

DOG TEAM TO DAWSON

A QUEST FOR THE COSMIC BANNOCK
AND OTHER YUKON STORIES



BRUCE T. BATCHELOR

DEDICATED to my best friend and soul-travelling buddy, Marsha

Agio 
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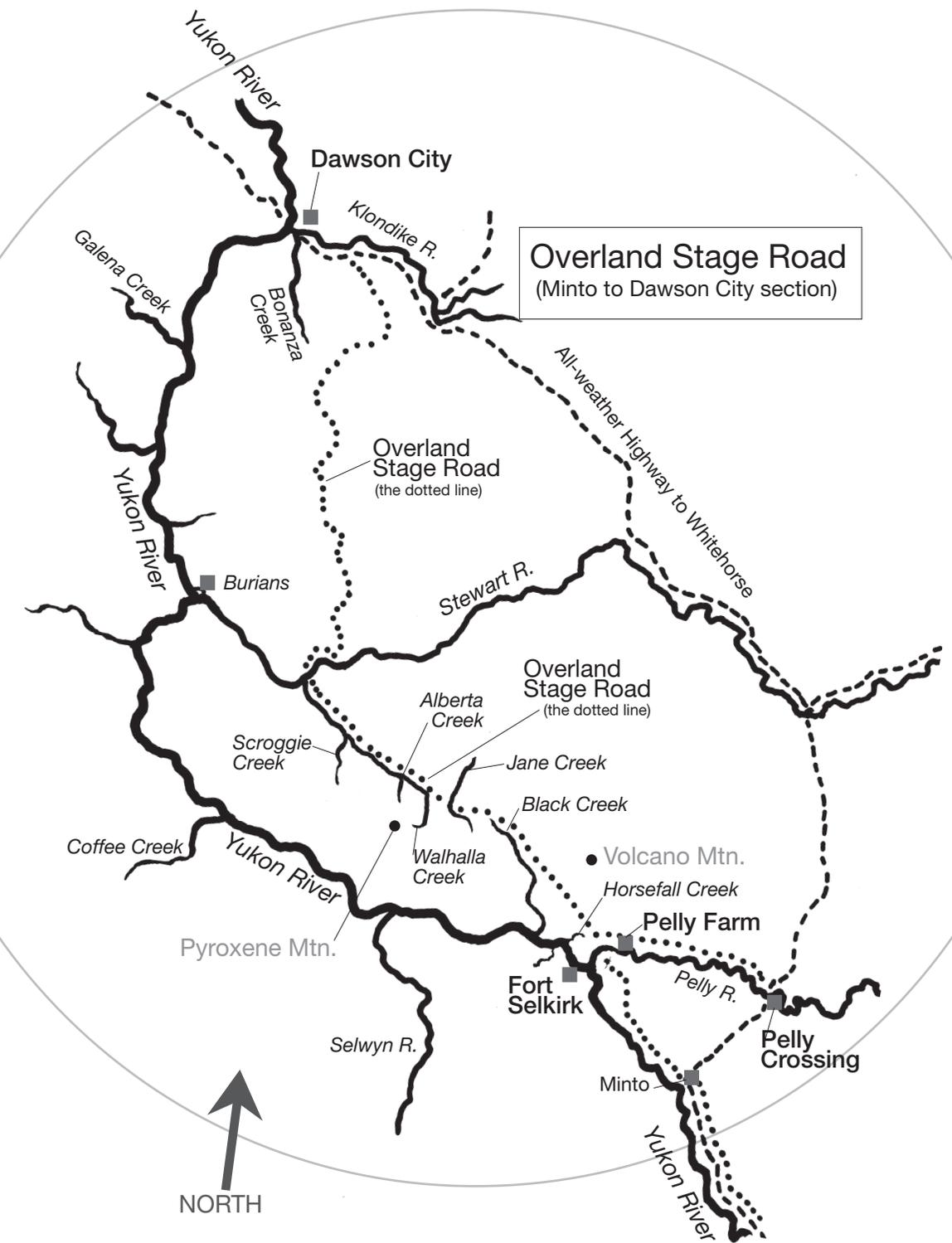
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DOG TEAM TO DAWSON: A QUEST FOR THE COSMIC BANNOCK





CHAPTER 1

DRIVING TO PELLY CROSSING

Doubts were intruding – no matter how I tried to ignore them – into my merry image of this adventure. The voices were those of close friends, parents. Even my own voice was there asking questions to which there were no easy answers: *This woman has never skied. She knows nothing about working with a dog team. How much help will she be on a 200-mile expedition? Are you crazy, man?*

Janet Prenty was concentrating on keeping her Datsun pickup truck from skating off the highway. Wet snow was steadily accumulating on the gravel road surface, hiding icy patches and disguising pot holes. Where the snow was level, it was about ankle-deep. In the wakes of the mammoth ore-hauling trucks with which we were sharing this road, packed snow had been moulded into humps higher than our pickup's differential and ruts far wider than our narrow wheelbase. Jan squinted at the world of white in front of us, straining to read the subtle differences in tone or hue that said 'packed snow here' or 'hiding under this dusting is a patch of black ice.'

In the headlights' brilliance, soggy flakes careened at us in a

hypnotizing, 50-mile-a-hour kaleidoscope of patterns. There wasn't much I could do to help, so I leaned my head back, closed my eyes and tried not to let my doubts annoy and unnerve me. Jan was managing fine so far. She was certainly a crackerjack driver.

Yet she looked far too city-ish for this: pink skin, soft body, with golden blonde hair that won't survive two days away from a blow dryer. Guess I'd soon see how she coped with winter camping.

And what about yourself? You live in the Yukon for a few years and now think you can merrily recreate a long-abandoned trek to Dawson City with a pack of borrowed sled dogs and a Whitehorse barmaid? These dogs have never worked together as a team. What if they refuse to work? What if they tear each other to pieces and leave you stranded miles from nowhere?

Sure. True enough, I didn't have a lifetime of experience in the North. I'd grown up in ordinary southern Canadian cities, where I'd never even seen a dog team, never experienced 60-below-zero temperatures, and never travelled through the wilderness. Three years ago, right after graduating from university, I'd come to the Yukon Territory – fleeing from the very real prospect of being seduced into some computer job at a government bureaucracy or large corporation complicit in the Vietnam War. I came essentially for the promise of quick money to underwrite an escape overseas, but soon found that I loved the place! Short-term jobs, mostly in construction, surveying and mining, were dead easy to come by. The territory was populated with wild and wonderful characters, many of them perched on a bar stool ready to buy you a drink and fill your head with bush-life advice, tales of adventure, and confidences about sure-bet gold mines. During summer at the Arctic Circle, in this land of the midnight sun, that silly bright star tours clockwise all around

the horizon, never rising very high in the sky but *never ever setting*. With all that constant daylight, many Yukoners simply worked and partied for months on end, seemingly postponing sleep until the long, dark winters.

I was fitting in perfectly. Those never-ending summer days were heaven to a never-grow-up, longhaired, 1970s hippie. I soon discovered that I could float a canoe down wide, briskly flowing rivers, paddling for weeks through landscapes of unimaginable beauty. Towering glacier-capped mountains, lush evergreen forests, moose- and mosquito-filled muskegs, emerald lakes... nothing in my public school geography lessons had even hinted at the magnificence of the Yukon Territory. I'd come fully prepared to find a flat tundra with scrawny black spruce and unmapped swamps. Instead, here were the highest mountains in Canada, a continuation of the Rocky Mountains. Here were tall and straight white spruce and lodgepole pine just begging to become walls of a log cabin – build one wherever you want. Here flowed the Yukon, one of the world's mightiest rivers, and dozens of intriguing tributaries. Two hundred thousand square miles with hardly any people, a land teeming with grizzly and black bear, beaver, moose, caribou, wolves and so many other critters. Overhead: whiskey jacks, owl, raven and eagles... How could anyone help but love the Yukon in summer?

Yes, but this is WINTER and you're about to set out on a trip with sled dogs you've never seen before and a woman you've barely met. Hardly a sane idea. Aren't you worried?

Truth be told, my experience using Northern husky dogs in harness was embarrassingly minimal. When those oh-so-ideal summer days had lapsed into the shorter, crisp days of autumn, I could still canoe until the dog salmon were running and the ice began to form. Then, although winter descended like an icy, dark blanket over the North, I

found myself still thirsting at the well of adventure – determined to find a means of being mobile again out in that magical wilderness. Hiring a dog team and driver for a week was my first introduction to the mad world of Malamutes, Siberians and Samoyeds. I soon determined dogs were noisy, often uncooperative, and consumed enormous quantities of food whether they were being used or not. They were prone to fighting at the slightest provocation, and required a year-round commitment by their owner. At least five dogs, preferably more, were needed to pull a complete outfit, especially when travelling anywhere off the beaten path. And unless the trail was packed and near perfect, one person had to half-run, half-steer the toboggan while another person had to walk, snowshoe or ski, breaking trail ahead of the dogs.

