

## THE CHOICE

The bus dropped fifteen-year-old Alex at the station in Duluth, and he hitchhiked the forty or so miles north on highway 61 to Silver Bay. He wore a Twins baseball cap, a Vikings shirt, no socks, too tight tennis shoes, and gray sweat pants.

A nice woman in the horseshoe-shaped business area downtown directed him to his grandfather's house. She told him to start at Outer Drive, walk past Mariner Mountain Park, and go two miles beyond till he came to a gravel road. Turn right on the gravel road, she told him.

"There's only two houses and your grandfather's place is the second one. It's a long ways up the road that meanders west and north," she said.

He didn't expect it to go as far as it did. Alex didn't know it, but it was an excellent jumping-off point for those seeking adventure on the Superior Hiking Trail.

Carrying all his possessions in a tan duffle bag, the walk, which he took his time at, took two-and-a-half hours.

Alex stood in front of a massive red pine door. It had been battered by something big, maybe a bear, he thought. Claw marks ran inches away from the top to the middle. He'd been told that his grandpa built the door from an old pine broken in half by a windstorm nearly thirty years ago.

*Well, I'm here,* he said to himself, slid the duffle bag from his shoulder, and looked around. He didn't know if this had been a good idea or not—to come here, but here he was, and if it didn't work out, he'd go somewhere else, maybe Canada.

As he wandered around the property situated on the hillside and well off of the main road, he noticed that trees formed an arc around the back of the place. They seemed to go on forever, and as far as he knew, they did. He didn't know what kind they were, but if he'd paid attention to his dad, he'd have known they were cedar, fir, white pine, spruce, jack pine, ash, aspen, birch, maple, and a few more deciduous trees thrown in.

*Just a little exploring*, he thought. Alex hiked around the back of the cabin and started into the woods. The ground was rocky, and, to be honest, the thin soles of his tennis shoes transferred the hard points of the numerous rocks straight to the tender underside of his feet.

*Not good.*

He carefully picked his way back to the front of the cabin and sat on what passed for a front porch. It looked like a bunch of black railroad ties dragged up from the nearest railway line and awkwardly placed in front of the doorway.

No one seemed to be around, so he debated whether to knock on the door or just sit and wait outside.

He thumped on the door.

No answer, so he chose a tie he liked and sat. An hour later, the light was dimming, and the mosquitos appeared. He slapped here and there and kept them at bay until a great swarm of them, like heat-seeking missiles, descended, intent upon satisfying their bloodlust. Launching himself in the air, he did a three-sixty while slapping and dancing around the front yard.

"Now that was entertaining," boomed a voice coming from the open doorway.

"You're home?" Alex said.

"Been here the whole time. I thought you'd give up and go away by now, but when you started the little jig, you gave me such a fit of laughter that I couldn't hold back anymore." The old man paused, before quickly adding, "You get in here now before I let any more of those little devils in the house."

Alex slapped as many mosquitos from himself as he could, plucked his duffle bag from the ground, and dashed into the cabin.

Nothing was said, except the old man nodded and gestured for him to throw his duffle in the corner. Then he rummaged around near the ancient stove, stocked it with wood, and brought a fire to life.

"It'll take a little while to get going the way I like, but it'll be ready for cooking in twenty minutes or so."

It took Alex a minute, but eventually he noticed an enormous dog lying near a fireplace opposite the corner he had thrown the duffle.

The old guy glanced at Alex and noticed him staring at the dog.

"That's Bear." Bear's ears perked up when his name was said.

"Don't worry about him. He's as gentle as they come. He'll be sniffing you pretty soon."

"I've never seen any dog that looked like that."

"He's an Irish wolfhound."

Alex temporarily dropped the subject of Bear and asked, "So how come you didn't answer the door when I knocked?"

"Told ya, I was hoping you'd just give up and leave."

Alex's lips scrunched a little, but he didn't say anything, debating whether to tell the old relic that he was his grandson.

"What?" the old man said.

"What, what?" Alex's head snapped upward.

"You looked like you were going to say something, then changed your mind."

Alex swayed his head back and forth like he was in a trance and tapped his thigh with his right hand. This was going to be tougher than he thought.

The old man continued to stare at him with increasing expectations making Alex more and more self-conscious, putting pressure on him to respond in some way.

"I'm Alex," he blurted out.

"Well, well, well, got a name out of you, at least. I'm Alan. Looks like we got something in common. Both our names start with a." He sounded amused.

