

A L A S K A

**DEADLY**

A Novel

J. L. Askew



## PROLOGUE

ISBN 978-1-68526-885-5 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-68526-886-2 (Digital)

Copyright © 2022 J. L. Askew

All rights reserved

First Edition

cover image copyright, John Schwieder  
used under license from Alamy.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business establishments, and events, are from the author's imagination and any resemblance to real things is purely a coincidence.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, solicit the publisher via the address below.

Covenant Books  
11661 Hwy 707  
Murrells Inlet, SC 29576  
www.covenantbooks.com

Something was wrong. She had come to meet a new friend, but the man walking toward her, saying her name, was a stranger. Minutes before, the sixteen-year-old Alaskan Native girl had gotten off a bus that brought her from a house shared with her mother at the edge of town. Walking down the street to the Anchorage coffeehouse, she was tall for her age and quite attractive. Her name was Myra, and she had left without a word, intent on seeing a boy met in a computer chat session. She had long used electronic media to interact with girlfriends, but the regular routine had become boring. Things had become dull, and she wanted to leave the ordinary and explore something new.

She heard of a recent media platform, popular with teenagers, where girls she knew found boyfriends, and she got on it, sharing comments, having small talk, getting queries from boys, and finally connecting with one she liked.

These thoughts played her mind as she approached the destination. The coffee shop was in a one-story building shared with a health food store. The structure had a flat roof, and the front was made of glass panels divided with strips of aluminum. Like much in Anchorage, it was plain looking but practical.

It was a pleasant midsummer evening of sixty degrees as the girl approached the shop entrance, passing a young couple standing beside a car, sipping from cups. She stopped, glancing through wide windows at the front of the building. The place was crowded. She paused, looking in her purse. She so liked seeing Michael's face she had printed a small photo from her computer. She retrieved the picture and stared for a moment. At last, she was to meet him in person.

After a moment, she put it back, stepped to the entrance, opened the door, and went inside.

Most of the tables were taken by young adults and adolescents Myra's age. She saw two friends from school and went to join them, not saying why she was there. They were soon enjoying themselves, talking and laughing. It was then she heard an unfamiliar voice from behind, someone who just came in, saying her name.

"Myra."

The girls turned to see a man walking toward them, pleasant looking, but much older, clearly middle-aged. The two girls looked at their friend; her blank expression told them this was a stranger. All were silent as the man walked up with his eyes on Myra, smiling, repeating her name. Perplexed, she finally replied.

"Yes?"

"Myra, I'm Michael's uncle Frank. I was dropping him off a second ago when his mother called. He's outside on the phone with her, wanted me to let you know he's here."

The man continued talking, ignoring the other girls, his attention on Myra.

"He said this was your first meeting and he didn't want to give a bad impression making you wait." The man paused for a moment. "I'm getting him a latte. Would you like one?"

Myra hesitated then said, "Yes."

Sensing the anxiousness of their friend, one of the girls made an excuse and they left. Now it was just her and the stranger. Myra began to feel more at ease. On chat sessions, Michael had mentioned his uncle Frank.

She accompanied the man to the counter where he ordered three beverages. He continued talking, quite apologetic for Michael's delay; apparently, the phone call was important. The drinks were delivered, and the man paused, then made a suggestion.

"Why don't we take this to Michael. His call should be about done, and he's eager to meet you."

What he said seemed reasonable, but she felt reluctant to leave with him. For a moment, she was uncertain, trying to reason with herself. The man was waiting, an affable expression on his face, and

she began to grow embarrassed at her indecision. It should be all right; her new friend had told her about his uncle. She finally looked up, managing a smile.

"Okay, let's go."

He led her toward the entrance and through the door, turning to the right, and continuing along the front. Myra walked expectantly with a spring in her step. Something caught her foot, and she fell forward, throwing her arms out to keep balance. The cup tumbled to the walkway, spattering the back of Uncle Frank's trousers. The man stopped, turning in a snap. Myra flushed and began to apologize but froze on seeing the man's face.

Suddenly afraid, she turned to go back into the shop, but a throng of young people at the entrance blocked her way. She pushed past them, breaking into a run to the corner of the building. The man followed, unhurriedly, dropping the cups in a nearby trash bin. Reaching the side of the store and seeing the girl twenty yards ahead running across an open triangle lot toward the street junction, he took off after her.

Tall, lithe, and athletic, she was outdistancing her pursuer. Track was her sport, and she was growing confident she would soon elude whoever was after her. When she came to the crossroads, she had to stop for passing cars. Looking back, she saw the man halfway down the street, getting into the back of a black SUV. After slamming the door, the car roared forward, speeding toward her. Panicked, she ran in the street in front of a car that screeched to a halt inches away, blaring the horn. She ran to the other side into a stand of trees bordering the parking lot of a school with a parade field behind. What had looked like a protective wood was only a row of trees at right angles to the street where the black SUV was coming.

With seconds to escape, she looked around. The trees hiding her went west along the cross street. Opposite from her pursuers, it was her only chance. She ran, crouching in the shadow of the foliage at her left, the open field on her right. The line of trees ended halfway across the field. She ran close to the foliage hoping she wouldn't be seen, but glancing back, she saw the SUV just entering the parking lot, barreling toward her.

Passing the end of the tree line, she had another hundred yards in the open before clearing the parade field. A large residential complex was just behind the school grounds. If she could reach the apartments before the SUV caught up, she could get lost in the housing units. She was more than halfway there, but her pursuers were coming fast; she could hear the vehicle getting close. Just ahead, she saw a low stone wall at the back of the building that would block the SUV from going further. Seeing the barrier, she felt better; it was nothing like hurdles on the track field.

Hearing the vehicle slam its brakes behind, she leaped over the stone border, running through the backyard of the apartments, through an open breezeway past stairways, and out the building into the driveway and parking area. Not stopping, she ran through the housing units on the other side, coming out on a driveway leading to the street.

Looking around and seeing no one, she slowed to a walk, catching her breath, making her way to a side street going toward Northern Lights Boulevard, to the wait stop where she would catch the bus home. She thought of the narrow escape, relieved she had avoided the trap. She felt foolish, falling for the online scam. The bus stop was just ahead; she would soon be home and tell her mother everything.

Suddenly, she felt slammed from behind, strong arms gripping her, a large hand clamping her mouth as a car rushed up, the back door flung open as she was thrown onto the seat, the assailant falling across her. She could hardly breathe, her face buried in the seat, the man's weight crushing her, and now a pistol muzzle pressed her forehead. The front passenger door opened as someone else got in. The car moved quickly, leaving the side street, swerving onto Northern Lights. She was gagged and blindfolded, her hands taped behind her back, excruciating pain in her shoulders and wrists.

It had happened in a rush, the violent crash of the man against her, jolting her senses, the rising panic. The first moments had been a shock, but then for no reason, her thinking changed. Calm took over, displacing fear, inner turmoil starting to subside.

*Yes, this is bad, real bad, but there is always good in everything, even this. I heard that once, and I believe it. Even now, the mess I'm in, there is something good; if only I could find it, and say it, that would be enough.*

*I'm alive, still breathing. I won't think about what's next, where I'm going, or what will happen. I'm going to get through this. I'll do what I must, to avoid pain, to stay alive, but I won't let them take everything. I will not give up my soul. They will not take that.*

Almost alien, the thoughts had come, displacing the fear that had shaken her moments earlier. She was now almost calm. Despite the restraints and pain in her shoulders and wrists, she believed she would get through it.

She could feel the car moving fast, but to where, she didn't know. There were some turns and high speeds where the road was straight and open. But the car soon slowed, and she sensed it turning off the road, moving cautiously, as in a parking lot. They stopped, and she heard the men in front getting out.

She was at a cheap motel, still bound and blindfolded, led from the car, taken to a room, and laid on a bed where the tape was cut from her hands while the other restraints stayed. She quickly began rubbing her wrists to quell the pain and get circulation back.

For the first time, one of the men spoke, the one she knew as Uncle Frank.

"Myra, do as you're told, and you won't be hurt. You'll get food and water, but the blindfold stays. If there's trouble, you'll be tied up for good!"

His voice was quite different from the tone at the coffee shop, and he was close, in a chair within arms' reach. She could hear his breathing, and he stayed there, unmoving. One of the men had gone out soon after they arrived, and she heard another man across the room. No one had said a word other than her apparent guardian, "Uncle Frank."

At last, the quiet was broken as the other man returned, apparently bringing food. She was made to sit up on the bed as she felt the gag being removed.

“This is temporary, so you can eat. Remember what I said earlier!”

She was given a small paper bag with a burger and fries. Several hours had passed since the ordeal began, and she ate the food hungrily. With eyes still covered, she heard her guard close by. He had warned her and seemed ready to act if she got out of line, and they had a gun. She had no choice but to obey.

The men had a measure of discipline, seeming to follow instructions from somewhere. She could tell it was a small room as she heard everything, the men moving around, a cell phone ringing, and the one answering immediately going outside. She was mostly ignored, and hardly a word was spoken in her presence. Before turning out the lights, she was handcuffed to the bed, but the restraints were not so cumbersome that she couldn't sleep.

The following morning, she was put in a car, restrained like before, taken on a short drive, and, hearing sounds of planes, knew she was at the airport. She was put in a small plane on water and flown away. After two stops, she arrived in the North Slope and learned her fate.

# I



## ARRIVING AT ANCHORAGE

A detached voice disturbed Warren's sleep. “We are beginning our final approach into Anchorage. We should be on the ground shortly.”

A flight attendant. Warren remembered he was on a plane. *Should?* The word suggested uncertainty, doubt about landing. A worrisome thought from the vagaries of an uncomfortable sleep of several hours in a cramped seat. Forcing himself awake, he pushed the thought from his mind.

The voice overlaid the phasing drone of aircraft engines, pulsating and vibrating softly through the seat and surroundings. Continuous and numbing, the sound had lulled Warren to sleep soon after takeoff.

He began moving, stretching to ease stiffness from the cramped position. Shifting his foot under the seat in front, he nudged his pack aside, extending the leg full length and holding, then pulling back and doing the same with the other leg. He felt better.

He slid the window shade half up and looked out, seeing lots of mountains, grouped like an animal herd, slowly falling behind, becoming foothills, sloping to a level plain where a city appeared, Anchorage, laid neatly in a grid, downtown marked by several high buildings. He remembered why he had come.

Warren was a private detective, on his first real case, looking for a woman's estranged husband who had gone to Alaska. His instruc-

tions were simple: Find the man and give him a message. It should be an easy job, more like a paid vacation. But he had little to go on.

He only knew that Ron Billings had worked briefly in Anchorage then gone to the interior.

Alaska was a big place, and Warren needed somewhere to start. He had gotten the name of the fish processing plant where Billings had worked.

He had been lucky, calling the plant earlier that day, talking to a cooperative person, and learning what the former employer knew: Billings had gone to the North Slope, to the remote village of Ataqsut. Warren had kept the flight to Anchorage, deciding to use smaller planes to reach his final destination.

Now more alert, he swept his eyes around the cabin. The middle-aged couple across the aisle was still, slumped in their seats. Others nearby were quiet or just beginning to stir. The long flight in cramped seats had left many passengers groggy. Here and there, heads tilted and bobbed in quiet conversation. Many began getting ready for the landing.

Warren raised the shade all the way, letting in light from the sun he couldn't see, but knew from the time on his watch was making a slow descent in the west. The sky was suffused with soft light, slanting through the window, slightly illuminating the cabin. A few clouds graced the azure atmosphere. Below, the waters of the north pacific were constrained in the narrow strait of Cook Inlet. Then the scene shifted.

The plane made a slow banking curve, the aircraft tilting, seeming to hold indefinitely, leaning right, passengers briefly losing sight of the ocean, then the craft leveled, amid a roaring sound as wing flaps extended. Looking out, Warren could see the ocean again, but now with a distant landmass rising from the waters under a few cottony clouds.

There was a loud and abrupt *thunk*, as the landing gear went down. He continued looking for land (the airport), but the ocean was all he could see in the small window; and as the plane got lower, the waves became more distinct, small caplets rising and falling in a calm

sea. The waters of Cook Inlet came nearer as the plane descended, slowing, the aircraft on a straight line with the unseen runway.

The ocean waves abruptly gave way to mud flats, shiny, like caramel, irregular and firm-looking, smooth, packed, and wet. The tides, among the world's highest, came in daily, flooding the bare ground and keeping it firm and smooth. Flying by rapidly, all Warren saw was mud. Where was the runway?

Then the brown expanse became tall coniferous trees, close enough to almost touch, serrated boughs, passing beneath in close ranks. The forest swept by, giving way to a clearing and high chain wire fence, marking the airport perimeter, then a stretch of well-kept grounds and a service road. Then he saw pavement, a dizzying blur and touchdown, accompanied by a loud blast from the reverse thrusters, jerking everyone as the plane slowed sharply.

He leaned back, stretching again, then slumping and letting out a long slow breath, like a final exhalation.

The plane slowed, turning to a side lane, passing over a stretch of tarmac, then another, heading toward the terminal. Through the window, he saw other planes lining up for departure, and then the building appeared, a shiny structure of glass and steel. The plane continued taxiing, with an occasional bump, then slowed as the craft neared the parking apron, ground attendants with orange batons, signaling the aircraft forward where it finally stopped.

Rising as the "fastened seat belt's" light went out, passengers started opening ceiling bins. The onerous process began, taking out close-packed luggage amid shuffling, swaying, and reaching of dozens of crowded people.

He reached under the seat in front and pulled out a backpack, feeling relief it was all he had. He partially undid one enclosure, slid his hand in, and grasped the swagger stick, eighteen inches long and finely crafted in pre-World War II days for some unknown British officer, and somehow, coming into the hands of his grandfather, a sergeant in the quartermaster corps stationed in Cairo, Egypt, the final years of the war. A favorite picture of the period showed him next to an Egyptian on a dirty street corner, nattily dressed in a resplendent uniform, holding the stick. It was a work of art, fashioned of select

hardwood, finely turned with crenels and knurls, finished in lacquer, the knobbed tip capped with inlaid silver.

He fastened the pack, pulling it close, sitting back, and waiting for the deplaning process to begin. The aisle was packed with people, expectant and wanting out after the long, confining flight.

At the front of the cabin, the glut of passengers made a wall of people unable to move. Finally, the door opened, and travelers at the front began moving, heads bobbing forward while the press of people behind seemed undiminished. Slowly the front of the crowd began to break free, travelers starting up the aisle, and disappearing through the passageway, the movement of humanity working its way back, slowed by an occasional struggle to get luggage from a tight fit in the storage bin. Others, traveling light, hoisted small carry-ons and proceeded quickly up the aisle.

The breaking of the passenger glut reached Warren's row, and he stood up, waiting briefly for others across the aisle to go, then lifted his backpack over his shoulder as he turned into the aisle and walked rapidly toward the cabin exit.

Passing the bulkhead, he nodded to the attendant and pilot as he stepped through the aircraft doorway into the tunnel-like access ramp, proceeding up the enclosure toward the terminal.

Leaving the jet bridge, he entered an enormous hub, round with spoke-like gateways extending to a ring of planes. It was busy with travelers, some forming a queue at one gate, lining for imminent departure. He crossed the large atrium, reaching the main hall, continuing at a fast walk, passing beneath a series of wood geese, hand carved, hanging from the ceiling. There was one every twenty feet or so through the hall, pointed the same way as though flying inland. Northern wildlife was a common decorating theme, along with Alaska's unique history, everything from the gold rush to the single-engine planes so prominent in the state's development and still used in the present day as the most common mode of regional transportation.

In fact, his priority the next day was to link with an "air taxi" for another journey. But first, he needed a cab to get to his motel. With no delay for checked baggage, he quickened his steps, need-

ing to get somewhere to rest. He began looking for signs to ground transportation.

He came to the forward reception hall, a vast area extending on both sides of the main building with ticket counters and baggage check-in at two levels. He stepped onto a moving stairway, slowly descending. Glancing below, he saw glass displays holding preserved animals, all quite lifelike. Although in a hurry, the exhibits piqued his curiosity, and he couldn't pass without seeing them. He turned, walking toward the displays, stopping for a moment, and staring.

There was a grizzly, moose, Kodiak brown bear, and wolf. Small rodents were set in the background, making a more natural display, almost a tableau. The bears were on hind legs to show their size and make them more threatening. He was impressed with the grizzly, studying it for some time, the most feared animal on the continent.

Then he came to the wolf. He stood at the display, staring. While the bear was feared for its size and ferocity, the wolf was different. There was something strange about the animal he couldn't explain, a feeling, an odd impression. The animal was dead and preserved like the other specimens, yet Warren sensed an air of menace. The eyes were drawn with intensity and the mouth slightly open, thin lips stretched back, revealing sharp discolored teeth and short ears, erect and tilted at an angle that gave a sense of danger. The animal had a broad chest and long tail, distinguishing it from a dog and giving an impression of wild ferocity missing in his domesticated cousin.

The taxidermist was skilled, mounting the specimen in a slight crouch, a hint of tension, like an iron trap with a sensitive trip lever, a hair's breadth from death.

A chill convulsed Warren like a crashing wave. In a second, it was gone.

What was going on? The animal was dead, inert, preserved in a display. Yet it seemed to touch him with dread. He must still be affected by the long flight.

Turning and walking away, moving to the open, he felt better, heading along the wide corridor, back to the spacious entry hall where he took a moving stairway down, passing through wide sliding

doors marked “ground transportation,” opening to a drive where a line of taxicabs waited.

As he got near, a driver came out, offering to put his pack in the car trunk, but Warren said he would keep it, opening the rear door and sliding onto the seat, the driver pushing it shut. He put the pack beside him and leaned back, extending his head and straightening his frame.

By now, the driver was in, pulling the taxi away from the curb.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Wild Winds Motel.”

“Right, just ahead. You been here before?”

“First time. I’ll be flying to Fairbanks tomorrow and then to the North Slope.”

Driving along, Warren was surprised at the amount of daylight; it was after nine o’clock, and the sun was still high in the west. The Chugach Mountains in front dominated the eastern skyline. They were as high as any mountains he’d seen in the lower states, here, rising above foothills, sloping from the city that lay on the coastal plain. The base of the mountains was green, turning brown on the rising slopes, reaching to peaks, merging with low clouds, then ranging north and south as far as eye could see.

A “Welcome to Anchorage” sign passed by, leaving the airport limits, the car speeding along the multilane corridor into the city. They had not gone far when the driver turned left at a light, crossing a railroad track, coming immediately to the motel. They turned into the drive, pulling to a short lane facing the building.

Warren paid the cabbie and got out, shuffling the backpack to his shoulder, crossing to the front, and stepping up as the entry door slid sideways, letting him through. On the left, a young man stood at the reception desk, looking up at the stranger’s approach.

Once he reached the counter, the clerk began processing the reservation, saying little, accepting the credit card, and staring at a computer screen, making keyboard entries.

“One night?” the clerk asked.

“One night,” he said.

He handed back the credit card with the room key card.

“Turn right at the elevator, straight down the hall.”

Warren thanked him, hoisting the pack and heading to the room.

It was near the end of the hall where he inserted the key card and opened the door. He entered with a sense of relief and turned on the light even though the room was bright from the setting sun.

Through the window, he saw the sun was still above the western tree line. It was 9:30 p.m. *When was sunset? Ten-thirty? Eleven?* He wasn’t sure but hoped shutting the blinds would let him sleep.

He showered then got into fresh underclothes and turned on the TV to watch the news and weather. Finding nothing of interest, he turned it off and lay down. He kept his eyes shut for nearly thirty minutes and was almost asleep as random thoughts grew distant, dissolving and sinking like a fog in a black hole.

But his conscious mind came back, sorting problems, demanding answers. He knew sleep was impossible.

He got up, dressed, and went to the registration desk. An older man had replaced the youth there earlier.

Warren came to the counter.

“How’re you doing?”

“Very well,” the man said, energetic, just starting the shift, clearly a night person.

“Can’t sleep and thought I would go out and kill some time. Any place close I could walk to?”

“Sure, follow the street out front, away from the tracks, till you get to Spenard. Turn right, and that’ll take you to a restaurant and bar.”

“What’s the name?”

“Winnie’s.”

Thanking the man, he turned and made his way through the door, down the steps, and out the drive to the street. The railroad tracks were on the left, separating the motel grounds from the airport drive; he turned right and started down the sidewalk. It was still light, though the sun had sunk under the horizon off Cook Inlet.

He walked faster, reaching his normal pace. He had always been criticized for going ahead of others, and once he tried to slow him-



self, he found it frustrating, finally settling into his natural stride. Besides, walking was something you gave yourself to, moving without thought.

He looked about, seeing things of interest common to every walk. He heard the querulous cry of a magpie, at first unseen, finally seeing the bird skirting the base of a tree, flitting across a yard, and disappearing in a tall conifer. The houses were plain frame structures, modest in size, but all seemed to have a simple fence around the yard, usually a picket or wood slat design, never very tall but still making a boundary. Perhaps it had more to do with aesthetics than boundaries.

Dropping his eyes, he saw the edge of the walkway on the street was chipped and worn, scraped by what he figured were snowplows in winter. Looking closer, it was more evident. In places the sidewalk had settled unevenly in the ground, the upper surface cleaved off, revealing a deeper layer, the broken rocks, and chipped pebbles of hard concrete. He imagined the steel blade, hard and heavy, swung out from a snow handling machine, running down the street tossing waves of snow in the air, the side of the blade banging over the concrete walk, shearing the exposed parts.

He had always been an observer of his surroundings, and the habit had only grown and sharpened since becoming a private investigator. Starting his own business had given him independence even though it had been a struggle, only recently starting to pay off.

As a young college graduate, a degree in psychology had left few opportunities for a job. Oddly, during his studies, he never considered what he would do later. His thoughts were only of each day's work, attending classes, preparing for exams, writing papers, and most importantly, keeping grades up. He had looked at college solely as an education, gaining knowledge. He would think about a career when the time came.

Once graduated, he found the four-year psychology degree had narrow career prospects, leaving him with work in state government, investigating child dependency cases, and counseling families. The work had been harrowing, providing small financial reward, but was as much an education as the degree, providing a wealth of experience dealing with difficult people under stress, an experience he gauged

when considering what he would do next because no one made a career in state social work unless staying too long and getting in a rut on a path of least resistance and too many years passed to do something different.

After five years, he chose to leave, but he changed his mind when he was unexpectedly promoted to frontline supervisor, staying two more years, thinking the added experience would enhance a resume. At year seven, approaching thirty and realizing it was now or never, he left the first real job he'd ever had. Being single, he had nothing to lose, so he considered the options, weighing and sifting personal assets, education, and experience to see what careers he might try.

He surprised himself at the idea of being a private investigator since decades of bad movies and cheap novels had glamourized the field and unrealistically portrayed it. But the job had advantages, requiring little investment other than some sort of office and getting a state license. The most difficult part would be the startup, acquiring clients and referrals and building a reputation to keep it going. The prospect of several lean years was accepted, but he had enough savings and could live on a slim budget until established.

Now, just over the past year, the business was self-supporting although he had yet to make a real profit. The current assignment might be the key to balancing the spreadsheet and putting numbers in the black.

Tramping along, he saw Spenard Street just ahead. At the corner, he turned right, not slowing. He was glad he had not stayed in the room, trying to sleep. He was now wide awake with no hint of drowsiness. Bandyng idle thoughts, he kept a fast walk along the street.

Then he saw a large two-story building with plain clapboard siding, painted in a nondescript color with a big sign, "Winnie's." Several cars were parked in an adjacent graveled lot, and lights were shimmering on a line strung along the roof.

He walked up to the door at the corner of the building and went in, passing through an entry hall with wide glass windows on the street side and a bunch of pictures and posters on the inner wall. Coming to another door, he opened it, immediately hearing tinny

music from speakers nearly hidden in ceiling corners and loud voices from diners further in the restaurant. He came to the hostess station and smiled at the middle-aged woman standing at the counter.

“One, for dinner.”

She looked at him for an instant, picking up a menu, then turned to scan the dining room. She was looking away for what seemed a long time, calculating some decision, then turned back, giving him an inexpressive look.

“There’s room at the bar, with full service.”

He was tired and didn’t feel like talking. “Okay,” he said.

She handed the menu, pointing him toward the far side of the room where he heard loud voices, following the sound until he came to a contingent of patrons at one end of a semicircled bar of heavily lacquered wood. Sitting down, he found the noise was not from the bar but from a nearby gathering where tables were pulled together for the assembly to sit as a group. It was a varied assortment of humanity, rugged-looking men with beards in outdoor garb, some with baseball caps, and a couple of women. *True salt-of-the-earth people*, he thought as he studied the menu. The food selection looked like ordinary American, meatloaf, pork chops, or salmon, and a variety of vegetables, corn, beans, or potatoes.

He placed an order for chopped steak and mashed potatoes and then swept his eyes around the room. The restaurant was crowded, but the bar was mostly open, except for a clutch of people gathered at the other end.

One man, at the center of the group, was especially notable. He wore what looked like extreme weather gear, heavy waterproof overalls, thick and bulky with a matching top, complete with a snug-fitting hood covering his head. This being late summer, air conditioning might turn on, but the man seemed comfortable, despite heavy clothing.

People at that end of the bar, close together and leaning toward him, appeared engrossed in what he was saying. His manner of speech, loud voice and slight slurring, showed he was getting drunk.

“It all began when I met this girl at a bar in the North Slope where I worked. A native girl of some Eskimo tribe. She was there

a few days. I saw her every free moment, and I couldn’t tear myself away from her. She had definitely struck my fancy. At work, I couldn’t focus on my equipment, the valves, gauges, the indicators that all need a caring touch, like a mother with a child. And if you don’t have that concern, you miss something, and you’re likely to have a malfunction or blowup. I found myself daydreaming about the girl and constantly looking at the clock, waiting for quitting time so I could go see her again.

“Then she was gone, back to the little village where she’d grown up. It got really bad. More and more, I couldn’t keep my mind on my work, and I knew if I didn’t see her soon, there would be an accident, or I would lose my job.

“Finally, I spoke to my boss, and he agreed I could take some days off for *personal time*. He knew I had a problem, and I knew this was my chance to set things right. Then I lit out for the village in my truck and got there in a couple hours.

“The village was real small, seemed no more than twenty or thirty people in the whole place. The local honky-tonk was easy to find since there were only a few business places. I went in, sat down, and had a drink. And as soon as I said the girl’s name, a district policeman showed up, took me to a corner, and started asking a lot of questions.”

The man paused long enough to raise the glass and down more beer, his audience as still as stones. No one said a word although Warren could hear the raspy breathing from one of them.

“It turned out the girl had just been killed in a very strange way. Most of her throat had been ripped out, and there were slashes on her face, neck, and shoulders, claw marks like from an animal. The police were baffled and had no idea what to make of it. Then I showed up looking for the girl, and naturally the cop fancied I may have had a connection.

“Of course, I was badly shaken, learning about the girl’s death. It had been only a few days since I first met her, and since then I couldn’t think of anything else, and now I was trying to see her again, wanted her to marry me, and got hit with the news she was dead. How do you deal with that?”

The man paused and took another drink from the glass of beer, draining it completely. His eyes had a wild look, and his face was beginning to perspire, tiny beads of sweat on a face growing redder by the minute. The bartender, looking from the shadows, floated to where the man sat, refilling the glass, then returned to a dimly lit space out of view.

Warren was fascinated by what he was hearing, and it was odd the bartender was not keeping the customary spot at the counter with customers. Rather, he had placed himself further away, near the kitchen. Perhaps it was because he had a dual duty, taking food orders as well as serving drinks. But he was hearing the oil worker's story too and maybe did not wish to be part of the audience.

Then he returned, coming to Warren, deftly placing a platter of food in front of him. Despite the late hour, the wait and strange tale he was hearing had roused his appetite, and he plunged into the food as if famished.

The quiet from the end of the bar was broken by an older man who had been totally still, listening to the man talk but now shifted positions, asking a question.

"The way you described the dead body certainly suggests it was a wild animal. Did the cops follow up on that?"

The man's question roused the oil worker further.

"No. The evidence at the scene and the condition of the body showed the girl died where she was found—in the house. You ever hear of an animal opening a door, coming in, and committing murder?"

The oil worker waited, as if to let his words sink in, then he continued.

"The cop questioned me over an hour, checking my ID, vehicle registration, asking my whereabouts for the past twenty-four hours, my boss's name and phone number, all those kinds of things cops ask you in a serious matter like this. Then he took me to where it happened."

The man took another drink.

"You saw the body?" Again, the older man asked the question.

"Yes, that was the worst part. After battering me so long with questions, he took me to the house where the girl was dead, on the floor, all torn up, twisted and stiff, dried blood on her and everywhere else. He said he wanted me to identify the body, but I think it was something else: He wanted to see how I would react."

The oil worker looked in space, caressing the half-empty glass of beer.

"He didn't let me touch anything, of course, a crime scene, you know."

His voice trembled slightly, Warren imagining the look in his eyes, unseen in the dim light.

"It was the most horrible thing I ever saw," he said, raising the glass to his lips and downing the rest of his drink.

There was silence for a while, then another man in the tight huddle managed to say, "Well," the word exhaled slowly with rising inflection like a question.

The group, which had been motionless, now began to shift position as though divided in their response to the story, some drawing toward the man as in sympathy and others leaning back as in repugnance at what they heard.

"That's it. The officer was done, said I was free to go, and I left. I tried to go back to work, but it wasn't the same. Everything happened too fast. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I'd become worthless. Then I was 'let go' from my job. I don't know what to do. I can't work. I can't do anything." He lifted the glass mechanically to his lips, gulping a mouthful, then set it down, empty.

The man beside him called the bartender.

"Let's have another round."

The attendant soon emerged from the shadows, distributing fresh drinks.

A voice came from the group. "It's strange that we've heard no news of such an awful murder."

The oil worker immediately responded, "The police don't have a clue and have it under tight wraps. They're keeping it quiet."

The older man had a question, "What was the name of the village where it happened?"

The oil worker finished most of the fresh glass. "It's a settlement, hardly a village, called Ataqsut."

Hearing this, Warren almost gagged on the last bit of food, just finishing the plate. He swallowed and took a deep breath as a wave of emotion, like fear, swept over him in an involuntary shudder. The death had occurred the very place he was going the next day.

He knew he had to talk to the oil worker and find out all he could about what happened. A terrible event like that in a small settlement was something not to be ignored with his plans to go there. How would it be, his showing up and asking questions in search of Billings? After such a catastrophe, an inquisitive stranger would rouse suspicion and might be shunned by villagers. The more he knew beforehand about the village and what had happened, the better he would be able to handle what had now become a more difficult job. Everyone there would be on edge, some perhaps under suspicion from the authorities, who apparently had an unsolved death on their hands with no leads of who or what committed the murder. It was bound to be a tricky business, and he would have to tread lightly and be careful how he introduced himself.

The group at the bar began breaking up, and when the seat beside the oil worker was free, he made his way over and introduced himself.

"Hello, I'm Race Warren. I heard you talking about the village, Ataqsut. Coincidentally, I'm flying there tomorrow. Okay if I sit down?"

The man eyed him suspiciously, and for a moment, Warren thought he might refuse. Then the worker lowered his head, motioning the stranger to sit down. The long spell of drinking apparently had made him stuffy in the heavy garb. He dropped the hood from his head, letting it fall to his back, and loosened the top, opening the collar wide, exposing his neck and top of his chest. It appeared the man wore nothing underneath.

"So you heard me talking about the killing?" he said in a somewhat quieter voice than the earlier rants. No telling how long he'd been there, and he may have been growing weary with the late hour.

He shifted his gaze, eyeing the new arrival for a moment in a look of appraisal, then turning again to his glass of beer.

Warren answered, "Yes, what you said was quite alarming, especially since I'm going there tomorrow. If you don't mind, I would like to ask you about it."

"You a cop?"

"No, I'm a private investigator looking for a missing person, supposed to be at Ataqsut. I'm working for a woman in Tennessee trying to find her ex-husband. From what I know, the man came to Alaska earlier this year, drifted around, and landed in Ataqsut. Overhearing you talk about this killing, my business there will be more difficult with the anxiety, uncertainty, and suspiciousness this has certainly aroused in the village. I'm hoping you can help me understand the situation so my work will go easier."

"First, you sounded like a cop, and now you sound like a head-shrinker," the man said, slurring his words and beginning to totter somewhat in his seat.

"I do have training in psychology. It helps in my line of work."

"Well, I'll say goodnight. I've got to get back to my bunk and get some nap time," the man said, obviously very weary and now quite drunk.

"Would you be able to talk in the morning? My plane doesn't leave till early afternoon."

"Yes, I can do that," the man said dreamily as he pulled himself up from the seat.

"Where are you staying?" Warren asked.

The man, so talkative earlier with a dotting audience, now had become almost quiet. "With the nice weather, I'm in the park."

"Well, look. I'm at a hotel just a few blocks from here. Let me put you up in a room. A cab can take us there in a few minutes."

"That would be mighty kind of you. I could use a hot bath. That would be nice."

"Okay, let's go."

Warren helped him up, and they began walking toward the door. The man tottered unsteadily, supported by his companion's grip under his arm, steering him outside.

“Look, there’s a cab. Wait here.”

Warren had noticed lots of cabs in the area, and at least two had passed in his earlier walk. He hurried to a taxi, which was slowing after seeing the pair emerge from the restaurant, perhaps sensing they might need a ride.

The driver had already lowered the window and motioned them to get in. By now, the oil worker had sidled up near the cab, and Warren opened the back door, helping him inside, shutting the door, and getting in front.

“Wild Winds Motel,” he said.

With the destination so close, the cabbie wanted no misunderstanding. “There’s a five-dollar minimum.”

“Sure, no problem.”

The driver made a sharp turn into Winnie’s parking lot, then swerved in a wide arc back to the street and sped toward the motel. Looking in the mirror, he remarked on the worker’s strange appearance.

“Colder than normal on the inlet this summer?”

Glancing halfway at the rear seat and seeing the oil worker slumped over almost asleep, Warren said the first thing in mind, “He just came in from a bad trip.”

The cabbie made a quizzical expression then turned his attention back to the road.

They soon pulled up to the hotel entrance. Warren handed the driver a ten-dollar bill, saying, “Keep the change.”

He got out, turned, and opened the rear door, reaching in and taking the oil worker under his arm as the man stirred and began sliding from the seat.

As he stood up, he leaned on his companion’s arm as Warren shut the car door with his other hand. He then turned, helping the drunk up the two steps, hearing the cab pull away speeding down the street. He passed through the door, helping the man, moving sluggishly as they headed toward the front desk where the clerk just saw them coming in.

“Could you put my friend in a room for the night? Charge it to my bill, Warren in 112.”

“Okay, we can put him next to you in room 110. Here’s the key; just sign here.”

Warren signed and took the key. The oilman had been leaning on the counter, nearly asleep, and the investigator put an arm under his shoulder and began assisting him toward the hall.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Larsen, Medford Larsen,” the man said gruffly.

Warren helped Larsen down the nondescript hallway. They came to the room.

“Here you go,” he said, opening the door. Larsen shuffled through.

“Much obliged to you. What’d you say’s your name?”

“Warren, Race Warren. I’m in room 112, right next door. Get plenty of rest. In the morning, we’ll talk more about Ataqsut. Good night.”

Warren handed him the key.

“And lock your door.”

The man withdrew into the shadows and pushed the door shut. Warren turned and stepped to his room, inserting the key card, the green LED lighting in the stainless-steel lock cover. With the handle engaged, he entered, turning on the light.

Midnight. There was still a glow outside. Midsummer. It would get no darker.

Suddenly realizing how tired he was, he threw back the bedcovers and began shedding clothing until in underwear, then turned out the light and slid under the blanket, quickly asleep.

## 2



## MYSTERY OF MEDFORD LARSEN

“Something was wrong. I couldn’t find my way to the car, and why was I in underwear? I walked faster, trying to remember where I had left it, doing my best to ignore the embarrassing stares of strangers as I continued along the street toward where I was sure the car was. With passersby staring, I felt quite uncomfortable walking barefoot in nothing but underwear. Where were my clothes? Once I found the car, I would be safe. Quickening my step, I kept walking, looking ahead, hoping to see the car, but it was nowhere. People were stopping and standing quite still, staring, mute, but with anger in their eyes. I walked more quickly toward where I was certain the car was, but ahead, there was a bright light, a glare growing larger, soon filling my sight, blocking my way. The Alaskan sun. In shadow or shade, the air is cool; but in direct sun, you feel the full intensity. Here, the sun doesn’t shine, it stings.”

Warren raised, throwing his arm over his eyes to ward off the bright light, now fully awake. The morning sun was intense, bursting through and around the slats of the shuttered window. The bedside clock said 8:25 a.m.

He had forgotten to set the alarm. Dispirited, he flung himself from bed, picked up his clothes, and quickly dressed. No time to wash or shave, just a few minutes in the bathroom, and he had to be on his way.

Quickly glancing over the room for loose articles and satisfied he had everything in the backpack, he slung it over his shoulder and left the room. Shutting the door, he stepped to room 110, rapping solidly on the door. No sound. He hammered again a succession of hard knocks.

“Larsen, you there?”

Only silence. He turned, going quickly to the front desk, greeting the clerk, a portly young woman with slight Asian features.

“Good morning. My name’s Warren. I need a key for room 110. I charged it last night.”

He showed a driver’s license, which she stared at for a long time then tapped some buttons and ran a key card through a reader, handing it to him.

“There you are.”

He rushed back to door 110, inserting the card, lit the LED, and activating the door handle. He cranked it down and entered the room.

The bed was a jumble of pillows and covers, but the man was gone. Hurrying to the bathroom, glancing about, turning back with a quick look, finding nothing, he left, shutting the door behind.

He went to the front desk where a thin, bookish-looking man stood behind the counter.

“Did the man in 110 check out?”

The clerk looked at the computer monitor on the counter, tapped a few buttons on the keyboard, and said no.

“Rooms 112 and 110 are in my name. I need to check out.” Warren handed both cards to the clerk, who closed the transaction on the computer.

“All done. Complimentary breakfast in the dining room if you have time.”

“No, thanks.”

Warren was already heading to the door, passing through into the morning sun.

Walking down the steps at the entry drive, he faced the question of Larsen, a flurry of thoughts on the man, most of which he quickly

dismissed. He was yielding to activity, hurrying along, giving himself over to exertions of the walk.

He was going back to Winnie's where he'd met Larsen. Something the oil worker said told Warren he might pick up the trail there. The walk would take no more than ten minutes.

The morning was bright with the summer sun. A pair of querulous magpies squawked and flitted in nearby trees. The birds had distinctive colors, black tuxedos, and white vests. Nearby, a raven, larger than a crow and distinguished by the ruffle of feathers at its neck, emitted a deep gravelly croak. It sat atop a utility pole, taking in the view of the street, eyeing every movement, closely watching the man go by. Everything was sparkling clear, drafts of clean air going in his lungs, animating his steps as neighborhood scenes passed. Walking rapidly, Warren's thoughts were working on several levels. *How strange that Larsen, taken to the room drunk and nearly passed out, should have awakened early and already gone? By all lights, he should still be asleep in bed.*

The hard walkway was marred in areas protruding above other sections. The nearby street curb also was chipped and scraped along its upper rounded top. Caused by snowplows during the long winters with frequent snow, the clearing equipment must be out promptly, going up and down the streets, the heavy steel blades running along, tossing snow in a sweeping arc from the roadway, jostling against the curb, shearing off any protrusion, and skinning the concrete. Actions from six months ago, leaving marks seen now. The past always leaves signs of what was before. That reminded Warren of a famous quote: The past is not dead; it's not even past.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sidewalk was mostly empty, a few pedestrians sauntering along, seemingly carefree, as he looked through the window of the shabby office, somewhat bored, not much going on, watching life pass by on the street, some birds flitting through the trees across the way, a squirrel bounding over the grass onto the trunk of a large oak,

skittering up the trunk and lost in the foliage. Some cars passed by. Far off an unseen plane sounded like a distant wind.

A knock at the door. Warren turned and glanced at the calendar. *Did I forget an appointment?* But in the box with the day's date, there was nothing, no penciled notes, only block numbers that it was June 15.

Perplexed, he walked the short distance to the door, took the knob, and turned it, swinging it inward.

A well-dressed middle-aged woman stood before him with a whimsical expression. She had dark-brown hair of moderate length, the tips of which curled around her ears and gently caressed her neck. She had pert lips, a well-curved chin, and deep eyes of dark brown.

"Hello, I'm Race Warren. May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Claire Billings. It's very good to meet you. May I come in?"

"Please." He stepped aside, opening the door all the way.

The woman came just inside the room, pausing, clasping her hands in front with a small purse, looking around tentatively.

He shut the door and stepped by to move a chair to the side of the desk. "Please, have a seat."

She turned, looking at him with a faint smile, saying, "Thank you."

Holding the back of the chair as she sat down, he paused a moment, making sure she was comfortable, then stepped around the desk and sat down across from her.

She was staring, still with a faint smile, as though unsure if she should begin or wait for him.

"Mrs. Billings, what can I do for you?"

She paused a few more seconds. "I'm not sure if you can help me. I've never called a private investigator, and I'm unsure who would be right for my particular problem."

"Well, maybe if you tell me what it is, then I'll tell you what I think if I can help or not."

She thought for a moment before going on. "Yes, that sounds right. My problem has to do with my marriage. Uh, no, it's not that.

I don't want you to spy on my husband. There's not another woman, at least, I don't think so."

Warren was intrigued at her words. When she said *marriage*, he must have widened his eyes or something, prompting her remarks.

She had paused, unsure of what to say.

"Yes, please. Go ahead."

"We were married quite young, just beginning college. Neither had dated much, but we were strongly attracted to each other, thinking we were in love, and thought we could handle any hardship, both going to school and working part-time. Neither was prepared for marriage under those circumstances, but when you're young, you don't understand those things.

"Our first year was very difficult, and we both learned surprising things about each other, things that are only revealed under the demands of married life and being so busy.

"Life went on. Our marriage endured but with great difficulty. The stresses of the early days seemed to have created some line fractures in the marriage that tended to widen from time to time, but we always managed to work things through and stay together.

"After twenty years, I don't know if it was just getting older or what, but things got particularly bad. Then earlier this year, my husband left me."

She paused again, now with a pained expression, looking toward the floor.

"Yes, please, go on." He didn't know what she wanted but knew from psychology it was best to let the client direct the conversation.

"My husband and I went to counseling a few times, and I always pushed the blame on him. The counselors tried to draw me out and search for anything I might be doing wrong, but I'm quite stubborn, and I couldn't be swayed. Recently, I've gone through intensive therapy and now understand my own dysfunction. It was very difficult, probably the hardest thing I've ever done, but arriving at this point has made me more accepting of myself and given me a better outlook on life."

She paused again, allowing Warren to ask a question.

"But what is it you want of me?"

"Yes, I'm getting to that. I've reached the understanding I want the marriage to survive if it's possible. I want my husband to know how I feel and that I'm willing to go back to joint counseling to work together to restore our marriage."

"Have you told him this?"

"That's just it. I don't know where he is. He left and went to Alaska. That's all I know. I want you to find him and tell him what I've told you. I want him to know I will do my part, and together, we can make the marriage work."

\*\*\*\*\*

That was a month earlier.

