

Like Antennas to Heaven

By Ratthew A. McDonald

“Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the overcompensations for misery. And, of course, stability isn't nearly so spectacular as instability. And being contented has none of the glamour of a good fight against misfortune, none of the picturesqueness of a struggle with temptation, or a fatal overthrow by passion or doubt. Happiness is never grand.”

- Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

Chapter 1

The snow fell in Alaska like it did nowhere else in the world—with purpose, with intention. Jonas Joplin watched it gather on the railing of his ranger station porch, collecting in soft mounds that would be gone by midday. Or maybe they wouldn't. Alaska didn't operate on certainties, and that's precisely why he had come.

Jonas didn't celebrate his birthdays anymore. He was twenty-eight, maybe twenty-nine now—he had stopped counting somewhere between the decision to leave everything behind and his arrival at Chugach State Park. The dates blurred together like the white horizon outside his window, indistinguishable and ultimately meaningless.

His morning routine never varied: coffee brewed precisely at 5:30 AM, oatmeal with nothing added, radio check-in at 6:15. The nagging voice in his head—the one that had followed him even to this remote outpost—ticked through his daily schedule with mechanical precision. *Trail inspection. Equipment maintenance. Visitor log updates.* All boxes to check off, one after another, in a life reduced to tasks.

The other rangers sometimes invited him to their monthly gatherings—potlucks with homemade dishes and stories traded around a fire. Jonas always declined. He sensed their curiosity about him, the quiet man who had escaped to the edge of civilization, and it made his skin crawl with discomfort. What would he even bring to share? Jonas didn't believe he deserved extras, treats, or indulgences. He already took enough from the world just by existing.

This morning, as he logged weather conditions in his notebook, Jonas noticed his hands lingering over the page. In the corner, almost without his permission, his pencil had sketched the outline of a bird—a raven, its wings caught mid-flight. He stared at it, this small act of creation that had somehow slipped through the rigid schedule governing his days. For a moment, something stirred within him—a distant memory of pleasure, of making something from nothing. The smell of burning wood, the sloppily engraved name *JoJo* on a walnut bird house, even the acrid fumes of paint thinner spiraled through his senses.

The radio crackled to life, breaking his reverie. A storm warning. Unusual patterns developing over the mountains. Jonas closed his notebook quickly, as if hiding evidence of a crime, and returned to his list of tasks—the comfortable, stifling normal that kept him tethered to this empty version of himself he couldn't seem to escape.

Chapter 2

The radio warning about the storm stayed with Jonas as he prepared for his afternoon patrol. He glanced at the small mirror by the cabin door—not out of vanity, but out of routine, another checkpoint in his daily regimen. The face that looked back at him was one he barely recognized anymore, though it hadn't changed much in years. Slightly taller than most men he'd worked with, Jonas carried extra weight around his middle—not the solid bulk of someone who worked with their hands, yet not the flab of someone who indulged when they saw fit. His softness was closer to that of someone whose body was merely a vessel, neither punished nor celebrated. His brown hair hung to his chin, the ends still betraying hints of a purplish-red dye job from earlier in his life—a remnant of a time when he'd tried to be someone. He hadn't bothered cutting it since arriving in Alaska. What was the point? The wildlife didn't care what he looked like, and the seasonal tourist rarely stayed long enough to remember his face.

His facial hair grew in uneven patches despite the meticulous nature in everything else. The contrast might have been amusing if anyone had been around to notice it—a man whose logbooks were immaculate but whose appearance suggested someone who had given up the social contract altogether. His eyes, a muted greyish-green, had a permanent downward tilt at the corners, as if perpetually apologizing for taking up space in the world. They sat slightly sunken into his face, shadowed by nights of fitful sleep.

Jonas pulled on his heavy park service jacket and stepped outside. The air had changed since morning—it held a metallic tang that experienced rangers recognized as a harbinger of serious weather. He checked his watch: 1:42 PM. He was already 7 minutes behind schedule.

The trail that led from his station into the deeper reaches of Chugach was familiar territory. Jonas had walked it enough times that he could navigate it with his eyes closed, marking each landmark in his mental checklist. *Fallen spruce at a quarter mile. Split boulder at half mile. Creek crossing at mile one.* But today, something felt off about the familiar path. The usual sounds of the forest—ravens calling, the distant rustle of small animals, even the occasional moose call heard from the nearby Glen Alps— had gone quiet.

He paused at the creek crossing, watching the water rush beneath a thin skin of forming ice. The temperature was dropping faster than forecasted, though Jonas had learned that forecasts in Alaska were a rough estimate at best. Jonas pulled out his weather notebook and made a precise notation of the time and temperature. As he wrote, a gust of wind ruffled the pages, and he looked up to see the sky had darkened considerably to the north. Storm clouds so dense they appeared almost solid were building over the mountains, unlike any formation he'd seen in his three years at Chugach.

The rational part of his mind—the part that operated on schedules and expectations—told him to turn back. Protocol for rapidly-forming weather systems was clear. But Jonas hesitated, frozen between protocol and something else—a curiosity, perhaps, or something deeper he couldn't name.

As he stood, his radio crackled to life.

“All rangers return to stations immediately. I repeat, all rangers return to stations. We’re tracking abnormal atmospheric conditions moving in from the northwest. This is not a drill.”