Cross-country skiing with a backpack was a much better match with my temperament. If I could have one dog following me, dragging a lightly-loaded toboggan, there would be relative quiet, no dog fights, less dog food consumed, no hired dog driver and only a pet to mind in the off-season. Who'd want to look after a yard full of huskies all spring, summer and fall? Right when you could be off canoeing? Imagine the cost just to feed them!

For two winters, I'd been content to scout around on skis, taking short jaunts into the bush with one dog. Sometimes I'd visit a trapper at his cabin, someone I'd met on his occasional supply run into town, or young homesteaders who'd created their own personal Walden in the wilderness. On each trip I picked up tips on how to be comfortable with simple light equipment. Soon I was packing two sleeping bags but no tent. Yet no matter how I pared down my camping outfit, winter food rations for man and beast weighed a lot, meaning that about six days

was the limit to how far this man-on-skis-and-one-dog-with-small-sled arrangement could go.

Call it a basic character flaw maybe, where reason can become a casualty to impulse, but I have never been too keen on *limits*. Despite my logical determination to not own a dog team, I'd recently been getting strange nudges and visual flashes about the winter route taken three-quarters of a century before by dog teams delivering the mail from the coast to the Klondike. Imagine mushing a dog team to Dawson! I could try the northern leg of this route, starting from Pelly Crossing and travel the frozen rivers to Dawson City – that was a particularly picturesque journey I'd canoed in summer. Clearly my lightweight one-dog touring style wouldn't be enough. The distance of over 200 miles with lots of unpacked trail meant a full dog team – or even two – would be necessary.

Yet I had no dog team, no money for supplies, not even a sled. And no partner to share the rugged work of trail breaking and winter camping. I'd reluctantly resigned myself to passing up or postponing this idea, perhaps even taking up a surveying job for a few months, when an encouraging string of coincidences occurred.

One night last week, in Whitehorse's raunchy Edgewater Tavern, obstacles to this journey evaporated one by one into the smoky air. First was the lack of a partner.

Jan Prenty, a pretty and spunky waitress, studied me for a long time before tentatively sitting on the edge of an empty chair across from me. Her intense stare made me wonder if I had beer foam on my moustache or potato chip crumbs in my beard. Both were quite likely.

She then glanced around, checking the other tables in her duty area, and said simply, "I want you to take me winter camping."

My drinking companion gagged on his beer. Three-Quarter Jon

Rudolph's eyes watered slightly as he struggled for control. Only through great effort did he prevent himself from extruding his present foamy mouthful through his nose.

"You've got to be kidding," was all I could think of to say. She'd caught me completely off guard. Though I'd met Jan before, we'd never said much more than hello. This sudden request had an embarrassing touch of double entendre to it; colour was rising in my cheeks.

"Why should I be kidding? I've camped in the summer," she said. "You're always going off on trips to someone's trapline. I'd like to see what it's like to camp in the winter, that's all."

She was clearly intent on going camping. I mumbled something about travelling over the old dog team mail route to Dawson City. It was a journey oft-discussed in the bars, but it hadn't been attempted with dogs in many decades.

"Unfortunately, though, it would require a team of at least six dogs," I said. "And money for dog food and supplies. And transportation to take everything to Pelly Crossing. And dog harnesses. And a toboggan. And it would be very hard work. And it is getting too late in the season."

Having finally regained his composure, Jon interrupted to offer two dogs and a makeshift toboggan. He then gave me a lewd wink to indicate he'd be quite happy to take Jan into the bush instead.

"And I have a truck," Jan pointed out.

"Half a truck," corrected Jon, never one to hide his biases. "That little rice-burner can't haul half the load of a real pickup—"

At that moment, an envelope with three \$20 bills arrived at our table, having been passed hand-to-hand across the room from somewhere in the corner. "That's the fifty you lent me last August, Bruce," Jim called

out. “Plus a bit of interest!” A group of young, long-haired miners from Keno Hill laughed approvingly at their red-headed buddy’s comment.

“There you go. Cash for the dog food,” Jan said merrily. “And I’ve got a credit card for gas. I don’t know how to ski. So you’ll have to teach me. Now we just need more dogs, right?”

Jeez, it is downright freaky when pieces of a puzzle fall into place so quickly. John Tapsell from Dawson City leaned over from the adjoining table and offered to lend his three dogs. He had three big brutes who could use some exercise. They hadn’t ever been really trained, he cautioned, but surely the right person could get some use out of them.

Not to be outdone, Mike Cowper piped up to volunteer his pet husky, Tuk, for whatever trip it was we were discussing. Suddenly I had seven dogs including my own Casey, plus an over-eager rookie female partner... and no more obstacles, except hundreds of miles of abandoned trail, river ice and all the blizzards and demons that the Yukon could throw at us. I felt a bit trapped. And too embarrassed to back out.

“Go for it, Bruce! To Dawson City!” Jon raised his glass, then told Jan to bring another round.

Coincidences. Your life seems to run on luck, said those voices. What if this romp ends in some epic Jack London-ish disaster? Get her to turn this pickup around right now.

“Someone has to be confident,” I muttered.

Jan turned her head partially in my direction while keeping her eyes locked on the road ahead. “Did you say something?” she asked.

Her next words were drowned out by the horrifically loud rasping of packed snow scraping on the underside of the pickup truck. We’d run into another snow-drifted section and Jan had to wrestle to keep

the Datsun's nose pointed north. The light truck planed over the dense drift, sledding on its oil pan, wheels spinning frantically. Jan twitched the steering wheel to correct for a slight sideways skid, but kept her foot hard on the gas pedal. I noticed her knuckles were white. Seconds later, the drifted portion abruptly ended and all was normal again – if driving on a snow- and ice-covered gravel highway through a blizzard can be called normal.

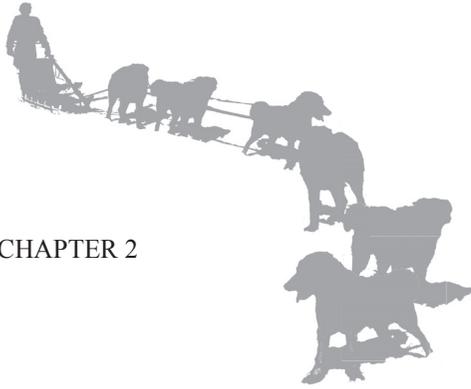
She'll probably give up after one day out.

“I said, ‘Do you think we can make it to Dawson with these dogs?’ ”

“Why not?” she asked back. “You getting worried? I can keep up, you know.”

“Naw, it'll be great. Like a *holiday*.”

That last word rang in my ears as I stared ahead into the mesmerizing snow swirls. My voice was surprisingly confident; my gut was in a painfully fierce knot.



CHAPTER 2

SEVEN SLEEPERS

Ssshhh! Sh!

Imagine yourself peeking in on seven mixed-breed sled dogs sleeping peacefully under the canopy shell on Jan's pickup truck's box. Lulled into tranquillity by the vibrations and constant droning of tires churning over the snow and gravel, they appear quite harmless, even pet-cute. Through the cab's rear window, we can examine them one-by-one. They are the strange result of breeding near-savage Northern work dogs with various southern domestic breeds. It's a stew pot of instincts, temperaments and body structures. Each serving is very different...

There are faint wisps of frosty breath rising from each wet nose. Six are black, while the seventh nose is pink, like a pencil eraser. Curled into an orange and white fur ball against the cab is my own pet, Casey the Wonder Dog. He is almost two and weighs about sixty-five pounds. This wild-eyed, eraser-nosed, Malamute-collie cross will serve as our lead dog. He understands commands for 'gee' [turn right] and 'haw' [turn left] from pulling a sled during previous camping outings.

Snuggled against Casey is another Malamute cross: Iskoot, who is

about the same age and stature, but all white. One of Iskoot's paws is twitching – likely chasing Arctic hares in his dreams.

“Iskoot's not very confident yet about leading,” Jon had reported. “He's too shy. Hope he grows out of it – maybe this trip will help.”

Jon's other loaner was our sole female, the regal Mitti. She's arranged herself so her chin is resting on my blue pack; her long, silky, white coat and smooth head give her the look of an over-sized spaniel. Like Iskoot, she has a few days of experience in harness, and is purportedly “a good worker, unless she spots a damn squirrel – then she barks her f**king head off.”

Tuk is sprawled on top of the brown tarpaulin, no doubt laying claim to the dog food beneath – 40 pounds of beef fat and 125 pounds of kibble pellets – enough for 10 to 14 days. Tuk has a wolf's head, massive chest, narrow hips and high, curled tail – he could appear on postcards as a ‘mighty Northern Husky.’ He fits that stereotype. According to his owner Mike, he is a rather spoiled pet who has Samoyed and Malamute blood lines. I'd borrowed Tuk once earlier in the winter. He was strong but quite sucky, needing lots of reassurance. Tuk is sleeping fitfully with one ear cocked towards the three newcomers who might dispute his position above the food.