"Oh yeah, we do," said Alex. It must have been the way he said it that drew a curious look from the old guy.

Alex twiddled his thumbs a bit before asking, "Does my name mean anything to you?"  
The whining way he said it and the expression on his face begged for an answer.

Alan ceased stoking the fire, looked in the air as if he was trying to recall something, until finally saying, "Nope." Then he turned around and continued stoking the fire.

Alex's shoulders sagged before he said, "I didn't think so."

Alan looked at him again. This time more seriously. "What's with you, kid? You come out here at the end of the day, no means of getting here, just walking right up and then you wait around till I can't stand it any longer until I let you in, and your name should mean something to me?" His words weren't angry, but they were forceful and honest. "Where you from?"

Alan noticed the kid's foot tapping on the floor like it would never end.

"You nervous? Or you gotta' piss?"

Alex stopped tapping his foot. "You really don't know my name, and you don't recognize me?"

Alan stood motionless, studying the kid with an intensity that alarmed Alex. There was a long pause until Alan walked nearer to take a closer look.

After thirty of the longest seconds Alex had ever endured, Alan said, "I don't know any black kids, and I don't know your name. My first thought was that you came up here and maybe wanted to break in and take something. Call that racist if you like, but that's the way I felt." He paused and then said, "You have a little familiar look to you, but I can't say I ever saw you in my life." The venerable, old white man stepped back, turned, and examined the fire. "Looks like it'll be ready pretty soon. You like baked beans? I got plenty of 'em."

"You have a son, name's Pete," Alex blurted.

That caught the old guy's attention. He froze for a moment before he slowly pivoted toward Alex.

Alan's eyes softened, and his body slumped. Staring at the wall beyond the kid, Alan asked, "And what if I do?" Alex had had to strain to hear the old man's words, and they seemed tinged with sadness.

"He's taken off and left me alone."

The tone of the old man's voice turned gruff. "What're you talking about?"

"My mom died, and Pete took off."

Now things started to fall in place for the old guy. That's why the kid looked familiar. He had Pete's eyes and cheekbones. His voice even reminded him of his son.

The flames jumped and crackled. Alan shuffled to a wooden chair he had made, sat down on a store-bought cushion, rested his elbows on his knees, and ran his fingers through his uncut hair.

"I've got no place else to go. Pete left me a note— told me about you living up here. He said I could probably stay with you." He looked up with hope in his eyes.

Gruffly, Alan said, "You call him Pete. Is he your father or not?"

"He is, but he's never acted like it, so I call him Pete." The kid paused and then looked down. "It's easier that way."

A long pause before Alan said, "He always did run away when the going got tough." He slid his hands across his face.

"Pete said you weren't much of a father to him, and he turned out okay, so why should he be any different?" It sounded insulting.

Alan stared at the floor, his eyes misting. Thirty seconds passed.

And then it came. "He was right about me not being much of a father, but he was wrong about it working out okay for him... or me for that matter." The old guy shifted in his chair. "I've got a lot of regrets and I... hope he does too. Looks like he did to you what I did to him."

Alex said nothing, just stared at the fire.

Shadows settled across the cabin as ephemeral flames flickered in the bowels of the stove. The silence was thunderous.

They sat without saying anything for a long time, both shifting positions and not looking at the other. Finally, Alan got up and poked at the wood coals, grunted, then pronounced everything perfect for cooking the beans. He got out an ancient, battered pot, dumped a couple cans of beans in it, and placed it on the stovetop.

"It'll be ready in a few minutes—doesn't take too long once I get the embers right."

He lit a kerosene lamp, and the inside of the building was exposed. It looked like a log cabin, but it wasn't really. It was just...rustic. A couple sets of deer antlers hung from thick wooden beams running across the ceiling. Nothing huge, but they were impressive enough to affect Alex. With all their talk earlier, he hadn't noticed the bearskin on the floor opposite where he was sitting. He couldn't help wondering if it was what was left of the bear that had made the claw marks on the door.

The old man stirred the beans, said they were ready, and ladled several scoops into each of the ceramic bowls he had set out.

Alex rose from his chair, accepted the beans from Alan, and began eating. Nothing he'd eaten in the past week had tasted as good.

When Pete left, the refrigerator was stocked with a gallon of milk, a jar of sweet and spicy pickles, eight leftover hotdogs, bread, pepper jack cheese, and some bottled water. Neither he nor Pete liked the tap water in the rented apartment in North Minneapolis, so the bottled water was the drink of choice. They never had a lot in the house, but always just enough. One day, Pete just never came back from looking for a job. Alex found the note on Pete's bed later that evening.

