can handle it. I think the rifles and ammo we hid will be there. That’s most important. And pots. Diesel fuel. Kid’s clothing, blankets.... What else?”

“Make a list.” He noticed Kathryn’s and Debra’s reaction. “We should each make a list. Things we really need. There will be room in the boat for a lot of stuff, but we must plan well.”

Sleet froze to their parkas and visibility was a problem. The sunlight made the sky glow, but the days were long, dim twilights of misery. The boat tarp over Jane Mary’s gear was covered with ice. A major earthquake the night before hadn’t loosened it.

“I have to leave soon or...”

“It will be too late. I think it’s mid-September.”

“I don’t think it’s that late, but I have to go Denoyer. This waiting around is very bad for me.”

That evening, rolling thunder announced the departure of the storm. The morning dawned crisp and clear. The sun rose over the horizon and the icy spawn that covered the land glimmered. Shaking the tarp, Jane Mary threw a fountain of ice into the air, reflecting sunlight in blinding flashes.

“When you break the ice in the boat, throw it into the river. She doesn’t need ice in the boat.” Denoyer ordered as Debra, Louis and Deno lent their small hands and pounded the icy crust.

“Bring the motor out now. I’m ready to leave.”

“The kids want to watch you go.” Kathryn was tired of breaking ice and thought how nice it would be inside their tipi tent, dressing the children.

“Denoyer, if I don’t get back, you won’t be able to come after me.”

“I know, we couldn’t without the boat. I could try again to fix the university’s boat, but when the shed burned, it melted the aluminum and motor. That settles it, come back! That’s an order.”

“Without a boat ... well, you can learn to make a kayak. You’ll have to if I get lost or something.”

Denoyer waded back to shore. Jane Mary lowered the prop into the water and sat as she pulled the crank rope. The motor coughed blue smoke and roared. The children applauded. Denoyer grinned. He had done things right protecting the motor and their store of gas. There were times each winter, during the long cold months, when a gas fire would have seemed like a touch of heaven. He resisted the temptation and now it paid off.

Jane Mary didn’t turn around or wave. She put her thoughts ahead and studied the river. *For some reason this is more like a lake than a river. If it flows west, there is little discernable current. I guess the outlet to the Chukchi Sea is blocked.* She thought of Doc Lightman’s last conversation. *Muck! What ridge of magma was he talking about?*

She made good speed. The ice was gone and there were no obstructions or floating islands of debris. If her reckoning was accurate, she should begin to see three-legged watchtowers along the shore. Each fish camp had one. They served as look-outs for spotting migrating caribou and as markers for river travelers. She depended on her memory of their trip up river to the Old Portage site after they fled Whitefish.

“Six years changes everything. Six long years, it’s hard to believe, eight years since the Cut Off,” she said, studying the water.

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Another hour passed before she saw a tower. As she neared it, she confirmed the ruin of a shack. *It collapsed since we checked it out on the way up river. No boats tied at the shore. The place is deserted, has been since the Cut Off.*

Hours passed. She kept the throttle wide-open. "I'm making better time than I expected." Fish camps appeared. She slowed to study them, saw they were deserted ruins and sped on.

"I guess five hours passed. The gas tank is nearly empty. I've got to be close." As she navigated a long curve, she knew she was nearing Whitefish. As she came closer, she saw the dock, or what was left of it. *That's the white tail of Andy Passco's floatplane, jammed against the broken timbers, stands out of the water like an icicle.*

*It's like the day I left, only ... the buildings along the river are gone. The boardwalk disappeared into the tundra. Drifts of ash that didn't wash away are rusty brown lines in the green.*

The ridge blocked her view. She couldn't tell if the rest of the village burned. She ran the boat onto shore below the dock and jumped out on the hard gravel. *The water level is at least a foot higher than I remember.*

She tied the boat and reached for the rifle; aware she was lifting the loaded weapon by the barrel. Carefully, she reversed it and checked the safety.

Avoiding the broken boardwalk, she made her way up the riverbank. She expected bears, and prepared for the worst.

It was bad, but not as bad as it could have been. Fires had leveled many of the houses. The community services building still stood, as did the generator shed, the tanks, and the school. Fire had ravaged the whole east wing of the building, but the center structure and other wing looked intact.

*The store burned while we were still living in the school. The gas storage shed stands alone, forlorn.*

Near the maintenance shed the three, fourteen-foot boats they brought up from the river were still bottom-up on blocks.

*No one used the boats. No one came here after we left, they would have taken them. Strange, they're covered with fuzzy corrosion. Their motors should be inside.*

She made her way toward the school, stepping on the boardwalk when she could. Her legs wet above the knees from wading.

*No sign of bears. No sign of... there are lots of birds. The birds came back.*

She looked south, toward the sun.

*Sun won't set for hours. I have time to explore and then begin loading the boat with supplies. We should have taken this stuff when we left... we never believed we'd be out there so long.*

The school had a vacant, hollow look. She climbed the steps and tried the front doors. They were locked and braced from the inside as she left them. Through a fire-smoked window, she could see daylight streaming in from the open corridor. The fire had burned through the roof. *I'll have to get in through the burned wing.* They had gone out that way, locking the heavy metal delivery doors behind them. So much had happened since then.

*The fire left one brick wall and the large metal doors standing. The other walls fell in. So, even metal buildings can burn.* The heavy beams of the loading dock, on concrete pilings, provided a way around the doors. *The wood looks rotten.* She walked carefully, stepping on beams closest to the building. Inside, she carefully made her way through the rubble. Close to the school's central section some of the roof beams were in place, casting strange shadows over fallen machinery - giant fans, ducts, and rectangles of bent and twisted sheet metal - that made passage almost impossible. *Everything metal is corroded and covered with a fur of organic growth.*



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She stopped and listened. Small rodents made rustling sounds as they ran through secret passageways in the wreckage. Ash stains, and blooms of lichen-like moss covered the walls. The entrance into the central section of the school was carbon blackened. The metal corridor doors stood warped and twisted, open enough to squeeze through. The rotting carpet, *orange*, she remembered, was brown with stains and rot. *It curled and melted in the heat of the fire.*

Inside, the walls and ceilings were coated with brownish varnish from noxious fumes.

The corridor stank of old smoke and vile chemicals. She made her way toward the front doors.

*I'll open them now and bring stuff out as I find it.*

She removed the braces and hit the panic bars, one, then another. The doors swung out, hinges protesting like geese.

As she turned, she looked into the main office. The secretary's desk stood littered with forms. In the back, the door to the principal's office was closed. In the dim light, past the secretary's desk, she could see the metal doors of the supply cabinets.

*They should be filled with paper, notebooks, pens, and pencils. What can I put stuff in? How can I get them to the boat and keep them dry? Trash bags, if I can find them.*

She remembered the food containers - plastic boxes with tight lids - they had emptied as they used supplies from the kitchen. "If I can't find trash bags, they will work. I can carry them to the boat. But wading across uneven tundra with a heavy box will be impossible."

*The boats. I can load a boat and get the stuff to the river.*

In seconds, she was outside studying the area for sign of bears. Assured she was alone, she made her way back to the boat storage area. She flipped a boat and found its nylon rope still coiled around the seat pegs. She was relieved when it slid easily across the brushy tundra and almost effortlessly on the water.

*I can tow boats. I'll load them. We can use them ... and the motors.*

There were boxes of heavy black plastic bags in the kitchen storage cabinets. She doubled the bags and filled three with notebooks and boxes of pencils and ballpoint pens. Then she placed the bags in plastic storage boxes, knowing the contents would stay dry.

*Stupid notebooks! Why waste my time. Denoyer just doesn't get it. Those damn women make him do whatever they want. That damned Kathryn!*

*Clothing, where will I find kid's clothing? We had some in the home economics rooms. Never thought to take it.*

She made her way down the corridor. It was almost too dark to see. The small hulk of the generator and its empty hydrogen canisters sat useless by the door. She stopped. Light was coming from the doorway at the far end of the corridor.

*We didn't leave the outside door open!*

Her skin tingled. She came fully alert as she crept down the corridor. The outside door had been open a long time. Rot was working its way into the building - had been for maybe a year. Back up the corridor, she slowly turned the knob and opened the home economics classroom door.

The odor was sweet, rancid-sweet like a meat cache after the thaw.

*We didn't leave food in here. I shut the door so rodents couldn't get in.*

A large pile of foul-smelling bedding lay next to the counters. The floor around it was littered with empty mushroom soup cans, half a dozen of them, their lids ragged - opened with a knife.

*Someone piled that bedding over there. It wasn't like that when I left.*

She moved across the room looking for a candle - anything she could burn for light. *There are wooden matches at the*

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*back of the top shelf of the cabinet over the sink. I knew I'd come back. Good thinking, it paid off.*

She rolled a piece of shelf paper into a thin tube and lit it. In the flickering yellow light, she saw a desiccated, barely recognizable face grinning out from the pile of rags.

“Well Gurtta Ambler, *yuay* (lucky you), you came back here to die? Evidently you didn't find anyone out there. Where are the others you misled?”

*She's been dead, I wonder how long?*

A half-empty can of mushroom soup had rolled down the rags to the floor leaving a trail of powdery white residue.

“Better here than with us, you made the right choice woman. You being here confirms we're alone, doesn't it? There was no one out there. Maybe you killed Passco? Did you find him?”

Jane Mary went over and ripped another piece of sticky-back paper from a cabinet shelf, made a roll, and lit it.

There was nothing in the home economics rooms worth taking.

*Where would clothing be? Where? Of course, lockers, hall lockers. P.E. lockers. The master keys are in the office.*

She rolled more shelf paper into torches. With five extras, she headed back to the office for the keys, leaving the door open for rodents.

The hall lockers were empty. In the gym, the lockers were all unlocked and empty.

*Of course, school wasn't in session. What about the teachers' closets and the custodians' lockers?*

She entered the first classroom, checked the closet, and came away with a blanket and heavy wool sweater. Each classroom yielded a blanket. Some contained coats and sweaters. At the end of her search, she had plastic bags stuffed with blankets, clothing, and several pairs of boots and shoes.

The custodians' closets yielded four pair of overalls and three stocking caps.

She made trip after trip, back and forth, packing the boat at the foot of the front steps. Exhausted, she stopped to look around, saw the destruction of the village, and a terrible darkness overcame her. She had never felt so alone. Finding Gurtta was the end of hope her people survived.

*Am I am the last Inupiaq? Am I the only one to carry our memories? Am I...*

She fought deep anguish, the empty meaningless of existence, total isolation. Her energy drained into the void of pointlessness. On her knees, and then slowly sinking to the steps, she collapsed into a mental pit, a morass of her soul. An insignificant voice within tried to fight back, but all color was gone. There were no internal lights. The futility disease possessed her. Her breathing slowed as her autonomic systems, drugged with anguish, barely functioned. Insects whined over her. The sun arced above the southern horizon. The temperature dropped. Hours passed.

An irritation stabbed through her darkness and stung the reptilian part of her brainstem. From a place in the dead zone, in the tar pits below the tranquility of sleep, colors exploded as stimuli from her survival instincts stirred the higher functions of her brain's cortex. Color energy, like a switchboard lighting up, formed into thoughts; awareness. *Alapit!* (blackout) As she came to, she was aware of the hard, cold, concrete steps and something else, the odor and presence of an animal. Her mind cleared and she became aware the sun had set. Something was breathing on her face. She felt the wet, warm sensation of an animal's tongue. Her mind screamed *bear*.

*Play dead.*

The animal pushed with its snout.

*It must be young, a cub. Its nose is too small for a big brown.*

Inside her shell of flesh, she was fully awake.

### C. Descry

*A bear would go for my leg or gut. This has to be a cub that doesn't know what to do. Maybe it has never met a person. Maybe it doesn't know I'm food.*

*But the sow ... she can't be far away. If I move, she'll be on me.*

The snout probed again, and she felt the hot wet tongue probe between her lips. She wanted to stand and yell and wipe her mouth. Instead, she maintained control and opened her eyes enough to squint through the lashes. As she adjusted to the faint light from the aurora borealis and starlight, she turned her head.

The cub jumped back. She tightened, readying for the sow's attack.

*The cub is small, too small to be a...a dog? There are no dogs left.*

The husky bitch - she could see paps hanging low from her belly - looked out from a ruff of gray-white hair streaked with black. Her nose was shiny skin, scar tissue. Along her back whole patches of hair were missing, as if she'd been skinned. Her ears were ripped, the points missing, probably from freezing or fighting. She moved on three hairless legs, holding a rear paw up against her naked belly.

*She must be old. Over eight, if she's not afraid of me ... if she remembers people. She's afraid of me, but not like a wolf, not that wild.*

She made a soft clucking noise at the back of her throat. The dog turned her head from side-to-side, listening.

Jane Mary recalled the words of the old man who taught her about half-wild dogs. He was one of the last to use dog-sleds.

*"Never smile. Keep your mouth closed and don't show your teeth. Sit down and pretend to ignore it. Talk softly. Use food. Always have something to share, something you are eating, not food just for dogs. It must know you are sharing."*

*The only food I have is in the ... no, I have dried fish in my parka.*

She took it out, unwrapped it, and began to chew one end. The dog was totally focused on her. She ignored it, looked away, and kept gnawing. The dog crouched down on her stomach, eyes on the fish.

“Here, have this, old dog, *bart* (buddy).” she said softly as she broke off a chunk of fish and gently placed it on the stair an arms length from her. “You are so thin, but you have pups, don’t you. Do you live around here? Will you come with me when I leave? Where is your mate? He’s wolf I’ll bet. Where is your den?” She kept talking in the same low voice, pretending not to look at the dog, or care that she was there.

The dog darted forward and grabbed at the chunk of fish, missed, lowered its nose, sniffed around, located it, grabbed it, and jumped back.

“So you have trouble with your eyes. We all do, it’s the ash, and you are old. Here, take more fish.”

This time Jane Mary held the fish out to the dog and didn’t pretend to look away. The animal whined, stared and paced, never letting Jane Mary out of her sight. Then, so suddenly Jane Mary didn’t have time to react, she grabbed the fish out of her hand and darted off.

“You come back soon, Mrs. Dog. You come back and bring your pups. I’ll have food when you do.”

A chill ran through her.

*Something happened and I passed out. It’s late and I was asleep out here, exposed. What if it had been a bear? What if ... what happened?*

A part of her was aching, morose, defeated. *The dog woke me from a place like the old people described as the in-between world.*

*I can’t remember, maybe I died? It was like that, but someone sent that dog to get me and bring me back. I should have eaten.*

### C. Descry

*I overdid it. Dumb, Tundra, really dumb, and a good way to get killed.*

*Is the dog real? She is. That complicates things. I can leave as soon as I pack rifles and ammunition. I can get the gas and ... how long will it take to tame the dog and get her pups? I won't go back without them. We need them.*

*What am I going to do tonight? My God, I'm not thinking straight. And I have to check the airstrip and see what's there.*

The school building was dark and foreboding. She would never reenter the home economics rooms and face Gurtta's ghost.

*There has to be a place to sleep - a warm place, a safe place - like ... Doc Lightman's office. It should be safe, the door was shut, no one has been there since I left.*

In the office, in the dark, she moved past the secretary's desk and down the short hall to the wooden door marked Principal. The knob turned easily. The door swung in. Light from the outside sky glared in the window. The aurora borealis colors played across the walls and floor. The chair, where she sat so many times as Doctor Lightman explained the workings of the plant to her, was still there. The big spring-back chair Lightman used sat waiting behind the cluttered desk.

"You'll never use that chair again Doc. Mind if I use it tonight?"

The sound of her own voice gave her confidence and strength. She turned, shut and locked the door, and loosened her parka. It wasn't as cold here as the other parts of the building.

*Sure, the sun comes in the window. The room was closed.*

She moved across the small office to the window. On the steps where she collapsed the dog was sniffing around. Not far away were three pups, tails high in the air, heads down smelling her scent.

*The only food I have is in the boat on the river. No, there are cans left in the kitchen.*

Jane Mary moved silently out of the office and across the main corridor through the entry to the cafeteria and into the kitchen.

*Gurtta found soup. We left a case of it in the big pantry. I can use the can opener mounted on the prep table.*

Gurtta had taken all the small cans. She searched the lower shelves and found a case of heavy gallon cans, then felt around until she found a shallow plastic refrigerator tray. Opening the can, she smelled and tasted the contents. In the dark, she guessed it was chicken soup.

Making soft clucking sounds, she carried the tray outside and placed it on the step. In the dim light, she stirred the cold contents with her knife, mixing chunks of grease with the gravy, chicken, and vegetables. In the dark, off to the side of the stairs, she saw the mother dog.

“Here girl, come on girl. Bring the pups and eat. Here girl, come on girl. Come on.”

She raised the tray and carefully drank from a corner. It tasted better than anything she could remember.

*“Use food. Always have something to share, something you are eating, not food just for dogs. They must know you are sharing,” the old man had said.*

*How long will it take me to tame them and get them in the boat?*

She slid about two feet away from the tray. Calling, clucking and talking to the dogs.

The old mother came out of the darkness sniffing the odor wafting from the tray and crawled toward it on her belly. Behind her, three pups, not very old, came forward to share the treat.

“Ain’t people great. That’s why you aren’t wolves.” She missed her babies, but now she had company and wasn’t alone.



*C. Descry*

“You know Dog, I’ve never seen a chicken, but someone told me chicken soup will cure anything that ails you. Well, let’s see if they were right.”

## Chapter TWENTY

*She didn't make it, did she?" Kathryn used her voice to taunt Denoyer. It was the tone she used, a certain belittling inflection that struck deep into him.*

"Hey Debra, we can only wait. We must keep busy so our thoughts don't drive us crazy. I'm not worried, you shouldn't be, Jane Mary is a cool head. She would stay over and not try to navigate back up here after dark. Besides, it could take a long time to find stuff, pack it to the boat, load it, and get underway. She said it might take her more than a day to pack the boat."

"And if she found other people? Would she bring them here?" Debra asked, knowing Denoyer didn't have an answer.

"Let's hope she contacts others. Let's hope she finds all the stuff we sent her for. Let's hope we didn't send her on a wild goose chase. If the school and village were sacked, she would have come right back."

Kathryn came out of the summer tent, angry. "Denoyer, can we talk?"

"What is it Kath?"

"I really don't understand why you are forcing us to do all this work. Why dig the house deeper? Why do we have to dig the entry tunnel down, and why is it so long? Can't you see, it's too hard for us? I'm not able to do hard work. I'm a mother and whether you recognize it or not, I'm a lady."

*C. Descry*

“Look!” Denoyer knelt down and flattened a sandy place with his hand. “I’ll draw you a picture. Here is what I want.”

With a switch, he began tracing lines in the sand.

“This is a cross-section. Let’s start with the tunnel entry. I want it dug at least two feet deep. It runs that deep for ten feet. Then there is a two-foot wall, and over that begins the pit for the house. The pit is at least three feet deep. The house pit is a big oval, ten feet wide, and fourteen feet long. Off to this side is a storage room. It doesn’t have to be so deep, maybe a foot.”

“And you expect us to build that?”

“If we don’t, we will not survive.”

“We don’t have enough willows. Think how much mud it will take. It’s too big to roof.”

“We have to go down river and cut willows, bring them back and strip the bark here. We need the bark. I don’t intend to spend another winter without it, and I know you agree with me on that issue. We build the roof like an inverted basket. First, we weave the willows together, tight. Then we use plants, branches, and grasses mixed with mud. We plaster the roof until it’s about six inches thick on top, thicker at the base.”

“You just don’t understand how hard that will be. Building the other ones was hard enough.”

“Kathryn, get real. We don’t have wood. The alder, birch and spruce the ancients used were cut and taken years ago. We don’t have big whale bones or mastodon tusks. All we have is right here around us.”

“It will collapse. It’s too big. I know something about architecture.”

“It’s not as big as we need. If we weave and tie the willows right, it won’t collapse any more than a inverted basket would. We anchor the bottom rim in the earth so it can’t push out. The mud will freeze, that will also give it strength.”

“Why not let us build it on top of the ground. It’s ridiculous to make us dig a hole. Besides, we can only dig a little and

then we have to wait for the ground to thaw before we can dig deeper.”

“No, it’s not ridiculous. The lower the profile, the less wind it catches. Even the tunnel must be low. We’ll build steps inside where we enter. The snow will drift over the house and insulate us. We don’t have wood to burn for heat and fuel. We must conserve heat and this is the way the ancients did it.”

“I don’t agree, but of course what I think doesn’t ever get consideration around here. You have to have your way. One thing I do know, the tunnel should have an outside door that doesn’t let the cold in.”

“No, that’s not right. We would use up our oxygen and die. The tunnel, and the adjustable air hole in the roof let us control the amount of fresh air that comes in.”

“Damn you Carl, you have an answer for everything, but that doesn’t mean you’re right.”

Debra listened, waiting her turn. It was the same old argument Kathryn always used so she could sulk and get out of work. She got up and stood in front of Kathryn.

“Jane Mary isn’t here to make you help, but I am. Carl, I’m ready to start. If Kathryn doesn’t pull her weight this time, what will you do?”

*Damn her, she has to put me on the spot. I knew this was coming. He turned to Kathryn.*

“She’s right! Do as we say.”

Debra grimaced. “Damn you Carl, this is it! This is the time to get things out. Don’t wimp-out on me, tell her!”

“Debra, she understands.”

“Damn you, tell her!”

“Tell me what? That you’re a laborer? Carl knows I’m a lady.”

Denoyer grimaced. There was no other way.

“Lady, this is a life-or-death matter. If you don’t pull your weight, if for any reason you slack off and ... well, you’re out. You will leave here and take your arguments and half-

### C. Descry

baked ideas away from us where you can try them out on your own.”

“What? How dare ... my children ... what? ...”

“Kathryn! Work or get the hell out. It’s as simple as that.”

The digging was relatively easy as they enlarged the old pit house. They shared the shovel and piled sandy loam around the edges of the new hole. Gathering willows was much harder. Denoyer took one woman at a time down to cut willows. The other stayed in camp to protect and care for the children. He covered them with the .270 as they went down river to a big stand, beating metal lids and yelling to scare away predators. Willow groves are larders for bears, and it is impossible to see a bear unless it is moving.

Cutting the older, thicker willows was difficult. For the women it took several swings with the axe to sever them. Their leaves and bushy branches intact, they tied them in bundles Denoyer could carry on his back. It was hard, scratchy work.

At every opportunity, they searched the river looking for Jane Mary. Dread filled them. Another day passed, and then another.

“She didn’t make it, did she?” Kathryn used her voice to taunt Denoyer. It was the tone she used, a certain belittling inflection that struck deep into him.

*I hate her. Stop it! We need her. Her babies need her.* “It’s only the fourth day. One day down, two days gathering stuff - maybe dealing with people - and a day back. I’d be surprised if she got back before tomorrow.”

Debra gave him a wistful look and turned back to stripping bark. *If only the children were older - able to carry their own weight - we could leave. Jane Mary wouldn’t go with us anyway.*

They finished digging out the floor of the house. Stacks of willow switches lay stripped of their branches and bark. He found clay nearby and started digging it. They were ready to weave the willows, and make their waddle and daub basket.

Eleven children pleaded for attention or acted-out to get what they needed. The older kids were in no mood to watch the younger, not that they could. Either Kathryn or Debra - too often both, occasionally all three adults - had to be with the children. Still, the kids demanded - needed - more. Time out for feeding, changing, cleaning up after, and nurturing slowed the project.

Jane Mary had been gone four nights. The afternoon was waning on the fifth day. Resignation turned to fear as shock crept in.

The wind blew down river as the sun dug away at the southern horizon. Debra guessed it was after 9:00. A cloud-bank formed to the north over the Brooks Range. The river took on the gray-blue colors of the sky. Animal calls out on the tundra gave her chills. She stood, tired of watching, tired of hoping, and scanned the river one last time.

A boat was coming around the bend. Not one boat, three. The wind kept the motor's sound from reaching camp.

"Get out here, here she comes. Do you hear me? Come out, Jane Mary is back ... and there are three boats."

Pulling on parkas, swaddling babies, the family came out of the summer tent and stood gazing down river. The boats were a quarter mile away. The light was growing dim and the reflections on the water made it seem as if the boats were in the air.

"There's no one in the back two boats, Denoyer observed. She's towing them. It does look like there's someone with her - someone in her boat."

"There is, I think she found someone."

The children were staring at the river. The older ones started down to the water. The adults followed.

"The boats are loaded. She's bringing all kinds of things. I hope she brought a mirror." Kathryn's voice was high with excitement.

*C. Descry*

“My God, I don’t believe it!” Denoyer shook his head and cupped his hands around his eyes to shield them from reflected light.

“What?”

“Wonderful! It’s more than we could have hoped for.”

## Chapter TWENTY-ONE

*I'm saving us, don't you see? I'm thinking clearly, you're not.. Kill the damned things. Do it now or I will ... I promise you I will!*

Jane Mary came in too fast. She was exhausted and anxious to be home. Denoyer caught the bow of her boat and slowed it, keeping it from riding up on the gravel. The towed boats, heavily loaded, came on at speed. The first hit the back of Jane Mary's boat to the right of the outboard motor. The impact pushed her boat forward and threw her back hard. She landed on piles of plastic bags and tumbled among the dogs. Tied on short leashes they couldn't get out of her way. The noise of crunching aluminum, Jane Mary's scream, and the yipping squeals of the dogs, scared the children. They ran back to the tent, sure some devil had landed.

The third boat passed by the second, ran to the extent of its tether, was jerked around and hit the beach sideways with a dull metallic crunch.

When the second boat hit, Denoyer was knocked back into Kathryn, who dropped painfully onto the rocks. His foot jammed under the bow, against the gravel. He wasn't in pain, but he couldn't get up.

Debra saw what was coming and stepped to the side as the three boats ran aground. She ran forward and shoved Jane Mary's boat back, off Denoyer's foot. The backward move-



ment sent Jane Mary, who was regaining her feet, back onto the dogs and cargo. She blew, cursing in Iñupiaq.

The four dogs cowered in the boat. They had almost adjusted to being tied, the sound of the motor, and being on the water. Now, they had been thrown about, attacked by Jane Mary whom they had begun to trust, and surrounded by strange humans yelling and cursing. The bitch snarled, lips curled back, teeth gleaming. Her primeval wolf fierceness sent chills through everyone. The pups tried to hide under her belly.

“This is not the way I planned to arrive,” Jane Mary yelled at Denoyer. The dogs! Don’t let them loose or they’ll run off, we’ll lose them. Now everyone, back away. I have to quiet them.”

“She’ll tear you to pieces.” Kathryn warned as she rubbed her bottom and stared in horror at the fierce animal tied in the boat. “It’s going to attack you Jane Mary. Watch out! And don’t let them loose, they’ll attack the children. How could you be so stupid as to bring wolves to our home?”

Debra was the only one who kept her cool. “Carl, are you okay? Is your foot...”

“Twisted, not hurt bad. Let’s get back and let Jane Mary settle the dogs.”

Jane Mary didn’t wait until they were away. She moved back to the stern and sat, pulling a dried fish out of the food box at her feet. The others could hear her voice, soft and gentling, as she pretended to ignore the dogs and eat.

With the immediate threats gone, the mother dog relaxed. The pups peered out from between her legs, grabbed at nipples and nursed. She pulled against the leash, knew it wouldn’t give, and studied Jane Mary’s back. The smell of fish changed her angst to desire. She let out a probing whine and waited.

Jane Mary turned and broke off a chunk of fish. Slowly, talking and cajoling, she reached back and let the dog take the fish from her hand.

“*Aarigaa* (satisfaction). It’s a peace offering. Here, I have more for the pups *Aatchug* (to give).” She broke off little chunks and tossed them, one at a time to the three little ones, making sure each got a bite.

She gave the bitch another chunk of fish and raised her voice a sentence at a time until Denoyer could hear her.

“Get something - jerky or something - and be eating it. Come up slowly.”

Debra disappeared into the tent and came back with a strip of rabbit meat that had been drying on a line. It was still pliable.

“Here Carl, pretend to eat this. Are they wolves?”

“No, I don’t think so. Part wolf, that’s for sure. But the big one - the mother - she’s mostly husky - husky and shepherd I think. She looks strange because she lost so much hair.”

“They’ll attack the babies. Keep them away from us!” Kathryn ordered in her nastiest, most threatening voice.

Denoyer ignored her. His excitement at seeing dogs, and knowing all they meant to their survival, hadn’t diminished. He understood what set the dogs off. He knew Jane Mary got them in the boat and was feeding them. They weren’t wild.

“Come slowly. Talk to me, not them. Ignore them. Eat.”

The bitch’s hackles rose as he came near, but he ignored her, made smacking noises like he was eating. He focused on Jane Mary. Slowly, he climbed into the boat and sat next to her with his back to the dogs.

“Good. Now we wait until she calms down. Then, bite off a chunk of that meat and give it to her.”

The bitch had his smell and wasn’t sure she liked it. She whined, growled low, throaty threats, and kept sniffing.

“If I’m right about her, she’s never been around a man. I think Gurta found her out somewhere and brought her back to the school. She’s dead back there in the home economics room, has been for some time. No sign anyone else was ever there.”

*C. Descry*

“She came back alone?”

“Maybe with the dog, I said! The dog stayed. The pups are from a wolf. Look how long their legs are.”

“No sign anyone else ever came back to the school?” Denoyer wanted a definite answer.

“Not a sign, I said! Except for Gurtta and some cans of food she ate, everything was exactly as we left it. Well, more houses burned. Probably lightning. Not ever bears there now. Birds all around. Part of the school burned too. I’m glad to get away from there, it’s full of ghosts.”

“Looks like you found gas.”

“Filled all I could find. There’s still lots there. It’s starting to smell funny. I found some cans of stuff that’s supposed to keep gas from spoiling. I brought them. Poured some in the school tank. Who knows what it will do.”

“Guns?”

“Three, but like all metal they’re corroded, but maybe not that bad inside. I found ammunition. The shells are okay, they pack them in grease. They didn’t corrode.”

“Did you find a mirror for Kathryn?”

“I pried one off the wall in the teachers’ bathroom. I want her to see she’s not a beauty queen anymore. I want her to see how bad she looks. That’s the only reason I brought it. I don’t want her to know I have it ... not yet, okay?”

“It’ll be dark soon. We can pull the boats up and unpack in the morning. What about the dogs?”

“We can’t leave them in the boat. I’ll get them up by the tent. You drive a stake. I brought a light metal chain she can’t chew through. We give them lots of food, they’ll be settled in the morning.”

Jane Mary coached the dogs from the boat while Denoyer stood at the entrance to the tent, watching. The chain tethered to the stake, Jane Mary went back and pulled a gallon can and a refrigerator tray from the boat. She approached the dogs slowly, still wary of the big bitch. As she poured soup from

the can, the pups came forward. The old dog followed, hardly concerned that Jane Mary hadn't moved away.

Denoyer smiled. "This old dog will not be a problem. The pups will learn from her."

Quarreling inside the tent broke his mood. He heard Debra command Kathryn to stop. Kathryn told her to get out of the way. He heard her curse and then push against him as she tried to get out the exit. As he turned, she pushed the barrel of the .270 past him and tried to force by.

"Get out of the way, I'm not going to let those wolves hurt the children."

Denoyer grabbed the barrel of the .270, pushed it up, and twisted it out of her grasp. She fought him, couldn't overcome him, and cursing, fell to her knees.

"Damn you Denoyer. Don't you see Jane Mary brought those wolves here without thinking of what they will do to the children? Am I always the only one who sees things as they really are?"

Denoyer passed the rifle to his left hand and clenched his right fist. He moved it back, ready to bring it crashing into her. Kathryn saw the look on his face and cringed back, scared of him for the first time.

"I'm saving us, don't you see? I'm thinking clearly, you're not. Kill the damned things. Do it now or I will ... I promise you I will!"

He tried to quell his anger, tried to stop his fist, but he had had enough, he hated her. He bashed her with all his strength. She made a huffing sound, rolled over her heels into the tent, and lay flat-out on her back.

Debra stared at her and then Denoyer. He registered her shock and watched as it turned into a smile.

"Carl, it had to be done."

His mind reeled. He recalled a fight with a gang of girls - he was ten, maybe twelve - and he and his buddies were standing up to the gang, fighting to be men. The rules were clear as

### C. Descry

any kid growing up in a conservative community like Prescott, Arizona knew. You can't hit girls ... but you can shove them. It hadn't worked then. It probably wouldn't have worked now, but...

"My God, what have I done?"

The older children left their piles of blankets and stood looking down on Kathryn. Blood ran from her nose. Her right cheekbone was dented where his fist connected. The bone was obviously broken. Her cheek was red and turning purple.

He registered that the children hadn't seen him hit her. They were asking what happened. Jane Mary saw it all.

"*Taikuu* (thankyou). Finally! You're finally man enough to do what had to be done. Damn," she took the rifle from Denoyer, "look at this. There's a shell in the chamber and she had the safety off. She would have killed them - maybe me. Is she dead?"