Warren learned the husband had landed in Anchorage, staying there a month, then went to Fairbanks, staying there an even shorter time, then drifting again, this time further north, and all the while as under a spell as though when first landing, he had been bitten or caught something in the air, hearing Alaska's siren song, calling him deeper to the wild, to more remote areas, until he landed at a small settlement near the Arctic Circle, a village called Ataqsut.

That was Warren's destination, his next stop after Anchorage. Larsen's encounter at the village meant he had information the investigator needed. He must find the oil worker, and he was going to the only place where he might pick up the trail. He was walking along the street, hurrying, rounding the corner, seeing Winnie's just ahead.

He continued the fast pace, reaching the parking lot and coming to the entrance. Passing through the door into an anteroom hall, Warren went to the end, opening another door into the restaurant where he paused, looking around.

Still morning, the bar was empty, but a man was busy behind the counter. The stranger walking in got the attendant's notice, looking up, about to say something when Warren spoke.

"Good morning. I was here last night and wondering if you could help me."

"I work days, never here past five o'clock," he said quickly, turning away.



“No, this has nothing to do with the restaurant. I’m looking for the nearest park?”

“Oh, is that it? Chandler Park’s two blocks east on Spenard Street.”

Warren thanked the man, turning back, proceeding through the inner doors, through the anteroom, and emerging in the bright morning sun. He looked around, shifting the pack to his left shoulder, turning into the sun, and began walking along Spenard. Traffic was brisk as motorists headed to work or morning errands. Warren picked up his usual pace, trying to make up lost time.

He was behind on tasks for the day. There was a package waiting for him at the airport, the first item of business once he found Larsen. He needed information from the man about Ataqsut before going there to find Billings. But he couldn’t let things crowd his schedule with an afternoon flight to Fairbanks, the intermediate stop to Ataqsut.

In the distance, he saw a cluster of tall trees, across the street a block away. It was some woods, mostly conifers with a few deciduous trees, extending far from the roadway, capped with serrated boughs in a ragged skyline rising behind buildings on the street. This was likely Chandler Park. Glancing back, seeing a gap in traffic, Warren crossed the street at an angle, reaching the curb on the other side and continuing along the walkway.

Ahead, a sign with the park’s name stood beside a paved trail going from the sidewalk and winding beneath the canopy of trees. He turned onto the path and entered the park, starting to wonder if he was wasting time. But one thing he’d learned in the business was to rely on instincts when there were no facts to go on and no time to look for any.

It felt cool in the shade, a slight wind coursing along the path through the thickness of trees. On one side, a small creek bubbled, partly hidden by foliage. The other side was heavy with seasonal growth of aspens mixed with conifers.

A runner approached, moving at a casual, rhythmic gait, eyes fixed forward, head fitted with miniature earphones dangling a wire to a device at his waist. He passed like a phantom unaware of the

PI’s existence. Nearby, a young mother pushed a youngster in a pram along the path with one hand, the other holding a cell phone at her ear.

Warren kept sweeping his eyes over the area, looking for any sign of a camp. Most likely, a drifter would set up away from the path, where it would be quieter and free from disturbance.

Seeing some rolled materials beside a tree about ten yards from the trail, he went for a better look, stepping off the path, picking his way through shin-high vegetation. As he got closer, it appeared to be an old nesting ground for some rootless soul, scattered with the remains of an old tarp, cheap, worn, and weathered. It looked abandoned years ago. He went back to the trail and continued in the same direction.

Was coming here a futile waste of time? He wasn’t acting on evidence or anything logical, just an impression, something pulling him this way if he could only find Larsen and talk to him. He went on.

Then he saw three men, two in uniform, or they seemed in uniform. Through the trees, it was hard to tell, but two of them seemed dressed alike, about ten yards from the paved trail, ahead next to an arbor of trees inside a circle of yellow tape.

Warren cut off the path, heading straight toward the men, and now clearly seeing two police officers and another well-dressed, perhaps a plainclothes, detective hunched over something on the ground inside an area ringed with yellow security tape.

Getting closer, he saw a white sheet on the ground, a loose bedroll, and assorted items bunched nearby. Seeing the outline of a body under the covering, Warren felt a sense of dread.

The man in plainclothes turned toward the approaching stranger.

“Don’t come any closer. This is a crime scene. You need to leave.”

He stopped a dozen feet away.

“My name is Race Warren. I’m a private investigator from Tennessee. I’m tracking a man who has led me here to Alaska.” His next words were on impulse. “Another man, Medford Larsen, has information about the case. It’s urgent I talk to him.” Warren pointed

toward the still form under the sheet. "I believe that body may be Larsen."

"You know this Larsen? You could identify him?"

"Yes, just met him last night, but he was too drunk to provide anything useful."

"Well, come closer. Let me see who you are."

The one speaking was obviously in charge. The two uniformed cops eyed the stranger suspiciously as the one in plainclothes stood up to full height, stepping toward the yellow tape.

With eyes on the newcomer, he kept his right hand touching the side of his jacket, near what Warren assumed was a holstered service automatic. Probably just a habit and a good one.

The detective stopped at the yellow tape.

"Let's see your ID."

Warren pulled out his wallet, retrieving driver's card and state investigator license, handing them to the officer who studied them closely for what seemed like a long time. The feeling of uneasiness in Warren dissolved when the detective looked up, a faint smile on his face.

"Tennessee. A long way from home. I'm Detective Roberts, and this is Officer Hennessy and Officer Simmons," he said pointing to the others.

Roberts turned his gaze back on Warren. "Okay, I'll show you the body, and you tell me if you know him."

He turned, taking a few steps back to the crumpled figure, silhouetted beneath a blood-spattered sheet. He stooped down as the other two men rose to their feet, eyes firmly on the stranger. The detective pulled the sheet back enough to show the face, then turned toward Warren.

"Is this Larsen?"

It was indeed Larsen, the face a grotesque death mask, smeared with half-dried blood, eyes half open, but the spark of life gone. The eyes were inert, static. He was quite dead.

"Yes, that's him."

Warren felt a bit of satisfaction; his instincts had paid off. He had found Larsen, but not as expected.

The detective drew the sheet back, letting it fall loosely over the face, then rose, stepping to the yellow tape. Warren was standing on the other side. For the first time since the stranger came up, the uniformed officers returned to the work, studying the area around the body, patiently and closely examining the ground, carefully going over everything in view.

The detective, now with a straight face and serious tone, started to ask questions.

"Now tell me what you know about the deceased."

Warren began to relate everything he knew of the mysterious Larsen from when he first saw the oil worker at the bar the previous night until he was checked into the motel. "That's all I know. Like I said, I was hoping to talk to him this morning, but he vanished, and now he's dead."

He had told the detective everything, but he felt he was in something much bigger than surface appearances. Larsen was now, truly, a dead end, but Warren needed answers.

"I know it's none of my business, but can you tell me what you've found?"

The question surprised Roberts. He eyed the other man intently, a straight expression on his face. He seemed given to lengthy pauses; whether part of his professional technique or a personality quirk, Warren wasn't sure.

After the longest time, he showed a slight smile, quite enigmatic, shifting his head and keeping the stranger fixed in his steely eyes. He now seemed almost friendly.

"Mr. Warren, you are a member of the trade, of sorts, so I'll give you what I have. Our Mr. Larsen died from an animal attack, likely a wolf, which is very unusual. In fact, most extraordinary. It was a very large wolf. An early morning jogger heard a partial scream. The cry was cut off, and he saw a large animal attacking the victim. From the description and the marks and injuries on the deceased, a wolf attack is our best guess. The animal, or whatever, was surprised by the approaching jogger, then ran off in the woods."

The detective had a wry, partial smile on his face, almost as if he didn't believe all he was saying. Whatever its purpose, the expression

concealed his thoughts and covered his thinking, putting any questioner at a disadvantage.

“That’s all we have for now. Of course, the investigation has only just begun, and there’s still the autopsy. It will all figure in the final determination of cause.”

The detective had shown Warren just enough, Larsen’s face, to make an ID, but he needed to know more, specifically the injuries to the body and what caused the man’s death.

“Detective Roberts, can you show me the injuries to the body?”

It was a pointed question, the type that might elicit a revealing response, but Roberts remained inscrutable. Again, he gave a long look with steely eyes and now an almost-quizzical expression.

“You are persistent. I like that.” He turned to the other officers. “Joe, uncover him. Mr. Warren wants a better look.”

The man called Joe pulled the sheet halfway down the body. Warren almost winced. He had seen dead bodies a few times in his job, but never one this mutilated. From just under the chin down to the collarbone was a gaping emptiness where the throat and most of the front of the neck had been ripped out, leaving a few bloody tatters.

“Okay, cover it,” said Roberts. The sheet was pulled back, draping the body and covering Larsen’s head, but Warren still saw the indelible image of the terrible damage done to the front of the neck.

Roberts had complied with the private investigator’s requests, but knowing the young stranger was part of the case, the detective wanted more.

“Mr. Warren, can you leave me your personal information, should I need to get back to you?”

“Of course.”

He retrieved a card from his wallet.

“This has my cell phone, business address, everything. And thank you for sharing what you know.”

The two exchanged business cards, shaking hands as the detective gave parting words.

“Good to meet you. Sorry, it couldn’t have been under more pleasant circumstances. It’s always good to meet another in the fraternity.”

Again, his steely eyes were fixed on Warren, a wry expression, almost a smile, playing on his face. The PI turned to go but stopped long enough for another look at Larsen’s remains, draped and still beneath the stained sheet.

Just then, two more police officials came up carrying equipment cases. Beyond the trees, flashing lights strobed on police vehicles in the parking lot.

Reaching the paved trail, Warren turned to look one last time. The body was now completely uncovered, revealing a grotesque view of the victim, fixed in terrible death throes. One of the newcomers had a large camera and began taking pictures. A sudden flash illuminated the ground, reflecting off those huddled around as Detective Roberts gave instructions.

“Now get one from this angle, over here. Careful about the ground. I want every leaf and twig turned. Don’t miss a thing.”

Warren turned and strolled down the path, unsure of his feelings, walking slower than usual. He couldn’t make sense of what he had seen nor of his brief acquaintance with Larsen.

He barely noticed the gurney wheeling toward him, an attendant on either side. Stepping off the path, he gave the medics room as they steered the rolling stretcher past, and he turned to watch. They stopped momentarily, retracting the wheeled legs which locked beneath the metal frame. With one on each end, they stepped cautiously off the trail and carried the gurney to where Larsen’s remains lay.

Warren turned and went on, slowly walking down the path, deep in thought, trying to assess all that had happened, giving his subconscious free rein to sift the facts, to fit pieces in place, to deduce some conclusion that would lead to Ron Billings.

But he was fooling himself; it wasn’t Billings. The image of Larsen’s mangled body was fixed in his mind, incredibly killed the same way the oil worker had described the death of a girl. Warren was into something more than a missing person’s case, much bigger than what had brought him to Alaska. It was clear the deaths were connected, but there was no proof, only what the oil worker said at the bar the previous night and, just now, seeing Larsen’s dead body. All

of this made Warren's imminent trip to Ataqsut more ominous, but that was where the search for Billings was leading. Whatever Warren was in, he was deep in the middle and would have to figure it out.

Emerging from the park, his cell phone made the distinct tone of a new email. He checked the message, chagrined that an important package had been delayed and would not arrive until the following morning. This meant he would have to stay another night in Anchorage. Returning the phone to the pack, he made mental adjustments to his plan. He would go back to the hotel, get a room, relax a bit, and find something to eat.

### 3



## DEADLY ENCOUNTER

The next morning, Warren got up, well rested. He showered and put on his last set of fresh clothes. He went for the complimentary breakfast, something he seldom did. Looking over the offerings in the dining area, he picked up a plastic fork, slid a fried egg from a platter to a paper plate, added a slice of toast, filled the other space with chunks of fruit, and grabbed a cup of black coffee, carrying it to a small table in the back, sitting and looking casually around the room. An elderly couple, likely tourists, sat nearby. A man in a suit with a briefcase and a man in work clothes were the only others in the dining room. Warren took his time, dawdling, eating the bland food, and stretching the meal for thirty minutes.

Finally, he went to the front desk and checked out. Conveniently, transportation was always available, without the need to call. Seeing a cab across the street, he headed toward the vehicle, heartened by the pleasant weather, an azure sheen covering the sky like a veil and the temperature a crisp 57 degrees. He came up on the driver's side, finding the cabbie reading a newspaper.

"Can I get a ride?"

"Sure, that's why I'm here. Hop in."

The driver looked quite respectable. He wore a light, solid-colored shirt with a modest tie, glasses, and had close-cropped hair.

Warren opened the rear door and slid in across the seat.

The driver turned. "Where to?"

“Take me to the airport, parcel delivery office, please.”

The cabbie started the car, flipped the lever on the timer, and pulled into the street. Warren lay the pack at his side, attached the seat belt, and pushed back slightly in the seat to stretch his legs.

The cab quickly made it down the street, rumbling across railroad tracks, reaching the light at airport drive. The driver glanced left, making sure he was clear, then pulled onto the street, turning right and heading toward the airport.

They passed Hood Lake, the largest small plane port in the world, where every type of small plane was parked, most with pontoons under the wings and some with wheels that could cross the aircraft traffic lane nearby which led directly to a runway.

The number of single-engine planes, crowded as far as the eyes could see, showed their importance that the craft were essential for regional transportation. Most of the planes, in every shade of color, appeared well used and were held to the ground by tethers. The scene flew by as the taxi went on, passing a post office facility and soon arriving at the package hub.

The driver deftly swept the car into the driveway and came to an abrupt stop.

Warren glanced at charges shown on the timer and handed the cabbie a large bill.

“Wait for me. It shouldn’t be more than five minutes.”

“Not a problem.”

Opening the door, pushing his pack out, then lifting it up, he exited the car, shoving the door shut. Hoisting the pack to his shoulder, he strolled toward the building’s double-door entrance. He opened the door of the glass anteroom, passing through, going through a second door into an open area, set off by a partition from the warehouse.

He approached the reception desk where a uniformed agent was shuffling papers, pausing until he got the worker’s attention.

“Yes, may I help you?” After looking up an instant, the clerk glanced back at a sheaf of papers.

“Hi, my name is Race Warren. There’s a package for me.”

He handed a claim check which the agent placed atop the stack of papers, looking at it, saying he would be right back.

He turned and pushed through a door, revealing for a moment a vast warehouse, shelves stacked high, close packed, and crammed with boxes of every size and description, before the door swung back, oscillating and stopping, leaving all unusually quiet.

Before long, the door opened, and the agent came up to the counter with a medium-sized carton. He retrieved the related documents, unfolding them carefully and laying them flat on the counter.

“Sign here, please,” he said, extending a pen.

Warren took it, scrawled a quick signature, and handed it back. The agent separated a copy from the papers, handing it to the customer.

“Here’s the receipt. Have a good day.”

Thanking him and picking up the carton, Warren turned and headed toward the exit, passing through two sets of doors. This was the standard arrangement for the far north, an outer door, short vestibule, and inner door, a practical design for lengthy cold winters.

The taxi stood where he’d left it, motor running, as he crossed the short distance to the back of the car. He pulled the door open, pushing the backpack across the seat, then sliding in with his package.

“Where to now?” asked the driver.

“Rush’s Flying Service on Hood Lake.”

“Yes, know it well. We’ll get you right there,” he said as Warren clasped the seat belt on, sinking slightly, openly sighing. Things were moving now; he was making progress. He ran his hands lightly over the box, thinking of its contents, necessary tools for the job.

The taxi turned out of the lot back to the main road that ran along the outer fringes of the airport. The speed limit was thirty miles per hour, but the driver seemed going faster, passing warning signs at crossings, where small utility vehicles, called tugs, pulled long trains of carts loaded with various size boxes, ferrying packages from the distribution hubs to huge aircraft emblazoned with names like FedEx and United Parcel Service.

Warren began opening the box, splitting the tape, pulling back cardboard flaps, and removing objects in brown paper, laying them

on the seat. Reaching in the backpack, he pulled out a leather holster worked on earlier with a special conditioner, rubbed smooth, leaving a soft sheen. He removed the wrapper from a .45 caliber Sig Sauer semiautomatic, feeling solid and heavy in his hand. He unwrapped paper from two boxes of .45 caliber ammunition and a steel hunting knife. He loaded the pistol, sliding it into the holster, placing the gun with ammo and knife into the backpack.

The box had one thing left, flattened at the bottom, a canvas carry bag for his clothes so he could lighten the backpack. He removed the satchel, transferring all clothing to it, then returned the loose paper to the box, and settled for the short ride to the flight station. Going toward the air terminal, Warren remembered something.

“Did we pass a post office earlier?”

The driver caught his eye in the mirror. “Yes, it’s just ahead.”

“Stop there, please.”

There was something important he’d almost forgotten.

He saw the flag flying over a flat, one-story building. Coming closer, the taxi slowed, the driver setting the turn signal as they came to a stop, waiting for several cars to pass. Then they turned into the lot, passing a lone tree at the road, on an oval drive around a narrow median strip, parking spots angled for easy access, the same arrangement on the other side where the lane returned to the street. Coming to the front entrance, the cabbie stopped.

Warren was in a hurry. “Wait on me. Should be a few minutes.”

He handed bills over the seat. The driver took the money. “I’ll be here.”

Warren stepped from the back of the cab into the bright sun. It was noon. He was still on schedule but had nearly missed something important. Hoisting the pack over his shoulder, he walked quickly to the entrance. The building was plain but functional, the front wall of half brick supporting thick glass, separated by aluminum dividers, the structure extending well past the entrance. He pushed through outer doors, passing through the glass anteroom through secondary doors into the facility.

It was a typical post office, display racks on the walls, a chrome and glass customer desk at the center of the room, holding cubby

holes for stacks of official forms under a heavy glass top. Three people stood waiting beside the table, the woman just ahead writing something on the desk. Just beyond, a solitary clerk stood behind a counter helping a customer with a small box. The right side of the room had a single window near a front wall that extended to the clerk’s work area. Near the window, a large pedestal fan sent currents of air along the length of the service counter, circulating through the interior. The whirring of the fan made a soothing, somnolent sound, heard throughout the room. Wide mirrored disks were attached over the doors to the warehouse. The doors swung both ways, allowing the workers easy passage to the building’s interior as they went about their tasks. A large clock on the back wall showed the time, 12:07. The needle hand moved continuously, silently, over the dots and numbers, measuring time in harmony with the fan-swept air.

Warren waited, mind wandering. The clock on the wall was not typical, the *second* hand revolving steadily in a smooth, continual motion. With most clocks, the *small* hand moved in a stop/start motion, marking individual seconds. This one seemed truer to reality. Time could not be divided into small increments, a tick-tock of the clock hand, momentarily stopping at each dot. Any such division would be infinite, smaller, and smaller bits of time. Time is motion, continuous uninterrupted motion, the flow of particles, changing energy. Humanity is a part of the fabric of time. We’re born, live a short time, and die. The silent flow of the small hand on the clock seemed in harmony with time.

He broke from reveries, looking around at the people in the room. There was something odd about the man with the box at the counter. He hadn’t spoken and had hardly moved. He was speaking, but not so you could tell, rather, in a quiet manner with a set, straight-ahead stare, past the clerk, into space. The attendant was looking at the box, shifting it in his hands.

There was something else. On the floor at the man’s feet was a dog, perfectly still, apparently asleep. A leash looped up from a collar, loosely hung from the man’s wrist. Now it made sense. He’s blind, and the dog’s a guide animal.

Warren glanced at the clock, 12:10, and checked his watch. They were in sync. Lifting his eyes, he saw the woman in front addressing a letter on the heavy glass desktop. It was going to Moscow. At one time, this was part of Russia and still had a Slavic presence. Anchorage was one of the most racially diverse cities in the world. The Russians were just another part of the mix. The woman's hand moved carefully, scripting the envelope with artistic flair. *Russian American*, he thought. She reminded him why he had come.

He reached into a pocket of his shoulder pack, pulling out an envelope, checking the address and stamp. It was all in order. The letter was a record of his first week's work, a progress report. He'd taken care to show his activities in a good light that he was getting closer to the goal. It had to go out that day to inform the client in a timely manner, to reassure her his efforts were on track and getting results. This was his first real case paying decent money, and he wanted to succeed.

A glance at the clock showed 12:12. It was taking longer than expected. He began to feel concerned, a hint of worry, which was strange. What was it? Something didn't feel right, but business was proceeding normally. The sleepy atmosphere in the room, whirring of the fan, air passing over his skin, all relaxing. The clock kept its silent revolution marking the passage of time. The people in line were patient, barely moving. The woman in front held her letter passively, loosely between two fingers in hands partially clasped, joined at her waist. The voices from the service counter were faint murmurs. Yet in the dull, lazy air, something was different. Some part of the inert background of the room had changed. An inner sense told him something was awry. Then he saw: something was different.

On the floor, beside the counter, the dog's head was erect, ears pointed, nostrils flared, eyes fixed on the front of the room. Then Warren saw something on the wide mirrored disk, high behind the clerk. A low growl rose in the dog's throat as Warren made out a dark figure poised at the entrance, fixed stance, with outstretched hand holding what appeared to be a pistol with an extended barrel.

Impulsively raising the pack as a shield, brushing the others aside, he rushed the counter, hearing a *whoomph, whoomph* of the

gun from across the room, the muffled packed air of a silencer, a thud wrenching the uplifted pack, a sound, the zing like an angry insect, passing his ear. The blind man knelt below the counter as at an altar and the dog, now silent, pressed protectively against him. The clerk had vanished. Warren thrust the pack to his front, hurling himself over the counter, not quite clearing it, hitting hard on the thick glass, sliding across the top into space, free-falling, and crashing on the floor. Stunned and bewildered, he fought to recover his senses amid chaotic confusion, hearing screams of the woman and angry snarls from the dog. Bruised and rattled, no time to think, he had to act quickly. The clerk on the floor was crawling toward the wall at the end of the counter. Turning the other way, holding the pack, and rising in a half crouch, Warren rushed for the spring-hinged door, throwing his shoulder to it, crashing through, teetering for a moment, recovering his balance, and breaking into a slow run.

Only now was he starting to think clearly; his actions since spotting the threat were instinctive, on impulse. The dog had saved his life. It wasn't paranoia, but Warren was certain the shadowy figure at the entrance was shooting at him. He didn't know why, only that he must get away.

The floor, hard polished concrete, echoed with his footsteps. The place was well-kept and orderly. A lift truck hummed, scurrying through the warehouse somewhere beyond a wall of shelves and storage bins. The high ceiling was supported by iron girders, shaded lights hanging down. To his left, Warren saw sunlight flooding into the building through open bays, a way of escape, where he ran. The side of the building had a series of wide collapsible doors, all raised, opening on an apron, a long loading dock with a side ramp merging into a drive leading to the street. A few workers were scattered in the building, but no one seemed to notice the man racing through. Then a woman came around a barrier, nearly colliding, jerking to a stop, a startled look on her face. He shouted a warning as he rushed toward the light.

"Shooter in the building, run!"

Pausing as he came to the row of open doors, Warren had to decide his next move. To the left, he saw a tug pulling a train of

empty carts mounting the ramp, heading for the inside of the warehouse. He ran in that direction toward the last open bay, the driver on the tug obscured behind part of the wall, and threw himself into the last conveyance as it came forward. He landed in a heap, but he immediately pulled into a crouch within the canvas-walled cart, flattening against the side between him and the direction from where he'd fled. He pulled the .45 from the pack, retracting the slide, chambering a round, and held it ready. The train of carts jostled along and began turning into an open bay.

It seemed only seconds since the eruption of events in the customer line. Warren faced a determined foe, clearly a professional based on his stealth, unassuming appearance, and suddenness of attack. Only by chance was he seen just before firing.

His thoughts were interrupted by words of surprise from the tug driver.

“What the ——” eclipsed by muffled shots from the silenced pistol. In that moment, the assassin's attention on the driver, Warren raised, turning reflexively to the sound, extending his hands with the weapon in a smooth motion, seeing the gunman and firing the instant the man saw him. Fortunately, his aim was close; the shot meant for the head caught him just under the chin. The round jerked his neck back, his body followed, pulled along by the force while his head toppled forward, going down in a crumpled heap.

As the train of carts was slowing, Warren jumped to clear the rim of the enclosure, moving quickly to the prostrate assassin, holding his gun ready and poised for a second shot. But it wasn't needed; the man was quite still amid gushing blood, spreading quickly in a pool on the shiny concrete floor. Head hanging to the side at an unnatural angle, the shot apparently had shattered the spine at the base of the skull as well as severing neck arteries. Warren crouched down, staying clear of the blood, and hurriedly rifled the pockets. There was a spare clip for the weapon, a .22 with an integrated silencer that lay near the body, which he ignored. Finding a cell phone, he threw it into his pack, leaving everything else. He took his phone out, clicking a picture of the dead man's face, then turned and rushed through the open doorway past the train of carts and moving quickly down the

ramp. He turned for a last look, seeing at the front of the linked carts, the tug with the driver slumped over, unmoving.

At the bottom of the ramp, he reached level ground; and although trying to hurry, he felt something holding him back, his movements becoming sluggish, while everything seemed to merge and form a strange mosaic of color and texture. Not understanding, he extended his arm, brushing fingertips over the surface of the building as he walked to see if it was real or maybe to help his balance; he wasn't sure. But everything was upright, correct proportion, and in place as it should be, and he wasn't dizzy, yet something was wrong. He saw the corner of the structure ahead, the point he was trying to get to, to go around and reach the car, yet it seemed almost out of reach. Time seemed to have slowed, like he was swimming upstream.

Then Warren knew, feeling revulsion at what had happened. He had come close to death and just as quickly killed a man. From when seeing the assassin in the mirror until fleeing the warehouse, he had moved without thinking, and only now, running alongside the building, his central brain was recovering, feeling the shock of what happened. Earlier, during the crucial ten minutes facing death, his lower brain was predominant.

Many days at the firing range, practice disassembling weapons, firearm maintenance, and two weeks of combat training at an Arizona facility last summer, these had formed a neural network that in an instant, waiting in line at the postal counter, had reacted and saved his life.

He heard the shrilling of a distant siren. He ran around the corner of the building then hurried to the cab. Reaching the driver's side, he looked at the cabbie.

“A man entered, dressed in a suit. Did he have a car?”

“He was in the gray sedan, there,” pointing to a car by the entrance. Warren went over and clicked a picture of the license plate with his cell phone, then rushed back to the cab and jumped in.

“Let's get to Rush's Air Service?”

The driver nodded and steered the cab to the road, turning left, the sound of sirens from the other direction as police cars approached.



At last, he began to feel safe. Apparently, the driver heard nothing of the disturbance inside, but he likely would be questioned once authorities began an investigation. While Warren was unknown in Anchorage, the brief meeting with the police detective the day before would likely lead to identification by security cameras. He did not want involvement with the police, not yet. First, he needed to find out who wanted him dead. Sending a professional to kill him meant a major enterprise was working, and they were sure to try again. He had to get away, like the man he was after, and disappear in the wilds of Alaska.

It was a short way to Rush's Air. They curved along fringes of the airport, Hood Lake on the left with its jumble of floatplanes of every description, mostly small two- and four-seaters clustered along the edge of the lake while the main air terminal was on the right. They slowed, approaching the Air Museum where a midsize passenger jet sat, a plane retired from the fleet of Alaska Air. The taxi made a sweeping turn past the museum's main building, coming to the edge of Hood Lake set with various buildings, short quays jutting in the water where a host of floatplanes were tethered.

They pulled to the entrance of Rush's Air Service, where Warren had a reservation for Fairbanks. An elderly couple, likely tourists, stood at the head of the quay, enjoying the nice weather, looking out at the lake.

Warren paid the cabbie, got out of the car, and shut the door, shouldering the backpack and carrying the satchel, turning and walking toward the entrance.

There was nothing showy about the place, a plain building with several windows across the front and a door in the middle. He entered the office and approached the high counter where a young man stood on the far side, raising his head and fixing a stare on the newcomer strolling in. Warren gave his name, saying he was scheduled to fly to Fairbanks at 1:00 p.m., checking his watch.

"Looks like I'm right on time."

The man gave a wry smile as he looked at a clipboard. "Yes, Mr. Warren, you're all set for the flight. Just sign the form, and we'll get you on the plane."

He pushed the clipboard forward with a credit card slip. He signed it, retrieving a copy, then slid the papers back to the clerk.

"Do you have luggage?" He asked the question as he came around the counter to take the customer to the plane.

"A backpack and satchel." Warren turned and followed him out.

The day was pleasant, midsummer, sun unblemished by clouds, in the upper sixties with a light wind. A short distance from the door, the young man pointed toward a small floatplane nestled beside a dock where the couple stood, waiting for their flight.

"That's your plane. Russ will help you board," indicating a young man working with a rope at the end of the landing.

Warren thanked him and continued across the pavement toward the dock. The couple looked up as he approached.

"Hi, I'm Race Warren. I guess we're flying together."

The couple smiled, introducing themselves and telling their story. They had come up along the coast on a cruise ship that made port at Homer where they changed to a bus that drove them along a winding highway through thick forests and beside lakes and rivers, finally arriving in Anchorage. They had a few hours to relax and dine, and now they were ready for the flight to Fairbanks. They had the summer for travel and seemed intent on seeing as much of the state as possible.

The woman did most of the talking, the man showing a barely noticeable air of determination, not enjoying the trip like his wife, but enduring it, going through the motions to give his wife what she wanted.

The young man approached from the end of the dock. "Hi, I'm Russ. If you're ready, we can board."

The passengers introduced themselves.

"Mr. Warren, we'll get you on first, in the copilot's seat."

The plane rocked gently, blown by a modest wind, barely felt.

Russ guided Warren as he put his foot on a step plate on the starboard pontoon then, with the other foot, stepped to the bottom of the open doorway as the plane shifted, wobbling in the water.

"Your things can go in the rear."

He pointed behind the folded seats where Warren flung the pack and satchel, bending down, carefully walking over the seat backs, making his way to the front, taking his place in the copilot's seat. It was a snug fit. All controls on that side had been removed. He almost felt he was in a hole, but high enough to see above the front panel that curved from the pilot's side to where he sat. He looked at the array of switches, lights, and dials on the left side, important to the pilot but meaningless to him.

The couple had struggled into the plane, crawling over the seats and managing to lift the chair backs and properly position themselves. It was crowded, and both were close enough for Warren to touch.

The pilot's door suddenly flew open, and a man in his midthirties climbed in.

"Hi, I'm Ken, your pilot," he said matter-of-factly, sitting down, adjusting his seat.

Ken put a communication set over his head and indicated everyone should do the same. Warren found the comm-set and clamped it on his head and, in the corner of his eye, saw the couple put theirs on.

Russ pushed the passenger door shut, turning the lever firmly. Warren could see him loose the mooring ropes, tugging on a line, taking plodding steps, and proceeding toward the end of the dock as the plane began floating out in line with Russ. He let the rope go, freeing the craft from the dock.

Ken was no more than six feet tall, yet he filled the space to Warren's left. He flipped a hidden control, and the propeller made a couple of tentative, halting jerks, then exploded in a roar, the blurring whirl of the prop in sync with the sound of the engine. The motor was loud, but the earphones allowed everyone to hear Ken's instructions.

"Be sure your seat belts are fastened. We'll proceed on the lake to the runway channel, turn, and take off into the wind."

Warren looked out the side window, seeing the water lapping around the pontoons, and as the plane picked up speed, small wavelets formed and began splashing over the floats. The plane was taxi-

ing, sliding smoothly over the waterway, coming around a bend, and now entering the wide expanse of Lake Spenard.

Along the shore, small jetties extended, floatplanes tethered securely, with a few trees, mostly aspens, scattered about. Stretching behind the plane, a wake was rippling, water sluicing over the front and sides of the pontoons, bubbling in white froth, and churning rearward.

The plane slowed, coming to the end of a narrow island, a strip of land about fifteen feet wide, dividing the channel in half, the near side for landing, the far side for takeoff. The craft began turning, curving around the end to reach the other side. As the plane straightened, Warren saw that the long, split channel connected two bodies of water. Perhaps at one time, there were two separate lakes, and a channel was dug to join them. The channel was neatly divided into two waterways by the long finger of land. The plane was now pointed for takeoff on the north side, and as on cue, the pilot adjusting controls, the single engine on the nose of the plane reached maximum, the craft lunging forward and the scene around them accelerating to the rear. The sound was deafening, the engine at full power, the pontoons knifing the water, shearing a wave in an arc, breaking into spray, flinging to the rear and outward, and splashing back over the wake.

The plane began to tilt slightly upward as the engine roared. Outside, sights on land were passing rapidly as the craft reached the end of the channel. The plane tilted further and lifted, rising from the water, climbing into the air as lake, shore, and trees fell behind, the forest at the lake's edge coming into view near the periphery, tree-tops, steadily falling below, growing more distant; then housetops, neighborhoods, downtown buildings, all seemed pulled together, growing smaller as the plane banked, leaning into a turn. They had taken off to the west and were now turning.

In the confines of the cabin, the pilot was above Warren, the craft banking right in a slow turn to the northeast, the PI pressed against the starboard side of the plane. Anchorage was spread below in a checkerboard pattern with the sprawling Elmendorf Air Base and Fort Richardson bordering the city on the north and east. The

plane slowly leveled off on a northeast heading at several thousand feet. The last sight of Anchorage and the military bases disappeared behind as the pilot adjusted instruments.

Three plunger controls were set in a row. The pilot pushed or pulled on the knobs at the ends of the shafts, in slight increments, the movements corresponding with changes in engine sound. Watching the pilot's actions, Warren assumed the adjustments optimized the choke and fuel mixture, compensating for the change in altitude. The pilot continued to manipulate controls and scan gauges, all second nature on his part as they flew onward, the plane occasionally bucking with passage through wind gusts.

Warren marveled at the sights, nearing mountain peaks, the edge of the Chugach Range with narrow fingers of snow on upper ridges, but mostly dull earth tones, typical of summer. The tree line was further behind, still green, becoming denser at lower elevations in the foothills and valleys lined with streams leading to Cook Inlet, the upper extent of the Pacific Ocean.

Warren was safely out of Anchorage, but a few thousand feet below, the police were still working on the park killing that happened the previous day.

## 4



## DETECTIVE ROBERTS

It was the day before, and Detective Lawrence Roberts left the crime scene soon after Warren identified Larsen's body. Returning to the Anchorage Police Central Building, the detective was deep in thought, mounting the stairs, not noticing someone go by, which was odd since everyone but Roberts used the elevator. Reaching the landing, Roberts went through the door, proceeding down the corridor in a state of distraction.

"No greeting?"

Angie, Roberts's assistant, had stopped as he passed.

"Angie, could you get me a coffee?"

Roberts rarely made the request, but his mind was elsewhere, and he said the words without thinking.

The woman did not move, turning her head to follow Roberts down the hallway to his office at the end. She stood silently before answering. "Yes, I'll get it right away."

Roberts hadn't noticed the woman's perplexed look as she turned, making her way to the coffeepot near the elevator.

Roberts reached the office and mechanically opened the door, walking in, slipping his jacket off and hanging it on the coat rack, rounding his desk, and dropping into the leather chair, immediately feeling better.

*Now when Angie brings the coffee, things should settle down,* he thought. The morning's events swirled in his head, the image of the

body, the jogger's statement, Warren's report, and how the killing might fit with the other park deaths troubling the city since spring.

The door creaked, as the woman appeared, coffee in hand, which she brought over and set gently at the center of the desk.

She paused a moment. "How's your morning, Larry?"

Not seeming to hear, he blurted some words, "Oh, thanks for the coffee, Angie. Very kind of you."

The woman stood in front of the desk, staring at Roberts. He had yet to look up or notice her. She had never seen him this self-absorbed, his features expressionless. Something was going on behind the blank look. She tried again. "And your morning. How is it?"

Roberts grasped the cup. It felt warm, but not too hot—the way he liked it. He raised the cup to his lips and gulped much of it down. "The morning? It's going well." And then a short pause. "No, it's not. There's been another park death, and it's making no sense."

The woman brightened. Finally, he was talking. "That's the fifth this year. Seems like an epidemic. The community agencies aren't doing enough."

The city had had a rash of derelicts found dead that spring and summer in various places around town, but mostly in camps at municipal parks. They had been either intoxicated, drug impaired, or died from exposure. One death was from a beating, for a small sum of money.

"No, this is different. Wasn't a vagrant. Done by an animal."

The woman winced. "Another bear attack, like summer before last? Two people injured then, but no one was killed."

Roberts was deep in thought. The coffee sharpened his concentration, weighing what was known about Larsen's killing. He was getting on track, sorting the sparse evidence, drawing out salient pieces, fitting them together, and adducing known facts.

"No. Not a bear." His tone denied further discussion. He obviously was distracted and deep in thought. "Thanks again for the coffee," he said, turning toward the window.

He heard the woman moving toward the door.

"Angie, wait." He turned around. "Get out an all-points alert on what we know about this morning's death. Something may turn up on Larsen."

"I'll get right on it," she said, turning and leaving the room, pulling the door shut with a soft click.

Then it was quiet. Robert turned in his chair with thoughts mingling, random impressions, objects on the desk, things on the wall, views from the window, scenes outside, trees bordering the esplanade, passersby on the walkway, utility poles, automobiles, downtown buildings stark in the morning sun, distant mountains streaming clouds, the sky. Now he was almost daydreaming.

The stress of the morning was hampering thought. Larsen's killing was different, unlike anything Roberts had ever seen, and it was hard knowing how to proceed.

He turned toward the wall, clearing earlier thoughts, trying to be productive, to find the answers he needed when the door opened abruptly. It was Angie again.

"Chief wants to see you. Not good!"

Roberts turned, giving the woman a slight nod. He vaguely saw her leave, not shutting the door. Roberts moved slowly but was soon in the hallway. The elevator was to the left, but he turned right, following the corridor to the end to reach the stairs where there was no waiting, no people, and it kept him moving. He climbed the three additional levels to reach the top floor where he came to the director's office.

Director Rainey was never called *Chief* in his presence, but he was an Alaskan Native, and the nickname stuck as soon as he was appointed Director of Police six months before. Rainey had an interesting background, adopted as a small child by missionaries in the interior. An only child, his parents were devoted to rearing him. From early on, he showed great promise and was well educated, receiving two degrees from the state university.

Why he had chosen police work was not known, but it had something to do with a desire to help his native people. He leaned toward social work but felt it wasn't rugged enough. Law enforcement fit better with his sense of manliness and still fulfilled his need for service.

Roberts knocked lightly on the door and the director answered at once.

“It’s open.”

Roberts turned the handle, pushing the door aside, and walked to the chief’s desk set at an angle in the corner where the glass walls met.

“You wanted to see me?”

The man had not moved since Roberts came in. He was leaned over, studying a sheaf of papers. He looked slowly at Roberts. “Yes, grab a seat. We have some things to talk about. I know you just got in from that homeless death in the park. Goodness, that’s the fifth this year. Do we have a handle on it? The paper had another editorial this morning.”

It was then Roberts saw the newspaper on top of the documents and reports the chief had been going over. Roberts moved, sidling over to the chair at the corner of the desk, and sat down.

“Director, this morning’s death is different. For one thing, it wasn’t a local, and he wasn’t homeless. He just got to town and was sleeping in the park. It appears he very recently got down on his luck.”

“But that’s not good enough.” The director was emphatic. “It’s someone living in a bedroll in the park. The newspaper won’t know the difference. To them, it’s another unfortunate that society’s not caring for. When someone dies, they look to us for answers. What’s your answer, Roberts?”

“Director, this case is different. The man was killed by an animal. We have a witness, a jogger. He said it looked like a wolf, a very large wolf.”

The director was silent for a moment, studying Roberts closely. He had a minor conflict with the detective, suspecting he had a grudge.

“Roberts, you’re the best man I’ve got, and I know you were disappointed that you didn’t get this job. I don’t want us to have a problem. If you feel badly, say so, and we’ll work it out.”

Roberts sighed. “There’s no ill will. You got the job fair and square, and I respect you as the director.” Roberts was truthful and meant it.

“I appreciate that. There’s talk my promotion was because of race, affirmative action, you might say. But I wouldn’t have taken it if I didn’t think I belong here. I need to be sure you’re behind me and fully on board with this case.”

Roberts was candid. “There’s no hard feelings. Of course, I was disappointed, but I’ve accepted the outcome and put it behind me.”

“That’s good to hear. This death has tipped the scale. These cases are testing our ability to do first-class police work. I need your full commitment, and you’ve convinced me I have it. Let’s go over what we have.”

The director began rehearsing the case with what was known. He expected Roberts to freely interject comments and give his opinions.

“The four prior deaths included three natives and one Caucasian. All were known alcoholics, with a preference for living in the parks when the weather allowed it and otherwise in public shelters. As you know, only one didn’t die of natural causes, and we have the suspect in that one locked up. I don’t have to tell you the situation has gotten political, and the press has made this a special cause.”

The director paused to let Roberts add anything, but the detective was silent.

Rainey continued, “And you’re telling me that number five is different.”

“Yes, I was at the scene two hours ago and saw something I’ve never seen in my career. The victim was killed by an animal and died instantly from massive trauma. Not a pretty sight.”

The director’s eyebrows raised, studying Roberts closely. Then he glanced down at the papers on his desk.

“The preliminary report doesn’t have much, that’s why I called you, to hear directly. As hard as it is to believe this man was killed by an animal, I trust your instincts and your skills. But the editorial writers will run with this and make us look like amateurs while inflaming public fear. Roberts, just get out there and get results so we can avoid panic. The public needs reassured we can protect them. I want a report twice a day. That’s all.”

The director turned around and looked out the window. Outside, the sun was shining brightly.

Roberts had not moved. He was marshaling his thoughts. He had already detached from the talk with the director, returning to the few facts they had on the morning's killing. He turned and made his way to the door and went out to the hallway. Feeling he needed coffee, he uncharacteristically went for the elevator, which would take him to the second-floor coffee machine.

The door glided to the right, and Roberts stepped in. He moved woodenly. Something wasn't right. What could he have missed? Hennessy and Simmons had been left at the park to scour the scene for evidence. Simmons was a recruit, assisting the more-experienced officer. Hennessy was a veteran, a pro, and if anything was there, he would find it.

The door slid to one side as Roberts stepped out, almost colliding with Angie.

"Where are you going?" Roberts asked. "It's not like you to leave early."

"Oh, Laura's at the hospital. Looks like the baby's coming early."

Laura Hennessy was expecting her first child and had had a difficult pregnancy. Hennessy was very worried about his wife and would have gone.

"Is Hennessy there?" Roberts asked.

"Oh, yes, he went as soon as he got word midmorning."

Angie had many responsibilities, and one was to know where all officers were.

"But what about the crime scene at Chandler?" Roberts blurted it out, not caring if he looked callous.

Angie was in the elevator and obviously in a hurry. "He left for the hospital about the time you came in earlier."

"What about Simmons?"

Angie looked exasperated. "He got called on a 201."

The door began to close. Roberts lifted his hand in a sort of wave as the panel shut. He forgot the coffee machine, turning toward his office. Why do people take the elevator for just one floor down? For the same reason, they circle a parking lot, looking for a spot near the entrance. It's easier. Yet everyone would benefit from more steps,

more exercise. Roberts thought of Angie, who was quite trim. *What was her secret?*

He got his mind on track. Taking the elevator had tipped him of a slipup in the morning's investigation. Simmons was green and not qualified to work the scene. He was there to learn from Hennessy, who had been suddenly called away.

