

1

White Out

Wednesday, November 10, 1999



The first blizzard of the year swept across western Alaska from the Bering Sea and dumped tons of ice and snow onto the Alaska Peninsula. As the raging Arctic wind crossed the Shelikof Strait, it sucked up moisture and unleashed a torrent of white powder on Kodiak Island, home to fifteen thousand Alaskans and three thousand bears. Chris MacGregor held on to the reins of the dogsled with one hand while adjusting the hood on his parka with the other. He quickly wiped the ice off his goggles with his right hand before again grabbing the straps with both hands. The lead dog jumped through the snow, with the others following behind. The new snow was wet and was easily pressed down into a rut. Heather held on tight to the reins of her sled as she steered the dogs into the path being plowed by her older brother, Chris.

“Way to go, Heather,” R.O. shouted over the roar of the wind. He held on tight as he sat in the sled, getting a face full of snow from the dogs’ kicking up the fresh powder.

Heather only nodded and kept her eyes glued on the trail ahead as Chris blazed onward. Chris strained to see his sister

and brother, but the fur on the parka blocked his view. He could hear the barking of the dogs and hoped Heather and R.O. were still attached to the sled somehow. He knew he couldn't stop unless one of them fell off. When they had left Trader Jim Gailey's lodge that morning for a fun sled trip through the forest, the weather report had called for a mild arctic front with only a few inches of snow. But when the arctic blast tangled with a cold front from the Bering Sea, it grew into a major winter storm from Nome to Anchorage. One of Trader Jim's dog handlers had suggested the path to take to ensure their safety from the large bear population, but he didn't realize that the kids had other plans. Chris had long since lost the trail and was now relying on the dogs to take them to Three Saints Bay.

Yesterday's dog sledding lessons were simply a crash course on how to hang on as the dogs led the way. Thrown in was an hour on how to escape a bear attack with the help of a Colt Anaconda .44 magnum pistol. With Chris being an experienced hunter and outdoorsman and eighteen years old, Trader Jim felt it would be better if he carried a gun, just in case he encountered one of Kodiak's famous grizzlies that had wandered away from its bear cave this early in the winter.

Chris again wiped the ice off of his goggles and made a slight turn and craned his neck to see his fourteen-year-old sister, Heather, and his twelve-year-old brother, Ryan, whom everyone called R.O. He sighed a frosted breath of relief as he saw them through the cloud of snow behind him. Heather was leaning over the sled and seemed to be as one with the dogs, kicking at just the right time to establish the rhythm that would carry the sled forward just as the lead dogs pulled in the snow. She had learned in her brief lesson that to kick out of rhythm would pull the sled back against the dog harnesses, and she looked like a natural at it. R.O. was seated in the sled and let out a whoop of joy as the sled cleared a small rise and lifted into the air a few inches.

Chris thought immediately what his mother, Mavis, was going to say. If he could keep his brother quiet, his parents would never know. But he knew that was unlikely. R.O.

had a tendency to share his excitement with everyone he met, and usually at the wrong times. Heather, on the other hand, was very sophisticated, as she would like to think. She didn't need for anyone to know anything and much preferred her privacy and anonymity. But that was difficult with two famous parents.

Dr. Jack MacGregor, a noted zoologist, Texan, and authority on endangered species, was their father of whom they were quite proud. Dr. Mavis MacGregor, a published paleontologist from London and their mother, had also accompanied them in their recent adventures in the Cayman Islands, East Africa, and Egypt. So Heather learned to live in the limelight and also in their shadow. She preferred the latter.

"Mush, Mush!" Chris yelled through the whine of the storm.

The beautiful huskies responded with an added leap into the snow. Their eyes were wild and determined. Their pink tongues were hanging out as they built up heat from their efforts at pulling and running. Chris's dad had known Trader Jim, the owner of the dogs and sleds, for nearly twenty years, having worked on several wildlife projects. Chris was sure that if the owner had known of the severe weather change, he would have never turned three kids from Texas loose in a wilderness with his prized dogs.