At the back, John Tapsell's three dogs are jammed into a familial fur pile on the toboggan. It is hard to tell where one dog ends and another begins, except that the shaggy white hair must belong to Sherlock, the thick black coat to his littermate, Rafferty, and the shorter, tan and black patches are Flander. All three are novices to this mushing business.

Sherlock has become a well-known dog this winter, a minor celebrity, for his strange talent of eating dog houses. He could calmly munch through plywood, particle board or lumber, tearing out nails and staples

with his teeth, reducing a dog house to a few wood and iron scraps and a large pile of dog doo. John was studying for his carpenter's papers and apparently welcomed the opportunity to design each successive mini-house project, practising diminutive gable windows on one, hipped roofs on the next, and gingerbread trim on another. While we were away, John would study the theoretical aspects of his chosen trade.

Brother Rafferty's sole previous outing in harness was a spur-of-the-moment entry in a one-dog weight-pulling contest at the Mayo winter carnival. John hadn't been able to interest Rafferty in pulling at all until a little girl wandered out of the crowd ahead of his dog. Rafferty barked, wagged his tail and, seemingly without effort, dragged the six-hundred-pound sled towards the child. John quickly escorted the child across the finish line with Rafferty hard on their heels, tail still a-wagging.

Harnessed to a slightly heavier load a few moments later, Rafferty showed a distinct lack of interest in either the contest or the girl. Apparently the black dog had received all the hugs and pats he wanted from the tiny human and was quite content to sit beside the sled and grin at the cheering and jeering spectators. John's advice, based on his dog's brief pulling career: "Rafferty'll work hard if you can motivate him. You just have to find out how."

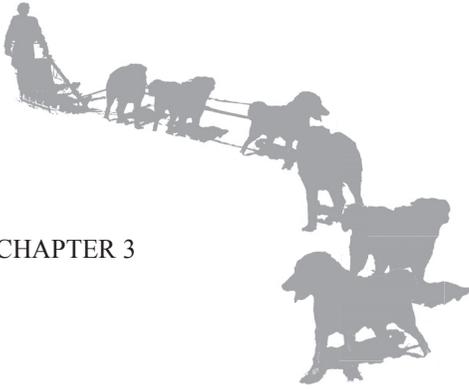
The third of this trio is smaller, but the obvious ring-leader. Perhaps it is his German shepherd heritage that makes Flander look so sly, even when sleeping. That, and his hang-down ears and long, wiener-like tail.

Now, imagine them all. There are six curled, bushy, husky-dog tails and a single thin, black, straight one. All these tails are still. Each dog is dozing to the monotone drone of a small truck driving to Pelly Crossing. Each canine brain is monitoring the sounds, the smells, and vibrations

– likely even the other dogs’ thoughts – while the muscular body rests, preserving energy, keeping warm.

Think of them as cute if you like, but this peace won’t last much longer. Let’s let them sleep while the Datsun emerges from the blizzard and rumbles on through the afternoon.

Sh-sh-sh.



CHAPTER 3

TRAILHEAD

Just after 4 p.m., we crossed the Pelly Crossing bridge. The moment Jan down-shifted and steered onto the left shoulder, we could feel our cargo coming alive. Seven bodies herded from window to window in anticipation of an early parole. Mitti's frantic, high-pitched, staccato barking would surely be pumping the team's adrenalin.

My door was open before the wheels were completely stopped, and I bounded out to unlock the canopy hatch. Keeping seven loose sled dogs in such a small space was asking for trouble.

"Any blood?" Jan called back just as a 500-pound fur ball knocked me over like a bowling pin and left me spinning on the snow. The mass immediately split into seven boneheads attached to individual bodies, each exploding into a full gallop. Paws thundered down the trail, tails flagged a good-bye, and in seconds... we were alone.

I examined the surrounding snow for any red spots.

"No signs of trouble," I reported, then scanned the truck interior. "No blood in here either!"

Dog team owners typically use multiple-unit, portable 'dog boxes'

when transporting their dogs, even when all the dogs know one another. A truck-box-sized plywood kennel is divided into small compartments each just big enough for one dog and each cell has its own latched door. Ten-dog kennels, and even the occasional double-decker, 20-dog unit, are familiar sights on Yukon roads. We'd taken quite a gamble hauling our team without one, really pushing our luck, but had apparently won this toss.

"This is it?" Jan asked, pointing to the single-lane road down which our dogs had disappeared. "The road to Pelly Farm?"

"This is it. Next stop Dawson City. Estimated time of arrival: eight to ten days from now. Twelve days max."

From here at the highway crossing over the Pelly River, we would follow an unploughed, 32-mile, one-lane road to an isolated farm near the Pelly's confluence with the Yukon River. Past that point we would use the river itself for our trail.

"Those dogs better come back to pull us," Jan laughed.

"Yeah!" I agreed. "I'll feel much better as soon as we're ten minutes down the trail and really on our way."

The new snow was about four inches deep over the last tracks on the side road, and very sticky. The afternoon high had been well above freezing, but as the sun was sinking lower in the south-west, one could feel the temperature dropping. The sky was now clear and it would be cold soon.

We began to unload our outfit, beginning with the toboggan. I put some sticks on the ground beside the truck and we lifted the toboggan out and onto them. This would keep the toboggan from freezing fast while we loaded up. Next, we stretched out the harnesses in the order I figured would work best. Casey's first, then Iskoot's because he needed to learn about leading, then—



Parked near the Pelly River bridge, we are packing hundreds of pounds of gear and supplies on the toboggan.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Dog fight! Growling and squealing, six dogs had locked into a rolling, snapping brawl. Teeth were flashing and tufts of fur floated up into the air. The din was terrifying. My heart pounded as I fought the immediate impulse to insert myself between the combatants. Sherlock and Rafferty twisted and grappled, their faces splattered with blood. Above them, Casey and Flander wrestled, jaws clenched vise-like on each other's fur. Tuk and Iskoot were indiscriminately biting any limb that came their way. Only Mitti stood apart from the pile, barking frantically. Jan began shrieking, "STOP IT! STOP IT!" as loud as she could, but no one was listening.

I grabbed Iskoot's collar and hurled him aside. Across the fray, Jan seized Tuk by the back of his neck and yanked him free. The next pair

scattered as soon as they realized the humans were involved, but our two most serious scrappers had to be literally pried apart with a stick. When finally Jan held Sherlock and I his brother, they glared at each other for a moment, then started to wag their tails!

I looked up at Jan. She grimaced and shook her head.

“That was scary,” she said simply. “I hope it never happens again.”

“Scares the hell out of me too when dogs do that,” I admitted. My hands were shaking noticeably. “Let’s hope they’ve got their pecking order sorted out now.”

Rafferty had red all over his face, but there was no obvious source until Jan pointed out the stained snow around Sherlock’s feet. A deep gash across one pad was gushing blood each time he took a step. Jan bundled him off to the truck to see what she could do, leaving me with the other six.

“Holidays are over,” I declared, putting harnesses on and adding each dog to the single file forming ahead of the toboggan. As soon as they were hooked up, John Tapsell’s remaining two rookies immediately began gnawing at the leather straps and testing the limits of their confinement. I was in no mood to repair chewed harnesses and slapped their ears with my leather gauntlet mitt to tell them so. Big brawling Rafferty instantly transformed into a whimpering mess, peeing on himself, terrified by my every move, and desperately anxious to climb back into the truck.

Tuk was growling at Rafferty, Mitti re-started her maddening barking, Casey had turned around and was playing with Iskoot, their traces now a mass of tangles, and Flander was licking my boot.

I took a big sigh. How are we ever going to get this ridiculous excuse-for-a-team to Dawson? I wondered, shaking my head.

According to Jan, Sherlock’s bleeding had stopped, but would

re-start as soon as he put any weight on it. We were faced with our first crisis and hadn't even finished unloading the truck!

I'd no experience with a dog cutting his pad before and really no way of gauging the degree of seriousness of Sherlock's injury. Dogs have remarkable mending processes, but this wound was in a critical place. He certainly wouldn't be able to pull worth a damn until it healed. Jan and I stared at each other, hoping for inspiration, when the sound of an approaching pickup turned on light bulbs in our heads.

Only after we'd flagged it to an icy stop did we recognize the driver: Dan Buckles, neighbour of Sherlock's owner.

"We're in a bit of a jam, Dan. Can you help out?" I asked. "One of our dogs is cut up and has to be returned to John Tapsell. What do you think about Sherlock hitching a ride with you?"

Moments later, from his perch atop a load of lumber, Sherlock disappeared down the highway, wagging his tail and sniffing the rushing air.

We didn't waste time lamenting his departure. Jan and I got back to work, shuffling our outfit from truck to toboggan and lashing it all in place. Somehow we found room on our small toboggan for all the dog food, about eighty pounds of our food and kitchen gear, 20-ish pounds of bedding, maybe 30 pounds of clothes and perhaps 30 more pounds of tools, tarpaulin, light dog chains and other odds and ends. Including a musher, the team would be pulling over 450 pounds, with the only consolation being that the load would steadily lighten with each meal served.

