



**Wilderness**

**Pursuit**

**Nathanael Reed**

# *Wilderness Pursuit*

*BY*

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## Chapter 1.

### Claim Jumpers.

A lone canoe slipped between the stands of timber lining the narrow river. Two canoeists were bent over their paddles, perspiration from the hot July sun coating their faces and arms. Desperation lined their features - an odd contrast to the serene wilderness surrounding them.

“Rapids!”

The lead canoeist back-paddled furiously as the current swept the frail craft around a sharp bend in the river and into the mouth of a foaming sweep of cataracts. “Make for shore.”

Both canoeists strained on their paddles, manhandling the bucking craft through the rock-strewn river.

“Look out!”

In less than a heartbeat, the canoe slammed into a partially submerged log and shot skyward, rotating slowly before crashing to the river - bottom-side up.

Karla Turnbull felt a surge of panic as water streamed into her wide-open mouth. She thrashed desperately, the current swallowing her, dragging her helplessly into the choppy maelstrom.

She drew a ragged gasp of air, careening round and round, brushing and bumping . . . The back of her head cracked sharply against a piece of granite. Lights and stars flashed before her eyes, then everything went black. She sagged into her life jacket, her face bobbing in and out of the water as a heavy darkness closed in around her.

She was only faintly aware of two stocky arms hauling her through the water . . . of air being squeezed back into her water-soaked lungs. Gradually her breathing returned.

“I’d better drag our canoe back here and see what’s left of our supplies.”

Karla opened one eye a crack and followed the path of her brother down the shoreline. She pulled herself up and leaned against the trunk of an immense jack pine. A hundred feet downriver her rescuer dragged their runaway canoe through the shallow water.

Joel was a year older than Karla, yet despite sharing the same parents, the two could hardly have been any more different: Joel, with his straight, black hair and stocky physique - the stern, serious lines of his dark face . . . quite a contrast to Karla’s fair complexion and slight build. And it was hard to find anyone in the whole world as quiet as Karla’s older brother.

Karla closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath of warm summer air.

“We’ll rest for a few minutes,” she heard Joel say. “But not for too long. He can’t be far behind!”

*A few minutes . . .* Karla looked up over the narrow river and nodded weakly. *Just a few minutes.* The hours of paddling had reduced her to feeling like she was about to burst out shaking from exhaustion. Her arms were as limp as strands of spaghetti. Her entire body was numb.

Home now seemed light years from the fast currents of the Timberwolf River. It didn’t seem possible that only a few hours earlier, she and Joel had climbed aboard a dilapidated bushplane and flown straight north into the absolute middle of nowhere.

Their dad, Jim Turnbull, had arranged the flight. “Come on up and spend the weekend. No roads. No people. Just three days of fishing in the middle of nowhere. Pickerel, pike, trout, whitefish . . .”

Karla hadn’t seen her dad since Easter. Their parents had been divorced back when Joel was a baby - yet two or three times a year their dad would drop them a line and invite them to come up north for a few days. The last couple of summers Joel had stayed for several weeks.

Karla rested her head against the trunk of the huge evergreen and looked up into the cloudless sky. Her mind returned to their early morning plane ride. She could almost feel the vibrations of the sleek Cessna aircraft, as they soared over the endless northern forest. Just two hours by air and they were circling their dad’s fishing camp.

“There’s dad’s cabin,” Joel had said, pointing to a building on the west end of the lake.

“Great spot,” the pilot agreed.

“Yah. More than a hundred miles to the nearest person.”

“Well, not quite,” the pilot said with a laugh. “Your dad does have a few neighbours in these parts. Probably none that he brags about too much, though.” The roar of the plane’s engine filled the cockpit as the pilot brought them in for a landing. “This’ll have to be a fast drop,” he shouted. “I still have to make it up to Moosonee this afternoon.”

The pilot eased the plane into a small dock. A stocky man in a red plaid bush shirt emerged from the cabin, a stone’s throw back from the shoreline.

Joel heaved open the airplane door and jumped out onto the pontoon.

“Your dad’s stuff is in behind the back seat,” the pilot said, cutting the motor. “Make sure you get it all. I’ll be back for you on my return leg Monday morning.” He watched as the two

travellers unloaded the supplies onto the dock.

“Now why is he just standing up there like a stump?” Joel glared up at their dad, still waiting in the doorway of the cabin.

“Probably has lunch on the stove and is afraid he’ll burn the place down,” Karla suggested with a grin.

Joel brushed his hands on his jeans and gave the pilot a quick wave. “Okay that’s it, Hal. See you Monday morning.” He pushed the plane away from the dock.

The motor caught, then roared to life. Joel and Karla retreated a few steps as the plane accelerated across the lake, then rose into the morning air.

“It’ll take more than one trip to get all this stuff up to the cabin,” Joel complained. “Especially if we don’t get some help.” He heaved a heavy packsack up onto his back and started up the trail.

Halfway up the incline, Mr. Turnbull moved out onto the front steps and gave a slight wave. Even from the distance, Karla could see that with each passing year, the resemblance between her father and brother grew more and more striking - the same broad chin and nose, the dark skin and black hair. A couple of the older man’s features, though, seemed out of place that morning - his mouth, for instance, was drawn into a strait line; his eyes screwed almost shut.

“That’s far enough!”

Karla and Joel came to an abrupt halt, a piece of luggage toppling to the ground. Karla glanced up at the cabin.

A thin, pinch-faced man; about sixty-five years old, and dressed like a woodsman elbowed their dad aside. He levelled a rifle in Joel and Karla’s direction, waving it menacingly.

The sudden appearance of the old man had barely registered on Karla before a third person stepped out. The newcomer was short and barrel-shaped - a stark contrast to the gaunt-looking old-timer.

“Howdy.”

Karla started. It was a woman! A great, huge woman with a sawed-off shotgun tucked under her arm.

Joel turned to his dad. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry I couldn’t come down and give you a hand,” Mr. Turnbull apologized. “But now you can see why. I was hoping old Hal would stop by for a coffee.”

“So these are your kids,” the huge woman said in her booming voice. “Cute kids, huh George?”

The thin man shuffled over to where Joel was standing and jabbed the rifle into his ribs. “You better behave young fella.”

Before Joel had a chance to open his mouth, the woman motioned them into the cabin with the barrel of her shotgun. “You kids come on up here while we get things straightened out.”

Karla and Joel dropped their luggage inside the door, and then were herded over to a table in the middle of the kitchen.

“Sit down,” the old man commanded.

The woman set her shotgun down by the sink. “I’ll brew up some tea. George, you can let Jim’s kids know what’s going on. I’m sure they’re mighty curious.” She brought a large tin can down from above the stove, and dropped a couple of tea bags into a nearby pot. “Jim, why don’t you make the introductions?” She nodded in Mr. Turnbull’s direction.

“Well, I’m sure I’d be honoured,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Kids, meet a couple of my more ornery neighbours, George and Clarabelle Duncan - they arrived just before you got here. The Duncans have a camp a few miles west of here. George and Clarabelle - I’d like you to meet my children - Karla and Joel.”

As Karla stepped forward to shake George Duncan’s hand, she felt something crunch beneath her foot. She glanced down at a tangled mess of tubes and wires.

“Watch out for the radio,” George said with a cackle.

“What happened to your radio, Dad?” Joel asked.

“Must’ve fallen off the table, by the look of it,” George Duncan said.

“George had a little accident,” Jim Turnbull explained.

Clarabelle Duncan plopped a pot of tea and several cups down on the table.

“Drink up. I’ll see if I can find some grub around here.”

Jim Turnbull poured himself a cup, watching the Duncans out of the corner of his eye.

“George was just about to explain what he, Clarabelle and their guns were doing here when your plane interrupted us,” Jim Turnbull said. “Busting in with guns is serious business. You two have always been a little hard to get along with, but never so downright obnoxious.”

A toothless grin widened the face of the older man. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Wouldn’t you like to know!” His voice rose in the small confines of the cabin. “Well you’re

gonna find out soon enough, alright. Ain't that right, Clare?"

"Oh quit your teasing George. Go ahead and tell them now."

The old man cupped both hands around his mug of tea and leaned across the table.

"Well, okay, Clare." His eyes darted among his listeners.

"You know why Clare and I moved up here back in '72 don't you?"

Jim Turnbull and the others stared at the speaker vacantly.

"Gold. To find gold, you dumb clucks. Didn't you know that? I'm a prospector - and a pretty good one, too."

Jim looked at George Duncan with a perplexed expression. "This isn't real good gold country, George. I knew you were a prospector, but I figured you'd given it up. Don't see you out on the claims much - haven't for years."

"Well now that is a fact. Trapping is what's kept the wolf from the door this past while, but I still keep my hand at it, you know. Still keep a sharp look out for the glitter, for that old teaser - that old devil . . ."

"And so now you're back at it?"

"You bet. But not gold, my friends - diamonds." He chuckled softly and glanced over at his wife for support.

"Diamonds?" Karla questioned. "I thought diamonds were only found in South Africa."

"No," her dad disagreed. "They've made some fairly big finds up north recently."

"Now that's a fact alright, Girly," the old man said, reaching into his jacket pocket. He fumbled around for a few seconds then very slowly drew out a small cloth bag. Karla found herself leaning forward as the old man set the bag down on the table in front of them and then silently undid the drawstrings. He then turned the bag upside down in the palm of his right hand. A multitude of tiny pieces of glass-like particles glittered in the light as the old man held it up before them. "Diamonds," he said in a quiet voice.

There was silence around the table. They each studied the diamonds in disbelief.

"A pile of diamonds like that would be worth quite a bit," Jim Turnbull finally said.

"That's what I figure, too," George Duncan said with a nod. "And this is just the tip of the iceberg, my friends. Oh, they're still rough, haven't been cut or nothing, and they're tiny - but like you say - they're worth something."

Jim Turnbull shook his head slightly and pushed back from the table. "So what do we

have to do with all this?"

"Well that's the dirty dickens of the whole blasted thing, Jim. You see we got some real good showings this spring - real good, but consarne everything if the best showings ain't over here on your land."

"On my land?"

"That's the fact! That's the squirrely dickens of it. On your land! Oh there's some small traces on our claims too, but dad-blast-it - if the best showings ain't right over there, 'bout a quarter mile behind this very cabin."

Joel turned to his dad. "Do you have the mineral rights?"

"Well now I didn't when I bought the place, but about a month ago, when I got wind that some mining companies were doing exploration work to the south of here, I staked all of my land - just in case."

"Ain't that just our luck though," George agreed. "A few weeks ago and the whole kit and caboodle would have been ours with no complications. Now look at the mess you're in."

"The mess *I'm* in?" Jim Turnbull said.

"Yah. 'Cause I know for a fact that you ain't been to the Mining Office to register them claims yet. Called the office on my radio. Mine ain't busted!" He nodded over to another two-way radio on the table in front of him. "So when I found out you hadn't got around to registering your claims, well I went right out there and restaked them all myself! Then I took all your claim posts and tags and buried them in a deep hole!" He chortled, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "So now all I have to do is get to the Mining Office in Telluride and register the claims for myself."

"Is that right, Dad?" Karla asked.

"Oh it's legal alright," the old man interrupted, leaning across the table. "Strictly legal - least as far as the government people are concerned. His word ag'in mine."

"So," Joel said. "You're here to make sure that my dad doesn't get to the Mining Office to register the claims before you do. Is that it?"

"That's so, boy. A pal of mine is flying in here this afternoon to take me into Telluride. That way I can get the jump on your pappy here and tie up all the mineral rights. After that - well it's his word against mine . . . and the missus. You kids just had the bad luck to land right in the middle of our little enterprise."

## Chapter 2.

### Costas.

George Duncan pushed himself back from the kitchen table.

“Sorry I had to bust up your radio, Jim,” George apologized, retrieving a green packsack from beside the stove. “I just couldn’t have you using it for the next day or two.”

A silence filled the room as George carefully pulled himself up to the battery-powered radio transmitter on the table. He unrolled a spool of fine copper wire, attaching one end to the back of the radio and the other end to the rafter overhead. He then leaned forward and flipped on the mike switch.

“Hello, Costas. Come in, Costas.”

He waited for a moment. “Costas. This is Duncan. Over.”

There was a pause as all eyes in the room fastened on the radio. Suddenly it crackled to life. “This is Costas. Speak to me, Duncan. Over.”

Karla shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The radio transmitter’s tinny speaker did little to disguise the raw power of the voice on the other end.

“Everything’s running smooth down this way,” Duncan continued. “Can you come over later this afternoon - say about three? Over.”

There was another pause.

“I already half way there now. I be there in a few minutes. But you better not mess up, Duncan. I don’t take good to people who mess up. Over.”

“No problem.” George Duncan grinned sheepishly. “See you in a few minutes. Over and out.” He flipped the *OFF* switch. “He must have his radio with him in the canoe.”

Jim Turnbull shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re linked up with a nutcase like Herman Costas.”

George shrugged his shoulders, glancing across the table to his wife.

“Who is this Costas guy?” Joel asked. “He sounds a little bent out of shape.”

“Herman Costas lives on a connecting lake just south of here,” his father explained. “And he *is* a mean one. In fact, most people go out of their way to avoid him - don’t they George?”

The little man grinned weakly. “He’s our new partner,” he explained. “We’ve been

prospecting together for the last few months. It was Costas who suggested we switch from gold to diamonds. I guess he heard about a big strike just southeast of here.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting into, George,” Jim said. “This guy wouldn’t think twice about slitting your throat and leaving you for the crows - and for a lot less than diamonds.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, Jim,” Clarabelle Duncan said. “We always keep one eye open around that old grizzly bear. He’s only gonna fly into Telluride with George. Once they return tonight, he’ll crawl back into his little shack, and you Turnbells can go on your merry way. In the meantime, we can’t have you running loose and getting into trouble, can we?”

George glanced at his watch. “Might as well keep the radio handy. Mackenzie Hullihan will be flying in here this afternoon to pick us up. I’m supposed to confirm our pick-up time with him in fifteen minutes.”

Jim Turnbull stirred in his seat. “Well, if you folks don’t mind, I’ll get Karla and Joel settled in. We shouldn’t let this spoil the fishing we’ve planned.” He rose from the table with a long lazy stretch. “Karla, can you and your brother help me lug the rest of those supplies up here?”

George Duncan lifted the barrel of his rifle in Jim’s direction. “Go ahead, but stay where I can see you.”

Jim Turnbull led the way out the front door and into the warmth of the late morning sunshine.

“Gonna be a beautiful day,” he said, lowering his voice as they reached the spot where the rest of their supplies were piled on the dock. “We gotta do something before Herman Costas gets here. That guy’s crazier than a cantankerous wolverine. The Duncans are nuts to get mixed up with someone like that.”

“What are we going to do?” Karla asked.

“Listen - two things are going to happen this afternoon. Number one, Costas is paddling down from his cabin and will be here shortly; secondly, a plane is going to land here at three o’clock to take George and Costas to Telluride - we’ve got to prevent that. If we’re not out of here when Costas arrives, we’re all up the creek. No telling what he’ll do.”

“How do we stop the plane from coming to get George?” Joel asked.

“The radio,” Karla answered. “We’ve got to contact the pilot on George’s radio before he confirms the pick-up. Then we’ll get in touch with your pilot friend, Hal, and tell him to get

down here and fly us out!”

“No way Hal can get us,” Mr. Turnbull said, shaking his head. “He’s already halfway to Moosonee by now. He won’t have enough gas to turn around, pick us up and get us out.”

“Is there another plane within radio range?” Joel asked.

Jim Turnbull shook his head. “No. George’s friend, Mackenzie Hullihan, is the only one anywhere near here.”

Karla rummaged among the baggage with an eye on the cabin. George was still standing in the doorway, rifle crooked under his arm. “Why not just ask Hal to pick us up later today?”

“Too dangerous with Costas around.”

“Could we meet Hal somewhere else - like on a nearby lake?”

Jim shouldered a large wooden crate. “Not a bad idea, but this is the only lake around here big enough to land a bushplane.” Mr. Turnbull glanced at his watch. “Anyway, our first priority is keeping George from confirming his pick-up time with that pilot. And he’s calling in about ten minutes.”

