

**WOLF  
ROAD**

**ALICE  
ROBERTS**

Simon & Schuster

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## WINTER'S END

**T**uuli sat on the compacted snow at the top of the cliff, looking out over the river. It was mostly white, but there were darker patches along the bank where the ice was thinning. It was time to move on.

Signs of spring were all around – a warmer feel to the still-icy air, bare larch branches emerging from their snowy winter shrouds, lighter mornings. All these changes stirred a tingling sense of excitement in Tuuli. But at the same time, she was always sorry to have to leave Winter Camp.

She felt somehow right in this landscape, settled, tucked in among the snowdrifts. The place where they camped was safe, nestled under the cliff, high up above the frozen river. They used natural rock-shelters, some just shallow hollows, others deep enough to be called caves, putting

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up tented entrances in front of them against the wind and snow. The reindeer spent many moons in the valleys around this place, so it was easy to go on short hunting trips and keep the tribe well fed through the winter.

But now the great had gathered, and was leaving, heading west towards the sunset, towards the sea. The lichen was running out, and the promise of better pastures beckoned with the lengthening days. The reindeer must have the *idea* of the summer meadows, perhaps a memory, tugging at them, compelling them to move. Most of the herd was already well on its way. Tuuli could see a few last stragglers just making their way out of the valley in the distance. A myriad hooves had left a trail of churned-up snow in their wake.

Tuuli loved the view up here, across the ice-bound river to the other side of the gorge, and right into the distance, sunwards, where the eternally snow-capped mountains touched the sky. Last night, she'd come up here to watch the show as the sun set and the mountains were silhouetted against the blazing orange sky. It was so beautiful. She'd bathed in that beauty, immersed herself in it. But she'd also felt a familiar sadness, filling her chest. Because it was time to leave.

This morning, she was shaking off that melancholy. The

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sun, just rising and starting to warm the air a little, was behind her – as she gazed out in the direction of the journey she'd be taking. The snow was beginning to sparkle. Tuuli was looking forward to the journey ahead. Like the reindeer, the *idea* of the summer meadows, glowing like honey in her memories, tugged at her. New adventures lay ahead.

Tuuli shrugged and wriggled her toes in her reindeer-fur boots. She'd stayed still too long – her feet were starting to feel cold and she'd lost the feeling completely in the tips of her long second toes. She flexed them some more to bring them back to life. Then she got up, dusted off the snow from her coat, also made of reindeer fur, turned away from the mountains and the river and started to walk back down to the camp – or what was left of it.

As she made her way down, she could see that most of the lean-to tents had been dismantled. And while the skeletal frames of two tall, free-standing tipis had been left, some shorter larch poles had been bundled up, ready to be pulled along. The bent-larch frames of a couple of smaller yurts had also been left, as their shape made them too awkward to pack for travel. But the hide coverings of all the tents had been wrapped up and tied with sinews onto pulks – small sleds – for the journey.

Now the hunters were tying everything else that would

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come with them for the journey onto their pulks. Parcels of tools – knives, picks and axes made of flint, antler and bone, some with wooden handles – all tied up in animal skins, were layered in between animal furs. There were packets of unworked flint too, good stuff from the hills that couldn't be found further downstream. And smaller food parcels of dried meat, chunks of fat, and very old, dried roots. Unworked antlers were tied on to the largest pulks, last of all. Some grass mats came with them, while others – along with hides too tatty to be worth bringing – were left tucked inside the caves and rock-shelters. There was a chance those things would still be there when they returned.

Two sleds were different. – On each of these, a fox-fur blanket had been secured over a soft bundle of hides that was arranged to make a cradle. The two babies of the tribe, both swaddled in luxuriant fox furs with their faces only just visible, would be tied onto these tiny chariots, to be pulled along by their mothers. One of the babies was Tuuli's little brother, Ketki, just ten moons old.

Tuuli's father, Remi, was checking the trampled site of their tent. He always did this before they set off to make sure they hadn't left any precious objects behind.

“Are you all right, Tuuli?” her mother, Jutsa, asked, as

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she tied the baby in its fur papoose onto the pulk. She knew that Tuuli often found leaving places difficult, especially this one. Tuuli didn't really know why leaving filled her with such melancholy. She enjoyed travelling, once they were on the move. But the dismantling of the camp, the packing up of everything, the *change*, was somehow unsettling. Although they did the same thing each year, it still felt like an interruption to the normal flow. It marked time.

