

PROLOGUE

Footsteps marched toward Annabeth in the electrical room. She flinched, clipped the system fault indicator and dropped her strippers. Bending down to pick them up, she saw two pairs of military-issue work boots stop at her door.

She jammed her snips in the bib pocket of her coveralls and stood erect in front of a wall of panel boxes. A wisp of hair near her temple trembled, as did her hands. She willed the quick breathing in her chest to slow.

Her supervisor, a burly master electrician accompanied by a soldier with the name “Orez” stitched over his breast pocket, said, “The master sergeant’s looking for the commanding officer. Have you seen him?”

“No,” Annabeth replied. Behind her petite athletic build, the severed wire swayed. Orez’s line of sight changed, caught by the motion. Jitters wobbled from her legs to her brain. “I wasn’t aware the lieutenant colonel was here,” she said before her mouth ran dry. “He better find me working instead of talking.”

“What a gal you are, Secord,” said her foreman, sliding his hard hat back on his balding head. “Work six tens a week and still willing to come in on your days off to fine tune the controls. Come on, Orez. Axton’s probably in the coffee room.” The men turned and left the room. “I don’t know where she gets it,” Annabeth overheard her chief mutter as the men’s unison tread carried on down the hall.

She kicked closed the door they’d left ajar, and yanked the wires out of the conduit. This was the end. After

working on this sub-contract at the post for six months, she'd had her fill of the Army Corps of Engineers. Armed co-workers gave her the creeps. Concentrating on the job, she turned her back on the sector's security camera and completed the remaining circuits, alone.

An hour later, satisfied that her work was seamless, she packed her tools, locked up the panel room and left. The dingy green hall lighting flickered on her way to ground level, telling her what to expect for weather above. Sure enough a storm raged over the tundra. Through a window by the exit, she saw nothing but dark flatness cut by blowing snow that drifted against the side of her car, the only vehicle on the miles-wide flood plain. She had to put her whole body into opening the door to the parking lot.

Out on the barren land, the wind ripped south in a twenty-mile-per-hour shimmy to the Alaska Range. The hood of her nylon parka pressed against her round cheeks and billowed on the lee side, catching a whistling eddy in her eardrum. With both hands she closed the faux fur ruff tight around her face, but the wind found her sleeves and rushed up to her elbows.

Hunched under the icy torment, she ran to her car, unplugged the block heater and climbed in. Crystal cold irritation in her lungs left her coughing. She pumped the gas pedal twice, stamped down on it and turned the ignition, urging the starter to catch before the battery died.

Her LeBaron had seen its day as a luxury sedan. Now the heap lurched forward on frost-flattened square tires for two miles through the double fencing around Fort Greely and into the Alaska night. At the Richardson Highway,

Annabeth turned right for the five-mile drive north to Delta Junction.

If her boss really wanted to know how she could work such hours, he need only drive a mile up the road to the rutted track on her left to the commune where she'd been raised. Their leader, a mail-order minister, had thought nothing of twelve-, fourteen- or even eighteen-hour prayer fasts when stocks were low.

Annabeth slowed the car as she passed the wooden WELCOME TO DELTA JUNCTION sign boasting the town's reputation as Alaska's Friendly Frontier. Quite the opposite had been her experience. "Wacko Jesus freak commie hippie," the God-fearing Christian army brats had called her in high school while they beat the daylights out of her. If they knew her now they'd be the ones crying home to mama.

Where the Richardson and the Alaska highways met was Bull's Eye Hunting and Sports, owned by her only friend, Evy Simpson. Evy had also felt the backlash of Delta's residents when she'd publicly announced her dissent against the Ground-based Missile Defense system being built at Fort Greely.

Annabeth zigzagged through the Junction to a broken-down farm, abandoned when the land and the climate had defeated the pioneers. Her house was a crappy trailer tossed on the property to rot. It sat under the snow, the roof almost as caved in as the barn behind it, looking like a stepped-on Crunchie bar, chocolate-brown siding flaking off orange sponge-toffee insulation. The effect continued inside with yellow spray-foam sealing all the window frames.

