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Introduction

He chuckled to himself, as he remembered the instructions he had received as a raw recruit in the military. “If it moves—salute it. If it doesn’t move—pick it up. If you can’t pick it up—polish it,” the tough old Marine drill sergeant had yelled, in ear-splitting decibels. He thought of the many men who had spent their entire careers, maybe even their lives being, what he called, polishers. Appearances meant everything to them. A Hollywood mentality took over their lives. They became like movie sets that appeared to be one thing but had no depth beyond the facade. The crease in the trousers and shirt was perfect. The shine on the shoes was dazzling. The belt buckle gleamed. All these things are well and good, if the man on the inside had received proper attention. Many of these “polishers” had died unnecessarily in Vietnam because the man on the inside had not been as painfully and skillfully prepared. Gabe was not a polisher. His shock of sandy-red hair and unkempt beard was an open declaration of that fact; nor would his plane take any prize for its appeal; yet, together they functioned very well. It had not always been that way. There was a time when he had lost his way, spending too much time reliving the past and what he should have done, but that was slowly being left to merge with the shadowy memories of yesterday. The past few years had been a time of healing and reclamation. He found it difficult to heal in the clamor and demands of the inner city. One needs solitude and quietness. That’s why, even after military life had been left in the distant past, many of those men are still lost souls, haunting the back alleys by night and searching for food lines in the day. They will probably never change, as long as there are unwitting enablers present to give them a dollar and a bowl of soup, and in the process salve their own conscience. He had shunned the cities as one who gives wide berth to a deadly adversary. He needed a place where the backfire of an automobile didn’t leave him diving for cover. Today he was doing very well. Of course that’s a relative term. He was doing well in comparison to what he had been.

After his disastrous marriage he had tried Yoga to quiet his jangled nerves. That helped somewhat but he discovered that nothing was as effective as good, hard work. It tired his body and mind and he slept better. Now, if only he could prevent the occasional invasion of old demons. He recognized the dangers that alcohol presented, so he imbibed sparingly and infrequently. Being a bush pilot kept him too busy for much self-indulgence. The Alaskan northland challenged him daily and kept him from becoming mentally sluggish. He spent numerous hours pampering and tuning the engine of his plane. He would have made an excellent airline pilot, but then he would have had to deal with the very thing he was trying to avoid—people. Most of the miners were people who were trying to escape something in their past. Most of the hunters and fishermen were chasing some elusive shadow in the future. He fared tolerably well with both.

Chapter 1

Winter's Last Gasp

Daylight comes late in the Alaskan northland in early March, so Gabe was working by the lights of his four-wheel drive pickup, as he prepared his plane for an early flight to transport diesel fuel and dozer parts to an old miner who had somehow miscalculated his need of both. He'd always had a struggle to arouse the plane's engine to life in extremely cold weather. He had used the lightest grade engine oil he dared, and still the engine just didn't want to start on cold mornings. Then one day an old-timer explained to him the solution to the problem. "It's not the oil," he said. "It's the block. If the weather is cold enough, the block contracts and squeezes the pistons. You'll have to figure out a way to warm up the block." If electricity had been available there would not have been a problem. He could have rigged a small electric heater next to the block, or he could have used a head-bolt heater. The catch was that Gabe didn't have electricity out here at what he called his hanger.

He had tried just about everything he knew, from road flares to kerosene heaters, when it suddenly dawned on him that he was driving the answer. He scrounged a long section of flexible pipe that would fit over the tailpipe of his pickup and ran it underneath the cowling of his Cessna. With the truck's warm exhaust, he could warm the engine block while preparing the cargo and tending to the other details of the flight. He would have had the pickup idling anyway to keep the battery charged.

Being a bush pilot came as second nature to Gabe Hunter. He'd delivered a lot of supplies and men while in "Nam", but then he was flying a helicopter. He hadn't started out to be a helicopter pilot, but then life deals you a lot of crooks and turns and you must make the best of the hand you're dealt. He'd taken his training initially in a plane not much different than the one he was now flying. Intending to fly fighter jets he soon discovered that he couldn't get used to the excessive G's necessary to be a good jet pilot. Even while flying with an instructor, he knew he couldn't cut it flying jets. Something in the hand-eye coordination and the time it takes to process information left him too slow for jets. The Marines are not known for their subtlety. They simply transferred him to helicopter school. The decisions in the chopper gave him a fraction of a second more time; although, it was a bit trickier at times, especially when hovering. Where once he flew men to front lines and rescue missions, he now flew them to good hunting grounds and fishing spots. Miners and trappers welcomed the supplies he brought; and occasionally he had to evacuate someone who was sick, caught by the cold or surprised a mama bear with cubs. The latter was the worse. Tending the injured in Nam gave him a world of experience. His business had him alternating between wheels, pontoons and skis. Today he had the skis on his plane.

Mok Tok was about as far as he could get from the world he once knew and still call it civilized. A small Eskimo village wedged between mountains alongside a sizable lake gave him precisely what he sought—solitude. He had tried Anchorage and Fairbanks. They both had acquired the smell of cosmopolitan sophistication. How he wished he could have arrived there fifty years earlier. But now people asked too many questions. He had found that a good percentage of the people were running from something. They were either trying to escape a failed marriage, a failed business or maybe just themselves. His was the latter.

Fifteen five-gallon cans of diesel and spare Caterpillar parts slid easily into the cargo bay of the Cessna L19 (an old military plane with horsepower to spare). The engine block should now be warm enough to start. He had checked the wing tanks making sure that they were full of gasoline and that the oil level was perfect. Take-off was just minutes away. He disconnected the flexible hose from the exhaust pipe of the pickup, and slid it into the side of the cargo bay alongside the cans of diesel oil. Backing the pickup into the makeshift hanger beside the Cessna, he locked the vehicle, although he didn't know why. He knew he would be back long before sundown. How many times had he done this before? Too many times to keep track of, that's for sure. Taking a large four by six timber, he bumped the struts to break the skis loose from any ice that may have formed. Crawling into the bucket seat that was now formed to fit his bucket, he adjusted the throttle and choke and then turned the ignition. Just as he expected, the old Continental engine roared to life without too much persuasion. He sat for a good ten minutes, allowing the engine to warm up and waiting for the oil to become more fluid; and then he taxied out to the makeshift runway he'd used for the last five years. It was daylight when he pushed the throttle forward and reached the appropriate speed needed for lift off. The skis made the ride a little bumpy, but then lifted off the icy snow like one of the geese he had watched run on top of the water to help them reach flying speed.

By the time he reached cruising altitude, the sun was barely peaking over the mountains. Dewey Burkett's mining camp lay about two hours southwest of Fairbanks, in the Kantishna area of Mount McKinley. On a clear day Denali (the Eskimo name for Mount McKinley) could be seen two hundred miles away. Most days were not clear, especially in March. Even in summer, clouds usually enshrouded the crest of the majestic mountain and the neighboring mountains that strained to match its summit. After a visit with Dewey, he should be home in about six hours. Meanwhile, he absorbed the cold beauty of the Alaska Range. The snow, alluring yet foreboding glistened like a million diamonds hanging from the fir and aspen. Huge moraines lay scraped out of the mountains where long past glaciers had groaned their way downward. Although many glaciers still existed in this area, Gabe wondered when the last ice age had melted. These glaciers, while carrying tons of dirt and gravel on their downward journey, also carried with it that precious ore that drove men mad—gold. He was shortly to meet one of these madmen, who traded his life, daily, for bits of this elusive

treasure. Gabe loved this beautiful country where the summers were a mixture of Mosquitoes, no-see-ums, wildflowers and inviting adventure, yet to be experienced. The sudden memory of wild blueberries left him salivating. Winters were filled with the breathtaking display of the Northern Lights and ice crystals that were formed out of the fog. In the warm months, a man could go mad in the swarms of mosquitoes, if he wasn't properly dressed—swarms which have been known to suffocate moose. Winter was even less forgiving. No mercy was offered to the unprotected. However, Gabe was a man of meticulous order. He studied other men's methods and tried to improve on their techniques. Vietnam had taught him the necessity of planning ahead if you want to survive. In most situations a man has many chances to survive; however, in the cold of the Alaskan winters, Mother Nature is absolutely merciless. She offers even fewer opportunities to survive if you have not prepared prudently. The silent predator of every living creature, she is like some giant beast hungry for warmth, wrapping herself around you and drawing you close unto her breast until you have become as cold as her breath. Gabe had felt her embrace before and had prepared wisely.

The snow-covered landscape slid silently beneath him as the drone of the Cessna hummed a lullaby. It could prove to be a deadly combination. The snow was deceptively beautiful. In many places the muskeg lay thick and treacherous. To traverse it in the summer was like trying to walk on wet bowling balls. To disturb it was to loose a horde of mosquitoes hungry for your blood.

After the many trips, the flights to Dewey's camp had become so methodical that he could let his mind wander. Why Dewey had wound up short of fuel he hadn't said when he radioed, but Gabe was sure he would relate it all in embellished detail as soon as he had brought the plane to a stop. After all, Dewey had no one to talk to except his contrary old malamutes that only he could tolerate. He had mused in from Fairbanks in early spring with a dogsled loaded with supplies. Lord only knows how long he had had some of his dogs. Many of them were third generation dogs he had raised from pups. They were like family to him. He would load the sled and dogs aboard the train in Fairbanks and ride as far as Denali National Park. There they would unload him and his merchandise, and he would make the rest of the journey by sled. He could make it in a day if he didn't rest the dogs too often, but normally he would take two. He was a child of the cold. He would bed down in his sleeping bag and both he and the dogs would often awaken the next morning, covered by a foot of snow.

As always, his wandering mind brought Gabe back to his ex-wife, who couldn't tolerate being married to him anymore, and to the infant son who had vanished from out of his life. "Let's see. He'd be about eight," he mused. He never blamed his wife for leaving. There hadn't been another man in her life. It was just this moody man that she had married, who had been letting his dark side out of the cage too often. Maybe she thought he would change; but something in his past kept surfacing and made their life more of a hell than a marriage. So he

staggered home early one morning, to find it empty. Oh! There were some belongings and furniture, but it was no longer a home. Maybe it hadn't been for a long time. Some would say that he started to drink more after she left, but that would have been a stretch—so he started running—trying to escape the demons that tortured his every waking hour. After bouncing from one place to another, like a football that could not make up its mind which direction to bounce, he had finally wound up in Mok Tok where, bit by bit, healing began to reclaim his life from all the wounded memories.

Although it was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen, Gabe hated Vietnam. The war had distorted everything that was beautiful and appealing. When he left, it was a place of suspicion and killing. You never knew if the ones you worked with today would try to kill you tonight. Nevertheless, he had performed his duty as he saw it, getting shot down twice and earning three purple hearts in the process. It was only when he came back to the States that he really came face to face with the politics that had cost so many young men their lives. No sooner had he stepped off the plane from Nam than he was met by a group of young bearded men and witchy looking women chanting slogans and yelling, "Murderer!" One young man came up and began to taunt him about the medals he wore. "How many babies did you have to kill for that one?" The protestor yelled. Not able to get a rise out of him, he spit full in Gabe's face. The next instant the young man was lying in a pool of blood begging for someone to help him. A policeman standing nearby smiled and looked the other way. It wasn't a good homecoming. After all these years, a deep pain still lurked behind the tangle of red hair and beard. The visible scars didn't bother him much anymore. It was the hidden wounds that still kept yesterday's door open. He wondered if he would ever be free from the memories. They seemed to rush into some open door and catch him off guard each time he wandered down some darkened corridor.

Gabe's thoughts were interrupted by something that jerked him back from his reverie. "Huh!" He thought out loud. Looking down he had spotted a small cabin with curls of smoke coming out of the chimney. "Don't remember ever seeing that before," he mused, "probably some trapper or prospector resting a few days." He circled it once to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. Sure enough, someone was occupying the old cabin that appeared to be supported by the snow banked high around it.

He soon forgot the cabin and was again swallowed up in his thoughts. As much as he had hated Vietnam, he loved Alaska. This was a land of live and let live. No one asked him how he got the stitches in his head or the scar across his cheek. His sandy red hair seemed to signal a caution light. He wasn't a small man—you wouldn't call six feet one inch, small. However, it wasn't so much his size that made men give him room. It was something in his eyes and that shock of rusty colored hair that signaled danger. Anyone with any sense knew not to push him. He didn't drink much now for he wasn't trying to forget the past, just

trying to make better memories. Just keeping the old Cessna maintained in top running order occupied most of Gabe's spare time. He'd flown long enough to know that if one was to stay alive, you couldn't scrimp on maintenance.

Chapter 2

Dewey Burkett

Seems like he'd just gotten settled into the flight when Gabe spotted Dewey's "landing strip" below. Dewey had scraped it out with a Caterpillar tractor, and it was a much better strip now that it was covered with snow rather than with the gravel of summer. He made one circle and set the little Cessna down like an old pro.

Dewey met him almost as soon as the prop stopped turning, and his tongue took up where the prop left off. As soon as they had unloaded the diesel oil and Caterpillar parts, Dewey suggested some hot coffee. Anything hot tasted good in this cold. "Why didya let it get so cold?" Dewey asked. "Kinda slipped up on you, huh?"

"Only a Cheechako (newcomer) would be surprised at Alaskan weather but I didn't expect it from an old Sourdough like you. You know better than to be surprised at the weather this time of year," Gabe replied. They both chuckled "I heard before I left Mok Tok that it was supposed to turn cold."

Gabe well knew that Dewey was no Cheechako. His history was like many of the pioneers who had come to Alaska during the gold rush of "ninety eight." Dewey's parents, with gold fever burning in their blood, had left a farm in Kansas and joined a wagon train just out of Fort Kearney, Nebraska. It took slightly over six months to reach Fort Vancouver, and from the mouth of the Columbia River they caught a ship to Skagway, Alaska. Both Dewey and his brother were born there. They had moved to Fairbanks when gold was discovered at Pedro Dome. Fairbanks was filled with people who had greed in their hearts, lust in their souls and a terrible thirst in their bellies. Observing all this appetite, the elder Mister Burkett began to moonshine and bootleg whiskey. It was better than clawing around in the muck and mire looking for some shiny little pebble. Since Alaska was a territory, little attention was given to the whiskey business ran by Mister Burkett. Dewey and his brother, Jack, had helped him for a considerable period of time until Dewey could not overcome the lure of gold calling to him from some unknown stream. Dewey had tried a little panning and sluicing, but never liked competing with a greedy mob working their claim. His brother, on the other hand, continued to make whiskey with their dad, and they became quite respectable businessmen.

Dewey grew restless and finally headed out on his own to the Mt. McKinley area. After discovering some sizable nuggets that gave promise of a prosperous future, he staked his claim almost in the shadow of the majestic Denali—the Eskimo name meaning, The Great One. He spent a year with a shovel, pan and sluice box. At the end of the year, his hands were like hardened leather and his arms and back were nothing but skin stretched over muscle. Nevertheless, he

had accumulated a tidy little fortune. Some said that the weight he lost was due to contributing blood to the mosquito population. That may have been it in part, but mostly it was the hard work, driven by greed, and the sparse diet. Other folk said that he was too tough for the grizzlies to eat so they just ignored him, opting for marmot and berries.

He discarded the shovel and pan for a small used Caterpillar tractor he found in Fairbanks. It could move more dirt and gravel in a week than he could do with a shovel the entire year and with a lot less wear and tear on the body. His next concern was getting the dozer to his claim on the Kantishna River. He found that he could load it aboard the train that ran between Fairbanks and Anchorage and unload it in Denali National Park. He then drove it the fifty miles to his claim in the dead of winter, pulling a sizable building loaded with groceries and household goods. By then the frozen streams would sustain the weight of the dozer and all the gear. Building a large sluice box along the river, he would push a yard or two of dirt and gravel into the box. The fast-moving stream washed away everything but the heavy material, which was caught in the riffles along the bottom of the sluice. He made a murky mess of the river downstream but he wasn't about to stop this profitable business for the sake of aesthetics or salmon.

He'd tried to get his brother to quit the whiskey business and help him on his claim, but Jack didn't savor the idea of being out in the boonies nine months out of the year. Dewey really would rather have had someone else anyway for he and Jack rubbed each other like fresh sandpaper. One would have wound up killing the other. He gave up trying to find a partner he could tolerate and who could endure him for days on end. He later found a half Eskimo woman, who was hewed out of the same slab of timber as was he. She had enough Indian in her to just ignore his abrasive qualities. He had done all right for Margaret and himself.

"By the way, when do you expect Margaret to come?" Gabe asked.

"Well, it won't be for awhile. She'll stay in Fairbanks until all the snow is gone and the ice is off the rivers; then she'll get some bush pilot to fly her in. Of course, he'll have to be a better pilot than you or she won't fly with him," Dewey chided him.

"If that's the case, maybe you won't even see her this year," Gabe shot back. Dewey and Gabe both knew there wasn't a better bush pilot in Alaska than Gabe Hunter.

Margaret Peterson was Dewey's wife. Well, she wasn't exactly his wife, just his woman. She was a big woman, half Eskimo and half Swede. She could have thrown Dewey over her shoulders like a sack of potatoes and had many times when he'd passed out from too much "shine". They used to fight a lot before Dewey learned he couldn't whip her. Then he'd only try when he was too drunk

to remember what this she-bear had dished out the last time. He ceased to give her much of a contest and finally gave up, having decided his face and ribs couldn't take any more punishment. In the winter she would make parkas from arctic fox and wolverine, which the stars of Hollywood would have been proud to wear, and some did. She also made gold jewelry from the nuggets she would take from Dewey's sluice box. Seems she always wound up with the largest and nicest nuggets. Dewey once used mercury in the riffles of his sluice box and made a lot more money because he captured most of the dust also. However, boiling off the mercury was tricky business, and he finally quit when a doctor in Fairbanks told him he was running a great chance of contracting mercury poisoning. He knew many men who had died from mercury poisoning. It was not a pleasant departure from this life.

Gabe glanced around inside the cabin and it had the appearance of something akin to the aftermath of a barroom brawl or caught in the eye of a whirlwind. His bunk was as yet unmade. Lord only knows how long it had been since it had been made or the bedding washed. Mosquito netting hung loosely around the entire sleeping area. No one could accuse him of being the best housekeeper in the world, not even in this neck of the woods. While he worked, he also wore netting over his face and neck; and long sleeves were a must. He wore no gloves. He was in the water too much for that. He lived off of canned goods and whatever meat he killed for himself and the dogs. Dewey kept water on the old potbelly stove, which was fired with coal. The mountains around his claim were full of coal so it was a more abundant source of fuel than wood. He would drive his dozer to an outcropping of coal in the mountainside and in a matter of hours would have enough coal piled up at his cabin to last the entire season. He kept up a steady stream of banter as he poured coffee in the tin cups. They each savored the taste of the welcome brew as the porcelain cups heated their hands. The malamutes kept up a steady cacophony of beastly sounds, which seemed to escape Dewey's hearing.

"Do they always do that," Gabe asked?

"Do what?" Dewey seemed surprised by the question.

"You know. Make that godawful howling and barking."

"Oh! I hadn't noticed." Dewey remarked. "Mostly they're pretty quiet in the day. It's at night they really set up a fuss. Used to bother me at first but now I kinda like it. Keeps the other critters away during the summer. They're cuttin' up now cause they want in on the company." Gabe was sure he was telling the truth. Dewey was about half animal himself. "Say! If you'd prefer, I got something a little stronger than coffee?"

"No. I'd better not. Drinkin' makes one forget the time, and I don't have time to spend the night." Gabe answered. "Thanks anyway." He'd have to be stoned

out of his mind to sleep through that unearthly noise. Gabe arose, stretched himself and ambled toward the door of the miner's cabin. "Looks like I got about four more hours of daylight," he spoke to no one in particular. "I may have that drink when I get home."

"You ought to get yourself a good woman to keep house for you and keep you company," Dewey offered as he followed Gabe to the Cessna, which was getting colder by the minute.

"Oh, I hire someone to come in about every two weeks to straighten up the place. As for company, I've got all I want," Gabe answered with a tone of finality. He walked around the plane, checking flaps, stabilizer and looking for leaks of any kind. Satisfied that everything was in order, he swung himself up into the seat of Cessna. "Thanks for the coffee and the conversation. Call if you need anything else. I'll see if I can dig up a good bush pilot to help you."

Dewey was laughing as Gabe hit the starter and the big Continental engine made its presence known. Gabe couldn't hear them but the malamutes tried to match the noise of the engine, to no avail. He headed the plane down the runway and was airborne in short order. After getting a little altitude under his wings, he banked into a steep turn and waved at Dewey as he passed overhead. He liked his solitude but not quite on this order.

Chapter 3

The Trap

Thoughts about Dewey crowded out everything else as he set his course for Mok Tok. He would fly the river for part of the distance, then turn south toward home. He could fly straight across and pick up the Alcan Highway, but that would put him too close to Eielson Airforce Base, and sometimes those SAC bases got a little unreasonable when planes invaded their air space. Eielson was built during the early part of the cold war for B-36 bombers, designed to fly over the pole and hit Russia. It had the longest runway in the world and was also a storehouse for nuclear bombs. No sense in ruffling feathers.

“What Tha!” Gabe exclaimed aloud. The engine had started sputtering badly. He was losing power rapidly. Not much time to find a landing spot. It had to be on that snow-covered gravel bar beside the river. Just as he lined up on the flat beside the river, the engine quit altogether. The chosen landing spot was flat enough and long enough and although he was far from a religious man, he whispered, “Lord, help me.” I guess the Lord did for he dead stuck the little plane in without a bobble. Now the problem was stopping. He had no brakes and no propeller backwash to help him steer. He hit one rudder then the other until the last few yards when the right ski dug into the snow and turned one hundred and eighty degrees so suddenly he almost ground-looped. He skidded backward to halt mere yards from the brush. He didn’t thank the Lord. It was his skill, nothing more.

He wasn’t sure what had caused his problem. Sounded like fuel loss. That could be the filter, dirty fuel or ice in the line. But then again, it could be magneto problems. Isolating the problem would have to wait for he hadn’t much sunlight left. He’d try to reach that cabin with the smoking chimney he’d seen earlier. It couldn’t be more than three or four miles. Reaching into the storage compartment, he retrieved his emergency kit that he kept packed with the solution to every conceivable problem. Just at that moment, he heard the soulful cry of a male alpha wolf. Wolves never bothered him, but he always got a little chill when one howled. You could never tell how near or how far away they were. It was always kinda eerie. Their howl wasn’t like the shrill yapping of the coyote but more like a viola being muted with velvet. Wolves have gotten a notoriously bad rap, he thought. Yet, when one emitted that prolonged howl, which seemed to emerge from a cavern of pain, it conjured up images of horror.

Gabe let out a silent curse. When he had loaded the diesel oil he had removed a pair of skis he normally carried with him. Now all he had left was a small, beat up pair of snowshoes. The skis would have allowed him to cover distance as fast as a man could run. The snowshoes would leave him slogging along like a desert tortoise; but the choice was made for him, they would have to do. After strapping on the snowshoes and the backpack of emergency gear, he gave one

last look at the plane and started off in the same direction he had been flying. Later he would regret leaving the plane, but he was so sure the cabin he had seen earlier was very close. He moved at a half walk, half trot, knowing he had little time to get to a place he felt safe to cross the river. Gabe had learned some things about survival that had saved his life before. The first and uppermost was that you never press yourself to reach an imaginary destination—one that is just over the next rise or around the next bend. To push too hard would tire you to exhaustion and deplete your resources. Yet, here he was violating that one law of survival.

He remembered Bill McGlaughin. A bush pilot like himself, Bill had gone down under similar circumstances and had decided to walk to an Eskimo village he had spotted some seven miles back. Bill had not filed a flight plan—first mistake. He left his plane—second mistake. His fatal mistake was that he pushed himself to exhaustion. When he was found, tucked snugly inside his sleeping bag, beads of perspiration were frozen to his forehead. The frozen perspiration exposed his total depletion of energy. Had he not been so drained of energy, he would have awakened before he froze. The body begins to feel like it is burning before it freezes—that would have awakened him. When found, he was almost exactly seven miles from his plane; however, the village was another seven. A person has a way of misjudging distance from the air, even experienced bush pilots. Another thing Gabe had learned in Nam was that a man has a limited supply of energy. If he pushed too hard, he would be in serious trouble. Energy is not something one can replenish without proper food and time. He had neither.