Debra was kneeling over Kathryn, noting her pulse and breathing.

"She'll recover. I don't think her face will."

Denoyer stared down at Kathryn, trying hard to feel sorry, trying hard to hate himself for hitting her. She moved, and his first impulse was to kick her, kick her hard. The thought disgusted him, appalled him. *I could kill her and never have a regret. I could.* He wanted to feel evil. He wanted to believe he was insane, but he wasn't, he was glad. *I should fall to my knees and help her. I should beg her to...*

"Look Denoyer," Jane Mary's voice was flat, matter-of-fact, "it had to be done. It should have been done years ago. If she survives, then it's up to us to make sure she never pulls a stunt like that again. Whatever we say, she has an argument. Whatever we need to do, she shirks her responsibility. You, more than anyone, are responsible for our survival. You did what you should have done at the start. Now go out and get your head straight. Debra, let's get her on the hides. We'll get the children settled and then take care of her."

“Explain to the children, they don’t understand.” Denoyer pleaded.

“Of course we will Carl. They’re our children. She had hers, but they’re ours, all of ours. We’re their parents, with or without her.”

Outside, the night was surprisingly warm. He tried to envision the face of his wife in Arizona. *What do you think? Are you looking at the sky imagining the volcanic storms destroyed me? Are you there after all these years, looking up at the September sky? If so, your world changed too, didn’t it? Are you fighting to survive in a world without energy slaves? Are you degenerating like me and becoming more primitive each day? Are you capable of killing others with no remorse? Like me, are you so focused on survival you ignore spiritual and ethical concerns?*

*No, I think you’re dead my love, my Maria. I’ve never been able to connect with you - like I could if you were still alive - I’d feel you. I think we’re alone up here, an unfortunate error when the earth was cleansed of the raging human virus.*

He stared into the dark clouds of night.

We can’t afford the survival of the unfit. Not a baby born deformed, not one too old to work. No one injured so badly they can’t recover. Not...not Kathryn, if she doesn’t change. I’ll take her away from camp and put her down. I have to be prepared for that, there is no other choice. Damn, she better get it!

## Chapter TWENTY-TWO

*What if?, isn't a game we can play. We don't know what happened and it doesn't pay to speculate. We go on hoping for the best. Meanwhile, we try to get information.*

Jane Mary tossed and talked in her sleep as she ran through the corridors of the school chased by Gurtta's ghost. Debra lay awake, wondering if they would ever be able to start south without Kathryn and Jane Mary. She eventually fell asleep, children cuddled next to her.

Jane Mary, a baby at each breast, snored softly. To maintain her supply, she had expressed milk while she was gone. The two five year olds were spooned together, sound asleep.

Denoyer slept through the night, oblivious to Kathryn's low moaning, the older children whining, the little ones crying, and the howling of the bitch and her pups staked in the yard. He awoke refreshed and ready to unload the boats, peruse the treasures Jane Mary brought, and get back to work on the pit house. The freeze was coming. Urgency drove him.

As light filtered into the tent, he pulled on his clothes and got up. Kathryn groaned. He studied her face, examining the damage. The right side of her face was a dark purple puff-ball. Her eye was black and swollen shut. Globes of blood coagulated in her nose, on her lip, cheek, and chin. *She's hurt bad - well, she deserved it. She is alive, will probably live. That's more than she deserves.*

*It's almost time, I'll have to get her pregnant again.*

He couldn't see the shape of her body through the covers, but he imagined the once impressive, now sagging breasts, the stretch marks and the dark line of hair running up her stomach, past her navel, and... *what happened to the model, the woman who thought she could manipulate everybody with her beauty? Her blond hair is straw, chopped off in chunks as needed to mend things. Well Kathryn, with your rotten personality you were never really attractive ... but I'll screw you. I have to.*

The morning was slow to command the day. Heavy fog lay along the river and swept over their camp on the morning breezes. The bitch was curled around her pups, the bare, deep purple patches of her exposed skin rippling as she shivered.

He moved toward her as he cajoled. She stood, head down, ears moving forward and back. "What did you do in the winter, old dog? How could you survive without your coat? Did you find a place to den-up? Did you have help? There is so much you could tell me. You're old, how long will you be with us? Can you teach these pups what you know? Can you find a wolf - they're around - to give you more? Will you trust me?"

He stopped, turned his back to her, and walked away, still talking to her, still communicating. He stopped at the river's edge, noting it had risen overnight.

*That's expected this time of year when the tundra is melting and draining. My markers, three years of recorded water levels, tell the water is rising about three inches a year. That means something ... probably the land is warming. More interesting is Lightman's observation that the river's blocked. I have to consider that possibility. When we begin our migration south, we will follow the Wikasel west and then go along the coast, south along the Chukchi Sea.*

He heard the Bitch whine and the scratch of the canvas door as it was pulled back. He heard soft, gravel-grating footsteps as Debra came down to the water's edge to join him.



*C. Descry*

Jane Mary walked heavy, her weight crushing down with each step. Kathryn walked timidly, as if she would bruise her feet. Debra walked surely and gently, planting her heel and then her whole foot. Her walking - everything she did - soothed him and made him glad.

“The boats are full. Jane Mary brought back more than I dreamed she could.”

“When the sun breaks through, we start unpacking. Then we work on the house.”

“You were staring out as if you’re planning something.”

“With these boats we can make it to the sea, all of us.”

“And then what? Can we take the boats down the coast, maybe to Nome?”

“I hope so. The five-year-olds will have to be older and strong enough to man boats. You know, that’s at least six years we have to wait.”

“I know. The thought of it keeps me going. We can make better time on the water.”

“Maybe hundreds of miles a year. We might be able to reach the lower forty-eight while I’m still strong enough to lead. But don’t get that set in your mind. We will have to climb over mountains, especially when we get near the Aleutians. We should be able to turn inland after we pass Dillingham. We can make our way up the river and then cross the mountains to Cook Inlet. We can check out Anchorage. If it’s gone, we can get to the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific. If we can’t go that way, we have to cross the Aleutians, go over mountains. It won’t be easy. We’ll lose the boats - probably will either way - and we’ll have to be prepared to pack what we need on our backs. The dogs can pull travois. If we can’t go by water we may not get far in our lifetimes. It may take five hundred years to reach Seattle.”

“Carl, what are the chances we’ll survive here six more years? We’re our own worst enemy, I mean Kathryn and...and Jane Mary won’t go, will she?”

“Good, if we learn the ways of the ancients. I have to teach the children ... all of you. Kathryn goes along or she goes, it’s that simple. I’m hoping she’ll cooperate, we need her. Jane Mary will change her mind and go with us. She believes she is the last Inupiaq. If we can store enough food to provide for our increasing numbers and maintain the dogs through the dark times, we will survive.”

“Jan Lightman said there were more than forty volcanoes west of Anchorage out across the Aleutians, and many more over in Asia on the Kamchatka Peninsula. The water level has risen since the Cut Off, right? What if the volcanoes erupted and built land all the way to Asia? What if the Bering Sea is landlocked or gone? What if the Bering Straits are above water again and the cold Arctic Ocean can’t move south?”

“What if?, isn’t a game we can play. We don’t know what happened and it doesn’t pay to speculate. We go on hoping for the best. Meanwhile, we try to get information. I think the constant earthquakes tell us that whatever happened is still happening. The big quakes are too frequent.”

“We could go to the nearest fish camp and get their tower. That would let us see more country.”

“We could. We need to be able to see when the caribou move. I could observe the water and ...we couldn’t see that much. It would require a lot of hard work.”

“I didn’t mean right now. It was just a thought.”

“We have to think like that. What I wouldn’t give for Andy Passco’s plane.”

“Without Andy, right?”

Denoyer laughed as he came to his feet.

“Time to get to work.”

“And remember, the fish camps have some wood, maybe stoves ... tin, and canvas.”

“We won’t make it this year. Remind me in the spring.”

The tent flap opened and Jane Mary stepped into the foggy morning, pulling her parka down over her thick body.

“The stuff I brought is safer in the boats. We have no place to put it. There are shovels and buckets we need to unpack now.”

“Is Kathryn up?”

“She’s awake. Nursing. She looks awful.”

“Will she try to kill the dogs again?”

“Knowing her, she might. Denoyer, you talk to her. You got her attention, make sure she understands.”

“We need additions to our pit house, a bigger storage room and a room for the dogs. Without body hair, the bitch can’t survive outside.”

“You’re right. I found her den in one of the large insulated ducts used to carry water. She had a snug doghouse, that’s how she survived. Denoyer, dogs inside mean fleas.” Jane Mary stared at him as if he were stupid.

“We can build a shelter for them. It doesn’t have to be connected to ours.”

“Carl, we need more storage pits - at least one more for dog food.

“You better go hunt, we’re going to be short food.”

“Can Kathryn work?” He knew the answer, but there was an outside chance.

“Not today. Tell her tomorrow she doesn’t have a choice. Are you going to talk to her Denoyer?”

He faced her and clenched his fist. “Jane Mary, get the hell off my back.” Her eyes opened wide as she stepped back, eyeing his balled fists. He turned away and entered the tent.

Kathryn had pulled herself up against a bundle of hides. Her tiny daughter and Debra’s son were nursing. Deno, her oldest, almost six, cuddled next to her. *He has her coloration and hair, my looks.* He stared up at his father, not sure what was wrong; what happened to his mother.

“It’s not fair. I’m fighting for our survival. I only do what’s right.” Her words came out muffled. She could barely open her mouth.

“No, as a matter of fact you act without thinking. Everything you do is based on what you want - what you perceive is right for you, not what is right.”

“It’s not fair. They get away with everything. They manipulate you. I’m the only one who cares about you, really cares. And what do you do? You hit me.”

“Get this straight. You are wrong. What you do often endangers the rest of us. If you don’t change that will be the end of you.”

“But I’m right.” She slurred the words, moving her jaw brought pain. “I know what is needed. I notice things. You must pay attention to me - listen to me!”

“You serve yourself, no one else. You will work as a member of this family or...”

“Or you’ll hit me again?”

“No, Kathryn. I’ll kill you.”

He turned to leave, aware of the damage she could do. Worried about what his children heard.

“Kathryn, if you use your power to manipulate the children or drag your feet or do anything other than join the team and work for the common good, you’re through. We’re all watching you and hoping you can change. You have two options. I’ll know by the end of tomorrow which one you have chosen. Who and what you were, died last night when you picked up that rifle.”

He turned as he left, noting her rigid body and pained attempts to fake a smile. *She never heard a word I said. Damn her then.* “Rest today. Tomorrow you work with us.”

“But...but don’t you understand? I’m not like them, I’m a lady.”

“So Denoyer, did you tell her?”

“Vengeance is mine, sayeth Jane Mary. You’re such a bitch, you must dominate everything and everyone. Nothing gets in the way of your rush to action. Did it occur to you we might not survive without her?”

*C. Descry*

“I am aware she could be the reason we don’t survive. I’m not attacking you, Denoyer. I only advise...”

“Like hell you do! You’re constantly setting me up.”

“You don’t understand our ways ... *Naluagmiu* (white man).”

“Your ways? You need a better argument. Why not let reason guide you instead of ignoring the facts when you get your mind set on something?”

She eased back, hot emotionally and sexually from the exchange. Innocence flashed across her damp face forming a subtle smile. “We should eat. We work better after.”

## Chapter TWENTY-THREE

*My ancestors wouldn't have survived without dogs. We need ten more, at least.*

*You mean for a sled?*

*Jane Mary gave him a sideways look. Sure. But what I really mean is food if we run short.*

They finished weaving the willows into a tight inverted basket over the pit. Beginning at the bottom, one course at a time, they plastered mud mixed with twigs, old canvas, pieces of worn hides, grasses, and the bushy ends of willow branches. By the time they mucked one course all around, the mud dried enough to support the next. By late afternoon half the framework was covered. They were running out of binding materials. Their hands were sore, their skin dried and worn thin by mud and grit. Their muscles ached, but each felt the satisfaction of knowing their house would be ready before freeze up.

Jane Mary looked up. "Carl, with Kathryn watching the kids, we make better time."

"And we don't have to listen to her bitching or her made-up crap about us doing it wrong."

"And I don't have to listen to her arguments about architecture," Denoyer said. "She doesn't get it that this pit house won't be in Architectural Digest. She keeps the little kids out of our hair. I'm not sure I want her out here working with us."

C. Descry

“I wouldn’t have believed the five-year-olds could do so much. They love to play in mud.”

“Okay, there are some things she’s good for.”

“I never thought I’d hear you defending her, Jane Mary.” Debra said.

“Me? You’re wrong. I always take her side if I think injustice is done. I’m trying to think of ways she can contribute. Her babies are strong. She’s a good mother to our kids. She has more milk than the two of us.”

Debra stared at her. “She’s not trustworthy. The needs of our family must govern us. We’re in this together, right Carl? And you know how I feel about things when they’re up in the air. This thing with Kathryn must be settled, it’s making me scared. Carl, you understand.”

She moved closer to Denoyer, hoping he would reach out and touch her. She needed his assurance she was right. She needed to know he agreed with her - more, that she always agreed with him and he appreciated it. *I’m not sexy or smart enough. If I could only be stronger. He must know, I’m only in this to serve him. I’m not alone, he loves me.*

She knew she would be safe if she predicted Denoyer’s moods and moves, his hidden agendas. If she judged him right, she would be safe.

“Carl, I need a timeline. I need to know for sure what’s going to happen with Kathryn.”

“I had one. Either she changed, or I put her down. Now, things have changed. We need her for baby-sitting. She serves a purpose even though she doesn’t do the work we do. What about that? Is it a reason to extend the deadline?”

Jane Mary gently pushed past Debra and stepped forward, facing Denoyer.

“Look, let me decide. It doesn’t have to be on your shoulders. Right now, we wait. She can gather willow tops tomorrow. We need a lot. I don’t expect her to plaster mud.”

"I'll have to cover you all while you cuts tops. And I'll have to haul them back. Who watches the kids while we're gone?"

"You're right, Denoyer. She watches the kids so we can go down river for willows. We need her here."

"Will the dogs run away if we untie them?"

"I don't think so. I'll give them a taste of the soup from the cans. That will keep them here."

"If they go with us to gather willows, they'll tip us off if a bear comes around. That will free me up a little anyway."

"My ancestors wouldn't have survived without dogs. We need ten more, at least."

"You mean for a sled?"

Jane Mary gave him a sideways look. "Sure. But what I really mean is food if we run short."

Debra listened, missed Jane Mary's point, thinking how nice it would be to see the children playing with the puppies. "We must name them."

"No!" Jane Mary's response was so sudden and hostile Debra stepped back.

"No names. You can't kill and eat something with a name. You can't get attached to them. They have to stay part wild."

She went over and slowly approached the bitch. The dog's ears went back, then forward as Jane Mary came near. Her tail jerked back and forth then wagged as Jane Mary's soft words eased her. She watched as Jane Mary uncovered a soup can secured with a slab of rock, her tail moving faster, her ears forward. Jane Mary scooped two globs of soup into the tray and let the puppies come forward and lap it up. The Bitch whined, and pulled at her chain.

"Okay now Dog, it's your turn. She wiped the rim of the can with her finger and held it out as she moved into the dog's circle. The bitch licked her fingers. She reached over its head and unclipped the chain, then in the same motion, turned and picked up the gallon soup can. The bitch was butting her



### *C. Descry*

with her head as Jane Mary scooped a dollop of thick soup into the tray.

Unexpectedly, the bitch gave a deep, vicious growl that scared Jane Mary so badly she fell backwards onto the loose rock. As she fell, she realized the bitch was warning away her puppies, not threatening her. She let out whoops of laughter, got up, picked up the half full can and reburied it under rocks.

“Let’s get willows. Come on you lazy would-be Eskimos. What do I have to do, carry you down there?”

Kathryn stood just inside the flap of the tent watching as Claire, the lightest of the girls, balanced on Denoyer’s shoulders, scooped the last mud and grass out of her bucket and plastered the top of the roof. She let out a groan to get their attention. “Be careful Claire, I told you all that roof is too weak to hold weight. You’re all so ignorant. You just don’t know things like engineering and...”

“Shut the hell up Kathryn,” Jane Mary leaned down, scooped a handful of mud from the ground, and turning, threw it hard at Kathryn. The mud splattered the sides of the tipi tent. Kathryn jumped back as several globs hit her.

“You’ll hurt the children. Don’t throw mud at the children you dumb slob. Did you see that, Denoyer? She threw mud at the children.” She ducked back into the hut.

“It’s almost time Denoyer. She’s getting worse.” Jane Mary bitched.

Denoyer lowered Claire until she could step to ground. “Whew, is that it?”

“I got it. It’s done, Daddy.”

“All we have to do now is build the storage rooms. We can use the boats, it won’t take much doing,” Denoyer announced.

Jane Mary wiped her hands. “Shouldn’t we dig a grave?”

“Look, we agreed we need her. We’ve got to try to get her to see how irritating her behavior is.”

“Really? Change her? What if we sewed her damn mouth shut?”

“Or stuffed it full of this mud,” Debra suggested.

“Okay ladies, think of something that will work.”

Jane Mary looked up, thinking. A wide, self-aggrandizing smile took her whole face. “I have a plan. The day we move in, things will be different.”

## Chapter TWENTY- FOUR

*The special smile she kept for herself dropped into a fleshy glare, her lips a seam. Her head jerked to the side as she attempted to separate from the reality she faced.*

The weather changed. Gray, almost black clouds moved down from the westernmost Brooks Range. Sleet and hail-snow, driven by forty mile per hour winds, forced them under cover. The nights were long, forewarning the disappearance of the sun. They were trapped in the cold tent for unbearable hours.

“This tent has to come down next time it clears. We have to get the boats unloaded so we can place them over the rooms we built. We have maybe a week, I don’t know. We should go out and unload the boats now. We can put the stuff in the house until we get the storage rooms built. I don’t remember the weather turning so bad, so early.”

Kathryn sat forward. “Well, it always has. This is normal. You may not remember, but I do. I keep track. I have to...”

“Shut up! You open your yap again and I’ll close it.” Denoyer turned toward her and shook his fist. “Kathryn, can you ever get it through your thick head that comments like that only serve to make people hate you?”

“What? That I’m present. That I’m thinking. That I have skills and knowledge you lack? Give me credit Denoyer, I keep us on course.”

“Debra. Jane Mary, come on, we’re going out to unload.”

With the canvas pulled away, Jane Mary dug around until she found the mirror. Secreting it tightly against her, she entered the tunnel and, hunched over, moved to the pit house interior. A patch of light from the uncovered smoke hole lit the floor near the center. She fumbled with twigs, pulled a rope from her parka, and experimented hanging the mirror until she found a spot where the light was brightest. “Just you wait Kathryn, this will shut you up,” she whispered as she took the mirror down and wrapped it in a caribou hide.

The treasures from the school and village were examined and sorted into piles on the beach, the boats were placed on their mud foundations and covered with a plaster of mud, grasses and willow tops. Working together, they stowed the last boxes and bags in the storage room adjacent to the house and arranged it for easy winter access. They drained and stored the boat motors. Jane Mary fed the dogs in their shelter. They sniffed around, scratched out hollows in the gravel floor, and took possession.

On the first clear day, October 1st, Denoyer decided, he put down eleven caribou. Dozens of animals moved along the ridge above their camp. He shot from hiding in the depression of a pit house his crew had excavated many years before. Animals fell as others jumped aside and passed. He thought of going back for more shells, counted the downed animals and decided their larder was full. Cleaning and preparing the meat and hides would take many days. *These hides will be prime. Winter hides are so full of insect holes they’re no good.* Through the summer, he had taken two black bears and numerous small animals. Jane Mary’s weirs, nets, and lines captured enough fish to last through the dark months.

*Next year I’ll be able to teach the older kids to hunt. Next year, and the next and the... There is so much to teach them.*

### C. Descry

October sunlight was dimmer each day. Night descended. Jane Mary knew she must act soon, while there was enough skylight to use the mirror. She went about her chores talking in whispers to herself, smiling about her plan; imagining Kathryn's reaction.

They were in for a noon break, out of the biting wind. Kathryn sat to one side as usual, nursing and preening.

"So you were a model once?" Jane Mary asked in her softest, non-threatening voice. The others looked up, puzzled. What was Jane Mary up to?

"You were quite the lady the first time I met you. Remember? You got off the Beaver and I picked you up and brought you to the school on the back of an ATV? You really looked out-of-place, I remember that."

The muscles in Kathryn's face changed her expressions as clouds moving over the muscle topography. There was anger, then questions, then a timid openness. Her mind raced to understand. She pulled the babies off, let them down on soft fur, and sat staring at Jane Mary.

*Is she being decent? Is she taunting me? She never talks to me ... is she trying to be friendly? Does she finally understand that I'm a lady?* "I was raised by genteel parents in a world where women are honored and protected."

"You were brought up different than me," Jane Mary's tone was tender, even understanding.

"It was different. I developed my mind and the skills necessary to contribute as one of the leaders. I am highly evolved." She hesitated, "I am a lady, and that is something none of you have tried to understand."

"You were never required to do physical work. Is that what you mean?" Jane Mary smiled at Kathryn as Denoyer and Debra sat trying to understand the game she was setting up.

"No. I have other qualities. Some do physical labor, others plan, build, and lead. I was meant from birth to be a leader.

That's just the way it is. I don't need strength to labor. My gifts are beauty and brains. No one should hate me or punish me for that."

"So did you really model? Were you photographed naked because you were beautiful?"

"I did once. The photographer was stupid. He double-crossed me. It was not nice at all. I could be a fashion model - I mean if things ever go back the way they were. I have what it takes!"

"Lady qualities. Beauty, right?" Jane Mary studied Kathryn's globose face, her cheek with its prominent dent.

"And brains, don't forget, I see things others miss."

The others saw Jane Mary's tight, held-back look. "Your beauty hasn't worked here. Being a lady doesn't exactly fit in. I understand what you must think of all this ... all of us."

"You don't have to ignore a flower just because things are tough. You don't have to... Well, just accept me for what I am. I can't change that. Do you understand?"

"I think so. I'll think about it." She turned toward Debra, effectively cutting off communication with Kathryn. Her round face twisted in a pixie grin.

"Debra, I brought you something I found in the school." She rolled onto her knees and stood. "It's something we could all use, I guess, but I thought of you. I'll get it."

Jane Mary unwrapped the mirror and held it facing Debra. Debra gasped as realization of Jane Mary's cruel plan became evident.

"No! Please put that thing away."

"But I thought you'd all like it. You don't? Well I like it. I'm putting it up." She moved to the side and hung the mirror next to where light from the open smoke hole glared into the pit house. "Now we go back outside and finish the hides. Kathryn, you're the lady, you stay in here and watch the kids."

### C. Descry

She motioned Denoyer out as she tossed Debra her parka. “Outside now! Let’s finish the job. Come on all you kids, you can help.”

The mirror hung in the shadow, just outside the circle of soft light. Kathryn waited until they were gone, then stood with her back to it, centered like a fashion model in a spotlight. Carefully, she ran her hands over her hair, finding and straightening each wayward strand. Then, wiping the corners of her eyes and mouth as she had done so many times as she fine-tuned her makeup, she wiped her forehead and brushed the back of her hand over her nose to eliminate glare. She pushed her shoulders back and straightened. Chin in, she was certain she looked her best. She turned to the mirror.

The special smile she kept for herself dropped into a fleshy glare, her lips a seam. Her head jerked to the side as she attempted to separate from the reality she faced. Her eyes dulled, her shoulders slumped, bulging her distended, flat football breasts out over her swollen belly. She slumped to the bed of furs and stared into the circle of light as if there was something she forgot.

*Mother! I’m mother ... just like her. She always said I was just like her. Damn her!* She took Dolly out of the case and stared at the delicate Barbie Doll.

“You’re me now, Dolly,” she whispered. “You’re all that’s left of me.”

“We should have heard something by now.” Jane Mary looked back over her shoulder at the pit house entrance.

Debra was furious. “What did you expect, a scream? A whimper? A gunshot?”

Denoyer frowned. “Look ladies, maybe Kathryn will face reality and change. The mirror was a dirty trick. She knows how hard this life has been on her - all of us. Didn’t you look

in the mirror and see what life on the Wikasel has done to you? What would be left of any of us if we lost our self esteem?"

"If she knows she isn't what she thinks she is - pretends to be - then maybe she'll stop with the bullshit. Maybe she'll stop her everlasting criticism and smart ass, know-it-all crap."

"That's why you put up the mirror?" Debra asked. "That's what you hoped for? Next thing you'll tell us you did it to save her life."

"I did."

"Sure, and now she'll get even with you. Watch out Jane Mary!"

"What can she do, criticize me? Beat me up? She already hates me - us. What's changed?"

"She's coming out. Look at her, I don't think the mirror had any effect." She raised her voice. "Are you going to help us, Kathryn?"

"No, I have the children to take care of. That's what I do as you know. Right Carl? Right Debra? Isn't that our agreement?"

Debra looked at Denoyer, caught his eye, and shrugged.

Kathryn started back into the pit house, stopped, turned, and studied each of her tormentors. "You never knew my mother. There's a lot I could tell you about her, but I don't have to. I will tell you she was one tough woman." She entered the tunnel and disappeared.

"What in the hell was that about?" Denoyer had a strange look on his face.

Jane Mary made a sucking sound and smiled. "She's a total void. Nothing has changed. Maybe we're going to be lectured about how her mother would do things better. Be prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Denoyer responded. "We've survived out here. It looks like we can go on indefinitely. Things are going well. You have to agree, Kathryn serves a purpose. We deal with her, what's new?"



## Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

*One more season and we leave. They think the whole world is tundra. They hear our stories and can't imagine the world we seek, or why we would want it.*

Another six years have passed:

Debra looked across the tundra, adjusted the .270 across her knees, and watched Denoyer as he stood gazing west. He was anxious to go, and had decided that late next summer the oldest boys would be capable of holding their own and helping others.

*The oldest are ready.* Her thoughts rambled, one minute on the wind, Denoyer, the trip, the children, and their future. The next instance, remembering her life before Alaska. Faces and feelings, joy, pain, and her stupidity: Love.

*I was stupid. But? No, I was just young and didn't know. I didn't listen. I didn't figure things out. I shouldn't be ashamed of having been young and not acting like an adult. I was a different person. Fairbanks gave me a second chance. I was right to come to Alaska. No one knew or cared what I had been.* She turned and searched for signs of danger; did a 360 with her eyes, using the bill of the baseball cap to scan and not miss anything. *Birds. Nothing else.*

*He keeps asking me about my parents and my life before I came here. I can't tell him. It doesn't matter. I was a kid. One thing is certain, our kids aren't like us, or stupid like I was, but*

*they're feral. They fit in here, it's all they know. They are Alaska. They are the tundra. They have nothing else in their minds. They don't see a purpose in heading south. They are part of this land and don't want to leave.*

*If I had had a child that first year, then Jane Mary's Carl Junior wouldn't be the oldest. Nor Kathryn's son Deno ... why couldn't she have had a daughter? Carl Junior looks Eskimo. His hair is brown, that's the only visible difference. He took her physical features and his coloring. Thank God he didn't inherit her personality. My Louis should have been named after Carl, not some favorite archaeologist. We couldn't have two Carls. Louis is already stronger than Carl Junior or Deno. I'll protect him, Jane Mary knows he's a threat to her Carl. He's a year younger but... She might do something. She's wild like they are. She's not one of us, she's tied to this land. And the girls. Except for Tommy and Jan they're all girls. We needed more boys...*

*I have to teach them to work together. We can't let them fight for leadership. I'll talk to Carl. He'll know how to keep his sons from fighting. They have to learn how to cooperate. And the younger kids, they're even stranger. Each set, depending on when they were born, act like cliques within the family. Not as much with the girls, they mature faster. They want to be with the oldest boys. That creates friction. The ones over six act like adults, all of them. Here in this place there is no time between childhood and adulthood. At eight or nine, they're adults. After puberty they will have babies of their own.*

*One more season and we leave. They think the whole world is tundra. They hear our stories and can't imagine the world we seek, or why we would want it. Jane Mary encourages that. They'll come along, but just for the adventure. If we're gone - when we're gone - they won't have any reason to go south. Well, unless they fight and split up and go looking for territory of their own. They all fool around in the dark, always have, but this is different. I screwed around at their age and it bought me nothing but grief. For them? Maybe it has to be. Things are so different, so strange.*

C. Descry

*They don't understand privacy. There are no mysteries about sex, bodies, relations - nothing. I don't ... My God, what's that?*

"Denoyer!"

"I see it."

"It looks like, it is! It's a moose."

"Big. Here, let me have the rifle."

"Use the scope. Are there others?"

"Wolves. They're back quite a way, following. No others I can see."

"If it survived, then maybe the forests didn't burn."

"Maybe. Maybe things were better further southeast, if it came from there. We can hope."

"Look at that rack, it's in velvet. The wolves probably know it can't use its antlers to defend itself."

"It's coming this way. You going to shoot it?"

"No. Not now. Let's get out of its path."

"What if the wolves kill it?"

"We need it more than they do. I'll try to keep it in sight. It's heading toward the river."

"I remember how big they are. They were all around Anchorage and Fairbanks. Carl, they can be dangerous."

"His antlers haven't hardened yet, not this early. All he wants is peace and time. The wolves won't get to him if he has the river at his back."

"But that's the best place for us to take him, isn't it?"

"Could be. He'll be looking for mates in another month. If he stays around here, well, maybe females are around. We could let them build a herd. Think of the meat we would have."

"The Eskimos kept caribou. About a hundred years ago the Finlanders and the government started a caribou herding program here. It never worked."

"We have no way to corral them or gather food for them. I'd consider building a herd if we get to where there are trees. We could domesticate a few. That would improve our chances

of survival. Now, all we can hope is that caribou and moose stay in our neighborhood.”

“Why haven’t the wolves attacked him?”

“He’s not helpless. He’s dangerous. He can kill easily with his hooves.”

“Carl, in the winter we must teach the children by talking about history and caribou and things like we talk about out here. That way the children will know what we know. If we don’t, Jane Mary will be their primary source of information - and you know she doesn’t want to leave here. She’s probably convinced them we’re crazy.”

“Debra, haven’t you missed something?”

“She talks to them about Eskimo ways, Eskimo values, Eskimo everything.”

“But she isn’t the one they listen to. Think about it. The person they spend their time with, the person they get information from, is Kathryn. She has inculcated them with dreams of another life, our girls especially. I realized it a long time ago, they’re growing up with Kathryn’s values.”

“And yours. Don’t forget, you are the only male to model after. You have to give them information. You have to share things you think and believe. You assume they know what you know and why you do things, but they don’t.”

“I hadn’t thought it through. You’re right. I need to think aloud so the kids hear how I make decisions. I haven’t done that. It’s because I’m not sure of my decisions. I guess I thought that by observing and doing they learned everything I know. They need to know how I think things through, how I gather information so they can too. And, you know how I absorb other opinions? Like now? Well, they need to know that process. Jeeze, Debra, you’re right on! I only hope it isn’t too late.”

## Chapter TWENTY-SIX

*Why should we learn about stuff that doesn't exist anymore? Why should we learn stuff we'll never use?*

The land lay frozen, resting under a coat of ice from the freak storm out of the southeast that drove warm air toward the Arctic Ocean. The violence, noise and electrical strikes of the collision of warm and sub-zero air, sent fear into every heart, especially those who remembered the great ash storms of the Cut Off. Children, never having heard such tumult before, huddled against adults, eyes closed, whimpering and crying as the earth vibrated and nature threatened to destroy them. The rain turned to ice, coating everything. Then, when the arctic won over warmth, dry snow fell from low clouds and lay inches deep on the ice.

The wind came suddenly, whipping the snow into the air, forming drifts over the river, almost burying parts of the willow groves and the pit house. The temperature dropped to forty degrees below zero and stayed there. Darkness finished creeping from the pole, and the arctic fall turned into the worst winter in memory.

Denoyer went out, but only when necessary. Even the dogs stayed far back in their boat-roofed kennel, waiting to be fed, too wise to brave the cold. Head down, he emptied the buckets, tossed them back into the tunnel, and made his way to the cairns where he moved rocks and dug out frozen chunks

of meat for dogs and humans. When he returned, his hands were thick from cold.

When dim light returned, mid-January he decided, he could see the land around them for the first time in three months. Snow had drifted six feet high on the lee side of the pit house. He studied the drift. It looked strange. He moved around it and saw the tip of an antler protruding.

*Moose antler. This was the only shelter you could find ... it wasn't enough.*

He made his way back down the tunnel and, almost frozen, stumbled into their cave.

Later, hands working again, he pulled the covers back and stared into the dark. He knew where each person was, but couldn't see them. He cleared his throat.

"We will call this, The Winter of the Moose. Mr. Moose tried to escape the fury of the storms by sheltering near our house. He's out there now, frozen stiff. I don't think the dogs know he's there.