His dad wrote that he knew Alex would be okay, that he was a strong and smart kid, and would survive, but if he ran into a "situation" to go look up his grandfather near Silver Bay. Well, a situation arose, so Alex left with everything of value he had stuffed into his duffle bag.

He had enough money to cover some food and a bus ticket to Duluth. The rest, as they say, was history.

Soon Alex finished the bowl of beans. "Think I could have some more?" he asked.

His mouth full, Alan nodded with a gesture to get it himself.

He did. The second helping of beans went down slowly, but was just as enjoyable as the first.

Alan finished his beans and scraped the remainder of the pot into his bowl.

He chewed like he lived alone--a little rough and noisy. Soon, he finished and took his empty bowl to the kitchen sink.

Alex finished his beans and followed the old man's lead--taking the bowl and spoon to the sink.

He paused when he was near the old man.

"I could wash these up. I mean, it's the least I could do since I barged in on you and ate some of your food."

Alan considered this with a cock of his head, shrugged, and said, "Sounds reasonable." He watched for a few moments as if unsure of what to do, but finally settled into what looked like a comfortable old chair, definitely store-bought, picked up a book and started reading.

Several minutes later Alex asked, "You want me to dry these?"

The old man didn't respond.

Louder, "YOU WANT ME TO DRY THESE?"

That startled the old guy into dropping his book.

"Damn it, now I lost the page I was on."

Alex seemed to shrink a little. "I—I'm sorry, but you didn't hear me the first time I said it."

Muttering was all Alex heard for the next several seconds. All he could make out was how the old man wasn't used to loud noises, and this was not anything he wanted to put up with.

With his reading glasses perched on his crooked nose, Alan said, "Ah, there it is. You're lucky I found the page I was on." He took his bookmark from the floor, placed it in the right spot, put the book down, and addressed Alex. "Ya, I want you to dry 'em. Anything else?"

Hesitation. "Uh no, I guess not, but only...where's a towel?"

A scornful look and a withering voice came from the old man. "Behind you, hanging on the wall."

Alex plucked it from the hook and began drying the dishes.

The evening was a serenely quiet one. The old man read while Alex tried to think of something to say, but eventually gave up, instead he looked over the pseudo cabin. Alan had started a fire in the fireplace and was reading with only that and the kerosene light available.

Alex wanted to ask about the bearskin and the marks on the door, but thought, given the old man's earlier crankiness, that he'd better save that for tomorrow...if the old man didn't kick him out tonight, which didn't look like he would--maybe tomorrow, but not tonight.

He fell asleep in the corner.

Awakening in the morning, he smelled it first then heard the sound of sizzling bacon. His eyes were crusty, as they always seemed to be when he first came awake. He rubbed them clean with his thin, soft fingers.

"You got a big day ahead of you," Alan said without turning around.

*God, that bacon smells good.*

"What do you mean, a big day?"

Pause. The old guy flipped the bacon over with a fork, then turned and looked at Alex.

"I'm putting you to work if you want to stay here for another day."

Alex noticed the old guy's eyes narrowed as he said it.



After bacon, eggs, and toast with homemade grape jelly, Alex washed the dishes and the old man dried because he said he didn't like the way the kid had put things away the night before.

When they'd both finished, Alan disappeared into the small bedroom and reappeared with a pair of boots. He threw the boots at Alex's feet and told him to put them on.

"I've got shoes."

"You're not going to wear those when you chop wood, too flimsy. Put on the boots. They're steel toed and tough leather all around."

Alex did as he was told and they were soon out the door walking a hundred feet to the woodpile.

Alan picked up the ax, stood in front of the squared--off stump in front of him, and placed a chunk of wood on top. He stared at it for a moment and then swung the axe up, behind, then down squarely in the middle of the chunk of wood, splitting it cleanly. He did another and then another. He paused and leaned on the ax for a few moments.

"There, think you can handle that?"

Alex nodded and moved to where Alan stood. The ax exchanged hands and Alan stepped well away. Alex studied the block of wood Alan had placed in the center of the stump. He knew he could strike the middle of it. Holding the ax loosely, he swung it back, up, over, and down with a force he thought would surely split the wood. The ax head slammed into the wood a third of the way, where it stayed. Alex was clearly perplexed. He looked at the old man who was leaned up against the trunk of a nearby ash tree.

"Don't look at me. Figure it out," was all the old man said.

