

Chapter One

I really don't know how I got here. Alaska. This morning I woke up sandwiched between a man I adore and a girl I hardly know—but trust in practical matters, enough to share a sleeping bag in the middle of the twilit wilderness. I stretched outside the tent, sucked in the air, and New York was the last thing on my mind. But then I see this guy, wearing the Yankees cap, and I wonder how he got here, too.

This guy's been following me since Anchorage; at least, that's where I first noticed him. We were outside the bus depot, trying to lure enough of the old folks to buy some sandwiches, when I saw him straggle by once, twice, vaguely looking at me without looking at me, as though trying to read some invisible sign over my head. I'm not much for remembering faces, but he was wearing the Yankees cap, faded to the state where the red dyes start to show, and I wondered what kind of fan he was, if he was from New York, if we had ever passed on the street, ever sat across from each other on the same subway car. You never know.

When he turned up again in Talkeetna yesterday, I didn't pay him too much heed, since plenty of tourists beeline straight from the depot up to Denali, making a stop in the cluster of tourist shops and B&Bs clustered on the strip leading to the Big Su River. He was still wearing the hat, and I watched him as he walked by without looking, too close, and settled at a picnic table across the street from where me and Bo were busking for tips. After a few minutes, he disappeared from view, and then reappeared directly in front of us. He hesitated, with his hand in his pocket, his face shielded by the cap, before gently placing a dollar in the banjo case, nestling a corner under a quarter so it wouldn't blow away.

"Thanks," Bo said to him with a nod, and I knew that Bo had not recognized him—if he had, he would have said something, probably asked him if he'd enjoyed Anchorage, if he'd had a chance to hike the coastal trail or check out Mount Chugach. It gave me a strange feeling to notice something that Bo had not.

This morning I see Yankees cap again, having a bagel and a coffee outside the café, the faded cap resting deflated beside him on the bench. He's a little older than I'd first thought, or maybe he just looks it for having spent a rough night away from wherever he's from. People seem older when they travel alone.

The clouds are lifting and it looks to be a beautiful day. Bo and Jenny have not yet emerged from the tent, but Jenny's dog, Beetle, has followed me out and is now back at the tent, sniffing them awake. It will be a good day to hitch the rest of the way up to Denali. Bo and I have been in Talkeetna almost a week now, stopping over on our way up from Anchorage, and this is where we met Jenny and Beetle, about as sweet and perfect a pair of companions as could be. Jenny is waiting for a friend who left Minneapolis about a month ago. She figures he will be getting here sometime this week. I like them plenty, but I'm getting restless. Maybe it's seeing the Yankees guy again that makes me feel like we

should push on. The little town feels too temporary to get comfortable and make neighbors. When Jenny appears, we share a cup of coffee and see if she's all right with us leaving them there, which of course she is. It doesn't take long for us to pack up and leave, and when we pass the café again, Yankees is still there—his bagel finished, the cap back on his head. I watch him watch us in the way of New Yorkers, with the common familiarity of spectatorship. As we near the road I give a glance behind.

"That guy looks lost," I say to Boaz.

He follows my backward glance and sees Yankees, still watching us, not even trying to look away. "Guy in the baseball hat?"

I nod. He has the air of a puppy who has been told to stay, and is just waiting for us to give the signal that he can follow. His hands are on the bench as if he might push himself up and run after.

"Maybe a little," he says. "He dropped us a dollar yesterday, I think. He was alone then, too."

"He was also in Anchorage," I tell him.

"That so?" He brushes his thick hand against my cheek. "Think we've got a fan club?"

At the turnoff into Talkeetna, we look sideways and begin to walk. We know we will not walk the whole way, but it is something to do so early in the day, when our legs need to be loosened up.

We pass by a rusting pickup, a late-generation Ford Falcon Ranchero. Old cars always make me think of Dad, who was a Starsky and Hutch fanatic when he and Mom first emigrated. Every car we owned was a vehicle he'd seen on the show at one point. Dad had a great eye for cars. When we watched movies or TV shows, he remembered cars more than characters. I remember him pointing out the Ranchero in a James Bond movie. "I love that pickup," he'd told me. "If I ever get a pickup truck, I'm going to get one like that. But not blue. Blue's not a good color for cars."

It's strange to think of Dad here just because it's so asymmetrical. I can picture him, what he's doing, and he can't do the same—picture me, what I'm doing. I see him in his office, having his coffee, and sitting in meetings with other men in suits, talking seriously and softly. I wish, for just one moment, that I could see him and Mom, that we could walk together for the next mile underneath this clear sky. Maybe, if they could hold this air in their lungs for just one moment, walk in silence with Bo, and think of absolutely nothing except for putting one foot in front of the other, they could understand why I am out here. But I am just kidding myself. We would just fight.

The last time we talked, we fought. He doesn't understand why I left and I have trouble explaining it. So few people out here ask you to justify your existence that even the monthly phone call got to be a headache for me. I stopped calling a few months ago, though I think of them a lot—my folks. I wonder how they got to the Midwest and why their notions of success are so far from my own. I'm as surprised as they are. I always thought I'd stay in New York forever.