"Toomi-Tuuli, are you all right?" her mother asked again, gently, standing up and putting her arm around her tall daughter. Tuuli rustled herself out of her wistfulness and kissed her mother on the cheek, with her nose, blowing a tiny puff of warm air on Jutsa's face.

"Thank you, Mama. I'm fine. Just thinking about leaving again. You know. But I am excited, too."

"Well, in just a half-moon we'll be at Spring Camp," said her mother.

"I do love Spring Camp." Tuuli smiled, leaning in and stroking Ketki's cheek. He was bundled up so snugly in a white fox-fur wrap.

"The little eight-petal flowers coming out from the under their blanket of snow . . ." mused Jutsa.

"And the salmon! Delicious salmon!"

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“We’ll be there so soon,” said Jutsa. “And then there’s Summer Camp to look forward to as well. Now, are you ready? Have you got all your stuff? I can’t imagine there’s anything left here.”

Tuuli’s mother scuffed with her fur-booted feet at what had been the floor of the tent, covered in brushwood, moss and scraps of fur. She reached down to pick up an object which just turned out to be a waste flake of flint. She dropped it again, then stood up, pushing her hands into the small of her back and arching a little to stretch the muscles which were aching from all the bending, lifting and carrying she’d been doing that morning.

“And look,” Jutsa said, taking a deep breath. “It’s such a beautiful day for a journey.”

It *was* beautiful. The snow was brown and trampled where the reindeer herd had been, but there were still huge drifts of glittering, glistening snow everywhere. The bare trees were like feathers planted in the whiteness. A few small birches bent their heads over to bury their twigs in the snow.

“I’m ready,” said Tuuli, picking up the reins from her pulk and tying them to her belt, then picking up her spear. It would help her to walk as well as being useful for defence if necessary.

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Jutsa, who was leader of their small tribe, stood up straight and surveyed the dismantled camp and the heavily laden pulks.

“It’s time to go,” she said to Tuuli. Off they went, a small tribe or talo of five families. Seventeen people, with all their worldly goods strapped to their backs and packed up on ten pulks, and dragging another three bundles of tent-poles. They had a long trek ahead of them.

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**P**ulling her small pulk behind her, Tuuli deliberately lagged behind her parents until she fell back with her older cousin, Wren.

“Hey, Wren.”

Wren looked round, peering at her cousin from inside her fur-fringed hood. Most of the tribe, Tuuli included, had brown or hazel eyes, but Wren’s were the deepest brown. A few strands of her dark curly hair escaped from her hood.

“Hey, Tuuli,” she said, smiling. “You were up on the cliff this morning. Could you see any reindeer up there?”

“Just the last stragglers, moving off.”

“And how about the river?”

“It looked snowy and icy still. I don’t think we’ll be

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getting our feet wet today. Anyway, I hope not!”

Wren and Tuuli could remember several years when the ice had been melting just a bit too much as they began their end-of-winter trek north.

“Remember that time when we had to cross the river? How many winters ago was that?” asked Tuuli.

“That was *so* cold. Taking our clothes off, floating the pulks across. It must be six winters ago – so I’d have been eight and you were tiny, only six!”

“It was freezing. I never want to have to do that again,” said Tuuli, shivering at the memory.

“You know who’d like it, though,” responded Wren. “Poz. He just loves swimming in icy rivers. He’s mad for it.”

“Or just actually mad”, concluded Tuuli.

Poz was another cousin, a bit younger than Tuuli. His family brought up the rear of the little procession of people and sleds making its way up the valley. Poz was the craziest kid in their talo. He was always up to something odd, usually risky. He loved telling stories of his exploits round the fire in the evening, though it was always difficult to tell exactly where reality ended and his imagination took over.

“Remember the time that Poz told us he’d killed a

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mammoth?!” exclaimed Tuuli. “Hern’s horns, that was some story. He said he’d jumped on its back and stuck a spear through its neck, and it carried him off for miles, trying to buck him off.”

“Buck him off! No one’s ever seen a bucking mammoth!”

“Poz has, apparently! And then he said he kicked it and made it run up a cliff and jump off, but of course he leaped off just before the mammoth plunged to its death on the rocks below.”

“And then he tried to drag it home but all he could do in the end was work one of its tusks loose and drag that back to the camp. Is there any of that tusk left?”

