

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

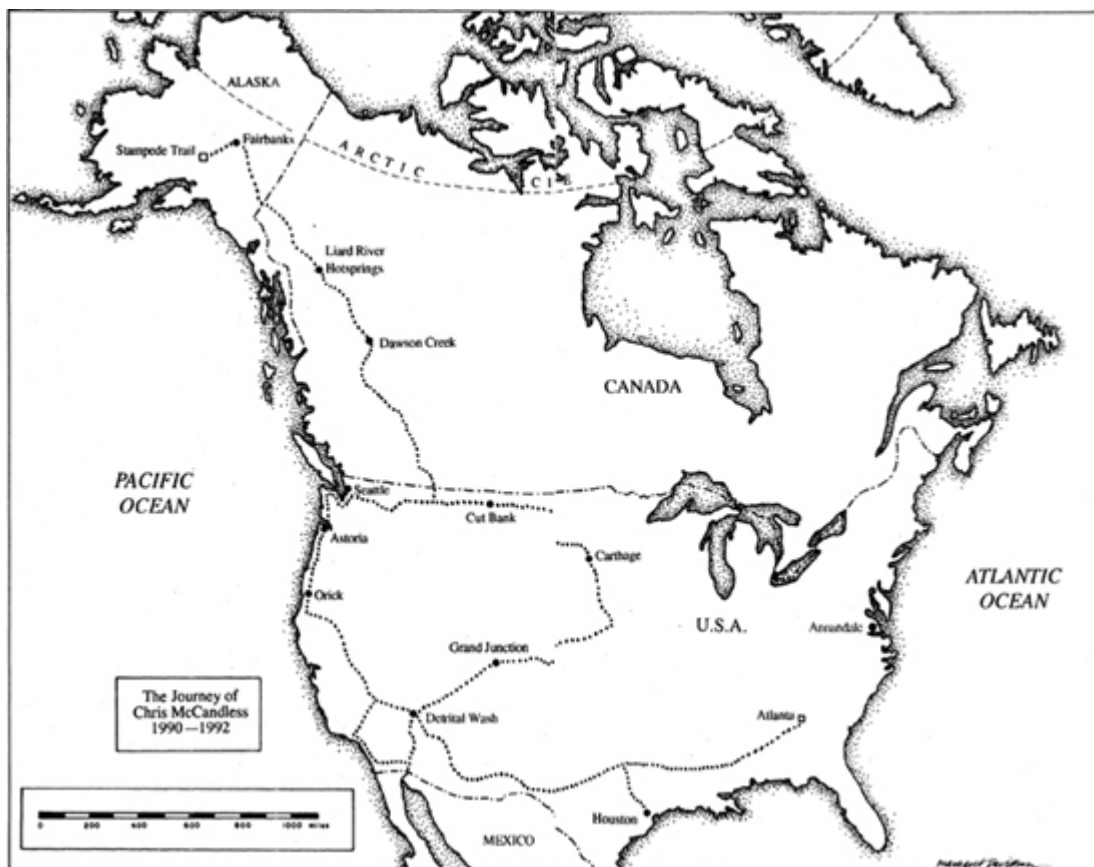
Jon Krakauer

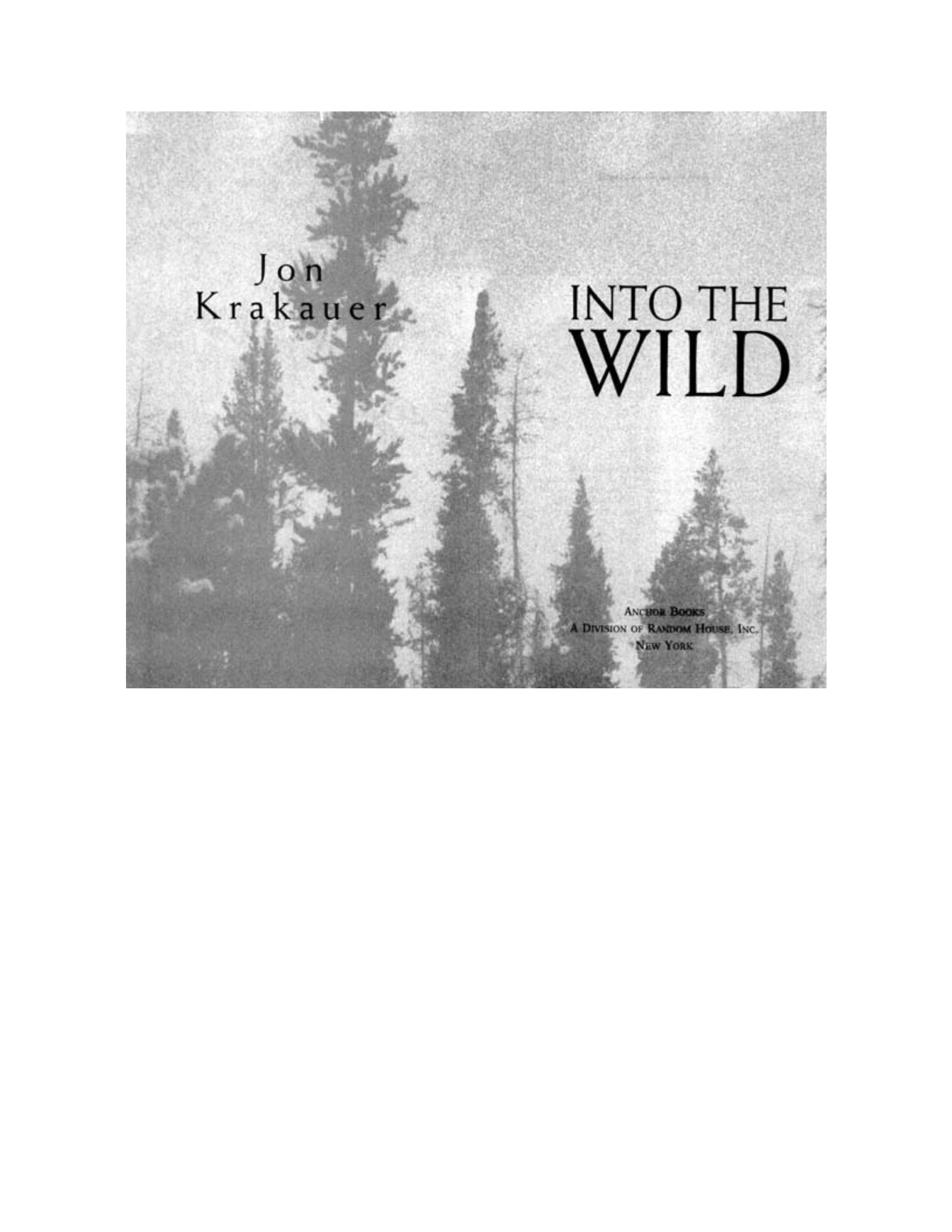
INTO THE
WILD

In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. His name was Christopher Johnson McCandless. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invented a new life for himself. Four months later, his decomposed body was found by a moose hunter. . . .

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD







Jon
Krakauer

INTO THE WILD

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FOR LINDA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do East Coast family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters.

Shortly after the discovery of the corpse, I was asked by the editor of *Outside* magazine to report on the puzzling circumstances of the boy's death. His name turned out to be Christopher Johnson McCandless. He'd grown up, I learned, in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., where he'd excelled academically and had been an elite athlete.

Immediately after graduating, with honors, from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless dropped out of sight. He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a twenty-four-thousand-dollar savings account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet. And then he invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. His family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska.

Working on a tight deadline, I wrote a nine-thousand-word article, which ran in the January 1993 issue of the magazine, but my fascination with McCandless remained long after that issue of *Outside* was replaced on the newsstands by more current journalistic fare. I was haunted by the particulars of the boy's starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own. Unwilling to let McCandless go, I spent more than a year retracing the convoluted path that led to his death in the Alaska taiga, chasing down details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered on obsession. In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip

wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons. The result of this meandering inquiry is the book now before you.

I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried—and largely succeeded, I think—to minimize my authorial presence. But let the reader be warned: I interrupt McCandless's story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless.

He was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence. Long captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance.

For most of the sixteen-week ordeal, nevertheless, McCandless more than held his own. Indeed, were it not for one or two seemingly insignificant blunders, he would have walked out of the woods in August 1992 as anonymously as he had walked into them in April. Instead, his innocent mistakes turned out to be pivotal and irreversible, his name became the stuff of tabloid headlines, and his bewildered family was left clutching the shards of a fierce and painful love.