It was Jolene, the chief ranger, her usually calm voice tightened with concern. Jonas clicked his radio in acknowledgement and turned back towards his cabin. But he’s gone only a quarter mile when the first snowflakes began to fall—fat, heavy flakes that seemed to materialize out of clear air rather than falling from clouds. By the time the trees around his station came into view, visibility had dropped to less than fifty yards. Snow that should have taken hours to accumulate was already ankle-deep, and the temperature had plummeted to well below freezing. Jonas stumbled onto his porch as the wind picked up, howling through the trees with voices that sounded almost human.

Inside, he moved on autopilot, checking off emergency protocols. *Radio. Backup generator. Water supply. Food reserves. Emergency kit.* Each item in its place, each step followed precisely. But beneath the practiced movements, something unfamiliar stirred in Jonas’ chest—not fear, exactly, but awareness. The awareness that nature operated on its own terms, indifferent to human schedules and expectations.

The radio reports grew increasingly concerning. Other rangers described similar conditions across the park—sudden, localized blizzard conditions appearing without warning.

Weather satellites showed nothing matching what they were experiencing on the ground, as if the storm only existed within the boundaries of Chugach.

“-never seen anything like it-” chirped a fragmented transmission from the western station.

“-temperature dropping at impossible rates-” reported another.

Jonas sat at his small desk, making careful notes as reports came in. When the power flickered and died despite the backup generator, he switched to candlelight without missing a beat in his documentation. The storm had become a problem to solve, data to record, a disruption in his schedule that needed managing.

It was only when the wind tore part of his roof away with a terrible screech of metal that Jonas was forced to confront the reality of his situation. Cold air and snow poured into the cabin, and he knew immediately that the structure would not survive the night. He had perhaps minutes to gather what he needed to find a better—or at least in-tact shelter.

Working with his usual mechanical efficiency, Jonas packed his emergency tent, sleeping bag rated for arctic conditions, provisions for three days, fire-starting equipment, and his notebooks. Some distant part of his mind noted the strangeness of including the notebooks—they served no survival purpose—but his hands moved of their own accord, unwilling to leave behind his careful observations.

The storm had transformed the familiar landscapes into an alien terrain. Wind-sculpted snow created ghostly formations and wave-like swells where trees should have been. Visibility extended barely beyond arm's length. Jonas oriented himself using his compass and the rough mental map he'd constructed over years of patrols.

There was a rock formation a quarter mile east that formed a natural windbreak—his best chance at setting up the tent somewhere where it wouldn't be immediately shredded by the storm. Each step required tremendous effort, the snow already knee-deep and drifting higher. The cold bit through his layers, finding the seams in his clothing with uncanny precision.

When he reached the rocks, his fingers were nearly useless, clumsy with cold despite his insulated gloves. Still, Jonas worked methodically, securing the specialized tent to the rocky ground with metal spikes designed for ice and snow. The fluorescent orange fabric whipped violently as he fought to stabilize it, the color an alien intrusion in the white wasteland surrounding him.

Once inside, sealed away from the direct assault of the wind, Jonas allowed himself three deep breaths—no more, no less—before resuming his checklist. *Secure shelter. Establish a heat source. Assess provisions. Attempt communication.*

The small emergency stove struggled against the overwhelming cold, providing just enough heat to keep the temperatures inside the tent barely above freezing, though not without

letting off the ghastly scent of burning kerosene. His radio produced nothing but static across all channels. Cell service, spotty even on clear days, was nonexistent. For the first time since arriving in Alaska, Jonas Joplin was truly, completely alone.

As darkness fell—though it was difficult to distinguish from the white opacity of the storm—Jonas made his final notes of the day by headlamp:

Storm continues unabated. Wind speed estimated at 60+ mph. Temperature approximately -30°F with windchill. No radio contact established. Sheltered holding for now. Will reassess at first light.

He closed the notebook and placed it carefully beside his sleeping bag. Without the familiar routine of his station, without the comforting tick of a task to complete, Jonas felt something unraveling within him—a thread pulled loose from the tightly woven fabric of his existence. The storm howled outside, a sound so consuming it might have been coming from inside his own head.

Jonas checked his watch: 8:17 PM. Time for sleep according to his mental schedule. He laid down in his sleeping bag, closed his eyes, and waited for unconsciousness to claim him, even as the walls of the tent shuddered around him like a living thing fighting for breath.

Sleep, however, proved elusive. In its place came thoughts—unwelcome visitors that had no place in Jonas' carefully ordered world. Thoughts of how easily he might disappear here, how completely. How no one would really miss Jonas Joplin if the storm simply erased him from existence. How perhaps that had been the point of coming to Alaska all along—not to find something, but to lose himself so thoroughly that even he couldn't remember what he once had.

As the night deepened and the temperature dropped further, Jonas found himself doing something he hadn't done in years. With trembling fingers, he opened his notebook again and turned to a blank page. But instead of weather observations, he began to draw—crude, shaky lines at first, then with growing confidence. The raven he had sketched that morning appeared again, but this time it wasn't alone. This time, it was in flight above a human figure standing in the snow, arms outstretched to a sky full of impossible stars.