"Ryan," Heather shouted. "I hate this weather. I'm getting ice down my neck."

"Pull up your parka," R.O. replied and tugged on his own fur-lined hood. He looked back to see several locks of Heather's blond hair dangling free and coated with ice crystals. Her beanie, knitted by her English grandmother, was soaking wet. The wind blew with a fury and sent waves of snow across them as if they were ocean waves on the beach in Grand Cayman.

Chris watched carefully ahead trying to see a trail through the dense wilderness forest, as the ice and fog worked against him constantly. The white shrouded trees loomed along the trail, and for a mile seemed to slow down the wind. But each time they reached a hill and changed elevation, the cold blast

would hit them dead center and drive the chill deep into their bones. After an hour of heavy wind, snow, and ice crystals, the dog teams began to labor. Chris could feel it in their harness and knew that a rest stop was needed. Peering through the forest, he found what he was looking for, a cabin. The blue metal roof was coated with wet snow that was forming a large bank on both sides, but a blue onion-shaped dome pierced the snow, giving the building a starkly beautiful appearance. As Chris tugged at the harnesses and pulled on the friction brake, the dogs started to slow down.

Heather realized she was suddenly gaining on Chris and pulled back hard.

"He's slowing down, Heather," R.O. shouted.

"I know it. Just be quiet and hang on," she shouted back.

R.O. shouted something but she couldn't hear it clearly. Her concentration was focused on bringing the sled to a halt without turning it over in the deep snow. A big flake of snow hit her goggles and she instinctively blinked. Her lead dog moved up quickly next to Chris' sled dogs in a short race to the cabin. The dogs labored as they plowed through the snow. The sleds soon dug to a stop next to the cabin, and the dogs instinctively looked at Chris as if asking what was next.

He motioned for Heather and Ryan to follow him as he stepped off the sled into the heavy snow. With each step, his boots seemed to be pulling off of his feet, until he came to the big front door of the building. Glancing around the outside, he couldn't tell whether it was a seasonal cabin used for hunting and fishing or something else. The dome on top made it look like a church of some kind. He didn't really care at the moment. It was just a place to escape the blizzard. As he approached the massive door, he noticed the big padlock that dangled from the brass fittings. Walking to the shuttered window next to the door, he tugged with all his strength. He felt the restraint that only a bolted window would have.

"What's up, big brother?" R.O. said as he trudged up from behind kicking snow as he walked.

"Door's locked. Window's bolted," Chris replied.

"How do we get in?" Heather asked as she took her last two big steps in the snow.

"Give me a minute," Chris replied and trudged back to the sled. The dogs were now resting with a thin layer of snow forming on their coats. Their pink tongues were still hanging out of their mouths, and their frosted breath created a mini-cloud around them.

In a couple of minutes, Chris returned with a navy-blue shoulder pack and handed it to Heather.

"Here, hold this," he said.

Chris unsnapped the plastic latches on the side and reached deep in the pack. He pulled out a green zippered case. He pulled off his left glove and handed it to R.O. From inside the case, he retrieved the brushed stainless steel Colt Anaconda .44 magnum revolver.

"You guys step back and cover your faces in case I get some splinters flying," Chris said.

They had been with Chris enough to know when he was serious about something and complied immediately. Taking aim from three feet away, with both hands wrapped around the gun, Chris pulled the trigger. The big Colt barked like a small cannon. The smooth recoil from the gun slightly pushed Chris' hands up in the air. Taking a step closer, he just barely had to push the door and the lock mechanism broke free from the jam and the door swung open. R.O. and Heather turned around quickly.

"Way to go, dude," R.O. said with a smile on his face.

"Now, go unharness the dogs and get them in here," Chris said.