But I suppose I escaped to New York, to prove something more than anything else. It was never my intention to “make it big” there, so a failure to do so was not so surprising. Maybe I did fail; I don't know. I could have stayed, but for what? Why do people stay anywhere? If failure is marked by an inability to stay, then I failed. But I think I failed in other ways, in ways that were so commonplace and accepted that they are not really seen as failures. I think I wanted to end up in some exciting urban existence, avoiding at all costs the slow-burning suburban romance that so many of my peers had followed. And what came out was some strange combination of the two. I guess you really can't stray too far from your roots—though I try. Over the past year, I've often fantasized about people from my past materializing in front of me, and I think it just drove me further away. I'm not running away from the past, though. It just makes me sad to think that our lives have become so incompatible.

We get lucky because a friend of Bo's passes us on the road on his way up to Fairbanks. There is only one road from Anchorage to Fairbanks, so it is not too uncommon to see the same people making the same runs. Also, Bo seems to know everyone in the whole country—or “those who take to the roads,” he says.

“Well, well, if it isn't Boaz the Bear,” the guy says through the open window when he slows his pickup next to us. Bo has to slump over considerably to bring his face to the window. He's built like a lumberjack—well over six feet tall, his smile obscured by some kind of beard. With his pack on he looks even bigger.

“Pesky Haggert,” Bo says, or something like that. Pesky pulls onto the side while Bo heaves his pack into the back. He opens the door for me. “Meet Olive Lee.”

“Climb on in,” Pesky says. “Man, where you been, Boaz? Been a hot minute since I saw you last. Where you headed?”

The two men talk over me. Pesky looks like a malnourished child compared to Bo, skinny and pale, but lively. As he talks, he periodically dribbles chew into a fast food cup wedged between his thighs. I gather that they knew each other in Texas, and that Bo also knows Pesky's brother Utah, who is now up in Fairbanks, where Pesky is headed. Their catch-up takes about fifteen minutes, and then they are talking about the dismal King Salmon season they're having.

The road seems new, smooth, deserted, and we speed through miles of tall trees. Just as I am about to go into a road trance, Boaz places his big hand on my kneecap.

“Say, Bo, think you could get me my strength out of the glove box down there?” Pesky asks.

He has to open his legs in order to open the glove compartment, since his knees are almost pressed against it. He passes Pesky a scuffed aluminum flask. “This what you’re looking for?”

He takes it but offers it to me first. “You want some? Ladies first.”

It’s a little early for me, but I take a swig for solidarity.

“I’ve been up all night,” Pesky says. He unscrews the top and takes a quick swallow. “Except here, it’s like all day, isn’t it.” After another pull he replaces the top and hands it back to Bo.

“I love it,” I say. There is silence in the cab. I put my hand on top of Bo’s and give it a squeeze. I can see a faint quiver of a smile in his beard and as I gaze out on the speeding scenery, I think to myself: here, anything is possible.

I come from the great suburbs of Chicago, a land of people navigating cars through well-paved roads, from the hot summers through the snowy winters. It’s a comfortable place where everyone assumes you are just like them, and are either too polite or shocked to show their surprise when they find out you are not. It is a place where we live with quiet dreams, undisturbed, with uncertain dreams relegated to the far past or inconceivable future. If you grow up in the suburbs, chances are you can’t imagine living anywhere else; nobody can.

But I wish every American would visit Alaska. Did you know that they pay Alaskans to live there? I’m not sure why. It’s such a beautiful place, made all the more expansive by its extremes: the peacefulness of solitude matched with the drama of nature, the constant sun followed by oppressive darkness. But really, it is just something else to travel forever through Canada and find yourself in another land of Americans, different from the ones you would find in Miami or San Antonio or New Orleans. Although all over I guess you can find the surreal mix of frontiersmen and outcasts and wanderers alike. It’s almost a 2500-mile drive from Seattle to Anchorage, enough time to ponder what it means to be an American, or to wonder what exactly it is that makes a place your home and zone of comfort. Or you could just stare out the window and wonder how Canada ended up in the middle of all of it.

True to form, Bo is greeted like the chairman of the board when we get to The Salmon Bake that night, the sprawling bar where the entire Denali park staff goes to drink. As I sidle up to the bar to wait for an opening for Theo to slip me a drink, Yankees appears next to me and says my name.

“Olive?”

I am not surprised. He would be out of place, anyhow, here, had he not come for me. I'm amazed that it's taken this long, almost relieved to hear this stranger utter my name. I respond by acknowledgment without speaking. I just look at him and wait. He has a steady gaze, like he's been drinking.

“You're Olive, aren't you? Olive Lee?”

He gets jostled from behind, pushed closer to me, and while this morning he looked old and tired, now he looks younger, tentative.

I ask, “Who are you?”

“Your family sent me.”

“Who?”

He hesitates, and at that moment the female bartender appears before us. She ignores me dutifully, asking Yankees what he'd like. But Yankees tips his head at me and hands her a twenty. “Amber for me, and whatever she wants.” I have the same, plus a whiskey. I am in no hurry. This is going to be good.