He adjusted the large box and started slowly back up the path to his cabin with Karla and Joel at his heels - their arms filled with supplies. “If I take care of George, can you two somehow manhandle Clarabelle - without getting filled with buckshot?”

Joel nodded. “We’ll give it a try.”

“Good, but be careful.”

Jim Turnbull staggered up the front steps, the wooden box teetering precariously on his shoulder. “Watch out, watch out,” he shouted, pushing past George. His breathing was coming in loud gasps. “This is heavier than I thought.”

He wove across the cabin floor, dumping the crate down from his shoulder with a crash. Clutching his chest, he wobbled drunkenly to the kitchen table. “Clare - get me a drink of water. My heart’s acting up.”

Clarabelle Duncan’s eyes grew wide. She turned to the cupboard and picked up a mug.

George sprang into action. “Here, Jim, sit down.” He pulled a chair out from under the table. “Sit down - quick.”

Jim Turnbull swayed over to the table, clutching at his chest and gasping loudly.

“Thanks, George.” He reached for the chair, almost falling into the side of the table. In the same stumbling motion, his big right hand shot out. He grabbed George roughly by the

shoulder, and pulled him across the table. The rifle clattered noisily to the floor.

Clarabelle turned from the sink, pausing for an instant as she took in the scene before her. In that half-second Joel was across the room and on her, yanking the shotgun from the crutch of her arm.

Karla swooped over, picked up George's rifle from the floor and pointed it at the Duncans.

"Appears as if the tables have turned," Jim Turnbull said, pulling George back to his feet.

"Aw now, that wasn't fair, Jim." George complained. "We was concerned about you. We thought you was havin' a heart attack." George rubbed his shoulder, and glanced over at his wife. "No need to be so rough, neither. We didn't hurt you none."

Jim Turnbull's face grew red as he glared at the older man. "George - do you know what you've done - bringing Costas in on this! Did you ever stop to think that the guy's probably wanted by the law - that's why he lives up here." He pulled the radio toward him and flipped it on. "What frequency is your pilot tuned to?"

George muttered the number of the frequency, and sagged wearily into a nearby chair.

"Now you say what I tell you to, George," Jim Turnbull said with a growl. "You gotta tell this Hullihan guy that he doesn't need to come and get you after all. You've had a change of plans. Got that? Foul up and you'll have more than a bruised shoulder."

George nodded, slumping in behind the radio mike. He leaned forward. "Hello, Hullihan. Come in. Over."

There was a crackle and faint hiss from the radio.

"Hello, Hullihan. This is George Duncan. Do you read me? Come in. Over."

The receiver gave off a loud burst of static. "Mackenzie Hullihan here. Go ahead, George. Over."

"Hello Mac." George paused and looked up at Jim. "Look, Mac, a little change of plans. I don't need you to pick me up today after all. Probably later next week. Okay? Over."

There was another pause before the radio crackled back to life.

"I booked your flight for this afternoon, George. I was counting on that trip. Now what am I gonna do? Look, I'm sick and tired of these short notices, George. This ain't the first time you've conked out on me at the last minute! Well, I ain't picking you up no more. This sort of thing costs me plenty. You get yourself another plane from now on, George - okay. Over."

George looked sheepishly over at his wife. “Yah, sure Mac. Sorry about that. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Right! As soon as you cash in those diamonds, eh. Well I ain’t holding my breath. Over and out.”

George clicked the *OFF* switch.

“Why don’t we have him pick us up?” Karla asked.

“That might be a possibility,” her dad said. “But first let’s deal with Costas. We’ve got to get rid of him.”

“Can’t we call the police?” Joel asked. “They could fly in and get us out.”

“Good idea - we’ll give it a try.” Jim Turnbull turned back to the radio.

Suddenly George Duncan’s arms shot out. He caught the radio transmitter in his scrawny grasp, picked it up and hurled it against the wall of the cabin. Parts flew everywhere.

“No police!” George wailed. “Can’t have no more police.”

Karla stared at the remains of the radio, scattered before them. A silence filled the room.

“Well,” Clarabelle drawled. “You got that right. There sure won’t be any police now. Not for awhile anyway.”

Jim Turnbull sprang to his feet and drew Karla and Joel with him to a desk by the window. He slid open the drawer and pulled out a map.

“Here’s what we’ve got to do.” He lowered his voice, while keeping an eye on the Duncans. “We’re going to have to make a run for it down the Timberwolf River to Telluride. We can contact the police there and register my claims. He pulled several documents from his desk. “It’s straight forward trip downriver - you’re riding with the current. But it’s tough. It’s at least three days paddling on a fast river - lots of rapids,” He traced the course of the river for his two children. “What do you think? Are you up to it?”

Joel took the map and slid it into his back pocket. “No problem.”

Mr. Turnbull drew Karla and Joel through the front door, leaving it ajar so they could still keep an eye on the Duncans. “Joel - Karla and I will collect enough supplies for three days - an axe, matches, compass, food. We’ll need sleeping bags and a tarp in case it rains . . . While we’re getting things together, Joel, you scoot down to the dock and paddle the canoe around that little point into the bay.” He pointed through the trees to a spot hidden from the cabin. “We’ll take the trail through the bush and meet you there in ten minutes. We’ve got to hurry, though.

Costas will be here any time.”

Joel sprinted off down the path to the lake while his dad and sister ducked back into the cabin. Jim Turnbull quickly threw together their supplies, while shouting orders to Karla over his shoulder. Finally, he straightened and looked over to where the Duncans sat.

Karla came up beside him. “I suppose the Duncans will tell Costas that we’ve gone down the Timberwolf,” she said in a low voice.

Mr. Turnbull smiled. “The Timberwolf’s the only way out of here. When Costas sees the canoe missing, he’ll know exactly what happened.”

Karla could feel a large lump forming in her throat.

“We’d better get going.” Jim Turnbull threw a packsack over his shoulder, picked up George Duncan’s rifle and swung the door open.

“You’re not gonna leave us here with that madman,” George Duncan wailed.

Jim Turnbull shrugged as he stepped through the door. “Your fault, George,” he said over his shoulder. “See if you can talk your way out of this one.”

Suddenly there was a crack and a sharp buzzing sound. Karla flinched. The window beside her head seemed to explode, showering glass all over the inside of the cabin.

“Look out!” Jim Turnbull dropped the packsack and pushed Karla back into the cabin. In the same instant they heard a second crack. Mr. Turnbull gasped and fell sideways into his daughter, his momentum carrying them both halfway across the room. The Duncans were already on the floor, George covering his head with his bony hands. Jim Turnbull scrambled to his feet. “George - you and Clarabelle had better head for the hills. Your friend Costas has arrived.” He looked down at his right shoulder. A dark stain was already spreading across his shirt.

Karla scampered across the room in a crouched-over position. “Dad. Are you alright?”

Jim Turnbull nodded grimly. “It’s not bleeding much. I’ll be okay.”

Another shot exploded through the same window.

“Let’s go.” Jim Turnbull led the way out the back door and down the path through the woods. Karla kept as close as she could until they stopped in a small grove of birch trees.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Karla asked.

“Never mind,” her dad said. “I’ll be okay.” He pointed through the trees. “We’ve got to leave the trail. The canoe’s through there - in a little cove hidden from the rest of the lake. It’s

only a stone's throw from the mouth of the Timberwolf River.”

Karla could see the water glittering through the trees a hundred feet away. A feeling of panic surged through her. “He can't be far behind, can he?” She glanced over his shoulder.

Jim Turnbull pushed Karla ahead of him. “Hurry.” They sprinted the last few feet to the shoreline. Joel stood by the canoe, staring in disbelief. “What happened?”

“Just get going.”

Joel hesitated long enough to allow Karla to leap over the side of the canoe and take her place in the prow. “Aren't you coming?” Joel asked his dad.

“I'd only slow you down,” Mr. Turnbull said, nodding at his shoulder. “You two get going. I'll see if I can throw a monkey wrench into our friend's plans.” He motioned to the rifle in his left hand. “Hurry up.” He pushed his son gently toward the canoe.

With one last faltering glance at his father, Joel stepped over the gunwales and eased the canoe away from the shoreline.

## Chapter 3.

### Fire

Karla leaned back against the tree and sucked in another long breath. The warmth of the afternoon sun felt good against her face. She glanced down at her soaked clothing, and then over to Joel, who had pulled the canoe up on the shore beside her.

“Looks like most of our stuff is okay,” Joel said, tossing the paddles back into the canoe. “The sleeping bags will take awhile to dry, though, even in this heat.”

“How far behind do you think Costas is?” Karla asked.

“Hard to say. He might be just around the last bend, or he could be still back at Dad’s cabin.”

Karla got to her feet and examined their waterlogged equipment. She shuddered despite the warmth of the July sun. “What do you figure he’ll do if he catches us?”

Joel shrugged his big shoulders. “Are you ready to get going?”

Karla stared out over the narrow, fast-flowing river and drew in a deep breath. “Just before we hit those rapids, I was thinking that things couldn’t possibly get any worse.”

“Oh, the sun will dry you out soon enough.”

Joel pushed the frail craft out onto the water and held it steady while his sister hopped in. “We’ll stop for a bite to eat in another hour or so. There’s still about four hours of daylight left.”

Karla scooped up her paddle. “Let’s hope there’s no more fast water for awhile.”

Joel settled into the stern and pulled the topographic map from his back pocket. He spread the soaked chart out in front of him.

“Can’t depend on this map for much,” he said. “Those rapids weren’t even marked.”

“How far to the next set?”

Joel spanned a section with his fingers. “About ten miles.”

“Maybe we should portage next time.”

“We’ll get close and take a look,” Joel suggested. “That way we’ll know how bad they are. Probably be a good place to stop for dinner, though.”

The late afternoon sun scorched Karla’s back. *Dip, pull, dip, pull . . .* The palms of her hands had long-since been rubbed raw, her shoulders throbbed with pain.

“I wish we’d thought to ask dad for a rifle,” Joel said.

Karla nodded glumly. Thank goodness for Joel, she thought. As long as Joel was with her, even a guy like Herman Costas didn't seem as scary. With extra long hours in the canoe they ought to be able to stay ahead of Costas - even if they had to keep going day and night to do it.

"What's that?" Karla pointed to the northern skyline before them.

"Looks like smoke," Joel said, resting his paddle on the gunwales.

The thin wisp of grey smoke seemed to grow before their eyes.

"Forest fire," Joel said simply.

"A forest fire!" Karla echoed. "How far away is it?"

"I'd say about twenty miles," Joel said, still studying the horizon.

"Is it near where we're heading?"

Joel glanced up at the sun's position, and then down at the map.

"It appears that the river runs northeast from here, which is precisely where that fire seems to be."

Karla felt her heart race. "We'll be safe out here on the river, though, won't we?"

Joel glanced at the shoreline, only fifty feet away. "In a big fire it's not usually the flames that kill you - it's the smoke. The flames suck the oxygen out of the air, making it impossible to breathe." He dipped his paddle back into the water. "I wish this river was a bit wider."

"What do we do?" Karla's eyes widened as the black smoke continued to fill more and more of the afternoon sky.

"Well, we have four choices, I guess," Joel said matter-of-factly. "Costas certainly complicates things . . ." He let the canoe drift for a moment, pondering their options.

"We could stop right here and wait for the fire . . . or for Costas - whichever gets here first - that's one possibility; or we could beach our canoe and head back to Dad's cabin by land - we'd miss Costas, but it would be slow going - lots of swamp and thick bush - and what's worse, the fire would probably catch us; thirdly, we could turn around and start back up the river - take our chances with Costas - but we'd also be going against the current and would have to portage around those rapids we just passed through." Joel paused and studied the horizon.

"You said there were four possibilities," Karla reminded him. "What's the fourth?"

Joel turned and met his sister's gaze. "We can keep going - run straight through the middle of the fire."

Karla reached for her paddle. She could feel her heart racing. Her mind was a total blank

as they swept swiftly down the river toward the billowing clouds of smoke.

“Rapids should be right around this next bend,” Joel announced.

They could hear the sound of the rapids even before the jagged rocks and eddies appeared.

“We’d better make for shore,” Joel suggested. “It sounds like a big one - probably a long portage.”

“We gotta be quick.” Joel beached the canoe and hopped into the shallow water. “Maybe we can reach the fire before it gets too bad.”

“Let’s get this equipment out of the canoe. We’re going to have to take more than one portage by the look of it,” Joel said.

“What if we just leave some of our stuff here?” Karla suggested.

“No. We’re going to need our food and supplies. We’ve still got a couple more days on this river - but I’ve got an idea.”

He pulled a small axe out of his packsack. “I’m going to fix up a little travois to help cart our stuff. I’ll cut a couple of poles. You spread a sleeping bag out on the ground - then we’ll zip the sleeping bag up around the poles and presto, a first class travois. All we have to do then is pile our stuff onto it and pull the whole load down the trail. You can drag the travois while I carry the canoe. That should save us returning for half our supplies.”

Karla unzipped one of the sleeping bags and stretched it out while Joel began cutting down a small spruce tree a few feet away. With four swift blows of the axe, the evergreen crashed to the ground at Joel’s feet. The silver blade gleamed menacingly in the fading sunlight as Joel attacked the base of another spruce. “Are the supplies loaded?”

In the space of a heartbeat, while his words still hung in the hot summer air, the blade rang sharply off the trunk of the tree. Caroming downward, it sliced into Joel’s leg just below the knee.

Karla watched in horror as her brother collapsed into a heap on the forest floor, clutching frantically at his bloody leg.

## Chapter 4.

### The Gauntlet.

Karla stood paralysed with shock as she took in the scene before her.

“Karla! Give me your belt,” Joel said.

Karla dropped to the ground and pulled out her jackknife.

“That’s what happens when you talk too much,” Joel said with a groan.

“Never mind. It doesn’t look too bad.”

She cut the pantleg off at the knee, revealing a large ugly gash in the fleshy part of Joel’s calf.

Dark red blood bubbled out of the wound, already forming a small pool in the leaves beneath his leg. She could feel her heart give a frantic lurch within her.

“We’ve got to stop the bleeding,” Karla said, leaning forward and peering more closely at the wound. “There seems to be some dirt in there too. Probably from your jeans or the axe.”

She drew his belt under the leg and pulled both ends toward her, adjusting the length before cutting a notch so it could be tightened directly over the wound.

“That should slow things down a bit,” Karla said, ripping a strip of cloth from the bottom of her T-shirt. She carefully wrapped the makeshift bandage and pulled it tight. “Keep the leg as straight as possible,” she suggested. “Shouldn’t be much of a problem in the canoe, but it’ll be tough on this portage - no way you should be walking.”

“The bleeding seems to be slowing down,” Joel said, loosening the tourniquet. “We’d better get going. Each passing minute brings Costas that much closer.” Joel pulled himself over to the trunk of a large birch tree and leaned his back against it.

“I can haul you over the portage on the travois,” Karla said, getting to her feet. “I’ll lug the canoe over first.” She heaved the front of the canoe off the ground and began dragging it down the trail, being careful to watch out for sharp rocks jutting out from the path.

Although the trail twisted and turned through the woods like a garter snake, it was wide and mostly downhill. The trickiest part for Karla was keeping from tripping over the many roots and branches which criss-crossed the surface of the path. To her immediate right the river cascaded noisily down the narrow gorge.

“One step at a time,” she muttered grimly. “I can’t count on Joel’s help now. I’m on my own.”

She turned the thought slowly over in her mind as she moved down a small incline. *On my own!*

Finally she rounded a curve in the trail and stumbled the last few feet to the water's edge.

"That canoe must be waterlogged," she mumbled, rubbing her aching arms. "Thank goodness it wasn't any farther."

Karla's second trip with Joel on the travois was much slower than her original headlong flight with the canoe. Making it even more difficult were the many supplies which had to be packed around her brother. The rest she hoisted onto her back.

Ever so slowly she threaded her way through the forest, dragging the travois, keeping an anxious eye on her brother's ashen face.

