

# North to the Future

## Water, Water Everywhere

The Gulf of Alaska's frothy waves licked at the sand and rock covered shore, back and forth in endless repetitive strokes. A man with a short, pointed nose and round cheeks dotted from freckles approached the water's edge, dressed in an electric blue wet suit that was specially lined for warmth. He held a polished lime green and canary yellow surfboard and gazed through hazel eyes at the ocean. The short black hair on his wide skull was littered with streaks of maple brown and swept back under mousse. The man grinned as an enormous wave rose up and curled over before collapsing back into the sea. Dropping the surfboard into shallow water, he stepped in and shivered at the cold around his feet. The tall, long-limbed man adjusted to the frigid temp as he waded in waist deep and straddled the board. He bobbed into the depths, charging through the liquid with his hands and feet while his wet suit squeaked against the smooth, polished board. Snaking into the gulf's heavy seawater, he crouched and prepared for the moment when a wave rose again.

The ridge built a few dozen feet back and he began paddling away from it. Angling the board, he scrambled up to a standing position as it gained speed and height, rushing towards him. The young man leaned forward and caught himself in the vortex of the wave; the swirling water pulled him in with an ear-splitting roar. He rocked in all directions and searched frantically for balance through the ride. His heart hammered in his ears at a pitch somehow louder than the screaming wave.

The water gurgled beneath his board, vibrating its base the way a bumpy gravel road shakes a sports car. He strained to keep balance, and a moment of fear burst through him as the board started to slip from under his feet. The wave picked up speed, as if it sensed weakness in

the human daredevil. The surfer thrust his lean muscled arms out and widened his stance on the sleek board. The wave growled around him, but lost speed. The water arch drooped as the current grew soft. He sucked in a deep breath as the water collapsed and pushed him beneath the water. A moment later he resurfaced and grasped his board, grinning as the current spun around him. Man and board were pushed toward shallow water lapping at the shore.

He trudged through the sand with a thick smile spread across his wrinkle-free face. He picked up the surfboard with thick, calloused fingers that had grown soggy and wrinkled by water. The rough beach ended quickly at the edge of a forest with tall, narrow trees set apart from one another. Natural paths cut through the foliage of horizontal branches lined with pine needles and feather-light leaves. He caught movement far up into the woods and at first thought it was a deer flitting between the trunks. The motion was flat and smooth, gliding through the trees like wind.

The man rubbed his hands against his face, blinked several times, and looked again towards the forest. *Snap out of it Frank, no one is there*, he thought, and let out a gust of air with a “*ha*” sound. *Just a colorful deer, I guess*. The moving figure coasted onward while the young surfer turned back to the gulf.

### Wind in the Woods

Squeezing his brakes until the teal and indigo mountain bike rolled to a stop, a man of thirty-some years stood on the dirt trail just outside Sitka, Alaska. He took a long drink from the water bottle; his stubble-covered chin rose skyward as he gulped. Weak sunrays drifted through the tree cover and lit patches along the trail. The tree boughs and leaves around him rustled in the

breeze. He stretched his burly arms and torso, surveying his entire form beneath the skin-tight, black Lycra pants and a hunter green athletic shirt. The man watched his muscles bulge and ripple when he flexed them. He smiled and wiped a palm across his moist forehead, just below the navy blue bandana looped around his hairline.

The biker snapped the bottle back into its holster as wind surged through the trees. It swept across his face and built wind knots in his shoulder-length, sandy brown hair. His bottle-green eyes widened, moisture forming at their corners as the wind gained speed. Powerful air buffeted his entire body and wobbled the mountain bike. He muttered a low oath as the trees shook violently while only the thick and sturdy trunks refused to move. The leaves trembled and limbs rose and fell as if riding the current of a frothing river. The entire forest swayed and rocked from an unseen force. The man clamped his long hands on the bike in an attempt to keep it upright. A persistent hiss built into a roar throughout the dense foliage; the sound of forceful wind and colliding leaves and needles filled the area. He lifted his foot carefully to the left pedal and twisted his neck in a circle. Wind whistled violently like a phantom of the forest ready to spring into some dangerous dance.

Aiming his Cannondale-brand mountain bike westward, the man pushed off down a mulch-lined trail and raced against the wind. He hurtled down the narrow path, racing across mossy roots and beneath horizontal limbs ready to knock him out. A mighty gust picked up debris and flung it towards the biker. He spat out dirt, bugs, and leaves that insisted on colliding with his face while nature's breath shot in and out of every opening above his chin. The man stuck his tongue tip out the right side of his mouth and squinted at the distant pathway that grew closer the faster he pedaled.

He finally emerged into an open clearing, free of trees but filled with the pink buds of fireweed. The wind still howled, but only grass and wildflower stems trembled beneath his whirling bike wheels and pumping legs. He sneezed at the fireweed, the loud sound muffled by the whooshing air. No more than a quarter mile from the place he stopped to rest, the wind died to barely a whisper, stroking the man's thin cheeks and large ears in defeat.

