



Thunder

Rally

Nathanael Reed

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BY

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Prologue

Alex Gray squared his shoulders and glared defiantly up at the tall man towering over him. His father's words cut into him and churned through his head in great murky cascades. Years of practice still hadn't made it possible for him to switch off his mind to his father's tirades.

"You listening to me, boy?"

Alex held his father's eyes. "I'm listening."

"Not likely. That's your problem. You never listen - and now look at you."

Alex could feel his shoulders sag. Sag and hang limply before the tall, dark-haired man.

His mother's hand reached out and pulled meekly at her husband's arm. "Now, John. Alex does do his best."

"Does he now?" John Gray glanced dismissively at his wife. "Does he really? I'll tell you when this boy does his best - never! He's never put a real effort into anything in his entire life. Look at him!" He waved his big meaty hand a few inches in front of Alex's face. "You think he'd be good at something! School . . . Football . . . Even tiddlywinks would be better than nothing!" His face twisted into an ugly sneer. "Look at him!"

Alex once again squared his shoulders. "I am good at some things."

"He does his best, John," Alex's mother agreed.

"His best!" John Gray grunted loudly. "I'll tell you what doing your best is all about," he said. "It's getting up at 5:30 every morning to milk and feed a herd of dairy cows, then taking the bus 35 miles to school - playing varsity baseball and getting straight A's - that's what it means to be a success."

Something within Alex seemed to give up and die. He dropped his gaze and took a long, deep breath. How many times had he heard this before? His father's early mornings on the farm, varsity baseball, four years in the Navy Seals . . . He knew he should be doing better in school - trying harder and all that, but . . . what was the point. Nothing he could do would satisfy his father anyway. Nothing.

"I'll tell you something, boy," his father continued. "This little trip up north to visit your friend Joel Flynn, might be just what the doctor ordered. There's still real men up there in

the northern wilderness - trappers, hunters . . . Maybe they'll rub off on you. It'll be a lot different than what you see everyday around here - hanging out in the mall and playing your precious video games."

"It would be nice if he could come with us to Acapulco for Christmas," Mrs. Gray said.

"No more coddling!" his father stated emphatically.

Alex flinched. "I'll never do enough to make you happy," he said, his voice cracking. "I'll never make varsity or get straight A's. None of my teachers even like me."

"Course they don't," John Gray said with a grunt. "You're too interested in slacking off and getting by with as little effort as possible."

"That's enough, John," his wife said firmly, steering her husband toward the door. "Alex's going to be gone for two weeks, and we don't want him to be thinking about this when he's away up north."

Father and son eyed each other in the glare of the Christmas tree lights. Finally the father gave his hand a dismissive wave. "What am I wasting my breath for? You're never going to change. You'll be a lazy, useless slacker till the day you die."

Alex felt a small shudder pass through him as he watched his father scoop up his two suitcases and start for the living room door. Two weeks in Northern Ontario! As much as he hated the thought of the cold and snow, spending the holidays with Joel Flynn and his family might be just what the doctor ordered. After all, Joel had been his best friend since Kindergarten - at least until he'd moved north this past summer. His spirits rose slightly. Surely whatever waited for him in Canada's frozen wilderness couldn't be as bad as living in the same house as his father . . .

A faint smile creased Alex's face as he followed his parents out into the night air. He took a deep breath of the cool December night and looked up into the darkened sky. A few snowflakes drifted down and melted against his face.

"Merry Christmas," he whispered.

Chapter 1

Blizzard!

The frigid north wind howled across the darkening lake, sweeping the falling snow into a wild, freezing blizzard. Icy cold pellets bit into the faces of the two boys, searing their lungs and making vision beyond a few feet impossible.

Lost! Alex Gray tucked his face even further into his parka and glared at his friend, Joel Flynn. This was not how a perfect winter's day of ice fishing was supposed to end! "We're going in circles," he shouted, catching Joel by the arm and jerking him to a stop. They stood together, faces hunched into the warm shelter of their coats, their breath coming in long, ragged gasps.

"I guess we should have stayed in the fishing shack until morning," Joel replied.

"I guess so," Alex agreed sarcastically.

Joel squirmed at his friend's harsh words. "It got dark too fast, and then this storm blew up . . . I've never seen anything like it." He knocked the thick snow from the webbing of his snowshoes.

"We've got to be near shore," Alex said, shaking his head in frustration. "We've been walking for almost an hour." He drew several deep breaths, trying to quell the anger that had been coursing through him. Anger at Joel - this smooth-talking, Momma's Boy who'd gotten him into this mess! His eyes swept the blackness and swirling snow for signs of the treeline. *Why, oh why, had he agreed to come north for the Christmas holidays? He should be back home in the city - warm and snug, waiting out the last few days before Christmas. He grimaced as an image of his father flashed through his head - his father relaxing on the warm beaches of Acapulco, while he was freezing to death here . . . Perfect!* He watched Joel shelter his eyes with a heavy mitten, searching for the shoreline. "So what do we do?" Alex asked, this time trying to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

"We've got to get off this lake," Joel said. "Once we reach shore I'm sure I can get my bearings, but out here it's impossible. We've been walking in circles . . ."

Alex noticed that their snowshoe tracks were already filling, and knew that within minutes their trail would be completely obliterated. He drew the collar of his coat up past the

fringes of dark hair that protruded beneath his toque and squinted hard into the blizzard, desperate for the sight of even the faintest landmark. There was nothing.

“We’ve got to keep moving!” Joel tucked his face down into his parka and plunged once more into the maelstrom.

Alex plowed after his friend, but with every step the cold seemed to creep through his heavy clothing and clutched at him like the hand of a huge invisible monster. His face felt like a block of ice, and his fingers and toes were numb. He folded his hands into the arms of his coat as a feeling of exhaustion overcame him.

“What’s that?” Joel stopped so abruptly that Alex almost bumped into him. He was pointing straight ahead of them through the storm. Alex followed the direction of the other boy’s hand.

“I thought I saw a flicker of light,” Joel said, slowly swinging his snowshoes back into motion.

Alex gritted his teeth and struggled on through the rising drifts, pushing each snowshoe one labourious step at a time - no longer daring to protect his face by dropping it into his coat, but keeping his eyes locked in the direction that Joel had indicated. Then he saw it, a tiny flicker far in the distance.

“Maybe it’s a fishing hut,” Alex shouted above the wind.

“I doubt it,” Joel answered. “It’s too high. It must be set up on the shore. It could be an old trapper’s shack, there are plenty of them scattered around Kenogami.”

The treeline gradually emerged from the night, and then the shape of a small cabin. From the lone window glimmered a tiny speck of yellow.

“Where are we?” Alex asked.

Joel shook his head, “No idea,” he replied. “That cabin doesn’t look the least bit familiar. We’re probably in some kind of bay. It is a big lake.”

They trudged the last few steps up the shoreline to a rickety-looking shack. Joel removed a heavy leather mitt and rapped on the plank door.

Even above the blizzard’s howl they could hear a sharp scraping sound inside the building.

“Well, at least somebody’s home,” Joel said. He was lifting his hand to knock again

when the door creaked open.

Framed in the light of the doorway was the strangest looking person Alex had ever seen. Even though the man was standing on the raised door stoop, he was barely taller than Alex . . . And his hair! It seemed to erupt straight up from the top of his head in a great tangled thicket. A pair of wire-rimmed glasses perched precariously on his thin nose, magnifying his eyes and giving him the appearance of a wild-haired owl.

Still, their reluctant host stood in the doorway, staring wordlessly out at his two visitors, his lips set in a thin grim line. Alex felt his mouth go dry. “We were ice fishing and got lost in the storm,” he finally stammered. “We saw the light from your cabin and we were hoping you could help us.”

Even then the man did not speak, he merely moved reluctantly back inside his cabin and waited for his two guests to enter. Alex and Joel quickly stepped out of their snowshoes and propped them against the cabin wall.

The heat of the wood stove wafted over Alex in a glorious rush. The cabin’s interior had a definite cozy feel, although a hissing kerosene lantern revealed only the barest of furnishings: crude wooden table, four mis-matched chairs, single cot covered with several grey wool blankets, large woodstove and woodbox, and against the far wall, a long coffin-shaped storage box.

Joel dropped into the nearest chair, oblivious of the snow he had just tracked across the floor. He let out a long contented sigh, “Man, this place was a sight for sore eyes,” he said with a chuckle. “I guess we shouldn’t have waited until dark before we left our ice hut.”

The man grunted. “The radio’s been warning about a major winter storm for three days,” he said gruffly.

“I guess we missed that,” Joel said, his ever-present grin unfazed.

“What do you expect from me? I ain’t got no phone.”

Alex could feel his nerves begin to fray at the man’s indifference. “Look,” he said. “Can you at least tell us how to get home? We were due more than an hour ago and Joel’s folks will be having a canary by now!”

“Don’t mind my friend here,” Joel said with a grin. “He has some anger management issues. I think that’s why his family sent him up north for the holidays.”

Alex ignored the wink.

“Where are we, anyway?” Joel asked, pulling off his toque. His long blond hair tumbled down around his collar.

“Collier’s Bay,” the man answered. “Northeast end of the lake.”

“Never heard of it,” Joel admitted.

“Not surprised,” the man answered. “Kenogami’s a big lake.”

“No kidding!” Alex said.

The man was about to turn away when Joel suddenly leaned forward, extending his hand. “I’m Joel Flynn,” he said. “And this is my friend, Alex Gray. I live down at the south end of the lake.”

“The name’s Johnson,” their host said. Ignoring Joel’s hand he returned to the stove and stoked the fire.

Alex’s toes began to tingle as the heat found its way through his thick boots.

“You’ve got a real nice spot here, Mr. Johnson.” Joel stretched out his legs, surveying his surroundings.

Alex grimaced as he once again witnessed Joel’s cool, unflappable personality in action. Nobody could roll with the punches with a grin on his face like Joel. Even when his dad retired from the police force and packed the family up north to this God-forsaken place . . . always cool . . . always confident . . . he often wondered how the two of them ever became such good friends - they were so different - no one looked up to him the way that people looked up to Joel. He knew, as well that his own straight dark hair and average, sensible appearance couldn’t compete for a minute with Joel’s curly blond hair, blue eyes, and rock star good looks.

“I’d like to get a place like this one day,” Joel was saying. “It would be a great getaway for ice fishing or snowmobiling.”

Johnson scowled. “I live here year-round,” he said. “I don’t have no fancy home to go to when I get tired of roughing it like some city folk.”

Alex looked into the man’s dark, haggard face, and for an instant their eyes met. A chill rippled through Alex’s body and he quickly shifted his gaze away from the strange, little man and over to the long box stretching the full length of the wall to his left. “We were pretty lucky to make it to shore,” he finally said.

“It’s easy to go around in circles in a blizzard,” Johnson agreed. “Lots of people never find their way to shore - especially when you’re out on a lake the size of Kenogami.”

“Are you a trapper?” Joel asked.

Johnson moved over to the door. He removed a heavy parka from a hook and pulled it on. “Soon as you’re thawed out I’ll take you up to the main road. You won’t have no trouble finding your way home from there.”

“That would be great,” Joel said. “My folks will be mighty grateful.”

Alex rose stiffly to his feet, every muscle in his body screaming in protest. Never before had he been so tired - and to make matters worse his toes, cheeks and ears were beginning to thaw out - burning and tingling as the circulation returned to the frost-bitten regions of his body. He grimaced as he noticed the twinkle in his friend’s eyes.

“All set?” Johnson swung open the door and a blast of Arctic wind howled into the room, sweeping a thin carpet of snow across the plank floor. With a groan Alex pulled on his toque and mitts and stepped back into the blizzard. His breath caught as the cold enveloped him.

“You can come back tomorrow and get your snowshoes,” Johnson suggested. “There’s a trail all the way to your place, and the snow’s not that deep.”

Half-way across the clearing Alex turned and glanced back at Johnson’s cabin. As he did the storm seemed to catch its breath. He blinked in surprise. Almost hidden in the tall spruce trees behind the shack was a large, barn-like structure. His brow furrowed. What on earth would Johnson be doing with such a building? His cabin didn’t even have electricity. Alex shivered as the cold crept back into the gaps of his clothing, chilling him. He turned and hurried after Johnson.

Something about their strange-looking guide filled Alex with uneasiness. Why, for instance, hadn’t he answered Joel when asked if he was a trapper?

Johnson led them through the forest until he came to a fork in the wide, snow-covered trail

“This here’s the old Ferguson Highway,” he said. “You oughta be all right now. Just follow this road for a couple of miles or so and it should take you by your place.”

Before either boy could reply, Johnson abruptly turned and started back toward home.

Alex shook his head. “That’s one odd duck.”

“We’d better get cracking,” Joel said. “My folks will probably have a search party out looking for us by now.”

“No doubt,” Alex said grimly, “Well, let’s go face the music.”

Phys. Ed. Class

It was one of those dreams where you know you're asleep, but it's so real and unsettling you wake up in a cold sweat, your heart pounding wildly.

He was back in phys ed class doing sit-ups - but it seemed that only he and Joel were there. Just the two of them and Mr. Williams, their phys. ed teacher - only the weird thing was - it wasn't Mr. Williams, it was his dad.

Alex was lying on a padded gym mat, completely drenched with sweat, struggling through an agonizing series of warm-up exercises. Good old Mr. Williams always enjoyed seeing his students suffer through these dreadful warm-ups at the start of every class. Only this time the sit ups wouldn't end. They went on and on and on . . .

And the very worst part of the horribly weird dream was the fact that somehow Mr. Williams had morphed into his own father. Right there - hanging over him - inches away and yelling - a black, plastic whistle hanging from a string around his neck.

"Why can't you do sit-ups like your friend over there?" He jerked a thumb toward Joel. "He looks like he could keep going all day."

Across from him Joel banged out another half dozen sit-ups, not a drop of sweat soiling his spotless white T-shirt.

"You can do it, Alex," Joel said reprovngly. "It really isn't so hard. Mr. Williams is just making us do them for our own good."

Alex's father leaned to within a couple of inches of his face. "That's right, boy. You gotta suck up the pain and bite the bullet! You never know, this might be the one thing you turn out to be good at . . . Make me proud of you, boy!"

Chapter 2

The Sled

By the time Alex and Joel finally stumbled downstairs the next morning Mary Flynn was already bustling about the dining room.

“I thought you boys were going to sleep all day,” she said, setting a large plate of toast down on the table. “Joel, go on into the kitchen and get the eggs.”

Alex glanced out the window and breathed a sigh of relief. The cloudless blue sky looking back at him was at least some small consolation to last night’s nightmarish adventure.

“Hard to believe it was so awful last night,” Mary Flynn said. “You boys were lucky to have found your way off that lake in such a storm. We were worried to death.”

“Where’s Dad?” Joel asked, returning with the eggs.

“He went into town first thing this morning,” his mother explained. “He should be back any minute.”

Alex sat down across from Joel.

“I don’t suppose you boys will be going out ice fishing again soon,” Joel’s mother said.

“Ice fishing’s boring,” Alex replied. “You just sit for hours in a cramped little shack, staring at a hole in the ice waiting for some poor, ignorant fish to decide whether or not it’s hungry.”

Joel nodded understandingly. “We should have left for home earlier,” he admitted, “But I wanted Alex to catch at least one fish for all our troubles.”

“Well, I’ll bet you didn’t find things too boring when you got lost in that blizzard.” Mary Flynn shook her head disapprovingly. “I shudder to think what your mother will say when she finds out you got lost in a blizzard the second day you were here.”

“We’re sorry to have worried you, Mom,” Joel apologized.

Alex grimaced as the slightly dishevelled-looking woman planted a kiss on her son’s cheek. She and Joel’s dad were both a lot older than his friends’ parents - a fact which probably went a long way in explaining why Joel always seemed to have them wrapped around his little finger. Two older sisters were long married and living in the States with their own families.

Mary Flynn stood by the dining room window, looking out into the bright morning

sunshine. “What was the name of that man who helped you last night?”

”Johnson,” Joel said. “He lives in a cabin down in Collier’s Bay at the north end of the lake.”

“Really,” his mother said. “Your father was just telling me that the new snowmobile trail goes right through there now.”

“Snowmobile trail?” Alex asked, anxious to change the subject.

Joel looked up at his friend. “Hmmm,” he said with a grin. “Someone’s Spidey senses are tingling.”

Alex grunted. “I’m no snowmobiler! You’re the northern boy. I just get to piddle around on an old rental outside the city where I got my snowmobile license.”

“You wouldn’t believe the trails around here, Alex,” Joel said around a mouthful of eggs. “They’re all professionally groomed and are as wide and smooth as most highways. People come from all over North America to use them.”

As if on cue, an ear-shattering roar erupted just outside their front door. Joel and Alex both jumped to their feet and raced to the large window overlooking Lake Kenogami.

“What on earth was that?” Alex asked, his eyes slowly adjusting to the glare. A hundred feet from the house a shiny red snowmobile was accelerating swiftly into the distance, a swirl of white powder trailing out behind it.

“Lance Higginson!” Joel said with a scowl as the machine and rider disappeared into the woods.

“He must have gone right through our yard,” Mary Flynn said in astonishment. “I know the snowmobile trail is near here, but he shouldn’t be taking short cuts through our property.”

“Lance Higginson’s the biggest showoff in Northern Canada,” Joel said. “His rich daddy even retooled his sled so it would go faster.”

“His sled?” Alex asked.

“That’s what we call snowmobiles,” Joel explained.

“He’s going to get killed driving that fast,” Mary Flynn said as they returned to their breakfast. “Snowmobiles are getting too powerful for their own good.”

“That reminds me,” Joel said, his eyes brightening. “They’re having this awesome snowmobile race here just after Christmas. It’s called the *Thunder Rally*. We’ll have to take it

in, especially if Lance Higginson loses.”

Alex scowled. “Great! Another opportunity to freeze to death and be bored out of my skull at the same time.”

“I’m saving up my money to buy a snowmobile,” Joel continued, ignoring his friend’s sarcasm. “I should have enough by next winter. In the meantime Clarence lets me practice on his machine.”

“Who’s Clarence?” Alex asked.

“He’s an old prospector friend of ours,” Mary Flynn answered. “He and his wife Agnes live across the lake.”

“He’s got a real old snowmobile,” Joel said. “Probably like the one you got your license on. Clarence lets me take it out anytime I want but it’s almost twenty years old, and pretty slow.”

The dull mutter of a truck engine drifted into the dining room.

“Sounds like your dad’s back,” Alex said.

Mary Flynn bustled over to the window. “He said he wouldn’t be long.”

