

## The Little Christmas Tree

### The Last Pine Tree Before The North Pole

Ryan yawned and tilted his head from side to side in a vain attempt to remove some of the stiffness from his neck. He pulled his head back and looked beneath the fake-fur trim of his hood to the canopy of pine branches high above. Thin, watery sunlight filtered through the trees, casting grey dappled shadows across the gaps on the forest floor. He leaned this way and that to counter the humps and bumps that tossed the sled from side to side as it slid over the snow-covered track. A few feet in front of him, two Inuit guides drove the team of ten, powerful Husky dogs through the rapidly thinning treeline. Earlier, the forest had been thick, and the going had been slow, he had lost count of the amount of times they had had to get off the sled to carry it over, or around, a fallen tree. Now, the vegetation was sparser, the going was easier and the few, short hours of daylight they had been blessed with at their base in Last Town, seemed to have been cut in half.

Ryan, disliked the freezing, long, night, which lasted almost twenty hours at a stretch. But that's what you had to expect when you got this close to the North Pole. In the forest daylight, he caught glimpses of startled reindeer as they dashed across the path ahead, but in the dark, all he saw was slow moving shapes amongst the trees. Scariest of all, was the sound of a wolf howling from the trees on the left, which was answered almost immediately by a howl from somewhere on the right. Every so often he would hear a loud, Plop! as lumps of ice fell from the treetops onto the soft snow on the forest floor.

Ryan tried to be brave, but he was beginning to regret that he had persuaded his father to let him come on his pre- Christmas trip to the far north, to recover data from the scientific, weather-checking instruments that had been tracking temperature, snowfall and air quality for the past six months. His mother had been against it, but he had begged and pleaded until she gave in.

'Make sure you're back in time for Santa,' she said. She would be waiting for them at their hotel in Last Town when they returned.

He yawned again and looked at his watch. The movement attracted the attention of his father, who looked down, smiled and ruffled Ryan's hood with his gloved right hand.

'What time is it, Son? My watch appears to be broken.'

Ryan showed the illuminated dial of his watch to his father.

'We're almost there, Ryan. Another half an hour and we'll be at the camp.'

Ryan puffed out his cheeks and blew warm breath into the freezing air.

'Thank goodness for that, Dad. I really need to stretch my legs.'

Professor Mulgrew nodded.

‘Make the most of it while you have the chance, son. We’re only here for a few hours. It will have to be a quick turnaround if we’re going to get back to Last Town for Santa Claus.’

Ryan suddenly felt a little worried. Lots of questions came into his mind at once.

‘We will get back in time for Santa, won’t we Dad?’

‘It might be tight; we lost a lot of time crossing that frozen river earlier, but we should make it.’

Ryan looked up at his father.

‘He will find me if we don’t get back in time, won’t he?’

His dad ruffled his hood again. ‘I’m sure he will, Son.’

Ryan pulled a face as he thought about it. ‘I forgot to hang my Santa sack up,’ he said.

Thirty minutes later, as promised, the dog team pulled the sled out of the pine forest, past a few large boulders, and came to a halt alongside a broken-down shack. Part of the roof had collapsed and the open door creaked as it swung in the strengthening wind. The shack was surrounded by a series of high poles which had various sized boxes fixed to their tops. A thin strand of wire holding a few dozen glass lightbulbs, hung between them. On the floor, just inside the shed, was a coil of unused lighting wire.

Ryan jumped off the sled and stamped around while his father and the two guides unpacked the replacement equipment and prepared to check the data from the existing experiments.

He climbed to the top of a ten-foot snowdrift and looked out across the frozen tundra. There were no trees beyond that point and the flat, snowy landscape stretched for miles until it reached a long line of white, jagged mountains. Beyond the mountains lay the North Pole; Santa’s home. The sky looked pitch-black above the peaks, although there should have been a good two hours of daylight left.