Without a word, R.O. and Heather walked as quickly as they could through the snow. Chris put the gun back in its case and dropped it down into the pack. Stepping into the dry room, Chris first noticed a large stone fireplace on one end of the cabin. Thanks to the owner, there was a lot of wood stacked neatly next to it. There were two doorways leading to other rooms and stairs leading to a loft overhead. But it was dry, and that was what they needed. He carefully stacked four logs in the fireplace, tore off some dry bark, and placed it next to the logs for kindling. Dropping his gloves on the floor next to the pack, he retrieved from his pocket a lighter, which he always carried in the wilderness,

and lit a piece of the dried bark and laid it carefully on one of the logs. The fire quickly spread to the dry wood.

"Hey, cool," R.O. said as he ran through the door with a team of dogs right behind him. Two of them were barking as if this were fun.

Heather's dogs ran in front of her and joined the other huskies. She pulled the parka hood down from her head and yanked off her goggles. Reaching up and touching her wet matted hair, she frowned.

"My hair's a mess," she said.

"Let me see if I have some mousse in my pack," R.O. smarted off.

"Stuff it, Ryan," she barked back and squinted her eyes.

"R.O., don't take off your gear yet. You're coming with me. We're going to unload the two packs from my sled. Trader Jim said there was dog food and some boots for the dogs if we hit some ice," Chris said. "Heather, watch the fire. Don't let it go out. Here's my lighter," he said and tossed it to her. She caught the lighter and walked over to the fireplace.

As Chris opened the door, a gust of wind pushed it out of his hands, and an avalanche of snow from the roof slid to the ground, creating a five-foot wall just in front of him. Undaunted, he stepped into the white snow bank and pushed with both hands, stepping higher each time. After a few feet, he was out of the bank and walking toward the sleds. He dusted off the new six inches of snow and pulled the quick release to the tarp on the sled and yanked it back. There he found two large plastic duffle bags. Pulling one off the sled, he turned to hand it to R.O., but there was no R.O. to hand it to. So he threw it over his right shoulder and began the short walk to the cabin, where he heard a familiar giggle. Noticing a red glove and brown boot sticking out of the drift around the cabin, he let out a heavy sigh.

He reached out and gave a yank on the hand, and R.O. popped free of the bank. Chris stared him straight in the face but didn't say a word.

"O.K., I know," R.O. said, already knowing the meaning of the stare.

"Go get the pack off the sled," Chris said.

"Roger, Chris. Pronto I go." R.O. started out in a run and got bogged down quickly. By the time he had pulled out the second pack, Chris had returned. Another gust of wind rushed down through the forest dumping still more ice and snow on the cabin. R.O. and Chris carried opposite ends of the pack through the snow and into the now warming cabin. Dropping the pack to the floor, Chris pulled his hood down and took off his goggles. He glanced across the room to find Heather sitting on her parka in front of the fire with her bare feet pointed toward the flames.

"Be careful. You can blister your feet pretty quick doing that," Chris said as he took off his parka.

"Chris, I swear. Sometimes you're worse than Mom," Heather said and then smiled.

Ryan dumped his coat and was digging out the two twenty-pound bags of dry dog food from the sled packs. As he poured it on the wood floor of the cabin, the huskies began to munch it up, looking toward Ryan as he continued to dump it out. The first bag went quickly. As he opened the second bag, Chris stepped out the door and retrieved a bucket full of snow. He had found some metal buckets under the sink in the primitive kitchen in the next room. He walked across the cabin and set the bucket next to the fireplace. The snow began to melt. Retrieving another bucket from the crude kitchen, Chris poured water from the melting snow into the cool bucket and took it over to the dogs. Several moved in and pushed each other to get a drink.

"Ryan. Go get another bucket in the next room and get more snow. These dogs need a drink after the run we put them through," Chris said.

R.O. did as he was told and for the next hour the focus was on feeding and watering the animals that had pulled them through the still-raging blizzard. When the dogs had stopped drinking, Chris stripped off his parka and dropped it next to Heather. Next off came the boots and soon Chris, Heather, and Ryan were all lounging in front of the fire while the storm continued to rage.

"Mom is sure going to be mad," Ryan said as he bit into a frozen candy bar.