Both boys looked up as the front door opened and a tall, grey-haired man stamped his way inside.

“Howdy, Dad,” Joel said.

Jack Flynn had the tanned complexion of a man who lived in the outdoors. A thick moustache covered his upper lip and from beneath two brushy eyebrows were two dark, smiling eyes.

“Come here,” he said, waving Joel and Alex over to the door. “I’ve got something to show you.”

With a curious glance at his father, Joel crossed the room and stepped outside. Alex followed close behind.

Standing in the driveway was the Flynn’s half-ton truck. The tailgate was down and behind the vehicle was parked a gleaming black snowmobile with red racing stripes.

“Woah - man!” Joel shouted. “Where did you get the awesome sled?”

Jack Flynn grinned down at him. “Merry Christmas, Son - a day or two early. What do you think?”

Joel stared dumbfounded at his dad. “It looks brand new.”

“Of course it’s brand new,” his dad said with a laugh. “Get dressed and try this baby out.”

Joel and Alex scrambled back into the house and threw on their outdoor clothes. “I wondered why you had that silly grin on your face all morning,” Joel said, giving his mother a quick hug.

The snowmobile was a high performance *Polaris Indy*, with a tapered front end and a plush leather seat that could hold two riders comfortably.

Joel slid behind the steering column. “It’s a beaut!”

His dad handed them two black and red helmets and the ignition key. “It’s ready to go so you might as well take her for a spin.”

Alex slipped on his helmet, then jumped onto the seat behind his friend.

“Don’t forget to put into practice all the things you learned at the snowmobile safety course,” Jack Flynn reminded his son.

“You boys be careful,” Mary Flynn added nervously.

Joel turned the ignition and the big motor roared to life. “Hold on!” he shouted.

Alex barely had time to grab the two leather straps beside him before the sudden acceleration hurled him back in his seat.

With a deafening roar the snowmobile shot down the shoreline and out onto the trail stretching across the broad frozen surface of Lake Kenogami. A groomer had already packed down the snow from the previous night’s blizzard, so the trail was hard and almost as wide as a two-lane highway.

Alex had snowmobiled on trails outside the city back home, but never had he travelled at the speeds that Joel quickly reached. It was breathtaking! The snow-covered surface of the lake flashed beneath them in a frightening blur, a huge cloud of powder rolling out in their wake. A hundred yards from shore the snowmobile hit a ridge of ice and soared through the air. Alex’s heart leapt into his mouth as they hung suspended for what seemed like an eternity before finally crashing back down onto the trail.

“We’ll go by Clarence’s place,” Joel shouted over his shoulder. “Show off a bit.” He swung the sled sharply to the left and around a point of land jutting out into the lake. In the cusp of a small bay an A-framed cottage sat nestled in a grove of pine trees just back from the

shoreline. A thin spiral of smoke drifted from a stone chimney at the far end of the building.

Joel cut the motor as they sailed up the shoreline and slid to a stop in front of the house.

“Man,” Joel said, removing his helmet. “We sure could have used this machine in that blizzard last night.”

“I’ll say!” Alex’s heart was still beating a wild tattoo in his chest. “You can go around in circles a lot quicker on a sled like this than you can on a pair of snowshoes.”

A beat up yellow snowmobile was parked by the front door of the A-frame. The word *Ski-doo* was stencilled in big black letters down the side of the engine cover. Alex couldn’t help thinking how old and well-used the snowmobile looked compared to Joel’s shiny black *Polaris*.

An old man appeared in the doorway. He was wiry and slightly stooped, with his hair cut almost to the level of his pink scalp. In his left hand he held a half-finished piece of toast.

“Joel!” he shouted, tossing the toast in the direction of a nearby bird feeder. Stepping down from the porch he circled the *Polaris* appraisingly.

“Christmas present,” Joel said, patting the leather seat affectionately.

The old man looked up at Alex, his grey eyes twinkling. “This must be your friend from the city you were telling us about,” he said, giving Alex’s hand a firm shake.

Joel nodded. “Alex and I have been best friends since kindergarten, long before I moved up here,”

“I wondered what my little animal friends were whispering about lately,” he said. “Must have been talking about you. But you never can tell about those critters, they’re full of stories, half of them they make up.”

“Now you be careful, Clarence,” Joel said. “You’ll have Alex believing your tall tales.” He ran a hand along the gleaming dark surface of the snowmobile. “I guess I won’t have to borrow the old *Ski-doo* anymore.” He looked up at the old man. “How about coming with me for a quick spin around the lake?”

Clarence laughed. “Some other time. My breakfast hasn’t even had a chance to settle yet.” He continued to eye the snowmobile admiringly. “This sure is a fine machine,” he said. “I’ll bet you might even be able to race it if you had a mind to.”

“Oh, I do,” Joel said with a grin. “I certainly do.”

Chapter 3

Agnes

Clarence ushered Alex and Joel through the living room and into a small bedroom. An elderly woman lay in the middle of a large bed, propped up by several pillows. A small book lay open on her lap.

“We’ve got visitors, Agnes,” Clarence announced.

The face of the frail woman lit up with a smile. “I know,” she said. “I heard them arrive.”

“It’s good to see you, Agnes,” Joel said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Not bad for an old lady,” Agnes said, patting his hand. “This must be the friend that was coming for a visit.”

“It sure is,” Joel beamed. “I’d like you to meet my best friend from back in the city - Alex Gray.”

Agnes held out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Alex. I hope you enjoy your stay in the Northland.”

Alex felt strangely flustered as he carefully shook the older woman’s hand, bowing his head awkwardly. Agnes’ fingers were swollen and twisted from arthritis, yet there was something almost regal about her. Alex cleared his throat. “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“What are you reading now, Agnes?” Joel asked.

Agnes glanced down at the book on her lap. “Oh - it’s a book of poetry by Marion Donaldson. She turned it over. “This one is called *The Choice*. Listen:

*My candle flickered in the gloom
as, huddled in my dismal room,
I gloated in its warmth and light
a golden circle in the night.*

*A gentle knock came at my door
A sweeter voice than heard before*

*said, 'May I share my Light with you?
My life is full; My Love is true.'*

*A harsh voice whispered, 'Keep him out!
He means to snuff your candle out,
and take your warmth and light away.
Or - wait, at least, some other day.*

*My choice I made, My door flung wide.
I welcomed Christ Himself inside.
All shadows fled before His face.
His love now warms my dwelling place."*

Alex grunted - a little more loudly than he'd intended, then shuffled uncomfortably as all eyes in the little room turned toward him. "My grandmother used to read me stuff like that," he said. "She passed away last summer." Memories of the last time he had visited her in the hospital rushed through him. He hadn't known that it would be the last time he would see her, and not saying a proper good-bye had haunted him ever since. He swallowed hard. "You remind me of her," he said awkwardly.

"Really?" Agnes said, smiling. "What was she like?"

Alex cleared his throat. "The nurses all called her *Sunshine Nanna*. I guess 'cause she was always smiling."

"It's wonderful to have a special grandparent." Agnes looked over at her husband. "Clarence and I don't have any children of our own, so we don't have any grandchildren either - but Joel helps to make up for that," she reached over and patted Joel's hand. "I had a special grandmother too. She lived with us until I was twelve years old."

Somehow Alex found it hard to imagine someone as old as Agnes having a grandmother.

"Is that when she died?" Joel asked.

"That's right. She went to sleep one night and didn't wake up the next morning. For years I felt terrible about not saying good-bye to her, but we treated each other special when she

was alive and that's the important thing."

Alex's brow furrowed at the old woman's words. It was almost as if she had read his mind . . . "That's how it was with my grandmother too," he said. "Only it was in a hospital." He shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair.

"You must have been the apple of her eye, Alex," Agnes said.

Alex shrugged. "I was her only grandchild."

"She must have been proud of you." Agnes looked at him for a long moment. I know that I'd be very proud to have a grandson like you." Her smile seemed to light up the little room.

A strange sense of peace passed over Alex as he watched Clarence lean forward and kiss his wife on the cheek. "Will you be joining us for a cup of tea, my dear?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not right now. I'm pretty stiff and sore this morning. But leave the door wide open so I can listen."

"We'll bring our tea back in here," Clarence said. "Come on boys." He led the way out to the kitchen. "You fellas take a seat while I put on the kettle."

A topographic map was spread out on the kitchen table. "What are you up to now, Clarence?" Joel asked. "Prospecting for gold?"

Clarence chuckled softly. "Not with three feet of snow on the ground," he said. "But I like to make a study of things." He returned to the table and sat down beside Joel. "The tea will be ready in a jiff."

Joel leaned over the map, his eyes brightening. "Say, Clarence, do you know what route they're using for the *Thunder Rally* this year?"

"Sure. I helped cut the new section last summer." With a red felt pen he traced a winding trail across the map. "It begins on the outskirts of the town of Kirkland Lake, nine miles to the east of here. Then it winds toward Lake Kenogami, cuts straight down its length, then zig-zags back through the forest toward town." He looked up at Joel and Alex.

"Twenty miles of rolling thunder," Joel said with a laugh.

"Oh, it's an exciting course," Clarence continued. "There are a few places, like out here on the lake, where drivers can really *pour on the coal*, but in most places it's quite winding."

"How will the race work?" Alex asked. "Will all the drivers start at once?"

Clarence laughed. "No. The snowmobiles will leave in groups of four at one minute

intervals. That way drivers will be racing against the clock as well as against each other. The fastest time over the course wins the race. It's not really a big deal. Admission is only a donation to the local Food Bank. Top prize is just a plaque. The organizers want to keep it to local racers so it'll be fun and friendly."

"That explains what Lance Higginson was doing this morning then," Joel said. "The trail must go right by our place."

"It sure does," Clarence agreed. "It passes within a hundred yards or so."

Alex turned to his friend. "You'd better get serious about practising if you expect to win."

"That's for sure," Clarence agreed. "The more familiar you are with the course and its little idiosyncrasies, the faster your time will be."

"Well, it's not like I haven't had any practice," Joel said, grinning at Clarence. "I sure have been out enough on your old *Ski-doo*."

"And if you can drive a pernickety old machine like that," Clarence said, "And drive her well, I'd say you'd have an excellent chance."

Joel's face turned a shade red at the unexpected compliment. Alex was a little surprised the ever-confident Joel was so pleased with the praise. *The Thunder Rally must be very important to him!*

"What about this Lance Higginson?" Alex asked. "Didn't you say that his engine had been retooled?"

Clarence pushed back from the table with a loud snort. "Having a souped-up engine is only half the battle, fellas. Knowing how to drive and drive well - now that's the ticket."

"I wish there was a way of checking Lance's time," Joel said. "Then we'd know if we had a chance of beating him. If someone else wins, that's fine, but seeing Lance win will be hard to take."

"Knowing his time would set the bar, all right," Clarence agreed. He poured each of them a mug of tea. "Why don't you fellas leave that little problem with me. I'll give it some thought."

Joel turned his attention to the map on the table. "I've already been over a good part of this trail on the *Ski-doo*."

“No doubt,” Clarence agreed. “But your new *Polaris* is in another league - I’d have to upgrade every single part in my old *Ski-doo* to keep up with you now.”

The boys laughed.

“Any suggestions?” Joel asked.

Clarence bent over the map and studied the route carefully. “The trail is fairly wide in most places, but it’s as curvy as a nimble-footed garter snake.” He looked up at Joel. “Even though each group of racers will be starting at intervals, it’s important you use every opportunity to pass as many racers as you can. Most won’t have sleds anywhere near as powerful as yours.” He tapped his finger on the large blue area representing Lake Kenogami. “Here is where you’re really going to have to air it out. Over two miles of straight out full-throttle.”

Alex could feel a thrill go through him as he thought of tearing across the lake at breakneck speed - driving Joel’s snowmobile . . .

“Now just remember,” Clarence continued. “You fall off one of those sleds doing seventy miles an hour and you’ll hurt yourself real bad. The snow won’t protect you much, especially if you hit a tree or a stump.” He snapped his fingers. “You could end up getting killed just like that.”

Joel grinned reassuringly at the older man. “We’ll be careful.”

“You keep the map,” Clarence said, folding it up and handing it to Joel. “Study it - get to know each bend - each twist and turn - each hill and straight stretch until you see the course in your dreams.” He stood up from the table. “Now, let’s take our tea into the bedroom and keep Agnes company for awhile.”

They were just stepping into the bedroom when Agnes waved her hand and pointed to the large window at the far end of the room. Several chickadees were flitting about a house-shaped feeder on the other side of the pane of glass. “Aren’t they pretty?” Agnes said quietly.

Clarence ushered Alex and Joel over to a couple of chairs by the foot of the bed. “We thought we’d take our tea in here with you, my dear. Would you like a cup?”

Agnes shook her head. “Perhaps later.”

“You have quite a view,” Alex said, edging closer to the window. “It’s really amazing that those little chickadees could survive a blizzard like we had last night.”

“Clarence installed the picture window two summers ago,” Agnes said, patting her

husband's hand. "You'd be surprised at the wildlife that passes by our little home."

They sat quietly for a moment, sipping their tea.

"Do you know a man named Johnson who lives on the north end of the lake?" Joel finally asked.

Clarence set down his mug, his brow wrinkling. "Johnson?"

"Funny-looking guy with this wild head of hair." Alex said. "Kinda looks like a mad scientist."

"I think I know who you mean," Clarence said. "He lives in a shack on Collier's Bay, as I recall. He's not the kind of guy who likes to stop and chat."

"That's right," Alex said. "We stumbled into him last night during the blizzard. Kind of gave me the creeps."

"Yah," Joel agreed. "He has this big outbuilding behind his place and inside his cabin he's got a long wooden box that's locked up tighter than a miser's safe."

"Who is he, anyway?" Alex asked.

Clarence shrugged. "I met him when I was staking claims up there a couple of years ago. He's probably just some oddball poacher. There's still a few of them around."

"What would he be poaching?" Alex asked.

"Mink, beaver, marten, moose . . . You name it. Poachers don't worry about licenses, or how they do it, or how many they take. He probably uses the outbuilding to cure the hides and the big box inside the cabin to store them in."

Joel nodded his head. "That's it then. I asked him if he was a trapper and he didn't answer. Probably hit a nerve."

Alex's brow furrowed suddenly. "Wait a minute," he said, sitting back in his chair. "When we were leaving Johnson's place last night there was something peculiar that struck me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it - until now."

Joel nodded. "What was it?"

"It was an aerial," Alex said, looking over at Clarence. "A radio aerial on the top of a long pole just behind the cabin. Back in the city, my scout master was a real short-wave radio nut. He had an aerial as high as Johnson's."

"Short-wave radio!" Joel echoed. "Who on earth would have one of those nowadays -

what with computers and email and everything?”

“Maybe that’s why he has one,” Clarence suggested. “If there aren’t many around, there’d be no prying ears listening in. I remember reading about Russian spies in the 1950’s who even used short-wave radios to contact the Motherland.” “But what possible secrets could a guy living out in the bush have that the Russians would be interested in?” Alex asked.

“Unless it’s how many mosquitos inhabit McGuire’s Swamp,” Clarence suggested with a chuckle. “Or how many pike are pulled out of Kenogami on any given day in the month of June.”

Joel scratched his head thoughtfully. “Probably just a strange man with an even stranger hobby. But then again, the cops might be interested in learning what he’s doing with a short-wave radio.”

“He must be up to something shady all right,” Alex said. “Maybe it’s time someone sent Comrade Johnson back to the Motherland.”

Chapter 4

Lance Higginson

Clarence stood at the door of his cottage watching as Alex and Joel strapped on their helmets. “Wait,” he called, pulling a set of keys from his pocket. “Alex, why don’t you take my old *Ski-doo*? You can use it while you’re up here. I’ve only driven it a couple of times this winter . . . You are licensed, aren’t you?”

“You bet,” Alex said, his eyes lighting up. “I got my snowmobile licence earlier this winter back home. Thanks a million, Clarence. This should be a lot of fun.”

“Now you be careful,” Clarence warned. “I’ve kept this old sled in good repair, so it’s still pretty fast.”

Alex dropped into the seat of the battered yellow *Ski-doo* and started the engine. It immediately roared to life, the sound of the raw power of the motor surprising him. He looked over at Clarence and gave the old man the *thumbs up*.

“What do you say we get some practice for the big race?” Joel shouted, then led the way back out onto the lake.

Alex followed the sleek black *Polaris*, slowly getting the feel of Clarence’s *Skidoo* and gaining confidence. A rush of wild exhilaration swept through him as they accelerated out across Lake Kenogami. The power of Clarence’s snowmobile was a pleasant surprise, even though he suspected that Joel was not opening his machine full out. A few short minutes later they were sweeping past the fishing hut they’d occupied the previous day, and turning toward Collier’s Bay.

Alex grinned to himself as they slowed to cross the small clearing by Johnson’s cabin. “The old hermit won’t be happy about having all these snowmobiles roaring by his place,” he thought

He and Joel drew their sleds to a stop a hundred feet or so from the cabin and for a moment sat on their idling snowmobiles, gazing at the peaceful wilderness, at the tall, snow-covered stands of pine and spruce trees. Alex pointed toward a large building nestled on the far side of the clearing. “What do you think he uses that big building back there for anyway?” he asked.

Joel craned his head for a better view. “Well it would be just about the right size for hanging furs to dry.”

“Looks like a big garage,” Alex observed.

“Not likely,” Joel disagreed. “Johnson doesn’t seem to be the kind of guy who would own a car.”

“Maybe it’s a barn then,” Alex said with a grin. “A horse and buggy might be more his style.”

Just then the door to the cabin opened and Johnson stepped out into the morning sunshine.

“I guess we oughta go over and collect our snowshoes,” Joel suggested, giving Johnson a friendly wave.

Johnson remained standing in the doorway, squinting his brushy eyebrows - making no effort to acknowledge the boys in any way.

Alex gave his head a shake. “Weirdo,” he muttered.

Johnson turned and disappeared back into his shack.

“I’ll get the snowshoes,” Joel said getting down from his sled. He quickly scooped up the two pairs of snowshoes and returned to the sleds, lashing them to the back of the *Ski-doo*.

“According to the map,” Joel said. “This trail will take us to the finish line. Why don’t we check it out.”

Alex gave the other boy a quick nod, gunning his motor at the same time. In a swirl of snow they roared off down the trail past Johnson’s cabin and into the forest.

From Lake Kenogami the trail wound eastward in great graceful sweeps through the tall timber. So thick were the branches overhanging the trail that in many places the winter sun was barely able to filter through, casting the trail in shadows. A long series of moguls made it crucial for the drivers to stay on their toes.