Even in the dead of winter, the river rapids can erode the ice from beneath until there is not enough mass to support a man's weight. He needed to cross the river and make camp for the night, but it was essential that he find a place he was confident was thick enough to bear his weight. He should have stayed with the plane and started out in the morning. Second mistake. His first mistake was that he, like Bill McGlaughin, had not filed a flight plan. He thought about these mistakes as he walked through knee-deep snow. If he had his snow skis he wouldn't be concerned about the river but he had been cautiously gauging the elevation of the river and estimated that he was now in an area of the river that was relatively level. By now the sun was below the mountains and the diminishing sunlight and snowdrifts played tricks with his eyes. He could not help but stop again as he heard the cry of the male wolf. It seemed as if he was being followed. He was sure the wolf was following more out of curiosity than anything else. They simply were not the terrible demons they were reputed to be. He had begun to sweat as he struggled against the snow that resisted him, so he loosened the straps on the front of the backpack and just let it hang by the straps over his shoulders.

The human body has only so much water. This you must keep replenished or your mind will start playing tricks on you. In the cold it is imperative to keep the body warm for it has a limited amount of heat. It has little to spare when the

temperature around you is well below freezing. Most important in the field of survival is this thing called emotion. This cannot be measured with any type of instrument. Some men will go berserk when faced with difficulties that are easily overcome. Some men have jumped out of lifeboats into shark-infested waters for no other reason than they couldn't bare the idea of sharks circling them hour after hour. Others have overcome seemingly impossible odds and by keeping calm, saved their own lives and the lives of others. Emotion is a strange, intangible quality that can be, to some degree, trained to work for us. Mostly, it is an innate peculiarity that resides to varying degrees in each person, which goes to make up our character.

Gabe wasn't yet comfortable about crossing the river but was faced with an impassable sheer wall on his left that jutted out into the river. That made the decision for him. He must cross here. He turned out over the river as the wind whipped the snow into biting needles that stung what little face that was exposed. As soon as he was across he would gather some wood and start a fire. There's nothing that will lift one's spirit quite as much as a nice fire. He was not really concerned about the ice. It should be at least two feet thick here. He thought about Dewey driving his Caterpillar across the frozen river when he brought it into his camp, but that was in the dead of winter. This was just before spring.

The river was about one hundred feet across at this point, and Gabe was almost to the bank when, without warning, there was a sudden crack; and he was through the ice. Because of all his clothing, he didn't feel a sudden icy chill; but he was almost neck deep in water and was fighting to regain his balance. When at last he was able to stand, he was no more than waist deep in the rapids. He pulled himself through the remaining few feet of ice and upon the bank. "Gotta get a fire started quick," he thought aloud. To his utter dismay, he discovered that the rapids had taken his backpack and snowshoes. Gabe was no fool. He had simply made too many mistakes, and he realized as the cold began to seep into his clothing that this was the mortal blow. It began to embrace him with those icy tentacles that would eventually escort him into another world. He knew that, if wet, a man had about five to ten minutes to get a fire started or your hands simply will not obey your commands. Even if he could have gotten a fire started, with wet clothing it is far from certain he could survive. However, all his emergency gear had been lost in the swift underwater current. Before the symptoms began, he knew what to expect. Gabe had never been a man of faith. He'd watched too many men die that he had prayed for. So he quit praying. But he'd never been in a situation so completely hopeless before either. So he tried once more, "God—if there is a God—in a very short time I will stand before you if you don't save me. I'm not an atheist; but I'm surely not a Christian. Help me if you can." Not a very profound prayer, but one of honest simplicity.

He knew the progression of hypothermia and its ultimate outcome. Already he had begun to shake uncontrollably—his body trying to shake circulation into his rapidly freezing flesh. It wouldn't be long before the brain's temperature would

drop to the point he would begin to hallucinate, and then he would become warm and comfortable. That howling again! This time it seemed very close. Well, at least perhaps he would provide a good meal for the solitary wolf that had followed him for the better part of three hours. The shaking began to decline and from somewhere he could smell the pungent odor of burning wood. Gabe sat down beside a fallen giant of a tree that had obeyed the call to return to mother earth. As he leaned his back against it, the tree seemed to provide him a substantial amount of heat. It must be on fire from the peat moss that sometimes burned beneath the snow all winter long. That's what he had smelled! As he became warmer, he watched, as the wolf that had been following him came into view. It seemed completely without fear. Why shouldn't it be? He certainly offered no threat in his condition. It was now so close that he could almost reach out and touch it. What a giant of an animal! As he looked into the yellow eyes of the Alaskan predator, he sensed in it no anger, no madness, simply a patient resignation. Its stalking was over. Its hunger would soon be satisfied. He was too sleepy to worry about that. It didn't matter anymore. Nothing seemed to matter. He watched the wolf as an old man and a mule that was approaching him joined it. Hallucinations paint strange pictures on the human mind. He chuckled as he fell into a warm sleep.

Chapter 4

Jesse Willet

The smell of smoke and fur in his face seemed to beckon Gabe from somewhere outside this present world. Knowing the evils of his past life, the smell of smoke wasn't comforting, and he couldn't understand where all the fur came from. He'd read of those creatures that were half man and half goat whose dwelling was in the nether world. Surely he had landed in a place of demonic habitation. In this place of dreadful confusion, he heard a voice, "Wolf! He's stirring now. You can get up." With that the mountain of fur moved and Gabe saw what appeared to be a wolf, like the one that stood over him as he had fallen asleep in the snow. It moved slowly away from him to the direction of the voice. "Are you awake yet?" Someone asked. From where he wasn't sure. All he knew was that he was warm, dry and terribly confused. He looked fearfully at the fire that was eagerly consuming split logs in the fireplace.

"Am I in hell," Gabe asked?

"Not quite, but you came close, if that's your destination," someone remarked with a chuckle.

Gabe tried to sit up but found he didn't quite know which way up was. He noticed the wolf eyeing him with curiosity and a bony old man tending a fire. He looked a bit like the pictures he had seen of the prophets of old. His snow-white hair hung long and uncombed and his white beard matched the length of his hair. Gabe couldn't help but notice the likeness of the white haired man and the huge gray lobo. "Where am I?" Gabe asked, not sure he wanted to know. "And who are you?"

As he looked around Gabe could see all of his clothes, even his long johns, hanging on a makeshift clothesline, stretched across one end of the room. His boots were close enough to the fireplace to dry but not get too hot and become stiff. A stack of wood was placed beside the fireplace, in which the fire was burning hungrily. The room was warm and comforting. One room was all there was. A bed, washstand, basin, and small dining table seemed to make up the entirety of the furnishings. Blankets were hung over the four windows in the small cabin to help ward off the cold. It also kept out the light, so the room was lighted with a kerosene lamp that was sitting on the table. He obviously did his cooking in those ancient iron pots that were suspended from hangers in the fireplace. The old man lifted a lid from one of the pots and the aroma filled Gabe's nostrils, causing him to salivate. He noticed the wolf was doing the same thing. The old man ignored his questions and asked, "Would you like something to eat?"

"I'm starved, but I'd prefer not eating naked."

“Well, I undressed you but I’m not going to dress you, unless you’re unable to do that yourself. You can wear the blanket and get your clothes, if you’re bashful.”

“I was in the military too long to be shy, but I’m not sure I can stand up.”

Gabe tried to get off the floor where he was laying but found he was too dizzy to stand. “Here!” the old man said. “Let me help you to the bed.” Placing his hands under Gabe’s arms, he fairly lifted him off the floor and guided him to the bed. “I’ll get your clothes.” Good heavens, Gabe thought, the man is as strong as a mule.

As he was dressing, he noticed the wolf had walked over to the door. “So you want to go out huh? Don’t stay too long. We’re gonna eat,” said the old man. As he opened the door Gabe could see that the light was dusky, yet he didn’t know if it was evening or morning. A draft of cold air squeezed in around the wolf as if trying to find somewhere to warm its breath. Gabe noticed that there were heavy snow flurries enveloping the little cabin.

“Does the dog belong to you,” Gabe asked?

“He’s not a dog. He’s a full-blooded wolf. Some years back, I happened upon his mother in a trap. She was too far-gone to save. Fortunately, I found her den where there were two little half-starved pups. I brought them home but only one survived. No! He doesn’t belong to me. Wolf doesn’t belong to anybody. We’ve just been partners for a long time.” Suddenly there was the cry of the alpha male wolf from somewhere close to the cabin. It was one of those protracted wails that seem to proclaim both its authority and pain. Finally it ended; and hardly was it over when the old man went over to the door and opened it just as Wolf came trotting in. He nonchalantly shook the snow off his thick coat and licked the old man’s hand. “Did you give them all the news, big boy?” He asked. These two understood each other in a language that surpassed vocabulary, thought Gabe.

“Have you always called him, Wolf?” asked Gabe.

“Well, I thought about other names but that’s what the Bible called him, so I thought that was good enough for me. Are you about ready to eat now? You’re probably well nigh starved by now, seeing you haven’t eaten for awhile.”

“What day is it anyway?”

“Tuesday.”

“That means I’ve lost two days. I went down on Sunday. Have I been here all that time?”

“Why don’t we eat first and we’ll talk later?” With that the old man went over to the two pots he had in the fireplace, swung the hinged lid on one and dipped some of its contents into a bowl and set it on the table in front of Gabe. He returned with another bowl filled from the other pot and repeated the process again. Gabe had already tasted from one of the bowls when the old man sat down, bowed his head and prayed a simple prayer of thanksgiving—first for the food and then for his guest the Lord had sent to him. Gabe pondered that last sentence. There was meat of some sort in one bowl and vegetables in the other. He looked around and there were no canned goods of any type in sight. Never had food tasted so good. It all tasted so fresh, despite the lack of refrigeration.

After they had finished eating the old man said, “Guess we had better introduce ourselves. I’m Jesse Willit. My friends call me Jesse or Will. And who might you be?”

“I’m Gabe Hunter.”

“Is Gabe short for something else?”

Gabe hated to be pressed but he relented. “Yeah, it’s short for Gabriel.”

“Ah! Man of God.”

“What?” Gabe almost choked on that remark.

“Man of God. That’s what Gabriel means. When did you start cutting it short to Gabe?”

“Well, I’ve been called Gabe for as long as I can remember. My parents called me Gabe. I just happened to see my birth certificate and discovered my name was Gabriel.”

“It’s strange how parents will give their child a biblical name of prophetic greatness and then shorten it to something that has no meaning at all. The name Gabriel has the power of God vested in it; Gabe entails no biblical meaning.” The old man minced few words.

“What does your name mean? Or is it a biblical name?” Gabe had suddenly become interested in the name connection.

“The name Jesse means—gift. I was destined from birth to be a gift to people. Many people have tried to call me Jess; but I have corrected them immediately. Jess is not a gift—Jesse is.” The old man seemed to stand a few inches taller, obviously proud of his name.

“By naming me Gabriel, I suppose my parents sure hung the wrong name on me, for I’ve been a hell-raiser most of my life.”

“You’re life’s not over yet.” With that the old man got up and headed for the door. Wolf immediately followed him. “Better go feed Bell before it gets too dark. She’s my mule. She’s been with me longer than Wolf.” He stepped out the door and left Gabe to his thoughts.

By this Gabe assumed it was evening. Thoughts were swirling around in his head like a swarm of bees. How did he get here? Was this the old man, the wolf and the mule he had seen when he went to sleep in the snow? He had thought he was hallucinating. How far is this cabin from where they found him? Did they just stumble across him or had they heard the plane go down? Was that the same wolf that had followed him for the better part of three hours after his landing? Did Wolf somehow communicate his whereabouts to the old man? He would have had to get him into the warmth quickly or he would still have died. Or did he die? How old was the old man and how did he remain so strong? There were endless questions begging for answers.

Footsteps at the door alerted Gabe that the old man was returning. He had hardly entered when Gabe started questioning him. “When flying over early Sunday morning, I saw smoke from this area. I took it to be a prospector camping in for a couple of days. Guess it was you, huh?”

“Probably. We don’t live here anymore but return occasionally to check out the old home place.”

“Where do you live now?” Gabe prodded.

The old man was reluctant to answer so Gabe didn’t press the question. This was one of the things he liked about Alaska. People didn’t pry into your past or your business, for that manner. He finally responded with an answer that wasn’t really an answer, “Well, we live a considerable distance from here. You probably wouldn’t know where it is.” There was such finality in his voice that Gabe considered the subject closed.

“I’m certainly lucky that you happened to be here at this time or I would be dead.”

“Well son, I don’t believe in luck, seeing that God rules over the affairs of men and the world is kept under close scrutiny. Whatever happened to you, happened of the Father’s will.” The old man spoke with assurance.

“Do you mean to tell me that God knew I was going to land dead-stick in the snow and fall through the ice and nearly die were it not for you and Wolf?” Incredulity clothed his voice.

The old man ignored the open skepticism. "Don't forget Bell. She helped too. Of course God knew. Do you think God is caught unaware by anything? God knew, before you were born, all the events of your life and especially these last few days. You said you were in the military, and I saw some nasty scars on your body when I undressed you. Do you not think that God was watching over you wherever you were? Tell me about the wounds." He saw that his last statement had made Gabe uncomfortable so he quickly added, "That can wait 'til another time."

Gabe's eyes had dropped unconsciously to his arm where an angry scar crawled from his wrist almost to his shoulder, like some giant centipede searching for prey. "I've got to get out of here, wherever here is, so I can retrieve my plane before the snow melts and I can't take off," Gabe blurted, anxious to change the subject.

"You'll have plenty of time. Time doesn't mean anything to God or to those that walk in His will," He replied. "You were pretty well frozen by the time we got you back into the warmth. It takes time for everything to heal properly."

"If it took so long, then why didn't I lose some fingers or toes to frostbite, or for that matter, why didn't I develop gangrene?" Gabe was now thoroughly perplexed at this impossible situation.

"There are some things I'll have to explain to you later. Your mind is still a bit fuzzy." Replied the old man knowingly.

If time doesn't mean anything to God, and this man seems to be pretty close to Him, then what exactly does he mean by 'later'? "You ever been married?" Gabe probed, hoping to dig his way out of this labyrinth of intellectual darkness.

"Oh! Yes. Wilma and I were married some fifty-two years before the Lord took her about four years ago. She's buried in the little family cemetery plot out in the back." The old man answered softly.

After some quick math, Gabe figured the old man to be between seventy-five and eighty years old. How did he retain his strength? "Were you a trapper or miner before you moved away?" Gabe asked.

"Neither," was his reply. "I wouldn't think of trapping some of God's creatures just to sell a part of their body. I don't have anything against anyone else doing it; I just couldn't bring myself to do it. As for mining, I've seen men groveling around in the mud, fighting and killing each other over a piece of shiny metal, that was usually spent on bad whisky and equally bad women. No! I logged—that is, Bell and I did. Logged and hacked cross-ties. A timber company would come in once a month with a huge wagon and a mule team and pick up the ties that I had hewed. We didn't make much money; but we lived comfortably enough. I did kill

game but only to eat. Had to kill bears more than once to protect Bell and me. Man gets into all sorts of trouble and brings numerous problems on his head when he begins to toil after more than he needs. Those that do such things call us that do not, lazy and slothful. Ambition causes men to do terrible things to other men. Are you an ambitious man, Mister Hunter, or are you one that wallows in the doldrums?”

The question bothered Gabe, especially as it was addressed to Mister Hunter. Gabe didn't consider himself ambitious at all. In fact, many men had called him a complete failure in view of the fact that he didn't attempt to enlarge his business. Yet something in the old man's tone of voice annoyed him somewhat. “I suppose, under different circumstances, I could be very ambitious; but I do not consider myself to be presently of an aspiring nature, especially to climb over other men to achieve my goal. To be caught in the doldrums is something all men experience occasionally. Why do you ask that?”

“To be caught in the doldrums is one thing—to make your abode there is quite another. Men live there because they have abandoned their faith—not their faith in themselves, but their faith in God. Like the “Ancient Mariner” they have given up all hope of ever being lifted out of their dilemma, and the albatross of despair hovers over their lives.”

Gabe bristled inside. “I've never depended on anyone else to lift me out of a hole I've dug for myself.”

“Where then is your faith in God? You would have perished if we had not helped you from the river.” The old man responded.

“Then did God send you to rescue me?” Gabe asked incredulously.

“You could say that. Even after you had abandoned your faith, God remains faithful.” The old man continued to probe areas that Gabe understood to be personal. “Do you have any desire to help a man be better than he is?” The old man pressed.

Gabe was becoming somewhat nettled. “Not really. I believe every man chooses to some extent which lily pad he will sit on. He can rise above his circumstances or wallow in his own bed of self-pity. Every man begins this life on level ground.”

“You can't really believe that.” The old man had turned to look Gabe full in the face. “Do you not believe that different men are endowed with different abilities?”

“Doesn't God say that all men are created equal?” Gabe could feel his face getting the same color as his hair.

“No, God does not say that. Thomas Jefferson coined that phrase, then Abraham Lincoln borrowed it. Since then, men have attributed it to God because it sounds like something they think God would say.”

“Do you mean to say that God creates men with different abilities and different levels of intelligence, that He chooses one to be born in poverty and another to be birthed in the lap of luxury? Why?” Gabe was becoming more perplexed.

The volume or cryptic tone of the old man’s voice never changed. “May I ask if you made the choice, before you were born, to choose your birthplace, your parents, the color of your skin, or the level of your I.Q.? Did you decide you would be six feet tall with sandy red hair instead of being a five-foot aborigine in the outback of Australia? Actually, you had nothing to do with your color, race, size or level of intelligence. These were all chosen for you. ‘Of those who are given much, shall much be required.’ Now that’s God speaking, not Abraham Lincoln.”

Gabe sat silent a long time. It seemed every time he opened his mouth he displayed his ignorance in this arena where this old man walked in comfort. He’d be safer not saying anything. But the old man seemed determined to uncover the thorns in Gabe’s being that had been such a chafing problem throughout his lifetime. The old man in mock innocence laid another snare. “What type of maintenance do you do on your plane? Do you have a check-list on the survival gear as well?” he queried. The question seemed innocent enough.

Gabe comforted himself before the warming fire as he verbally proceeded through the list of things he checked before every flight. “I’ve never been interested in becoming a statistic in tomorrow’s headline.” He added, as if to emphasize their significance.

When he had finished, the old man with a cherub-like countenance, asked, “Is that all?”

Gabe knew that his military training plus his thoroughness had made him one of the best, if not the best, bush pilots in Alaska and this hidden little insinuation annoyed him. “Do you have a suggestion of something I should do further?” he asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Do you seek your spirit’s recommendation? Did you consult with your spirit at all before you took off Sunday?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Do I seek the answer on some Ouija board or do I read tea leaves or just throw bones and stones?” He answered sarcastically. He regretted it the moment he said it for he owed this man his life. However, being indebted to another was something he disliked, for it made him feel weak and vulnerable.

“Are you telling me that a man of your years and intelligence has never felt a little nudge or check deep inside? Haven’t you ever had that gut feeling about your actions beforehand that turned out exactly as you had felt?” The old man questioned.

“Well sure, I’ve had those. In fact, they probably saved my life a couple of times in Nam; but I was in real danger then. I thought that only worked when you were in extreme peril.” His statement made him feel a little foolish seeing how near death he had been. How much closer to danger could a person be?

“Man does not realize how he is constantly threading his way through a minefield of danger each day of his life.” The old man said. “Because he is blind to the things of the Spirit of God, he doesn’t give much credence to the persuasion and direction of the spirit that dwells within him. He has to be reined in quite abruptly before he will listen. Had you developed a relationship with the spirit within, you would never have taken off without correcting the problem that caused you to go down.”

The old man’s rational was something Gabe found hard to accept, for he was a man who had always faced each tangled web with a “why” or a “how”. With that “why” was the insatiable desire to find a sensible reason behind every complexity life threw his way. Things just didn’t happen—there was a logical explanation behind every accident or malfunction. The magician’s reputation has been given credence because of gullible people who refused to investigate the “why” and the “how.” “Do you ever question God about some incident or situation?” He blurted out.

The old man gave Gabe a quizzical look and nodded. “Of course I have. I’ve asked God many questions. What father does not invite the exploring mind of his child? However, you would not give your child a detailed answer to every question. To some questions you would not answer at all. Neither does God answer every question. There are many “whys” and “hows” that we ask, to which God simply remains silent. To many, when God remains silent or does not respond to their prayers, they become disillusioned with Him and lose their faith.” This thing was getting a little scary. It was as if the old man had targeted the centered of Gabe’s thoughts.

Gabe looked at the gaunt figure before him and again his flowing mane of hair and long beard reminded him of pictures of prophets he had seen as a child. He had long remembered the pictures of ancient men, as gnarled as the staff upon which they leaned. He unconsciously glanced around the room for the old man’s staff. This man has never leaned on anything, he thought. “Are you a prophet or a preacher?” He was a little fearful of the answer.

“I suppose I’m a little of both. A preacher is one who proclaims a message—any message. In the true sense of the word, every man is a preacher. We are

constantly proclaiming a message, either in word or in deed and men hear our message loud and clear—whether we're a mime or an auctioneer. A prophet is one who speaks for another. In that case I am a prophet for I speak for God almighty." There was no boasting or pride, just a simple statement spoken out of immovable faith.

This last phrase alarmed Gabe for he had never met a man who spoke for God. He studied the old man in the shadows of the room. It seemed he was completely at peace in his own little world. The wolf seemed just as contented. Gabe knew instinctively that the mule was of the same nature. Had he only known, he would have realized that it wasn't a "little world" in which the old man dwelled. "If you speak for God, how do you hear Him? Is His voice like thunder or like a whisper?" He asked.

"Well, I've never heard His voice like thunder. I think that would scare me terribly. For the most part it is as soft as a thought. That gut feeling that you have had, did it have any volume to it? Yet I have heard his voice as clear as I hear you. To seek that voice and to listen for that whisper is (as the Apostle Paul puts it) 'to walk in the Spirit'. God gives man a great deal of freedom but desires his availability."

All this religious stuff had left Gabe's mind in a whirl, and he had to escape for awhile. "I feel kinda tired. Since I've been sacked out here on the floor for two days, I believe I'll just stretch out here by the fire."

"That'll be fine, but you're perfectly welcome to the bed. You know you'll probably have company. Wolf feels responsible for you. He gave you body heat when you had none."

Gabe was unaware of how long he slept; but he awoke again with fur in his face and the moment he stirred, Wolf was up and at the door. The old man moved silently to the door and pulled it open. Didn't he ever sleep, Gabe thought? Wolf was out like an arrow loosed from the bow. Gabe lay still, thinking about some of the things the old man had said. He had something boiling in the fireplace that smelled like oatmeal. "You been up long?" Gabe asked. He assumed it was morning.

"Oh! I don't require a lot of sleep. I've been meditating for awhile." Suddenly the morning stillness was broken by the call of the lone wolf. Gabe knew it was Wolf announcing his presence to all within earshot; but it was amazing how prolonged the howl was. A little chill went down his spine as he listened to the icy performance. He could imagine Wolf standing with his muzzle lifted toward the heavens and a stream of frosty breath embracing the sound. As before, the howl had hardly died when Wolf bounded through the door just as the old man opened it. The timing was perfect—eerily perfect. The old man looked at Wolf and said, "You must have had more to say this morning than usual."

It didn't take Gabe long to get dressed, since all he had to do was put on his boots. He had thought it a little foolish to undress and chance sleeping cold. An icy wash in the water basin really brought him to life. At the old man's motion, he sat down at the little table while a pot was carried from the fireplace and set before him. Oatmeal was spooned out into a bowl and set before Gabe and then another in the place where the old man always sat. Remembering last night's meal, he waited for Jesse to pray. The prayer was not much different except he thanked the Lord for the strength that He had poured into his guest and the testimony of his ordeal. Gabe didn't quite know what to make of that; but if it pleased the old man, he was happy.