Bear sat and watched.

Alex took hold of the ax handle with the head still stuck in the wood, swung it back, up and down again. It went a little deeper into the wood, but remained stuck. He did it again and

again, until the blade cut through, splitting the chunk asunder. *This is going to take a while if every one goes like that.*

“You’ll get better. The trick is hitting it dead center. You do that and it’ll split clean the first time.”

It didn’t get any better for the first five chunks of wood, but on the sixth, he split it on the first swing of the ax. He jumped up and gave a whoop of satisfaction. The old guy showed a shadow of a smile, but didn’t say anything. He kept watching though.

After an hour of painful watching, Alan said, “Hey, take a break. Bear and I have a story to tell. I noticed you staring at the bear skin I have so I’ll tell you how I got it.”

Alex was relieved to stop working for a while and hear the story so he took a seat on the stump.

“Bear. Get over here.” The monster loped over and accepted Alan’s scratches, pets, and hugs. “You probably also noticed the scratches on the doorway when you knocked on it.”

“I did.”

“Well, one day I was in the house here and pretty soon I heard Bear woofing away with that big, heavy bark of his. Pretty soon, in fact, right fast, it got pretty intense and nervous sounding. I took a peek out the window to see what was up, and here came Bear running back to the cabin whining like crazy. Before I could get to the door he jumped on it and scratched it from top to bottom. You’ll notice he’s got quite the set of claws on him.”

Alex glanced at the dog’s paws. They looked the size of small plates.

“I got to the door, opened it in time to see this mangy looking bear running lickety-split after the dog. Well, I hadn’t named the dog ever--kind of liked the no-name thing. That dog jumped in here so fast it’d make your head twirl. I slammed the door shut and waited for the bear to hit it, but he never did. He just wandered around the yard sniffing and batting logs around. When he started tearing my logs out of the lean-to, it ticked me off. I had them stacked in pretty good and I didn’t relish the thought of re-stacking them. I got out my shotgun. I just

wanted to scare him away so I shot up in the air. The damn thing charged me. Black bears don't normally do that. The only thing I can figure out is that maybe he'd been eating backpacker's food and got a plastic bag stuck in his stomach and was starving to death. It's happened before. Probably it could never get full because of the bag in its gut. I had to put three slugs in it before he died. When I opened it up, sure enough there was a plastic bag in its gut. I didn't want to waste anything so that's how I acquired a nice bearskin."

"So, you named the dog, Bear."

"Right there and then, I did."

"It's a shame that he's such a chicken-shit. Not very good for protection out here," said Alex.

"You might be right, but I'll bet if anybody walking on two legs tried to hurt me it'd be a different story." Based on the timid look Bear flashed at him, Alex considered that a long shot.

With story time over, they slurped some water and got back to work.

Three hours later, Alan told him he could quit. Alex had split fifty logs during the three hours he'd worked and felt like he had been in a sauna for a week. He peeled his shirt off, wrung it out, and spread it on a low branch of the ash to dry off.

"You're going to wash that. It's gonna' stink to high heaven."

Alex had to agree. He smelled his armpits, made a face, and turned away fast. In fact, he'd sweat up a storm in his pants as well, and felt a bit of swamp ass, as some of the other kids called it, when they played football.

The two of them stacked all the cut wood in a lean-to next to the house. As Alex stacked the last chunk of wood, Alan noticed the blisters covering the palms of Alex's hands.

"Looks like you're not used to much work are you?"

A too tired Alex only had the energy to nod his head.

"Let's go in the house and get something on those hands of yours."

Twenty minutes later, Alex sat with bandaged hands cradling a cup of very strong coffee. He'd been a coffee drinker since the age of ten when his dad introduced him to it. He liked it immediately, mainly he thought, because they didn't have any soda or anything else with taste in the apartment, so his options were limited. Whatever the reason, he liked it, and he liked it even better when it was so strong it made his lips curl.

After coffee, the old man sat back in his favorite chair, which was the only soft chair in the house, and fell asleep. His longish hair fell haphazardly across his forehead. *Blood must have drained from his body after all that work today*, Alex thought. Alan's white skin looked even whiter than before.

He studied the old man's face, and if any doubts had creased his brain about this being his grandfather, they all vanished from his thoughts now. Pete was his father's son all right. Once he got past Alan's long hair, the resemblance between Alex's grandfather and Pete was obvious, and evidently, he had a little bit of the look too, according to the old man, anyway.