We wait in silence, leaning against the wooden bar. When she returns with the drinks, he picks up the beers and I follow him downstairs, my supplementary drink in hand.

“How long have you been following me?” I ask after we've settled into a table.

“I'm not some creepy private eye,” he says, extending his hand. “My name's Jason. I'm...our father's are friends. I...I get a call last week, *from* a private eye, but just a hack, you know? Just some guy looking for you in his spare time.”

I swallow half the glass of whiskey.

He pulls a worn, clump of paper from his jacket pocket, and I watch as he smooths out onto the table a sort of dossier on me. There are three photocopied pictures of me, grabbed, no doubt, from the folds of the Internet. I hardly recognize myself. There I am grinning, under the arm of Eric, taken at a drunken hour on a rooftop somewhere in Greenpoint; seated behind glasses of wine at the Jackson Pub in Midtown, my hair short and gleaming; the last one is a cropped close-up of me on the beach in Cape Cod, tan with my sunglasses pushed atop my head. I take the packet of papers from him. The next two sheets list names and numbers of people I have known, seemingly grabbed at random from the spreadsheet we used for 050607—May Sixth, 2007—the day of departure, the day of our wedding.

He stops me on the second sheet, points to a name with a star next to it. “Him,” he says. “You saw him last month in Seattle.”

Ricky Goodwind, my dear college friend. So this is how this came about. I’m not mad—just surprised. Seems a sparse coincidence. I hadn’t even intended to see Ricky, but we had crossed paths by the water one day as Bo and I watched the fishermen casting for squid.

“We thought we almost had you when Eric mentioned some guy named Stephen Leighdon in Charleston, who you’d called from San Francisco. But that was a dead end. You’d moved on again. Anyhow, this guy got word back to your brother that you were headed up to Denali. It was coincidence that I saw you on the way up. I was staying in town and decided to take the train—kind of on a lark—with the tourists. I wasn’t sure it was you at first. But—” He flips back to the first page of photos. “Your tattoos are kind of hard to miss—you pushed up your sleeves for a minute when you were singing up in Talkeetna.”

I’m stunned for a moment, that he’s been watching me so intently. I haven’t exactly been trying to disguise myself, but the thought that someone has been watching me for such clues casts a shadow over the last few days. I’ve gotten so used to running under the radar for so long now, recognized solely by a handful of fellow unknowns. Then again, it’s in these small towns where people actually look at me, not like the pass-through stares of New York. I sit with this for a moment, trying not to bear any ill will toward this guy, this guy who sort of knows my family.

“What’s your name again?” I ask.

“It’s Jason.”

I look him in the eye and half smile. “Well, Jason, that’s some private eye shit if I ever heard it,” I say. “But you’ve got to admit there aren’t exactly a whole lot of Asian girls running around Alaska though either.”

He laughs, relieved that I’m not upset, or about to bolt from him. “That’s true. This whole thing seems a little crazy, I know. I can’t believe I actually found you. It was almost too easy.”

“It’s easy out here. If you stay out of the woods.”

“Well, since *you* did, pretty much, it was easy.”

I pick up the folded papers and stare at the first photo of me, with Eric in Brooklyn. It’s summer time; I’m wearing a sleeveless dress and I’m holding my sunglasses in my hand. In the background I see my friend Johnny’s dog, Lucy, and I remember that he is the one

taking the photo. It's a weird feeling to suddenly peer out of those eyes at Johnny taking our photo. Eric loved me then, and I can almost feel the weight of his arm around me. But he hates me now—the me that left him. It's hard to remember what I could have been smiling about in that photo. I was probably drunk or high or...I don't know. It was a sunny day in New York. Johnny had pulled together that rooftop party via text message, and we had all magically appeared from all corners of the city to pass the time together. Those rare moments of New York tranquility seemed so hard to come by.

Jason watches me as I turn the page of photos and skim the list of names and numbers. I don't even remember if Ricky Goodwind RSVP'd to the wedding and I remember wondering the exact same thing when I ran into him in Seattle. I see Michael Torwisch's name—The Wisch—and wonder if he ever spoke to my family again. Somehow all these flesh-and-blood people turned into entries on a spreadsheet.

I abandon the dossier on the table and think of nothing. In Alaska, this too is easy.

"I used to work here, you know," Jason says. He fidgets with his glass nervously, and I wonder what he has to be nervous about. I'm not really a fugitive, and I'm sure as hell not going to hurt him.

"At The Bake?"

"No, at The Chalet. The year it opened. It was a big deal then."

"Oh." I drain most of the beer. "Is my family paying you?"

He laughs. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know."

"I guess they might reimburse me for airfare and stuff..." He stops. "I'm not making any money off of this." He speaks quickly and I recognize his nervousness as a Manhattan tic, the abrupt, vaguely anxious behavior of those searching for the next step.

"Just curious, I guess." I shrug. "What are we supposed to do now?"

He scrapes his finger at the logo printed on the glass. "I just said I'd come look for you, let you know..."

"Let me know what?"

He takes a sip of his beer and looks down. "You need to call your brother."