Annabeth dropped her toolbox under the boot rack and tossed her coat on a chair in the two steps it took to cross the kitchen to the beer in her fridge. She flicked on the living room light and clicked on the television before sinking into her ratty second-hand sofa.

Rolling ads flipped across the TV screen and Annabeth looked long and hard at the houseboat for sale in Valdez. Hopefully it wouldn't be sold before she was paid. She finished her beer, got another and opened her computer bag beside the phone on the coffee table. At the top of the hour, she dialled.

Across the border, in Canada's Yukon, a man answered. Annabeth leaned back and put her size-five feet up on the coffee table. She adjusted her camera on the low bookshelf beside her and plugged it into her laptop. "It's me," she said. "Are you sitting near your mini-cam?" In a moment, her screen flickered and she was looking at a cluttered dining table in Whitehorse's Riverdale subdivision. Cramped Arabic script crawled across a pale green topographic map.

"Change the angle, Omar," she said. "I'm looking at the table." The picture jerked around the room. A shaded lamp, the wing of an armchair and a swatch of Persian rug splashed over her screen until it settled on the face of Omar Ahmed, her smiling lover.

"That's better. What're you doing?" she asked.

"Plotting where I will stop for prayer during the Yukon Arctic Ultra." The dark curl that fell over his forehead threw a pang of lust between Annabeth's legs. He held up the Dawson 1:250 000 map, and before he lowered it, she had her coveralls off and her blouse open to her underwear.

“How do I look?” she teased.

“Yes, I would take you in my arms right now if I could.”

Annabeth loved the cadence of Omar’s English, even from five hundred miles away. She hung on to his every word.

“I met Markus Fanger recently,” he said. “He is a volunteer on the Ultra race, an auxiliary constable with the Mounted Police.”

She bolted upright and swung her legs off the couch. “A cop came to your house?”

“Yes, and thank Allah he cannot read Arabic. I was able to conceal my plans. And I asked him many questions about the trail.”

“That’s enough, Omar. You can’t do this anymore. It won’t work.”

His tone darkened. “I can and it will. We have everything in place.”

The honey-thick braid she flipped over her shoulder smacked the newspaper on the back of the sofa. She sulked. He lived for the risk, but she wasn’t going to fight about it again tonight.

“Did you have a holiday recently? Homeland security upped the alert and I must’a had to show my pass about a million times.”

“Yesterday. It was Eid-ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice.”

“Sounds gruesome. Tell me there aren’t any virgins involved.”

Omar laughed. “Do not worry. It is a time to give gifts to friends and family and, of course, the poor. You are perfectly safe.”

She sensed the skin between her curved brows pinch. “That’s easy for you to say. You aren’t surrounded by the agents of destruction.”

Creases in his face bracketed a small smile. “Tell me everything, Kleine.” Annabeth loved Omar’s terms of endearment. The words didn’t sound as lame as they did in English.

She stretched out. “Yesterday we were in and out lugging conduit and every time, at every door, they had to check that my hair matched my face. All day. By the end of it, I was so mad I didn’t look anything like my photo. God, I hate the military.” She put her beer to her lips and tipped it up for a deep swallow. “And today I could’a just about died when my boss came in looking for the CO. He had a Master Sergeant Orez with him, and I’m sure it must’a looked pretty suspicious with a lead hanging there.”

“Have you heard anything since?” Omar’s question hardened to earnest concern.

“No. I shoved the wire into the bundle in the box. But I tell you, Omar, I’ve had about all I can stand.” Propped up on one elbow, she shook her index finger at him. “Politics and religion have ruined my life enough. As soon as I have my money, I’m taking my little girl back from Marty and we are getting out of the North.”

She saw Omar touch her face on his laptop. “It is not much longer now.” Annabeth’s sadness melted.

“You know, the stupid thing is my ex thinks I’m working here for the money. Which is true, but Marty doesn’t understand. All I want is a future. ‘What about our peace marches?’ he asked. ‘The no nuke rallies? The anti-war petitions?’ What about our daughter, that’s what I say. This

way we'll have enough money for whatever Marie needs. It's called family planning, and it's more than giving birth to a new Permanent Fund Dividend cheque every year, like my folks did."