Alex found himself in awe of the rugged terrain as they penetrated deeper and deeper into the northern wilderness. As he watched Joel handle the lightening fast *Polaris*, it also became quickly evident that his friend was an extremely skilful driver. It seemed to Alex that Joel possessed a built-in radar system, alerting him to each twist and turn in the winding trail.

About three miles from Lake Kenogami they crossed the Blanche River, and started

down a steep ravine. Alex cut his throttle, then as they started into a sweeping curve at the bottom of the hill gradually eased back down on the accelerator. A moment later, just as they were crossing an ice-covered stream, Joel hit his brake so hard that Alex came within inches of colliding with the back of his friend's machine.

A few feet ahead of them, idling dead-centre in the middle of the trail sat a bright red snowmobile. Its driver straddled the machine, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. Slowly he turned and looked back over his shoulder, his pale blue eyes gazing insolently in their direction. Alex could see Joel's face flush angrily. "Lance Higginson," he said in a low voice. He pulled the helmet off and stepped from the *Ski-doo*. "Dangerous place to stop," he said in a low voice.

Lance exhaled a final cloud of tobacco smoke, then flicked the butt in among the nearby trees. "New machine?" He eyed the *Polaris* appraisingly. "And who's the fairy tale with you?"

Joel met the other boy's stare, pausing for a moment before answering. "This is my friend, Alex. He's visiting for the holidays."

"From Disneyland?"

Alex felt a slow burning rage begin to fill him. He took a step closer, his eyes meeting those of Lance. "You're blocking the trail."

Lance eased himself from the snowmobile and stretched lazily. "You girls must be going to a pajama party. You seem to be in an awfully big hurry."

"Move your sled," Alex said, taking a step closer.

Lance finished stretching and turned. "Now you two pretties wouldn't be practising for next week's *Thunder Rally*, would you?"

"You'll find out," Joel said with a shrug. "Sooner or later."

"Probably later," Lance said with a sneer. "Like a half hour after the race. That's how far behind me you'll be."

Alex glanced down at Lance's red *Arctic Cat*. It was a beauty. Stencils of various companies covered it from one end to the other. He bent down for a closer look when Lance suddenly reached out, grabbed him by the front of his coat and gave him a heave. "Keep your hands off my sled!"

Alex staggered several steps before catching his balance. With an angry cry he sprang at the other boy, his right fist cocked behind his ear.

“Wait!” Joel stepped between them, grabbing Alex’s coat.

Alex was so close to Lance that he could smell the stale tobacco on his breath. He gave Lance a furious shove, his eyes blazing. “Keep your hands off me!”

“Buzz off, Creep!” Lance turned and threw his leg over his snowmobile. “I’ll be seeing you chap-sticks at the finish line next week.” He turned, his eyes meeting Alex’s. “But try not to be too long - I’m a busy man.”

Alex could feel the veins in the side of his head throbbing as Lance started up his sled and disappeared off down the trail. “I’ve never met anyone I’ve wanted to kill before,” he said quietly.

“Strong words, Alex.” Joel managed a small grin. “Talk like that can get a guy into serious trouble.”

“I can’t help it,” Alex said. “Guys like him just make me so angry. They think they’re God’s gift to man, and we’re just dirt.”

“I know what you mean,” Joel said. “But don’t let old Lance get under your skin. He’s just a rich pretty-boy. The best way to get to him is by beating him in the *Thunder Rally*.”

Alex took several long, deep breaths to calm himself, and then looked over at his friend. “He had one mean-looking machine. Do you think you can take him?”

“He’s got a souped-up engine - compliments of his rich daddy,” Joel said with a shrug, “But Lance isn’t famous for being a terribly disciplined driver - I think I have an advantage in that department.”

“Then you’ll have to practise,” Alex said, thinking once again of Lance’s leering face. “Practise . . . practise . . . and more practise.” his voice rose. “You’ll have to be on your sled so often you’ll start getting bow-legged.”

Joel grinned and nodded, I’ll beat him all right,” he said. “If it’s the last thing I do.”

Into the Fire

Alex sat staring into the fireplace, watching the flames flicker and dance brightly in the stone hearth.

Why oh why had he gotten so upset with that Lance guy this afternoon? Why hadn't he just grinned and shrugged like Joel always did? He groaned . And why did he always compare himself with Joel? Always comparing, always coming up short - never good enough to satisfy the almighty old man.

He continued staring into the fire, mesmerized by the orange and yellow flames licking at the pieces of firewood.

He couldn't remember ever feeling so completely despondent and helpless - but the feeling had been building for some time.

Ten more days till he left for home.

But what would he do then? The gloomy feeling seemed to deepen.

Nothing would ever make his dad think he was worthwhile. He knew that now. Some things were set in stone. And maybe it wasn't so important anyway . . . If only he could convince himself of that! Somehow he had to get over all of this - he had to put his dad behind him and get on with his life.

He looked up to see Joel approaching the fireplace, a snowmobile manual tucked under his arm.

Back to reality. Perhaps reality was the first step in dealing with his increasingly complicated life. It was certainly a reality that his dad would probably never change, and so nothing he did would ever affect that. But what about himself? Maybe he could change. And maybe by changing he would at least have peace with himself about the way he was. But how could he do that?

Chapter 5

The Side Hill Gouger

“Christmas tradition?” Joel echoed.

“That’s right.” His mother bustled back into the kitchen. “This is our first Christmas in the north, so we’re going to do it up right! This is the time of year to spend with family and friends, so we thought it would be nice for us to spend Christmas Eve with Clarence and Agnes Sprague at their place. They don’t have any family.”

“It’ll be fun, guys,” Jack Flynn assured them. “Clarence is a real musician, so there’ll be carol singing, story-telling and lots to eat.”

Joel rolled his eyes. “Alex and I were going to go for a ride and see what the trails are like at night.”

“Oh, I think you boys have been out on those snowmobiles enough the last couple of days,” his mother said, stirring a pot of something on the stove.

“What are you making, Mrs. Flynn?” Alex asked, edging closer to the spicy aroma.

“Apple cider.” A broad smile lit up her face. “Now this really *is* an old family tradition.” She carefully poured the steaming golden liquid from the pot into a large thermos on the kitchen counter.

“That just about does it,” she announced. “You boys get your coats on, and get out to the car. This evening we’re driving around the lake to the Spragues - no short cuts on your noisy snow machines.”

Alex groaned inwardly at the thought of a wasted evening. The only redeeming thing about the holidays so far had been the time spent on Clarence’s old *Ski-doo*.

“Christmas Eve at Clarence and Agnes’ should be fun,” Joel said as he pulled on his boots. “They’re real nice.”

Alex managed a small grin. “I guess it would be pretty lonely for them if they had to be by themselves.”

The twenty minute ride around Lake Kenogami reminded Alex of drives he and his family had taken in the country when he was small - back before his father had realized his only son wasn’t all he’d hoped he’d be. Millions of stars blanketed a cloudless sky, and a huge,

yellow moon hovered just over the eastern horizon.

“Great night for a snowmobile ride,” Joel said with a sigh.

Alex grunted. “It’d better be like this again tomorrow,” he said. “Christmas or not, we’ve got to get you back on the trail.”

“It looks like we were expected,” Jack Flynn said, pulling the car to a stop in front of the brightly lit cottage. Clarence met them at the door, a broad smile lighting up his craggy face. “Merry Christmas, everyone! Come on in.”

Agnes lay on a sofa in the middle of the living room, propped up by several large pillows. Her face seemed to glow in the light of the fireplace. At the far end of the room stood a large Christmas tree, and piled beneath its branches lay a number of brightly-wrapped presents.

“This is lovely,” Mary Flynn said. She crossed over to Agnes and gave her a warm hug. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“We’re so glad you came,” Agnes replied, squeezing Mary’s plump hand.

Alex took a seat in one of the armchairs across from the fireplace. “Do you play the guitar, Clarence?” he asked, noting an instrument case by the sofa.

“Banjo!” Clarence pulled a long, thin, guitar-like instrument from the case.

“Far out, Clarence,” Joel said with a laugh. “I never knew you played the banjo!”

“Christmas carols and a banjo,” Jack Flynn said with a chuckle of his own. “This will be a first for me.”

Clarence dragged a straight-backed wooden chair up next to his wife and gave the banjo strings a quick *plunking*. “What’ll it be, folks?”

“Christmas carols, of course,” Mary Flynn said, giving Clarence a playful poke. “Do you need to ask?”

The old man dove quickly into a bluegrass rendition of *Jingle Bells* with everyone scrambling to keep up. *Winter Wonderland*, *Silent Night* and a myriad of favourites swiftly followed - interspersed with cider, shortbread cookies, and some mouth-watering, strawberry-filled scones that Clarence had prepared from an ancient recipe.

Alex had to admit a grudging respect for the quality of singing that emanated from the small group. He was especially surprised at the strength and beauty of Agnes’ voice.

Finally Clarence leaned his banjo against the sofa, tilted back in his chair and flexed his

fingers. “That was a real workout. My fingertips are almost bleeding from the strain of it.” He took a sip of the cider. “It was sure good of you folks to come over. We don’t mind Christmas Day being quiet, but it’s nice to be with friends on Christmas Eve.”

“Christmas has always been the most special time of the year for us,” Agnes said, smiling. “When you remember that it was on this day that the Saviour was born, what could be more special than that?”

Alex found himself nodding in agreement. “That’s often forgotten, isn’t it?”

“It’s great to be here,” Jack Flynn said. “Isn’t it boys?”

Alex and Joel both echoed his sentiments.

Clarence turned to his wife, a sly smile creeping across his face. “You know a friendly get-together like this puts me to mind of family gatherings we had many years ago - and some of the stories that got passed down from generation to generation.”

Agnes shot her husband a dark look. “Now Clarence . . .” she cautioned.

Clarence grinned. “You know the woods around Kenogami have certainly spawned a rich tradition of oddball characters and ornery critters . . . Fact is we’ve got a whole passel of grief-causing little monkeys just back of here.” He leaned forward, arms resting on his knees, his expression taking a faraway look.

“It’s a mighty peculiar thing,” he continued, chuckling softly. “I haven’t given those little critters a thought for quite a spell. But of course the sidehill gouger hibernates in the winter time.”

“The sidehill gouger?” Jack Flynn echoed. “Never heard of such an animal.”

“Well, you might not have, of course,” Clarence said, turning to his guest. “You’re from the city, and they’re a right mysterious little varmint, keeping what you might call a low profile. Another thing, too, is the fact that they’re nocturnal - that would explain why most folk never see them - they only come out at night. And they’re fast - quick as a greased lightning bolt - course with their legs built the way they are - they’d have to be fast!”

“How’s that?” Alex asked, intrigued. “Are they like a rabbit?”

The old man gave a good-natured snort. “No, although there are some definite similarities to the rabbit - that’s for sure. But I’d say he’s more like a groundhog - at least from a distance. You see the sidehill gouger gets his name from the fact that he lives on the sides of

steep hills where he gouges out his dens. In fact it's on account of their peculiar abode that these critters are so unusual-looking. Now picture this if you will, on the one side of his body the sidehill gouger has one long set of legs, and a short pair on the opposite side. That way he can move about on the sides of steep hills."

Joel's mouth dropped open. "Get out of here!"

The old man nodded his head emphatically. "Let me finish . . . let me finish." He swung his gaze in Alex's direction. "I can tell you another thing I've been told - there's left-handed sidehill gougers and right-handed sidehill gougers. They probably developed that way so they don't all run the same way on the hills where they live."

Clarence picked up his mug of apple cider and took a long drink while the small circle of people stared at him. Alex grinned suspiciously at the old man. "Sidehill gougers?" he said.

Clarence set down his mug and gave his head an emphatic nod.

"Oh, Clarence," Agnes said, sounding somewhat proud of her husband's yarn. "No more stories."

Mary Flynn got to her feet and retrieved a brightly-wrapped Christmas present from the foyer. "Agnes, this is for you and Clarence."

Slowly and with utmost care the older woman unwrapped the colourful gift. "This was so thoughtful of you," she said, holding up a lovely green and white afghan blanket. "You must have made this yourself, Mary."

"I did," Joel's mother admitted, appearing pleased with her own handiwork. "I thought it would look nice on your couch."

"It's beautiful!" Agnes pressed the blanket against her face, her eyes filling with tears. "It must have taken you hours to knit." Clarence got stiffly to his feet and crossed over to the Christmas tree. "We also chose something practical for you two fellas," he said, picking out a box-shaped present and returning to the fireside. "Open her up, Joel. It's for you and Alex."

Joel quickly tore into the bright red and green paper.

"I told you boys I would come up with a way of timing Lance Higginson," Clarence said. "Well, this is it."

Joel reached into the box and pulled out a stopwatch and two sets of headphones with attaching mikes.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“Looks like a walkie-talkie,” Joel suggested.

“It is,” Clarence said. “Now you fellas can stay in contact when you’re out on the trail.”

“This is perfect, Clarence!” Joel said. “Thanks.” He leaned over and gave Agnes a hug.

“It should come in handy when we’re out on the trail all right,” Alex said.

“It sure will,” Jack Flynn agreed.

“How’s that?” his wife asked. “You fellows are too wrapped up in this race business.”

“Well for one thing,” Jack Flynn began. “The boys won’t have to shout to be heard when they’re out riding - they can just talk to one another.”

Mary Flynn nodded understandingly.

“You’re going to need every little edge you can get when it comes to winning the race next week,” Clarence said. “We’ll talk later about how you can use the headphones to time our friend, Lance.”

“We’ll be able to keep the lines of communication open now,” Joel said. “What a neat gift.” He put the headphone up to his ear. A small microphone extended from the headset down to within a couple of inches of his mouth. “One step closer,” he said, not noticing as his parents opened a present from the Spragues.

His mother looked at him a little impatiently. “One step closer to what?”

“One step closer to beating Lance Higginson,” Alex answered.

Chapter 6

Dry Run

The trail through the forest wound crisp and cold in the morning sunlight. Alex eased the throttle, negotiated a particularly sharp bend, then quickly maxed the accelerator in a futile attempt to gain ground on Joel, who managed to maintain a fairly generous lead, despite Alex's best efforts.

Christmas morning had been quiet. Joel had already received his main present, the snowmobile, and Alex had opened most of his presents back in the city before he left. By mid morning both boys were back on the trail.

It had taken Alex a day or two to get used to the peculiarities of Clarence's snowmobile. Old and battered, the *Ski-doo* was still quite powerful, although nothing compared to Joel's. The throttle on the right handlebar reminded Alex of the brake on his bike back home, but when he squeezed this lever down, the sled jumped forward like it was stung by a wasp.

"Steady," Joel had said. "You'll get the hang of it."

The trail at the northern end of the lake reminded Alex of a tightly coiled maze, twisting and turning through stands of pine and spruce, making him think that the designers of the course must have been paid by the number of bends.

Alex reached up and turned on his microphone. "We'll need more practice on this section. It's really tricky."

Joel's voice crackled back to him through the headphones as they emerged onto a long straight stretch. "How does my driving look from where you are?"

"I think you're swinging too wide on the curves, Joel. You're losing time."

"Okay - the finish line is just over this little rise. Let's catch some air."

Side by side the two machines soared over the last mogul, and sailed through the air for the length of two parked cars. In another heartbeat they were flashing between the two red metal poles which indicated the finish line.

"Lance must still be at home eating his Christmas turkey," Joel said when they came to a stop.

"I'll get on over to the starting line," Alex suggested. "He's arrived there at eleven

o'clock sharp the last couple of days." He glanced down at his watch. "I'll take the short cut through the bush."

Joel nodded. "Let's just hope our black-hearted friend doesn't take the day off - it being Christmas and everything."

"I doubt it," Alex said. "He's probably afraid of losing whatever edge he thinks he has on you."

"Remember to stay well out of sight," Joel reminded him. "And let me know on the walkie-talkie the second he starts. I'll get the stopwatch running."

Alex eased the snowmobile onto the narrow trail which skirted the west end of Kirkland Lake. Once again he felt a thrill rush through him as he swept through the trees, leaning with each turn - accelerating a little more with each bend, his confidence growing.

It was the perfect winter morning. The snow from last week's storm still clung to the branches of the spruce and pine trees that lined the trail.

Alex found his mind wandering far from the rugged beauty that surrounded him - back to his friends in the city. *What would they say when he told them about his adventures?* A sudden movement in a nearby clump of trees jerked Alex back to the present. He hit the brake, the snowmobile sliding to an abrupt stop. Nestled in a grove of poplars only a few feet from the trail stood a huge bull moose. The animal, totally oblivious to Alex's presence, munched calmly on some twigs. It was magnificent. Gigantic! Its rack of antlers were as wide as the living room couch back home. Ever so slowly the moose turned its head toward Alex, studying him thoughtfully, its massive jaws working . . .

For one long moment Alex's eyes locked with those of the huge animal, then the moose turned and plunged off through the deep snow and into the forest.

Alex glanced down at his wristwatch. "I'd better get going," he muttered to himself. "I don't want to miss Lance's grand entrance."

The *Thunder Rally's* starting line was on the west edge of Kirkland Lake, a stone's throw from the ruins of a long-abandoned gold mine. Two green-painted poles had been erected on either side of the trail, and across the top hung a large banner with the words, "Thunder Rally," stencilled in huge red letters.

Alex eased his sled in behind a bushy cedar tree on the edge of the clearing and turned off

the ignition.

He loosened his helmet and sagged back into his seat, hoping Lance hadn't already left. High above him in the branches of the cedar, a whisky-jack chattered noisily, turning its head from side to side as it looked down at the intruder. Alex grinned at the little show-off, watching it flit from branch to branch tilting its head expectantly, looking for a handout.

Only the occasional roar of a passing snowmachine disturbed the stillness of the winter morning. Ever so slowly the sub-zero weather crept through Alex's thick clothing. Perhaps Lance was not going to show up this morning for his daily practice run after all. . . Suddenly the roar of an approaching motor stirred Alex from his daydream.

Lance Higginson.

Alex adjusted the microphone. "Get that stopwatch ready, Joel," he said. "The pigeon has entered the nest."

He watched Lance roll up to the starting line, rev his engine several times, then with an ear-splitting racket, roar off down the trail.

"Now," Alex called into the microphone. "Start the watch."

"Got it," Joel answered.

Alex turned the ignition and quickly eased out from behind the cedar. He could feel his heart accelerating as an overwhelming urge coursed through him. An urge to put his driving skills to the test - to see how he, Alex Gray, stacked up against Lance's souped-up *Arctic Cat*.

He flipped on the mike. "Joel keep the timer on. I'm going to see how fast this old clunker can go."