"Back home in Arizona, we could call for home delivery. That means, we called a pizza place, ordered a pizza, and they had someone deliver it to our door. Here, we don't even have to call. Nature delivers a moose. Does everyone understand what I'm describing? What I mean? What I'm talking about?"

"What's pizza?"

"How could they hear you call for home delivery? Did you go outside and yell?"

"Is pizza another name for moose? Who could deliver a moose? I don't understand you Dad."

Debra's laughter filled the pit house. "Okay, Carl," she gasped, "start from the top and explain. Why not describe pizza? That should be fun. And then, have we ever talked about telephones? And ... Kathryn, Jane Mary, this is going to require us all. Keep going Carl, I think this will open many doors." She couldn't suppress her laughter. Kathryn caught the bug and was unable to contain hers. Jane Mary's deep chortles

infected Denoyer. The adults laughed together, to the wonderment and confusion of the children.

“Stop laughing!” Carl Junior ordered. “Tell us what’s so funny.”

Debra caught her breath and calmed herself. “We’re trying to teach you guys about things that were common before the Cut Off. Things we did, ate, studied and ... Well, we realize you have never seen a car or plane, a pizza or a television. I think when we go to Whitefish, we can start up a generator and run some video’s.”

“What do you mean?” Deno asked.

We can use electricity generated by a generator and it will run a television and then we can put a tape in the VCR and play the pictures on the television screen.”

“And don’t forget, we can hear the sound from the video. The sound and music.” Kathryn added. “You kids have never heard music except our own.”

In the dark, they could hear the kids whispering to each other. Deno said, “Okay. I’ll tell them.”

“You guys are kidding around. Right? If that stuff existed, then it is all gone now. Right? Why should we learn about stuff that doesn’t exist anymore? Why should we learn stuff we’ll never use? You make us read and write. When will we ever use that? You make us do math. Show us how that helps us. We’re learning what it takes to live, to have a good life. I ... We think the past is fun to hear about, but we shouldn’t spend so much time studying it. Jane Mary agrees. Kathryn - Mom - your world is gone. We have to learn what works now.”

Denoyer tried not to overreact. “Deno, kids, what you say is partially correct. You may never see an airplane fly, or drive a car, or visit a city. You may never hear recorded music or see television. It’s true, you may not, but that doesn’t mean those things aren’t - weren’t - real and worth knowing about and passing the information down to your children so they know they can make things like those. I want you to know how

much pleasure a good car or travel or a house with electricity can be. When we go south, we'll find highways and cars and all the things we teach you about. It's all down there, even if people didn't survive. You can fix it and use it.

"There are things we have, like our boats and motors. If they break, you must fix them and you are learning how. You need to read so you can use the books that tell how to fix things. If we run out of gas, perhaps we'll have to throw the motors away and use oars, or maybe we can make old gas good again. If the boats wear out, someone will have to know how to build others. At each level, as things wear out or break, someone will have to fix them or replace them, and you can't do that if you don't know how they work and how they were built. We depend on our rifles. When the ammo is gone, then what? When the metal wears out, then what?" He took a deep breath, wishing he could see their faces.

"You know we adults have some of the knowledge that you need to keep what we have working and to make other things. Other knowledge is in books that you have never seen. There are books in the library at Whitefish School. There is a good library in Nome. Anchorage has a library so big you could spend years there and learn everything about everything. Because you read, you can have all that information. Because you are learning math, you will understand and be able to do more. If you..."

"But?" Carl Junior interrupted. "If we stay here, we don't really need boats. If the ammo is gone, we can use traps and bows and arrows like the old ones did. We're happy and doing okay. We don't want to change that!"

Kathryn's anger welled up, making it hard for her to speak. She cleared her throat, waited, and then spoke, her voice fervid. "There are fifteen of us now. Every year there are more of us. Soon you will have children and our numbers will increase rapidly. We have to go further and further away to find things we need like willows. It is harder for your father, even with



### *C. Descry*

your help, to get enough food for all of us and the dogs. Soon, we will need more houses. We have about stripped this place. Some of you will have to move away and find new places. You'll have to go a long way away, because this land will not support many people. Life is getting harder. We need rifles and ammo. We need wood and canvas and clothing. Don't you see? Life is not simple, as it may seem. You can't just stay here and live happily ever after. You must study and learn and..."

"But we can't read in the dark." Carl Junior broke in. "We can't study in the winter, all we can do is listen to you guys. In summer, there's so much to do outside we don't have time to study. It doesn't make sense."

"People solved that problem a long time ago." Denoyer said. "We can find out how to make lights that use gasoline. I used a Coleman lantern when I went camping as a boy. I'll bet we can find some in the old fish camps and at Whitefish. Then we will have light and some heat. Does that sound like a good idea?"

"You mean we would have light in the winter? We could see." Six-year-old Debbie asked.

"Light so bright you could color and write and read."

"Then we have to do that. Can we, Dad? Can we?"

"I'm thinking we should all to go to Whitefish after break up," Denoyer answered. "We can improvise. If we find stuff there, and decide to stay, we can fix up a house and stay as long as we want. We can explore out from Whitefish and look for Jan Lightman, Tom, and the others - try to find out what happened to them. We can go on to Kotzebue. We can plan based on what we find. You know, when we are by the sea and head south, life will be easier. For one thing, there will be wood. For another, the further south we go the milder the winters, the more food we will find on land and sea, and the better our chance of meeting other people because there are towns along the coast."

Jane Mary came to her knees, thinking, *I knew this was going to happen. Damn them! This is a good life. I'm happy here and there's nothing wrong with the kids going out and starting their own camps.*

She clapped her hands together. "Denoyer, you have an itch and you would risk us all to scratch it. You don't know when we're well off. You'll get us all killed. What makes you think I'll go on your wild goose chase? I've been to Whitefish. There's nothing there I want or we need, only ghosts. I'm staying here."

*She's going to force a show down. She thinks the children will do what she wants. Now's not the time.* "Look, now is not the time to make decisions like this. I value your input, but when I make the decision to go or stay, everyone goes along."

"You made the decision years ago. You people from down below want to go back. I understand. But the kids and I want to stay here where we're safe and where we know what's going to happen."

"That's only partly true, Jane Mary. You can present your case. I'll listen."

Denoyer felt Kathryn come to her knees. He knew she wanted to bring matters to a head. He reached out and pulled her back, whispering: "Wait! Trust me." She jerked away. "I want it decided now. Believe me, this is the time. I am the one person here who takes responsibility and knows what is right and what we have to do. You want to put it off, but it must be settled now. I'm lighting the lamp so we can see. We each have a vote, including the kids." The match flared, the wick sputtered, took, and the tiny flame lit the interior of the pit house.

*Got you, Jane Mary! Damn you to hell.* Kathryn gloated. *You can stay here alone if you want. If you make trouble, I'll stop you. You threaten to kill me all the time, well, the kids do what I say. I'm in charge.* "We vote. Ready? If you are in favor of leaving here and starting our trip, raise your hand."

C. Descry

Debra smiled, knowing how the vote would count. Denoyer grimaced, not prepared to deal with Jane Mary's anger.

Jane Mary erupted. "Damn you Kathryn, we weren't ready to vote. We never discussed this. The vote does not count. What do the kids know, anyway? If they heard the truth, they would have voted with me." She came to her knees, bare skin white in the flickering light. "You let this happen Carl! You let Kathryn manipulate the children. You would do anything to get your way, even connive with Kathryn to double cross me. You weak son of a bitch! You can't lead."

Denoyer pointed his finger at Jane Mary, readying a fist if she attacked. "The vote counts. My mind is made up as of now. We leave in late summer when the insects are fewer and we can find food. There will be no more discussion. We all go." *She'll work on the kids and try to get them to stay. She thinks they're loyal to her because she birthed them. She underestimated Kathryn's role as mother.* "Jane Mary, you will not undermine my decision. You will not try to sway the kids - any kids - over to your side."

Jane Mary lay back on the furs, cursing.

"Let me hear it from you! I need your word that this is settled."

*It's not settled. We need to stay here and survive. Kathryn did this. I should have killed her when Denoyer didn't have the guts.*

"I'm waiting for your answer."

Silence.

"Okay, you may stay here when we leave. We can leave some supplies."

Silence.

"It's done then. The choice is yours, Jane Mary. Think long and hard about it. The rest of us have made up our minds."

## Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

*She didn't dare remove her mitten. She pulled her knife and awkwardly cut a strip of hide from the frozen neck. Holding the hide out, she motioned Denoyer to help get her back to the dogs.*

Denoyer listened to the screaming wind, monitored whispers and giggles as the children played their games, and cursed the slow passage of time. By his reckoning, forty-five days had passed since the decision to begin their trek. He hadn't been out for more than a week because of the storm. He had to go and feed the dogs and bring meat in. He rose, shivering in the intense cold, and moved carefully over bodies until he stood beneath the smoke hole. Reaching up, he moved the slab of thin sandstone used to block the cold. Snow cascaded over him. The vent had been blocked by wind-driven snow. Looking up, he could see the gray light of day ... and sky.

Early morning ... no, maybe late afternoon. The storm clouds eat the light. I should go.

He woke everyone as he dressed, fumbling for his clothes, liners, mukluks, parka and mittens.

"You better be careful," Jane Mary warned. "The storm is still raging out there."

"The vent was blocked. The tunnel entrance may be sealed by snow. The air in here is bad."

"We need meat. Kids are hungry."

### C. Descry

“We’re all hungry, Debra. Denoyer, how much is left out there?”

“Not much, but there’s Mr. Moose. We won’t starve.”

“I never knew a winter this bad. It’s colder now than it should be. The wind should have eased up and the breakup should have started.” Jane Mary had an inner sense of time, she was never wrong.

“Denoyer pulled on his second parka. “I agree. It must be April. Sometime in late March, maybe. Spring is late.”

“When you open the tunnel, I’ll open the roof vent all the way.” She clapped her hands, demanding attention. “Everyone up! We need to do exercises and keep our muscles from turning to jelly.”

Jane Mary didn’t have to say it a second time. Everyone in the cramped pit house was moving, trying to stand, stepping on or pushing against each other, cursing or laughing.

Kathryn’s voice. “Don’t step on the babies. Watch out for the little ones.”

*A house full of naked bodies wiggling and scrambling in the dark. I never imagined such a thing, Denoyer thought. We are one organism, a dangerous virus, a colony of... a nest of... we’re a nest of animals fated to repopulate the Earth. Why? Is God responsible for this? Is there a God we’re responsible to? Why are we surviving? What will we find out there?*

*One day at a time. I need to rope myself so I won’t get lost. What if the climate has changed? What if this is just a taste of what we have in front of us? What if spring doesn’t come? We’re almost out of food, when the moose is gone we’ll have to eat dogs. We can’t survive without ... but we have the moose. God, are you messing with us?*

*And the Lord spake unto Denoyer, saying, go forth into the lands in the south and build a great nation. Like hell! I’m not Abraham, and God doesn’t speak to me. So, I go forth into the blizzard and freeze my ass off. Then, if we get through this damned winter, I lead my people into Whitefish, and then into the land of*

*Kotzebue. Maybe we will go south. Someone will write: Denoyer led them to Nome, and on into the lands of the Athabaskan. Then across the mouth of the Yukon River, along the Bering Sea, over the Aleutians and on to the ruins of Anchorage... Damn, the tunnel is sealed. Good thing I got out here today. I can't see! Tie the rope tight. The sky is clear. It's a ground blizzard. Blowing snow. More drifts over the ice. Nothing looks the same.*

He bent to push and kick away a drift that closed the entrance to the kennel. The dominant male came to him, cowering on his belly, ears back, fangs bared.

I should have dug out their meat first. He thinks I'm food. No, he's warning the other dogs away - keeping them away from me. They're starving.

"Okay big guy, I'll go dig out some meat. You coming?"

He turned and fought his way against the crosswind, pulling the rope behind, hunched over to shield his face from the cutting crystals. At the cairn, he forced the capstone off and reached in. At the bottom of the storage pit, almost as far down as he could reach, he found the last frozen chunks of meat. Before he could raise them, he was surrounded by snarling dogs. The big male, wild with hunger, forced him back. He dropped the meat and slid away from the pit on his belly. The dogs tried to get inside, but the male was already in, snarling and snapping as the others fought to join him. There was only room for one.

He can't reach for the meat and leave his backsides exposed.

Denoyer stood, observing the standoff.

"Got yourselves into quite a fix, didn't you dogs? I can't help, not alone."

He pulled the rope tight and pulled himself, hand over hand, back to the pit house. Inside the tunnel, out of the biting wind, he caught his breath. Pushing forward, he yelled for Jane Mary.

### *C. Descry*

“I need help out here. Get dressed and come help me with the dogs.”

When Jane Mary assessed the situation, she grabbed Denoyer’s arm and pulled him close. There was no oar or weapon outside they could use to drive the dogs away from the pit. Yelling above the wind’s howl, she told Denoyer to help her uncover the moose. Denoyer understood her plan. Together, fighting the wind and blinding snow, they crossed back to the pit house, went around it, and started kicking and pushing snow away. In minutes, the antlers and head of the moose were exposed. They were exhausted.

“We got to get them here.” Jane Mary yelled. “Here...”

She didn’t dare remove her mitten. She pulled her knife and awkwardly cut a strip of hide from the frozen neck. Holding the hide out, she motioned Denoyer to help get her back to the dogs. Denoyer grabbed her arm, shaking his head, yelling. “They’ll attack you. Tie it to the rope. Drag it past them.”

She nodded, held her hand up to protect her eyes from the blowing ice, tried to look around, then untied the rope around her waist and tied it to the strip of hide. “Hold on. Don’t let go of me! I can’t see anything.”

They fought their way back toward the pit. Jane Mary held the rope and hide close to her body, certain she couldn’t throw it unless they were right on top of the dogs.

“You can’t throw in this wind. Go around them, drop the hide and then we can come back and pull it through them.” His face was almost touching her head. She nodded.

“Okay. Now we’ll have to move fast. Hook my arm.”

They turned back toward the pit house and made their way along the rope as fast as they could. Their trail through the drifts made the going easier. Then Jane Mary pulled the rope in as fast as she could. The strip of hide caught the dogs’ attention. Unable to grip it because they were fighting each other, they followed it until the leaders sensed the moose and

lunged forward. Vicious fights broke out as the pack attacked the carcass and each other.

“I have to get the meat out of the pit. I don’t see the big Husky.”

She understood. Roped again, she followed him to the cairn. The big dog was inside the pit, gnawing a frozen fish. Jane Mary knelt, reached in and, in spite of his terrifying growls, grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up out of the pit. She knew he wouldn’t let go of the fish to bite her.

“There not much down there,” she screamed. “You get it!”

It took a long time to warm them. Jane Mary had frostbitten cheeks and her fingers were numb. For the first time, she was aware of her vulnerability.

“Pretty rough out there wasn’t it.” Debra talked as she rubbed circulation back into Jane Mary’s hands.

“If we dropped the rope ... if the dogs attacked ... there is no way we would be here now. This is the worst spring storm ever. First the ice storm last fall, now this. I don’t know how we can survive with this weather. I think Denoyer’s right about finding a house to fix up in Whitefish. We will have a better chance there.”

“And you agree we should look for Jan Lightman and the others?”

“Sure, I agree. But if we were in a temporary camp when a storm like this hit us, we’d be dead. You see why I object to leaving everything and heading south?”

Kathryn overheard. “We just have to plan for it, that’s all. Like Carl always asks, ‘What’s the worst case scenario?’ It takes leaders with guts. We can prepare ourselves and get to where other people are. The problem’s in your head, you’re Eskimo.”

Debra felt Jane Mary tighten and then relax. “Good thing it’s not up to you Kathryn. You should respect Jane Mary’s viewpoint. She knows what she’s saying.”



*C. Descry*

“All I said was we can plan. No one can disagree with that.” I’m a planner, so is Carl. You two will have to learn to trust us.”

Debra smiled. Jane Mary cursed so softly only she could hear. In all these years, Kathryn hasn’t learned anything. I hate being on the same side.

## Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

*We should leave a note in a jar, just in case. Debra added. We can tell them about us and make a map of where we hid things. Who knows, maybe some archaeologist will find it someday.*

Mid-April brought hours of sunshine and the slow thawing of ice covered tundra. It was as if there hadn't been a March. Winter, then spring. The breakup came weeks later than Jane Mary knew it should have.

"Is something wrong?" Denoyer kept asking. "What do you think caused this? Do you remember any spring like this? The winter was so hard, everything without shelter died."

Debra avoided his questions, knowing he was thinking aloud. "Carl, we can't make it through another winter like that, not here. And if the caribou and small animals didn't make it, there won't be anything to hunt. I'm glad we're leaving."

Jane Mary stood, hands going to the small of her back. "This scraping kills me." She kicked at the moose hide and turned toward Denoyer. "The question is, are we ever coming back here?" We should leave this camp intact so if we have to use it again, it will be here."

"We can. There's no way we'll get all this stuff and the family into the boats. But there's no way to keep the bears or the wolverines out. We can cover stuff with rocks and hope that protects it. If we come back here, it will be within the next year or so or never."

### *C. Descry*

“We should leave a note in a jar, just in case.” Debra added. “We can tell them about us and make a map of where we hid things. Who knows, maybe some archaeologist will find it someday.”

“Better chance it will be some of our own children returning to live the good life.” Jane Mary leaned over the hide and continued scraping.

“There’s still a lot of ice in the river.” Denoyer said.

“Eight weeks, maybe less if it stays warm,” Jane Mary said. “We can be ready sooner, but why risk it? When the moose meat is gone, we’ll be able to gather eggs. We need green plants. Too bad Kathryn got pregnant so late. She’s going to be a problem - she’s always a problem - but I mean when she has the kid. Probably be when we’re on the river, knowing her. I thought we agreed about not screwing around during the dark time, Carl.”

“I know. I’m not sure how it happened. She should have been pregnant. Nothing we can do now.” Damn her, she said she was. She ... damn her! I was asleep. She’s afraid of Jane Mary. She didn’t take the first time, that’s why. Jane Mary might kill her if she wasn’t.

Denoyer scowled. Almost eight weeks had passed and they needed to wait another week, at least.

“What are you thinking?” Debra asked.

“Is it more economical to run one motor and pull the other boats, or let each boat go on its own?”

“We’ll be going with the current, not that there’s much anymore.”

“I agree. We should have all three motors working and ready, but we start out using one. Which boat should carry the heaviest load? I think the last boat. Once it’s moving, the current will help carry it along and it won’t drag so much.”

Debra gave him a questioning look. “Does that make sense? Won’t the current carry all the boats the same way?”

“Probably, but if the first boat has the motor and most of the weight, it will be harder to move. At least I think I’m right. If we go fast, the boats will be pulled along with an occasional yank to keep them up to speed.”

“We won’t make as good time as Jane Mary did when she went to Whitefish.” Debra paused. “Damn!”

“What?”

“We did it again. We didn’t involve the kids in figuring this out. Let’s get them out here with us and pose the problems to them. Maybe they’ll come up with a way to test your theories.”

The weather changed hourly as winds from the warming land chased cold and drizzle across the tundra. Each day they sorted, cleaned, repaired, and planned. They rocked things they would leave behind into a large cairn in front of the pit house. Each person who could write put a message with their name, age, and a description of themselves in a glass jar. On their last day, Jane Mary would wrap the jar in hide and place it deep within the cairn.

In between the sudden storms, the older boys took the .30-30 for protection and led the younger children out onto the tundra to gather eggs. As the weeks passed, and eggs and an occasional bird fell to their larder, it was obvious that the little creatures - rabbits, weasels, fox, and skunks - had not survived the harsh winter.

“I think they were sealed in by the ice and smothered,” Carl Junior reported. “We couldn’t have stayed here even if we hadn’t decided to go.”

Denoyer made a list of assignments, deciding where each of the twenty-one members of the family would sit. He loaded gear into the boats. Then, with Jane Mary in the first boat, he put the babies, young children, and four girls to take care of them. They would ride comfortably on the packs. Carl Ju-

### C. Descry

nior operated the motor. He gave Jane Mary the .30-30 and Carl Junior a big knife in case he had to cut the towrope in a hurry.

In the middle boat, on top of gear and hides, he put Kathryn, Debra, and Madonna, the oldest girl. She and her mom could help Kathryn if she started to give birth. He placed Deno in charge of the motor if needed. He placed a .270 in Deno's care, along with a knife similar to the one he gave Carl Junior, with the same instructions.

In the third boat, they stored packs and gear, tools, and the extra rifles and ammo. Louis was in charge of the motor. He stationed Jan in front to control the rope, and saved the middle seat for himself. He placed his .270. where he could get to it in an emergency. The remaining children, led by Tommy, Claire and Janet had control of all ten dogs, which he tied on short leashes. He let the children sit wherever they liked on the bags and gas cans. He warned them to keep themselves and the dogs low and out of his line of fire if problems occurred.

Without ceremony, Denoyer launched Jane Mary's boat. When the rope was taut, he pushed Debra's out into the gentle current and ran back, grabbed the side of his boat, pushed it into the current and pulled himself in. When he saw Denoyer board, Carl Junior started his motor, put it in gear, and manipulated the throttle to get the right speed.

When the lead boat pulled, the others came in line and followed. When Carl Junior cut back, Denoyer's boat, the heaviest, came forward and almost rammed Debra's boat.

*Shit! Of course. The lower draft catches more current. It's too late.*

He motioned Carl Junior to increase speed. Carl Junior saw him and waved. He gently twisted the throttle, keeping a slight pull on the ropes. The problem was he had to keep increasing their speed. He kept his head, trying to figure out what to do. The throttle was wide open. Denoyer's boat was

closing the distance between it and Debra's. He saw them closing and Denoyer waving.

We've got to land? How can we? What if? He steered towards the right bank, began a long turn to the left, slowed the motor, and let the other boats swing around him. He gave more throttle, pulled back up river and headed to a long, crescent beach. The current kept the towed boats in line. Jane Mary jumped out and held their boat. The others landed gently. Denoyer was out of his boat, hugging Carl Junior.

"How did you know to do that? How did you know? Boy, that was great!"

"Okay, we switch the order. This heavy boat goes first. Jane Mary, we switch places. Carl Junior, raise you motor. My boat will pull. Understand Louis?"

In ten minutes, they were on the river again. This time, Jane Mary was the last to board. Denoyer shook his head. "I should have figured that out." The dogs were quiet, the children happy, as they studied the passing land.

"Louis, keep the rope taut. Give it more gas."

Jane Mary's boat gained on Debra's. Louis's outboard was at full throttle. "What the hell?" Denoyer half stood, studying the problem.

"Dad, I can't go any faster." Louis yelled.

"Okay Louis, keep her pegged. I'm looking for a place to land. Remember how Carl Junior did it? We need oars. Something to hold the last boat back."

"Debra, yell back at Jane Mary. Ask her how far to a fish camp?"

Jane Mary heard Denoyer over the roar, and yelled her answer to Debra. Debra turned back to Denoyer.

"Not far, she thinks around the next bend. She wants to know what you plan to do."

"We land. I need to dig out the oars."

*C. Descry*

“To hold the boat back, right?” Debra smiled. Kathryn, unable to do anything but groan and complain, had told Denoyer not to pack the oars. He ignored her as usual.

Louis watched Jane Mary’s boat gaining on Debra’s. He began doing long, gentle turns from one side of the river to the other. It worked, like crack-the-whip.

“When we see the landing at the fish camp - any good landing - come around and land.” Denoyer ordered. Louie stared at him, angry that Denoyer didn’t think he knew.

“Look! A watch tower. The camp must be around this bend.” Louis yelled.

“Check out the landing first.”

“I’ve got it, Dad. I’m on it. Relax. The camp will be on the left. I’ll stay right around the bend, pass the landing, and come back up river.”

“Look out! Caribou! My God, there are hundreds.” He grabbed the .270 and shot three. He heard shots from the trailing boats and put his rifle down. “Get ropes, tie them on so we don’t lose them.”

Louis steered into the swimming heads, unable to stop. He felt a bump as the boat ran over the back of an animal. The dogs went crazy, fighting their leashes. In two quick acts, he shut off the motor and pulled the prop out of the water. He felt the nudge of Debra’s boat as it rammed them, and then the stronger jerk as Jane Mary’s boat came along side of Debra’s and the rope stopped it. The caribou were swimming around the boats, trying to avoid them.

Denoyer yelled, “Get ropes on those dead ones. Make sure they’re tied tight to the boats. Whoopee!”

“It’s clear. I’m starting the motor. Ready everyone?” The last of the caribou scrambled up the bank, fought their way through the willows and onto the tundra.

“I’m aiming down river, then I’ll turn back and land us.”

Debra yelled across to Denoyer. “We lost one animal. It drifted over by the shore. Too far to get.”

“Let’s get these in. How many do we have, six?”

“Five. What luck.”

The dogs were in a frenzy. They lunged, fighting their short tethers, barking and growling. The children were being jerked around as they tried to control the animals. Two dogs pulled through their collars and jumped in the water.

“Keep back from them! Get away from them!” Denoyer yelled over the racket. “Let them do what they want. Don’t get scratched or bit.”

Louis carved a long u-turn until he was towing up river. “Get ready to land us.”

Denoyer waited for the boat to bottom and jumped into the freezing water, yelling, “Cut the dogs loose!” He dragged the boat forward on the gravel and attempted to slosh back to Debra. The ropes and floating carcasses stopped him. He couldn’t get around. Debra saw his problem and jumped into the water to land her own boat. She looked up as Jane Mary shouted, “Look out!” and barely had time to avoid the carcass of a big buck pushed at her by the other boat.

“Every time we maneuver the boats get tangled. Wouldn’t it be safer for each boat to go its own way?” Debra asked.

“I think everyone agrees.” Denoyer looked around, assessing their situation. “It’s late morning. Preparing the meat and saving the hides will take the rest of the day. That is, if we all pitch in. The problem is, we need shelter for the night. Carl Junior, Louis, take a look at the fish camp up there. See if it can provide shelter or what we have to do to make shelter there for the night. Deno, you and I can pull these caribou up on the flat.”

“Jane Mary say’s there’s ghosts in these old camps.” Louis said.



*C. Descry*

“Probably, but not when it’s daylight. Look at all this rotten stuff. I wonder what it was?”

“Some of the wood they used for supports is still here. This stuff is old metal and canvas. Look, a boot.” Carl Junior bent and picked up the dried, shriveled leather.

“Yiiee!” He threw the boot down and stepped back.

“What?”

“Bones. Foot bones in the boot.”

“I ain’t camping here. Let’s tell them.”

“No, we better just tell Dad.”

“We have to expect finds like that. Lots of people died during the Cut Off. This was an active camp. We don’t know how many people were here. What else did you find?”

“Dad, we can’t sleep in a place like that. Besides, it’s too full of junk. Can’t we salvage some of the wood and put our tent away from there?”

“You’re right Son. Okay, you and Louis get started. The big canvas is in my boat. Use hides, do whatever needs to be done to make a good shelter.” He paused. “One thing don’t do. Don’t get the others riled up about your find. Oh, and don’t put the shelter in the trail. Those caribou came right through here.”

“These damn dogs. Keep them away or I’ll brain some of them.” Jane Mary said as she gutted a large buck. “We should have eaten half of them.”

“Here, Janet and Claire,” Denoyer said, “you’re responsible for feeding the dogs. Take the stuff Jane Mary, Debra and I don’t need and make piles. Make lots of piles so they don’t have to fight. Protect yourselves, use a rope or a strong willow to keep the dogs away from you.”

“They’ll all be full and asleep in no time,” Debra said. “It’s not the dogs I’m worried about. It’s the bears and wolves that follow the caribou. This year especially, when there are so few

rabbits and small animals for them to eat. Maybe the dogs can keep them away from us.”

“A big brown can kill a dog, any dog. Ours are so dumb they’d get killed,” Denoyer warned. “When they’re full and quiet, tie them. Their barking and howling will keep the ghosts and critters away tonight.”

“Oh, I was counting on Kathryn’s bad humor to do that. She’s really outdoing herself this time, you’d think it was her first kid,” Jane Mary jabbed.

“Just hope she waits until we get to Whitefish. We don’t need any more interruptions.”

“These damned flies!” Debra cursed. “They’re in my eyes, my mouth ... their damned feet must carry every vile germ ever heard of.”

“Debra, Kathryn is in trouble, isn’t she?” Claire, one of the mature ten year olds asked.

“Maybe not, Claire. She always has trouble ... and she, well, she has a low tolerance for pain.”

“But one of you should be with her. I can finish stripping the meat.”

“Okay. I’ll go check on her. Get this stuff bagged as soon as possible. I think the flies are trying to lay eggs in the meat.”

“And in me too,” Claire tried to wipe the bugging insects from her eyes. “We should start a smoky fire. Debra, can you ask one of the boys to do that?”

Debra stood up slowly, letting circulation back into her legs. Kneeling over carcasses made her back hurt. She looked around at their forced camp. The caribou had worn a trail down through the tundra plants and into the water. The old fish camp sat on a small flat above the beach. Inland, the ground rose in gentle mounds, not high enough to be hills, but tall enough hide the interior from sight. The willows grew at least six feet high. They looked impenetrable, except where the

round, dark mouths of tunnels showed how animals moved from the thickets to the river.

Debra was standing watching the dogs as they forced their way from pile to pile, gorging on the scraps. Denoyer was up on the flat with the boys looking for a safe place to pitch camp.

She heard Kathryn call out from the boat and something in her voice alarmed her. She knew all of Kathryn's manipulative turns and twists, pleas and arguments. Her voice signaled something else. Real pain. Fear.

She looked down and smiled. Claire had bagged most of the meat. She turned and crunched down the gravel beach to Kathryn's boat.

"I think it's breech. I feel it trying to come out, but it can't. It isn't that it hurts so much, it's that it doesn't feel right. Debra, it's wrong. It's wrong, do something!"

She had never heard terror like that in a voice. It wasn't hysterical. It wasn't madness. Kathryn's voice was calm, cutting like jagged ice, an echo of a scream. It wasn't pretend or an attempt to get sympathy. Kathryn was in trouble.

"Jane Mary. Denoyer. Come down here!" She stared at Kathryn's pale, almost blank face. "Please! And Hurry."

Louis and Carl Junior watched Denoyer run down to Kathryn's boat. Carl felt the chill of fear.

"Kathryn - Mom's in trouble."

He heard gravel crunch and sensed Louis turning away. "Louis, what are you..."

"Quiet! Turn slowly. There's something big coming at us through the willows."

"Our rifles! We shouldn't have put them down. I'll get them."

"Me too. I'm not standing here alone."

The snapping and whipping sounds coming through the brush grew louder. They got to their rifles and checked them as they turned back toward the noise.

A scream cut up from the river.

The crashing in the willows stopped.

"Mom's in real trouble. I want to go down there. I've got to go, Louis." Carl Junior whispered.

"Okay. But first, we take care of whatever's out there. It must be a bear. If we don't scare it off, we could all be in danger."

"The thing is moving toward us again."

"That tunnel over there. I think it's going to come out there ... but why all the crashing? If it's following a trail, wouldn't it move quietly?"

"Old blind bear?"

"My guess. Maybe a bunch of bears."

"It stopped. Hear anything Louis?"

"No. Shush. Listen!"

They stood, side-by-side, rifles ready, minds focused. Minutes passed. Louis knelt down, steadying himself on one knee. They heard Kathryn's cries, birds far away, the wind twisting the brush, Janet talking calmly to the dogs, nothing else.

"It's just inside the willows. It's there!"

"I know. It must be watching us."

"I need to get down to see how Mom is doing."

"Can't go and leave that thing out there ready to pounce."

"We could shoot into the willows. I'll shoot, you be ready."

"Wait. What if it's a person? What if it's ... you know, like one of our dogs or something."

"How could it be? Dogs don't make that kind of racket going through willows. People don't. Okay, what if we call out?"

"Be ready to shoot. It could come fast."

*C. Descry*

“Hey, you out there in the willows.” Louis shouted as loud as he could. “We’re going to shoot. Tell us not to if you’re human.”

“How long should we wait?”

“A bear would have charged our voice. It’s so quiet in there. Nothing’s moving.”

“Should we shoot?”

“I wish Dad was up here. I don’t know what to do.”

“He’d shoot. I know he’d shoot.”

“Okay, aim high. Shoot a pattern. Three shots.”

As Carl Junior aimed, he heard Kathryn scream.”

Blam! Blam! Blam!

The shots echoed across the tundra and down over the river. For long minutes everything was silent. No birdsongs, no voices, and most distressing, no sounds of movement in the willows.

“Nothing!”

“Maybe I killed it?”

“You shot over the willows.”

“What should we do, Louis?”

“You go down. I’m going to lay on the edge over there and keep watch.”

Denoyer’s voice broke the silence. “Hey, what’s going on up there?”

“Go down and tell them to watch out. I’m okay, but don’t be gone long.”

“What the hell were you shooting at?”

“Dad, there was something big in the willows. We waited for it and it stopped moving. We waited and ... nothing. So we called out in case it was a person. Then we tried shooting. It was big, made more noise than you can imagine, and just stopped. Louis is laying on the edge up there, covering the camp. How’s Mom?”

