



# Video Story Transcript

## Two Women: Alone in the Vast Alaskan Wilderness

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**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://youtu.be/XySaA2TlrFY>

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Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hi, I'm Ingrid Nixon and I spent many years working as a National Park Service Ranger in Alaska and I've always been inspired by the stories of Indigenous people and their knowledge of the landscape. And I first came across this story in a document that was called *The History of the People of the Upper Kuskokwim Who Lived in Nicholai and Telida* by Ray Collins.

Now imagine for a moment that you find yourself suddenly alone out in the Alaska wilderness. You have nothing but a knife, a tool to make fire, and the clothes on your back. You have no other tools no, other supplies, no hope of rescue. Could you survive?

Now the events of this story took place a long time ago. The exact year is not known, but it happened before many Europeans had found their way into the Alaska wilderness. It involves two sisters. Two women who are part of a hunting party that was camping in the foothills of Denali, that great mountain in the interior of the state. Denali is the Athabaskan name that means the high one and all of the members of this hunting party came from the upper Kuskokwim and the Kuskokwim is a great river that drains the interior.

Well it was spring, and the days were getting longer and they were getting warmer, but there were still a fair amount of snow on the ground. ...One day the hunters went out hunting leaving these two women behind in camp. Well the hunters had not gone far when suddenly they were attacked by raiders. Now who exactly these raiders were was never determined. But back at camp these women heard shouts and yells and sounds.

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It sounded like they were coming from a struggle. And the women became frightened and so they fled out into the Alaska wild and they ran and they ran and they managed to evade the Raiders. But when at last they stopped and assessed the situation, they realized that all they had was a knife, tool to make fire, and the clothes on their back. That was it.

Now they couldn't go back to camp, so they had no choice but to push on into the Alaska wild. Well initially, their flight had been fueled by fear. But soon that fear gave way to hunger. Hunger began to gnaw their bones.

Well luckily it was spring, and it was a time when the ground squirrels have emerged from their burrows where they had been hibernating all winter. Now ground squirrels are kind of like gophers. They live in burrows underground and in colonies. Now these sisters could see these ground squirrels out there in the landscape and their stomach always growled and their mouth began to water. But how could they catch one?

Well then one of the sisters looked over and she saw this tree and in the tree there was a large eagle's nest. So they walked over to the tree and they started looking around on the ground and they found an eagle feather. And they kept looking and they found more feathers. Now if you've ever looked at a feather you'll see that there is a center shaft of that feather. And then there are barbs that come out on either side. Well the sisters ripped the barbs off that feather, so it was just that center shaft and then they bent it around to make a kind of snare. So they made several little snares and placed those snares just outside the entrances of those ground squirrel burrows.

And then they hid, and they watched, and they waited. And this little ground squirrel poked its head out - poked it a little bit more. They were like come on, come on, come on. And at last, that ground squirrel emerged. And whooot, it was caught in the snare. Well that night, the sisters ate roast ground squirrel and it had never tasted so good.

Well the sisters lived that summer off roast ground squirrel as well as plants that they knew were edible. And then as summer went on. Then the blueberries came into season and that was a welcome addition to their diet.

But then they could feel fall coming on. Like at night it was getting dark. It was getting cool and brisk. The northern lights were dancing up above and the tundra was turning colors; it was red, and it was orange and it was yellow. The sisters realized they could not stay where they were because soon the ground squirrels were going to go into hibernation.

So they decided that they needed to go to a lower elevation. So they followed the Kuskokwim River down to lower ground and at last they came to a lake. At the end of this lake there was a small stream and the stream was just choked with whitefish. These white fish were migrating out of the lake for the winter months. Well the sisters took their knife, they cut some branches and they made a fish weir. A fish weir is a structure that will funnel the fish into an area where they're really easy to catch. So those sisters caught a lot of fish and finally they had enough to eat.

Well they caught so much fish that they could dry some of the fish. So they cut more branches and made wooden racks and dried those fish in the air. And soon they had so much fish that they bundled it up, dug holes in the ground, put the fish in the ground and there it would be preserved.

Well by now winter was close and the sisters realized that they needed a winter structure, but they knew how to build one. So they dug a hole in the ground. It was about four feet square and about four feet deep and then they cut more branches, cut some tree bark, made a sort of house over that hole. And then they

covered the whole thing with dirt with a little hole in the top, so that smoke could escape. And then they cut a lot of wood because that wood was going to be something that they used to cook and keep warm over that long, long winter.

Well winter settled in, and those two sisters settled into their snug little house - plenty to eat. Now all this time they had seen no one. But one winter's day they heard sounds outside their dwelling and they called out, "Who's there?"

And then they heard a man's voice call, "Who are you?"

And that man's voice sounded really familiar, and so the two sisters pushed open their door and there was their brother. He had been looking for them ever since the hunting party had just vanished. It was a wonderful family reunion in this place where the sisters were. In this place where there was plenty of whitefish.

Well the word got out and soon other people were finding their way into this little area and a little community sprang up and they name that community after the whitefish. And today you can find it. It's a place that's called Tal Lleida. But this was a place that was discovered by two women who found themselves alone in the Alaska wild who not only survived but they thrived because of their skill and their knowledge of the land.