The meal was filling if not the tastiest in the world. Suddenly the old man announced, "You'll be leaving this morning. Don't worry about the plane. You'll be back in plenty of time. Remember! Check your spirit." Gabe thought about where he was going and how he would get there; but the old man was utterly certain about the outcome. "Get your coat, I want to show you where Wilma is buried." To go sight-seeing in a cemetery this early in the morning was not the highest on Gabe's list of things to do; nevertheless, he followed Jesse through the snow like an obedient puppy. Hardly twenty-five yards behind the cabin was a neat little cemetery enclosed by a picket fence. The cemetery was hardly thirty feet square—a typical family resting-place. In one corner of the picket fence was a gate hung by two large metal hinges. Over in the opposite corner stood a blue spruce about eight feet tall. River rocks formed a small border around Wilma's grave while a slab of stone marked the head. The dates had been neatly chiseled into the stone; but moss had obscured them until their message was safe beneath the growth. The old man stood for a moment, at the foot of Wilma's grave, without any trace of emotion. Gabe scanned the small cemetery but saw no other burial plots—just the one.

"Forgive me for asking but did you have any children?" Gabe inquired.

"Oh! Yes, we had a couple of boys but they got to chasin' after gold and we completely lost track of both of them. They kept in touch for awhile but then the letters became fewer and then nothing. One of them would have been about your age. The other was older. The enticement of riches was too great. It broke Wilma's heart. No doubt it contributed to her early death. Tell me Gabriel, did you ever father any children?"

Gabe hated these questions. The old man continued to pry into areas he considered private, but he himself had opened the door. "Yes. I have one boy who'd be about eight now. I haven't seen him since he was a baby, so I've lost all influence in his life." An obvious remorse had risen to the surface as Gabe spoke of his son.

"That's not true." Jesse spoke with finality. "You may have lost intimacy and oversight but you have more influence over your son, in the realm of the spirit,

than you realize.” Gabe could not unravel any logic from this unfamiliar territory so he let it lay for the moment.

They walked out of the cemetery back toward the house. Jesse suddenly stopped, turned and pointed back toward the cemetery. “The river is right over that ridge about half a mile,” he said. Stopping by the barn, he stepped inside and said, “This is Bell. She carried you from the place where you had given up.” It sounded like a formal introduction. Wolf, who had been silent most of their little tour, walked into the stall and rubbed against Bell’s leg. Bell nuzzled him and emitted a low throaty sound. It was evident that there existed a deep bond between these two. “Bell will be carrying you up to the ranger station as soon as you’re ready.” Gabe noticed fresh bales of hay stacked along the wall and a row of five-gallon buckets, which, he assumed, contained oats—probably the same thing they had eaten earlier. “You go on into the house, and I’ll get Bell ready for your little trip,” Jesse said. As soon as Gabe was out of sight, he could hear Jesse talking to Bell—no doubt giving her instructions. The whole thing was so eerie that it made him shudder.

The ranger station Gabe was familiar with; but he had no idea how far it was. Jesse had called it a little trip; but knowing what he now did of Jesse, it could be days. He went inside and gathered up what was his. All he had escaped with was the clothes on his back; but he always carried a spare set of wool socks in his parka lining. The old man had washed them, and he placed them inside the lining just in case his feet got wet.

Jesse walked in and gave Gabe a piercing look—not harsh, but piercing. “You have been preserved for a reason. I know you’ll do good.”

“For what reason have I been spared? Gabe asked, not sure he wanted to know.

“I can’t tell you that but you’ll discover that in due time. Let me repeat, don’t rely on logic as your guide. Well, Bell’s ready.”

Walking out on the porch, Gabe saw the old mule bridled and a blanket thrown across her back. “I don’t have a saddle, and to ride bareback would leave one terrible blister on your tailbone. She’s real gentle and she’ll go at her own pace. She knows the way to the ranger station but she won’t approach it. There’s a fork in the trail about four hundred yards from the station. You can see the ranger station from there. She won’t go any farther. They put the dogs on her once and that’s as close as she’ll go. Take the blanket off her when you get there. That’s her signal to come back home. Don’t worry about her. She’s made that trip hundreds of times. It’s only about fifteen miles.”

After shaking Jesse’s hand and thanking him generously, Gabe stepped off the porch onto Bell’s back. She merely looked back at him as if to see that he was

seated properly, probably thinking about the last time he had been on her back. Satisfied that he wasn't going to fall off; Bell turned and started up the mountain without so much as a signal from the old man or a click of his tongue.

Bell plodded through the snow with a steady pace that would have tired most horses; yet it seemed not to bother her in the least. Suddenly, Gabe caught a glimpse of a gray animal some three hundred yards to one side and instinctively knew that it was Wolf. Was it imagination or was it that thing Jesse had called 'spirit'? What a strange trio these three were. It was as if Gabe had been snatched off this planet and set down in the midst of benevolent alien creatures. Little did he know.

Within the next five hours, Gabe spotted Wolf a number of times, first on one side and then the other. It was as if he wanted to make sure that Bell delivered her cargo. Who knows, maybe the old man was also out there somewhere in the snow and timber. The thought gave him goose bumps. He'd had to stop two or three times coming up the trail. He rationalized that it was to give Bell a rest, but she didn't seem tired at all. In fact, she seemed a little impatient to go, as she pawed the ground; but he wasn't up to riding that long on anything without wings and an engine. About five hours after he had left Jesse's cabin, he came to the fork in the road, and just as Jesse had predicted, Bell stopped. Sure enough, he could see the ranger station about four hundred yards ahead but Bell wouldn't budge in any direction; so Gabe slid to the ground, taking the blanket with him. Hardly had he hit the snow-covered ground, when Bell turned and was on her way back down the logging road in a slow trot. She as much as said, "I've finished my job." He watched her until she disappeared from view then rolled up the old blanket and tied it with one of his socks. Wolf began one of his extended howls. He couldn't see him; but it was as if he was saying goodbye. Even without seeing him, he knew he looked magnificent.

Chapter 5

Ranger Gibson

Gabe kicked the snow off his boots and walked into the ranger station just as the ranger came out of a closed office. "Where did you come from?" the ranger asked. His startled expression spoke volumes.

"I had to set my plane down a few days ago, and I've been awhile getting out."

"You wouldn't be Gabe Hunter would you?"

"One and the same."

"Well, the Civil Air Patrol found your plane Monday. Dewey Burkett has been trying to reach you. He's radioed every day to see if there's any news of you. He grew uneasy when he couldn't raise you on the ham set. Then he contacted someone else in Mok Tok, and they told him your plane hadn't come in and your truck was still at the hanger. CAP immediately started looking for you and spotted your plane without much trouble. Seems you've flown that river a number of times. They set their helicopter down near your plane, then tracked you to the spot where you fell through the ice. They couldn't find any trace of a fire so they were convinced of the worse. How'd you manage to stay alive?"

"This may sound like a fairy-tale; but old man Willit and his wolf found me immediately after I crawled ashore. The current had taken my snowshoes and survival kit. I'd sure be a goner if they hadn't come by." By this time the Ranger was backing away from the counter and had turned three shades whiter. "Say," remarked Gabe, "You don't look so good. You're not sick are you?"

"You say it was old man Willit who saved you? Was his name Jesse Willit?" Gabe nodded. "And you say he had a wolf with him?" Again Gabe nodded. "He wouldn't have happened to have a mule also, did he?"

"As a matter of fact, it was his mule that carried me up here from their cabin. See! I still have her blanket. Jesse didn't have a saddle."

The ranger grew even whiter. "Now that's really a stretch. You see, according to our records, Jesse Willit died about fifty years ago. His wolf dog and the mule had died long before him. The last time I was down there the old cabin was nothing but a pile of rotting timbers; so you see, you must be mistaken." Now it was Gabe's turn to blanch.

"So how do you account for this horse blanket he gave me to ride old Bell up here?" Gabe's red hair was tingling at the roots.

"I can't account for that. I can't even account for the fact that you are Gabe Hunter. You wouldn't happen to have any identification, would you?" Gabe shook his head. "No, I didn't think so. Do you know anyone in the CAP?"

"Sure. I've worked with them for five years."

"Then maybe we'd better call them." Ranger Gibson sat down at the radio and after a few minutes had some CAP personnel on the other end. "Is this Jim? Well, I've got someone here who claims to be Gabe Hunter." After a brief pause he continued. "Oh! He's about six one with sandy red hair and a beard to match. Looks like he may weigh a hundred and ninety pounds. Okay, I'll put him on."

"Jim! This is Gabe. I'm at the ranger station close to where my plane went down. Can I get a ride out of here? Yeah—tomorrow morning will be fine. Well, it's kind of a strange story. I'll tell you about it when I see you." He turned to see the ranger eyeing him with more than a little disbelief mixed with wonder.

Before he could sign off Dewey Burkett cut in, "So you're the best bush pilot in Alaska? Maybe I'd better change carriers. Where'd you go down?"

"About twenty miles from the ranger station. I left my plane setting on a gravel bar of the river. Yeah, I'll talk to you later. Glad that you were concerned."

The ranger cast a peculiar look in his direction and said, "I think you'll find out that you were a lot farther than twenty miles." He didn't elaborate. "I'll fix up a cot for you and you can spend the night here. CAP will be in here with a chopper first thing in the morning. By the way, have you eaten anything?"

"Not since morning. Jesse fixed some meat and vegetables every night and oatmeal in the morning. But I sure could use something about now."

Gibson gave him that look again and remarked, "Well, you don't look too much for the worse. Guess he was a pretty good cook. I may not be as good." He opened up a few cans of vegetable stew, and after heating them over a propane stove, they sat down. Without thinking Gabe waited for him to return thanks and was a little embarrassed when Gibson said, "Dig in, or doesn't my cooking measure up?" Gabe served himself a big helping and after taking a few bites had to agree. It didn't measure up. But what can you expect coming out of a can.

Gabe stripped down to his long johns for the first time since he woke up naked in the old man's cabin. It felt good not having on the cumbersome clothing, but he knew he was going to miss the warmth of Wolf's furry body next to him. He drifted off quickly but rested fitfully. Throughout the night he could hear the voices of loggers and muleskinners yelling commands. He listened to the chopping of the broadax as someone hewed cross ties. Occasionally, he thought

he heard the howl of an alpha male wolf. He awakened to the smell of coffee and was grateful to Gibson for brewing a pot. He hadn't had any coffee since he and Dewey had shared a couple of cups at his claim.

Ranger Gibson's coffee was much better than Dewey's, but the camaraderie was less genteel. How can you have companionship with someone who treats you like an intruding fraud? Ranger Gibson was actually like Gabe in many ways. Isn't it strange how we dislike the qualities in another that are prevalent in our own lives? Ranger Gibson began cooking some salt bacon, sourdough biscuits and powdered eggs. Gabe could hardly wait to sink his teeth into the mountainous portions. Very little was said during the meal. Gabe was concentrating on the meal that his stomach was noisily welcoming. It was as good as he could remember; and with another swig of coffee he washed down the remaining morsels. Ranger Gibson had sat in thoughtful silence through the entire meal.

"I spent a great deal of time thinking after you went to sleep last night," Gibson said. "You know, hypothermia will cause hallucinations which are as real as anything a person could experience. How you survived this past week, I don't know; but that's the only logical answer to what you say you remember. Yep! That's got to be the answer."

Gabe looked at the ranger with more than a little irritation; yet he understood his skepticism. He was a realist also. There was more than a little irritation in his voice as he responded. "Being in your profession, I understand you have to deal in facts. I would imagine you've had more than one encounter with raving lunatics. I've also met my share of men who went "bushy" by being by themselves too long. You may remember Tom Casey, an ex college professor, who went as balmy as a lifelong wino. But he had been in the bush for over seven years. He thought his old malamute was his mining partner. I've only been away from civilization for one week. I remember distinctly crawling out of the river, although the men from CAP could find no exit, neither trail nor campfire. The temperature was around zero. You were trained in survival. How long would a man, soaked to the bone, last under those circumstances? You're skeptical of my story about Jesse Willit, and I'm more than a little skeptical about your version of Jesse. We'll have to allow some time for the real truth to reveal itself."

Chapter 6

Jim Vandergraf

The pop, pop, pop of the chopper blades cut short the remainder of their opinionated conversation. It was just as well. Both men were too much alike to walk this flinty path without kicking up some sparks. Gabe grew hot under the collar when men thought him to be one who played loosely with the truth, and Gibson was somewhat insulted that someone expected him to believe such a tall tale.

Swirls of snow raced out from the downdraft of the chopper blades as it eased its skis to the ground. Gabe and the ranger both waited until the blades had almost stopped, neither man wanting to brave the snow shower. The plastic bubble opened and Jim stepped to the snow, smiling as he came toward Gabe. "We thought you had bought it. Should of known an old bear like you would find a way to survive." Jim Vandergraf had also spent time in Nam as a helicopter pilot, and he remembered how Gabe had cheated death more than once. He was now a bush pilot flying out of Fairbanks, where he lived with his family. He flew with Civil Air Patrol when someone was down or lost. "You did a awesome job setting that plane down. Why did you leave it? When we found that hole in the ice with no exit tracks, we just knew you were a goner."

"It's a long story. Guess we'd better have a lotta time and some good hot coffee before we get into that." Jim shot a questioning glance toward Gibson, who just shrugged his shoulders. "Have we got time to go by the plane? There's something I want to check."

"Let's have a cup of coffee with Gibson before we go. Don't get to see this old hermit very often." They all went back into the ranger cabin and Gibson began brewing coffee on his propane cook-stove. "How did you get from there to here?" Jim asked. "That's some walk even with snow-shoes."

"He says he rode a mule out of there." Gibson couldn't hold it in any longer. "Says he's been with a man who rescued him, but who's actually been dead for fifty years." Gabe felt the hair tingle on the back of his neck. He knew he turned red, if they could have seen it under his red beard. However, they both could see his knuckles turn white so the subject was dropped for the time being.

After the coffee was finished, Gabe stood and extended his hand to Gibson. "Thanks for the meals and cot. You must get lonely out here throughout the winter."

"We're not open the entire winter. We come in around the middle of March and are open 'til the last of October. It does get a little lonesome sometimes but then

we have some interesting guests drop in on us occasionally.” He grinned at the last remark.

“Better get your gear together.” Jim said.

Picking up the old blanket Gabe answered, “You’re looking at it.”

“Is that your security blanket?” Jim asked jokingly.

“Well, it hasn’t been in the past, but it very well could be now.” With that the two men strode toward the chopper, leaving Gibson looking a little lost and forlorn. As soon as they had boarded and the rotor blades were turning, Gabe yelled at Jim, “Do you mind if I take the controls for awhile?”

“She’s your baby.” Gabe lifted the chopper off the ground and headed back toward the logging trail that he and Bell had plodded up yesterday. He flew slowly looking for the trail, but could find no clear-cut opening.

Gibson was watching from a distance, expecting them to do this. If they were looking for the road, they would be in for a surprise. Timber had not been cut on anything up here for over thirty years. The fir and birch had long since reclaimed the land and healed most of the scars men had left on this mountain.

Try as he might, Gabe could not find the logging road that Bell and he had traveled only one day before. He remembered the old man said the river was just over the little rise behind his cabin, so Gabe swung the chopper in a hard right turn and headed in the direction of the river. Minutes later he was over the river flying slowly upstream. From a thousand feet, he could see everything for three to four miles. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed when he spotted what appeared to be the ruins of a cabin, lying in the general direction of where Jesse’s cabin would have been. It was hidden in a grove of thirty-year-old birch. Flying slowly over the spot, Gabe lowered the chopper until he was barely two hundred feet above the shambles. It had a familiar look but was out of his time frame. Jim was watching Gabe with intense curiosity as he lifted the aircraft back to one thousand feet and headed upriver again.

Flying the river, twenty minutes had elapsed when Jim reached over and shook Gabe’s leg. Pointing downward, Gabe followed his direction and could see the hole in the ice where his journey had taken its bizarre turn. He flew in low and, sure enough, there were clear tracks leading to the breakthrough but none leading any farther. Little wonder they thought him dead, Gabe thought solemnly. Turning back upstream, they had flown less than five minutes, when he spotted his plane. He set the chopper down upriver from his plane and cut the power, letting the blade’s rotation die slowly. “How far do you reckon it is from here to where I fell in?” Gabe asked.

“Oh, maybe three miles.” Jim offered.

“And how far from where I fell through the ice to the old shack I circled?”

“Perhaps thirty or thirty-five miles.”

Gabe nodded in agreement, but a look of deep consternation clouded his countenance. Walking over to the plane, he headed directly to the inspection plate in the bottom of the wing, jerked it open and examined the fuel line coming from the wing tank to the selector valve. Moving it, he found it to be reasonably flexible. Moving to the other side, he repeated the process and frowned as he moved the gas line. Where the two lines joined together was a noticeable stiffness. He cursed silently under his breath. Why hadn't he checked this before he took off plodding through the snow like some harebrained Cheechako? It was as if some higher power had dulled the rationale of his normal thinking in order to lead him to Jesse Willit. “Got some ice in the fuel line. Seems like it did its job right here in the changeover valve. I had just switched tanks when it started to die. I switched back to the other tank, but it never caught on. Had some water in the full tank which froze immediately after hitting the metal valve.”

“You wantta try to start her now or come back for her tomorrow or the day after?” Jim asked.

“Well, I hate to cause you an extra trip, if I can possibly get it out today. I've got tools here.” Reaching into a storage bin, he extracted a box of tools; and after cutting off the fuel supply, he immediately began to loosen the connections and free the switching mechanism in the fuel line. Fifteen minutes later the valve lay open in his hand. Trying to blow air through the valve was unsuccessful, so Gabe took the valve assembly over to the chopper and laid it on the hot manifold. Minutes later he began to see water drain from the valve. Putting the valve to his lips, he could now blow air through the valve assembly without any sense of restriction. “Well, let's see if we can get some fuel through this baby.”

“How'd you get her turned around like this if you came in from the other direction?” Jim asked.

“Well, I was rocking her with the rudders and just as we got to this point the right ski dug in and spun me around facing exactly the direction I had come.” Gabe answered.

The warm assembly went back on easier than it was removed; and within minutes, he checked fresh fuel at the carburetor. “Jim, I know this thing won't start, having set out here this long. I don't think we can get the chopper close enough for the cables to reach. Do you think we can borrow one of your batteries to get it jump-started?” Removing the battery from the chopper was a bear so Jim and Gabe were both breathing out a lot of steam by the time they

had freed the battery and lowered it to the ground. Gabe pulled the jumper cables from the storage bin and hooked them to his own battery. Climbing into the cockpit he held up crossed fingers and exclaimed, "Moment of truth!" The old Continental made torturous sounds of protest but suddenly sputtered to life one cylinder at a time. They both cheered as the metal beast smoothed to a confident idle and white vapor blew from the exhaust. Both men were puffing after they had finished lifting the oversized battery back into position in the chopper and reconnected the harness. "Now let's see if your machine will start," Gabe said. Since it was still warm, the chopper started without any problem and Jim got out to talk to Gabe.

"You think you've got enough runway to take off?" He asked.

Gabe nodded in the affirmative. "I've noticed that the snow has a thin layer of ice on the top. That'll help me get up to speed quicker. Also, I can run right off onto the river without any fear, once I get moving pretty fast." After packing all his tools and cables in the bin, Gabe reached into another compartment and retrieved the four by six-inch piece of timber he used to break the skis from the ice. Having finished that little chore, he walked over to Jim, who had been watching with interest and said, "Jim, I'm going to fly with you to Fairbanks. We can have a little chat there. You take off first and wait around 'til I'm up."

Jim lifted the whirlybird off the ground and hovered about five hundred feet, while Gabe revved the engine in the old Cessna. He stomped the rudders first one direction then the other until the plane was free from the ice. Giving it full throttle, Gabe roared down the snow covered gravel bar and was airborne before he had reached the river. This time he did say, "Thank you, Lord." He dipped his wing to Jim and took to the lead. Just in case he experienced any trouble, Jim could see him. The flight to Fairbanks was uneventful and Fairbanks tower directed him to a small strip still covered in ice and snow that ran parallel to the main runway. The landing was routine but the taxiing was somewhat more difficult. Having accomplished that, he parked the Cessna and walked away, a sense of troubled freedom in his heart. Joining Jim in the hanger area, the two caught a taxi downtown.

Fairbanks was basically two cities, divided by the crystal clear waters of the Chena River. Cushman Street was no longer the main street of Fairbanks but had relinquished its throne to the Steese highway since the opening up of the northern slope to the oil rush. The gold rush of 1898 had surrendered its allurements to the power of the black gold in the northern slope in 1975. It had all changed considerably since the early days of the gold rush. In fact, it was hardly recognizable from just six short years ago. "Jim! What has happened to your city?" was Gabe's surprised question.

"Oil!" Was Jim's simple answer. "Overnight, men seemed to appear from out of nowhere. There were drillers, roughnecks, steel men, welders, pipefitters,

carpenters, engineers, and laborers. Oil had thrown its noose around them all. These were daring, adventuresome men, and they didn't always get along. The trade unions had open conflict at times. The bars and prostitutes did a booming business. They were always open for business and the jails were full. The police force had to be tripled. It wasn't like the gold rush where a man could stake his claim and maybe become rich; but still, there was a lot of money flowing in Fairbanks and this little city welcomed them with open arms. Available housing became non-existent. The price of our home tripled in less than a year. Only this year did the Alaska pipeline connect just east of the city. The Dalton highway is open, but not to the public." All Gabe could do was shake his head. "Come out to the house and meet the wife and children," Jim implored. "They'd love to meet you."

"Jim, I'm afraid I wouldn't be very good company," Gabe begged. But upon the insistence of Jim, he relented. "But only for a little while. I don't want to be too boring." In reality, Gabe dreaded the thought of more questions.

The taxi carried them across the Chena out toward the University of Alaska, turning off into a nice section of development with blue spruce and birch in abundance. "Here we are," exclaimed Jim, as he exited the taxi. "I'll pay." He said, handing the driver a bill. He looked at Gabe and smiled, knowing he had lost all identification and money in the accident. Gabe liked Jim. He was open and honest without pretence or distorted facade. Here was a man who wasn't trying to hide anything or run away from something. Whatever he had run from before he had either outdistanced, or it no longer held any power over him.

Jim's family all ran to meet them as they made their way to a two storied house with a deck overhanging the entire length of the house. After the formalities, they entered into an atmosphere as different from Gabe's habitat as night is from day. Jim's wife, Carol, had dinner on the stove, and the smell held promise of something Gabe hadn't experienced in a long time.

Chapter 7

Carol—Jim's Better Half

Carol was a big handsome woman with an infectious smile and a spontaneous laugh. As Gabe would soon find out, unlike most Alaskans, she was not at all shy about prying into your life. Maybe she was one of those rare ones, who had nothing to hide, so she assumed everyone else was just like her. As soon as the meal was set and they all were seated, they did exactly like the old man had done. Jim thanked the Lord for the food and for the guest He had sent their way. That was how Jesse had prayed. No sooner had the prayer ended when Carol opened the conversation, "So, how do you like our city?"

"It's a heap different than when I came here last time." was Gabe's reply. He didn't embellish the answer for he didn't care to engage in a prolonged conversation with this woman who seemed ready to pounce upon any supposed invitation. He was checking his doors to see if they were all properly closed.

"What brought you to Alaska?" Carol asked, seemingly oblivious to Gabe's curtness. The question sounded innocent enough; but his guard immediately arose and Gabe locked the door. "Did you and Jim know each other in Vietnam?" Rather than answer Gabe just nodded his head. Jim caught Carol's eye and frowned; but she wasn't a woman of subtleties. "Jim has mentioned you before—said you lived in a little Eskimo village on the edge of nowhere. Is that the best place for your business or did you choose to live there?"