A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in *Outside*, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a

narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity—and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received. My convictions should be apparent soon enough, but I will leave it to the reader to form his or her own opinion of Chris McCandless.

JON KRAKAUER

SEATTLE

APRIL 1995





THE ALASKA INTERIOR

April 27th, 1992

Greetings from Fairbanks! This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne. Arrived here 2 days ago. It was very difficult to catch rides in the Yukon Territory. But I finally got here.

Please return all mail I receive to the sender. It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild. Alex.

POSTCARD RECEIVED BY WAYNE WESTERBERG

IN CARTHAGE, SOUTH DAKOTA

Jim Gallien had driven four miles out of Fairbanks when he spotted the hitchhiker standing in the snow beside the road, thumb raised high, shivering in the gray Alaska dawn. He didn't appear to be very old: eighteen, maybe nineteen at most. A rifle protruded from the young man's backpack, but he looked friendly enough; a hitchhiker with a Remington semiautomatic isn't the sort of thing that gives motorists pause in the forty-ninth state. Gallien steered his truck onto the shoulder and told the kid to climb in.

The hitchhiker swung his pack into the bed of the Ford and introduced himself as Alex. “Alex?” Gallien responded, fishing for a last name.

“Just Alex,” the young man replied, pointedly rejecting the bait. Five feet seven or eight with a wiry build, he claimed to be twenty-four years old and said he was from South Dakota. He explained that he wanted a ride as far as the edge of Denali National Park, where he intended to walk deep into the bush and “live off the land for a few months.”

Gallien, a union electrician, was on his way to Anchorage, 240 miles beyond Denali on the George Parks Highway; he told Alex he’d drop him off wherever he wanted. Alex’s backpack looked as though it weighed only twenty-five or thirty pounds, which struck Gallien—an accomplished hunter and woodsman—as an improbably light load for a stay of several months in the back-country, especially so early in the spring. “He wasn’t carrying anywhere near as much food and gear as you’d expect a guy to be carrying for that kind of trip,” Gallien recalls.

The sun came up. As they rolled down from the forested ridges above the Tanana River, Alex gazed across the expanse of windswept muskeg stretching to the south. Gallien wondered whether he’d picked up one of those crackpots from the lower forty-eight who come north to live out ill-considered Jack London fantasies. Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing.

“People from Outside,” reports Gallien in a slow, sonorous drawl, “they’ll pick up a copy of *Alaska* magazine, thumb through it, get to thinkin’ ‘Hey, I’m goin’ to get on up there, live off the land, go claim me a piece of the good life.’ But when they get here and actually head out into the bush—well, it isn’t like the magazines make it out to be. The rivers are big and fast. The mosquitoes eat you alive. Most places, there aren’t a lot of animals to hunt. Livin’ in the bush isn’t no picnic.”

It was a two-hour drive from Fairbanks to the edge of Denali Park. The more they talked, the less Alex struck Gallien as a nutcase. He was congenial

and seemed well educated. He peppered Gallien with thoughtful questions about the kind of small game that live in the country, the kinds of berries he could eat—"that kind of thing."

Still, Gallien was concerned. Alex admitted that the only food in his pack was a ten-pound bag of rice. His gear seemed exceedingly minimal for the harsh conditions of the interior, which in April still lay buried under the winter snowpack. Alex's cheap leather hiking boots were neither waterproof nor well insulated. His rifle was only .22 caliber, a bore too small to rely on if he expected to kill large animals like moose and caribou, which he would have to eat if he hoped to remain very long in the country. He had no ax, no bug dope, no snowshoes, no compass. The only navigational aid in his possession was a tattered state road map he'd scrounged at a gas station.

A hundred miles out of Fairbanks the highway begins to climb into the foothills of the Alaska Range. As the truck lurched over a bridge across the Nenana River, Alex looked down at the swift current and remarked that he was afraid of the water. "A year ago down in Mexico," he told Gallien, "I was out on the ocean in a canoe, and I almost drowned when a storm came up."

A little later Alex pulled out his crude map and pointed to a dashed red line that intersected the road near the coal-mining town of Healy. It represented a route called the Stampede Trail. Seldom traveled, it isn't even marked on most road maps of Alaska. On Alex's map, nevertheless, the broken line meandered west from the Parks Highway for forty miles or so before petering out in the middle of trackless wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. This, Alex announced to Gallien, was where he intended to go.