At the end of the portage Karla eased Joel into the middle of the canoe, then reexamined the bandage to make sure the bleeding hadn't started again. She glanced nervously at the horizon before settling herself in the stern. The smoke was more noticeable now - a great, towering shroud of blackness billowing high above the trees on the northern horizon.

"We'd better grab something to eat," Karla suggested. "There's some dried moose meat in the green pack sack. We can eat on the way."

Joel pulled two long strips of meat from the canvas sack and handed one to his sister.

The moose meat had a tangy, wild taste. "How far now, Joel?"

"Less than ten miles, I'd say."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Well, we're running with the current, and the fire seems to be heading this way . . . so unless the wind changes direction, we should hit the worst before the hour's out." He lay back down on the bottom of the canoe and closed his eyes.

Karla's brow furrowed as she studied the horizon, her paddle moving the canoe forward for the ten thousandth time that day. "This moose meat's good," she finally said, popping another piece into her mouth. "Tastes spicier than beef."

Joel nodded weakly, his eyes closed.

"Look." Karla pointed to the shoreline on their right. A mother bear and two cubs stood in the shallow water, watching as the canoeists swept by.

"Not a good sign," Joel said. "The fire must be swinging in from the west. The animals are being driven to water."

He reached over and pulled a T-shirt from one of the small duffel bags. "Soak your shirt

in the water and wrap it around your mouth when we get close,” he said. “The next half-hour may be touch-and-go, especially if the fire’s right up to the river. Breathing through our T-shirts should help.”

The sky continued to grow darker. Wisps of smoke drifted through the trees and soon hung in low-lying clouds over the river. The great blanket of darkness drew ever nearer.

Karla was the first to notice the water-bombers in the distance. The bushplanes seemed to resemble low-flying blackbirds, dipping in and out of the clouds, swooping down to drop their loads of water and then quickly disappearing into the distance.

“Maybe they’ll see us,” Karla said as one of the planes came within a mile or so of their canoe.

“What can they do even if they see us?” Joel asked.

“If Dad got through to them on Costas’ radio - they’ll know we’re on the river. They could send a chopper to pick us up,” Karla said.

“There’s no choppers up this way.”

Suddenly an ear-shattering roar split the air. A great twin-engined Otter roared directly over them, banking sharply to its left, then climbing labouriously into the sky. The wings of the plane waggled back and forth as it levelled off and disappeared beyond the trees.

“Well, they know we’re here,” Joel said. “The pilot was saying hello.”

Karla watched longingly in the direction the plane had disappeared.

“Okay,” Joel said, struggling to sit a little straighter. “Looks like it’s a worse-case scenario. The fire’s right up tight to the riverbanks, so we’re going to have to shoot the flames - just like we shot those rapids. The faster we go, the better our chances of surviving. Wet your T-shirt and get ready.”

Joel straightened himself and picked up a paddle. “I should be good for a few minutes.”

Karla tied the T-shirt around her face, her heart pounding fiercely.

“I’d say the next few minutes will be the worst,” Joel said through the damp cloth.

Great sheets of orange flames now licked angrily above the tops of the trees lining the river. The cracking and roar of the growing inferno seemed ready to swallow them. Everywhere the air was filled with debris, floating on the currents of smoke and ash, drifting over the river and slowly enveloping the canoeists in its suffocating darkness.

“Get ready!” Joel shouted. “Paddle like you’ve never paddled before.”

Karla stuffed part of the soaked T-shirt into her mouth. The thick air already burned her lungs, scorching her breath. She gasped, trying to hold her breathing while she dug her paddle hard into the water and pulled with all her might.

“Oh, God,” she prayed to himself. “Help us through . . . There’s no air to breathe.” With a slow, sinking feeling, she knew for a certainty that they weren’t going to make it.

Suddenly a terrific roar filled the air, tearing down at them from just over their heads. Karla pitched face-first into the bottom of the canoe. In the same instance a great cascade of water poured down on them and on everything else in that immediate area. Karla scrambled back to her knees, shielding her eyes as she peered through the thick mist which now covered them. Two huge Canso water bombers roared over their heads just above the level of the trees, one on each side of the river. Even as the canoeists watched, the planes disappeared into the black smoke, wagging their wings.

“Wow!” Karla shouted.

“Keep digging!” Joel yelled. “They’ve given us the break we need. Let’s take it.” The canoe surged forward.

Again the air was breathable - just when it seemed that they would surely strangle. The water dumped from the planes had not only killed the flames in their immediate vicinity, but it had also pushed some badly-needed oxygen down to the surface of the river.

“We’re almost through,” Joel shouted.

Sure enough, although the air was still choking, it had cleared ever-so-slightly. The shorelines on both sides of the river could now be distinguished.

“We did it,” Karla said.

Slowly the canoe emerged from the thinning grey cloud.

“Okay, let’s rest for a minute,” Joel suggested, pulling the T-shirt away from his face and sampling the air.

They slumped to the bottom of their canoe, coughing the last of the smoke from their scorched lungs.

Karla felt totally spent. Her arms lay at her side like wet dishrags.

“Those water bombers saved us, didn’t they?”

“Reckon they did,” Joel agreed. “Pinpoint timing. Dad was right when he said that those pilots are the best in the world.”

Karla glanced at the riverbanks on either side of them. “Good grief,” she gasped. “Look!” Her brother lifted his head and peered through the wisps and clouds of smoke that hovered around them.

The only thing left of the once-beautiful forest was a charred, black ruin. The ground . . . the trees . . . even the rocks were burned to a black crisp. Not a leaf or a pine needle remained. Smoke curled from the tall, naked sentinels that once fringed the shoreline.

“Everything’s destroyed!” Karla moaned. “Everything’s gone.”

## Chapter 5.

### From the Shadows.

The two canoeists surveyed the destruction in silence.

“Not much left is there?” Joel said, tossing the paddle into the bottom of the canoe.

“No more paddling for you,” Karla said, studying Joel’s pasty, grey face.

“I won’t have to.” Joel said with a grimace, his eyes tightly closed. “You should be able to handle things from now on. With luck our miserable prospector friend won’t make it past that fire.”

Karla shuddered as she took up the paddle.

“I’d forgotten about Costas.”

“Think you can keep going for another hour or so?” Joel asked.

Karla nodded wearily.

“We’ll have to start again before dawn. It’s the only way we’ll stay ahead of Costas. He’s got to rest sometime too.”

Karla surveyed the desolate riverbanks as she settled back into the routine. The once-majestic evergreens were now black, fire-charred, and limbless, casting their ghastly silhouettes against the evening sky. To the south, the faint sounds of the water bombers could still be heard, droning endlessly in and out of the fire zone.

Slowly the time and miles crept by. Each paddle stroke now become a painful ordeal - aggravated by ten million mosquitos which descended with the twilight.

The landscape’s gradual transformation from fire-ravaged wilderness to green forest seemed to take forever. First tiny oases of vegetation appeared amidst the desolation - areas the fire seemed to have forgotten. Then the oases became more plentiful and larger, until finally the canoe swept into an area which the raging inferno hadn’t touched.

Karla felt her spirits lift as they glided silently through the tall stands of evergreens.

“I’m going to beach the canoe up there.” Karla said, nodding to a rocky point jutting out into the narrow river. It’s getting too dark - we might hit a deadhead or something in the water.”

She guided the canoe into shore, then helped Joel over to a spot under a small grove of cedar trees.

“A little bannock and tea would really hit the spot about now,” Joel suggested. “How

about gathering up some firewood and getting supper going - the smoke should help keep the mosquitos away.”

While Karla got a small fire started, Joel mixed together some flour, water and lard, making a doughy mess. He then took a handful and carefully patted it around the end of a stick.

“Bannock,” he said with a grin, holding the concoction a few inches above the flames. “Don’t make it too thick or it won’t cook through all the way.”

“How much farther do you figure it is to Telluride?” Karla asked a moment later as she sampled some of the freshly-baked bannock.

“We should be there about this time day after tomorrow,” Joel said.

“Yuch,” Karla grimaced. “This is pretty brutal tea.”

Joel opened the bandage covering his leg and examined the wound.

“Is it bleeding?”

“Nope. It appears to be a bit redder than it ought to be, though.”

Karla scooted over for a look, frowning as Joel dabbed the leg with a wet cloth.

“We’ll have to watch for infection,” Karla said. “I wish we’d brought along some disinfectant.”

“Well, I’ll keep the leg as still as possible from now on.”

The campers ate the rest of their dinner in silence, studying the forest around them in a growing stupor.

To the south, great clouds of black smoke were still visible, even in the darkness, and as night approached the flicker of orange flames danced afar off in the fading light.

“What if the wind shifts?” Karla asked, finishing the last of the bannock. “Will the fire come back this way?”

“Naw,” Joel answered. “Too much burned timber between here and there. In fact, if the wind shifts, the fire will die a quick natural death.”

Karla felt her mind gradually clouding as the warmth of the campfire and the hours of exhausting exercise caught up with her. Her head nodded, her eyes grew increasingly heavy. Finally she tossed the remainder of her tea into a nearby bush and stretched out on her sleeping bag, pulling it up around her head to keep the insects at bay.

“Phew,” she said. “These things really smell like smoke.”

“I’ll wake you up in a few hours,” Joel said. “And I don’t want any complaining when

you see that it's still dark.”

Night stole down on the forest, covering the campers with a canopy of stillness. A great yellow moon rose from the tree tops to the east of the river, gliding silently across the black sky until its reflection shimmered on the surface of the water.

Karla stirred in her sleeping bag and looked up into the starry night. She could hear the gentle lapping of the river a few feet away, and knew that it was the same body of water that carried their enemy northward and ever-closer.

What would a man like Costas do if he were to catch them? She shuddered slightly. The terrifying face of Costas seemed to loom out of the night before her.

“Hmph,” she grumbled to herself. “How do I know what he looks like? I’ve never even seen him.”

The night sky darkened suddenly as the moon slid behind a summer cloud, and the night drifted on ... moment by moment, hour by hour..

At some point in the night Karla rolled over in her sleep, dimly aware that all was not as it should be. Her eyes snapped open and she stared blindly into the blackness. At her side, where Joel lay, there was not a sound.

“Joel?” She whispered.

“Shh!” It was her brother.

Karla craned her ears. What was it that had awakened her? There wasn't a hint of sound in the night air. Even the bullfrogs and crickets went silent as she and Joel listened.

She watched as Joel pulled himself awkwardly from his sleeping bag and got stiffly to his feet.

“What is it?” Karla whispered.

“Don't know,” Joel answered. “Did you hear anything?”

“No. It feels weird, though - like someone's out there watching us.”

Far off in the forest an owl hooted, the sound echoing hollowly.

The fire had long since gone out, and Karla shivered in the cool night air. “We might as well get an early start,” Karla suggested, rolling up her sleeping bag.

“What time is it?” Joel asked.

She shrugged. “Get your stuff together - hurry.” A chill passed through her body. She pulled an extra shirt out of her pack sack and put it on.

“You cold?” She whispered.

Joel ignored the question.

Karla pushed the canoe back out onto the water and climbed in behind her brother.

A moment later Joel lay sprawled among their supplies in the middle of the canoe, exhausted. Even in the chilly darkness Karla could see a thin film of perspiration beginning to form on his brow and face.

“You okay?” She asked. “You look feverish.”

Joel nodded. “I’m okay. Just get paddling. And keep a watch out for rocks and deadheads - we don’t want to hit one in the dark.”

“Don’t worry.” She paddled in silence for several minutes. “You figure there was something out there watching us?”

Joel grunted.

“You think it might have been Costas?”

“Not likely. I doubt if Costas would be sneaking around the bush waiting to do something - he’d just do it!”

“Who was it then?”

Joel pulled a sleeping bag up around his chin. “Maybe an animal...”

Karla eyed the nearest shoreline as she paddled.

“Or it could have been a wendigo,” Joel said suddenly. “Who knows?”

Karla’s paddle paused in mid-stroke as her brother’s words sunk in. “A wendigo?” she repeated.

“According to the Ojibwa in these parts, the wendigo is a spirit beast.. Supposed to be a great cannibal. Preys on the lost and stupid. Dad used to tell me stories about him.”

“Come on,” Karla said with a laugh.

Joel stirred uncomfortably, glancing briefly at his sister. “Don’t laugh. Who knows - they could be real.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Karla resumed her paddling. “Sounds like some kind of a ghost story.”

A tremor suddenly passed through Joel’s body, and his face constricted.

“You okay?” Karla asked.

Joel nodded again. Karla could see the beads of cold sweat now caking his forehead.

She turned her attention back to paddling, glancing uneasily around her. Why was it that she still had the overpowering feeling that they were being watched? She strained her ears but the dipping of the paddle and the light slapping of waves against the shore were the only sounds she could hear in the early morning darkness.

## Chapter 6.

### Dark Waters.

The blackness of early morning faded ever-so-gradually. A thin line of light appeared on the eastern horizon, then slowly worked its way into the darkened sky.

Although grateful for the welcome light of dawn, the dampness chilled Karla to the bone. Her fingers felt like they were still frozen to the paddle, her arms dead. At her feet, Joel stirred restlessly in his sleeping bag, trembling periodically.

“Six o’clock.”

Joel groaned softly in his sleep, rolling his head slowly from side to side.

Karla leaned forward and felt her brother’s forehead. As she did, Joel’s eyes opened. He stared vacantly at his sister.

“Costas?” Joel said, his eyes growing wider.

Karla shook his head. “No. It’s alright. He hasn’t caught us yet.” She drew the sleeping bag back from Joel’s leg and unwrapped the cloth bandage.

“It’s bleeding again,” Karla said, gently dabbing the area around the cut. The edges of the gash were now inflamed and swollen. Another tremor racked Joel’s body.

Karla looked up from her unconscious brother. What was it lately about their surroundings that made her feel so uneasy? Surely Costas was still miles behind them, especially at the pace they had kept. Yet she could not shake the unsettling feeling that they were being watched. She shook off the feeling and began packing their supplies.

By the time the sun rose over the trees on the eastern bank of the river, they were back out on the river. Just before noon Joel stirred and slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, his eyes glazed; his face flushed.

“How are you feeling?” Karla asked.

Joel shook his head, and lay back down, staring up at the cool blue sky.

“I think I’ve got a fever.”

“We’ll stop in a few minutes,” Karla said. “I need to stretch my legs.”

Joel nodded. “You’re doing great.”

“We’ve got to get you to a doctor, Joel. I cleaned your leg the best I could, but . . .”

“I know,” Joel agreed with a slight nod.

“How are you holding up?” Joel asked.

“I guess this is where we find out what we’re made of,” Karla finally said.

“Remember when we used to go to Sunday School?” Joel asked, closing his eyes. “Our teacher used to quote that verse from the Bible about one who sticks closer than a brother - remember that?”

Karla looked puzzled. “Why are you quoting the Bible? You’re not going to die.”

Joel shrugged, nestling down against the sleeping bag. “I don’t know. I just remembered that verse from Sunday School. It made me feel good.”

Karla reached down and patted Joel’s shoulder. “That’s good.” It had been awhile since he’d seen her brother smile - and the effort made her feel more confident. “I suppose so.”

Joel suddenly turned his head and looked right at Karla.

“Somebody’s right on our tail, Karla - he’s been dogging us since we made camp last night.”

Karla’s paddle paused midway through a stroke. She turned and scanned the river behind them and then the shoreline.

“Oh he’s keeping out of sight, but he’s there. I can feel him.”

“Costas?”

“No. Like I said before, if old Costas catches up with us, he’ll probably take a more direct approach.”

The noon sun was high above the trees on the east of the river before they found a suitable spot to beach their canoe and set up camp.

Joel slept most of the time now. His red and swollen calf was hot to the touch, and his eyes were even more glazed than before.

Every muscle and bone in Karla’s body screamed out as she rose from the campfire and stretched. Her head was heavy with fatigue, her mind cloudy.

She glanced over to the canoe where Joel slept. How much further did they have to go ‘till Telluride? Tomorrow afternoon? The next day? Her dad had said it was three days hard paddling. And it sure had been hard paddling . . . She pulled the topographic map out of a packsack and spread it out on the ground before her.