The starting gate flashed by in a whirl of snow and an instant later he was accelerating rapidly between the first line of trees.

As wide as a two-laned highway, the groomed trail rolled through stands of spruce and pine in a line as straight as an arrow, the first bend not coming for a quarter mile. There it rolled to the right in a long, sweeping curve around a large beaver pond. Alex eased up on the throttle, spotting Lance's powerful *Arctic Cat* as it disappeared into the timber at the far end of the beaver pond. He grimaced - it was hard to believe how fast that sled was!

For the next several miles the trail alternated between exhilarating straight stretches and winding s-shaped bends. He knew it was on these sections that Joel would have to spend his

practice time.

Several minutes later he shot past the Flynn's home and down onto the surface of Lake Kenogami, already nine miles from the starting line. Alex glanced down at the broken speedometer as he turned down the length of the lake. He wished he knew how fast he was going . . . forty . . . forty-five . . . fifty miles per hour? Without a doubt, this was the most exciting feeling he'd ever had.

When he swung the *Ski-doo* into Collier's Bay, only a thin column of chimney smoke betrayed any evidence of life at Johnson's cabin.

What a mysterious man, Alex thought as he swept across the clearing. *Why was Johnson so secretive about everything - never saying much or answering questions? And what on earth was he doing with such a big building behind his cabin? And who would use a short-wave radio nowadays?*

The trail beyond Johnson's shack was especially challenging. Alex felt a rising sense of pride in his ability to pilot the machine at high speeds and negotiate the sharpest of hairpin turns. Despite not seeing anything of Lance for the remainder of the trip, he relished the challenges presented by the twists and turns and the endless series of moguls.

In less than fifteen minutes he rounded the final bend in the course and slid to a halt at the finish line. There was no sign of Lance, but two other snow machines were just starting out, and as Alex cut his motor the drivers gave him a friendly wave and a *Merry Christmas*.

Joel dismounted from his snowmobile, stopwatch in hand. "Where on earth were you?" he asked. "I tried to raise you on the walkie-talkie. Why didn't you answer?"

Alex looked sheepishly at his friend. "I must have turned it off," he admitted.

"You couldn't resist following Lance around the course, could you?" Joel accused, sounding a bit annoyed.

Alex shrugged. "What was his time?"

"Twenty-eight minutes, forty-one seconds."

Alex whistled. "What was mine?"

Joel looked disgustedly down at the stopwatch. "Thirty minutes, nineteen seconds."

Alex's expression fell. "Two whole minutes! We'll never beat him."

Joel remounted his machine and turned the ignition. "You may never beat him on that

old clunker, but I sure plan on doing better than thirty minutes. You wait here!” He handed Alex the watch. “I’ll go over to the start line and let you know when to begin timing. Keep the walkie-talkie on! I’ll beat your time, that’s for sure.”

Alex grimaced as his friend disappeared through the trees with a roar and a cloud of snow. He sagged into the seat of Clarence’s *Ski-doo* and clicked on the walkie talkie.

“No doubt your time will be better,” he said sarcastically. “After all, if you can’t beat Alex Gray at something - what good are you?”

Morning Ride

The cold, early morning air whipped in under the face protector of Alex's helmet and nipped savagely at his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

It wasn't often Alex got to take the Ski-doo out for a ride by himself, and he relished the feeling. At the top of a small hill he rolled to a stop, the Ski-doo idling noisily beneath him. At the foot of the hill the vast reaches of Lake Kenogami, stretched far into the distance.

He breathed in a long lungful of winter air and thought back over the last few days. What a relief it was to get away from his folks for awhile. Last night his mom had even called to see how he was doing, and he was a bit surprised at how good it felt to hear her voice again.

Maybe a couple of weeks apart would help his dad to appreciate him more . . .

His thoughts turned to the Ski-doo idling patiently beneath him and a feeling of pride welled within him. What he wouldn't give to have his dad see him now - better still to see him driving the Polaris - watching him go tearing across Lake Kenogami. He could handle Joel's sled - somehow he just knew he could! Now that might be something that would make his dad sit up and take notice.

He was suddenly conscious of the frigid morning air creeping stealthfully into his clothing. With a strange sense of sadness he settled back in the seat, revved the motor a couple of times, then roared out over the surface of the lake and into a brand new day.

Chapter 7

Sabotage

The table in Clarence's living room was cluttered with topographic maps, plates and coffee mugs. Joel pushed himself back and shook his head, a worried look on his face.

"I don't trust Lance Higginson as far as I can throw him," he said looking up at Alex and Clarence. "Is there any way he could cheat - like taking a short cut or something?"

Clarence grinned. "Oh I wouldn't put it past Lance to bend the rules. I've known that boy since he was knee-high to a side-hill gouger, but it's gonna be almost impossible for someone to cheat in the *Thunder Rally*. Race marshals will be scattered all along the route - especially at spots where a corner might be cut or a short cut taken."

Alex looked over to the large rocking chair where Agnes sat, wrapped in the afghan that Joel's mother had given her for Christmas. "Good to see you're feeling better, Agnes," he said.

She smiled warmly. "It's so nice of you boys to stop by again this evening. Did you have a good Christmas?"

"We spent most of the day out on the sleds," Joel said, getting up from the table and going over to the older lady. "I still haven't given up on taking you for a ride, you know."

"You just never know," Agnes said, with her ever-present smile, "If this old arthritis of mine would let up for a day or two, I'd love to go out on your new snowmobile. And I am blessed having such thoughtful friends as you and Alex - and your wonderful parents, Joel. The Lord is good."

Alex found himself surprised at the mellowing influence that Agnes seemed to have on him. Whenever she was around it seemed that everything was going to be alright. And the thing he liked best about her was the fact that she genuinely seemed to like him - just as he was. He glanced down at the bent and swollen fingers protruding from beneath the afghan.

"Well," Joel said. "I think we just about picked your husband's brain clean." He put his arm around Agnes and gave her a gentle hug. "The *Thunder Rally* is only four days away."

"Have you timed yourself on the course with your new sled?" Clarence asked.

Joel shrugged. "My times aren't bad. The walkie-talkies came in handy yesterday, by the way. We were able to clock Lance's run . . . I'm still about a half minute slower."

“That’s good isn’t it?” Agnes asked.

Joel smiled at her. “Not good enough,” he said. “Thirty seconds might as well be an eternity in a race like this one.”

“Joel’s speed on the winding parts of the course is really improving,” Alex said. “We’ve checked Lance’s tracks and can see that he slows down too much for the sharp bends and takes them too wide. He’s putting too much trust in the power of his snowmobile.”

“Good observations,” Clarence said.

“And he only practises once a day,” Joel added with a grin.

“It’s on the straight stretches that he gains his time then?” Clarence said.

“That’s right,” Joel agreed. “His sled is quite a bit faster than mine.”

“Well, keep practising, that’s all I can suggest,” Clarence said. “You’ve got to find ways of gaining more time on the turns and hope you don’t lose too much on the straight stretches.”

“We’d better get going,” Joel said, reaching for his coat. “We still have time for one more run before we call it a night.”

Clarence put a hand on the shoulder of each of the boys as he walked them to the door. “Now you fellas don’t take any foolish chances. Even in a big race like this one, it’s not worth getting seriously hurt or killed.”

“Yes,” Agnes agreed. “Please do be careful, boys. Those machines can be very dangerous. And just remember that winning isn’t everything. Life offers many kinds of challenges other than racing.”

“Thanks again for letting me use your snowmobile, Clarence,” Alex said as he pulled on his coat. “It’s made the holidays a lot more fun.”

Clarence nodded. “Just be careful.”

It was a perfect evening, crisp and cold with only a hint of breeze. Alex strapped on his helmet and wiped the visor with his mitt. “That Agnes is really something, isn’t she?” he said. “She’s in constant pain from her arthritis - she can’t even leave the house anymore, and yet she says that *the Lord is good*.”

“And she never gives up on trying to convert me,” Joel added with a laugh.

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “Convert you to what?”

“Into becoming a Christian. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea someday, but there’s

lots of time for that stuff when a person's old."

Alex stared at his friend for a second. "What does she think we are, atheists?"

Joel laughed. "Nah, but she believes that just because you live in a Christian country doesn't make you a Christian. With Agnes it's personal - between someone and Jesus Christ."

"He's dead," Alex said.

"Not according to Agnes," Joel said. "That's why she doesn't get worked up about all the rotten things that have happened to her - like being crippled up. She believes everything that happens to you is God's will and meant to teach you something."

Alex shook his head. "I've never met anyone who thought like that. Especially somebody so sick."

"She is amazing all right," Joel agreed, pulling on his helmet. "Now let's give these sleds a workout. I'm going to push my machine as hard as I can, especially on the winding sections - that's where the race will be won or lost."

In a swirl of snow and a deafening roar, the two snowmobiles thundered out from the shoreline and across Lake Kenogami, their powerful headlights illuminating the trail far into the darkness of night.

Once again Alex found the experience wildly intoxicating. The wind whipped under the plastic visor and reached through his thick clothing - but all he felt was the thrill of the ride - the wonderful sensation of reckless abandonment.

It seemed to take them even less time than usual to reach Collier's Bay, and before Alex knew it, they were shooting toward the speck of light in the distance that was Johnson's cabin.

This time we'll go right by, he thought. *No slowing down to take a look - just a blast of speed and noise and they'd be up the shoreline and into the trees.*

An instant later they left the lake and were entering the clearing. There Alex risked one quick peek in the direction of the cabin . . . and in so doing almost piled into the back of Joel's sled. Alex yanked the handlebar hard to the right and hit the brake at the same time, sliding to a shuddering stop only a few feet from Joel's stalled snowmobile.

Alex jumped from his machine. "What's happened!"

Joel was slowly dismounting, a puzzled expression on his face. "I'm not sure," he said. "The motor coughed a couple of times, then just died."

Joel walked to the front of the snowmobile and lifted the engine cover. Even with the headlight from Alex's sled, it was impossible for them to see much of the motor.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" Alex asked.

"No idea," Joel said, bending even closer to the engine.

"Maybe we should go and get your dad," Alex suggested. "Your sled should be all right here for awhile if we pull it off the trail. This is so close to Johnson's place I don't think anyone will touch it."

"Hopefully it's just something minor, like a blocked fuel line or something," Joel said, sounding somewhat deflated. "Well, come on, then, let's move it off the trail."

Alex was bending to grab one of the heavy metal skis protruding from the front when a sudden voice from the darkness froze him in his tracks.

"What's going on here?"

Alex and Joel wheeled in the direction of the unexpected voice. Shadowed in the darkness stood Johnson, silhouetted in the dim light of a thousand stars.

"The engine died," Joel explained haltingly. "It coughed a few times then just conked out."

Johnson eyed the boys suspiciously. "You're the same boys as was by here the other night," he finally said.

"That's right, Mr. Johnson," Alex said. "Looks like we're in trouble again."

"We were just going back home to get my dad," Joel added. "He's fairly handy with machinery."

"So am I," Johnson said, walking slowly up to the snowmobile. "Why don't I have a quick look. It's probably nothing much."

"That'd be great, Mr. Johnson," Joel said, his voice sounding cheerful again. "We'd sure appreciate it."

Johnson pulled a large flashlight from his coat, leaned across the motor and scanned the beam over the myriad of complicated-looking components. "Everything looks okay," he said, clicking off the flashlight and straightening up. "How about if I tow it over to my shop?"

Joel and Alex looked at one another. "Ah, sure," Joel finally stammered. "I guess that would be all right."

“What’s the matter with the motor?” Alex asked. “It sounds kind of serious.”

“From what you said, it’s gotta be water in the gas.”

“How would water have gotten into our gas?” Joel asked.

“Sabotage,” Johnson said. “Somebody must have stuck a handful of snow in your tank.”

Chapter 8

Modified

Joel's disabled snowmobile was swiftly hooked to the back of Clarence's *Ski-doo* and towed the short distance to the big shed behind Johnson's cabin.

"What kind of building is this?" Alex asked, as they approached the two large double doors. "We thought it was a barn."

Johnson stepped wordlessly through the entrance and turned on a light switch.

"I didn't think you had electricity," Alex said.

"I do in here," Johnson replied. "I need power for light and to run my tools." He leaned his shoulder against the back of the snowmobile. "Let's get her inside, boys. All hands on deck."

Three sets of arms quickly manhandled the snowmobile through the open door and into the building.

"Shut the door," Johnson said. "Keep the heat in."

It was immediately evident to Alex that Johnson's building was indeed a garage. Its walls were lined with tools and mechanical equipment, and in the centre of the floor, about fifteen feet away, sat a sleek red sports car. A number of colourful decals were splashed across its body.

"1956 Citroen," Johnson said proudly. "A French classic."

"So this *is* a garage," Joel said.

Johnson walked over to the workbench and rummaged through one of the toolboxes. He returned with a small plastic container.

"Gas line antifreeze oughta do the trick," Johnson said. "It's a wonder you got this far."

Alex scowled. "Who could have done that?"

"Lance Higginson!" Joel almost spat the words. "Who else?"

"When could he have done it, though?" Alex asked as Johnson knelt by the front of the engine and started to work.

"Maybe when we were visiting Clarence? Or when we were having supper," Joel suggested, watching carefully as Johnson began work on the machine.

“Had to be fairly recent,” Johnson said.

“But I didn’t hear a snowmobile at Clarence’s,” Alex said.

Johnson glanced over his shoulder. “Does the Higginson boy have a red *Arctic Cat*?”

“That’s him,” Joel said.

Johnson grunted.

Alex looked at the man curiously. “Do you know him?”

“I know him.” Johnson was silent as he poured the antifreeze into the gas tank. “You want to make this machine go faster?” he asked without looking up.

Joel’s eyes widened. “Could you do that?”

“There’s folks from all over who like to work the Citroens. Some of us also tinker with snowmobiles and motorbikes.” A look of pride crossed his craggy face. “If I run into trouble I’ve got a couple of friends who’ll help me out.”

Something twigged in Alex’s mind. “You mean on the telephone?”

“Short-wave radio,” Johnson corrected.

“We wondered about the aerial,” Alex said, his face brightening.

Johnson shrugged. “Big or small, a motor is a motor.” He slapped a small pair of pliers absently against the palm of his hand. “Leave the sled with me until noon tomorrow. I’ve got to get a few parts in town . . . You got twenty bucks?”

Joel pulled out his wallet and handed Johnson the money. “Christmas money,” he explained. “Are you sure that’s all it’ll cost?”

“I can get used parts from a friend.”

“Why are you doing this?” Alex asked.

Johnson led them to the door, opened it and pointed out across the clearing. “In the summer I grow rhubarb over by the trees,” he said. “This Higginson boy came through here last summer on his all-terrain vehicle and run through my patch. Did it on purpose and churned it up real good.”

“That sounds like him all right,” Joel said. “He’s real mean. A real bully.”

“Maybe it’s time for him to be bullied back,” Johnson said.

* * * * *

At noon sharp the following day, Alex and Joel arrived back at Johnson’s garage. The

more-than-usual frazzled-looking Johnson quickly ushered them inside.

Joel's Adam's apple was bobbing up and down as he slowly circled his snow machine. "What exactly did you do?" He asked. "It looks pretty much the same."

"I put in a new exhaust system, modified the clutch, added studs to your tracks, and carbide tips to the bottom of your skis. The studs and carbide tips will give you better handling; the exhaust system and clutch will give you more power."

Joel took a long deep breath. "It'll go faster?"

"It oughta give Higginson's *Arctic Cat* a run for the money," Johnson said. "Give it a try."

The snowmobile was already pointing toward the door, so Joel hopped on, tuned the ignition, and guided the rumbling machine outside. Alex and Johnson followed close behind.

Joel sat for a moment, revving the motor and listening to the new, more powerful sound. Slowly he squeezed down on the accelerator.

The machine jumped forward with an angry howl. It shot out across the open area and down onto the lake, missing the trail and sending up a huge cloud of snow in its wake.

"Wow!" Alex shouted as he watched the sled tear through the unbroken snow of the lake. "You really did soup her up. That's amazing! It sounds like you put a jet engine in there." He looked over at Johnson and for one brief instant he was sure a faint smile flitted across the man's scraggly face.

Good Enough

Alex hadn't really stopped to consider the similarities between Agnes Sprague and his grandmother until late that night. He lay in bed, tossing and turning in the darkness, Joel's soft snoring filling the small bedroom.

Since meeting Agnes he'd found himself thinking about his grandmother, especially when she died, but also about some of the fun times they'd spent together.

Like his grandmother, Agnes was someone who seemed to believe in him - thought he was special - and I guess that's why he liked her so much.

Even his dad had learned not to put him down in front of Grandma - she just wouldn't take it. If Grandma thought he was at all different it was in a good way. He recalled her reminders of how many of the world's great people were unique ...

He took a long deep breath, wishing he could fall asleep and turn his mind off for another day.

But how was he unique? His grandmother hadn't really gotten into specifics in that department. If only there was some way of proving he was worth something to his dad - of proving his grandmother right. Then he remembered, and his heart sank . . . she was gone - but he could still prove it to Agnes - Agnes believed in him, just like his grandmother had. And he could prove it to his dad too. But most especially, he could prove it to himself.

But how? How could he do that?

Chapter 9

The I.C.U.

Alex flinched as he followed Joel into the emergency ward, the sickening antiseptic odours wafting over him. Memories of visiting his grandmother in the hospital last summer returned as they approached the nurses' station.

"Can we see Agnes Sprague?" Joel asked.

"She's in Intensive Care," the nurse replied, not even bothering to consult her chart. "Second floor to the right of the elevator, but I doubt if they'll let you visit her right now."

Joel nodded. "That's okay. Her husband's there. We can visit with him."

Alex found it difficult to comprehend all that had happened during the past hour. It was all so fast! Much too fast.

He and Joel had just arrived home for lunch when they found a note left by Joel's parents: *Boys - Agnes has had a heart attack. Come to town on your snowmobiles and meet us at the hospital.*

An image of Agnes in her hospital bed flashed through Alex's mind. He shuddered.

Outside the door of the ICU several chairs lined the walls of a small alcove. All were empty.

The boys hesitated.

"It looks like your parents have already left," Alex said.

He'd no sooner spoken when Clarence stepped from the Intensive Care Unit. A thin smile creased his wrinkled face when he saw the boys. "Thanks for coming," he said, gripping each of them by the arm. "Your parents just left, Joel."

"How's Agnes?" Joel asked.

"Sleeping," Clarence said. "Why don't you come in for a minute?"