“There is a bit. I mean, that was a great piece of ivory. All these fixings –” Wren waved at the toggles on the twisted sinews holding her gear onto her pulk – “are from that ivory. And my toggles. And my snow-goggles.”

“Mine are too. I think everyone got a piece of Poz’s tusk.”

“But he saved a bit. Just the tip of it. He keeps saying he’s going to make something special out of it. I’ve seen his carving, though – he should hand it over to Aunt Aski. She’d make something really beautiful.”

They tramped on and on. By the time the sun reached its midpoint in the sky, they’d reached the place where they needed to cross the river. Tuuli’s father, Remi – wearing

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his long coat of fox fur, the animal he was named for – walked out on the ice, carefully, testing his weight on it.

“It’s still good and thick,” he shouted back to the rest of the talo, waiting on the riverbank. “We’ll make it over safely. Just be careful of the edges. The thaw is late this year, but it’s happening fast.”

They forded just upstream of where the reindeer herd had crossed. Tuuli knew to follow others’ footsteps, but she also took time to tap down through the snow to the ice with her spear to test it. All winter, they walked on the icy river without a second thought – they would even tie deer bones to their feet and skate on it – but once the spring arrived, the river – still bound in ice but unpredictable – became a dangerous force.

Just downstream, they came back to reindeer-trampled snow. They didn’t need to rush, as they’d camp on the way, following the trail of the herd, and catch up with them eventually, in a few weeks’ time.

After the ice-river crossing, they gathered together and pulled up the pulks. All the children had been collecting bits of brushwood on the way, and now they lit a small fire and sat round it. Tuuli sat next to her older cousin, and they each unwrapped their parcels of roasted reindeer meat and started to tear off pieces to eat.

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“I’m fed up of just reindeer,” said Tuuli, through a mouthful of the stringy meat.

“Oh, but we had hare the day before last,” said Wren. “That’s my favourite, I think. Or ptarmigan, I like ptarmigan. Though one bird’s not much meat for a whole family, and Kuba always manages to grab more than his fair share, of course.”

Kuba was Wren’s younger brother. They currently existed in a love-hate dynamic. They were fiercely protective of each other, but with five years between them, they often rubbed each other up the wrong way. Kuba was at the age where he thought putting lumps of ice in Wren’s boots was hilarious. Once, he’d sewed up the sleeves of her fur coat so that she couldn’t get her hands out. But if she played any tricks on him, he’d go running straight to their mother, Starra, and Wren would be in deep trouble.

Jutsa came over to offer them some fermented reindeer milk. Tuuli took the leather bag and tentatively sipped a little from it.

“Ugh, I think it’s past its best!” She grimaced at Wren.

“Let me try it,” said Wren, taking the bag and tipping it back to slurp the kumis. She swallowed it and made a face.

“That’s pretty rank. I think it’s actually fizzing. How old is it?”

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“Hern knows. Mama must have made it a couple of weeks ago. I’m sure this isn’t good for us.”

“Oh well, at least it might counteract the effects of all the meat we’ve been eating!” Wren laughed.

Through all the long winter, meat was their main food. And it was mostly reindeer. Sometimes there would be groups of reindeer close by, and hunting parties could head off and return the same day with meat for everyone. At other times, they’d be more distant, and hunters could be away for six or seven days. But though they were reindeer people – sustained by the reindeer, connected with the reindeer – there were always other animals to hunt as well. People who stayed put in Winter Camp would keep themselves fed with hare, grouse, and sometimes deer, while they waited for hunting parties to return with a haul of reindeer meat. The hunters would come back with the fleshy legs tied at the hooves in pairs, hung over their shoulders. Sometimes they brought back bison too. Sometimes even mammoth. But reindeer were the staple.

The herds would mill around the deep valleys, digging down through the snow with their hooves to get to the mossy lichen underneath – their meagre winter fodder. But now the reindeer had exhausted the lichen, they were

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moving on. And when the herds decided to move on, the people moved with them.

Jutsa and her younger sister Aski had been breastfeeding their babies. Now the two mothers were wrapping the infants back up, ready for the afternoon's journey. Jutsa bundled up Tuuli's baby brother, little Ketki and secured him amongst the furs on her pulk. He looked like he was going to fall asleep immediately. Aski loosened her reindeer-fur coat and tucked her smaller baby, Nika, into a sling underneath it, before closing the coat again by tying a long sinew belt under the baby. Nika nuzzled into her, contented, and they were just about ready to set off again.