There had to be something between here and Telluride. She studied the map carefully, her finger tracing the course of the Timberwolf River. Nothing - just a few old mine workings -

abandoned by the look of them. No nearby lakes - nothing! Nothing but bush, bush, and more bush.

She pulled a small frying pan and several strips of bacon from a packsack. Soon the odour of crackling bacon hung tantalizingly in the air.

Karla sagged to the ground and lifted a piece of bacon to her mouth. As she did, she sensed a slight movement to her right. She turned slowly . . . fringed by the branches of a great spruce tree stood a tall thin figure, a double-barrelled shotgun hanging menacingly from the crook of his right arm.

The piece of bacon slipped from Karla's fingers and dropped silently to the forest floor. The tall figure stepped silently from the trees, carefully pulled back both hammers of the shotgun and levelled the weapon squarely at Karla's chest.

"Don't move," the stranger said in a quiet voice. "Don't even breathe hard."

## Chapter 7.

### Chance.

The stranger waved the shotgun in Karla's direction.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," he ordered in a low voice.

Karla rose from where she was sitting and held her hands out in front of her, palms up. The stranger's eyes seemed to bore right through her.

Karla was surprised to notice that the intruder wasn't much older than herself . . . He was tall and thin to the point of skeletal. An unruly head of dark red hair stood almost straight out from his head.

"What are you doing in these parts?" The red-haired boy asked. "And what's going on with him?" He pointed to Joel, still lying in the canoe. "Where are you taking him?"

Karla lowered her hands to her sides. "My brother cut himself yesterday with an ax. It's infected. I'm trying to get him to Telluride."

The tall boy kept his eyes fixed on Joel "You're trying to get him to a doctor?"

"Have you been following us?" Karla asked.

The stranger's face was expressionless. Finally, he nodded. "Did you start that fire south of here?"

Karla's eyes grew wide. "Of course not. We came through it, but I don't know how it started."

"If you came through that fire, you were mighty lucky." He lowered the shotgun and set the hammers back. "Sorry for the scare, but you can't be too careful in these parts - lots of strange characters go through here. I was afraid you'd started that fire. Good way to lose a tail, and you seemed in a big hurry."

"Do you live near here?" Karla asked.

"Not far," he answered with a shrug. "Your brother is going to need help before you reach Telluride. It's still two days paddling from here."

"Two days? You don't have a radio transmitter, do you?"

The stranger shook his head. He walked over to the canoe, laid his gun on the ground and felt Joel's wrist for a pulse. He then slipped out a broad-bladed hunting knife and carefully cut the bandage around the injured boy's torn calf. He studied the inflamed flesh for a moment.

“Where are you canoeing from?” He asked.

“Our dad has a cabin south of here.”

The newcomer proceeded to carefully rebandage the injured leg.

“We should try to clean that cut out some more,” he suggested. “I have some disinfectant back in my cabin.”

“That would be good,” Karla said. “But we’re in kind of a hurry.”

The tall, red-haired boy paused. “Suit yourself, but Telluride may be too late for your brother. He could lose his leg - or worse.”

Karla stirred uneasily at the unexpected prognosis.

“My cabin’s not far.” He picked up his shotgun and waited for a response.

Karla looked down at her brother, and then out to the river. She cleared her throat awkwardly. “There’s someone chasing us,” she finally said.

The stranger followed Karla’s gaze. “I thought so. Cops?”

“No,” Karla answered. “A guy named Herman Costas jumped our dad’s mining claims.” She grinned awkwardly, and then reached out her hand. “My name’s Karla Turnbull. This is my brother, Joel. We’re from Sudbury.”

The stranger shook Karla’s hand tentatively. “Name’s Smith,” he said. “Chance Smith.”

Karla nodded back at Chance. “I guess we’d better accept your offer,” she finally said. “We’ll have to take our chances with Costas.”

Chance broke a large branch from the far side of the spruce tree and walked over to the shoreline where Karla had beached the canoe. He began to sweep away all the telltale signs of them having been there. “Get rid of your fire,” he said. “My cabin’s just back of here - we can be there in a few minutes.”

Karla began kicking sand over the fire.

“Make sure the coals are all buried,” Chance suggested. “We don’t want a forest fire up this way.”

Karla dragged their canoe far back into the bush. When she returned, Chance was waiting patiently. A crude stretcher, fashioned from a couple of small trees and a sleeping bag, was propped up against a stump behind him.

The route to Chance’s cabin was little more than a series of gaps through the thick underbrush. In places the bush was so tangled that Karla was afraid Joel would topple from his

stretcher.

Finally they struggled up a steep slope and emerged into a small clearing. A log cabin sat alone in the middle of the open field.

“Cozy,” Karla said.

Chance grinned. “My uncle built it years ago. He was a trapper. This area was his trapping grounds.”

Chance set the stretcher down in front of the small building, opened the front door and led the way inside.

“I’ll get a lamp going,” he called out. “It gets pretty dark in here, even during the day.”

Chance struck a match and a dim glow soon emanated from the interior.

“Okay - let’s bring him in.”

The cabin was surprisingly neat and comfortable-looking. A bed, table, four wooden chairs, and a large cast-iron stove were the room’s only furnishings. Two small windows allowed some light, but this seemed to be immediately soaked up by the thick log walls.

“Let’s put him on the bed,” Chance said. “I’ll see if I can fix your brother up a bit first.” Chance got a first aid kit down from the shelf above the stove. “Why don’t you rustle us up some grub? There’s some dried meat and bannock in that tin box by the window.” He unwrapped Joel’s bandage. “And start a fire, I’m going to need some hot water.”

Chance carefully removed the blood-drenched bandage and swabbed the wound with disinfectant. Joel’s eyes sprang open.

“You’re awake,” Chance said.

Joel gazed blankly up at him.

“Hi, Joel,” Karla said. She motioned toward Chance. “This is Chance Smith. He lives here. He’s going to help us.”

Joel nodded weakly then closed his eyes. A few seconds later he was asleep.

“It’s a deep cut,” Chance muttered. “But the blade of the ax doesn’t seem to have broken any bones, which is amazing considering it seems to have glanced off his shin.

“I’m going to leave the bandage off for a while,” Chance explained. “That will let the air in - speed the healing. But I’m not sure how much good the disinfectant will do. He may need something stronger - like penicillin.”

He looked up at Karla hovering over him and got to his feet. “Have you eaten breakfast?”

“We were just starting to, when you turned up.”

“I haven’t eaten either. I’ve been too busy keeping an eye on you two.”

Within minutes they were digging hungrily into several large slabs of dried moose meat and bannock. A large kettle of tea washed the meal down.

“Do you live up here by yourself?” Karla finally asked.

Chance nodded. “My uncle’s in an old-age home in Telluride . . . He’s really my mother’s uncle, so he’s quite old.”

“Have you always lived here?”

“No. I started coming up a few summers ago to give him a hand.”

Karla smiled. “That’s what we’ve been doing - coming up here during the summers to visit our dad. How do you make your living? Do you still trap?”

“I trap some. Hunt . . . fish. I have a potato patch nearby.”

“Do you get into town much?”

“Now and then to pick up a few things . . . Sell my furs. Not often.”

“Boy, that must be neat,” Karla said with a shake of her head. “Imagine, being out here all by yourself . . . No one to tell you what to do. Sleep ‘till noon whenever you like.”

She looked over at Chance - he wasn’t smiling.

“So you say this Costas guy jumped your claims?” Chance asked.

“Yah - we’re trying to make it to Telluride to register them before he does.”

Karla looked over at Joel, and then back at Chance. “You know until you mentioned it just now, I had forgotten all about those claims.” She got up from the table. “We’ve got to get to Telluride before Costas, or he’ll register those claims for himself.”

Chance pushed back from the table. “How far behind do you think he is?”

Karla thought for a moment. “There’s no way of knowing for sure. Hopefully our dad was able to stop him back at the lake. Anyway, the worse-case-scenario means we probably have a couple of hours on him. He may have gained some, but we’ve been going very steadily.”

Chance glanced at his watch. “I’ve heard of Costas. In fact he’s gone by here now and then - I stay clear when I hear him coming.”

“*Hear* him coming?” Karla interrupted.

“Yah. He’s a real singer. You can hear him quite a ways off.”

“That’s what our dad told us, come to think of it.”

“Anyway, I remember my uncle saying that he’s a bad fella - real mean. But he can paddle a canoe. He’ll probably catch you before you reach Telluride - especially now that you’ve only got one paddler.”

Karla looked across at Chance. The colour had drained from his face.

From the bed on the other side of the room, Joel moaned quietly in his sleep.

## Chapter 8.

### Ambush.

Chance Smith rose from his seat and walked over to the window. He gazed out at the surrounding wilderness.

Finally he turned back to Karla. "If you can't outrun Costas, I'll bet we can outsmart him."

"Outsmart him?"

Chance glanced down at his watch. "If he survived the forest fire, he should be here before noon. Right?"

"Will he be able to tell we stopped here?"

Chance shook his head. "I doubt it. He'll be heading straight through to Telluride to register those claims. On the other hand - if he did catch up with you here, it would probably make life a lot simpler just to get rid of the both of you."

"Yes, but there's still our dad . . ." Karla reminded him. "Hopefully he can stop Costas."

"We hope."

Chance crossed the room and sat down at the table. "I think there's a way we can stop Costas before he gets to Telluride, but we'll have to leave Joel for a couple of hours."

"What do you have in mind?"

"There's a portage a few miles north of here. We'll paddle down there. It's a perfect spot for an ambush."

"An ambush?"

"A surprise party," Chance said mysteriously, getting up and clearing the dishes from the table. "For now, we'd better catch some shuteye. We'll leave in an hour. That should give us plenty of time to get back on the river before Costas arrives."

Karla stretched her tired arms, stifling a yawn. "That sounds like a great idea," she said. "I am tired."

"Grab a couple of blankets from the bed and flop down over there in the corner."

Within five minutes Karla was sound asleep. When she awoke about an hour later, she stared in confusion at the pole rafters above her head. Dark log walls rose all the way to the roof; to her right a huge wood stove loomed ominously. She scrambled to a sitting position, her

senses slowly returning. Never before had she felt such a bone-deep weariness. Her shoulders, arms, and hands - all ached dreadfully. Her head felt like it weighed at least a hundred pounds.

Chance banged in through the cabin door just then with his arms piled with firewood. "All set?" He asked, dropping the load in the wood box by the stove.

Karla threw back the blanket and climbed stiffly to her feet.

Chance sat down in the chair beside the bed. He felt Joel's forehead, then took his pulse.

"Where'd you learn all that?" Karla asked.

"Here and there. When you can't get to a doctor in a hurry, it pays to know a bit of first aid."

Karla looked at her host with a puzzled expression. At that moment Joel stirred and opened his eyes. He stared vacantly around the room. Finally he noticed Chance.

"We're going out for awhile," Chance explained. "We'll be back as soon as we can. I've put some water here on the chair."

Joel's eyes travelled down to the can of water. He nodded. "I'll be okay," he said in a raspy voice. "Be careful."

Karla joined Chance by the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Leg's burning like crazy and my head's real foggy."

"We put some disinfectant in your cut," Karla reassured him. "Maybe that's what's burning."

Joel nodded again and closed his eyes. "I'm so sleepy."

"You want a drink?" Karla asked.

Joel shook his head. "I'll get one later." A brief tremor shook his body.

Chance pulled the blanket up around Joel's chin. "Try to sleep until we get back."

Karla moved away from the bed. "What's the plan after we've dealt with Costas?"

"Well, you'll head for Telluride and register those claims yourself. I'll follow later with Joel. Don't worry. He'll be alright."

Karla scooped up her packsack and followed Chance out the door and down through the trees to the river.

For the next half-hour the tall, red-haired boy led the way down the river, setting a pace much like Joel had done before his injury. Before long Karla felt her shoulder muscles tightening and it was everything she could do to keep up with the other canoe. Beads of sweat

stood out on her forehead and bare arms as the late morning sun burned down on them. “Seems awfully quiet,” she finally said.

“The birds tend to quiet down during the heat of the day,” Chance explained. “They come out again just before supper.” He eased the pace slightly while Karla drew her canoe alongside.

“Why do you live out here all by yourself, Chance?” Karla asked. “You’re missing out on all kinds of great things. It must get lonely.”

Chance shrugged. “Sometimes it gets lonely,” he admitted. “But . . .” he paused. “It’s not always possible to get everything you want.”

A puzzled expression crossed Karla’s face. “Well there’s nothing keeping you here, is there?” she asked. “It’s a free country.”

“Maybe for you.”

Karla turned. “What . . . ?”

“Here we are,” Chance interrupted, pointing his paddle at a small point of land jutting out into the river. “Portage?” Karla asked.

“There’s some fast water up ahead and this is a good jumping-off spot.”

The canoeists hopped into the shallow water and pulled their canoes ashore. Karla surveyed a small clearing clustered about with stunted pine and cedar trees. A gap through the forest next to the river indicated the portage trail.

“Pretty spot,” Karla said.

“I’ll carry your canoe to the other side of the portage,” Chance said. “Pull mine up into the hollow behind those cedar trees and hide it good.”

Karla grabbed the prow of Chance’s canoe and skidded it across the clearing and into the dense cedar trees. She turned in time to see Chance disappear down the trail, an upside-down canoe hoisted over his shoulders. A few minutes later, with Chance’s canoe safely hidden under a pile of pine boughs, Karla swept the ground clean of all tracks. She then sagged to the ground and stretched out, her back propped against a large boulder.

“Why does Chance live by himself like this - as if he has no choice?” She wondered. “He must be in some kind of trouble. Why else would he stay up here in the bush all alone?”

Suddenly Chance burst through the trees. “Let’s go - hurry! He’s coming.”

Karla sprang to her feet and sprinted down the trail after Chance.

“How do you know he’s coming?” Karla asked as she drew alongside.

“I heard him,” Chance answered. “He’s a singer. Remember?”

The trail wove in and out of the trees, following the bends of the tumultuous river a few feet away.

“I wouldn’t want to try to shoot those rapids,” Karla said, glancing at the turbulent white water careening past them. “It looks pretty fast.”

Just then they rounded a corner, and the trail abruptly ended at the water’s edge.

“Where’s the canoe?” Karla asked.

“Right over there behind that big spruce.”

“How could you hear someone singing above those rapids?” Karla asked. “You’ve got better ears than Joel!”

Chance stepped off the trail and disappeared into a large, leafy bush. Karla followed, crouching behind the foliage as she studied the trail silently.

“I think I do hear something,” Karla whispered. “Sounds like someone hollering, or singing.”

“That’s him,” Chance said, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “Now I’ll fill you in on our plan.”

## Chapter 9.

### Target.

“Such a simple plan.” Karla shook her head, grinning with admiration.

“Let’s just hope he takes the portage in two trips,” Chance said. If he’s able to carry the canoe and all his supplies on one trip, well . . . I guess we’ll have to go with Plan B.”

Karla’s heart raced as she crouched behind the bushes a stone’s throw from the river.

“Once Costas goes by, I’ll return to the landing through the bush,” Chance explained, motioning to the trees behind them. “Remember - you’ve got to be quick, but be careful - you have to get back on the river and out of sight before Costas returns with his second load.”

Chance ducked. “Here he comes,” he whispered.

Karla’s first glimpse of the dreaded Costas caused her to break out into a cold sweat. Her heart beat a frantic tattoo as their enemy appeared no more than fifty feet away. An upside-down canoe bounced up and down on his shoulders; his singing reduced to the occasional grunt as he strode down the trail. Costas’ face was hidden inside the upturned canoe, but Karla could tell from his build that he was a large, powerful man.

When Costas reached the river he swung the canoe down from his shoulders and dumped it by the water’s edge.

“This is it,” Chance whispered, nudging Karla.

Costas paused for a second, stretching his arms out in front of him, flexing his fingers before he turned back up the trail.

“Thank goodness he’s taking two trips,” Karla said, crawling further behind the camouflage.

