

Life in the Tundra

by

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Chapter One—The Arrival

The deafening roar of the six-seater bush plane made conversation impossible as we flew low over the frozen tundra. Subtle shading and dipping hinted at the snowy banks of the Yukon River as it wound its way through the vast whiteness that extended until it finally curved out of sight. The edge of the earth and the beginning of the sky blended together into a fuzzy border of white, making it unclear where one ended and the other began. It was winter in the tundra, so even on clear days the sky was incapable of turning a true blue. There just wasn't enough sun.

It had taken two days of flying to reach this remote part of the world that was to be our home, and I was beginning to feel some trepidation. In preparing for our move, we had done a lot of research. But reality was settling like a cold fog as I realized that we actually knew very little about Alakanuk, the tiny Eskimo village where my husband, Keri, awaited our arrival. It seemed the closer we got to our destination, the less I knew about where we were going. During my life, I had lived on three continents and traveled on two others. But I was sure that even with all that mobility, I'd never been any place like the Bush. Reading about life in the Bush of Alaska is kind of like reading about childbirth. There is no way you can truly understand or appreciate the experience until you are in the middle of it—and then it's too late.

I was sitting in the copilot's seat of the tiny plane. "Where is Alakanuk?" I tried shouting over the thundering noise of the engine and propellers. "Huh?" the pilot shouted back. "WHERE IS ALAKANUK?" I yelled even louder. He grinned and jerked his head forward as he banked the plane to the left. A smattering of houses appeared, seeming to have sprouted up haphazardly. It looked as though they had been tossed about the landscape by a bored child throwing dice. The seeming lack of organization was because they'd been built along the winding Yukon River, now frozen and virtually invisible under a heavy quilt of snow. While many places may be described as being nestled along a riverbank, Alakanuk looked like it was dug in or hunkered down or standing against all odds.

My heart sank. Surely that tiny village couldn't be where we were headed. There must be some mistake. But there was no mistake. The pilot aimed straight for a flattened section of snow that served as the airstrip. It was about a mile from town, and there were no buildings nearby, just a few snowmobiles and a lone red pickup truck parked amidst the scraggly alder bushes that lined the airstrip.

I twisted around in my seat to look at our boys, smiling an encouragement I didn't feel. Tanner, gangly with a thick mop of dark brown hair and an impish grin, was somewhat shy. He'd just turned 16. Our youngest, Taco, was a few weeks away from turning 13. Taco's real name was Jeremiah, but he'd been dubbed Taco when he was a baby because, according to our Costa Rican friend, his diaper smelled like taco meat gone bad. The nickname had stuck. Taco was small for his age and had blond hair and big brown eyes with long thick lashes that were the envy of females everywhere. Tanner and Taco were mesmerized by the sight below, their expressions portraying a blend of

disbelief, confusion, and dread. I wondered again about the sanity of our decision to move to the Alaskan Bush.

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The housing crisis of 2008 that culminated in the federal bailout of the Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac programs, sent shockwaves through the economy. These shockwaves had a resounding effect on the funding of school districts.

We had been living in Nevada for a year where my husband worked as an assistant principal. In that state, a third of the funds for education came from the gaming industry. When the economy floundered, the flow of casino enthusiasts dried up and so did the funding. Schools slashed programs; jobs were cut. The general mantra was “Last one hired, first one gone.” Keri was one of the first job fatalities. So, the hunt for employment began.

After numerous interviews, he was offered a principal’s job in a small town in Northern California not far from where he’d grown up. As Joe, the Assistant Superintendent, drove Keri around to show him the town, Keri asked how the economy had affected the district.

The man shook his head and said, “It’s hit us hard and we’re having to make cutbacks all over the place. My job barely survived the cuts, but next year I’ll probably be a principal again.”

“Great,” Keri thought. “Last one hired, first one gone. That means next year I’ll be unemployed again because he’ll get my job.”

When he returned home, Keri said, “Deb, I’ve got a job if we want it, but there’s a good chance we’ll probably be doing this again next year.” I groaned.

“I’m tired of moving,” I replied.

“Ya, I know,” he said.

As a child, I had moved a lot. My dad’s job was building an education program for our church and it had required frequent moves. Shortly after my twelfth birthday, I made my twenty fourth move when my parents packed up our family of eight and moved us from Canada to South Africa. We were there for a total of six years, living in four different houses. I’d attended a long list of schools by the time I was eighteen. During one stretch of my teen years, I went to five schools in two years. Because of the way school calendars lined up, I never did graduate high school—I just left and returned to the U.S. where I started college.

But my nomad lifestyle didn’t end when I left home. My first year and a half of college involved several apartments, then returning to Canada to help when my sister got ill, then down to California to work. That’s where I met my husband. He was a pilot in the Marine Corps. There was more moving, including two jaunts to Japan.

By the time Keri and I had our conversation about the job offer, we’d been married twenty-six years and had six children. We only had two children left at home; the rest were off at college or on service missions for our church. Years before, Keri had left the Marines and become a teacher and later a school administrator.

I was forty-nine years old and had moved sixty-two times. Because of all the moving, I didn’t have roots—but I sure had an incredible sky. I’d always been curious about the idea of having ties to a place, but I’d reassured myself over the years that a majestic sky was much better. However, I was beginning to envy those who could claim to be “from” somewhere. I wanted to stop changing houses and towns and states and

countries. I wanted to find a nice place to live out in the country somewhere and stay. Maybe even put down roots. But despite my desires, we were looking at another move. We just needed to decide where.

After a lengthy pause in our job conversation, Keri said, “You know, I was talking to some coworkers the other day, and they said that Alaska is pretty stable. Apparently, the economy hasn’t affected them as much. What would you think of the idea of moving to the Bush of Alaska?”

“Where?” I croaked.

“The Bush of Alaska,” he repeated.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because there’s work and we wouldn’t have to move in another year,” he explained.

“The Bush of Alaska?”

“Yup.”

“Can I think about it?” I asked.

“Sure. But we don’t have a lot of time because I told Joe I’d give him an answer by tomorrow afternoon,” Keri said.

The next day, Keri called Joe. “I really appreciate the offer,” he said, “but the thought of going through this again next year has us concerned.”

“I totally understand,” Joe said. “But aren’t you going to deal with that no matter where you go?”

“Actually, I’m applying in Alaska. From what I hear, they haven’t been hit as hard, so I’m looking at working in the Bush,” Keri said.

There was a momentary pause before Joe said with feeling, “Wow. I’ve always wanted to do that, but there’s no way my wife would go for it.” They laughed, Joe wished Keri luck, and they hung up.

I’d learned early in life that, while I couldn’t always control whether or not I moved, I *could* control my attitude about the move, and that usually gave me some control over the experience I had once I got there. So, I got excited about moving to the Bush.

“It’ll be an adventure!” I told Tanner and Taco. “It’ll be fun!” I don’t think they believed me at the time. And now, looking down as we flew low over the barren and frozen tundra, they *knew* I had lied. And I knew it too. What I had lauded as an educational opportunity and the adventure of a lifetime, now seemed like a really dumb idea.

Alakanuk—a tiny remote Yup’ik Eskimo village where my husband awaited us in a school-owned truck, and where we would call home for a time. In Yup’ik, Alakanuk means “wrong way”—and that was how I felt as we neared the snow-covered airstrip dug out of the tundra—that somewhere along the way we had made a wrong turn and were now headed towards who-knows-where.

My stomach lurched as the plane’s wheels made contact with the snow—not because of the landing, but at the realization that, like it or not, this was where we would stay. The inside of the unheated plane was hit with an arctic blast when the pilot opened his hatch and jumped out. The boys and I stayed put. Keri had been standing beside the truck, eagerly watching our arrival. As soon as we touched down, he took long strides towards the plane, an impossibly wide grin on his face. It took all his control to not break

into a run.

He stuck his head in the side door of the plane. “Hey, guys!” he almost shouted. “It’s great to have you here!” We stared at him in silence. His enthusiasm began to wane. He cleared his throat. “Hey, let’s get you home and warmed up. You must be frozen!” And he grinned again. The boys and I climbed out and followed him mutely.

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The village of Alakanuk, population 670, boasted three very tiny grocery stores (selling mostly canned food and dry goods), small Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches, a post office run by a sweet gray-haired lady (also a place for friends to gather and gossip—but closed for funerals, exceptionally bad weather, and urgent business), a dirt or snow airstrip (depending on the season), and a single gas pump located next to the river. The gas pump serviced the cars (there were about 10 working vehicles); the boats (there were a lot more boats than cars); and the snow machines and four wheelers, which were the main form of transportation. All the buildings were built on stilts, three to five feet off the ground, because every spring when the snow and ice melt, the Yukon River floods, sending water coursing through the streets.

The town also boasted one of the largest schools in the Bush—a K-12 school with 240 students, and Keri was the new assistant principal. The school was a spartan wooden structure painted light brown. Two of its sides were devoid of windows. A few stand-alone classrooms had been built about fifty feet from the main building. One year during the annual flood, the water got so high that one of the classrooms was lifted right off its pilings. When the waters subsided, the building dropped back down, but the pilings were at a precarious 45-degree angle. And that’s the way they remained. That classroom also

had a hole in the floor large enough to swallow a child's foot. But fifth grade continued to meet there because there was nowhere else to go.¹

We lived in teacher housing, which was a series of squat, single-story buildings huddled together. There was a triplex and a duplex, as well as some trailers placed in a U shape. One of the trailers had been burned out several years before and it sat vacant and rotting. Keri pulled the truck up near the middle door of the triplex. During the short drive from the airstrip, silence had permeated the cab of the truck.

“We're here!” he said, trying to hang onto his earlier excitement. And he jumped out to grab the luggage from the back.

I turned to the boys. “Okay,” I said, my fake smile back in place. “Let's see our new home.” We climbed out of the truck.

The inside was surprisingly welcoming. Large windows lined the front and back walls. It had an open floor plan with a living room, kitchen, and eating area. A hallway to the right led to three small bedrooms, a bathroom, and a laundry room. Towards the end of the hallway, a rope hung from the ceiling. I pulled on it and a hatch opened, lowering a folded ladder that led up to a spacious attic for storage. Even the boys seemed mildly impressed. They were also pleased to finally have their own bedroom. In his journal, Taco wrote, “I have a big full-size bed, desk, average size closet, and two small dressers all to myself. We have a cool attic.”

I was pleased with how clean the apartment was. During all our moves over the years, I'd learned to brace myself for several days of heavy cleaning when moving into a

¹ This school was replaced a few years later when the state built a new school in Alakanuk.

new rental. But Keri had been living there for three months, so he made sure it was ready for us.

We set the suitcases aside to unpack later. Winter in Alaska offered little daylight. That time of year, the sun didn't peek out until late morning, and even then, it didn't actually rise, but just ran along the horizon for a few hours and then disappeared from sight. With the shorter days, sunlight was highly valued so the four of us went out for a walk before it got dark. I gripped the inside of Keri's elbow for balance as we walked the paths made by snow machines and four wheelers. The boys were ahead of us, walking side by side, mostly in silence with their heads down, shoulders slumped, and hands buried in their pockets. They looked defeated, and my heart ached for them. I hoped desperately that things would improve as we settled in.

Chapter Two—First Day of School

The boys and I arrived the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, so we decided to wait until after the four-day weekend to start them in school. Wednesday was a half day at school, with the day's culmination being a big Thanksgiving feast that the school put on that afternoon. The entire village was invited, and it seemed like the entire village came.

As the boys and I got to the outside double doors of the school, a gaggle of children burst through, squealing and chasing each other down the ramp. We entered. The inside doors were propped open and we could see a crowd filling the large area. Some people sat at tables eating; others milled about, visiting. It was a festive atmosphere. We felt completely out of place. We were strangers in a strange land.

The meal was being served buffet-style in the school cafeteria. There were mountains of food piled on a long table against the far wall. There was turkey, ham, stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, pies, and more. It is difficult to get fresh food in the Bush, so much of the food had originated from cans or boxes. But even so, the lunch ladies must have spent a couple of days working on the feast.

We found Keri, but he was helping with the party, so we dished up and sat in the corner of a table where we ate in silence while all around us were boisterous and animated conversations. The boys bolted for home as soon as they had wolfed down their food. I sat in agony for several minutes, questioning the wisdom of this move and wondering if we would ever fit in. Finally, I got up and quietly cleared off our end of the table, dropping the paper plates in the trashcan. On my way out, I noticed a light on in the

kitchen. I knocked and then opened the door wide enough to look inside. There, sitting around a table were the four kitchen workers, visiting as they ate in peace. They froze mid-bite and stared at me. I flushed.

“I just wanted to say thank you for the meal. It was delicious,” I said. They looked at each other in surprise, and then back at me. But no one said anything.

Just when I decided that I’d committed some kind of faux pas, they smiled and one of them nodded and said, “Thank you.” I smiled back and then escaped for home.

The next four days were spent unpacking, relaxing, playing games, and watching DVDs. Monday morning came much too quickly.

I stuck my head into Tanner’s room. “Time to get up!” I announced energetically. “We’ve got a big day today!” Tanner groaned and rolled on his side, his back to me. “C’mon, time to get up!” I hollered. Then I repeated the same performance in Taco’s room and got the same response.

It took several “Time to get up!” announcements before they finally crawled out of bed, and then they dressed for school with the slowness and enthusiasm of men condemned to the gallows. By then, Keri had already left for school. I tried to keep up an animated “isn’t this fun?!” approach to the day. But by the time breakfast was over, my veneer was beginning to crack. The boys, with their bottomless stomachs and hollow legs, who could down a seven-course meal and then ask, “What’s for dinner?”, had barely touched their pancakes. I was worried.

“C’mon guys, let’s go,” I said, as I headed for the coat rack. They followed reluctantly, a sense of impending doom radiating from their very core.

Even though our apartment was only about 50 yards from the school building, the

short walk still involved donning winter gear and trudging through the snow. It also involved precariously climbing over a small bridge-type contraption which was really nothing more than a three-by-three-foot wooden platform with steps going up one side and down the other. The platform was set atop a huge pipe which ran across the ground of the teacher complex. In that area of the tundra, pipes weren't buried because the ground was impossibly frozen. So water, sewage, and natural gas pipes were simply laid on top of the ground and then structures were built over and around them.

Outside of the school, there was a slew of snow machines parked haphazardly, many with plastic two or three-person sleds attached to the back. Almost all the students traveled to school this way—piling on the snow machines and in the sleds. For an older student to drive their own snow machine would be like a kid driving their own car in the lower 48, but much more common. Most hauled their younger siblings with them or picked up friends along the way; a few came solo.

We walked up the ramp and through the solid double doors, into an entryway that felt cave-like—windowless, mildewy, and closed in. It was a different place from just a few days ago. I noticed for the first time that the walls were lined with lockers (about 20 on each side). The night of the party the metal double doors in front of us had been propped open, welcoming all to the festivities; but now they were shut tight. We walked through them and I felt uneasy in the eerie quiet of the now sullen and even formidable building. I looked around as if for the first time.

Offices lined the wall to the right. To the left was where we had attended but not participated in the party just a few days before. It was an open basketball court that doubled as the cafeteria. Basketball hoops hung from the ceiling at both ends, and against

the far side wall were cupboard doors where the cafeteria tables were stored. From where we stood, three steps led down to the basketball court/cafeteria, and they ran the length of the court and served as really short bleachers during games. The entire floor, with the exception of the wooden court, was covered in a worn and faded rust-colored carpet. We stood near the kitchen, and I could hear soft laughter and talking coming from behind the closed door and shuttered serving area. It must be the four kitchen workers. I cringed at the memory.

Keri stepped out of an office and walked towards us; his enthusiasm and grin had returned. “Hi guys!” he exuded a nervous energy. “Come on, let’s look at your schedule!”

We followed him into one of the offices where the school secretary, a beautiful Yup’ik woman in her early-to-mid-thirties, sat at her desk. She had long black hair pulled up in a loose bun, with tendrils of hair that hung down to frame her round face. She stood and smiled shyly when we entered.

“Deb, this is Stephanie,” Keri said. “She’s helping us get the boys situated.”

Clasping her hands in front, Stephanie said, “Welcome to Alakanuk.” Her voice didn’t carry the expressive vocal fluctuations that we were used to, but she spoke in the flat monotone timbre that is characteristic of the Yup’ik people. Stephanie’s eyes sparkled as she spoke, and I liked her instantly.

“Here are your schedules,” Keri told the boys as he took the papers that Stephanie held out to him. “Of course, you will be taking Yup’ik class together. But other than that, you will be in separate courses.” And Keri went over their schedule with them.

Alakanuk School struggled academically, in large part because there was a high

ratio of fetal alcohol syndrome among the student body. In order for our boys to be challenged, they were put with higher grades. So Tanner was with seniors and had some independent study classes as well. Taco, who was in seventh grade, was put in with freshmen and sophomores. After going over their schedule, they followed Keri out the door with the slow, weary shuffle of the doomed.

I turned to Stephanie. “I hope they’re alright,” I said.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” she said with a smile.

We chatted for a few minutes. I learned that she had two elementary-aged children and they lived in a small house right behind our apartment; I could see it from my kitchen window. Later, I would often see her children playing with their friends outside in the snow. In the spring, I laughed as they splashed their way across the lake that had formed from the melting snow, flailing water all around. Stephanie was often out with them, watching contentedly with the glow of a mother’s pride, or even playing at their side.

Stephanie was easy to talk to and we enjoyed sitting and visiting. If I had any questions, I knew I could ask her, and she would never laugh at me, no matter how silly or trivial I might sound. Questions like:

“So, I was awake half the night from wolves howling. Should I be worried?” I asked one groggy morning when I went in to school.

Stephanie smiled and said, “No worries. Just don’t go out when it’s dark, and you’ll be fine.”

“So, Keri’s and my anniversary is coming up. Is there somewhere we can go for dinner?” I asked on another day.

“Yes. Anchorage,” she said with a grin. Anchorage was five hundred miles away.

* * *

I tried to act calm when the boys walked through the door later that day.

“How was school?” I asked with forced restraint.

“Okay,” they mumbled on their way to their bedrooms. I followed, shedding my cool façade with each step.

“Tell me about your classes. Did you talk to any kids? What are your teachers like?” I gushed. Taco kept walking, but Tanner stopped momentarily and turned to look at me. His face was strained and haggard looking.

“How can he look haggard?” I wondered, stunned. “He’s only sixteen years old.”