*I've never seen such a bizarre wind pattern develop out of nowhere. Good hustle, Trevor. The bike workouts are paying off,* he thought, patting his thigh. The biker's hand moved up briefly to touch the risen skin above his left hip—the spot he had gotten a fish hook stuck when he messed up a cast. It became infected because he was too embarrassed to tell anyone about his accident, and the punctured skin left a permanent scar when finally treated. He pedaled easily out of the clearing and found it led to farm zones, including an apple orchard in the distance. The entire area to the west was covered with intense fog, but Trevor could make out a large, shadowy figure in the whiteness fighting to escape.

### Foggy as Pea Soup

The air was dense and heavy, as if a human hand could reach out and scoop it like whipped cream from a bowl. The stretching whiteness was so thick it swallowed everything in range. A dark path led into the white haze, but it was quickly engulfed by damp wisps. Apple saplings stood a single foot from the path and four feet from one another. The trees marched into swirling, colorless mist and dissolved like sugar in the murky atmosphere. The world itself seemed to be devoured by the wispy maw of earth-bound clouds.

When it seemed nothing could escape the crushing, creamy cumulous, a flicker of movement fought forward. A tuft of ebony hair bobbed from within the blank mist. Black stones

pounded the path and echoed a *clip clop* noise one hundred times louder than the heavy twists of fog. The midnight mane shot up like fresh grass and out of the clouded world as if sun had touched its tired roots. The thin strands of dark hair exploded into a field of black growing from soil made of flesh and blood; it raced along the neck and head of the obsidian-haired horse. The animal's hooves stomped the squirming whiteness, halting the progress of its fingers trying to caress and twine prey back into milky smoke. The horse bolted from the swirling haze, black mane and stone-like hooves wrestling away from the cloudy air.

A rider, her skin and hair as dark as the horse, perched above the fog, high enough to escape the suffocating white world. She wore no helmet; only an orange headband to hold back the curly hair that fell halfway down her back. The horse tossed his head and grassy mane, spreading black amidst the void. She urged her mount forward, whispering into his neck in a soft, soprano voice. They climbed past the marching trees and up the dark path that sought the ever-swirling basin of earthbound clouds.

“Good boy, Onyx,” she murmured. Her right hand stroked his withers, revealing a long scar that stretched from first to last knuckle—the result of accident when lifting a rasp from her farrier box. Eager to move out of the gobbling fog, they emerged from the thickest fog but a veil of muted color hung around the damp road leading south. She touched her pendant of Sagittarius attached to a gold chain after threading her reins into one hand. The weak, white wisps around her moved past the orchard and out towards the distant highway.

*Looks like a storm is coming*, Sarah mused as wide, grey storm clouds inched across the sky. Her own grey eyes seemed to reflect the moody weather when she nudged her heel against Onyx's side to tell him where to go. *They can get pretty bad in this part of Alaska—Mom will probably be worried*. She could see the streak lines of falling rain over the distant road. A

cherry-red car zipped into her view and sped along the road, possibly oblivious to the brewing storm.

### Raining Cats and Dogs

An old highway road swerved past the dark forest line as countless trees rushed past a little red vehicle like screaming arrows. The teenaged driver with wheat-colored hair and sharp orange-brown eyes guided her wheels along the wet pavement. Sleet showered her windshield while the road jumped to the left and within seconds the sleet became a thick blanket across her view. The sweeping wipers could not keep up with the pounding of rain and ice that made a winding road deadly. Whipping her head left and right, she made the curled, pixie hairstyle bounce around her neck and jawbone as she scanned the darkness for some place to stop. A tiny gas station, immersed in fluorescent light against the dark, raging storm, sat off the road northeast of her.

She pulled up next to a rusted old gas pump. Stuck under the false light of the station, the world beyond that shelter became an ominous background of solid black laced with streaks of white. She stepped out of the car and wrapped a furry, coffee-brown coat, smelling strongly of Calvin Klein perfume, tightly against her chest. Underneath she wore a long, white skirt and a thin strap blouse colored with messy brush strokes of brown, green, and white. Wind whistled past the gas station's canopy. She saw no workers within the convenience store, only dim lights that illuminated rows of water bottles, energy drinks, and pop cans.

Turning back to the storm, the short, skinny woman felt transported into some clichéd twilight zone. The blazing streaks of sleet and rain gave the illusion of being trapped in hyper-speed. She snatched a cigarette from the pack in her car with thin, short fingers and smoked

silently next to the door. Her taught and yellow-tinted skin looked sickly in the false light as she scowled at the storm. The girl willed it to go away, but nothing changed.