"I saw Marie, briefly, at the RunYukon time trials," Omar said, his tone eased.

Annabeth cut off her own rant. "How did she look? Is she happy?"

"She seemed so."

"Does she miss me?" She was on her feet now.

"I could not tell from the distance, but, yes, if she is like me, she does. Very much."

"We'll show them." Annabeth wiped her eyes with a throw blanket and murmured, "Mommy'll be with you real soon, baby." Focusing on the larger problem, she pulled herself together. "Did you talk to Marty? Is he going to let me bring Marie here?" Annabeth paced around her furniture.

"No, not yet. Please, sit." She did, and listened. "I did talk to him, but his lawyer advises against the visit."

"You said you'd help me get custody. If I did for you, you'd do for me, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," he said, controlled.

"Well, I've done for you and now I want my little girl. She needs me."

"But not before we are ready. In two weeks I will be at the Arctic Ultra startline. Will you be at the finish?"

"Yes." With less conviction than she'd hoped for, she added, "But this is definitely the last favour, Omar. I mean it."

Her screen went blank and her phone went dead.

ONE

Granted power to speak freely, Markus Fanger closed his hands firmly around the talking stick and addressed the court. “I am honoured that you have included me in this circle sentencing ceremony, and as thanks I offer to personally supervise Donjek Stoneman’s community service.”

The last time he’d held the talking stick was to return it as property stolen from the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation. Today, for the first time, he used the influential artefact for its intended purpose, to mediate discussion – in this case, about how a community could divert a young offender. Fanger could no longer deny his place in the history of one of the Yukon’s fourteen First Nations.

The talking stick, a weighty symbol of free speech, was a sculpted ivory shaft crafted generations ago from the rough fossil of a mammoth tusk. Crow, Maker of the World, stared at Fanger from the yellowed ages of tradition. On the opposing face, Wolf looked out with eyes and snout stained black between fiery-red cheekbones. Bands of minerals – red, yellow, black and white – recalled the power of the four directions. Swirls of malachite and azurite inlaid in the calcium reminded the bearer of their stewardship over the mountains and rivers.

Fanger laid the stick on the podium and took his seat. Across from him, Constable Jake Stoneman nodded to his nephew on his right. The accused turned away, but met

his father Edwin's lowered head. Approaching them, the judge's robe brushed past the feet and chairs of observers along the aisle to the lectern.

Fanger kept his eye on Donjek, who twisted back and forth in his swivel chair, not bothering to hide his contempt for the judge, the man who had the power to commute his sentence from closed custody to one deemed fair by the elders.

The magistrate lifted the mace in a sure grasp. "The court accepts Mr. Fanger's generous offer." His curt nod to the stenographer confirmed the decision was recorded. "Court is adjourned."

Donjek's aunt, Donna, stood, poised and assured, and in Northern Tutchone gave the closing prayer. It was a way for Dawson City's First Nation to honour her as the chief in the neighbouring town of Pelly Crossing. Donna had experience with all levels of the law; when her husband Jake was away, she was the community's unofficial member-on-duty.

Approvals circled through the crowd as the assembly broke. Several people stuffed their feet into snowpack boots and ran out for a cigarette. Before Fanger escaped the stuffy chamber to join them, a youth worker let him know she would brief him after crossing the T's and dotting the I's on Donjek's probation order. Then she hustled over to the Stoneman family and led Donjek upstairs to her office. Fanger heard the teen's cuffs slap the floor; the kid in oversized jeans trailed behind the batik scarf that accented his probation officer's maroon blazer.

Fanger shrugged into his heavy parka and stepped out to the wide porch for a smoke. The wolverine ruff around

his hood kept frost from building up on his beard and moustache. His hands felt the chill, but the low, fiery ball of sunshine on the horizon was the picture of warmth. Jake and his brother Edwin joined him.

Fanger flicked the butt of his rolled tobacco over a snow-bank. "I love this time of year, having an extra hour of light at the end of the day," he said to them.