I stopped and watched silently as my boys went into their own bedrooms and shut the door behind them. I stood for several seconds, unable to move. Finally, I continued down the hall to my own bedroom where I curled up on my bed and cried.

The boys had been dropped into an area that was completely foreign to them. New people, new land, new culture, new life. As the only white kids in school, our boys stood out like neon signs. And the fact that they were put in classes with kids above their age level didn’t help. As the days wore on, my boys were scrutinized by students, befriended by some, ignored by others, and bullied by a few.

Tanner’s tactic against the bullying was to befriend the two biggest kids in school. But even with that, he had a couple of tussles where he fought back, which ended the bullying for Tanner. But Taco, younger and smaller and without the benefit of friends, endured the bullying in stoic silence for several months. He was a target anytime he was alone, so he tried to stay near the office or where there were adults around. But he was

frequently tripped, shoved, and cussed at. He was sometimes caught in the entryway where metal doors closed off the world.

“F#\$@ing gussak!” the bullies growled as they shoved him into lockers.

He finally told Keri when the bullying got so bad that he was getting bruises on his body and bumps on his head. Keri spoke with the parents, and the overt bullying stopped. It was years before I learned about it.

Gussak, derived from the Russian word *Cossack*, was a derogatory Yup'ik slang meaning *white man*. Russian hunters were the first white people to enter Alaska. They flooded in beginning in the early 1740s, shortly after discovering Alaska's wealth of furs. The native population suffered terribly. Russian hunters killed many native Alaskans. They also brought diseases the natives had no resistance to, decimating large chunks of the population. The Russian hunters used the local tribesmen as virtual slaves, forcing the natives to hunt for them by threatening to kill their families if they didn't. Within a few years, the Russians had hunted the whales and walruses almost to local extinction, thus bringing on famine for the Alaskan natives.

In 1876 the United States purchased Alaska from Russia. The Native Alaskans were thrust from a Russian nightmare of excessive hunting and nature's exploitation, to an American arrogance that would try to eliminate Alaskan cultures. It didn't take long for the Native Alaskans to realize that, whether Russian or American, their enemies were always white.

Many Americans fell in line with the famous Civil War general, Philip Sheridan, who was quoted as saying, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Captain Richard Pratt, superintendent of one of the largest Indian schools, “softened” that sentiment to,

“Kill the Indian, and Save the Man” (Wallechinsky). In other words, “Americanize” them by taking any semblance of native culture and identity out of them.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tens of thousands of Native American children were forced to attend “assimilation” boarding schools. This included Alaskans. In school, the children were forbidden to use their native names, speak their native tongue, dress in their native clothes, or practice their own religion or culture. “They were...told they must abandon their way of life because it was inferior to white people’s” (Little).

Many of the children were kidnapped or forcibly removed from their homes and villages. The government subsidized schools to teach Native Americans, but the schools had to maintain a certain enrollment. If they didn’t have enough students, they went to great lengths to get more. “There were no holds barred to enroll the children. At first, they tried to recruit children through friendly home visits. When that didn’t work...agents, with the help of the police, patrolled the reservations looking for children of school age. Many times, they removed children as young as three years old from their homes and took them to the boarding school” (Laabs).

The forced assimilation petered out in the early 1900s, but the system left a devastating legacy. Tribal cultures were lost for an entire generation of Native Americans. One woman stated, “We Indians live in a gray world. We are not accepted by your culture and we are not familiar with our culture. That was taken from us. So we have nowhere to really belong” (Laabs).

Almost two centuries of abuse at the hand of the white man had left deep scars on the psyche of Alaskan Natives. Anger and hostility for the terrible deeds inflicted had, in

some instances, been passed down through the generations. And now, in Alakanuk, we felt the repercussions of those acts of horror inflicted so many years before.

Chapter Three—Zombie Fish

Probably the most memorable class of Tanner and Taco's school career was the daily Yup'ik class all students were required to take every year.

The first part of the year, the students studied the Yup'ik language, and the elders would come teach folklore or tell stories of what life was like when they were young. The second part of the year, things really got fun. As tradition dictated, the boys and girls were separated to work on different projects. The girls learned to do beadwork and embroidery, and they made special gloves and hats for ceremonial dancing. The boys learned to live off the land and make things like tools and traps.

Learning to live off the land is of utmost priority in the Bush of Alaska, and when the opportunity arises to practice these skills, all else is set aside. At the beginning of the school year, when a moose was shot near the village, the older students were taken out of school for the day and put to work. They skinned the moose, and the girls were given the job of tanning the hide to be used for ceremonial wear. The boys cut up the meat to be distributed among the elders. It was all part of the Yup'ik class experience.

Taco was disappointed to discover that he'd missed out on ice fishing. Tanner, who hates being cold, was relieved. A few weeks before our arrival, the Elders had come to class and taught the boys how to make ice fishing poles using short, thick sticks about 18" long. Some of the sticks were left plain; others were given fancy carvings and designs. The poles didn't have reels, but the heavy fishing line was tied to the end of the stick where a notch had been carved so the line wouldn't slip off the pole. The fishing line was six to eight feet long, because it had to pass through about four feet of ice before

it even hit water. The fisherman dropped the baited line into the water, and then pulled it out by hand when a fish was caught. Once they completed their poles, the boys were taken out of school and onto the Yukon for a day of ice fishing.

The boys' Yup'ik class was organized chaos because there were several projects going on at once, and the students could choose what they wanted to make. One available project was making an ulu, a traditional knife with a rounded blade that extends along a short handle. To work the knife, you grip the handle across your palm and “rock” the blade back and forth to cut. It works great when you know how to use it. In no time flat, natives can have a king salmon skinned, gutted, cut in strips, and ready for drying. They even use ulus to skin moose and other animals. Traditionally, the ulu would be passed down from generation to generation. It was believed that an ancestor's knowledge was contained within the ulu and thus would also be passed on. Back in the olden days, the knife was made from polished slate with a wood or bone handle, but nowadays the blade is made of metal.



Another available project was building wooden traps to drop into the Yukon and catch the strange Alaskan blackfish. That was the project that Tanner and Taco both chose to work on.

Alaskan blackfish look like ordinary, uninspiring fish. They are small, about 6-8 inches in length. Their most prominent physical characteristic is that their lower jaw juts out beyond their upper one, giving them the appearance of a tiny bulldog with fins. These odd fish captured our boys' imaginations because blackfish can breathe both in and out of water— and if frozen, they will come back to life. These traits make the blackfish ideal for living in the frozen tundra. But it also makes them weird—creepy even. It's like

having a miniature zombie bulldog swim around in your own backyard.

Since rivers in Alaska freeze every winter, survival can be an issue for fish. We learn from our elementary science classes that fish use their gills to “breathe” oxygen that they pull from the water. But winter in the tundra creates an oxygen crisis for fish. First of all, the thicker the ice, the less water there is for the fish to live in. And because the water is sealed up by the ice, it doesn’t have contact with the outside air—so the oxygen gets used by the fish but can’t be replenished.

Most fish become inactive, entering a state of suspended animation in an attempt to survive until the ice breaks up and the water once again becomes rich in oxygen. But the blackfish got creative. Over the millennia, they evolved to having a backup breathing apparatus that allows them to breathe air. And they have joined the muskrat in a rather odd survival partnership. The muskrat looks like a really small beaver with a skinny tail...or a giant rat, whichever way you want to look at it. Like beavers, they spend a lot of time underwater. During the winter, when the rivers and lakes first begin to freeze over, muskrats make a hole in the ice and push vegetation out of the hole. This creates a dome-shaped safe spot where the muskrat can sit and eat, but it can still dive back into the river through the hole. But in the frigid Alaskan winters, it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep the hole from freezing over. That is where the blackfish come in.

Because the blackfish can breathe air, when the river freezes over during the winter months, they are attracted to the muskrat holes. Those little fish hang around the holes in droves with their heads above the water, sucking in fresh oxygen, their fins moving nonstop. It is the constant movement of the fins that keeps the water churning and stops the ice from forming to plug up the muskrat hole. Everyone benefits.

The blackfish is an important part of many Native Alaskans' diet, especially during the winter when other forms of food are unavailable—and they use specially-made traps to catch them...the kind Tanner and Taco made in Yup'ik class.

These traps are made of two wooden pieces that fit together. The one piece is a type of funnel that guides the fish into the second piece which acts as a trap. In the spring and fall, traps are set in the rivers to catch the migrating blackfish. But in the winter, a hole is drilled through the ice and the trap is dropped into the hole. The blackfish swims up for a breath of fresh air, and in doing this, they swim through the funnel and into the trap. Since the fish are small, a single trap can hold a lot of them. An average sized trap like our boys made was about three feet long and could hold forty fish; a large trap could hold hundreds.

Once caught, the blackfish can be kept alive for long periods of time in a washtub, or simply frozen. This way they can be used as needed. The tricky part is killing them first. The boys' Yup'ik teacher told about returning from one fishing expedition with a trap full of blackfish. He was in a hurry, so he just threw the fish he'd caught into a bag and tossed them in the freezer. Several months later, he took the solid block of frozen fish out and plopped them in a frying pan to cook. He was in an adjoining room when he heard a crash in the kitchen. He ran in to find the frying pan on the floor, and a bunch of blackfish flipping and wriggling their way across the linoleum. They had come back to life and flopped right off the stove.

Whether a blackfish can be frozen and still live has been a hotly debated topic for some time. There are scientists who state that they've done experiments, and that once frozen, the blackfish does not come back to life. Perhaps they should get out of their lab

and do some fieldwork in the tundra. They can start with a freezer and a frying pan.

Chapter Four—A Million Shattered Pieces

About a month before we were to move to Alakanuk, I began having kidney problems. We discovered that I had pretty impressive kidney stones. Because of a history of other health issues, I was hospitalized and put through a procedure called extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy. That is where they beat the stones to pieces with focused sound waves, and the patient wakes up from anesthesia feeling like they've been kicked by a mule.

Since the village in Alaska was about five hundred miles from the nearest hospital, and it was only accessible by bush plane (weather permitting), I had to be completely recovered before moving there. So Keri went without us, and the boys and I moved in with my parents in Utah while I recuperated. Full recovery was going to take about three months, so we registered the boys in school. The next three months were a gift.

I am the eldest of six and was only fourteen months old when child number two came along, with the others following in quick succession. I shared my parents' attention with five younger siblings, some of whom demanded a lot of it. But during those three months of recovery, the boys and I had my parents all to ourselves. It was wonderful!

As soon as the boys left for school each morning, my parents and I headed out for our daily walk. It wasn't long, just a mile or two, but we enjoyed it. As soon as we walked back through the door, my dad hung up his leather jacket and then sat in the antique wooden chair at the edge of the living room. As I passed him to go downstairs for a shower, I always bent over to kiss him on his forehead, and he would smile up at me, his eyes sparkling. My dad's eyes were unique; they almost always sparkled, and his left

pupil was shaped like a teardrop. I cherished that teardrop.

My dad was about 5'10", but to me he was larger than life. He was brave, he was strong, he was my protector. When I was a child, he taught me to drink from a garden hose. He rescued me from the tops of trees when I climbed up but couldn't get down. He gave us kids under-ducks on the swing (pushing us high as he ran under the swing), which evoked shrieks of glee and had us begging for more. And we hung on for dear life when he got down on all fours to give us "bucking bronco" rides. When I was twelve, my dad swam into the Indian Ocean to rescue me from a rip tide, knowing we both might drown. When I was sixteen and we arrived home to find our house on fire, he ran into the burning building in search of my mother. My dad was my hero.

Just before my surgery, my parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. While many of their friends took cruises or went on elaborate trips to celebrate a fiftieth, my parents said they'd done enough traveling for ten lifetimes. All they wanted to do was get the family together. So, six kids plus spouses, thirty-four grandchildren (ranging in age from a few months to twenty-seven years old), and three great grandchildren all converged on their small house with a big back yard. It was quite a party. At about ten at night the cops showed up because neighbors had complained about the ruckus. I was impressed—especially considering we had a sparkling-cider-only-bar. My parents thought it was hilarious.

During most of my three-month stay, the days were relaxed. My parents and I visited, we worked on projects, and we played games. Our favorites were Rook and Cribbage. My mom and I did the daily newspaper crossword puzzle. I helped my dad clean up his computer files—a mundane job that was enjoyable only because we did it

together. Occasionally, the three of us watched TV. Matlock and Wheel of Fortune were two of their favorites. Matlock was rubbing off on my normally composed father. He'd recently started blurting out "Jackass!" when he got frustrated with someone. I guess he figured that if Andy Griffith's Matlock could get away with it, then so could he.

Finally, the doctor said I was healthy enough to make the move. At the airport, my parents were subdued. I think they hated seeing us leave. And I hated to leave them, but I knew I had to join Keri, even if it was in the frozen tundra. He'd gone up there for his job, and now it felt like joining him had become my job. Feelings of dread and hope battled it out within me as the boys and I left for Alakanuk.

* * *

Shortly after arriving in the village, I was hired as a tutor for students in fourth through sixth grade. My job was to pull students out of class to work with them one-on-one, helping them with letter recognition and basic reading.

I didn't have to be at work until ten, so every morning I called my parents around nine. We chatted about everything from life to the weather to the latest Matlock episode. Sometimes we did the crossword puzzle together, with my mom reading out the clues and me coming up with the answers.

On the morning of December third, ten days after arriving in Alakanuk, I called my parents several times but there was no answer. I figured maybe they had gone on their walk late, so I wasn't the least bit worried as I bundled up to leave for work. I would just call them at the end of the day. But I hadn't even taken off my coat when Stephanie found me and said I had a phone call. I assumed it was the parent of one of my students, so I still wasn't concerned. But as I rounded the corner going towards the office, Keri was

in the hallway looking for me. The moment I saw his face I knew it was going to hurt.

“What happened?” I choked.

“Sit down,” he said, leading me to the couch in his office and sitting next to me.

“Your brother Curtis called.”

“And?”

“Your parents were hit by a truck while—”

My wail of pain cut him off. He held me as my body shook. Stephanie ran into the office. “What happened?” she asked, a look of dread on her face.

“My parents got hit!” I wailed.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry!” she whispered. She sat down next to me and hugged me as I cried.

“Let’s get you home,” Stephanie said. She stood me up and walked me out the office door, her arm around my shoulders. I moved like a sleepwalker. Behind us, Keri scrambled, scooping up coats and backpacks, and then followed us.

As we neared the cafeteria, we passed one of the Yup’ik aides. She stopped, and with concern in her voice, asked Stephanie, “What happened?”

“Her parents were bumped,” Stephanie replied.

The woman’s face crumpled. “Oh no!” she gasped.

When we reached the double doors leading outside, Stephanie gave me a hug, and whispered “I’m sorry.” Keri guided me out into the cold and across to our apartment. He said later the thought flickered through his mind that he should have taken me home before telling me; but he was shocked over the news and wasn’t thinking straight.

Once inside, I was frantic to keep moving. I paced as I had Keri repeat everything

that Curtis had said.

“Deb, he didn’t tell me much. All I know is that your parents were on their morning walk, and they were hit while in the crosswalk with a green light. Some kid running late didn’t scrape the ice off his windshield. Ran a light and hit three people. Said he didn’t even see them,” Keri told me.

“How could he not see them?” I shrieked.

“I don’t know.”

“Where are they now?” I asked.

“They were taken to the hospital. Your dad is in surgery. Your mom is going to be okay,” he replied.

“How could he not see them?” I repeated quietly.

I called Curtis. They were all in a conference room, waiting for surgery to be over. He had some information, and I would learn more over the next few weeks.

My dad had gotten sidetracked that morning, so he wasn’t ready to leave on their walk when my mom’s friend, Carol, got to the door. After I left for Alaska, Carol had started walking with them. So my mom and Carol left, with the promise from my dad that he would catch up. That worked great, because Mom and Carol liked to walk slower and chat along the way; my dad liked to walk quickly and get more of a workout. My mom enjoyed the journey; my dad just wanted to get the job done. About halfway through the route, my dad caught up. He grabbed my mom around the waist and whirled her in a circle. “Oh, Dale!” my mom blushed. My dad laughed.

A couple of blocks later, they were crossing the road in the crosswalk, with the light, when they were struck by a pickup. My dad must have glimpsed the truck just

before it hit, because he shoved my mom hard. She flew back, receiving a glancing blow from the side of the truck. My dad was hit solid, and he was dragged seventy-five feet before the truck stopped. When my mom got to him, he was laying on his stomach, contorted, unconscious, and barely breathing.

Traffic stopped. Police, paramedics, and multiple ambulances arrived with sirens and lights. Carol's leg was a mess, so she was taken in one ambulance. My mom was in shock and had a large lump on the back of her head where she'd hit the pavement, but she wouldn't get in an ambulance. She refused to leave my dad's side. Finally, a policeman said he would drive her to the hospital right behind dad's ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, one of the first things they did was cut my dad's leather jacket up the back so they could remove it. My mom gasped and thought, "That's his favorite jacket! He's going to need that later!" When they got ready to move Dad from the road onto a stretcher, my mom, still in shock, said, "He's hurt bad, so I don't think you are supposed to move him!" They assured her that they'd been trained for exactly this situation.

My sister, Shawna, who lived the closest to my parents, got the call. She phoned Curtis and Angi, our brother and sister who also lived nearby. Curtis called the out-of-town siblings—Rachel (Idaho), Dave (Maryland), and me. Grandkids were called. Our daughter, Katrina, had just walked into her college class to take an exam when her phone started buzzing almost nonstop. Checking her phone, she saw three missed calls from cousins, and a fourth cousin was calling; he told her about Grandpa's accident. She grabbed her backpack and ran. The family had been mobilized. Local family was rushing to the hospital; Rachel was on her way down from Idaho; Dave and I were making flight arrangements.

Curtis arrived at the emergency room about fifteen minutes behind the ambulance. It was a trauma center, so the ER was quite large. He found my mom and Shawna, holding onto each other outside the room where Dad was being worked on.

“What are they doing to him?!” Shawna asked shakily.

“They’re doing CPR,” Curtis responded.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because he’s dying,” Curtis said flatly. Mom just stared at him blankly, not understanding. He may as well have been speaking Swahili. Shawna got angry.

“How do you know?” she snapped. “Who died and made you prophet?”

The medical staff had wanted Mom to be checked by a doctor because she was in shock and showed signs of a concussion, but she refused to leave her husband. Within a short time, family members converged on the ER. When Dad was rushed into surgery, the family was ushered into a conference room where they could wait together. Some sat in chairs, holding hands with those next to them. Others paced. That’s where the family was when I reached Curtis on the phone.