"Baby is in a bad position, may not make it." Denoyer's shoulders sagged. There were tears in his eyes. He looked awful.

"But Mom's going to be okay, that's what counts, right Dad?"

"What was up there? Were you and Louis imagining things? Nothing just disappears."

"It was big. We thought it might be a blind bear, the way it crashed through the brush. It came near and we were ready to shoot it. We heard Mom scream. We never heard another noise in the willows, even after I shot. Dad, it's in there watching us, it knows we're here."

"Janet," Denoyer turned, watching the dogs. "Did all the dogs eat? Why haven't they settled down?"

"Dad, there's still meat on the ground. They all ate. They're acting strange, like they can't lie down."

He turned and noted that Jane Mary and Claire, Mary, Jane and Madonna had finished butchering the caribou. Jane Mary was starting to turn the hides so they could scrape them. "Jane Mary, get everything in the boats. We've got to get out of here. Boys, help load, but don't be far from your rifles. Move fast."

Kathryn cried out.

Denoyer tried to ignore her pain. "Tommy, all you kids, get the dogs in the boat."

He moved quickly back down to the water's edge. "Debra, this is a bad place. We have to get out fast. Can you leave Kathryn and help load?"

"I can't. Carl, I'll have to turn the baby. Not in the boat, it's too..."

"We have to get out now. Do what you can. We can reach Whitefish in a few hours, less, I hope."

"Everyone, we won't tie the boats together this time." He waded over and got his rifle. "I'll cover. Louis, Deno, Carl Junior, sling your rifles and help load."

C. Descry

“Dad, I hear the thing again.”

“I’ve got you covered. Help with the dogs.” He noted the dogs were unusually quiet. Even the smaller kids were having no difficulty getting them down to the boat.”

“Jane Mary, have you ever seen dogs act like this?”

“Before break up, when we had to start killing them for food.”

“Would a bear scare them like this?”

“They’d be barking and tugging to get loose. I don’t think they know what’s out there. Their noses are still covered with blood and caribou scent.”

“Leave stuff if you have to. Everyone, let’s get out of here. I’ll cover and be last on the river. Go fast, but don’t get separated. Boys, keep a sharp watch. Louis get in the front, I’ll drive.”

He helped push them off, using one leg to push away while pulling himself up on the other. As he gave his sons the sign to start their motors, he saw shapes emerging from the willows up near the flat, things - fifteen or twenty, stocky, shapeless, shaggy mounds. Fear gripped him. Mutated bears? Strange ... no!

He yelled, hoping the others would turn and see what they were running from, cranked the motor, and put it in gear.

*Damn, that explains it. Musk Oxen!. They circle, butts touching, and freeze when they sense danger. They don’t run away when they hear shots. They were watching us, waiting for us to go. Maybe the dogs were so full of caribou scent they couldn’t tell what was out there. No, they never knew the scent of a musk ox. That’s why they were acting so strange. They’re goats, won’t attack unless isolated from the herd. But they went extinct in Alaska more than a century ago ... except, they re-introduced some from Greenland in the 1930s...*

*The light’s getting flat. It will stay dusk for hours. It’s hard to judge distance or danger. Stay within the wakes of their boats and*

*relax. This is what it feels like to be a follower. I almost forgot. It feels good, I can't remember being this tired. The boys are old enough to take some of the burden.*

He studied the banks, the endless soggy land, the occasional beaver lodge, and, waving away the ever present black flies, felt almost glad he was here. Before he could relax too much, his thoughts returned to Kathryn's plight. He was back on edge again, thinking through a dozen scenarios of what could happen and how he should react.



## Chapter TWENTY-NINE

*He leaned forward, almost touching his forehead to the water. Slowly, aware that everyone was waiting, he faced them, handed the rifle to Kathy, and cleared his throat. The baby. It's gone! I dropped it.*

*Death, Denoyer thought. So far we've been lucky. None of the children have had to deal with death - not a person's anyway. Not someone they know and love and count on. Not a parent, and we are all parents. One father. Three mothers. Kathryn is the nurturing mother, the one they know best. She's dying.*

Debra ordered, "Carl, pull up along side and get these children into your boat! Hurry, get Jane Mary to switch and help me! Damn it, move fast! We need to take the baby."

Denoyer gave the throttle a gentle turn and let his boat glide alongside Debra's. The other boat was circling and coming up.

"Louis, help Jane Mary switch boats. Claire and Janet too, there's no more room on our boat. We're overloaded ... and keep us drifting and away from the banks. Carl Junior, cut your motor, but be ready if we start to drift into danger."

"Dad, can't we land?" Carl Junior asked.

"Safer out here. Nothing can sneak up on us. Just do as I say."

Debra moved hides and made a flat area for Kathryn in the bow, leaving room for Jane Mary and herself to work side-by-side. "Climb over, Jane Mary. We have to work fast."

Denoyer studied Kathryn's face. She was in a stupor. "Debra, save Kathryn!"

"Keep our boat steady. We're doing what we can."

Jane Mary finished washing her hands in the river, made no attempt to dry them, and began to probe for the baby. She grunted as she forced her hand up the birth canal.

"Sideways ... no, twisted. Feet first but ... can't feel the other leg. Can't turn it."

"You've got to! Find the other leg and pull it out."

"Jane Mary had her head on Kathryn's bulging belly as she forced her arm deeper alongside the baby. "I got it. Kathryn, I'm going to pull. Can you push?"

"She's out. Too weak. She can't help. Pull!"

"When you get a foot, help me."

"It's so slippery."

"Use cloth or rope ... anything. We've got to do this fast or the baby will ... here it comes ... it's blue. Debra, it's too late. Pull!"

"Okay! It's not really dead, I don't think."

Jane Mary didn't let go of the baby. She held a foot in the air and worked to clear the mouth and nose. She reached over the side of the boat, brought cold water up, and splashed the blue body, noting as she did that one arm looked disjointed. The leg she held seemed too loose to be in the hip socket. The baby didn't cry, but soon bubbles of mucous formed around its mouth and nose. It belched and seemed to breath on its own.

"This baby's not right. Its body is damaged. It can't cry. It was too long without air."

*C. Descry*

Denoyer stared at the small form, wondering what to do. Jane Mary wrapped it in a soft hide, leaned across the boat, and handed it to him.

“It’s your decision, Denoyer. Take It! You decide.”

The baby was breathing, weakly. It didn’t move. “It should turn pink, shouldn’t it?”

“Carl, Kathryn needs... Damn, I don’t know what she needs. Jane Mary, what do we do?”

“Everything’s out down here. She’s not bleeding too much. Warm. Keep her warm. She’s in shock, exhausted. Nothing to do ... we should have some warm soup for her. Denoyer?”

“This baby is not right. What can I do?”

Jane Mary sat back on her haunches, gently swaying with the boat. “It’s brain is damaged. It has disjointed limbs. You know what to do.”

“We can’t!” Debra cried. She was emotionally wiped-out, unable to deal with the horror of infanticide.

“Then rub it. Rub it all over and see what happens. Give it time. If it can make it on its own, then okay. If Kathryn doesn’t make it then ... well, it would be too much for us.”

“Denoyer, what about landing and starting a fire?”

“Where are we?”

“I don’t recognize this spot.”

“We go! Clean up your boat, then get the children back in. Everybody,” he commanded, “get reorganized and we’ll head for Whitefish. Let’s move it!”

None of the children missed anything related to the birth. They saw Kathryn’s deathlike pall and the blue form of the baby. They sensed the worst. They didn’t talk or grumble as they switched back to their boats, did what they could to quiet the dogs, redistribute the loads, and study the banks as the boats sped down river.

*The sky is too occluded to host a sunset. The light is growing dimmer and dimmer, we have maybe two hours until nightfall. The baby's circulation may be improving. It doesn't cry. It doesn't move. It should be hungry.* He placed his forefinger next to the baby's mouth, pushing the cheek, teasing the edge of the small lips. The baby didn't respond. He ran his finger over the thin, blue lips. Nothing.

"Baby won't suck."

"Color any better Dad?" One of his daughters asked. He couldn't see back of him. He supposed it was Debbie.

"Well, maybe a little. What do you think Debbie?"

"It's me, Mary, Dad. It'll die, won't it?"

"It may."

"Dad." It was Debbie's voice this time. "Look at its pupils - the eyes, I mean."

"Right!"

He carefully raised the tiny eyelid. The eye didn't move. The pupil was dilated, wide open. "It doesn't close with the light."

"You mean it's just open all the way?"

"Open. The eye hasn't moved."

He heard the girls crying softly. He studied the tiny face. I wonder what he would have looked like, what kind of person he would have been. We should name him before...

"Dad," Carl shouted from the middle boat, jolting everyone. "Bears. Looks like a sow and cubs - big cubs - and there are others. They're coming into the river! Some are in the river."

Louis slowed his boat and began to circle back. "Dad, there's another one on the left side."

"Follow around. Back upriver! What are they doing? Are they after us?"

Carl Junior had a clear view ahead as he began to turn his boat. "Dad, it's a caribou ... maybe the one we shot that got away. They're after it."

C. Descry

Denoyer could see the bears in the river fighting to drag the caribou to the edge where they could devour it. Other bears were fighting them for control of the carcass. Still others were gathering on the gravel benches, waiting.

"I count seven browns," Jane Mary said. "We can go past them."

"How? There's another in the water swimming across. There are probably others. We've got to wait."

"No, Denoyer. We should get past while they are focused on the caribou. If we wait, they'll come after us. We can shoot any that get too close."

"What? I can't hear. What did you say?" Deno shouted.

"Run the gauntlet. Use the rifles if necessary. We go for it!" Denoyer half stood and pointed downriver. Then he picked up his rifle with his free left hand and pretended to shoot into the water. Everyone understood."

Denoyer pulled his boat up nearer the other two. "Listen! We stay on each other's tails, like one long boat. Carl Junior, point out the safest path. Stay in the deep water where the bears can't stand. Louis, Debra, Jane Mary, shoot any bear that even looks like it wants us. You older kids watch our sides and rear."

"We ready Dad?"

Denoyer checked each boat. Debra raised her rifle in the air. The others did the same."

"Let's go."

Something nagged at his mind as each motor revved and they began to move downriver. He turned and looked down at the gauge on the red 5-gallon gas can attached by its black umbilical cord to his motor. It read E and then less than 1/4. The float was bumping on the bottom of the can. *We should have changed tanks! My God, Louis's boat has the big motor. How much gas does he have?*

They were in the center of the river, perhaps fifty feet from the battle for the caribou carcass, moving so fast the bears

didn't have time to react. The one Carl Junior had seen swimming from the left bank was about fifteen feet from the first boat. In deep water, it didn't seem a threat. When the wake hit it, water got up its nose and it started shaking its great head and sneezing hard. Rifles were ready if it decided a boat was a safe way to get out of the water.

Leaving a curling, V-shaped wake the three boats sped past the scene of carnage and competition and were about two hundred feet downriver when Carl Junior's motor quit. The bow fell, and the wake was overtaking it when Deno's boat rammed hard into its stern, knocking everyone inside both boats into a tangle. Debra grabbed the edge of her seat as Kathryn's limp body rolled over her and onto Jane Mary. An instant later, Denoyer's boat hit the back of Deno's. Everything stopped except the water rushing to fill the hole made by their passage. Denoyer's boat, the last boat, was swamped. Water rushed over the stern. Kids and dogs, gear and Denoyer, gasped as cold water doused them. In seconds, the boat partially submerged, held from sinking by its internal air spaces and air trapped in the gear tied inside.

Carl Junior's boat got doused, even though it didn't take the full force of the water. The passengers, knocked around twice, were regaining their seats. Three dogs got loose and were in the river swimming around yapping their displeasure. Deno had the great sense to pull the safety cord on his motor just before they hit the back of Carl Junior's boat. Denoyer's motor had drowned when the wave gushed into its cowling.

None of the family were in the water. They were drifting now. The children, Louis, dogs and Denoyer sat immersed in their swamped boat. The party drifted on the slow current in silence, as if the roar of their passing had fled downriver out of hearing. They drifted along quietly, so did the big brown.

Denoyer looked back. The head of the brown turned downriver toward them. He heard another sneeze as it cleared

*C. Descry*

its nose. Its head was bobbing - it was paddling toward them. The dogs hadn't seen it yet.

Deno was the first to get over the shock of the accident. "Gas! I should have checked. Dad, we all have to change our tanks."

"Yes, do it. You and Carl Junior. My motor is swamped. I'll need a tow."

"Can you bail?"

"With what?"

Louis saw the brown closing on them. "Who has a dry rifle? Get it! See that bear coming up behind us?"

Denoyer's arm ached. Through it all, he held his .270 up out of the water. "My shot. But be ready in case."

The swamped boat was slowly turning stern down river, as it drifted. He turned to the left, ignoring the waist high icy water and gained a clear shot at the approaching head, now less than fifty feet away. As he raised the rifle to shoot, dread filled him. He looked back in his boat, studying the wet and shivering children, dogs, and floating packs.

"Dad? Are you going to shoot?"

"Denoyer, what the hell are you doing? Shoot!" Jane Mary ordered.

He sat there, still stunned by the realization of what had happened.

"Carl, shoot or let one of us." Debra pleaded.

He cleared his head, focused on the approaching bear, and raised the rifle. One of the dogs came between his sights and the head. The dog barked its hysterical yapping bark. The bear's jaws opened as it lunged forward, catching the dog's hind leg and shaking the animal from side-to-side as if it weighed nothing; pounding, biting, killing.

Denoyer shot. If he hit the bear, there was no sign. It continued thrashing the dog back and forth, slamming it into the water, lunging forward and getting a better grip with its massive jaws.

He heard Deno's rifle crack, and instantly the bear's head came up, the dead dog dropped from its jaws, bear and dog sank, leaving a bloody red stain on the water and eruptions of bubbles that came in three giant bursts to the surface.

Jane Mary was furious. "Damn it Denoyer, that dog didn't have to die. What in the hell happened?"

He sat in the freezing water, holding the rifle in both hands, shaking his head.

"Dad? The girls in his boat were shivering and crying from cold and fear. Dad?"

He leaned forward, almost touching his forehead to the water. Slowly, aware that everyone was waiting, he faced them, handed the rifle to Kathy, and cleared his throat. "The baby. It's gone! I dropped it."



## Chapter THIRTY

*The plane's tail was dented and mashed by ice, yet it stood about five feet out of the water jammed between and supported by the vertical timbers of what had been the dock.*

“Hey, we got to do something!” Deno took charge. “Carl, tie onto Dad’s boat. We can tow it. Switch gas cans. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“We need to find a place - a sandbar or a beach - land and get the water out of Dad’s boat.”

“See if your motor will start.”

“Yours is the one that ran out of gas.”

“Do it. I’ll do mine, okay? You don’t always have to be a pain in the ass.”

“Jane Mary,” Carl Junior turned to her, pretending to ignore his brother, “can you get a rope to Dad’s boat? And we need to get the kids on our boats. We need to get dry.”

Jane Mary smiled, relieved the problem with Kathryn’s baby was solved so easily, *Taiquuu* (thank you).” You got to go slow, otherwise the boat will go under. You okay Denoyer? Feeling a little shriveled? It’s for the best, you know. Saved you from being the big bad baby killer.”

“Just hurry. Those bears know we’re here. One caribou won’t keep them happy for long. I’ll stay with the boat. I’m okay now. I saw Kathryn get knocked back. How is she?”

“She’s barely conscious. It’s up to her. Nothing I can do.” The coldness in her voice chilled him more than the water.

*She has separated from Kathryn, as if she’s already dead. Well, that’s what she always wanted.*

“Here, bail with this.” She tossed a harvesting basket over to him. “When the kids are out, the boat will rise. The more you bail, the less danger of sinking.”

“I’m freezing. I can’t stay with this boat. We have to land soon, even if it’s only long enough for me to get out and to tip some water out. Louis! Keep an eye out for bears. Now pull out. Get me the hell out of here!”

“I’ve tied a line. I hope it’s long enough.”

“I can’t hold the boat back, you know that,” Carl Junior went on record.

“Deno,” Jane Mary yelled, trying to be heard over the cranking and spluttering of his motor. “When we find a place, nudge him in so he lands first.”

Deno looked up, nodded, and gave his rope a snapping pull. The motor belched blue smoke and roared to life. Seconds later, Carl Junior’s motor did the same.

Debra turned away from Kathryn, smiling at the girls helping her. “At least she’s breathing normally. I think she’s warm enough. We need to get something warm in her.”

“I thought we were going to land and let Dad empty his boat.” Claire complained. She was wet and shivering. “Dad’s shaking hard.”

“I thought so too, but they haven’t found a good spot. It will be dark soon, we need some good luck.”

“Mom,” Debbie was wet and cold. “We can build a big fire and get warm ... can’t we? The little kids aren’t dry and they’re hungry. I wish I had milk.”

“You will soon enough, believe me. We will build a big fire when we find a safe spot to land. Come closer, we’ll be warmer together.”

C. Descry

“Dad’s the one who really needs warming. He’s all wet.”

“Let him sleep.”

“It’s getting so dark I can’t see down river. Louis will have to land. Debra, what will we do when it’s dark? Where will we sleep. We have to eat...”

“Stop it! It’s going to work out. We’ll be safe.”

“Mom, I see something white. What’s that?”

Louis shouted, “Look! Look!”

Denoyer woke, pulled his cold, stiff body up, stared down-river and responded. “Thank God, it’s what’s left of the tail of Andy Passco’s plane. It’s Whitefish.” *My bag’s in there. Everything I worked for.*

Jane Mary studied the landing, shouting advice to Louis and Carl. “Land Denoyer’s boat first. Denoyer, you get out and ground it.”

“What about bears?” Carl Junior warned.

“Everyone with rifles, you cover. Then when you’re out, check the area.” Debra yelled.

Debra leaned over placing her ear close to Kathryn’s mouth.

“I feel horrible. Please help me.”

“We’re at Whitefish. We’ll soon be out of the boats and able to cook. You’re going to be okay, just hold on.”

“My baby didn’t...”

“No, it was ... it didn’t have a chance.”

“I know.”

Debra heard the two youngest babies fussing. They had been quiet since the mishap, even though she knew they were cold and hungry. She bared her breast and motioned for the children to hand August to her. With the baby snugly arranged in her sling, she patted Kathryn’s hand, grabbed her rifle, and waited for the boat to touch shore. Jane Mary, following Debra’s lead, reached over and picked up July, who latched onto her and began nursing.

The plane's tail was dented and mashed by ice, yet it stood about five feet out of the water jammed between and supported by the vertical timbers of what had been the dock.

The rest of the plane was nowhere in site. Denoyer's boat was forced into the shore hard and beached leaning inland, water spilling out on the gravel as the dogs fought their leashes. Denoyer's body slumped to the side. He made no attempt to get out of the boat. Jane Mary's boat slid sideways against the gravel and ground to a stop. She felt the softness of the beach and eased her weight from her boat leg to the other, tightened the sling that held July against her breast, checked her rifle again, and motioned for the five year olds to untie the dogs and help Denoyer. Then she moved up toward the broken remnants of the boardwalk. Mosquitoes and black flies, blood sucking gnats and bugs that seemed to do nothing but create misery, formed a barrier where the tundra began. Once away from the water, the insects thinned and she focused on the dimly lit town site looking for bears.



## **PART III**



## Chapter THIRTY-ONE

*The blow knocked Denoyer over. He lay on the hide, raised his hand to his face, and looked around, his eyes seeming not to focus. Then a low, raspy chuckle rumbled in his chest and came out as a chortling laugh.*

“Debra, Dad’s asleep. He didn’t know to get out of the boat.”

“No Claire, he’s so cold he can’t move. Come on,” she looked around and used her arm to motion to the others, “everybody, let’s get him out of the boat and up on the beach where it’s dry.”

“Is he asleep. Is he ... dead?”

“Hurry, let’s get him dry and warm. Go gather willows for a fire. Everyone, pitch-in and let’s get a camp started. Let Dad sleep.” *My God, she thought, it’s like he’s frozen. Too long in the cold water. He’s half dead. He ... he lost Kathryn’s baby.*

Debra easily took command. “Put Kathryn on dry hides, then make a place for Denoyer. There, good. Keep all the babies on the hides. The smoke will keep the bugs away until it’s full dark. We need a big fire for heat, cut all the willows you can. Be careful cooking. All you kids, do what needs to be done. Girls, heat water as soon as you can and give it to the littlest kids until we can boil some of the Caribou meat. Let them chew all the jerky they want.”



### *C. Descry*

“Did you expect to find people here?” Carl Junior asked as he followed Jane Mary through the swampy tundra, avoiding rotted sections of the old boardwalk, placing each foot carefully to avoid sliding off the hidden hummocks of tundra plants. “Cause there ain’t anything here ‘cept piles of moldering junk, and bugs.”

“I hoped someone came back here and ...” She thought of Doctor Lightman and the others who left them behind and headed west so many years ago. She shook her head and pushed the visions aside.

“That building over there was intact when I was here. It was metal. I thought it would survive, but,” Jane Mary looked around in disgust, “it looks like the ice storm collapsed it. There was a lot of stuff stored in there, maybe we can dig it out if it’s still okay. Every building in the village collapsed except parts of the school.”

Carl Junior snorted. “That’s what that big ruin over there is? That building by the big round tank? The school? I thought you said it was new.”

“It was - well, when I worked here.”

“So, what good is it now?”

“Good if it protected stuff we can use.”

“And we will live in there?” Carl Junior shook his head conveying that he wanted her to reevaluate staying in this rotting place now that they saw the state of the mess.

“We have to find or build shelter. It’s easier to use existing structures. Come on, let’s have a look before we can’t see at all.”

Someone was calling from the riverbank. The breeze and the buzz of insects getting their last blood before dark, made it difficult to hear.

“What is it, Carl? Can you make out what they’re saying?”

“They’re calling us back. I heard, ‘Come back’.”

“Why do they want us to come back? Can you tell?”

“No, but we better go. It’s too dark to explore, anyway.”

“Debra, I think they heard you. They’re starting back.”

“Get everyone back here. Keep the fire burning and get Denoyer and the children warmed up. I’ll start cooking. Get a shelter up. We need a plan. Everything here is in ruins. We may not want to stay here. Your dad - Carl has hypothermia, I think that’s all it is. He’ll come around when he warms up and gets some hot broth and food. He’ll be okay. Call everybody back. If there are no signs of bears we’re safe for now.”

Louis came into the smoky firelight, rifle in hand. “No bears, but I saw a strange looking boat-thing beached down river. We’ll need to check it out first thing tomorrow.”

Carl Junior was in no hurry to get back to the river’s edge. “We should have looked in the school. We were close, and I can still see. What’s the emergency? Look, they’ve got a willow fire going and everybody’s standing around. Why do you think they called us back, Jane Mary?”

“We’ll know soon enough. Here, some of these boards are dry enough to burn. Grab an armful and let’s go.”

Louis greeted Carl Junior by raising his rifle in a kind of salute. “Dad’s like frozen. Kathryn’s still out of it. What did you see?”

“Looks like the ice storm flattened everything but a part of the school. It’s like a rotting pile of crap. You? See any bear sign?”

“No bears. Old sign. But I saw a fairly big boat type thing down there past the cleared area. It’s out of the water. I didn’t get to investigate.”

“We could use another boat.”

“Yeah, and by the time we learn how to float the river, we may not have any boats.”

*C. Descry*

“Well,” Louis sneered, his features were like Debra’s, except Denoyer’s eyes burned beneath delicate brows. “We made it this far. Dumb not checking the gas. Dad paid for that.”

“That and roping the boats together. Who’d of thought? Oh well, we won’t need boats unless he makes us go south. I believe Mom, but they have to know those times are past.”

“Yeah,” Louis said, “I don’t know who’s more caught up in the past, my mom, Kathryn or Dad. Jane Mary thinks like we do. Why leave a good thing when you’ve got it?”

“Let’s get more wood from the fallen houses. Come on, follow me.”

Debra bent close to Denoyer to make sure he was breathing. “Jane Mary, does he have hypothermia?”

“A little, I guess. As you see, he’s curled up like he’s in a, what did you call it, a fetal position? Now he’s warm, but he’s not coming out of it. It’s some kind of shock. We have to keep him warm and get broth in him. And another thing, his eyes shouldn’t be open.”

“He’s staring at nothing. Let’s get him up and force him to move.”

“You and me? If we don’t get warm and something to eat soon we’ll be just like him.”

She looked around the campsite. A makeshift lean-to tent that protected them from the breezes coming down river caught the firelight and radiated heat back toward the gathering. Claire and two of the older girls were comforting the babies and getting them ready for the night. Several younger girls were sitting listlessly, sipping hot drinks and staring into the fire. “You Kathy, and Debbie Sue, come over here and give your dad a massage. Here, I’ll show you. Get under his blanket and rub his back and limbs. Rub hard, get circulation started.”

“It won’t hurt him?” Mary Jane heard the argument in Kathy’s voice. *She’s like Kathryn, too much like her. Something has to be done.*

“No way! You do it now, both of you. Debbie Sue, you rub his back.”

Jane Mary took a cup of hot broth in one hand and a hank of caribou in the other. She pulled the stringy meat off the bone and chewed. Debra joined her, broth and greasy meat taking the edge off her hunger. “Kathryn’s okay, in spite of our wishes.”

“Stop that shit!” Debra was too tired and worried to play the game. “It could have been you or me. Like it or not, we need her.”

“Not if Denoyer doesn’t ... can’t ...”

“No,” Debra was scared, “then we three don’t matter – well, accept as teachers maybe. If we can’t have babies then ... our first girls are entering puberty. We have to plan. No two can marry siblings of the same mother. We taught them that, right?”

“Maybe. I mean I think so. Does it really matter? We could still have babies.”

Debra threw her bone into the fire, wiped the grease off her hands, and turned toward Jane Mary. “You would consider that? I can’t believe...”

“Oh, it’s okay for Carl Junior and your Madonna, but it’s not okay for your Louis and me?” She gave Debra a haughty look and stared at her, waiting for an answer.

Debra took a sip of broth and looked up. “I could never do that. I can’t imagine doing that. I couldn’t. You’re saying you could?”

“It may be necessary for the gene pool. Another combination to protect them from total inbreeding. I would if I had to. So would you.”

### *C. Descry*

They turned looking down at Denoyer, praying he would recover.

Jane Mary crawled into the pile of children's bodies and, nursing and petting fell asleep. Debra used her body and two nursing babies to warm Denoyer. He mumbled and began to move around, obviously dreaming. Morning twilight came over the camp as first the boys and then the children awoke. Kathryn slept as Debra and Jane Mary sat up and examined their situation.

"I can't believe we made camp here," Debra complained. "What a mess. We know better."

"Had no choice," Jane Mary observed. "Only the school - part of it, I should say - is left. Forget moving into a nice house."

Denoyer tried to sit up. Debra helped him brace into a sitting position. "I never wanted to stay in the arctic. I only went there to do research. I don't think I'll ever go back."

Debra stared at him and then checked to know if Jane Mary had heard. Jane Mary had. Her face was flat, her mouth set with anger.

"Denoyer," she yelled across at him, "Wake the hell up and stop talking like your brain is full of bear shit."

Debra studied his face. "He isn't here right now. No use to yell at him. I'm going to get some food into him."

Jane Mary was up. Naked, she stepped carefully over the little ones and, in motion, swung her open hand and slapped Denoyer hard on the side of the face. Aachikann! (watch out)."

"He here now?"

The blow knocked Denoyer over. He lay on the hide, raised his hand to his face, and looked around, his eyes seeming not to focus. Then a low, raspy chuckle rumbled in his

chest and came out as a chortling laugh. His eyes focused on something beyond Jane Mary's naked, barrel form.

"Gota watch where I'm going. Forget about walls and things when you spend so much time in tents and pit houses. Forgive me guys, it takes me awhile to adjust to being back down here." His chuckling turned into a hearty laugh. The whole camp became quiet, aware something strange happened. Then his eyes closed and Jane Mary, still standing over him, decided he was ignoring her.

"You son of a bitch," she screamed. "You wake up damn you!"

"What happened? I went to get wood and...? What's going on? Louis? Carl Junior? Tell me what happened.

Louis motioned for him to come sit. "Debra was at the fire ladling broth when Jane Mary slapped Denoyer. When he fell back, she said she was sure he was hurt. As she made her way back to his side, she said she heard his words and stopped. Walls? She said she couldn't believe he said that. Then, as Debra and all of us watched, that's when Jane Mary went into action. We saw her drop down and grab Denoyer's arm, swing him around and up so she could get her other hand under him, lift him off the hides, and cradling him in front of her, stumble into the river yelling, 'Stop your stupid playing around, Denoyer,' as she dumped him in the icy water. In seconds, Debra was fighting to raise Denoyer's head. She said the expression on his face hadn't changed and he looked preoccupied and peaceful. Then she ordered Jane Mary to get him out."

"I didn't see it," Deno said, nodding his head, still slightly confused. "The kids said Jane Mary was trying to kill him."

"Naw," Carl Junior said, "she just thought it would shock him out of his dream. It was probably the right thing to try. Even Debra said she had heard of that kind of shock treatment. She said she didn't take his condition seriously enough until Jane Mary's stuff didn't work. What are we going to do?"

### *C. Descry*

“Mom—Kathryn is down,” Deno said. “Debra says she’ll recover. But she said Dad might not, at least for a long time.”

“I’m in charge then,” Carl Junior made it a statement, not a question.

“Why, because you’re a day or two older than me?” Deno challenged. “Or is it because Jane Mary and Kathryn don’t get along? I think we’re both in charge, right Louis?”

“Look, we each are good at things. We share the load. Actually, Jane Mary and my mom are in charge. We still take orders from them.”

“Yeah, and wait until my mom is well. She’s the only one who really plans and thinks things through,” Deno said with certainty.

“Well, there seems to be some disagreement on that.” Louis jabbed.

“Even without Dad leading, we still have to go south,” Deno probed back.

“I don’t think so,” Carl Junior sneered. “All I know is we have to find a place better than this pile of shit from the ruined past. I don’t want to stay here any longer than we have to. We should get going to Kotzebue, just to see the sea they talk about. I wouldn’t mind having other sources of food.”

“And wood,” Louis added. “There’s wood here, but I agree this place is full of ghosts like your mom says.” He paused. “Dad said the muck they ran into - the ones that got lost - should be gone by now. He told me we could probably take the river to the sea. Well actually, he said to the Hothham Inlet and then across it to Kotzebue. We sure as hell can’t walk. And besides, my mom is not going to give up going south. If it’s up to them, Kathryn and my mom will outvote Jane Mary.”

“Strip you! That’s only if we don’t get to vote. We’ll see.” Carl Junior got up and walked away from their meeting.

“Deno, want to investigate the boat I saw?”

“Yeah.”

“Get your rifle, mine’s over there. Let’s go. Let Carl Junior sulk.”

“Okay with me. We outvote him, don’t we?”

“Only if we stand together. Like usual.”

“How close to it did you get last night, Louis?”

“Not far away, but it was getting too dark. I could tell it was different.”

“Dad would know what it is -- what we should do.”

“Yeah, but it’s up to us now. We can figure this out.”

“I don’t think it’s a boat. It’s big and ... it looks flat.”

“Flat bottom. It’s like sealed on top. If it’s not a boat, what is it?”

“It’s not a boat. It’s ... may be dangerous. We should go back and get Debra.”

“Yeah, this thing’s not what I expected.”

“Wait, I don’t think we should bother her now.” Louis stopped at the edge of the makeshift camp. Debra sat on the skins nursing one of the little ones. “She’s crying.”

“No. I never saw any of them cry.”

“She is. Look!”

“Worried about Dad I guess, Deno observed.

“Me too. So is everybody. Think we should talk to her?”

“Yeah. We got to. Come on, you first.”

“Debra, Mom, whatever that is on the bank down there we don’t think it’s a boat. It has a flat bottom and it has a flat top. It’s big. You crying about Dad?”

She wiped her eyes, disengaged the baby, and focused on Louis. He looked so much like Carl. Well, he should. So did the other boys. Her girls had his eyes or hair. All were willowy and lithe like both of them. “Sure I am. We all are. He looked so small and helpless when Jane Mary picked him up. He seems to be somewhere else ... back home I think, where he always wanted to be. What about the boat?”



*C. Descry*

“Aren’t boats like ours? This thing is flat on top and bottom, at least it looked that way to Deno and me.”

“A barge?”

“A what?”

“Did it have a motor? Was there a cabin?”

Deno shook his head. You see one Louis?”

“Motor? Don’t think so. What do you mean cabin?”

“A house built on the deck.”

“No. Are you making a joke?”

“A barge is a like a ... well, a big tank ... you know, a big sealed bucket that another boat pulls. That’s how we got the fuel for the diesel generators and our gas. It was loaded into a barge and brought here where we pumped it into our tanks. If it wasn’t pulled, it would have a motor and a place on top for the crew to stay – a pilot house. Then it’s more like a boat or ship.”