God! She was pushy but her food was good. Had not Jim been his friend, he would have excused himself and walked out on this nosey woman; but at this stage in life, he began to sense that he needed all the friends he could gather. Gabe cleared his throat, overpowered the tingling on the back of his neck and forced a smile. He knew he had colored but they all seemed to ignore it. "I live in Mok Tok because I choose to live there. I like the solitude and people there. I tried Fairbanks and Anchorage but people there always seemed to ask a lot of personal questions." Now it was Carol's turn to blush. Jim turned his head and smiled. Gabe seemed not to notice

"Mister Hunter," Carol began, but Gabe held up his hand.

"Mister Hunter is my dad. My name is Gabe."

"Sorry, Gabe. You have a nice smile—that is, your mouth smiles but your eyes don't. Jim used to be like that when we first met. Do all Vietnam veterans do that?" She inquired gently.

"I can't answer for anyone else. As for me—I haven't found a lot to smile about in the last ten to twelve years. Nam took the smile out of thousands of young

men. War is a demanding master. It takes from you until there is nothing left to take, and then it discards the empty remains. I guess I enjoy life well enough; but its purpose has seemed to escape me. It appears to be a senseless cycle of chasing after something just out of reach; and if you finally catch up to it, you find it has very little substance or satisfaction. Like a cone of cotton candy, it promises much but delivers little.” Strangely Gabe seemed to sense he was being pulled into another trap—a trap which held an inexplicable attraction.

“You know, I’ve seen the same expressionless eyes in hundreds of people. Some were pictures of those caught in the Holocaust,” said Carol. “Those men had surrendered all hope and were filled with a terrible sadness because of their predicament or hatred toward their captors or anger at God for permitting them to be in their wrenching hell. Which one is it with you, Gabe?” Although Gabe sat with a vacant look, he felt a knot in his stomach as if someone with a pry bar was forcing entry into an area that had been sealed for a long time. “I don’t believe anyone chooses to be alone all the time unless he has been savagely wounded or is intensely angry at God.” Although his outward demeanor did not change, this last statement left Gabe reeling from the impact. Jim had slid quietly back into his chair and watched this woman, whose chatter had oftentimes been mistaken for shallowness, dismantle all the defenses this man of steel had erected around himself. “You know,” she continued, “most men who are angry at God are men who have an intense desire to know Him but cannot find Him. It seems the God others have preached simply does not exist.”

“The old man told me some of the same things.” Gabe said.

“What old man?” Carol asked.

Silence filled the room as Gabe drew in a deep breath and exhaled it with a loud sigh. “I might as well tell you. This will crystallize your suspicion of my sanity.” Jim suddenly sat up on the edge of his chair.

Starting from the beginning, Gabe related his flight to deliver the goods to Dewey and his subsequent landing on the riverbank. “I guess I was fortunate that the strut ski dug in and spun me around, otherwise I would have had trouble taking off.”

At this point Jim interrupted him and remarked, “Gabe, there was no indication that your ski had dug in. It appeared you had made a power turn with the rudder, except it was too radical. You couldn’t have turned that tight.” Now it was Gabe’s turn to look puzzled. “Another question. Why, in heaven’s name did you leave the plane?”

“Earlier on in my flight, I saw smoke coming from a cabin just down-river from where I went down. I thought it to be only about two hours away. I know—it violates every rule of survival, but it was almost as if something was pulling me.

The moment I stepped out of the plane, I heard the howl of a wolf and he began following me for the next three hours. I felt as if some primeval but kindred force was beckoning me—drawing me.” There were “knowing” glances passed between Jim and Carol, which Gabe missed.

“After I fell through the ice, I remember crawling out of the river and making my way to a huge tree that had fallen years ago. I sat down beside it and waited to die. I could smell the pungent odor of smoke, and I assumed it to be peat burning under the snow. Then I guess I began to hallucinate, for I saw a wolf, a mule and an old man standing near me as if they were waiting for me to die. Two days later, I awakened with fur in my face, a huge wolf curled up next to me and the same old man stirring some food in a pot, which was suspended over a fire in the fireplace. All my clothes were hanging on a line in the cabin, and I lay on the floor next to a warm fire. He told me his name was Jesse Willit. Later he told me that his wife, Wilma, had died about four years earlier. Saturday, he put me on his mule; and I rode up a logging trail to the ranger station where I called you. When Gibson asked me how I had gotten there and where I had been all this time I told him I had been with Jesse Willit who had saved my life. That’s when things got a little crazy. Gibson declared that Jesse Willit, who had lived in a cabin about fifteen miles down the mountain, had died about fifty years ago. That’s why I wanted to take the chopper around for a look.”

Jim let out a low whistle and Carol’s eyes were dancing as if she’d had a little too much champagne. Gabe looked first from one and then to the other, expecting the rolling eyes and look of resignation but both seemed excited and receptive to the story. “It looks as if God set a trap for you,” Carol said.

“What?”

“I said, it looks as if God set a trap for you.”

“I have no earthly idea what you are talking about. If there was a trap set, it looks like I fell right into the middle of it.” Gabe admitted.

“Did the old man talk to you about God?” Jim asked.

“Yes, he talked about God in almost every conversation.”

“Did he ever ask you to accept Jesus as your Savior or tell you that you must be born again?” Carol inquired.

“No! His questions were mostly thought provoking ones. However, he did seem to know all the answers even before he asked them. When I was concerned about retrieving my plane, he reassured me that there would be plenty of time. The funny part about it was that I believed him. It all seems so peculiar—like I was flying in a dense fog—without bearings.”

“Well my brother, it appears that you have been given a rare visit from a heavenly being. Not many have that opportunity. It is obvious that your calling is great.” Jim said, almost reverently.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about when you say a “heavenly” being, and I sure don’t understand this “calling” you speak of. My calling, as I see it, is to be a bush pilot.” Gabe was almost defensive.

Carol broke in as if she knew more about these things than Jim, “There are many different kinds of heavenly beings. There are cherubim, seraphim, angels of darkness, angels of light, and then there are Manifested Sons of God. We think your encounter was with the latter.”

“I haven’t a clue as to the meaning of any of these.” Gabe responded.

Carol picked up where she had left off. “All of the above, with the exception of Sons of God, are created beings. What I mean by that is that they were all created rather than being born or birthed in the earth. Sons of God are men or women who have passed through this life; and because of their life of sanctity, they operate in a sense somewhat as angels. They can appear as humans in the earth, sent to bring salvation or help to someone in desperate need, such as you. This is my understanding, and it could be flawed. You said you had seen smoke from the cabin as you flew over. They would have had no need for a fire, but you would. They had already arrived, fully aware of what would transpire and were prepared to save you. Jesse, possibly with the help of Bell, may have actually pulled you from the river.”

Jim immediately interrupted, “Gabe, remember I told you we didn’t find any exit tracks showing where you left the river. We actually landed downstream and walked back up the bank to the hole you left in the ice where you fell through. There were no tracks leaving the river—going in, yes—coming out, no. Even if there had been fresh snow, there would have been some sign of struggling in the snow.”

“I sure would like to go back to that old man’s cabin come summertime. The blank area in my memory is so vast. Why do you suppose I was unconscious for two days? It appears, from all I’ve heard, a person regains consciousness fairly quickly after being warmed.”

“The memory is oftentimes blanked out deliberately for a season so as to allow the body enough time to be receptive. Healing is almost always necessary after a great trauma. Who knows! Your spirit may have been in a place of intensive teaching, transported into another realm completely.” Carol continued.

“Where do you get these things?” Gabe asked incredulously, not really expecting an answer he would understand. “It sounds a lot like science fiction.”

Carol ignored the skepticism. “Gabe, you will never know how grateful to God we are for allowing us to share a portion of this incident. We’ve heard of these happenings on rare occasions but to actually meet someone who has had an encounter with those spirit beings is so exciting. I know I won’t sleep a wink tonight.” Carol exclaimed.

“Whoa!” Gabe turned up the volume a little. “Slow down! You may be convinced that these were spirit beings, but I’m not sure of anything. I feel like I’ve been pulled out of one river to be plunged into another.”

“That may be exactly what has happened.” Carol agreed.

“Huh?” Gabe blinked. “I guess that’s enough for tonight. I’m bushed. Jim, could you drive me into town so I could get a motel room?”

“We wouldn’t think of it. If your plane is safe, you’ll stay right here and leave tomorrow. We have a spare bedroom, and you probably couldn’t find a room in town anyway. You sleep as long as you like.” Jim’s remarks were so final that Gabe didn’t feel like protesting. This was so totally out of character for Gabe. He always made his own decisions and allowed few people to meddle with them. He felt a strange peace in this place, much like how he had felt in the old man’s cabin. So he followed Jim, without argument, to a room where Carol was already turning down covers and fluffing pillows.

“There’s a fresh towel and soap in the bathroom if you’d like to clean up,” Carol remarked. It sounded more like a suggestion than an invitation. Gabe smiled. Nevertheless, he took advantage of the opportunity to rid himself of some grime from the accumulated mileage. He hardly remembered how wonderful a warm shower could be. The old man had only water heated in a basin. Too bad he hadn’t a fresh change of clothing. About that time Carol yelled through the door, “If you’ll throw your clothes out the door, I’ll have them nice and clean for you in the morning.”

During the night, Gabe was awakened with an eerie sensation of the presence of someone in his room. He had just had a dream of Jesse, Wolf and Bell. Now he lay awake with their presence all about him. Unlike it was before, it seemed everyone was laughing—even the animals. The snow was gone and greenery was everywhere. He noticed that it was not the same locality where the cabin was, and he saw no cabin at all. In the distance, he could see Wilma working in a flower garden. He thought it strange that he would know Wilma since he had never met her. There was no fear or trepidation, only this awesome sense of peace and excitement. He glanced over at a clock on the nightstand. It was 2 A.M.

He was awakened later to the smell of hot coffee and frying bacon beckoning him to indulge his appetite. His clothes, now clean, were folded on a chair just inside his door. After he had finished his toiletries, he walked into the kitchen to find the children already eating and preparing for school. "Thought you might sleep all day after what you've been through, but you look rested," Jim remarked.

"I don't know when I've slept so well. There were no demons." Gabe answered. Jim nodded, knowing exactly where Gabe was coming from. It was not an uncommon occurrence among war veterans.

Carol hurried the children out to the bus stop just in time to catch the bus for school. As she re-entered Jim teased, "You didn't get much sleep, did you?" Knowing full well she hadn't slept at all.

"I was too excited to sleep, and I heard some strange noises during the night. It sounded like footsteps around 2 this morning. I checked the doors, but they were all tight. Still, there was an uncanny presence in the house." She looked at Gabe and his jaw had dropped as if he had been slapped. "Did you have company?" she asked.

Gabe half stuttered, half blurted out his dream and the presence he had felt in his room. "It was exactly two o'clock. Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked, feeling a little foolish for asking.

"We don't believe in ghosts as they have been portrayed, but we do believe in spirits. They may be one and the same; however, there are unclothed spirits which I believe many people have encountered and have called them ghosts. I've encountered this phenomenon only one time before." Carol choked up a little and then continued. "One night I had a dream of my dearest friend and her daughter in a beautiful field of flowers. They were so happy basking in a light that was different than our sunlight. I was immediately awakened and was aware of their presence in my room. Early in the morning, someone brought me the news that she and her daughter had both died in a fire that had consumed their house that very night. Her husband was away, working up on the arctic slope."

"Then you believe that my experience with Jesse and his animals was all in a spiritual or ghostly realm?" Gabe offered.

"Gabe, I don't know that. There's so much of the spiritual realm that is foreign to us. It shouldn't be, but it is."

"Carol, I dreamed of Jesse, the animals and Wilma. He had shown me no picture of her, and she was not present during my stay at Jesse's. Yet, I knew her as well as if she had been." Gabe remarked almost reluctantly. "I felt the

presence of them all in my room. Do animals also go to heaven? Or maybe we're not talking about heaven." Gabe was thinking out loud.

"This is something I've never seriously considered. I surely don't have an answer to that. I have an idea that we don't actually know what heaven is all about. We don't know where it is, what it is or how it affects our lives. In the majority of times Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven rather than heaven itself. It would be like me expressing views about a democratic government rather than the United States. The kingdom of heaven is the place of the King's dominion. From this prospective, I suspect that heaven is nearer than we think."

Gabe's countenance betrayed the fact that he didn't grasp Carol's rational. "We're going to have to leave it at that for the time being. I've got to be going as soon as I finish this cup of coffee." When Gabe arose to leave, Carol suddenly gave him a quick hug. He hadn't had a hug in a long time. It felt good. "Sorry I didn't have any change of clothes to put on—they took a journey down the river. Someone may find them floating in the Tanana this spring. Some poor miner or Eskimo will enjoy them, but I sure appreciate you washing these." Carol nodded and gave a slight chuckle.

On the way to the airport, Jim took the opportunity to open up a little to Gabe. "Please, don't think badly of Carol because of her apparent pushy ways. She is so pure and open. She sees nothing wrong in prodding, but last night and this morning was different. I've never seen her so excited. She was like a hunting dog that smelled a fresh trail. More often than not, she's right and she cares deeply for you."

Turning his head away, Gabe resisted the tears that wanted to surface. Men just didn't say those things to each other and to know that Carol cared for him touched him. "Jim, you made a statement that my calling was great. What exactly does that mean?"

"Gabe, I was in essentially the same condition as you when I came to Alaska. Carol rescued me from my demons. I was sitting on a sidewalk, stoned out of my mind, when Carol approached me and began to talk to me. I didn't understand any of it but something inside of me wanted to hear more and especially from her. She spoke to me of a calling—a destiny—which all of us have to fulfill. I learned that we are called of God from the foundation of the earth. Before we were ever born or our forefathers were born, God knew us and set a calling on our lives. I guess mine is to be a bush pilot and to look for other bush pilots who have gone down." Jim smiled, satisfied with the opportunity to open up to Gabe. "I think, your calling is great due to the fact that God sent someone who's been dead fifty years to minister to you."

"Well," exclaimed Gabe, "first of all, I'm not at all convinced that Jesse is dead. The man I talked with certainly wasn't dead, nor were his animals."

“How do you explain the remains of that old cabin?” Jim asked.

“I can’t.” Gabe responded. “As for that matter, how do you explain the horse blanket that Jesse put on Bell for my comfort? That may not have even been the same cabin that I was in. I may have been off by a couple of miles, but I assure you, I’ll find out.” By now Jim and Gabe had reached the airport and turned in to where Gabe had parked his Cessna. “Can you pull up close and let me borrow some exhaust heat? This thing is a booger to start when she’s cold.” Jim pulled up close; as Gabe stepped out and opened the cargo door, from which he retrieved the long flexible tubing. As he had done many times before, he placed one end under the cowling of the Cessna and the other end over the exhaust pipe of Jim’s truck. Cold weather and snow have an aesthetic allurement to those who do not have to work in it; but it is a numbing, unyielding adversary to the man caught in it with a job to do.

While they waited, they stepped into a warm room at the end of the hanger until the heat had done its work on the Cessna. Gabe had never seen this side of Jim so it was as if he was meeting a new friend, with whom he was becoming fairly comfortable in this newfound relationship. After some casual chitchat and checking the plane thoroughly, Gabe thought it time to leave. “You know you have a welcome spot in our home anytime you can get back,” Jim said, knowing Gabe would do a lot of investigating before they would meet again.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping me get my plane out of there and for your hospitality. I’ll see you as soon as I can. Give Carol my love and appreciation.” After disconnecting the flexible tubing from the exhaust pipe of Jim’s truck and storing it in the cargo compartment, Gabe crawled into the cold seat of the Cessna, hit the starter switch and listened with satisfaction as the Continental reluctantly coughed and sputtered into life. After a few minutes of warm-up, Gabe waved goodbye and slid the little bird into the air. He turned into his heading of south by southwest and aimed toward Mok Tok. Whatta week! It all seemed like a fairy tale. Did he dream it all? Maybe he did; but there lying in the seat beside him was the blanket he’d taken off of Bell, adding some reality to the “happening” he had experienced. Jesse knew he would need some help with his faith so the blanket tied the two worlds together. Three hours later, he was sitting on the runway at home. The pickup had set too long in the cold and was disinclined to start. He had to run jumper cables from his plane battery to the pickup in order to coax it into running. The plane and pickup were like partners against this cold, invisible enemy.

No sooner had he arrived in his driveway than he saw the shutters ripped off one of his windows and the window broken in. Bears were usually not a problem in winter as all the females were in hibernation, yet some of the male grizzlies did not hibernate at all, especially if food was available through the winter. Garbage dumps were a favorite haunt of more than one big male this year. Gabe was reluctant to enter his cabin, not knowing if the unwelcome visitor was still using

his home as his own. He drove his pickup close to the cabin and set down on the horn. Maybe that would alarm any unwanted visitor. He had just stepped out the door and retrieved his shotgun from behind the seat, when a four hundred-pound ball of grizzly launched himself through the broken window, from which he had gained entrance. Gabe let him get about thirty yards away before unloading both barrels of birdshot into his posterior. Mr. Grizzly kicked it into overdrive, leaving a shower of snow, as he said goodbye, never to return. They have good memories. He was glad he had the shotgun, which he carried to kill ptarmigan and spruce hens. That helped keep his larder full of delicious meat. Entering the cabin, Gabe was dismayed as he eyed the mess, which greeted him. The refrigerator was empty and the floor was covered with dishes and jars—some broken but all licked clean. The bear had obviously not been there very long for the deep freeze had still not been opened. Although it was locked, it would have presented no problem to this powerful intruder. After cleaning out the fridge he had taken a little nap in the middle of Gab's bed, prior to attacking the freezer. Gabe decided that he might install the bars over his windows, which he had considered previously. He had been reluctant to do so for fear it would convey to some juvenile delinquent the idea that the cabin housed a variety of precious treasures. The only things worth carrying off were some guns and the ham radio set.

As was his custom, he turned on the power to his ham radio and it had scarcely warmed up when Jim's voice broke over the airways. "Carol was concerned that you had made a safe trip. I wasn't too concerned but then I know you better than she does—I think."

"I made it home fine but I had a visitor waiting for me when I got here," Gabe said.

"Was it the old man?" Jim asked excitedly.

"No. It was a grizzly that had decided he'd found a refuge for the remainder of the winter. This place is a mess and he emptied my refrigerator, but I'm sure I won't starve. At least he didn't find the ham set appetizing."

Since this is not an earthshaking experience in Alaska and satisfied that he was safe, Jim signed off for the day. Jim had barely quit talking, when Dewey cut in. "I didn't know you was so fond of ice fishing or maybe you just like your swimming pools cold. Hey, why is it you shy away from my malemites but you'll bed up with a grizzly? You got some strange sap running in your family tree. I'm glad your back in the slot buddy." As usual Gabe couldn't get a word in edgewise. Dewey, with all his crudeness, did seem sincerely glad that he was safely back.

Gabe retrieved a caribou steak from among the packages of moose, salmon, and ptarmigan in the freezer and had some time to kill before it was ready to eat. He set aside some of the canned goods the bear had ignored. While the coffee

was perking, he swept the considerable pile of trash out the front door into a cardboard box. He had never been the best housekeeper; that's why he had an Eskimo lady come in regularly to clean up. After the coffee had finished brewing, he poured himself a welcome cup and sat down to contemplate the happenings of the past week. He sat as one transfixed, his hands embracing the warm cup, looking out the now-open window of his little cabin at the snow-covered fir and spruce trees. He'd have to get that window covered before he could keep any heat in his little cabin.

The snow would soon be gone and yet Jesse was so positive he would have time to get his plane. Gabe was a man of reason and logic. He was basically a "cause and effect" man. Men had ribbed him all his life because he searched for the "why" behind an action, be it human or mechanical. He couldn't accept that a light would come on when one flipped the switch; he had to know why it came on. While others were merely enjoying the beauty of the Aurora Borealis, he was delving into the action of the solar winds blowing across the magnetic fields of the Polar Regions. While in Vietnam he became so fascinated with the helicopter he flew that he was as good as any mechanic, whose job it was to keep it in flying order. Also, he didn't like to entrust his life into the hands of another. It was because of his independent nature that he never suffered too much humiliation calling for help. Even now he was somewhat amused at those who were constantly ribbing him about his inquisitiveness, yet calling on him for help because their snowmobile would not start or some electrical problem confronted them.

It was at this very moment that "Mr. Reason" knocked on the door of his mind and after an invitation to enter, began to ridicule the experiences of the past week. There must be some logical explanation that would put everything into analytical order. It is the same kind of reasoning that insists that Jesus did not die on the cross, but merely swooned and was later revived by the coolness of the tomb. Gabe knew that there were many mental disorders and drugs that produced hallucinogenic experiences. He hadn't been on drugs, of that he was sure; but he couldn't be sure how much affect the cold had had on him. Still—there was the blanket. That was not a figment of his imagination. It hadn't been just a dream or a fabrication of some hallucination he had experienced. Despite all his efforts, he could not fit this into some nice little niche, nor could he ignore the experience as something he had imagined. This needed some answers and although it denied logic, Gabe would chew on this bone until he reached the marrow.

Chapter 8

Back to Jesse's House

As the next two months passed, day followed each lengthening day without offering any solutions to the puzzling questions locked up inside Gabe's mind. But Mok Tok had changed, or so it seemed to Gabe. It definitely was not the same. He had carried two prospectors out to their claim, or close to it. Supplies had to be flown to other miners—supplies that he had bought, packed and delivered. Fishermen, with dreams of huge trophies hanging on walls, were taken to a lake they had heard about. All these things seemed to have lost their allurements. They didn't matter any more. He wanted to see Jesse.

It was the middle of May when he loaded the Cessna with camping gear and took off for the ranger station where Gibson was on duty. He radioed Gibson that he was coming, so it was no surprise that the ranger was standing outside when he taxied up to the station. Cutting the ignition, he stepped out of the plane and shook the extended hand of ranger Gibson. "Where's your security blanket?" Gibson jibed his guest.

"It's in the cockpit. Can't get too far away from that. It's more for evidence than my security—not evidence to anyone else, just to me. I just need proof that I haven't totally lost it." Gabe replied.

"You're determined to go back down there, aren't you? Guess I don't blame you. I would too. Better watch for bears. They've got cubs with them this time of year and can be real nasty. Of course you know that. Had a hiker mauled real bad last year about this time. Seems he surprised an old sow with her cubs." Wouldn't want you to go through his experience. Gibson seemed genuinely concerned for Gabe.

After securing his plane, Gabe removed a large backpack from the cargo compartment of the Cessna and after a short conversation about the weather, the fishing and the hikers, the uneasy dialogue ended on this note: "I'll be back in a couple of days—three at the most." Leaving the ranger station, Gabe headed in the same direction from which Bell had brought him. Reaching what should have been a fork in the road, the road simply meandered on up the mountain. He could see Gibson watching him with binoculars. He finally found what appeared to have been a road at one time. This time of year there were eighteen to twenty hours of daylight, so he had ample time to reach the cabin. Everything was so strange. He was sure that this was the logging road, but it was only a hiking trail now. There was no sign of logging or of any timber having been cut in years.

Suddenly through the dense trees, he caught a glimpse of something white darting through the underbrush. A fleeting glance told him it was Wolf but if it

was, why was he so distant and unfriendly? Surely his eyes were playing tricks on him. Three hours later, he had to admit it was easier going downhill than up, even with Bell carrying him. There! Right over to the side of that huge outcropping of rock, he had slid off of Bell and sat down on a large fir stump. He remembered that the stump seemed easier to sit on than Bell had been. She had stood there pawing the ground, impatient to be moving on. He had stood on the stump to get back on the old mule. But now, there was no stump. Did he dream it all? No! There was the blanket. Had it not been for the blanket, he would have questioned the entire episode.