They followed the old man into the small windowless room. Agnes lay sleeping, a myriad of wires and tubes connected to a heart monitor on the wall. At the head of the bed a nurse sat reading from a large clipboard. She looked up and smiled at the two newcomers.

Alex and Joel stood for several wordless moments gazing down at the sleeping patient. Finally Clarence let out a small sigh and ushered them back into the waiting room.

“Was it a heart attack?” Alex asked when they were seated.

Clarence nodded. “The doctors think so.”

Alex was at a loss for words. What could be said to this kind old man that would be of any comfort? He watched Clarence lean forward, rubbing his hands together as if he was holding them under a tap.

“I thought Agnes was feeling better,” Alex said.

“She was.” Clarence looked up. “In fact we were planning on going for a drive around the lake this afternoon. It was such a beautiful day.”

The door to the ICU opened and the nurse poked her head out. “She’s awake, Mr. Sprague. She’s asking for you.”

Clarence jumped to his feet. “You boys come in too.”

The nurse stopped them at the door. “Only a few minutes,” she said. “I’ll be at the nurse’s station.”

Alex’s heart raced as he re-entered the I.C.U. Agnes’ eyes were still closed, but when Clarence gently lifted her hand into his, her eyelids fluttered open. For an instant she just stared blankly at the ceiling, then slowly she turned and fastened her eyes on her husband’s. Her face lit up in a warm smile as Clarence gently wiped a strand of long grey hair away from her face.

“The boys dropped by to see how you were doing,” he said. “They were worried about you.”

“How nice,” she said in a surprisingly strong voice.

“You gave us quite a scare, Agnes,” Joel said.

“Oh, don’t you worry about me,” she said with a soft smile. “I’m in good hands - you know that.”

Clarence gave her twisted fingers a gentle squeeze. “We know.”

Agnes looked straight into Alex’s eyes, and he knew she wasn’t just referring to the medical staff.

“It is wonderful to know that no matter what happens to this old, worn-out body, I’m going to be all right,” she said.

Alex could only nod dumbly.

Agnes paused for a moment as if collecting her strength. “Despite the disappointments

and heartache that life deals each of us, it is wonderful to know that the Good Shepherd is holding us in the palm of his hand.”

Alex smiled at the old woman. It was strangely comforting to hear Agnes’ reassuring words. She sounded so sure and at peace with whatever happened. But then again she was old and perhaps most old people made peace with their creator. He thought once again of his grandmother.

“We’d better go,” Joel said, moving to the head of the bed and giving Agnes a gentle hug. “We’ll come back tomorrow to see how you’re doing.”

Agnes beckoned both boys close to her. Alex could tell that she was losing her strength. He leaned closer.

“Think of what I’ve said, boys,” she said in a voice that was barely a whisper. “Following the Good Shepherd should begin when you’re young, like it did for me. The Lord Jesus wants us to be his disciple all through our lives. Don’t wait until you’re old and all used up before you decide to follow him.”

Clarence escorted them out of the ICU and back into the little alcove. “Thanks for coming, boys. We sure appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

Alex and Joel slowly made their way back down the sterile corridors and out into the afternoon sun.

“Man,” Joel muttered. “That was depressing. I hate hospitals.”

“You were right about Agnes,” Alex said as they started down the trail to where they’d left their snowmobile. “She really is bent on converting us.” He hesitated as they arrived at their sleds. “But that’s to be expected I guess. When you get as old and frail as Agnes, you probably think a lot about the great beyond.”

“Nah,” Joel disagreed. “I think Agnes has always been like that, even when she was young.”

Alex grinned. “You’re probably right.”

“Let’s make a mental note to have this same conversation in say - fifty years.” Joel pulled on his helmet. “What do you say?”

Alex laughed. “Agreed. Right now we’ve got something more important to worry about, and that’s beating Lance Higginson.”

“Amen!” Joel turned the ignition. “I know I can beat this guy. We were already close before Johnson’s modifications . . . and I’m a better driver than old Higginson.”

Alex dropped into his seat, turned on the engine, and followed Joel down the narrow trail out of town. When they pulled up to the starting gate a few minutes later, his heart sank. Lance Higginson was sitting astride his snowmobile smoking a cigarette.

Wordlessly Joel and Alex manoeuvred their machines up to the starting line, one on either side of the red *Arctic Cat*. They sat for a moment, silently eyeing their adversary.

With a sly smirk Lance flicked his cigarette into the snow by the path, stretched both arms in front of him and yawned loudly. He then turned to the sleek *Polaris*. “Done a little tinkering I hear?”

Joel squinted silently at the other boy.

“If it’s any consolation to you ladies,” Lance continued. “It looks like you’re going to be my main competition. I had a look at the list of racers, and I’ve never seen such a pathetic bunch of losers.”

“That’s encouraging,” Joel said sarcastically.

Alex could feel the blood rushing to his face. No matter how hard he tried, Lance always seemed to bring out the worst in him. “How about putting up right now?” he said in a low voice. “I think you’re all blow, and your sled’s all show.”

Lance’s face brightened. “You serious?”

“You must be getting a little bored running this course all by yourself,” Joel taunted. “Even Sunday drivers enjoy a little competition now and then.”

Lance settled back into his seat and turned the ignition. “Bring it on!” he shouted.

Alex looked over at Joel. “Show him how it’s done. I’ll do my best to keep up.” He climbed to his feet, stepped up onto the running boards, then raised his right arm high above his head. When both Joel and Lance were looking his way he brought his arm quickly down to his side.

Both snowmachines jumped forward as if hurled from a catapult. Alex dropped back into his seat and jammed the accelerator. Still, by the time he reached the beaver pond, the other two sleds were already opening a large gap between themselves and him, and before he’d reached the *Mile Two* marker there was no sign of the other racers. Clarence’s old *Ski-doo* was just no

match. Despite the obvious disadvantage, he didn't give up, pressing every ounce of power from the machine, and every bit of skill from his driving abilities. He was approaching an especially sharp curve at *Mile Three* when he noticed something in the snow beside the trail ahead of him. He eased off the accelerator as he started into the curve, his eyes glued to the approaching object. It wasn't until he was about fifty feet away that he realized what it was. Joel's black *Polaris* was lying on its side a few feet off the trail like a wounded animal. Alex slammed on his brake and jumped from the snowmobile. Yanking off his helmet he charged through the waist-deep snow. Behind the upturned sled and next to a thick poplar tree, lay Joel. His face was ashen and he was gripping his right leg with both hands.

"What happened?"

Joel groaned, rocking back and forth.

Alex dropped to his knees beside his friend. "What happened?" he repeated.

"Lance forced me off the trail," Joel said between gritted teeth. "I think my leg's broken."

"Are you bleeding anywhere?"

Joel shook his head. "It's just my leg."

"I'll get you to the hospital," Alex said. "Can you stand if you lean on me?"

Joel's teeth were already chattering. "I can't sit here any longer. I'm freezing."

Alex went around behind Joel and dragged him through the snow to Clarence's *Ski-doo*.

Joel groaned again as Alex put an arm around his waist and hauled him up onto the back of the snowmobile - his left leg resting awkwardly on the running board. Alex then plunged back through the snow to the *Polaris* and retrieved the ignition key. "I'll come back and get your sled later," he said as he saw Joel eyeing his snowmobile worriedly.

"Did you say that Lance forced you off the course?" Alex asked.

Joel nodded, steadying his leg with both hands. "I could have taken him, too, Alex. I know I could have. I had him . . . he's totally nowhere as a driver - all over the place!"

Alex took his seat behind the steering column.

"I'll drive as carefully as I can," he said. "But it'll still be a rough trip back to town."

Three miles of sharp corners and a multitude of bone-jarring bumps followed. By the time they arrived at the hospital Joel's face had lost all its colour, and his head hung so low that it almost touched his chest.

Alex was just pulling up to the emergency entrance when the glass doors flew open and an attendant raced out, pushing a wheel chair.

“We heard your snowmobile,” he explained.

“I think his leg’s broken,” Alex said.

Together they gently lifted Joel into the wheelchair and hurried him into the hospital.

“You wait here,” the attendant ordered as they reached the waiting room.

Alex dropped into a chair, breathless. He leaned forward, his arms resting on his knees. He was shaking. *I’d better give Joel’s folks a call*, he thought. Slowly he got to his feet and crossed over to a pay phone by the exit. His mind was numb, but somehow when Mrs. Flynn answered the phone he managed to stumble through the story of what had happened. When he finished there was a pause on the other end of the line, and he could hear Mrs. Flynn relaying the message to her husband.

“We’ll be right down,” she said.

“He’s going to be okay, Mrs. Flynn,” Alex reassured her. “His leg may not even be broken.”

Mrs. Flynn hesitated for a moment. “Oh Alex, I’m afraid I have some bad news - Clarence called a few minutes ago from the hospital. Agnes died shortly after your visit.”

Chapter 10

The Coach

Alex stood for a moment as the news of Agnes' death sank in. He returned the phone to its cradle and sagged into a nearby chair.

How could this have happened? He was numb. He sat for what seemed like an eternity, checking his watch and glancing down the hallway toward the emergency room every few minutes. Finally Joel's parents rushed in . . . Mary Flynn looking especially frazzled.

"Why didn't Lance stop and see if Joel was all right?" Jack Flynn asked after Alex had again explained what had happened. "Joel could have been killed."

The door to the emergency ward banged open and an exhausted looking doctor entered the waiting room. He dropped into a chair across from the Flynns and exhaled loudly.

"Your son's leg was severely broken just above the knee," he informed them. "But it looks like there's no other injuries except bruises and the leg will probably set well."

"Will there be any permanent damage?" Mary Flynn asked.

"Not likely. But because the break occurred high on the leg, he'll have to wear a full cast for several weeks." The doctor glanced at his watch. "You can see him in about an hour. He's sedated right now."

When they were alone, Mary Flynn reached into her purse, drew out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

"So much for the *Thunder Rally*," Alex said.

"Thank goodness," Mary Flynn said.

"Was his snowmobile wrecked?" Jack Flynn asked.

"I only had time for a quick look," Alex said. "But it seemed okay. Joel was thrown from it and hit his leg on a tree."

"I'll make arrangements to have his sled brought home," Jack Flynn said.

"I can do that!" Alex was suddenly anxious to do something - anything to get out of this place.

Jack Flynn nodded, his expression betraying the fact that his mind was miles away. "That would be fine, Alex." He got to his feet. "I just can't get over the fact that Lance

Higginson didn't even stop to see if Joel was okay."

"Do you think we should call the police?" his wife asked.

Jack considered the question for a moment. "No," he finally answered. "After all, it's possible that Lance may not have noticed that Joel was injured. Besides, it would certainly make it awkward if we had him arrested. It's a small community."

"I'd better go get the sled," Alex said.

"You'll need help," Jack Flynn objected. "Who's going to drive Joel's machine?"

"I know someone who'll give me a hand." With a quick nod he was out the door and enjoying the cool winter wind on his face. He wasn't sure why he thought Johnson might help him, but somehow he knew the strange little man would.

* * * * *

When he and Johnson arrived at the abandoned sled, it was exactly as Alex had left it - lying on its side just off the trail. "Seems okay," Johnson said after they had turned it back onto its treads and given it the once over. "Your friend must have turned too sharp and been tossed into that tree." He nodded toward the base of the poplar where a large impression was visible in the snow.

"Lance Higginson forced him off the trail," Alex explained, slipping the key into the ignition of the *Polaris*.

As the big engine roared to life, Johnson nodded, a satisfied expression crossing his face. "Sounds fine. I'll follow you to your friend's place on the old *Ski-doo*," he pointed to Clarence's machine. "Then you can give me a lift home."

Although Alex was driving the *Polaris* for the first time, the return trip to the Flynn's house seemed to take forever. His mind was a turmoil as he thought of what had happened to Joel, and the role that Lance had played. And Agnes . . . he couldn't get her gentle face out of his mind. Why was her death bothering him so much? He'd just met her, for crying out loud! Maybe it was because she reminded him so much of his own grandmother. His legs seemed to have been knocked out from under him and he was floundering - just as he had in the blizzard the other night - only worse.

When he finally pulled into the Flynn's yard his mind was still tumbling over and over.

"How did the *Polaris* handle?" Johnson asked.

“Real smooth,” Alex acknowledged. “Lots more power than the *Ski-doo*.”

“What are you gonna do now that your friend’s out of the race?” Johnson asked, a sly grin on his face.

“What can we do?” Alex asked. “Joel can’t race with his leg in a cast.”

Johnson grunted. “Someone’s gonna have to take the bull by the horns.”

“And how would someone do that?” Alex asked sarcastically.

“Drive!” Johnson said bluntly, shaking his bushy head. “You can do it - I watched the way you handled the sled on the way here.”

“Oh no,” Alex disagreed. “Joel is a real ace - he had an honest shot at winning the Thunder Rally. I’d look like an idiot out there with all the other racers. I’ve never raced before.”

“Neither has your friend or the Higginson boy.”

“But they’ve been practising,” Alex said, but even as he protested he was thinking, *I could do it! I know I can!*

“All you need to win a race like the Thunder Rally is to have an edge,” Johnson said. “And I might be able to help you out in that department.”

Alex hesitated. “Help me out?”

Johnson nodded, his eyes narrowing. “I’m a mechanic by trade, but I know a thing or two about racing - mainly cars, but it’s really the same whatever machine you’re driving.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Johnson. If I had to lose, I’d hate to lose to a creep like Lance Higginson.”

“Don’t lose then! You want to see him get beaten don’t you? Especially after what he did to your friend?”

“Of course.”

“Let’s take the old *Ski-doo* out for a ride,” Johnson suggested. “It’ll do fine until you get your friend’s okay to race his *Polaris*.”

“I doubt if Joel will let me race his sled,” Alex said, sliding onto the seat of Clarence’s snowmobile in front of Johnson. Joel had never even offered him a chance to drive the *Polaris*.

“Let’s go back up the trail,” Johnson said. “I seen a couple of things when I was following you. Don’t worry about speed for now. You won’t be able to go too fast with a passenger anyhow.”

Alex pulled back onto the trail, keeping the machine at a moderate speed. Johnson tapped him on the shoulder just as they approached the first bend.

“Lean more with the turn,” Johnson shouted over the roar of the motor.

Alex leaned toward the bend.

“More!” Johnson yelled. “You’ve got to really lean to keep your speed. Try the next one.”

As the snowmobile roared into the next curve, Alex leaned hard to the left, hanging out over the machine as it swung into the sharp turn.

Johnson stayed quiet for the next few twists in the course, then tapped Alex on the shoulder again. “You’re doing good, but you’ve got to keep more to the inside of these turns.”

On the next bend Alex cut the corner even sharper - so close to the edge of the trail that his helmet actually brushed a few branches.

A few bends later Johnson tapped him once again and hollered. “When you have a real sharp bend like the last one, try accelerating as you start into the turn, then real quick touch the brake - that’ll swing the back of the sled out. Once you feel it going, hit the gas hard.”

For the next two hours they practised. They practised until Alex’s right hand ached from squeezing the accelerator and his ears hummed from the constant roar of the engine. “Talk to your friend about entering the race for him,” Johnson said when they finally pulled into his yard. “Then get out on the trail and practise every chance you get.” Without further adieu he opened his door and disappeared inside his cabin.

Chapter 11

A Change of Plans

Alex sat staring at the floor between his feet - his mind a million miles from the Flynn's living room.

"It hasn't sunk in yet, I reckon," Clarence was saying. "Not after spending every day with someone for half a century. It sure is gonna be different."

"Well, I'm so relieved that you were able to have supper with us this evening," Mary Flynn said. "And it's wonderful to have Joel home from the hospital. I was afraid the doctor was going to keep him in overnight."

"It's good to be home, believe me!" Joel said, propping his leg up on a stool. The large cast ran from his ankle almost to his hip. "Alex and I were just saying how much we hate hospitals, and then I end up in the emergency ward on the business end of things." He scratched at a spot just above his knee. "It itches like crazy."

"Just be thankful that's all you have to complain about," his mother said. "It could have been a lot worse. I think it's simply insane to go so fast on those little machines. You're lucky you weren't killed."

"Are you absolutely sure that Lance forced you off the trail?" his dad asked for the third time.

Joel nodded. "We were running neck and neck and were coming up to this really sharp bend. He caught my eye and gave me a little grin. Then he steered right into me. The sled's ski caught something on the edge of the trail and I sailed over the wind screen and crashed into that stupid tree."

Alex scrunched further down in his seat. It seemed like a huge cloud was hovering over him. He found it impossible to keep from thinking about Agnes. Nothing about the last week or so made any sense.

Clarence rose from his chair and crossed over to the couch where Alex was sitting. "I think I know how you're feeling, young fella," he said, patting Alex's arm. "Life can be mighty aggravating at times. It's curious how things seem to go along pretty good for quite a spell, then all of a sudden - bang - everything that possibly could go wrong, goes wrong!" He stopped for a

moment, and stared vacantly into the fireplace. “And then . . . things turn around and gradually go back to normal. And you know what I’ve found? When the good times return, you kinda forget how terrible you felt when things weren’t going well. Right now it would appear that all of us are going through a particularly rough spot.”

Alex set his jaw, “What about Agnes?” he asked, looking directly into the old man’s eyes. “She had more than a few weeks of bad luck. She suffered with her arthritis for years, with only you and a bunch of chickadees to keep her company. Why did God allow that to happen to her? He couldn’t have asked for a better Christian.”

A faint smile crossed the old man’s face. “Well, that’s one way of looking at things all right, but I know for a fact that’s not how Agnes saw it.” He leaned back on the couch. “Have you ever given any thought to your funeral, Alex?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Agnes gave it plenty of thought,” Clarence said. “She saw it as her last chance to let folks know how important Jesus Christ was in her life.”

“But why?” Alex asked. “I mean everybody says that if you don’t have your health, you don’t have anything.”

Clarence grinned. “I don’t think Agnes ever felt that her aches and pains were all that important. Now I can’t give you an answer as to why her faith was so strong - I’ve never been sick a day in my life. But I do know that the weaker and sicker she got, the stronger her faith seemed to grow.”

Mary Flynn pulled a chair up to the couch. “Agnes was a remarkable woman. You would think that someone who suffered as much as she did would really question whether God loved her, but I think she was the most contented woman I’ve ever known.”

Joel scratched at his cast. “And she was always trying to convert me. It was kind of nice she worried about my soul.”

“And,” Clarence said with a grin. “She’s going to give it one last try, Joel. That’s the kind of funeral she wanted. Share her faith one last time.”

Joel laughed, “I’ll listen carefully, Clarence. She deserves an honest chance.”