“Okay,” Chance said. “Let’s do it.” He turned and melted into the bush, heading parallel to the trail, in the same direction as Costas.

Karla waited until Costas has disappeared from sight, then sprang to her feet and sprinted across the clearing to where her own canoe was hidden. She dragged it out of the bushes and skidded it down to the river beside Costas’. Removing the hatchet from her belt, she leaned over the front of Costas’ canoe, and with several short, sharp blows, cut a gaping hole in the prow.

“That oughta do it!”

An overwhelming feeling of panic pushed every other thought from her mind. She

shoved her canoe out into the current and climbed in, pointing the prow at a bend in the river a hundred yards away. Only after taking a half-dozen strong paddle strokes did she chance a quick glance over her shoulder.

“Hey!”

Karla started at the sudden voice.

“Get back here!”

She glanced once more over her shoulder. Costas was standing on the shoreline, feet apart, watching the fleeing canoe.

“Almost there,” Karla gasped.

Trees were now shooting by a few feet to her left as she rounded the point . . . Just a few seconds . . . a few more paddle strokes and she’d be safely hidden from her pursuer. Suddenly there was a sharp crack from the shoreline, and then two more in quick succession. Shots! In the same instant she swept around the point of land and was hidden behind a large sandy riverbank.

Karla sagged backward with relief. Her hands trembled as she wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

She then realized that something was dreadfully wrong. The bottom of the canoe was awash in water. A fountain gushed through a large hole a few inches from where she sat, just at the waterline. A couple of feet forward on the other side of the canoe the frame was smashed where the bullet had exited.

How had the shot ever missed her? She shook her head in amazement, wiping her face with the bottom of her T-shirt.

Already the water had formed a pool about an inch deep. In all the excitement, she had not even noticed her knees getting wet.

She drove her paddle back into the water. “I’ve got to get to shore before it sinks.” She turned the canoe toward the opposite side of the river and pushed hard. Already the canoe was heavy and awkward, as water poured in.

She stole another quick, nervous look over her shoulder, as she manoeuvred the canoe alongside a large dead fall. She then jumped onto the old log, and pulled the canoe into the trees.

What a mess! The one bullet hole was large enough to stick three fingers through. Costas must have been using a high-powered rifle. A few inches forward . . . Karla shuddered

at the thought.

She studied the shattered canoe for several minutes. “What do I do now?” She wondered out loud. “I can’t go any further with this thing, and Costas is just a couple of bends of the river behind.”

Perhaps the pieces of broken cedar could be pushed back together . . . She tried, but it was hopeless.

“The whole frame is smashed,” She moaned. “I can’t even stick a rag into the hole to stop the leak.”

She leaned her back against a nearby tree and took a few deep breaths. “Maybe I can follow the shoreline into Telluride. But how long would that take?”

“Days,” she said simply. “Compared to canoeing, walking through this jungled mess would take forever.”

“The map!” She reached into the back pocket of his jeans. “I still have the map.” She spread it out on the ground in front of her. The map looked despairingly foreign until she was able to find her bearings.

“Here we are,” she said, pointing to a spot in the middle of the chart.

“There’s the rapids we just portaged.” She traced her finger along the blue ribbon until she reached a red dot with the word TELLURIDE printed in bold.

“Long way,” she said.

She was quiet for a moment, her brow furrowing as she again considered her options.

“I’ll have to go back to Chance’s cabin,” she finally said. “It probably won’t take that long, and I’m sure I can find it.”

“But what if Costas hikes all the way to Telluride through the bush? He’ll register those claims before I do.”

Maybe there’s another way. She bent over the map, tracing the course of the Timberwolf River, but this time studying the shoreline on either side. It was then that a peculiar symbol two or three inches to the west of the river caught her attention. She glanced down at the map’s legend.

A mine working.

She studied the spot more carefully. That old mine looks like it’s not that far from here - and look - a broken black line led from the old mine site. A trail led all the way to Telluride.

Could people still be living there? It hardly seemed likely, but even if no one did - she'd at least be able to follow the trail into town.

It was worth a try.

Suddenly from across the river she heard the crash of branches breaking.

"Costas," she muttered. "He must be following the shoreline."

She turned and peered through the bushes toward the river. "Or," she thought to herself. "He's come looking for me."

## Chapter 10.

### The Old Mine.

Karla froze as the crashing of underbrush across the river grew louder.

“He sure makes a lot of noise for a bushman,” she thought.

A brush moved slightly across the way. Every once in awhile the top of Costas’ head would appear from behind a bush or a tree. Karla sagged down onto the ground, leaning against an old birch. She reopened the map and studied it once again.

Perhaps there were buildings at the old mine - maybe even people. She perked her ears for sounds from across the river. If Costas couldn’t get his canoe fixed, he was probably stubborn enough to walk all the way to Telluride by following the riverbanks.

Should she try to make it through to the old mine site? What choice did she really have? She couldn’t follow the river - it would be too dangerous - Costas would hear her for sure.

According to the map, if she walked in a northeasterly direction, keeping the sun slightly to her right, she should meet up with the creek that the mine was on, then she could just follow it. As long as it didn’t cloud over, she should be able to get her bearings from the sun.

Karla picked up the small packsack and struck off through the undergrowth.

The terrain was as varied as the wild assortment of trees and plants that surrounded her. But every so often she would come to a stretch that was blessedly devoid of undergrowth - covered only by a sparse scattering of poplar trees.

The afternoon sun baked relentlessly down on the northern wilderness.

Five o’clock.

Back home, her mother would just be sitting down to supper. And how she longed for that small apartment back in the city - instead of this infernal forest that seemed to go on and on forever, being eaten by bugs, roasted by the sun, and having her feet soaked from the endless marshes.

Shortly after five o’clock she sagged onto a bare outcropping of rock and pulled the map from her back pocket. “I swear I’ve seen that clump of jack pine before,” she said, laying the map out on the rock before her.

“I can’t be going in circles?” She shook her head in frustration. “I should have come to that creek ages ago.” She glanced up at the sun. It was now to her left.

“Okay that way is west - the sun is setting. I’ve been heading northeast - which means I should have intersected that stupid creek hours ago.”

Where was she then? She poked her finger into the middle of the map. What can I use for markers? There’s nothing . . . No rivers, no streams, no lakes or mountains. Just mile after mile of bush.

“I’m lost.”

She drew in a large lungful of air and let it out slowly.

“So what do I do? I have no supplies - not even a can of insect repellent.” She opened the packsack and peered inside.

“I’m starved . . . ”

She closed the packsack in disgust. All it contained was her dad’s notebook, outlining the information regarding his mining claims.

“Well, I can always lap up some of the water in the bogs I’ve been splashing through all afternoon.”

She looked around her again - at the undergrowth, the marshlands.

She focussed her attention on the map and studied it intently for a few minutes. “I must have missed the creek by going too far north.” Her finger traced the thin blue line representing the creek. If she headed due west, she would still intersect that illusive sliver of water. Probably no more than two or three miles - only an hour or so.

Karla staggered to her feet, turning toward the setting sun. “Man, my feet are sore.”

The land seemed to rise steadily uphill, climbing into the more solid, barer areas where the going was easier.

“This is good,” Karla said to herself between steps. “I remember the map showing that the mine workings were at a fairly high elevation. This must be the right direction.”

Suddenly she came to a stop. Off to her right a high piece of land jutted out of the trees.

That had to be it - the height of land where the old mine is located.

The discovery filled Karla with renewed energy. Her feet seemed lighter, her mind clearer, her legs fresher. But the hill was farther away than it first appeared.

“Where’s the creek? I should have crossed it by now. I have to reach the creek before getting to the old mine.”

She looked up the nearby hill. “Well, at least I’ll be able to get a good look at the

countryside from up there.”

She pushed onward, dragging herself uphill through the forest until reaching a treeless area at the top.

Karla glanced around the clearing. No mine. But maybe there was nothing left of it. Why would there be a clearing up here unless someone cleared the bush out? She began walking around the grassy area, studying the ground, looking for any sign of the people who had once lived and worked in that small area.

The sun was just setting, and with it came the chill of early evening. A fire would be nice. She'd make a campfire and set up camp for the night over by that clump of trees. Did she have any matches? She rummaged through the duffle bag. Nothing.

She threw the bag back down on the ground, shaking her head in frustration. A slight movement in the trees to her right made every muscle in her body freeze. She eased himself back to her feet, straining her eyes through the brush.

Costas? Could it be him? Or perhaps it was a wild animal . . . a bear, or a wolf . . .

She looked around for a place to hide, but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. She was trapped!

## Chapter 11.

### All for One.

Karla scanned the clearing. She turned and sprinted toward a small clump of bushes a few feet away, diving into the brush and scrambling out of sight.

Who or what could it be? Could it be that Costas' game plan was the same as her's - trekking through the brush to the old mine site?

Karla parted the leaves and fixed her eyes on the far end of the clearing.

A moment passed, and then another. Suddenly the branches of an evergreen immediately in front of her parted and a solitary figure stepped into the clearing, hands on his hips, scowling angrily.

"Alright come on out - wherever you are."

Karla rose slowly to her feet, a sheepish grin on her face. "Hi, Chance."

"What are you doing here?" Chance asked in a loud voice. "I thought you'd be half way to Telluride by now."

Karla shuffled her feet awkwardly, "Costas shot a hole in my canoe."

Chance's eyes grew wide. "When I heard Costas shooting at you, I followed the shoreline for a couple of miles to see if you were all right. When you were no where to be seen - or your canoe - I figured you'd gotten away."

"I nearly did."

They paused awkwardly. Finally Karla asked, "What was Costas doing when you saw him?"

"Fixing his canoe."

"How'd you find me?"

"You wandered right by my cabin," Chance said. "I spotted your trail on my way back from checking some rabbit snares."

"How long ago was that?"

"Only a few minutes," Chance said with a grin. "My cabin's just back that way apiece. It's a wonder we didn't bump into one another."

Karla pulled the map out of her back pocket. "We can't be near your cabin," she said. "I've been going mainly northwest since leaving the river." She peered at the map for a few

seconds and then pointed to the mine in the middle of the map. "We're right here - according to the map."

Chance leaned over Karla's shoulder and studying the map. "That's the old Peacock Mine," he said with a snort. "It's been abandoned for years - nothing there." A faint smile crossed his face. "Which sun were you following, anyway - the one that sets in the east or the west?"

Karla's shoulders sagged. "I knew I'd gone too far."

"Too far!" Chance echoed. He pulled the map over to him and traced a line from the river to a spot several inches away. "You must have been going in a big circle, cause you're only a quarter mile from my cabin."

"Good grief," Karla murmured.

There was an awkward silence for a minute. "Oh well," Karla finally muttered. "It beats being lost, anyway."

Chance laughed. "Come on. Let's get you back home - my home that is. You look played-out."

Karla fell in behind her rescuer. "I was lost," she finally said. "And for the most part I didn't even know it."

She shook her head, trying to keep pace with Chance's long strides. For some reason the whole situation reminded her of the way his life had been going lately. "I can't believe how close I came to your place," Karla said as they emerged from the clearing.

"Maybe it's just as well you're back," Chance said. "Joel's not getting any better. I think the infection's really taken hold."

Karla followed Chance up the steps, kicking the dirt from her shoes as she entered the darkened cabin.

Across from them Joel lay in the room's only bed, propped up by a couple of pillows.

"Well," he said with a weak smile. "Look what the cat dragged in."

"Joel." Karla crossed the room to her brother. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, I hope you're not inviting me to a party this evening, cause I'm not quite up to it," he looked over to where Chance was pouring each of them a mug of cold water from a thermos.

"I thought I was going to have to amputate a couple of hours ago," Chance said over his shoulder.

"So how come you're back?" Joel asked.

“Costas shot a big hole in our canoe,” Karla explained. “And then I got turned around in the bush.”

“She got lost,” Chance corrected.

“I noticed an old mining camp on the map. I thought I could walk into town from there.”

Joel grunted. “You could have been killed,” His brow furrowed. “I’m real sorry for the mess I got you into.”

Karla flipped up the sheet covering Joel’s leg. His calf was still unbandaged. “It looks pretty red.” The gash was knitting together, but the calf was scarlet, reaching almost to the knee.

Karla placed a hand on her brother’s forehead and frowned.

“So what do you think?” Joel asked.

Karla straightened up, avoiding her brother’s eyes. “We’ve got to get you to a doctor, Joel, and right away.”

Chance joined them by the bed.

“The infection is spreading,” Karla said.

Karla drew the sheet back over Joel and straightened the blankets. Outside the sky was growing dark.

“We’re trapped,” Karla said. “If we try to get into Telluride now, Costas will shoot us full of holes.”

Chance turned to the kitchen shelves and brought down a few items. “First things first. You’ll be able to think better on a full stomach.”

Karla shuffled absently over to the table.

Chance began frying up some potatoes and beans on the old wood stove.

“What if Costas fixes his canoe?” Karla finally asked.

Joel glanced up at him from his bed. “Sounds like you chopped a pretty big hole in it. Of course he might have a few tricks up his sleeve for emergencies like that. Sometimes a rock will punch a good hole in a canoe and I’ve seen Dad fix that up real quick.”

“If he does get it patched up,” Karla said. “We could put Joel in Chance’s canoe and follow Costas into Telluride.”

Joel and Chance stared at Karla for a few seconds, considering her suggestion.

“We’d have to keep well back.” Chance finally said. “If we happened to catch up to him by accident, we’d be in deep trouble.”

Karla cleared her throat. "It may be our only chance to get Joel to a doctor in a hurry."

"I'll be okay here," Joel said weakly. "At least for a day or two."

There was an awkward silence while Chance ladled out several large spoonfuls of fried potatoes. "Dig in, Karla." He stood by the table watching Karla eat. "I think you could get Joel into town safely - if I came along"

Karla felt her eyes widen. "You'd come with us?"

"I did manage to tail you guys for quite awhile without you knowing it," Chance said. "I'm sure I could help you sneak by that singing fool."

Karla stirred uneasily in her chair. "Speaking of you tailing us - if Costas senses someone's on his trail. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Well we've got to decide," Chance said. "Are we going to make a go of it or not? It'll be a rough ride for Joel"

Joel peered over at them through narrow slits of pain. "No foolish chances. That's all I ask."

Karla looked out the window, over the darkening treetops and into the black night sky. "We've got to try," she said. "We've got to try."

## Chapter 12.

### The River.

Karla shivered uncontrollably in the early morning chill. She blew into her hands, then pulled her shirt collar closer to her ears. From her spot on the porch, the tree line was barely visible in the darkness.

Her sleep had been filled with nightmares. She'd been lost and wandering through a snake-filled swamp. And she'd kept going in circles - the trees getting taller and growing closer together, the ground becoming more and more swampy.

Karla cleared her head with a shake, swatted at an early morning mosquito, and shivered. "Are you all set, Chance?" she asked, poking her head back in the cabin.

Chance set the kerosene lantern down on the table and beckoned Karla over to the bed. In his right hand was a makeshift stretcher.

"Too bad we couldn't have left earlier," Karla said, studying Joel's flushed face.

"That would have been ideal," Chance agreed. "But we don't want to bump into Costas. This way we can probably stay behind him.

"Help me get Joel on the stretcher," Chance said. They positioned the stretcher on the bed beside Joel, then gingerly lifted him onto it.

"All set?" Chance asked, hoisting a packsack onto his back.

Karla nodded wearily. "Let's go."

"Just a second." Chance retraced his steps back to the stove, reached up and brought down his hunting rifle. He lay the gun on the stretcher beside Joel

Karla eyed it cautiously. "I hope we don't have to use that," she said.

"I don't plan on getting close enough to Costas to exchange shots," Chance said.

"We oughta reach the landing by first light," Chance said, picking up his end of the stretcher. "I'd hate to meet up with that man in the dark."

Negotiating their way down the darkened path with a heavily-laden stretcher was an almost impossible task. Roots and rocks seemed to reach up from the forest floor to hamper Karla's every step.

The morning sky was already showing the first signs of dawn when they arrived at the river. Karla flexed her arms gingerly as Chance uncovered his canoe and dragged it down to the

waterfront.