“Must be a barge, Deno said, “ ‘cause it’s like what you said. Can we use it?”

Debra looked across the camp to the bed where Denoyer slept. “I’ll go with you. Show me.”

“No one could have pulled this barge up on the bank this way,” Debra said as she walked around the wreck and noted a ragged, ripped-open split. The contents were long gone, although black goo was seeping down the beach and into the water. “It’s like it was thrown up here out of the river.”

“Mom, look how the metal here is like melted. It’s shiny and...”

“Yeah, Deno interrupted. Look at this line of melted metal. It leads to the big rip.”

Debra came closer to study the side of the barge. “Hey, I know what happened. Lightning. It got struck and exploded. That’s why it’s so far up here out of the water.”

“I don’t think it all exploded. Look, there’s a wall inside. That’s where the black shit is coming from,” Deno observed.

“You think there’s something ... still inside?” Debra moved to a bent ladder and climbed onto the deck. “There should be a hatch. We can open it and see.”

“Use that piece of pipe to turn the wheel. There, it moved. Careful!” Louis instructed. The wheel squealed, corroded metal against metal. The hatch made a pumpf sound as it released. It took all three of them to pull it up and out of the way. The smell of fuel oil was strong. Deno and Louis pulled back, trying not to breathe.

“It’s fuel oil. Diesel. Gasoline was probably in the rear compartment. It exploded. I think Jane Mary said there was still fuel oil in the tanks at the school. I’m not sure what we can do with this. Denoyer ... well, when he’s better he will have some ideas. One thing, we can burn it.”

Debra waited until Jane Mary was resting. “You know, Jane Mary, I really don’t care what we find here. Fuel oil, pieces and parts of things, tin? What good it if we can’t survive anyway?” She slumped, fighting tears. “We all agree we can’t stay here, but that leaves two choices. We can try to go on to the sea, or we can go back where the caribou migrate. After last winter, no one wants to go back. Do you?”

“Look Debra, let’s agree on this. We won’t be in charge much longer. With Denoyer playing his game, Kathryn so weak, you and I depend on the kids. They’ll let us lead for now, but soon we will be replaced. Not me as much as you. All you ever did was try to please Denoyer. Now that he’s out, you’re asking what you’re doing here. That’s what you’re asking, right?”

“I guess. It’s like I can’t see any way to survive. We know what Doc Lightman and the others found. Where do we go if we find the same muck? What if the sea isn’t there anymore? What if...? Oh you know, I’m trying to understand our chances. It’s September, right? We have to find a place and be established, with food, in less than a month. Maybe we should

*C. Descry*

rebuild something here and try to survive the winter. You must have an idea...

“We stay here. I can convince them. That’s why we’re here; the plan we agreed to. We take the boats and hunt caribou. We try for the few fish we can take. We dig into the old buildings and look for survival rations – anything we can eat. You asked what good is the fuel oil? Well, we can burn it for heat and light. We just have to figure out how. You have to agree. Do you?”

“We have no other choice. You tell them, get them organized. I’ll help. But have you noticed that the children are starting to get something? I think it’s like when we were here before ... so many died. I need to take care of them. And Kathryn.”

“You mean Denoyer. Don’t play games with me. Okay, you do that. Don’t undermine me, Debra. You know how I work. I’ll get you if you do.”

## Chapter THIRTY-TWO

*He told me you boys would kill him, Kathryn screeched. He told me you would do this. I'm the only one he talks to. Listen to me! He knows all about your plans. It's parenticide.*

“Kathryn, ever since you’ve been up and going again all you’ve done is mope around and refuse to help. You don’t even take care of the children like you should. None of us will have a baby this year. You don’t know if you can have one or not.” Debra kept her voice soft and controlled. She didn’t want Kathryn to respond, just change.

“I have a responsibility to Carl. He needs me. I am the only one that gets through to him. You don’t understand what he needs. You don’t understand our relationship and why he chooses to communicate only with me. Besides, I’m doing what is most necessary. I’m a lady, not some workhorse. In planning, it’s called ‘highest and best use’. You never seem to understand.”

“If you want us to get out of here next summer, you’d better cooperate now. Those who don’t pull their weight in Jane Mary’s view of things get left behind.”

“You would never leave Denoyer.”

“I’m talking about you.”

“And I’m talking about you, bitch. I have the power, not you. They all listen to me.”

C. Descry

“Really? Checked that out lately? Kathryn, you’re pathetic. And don’t pretend Denoyer talks to you. We all know better. He hasn’t improved, and you can’t pretend he has.”

“Is there anything we can do about Dad?” Louis looked at Carl Junior as he spoke. It’s up to us. How far can we get if we have to carry him? At what point do we do what Jane Mary suggests? It’s up to us. None of the girls want to discuss it.”

“We need to take him away from Kathryn,” Carl Junior looked at Deno. “Your mom babies him. We need to get him away from all of them and see if we can shake him out of his game.”

“It’s not a game!” Louis’s voice was steely and firm. “Only your mom doesn’t understand what’s going on. But I agree. Let’s get him away - take him out with us. He can walk. Then he will have to respond.”

“What bothers me is that Madonna and ... none of the girls want us to do anything. Why do they leave it all to us?”

“They’re girls, that’s why. Jane and Mary will be like Jane Mary someday. Right now, they don’t have to do things like we have to.”

“So when, Louis?” Deno asked.

“We have to go for meat one more time. The caribou are gone, but maybe we can get a bear.”

“Let’s go now.”

“It’s ... we need to rest first. Lets go when we wake up. Don’t tell them. We get up, get Dad dressed and go. Agreed?” Carl Junior smiled as he watched the others nod. Jane Mary told him they would agree. She was always right.

“No one is interested in the library,” Debra complained as she nursed July and August. “If Carl would wake up, he would make everyone pick a book.” *Now I’m sounding like Kathryn. Damn. What’s happening to me? Books? What for? We have no reason to learn now.*

“Where’s the rest of his stuff?” Carl Junior raged at the camp. He winked as Jane Mary pretended to be confused.

“Why are you dressing him?” Jane Mary acted surprised.

“I want to know too,” Kathryn hissed in her nastiest, most threatening voice.

“He’s going out with us. Where’s his hat?”

“You can’t take him out there in the dark with you,” Debra pleaded. “Why would you do that? What are you going to do to him? Stop it! Jane Mary, this is your doing. They won’t bring him back, will they?”

“Cut it Mom,” Louis pushed between her and Denoyer. “We’re not going to hurt him. He needs to get out with us. You’ll see, he’ll be better for it.” He turned to Deno and Carl Junior. “Ready? Let’s go.”

“He told me you boys would kill him,” Kathryn screeched. “He told me you would do this. I’m the only one he talks to. Listen to me! He knows all about your plans. It’s parenticide. You’ll suffer forever for doing it. Listen to me, I know what’s best for us and this isn’t right.”

Denoyer seemed alert as he was carried, feet dragging, sometimes stepping, between Louis and Carl Junior. He was a head taller than either boy, and difficult to maneuver. As they left the library and started down the icy corridor, he carried more of his own weight, found his footing and moved his legs. They reached the front doors, Deno got the panic bars working and two doors open. Denoyer shuffled along on his own. Louis looked at Carl Junior and grinned. “Hold him, he still won’t stand on his own.”

The temperature, Louis judged, was colder than it had been. October was always cold and dark. Coming out of the blackness of the building the starlight and faint curtains of light from the aurora borealis made it easy to see the frozen tundra.

“Isn’t there supposed to be snow?” Deno observed. “I don’t think we’ve had snow this year.”

“None,” Carl Junior confirmed. “The ground should be covered. Remember last year? By this time we had drifts.”

“Dad? You know where we are?” Louis pulled Denoyer around so he could study his face.

“Cold. Don’t want to be,” Denoyer mumbled.

“Dad, you’re in Whitefish. We’re outside the school. Do you know us?”

“You don’t believe me?” Denoyer asked in a voice that suggested he found it incredible. “I found what I said. I brought proof. I can show you... Is that why you brought me back here? Because the proof is still in the tail of the plane?”

“What’s he talking about?” Deno asked. “Doesn’t he know who we are?”

“Dad!” Carl Junior turned the old man so he could be in his face. “We never brought you back here, you’ve been here all the time. Here with us ... your family. We’re your sons.” He placed his hands on Denoyer’s shoulders and shook him gently. “Look at me! I’m Carl Junior. I’m your son. Look at me.”

“I don’t want to be cold. I’ll show you.” He raised his head and looked around. “If you look above the portage...”

“What the hell is he talking about? He’s crazy. Let’s go on.” Deno said.

“Okay,” Louis agreed. “At least we got him talking. Remember he used to talk about a discovery he made that would make him famous? Remember? It was something about people who lived in our land that people never thought were here ... something like that.”

“Yeah, Neanderthals...”

Deno paused as Denoyer jerked away from Carl Junior and Louis.

“The Pleistocene, same as in Central Asia.” Denoyer became animated, swinging his arms, walking ahead, expecting them to follow.

"Where does he think he's going?" Carl Junior asked.

"Who the hell knows. We follow." Louis kept hold of Denoyer's parka, letting the gangly old man lead.

"This isn't right. The ridges are?" He looked around the frozen tundra. "This isn't ... I don't know this place. Why are we ... this isn't." He slumped as if his spine melted. Louis yelled out a warning. "Catch him!" but Denoyer was on the ice before they could.

"He's back in his trance," Deno observed. "He went back in."

"Where did he go?" Carl Junior asked. "People don't just go away. He has to hear us. He has to know."

"I think so too. What about it Louis, should we do something to him?"

"You mean like hit him?"

"Well, like when Jane Mary threw him in the river."

"Didn't work, did it?"

"Look," Carl Junior said. "Let's get him up walking again. That worked last time. Here, help me."

"You know, he just won't come back. He doesn't want to. When we started on the river, he was himself. Then ... he thinks he killed the baby. That's what. That baby was almost dead ... maybe dead already. Wouldn't have lived from what I saw. Even Debra agreed. But he thinks he killed it."

"Well, he dropped it in the river," Deno said.

"But...? Dad, you think you killed the baby?" Carl Junior shouted. "Do you think we care?"

"Forget it. He won't walk. He won't wake up. You know something we haven't tried?" Louis asked. "Let me try." He turned his father and bent him toward him so they were face-to-face.

"Doctor Denoyer you lied!" he shouted. "You lied to us. You faked your discovery. No one believes you."



*C. Descry*

“No. No. What are you talking about?” Denoyer sat up, eyes open, face twisted with anguish.

“You never got to present your findings, Dad. You never got to go back. You’re still here with us. Dad...”

“Look Louis, I would never fake ... Louis? Do you believe me?”

“Dad, do you know us? Carl Junior. Deno?”

“Why wouldn’t I? But you of all people must believe me... I went home, but they ... no one would believe me.” He paused. “We’re going home, that’s why we .... I want to go home. I belong in Tucson.”

“It may be gone, Dad. But we made it back here to Whitefish. When we can, we’re going to try to get to Kotzebue. We need you, stay with us and we’ll prove you were right.”

“Help me. Come here. “He opened his arms and gathered them in. “Where are the others?”

“We’re at Whitefish, Dad. We fixed up the library in the ruins of the school. They’re all in there.”

“All safe? I remember ... oh shit! I lost Kathryn’s baby, didn’t I?”

“The bear? Do you remember the bear coming at us in the water?”

“Yeah. The boat swamped. I was freezing.”

“You were. We thought we lost you.” Deno said.

“What ... happened? How did? Why are we out here? Why do I feel so ... weak?”

Louis broke from his hug. “You were in a trance or something.”

“A coma? Was I in a coma?” Denoyer let Carl Junior and Deno break contact.

“Probably, I’m not sure what that is. You were, well, it was like you wanted to be somewhere else.”

Denoyer nodded. “I do. I do. You must understand. I was living my life when the Cut Off interrupted it. Everything I thought had meaning ... everything I worked for ... for more

than forty years didn't matter." He moved to get separate, stared across the tundra. "Everything I was. Everyone I loved. Every value I had ... lost forever. I don't know who I am now."

"Jeeze, Dad, that's ... that scares me," Deno responded. "We know who you are. We ... Dad, you are ..."

"You lead us," Carl Junior injected. You are our Dad ... everybody's dad. We know who you are."

"Don't you want to be with us?" Louis asked.

Denoyer reacted as if the question were a blow. He moved back, hunched over as if trying to avoid another. "You've got to understand, the three of you - everybody. I am two people. The one you know and the one I grew up to be. The man who existed before you were born. Before I met Debra and Jane Mary, before I knew Kathryn. Before we were thrown together out here to survive. I'm not from this land. I'm from another culture that..."

"Dad," Carl Junior had enough. "We brought you out here hoping to bring you back from where you were in your head. It worked. Everyone will be happy. Let's go back and ... you know, I really don't understand. This is our home. This is our land. We belong here. So do you."

As they walked Denoyer back, Deno came close to Louis. "I don't understand. Why would knowing about some people who used to live here be important? Why did he spend his life looking for them? Who cares? I think he's probably still kinda lost."

"It's like Mom - Jane Mary says. The ones from down below have all sorts of crazy ideas."

The sun was inching up into the southern sky when the snows came. They were prepared for the dry sub-zero arctic winds blasting across the tundra through the late fall and winter. They weren't prepared as the entombing effects of warm winds and thick clouds blew in from the southwest, dropping heavy, wet snow that froze like concrete when the cold

### C. Descry

returned. The drifts of snow-turned-to-ice sealed them into the building and made it impossible to go out for any reason. The dogs ran the corridors, frustrated beasts pacing their cage. Feeding the pack required Jane Mary and sometimes Carl Junior or Louis to climb up on the stacks, squeeze through the hatch, haul up food in a bucket, navigate the walkway through the attic, and drop the meat several places in the corridor.

“If they try to get in here, I’ll kill them,” Kathryn threatened. “I told you before not to bring wolves near the children. I warned you this would happen, and I told you not to let it happen. I know what is best. You ignore me because you don’t know how to make decisions. I’m...”

“Oh shut the hell up!” Debra ordered. “You tried that and what happened? Didn’t you learn anything? Don’t you ever learn? Just shut up!”

Jane Mary got up and moved to another pile of blankets and hides. “Denoyer, you pretend there’s nothing wrong. Can’t you see Kathryn never learned anything? Every day she finds some new way to undermine us. How much longer do we have to put up with it?”

The wicks burning in the bowls of fuel oil on the desks and tables released dirty black lines of sooty stench which rose, formed black clouds, and disappeared through cracks in the stained ceiling tiles. In the dim light, the older children took turns reading aloud or stopped to show pictures to the children gathered around them. All seemed to ignore the normal banter between Kathryn and the other adults. All but Carl Junior.

“*Alappaa* (it’s cold). My people loved this time.” Jane Mary’s voice was soft, contrasting with the cold, hard darkness. “We could travel across the tundra when the snow and ice sealed it. That’s when we visited other camps. We had dogs. That was before power sleds. This would have been a good year to travel.”

Louis imagined what it would be like if they could get out through the drifts. "We could travel. We could go to Kotzebue and not have to worry about the muck trapping us. Is it too far? We'd have to walk, the dogs ... well, we should have trained them. There are some power sleds under the collapsed building."

"Forget about them," Carl Junior said. "Mom and I looked them over pretty good. They're ruined like everything else."

"We should walk over there," Deno advised. "Then we'd know what to expect and whether to take a boat there, right Dad?"

Denoyer lay listening, not ready to respond. Jane Mary answered for him. "You're talking to people who sent their best friends away in a boat. They never came back. We're not about to send you boys ninety miles across the ice to look for something that may not be there."

"How long would it take?" Madonna injected. Why do you say 'boys'? We're strong and we could go. You always think girls are too weak or dumb or something. I'm stronger than everybody but Louis and Carl Junior. I can beat Deno at leg wrestling. I can walk. I'll go."

Denoyer sat up. "Look, we don't know what it's like outside. All we know is that the tundra was frozen hard before all this snow came. That's good. But what if you can't walk on the drifts without crashing through? What if another of these wet storms hits while you're out there with no cover? What if there is a sudden thaw? We could go, but should we? Is it more dangerous that waiting until late summer and going by boat? What if something happens out there and we can't get back?"

"Carl," Debra said. "You've just said yes and no at the same time. Should we try or not?"

"If we had sleds," Denoyer answered, "and we don't."

"One of the shorter aluminum boats would work," Jane Mary noted.

*C. Descry*

"Yeah, then we would have a boat if we needed it. That's better than a sled, right Dad?" Deno asked.

Jane Mary answered, knowing Denoyer wouldn't. "I'd have to go. You wouldn't know what to do. Remember I told you? My father and brother went out and never came back. I don't think I should leave here."

"This is the first year none of us have a baby to worry about," Debra said.

"Yeah but, the others are too little." Jane Mary countered.

"You women are really considering this stupid suggestion?" Kathryn taunted. "All of you together don't have an ounce of common sense. As usual, I'm the one who has to make you see reason. I'm the one who has to apply common sense and lead. You can see that Carl doesn't have his heart in this. You should read him the way I do. He tolerates more of your stupid ideas that I ever would. Listen to him. It's too dangerous to go. Tell them Carl. Tell them to start thinking."

In the dark they couldn't see Denoyer's reaction. They waited. Nothing.

"Dad didn't say no, Kathryn," Madonna corrected.

"Yeah," Louis agreed. "Dad just told us to evaluate the problems we might have."

"He didn't say yes or no," Debra reiterated. "Denoyer - Carl? Should we even consider it?"

"Well ... either way, boat or land, summer or winter, we risk losing someone." His voice was weak.

"But on the water, we all go together. We can wait till summer," Debra advised.

"Why is that better than risking maybe four of us? If four of us go now, then...?"

Madonna interrupted Louis. "Next year I can have a baby. Then I won't be able to go. Now, I think Mary and me, Jane and Louis ought to go." She paused. "Well, if they want to. I know I want to. Do you Jane? Mary?"

"I want to go," one of the younger girls said.

"Me too, we're not babies. We can go too, can't we?" Kathryn's third son Tommy asked.

Kathryn screeched. "What are you talking about Tommy? No one is going. Not you or anyone. I won't allow it. Don't you all understand that this discussion is stupid? Think! Don't make me have to correct you all the time."

"Then it's settled," Jane Mary announced as if Kathryn's comments made up her mind. "Louis and Madonna, Jane and Mary. But you can't go if the snow is too deep or not frozen enough. You can't go until we can get out. We have to design a harness to pull the boat. We have time to plan. Agreed?"

"Ten and eleven year old girls? A twelve year old boy? Are you all insane? Haven't you heard a word Carl and I have been saying? I won't let this happen. I know what is at stake. I think things through. You're not going to get away with sacrificing four children for some ill-thought adventure," Kathryn warned.

Carl Junior grimaced as her voice cut through him. He ignored her. "Why Louis and not me?"

"Or me?" Deno added.

Jane Mary cleared her throat. "Because you're the oldest, Carl Junior. You must help Denoyer lead." Had he seen her face, he would have known the real reason.

"And me?" Deno asked.

"Deno, you are not as strong as Louis. In fact, you have Kathryn's build and strength. You could do it, I'm not saying you couldn't, but Louis is the obvious choice."

Debra got to her feet, turning to search out Jane Mary, unable to see her in the dark. "It could be either Carl Junior or Louis, both are qualified. Carl Junior is older, we should consider that."

"Like hell," Jane Mary mumbled so softly no other could hear.

## Chapter THIRTY-THREE

*Debra leaned close to Jane Mary. This is a total white-out. Remember the last storm? Remember how the wind shifted and everything froze? This is like that.*

The glow from the returning sun was a smear on the horizon when, working in shifts, they chopped and cut their way out through the drifts and saw sky again. The world was white. It was impossible to see where the land stopped and the river began. Everything was covered. The drifts created long fingers of ice making the land a series of ridges, most with steep leeward escarpments and cornices. Many of the drifts were five feet or higher, high enough to cover the willows and hide all vegetation.

“There are no landmarks,” Louis observed. “No way we could follow the river. Not that we could anyway, it’s more like a lake every year.”

“Then we can’t go, can we? No way we could pull a sled-boat over these drifts.” Jane observed. “We should ask Dad to come out here.”

“What, and get Kathryn wound-up again? He lets her control him. My Mom - Debra is the one to ask,” Louis turned, beat the snow off his parka, and started back in.

“Jane Mary stamped her feet to get the slushy snow off before it soaked in. “It shouldn’t be this warm. The break up isn’t for two months at least. It’s not the sun, It’s the wind. Warm

wind out of the southwest, a bad sign this time of year. Things are still not like they were.”

Denoyer stood on the foundation of the burned wing. “Like last year. The ice has sealed every living thing in its den. We’ll have a hard time getting food. There’s no use hunting now. We ration.”

“So what’s new? I worry about the dogs,” Debra said. “Even if we let them out, there’s nothing for them to hunt. One thing, the big drifts have flattened into gentle ridges, but the snow is mush. Do you think they’ll freeze again?”

“The pattern is warm winds bring moisture and all this snow. The wind is warm, but there aren’t any clouds.” Denoyer pointed toward the southwest. “When the jet stream pushes past us again, this land will be a frozen sea of ice. An ice desert, that’s what it is.”

“Then Dad, is that the time for us to go to the sea?”

Jane Mary answered when she saw Denoyer hesitate. “You would have to make it fast, there and back. The cold will hold for a week or more. Then it may get warm and snow again. You would be trapped.”

“Two weeks? We don’t need that long. You said we could make thirty miles a day, at the least. We could be back in a little over a week. We can make it. Let’s get the boat and start organizing our gear.”

“I don’t know, I really don’t know. Thirty miles? It’s level, but... I don’t know...: Denoyer shook his head and turned to go in. Debra grimaced so that Louis could see. He nodded.

“Hell, what happened to the man we knew?” Jane Mary complained.

“You have to have brakes. The one riding in back keeps the boat in line and brakes it down grades and when it gets going too fast.” Jane Mary used her hands to make her points. “We’ve got to build a brake that you can step on and push into the snow so it drags. We can make it so it attaches to the transom and you can take it off if you’re attaching the motor. On



### *C. Descry*

ice, you have to ride it. Maybe we should give it some teeth, like a rake. Is there a rake in the shops?”

“We better try it out around here before we go,” Louis observed. “I think I know what you’re talking about, but... Well, if anything doesn’t work right or we can’t handle the boat we’d know before we leave.”

Denoyer appeared from the depth of the building. “I knew I saved this GPS gismo for a reason. What I don’t know is if it works. I mean, I know this works, I tested the winder and the battery still seems to have life. What I don’t know is if the satellite is still up there. I’ll save the battery and wind it for a minute. That will give us about half an hour worth of power. Now on this old map ... I drew a line between Whitefish and Kotzebue. Now look, Louis, you too Jane. Mary. Madonna. You each have to know this, your lives depend on it.” He tried to be energized and certain. “In the past we could follow the river. Now the river is wide, more like a lake. You can’t tell where the main channel is. Under this snow, you can’t even see the depression in places. You can get to Kotzebue okay, because you will hit the coast if you go west. You can go along the coast until you hit an inlet – that’s a narrow band of water between the land and the peninsula Kotzebue sits on. You can figure out if you are north or south of Kotzebue, but that’s the hard way and it will take too much time. With this GPS, there is a better way to know where you are. Getting there is one thing, getting back here is quite another. Getting back depends on your ability to follow GPS direction because you could pass us by as little as a mile and never know it.” He looked around to make certain they understood. “Now orient the map to north. Here’s Whitefish, There’s Kotzebue. I’ll demonstrate how this thing works.”

Jane had a frightened look on her face. “This is too complicated.”

Louis held up the GPS receiver. “I’ll show her, Dad. Look here and you can see the direction, names and distance.”

“You mean it knows where we are? It made this map?” Mary asked.

“You’ve got it. You, me ... anyone can plot our course and make sure we aren’t wandering off in the wrong direction. Now you try it Jane. Then you, Madonna.”

Denoyer smiled. “This little thing is communicating with a satellite thousands of miles above us. Maybe the satellite will tell others we’re here. The thing we have to deal with is that the map was made before the Cut Off. It shows the towns, roads and geological features that may be under water or destroyed now. It will show Kotzebue and the coast, but there is no guarantee things are the same. We’ll adjust. ”

“Dad,” Louis pulled close to his father so others couldn’t hear, “I never understood when you told us about satellites and space and ... that’s part of the old stuff you always want us to know about. Could we go to Kotzebue and get back without it?”

“No. A compass won’t work well at this latitude. Snow and the rising water have hidden most of the landmarks. Without this, you wouldn’t have a chance. There’s so much information like this I hope to teach you about, but...”

“I know dad. We pretend like we don’t want to hear about any of it ... that is until we see how it fits into this time, now.”

Kathryn moved around in the dim light, pretending she was focused on attending to the babies. “These are all we will have left if they don’t come back,” she whined. “None of us will survive if anything happens. I told you all how stupid it is to send children out across the ice. You don’t listen. I know what has to be, I’m the planner. I think! This is a bad year, you’ve said so. The snow. The early melt. The... I’m making the decision. They can not go.”

“Oh shut the hell up,” Deno snapped. “You do what you’re good at, take care of the babies. Stop pretending you know anything.”

*C. Descry*

Carl Junior jumped in. "Because she's usually right, that's why."

"Well, you should start thinking on your own, Carl Junior. If you're not a child, why do you say everything your mother says? You're the oldest. You should go if anybody. But no, Jane Mary's little boy has to stay here and be safe. It's okay to risk Louis. That's right, isn't it Louis? That's what she fears, isn't it?"

Denoyer lay as if asleep, unwilling or unable to engage.

Debra knew Deno's taunt hurt Carl Junior and enraged Jane Mary. "Kathryn, nobody listens to you. Nobody wants your opinions. You want to start a thing between Louis and Carl Junior, well, they're too smart for you. They work well together. They see through your games and bullshit. We all do. Now shut up, take care of July, she's hungry, and ... shut the hell up!" Debra turned and made her way through the bodies spread out on the hides.

"You think you're so smart, little mousey Debra. Well just remember, I'm the one who has been right about everything. I predicted exactly what would happen each time you screwed up. When something happens to them, it's your fault. Their loss is on your shoulders. You will be ... murderers, bit not of my son."

"Is putting someone out of their misery, murder?" Deno mumbled. "I don't think so."

"The cold time is the time we traveled," Jane Mary said as they pulled the boat from the shelter of the school and finished loading it. "The problem is this cold may not last. You have to plan for the return of warm winds and heavy snow."

"We know that, Jane Mary," Louis, focused upon the immediate, clamped the brake to the transom.

"But it's how you plan for the worst case that will save you," Debra tested the brake as Louis moved the boat forward.

“I know that Mom. We all know that. We stay put if we can, use the boat as a cover, and wait until the cold comes back. Or, we wait and use the boat to come back. That is if we find food. We’re betting we can get there and back before it warms up, if it warms up again before break up.”

“Besides,” Madonna said, “If we can’t get back here for some reason it will be like in the old days. Right Jane Mary? We will start our own camp.”

“You have to get back. We can’t survive without you. You can’t make it without us,” Denoyer handed Jane a plastic storage container packed with dried meat. “Everything you do - every decision you make - must be based on the survival of all of us.”

“Dad, won’t Kotzebue look like Whitefish? I mean, flattened and a ruin?”

“Be prepared not to find anything. A big wave might have washed it into the sea. There are many things to be aware of. The ash was bad here, but every indicator is that it was worse to the west. The sea might have ... well, I told you about the Bering Straits. How there was a land bridge between here and Asia? You might find land instead of sea. If so, we need to know that. We may need to go south and find the sea. Louis, Jane, Mary, Madonna. What you don’t find is as important as what you do find.”

The four nodded. Denoyer leaned against the boat and searched their faces. “People can revert to being wild. If you find others, approach carefully. You will be armed all the time, of course, but the most dangerous animals are human. Don’t trust anyone. Don’t let them near until you are certain of their intent. Find out where they came from. Maybe they are our people. The pilot of the wrecked plane was Andy Passco. He almost killed a very good man, Doc Lightman. If he survived, he’ll be up to no good.”

“Dad,” Louis came around the boat, reached up, and put his hand on Denoyer’s shoulder. “We have talked about all of

*C. Descry*

this for months. We're ready to go. Please promise me that if we get stuck out there, you'll go back home."

"But Louis, I told you that's where I want to be."

"No Dad, I mean where we were born. The Portage. This place is not good. Going west ... well, if we don't make it and the others didn't, then there is something awful out there. Don't follow us. Go home."

Jane Mary was relieved Denoyer had taken control. "We can survive here for another winter. We'll be here until the end of next summer if you do not return. Then," she looked at Denoyer, their eyes caught in agreement, he nodded, she continued. "We will leave directions here. I think we may choose to go south and not follow the river. Denoyer showed you on the map how going south we would intersect the Yukon somewhere east of Nome. We would leave on the ice, probably in November."

"If we can't get back, we'll go south. We will wait at Nome. But that's only if ... we will be back within two weeks."

"Denoyer is walking around the halls," Debra said to the darkness. "Carl Junior, do you think he's..."

"All right? I don't know. How would I? What is it you want?"

"He is, probably," Debra continued. "But I would like it if you and Deno joined him."

"And do what? Keep him from zoning out and thinking he's down below?"

"Aw come on Carl Junior," Deno sensed Carl Junior's irritation and increasing bitterness toward Debra. He hated Kathryn, but why Debra? "We should get out of here for awhile anyway. Let's go find him."

"I know right where he'll be. Do you want him delivered back here, Debra, or should we...?"

Jane Mary's voice cut through the darkness. "Knock it off, all of you. Carl Junior, bring him back or let us know what he's doing. Now go!"

“You thought he’d be in here?” Deno turned to look at Carl Junior, hoping to catch some clue to his anger. “Why the wood shop?”

“There’s an old dog sled up on the top of the storage rack. I saw him looking at it when we were packing things for Louis.”

“You mean he thinks we can use it to go cross country? Head for the Yukon River?”

Carl Junior didn’t answer as he made his way to the little door beside the big double doors.

“Now where are you going?”

“Sled’s gone. He has to be outside.” He pushed through the door and stood on the rotting loading dock. “See, there’s the sled.”

“But ... no sign of Dad. Look, he’s been making a harness out of rope.”

“Then I know where he is,” Carl Junior scoffed. “The old fool has gone for the dogs.”

Deno turned to Carl Junior, fists clenched, mouth closed into a tight straight line. He caught Carl’s eyes and stepped in front of him. “Look goddamn you. For a week now you’ve been mouthing off and acting like you’re king shit. Maybe you think that’s how you take charge. Well it ain’t. You’ve got a louse so far up your ass you’re becoming one.” He watched Carl Junior’s hands, ready to dodge a fist. Carl Junior sneered, then seemed puzzled.

“You want to lead? You haven’t got what it takes. Dad turned weak. He’s over sixty. He’s an old man and he acts like a fool.”

“Not if he’s doing what you thought he’s doing with the sled.”

“My mom’s the one who knows. I know. I’m part Eskimo, not you.”

*C. Descry*

“And what does she say? That we hide out here or go along the rivers and try to survive another ice storm or another winter like this one?”

“Yeah, Deno. That’s exactly what. She doesn’t want to go south any more than we do.”

“You decided that? You decided before we know what Louis learned? All Dad is doing is preparing for an alternative if they learn the way west is blocked ... or if they don’t return. He’s smart and he’s still in charge. In fact, I think...”

Denoyer stepped through the door and stood behind them. “That’s enough! I’ve heard enough. Carl Junior, with your limited understanding of our options it’s a good thing you aren’t in charge. Deno ’s right. I’m planning for winter travel. He’s wrong when he says it’s to the Yukon. Right now, I’m planning for travel in any direction we need to go. And yes, it’s time we trained the dogs.”

“Sorry Dad,” Deno hung his head.

Denoyer took a step closer to Carl Junior. “We’re all Eskimo now, Son. Like it or not, how you’re related to Jane Mary is not an issue. Now let’s get this out. What in the hell is making you so angry? What’s biting at you?”

“You ... you are too weak to lead ... I mean at times. I mean...”

“I know exactly what you are referring to,” Denoyer almost growled. All I have to do is listen to Jane Mary and I know what’s eating you. Right?”

“Don’t bring her into this.”

“Oh? And she hasn’t filled your head with resentment about Kathryn? She hasn’t undermined Debra and me? If you’re ever to lead, Carl Junior,” he lowered his voice and spoke softly, kindly, “Son, you have to be able to know everyone’s agenda, even hers. You have to know where they are coming from and why they think like they do. Then, and only then will you keep us safe.”

“Yes but, I do all that. I see things ... like how everyone’s afraid of Kathryn. You all hate her, I see that too. We’d be better off without her. She should have died out there on the river. Even Louis would agree to that, I think.”

Deno was pissed. “She’s my mother. She’s the one who took care of us. Sure she’s a little hard to deal with at times, but you don’t kill people for that. She doesn’t endanger us. You’re not thinking.”