It had been five hours since he had left the ranger station, so he must be nearing the cabin. Surely it can't be far. There! There it was again—the white rush of fur and fangs. It was Wolf! He was certain of it now. “Wolf! Is that you? Come here boy.” His voice trembled as he called. He felt a little foolish standing here in the middle of the forest calling for an animal that presented one huge question mark. Four hundred yards down the trail he spotted a patch of white on the edge of a stand of birch. It could be the white of the birch he reasoned, but his heart raced as he neared the spot he was watching. Drawing nearer, he recognized the creature that had been instrumental in saving his life. Wolf sat still as Gabe approached. A bond had been formed in the short time they had been together; yet, there was still a gulf between them that was nigh impossible to span. As Gabe approached, he noticed that Wolf did not wag his tail nor give any indication of recognition. When he was within about twenty feet, Gabe knelt on the damp ground and spoke softly to Wolf. “Come boy! Come!” Wolf arose and walked slowly to where Gabe was kneeling. Wolf put his nuzzle under Gabe's chin, smelling his body and his breath. Gabe stroked his head and neck. What a magnificent animal! He would easily weigh one hundred and seventy five pounds, Gabe estimated; and those fangs could rip open a full-grown caribou as easy as a man tears open a biscuit.

Gabe had been so engrossed with Wolf that he hadn't noticed the remains of the cabin in full view. Although he suspected, he was not prepared for the sight he now looked upon. He arose and headed for the place that had been his healing and introduction into a world of new beginnings. Quickly Wolf jumped in front of Gabe and would not allow him another step. Misunderstanding his intentions, Gabe reached down and patted him roughly on the side. Again, he tried to approach the cabin. Again, Wolf blocked his path. Gabe filled both hands with fur and tried to pull Wolf to one side. Wolf emitted a low growl and showed Gabe those terrible fangs, which moments before he had viewed with admiration. A chill ran the length of Gabe's spine as he was faced with the determination and strength of this yellow-eyed creature. “What in heaven's name is wrong with you, Wolf?” At that moment, he saw a female grizzly emerge from the wreckage of the cabin, with two small cubs tramping after her. Obviously, she had bedded down there last night. This could be the same old sow that mauled the hiker last year. Only when the little family had fully disappeared over the

distant ridge did Gabe move, and then it was to kneel again by Wolf's side and lay his head on his neck. "You saved me again my friend. Thank you."

Wolf offered no more resistance as Gabe walked hesitantly toward the remains of the cabin, which had offered him warmth and sustenance. He could hardly believe his eyes as the memory of the cabin flashed before him. He choked back the tears that welled up as the sudden realization hit him. Jesse would not be here, nor would Bell. Wolf had been sent to protect him in his inquisitive pursuit. There was no question that this was the same cabin, although, there wasn't much left to verify his belief. Over there, just to the side and back of the cabin were the remains of what was once Bell's stable.

Gabe pushed his way through a dense growth of underbrush that had once been Wilma's garden. The little family cemetery parcel lay just beyond the garden plot. Scarcely was he through the dense brush when he saw the small cemetery. Almost every one of the pickets was either down or rotted. Some of the posts were still standing and one could clearly see the outline of this hallowed spot of ground. In the corner stood a blue spruce between twenty and twenty-five feet tall, much different than when he had last seen it. There were now two headstones where only one stood barely three months ago when he had last seen it. One still stood erect while the other was leaning almost to the ground. He walked over and lifted the one to an upright position in the soft soil and tamped it with his foot. Taking up a flat piece of rock, he began to scrape away the moss and lichen, which had taken up residence on it. As he removed the moss from the slab of granite, he could make out the name on the headstone, WILMA WILLIT—NOV 1851— FEB 1920. That would have made her sixty-nine years old when she died. He noticed how carefully the etching had been done. It must have taken Jesse a long time to engrave the granite. Next he began to clean the other headstone, somehow apprehensive about what he would find written underneath the moss. As he gently scraped away the growth of moss and lichen the writing began to appear, JESSE WILLIT—MAY 1840—Dec 1926. That would have made Jesse eighty-six years old when he died. He noticed that the engraving on Jesse's headstone was not nearly as meticulously etched, as was Wilma's. He assumed that Jesse had done the stone for Wilma, therefore displaying more love in the process than whoever had inscribed his own.

Gabe felt as if someone had knocked the wind out of him. Somewhat sick to his stomach, he arose unsteadily from where he had been kneeling and walked over to the large spruce and sat down under its branches. His mind could not find one piece of this puzzle that would fit. Wolf lay over by the graves, his muzzle between his front feet, eyeing Gabe curiously. Wolf was another piece of the puzzle. If he had actually entered into some kind of time warp, and it was he who had gone back in time, how was it that Wolf was here today as a guardian angel? Gabe sank his head in between his knees and for the first time in many years prayed a simple, honest prayer. "Lord, I don't know if you want me to understand all this; but I know one thing for certain, I'll never get a grasp of it unless you

reveal it to me.” He arose and returned to the front of what was once the cabin. All he could do was shake his head, remembering in detail the porch and inside of the small room. The chimney still stood like some gaunt sentinel of yesterday’s memories. He walked around the cabin to where Bell’s stall once stood. There still stood some of the posts with Bell’s tooth marks on them. Jesse had mentioned how Bell loved to gnaw on the posts.

Gabe thought about going upriver to the place where he was rescued; yet he knew it was at least twenty-five or thirty miles further. He didn’t feel like hiking that far and besides, there were a lot of bear on the river this time of year. They weren’t fishing but searching for berries that grew close to the river. He didn’t fancy meeting up with any mama bears at this time. He’d already seen the hole where he climbed out of the ice or was pulled out. The sight of the ruins about him had left him with an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He’d felt sure Jesse would still be here in the cabin. He was more convinced when Wolf showed up. No wonder Gibson had thought he’d lost it. Maybe he had. He’d always heard that there was only a heartbeat between reality and insanity. Wolf hadn’t strayed too far from his side. Perhaps, he thought the she-bear and her cubs would return. Suddenly, he just wanted to go home. The problem was, he didn’t know where home was. He shouldered the backpack he had unceremoniously dumped when he had first seen the cabin remains. It seemed his knees were too weak to carry it any longer. They rebelled at any urging to move forward; nevertheless, with great effort he took a faltering step, adjusted the rumpled backpack and headed back up the trail, knowing that he’d milked about all the answers he could from this pile of rotting timbers. Wolf followed behind him for a few yards then went ahead sniffing first the ground and then the air. He finally disappeared from sight, doing whatever wolves do. Gabe hiked about two miles from Jesse’s old home-site and found Wolf lying in the sun waiting for him, as if telling him that this was a good place to camp. “Okay Wolf! This is where it will be. Seems as if I need someone to make my decisions for me anyway.”

After building a fire, Gabe retrieved a couple of cans of beef stew and the utensils for cooking from his kit and proceeded to heat the contents in an open pan. Wolf’s ears straightened and he was definitely interested in what was going on. He doubtlessly liked what he smelled. Gabe took another pan from his kit and poured some of the warm stew into it. Setting it before Wolf, he watched as the huge animal made the entire content disappear in a couple of gulps. “Well, I would have thought someone would have taught you better table manners.” Wolf ignored the lighthearted barb. Gabe reached into his kit for another can and after opening it poured its contents in with the first. “Wolf! I’ll share this with you but I’d like to have a little for myself.” After eating, he picked up the cans and carried them about two hundred yards back down the trail. There, with the aid of his camp shovel, he buried them in the soft Alaskan soil. He knew if a bear came that way the cans would be dug up, but at least they were a safe distance from the camp. He had no perishables with him to tempt a bear, only cans and a can-

opener, besides a bear would be hesitant to come into camp with Wolf standing guard.

He sat for a time, cradling a cup of coffee in his hands, remembering the hiker he had flown out, who had accidentally encountered a she bear with cubs. He shuddered to recall the great chunks of torn flesh that exposed white bone in many places and the unrecognizable horror that once was a handsome young man. The grizzly held no animosity to the young man. She was, in her mind, protecting her family. Had it not been for Wolf, he could easily have experienced the same nightmare earlier in the day.

Slipping into his tent, the night held no terror for Gabe. He felt safe with Wolf's fur in his face as he slept through the night. Wolf had slipped out to check on something that had interested him but had returned shortly. Gabe wondered that he had never howled during the night. Wolf had not howled but he had heard the howl of another alpha male in the night and had arisen quietly to slip out into the darkness. He had not answered the cry because more than likely it was one of his own offspring, and he was not trying to invade his territory. Once outside he sniffed the air to see if there was any trace of a bear that might bring harm to Gabe. After all, he was sent to protect Gabe. He trotted off in the direction of the ranger station, stopping here and there to sniff the air and the scent of other animals in the area. He passed within yards of a red fox but the wary fox could not smell this creature from beyond. Reaching the ranger station, he trotted quietly to the plane that had transported Gabe to and from this area. He still did not understand this noisy contraption that could take a man soaring through the air like a bird. At daybreak he heard noises from inside the ranger station, but he had no fear of the man inside, so he continued his investigation of the steel bird.

Gabe awoke with mosquitoes getting their much-needed transfusion. Wolf had neglected to close the netting over the door when he left. Mosquitoes are a vicious horde this time of year sending caribou into a frenzy and moose seeking deeper waters. Gabe looked about him but Wolf was nowhere to be seen. Arising, he went outside and called for him softly. Somehow he knew that it would be futile to call louder. He suspected that Wolf had disappeared into that vast realm from whence he had been sent. After a light breakfast, and no hungry yellow eyes asking for his share, Gabe packed his gear and continued on his trip up the mountain. He had the sense of never feeling safer. He felt enveloped in unseen arms. As he walked, he wondered why a creature from beyond would still consume food from this region. Perhaps we are closer to that realm than we realize, he thought.

The trip back up the mountain from the campsite took about four hours; and as he came in sight of the ranger station, he could see Gibson walking around his plane. That seemed strange since he has never taken any interest in it before. He was near when he yelled, "Did you lose something?"

The startled Gibson whirled, obviously lost in his own world and hardly expecting him, "Didn't expect you back so soon. Figured you'd be another day at least. No, I didn't lose anything; but about daybreak I spotted a huge gray-white male wolf sniffing around your plane, and I was wondering what interested him. Never saw him around here before."

"Well, he's been with me almost since I left you yesterday. He's Jesse Willit's wolf. At the old cabin site he saved me from getting mixed up with a she bear and her cubs who had obviously bedded down there for the night. He slept in my tent last night."

Gibson gave him that old look until he got close to Gabe. "Say, you've got enough dog hair on your clothes to weave a parka. Didn't know you had a dog."

"If you'll look at my bed-roll you'll probably find a lot there too. It's not dog hair. It's hair from that wolf you saw earlier. I guess they're shedding this time of year." Gibson had a bewildered look as he kept looking at the hair on Gabe. "You were right. The cabin is little more than a pile of rubble. I searched out back in the little cemetery Jesse showed me and found the grave-plots, only this time there are two instead of one. One of them is his wife Wilma's, who died in 1920, the other belonged to Jesse's and it shows he died in 1926. So you were exactly correct in saying he passed away fifty years ago."

"So how do you explain what you say happened to you?" There was no sarcasm in Gibson's question.

"I haven't a clue. But I am certain of what happened in the cabin last March, and I know that the wolf you saw was Jesse's wolf, and he's been with me the last two days, but can I explain it—no. I'm as confused as you are. I'm not sure we'll ever know. I'll just make sure I don't tell too many people. I don't enjoy being thought a fool; but since you already think me one, to what degree doesn't matter." Gabe smiled and it surprised him that it came so easily.

"Why don't you stick around for some dinner or at least some coffee?" Gibson offered.

"I guess not—at least not this time. I might be missing out on a lot of work back home. So let me crank up this old bird and see if I can coax her into the air." With that he walked over to the plane, swung himself up into the cockpit and within minutes had the old Continental at a fast chug-a-lug idle. He crawled out and checked every area of the plane not covered by the cowling. He thought about what Jesse had said about checking with his spirit. He didn't know how to do that; but at least, he gave it some thought. After having given the plane sufficient time to warm up, he waved goodbye to Gibson, crawled back into the plane, shut the door and taxied to the little strip. Three minutes later he was airborne. Gibson watched this half-man, half-bird creature of mystery, disappear

into the morning sky and wished he could trade places with him. They were both lonely men, but at least, Gabe was lonely with changing scenery.

Dropping into the valley, Mok Tok now seemed like some alien planet rather than home to Gabe, as he set the Cessna down on the gravel runway. He had felt isolated from people before and that was how he chose it, but now he felt like a small ship set adrift in the midst of a barren sea. The sails were in tatters and the helm, it seemed, was not connected to the wheel. Having no direction or port of destination, every wave and wind tossed his vessel. For the first time in a long time Gabe Hunter was scared, and the scariest part was, he didn't know of what. He had felt fear before in Nam, but this was different. He had been so fiercely independent before, and now he felt he needed people. That bothered him. His invincibility had been stolen from him, leaving him weak and vulnerable. Why should he miss Jesse so much? He felt a little silly since he didn't really know him, but he seemed like family. It appeared that from that simple man he had gotten a taste of what life was really all about. Gabe went about mechanically securing the plane and driving back to his home. His mind would not let go of the old man and his family of Wolf and Bell. Who had sent Wolf to watch after him yesterday, and from where was he sent? He was not a figment of his imagination for Gibson had seen him too. How does a person travel through that time warp—much less an animal?

Like a ritual he always went through, the first thing he did after arriving back to his little house was turn on his ham set. Then he opened the wooden shutters he had replaced to protect against the curious bears that might want to investigate his food pantry. He still hadn't installed any bars over the windows. Retrieving a moose steak from the freezer, supper already had that delicious taste as his saliva glands began to anticipate the coming treat. Although his freezer was full of wild game, he never killed any animal except for food or for his own protection. He'd witnessed enough killing of the other kind. The ham set began to crackle and Gabe tuned in the voice of Jim Vandergraf. "Gabe! Our pastor knows of an old man who knew your friend, Jesse. Thought you might be interested."

Was he! He was interested in everything about Jesse Willit. "Of course I'm interested! How do I get in touch with this man?" Gabe couldn't hide the excitement that he felt.

"You'll have to come in here. Attach your pontoons because he lives just off the Tanana River near Nenana. There's no landing strip there. If you can make it, we'll prepare to put you up as long as necessary. Carol is excited. You can land at the field or on the Chena near the field. Radio me before you arrive so I can pick you up." Jim sounded as thrilled as did Gabe.

"I'll be there as soon as I can get the pontoons attached. I'll call you." Gabe went out and gathered his camping gear from the truck. Much of it would have to be washed. He considered not washing the clothes that contained Wolf's fur in

order that he might show Jim and Carol. Instead, he brushed the hair from his sleeping bag and the clothes, to which Wolf had abundantly contributed, and placed it in a small plastic bag. Fresh clothes and a bath might present an entirely different person to Jim and Carol.

Attaching the pontoons was a laborious job for one man. He'd just taken them off before he went to the ranger station. He could have landed on the river and walked over the ridge to Jesse's, but he wanted to see Gibson. The struts had to be jacked up, the wheels removed, and then the wheel that was part of the pontoon had to be slipped on and secured. Getting both pontoons on was a hassle. Next the control lines to brace the pontoons had to be attached and aligned. Gabe contemplated just leaving the pontoons on the rest of the summer. He was as proficient as he desired in changing his landing equipment. The problem was that there was usually no taxi waiting on the river, as there would be at an airfield. Well into the second day, he had the pontoons attached and properly braced. Back at his house, he gave Jim a call, "Hey, I got the pontoons on so I'll fly out in the morning. Probably be there around eight o'clock. Is that too early for you?"

"You could come in at six o'clock, and it would be fine with me." Jim responded, "but you better not come in that early. Gotta give Carol time to do her morning business. You know how women like to plan for meals, etc. See you tomorrow."

The sun had been up about two hours when Gabe took off for the three-hour flight to Fairbanks. The pontoons slowed him down a bit; but prior to arriving in Fairbanks, he called Jim and said, "Looks like I'll be on the river at about eight. It'll take a few minutes to get tied up at the slip."

"I'll be there. Be careful." Jim remarked.

True to his word, Jim was waiting as Gabe taxied the Cessna to the waiting slip and secured it to the moorings. Taking a small bag of clothes, he stepped from the pontoon to the pier and was shortly shaking Jim's hand furiously. "Carol's anxious to see you. This is a new experience for her." Jim exclaimed.

"I think it's a new experience for all of us. I'll fill you in later so I only have to tell the story once."

Carol came running out of the house as if she were greeting some long lost friend. Gabe was not as surprised this time when she gave him a quick hug. Jim just chuckled inside as he watched Gabe's expression. She did everyone like that; yet, it was special to Gabe. "You're just in time for breakfast, if you don't mind sourdough hot cakes this time of the morning." He didn't mind but rather relished the thought of someone else's cooking. "Wait until I'm seated before you start telling us anything. I don't want to miss anything." Over a hot cup of coffee they exchanged small talk as if a prelude to the orchestra's main offering.

The sourdough batter was already sizzling on the stove, having been mixed the night before. Carol had already cooked breakfast for the kids and rushed them off to school an hour earlier. Stacked high on a platter, she brought hotcakes and bacon and placed them in the center of the table. As before, Jim said grace. Before he had finished, Gabe was salivating over the stack of hotcakes, slathered with butter and dripping with maple syrup. Surprisingly, little was said during the meal, as if each was submersed into their own questions or speculations. Finally Carol said, "Why don't we sit on the deck and finish our coffee out there?"

The deck was spacious and screened to protect from the mosquitoes. After everyone was seated like an audience waiting for the opening curtain, Gabe began to relate how he had flown up to the ranger station and hiked down to Jesse's old house. When he got to the part where Wolf appeared, Carol gave a little gasp and Jim sat up on the edge of his chair. Time has a way of dulling the excitement of one's faith and the story he had heard at first had begun to seem a bit absurd. He needed his faith stimulated also. "Did he howl?" Carol asked.

"No. He never made a sound the entire time he was with me except for the time he growled at me and showed those impressive fangs."

"Oh! He bared his fangs at you and growled?" Carol could hardly believe the possibility.

"He not only growled, but I'm sure he would have grabbed me in those powerful jaws had I persisted." Then Gabe related the account of the grizzly bear and her cubs.

"Then he saved your life again!" Carol fairly squealed in excitement.

"I think that is very likely. If not, he certainly kept me from being badly mauled." After his account of the cemetery, the dates on the headstones and Bell's old stable, he recounted how he had wrestled with the idea of going back upriver to where he had fallen in. "While camping on the return trail, Wolf slept in the tent with me until dawn. I suppose he thought I was safe then."

Carol had tears in her eyes by now. "He came back from wherever, to keep you safe from the bear. Do you think he would have had to make himself visible to do that?"

At this point Jim interrupted, "I'm sure that was not necessary, but Gabe would not have seen him and his faith would not have profited. Also, the bear needed to be able to see him as well. Gabe needed to be assured of God's love. No doubt Jesse, Wilma and Bell were standing no farther away than was Wolf. The purpose behind all of this leaves one staggered at the design and genius of our loving Father."

“Oh! By the way, I have something in my overnight bag.” With that Gabe arose and retrieved the plastic bag containing Wolf’s fur. “I brushed this off my sleeping bag and my clothes after Wolf spent the night with me. He slept up against me like I found him when I awakened after my rescue. I’m intrigued by the idea that he’s still shedding and has a voracious appetite wherever he is.” Jim and Carol examined the bag of fur as if it was a pouch of gold nuggets. Neither said anything apart from the oohs and aahs that escaped their lips during their scrutiny. It was as if both were forming their own set of questions to be asked at the proper time.

“I didn’t see Wolf again; but when I got to the station, Gibson was giving my plane the once over. He said he had seen a huge gray-white wolf nosing around my plane. I explained to him that it was Wolf and that he had spent the night with me. He gave me that look again, like I’d been in the bush too long. I’m sure he’s scratching his head too. By the way, what did you hear about this old man in Nenana who had known Jesse?”

“We told our Pastor of your ordeal. We didn’t think you would mind. Whether he believed us or not, we couldn’t tell; but he did some checking with different pastors and one knows of this ancient man who has a cabin just out of Nenana, who knew Jesse Willit. The Pastor thinks he’s still alive and lives just two or three miles out of town. Some of his flock visits him occasionally to receive a “word” from the Lord. The Pastor has never gone out but the old man has attended his church service once or twice. The Pastor tries to discourage anyone from going out there, for he contends that the old man says some really strange things that are incompatible with Scripture. Our Pastor gave us a detailed map of how to get to the Pastor’s place in Nenana.”

A rush of excitement leaped in his heart as Gabe listened to the details. “Well, if he’s anything like Jesse, he will say a lot of strange things. Jim, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll fly on down there today. I can be there in an hour. I’ll come back by here and fill you in on all he details.” Gabe grabbed his bag and headed out the door toward Jim’s pickup. Jim and Carol looked at each other and smiled, appreciating the excitement stirring deep within Gabe.

Thirty minutes later Gabe was in the air headed for Nenana. By following the Tanana River, he should be there within the hour. Gabe gained a little altitude so he wouldn’t have to follow every bend in the river. His journey took him by mountains that had huge veins of lignite totally encircling them. Alaska is rich in lignite coal. It doesn’t burn as hot or as clean as bituminous or anthracite, still it is better fuel than wood. This was one of those rare days when the clouds did not cover Denali’s head. She stood tall and proud as half dozen other mountains stretched upward, trying to match her height.

Chapter 9

The Old Man of Nenana

The Tanana is a beautiful river heading up down south close to the Yukon Territory, then flowing north and emptying into the Yukon River, west by northwest of Fairbanks. It's hard to believe that it was just over a month ago that the ice broke on the Tanana and started its journey to the Bering Sea. There was always a betting pool—betting on the closest time the ice would break on the river. Someone could get rich if he or she guessed closest to the hour and minute when the ice would start to flow down river. They also have, on a smaller scale, a pool for the Chena, which flows through Fairbanks. The breakup of the ice is the one momentous welcome of spring, although occurring usually about a month after the spring equinox. The beauty of the river and the landscape had a mesmerizing effect on Gabe, and he was in Nenana almost before he knew it. He remembered bringing some hunters in here some seasons back.

Settling the little plane back on her tail, he set the pontoons down tail first and quickly lost speed. He tied up at the first slip available, as a young Eskimo boy watched him curiously. His fishing had been interrupted. Anyway, he seemed more interested in killing time than catching fish. He should be in school; but obviously, fishing held more appeal to him. Many of the Eskimo children entertained dreams of ice floes scattered in open seas and enormous whales spewing steam through their blowholes.

Throwing on his backpack, he walked up the main street and followed the crude map Carol had given him to the chapel constructed of logs. They said it was likely no one would be in the chapel, but the Pastor lived in the log cabin next to the church. He knocked on the door that was opened by a man who was shaped like a huge question mark. He would have been a tall man, could he have gotten the crook out of his back. The children's nursery rhyme popped into Gabe's head. "There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile." Unconsciously, he substituted—"Who wore a crooked smile;" for this man wore a large crooked smile, which seemed to have been dragged reluctantly out of a disposition that was equally twisted. He looked like a man who would slip his hand into your hip pocket if you didn't watch him closely. Gabe was reminded of a line from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: 'Cassius hath a lean and hungry look.' "How may I be of help?" he asked. He failed to introduce himself.

"Good afternoon. I'm Gabe Hunter and I'm looking for an old-timer in these parts by the name of Michael Roberts. Perhaps you could help me?"

"Oh, yes. You're the man Pastor Burkett said was looking for him. Well, I haven't seen him in a long while, maybe two winters; but if he's still around, he'll be easy to find. Just west of town the road forks. Take the road to the right. It stays close to the river. It's about three miles from here. You'll see his cabin up

the hill away and his name is on the mailbox. You can't miss it." He looked Gabe up and down as if he had just decided to join a freak show. No doubt he had heard some of the details concerning his curiosity.

Gabe fought back the temptation to shoot a sarcastic barb in his direction, but decided against it. "Thank you so much for your help. It'll be a nice hike." It wasn't meant as sarcasm, but the good pastor reddened for he hadn't offered Gabe a ride. He shifted the backpack and left whistling as his long strides ate up the gravel road.