“How’s Dad?” I asked with no preamble.

“We don’t know. He’s still in surgery. We are waiting to hear.”

“The first flight out is tomorrow, and it’ll take two days to get home,” I said.

“Okay. Just get here soon as you can.”

“I am. When will the doctor be in?” I asked.

“No way of knowing,” Curtis said.

“As soon as he comes in, will you call me?” I asked.

“Of course.” And we hung up.

There was a bush plane leaving Alakanuk the next day, weather permitting. I could take that into St. Mary's where I would catch a larger plane into Anchorage, and from there I could catch an Alaska Air flight to the lower-48 early the following morning.

I was throwing laundry in when Curtis called back.

"Deb, the doctor just walked in," he said.

He put me on speakerphone so I could hear what the doctor said, but it was somewhat muffled, and I couldn't make out any of the words. Then there was a burst of noise on the other end, and I couldn't hear the doctor at all. Curtis got back on the phone.

"He didn't make it. He's gone," Curtis said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's gone."

"But where did he go?" I asked.

"He's dead, Deb. He died in surgery." It took a moment to understand what he had said. But when it hit, it felt like my heart shattered into a million pieces.

The doctors had restarted my dad's heart several times, but it finally refused to beat any more. His time of death was recorded as 1:10 PM—five hours after he was hit.

Numbness slowly washed over my body from my head on down. I sat on the couch, staring at the floor. Keri knelt in front of me and took my hands in his.

"I'm so sorry, Deb," he said softly.

"Huh?" I asked, slowly raising my gaze. The world's rotation had slowed. Everything was in slow motion and looked somehow skewed.

"I'm so sorry," he repeated.

The boys walked through the door. Stephanie had called them out of class and

told them they needed to go home, that their dad needed to talk to them. When they saw us sitting there, my face puffy and red, they stopped short. Keri told them what happened, but nothing he said registered in my brain. The boys were shocked. They looked back and forth between us, stared at each other, and then back at us. Keri stood.

“Deb, let’s lay you down,” he said, and gently helped me off the couch. He guided me to the bedroom, laid me on the bed, and pulled the covers over top. I lay on my side staring at the far wall but not seeing it.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked. I didn’t answer. “Try to get some sleep,” he said, and kissed my wet cheek.

It was late afternoon when I awoke. I lay there, not sure where I was. I heard voices. Deep voices. Gradually, awareness settled. I was in Alakanuk. The voices must belong to Keri and the boys. Was it time for work? Why was I already dressed? Then slowly, realization settled like a blanket—and it morphed to a crushing concrete slab that forced the breath from my lungs. The phone call. Dad is gone. My exploded heart.

I lay there for a while. The numbness that returned was a blessed relief. There was laughter from the other room. It seemed foreign, but at the same time reminded me that people I loved still lived and laughed and cared. I sat up slowly, got to my feet, and walked down the hallway. When I entered the living room, all laughter stopped.

“Mom, are you okay?” Tanner asked, concern on his young face. I tried to smile.

“Ya,” I lied.

“Hey Mom...we’re so sorry,” Taco said. And they came over and hugged me tight.

“I love you, Mom,” they both mumbled into my hair.

A short time later, there was a knock at the door. It was Stephanie and another woman from school; they had brought dinner for our family. I invited them in, and we talked for a bit. When I told them that my dad had died in surgery, it was like I was hearing it for the first time from a voice far away. When I said, “But at least I still have my mom” the pain inside me shifted slightly to make room for a trickle of relief.

That night, Keri and I told the boys that I would be flying down for the funeral, but because of the high cost of airfare, I would go alone. And I would stay to take care of Grandma and help her get back on her feet.

I had two sisters and a brother who lived within ten miles of her, but I don’t think it occurred to anyone (including myself) that I wouldn’t take care of things. As far back as I can remember, I had been the big sister, the teacher, the helper, the fixer, the caregiver. It defined who I was. Perhaps I thought that without it, I had no value.

The following morning, I dressed and packed early. Still reeling, I clung to routine—anything to bring normalcy back into our lives—so I sent the boys to school.

At the time I booked the flight I was told that the pilot had a couple stops before Alakanuk, but they would call us when he was about fifteen minutes out. We expected that call at any time, so Keri and I sat on the couch in silence, waiting, each of us lost in our own gloomy thoughts. I was dressed in full winter gear. As well as my regular clothes, I had on long underwear, wool socks, snow pants, flannel shirt, sweatshirt, an arctic jacket, arctic boots, and a hat with ear flaps. My gloves lay on the couch next to me.

Bush planes aren’t heated, so full winter gear is required. Not only do you sit in freezing temperatures while flying, but if the plane went down and you survived the

crash, you'd need to be dressed warmly enough to stay alive until you could be rescued.

We waited...and waited...and waited. Within a short time, I was sweating so I took off my hat and jacket. Still no phone call, so I pulled off my boots and sweatpants. Within the hour, I'd stripped down to my long underwear. Keri and I spoke haltingly. In protecting myself from pain, and fortifying myself for the days and weeks ahead, I had buried my emotions. What was left was a hard crust—and that was more bewildering to Keri than a sobbing woman. At least he could take care of a sobbing woman; he didn't know what to do with a hard crust. But I preferred the hard crust because it didn't hurt as much.

After waiting several hours, we got the call that the plane would be in shortly. I dressed quickly. Keri and I stood at the door looking at each other, but I turned my head away when I started to choke up and my eyes threatened tears. Keri picked up the bags which had been standing like sentinels along the wall, and he opened the door. The Village Agent was just arriving on his snow machine, pulling a sled. The Village Agent was the guy who collected mail from the planes and delivered letters to the post office and packages to the school and homes. He also gave people a ride to the plane. Unless he didn't like you; then you were on your own.

The Agent tossed the suitcases into the sled as Keri and I hugged each other. My hard crust crumbled as pain exploded from deep within my core. I held on tight for a moment and whispered, "I love you!" Then climbed on behind the Agent. As we sped away, I watched Keri standing in the snow alone watching me leave, hands in his pockets and shoulders slumped. Within seconds we had turned the corner and he was gone from view.

* * *

Two days later I landed in Salt Lake City, Utah. Chris and Katrina, our son and daughter, picked me up and drove me to my parents' house.

I desperately wanted my dad to be there. I wanted this to be a bad dream or some sort of sick joke. I looked around the living room. The wooden antique chair was empty. So was his recliner. I glanced in the kitchen. No dad. I walked down the hall towards his office. "Dad!" I hollered. There was no reply. My mom came out of her bedroom. "Debi Sue, you made it," she said, trying to smile. I threw my arms around her and we clung to each other.

The next few days blurred together. My mom and I chose a casket. My siblings and I planned the funeral. We visited and laughed at "Remember when..." stories. Like the times on safari when Dad risked life and limb to get better photos of lions and elephants. Or the time Mom and Dad were visiting Rachel and they watched a local parade. Lots of candy was thrown to the children, but Rachel's four-year-old daughter, Becca, couldn't get any, so Dad ran home, got in his car, and joined the parade. When he came to where the family was, he threw an entire bag of candy just to Becca.

I also learned more about what had transpired since Dad's death. The day Dad died, my sister, Angi, drove Mom home from the hospital. During the short trip, Mom kept saying, "That poor young man. I feel so sorry for that poor young man!"

When they arrived home, Angi said, "Mom, why don't you lay down?"

"No. I need to do something." Mom paced.

"Do you want to sit down and talk?" Angi asked.

“No! I just need to keep busy,” Mom said as she pulled out boxes of Christmas decorations. As she worked, she kept saying, “That poor young man! What’s going to happen to him?” She continued fretting about him, possibly because worrying about someone else was easier than facing her new reality, or possibly because the clean-cut young man reminded her of her own sons. The next day she asked to have a meeting with the boy. Curtis, Angi, Rachel, and Shawna went with her. Dave and I hadn’t arrived yet.

The twenty-one-year-old, Andrew Stevens, had recently returned from a church mission and was living with his parents. When my sister rang the bell, Andrew’s mother immediately opened the door. She held our mom in a long embrace and sobbed. Then Mom hugged Andrew, and he was crying. The dad, also crying, looked on, as well as two younger sisters and Andrew’s girlfriend. They all went into the living room and sat down.

My mom said, “I realize that holding onto anger will do nothing to bring my husband back. I know that it was an accident and I want you to know that I forgive you. I don’t want this to be the defining moment in your life. I want you to move forward, being more careful, and live a productive life.”

Curtis told Andrew of a friend of his who was responsible for an accident that killed someone. His friend was never able to move on and ended up making some poor choices that destroyed his life. Curtis said, “I hope you will learn from this accident, but move forward with your life.”

Angi said, “If my Dad were here, he would put a hand on your shoulder and look you squarely in the eyes and enthusiastically say, ‘Tell me about your mission!’ He would say that you need to ‘move onward and upward,’ and not define your life by the accident.”

When I asked my mom later why she didn't wait for me to arrive so I could go to the meeting, she said, "Because I knew I might not be able to do it later." My sister added, "Besides, you probably would have punched him."

To allow for travel, we didn't hold the funeral until about a week and a half after Dad's death. Friends and family flew in from across the country and down from Canada to be there. Our dad's life was spent serving others, including over a decade working with and heading up a church mission in Southern Africa. Many of his ex-missionaries, now in their 50s and with families of their own, flew in for the funeral. There were even representatives from Southern Africa. At the funeral, a crowd of over a thousand people filled the large church. My parents were well-loved.

We learned later that Andrew Stevens had attended the funeral. He sat near the back and sobbed throughout the service, devastated by the damage his carelessness had caused.

Those first few weeks were a blur of events, emotions, and pain. But there was one event that stands out in my memory. My sister, Rachel, and I both came from out of state, so we stayed at our parents' house. My brother, Dave, also from out of state, stayed with his in-laws who lived nearby. About a week after my dad's death, Rachel and I had our first argument ever. I'd fought with my other sisters plenty, but with Rachel, there was never anything to fight about. Maybe fighting was our way of striking out and trying to wake up from the nightmare we found ourselves trapped in. The argument lasted about thirty seconds, and neither Rachel nor I can remember what it was about, just that it happened.

Shortly after our spat, I heard a deep, muffled moan of pain. It wasn't a human

sound, but the broken cry of a wounded creature—a shattered, raw, animalistic howl. I found my sister prostrate on the bed with her head buried in a pillow, her body convulsing with sobs. She howled out her pain and anger—anger at a reckless kid and his deadly act, and at life’s unfairness. She sobbed as only the broken-hearted can. I held her and fed her Kleenexes. I didn’t tell her it would be alright, because I knew it never would be again.

I envied her ability to cry, to wail at life, at the world, at the injustice of it all, at God. But fear kept me silent. Fear of my emotions, fear of my anger, and fear that once I began to cry, I wouldn’t be able to stop. And my job was to take care of my mother and to hold my sister, to be strong. So I didn’t howl. I just buried the million pieces of my shattered heart and trudged on.



With my parents at the Salt Lake City airport just prior to flying to Alaska.

This was the last picture ever taken of my dad.

Chapter Five—Christmas and Beyond

Over the next couple of months, I took care of my mom and took care of business. I filed the life insurance paperwork, cancelled Dad's cell phone, took care of social security changes, dealt with the insurance companies, etc. My mom couldn't remember very much about the accident, so I went to the police station and obtained an accident report. We didn't learn much from it.

The medical bills came to almost \$750,000 for my dad's four-and-a-half-hour stay in the hospital so I sat down with a hospital administrator and went through the bills. It tore my heart to read the bare and cruel facts of how broken my dad's body was. His legs, an arm, and his pelvis had been crushed. If he had survived, he would likely have been bedridden for the rest of his pain-filled life. When the mortician prepared him for burial, my dad was put in a type of wetsuit to hold his limbs together and stop bodily fluids from leaking. All of these tasks, discussions, and discoveries wreaked havoc on me emotionally. It was like having a grappling hook jammed into my core and twisted. It ripped me apart inside. And it hurt. A lot. I kept burying more and more of my anger and pain, figuring I would deal with it later. But for the moment, I just needed to take care of my mom and make it through each day.

A few weeks after the accident, I was pulled over for speeding. I wasn't paying attention because my mind was elsewhere. I was driving my dad's car, and when I gave the registration to the young cop, he asked, "Ma'am, where did you get the car?"

"It's my dad's. I'm in town helping my mom with some stuff." I still had a hard time verbalizing my dad's death.

He handed the paperwork back and said, “I was at the scene of the accident. How’s your mom doing?” His words sucked the breath out of me, and it was all I could do not to break down and cry. I got out and we leaned against the car and talked about the accident and about how she was struggling. He told me that his brother had been killed in a similar accident, and how hard that had been on him and his entire family. We talked for quite a while. I gave him a hug when we parted. He did not give me a ticket.

* * *

I spent almost two months helping my mom, including over the Christmas holiday. Some evenings, when returning home after running an errand by myself, I parked in front of a neighbor’s house and just sat there. This house had an explosion of Christmas lights in the front yard, and Christmas music played from the bushes. I opened the car window to the frigid night air, drawing strength from the peaceful music. Then I drove home to my mom.

Every day or two I talked with Keri and the boys. They filled me in on how things were going for them. During Christmas break, it was too cold for them to go outside, so they spent most of their time sitting around the apartment playing the Wii that Keri had brought with him and hidden away until Christmas morning. Keri and I had always resisted the idea of video games in our house because we didn’t want time wasted. But before making the move to the Bush, we broke down and bought a Wii console with several games. It was a smart investment.

The guys were excited about care packages they’d received from people at church. Since we don’t happen to be Catholic or Greek Orthodox (the only two churches to be found in Alakanuk), there was no way for us to get to church every Sunday, so we

hooked up with a group who “met” over the phone. Every Sunday at 10 AM, about fifty people from across the Bush would call in to what we referred to as the Bridge Line. It was a conference call on steroids. Each week, we took turns giving talks and teaching lessons as we worshipped and learned together. It sometimes made for interesting meetings—especially when someone who was not teaching or speaking forgot to mute their phone. We had one meeting interrupted by grunts and then a flushing toilet. Things were silent for a bit after that one. I think the speaker had muted himself while he laughed. We were wailing with laughter at our house. Another time, it was difficult to hear the speaker over some guy’s heartbeat. We could hear him walking through the snow, and he must have dropped the phone into his shirt pocket because the sound of his heartbeat dominated. The longer he walked, the faster his noisy heart pumped.

And although most of us had never met our church-mates, we were still a somewhat close group. When the others heard about my dad and that Keri and the boys were going to be alone for Christmas, support packages began arriving, filled with everything from games to ornaments to homebrewed fireweed jelly. One box even had everything needed for a homemade Christmas dinner in boxes and cans; just mix and heat. All of this must have taken great effort—especially considering they were sent from the Bush where things were difficult to come by.

I always looked forward to hearing Keri and the boys’ voices. One day when I called around Christmas, Taco answered.

“Hey, Mom!”

“Hi Sweetie! How is everything going?” I asked.

“Oh, pretty good. The same old thing.”

“Ya? Like what?”

“Oh, you know...just playing Wii. Dad still sucks at Mario Kart. It’s pretty funny.”

“Does his forehead wrinkle up and his eyes get all scrunched?” I asked.

“Ya. And he gets all frustrated!” Taco laughed.

“Are you eating healthy?”

“Ya, I guess. We’re not just eating candy,” he said.

“Well, that’s a plus. What else is going on?” I asked.

“Not much. Just playing games and setting up the tree.”

“You got a tree?! That’s great!”

“Not really. It keeps falling over,” Taco said.

“Where did it come from?” I asked.

“Dad found it, and it’s a pain. But you know Dad—he really likes having a tree.”

In the tundra, there aren’t any trees because it’s too cold and the wind is too strong for much of anything to grow. There are only scraggly alder bushes. But Keri found an artificial tree in a storage room of the school. That is, he found the top part of an artificial tree. The base had been lost long before, so the thing was just sitting there collecting dust. He figured it was still usable, so he took it home. The tree was over six feet tall, and the metal rod that made up the trunk of the tree ended in a point at the bottom. No problem. They simply kept it upright by duct taping it to the wall and the couch. That worked fine, except that every time they jumped or wrestled or moved too much, the tree came tumbling down. Considering the size of the thing, that was quite a crash. With three guys in the house, that tree fell down a lot. But they kept putting it back

up and taping it in place. I think even Keri was glad to haul it out at the end of Christmas break.

Christmas came just twenty-two days after Dad's death. During that time, I had done some shopping to fill Mom's and my stockings, and I'd bought some gifts for Mom. I also knew where Dad had hidden his gift to her. My last evening home, before flying out to Alaska, Dad and I had gone shopping because he wanted to get Mom a pair of soft comfy pajamas. He chose a pair of deep-burgundy, silky pajamas. It was the first time in fifty years that he went Christmas shopping before December 20th. He planned to go shopping later with my sister, Shawna, so she could help him find a new outfit for Mom. They never got the chance. But at least I had the pajamas he had bought her.

Christmas Eve, mom announced, "I don't want to do Christmas this year. I'm just not up to it."

"That's totally fine, Mom. We don't have to do Christmas," I said. I left all the gifts and stocking stuffers in my bedroom and passed along the message to my siblings that Mom just needed time.

Christmas morning, I woke up to find a knee-high sock with my name pinned to the front, stuffed to overflowing and sitting on the downstairs couch.

"Mom, what is this?!" I hollered. She walked downstairs, smiling.

"Last night, I realized that I'm not the only one here. You left Keri and the boys so you could take care of me. You need to have a Christmas," she said.

"Cheater!" I laughed. And I ran to my bedroom to grab all the Christmas loot I'd been hiding. We had a nice quiet morning, visiting and opening gifts. She cried when she heard the story of Dad choosing the pajamas. My siblings and many of the grandkids

called throughout the day. Later that afternoon, I brought out a shoebox of poems.

Since early in their marriage, Dad had written Mom a Christmas poem; some years, he didn't get it written until Christmas Eve. It was always the last and more anticipated gift to be opened. Each year, she read it aloud to the family as my dad watched her, his eyes bright with love. This would be the first time in fifty years that she wouldn't have a poem from Dad. So it was suggested that family members each write a poem to Mom that year. The shoebox was full of folded papers, each with their own personal masterpiece. Mom wept as she read them aloud.