Jan drove off to park her truck at the Pelly Crossing village gas station, leaving me alone with the six remaining dogs who were now peacefully sprawled out in the snow, yawning and licking at their minor tears and bruises. The plan was for me to work the team for the first few

miles and Jan would follow on foot in a few minutes. I untangled the harnesses for what seemed like the fiftieth time, gave a mighty heave and told Casey, "Let's GO!"

The toboggan lurched forward, pushing up loose snow and crunching and grinding over lumps of ice. Rafferty and Flander in particular leaned enthusiastically into their traces as we swept away along the road. It was now six-thirty and sunset would be around eight. A huge advantage to travelling in April would be the ever-lengthening days. We'd start with over 14 hours between sunrise and sunset and add five minutes more every day. With so much snow cover to reflect light, dawn and dusk would be fairly bright also.

The farm access road is on the north side of this east-west Pelly River valley, winding at first through an area devastated by a fire a decade ago. It was a black and white, high-contrast scene of burnt trees, with stubbled branches and strips of blackened bark clinging to the grey trunks, all trimmed in fluffy white flakes. Snow-drifted caps on stump tops were like oversized mushrooms in this bleak forest. Gray stalks of dried fireweed protruded lifeless from ice patches. All was ghostly quiet save for the rustling of traces and the raspy, snow-crunching prow of the toboggan.

A large truck's double tires had packed deep ruts on this road, each track just narrower than the toboggan. Even though I stopped the dogs repeatedly and placed them bodily one by one on the centre mound between the ruts, they refused to run there and immediately the toboggan was dragged again into a rut, one edge in and the other riding the rim so the load was in constant danger of tipping. When it did topple, only by crouching low and heaving as hard as I could with my shoulder was I able to right the load. Mushing along this rutted section was curiously

like tacking a small sailboat: I hung onto one handlebar and hiked way to the side to keep our craft from listing over too far.

The road initially followed the lip of a cliff above the Pelly, then turned up a creek gulch that had escaped the fire. Occasionally there was a spectacular view of the river but just as often the road was walled in by pine and spruce forest. At the first uphill, I stepped off as the toboggan slowed and walked behind. Gradually progress diminished to the point where I began pushing on the handlebars and shouting encouragement. Nearing the top, as we were losing all momentum, I put my shoulder against the load and leaned with all my strength. With each step I dug my boots into the snow for traction and strained to help.

“Come on, Casey!” I encouraged. “Let’s go! We can make it! Mush! Mush!”

Just before the crest of the hill, I glanced up and saw that the traces behind Tuk, the wheel dog, were slack and all the dogs’ tails were up and wagging merrily! They had all caught on to this game very quickly, it seemed – far quicker than I had. They were happily looking back, watching me do all the work.

When I too let up, we stopped immediately. I walked up to Tuk and shouted “WORK!” in his ear as loudly as I could. He jumped sideways as far as his traces allowed and cowered. I repeated this performance with each dog and what it lacked in surprise was more than offset by the dreaded anticipation.

Now, when I returned to the toboggan and called out, “Let’s GO,” all six bodies leaned heartily into their harnesses and we were once more underway, crunching onwards. I was able to ride again, scanning the passing terrain for a suitable camping spot.

Soon I found a sheltered, flat patch under a massive spruce, just

room enough for two sleeping bags and our packs on the mossy ground. Within easy reach were a half-dozen three-inch-diameter spars for firewood, and six stout trees to which the dogs would be chained. There was no creek, but we could melt snow for our drinking water. I whoaed the dogs and was digging out their chains when Jan danced into camp wearing her moccasins with toe rubbers over them, carrying both parkas and an armful of other items we'd left behind in the cab of her Datsun.

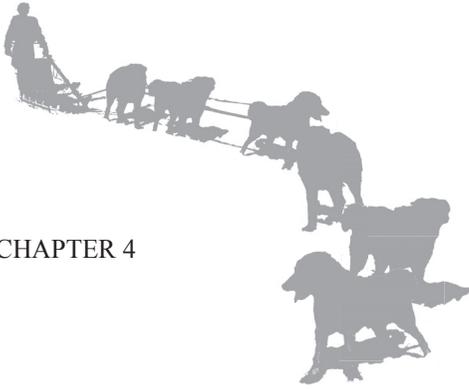
She had colour in her cheeks and a big hello for each dog. There ensued a tremendous clamour as each dog tried to tell her about being deaf in one ear. Jan didn't understand a thing they told her but won their hearts by patting heads and rubbing chins.

I chopped up firewood while Jan dug out supper food from the big kitchen box. Soon we had steaks, eggs and onions frying, the tea billy boiling, and were able to pause for a moment before feeding the dogs their crunchies.

With the sunset now fading, a rising full moon cast a silver-blue iridescent glow over our snow-carpeted campsite. I caught Jan's eye for a moment and we exchange smiles. During all the unpacking and setting up, we'd worked steadily and effectively, conversing in short, necessary sentences. I realized suddenly that neither of us had taken the time to really notice the other person or to inquire about the other's feelings.

"I'm glad you wanted to come along," I offered over the crackling fire.

"Well," she laughed, "I'm glad, too!" And then she looked at me through the steam rising from her mug and added, "Partner."



CHAPTER 4

RAFFERTY'S STRANGE LOVE

There was 20 degrees of frost in the clear morning air when I wiggled out of my sleeping bag and fumbled into my clothes. Taking advantage of the generous supply of squaw wood – the lower, dead branches – on the tree we'd slept under, I soon had a hot fire snapping, its smoke drifting through the dense forest.

As I warmed my fingers, one by one the dogs lifted their heads from the snow nests they'd dug, stretched their necks and said hello. Each made a tentative woof, like a singer tuning his vocal chords, until finally, with Casey as opening soloist, the morning greetings became a full-blown symphony of howls. Mitti, who didn't seem to be able to howl, offered her choppy, high-pitched bark, playing an effective counterpoint to the con brio improvisations of the five wannabe wolves around her.

Though others may find huskies' howling eerie or even scary, something inside me was amused by their primeval yodelling and I couldn't stop smiling. Watching the over-earnest expressions on their doggy faces as each one contorted and strained and rolled his eyes back – their seriousness triggered tears of laughter rolling down my cheeks. I found

myself cheering, “Louder! More noise! More!” as I savoured the silly racket.

The sleeping bag shuddered twice, erupted a mop of matted blonde hair, then began squirming like a puffy, ringed caterpillar. Moments later a half-dressed Jan half-emerged and sat up rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“Does this mean it’s morning?” she asked in a groggy voice when the dogs paused. “It’s sure hard to sleep in with all that racket.”

“Seven-thirty and all’s well,” I laughed. “Let’s get at ’er while the snow’s still crisp.”

The toboggan would slide much more easily over the icy crust now coating yesterday’s snowfall. If the temperature later in the day rose above freezing again, we would be in for some sticky trail conditions.

Stopping only to warm our fingers, eat some rye bread and sip last night’s coffee from the thermos, we brushed the frost off our bedding and rolled and packed and tied and were soon priming and harnessing the workers. Now steeped, the hot tea went into the thermos to drink later. Strangely, neither Rafferty nor Mitti had eaten all their food from last night so Tuk opportunely vacuumed up the unwanted crunchies as he was escorted past their nest spots to his place in the traces. That would be the last time that any of the dogs left any food uneaten.

As a pick-me-up – and a bribe – we distributed chunks of beef fat to the team. Each ration was swallowed almost without chewing. This fat would balance the high-protein racing formula dry food we’d brought for their evening meals.

Tuk was showing the most energy, so I moved him up to lead position and we lurched off down the trail. Our camping spot had been only three miles in from the highway and I was eager to cover a decent distance today, taking us at least half the way to Pelly Farm.

Jan buckled her brand new boots into the cross-country skis and, holding the gee-line [a trailing rope], was towed behind like a water skier. Instead of coping with a motorboat's wake, though, she had to navigate the tire ruts. After only a few spills, she got the hang of it and became quite adept.

On the uphill I stepped off and walked behind, lending a hand on the steepest parts and encouraging the dogs to "Get UP! Let's GO!" On the downhill I stood on the brake so as not to run down Mitti, today's wheel dog. Our brake was a metal claw bolted to a plywood pad, in turn hinged to the tail of the toboggan. My weight on the pad caused the claw to furrow deeply into the snowy trail, ploughing yet another rut Jan had to contend with.

Rafferty's leg near his ankle was stiff and tender around a gash from yesterday's fight and he let out a yelp whenever he put too much strain on it. I encouraged him to lick the wound clean but he didn't comprehend the fuss at all. Only Flander understood my concern and he licked it for his buddy whenever we paused to untangle twisted harnesses.