"I'm sure of it." Heather said. "She said yesterday, when she and dad flew on to Anchorage, not to mess around but catch the next plane off Kodiak. It was your big idea, Chris, to go dog-sledding for a few hours," she said sarcastically. "I can't believe you talked Trader Jim into it. Mom is sure going to give him a piece of her mind. I can hear her now. 'Jim, you let three children go dog-sledding in bear country in the middle of winter,'" Heather mimicked in her mother's British accent and then laughed.

"Well, I . . ." Chris began.

"There's no well about it," Heather scolded. "You're taking the rap for this one all by yourself, big boy. I'm out of it. Totally devoid of responsibility, as adults would say."

"Me, too. And I like that adult thing, Heather," R.O. added and crunched on his candy bar. "Dude, did we bring any pop?" he said to Chris.

"No, and I'm not dude. But there are a few bottles of water in the pack," Chris replied. He had already begun feeling bad, so he didn't respond further to their comments. He just sat quietly by the fire, looking around the big room at the wooden paintings on the walls. He got up and walked over to one and touched it.

"These are really old," he said.

"I think they're icons of some kind," Heather said.

"Yeah, I know. This must have been a church or something. The dome on top, these icons all over the walls," he said as he walked to another, noticing the faded colors of the faces and robes of the people on the icons.

"Saints, I think," he said trying to remember the history lesson where he studied them. He shivered from a cold draft that hit him and walked back to the fire.

"Ok, what's the plan?" Heather asked and dug through the pack looking for food.

"We wait for the storm to stop, harness up the dogs, and move on toward the coast. We should only be about five miles away," Chris replied. "I suggest we all get a nap. It's about eleven o'clock," he said, as he looked at his

diving watch. "With a little luck, we should be able to leave around noon or just after."

The trio didn't need the suggestion to tell them they were tired and needed a nap. The dogs were already curled up like big balls of black, tan, and white fur across the cabin floor. A couple had dumped their bladder and the rank smell of urine floated through the air. Heather wrapped her muffler securely across her face so she couldn't smell it. Ryan was fast asleep while Chris at first just lay there and listened to the wind howling through the cracks of the cabin. It was amazingly warm inside, and soon Chris fell asleep.

An hour passed quickly, and suddenly Chris opened his eyes. For a second, he couldn't remember where he was but then remembered as he gazed into the dwindling fire. The room had gotten colder despite all the warm bodies, human and animal, scattered about. He sat up and looked around. One of the lead dogs was up walking around with its nose high in the air. Instinctively, Chris sensed something but couldn't tell what it was. Then it hit him. It was a rank odor that surpassed anything the dogs could give off. It was strong, and then it was weak again. Quickly he pulled on his snow boots and stood up.

"Heather, Ryan," he said softly. "Wake up."

Heather looked up and didn't say anything when she saw Chris' face.

"Ryan, get up," Chris said again and nudged him with his right foot.

"O.K.," Ryan said loudly.

Chris leaned over quickly and put his hand over R.O.'s mouth.

"Sshh. Don't talk." Chris looked him straight in the eyes.

Ryan shook his head up and down in agreement.

"Put on your boots and parka. Quick. Then harness the dogs together. But do it quietly," Chris whispered.

But it was too late. Two more dogs were already on their feet, their noses high in the air. One of them barked and then began to growl. Immediately all the dogs were up and restlessly running around the cabin. Several were barking.

A loud bang was heard at the back of the cabin.

"Quick, let's bolt the front door," Chris said and ran across the cabin. He grabbed the big two-by-six-inch timber and dropped it into the metal brackets blocking the door.

"What is it?" Heather shouted over the barking of the dogs.

"Grizzly," Chris replied as he ran back to his pack and pulled out the Colt revolver.

"Cool. I've never seen a grizzly before," Ryan said and zipped up his parka and slipped his goggles over his head.

There was another big bang in the back of the cabin. Chris walked carefully to the back room just as a boarded window was hit again. Two planks gave way and snow blew into the room in force. Chris froze in his tracks as he saw a grizzly paw reach in and feel around. But it was no ordinary bear paw. The rangers at Trader Jim's had been talking about a few of the old grizzlies that had gotten to twelve feet in height and developed into a dangerous threat to humans and bears alike. This paw could have easily belonged to one of them. It was twelve inches across, with eight-inch claws. Coming to his senses, Chris turned and ran into the next room.