I had flown down on an open-ended ticket. Eventually, I booked my return trip. About a week before leaving, I asked all the local siblings to come to the house for a meeting.

"I need to get back to my family," I said. "But before I go, I need to know that Mom will continue to be taken care of. I know that everyone here loves her, but I also know that everyone is busy. What I don't want to happen is for her to be overlooked or have people assume that someone else is taking care of her." Everyone nodded in agreement. "I have a plan," I continued. "Let's divvy out Sundays. There are four of you locally, so you can each take a Sunday to have Mom over for dinner. For simplicity, we will start at the eldest, and move down. That way you will always know which week is yours. When there's a fifth Sunday in the month, please make sure someone has her over."

They liked the idea. And Mom appreciated her children's concern. She wondered aloud, "How do people survive something like this alone?"

* * *

I returned to Alaska about two months after Dad's death. I was physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. I realized later that, while my siblings were able to return home and process their grief, I hadn't cried since the day I flew out for the funeral. Instead, I'd stuffed my pain and anger, ramming it deep inside, so that I could focus on taking care of my mom and taking care of business. But the pain didn't fade away, and the anger didn't dissolve. Instead, they festered. They melted together until they were a molten lava, just waiting to explode. I kept pushing them deeper, and they got hotter, and the pressure more intense. But the strange thing was that, with all that anger simmering below the surface, for the most part I felt hollow. Empty. There was little that I cared about. That was my condition when I landed back in Alakanuk, the land of eternal winter and no sun.

On my second day back, I returned to work. That morning, before leaving for school, I called to check on my mom. Even though she tried to sound chipper, I knew she wasn't doing well. I had a knot in my chest when we hung up. All day, I was distracted. I didn't want to be in Alaska. I didn't want to be at my job. I didn't even want to work with my students.

During the last period of the day, I was walking towards the double doors leading outside when I saw a group of boys. Taco was among them. They were all huddled around the school jock and were intently looking at his phone. I peered around a couple of heads to see what the attraction was. And there, on his screen, was an animated porn clip.

My hand shot out and I grabbed the kid's phone. They all looked shocked; they hadn't realized I was there.

“Get to class!” I yelled at them. I was livid—not because they’d been watching porn. I was livid because they’d been showing porn to my son. Pointing at the offender, I ordered, “You—come with me!” Some of them, including my son, took off running; some hung around to watch.

“Hey, I want my phone back!” He was putting on a show for his fan club.

“Get to the office. Now!” I ordered again. He looked around at his fan club.

“You can’t take my phone away!” he challenged. “You don’t have any rights.” That’s when I snapped, and the dormant lava exploded from deep inside. Dropping the phone, I grabbed the boy’s shirt and slammed him up against the lockers. He suddenly looked fearful. Even though he was about six inches taller than me, he didn’t resist—possibly because he saw something within me that was frightening.

“If you ever get near my son again, I’ll kick my boot up your butt so far you’ll never get it out,” I said in a low growl. “You keep your filth to yourself. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” he croaked, looking down at me. I had a firm grip on his shirt collar, my fists against his neck and my forearms pressed into his chest.

“Stay—away—from—my—son,” I repeated, my grip tightening.

“I will! I swear!”

“Get out of here,” I said in disgust, letting go of his shirt. The boy took off at a run. His fan club had already scattered.

I picked up the boy’s phone and walked to Peter’s office. He was the principal. I set the phone on Peter’s desk, told him I was resigning, and told him what happened. I didn’t leave anything out. He was stunned.

“You know I have to fire you, right?” he said.

“Ya. I know,” I shrugged. And I walked out of the school, glad that I didn’t have to return. Later that evening, Peter phoned me.

“The community is pretty upset. Would you be willing to come to a meeting and talk with them?” he asked.

“Ya, Sure.”

I felt dead inside so didn’t care what the community thought. I had become a vast void—a boundless emptiness surrounded by skin. It would take months of healing before I would recognize how my actions had affected others. I was a stranger who had come to a close but fragile community and had threatened one of their own. And to make things worse, I had reinforced their belief that the enemy is white. This hurt the educators, the students, the school, the village. It also hurt my family because they still had to go to school and work. But at the moment, I was unable to see beyond my own emptiness.

The next afternoon, I went to school to face a large room full of scowling faces. A few were teachers; almost all were Yup’ik. I stood against the side wall. Keri put his arm protectively around my shoulders.

Peter stood at the front of the room. “Thank you for coming. I know you are aware of what happened yesterday involving one of our aides, who no longer works for the school. She is here to talk to you, and you can ask her any questions you want.” He seemed relieved to sit down again.

I walked to the front of the room. I could feel hate radiating from them like a desert sun, so intense it was palpable. I had no idea what I was going to say, so I just began talking.

“First of all, I want to say that I am sorry for my reaction yesterday. It was completely unprofessional,” I began. They glowered even harder and the hate radiated more intensely. Suddenly, my emotions welled up and I began talking from my heart. “When my dad died, it broke my heart,” I said. “It hurt everyone in my family. And one of the things I have experienced is frustration over not being able to stop my dad from being hit or my mom or siblings from hurting. Someone killed my dad and hurt us all, and there was nothing I could do to protect them.” I was expressing thoughts and emotions that I hadn’t even processed or recognized until that moment. I continued. “Yesterday, when I saw a student showing my son pornography, I was outraged. To me, pornography is a terrible thing. Here was someone hurting my son. And I reacted. All of the anger I’d felt about someone hurting my dad, suddenly exploded in my reaction to this student harming my son.” I talked a while longer and then sat down. The heat of hatred that I’d felt earlier had diminished substantially.

After the meeting, most of those leaving smiled at me and touched my back or shoulder on their way out. Several of the women even gave me a hug. Only a few left without contact. Peter was ecstatic—the meeting had been a success and he was in the clear.

Over the next few weeks, I sunk deeper into depression. I had always taken the sun for granted. But in Alakanuk winters, the sun seemed to be MIA for most of the day. I was in mourning for the sun. I’ve always loved being outdoors, but the harsh conditions made that nearly impossible. Besides the frigid temperatures, it simple wasn’t safe to be outside. Wolves were a problem. The previous winter, a teacher in a neighboring school district had gone out jogging by herself and was attacked by wolves. By the time they

found her body, there were only pieces left. So I was stuck inside all day, every day, mostly by myself. And I wasn't very good company.

Meanwhile, Keri's job was taking its toll on him. While most of the locals were friendly and accepting, there were a few parents and students who despised whites. Getting cussed at and threatened had been a normal part of Keri's job since his first day in the village. Months of the daily grind was beginning to get him down. Neither one of us was in great shape.

One evening at home I snapped, and all my frustrations spewed out. I cried and wailed that I hated Alaska, I hated the village, I hated the dark, and I hated being stuck indoors all the time. I hadn't left the apartment in weeks because I *couldn't* leave the apartment. There was nowhere to go, and even if there was somewhere to go, I couldn't go alone. Wolves. Darkness. Frostbite temperatures. No friends. Loneliness. Heartache. My dad dying. It all came out in one massive, unending explosion. Keri started to yell back.

"It's not my fault your dad died!" he yelled. "I wasn't the one who hit him! And I'm sorry you lost your job, but you're the one who blew it at school!" He kept yelling, all of his stuffed frustrations and anger exploding out. I don't remember much of what he said, just how he looked. His face turned purple, his temples pulsated, and spittle shot from his mouth. I was fixated on the spittle.

The yelling wore itself out, and we went to bed, not speaking to each other. But neither of us slept much. The next morning, Keri left for work at 4 AM. I felt miserable all day, regretting the fight. At 2:30 that afternoon, shortly after school let out, he walked through the door.

“C’mon, Deb!” he hollered. “Let’s go!” I came out of the back room.

“Go where?” I asked, suspiciously.

“Cross-country skiing. You said you need to get out of the house, so let’s go. The school has skis, and we’ve got about an hour and a half of sunlight!” he said.

“Um, I don’t know how to cross-country ski.”

“So, I’ll teach you. C’mon!”

“Uh, okay,” and I ran to get into my winter gear. Keri grabbed his rifle and revolver in case of wolves, and headlamps in case we didn’t get home before the sun dropped off the horizon.

Several years before, the school had bought about twenty pairs of skis with the idea that they would implement a cross-country program, but the students hated it, so the skis sat in a closet, largely unused. For the rest of the winter, Keri went to work at 4:00 most mornings so that he could get away and take me cross-country skiing in the afternoon. Taco often came with us. Tanner never wanted to come; he hates the cold. The locals thought we were crazy. They couldn’t understand why we would intentionally go outside to ski around, just to come back home again.

Chapter Six—Snow Globe

Cross-country skiing was a life saver. Every afternoon I waited in anticipation for Keri and the boys to come through the door. Most days I was already dressed in winter gear, ready to grab the skis and head out. Since Tanner was usually the only one who stayed behind, his job was timekeeper. If we didn't return within an hour of losing sunlight, he was to alert someone so they could send out a search and rescue party. We always returned.

We'd usually ski south and follow one of the tributaries of the Yukon River, exploring a different area each day. We never saw any wolves or bears while out skiing. But we did see other forms of wildlife—like people racing around on snow machines, and a crazy bush pilot.

Snow machines were the primary form of winter transportation. When I'd see one of those machines whipping past, I often felt a pang of envy. To be able to travel and leave the village looked like the ultimate in freedom.

I never did get good at skiing, but I got better. The biggest challenge was getting out and then back into the village. Some of the gas and sewage pipes that lay on top of the ground were quite large and made a tall mound of snow to maneuver over. Keri and Taco managed it fine, but I had a hard time staying upright while pushing myself over and down that mound. By the time we got back from skiing, I was so tired that I often took my skis off and sat on the mound to catch my breath, then threw one leg over to straddle it, followed by the other leg, and hiked the short distance home, carrying my skis.

One Saturday, it was just Keri and I because Taco wanted to stay home with Tanner and play Mario Kart. When we left, the boys were in an intense competition, racing each other around a track in search of powerups. Since there was no school, Keri and I left as soon as the sun hit the horizon, so we got in a few hours of skiing. By the time we turned back for home, I was already tired. We were crossing an open, flat area about a mile from home when my ski caught on something and I started tipping. In trying to catch my balance, I somehow crossed my skis and I went down hard—face first. I lay there, a tangle of skis, limbs, and poles. Since my feet were buckled into my skis, I couldn't roll over. And I couldn't push up because my legs were crossed. So I lay face down in the snow, one pole digging into my ribs and the other pole rammed against my throat, utterly stuck. I started to giggle and then burst out laughing at my predicament. My body shook with laughter, which was muffled because my face was half buried in the snow. Keri thought I was crying.

“Are you alright, Deb?” he asked as he skied over to help. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I'm just stuck!”

“Okay, let me unhook you. Don't move.”

“No chance of that” I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

Keri stooped over and tugged at my bindings. As soon as my feet were free, I rolled over and lay on my back, still chuckling. Keri grinned as he shook his head.

“You sure you're okay?” he asked.

“Yup.”

I pushed my skis and poles out of the way and made a snow angel. Then I lay still, arms spread wide and eyes closed as I enjoyed the unfamiliar feeling of the sun on my

face.

“Deb?” Keri said.

“Hmmm?”

“You ready?”

“Mmmm. In a minute,” I mumbled. “This is nice.”

Keri unbuckled his skis and sat down beside me. We stayed motionless, listening to the music of the Bush. A cold breeze rustled the alder bushes. From overhead we could hear the distant throaty sound of geese. But beyond that was the perfect silence of life far from traffic and crowds. The Bush of Alaska was Mother Nature in one of her purest forms. Unmarred. Barren but still beautiful. In that moment, our world was perfect.

Gradually the numbing cold of snow seeped through my winter gear. I stirred.

“I guess we’d better be going,” I said.

“Ya,” Keri replied. He stood and reached down to help me up. Then he turned as the faint high-pitched drone of a bush plane suddenly got louder. The thing was swooping down on us. Keri dove on the snow and it passed so close to us that I could see the rivets on its underbelly. Then it veered back up and continued its path to some distant village. I could almost hear the pilot laughing.

I thought back to the flight I took when I left Alakanuk to go to my dad’s funeral. I sat in the copilot’s seat up front in the six-seater plane. Even in my winter gear, I was shivering. I’d been sitting alone for several minutes while the pilot and the Village Agent chatted as they unloaded the mail.

Finally, the pilot climbed in. He grinned at me as he started the plane.

“How long have you been in Alaska?” he shouted over the noise of the engine.

“Not long,” I replied. The plane raced down the short, snow-packed runway and rose into the sky. We flew in silence for a while. It still amazed me the way the tundra seemed to stretch on forever.

“Hey, let me show you some of Alaska’s great beauties!” the pilot shouted, and he went into a shallow dive. Below us were several large moose. During the summer, the animals tend to be loners; but during winter they stay together. The moose ran, trying to escape the low-flying aircraft. The pilot laughed. “I love this job!” he said. Even through the overwhelming numbness of grief that dulled all emotion, I felt a flicker of anger that he would intentionally frighten animals. Now, laying in the snow, staring at the rivets passing overhead, I wanted to slug the guy.

* * *

One day Keri exploded through the door. “Deb, one of the teachers ordered a snow machine and now she doesn’t want it,” he said. “What do you think?”

“You mean buy it?” I asked.

“Ya!”

“Oh my gosh, we can leave the village,” I said softly. Then I gasped and my hands started flapping like they’d taken on a life of their own. I was bouncing up and down. Keri looked at me strangely. “We can even go to Emmonak!” I squealed.

Keri laughed. “Sure. If you want to,” he said.

Emmonak was the nearest village to Alakanuk, about ten miles up the Yukon

River. It was about the same size as Alakanuk and had the same amenities—two or three small grocery stores, a post office, a clinic, a couple of churches, and a gas pump. It wasn't that I *wanted* to go to Emmonak that got me so excited; it was the realization that I *could* go.

The only catch was that the snow machine was in Pilot Station—a tiny village over one hundred miles away. In the lower 48, a distance of one hundred miles wouldn't be a big deal—but most of the Bush consisted of rugged terrain, a lot of wildlife, and no roads. The only “easy” way in or out of Alakanuk was by bush plane—and a bush plane can't transport a snow machine. So Keri did what most everyone in that situation did—took a road trip without the benefit of roads.

Keri had become friends with two schoolteachers, Guy and Josh. Guy taught science in the upper grades. He was short and stocky and sported a thick head of gray hair and an equally thick mustache. He was from the lower 48 and many years before, he and his then-wife had moved to Alaska to teach. A few years into the experience, they relocated to Alakanuk where he got involved with another teacher—a soft-spoken, petite and beautiful Native Alaskan. His wife divorced him, and Guy married his new love. When we met them, they were counting down the days to retirement at the end of the school year. They'd already bought a house near Anchorage, which meant there were roads so they could drive places. No more relying on “weather permitting” bush planes.

Josh was at the other end of the spectrum. He was an elementary school teacher. Tall and thin with dark hair and an irrepressible grin, he was young and single and had been in Alaska only a few years. He enjoyed life and relished adventure.

The previous summer, Josh had climbed Denali, aka Mount McKinley. McKinley

is the official name, but Denali is what it's called throughout Alaska. Denali is an Athabascan word for "great one." And it is great. While Mount Everest claims to be the highest mountain, Denali is the tallest—almost 6,000 feet taller than Everest. It's just that Denali's base is much closer to sea level. Imagine two guys standing next to each other, but the shorter person stands on a stool, making him "taller." Now you get the idea of Denali vs Everest.

When Keri mentioned the snow machine conundrum, Guy and Josh offered to take him to pick it up. So early one morning, the three of them headed out through the dark for Pilot Station. On the way out, they drove two snow machines; Josh drove solo, and Keri sat on the back of Guy's machine. They drove cross country, following the frozen Yukon River out to Pilot Station, sometimes riding on the river and sometimes on land. At one point, they dropped down a steep bank to the river, but to reduce strain on the skis, they took it at a sharp angle. Josh navigated it just fine. But when Guy and Keri hit the steep slope, their extra weight made the snow machine tilt. Guy thought it was going to roll, so he bailed, shooting off like a spring and leaving Keri sitting atop an unmanned machine. By leaning way over to the other side, Keri was able to keep it upright as it coasted to a stop. He twisted around in the seat to spot poor Guy, buried in snow and feeling rather foolish. He looked like a giant red-faced marshmallow. Keri and Josh about fell off their seats, they were laughing so hard.

That time of year, the sun didn't peek out until about 11:00 in the morning, and it ran along the horizon for a few hours before it disappeared from sight. About eighty miles into the trip, while the sun was making its horizontal run, Josh stopped his snow machine and motioned Guy to pull up alongside.

“We’re almost to the spot,” he said.

“Oh crap,” Guy responded.

“What spot?” Keri asked.

“There is a spot up here where the two rivers meet,” Josh began.

“It’s bad!” Guy interjected.

“Ya, it is. The water is sub-zero temperature, but it doesn’t freeze. Anyway, you’ll see for yourself. People say that every year someone falls in and dies, sometimes more than one,” Josh explained.

“The trail goes right along the side of the river, so we’ve got to be real careful,” Guy said. “We can’t veer or slip or get distracted at all.”

“Yup,” Josh said. “Ready?” Guy nodded, and they took off. But this time they were drove slower, sat up straight, and there was an intensity in their concentration. And when they got to the point a short time later, Keri was stunned.

The point where the two rivers met, or, more correctly, collided, was a bizarre and treacherous patch of water. The water in this spot flowed so quickly and churned so violently that it did not allow solid ice to form, even in subzero temperatures. Instead, the freezing water roiled over and around chunks of ice. So there, in the middle of the frozen tundra, was a section of unfrozen water—a death knell to the unsuspecting traveler. Even getting near it could prove fatal because what ice did exist was thin in spots. Riding alongside that section of water felt eerie. Otherworldly. They were all relieved to get past.

They stopped for gas at the village of Saint Mary’s, a community of about 500 people. It was perched on the Andreafski River, a few miles from where it emptied into the Yukon River.

When they got to Pilot Station, they picked up our snow machine and didn't waste much time before heading out for home. Since they were all on their own machines now, they made even better time on the return trip, arriving home around midnight.

The machine was an extra-long model, easily seating three adults. It also came with a sled which we usually kept attached, since there were four of us. It wasn't built for speed like Josh's model; it was more of a station wagon than a race car. But it had a large, quiet engine and it suited us just fine.