There was an awkward pause. Each person lost in the privacy of their own memories. Finally Clarence cleared his throat and turned to Joel. “It’s a real shame you’re gonna miss the

big race.”

“Yah,” Joel said. “I was really looking forward to cleaning Higginson’s clock.”

“Why not let Alex drive for you?” Clarence suggested. “He’s been getting lots of practise.”

“Let the rookie drive?” Joel looked over at his friend. “Would you be interested? Do you think you could handle my machine?”

Alex could feel his heart begin to race. “I think we’d better forget about the *Thunder Rally* for this year.”

His friend was quiet for another minute, watching as Alex slouched even further into the couch. A sly grin crossed his face. “Actually having you in the race might be a good idea,” he admitted. “I hear our wild-eyed trapper friend has been giving you a bit of coaching. Was he any help?”

“He knows his stuff,” Alex admitted.

“Then I think you oughta do it,” Joel said. “It’s not likely anyone will beat old Lance anyway, but it would be nice if somebody gave him a run for his money.”

“Well then it’s settled,” Clarence said. “Alex, you’ve still got a couple of days before the race. You can squeeze a lot of practice into forty-eight hours if you have to.”

Alex suddenly felt very awkward. “I’ll sure give it my best shot.”

Joel punched his friend lightly on the shoulder. “You’d better,” he said, the smile back on his face. “Otherwise I’ll have to go back to school and listen to Higginson brag his head off for the rest of the winter.”

Mary Flynn returned from the kitchen with a plate of oatmeal cookies. “You know, Clarence, you’ve never told us how you and Agnes met. She hinted that it was quite an amusing story.”

Clarence shifted self-consciously. “Now that takes me back,” he said slowly. “Sometimes it seems like yesterday, and then at other times it seems like a hundred years ago.”

“So how did you meet?” Mary Flynn persisted.

“Well, you might find it difficult to believe,” Clarence began. “But fifty years ago I wasn’t the same debonair gentleman that I am today.” He grinned at the others. “After the war I came up here and found work in the lumber camps. When spring came I decided to visit my

brother in the city, and it just so happened he was staying at a rooming house owned by Agnes and her mother. Well, there I was, just off the train - beard down to my belly button, bush clothes . . .”

Mary Flynn laughed with delight, “Oh, Clarence, you must have looked a sight.”

“I was for a fact,” Clarence agreed. “But not knowing any better I walked right up to the front door of the rooming house, bold as brass . . . You know, I’ll never forget seeing Agnes for the first time when she answered the doorbell. There she stood, dark hair down to her shoulders, light cotton dress. She looked so pretty that even after all these years, when I think of it, she still takes my breath away.”

He reached for a cookie and took a minute to collect himself.

“Do you know what my future wife’s first words to me were?” he asked.

“I’ll bet they were romantic,” Mary Flynn said.

Clarence laughed. “Not exactly,” he said. “She took one look at me and said, *if you would like to go around back, my mother will fix you a sandwich.*”

“She thought you were looking for a handout!” Joel said, laughing.

Clarence nodded. “She sure did. But I said, *no, no - I’m here to see my brother, Charlie.* Agnes was so embarrassed. She put her hand over her mouth and her face turned red,” Clarence shook his head. “Imagine, me embarrassing her ...”

“I’ll bet that wasn’t the last time, though,” Joel said.

The others all laughed.

“So what happened then?” Alex asked. “Did you ask her out?”

Clarence shook his head. “Not right away, young fella. I was pretty shy back then, believe it or not. I had to build up my courage . . . So I cut off the beard and got into some city clothes. But from the first moment I saw her, though, I made up my mind that one day I was going to ask her to marry me. And I did! Not bad for an uncouth lad from the lumber camps.”

“Not bad, Clarence,” Joel agreed.

“Married for a half century,” Clarence continued. “Been my faithful partner since the first day we met.”

“That’s quite a love story, Clarence,” Mary Flynn said. “But it isn’t hard to imagine you as such a romantic.”

They were quiet again. “The funeral is tomorrow afternoon then?” Alex finally asked. Clarence nodded. “Two o’clock. I spent most of the day delivering invitations to the folk living around Kenogami.”

“I’m sure it will be well-attended,” Mary Flynn said. “Agnes was a very special lady.”

“*Is* a special lady,” Clarence corrected gently.

Chapter 12

A Focus

Breakfast was barely over when the bright, peaceful morning was shattered with the roar of a snowmobile just outside the Flynn house.

“It’s a little early for Higginson to be out on the trails,” Joel muttered with a scowl.

Alex got up from the table and peered out the window. “It’s not Lance,” he said. “It’s Johnson - and he’s driving a real hot sled.”

Alex and Mary Flynn arrived at the door just as Johnson knocked.

“Come in.” Alex ushered their guest inside.

Johnson removed his helmet and stood silently in the foyer.

“Morning, Mr. Johnson.” Joel gave him a wave from the kitchen table.

Johnson nodded.

“Is that a new machine you’re driving?” Alex asked.

“I borrowed it from a friend,” Johnson explained.

“Joel is going to let me use his sled in the big race,” Alex said.

”Figured he would.” Johnson said. “But there’s one more thing you need to do to get ready.”

“What might that be,” Joel asked from the kitchen.

“Racing somebody that will give you a run for your money,” Johnson said. “Like the Higginson boy will be doing.”

Mary Flynn glanced at Alex, a worried expression crossing her face. “I think you’ve had enough of those machines. Agnes’ funeral is this afternoon, Alex. You wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“Of course not,” Alex said, looking questioningly at Johnson. “How long do you think we’ll be?”

“A couple of hours. Then a couple more hours after the funeral. The race is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

Alex turned back to Joel. “What do you think?”

“Go for it.” Joel struggled to his feet and hobbled over to a chair by the living room

window. “Don’t worry, Mom. There’s no tree with Alex’s name on it.”

A strange hollowness overcame Alex as he pulled on his outdoor clothes. “Why don’t *you* enter the race yourself?” he asked Johnson. “From the look of the sled you’re driving, I’d say you had an excellent chance of winning - especially with what you know about racing.”

“Nope,” Johnson said. “It’s gotta be someone his own age that beats this Higginson kid.” With that he opened the door and stepped outside.

“Be careful, Alex,” Mary Flynn warned.

Alex scooped up his helmet and stepped into the cold December morning. It was brisk and perfectly cloudless, ideal weather for a ride in the forest.

Johnson’s machine was a beaut! It was dark green, with a thin red racing stripe down both sides. *Yamaha*, was painted in bold red letters across the hood.

“Wow!” Alex said.

“Top of the line,” Johnson agreed. “Should give your beast a run for its money.”

“Especially with you driving,” Alex said, starting the engine of the *Polaris*. He glanced up at the living room window as he pulled on his helmet. Joel was looking out at them. A pang of guilt stabbed him. He wished that somehow both he and Joel could run in the race this week. Not having Joel along took most of the fun out of it.

“We’ll go back to town and do a practise run,” Johnson shouted. “When we reach the starting line I’ll give you a five second head start. Make sure you keep in front of me until the end of the race!” With that he gassed the engine and shot off down the trail.

The power of Joel’s *Polaris* was awesome. It was as if a huge animal was caged under the hood, anxious to tear up the freshly-groomed course before them.

In the fifteen minutes it took them to reach town, they passed only two other riders - no doubt a major factor in Johnson’s choice of such an early hour. At the starting line Alex’s self-appointed coach turned off the *Yamaha’s* engine and removed his helmet - bushels of hair immediately sprang to attention. He waited while Alex pulled in beside him, then leaned forward, his piercing, dark eyes burrowing into Alex’s. “Stay focussed,” he said. “Focus on each and every part of the course. Eke out every bit of speed and every little advantage you can. Don’t worry about whether I’m behind you, beside you, or a mile ahead of you. Focus on what you’re doing. I’m a better driver than Lance Higginson will ever be - just remember that. And

whatever you do . . .” Johnson paused, his dark eyes never leaving Alex’s. “Don’t let me pass you!” With that he pulled his helmet back on and restarted the *Yamaha*.

Alex drew in several deep breaths of air, wishing with all his might that Joel had never broken his leg. He had sensed his friend’s growing resentment at missing the race, and he didn’t blame Joel one bit. Worst of all, he felt his own personal sense of failure. He knew he would never be able to stay ahead of Johnson, and he didn’t stand a chance against Lance Higginson either - even on Joel’s souped-up *Polaris*. He could almost hear the other racers laughing at *the city boy*. An overpowering feeling of anxiety began to take hold of him. With a last deep breath he glanced back at his strange-looking mentor. As Johnson’s gaze met his own, Alex nodded reluctantly.

The *Polaris* jumped forward with an ear-shattering roar. The acceleration was so swift that Alex was yanked backward. Gripping the handlebars with all his might, he shot down the straight stretch and then swiftly into the long sweeping curve skirting the beaver pond.

He found himself counting . . . *three . . . four . . . five!* Johnson would now be leaving the starting post - charging down the straight stretch on his powerful green *Yamaha*. Alex’s throat tightened as he felt a surge of panic. He was suddenly filled with an overpowering desire to impress Johnson, and for Joel to hear how well he had done.

Keep to the inside, a voice told him. He eased the accelerator and swung into the first of a long series of sweeping bends. *Accelerate into the turn*. He leaned far out over the trail as he roared into the curve, then swung himself quickly to the other side of his sled as the next curve veered the opposite way.

The exhilaration of the moment raced through him like a giant tidalwave. He wanted to scream . . . to shout at the top of his lungs and hear his voice echo back from the snow covered trees and hills. He glanced quickly into the rearview mirror, but there was still no sign of the *Yamaha*.

Focus, Johnson had said. And that’s what he did - rivetting his concentration on each bend, on every foot of the winding race course. Only twice in the first couple of miles did he have to contend with other snowmobiles on the trail - and he felt a wild sense of pride as he roared by them.

It was not until he passed the five mile marker that he became aware of the steady sound

of another motor behind him. He glanced quickly into the mirror and caught sight of Johnson, barely a length behind. A surge of excitement rippled through him. A long straight stretch lay before them - one that he recognized as being the last before Lake Kenogami. He pushed the accelerator down the last fraction and for an instant Johnson vanished. Then to Alex's astonishment, the *Yamaha* suddenly appeared on the opposite side of his machine, edging up beside him just as they were barrelling down on another sweeping bend.

Keep to the inside. A sense of frustration swept through him. How could he gain the edge when Johnson had crowded in beside him? And worst of all the *Yamaha* now held the inside track, and the advantage.

Lean - lean as far out as possible. But he couldn't even do that because the green *Yamaha* was in the way, right there next to him. In a heartbeat he was into the corner, Johnson's sled creeping slowly into the lead.

Accelerate into the turn . . . But unable to lean, Alex knew his speed was maxed out. A wave of frustration passed through him as Johnson rounded the curve a full sled length ahead of him.

By the time they reached Lake Kenogami Johnson had opened up a twenty foot lead, and Alex knew that the race was lost.

Keep it close, he told himself. Don't let him embarrass you. Don't let him think you have no talent! He wondered now if Johnson was giving it his all, because from there to the finish line Alex was able to keep the lead from growing. At the finish line Alex was greeted by a beaming Johnson. "Twenty-eight minutes twenty-five seconds," he said. "Top notch."

Alex turned off the ignition. His arms, shoulders, even the fingers of his right hand ached. He flexed them gingerly. "I didn't stand a chance," he said, unable to meet Johnson's gaze.

"Course not," Johnson said. "You've been racing for how long? A week? I been racing for thirty years, and I still only beat you by three seconds."

Alex looked up at him. "Were you trying?"

"Were you?"

"Of course!"

"Did you focus?"

"I tried."

“Not hard enough,” Johnson said bluntly. “You didn’t keep ahead of me and you don’t know the course good enough.”

“What?” Alex could feel his face flush. “I’ve been over this course a dozen times.”

“Then why did you let me have the inside track on that big bend? That cost you the race.”

Alex stared at him for a moment. “You forced your way.”

“Once you have the lead on another racer you’ve got to do whatever it takes to stay there. You gotta keep checking over both your shoulders. Anticipate the other guy’s moves and cut him off!” Johnson dropped back into his seat. “We’ll try it again,” he said. “How are you for gas?”

“We filled up last night,” Alex said. There was something about Johnson that reminded him of Mr. Williams, his phys ed teacher, and that made him remember the dream he’d had of his dad being Mr. Williams. A small shudder passed through him. “Let’s get going,” he said, flexing his weary fingers. “We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Agnes’ funeral was only a few hours away and he was afraid that what Johnson had in mind would take forever.

Chapter 13

Remembering Agnes

Alex had been expecting a stuffy funeral chapel, with a black-robed minister droning on and on . . . But the memorial service for Agnes wasn't anything like he had imagined. To begin with, it took place on a hill a short walk from the south end of Lake Kenogami.

The snow in the clearing had been packed down with snowshoes the previous day so it would freeze hard overnight, and a large bonfire blazed welcomingly. By the time Alex arrived with the Flynns a fair-sized crowd had gathered.

"There are a lot of people here I don't know," Joel said. "Word must have spread beyond Kenogami."

"What a spectacular view!" Alex said, warming his hands by the fire. Almost the entire length of Lake Kenogami stretched out below them on one side, and a long, tree-covered valley on the other.

Joel hobbled up beside him, leaning heavily on his crutches and panting slightly. "Almost worth the effort," he agreed. "Except for a bit of wind, this is the perfect winter day."

"There must be more than a hundred people here," Alex said.

"Lance's parents are here," Joel pointed out a tall, round-faced couple. "Now where could Lance be?"

"It's a nice crowd," Mary Flynn agreed. "Clarence has been out delivering personal invitations to everyone, and I see some of Agnes' out of town friends are here. Afterward we're all invited over to the Community Hall for coffee and sandwiches."

A tall, fair-haired man with piercing blue eyes and a square, determined-looking jaw accompanied Clarence over to a spot by the fire - shaking hands with everyone in their path. For some reason the newcomer reminded Alex of pictures he'd seen of western gunfighters.

"That's Jess Wheeler," Jack Flynn informed the boys. "He's a lay preacher - a long-time friend of Clarence and Agnes."

"There are more people here than I expected," Mary Flynn remarked. "Agnes hasn't been able to get out for the past few years and sometimes people get forgotten."

"Agnes was someone you'd never forget," her husband said.

A hush fell over the group as Clarence turned to face the gathering.

“Come up close to the fire, folks,” he said in a loud voice, beckoning them forward with a wave of his hand.

The crowd pulled into a tight circle around Clarence and the lay preacher.

“Folks, I’d like you to meet a good friend of mine. This here is Jess Wheeler.”

The tall man grinned broadly, tipping his head toward the crowd of people.

“Those guys are always smiling,” Joel whispered.

“Agnes asked Jess to say a few words today,” Clarence continued. “We thought it would be a good idea if we remembered Agnes up here on this hillside. This is where we loved to come and enjoy God’s handiwork. Sometimes we’d bring a picnic lunch.” He turned to Jess. “Go ahead, my friend.”

Jess Wheeler pulled a small black Bible from his coat pocket and cleared his throat. “Some of you might be wondering how we can have a funeral service without a body or casket. Some might even consider it disrespectful.”

Alex looked up. He had just been thinking that very thing. There were just so many things about this funeral service that were downright strange!

“Well, those of us who knew Agnes best can assure you that the absence of her casket wouldn’t matter to her in the least. You see, the Agnes we all loved has moved on. It doesn’t matter where her body might be resting at the moment, for she has already made herself at home in a much better place than even this beautiful spot.” Jess opened his Bible and leafed quickly to a place near the back.

“Agnes’ favourite verses have extra meaning today: *Behold, I show you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*”

“These verses were important to Agnes because they told her that death had no power over her soul and spirit - that when her life came to an end she would immediately go to be with her Lord Jesus.”

Alex found his thoughts going back to his first visit with Agnes, only a few short days ago. He remembered Joel’s comment about waiting until he was older before considering

becoming a Christian. He glanced over at his friend. Joel was staring stoically ahead, eyes fixed on Jess Wheeler. On his other side, Mrs. Flynn was busy wiping away tears as Jess continued his eulogy.

“Agnes Sprague was born Agnes Marjorie Kelsey seventy-three years ago in Toronto. Agnes was an only child and for the past few years Clarence has been her only family member.

“To countless hospital patients and shut-ins Agnes was a faithful and caring ministering angel, who for many years provided comfort and encouragement to the less fortunate during their time of need.

“Although Agnes lived here on Lake Kenogami for fifty years, and wasn’t able to get out much lately, she always thought of herself as a traveler. To Agnes life was a journey, and her final destination was heaven. A few years ago Agnes told me about a canoe trip she and Clarence had taken in the far north just after they were married. For over a month they canoed the great rivers of the Arctic, miles from civilization. They spent twelve hours a day in their canoe, enduring blistered hands, hordes of mosquitoes, and torrential rains. Afterwards she said that it was the happiest month of her life. That was the kind of woman Agnes was. Endurance - whether it meant putting up with the elements on a month long canoe trip, or tolerating painful arthritis for many long years - she was able to see far beyond the trials of life.

“Like most people she had troubles and hardships along the way - probably more than most of us will ever have to bear, but she always kept her eyes on the Good Shepherd and trusted him. We all find it necessary at times to persevere through various troubles that life dishes out, but an important part of the process is making good choices, and the most important decision we will ever make is whether to accept or reject the Lord Jesus Christ as our own personal Saviour, for that is a choice we will live with for eternity.”

Jess turned a few pages in his Bible. “Another of Agnes’ favourite verses is also my favourite, John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

“Agnes knew Christianity was a very personal thing,” Jess continued. “No one is born a Christian. It’s a one-on-one commitment to Jesus Christ and doesn’t depend on who our parents were or what country we were born in. Just as Agnes knew that Jesus had committed himself to her, she committed herself to him. That was what her life was all about.”

Jess Wheeler put his arm around Clarence's shoulders.

It was Clarence who continued the eulogy.

"My dear wife wanted one last opportunity to share her faith with you, so that you might walk with Jesus as she did." Clarence passed the back of his hand quickly over his eyes. "We're here to remember her, to honour her life, and to let everyone hear one last time what her Saviour, Jesus Christ, meant to her," he paused. "Where do you stand?"

As Clarence asked the question, he seemed to turn and look directly into Alex's eyes. Alex swallowed hard, his heart accelerating. It was as if this old man could see inside him - especially whenever his head was in a turmoil - like now. He felt Joel's elbow dig into his ribs. "She's even trying to convert us at her funeral," he whispered.

Alex managed a weak smile, but the words of Jess and Clarence echoed within him, and he knew that Agnes' influence, through these two men, would never, ever leave.