Gallien thought the hitchhiker's scheme was foolhardy and tried repeatedly to dissuade him: "I said the hunting wasn't easy where he was going, that he could go for days without killing any game. When that didn't work, I tried to scare him with bear stories. I told him that a twenty-two probably wouldn't do anything to a grizzly except make him mad. Alex didn't seem too worried. 'I'll climb a tree' is all he said. So I explained that trees don't grow real big in that part of the state, that a bear could knock down one

of them skinny little black spruce without even trying. But he wouldn't give an inch. He had an answer for everything I threw at him."

Gallien offered to drive Alex all the way to Anchorage, buy him some decent gear, and then drive him back to wherever he wanted to go.

"No, thanks anyway," Alex replied, "I'll be fine with what I've got."

Gallien asked whether he had a hunting license.

"Hell, no," Alex scoffed. "How I feed myself is none of the government's business. Fuck their stupid rules."

When Gallien asked whether his parents or a friend knew what he was up to—whether there was anyone who would sound the alarm if he got into trouble and was overdue—Alex answered calmly that no, nobody knew of his plans, that in fact he hadn't spoken to his family in nearly two years. "I'm absolutely positive," he assured Gallien, "I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own."

"There was just no talking the guy out of it," Gallien remembers. "He was determined. Real gung ho. The word that comes to mind is *excited*. He couldn't wait to head out there and get started."

Three hours out of Fairbanks, Gallien turned off the highway and steered his beat-up 4x4 down a snow-packed side road. For the first few miles the Stampede Trail was well graded and led past cabins scattered among weedy stands of spruce and aspen. Beyond the last of the log shacks, however, the road rapidly deteriorated. Washed out and overgrown with alders, it turned into a rough, unmaintained track.

In summer the road here would have been sketchy but passable; now it was made unnavigable by a foot and a half of mushy spring snow. Ten miles from the highway, worried that he'd get stuck if he drove farther, Gallien stopped his rig on the crest of a low rise. The icy summits of the highest mountain range in North America gleamed on the southwestern horizon.

Alex insisted on giving Gallien his watch, his comb, and what he said was all his money: eighty-five cents in loose change. "I don't want your money," Gallien protested, "and I already have a watch."

“If you don’t take it, I’m going to throw it away,” Alex cheerfully retorted. “I don’t want to know what time it is. I don’t want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters.”

Before Alex left the pickup, Gallien reached behind the seat, pulled out an old pair of rubber work boots, and persuaded the boy to take them. “They were too big for him,” Gallien recalls. “But I said, ‘Wear two pair of socks, and your feet ought to stay halfway warm and dry.’”