With the arrival of our snow machine came a feeling of new-found freedom. It meant we no longer lived in a tiny snow globe, restricted to walking distance. We now lived in a B-I-G snow globe, restricted by a five-gallon fuel tank and potentially nasty weather. But the difference was liberating. We'd go on weekend "drives" to get out of the house and experience the beauty of the tundra. Occasionally we rode into Emmonak, just because we could. In our boys' minds, the snow machine took the place of the family car. One evening we all ran out the door to jump on the machine and drive to a village celebration. On his way through the door, Tanner yelled, "Shotgun!" Without a pause, Taco hollered, "Sled!" And they jumped aboard.

Keri grabbed every opportunity to take the snow machine out for a spin. One day Keri and Guy drove about fifteen miles from the village to a single mountain that jutted up from the flat land. Josh rode behind Keri, and his skis were tied onto the sled behind. Once at the mountain, Josh strapped on his cross-country skis, and he skied home.

* * *

The longest trip Keri and his friends made was an expedition that spanned almost 300 miles of wilderness. Their journey took them down frozen rivers and tributaries,

across desolate snowy tundra, along the edge of the Bering Sea, and over mountain passes.

Armed with extra gas cans, and tools in case of mechanical failure, they raced along the frozen Yukon River and its tributaries, and then took off cross country, heading for the mountains. Their first stop was to be Scammon Bay, a tiny village nestled at the base of the first mountain that started the coastal mountain range.

It was early April so sunless days were a thing of the past. When they made this trip, there was about twelve hours of daylight, with the promise of constant sunshine soon to come. The deep snow covering the tundra stretched out like an endless sea of white waves of glitter beneath the bright sun.

The beauty was captivating, and the brilliant white gave the illusion of the ground being somewhat flat. This illusion of driving over level terrain was so deceptive that they were caught completely off guard when the ground suddenly vanished from beneath them, and they were airborne. The riverbank simply dropped away. Fortunately, they rode out their “flight” without any damage to people or machines.

When they reached Scammon Bay, they filled up on food and gas. Even the smallest of villages offered a grocery store, although some were little more than a room or two. Scammon Bay was on an inlet, somewhat sheltered from the storms that rage over the Bering Sea. The village was basically divided in half. Part of it was built down along the coast, not far from the beach. A few homes, the gas pump and small general store were there. The airstrip was nearby, beginning on the beach and then running a short distance inland. Behind that section of village were some rugged cliffs, and atop them was where the rest of the village was located, including the new school. A road connected

the two sections of town.

Leaving Scammon Bay, Keri and his friends followed the coastline around the inlet to the open Bering Sea. They caught a trail that took them up over a mountain and down the other side where they continued following the coastline. About 50 miles later, they reached Hooper Bay, a large community of just over 1,000 people.

The city of Hooper Bay had much to brag about. They boasted a regional airport, which meant they had a longer runway than is found in most villages in the tundra. This was a big deal. The longer runway meant that larger planes could land, which made it possible for cargo (such as snow machines) to be flown directly into Hooper Bay. And they had what we called a permanent airport because the runway was paved and there was even a small building for people to sit in while waiting for their flight. It was quite the vanguard town. However, life in Hooper Bay could be frustrating because much of the area was without indoor plumbing. Instead of flushing toilets, most houses used “honey buckets”—a bucket or portable toilet usually set in the corner of a room. The bucket was routinely hauled out and dumped into a collection bin. Basically, they had indoor outhouses that required frequent emptying—and there are some odors that even the best honey bucket system simply cannot mask. But the city was working on the plumbing problem, so the future held promise.

The coastline of the Bering Sea is varied and beautiful. Keri, Guy, and Josh spent part of the afternoon walking along a cold and windy beach. The black sand was so fine, it felt almost muddy. They found some beautiful shells, including several black sand dollars.

Since hotels are unheard of in the Bush, the three of them spent the night sleeping

in Hooper Bay's brand-new K-12 school. The old one had burned down a couple years previous; rumor claimed it was set fire to by some disgruntled kids. The new school was huge by Bush standards, serving about 450 students. It was a two-story building with big wooden pillars and a lot of windows. The front of the school had glass walls, and the entryway was open to the second floor. Keri and his friends spent the night camping out on the floor of one of the classrooms, sleeping on air mattresses the school kept on hand for just such an occasion. That was considered VIP accommodations.

The following day they headed for home. This time, instead of going cross-country, they followed a trail that took them over mountains and through villages. Along the way, they ran across and explored an old abandoned shack that was too small to even hold a bed. It was run down but still standing, clutching doggedly to the side of a slough.

At one of the villages, along with buying food and gas, they stopped by the school where they met up with the shop teacher, a friend of Guy and Josh's. This guy was the king of metal shop—he had somehow built a master program from next to nothing. Each year, the twenty-or-so high schoolers at this small K-12 school built an airplane that actually flew. It's a bush plane, which is perfect for the area since bush planes are the main form of transportation. At the end of the year they sold the plane and used the money to buy materials for the following year's bush plane project.

The three continued along an inland route and then swung back over to Scammon Bay. The rest of the trail home shadowed the coastline. They passed the house of a couple who'd had a business in the lower 48, and when they retired, they decided to escape the rat race, so they moved to the middle of the tundra. They built a small house along the trail, basically in the dead center of nowhere, and had been there thirty years. The house

looked like it was pieced together from odds and ends, like a patchwork quilt. They ran a self-appointed way station, opening their door, day or night, to anyone who came along. Whether the passerby just wanted to stretch their legs and visit or needed a hot meal and a safe place to spend the night, they were always welcomed—and all at no cost. The guys didn't stop, though because they had spent so much time at the school talking to the shop teacher, that they were running behind schedule. They all had to be at work the next morning, so they just headed home.

* * *

The most fascinating “road trip” they took was out to a tiny abandoned fishing village about twenty miles from Alakanuk. It had a small processing plant, a smattering of houses, a one-room schoolhouse with teacher quarters in the back, and a radio room full of expensive equipment. But it had become a ghost town literally overnight.

The village used to house several families, including children, as well as a teacher and a few other employees. The locals were adamant that one day the villagers simply disappeared. Nobody seemed to know where they went. They were just suddenly gone. It looked like the people had simply stood up from dinner and walked out. There were plates on the table, some scraped clean and some with little bits of dried up food still on them. Ketchup and mustard bottles stood nearby like sentinels guarding the fully stocked kitchen.

The buildings were unlocked, so Keri, Guy, and Josh went in. Clothes hung in the bedroom closets. Some beds were meticulously made, others had covers thrown to the side. There were tools laid out on counters, wood stacked next to cast iron stoves, and schoolbooks scattered about the classroom. But most disturbing of all were the fishing

nets, still hanging out to dry. No fisherman would just leave their nets to the elements. The nets bring food and provide a livelihood; they are a valued commodity.

The tundra is rough terrain peopled by hardy individuals. Many areas resemble the Wild West of lore, where theft and vandalism run rampant. Yet this village remained untouched. The locals wouldn't go near it because they were convinced it had been cursed by an evil shaman, and that's why the people had vanished.

Chapter Seven—School Sports

School athletics in the Bush was quite different from anything we'd experienced in the Lower 48. There were no yellow school busses to transport kids to their weekly sporting events—mainly because there were no roads. Instead, their travel to sporting events was occasionally by snow machine or boat, but most often by bush plane.

Weekly games between two schools didn't happen in the Bush. In Alakanuk, the school district had ten schools spread across an area of about 25,000 square miles with no roads. Each school took turns hosting tournaments which usually lasted a couple of days. Every two or three weeks, the other nine schools would converge on the hosting school, camping out in their classrooms and being fed by their lunch ladies. School was supposed to continue as usual during the day, although in reality, little was accomplished. The visiting teams rarely completed their homework, and the students at the host school were too excited about the visitors to pay attention to something as trivial as education.

Our first experience with school sports in Alakanuk was a cross-country meet. There were about six schools involved. Most of them came by bush plane, but a couple of the neighboring villages came by small fishing boats, floating down the Yukon River. They all trickled in the morning of the meet—except for one of the schools that was coming by boat. They just didn't arrive.

Josh, our cross-country coach, was in charge of the meet. He called the missing team's school.

“Hi, this is Josh in Alakanuk. Has your cross-country team left yet?” he asked.

“Ya, they left early. They should be there a while ago,” the secretary replied.

“They must’ve stopped for some reason,” she added.

“Okay, thanks.” And Josh hung up. No one seemed to be the least bit worried.

“They probably caught a seal. Good eating, those seals!” one coach said.

Another coach shrugged. “Or they stopped to fish,” he suggested.

While they waited, a few of the runners walked the course to get a feel for it.

Their coaches went with them, armed with rifles in case of wildlife. Most of the students lounged around visiting. A pickup game of basketball was in full swing when the last school finally arrived, over two hours after the meet was supposed to start. Turns out they had shot a moose along the way, so they stopped to field dress it.

* * *

Basketball was the sport of choice in the Bush—probably because it was played inside and required little more than a ball and a couple of hoops. The season began around November and ran clear into March.

One day during basketball practice in Alakanuk, a visitor from Anchorage sat on the sidelines to watch. She held a young kitten. Practice came to a dead stop. The boys, with the exception of Taco, had never seen such an animal before. They wanted to touch it and wanted to know what it was, but the girl’s explanations were of no help. None of them understood the term “kitten” or even “cat.”

Finally, Taco piped in. “It’s like a really small lynx that you train to be your pet.”

The boys looked at him with curiosity and a newfound respect. He was explaining something in a way they could understand.

Traveling to tournaments could be a challenge. Emmonak was close enough that the Alakanuk team could just pile onto sleds and get hauled to the village behind snow

machines. But for all the other tournaments, they had to fly there by bush plane.

Flying to a tournament wasn't as easy as it sounds. The bush planes were small and unheated. Most planes held six to ten people, including the pilot, so transporting an entire team required numerous trips. Besides their uniforms and sporting gear, the kids and coaches had to take sleeping bags and pillows, and everything they needed to live away from home. There was also a hard-and-fast rule that no one was allowed on the plane unless they were dressed in full winter gear from head to toe. That included snow suits, heavy winter jackets, hats with ear flaps, thermal gloves, and insulated winter boots—at a minimum. The idea was that if the plane went down, supposing they survived the crash, they'd need the warm clothes to keep them from freezing until they could be rescued.

The most eventful tournament of our boy's school career happened in Bristol Bay. There were boys' and girl's teams from six different schools, involving over 150 visiting kids and 20 or so adults. As usual, the visiting teams were assigned classrooms to camp out in, and they were fed in the school cafeteria. The local students were crowded up at the other end of the building where they tried to conduct school as best they could.

The teams straggled in on Wednesday and were scheduled to leave on Sunday. The tournament ran from Thursday through Saturday. The school had two gyms—an old one which was tiny and decrepit, and a brand-new one, complete with a full-sized basketball court and bleachers running along both sides. The tournament and all activities were being held in the new gym.

Friday evening after the organized games, the kids filled the time with various activities. A few worked on homework; the rest sat in the bleachers visiting or played

ball on the court. Just inside the gym door, a group alternated games between a free-throw competition, a dunking competition, and a game called Knock-Out. In Knock-Out, players form two lines and take turns running up to the basket and trying to make a shot. If they miss but the next player makes the shot, the first player is out of the game. If the second player misses too, then the first player is still in. It is a fast-moving game and a favorite.

At the far end of the gym, the kids held a trick shot competition where they took turns trying to make the hardest and most outlandish shots. The craziest successful shot would win. One kid stood in the far doorway and tried to hurl the ball across the entire gym into the basket. To get enough distance, he figured he needed extra height, so he heaved the ball as hard and as high as he could. Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, except that there was no ceiling—just a roof. The roof, which resembled graph paper because it had pipes crisscrossing its entire length, was high, but not high enough. Near the middle of the gym, the ball smacked soundly into one of the pipes right at the point where a sprinkler head came out. It bent the sprinkler head to the side. In that room echoing with yelling, laughter, and shouts, all movement and noise came to a sudden and complete stop at the sound of that off-key “thunk.” Time hung breathless for about two seconds, and then chaos erupted when the water pressure tore the sprinkler head off, and a waterfall of sulfur-smelling liquid exploded into the gym. Kids scrambled for their stuff, and then got bottlenecked trying to get through the doors.

Within moments the stench of sulfur permeated the school. The students were corralled into the old dilapidated gym while the adults appraised the situation. The small gym was cramped quarters for 150 kids—and they were stuck in that room for

hours. They tried making the best of it, visiting and playing games. But before long, the sulfur stench mixed with the body odor of wall-to-wall teenagers was enough to make the eyes tear up. Taco described it by saying, “That smell should never happen. Ever.”

Three hours later the adults had reached the unavoidable conclusion that the tournament couldn’t be played, and there were 150 visiting students with nothing to do—and they weren’t leaving until Sunday. A dance was planned for Saturday evening, and it was decided that during the day the students could go hang out at the indoor pool across the street from the school. Even though it was a short walk to the pool, no one was allowed out of the school unless they were dressed in full arctic gear; they didn’t want them returning wet and underdressed.

Before leaving on Sunday, Taco peeked into the wounded gym. The floor looked like a lake with ripples all over it. It would be a while before Bristol Bay hosted another tournament.

* * *

I’ve always enjoyed watching our kids play sports, so I got very excited about home tournaments. But I liked the Emmonak ones too because Keri and I could just hop on our snow machine and drive out to watch the games. Our boys hadn’t played much basketball before moving to the Bush, so they weren’t especially good at it, but we enjoyed watching them anyway.

During one Emmonak game, our Junior Varsity team was down by one point and there were only seconds left in the game. The other team had the ball and was heading down the court to score another basket. Taco, being small for his age, hustled under and around players, stole the ball and passed it to one of our top shooters who made a basket

as the buzzer sounded, winning the game. The Alakanuk fans exploded into cheers. Taco was the hero of the game. When we left for home later, we were still euphoric over the game and Taco's success, and grateful for the kudos he was receiving. Initially, he'd had a hard time being accepted, but had finally made friends through basketball.

That night on our way home from Emmonak, I sat behind Keri as we drove down the frozen Yukon River. At about 0° F, the air felt almost warm. It was a cloudless night and the stars were so thick the sky looked like a mass of bright lights that glittered off the white snow all around us. The sparkling snow lay in sharp contrast to the deep blackness of the shadows created by the thick trees and shrubbery which lined the Yukon River. Except for the soft hum of our machine and the distance cry of wolves, silence permeated the air. It was a perfect moment. I can still close my eyes and transport myself back to that night. Distant wolves howling and a cool wind brushing my face as I rode down the Yukon between glistening snowy banks, my arms encircling Keri's waist. The world was right.

The following Emmonak tournament, however, was a different experience. During the games, a storm rolled in. Freezing winds whipped, planes were grounded, and the world was in a whiteout of thickly falling and blowing snow. When the tournament was over, there was much debate about whether to bring the Alakanuk team home or have them ride out the storm at the Emmonak school.

On Wednesday, the players had been taken to Emmonak by snow machine and then stayed there with the other teams for three days. Parents rode out every evening to watch the games. Saturday night, several parents came with sleds attached to their snow machines so they could help bring the players back. They hadn't come prepared to stay,

so they wanted to just go home, but they were also concerned about the welfare of the students.

“It looks really bad out there. We can’t see a thing!” was the consensus. Then the debate started.

“We don’t need to see! We can make this trip blindfolded!” some said.

“But if something happens to even one of the kids, it will be really bad. Better safe than sorry,” others said.

In the end, the decision was made to bring the students home. So the kids, dressed in full winter gear, hunkered as low as they could in the sleds, a mass of tangled limbs and bodies, and tried to hide under a tarp for cover. But by the time they got home I had to treat some frostbite on exposed parts of our boys’ faces. The other teams had to stay until the storm cleared and the bush planes could fly again. It took several days before those students returned home.

* * *

It is probable that in the Bush of Alaska, participating in school sports means more to the students than it does in most other places. As well as team comradery and school spirit, traveling to tournaments is the only time some of the students ever leave the village. When any of the students finished first or second in the league championship, they were able to compete in Anchorage—and that was an extra big thrill. Anchorage had things like long roads, tall building, restaurants, hotels, and lots of people and cars. While there, the chaperones took the students to a movie theater or the shopping mall. If they were lucky, they went to both.

On one trip, Keri helped chaperone a volleyball team. He went because the coach

didn't have a driver's license. She didn't need one. She didn't have a car, and a license isn't needed to drive a snow machine, a four-wheeler, or a boat.

The two youngest players on the team had never been to Anchorage, so the entire experience was an adventure for them. The group was at a mall and decided to go to a sporting goods store on the second level. The older and more experienced players stepped on the escalator and chatted with each other as they went up. The two younger players cowered back, gaping open mouthed as they watched the moving stairs.

“What's wrong?” Keri asked. The girls stared at him and said nothing. “Haven't you ever seen an escalator?” he asked. They shook their heads in unison. Keri chuckled. “Don't worry,” he said. “It's actually quite easy.” He showed them the moving handrail that they could hang onto, and they watched several people step on.

The rest of the team waited at the top, shouting encouragement. “C'mon! It's easy!” “You can do it!” “Just take a step and it'll do the rest!”

Finally, one of the girls fixed a smile on her face to hide her fear, and gripped the handrail as she stepped on. Her friend followed. Their team cheered from above.

Chapter Eight—A Family of Farmers

As well as adjusting to severe weather and loss of sunlight, we had to adjust to the scarcity of fruits and vegetables. And produce was a part of me—like it was in my DNA.

My dad's parents, Homer and Luella LeBaron, were farmers. They weren't wealthy farmers with a thousand acres of grain. They lost most of their land during the Great Depression, so they were of the raise-nine-kids-on-forty-acres variety. But they managed. Living in Southern Alberta, Canada, their growing season was short so they had to make the most of every day, hoping their crops wouldn't be devastated by late frosts or early snows. From the moment they planted, sometime in May, until they finished harvest, usually by the end of September, the family worked almost non-stop, starting before the sun was up and working until after dark. They did this every day but Sunday. On Sundays they went to church.

All the children were needed to work the farm. The family grew labor-intensive crops like corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, peas, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, and anything else they could coax to grow. These crops required hoeing, thinning, weeding, and hand-picking. The children too young to manage a hoe or heft a fifty-pound bag were put to work hauling drinking water to their siblings in the field, or other such tasks. By the time Dad was twelve, he could drive the tractor and truck.