Carl Junior pulled away from Denoyer and started back through the door. “That’s a matter of opinion, yours not mine.”

Denoyer turned. “Make certain it is yours. Think for yourself.”

*Jane Mary’s sitting there with her back to the checkout desk, wrapped in hides and a worn brown blanket. Debra smiled. Makes her look like a thanksgiving turkey in a cornucopia. She’s up to something the way she’s studying the girls.* “What is it Jane Mary?”

“Remember Nate and Charlie? The first Madonna and Jane ... and Mary? The ones we named our kids after? Well, we just sent them away and now look at what’s happening. These next ones, they’re taking charge.”

“They are, aren’t they. We didn’t really send them away - the young ones who left with Doc. I think they died out there. Now...”

“Oh don’t start, Debra. You’ll end up siding with Kathryn. We had no choice. It was the right thing to do. This group won’t die, they should be on their way back now. Another day. We had to send them ... and Nate and Charlie and the girls, they had proven themselves. They had a chance and took it. They wanted to go. So did I. I’d of gone too. Maybe we all should have gone.”

“Yeah, “Denoyer said, “then we would all be dead and none of this would have happened. Probably a blessing we didn’t get.”



### *C. Descry*

“Don’t read too much into it, Jane Mary. Carl talks that way when he’s down. I wonder if Jan hadn’t led them out if it would have made a difference?”

“There would be more of us now... or we would have been too many to survive. He’s recovering, but have you noticed how much older he seems?”

Debra shuffled her butt, getting comfortable. “He’s sixty. That’s not so old these days.”

“You mean in those days. With all he’s been through it’s old today. He’ll never be the same man. Thank God we have the boys and...”

“And we can lead them into manhood,” Debra finished.

When the wind came from the southwest it forced its way into the attic through the burned roofing and played along the tin ducts. A very strong wind like the one that brought the wet snow, and the one blowing now made the squirrel cage fans turn, their bearings moaned in protest. The sudden gusts of wind stopped their conversations and games. Debra Deno, and Carl Junior were out helping Denoyer with the dogs. Jane Mary sat up listening.

“Oh hell no! Not yet. Not now, they’ve only been gone nine days.”

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Tommy stood and came to her, wanting to be held.

“It’s going to snow again. The kids aren’t back.” She hugged Tommy and set him aside.

Kathryn gathered two toddlers and made a hissing sound. “I told them. I told you all. I knew this would happen. You never listen to me. I knew. I warned you.”

Deno and Carl Junior burst into the library. Carl Junior breathing too hard to talk. Deno grabbed a breath. “Come out. The dogs. We lost some of them ... they went crazy when the wind hit. Debra and Dad are holding the others. Come on, we need you both. Our stuff’s all over the place.”

"I must stay here and take care of these little ones," Kathryn attempted to excuse herself.

"No Mom, it won't take long and believe me we need you. Get dressed. Hurry. You don't need much, the wind is warm. It's just starting to snow.

Denoyer and Debra leaned over the old wood sled untangling dogs that wouldn't stay still.

"The weather change spooked them," Debra complained as she forced a bitch to the ground and attempted to unwrap the harness ropes from her leg.

"Get the other dogs," Denoyer yelled, barely heard over the roar of the wind and howling of the dogs. "The harness broke. They ran down-wind, two dogs dragging the other two. Fighting. They're all tangled up. Need help. My God, here comes the snow! Get them back here!"

Jane Mary studied marks in the snow looking for sign to follow. Shielding her eyes from the diving snow she walked around the sled. "Look here, Kathryn, see these marks? They went this way. Hurry, stay with me. We have to get to them before their tracks are covered."

"Go to hell. What are you stupid? You know I can't be out here. I need to be with the children. I'm not going to follow those wolves, they'll attack me."

"Kaniqsvich (do you understand?)" Jane Mary turned quickly, backhanding her fist into Kathryn's stomach. Kathryn doubled over and fell to her knees, gasping. "I'll knock more than the wind out of you, you bitch. Now get up and do as I say." She raised her hand and brought it to within inches of Kathryn's nose. Understand? You want to die right here, I'll accommodate you."

"But the snow. You can't even see their trail. Think, Jane Mary. Why do I always have to be the one who thinks?"

"Get the hell up!" She hit Kathryn's shoulder as hard as she could. The blow spun Kathryn around and back down onto her knees.

C. Descry

“Okay, stop hitting me. I’m up.”

They were covered with an inch of wet snow by the time Jane Mary was assured Kathryn would help.

“Now we can’t see their trail,” Jane Mary screeched. “We can’t see anything.” She made her way back to Denoyer. “I need the longest rope you have.” The six dogs had settled down some, but she could see they were still tangled. “I’m going for them. They probably stopped when the snow came in. Kathryn can hold the end of the rope while I search.”

Debra leaned close to Jane Mary. “This is a total white-out. Remember the last storm? Remember how the wind shifted and everything froze? This is like that.”

“I have time.”

She turned back to Kathryn who was holding her shoulder and trying to catch her breath. In the wind and heavy snowfall she couldn’t do either. “Hold this end of the rope. After we get around the building, I’m going out to search for the dogs. I’ll do big sweeps. You keep me from going too far. I need the rope to get back, understand?” She saw the look on Kathryn’s face, and misjudged it. “And don’t worry your little brain, you won’t even be near the dogs.”

Kathryn stood, back to the blizzard. “‘Hold the rope. Hold the rope,’ you have no right to order me to do anything.” *I can’t see her. I can’t see anything past my hand. I’m just supposed to stand here and be a post? What does she think I am? How will I get back. This is a trick, isn’t it? You leave me here and I have no way back. You bitch, you hurt me.*

“Jane Mary,” Kathryn screamed as loud as she could without seeming unladylike. “Jane Mary, you get back here! If you left me out here to freeze, I’ll kill you. Damn it! Jane Mary?”

*I should go back. No, Denoyer wants her to get the damned dogs. He’d be mad at me even though he’d understand. I can’t let him down. She pulled gently on the loose rope. That bitch. She’s probably inside already. Left me out here to freeze. Well, I’ll wait a few more minutes, just in case.*

The wind stopped as suddenly as it had come up. Slush fell in clumps that splattered when they hit, soaking everything. The ground was already covered with a foot of slush. The sudden quiet startled Kathryn. Then, with explosive power and deafening noise, lightning struck off to her right. She staggered to catch her balance. With the lightning's flash, thunder shook the ground. She crouched down in the wet, hiding her head.

She felt a strong tug on the rope, let go and watched it snake away in the snow and disappear in the semi-darkness. *I have to get in. Kathryn, you have to save yourself. Eat the dogs if you get hungry, Jane Mary, you always said that's what they're for.*

Jane Mary was knocked to her knees by the lightning blast. As she fell forward, she tugged the rope, felt it tighten then give. She lay flat until the thunder quit. The wet penetrated her light parka and pants, forcing her up. Lightning struck further away. *Not as bad this time. Storm's moving off. First strike must have hit the school.* She crouched, got her bearings and marked a line in the snow toward where the lightning struck. *It came from over there. The rope... I'm still close, pull in the slack. I felt it tighten when I fell ... probably sticking to the snow.* She pulled the rope in, carefully winding it around her hand and elbow. *I thought I went out farther than ...* She wound five more pulls and stopped. *Stupid! Kathryn let go. She must have. I've pulled in maybe thirty feet ... Dogs! Yelping. Over there. I'll mark this spot and lay the rope out to get back to it.* She wound the rest of the rope around her hand and elbow. *Funny, she laughed loudly, challenging the still air and falling snow. Taikuu (thank you). Maybe Kathryn got hit by the lightning. Wahoo, that would be the perfect solution. Dogs are close. Must be caught on something.*

She stamped a circle in the slush and re-marked the direction to the first lightning strike. *I can get back here with the dogs and follow this line to the school.*

### C. Descry

Kathryn noted the clouds boiling in the sky overhead and turned toward the building. *I knew not to get too far from it. I always think and plan and it turns out right. Snow's over. I'm wet. I've got to go in. Jane Mary can see her way. She doesn't need me to be a post anymore.*

Kathryn turned as a crackling sound filled the air. *What the hell is that? What's glimmering? My God, chunks of ice. Run!*

She ducked low and pulled herself under the building. Ice knives cut the calves of her legs as she pulled them in. She screamed in pain. The crackling turned to ear-shattering reports as super-cooled air froze everything in its path. It was over in less than a minute.

*Clothing frozen ... blood! The backs of my legs are bleeding. Frozen blood. My hands and face ... frostbite. I can't feel the cold. Got to get in. Don't go out there. The hatch ... can't get to it. Got to...*

The others took the dogs inside while it was still snowing. Carl Junior went in, got dry clothes, and was on his way to find Jane Mary when lightening struck down by the river. *Way across the river, due south*, he thought. He heard the crackling and dove under the rotten porch.

When the ice fell, he heard Kathryn scream. *She's close. Maybe under the building across from here. Where's Mom? It's like before, everything will freeze.* He curled into a ball with seconds to spare.

*Face and hands... stay under cover, it's not over. When the noise stops ... metal screaming ... everything's is frozen. Where are they?*

"Kathryn? Kathryn? Do you hear me? Mom? Anybody?"

"Here."

"It's too dark to see you. Make noise. That you, Kathryn?"

"I'm hurt. Frozen. Here. Over here."

"I'm crawling. Keep talking. Where are you?"

"I'm dying. I can't move. I'm... Help me."

“Mom? Jane Mary? Is she with you?”

*If I tell him she's out there he'll go for her.*

“Answer me. Is she with you?”

“Help, I can't make it much longer. Help me.”

“I'm almost there. I see your outline against the light.”

“I'm frozen here. Frozen to the ground. I can't do anything.”

“Okay, I've got you. I'll pull you free, it might hurt. Brace yourself. You're legs are bleeding ... wet clothes ... blood ... that's why you're stuck. We can crawl through the hatch. I have to drag you.”

“What the hell is that?” Denoyer paced the library, assuming the worst, not knowing how to rescue the three caught out.

“Someone tapping. I hear... Come on Carl,” Debra grabbed him by the arm, “it's coming from the trap door to under the school.”

“Her face and hands are blistered, so are yours, Carl Junior. Your feet are frostbit, not as bad as hers, but you can't walk. Here, let me put grease on you too,” Debra spoke softly though she knew nothing would wake Kathryn.

“Wake her up! She has to tell us where Mom is. She's not hurt that bad. The cold hit but we were under the school. Mom didn't have cover.”

Denoyer pulled his heavy outer parka over his head. “If it's like the last time, the super-cooled air hits and then disperses. It's cold out there, but nothing we're not used to. Carl Junior, you can't go out there with me.” He looked around, searching the faces of the ten year olds. “Tommy, get dressed.”

“I can do it, Dad. Let me go too,” Jan grabbed his parkas and started dressing. “We're eleven. Old enough.”

“Okay. Jan and Tommy, you'll go with me.” He paused, “Let's go get Jane Mary and the dogs.”

“Don't risk ... don't take any risks, Carl. We can't lose anyone else. Louis, Madonna, Jane and Mary... They couldn't

C. Descry

have survived out there..." Tears streamed down Debra's face, "Could they?"

"Look Debra, they would have turned the boat over when the wet storm hit. It would have been covered with snow, protecting them from the freeze. If they had air ... they would know to punch a hole through the ice to get air ... they survived. When I get Jane Mary and the dogs back here, we can go down to the barge with a bunch of rags, soak them in oil, and light a smudge fire. They'll see the smoke."

"Carl, take a fire axe. You have to break through ice to get..."

"She knows how to survive, Debra. There's a pile of insulated pipe sections out in that direction. Let's go boys."

Debra went to the door and closed it after them. The corridor air was so cold it created a cloud in the library when it hit the moist air. *If it were only light out. This damned dark. I can't stand it. We'll die here in the dark. Oh my God, it's over for us. All we have done ... all the children, we're dead. It's so unfair. These children, why did we bring them into this horrible world? What were we thinking? Oh Louis, if you are gone... I can't love the others... not if they have to die.*

*Carl Junior is asleep. Kathryn ... why her? Jane Mary counted on her ... what did she do? Why did she get shelter and not Jane Mary?*

"Listen to me. I can't see very good anymore. You boys will have to be my eyes. The sky is clearing, we'll have some starlight soon. Careful, the ice may not support our weight. Jan take this axe and make marks we can follow back here. Understand? Make a trail as we go. Tommy, you lead. Jan you go next, marking the trail. I'll be behind you about twenty feet to make sure we aren't going in circles. Judging from the building, we should head that way. I'll tell you left or right."

*The ice is rough, like walking on gravel. I thought it would be glazed, like before. The slush is filled with hail... it froze so*

*suddenly nothing settled. I can't see except close.* "Jan, a little to your left."

"Hey, stop!" Denoyer closed the distance between them until he could be heard. "We've gone too far. She wouldn't have come out this far. We have to go back on our trail about one hundred-fifty feet and set a new course. I think we should go to our left."

"Why go back, Dad?" Tommy was ready to head left.

"Because we need to ... don't ask. Just trust me. It won't take long."

"Now, we veer left. Tommy, make a big mark here."

"Dad, you don't have to yell. It just got so quiet out here it's spooky."

"Right, Sorry. Jan, head out at this angle." He turned Jan by the shoulders and pointed him. "Keep your eyes open for... Well, you know."

Jan focused ahead and planted his feet, getting his balance. Ready to lead again. "Dad, I can see more now. I can see a ways, anyway."

*Damn, where would she go? The stack of pipe is somewhere out here. The dogs... We've gone too far again.* "Hey guys, stop!" He closed the distance and stood with them. "We need to yell for them. The dogs will hear. Jane Mary will know we're here and come out. Okay? As loud as you can, yell 'Jane Mary'."

"Again."

"Okay, one more time, then Listen."

"Nothing. Okay, we go back to the junction and take a new course."

"Dad, I see her. Look, over there! She must have heard us yell. She's over there, see?" Jan's voice was pitched with excitement.

"Look Dad," Her arms are up, she's...waving? Dad, she must have heard us."

"Don't run. Tommy, mark our trail. Is that her? I think ... I see her now."



C. Descry

“Jane Mary, over here. We’re over here.” Jan’s voice cut through the cold, as he ran to her.

“Dad, she can’t move!”

Denoyer closed the distance and stood next to Jan and Tommy.

*Oh my God, she’s frozen solid. Her parka is cut... shredded .. the ice! She’s protecting her head ... was, when the cold hit. It froze her in place. She must have been wet, encrusted with ice, blood. Couldn’t find cover. Like a statue.*

“Dad, Jane Mary is dead! She’s dead. Dad, do something. Hurry. Hurry, help her.” Tommy tried to hug her. “Dad, her face! Look!”

*What the hell was she thinking? The rope is coiled around her shoulder. I should have been attached to Kathryn. What was she trying to do? Damn you, Jane Mary. How could you be so dumb? How could you forget all you know? What the hell ... the dogs?*

“Boys, get it together. She’s dead.” He used the hardest voice he could muster, in spite of his grief. “We’ll have time to deal with it. Not now! Tommy, get yourself together. We don’t want to die out here. Jan, stop staring at her and come here.”

*They’re so young. How can they know? How can they cope with this. We’ve got to see if the dogs survived. We need them. Then ...*

“Guys, she was out here without the rope to get back. She must have known where the dogs are. We’ve got to find them if we can. Then, we’ll get her free and take her home.”

“The dogs are here, Dad. Look over there.” Tommy pointed to bulges under the frozen slush. “See, one, two, and the other two are together.”

“They would curl-up and wait out the storm.” Denoyer agreed.

“Are they alive under there? I mean if they didn’t freeze?”

“Check. Careful, use the axe, but be gentle.”

“Dead.” He broke the ice cocoons. “They’re dead too. The falling ice and freeze killed them too. It killed them.” He

sobbed, trying to be strong, be a man, but his anguish could not be controlled, "I hate this place. We all hate it. Dad, can't we leave? Kathryn says its warm down below, and it's only dark at night. I don't want to stay here. Why Jane Mary? Why? That's what I don't understand. All she was doing was trying to save our dumb, stupid dogs."

## Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

*Debra tried not to wake, caught in the realization of her nightmare. He can't lead us. He lost his strength. He got old and even if he wants to, he can't.*

Debra stood on a chair and looked out the long horizontal window over the check-in desk. *The sun stays up longer now. The pink glow of a sunrise that will never become day lights the ice field that leads west to the Sea. They're out there, probably dead. Louis. Damn you Louis, I know you tried, but ... it's been too long now. Two weeks. No way you could have survived. Everything ... everyone who goes West disappears. What will we do now?* She turned, balancing on the chair, and studied her family in the smoky light of the wick lamps.

*We were twenty-one hearty souls when we landed here. Now, we've lost Jane Mary, Louis, Jane, Mary and Madonna. Carl Junior's toes had to come off. He'll always have a hard time walking. He can't accept Jane Mary's death. He blames Carl, thinks he sent her to her death. Blames Kathryn, blames everyone, mostly himself.*

*Kathryn can do okay without her pinky finger and the dead places on her nose and forehead will eventually fill in. She lost her milk. I don't have enough, luckily July and August are old enough to wean. Sarah is little for her age, not healthy like them, and she's a whole year older. I can feed her, but not the others.* She stepped down and went over to Denoyer, cupping his head and then

letting her hand slide to his shoulder. He looked up, smiled a sad, weak smile, and went back to patching harness. *Carl can't seem to get his strength back. He won't admit Louis is lost. He won't hold Kathryn responsible for letting Jane Mary take the rope away from her and go for the dogs. He's probably right. The freeze came so fast, there was nothing anybody could do.*

"Carl, can we go with the dogs we have?"

"I can put outriggers on the sled. We can push and help the dogs."

"But three of them are still pups."

"So, they'll be big enough by the freeze up. I'm praying we'll have enough snow, early."

"But not like these last two years, right? What about..."

"Food?" He knew her well.

"We have some gas that hasn't turned. Jane Mary put some kind of stabilizer in it. We can go up river when the caribou migrate. Jane Mary taught the kids how to snare and fish. If we run out of gas, it won't matter. We won't need the motors if we go overland. Louis Giddings made a one-man overland trek. Over ninety miles, and that was in summer. We can make it on the snow and ice with less trouble than he had. I'm pretty sure we'll be prepared if the going gets tough."

"We need to get the hell out of here. Nobody likes it up here, because, thank God, Kathryn filled their heads with visions of light and warmth. Jane Mary would have to agree. Can we make it without her?"

He gave her a inquisitive look. "You mean we have a choice? We have to meet up with Louis and the girls. We have to get to the Yukon River ... as far as Nome. We don't have a choice."

"What if it's more than 240 miles?"

"It is. That's a straight line, like an airplane flies. We have to follow the terrain. I found topo maps. We sure could have used the GPS, but I guess it's lost too. We only have to average twenty miles a day."

### C. Descry

"I can't be pregnant. Neither can Kathryn. I don't ... I won't bring another life into this world until I know we can survive."

"I never planned on taking pregnant women across the ice. You need to have all your strength. I need help building sleds. The little ones can be safe and protected from the cold. The rest of us walk, push and pull."

"But Carl...?" Debra stared at him thinking, *are you all right now? Have you recovered? Will you go away again when things get tough? Can I count on you to continue getting stronger? How are you feeling?*

He looked down, thought a moment and turned so he didn't have to face her. "As you can see, I'm all right. I know we have to get out of here. I'm getting my strength back. I'm..."

"I know you are. What I mean is ... well, Carl Junior can't help much. Deno thinks Carl Junior will hurt Kathryn. Notice how he stays between them? He doesn't have Carl junior's strength, but he stays there to protect her. Carl Junior hasn't been the same since we lost Jane Mary, and Kathryn is acting so strange. The only help you will have is from me and maybe Deno and the older kids. Is that enough?"

"What are our options? Enough is what we have."

Kathryn looked around, making sure everyone was asleep. She pulled her small case from under the blanket. *I'm coming. Don't you know I think about you even though I haven't seen you in a while. Oh Dolly, you have to know what I've gone through. Don't stare at me that way! I've been through a lot you can't imagine. Why are you staring? I know I look bad. You would too if you had to ... don't stare at me! You're still so beautiful. What about me? What about ...? She shook Dolly until her wig fell off. See? See what it's like? Don't just stare at me, I'm not ugly.* She held Dolly in her left hand and with her right, swung the doll's arm out. Grasping the tiny hand, she raised it to her mouth and bit off the little finger. *There, you see what it's like? You think you can*

*survive up here and stay beautiful. You think you're not me?* Kathryn raised the doll and bit off three toes, spitting the plastic pieces out on the hides. *Now you know. Now you're me, really me.* She cradled the doll against her sagging breast before lovingly placing her back in the case and snapping the latches.

Carl Junior lay watching Kathryn, as he did most of the time. He feigned sleep as she took the doll out of the case, shook it and bit it. In the smoky light of the oil lamps, he studied her face as it contorted and then relaxed in the silly grin of madness. *You left her out there. It should have been you. I know she would never have taken the rope from you. You let it go. She had no way back. You should be dead.*

Denoyer awoke. *Same dream, always the same since the storm. It won't happen. We're dead out here, the walking dead who go on and on even though there is nothing to go to, and no way to get there. We should stay here and die in comfort. Out there, in the depths of winter blackness, freezing, we can't survive. The critical mass we needed is gone, dead as we should all be. Jane Mary, do you know how lucky you are? Peace, that's what we need. There is no hope. I can lead them to their deaths or ... we die here. It would be easy to help them find peace. I'm the leader, leading toward death either way I choose. What's wrong with the easy way?*

Debra tried not to wake, caught in the realization of her nightmare. *He can't lead us. He lost his strength. He got old and even if he wants to, he can't. That leaves me. I don't have the strength. Can't do it alone. There is no way I would know what to do. And besides, if we got there, it's still too far north. It's not that different. Long dark winters. Cold, always cold, and then too hot and the awful insects. We'd have to camp every night out on the tundra. Make a camp without strong people to put it up? No. We can't go. We are trapped here. There is something out there. Something that kills. Killed our friends. Now Louis and the girls.*

C. Descry

*It's out there and it will kill us. If we go. If we ... We can't go. We might survive here, we will die out there. Death either way, so why fight it?*

Jan and Tommy huddled together, whispering. "Tommy, what's wrong with them? They all act like they're poisoned or something."

"Yeah, like they don't care about anything. Do you suppose it's the air in here? I'm used to the stink, but maybe the oil in the lamps and heaters is bad?"

"Could be. But ... it's like Dad is going back into his dreams. And Debra is sad. She said she knows Louis is dead. Deno stays near Carl Junior. I don't know why."

"Well, Carl Junior can't walk."

"Debra says he can. I heard her tell him. All he lost were some toes."

"Yeah but, imagine how much that hurt."

"Deno used to be with us."

"I think he's protecting Kathryn."

"What's wrong with her?"

"We have to let fresh air in. Something is poisoning us."

"Dad. Dad? Look, I think ... Tommy and I think we need to let fresh air in. We think the air is bad, we're being poisoned."

Denoyer shook his head, sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. "Stinks, I guess. Cover the little ones before you do." He turned and lay on his side facing the wall.

"Cover everybody up! Everybody, we're opening the door. We need fresh air."

"Okay, but the air isn't moving," Jan said. "We should open the outside doors and let air in."

"What's it like outside? Day or night?" Jan hit the panic bars and threw his shoulder to the door.

"Maybe... I don't know. There's a pink glow over there. I'd guess afternoon, but it could be... What the hell is that?"

Tommy looked where Jan was staring. “Too dark to tell. It’s moving. I think.”

“It is! It’s them!”



## Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

*He came in, got his pack, told me he'd get even one day, and stormed out like the rude, ill-mannered brat he is.*

“Dad, remember that story Jane Mary told about hunting hibernating bears?”

Denoyer shook his head. “Can’t say I do.”

“They sent one man into the den and he pushed the bear out? That story?”

“That was a joke. She was pulling your leg.”

“She said a hibernating bear won’t attack you in its own den. Remember?”

“So...? You believed her?”

“When we felt the wind switch from the south, we knew we were in trouble. Jane spotted a vent hole in the side of a ridge. Madonna and I opened it and I went in.”

“A den? A big brown’s den?”

“I was going to shoot it, it was full grown. You should have seen the size of its head ... giant teeth and claws, but I didn’t want to in the den, what with my ears and all. So, I cut the bear’s throat. It came awake and tried to get up. I sat on it. It didn’t know what was happening, lack of blood to the brain I think. It bled out. That’s all there was to it.”

Debra sat as close to him as she could, arm locked inside his.

“We got some of our gear, turned over the boat-sled, and got into the den before the wet snow covered everything. There was a terrible noise, and everything outside froze. I chipped an air hole, but ... well, we were trapped there. We could tell it was too cold outside to do anything. Besides, when I did chip my way out with my knife, the boat-sled was frozen under and we didn't have tools to break through the ice. It was maybe the sixteenth day when we finally got out. We couldn't head home, not until we got the boat free. We had food and shelter. We waited. We finally got the boat out and it only took a day to come home. We brought fat and meat we had left. The hide was full of bug holes, right Jane?”

“The den was big enough,” Jane and Madonna stood arm-in-arm, surrounded by children. “We got enough of our stuff off the sled before we went in. We were out of food...”

“Didn't have any food left. We knew from the GPS thingy we were only a day from home,” Mary hugged Tommy. Emil cuddled in her lap. “There is no sea over there. We never found the sea.”

“We think we found Kotzebue,” Madonna injected.

Mary looked at Denoyer. “Dad, we did. At least we found a bunch of stuff ... a long strip of broken black stuff, long like the runway here.”

Denoyer leaned forward. “Asphalt? You mean paving?”

“Maybe. It was black and full of gravel. Some of it had white stripes on it. It was all wrinkled and jammed up, hard to tell.”

“No buildings?” Kathryn moved next to Deno and leaned away from Carl Junior. Madonna moved to be close to her.

“None. No nothing, except maybe the top of a buried car. It was a round metal thing buried in the ash, only the ash there turned hard.”

“You can cut it though,” Jane said. “It's like sorta hard sandy stuff.”

“Tufa,” Denoyer answered. “It's called volcanic tufa.”

*C. Descry*

“Oh. Well, if it was the top of a car you’d have to do a lot of digging to see.”

“No sea?” Kathryn was puzzled. “What do you mean ‘no sea.’ Are you sure you went far enough?”

“We went along the GPS path until we hit the hills. They started not far from the place it said was Kotzebue. The rock was sharp and we couldn’t go further without cutting our mukluks and feet. Besides, Louis and we thought the hills were new. There were still hot spots and jets of steam. No snow or ice on them.” Mary shrugged and looked at Kathryn. “We went up and down and never saw any signs of water.”

“Hills,” Denoyer asked. “How high?”

Madonna stood. “High Dad. And in the distance it looked like a mountain volcano, but we couldn’t see through the smoke and fog... and there were constant earthquakes, that’s what you call them. Rumbling and the ground shook.”

“Except once or twice when the clouds lifted a little and we could see a ways,” Louis added. “Then we spent a day going north, then a day back and a day going south. Nothing. Then we walked a day back, picked up the sled and started home.”

“Debra squeezed his arm. “You left the boat-sled?” By the way, how did it work?”

“Mom, there was no one out there. I mean no one and no thing. We took what we needed and walked up and down in front of the hills.”

“And the sled? Should we make more?”

“Really good. Easy to pull. The brake worked okay, even on ice. If we had of gone over the rocks, it would have torn out the bottom. Works on snow or water. Why, you thinking of making more of them?”

Tommy stood, and turned facing Mary. “Wasn’t it dark in the bear’s den? What did you do for water?”

“Tommy, that nice ‘ol bear gave us fat for light and with the light, we melted snow for water. It was easy.”

“Easy? I wish I could have gone.”

Denoyer stood, leaning on a piece of electrical pipe Debra had scavenged for him. "You will Tommy. We all will. Next fall we're going south."

Debra sat with Jane and Mary. *We didn't lose Jane Mary, Jane is her spitting image, hair, square face, breasts and all. Mary is built like me, but stronger. Her hair is fine like mine, her face a long oval like Carl's. Her breasts are bigger than mine and she's only reaching puberty. Madonna doesn't take after any of us.* "Okay, what is it you don't want the others to know?"

Jane smiled and leaned against Mary. "Guess what, Debra, we're pregnant. So is Madonna."

Debra sat, stunned.

"And Louis is the father, Mom."

"You mean ... Your brother, Mary?"

Jane sensed a problem they hadn't considered. "Well, he's my brother too. We're all brothers and sisters."

Debra didn't know what to say. *We talked to them about this. We... They weren't supposed to... There was no way to prevent it.* "Well, when do you want to announce the good news?"

"What if...? You heard Dad. He doesn't want little babies on the trip south. By September we'll have three."

"What choice does he have?" *That sounds familiar. What choice do we have about anything.*

"Carl," Kathryn pulled close to him and whispered. "I need you to do something about Carl Junior. He stares. He never lets me alone. He's possessed. He thinks I could have saved Jane Mary. She made him hate me and now he's going to do something ... oh I don't know, something bad."

"I never could communicate with him. I've tried. I'm aware he glares at you. He's not pulling his weight. Now he argues with Louis over every little thing. I could talk to him..." He pulled back so he could focus on her face. "What do you think I should do? I mean I'm ... I'm...."

“Well, I see these things so much clearer than all of you. He’s a problem. If he can’t contribute then ... well, you know. He has to go before he hurts me or...”

“Kath, I’ll ask Debra what she can do. I don’t think he will hurt you.”

“Debra? All she cares about is making you think she’s here to serve you. Don’t be fooled, Carl. She’ll say whatever she thinks you want to hear.”

“Does it ever end with you, Kathryn? You’re like one of those dolls where you pull the string and it has about three lines it repeats. What possible good comes out of what you say?”

“Good? Is our survival good? I see things. I have insights into things no one else knows. I have gifts only a person with my breeding and upbringing has. What good? I have the information that will save us. I’m the only one who truly loves and understands you. I’m the only one you can trust.”

Denoyer motioned for Debra to follow him behind the stacks and explained the dilemma. “What should I do?”

“We have a family meeting. All of us. We confront Carl Junior. We each tell him we support him and then give him straight feedback on how he’s acting. We get him to say what’s bothering him ... get it all out in the open. Then we see if he is willing to change.”

“He won’t sit still for it. You know him.”

“Carl, honey, you’re his father. You tell him in no uncertain terms... You have to be strong, like you ... are.”

“What can I say? Debra, he doesn’t listen to me.”

“You say what we all want to hear from you. I love you Son, and we need you.”

“Yeah, I guess. If that doesn’t work?”

“Denoyer, who needs his shit? He has to know, it’s our way or the...”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have a highway, Debra?”

“Dad, he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t even try.” Louis stood facing Denoyer, hands balled in fists, staring over the heads of younger hunters.

“Well, for now, just stay away from him. Jane Mary had a streak like that. He got it from her. Louis, we all saw in the meeting, he just doesn’t get it. Nothing we say or do will change that. He doesn’t have the capacity or something. He, well, he bulldozes along his own narrow path.”

“But he can’t hunt alone. We’ll lose the boat and rifle. Someone has to go with him. No one wants to. No one will. We’re all a little afraid of him. Dad, don’t let him go alone. You wouldn’t let me go by myself. You wouldn’t...”

“I get the point. He goes with a group or he stays here. I’ll tell him.”

“So what did whiny little Louis tell you, Dad. What did he come crying to you about?”

“The issue isn’t Louis, the issue is you can not go hunting alone. None of us go it alone. You go with a group or stay here.”

“Like hell. I’m Eskimo. I do what I like. You are the one who let my mother go out there and die. You and Kathryn. Do you think I don’t know?”

“You’re no more Eskimo than Jane or any of the others Jane Mary had. You want to be Eskimo, then go out there and hunt and fish and survive like they did. No rifle. No boat. Even they went in groups. Carl Junior, you heard what I said. You go, you go with them.”

“Sure, and who is in charge? They want Louis. I don’t.” He turned and ran toward the building. Denoyer, shaking his head, watched him go. *Stupid little boy, there is something wrong in your head. You’re not part of us, then ... you will be gone. Shit, I’m supposed to love him? I don’t have any feeling for him. First born? I never gave a damn about Jane Mary. Now I know why. Inflexible. Tunnel vision. Kathryn pointed that out. Debra knows. Why am I the one who has to deal with him?*

*C. Descry*

“Is he coming?” Louis steadied the boat, waiting.

“I’ll help you push off. Two things, I know I’ve said it before, watch for bears, and bring back caribou if you have to drag them behind the boat. You’ll be fine.”

“What was that all about?” Kathryn was up, cooking on the diesel stove. She had a blanket around her shoulders to protect bare skin from the grease splatter.

“What?”

“He came in, got his pack, told me he’d get even one day, and stormed out like the rude, ill-mannered brat he is.”

“Carl Junior? You mean... Carl...?”

“Who else would act that way? His pack was heavy. I think he planned this, wanting to go alone and all. His stuff is gone, all of it. Did he go with the others? He didn’t, did he.”