Entering the office, Roberts grabbed the examination kit, checking everything. There was always a sense of forgetting, leaving something. Satisfied he had all he needed, he left, taking the door to the stairs.

Meanwhile, his mind was stuck on the morning missteps. Hennessy must have left soon after he did, and Simmons soon after that, leaving the crime scene unscrubbed.

Roberts was now in his car, pulling out of the basement garage, coming up the ramp, and stopping momentarily to see the way was clear. He took advantage of a gap in traffic, which was tightening further back on the street. He got on the main westward one-way from downtown, which would take him to Spenard, then to the park entrance.

His mind was racing, thoughts jostling. Larsen's body had been examined, and pictures were taken, but the immediate area could not have been examined with Hennessy leaving so soon. The man was concerned for his wife and understandably left, but Simmons should have immediately called for help. They would be lucky if Simmons had not compromised the crime scene the short time he remained. Roberts tried to dispel the depressing thoughts as he drove. He made a right turn onto Spenard, soon seeing the thick trees of Chandler Park.

It was midafternoon. Solitary runners and walkers made their way along the paved track just beyond a small parking lot. Roberts pulled up to a line of creosoted timbers. The posts were waist-high, the boundary for cars. Roberts emerged from his vehicle, rounded the end, and made for the path. It was about a hundred yards to the so-called crime scene, although he was already convinced the death was caused by an animal. A stream was gurgling softly, unseen in the dense foliage. Roberts saw the yellow tape strung around the area

where Larsen's body had lain. It was the same as before. He came to the stringed marker, stooping and passing underneath, taking care where he stepped.

He stood still for a moment, looking around the circled area, recalling the exact spot the body was found, the way the corpse was laying, position of arms and legs. Pictures had been taken and filed on the office mainframe.

Roberts opened his case and took out a laptop computer. He turned it on and waited for the display. He made keystrokes, which brought up the graphic pictures.

Studying the images, he plumbed his mind, searching for something about the body's appearance that might give answers. The body had been tilted on the left side with the arm bent in a way to support its weight. But there was something about the right arm. It was slightly bent and reaching out. He studied the picture then looked on the ground, imagining Larsen sprawled there.

Scratching his head, Roberts lay the laptop on the utility case and pulled out a pair of thin medical gloves, putting them on as he began studying the ground. He was on his knees, slowly and meticulously sifting the grass, leaves, and twigs covering the earth. He focused on where the body's right hand had extended. He continued, slowly and methodically, lightly stirring the ground, picking up a leaf, turning it, and putting it down. He pushed grass, slender, thin stalks, bending the filaments one way and the other, slowly widening the search area, looking for what? He didn't know.

Roberts went on, moving forward slowly, as monotony set in, pushing the feeling aside, focusing intently on the minute space inches from his face.

Time passed, and he continued scanning small sections of the ground. How long had he been doing this? Grass, leaves, twigs, pieces of litter, whatever it was, he looked at it closely, turning the object over carefully, pushing it aside, and going on to the next small piece on the forest floor.

Roberts knew the monotony would grow, and he fought it, but he began to feel the ennui, the boredom of what he was doing. He

knew, at this point, he had lost effectiveness, but he continued, mentally trying to stay on task.

How long had he been there? His knees were stiff, and he began to feel pain, but he pushed ahead. Later, when back at the office, he had to be certain that the *crime scene* had been examined by procedure. That is what kept him going. He had a list of boxes to be checked. All must be done *by the book*. This case had crossed a line, tripping the threshold on the string of park deaths. The department was under the gun, the case on center stage, under the director's full scrutiny. The lapse that morning must be corrected. Roberts was determined to search and examine every inch of ground inside the circle of yellow tape. And then he found something. It was a small object that lay several yards from where the corpse had lain.

He reconstructed what was known. An early morning runner caught sight of the animal attack on Larsen, frightening the beast away. The trail was marked where the witness made the sighting. To escape, the animal would have fled to deeper woods, going upstream along the creek, in a direction making a straight line from the body. On an imaginary line just inside the yellow tape, Roberts found a small brass disk, a medallion of some sort. It had a small hole, perhaps for attaching a chain, and the disk had specks of blood. As he studied it, he concluded the object had been in the attack. If it had been there for a time, it would be tarnished from the weather. Also, there was no blood this far from the attack. The small disk had been thrown from the violence of the encounter or had been dropped by the assailant, if there was an assailant rather than an animal. Studying it, he saw an inscription. His heart jumped. This was a major piece of evidence. Roberts put a numbered marker at the spot, then carefully placed the medallion in a small plastic holder and slid it into the examination bag.

He continued searching but now focused on an imaginary line from the body to where the medallion was found. He was hoping to find more. If one object emerged from the painstaking search, there possibly was another.

Roberts pushed on. Now he was at the yellow tape, but he went under it, following the likely path the animal had fled. Still on hands

and knees, he scoured every inch in a wide swath of forest floor. Then he saw a fine chain of thin wire half hidden under a leaf. He picked it up carefully in a gloved hand. He turned it over, again and again. It was of finely crafted brass. He ran his fingers down to the end, finding it broken, as expected. He examined the break closely. The fine wire links appeared forcibly pulled apart. He looked for a long time, but there was no blood on it. He put a marker on the spot, then pulled out another glassine packet, watching the chain coil and undulate, sliding into the clear envelope.

He looked at his watch, astonished to see he had been covering the ground for nearly two hours. He had gone over everything inside the yellow tape plus several feet on a line he guessed had been the animal's escape route. But it had paid off. He stepped over to his utility pack and placed the small envelope in a pocket with the other one and zipped it shut. He would get the two items back to the crime lab at once. Picking up the case, he headed along the path as solitary runners passed by. He soon reached the car, got in, and was on his way.

He drove the speed limit. The intense search had left him exhausted. He could have called the Crime Lab Director, Dr. Dauphin, from the car, but he disliked talking while driving even with the hands-free phone. He would be back at headquarters in less than ten minutes so decided to wait.

A dull throbbing sensation formed at the top of his skull. Roberts rarely got headaches but felt one coming. The close work had left him tense. The effort brought him more than expected. He was certain the two objects were important evidence. Driving along Northern Lights Boulevard, the headache was a small penalty for what was gained. Once back at the office, he would call Dr. Dauphin, who wouldn't mind being called back to work.

Doctor Dauphin was a short man with geek-like glasses and close-trimmed hair. He was unmarried and, to everyone's knowledge, had no romantic interests. He was passionate about his work and exceptionally good at what he did. He would perform a thorough analysis, cross-checking the blood on the medallion with Larsen's type, and providing whatever could be learned from the evidence.

Roberts's car began the hooked curve rising to the bluff where Anchorage had been originally settled. He glanced at the distant Chugach Mountains, standing in sharp relief in the evening sun. There was no thought of the drive; his mind was on the case. Traffic was light, and Roberts soon found himself entering the sublevel parking garage. He parked the car and reached for the kit bag as he opened the car door. He got out and went to the stairs beside the elevator. He made his way up the steps, passing the landing, reaching the second floor where he proceeded from the stairwell into the corridor and to his office where he dropped heavily into the chair, depositing the kit on his desk, and picking up the phone.

He dialed Dauphin's number, setting it to speaker mode as he removed the contents of the bag. He laid the objects side by side on the desk. He picked up the glassine envelopes, looking at the objects inside and turning them over in his fingers. The medallion and chain both had the look of antiquity, clearly not the modern era. The phone crackled with a recorded voice to leave a message. Roberts ended the call and pressed buttons to try Dauphin's cell phone. The line rang once and then a voice.

"Hello, Dauphin speaking."

"This is Roberts. I've found something in this morning's park killing and need you."

"Killing? What, another one?"

"Nothing like previous ones. This looks like an animal attack, but it's not making sense. I've found some things and need your help."

"Very well. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

It was good that Dauphin would soon be there. Like everyone in the department, he knew the park deaths were top priority; and with another one, even more pressure would come down.

Director Rainey was wound tight. He was pressed by frequent calls from the newspaper editor, wanting more. He was careful with the press, but based on Roberts's earlier meeting, tensions were high. The director's demands on the detective were exactly proportional to the newspaper's queries to the department. The editorials were raising a frenzy among citizens, implying the department was lax, if not negligent, in handling the park deaths. The public was skeptical that



most of the deaths were from natural causes. Yet the homeless were visible, many standing on downtown street corners with a torn piece of cardboard scribbled with various appeals. Others were seen walking, tottering, their faces flush from alcohol, haphazardly begging for money. Many of these people were Alaskan Natives. The director too was an Alaskan Native, but he had avoided such a fate.

The desk phone buzzed with an inside call, the display showing it was the lab. Roberts picked up the handset.

“Roberts here. Dauphin?”

“Yes, I’m down in the lab waiting expectantly.”

That was like Dauphin to inject a little humor.

“I’ll be right down.”

Roberts grabbed the utility bag and rushed from his office, crossing the hall to the stairwell and descending quickly to the basement lab. He walked in to find Dauphin seated on a shiny metal stool at a gleaming worktable. Everything was in perfect order and hygienically clean. The room was arrayed with metal shelving of chemical vials, electronics gear, one wall lined with books, manuals, and archival volumes.

Dressed in a resplendent lab coat, a pair of small-framed glasses stuck at the end of his nose, Dauphin looked up immediately. “What do you have?”

Roberts walked to the table, reached in the bag, and produced the two glassine envelopes. “The medallion was found near the body and the chain ten feet farther.”

Roberts laid the objects on the table.

Dauphin turned, rolling his chair to a desk against the wall where he tapped on a computer keyboard as the monitor showed graphic pictures from the earlier crime scene.

He tapped at short intervals, stepping through a series of pictures.

“It’s certainly different from our other clients, most who had no markings or injuries of any kind.”

Dauphin had a strange sense of humor.

Roberts spoke up, “I think you agree. The anterior of the neck ripped out, very forcibly. Note the indentations on both sides, the

small shreds here [Roberts’s forefinger brushed the monitor screen], and a very similar shredding on the other side.” He moved his finger, marking the edge of the wound.

Dauphin concurred, “Yes, no doubt. It has all the marks of an animal, a large and powerful one.”

“So, what was it? A bear, a wolf?”

Roberts wanted a dialogue, some interaction, give-and-take. The medical examiner was quite knowledgeable, and an active conversation might shake out an idea to further the investigation.

Dauphin pointed at the monitor screen. “Not a wolf. No wolf could do that. And not a bear either. I’ve seen lots of bear injuries. They go for the head. No, this was not a bear.” Dauphin shifted, eyeing the monitor from a slightly different angle. “It’s as if some large serrated tongs thrust on the ventral part of the cervical spine, closed, and took out almost all of the neck. This is the ventral view.”

He drew his forefinger along the monitor. “A shredded bloody pulp, on both sides, of what used to be the neck.” Dauphin stared for a long time. “Okay, enough of that. Let’s see what you got.”

Dauphin turned from the desk and rolled the chair back to the worktable. He pulled surgical gloves from a drawer which he slipped over his hands.

Roberts watched as Dauphin picked up the see-through envelope, opened it, and held the medallion deftly in his fingers.

“Quite unusual.”

Dauphin carefully turned the brass disk in his hand. “There is a spot of blood. I’ll check to see if it’s yours. And this is interesting. There’s lettering on one side.”

Roberts responded, “I noticed that. Seems quite old. Any idea?”

Dauphin looked up. “No, not a clue.”

Dauphin opened the other packet, removing the fine chain. He held it high, eyeing it closely. “Looks like the same metal. Metallurgical tests will confirm. I’ll have the report to you by morning. Tomorrow, I’ll run them over to the university and get Ed’s opinion.”

Roberts was satisfied. “Okay, I’ll leave you with your work. Thanks for the help.”

Dauphin nodded his head as the other man turned, left the lab, and went home.

Dauphin carefully removed the speck of blood from the medallion and ran it through standard tests to determine blood type and other characteristics. Then he looked at the disk under a microscope and ran diagnostics using reactive agents. Results from the series of tests would be compiled in a written report.

It was far past midnight when Dauphin was done. He gave a cursory look at the document on the screen, clicking the “send” key, and the report instantly went to the director, Roberts, and a few other officers working on the park killings.

## 5



### ROBERTS LEARNS MORE

**I**t was before 7:00 a.m. when Roberts strolled into the Anchorage Police Central building. He immediately descended the stairs and went into the crime lab.

Dauphin was asleep on a small sofa in the back of the room, partly hidden by a freestanding metal bookcase.

Roberts walked to the couch. “You awake?”

Dauphin, his head buried in a corner of the sofa, began moving and raised. “I am now. What time is it?”

“Almost seven o’clock,” said Roberts.

“Well, good. I got five hours. Should be enough. The report is on your computer.”

“I thought it was but wanted to talk directly in case something came to you while you slept.”

Dauphin’s eyes may have rolled as he sat up, rubbing his face. “Yes, there was something.”

Dauphin agreed with his colleague that when stuck on a problem late, it was best to get some sleep because often you would wake with an answer. “It may not be important, but I thought of something soon after my eyes closed. Or was I dreaming?”

“Yes, well what was it?”

“I believe I’ve seen the medallion before.”

“Well, think. Where was it?”

“The museum downtown. I was there a few weeks ago for the *Star Wars* exhibit and spent the entire day. It was somewhere in the native history exhibit, I believe.”

Roberts looked at his watch. “The museum opens in an hour. Can you go there and see?”

Roberts was almost pleading. He had no authority over Dauphin but felt the scientist shared his concern that the case was a top priority.

Dauphin liked Roberts and didn't want to discourage him. “Not much else going on. I have time to run there. But the exhibits are constantly changing. If I don't see anything, I'll check with the technical advisor, an anthropologist at the university. He's very good with old artifacts.”

Roberts was pleased. “Great. I'll get on my computer and check your report. Call if you get anything. And thanks for what you've done.”

Roberts turned, hastening for the door. Dauphin collected some things and was right behind him. While Roberts headed for the stairwell, Dauphin strolled to the elevator, calling out, “Don't overdo it on the stairs, you may throw a coronary.”

But the detective was already gone.

Roberts raced up the stairs, two steps at a time. His chest was heaving as he got to his desk. He felt light-headed for a moment, but that passed quickly once he was in his chair.

He powered up the computer, logged in, and found Dauphin's email. He selected the attachment and downloaded it to a folder for the Larsen case.

The document was thorough but told Roberts little he didn't already know. The analysis of the blood on the medallion listed several properties, including type. The report only whetted Roberts's desire for more information. The results from the coroner should be forthcoming. It had been twenty-four hours since Larsen's demise.

And they already knew more about the case than on any of the other park deaths in the same time frame. Despite his initial skepticism, Dauphin had concluded a wild animal killed Larsen, corrobo-

rating Roberts's theory. But until they got the coroner's report, there were more questions than answers.

Roberts slumped back in his chair. There were lots of questions. *Where had Larsen come from, and how long had he been in the city? Was the killing purely by chance, being at the wrong spot when a wild animal came along? What was the cause of death? That was easy. He bled out after most of his neck was ripped off. If a large animal had attacked and killed Larsen, where was the animal now, and would it strike again?*

The phone rang, jarring the detective's thoughts. He picked up the handset. “Roberts here.” It was Dauphin.

“The coroner's report just came. Check your computer. It has the victim's blood analysis. I ran a comparison with the blood on the medallion. It's a match, Larsen's blood. Something else. A hair found on the body in the dried gore in what's left of the neck.”

Dauphin paused.

Roberts switched views on his computer, finding the coroner's report, quickly scrolling the document, as Dauphin continued.

“DNA analysis of the fiber shows it's from *Canis lupus*.”

“What?” asked Roberts.

“*Canis lupus*, the common wolf. Hard to believe a wolf did that damage.”

Roberts almost froze. This was what he'd expected after viewing the body yesterday in the park. He knew it was an animal, the trauma to Larsen's neck. But a wolf?

“Thanks, Dauphin. Good work.”

Roberts hung up the phone. He sat for a long time, very still. He closed his eyes for a moment, sinking in the chair. He wanted quiet. He went over what had happened the past two days. He thought if he went home and slept a few hours, rest might bring fresh ideas, but it was only midmorning; there was too much to do. There were a lot of details on the case, but no unifying thread.

He ran through what was known. The body was in a cold drawer in the morgue and had been positively identified. And they had the cause of death, sudden and massive trauma to the ventral portion of the cervical spine. And the *perpetrator* was known, a wolf. That was the part that, he had to admit, was hard to accept. Roberts had

been in police work for over twenty years, the last seven as homicide inspector. There was no arguing the fact this case was different from anything he'd ever seen.

The wolf was not just a wild theory but had been proved by analysis of fibers found on the body. And he shouldn't forget the artifacts, an ancient medallion (Dauphin himself had suggested it might be hundreds of years old) and chain found nearby, almost as if the victim had them during the final moments of his horrible death. Could the chain have held the medallion and been broken the moment of attack? Larsen's blood was on the medallion. Of course, such violent trauma on the victim's neck would have torn away anything there.

Roberts pictured the moment of attack, seeing the animal leap onto Larsen and, in one awful sweep, the powerful jaws of the wolf tearing away the victim's neck and slinging the broken chain and medallion to the ground. Now, it seemed he had a plausible theory of what happened. But how could he prove it? Roberts was slumped in his chair, eyes shut. How could he make the connection and determine the significance of the chain and medallion found near the spot where the man was killed?

The abundant trees were mostly in shadow, hidden from the rising sun, but here and there, light played on the upper branches. The morning was casting incipient sun rays over the nearby street and houses, but in the trees, abundant shadows seemed remnants of night's earlier darkness. Through the thickness of trees, an asphalt path wended, coming close to a bubbling brook nearby, feeding a pond held by a small dam, discharging the overflow sluiced by a concrete channel leading to the mudflats bounding Cook Inlet.

A man, Larsen was his name, kneeled in the shadows, rummaging through a bag lying beside a tarp, a ground cover used by homeless wanderers to mark their spot in the woods. To the east, the trees thickened, sheltering a brook where salmon flitted, a creek flowing from the foothills spread below the Chugach Mountains.

Sometimes seasonal droughts and food shortages drew the larger animals, especially the grizzly, from the mountains to feed on the salmon. This morning, the sun still below the horizon, some-

thing was coming through the trees, passing from the east through shadows along the stream, moving silently, unseen, and unnoticed. The movement through dense tree growth was mostly quiet except for an occasional twig snap or rustle of a leaf. The man, intent on his search, heard nothing as he sifted the bag in dim light. Nearby a lone runner, taking advantage of the cool temperature and semidarkness, was moving briskly along the paved path. Following the trail, he was coming closer to where the man was shuffling his bag in the shadows not far from the running path.

There was a sudden rush from the darkness of the woods as something saw the man and came with incredible power and speed. Larsen looked up, hearing what sounded like a rush of wind through the trees. Just as the animal was almost on him, Larsen saw it, jerking back in horror, raising his arms in reflex as a scream came from his throat. The cry startled the runner, bringing him to a dead stop on the path, looking toward the sound, seeing through an opening in the trees. He saw in the shadows the outline of an animal holding his victim at the neck, ending the cry before it fully formed, lifting the man off his feet, and ripping away all flesh from the jaw to the collarbone in one quick instant, and slamming the victim, what was left of him, to the ground from the force of the attack. The runner, fixed on the path, the clipped scream still in his head, saw it all, the victim's body torn and dashed upon the earth and the animal now raised up, in a terrible crouch, flesh and gore hanging from clenched jaws in shadows; and for an instant, their eyes connected. The beast was large, his faint outline barely seen in the dimness of the trees. But the eyes were glowing amber, and in a moment, the animal turned in a rush, disappearing in the forest. It was then the runner recovered, a sharp chill convulsing his frame, his breath in gasps.

Lying near the body in the woods was a brass medallion, and several feet away, in the direction the animal had fled, lay a broken chain. But where were the chain and medallion the instant before the attack? Larsen's neck was gone, but a few seconds earlier, had the medallion hung there? That's how it looked. Backing up, rewinding the images before the attack, the man was searching his things on the forest floor. Was there something around Larsen's neck? But the

dimness of the shadows hid everything. The man was only a shade, and then he was gone.

Roberts jerked upright in the chair. He looked at his watch. Nearly noon. The light outside was bright. There was a chill in the room, and he felt damp. His breathing was quick, in short breaths. Was he shivering from the cold or shaking from nerves? He looked for the cup of coffee, then remembered he had not gone for it.

He got up from the chair and crossed the room, opening the door, going into the hall and down the corridor to the coffeepot. Another officer just filling a cup greeted him. Once Roberts had coffee, he stood for a moment, raising it to his lips, tasting the hot drink. He went back to the office and sat again at his desk, continuing to sip the brew, remembering.

He had fallen asleep in the chair and lapsed into a dream. Surprisingly, he clearly recalled the images that had played in his mind. The coffee helped bring it back. It was logical to assume the medallion and chain came from the victim's neck. The blood on the medallion was proved to be Larsen's, yet nothing revealed the origin of the medallion, although there was no reason not to assume it was Larsen's.

But Roberts didn't like acting on assumptions. He mulled over it a long time, then had a thought. He reached on the desk, opening a small box of business cards in alphabetical order. He flipped through to the name *Warren*, finding a number.

At the park, when asked all he knew of Larsen, the young investigator had said everything he remembered from the night before. But that had been a timeline of events at the bar and hotel. Now Roberts had specific questions, questions that could only be answered by the last person to see Larsen alive.

Dialing, he waited at the ring tones.

"Hello, this is Race Warren."

"Mr. Warren, this is Inspector Roberts, Anchorage Police Department."

"Yes, Inspector. We met yesterday morning at the park, about the Larsen death."

"That's right, Mr. Warren, but now I need your help with a particular question. When you first met Larsen at the restaurant and assisted him to the hotel, can you recall if he had any neck jewelry, a chain and medallion?"

"No," said Warren.

"Are you certain, Mr. Warren?"

"Yes, absolutely," said Warren. "I'm a close observer, especially of people. Larsen was oddly dressed for extreme weather that evening. He was zipped up. Even the hood was on his head. When I first saw him, he was drinking heavily and began to sweat. He removed the hood and undid the parka, leaving it open at the top. He appeared to have nothing underneath."

Roberts was unconvinced. "Of course, he could have put on a neck chain the next morning, before leaving the motel."

"Not likely," said Warren. "He was quite drunk that evening and probably slept in his clothes. Another thing. The man had no rings, bracelets, not even a wristwatch. He apparently had no taste for jewelry."

There was silence for a moment then Warren continued.

"Inspector, I've told you all I know of Larsen. May I ask why the interest in a neck chain?"

Again, there was silence. Although the question was out of bounds, Roberts felt partial toward the young investigator. "A search of the crime scene turned up a broken chain and medallion. A spot of blood on the disk matched Larsen's. It must have been on the victim and torn away by the attack and...what other explanation is there?"

More silence as the two considered the other's questions.

Then Warren offered a theory. "Unless it belonged to the assailant."

Roberts chuckled. "The *assailant* was positively identified as a wolf."

Warren was not convinced. "But what other explanation is there? If Larsen's blood was on the disk which he hadn't worn, of that I'm quite certain, then it must have been on the assailant, the wolf, or whatever it was."

Warren thought for a moment, then posed another question. "Was the chain length typical for a man's neck?"

The inspector paused before answering. "No, the girth of the chain was bigger than any man's neck but tells us nothing. Things like length are matters of personal style."

"That's true."

The back-and-forth questioning had come to an end.

"Thank you, Inspector. I get the feeling there may be a connection to my case, and I'm grateful for the information."

"Mr. Warren, the help has been mutual. You've answered about Larsen. I'll have to ponder what this means. I appreciate your cooperation. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Inspector Roberts."

The detective slumped back in his chair. Warren's information was useful. Satisfied the young investigator was reliable, Roberts concluded the medallion and necklet had been on or with whatever killed Larsen, but that seemed at odds with Dauphin's and the coroner's report that a wolf had caused the death. There had been no record of a wolf in Anchorage in years. And anything on a wolf's neck would have been put there by a human; if a person was involved, what was the motive? None of it made sense.

He was tired. He hardly slept the night before. The case had worn him down, and the additional information made it more confusing. What was he to make of it?

There was a knock at the door. It opened, and Angie peeked in. "You want something to eat, coffee, anything?"

Roberts looked up, noticing a strange look on her face.

"You've been shut in here all morning. I thought I would check on you."

"Thanks, Angie. I appreciate you asking. I think I'll go round the corner for a sandwich. I need to get out."

Angie revealed a slight smile. "Okay, let me know if there's anything."

She was concerned, but he hardly noticed.

"Thanks, Angie."

Roberts felt a little befuddled. Angie was gone, the door shut, and all he heard was the soft air from the vent and the sound of the clock.

He grabbed a small pack carrying his essentials, things he always carried. He walked to the door, opened it, stepped across to the stairwell, and descended to ground level where he left the building. It was a bright and pleasant day. The summer had been delightful. Temperatures in the sixties, a soft wind most of the time, and rain only twice since early June. It was a nice midafternoon; many people were out. There were a few runners on the sidewalks. Quite pleasant. He should have come out earlier. It would have helped to get his mind on other things. He walked south past an ice-cone/ice-cream store. At the end of the block, he crossed the street and turned right. The Snow City Café was just ahead.

The small pack felt easy, slung on the shoulder. He most always carried it so he would be prepared. For what? He wasn't sure. He just knew he felt better with it. Several things were inside, a laptop computer, small camera, voice recorder, surgical gloves, small first aid kit, extra ammo, and even a leather-bound journal where he often wrote things. It was not truly a diary although he sometimes narrated the day's events. He was a great believer in the mind's ability to work through problems unconsciously, and figments from the process might be lost. He was always ready to write down ideas before they slipped away.

His thoughts were interrupted when he approached the glass panes on the street side of the cafe. Heavy thermo-pane glass was sectioned with aluminum dividers, giving a full view of the inside where patrons sat at small tables. The restaurant specialized in breakfast and lunch, but this afternoon was still busy.

Roberts noticed the person at the bar. Something about him looked familiar. Although the man was turned away, something in the silhouette and his manner of raising the coffee cup drew Roberts's gaze. Roberts continued studying the figure at the bar as he came to the door at the corner of the street. He realized he had been staring and dropped his eyes to the sidewalk. Once inside, he would see the man's face and clear the mystery.

He stepped through the outer door into a small glass-walled passage, then through the second door into the restaurant proper. He paused to survey the room. A hostess appeared, handing him a menu, inviting him to follow, but Roberts said he preferred to sit at the counter. Seeing the profile of the man seated at the other end, he remembered.

Roberts came to the bar, taking a stool within speaking distance. The server asked him what he'd have to drink. Roberts ordered a cup of coffee and scanned the menu.

The man nearby faced ahead, taking no notice of Roberts.

Roberts began a conversation. "Say, don't I know you?"

The man looked up from his sandwich and coffee. "Yes, I believe we've met."

Roberts eyed the man closely. "Of course, you're Davis."

A slight smile formed on the man's face. "And you're Inspector Roberts who sent me to prison. I'm sure you're asking what I'm doing here. Well, I spent seven years in the penitentiary, paid my debt, and now I'm free to go where I please."

Roberts's voice now had a different tone, a slight edge. "Seven years. Not nearly enough for what you did. You killed a man, cold-blooded, as simple as that."

"The law said it was manslaughter. Got in a fight at a bar, and the guy who attacked me got killed. It was self-defense."

"It was first-degree murder. You plea-bargained the lesser charge," said Roberts.

The other man had finished and laid down a few bills as he got up. "Like I said, I served my time, and now I'm just an ordinary good citizen. See you around, Inspector."

The man got up, heading for the door, almost brushing the detective as he passed.

The server asked if Roberts had decided. Roberts watched the man through the expansive windows, walking across the street and getting in a pickup truck. The man was out of prison for now, but he likely would be back before long.

Remembering the waitress, he turned, speaking absently, saying he'd have the daily special. It didn't matter. His mind was swirling with thoughts from seven years ago.

He remembered the case vividly. Davis had a long-running feud with another man whose wife he'd had an affair with. The wife broke it off, but Davis was obsessed with the woman and thought if he got rid of the husband, he could get her back. One evening, Davis saw the man in a bar. The man was drunk, and Davis started a fight and killed him with a knife. Roberts handled the case and was certain it was cold calculated murder. But the evidence was circumstantial, and Davis had a witness who said the other man struck first.

*But why was Davis back here?* As Roberts pondered this, he realized food had been set in front of him. He slowly ate the sandwich and sipped coffee while seeing images from the past. Strangely, this was the first time his mind had been off the park killing for two days.

He finished the food, pulled out his wallet, and retrieved some bills which he laid on the counter. The server came up, taking the money as Roberts gave a slight wave. He stood, hearing a vague thank you as he turned, slinging the pack over his shoulder, starting for the door. A café worker wished him a good afternoon as he passed through the doors, stepping outside and starting back to the station. Roberts pushed all thoughts of the Davis case from his mind, trying to get back on track with the park killing.

As he was crossing Fourth Avenue, his cell phone rang. He pulled out the phone, raising it to his ear. "Roberts."

"Inspector, this is officer Kimbrough."

Roberts immediately pictured whom he was talking to. Kimbrough was an experienced and capable officer.

"Yes?" said Roberts.

"We found an apparent abandoned vehicle northeast of town registered to Medford Larsen. The dead man found at the park."

"Is the vehicle secure?"

Roberts knew Kimbrough always went by the book. "Yes, I'm here now. I've called CSI, and they should be here shortly."

Roberts got the tag number and vehicle location, writing the information on a notecard. He thanked the officer and ended the call.

He quickened his pace, crossing the street, passing along the esplanade to the wide steps leading up to the main entrance. Walking in, he nodded to the officer at the desk and crossed over to the stairwell, opened the door, and stepped quickly down the stairs to the basement garage. He reached his car, got in, and flung his pack in the back seat.

He started the car and entered the tag number in the console computer, immediately seeing a listing on the vehicle and owner. The address for the registration was the North Slope. The vehicle could not have been left more than a few days since a patrol went by regularly and just saw it that day. This could be the break he'd hoped for. He got moving, emerging onto Third Street, concealed emergency lights flashing. He would be at the location in less than ten minutes.

He saw it sitting on the side of the road at an odd angle, looking abandoned, just as the officer said. It was well onto the graveled shoulder with a forlorn appearance, not different from other vehicles left behind for good.

Roberts watched, slowing to a stop, letting cars going the other way pass, so he could make a *U*-turn. Kimbrough's patrol car was just in front of it and the CSI car just behind. The two crime scene officers were moving methodically, deep in their work. Both had on white lab coats, wearing clinical gloves. One stood at the open rear hatch door bending forward, collecting items for a plastic bag. The other was busy at a laptop computer set on his car. Roberts made the turn and stopped behind the others. Officer Kimbrough walked over just as the detective got out of his car.

Kimbrough extended a hand. "Good to see you, Inspector."

Roberts shook his hand. "Thank you for spotting the vehicle. I hope we find something. The director's got city hall and the press squeezing him, and that means he's squeezing me."

Roberts turned his attention to the CSI team and the well-worn oversize truck with an enclosed bed. The original paint had

long since faded, and traces of rust showed along the undercarriage. Roberts stepped to the officer typing on a laptop.

"Anything interesting?" Roberts asked.

The officer greeted Roberts and explained what he found. "The fuel tank is empty. Looks like the driver coasted to the side and left it."

Roberts walked over to the officer at the back of the truck. They greeted each other as the technician finished depositing items in plastic bags.

Roberts looked closely. "Is there much worthwhile?"

"Worthwhile? That's questionable. The owner was not one for neatness. Lots of evidence, but mostly garbage, you know, snack wrappers, empty soda cans, that sort of thing. Looks like he spent a lot of time in here. An army blanket was laid in the back like someone slept there. Once we get it to the lab, we'll learn if there's anything useful."

The officer turned and carried the bags back, putting them into the CSI vehicle. Then he shifted through the stack of equipment and retrieved an odd-looking vacuum cleaner. He carried it back to the truck, turned it on, and began carefully running it over the vehicle's interior, intent on gathering all loose particles in the carpet, side panels, and floor mats.

Roberts drew the officer aside so he could hear over the noisy vacuum.

"How soon can you have a report? Any chance you can finish today?"

The officer leaned toward Roberts. "We were told to get this done and have the report by end of shift. I guess that squeeze you mentioned has cast a wide net."

Roberts turned to go, thinking of what it meant.

Despite his anxiousness about the case, a lot had been learned: the positive identification of the body by Warren, his statement the medallion was not on Larsen, autopsy report, and now the victim's truck turning up. If only something was found from the vehicle search. The CSI team was quite capable; if there's anything there, they would find it.



Roberts took his time driving back to headquarters. There was no rush since he had done everything on his checklist. He wished he could think of something else, but he was sure nothing was overlooked. There was nothing to do but wait for the CSI report on the vehicle which (he looked at his watch) should be done by midnight.

It was after four o'clock, and he had no wish to go home since it was no more than an empty house. It was a comfortable mid-sized home with nice furnishings and an office with lacquered oak shelves holding hundreds of books. Reading was one of his few diversions. He favored biography and history, especially the military genre. But it was still an empty house. He always felt this way on an important case, going home only for sleep.

He was a middle-aged bachelor who had always had girlfriends but never seemed to meet the right one, except for one or two he felt would have made him happy, but they could not accept his busy life.

Rita was the woman he came closest to marrying. He thought he might have been in love with her but was never certain he could not live without her. That was his test for marriage, and it had been close with Rita. One evening, she told him bluntly, "Larry, I love you, but I'm weary of having to get an appointment to see you." It almost came off as a joke because she said it pleasantly enough, and he chuckled when hearing it. But she was serious. They broke up amicably soon after, and six months later, she married a mutual friend. Roberts, of course, was invited; and at the reception following the ceremony, the bride kissed him on the cheek. He wished them abundant happiness.

His thoughts were interrupted by a car almost cutting him off, approaching the headquarters garage. It was partly his own fault because his attention was drifting. It had been a long day. As he turned into the garage entrance, going down the ramp, he thought coffee would help. But once he left the car, he followed his usual track, climbing the stairs slower than usual. After entering the office, he lay the rucksack next to the desk and slumped in the chair. He heard only his breathing and the ticking of the wall clock. He closed his eyes, thinking this was the best place, around familiar things,

among a few cherished mementos, resting in his favorite chair. Of course, the Larsen case was on his mind.

Roberts was startled by the clamorous ring of the phone. He had dozed again. The display showed it was the crime lab.

He picked it up. "Hello, Roberts."

"Inspector, this is Dauphin. I've got good news. The CSI brought in several items from Larsen's abandoned truck, mostly garbage. The guy must have been living in the vehicle for weeks. But there are two things of interest. Number one, a few hairs were found on an army blanket, animal hairs. Here's what's strange. On a whim, I did a comparison with the fibers found on Larsen's body. They're the same. Yes, the same wolf. Number two, a battered notebook used as a travel log was in the glove box. It contains mostly random notes, dates, and travel mileage. Larsen recorded every time the speedometer crossed a thousand miles with the date and location; habit, I suppose. But here is where it gets interesting. The pattern of entries in the notebook suddenly changes, apparently after the death of a girlfriend. That's the best I can figure. It then reads like a diary, with short notes each day. He mentions picking up a stranger at a road stop and giving him a lift to Anchorage. On the trip, there are notes on mileage, stops, and comments on the weather and sights along the way. The last entry was a few days before we found the vehicle. Roberts, are you there?"

The inspector was listening closely but had been silent. "Yes, I heard it all."

Dauphin finished with the final details. "The book's waiting for you."

Roberts hurried from his office and down the stairs. The case was taking another turn. What did these developments mean? The new information seemed to just raise more questions. When would the parts fit together in something making sense?

These thoughts flitted through Roberts's mind as he opened the door and entered the crime lab. Dauphin was at his workbench, studying something, hardly noticing his arrival, saying, "It's on the desk. Sign it out, please."

Roberts found the small notebook in a plastic bag lying by the evidence log. He ignored the black government pen dangling on a chain and, instead, took his own from a shirt pocket and neatly entering the required information, signing his name.

He picked up the evidence, fingering the notebook through the bag as he studied it. Although new, it was already well worn, a small accounting ledger available at any office supply.

Still busy, Dauphin spoke over his shoulder, "The only prints found were Larsen's" as the very question entered Roberts's mind. He couldn't think of anything else, so he started to leave, then paused.

"Dauphin, I want you to know you've been key in moving this investigation, you and the pathologist. We have enough now to almost see a pattern."

Dauphin turned in his chair. "No two are alike, but this case may be one for the books."

The two looked at each other for a moment, Roberts replying, "It's beginning to look that way."

He turned and headed for the door, opening it and passing through silently.

As usual, Roberts was deep in thought. He crossed the corridor and entered the stairwell. He was trying to understand what was just learned about the abandoned truck. Had Larsen been transporting a wolf to Anchorage? But there was no cage. And how would the same wolf get out of the truck, cross town unseen, accost Larsen in the woods, and kill him? The journal made no mention of a wolf.

Roberts found himself in his chair in the office with countless thoughts flitting through his mind. There had to be an answer, a key to what it all meant. He would erase any presuppositions and go back to what was known about the case, beginning with what he, Roberts, had seen.

And that was the most gruesome thing, how the body had been torn and mangled. The shocking gap below Larsen's face where only some tattered strands of flesh matted in gore had continued to disturb his sleep, which he'd had little of since this all began. The case had consumed him, propelling him with little rest and little time for food.

Succumbing to weariness, Roberts fell asleep in his chair.

## 6



## PROFESSOR MARK DUNBAR

**D**r. Mark Dunbar, a full professor at the University of Minnesota, Department of Biological Sciences, was dressed in a neat suit, standing at a small desk at the front of a spacious lecture hall, half filled with students. He was finishing the day's talk in an introductory class on animal biology.

"Finally, let's consider man's relationship with the historic fauna, not domesticated like cattle, sheep, or goats, but specifically with wild beasts, lions, tigers, and wolves.

"Let's look particularly at the wolf, the species *Canis lupus*. Because the wolf has been more widespread than other wild animals, the species has had more contact with man since history began. Throughout history, wild beasts have posed danger to man, arousing his fear. And among such predators, the one having the greatest enmity with humankind is the wolf. More contact with the animal gave man greater familiarity with the species, leading to a unique relationship between man and wolf since the start of recorded history. This is partly explained by the animal's similarity to the domesticated dog, both animals sharing a common ancestor.

"To understand, let's use an analogy from the Robert Louis Stevenson novella. Our canine friend has served man for thousands of years as companion and watchdog, warning of danger. In this role, the dog can be thought of like "Dr. Jeckel," while the wolf, a wild animal posing a threat to man, has been more like "Mr. Hyde." In

appearance, the two species are very similar, and this has led to a heightened distrust of the wolf because man feels, in some way, he can understand wolf nature, but this is an illusion because the wolf is a wild animal that long ago crept into the ancient mythology of man and animals.

“This is evident in folklore where seemingly benign tales, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, show the wolf as a symbol of evil, but with intelligence, faculty of speech, and the ability to deceive humans like the child in the story. In literature, the wolf is fraught with mystery, and man’s subliminal feelings about these animals are revealed in ancient lore like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Three Little Pigs*. These are not mere children’s stories but are symbolic of man’s attempt to understand this wild animal that has been man’s enemy since the beginning of time. Among all animals, the wolf alone is a symbol, an archetype deep in man’s psyche, a primitive presence, separate from ordinary awareness, residing in the lowest regions of our subconscious.

“Considering physical characteristics, most shared with the domestic dog, the wolf has unique features that distinguish the two. The wolf has a deeper chest that rises to a thicker neck, has a long shaggy tail, and most importantly has eyes set deep in the skull, eyes like liquid amber, inscrutable, and described in legend and folklore as the repository of evil, near satanic.

“A common misconception, heard repeatedly and mostly, I might add from conservationists and wildlife preservationists is that there has never been an unprovoked attack in North America by a healthy wolf on a human. This, of course, is patently false, as can be proved by anyone willing to search the historical record.”

A bell rang with jarring insistence.

“That’s all for today. Finish chapter seven for next time.”

The classroom erupted in a flurry of activity, students grabbing books, cramming them in backpacks, flinging them over shoulders, amid loud chatter, hurrying to the doorway, jamming up as one by one, they filed from the room. The sound of the bustling crowd hurrying along amid random conversation ended with the closing of the door.

The professor glanced at his watch as he gathered his papers and shuffled them into the briefcase, preparing to return to his office to finish the day’s work. Only a few weeks remained in the term, and in addition to normal duties winding up the semester, Dr. Dunbar was preparing a hastily arranged trip to the upper reaches of Alaska on an official field study.

“Excuse me.”

The professor looked up, seeing a student.

“I thought everyone gone! You surprised me. Miss Henson, right?”

Dunbar still held some papers while breaking into a wry smile, watching the girl closely, wondering what she wanted.

“Yes, but I’m surprised you know that since I’m probably the quietest person in the room.”

The young woman had her hair done in a conservative style, pulled up in a bun, lending an air of studiousness, and brown eyes, liquid and somewhat mysterious behind a pair of stylish glasses.

“I don’t get many questions from you, but based on scores, you are one of my brighter students.”

She smiled at the compliment. “I do have a question, though, or rather a comment. I’m curious about the tone of the lecture. It seemed almost melodramatic, attributing to the wolf evil characteristics. I’m wondering what basis you have for your low opinion of the wolf, when, in my mind, it’s one of the noblest of creatures.”

The professor made a pleasant expression, speaking hastily. “Perhaps my words are overwrought at times but makes it more interesting. Keeps students awake.”

But then Dunbar became serious, dropping his eyes, looking down for a moment, but not at the papers in his hand. He was staring at the table. The student’s pointed question reminded him he did, indeed, have an uncommon opinion of the wolf, based on personal feelings. It was something he did not easily talk about, something from the distant past, a memory still fraught with pain.

He looked up, straight at the student, speaking frankly, saying since she had stayed behind with a question, she deserved an answer, and he would try to explain. While speaking, Dunbar stared beyond

the girl, looking in the distance, seeing images from the past, a wolf on a dark night long ago.

“It was early spring. We were on a camping trip in British Columbia, far off in a rugged and wild area, a pristine forest. There were three of us: my father, older brother Dean, and me. I was twelve years old.

“It had been a pleasant day, almost dreamlike, hiking through the wilderness, remnants of snow in the lee of trees, the river tinted blue, clear as glass, distant mountains, an azure sky. Everything was alive, sights and sounds. Impressions and sensations intense, like when you’re young.

“At close of day, a fire was made where we three sat around in sweaters against the night’s chill, cooking our supper and talking about the day, the fun we had, and our plans for the morrow.

“The fire dimmed, sending up tendrils of smoke to twist and curl, rising and melting in the dark. We were soon in our sleeping bags, said our goodnights, and fell asleep. It was a peaceful sleep. The chill of the night air on our faces made the comfort of the sleeping bag even more satisfying. I had never slept better, truly content, and resting after one of the best days I’d ever known.

“It all changed during the night. I was awakened by a sharp pain in my left arm, an abrupt snarling, a hot foul breath. A vise-like grip on my upper arm began dragging me away, over rocky ground as the embers of the fire began to recede. I saw the head of a wolf quite close, jaws lined with discolored teeth, sunk in my arm just beneath the shoulder, snarling, dripping saliva into my blood, the deep-set yellow eyes, liquid, glowing with menace.

