

SCARIEST. STORY. EVER.

RICHARD VAN CAMP

"Sugar Snow" they call it. It had been falling for hours. *Shit*, now I was going to have to do the church parking lot and then Ingrid's and then Frank Senior's. But I had to put the hours in. I had to continue to gain the trust of the Elders.

I needed their stories.

I was one of the three finalists for the Scariest Story Ever Award. The event was in Yellowknife tomorrow night; CBC was going to record it before a live audience. First prize was a thousand bucks and I had earned this. I'd done good. I recounted a story that I had heard a long time ago from Narcise, a trapper now long dead, about why horseshoes outside a home ward off the Devil. It got me a standing ovation. This was after I told the story of "How Cat Came to Be," as told by Irena Tobacco. I was lucky. CBC didn't record and broadcast and nobody had their cell phone out to record and upload to YouTube. There also wasn't a Tobacco family member in the room so I was good. My nomination to represent Fort Simmer in the annual territorial competition was official and I was feeling great. My only problem? I didn't have an even scarier

story for the finals. To win I'd need to go to the source. I'd need to go to Mike in the part of town we call "Indian Village." Mike was Irena Tobacco's nephew and he, I suspected, was the keeper of the scariest story ever.

"Uncle Mike," as we called him, was going to be a grandpa at the end of the month. His small house was already filled with baby gear—a new car seat, a potty, three big boxes of Pampers were piled on the old freezer that had been humming here since the days of Aunt Irena. There was a blue hamper full of baby clothes already folded right beside it on a small shelf that showcased a bush radio that was turned off. There were pictures on the wall of family, friends: good times, cherished memories. And there were class photos of Junior, Mike's son: all the way up from kindergarten to grade twelve to Junior's graduation photos. You'd never guess that a kid who we all assumed was given the world would end up knowingly selling tainted drugs that took the life of a brand-new mother in Yellowknife. Junior was in custody and we'd learn soon what his sentence was, minus time already served. It was horrible, but I could use this to my advantage.

I loved how it smelled here: fresh brain-tanned moosehide on Mike's moccasins and mint tea steeping. But, like always—even decades later—the floor was cold. I should have brought my moccasins. It was going to be Halloween soon and it was, what, thirty-two degrees below out? Tons of snow. All of us were breathing a little easier knowing it wouldn't be a bad fire season next year.

I've always loved this house, despite the cold floor and the fact that all the stray dogs in Indian Village love to sit in the yard. I'd actually wanted to buy it after I graduated from college. It had a quiet furnace and a wrap-around design so the kitchen flows into the living room and there are three separate bedrooms around the corner. I took the tour when Irena's family held an open house. The family was going to sell it at a loss because Fort Smith was

going through tough times. Mike was going to move to his cabin out of town. I put in an offer of ten thousand dollars less than it was listed. If I'd gotten it, my truck payments would have been more than my mortgage. But Mike changed his mind and decided not to sell. The house had a big yard on a pie lot that opened into a lush forest of spruce and pine. It always felt so cozy here—despite the floor—and I could see that Mike had hauled a big smoker for ribs and brisket on his porch right next to the barbeque.

I could see the newspaper on the table: *The Fort Simmer Chronicle*. The info for the final showdown for the North's Scariest Story was on page two. The story of Junior was on page one. Mike knew why I was there so I brought gifts and cash. I was hoping he'd make bannock. Mike's secret, I'd heard, was that he used warm water. He told a friend, "Just use warm water and everything falls into place." "Mike," I said looking at the first box of food I'd brought him from the Northern: yogurt, strawberries, blueberry powder from Green Lake, Saskatchewan, moose dry meat from Bobby and Barb. "You know I'm representing Simmer in Yellowknife for that contest."

"Oh yeah," he said, putting a pot of fresh tea on one of his aunty's doilies. "That's tomorrow, hey? You're driving up?"

"They're flying me up." I nodded. "I need your help. Can you please tell me Irena's scariest story? I can pay."

He chuckled. He came back with two mugs: one for him, one for me. Then he shook his head.

Uh-oh. He shook his head again. I tried to laugh it off and said, "Come on. Don't be cheap. I got fifteen minutes before my dad picks me up."

Here I was in my forties and my dad was still picking me up when my truck was in the shop.

"All right," Mike said. "I'll tell you a story. A long time ago, I was seeing a—"

"I need Irena's story," I said firmly and reached into my pocket for cash. "Her scariest one."