"Especially after an all-day meeting," said Jake. Seeing the men together, Fanger saw how his friend would age. Jake's stalwart frame would always be impressive, but in the future his proud bearing would be tempered with Edwin's outlook of wisdom. Fanger respected that outlook and hoped their idea for Donjek to complete his sentence on the Ultra would work to reform him.

"We came out to start the truck," Jake said as he jogged down the timber steps to his vehicle.

"Are you coming over for dinner?" Edwin asked.

"Gladly," Fanger answered, "but I don't know how long the PO's going to keep me."

"Janice? She won't take long. You probably noticed she's not one to skip meals."

"Right. Okay then, I'll be there." Fanger fished his keys out of his pocket. "My truck wasn't plugged in. I should let it warm up, too." Under the skiff of snow that blew across the parking lot, a row of footprints trailed from Fanger's truck — a pile of rust so old it said Datsun on the tailgate — to a line of nearby trees. He opened the door and empties clattered around his feet. "Das gibt's doch nicht! I don't believe this." He put his hand over his nose.

"What?" Edwin and Jake hurried over. The stench

of strong beer and stale cigarettes assaulted them from the cab.

“While we were inside working on Donjek’s case, some idiot hosted a party in my truck.” Fanger fired the cans into the box of the pickup.

From the passenger side, Jake dumped the ashtray into a coffee-rimmed paper cup. “At least they didn’t set it on fire like they did to Joey Masters’ truck last week.” He closed the door and tossed the garbage. “When the weather warms up, you can lock your truck again without being afraid it’ll freeze permanently shut.”

Fanger got behind the wheel. “It’s exactly this kind of constant nuisance crime — vandalism, stealing cars, ripping off the neighbours — that makes people think circle sentencing is a joke.”

“Well, it sure doesn’t make our job easier,” Jake said.

The brakes and the gas were crusted in slush. Fanger pumped them loose, turned on the ignition and let the starter whine to life. When the motor stopped sputtering, he left it running and walked back to the band hall.

“Fifteen or more cases a week in a place the size of Dawson is too many,” Fanger said. “I mean, there are only a thousand people living around here. It’s obvious jail hasn’t helped them.”

Jake and Edwin quick-stepped to keep up with Fanger’s long stride. “Keep Donny out of jail and we can prove diversion works,” said Jake. “I’m trusting you to make it a success.”

Fanger halted.

Edwin neared. “You are a good friend,” he said. “I am not young. You will teach Donny something I can’t.” He

took Fanger's hand in his own, which was as worked and worn as the hides he tanned. The elder's eyes misted, but it could have been the winter dryness.

Inside, Janice steered Fanger into the probation office with an imperious wave. "I understand the arrangement you and the judge worked out with the Stoneman family," she said, sitting. "And I am aware of your service as an auxiliary constable for the RCMP. But I would like to hear more about what you have planned for Donjek, Mr. Fanger."

"I need another volunteer to staff a checkpoint on the Yukon Arctic Ultra race. I think I just got one."

"And what makes you think Donjek would be an asset to the race?"

"He'll be out on the land and I need his skills."

"And what skills would those be?"

"Edwin says Donjek knows the trails from hunting, and he's volunteered at the Yukon Quest checkpoint at the campground, too."

"And you'll be taking him with you to Whitehorse for a few days, is that right?"

"Yeah, to help with the race prep."

"Well, let me remind you of our mission statement," she said. "Youth intervention must be handled very carefully." From a drawer, Janice pulled out a thick case file.

Fanger learned a whole new vocabulary in fifteen minutes. Sheaves of paper, white, yellow and pink, sat in bales on Janice's desk — narrow time sheets, offender reports, supervisor feedback, department evaluations. No young offender's life story was going unwritten, but as far as

Fanger knew, intervention meant listening rather than feeding filing cabinets.

“In case of emergency I call you, right?” he asked. “If something happens.”

“What can? The terms of our insurance for youth-in-care prevent young offenders from engaging in any high-risk activity. That’s as much to protect Donjek as it is us.”