Every one of the next five days resembled the wood-splitting day. Get up, have breakfast, then work outside. Sometimes it was splitting wood and sometimes it was sawing wood. Another day was spent rearranging the railroad ties in the front to make the porch look better. Alex thought it was all make-work stuff to occupy his time. "Always something to do around a house," said Alan.

The seventh day started out the same, until the old man suddenly called a halt to the work and sat him down on a boulder near the edge of the jack pines.

"What are your plans?"

Alex looked him in the eyes. He felt comfortable enough with his grandfather now to speak his mind, but still, he paused before answering.

"I thought I could stay here."

Alan squinted into the sun, grabbed the top of a lupine and ran it through his fingers without dislodging a petal. Silence.

“Before you make up your mind, there’s something I want you to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Take a little walk with me.”

“Right now?”

Alan shook his head. “No, we’re gonna’ need to prepare a little first.”

“Like, what do you mean? Where we going?”

The old man gestured to the trees and hills behind him. “Back there. We’re going into the back country.”

“Why?”

“Cause I think you should see it before you decide anything.”

“I’ve all ready made up my mind. I want to stay here.”

The old man looked away, picked up a pebble and threw it down the slope.

“You might change your mind after you see what it’s like.”

The following day Alan gathered the food and gear they both needed for a few days, and stuffed two packs for the hike. They shouldered the backpacks, walked behind the house and into the forest, following a deer trail that meandered up the hill and down into a deep valley. Alex was grateful for the boots, even though they were a tad large.

The trail seemed like more than a deer path and when Alex mentioned that, the old man, without breaking his stride, turned his head to the side and tossed the words behind him loud enough for Alex to hear. “Over the years I widened it a bit, spent many hours cutting back

vegetation, smoothing ground a little, and cutting out the occasional downed tree. It's not like a nature center trail, but it's nicer than it was when just deer used it."

They followed switchbacks up, down, and around. Every once in a while an opening in the brush and trees exposed a river and the valley below as it snaked through the hills. Three hours later, having climbed a nasty portion of the trail, Alex was winded, but kept up with Alan. They arrived at the top of a hill where the deer path disappeared, replaced by a wide swath of rhyolite rock bordering a sheer drop to a beautiful lake below.

"That's Bean Lake. You keep looking that way and you'll see Bear Lake." He pointed northeast. Alex could see both. He drew a breath and let it out slowly, his head moving southwest to northeast. He'd never seen anything like it before.

The perfectly cloudless, blue sky provided an impeccable contrast with the yellow green of the trees, the darker blue waters of the lakes, and hills that stretched on for miles. The wide expanse of rhyolite they stood on amazed Alex as much as the drop-off and water he looked upon.

Alan removed his pack and found a suitable boulder to sit on. Alex didn't need to be told to do the same. The halcyon air was disturbed only by the cry of a red-tailed hawk flying overhead.

"Now this is why I stay up here. I like sitting right in this and other places along the trails." And then an afterthought came. "And being alone. If you stayed here, this is what you'd have: no cars, buses, trains, buildings, TV, Internet, asphalt, fewer people, and the vast majority of them are white, not black, like you. I haven't put up with living with anyone for a long time. I've gotta' tell you, a person gets used to being alone, and I'm not used to talking. As you could tell from being Pete's son, I was no better than he was as a father. If you're expecting some all-wise old man, you've got another thing coming. If I tell you the truth, I don't know how to do it, especially a black kid like you. I don't think that I want to do it. I know your dad married a black girl. That much is obvious, but I didn't know it until you showed up on my doorstep. I'm

also sorry that she died.” He seemed to contemplate what he’d just said for a while, but then started in again. “You’d probably have to take a little shit from the kids in town who aren’t used to blacks, and maybe even some of the adults. I do know there’ll be questions and flat out mean things said to you, and behind your back. Add in that and I can be cranky and rude, and I know I chew with my mouth open.” He stopped talking and seemed to be struggling with all his thoughts. He added what he thought would be the final kicker, “Plus, you’d have to go to school. You’ve gotta’ finish your education.” The old man paused and jerked his head quickly toward Alex. “You went to school, right?”

“Yeah, I did,” he said it as if he was in a trance.

Alex didn’t say any more, so Alan turned back toward the lake below and the hills beyond. More silence.

Ten minutes later, somewhat gruffly, he said, “Have you been listening to me?”

Alex said, “Yes.”

“Okay.” He cleared his throat. “If you could handle all that, and if I could handle you being here, you could stay, for...a while.”

Alex nodded and it was decided.