As he clambered down from the snowdrift, he noticed a small, stumpy, pine tree that had grown just behind the run-down shack; the only tree for a hundred metres or so. It was a thin, spindly little thing, no taller than Ryan himself. The sparse branches were tipped with icicles. He immediately felt sorry for it.

‘Look, Dad,’ he called out. ‘A baby tree, all on its own.’

Professor Mulgrew walked across and examined the pine.

‘It’s not a baby, Ryan. It’s probably as old as many of the trees in the forest back there. It’s just that the soil isn’t as good out here and it hasn’t had a chance to grow like they have.’ He looked out across the frozen waste, then back to the tree line. ‘This must be the last pine tree before the North Pole.’

‘It looks so lonely, Dad,’ said Ryan. ‘Can’t we dig it up and plant it near the other trees?’

Professor Mulgrew stamped on the rock-solid ground.

‘We’d never get a shovel into this, Son, and even if we could, I doubt it would survive the shock of being moved.’

As his father walked back to the sled, Ryan patted the tree on one of its frost-covered branches and said.

‘Did you hear that? You’re the last pine tree before the North Pole, that’s something to be proud of. You should be one of the most famous trees in the world really. People should write stories about you. You shouldn’t be left unnoticed and alone.’

Then he had an idea.

He ran around to the storage shed and picked up the coil of spare lighting wire, made sure the lamps were screwed into their holders, nice and tight, and ran back to the tree. He wrapped the wire around its branches, being careful not to disturb any of the hanging icicles, and happily found he had just enough spare wire to reach back to the shed.

‘Dad,’ He called. ‘Could you plug this into the generator for me?’

Professor Mulgrew plugged the extension lead into a spare plug socket as Ryan waited outside, expectantly. Suddenly he heard the sound of the generator starting up and the thin line of lamps between the poles flickered into life. Ryan cheered as his tree lights burst into life. The glow from the bright yellow lamps flickered across the icicles, making them seem to dance in the icy, arctic breeze.

‘There’s something missing,’ said Ryan to himself. Then he realised what it was.

He ran back to the sled and rummaged about in the bags until he found a small, round, shiny metal, dinner plate. He rushed back to the tree and wedged it into the topmost branches.

‘There,’ he said proudly. ‘Now you have a shiny star.’

His happy thoughts were interrupted by the alarm in his father’s voice.

‘There’s a storm coming!’

Ryan clambered up the snowdrift again and looked north to see that the dark black clouds had moved a lot closer. The three men hurried about, taking down old boxes from the pole tops and installing new ones.

Amaruk, one of the Inuit guides, (his name means, Grey Wolf, in English,) called Ryan down from the snowdrift and pointed to the old shack.

‘Get the huskies inside, Ryan, take them to far end, where the roof is still in place and tie that door shut. We’re going to have to camp here tonight.’

Ryan began to panic. ‘We can’t,’ he said, ‘Santa is coming tonight. He doesn’t know I’m here.’

Amaruk looked at Ryan sadly.

‘I’m sorry little one, but we can’t outrun this storm. It will blow us back to Last Town.’

Ryan reluctantly led the Huskies into the shed, settled them down, then closed the door and tied it shut with a length of old rope he found on the floor. When he had finished, he walked round the back of the shack to the little Christmas tree. He pointed to the north.

‘There’s a storm coming, little tree. I know it’s not the first one you’ve seen; you’ve probably been through a lot of them. I just wanted to wish you good luck with this one.’

When he got back, he found the guides using short, sharp, saws to cut blocks of solid snow from the snowdrift.

‘What’s happening, Dad?’ asked Ryan. ‘We’ve got tents on the sled. Why aren’t we setting them up?’

‘They’ll just blow away in this storm,’ replied his father. He noticed the look of alarm on Ryan’s face. ‘Cheer up,’ were going to spend the night in an igloo.’

Ryan forced a smile.

‘I just hope Santa knows where I am. I’m supposed to be in the hotel in Last Town tonight.’