There wasn't much time to play during the summers. One particularly hot day, Dad's friends stopped by on their way to swim in the watering hole. He desperately wanted to go, but his older brother, Homer, wouldn't let him. A few minutes later, my

frustrated dad hurled a potato as hard as he could, and with feelings of both horror and delight, watched it soar through the air about 100 yards to hit Homer on the head. Dad took off running, with Homer in hot pursuit. Because he had a head start, Dad was able to escape until Homer cooled down.

Grandpa and Grandma LeBaron also owned several pigs, a bunch of chickens, and two milk cows. The pigs and chickens were easy to take care of. They required regular feeding but weren't picky about what they ate. The milk cows, however, required much more care. They had to be milked every twelve hours: early each morning and again in the evening. Dad was often the designated milker.

Grandpa loved beauty. He planted flowers in their yard and around the outhouse. And at a time when every square inch of land was needed to grow food, Grandpa set aside an entire acre just for growing flowers. He knew that people needed food, but they also need beauty. Neighbors came from miles around to take his flowers for weddings, funerals, or just to give to a special gal. They never paid for them, and if they'd offered, Grandpa wouldn't have taken their money anyway. He just wanted to share the beauty.

At the time he and Grandma started farming, the only corn grown in southern Alberta was cattle corn, which was inedible for humans. It was thought that the growing season was just too short to grow sweet corn. But Grandpa, an intelligent man, set to work and discovered a strain of corn that not only thrived, but became renowned for its sweetness. A cannery was built in the nearby town of Taber so the corn could be processed and preserved, and Grandpa's corn was dubbed Taber corn. It is still grown today.

In many ways, Grandpa was a man before his time. He loved his farm, but they were barely surviving. Determined to stay afloat, he met with other small farmers and led the organization of a Farmer's Co-op. He started a Farmer's Market in a city almost an hour's drive away, and every day of harvest the farmers converged on the market to sell their produce. Their profits increased substantially. People from neighboring provinces drove to the Farmer's Market just to buy Grandpa's corn.

While the Farmer's Market helped financially, it also increased the work required. Even though Alberta days were long during the summer, they weren't long enough. In an area where it didn't get dark until after midnight, my grandparents stayed outside washing vegetables for Market, using the truck headlamps as their source of light. By 4 a.m., Dad and his brothers were out in the field picking corn to sell at Market. They knew corn so well, they didn't even need to see it; they could tell just by feel if it was ready or not. The truckload they picked each morning was all sold by afternoon.

Grandpa and Grandma taught their children to work hard, and then to go out into the world and work equally hard in whatever profession they chose. Their children did just that. But as the children grew up and moved away, Grandpa and Grandma were unable to manage the farm on their own, so they sold it. For the family, that marked the end of an era.

* * *

My mom's parents, Willard and Bernice Brooks, were also poor, barely scraping by. They lived in southern Alberta, just over a hundred miles from where the LeBarons' farm was. During the depression, Grandpa Brooks was a schoolteacher. At

that time, the school board supplied them with a house but not necessarily a salary. Instead, he was paid 'in kind,' meaning he could be paid with anything from eggs to furniture. Grandma was a housewife. When World War II broke out, even though he was older than draft age, Grandpa joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and became a Physical Fitness Trainer. In one letter home he described, complete with sketches, a wonderful new exercise called push-ups.

Grandpa explained that he had enlisted, first and foremost, out of a patriotic sense of duty. His grandmother had been a nurse in the Civil war, and his grandfather and other relatives had also served. Secondly, he enlisted to increase the government allowance his family would receive. But he hadn't really thought through how his leaving would affect the family. Years later, Grandma said, "Getting used to Willard being in the Air Force was the most trying experience that ever happened to me. Having to be alone and take care of everything alone—I never really got used to it, I just knew I had to do it."

Grandma had to move out of their home because Grandpa was no longer the teacher. She rented a tiny cabin for herself and their three young children, consisting of a kitchen and a bedroom. It also came with an outhouse. During the winter, ice formed on the inside walls of both buildings. Grandma slept in the bedroom with my mom, just two years old at the time. The two boys slept in the cellar—a hole dug underneath the house. They reached the cellar by lifting a board in the kitchen floor and then climbing down a wooden ladder. Grandma hauled a twin bed down there for them to sleep on. Because it was underground, the temperatures in the cellar stayed cold but did not reach freezing.

A year later, Grandma decided to move into the town of Cardston to be closer

to her family. They rented a much larger house. It had a kitchen with a wood-burning stove, and a living room with an oil stove. They were the only sources of heat. Even though the house had four bedrooms, during the winter the family often slept together in the living room so they could have the warmth of the oil stove. There was often ice on the inside walls of the bedrooms. The best part of the house was that it had indoor plumbing, including a bathroom. Grandma burned coal in the kitchen stove because it lasted longer than wood. She kept the kitchen stove constantly burning during the winter so the pipes wouldn't freeze.

From spring through fall, Grandma threw herself into clearing land and planting and caring for a huge garden. She became a gardener extraordinaire, growing almost every vegetable that could be grown in southern Alberta—potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, radishes, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, and, thanks to Grandpa LeBaron's discovery, Taber corn. To complete the picture, a row of raspberry bushes grew along the fence line, separating the garden from the dirt road that ran in front. Every year, Grandma coaxed a bounteous harvest that fed the entire family and many friends and relatives. She bottled enough preserves to feed her family through the winter.

Grandma also cared for a coop-full of chickens and a milk cow. She butchered, plucked, gutted, and cooked the chickens. The cow had to be milked every morning and evening. It had a penchant for escaping the barn and would frequently amble off down the road. Grandma would send her boys to bring the cow back. Sometimes a neighbor would see the cow wandering along and they'd tie her to a tree, knowing the boys would be looking for her before the day was over.

* * *

With the heritage I've got, farming should be in my blood. But somehow, I missed out on that part of the DNA. Other than my children, I can't seem to keep anything alive...especially plants. However, while I may have missed out on the ability to be a farmer, what I do have is the desire to eat things that grow on farms.

One of my earliest memories is of standing barefoot in the cool, damp soil of Grandma Brook's garden, pulling fistfuls of raspberries from the bushes that towered over me. Around the time I turned two, our family took care of a farm for a few years while the owner worked out of state. We had pigs and chickens and sheep—until the sheep got out and wandered into the mountain and Dad had to chase them down and bring them back. After that, they got rid of the sheep.

We also had a single milk cow. The cow never caused any problems, but the milking stool did. The stool was a short three-legged seat that hung on the wall of the barn when it wasn't being used. Every morning and evening, Dad sauntered into the barn, metal bucket in hand. In one fluid motion, he'd grab the old wooden stool as he passed, lifting it from the large nail that stuck out of the barn wall. This ritual went on for some time with no problem—until the day he got splinters in his butt. The milking stool was deemed unusable. There was no extra money for a new stool, so Mom came up with a solution. She took some cotton batting left over from a quilt she'd made, and she padded the seat, covering it in a bright green fabric with large orange polka dots. He had the most unusual and comfortable milking stool in the county.

I loved being with Dad, so when he was home, I followed him around like a shadow. He taught me to drink from a garden hose. I felt on top of the world, perched high on the tractor as I sat on his lap, wrapping my legs around his thigh for balance.

But one of my favorite times was milking time. Dad would squirt some of the warm, creamy milk into my open mouth, and then chuckle at the faces I pulled. Sometimes he missed and squirted me in the face. That got us both laughing.

In addition to animals, we had five acres of fruit trees. We grew apples, cherries, peaches, pears, plums, and apricots. The advantage of having a variety of fruit trees was that different fruits ripened at different times so the harvest was spread out over several months, making it manageable. The disadvantage of having a variety of fruit trees was that different fruits ripened at different times so the harvest was spread out over several months, and it seemed to drag on forever.

The ladders used to harvest fruit trees were basic—twelve feet long and made of wood. They didn't have a leg to help them stand up. Instead, they just leaned. The picker would carry the ladder to the tree, search for a viable spot, and ram the ladder in, trying to wedge it among the branches firmly enough that it wouldn't come tumbling down when he climbed it.

When I was a small child, my favorite fruit was cherries. I was barely three years old the first time I climbed one of those ladders to the top of a cherry tree. I sat on the top rung, sticky and stained from filling my belly with the luscious fruit. I looked down and giggled as Dad inched his way towards me, trying not to jostle the ladder. The slightest tilt could send me tumbling to the earth. "Don't move, honey! Stay where you are!" he pleaded. From the ground far below, Mom held her breath and craned her neck as she strained to see through the branches. I squealed with delight when Dad scooped me up and carried me back down the rickety ladder.

Much to my parents' dismay, I continued to climb ladders—especially during

cherry season. I knew I wasn't supposed to, that I would get a tummy ache from eating too much fruit, and that my parents would be upset if they caught me. But I climbed them anyway because I wanted cherries. We lived on the farm until I was five, moving when Dad finished school and got a job.

Several years later, shortly after I turned twelve, Dad's job moved us to South Africa. Even though we lived in a lush area where fresh produce was plentiful, Mom still planted a garden. One afternoon, I glanced up from doing homework to see Mom trudging up the lawn towards the back door. She carried a heavy knife in one hand, and her other hand had a grip on something she was dragging behind her. That "something" turned out to be the largest cabbage I had ever seen. She'd had to use the heavy knife to cut it from the plant.

Our time in Africa was a produce-lover's paradise. We ate freshly picked pineapples, guava, bananas, pawpaw, nartjie, and avocados. I relished the sweetness of vine-ripened granadilla that grew in our yard. We also had an abundance of fresh produce from the garden. Other than our occasional braaivleis (the Afrikaans word for barbecue), I became a quasi-vegetarian by default, because produce was all I wanted to eat. My early love of cherries and raspberries had expanded to include almost every kind of fruit and vegetable.

Chapter Nine—A Love Affair with Produce

I left South Africa to attend school at a college in Idaho, surrounded by farmland. While my roommates lived on chips and soda, I preferred grapes, carrot sticks, or a baked potato. Years went by, and my love of produce never subsided. I eventually married my sweetheart, Keri, and we had six children who also loved fresh produce—possibly because I told them they did.

When Taco was born, he had chronic breathing problems which resulted in frequent hospitalizations. He was a year old when he was admitted to ICU for the fifth time. The hospital was almost an hour from our home, so I stayed with Taco from early morning until after midnight, and then went to the Ronald McDonald House across the street for a few hours of sleep each night. By the third or fourth day, I was drained and exhausted. I used a pay phone to call Keri at work. As soon as I heard his voice, I started to cry. He was panicked, thinking that something bad had happened to Taco. I assured him the baby was all right, but I wasn't.

I wailed, "I can't do this by myself anymore! I need you!"

He said, "All right. I'll get things covered here and at home. I'll be down there tonight." Then he asked, "What would you like me to bring you? Do you want chocolate?"

Without pausing, I replied, "No! I want spinach!"

As Taco got older his lungs got stronger, so the hospital stays were further and further apart. About a year later, I was helping our daughter with her schoolwork when I suddenly went blind in my right eye. The next day I started going blind in my left eye

as well. Tests showed clots lodged in the retinas, cutting off the blood supply to my eyes. A few days later I had my first stroke. I was thirty-eight years old.

I spent ten days in the hospital on a heparin drip while the doctors tried to thin my blood and figure out why it had clotted in the first place. They learned I had an autoimmune disease where the body kills off the special proteins that control clotting, so my blood clotted unchecked. The disease had just recently been discovered, and was considered a silent killer: “Can you believe it? So young, and she just dropped dead of a stroke!” I was put on high doses of coumadin, a blood thinner, and so began the daily tightrope of trying to keep my blood the right thinness. If it got too thick, I could have a stroke; too thin, and I could have internal hemorrhaging and possibly even a brain bleed.

Because vitamin K promotes clotting, I was told to stay away from certain foods— especially green, leafy vegetables. The doctor said that foods rich in vitamin K would interfere with the coumadin, making my blood too thick, and I could clot. Before leaving the hospital, my doctor handed me a list of foods to avoid; the list was a page long and seemed to include almost every healthy food available. The greener they were, the higher on the list. Spinach was at the top. That was when I burst into tears of frustration. Losing spinach pushed me over the edge, and everything I had been through during the previous two weeks came flooding out in hysterical sobs.

Keri was terrified of losing me and felt overwhelmed at the possibility of being left with six young children to raise alone. He felt helpless and frustrated. So he planted a garden, reasoning that while there was nothing he could do to fix my disease, at least he could provide me with fresh, healthy things to eat.

Keri had grown up on an almond ranch in central California. As well as forty acres of almond trees, they also raised steers and rabbits, and they planted a large garden every year. But we now lived in rocky soil in the mountains. It took all his know-how to make our garden grow. Somehow, he was successful—especially where the septic tank was buried. Those plants really flourished. Because of my dietary limitations, Keri was careful with what he chose to plant. Basically, he grew a yard full of tomatoes and red peppers.

After a year of avoiding the banned foods, I rebelled. I decided that I was going to eat greens, but I would increase my coumadin intake to offset their effect. I talked with Keri and my mom about my plan and neither of them was in favor of it, but I was determined. The person I intentionally left out of the conversation was my doctor. The idea of arguing my case to her was rather intimidating so I decided to let her in on my plan after the fact—assuming I was successful. If my plan failed, I would have to confess when we were dealing with the aftermath in the hospital.

Slowly, I introduced spinach and broccoli to my diet, and increased my coumadin. I monitored myself with frequent blood tests which gave a thickness/thinness reading called an International Normalized Ratio (INR). The average individual has an INR of zero. My levels, which we tried to keep close to 3.0, indicated how much thinner my blood was than the norm. The higher the number, the thinner the blood.

One of the challenges I faced in adding green vegetables was that eating vitamin K affected my levels within hours, while any change in my coumadin dose had a three-day lag time. That meant that I increased my coumadin slightly, and two or

three days later would add a small amount of vegetables to my diet, trying to keep my levels constant. Then I increased the coumadin a bit more and three days later added additional vegetables to my diet. I had to keep my daily vitamin K intake constant with each step of the process. I felt like I was juggling knives—it took a lot of calculation, and I couldn't afford to make a mistake. But after a couple of months, I had succeeded. I was eating my beloved spinach, and was still keeping my blood within the targeted INR. I was ecstatic and looked forward to confessing—and bragging—to my doctor at my next appointment. But before I got the chance, she said, “OK, protocol has changed. It is now thought that you should eat whatever vegetables you want. Just make it a consistent amount and increase your coumadin dose.” It was all I could do not to laugh out loud.

Chapter Ten—Finding Food

Finding fresh produce in Alaska proved to be a challenge. I researched and learned about a greenhouse business located in Washington state just below the Canadian border. They utilized artificial light to grow produce year-round, and they catered to people in the Bush of Alaska, shipping directly to customers via the bush planes. We placed our first order.

The Village Agent in Alakanuk wielded a lot of power. He was the guy who picked up the mail and any packages from the planes and took them to the post office or school. If he thought a package might be expensive or important or might get damaged if it froze while sitting in the post office storage shed waiting for pick-up, he would drop it off right at your doorstep—unless he didn't like you. Then he would put it at the back of the post office shed where it would wait to be processed. There are some people in life for whom you'll do almost anything to stay on their good side. He was at the top of that list.

The day we got our first shipment of produce we were thrilled! Well, I was thrilled. The boys didn't seem to be overly impressed—especially when we unloaded the contents. The box contained: a head of lettuce; some Swiss chard; a miniature stalk of celery; a few green onions; a very small head of broccoli; a nice-sized orange pepper; three tiny purple onions; two small grapefruit; three apples; four tiny tangerines; a lime-green mango; eight red potatoes, each roughly the size of a large marble; and a lip-gloss-sized jar of “fennel & salt.” I had no idea what to do with “fennel & salt.”

We'd spent over \$60 on produce that, even if we had been able to find any that small or green in the lower-48, would have cost us less than \$5. But at least we were able to eat healthy for a day or two. Then we were back to cooking with frozen meat and canned veggies (when we could get them).

A few months later, we had made it through winter and were looking forward to spring. The sun was staying up longer, which was something to celebrate. One beautiful clear day, I was at the living window, relishing the sunshine. From where I stood, I could see the side of the school about a hundred fifty feet away. The school day had already ended so most students were gone, and the parking area was almost empty of snow machines.

Suddenly, Keri and several teachers crashed through the double doors leading from the school and ran to their respective homes. My heart raced, and I wondered what was chasing them. It wouldn't be the first time a bear had gotten inside the school. Keri rushed into the living room and, even though we were right in front of him, he hollered, "The store has produce!" Taco and I flew into action. We threw on our jackets and boots and ran outside to jump onto the snow machine. Keri was already aboard, revving the engine.

On the way to the store, Keri yelled over his shoulder to fill us in on what to expect. The store had called the school to say they'd just gotten a shipment of fruits, vegetables, and eggs. We were ecstatic! To get to the store, we had to ride down the Yukon River and over a couple of sloughs.

When we arrived, I noticed several other snow machines parked erratically, all belonging to teachers. Glancing back the way we had come, I saw more teachers

heading our way. For us, yelling “Produce!” was as good as yelling “Gold!” But those early Alaska miners in search of the mother lode had nothing on a bunch of Alaska Bush teachers chasing down apples and carrots.

Inside the store was one of the most beautiful sights I’d ever seen. There was an entire portable table holding nothing but boxes of big fat onions, withered potatoes, brown spotted bananas, beautiful red apples and bruised yellow ones, soft mushy oranges, pale green broccoli, hard green pears wrapped in paper, and a single kiwi. Taco grabbed that kiwi up real fast. It was a steal at only \$2.00.

We filled our carry baskets with some of everything. It was heavenly! And to top it off, in the back of the store I discovered a stash of lettuce in the cooler next to the eggs. Of course, there was a bunch of slimy stuff on the outside leaves. But I did find one head that only had a slime spot about the size of a golf ball—so I snatched it up.

Taco pointed to the spot and said, “Uh...Mom?”

Keri said, “That’s OK. We can toss the outside leaves.” I looked at him like he had suddenly grown two heads.

“Are you nuts?” I exclaimed. “We can just cut that one little spot off. The rest of the leaf will be fine!” Living in the Bush and being produce-starved can change a person.

Next to the slimy lettuce, I found the *pièce de résistance*: the last two zucchinis. They were on the scrawny side, had a couple of gouges, measured between six and eight inches long, and they cost \$6.00 each. But I was thrilled to drop them in our basket. They were going to taste wonderful!