Getting the Feel

Alex sat at the Flynn's dining room table, poring over Clarence's topographic map, memorizing each twist and turn of the Thunder Rally's course - anything unusual about the trail that could possibly give him an advantage. He carefully studied the details laid out before him - the hills, swamps, ravines, rivers and lakes, recalling in his mind's eye each section of the course.

He could imagine the big Polaris beneath him, thundering down the snow-packed trail, the wind whipping up under his face protector and stinging his cheeks. The roar of the engine took on its distinctive howl, as with a slight touch of his fingertips he accelerated down a straight stretch, slammed into a mogul and sailed through the air like a giant bird.

In the same instant an overpowering sense of anxiety rushed through him. The Thunder Rally was scheduled for the day after tomorrow and he wasn't ready! He needed more time . . . more practice. Johnson's coaching was only just beginning to sink in and pay off. His heart pounded wildly . . . How had he ever gotten himself into this? One of these days he would learn to say "no". The last thing he needed right now was to feel like anymore of a failure than he already was!

Chapter 14

Main Street Melee

The main street of the town of Kirkland Lake was strung with Christmas lights from end to end. Despite the late evening hour, the stores they passed in Jack Flynn's half-ton truck were alive with shoppers.

"When you're finished, meet me down the street at *The Grocery Mart*," Jack Flynn said, pulling to a stop in front of the hardware store. "I'll be about a half hour."

"Sure, Dad." Joel swung his cast out the truck door and waited while Alex handed him his crutches. "This is brutal," he grumbled. "I'll be so glad to see the last of these things." He waved the crutches over his head. "And this!" He banged his cast against a nearby fire hydrant.

"Six more weeks," Alex said. "Just be glad it isn't summer - think how hot that cast would get if it was ninety degrees out."

Joel gave his friend a wry look. "You have a real knack for seeing the dark side of everything, don't you?" He gave his head a little shake. "Anyway, I'd gladly trade six weeks of ninety degree weather for a turn in the Thunder Rally."

Kirkland Lake Hardware was a large, sprawling store set back from the main drag. Joel led the way through a myriad of shelves to one marked *Snowmobiles - Parts and Accessories*.

"I really don't think those fuel additives do anything," Alex said as Joel selected a container from the shelf.

"*For higher octane power and better fuel efficiency*," Joel read from the red plastic bottle. "This may be just the little extra we need." He picked a litre of oil from the shelf and an oil filter. "In a race of inches even the smallest edge . . ." Suddenly he grabbed Alex by the arm and dragged him behind one of the shelves, almost knocking over a stack of hockey equipment in the process. "Lance Higginson," he whispered, nodding toward the door. "He's here with a friend."

Alex peered between the rows of merchandise. Lance and a stocky, dark-haired boy were just going through the check out.

"Who's with him?" Alex whispered.

"Herman Rutledge. He's almost as big a creep as Lance."

Alex watched the two boys saunter from the store. "I wonder if he's in the race too."

"Nah," Joel said, hobbling out from behind the shelf. "Herman's only interested in looking pretty, flexing his muscles, and lifting weights."

They checked their purchases with the clerk, then stepped out into the cool evening air. Alex drew his collar up to his ears. "Feels like more snow," he said as they started toward the grocery store. He glanced at his friend, anxious to say something positive. "You're really getting handy on those crutches."

Joel was swinging his way down the street almost faster than Alex could keep up, seeming to enjoy the sympathetic glances given to him by passers-by.

They were approaching a large abandoned building on a quiet section of the street, when two shadowy figures stepped from the alley directly in front of them. "Well, lookee here," came a familiar voice

Alex groaned. *Lance Higginson.*

"We saw you back in the hardware store," Lance said. "Shopping for magic formulas and secret potions to make your sled go faster, I'll bet." He poked Alex in the chest with his finger. "Herman was telling me that our little friend here signed up to take your place in the big race tomorrow." He threw back his head and laughed. "Guess what, ladies? They arrange the heats alphabetically, so Lance Higginson and Alex Gray will be riding in the same heat."

Herman Rutledge took a step closer to Alex and Joel. "Looks like they really will need some magic potions," he said. "Just to keep from getting killed." He and Lance laughed hysterically.

Alex stepped forward, his eyes blazing. "You forced Joel off the course, Higginson," he said. "Then you didn't even stop to see if he was hurt. We could have you arrested." He felt his friend's hand on his elbow.

"Aw," Herman said. "Did the little baby bwake his toe-toe?"

"You could kill someone driving like that," Alex shouted. "Oh shut your trap," Lance said, his laughter coming to an abrupt halt. "Remember the motto of the pirates, boys? No quarter asked, none given."

"You deliberately knocked me out of the race," Joel said in a low voice, "And you were the one who sabotaged my sled the other night."

A shopper edged by them.

Alex could see Lance's lip turn up and his eyes narrow. "I'd like to see you prove that!" In two quick steps he was on top of Joel, grabbing the front of his coat and pushing him violently backward. Joel hit the ground with a crash, crutches flying in different directions.

Alex charged straight at Lance, driving his head into the other boy's chest, knocking him backward, their arms flailing helplessly before crashing into a snowbank. Alex rolled off his adversary and was scrambling back to his feet when he felt a heavy hand grab him by the back of his coat. He spun around, swinging wildly at his new attacker when . . . *Bang!* Something slammed against the side of his face. In a brilliant flash of colour, a million stars exploded inside his head!

Herman Rutledge! Gamely, Alex brought his fists up in front of his face, his head reeling. He was only barely able to make out the hazy forms dancing in front of him. A blur appeared to his right and he recognized the dark form of Joel crash into Herman, sending both boys into a thrashing pile of arms and legs on the snow-covered sidewalk.

Somewhere in the distance he heard a shout, "Fight!"

Gradually Alex's head began to clear. He turned to face Lance. The other boy was climbing back to his feet, his breath coming in short panting gasps.

Alex quickly sized up his adversary as if seeing him for the first time. Lance was slightly taller than him and a whole lot stockier. Icy blue eyes dominated a face contorted with an indescribable rage.

"You jerk!" Lance hissed, his eyes narrowed to tiny slits. "Now you're gonna find out what I mean by *no quarter*."

Alex braced himself. Lance Higginson's approach was slow and measured. When he got to within arm's length he stopped, his breathing gradually slowing. "I'm going to fix it so you won't be riding in that race either. You'll be hobbling around on crutches, just like your little friend." He moved to within swinging distance, both fists now pulled up in front of his face.

"If you fought as well as you talked," Alex said in a quiet voice. "The ambulance would already be carting me off to the hospital." He risked a quick peek at Joel and Herman, who were now on their feet and circling one another - Joel having to throw his cast out awkwardly before him with every step. Several pedestrians left the sidewalk rather than pass the boys, even though

they had to scramble over a snowbank onto the street.

“Trouble boys?” The unexpected voice caused all four boys to freeze in their tracks, then slowly turn in its direction.

Jess Wheeler! Alex’s mouth dropped open.

“Looks like we have a bit of a misunderstanding here,” Jess continued.

“Bug off, mister,” Lance snapped. “This is none of your beeswax.”

Jess smiled and took a step closer to the boy, towering over him.

Lance retreated. “This is private.” He glanced over to Herman for support. Herman was watching the big miner nervously.

“I’m sure it is,” Jess agreed. “But these two fellas are friends of mine.”

“We don’t need help,” Alex said quickly.

“Oh, that’s probably quite true,” Jess said, the smile never disappearing. “But if this little melee continues for much longer, somebody might get into trouble.”

He’s right, Alex thought as he dropped his fists to his side, and the instant he did something crashed against his jaw. He staggered backward, fighting once again to stay on his feet. Only faintly was he aware of Lance lunging toward him, but there was nothing he could do - his head was spinning and his legs were jelly . . . Then just as suddenly Lance disappeared and Jess was standing before him.

“That’s enough!” Jess’ voice had lost its friendliness. He stood, hands on hips, glaring at Lance and Herman. “Sucker punches are for cowards.”

“We’ll see who the suckers are tomorrow,” Lance said through clenched teeth. “Too bad I have to beat the *City Boy* instead of his little girlfriend - but even that’s gonna be sweet.” He turned and stomped off down the sidewalk, Herman trailing behind.

Alex stood for a moment, not daring to move, his senses gradually wobbling back into place.

Joel came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “You okay,” Joel asked. “That was quite a punch he landed.”

Alex nodded. “I never saw it coming.”

Jess gripped him by the arm and steered him gently down the sidewalk. “My fault,” he said, looking embarrassed. “I distracted you.”

“Actually you probably saved us a lot of trouble,” Alex acknowledged, managing a smile.

“How about a coffee?” Jess asked. “There’s a café just down the street.”

Joel glanced at his watch. “I guess we have time.” He recovered his crutches from the snow and gave a disarming smile to two women who had been afraid to pass. “Sorry ladies!”

Jess’ hand remained on Alex’s elbow, guiding him into the restaurant and over to a table by the door. There were no other customers.

“I remember seeing you at Agnes’ memorial service,” Jess said to the boys after they had placed their orders.

“Where are you from?” Joel asked Jess. “I don’t remember seeing you around here before.”

“I *am* from Kirkland Lake, but I’ve been working at a gold mine down in Chile for the past year. I’m just back for the holidays.”

“It was nice you were able to be here for Agnes’ funeral then,” Alex said.

“Yes,” Jess acknowledged. “And I got to visit her one last time.”

They were quiet for a moment as they sipped their coffee.

“Agnes was the genuine article,” Jess said. “She taught me more about life than anyone I’ve ever met. And no doubt she’ll continue to teach many of us through our memories of her.”

“Really?” Alex asked, doubtfully.

Jess looked across the table at him. “About important things, anyway.”

“Like winning snowmobile races?” Joel laughed. “Mom thinks we’re absolutely obsessed with winning and will probably be killed in the process.”

Jess’ face broke into a broad smile. “I always loved competitions. I have half a mind to enter that race myself, but I know this young fella here would probably beat the tar out of me.”

Alex could feel himself blushing at the unexpected compliment, but he wasn’t sure he should be so pleased. Mrs. Flynn was probably right. The thought of winning the *Thunder Rally* - even beating Lance Higginson, seemed to fade in importance.

“Alex’s getting to be quite the cocky driver, all right,” Joel agreed. “But I wouldn’t be talking him up anymore - it goes straight to his head.”

Alex glanced at his friend, unsure just how serious Joel was.

Jess tilted back in his chair and eyed the two boys. “Agnes used to say that life’s most

important lesson was finding one's perspective."

"Perspective?" Joel echoed.

"That's right," Jess said. "But it's been my experience that discovering what's truly important in one's life can be downright elusive. Just when you think you have it . . . it's gone. A man needs to spend some time in a foreign land - like Chile - to help him find a proper perspective about some of the things we consider to be so important back here in North America."

For some reason Alex remembered Johnson and his little lectures on the importance of focusing. *Focus* and *perspective*. More stuff to think about. Alex winced as he rubbed the spot on his jaw where Lance had landed the punch. Somehow the two concepts seemed to fit together - the importance of staying focused on the important things in life. But how did one determine what things were truly important? That's what he admired about Agnes - she seemed to have all of life's priorities sorted out, though he doubted if Agnes would have attached much importance to a snowmobile race. *And how would she have felt about a street brawl!* A niggling feeling of resentment crept through him. Agnes would no doubt be more concerned with preparing for the great hereafter . . . Well - that was fine for old people like Agnes. Jess? Well, he couldn't figure Jess out.

Alex set down his cup and pushed back his chair. "We'd better get going, Joel. We're supposed to meet your dad at the grocery store. He's probably steamed by now."

Joel took one last sip of coffee and struggled to his feet. "Now that's putting things in perspective," he said reaching into his back pocket for his wallet.

Jess held up his hand. "My treat, boys," he said in his easy going way. "I'll see you at the race tomorrow."

Another Funeral

It was a gorgeous summer day. The Florida sun sparkled and danced on the nearby waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Alex stood beside Jess Wheeler under a spreading palm tree looking down into the mouth of an open grave. An oak coffin was being lowered into the hole. Across from him Alex could see his mother, weeping softly into a white handkerchief.

Jess put a comforting hand on Alex's shoulder. "Too bad your dad never got to see you race."

"Yah." Alex watched as two men in rough work clothes began to shovel dirt into the grave, slowly covering his father's coffin.

Something inside him desperately wanted to weep - to cry out for his father. To jump down into the grave and wrap his arms around the coffin and bawl his eyes out. But it was too late. His dad was gone. Never would he have the chance to prove to him that he was actually good at something - really good at something.

But what did it matter anyway? It probably wouldn't have changed the way his father looked at him . . .

Alex woke to the shadows on the ceiling above his darkened bedroom. Slowly his surroundings drifted into focus - desk and dresser across from him . . . Joel's slow and measured breathing.

Perhaps winning the Thunder Rally would prove to his father that he was really good at something. For a moment he imagined himself of the victory podium - the crowds cheering wildly - his dad clapping him on the back and shaking his hand - pumping it up and down, up and down - a huge grin on his face.

Then, like a big soap bubble, the dream disappeared and his heart sank. It was no use! What made him think that his father would care about a stupid snowmobile race in the middle of nowhere against a bunch of yokels.

Then in the darkness Agnes' face drifted before him. Her gentle smile and kind words. Agnes wouldn't care if he won the race - if he ever won at anything. She liked him just the way he was! Then he remembered. There was one area he knew that he did come up a bit short in

Agnes' eyes. Agnes felt that he needed to make Jesus Christ a part of his life - much as she had. He took a deep breath, that would certainly be a big step. It would mean making some changes in his life . . . but the thought of leaning on the same God that Agnes leaned on was strangely comforting.

He glanced out the window and into the darkness of early morning. So much uncertainty, yet of one thing he was very sure! Whatever the results of the snowmobile race - whether he won or lost or whether his dad was tickled pink - or even if he couldn't care less - he had to give it his best shot. For once in his life he would try his level best from start to finish. That would give him a fresh start and he could go from there. Focus and persevere! After that he would be able to square his shoulders, look his father straight in the eye and know he'd done his best!

Chapter 15

Thunder Rally

Alex awoke just as the light began to creep beneath the blinds of the bedroom window. He crawled out of bed and pulled the curtain aside. “Good grief!”

Joel rolled over and peered up at his friend. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s snowing!” Alex said in disbelief.

“That’s not good,” Joel said. “The big race is today.”

“How am I going to race in a blizzard?” Alex asked,

Joel swung himself out of bed, his battered cast clunking loudly on the floor. “Well, they’re not going to cancel the *Thunder Rally* because of a little snow.”

Alex took a deep breath. “It’s more than a *little* snow,” he said. “You can’t even see the treeline from here.” His hand went unconsciously to the lump on his jaw. *That was some punch Lance had landed.*

Joel struggled to his feet and pulled on his shirt. “Get yourself psyched, my friend. This is the day we show Lance Higginson who’s boss.” His face broke into a huge grin.

Alex could feel his heart beginning to race in anticipation of the day ahead as he dressed and made his way down to the kitchen.

“I didn’t suppose you boys would be up so early,” Mary Flynn greeted them.

Joel’s dad was already sitting at the end of the table, sipping his coffee. “So today’s the day, eh boys?”

“You be careful, Alex,” Mary Flynn warned, bustling about the kitchen. “I could never face your parents if you got hurt in this silly race.”

Alex gave her a sickly smile, thinking of the thick snow falling outside.

“The snowstorm’s made Alex a little nervous,” Joel teased.

“It sure is blowing up a storm out there,” Jack Flynn agreed. “You’ll have to slow down, especially on the bends. We’ll be coming into town later to catch the race,” he continued. “In the meantime, I’ve got some correspondence to catch up on before I go anywhere.” He pushed back from the table and made his way to the den.

Joel waited until his mother left the room. “Listen, Alex,” he said. “I’m sorry if I’ve

been a bit of a jerk the last couple of days. My nose was out of joint over not being able to be in the race.”

He now had Alex’s full attention.

“I guess our little tiff with Lance Higginson last night reminded me of who my friends are. I just want you to know that I’m in your corner one hundred percent. You’re a real good driver and I think you’ve got an honest shot at winning today. Not just beating Lance, but winning.” He reached over and poked Alex on the shoulder.

“I wish *you* were racing,” Alex stammered awkwardly. “And it’s not just because of the storm either. It’s your territory. I’m the city boy.”

Joel laughed. “We’re both city boys, Alex. That’s what’s so perfect about this . . .”

Mary Flynn returned to the kitchen and put on her apron. “Looks like you boys don’t have much of an appetite this morning.”

Alex got up from the table. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Flynn. If it’s okay, I’m going to get an early start on the trail - get used to driving in this storm.” He looked over at Joel. “You coming?” He just wanted the day to be over.

* * * * *

The chill north wind and blowing snow reminded Alex of being lost out on the lake. As soon as he stepped outside he knew that whatever slim chance he had of winning this race had been blown away with the swirl of snowflakes.

“Don’t let the weather get to you,” Joel said as they strapped on their helmets. “No one in the race will be used to these conditions.”

Alex shrugged. “I still have some time to practice.”

Joel laughed and slapped his friend on the back. “Never say die. That’s the spirit.”

“Let’s go see Johnson,” Alex said, suddenly anxious to see a supportive face.

Joel gave his friend a puzzled look as he climbed into the passenger seat, propping his leg up on the running board. Driving in the blowing snow was even more difficult than Alex had anticipated. The blinding swirls and clouds seemed to come at him from every possible direction. He knew that his knowledge of the trail would be more important than ever as visibility was limited to only forty or fifty feet. He was grateful that the trail groomer had already passed.

By the time they reached Collier's Bay, Alex was feeling a bit better. They'd no sooner pulled into Johnson's yard and cut the motor than the strange-looking man appeared on his front steps.

"What are you expecting?" Joel asked as he and Alex climbed from the sled. "A pep talk?"

In his typical wordless manner Johnson stepped back inside the cabin as the boys approached, leaving the door slightly ajar. "All this snow kinda reminds me of the day you boys got lost in the blizzard," he said, motioning them over to the kitchen table. He crossed the room to the long wooden box stretching the length of the far wall, reached in and pulled out a gleaming red helmet. With a moulded glass front and a silver vent protruding at mouth level, it looked something like an astronaut's helmet.

"Wow," Joel said with a whistle. "First class."

"A racing helmet," Alex said.

"I was going to drop it off at your place this morning," Johnson said, handing it to Alex. "With all this snow it may come in handy."

Alex turned the helmet over several times, admiring each and every stunning facet. "Thanks, Mr. Johnson."