“I screamed.

“My father was up immediately, shaking himself awake. He shouted my name as he saw me dragged by the wolf. He looked around and picked up a tree limb and ran toward me. My brother also got up but was frozen with fear. I cried for help. My father got to the wolf just as it released me, turning on him and charging. My father struck the animal a sharp blow, the wolf shifting sideways, recovering, and lunging, my father trying to keep his balance as he wielded the branch to ward off the animal.

“‘Dean, get the knife!’ my father said sharply to my brother who had not moved.

“‘The knife!’ he shouted.

“Dean turned and reached for the pack where it lay on the ground. He pulled the long hunting knife from the enclosure, still in its sheath.

“My father circled, countering the wolf’s moves, parrying the lunging animal with the tree branch. But the wolf continued, aggressively, alternately butting the limb with his head, then gripping it with his jaws, savagely jerking, trying to pull it away.

“‘The knife!’ my father yelled.

“Dean pulled the knife from its sheath and ran to my father, who stood swinging the branch from side to side, bringing down glancing blows on the wolf’s head, all the while, the animal shifting about, making lunges, trying to circle the obstacle and get to my father.

‘Give me the knife. You take this.’

“Dean got the limb, holding it firmly, tracking the wolf’s movements back and forth, and my father had the knife with arm drawn up and back, looking for the right moment.

“The wolf parried the branch, coming around it, driving to the left to get at Dean, coming up quick along the left side, the limb brushing harmlessly over the animal’s head, shoulder, and flanks. My father, now in front, raised the weapon, steel glinting in the moonlight. Just as the beast leaped, the knife plunged down, the blade going deep in the wolf’s neck.

“We never knew the reason for the attack. We were told it had been a harsh winter, one of the worst in memory, starving the animal herds and creating a shortage of food for predators like the wolf. The dead animal, an aged male weighing 140 pounds, long and lean, was turned over to the Fish and Game Department. A test for rabies was negative. Dissection revealed the wolf’s stomach almost empty. The authorities concluded the animal was suffering from extreme hunger.

“I was left with permanent scars on the upper part of my left arm, but worse, the trauma of the experience left me with nightmares for years. I would wake in the middle of the night, seeing the wolf,

yellow teeth dripping, amber eyes deep in the large head. I never forgot, and growing up, the dreams continued until I reached adulthood." Dunbar paused, the memories rushing over like an ocean wave.

There was a brief silence, then the girl spoke, "That must have been horrible."

"Yes, I guess you could say it left a mark on me, and that's why I'm here. Choosing a program for undergraduate study, I seemed led by an unseen hand to wildlife biology, specifically, study of the life cycle, habits, and nature of the wolf. I confess having a prejudice against the species, but my lifelong study has broadened and deepened my understanding of the animal and left me with mixed feelings. Let's just say I have great respect for the wolf, how the animal has survived years of depredations, coming near extinction in some areas, yet has endured."

Dunbar was again silent. The student felt uneasy. While the teacher had fully answered her question, she felt guilt and embarrassment the professor had been so revealing that he had dropped his guard, exposing a sensitive part of his past. It was best to excuse herself.

"Thank you for your time, Professor Dunbar. Speaking with you has given me a better understanding of the course." She paused. "Good day."

"Good day, Ms. Henson."

The young woman turned, walking to the door, pulling it open, and disappearing into the hallway.

The professor did not know why he told the personal story to a student. He could tell it left her uncomfortable. He stood, feeling regret, unmoving, looking at nothing, his hands still holding the raft of papers. Finally, he began stuffing documents, books, and other articles into the satchel. Satisfied he had everything, he picked up the bag and headed for the door. The earlier crowd in the hallway had thinned, only a few students remained, hurrying to class.

Professor Dunbar turned left, walking toward his office at the end of the corridor. His teaching responsibilities were finished for the day, but he had lots to do for the upcoming trip.

The summer session would be over in two weeks, then he would make the trip to Alaska's far north for a field study with a team of anthropologists. The trip was planned two months earlier, and now he was making sure all was ready. The trip itinerary, ticket purchase, and supplies requisition had been completed. All that remained was to contact the other participants and work out last-minute details.

He came to his office door, pulled out his ring of keys, and fumbled till he found the right one. He then inserted and turned the key and walked into the small but neatly arranged office, with a window overlooking the campus quadrangle.

He glanced outside, observing students and a few professors crossing the broad walks stretching between well-kept greenery. He set the satchel beside the desk, then slumped into a leather armchair. Swiveling around, he opened the top drawer, pulling out the printed itinerary and list of participants.

The trip involved a cross-disciplinary team, including a wildlife biologist (himself) and three anthropologists. While Dunbar's specialty was the wolf, his interest was more than a study of the animal in its natural habitat; he also favored the psychology and even mythology of the creature. His studies included man's relations with the wolf since the earliest times. Dunbar not only wanted to know the wolf but also, more importantly, wanted to plumb the depths of man's understanding of the animal in culture throughout history. The professor was particularly interested in the North American wolf, specifically those indigenous to the north of Alaska. Since his interests leaned toward interactions of man and wolf, Dunbar had invited Professor Hartley, an anthropologist expert in studies of the Inuit and Alaskan Natives, to join the expedition.

Over the years, Dunbar had made annual visits to the wilds of northwest Canada and Alaska, a continuation of family camping trips made as a youth. During this time, the professor had made friends and established professional contacts in the far north. Within the past year, he had heard rumors of unusual activity within a segment of the Inuit community, consisting of religious rites involving a wolf motif. What was especially interesting was the small village where this was occurring had recently experienced the tragic death of

a young woman, and according to native hearsay, killed by a mythical creature.

Dunbar's nearly thirty years studying the wolf included diversions into mythology, as well as so-called fairy tales, children's stories, and werewolf myths. To thoroughly understand the animal, all these topics were required reading. When the rumors first appeared, Dunbar was able to put them in context with ancient beliefs. More recently, news reports of mysterious deaths involving animal attacks especially piqued his interest. The rumors and the reports all centered on a remote Inupiat village in the North Slope Borough of Alaska. Dunbar believed the village would make an ideal site for a multi-disciplinary field study which he, as a wildlife biologist, would lead, along with an anthropological expert on Inuit Culture. Unlike his colleagues, Dunbar was not a hard science purist but preferred an eclectic approach, delving into anything, even myth, if it led to greater understanding.

Fortunately, he was a good friend of Professor Hartley, a leading expert in Eskimo culture and history. When the field study was proposed, Hartley was quite interested. The investigation would be conducted in a village Hartley had gone to two years earlier. The anthropologist had wide knowledge and keen insight into the Inuit race and would be a valuable contributor to the investigation centered on the native village. Hartley, his anthropologist daughter, a graduate assistant, and Dunbar would make the four-member team. They had arranged their schedules to conduct the two-week field study in midsummer.

The purpose of the study was to examine a wolf cult, believed to be prevalent among an Inuit offshoot, a small tribe holding an ancient religion of animal worship. Little was known of the native sect, but Hartley was the recognized authority. Throughout Dunbar's career, traveling through northern Alaska on research, he heard rumors of remote tribes incorporating the wolf into spiritualism. He had even heard the word *werewolf* mentioned once or twice in talks with native tribesmen. Such superstitions were more in the province of anthropological study. When Dunbar had mentioned this to his friend Hartley, the anthropologist said he had come across such

activity two years earlier on a solitary field trip. In a remote area, he had managed to observe a native ceremony involving wolf worship. When Hartley identified the village nearest to the site of the ceremony, Dunbar was surprised it was the same location as the planned field study. He immediately invited Hartley to join the expedition in a multidisciplinary effort. The goal would be to investigate native behavior and religious beliefs with respect to the indigenous wolf. The animal superstitions appeared to be common in this area, and its study and investigation were a primary purpose of the trip.

After learning of Hartley's experience, Dunbar thought it possible the ritualistic ceremony his friend had seen might be connected to the recent rumors. This made a good working hypothesis for investigation as part of the planned study. A wolf biologist and an anthropological expert in Inuit culture together should be able to uncover what was going on in the village.

With these ideas, Dunbar had prepared a written proposal for the expedition, outlining its purpose in the main heading with several subgoals. He distributed the document to the members of the group, Dr. Hartley, his daughter Kaitlyn, and graduate fellow Doah Collins, Hartley's assistant. Any questions about the trip were sent to Dunbar who replied to ensure everyone was clear about the purpose and goals of the expedition.

Collins sent an email asking if the research was primarily biological or anthropological, which gave Dunbar pause. He had thought his proposal was clear, but apparently, he had failed somewhere. Wishing to provide clarity for the youngest member of the team, Dunbar prepared a nearly two-page reply stating the primary objective was to identify the behavior and activity of indigenous natives with respect to recent rumors of a religious cult and speculation the tribal activities may have contributed to a mysterious death, unsolved by the authorities, with earmarks of an animal attack. The unsolved killing had left the village in turmoil.

The rampant hearsay could be due to group hysteria, cultist activity, or unusual interactions with animals. This was the reason for the multidisciplinary team: to examine whatever they found from

both an animal and human perspective, considering all aspects of culture, mythology, and wolf behavior.

Dunbar sent the email to Collins, which apparently answered the questions as the young man replied with a succinct “Thank you.”

7



## PROFESSOR JONATHAN HARTLEY

**D**r. Jonathan Hartley, Professor of Anthropology, was nearing the end of a classroom lecture at the University of Minnesota.

“My studies of Inuit culture centered on tribes living in the far north of Alaska near the Arctic Circle. These disparate groups of natives for hundreds of years lived lives of isolation in harsh environments in small communities on vast tracts of desolate tundra. The people traditionally lived close to the land in an intricate relationship with indigenous animals, a unique ecosystem involving daily interaction between man and wildlife. Their very survival depended on animals for food, especially fish, but also the seal, elk, and caribou. The natives’ daily life involved frequent contact with wild animals, hunting and fishing, skinning and preparation of pelts, fashioning clothes from animal hides, making useful articles from bone, and preparing food. Their interaction with wildlife over eons of time led to animal characteristics being impressed into their consciousness. Their very existence involving close contact and dependence on animals, it’s not surprising that animal myths evolved among the tribes, beliefs that were passed down with each generation.

“One such belief is the myth of shapeshifting, the idea that performing special dark rituals allows a human to change into an animal. The raven is sometimes the object of such ceremonies since the bird is not only intelligent but is also a familial species, show-

ing group loyalty, appealing characteristics to the shaman seeking transformation.

“But an animal more commonly associated with shapeshifting is the wolf. And, in fact, this is how the werewolf myth began. Werewolf mythology is almost universal, appearing throughout many world cultures. The myth was common in Europe in the seventeenth century, and in our own hemisphere, the belief has been traced to some Alaskan Native tribes of the far north.

“In the present day, there has been at least one report of a native shaman conducting ceremonies involving the ancient superstition. The report, never proved and considered no more than a rumor, said the behavior began with the shaman carrying out dark and unspeakable rites and rituals, developing a taste for human blood, leading to an obsessive craving for the warm blood of a living being. According to the legend, to satisfy the perverse lust, he made a pact with the devil to be transformed, through shapeshifting, into a powerful wolf to prey on human beings, slaking his thirst for copious amounts of blood from fresh kills.

“This explanation of the werewolf myth is at odds with the Hollywood version that the creature arises from the bite of an infected animal. But the movie version is pure fiction while the shapeshifting explanation is based on historical studies of the superstition. Research has shown that shapeshifting has been integral to the werewolf myth from its beginnings in seventeenth-century Europe, and the two phenomena are linked wherever the superstition appears, including my investigations of native tribes in northern Alaska. Unlike the movie versions, mythological studies show no transmission of the acquired trait through an animal bite. The werewolf originates from an individual’s journey into the forbidden, making a pact with forces of darkness to fulfill an unspeakable blood lust. It is the consummate human degradation, a descent to the innermost and darkest regions of man’s soul to access the ultimate evil.

“While Hollywood’s account of the werewolf origin is fiction and contrary to mythological studies, cinematic depictions of the creature’s aversion to silver accord with anthropological research. Silver has medicinal qualities and for centuries has been used to fight

infection and serve in other curative ways in the human body. At least one case was documented in the Civil War where a Confederate soldier suffered a head wound, 99 percent of such wounds fatal in that conflict, and survived by the surgeon repairing the hole in the skull with a silver dollar. While curative in man, mythology purports silver has the opposite effect on the werewolf. If silver is ingested or penetrates the creature’s body through a skin break, a highly allergic reaction occurs, anaphylactic shock, which can lead to the animal’s death. It is quite odd that silver is neutral or curative in the human body and other mammals while toxic to the werewolf. The cause of the hyper-allergic response to the metal is unknown although some explanations have been proposed. The most common theory is that silver toxicity developed from the werewolf feeding on large quantities of human blood, causing a biologic reaction to the metal.”

Professor Hartley made sure his students understood that in the lecture he often spoke of aboriginal superstition and myth in language that might look like he was stating facts, but this was only done to make a smoother presentation. He ended the lecture with a kind of disclaimer, stating plainly that shapeshifting and werewolves were superstitions, but the study of aboriginal mythology was essential to understanding native culture.



## 8



## HARTLEY AND THE ANKAUITS

Professor Hartley's special interest had always been the native populations of Alaska, and one winter between semesters, he was on a small plane traveling from Fairbanks to the North Slope Borough. Hartley and the pilot left early morning in a small two-seater aircraft. With fair weather, the plane flew under gray skies, over vast stretches of pristine land, between mountains, and over rivers toward the destination four hundred miles away.

The captain was a capable pilot with years of experience flying over mountains and vast wilderness. Intrigued by the anthropologist's interest in aborigines, the pilot told what he knew of Alaskan Natives from his years living in the state.

About an hour into the flight, the plane passed over the Yukon, a major river running nearly two thousand miles from the mountains of British Columbia to the Bering Sea on the western coast.

The pilot was conservative in flying habits, avoiding long non-stop trips; midmorning, halfway to the destination, the pair landed at Chandalar Lake. The pilot chatted with some acquaintances as the plane refueled. Hartley took advantage of the break, taking a short walk around the landing strip. In half an hour, they were in the air again, soon crossing the Brooks Range, a crescent of mountains along the north of Alaska.

At noon, the plane touched down at the destination of Ataqsut, a small village of two hundred, mostly natives, at the upper end of the state on the arctic coastal plain.

The settlement lay west of a large tract of oil wells and petroleum installations stretching east to Prudhoe Bay. Hartley planned on exploring the village and surrounding area to study the Ankauits, an obscure Inuit branch, a tribe in decline and growing smaller with each passing year. After two weeks, the plane would return and fly him out. With details confirmed, they shook hands, and the pilot left.

The anthropologist arranged to stay at a local bed-and-breakfast and hired a car taking him from the airstrip with his baggage and equipment to the inn. The weather was typical for the season, temperatures below zero with periods of snow. Hartley found the room small but adequate for his needs. The scientist spent the rest of the day in his room going over plans, writing an itinerary and agenda, and organizing his equipment for the next day's excursion. Finally, he sat down and wrote in his journal, recording impressions of the day's journey with his memory fresh.

Noting the time, Hartley put pen and paper aside, slipped on a coat, and hurried out for something to eat. He had seen a place on his arrival that was a short walk away. His destination was among about twenty similar buildings forming the center of the village, all nestled near the airstrip.

Hartley approached the place in the dimness of late afternoon. A lighted "Open" sign hung in the window. Like other structures in the settlement, it was built like a box, the low-pitched roof with no overhang at front or back to mar the evenness of the walls. On the sides, the roof formed a partial crown, eaves barely extending from the square building. The walls were painted a dull green, weathered well in the harsh climate, and for more than a month, the structure had been topped with snow. Two antlers were attached just above the door, those of a moose on the left and a caribou on the right.

Stepping inside in dim light, Hartley saw several people at scattered tables. Apparently, this was the main meeting place for workers at the end of the day. A few were seated at a bar with a rack of bottled liquor and a shelf of cocktail glasses behind, and in a nearby corner, a rack of shelves was stocked with basic foodstuffs and canned goods. Heading toward the bar, he passed two men at a table in conversa-

tion, then found a place near the end of the counter. Hartley pulled a stool out, seating himself, shifting around till he felt comfortable. To his right, a man in heavy clothing drinking beer was deep in thought. Momentarily, the man looked up and, seeing a stranger, paused for a moment and began speaking.

“Hello, you look new here. My name is Ken Baker.”

“Ken, I’m Jonathan Hartley from Minnesota.”

Baker was quite friendly and began talking about himself. He had come a few years before, finding work in the oil fields, enjoying the outdoors, and doing well. He was happy with his life and, being young, seemed content to let the days pass with little thought for the future.

Hartley then told his story, going into detail, relating how he got interested in native cultures as a child after seeing a documentary on the Eskimo. While in college, he made a trip to northern Canada where his interest grew, and he settled on a career in anthropology. Later, he went to Alaska, grew fascinated with the state, and began countless journeys over the years to the place known as the “Last Frontier.”

“This is what I love about anthropology, getting outdoors, meeting people, being absorbed in the life of obscure cultures. I’m here for two weeks to learn more and get some firsthand knowledge of Inuit tribes in the North Slope.”

“Anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“Mainly interested in the Ankauts. I’ve studied Inupiat culture for years but only recently discovered this relatively unknown tribe.”

Baker seemed to enjoy meeting someone of a different background, having a fresh conversation. “What you’ve said is intriguing. I spend hours on oil rigs around people a lot like me, and to meet an anthropology professor is quite interesting.”

The petroleum worker was younger than Hartley but friendly and easy to talk to. Baker thought of something that might benefit the professor. “I know someone who may be able to help you, a guy who has lived for years among the Ankauts, even speaks the language.”

Baker paused with another thought. “Of course, all the natives speak English, but after they’ve been drinking, tend to slip into their native tongue. But I’m talking about a white man who comes in occasionally, an older guy who has lived here most of his life. He stays in a cabin north of town, sort of a recluse, named Jim Morphis.”

This piqued Hartley’s interest. He would look the man up, and he thanked Baker for telling him.

The two enjoyed the other’s company, talking until the place closed. Baker would be leaving the next morning, driving east, returning to the oil fields. After shaking hands, the two men agreed to try to see each other again, perhaps before Hartley returned to Minnesota.

Walking to his room, Hartley thought the conversation had been enlightening. Though he had not gone past high school, Baker was intelligent, a hard-working outdoorsman whom Hartley found interesting, making for a pleasant evening. Most importantly, Hartley had learned of a local man who knew the Ankauts. He would try to find Jim Morphis the next day.

The following morning, Hartley decided to hike to where Morphis lived a few miles from the village. He began walking on the road north of town across the barren tundra, typical of the northern part of the state. The roadway was mostly open, recently cleared by a mechanized plow, revealing a surface of dark gravel. It was rugged, making a straight line as though laid on a ruler, then abruptly turning in a slightly different direction for a distance, then going back the same as before. Hartley could see this as his eyes followed the road on each deflection until it came to a thin line, narrowing to a point and disappearing. To his right, mountains rose far off on the eastern horizon; and again to the west, similar eminences were barely seen in the distance. Straight ahead north, he saw nothing but a bleak and empty land, glistening white, ending at the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

Hartley finally saw the house a mile away, a speck in the distance. Walking another fifteen minutes, he halted, taking a moment to look around. The dwelling sat about thirty feet from the road, a nondescript house, hardly more than a shack of rough-hewn lumber,

paint faded, a board hammered over a spot as a temporary repair. Weathered tarpaulin-covered firewood stacked at the side of the house and various implements were propped and leaning against the walls. A battered pickup truck was parked a few feet from the front door. Everything was covered with an accumulation of snow. The owner of the house likely led a simple life, doing what was necessary to eke a living in the barren land. Morphis was said to be a recluse and nothing about the place suggested otherwise. Thin smoke rising from a chimney indicated someone was home.

Hartley turned from the road and began walking toward the house. The scene was like a picture in a magazine piece on poverty in rural America. Nearing the door, he was surprised by the sudden appearance of a man coming around the side of the building. The man had a full beard, a knit cap snug on his head, dressed in heavy outdoor clothing, and was carrying a hunting rifle pointed at Hartley.

“Who are you?”

The voice was firm but nonthreatening, the *are* stressed, as it rolled off the man’s tongue.

Hartley stopped, shifting his weight in a smooth careful turn, spreading his hands as he squarely faced the man.

“My name is Hartley. I’m an anthropologist studying the Inuit and was told that Jim Morphis is an expert on native culture.” Hartley paused, waiting.

“I’m Jim. Sorry for sneaking up on you. I don’t get many visitors.” Morphis lowered the gun. What the stranger said seemed to fit his appearance. “Please come inside, and we can talk.”

The woodsman looked in his mid-fifties, above-average height and somewhat thin. Watching Hartley, he moved to the entrance, opening the door, gesturing for the anthropologist to go in. Hartley entered, pausing in the middle of the room, looking around. An indentation in the corner made a kitchen, and a stub hallway led to another room. At the center, a stone hearth held a fire, warming the room. The walls were spread with pictures, wildlife drawings, a rack of rifles, and a mounted elk head. The clutter Hartley had seen outside belied the interior, surprisingly clean and organized.

Morphis motioned toward a chair. “Please, sit.”

As Hartley took a seat, Morphis leaned the rifle against a wall at arm’s length, sitting down and eyeing his guest. “Where are you from, and what’s your interest in the Inuits?”

Hartley began to relax. Recluses were not typically sociable, and to get the man’s cooperation, the scientist would have to be transparent about his journey.

After thanking Morphis for asking him in, Hartley began with where he was from, education and time as a Minnesota professor, and the reason he was at the North Slope. He was in Ataqsut to learn about the Ankauts, to meet tribal leaders, attend community events, and visit any cultural centers. The scientist wished to immerse himself in native life and learn tribal history. He especially wanted to learn about their religious beliefs, culture, and superstitions. Since Morphis was said to be an expert on the Ankauts, he must have lived there a long time.

“Considering the rugged environment, you seem to have adapted well and made a good life for yourself.”

The backwoodsman began to warm to the attention.

“If nothing else, life here is practical. As you see, it’s all *hands-on*. Excuse me a moment while I get more firewood.” Morphis rose from his chair, made his way to the door, and went out.

Hartley thought he was gaining the older man’s confidence. Perhaps Morphis might give names of important Ankauts or community leaders, someone who might help him learn more about the tribe.

Morphis returned with two pieces of wood which he laid on iron rungs of the hearth where a residual fire burned.

“Not so cold today but stoking a fire keeps me moving.” Morphis stepped toward the room’s offset that made a kitchen. “I have some coffee here. Would you like a cup?”

Hartley smiled. “That would be delightful, Mr. Morphis.”

“The name’s Jim. Call me Jim.”

Hartley was pleased the meeting had gone well, and he and the older man found each other agreeable. But Morphis had yet to say anything of himself or his relations with the Ankauts. The anthropologist was satisfied to let the conversation go on naturally without

asking direct questions. He didn't want to disrupt what had been a pleasant meeting. But he hoped for an opening where he could ask a question that would not look pointed or breach the cordial air.

Morphis had been silently preparing coffee as Hartley waited. Soon the man returned, handing a cup to his new acquaintance, who thanked him, as the older man returned to his chair.

Morphis leaned back, sipping coffee. "Now, where were we?"

Hartley saw an opening. "Yesterday, I learned you're the most knowledgeable person on the Ankait people, their customs, culture, and history. It was said you're even fluent in the language."

Morphis smiled, pausing to gather his thoughts. "I know something of the language, not fluent, but of course, in today's world, it's unnecessary. They long ago were absorbed in the predominant culture. What I know was learned from my wife, a full-blood Ankait who I lost not long ago. Today, the native language is rarely heard outside the home."

Morphis had warmed to the conversation from Hartley's compliments or the pleasure of a new acquaintance, but the scientist was content to let his host go on telling of his life in Alaska. The woodsman had come as a young man seeking adventure, found love with a native woman, and, through her, was united with the Ankait community.

He seemed to have led a normal life, working hard at various jobs, hunter, trapper, guide, and even stints with oil companies. He had married soon after arriving in the North Slope, there had been no children, and his wife had recently died. Since then, Morphis had kept in contact with Ankait relatives.

From the talk, Hartley learned two things. First, he was told of the tribal leader in the region, although the concept of tribe was fading. This was the most prominent Ankait in the area, like a political figurehead, an important person, and a valuable source of information.

Next, Hartley learned of a small cultural center, a quasi-museum established to preserve native customs and history. Managed by a volunteer, the center had artifacts, a few books, and some historic documents important to Inuit heritage. Hartley got the name

of the museum curator and directions. Contacting the native leader and visiting the cultural center would be the first things the scientist would do during the next two weeks.

He had been fortunate to meet the remote woodsman. For a so-called recluse, Morphis had been quite talkative, not only telling his own history but also providing valuable information about the Ankait. The older man seemed genuinely interested in Hartley's research. The anthropologist was about ten years younger and perhaps reminded Morphis of his earlier days coming to the region, seeking adventure and life outdoors. Whatever it was, the two had got on well, the woodsman quite willing to help Hartley in the scientist's quest to learn more of native culture.

The day had been long as Hartley thanked Morphis and got up to leave. Morphis offered to drive him back to the village, but Hartley declined, saying he liked walks and needed the exercise to recover from the all-day talk. Looking at his watch, he said he could make it back before nightfall. He thanked him again and left.

By the middle of his second week, Hartley had mostly completed his goals, walking to nearby points of interest and hiring a bush plane to reach more distant places. Now he was content to write what he'd done, not only detailed notes of the past week but also questions or points for more study. What he wrote was not only a record of events but also an aid for future tasks and a way to stimulate ideas for new research. With the two-week study almost done, Hartley would complete the documentation and begin packing luggage.

On Wednesday evening, Hartley left the room and walked to the village bar for an evening meal as he'd done each day. Inside, the barroom was dimly lit like always as he made his way to a table near a window. As he began to sit down, he noticed a man who looked familiar. The man was tall, slightly slumped at the shoulders, and had a beard. Although turned away, he appeared to be Jim Morphis. Hartley had not seen the man since their meeting the previous week.

The scientist's thoughts were interrupted when a server appeared and asked what he wished to drink.

"Nothing at the moment. I see someone I think I'll join at the bar."

Hartley rose and walked over to where Morphis sat. "Jim?"

The man put down his drink, turned his head, and looked up at Hartley, unsmiling with a somber expression. "Hello, Dr. Hartley. Please sit down."

The older man appeared drunk or close to it.

Hartley sat on a stool beside Morphis, wondering if the backwoodsman was well. Morphis was quiet and continued to down whatever liquor was in the glass. As the silence grew awkward, Hartley spoke up. "Haven't seen you since we met at your house. Is everything okay?"

More silence, then Morphis spoke without lifting his head. "Been thinking of my wife."

Feeling sympathy, Hartley began talking, trying to console the one person in the village who had been a friend. In a few minutes, Morphis began warming to the attention. It was like the day at the house, the older man starting to open and talk about himself. But this time, somewhat intoxicated, Morphis spoke more slowly, not speaking of himself but about a brother of his late wife.

Hartley thought it strange the way Morphis began to ramble as though some switch tripped, sending him on a flow of words becoming almost a soliloquy. Morphis had something on his mind, and with a ready listener and the loosening of liquor, he launched into a prolonged discourse.

Since his wife passed away, the white man had stayed in contact with North Slope natives. Morphis spoke of a particular brother-in-law who had held on to native culture and was almost a throwback to older ways. Hartley listened as the man rambled, telling things that rapidly drew the anthropologist's attention.

The brother-in-law was head of a religious cult deep in ancient practices of Ankaait culture. His name was Tulok, and his followers held to traditional Inuit religion including ancient mythology, especially the supernatural. Listening to Morphis, Hartley was almost shocked at what he heard. Tulok was a shaman conducting ancient ceremonial rites of animal sacrifice and the use of hallucinogenic plants, carried out while worshipping a mythological wolf called

Amorok. The culminating ceremony was a shapeshifting ritual led by Tulok, believed to transform the shaman into a wolf.

This was incredible. Morphis was suddenly quiet, Hartley gathering his thoughts to ask a question when the man abruptly spoke.

"They're doing it tonight."

"What?"

"The ceremony to Amorok."

"Why tonight?"

"A full moon."

This sounded strange, almost ridiculous, but Morphis was drinking for a reason. Apparently, Tulok's activity was quite disturbing.

Hartley became excited, asking a lot of questions, confusing the older man. Realizing Morphis was nearly drunk, the scientist slowed down. "Where is the ceremony taking place?"

"On the Kaluik Peninsula, near the Inuit obelisk."

"What?"

"A state marker to native history."

"What time is the ceremony?"

"Just after midnight."

As Hartley turned to leave, Morphis grabbed his arm. "You're not going! You'd be in danger!"

Hartley pulled away, mumbling thank you, amazed at his incredible luck. To hear of an obscure native practice, an occult ceremony, and maybe have the chance to see it. He was determined to go and learn what he could. He rushed back to the room, got everything needed, and hurried to the airfield.

He went to a small building with a few bush planes nearby. Finding a pilot, Hartley began conniving to convince the man to go out that night. Offering immediate cash for a flight out and return got the captain's interest, then it was a matter of settling on the amount. The pilot clearly had done this before and was quite good, coming to a figure exceeding Hartley's flight from Fairbanks. With the matter settled, the pilot got busy, clearly pleased with the deal. He got the aircraft fueled, then began going over flight details.

Hartley said the destination was twenty miles to the northwest, a small peninsula on the north coast, a few miles shy of the Inuit

obelisk. An obscure monument, it was commonly known by pilots flying the North Slope. The captain pulled out a map and began going over it.

“Here it is.”

He drew his finger across the chart, indicating a small lake five miles from the obelisk that provided a good landing site. Concerned about a risk of discovery since a night landing could be seen at great distances, Hartley said his work was confidential, and he preferred the landing be concealed from anyone in the immediate area, especially near the obelisk. The pilot raised his eyebrows, looking hard at the scientist.

“Don’t say anything more.”

He had been well paid, but if there was anything illegal, he didn’t want to know. He directed Hartley’s attention to the chart, pointing to a stretch of high ground above the lake.

“The lake is thick ice this time of year. This ridge is just west of where we set down. Anyone on the peninsula would see the plane fly low, but not landing.”

Satisfied, Hartley walked with the pilot to the plane for take-off. The captain helped Hartley load his gear behind the rear seat. Hartley took the copilot position, modified as a passenger seat.

Once positioned and in seat belts, both men put on communication headsets. The pilot flipped the start switch, the engine coming alive in a low cacophonous drone. He adjusted the controls, the propeller now in a whirr, the engine growing louder as the craft began to move. Already pointed into a modest wind for takeoff, the captain thrust the control to the limit, the prop now at maximum rotation, the engine loudest. The plane moved smoothly on skis, front lights reflecting across level snow, gaining speed, the nose starting to rise, rushing over the white expanse, the craft slowly pointing upward, lifting from the ground. The pilot cut the main lights, relying on moon reflection off ubiquitous snow, seeing the way clearly, banking the plane slightly northwest on the compass heading, and guided by isolated and obscure landmarks on the endless tundra.

Visibility was good in the moonlight. The plane was high enough for the pilot to see distant mountains, palpably giving him a

positional sense and confirming the GPS reading and compass heading that he was on course. Experienced bush pilots, never too high to lose sight of landmarks and geographical features, developed a feel for location based on sight, avoiding weather that would obscure vision. This evening, conditions were ideal; the most recent snowfall was days earlier, and no precipitation was predicted for forty-eight hours.

Hartley and the pilot were silent as the dim landscape passed imperceptibly, the droning of the engine a constant. Ahead, they saw the demarcation of land and sea, the location of the small peninsula of Hartley’s interest. It was still miles away, but the scientist felt the plane starting a slow descent. The lake landing site must be getting close. The pilot’s mechanical voice came over the earphones.

“The lake is just ahead. We’ll do a flyover first.”

Hartley scanned the dim landscape, seeing nothing but trackless tundra. Then a faint outline of what looked like a frozen lake, different from the surrounding land, thin windblown snow spread over hard ice. Getting lower, lights switched on, projecting brightly from the aircraft wings as the plane descended, the pilot lowering the craft a few meters over the lake, making a preliminary pass, ensuring there were no obstacles on the landing path. Seeing it clear, he circled back until at the point for a touchdown, cutting the engine to idle, gliding lower, setting the skis on hard ice, the aircraft scarcely slowing, sliding forward. Hartley could see it would be close, nearing the end of the lake. The pilot did not want to go aground, applying all braking aids, abruptly bringing the craft to a hard turn where the ice ended, then taxiing along slowly as if unsure where to stop. The captain seemed satisfied with the landing.

“This is the best part of the flight, safely back on terra firma or, in our case, glaciers firma.”

The pilot brought the plane to the west side of the ice facing the ridge seen earlier on the map. Bringing the craft to a stop, he shut off the engine, then opened his door and got out. Hartley shuffled between the seats to where his gear was stored in back just as the pilot came round and opened the wing door. He leaned in to help his passenger unload.

“Here, let me give you a hand.”

It was a modest amount of gear to be packed on Hartley’s shoulders. The pilot accompanied Hartley just past the plane where they stopped to talk.

He gave the GPS coordinates, saying to write them down or store the data on his electronic device.

“As agreed, I will come back at sunrise. I’ll be waiting here at these coordinates. It’s quite cold but normal for this time of year. You appear to have all you need for an overnight. I don’t know what you’re doing, but good luck.” He thrust his hand out which Hartley shook, thanking him.

The pilot turned, covering the short distance to the plane, mounting the side struts, opening the door, and getting in. Hartley watched in diaphanous moonlight. The pilot had parked the plane at the southernmost corner of the lake, leaving it pointed north into the wind, a moderate breeze crossing the ice. For a moment, all was quiet; then the engine came alive, propeller flailing the air in a whirling blur, gussets of hot exhaust furling into a cloud, rolling over the cockpit, quickly dissipating. In an instant, stark illumination shot forward in wide beams from wing lights as the pilot prepared for takeoff. The sound from the engine grew louder as the plane began to move forward, turning slightly to come on a straight line across the furthest extent of the lake when the engine burst to maximum, the craft beginning to accelerate, gliding over snow-dusted ice, growing smaller as Hartley watched, then lifting, rising in the distance, banking into a gradual right curve and soon becoming a speck of light in the night sky.

Hartley had not thought through plans for the evening. He’d not had time. He knew only he must get to the site of the native ceremony. What he was doing involved grave risk, the possibility of miscalculation since he was haphazardly making his way to the peninsula, hoping to observe what Morphis had told him. He was about five miles from the site in subzero weather, but it was less severe than it could be. Conditions were good for midwinter. Hartley was a sturdy, well-proportioned six-footer, and the fifty-pound pack carried was no bother. As he thought over his plans, trying to firm up

what he would do, he removed a protein bar and took a drink of water from an insulated canteen.

Morphis had told him the ceremony took place no earlier than midnight. He had time to make a fire, warm himself, and eat an MRE. But he knew he wouldn’t do that. He wanted to get close to the site and see everything from the beginning. It was all quite risky, and there was plenty that could go wrong, but Hartley didn’t think about that; he only knew he must get there, and quickly.

He began walking, eyes on the luminescent device at his wrist, compass heading, and coordinates. It was 7:00 p.m., and the five-mile trek should take an hour and a half, two hours at most. The air was crisp and sharp, an iron cold. He was properly dressed for harsh weather, knowing the vigorous walk in heavy clothes would cause perspiration. But that was no concern; the inner fabric, next to the skin, would wick any moisture.

As he walked, he took bites on a protein bar, hoping to make it last as long as possible. He soon adjusted, settling into a repetitive motion, free of thought, yet staying alert, glancing frequently at the wrist device. He was on course, and the terrain was mostly flat. So far, it was easygoing. Even with the heavy pack, he hardly noticed. With open terrain, he could see a considerable distance in the moon’s reflection on snow. Of course, anyone on the tundra could see him as well. The only way to avoid detection would be to wear all-white camouflage clothing in the snowscape. But there had been no time to plan and prepare a proper trek. He could only hope he wouldn’t be spotted.

His plan was to approach from the east, holding back a mile until he saw the ceremonial fire Morphis had talked of. Once he saw an illumination, he would make a slow approach. He carried a top-grade camera with a telephoto lens, hoping to get a visual record. But he would have to be careful. If discovered, the consequences might be severe. Morphis had given a vague warning. To intrude on people using hallucinogens, conducting secret rites, would put him in grave danger. He would do his best to get near the ceremony, observe, and record it without detection.

Checking the wrist device, he saw he had covered two miles. He judged he was about halfway there, the trek so far had been uneventful, and he was only moderately fatigued. Visibility was diminished as clouds drifted over the moon, reducing the range of sight, but widespread snow reflected ambient light, allowing Hartley to go on at a good pace.

He heard the far-off wail of an animal, long and mournful, a wolf. The cry was picked up at a different location, another animal answering the first. This began a series of howls, all distant, separate, and distinct. The sounds continued for a few more minutes, then all was quiet. Now he only heard the movement of his boots, pushing through the snow.

When about a mile from the estimated site, he stopped to look around. Approaching from the east, he began a sweeping movement north for a stationary spot to halt and wait. After going a hundred yards, he found a suitable point, a slight depression facing west toward the spot a mile from where he judged the meeting would take place. The land was almost flat in all directions. Visibility was not as good as earlier since clouds moved in, occasionally blotting the moon. He had been told the ceremony would have a fire. Once he saw it, he would move close enough for observation.

Everything was based on what Morphis had said, but now he began to have doubts, considering the grand effort was based on the words of a drunken old man. Although he had taken an extreme risk coming on the tundra in the middle of the night, if things happened as he hoped, it would be the coup of a career.

Now in position, Hartley removed his pack and set it down where he would sit. He removed a chemical warmer, twisting a tab to activate the heat he needed. He placed it inside his coat then uncapped his canteen and took a drink of water. It was quite cold, but the vessel was designed to prevent freezing. He put everything away and sat on his pack, staring ahead, shifting his eyes in a slow sweep toward the west. Checking his watch, seeing it was ten-thirty, he settled for a long wait. Holding his hands deep in his coat by the heat pack gave some relief from the extreme temperatures, but sitting

unmoving over time made Hartley more subject to frigid cold, slowly creeping inward, reaching deep to his very bones.

The effects of harsh weather crept slowly as did the languor, which grew on Hartley as the period of inactivity lengthened. The scientist knew this was the only way. He must hold the position the instruments told him was about a mile from where the ritual would take place. From here, he would see the ceremonial fire once it started. To get closer now without seeing anything was too risky. He could only guess how the cultists would react, finding someone watching them. He had no choice but to wait at a safe distance, despite extreme boredom of staying still and in a fixed position in the dark and cold.

As he waited, his thinking was first quite orderly and focused. He thought of the journey, coming to the North Slope, activities the previous week, and the sudden revelation from Morphis. Learning of the Ankait cult was a surprise and changed everything about the field study. Everything before the discovery had been routine and, although informative, had not given Hartley the results he'd hoped for. But now his research was on a different plane, maybe another dimension. Here on this isolated piece of tundra in a barren, empty land lay the potential to change his career. The possibilities were almost endless and could lead Hartley's research into vast new areas where he could achieve breakthroughs, new insights, and understanding. Imagining the future, he saw no limit to what could be accomplished. The thoughts were uplifting, images of events still to come; the success he had always craved would be in his grasp. The future was bright. Just keep going in the direction he was on, the path he was walking, toward the light ahead.

Hartley was stiff and quite cold, feeling a start that shook his frame. He stood up, extending his arms which for too long had been pressed on his sides with hands set firmly in pockets. He swung his arms out and back several times to restore circulation. Looking at his watch, he was surprised it was midnight. He had been asleep. His last memory was a faraway light. A dream?

Then he saw it, a glowing speck in the darkness. Based on his instruments, the faint light was northwest of his position. From the



size, he guessed it was a mile off or more. Could it be the cultic liturgical fire?

Hartley hoisted the pack to his shoulders and began walking toward the light. Sleep had left him stiff, and his movements were quite sluggish. He went a short distance, walking slowly, when a cramp developed in his left leg, causing a limp that persisted for a time; but he kept going, and the pain began to ease, ending with minor soreness, hardly noticeable.

At one hundred yards, he could see movement around the fire. He decided to stop and get a feel for the area. Once he felt it was safe, he might go closer for a better look. Meanwhile, he took out his camera with the long-range lens. Earlier he had adjusted the settings for low light. All that was needed now was to aim the shot and set the focus. Kneeling, looking through the camera, he turned the neck ring on the lens to bring the scene into stark clarity.

The fire in the center revealed a line of men further back in shadows, squatting side by side in a circle around a pile of burning wood on ground that had been cleared and leveled. The men, dressed for the cold and sitting on their heels, swayed side to side in unison, in time with a rhythmic sound the anthropologist vaguely heard. But what truly got his attention was close to the fire, a nearly naked man moving rapidly about the circle.

He appeared of late middle age, sinewy and gnarled, hopping around the fringes of heat and light wearing a loincloth, covered in a wolf's skin, the head hollowed and pulled over the man's skull, intoning the words of an ancient tongue, his breath rising in clouds of mist. The blazing fire, tight inside a circle of stones, leaped upward, separate tendrils of red and yellow amid gray smoke and misty condensation, swirling, thinning, and vanishing in the dimness. The man was amazingly agile, whirling and leaping, the animal skin tight on his body, looking more like a wolf than human. Seeing this, Hartley thought the ritual was animal worship, that the Ankauits believed in a wolf deity. But with further observation, it became more ominous.

While the circle of men on their heels, heads bowed, swaying back and forth together looked like a form of worship, the energetic shaman, rushing and leaping, seemed onto something else. While

maybe meant as worship, Hartley began to think the leader's frenetic activity under the wolf skin had greater implications. There was more going on than what he was seeing. It was more than worship. By all appearances, it looked like a man imitating a wolf. But that wasn't right. He was acting nothing like a wolf; he was only wearing a wolf skin while making exertions that seemed to surpass worship. The animal pelt was not merely for appearances but as an implement or aid toward bringing about a desired result. What was the word? *Alembic*? Yes, alembic. The shaman was trying to be transformed; he wanted to become the animal. The skin, chants, and vigorous gyrations were directed to a deity: supplications and pleadings to become a wolf.

What Hartley saw was the ancient practice of shapeshifting, the mythical belief that man could be changed into an animal.

This was incredible. He had to get closer for better pictures. Rising, he put the camera in the pack, hoisted his gear, and set out cautiously toward the fire. Walking along, he continually looked to make sure he had not been seen. Finally, he stopped about seventy yards off, deciding he was close enough. He put his pack down, removing a ground cloth, spreading it out, and placing the camera and other objects on it.

He kneeled, bringing the camera to his eye. This was perfect. Adjusting the lens brought the objects in close, and he began snapping a series of shots, mainly the shaman who was still moving rapidly, taking long steps one way, simulating a leap, turning, creeping low, and repeating the moves. In some way, the actions did resemble a wolf; yet at other times, the movements seemed more those of a dancer or actor. It was hard to say, only that they were predatory, ominous, and chilling to see. Hartley rotated the adjusting ring, widening the view to the entire circle of men, and, once again, clicked off a series of shots.

Then something hard pressed the back of his neck. Even with layers of clothing, Hartley knew it was the barrel of a gun.