After an hour of steady progress, during a steep descent with the dogs galloping strongly, the plywood brake pad snapped in two. By tipping the toboggan on its side, I managed to stop it and save Mitti from being overtaken and crushed. I'd forgotten, however, that I was not the last in this procession. A split second later, Jan slammed into me from behind, wrapping arms, legs, poles and skis around me as we somersaulted over the backboard into the toboggan's basket.

"Oops," she said sheepishly as the stars settled.

"Oops," I agreed, laughing.

Ahead of us, six dogs wagged their tails in agreement and smiled their goofy, tongue-hanging-out dog-grins.

“I think I’ve a few things yet to learn about making toboggan brakes,” I admitted.

“I think we’ve got a lot to learn about *everything*,” Jan said matter-of-factly.

She poured tea from the thermos while I wired the brake claw directly to the hinge as a makeshift brake. The temperature had risen noticeably over the past hour – I was using the pliers without mitts.

“With the sun warming this south-facing side of the valley and melting our crust, we may not need a brake much this afternoon,” I suggested. “Our trouble will be sliding on sticky snow, not stopping.”

Taking advantage of the pause, Flander was snoring softly, his head leaning against Rafferty’s butt, who was making low disagreeable noises at Tuk at the opposite end of the line. Iskoot was wriggling around on his back, rubbing an itch while Casey had wrapped himself up like a mummy in his traces. Mitti posed very regally, surveying the rabble in front of her, then settled down to lick snowballs from between the brown pads of her feet.

Our team sported an eclectic collection of harnessing, provided by the dogs’ owners; each was a bit different in style, age and state of repair. Gold rush era freighting harnesses – designed for use on narrow trails and hauling a load – were scaled-down tandem horse harnesses, with padded collars to which heavy leather straps called traces were attached. We had only one collar harness: Casey’s. The other dogs’ harnesses had a wide leather band across the front of the dog’s chest, and another strap around the back and tummy to hold the traces in position. Each dog’s traces were clipped to the following dog’s harness, so they were in a single file about 60 feet long. I’d put spare belting, a leather punch, waxed heavy cotton

thread and an awl in the tool kit to repair the inevitable breakage. Plus we had Sherlock's harness as a spare.

Determined to squeeze every mile possible from the crust, we moved on as soon as the brake repair was complete. By now we'd left behind the scattered burnt-off patches of forest and were paralleling the river through tall straight poplars. Here, the packed snow on the road averaged about six inches deep, so it would take many days yet to melt completely, especially in the shade. On the sidehill above us, though, all loose snow was gone. Green grass shoots hadn't appeared yet in those bare patches, but the sight of bare earth was unnerving – a blunt reminder that this trip was running on a very tight timetable. Spring was coming on fast; we had less than three weeks before the weather would become uncomfortably hot for these furry dogs to work, the trail too slushy (or muddy), and the river ice too dangerous for travelling. I was hoping we could dash through in ten days.

Two miles on, Mitti's harness suddenly snapped. The old leather fastenings weren't up to the strain of six dogs pulling ahead while the toboggan yanked back.

Jan sat on the toboggan curl to dig out the spare harness for Mitti. Rafferty, momentarily freed, immediately walked over to Jan, lifted his leg high and peed profusely on her shoulder.

I seized Rafferty, shaking him violently, yelling, "NO! NO! NO!"

I was afraid to look at Jan, worried how she'd react. Would she freak out? But when I did take a peek, she was grinning at me and holding back laughter!

"Something to tell your grandchildren about someday?" I teased, placing a handful of snow on her coat to absorb the urine.

“Yeah, but maybe I’ll leave out some of the details,” she muttered while brushing off the yellow snow.

Rafferty sat gazing vacantly at Jan, wagging his great curled tail slowly back and forth. He didn’t appear at all repentant. In fact, he gave the impression of a complete absence of thought, a total void behind those dark, cow-eyes. Quite possibly he was in love with Ms. Prenty.

We’d just started again when we reached a flooded section of the road. About an inch of new ice had formed over six inches of water where a spring was creating a minor glacier across our route.

There was no way around; the road was flanked tightly in dense willows. So we paused to catch our breath, rolled our eyes at each other, nodded, then rushed forward, cheering on the dogs.

Toenails clattered, digging into the ice as we raced for the far side. But ten feet short of success, the toboggan caught on a ridge, spinning sideways. Then it toppled over, breaking the surface and sinking into the icy water.

Jan and I heaved it back upright as quickly as possible and dragged it forward to the first dry patch. There we assessed the water penetration, hauling bundles and bags out of the tarpaulin-wrapped cargo area. Our food was fine except for one somewhat soggy rye bread loaf. The paper dog food bags, however, were wet and one side of the bedding roll was damp.

Jan’s ski boots were soaked from rescuing the toboggan but she said that didn’t matter. “Let’s just carry on,” she said gamely. “I’m actually curious to find out what will go wrong next!”

About a third of the way to Pelly Farm, before Braden’s Canyon, the road bends away from the Pelly River and climbs up along a ravine. The dogs didn’t appreciate the incline and seized every possible excuse to

stop. Each dog took a separate turn to have a bowel movement, causing more back-breaking work for me to re-start the toboggan in this sticky snow and steer around the steaming deposit.

Frustration was building for all of us when another broken harness trace forced a halt. This time there was no intact spare and my repair would take twenty minutes. While I cobbled, Jan fixed rye and cheese sandwiches, the dogs watching her attentively.

Our spirits picked up after a snack and, with clearer minds, we decided to look for a good spot to rest for the afternoon. Ideally, it would be somewhere bare of snow under a big white spruce, in the sun, where we could dry out from the morning dunking and wait for the temperature to drop again.

With that setting clearly in our minds, we got the dogs up from their nap and pushed off again up the steep hill. Both of us were straining to help move the load: coaxing, shouting, pulling, bullying, then stopping. Then back to grunting, leaning, heaving, sweating. I was stripped down to a T-shirt under the blazing sun, my skin tingling from the radiation reflecting off the snow. After one gruelling mile, the dogs would have no more of it and we were exhausted.

Thus we were halted once more, for what would likely be at least four hours, in the middle of this slushy road, on an uphill slope with nothing but scruffy black spruce for neighbours. There was no bare ground in sight, no creek for running water – certainly this was not the site I'd envisioned.

I spread the tarpaulin to lie upon and stretched wet and damp clothes around us to dry in the sun. Jan pulled pans from the kitchen box and put a thin layer of snow in each. Twenty minutes later the sun had done its business and we had a few mouthfuls of stale-tasting water to sip. Jan

sprinkled orange juice powder over more snow, creating a mush that was unsettlingly reminiscent of Rafferty's earlier performance. The melt time was much shorter, but to make this coloured melt-water palatable we needed a wee dram of Scotch whisky from our repair kit.

Like Hansel and Gretel's trail of bread crumbs, dog food had been trickling out from a small tear, so Jan rough-stitched a sturdier sack from a length of canvas, and then transferred the crunchies. At the first rattle, six pairs of eyes were locked on her every move.

The toboggan needed repairs, too. The frequent tipping had loosened the plywood sidewalls but that was nothing that some haywire and twists of the pliers couldn't rectify. Noticing a few loose bolts, I shook my head and wondered if this clumsy affair would really make it to Dawson. How did I get talked – or talk myself – into believing Jon's jury-rigged toboggan would work for the ten or more days ahead of us?

The toboggan's base was a child's toy made of thin slats of hardwood, seven feet long and designed to carry perhaps three pre-schoolers down an icy suburban Ontario slope. Before an earlier trip, Three-Quarter Jon and I had replaced the original thin crossbars with strips of 3/4-inch plywood. Jon then welded four steel braces so I could bolt on spruce pole handlebars. The handlebars were wired to the front curl and we loosely wove a net of rope along each side to contain the load. Inside this net, to protect the contents from poking branches or rasping ice chunks, were thin plywood panels. On the toboggan's base I'd painted three coats of urethane and a thick layer of paraffin wax – much of which, I was sure, was already sanded off by the abrasive snow crust.

"Wouldn't a sleigh with runners be better than a toboggan?" Jan asked, interrupting her stitching to cut us chunks from a garlic sausage ring. "There would be much less bottom to drag on this sticky snow."

“Much better, yes,” I agreed. “But when we hit deep or unpacked snow later on, a sleigh would sink and catch where a flat-bottomed toboggan will stay on top. My main worry is that we’re going to wear right through the base on the icy sections.”

“Then what will we do?” she asked.

“I hope we’ll be close enough to Dawson by that time to be back on a packed trail. Somehow we’ll attach the skis under the toboggan as runners. I brought eight long bolts just in case.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jan smiled, buttoning up her parka and leaning back to catch a faceful of sunshine. “With no skis, I’ll have to ride!”

