

Surviving Alaska

by Paul Greci • illustrated by Joe Bucco

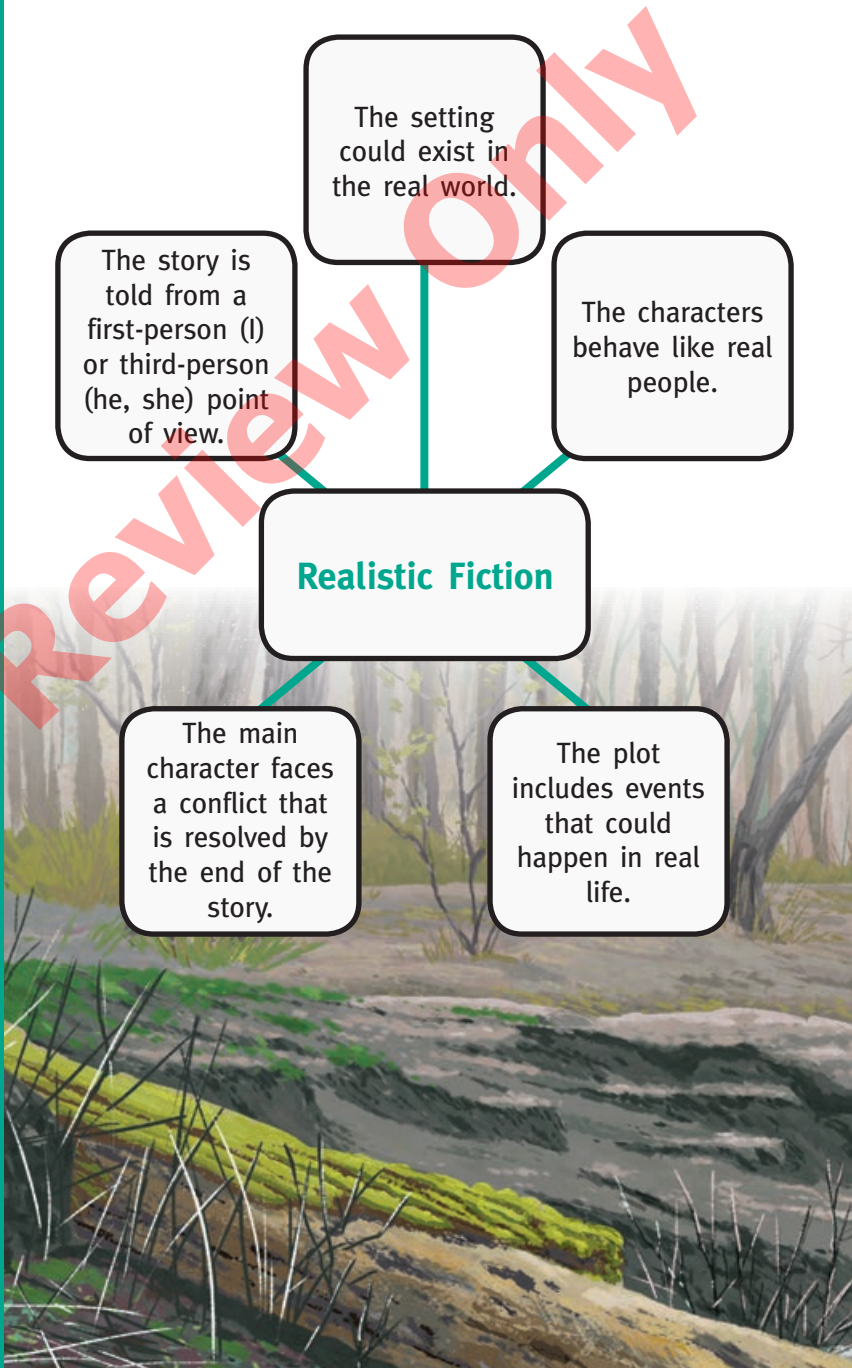


REALISTIC FICTION
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Realistic Fiction

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The Rules

I zipped up my pack and then looked over at my dad. His breath came in gasps. He'd put a splint on his lower leg after he fell from the roof of the cabin two days ago while fixing a small leak. Now his foot was swollen like a balloon. Last night, he started running a high fever.