Mike looked at me and he looked at the second box of food I'd brought him: blueberries, a big tin of Timmy's coffee, lard, butter, flour, raisins, a jumbo box of Raisin Bran, a no-name sack of one hundred tea bags, oranges, apples, bananas. "My oil tank is getting low," he said and looked to his moccasins.

I pulled out forty bucks and tapped it on the table twice. Mike had always had bad feet and he walked like a bear. He did his slow walk toward the cash and said, "Mahsi cho," before placing the money in his breast pocket.

I shrugged. "I know you're not supposed to pay for medicine, but you can always help a nephew out, eh?"

He smiled. "Oh yes, I can always help a nephew out. That first prize is a thousand bucks." He looked down at the two twenties hidden in his shirt. "I have a grandbaby on the way, and we're low on dog food, too." He pointed with his big Dene lips in the direction of the house where five big huskies and a few mongrel dogs all slept together out of the wind.

My cheeks burned as I reached into my pocket. I pulled out two one-hundred-dollar bills. "That's all I got."

He looked at me directly and grinned. "You sure you want Irena's scariest story?"

I smiled and sat up. If I had flippers, I'd start clapping them. "Oh yes. I'm ready."

"You're sure you're sure?" He peered at me and grinned wider.

I nodded and poured him tea before pouring mine. God, it smelled good. "Yes."

Mike took a big breath and stood tall. He put his hands in his pockets. He'd gotten bigger over the years. Not fatter. Just bigger. Here in our northern truck town of 2,500 people who are French, Bush Cree, Dene, English, and Métis, if you get a paunch the men

will tease you and say, "Well, lookie here, you're getting a little roof over the toolshed." Most will blush, but it's a compliment because here in the north we tease those we adore. We tease who we feel safe with. We're also complimenting your life because if you've got a paunch, you're slowing down. You're enjoying Pimatsawin: a happy life, as the Bush Crees call it here.

"A long time ago," Mike began as he sat down on his recliner, "we would go camping and my parents would bring Aunty Irena with them. She had a cane and a bad cough, remember?" He motioned for me to sip my tea. I took off my jacket and placed it on the back of the chair I was sitting on.

Mike glanced up to the ceiling and stretched before looking at me and continuing. "Aunty would tell us scary stories and it would just wreck the whole summer because, after that, one of her stories would chase you." He smiled, shook his head, and looked out the window. He'd been getting shaky these past few months. I could see it in his hands. This was why he kept them in his pockets now. "Aunty never had kids that lived, and at night you could hear her in the kitchen tent going through things to steal for her own little tent. She'd set off mouse traps and you could hear her swearing in Cree and we'd all laugh, but she'd help herself to whatever she wanted, but we didn't say nothing. She was a good storyteller. But when we came back to town after camping, we'd all go to her house to hear more scary stories and we'd see what she stole right there on her counter: a box of spark plugs, a hatchet, packs of matches, earplugs, axe handles, food. Some things she needed. Other things she sold. Just like you."

What? I'm surprised by this: An insult? My cheeks flushed and burned.

He kept going. "Well, after some time now, Irena started to repeat herself and she kept telling us the same stories over and over and us kids, we started to figure this was on purpose.

"She was the one who told us the Dogrib or Tłı̨chǫ story about how Cat came to be," Mike said. I winced as this was the story I borrowed for the win the other night. Now I'd have to pretend I didn't know it.

He continued: "Irena said a long time ago when the world was new, there was a flood and all the people had to leave their homes and race to a small tiny place, an island, that wasn't underwater. There, the animals became friends and they could see that it was Cat who was the friendliest. Cat was the peacemaker. Cat was the romancer. Everyone was happier when Cat was around and it was Cat who stopped the wars between certain animals. It was a blessing, the animals agreed at night, that they had Cat to help bring light during such difficult times.

"Over time, the water started to leave and there was a land bridge back to the mainland and the people decided to travel together. But the Devil was waiting halfway. Some think the Devil is a handsome man in a suit but what they saw was a small boy with hay for hair and sticks for teeth. The child had no eyes. It grinned in their direction with its black stick teeth as the animals grew closer. Everyone got cold. People think Hell is a place of fire, but it's a growing hole of ice. Where the child would touch, there'd be a hiss of ice. The animals could smell Home through the wall of ice around the boy. They could almost see it.