"Stand up. Slowly."

The voice, clearly an Inupiat, was deep and insistent. Lowering the camera, Hartley moved a slide button, placing the device on the ground face up while slipping a small object from the ground into

his hand as he rose, the gun barrel pushed forcibly against his neck, nearly unbalancing him, then pulled away. It was a warning that Hartley did not contest.

Now standing erect, arms spread, Hartley was still and silent. He had been discovered, likely by a member of the party he was observing.

“Start walking. Slowly.”

Starting forward, Hartley decided to test the situation.

“Let me explain. I’m an anthropologist on a field study. I saw the fire and wanted to see what it was.”

While speaking, he took a risk, turning around. He was no more than ten feet from his captor, a shorter man dressed like the other cultists, holding a rifle pointed right at him.

“Stand there and don’t move. You’ll tell everything once we join the others.”

Apparently, the man had not seen the small remote in Hartley’s hand.

Keeping his eyes on Hartley, the man began reaching down to gather Hartley’s gear. Just as he touched the camera, there was a blinding flash. Hartley rushed the man, knocking the gun from his hands, tumbling him backward. The anthropologist was bigger than his antagonist and had an initial advantage over the man, momentarily blinded. But the smaller man fought savagely. There was no help for either in the terrain, no tree limb and a scarcity of stones that might serve as a weapon, mostly an expanse of empty tundra. The outcome would depend on strength and resourcefulness. Hartley had no idea where the gun fell, but he knew his enemy was desperately trying to reach it. In heavy clothing, neither man could hurt his opponent. Gloved hands were ineffective fists for pummeling an adversary. It was mostly a test of pushing, thrusting, and twisting. They continued to tumble and grapple, bringing both men near exhaustion. It appeared it would be a test of endurance. Hartley fought hard, knowing that losing the contest likely meant his life. Then his antagonist forcibly pushed him aside, just as Hartley lost his footing and went sprawling in the snow. He had the misfortune of hitting an outcropping of rock.

Momentarily stunned, he looked up to see the gun in his face. The Ankaunit must have been relieved, regaining control. Knowing his captive meant to escape, the native would take no further chances. Hearing a click as the gun hammer cocked, Hartley froze and waited for what was next.

A shot sent a jolt like an electric shock through his body. The gun blast left him fazed, a loud ringing sensation, vibrating in his head.

Someone was leaning over, indistinguishable, but the voice was familiar.

“Dr. Hartley, are you all right?”

“Jim...Morphis? Is that you?”

Hartley felt a firm hand grip his shoulder as he was slowly helped off the ground.

“What happened? I left you at the bar hours ago half drunk.”

“I’m better. You and I are in danger. Get your gear. We need to leave.”

Morphis helped Hartley secure his things, and as the scientist hoisted the pack, he saw the Inuit motionless on the ground.

“Is he dead?”

“He was about to kill you, and I shot him.”

Morphis took Hartley’s arm, forcibly moving him, starting him off in a slow run, pushing through the snow.

“Come on. The others will be here soon.”

Hartley was feeling better. He must have been stunned in the fight. He had many questions for Morphis that would have to wait. For now, he ran beside the man as fast as they could manage in the snow, trusting the one who had saved his life. Occasionally, they looked back to see if they were being followed. There was no sign of pursuit, the distant fire growing smaller until a single point of light, then it disappeared. The pair came to a slight declivity, sloping down to a frozen creek bed, crossing to the other side where a snow machine waited. The forward carriage had handlebars and a driver’s seat, like a motorcycle, but everything else was different. There were two extended skis mounted at the front and a wide surface-engaged drive belt at the rear, specially made for travel on snow.

Morphis ran to the right side, grasping a half-moon ring, extending from the front panel. Standing erect, he pulled the handle forcefully, trying to start the machine, telling Hartley to jump on behind. The professor slung his leg over the seat forming the top of the carriage, moving to the rear where he grabbed a handle on each side. The engine, like that of a large grass mower, cranked at last, making a loud, tinny whine. Morphis jumped on, still standing, as he gripped the handle while pushing a small lever, revving the engine louder until they began to move, picking up speed, going faster, steering the machine in a sweeping curve, then straightening onto a course back toward the village.

Holding the seat handles, Hartley was carried along as the machine sped over snow, the engine rattling noisily, Morphis standing straight like an apparition, tilting sideways, leaning in the turns, Hartley fearing the sled would roll; but they went on and on, like a comet flung through space.

Most of the way was straight, over flat tundra, when the machine pressed hardest, sounding like a hornet inside a tin can, the shrill, metallic engine rattling in the cold air; and all Hartley could see was a penumbra of light flaring on both sides, his view partly obscured by the dark figure towering over him.

The light was seen by someone far back because Hartley saw a tuft of snow spout near the edge of the illumination cone projected by the headlamps, quickly followed by the crack of a rifle in the distance. That happened only once as the ride became a numbing, droning rush. Hartley now had time to consider what had happened. The monotony of the sled ride dulled his senses while plunging him in a flurry of thoughts.

Nearly ten hours earlier, he had come on impulse to find the secret native ceremony. It was exactly the kind of thing his anthropological yearnings craved, atavistic group behavior, an activity linked to cultural roots. With no preparation, he had come, taking a chance for scientific discovery. He made it to the site, found the ceremony, and got some pictures until he was detected by an apparent sentry. The native that discovered him meant to take him to the others, where no doubt he would have been interrogated and likely put to

death. From the time he was detected, he determined if he were to live, he must get away; and the ploy with the camera gave him his chance, but the Inuit had gotten lucky in the fight. He thought that was the end, but somehow, miraculously, Morphis had appeared. Hartley was grateful (thanks be to God) he was now on the motor sled, alive and breathing, speeding across the frigid tundra back to the village.

## 9



## THE NORTH SLOPE

**H**artley's scrape with the Ankauits had been a year and a half ago, and he was thinking of the brush with death as he was returning to Ataqsut as part of a multidisciplinary team studying Alaskan Native culture, flying to Fairbanks to connect with a bush plane for the final flight to the remote village.

While the scientists flew toward Fairbanks, Race Warren was just lifting from Lake Hood in a small air taxi. Still shaken by what happened at the post office, he was starting to feel better, knowing he was now safe.

Warren settled in his seat, trying to understand what happened earlier. The man who tried to kill him had trailed him to the postal building. But when had the stalking begun? Warren had never seen the man before. The cell phone recovered from the body might reveal something.

Warren was stunned; one of his first assignments had morphed from a routine case into a deadly mystery, putting his life in danger. The woman who hired him obviously had not told him everything; there must be other things about her husband than a failed marriage. He would have to confront the woman for answers, but for now, he had to do all he could to protect his life. At last, he was safe in the Cessna at eight thousand feet, cruising at 140 miles per hour.

Warren shifted position, trying to relax and sort the thoughts swirling in his head, the many questions, and the need for answers.

The pilot was silent, his mind on the sky and the instrument panel in front. The couple in back occasionally murmured, the woman mentioning sights below, a mountain peak or winding river. But the overall impression for those in the plane was the droning engine sound, loud but softened by the headsets. The private investigator closed his eyes and began to slip back, sleep beckoning, thoughts forming vague images, random and disjointed. He was not prone to worry, usually keeping a sound frame of mind, given to positive thoughts that things were fine, people mostly good. He was mostly an optimist, but the sudden violence, a stranger trying to kill him, and having to take a life had been unsettling.

He lapsed into a sleep of dark images, swaths of blood, wasted corpses, and overpowering fear. He struggled to get away from the carnage, an unseen killer closing in to finish him. Feeling a vise-like grip, he pulled away.

He heard a voice.

"Are you okay?"

Warren opened his eyes, the aircraft engine droning, a hand on his shoulder.

"You all right?"

A voice in the headset. He turned to see the pilot staring.

"You were asleep, mumbling."

"Yeah, I'm okay, must have been dreaming."

The pilot turned back his attention on flying the plane. But Warren wasn't okay; he was trembling, seeing images of the man in the warehouse, head sideways, neck shattered. Warren didn't understand what was happening, why the memory wouldn't go away. The shooting had left him numb, but he thought it was over, and he would be okay. It had been awful, but he would shake it and go on. But now he wasn't sure. He must think differently and put his attention elsewhere. He was trying, but so far, it hadn't worked.

Now it was quieter. The only sound was the droning of the engine behind the bulkhead where his knees were almost touching. The elderly couple at the back was silent, perhaps asleep. The weather was calm, thin clouds scattered around a bright sun. Warren checked his watch, seeing they were half an hour from Fairbanks. The

flight had been uneventful except for sudden air currents shaking the plane, swinging the craft violently upward for several moments then dropping in short freefalls. They may have been on autopilot since Ken had been still and silent since waking Warren thirty minutes earlier. Even when colliding with unseen air streams, buffeting the craft, electronics kept them on course, the nose of the plane unerringly returning to its heading.

This guy must love his job, spending his days gliding above a landscape of unparalleled natural beauty. It had to be like an eagle, soaring high, commanding all below. Of course, there also was an element of danger. Bush pilots likely had more hours in the cockpit than any other small plane captain, which meant that over a long career, there was a greater chance of mishap. Safety figured in Warren's choice when he had been looking for an air carrier, deciding on an air taxi for flexibility and low cost, finding Rush's Flying Service highly recommended. Considering the great number of flights through Alaska, the number of small plane crashes was relatively few. Regardless, Warren was not concerned. Air taxis were the only way to get to Ataqsut, and he had to find Billings before the trail grew cold.

Then he heard the pilot.

"Fairbanks is in sight, and we'll be landing shortly. Our time on the ground will be about forty-five minutes."

The couple in the rear started to stir as they began talking. They were disembarking after touchdown, and Warren presumably would be the sole passenger going to the North Slope.

He looked out, seeing distant buildings of Fairbanks on the banks of the Chena River, spread on a flat plain. Soon the airport came in sight, a terminal building, and runways on both sides of an oblong, manmade lake where the Cessna would land. The narrow body of water had protrusions on one side, like the tines of a fork, slips where small planes moored.

Ken brought the plane just beyond the airport then banked in a tight turn, straightening and leveling in a gradual descent, aligning the craft with the lake, the stretch of water enlarging on the approach, spreading, and seeming to rise to meet them as the Cessna

skated onto the glassy surface, throwing curved sprays of water from pontoons. The plane slowed, taxiing for a distance, then turning into a slip, continuing a short way to a small dock where a man assisted in mooring the craft.

After cutting the engine, Ken turned to the passengers. "Please wait for Eric to help you out."

The pilot opened his door and stepped onto the pontoon, clambering around the outside of the craft to the landing where the young man named Eric had opened the right-side door and was assisting each passenger onto the dock. Warren was last to leave, shouldering a pack and carrying a satchel as he stepped from the float-pod onto the planking of the dock. Just ahead, the couple was walking with the pilot, complimenting him on the flight. Ken was pleased.

"Thank you. You may wait in the office for the taxi."

The couple was staying in Fairbanks for several days, then leaving on a scenic train tour.

"Mr. Warren, you can wait in the office till your flight is ready."

Warren thanked the pilot and walked across the short jetty, crossing a patch of grass bordering a wide pavement that led to a small building like the one at Anchorage. He went inside, finding a couch where he sat down, putting his luggage beside him. He had less than an hour to wait and could have easily taken a quick nap but was not one to waste time. Removing his notebook from the rucksack, he shifted his weight, finding the couch welcome after the seat in the tight cockpit.

He looked over earlier notes he had made about the trip and other important matters. There were specific details he mustn't overlook. Self-employed, he had lots of freedom, but no one besides himself to see that everything got done. Warren had a knack for order and details, essentials for running a business as a sole employee. Perhaps the current job would make enough for him to hire a secretary.

Then he remembered the letter. He had been at the Anchorage post office, in line, and then—it was never sent. His client insisted on weekly reports, and he had one prepared to mail when disaster struck. There was still time; he could send it from Fairbanks. The clerk at Rush's could mail it.

He began rummaging through his backpack when there was a sudden ringing of his cell phone. He started to silence it but saw the call was from Anchorage.

"Hello, this is Race Warren."

After a short silence, Warren heard the familiar voice of Detective Roberts.

"Hello, Mr. Warren. I didn't know I would need to phone you again so soon."

Warren paused, confused. *What did the police detective want?* "Yes, Inspector. Good to hear from you. Uh, how may I help you?"

"Mr. Warren. You've already done a lot. At the park, yesterday, identifying the dead man, and again on today's earlier call. I hope our talks may have benefited you in the search for the missing person. I'm sorry you had to leave so soon, and we couldn't get to know each other better. You see, Mr. Warren, I like you. You remind me of someone I once knew. But all that aside, I'm hoping you can help again because there's been another unfortunate death I would like to ask about. Can you tell me about your time in Anchorage?"

Warren was perplexed. Roberts's questions seemed strange. Warren's silence was beginning to seem suspicious.

"I'm not in Anchorage. I left soon after I spoke to you."

"You're now in Fairbanks, but I'm asking if you know anything of a killing at the Anchorage post office three hours ago."

It was understandable the police were investigating the postal incident, but Warren was surprised he was already tied to the event. What else did the detective know? Warren was unsure what to say; he didn't want to be charged with murder. His thoughts raced back to the post office, covering every detail of his short twenty minutes there. The security cameras: That's always the first thing checked.

"Yes, I stopped by the post office just before my flight. I guess the security cameras show that."

"No, Mr. Warren. The cameras were not working, a lapse by the station. But we did find a letter of yours."

There was a lengthy silence, broken by Roberts.

"Mr. Warren?"

After a short pause, Warren spoke, "The man tried to kill me. I acted in self-defense."

"That may be, but leaving doesn't help your case, Mr. Warren. You need to turn yourself in. The sooner you cooperate, the better. If what you say is true, your life may be in danger. Come in, tell us what you know, and we'll protect you."

Warren interrupted, "I don't know what's going on, but I've got to protect myself."

Roberts's tone changed. "Warren, you were at the scene, and leaving makes you prime suspect. Turn yourself in, or we'll find you."

"I can't do that."

Warren hung up the phone and laid it on the table in front of him. He removed a paper towel and sandwich from his pack, taking it from an aluminum foil cover, putting it on the paper then wrapping the phone in several layers of foil, and placing it in his backpack. Now the phone could not reveal his location. He pulled a bottle of water from the pack, leaned back, and ate the sandwich, trying to forget the call.

Warren was seated at the far end of the waiting room, beside a wall of closely spaced windows overlooking the dock and lake. To his right, a service counter ran the length of the room, ending at an office door. Warren watched, as the door opened, a man coming out in a blue shirt with a company logo, followed by several people, probably a group of travelers. There were four, two middle-aged men and a younger man and woman.

The company agent looked toward Warren, leaving the group and walking his way.

"Hello, I'm Henry Mackie with Rush's. Are you Mr. Warren?"

Warren stood up. "Yes."

"Mr. Warren, there's been a change of schedule preventing us from accommodating you this afternoon. We can get you on another flight first thing in the morning. Of course, we will arrange a hotel stay overnight."

Warren was irritated. He had to get out of Fairbanks at once. Roberts had likely contacted the local police, and they would be coming to arrest him.

“Mr. Mackie, what’s the problem? I’ve got to get to my destination on schedule.”

Mackie sensed Warren’s rising frustration and tried to calm him. “These things sometimes happen and are in your contract. If unforeseen circumstances prevent us from completing flight plans, we have twenty-four hours to get you to your destination before issuing a refund.”

“But I’ve got to make this flight.” Warren looked at his watch. “Leaving in ten minutes.”

“Mr. Warren, I am sorry. The aircraft is limited to a maximum of four passengers, and unfortunately, we cannot accommodate you.”

Warren was becoming increasingly frustrated. As he tussled with the flight representative, Warren noticed the group standing across the room. While the three men were talking, the young woman was staring at Warren and Mackie.

“Mr. Mackie, I’m a private investigator from Memphis on a critical case in the North Slope. It’s imperative I get there this evening. If you can’t help, let me speak to the manager, or better, the owner.”

While explaining the situation in a firm manner, Mackie had been polite. He forced a half smile. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Warren held up his watch, only a few minutes till departure time. Looking at the group near the door, he saw the young woman turning away, talking with her companions. Warren suspected these people had preempted him on the Ataqsut flight. The delay was starting to fray his nerves, and rather than wait, he decided to find out what was going on. He crossed the room to where the group was standing by the front entrance.

Putting on his best smile, he tried to get their attention without being intrusive. “Excuse me, my name is Race Warren, and I’m traveling to the North Slope. I’m wondering if we’re going to the same place.”

One of the men responded, “Mr. Warren, pleased to meet you. I’m Professor Dunbar, this is Professor Hartley, his daughter Dr. Hartley, and Mr. Collins. We’re also headed to the North Slope, the village of Ataqsut. And what is your destination?”

“I’m going to the same village but was just told I’ve been bumped since the plane can only hold four.”

Dunbar’s expression changed to one of concern. “Sorry, we didn’t know there was a problem with arrangements. We arrived an hour ago on a commercial carrier, and Rushes is the only North Slope flight today. We were lucky to get them.”

“Lucky for you, but not me. The plane rules apparently allow a single booking to be canceled if a larger party shows up. I guess it’s the only way the company can make money. But I have important business in Ataqsut, and despite the fine print, I’ve insisted I make the flight. Mr. Mackie is checking on it.”

“I certainly hope it works out.”

The young woman spoke up, “Mr. Warren, we’re going to the village for a field study. What exactly is your business?”

Warren found the young woman friendly and her manner disarming. He wished circumstances were different. The girl was interesting and worth knowing better, but in his present state of mind, he felt incapable of making a good impression.

“I also do fieldwork. I’m a private investigator on a missing person case.”

Warren looked at his watch. The plane was ten minutes overdue, and he could imagine the police arriving any moment, arresting him and ending any discussion about the flight.

The young woman smiled. “How charming, a real private eye. I thought technology had done away with the profession.”

She was warming to the conversation and beginning to draw in her new acquaintance. Warren began to relax, feeling growing interest.

“Like everything else, the Internet has changed investigatory work, but there are still some things best done in person.”

The conversation was interrupted with Mackie’s return.

“Excuse me, Mr. Warren. I’ve got good news. We have another plane, a Beaver, that we are preparing for flight. It will accommodate all parties and be ready in twenty minutes.”

Warren nodded with a half smile, the best he could do at thanks. He was worried about the police and anxious to be on the plane and out of Fairbanks. His life was in danger, and he did not trust

Detective Roberts to find answers or protect him. The search for Billings was a threat to someone who was taking extreme measures to stop him. Warren wanted to find who was behind it and why the attempt on his life.

“Everything okay now with the flight and all?” The young woman was trying to restart the conversation.

Since Mackie’s interruption, Warren had been silent.

“Oh, yes, Dr. Hartley, everything’s fine.”

“Please, call me Kate, and may I call you Race?”

“Of course, Kate.”

Warren reached out, and she shook his hand.

“So good to meet you.”

Soon the party of researchers and Warren were on their journey, the plane lifting from the waterway and rising above Fairbanks. The city skyline receded behind as the aircraft flew north. All the passengers wore headsets for communication with the captain. This plane was roomier with a longer fuselage than the previous plane, but the chief difference was the greater wingspan.

After leveling in flight, the altitude and cruising speed were about the same as the smaller plane from Anchorage. The sound of the aircraft engine was deeper than a Cessna, and with the longer wings, this craft likely carried much more weight than the smaller plane. Warren was pleased that Rush had made the Beaver available so he could make the flight. He was now able to relax for the first time since Roberts’s call. If only he could avoid the police until he had time to figure out what he was into. He was almost certain his client’s story was fabricated, or at the least, information had been withheld sending him after Billings. But why?

He would get answers only when he found Ron Billings, the key to the mystery. But someone felt strongly that Warren be stopped. The situation was clearly more complex than he knew. With his life at stake, he believed his best chance lay with himself, acting without interference from the police. The droning aircraft engine soon lulled him to sleep.

He awoke, feeling the plane touch down, skipping over water. Looking out the window, he saw sparse vegetation, a few scrub

plants, and some wildflowers along the shore of a small lake. There were even thin lines of snow here and there, unmelted, even though it was midsummer. In only moments, the plane floated up alongside a small dock projecting from a road, with a cinder block office, a supply shack, and a fuel storage tank nearby. A worker on the landing was waiting to secure the plane. As the port pontoon bumped the dock, the man hitched the rope from the aircraft, looping it securely around a timber post. He stepped onto the float and opened the side door, assisting each passenger onto the landing, the four members of the scientific team first, followed by Warren. The group was directed to a Land Rover, which they boarded for the short ride to Ataqsut.

Warren found himself in the back, seated next to Kate who was relieved to be on the ground.

“The plane was so confining and loud.”

“Yes, the earphones make it hard to talk but, of course, are for our safety.”

“Now we can carry on a normal conversation. One thing I like about the small planes, though, you’re not so high and can better see the scenery.”

“Yes, bush planes are great for sightseeing.”

Warren said this although he had slept most of the flight. The two older scientists were in the seats immediately behind the driver while the front-side seat was occupied by Collins, the young graduate assistant. Dunbar and Hartley apparently were good friends. Since meeting the group in Fairbanks, Warren noted the pair were always together, in frequent conversation. Kate had paired off with him, leaving Collins by himself. At times, the young man would talk to his mentor, Hartley; but for the most part, he was quiet.

Soon the Land Rover was at the control building for the airstrip. Dunbar went inside to get a rental car as the others waited. The professor’s secretary had reserved a vehicle when arranging the trip. Dunbar came out, directing the group to another Land Rover. Once everyone got inside, they drove less than a mile, pulling in front of a plain building serving as a bed and breakfast and boarding house. Dunbar stopped the vehicle as Hartley spoke.



“This is the place I told you about. I was here less than two years ago. It’s the only place open for travelers.”

Getting out of the rover, the group viewed the boarding house. It was a frame building of weathered wood covered with layers of old paint. Hartley opened the entrance door and led the group inside. The room was the width of the building and had a few pieces of furniture, a small table with chairs, and a well-worn leather sofa against one wall. Near the center stood what looked like a reception desk, a raised enclosure of finished wood like a podium with a flat surface holding a small lighted lamp. An open passage at the side of the room gave a view of the dining room.

A woman of late-middle age came through a curtain covering a passageway on the right, having heard the group come in or being alerted by a door signal. Portly and dressed in loose clothing of lace and ruffles, she smiled as she floated in, welcoming her guests.

“So glad to see everyone. I am Madame Shevsky. You must be Dr. Hartley’s group.”

“Yes, I’m Jonathan Hartley. This is Dr. Mark Dunbar, my daughter Dr. Kate Hartley, and Doah Collins.”

Hartley gestured toward the private investigator.

“This is Mr. Warren. Although not with our party, he’s in need of a room.”

“We don’t get many reservations, Dr. Hartley, and we are happy you’re all here. And, of course, Mr. Warren too since most of our guests arrive unannounced. And we always have room for everyone.”

The woman began the process of registering the group, entering the information by hand in a large well-bound ledger.

When Hartley approached the counter, he smiled, saying he had been at the village about two years before and remembered Mrs. Shevsky.

“Yes, I seem to recall. The years pass quickly, but our village the same, no?”

“Ataqsut, just as I remember.”

Warren was the last to sign in. After showing his identification and writing his name (*quaint custom from a bygone era*, he thought), he listened to the woman’s friendly banter.

“Your first visit to our village, no?”

“Yes, in fact, my first time north of the Mason-Dixon line.”

Mme Shevsky looked perplexed. “Where you from?”

“Memphis, Tennessee.”

Mme Shevsky’s eyes widened. “Elvis Presley,” she said, beaming.

“Yes, Elvis’s hometown.”

Concluding the friendly old woman was of Russian heritage, Warren bade her a pleasant evening and left for his room, ascending the narrow stairway on the right to the second level, turning into a close-in hallway, seeing his room number just ahead. At the end of the corridor, he saw a door marked “Bath,” the communal shower. Entering his room, he saw in the corner a small enclosure with a toilet and lavatory. There was one window with a simple curtain, a double bed, a plain table with two wood chairs, and a cushioned chair beside an end table with a small lamp.

The room was quite spare but not unexpected in a remote place in a vast and barren land. He lay his pack on the table and opened the luggage, removing the few clothes he’d brought, hanging them in an enclosure in the wall behind a curtain. He checked his watch, seeing he had an hour before dinner. He pulled out a chair, sat down, and retrieved the items from his pack.

There was much to do, but the priority was finding Billings. With more questions than answers, Warren opened his black leatherette journal to write his thoughts and record events of the day. What he wrote was minimal.

His main goal was to avoid the police long enough to find Ron Billings. Detective Roberts knew his last location was Fairbanks Airport and, by now, would have traced him to Ataqsut. There was a risk staying here one night, but he needed at least a day to inquire about Billings.

Besides the law, he had to be alert for more attempts on his life. He had no idea why this case had put his life in danger, but knowing his quarry had come here meant this place was Warren’s only chance.

Looking at his watch, he saw it was time for dinner. He put away the writing materials and stepped into the toilet area where he stood before the sink, looking in the mirror. His face was haggard,

lined with a stubble of beard. He picked a washcloth from the hanger, holding it under the faucet, soaking it, then wiping his forehead, face, and neck, trying to relieve the tension that had been building all day. After a minute, he lightly pressed a towel to his face then turned back into the room. He stood for a moment to consider what he might need. The cell phone, wrapped in foil, stayed in the backpack.

# 10



## ATAQSUT

**L**eaving the room, Warren had little appetite for dinner. His dreams of having his own business seemed not only suddenly distant but even undone. What happened that day had changed everything.

He walked down the stairway, roughly made of construction wood but nicely varnished. He crossed the room, passing the podium where the registration ledger lay under the small lighted lamp, then through the doorway into the dining room where members of the scientific team were already seated.

“Mr. Warren, we just sat down. Good to see you. Have you been able to relax since the flight?”

Professor Dunbar, quite cheerful, was clearly the group leader. He and the others seemed lively, welcoming him warmly, greeting the detective in turn.

Warren responded, “Still a little stiff but starting to feel better. You all look well this evening. I suppose we are all of Madame Shevsky’s house guests.”

“There is at least one other, a gentleman wanting privacy. The madame took his food up on a tray earlier.”

At that moment, the madame bustled into the room pushing a stainless-steel cart of food.

“You must be quite hungry after the flight. Small planes are confining and can make for rough travel. But I hope you are now relaxed.”

The woman placed platters of food on the rectangular table that could seat ten chairs, but this evening had five guests.

As everyone began spooning food on their plates, Warren spoke, “It all looks great, Madame Shevsky. Are we five typical for your boarding house? Professor Dunbar mentioned there is another guest we haven’t met.”

“The house can accommodate twelve, but that would require opening two spare rooms kept for storage. And yes, there is another guest, a very private man who prefers to stay in his room. I do my best to care for guests and see they are comfortable.”

She had not mentioned a name, and it might have been rude to inquire further.

Warren thought this curious, but there could be any number of reasons for someone wanting privacy or anonymity. But with this Billings’s last known location, Warren wondered if the mystery guest could be the one he was seeking.

Everyone was now eating and bantering idly. Kate, seated across from Warren, began a conversation.

“Race, since you said you had pressing business in Ataqsut, I’m sure you’re relieved to be here.”

“Yes, I’ll get started at daybreak. What does your team have on the agenda?”

“First thing is to contact the VPSO.”

“What?”

“The Village Public Safety Officer, an auxiliary law enforcement official we need to interview about a crime that happened about a month ago.”

Warren raised his eyebrows. “You’re not talking about the young woman reported killed in an animal attack?”

Kate answered, “Yes, but we understand it’s unsolved, and the possibility of murder hasn’t been ruled out. How did you know about it? The authorities kept it quiet, and it didn’t make the newspapers.”

Warren turned the question back. “In that case, how did you know about it?”

“My father knows game officers in the North Slope, and one of them passed the information to him. Okay, I answered your question, so how did you know?”

“I overheard an oil field hand at an Anchorage bar talking about it. He had just come from Ataqsut.”

Warren said no more, so Kate continued, “Quite tragic. She was so young.”

They were silent for a time, then Warren asked Kate why the death of an Alaskan Native girl in a remote village would be of interest to a group of research scientists. Kate said the girl belonged to a subbranch of Inuits, an obscure, almost extinct tribe known as the Ankauits, which held ancient superstitions and still practiced a primitive religion. Believing the girl’s death was a direct result of occult beliefs, the scientists wanted to learn more of the tribe’s religion and culture, hoping their work might lead to improvements for the natives. Kate thought she’d said enough on their goals, turning the conversation back to Warren.

“It seems strange your search led you to the same remote village where a killing just occurred, a possible murder.”

“It’s odd but likely just coincidence.” Warren paused then asked a question to move the conversation along. “Does your group expect to learn much from the VPSO?”

“My father and Dr. Dunbar will present our work as in the interest of science, but, of course, we will keep everything in strict confidence.”

Warren hoped to be privy to whatever the scientists learned. He would try to stay friendly with Kate and the others without intruding with his own investigation. Whatever the authorities told them might also be useful to him. In such a small, remote village, things could easily be connected. Kate’s observation about the oddity of the scientists and Warren both coming to the same middle-of-nowhere spot, the team to investigate a killing, and he to find a missing person was shared by Warren, but he had dismissed it as coincidence. He had felt that way since hearing Larsen name Ataqsut as where the

killing occurred. If the two were connected, there was not a hint of evidence.

Warren pushed all speculation from his mind. His priority now was to identify Madame Shevsky's secret house guest. The hostess had just finished clearing the table when Warren excused himself, wishing everyone a good evening, turning to the front room, and crossing to the stairs on the other side. He bounded quickly up the short flight, turning left, proceeding to the end of the hall to check the communal bathroom, which was open. He went back to his room, gathered a few things, and returned to the end of the hall, looking toward a hot shower to wash away cares after an exhausting day.

Later, back in his room in the small bed, Warren tried to empty his mind of persistent thoughts, hindering sleep. Somehow, he was able to dismiss the disturbing images, his fitful body settling, drifting to subconscious reveries, and much-needed rest.

A faint buzzing roused Warren from sleep. He raised himself and looked toward the sound, a small timepiece flashing on the bedside table. He reached over to shut it off, seeing it was 2:00 a.m. He sat up, turning to let his legs drop over the side of the bed, then was still. He gathered his thoughts for what was next.

Learning of an anonymous boarder the previous evening, Warren suspected it might be the man he was looking for. He wanted to check the guest register at the reception counter downstairs and at this hour he thought he could do it in secret.

He got up, put on some clothes, and got his small tech light. Slowly opening the door, he looked into the darkness of the corridor. Slipping through the opening, he held the small light, flicking it on, casting an illuminating beam. He crept slowly along the narrow hall to the stairs, wary of the creaking floor, unusually loud. Pausing a moment at the landing, he slowly took each step down, feeling his way, his left hand sliding across the wall and his right over the railing, shining the light through the room. He stopped at the bottom, stark still, listening. All was quiet, and other than the small illuminator, there was only dim light from outside coming through the curtains of the front window.

Warren turned toward the back of the room, following the light beam to the reception counter. The small desk looked as it had the previous evening, standing at the center near the back wall. The only thing on the counter was a miniature lamp. Going behind, Warren found an upper shelf that held the registration journal. Pulling the ledger out, he placed it atop the desk and opened it to the first page.

The book was far from full; a month of entries taking no more than a page, mostly oil field workers, others in the energy industry, and an occasional hunter. A single line held each guest's information: identification card numbers and states of origin, all done in the Madame's neat hand, and the registrant's signature at the end. Warren carefully rolled the pages from right to left until reaching the last entry, where he and the scientists had arrived that evening. Running his finger back up the page under the light beam, the detective caught the name of Billings. He had registered two weeks earlier under a Tennessee driver's license. He was in room 7. Warren closed the ledger and slipped it back into the desk, turning and carefully stepping to the stairway, making his way back to his room.

He woke early, the morning quite bright. The Alaskan summer was never truly dark; the least light was about 1:00 a.m. Yet he had slept reasonably well and wanted to be fresh and relaxed for breakfast Madame Shevsky had set for seven-thirty. He washed at the small sink within the bathroom enclosure. Then he shaved, something he did every other day. After putting on the last set of clean clothes, he grabbed the backpack, slinging it over his shoulder as he left the room. Seeing the hall empty, he locked the door and headed toward the stairs. At room 7, he paused and listened, hearing no sound from within. Billings was like a ghost, silent and mysterious. As Warren reached the top of the stairs, Madame Shevsky was coming up with a tray of food.

"Good morning, Madame Shevsky."

"Good morning, Mr. Warren. Breakfast is on the table, and your friends are there."

Warren thanked her with a smile, waiting a moment, seeing her stop at room 7, knocking softly at the door. He then hurried down the stairs, crossed the front room, and entered the dining area.

Everyone was seated just as the night before, all turning, greeting Warren, or acknowledging him with a nod.

“Good morning, everyone. It seems I’m always last to arrive.”

“You’re right on time,” said Professor Dunbar. “Madame just brought the food.”

Warren slid his chair out and took a seat. “I passed her at the stairs.”

“Taking breakfast to her mysterious guest,” Dunbar said with a chuckle.

Everyone was passing bowls and platters, spooning out diced fried potatoes with eggs or sausage links, toast, and pancakes. There was butter on a saucer, a container of syrup, and a pitcher of orange juice. On a nearby stand, a carafe of coffee was steaming.

Sitting next to Kate, Warren began a conversation. After a moment, someone commented on the food.

“The accommodations may be Spartan, but breakfast is excellent.”

It was Professor Hartley who then asked a question. “Mark, everything look good for today’s work?”

Everyone turned their attention to Dunbar. He glanced around then began going over the agenda. “As you know, I had a preliminary call with the Village Public Safety Officer a few weeks ago. I think she will cooperate as much as she can. The killing of the young woman, either an animal attack or murder, is unsolved. Of course, the authorities are quite circumspect.”

Dunbar explained he had a good friend, a federal Wildlife and Game Officer in the North Slope who knew the VPSO and convinced her to cooperate with the research team. Dunbar believed she would provide all the information allowed.

Besides the officer, Dunbar hoped to speak to the victim’s family, neighbors, and Alaskan Natives in the area, anyone who might shed light on what happened.

“Mr. Warren, you are welcome to join us as your missing person search will likely involve the same people we question.”

“Thank you, Professor. In such a small place, that’s true.”

The conversation broke into two groups, Dunbar with Hartley and Warren with Kate. Collins seemed left out, although when Warren wasn’t around, the young man frequently spoke to the young woman.

The madame breezed in and out, removing empty platters, refilling coffee, seeing her guests were kept satisfied, all the while smiling and talking gaily. There were occasional sights of an Alaskan Native woman busy in the kitchen. Everyone was done eating, now engaged in conversation and sipping coffee.

Dunbar looked at his watch. “Let’s meet at the front in fifteen minutes.”

He rose from his chair and rounded the table, thanking the madame as he left the dining room for the stairway. Hartley and Collins followed while Warren and Kate continued talking. Warren felt growing interest in the young woman.

“How long is your group remaining in Ataqsut?”

“The itinerary allows for two weeks. What about you, Race? What are your plans?”

“I’m not part of a disciplined group of scientists on expedition. My stay is based strictly on results. Something may turn up, sending me to another part of the state.”

“That’s your job? Sounds more like a fun vacation.”

Seeing the quizzical look on his face, Kate tried to explain. “At least the spontaneous part, going where the spirit leads.”

Warren’s expression didn’t change. That was not what he had said. Kate was seeing things differently. He forced a smile. She was just being a woman. He slid the chair back, standing up. “Let’s go. We don’t want to hold up the group.”

Warren accompanied Kate through the front room to the stairway where they ascended to their separate rooms. He did not linger long since he did not wish to delay the others. He soon grabbed his backpack, slung it to his shoulder, and left the room.

Coming down the stairway, he noticed Madame Shevsky examining some papers at the reception counter and saw the three men of the group standing near the front door. The two professors carried portfolios, and Collins had a small satchel hung over his shoul-

der. The graduate assistant was talking with Dunbar, and as Warren walked up, Hartley looked his way.

“Race, I’m pleased you agreed to join us. My daughter finds you interesting. She was pretty hard on herself completing her studies the last two years, and I’m hoping she will develop a more active social life.”

Hartley was thinking of how easily Kate handled schoolwork until her setback. Since her recovery, she had been almost a recluse, studying extra hard just to get by. It was as if she had to prove to her father, and herself, that she was her old self, but she wasn’t. The drugs had left small, permanent changes, taken away her edge, and now she had to work hard for any measure of success.

Warren found Hartley’s words affirming.

“I also find Kate quite interesting. I’ve never known a female academic before. Intelligent women are fascinating.”

“Speaking of…”

Everyone turned toward the back of the room. The younger professor Hartley descended the stairway and floated over to the group of men. Warren thought there was something different about her. Were her clothes changed from before? Hardly possible; it had been only minutes since he’d seen her. Perhaps she had done something with her hair. He was unsure. She was smiling, looking at Warren. He fumbled to say something, but her father spoke first.

“Kate, we were just speaking of you, in glowing terms, of course.”

“You are all kind. I don’t think there’s an enemy among you,” she said with a short laugh.

Dunbar said simply, “Okay,” turned, and pushed through the door, the others following.

The group began walking past small buildings set together, none over two stories, various businesses, stores, agencies, trading companies, and government offices. The day was pleasant, the sun brilliant. Dunbar led the group, passing people on the way, mostly Alaskan Natives and others looking like oil field workers. They soon came to a building, like the ones before, but with a sign at top: “North Slope Native Association.” Dunbar opened the door and walked in,

the others filing behind, everyone gathering loosely inside, glancing around the room. A slightly plump woman in a snug khaki uniform sitting at a desk looked up, a somber expression on her face.

“What can I do for you?”

Dunbar stepped forward, saying they were looking for the Village Public Safety Officer.

“I’m VPSO Amie Haidana.”

The native woman eyed the group as Dunbar introduced himself and the others.

“Brad Kendrick said he would let you know we were coming, conducting a research study on native culture in the region.”

The woman changed her expression to what seemed a forced smile. “Yes, Brad’s a friend. He told me I should expect you that you had questions about the recent unfortunate events. The investigation is being done by state police. My involvement was minimal. I got the call, but when I got there and found the woman dead, I immediately notified the nearest state troopers. They got here quick and secured the scene.”

The woman paused, and Dunbar got to the point. “Could you take us there?”

Dunbar wanted to see what he could and learn as much as possible. It was unlikely the woman would say much about what police found, but if he was careful, she might reveal more than otherwise.

“Brad asked that I help you as much as permitted. I will show you where it happened but can’t let you beyond the perimeter.”

The professor thanked the woman for agreeing to help. They followed her to the door as she explained the building held several government agencies, but everyone was away, requiring she lock the door behind. The officer said the crime scene was at a house at the edge of the village, and the group should follow her. Everyone got in their vehicles, the VPSO leading in her agency car, a Subaru Outback. Dunbar’s party, including Warren, followed in the Land Rover.

The two vehicles went down the main road through close-packed buildings to where the village dwindled to randomly spaced houses, then past the gravel airstrip another quarter mile to a small squat house on the outskirts of town. The officer parked her car on

the side of the road just as the Land Rover pulled up behind. Haidana got out and waited as the others exited their vehicle and walked over to where she stood.

“Crime scene work is done, but the premises are shut till the investigation is complete. Only one person is allowed inside, everyone else please wait here. Dr. Dunbar, if you’re ready.”

Dunbar nodded and followed the woman for a dozen steps to the front of the house where a notice stated all entry was prohibited, by order of state police. The woman removed a set of keys and opened the door, leading Dunbar inside.

Hartley and Collins had wandered back to the side of the Land Rover to talk while Warren and Kate had not moved, standing beside the officer’s car watching Dunbar and Haidana enter the house.

“I heard about this in Anchorage. It was strange, a guy talking at a bar, saying he’d come here to see his girlfriend and learned she’d been killed.”

Warren heard Kate take a quick breath which hung for a second in her throat.

“How awful! What took him to Anchorage?”

“I believe he was distraught. He wanted to get away, left his job, and went south.”

Warren became silent, wishing he hadn’t spoken. He was becoming familiar with Kate and not guarding what he said. He didn’t understand what happened with Larsen, and to say any more would only reveal his involvement in what had rapidly become a complex and inexplicable situation. He couldn’t explain because there were too many unanswered questions; but what he did know, he should keep quiet about. He was in enough danger.

While Warren talked with Kate, the officer was showing Dunbar the inside of the house, beginning with a description of the premises.

“The house has two rooms,” she said, pointing toward a portal, accessing a stub of hallway with a bathroom in the middle and bedrooms to right and left.

“That’s the kitchen area,” pointing to the left where the main room had a counter and all the apparatus of a kitchen. There were

no cabinets, just shelves holding some plates, glass tumblers, and utensils.

Dunbar thought her demeanor was more like a sales agent describing the house rather than giving details of a crime scene. But the officer was filling the time, giving the appearance of cooperating, knowing she could say little of substance. He was lucky Brad was a mutual friend, convincing the VPSO to allow him on site and go through the motions where he might learn something.

“And here’s the bathroom,” the officer continued as they stood in the connecting space making a hallway, “with a bedroom on both sides.” The professor noted the room on the left had only a curtain over the entry. The officer paused for a moment then gestured to the right toward a closed door with a yellow strip across it. Having a door, Dunbar assumed it was the master bedroom.

“This is where the incident took place. I can’t let you in, but I’ll let you have a look.”

She peeled back the tape and opened the door. The room was plain and sparsely furnished. A small bed set in a corner, the coverings loosely jumbled in a heap, next to a lampstand. A single window was at the back wall, and a chest of drawers was set nearby. But what drew Dunbar’s attention was the chalk outline on the wood floor over spots of dried blood.

The officer was silent. The graphic chalk line indicated the victim had both arms out and twisted unnaturally in what had been a violent attack. The markings, stains on the floor, and the sparse furniture were mute testimony of the person formerly occupying the room. Dunbar finally broke the silence.

“Was the victim initially in bed when attacked?”

“I can’t say anything about the investigation, and to be exact, my involvement was minimal. The mother found the victim and called me. When I saw this, I called state police. Lieutenant Jamison is in charge.”

Dunbar continued with questions. “What about the cause of death, results of the autopsy, and crime scene results?”

“Can’t say. Most of that I haven’t seen. You could ask the lieutenant, but he can’t say either.”

Dunbar asked the officer about the mother. Haidana explained the mother and daughter had lived alone at the house, and the woman was now with relatives. The professor asked how he might find her, and the officer gave information.

Knowing they were done, Dunbar made final remarks.

“I’ve seen enough. Thank you for your help.”

Dunbar turned and headed for the front door. He was mostly satisfied with what he’d learned although the officer’s answers were limited. He was relieved Haidana told him how to find the mother so he could question her and continue the inquiry into the alleged tribal cult. The secretive group was said to be involved in shapeshifting, rumored to be linked to the killing. Thinking of this, he left the house, walking to where the others waited beside the Land Rover.

“Did we miss anything?” asked Hartley.

“Very little, but quite disturbing. A chalk outline on the floor with dried blood where the girl was killed.”

Dunbar stared in the distance as his friend looked in silence. Collins was also quiet, standing nearby as Warren and Kate watched from beside the SUV.

The stillness was broken by the sound of the door shutting, the officer locking it, and walking their way. Dunbar turned and met her in the yard where they shoot hands.