“Nothing like a little exercise to warm you up,” Karla remarked.

“That’s for sure,” Chance said with a grin. “Is Joel still asleep?”

Karla nodded. “Let’s just keep well back from Costas.”

“He’s probably still at the landing where we left him,” Chance said, dropping his packsack into the front of the canoe. He pushed the prow out into the current. “Either that or he’s already got his canoe patched up and is back on the river.”

They moved their unconscious companion into the middle of the canoe.

“We’ll paddle as far as where we left him yesterday, and then play it by ear.”

A light mist seemed to hang over the darkness as they slipped through the waters. Karla glanced at the opposite bank. She could easily throw a rock from one shore to the other. She shuddered, remembering Costas’ high-powered rifle. All around them, the forest lay silent in the still morning air. Only the quiet dipping of their paddles, and the faint chirp of a bird or insect disturbed the solitude.

“How far to where we left Costas?” Karla asked in a low voice.

“Half hour.”

“Then what?”

A pause. “If he’s back on the water - we trail him.”

“Won’t that be kinda dangerous?”

“We’ll stay behind him until he stops for the night - then once he’s asleep - we pass him and keep paddling.”

There was a longer pause while Karla considered her friend’s suggestion. “You plan on paddling all day and then all night?”

“With only two paddlers it’ll be tough,” Chance agreed. “But we’ll need to keep going most of the night if we want to get help for Joel in time. But we can spell one another off now and then. We both don’t need to be paddling all the time.”

For the next half hour they paddled in silence through the awakening wilderness. Each bend of the river was a nerve-racking experience - perhaps Costas was waiting . . . waiting just around the next bend.

Gradually the sun crept over the tops of the trees on the eastern shore. Karla’s attention had begun to drift toward thoughts of hunger when she felt the canoe slow.

She glanced back at Chance. He was pointing his paddle to a clearing on the riverbank a hundred yards downriver. Karla recognized it as the spot where they had set the trap for Costas the day before. They were there!

Chance turned the canoe into shore a hundred feet down from the landing and then leaped silently over the side. Karla followed her companion into the shallow water and helped him drag the canoe silently up onto the beach. Chance removed his rifle from the canoe, and then levered a shell into the chamber.

“Come on,” Chance whispered. “But be quiet.”

Karla felt her heart racing once more as they wound their way through the trees along the portage route. They could hear the chattering of the rapids cascading over the rocks a few feet away.

At the top of a slight rise, Chance signalled a stop. He dropped to his hands and knees and peered cautiously over the slight knoll.

Karla sidled up beside him. She lifted her head and glanced down the path to the end of the portage. It was here that Costas had shot her canoe full of holes - but the landing was empty. There was no canoe - no sign of life. The clearing was empty and Costas was gone.

## Chapter 13.

### No Return.

Karla and Chance lay staring at the empty clearing for the better part of a minute. “Well, he’s gone,” Karla finally said in a low voice.

Chance rose slowly to his feet. He glanced at his watch. “He can’t have left too long ago. It’s only 6:30.”

“Unless he set out last night.”

Karla followed Chance back to where they had left Joel with their canoe and supplies. Within a half-hour they were back on the river - the portage behind them. Joel had wakened only briefly while Karla checked his bandage.

Chance dipped his paddle into the water and played absently with the ripples. “This is where things could get kinda tricky.”

“Yes,” Karla agreed. “I can see that. Like what if we catch up to him unexpectedly? He could go ashore for a few minutes for something to eat or to rest . . . Then bingo - hello Mr. Costas - how are you today?”

“Let’s just pray he doesn’t get laryngitis and quit singing,” Chance said. “That’s our only hope.”

“I guess we’ll just have to take our chances with Costas,” Karla said quietly.

Chance nodded. “Let’s keep our voices down and stick near the shoreline - just in case.”

They swung their canoe so close to the embankment that they could almost reach out with their paddles and touch the trees that swept by. The sun was now rising in all its glory, melting away the morning chill. But it also welcomed countless myriads of mosquitos and blackflies. Chance handed a small bottle of insect repellent to Karla.

“They’re always worse now and in the evening,” he explained. “But it looks like it’s going to be a hot day - the mosquitoes aren’t too bad when it’s really hot.”

Karla swatted vainly at another blackfly which was exploring one of her ears. “Greedy little pigs.”

Slowly the canoeists fell into the routine of the journey. They approached each bend cautiously, keeping an ever-watchful eye for their elusive adversary. And then on each straight stretch they bore down furiously. In this way they made fairly good time.

“Why don’t we pull into shore to stretch our legs and grab a bite to eat?” Chance finally suggested.

Karla glanced down at her watch. “Eleven-thirty!” She rubbed the palms of her sore hands against her pant legs. “I’m game,” she agreed. “Even Costas will have to stop sometime. Anyway - we should take another good look at Joel’s leg.”

Chance nosed their canoe toward a spot on the shoreline dominated by a stand of tall jack pines.

“Pretty,” Karla said.

“Blueberry country,” Chance added with a grin. “I found a really good patch here last summer - kinda early for blueberries though.”

They pulled the canoe up onto the shore and stood stretching their arms and legs. Karla dipped a plastic cup into the water and put it to Joel’s lips.

“Is he awake?” Chance asked, peering over Karla’s shoulder.

“Sort of. He’s taking in some water. We probably should change his bandage. It looks like its been bleeding again.”

Karla pulled a packsack out of the canoe and carried it over to where Chance was collecting some dry branches for a fire.

A few feet back from the shoreline there was a circle of rocks and a small pile of garbage. Karla nudged an old charred piece of firewood with the toe of her boot. “Costas?” She asked.

“Naw,” Chance said. “Too old. Travellers have used this campsite for generations.”

“When do you think we’ll catch up to him?” Karla asked.

Chance grinned at the question. “Hopefully not when we least expect it - that would be embarrassing. Let’s see if we can get a fire going. How about gathering up some more dry wood while I rustle up some refried moose meat.”

Karla nodded. “That’s a good idea. We should also boil some water so we can clean out Joel’s cut.”

Karla’s face brightened as she left the little clearing and made her way into the thick forest. “There’s lots of dry wood around here,” she said over her shoulder. “Berries too.”

She stepped over an old log lying at the foot of a small knoll. “The blueberries won’t be ripe for awhile yet, by the look of them,” she said to herself. Chance was now out of hearing, and she didn’t want to risk raising her voice.

As she was rounding a thick black spruce, she heard a faint rustling sound from behind a nearby bush.

“Chance?” She said in a low voice.

She felt a strange tingling up her spine. She wanted desperately to back up, to get away from the bushes as fast as she could, but her legs seemed rooted to the ground.

Suddenly the bushes were swept aside and a huge black bear loomed before her. The beast was straddling an old log, ripping at the rotten wood with his mammoth claws. He grunted greedily as dozens of ants poured out of the log, then dropped his muzzle into the fragments and scooped up as many as he could with his thick tongue.

In that instant he caught sight of Karla. His small black head shot up and he pushed himself up onto his hind legs, peering stupidly through the thin canopy of bushes separating him from his strange intruder. His front legs pawed the air, his head turning from side to side.

Karla sucked in her breath, dropping the pieces of wood she had collected. She backed slowly away from the towering creature.

As soon as Karla moved, the bear dropped back to its four paws and lunged over the log toward her. Karla scrambled backward, frantically trying to get out of the charging bear’s path.

Although the entire incident was over in only a few short seconds, time seemed to move in slow motion. Even the terror of the moment could not mask the lumbering grace of the huge animal as it swiftly closed the distance between them. The bear’s head turned to one side as it charged, its mouth open, saliva flying from its black lips.

Karla turned and ran, dodging past a stand of pine trees and down the small knoll she had just climbed. As she clambered down the incline, her left foot caught the root of a tree, sending her sprawling.

The bear instantly noticed Karla’s fall and swung his enormous body in the girl’s direction. Karla scooted crab-like away from the enormous animal, bringing up her right arm to ward off the impending blow. The bear roared furiously as it passed within a whisper of the fallen girl, the saliva from its jowls spraying Karla’s body and face. The great beast roared its defiance one last time, then lumbered off into the dense bush.

Karla picked herself weakly off the ground and was dusting off when Chance dashed through the bushes. He dragged Karla by the arm back through the trees to the riverbank.

“I thought I was a goner,” Karla said, her voice barely a whisper. “Let’s get out of here.

He may be back.”

Chance shook his head. “No he’s long gone.”

“I don’t care,” Karla said with a shudder. “I’m not staying here.”

“Okay,” Chance agreed. “We’ll eat while we paddle. I’ve got some dried meat and stuff.”

A few minutes later the canoe was packed and they were back out on the river.

“I’ll try cleaning Joel’s leg the best I can with cold water,” Karla said, undoing the bandage. She felt like she had just run ten miles - her whole body was still trembling. “That could have been it for me,” she finally said, taking a long stringy piece of meat that Chance offered. “We’re in way over our heads. We could be paddling into the crosshairs of Costas’ rifle at the next bend in the river . . . It’s crazy.”

Chance paused as he considered his friend’s words.

“What choice do we have?” Chance asked. “Do you want to go back?”

Karla put the piece of meat into her mouth and tried to chew it. “There’s no way we can turn back,” she finally admitted, looking down at Joel’s still form. “We’ve committed ourselves now. It’s straight ahead and no return.”

## Chapter 14.

### Close Encounter.

The strain of the past few days had taken its toll. Fatigue clouded Karla's every thought and made even the most routine movement a supreme effort. Each paddle stroke was now automatic, dragged from some deep reserve of inner strength.

So much had happened during the past couple of days that her mind seemed to be on overload. What would her mother think if she knew the kind of jackpot she and Joel were in?

A slight shudder ran through her body, and she blinked her eyes hard a couple of times. In her exhaustion she felt hopelessly adrift. Nothing seemed stable or dependable anymore. She knew Joel would probably disagree with her - Joel was always so steady, and saw the good in everyone. Behind her she heard Chance clear his throat.

"Appears like you're in deep thought," Chance said.

"Ever read the Bible, Chance?" Karla asked in a loud whisper.

Chance looked a bit startled. "Nope," he answered. "Never have."

Karla returned to her paddling, eyeing the bend in the river a hundred yards away.

"How come?"

"I'm not much of a reader. Anyhow, I ain't really into religion. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about something Joel said yesterday."

"What was that?"

"He was talking about a friend that sticks closer than a brother."

Chance grunted. "Wouldn't know much about that. Never been all that close to my brothers. How about you and Joel?"

"Oh, we're pretty close, I guess," Karla said. "As far as brothers and sisters go."

"How long has your dad lived up here?"

"Three years now - he and my mother split up years ago. Our mom's getting married again in the fall."

"You mentioned that Joel comes up here every summer to spend time with your dad?"

"Yeah. I usually come up for a part of the summer." They were silent for a minute.

"So what do you think about that friend who sticks closer than a brother?" Karla finally asked. "Who could they be talking about? Jesus?"

Chance looked at her. “Like I said. I ain’t much for reading - especially religious stuff.”  
“Be kinda neat though - I mean if it were true.”

From the corner of her eye, Karla could see Chance shrug indifferently. “It’s not likely he’d stick close to just anyone - probably just religious people. That’s maybe who they mean by *friends*.”

Karla’s paddle paused in midair. That was something she’d never really considered before.

Karla eyed a fast-approaching bend, then glanced down at the rifle lying in the canoe.

“There’s another stretch of rapids ahead,” Chance said. “We’ll have to portage.”

Karla groaned softly.

“It’s not a long portage,” Chance reassured her. “Listen. You can hear the cataracts now.”

A point of land jutted out from the west bank of the river ahead of them, forming a little bay at the mouth of the rapids. To the right of the craggy point, the waterway narrowed to a fast-flowing, boulder-strewn turbulence.

“Why are all the portages on the left side of the river?” Karla asked.

“The snow melts there first,” Chance said with a grin.

Karla looked back at him. “Are you serious?”

Chance laughed lightly as he steered the craft expertly up to the shore.

It was a pretty spot, with a narrow sandy path leading up from the shoreline into the trees fifty feet away.

They stepped noiselessly into the water and beached the canoe. The routine was well-established now. Joel was lifted out, and carried to the shade of a bushy spruce tree. He wakened only briefly. “We’ll be back for you in a sec,” Karla reassured him.

Chance hoisted the canoe up onto his strong shoulders and set out down the trail, followed closely behind by Karla with their supplies.

Huge white pines towered high above them in a cloudless summer sky. Shafts of morning sunlight filtered between the canopy of limbs, casting strange patterns on the forest floor. A chattering squirrel scrambled up the bark of one of the pine trees and perched on a branch high above their heads, scolding the travellers loudly as they passed.

Karla was still smiling at the antics of the squirrel when they reached the end of the portage and emerged onto the landing. She braked with surprise, almost running into Chance.

Before them, on the far side of the clearing - someone lay sprawled on the shoreline.

There was something so unreal about the scene, that for a moment Karla stood rooted to the ground. Beside her, Chance eased the canoe down from his shoulders and slowly drew the rifle from his packsack. The stranger lay on the sand, his dark, bearded face turned up at the morning sun. A canoe was pulled up on the beach beside him.

“Costas?” Karla whispered. A tingling sensation worked its way up and down her spine. “Is he dead?”

Chance motioned to the stranger’s chest with his free hand. “He’s breathing,” he whispered.

A dark green bottle lay in the sand by the man’s outstretched arm. Chance picked it up and gave it a sniff. He shook his head and set the bottle back down.

Karla peered into the nearby canoe. “Look at this,” she said in a low voice. She leaned into the craft and pulled out a high-powered rifle. Chance nodded approvingly.

“Come on,” Chance said, beckoning Karla back down the trail.

“Drunk,” he muttered when they were out of earshot. “He’s passed out by the look of it.”

Karla looked over at the prone figure curiously. She had never seen anyone who had passed out from drinking. “Is it Costas?”

“Sure is,” Chance answered.

“What do we do?”

“We get Joel, then we skedaddle, dragging his canoe along with us.”

Chance swung the canoe back up onto his shoulders and carried it silently down to the water’s edge. Karla studied the sleeping face of Costas. There was something frightening about this man, even in sleep. His powerful compact body was accented by a face almost completely hidden with hair - wild, dark hair and a full beard, stretching partway down his green plaid shirt. The man looked menacing - even in sleep.

“Let’s get Joel,” Chance said in a low voice.

Karla followed Chance back down the trail. “You think he’s just sleeping off a drinking spree?” Karla asked.

“That’s what it looks like.”

Karla paused briefly, her brow knitting. “What if there is something really wrong with him?” She asked. “Maybe he had a heart attack or something.”

“So what,” Chance said gruffly. “He asked for this. Anyway, he’s drunk - why else would that whiskey bottle be there?”

Joel was stirring in his sleep when they returned to where they had left him. Karla knelt beside her brother and placed a hand on Joel’s forehead. The boy’s eyes fluttered briefly

“He’s sleeping too much,” Karla said, her brow creasing.

“We can check his leg once we get back on the water,” Chance reassured him, helping to hoist Joel onto the makeshift stretcher. “Let’s go.”

They carried their unconscious passenger gingerly down the trail to the end of the portage. There they lay him in the canoe on top of the sleeping bags. Chance tied Costas’ canoe to the back of their own with a piece of yellow rope.

“We’ll drag this a few miles downstream and then hide it in the bush on the opposite side of the river,” Chance said, picking up his paddle.

Karla hesitated again, looking back at Costas. “Wait!”

Chance turned toward her.

“We can’t leave him here. How can we be sure that he’s just drunk?”

“Are you nuts?” Chance almost shouted. Instinctively they both looked back at the man lying on the shore. He didn’t budge.

“Are you crazy?” Chance said in a low voice. “He’s drunk, Karla. What do you want to do - take him along? We’re trying to get Joel safely to Telluride - preferably before that guy over there does - remember?”

“What if he is sick, and we leave him here? He might die.”

Chance stared in silence at Karla for a long minute. “We can’t take him, Karla,” Chance said simply. “It’d be too dangerous.”

“We have the guns. We could tie him up.”