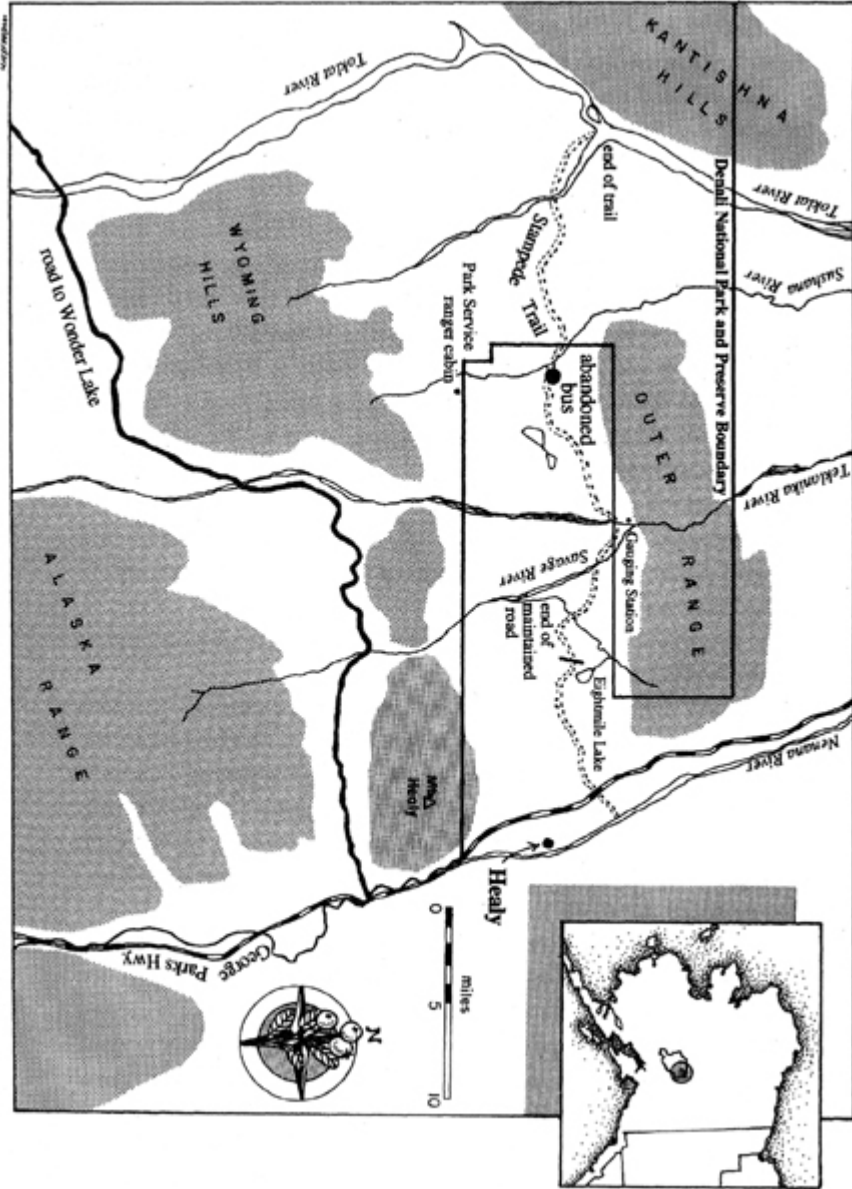
“How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gallien answered. Then he gave the kid a slip of paper with his phone number on it, which Alex carefully tucked into a nylon wallet.

“If you make it out alive, give me a call, and I’ll tell you how to get the boots back to me.”

Gallien’s wife had packed him two grilled-cheese-and-tuna sandwiches and a bag of corn chips for lunch; he persuaded the young hitchhiker to accept the food as well. Alex pulled a camera from his backpack and asked Gallien to snap a picture of him shouldering his rifle at the trailhead. Then, smiling broadly, he disappeared down the snow-covered track. The date was Tuesday, April 28, 1992.

Gallien turned the truck around, made his way back to the Parks Highway, and continued toward Anchorage. A few miles down the road he came to the small community of Healy, where the Alaska State Troopers maintain a post. Gallien briefly considered stopping and telling the authorities about Alex, then thought better of it. “I figured he’d be OK,” he explains. “I thought he’d probably get hungry pretty quick and just walk out to the highway. That’s what any normal person would do.”





THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

*Jack London is King.
Alexander Supertramp
May 1992*

*GRAFFITO CARVED INTO A PIECE OF WOOD DISCOVERED
AT THE SITE OF CHRIS MCCANDLESS'S DEATH*

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness—a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the Sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.

*JACK LONDON,
WHITE FANG*

On the northern margin of the Alaska Range, just before the hulking ramparts of Mt. McKinley and its satellites surrender to the low Kantishna plain, a series of lesser ridges, known as the Outer Range, sprawls across the flats like a rumpled blanket on an unmade bed. Between the flinty crests of the two outermost escarpments of the Outer Range runs an east-west trough, maybe five miles across, carpeted in a boggy amalgam of muskeg, alder thickets, and veins of scrawny spruce. Meandering through the tangled, rolling bottomland is the Stampede Trail, the route Chris McCandless followed into the wilderness.

The trail was blazed in the 1930s by a legendary Alaska miner named Earl Pilgrim; it led to antimony claims he'd staked on Stampede Creek, above the Clearwater Fork of the Toklat River. In 1961, a Fairbanks company, Yutan Construction, won a contract from the new state of Alaska (statehood having been granted just two years earlier) to upgrade the trail, building it into a road on which trucks could haul ore from the mine year-round. To house construction workers while the road was going in, Yutan purchased three junked buses, outfitted each with bunks and a simple barrel stove, and skidded them into the wilderness behind a D-9 Caterpillar.