How could they expect to turn boys into men when puberty itself is a high-risk activity? The answer was not long coming. Donjek would be tracked like a radio-collared alpha male.

“This is a formative stage in Donjek’s development, and although diversion has made great gains recently, more traditional restraints will apply.” The first of many documents she gave Fanger described the security protocol. Not a mere list of do’s and don’t’s, the handbook governing Donjek’s life ran to several pages—don’t consort with known offenders, remain under supervision at all times, no operating motor vehicles, respect the curfew. Violation of any and the offender would be remanded to custody.

“I realize these may seem like strict controls, but I must insist they are kept in place,” Janice said.

“Except for motor vehicles. We’re sledding out to the checkpoint.”

“Under your personal supervision. And with a helmet.”

Fanger nodded. “What if Donjek’s got a problem with this?”

“That doesn’t really come into it. These are the conditions of his sentence. But here’s my number if anything comes up.” She handed him a business card. He picked it

up and, with a load of report forms and regulations under his arm, left the band office.

Thin shadows of lodgepole pines crossed the box of Fanger's truck. He shifted the folders, tossed them onto the passenger seat and drove away.

On the ice bridge he crawled across the river in second gear. At the Top of the World Highway, he ploughed through west Dawson in four-high before turning into Edwin Stoneman's driveway. Dogs barked and Jake opened the front door before Fanger had a sleeping bag spread over the warm engine.

"Right on time, Fanger. I knew Janice wouldn't keep us waiting."

In the mudroom, Fanger shucked his coat and snow-packs but kept the boot liners on as slippers. Jake led him down the hall past generations of family in black-and-white, colour and sepia. Moosemeat on the fry drew him into the kitchen. Juice dripped from the steaks that Donjek's mother, Shirley, turned in the cast pan. Donna, wearing an apron over the hand-knit sweater she had worn in court, put the last place setting on the table and pulled out a chair for her husband Jake, who poured coffee for himself and Fanger.

A plywood door at the back of the kitchen opened, and Edwin entered with Donjek. They hung their coats on pegs near the stove and sat at the table. Donjek pulled a smoke out from behind his ear. "Don't light that now," Shirley scolded him. "Dinner's ready." She used both hands to move the pan to the trivet in the centre of the table.

Edwin thanked the Creator for the day's judgments and the food in their home. Then the dishes circled the table.

No one spoke more than to ask for butter or salt while they ate in familiar quiet. The flavour of the land filled Fanger's mouth with each bite of wild meat. He soaked up the savoury juices with a piece of bannock.

After dinner Fanger conscripted himself and Donjek to do the dishes, "as soon as we've had a smoke." The youth escaped for the break through the back door. Fanger followed him and, from the kitchen porch, looked over a village of two dozen husky-cross pullers staked out in front of their dog boxes. Donjek had his back to him, facing an array of snowmobiles in the yard. A well-tuned machine or dog team was the best transportation on this side of Dawson, where the highway ended and mountain trails began.

"Working the checkpoint is different. It's work, but it's interesting," Fanger said to break the silence. "You looking forward to it?"

"You think if I was, I would've been sentenced to it?" Donjek turned to Fanger and exhaled a long tobacco breath. "Look, I know you cooked up this culture camp idea with my dad and Uncle Jake, but don't think I don't see what you're trying to prove, Great White Saviour. You and that judge."

"I've known your judge — Ian — since you were a baby," Fanger said. "And fifteen years ago, when he started practising, you would have been sent to the young offender's facility in Whitehorse — where you probably would have graduated to adult corrections right next door." Fanger didn't bother telling Donjek that he was given this chance because of Ian's determination to win recognition for aboriginal justice in common law.

“It would be better than listening to my dad and uncle going on about how great you are. I think you’re a wannabe Indian and you need a real one around, like me, to look after you.”

“If that’s the case, then I’ll be counting on you.” Fanger mashed out his cigarette and went inside. A moment later, Donjek followed. At the porcelain double sink they worked shoulder to shoulder.