"It's not to keep," Johnson added hastily. "It belongs to a friend. I'll need it back after the race."

Joel laughed. "Appears you've got more friends than a person might think."

"Not that any of them would admit," Johnson said, pouring each of them a cup of tea from a battered kettle.

"We wanted to come by and thank you for everything, Mr. Johnson," Alex said, accepting the tin cup from his host. "I'll probably get a good tub-thrashing, but I know if you hadn't helped me, I would have been totally embarrassed."

Johnson eased himself into a chair at the head of the table. "No reason you can't win," he said. "You just gotta stay focused."

"Yah," Joel agreed. "Focus on how good it will feel to beat Lance Higginson."

* * * * *

All the way from Johnson's cabin to the starting line, Alex's mind was in a state of

turmoil. For days he'd wanted nothing better than to see Lance Higginson get beaten in the Thunder Rally, but now that it was *his* responsibility, the whole thing seemed overwhelming. He didn't want Joel depending on him - or Johnson - or especially his dad . . .

He brought the *Polaris* to a stop beneath the bright banner advertising the starting point of the race and waited while Joel climbed from the back of the machine. A number of drivers were already milling about. A group of teens called out to Joel and he gave them an exuberant wave.

"Jess Wheeler will be along soon to give me a lift to the finish line," Joel said. "We'll meet you there."

Alex nodded, peering intently into the driving snow. "Don't be so tense, man," Joel encouraged. "If you're all geared up, you won't stand a chance. I can almost smell the fear."

Alex nodded nervously, barely conscious of his friend's encouragement.

"Well," Joel said. "Let's check in with the race marshal and find out when you start."

A table had been set up under a large umbrella, and beneath it sat a harried-looking race marshal. Two burly men in skidoo suits were standing in front of him.

"Do you think those guys by the table are in the race?" Alex asked, eyeing the stern features of the two men.

Joel shrugged, "I hope so," he said quietly. "I've seen them both out on the trails. They're pushovers."

The race marshal was a heavy set man with a huge dark moustache and blue toque. He glanced up at the boys when it finally came their turn. "Name?"

"Alex Gray."

The marshal ran his finger down the chart in front of him. "Ten-oh-five," he said. "Make sure you're at the starting line a bit early."

"Who else is in his heat?" Joel asked.

"Walt Emberly, Cam Fenton and Lance Higginson."

Joel thought for a moment. "Emberly's greener than you are," he finally said. "And Fenton's older than Clarence - he's just in it to support the Food Bank."

Alex and Joel turned and made their way back to the snowmobile, eyeing the different

racers and machines idling noisily in the clearing.

“Looks like I’ll have some tough competition,” Alex said warily, looking about at the gathering sleds. “If I can’t beat Lance I hope they can.”

Joel waved his hand dismissively. “Are you kidding? Most of these guys are pussycats - Sunday drivers. Their greatest thrill is catching a little air when they hit a bump. You’re the only one I’m worried about . . . I’m afraid that after all your practising, you’re going to choke.” He waved and made a face at a driver across the clearing.

“I won’t choke,” Alex assured him. “I guess I’d better get into position.”

“Good luck, Buddy.” Joel punched his friend on the shoulder, then hobbled slowly away from the starting line.

A dark cloud seemed to hover over Alex. He watched Lance Higginson ride his *Arctic Cat* in amongst a group of snowmobiles across the clearing from him. Only vaguely was he aware of the first four racers as they roared out from the starting line.

He started his sled, revved it a few times, and listened carefully to the sound of the motor. Across the clearing, through a covey of snowmobiles, he watched Lance wipe the snow from his visor, his sneering gaze sweeping the other racers. *Why was it so important for Lance to win this race? It seemed to be an obsession. And why was it becoming so important for him to beat Lance?* He wished for an instant that he could catch Lance’s eyes - perhaps he could see something there that would help him understand the other boy, help him to like him, just a little bit. For an instant he almost wished that Lance *would* win - anything to have this race over with and to be back home . . .

The snowfall continued in an ever-swirling curtain of white - not as bad as earlier in the morning, but still heavy! Racing in this weather would test every little thing he had learned in the last few days!

“You’re up next,” a voice announced close to his ear.

Three sleds rolled up to the starting line with Alex. One, a red *Yamaha*, was driven by a boy even younger than himself. The second, a yellow *Ski-doo*, was driven by an older man in a black snowmobile suit. And the third, Lance’s *Arctic Cat*, rolled in beside Alex, so close that their skis almost touched.

A race official clutching a large green flag climbed onto a chair to their left and raised the

flag high above his head. Alex held the brake down hard with two fingers of his left hand. With his right hand he eased the accelerator half way to the bar. The big motor screamed in protest, the brakes barely able to hold the snowmobile in place.

Suddenly in a whirl of colour and motion, the starter brought the flag flashing downward.

The snowmobiles leaped forward in a cacophony of noise and snow.

Alex knew they would not all be able to run side-by-side beyond the first bend a few hundred yards away. It was absolutely critical to get out in front by then. He needn't have worried. Barely had the four machines burst out of the starting gate when the driver on the opposite side of Lance hit a small mound of snow. This threw his sled sharply to the left and into Lance.

Lance veered to avoid a collision, but in so doing was forced to let up on the accelerator. Alex and the red *Yamaha* shot ahead of the other two sleds.

Keep to the inside. Johnson's voice echoed inside his head as he approached the sweeping bend around the beaver pond. He could sense that his machine was not only faster than the *Yamaha*, but he was also a better driver. By the time he had rounded the beaver pond, the *Yamaha* was already starting to fade.

Alex waited until he had skirted the pond before he risked a quick glance into the rear view mirror. Lance's sleek *Arctic Cat* was only four lengths behind and charging hard. The other two sleds were barely visible through the swirling snow.

Focus! Ahead now lay a number of sharp bends, winding through a stand of stunted cedar and spruce trees. *Focus!* He took another quick look in the mirror. Lance was still four sled lengths behind him.

Alex swung the snowmobile onto the right hand side of the track, punching the brake sharply as he entered the first bend, then as he turned with it, hit the accelerator. He felt the back end of the sled swing out, catch and then shoot ahead. He veered to the left, catching the next bend in the same way . . . suddenly Lance was in his mirror, close and visible through the blowing snow - right on his tail. Alex swung the machine back to the right and pushed the accelerator down to the bar.

I'm not going to make the same mistake I did with Johnson, he thought. To beat me Lance is going to have to be better than me - that's the only way!

More bends, then a couple of straight-as-an-arrow runs through a stand of tall red pine . . . Johnson's new helmet was fantastic at helping him see the trail, but even so, the driving snow made visibility beyond more than fifty feet impossible. Alex knew that he would now have to stay particularly alert for snowmobiles on the course ahead of him.

It seemed only a few minutes had passed before he was shooting by Joel's house and out onto Lake Kenogami. It was on this two mile stretch down the lake that he began to overtake the first of the sleds that had started ahead of him.

Perseverance! Perhaps Agnes was right about its importance. Focussing his concentration on the snow-blown trail before him was critical.

He knew Lance was still there - right behind him. He didn't have to look in the mirror, or hear the roar of the *Arctic Cat's* motor. He was always there - matching him move for move - never far behind.

Keep him behind! He eased the sled more to the centre of the course.

When they swung into Collier's Bay, the tips of the *Arctic Cat's* skis were striking the back tread of Alex's sled. Lance's screams rose above the roar of the motor and the whistle of the wind, but every time he tried to pass, Alex moved a fraction of a second before his adversary, keeping him in second place.

Alex launched his sled up the shoreline and past Johnson's cabin. He could see Johnson standing in the doorway, barely visible in the driving snow. He gave Alex no sign of recognition, no wave, nothing. Despite himself, Alex grinned.

The two snowmobiles roared through the clearing and into the gap between the trees on the far side. There, the trail seemed dramatically narrower, but perhaps it was only because Alex had gotten used to the wide open spaces of the lake.

The next couple of miles was marked by a series of small knolls or moguls. Alex knew that the trick to the moguls was to catch them just right, so that your treads didn't bog down when you landed. He loved this part of the course - it seemed he was always airborne.

He could now really feel Lance's rising panic. It was evident in the way the other boy swung back and forth from side to side on the trail, trying desperately to pass. Still, Alex was able to manoeuvre a fraction of a second before Lance and block his route.

A particularly large mogul rose suddenly out of the storm and Alex hit it perfectly, rising

to his feet and hanging onto the handlebars for dear life. The sled soared through the air like a kite, hanging for an eternity before crashing back to earth. A wild exhilarating thrill rushed through him as the huge cloud of snow blew up around him like an exploding bomb.

A gold coloured sled suddenly appeared on the course ahead of them - dead centre in the narrow path. Alex swung hard to the left, passing the other snowmobile so close to the trees that he was whipped by the branches of a large spruce. For a split second his fingers eased up on the accelerator, just for an instant, while he veered around the other sled and regained the trail . . . He glanced to his right . . . Lance was right there beside him! Alex felt his heart sink.

Lance must have squeezed by the other sled on the opposite side, and instead of slowing as Alex had done, accelerated, catching Alex napping for one fatal instant.

He groaned - Lance's machine now protruded a few feet in front of him, and the finish line was almost in sight. *Focus!* For one brief second he had forgotten Johnson's most important lesson, and because of it he had lost the race. He knew there was no way to gain back those few precious feet, not in a straight-out sprint to the finish line with Lance's powerful machine. The sleek *Arctic Cat* was now a good half length ahead as they roared into the final stretch.

It was at that instant that he heard Agnes' voice inside his head - it was so clear that he could have sworn she was right there beside him. *Keep things in perspective, Alex! Even if you lose the race, the world won't come to a screeching halt!* He edged the last bit of juice out of the *Polaris*, standing and leaning out over the windscreen - gaining back a couple of feet. Through the swirl of snow, a mere hundred yards ahead of them, he caught a glimpse of the finish line.

A glimmer of hope rippled through him as he gained a few more precious inches. They were now dead-even - neck and neck! Perhaps the race was not lost after all.

He glanced over at Lance. The other boy was looking straight at him, his pale blue eyes blazing out from under his visor. Never had Alex seen such a look of pure desperation - and he knew instinctively that Lance would stop at nothing to win. The eyes mesmerized Alex. He was sure that Lance was going to do something . . . Suddenly the *Arctic Cat* veered toward him, shooting across the trail and slamming into the side of his machine.

Alex managed to stay on his feet, bracing himself on the running boards as the two machines roared neck and neck toward the finish line. The *Arctic Cat* swung back over to the opposite side of the trail, then in a heart-stopping second it once again hurtled toward the

Polaris. Alex hit the brake so hard he was almost pitched over the wind screen in front of him. The *Arctic Cat* shot past him, disappearing off the course and into the trees in a huge cloud of snow. Immediately Alex punched the accelerator, his heart pounding wildly . . . his hands shaking.

The finish line flashed by in a whirl of snow. He had beaten Lance Higginson.

Epilogue

The evening sun dipped ever-so-slightly behind the western shores of Lake Kenogami casting the wilderness in shadows. Clarence, Johnson and Jess Wheeler lounged comfortably in the Flynn's living room, looking out over the lake and darkening sky.

An awkward silence had settled over the little group as they sipped the hot apple cider prepared by Mary Flynn. Alex felt the same sense of emptiness that had taken hold of him on the day of the race. He had never really expected to beat Lance, let alone win the Thunder Rally - and now that he had, the feeling of elation somehow eluded him.

Joel sat beaming across from him, his broken leg propped on a footstool. The battered cast now covered with signatures. "I doubt if Lance will ever be the same," he said for the third time, laughing.

"That was a real good piece of driving at the end," Jess Wheeler said. "Mr. Johnson taught you well."

"From what I hear, you did stay focused, at least for the most part," Johnson admitted. "Too bad you're heading back to the city tomorrow, you still have a few things I'd like to work on."

Joel gave his friend an exaggerated wink. "Be careful, Alex. He'll have you racing in the *Indianapolis 500* before you know it."

Johnson glanced out the corner of his eye at Joel. "Maybe I could work on your friend here. He's got some potential from what I seen."

Joel laughed. "As soon as I get this cast off, I'll be coming by, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson rose from his chair. "Time to go home."

Alex extended his hand to his strange benefactor. "Thanks for everything."

"I think I'd better get going, myself," Jess Wheeler said, turning to Clarence. "Do you want a ride home?"

Clarence shook his head. "Thanks just the same, but I've got to drive my sled back. In the meantime I'm just going to let my supper settle for a few more minutes . . . maybe have another piece of that cherry pie . . ."

Alex and Joel followed their guests to the door. Alex, felt his spirits sink even lower as

he wondered whether he would ever see his two friends again.

As soon as Johnson and Jess were gone, Jack Flynn shooed the two boys back into the living room. “You fellas can go and visit some more with Clarence,” he suggested. “We’ll finish up the supper dishes.”

Alex and Joel returned to the sofa across from Clarence. The old man was sunk into the plush cushions of the arm chair, the picture of relaxation.

“Thanks for letting me use your snowmobile earlier this week, Clarence,” Alex said.

Clarence smiled. “That’s quite all right. But I’m afraid you probably spoiled her.”

“It’s been a great Christmas vacation,” Alex said. “I’ll certainly never forget it.”

“Oh, this was nothing,” Joel said. “You’ll have to come back in July. You should see this place in the summer!” He paused, giving his friend a puzzled look. “How come you’ve been so quiet since the race? Anyone looking at you would think you’d lost.”

Alex shrugged. “Sorry,” he apologized. “This week’s been really awesome, and I guess I’m just sorry to see it end. I have a whole jumble of confusing thoughts bouncing around in my head right now.”

“That’s understandable,” Joel said. “You went from a snowmobile novice to a racing champion in one week.”

“Well,” Alex said, embarrassed. “Except for Lance, the competition wasn’t all that fierce. You’d have really cleaned up out there.”

“Say, Joel,” Clarence said, straightening. “Would you mind making me a cup of tea? And while you’re there, how about rustling me up another piece of cherry pie. I think I may need a little pick-me-up before heading for home.”

“Sure.” Joel pushed his way out of the armchair. “I’ll be back in a minute.” He hobbled out of the living room.

Alex studied Clarence nervously, bracing himself for some sort of lecture or pep talk.

“I needed to talk to you alone before you left for home,” Clarence finally said. His brow furrowed as he looked intently into Alex’s eyes. “I guess you’re trying to put everything from the last couple of weeks into perspective aren’t you?”

Alex hesitated for only a moment, then nodded. “I can’t stop thinking of Agnes, and what she said about keeping one’s priorities straight. When I think of her I can’t help but feel

this whole racing thing isn't all that important. I know I'm going to be facing challenges everyday of my life, and I guess I'm just wondering if I'll even be able to figure out which ones are worth putting an effort into."

"The race was important," Clarence corrected. "It taught you a great deal about perseverance, didn't it? You took all of the things that Johnson taught you and put them into practice perfectly. These two weeks were an unforgettable experience for all of us. And you know, I think it may have been especially good for Lance to be humbled the way he was. He didn't only lose the race, but was disqualified for trying to run you off the course. It's important we take advantage of the lessons that life sends our way, and trials like this have a way of putting things into focus."

"Keeping things in their proper perspective was what Agnes' values were all about, weren't they?" Alex asked, a little afraid of intruding in Clarence's private world.

"That's what she was all about," Clarence agreed. "For instance, in the final straight stretch when Lance tried to force you off the course - think of what would have happened if you'd hit a tree going seventy miles an hour!"

"It makes winning a race seem pretty unimportant," Alex agreed. "They might have had to ship me back home in that long box Johnson has in his cabin."

"That's right," Clarence said with a chuckle.

"I wish I could see things the way that Agnes did," Alex said. "I'd like to be sure of where I'd end up if I ever do run into a tree. Sometimes I think I do see, but it's like a shadow. I can't quite grasp it."

"Nothing could be easier," Clarence said. "You just have to stop trusting in yourself and trust in someone else."

"That would be Jesus," Alex said. "Is He . . . uh, like feeling someone is right there beside you, an arm on your shoulder?" He had felt that feeling.

"That's right. Remember when Johnson started coaching you? You didn't think you had a chance of winning the race, but gradually, one step at a time he made it possible for you to succeed."

Alex nodded.

"Well, that's a lesson on what it's like to trust Christ for eternity. You commit yourself

to him one small step of faith at a time. The stakes don't get any higher than this because we're trusting him with our eternal destinies. We need to tell him that we're sinners and we need him to be our Saviour. So you see, it's very easy - but on the other hand, if you're not ready for that kind of commitment, it's so hard it's impossible. You'll know when you're ready, Alex. No more shadows."

"I just want what Agnes had," Alex said simply.

A smile creased Clarence's lined face. "Well, why don't you just bow your head and I'll lead you in a short prayer."

As Alex bowed his head he heard a shuffling noise at the living room door and knew Joel was returning. Now he knew why Clarence had sent Joel away. A feeling of nervousness swept over him and he briefly considered postponing his decision - waiting until later when Joel wasn't around, but he set his mind and repeated Clarence's words inviting Jesus into his life as his Lord and Saviour.

When he looked up, Joel and his parents were standing there.

Mary Flynn smiled broadly. "I'm so glad you've made that decision," she said. "It's the most important one you'll ever make." She glanced at Joel hopefully and then looked away, before he could notice.

Joel set Clarence's tea and cherry pie down on the end table and returned to the chair across from Alex with his own piece of pie. "Well," he said a bit flippantly. "I guess Agnes has her convert. Her work is finally done. Right now my work involves tackling another piece of Mom's cherry pie."

Clarence looked at Joel in surprise. "Well, I wouldn't say her work is completely finished by any means," he said, his eyes narrowing.

Joel sank back into his chair and grinned at Alex. "I suppose it will be just a matter of time before I get on the band wagon too."

Clarence's face grew serious. "You know they say that people react differently to God's love. It's kind of like the sun. The same sun will melt wax, but harden clay. For some, the longer they put off a decision to accept God on his terms, the harder their hearts become. There may never be another tomorrow."

Joel leaned forward and looked Clarence straight in the eyes. "Unlike my good friend

here,” Joel said, “I’m not quite ready to make that big a decision.” The grin returned to his face. “But when I get a little older, Clarence, who knows, maybe I’ll take the plunge. It doesn’t sound like much fun for a young guy.”

Outside, the blizzard had long since passed and another cold winter night closed in upon the northern forest. A gust of wind picked up a handful of snow and blew it against the window of the Flynn living room. Far out in the darkness a lone timberwolf howled up at the rising moon, grateful for its strange, lonely life and for the wild, frozen wilderness that it called home.