“Costas is too dangerous to take any chances with. We still have one more night ahead of us.”

“I know,” Karla said. “But we just can’t leave him here, not knowing.”

Chance pulled his eyes away from Karla and began checking Joel’s bandage.

A strange sense of despair filled Karla as she watched Costas’ canoe bobbing along behind them in the fast flowing water. Slowly she settled back into the routine of the journey, trying to reconcile the confusing thoughts pouring through her tired mind. Was it only a few

minutes ago that she'd been living in constant dread for her life? She shook her head - why was she so concerned for the very one who had tried to shoot her only yesterday?

Another bend in the river appeared just ahead of them. Karla glanced one last time over her shoulder at the prone man on the shoreline. She sighed.

Suddenly there was a swirling of water behind her. She felt the canoe turning sharply.

“All right. All right.” Chance said loudly, frustration edging his voice. “Let's go back and see if he's alright.” He glared at his smiling friend. “I still think you're crazy, but I wouldn't want you spending the rest of your life with a guilty conscience.”

Karla grinned, helping her friend turn the canoe.

“This is gonna be just like getting between an angry grizzly and her favourite cub,” Chance growled. “We're gonna regret this - you'll see.”

## Chapter 15.

### Night Terrors.

Karla knelt on the sandy beach beside the unconscious Costas. The rise and fall of the man's chest was the only evidence of life. Chance rolled Costas over on his side, and tied his wrists snugly together behind his back. He then looped another length of rope around Costas' ankles and pulled it tight.

Chance leaned over the prostrate man, placing two fingers on his neck. "His pulse seems fairly strong," he said, straightening back up.

"How can we tell if he really is sick - or just hung over?" Karla asked.

"The only way to tell for sure is to wait until he wakes up."

"Well at least we know why this guy always sings wherever he goes," Karla said with a frown. "He's always slugging on a bottle of hooch."

"Not a good combination," Chance said, rising to his feet. "You fall out of a canoe when you're loaded, and you usually don't come back up." He moved around to the man's shoulders. "Grab his legs and we'll hoist him into his own canoe."

Together, Chance and Karla managed to manhandle their awkward load into the bottom of the second canoe.

"Okay, let's get going," Chance said. "We've still got more than a day of hard paddling left - and now we have to drag this dead weight."

The sun climbed slowly across the sky, beating down mercilessly on the weary travellers - and Costas slept.

"Costas *must* be sick," Karla said when they paused for a drink of water.

Chance shook his head. "Not necessarily. When my uncle went on a toot, he'd sometimes sleep like that around the clock."

"Are your parents still alive?" Karla asked.

Chance shrugged. "As far as I know. My dad left home when I was about five. Moved down to the States. My mom worked two jobs to keep her four kids fed and clothed - but we basically grew up on the streets of Montreal."

Karla whistled softly. "Boy, for a city guy, you sure know a lot about the outdoors."

"I should. I've been coming up summer after summer to stay with my uncle, and I've

lived here permanently for about a year.”

“How long has your uncle been in the nursing home?”

“Well, he started acting funny early this spring, so I took him into the doctor’s. Apparently he had a mild stroke. The doctor figured he would be better off in the home. He didn’t even seem to mind being put there - that’s how far out of it he was.”

Karla shifted the paddle to the other side of the canoe. “It must get kind of lonely all by yourself.”

Chance gave another of his customary shrugs. “Sometimes. But you get used to it.”

“Why don’t you move back to the city? Your mom must worry about you.”

“I keep in touch,” Chance said. “Besides, I like it better here.”

“Do you ever go back to visit?”

“I will some day.”

Karla glanced over her shoulder at Costas. “I think Sleeping Beauty is stirring,” she said. Sure enough, Costas was now groggily stretching himself, blinking rapidly in confusion. Any kind of movement was extremely difficult, though, with his hands tied behind his back.

“He’s awake,” Chance said with a loud sigh.

“What you guys think you’re doing?” Costas shouted furiously, straining on the ropes.

“Stop struggling or you’ll tip the canoe,” Chance said.

Chance’s words seemed to infuriate the man all the more. He gave a huge heave on his bound wrists, water now slopping over the edges of the canoe.

“What you fellas doing? When I get ropes off, I beat the tar out you. You fool with ol’ Costas, he fix you good.” He gave another heave on his wrists.

“You tip the canoe over and we ain’t fishing you out,” Chance warned.

Costas stopped struggling and began to swear loudly.

“What do we do with him now?” Karla asked. “He’s obviously not suffering from anything more than a hangover.”

“We oughta tip the canoe and let him fend for himself,” Chance said with scowl.

“Come on, Chance.” Karla whispered. “What can we do?”

“We take him to the police.” Chance said.

“The police?”

“If we cut him loose now, it’d be too dangerous,” Chance said. “Didn’t you say your dad

might be behind us on the river? If so, Costas could bushwhack him. Anyway, he took a couple of shots at you, didn't he?"

Karla nodded slowly. "It's our word against his, though."

"The cops can dig your canoe out of the bush and see the damage for themselves. In the meantime, we've got to get through the next few hours with this guy. If he gets loose - he'll kill us for sure."

The remainder of the day was an exhausting, nerve-racking ordeal. The hot July sun continued its merciless assault on the defenceless travellers, bathing them in sweat and burning their exposed skin. And with the passing of the heat of day, the mosquitos and blackflies swarmed in from the surrounding forest. Costas kept up a steady stream of curses and threats for most of the afternoon before finally fading into a troubled sleep.

It wasn't until the sun was beginning to slip down the western horizon that Chance steered them into a small cove.

"We'll stop here and rest for a few hours," he explained. "We can't spend the night, though, not if we want to get Joel into Telluride on time."

"We can all use a bit of a break," Karla muttered, rubbing her shoulders gingerly. "I'm about done in. My legs are cramping up from kneeling so long."

After setting up camp and building a small fire, Chance heated some dried moose meat over the open flames. Costas was propped up against a large red pine.

"Loose my hands. My blood's cut off and pretty soon I be in big trouble."

Chance shook his head.

"I hungry then. I not eat since yesterday."

Karla pulled a strip of moose meat from the fire and cautiously fed it to Costas, keeping her distance.

"We'll take turns staying awake," Chance suggested. "Grab a couple of hours sleep, then be on our way. And we'd better keep checking his ropes - make sure they're good and tight." He stepped over to Costas, bringing a large handkerchief out of his back pocket. He wrapped the piece of cloth around the captive's eyes and tied it tightly behind his head.

"Leave it on," Chance growled. "You drag it off against the tree and you'll be sorry."

Costas cursed under his breath, but stopped struggling against the blindfold. "I sick, you know."

Chance rolled out a sleeping bag. The moon was just coming up over the river, casting shadows among the trees.

“I’ll take the first watch and wake you in two hours,” Chance suggested.

Karla nodded, a great weariness clouding her mind. She rolled out her sleeping bag and eased her aching body down on the hard surface. She then reached over and picked up Costas’ rifle, checking to make sure it was unloaded before sliding it into her bedroll. Finally she crawled beneath the warm covers and closed her mind to the day’s numbing events. All of her pent-up energy seemed to seep from her body as she struggled for a comfortable position on the hard-packed earth. Even Costas’ cursing and threats gradually ran out. Maybe he, too, was exhausted . . .

When sleep came, so again did the nightmares - a terrifying, confusing panorama of dreams. She found herself mired in a sticky, black swamp, beating off hordes of mosquitos. Leeches clung to her legs and fingers, and no matter how hard she pulled at them, they wouldn’t come off. She struggled frantically, wading through the marsh as darkness descended. From somewhere in the distance a wolf howled. Then just as she was about to give up in despair, Joel appeared out of a thick fog. He was dressed in a long white gown and had Chance’s rifle tucked under one arm - a grim look on his face. “You’re too late Karla,” he said in a sad voice. Then Karla felt herself burst into tears.

With a start, she woke. Her heart was beating wildly and it was pitch dark and cold. The fire had gone out and the campsite was perfectly still.

She pushed herself to a sitting position and peered into the darkness around her. “Chance,” she whispered, getting stiffly to her feet. Surely it was his time to stand watch.

There was a rustling noise from over by the tree where she’d last seen Chance. Gradually her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. She swung her gaze over in Costas’ direction, disbelief tugging at the corners of her mind.

“What’s going on?” She heard Chance whisper.

“He’s gone,” Karla managed to croak. As she scanned the silent blackness surrounding them, a cold feeling of terror came over her. “Costas is gone.”

## Chapter 16.

### Castaways

Chance clicked on the high-powered flashlight and shone it around the campground. The faint light of dawn had just begun to lighten the eastern horizon. “Do you still have Costas’ rifle?” He asked.

“I’ve got it,” Karla said, clutching the rifle tightly under her arm. “I unloaded it and put it in my sleeping bag.”

Chance glanced down by the waterfront. “Oh no,” he said with a moan. “He took both canoes.”

Karla groaned.

Chance walked over and knelt by the tree where Costas had been tied. He held up a couple of pieces of the bright yellow cord that had bound the wrists and ankles of their enemy.

“He must have had a knife hid somewhere.”

“Why didn’t he come after us while we were asleep?” Karla asked. “It would have been a simple matter for a big guy like him to overpower us.”

“I don’t think he was sure who had the second rifle,” Chance said. “Maybe he didn’t want to risk it in the dark. Anyway, it could be that he figures he can get into Telluride to register those claims and then come back for us.”

“It looks like he took all his stuff with him.”

They were silent for a minute.

Chance checked his watch in the beam of the flashlight. “It’s already five-thirty.”

Karla walked over to the spruce tree where Joel lay sleeping. She knelt in the darkness beside her unconscious brother and checked his forehead. “His breathing’s getting worse.”

Chance cleared his throat, his head drooping onto his chest. “I guess I dozed on my watch. It’s been a long couple of days. I was hoping to be back on the river three or four hours ago - now we’re stuck here.”

“It could have been worse,” Karla reassured him. “Joel may have been right about someone up there watching out for us.”

“Well, I sure wasn’t,” Chance agreed.

“So what do we do now?”

Chance hesitated. It seemed he had suddenly lost his confidence.

“We’ve still got the guns,” Karla reminded him. “Costas won’t try anything as long as we’re armed.”

“Yah,” Chance agreed. “But what does he care - he’s halfway to Telluride by now. I can’t believe I fell asleep and didn’t even wake up once.”

“Same here,” Karla said. “But what do we do now? We’ve got to get Joel to the hospital, and we don’t even have a canoe.”

“Well, we don’t have too many options,” Chance said quietly. “About all we can do now is start walking - follow the river into town. Carrying Joel through the bush on that stretcher will be slow going. But we can do it - we have to.”

“How far is it to town?” Karla asked.

“It’s at least a two day hike through this bush under the best of circumstances.”

“We’d better grab something to eat before we head out,” Karla suggested. “We’re going to need all the strength we can muster.”

Several minutes later the two travellers were crouched around the warm glow of a small campfire. A skillet containing strips of moose meat crackled over the flames. At the edge of the campground Karla was bent over Joel’s leg.

“How does it look?” Chance asked.

Karla shook his head. “It’s looking more and more inflamed. I’m afraid the poison will be all through him before long.” She could feel her words catch in her throat.

“We’ll leave as soon as we’ve eaten,” Chance said, flipping over the strips of meat in the skillet. “By then the sun will be completely up. Looks like its going to be another scorcher.”

Chance distributed the meat slices between them and then added some more strips to the frying pan. Suddenly he froze. He turned his head to one side and gazed intently down the river. “Someone’s coming!” He whispered. He whipped the skillet off the fire, kicking dirt over the flames. “Grab our stuff - hurry.” He dragged Joel and the stretcher into the trees.

Karla scooped up their few remaining supplies and followed Chance through a gap in the forest.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Karla whispered when they came to a stop behind a large tamarack.

Chance nodded. “I’m not sure if it was upstream or downstream,” he confessed.

“Sounds really carry on the open water at this time of the morning.”

They crouched behind the branches of the tamarack for another minute, eying the river. Karla’s heart pounded furiously. Was Costas returning? She pulled the rifle from her bedroll and checked the chamber for shells - it was unloaded. She glanced back at the river. A sudden movement caught her eye.

“It couldn’t be Costas,” Chance whispered. “He’s coming from the wrong direction.”

The lone canoeist was paddling hard as he drove his craft down the narrow stretch of river.

“Do you recognize him?” Karla asked.

“Naw - it’s still too dark. I can’t see his face.”

“Maybe we should flag him down,” Karla suggested. “If it’s not Costas, we could get Joel to the doctor a lot quicker.”

The words had barely left Karla’s mouth when the canoe abruptly changed course and turned toward the landing.

“He’s coming this way,” Karla whispered.

Karla could sense Chance tensing beside her. “What do we do?”

A few feet from shore, the canoeist stepped into the water and pulled the canoe up onto the beach. Karla studied the man. The shadows cast by the trees, and the man’s large-brimmed hat made it difficult to get a clear look at his face - but there was something familiar about him. The newcomer walked slowly into the clearing. When he reached the remains of the campfire he stooped and stirred the ashes with a stick. He then rose to his feet, placed his hands firmly on his hips and shouted, “All right - come on out, it’s only me.”

Karla and Chance looked at each other. “That’s my dad,” Karla said. She sprang from behind the bush and sprinted across the clearing.

“Dad. You’re here. You’re alright.”

“I’m surprised you heard me coming,” Mr. Turnbull said with a grin, giving his daughter a big hug. His smile faded as he glanced around him.

“This is Chance Smith, Dad. We met him yesterday. He’s been a big help.”

Jim Turnbull barely looked at Chance. “Where’s Joel?” He asked.

Chance and Karla stepped back into the bushes and returned with the stretcher bearing the stricken Joel.

“He cut his leg with the axe,” Karla explained. “We’ve been trying to get him to a doctor. We think the cut’s infected.”

“He cut himself with an axe?” Jim Turnbull asked, dropping to the ground beside his son.

“Yes,” Karla answered. “Don’t open the bandage, Dad. I just changed it.”

“How long has he been unconscious?” Mr. Turnbull asked.

“Off and on since we left Chance’s cabin yesterday morning.” Karla answered. “Chance has a cabin a day’s journey upriver.”

Mr. Turnbull glanced at Chance and then scanned the campground. “Where’s your canoe?”

Chance glanced nervously over at Karla. “Costas stole it,” Chance finally said.

Mr. Turnbull grunted. “When did he do that?”

“Last night,” Karla answered. “We’re not sure exactly when.”

“You are lucky to have lost just a canoe.”

“How’d you know we were here?” Chance asked.

“I smelled the smoke from your fire.”

There was an awkward moment while Mr. Turnbull turned his attention to his injured son.

“How’s your shoulder, Dad?” Karla asked.

“Hurts like crazy. But like they say in the westerns - the bullet went clean through.” Mr. Turnbull rose to his feet. “Let’s get Joel into the canoe and be on our way. It looks like every second’s going to count.”

“Did you finish breakfast?” He asked.

“Not quite,” Chance confessed.

Mr. Turnbull pulled a small package from his duffel bag. “Try this,” he said, tossing the pack over to Karla. “Smoked fish - prepared with my own secret recipe.”

Karla undid the pack and handed a couple of pieces to her companion.

“Well, the canoe’ll be pretty crowded with four of us,” Jim Turnbull said. “But we don’t have much choice.” He beckoned Karla and Chance forward. “Gather your stuff together and let’s get going,” he took a step or two toward the river and then stopped. “Oh, by the way, is Costas armed?”

“Not anymore,” Karla said with a broad grin, holding up the extra rifle.

Jim Turnbull returned the smile. “Okay. You can tell me about how that happened later.

Meanwhile, let's get Joel aboard and get going." He tossed one of his packsacks up onto the shore. "No room for your supplies, and I've only got one extra paddle. You two will have to spell each other off." He and Chance carried Joel to the canoe and settled him into the middle of the craft.

No way they'd catch up to Costas now - and once they arrived at Telluride - then what? Karla's heart gave a slight flutter as they swept out into the current to begin the last leg of their long journey.

