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THE TRAIL TO EAGLE ROCK

By Edward W. Wilson

TO THE READER

All of the events and characters in *Climbing Eagle Rock* are fictional, but the locations are real. The Rampart School looked exactly as described as did the trail to Ruby Creek. The bench where Jake made his camp is there and if you looked you could probably still find the rotting tent platform where he slept. Correct names are given to all geographic features and, if you wished, one day you too could climb Eagle Rock.

Chapter One

Jacob shivered against the dropping temperature as he opened his eyes peering around the single room. Dark except for the flickering reddish light that leaked through the cracks and around the door and damper of the old oil drum that served as a stove in one corner. Late at night, the fire dying, the cabin too cooled while his three sisters burrowed closer together in their bunk, his parents and baby brother in theirs. In a chair by the door his Uncle Moses snored loudly, sleeping off the effects of last night's, most nights', bottle of whiskey.

Jake moved slowly, feeling the cold drafts of air that came in around the cabin's single window and door, other stray drafts leaking through the chinking between the wall's logs. Raising his head, he could see out the window to the wood yard where a light snow fell through

the sub-arctic night. Up the hill a single light burned in the teacher's office and Jake could hear, and feel, the thumping of the school's diesel generator that provided the only electricity in the village.

Slowly, he crawled out of his bunk and silently pulled on his canvas and moosehide mukluks. Carefully, he eased his way to the door, hoping he wouldn't wake his sisters or the baby. His parents and uncle weren't a problem. It would be hours before they awoke from last night's alcohol induced stupor. But he didn't think he could leave over his siblings' protests. At fourteen, the second oldest child and oldest son, his sister Kelly would understand if he explained, but he didn't want to explain any more than he wanted to leave her alone to care for the others. But he couldn't think of another choice.

"Sometimes all of the choices are bad ones," Mr. Searles, the teacher, had once said to him. "Too many people keep looking for the right time, or answer, or choice when there aren't any. Sometimes you just have to go with the least awful."

As he crawled out of bed and tested the door the wooden door latch stuck. The cold outside air and the moisture inside the cabin had combined to create a frozen lock. It opened with the harsh crack of breaking ice and Jake held his breath, waiting to see if the sound had awakened anyone. Only the usual sounds of breathing and snores reached his ears. Carefully, he opened the door, thankful that he had oiled the old hinges a week before. Momentarily, he considered returning to bed, but knew that if he did, he would never leave.

Outside, in the small entryway, he collected his parka and ski mask, slipped on his gloves, and then his mittens. From a nail by the door he lifted down his 22-caliber rifle, the only

thing he really owned, a new Browning semiautomatic, given to him by the teacher in partial trade for Jake's help during the previous summer's salmon season.

Out in the village he could see the outlines of a dozen other cabins. The full moon shone dimly through the snow that now fell more heavily. Good, he thought. His tracks would be covered even if someone bothered to look.

For a moment, he felt nearly unbearably homesick. The village had a quiet beauty in the silent snowfall. The flakes covered the trash and junk with a soft forgiveness. The night absorbed the memories of violence and fear. Slowly, he walked through the village, reminding himself of the reality.. The drunken brawls, the occasional killing, the helplessness and hopelessness that would be his future if something didn't change.

Reminding himself of Silas.

Up the hill he could see the lights burning in the school office. Mr. Searles, still awake, he supposed. Probably talking to his friends on the high-powered two-way radio that provided the only link with other northern Alaskan villages. Slowly, he climbed the trail up to the school, thinking more about what school had meant to him than he ever had before. He had walked this trail that had led to warmth and safety a thousand times before. Walked it to classes, to work, to an occasional much needed meal, and, a few times, to sleep. It had also led, at nine, to his friendship with this strange, quiet man who had run the school for five years now. Not in Jake's memory had any other teacher stayed more than a semester, and the school had frequently been closed for lack of a teacher.

Jake could not understand Mr. Searles, “Tom,” as Jake called the teacher on the river or back in the hills. Why did he stay? When would he leave? But Tom always answered Jake's questions with words like, “Cuz” and “When it's time.”

“Now, Jake said, “It’s my time,” and the answers sounded like they made a little more sense, even if he wasn't sure how. Guilt about disappearing on Tom bothered him, too. Not as much as his sisters, of course, but some, and in a way he couldn’t explain either.

For a few minutes, he stood outside the office window watching the huge bearded man inside, laughing as he talked over the radio. Smiling around a cigarette; the usual coffee cup in hand. Finally Jake made up his mind reached up and tapped on the window. Tom looked up, saw him, said a few words into the mike, and came around to open the door.

“Out a little late?” he said.

“Yes, sir. Guess I am,” Jake said, half sorry he’d knocked.

“Sir?” Something serious?”

“I’m going,” Jake said.

“I see,” Tom said. “I don't think I’ll ask where.”

“Don't you even want to know?” Jake said.

“Well, it’s not that I don’t want to know, and not that I don’t care. But we’re both better off if I don’t. Folks will eventually get around to asking me and I get a little uncomfortable with too much lying. I don't mind saying I didn’t see you tonight. And I’m glad you stopped by. Saves

me wondering, which I appreciate. But I don't want to really know more than that just now. You know where I am if you need something bad enough. That's best I think."

"Will you come looking for me?"

"No. I promise you I won't do that. Your folks might, but I doubt they'll manage to find you, unless you want them to, of course. I'd likely manage to if I looked, so I won't try. That okay with you?"

"I guess," Jake said.

"Come on," Tom said, "time to be moving if you're counting on your trail being snowed over. Anything you need?"

"Don't think so."

"Scared?"

"Yes."

"You should be," Tom said. "Only a fool isn't scared. I have a lot of practice at being scared."

Jake looked at him in astonishment.

"You? Scared? You never seem scared to me. You do stuff nobody's done in years, and the Trader hasn't run you out of here like he did all the other teachers."

“I’m scared all the time,” Tom said. “Doing what you’re scared of, but is still the right thing to do, that’s the hard part. If it’s any comfort, you’re doing the right thing. I’ll be sorry if it gets you killed, but better to die doing stuff than to do what Silas did.

Silas. Jake still couldn’t talk about it. .

“If you need anything, here’s a pencil and some paper. You can always leave a note somewhere along my Slate Creek trap line and I might accidentally leave something behind on one of my check runs,” Tom said. “Now get moving before you wake up Jean or one of the kids.”

Jake moved. He tended to forget about Tom’s alcoholic wife and his two young children. But Tom didn’t ever seem to notice so he tried hard not to let it show.

Out on the porch again they stood for a moment watching the snow. Tom quietly talking to himself.

“Tomorrow be a good day to take an early ride on the snow-go. Likely go out the main south trail a dozen miles or so. Don’t suppose I’ll see any tracks even if the snow stops. Snow-go’ll likely fill in any that happen to still be there, but I don’t suppose I can help that.”

Jake didn’t say anything. He knew he wasn’t supposed to. Slowly, he descended the steps and edged out of the circle of brightness the school’s yard light cast on the new

snow. Looking back a few minutes later, he thought, in surprise, “How’s he know I’m going south?” But just as quickly he knew.

“I can figure it out,” he said to himself, “why am I surprised he can too?”

With a last look, he could see Tom still standing on the porch, staring intently across the frozen river, towards the mountains in the north, and Jake could only wonder what he saw there.