"We've got to get out of here fast. Line up the dogs. Put the leader dogs in front. You two get on each side and hold on to your lead dog. I'll take mine. When I swing open the door, take off in a run and don't look back. No matter what you hear or what I do, don't look back. Just keep running."

"Chris, what's wrong? You're not telling us something," Heather said.

"Just do what I say to do and we'll be at the coast in two hours. Now. Get ready," Chris said and put the Colt in his front coat pocket and barely zipped it closed. Heather and Ryan quickly lined up the dogs that were agitated from the smell of the bear and fought to be harnessed. Another loud boom could be heard from the back of the cabin. Chris slid the beam off the door.

"We've got to go!" Chris yelled and swung open the door.

The lead dogs bolted through and tried to turn to go around the cabin toward the bear, but the three MacGregor

kids held on tight and steered them toward the sleds. As they reached the sleds, they frantically worked to find the harness connections in the fresh snow. Another loud boom was heard from the cabin, followed by a crashing noise. The dogs were barking wildly as the last one was lashed into place. The giant grizzly bounded out of the cabin door on the run.

"Oh, my gosh!" shouted Heather in terror as she stared at the mammoth bear.

"Ryan, take my sled," Chris shouted.

R.O. jumped from Heather's to Chris's in one step.

"Now both of you, get going," Chris shouted again.

"Chris, we can't leave you," Heather argued.

Chris reached into his pocket and pulled out the Colt Anaconda and fired one round into the air. The dogs jumped forward in a run, and the sleds pulled out of the snow and surfaced on top. In a few strides, the dogsleds were on their way. Chris knew that his extra weight and Ryan riding with Heather would have slowed them down enough for the bear to catch them. Turning toward the grizzly, he lowered the Colt and pointed toward its two-foot-wide head. The leviathan of a bear lunged with massive strokes through the deep snow toward the sleds, just missing Heather by two feet. Chris could hear her scream through the gale wind still blowing, her blond hair trailing in the wind.

Pursuing the sleds for thirty yards, the grizzly stopped and looked toward Chris. Chris glanced to his right and began running in the deep snow toward the trees. The bear turned and ran quickly in the same direction. After a few steps, Chris realized his escape attempt was futile, so he stopped and turned to face the angry bruin. He breathed in deeply as he raised the Colt and aimed at the head of the bear. He judged the distance at one hundred feet. It was too far for accuracy, given his inexperience with a high-caliber pistol. But if he waited longer, he might not have time for a second shot. He cocked the hammer and for a second held his breath. He pulled the trigger, and the gun bucked up in the air. The big bear stumbled and plowed headfirst into the snow, leaving a trail of red behind him.

Chris pulled back the hammer again. He thought his heart had stopped. The falling snow matted down his hair, and he suddenly noticed his hands were cold. In the rush of leaving the cabin, he hadn't put on his gloves or cap. He held the gun steady for a full minute before he lowered it and released the powerful hammer. He took a deep breath and started walking through the snow toward the giant grizzly. After a few steps he stopped and listened. He couldn't hear anything, so he walked closer to the bear. He was awed by its size. It was definitely one of the old grizzlies the rangers had been talking about. As he looked down at the bear, he noticed that he had shot it in the head. But when he looked closer, he realized the bear was still bleeding. It was still alive.

He stepped back and readied the Colt again. The bear breathed in deeply and rolled to one side. Chris could see that the bullet had glanced off the side of the skull and had simply delivered a knockout punch rather than a fatal blow. He pulled the hammer back on the Colt and aimed it at the head of the bear. As he pointed the gun at the grizzly, he thought about what he was doing and lowered the revolver. He released the hammer and stepped back. The grizzly, he tried to reason, was no longer a threat. He would probably never see another human, and so he needed to get out of there.