The sudden cold woke us a few hours later. As the sun moved along the horizon and cast the narrow, tree-lined ravine into shade, the temperature had instantly dropped 15 degrees. We quickly gathered the clothes and tarp, and straightened out the inevitable harness tangle. I led on skis with Jan nervously taking her first tour of duty as musher. Iskoot was our latest candidate for lead dog and he threw himself into the job with enthusiasm, rallying the dogs to pull the toboggan smartly on the newly chilled road surface.

With Casey right behind him to interpret any gee or haw, the skinny white pup only had to understand ‘get up’ and ‘whoa.’ Jan, however, kept singing, “Let’s Go-oo-oo-oo” at the dogs as they trotted along, causing great confusion because half of them thought this was the hoped-for “whoa-whoa-whoa.” After I offered this explanation, Jan walked from dog to dog, having a lengthy heart-to-heart conversation with the bemused canines. Every dog wagged his tail and panted and appreciated the scratches that accompanied her lecture. And, despite my initial

scepticism about this approach, Jan soon had them pulling well and apparently understanding exactly what she meant.

Out in front I could now relax and enjoy the skiing. We slid out of the ravine and onto a stretch of gentler slopes. After the raucous crust-rasping noise at the toboggan's tail, I savoured the comparative tranquillity of swishing skis and faint creaking of bamboo poles. It was exhilarating to be gliding effortlessly through the poplar forest, noticing snow grouse trying to be invisible and squirrels playing in the branches. Relishing the random glimpses of snow-crust-covered river far below flashing in the late-afternoon sun – all confirming why I so loved to be out travelling in the winter and early spring. I became so involved in the scenery and fun of skiing that twice when the toboggan tipped I was out of ear-shot, leaving Jan on her own to heave the heavy load upright. She managed fine until the third time when the upset was downhill, slightly off the road and tight against a willow thicket. After a valiant effort, she sat on the load fuming until I noticed their absence behind me. I skied a half-mile back rather sheepishly to lend a hand and mumble my apologies.

The makeshift brake wasn't very effective on icy downhills so when we came to a very tricky steep descent just before sundown, I suggested we 'chain up.'

I'd read in a gold rush era book by Arthur Walden called *A Dog Puncher on the Yukon* how dog team drivers had put chain under their toboggans or freight sleighs as a brake on steep hills. This appeared to be the ideal time to try, to save poor Tuk who had graduated from this morning's lead dog all the way back to wheel position. The big white Samoyed-cross was in real danger of being transformed into a small polar bear rug if Jan couldn't control the load on this particular icy hill.

Feeling rather smug for remembering this solution, I wrapped two

dog chains around the curl of the toboggan and slid them down just under the front, into the snow.

“Now hold on tight and don’t be afraid to tip the toboggan if the chains aren’t enough,” I instructed Jan. “We can’t afford to carry any injured dogs. Especially a big fat one like Tuk.”

She indicated her readiness, so I stepped around and skied off down the hill, calling Iskoot to follow. With the road so glazed from the day’s thaw and freeze, I whooshed along at a terrifying clip, tucked down in a racing egg shape, coasting along the flat at the bottom, around the corner and down the next slope.

“Yahooooo!” I hollered and skated further on my skis, trees whizzing past and snow flying where my poles touched. Abruptly the forest opened to an incredible view of the Pelly valley and the setting sun. To my right was a large bare patch under a massive, old spruce, with plenty of standing firewood close by – perfect for tonight’s camp.

But where were the dogs?

Maybe she dumped at the bottom of the hill, I worried, after waiting a few minutes, wondering if the toboggan would survive a high-speed impact. Or maybe she couldn’t stop and has wiped out Tuk, I fretted as I started back up the slope. No, I’ll bet she needed more chains to control the load properly and is putting on more. I skied faster, kicking hard to run up the hill, expecting to see them at the top of the rise, but— no one there...

Around the corner I raced, across the flat, but they weren’t piled up at the bottom there either... I looked up, and finally spied them all – still at the very top, right where I’d left them!

When I arrived, breathless and sweaty, Jan was seated on the bank, eating snow and looking very annoyed once again. The dogs



The snow was too sticky to continue. The dogs sprawl in the snow with Rafferty staring very intently at the food Jan is unpacking.

were sitting or lying in their traces, and wagged tails happily at my arrival.

“Whatsamatter?” I panted.

“Won’t move.”

“Won’t move?”

“That’s what I said. Won’t move.”

“Oh.”

So I pushed as hard as I could on the back of the load. It didn’t budge an inch.

“See?”

“Yep. Won’t move,” I admitted.

So I pried up the front with a stout pole while Jan slid the chains off.

“I’ll just use the brake,” she said. “Okay?”

I wanted to explain that I really had read about using chains, but opted instead for mentioning the good camping spot half a mile ahead. Jan steered the toboggan there without any trouble or any more help from ‘Mr. Bright Ideas’ who sheepishly skied a respectable distance behind.

While unloading the toboggan, we let the dogs run loose for a moment. They suddenly came to life and bounded though the deep snow off the trail in pursuit of squirrels real and imaginary.

Rafferty didn’t run with the rest but instead went under the tree where Jan was stretching out our sleeping bags and started to lift his leg—.

He was the first to get chained up, and when Tuk came back and wanted to rumble with Rafferty, I chained him, too. While I was there, the others returned and I fastened each to his own tree along the road with Mitti closest to our tree because she’d been the best behaved and could

have the scraps from our meal. Soon each dog had dug or flattened a bed in the snow and was curled up, nose under tail, settled in for a snooze.

With the sun disappearing down the valley, the darkening sky became more noticeable – totally clear, warning of a cold night. A flicker of Northern Lights rippled across the heavens, entertaining us while we warmed our bones with soup and tea.

I melted a big panful of snow-water and cooked the dogs' supper a bit, a routine I'd been too tired to perform the night before. It was important, I'd been advised by 'real' mushers, to keep the dogs well hydrated. They gobbled it up, even Rafferty and Mitti, when I walked around in the moonlight and dished the glop out in the snow before each dog. Tuk was kicking up such a godawful racket that I fed him last, and almost lost my foot when he wolfed down everything within a twenty-inch radius of where I'd dumped his portion. He had the table manners or lack thereof of a Malamute; there was certainly no doubt about that side of his breeding.

Relaxing finally with our hot drinks, we stoked the fire to keep it from smoking too much and soon had a toasty bonfire. The flames began to lick the bottoms of socks drying on a rope over the fire so we pulled them to the side, and finally retreated ourselves as the heat increased to dry sauna intensity.

Jan was wearing her sunglasses, seeing if that would keep some of the smoke out of her eyes, and was obviously enjoying the kilocalories of energy engulfing her. Her blissed face was flushed in the intense heat as she squatted as close as possible to the blaze. The plastic sunglass lenses were also noticing the temperature, however. By the time Jan figured why the world was distorting like a Salvador Dali painting before her eyes, the lenses had inverted completely and were now concaved

inwards! They were still wearable, she announced after a long silence, adding that they might even start a new fashion. I declined comment, not sure just how many calamities she could face in one day, and not wanting to push her over the edge with any well-meant teasing.

Later, as I was almost asleep, Jan returned from a last check on the dogs and a call-of-nature to report seeing two strange objects blink-blinking through the trees.

“Uh-huh,” I murmured sceptically and sleepily. “Were you wearing your LSD sunglasses when you saw these lights?”

Jan didn’t answer. From her silence I realized she had been quite serious about seeing some unidentified flying objects. Better just shut up, I realized.

Well, maybe they can help us get to Dawson, I mused and, comforted by that thought, soon fell asleep.



CHAPTER 5

PUSHING ONWARD

Morning.

I wiggled my toes and rubbed my feet together to get the blood circulating. There was a cool draft licking at the back of my neck where my toque didn't quite reach the collar of my sweater. My fingers were jammed into my armpits in search of heat.

Only my back was comfortably warm – even a little sweaty – where I was wedged tight against Jan. She was huddled, back towards me, wearing pale blue fuzzy pyjamas with attached feet, two sweaters and a toque.

Last night we'd zipped our sleeping bags together to share body heat, but had shared little else. Those flashes of smiles, the easy flirting, the hints of steamy romance that had punctuated our tavern room planning seemed long gone – dissipated in the stark reality of sweaty, smoky life on the trail. When Jan had said she felt too dirty even to be hugged, I didn't contradict her – we were both rank from all our exertions and darkened from hovering over cooking fires. Treat me like one of the boys, she insisted, and we'll just see how the trip develops. For some reason I hadn't felt hurt, or rejected – I was more focused on whether Jan

was still willing to continue the trip. Without her help, could I make it to Dawson City?

Indeed, there may be no hope even with her best efforts, I thought, as we lay back-to-back, each shivering slightly. We hadn't yet seen the condition of the Yukon River ice. There would be a make-or-break, go-or-turn-back, possibly life-and-death decision to make over the next few days.

Slowly I opened an eye and looked out through the hoar frost ringing the mouth of the sleeping bag. The sky, I was pleased to discover, was covered in thick clouds. A high pressure front had moved in during the cold night, dropping the temperature to about 9°F and throwing an insulating blanket between the sun and our re-frozen trail.