But Kuba was messing around with Poz's younger brother and sister – all of them with bare hands and feet – pushing each other into the softening snowdrifts. Tuuli was laughing, but Wren didn't find it so funny.

“Kuba, you'll just get wet and cold. And you're a bad influence on the others!” said Wren, exasperated. “Can't you just get ready to go?”

“Oh, you're so sensible and BORING!” shouted Kuba, throwing a snowball which caught her off guard and landed inside Wren's hood.

“Kuba! You're such a pain in the . . .”

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“Wren!” Her mother Starra intervened. “Come on, he’s just having fun.”

Wren draped herself over Tuuli and groaned.

“He really can do no wrong,” she moaned under her breath. “I’ve got snow melting down my neck now. He is such a pain in the backside.”

Suddenly, Poz appeared out of nowhere, hurtling – and like a charging bison, put his head down and collided with Kuba’s stomach. The two of them went rolling over and over in the snow. Tuuli was now laughing out loud, and even Wren cracked a smile.

“Admit it,” said Tuuli, “they are hilarious.”

“Wild animals, more like,” said Wren.

Eventually, the boys wore themselves out and got ready to go, and the small tribe was on the move again. They trudged along the valley for another four hours that day; then, as the sun was hovering above the horizon, they stopped to set up camp for the night. They’d brought piles of skins with them on the pulks – from the tipis and lean-to shelters up against the cliffs at Winter Camp. Now the hides would be used to create smaller tents as they camped along the way on this long hike west to the summer grazing grounds. They’d dragged some of the shorter larch poles with them too. These poles were long

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enough to form the frame for a small tipi – the easiest way to put up a temporary shelter.

They lit a fire and cooked outside the tents. A couple of Tuuli's uncles had headed off to hunt when the talo had come to a stop. By the time the tents were up and the fire was going, they were back, with a hare and two rock ptarmigans to share amongst the tribe. It wasn't much, but at least it was fresh, which meant they could keep the rations of roasted and dried reindeer meat and rancid fat for the journey. Kuba had finally made himself useful and sharpened a few long sticks to skewer the little carcasses, so they could be roasted over the roaring fire. The meat was shared out among the tribe. Tuuli was lucky and got a hare's hind leg. She ate all the meat off the bones, stripping them completely bare. She broke the thigh bone in half and picked out the delicious fatty marrow inside with a thin stick. Eventually she had to admit there was nothing more to be extracted, and she threw the greasy bones onto the fire and sat licking her fingers.

After her mother had crawled into the tipi to get an early night with the baby, but Tuuli sat outside, leaning against her father's legs, enjoying the heat of the fire and the lazy chat. She watched the embers glowing, like a living thing. Every now and then there was a pop, and little flurry of

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bright sparks would launch upwards, drifting in the cold air for a few moments before losing its hot glow. Talk had already turned to what would happen when they caught up with the reindeer. They knew when this would happen, as their route was planned to intersect the course of the reindeers' migration, which never varied, year to year. The reindeer always followed the valleys, and the tribe should catch up with them in a half-moon, heading up over high ground to meet the valley snaking back around. There was a perfect meander downstream, where the reindeer would have to cross the river, and where the hunters could lie in wait in the bushes on the far side.

"I'll get to try out my new dart-thrower," Remi was saying. This invention was already his pride and joy. He'd been working on it all winter, whittling it to perfection during the long evenings.

"So this is my sixth dart-thrower," mused Remi. "The others have all had problems, but I could see how to improve them. And this one, I believe, is the wolf's nuts. It will fly strong and true and deliver us meat to feast on. You're all going to want one like it, I can assure you."

On the other side of the fire, Uncle Leon laughed and spat out the piece of hare leg he was eating. Another uncle, Kussa, guffawed.

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“Something funny?” asked Remi, with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“No, no,” said Leon quickly. And then, quietly, sarcastically, “I can’t wait to see it, really.”

Kussa laughed again.

Remi shifted his weight, to sit in a more upright position. Tuuli moved away from him slightly. She could see how this was going. The women had gone to bed – even Wren – and now the men were going to have a row. There was often tension in the air at this time of year, when everyone was a bit hungry, surviving on the remaining winter rations with thin pickings from short daily hunting trips, with nothing much to gather or dig for, yet. Now they were on the move, things were thrown up in the air. Food wasn’t always forthcoming. People were jostling for their place in the tribe. And Remi had lost his great friend and ally, Uncle Maluv.