"You can pass," the child said as it twisted its head to hear where they were standing before clicking its stick teeth over and over as it sniffed the air. "But you have to leave one of your own with me. You have to gift me a friend."

"The animals knew that this had to be. The Devil had power. The child's hair ignited and they could see a small cold light in each of its eye sockets. It was waiting.

"The animals began to argue. No one wanted to stay behind. They panicked.

"As usual, Cat did not know what was happening because Cat was in the back visiting with everyone, wrapping his long slinking tail around the legs of those he visited. The lead animals knew this and realized at once that they could use it.

"Cat," they called. "Go to that boy on the bridge. He is pitiful and has no friends. Go find out who he is and come back and tell us."

"Oh, I'd love to!" Cat smiled. "No friends? Oh how sad. Let me help him. He must be cold standing there all alone."

"Cat trotted forward and became the Devil's friend instantly. Cat wrapped his long feathery tail around the legs of the Devil and began to purr. The Devil smiled and purred back, like a huge lion. Cat loved this and climbed the body of the boy, who knelt down, and they began to talk as the animals watched.

"The Devil was happy. It moved out of the way and stood with its back to the people. They began to run past it quietly as it and Cat visited and laughed. There the animals discovered more water behind the child, stopping them from going home. They were hostage to the Devil until it was done with them. Water began to flood the animals and they had to stop and walk back toward Cat and the Devil.

"Look," the Devil said to Cat and pointed directly at them. It had only been pretending to not see. It knew exactly where the animals stood. "Look at your friends."

"Cat looked and realized that he'd been left behind. 'I don't understand,' Cat said. "This is my family."

"Are they?" the Devil asked, stroking Cat's tail. "They offered you to me so they could go home."

"But I want to go home, too," Cat said and looked pleadingly at all of his friends. "I trusted them."

"Yes, you did." The Devil smiled as it turned and began choking Cat. It reached under his ribs and began pulling and twisting

Cat's heart. Cat choked and thrashed and cried out as the animals watched. Blood flew as Cat scratched and gouged the Devil's arm and the blood that splattered the ice bridge hissed and smoked. The Devil started to smile even harder, grinding its stick teeth, and then it started to laugh. Cat scratched and kicked and tried biting, but the Devil pulled his heart over and over with its fingers as it squeezed harder and harder on his throat. The people could hear the snapping of small bones in Cat's throat and his tongue bulged out. His eyes rolled back and his face was a grimace and the Devil then blew its breath into Cat and Cat became still. The animals who looked back were weeping. Some were wailing. Not one of them could look away.

"'Yes,' the Devil clicked. 'Yes. You belong to me now. From here, your teeth shall be sharp like mine.' He smiled. 'Your claws will be wicked and you will always remember that it was your friends who sacrificed you for your trust and kindness so now you will walk alone and be pitiful with this memory. You will always know you were given to me, the Devil—betrayed by your friends.'

"And just like that Cat hissed at the other animals when he wanted to talk and his teeth were sharp and his claws were wicked and the hair on his back raised in hatred for his friends. The water cleared and all of the animals were allowed to go home, but when they arrived they were heartsick for what they had done and now we know the story.

"That story is a great story maybe the first ten times you hear it but after the twentieth time over and over, she gets a little stale, hey?" Mike said. "It was like Irena was hitting the pause button on something even scarier. So finally, one day, Arlis, the oldest, spoke for all of us: 'Yes, Aunty. We heard that one already. We know how it ends.' We'd heard about a movie that was so scary that it had people fainting and running to churches. For some reason, we wanted to be that scared. All us little kids in Indian Village had

a meeting and we said, 'Aunty, we want you to tell us the scariest Wheetago or Sasquatch or Aliens or Little People story you know. Tell us about demons. Scare us!' and Irena asked us, 'Why?' It was the way she asked it. It's like she set out a little snare braided with human hair, like she was showing it to us, shaking it a little, warning us.

"'Because we're not little kids anymore and we know that it's all just pretend. There's no Wheetagos. There's no Sasquatch. There's no Devil. Aliens are just one big fib. Nothing you said is real,' Arlis said and we looked at one another. He said what we'd come there to say and now it felt dangerous.

"'Are you sure you want to hear my scariest story?' she asked us.

"She looked sad for us. I should have paid attention.

