

Chapter One

It was a warm October afternoon in the Yukon River valley. I stood on a beaver dam in the middle of a stream. This was my last stop of the day on the trapline.

I saw a beaver in the trap on the edge of the stream. It was not dead. It sat near a beaver house. One front leg was caught in the trap.

Something had gone wrong, I thought. The trap had a one-way slide on a cable. A trapped beaver always dove into the water to get away. The slide would let it go down, but not up again. It would drown.

Not this one.

Its front leg was probably broken. It must be in a lot of pain. I wondered how long the beaver had been in the trap.

“Just when I thought I could not hate trapping any more than I do.”

There was nobody around to hear me. I walked this trapline, owned by my foster parents, alone. Talking to myself made it seem less lonely. Soon I would be sixteen. Then I would be old enough to leave. I would

never again be forced to trap, kill and skin another animal.

I walked the rest of the way across the beaver dam. It was made of sticks and mud. It held back the water of a deep pond. A little stream ran over the top of it.

On the other side, I walked around the beaver house. It was also made of sticks and mud. It was round and high. It was almost the size of a small car. The only way into the beaver house was through a tunnel. One end of the tunnel was underwater. A beaver would swim into the tunnel. It would come up inside the house. The house was strong. Not even a grizzly bear could tear it apart.

Every time I saw a beaver house, I thought of this YouTube video I'd seen. A guy who did something that looked really crazy. And the beavers didn't attack him. And he survived.

I stepped toward the beaver. It flipped into the water when I got close. It slapped its broad tail and dove out of sight. It took the trap with it.

Beavers splash their tails to warn other beavers of danger.

How about that, I thought. The beaver could not escape the trap. But it still wanted to make sure others stayed clear.

I reached the edge of the water. I saw that the cable with the one-way slide had come

loose from the post. That was why the beaver had not drowned. I watched bubbles pop up from the beaver underneath. It was at the edge of the chain that held the trap. It had nowhere to go. Soon it would run out of air. It would have to come to the surface again.

I also carried a rifle in case of a grizzly bear attack. I set down my backpack. I lifted the rifle. I waited.

The beaver came to the surface. All that showed was its nose and black eyes and the top of its head. It looked like it was too tired to move.

The best thing I could do for the beaver was kill it quickly. My foster father would yell at me if I put a hole in the beaver fur.

I would have to shoot it in the head. Then I would have to skin it like the other beavers I had trapped.

I aimed the rifle at the beaver. It stared at me.

I thought of how much pain the beaver had already suffered. I thought about how much I hated to work the trapline. I was not going to kill this beaver.

I set the safety device on the rifle so that it could not shoot. I rested the rifle against my backpack. I removed my jacket. I put the jacket down beside me.

I grabbed the chain to bring the beaver to shore. The beaver began to splash to try to get away. It was strong. I began to

slide to the water as it pulled. I kicked over a big rock. I dug my boots into the ground. Now the beaver would not be able to pull me into the pond. But still it tried to get away.

It took five minutes for the beaver to tire. I pulled the chain again. The beaver wasn't fighting anymore.

I dragged the beaver onto the land. It was barely moving. I wrapped my jacket over the beaver so that it could not bite me. Then I opened the trap. The beaver's leg was broken. But the animal would live.

I unrolled my jacket and stepped back.

The beaver pushed away from the jacket. It looked at me one last time. It slid

into the water. I watched bubbles rise as it swam under the water. More bubbles where it entered the tunnel under the water. Then nothing.

I leaned over to grab my jacket. I saw something in the dirt where I had kicked over the big rock.

It was a gold nugget the size of a baseball.

Chapter Two

I knew that people often found gold in the streams that led to the Yukon River. Where I lived was down the river from Dawson City. Gold was first found there over a hundred years ago. Once it had been a big city in the middle of the wilderness. Then the mines ran out of gold. Most of the people left. But tourists still came to pan for gold.

I picked up the nugget. I could barely close my fingers around it. I was surprised at how heavy it was. The surface was dull and dirty. I polished it with my sleeve. The gold became shinier.

I did not know how much it was worth. I did know that my foster parents would take it from me.

They would not be able to do that if I was sixteen. But then, if I was, I wouldn't be here. This find meant I had to speed up my plan to escape. I had to get to Dawson City. I would sell the gold there. I would put the money in a bank account. I would go south to a city like Vancouver. I would find work. I would live by myself. Freedom.

The nugget was so big that it wouldn't fit into the pocket of my jeans. If I put it into my jacket, though, Dan would probably see it. Dan Cork, my foster father.

But if I put it in my backpack, he would see it there for sure. He always emptied my pack to check the furs.

I wondered where I should hide it.

I thought about the trapline cabin. Most traplines in the Yukon went for hundreds of miles. Most had one or two cabins along the way for shelter during the winter.

But our cabin was too far back up the stream. I was supposed to meet my foster father at the river soon. I did not have time to go there and back.