Denoyer turned and ran from the building. As he neared the water he could see both boats were gone. Upriver, he made out two objects. “Hey kids,” they had gathered there waiting for Louis’s boat to depart, and had seen Carl Junior jump in the boat and leave. “What do you see up there?” He pointed at the receding boats. “My eyes aren’t good enough to see what they are doing.”

“Dad,” Jan answered, “Carl Junior is racing Louis. He passed him and is way ahead.”

## Chapter THIRTY-SIX

*Babies having babies. At least Kathryn and Debra aren't pregnant. First time in how many years? Too many, fourteen, sixteen?*

"September," Louis stood at the door to the school building looking out across the water-logged tundra, north toward the Brooks Range. "Damn, I never thought we'd get through another hot, muggy, bug-infested summer. Look out there," he pointed and helped Tommy and two smaller boys see where he was pointing. "Green as far as you can see. Dad says that's what it's like down below, only it's land, not tundra. Land we can walk on. Dirt with trees. He says we hit the taiga - that means forest, he told me - after only a few weeks going. We'll have wood, all we want. And maybe other people. I can't wait."

"He said only if you got enough caribou. I heard him." Tommy said shaking his finger.

"Yeah, and Deno and I already brought in more than the women can butcher. We're going out again, maybe two times."

"And Carl Junior," Jan's voice indicated a question hidden in a statement, "will come back with a bunch."

Louis looked at him; evaluated his sincerity. "Jan, I know you were his friend and cared about him. I hope so too, but... Well, you know he wants to be out on his own. You know he... Well, I hope he comes home with a boatload of fat caribou."



### C. Descry

Denoyer awoke to screams. *Goddamn it to hell. What? Did he impregnate them all at the same time? Three girls in labor? What the hell am I supposed to do? Babies having babies. At least Kathryn and Debra aren't pregnant. First time in how many years? Too many, fourteen, sixteen? Never thought we'd get this far. My mind is willing, but... don't have much time. I've got to find out if everything is gone down below. Got to before the last shell is used. Before we re-enter the stone age. Nome, I'll know in Nome.*

“Dad, south of here there is no river, we all know that now. It's flat. It's a lake now. Didn't you say we had to cross tundra?”

“It's the backup water from the Wikasel. I have known for sure since you told me about the hills where the Chukchi Sea used to be. The water can't get out. We're going to be able to cross a lake that filled the glaciated lowlands. We will still need to haul over ridges – depends on how high the water is. Easier going than I had imagined. We will make better time.”

“Okay Dad,” Louis said, “you showed us on the map. Nome is south, north of the end of the river. The rivers all run west, right? There are lots of ridges to cross and we can't if they aren't covered with snow. The Yukon is a big river. What if it's blocked like the Wikasel?”

“If it is,” he pulled the bear fur fringe tighter around his face, “we'll have to keep going east. If there's a lake all the way, we can make maybe forty miles a day. But maybe not. We'll be held up by storms. The Yukon River cuts through the forests. The lake may be impossible to cross because of the trees.”

“Then what?”

“Louis, the question is, ‘what then?’ We'll figure it out. Probably have to turn East. For now, we will follow drainages, cross the divide and then keeping the Shekiluks Mountains and the Zane Hills on our left, we go over ridges and hills until we see Wolf Mountain. Look, here it is on the GPS screen. Then we hit the Yukon River and... well, we go west or east.

Depends on what happened to the Chukchi Sea and if the Yukon is flowing. Finish packing, we'll get an early start."

"Debra," Deno said as he helped pack hides around the kids in the sledboat, "by my reckoning, and I checked the GPS, second day we crossed the Arctic Circle. Each day the sun will seem to stand still, not set, because we're moving south of the Tropic of Cancer. A little, not much, but we will notice it because it will never get completely dark for twenty-four hours down here. That's right isn't it? Isn't that what we learned?"

"No. Not right. Deno, the Earth's North Pole is still tipped away from the sun until Winter Solstice, which is soon. Then it will start tipping back toward the sun and by March 21, the sunlight will hit directly into the equator. We will have equal night and day. We have to wait until a month after Winter Solstice before we see the sun again, would, even if we were in Anchorage."

"Oh damn! I told the kids wrong. They think we won't have darkness this winter. I guess I have to tell them."

"Tell them it will be totally dark, but that the length of time the darkness covers us is shorter the further south we go. They'll like that."

"Carl, if we don't have a storm we'll make it to the Yukon River sooner than we thought. All we feared about traveling cross-country was wrong. If the Yukon's not damned, we'll know it, right?" She spoke so everyone in the shelter could hear.

"I thought the forest would be..."

She interrupted. "Carl, speak so everyone can hear. They need to hear what we talk about."

"Okay. Everyone can hear me, we're almost on top of each other. I was saying I didn't expect the forest to be burned-out. This whole area was incinerated. I think the lakes formed by the Wikasel and Yukon have joined. Where we were, on the Whitefish, was an area that wasn't glaciated in the last ice age.

It was part of a land bridge between Asia and Alaska called Beringia. This land to the south where this lake is forming was glaciated ... you know, cut-out and lower. I don't think the Yukon River is a river anymore. Maybe up to the east someplace, but not here this close to the old coast."

"Then we have to change our plan?" Louis asked.

"I'm thinking about that. That's why I said we might have to go east until we come to the end of the lake. Then follow the Yukon into the interior. I'm hoping the interior survived incineration. It had to or there wouldn't be any animals. Remember Mister Moose? We know animals survived and now we know the new lake pushed him our way. Now we know why the caribou weren't around Whitefish. Why there were so many bears in that area. I think I know why the ice storms hit us so hard. All that is connected."

"So we should start angling east now?" Kathryn's voice was muffled by blankets and hides. "I've thought this thing through. We shouldn't go into the interior. What are you thinking, go into Canada? That's a foreign country. I see this thing so clearly, we don't want to be strangers in another land, we have to go South."

"Well, Kathryn, everybody, I said I was thinking. Of course we can keep heading south until we come to the end of this lake. But then we hit mountains. We can't go over them. We go to the coast or to where the pipeline went or the Alaska Highway. That's a long way. Fairbanks is where we would head."

"And then what?" Deno's voice came from the foot of the tent.

"We see if the forest is standing. If it is, we see if we can get through it on the Yukon. If it's dammed, we head east until break-up. Then, we camp for the summer."

"You mean if we find food. One sure thing, there's nothing out here on the lake," Debra noted.

“And we can’t survive on fish. The lake is too new to have enough fish. And there’s no sea for the fish to come from. Like our river, right Dad?” Jan, who had always been ignored because he was physically weak and slow to comprehend, looked at Denoyer for approval.

“Right, Jan. I’m glad you understand about the fish.”

“So what are we going to do?” Jane asked.

“I’m considering the options. I think we’ll keep going the way we are until we know more.”

“Dad, if you don’t know... I mean if you ...?”

Debra felt Jane’s fear. “Jane – everybody - this is a good lesson. We don’t make decisions until we have enough information. What Dad is saying is that he is gathering information. Information will lead us.”

“I think it’s been about ... how many days?” Louis asked.

Deno shrugged. “We have traveled thirty-eight times. We had to wait out three storms. Say, nine or ten days. Dad says we make maybe ten to fifteen miles a day. When he thought forty, he wasn’t thinking of the babies or two sledboats and a wooden sled, or that four people would ride most of the time, or that he would hurt himself and have to ride, or there were so many ridges to go around.”

“Yeah, even so, we’ve gone at least 300 miles. According to the GPS we’re past where the Yukon River was. At least we know not to look for Nome.”

“Yeah,” Louis added, “this is fresh water ice. Yukon water. So where did all the water in the Bering Sea go? It had to go somewhere...” He didn’t expect an answer.

“How should I know? All I know for sure is we’re reaching the end of the lake. The wolves? They wouldn’t be out here if we aren’t near land.”

“They think we’re food. They’re starving I think.” Mary held both babies while Madonna wiped-down the third.

“Naw, if they were, they would still be out there. They left.”

C. Descry

"Listen! They didn't leave. Listen to the dogs. They're scared." Louis got up, his weight gently rocking the sledboat, pulled on his parka and checked his rifle. He fingered the safety. It was on.

"Where are you going, Son?" Denoyer asked.

"Dad, sorry if I woke you. Is your hip any better?"

"Not really. I know how hard it is to have my weight in the sled."

"I didn't notice. You hear the dogs?"

"Wolves followed us all day. I had several clear shots, but we need our bullets."

"I'll check outside. The wind let up a little. I hope there's enough light to see." He crouched low and crawled through the small opening and stepped to the ice. *The wind's blowing hard. No starlight. It's difficult to see anything but faint shapes, dark against the ice, blowing snow.* He followed their noise into a circle of dogs. *They've stopped their yapping and fear-filled howls, but not their whining; anticipation. The wolves intrigue them and scare them. They assume I brought food. Okay, what do I do now? I wish I could see further.*

The growl was guttural, wet, a rattle deep in a carnivore throat; full of threat and terror. He clicked off the safety, raised the rifle waist-high, turned to face the threat, and saw wolves milling among the dogs. The threat come from a wolf sneaking up on his back. *Jeeze, he's big! Dogs are tied, but they're wolves too. I'm... The wolf is going to spring.*

Denoyer sat up in the dark. "He shouldn't be out there alone. If I could walk... Deno, get out there and help him."

"I'm almost dressed, Dad."

"The howling stopped. Listen! Louis must be calming them."

"Deno, I agree," Kathryn's shrill voice cut through the dark. "There's no need for you to go out now. Louis has it under control. He'll come get help if he needs it. You shouldn't go out there." *Let Louis take the risks.*

"I'm going. I'll see what's up out there."

The sound of the whump of a bullet hitting flesh and shot cut through the darkness as Deno came to his feet outside the tent. "Louis? I can't see a damn thing. Louis?"

The dogs went wild, he could hear them fighting each other. Several dogs ran past him. "Louis, some dogs are loose. Are you all right?"

"Stay put, Deno. Those weren't dogs. Wolves were here. I killed a big one, hope it was the alpha male."

"It's so damn dark I can't see if we're missing any dogs," Louis said. "Look over here, I think ... yeah, the collar is here. This one's missing."

"Think they took it? Uh oh, here's another collar."

"No, probably bitches. Went with them. Let's pull the wolf away from our dogs. Here, give me an hand."

"Louis, listen. The wolves are right out there. Not far. That's why the dogs won't settle down. What should we do?"

"Got to make sure the rest are tied. You start right, I'll start left. Careful, they want loose."

"Jane Mary would have known what to do," Deno could barely see in the dim lamplight, "we've got a real problem. The wolves come right in and they aren't afraid of us."

"Did you tell Louis to keep his back to the tent?"

"He knew that, Dad. You can't see out there. The wolves are circling around. The one he killed was coming at his back."

"They'll get our wolves, all of them." Kathryn's voice cut into them. "I told you they were wolves. Why are you surprised they want to be with the pack? They called the others in here, just hoping they could get the children. If you had listened to me when Jane Mary brought them from the school..."

"Kathryn, this is not the time to be stupid and make stupid observations even if you can't help it. Carl," Debra tried to change the subject, "I'm going out to back-up Louis. He's probably frozen. Should we shoot them?"

*C. Descry*

“We pulled the carcass of the one Louis shot out away from camp. If they’re starving, they’ll feed on it.”

If you shoot others, put them out for them,” Denoyer said.

“Dad, it’s so dark out there you can’t see them. We have to wait until the sky lightens. We have to wait. I’m going back out too, Louis expects me.”

Kathryn’s voice cut at them. “Keep them from coming into the tent. There are babies here. They’ll kill the children. I’ve warned you. I’ve been aware of this for a long time. It’s happening, just like I said.”

“I don’t think we can survive much longer exposed out here on the ice,” Debra told Denoyer as they prepared to de-camp. “We must be close to the end of the lake. If we could only see. Damn, I hate this time of year. The sky is beginning to glow. It’s mid-day.”

“We’re missing two dogs. That will slow us down. I’ll keep the wolves at bay. They have no fear of us, but they haven’t tried to come back into camp. Louis shot the alpha male, I’m sure of that. I’m watching for the alpha female. If I can kill her, that should help.”

“But they’re with us now. No way we can relax. They’ll attack us. They’ll get the dogs.”

“Debra, we can use fire. When we reach the forests we can have big campfires. Early man had the same problem with wolves.”

“Dad, look! There is some sort of wall. The lake ice ends at a wall.”

Denoyer pulled himself around on the hides and stared into the glowing occlusion.

“Looks like...” Louis’s warning cut him off.

“Stop! Everyone, stop! Look out for the ice.”

The dogs stopped as soon as they saw the buckled, frozen blocks of up-thrust ice. “Dad, we can’t get to the wall.”

“It’s a bluff, not a wall. Probably the edge of the Yukon River valley at the foothills of the Alaska Range. The GPS screen shows we passed over the Yukon River way back. What can you see?”

“We have to get closer. We can’t get the sleds over that mess. I’ll go ahead and see what’s there,” Louis yelled. “Deno, you and me. Let’s go.”

Jane, Mary and Madonna raised the blankets and peered out of the sledboat. “Kathryn,” Jane asked, “what happened?”

“We’re near the edge of the lake. The ice here looks like the river at break-up. We don’t know how to get through it. Louis and Deno went to look.”

Denoyer watched three wolves circling about fifteen yards away. He knew he had hit, maybe killed a female that seemed to be dominant. He wasn’t sure. The others were wary, but not afraid. “They’ll attack our dogs if they think they can,” he told Nate and Charlie. “Wait for Louis and Deno, then we’ll know how to get past this ice field.”

“Dad,” Deno said as he and Louis walked up to the sledboats. “Up a way is a crack frozen over. We can get to land there. But, the wall ... what did you call it? A bluff? Well, it’s steep and where we could see, the forest burned. Lots of trees dead and badly burned. And Dad, none are standing. They’re all on the ground like they were knocked down. They’re all black. They all point the same direction, East.”

“Wood. We need wood for the fires. There will be cores to burn. That’s good news. Okay, lead the way. The force of the storms came from the west. Maybe because they were on the ground some didn’t carbonize completely.”

“Okay,” Denoyer said. “We have enough sticks and firewood. Don’t bring in any more. With our backs to the bluff and fires out front we can keep the wolves out. Nate and Charlie, what did you find on top?”



### *C. Descry*

“Like Deno said, fire burned everything as far as we could see. Got too dark to go on. Fallen trees and stuff ... no way we could travel across that. Can't even walk.”

“Well, listen, everyone!” Debra raised her voice and got attention. “We were seeking information so we could decide which way to go. Now we know. Mary, you were worried about not knowing? Well, this is how decisions are made, with information.”

“So,” Mary put her hands out, palms up, “what did we learn?”

Tommy pushed his stick into the fire. “We have to go East. Dad, what's Fairbanks?”

Kathryn answered. “I told you about Fairbanks. It's on the Tanana River. Remember, I taught the Tanana is a branch of the Yukon? Remember the map we studied? Fairbanks is a big city.”

“I lived there,” Debra injected. “I had come from Fairbanks to fish on the Kobuk River. That's when we flew out and our plane barely made it to Whitefish. You know the story.”

“How long will it take to get there?” Nate asked.

“Well, if we get back on the lake, we can make good time. From the looks of this ice we'll probably have trouble getting onto the Tanana, but once we do, it is still maybe a month of travel if we make good time. One thing, and I know you will like this. We will be able to have fires. We'll stay near the edge of the lake and camp like now.” There was a cheer, clapping, laughter. “Oh, you like campfires, do you?”

“Carl, can you imagine? They never saw a campfire. I've never seen them so excited.”

“The wolves aren't,” Denoyer smiled. “I think our troubles are over. We can easily make the Tanana by break-up. Maybe further. There are lots of little towns along the river, although the water here is very deep and they may be drowned. Let's hope the fires never made it that far east,” he paused to think,

“but these river valleys seemed to funnel the force of the heat into the interior. If they didn’t, we’ll find out if we are alone or not.”

## Chapter THIRTY-SEVEN

*What do you kids see here? How would you describe what happened here? You've had a chance to look around, what have you learned?*

“Everything is easier,” Kathryn smiled down at the three babies she was tending while their mothers went out to set snares. “It gets light enough to see. Making camp is easy with poles. The fires keep the wolves away. Deno said animals are in the burned forest because there’s lots of new growth under the snow. They’re small, but we have meat. I told Carl we shouldn’t take the time to set snares and traps. No, he never sees the whole picture. We could be eating deer, but no, ‘We don’t have bullets to spare’. Same story, hundredth verse. I’ve told him we’ll get more in Fairbanks. He’s too stubborn to listen. Now you three will grow up and never have to know about the Arctic. You’ll never be trapped like I was. Sleep now, I’ll protect you. I was right about going to Fairbanks. I know what has to be done and I lead them, even though they hate me because I’m genetically superior.”

*Every kid has a stick, Denoyer thought. Well, I do too. How did we live without wood? . . . without fires?*

*There they are again. Two wolves watch us all the time. Maybe they take turns. No, Tommy may be right. Those are our dogs. Maybe...*

“Tommy, are you sure they’re our dogs?”

“Sure Dad. I know them.”

“Think we can get them in?”

“They hang out when we feed.”

“Okay, this time let’s put food out for them. They’re not starving, there’s food for wolves. But...”

“I know Dad, they like being fed. If we rope them, they’ll fight.”

“Maybe not. We’ll try.”

*Lightman lost his leg. Now I can't use mine. Hip hurts bad, maybe I cracked it? May be arthritis? Same result, I can't get around. Well, we're almost out of it. At this rate, we'll hit the Tanana soon. According to the GPS there is a hot spring near there. Went in one... good memories...so long ago. I'd like to soak for days. Debra went to one – may be that one – when she lived in Fairbanks. Heat will help my hip. Boys are doing fine. The forest here was flattened and burned, but it's not totally incinerated. Whatever happened, Fairbanks might still be there. We've survived! Thank God ... or fate.*

“Carl, how are we going to get over that?” Debra asked, staring ahead at a jumbled ice field clogged with jutting timber that seemed to run for miles.

“Swing out on the Yukon. Go above the junction. Should be easier there.”

“Can’t, I don’t think we can. The ice is clogged by tree trunks and limbs. The sleds can’t get over.”

“Have Louis find a way. It will be good to get off the Yukon. Once we left the lake, the Yukon is getting too rough to travel. I thought we would find the town of Tanana, but the GPS says we already went past it. It may be under us now.”

Debra waited until they were all eating. “The Tanana is locked-up. Seems much colder here. I thought there might be water flowing under the ice. Well, whatever, we start up tomorrow. First we pass a town on our right, according to the GPS, Coskakat. Just a river camp, I think that’s all it was, but we’ll learn a lot about how things made it through the Cut Off. On our left the GPS says we should see a gravel road. Look for it.

*C. Descry*

It follows the river to a hot springs. I was telling you about the hot springs around Fairbanks. Look for it tomorrow.”

“What if there’s people there?” A small voice under the blankets asked.

“We hope so. Might be Inuit people around here that survived. Eskimo. We may be too far east. Athabaskan people live, ‘er lived here. Different. Related to the Navajo and Apaches. Survived in these forests for thousands of years.” Denoyer’s thoughts ranged back over the anthropology classes he had taught. “Survivors, that’s for sure. Earliest sites, 11,800 years ago.”

“Dad, Deno and I found the site of the town, what did you call it? Coskakat? We don’t think so. The GPS just shows an X there. Nothing much there either. Overgrown with brush. One thing seemed strange. There is a fire pit in the ruins of a building’s foundation. We saw poles sticking up, tied with wire at the top. Inside, there was an outline of a fire pit in the snow. We cleared down to it. Lots of ash and stuff. Has to be more recent.”

“I need to see it. How close can we get? I’m not walking like I should be.”

“Not far from the river. Once we get even with the place, you can get there easy.”

Louis gave the order. “No bluff to protect our back here. So we have to protect our back. But this is where we camp. Unload.”

“Dad, I can carry you on my back.” Louis offered.

“Son, that would hurt more than hopping along. Help me get to the fire pit.”

“Now the problem is I have to get down on my knees and get the rest of the snow out. Okay, easy. There.” His breathing labored as pain shot down his leg. “Damned sciatica! Wish I had my trowel. I need something flat to dig with.”

“Tommy kicked around in the snow uncovering objects until he felt something flat. “Wait, this feels like something

we could use.” He bent down and pulled a flattened can from beneath the snow. “Try this Dad.”

“Watch. I’m going to scrape the frozen surface. Ground’s frozen, but notice this stuff I kicked up? Dirt and sand, maybe an inch thick. A few fragments of bone. Let me see, all too small. I need bigger samples. Ground is too hard.” He thought a minute. “Don’t have to worry about Carbon-14 tests. Okay, we build our fire here. Then before we leave, I can dig. The ground won’t be frozen, more like thick soup.” *I’ll dig-out my trowel. I’ll show them what an archaeologist does.*

“Dad,” Deno asked, “what are you looking for?”

“What they ate. What they threw away. How long ago. Stuff like that.”

Denoyer clapped his hands. “Before you all go to sleep, I have some questions. What do you kids see here? How would you describe what happened here? You’ve had a chance to look around, what have you learned?”

“There was a lot of fire, but some areas didn’t get burned up,” Tommy said.

“Good observation, Tommy. And we saw that this place burned, but somebody camped here after that,” Deno added. Denoyer noted he had his arm around Claire. *Well, they’re the same age. She’ll be pregnant next.*

“People?” Jan’s weak voice asked. “Real people?”

“We hope so,” Kathryn injected, “I told you there would be people here. Don’t act surprised.”

Louis changed the subject back. “And a lot of trees came down the river and built...what did you call them Debra, ‘log jams?’”

“And that once we left the Yukon, we don’t have a wall to protect our back at night.” Tommy added, worried about his stint on wolf duty.

“You mean the cliff? Maybe when we get upriver. This area where the rivers join is too wide. No, we’ll each do guard duty from now on. Stoking fires is not bad duty,” Denoyer smiled.

C. Descry

Debra grinned. *First time he's smiled in months. We made it, we all feel good. Three and a half months traveling in the dark. More than a hundred-ten days of nothing but ice and blowing snow. Must be fifty below here, even colder than on the lake. Forest. Mostly burned, but not totally incinerated. Wait till we find the hot springs. I haven't felt clean in sixteen years. Carl's smiling again, fondling that trowel like ... he loves it.*

"I'm going to use this tomorrow. This is my lucky trowel. See how it's worn? See the stains on the handle? Sweat. Maybe fifteen years of sweat before the Cut Off."

Kathryn sat hunched over the tiny ones, her swaying breasts hanging, wrinkled bags. "Carl, I should have milk again. We're going to have more babies. When we get there and are settled in, I'll get pregnant."

*By whom, Madame. You and what army are going to make me do the honors?*

## Chapter THIRTY-EIGHT

*Human? Kathryn screeched. How do you know. Why would you say a thing like that. They burned their dead?*

*Ate, Denoyer looked at her and smiled. Ate. Certainly dead when they did.*

“Okay, now that the fire is scraped away, I have to work fast. This soup will freeze. Look, first I’m going to cut a trench through the fire pit. Just this deep ... about six inches I should ... There, bottom. Clean gravel.”

Denoyer stacked the black ash and refuse along side of the trench. “I’ll go through this fast, just to get an idea of ... My God.” He took a long, splintered bone out of the ash and held it close to his face, then pulled back, obviously concerned.

“What is it Dad? Madonna asked.

“Yeah, what kind of bone? It’s burnt and ... is that why it’s splintered? Did the fire do that?” Louis added.

Denoyer put the bone aside and dug around for another. He pulled a piece of skullcap from the ash. “Yeah, the long bones were splintered. Broken for the marrow.” He examined the splintered bone again. “Here and here. See the shatter marks of where rocks were used to crack it? Man did this.”

“Carl,” Kathryn leaned over to see in the dim morning light. “That looks like part of a skull.”

Denoyer picked up the concave fragment and turned it before his eyes.”



### C. Descry

“Looks like they ate bear,” Deno said.

“It’s not bear,” Denoyer mumbled. “Okay, now I need to check this fire pit layer by layer. First, see where I cut down and made a profile of the layers? Look at this. It’s dirt and sand. See? A layer of dirt, sand, then another layer of mixed, then dirt... What do you think it means? What does it tell us?”

Deno leaned in. “It’s covering the ashes. It’s on top of the last fire.”

“Right. Everybody see it? Now below it is almost pure charcoal and ash. No layers of dirt. Lots of fires I think, but all about the same time.” He cut down, making a wider trench. Bone fragments caught the trowel and popped out. He studied them one-by-one, placing them in three piles as he identified them.

“Pile one. Deer. Pile two. Dog or wolf. Pile three. Human.”

“Human?” Kathryn screeched. How do you know. Why would you say a thing like that. They burned their dead?”

“Ate,” Denoyer looked at her and smiled. “Ate. Certainly dead when they did.”

Denoyer moved to the edge and began digging into the freezing muck at the side of the pit. “Look, I’ll get this out. It’s big. I have to be careful the ground is almost frozen again. You all know what this is.”

He ran the trowel around the outside of what looked like a bowl, being careful not to touch the bone. “I’m getting it. Here, Deno, help me. Just cradle it in your palm, keep it from dropping. There.”

*It’s not good for them to see this. No mandible. Mature, sutures well-grown together. Probably male from the look of the orbitals. Punched a hole ... like a rock pick or big spike. Killed and eaten. And not related to the other skull fragments from a child or small woman. Cannibals.*

“Happened a long time ago. Several years anyway, if you look close there are five distinct layers of dirt and sand over the

ash. Probably were more, but they got mixed into the ash from our fire. This guy was killed and eaten. Bones broken open for marrow. And he wasn't the only one. This is a cannibals camp. Probably wintered here one season."

"Well, I'm not surprised," Kathryn lectured. "Man is just a few good meals away from going savage. I've thought a lot about this, and ... well, some survivors obviously didn't handle the Cut Off as well as we did. I know to watch out for crazies. I'd tell you more, but you never listen to me until it's too late."

Debra picked up a handful of snow and jammed it in Kathryn's face. "Oh shut the hell up, Kathryn. You're only a few good meals away from total insanity yourself."

"What's the best guess, Dad? Five years?" Louis asked.

"Maybe ten or fifteen. Maybe right after the Cut Off. I think it was then, because that's when food was scarcest."

"What if they're settled around the hot spring?" Deno asked.

"Could be. You guys continue to scout ahead. Keep hidden and leave sign for us. If you find a settlement, come back and we'll decide what to do."

"I think we ought to scout the hot spring," Louis said, "while we're out there. We may have to stop you before you come too far."

Denoyer nodded. "We still have a long way to go up river. You can scout if you can do it without being seen. Take no risk. We'll go ahead and find another place to stop. No one wants to stay here. Then... Okay, head out now. We'll camp this side of the river."

Louis's thoughts focused as he walked. *We have to walk on the river ice because the snow is too soft at the tree line. Damn, we're exposed out here. I've got to think that way, there was little cover at home and people couldn't hide as easily. Dad likes the forest. The patches that survived are dark and full of evil. Jane Mary*

C. Descry

*was right. How can I know if someone is watching us, hidden in there? I'm supposed to sneak up on the hot spring? How?*

"Louis, I think they will see us," Deno said.

"I know, but what can we do about it? We can't walk in the forest."

"Yes but, I think we should cut in until we hit the road. GPS, here on the GPS screen, this windy line."

"Okay, but let's look for a place to cut over that's down and burned. There won't be as much stuff on the ground for us to trip over or fall into and break something."

"Deno, my legs are so tired I can't go much further. Remember, if we don't find the road, we have to go back."

"We haven't gone very far. It's got to be here. No one should ever try to walk in this damned mess. My legs are too short or the ground's too low."

"Okay, brother, we go on a little. We need ... see the top of that tree way off over there? The one with the top that looks like a nest? Dead. Tall, barely see it in this light?"

"Okay, if we get to it and there is no road, we go back." Deno groaned.

"Wow! Looks like the river except no ice," Louis said.

"Doesn't wind around like a river. Snow is deep. Think we can walk on it?"

"No. This crust won't support our weight."

"What are those mounds?"

"There's something under the snow. You know, maybe they're cars. Debra said they had cars on the roads."

"We should look for one that's not covered so deep, just to see it. We need to go around them."

"We need snowshoes. Let's see... Louis, what if we used our stuff sacks? Stuffed them with pine branches and tied them to our feet?"

"Don't have four."

“Yeah, we do. I brought extra ‘cause Jane and Madonna said to bring back stuff we find. They gave me these,” he pulled off his backpack and pulled six stuff sacks out.”

“Worth a try. We’d kinda have to skate. Can’t tie a bag on very well.”

“Well,” Louis said studying their back trail, “If anyone crosses our tracks, they won’t know humans passed this way. Looks like ... I don’t know.”

“An evil forest demon. Maybe a flock of fat geese?”

“Yeah, we have to stop soon. I’m working up a sweat, how about you?”

“Wet. We should go over by that tree and get rid of the moisture.”

“Okay, be careful, it must be colder here than we know. It just feels cold, like you can’t feel it, it’s so cold,” Louis said. “Okay, be quick. Pull off your outer parka, I’ll hold it. Then quick, out of the inner one. Then back into the outer. Then I’ll do the same.”

Louis reached up and broke off a thick branch. “We can beat the parkas with it.”

“Look at mine. Jeeze, it’s already frozen. Beat it. Don’t hit my hand.”

“We better drink lots of water. Look at all the ice I beat out.”

“No wonder I had trouble walking. All that weight,” Deno said. “Now, let me put this back on and we’ll beat yours. I’m freezing.”

“Don’t forget, we have to do this often or we’ll freeze to death.”

“Shouldn’t we be there? It would be nice to get there with enough light to see them, but hide us.” Louis took short strides, balancing on the stuff-bag snowshoes.

“If they have fires, we’ll smell the smoke. I smell something awful, but it’s not smoke.”

“Rotten,” Louis wrinkled his nose behind his facemask, “like a birds egg that didn’t hatch.”

“Look. The road goes into a cloud. See, ahead there? And hear that? A hissing noise, kinda like the sound of our stuff-bags on the snow. Louder.”

“Okay, rifle ready? We’re near it.”

“The air stinks! What if it’s poison? Feel anything?” Deno asked.

“Only fear. Other than that, I’m fine. Look for tracks. The hot spring must be around that bend.”

“Dad,” Louis said, sipping hot broth and warming his hands with the cup. “There was a big area overgrown with brush and small trees. Some of it burned, but the biggest part had to have been cleared. There were small steam vents all over that area, a big rectangle pit, and what looked like foundations, kinda like where you dug the fire pit. We circled it, following a side trail. That’s when we saw the little houses ... huts. No tracks. Nothing there. The main hot spring was up above the clearing and that’s where the cloud came from. We saw steam and a big mountain of ice. Water ran off the ice and froze by the time it got down past the road. The steam from the hot water rises into the air and freezes. It snows ice crystals over a big area. We couldn’t get too close. We drank the water. It tasted bad like it smelled. Like rotten eggs.”

Denoyer nodded, “Sulphur.”

“And,” Deno stood, “The five cabins got charred outside, mostly on the west and north, but they didn’t burn down. They have tin roofs like the school, and inside, no one has been in any of them. There are woodstoves and benches and beds without mattresses.”

“Stuff on the shelves. Blankets and things like that the packrats have eaten.” Louis couldn’t contain his excitement.

Denoyer interrupted. “Guys, did you check all around for sign of people?”

“Far as we could, Dad. No one been there for ... forever. We should go soon, but first we have to make snowshoes. Real ones, not stuff-bags filled with branches.”

“Any sign of animals? Anything to hunt?” Debra asked.

“Maybe up above the hot spring where the ground is warmer and the snow doesn’t cover. We never went up there.”

“Oh, I might know the place.” Debra nodded. “If it’s the spring I visited, that’s where the resort is. Only there wasn’t a hot spring where you found one. That square pit you saw may have been a big swimming pool.”

“Well, we never went up there. No tracks or anything.”

“I wish you had,” Kathryn said in her quiet voice. “I wish you had, I know things you should be aware of.”

“Okay,” Denoyer said, “Everyone has to make their own snowshoes. First watch. Then go with Jane and Deno and gather willows. Kathryn, start stripping hides to make straps and ties. Boys, everyone, build up this fire. It’s so cold here we could all freeze if we’re not careful.”

“We wouldn’t need snowshoes if we just followed the river. If there are no people up there to be afraid of ... well, you are leading us there the hard way. I’ve given this some careful thought. We are safer...”

“Kathryn, shut the hell up and start cutting. Make your hands go as fast as your mouth,” Debra said, “but not as slow as you atrophied brain. And keep an eye on the babies, it’s too cold in the tent. Bring them out here by the fire.”

“Yes but ... you have no right to talk to me that way. Carl, can’t you stop her from attacking me?”

“Do as she says. And keep your two cents out of every decision we make.”