The three miles passed quickly, and he found himself following a trail off the road from the mailbox that bore the Roberts name. Passing a large fir tree, that had hid the cabin from view, he spotted an old man sitting on the porch of a rather small log cabin. The cabin had a sod roof, which was growing a huge bouquet of fireweed, each seeking to push its neighbor off the roof. Upon seeing Gabe, the old man arose immediately and gave a cheerful greeting. "Come on up." The man was short, probably five feet four inches tall, with snow-white hair and a very large mustache and beard, which seemed to be a continuation of his hair. Between his hair, eyebrows, mustache and beard, there wasn't much room for face left. He appeared to be a comical cherub who belonged to a circus sideshow or in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. As Gabe drew near, he noticed a distinctive twinkle in the old man's eyes. He appeared to have just heard some amusing news. "We're glad to have you." Gabe looked around for the other part of the "we". There was no one else that he could see. "Could I get you a cup of tea or coffee?" The old man asked amiably.

"I'll have the coffee if you have some made."

"Let's sit inside, if you don't mind. The mosquitoes are especially bad this time of year. I'm known as Michael Roberts, most folk just call me The Old One; and who might you be?"

"I'm Gabe Hunter. A Pastor in Fairbanks said I might find you here, so the first chance I got I flew down."

"Ah! Gabriel—man of God," he said, almost reverently. Again, the hair stood up on the nape of Gabe's neck. That's what Jesse had called him. What had prompted his parents to pin this name on him? Names, for the most part, were just something selected from the family tree, taken from the Bible or borrowed from a novel once read. How could his parent's random choice of names have any affect on today's events?

After some light chitchat about the weather and the surroundings, Gabe got right to the point. "I need some information, and I hear you might be able to fill me in on some details. I understand you knew Jesse Willit." It was half statement and half question.

The Old One nodded. “To say I knew him is an understatement. We were like brothers—only more. It seemed we drew life from each other. We spent many years together. Our lives were fast joined.”

“Are you ready for a rather remarkable story?” The Old One nodded, so Gabe related to him about his forced landing and the events leading up to his walking into the ranger station. “I went back to Jesse’s cabin the first of this week. The cabin is a pile of rubble. It looks like someone deserted it fifty years ago.” He hadn’t yet told him about Wolf meeting him. There was no need looking like an utter fool. “I went to the little cemetery and cleaned off the headstones so I could make out the names and dates. Jesse died exactly fifty years ago. I’m at a total loss as to any logical explanation. I’m sure I didn’t imagine all that time I spent with him. There were too many intricate details for it to have been a dream.”

“First of all, let’s forget about logic,” The Old One said. “The things of God and the things that have happened to you cannot be tailored to fit into man’s idea of logic. God’s thoughts and His ways cannot be made to conform to man’s finite mind.” Had he closed his eyes, Gabe would have sworn that he was listening to Jesse. The Old One continued, “You saw Jesse’s name on the headstone, but Jesse’s not buried there.”

Gabe thought he was going to give him some religious, theological overture of Jesse being in heaven, etc. “You mean Jesse is now with the Lord?” He impulsively offered.

“No! That’s not what I mean, although that is true. I mean Jesse was not buried at that gravesite. You see, as a matter of fact, no one is buried in that grave.”

“I guess I don’t know what you mean.” Gabe stammered. He quickly discarded any idea that this Old One was some comical bumpkin. His appearance totally belied the wisdom hidden behind all the hair.

“One cold winter day, they found Jesse’s clothes neatly folded on the log he was hewing. His boots were sitting beside the log. The axe was lying among the chips and no one ever heard from Jesse again—that is, until you came along. Everyone figured he had suffered from hypothermia, began hallucinating and just stripped off his clothes and died. They concluded that wolves had eaten the body and dragged the carcass to their den—so they just placed his clothes in a shallow grave beside Wilma’s and made a headstone to mark the site. The date on the headstone is the date they found his clothes. They could have been lying there some considerable time before they were found. I don’t know of anyone who ever visited their graves anyway until you came along.” answered The Old One matter-of-factly.

“I take it that you don’t believe that’s what happened. Can there be another logical explanation? Most bears would be hibernating. Wolves, wolverines and

fox are the only other natural predators except the eagles and ravens.” Gabe offered skeptically.

“You see—human logic is again driving you to a solution that is false. Did you ever hear of Enoch, in the Scriptures?” Gabe shook his head. “Enoch walked with God and was no more for God took him. He was simply translated off the face of the earth, leaving no trace. After Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, Peter and John ran to the tomb after hearing that it was empty. They found all his clothing neatly folded, as if He had simply evaporated from within them.”

“Are you saying that Jesse was—what was that word—translated? You mean he was right in the middle of swinging that broadax, when—poof—without warning, he was gone? Had Wilma still been alive he wouldn’t have had time to warn her that he wasn’t coming back?” Gabe sounded a little dubious. Who was this old man telling him these preposterous tales, he wondered?

“You say these things because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Elijah, who was a prophet of God, knew precisely the time he would be translated. Not only he, but also Elisha his servant, and all the sons of the prophets knew as well. It was a secret only to the ones who did not walk in that same spiritual realm. Jesse’s departure was a secret only to those who did not eat at the same table.”

“Have you eaten at that same table?” Gabe asked, incredulously.

“Of course.” The Old One answered, matter-of-factly.

“What happened to his body? The man who picked me up off the floor definitely had a body. He was not just a spirit.” Gabe’s mind was in a whirl. It was difficult to follow this Old One through the labyrinth of limited light.

“The body that he had on earth was changed into another body that fit his chosen work. Man is a spirit, living in a body. The body is designed to be a servant of the spirit. When this body we live in, can no longer fulfill the dreams, demands and desires of our spirit, then the body must be changed. The body has an obligation to obey the spirit to the letter.” The old man continued, “It’s much like you flying that plane. You’re operating the controls of that plane just like your spirit dictates the operation of your body. When that plane cannot fulfill your needs, you either change planes or modify your present one to fit your needs. With you there are numerous limitations. However, there are no limitations with God.”

Gabe sipped his now cold coffee and tried to drink in what The Old One had just said. He arose and walked over to the small propane stove, which coaxed the coffee near the boiling point. Pouring the hot brew into the cold coffee made it

just about right. Returning to the table, how he wished he had some way to record the conversation.

“Would you say that Jesse was a time traveler?” Gabe asked abruptly, “Or did I enter into some sort of time warp?”

“No! Jesse was not a time traveler, nor were you. However, you entered into God’s **NOW**.” The Old One looked at the questioning frown from his guest and said, “Let me clarify. God once explained to Moses and said, ‘Tell them that **I AM** sent you’. The ‘**I AM**’ is neither a yesterday phrase nor is it a tomorrow phrase. It is a today phrase. God lives in the ever present **NOW**. There are neither yesterdays nor tomorrows with God—only the constant **NOW**. If you seek the God of yesterday—you will find that He does not dwell there anymore. If you seek Him in some future dimension, you will miss Him completely. Can you grasp that?” Gabe gave a tentative nod; not sure if what he was swallowing would later rise up and choke him. “Can you then believe that anyone who has entered into God’s realm has also entered into His time frame of the **Now**? Jesse not only entered into your ‘today’, but you also entered into his ‘yesterday’. Neither of you was a time traveler, but you both were Spirit dwellers. You can easily see how God knows the end before the beginning, because in Him there is neither beginning nor end, only now. This is the reason He can reveal His mind to one of His prophets and that prophet can see clearly a thousand years into the future. However, it is not the future with God—only **NOW**”

“This is mind-boggling,” Gabe exclaimed. “This doesn’t even enter into the realm of reason.”

“Oh! But it does.” Said The Old One as he fairly jumped with excitement. “Albert Einstein approached this very subject when he put forth his Theory of Relativity. He theorized how time changed when space, mass, motion and gravitation were combined in close association. Although we do not understand it, we believe it because Einstein said it. Do you have another explanation for your experience than what I have offered?”

“I certainly can’t explain it. I’ve always been a man of logic. Now you’re asking me to accept something totally out of the realm of reason. Where was I when I was in a coma—or unconscious—those days? Why didn’t I die, seeing Jesse had about thirty-five miles to carry or drag me? That should have taken him at least ten hours.” Gabe seemed utterly exasperated.

“One thing at a time.” The Old One shushed him. “The truth of the matter is, you might have died. Nevertheless, you—your spirit was being given a guided tour and being introduced to the activity of that other realm. I’m quite sure that you absorbed an abundance of knowledge in that short time. Yet, you may never remember any of it except in flashes of revelation or in dreams. If Jesus could speak life back into a man who had been dead for four days, is it too hard to

believe He could breathe life back into a man who had been dead for two and one-half days—if indeed you did die? Just as youth rejects the wisdom of the aged both in the houses of worship and in the world, so the mind rejects the wisdom of the Spirit. The reasoning of the human mind is, more often than not, an enemy of the Spirit.”

“You speak as one who has been on the other side and returned. How else would you get your wisdom?” Gabe inquired hesitantly.

The Old One’s eyes twinkled and a little smile played around the corners of his mouth as he answered. “I have.” To him it was not something to broadcast or boast of but a simple admission of truth. Gabe knew this man was of a different breed but how different, he could only guess. “Paul, the Apostle, was caught up into that higher realm and received from that region the truths of everything he taught in the New Testament. He later admitted that he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body. But he remembered what he was taught. He said it was things for which there were no words to describe.” The Old One now looked intently into the eyes of Gabe and continued, “You do not, as of yet remember, but you shall.”

Gabe could only blink at the seeming nonsense. “How high is this higher realm that you speak of—this realm which I apparently visited?” He asked like a child.

“Well, it certainly has nothing to do with elevation, and the deep things of God have nothing to do with some bottomless pit but rather profundity. These things are taking place all about us even as we speak. There is a great gulf fixed between us that the foolish and unlearned cannot cross; although, there are no bars or gates present which would ban their entry.”

Gabe thought it was time he took the last plunge into this maze of absurdity so he related to him how Wolf had met him and protected him on his return visit to Jesse’s place. “How do you account for the fact that Wolf came back from the other side to protect me. Do animals have souls?” Gabe probed deeper.

“The soul is not a separate entity as is the spirit from the body. The soul is merely the sensory mechanism of the body. It gives us our sense of being. Many people combine the soul and the spirit, saying they are one. If you should see someone in a deep coma, the spirit is still present; but the sense of self-awareness is missing. The soul is the sense of who I am. I believe that most if not all, mammals have souls. Isaiah speaks of the wolf that shall lie down with the lamb and that the lion and the oxen shall eat grass together. The nature of the ravenous beasts will have been changed. Nevertheless, they are dwelling together in that place we refer to, as heaven. You saw both Bell and Wolf with Jesse; and then later, Wolf came back to help you. However, Wolf did not come back of his own volition. Jesse was probably as close as a whisper.” The Old One grew so excited it seemed that he would burst.

“Why, if both Jesse and Wolf came back from the other side, did they still have an appetite for the food of this land?” Gabe’s head was still full of questions.

“On the other side, as you put it, is the most beautiful land you could ever imagine. This present atmosphere of earth appears to be blighted with heavy smog, which is part of the curse of Adam. The colors there are so bright you would think that behind every leaf and flower were brilliant lights enhancing their beauty, accentuating their individuality. Also, there is such an abundance of animal life. All the animals that are extinct in this life live in peace and harmony there. The dinosaur and hairy mammoth graze together. The saber tooth tiger and the mastodon are at total peace. No fear is present there. Man and animals live in peace and mutual respect. There is no meat on man’s diet there; but man lives from the fruit of trees and plants, which are abundantly fruitful. However, man rarely experiences hunger in that place. As for your question concerning Jesse’s and Wolf’s appetite for earthly food: After Jesus’ resurrection and having received His new body, he still ate food with His disciples. He didn’t need earthly food to sustain his strength, but men fellowship around food, so He dined with them at their table.” The Old One seemed to drift over into another time and place and his face had a cherubic presence.

“Do you visit that place as often as you wish? I mean, can you come and go at will?” Gabe seemed to sense that he was standing on holy ground.

“I come and go as the need arises. There are times when I return from there a year has passed here, and the folk all think I have died. They are surprised to see me still walking around. Pastor Fiedler counts me as a troublemaker, but only because he can’t put me into one of his theological boxes. Men fear what they do not understand, and some men fear those they cannot control. When he first came here, he innocently asked me to speak to his little flock. Halfway through the sermon, he interrupted me and asked me to be seated. He then proceeded to categorize everything I had said as heresy and false doctrine. I’ve still gone back a few times, not primarily for him but for the ones there who might be hungry. He doesn’t like me to be there; and although he has tried, he cannot offend me—I cannot be provoked. On rare occasions, a few of the folk slip away and visit me. These are ones whose hunger cannot be satisfied with husks and “filler”. They desire strong meat in their diet. God passes by multitudes of pretentious worshippers to minister to the groaning of one hungry soul.”

“If the hereafter is as grand as you say, why would you ever come back?” Gabe asked. “I would think that this place is a place of hell compared to that land.” He couldn’t keep the skepticism from creeping into his voice. He had always questioned every statement that seemed a little far-fetched.

The Old One hesitated for just an instant; “Perhaps this is a place of hell for some. Many folk dwell in a hellish atmosphere. I came back this time for your sake, just like Jesse did. You are clothed with a wealth of goods that will be the

saving life to many. We couldn't let you perish without giving you the chance to accomplish your calling and purpose. You see, a promise was made to your great, great grandfather by the Almighty, and that promise must be fulfilled"

Gabe felt as if he had been hit between the eyes with a board. There was that word again, "calling". He didn't even know what it meant. Did "calling," mean the same thing as talent? How could a promise made to his forefather spring forth now, as a seedling out of barren ground? He didn't even know his great, great grandfather's name. With shaking voice hardly above a whisper, he ventured the question, "Are you then an angel like those we read about in the Bible?" Gabe hardly dared to ask the question.

"The true meaning of angel is a messenger." answered The Old One. "In that regard, I am an angel, but then so is every messenger sent forth from God. I am not an angel in the sense of the Cherubim and Seraphim. These are created beings that have been with God from almost the beginning. Powerful beings, they afford deliverance and protection to God's children. Yet, those who have been birthed from the seed of God have a closer relationship to God than do they."

The Old One and Gabe spent the night in exploring conversation—the teacher and the pupil. Gabe would not remember all that was said, nor would he understand all that he remembered. Nevertheless, he felt a rush of life within him as The Old One spoke of God and the hereafter. There now burned within him a fiery hunger to experience what this ancient one was already living. In Gabe's thinking, mystics and quixotic visionaries had always seemed to be not wrapped too tightly. He had proven some of them to be borderline idiots; but this man knew things about him that no other man knew, and above all, he was not trying to amass a fortune nor a following. He shunned publicity and applause. He lived as one completely destitute, at least while he was on this side of the veil.

"Every wise man or woman must have a long-term plan for their life. If they do not, they are much like the old saying—'No wind is a good wind to a ship that's headed for no port.' Most people are drifters. They're content to exist. Tell me, Mister Gabriel," The Old One asked with a twinkle in his eyes, "What have been the plans for your life—up to now, I mean?"

This man called him "Mister" just like Jesse had. That in itself made him uneasy. "I guess I never really had any definite plans. I was like a half-dead salmon floating back to the sea, a ready prey for any predator. I think I can now see that my life has been wonderfully protected. In my early years, I had lofty ambitions of being rich and famous. That somehow got lost in the involvement of the journey. I was preoccupied with thoughts of being either an entertainer or a politician. I could see gaining both my dreams in that fashion, but then I discovered you have to sell your soul to be really successful at either. So here I am—neither rich nor famous. All my grand ambitions have crumbled like sand

castles before a rising tide.” Gabe threw up his hands in a gesture of frustration and resignation.

“You’re fortunate.” answered The Old One. “If a man is not a fool when he begins to pursue riches, very soon the riches itself will make a fool of him. The Scriptures speak of the deceitfulness of riches. It’s like fool’s gold. It promises more than it can ever deliver. Even if one succeeds in acquiring wealth, the rest of his life is either spent trying to enlarge it or protect it. Jesus said, ‘How hardly shall a rich man enter the kingdom of heaven’. I knew an ex-college professor who went crazy searching for gold in these very mountains. After he had struck it rich, some scheming little barfly took it all away from him. He died broke and demented. It’s difficult for man to be content with food and raiment, unless he’s indolent, which in itself is a grievous sin.”

Weariness had crept over Gabe in the last hour. However The Old One seemed as fresh as when he met him yesterday. The twinkle in his eyes was still there and the bounce in his steps belied his age. One more question begged to be asked but he was reluctant to broach the subject. Nevertheless, now was as good a time as any, so he blurted out his inquiry, “Have you ever seen Jesse on the other side?”

The Old One eyed him quizzically, obviously concerned as to how much truth this man could handle. Satisfied that his hungry spirit was teachable, he took Gabe by the hand and said, “We’ve been as close as you and I are now. Not only have I seen Jesse and talked with him, but his wife and his animals are all there too. You see. God does not destroy nor withhold life and joy from any of His creation. Because it does not fit into our particular theology does not negate its reality. ‘For God so loved the world’ is not speaking of man alone. Many owe a great deal to Jesse. He introduced them to this life beyond the man-made denominations.”

“Do you intend to be around long this time, or do you know? I mean—are there others you must visit on this trip or is your list clean?” Gabe inquired.

“There may be others, and perhaps I’ll go pay another visit to Pastor Fiedler. Although he’s wrapped in a cloak of spiritual pride, God can still tear it away. He may somehow fall through the ice.” He said, with that familiar twinkle in his eyes. “God has His ways.”

“Are you the only one who fits into this category or are there others on earth who possess these same attributes?” Gabe queried.

The Old One gazed out the door as though he was watching some activity nearby. “There are many in the earth who are of the same calling and distinction; but almost without exception, they dwell in obscurity and are held in ridiculed and contempt because they never fit the modern church’s theology. God has had to

miraculously open the eyes of some that they might behold the unseen ones in their midst. They will never submit to worship or applause so if you meet one who does, they're not one of us."

"Could I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"How old are you?" Gabe was uncomfortable with the question.

"Well, there have been times when I was on the other side, that many years passed here. Let me just say, when Jesse was a youngster we enjoyed great times together."

Gabe let out a little gasp. That would make The Old One at least a hundred and twenty-five years old. "Will I see you again or will you do like Jesse and leave me stranded with my dreams?"

"There is no reason any person should ever feel stranded or alone. The Spirit of the Lord is as close as a breath. He will be your constant companion. However, there may come a time when we will meet again on this side of the veil. Time will tell. I have many things waiting for me to do and so do you. The riches of the Kingdom of God must be disbursed. We must discover what things we are to confer and upon whom. We are saved for a purpose, not to idle our time away."

Gabe stood to leave and The Old One took him by the hand saying, "I want to have a word of prayer with you." With that he began to talk—to pray as someone talks to his closest friend. He asked for strength, wisdom and guidance to be Gabe's daily portion. It wasn't like words said that one hoped would come to pass, but faith accompanied each word until Gabe knew it was so. To Gabe, it sounded more like a prophecy than a prayer. Each word was like a drink of fresh water; and when The Old One was finished, Gabe felt strengthened and refreshed again. He looked intensely at Gabe and said, "I want you to consider spending less time alone. A man likes to show off a trophy moose or a trophy fish. God wants to put you on display. Mok Tok has been good to you, as a place of healing until now; but it will not be your home for long. It is too small to properly display God's purposes. There are other plans for you."

"How will I know about these other plans?" Gabe asked.

That familiar twinkle came into The Old One's eyes again as he answered, "You will know." And Gabe believed it to be so.

Picking up his few belongings and after embracing the old man, he walked back down the path he had arrived on yesterday. It seemed he had taken an

incredible journey. How could these things have happened only three miles from Nenana and Pastor Fiedler? He wondered how much time had actually passed. He surely wasn't the same man as he was when he arrived. So deep in thought was he that he was back in the town scarcely before he knew it. Coincidentally, Pastor Fiedler just happened to be putting in his flowerbeds when Gabe approached. "Well, I see you found him. I'm somewhat surprised. One never knows when he will be around. He's here for awhile and then he goes—heaven knows where."

"You're absolutely right about that." Gabe responded.

"I'm right about what?" Pastor Fiedler asked

"About 'heaven knows where he goes'." Gabe answered smilingly.

It was not the response the good Pastor was expecting. "You sound as bushy as he does. A few more days with him and you'd be just like him."

"I would surely hope so." Gabe answered with a smile. "You would do good to seek him out and kneel at his feet for some teaching."

"That's not likely to happen." He sputtered

"Don't bet the ranch on it." Gabe was still smiling. Pastor Fiedler whirled and half marched—half stomped back into the "house of God".

Gabe chuckled to himself as he made his way back to the river where his plane was left. He could feel Pastor Fiedler's eyes boring into his back as he disappeared around the corner. He was amazed that he could talk to someone he didn't particularly like without becoming irritated and angry. As he came to the river, he saw the same Eskimo boy still by the plane just where he had left him. He now made no pretense at fishing. "Shouldn't you be in school?" Gabe asked with a smile.

"I couldn't. I had to watch your plane to see that no one messed with it." The boy answered. He seemed surprised that Gabe didn't understand the logic.

"Have you been here all night?" Gabe continued.

"Yeah! Night is when it needs watching."

"Where did you sleep?"

"Most of the night I slept on the pontoon and some here on the dock." He answered matter-of-factly.

Gabe remembered times in Mexico when youngsters would devote hours watching your car without being asked, in hopes of a generous handout. Surely this boy deserved some compensation. "Let's see. You've spent the last twenty hours on the job. Surely you must be worth a dollar an hour," as he handed him a twenty dollar bill.

The young lad's eyes widened, as he grasped the money in his hand, which was probably the most he had ever had at one time. "Thank you. Thank you, sir," as he shoved the money deep into his pocket. He would now go and boast to his friends how school was a waste of time.

Stepping onto the pontoon, Gabe crawled into the cockpit; and after a few preflight inspections, he hit the starter and the old engine sputtered into life. The young Eskimo unhitched him and pushed him out from the pier with a long pole that was there for that purpose. He'd done this before. Gabe nosed it upriver and let it idle just enough to keep it even with the pier. When the plane's temperature was sufficiently high, he turned downstream with the throttle to the limit. Within a few hundred yards, he felt the water lose its reluctant grasp on the pontoons and he was soon headed toward Fairbanks. No sooner had he set his course than he radioed Jim that he was coming in. Jim didn't answer but Carol responded from the base station at home. Jim had to tend to some errand. "I'll call him on his portable and have him meet you at the river-port. We've been looking forward to seeing you. Would you mind if our pastor came over?"

After leaving Pastor Fiedler, Gabe wasn't anxious to talk to another pastor, but what could he say, it wasn't his home. "Of course not, I'd be glad to meet him," he lied. As Fairbanks came into view, he could see the Dalton Highway stretching north in an earth colored line, to end hundreds of miles later at Prudoe Bay. He crossed the Chena River, winged over and set the Cessna down close to the river-port. Jim was already there, waiting on the pier. Gabe kept the engine at just enough throttle to give him steering. Before reaching the docking area, he killed the engine and let the craft glide into the docking slit. Jim threw a line over the pontoon hook and pulled the Cessna into the exact position where she would rest. The craft had hardly stopped when Gabe loosed himself from the cockpit. Stepping from the cockpit to the pontoon and then to the pier was taken in one fluid motion. Jim was surprised at the exuberance with which Gabe pumped his hand.

"My! You're in great spirits this morning. Have you eaten?" Jim asked.

"I haven't eaten or slept since I left here yesterday morning. There's been too much going on."

"I'll call Carol and get her to scramble up a meal." With that he radioed Carol and within minutes bacon and eggs were cooking on the stove.

Jim pulled into the driveway and Gabe could smell the bacon the moment he stepped out of the car. Carol met them at the door and said to Gabe, "Are you sure you want something to eat? You look like you're full."

"I guess I'm full of one kind of food but empty of another," he replied. He followed Carol into the house, excused himself and made his way to the washroom. Minutes later at the table, questions poured forth from both Jim and Carol, as though an artesian well had erupted. "Whoa! Let me catch my breath." His hosts looked a little embarrassed for their lack of courtesy.