"Arlis wrinkled his nose to steady his glasses back into place. He was the coolest babysitter. He'd let us do anything, even let us watch as much TV as we wanted, even until our eyes dried out and our vision blurred, so he could read more Stephen King. 'How 'bout, Aunty,' one of us said, 'we make a deal where you tell us your scariest story and we'll link arms. We'll even wear our jammies. We'll even bring our blankets. We'll all go pee before so we won't have accidents but if we link our arms together we'll be strong. Our medicine will be strong. We'll even get our Bibles and sweetgrass in front of us and we'll put rat root and sage behind us so nothing can sneak up on us. We'll be protected. Our courage will unite us. And if we do have to go pee in the middle of the night we'll all go together.'

"So my aunty said, 'Well if you want it. If you think you're ready, you have to do three things.' And we all looked at one another with wide eyes because this was now a possibility. We were all like 'What?'

"'You have to do three things,' she repeated, and started to cough. We all looked at one another. Her cough was getting worse,

deeper, cracklier. She turned and spat something into a Kleenex. She looked at what had come up for a while and shook her head before folding it and throwing it into the woodstove. We all looked at one another, winced and wrinkled our noses in disgust.

"So you kids really want to do this?" she asked as she sipped her tea. "You really want the scariest story ever told?"

"We all cheered, 'Yeah!'"

"And she looked at this one picture on her shelf of pictures. It was a frame you'd put a baby's photo in. It was facedown. She glanced at it before looking down and she shook her head, suddenly so sad.

"What's wrong, Aunty?" I asked her. Irena had been lonely these past few years. She used a cane now to walk and she was all hunched up. As her cough grew louder and her coughing fits lasted longer and longer, fewer and fewer people came to visit her. She was often the last on the list for food from the community hunt. With so little family left, she was starting to turn invisible.

"You only get to be kids once," she said. "After this story, you won't be kids anymore."

"Everyone laughed but me. 'Yeah right,' they all said. 'As if. *Wah!*' But this was serious. I looked into the woodstove, and you could see that what was in the black waxy middle of the Kleenex still hadn't burned. It was so thick the fire couldn't grab it. Gross!"

"Tell us!" Arlis said.

"It was a good thing he was bossy."

"I realized I was digging my heels into the carpet already," Mike told me, looking up suddenly, "because I'd never realized what we were all agreeing to. It's like we were all standing at the edge of a cliff no one told us about and what was waiting below was cold and starving."

"Okay, what?" the kids asked. "What's the first thing?"

"All of you have to clean your rooms," Irena said.

"Whaaa!" We were all crying, rolling around, yelling, "Don't be like that. Don't be cheap! Don't make us. Come on. Anything but cleaning our rooms!"

"Irena said, 'No, you clean all your rooms. That's part one. You do that. Then you come back.'"

"Well, we had to go house to house to help one another. It took a week for everyone to clean their rooms, eh? So finally we all came back, and we watched as she took her phone and she called all our parents and she said, 'Go in their rooms. If there's anything not perfectly right you call me.'"

"The parents all called back or stopped by with food and said, 'Aunty, thank you. It's perfect. The bedrooms in our homes are spotless.' So all us kids started linking arms and some of us had little yellow ropes tied to one another in case today was the day and she was going to tell us her scariest story, and we said, 'All right you said there were three things we had to do. What's the second thing?'"

"She said, 'You have to clean your yards—front and back—and mine: front and back.'"

"Whaaa!" We all started crying. Even me. "Oh hey! Come on now. That's enough now! We're just little kids."

"She shook her head. 'Namoyah. A long time ago people had pride in their yards. I don't see that anymore. I miss that. Go clean your yards and then you come back.' Well, it took two weeks. We all teamed up and we got weed whackers, shovels, rakes, bags for leaves—good Lord, the dog poop! The dogs didn't like it: it was one disruption after another to their society meetings, I guess. We begged our parents and they helped clean up. There were chainsaws and axes for all the downed trees and there were bags of lawn clippings for the Town to pick up. And all those runs to the dump. I remember my dad making trip after trip with other men as garbage was placed on the side of the roads to be taken away. The

people worked hard, together. We cleaned Aunty's yard—front and back—and you could see that it hadn't been cleaned in years. You know, I can still recall how good the air smelled after we cleaned everything up. You could smell the sap from all the trees we cleared and cut down. And the light was different. It reached us, you know?