By the time we’d finished our shopping, we had three-and-a-half plastic

grocery bags of mostly fruits and vegetables. It cost us almost \$100, but we were just excited to finally have produce again. Keri drove slower and very carefully all the way home. After all, we were carrying precious cargo. I don't think the crown jewels could have been more appreciated.

It didn't take long for us to realize that the best way of getting fresh produce was to bring it in ourselves. Fortunately, we made semi-frequent trips to Anchorage. With Keri's role as school administrator, he flew in for occasional meetings; and one or both of us would also fly in, to chaperone students at school events.

One winter we were getting low on food at home, so when Keri flew out for Anchorage, he took two empty totes with him. The plan was that he would bring them back full. At the end of the week-long trip, Keri arrived back home looking like a smuggler. He walked through the door and I barely got a hug in before he was over at the freezer, emptying the pockets of his snow jacket, snow vest, and snow pants. That man had been carrying 20 pounds of butter on his person!

Keri had gone shopping his last evening in Anchorage, and then packaged it all up. He filled one tote with long-lasting produce (like potatoes and carrots), and mailed it home. Alaska's postal rates were subsidized so it cost \$20 to ship a seventy-pound tote to the village from Anchorage; it would have cost almost \$150 to send that same tote from the lower-48.

He filled the other tote with frozen foods and short-lasting produce (like lettuce and kiwis) and took it on the plane with him. However, when he checked in at the airport, the tote was about 20 pounds over the allowed weight—so he took out the butter and filled every pocket and crack and crevice in his clothes with boxes of butter.

Then the tote weighed in perfectly.

You would think carrying butter on the body wouldn't be a good idea due to possible melting. But it actually worked quite well, because flying in unheated bush planes was like flying in a bumpy freezer. So when we flew, we wore long johns, sweats, jeans, snow pants, hats, gloves, winter boots, etc. We layered up for survival, not comfort. Dressing like that was not the way to lounge back and relax. But it was a great way to smuggle twenty pounds of butter.

Sometime later, Taco and I were in Anchorage together. As was our custom, we bought food before flying home, including all sorts of dehydrated fruits and vegetables. Dried fruits were good for baking and snacking, and dried vegetables were good in soups. We also bought a lot of fresh produce and other food, plus several large totes, and then returned to the hotel room.

We packed most of our clothes, as well as all the canned food we'd bought, in the totes, which we mailed home. Mailing our clothes meant we could fill our suitcases with food. I took the large cans of dehydrated food and emptied the contents into freezer bags to make them easier to fit in the suitcases. Exhausted, we decided to wait until the next day to finish packing, and we went to bed.

The following morning, I was bewildered to realize there was no way we could fit all the food in our suitcases. But that was only half the problem. I had borrowed a scale from the hotel office (they keep one on hand, so guests can weigh their luggage and totes), and to my horror, I discovered that our luggage was about twenty pounds over the limit. We had a plane to catch; we were over the limit in content and weight; and it was too late to buy, pack, and mail another tote. I wanted to cry or scream, I

wasn't sure which. Then I remembered how Keri had gotten all the butter home the previous winter, and that gave me a brilliant idea.

I grabbed the roll of duct tape we'd used to seal the totes for mailing, took the gallon-size bags of powdered milk, icing sugar, dried apples, and dehydrated yams, and I duct-taped them to my torso. Then I did the same thing to Taco. The freezer bags I taped to him included au gratin potatoes, among other things. While these bags of dehydrated food didn't weigh a lot, they did take up space. Now we could almost close the suitcases, but they were still too heavy. So I had Taco tuck his shirt into his jeans, and we dropped about a dozen or so oranges down his shirt. He was not impressed. He complained that the oranges made him itch and the dried potatoes scratched him. I told him it was the perfect combination. We managed to close the suitcases, and they were now within weight, so we headed for the airport to catch our flight.

The Anchorage airport was the most user-friendly airport I'd ever been in. It had a separate terminal set aside for travel in and out of the Bush. There was no security to pass through to get to the gates in the Bush terminal. There was no x-ray or bag checks or anything. I guess it made sense because there was no point in hijacking a bush plane. They couldn't fly very far; there was nothing of value on board; and chances were, the pilot and half the passengers would be carrying guns. Almost everyone in the Bush owned guns, and many traveled with them because if the plane went down a gun might come in handy to scare off wildlife.

That morning when Taco and I arrived at the airport, we both looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy. We had our winter jackets zipped up to help keep the food under control. But even zipped shut, our coats didn't hide much.

The airline representative did a double-take when she saw us standing at her counter. She stared and opened her mouth to talk. But unsure of what to say, she simply snapped it shut again and continued as though there was nothing out of the ordinary.

We went through the usual routine. We weighed in each of our bags. Then we, ourselves, stepped onto the luggage scale. Bush pilots had to know the total amount of weight they were carrying, so when checking people in for a bush flight the airlines not only weighed the luggage, but they weighed the carryon bags and the passengers as well. It was like attending a cattle auction—especially when one airline representative yelled out the weights for another representative to write down.

As Taco and I walked out to board the plane, I could feel the weight of the freezer bags pulling at the duct tape. When I thought of the food strapped to our bodies and the oranges sequestered inside Taco's shirt, I started to laugh. I leaned over to Taco and whispered, "I feel like a health food terrorist!" He was not impressed.

Chapter Eleven—Staying Alive

Pretty much any Bush village settled along the banks of a river was built on stilts, and there is good reason for that. Every spring, the rivers flood, sending water coursing through the streets. Oddly enough, the locals seemed to look forward to this annual flood because it presented a solution to a rather pesky problem.

Even in the middle of nowhere, people make garbage. So, the villagers set up a system to take care of this problem. There was a spot a little way from town that was designated as the local dump. When you had trash, you just hauled it to the dumpsite, and every so often, an assigned villager would go to the dump, douse the heaps with flammable liquid, and set it on fire. Some of it burned; some of it didn't. But as the winter wore on, the dump got closer and closer to the village because people didn't want to walk that far in the cold and dark, so they just tossed their trash somewhere in its general direction. And that stuff didn't get burned—it just lay around and rotted. But even at the dump, most of the garbage putrefied.

The solution to this trash problem appeared when the rivers flooded because they invariably cleared out most of the garbage and washed it downriver and out to sea. I'm not sure the fish appreciate the process, but the villagers saw it as a sort of annual spring cleaning, courtesy of Mother Nature.

The kicker to this is that the villages downriver not only had to deal with their own garbage, but everybody else's trash that got washed through there as well. The Yukon River is almost 2,000 miles long, with villages dotting its entire length, and Alakanuk is at its very end. They got everybody's garbage. And some of it filtered

through to the ground water, contaminating the water supply. Since the village ran on a well with no purification process, the water was nasty. Even many of the locals wouldn't drink it straight from the tap.

One of the first things we had to figure out was how to make clean water. I became obsessed with the process. The contaminated water that came out of the kitchen sink went through a filter we'd attached to the pipes. Then I boiled it for a minimum of twenty minutes, let it cool, and filtered it again in a special pitcher. Only then was it deemed good enough for human consumption.

Coming up with clean water was a major concern of many residents, and the merits of different filtering systems became a hotly debated topic. The teachers even held an annual water tasting contest. It's kind of like a chili cook-off, but it's all about finding the best tasting filtered water. Ours didn't win—but I stuck with the system anyway because I wanted clean much more than I wanted tasty.

Since we used the clean water for everything but showers and laundry, I spent much of the day boiling and filtering water. But this drudgery kept us healthy. Even with just the four of us, we required a lot of clean water. We used it for washing dishes, rinsing produce, cooking, baking, making hot chocolate, freezing ice cubes, mixing juice, and just plain drinking. We even used it when we washed our hands. My day was complete when I had two filtered water pitchers in the fridge, two plastic “standby” pitchers of boiled but unfiltered water on the counter, and a big pot of boiling water on the stove. That was the pinnacle of life. I had become the queen of clean water. Then catastrophe struck.

I had been dealing with the water problem for several months and considered

myself an expert at boiling and filtering, when one evening, while pouring boiling water into the sink to wash dishes, I slipped and dumped it all over my hand. I shrieked in pain.

I flipped on the cold faucet and stuck my hand in the icy water straight from the tap. The water wasn't clean, but I didn't care—I was desperate. One look, and Keri groaned, "Oh, Deb! We've got to get you to the clinic!"

Keri tried to coax me away from the cold faucet to go to the clinic, but whenever my hand left the water and hit the air, pain shot up my arm, so I refused to budge. He filled a plastic bag with snow, picked out the twigs and animal hairs, and had me plunge my hand into the soothing white iciness. Then we bundled up in winter gear and headed for the clinic, trudging through the snow against biting winds with temperatures that froze our brains, frosted our skin, and made our teeth ache. That short hike of two hundred yards seemed more like two hundred miles.

Wading through thigh-deep drifts with the wind trying its best to rip off my thick jacket, and my hand buried in a bag of snow, I wondered once again about the sanity of living in this remote village. But at least with the horrible weather, I knew we were safe. The animals were too smart to be out. The bears were hibernating, all snug and hidden from the storm, and the wolves were hunkered down somewhere. We were the only creatures foolish enough to be roaming around that night.

The term "clinic" may be a bit generous. It was a nondescript building consisting of a waiting room with 5 or so chairs, a triage room, two or three examination rooms, and a couple of offices. Unless an illness hit the village, it was very unlikely that all the examination rooms would be used at the same time.

It was staffed by health aides who filled shifts and took turns being on call

through the night. While a high school diploma was not required, they did have to be able to read and fill out forms. They then called a doctor with the information, and filled the doctor's instructions to the last detail. The doctor was most likely in Anchorage, five hundred miles away.

The health aide who met us at the clinic door was a young pretty girl in blue and purple scrubs. She was somewhat short, with long silky black hair, dark slanted eyes, and round cheeks. She radiated efficiency, and at the end of the day, she still looked fresh. She was also extremely thorough. Even though it was obvious that the problem was my burned hand, she insisted on asking me every question on the form—and they covered everything from head to toe.

“No, I do not smoke, drink, or use drugs.” “No, I do not have a sore throat or earache.” “No, I have no sign of a broken bone.” “No, my bowels are just fine, thank you very much.” “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do have a headache, but that started after you began asking me these ridiculous questions.”

I sat there so long while she filled out her never-ending form that the snow melted, and my hand was now swimming in icy water which was slowly beginning to warm up and lose its effectiveness. My husband took the bag outside to refill it, but removing my hand from the comforting cold shot pain up my arm and clear down to my toes.

A full hour after our arrival, the aide finally called the doctor, reported all the information she'd gathered, and listened intently to his instructions. It felt like an agonizing eternity before the aide finally produced a jar of Silver Sulfadiazine—a sparkly whipped-cream-looking ointment. And that miracle cream gave me instant relief. As she

carefully and gently spread it over my hand, I could feel the burn melt right out of me. She then bandaged up my hand in gauze like a mummy, and sent us on our way, armed with the jar of ointment and detailed self-care instructions.

The upside to the whole experience is that my hand healed before the cream ran out, so I was able to use the leftovers later to treat frostbite on Keri and the boys. Plus, I was banned from dish duty for a long, long time.

* * *

A few months after the burned hand incident, Taco, got sick with pneumonia when it seemed like half the village was ill. I tried for several days to get him into the clinic but couldn't because the locals had top priority, and there were simply no appointments left. The clinics were closed on Sundays, so when I still couldn't get an appointment on Saturday, I phoned the clinic in Emmonak and begged them to see Taco. The Emmonak clinic was much larger, and sometimes they even had the benefit of having a PA on site. The receptionist who answered the phone said they were full, but I was desperate.

“Please can you see my son?” I begged. “It's getting hard for him to breathe!”

She put me on hold, and a few minutes later returned. “Okay, we will work him in. Come in at two,” she said.

“We will! Thank you so much!” I said, and I hung up. I was sitting on the edge of Taco's bed, taking his temperature. It was 102. “We've got an appointment in Emo!” I hollered to Keri, who was in the kitchen making breakfast.

“Oh good!” he hollered back.

Taco tried to respond but doubled over coughing instead. So he just gave me the

thumbs-up.

At 1:10, we put Taco on the snow machine, and he hacked and coughed as we drove 10 miles up the frozen Yukon River to Emmonak. The only protection we could offer as we raced over the ice and snow was to sandwich him between us in the hopes of shielding him somewhat from the wind and cold. He was checked and given antibiotics, and we took him back over the 10 miles of snow and ice to home so he could get well. After a few weeks of chicken noodle soup, medicine, and lots of liquids and tender loving care, he was up and running again.

About a month after Taco got better, I was hit with pneumonia and within a day or two I could hardly breathe—so I drug myself through a storm to the clinic. My favorite health aide was a man by the name of Paul. He was Yup'ik, medium height and build, and wore glasses. He had confidence, and when he had an opinion, he would express it. And he was almost always smiling.

Paul could see right off what was wrong, and skipped most of the multi-page form, only hitting on the pertinent stuff, which was a pleasant relief after all the agonizing questions I'd endured when I burned my hand. Then he phoned the doctor. He read off the important information (oxygen saturation, temperature, blood pressure, etc.) and then finished with,

“I can hear her wheezing. I think she has pneumonia.”

The doctor told Paul to send me to Anchorage, to which Paul responded, “We've got a storm going on, so nothing's flying.” In remote Alaska, bush planes are the only form of transportation. When the planes don't fly, you simply don't go anywhere. Paul listened to the doctor some more, responding with periodic “uh-huh's” and “okay's” and

then hung up. He was beaming when he reentered the room and announced, “The doctor said I am to keep you alive until the storm clears!” He was clearly delighted by this assignment.

Paul held up a syringe and, with an uncharacteristic concerned expression, asked, “Do you faint easily?”

“Uh...I don’t think so,” was my croaked reply.

“Oh good,” he said. “Because this injection hurts so bad that some people faint.” And he was right. Although I didn’t faint, I paced the floor for quite a while, trying to work the pain from my buttocks.

He instructed me to call if I got worse, and to return every day for another shot until either I was better, or the storm cleared and they could fly me out. On days two and three, the shot hurt just as much, and I paced the floor. By the fourth day, I was feeling somewhat improved, so decided to forgo the painful shot. But Paul phoned the house and told me I still needed to come in. I begrudgingly obeyed. At the clinic he checked me over and called the doctor with the update. I am sure I detected a hint of disappointment in Paul’s face when he told me that the doctor thought I was improved enough that I didn’t need any more shots. But he beamed again when I thanked him for keeping me alive.

Chapter Twelve—What a Dumb Ass!

With all the misadventures and challenges that come with Bush living, I have been asked numerous times why we ever decided to move there. I guess that because of my frequent moves and living in diverse places, the Bush seemed almost like a natural extension of that. Besides, I loved nature and wildlife. And I've always been one to try new things. I think Keri saw it as an exciting adventure. Keri grew up on an almond ranch in Central California, and they worked hard most of the year—especially spring and summer. During these seasons, they disked the ground, fertilized the trees, sprayed for bugs and weeds, cut the grass, irrigated the orchards, and then repeated the process several times until harvest. And just before harvest, they had about three weeks of waiting for the nuts to ripen. It was during that downtime that the family took their annual backpacking trip, usually into the High Sierras in California. It was perfect timing, because mid-August was still summer, but it was late enough that the snow was mostly gone. Keri was about nine years old the first time the family went backpacking; his youngest brother was five.

I didn't grow up on a plot of ground. Instead, my childhood was spent traveling the world. When I was twelve, my family relocated to South Africa. Our family didn't backpack majestic mountains, but we went on two or three safaris a year. We'd spend most of the days driving slowly in search of lion, elephant, rhino, giraffe, sable, impala, or any other wildlife that crossed our path. During the long summers, the sun pulsed from the dry earth, baking the interior of the car. We didn't have air conditioning, so we drove with our windows open, grateful for even the slightest breeze, and ignoring the dust

that mixed with our sweat, colored our hair, and settled on the seats.

Evenings and nights on safari were spent in the compound—a fenced-in area where we slept in rondavels—small round mud huts with thatched roofs. My mom cooked over an open fire. After the fire died down, we'd lay back and stare up at the explosion of stars that were uninhibited by city lights. It was like gazing into eternity. Later, we fell asleep to a distant orchestra of animal sounds—the deep growl of lions, the high-pitched yipping of hyenas, the occasional trumpeting of an elephant, and a myriad of other melodies. I loved Africa and its wildlife.

When Keri and I married, we shared a passion for the outdoors and a love for Mother Nature and her creatures. We spent many of our vacations camping and hiking, always in isolated areas. As we added children to our family equation, we'd just haul them along. Carrying diapers in and back out when we hiked was a challenge, so for a while we resorted to car camping, finding secluded spots to set up our tent, away from organized campgrounds.

As our children got older, Keri talked about taking the family on a backpacking trip. He wanted our kids to have the same wonderful memories that he had. We decided on the upcoming August. We would be taking our six children—the oldest almost fifteen, and the youngest three and a half—for a ten-day backpacking trip into the same part of the High Sierras where Keri had spent so many summers. I was a little uneasy about the idea. I would be fine taking the family on a safari around lions and elephants, but getting lost in the mountains for a week with six children in tow felt a little intimidating. However, Keri assured me that everything would be fine—especially because we were going to bring a donkey with us to help carry the load.

Keri's confidence won me over. I started researching backpacking. I found a website with all sorts of great food ideas guaranteed to please a hungry outdoors crowd, and I embraced them all without question. Turns out, they were the dumbest backpacking ideas known to man. But Keri, the only experienced backpacker in the family, figured his job was done once he'd arranged for the donkey and checked the equipment. He let me, the excited-but-know-nothing novice, handle all the food preparations.

* * *

The big day finally arrived. We drove up to Keri's parent's ranch where we picked up the donkey and equipment, did last minute shopping, and loaded the truck. The donkey, a mangy beast named P  p  , looked old and rickety, and had bare patches on his rump and back legs.

We spent the night at the ranch and left early the next morning so we could make some headway the first day into our hike. Keri drove his dad's twenty-year-old Ford pickup truck whose dark paint had faded to "baby poop green." It was decorated with an assortment of dents and scratches, some of them deep enough to reveal the gray primer underneath. The truck was loaded down with all the gear, and it pulled P  p   in the horse trailer. Keri took our eldest, Christopher, with him, and I followed in our Ford Aerostar van with the other five children and the two dogs.