Reaching in the coat pocket, she pulled out a silver cell phone and dialed a number with only her thumb. Pressing the Motorola to her ear, she heard a voice squeak hello.

“Hey, I’m going to be late...yeah, stuck in the rain...I’ll be fine, just pissed off...you know, the storm.”

“Don’t do anything reckless, Allie,” her friend’s voice said. They exchanged farewells and Allison sighed as she hung up the phone.

She stood by her car and smoked half the pack of Marlboro lights, shaking her head from side to side to feel the feather-like brush of her short hair while she watched the rain and sleet. The teenager’s pale skin tightened as she frowned, and her sharp eyes brooded over the storm. Her mind drifted, imagining what it must have been like when her parents were out in a similar storm, had lost control of the car, and died in that flash flood.

She rasped long, blood red painted fingernails against her upper arm and swore out loud. She spun the silver charm bracelet around her wrist several times before she hopped back into the red, two-door car and cranked up her Metallica CD. When nothing but misting sprinkles hit against the road, she buckled in and drove down the road once more. The car raced a few miles until she noticed a lone figure walking on the old gravel lane to her right. Without slowing, she watched out the window as a man and his harnessed dog strode toward the rocky hills under gently falling snowflakes. After looking to the road and then back at the lane, the figure had vanished. Shaking her head slowly, Allison muttered about the weather conjuring illusions.

No Two Snowflakes Are Alike

At the farthest end of an old gravel lane, an older man with bright blue eyes, protected under a fur-lined cap with earflaps loosely hanging around his cheeks, marched behind a female husky pup hooked up to a sled dog training harness. The pair followed the lane up to a snow-dusted hill, crested it, and continued down a park trail paved with wooden logs to use as step markers. To the left and right, boulders as large as trucks carried a thin layer of snow on top and a sea of moss on their northern sides.

The man twitched beneath his heavy trench coat, littered with dog hair, when a large snowflake fell into his collar and touched bare skin. His hand shook the lead line connected to his husky, causing her to look back curiously. He whistled a command to the dog, signaling her to keep moving. She yelped and leaped forward, the crunch of twigs and mulch covered with thin snow like music to his muffled ears. He watched her powerful strides pull across the dirt, wood, and slush, moving past rocky hills and short grown brush.

The soft, large snowflakes fell more rapidly as the pair followed the log-guided pathway, until fat flakes of cold covered the entire area—including man and husky. Before he had time to do more than wonder at the sudden increase of snow, the rocks transformed into solid blocks of white and the flakes now pounded against his back, head, and face. The air around him seemed to crackle with cold energy. Snow blew in every direction, and the dog whined as powerful tuffs of snow buffeted her from nose to tail tip.

“It’s okay, Foxie,” the man cooed. He whipped around and whistled sharply to her. The husky bolted in front of him and raced back up the clearest path when she caught the man’s mush order. The harness strained against his hand, taut as the man raced to keep up with his lead dog. Both of them panted and fought against the sudden blizzard of thick flakes and gusts of frozen cold. They crested another hill and galloped for a storm shelter set to the eastern side of the trail.

The man ducked into it after his husky and pulled a tanned, deer-hide flap across the opening. *It's not the best set up*, Nathan thought bitterly. *Must be time to talk to the Sitka ranger about more accommodating shelters.*

Together they waited out the sudden snowstorm, both listening to the snow beat against their shelter flap. The man pulled a slim water bottle out of his coat pocket, took a long drink, and poured the rest for his husky to lap. His large left hand stroked the dog, his simple gold band twisting through her fur. Several minutes passed before the pound of winter's wrath let up. They stepped back onto the trail and waited for a moment to feel the fat snowflakes fall softly once more. He scuffed one fur-lined boot through the snow and rolled up his grey, wool and rayon pants.

He patted Foxie and said, "Let's go home, girl."

The man and his companion strode down the path again and stopped at an observation point, overlooking a snow-peaked mountain. Someday he would bring his whole team up here, if only for the view. When he looked down and out, he could see a row of human-shaped totem poles near the foot of the Annahootz Mountain. Some were short while others stood unnaturally tall, but suddenly one sprang to life and hiked towards the mountain. The man blinked, rubbed a palm against his scruffy chin, and the moving totem disappeared between rocks along the mountain walls.

### Ice in Her Veins

Covered with hiking gear—ropes, clips, an ice pick, and steel-toed boots—a thin, active woman trudged up the mountain slope. She had forgotten a backpack and map, but it did not concern her. The woman's strawberry-blonde hair was tightly packed into a bun beneath her wool hat. She wore jeans and a bright pink snow jacket over several shirts. Her upper body

movement was awkward, but she felt warm enough for a hike. She bobbed in place for a moment, her button nose, long brown eyelashes, and full pink lips moist with perspiration under the black neck warmer.