"One by one the kids and their parents showed up with more food to thank her and she ate good. Aunty ate good. She filled her freezer, her fridge, her cupboards. All those berries and she kept asking for blueberry root, rat root, bear grease, goose grease—and she got it. I remember the tops of her cupboards had silver bowls filled with dry meat, dry fish, fat, pemmican—and she shared so when you visited now, boy, you ate good.

"So, finally now, after we all walked her around to show her all the work we did together, she said, 'I'm going to call the mayor, the chief, and the president of the Métis Association and they're going to do an inspection. Everyone always calls down Indian Village for being dirty and filled with Greedy Treaties and lazy Indians but they're going to see who we are now. We worked together and now we're the cleanest part of Fort Simmer.' And that's what they did. Holy cannoli, it even made the paper.

"Aunty said, 'You all live here as a family. We are all related in memory. It is a gift to live here, to come from here. The leaders, the police, the nurses, the church, everyone's trying their best. I like that new jungle gym elephant they put up for the kids at JBS with the slide for the nose.

"When someone dies, who's the first to cook for you and shake your hand and sit with you? The people. That's who. You know, we have to reclaim our dignity and our pride. We're given these houses. We're given these yards. We're given these fences. They give us all this stuff and us, we forgot our part. But that's where pride

lives: for when you work hard for what you have and share. I read the paper, me, and we're like wolves fighting for scraps. That's what the government wants, that we keep fighting, and that's why Hay River and Yellowknife keep getting better opportunities. It's time for us to work together again, like we used to.

"So we cleaned Indian Village and even I remember how good it felt to get up and race around on my bike and see all the wood stacked from the fallen trees. Everyone was happy, giving one another the Fort Simmer Nod when you went by. All for a scary story. I still remember how everyone would go cruising through Indian Village at night in their trucks and say, 'Look at these beautiful homes. Look at all the yards, all clean.' And couples would hold hands and go for walks and kids would say hi on their bikes. We were happy and proud. To our surprise, the other sides of town started to clean up their own backyards: the Welfare Center, downtown, by Panty Point, the airport trailer court. Soon our town was sparkling!"

Mike took a long sip of his mint tea and so did I. This was frickin' boring. I already knew all this and it wasn't what I came for.

"So finally now at the end of summer," Mike continued, "Aunty did a little walk around the village with all of us kids one more time but this time it was for the Yellowknife paper and for the *Chronicle*. The reporters wanted to hear about how the promise of one story had cleaned up a larger part of Fort Simmer. She didn't need her cane this time and she said, 'Now this, this is how I remember Fort Simmer. This is how Simmer used to look and feel: proud.' And that was the summer and fall families started sitting on their porches with tea and coffee and bannock and the families started to visit once again.

"The mayor even said in the paper, 'I don't understand it. Fort Simmer has never looked cleaner. People from Hay River and Fort

Smith have been driving hours to look at our gorgeous town and they're even cleaning up their towns to compete with the beauty of ours. Good luck! And we hear that's sparked something similar with Fort Resolution and Fort Providence. My goodness! What a spectacle to behold. Hats off to everyone who volunteered their time to really show off the Garden Capital of the North. We are the Gateway to Wood Buffalo Park. We are the Pumpkin Capital of the north and our pelicans are going to be so happy when they soar back and they see their summer home looking so fresh and shiny.'

"Chief Danny got in there and squeezed in an interview. It was hilarious. 'Once again,' he said, 'when Columbus got lost we saved him, okay? The Indians saved him. Get that through your moon-yow face. When he saw how beautiful we, as Indians, were and continue to be. You know they say the prettiest women come from Fort Simmer and the handsomest men, too, ey? You know that, right? You didn't need to go to school to learn that, hey, Junior? You were born knowing that. I know they say the best don't advertise but come on now. I tell people when I'm in Ottawa where I'm from and as soon as I say, 'Fort Simmer,' they shake my hand and bow because Columbus called us 'Indios.' You know what that means? That means 'With God.' That's our heavenly natural light. Indios. Indians. We are the natural beauty where the divine earth meets the heavenly sky, Junior. We are Indios and now you know us as Dene, the original people. The First people of Denendeh. Land of the people.'"

Mike started laughing. "Holy cannoli, Chief Danny's statement went for pages and frankly no one can remember what the Métis president said because, well, you never want to take the stage after Chief Danny."

Mike shook his head again and chuckled. I shook my own head and smiled with him. He then looked at the clock: "Ahem, okay.