Around eleven o'clock, we arrived at the starting point for the hike. The dogs, eager to leave the van, were the first out when I opened the sliding door. The kids jumped out of the van, eager to grab their packs. They ranged in ages from Christopher, who had just turned fifteen, down to Taco, who was three. In between were Rachele (13), Katie (11), Jeff (9), and Tanner (7). We had a backpack for each child. Taco's was a school

backpack and weighted about seven pounds; Chris's weighed about seventy. Keri's was even heavier.

The donkey came with a pack saddle and two wooden crates to hang from the sides. It seemed like ample space, and it would have been if I'd had an ounce of common sense in the food department. But being the excited-but-know-nothing novice, I had packed all the wrong stuff, and I'd brought enough of it to feed an army. It's a mystery why I thought I would be able to successfully carry two dozen eggs on the back of a donkey. And even worse than that were the twenty plump oranges. On the "website for pros" I'd discovered a wonderful recipe for cake baked inside a hollowed-out orange. The idea was that hungry and dehydrated backpackers could eat the orange, and then pour cake batter into the hollowed-out shell, wrap the thing in foil, and cook the cake in the hot ashes. What I hadn't considered was that the oranges weighted almost ten pounds. And that was just for dessert.

We packed and repacked that poor donkey. Almost half the food that I'd brought was left in the van, but the donkey was still overweight. The crates were full, and the center section was heaped to form a mountain in the middle. That poor animal took one step and crumpled to the ground. We were trying to defy the laws of physics by expecting P  p   to carry such a huge load. So we unloaded him again. More food was put in the van.

Keri announced that the oranges had to stay behind, but I insisted that we try the dessert at least once, so I slid two eggs into the box of cake mix, and pulled out eight of the largest oranges we'd ever seen and set them aside. Each person would have to carry their own orange, and I would take the cake mix as well. I would not be deterred.

Once P  p   was reloaded, we managed to travel about the length of a football field

before the donkey gave up and knelt down again. He simple couldn't continue, so we unloaded him again. More food went back to the van. Keri put more supplies on his and Chris's backpacks, and we reloaded the donkey. This time we made it across the stream to a clearing, about a hundred feet further, when the donkey decided he was done. He started to kick and buck and turn in circles. Supplies shot off his back. Meanwhile, the dogs started barking excitedly, which only amplified the donkey's hysteria. In the frenzy, P  p   rammed Jeff with his butt, sending the kid flying. Because Jeff was wearing a heavy backpack, he landed on his back and couldn't get up. He lay there like a stranded turtle, his arms and legs flailing as he tried to crabwalk backwards, with the donkey kicking in circles in front of him. Keri tried to control the donkey, Chris grabbed Jeff's backpack and threw him to safety, and I grabbed Taco and ran out of harm's way. The girls, playing under a tree, danced in circles while singing a made-up ditty about the donkey, and Tanner solemnly watched the action from a safe distance.

By the time we got the donkey, the dogs, and the kids all calmed down, it was starting to get dark.

Keri growled, "We're camping here!" We'd hiked about four hundred feet and could still see the van through the trees.

Chris said, "Ya know, if I threw it hard, I bet I could hit the car with my orange."

"You're not helping!" Keri grumbled.

Chris hauled more food to the van while Keri and I started a fire to cook dinner. Now there was more food left in the van than what we kept with us. For dessert that night, we cooked the cake-in-an-orange that I'd been so stubborn about bringing. It was disastrous. Most of the batter seeped out of the oranges, and what little remained had

absorbed the taste of the orange peels and was horribly bitter. It was inedible.

That night, Keri and I lay in silence, watching the stars flashing from behind the rustling treetops. We could hear the donkey moving around down near the stream where he was tied to a tree. We could hear the deep steady breathing of our sleeping children and dogs. I was laying on a foam roll that absorbed air, so I had a shallow cushion of foam and air, but I could still feel pebbles digging into my back, keeping me wide awake. I sensed Keri turn to me in the dark.

“Let’s not tell anyone we could still see the van, or my brothers will never let me live it down,” he said. I giggled.

* * *

The next morning, we repacked the reluctant donkey and started on our way. We trekked through a meadow, and then started uphill. Rachelle was leading Pépé. None of us can remember why we thought it was a good idea to turn a temperamental donkey over to a thirteen-year-old, but she was the one holding the lead rope. Suddenly, Pépé, deciding that the river looked much more appealing than the uphill trail we were on, bolted and ran straight down the mountain. Supplies flew from the pack like it was spring-loaded, getting scattered along the mountainside. Keri and Chris were in hot pursuit. They finally caught up with Pépé down by the river; he was drinking. They tied him to a tree and gathered up the dropped loot. Then, not wanting to drag the donkey back up the steep incline, Keri crossed the river with Pépé, and walked him clear back to the start of the path we had taken. Meanwhile, the rest of us continued our hike up the trail.

Keri caught up with us just before we reached Roosevelt Lake, and we decided it

was a great place to rest and eat lunch. There was a meadow nearby where the kids went to play. I looked up from preparing lunch to see a strange cloud rise around them as they ran through the knee-high grass. I rushed over to investigate and was sickened to realize it was clouds of mosquitoes. I quickly corralled them from the meadow and brought them back to play in the lake instead.

The older kids took off their boots and waded into the ice-cold water, while Tanner and Taco perched on a log and splashed their feet back and forth. Keri and I sat on a boulder and watched. Suddenly, Katie screamed. Jeff and Rachelle darted out of the water, while Keri and I ran towards it. Katie was standing in the water up to her knees, her elbows bent and arms flapping as she screamed, “Eeewwww! It crawled across my foot!” Keri knew what had scared her. With a grin, he quickly unlaced and removed his hiking boots, and ran towards Katie. He bent down and dug around in the mud.

“It’s a crawdad!” he yelled triumphantly as he held the small lobster high in the air for all to see. “They’re really good to eat! Hey—this is what we can have for dinner tonight!” he added. And the hunt was on for more.

Keri grabbed them with his fingers, but the kids were afraid of being pinched. Chris caught them by sliding the end of a stick under the belly of the crawdads and flipping them out of the water, flinging them onto the beach. I gathered them up and dropped them into the large pot we’d brought. After an hour or so, we tied the filled pot back onto the side of P  p   and continued our trek.

By the time we stopped to set up camp, everyone was exhausted. Most of the kids were too tired to wait for dinner to cook, so we fed them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and they crawled into their sleeping bags and went right to sleep. Keri and

Christopher and I (mostly Christopher and Keri) ate all the crawdads. Just as with their cousin, the lobster, the tail was the edible part. We dipped them in melted butter and sprinkled them with lemon pepper. Who takes butter and lemon pepper backpacking?! It was another example of the ridiculous amounts of food I'd brought. But to this day, Chris swears it was the best meal he's ever eaten.

By the end of day two, we were only a third of the way to Lower Piute Meadow, which was the goal that Keri had set for our first day of hiking. I think Moses and the Ten Tribes moved faster.

On day three, we started the morning early and strong. The donkey was cooperating, and we had energy. But as the day wore on, the blazing sun began to take its toll, and our energy waned. It was especially hard on the younger ones. And on Pépé. Once again, the donkey started to kick out, almost kicking Rachelle. We all ran for cover while Keri got him settled down. Turns out, the packing boxes had slipped and were hanging low, irritating Pépé's back legs. We unpacked the boxes, fixed them back into position, and reloaded Pépé, who snorted in irritation.

"I've got to get this load off him," Keri said. "These boxes have rubbed a raw spot on his back leg. I'll take Pépé and go quickly to Lower Piute and get him unloaded. Rachelle and Jeff can come help. Then we'll come back for you guys, and we can put your packs on Pépé for the rest of the hike to the meadow. That load will be nothing compared to what he's been carrying."

"Uh, Keri, you're the only one who knows how to get to Lower Piute," I said. "What happens if we get lost?" We didn't have walkie talkies or any other way of communicating.

“Look, you guys just keep on walking. If you get to a fork in the trail, take the right one.”

“What fork?” I asked.

“Don’t worry—you can’t miss it,” he reassured us, and they took off at an almost-jog, leaving behind Chris, Katie, Tanner, Taco, me, and the dogs. Chris and I looked at each other in disbelief.

“Well, let’s get going!” I said with a grin, trying to hide my uneasiness.

“This is so stupid!” Chris grumbled quietly.

We headed out, going at three-year-old Taco’s pace because we couldn’t hike any faster than the slowest one in the bunch. But Chris’s irritation had given him stamina.

“Come on!” Chris said, as he scooped up Taco, backpack and all. Then Chris, carrying his brother in his arms, started into his own semi-jog. The rest of us had a hard time keeping up. Soon, Katie and Tanner began to complain.

“Chris,” I said, “We can’t keep going this fast. It’s too hard.”

“Mom, we’ve got to get to Lower Piute!” he said. “Then we can rest.” But he did slow down.

Finally, we stopped to rest and get a drink from our canteens.

“Don’t drink too much,” I cautioned. “We don’t know when we’ll be able to fill up again.”

“How much further?” Katie whined.

“I don’t know—I’ve never been there before. But we haven’t gotten to the fork yet, so we still have a little ways,” I said.

“Why would someone leave a fork on a trail?” Tanner asked. “And how are we

supposed to find it?”

“No, a fork in the trail means that the trail splits. The trail we are on will split in half, with one trail going to the left and the other going to the right. When we get to it, we take the one to the right. And don’t worry—Dad says we can’t miss it,” I reassured him.

Chris and I stood up to continue the hike.

“I don’t want to walk anymore! My feet hurt!” Tanner cried.

“Come here, buddy,” Chris said. And he had Tanner stand on a boulder. “Okay, I’ll give you a piggy-back ride. You just lean over my backpack and hold on tight. Can you do that?” he asked. Tanner nodded.

So Chris continued the trek carrying a heavy load. On his back he carried his own pack, with seven-year-old Tanner (still wearing his backpack) hanging on. In his arms, he carried Taco. But his pace was a little slower now. As we walked, we searched for the fork in the trail.

Tanner and Taco walked a bit when we had to climb over a field of large boulders. But once we were past it, Chris took on their extra weight again.

After what seemed like an eternity of hiking, we finally reached a meadow. A ranger’s cabin sat off to the side; it was a small log building that looked like it had just been transported from *Little House on the Prairie*. We looked around in confusion. Had we taken the right fork without realizing it? Chris set Taco down, and I helped Tanner slide off Chris’s back. We heard someone talking. Walking to the other side of the cabin, we saw a ranger sitting on a horse, talking with some hikers. He had short reddish-blond hair that stuck straight out in places, and his freckled face was deeply tanned. He saw us and stopped mid-sentence. We must have looked like a ranger’s nightmare...an

exhausted group of novices that included young children and dogs.

“Is this Lower Piute Meadow?” I asked.

“No, it’s Upper Piute,” he replied.

“So where is Lower Piute?” I croaked. “If this is Upper, then did we pass Lower?” My brain was frantically searching for an alternative explanation.

“You went about five miles too far. You should have turned at the fork in the trail.”

“What fork?!” Christopher and I exclaimed together.

“The one about five miles back.”

I wanted to cry. Christopher looked angry.

The ranger dismounted. “Are you alone?” he asked, unsure of what to do.

“No,” I said. Confused, the ranger looked around for someone else who might be with us. “Well, kind of,” I continued. “My husband went to Lower Piute to unload our donkey and said we needed to take the right fork but we never saw a right fork and we ended up here and we’re almost out of water and our feet hurt and now we have to hike the rest of the way back and I don’t even know where that stupid fork is!” I came up for air.

“This is dumb!” Chris grumbled, not so quietly.

The ranger gave Chris and me detailed directions on how to find the fork in the trail. Then we joined the younger kids, sitting on some boulders in the shade. None of us wanted to walk the five miles back down to the fork. We drank the last of our water but were still thirsty. Just when I was about to stand up and start our hike down, we saw Keri, Rachelle, Jeff, and P  p   coming around a bend in the trail. We watched them approach.

Christopher glowered.

“What happened?” Keri asked as they approached. “You guys were supposed to take the fork in the trail!”

“What fork?” Christopher practically shouted. “There was no fork!”

“How did you find us?” I asked. “How did you know we had passed the fork?”

“Dad recognized Chris’s shoe print in the dirt!” Rachelle said proudly, coming to her dad’s defense. “That’s when we realized that you’d passed us!” We stood in silence for a moment.

Then Keri said, “Well, we’d better get going. Give me your packs.”

Chris turned away and headed towards the trail, still wearing his pack.

“Chris, let me carry your pack,” Keri said.

“NO!” Chris barked. His feet, knees, back, and his entire body was screaming after his Herculean feat of carrying his brothers such a long distance. But he was too angry to be reasoned with.

Keri sighed. “Here, Deb, I’ll carry your pack,” he said. He lengthened the straps and put it on.

Rachelle put on Katie’s pack, and carried Taco’s; Jeff put on Tanner’s pack. We started hiking back down the mountain—and we moved at Taco’s pace.

Five miles down the trail, Keri stopped. “Here’s the fork,” he said. I stared at the narrow, barely perceptible indentation in the grass.

“This is the fork?” I was incensed. “You said we couldn’t miss it! This looks like a coyote walked through once upon a time. It does not look like a trail!” Even though I had no idea where to go, I marched past him in a huff, heading down the new trail.

Eventually the trail emptied into a meadow. Not Lower Piute Meadow, but a meadow none the less. And that meant we were finally on flat ground. My back hurt so badly that it was getting difficult to walk.

“Deb, why don’t you get on P  p  ?” Keri suggested.

“No way! I’m not riding that donkey!” I said stubbornly. But Keri and the kids persisted until I finally gave in. They helped me climb onto the donkey’s back. P  p   took about two steps before I fell off, spraining my wrist.

Now I was mad. I was mad that I’d let myself be talked into the dumb trip. I was mad at the donkey. I was mad at Keri for leaving us to find our own way and thinking that the fork couldn’t be missed. I was mad that my back and feet and entire body hurt. I was mad at the world.

By the time we finally stumbled into Lower Piute Meadow, no one was speaking. Chris and I were angry, Keri was trying to dodge our bullets, and the other children’s survival instinct was keeping them quiet. We set up camp, cooked and ate dinner, and went to bed—all in silence.

By the next morning, life looked better. It’s amazing what a good night’s sleep can accomplish—especially when we realized we didn’t have to hike that day. The original plan had been to spend a day or two at Lower Piute, and then hike to Upper Piute for a couple of days. But the kids and I put the kibosh on that. “Been there, done that” was our opinion. Keri agreed. So, we stayed put.

* * *

The next five days in Lower Piute blended together into a blur of fishing, fun, and relaxation. We were the only people in the meadow. Every morning, Keri started the day

by cooking us a hardy breakfast of diced potatoes, onions, and peppers, fried on the open fire.

Keri and the children each had their own fishing pole, and they spent a lot of time down at the river that ran near where we were camped. They walked along the river, trying different spots. Chris discovered a separate pool that had broken off from the river, and it was loaded with big fish. It was surrounded by reeds, so they had to wade through water to get to where they could fish. They spent a lot of time in that fishing hole—until the day a long snake swam between Chris’s legs. In Rachele’s words, “He screamed like a girl and took off running.” It was no longer the favorite fishing spot.

Our five days at Lower Piute were wonderful and rejuvenating. We fished when we wanted, lounged around or napped when we wanted, and played when we wanted. I slept better than I had in ages. I have always loved sleeping outside in nature and find night sounds to be soothing. The rhythmic maracas of crickets, the haunting call of the owl, the beat of bat wings, all blend with the calming tumble of the nearby stream to create a hypnotic melody that lulls the senses and pulls me into a deep sleep.

Our five-day hiatus came to an end far too quickly. It was time to hike back out. It had taken us three days to get in to Lower Piute Meadow, but we figured we could make it out in two because we were rested, we were a little more experienced, and the load was lighter.

It was a great day for hiking because our feet didn’t ache, our canteens were full, and it was partly cloudy, so the weather was a little cooler. Rachele was holding the donkey’s lead rope. We were walking along a wide trail next to a field, when P  p   suddenly bolted, but this time, Rachele held on. Jeff, Tanner, and Taco were ahead. They

looked back when the rest of us yelled “Run!!!” and they saw the donkey charging down the trail towards them, dragging Rachele. Instead of running into the field on the left or the trees on the right, the three boys ran straight down the trail, fear etched on their faces as their legs pumped their fastest. The donkey took out Jeff, knocking him down and running right over the top of him. Tanner got the same treatment. Still holding tight to the rope, Rachele saw P  p  ’s nose over Taco’s head, steam coming from the donkey’s nostrils. Taco looked up, terror burned onto his three-year-old face. Adrenaline coursed through Rachele, and she somehow swung her feet around to the front, dug the heels of her hiking boots into the ground, and yanked hard on the rope, forcing the donkey’s head to the left. The donkey followed his head and took off across the field. Rachele let go of the rope and went into a half skid, half tumble.

We ran to the boys, who were all screaming and crying hysterically. Jeff and Tanner had dusty hoofprints on the back of their packs, but other than some minor scrapes, they were not hurt, although Jeff’s pack was broken. Taco was frightened but, thanks to Rachele, he was unhurt. Rachele was shaken up but had only some minor scratches from her tumble. She hugged her brothers tight. “I’m so glad you’re okay!” she whispered into their wails.

Once Tanner and Taco had stopped crying, Chris looked around and said, “Hey—where’s P  p  ?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” I replied.

“I’m ready to shoot that dumb donkey,” Keri added with feeling.

“Please do!” said Rachele.

I think we were all ready to leave P  p   to his own devices, but he was carrying

the food, and the kids were hungry. So Keri and Chris went in search of him. They found him down by the stream, calm as could be. He didn't seem at all bothered when they took him by the lead rope to bring him back.

We found a shady spot in the trees for a picnic. After we had lunch and Keri and I did a patch-job on Jeff's backpack, we continued hiking. We were pushing towards what Keri referred to as "our usual lunch spot" (the spot his family always stopped at to eat), but with all of the delays, we didn't make it before the sun set. It was dark when we finally stopped to sleep in some random clearing just off the trail. We were so tired, we didn't even set up the tents, but just slept under the stars. When we awoke in the morning, we discovered that we were laying on a massive ant hill. They were everywhere! The cry of "Ants!" had us up and out of our sleeping bags in record time. We didn't even stop to make breakfast, but handed out granola bars to eat on the way

We arrived back at our vehicles around noon, tired, filthy, and a little disappointed that the trip was over.