Encouraged, I got up, kindled a fire and rearranged the clothesline, leaving Jan to nap a few minutes longer. Taking advantage of this private moment, I walked along the road and stood at a bend, staring out at the river valley beyond and below us. Apart from the dark green spruce, all was again those inimitable shades of gray: storm clouds overhead, rocky slopes cupping pockets of snow above a flat, wide river. The frozen Pelly, trackless and still, was like the flour-dusted floor of a timeless world. From this vantage point, the ice surface was almost smooth; yet I knew well that every slight wrinkle or scratch might actually be a five-foot-high pressure ridge.

We'd camped at the end of a long bench; from here the road descended further. I could see it strung out, carved out, even built out along the right river bank, a marvel of planning and engineering, delicately designed to require a minimum of bulldozer work to build and to maintain. The farmers had designed and constructed this road themselves as

a 32-mile front laneway to move their beef out to market in the mining communities of the territory.

We'll make it easily to the Pelly Farm today, I thought. From summer canoe trips down both the Pelly and Yukon rivers, I was aware of three homes near the Pelly mouth. One was the farm – officially the Pelly River Ranch – on an ancient floodplain about fifteen miles travel from our present campsite. Next was John and Mickey Lammers' homestead a few miles further down on the opposite bank, and the third was Danny and Abby Roberts' small house in the Fort Selkirk townsite on the far, western bank of the Yukon River. Past these dwellings would be up to a hundred miles of wilderness travel before we'd meet up with the closest trappers who maintained a packed trail along the Yukon River to and from Dawson City.

Back under our camp-tree I added more snow to the tea billy. When Jan awoke, there were eggs and bread slices sizzling in the pan. For these first days we'd be eating the fresh and heavy foods, saving the dried staples, such as rice, oats, beans, raisins, noodles, flour and canned fish for the last leg. There was even peanut butter and cheese to spruce up the first days' snacks. Before leaving Whitehorse, we'd dried strips of beef from an 8-pound round roast – that was our emergency protein stash. Knowing that with so much exertion we'd crave carbohydrates, I'd made four loaves of very dense rye bread to eat on the first half of the trip. These loaves were baked in upright 48-ounce tin cans. After cooling, the bread had been packed in the same tin cans for protection. There were raisins and orange rind in the dough. After the loaves were consumed, we'd rely on the flour to make fried biscuit-like bannock.

"Whatcha thinking about?" I asked after breakfast was eaten in an uncomfortably long silence. "Worried about what's ahead?"

“More about what to do after we get there,” she admitted. “I don’t have rent money or enough for my truck payment. Don’t know what I’ll do. My work with the Follies doesn’t start for another month, and it doesn’t really pay much. I love it because everyone is so supportive – it’s like a big family.”

The Frantic Follies was a vaudeville show for the summer tourist trade. Jan, who’d grown up in Winnipeg and recently arrived in the territory, had been hired as a gaffer, ticket-taker and general odd-job person.

“Something will work out,” I said. “Something always does. Have you got a long-term plan? Like what you want to do later, maybe in five years, or so?”

“You mean when I *grow up*?” she laughed. “Yeah, I’ve got a plan.”

“And are you going to tell me? Or is it a secret? Promise I won’t laugh. Really.”

She took a deep breath and stared at me. The look said clearly, ‘Don’t you dare laugh.’ Then she revealed that one day she would move to New York City or London and work for an art auction house. Sotheby’s was the name she gave. In my ignorance, I’d never heard of it.

“Guess you know a lot about art,” I said. “I’d never be able to live in New York. Just the thought of it gives me the creeps. Too crowded. Too busy. I’d feel lost. I’d go crazy within a day.”

“I’d love it,” Jan said, with confidence. “And to be surrounded by amazing art, and the people who understand it...” After a pause, she asked, “What about you? Going to be a hippie squatter forever until you move into an old folks home?”

“Maybe... not sure really. Guess I know more about the things I don’t want to do – like work in an office or live in big city – than what I

really do want.” Looking around, I added, “Being in the Yukon bush is a wonderful place to be until I figure it out.”

Jan stirred the fire and waited for me to continue.

“When my grade one teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up,” I said, “I didn’t say a fireman or teacher or railroad engineer like the other kids.”

“What did you say?”

“ ‘When I grow up, I’ll be over six feet tall, like my dad.’ Figure that gives me two inches of growing to do yet. Plenty of time left to figure out what to do, what my quest in life is.”

She shook her head and smiled kindly. “Guess we’d better get this quest going then. It will be good to get to Dawson and have a bath.”

By my pocket watch it was 11 o’clock when we finally slid away. The dogs were well rested and anxious to perform. I skied ahead, with Iskoot as lead dog hot on my trail – and tail. Literally. He wanted to walk on the back of my skis.

Tuk was at the very back, separated from Rafferty by the female Mitti plus Flander, who seemed too sneaky to get into a serious fight with big Tuk. Light-weight Casey was second, well away from Flander with whom he’d shared a few bites back at the highway. We thought we had them all figured out and geography would thwart their battle plans.

Near the foot of the longest incline, a cubic-foot-sized boulder had rolled into the centre of the road – easy to see and simple to avoid on skis. Over my shoulder I watched Iskoot and Casey step to the left, then Rafferty and Flander leap right over, with Mitti and Tuk veering left. The toboggan hit dead on. There was a resounding thud as wood crunched into stone – the boulder not budging an inch.

Jan had been standing – actually jumping – on the brake, which had

little effect over the ice and gravel patches besides making lots of noise. Though she'd been somewhat braced for impact, the handlebars had smacked her hard in the ribs, leaving her gasping for breath. Shaking that off, she walked around to assess the damage and gave the boulder a push. When she couldn't move it, I offered to lend a hand. The boulder was frozen solid, virtually welded to the spot, so we backed the dogs up a bit and manoeuvred the toboggan sideways enough to slip past. Feeling the release of tension on their traces, the dogs suddenly bolted off, racing like all the demons of Hell were chasing them. Jan barely managed to grab on as the handlebars bounced past. She was jerked almost horizontal, her arms no doubt stretching six inches longer as she was dragged, struggling to gain a foothold on the toboggan. I scrambled to clip into my skis.

Only seconds later, Iskoot veered sharply off the road in pursuit of the squirrel he'd spotted, with the others following, rolling the toboggan on its side when it couldn't make the abrupt turn, and shearing Tuk's harness clips in the process. Jan somehow managed to step around and over the tumbling toboggan and wasn't hurt by the spill. Immediately I screamed at Iskoot to get back on the road but it was Casey who responded first, hauling Iskoot backwards and tangling Rafferty in his traces. With Rafferty hopping sideways like a solo three-legged racer, Tuk seized the opportunity to pounce, knocking Mitti onto Flander who yelped frantically. One yelp was all it took for Casey to loop back onto the pile, dragging Iskoot – now upside down and hog-tied in traces – who was snapping at any and every limb in sight. When Jan and I tried to pull the fighters apart, we became as tangled as they were, losing our footing in the deep snow and having to out-wrestle the most serious warriors.

Once again, after they had been stopped and each cautiously

unhooked and re-attached to the toboggan, the dogs began wagging tails as if to say that was grand fun, while Jan and I were left trembling and covered with snow and sweat.

“At this rate, we’ll need ten years to reach Dawson, not ten days,” I muttered, brushing snow off Jan’s fanny.

“Maybe they’ll work now that they’ve got that out of their system,” Jan suggested hopefully. She pulled a length of poly rope from the repair stash and tied Tuk’s traces directly to the toboggan, replacing the broken clips.

Her prediction proved surprisingly accurate. I continued skiing in lead, gradually paying less attention to the dogs behind and more to enjoying the forest ahead. Enormous snow flakes began drifting down gently and delicately, gracefully balancing on every twig and stalk of tall dried grass. Jan pulled on her canvas parka and had to run behind the toboggan to keep her feet warm. Hour after hour, she kept the dogs in line while the miles steadily passed under twenty-four furry feet. When the trail left the riverside, turning north toward the last creek crossing before the farm, the dogs were still pulling well and responding happily as Jan chattered and called out their names, addressing them like so many preschoolers on an outing to the zoo.

Twice I noticed leghold traps set beside the road, marked by an overhanging piece of fluorescent orange survey ribbon. Both traps had been sprung, one by an overly curious and now dead whiskey jack. We nonetheless hurried the dogs past the inviting bait, hoping they’d learn to avoid any future sets. Another advantage we had in our late season start was that trapping season was now officially closed. All traps were supposed to have been sprung five days earlier.

At the creek crossing, we had a welcome surprise. Here, where the

flow usually freezes under the low log bridge and then glaciers up over the road into a 100-yard-wide barrier of flood water and thin ice, we encountered only a few wet patches to ford and piles of long, delicate ice candles to slalom a course through. The creek had obviously glaciated earlier but was now bubbling tamely beneath an icecap below the bridge.