He watched, fascinated as the two Inuit guides shaped the blocks of ice they had dug out of the snowdrift. When they thought they had enough, they began piling them on top of each other to build a circular wall. It was amazing how quickly the building came together. In what seemed like no time at all, Amaruk placed the final block onto the roof and patted into place with a small, wooden mallet, then everyone joined in to cover the igloo with loose snow. Ryan’s job was to pat it all down with a wide, plastic spade.

They finished work just as the storm arrived. Ryan followed his father through a short tunnel and found himself inside the igloo. It was warmer than he thought it would be, and by the time Amaruk had finished carving a few nooks into the ice wall, to hold some battery-operated LED lights, he was warm enough to remove his outer coat. A few minutes later, Aput, the other guide, (whose name means Snow, in English,) crawled into the igloo with their sleeping bags and food packs.

Ryan suddenly found he was really hungry and tore open one of his packs to find a banana, an apple, and a couple of carrots. His other pack contained sandwiches and some round, oatmeal biscuits.

He ate hungrily, leaving only two biscuit and the carrots. He washed the meal down with a bottle of fizzy water and settled back on his sleeping bag with a notepad and a thick pencil.

Dear Santa.

If you read this note you'll know I'm not in Last Town tonight. I'm stuck up here instead, so, can I ask you a favour? Instead of leaving me a present, could you use some of your Santa magic to make the little tree happy. I feel so sorry for it, growing on its own like that.

Lots of love.

Ryan.

PS.

Sorry I don't have a mince pie. I've left you some oatmeal biscuits and carrots for the reindeer. I hope that's okay.

He flattened out the foil-wrapping that the food had been packed in, and placed it on the floor between his sleeping bag and his father's. Ryan slipped the note under the carrots, pulled off his boots, slid into his thickly-padded sleeping bag, and with the sound of the storm howling around outside, he drifted into a dreamless sleep.

At exactly two-minutes-past-midnight, Ryan woke with a start. He shot bolt upright in his sleeping bag, his head cocked to one side, listening hard to see if the sound that had filtered into his sleep, was real.

The storm, it seemed, had passed over and all was eerily silent, except for... YES! Now he was sure... the sound of the tinkling of sleigh bells. They were faint, but unmistakable.

Ryan eased himself out of the sleeping bag and as quietly as he could, in his excited state, pulled on his thick coat and boots. He scurried on his hands and knees through the short tunnel and got to his feet. The air was cold, the night was black, but the sky was filled with a billion, sparkling stars. Ryan looked up in wonder, he had never seen so many. Then, as his eyes turned to the north, some of the glittering stars

began to move towards him. He blinked, and looked again to make sure he wasn't imagining it, but the stars were moving towards him, there was no mistake.

His mouth opened wide as the tinkling of bells got louder. The tiny stars became bigger, and bigger until he could see the shape of a sleigh, led by nine reindeer. The sleigh and the harness were covered with strings of rapidly flashing, white and silver lights, Ryan could hear the whoosh as it sped through the skies towards him. Suddenly, it was overhead, two hundred feet above, he heard a deep, booming, 'Ho, Ho, Ho,' as it sped on.

Ryan jumped up and down, waving his arms, shouting, 'I'm here, Santa, I'm here.'

But Santa drove, on, seemingly oblivious to his desperate calls. A tear slid down Ryan's cheek as he watched the twinkling lights fly over the forest, towards Last Town.

He turned towards the little tree, amazingly still lit, and glowing proudly despite the storm.

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'Santa missed us.'

He crawled back into the igloo, and fighting back the tears, undressed, slipped back into his sleeping bag and fell into a restless, sleep.

Ryan was the first to wake next morning. He sighed as he remembered the events of the previous night. They would be going home today and the lights would be turned off, leaving the little Christmas tree alone and cold through the long dark winter. He looked hopefully at the floor where he had left his note for Santa but his father had rolled over in the night so that he was lying across the spot where Ryan had left it.

He felt a sob rise from his throat, but he held it back, got dressed and slid out of the tunnel. He didn't want to let the grownups see him cry.