## Chapter 17.

### Last Leg.

The sun rose from behind the trees on the eastern horizon, its pale glow gradually lighting the morning sky.

“Keep an eye on the shoreline,” Mr. Turnbull ordered as they moved out from the landing. “Costas will probably ditch the extra canoe once he’s gone a few miles.”

Even though they were travelling with the current, the journey seemed agonizingly slow. Often the heavily-laden canoe seemed to wallow, and great care had to be taken so that the craft wasn’t swamped whenever anyone moved.

“How’s Joel doing?” Mr. Turnbull asked, nodding toward his son.

Karla had just removed the bandage and was applying a damp cloth to her brother’s leg and forehead.

Joel’s eyelids flickered open and he stared vacantly around him.

“Joel, can you hear me?” Karla asked.

The injured boy turned his head slightly, his eyes clearing. He looked up at Mr. Turnbull. “Dad?” He whispered. “You made it.”

“I finally caught up with you,” Jim Turnbull answered. “You sure led me on a merry chase.” He paused, his face growing serious. “How are you feeling?”

Joel moved his damaged leg. “Leg burns.” He said in a weak voice.

“It’s okay,” Mr. Turnbull assured him. “We’re almost there. We should reach Telluride in a couple more hours.” He placed a flask of water to his son’s lips. Joel took a few sips and turned his head away.

“He looks a bit better,” Karla said hopefully.

Jim Turnbull nodded slowly.

“Did you see that?”

Jim Turnbull and Karla looked up at Chance’s sudden question. Chance was pointing downstream.

“What is it?” Jim Turnbull asked.

“I don’t know,” Chance answered. “I thought I saw something move up ahead of us.”

There was silence while the others took in Chance’s words.

“Do you think it was Costas?” Karla asked.

“I can’t see how,” Chance answered. “He’s probably already in town.”

“Unless he decided to relax a bit and take his time.” “Did he have any more bottles of liquor with him?” Jim Turnbull asked.

No one answered.

“I guess we never did do a thorough check of his belongings,” Karla finally confessed.

“He could have stopped for a drink then,” Mr. Turnbull suggested.

“We still have the guns,” Chance said, nodding to the rifle beside him.

“Let’s keep a sharp eye,” Mr. Turnbull said. “He’s a cagy guy. He probably already regrets leaving you back there.”

The next half hour passed in silence. Karla found it increasingly difficult not to be lulled by the growing warmth of another beautiful summer’s day. Yet she knew that each bend of the river had to be approached with extreme caution.

The river narrowed slightly as it wound northward, often making it necessary to navigate around fallen trees and rocks.

“I wouldn’t want to bring a motor boat down this stretch,” Karla finally said, as they negotiated their way through an especially cluttered section.

“Eleven-thirty,” Jim Turnbull said, glancing at his watch. “We’re making good time - all things considered. We oughta be in Telluride before one o’clock.”

Karla drew in a deep breath and leaned her head back against the side of the canoe, enjoying the feel of the warm sun on her bare arms and face.

“Big log coming up to our right,” she heard Chance say from the front of the canoe.

Suddenly the canoe shuddered. Karla felt a jarring sensation and in the next instant the right side of the canoe rose out of the water. She fought to keep her balance, grasping for the gunwales. What on earth . . .?

In the same terrifying instant her grasp slipped from the canoe’s edge. As it did, the face of Costas loomed from the water before her. Huge hands clutched the edges of the canoe and heaved downward - a loud roar breaking the tranquil of the morning.

Karla pitched headfirst into the river, water filling her nose and mouth. She felt herself turning, rolling, trying to gain her bearings and fight her way back to the surface. Finally her feet touched the river bed, and she pushed off, shooting upward through the water until her head

broke the surface.

“Joel,” she screamed. A few feet away the canoe floated - bottom up. She dove frantically back into the water toward the canoe. She had to find Joel.

The water along the river was so murky that it was impossible to see beyond a few feet. From the corner of her eye she thought she detected a slight movement. Perhaps it was Joel. Suddenly something struck out at her from the swirling water. Karla lunged forward and grasped blindly in the darkness. A pair of legs appeared before her. She pounced on them, and wrapping both arms around the legs she pushed off from the bottom of the river . . . driving forward as hard as she could. She felt the weight of the man shift slightly, desperately trying to stay upright. Karla released her hold, her lungs almost bursting. Her head shot above the surface.

A few feet away her dad came into focus - floundering desperately. Costas had him in a fierce bear hug from behind, lifting him right out of the water.

With a quick upward thrust of his arm, Jim Turnbull brought his right hand back over his shoulder, gouging his thumb directly into Costas’ eye.

The big man howled, dropping Mr. Turnbull back into the water, while he reached up to his damaged eye. Jim Turnbull turned swiftly and swung a savage uppercut into the face of his assailant, catching Costas right on the point of the chin. The big man straightened like he had been shot, then sagged limply into the water. Jim Turnbull reached out and caught his adversary by the hair, keeping the unconscious man’s head above the water.

“Where’s Joel?” Mr. Turnbull shouted.

“It’s okay. I’ve got him.” On the far bank of the river, Chance was dragging Joel up on the shore.

“He’s okay,” Chance reassured them. “I got to him right away.”

Karla grabbed hold of the overturned canoe and pulled it to shore.

Within minutes the straggling, sopping-wet crew were ashore with their various bundles. Joel coughed feebly as Karla and Chance laid him out on a patch of grass. Nearby, Mr. Turnbull dropped the unconscious Costas in an unceremonious heap and went back to check on his son.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

Joel’s eyes opened. He tried to lift a hand, but it fell back down to the ground and stayed there. A tired, worried look crossed his father’s face as he reached for his son’s hand.

“I got to him right away,” Chance repeated.

“I was terrified,” Karla said, sagging to the ground beside Joel “Where did Costas come from?”

Jim Turnbull ran his fingers through his wet hair. “He must have been hiding in the water by that old log. Good place for an ambush.”

“He’s a very determined guy if he thought he could take on three people with guns,” Chance muttered.

”He almost did, too,” Karla said.

“Where’s his canoe?” Jim Turnbull asked, looking around. “A second canoe would be a big help - especially now that we’ve got another passenger.”

“I’ll take a look for it,” Karla offered.

“Good. Meanwhile we’d better get Joel back in the canoe and get going as soon as possible,” Jim Turnbull said.

Karla and Chance splashed through the shallow water along the shoreline. “It’s gotta be around here somewhere,” Chance said. Still, it was almost ten minutes before they finally found the missing canoe - tucked behind a jack pine just offshore.

“We got it,” Karla called out.

Mr. Turnbull had already loaded Joel into the bottom of their own canoe when Karla and Chance returned. Costas was gagged and bound hand and foot. He was conscious and glaring in Chance’s direction.

“Good going, guys,” Jim Turnbull said. “We’ll load Costas into his own canoe. Karla, you and Chance can jump in with him. I’ll take Joel with me.”

Loading the kicking and struggling Costas into the canoe was almost more than the three of them could handle.

When they finally had him secured, Jim Turnbull straightened and brushed his hands together. “You didn’t find anymore of our luggage, did you?”

“No but I did see a couple of suspicious pieces floating down the river,” Karla said with a smile. “We can scoop them out on the way past.”

“I was able to grab the packsack with the information on our claims, anyway,” Jim Turnbull said. “But the rifles are gone.”

“Let’s get going,” Karla said, pushing her canoe into the current. “Next stop, Telluride.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Chance added.

## Chapter 18.

### Telluride.

The sun was approaching its zenith when the two canoes swept around the final bend of the Timberwolf River.

Karla waved her paddle over her head and whistled. “We’re here, Joel.” The shoreline ahead of them was dotted with small white cottages.

Joel’s eyes fluttered slightly at the sound of his name.

“What do we do now?” Karla asked as they skimmed by the first of the houses.

Jim Turnbull pointed toward an approaching cottage. “I know the fellow who lives there. If he’s home we can call the police and get a ride to the hospital. Karla, you and Chance had better stay here with Costas and wait for the police - they can give you a lift to the hospital later. Be sure to tell the cops that Costas was taking shots at you downriver, and that he tried to drown us back there. I’m sure they’ll have enough to hold him.”

As they approached the rickety dock in the front of the house, a thickset man in a red, plaid shirt emerged from the doorway and stomped down onto the dock. “Jim,” he yelled. “What’ve you got there?”

“My son cut his leg with an axe,” Jim Turnbull explained. “We’ve got to get him to the hospital.”

The man studied Joel’s pale form in the bottom of the canoe. “Looks like he’s in a bad way, Jim. We’d better shake a leg.” He helped to lift the injured boy out onto the dock.

“I’d like to make a quick call from your house before we leave,” Jim Turnbull said.

Karla and Chance climbed stiffly onto the dock as the two men lifted Joel out of the canoe and carried him up to the car.

A couple of minutes later the car tore off down the road in a cloud of dust.

“Shouldn’t take the cops too long to get here,” Chance said, pacing nervously up and down the dock. He glanced down into the canoe where Costas was tied.

“What’s bothering you, Chance?” Karla asked. “You look like you’re sorry we finally arrived.”

Chance stopped his pacing. He took Karla by the elbow and led her away from the canoes. “I can’t be here when the police arrive,” he finally said. “I’ll meet you later at the

hospital.” He started to move away but Karla stopped him.

“What do you mean? You can’t go now. We’d never have made it without your help.”

Chance gave a small smile. “I can’t stick around. That’s all.”

“Wait.” Karla moved up beside her friend. “Is that why you live in the bush by yourself? Are you wanted by the police?”

Chance met his friend’s eyes. “Look, Karla. Don’t tell the cops about me, okay. It’s important.”

Karla looked back at their canoe. The sounds of Costas’ muted curses reminded her of all that she and Chance had been through together during the past couple of days. She patted Chance on the arm. “You will meet us at the hospital later, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

She watched as Chance gave a faint grin, turned, and then sprinted up the embankment.

Numb, Karla turned back to the dock. Could Chance be wanted by the police? Could her friend be hiding in the wilderness because of some crime he’d committed?

She was only dimly aware of the blue and white police cruiser rolling to stop by the dock. Two uniformed officers got and approached her.

“Are you the person who turned in the call?” One of the men asked.

Karla nodded. “A friend did.” She pointed to the canoe and Costas’ bulky form. “This man took a shot at us yesterday. Then this afternoon he tried to drown us.”

One of the policemen walked over to the edge of the dock and looked down at Costas. His brow furrowed as he studied the face before him.

“Take a look, Marcel,” he said. “Does he look familiar to you?”

The other officer thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No, but it’s like I should know him.”

The first policeman turned to Karla. “Do you know his name?”

“Herman Costas,” Karla answered. “At least that’s what they call him.”

The policeman stepped into the canoe, holding onto the dock with one hand. “Well, let’s get him out of here.” He snipped the ropes tying Costas’ ankles with a jack knife, and then hauled the big man to his feet. His partner undid the gag. Costas immediately began to sputter and curse in Karla’s direction.

“Quiet,” the policeman commanded. “Or I’ll put that gag back in.”

The second policeman reached down and pulled Costas up onto the dock.

“We’ll take you both down to the station and see if we can get this straightened out.”

\* \* \* \*

When Karla finally arrived in the Emergency Ward, she found her dad and Chance in the waiting room. They rose to their feet as Karla entered.

“How’s Joel?” Karla asked.

“They called in a second doctor to look at him,” Jim Turnbull explained.

Karla took a seat next to her dad, noting the strained look on the older man’s face. The emergency room was hot, empty, and eerily silent; Karla felt a great weariness slowly creeping over her. She was just beginning to nod off when she heard footsteps approaching them. A doctor dressed in a green hospital gown walked up to Mr. Turnbull.

“How’s he doing?” Jim Turnbull asked.

The doctor grimaced slightly. “Close call,” he said. “I can’t remember seeing a worse cut left unattended for so long. Another day . . . and well, anything could have happened.”

“He’ll be alright, then?” Mr. Turnbull asked.

“Oh, I think so. We cleaned out the wound and put him on antibiotics. He should make a full recovery.” The doctor got to his feet. “He’ll be here for a day or two, though - and no visitors until tomorrow.” With that he turned on his heels and returned the way he came.

Karla sank into his chair, exhaling slowly. “Whew,” she said, laughing weakly. “Must have been all that fine doctoring we gave him, Chance.”

“How’d you make out with the police?” Mr. Turnbull asked, turning to Karla. “Any problems?”

“No,” Karla said. “They’d like you to go down for a statement, though.”

“They kept Costas, I hope,” Chance said.

Karla nodded.

“What about you, Chance?” Mr. Turnbull asked. “How did you manage to get out of the police questioning?”

Karla shrugged. “Chance’s done his bit,” she said. “It’s probably for the best if we left him out of the reports.”

Mr. Turnbull stared at Karla for a minute as her words sunk in. Finally, putting a hand on Chance’s shoulder, he rose to his feet. “Okay. You may not be a part of the official version,

my friend, but I want you to know that we couldn't have got Joel safely here without you - and I'll never forget it." He shook Chance's hand. "In the meantime, I'd better get the police report over with, and get down to the Mine Recorder's Office to register those claims. The office closes soon."

"Hey," Karla said. "I'd forgotten all about that. Those claims were what got us into this whole mess to begin with."

"I'll call a cab," Jim Turnbull offered.

Karla followed the others to the door of the hospital and out into the bright summer sunshine. She breathed deeply as the fresh July air met her, filling her lungs.

## **Epilogue.**

The Mining Recorder's Office was a few blocks down the street from the Ontario Provincial Police Headquarters. Jim Turnbull took the front steps two at a time.

An older man with a slight build and a balding head greeted the visitors.

"Can I help you?" He asked in a quiet voice.

Jim Turnbull placed several sheets of paper on the table before the man.

"Aha," the man said, brightening. "You're registering mining claims. I can help you fellas with that."

The clerk unfolded the sheets of paper that Mr. Turnbull had produced, then slowly rose from his desk, frowning.

"Where exactly are these claims located?" He asked, leading them over to a large map on the far wall. "Show me on the map."

Jim Turnbull joined him, squinting for a moment at the light green surface. "Here!" he finally said, pointing to a fairly large blue area a few inches from his face. "My claims are to the east of this lake."

The mining recorder shook his head and returned slowly to his desk. "I was afraid of that. I'm surprised you haven't heard."

"Heard what?" Jim Turnbull asked, a puzzled expression creasing his face.

"I'm surprised you hadn't heard about the land caution that's been filed on all exploration and development work in that region."

"Land caution?" Karla and Chance echoed.

"What's that?"

"The native people in these parts have started a legal action - called a land caution. The courts have agreed that no exploration or development of any kind will happen in the area to the south of here until the matter's settled in court." He returned to the map and circled a large area to the south of Telluride. "The land is supposed to be a part of their ancestral hunting grounds, and they're laying claim to it. For the past couple of months no one's been able to stake any claims, or cut any timber."

"And my land is right in the middle of it," Jim Turnbull sighed.

"It is for a fact."

Karla sagged into a nearby wooden chair, disbelief clouding her thoughts.

The mining recorder returned to his desk. “Oh, it’ll probably open up again, but not for a few years, these things take time.”

Mr. Turnbull threw back his head and laughed. “Ain’t that something,” he said. “And here I’d already gone and spent my first million.”

Chance walked over to Karla’s dad and clapped a hand on the older man’s shoulder. “Well, easy-come . . .”

“Easy-go,” Karla chimed in.

“Let’s get some lunch,” Jim Turnbull said, leading them toward the door. “I can still afford to buy dinner for the two of you, even if I can’t pay the waitress in diamonds just yet.” Karla followed her dad and Chance down the steps of the Mining Recorder’s Office and into the street. She watched Chance matching Jim Turnbull stride for stride, and smiled. So much unfinished business, she thought. And what was there about having inner peace during tough times that was so difficult? But maybe she was learning - little by little.

A police car drove slowly past them and turned the corner. She noticed Chance give a start and slouch quickly into the shadow of Mr. Turnbull.

So much unfinished business, she repeated to herself. God grant us all another day. She followed Jim Turnbull and Chance up the steps and into the restaurant.