Shirley spooned leaf-tea into a teapot. “You sure you fellows know what you’re doing?” she asked. “Tell me what it is again.” She tucked a strand of mostly salt hair, with a dash of pepper, behind her ear.

“It’s a cross-country race. The contestants can either run, ski or ride a bicycle from here to Tok,” Fanger replied.

“On the Trek Over the Top route. Jake told me that part.” With more than a hint of nervousness, she added, “But Tok’s three hundred kilometres away, and in Alaska.”

“There are shorter distances, too,” Fanger said. “The marathon stops at a lookout on the Top of the World Highway, and our checkpoint at Little Gold is the hundred-K finish line.”

“I thought you said you’d only be out there a few days?”

“That’s what makes the race extreme. From two PM on February twenty-first, participants have seventy-two hours to complete the hundred-kilometre run, and five more days for the rest of the course.”

“Are you serious? That’s fast.” Shirley nudged her son, who was quietly drying cutlery. “What do you think, Donny? This will be the quickest you’ve ever had your community service done.” The clatter of dry knives and forks falling into a willow basket on the table drowned out

his reply. Shirley shrugged her bony shoulders at Fanger. What's a mother to do?

Fanger couldn't remember if he'd driven his own mother this crazy when he was a teenager in Germany. He dried his hands and then, carrying a tray of cups, followed Shirley down the hall to the living room. Donjek stayed behind, absorbed in wiping the counters.

Shirley pointed to a steamer trunk where Fanger set the tray. She put down a pot of coffee and a freshly iced cake. Jake and Donna sat together on the sofa under the mount of Edwin's prize caribou. The hunter himself rocked in his recliner. Fanger declined Shirley's offer of her chair—the one with a crocheted afghan draped over the worn arms and back—and took the footstool beside Jake. Shirley served, elders and guests first.

"It's a good thing you decided to stay on with the race this year," Jake said as he poured coffee for his brother and Fanger. "What was that, anyway, about you quitting?"

"You heard that, nah? It's true I asked the race director to look for a replacement. The first two years were enough, but when the course was moved from the TransCanada Trail to here, I thought I'd better stay. This trail is more challenging, and there're all-new volunteers." Fanger blew across the top of his cup. "The logistics alone have been a nightmare. All the marathoners and mid-distance runners have to be shuttled out by snowmobile. But we get the Americans' help on their side of the border, and their sponsorship."

Fanger pulled out a notebook and pencil from his pocket and, resting on the cut-burl end table beside his chair, wrote while they talked—a list of specific tasks and the

supplies they would need. Donjek, who had slipped in to sit beside his aunt, read Fanger's notes and passed them to Donna. "You know I was sentenced to a hundred and eighty hours, not eighteen hundred," Donjek said.

"People are depending on you to do your share," Donna said, her quiet assurance emphasizing the responsibility that had landed in her nephew's lap.

Edwin rose and stood by the photos in the hall. "Our family have been members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for three generations, Donny. You are not going to become a career criminal."

Fanger woke in the dark the next morning and, before it lifted, he'd met with the management of the Gambler's Den hotel for a room quote and meal plans for the racers.

After breakfast he drove to Edwin's to pick up Donjek. Since last night, his conscience nagged — what did he, a childless single man, think he knew about kids? Especially kids with attitude. And now he was taking the kid to Whitehorse with him. Truly the last thing he expected to see was an eager assistant.

Donjek shot out the door and came at Fanger full speed. Shirley bustled behind her son and slapped a scarf over his shoulder. "You stay out of trouble, up there in Whitehorse. I don't want any more court dates."

The kid slammed his duffel into Fanger's chest. Fanger slammed the door shut on his ass. "No worries, Shirley. I'll keep an eye on him." He tossed the Flames bag into the box and, ignoring Donjek's complaints, climbed in. "Sorry, the porter quit." In response, Donjek tossed a paper bag to him.

“What’s this?” Fanger folded the top back, and the meaty richness of game filled the truck.