So that was the summer the Indians outshone everyone in Simmer and that started a chain effort where everyone competed with everyone to have the cleanest yard and most manicured part of town. And it is true: Hay River, Fort Res, Fort Smith, and Fort Providence cleaned themselves up, too, all because of Aunty Irena.

"And when all was said and done, Aunty's house was filled with kids from all parts of town: they all got together because they wanted to hear this scary story that had cleaned our town even though it hadn't been told yet. . . . We all felt a part of something huge. I remember that summer there were no break-ins anywhere. Lonny, the Dog Catcher and By Law Officer, went home every night because there was simply nowhere he needed to be because everyone was home helping out, doing chores, waiting for the night Aunty would tell her story. When she asked, 'All right, are you all ready for the last task?' we all cheered, 'Yeah!'

"Before I tell you the story,' she said, 'you have to bring your parents tonight at eight. Your parents need to hear the beginning. If they think you can handle it, I'll share it all.'

"Wait a minute,' Arlis said. 'You never said this was for parents, too. This is just for us kids.'

"But no one else said anything. I sat up and realized that maybe this would save us. If my parents got word of this, maybe they wouldn't let me attend.

"No parents,' Irena said, 'no story. If my boys had lived, I would never forgive anyone who took their happiness away.'

"We all looked at one another. Now *this* was spooky, but it actually felt good because Irena had given us an escape route. We all took off and grabbed our parents and begged them to come listen. Even me. I begged them to come, but they were drinking and Irena knew that. She let me come alone, like always.

"So at eight that night, Indian Village was packed with trucks.

Irena's house was filled with parents who'd brought gifts and food, but they weren't smiling. Something had changed. This was not fun anymore. This was real, they could see.

"Auntie met them at the door. Her fire was going in her woodstove. She looked young again and she stood straight.

"My goodness.' She smiled and looked at everyone. 'All of this for one scary story. Come in. Come in.'

"We could see a big pot of water simmering on her stove. The element was red hot underneath it. None of us were offered tea, coffee or water or juice. You could feel that we were all to sit and listen, so we all did. A big fan, one usually reserved for a long hot summer, was going, rotating slowly, probably to move the smoke and heat around.

"On her couch were two small somethings wrapped in two twisted black garbage bags covered with two blue baby blankets. Whatever was inside those blankets was small and every once in a while, when the rotating fan would pass by, the plastic around those two somethings would rustle. Like whatever these things were were unthawing and remembering that they were alive, kind of. Some parents pointed. Others grabbed their kids and left. 'No,' one mom said. 'We're going. That's enough. Auntie, why are you doing this?'

"Because they asked,' she said and looked down. She was smiling, chuckling to herself.

"Other parents started to do the same. And when they left, more parents who were on the porch caught a glimpse of what was on the couch and they, too, took their kids.

"Whenever that plastic would rustle from the air of the fan fanning it, Irena would say in Cree, 'Namoyah. Awas. Awas. Not yet.' For 'No. Go away. Not yet.'

"As she spoke, I realized she was no longer sick. She wasn't using her cane. She'd grown. Could you draw power from the spirit of a

story? I think so. She was living proof. Her house was now full of food and visitors and respect and gratitude. Our town was clean because of her. Families were visiting because of her. Now she just had to tell us the story.

"I'll keep my part,' Auntie said, looking at the few listeners who remained, but her voice had changed. She had a man's voice now. 'But I ask those of you who want your kids to stay kids, take them away before I start because once I start I can't stop. They'll get mad if I stop and we don't want them mad. We don't want to thaw them for nothing.' She looked at the two plastic somethings and, as the fan moved the air in the room, the plastic crinkled again. Did the bundles move? I swear they moved. It was like they twitched or were frozen and trying to stretch. Through the black garbage bags, I saw two little open mouths. You could see the outlines of whatever was inside those plastic bags when the air from the fan hit them and they looked like, well, I won't say it."

Mike looked down and then he looked at the gifts piled high for his grandbaby on the way. He started to have his tremors again so he sat up and continued.

"She then grabbed a mason jar and started to shake it. What was inside were black smooth rocks of all sizes.

"Oh, wait,' she said. 'They have a song for you. I'll teach you. They love this song as they wake up. It's a lullaby. It goes, 'We need toes for our jar,' she smiled and clicked her teeth, 'and ribs for our soup. We need toes for our jar and ribs for our soup.'"