"Willie, I wish you didn't have to do this hike alone," my dad whispered. "And that you had some protection." He closed his eyes. "But ..." his voice trailed off.

I wiped the sweat from his head onto my pants. "I'll be okay," I said. I'd never done a long hike alone through the Alaska backcountry. But now I didn't have a choice.

Yesterday, when we tried to drive out to get to a doctor, we discovered that the road was blocked by a landslide just a mile below our cabin. In all our years coming here, this was the first time the road's been blocked.



“Willie,” my dad said, “remember the rules about the backcountry. Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Follow my directions. Keep moving, but pace yourself. Don’t overreact.” His voice grew weaker and he closed his eyes again. “Stick to the plan.”

The plan. The plan was to hike cross-country to Jim’s cabin and use his radio to call for a helicopter. Jim was away, but there were directions on the front table about how to use the radio.



“Goodbye, Dad. I’ll be back,” I said as I refilled his water cup.

My dad’s face seemed to relax a bit. “Remember, save yourself first.”

My face grew hot. “I better go.” I had to leave for help right away. There was only so much daylight.

No one had ever died in our family’s fishing cabin. I wasn’t going to let my dad be the first.

The woods in late October were wet and cold. It had been raining all week, but snow could have come any day. On the ground, I saw a few wolf tracks in the mud. We’d seen a lot of wolverine and wolf tracks recently. We hadn’t seen any bear tracks, which made sense. They were probably just starting to hibernate.

My red backpack sat snug on my back. Inside it were cold trout and potatoes from last night’s supper, a flashlight, and a bottle of water. I had matches in case I needed to build a fire and a change of socks that could double as mittens.

Over my pants and polar fleece jacket, I wore a raincoat and pants. I knew for much of the hike I’d be crashing through wet brush. It was the first clear day all week, but the ground was still flooded.

As I took my first muddy steps, my dad’s directions ran through my mind. *Go up the creek until it forks. Use the big log spanning the creek to cross the left fork. Follow the right fork until it ends at a small lake, and then hike up to the ridgetop behind the lake. From there, you should be able to see the big rock outcropping below—right on the edge of the flats. Climb the pillars and you’ll see Jim’s place, about a mile beyond.*



I walked alongside the creek. It felt like the mud had arms, clinging to my boots with each step, refusing to let go. The water was running high and brown from all the rain. After a couple of minutes, I hit a place where the creek had cut a steep bank. I worked my way into the woods, keeping the sound of the creek to my right.