“Thank you, Officer Haidana, for your assistance. Next time you see Brad, tell him I said hello.”

She said goodbye and headed for her car. Dunbar watched her get into the small sedan, make a *U*-turn, and drive back toward the village. As the car disappeared, Hartley turned to his friend.

“So what now?”

Dunbar seemed not to hear, but after a moment, he looked at Hartley. “Two people lived here, the victim and her mother. She found the body and is now with relatives nearby. Let’s go see if we can talk with her.”

Everyone got into the Land Rover, Dunbar at the wheel, then the group headed the short distance to the address given by the officer. It was another small house, plain and of simple construction.

Two young children were playing out front as the vehicle stopped on the roadside.

Dunbar switched off the motor then turned to the others.

“Why don’t you wait in the car, and I’ll see if”—he looked at his note card—“Mrs. Shika is home.”

Seeing the stranger get out of the vehicle, the girl and boy grew quiet, then ran into the house. Dunbar reached the front door just as it opened. An elderly native woman appeared, a quizzical look on her weathered face. She spoke to Dunbar in her native tongue. He identified himself, holding up his university card, smiling, and asking for Mrs. Shika. The woman turned, calling to someone, then swung the door wide, letting Dunbar in.

The house was similar to where the girl had been killed but was better furnished, arranged with decorative objects set on countertops and end tables and artistic plaques and photographs on the walls. Two other women, one in her early twenties and another, apparently Mrs. Shika, sat on a small couch, the two children leaning on the armrest, staring at the stranger.

The elderly woman walked to those seated, speaking to them in native language, as Dunbar stood nearby, waiting for the right moment to begin. The woman seated to his front was middle-aged, with an angular face and typical native features; Dunbar thought she was not unattractive. As the older woman finished speaking, the younger said something to the children, sending them running for the door, going outside. Everyone was quiet, looking at the stranger.

Dunbar began, speaking to the middle-aged woman. “Mrs. Shika? I’m Mark Dunbar. Amie Haidana said I might talk with you.”

The elderly woman said something Dunbar didn’t understand, pointing to a chair, gesturing for him to sit. Dunbar moved the chair closer to Mrs. Shika and sat down, just as the woman began speaking.

“I’ve already told the police everything.”

She spoke softly in a slight accent, her face etched with sadness. She was suffering from the loss of her daughter, and Dunbar saw he must be sensitive and careful to get her cooperation. He had to act cautiously and assure the woman he was not a threat. There must be some way to gain her confidence.



“It was a terrible thing that happened, and I’m not going to ask you about it. It must be too painful to speak of. I’m with the university, conducting research. My associates and I hope to learn about conditions in the native community to make things better and try to prevent tragedies like you’ve gone through.”

It was a clumsy start, but a beginning. If only he could get Mrs. Shika to talk.

He paused, trying to think what to say. “I’ve found Ataqsut pleasant this time of year. Have you always lived here?”

Dunbar waited, afraid the woman would stay silent. Staring vacantly in space, she slowly began to speak. Her story began years before.

She grew up in a native settlement far to the west. She had met a man, Yutu, who followed traditions, making a living by hunting and fishing. It was an uncommon vocation, a simple life of manual work, stalking wild game and making things by hand.

He was also deeply involved in ancestral religion. Most natives had abandoned such things, but for Yutu, the ancient practices and rituals were central. They married and moved to Ataqsut, closer to the oil fields being developed.

As Mrs. Shika spoke, Dunbar sat attentively, nodding his head and saying, “Yes” and “I see,” to reassure the woman and give her confidence to continue. She spoke slowly, sometimes with long pauses, but as she went on, she became more self-assured, finding her way through past memories.

Yutu led a tight-knit group of men conducting religious ceremonies. From the woman’s description, Dunbar realized the group was a cult. The group was joined by a younger man named Tulok who had just returned from two years in the Russian army and became an understudy to Yutu, expecting someday to take the older man’s place.

By this time, Mrs. Shika and her husband had a child, Maura, who grew to be a beautiful young woman. Yutu died under unexplained circumstances, and Tulok became the leader of the religious cult. Tulok took Maura as a paramour, and they had a child, a boy who the father showed no interest in because he was devoted to religious practices and cultic ceremonies, activities he shared with men

of the tribe, excluding women. The child stayed with Mrs. Shika, Maura disappearing for long periods, rumored to be working at a bar in the town of Nuiqsut, a hundred miles east.

When the boy was not quite a year old, some men showed up, telling Mrs. Shika that Tulok wanted his son, forcibly taking the child away. The state police were called, and an immediate search was launched for the child and for Tulok.

The police investigation led to a spot miles away, beyond the tundra, where a natural fissure in the land had been used by native spiritualists as a firepit for ceremonies. At this point, the woman found it difficult to go on, speaking in fragments, saying she had heard rumors her grandson had been sacrificed in a ceremony. During the search, authorities removed all debris from the pit, finding no evidence of human remains. The boy was never found, and Tulok had fled to the wilderness.

When the boy was abducted, Mrs. Shika notified Maura, who came home briefly but soon went back to Nuiqsut, staying for weeks at a time. It was during an infrequent home visit that she was killed. The woman became silent as she recalled the moment she found her daughter. She had nothing more to say.

Outside, Warren watched from the back seat of the Land Rover, sitting next to Kate, with Collins on the other side. The graduate assistant broke the silence.

“We’re on our second day, and it feels like we’re crime investigators. I thought we were here to study wildlife. Wasn’t that the purpose of contacting Kendrick?”

Hartley turned from his front seat to look at Collins. “Information from Kendrick was the impetus for the field study. He told Mark of rumors an Ankait cult was practicing forbidden religious rites. Tribe members are concentrated in the area, many in this village. The woman’s death is unsolved, and rumors say it was native cultists or a mythical animal.”

After saying this, Hartley grew silent, recalling a field trip he had made two winters ago, a solitary trip to this very village. It had been a traumatic experience he’d kept to himself, other than telling Dunbar about the ceremony he’d witnessed, activities which may

have contributed to current rumors. What he had seen happened in a remote part of the tundra miles from the village. While here, he hoped to contact the man who had rescued him on that trip. The man was an expert on the natives and would certainly know about the young woman's death and possible causes.

Hartley's thoughts were interrupted by Collins. "What are these rumors about? What exactly are you talking about?"

*Had Collins read the proposal for the expedition, its themes, concerns, and aims?* Hartley was beginning to question not only if Collins had adequately prepared but also if he had the maturity and judgment to be on the team.

"Doe, did you read the proposal?"

"Uh, yes, of course."

He seemed taken aback by the question and took a moment to respond. "Our goal is to study tribal superstition and myths related to indigenous fauna and its effect on present native life."

"Very good. That is a general statement of purpose. More directly, the woman's death may be linked to what we're studying."

Collins was silent for a moment, looking down and shifting in his seat, inadvertently brushing Kate with his elbow. She looked at him; he was plainly uncomfortable. Feeling her stare, Collins said, "Excuse me," raising his head toward Hartley. "I don't see what tribal superstition has to do with the woman's death."

Hartley turned, squarely facing his young assistant. "This is all speculation and rumor, but sketchy evidence suggests the woman was killed by native cultists worshipping wild animals." Hartley paused for a moment, holding the young man in a fixed stare. "Have you heard of shapeshifting?"

Of course, he had; he was almost indignant. It was a superstition among certain ancient cultures: the belief that through special practices, a human could be transformed into an animal. But why would the subject have any relevance to their current work? And the woman's death, an apparent murder, of such interest to Dunbar and Hartley, seemed far removed from any primordial superstitions. Collins had a perplexed look on his face. With Hartley staring at him

and beginning to feel inept, the young man responded, "Yes, I know the concept."

Hartley was relieved. "That is precisely what we are dealing with. The practice of shapeshifting has figured large in the rumors. Mark and I haven't said much about it, except between ourselves, because it's a fantastic notion, and I, for one, prefer to keep it quiet until we know more."

Collins was listening closely, even as Kate and Warren stayed silent. "You're saying native rumors say the girl was killed by a wild animal transformed from a human?"

Hartley seemed to relax and leaned back some, meaning to clarify and help the young man's understanding. "Of course, only a few natives truly believe it. What we have is an outbreak of hysteria, sprung from myth and old superstitions, perhaps set off by crisis in the community."

Hartley paused, looking into space, then continued, "I witnessed the phenomena on a trip here, winter before last, not too far from the village. It was a ceremony out on the tundra where a sort of witch doctor was leading a group of natives. The shaman was hunched beneath a full-length wolf pelt, cavorting about, making loud intonations, I believe, to some deity. What I saw, I'm convinced, was a shapeshifting ritual."

Collins understood. "To become a wolf."

"That's what I saw. It was clear to me that's what the shaman was doing. Of course, it's superstition and myth, yet actions based on these things can have dangerous consequences. The question is, Did the ceremony I saw nearly two years ago lead to the woman's death?"

Listening to the professor and Collins, Warren realized he likely knew more than Hartley, having heard what Medford Larsen said days ago at the Anchorage bar. Strangely, Larsen had been killed a day later in the same manner as his girlfriend. Warren felt almost overwhelmed with what he'd been through. He was caught in a complex web of events linked in unknown ways, beginning with the missing person case, the reason he'd come there. That seemed to be key, at least the attempt on his life. But his search for Billings had nothing to do with Larsen's death and the girl's; at least, he didn't think so.

Yet the woman was killed here, in the same village where Billings was secluded at Madame Shevsky's. He must meet the man that day, once they returned to the boarding house.

Warren was growing weary. "I'm getting stiff from sitting too long," he said. He opened the car door and got out. It was early afternoon, the temperature in the midfifties, a slight chill on his face and hands. The two children had returned, playing near the house. Kate also got out, leaving Hartley and Collins talking in the car.

The conversation between the professor and his understudy left the young woman with questions. "So what do you make of this? I think Doe has a point, our first day feels like police work."

Warren looked at Kate with a quizzical expression. "I don't know. Professor Dunbar seems to be following a plan. You're an anthropologist. What do you think?"

"I suppose this is legitimate inquiry, but I have doubts too. My father and Mark are good friends, doing joint research with social science and animal biology."

"And what is Professor Dunbar's specialty?"

"Mark is a wildlife biologist. His chief interest is the wolf."

"The four of you should be able to solve the mystery, but you're at a disadvantage. You don't have the police report."

His detective skills and knowledge of Larsen's death had given Warren greater insight into the mystery than the science team.

"Yes, true. Neither Mark nor my father has influence with the Alaska police."

"Kate, maybe I can help. Remember, earlier when I told you about the man I met at the Anchorage bar?"

"Yes, you said the dead woman had been his girlfriend."

Warren recounted his experience two days earlier, explaining how he wandered into the Anchorage bar and saw the drunk oil worker with a group of listeners, telling of falling in love with the native woman, following her to Ataqsut, and learning she was dead.

"He had come to see her the same day she was killed, and the police took an immediate interest when he showed up. After putting him through rough questioning, they had him identify the body. I

heard the whole story at the bar: He gave graphic details of the girl's injuries, and the description fits with a wild animal attack."

"This is important. You need to tell my father and Mark."

She was right. Although Warren earlier had determined not to say more, now he had. He now believed the only way to solve the mystery was to cooperate fully with the scientists. Earlier, he thought revealing it might put him in more danger, but now he realized he wanted answers, no matter the risk.

It was nearly an hour before Dunbar emerged from the house. He walked across the yard, petting one of the children on the head as he came to the Land Rover. By now, Hartley and Collins were also out of the car, walking about and stretching. Warren and Kate had been talking near the back of the vehicle but now turned and came to hear what the professor would say.

Dunbar looked cheerful as he spoke to the group. "The woman was very helpful. At first, she was reluctant, saying she had told the police everything, but I explained I'm with the university doing work to prevent these things from happening."

Hartley gave a faint smile. "I suppose you could say that."

Dunbar reached for the car door. "Let's go back to town where we can talk."

He opened the door and got behind the wheel. Hartley walked to the other side and got in as the other three filed into the back seat. The Land Rover made a sharp *U*-turn and headed west toward the cluster of distant buildings at the village center.

## 11



## WARREN FINDS BILLINGS

**T**hey came to a local gathering place, a flat square building painted drab green, near the madame's boarding house, with a center door and large windows on both sides, the one on the right with a bright neon sign, "Open." The place served as a bar, short-order eatery, and store.

The Land Rover pulled to the roadside and came to a stop. As everyone got out, Hartley came to Dunbar, pointing to the entrance.

"This is the place I told you about. Looks the same as last time. A good place to relax."

The anthropologist led the way, opening the door and going in, the others filing behind. It was dimly lit, a bar at the back, a few tables and chairs spaced around the room, and a recessed section on one side with shelves of canned goods and food packages. A few men sat at the bar where an attendant in a white apron was serving food and drink. One table was occupied by a couple having coffee. Dunbar led his party to a larger table in the corner with enough chairs for everyone. The bartender saw the group coming in, and in a few moments, he was at their table, greeting them and asking what they would like. Dunbar spoke up, looking at his companions.

"I think we'll have coffee for now, unless someone wants more."

"Coffee's fine," said Kate. "I'm just relieved to be out of the car and not squeezed between you two men," eyeing Warren and Collins.

Dunbar agreed. "Yes, it's good to be less crowded. We need a break and some time to go over today's work."

Kate spoke next. "Once you tell us what you learned from Ms. Shika, Race has something we all need to hear."

The three men looked up. They had considered Warren an observer, and Kate's remark aroused their curiosity.

Deferring his report on the native woman, Dunbar opened the way for Warren.

"Have you made progress finding your man?"

"No, this concerns the girl's death."

This surprised everyone except for Kate.

Hartley reacted. "Please explain."

Just then the attendant brought a tray with a coffeepot and cups, putting it on the table, setting everything in place, and filling each cup in turn. He left the pot, placing the tray under his arm, walking away quickly through a swinging door to the kitchen. The waiter had moved so quietly and efficiently the interruption was hardly noticed. Everyone took a sip of coffee except for Warren, who was toying with the handle on his cup. All eyes were on him as he considered where to start. He had no intention of revealing his trouble with the police and would be careful what he said.

At last, he began, thanking Dunbar for letting him join their investigation. He had learned of the girl's killing two days before leaving Anchorage for Fairbanks. He had just arrived in Anchorage, checked into a motel, and found he couldn't sleep, setting out to a nearby restaurant, taking a seat at the bar.

It was there he saw a strange sight. Seated on one of the stools, an oil worker was dressed in bright-orange clothing, insulated, and waterproof, extreme weather gear used in the North Slope. The man had obviously been drinking, surrounded by people listening to his tale. Seated nearby, Warren heard everything and was immediately taken by the story.

The man had met a native girl in a bar at a town surrounded by oil installations. The man fell for the girl and began visiting the bar anytime it was open when he could get away from work. Then unexpectedly, the girl left, gone back to her native village, he was

told. The worker took off from work and went to the girl's reported location.

Once at the village, the man went to the local drinking establishment, making inquiries. Saying the girl's name brought the police. The man was questioned and learned of his girlfriend's death. He was taken to the scene to identify the body. Telling this at the bar, he gave vivid details of the girl's injuries. Her throat had been ripped out and her face, neck, and shoulders slashed with apparent claw marks. Larsen was certain the injuries were caused by an animal, but the police said nothing other than questioning him harshly then letting him go.

Warren ended the story, saying no more. For the moment, he did not want them to know about the oil worker's death. With police after him, Warren felt the less known, the better.

Dunbar responded, pleased with the information. "This is very important. It seems to confirm the rumors."

But Hartley disagreed, giving his associate a stiff look. He had several objections to what Warren said. "I'm sure Race is accurately telling what he heard, but it's all secondhand, no more than hearsay, the ramblings of a drunk. The only facts are in the police report, which we don't have. Mark, I presume Mrs. Shika discovered the body. What did she say?"

Hartley had quickly dismissed Warren's story, moving the discussion back to Dunbar.

Dunbar was quiet for a moment. "I never directly asked. It was difficult, at first, to get her to say anything."

"But you were in the house over an hour. You must have got something."

"She was resistant in the beginning, still suffering trauma from finding her daughter dead and not wishing to speak. You're right. I had to get something. I said I would not ask about the girl's death; instead, I asked about the family history. Only then did she open up and start talking."

Dunbar continued, repeating all Mrs. Shika said and his assessment of the interview. Occasionally, he was interrupted with questions from the others, mostly Hartley.

"She said the man Tulok disappeared? He's a key figure in this, and, from what you said, the police must be looking for him, but apparently, he was never found."

"Looks like there may be several police reports we need," Dunbar said.

While Dunbar's comments implied the informational trail had dried up, Hartley had a suggestion. "There may be another way to get what we need. There's a man I met nearly two years ago who had an Ankait wife. If I can find him, I'm sure he would be able to tell us more."

Dunbar was interested. "Okay, Jonathan, let's pursue that."

With the discussion completed, Dunbar paused to consider what was next. He looked at his watch. "It's nearly four o'clock. Let's call it a day and go round the table for final thoughts. Jonathan, you start."

Hartley gave a concise summary of what he thought got done that day. Collins was next, suggesting the day's work seemed more like a police investigation than a scientific study.

Disagreeing with Collins, Hartley interjected, "The work is comprehensive, and the young woman's death was a trauma for the tribe. As we move on, we'll look at how Ankait superstition may have contributed to the tragedy."

Kate spoke next, saying it was plain the woman's death was an example of native women victimized by the culture. After she finished, Dunbar looked at Warren.

"Race, although not officially a member of our group, your thoughts on the day's work would be appreciated."

Warren acknowledged he had a different perspective from the others. "I see this strictly as an investigation, and I'm curious what each of you think about the woman's death. We don't have the police report, but by now, we all have thoughts or perhaps theories as to how the woman died. We know she was killed in her bedroom, in a particularly ruthless and violent manner. Larsen's description of the girl's injuries clearly indicated the woman died from an animal attack."

Hartley's eyebrows raised, and he interrupted. "Or a brutal murder, staged a particular way. Part of our goal is to understand the Ankait culture and what conditions led to a heinous murder. The fact that it looked like a wild animal, I believe, explains the killer's motivation. We need to interview more of the community, the ones most knowledgeable about ancient superstitions although, to be honest, those active in the occult would be least likely to talk."

Warren almost felt he was deceiving the others, hearing their interpretations while knowing Larsen died exactly like the girl, which meant it was likely the same killer who committed both crimes. If that were true, how could it be an animal as he believed? He felt conflicted about who or what had killed the girl (and Larsen).

Despite knowing more than the scientists, he had a lot of unanswered questions. How could almost identical killings occur in less than two weeks over six hundred miles apart? And though none of the scientists seemed to believe the cause was a wild animal (except perhaps Dunbar), Warren had earlier been convinced that it was. But now he wasn't sure, recalling what the drunken oil worker said at the bar, words fixed in his brain: "You ever hear of an animal opening a door, coming in, and committing murder?"

A cold chill washed over the back of his neck, a shudder racking his spine. He felt self-conscious. Did his face show he knew something? That he was hiding information? The others were deep in conversation.

The bartender walked up. "Can I get you anything else?"

With the check in front of him, Dunbar handed the man a large bill, telling him to keep it.

The bartender said, "Thanks," then Hartley asked him a question.

"By the way, have you seen Jim Morphis lately?"

"Now and then, he stays just north of here."

The scientist thanked him, and the attendant turned away, going back to the bar.

Seeing Dunbar with a quizzical look, Hartley explained. "He's the man I told you of earlier. Met him winter before last here at

Ataqsut. It was from him I learned about the Ankait tribe. I'll see if I can find him tomorrow, and maybe he can tell us what's going on."

"While you anthropologists are doing that, I'm going out on the tundra where Brad told me to check the fauna."

Looking at Warren, Hartley explained. "He means animals, particularly wolves."

"You're welcome to join me," said Dunbar.

Warren smiled but declined, saying he had best get back to looking for the missing person.

"I've learned a lot in your company today and appreciate you including me, but I've got to get to my room and get to work."

With that, everyone stood, making their way to the door and filing out. As Dunbar and the others got in the Rover, Warren and Kate decided to walk. They went slowly with no hurry, enjoying the late afternoon, the sun high, and the air a brisk fifty degrees.

Learning Warren was from Memphis, Kate said she had been to the River City several years earlier but, when there, had not seen many sights. When she grew quiet, Warren asked if she had been there for business, or had she been on vacation. When she replied that it was neither business nor pleasure, he thought it best to turn the conversation another way.

"Kate, this matter of the woman's death is more involved than we know. There's more to it than what we learned today, more than what Professor Dunbar found out from the officer or from Mrs. Shika."

Kate stopped and looked at Warren. "What do you mean?"

"Medford Larsen is a key part of this. The whole business is just bigger than it looks."

Kate studied Warren's face. He had suddenly got quite serious, and she sensed he was hiding something. "The oil worker, the dead girl's boyfriend? There's more you haven't told."

"There is more, a lot I'm trying to figure out. I can't say, except I've gotten in trouble with the Anchorage police. They want me for questioning. It sounds crazy, but it may be tied to Larsen and the woman's death. Until I straighten it out and find what it means, I'd rather keep it quiet."

Kate realized the conversation was over. They had reached the boarding house where Warren opened the door and held it for her. As she went through and turned to the dining room, he said he had work to do, said good evening, and proceeded to the stairs. At the top of the landing, he nodded to Madame Shevsky, who passed by on her way downstairs to see to the other guests. Warren continued to his room, unlocking the door, going in, hanging his pack over the back of a chair, and throwing himself on the bed.

He was bothered by what he'd said to Kate. His growing feelings for her had caused a lapse, dropping his guard, saying things that might put him in danger. He was threatened from two ways: the police and unknown persons trying to kill him. The detective in Anchorage was not stupid; he likely had someone coming at that very moment. And whoever sent the killer after him would try again. Lying facedown on the bed, Warren raised himself, breathing a sigh, turning over, and staring at the ceiling. Why did someone want him dead? Billings was the reason; someone did not want the man found. But Warren had found him and now must see him and get answers.

Billings apparently was in his room since it appeared food was brought to his door. *The time has come for us to meet.* He removed the automatic from the pocket of the backpack and slipped it in his waistband under a loose-fitting shirt. He did not know what to expect of the reclusive Billings, and it was best to be prepared.

He stepped into the hall, locked the door, and walked slowly to room 7. He glanced at both ends of the corridor then paused at the room, listening. There was no sound, no TV, no radio, nothing. Warren stood at the door, clearly seen at the view hole, looking normal, relaxed, a legitimate reason to be there.

He knocked three times, firmly, not too hard. Silence; a still quiet; no voice answering and no sound from inside. After a few moments, he knocked again, louder.

Immediately, the door opened, a strong hand grabbing his arm, jerking him into the dim room, forcing him down hard, pressing him to the floor on his left side with his right arm pinned painfully behind him. One hand, gripping the collar of his shirt, pinioned his neck, the other clamped his right wrist, twisting the arm upward.

With his head pressed against the floor, he vaguely saw a penumbra of light from curtains over the window.

A rough voice behind said, "Who are you?"

The man had kicked the door shut after throwing Warren to the floor. Warren felt the man on top of him leaning down, the full weight behind a knee on his back, while his right arm was twisted to the breaking point. There was no feeling in his left arm, pinned to the floor under the weight of his body pushed by the crushing force of the assailant.

"I said, who are you?"

The peremptory demand came with increasing pressure, heightening pain, and growing numbness. Thinking he might pass out, Warren blurted a response, "My name is Warren. Your wife sent me."

His words were met with silence, and just as things began to go dark, the press of the knee in his back slackened, and the grip holding his arm started to loosen. He could breathe easier now with the easing of the strictures holding him. Then a hand thrust under his armpit, probing in a deft movement down his side, a series of pats. The movement stopped at his waist where his shirt was rustled, the Sig snatched from its holder and tossed across the room.

Now he was pushed down harder, increasing pain in his arm and shoulder, nearly squeezing all breath from his lungs as the man continued the search, removing his wallet.

Again, the knee pressed stoutly into Warren's back as the man leaned further, the grip of a large hand applying torque on his right wrist, pushing the twisted arm up against the cervical spine.

The pain was excruciating. The gun needed explaining. While he still had breath, he got words out.

"I'm a private investigator."

Warren felt close to blacking out. His breaths were shallow and short, heartbeats pounding his ears. The assailant's grip and the applied force had him pressed and twisted as on a torture rack. Then, the pressure and grip relaxed, giving Warren hope the assailant was backing off. But he was only changing position. The hand on Warren's neck switched with the one pinioning his arm, and he heard the clang of iron and the snap of handcuffs closing on his right

wrist; and, mercifully, the contortion eased as the arm was lowered in a sweep across his back, and now his left arm, inert with no feeling, was pulled from his side and the hand locked with the other. He was forcefully lifted and shoved into a hard chair.

A light switched on, and Warren saw the man, bigger than in the wife's photo. He appeared to be middle age, well over six feet and strongly built, a gym enthusiast. The man stood by a table, holding a gun leveled at Warren (it looked like a police Glock) as he removed items from the wallet, spreading them on the table, sorting through, one by one.

A small card got his attention, and he held it, looking closely front and back. Warren saw it was his state license, the permit to conduct his trade. The man studied it for a time and at length he spoke.

"I've worked in Tennessee. Looks like you're who you say you are."

The man paused, holding the gun on the handcuffed prisoner, eyeing him closely, sizing him up, not yet certain he wasn't a threat.

"Why the .45? Kind of big for carry."

"Personal preference."

"Where's your cell phone?"

"In my room."

"You staying here?"

"Down the hall."

The man was motionless, the gun extended and fixed at Warren's head; Warren was tense, uncertain what was next.

"I'm Billings. Tell me what you want."

Warren was starting to relax. He felt better, but pain still radiated from his arms, back, and shoulders. If only he could get the handcuffs off, stretch his arms, relieve stiffness.

"Can you take these cuffs off? It would help."

Billings ignored him. "Why are you here?"

Warren took slow deep breaths, gathering his thoughts, not sure how Billings would respond, but fully intent on telling everything truthfully. It was the only way; he did not willfully lie. Even if he did, it would be patently obvious.

Before speaking, he was cautious, thinking how to frame his comments, but he quickly abandoned the tactic; it would only impede what he said and perhaps look disingenuous. He decided to start at the beginning.

He told of his decision to become a PI, how his earlier experience as a social worker, interviewing people, searching their backgrounds, investigating failed parents, and myriad other actions, all intent on salvaging children (to the extent government could, which Warren had found was very little), had prepared him for his next job. He had managed to transfer much of what he'd learned, especially skills relating to people and data searches, into his new role of private investigator.

The day Mrs. Billings came to his office turned out to be his first real case. The woman appeared transparent, sharing her background and the circumstances bringing her. She presented the problem as a broken marriage, which she hoped to save by finding her husband and seeking to mend the relationship. She gave her husband's last location, a business in Anchorage where he'd worked briefly before disappearing. She was convincing, and Warren had believed it was nothing more than a missing person case.

Before getting to Anchorage, Warren had phoned the employer and learned his quarry had gone to the remote village of Ataqsut. The day Warren was to fly out, he made a stop at the post office where he discovered he had been trailed by an unknown gunman who tried to kill him.

Telling the story, Warren was watching his captor closely and saw a change in Billings when mentioning the assassin. Warren went on, covering the details, fleeing through the postal facility, getting to the back, concealing himself in a mail cart where he was able to surprise the man, gaining a split second to get off the first shot and kill him.

Billings began asking questions. "What did he look like?"

Mention of the gunman had roused the other's attention.

"He was tall, slender, short black hair, in a dark suit, dark gray shirt, and blue tie."

"What about his looks, ethnic features?"



Warren paused, thinking back. "He was foreign-looking, eastern European, maybe Russian."

Billings's interest had heightened, learning of Warren's scrape with the assassin. While telling the story, the private investigator had been studying Billings's face and noted a change when describing the killer. Warren now realized the gunman was part of something Billings already knew. Warren's instincts were correct: Finding Billings was key to solving the attempt on his life.

The gun was lowered, and the man moved toward Warren. "Let me get the cuffs off."

Billings helped him up as Warren turned aside; a hand on the iron sleeves, another turned a key, the metal ringlet dropped away, the process was repeated, and the manacles fell on the table. Warren rubbed his wrists, massaging the soreness.

"I guess you believe me."

"I've been a cop over twenty years and heard a lot of lies. I know the difference."

Billings extended a hand. "Sorry for the rough treatment."

Warren stood silent for a moment, taking in what he'd just learned. If the man was a cop, the situation was more complex than thought. He had a lot of questions for Billings and wanted answers.

"Mind if I sit?"

Billings was now a different man, even remorseful for the rough handling of Warren.

"Of course, pull the chair over," he said, gathering Warren's personal items with the wallet, handing them to the private investigator who had moved the chair to the table and was sitting down. Billings had put his gun back in a concealed holster. The only thing left on the table were handcuffs.

Billings stared at Warren with a sympathetic eye. Gone was the cold hostility he had earlier.

The policeman began. "I know you have questions. Hope I didn't hurt you, but I thought you'd come to kill me. Knocking at the door was odd, but I had to be sure."

Now it made sense. Billings saw him as a threat until the mention of the attempt on Warren's life. It was then the reclusive tenant

in room 7 began to consider the stranger might be telling the truth. When the assassin was identified as Russian, Billings was convinced Warren was innocent.

Seeing the police officer looking at him with an innocuous look, Warren began to speak. "You've heard my story. All that's happened since I got to Alaska has raised questions. I think your wife's explanation of why you left is not true. What exactly brought you here?"

"What she told you is partly true, but Claire sometimes has trouble with the truth. What I would call a lie, she might see differently."

"I met Claire on the rebound at the local college. I had done three years in the army, and she had just broken up with a student from out of state. We seemed perfect for each other and were soon talking about marriage. I was studying criminology and talking with the police department that was seeking recruits with college experience. After two years we were married, and I entered the academy. We soon had a daughter, and I was busy in my career making detective after twelve years.

"Everything seemed to be going well, or what would be expected for a policeman with a family. Few women thrive married to a cop, but Claire made the best of it.

"Problems began when our daughter Carrie went to the university, moving into a dorm. As an only child, she is strong-willed and independent and began exploring her freedom, becoming more interested in social life than studies.

"During summer break, Claire took Carrie on a cruise to Alaska to urge her to get more serious with schoolwork and improve her grades. While in Anchorage, my wife became reacquainted with her old boyfriend from college, an ethnic Russian with roots in Alaska. The old relationship rekindled, and Claire apparently threw off all restraint. She didn't know he was part of a crime family, a branch of the Russian Mafia. He convinced her he held a company big in the hospitality industry, and he offered Carrie the chance for a career.

"She had no interest in college and when he spoke of adventurous travel to exotic locations, she immediately took the job. Claire was now quite involved with the Russian and apparently did not

blame him for Carrie quitting school, but she argued with Carrie over the decision and our daughter stopped speaking to her.

"I had been so busy at work I knew nothing about this until Claire came home without Carrie and told me what happened, omitting her involvement with Volkov. I tried to call Carrie, but she never answered.

"Then late one evening at work I got a disturbing call that I first thought was a wrong number. It was a young woman who seemed intoxicated or drugged, almost incoherent. When I realized it was Carrie, I tried to calm her and get answers, but she said only she was afraid and wanted to come home, then the line went dead.

"I immediately confronted Claire and demanded she tell me everything that happened in Alaska. She just repeated what she'd said before, but I became insistent. Then she became evasive, saying she was skeptical the call was from Carrie. But I knew our daughter was in trouble and I decided to come here at once and start a search.

"I had the name of the Russian but nothing else. I considered requesting a leave of absence from the force, but there was no time, so I resigned and caught the next flight. I got to Anchorage and took the first job I could find, at a fish processing plant. I went to the police where I met a Detective Roberts. I told him what I knew and learned Andrey Volkov is part of a crime syndicate based in Anchorage and deep into human trafficking. They get young girls from around the world for the lucrative sex trade.

"I did some snooping at Volkov's headquarters and after a week left Anchorage, heading to the North Slope where they have small night spots scattered across the region near concentrations of workers serving the petroleum industry.

"Roberts warned me to be careful because the Russians don't take lightly anyone meddling in their business. I've had suspicions the Volkovs know what I'm up to. That's why I reacted the way I did when you showed up. I've been here two weeks making calls and now believe Carrie is held in a town less than a hundred miles east at a joint frequented by oil workers. I just hope I can get to her in time."

Warren knew what he meant, feeling growing sympathy for the man who only moments earlier had handled him so roughly. Billings seemed sorry for his actions.

"You understand my suspicions at the door."

"Yes, and why you eased off when I mentioned the post office attack."

"Your description fits one of Volkov's henchmen. You've put yourself in danger. Looking for me has involved you with them."

"And, of course, they found out about me through your wife."

"She was well-intentioned sending you, but her involvement with Volkov made it easy for him to find out and take steps to stop you. By killing one of them, you've increased your danger."

"It was pure luck I killed the attacker. Obviously, you have skills and little need for luck. But we face the same threat and perhaps should work together for our protection."

Warren waited. He had been right about finding Billings. The mystery was solved, and the case closed. But he felt little consolation. Things were not better but worse, and Billings now seemed his key to survival.

Billings was quiet a long time. "I'm going to Nuiqsut in the morning to find my daughter. It's quite risky, but with two, it might work."

"I'll help any way I can, but I have a request. Do your contacts extend to the North Slope? I need a police report on a killing in Ataqsut about ten days back. I'm working with a group of scientists on a study of area natives, and the death of a young woman is in the middle of it. Yesterday, we met an officer at the crime scene and got superficial facts. But we need autopsy results."

"I have a friend who should be able to help. Give me the victim's name and what you have, and I'll see what can be done."

"Billings, didn't know you could be so cooperative. Now, if you don't object, I'll leave so I can get packed. I assume we're going by plane."

"Yes, I've made arrangements for an air taxi at 10:00 a.m. One more person won't matter. I'll see you downstairs at nine-thirty."

Warren left the room as Billings firmly closed the door. Pausing in the hall, he looked at his watch. It was six-thirty; the four scientists would likely be downstairs finishing dinner. Although he wanted to see Kate, he was exhausted, feeling pain at various points in his body and mental and emotional fatigue from what he'd learned. Warren felt it was best he retire for the evening. He walked two doors down, entered his room, and turned the dead bolt behind.

## 12



## WOLVES

**T**he scientific team was seated at the dining table. Madame Shevsky had laid out the usual breakfast, and everyone was helping themselves. Hartley sat by his daughter while Dunbar and Collins were across the table.

Hartley checked his watch. "Apparently, Warren's not making it. Breakfast is seven-thirty sharp, and it's seven-forty-five."

Kate responded, "He said last evening he had work to do in his room. Must be the same this morning."

"We all have lots to do today," Hartley said, looking at Dunbar.

"Kate, Doe, and I are going to look up Jim Morphis to see what he knows about recent events. He knows the Ankauts well as his late wife was a native of the tribe. Good luck on your wolf hunt."

Dunbar smiled. "Hope to get a sighting. Brad gave me coordinates due north."

"I know you like to walk, but Morphis's place is on the way if you care for a lift."

"Sure. I'll go that far."

The foursome soon left Madame Shevsky's, Hartley driving, Dunbar in the passenger seat, and Kate and Collins in back. It was not quite 9:00 a.m., the sun high, scintillating, and it was thirty-five degrees. It was less than five miles to Morphis's, and the way looked much as Hartley had seen it last although then it was covered in snow. Soon the place came in sight, about three hundred feet from

the road, a simple house with a row of firewood stacked in front, a lean-to shed behind, and a motorized snow sled draped with a tarpaulin. What looked like old farm implements were scattered about the lot.

Hartley pulled the Land Rover onto an ancient driveway, a patch of gravel that had settled over the years, now part of the ground and stretching toward the dwelling. The vehicle stopped, and everyone got out. Dunbar went to the back, raising the rear door and taking out his equipment. He hefted the pack to his shoulders as Hartley came around.

“Perfect weather for the outing. If anything goes wrong, call on the satellite phone.”

Dunbar smiled. “Where I’m looking is ten miles north. These treks are my therapy. It’s a fine day and should go well. I’ll be back at Madame Shevsky’s in time for dinner.”

Dunbar turned and began trudging along the road, glancing at a directional device in his right hand. It was set with the coordinates given by Kendrick and would lead him to a likely site for seeing a wolf. How Brad got the location, Dunbar could only guess, but years of experience with the Division of Wildlife Conservation made him an expert. Brad had laughed. “You’ll see a magnificent gray wolf at the exact spot.”

It was a good joke; the coordinates at an area of greater wolf activity and prospects for sighting one were good. Dunbar was confident the advice would bring him luck.

The biologist turned and glanced back. Morphis’s place was the only house beyond Ataqsut, and now it was only a speck on the horizon, soon vanishing in the expanse of tundra. He shifted view, scanning east and west before glancing again at the GPS. The indicator showed the present tack was slightly off course. He shifted direction, pitching more to the northwest, crossing at a diagonal where the road was fading, merging into the endless, empty landscape.

The day was almost pleasant, bits of flora, dry and hardy and topped with thistles that had recently sprung from the earth, nothing green, just dull and colorless vegetation. Above, the glare of the sun was at a lower angle than what he remembered from Minnesota.

Even though summer was at a peak, there were remnants of winter, thin lines of unmelted snow laying starkly on the barren land, white tendrils on the brows of irregularities, creasing the tundra. This must be quite different from winter when the land would be crusted in ice and snow falling so thick it would blur everything in swirling white.

Dunbar had settled into an even pace, making good time. Even with thirty-five pounds of gear on his back, he was doing better than four miles an hour. He was an outdoorsman, and the trek was hardly more than light exercise. Dressed in suitable clothing and carrying only what was needed made the going easier. He made sure he was properly supplied, never stinting on equipment. A floppy hat shielded the sun, and he wore the best dark glasses, seeing the tundra in sharp clarity. He took measured steps, on a heading shown by the handheld device, referencing sparse landmarks on the open expanse.

After an hour and a half of walking, he stopped for water. Laying down the pack, he took the canteen off the belt, taking several sips. While motionless, he felt minor soreness in his legs. Although active in regular exercise, he was not used to weight on his back, and the slight discomfort was not unexpected.

He put the canteen back and leaned over, shuffling in the pack for the spotting scope, slipping it from its case. Dunbar didn’t need the accompanying tripod, just raising the optics to his eye and scanning the landscape.

The scope brought everything into stark perspective. Looking north, a distant stream snaking toward the Arctic Sea was the only thing breaking the evenness of the tundra. Scanning slightly east, Dunbar saw movement farther out. Adjusting the scope, he saw a herd of caribou, having earlier crossed the stream, moving to his right across the field of view. It was a magnificent group of animals, mostly males with impressive antlers. Sighting on the leaders, Dunbar slowly panned toward the rear, seeing trailing reindeer in a rush, pressing those ahead, crowding forward as though trying to escape. What caused their fear? Looking behind the herd, continuing a slow left sweep across open ground, Dunbar saw nothing except the north bending stream the animals passed earlier.

Lowering the scope, he paused to look with the naked eye. The herd of caribou was now almost indistinguishable from the tundra, slightly darker than the landscape, only the movement making them visible.

He put the sight in the case and returned it to his pack, straightening to full height as he stood. He paused, unthinking and absorbed with the surroundings. He was part of the vastness, the absence of color, the dull gray landscape temporarily free from winter's grasp. It was an aberration, a short time when the land was loosed from the iron cold of its normal state. The land was synonymous with winter, and even now, its true essence was seen. Rivulets of snow appeared wherever the ground crust wrinkled, along narrow depressions shielded from direct sun. Dunbar knew that two feet below, the earth was frozen solid and had been for eons. He marveled at the anemic, colorless plants, sparse and diminutive, the gray almost-lifeless soil stretching in every direction as far as the eyes could see, and far off on the southeastern horizon, a string of mountains.

He had rested long enough. He picked up the pack and slipped it on his shoulders, setting out, guided by the GPS. He would continue until he reached the coordinates of his objective. Going without letup for two hours, he felt he must stop. Nearly noon, it was then, in a quiet moment, he saw what he had come for. He later wrote in his journal, putting in words the high point of the day.

"He saw me first. I was one thousand meters off, and he was a speck in the distance until I set up the spotting scope. I lay down on a slight rise with the sight on a stub tripod. I looked through, adjusting dials, and then the wolf came in close. He was perfectly still, framed like a tableau on the open tundra. Patches of snow stretched behind him, running in a narrow line, and frozen thistles and scrub weeds obscured where his legs touched the ground.

"He was a typical Alaskan gray in the black phase, a seasonal coloration making the animal look malignant. He was large, his hindquarters perpendicular to my sight with his forequarters turned, his forelegs apart, and the large neck rising to his head squarely facing me. He had thick fur, showing characteristics that distinguish the wolf from dog. The legs were long and limber. The tail was thick

and furry, dangling lower than the hocks and flaring at the end like a brush. His chest was deep, jutting up with hardly a neck, wrapping around the head, the most impressive feature, sunk back in thick fur, the jowls pulled back in a mask around the eyes, glowing amber, set in black sockets like deep caverns. The snout, if it can be called that, made a broad ridge, like basalt, dropping from the forehead with a nose at the end like dark fruit, perched above flat jowls, all dark, indistinguishable from the blackness, like a vest. The slit of mouth was hidden by a drooping upper lip offset by white tufts of fur at both sides. The lower lip, pure white with a slight dip in the middle, like a lazy V, gave an almost pensive look. But the glowing amber eyes, sunk in coal sockets gave the wolf a demonic glare, reaching across the half-frozen tundra, connecting with my spy scope.

"What was going on in his mind? Not that a wolf has a mind like a human, but such animals have great intelligence more than we give them credit for. And I was certain by the stark stillness and his look, how he held himself with an air of self-importance, if not arrogance, that he was thinking of something, and most assuredly, it was me because as far as I could see, in all directions, it was only he and I that occupied the vast expanse. There was nothing but stillness, desolation, and emptiness. I couldn't take my eyes off the animal, by far the finest I'd had ever seen. Wolves this far north, near the Arctic Circle, are larger, more primitive, a wildness not seen in animals farther south. The shape and build of the wolf were impressive, and I could easily picture him in a full run, overtaking and bringing down a caribou; he was trailing the herd I'd seen earlier.

"It was a clear day in late July, the sun high in the sky, the wolf facing from the sun, leaving his forelegs, neck, ears, and particularly the deep-set eyes, all obscured in shadow. The eyes, the ruff around the neck, like a draped fur coat down to his chest and tops of the forelegs, all dark as coal dust.

"My eyes were beginning to tire, growing dry in the cool air and from the long fixation on the wolf. His stillness and rigidity, his presence, the amber eyes like mica, had almost split me from time. It was as if hypnotized and slipped from knowing who I was, or where

I was. The glowing eyes, like jewels in basalt sockets, had me in a trance.

“My eyes began to sting, and I removed the spy scope and rubbed them. I reached for some drops, tilted my head back, and dripped some solution in my eyes. I blinked a few times, feeling better, and pressed back to the glass.

“But the wolf was gone, vanished into nothingness, dissolved in the vastness of the tundra. I kept looking through the scope, covering the horizon, pivoting the glass slowly to the east, the direction I was certain the animal had gone, but there was nothing, only still and barren landscape.”