She crept higher and thought of all the people who claimed Annahootz Mountain was the best place for high altitude hiking. Though they suggested traveling with a friend, it was her only chance to try, so she continued to hike further up the side. Her foot slipped on an ice patch, arms splaying out in front to catch her fall. Standing like an abnormal cat, she pushed back upright and stomped onward.

About two-fifths up the mountain she was lost and surrounded by frost-touched trees, ice-buried growth, and rocky terrain. The woman looped off the main trail and stood at a wide landing, patches of ice dotting the area. She gazed at the upper peaks of the mountain until the ground trembled dangerously. A falcon shot out of the frost-coated brush to her right moments before the ground cracked and opened up like the jagged mouth of a bear. The woman gasped, but it turned quickly to shrieks of terror as the crack widened to where she stood. The icy mountain edge collapsed under her feet.

She scrambled to grab onto anything as ice and earth shattered around her. She managed to grasp a jutting edge of rock and dig her boot into a tiny cavern on the lower edge of the rock wall. The woman's screams echoed throughout the mountain, but no people were close enough to hear. Icicles rained on the woman as she clung for her life, and the falcon she saw earlier flew up and out of sight above the landing she managed to hang on to.

The woman's heart raced as her cap fell off and her ears stung. The bun came undone and red locks cascaded down her back while her free leg flailed beside the one held in the rock

crevice. Her mind blurred, racing through different scenarios in a haze of fear. She forced herself into a calm, desperate to think logically and thoroughly.

*You can do this, Marsha!* she chanted, until she decided to free one hand and dig her ice pick into the firmer rock above. She managed to ram the pick deep into rock and securely set an eyehook and rope. Attaching it to her jacket, Marsha pulled herself up and over the dangerous precipice with long, trembling fingers.

She fell back against the ground, panting with cold but warmed by relief. Her head lulled to the left side, cheek pressing into the frozen rock. Her hair dropped to veil her sight of the other side of the mountain, jutting out like the new section of a house to explore. She swiped the hair from her plump face and analyzed the view. The mountain's image was mirrored perfectly in the gentle waves of the gulf seawater below. A bright surfboard momentarily broke the rock wall reflection before it reformed into an exact liquid duplicate.

### When a Tree Falls in the Forest

Deep in the Alaskan wilderness, a river weaved through the forest the way lace flows through a woman's hair. It rushed around rocks and inched up banks of soft soil. Between the immense pine trees, ferns shivered in a breeze and moss grew over the stumps of what used to stand tall. Beyond the moss lived a wave of snow, building as the forest hills sloped down to chase after the winding river. Further still the river found its source: an icy blue lake supporting the distant, snow-capped mountains.

The river diverged again, away from the blue lake and into the mountains. The banks transformed from wet soil into gravel rock, and calm water changed into a frothy current of frigid liquid ready to absorb ice and snow. The river raced on, now up into the mountainous

forests made of trees and foliage that thrive on rocky roots. White mists floated up from the foaming river water as it reached an edge and cascaded elegantly into a waterfall between mossy boulders and lofty trees with branches so far up even the animals go cross-eyed to see.

The river grew calmer after it fell, advancing once more through deep forests of old and new trees surrounded by vegetation and a variety of wild creatures. The clear water turned cold as it progressed toward snowy banks where only sparse growth pushed through. The water fought against frozen plates of ice and turned sluggish, churning and reflecting the expansive sky overhead.

Miles above the Alaskan river, a collection of awe-inspiring colors filled the air. Night fell long ago but the colors swayed and brightened the sky back to a semblance of daylight. Rosy pink, aqua blue, even emerald green swirled above the mountains and forests—like a grand river of the cosmos. The hazy colors blurred together in a dance of light; some stretched straight while other lines curved over like giant waves. Set against this unique sky, the tallest forest trees looked like mere shadows; dull in comparison to the Aurora Borealis. The colors drifted and transformed into foggy, mysterious shapes. The night sky phenomenon blocked out the stars like nature's fireworks. The streaks continued to flow and shift until they became surreal pathways to the next world. Perhaps blue paths led to space while pink rays brought travelers to heaven and beyond.

Above the forest line, straining up towards the Aurora, the tallest and oldest pine tree stands black against to the intense, fantastical colors. The tree's limbs rustled like a sigh and the needles trembled. As the final strands of color floated past this mighty tree, a crack echoed through the wild. Its sound reached across the forest to rivers and mountaintops. As the ancient trunk collapsed, the tired limbs whistled from the rushing wind and needles fluttered like

thousands of bird wings. When the treetop finally touched ground, the forest floor shook and rumbled as the giant laid down to rest.

The tree's residue and debris whisked off with the breeze and flew back to the river, back to the lake, back to the Gulf of Alaska's seawater. The colorful Aurora swirled and faded back to the sky—back to the natural world.