“We make?” Kathryn sneered. “And who is this ‘we’ you refer to?”

“Me and Deno, that’s who,” Louis cut in. “We were there. We know. Why don’t you just do what you’re good at and stop being a pain?”

*C. Descry*

“Well, now you’ve even poisoned the boys against me. When will you ever learn that I...”

“Kathryn,” Denoyer moved toward her, balling his fist and shaking it. “Another word and I’ll bash you. Got that?”

## Chapter THIRTY-NINE

*I'm telling you one more time because it is so important. The most dangerous thing we face - you all face out there - is our fellow man.*

"Axes aren't that hard to use," Tommy said as he cut branches into foot long sections that would fit in the stoves. "Now everybody has an axe, we can get enough wood."

"These stoves eat this little stuff Dad," Deno said, "can't we cut up one of these big trees?"

Denoyer smiled. "I say we wait until we are sure we can't find easier wood. We only have a month or so until break up. This snow will start to go soon."

"Uh oh, here comes Kathryn," Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"We have four good cabins. Why does everybody have to cram into one? I've brought this up before, Carl, and you ignored me. Now, I want you to divide us up and use the other cabins. We have enough wood. Do it today, Carl."

"Well, Kathryn, it's not for me to decide. We'll have a family meeting. If that's what a majority want to do, then great."

"You always shirk your duty to lead. You..."

"Oh shut the hell up, Kathryn. Put a glove in it."

"I don't have to agree with you, because I'm right. And Carl, I told you we should dig out some of the cars and trucks and use them for ... well, we should use them."

"Dig out any one you want. I don't mind."



### *C. Descry*

Denoyer stood, slowly straightening his back, easing weight to his left leg to favor his hip, and working his sore knees. "Okay, I agree. It is much nicer being together. Anyone who wants can move to the next cabin. We'll leave it at that. I think it is time to take a look at what has happened to our family since the Cut Off. You all know the story of how Debra, Jane Mary, Kathryn and I made our way up the Winkasel and made our home on the portage where I had worked for over twenty years doing archaeological investigations. We survived up there and you kids - well, most of you kids were born there. The first person we lost was Kathryn's baby who was born on the river when we were moving to Whitefish School. At the school, Louis, Jane, Mary and Madonna went out on the winter ice to find the town of Kotzebue and the sea. They came back and told us there was no sign left of the town and where the sea had been there were volcanic hills. While they were gone we lost Jane Mary. We decided to go south that next winter, and then Carl Junior went out on his own. We don't know what happened to him. We made our sledboats into warm campers, packed them with food and started south and found that the rivers were dammed and had formed a lake. We crossed the lake and followed the Yukon Valley east. We were all very brave and didn't let the darkness, the constant wind and the cold stop us. Then we found the Tamara and started for Fairbanks. We learned of cannibals. Louis and Deno found the hot springs, these cabins, and so here we are."

"Yeah," Jan noted, "and you forgot to tell about the wolves."

"Yeah, you make it sound so easy, Carl," Debra said. "These have been the hardest years of my life...all of our lives. And you avoided saying that we may be the only human beings to survive. That our family is alone on this planet and..."

"We just don't know, Debra," Louis said. "What we do know is that if we don't find other people at Fairbanks, then

we'll have to go on to Anchorage or down the Alaska Highway through Canada."

"Why not just stay here?" Madonna asked.

"Yeah, Dad, we like it here. And maybe there are more animals than you thought?"

"I don't think so," Deno answered. "Those that stayed around here depended on the hot ground and no snow cover to find food. They were trapped. We've killed most of them. Most were old and tough as you know."

"But others will come here when the snow is gone," Claire said.

Kathryn sat up. "Listen, this is nice compared to what you have known, especially as we traveled across the lake and ice. But in Fairbanks we will find the things I have told you about. Wonderful things like beautiful houses, stores full of fine clothes, canned food and ... cars and buses and maybe even airplanes. There are libraries and movie theaters. We are so close to a way of life you will love. And Fairbanks is just one city. Someday we will be able to live where it is warm all year, and light even in the winter. All we have to do is go south. Always go south. Follow the land."

"I hope you're right, Kathryn," Debra said. "We are looking for the things we knew in the past. Who knows what's in our future."

"I know this," Denoyer said. "There were people who survived after the Cut Off. They got very hungry. That was many years ago, but... Well, we will proceed with caution. When the snow melts around here we'll know a lot by studying the ground. Maybe people still come here for the hot water. Maybe the local tribes survived and went back to the way they lived over a hundred years ago. We can't be the only family that survived. We may think we are the ones who will repopulate the Earth, but that is our ignorance talking. I want to get to Fairbanks and find a way to monitor the radio frequencies. Al-

### *C. Descry*

most twenty years have passed. Somewhere, people have done what we have done.”

“But Dad,” Louis said. “When the snow melts and the river is raging, we won’t be able to get to Fairbanks ... Will we?”

Debra leaned forward and put her hand on Denoyer’s shoulder. “The roads. Don’t forget the GPS shows roads here. Most of you have never seen them. Some were paved with concrete or asphalt. Even though a car might have a hard time navigating them now, we can easily walk down them.”

“And we saw signs,” Tommy said. “We can read them and match them to our GPS. Madonna says they tell us where we are going.”

“That’s right,” Denoyer warned, “but there does not seem to be a road that connects to Fairbanks. These are local roads that may connect to the landing strip. And roads go two ways. We will have to watch the roads so no one can take us by surprise.”

“But Dad,” Deno stood and turned to face Louis and the others. “If that is true, we should go look before the melt. I think we should send out a scouting party, like the one Louis, Jane, Mary and Madonna went on. Then we would know for sure.”

Kathryn’s harsh voice cut in. “Deno, you always have ideas that are impractical. We can’t risk sending anybody out now. Besides, why risk anything? We’re safe and snug here, even if everybody wants to pile on top of each other. This is a time to rest and get over the trip across the ice. I say no one needs to go, and I have given this considerable thought. You know I see things you don’t. You know I...”

Debra cut her off. “Yeah, Kathryn, you probably do see things. I can agree to that. I question your vision and, although it scares me, we have to send out a scouting party. And soon. I don’t want them to discover us. We have to know the territory and avoid barging into someone’s camp.”

“And I’m leading this party,” Deno announced. “I’m ready and I will pick my team. Here is who I want to go with me. Say ‘no’ if you won’t go. Claire, Janet, Debbie.”

Tommy stood, waving his hands. “And what about me? Why did you pick all girls? I’m ready to do my part. Tell them Debra, I’m old enough.”

“ ‘Cause I need you,” Louis said. “Because it works best with four and these girls are ready. You can’t go and leave me without a right-hand man.” He looked over at Jan, playing with something and seemingly oblivious to the conversation.

“Denoyer looked at Tommy, studying him. “Louis is right, you’re needed here. Maybe you will lead the next scouting party. We’ll see.”

“Dad,” Deno hesitated and looked around the room. “Dad, we take the wood sled, but no dogs. Can’t sneak up on someone with dogs yapping. Do you know how far it is?”

“On snowshoes, pulling a sled? You can make better time than we did coming across the lake. If the river ice is smooth enough and you can go on it, I’d guess ... well, I need the map.” Denoyer motioned for Kathryn to find the map in his bag as he scanned the GPS.

“Here, looks like if they follow the river valley it’s more than ... let’s see ... as much as one hundred-fifty miles.”

“By road? There has to be a road. It would be shorter than that.” Kathryn said. “That’s too far. They could never make it. We can’t send them on a death mission. All Louis had to go was ninety miles. No road, they can’t go.”

“We went a lot farther than that,” Jane argued, ignoring Kathryn’s comment.

“Deno,” Debra said, “somewhere along the river you will see towns with signs that tell you where you are and you can check the GPS. Dad, why are these maps so bad?”

“They never finished mapping Alaska, it’s so wild. Even Google Maps – that was a... Well, they never made good

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maps. Even the GPS doesn't have what we need, but it's better than nothing."

*Well, Denoyer thought, this is an opportunity for Deno to sire as many babies as Louis. He picked those three because they can get pregnant. That defines two more family groups. Each generation a boy leads three women ... well, that's what I did and it worked.*

Denoyer called the four scouts together. "You have a rifle. Keep it hidden. If anyone sees it, they'll kill for a rifle, you can be sure of that. But keep it handy so you can defend yourselves. When possible, one of you go ahead of the sled. You know, far enough ahead to spot trouble before you stumble on it. And don't walk in plain site, stay to the edge of the path you take and use the trees. And look for sign. And keep your food divided up so it won't look like much. And..."

"Dad, if we take a rifle and all these supplies, then what will you all do?"

"Hunt. Don't worry, we can always eat dog. We won't eat each other, at least until you come back."

Denoyer's smile encouraged Deno. He broke the sled free, went forward, put on the harness, and commanded, "Let's go!"

Denoyer raised his hand, "Wait a minute. I'm telling you one more time because it is so important. The most dangerous thing we face - you all face out there - is our fellow man. Hide. Don't make contact. Come back in ten days at the most. More than that, and we will assume you didn't make it ... and try to travel when it's dark. Smell the air for smoke. Look for fires. And..."

"We'll make it Dad," Claire said as she and Janet checked their snowshoes.

"Deno will pull and I'll scout ahead," Debbie smiled, reached up and put her hand on Denoyer's shoulder. "We're a team, Dad. Just like Louis, Jane, Mary and Madonna."

“Carl,” Debra pulled closer to the stove and made sure both babies heads were covered, “why are you so worried about them? Do you know something we don’t?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure. It’s just that ... well, I studied the cultures that grew up around here ... and over to the coast. Inuit Eskimos, Athabaskans. Native people who maintained cultures not far removed from their ancestors. There were Athabaskan people here 11,800 years ago. Their culture extended all the way down to central Oregon. Their language group includes the Apaches and Navajo of the Southwest. In Southeast Alaska near Ketchikan, north along the coast and east across into Canada, peoples called Haida and Kwakiutl flourished. Their history is full of conquest, even slavery. We’re probably north of their territory, but they could have been driven north. Each group of people has thousands of years experience surviving in this land. The chances of some of their people surviving, especially those who lived out on the land, are great. My guess is that few citizens of Fairbanks were prepared for the Cut Off. If the fires were this bad here, then it is safe to guess that Fairbanks was incinerated. The whole Alaska Range is made up of active volcanoes. I fear our kids will run into tribal survivors who will want our women and our supplies.”

“What about our boys?”

“The young ones, they would probably keep. The older ones and me? Well, we would be seen as competition.”

“The babies and us older women?”

“Depends. If they are trying to grow their population or not. If not, there would be no use for us older people if we are dependant in any way. We would be useful only so long as we could produce – babies or labor.”

Debra thought a moment. “Carl, do you think Fairbanks was incinerated?”

He shook his head, nodded and looked down. “This thing that caused the Cut Off was funneled between the Books and

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the Alaska Ranges, east along the drainages and now we see how it blasted up the Tanana River Valley. There were towns here like Tanana, it shows on the GPS. But if the GPS is right, it's under a mass of logs and rock that came down the river. Where there are trees standing, they were in the sheltered gullies. The force of the firestorm ran up this river valley and if it hit Fairbanks... Well, Debra, you know what we'll find. Oh, and don't forget all the earthquakes since the Cut Off. I think they were down here and we only felt a little of their force on the Wikasel."

Kathryn watched her footing as she navigated the icy path from the cabin. "I thought the wolves had given up, Carl?"

"No, they never will. They come around the cabin at night. We can keep our dogs safe in their cabin, but we'll lose a few, although they will probably come back."

"But why are the wolves so angry now? Are they coming for the children? They'll kill the children, I've told you, I've warned you. Listen to me!"

"That's what I came out to find out. They've got something down up there on the hill where the hot spring comes out. I'm going up there and see what they have."

"Someone has to go with you. Take Louis. None of the others can face wolves. Kill them all! If we don't kill them, they'll get us ... they'll get the children. Carl, I know these things."

"Kathryn, shut the hell up. The wolves aren't after us."

"I'll stay directly behind you, Louis so I can walk in your tracks. You may have to help me. There's still enough light to see. You cover the front and right side. I'll cover the back and the left. They'll come at us if they see us."

"I see them, Dad. Hey, they have a moose of something surrounded."

"It is a moose. Big! How many wolves do you count?"

Louis strained to see through the half-light. Eight. The big ones are the leaders ... no, a big one and a medium size one. They're calling the shots."

"Okay, but I can't see well enough to tell which one ... oh yeah, he's moving around, leading the attack. I can hit him if we get closer. They aren't interested in us. You take the other one."

"Wait, Dad, what if the moose runs?"

"Okay, your second shot, put it down. But watch the wolves. If they don't run, we didn't get the leaders."

"I'll watch and get any that stay around."

"Debra, come out." Kathryn screeched. I heard three shots. They're shooting."

Whump!

"That's four. I didn't think they would use that many bullets." Debra said.

"Carl said they had to or they would kill the children. They're coming for the children."

"Listen! That's Louis calling. Is he calling me? Listen!"

"Debra, get a rifle. Come here," Louis's voice was clear in the cold air.

She went in, slipped her outer parka over her head, grabbed a .270, and started toward Louis and Denoyer.

"Louis, what do I do?"

"I'm going to harness the dogs so we can drag the moose. Go up there and protect it with Dad. He fell again, but he's laying where he can cover us. And we'll take the dead wolves, too."

"Okay, it's safe in the lower cabin. We have to butcher before it freezes. Tommy, start a fire in there. You other kids, get wood and ... you Jan, and you older girls gut and skin the wolves. Then start gutting the moose and skinning it out. Move fast, you're safe in there. I have to do something with these dogs, the dead wolves are driving them wild. Louis, Tommy, help Debra get Denoyer down and then help me."



## Chapter FORTY

*We can't let our minds play tricks on us. We can't believe in magic. I fear a return to ignorance and superstition.*

“It’s not like going to the supermarket, but at least we have food,” Debra said as she turned a thick steak in the pan.

Kathryn sliced another chunk of meat into steaks. “We would have starved. It’s been seven days since they left. They’re probably out of food too. Unless...”

“Unless the wolves brought them an elk or deer or something,” Debra injected. Now what do you think of wolves, Kathryn? Good guys, right?”

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. Debra, you just don’t get it. If it weren’t for me these children would have had their throats ripped out long ago. If I hadn’t warned Carl and Jane Mary about bringing wolves into camp we might all be dead. I understand these things. Wolves are wolves, and they plan to kill us all. Taking this moose from them has only made them madder at us. You just don’t see, because stupid is as stupid does, you...”

“Kathryn,” Debra cut a chunk off the bloody steak and jammed it into Kathryn’s mouth. “This is wolf, hindquarter. Good, huh?”

“They’ll be here tomorrow,” Louis stated. “I know Deno, he’ll be here.”

"I hope you're right," Denoyer said. "Nine days may not have been enough time to go there and back."

"I'm going out tomorrow afternoon and look for them. I have a feeling..."

Debra nodded at Louis. "I've had strange feeling too... Like something happened. I can't tell if it's bad or good, just a feeling."

"This is not good," Denoyer said. "We can't let our minds play tricks on us. We can't believe in magic. I fear a return to ignorance and superstition. Louis, when you lead, you must never let that happen. We all have feelings, but we just don't know ... can't know. They're safe, they're in trouble, they come back today, they come back early. They come back late. Whatever we imagined, is true to someone, but that doesn't make it magic or intuitive."

"But Dad, I just know they're on their way back. Let's see."

"You kids want to go out with me to watch for Deno and the girls? I'm getting dressed now. It's really cold, so dress warm. Help them Kathryn."

"I'm going too," Kathryn announced. "Deno will expect me to be there."

"Louis, if these kids are going out, take a rifle," Denoyer reached over and grabbed a .270, checked it, and handed it to Louis.

"Wolves?"

"They're out there."

"I want to be here where we can see down the road. We don't have to go any further." Louis packed the snow at his feet and leaned against the burned trunk of a tree. Kathryn unrolled a hide and put it on the ground.

"Here, you kids sit on this. You can still see the road."

"Are you sure they'll come today, Louis?" Tommy asked.

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“Any time now. Before it gets too dark ... or they won’t come in until tomorrow ... I mean if it gets too dark. Wait and listen.”

“It’s so cold, don’t you think we should go back?” Amy’s voice was muffled in her parka fur.

“There!” Louis shouted. “I told you. Look!”

“It’s them, I knew they’d come today. I have an instinct for these things.” Kathryn got up and began to roll the hide.

## Chapter FORTY-ONE

*He gave me instructions. He told me what to do, not that I don't know. Listen to me. I'm the one who has always led, always had insights into what to do and how to do it.*

As Deno pulled the sled off the trail and into the field of packed snow around the cabins, Denoyer, having hugged his three girls while balancing on his crutches, pulled him aside.

“Why did you say ‘bad news’ when Kathryn asked how things went?”

“I tried to make a map, Dad. I tried to draw what is there now. This river is not the Tanana on the GPS. I think it's really fed from what was the Denali drainage, but the water comes from far to the west of where the old river flowed. About seventy miles from here there are a lot of pushed-up rocks blocking the valley. I climbed as high as I could and in the afternoon saw high mountains - volcanoes, because they are still spewing smoke - where Fairbanks should be. We thought of coming back, but decided to follow the river and see if we could get around the uplift. We couldn't because the new river has never had time to cut a channel. We got up about a half mile and hit cliffs and frozen waterfalls. There weren't any trees in that area, no wood for fires, nothing but hot spots and ice covered rocks. We would have frozen if it weren't for the hot areas where the ground hasn't cooled yet. There were no animals.”

“But you were gone ten days?”

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“I know Dad, let me finish. We came back to this river valley and looked along the left side for a road up from the Tanana to the pipeline. GPS labeled it a service road. We found it and it wound up into the old mountains and was difficult to follow, but we got high enough and all the trees had been incinerated and the going was easier. We didn’t see any life or signs of life. We found hot springs and areas where the ground was hot where we could stop. Three hard days we found the remains of what must have been the pipeline. There was a trail beside it that led off to the southeast. We saw old sign along the trail, animals used it. We didn’t see any fresh sign.”

Denoyer sat on the side of the sled, resting his hip and leg. “Show me on the GPS.”

Deno worked the winder for about a minute as he watched his women sort through their offloaded gear.

“This old road. See where we found it? Its bad, lots of rockslides from the quakes and washed out in places, but I think all of us could get up it ... that is if there is a reason to use it.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t think it will take us where we want to go. Fairbanks was in a very broad river valley. There is no valley there now ... none we could see at least, and Dad, we looked.”

“The pipeline road?”

“It ends at the uplift of new, ragged mountains.”

“No way through?”

“Maybe, but not in winter and there’s almost no snow in places. There may be a pass, or a way around the new mountains to the east. The animal sign suggests they go that way. We scouted for two days and then had to head back. But look at this!” He unwrapped a hide bundle from the sled.

“You found that?”

“We found a metal hut in a pocket off the side of the pipeline trail. Everything was inside still. We stayed there and used

the wood stove for heat. I brought this back for you – and two boxes of .270 shells.”

As Denoyer admired the rifle, Deno said, “And Dad, there were four dead guys in the hut ... all in their sleeping bags. It looked like they survived for awhile, then just died. There wasn’t any food, but lots of empty cans and bags. It was creepy. They were all dried out but still you could see what they had looked like. We took them out behind the hut and left them there. They didn’t smell, exactly, but we needed to light the fire and use the place and we knew they would. We sensed this storm was coming, and we got back just in time. Let’s get everything stowed and inside before this snow buries us.”

Debra watched Kathryn’s reaction to the news that Fairbanks was gone. Kathryn’s face first screwed up tight with anger. Then a wave of calm rearranged her features and she smiled. Debra observed as the disfigured woman gathered her strength and stood.

“I’ve prepared us to deal with false information. Believe me, Fairbanks is there, they just missed it. It’s too big a place to disappear. I know more than anyone about these volcanic things, and volcanoes are mountains. They are not new. Believe me, I am the only one who knows about these things. I’ve read. I have insights none of you can have because you’re not gifted like me. We should pack and leave this place for Fairbanks as soon as we can. Besides, once the snow melts we can’t use the sled and sledboats.”

Deno studied Kathryn and shrugged his shoulders. “Why don’t you keep out of this. The only thing I agree with is that we could go up to the pipeline hut. From there, we can probably go east and find the road the GPS shows goes into Canada, but there is no Fairbanks. The sled and sledboats are of no use if we have to go over mountains.”

Debra stood and felt waves of dizziness that almost made her fall. *Something is wrong. I feel shitty. Not food, it started months ago. I need to drink more water.* “Kathryn, do you real-

ize you just called your son a liar? Don't you get it? It's not how you want it to be, it's how it is. But I agree, we should move while we can and get to where there is food. We're about out and there is no sign of animals around here. Kids, you saw sign up there, right? Carl, let's get organized."

Denoyer sat with his back against a bedroll of hides. His hip and leg were numb. The short time outside had tired him and he wanted to be left alone to sleep. "Me? No, this is Deno's call ... and Janet, Claire, Debbie, they were there. Louis? You've talked to them, it's really up to you kids."

Kathryn let out a groan. "And what about me? I know best about these things, I'm the one who thinks things through and is qualified to..."

Denoyer gave her a look that shut her down, clenched his fist weakly, and she wilted back into her blankets with an expletive fart.

"Dad, everybody," Deno's voice communicated his frustration, "it looks like a dead end up there. There are no roads from there. The pipeline ends where the uplift and magma begins. We didn't find a way to get out of there, but there may be several the animals have found. If we get up there and can't get out, we'll have to come back here and try to follow the Yukon into Canada ... if that hasn't been blocked too. Oh, and also, we saw old sign, but no animals. They wouldn't be up there this time of year anyway. We would starve up there."

"Or down here," Kathryn blurted. "Fairbanks will have food. We know there is nothing but wilderness up the Yukon."

"No," we know more than that," Deno inserted. "Louis and I have studied the GPS maps. If we follow the Yukon River, it turns southeast and could take us to a place almost east of Fairbanks called the Yukon Charlie National Preserve. By going that way we might avoid the volcanic uplift that probably wiped-out Fairbanks."

“Yeah,” Louis scrolled down the GPS screen, “we could come out at Eagle or Chicken and then go directly south to Whitehorse.”

“Following roads?” Debra asked.

“Don’t think so,” Louis lowered his voice. “The Yukon and Charlie Rivers, maybe. Nothing like a road shows here. The National Park Service must have some roads inside the preserve. Can’t count on it. It will be tough going.”

“And we don’t know if the volcanic activity blocked that exit too,” Claire pointed out. And I know what an eagle is, but wasn’t a chicken a bird you took eggs from and ate? Why would they name a place Chicken?”

“I know there is some kind of trail. The gold rush guys went up that way,” Debra offered. “Also, when I lived in Fairbanks there was a highway that went up to the Chena Hot Springs and a place called End-of-the-Road near that Yukon Charlie National Preserve. Maybe we could find it and take it back toward Fairbanks?”

Louis nodded. “Look, the river goes from Eagle to a place where Highway 9 and the Klondike Highway connect.” If we could make it to the river and float it...” he paused, and grimaced, “but I think it flows north to the Yukon. Then there’s Highway 5 to Valdez and 2 to Whitehorse, which is where we should go, I think. It’s a long way, maybe years.”

“You play with your map thingy all you want,” Kathryn’s voice was so shrill the younger children whom she spent so much time with were scared, “but we all know the shortest distance to Fairbanks is right up this Tanana and to the pipeline. You must listen to me, my judgment has always been right and I know this. Kids, you know me. It’s too long to go around, we must get over the hills and into Fairbanks. Trust me. I always prove to be the only one who knows these things. I...”

“Damn it Kathryn, the way you see things is always off,” Janet, who seldom spoke, but when she did people listened, stood and went to the tiny window, scraped away the ice, and



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looked out. "It's hasn't let up. The snow is really pretty deep out there. We got back just in time. Whatever we decide, we won't get out of here for a long time."

"But Dad," Louis turned back to Denoyer...

"He's asleep," Debra said quietly.

"But we need..."

"Guys, did you hear what he said? It's up to you. All of you. Kids, Carl is fighting just to walk and stay with us. We need his insights, but it's up to us now."

"He told me not to be concerned that he sleeps all the time. He said he dreams a lot and is very happy," Tommy looked down at Denoyer, confused about what was happening.

Debra smiled. "Kids, Carl was a great archaeologist before our world changed. He was in Alaska working to prove a theory that over a hundred-fifty thousand years ago men lived here. We call them Neanderthal, and they were different than us. Carl said their culture was found in Central Asia, and he believed they came into this land. Just before the Cut Off, he found remains of their camps and tools. Remember what he did with his trowel to find sign of people who were here? The cannibals? Well, he did that near Whitefish at the Portage site on the Wikasel and found sign of those early man-like creatures. He would have been famous if he could have shared his finds with his university and peers. But all that ended."

"That's what he dreams about?" Tommy was even more confused, as were others.

Louis smiled. "Now that connects for me. While Deno, Claire, Janet and Debbie were gone, Dad and I had some long talks. One time he said we were like the Neanderthals in that we were the end of our species and dying out. I didn't know what he meant by Neanderthal, and it made me angry. I don't think it's true. Look how our numbers have grown. We're not dying out and we have strength and plans and look how far we've come."

“Is Dad?” Debbie turned from the window and took Janet’s hand, “I mean...”

Debra looked around the room and then down at Denoyer. Kathryn sat upright, the look on her face empty and scared.

“We all die. That’s the way life is.” Debra tried to sound matter-of-fact and keep fear from her voice. As she stood, her mind fogged and she felt the dizziness sweep up her spine to her head. She waited until she could take deep breaths and regain control. Everybody thought she was pausing because of grief. “Carl is ready to go on. He knows that and he wants to share everything he can with us before he leaves. He wants to know that you kids, his heirs, are in charge. So does Kathryn. So do I. We each have our time and then go on to ...” she wanted to say ‘heaven,’ but couldn’t ... “to become part of all time and energy and beauty and ... that’s all we know.”

Debra turned to Louis and whispered, “I’m not sure the little kids needed to hear that, but it’s something we will all have to deal with. You guys are ready to lead. I’m here and so is Kathryn to help you. Do something to change the subject, Louis.”

Before Louis turned away, she saw his eyes were wet.

“Listen!” Louis clapped his hands and demanded attention, “It’s time we planned for dealing with the snow. We don’t have much to eat, but we have water and we’re warm. We’ll need to take turns shoveling our way out in the morning. Deno, Jan, Tommy, all of us have to form our groups. The girls who have babies or will soon, should not have to shovel. Get together and plan for work tomorrow.”

“Are we leaving?” Claire stared down at Denoyer. “Where will we go? Up, or back to the Yukon? We have to decide.”

Deno felt the question was directed at him. “We know we can’t go up, that Fairbanks is probably gone, and that the uplift and volcanoes block the old paths. Crossing the mountains we would have to leave our sled and sledboats. We have

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babies to think about. We can't make it cross-country. We have to go around."

Had he seen Kathryn's face, it would have sent chills through him. He knew her, her power over them, and her craziness.

"We were able to get the snow away from the door and the front, but it's coming down so hard we'll have to clear it again by afternoon," Deno announced as he came in with his team. "This stupid snow shows no sign of stopping."

"We must conserve our food. Remember when we were still up on the Wikasel how we had to slow down and almost hibernate? That's what we need to do." Claire took charge and moved around the human mass, adjusting covers and urging everyone to lie quietly and sleep.

Debra smiled. *She was a baby – maybe four and she remembers.*

"I'm at peace, Debra," Denoyer said softly. I'm many places these days, remembering and reliving. For me the past is still vivid and alive. I think things are okay here. I don't want to travel, not the way you will, at least. I'm glad the snow is letting up, but I won't go with you. The Yukon is your only option and it's too long a trip for me."

"Don't say that Carl. You know we can't leave you." Debra pulled the soft hide up over his shoulders.

"I'll leave you, you won't leave me. You are my other half – have been for many years. I'll carry you on with me. Let me go, I'm ready. I'm no use here anymore."

"Don't be in any hurry. Know that I need you." She leaned down and gave him a soft kiss, his lips cracked, cold. Hers hot and dry.

Jan and Deno came in stomping snow off their mukluks. Jan moved ahead of Deno and gave the orders.

"Okay, all of you up and ready to get the sleds dug out and loaded. We can leave here when it starts getting light in the morning."

Deno smiled, glad Jan was taking responsibility. Louis, can you get the dog's stuff together? We need to pack the food where they can't get at it and we can give it to them bit-by-bit. They're hungry, but we have to ration their food."

"I'll need help. Dad can't help, so..." he paused and looked about the room. *Only Debra knows how to fix the harness.* "Debra, will you help me with the dogs' harness?"

Dizzy, but able to keep her balance, Debra followed Louis through the snow to the dog's hut. Inside, the dogs went wild thinking they would get fed, anxious to get out of the confined space. Several rushed the door trying to get past Debra.

Louis fought against a tide of dogs, yelling "Don't let them get out!"

He heard barking and baying from outside and turned to help Debra. She was down in the doorway. He ignored the dogs rushing by him, picked her up, checked her breathing and pulse, let out his anguish in a sobbing cry, and carried her back to the cabin, saying goodbye.

"What are you doing with her?" Kathryn screamed.

He lay her next to Denoyer, who raised his head and stared at her. "Dad, she died, just like that, out there in..." His sobbing spread grief throughout the tightly packed cabin.

Debbie saw Denoyer slowly shake his head, reach for Debra's hand, fail to grasp it, and fall back against the bed. His eyes closed. His face like wax.

"He's breathing, but I can't wake him. His breathing is barely audible. I think he's going too," Claire moaned.

After several hours Claire knew they had to take Debra away. "Kathryn? Kathryn? Help us, what should we do? Louis, I can't get through to her."

Louis stared at Kathryn and scowled. "I think ... for now we can open the last hut, the one we never use and put her in there."

Every child followed the funeral procession. Kathryn, who sat seemingly alert, but lost in her thoughts stayed be-

hind. Louis carefully placed Debra in a sitting position near the cold stove.

“Kathryn,” Deno asked when he saw her smile and look around the crowded cabin, “how long does it take?”

“Probably soon. Don’t you understand he may be your father – everyone’s father, but he is my closest friend, my lover and my companion all these years. We were destined to be together. He loves me more than anyone.” She noted that everyone was listening. “He gave me instructions. He told me what to do, not that I don’t know. Listen to me. I’m the one who has always led, always had insights into what to do and how to do it. Oh I know Debra and at one time Jane Mary questioned my wisdom, but I am the one he chose to follow him. I am the one he gave instructions to.”

“He’s gone.” Claire and Debbie had been taking turns sitting next to him all day. “He looked at us, smiled, and died.”

“Are we just going to leave them in the cabin?” Tommy didn’t want them to be cold and alone.

“That’s exactly what he told me to do.” Kathryn held her head high, her stringy gray hair falling past her shoulders, her face distorted from Denoyer’s fist, and gave orders.

“If everything is ready we’re heading out. Quit arguing Deno, you too Louis, you’re too young to understand these things. You know Carl and I know best. We will get to Fairbanks in less than a week - it’s high in these mountains, I can visualize it. We’ll find other huts along the pipeline and get food. I know things that others haven’t been bred to understand. There is no way I would risk our family. Now let’s go!”

## Epilogue:

*What will happen is that the seeds of our destruction in place within individuals and our culture will grow and end all imagined pretense. That's true on a planetary level and within the operational systems we call our existence.*

Hope may spring eternal in the hearts of men, but reality is not subject to magic or changed by wishful thinking. What is real is not conformed to comfortable conclusions. It is neither good nor bad. It is a smile or it is the final gasp.

Humans imagine reasons why reality is modified by hope. That is why *Illusions Survive*. We invent gods to look after us. We imagine a universe that exists for us. Humans tell vital lies about who we are and what we are. These lies may keep us sane; they keep us believing there is an overall reason for our existence and, on a scale of things too immense for us to comprehend, that we play a role.

To escape reality we ignore the fact that within ourselves lie the seeds of our destruction. We have survived and evolved – well, at least a critical mass of us have. That survival, we pray, is our proof we are special.

Writers are urged to avoid the totality of all things possessing actuality, existence, or essence and tell a story that conforms to standard wished-for expectations. Editors advise: “A story must have a good ending. It must leave one in a positive state of mind. It must end in a way that the reader can believe in man’s worth and future.” A story may end in a way that

makes one examine what in reality is truth, but it is not supposed to cause one to examine futility.

Our vital lies are used to create endings that are acceptable to those reluctant to confront reality. “They lived happily ever-after,” is a lie. “They discovered a village of other survivors and rebuilt their culture,” and, “They connected with survivors in distant lands and knew they were not the last of the species,” are acceptable endings based on a belief in magic. But the probability of anthropomorphic invention bailing us out, and forces invoking the supernatural to rescue us, forces which ignore natural law, are not plausible. What will happen is that the seeds of our destruction in place within individuals and our culture will grow and end all imagined pretense. That’s true on a planetary level and within the operational systems we call our existence.

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