“You want ’em? Keep ’em. I got to take some to my cousin, too, when we’re in the city. My mom’s so old-fashioned. Did you hear her saying I was going up to Whitehorse?” People his age drove down, south, to Whitehorse. Only old timers talked about going upstream. “Like I’m taking a paddlewheeler or something.” He looked around Fanger’s truck. “This thing’s not much younger, is it?”

“Quit giving everyone a hard time. We’ll have the moose links for dinner. And you’ll tell Shirley you loved it.” Fanger put the truck in gear. “Let’s go. I want to be on the road before sun-up.”

“Better hurry,” Donjek said. “The sky’s already light.” He slumped against the door and huddled in his jacket. “Geez, it’s cold in here,” was his last comment before he slid his ball cap down over his eyes.

Fanger drove southbound on an empty highway. He put Lynyrd Skynyrd in the cassette player to drown out any more second thoughts about what he was getting himself into.

At Stone Boat Swamp, a pothole and the freezing air that poured over his knees jolted Fanger to attention. The blast from under the dash woke his passenger, who resumed his complaints. “What’s the matter with your truck, man? It’s stalling.”

Fanger pulled over before the motor conked out cold—fuel gelled in the lines, pistons frozen in the cylinders. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll check the cardboard out front.”

Sure enough, one of the tie wraps holding the wind-break against the radiator grille had snapped, letting a

ninety-kilometre sub-arctic gale super cool the engine. Fanger felt around behind the driver's seat and found a roll of duct tape lying near some candles. By the time he fixed the flattened box in place, Donjek was pretending to be asleep. Fanger drove on and let zz Top fill the silence, then George Thorogood, then Steve Earle.

A sign boasting the world's biggest cinnamon buns at Braeburn rang the dinner bell in Fanger's stomach. He slewed his truck off the highway and Donjek bobbed awake. The windsock across the road lifted its lazy tail, blinked in the glare of the sun-crust landscape and dropped.

Ice glaciated the windowpanes, distorting the faces in the restaurant. Inside, Fanger led Donjek over the frost-heaved linoleum to a table beside a dry, cracked, upright piano. Their waitress, the Rendezvous Queen's Miss Congeniality, grabbed the coffeepot and greeted them. She sat in the empty seat beside Fanger to take their order. "How's it going setting up the new trail?" she asked.

Fanger told her the truth: a lot harder than he thought it would be. "I've had a hell of a time getting volunteers, what with events like the Quest and Rendezvous running at the same time." With every dog handler in the territory helping mushers on the Yukon Quest's thousand-mile dog sled race, and everyone else involved with the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous, Whitehorse's annual winter festival, it was a miracle Fanger had managed to round up enough volunteers to stage the Ultra. But that was only one of the challenges. "This new course will be tougher on the racers, too." He looked at the topography outside. "The elevation gains around here are gradual. On the Top

of the World there's wind and altitude to deal with. If this cold snap doesn't break, their gear will."

"It's too late to switch, eh?" Her smile made the invitation appealing. "We'll miss you guys, all the activity. It was fun last year," she said before leaving to serve a new customer.

Fanger rolled a cigarette and Donjek lit one of his own. "You sounded a lot more confident yesterday in front of my family," he said.

"If something happens, we're a hundred kilometres from Dawson and another hundred and twenty miles from Tok with no road access in between. At least here we had the highway." Fanger looked out the window. A pack of truck-stop dogs chased a coyote across the road, over the Cinnamon Bun Airstrip and into the carnivorous wilds.

"You don't have to tell me. I know what the country is like out there," Donjek said. He butted his smoke when their burgers arrived, bulging out of homemade buns — homemade because factory buns just weren't big enough. Fanger ate half and took the rest with him when they left twenty-five minutes later.

Donjek remained shaded behind his sunglasses and tuned into his Walkman for the last forty-five minutes of the drive.

At three in the afternoon, school buses clogged Whitehorse's downtown streets. Fanger caught red lights all the way to the log cabin he called home. It butted up against a two-hundred-foot clay cliff that kept the airport plateau above from landing on his roof. The city had never planned to have houses built under a landslide zone but, in 1942 when the US Army started nailing up shacks for its

Alaska Highway road-building crew, no one cared where they lived, as long as it was clad to weather and had a working stove.