"She looked mean chanting this, but we realized that it wasn't for her. It was for what or who was in those plastic bags that was making her say this: 'I need toes for my jar and ribs for my soup.' Each time she said this her voice got deeper and louder until she was shaking and chanting and as she moved the blankets moved until they started to jump. It was like they were altogether bound by the chant: 'I need toes for my jar and ribs for my soup!'

"*Sh sh sh*, the rocks raced around the jar, and when I looked closer I realized that they weren't rocks or pebbles. They were toes. Petrified toes.

"I need toes for my jar and ribs for my soup!"

"*Sh sh sh*."

"The dogs outside started to howl.

"When the pot started to boil over and we heard the hissing and spitting on the stove top, everyone stood and ran outside, racing to their trucks, holding the arms and hands of their children. And then Aunty Irena threw her head back and started laughing, started cackling.

"They say that that night the priest was awoken by begging families and a church service was demanded to bless the children and bless the parents. Some people smudged. Others went down to the rocks to pray and offer tobacco to the Creator and to their ancestors for protection."

"What did you do?" I asked.

He looked at me and then to his feet. "I stayed. I sat down. I served my auntie tea. I was the only one to stay and listen and hear the scariest story ever told, and I'm going to share it next week in Yellowknife."

"What?" I asked, surprised.

Mike looked at me for a long time. His features changed. They darkened. "You know what we lost, Simon? We lost the power of shame. Long time ago, in the seventies, if you came up here and you bothered a girl from Fort Smith? Holy cow, you'd get a frickin' lickin' from her brothers, her dad, her uncles, her grandpas, her exes. You got the shit kicked out of you in ways you'd never imagine. Then, if you still had the balls to stick around town, people would turn their backs to you. Treat you invisible. Even at the bank. Even at the Bay. Now we wave to the wife beaters, the pedophiles, the bootleggers." *The drug dealers*, I wanted to add. "We do

this because we're scared. The courts take too long and those who are charged know who made the call and they are punished." Mike hung his head for a while. "I'm tired of all of this."

I hoped he was talking about his son. I prayed he was talking about his son.

"What happened to you?" he asked and looked at me.

Oh, shit. I sat up in my chair. "What?"

"You had my trust for a while, Nephew." His cheeks were red. Was he going to fight me?

My face started to burn. "What are you talking about?"

"This town wants to give you everything." He reached across the table and spread his massive hands, gripping the sides of the table. "I want to give you everything. But now I don't know."

I let my breath out and steadied myself. Shit. Here it came. I felt like I was on an elevator and the cord had snapped.

Mike held his hand up by his shoulder. "I remember when you were growing up, you had the sweetest smile. You were always helping people. It was good. We were happy whenever you were around. As you grew, you always respected the Elders. You were always serving tea at the meetings, always sitting with the storytellers, listening. But as you grew—and I don't know what happened. You never left. You never went for schoolin' down south. All your friends did and look at them now: happy, with kids, married. Making a living with purpose. What do you have that you haven't stolen?"

I could feel my jaw shift. I did this when I felt shame. I willed it back in place. "Mike," I said.

"Listen. I'm not done." His eyes were fierce when he looked directly at me and I felt his anger fill the room. "So you stayed and did little jobs. And then you started showing up with your tape recorder. You started recording the Elders and we were happy you were getting the stories down but you never brought them back like you said."

I raised my hands to talk.

"Listen," Mike said firmly. "You will listen because what I'm about to tell you a lot of Elders want to say, most of them are long gone now. But they left wondering why you stole our stories."

"Whoa, Mike," I said, embarrassed. "Take it easy."

"Listen," he said. "You're about to receive the biggest truth—and you've had this coming for a while. You came here tonight to steal a story, a story you don't have any right to. Why? It's to make money and steal what isn't yours. You came here with a pittance of what you wanted to make next week." He looked up at the ceiling. "But here's what we're going to do. You're going to stop."

"Stop?" I asked. I could not remember ever feeling so ashamed and scared. "What do you mean stop?"

He looked at me. "You're going to stop and you're going to listen. And you're going to go home and you're going to write out all those stories that you took and you're going to give them back: word for word. You're going to make copies of all those tapes from our loved ones, and give them to the families of those storytellers and those knowledge keepers. Their children and grandchildren are still here and they deserve their ancestors' stories. You're going to do what you said you were going to do a long time ago."

"Mike," I said. "That's, what, forty tapes."