He ran through the snow back to the cabin and went inside. He gathered up his navy backpack and picked up his gloves. He saw R.O.'s knit cap lying on the floor and grabbed it. As he ran back to the door of the cabin and went outside, Chris quickly glanced back toward the fallen grizzly and saw that it was gone. A cold chill went down his neck. He tried to unzip his parka and pull out the Colt, but the hammer got hung on the corner of the pocket. A heart-stopping growl echoed over the cabin as the giant grizzly staggered around the corner, dizzily crashing headfirst into the side of the cabin. Chris stepped backward but tripped in the snow and fell on his back. The grizzly stood up with its head level with the eaves of the cabin, and growled. Big strings of slobber rolled out of its mouth.

As it walked on hind legs toward Chris, it wobbled right and left.

Chris yanked hard at the gun in his pocket and ripped the nylon as the Colt came out. Pulling the gun up, Chris pointed it at the bear just as an avalanche of snow came off the house on top of him. Rolling to one side to avoid the snow, he pulled the trigger. The bullet ricocheted on the thick log walls of the cabin, causing more snow to dump from the roof, but this time onto the bear. Chris struggled to his feet while clinging to his backpack in his right hand and the Colt in his left hand. Lunging out of the snow, he found the dog tracks and sled ruts and began running. He looked back and could see the bear's paws waving about in the snow. He estimated he had a three-minute head start and hoped the grizzly would be in enough pain and confusion not to follow. He slung the pack on his back, gripped the gun tightly, and began to run.

After five minutes of running, his lungs began to hurt from the cold air. The snow had stopped falling, the sky was turning blue, and the sun was peering through the clouds. Still frightened, he turned and pointed the Colt toward the trees. When he couldn't hear anything, he turned back toward the trail and again began to follow the ruts that the sleds had made. Then he heard something. It was the barking of dogs. In another minute, he could see a dog sled coming toward him at high speed. It was Heather.

As the lead dog came to a stop, Heather bounded off the sled and jumped into his arms.

"We were so scared. I had to come back for you. When I heard the third shot, I knew you were still alive and might be able to escape," she said and hugged his neck hard.

"Where's Ryan?" Chris asked as Heather stepped back.

"He's waiting over the rise," she replied.

"Good, let's get out of here," Chris said and tucked the gun back into his torn coat pocket. The walnut grips of the Colt hung out next to the broken zipper.

Suddenly, tree branches cracked as the giant grizzly burst from the forest and landed on the sled, crushing it flat on the runners. Heather screamed and jumped into the

snow next to the dogs. With twelve-inch paws swinging wildly, the grizzly wrestled with the sled as if it were a mortal enemy. Still groggy, dizzy, and confused from the head wound, it fought with great ferocity. The dogs barked and growled and tried to run, pulling hard at their harnesses.

Chris struggled to one knee and pulled the Colt from his pocket. His first shot was at the chain attaching the dog harnesses to the sled. It ripped apart as if it were paper, setting the dogs free. They quickly bolted from the mangled sled and ran toward Ryan up the trail. The angry grizzly stood on its hind legs and hovered over Heather. Chris pulled the trigger in rapid succession three times, with the hammer hitting on the last round and two empty chambers. Chris held his breath, but the final bullet had found its mark straight through the heart of the grizzly.

The grizzly stood still and then fell backward, landing again on the sled. The creature was dead. Chris stood up slowly. Heather got up and joined him. They hugged and looked at each other. A full minute passed as they embraced and looked at the giant bear.

"Why didn't you shoot the bear first?" Heather asked.

"I don't know. I guess I lost count of the bullets. I wanted to save the dogs, too. Sorry," Chris replied.

"I'll forgive you and thanks for the day trip, big brother," Heather said and then smiled.

Chris let out a heavy sigh.

"Let's go find R.O. He'll be mad he missed this," Chris said and smiled.

"Boy, I'll say. He'll complain all the way to Anchorage," Heather replied and moved in alongside Chris on the trail.

For a moment, they relaxed and tried to calm down. But little did they know that the day's excitement was not over yet.