Fanger scuffed a berm of snow away from the stoop and stepped inside to where his stove squatted in his chill, ten-by-twelve living room. The steel drum was the central fixture of the whole house. Snow fell from his boots as he kneeled down in front of the cold barrel and clanged open the door. He lit crumpled paper and kindling to get a flame, then added some split logs and a few full rounds to the blaze to hold the heat.

Donjek shouldered into the mudroom and dropped his stuff. The phone rang from the cushions on the sofa and Fanger shoved aside a pile of German magazines to find the receiver. It was Jenn Strider, registrar of the Yukon Arctic Ultra.

“Hey, Fanger. I’m at the Constantine,” she yelled. Blaring over her voice was the hockey game broadcast from the Saddledome. “The trail guys are here and we sort of started having a meeting. Can you join us?” Fanger and Jenn had been organizing the Ultra since November, and now that the race was just weeks away, all the last minute details were coming together.

“Just a sec.” Fanger held his hand over the mouthpiece to speak with Donjek, whose cousin worked as the program coordinator at the Skookum Jim Friendship Centre. Donjek could meet with him, as Shirley had asked, while Fanger met with the trail crew.

He uncovered the phone to answer. “I just got home and the house is cold, but sure, I’ll be there soon.” Fanger closed the stove’s draft flue and latched the plate door shut.

Fanger dropped off Donjek at Skookies on Third Ave, and from there it was five minutes to the hotel that was guarded by a four-storey pine Mountie. In the tropically warm, cabana-style bar, the crowd enjoyed a taste of summer at the end of a winter day.

Jenn wasn't kidding about the meeting-in-progress. Fanger spotted her in energetic discussion with five others at a table for four. She waved to him across the full-to-capacity room just as a server arrived with fresh pints. "Here, Fanger, we ordered you a Grizzly," Jenn said, passing one to him.

Fanger sat in the only empty chair in the place, took a healthy first gulp and set down the beer to reach room temperature—it wouldn't take long under the heat lamps overhead. He spread open his coat. The arms draped to the floor.

"Registration ended yesterday and there's over forty people signed up," Jenn reported. She unfolded a foolscap sheet and handed it to Fanger. "I'm taking this to customs tomorrow. We finally got the list today." Obtaining clearance for the athletes, people from every corner of the world, had required the most limber bureaucratic gymnastics.

"At last." Fanger counted the stars beside novice runners. "Over a third of them have never been in a northern race," he said. "They have no idea what winter is."

"I know. The Canadians and Americans from Outside should manage okay. I am concerned about these entries, though." She pointed to the home countries listed beside the names of racers from Guatemala, Mexico and Spain.

“What about this one? Omar Ahmed?” Fanger asked. “He’s from Morocco.”

“Oh, Omar?” Jenn shrugged. “He’s the only one I’m not worried about.” Jenn’s husband, George, snickered, and beside him, Ted, the trail crew boss, chortled. Marty, a local racer, hid his long face behind the glass he upended at his thick lips. “What’s so funny?” Fanger asked Jenn. Laughter burst over them.

Ted thumped his stout chest and caught his breath. “Nothing, Fanger. Nothing. Just that you ask who this Omar is, and Jenn says she’s not worried about him. That’s right she’s not worried. The rest of us are turned to stone waiting to see what’ll happen next.”

TWO

Fanger took out his tobacco and rolled a cigarette. “What do you mean, ‘what’ll happen next?’ You make it sound like a comedy routine.” Fanger curled the pouch closed and slid the ashtray closer.

Ted snorted. “Ask George here what happened when they went hunting.”

“What did you have to bring that up for?” George, a familiar face on the sidelines of the Ultra, reddened to his ears. “You have such a big mouth, Ted.”

The trail chief protested. “It’s the best hunting story this year.”

“Well, how was the guy supposed to know? I’m sure he thinks our hunting methods are heathen, too.”

Fanger lit his smoke and settled in.

“Tell him,” Ted said.