"Sorry, I could have serve some sourdough biscuits, but you didn't give me much time." Carol commented.

"Hey! This is just what I needed. I don't even stop for toast most mornings." The brunch was especially good and just as Gabe was wiping his mouth, the sound of a car pulled into the drive.

"That'll be Pastor Mark," Carol observed. Moments later a tall lanky man with sandy brown hair stepped through the door. He wore an infectious smile as easy as one wears an old shirt. "Pastor, this is the man you've heard so much about. Mark Burkett, meet Gabe Hunter. They shook hands and were immediately at ease with each other. It was apparent that this man didn't put on too many airs.

"You wouldn't by any chance be kin to a Dewey Burkett up in the Kantishna area would you?" Gabe questioned.

"If he's a man of grace, elegance and refinement, I would not. If he's a rough old codger you can hardly distinguish from his malemites, he's my uncle. The outside is as rough as pine bark, but inside there lives a tender man. I assume then that you know him." Mark answered.

"He's the one who got me into this mystery in the beginning." Gabe responded.

"I hear you've made quite a journey. I'd be honored if you'd share some of it with me. At our church, we're not looking for something spectacular; but we are searching for life and truth. Sometimes even that seems to have abandoned us." Pastor Mark openly confessed.

"I suppose Jim and Carol have filled you in on everything up until yesterday." He didn't speak as if he was being critical, yet they both seemed a little uneasy. "Well, the best is yet to come; or at least, I think so. I met Pastor Fiedler; and by the way, he's an egotistical fraud. However, he showed me where Michael Roberts lives, although he didn't offer to take me out there. It was as if he was afraid he might catch something. Well, he needs to catch something. Any change would be an improvement." The minute he said it he regretted it. "Oh!

I'm sorry. I'm sure there's some good in the man. We just rubbed each other the wrong way."

"The church is full of both good and bad, pure and corrupt. That goes for the ministry as well, or should I say, especially." Pastor Mark admitted. "I'm sure I have as many bad qualities as does Brother Fiedler; I just wear a smile easier than he does. No one walking around has yet been perfected." Gabe took this occasion to disagree.

"I want to tell you about a man who has been perfected, and he's still walking around." Everyone in the room was quite taken aback at the boldness of this newcomer on the scene. "In the course of our conversation, I figured out that Michael Roberts is at least one hundred and twenty-five years old." Everyone gasped in unison. "He was a boyhood friend of Jesse Willit, the man who saved me from the river. We talked all night about a veil—a gulf that separates the two worlds and how many from that other world walk about in this world, ridiculed and scorned; yet, as he put it, 'plucking brands from the fire'."

"Do you mean to tell me that you believe he came back from the other side?" Pastor Mark asked incredulously.

"Not only do I believe it, I believe he is one who crosses that great divide almost at will. He's in contact with Jesse, his family and his animals all the time." Gabe asserted.

"That contradicts the Scriptures." Pastor Mark offered. "Jesus' own words regarding the rich man and Lazarus states that there can be no traveling back and forth."

"The Old One warned me that this would be the first Scripture the religious world would throw at me, ignoring the fact that Moses and Elijah were very visible to those who were on the mountain with Jesus." Pastor Mark blushed quite noticeably. "He also mentioned that Jesus, while yet an unperfected man, made that journey to the other side on that same mountain. Paul made a journey into that heavenly realm and while there was taught the entirety of his epistles." Gabe offered these comments, not as a lawyer arguing his case but as a witness who had observed the wonders of The Old One yet full of strength and joy.

Jim let out a muffled whistle under his breath and said; "Last night must have been some night you spent with The Old One. It's not that we are trying to refute your experience; it's just that we have never heard anything to compare with this. Everything we have ever heard has relegated all these things to the far and distant future."

"Did The Old One preach Jesus to you at any time of your stay?" Pastor Mark asked. "Did he ask you to be born again?"

“No he didn’t.” Pastor Mark was about to interrupt when Gabe continued his answer, “But he radiated Jesus the entire time I was with him. He said Jesus was our pattern. Is that comparable to preaching? Must I have chapter and verse as guidance for my walk with Him?”

“It’s just all so different. It has been three months since you got involved in this experience; and you are telling us things we never even dared consider, although we have been faithful to the church all our lives.” Pastor Mark fairly groaned out his complaint.

“That was my discontent with the church. As a child, when my parents took me to church services, I never met any really joyous people. They griped and complained about everything from the government to the weather. They got angry over the least imaginable offense or inconvenience. In addition, they were backbiting, deceitful and selfish, yet all the while asking me to be a part of their club. I wasn’t any better than the rest of them, but I sure didn’t want to carry their membership card in my wallet. It turned me off to church. Then overseas when I prayed for God’s intervention in some terrible situations and He didn’t respond, it turned me off to Him. Neither Jesse nor The Old One asked me to join anything, yet their lives invited me to be a part of the greatest brotherhood I’ve ever encountered. An inexplicit hunger saturated my being.” Gabe was a little embarrassed that he had, in his own words, rambled.

“Did either Jesse or The Old One indicate what God’s purposes were for you—for us?” Jim interjected. “We seem to be groping for answers—for life.”

When a person is in the position of having people come to them for answers and they are recognized as the authority on a given subject, or in a certain realm, they often feel threatened when these same people he has instructed turn to another for solutions—especially if the one they are turning to is a novice. Pastor Mark showed absolutely no resentment to this newcomer on the scene but rather exhibited a great deal of humble acceptance. “Jesse had spoken some words concerning my calling. The Old One was even more explicit. He said I was to be as a trophy that God would exhibit in order to demonstrate His grace. He quoted some Scripture where it states that God would put us all on display.” Gabe looked around. Carol was silently weeping. Jim’s eyes were watery and the preacher’s head was bowed, as if the impact of it had just hit him.

“Did he give any indication as to what you were to do?” Pastor Mark asked, pressing the question even further.

“Yes! He said I was to do absolutely nothing for the present time. When I asked how I would know the way, he just got that twinkle in his eyes and said, ‘You will know’. He warned against trying to search for the special ones among us but rather to look for Christ in every man and woman. Another thing he said was, ‘You’ll find very few in the recognized church system’. I don’t know if we’re

to try and change the system or just the ones who come to us or only those to whom we're sent. He did encourage me to stop being a loner in Mok Tok. So you'll probably be seeing more of me in the future."

Pastor Mark sat for a long time in quiet contemplation and then said, "I think I need to go visit with this Old One. Do you think he'll be around for long?"

"He mentioned that he needed to drop in on Pastor Fiedler; but if the good Pastor is not receptive, The Old One may be gone for a long time. He said he may leave for just a short time and when he returns, a year may have passed. If you're going, you'd better make it soon." Gabe advised.

"Do you think you could speak to our congregation this Sunday morning. I don't know how the reception would be; but at least, they will have something to chew on." The good Pastor invited.

"I don't think I'm ready for that at this time. I got the distinct feeling I was not to go on tour telling my story. Neither Jesse nor The Old One ever did that. It seems they just ministered to a few special ones. They were not under pressure to follow any man-made schedule of Saturday or Sunday." Jim and Carol sat in wonderment as they observed the inner glow that illuminated Gabe from within, especially since he hadn't slept for over thirty-six hours.

Little more was said concerning Gabe's meeting with Pastor Fiedler and The Old One, so Pastor Mark excused himself and left, depicting a man who had a lot of praying to do and decisions to make. He was no fool. He realized the cost of radical decisions. To decide to embrace what he had heard the last three hours would almost surely cause a split in his church and cost him the fellowship of most of his preacher friends. To disparage the testimony of Gabe would cost him a great deal more. Gabe appreciated the battle fires that must have been ignited within the good Pastor. But he was a gracious man—a calm and thoughtful man. There was little doubt that he would make the judicious choice.

Suddenly Gabe was tired. Even though it was still morning, he needed some rest. Carol directed him to the room he had occupied before and within minutes he was in a land where the waters ran clear and animals of all variety grazed contentedly without fear.

The stirring of children awakened Gabe after about four hours, but he was remarkably rested and alert. Walking out of the bedroom, he could hear the shushing of Carol as she attempted to keep the children quiet. She looked at Gabe and threw up her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Gabe laughed at her mothering and the endeavor to keep the brood under her wings. She knew, perhaps better than anyone, they'd fly the coop soon enough. Most mothers entertained the same disposition. When Gabe looked around for Jim, Carol sensed his searching and said, "Jim had a group of prospective customers he

needed to meet, in order to wrap up some plans. He'll be back shortly." Carol began immediately where the conversation ended. "What did you think of our Pastor?" was her first question? "I think he left in shock."

"Perhaps he left in shock, but he's an honest man and he'll follow his spirit. I think he'll leave shortly to find Brother Roberts, if he's still around. The Old One will teach him a great deal. It'll change his heart as well as your church. There are not too many Mark Burketts running around. You're fortunate to have him as your pastor." Gabe offered.

Jim came into the door with a bounce in his step. He had always been an upbeat guy, even in Nam, where there wasn't much to be upbeat about. Unlike Gabe who had come out of service as Lieutenant Colonel, Jim had been passed over for promotion and came out as a Major. Perhaps it was because he hadn't been shot down as many times or received as many purple hearts. He never was one to get bitter though, no matter the circumstances. "What's for supper?" he questioned, hardly before he was inside. "I saw Pastor Mark. He wants me to fly him down to Nenana so he can meet with The Old One. He seems in a bit of a hurry. Wants to leave tomorrow morning. Gabe, we'll drive you to your plane, then Carol can drop me off at the chopper. We both ought to be off the ground by seven. Hey! I'm talking as if you want to leave. You know you're welcome to stay as long as you want."

"No, I need to be going this afternoon. There's some business I need to attend to. The Old One said Mok Tok was too small for me, so I'm seriously considering moving to Anchorage, or at least in that area. I can't imagine any place too small in light of the place where he lives. But he's existing in a whole different realm. Nevertheless, his words carried a hint of command as well as prophecy. Maybe that's how this thing works." He said half to himself. Gabe didn't expect an answer to his musings.

"Why don't you move to Fairbanks? We could put you up 'til you've found a suitable place. We need you here." Carol was almost pleading.

"I've got a feeling, by the time you and Pastor Mark blend your spirits, Fairbanks will have more than it can handle. We each must work out our own relationship with that other world." Gabe was speaking things that he had not heard or did not remember hearing.

"What if Mark gets to Nenana and The Old One is gone?" Carol probed.

"He'll be there." Gabe answered with such finality it surprised him. "Don't ask me how I know. I just know."

Chapter 10

The Pastor's Baptism

Pastor Mark was waiting at the airport when Jim, Carol and Gabe arrived a few minutes minus five o'clock. Driving by where he was standing, Jim said, "Jump in while we take this character over to his plane." Mark jumped in and reached over to shake Gabe's hand. "What made you change your mind? I thought you were going over tomorrow morning." Gabe smiled, knowing the obvious answer.

"I was afraid if I waited I might miss The Old One. I hope I'm not too late," was his response.

"You won't be too late. He'll be there waiting for you." Gabe stated with even more certainty. "He also said that this was one of the marks of the called-out ones—the fear of missing out on something of God."

After retrieving his gear from Jim's truck, Gabe bid them Godspeed; stepped off the pier to a waiting pontoon and stored his gear in a behind-the-seat compartment. After a quick check (it was difficult to do a thorough check with the plane sitting on the water), he climbed into the cockpit and started the engine. This time Jim did the honors of pushing him away from the dock. They all watched as Gabe brought the plane around and headed downstream. Minutes later he was airborne and banked around to the southwest destined for Mok Tok. Pastor Mark envied these two men who flew like birds.

Jim kissed Carol bye and minutes later he and Mark were sitting in the whirlybird waiting for it to warm up. Shortly Jim had the bird off the ground seeking an old man, who would change their lives forever. Knowing that the Chena flowed into the Tanana a few miles northwest, Jim simply cut across and picked up the Tanana on its westerly flow. With its tail in the air like a mad wasp, Jim covered the distance to Nenana in slightly over an hour. A heliport was located a short distance from where Gabe had hitched his plane to the pier. Setting the bird down, the rotors had scarcely stopped turning when a young Eskimo boy approached them. "I'll watch your chopper for twenty dollars." He yelled. Gabe had spoiled him with his generosity.

"I'm leaving right away but my passenger will be staying." Turning to Mark he said, "Phone Carol when you're ready to come back. I can be down here in short order. She can locate me on the radiophone."

Mark had been here before so he knew the way to Pastor Fiedler's house. Along each side of the path from the river a profusion of fireweeds was growing. He always wondered why they called them fireweeds. In the lower forty-eight, all manner of fertilizer and energy would be spent in order to make them send out their fiery red blossoms, which occurs naturally here. Maybe this is some sort of

compensation for the intemperate winters. Shortly he was standing in front of the Pastor's log cabin. In response to the knock a puzzled, disheveled Pastor opened the door. Pastor Fiedler, observing his guest, harbored a quizzical and suspicious look. "What brings you down here?" He asked. Mark caught a fleeting glimpse of a young Eskimo girl dart out the back door.

"I'm looking for The Old One, Brother Michael Roberts. Gabe said he lived close to here."

"Good God! Don't tell me you're mixed up with him too?" The good Pastor fairly spat out the words.

"Now Quincy, how could I be mixed up with him? I've never met him." Pastor Fiedler didn't like to be addressed by his given name. First of all, he didn't like the name; and secondly, it seemed to show a lack of respect. Mark knew this but enjoyed pricking his pride occasionally. "Could you give me a lift to his place. If he's not home I may have to avail myself of your hospitality for the night." Quincy Fiedler's face flushed as he turned and mumbled something about finding the keys to his car. I'll repent tomorrow Mark chuckled to himself. Since there was no highway out of Nenana, most people left their keys in the car; but because of Pastor Fiedler's disposition, he couldn't bring himself to indulge in this one luxury of trust.

It was only about three miles up a narrow gravel road when they rounded a curve almost upon a small log cabin. On the front porch was an ancient man, with a snow-white beard, sitting in a rocker. "That's him; and if you don't mind, I'll be going." Mark had barely closed the door when Pastor Quincy Fiedler turned around in the old man's front yard and sped off unceremoniously. He did not so much as acknowledge The Old One.

Michael Roberts walked out into the yard where Mark was still standing and said, "He believes this place has spirits. In reality it does, but not as he thinks. We've been expecting you. It didn't take you long. I like that. Procrastination is more than a thief of time, it dulls our vision." Just as Gabe had said, Mark could not help but notice the twinkle in his eyes. It was as if he was hiding a monumental treasure that he was going to reveal momentarily. Any moment now, he would begin to share the nuggets from his gold mine. Mark wanted more than nuggets—he wanted access to the mine. As Mark eyed The Old One, he could not help but notice the simplicity of his dress. He had on a simple khaki shirt and trousers to match and they were far from being new. The shoes were more like the Eskimo mukluks—soft and comfortable. Nothing about him was spit and polish—more homey and inviting.

"You said that you were expecting me. Did Gabe tell you I was coming?"

“No. Your name never came up, but I knew Gabriel would do his job. He blew the trumpet. He was our key to get to you. You’ve been on our list for a long time.” The Old One’s smile grew broader.

Already Mark felt a little weak-kneed. Like Gabe, he wondered who the “we” were who made up the plurality. It was scary having a man know all about you before you had even been seated, as he was sure this man of God did. He felt like bowing in worship, but he suspected The Old One wouldn’t tolerate that. One thing he knew for certain—he was standing on holy ground! That seemed to erase all the foolish questions that he had wanted to ask.

“Pastor Fiedler is afraid of what goes on out here because he suspects I know what goes on there. When a man has something to hide, he loves the darkness and shuns the light.” The Old One said sorrowfully. “He could save himself a world of sorrow if he would just stop resisting the inevitable.”

“Do you mean that he’s on the list too?” Mark asked incredulously. “When can we expect him to become a seeker?”

“Oh! Everyone is on the list; but the time of their apprehending is not open to speculation, only the assurance. Pastor Fiedler will run the gamut of his carnality; and then when all his pride and self-sufficiency has been depleted, he will become a seeker. The Prodigal Son had to exhaust all his carnal appetite before he decided to return to his father. Pastor Fiedler came right out of bible school and wanted to be a missionary, so he was sent here by the board of presbytery. He has since become disillusioned, not only with the church but also with God Himself. To lose one’s faith in people is one thing but when a man loses his faith in God, he has no anchor, rudder nor sails but is tossed on a sea of sin without direction or destined port. Sadly, that’s where the good Pastor is. Enough of him for the present, why are you here?”

“I’m really not sure. I only knew I had to come. Our church has devolved into a series of dull Bible studies and dry-mouthed prayers. There remains neither excitement, expectation of miracles nor even life itself. Christianity has become a pilgrimage of habit. I’ve seriously thought of resigning, but I know whoever comes next will exhibit the same attributes,” Mark admitted sadly.

“You understand the problem, don’t you?” The Old One asked. Mark shook his head. “The majority of people live on someone else’s revelation or vision. Paul the Apostle had a tremendous revelation of truth; however, by the time it had been filtered down through fifty generations, the present message holds only a grain of truth, and that’s hidden beneath a mass of man’s tradition. For one not to embrace another’s theology will brand him as heretical in their eyes and thus be eternally lost. Most people think that I’m a heretic. Every man, in his carnal state of uncertainty and fear, wants to control people and rule the circumstances. Preachers fall into the same category. They want nothing that will disrupt the

order of the services; when actually, the order is not order at all but traditional confusion. This is why the sermon is more often than not, a monologue of pap and filler—never a discussion among the people. Whenever a discussion occurs, the preacher loses a degree of control over the people and the situation. Should you have been in one of Jesus' meetings, there would have been crying babies, barking dogs and people on the fringes talking and criticizing His comments. If you stand in the majority of church meetings today and openly question the preacher's last statement, you will, most likely, be ushered out of the assembly. How can a man's heart be opened to revelation when he is compelled to a path of conformity and dullness? He will plod along in the footsteps of his grandfather, his father or his Pastor. He will try, with all his might, to press his children into the same mold; consequently, the rituals and untruths are perpetuated from generation to generation. This is why you will find so few of the enlightened ones within the walls of the recognized church system."

The Old One's observation almost took Mark's breath away. He was sure he choked back an audible gasp as he asked, "How do we break out of this pattern? How do we break the chains of conformity?" It sounded like a prayer.

The Old One studied the young man, obviously pleased with this seeker. "Man is helpless to break free, in his own strength. He must be infused with power from the Spirit of the Father. The pit is too deep, the trap too strong. There must come a cry for deliverance, a confession of helplessness and discontent." The Old One stated.

"But Gabe uttered no cry. From what I hear he was quite satisfied where he was. Was he captured against his will?" Mark protested.

"Then what you have heard is wrong. Gabriel had cried out of the depth of his being since early childhood. He became angry and stubborn; but the cry was still audible to God. You see! He was angry with God because he could not manipulate Him into answering each of his childish prayers. He could not press Him into the theological mold he had learned from his parents and Pastor. A sullen man was all people could see—one who had come back from the war expecting to be welcomed as a hero. Since he was not received in that fashion, he just said in his heart, 'to hell with all of them' and began to run. He ran until Jesse dragged him out of that river."

"I thought he pulled himself out from where he crashed through the ice!" Was Mark's astonished answer?

"If you could have seen where he went through the ice, you would have agreed that no man could have overcome that current and crawled out. The current would have pulled him under. Death cannot apprehend life. It must be seized upon from a higher source." The Old One said with an assured smile.

Mark contemplated that last statement. It made sense. “How do you know so much about it? Were you watching?” He questioned.

“There was a multitude watching, gathered to rejoice in his birthing. Gabriel had been the center of attention to many for a long time.” The Old One nodded knowingly.

Mark sat for a long time trying to assimilate all he was hearing and reconcile them in harmony with his religious training. It caused an excitement in his spirit, but it was all so contrary to his training. Finally he ventured, “How does one embrace all of this without appearing to be a fool? How do you confess to a congregation of believers that you have taught the wrong doctrine without raising the question, ‘Well! What’s to say you’re not teaching error now?’”

“This is the overriding problem with preachers’ theological stance. Even after having heard the truth and the Holy Spirit has quickened it to their inner man, they’re so crippled by religious tradition and fearful of man’s rejection that pride makes it nigh impossible to recant. Except the Lord imparts His strength and humility, deception performs its fulfillment of death. Jesus said many things that stood in direct opposition with what the Pharisees were teaching. It was so shocking that even after witnessing the miracles He performed, many of His own disciples followed Him no more. Pride is such a compelling adversary that they would sooner risk the rebuke of their Heavenly Father than the scorn and contempt of unlearned, mocking men. It makes no sense does it? As for being a fool—the statement of the Apostle Paul says it all, ‘We are fools for Christ’s sake’.” The Old One settled back in his chair and viewed Mark with the look of a satisfied father. This young man would be a valiant adversary to the kingdom of darkness.

“Has anyone considered you a heretic—apart from Pastor Fiedler, I mean?” Mark blushed at the question.

The Old One chuckled. “Everyone who performs a miracle will be considered a charlatan—a fraud by those whose eyes have not been opened by the Holy Spirit. One Sunday afternoon, right after the morning service, twenty-one people crowded into this very room. I had one chicken roasting in the oven. Everyone ate sufficiently from that one chicken. Someone counted eight legs and thighs and there were whispers throughout their midst. Yet, some of those same people count me as one who works by divination and enchantment. They think I’m a magician because they’ve never been introduced to creative life. They reside in a place of death because that’s what they’re comfortable with. But ‘wisdom is justified of her children’.” With that he reached over and took Mark by the hand. The Old One’s hand was so hot that Mark recoiled involuntarily, but he could not free his hand from that bony grasp. The heat traveled through his entire body until he felt as if he was being saturated by fire.

Just at the time when he was sure he could stand no more, he suddenly seemed to be caught in the vortex of a mighty whirlwind. He seemed to be swept past the confines of time and space. Finally his eyes were opened to see a beautiful valley where people and animals dwelt in peace. The Old One was walking with him and stopped to converse with different ones as they made their way. He talked to a man and woman, whom Mark was confident, was the same Jesse and Wilma that he'd heard so much about. The astonishing thing was that they appeared as a young married couple. There were neither gray hairs nor wrinkles of labor and care. Although every visible witness denied what his spirit was testifying to him, Mark was convinced that this was the couple he'd heard so much about. Although Jesse did not speak to Mark, he turned and smiled as he and The Old One spoke of his friend, Gabe. There were never any introductions, yet Mark seemed to intuitively know everyone they met. It suddenly dawned on him that he never saw anyone old or infirm. The only one who looked old was The Old One who guided him around this place. He was overwhelmed at the contrast between this place and Fairbanks. There was such a variety of animals and birds that he'd never seen before.

"Let your eyes rest and enjoy the beauty of this place." The Old One invited. Mark drank in the overwhelming beauty of his surroundings. He had never witnessed colors so vivid. The river that ran through the midst of the valley was bluer and clearer than any water he had ever seen. The setting reminded him of a book he had read long ago by James Hilton. It was called "Lost Horizon", wherein was a valley called "Shangri-la". It was an imaginary place where life approached near perfection and no one aged. He wondered if this might be similar; but immediately rejected that idea.

"Come! Let me show you another place." The Old One beckoned. They began walking to a distant peak that was wearing a cloud like a canopy, completely hiding its top. Mark noticed that as they walked their feet did not touch the ground, but they seemed to glide as if skating on ice. Long before they had reached the summit, strange noises could be heard from the other side. Upon reaching the top, The Old One stopped and pointed to the scene below. There lay a city not unlike the city of Los Angeles, covered with smog and spread as far as the eye could see. A cacophony of grating noises arose from the city as it spewed out its discontent and bitterness. The shrill sounds of mechanical as well as human noises mixed together to give one the impression of a mighty war being waged. "These are the cities of the world." The Old One said. "There is no peace or joy. Even Christians are embroiled in the confusion. When worldly men are crowded together they will invariably do violence to each other. They cannot do otherwise, for the beast nature always contends for superiority. They will rule or ruin. Violent men, cloaked in the robe of Christianity, bring division and turmoil to the family of God, for they too know not the path of servanthood. As the world's population increases, wars will also increase until the end, for men will become more brutal and lose the value of all life. Can you see the enormous

need for someone to bring cleansing and restoration to its inhabitants? These need more than just a message of hope. These need an impartation of life.”