Maluv had died last leaf-fall, poisoned by the bite of a wounded fox. His final days had been wretched. He’d ranted and torn off all his clothes before eventually staggering out of his tent into the taiga, just as the winter was approaching.

Tuuli stared into the flames of the fire, thinking about Maluv and the sky burial they’d given him. Starra had

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washed his body, then oiled it with reindeer fat, and all the men had lifted him up onto a timber platform built up among the branches of larches. His body would have been picked clean by ravens, eagles, even kestrels. Reduced to a skeletal essence, dry bones, that would be scattered and lost, returning to the earth. She wiped a tear from her eye, and rubbed her cheeks, feeling sad for Starra, who'd lost her partner, and Wren and Kuba, who'd lost their papa. And for her own papa, right now. His other cousin, Maatu, would have supported him, Tuuli knew, but he'd already turned in for the night.

Leon and Kussa – the lion and the ox – were brothers, both of them tall, with long, black hair and beards. Tuuli was more than a little suspicious of them. They seemed to share a mean streak. She didn't like the way they laughed at her father. She'd seen them doing it over the last year, when they thought no one was watching. But now that Maluv had gone back to the spirits, they were doing it openly – around the fire, which was meant to be a circle of friends.

The discussion about the dart-thrower and the barbed comments went on. Tuuli watched the flames flickering and dancing, and half-listened in.

“All *I* need is a strong arm to throw a dart swift and true,” said Leon.

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“I can throw much further with this, though,” said Remi, turning the dart-thrower over in his hands.

This is what the new dart-thrower design was about. A simple dart or javelin worked perfectly well on its own over a shorter distance; Remi had brought down plenty of reindeer and other animals with his darts. He was a skilled hunter.

“It’ll turn you soft,” said Kussa. “What’s wrong with a javelin anyway? Why do you always have to try to improve on what the Ancients gave us?”

“I just think we can build on what went before,” Remi replied. “We don’t have to do the same thing, year after year, generation after generation.”

He continued whittling the notch at the end of the dart-thrower.

“You know Jutsa thinks you’re wasting your time,” said Leon.

Remi ignored this remark. But Tuuli knew it was partly true. Jutsa had said as much. She didn’t understand Remi’s drive to endlessly innovate. Jutsa believed in a world where every sort of living thing had its place, and humans were just another living thing, alongside the willows and the hawks and the reindeer, and the cycles of the seasons, and the circle of life and death. And everything was the same,

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always; their own lives were echoes of the lives of the Ancients, and their children and grandchildren would live in the same pattern, migrating with the reindeer, playing out their repeating destinies. It was comfortable and familiar and balanced.

Tuuli knew her father believed something different. He thought humans were set apart from the rest of nature, in a special way. He believed that there was a unique creative urge that separated people out. And he was always looking for ways to improve weapons, sleds and tips. Jutsa preferred things to stay the way they'd always been. But she didn't complain when Remi made her beautiful, polished stone and ivory beads. Years ago, he'd carved her an ivory swan, in flight. She, in return, had made him a tiny mammoth. They'd exchanged these small, beautiful, gifts when they declared their love for each other.

When Tuuli was tiny, Remi had carved things for her too. In the long winter evenings – after making sure weapons were fixed and ready, with plenty of replacement tips – there would still be time to make other things: objects which would never be used merely for survival, but were somehow even more important. Remi had made Tuuli the small bone bird that she always wore on a thin sinew-string around her neck. “A little hawk for my

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wind-hawk,” he’d said. Tuuli instinctively felt for it now, under her layers of furs. A talisman in the dark night.

Sparks were flying up into the charcoal-black sky again. The fire had burned down into glowing red embers. Tuuli had fallen asleep and her father was gently nudging her awake. The ground underneath them was cold and the chill had crept into Tuuli. They both crawled into their low tipi, pulling reindeer blankets over and around themselves. Tuuli heard Ketki stirring, waking for a feed. Remi rolled over and started snoring. On the opposite side of the tipi, Tuuli drew her knees away from the cold hide, dragged the edge of a blanket over her head, and drifted into a deep sleep.