The project was halted in 1963: some fifty miles of road were eventually built, but no bridges were ever erected over the many rivers it transected, and the route was shortly rendered impassable by thawing permafrost and seasonal floods. Yutan hauled two of the buses back to the highway. The third bus was left about halfway out the trail to serve as backcountry shelter for hunters and trappers. In the three decades since construction ended, much of the roadbed has been obliterated by washouts, brush, and beaver ponds, but the bus is still there.

A vintage International Harvester from the 1940s, the derelict vehicle is located twenty-five miles west of Healy as the raven flies, rusting incongruously in the fireweed beside the Stampede Trail, just beyond the boundary of Denali National Park. The engine is gone. Several windows are cracked or missing altogether, and broken whiskey bottles litter the floor.

The green-and-white paint is badly oxidized. Weathered lettering indicates that the old machine was once part of the Fairbanks City Transit System: bus 142. These days it isn't unusual for six or seven months to pass without the bus seeing a human visitor, but in early September 1992, six people in three separate parties happened to visit the remote vehicle on the same afternoon.

In 1980, Denali National Park was expanded to include the Kantishna Hills and the northernmost cordillera of the Outer Range, but a parcel of low terrain within the new park acreage was omitted: a long arm of land known as the Wolf Townships, which encompasses the first half of the Stampede Trail. Because this seven-by-twenty-mile tract is surrounded on three sides by the protected acreage of the national park, it harbors more than its share of wolf, bear, caribou, moose, and other game, a local secret that's jealously guarded by those hunters and trappers who are aware of the anomaly. As soon as moose season opens in the fall, a handful of hunters typically pays a visit to the old bus, which sits beside the Sushana River at the westernmost end of the nonpark tract, within two miles of the park boundary.

Ken Thompson, the owner of an Anchorage auto-body shop, Gordon Samel, his employee, and their friend Ferdie Swanson, a construction worker, set out for the bus on September 6, 1992, stalking moose. It isn't an easy place to reach. About ten miles past the end of the improved road the Stampede Trail crosses the Teklanika River, a fast, icy stream whose waters are opaque with glacial till. The trail comes down to the riverbank just upstream from a narrow gorge, through which the Teklanika surges in a boil of white water. The prospect of fording this *latte-colored* torrent discourages most people from traveling any farther.

Thompson, Samel, and Swanson, however, are contumacious Alaskans with a special fondness for driving motor vehicles where motor vehicles aren't really designed to be driven. Upon arriving at the Teklanika, they scouted the banks until they located a wide, braided section with relatively shallow channels, and then they steered headlong into the flood.

"I went first," Thompson says. "The river was probably seventy-five feet across and real swift. My rig is a jacked-up eighty-two Dodge four by four

with thirty-eight-inch rubber on it, and the water was right up to the hood. At one point I didn't think I'd get across. Gordon has a eight-thousand-pound winch on the front of his rig; I had him follow right behind so he could pull me out if I went out of sight."

Thompson made it to the far bank without incident, followed by Samel and Swanson in their trucks. In the beds of two of the pickups were lightweight all-terrain vehicles: a three-wheeler and a four-wheeler. They parked the big rigs on a gravel bar, unloaded the ATVs, and continued toward the bus in the smaller, more maneuverable machines.

A few hundred yards beyond the river the trail disappeared into a series of chest-deep beaver ponds. Undeterred, the three Alaskans dynamited the offending stick dams and drained the ponds. Then they motored onward, up a rocky creek bed and through dense alder thickets. It was late afternoon by the time they finally arrived at the bus. When they got there, according to Thompson, they found "a guy and a girl from Anchorage standing fifty feet away, looking kinda spooked."

Neither of them had been in the bus, but they'd been close enough to notice "a real bad smell from inside." A makeshift signal flag—a red knitted leg warmer of the sort worn by dancers—was knotted to the end of an alder branch by the vehicle's rear exit. The door was ajar, and taped to it was a disquieting note. Handwritten in neat block letters on a page torn from a novel by Nikolay Gogol, it read:

***S.O.S. I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH, AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE
OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL ALONE, THIS IS NO JOKE. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE
REMAIN TO SAVE ME. I AM OUT COLLECTING BERRIES CLOSE BY AND SHALL
RETURN THIS EVENING. THANK YOU, CHRIS MCCANDLESS. AUGUST?***

The Anchorage couple had been too upset by the implication of the note and the overpowering odor of decay to examine the bus's interior, so Samel steeled himself to take a look. A peek through a window revealed a