Dunbar had met the objective twofold. He had gotten on the tundra, feeling at one with the wild, untouched land, and secondly, meeting at a distance through a spotting scope a great wolf. He felt well rewarded for his efforts.

He packed his gear in the rucksack, hoisted it to his shoulders, and turned back, following the directional device on a south by southeast course. Time on the return walk seemed shorter than it had coming out (as it always does), and Dunbar got back to the boarding house at three where he cleaned up, got to the shower at the end of the hall, and returned to his room to wait until time for the evening meal.

Earlier that day, when Dunbar had set out, Hartley had watched him take the road and trudge north, looking like a trapper crossing the tundra. There was always risk going into the wilds alone, but it was something that endeared the biologist to his profession. Yet Hartley had done the same thing, nearly two years earlier in the same area and in the depths of winter. He had never told anyone the full story of what happened, not even Dunbar. The experience had been disturbing, but now Hartley understood what he had seen that night could be connected to their current investigation. The anthropologist believed Jim Morphis would have information that would aid their study. As the three walked toward the house, Hartley felt renewed gratitude toward the man who had saved his life.

Morphis lived a simple existence. Although relics of implements lay here and there, unused for years, the snow machine under its

cover was well maintained. The dwelling was plainly built from timber and boards fashioned at mills in forests to the south. The stacked firewood beside the house came from the nearest trees a hundred miles away. Life on the tundra was hard, but this man, whose late wife was Ankauit, had adapted and would remain.

The three came to the door where Hartley knocked loudly. There was a sound of movement inside, and the door swung open. A grizzled face appeared, Jim Morphis, looking just as he had nearly two years before.

“Why if it isn’t Dr. Hartley.” Morphis stood in the open doorway, smiling.

“Hello, Jim, just call me Jonathan. And this is my daughter Kate and our associate Doah Collins.”

“All anthropologists, I presume. Please, come in.”

Hartley walked into a simple two-room house, leading Kate and Collins to the main room where they stood as Morphis closed the door and pulled some chairs to a table where all could sit. As the guests were seated, the host asked if he could get them coffee.

“I have a pot on the stove, still warm. I think it’s enough for three more cups.”

Everyone agreed, and Morphis crossed the room to a corner he called the kitchen. A counter with sink and water faucets was attached to the wall, next to a stove and refrigerator. The appliances were set beside a rack of wide shelves, filled from floor to ceiling with canned foods and packaged dry goods. The fireplace at the center of the back wall showed evidence of use overnight. On the right side of the room, a short passageway connected with two doors, one to a bath and the other to sleeping quarters.

The main room was slightly cluttered. A small couch was set against the right wall. A wood case held a few books but was mostly filled with magazines and old newspapers. A large wool rug at the center of the room covered most of the wood floor. An elk head was mounted prominently to the right of the fireplace, the first thing seen when entering the house. A gun rack above the couch held an antique muzzleloader. Hartley suspected the real weapons were kept in the bedroom.

He rose from his chair and headed to where Morphis was pouring coffee. "Jim, let me help you."

As Hartley came alongside, he lowered his voice. "I want to thank you again for saving my life two years ago."

"You behaved rashly that evening. Didn't know what you were getting into. I knew the danger, so did what I had to."

"Were there any repercussions from killing the native?"

"No. The tribe covered it up, didn't want an inquiry. Afterward, I never heard a thing. Here, take the coffee."

Hartley took a trifling sip, turning and walking to his chair. Morphis followed, carrying three more steaming cups on a tray which he set on the table. Kate and Collins lifted cups, the woman wafting the aroma past her nose and the man sipping just enough to taste.

Morphis drank slightly from his cup, cautioning the others. "I like coffee hot, more so than my guests, usually. I grind the beans just before brewing, then pour boiling water. Crude, but it's how I like it."

Kate said, "Smells great, but I'll have to let it cool."

Collins smiled.

Morphis then got to the point. "What can I do for you, fine people?"

Hartley began, explaining the three were part of a bi-disciplinary team conducting a field study at Ataqsut, focusing on the Ankauits and how tribal superstitions may have led to the recent killing of a native woman. The project was begun after a state wildlife officer informed Mark Dunbar of rumors the killing had something to do with tribal worship of a mythical wolf deity. After learning this from Dunbar, Hartley had told the biologist of his experience nearly two years earlier, seeing the native ceremony.

Hartley continued, directing his comments to Morphis as the others listened, giving a superficial description of the ceremony, not mentioning the close call or the backwoodsman's involvement.

Weeks before, when Hartley and Dunbar had discussed these things, they concluded the events could be related, and Dunbar had immediately begun arrangements for the expedition. After arriving at Ataqsut, the group had gone to the crime scene with the local

VPSO who had given them limited information about what happened. Dunbar had been able to look in the room where the killing occurred. His impression had been it was a vicious attack, but the officer had provided no details. The only way to fully understand what happened would be from the police report which they didn't have.

"Jim, since we know so little about the circumstances and cause of the woman's death, we're hoping, with your close ties to the Ankauits, you can tell us what the native community is saying about the killing."

Morphis had been watching Hartley closely as the scientist explained the origins of the expedition and what the group had been doing since their arrival. He understood why the anthropologist had described the Ankauit ceremony for the benefit of Kate and Collins while concealing the deadly encounter with the native. A lot had happened since then, things well known in the native community, forbidden things and activities drawing the attention of the authorities. Morphis gathered his thoughts, considering where to begin.

"Jonathan, you already know my background, but for the benefit of the others, I'll set the stage for what I say.

"I came here as a young man in search of adventure, going for anything and everything having to do with the outdoors. My head was full of dreams, what it meant to be a man, ideas of living off the land, being self-sufficient, not just surviving, but coming to terms with myself, seeing if I had what it takes to go against raw nature, not only conquering the wilds but conquering myself.

"I became hunter, trapper, fisher, a student of nature. I thought I was a loner, believing that was what drew me to the solitude of the wilderness, to be part of the vastness of the land, but I soon discovered a need for others, befriending the natives, learning their language, and being taught the skills of an outdoorsman. I met a young Ankauit woman whom I married. I then had all I wanted, and this has been my life ever since. We had no children, and she passed away nearly three years ago. I stay in touch with the natives, not like before, but I hear what's going on.

“Jonathan, you recall the ceremony you saw when you were here before. The man called Tulok, brother of my late wife, led the meeting. He’s a shaman, the head of a religious cult mixed up with ancient native beliefs. The group worships a mythical wolf god, called Amorok. The ceremonies involve chants, dancing, and even animal sacrifice.

“These events are meant to be cumulative, each ritualistic session of greater consecration, leading to a final sacrifice, the ultimate act appeasing the god, empowering Tulok to be transformed into a wolf or wolf-man. The ceremony Jonathan saw apparently was a breakthrough, the penultimate event, clearing the way for the final sacrifice.

“A few months later, with the arrival of spring, the cultists relocated south to a place bordering the tundra near the mountains where the group found a choice site suitable for the culminating ceremony. It was a natural crevice in the earth, a deep hole in the ground which the natives prepared for making a burnt offering to Amorok. The pit was stacked with sticks of charcoal and everything made ready for the final sacrifice, Tulok’s own son, a boy named Ujarak. Incredibly, the Ankauit cultists were repeating the ancient Canaanite sacrifice to Moloch.

“The shaman had taken a young girl to wife two years before, and the boy was scarcely a year old when the night for the ceremony came. Tulok never lived with the girl; she stayed with the grandmother who was the principal caretaker of the child while the young woman was away, working in Nuiqsut at a bar.

“When everything was ready, Tulok’s men came to the woman’s house early in the day, took the boy, and carried him to the site where the ceremony would be held at midnight under a full moon. The fire in the pit had been burning for hours, and at its hottest, Tulok got as close as he dared, made the prescribed series of chants, held the child up, and threw him to the flames.

“The authorities acted quickly on the grandmother’s report of the child’s abduction and, late the following day, found the site where the ceremony took place, the pit still smoldering. A scouring of the chasm and search of the area found nothing. Although Tulok had

vanished, one member of the cult was found and persuaded to talk. The witness testified he saw the child thrown into the blazing pit. A cursory examination found only remains of the fire. All debris was removed, shoveled in buckets, mostly ashes, and partly burned charcoal which was sifted and thoroughly analyzed. There were no bone fragments or remains of any kind. The authorities were baffled. The alleged perpetrator had fled. There was no body and no evidence of a crime. The only certainty was the child was missing.

“The investigation was at a stalemate when the lead detective came up with a wild theory. He had repeatedly roamed the ceremonial grounds, spent hours staring in the blackened pit until his eyes ached and his brain seemed dead from strain. The large hole was ten feet wide and maybe twice as deep, apparently formed by some quirk of nature hundreds of years ago. But there was something about the pit that was odd, something that began to draw the detective’s interest and soon became the center of attention. It could only be seen from the edge of the pit, but just below the lip of the opening there was an outcropping of rock, a three-foot ledge projecting from the upper wall of the chasm on the near side. The officer walked back several yards and turned, looking at the marker placed by investigators at the spot where the shaman had stood when throwing the child in. The shaman had stayed back to avoid intense heat, throwing the child several feet, the child’s body likely just cleared the edge, going into the pit.

“From his vantage, the detective could not see the opening. It was only when coming close, up the slight incline, that the chasm was seen. Of course, the night of the ceremony, the flames would have looked like fire erupting from the earth. But now all was quiet, and the opening was obscured by the crest at the top of the rise.

“The detective walked back to the exact spot where the child had been sacrificed. Standing there, the detective took several steps forward to the chasm’s rim and, looking down, could see the rock ledge directly below him. The falling child could have landed on the shelf of rock.”

Morphis had been speaking for nearly half an hour and now became quiet. He looked at the three seated at the table, all engrossed



by the story, quite curious about what was next. Even Hartley looked dumbfounded since most of Morphis's story was new to him.

Collins broke the silence. "Even if the child fell on the ledge, he would have survived only a few seconds in the flames."

Morphis stood up. "True. But before I continue, let me take away these cups. Anyone want more coffee or a glass of water?"

Hartley said he was okay, and the others nodded.

Morphis placed the cups on a tray and turned.

"I'll have some water. I'm getting dry."

The older man walked away as the three scientists looked at one another with quizzical expressions. What Morphis told them had broadened their understanding of Ankait superstitions and rituals. Even Hartley was surprised how the story had turned.

Collins looked at Hartley, speaking in a whisper, "What do you think? Is this believable?"

The professor barely spoke, "It's strange, but I believe him."

Morphis was in the corner kitchen where he set the cups in the sink and got a glass from the shelf, filling it with water. After a short pause, he raised the glass and drank. He stood quietly for a moment before returning to his chair at the table and sitting down, everyone watching.

"And where were we?" He thought for a moment, then went on. "Yes, the fire in the pit was extremely hot, but remember, all the ashes, stones, everything loose, were removed and carefully analyzed. And there were no human remains, no bone fragments, no traces of anything, animal or human, nothing. Yet a witness's sworn statement said the child was thrown into the flames. The lead investigator, like you, was perplexed and mystified that nothing was found.

"Mr. Collins, you make a good point. The child could have survived only a second or two on the ledge, but the investigators found nothing on the rock projection, no remains or residue, only smooth, discolored stone."

Morphis paused, letting his words sink in. Hartley felt impatient the way the man seemed to be dribbling out information. He sensed his daughter and Collins were also keen on hearing the rest.

Collins broke the silence. "So what is it, an unsolved case?"

Hartley thought he saw a faint smile on Morphis's face as the man ignored Collins and went on speaking.

"Finding the projection of rock below where the child fell seemed important to the detective. As he studied the shelf of rock, he found at its base an opening, what appeared to be an animal burrow. Secured by a rope, he lowered himself over the edge to get a closer look. He found the burrow big enough for an animal like a large dog, and shining a light inside he could see no end. He began an intensive search of the area, and after an hour, just beyond the brow of a nearby hill, he found another opening, like the first, showing no sign of recent entry. He got on his knees with a light and looked but could see no end. He even crawled a few feet inside but found it too narrow to go on. The hole went in the direction of the pit. After taking measurements and conducting tests, the detective was convinced the two openings were connected, making a tunnel. This was a startling discovery, and the officer paced the distance from one opening to the other several times, finally standing at the spot where the child had been thrown in.

"The stone ledge, which, by the way, had a slight upward tilt from the earthen wall, now became the center of attention. That and the tunnel.

"After thinking a great deal on the matter, a possible scenario began to take shape in the detective's mind, a theory of how the child could have escaped death. Flung several feet from the edge, the child would have just cleared the rim of the opening, struck the stone ledge, and tumbled into the burrow. It was more probable the victim would have been thrown to the center of the flames, but then human remains would have been found. And it's also more likely that if the victim was thrown short and struck the stone shelf, he would have gone over into the flames, but, again, there would have been remains. The only explanation is that a quirk of circumstances and the laws of physics aligned in a way that propelled the child into the burrow. After reaching that conclusion, the detective had the tunnel examined end-to-end, finding nothing other than what would be expected, a few twigs, leaves, and fibers—later identified as from a wolf. But no trace of the year-old boy allegedly sacrificed. The

authorities were left with a mystery. The case remained on the state police books for nearly a year, unsolved and open. Here is where the story becomes even more fantastic.”

Morphis paused, his listeners quite still, nearly spellbound at what they were hearing.

“The following year, a hunter saw something moving among brush at the edge of a stream. He approached cautiously until he saw a female wolf caught in a trap, the metal jaws clamped on the creature’s foreleg. The animal had earlier been thrashing about but now lay exhausted. The man was stunned to see a small boy, dirty and naked, beside the wolf stabbing a stick at the trap. The hunter froze at the sight. It was a lactating female. Her belly was heavy with teats, signs she had pups nearby. About ten yards away, the hunter had not moved when the wolf sensed his presence, lifted its head, and growled. The small boy, hardly a toddler, turned toward the man, dropping the stick, and began making guttural, animal sounds. The hunter had not moved but now began slow, careful steps toward the wolf and boy. The wolf raised up to face the approaching man, a low growl from its throat, yet the animal was feeble, struggling in its defiance. The boy moved behind the wolf, reaching to hold the animal for protection. The man paused, amazed at the sight. He pushed aside thoughts of shooting the wolf, the animal not appearing a threat to the child. Rather, the pair seemed to have a bond, and the hunter was reluctant to do anything until he had a better understanding.

“The man began speaking in a soft voice.

“Easy, easy. I’m not going to hurt you. I want to help.’

“He continued, speaking slowly in a soft monotone, taking additional steps, moving cautiously until about ten feet away. He stopped at the edge of the stream, his eyes on the wolf, the boy crouched behind the animal.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I want to get you out.’

“The wolf, making a low growl, kept the man in its glare. The hunter could see the animal was exhausted, eyes tired, hardly able to stand. The wolf was only partly erect, its forepaw crushed in the trap. The man stayed where he was, reluctant to go closer until he had a better idea of what to do.

“He wanted to free the animal, but mainly he had to rescue the child, and he was trying to sort in his mind if this meant killing the wolf.

“The man stayed in position for an interminable amount of time in a dilemma what to do. He felt fortunate to have gotten so close and the boy and animal still relatively calm. But the wolf, held by the trap, could do nothing more than what she had done, and the child, hiding behind the the animal, was afraid of the man.

“As the man watched, the wolf sank in exhaustion, collapsing on its side, laying its head near the water, panting. The child sat down on his haunches, his hands clenched in fur at the animal’s neck. The animal was clearly faint, probably from lack of food. Being filthy, it was hard to judge the boy’s condition, but he did not appear malnourished. The wolf’s milk sack was full, signs she was suckling pups, or was it the boy? It was a fantastic notion, but the child’s attachment with the animal, his very survival, seemed to suggest that theory.

“The man began moving closer, taking slow, careful steps, speaking in a soft voice, hoping the wolf would stay still and quiet. While the boy had made sounds on first seeing the stranger, he was now mute, crouched behind the animal, eyes fixed on the man’s cautious approach. With only a few steps, the hunter would be close enough to spring the trap. The wolf had not moved, laying outstretched, panting heavily.

“Now within arm’s reach of the animal, the man paused, speaking, ‘Easy, easy. Don’t be afraid.’

“The man slowly extended his hands toward the steel maw clamped on the animal’s foreleg. The wolf held the man in a fixed stare amid labored breathing. Holding tightly to the animal’s neck, the boy shrank from the man’s outstretched hand. Touching the steel, the man’s fingers played about, seeking a grip and, at last, had a solid grasp, slightly shifting the trap. The wolf winced, a low growl rising from her throat. Deciding now was the moment, the man’s fingers tightened, straining forcefully, feeling pain as he separated the bindings, pulling the steel jaws away, then letting go, the device snapping shut, falling to the ground.

“The wolf came alive, rising, turning, and loping off at a limp, the boy holding tight, face pressed in fur, flattened on the animal. Still on bended knee, the man watched the strange scene play out, the animal cresting a rise in a broken trot with the naked child pressed on its back, the two moving as one, disappearing from view.

“The hunter reported the incident to the authorities, but it was met with skepticism, and the spinning of theories of what he had seen, leaving some officials concluding the man had been drinking. With no evidence and only the man’s word, the story quickly became another mythical tale out of the vast Alaskan wilderness.

“But within six months, there was another sighting. A small child with a wolf was seen far off by a hunter and disappeared before the man could investigate. This time, the report was believed. A team of state police and game officials, including an expert tracker, was organized and sent to the location. They scoured the area and picked up a trail, leading to an animal burrow at the base of a boulder on a stream. The team disbanded, leaving a policeman and game official to look for a suitable spot to monitor the burrow. They set up a sighting post seventy yards away, downwind and concealed, with a clear view of the animal den. Now in camouflage, seated on a ground mat behind a fallen tree trunk, one with a spotting scope, the other holding a tranquilizer gun with a telescopic sight.

“The pair waited for several hours then, late afternoon, saw movement in the trees. A wolf came in view at a steady gait with a small boy, his arm draped over the animal’s back, the pair headed for the den. The wolf suddenly stopped, head erect, ears flared, turning, searching for any sound. The boy froze at the animal’s side, pressed against the shaggy canine. The wolf lowered its head, sniffing, parsing the ground. The scent of man was there, and the animal was reluctant to go farther until it was safe.

“The game officer had long experience with the tranquilizer gun and, peering through the scope sight, knew seventy yards was the upper limit to hit the animal. He could squeeze off the shot, and the odds were good the dart would strike the center of mass, but the child was in the way, and if struck, the drug would kill him. The only choice was to wait and hope the boy moved away. The police-

man, staring through the spotting scope, knew this as well. The wolf was staring straight ahead, looking for man, its ears twitching and turning, plumbing the air for the slightest sound, nostrils pulsating, testing the air for a scent. As the officer watched through the scope, the wolf turned in his direction, looking right at him. It was almost unnerving, and he was certain the wolf saw him. But he and the other officer were hidden, dressed in natural coloration under camouflage netting. Staring straight at the men without seeing them, the canine knew danger was near. Since halting, neither the animal nor child had left the spot where they stopped. Concealed seventy yards away, the men also had not moved, both looking silently, watching the wolf and boy, waiting.

“Then something changed. Growing restless, the child took his arm off the wolf and began looking around. He saw something, piquing his curiosity, and moved away, bending to pick it up.

“With a clean shot, the game officer fired the gun, the red stabilizer streaking through the air in a blur, the dart slamming the animal’s shoulder. The wolf lurched sideways, wheeling around, and nipping the child at the base of the neck, jerking him backward, springing the boy onto the animal’s back where small hands grabbed fistfuls of fur and heels pressed sharply in the wolf’s sides. The animal with clinging child loped up an incline, vanishing in the trees.

“The two men stared for a long time at where the pair disappeared.

“The policeman finally broke the silence. ‘That’s the strangest thing I’ve ever seen.’

“‘Yes, made me think of the book of Isaiah where the wolf is at peace with the lamb, and “a little child shall lead them.”’

“The policeman smiled at the comment, both men standing up. The game officer began packing his gear, satisfied they were almost done.

“The policeman broke the silence. ‘How long till the drug takes?’

“‘I put in the maximum dose for an eighty-pound wolf. It will slow the animal immediately and knock her down in thirty minutes.’

“The two men shouldered their packs and headed where the wolf had gone, soon picking up the trail. The track was irregular, and the game officer stopped frequently, pouring over grass, leaves, or tree branches that appeared meaningless to his companion.

“While studying a branch near the ground for an unusual amount of time, the officer remarked, ‘I wish Charley had stayed, but he had to help with a missing hiker in Denali. Tracking’s not my specialty. I can do it. Just takes more time.’

“The policeman scratched his head. He didn’t see a thing, and they had gone nearly a mile. It couldn’t be much farther. He watched his companion as the man stood still for long periods, staring at a twig or a leaf, a scrape in the ground. Then the man advanced a few feet more, turning his head side to side, scanning the ground for clues.

“The man stopped abruptly, seeing something ahead. ‘Good. We’re on track. It won’t be long.’

“What did he see? The policeman wanted to speak but kept quiet, not wanting to break the other’s concentration. It had been a tedious process, almost an hour since they left the sighting post. The officer was walking quickly now and soon stopped, reaching down, picking something from the ground. He held up the thin dart with a feathery pink stabilizer.

“‘It got knocked off in the thick brush. Looks like she got the full dose.’

“The officer looked at his watch.

“‘The animal is down and close by. Let’s spread a little and look around.’

“The pair divided as they left dense brush, going through open timber, then paused at the edge of a clearing. On the far side, they saw the wolf laid flat with the child resting. The game officer removed his backpack, placing it on the ground. He took out a blanket, holding it between his arms, moving cautiously toward the child, speaking in a soft voice, “Not going to hurt you. Easy now.’

“The policeman followed slightly behind. ‘Think he’ll run?’

‘No, the wolf is his protector, all he knows. He won’t leave her, willingly.’

“Drawing near, the men heard the animal’s labored breathing. The child held the men fixed in his gaze, and as they got close, he sank his fingers into the animal’s fur, clutching tightly.

“The officer knelt till he was level with the boy’s eyes, seeing distinct fear. ‘Time to go, young fella.’

“The officer reached down, wrapping the blanket around the child and picking him up. The boy made a feeble cry then was quiet as the man held him close, gently patting his back. Looking at the wolf on the ground at his feet, the man assessed the outcome.

“‘I’d say about eighty pounds, average for a female gray wolf. Should sleep for maybe an hour then wake up and be groggy for another hour or two. From the look of the plump milk bag and teats, I can see why you don’t want to leave. Looks like she kept you alive.’

“The man then pulled back the blanket, speaking to the child. ‘Tell her goodbye. It’s time to go.’

“The boy stared at the man as the officer turned with the policeman to begin the long hike back to the truck.”

Jim Morphis had been talking a long time and had told most of the story.

“Finding and rescuing the child cleared up the mystery, answering a lot of questions about the native ceremony, the reported sacrifice, and absence of human remains. But the case remains unsolved because the perpetrator was never caught. To this day, Tulok’s whereabouts are unknown, and he remains at large.”

Morphis paused, raising the cup, taking a slow sip of coffee.

“But what happened to the child?”

It was Kate, the first word from a listener in over an hour. Morphis had told an incredible story. The child had miraculously survived the sacrificial rites carried out by his own father, a man demented and caught up in the rituals and atavistic beliefs of an obscure tribe of Alaskan Natives. In a sacrifice to an animal god, ironically, the child had been rescued by a female wolf. The female, deprived of her newborn cubs in some unknown tragedy, had apparently happened upon the scene and been drawn to the helpless child. After nurturing and sustaining him for nine months, the wolf had been caught in the trap and discovered by a hunter, followed by

sightings that led to the search by state authorities. At last, the child had been rescued. Obviously, this marked a new beginning for the small boy. The woman had asked a good question, and after a brief pause, Morphis continued.

“The child had no signs of injury nor any long-term effects from his time in the wilds with the wolf. He was taken to a Fairbanks hospital for examination and observation. He was found small for his age, with residual scarring from burns on his extremities and moderately malnourished; otherwise, he was a healthy two-year-old. As soon as the child arrived at the hospital, a social worker was assigned to research the family, to learn of his background and the suitability of returning the child to his mother. Pending the investigation and determination by district court, the child was temporarily put in an area foster home. It soon became apparent that neither the mother nor family members were acceptable. The mother’s work in the sex trade at Nuiqsut ruled her out, and placement with relatives put the child at risk since Tulok was still at large. At the court hearing, the mother and grandmother pleaded for the child’s return, but the judge ruled the child be removed from parental authority and placed in custody of state Children’s Services. Everything about the boy was then confidential, and for his own safety, he was moved to another part of the state and put in another foster home. That’s all I know. Hope what I told is of use to you.”

It was an interesting story, providing much insight into Ankaait culture, adding to what the research team already knew. The listeners were especially pleased the child had survived and was now safe. The group thanked Morphis for his hospitality and the information and left. It was midafternoon.

Before getting into the Rover, Hartley paused, looking north along the road.

“Wonder how Mark fared on his hike?”

“He may have beat us back to Madame Shevsky’s,” Kate quipped.

The three anthropologists had a short drive back to the village, arriving at the inn and going to their rooms. Wanting to know if Dunbar was back, Hartley knocked at his friend’s chamber. After a

moment, the door opened, and Dunbar appeared, looking fresh and relaxed.

“How are you, Mark?”

“A long trek, been back about an hour, did see a magnificent gray, though.”

“Great. Hope to hear more at dinner. And I’ll tell you what we learned from Morphis. Will see you downstairs at the usual time.”

Hartley turned away, going to his room. He thought his friend looked well, the outing on the tundra apparently a success. While Dunbar had a day of hiking, the other three had been with Jim Morphis. Although they had learned a lot, they were still missing critical information on the cause of the young woman’s death.

At 5:00 p.m., the group of scientists was assembled for dinner, Madame Shevsky moving about, attending to her guests. She approached Kate, handing her an envelope. “Mr. Warren left this morning and asked that I give you this.”

Seeing her name on the envelope, she opened the flap, removing the handwritten message.

Dear Kate,

Unexpectedly, my business in Ataqsut has ended, and I am required elsewhere.

Meeting you was a delight, and I regret having to leave so abruptly. I wish you and your associates the best with your work. I hope to see you again.

Regards,  
Race

For a moment, Kate felt miffed; Race had left without saying a thing. Then she tried to reason with herself. Their meeting had been casual and friendly, nothing said to suggest commitment. Yet she couldn’t deny the feelings inside that she was hurt. It was her fault. He never said a word leading her in that direction, but she

had gone, willingly, on her own accord after seeing him the first time and falling under his attraction. The pain she felt made her resentful, and she grew angry at him for leaving, then she turned the hurtful feelings on herself that she had let this happen. She was confused. She picked up her bag, crushing the letter, and thrusting it into the purse.

While the others were talking, Hartley looked at his daughter. "Kate, are you all right?"

"Yes, Dad. Race left. Didn't say where or why."

Hartley grew concerned. "That's strange. I suppose he got a lead taking him elsewhere, but it's odd he didn't say anything."

The young woman looked at her father with a pained expression. "I thought Race and I got along, and I'm disappointed he left without speaking."

After listening, Hartley was silent a moment before replying. "His occupation is very unpredictable, especially when looking for someone who may not want to be found. Such work sometimes requires secrecy. I'm sure he didn't want to let you down. Didn't the note explain?"

"Not really. Just said he had to go."

Kate's tone indicated she was through. She became silent and turned her attention to the meal.

Hartley looked across the table at Dunbar who had been speaking to Collins.

"Mark, now that you've had a diversion, are you ready to get back to work?"

"Diversion? No, a field study, getting sight of a magnificent gray. I have a feeling *Canis lupus* is part of the mystery we face."

Hartley brightened, pausing for a moment, looking straight at his friend. "You have no idea. Let me tell you what we learned today."

Kate continued eating but watched closely with Collins to see how Dunbar would react to hearing the strange story told by Morphis. Hartley shortened the backwoodsman's lengthy monologue to half an hour, covering the main points about the cult's attempted

child sacrifice, the police investigation, and how the boy survived in the wilderness and was rescued.

Dunbar seemed unfazed by the story. His erudition concerning wolves included intensive knowledge of animal fables and mythology. On hearing about the wolf saving the child, he made a comment about truth eclipsing fiction, calling the child "Mowgli." The three anthropologists suspected the biologist had his own theories of what happened and why. It was almost as if what he was just told confirmed his own beliefs of where the field study would lead.

"Mark, you don't seem surprised by what I've said."

Dunbar's expression changed to a wry smile. "Why, of course, it's all very strange. I'm thankful the boy is safe. It's amazing we have learned so much in so short a time." The biologist paused, looking at his friend. "I do have one question. What became of the child?"

"It happened last year. The court placed the boy with a foster family in another part of the state. Of course, all details are confidential."

Although not surprised, Dunbar was clearly pleased with the information. "We've learned a lot since arriving, but still need facts about the woman's death. The autopsy report, cause of death, whether this is a murder or something else."

Hartley was perplexed by his friend's last remarks. "It's plain the woman was murdered, in a heinous and unusual manner. If we could get the coroner's report, I'm certain it would be confirmed."

"Don't be so sure. But the report is needed because it's the key to clearing this up. Don't you see the connection?"

Collins had been listening closely, but Dunbar's reasoning had lost him. "What connection?"

The biologist glanced at Collins, then looked back at Hartley. "The attempted sacrifice of the child, unknown to us till now, occurred about eighteen months ago, but rumors concerning the girl's death are what prompted our current research."

Professor Hartley saw where Dunbar was leading.

"The killing of the child's mother is the link to what happened before."

“Yes, Jonathan, that’s the connection, the woman and her child, both the center of separate and quite bizarre events, which means we need more than the coroner’s report. We need to know where the child is because he’s in grave danger.”

# 13



## THE DARK MOON

**E**arlier that day, Warren and Billings had arrived at the lake on time, but the 10:00 a.m. flight was delayed more than an hour. They were the sole passengers on the floatplane taking off from Ataqsut late morning. Seated just behind the pilot, the two men were silent, but the pilot was quite talkative, giving a running commentary.

“Our time in the air will be about an hour on an east by south-east flight path to Nuiqsut, a hub for the regional oil industry, lying on the Nechelik Channel, one of several tributaries draining the Colville River Delta to the arctic.”

The droning of the plane made Warren drowsy, the voice in the headphones fading. He thought of Kate, feeling regret for not saying goodbye. But Billings wanted the departure kept quiet. Now in the plane, with time to think, Warren thought it was a mistake, that he may have hurt the young woman’s feelings. Though their time together had been short, their mutual attraction had formed a bond, and he had been negligent. The note was inadequate. Women were sensitive, and Warren too often was lacking in awareness. The more he dwelt on it, the worse he felt. He would call when they landed and apologize. The droning of the airplane soon lulled him to sleep.

Billings was half awake, mulling what lay ahead. Nuiqsut was more than twice the size of Ataqsut, with a large population of oil workers. Once there, he and Warren would get a room and start

observation of where he thought his daughter was held. Billings had the address near the center of town and, from his inquiry, had learned the building had two floors, a bar in front and the rest of the place secluded. One of them would have to make a trial run, posing as a client seeking female company. He would have Race go since the younger man would more easily pass as an oil worker that frequented the brothel. Billings regretted his lack of planning, but there had been no time.

Since arriving in Alaska, it had taken nearly three weeks to learn his daughter's location. Now almost certain she was at Nuiqsut, he had to move quickly. Each day she was held under a range of harsh conditions and controls, possible punishment, and forced drug addiction, chances for her recovery lessened. Billings tried to think of every situation, how his daughter might be confined, and how he could get her out. He had seen these things during years in law enforcement, and he considered likely scenarios, trying to make a workable plan. While in the idleness of flight, he faced his daughter's situation based on what he knew of trafficking, posing thoughts with counter ideas in a kind of solitary brainstorming. For the moment, he was going in circles but hoped for fresh ideas that might lead to a plan. Once on ground, he would talk to Warren. Since they were both targets of the Russians, the two must have mutual trust, be candid with each other, and have a joint understanding about their role in the rescue attempt.

He would suggest that the young investigator reconnoiter the brothel. Billings knew his own limits, things plain clothes could not conceal; more than twenty years in law enforcement had left signs, mannerisms, and his innate transparency, making it obvious he was a cop. He had never been good at dissembling, pretending he was something he wasn't. The younger man would be more believable and less likely discovered, posing as a client at the so-called house of ill-repute. Time was short, but reconnaissance of the brothel was the first thing to be done at Nuiqsut. With less than twenty minutes to touchdown, Billings lapsed to sleep. While the pilot had been talkative earlier, he said nothing for the duration of the flight.

Warren felt his body bounce with the tug of the seat belt as the plane landed on a small lake in the barren tundra. Opening his eyes, he saw frothy spray falling at the sides of the aircraft, the plane skirting over water, slowing suddenly, the engine revving as the craft turned, crossing the lake, floating toward a landing of rough-hewn timber jutting from shore. A young man stood on the quay, waiting to secure the aircraft.

Warren heard the pilot's voice, commenting on the arrival, the time, weather conditions, and main features of Nuiqsut. There was nothing noteworthy, mostly flat barren land. In the distance, Warren saw the town, a clutch of low buildings and some oil structures rising on the horizon.

As the plane floated toward the landing, the pilot cut the engine, giving final instructions to remove headsets. The captain put his communications gear on a holder and released the door, preparing to exit. With the plane close, the young man stepped to the edge, leaning over, grabbing the end of the mooring rope, pulling the craft snug against the quay, and then looping the cord around the piling. The pilot got out and stepped back to open the rear door and assist the passengers. The two men had gathered their packs and satchels from behind the seats and exited, Billings first followed by Warren. Two other floatplanes, similar to the one just landed, were moored along the bank. The men walked across the deck of the quay to a graveled area where a van waited. From there, a connecting road made a straight line to town, a mile away.

Once in the van, the men sat back for the ride, gazing at the tundra, stretching endlessly in all directions. The road approached the town from the south, skirting the eastern end of a four-thousand-five-hundred-foot gravel runway. The airport terminal, a small cement building with a windsock flying above, anchored the southern end of the town.

Nuiqsut was laid in a grid stretching a mile north and three-quarters of a mile east to west. The eastern side of town lay on the sharp bend of a channel in the Colville River Delta, flowing twelve miles before emptying in the Arctic Ocean.



The driver had instructions to take the men to the only hotel, located on the north side. The pair had no need for a rental car since their business would be in town. They were operating with strict caution, posing as employees of different companies, independent of each other. During the short ride to the hotel, they carried on a limited conversation, casual talk typical of strangers, in case the driver had Russian connections.

The buildings in Nuiqsut looked like those at Ataqsut, plain, squat structures with low roofs. But there were also larger buildings, wider and longer, boxlike, built on straight lines. Windows were few, small and simple. The place looked more like an obscure military installation, immensely practical but unappealing to the eyes. There was something else distinctive about the town, first noticed when the men exited the plane at the lake: the ubiquitous smell of petroleum.

It was one o'clock when the two arrived at the hotel, getting out of the taxi and entering apart from each other, keeping their distance and approaching the counter separately. Warren checked in first, making small talk with the desk agent, implying he had come to start a job as an oil worker. He completed registration, got the key, and proceeded to his room. Billings was more reticent, saying only what was necessary and asking questions about the hotel restaurant. Obtaining the key, he thanked the clerk and headed straight for the eating area.

The dining room was not half full. Billings paused at the entryway, noting a sign for patrons to seat themselves. Seeing a table at the back, Billings made his way to the secluded area and sat down. Here, he could observe everyone in the restaurant and keep a clear view of the hotel lobby.

A one-page menu in a plastic cover lay on the table. He picked it up and studied the list. The bill of fare was simple, mostly burgers, sandwiches, fries, and various fast foods. There was also a buffet, limited to a single serving. It was bland and skimpy but seemed about right for a village a dozen miles from the arctic sea.

He was suddenly uninterested, laying the menu down. He felt restless that something was missing. A latent fear came inside. What he was there to do became starkly clear.

He was supposed to call Warren by phone to plan the next move. Billings had come into the restaurant to think things over and now realized he was unsure what was next. He knew what needed to be done but was not sure what steps to take. Acting too hastily would risk failure and possible disaster, but it was urgent to get his daughter out soon. There was no time for a detailed plan.

His thoughts were interrupted by an attendant asking what he'd have to drink. He looked up at a young woman, a native. He asked for a glass of water and said he hadn't decided yet. The woman nodded and disappeared to the kitchen. He needed to come up with something to tell Warren when they talked, either later that night or first thing in the morning.

He had made a start. Contacts had faxed him original construction plans of the Dark Moon, the name of the bar where the Russians plied their trade where his daughter was believed held. Billings pulled the schematics from his luggage and began going over them. He'd given copies to Warren earlier to commit to memory. They both had to have thorough knowledge of the building before going in. Based on the blueprints, the structure appeared larger than other buildings in town. The entrance opened into a barroom on the right, giving the appearance it was nothing more than a drinking place. But the structural drawings showed more. There was a similar room to the left, marked as storage in the prints, with a stairway to a second level where a central hallway connected a dozen small rooms, six per side. There were only two windows upstairs, one at both ends of the corridor.

It was clear the second floor was where the girls did their work. Probably the secondary room downstairs was where patrons were checked and validated. Billings expected there would be guards, likely at the door from the barroom and in the second room.

Billings was worried about discovery. The Russian crime boss had found Warren in Anchorage, and but for his alertness and resourcefulness, the PI would be dead. The Volkovs might even know he and Warren were in Nuiqsut. It was simply another reason there was no time for a complex plan. To delay longer meant greater chance of discovery. They had to act at once, despite the risks.

He slid the prints back into a manila envelope just as the server returned, setting down a glass of water, asking if he'd decided. He hadn't decided but said the first thing in mind.

"I'll have a cheeseburger with fries. What comes on the burger?"

She went through a list: mustard, mayonnaise, pickles, an onion slice, lettuce, and a slice of tomato.

"Hold everything except mustard."

He normally avoided such food, but with a simple menu, it all seemed the same.

The woman did not linger but was gone in an instant. He got back his train of thought. He was still undecided on an exact plan other than sending Warren to scout the suspected bar/brothel for more information. His queries through police contacts and informants left him almost certain the building was an end point for Volkov's trafficking operations. But either he or Warren would have to go to be sure. And the younger Warren would be more believable as an oil worker. That was his thinking now, but he remained uncertain. The only thing he was sure of was something must be done at once. The damage to his daughter would only increase with each passing day.

He was staring in space when a plate of food was set before him. He looked up to catch the woman smiling.

"Sorry to interrupt. Is everything all right?"

Billings hesitated before speaking, "It's been a long day, getting around on air taxis can be tiring."

The server became friendly. "As you see, we have only the basics. But if you need more, a place to relax, I recommend the Dark Moon near the airport. Here's your check. Pay the cashier at front."

Billings watched the woman walk away, toward a couple at another table. It was curious she brought up the Dark Moon. But the restaurant and hotel served no alcohol; she may have simply been trying to help a traveler, or she could be tied to the Russians. He took his eyes off the woman and picked up the burger, eating most of it with a few fries.

After a drink of water, Billings stood up, leaving a tip on the table, shouldering his pack, picking up his luggage and the meal

ticket, and proceeding to where an older woman stood behind a counter. Setting the satchel down, he pulled a bill from his wallet, handing it with the ticket to the cashier, saying, "Keep the change."

From there, he passed into the entry hall of the hotel to the stairway, climbing the steps to the next level, walking down the hall until he came to his room. Once inside, he set the luggage against the wall, unshouldering the backpack beside it, and sitting on the bed. Billings looked at his watch. It was 7:00 p.m. He had spent the entire afternoon at the restaurant, studying schematics and trying to come up with a plan. He had not heard from Warren. Perhaps he was in his room, trying to sleep. Billings decided to wait till morning to contact him.

He couldn't get the waitress's words out of his mind. He had merely expressed weariness from a long day, and she had suggested a bar to drink and relax, the very place he meant to go. Was she working for the Volkovs, referring travelers to the Dark Moon as part of the Russian network?

Sunlight through the window played about the room, and Billings thought of how hard it would be to sleep. Sleep had been no problem at Ataqsut, but here at Nuiqsut, his objective so close, the reason he'd come to Alaska. The waitress's words sounded in his mind, like a siren song, calling him.

Sleep was out of the question.

He got up, grabbed his backpack, and headed for the door. He must go to the Dark Moon.

He was soon outside, seeing Nuiqsut. The street had the barren look of the far North, the road an ashen gravel mixed in detritus from countless winters and annual snowmelts, powdery gray dust. Buildings along the way were oddly spaced, set back from the road, low, simple frame structures with no ornamentation, painted in dull hues, white, gray, brown, or pale green. Houses were fitted with satellite receivers projecting from walls, like aberrant mushrooms or giant anemic sunflowers. The only vegetation was behind buildings, fields of grass covering the ground, stretching in the distance. With no trees or shrubs, utility poles stood out, starkly erect on the road, cables stretched between them, a scene of glaring bleakness. Here

and there, lean-to additions projected from houses. Billings saw occasional boats or Jet Skis on trailers, four-wheelers here and there, and snow machines under tarpaulins. The town was mostly groups of houses on roads set in a grid pattern. At the southern end, near the airport, Billings came to the few business establishments in town.

He saw the side of the building he wanted, the Dark Moon. It was rectangular with two floors, larger than nearby structures, set prominently on a corner, the front facing a side street. There were two windows on the lower floor and a single window in the center of the top level.

Billings took this in while walking on the opposite side of the road. He paused for a closer look. The single upper window marked the end of the second-floor hallway. He could imagine the interior layout from his earlier study of blueprints. Now he would see the place.

He crossed the road at an angle, coming to the southwest corner, continuing along the front to the entrance where he stopped. A sign overhead said, "Dark Moon," and a neon light in the window flashed, "Open."

He stepped away from the door and pulled out his cell phone. Before entering, he would let Warren know what he was doing. The young investigator was not using a cell phone, so Billings called the hotel and got the line to his room.

There were several rings before an answer.

"Is that you Billings?"

"Yes, Warren. Sorry if I woke you. I'm at the Dark Moon about to go in. Thought I would go this evening, just to the bar, and get a feel for the place. I'll see you in the morning, and we can talk."

There was silence on the other end, then Warren spoke slowly, "Okay. And, Billings?"

"Yes."

"Be careful."

Billings slipped the phone into his pocket, turned, opening the large single door and pushing through, swinging shut behind him. The room was somewhat dark, with only two small windows at the front, tightly shaded, and dim light coming from recessed fixtures

in the ceiling. The room's main feature was an ornate bar, extending across the back, where an attendant, dressed in black with a white apron, waited on several people seated on pedestal stools. Letting his eyes adjust to low light, Billings looked toward the center of the room, using the method of relying on side vision to better see his surroundings. As he crossed the room, a worrisome thought sprung up: fear he would be suspected a cop. Heading toward an empty space at the bar, he tried to be aimless and unassuming, mentally dropping police mannerisms, but he feared the result was a wooden and awkward behavior.

Taking a seat, finding the padded stool comfortable, he put himself at ease, deliberately clearing his mind, setting his eyes on the mirrored cabinetry behind, topped by a row of inverted glasses hanging from a fancy wood molding. Customers spaced along the bar were talking among themselves, paying no mind to the new arrival. But the bartender had been eyeing the stranger since coming through the door. It was only now that Billings shifted his view, looking at the splendidly dressed attendant.

"Could I have a whiskey?"