He nodded. "Do this and you will be the hero you deserve to be for taking the time to do those things."

I thought about it. I had no money. I had my dad's cheap boom box that could duplicate tapes. This would take months to do. How could I type out hours of visiting and storytelling? How?

"Right now, you're calculating how long this will take you, right?"

I nodded.

"And right now you're feeling ashamed and embarrassed, right?"

I nodded and looked down. My face was burning.

"Nephew," he said and leaned forward. "This is your chance to make good on all that you promised. You do this and you will have the trust of the people. You'll have my trust and I will teach you everything I know. My own family, my own kids, they don't have time for my stories. They want to do this." He made a motion of playing video games. "I've got a cabin I haven't been to in over a year. Nobody wants to go there anymore. Nobody wants to hunt or trap or fish. They want it easy."

I nodded. He was talking about Junior.

"But you do all of this, Nephew. You keep your promises. You keep your word, maybe I'll give you my cabin and you will learn. You'll learn that a blue sky is dangerous and it's the gray overcast days when you haul your water, cut your wood, secure your camp. You'll learn how to read the land in the ways of our ancestors. I knew your mom, your dad, your grandparents. I remember what they knew. You could learn all of this through me, but no more bullshit, okay? No more ripping off people who believe in you."

I thought of Mike's cabin. He posted pics on Facebook. It was gorgeous. He had a tipi for smoking dry meat and dry fish, and he had access to the river. If I ever had a family of my own, I could take them there and we could be happy.

I had tears in my eyes.

"You deserve a family of your own. If you're not going to leave Simmet, you can learn from her, but you have to honor her with protocol and respect." To my surprise, he patted my hand tenderly. "And I will teach you how."

I looked at him. He was smiling, warmly.

"Remember when I told you what the three best lures for lynx are?"

I nodded. "Aqua Velva aftershave, rotten loach, and catnip mixed with peanut butter."

He nodded.

"Remember when I told you the three things you need to survive out in the bush?"

I nodded. "An axe, snowshoes, and a flint."

"Remember when I told you where to find the sweetest mint?"

"On top of a beaver lodge."

"That's right," he said and pointed to his temple. "That was—what—ten years ago I told you that. See? You've got it. You have the gift. You're a listener. Remember how I told you a long time ago that there is one listener in every family?"

I nodded. He had me. "Yeah."

"Well, you're it and I'll go even further. There's a treasured few in every town. I've been this one's for so long and I won't be here forever, so let's start over. No more bullshit. No more lies. I'm winning next week's scary story contest, Nephew. Call CBC and tell them you're giving up your seat to your uncle to represent Fort Simmer, and I'm giving you half the winnings."

I looked at him, surprised. "What?"

He nodded. "You're going to use that money to buy tapes, paper, whatever you need, and you're going to make good on everything we spoke about and then you will apprentice under me and I'll teach you what your grandfather knew: how to stop a windstorm with a willow and four rocks. I'll teach you everything I've become through stories and you will become this town through Spirit, stories, protocol, and memory."

I found myself smiling.

"Sound good?" He smiled.

"Yeah." My voice cracked. "Yes. Thank you, Mike." This is what I always wanted: to be held to something. To answer to someone. I heard a honk in the driveway and saw my dad's headlights shine in Mike's front window. The dogs outside barked and ran around the lights.

Mike waved out the window to my dad. "Watch my house

while I'm gone and I'll honor you with five hundred bucks for being my apprentice. Your life—your true and sincere life—begins now and I will help you. We—the Elders of this town who have no one to listen to them—will help you." He smiled. "Nephew." I shook his hand and hugged him, really hugged him. "Thank you, Uncle."

"A long time ago . . ." Mike looked to me and winked. "I was on a similar path as you. Lucky for me, the right person at the right time set me straight."

I nodded.

"You can't bullshit a bullshitter, Nephew," Mike said and patted my shoulder. "Let our bullshitting days be done. Thank you for the food you brought me. Mahsi cho."

Richard Van Camp is a proud Tłı̨chǫ Dene from Fort Smith, NWT. He is the bestselling author of twenty-seven books these past twenty-seven years, and his novel, *The Lesser Blessed*, is now a feature film with First Generation Films. Van Camp is an internationally renowned storyteller whose passion is helping others reclaim their family medicines. You can visit with Richard on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SoundCloud, YouTube, and at his official site: richardvancamp.com.