Outside it was still dark, a few of the bulbs on the line of lights had gone out during the storm, but a few were still lit.

Ryan walked over towards the shack to check that the Huskies had got through the night without incident. On the floor, by the shack door, was the string of lights that Ryan had hung around the little tree. They had been unplugged and lain out on the floor alongside his stainless-steel dinner plate. Ryan took off a glove and touched one of the bulbs; it was icy cold.

Puzzled, Ryan walked around the back of the shack to where the little tree stood. As he turned the corner, his eyes opened wide in amazement, a joyful cry escaped his throat.

The lonely, bare, little tree, was lonely and bare no longer.

Its branches were strewn with dainty, star-shaped, glittering lights, some glowed red, others green, blue, silver and gold. There were no wires between the lights, each one

was powered separately by Santa magic. Between the lights, lying across the branches, were long strands of silver. The icicles on the tips of the branches, danced, bathed in a myriad of colours. Best of all, at the very top, was a large, shiny, silver star.

Ryan stepped back and admired the little tree.

‘You look beautiful,’ he said. ‘And, because of the Santa magic, you’ll look like that for ever and ever.’

As if to reply, a breeze whispered through the tree’s branches, making them sway, gently.

Then Ryan saw something else that brought more tears to his already wet eyes.

Between the shack and the back of the little tree, in the shape of a horse shoe, were a dozen little pine trees, each about eighteen inches tall. All had their branches decked out in the same star-shaped lights as the little Christmas tree. Ryan clapped his hands together.

It was still the last pine before the North Pole, but it was no longer alone!

Ryan was so entranced by the scene, that he hadn’t noticed the small pile of gaily-wrapped presents that sat beneath the little Christmas tree.

He ran back to the igloo, shouting at the top of his voice.

‘Dad, Dad, Santa found me. He’s left us presents; you should see the little tree.’

The grownups crawled out of the igloo and Ryan led them around to where the little tree danced its colourful dance in the early morning breeze. He passed around the presents.

Dad got a new watch to replace his broken one. The new watch had dials which could tell you the time in any part of the world.

Aput and Amaruk, each got a new fishing rod that could fold away into the smallest length imaginable. The Huskies got a large bag of dog treats.

Ryan held his present close to his chest, not wanting to spoil the moment by opening it.

Finally, under pressure from the others, he at first, folded back a little bit of the paper from one end, before giving in and tearing the brightly coloured wrapping from the gift.

Inside was a box with the words, Junior Arctic Explorers Kit, emblazoned across the lid. Ryan slipped it off to find a fake-fur hat with flaps to keep his ears warm, a set of powerful binoculars and a digital, satellite-connected tracking device with which you

could find your way home from anywhere. In the bottom of the box was a card with a picture of Santa on it. Ryan opened it slowly and read.

Dear Ryan.

Thank you for your letter. I was a little bit concerned that you might think I hadn't found you, but you were my last call on the way home. Thank you for pointing out the plight of the little tree. I hope both you, and it, are pleased with the result.

See you next year, wherever you are.

Love, Santa.

PS.

You will find some more presents back in Last Town.

Merry Christmas.

The adults packed the sled and tidied up the camp, while Ryan said a happy goodbye to the little tree.

'I'll come to see you again next year and every year after that,' he promised.

Ryan stroked one of the glittering branches, took one last look at the little tree's new companions, and with a happy heart, walked back to the sled.

The Huskies were yapping to each other, clawing at the snow, eager to be off. Ryan fed them two treats each and took his place at the front of the sled alongside Amaruk.

'Which way is home, Navigator?' asked the guide with a smile.

Ryan started up his new device, typed in, 'Last Town,' and waited. A few seconds later a route was displayed with an arrow pointing South-West. Ryan held out his arm in the direction the arrow was pointing.

'That way,' he called.

The Huskies began to run. Ryan took one last look back and waved.

'See you next year,' he whispered.