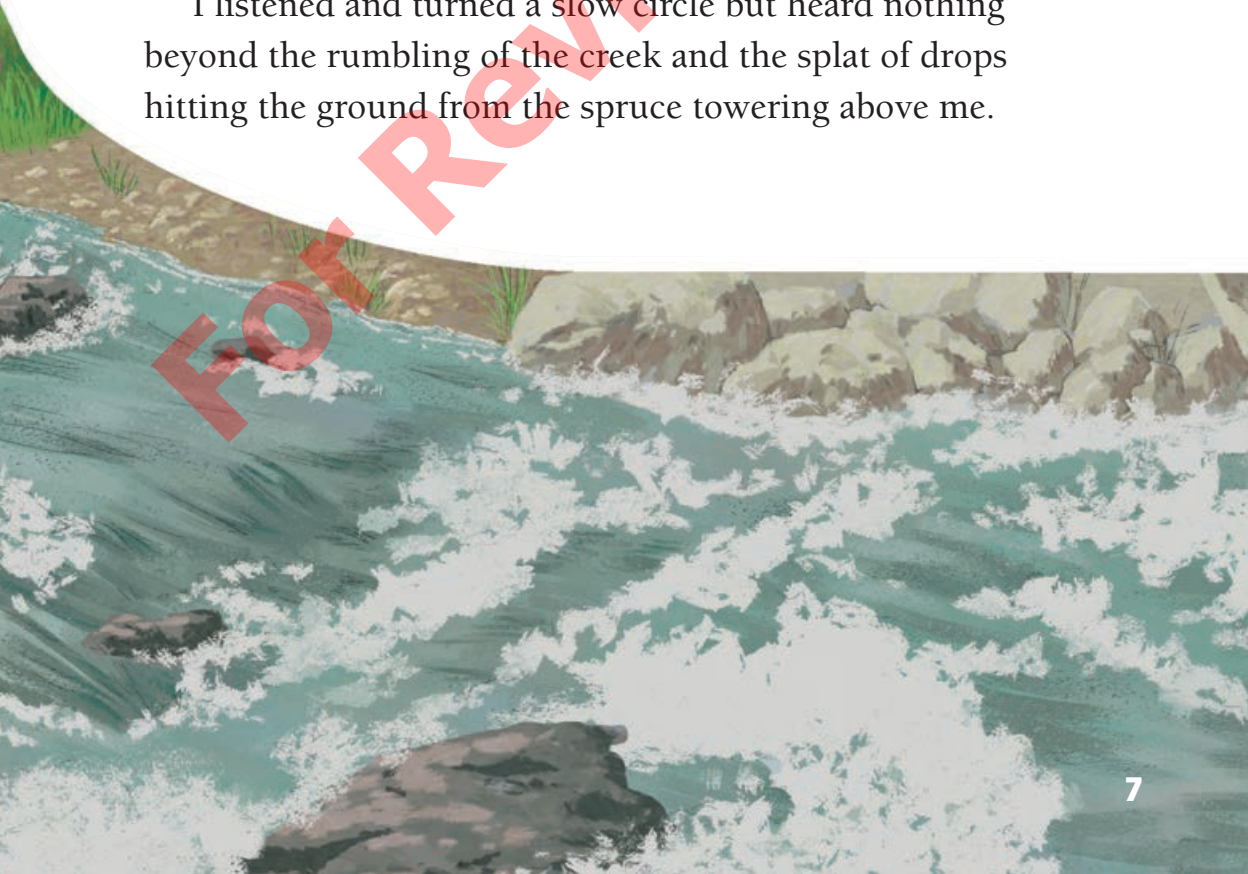
Sopping wet berry bushes, devoid of leaves, slapped against my arms and legs. I was already soaked. I wanted to turn around and go back to the warm cabin and sit by the woodstove. I wanted my dad's infection to just go away. I wanted the road to get fixed, and I wanted us to drive out together in the jeep. But that wasn't going to happen. I kept moving through the brush above the sweeping cut bank. Water drops fell from the big spruce trees overhead, saturated from all the rain. The brush thinned out, and I stopped under one of the spruce to catch my breath.

I thought of things my dad told me before I left the cabin.

Pace yourself, my dad had said. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

A twig snapped and sent my heart to my throat. I jerked around, searching for whatever made the sound.

I listened and turned a slow circle but heard nothing beyond the rumbling of the creek and the splat of drops hitting the ground from the spruce towering above me.





But something had to be out there. Was it a wolf or a wolverine? Was it watching me? I pictured a pack of wolves closing in on me and felt my legs trembling.

You're gonna hear things. The woods are full of animals. Don't panic. Just breathe. Relax, or you'll look like prey.

I took one deep breath. And another. And another.

With my dad, I'd hear twigs snap, and it was fun. We'd look around, hoping to see something. Last summer, we'd seen a black bear.

But now I didn't want to see anything. I didn't even want to hear anything. It's easy to stay calm when you're not in charge—when you're with someone else and when you're the one who doesn't have to make the decisions about what to do.

My stomach rumbled. I thought of the trout and potatoes in my pack and the beef jerky I had slid into my raincoat pocket, but told myself, *No, not until you reach the fork.*

Every few steps I turned and looked over my shoulder, expecting a wolf to be loping along, but there was nothing. At least nothing I could see.

I picked up the pace, following a faint animal trail next to the creek. I ducked under some low-hanging tree branches, imagining a wolf running through here with no problem. I rounded a bend in the creek, and there was the fork.

Cross the left fork of the creek on the big log and follow the right fork of the creek up to the lake.

My eyes scanned the ground. There was no log! Just a raging creek, running high and angry from all the rain.