

MISHA ALEXANDROV

Ross Colony, Alta California, 1827

Misha Alexandrov pushed himself through a narrow space between two burly men, bursting through to the ship's railing in time to catch the old crewman pointing just beyond the bow. The man shouted again, "There she is, beyond the point! See the top of her southern guard tower? There, on the peninsula ahead!"

Men dressed in heavy parkas leaned against the ship's railing peering ahead to where the grizzled sailor's eyes were focused. Misha, who didn't look his ten years, stood his ground, defending his small space at the rail. He braced himself as the ship heaved its bulk over yet another wave, then lifted his hand, shielding his eyes against the sun's morning rays.

The fog which had blanketed the coast since first light had lifted, leaving behind only drifting wisps. At last, the rocky shore and sandstone cliffs revealed themselves to the crew and passengers of the Russian brigantine ship, *Surorov*. Weeks of sailing rough seas in the waters of the north Pacific made the fortress an especially welcome sight.

Now the boy saw the stout wooden walls of the stockade along with its guard towers. Ross Fortress sat serenely on the peninsula just above a small, secluded cove flanked by deep ravines on either side. On the beach, a partially constructed ship balanced on giant logs.

The *Surorov* floated close enough for the boy to recognize men on the shore working around a half-dozen small boats, the ones the Russians called baidarkas, the same Aleut kayaks that fished the waters of Archangel. The men near these boats waved at the passengers. Misha, along with several others at the rail, waved back.

"Look, Misha, the men must be going seal hunting! One of them already put his baidarka into the sea." Dimitri Makarova gestured just beyond the bow of the ship. Misha looked up into the man's whiskered face, a man scarcely more than a stranger, but one on whom he had suddenly become completely dependent. The boy turned his attention once more to the shore, where one of the small crafts was just launching into the breakers.

Another passenger spoke from behind them, "They don't hunt so much now. The Aleuts were too good at their jobs, so not many seals remain. Now the hunters become farmers. I've heard that many grumble because of this, but stomachs must be filled with something other than fish."

Dimitri nodded. "Ah! I've heard the colony grows wheat here! I'd surely welcome even a crust of bread."

Misha watched Dimitri's eyes close at the memory, just as his father's had when he'd spoken of his longing for bread. What type of food could be more delicious than sea lion or salmon? He peered eagerly again at the shore, while his stomach made a curious murmur.

Coming into view were smaller buildings huddled close to the fortress like chicks near their mother hen. This village reminded Misha of the picture books from his Russian homeland, stories his father had read to him. Here were those same quaint isbas, cottages, painted blue. A short distance from the fortress stood a stocky windmill, its arms turning gently, driven by the coastal winds.

Despite the forbidding stockade walls, the open gates of the fortress seemed to extend welcoming arms to the sea. Misha smiled for the first time in many, long, cold months, and something awakened within him that had vanished with their sudden departure from Archangel, Alaska.

Misha looked up again at Dimitri's naturally serious face. This man, though his father's oldest friend and a good and decent man, was not accustomed to children. Misha knew he was uncomfortable in this sudden role thrust upon him as his guardian. Dimitri was honoring his father's dying wish, but it had been awkward for both of them.

A lonely cold clutched at the boy's heart, banishing his flush of excitement. He hugged himself against the brisk sea breeze, his fingers stroking the familiar soft sealskin of his parka. A fleeting image of his mother passed behind his closed eyelids. This touch of her last gift to him, one she'd spent a year crafting, braced his courage.

"Dimitri?" he asked, his gaze now upon the bluffs and gentle hills rising just beyond the fort.

"Yes?" Dimitri smiled down at the boy, a smile that seemed tight at the edges, as if his face were unaccustomed to the expression.

"Why isn't the ship stopping? She's sailing away from the shore, not closer?"

"The ship will take us to Port Rumianstev in Bodega Bay where the ship's cargo can be more easily unloaded. A sailor said we'll return north to the fort by land. I think we don't have more than a few hours before we arrive at the port," Dimitri answered.

"I see."

Misha gripped the rail and peered back at the shore. Slicing easily through the gentle waves, the ship sent cold spray over the deck, while the golden sun reached down, warming the young boy's face and heart. Misha laughed and licked sticky salt from his lips. With renewed hope for finding a place to once more belong, he watched the colony on the bluff grow smaller as the ship sailed south to Bodega Bay. Ross Fortress, resting high on the bluff, returned the boy's gaze and beckoned.

Chapter 2

"We cross that, yes?" Dimitri pulled at his grizzled beard. A skeptical eyebrow disappeared beneath his fur cap.

The fort construction foreman, Stepan Tarasov, pulled up the reins and grinned mirthlessly at Dimitri who sat beside him. "We've no other way to get to the fort. The Slavianka River shows her temper this time of year, but the Miwok Indians know her moods well, and the Aleuts are skilled with the baidarka. You can either trust their skill, trust God for deliverance to the other side, or both. Either way, the odds are in your favor, I think."

"And the horses? How do the horses cross? Surely they don't swim?" Dimitri asked.

"No, not this time of year. A wagon and a sturdy pair of mules are waiting on the other side. Only men are foolish enough to cross the river," Tarasov answered with a snort.

