

CHAPTER 1

Before the plane crashed, before it became more than the sound of a mosquito up in the sky, a moose, a great northern Alaskan moose, stepped into the bright body of water called Long Lake. The moose appeared coated in copper; he had been rolling in dirt and mud to rid his ears and body of the mosquitoes that peppered him all day. He weighed thirteen hundred pounds and stood over seven feet high at the shoulder. He possessed a forty-inch-long leg and measured ten feet from tail to nose. As distant relatives, he counted the wapiti or North American elk, the caribou, the mule deer, and the whitetail in his family. He was a deer, the largest in the world, and on this summer evening, his pedicels – two small knots of soft tissue just forward of

the ears – had pushed out into what became, over the long summer season, the trademark symbol of moose: palmate antlers.

He was the first animal to notice the plane.

The sound of the plane changed when it was still a fair distance away from Long Lake. What had been a steady hum suddenly became erratic and choked. Gradually, as if the engine had tried to clear its throat and failed, the plane began to glide and spin. In all the world below, at least from the height of the plane, it seemed the only thing in motion. That was an illusion, of course, because the land beneath the plane teemed with life: the getting and keeping of calories, the squirrel on the branch, the jay, the Arctic char tucked under a white stone in cold, cold water. A cinnamon-colored bear, a grizzly, raked its fierce claws through a rotted birch log, the log cadaverous and round. The bear's eyes cast up for a moment at the spectacle of a silver creature falling, falling, falling. The bear went back to feeding, its front teeth snapping yellow, meaty grubs like popcorn kernels.

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The plane dropped from the Alaskan sky in the last light of a late-summer evening. Seen from a distance, the plane's plummet might have contained an element of beauty. The dying sunlight flashed on its outstretched wings, and the sudden cessation of sound – the stalled engine, the slice of air over the fuselage, the creak of the wings' guy wires – signified the return of the natural silence that marked the north country. Wind canted the plane slightly to starboard, and if it were possible to be above the plane, one might have witnessed a flash of light coming off the pilot's window as the forward momentum of the plane began to slow.

The pilot thumbed at the radio, tried to restart the engine, looked hurriedly about him. Russell Hedgeman, fifty-four, had been a bush pilot for over twenty years, and he was competent and smart, a veteran, a fellow who had thrown his hat into the Alaskan guiding business years before. Two days earlier, he had already ferried *Junior Action News Team's* film crew to the town of Takalut to scout locations on the southern slope of the Brooks Range. In other words, he did not panic. He had been in tight spots previously, but this time, with the plane

fighting him, he felt a quiet enter his body and a premonition – yes, today was the day that he had waited for and fought off for a million miles or more – that he would not survive. Now that it was here, he did not mind it so much. He went through the necessary procedures, and if a pilot licensing board had recorded his actions, he would have passed their inspection, received nods of propriety. He did his best, and his best was quite good.

Russell Hedgeman aimed the plane as well as he could toward water. It was his only chance, the plane's best bet. He felt the steering harness in his shoulders and chest, and he yanked hard to get the plane to respond, but it was done listening to him. It had become a heavy, unresponsive thing, its shrug at giving in to gravity fierce and terrifying. It dropped nosefirst, and though Russell tried to get the nose to rise, the weight of the engine forced it down. In his last moments, Russell thought of a balsa glider he had owned as a boy: the lovely broad wings, the way he had once climbed to the top of a shady maple and launched the plane. It had flown for what seemed

like miles on the North Carolina breeze, falling as softly as a leaf, the metal nose clip keeping the yaw intact, and once, on a stronger breeze, it had risen again almost to his height in the tree. A monumental flight. That's what Russell remembered as he felt the trees begin ripping at the plane's wings, the spars jabbing through and trying to impale him.

Eleven passengers falling from the sky. Nine *Junior Action News Team* members, the crew of a teen-based TV magazine show that brought the viewers different adventures from around the world. They were on their way to record a program near the Brooks Range in central Alaska about summer training for the Iditarod dogsled race. Four boys, one accompanied by his father. Three girls, one on the verge of international fame, two of them twins. One thirty-three-year-old producer: a short, gabby man who hated flying, hated kids pretty much, and thought his services would be better suited to working with a real television program, not some ridiculous preteen after-school show like *Junior Action News Team*.