“From here it is easy truckin’ to the farm,” I announced. “No more crossings!”

Jan cheered, Mitti barked and the others hung out purple tongues. As Jan pulled out the makings of a late lunch, I gave Iskoot a lecture on keeping the lines tight and not allowing the other dogs to get at each other. He acknowledged by rolling on his back and offering his tummy to scratch. Casey followed suit, wriggling snake-like on his back, inventing new knots with which to tangle the traces. When we sat down to eat our bread and sausage, they all sat up at attention in a line to offer paws, begging with pitiful eyes and drooling lips.

Jan volunteered to work the dogs again and I set the pace, having to double back to help right the toboggan only a few times. The dogs seemed to have found a rhythm and pulled willingly, although they never missed a chance to investigate the squirrels which chattered and screamed at us from the forest. Jan had Iskoot and Casey quickly trained to tighten up the line before she walked up to the front but, as there weren’t any more fights, she let them get away with lots of short hold-ups to stare at screeching tree-dwellers. For my part, I was happier being away from the dogs, content for her to develop whatever style of mushing she wanted as long as it was getting us there.

The gently undulating plateau country with its relatively open deciduous forest had a relaxing, mesmerizing atmosphere. The steady flash-flash of sunlight through the poplars bordering this narrow lane

could have been a hypnotist's metronome. I was almost asleep on my skis. Suddenly – breaking from the forest not 80 yards in front of me – a great ball of black-brown fur bounded across. Startled awake, I skied up to stare wistfully through the forest along the beast's path, hoping for one more glimpse... but it was gone. I crouched low to examine its tracks, but they weren't distinguishable at all. The thick snow crust had broken in icy chunks and plates, leaving only large dents and no detailed paw imprints. When Jan pulled up, six noses began working triple overtime, sniffing and sneezing frantically like a convention of hay fever sufferers. Our mystery animal was probably a wolverine – the most vicious of the forest carnivores – though these stout-bodied, razor-clawed predators reputedly prefer to travel at night. I'd never seen a wolverine before and certainly wouldn't want to spook one.

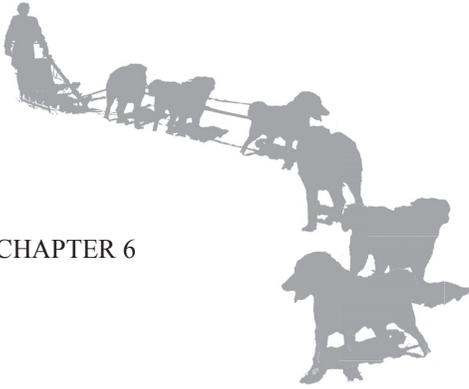
Coasting down the long straight stretch from the plateau was fun for me, but hair-raising for Jan. She came barreling down the road, hopping on her virtually-ineffective brake and yelling commands that were largely ignored. We noticed a crudely-lettered sign nailed to a tree proclaiming we were *Entering Open Cattle Range* with a sketch of a rather jaunty bovine. To emphasize the point, horse and cow prints and manure began to appear on the road in increasing frequency. The dogs picked up the scents and their pace. On skis I could easily sidestep the frozen cow pies, but the dogs and toboggan just bounced over and onward, Jan still chattering to her charges and hanging on tightly. Soon the poplars yielded quick glimpses of the Pelly River, enormous and rough at such close quarters. Then the forest dwindled away, falling back to show us a half-section of flatland, walled to the north by steep hillsides and cut abruptly on the south border by the wide expanse of the Pelly. Across the

river ice and past a few islands, cliffs rose sharply to define the width of the valley.

Brown dots low on the near slopes were cattle, searching out last year's dried grass where the snow had blown clear or melted off. In the first fields, we could see a few horses grazing on stubble poking through the snow. Ahead along the river bank was a cluster of log and board-sided buildings, their yards fenced with rough-milled planks, wood smoke spewing in low clouds from metal chimneys. The dull throbbing of a diesel generator and the barking of two loose dogs were the only sounds we could discern over the crunch and rasping of ice and gravel beneath our skis and toboggan.

But as I listened, there was another sound. It was the loud gasping of breath from sled dogs straining on their harnesses, tugging frantically forward, desperately eager to confront those two tail-wagging farm dogs. Iskoot and Casey lunged to pass me, sprinting towards their prey, with four more wide-eyed, tongue-flapping huskies thundering behind. I grabbed Rafferty's traces to hitch a wild ride and slow them slightly. At the last possible moment, I arrested their gallop by tripping a few dogs. Jan steered the toboggan deftly around us, barely managing to keep it upright as the traces tightened and spun it fully 180 degrees. Facing backwards, we'd made our arrival at the Pelly Farm.

"Whew!" I felt both relief and pride wash over me. We'd successfully completed the first test in our epic journey. Maybe we could pull off this quest after all.



CHAPTER 6

WELCOME

Greetings and gentle laughter floated down from the farmhouse doorway. Hugh Bradley, tall and lean, and dressed in grimy green coveralls, was in danger of losing the roll-your-own cigarette dangling from a grinning lower lip. Brother Dick peered over Hugh's shoulder, eyes twinkling as he stuffed his arms into the sleeves of a checkered wool bush shirt. In the window we could see Marjorie's round face pressed to the pane and young Glen's right beside her.

"Welcome, Bruce," Hugh called out. "That's quite an outfit you've got there!"

"Lots of raw power there, I imagine," Dick added as he followed Hugh across the yard to our gaggle of animals.

"Yeah, they're a bit too raw at times, Dick," I smiled. "But we'll get them cooking before long."

We shook hands and I introduced Jan. Hugh insisted on introductions to each dog as well, suggesting I do that while chaining them up to the fence near his cabin.

"Your timing is as good as ever, Bruce," Dick teased. "We were just

having an afternoon break. I'll show Jan inside while you and Hugh tend to the dogs."

"Actually," Hugh smiled, "we'd finished our tea. But we don't mind doing it all over again, especially with entertainment. You can tell us what you're up to out here with all these sled dogs. I would have thought you'd be dusting off your canoe about now and getting ready for more river trips."

I could tell that my plans for an expedition down the Yukon River ice would be received with little enthusiasm by the farmers. It was, admittedly, very late in the season, and they'd had decades of experience living in the wilderness but, damn, I wanted to continue on.

At what point do caution and logic trump pride? Am I being too stubborn, I wondered as Hugh walked our lead dog by the collar through the barnyard. A hundred yards along the lane was the small, low log building where Hugh lived alone. We strung the dogs out, each chained to a fence post, and Hugh grabbed a pack from the toboggan.

"I take it you're staying for at least one night," Hugh said. "You can sleep in the upstairs of the farmhouse. You're welcome in my cabin, too, but it would be a bit crowded."

Once again, I found myself easily accepting the warm hospitality of the Pelly farmers. This was my third visit to the farm and on both summer visits I'd stayed far longer than planned, lulled by the relaxed farm pace and captivated by the stories and bush lore that accompanied every meal, chore and project. Both Dick and Hugh Bradley were great storytellers, needing only an interested audience. I was that eager listener, and eagerly joined in the farm work to earn my keep whenever I visited. The very existence of this beef farm – the most northerly working farm in



Canada – was amazing. It seemed so improbable to find a viable, fully fledged agricultural enterprise tucked away in this Yukon valley.

The farm was almost as old as the century, with the archaeological record indicating the site was used for many centuries, perhaps millennia, before as an Indian gathering spot. The two Lacombe, Alberta-raised Bradleys, along with an older brother, Ken, took over the farm in the early 1950s from the Wilkinson family who were using it mostly as a trapline headquarters. Since then, the Bradleys had experimented with a variety of livestock, deciding finally on a cow-calf operation, ranged during the warm weather and fed largely on Pelly Farm grain and silage over the winter. Hugh noted there were about fifty head of beef at peak times. If the crops didn't fare well during the summer, fewer cattle could be over-wintered and thus more meat would be marketed that fall. The years when crops did well were a chance to rebuild the herd's numbers.

The Bradley brothers were in their late 40s, wiry and well weathered.



Facing page: Pelly Farm, Hugh's cabin in foreground, farmhouse in background. Above: Hugh Bradley (left) and brother Dick Bradley.

They moved calmly, with purpose and a peaceful serenity that wouldn't have been out of place in a Buddhist monastery. Hugh pointed to a rusted tractor they'd been repairing that afternoon which could have been older than they were.

"We're not making a fortune," explained Hugh, "but this is what we like doing. That's why we're here."

Being where they are put the farm on many people's maps, with the accompanying advantages and disadvantages. Since the Canadian government closed its last northern agricultural research station at Haines Junction, the Bradleys had been testing new seed varieties for government scientists. Also, the certainty that someone was always going to be around to mind the animals had made the farm a secure, advance supply depot for surveyors, firefighters, miners and game wardens venturing into the region. A *National Geographic* article on the farm portrayed it as a noteworthy curiosity, though the resulting tourist numbers were