Dimitri turned to Misha, who had scrambled to perch on the box behind them. "Well, we've survived a sea crossing from Unalaska. I suppose one river shouldn't stop us from reaching our destination, eh, my young friend?"

Misha stared ahead at the flooded torrent gorged with floating debris. Giant logs tumbled in their race to the sea. The boy gulped at the prospect of crossing in the small boats pulled up on the shore. He offered Dimitri a wan smile in a feeble attempt to hide his fear.

After spending the night at Port Rumianstev, Foreman Tarasov had collected Dimitri and Misha for the overland trip to the fort. He'd made it clear from the beginning that he did not approve of the boy's presence. He had no skills and no contract with the Russian American Company, and therefore no business with the colony. Had his father not died and instead been

with him as they'd planned, the boy's presence would not have been the problem it now posed. But Tarasov lacked the authority to send him back on the ship at least, not yet.

Four men stood on the shore, two Misha recognized to be Aleut, like his mother. The third man stood taller with deep-set eyes that gave him a fierce expression. Tarasov told Dimitri that he was a Miwok Indian from Bodega.

The imposing man smiled and spoke in heavily accented Russian, "You haven't ridden a bucking horse, have you?"

Misha had seen no horses until today and would not have known a bucking one from a docile one. He shook his head.

"After today, you might say you have." The man laughed, and his face softened.

A few items were loaded into the middle seat of the baidarka that Tarasov would pilot. Dimitri stepped up to the water's edge and slowly eased himself into the forward compartment. Into the middle seat of the second baidarka, the two Aleuts loaded Dimitri's trunk.

The Miwok pulled the smaller boat into the shallow waters and motioned to Misha to come closer. Misha quickly pulled on his parka to free his hands and tried unsuccessfully to lift his leg into the bouncing baidarka, losing his footing on the slippery rocks. The Miwok grabbed his arm and pulled him upright before the cold waters drenched him.

Misha glanced over at Tarasov, whose eyes were narrowed watching his clumsy attempts. Misha knew he was small for his age and appeared weak in the man's eyes. He mustn't let the man think he was too small to be of use to him.

"Here!" Before Misha could protest and try again, the Indian lifted Misha like a sack of potatoes and lowered him into the boat's narrow opening. He then pushed the baidarka forward and slid into the back compartment. Pulling away from the shore with strong strokes, Misha's

boat easily caught up to the other pair. The men strained against the rushing current, aiming for the landing visible on the opposite bank. With each stroke of the paddle, Misha heard their labored breath come in grunts.

Misha gripped the baidarka's sides, his eyes wide as he watched the oarsmen fight against the pull of the sea. At this crossing, so near the ocean, the tide could also be a factor in the current. More than just a matter of a pulling from one side of the river to the other, this trip required constant maneuvering to avoid one obstacle after another. Everything from tangled twigs to full-size trees that had fallen close to the river's shore through the winter months careened wildly to the sea.

The boy watched Dimitri's pilot dodge a mass of limbs that were trapped in their own whirlpool. The Miwok skillfully steered the craft upstream away from the snag. As the mass passed harmlessly to the side, Misha caught sight of movement in the branches of a small floating tree - a tiny, brown bundle of wet fur. A squirrel stared back at Misha with defiant eyes and scolded him as if all this was somehow his fault.

Another log suddenly loomed into view and once more the Miwok maneuvered the craft upstream, steering away from the tree's path. The Indian grunted with the effort and the little boat tipped sharply. Misha grabbed the edge, and his eyes grew even wider.

The boatman corrected his course and shifted his balance. A sudden lifting of the bow, and then the boat lurched sideways as a log, wider in diameter than three grown men, brushed the side. Again the Indian corrected their course, but not before a second log hit them broadside with such force that Misha's hands tore free of the side. The small boat tilted wildly. Misha grabbed for something but found only air, and then only water.

He kicked his legs, attempting to push himself back to the surface, but broke above the water just as a piece of debris smacked into his head, plunging him beneath the surface again. He struggled once more, frantic for air, and emerged several feet farther away. In a desperate attempt to stay afloat, he thrashed his arms.

At one point, Misha heard Dimitri shout to him. Because of the number of times he had been spun by the waters, he strained to orient himself, uncertain of the opposite bank. He tried to locate the other boats, but logs and his own hair plastered to his face obstructed a clear view. Once more he heard a distant shout.

His parka hung heavy now and made lifting his arms difficult. His boots pulled like anchors on his legs. He kicked wildly and tugged his arm free of one sleeve, but sank again. The shock of the cold further hindered his movements.

Over and over he struggled, pushing his nose above the water, but his other arm remained trapped in the water-logged jacket. He took in a lungful of air and dived to wrestle with the sleeve that bound him. He tore at it with his unencumbered hand until at last his tangled arm pulled free. His head surfaced again, his lungs burning, but the parka was gone.

With awkward strokes, he began to paddle toward the shore when something grabbed his leg. He kicked frantically, but his foot had caught in the branches of the log snag. He twisted his body, grabbing for another branch, and managed to pull himself partially out of the water onto a larger limb. Clinging to the swiftly moving tree, he remembered the poor, drenched creature he'd seen before, who had done exactly this. Like the hapless squirrel, he was now at the mercy of the raging current.