“Yes.” Mark agreed simply. “But where are the ones who will do this?”

“You will be one of many who will bear the basin of cleansing to the multitudes. You will wash the feet of the filthy and bring healing and deliverance to the oppressed.”

“Oh! But who are so few among so many?” was Mark’s astonished question.

“Remember the lad with the five loaves and two fish. The same question was asked then; yet, they had abundance with baskets full remaining. Your supply will be sufficient. The ministry will not be from pulpits—from dead preachers regurgitating dead sermons. However, to those who have discovered the walk of the Spirit, fountains of life will flow from person to person—from community to community. You will be amazed how life will enlarge itself. With your own eyes you will see the ministry take on a whole new direction. Do you believe this?” The Old One’s piercing eyes demanded a positive answer. Mark nodded in agreement. “I believe—help my unbelief.” Mark was astonished at his own words. They were as if he was praying to the Lord.

He suddenly felt weak—drained of all his strength. This sickening view had left him nauseated. The Old One took him by the arm and led him to an outcropping of rock, which formed a series of ledges, upon which they sat; and at once, he was refreshed. From this position, both the polluted cities of the earth and the pristine valley below were visible. It was only from this vantage-point that he noticed the river that ran through the valley actually formed the border between the two lands. It seemed that those in the beautiful valley could see across the river to the polluted cities but could not willingly cross it. Mark gazed at one land and then the other and finally asked the question that had been burning in his bosom, “Why are those in the polluted cities unable to see the beautiful valley?”

The Old One looked at Mark as if surprised by the childish question. “Are you also so dull of understanding? Sin leaves a person blind to the things of God. If a person’s mind is full of carnal things and worldly ambition, they will be so distracting he or she will miss the operation of the Spirit. It’s much like the trickery of a magician, who persuades you to look at one activity while the purposeful action is occurring simultaneously right before your eyes—yet unseen. There are no sinners and very few saints who see beyond the masquerade of the present, because they pursue a false image. Whereas the sinner cannot see because he has not been born from above—the saint chooses to be blinded to the realm of the Spirit. Which is the greater violation?”

“Are there no other places of abodes between these two extremes?” Mark asked, thirsty for more revelation, “Is it just either—or?”

At that, The Old One brushed his hand down the front of Mark's face. When Mark opened his eyes, he jumped with involuntary surprise, for before him a vast region stretched as far as the eye could see, filled with spirit beings. A collective groan seemed to emanate out from among them. Most of them were still attempting to engage in the same kinds of carnal acts that was their undoing while they dwelled on the earth. The adulterer and fornicator were still trying to commit all manner of lewd acts but were met with angry frustration because they had no body with which to perform the act. The drunkard tried still to experience the highs he once derived from the bottle, but the useless endeavor left him cursing his predicament. The addict remained in wrenching pain, ever trying to satisfy the craving, while violent men sought means to execute their violence. However, there were others who seemed truly repentant of the life they had lived on the earth. "What is this place?" Mark asked. "And why do they not have bodies?"

With that, The Old One sighed as one with great sorrow. "This is one section of hell. Some people call it purgatory—a place where people are purged of further impurities."

"Then the Catholics are right!" Mark gasped.

"Only so far as the place is concerned," replied The Old One. "However, there does not exist a grace called 'indulgence'. No one on earth can pray these people out nor buy them out of this stage of their experience. It is a grace given for their further perfection. There will be some who will truly repent of their sins, asking Jesus to save them. They will be transported to the Valley of Peace where a new body awaits them. Others will resist and fight their circumstances for hundreds of years, attempting to engage in the same activity that gave them pleasure in the former life." Mark glanced at The Old One and saw that he was weeping. "They cannot inherit the Valley of Peace until a new body has been prepared for them."

"This is so new to me that I can't fully grasp its magnitude. I never realized that the passport to Paradise was a new body." Mark exclaimed.

The Old One turned and pointed as if to a page in a book. "Remember the writings of the Apostle Paul who said, 'We know that when the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked, (*or be wandering, unclothed spirits*) we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up in life.' These beings that you see have no heavenly house, so they are unclothed spirits—some even seek gratification

by dwelling in the same wood or brick buildings they once inhabited—miserable, lonely and tormented. To be born again is to be born into a new house.”

“How old are these spirits?” Mark asked.

“Some are thousands of years old, while others are new arrivals. Some stay in this place millenniums, while there are those who repent and are transferred to the Valley very soon after their arrival. To others it’s merely a stopover. Chosen ones from the Valley will come back here to preach the gospel and rescue many who are repentant and open to the gospel, just as Jesus did when He went by the Spirit into hell and preached unto those who were unrepentant in Noah’s day.” The Old Man answered.

Mark ventured this observation, “I was sure that in this Valley of Paradise Jesus would be ruling from a golden throne, clothed in a regal robe and a crown of diamonds on His head, yet, I have not seen Him. Is He elsewhere or have I missed Him? Surely He is the centerpiece of Heaven.”

The Old One’s eyes fairly danced as he answered, “You haven’t missed anything. Your eyes are not quite adjusted to this light.” With that he arose and headed back down the mountain—to the region where the peace and silence was broken only by laughing children, singing voices and contented animals. The trip back seemed to take only minutes as compared to the previous journey. Two huge men with swords buckled to their side approached them. They showed the utmost respect and reverence to The Old One. He spoke some words to them that Mark did not understand; but as they turned to leave, he could have sworn that he heard them refer to The Old One as The Ancient of Days.

The meeting with Jesse and Wilma had been troubling Mark for awhile; so at the first opportunity, he ventured the question, “How is it that Jesse and Wilma look so young in this place?” Why are there no old people here?”

The Old One chuckled. “The spirit never ages. It remains eternally young. Do you not remember things that seem as if they had happened yesterday, when actually they occurred many years ago? This is part of God’s **NOW**.” Mark swallowed hard. He wanted to shout and cry in the same voice.

“Gabe mentioned that Jesse and Wilma had two sons. Did I miss them or were they somewhere else?” Mark asked.

The Old One looked at Mark, embracing his childlike inquiry. “They have not yet reached the place where they can be contented in the Valley. They will arrive later.” Mark looked puzzled, for he knew that “later” could mean decades—even hundreds of years later.

The Old One looked tenderly into Marks eyes and explained. “For anyone to be allowed to enter this place apart from the proper preparation and hunger would do them a great disservice. It would, to them, be just another segment of hell. To be born from above is much more than acknowledging that Jesus died for your sins. The birth process must be worked into your spirit. Not only a change of direction must occur but also a change of ambition, dreams, speech and allegiance. The purposes of God are not primarily to save you from hell, but also to prepare you for heaven. Do you understand?” Mark nodded, but he still wasn’t sure he fully grasped the truth. The Old One smiled knowingly.

This was all so different than anything Mark had ever imagined. Instead of a thousand-voice choir, there were thousands of people whose lives emanated praise and thanksgiving. Instead of singing a song of praise, they had become a song of praise.

Chapter 11

The Joining

The pounding on his door and Carol's anxious call awakened Mark. As he arose he noticed that he had not been in bed but merely lying across it fully dressed. He was confused as he opened the door to confront a bewildered Carol, who did not really expect to receive an answer to her knocking. "Where have you been?" She exclaimed. "We've been concerned about you! You should tell someone if you're planning to run off. Jim has been searching for you for three days."

Mark was as astonished as was Carol. He didn't remember how he got from The Old One's house back home. He certainly didn't remember leaving that place of beauty and tranquility, but he definitely remembered that The Old One was more than a man. "I have much to tell you; however, I want Jim and Gabe present when I do. How soon can we meet?"

"I don't know." Carol responded. "Jim is out searching for you right now. I'll go see if I can raise him on the radio." She gave Mark a peculiar look as one looks at a stranger. This is definitely not the same man who left three days ago. An hour later she had contacted Jim and he, in turn, began trying to raise Gabe on the radio. After half-hour of diligent effort, Jim located Gabe on a river close to Anchorage. He had taken a party there in search of grizzlies.

"I can't be in before tomorrow," Gabe responded to Jim's inquiry. "These are national magazine photographers who want to fly out to the Aleutian Chain where the big browns are, so we've contracted another pilot to finish their investigation. I'll fly back into Fairbanks and call you when I reach your area. Sounds as if Mark met with something or someone that made him a believer." Gabe said.

"I believe you're right." Jim agreed. "See you tomorrow. Keep the nose up."

Gabe pondered the possibility that Mark had found in The Old One something that had authenticated his doubts. Yet, if he was filled with doubt, he wouldn't want to meet anytime soon. He would probably want to shun any confrontation with all three at once. No! Pastor Mark had received a revelation. What else would explain his being gone so long? Gabe made a quick trip to Mok Tok and put the plane, as well as himself, to bed. He wanted to be rested for the meeting tomorrow. He knew in his heart that neither Mark nor his little flock would ever be the same again.

By four A.M. the sun was shining through his window so, unable to sleep, Gabe arose and took a fresh shower. He was anxious to hear the results of Mark's meeting with The Old One. If he hurried, he could get to Fairbanks in time for some of Carol's sourdough biscuits or hotcakes. He really didn't check his plane

as thoroughly as he normally would but God hadn't saved him to let him perish now. He vowed in his heart not to make a habit of skipping the procedure though. God could let him go through a learning process that might not be very pleasant. Through a swarm of mosquitoes that threatened to bleed him of all life, Gabe hurriedly jumped into the cockpit and coaxed his little plane skyward, marveling at the beauty of this land lying, as it were, inside the Bastille of those pesky little warriors. Their eggs had lain all winter, frozen beneath the muskeg bogs and river-bottom land, only to hatch in the spring with a voracious hunger for blood, be it human, animal or fowl. Gabe thought of the conflict in Vietnam and was struck with the likeness of their own activity there, as they, like the thirsty mosquitoes, sought the blood of the enemy. To live, one had to take another's blood. What a crazy world, where the family of man was at constant war over the most inconsequential things. It would require a greater power than guns or bombs to quell the violence and antagonism residing in man.

Jim sounded a little sleepy when Gabe radioed him around six-thirty. "Be there in twenty or thirty minutes. Do you think you can get awake by that time?" He chided Jim.

"I wouldn't be so sleepy if Carol could only bridle her excitement. She's been up for hours and she's cooking breakfast now. You'd better hurry if you want any. I'll pick you up at the slip. Don't let the river get into the cockpit with you." Jim checked off with a chuckle, thinking how much their lives had been interlocked since March, and he had a deepening suspicion they were about to change even more dramatically. How right his suspicions would soon be confirmed. He thought of Vietnam and how raunchy the language over the air was. It was much like the trucker CB-er's language, except much worse. He liked it better this way. He watched Gabe bring his little Cessna in, dragging the pontoons tail first, until they settled in and leveled out. He glided into the slip with hardly more than a bump and Jim secured her to the walkway. They seemed like a good team.

"Did Carol give you any indication as to the substance of this meeting, and where had Pastor Mark been for three days?" Gabe asked, as they headed for Jim's home.

"I don't have an answer for either question. Carol said it was kinda spooky; he seemed so different. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough. Right now, all I'm curious about is if there'll be enough breakfast with you and your appetite present." They both laughed. The edge of Vietnam was rapidly wearing off of these two old warriors.

Carol was like a Christmas present crammed into too small a package as Jim and Gabe entered the house. The ribbons were nigh on bursting and spilling an unknown surprise before them all. The problem was, she didn't know what the surprise was either. Pastor Mark had called and said he would eat at home. He

didn't want everyone choking on their food in anticipation of the object of the meeting. His intentions were good but his fears were, nonetheless, realized. The entrée was delicious, yet everyone's thoughts were in expectation of the dessert.

Shortly after the breakfast dishes were all cleaned, the three were looking at each other, not knowing the questions much less the answers. The sound of a slamming car door announced the arrival of Pastor Mark. Carol met him at the door, barely able to keep the ribbons around the package. As he entered the room, both Jim and Gabe immediately noticed the difference. He looked radiant and pure. Taking the seat nearest him, he sat quietly for a minute or two before saying anything. Finally he spoke in a subdued voice. "I left here skeptical and filled with doubts; but after ten minutes in The Old One's presence, I was utterly captivated. We had conversed for perhaps three hours when he took me by the hand, and I thought I was going to burst into flames. The heat became so intense that I suppose I passed out. The next thing I knew we were in this breathtaking valley filled with animals, both prehistoric and present. A beautiful river flowed majestically through the land. Sandy beaches and palm trees seemed to beckon to their serenity. The azure blue sky appeared to be polished crystal. The songs of birds joined with the laughter of the children who seemed to be playing a game with the tigers and leopards. There was no hurt in all the land."

"That's the land The Old One told me about when I was with him." Gabe said excitedly.

"Pastor Mark, did you see Jesse and his family?" asked Gabe excitedly.

"The answer to your question is—yes. I watched the whole family, including the wolf and mule as they basked in the beauty of that land. They were very familiar with The Old One. You'll be pleased to know that they are not old there. They appeared to be a young married couple, delighting in the health and vitality of those who had never tasted the ravages of old age. It seems they had much to share that I was not privileged to hear. Shortly after speaking to The Old One, Jesse disappeared. I assumed that he had been summoned to some higher appointment or assignment.

"In addition," Mark continued, "The Old One instructed me that I am never to accept the title of Pastor again. He said that the word Pastor is a title, and in reality, it is a job description, just as Prophet or Evangelist. Men of the world love titles but the true man of God abhors such religious appellations such as Reverend or Bishop. These are an abomination to God. Hereafter, I will be addressed simply as Mark."

Carol was embarrassed, but it didn't curtail her questions. "Would you say that this was heaven where you were taken?"

“I don’t know that. I know that it was Paradise, but whether Paradise is heaven, as we have been taught, I don’t know. In my own mind, I believe it was.” Mark was thoughtful. “We spent a great deal of time there and I saw friends and loved ones that had passed on. They were not surprised to see me, but they seemed to know that I was just visiting. There were many there that I had thought never gave any consideration to God, but they fit into this great family as easily as the rest. I looked for some who were absent but seemed constrained to ask no questions. I seemed assured that they were in a realm that God had chosen.”

“It was at this time I began to notice an aura gathering about The Old One. It seemed to change from purple to blue to gold then red. The aura didn’t come from some outer source but seemed to emanate from within him. It was almost like a rainbow, yet there were no clouds. It pulsated almost like a heartbeat. In fact, now that I recall, I didn’t even see the sun the whole time I was there; yet it was bright. The light was different—not dazzling but nevertheless a different sort of whiteness. I began to suspect that The Old One was, in reality, Gabriel of old. I hoped that he would introduce me to the Lord, but I didn’t dare ask. We walked—rather were swept—up to the top of a high mountain to view a city set below. It was permeated with a thick yellowish-brown smog and from the midst of it arose a sound not unlike the noise of a great carnival or a tremendous battle. The screams and groans that issued forth from it caused me to be nauseated and sickened. An ocean covered with filthy debris and dead carcasses bordered it. It appeared to be a city like Los Angeles—but this was no city of angels—at least not heavenly angels.

“There are many cities like this scattered throughout the world and I want you, Jim and Gabe to restore them to a place of redemption.” The Old One had said matter-of-factly. There was such finality in his mandate that I choked back my objection and disbelief.

“How can so few accomplish this?” was my astonished question.”

“The Old One laughed at my trepidation.” ‘You will achieve this goal without the pulpit but with the power of miracles. Entire cities will be drawn to you because of the awareness of their need and because you have the answer. The miracles will draw them and then the Christ within you will seal their redemption. In addition, you’re not the only ones with this calling. There are many more. You will not be alone.’ The words were so positive that I believed him, for I knew that this One had a message straight from God Himself. It seemed he had disdain for the pulpit, which separated the “clergy” from the “laity”. ‘You are to carry no bible.’ He said. ‘The Bible has too long been used as a prayer book or a sermon factory, but you will radiate the Lord from within and rather than explain the Lord, you will demonstrate Him’.”

At these words Gabe and Jim were dumbfounded into mute silence. How does one, who has not been schooled in these things, accomplish anything

approaching this magnitude, they thought? Gabe finally found his voice, “Would not pride and the enticement for riches be a terrible adversary? The deceitful desire for applause and recognition would always be present, would it not?” Jim nodded his agreement.

“These are always an enemy of the Lord; yet, Jesus was never overcome by any of these things. We are to use the same weapons He used—the Word of the Lord.” Mark replied.

“The Old One never told Gabe these things; and I never met him, so we don’t have the imparted faith that you do.” Jim said. “I went back to Nenana looking for you,” Jim said to Mark. “Pastor Fiedler was simply fit to be tied. I believe he suspected we were about to oust him from his position of ministry. Of course I didn’t find either of you at The Old One’s cabin, although I tried. I wish I had gone to see him. Maybe I can still go see him and receive something from him.”

“You can go.” Mark replied, “But you won’t find him. Neither of you will ever find him again in Nenana, at least at that cabin. You see when we came back down the mountain to the Paradise of beauty there immediately came two huge men with swords attached to their waist and a golden girdle about them and met The Old One. I took them to be warriors. He spoke some instructions to them; they bowed slightly, and one referred to him as The Ancient of Days. The next thing I knew, Carol was beating on my door and calling my name.”

Jim beat Gabe to the punch as he asked in total wonder, “Do you mean this man was God?” Jim’s knowledge of the Scriptures prompted the immediate question. “No wonder he preferred to be called The Old One! Did you hear anyone else refer to Him as the Ancient of Days?”

“I did not. It was as if all these glorified ones were members of His family. So many misconceptions were cleared up. I saw no suggestion of fear or pressure; yet, it seemed that everyone was waiting for orders, just, as I’m sure, Jesse had been that day he rescued Gabe. It appeared that everyone had been assigned a task, and they were waiting for the proper time to fulfil it.”

Jim gave a little gasp. They all looked at him in unison. “Do you realize that Pastor Fiedler refused to let God speak in his church assembly?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time nor the last that God has not been allowed to speak in a church assembly. Sadly, it happens more than we would like to think.” Mark said with some sorrow. They all contemplated that statement for some time.

Carol was about to explode with anxiety, so she burst in with her question as soon as there was an opening. “Did you meet Jesus while you were there?”

“I have a feeling I did, yet not as we have been taught. When I ask The Old One about His whereabouts, He merely smiled and said, in effect, that I was partially blind still. So maybe the two are one, and we’ve been worshipping two Gods, or even three Gods. It seemed I met all that was necessary,” was Mark’s surprising answer.

They looked at each other as if expecting to find the answer to the next move hidden somewhere in the expression of the other. Almost in unison they said, “What do we do now?” then laughed at the coincidence.

Chapter 12

ShowTime

It was at that very moment a small knock sounded at the door. Jim was closest to the door so he opened it to find a small gnome of a child standing outside. "Come in! Come in!" He invited the youngster. With an awkward gait the youngster hobbled in. "Folks, this is Eric Johanson. He lives about a quarter mile down the road." They all furtively glanced at the boy's clubfoot and the hideous shoe he wore. Eric had never run a day in his life. He had trouble enough just walking with the deformity and a shoe that weighed a ton. "How may we help you, Eric?" Jim asked, puzzled as to the boy's mission.

"I was told that if I came here this morning, I could get my foot fixed." He replied in childlike simplicity. They all swallowed in unison at the boy's monumental announcement. "I came as fast as I could."

"I'll bet you did." Jim responded. "Who told you that you could get your foot fixed here?" Jim inquired.

"I was playing in my front yard when a little old man, walked up to me and asked if I'd like to get my foot fixed. He acted like he was laughing on the inside. So I said 'Sure', and He told me to come here and my foot would be fixed this morning. How are you gonna fix it?" He asked simply. His question harbored no doubt. "Are you gonna operate on me right now?"

"What did the old man look like? It was Mark's turn to ask the question.

"I don't know. He was just old, with a long white beard and white hair. But he didn't have a walking stick or anything, but I could tell he was really old. I didn't see him walk up. He wasn't much taller than me. He was just there all at once. So I came as fast as I could." He repeated.

They all had a knowing look as they glanced at each other. Strangely, every shadow of doubt had left the room. Tears were streaming down Carol's face as she looked at this pathetic figure standing in front of them. "Come over here and sit down." She remarked as she gently led him to a chair. "Why don't we all join hands in prayer?" She offered.

"No! We will not join hands, and we will not pray." Mark's statement startled everyone with its finality. "The Ancient One told me we were not to do things as we had done before, but we were to merely speak the word in faith, as if it were already done. Does anyone doubt who sent this lad to us." They all shook their heads. "So, we'll speak healing to this deformity. Son, would you mind taking off your shoe?" With that the youngster untied this monstrosity called a shoe, revealing a foot that was as torturously deformed as the shoe. Not only was his

foot misshapen, but also the leg was too short and turned outward, giving him a grotesque appearance. Mark knelt by the boy, who now looked somewhat panicky and motioned for the others to gather close.

As they laid their hands on the boy's leg and foot, he let out a little cry; "Your hands are hot. My leg and foot are burning." Yet, he never tried to move it away. After a moment, Mark removed his hands, as did the others, and stepped back to watch the progressing miracle. It reminded Carol of a birthing as they watched a strong, healthy leg and foot begin to appear from the crippled structure that had once housed the distorted limb. It took perhaps fifteen minutes, as the boy joined with the others watching the unfolding reconstruction. His smile said it all. It grew wider by the minute and finally turned into an uncontrollable laugh. He suddenly jerked the other shoe off and tossing both shoes aside as so much garbage said, "I want to run." And run he did—jumping and yelling as he went. People came to their doors to investigate the noise and saw a boy who had never run a day in his life running, jumping, spinning and yelling with all his might.

Tears flowed like a river in the Vandergraf household; but there was no sorrow to evoke their presence. After an interval of, who knows how long, Mark offered the simple statement, "It has begun!"

It was at this moment Carol began to laugh uncontrollably. She laughed so hard that she had to sit down. They all looked a little concerned at this hysterical woman. When she had finally regained her composure, she laughingly giggled and blurted out the reason for her seeming insanity. "Do you realize, this boy's entire family—parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents all believe that there are no miracles happening today? Can you see the monumental problem this will cause?" She again set off on another episode of laughter. The laughter was contagious. Soon the whole house was filled with rejoicing and suddenly they could distinctly hear another voice join them in their celebration of triumph.

After the laughter and praise had quieted somewhat, another knock announced the presence of another visitor. The open door revealed a mother standing behind a wheelchair, whose metal tentacles embraced the twisted form of a young man. His struggle to speak was a hideous caricature of facial deformity. "An old man said you could help me" The words came in deliberate painfulness.

Mark looked at the mother and ask, "What else did he say?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I was standing right there but I didn't see nor hear anyone." Motioning toward the boy she said, "He occasionally hears voices." She said apologetically. "This time he was so persistent." She seemed sorrowful and a little bit ashamed that she had bothered them.

The men lifted the wheelchair, patient and all, and carried them through the door. One look at the mother's eyes said it all. She'd been through this before. There were so many false dreams she had chased, trying to find an answer to their dilemma. Finally, what assurance she had in God had evaporated, like a shallow pool of water on a hot summer day, and she embraced the hopelessness of their glaring predicament. There was no confidence—only hope—hope that searched for a handhold on this elusive thing called faith. Only moments later there was heard coming from the Vandergraf house something akin to what must have come forth on the day of Pentecost. No one could have kept it quiet, even had they tried. It spread like wildfire until Fairbanks was engulfed in the flame of the Spirit.

The fire had been ignited! The fog of confusion was lifting; revealing a hungry world searching for answers; and at least four people who held the prescription for their ills. Needless to say, Fairbanks was never the same again, as the flames spread across the state. Who could foresee what impact the world would experience, started by one man falling through the ice?