The man turned casually, taking a glass from the rack and reaching for a bottle, then setting both on the smoothly lacquered bar. Twisting the cap off the bottle, the bartender looked up at the customer, a faint smile on the stranger's face. Billings met the attendant's gaze but could fathom nothing from the man's blank expression.

"You new in town?"

It was an obvious question, and they both knew the answer.

"Yes, here on assignment with Norco Oil. Staying at the Caribou Hotel."

Billings hoped the fabrication worked. He gazed at the short glass where the drink had just been poured, reaching out, picking it up, and holding it where he could study the amber liquid. Still with a hint of a smile, he looked up in the attendant's eyes. "Haven't had one of these in a while, but it seems like the time."

He raised the glass, taking a short swallow, leaving his mouth burning.

The bartender became talkative. "Most everyone here is in oil. It's about the only thing keeping the town alive. Will your business keep you long?"

"No more than a week or two. Glad it's summer."

The man gave a slight smile at the words but then was called away. Billings watched him walk to three patrons huddled at the far end of the bar near what he believed was a reception room where men arranged meetings with women. Looking in the direction the bartender had gone, the ex-policeman saw a curtain covered most of the far wall, concealing a door to the adjacent room. The attendant was leaning over, talking to the three men, then glanced back, prompting Billings to turn quickly, looking straight ahead, raising the glass, swallowing hard on the liquid. He was now starting to feel the liquor and decided that was his limit.

The bartender came back, more amiable. "Yes, this is the best time to be in Nuiqsut. The summer months make it easy to get around and enjoy life. You here for anything special or just routine?"

Billings was reluctant to say much. Telling lies, the less said, the better. "Sort of in between, a particular job I'm needed for."

He thought his words hollow, unconvincing. He raised the drink once more, pausing with head back, the liquid passing through his throat, then set the glass down with a clunk on the hard varnished wood. "That was just what I needed. Think I'll head back to the hotel."

The attendant seemed suddenly interested, becoming friendlier. "It's barely past nine, still early, and the sun never going down, the day is young. Care for another?"

Billings felt one drink was his limit and would not have had that except for appearances. He had met his purpose to scout the location, seeing it fit the drawings and was what he'd expected. But now with the barkeeper becoming gregarious and solicitous of his time, he did not want to raise suspicions. He had come there for a drink, and it might appear unseemly to leave too soon.

The attendant was staring straight at Billings, the previous blank look transformed to a slight smile. He had asked a question

and was waiting for an answer. Billings returned the man's smile. "Sure, give me another."

The man brought the bottle back, twisting off the cap and filling the short glass. After putting the container on the shelf, the man turned back to Billings. "By the way, I'm Jack."

Billings thought for a moment. Earlier he had expected he would pass through the bar anonymously and be on his way, but now, with the bartender making overtures to keep him, he had to be flexible. "Glad to know you, Jack. I'm Frank."

He raised the glass to his lips, downing a small amount. He now was beginning to feel somewhat tipsy and decided he would leave the rest in the glass.

"Frank, you know, there's a lot more to do in this town than meets the eye. You're lucky you're here this time of year at the Dark Moon. We take care of our customers, so they'll come back."

Billings sensed his newfound friend Jack was going to tell him all the benefits of Nuiqsut, things that did not "meet the eye."

"This is an oil town, utilitarian and practical. With all the derricks, pipelines, pumping stations, and installations spread out, hardly anything here but infrastructure. And it's worked by men, lots of men. It's a hard job, requiring young men, tough men. Every now and then, a woman shows up, but they don't usually stay."

It was surprising how talkative Jack had become. He had snagged Billings with a second drink and now, in a burst of garrulity, was pulling him in, keeping him at the Dark Moon.

Something caught Jack's attention. He looked away momentarily then faced Billings with a broad smile. "Excuse me, Frank. I'll be right back."

The bartender moved to his right, heading toward the end of the bar. Billings noticed a man had come from the adjoining room, drawing the curtain back and stepping into the open, just enough to be seen. He was a tall man dressed in black, young, burley, with an athletic build, probably part of the security detail. Jack went around the end of the bar, drawing close to the other man who spoke in his ear. Whatever message was delivered, it was short, and the man turned aside, disappearing behind the curtain.

At that moment, Billings faced forward, keeping his attention on the drink. He lifted the glass, downing most of what was left, regretting it immediately. Something about what he had seen didn't look right. Billings suspected that what was said at the side of the room concerned him. He had taken another drink, trying to dissociate himself from what was going on to allay any suspicion of the real reason he was there. He couldn't be certain, but he suspected they were onto him. He had been in such situations before, and his feelings were usually correct. He could not dismiss the thought they knew who he was. Security cameras were likely everywhere, even though they were not visible. The elaborate bar area and ornate mirrors, racks of glassware, and shelves of liquor, likely provided clear angles for hidden cameras. Billings now wished he'd eaten more than a partial burger and a few fries. It would have slowed the alcohol which had now hampered any reactive or evasive actions he might have to take.

Jack had returned and was now back in front of him. "Sorry for the interruption, Frank. Can I get you another drink?"

"Not at the moment, maybe in a bit."

"Yes. It doesn't take much of the hard stuff. A little goes a long way. I was telling you about our town. Although we are in the best time of year with respect to the weather, there is little to do here besides work. For that reason, a lot of the guys take all the overtime they can get, just to stay busy. But like I was telling you before, there's more here than meets the eye."

Billings downed what was left in his glass. He had to do something to take his mind off the situation. A cigarette would have worked, but he didn't smoke.

Jack paused, still looking directly at Billings with what looked like a sincere smile. He had become very friendly, quite different from the wooden character he had been earlier. Then he shifted his gaze to his customer's hands. "I see you're wearing no rings. You have family?"

Billings sensed where the conversation was going and decided he could do one of two things. He was getting closer to seeing how the operation worked, and the more he found out, the closer he

would be to getting Carrie out. But coming here on impulse had placed him in a precarious situation. Things were too unpredictable, and it might be best to leave now, talk with Warren in the morning, and let him come back based on a plan. Yet, if he waited till later, and anything happened to Carrie—. He pushed the thought from his mind. Despite the risks, he decided to play along, hoping it would work out and lead to his daughter.

"Uh, I had a wife once, but it didn't work. I guess you could say I'm married to my job, at least, that is what my ex thought."

Stringing out the lies made him uneasy. Was the bartender onto him?

"And yeah, I'll have another round."

Jack turned, stepping to the shelves and selecting the bottle of whiskey, giving Billings a moment of relief from the self-consciousness he was starting to feel fabricating the false story.

As he filled the glass, Jack picked up where he left off. "Frank, you have come to the right place. Things may look dull in this town, but here at the Dark Moon, we know how to brighten your time. Men in this town work hard, and many come here to relax. So if you're unattached and interested, I can connect you with some of the prettiest young ladies in the North Slope."

Billings left the glass untouched, feigning interest in what Jack was saying. "Really? And how would you do that?"

He raised the glass and took a drink, another short one, trying to forestall serious effects of the alcohol. He had to keep it up, stay in motion. Staying still too long brought self-absorbed thoughts that would give him away. Doing something with his hands took the focus off himself, but it also meant the drinks were getting to him. He was not yet to the point of impairment but getting close.

"Frank, I can see you're already starting to enjoy yourself, but the Dark Moon is much more than a place for good drinks. We have right here, in our establishment, young ladies who are excited and ready to meet men like yourself, and all you have to do is allow me to direct you to an adjacent room where you are free to select from a bevy of beautiful ladies and meet the woman of your dreams."

It was quite a pitch, spoken in an upbeat manner, with enthusiasm, and quite convincing. Billings sat motionless, hearing Jack's words, but undecided what to do. He stared at the glass in front of him, only a small amount of amber liquid remaining. This was not what he'd expected, but there had been no forethought, only an unplanned visit to the Dark Moon with the hope something would happen that would lead to his daughter. It was very haphazard, extremely risky, and here he was with a choice, to leave and devise a real plan or to stay and hope things worked out.

Billings lifted the glass, draining the rest of the liquor in a single gulp, then stood up.

He took a large bill from his wallet, laying it beside the printed tab on the counter.

"Jack, you're quite convincing. I'm curious and would like to see more."

"Frank, you won't be disappointed. Right this way."

Billings seldom second-guessed himself once he committed to a plan, but this evening, there was no plan, and he felt a rare sense of unease at what he was doing. But not one to indulge negative thoughts, he brushed the idea away, standing and following the bartender.

# 14



## HEART OF DANGER

The bartender turned to the right, heading to the end of the counter as Billings crossed the room in the same direction. Jack came from the bar and stood beside the curtain concealing the door to the next room. As Billings walked up, the bartender drew the covering aside and opened the door.

"Right this way, Frank. There's someone I want you to meet."

The two stepped into the room to find a moderately portly middle-aged woman coming toward them. She had lost the graceful movement of youth, carrying herself somewhat stiffly, but she was extravagantly dressed, her Slavic features smoothed and refined by a beautician's delicate touch, and she beamed with a disarming smile.

The bartender made a formal introduction.

"Dama Sasha, this is Frank."

The woman took the man's hands, giving a quick shake. "Welcome, Frank, delighted you are here."

Jack said parting words. "Frank, you're in good hands. Have a pleasant evening."

The bartender returned to the other room as the woman continued speaking.

"Jack is marvelous at the bar, but our customers cannot experience our full hospitality without my assistance. As mistress of our establishment, it is my purpose to make you at home, put you at ease, and allow you to have a relaxing and enjoyable evening."

“But first, anything you bring in, like your pack, can go no further. There are lockers at the back of the room. Please put your belongings there and take the key. You can reclaim your things when you leave.”

Billings walked to the array of lockers, opening one, inserting his backpack, closing it, and removing the key. Walking back to where the hostess stood, he surveyed the room.

The interior was smaller than the barroom. On the far side, there was an ornately crafted stairway, leading, Billings assumed, to the second level holding a dozen smaller rooms where the women took their customers. In a corner near the stairs, a man stood motionless and alert, the same man who had earlier given the bartender a message. He was clearly watching everyone and would act quickly if anything went awry.

At the front of the room, there was a floor-to-ceiling-fifteen-foot-wide drapery, automated and retractable. There were others in the room, a couple in a far corner, and closer, a man in work clothes seated on a plush sofa with a young woman in scanty attire. The man was getting to know the girl, deciding if he should go with her to the second floor. Billings saw all this as he returned to where the Dama stood waiting. She directed him to a wide leather sofa facing the curtained area.

“Please, have a seat.”

The woman took his hand briefly as she sat down, guiding him onto plush cushions.

“Now let me show you some of our best girls, all specially groomed to make our guests welcome, to meet your every need and make your time here the highlight of your visit to our town.”

Billings noticed she held a small control, and then he heard a low mechanical sound, accompanied by the rustling of the curtain as it retracted on a pulley system at the top of the wall. The drapery moved back, collapsing in a stack of vertical folds, coming together, and stopping, accordion style, near the entry door.

Billings looked quickly at the Dama, staring with a broad smile, then straight ahead at what was revealed. It was what he'd expected, girls posing for customers. Behind plate glass sat seven young women

in skimpy, very revealing clothing, but Carrie was not one of them. He guessed some could be as young as sixteen, but none appeared older than twenty-one or twenty-two. He felt repugnance at what he saw, four girls seated on a front row, and three more elevated behind; the arrangement and number of chairs could accommodate twelve women, the number he suspected were kept there. There were two with men at the back of the room, and perhaps three others occupied upstairs.

It was nothing more than a display case for human flesh, to sell innocent young lives for the satisfaction of degenerate men. Yet each girl looked like she was enjoying herself, smiling in ways that seemed genuine, casual, not wooden or stiff, moving slightly from time to time, uncrossing and recrossing legs, shifting heads, tossing hair from eyes. Billings repressed his thoughts, hiding his disgust, trying to conceal his true feelings from the woman beside him.

“Take your time, just look them over, and if one appeals to you, say the word.”

Billings tried to feign interest, his eyes roving over the girls as though having a hard time making his mind.

“As you see, we have variety, blonds, brunettes, a redhead, and for the traditionalist, a beautiful Alaskan Native. But be in no hurry. Like a fine wine, these occasions should not be rushed. Such moments should be savored.”

Billings was looking for intelligence and experience, the girl most likely to give answers once he revealed his true purposes. The young woman at the end of the top row looked different from the others, more sure of herself, perhaps less indoctrinated.

“I like the one at the back, with dark hair.”

“Myra, an excellent choice. An early understudy of mine, our prize. She has more than beauty, more than physical allurements. Her true charms are beneath the surface, passion and warmth, enticements that last longer than an evening.”

The Dama stood up, and the drapery began moving with a mechanical ratcheting sound.

Billings also stood, perplexed by the woman's comments. How could a girl trapped in such a place be able to reveal or express such

feelings? It was an elaborate and fanciful sales pitch, which the woman (and the bartender) excelled at. The curtain was fully drawn, the room behind the glass hidden once more, and all was quiet.

Then Myra appeared, slipping through a side door, near where the guard stood. She approached in a smooth fluid motion. To Billings, she did not look like a woman for hire. The skimpy attire was a distraction from an aura the girl projected as she floated across the room. With proper clothing, the true beauty of the young woman would have shown. With a winsome smile, the girl came to a stop just before the Dama Sasha and Billings.

“Myra, I want you to meet Frank.”

As she spoke, the Dama reached out, taking the girl’s hand, then taking the man’s hand, joining them together. It could have been awkward, but the middle-aged woman made it quite natural.

“Frank, I’ll leave so you two can get acquainted, but I’m always available.”

She turned, walking across the room, disappearing through the same door the girl had come through.

Despite smooth handling by the Dama, Billings felt awkward, and still light-headed from the drinks. The girl tried to put him at ease.

“Hello, Frank. A pleasure to meet you. Would you like to sit and talk a while, get to know each other better? Or would you prefer to go upstairs where we can be more comfortable?”

Now that he had made it this far, Billings did not want to waste time.

“Why don’t we go to a private room? We can talk there.”

“Perfect! Right this way, please.”

As she turned and led him toward the stairway, her hand felt soft and warm in his. Billings pushed the thought away, turning his mind toward what he had to do. Passing the guard at the foot of the stairs, Billings noticed the man was unmoving, staring straight ahead. There was no need for eye contact, dressed all in black, with an athletic build, over six feet in height, his mere presence enforced rules of the house.

Walking up the stairs, Billings felt like a fraud or worse. Interacting this way with a girl no older than nineteen was loathsome, but it was the only way to find his daughter.

As best he knew, Carrie was here; and since he had not seen her with the other girls, she must be in a room, and—. Billings blocked the thought, shifting his mind back to himself and Myra.

The girl had been talking continuously since they met, but he had not been listening. Walking up the stairs, she had been making comments about him, saying he must be new in town. She had never seen him before; she hoped he was enjoying Nuiqsut. He mumbled a few words, saying the visit had been good so far. Despite his wooden behavior, the girl was attentive, saying words to put him at ease into a frame of mind to enjoy the evening. Billings thought it strange that the girl’s one-sided conversation going up the stairs, even though done for money, came across as sincere.

At the top of the stairs, Myra paused momentarily, looking into Billings’s eyes, then, almost with a twinkle, said something odd.

“Behind which door is the grand prize?”

Still holding his hand, she raised her left in a wide sweeping motion, taking in the entire hallway. She was feigning the line of a television host of a game show. He looked and saw the doors were numbered one to twelve, odd on one side, even on the other.

“Only I know the number of the door to the winning prize.”

She was studying his face to see how he was responding to the charade. Billings thought her behavior quite strange. Is this her usual conversation? Most so-called clients would find the talk not only an irritant but a delay to what they’d come for. Maybe she had different routines; he had been especially wooden and self-conscious. Perhaps the ruse was to loosen him up.

She held him in a fixed stare, a slight smile playing on her face. “Would you like to take a guess?”

Billings had hardly spoken since their meeting downstairs. And now, she was inviting his comments, but he was transfixed by what she was doing. Was this a game she was playing, perhaps, a comic relief from the realities of her work? No, it went deeper than that. She was carrying out an elaborate coping scheme, a way of enduring the



harsh existence, a means to survive the unspeakable acts framing her life. Billings suddenly felt great pity for the young girl.

His daughter was here too and, like the others, a prisoner, painted and trained to exchange the flower of their youth for the lusts of evil men.

The girl was looking at Billings, her expression unchanged. He mumbled some words.

“Uh, room 7, I guess.”

The look on Myra’s face changed to an exuberant smile. She turned, leading him halfway down the hall, pausing in front of the door bearing the number seven. She took the door handle, giving him a pleasant look, then turned the knob, pushing the door in.

“You’re a winner,” she said, leading him in.

It was a small, windowless room with some paintings on the wall of Alaskan Native women, one, a rugged scene with the subject stalwartly holding a spear in front of a looming bear, the other of a scantily clad female relaxing beside a hearth, blazing with fire. A leather lounge chair, plush, reclining fully, and large enough to accommodate the imaginings of any client, was on the left side of the room. To the right, a lighted fixture sat on a lampstand next to a spacious bed covered in a plump, silk comforter, and topped with a bevy of pillows.

Here, the girl’s tone changed. Still smiling and continuing a steady stream of words centered on her client, meant to soothe him and make an emotional connection, there was a subtle shift as she broached the subject of fees. She reached for the top of his shirt, undoing the clasp, and playfully manipulating the button in her fingers.

“Before going further, to be fair, I need to inform you. There is a three-hundred-dollar minimum for twenty minutes, with no frills or extras, payable in advance.”

Billings reached up, taking the girl’s hands off his shirt.

“Myra, that’s not why I’m here. I came for information.”

Fear rose in the girl’s eyes as she pulled away and began a break for the door. Billings grabbed her and, for a moment, thought she

would scream. He turned her around, holding tightly, pulling her face close to his.

“Please, I’m not going to hurt you. Calm down and let me explain.”

In a state of panic, she continued to struggle, squirming, and twisting, trying to get free.

“Please, settle down. I won’t hurt you. I’m here to find my daughter, Carrie.”

Mentioning the name brought a change over the girl. She stiffened, becoming still as her eyes widened, set in a stare that cut through Billings.

“You know her? You know Carrie. Where is she?”

The man felt the girl’s body slump, becoming almost limp. She dropped her eyes to the floor.

Billings knew he was close to the answers he wanted. He shook the girl violently.

“You know about Carrie. Where is she?”

Myra was no longer the playful girl bantering with the man in the hallway nor the businesslike young woman explaining the rules once they were in the room. Her persona had been swept away, and now Billings was dealing with the raw interior of a girl snared in the brutal trafficking trade.

He lifted the girl’s head so he could see her face, but she pulled away, averting her eyes. She was weeping softly, mute, and uncommunicative. She had said nothing since he revealed his true purpose. The girl obviously had a set routine, well scripted, with sequential steps allowing her to navigate through each new meeting, encountering strangers, performing unspeakable acts, an automaton dissociated from her feelings. As long as she stayed within the boundaries, she could pass through such encounters relatively unscathed. The lively banter she had played earlier was part of the façade she had built, constructing an elaborate framework in her mind, fantasies, whatever was necessary to protect her from the realities of the day.

But Billings’s revelation had shattered the routine, bringing her defenses crashing down. Now she seemed lost in a maze of confusion. But time was short, and Billings needed answers.

He tightened his grip on her shoulders for a moment, then reached in his pocket, pulling out a picture of his daughter, holding it in the girl's face.

"This is Carrie. Have you seen her?"

Myra seemed over the worst of her distress. She looked at the photo, staring for several moments. Then she looked at Billings, fear waning. "She was here, but they took her away."

He did not understand. His queries through informants and contacts in police networks had led him to believe this was where his daughter was held. But he had acted hastily, following his instincts, and come to a dead end.

He relaxed his grip on the girl, and unconsciously, his fingers began a soft, rolling tap where he held her. She was now compliant, willing to tell what she knew, so different from the self-assured young woman leading him up the stairs and along the hall and transformed from the fearful girl he had held just moments ago. He felt badly he had led her in a ruse, acting falsely, but it was the only way.

"When was she here?"

The girl spoke slowly, haltingly. "Dama Sasha had her for two weeks, teaching the work."

"When did she leave?"

"Last week, maybe the week before."

Billings dropped his hands from the girl's shoulders, shifting back slightly. "Do you know where they took her?"

"I've only been here. But I've heard there are other places, Fairbanks, Utqiagvik, Anchorage."

Time was getting short. Even though Carrie was still missing, his visit to the Dark Moon had not been a total dead end. He had learned all he could from the girl, and it was time to leave.

"Earlier you mentioned extras, above the base rate. How much would you earn for an extended evening?"

The girl looked surprised.

"Extra requests are one hundred dollars each."

Billings pulled out five one-hundred-dollar bills, handing it to the girl.

"This should cover it. Sorry for the rough treatment."

He had hardly spoken when the door burst open, the guard from downstairs rushing in, grabbing the girl, pulling her back, pointing a large handgun at Billings, ordering him to hold his hands high, turn slowly, then step forward and stretch out with his hands against the wall. Then he ordered the girl out, pushing her through the door.

"Mr. Billings, we had been warned about you, but your picture only just arrived." He pulled a folded photocopy from his pocket, opening it for a quick look, then stuffing it back in his shirt.

"Yep, it's you. Agents have been looking for you with a terminate-on-sight order. But you've saved us the trouble by coming. That's good for the company, but not me. I can't carry out the order because I'm just a guard, but if you resist or try to escape, I'm authorized."

Billings was now facing the wall, his arms stretched upward. The girl was gone, and the door was closed. Knowing his only chance was to engage the guard, he began speaking.

"What's your name?"

"Never mind. I'll ask the questions."

The man was smart, and Billings did not want to provoke him, but he knew he had to keep him talking.

"Of course, that's reasonable. My name is Ron Billings. This must be a mistake."

The guard responded angrily, "I know who you are! Do you have a weapon?"

"There's a gun in my waistband."

"Anything else on you?"

"Just keys in front pocket and wallet in back."

Billings heard the metallic sound of something dropped on the nightstand.

"Drop on your knees, very slowly, and keep your hands against the wall."

He had no choice but to obey and hope the guard made a mistake. Sliding his hands down the wall, Billings lowered himself until his knees touched the floor.

"Now, very slowly, reach back with your right hand, keep your left pressed on the wall, and take the weapon and toss it back to me."

The man was calm and controlled, not likely to make a mistake. "I came here for my daughter, that's all."

"My sympathies, Mr. Billings, but you just showed on our watch list, you understand?"

Billings continued speaking calmly, in a measured tone. "Yes, and I'm doing like you say."

He slowly reached back, lifting the loose shirt, removing the gun, and with a flick of the wrist, flung it back across the floor.

"Now, very slowly, get the handcuffs from the table. Do the right hand first and lock both behind your back."

Most people would find the effort a strain, but as a former policeman, the awkward movements would not be difficult. He reached out with his right hand and, after picking up the manacles, was surprised to see they were Russian military design. Billings recalled these handcuffs had an obscure flaw. As he slowly passed the device to his left hand, he pressed a fingernail hard on a small pin at the joint of the hasp. He was pleased, almost elated, to feel the pin give slightly and remain a millimeter below the steel surface.

"Come on, faster. I want to hear it lock on your wrist."

Billings pressed the steel ring firmly around his right hand with a metallic click, immediately feeling the clasp give slightly in the holder. Although it would appear locked, with pressure applied, it would release.

"Now, behind your back, shackle your left."

Billings moved both hands behind his back, groping with his right hand to slip the open clasp over his left wrist, snapping it shut. He was silent, waiting for his captor's next move. He could feel the Russian's eyes on him, inspecting, making certain he was secure. The man was quiet for an unusually long time. Did he see something wrong with the handcuffs?

"You're doing well, Mr. Billings. We need to leave, so get on your feet, slowly."

Billings heard the man step back, giving him a wide berth to stand; but without the use of his hands, it would be almost impossible to rise from a kneeling position. He tried again to connect with his captor. "What was your name?"

The man seemed to have mellowed. Now that Billings was cuffed on the floor, the Russian seemed more friendly. "Call me Alex. I've moved back to give you space. Now stand up."

"I'm not a gymnast. I can't get up like this."

The Russian suddenly grew impatient. Billings heard him come close, bending down, grabbing the junction of the handcuffs, forcibly pulling him upright, and thrusting him against the wall.

"Now, turn around. Don't try anything, or I'll have to use this."

He was speaking, holding the gun with both hands pointed squarely at his captive as Billings slowly turned, seeing his service pistol now in his adversary's waistband.

The Russian held the gun steady, eyes fixed on his captive while reaching back, feeling behind, slowly opening the door, backing, and gesturing for Billings to come forward. The man was about thirty, tall and muscular. He was acting with extreme caution, carefully moving the prisoner from the customer area to a more secure location. Billings had been cooperative, and his captor had made no mistakes. Now facing the Russian might be a good time to trip him up.

"Alex, why not let me go? I know my daughter's not here. Let me go, and you'll never see me again."

"So you can make trouble for someone else? Sorry, but there's a detainer on you. Now, move through the door!"

For emphasis, he pulled back the hammer of the automatic, looming in his hand, making an ominous click, the loudest Billings had ever heard.

Breaking contact with the man's eyes, Billings stepped cautiously forward, going from the room to the hallway, pausing.

"Where to?"

"To the right, toward the stairs."

As he began walking, he heard the man behind, closing the door. Billings was growing worried. His captor had done everything right, smoothly and by the book. Billings assumed he was headed to a secure room, under lock and key, where the possibility for escape would evaporate. His only chance was to break the handcuffs loose, but he couldn't do that with the Russian watching closely. He needed

a distraction; a mere second would be enough to get free and surprise the guard.

As Billings neared the landing, a man appeared at the top of the stairs, quite drunk, blubbering at a girl in his arms. The young woman was supporting him, giving her full attention, smiling, and encouraging his words. Finding the way blocked, the drunk, with support from the girl, stopped in the middle of the hall, now silent, an angry expression forming on his face, staring at the stranger in front. He had busied himself for twenty minutes making an impression on the young woman, and now he expected the man blocking him to stand aside and let them pass.

Holding securely to the woman, the man stepped ahead, brushing against the man who was now trying to move out of the way. The drunk slipped from the girl's grasp, stumbling, careening against Billings, grabbing him, both going down in a heap. As Billings struck the floor, he made a twist on the manacles, the right handcuff springing free. Keeping his hands behind, he turned his head to see his captor.

The girl had reached down to help her customer, but the Russian grabbed her arm, pulling her back and pushing her down the hall. He now reached for the drunk, intending to get him up out of the way. Reaching down, he was caught off guard when Billings leaped from the floor, lunging for the gun. The sudden move surprised the guard, both grappling for the gun, knocked free as the Russian was shoved against the wall.

With the two men fighting almost on top of him, the drunk turned toward the landing, crawling away, standing, and stumbling toward the stairs where the girl stood aghast, watching the melee.

With Billings on top, pummeling away, the Russian fended him off with his left hand, trying to reach the gun in his belt. The more experienced ex-policeman had the loose handcuff over his left fist smashing his adversary's face, starting to draw blood. Although surprised by the unexpected reversal and stunned by blows to his face, the younger and stronger Russian was able to pull the gun from his belt and raise it toward Billings, who grabbed it, the two struggling to control the weapon. Now the antagonists were locked arm in arm,

the struggle becoming a test of brute strength. Billings began to give way as his more-powerful opponent pressed him, the Russian rising in a crouch, the tight grip of his right hand bending the older man's arm back while steadily twisting the gun for a headshot. While Billings had the initial advantage, surprising his foe and using the loose cuff as a bludgeon, failure to render the Russian senseless let the younger man begin to overpower his opponent, twisting him to the floor. Straining to the utmost, trying to push the man back and deflect the gun, Billings was now almost powerless in his foe's iron grip, watching the weapon's barrel creep slowly toward his face.

Then Billings saw movement at his left, a blurring motion coming down on the Russian's head. The strong hands gripping him relaxed, the man falling to the side, crumpling on the floor. Billings blinked his eyes, looking up, seeing Warren bending down with extended hand, the girl Myra beside him.

Billings mumbled almost nonsensically.

"Where did you come from?"

Helping his friend to his feet, Warren said little. "I'll explain later. Let's get this guy out of sight."

The two dragged the Russian to the room where the confrontation had begun, restraining him with handcuffs, tying his feet, and gagging him. Warren looked him over.

"I hit him hard with my forty-five. He may be out a while, but he'll be found. We need to get away fast."

"Did you see a drunk? He'll raise an alert."

"Myra spoke to him. He left."

Looking at the girl, Billings spouted. "What's she doing here?"

"She wants out. She's coming with us."

"But, how—"

Warren cut him off. "Later. We need to go."

Retrieving his gun from the floor, Billings led down the stairs, followed by the girl and Warren. Billings paused at the bottom to see the way clear. The working man was still seated on a couch with the girl nestled almost in his lap, pulled close, whispering in his ear. Billings saw no one else except the Dama Sasha seated, facing the other way, talking with a client.

Billings turned to his companions, partially hidden, halfway down the stairs.

“Wait here.”

Pulling a key from his pocket, he walked to the panel of lockers at the back wall, unlocked a compartment, and retrieved his backpack. He sat it down and pulled out a featherweight hooded waterproof. Shouldering the pack, he rejoined his companions, handing the light parka to the girl.

“Put this on. When I get the Dama’s attention, go to the exit.”

While Warren and the girl waited in the shadows of the stairwell, Billings strolled across the showroom to where the hostess was speaking to a customer. He went around, stopping next to the seated man, standing to block the woman’s view of the exit. Smiling, ignoring the man, Billings broke into the conversation.

“Excuse the interruption, Dama Sasha, but I must tell of my evening. The whole experience, from beginning to end, was extraordinary. Your people are professionals.” He continued in this manner, seeing Warren and the girl passing by close to the back of the room, heading for the door to the barroom.

“Thank you again. I’ll be back soon.”

Billings turned, leaving the woman speechless, an odd expression on her face. Still walking casually, he reached the door, opened it, and passed through, seeing his companions just ahead moving toward the exit. Billings caught sight of the attendant at the bar busy with several customers. It was midnight, and activity was at a peak. The two men walked with the girl unnoticed through the doorway, leaving the Dark Moon behind.

Once outside, they hurried to the hotel. The two men agreed they should get out of town at once, bringing the girl under their protection. They would leave as soon as the air service opened at 6:00 a.m. Since the hotel would be unsafe, they had to decide what to do till morning. Warren thought they should hike to the floatplane dock and wait, but the girl said she had a relative living at a nearby house, not seen in years, who might take them in for a few hours.

Arriving at the hotel, the two men went to their rooms, got their belongings, and met downstairs where they checked out. The

trio made a short walk to a house Myra remembered as where an aunt lived. While the men waited on the street, the girl went to the door.

Standing with Warren, Billings looked at his watch. “It’s nearly one o’clock. Not likely to get a good reception this hour.”

Surprisingly, the door opened only a crack, and the two men saw Myra speaking with someone. They could not hear what was said, but the girl was making expressions with her hands, moving her head side to side, the conversation taking an unusually long time.

Finally, the girl turned, waving the men forward, then going in, leaving the way open. Billings hurried ahead, followed by Warren, both with a shoulder pack and hand satchel. A middle-aged Alaskan Native woman held the door, closing it behind them.

She introduced herself, saying she was stunned to see Myra and hear her tale.

“Thank you for rescuing my niece. Her sudden disappearance was a shock to everyone. Some said she’d run away to live her own life, but I knew Myra was responsible. And she has been here nearly two years.”

The woman, quite perplexed at Myra’s appearance, questioned the girl, wanting to know more of what had happened. But the girl moved the conversation to more immediate concerns.

“Auntie, I’m in danger, and these men too. We need to leave at daybreak.”

The woman understood. “I’ll do what I can to help.”

It was agreed that everyone should go to bed, the three travelers to grab a few hours rest before morning. The girl was given a spare room, and the men were provided bedding at the front of the house, doing as best they could, one on a couch and the other on the floor. While her guests were settling down, the woman called the taxi service, arranging for a car to come at 6:00 a.m. Then everyone retired.

In the front room, the two men talked, Warren explaining his sudden appearance at the Dark Moon.

“I was half awake when I got your call, saying where you were and what you were doing. It was more like a dream than not. The call was short, and when you hung up, I brooded over what I’d heard and could not get back to sleep. I got concerned, considering what

you were heading into, the danger. I couldn't leave you there in a bad situation and your life at risk.

"I got up, got dressed, deciding to follow you to the Dark Moon. I grabbed a black coffee downstairs at the café and drank it as I walked to the nightspot. When I got there, I went in at once, stopping just inside. It was then I saw you and the bartender going through a door on the left side of the room, which I soon learned was where the women are kept, why the place is also called Dama Sasha's House. It was a lucky break I came then and saw you. I knew you were okay, that nothing had happened yet, and I had time to provide backup.

"I went to the bar and waited for the attendant. When he approached, I asked for a drink and got to the point, asking if he knew how I might find a woman. Then Jack, that was his name, perked up and said he could direct me to another part of the place where there were girls available.

"After I finished my drink, he led me to the other side of the room, taking me through the same door I saw you go through earlier. Just inside, I caught sight of you and Myra going upstairs. Again, it seemed I was always at the right place to follow your trail. Jack said someone would be right with me, then left. I found a seat on the nearest couch and sat down, trying not to draw any attention. Apparently, I was waiting for the mistress of the house, Dama Sasha, but at the moment, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Finally, she appeared, quite distinguished looking for her age. I stood up as she approached, and she graciously received me. We both sat down, and she immediately had me under her spell with words and mannerisms, putting me at ease and glamourizing the services. I feigned curiosity and interest as she directed my attention to the long drapery across the front, which began to be drawn to the sides, and I saw a group of scantily clad young women behind a wall of glass. I felt quite wicked playing the scam, but I knew it was the only way to stay close if you needed help.

"I stared at the girls as the Dama Sasha made her pitch extolling the ladies, noting each one's special charms, all equal to her praises and more as seen with the eye. After an unusually long silence on my

part, she looked at me, asking if one of the girls met my approval. I tried to delay as long as possible, making a vague response, saying I was unsure and hadn't made up my mind. Now the Dama began the hard sell, announcing incredible traits of this one, and unbelievable endearments of that one, asking, 'Do you prefer brunettes or blondes? One is a gorgeous redhead. Do you see her at the top left?'

"I continued to stall.

"'Hmm, I'm just not quite sure.'

"My host was growing suspicious that something wasn't right. She was suddenly silent, looking from me to the girls, then back to me. I decided I had to act and was just about to pick one when something at the corner of my eye got my attention. I turned to see the girl I saw you with earlier. She was coming down the stairs across the room.

"'There, that's the one I want,' I said as I got up and walked quickly to where she was about to go through a door. I heard the Dama Sasha raise an objection, which I ignored, and I called out to the young woman.

"'Hello, I'm a friend of Ron Billings, the man you were just with?'

"She stopped halfway through the door and looked at me with surprise. She looked over my shoulder and seeing Dama Sasha coming our way, her expression changed, and she took my hand and quickly led me up the stairs till we were out of view, then stopping and looking me in the eye.

"'Your friend is in trouble. I'll take you to him if you promise to get me away.'

"I asked her name, which she said was Myra, and I told her mine.

"I'll do all I can to get you out of here. Now where is Billings?'

"She had never released my hand, and now she led me to the top of the landing where we saw you struggling with the Russian."

Billings had heard enough. "Yes, thank you for showing up. Now, go to sleep."

Morning came quickly. Warren opened his eyes, awakened by Billings's voice. He was on a cell phone, just a few words, then the call ended. He looked at Warren.

"Good, you're awake. The car should be here any minute."

He said he'd just called the hotel to ask if any inquiries had been made following their departure. Soon after they had checked out, two men came, asking for him by name, citing a family emergency. They were told the person they sought had already departed.

Warren listened silently, but the look in his eyes told Billings he understood what it meant.

The girl and her aunt came into the room. Dressed in casual clothing, Myra approached Billings, carrying his lightweight parka.

"My aunt found me something to wear from an older cousin. Here, I won't be needing this."

Billings took the waterproof and stuffed it into his backpack as their hostess held out a cup of coffee. Warren stood nearby, sipping a cup he had just gotten, his pack and bag at his feet. With everything ready, the three waited at the front as the woman looked out the window. They heard a vehicle pulling onto gravel outside the house. The woman turned toward them.

"Your car is here."

The two men thanked their hostess as she opened the door, and they went outside. Myra stopped to hug her aunt and thank her. The woman held her for a moment, looking in her eyes.

"I'm happy and sad. Sad at what happened but happy you're free. I hope you get home and back to normal life."

The woman let the girl go, and she rushed out to where Warren stood by the open door of the taxi, an Outback. Billings had already instructed the driver; they were taking the precaution of holding their baggage during the short trip. The girl slid into the rear seat, followed by Warren, shutting the door. Seeing the three passengers crowded in back, the driver offered for one to sit in front, but Billings declined, saying nothing else. For now he wanted the girl between him and Warren. The three of them bunched in back with luggage looked odd to the driver, leaving questions in his mind as he pulled the car onto the road.

The destination was obvious. In a town the size of Nuiqsut, a hired car only went to a few places. Getting the call, the driver had assumed he was taking his fare to the airport, or the adjacent waterway, and this was confirmed when Billings got in.

Passing the hotel, Billings glanced that way, thinking how strange that he had hardly been in his room before making the impulsive walk to the Dark Moon. While disappointed not finding Carrie, he and Warren had at least freed Myra from the traffickers. Knowing someone asked about them soon after departing the hotel had left Billings worried. He would not feel safe until they had the girl in the air.

Driving along, both men watched the roadside. They passed gray, forlorn houses, mostly one level, plain with simple low-pitched roofs, many looking like storage buildings. They were traveling the principal road, a mile long on a simple rectangular grid of three roads spread to either side, coming south to the main part of town, ending at the airport with a single east-west landing strip. Here, the car turned toward the edge of town, reaching the connector road that would lead a mile south to the lake where the air taxis operated.

Till now, both men had seen nothing unusual, just normal morning activity, a handful of other vehicles on the road going here and there. Everyone in the taxi had been silent. The driver had not spoken since offering a front seat. In the small car, the three in the back were pressed together. Although quiet, Myra was hopeful, knowing her life had suddenly turned around, and now expectant things would get better. Neither Billings nor Warren was thinking of the girl now but were looking outside for signs of danger. The Russian already had them marked for death, and their actions at the Dark Moon made it worse. Volkov would try to get Myra back and see the two Americans dead for their interference in his business. Both men knew well the danger they were in and would not rest until they had the girl on the plane, safely from Nuiqsut.

## 15



## ESCAPE FROM NUIQSUT

**A**t the southeast corner of town, the car turned to the narrow road leading to the lake where the floatplanes operated. Billings could barely see the tank of aviation fuel and building near the landing, but there was no sign of aircraft. The plane must be running late.

The landscape was wide open, nothing but tundra, flush with seasonal grass, short scattered plants, a few wildflowers, and small scrub weeds. But something stood out just ahead, a black SUV parked on the roadside. Coming alongside the vehicle, Billings turned his head, looking closely as they passed. The glass and windows were darkly tinted, and the vehicle suddenly lurched into motion, pulling onto the road.

Billings spoke first, "This may be trouble."

Warren agreed. He slipped the .45 Sig out, holding it under the backpack.

The driver noted the men's expression when the car pulled behind them. This only added to his perplexity with the passengers crowded and holding luggage in the back seat. He looked in the rearview mirror repeatedly as they approached the destination. The dark vehicle kept back a few car lengths as they neared the landing. Billings reached toward the driver, handing him a large bill.

"This should cover the tab. The people in the car may mean us harm. Pull up next to the building, and once we're out, leave quickly."

The driver took the bill, stuffing it in his shirt pocket, as he made a tight turn on the gravel, stopping at the corner of the cinder block building that served as an office and storage facility. Shielded by the vehicle, Billings opened the car door, grabbing the girl's hand, pulling her out as Warren followed. Billings stopped, placing Myra's hand in Warren's.

"Take her inside. I'll cover the SUV."

The pair crossed the front of the building, opening the door and going inside, finding themselves in a small room with a single window overlooking the lake. A lone middle-aged man looked up from a counter, scattered with papers, reading a black leather book.

"Can I help you?"

Outside, Billings saw the dark SUV stopping in the middle of the road about a hundred yards back. Three men got out; two were tall and young looking, and the third was shorter and older. They appeared to have guns. As the Subaru began to leave, Billings stepped from the side of the building, pounding on the window, halting the car.

The taxi driver shouted, "What is it?"

"No time! Park beside the building and get out."

The man wheeled the car around, pulling up, stopping at right angles to the edge of the building. The driver got out, running toward where Billings was pressed against the corner of the wall. The man fell as a gunshot sounded across the tundra. Billings dropped to a crouch, stepping out, grabbing the man's collar, and dragging him back behind the edge of the building. The top of the man's shirt had blood, an entry hole in the right shoulder and torn flesh at the upper back. Although in extreme pain, the man stood up as Billings pulled him to the wall, then Warren appeared.

Billings spoke hurriedly, "I see three men." Indicating the wounded man, he continued, "They have a rifle"—he looked at the young man's wound—"probably a .223."

The driver had been hit at the top of his right arm, the bullet missing the bone but careening through flesh, damaging the back of his shoulder. Blood was spreading on his shirt.

"Get him inside. Have Myra do what she can, and get back."



“The station manager’s here. I’ll see if he can help.”

Warren assisted the wounded man, both staying close to the wall, rushing to the entrance, and passing through the door where the girl stood with the station manager. The man looked aghast, asking what happened as he and the girl helped Warren lay the driver on a small couch, feet dangling over the armrest.

The manager looked to the injured man, taking the girl’s hand, pressing it on where blood was flowing.

“Push firmly to stop the bleeding. I’ll get an aid kit.”

But Warren stopped him. “You need to know what this is. Three men mean to kill us, all of us.”

The man stared with disbelief as the girl watched.

“They’re after me. I was held at Dama Sasha’s House, and this man helped me escape.”

Warren pulled out his state license, holding it up. “I’m Race Warren. No time to explain.”

The girl’s words and Warren’s identification brought an instant change to the man’s face. “I’m Eddie Paschal, caretaker here.”

“Do you have weapons?” Warren was almost frantic.

“A rifle. I’ll get it.”

The older man turned, stepping to the back wall, reaching beside a file cabinet, and pulling out a scoped .308 hunting rifle. He brought it back, holding it up.

“It’s loaded, a five-shot magazine.”

Warren reached out. “May I?”

Paschal nodded, handing him the rifle. Warren opened the bolt enough to see a chambered round, then slammed it shut and rushed outside.

Billings was crouched hard against the corner of the building as Warren came up beside him.

“I got this inside.”

Then they heard a man on the road, calling out. He spoke clearly in a slight accent. “We’re here for the girl. She belongs to us. Give her up, and we’ll let you go.”

Billings placed his pistol in the holster, taking the rifle. He took it without changing position, staying low against the edge of the

building, high enough to see the road. He swung the weapon up with the scope at eye level. Now he saw clearly. The two younger men, looking like twins, were in close-fitting black suits, one pressed against the right side of the SUV, the other crouched against the left front. Both had handguns extended and ready. The shorter, older man stood on the driver’s side, holding an AK-74 with a miniscope. He was obviously in charge and had made the demands. Even now, he shouted again.

“You’re blocked. There’s no way out. You’ve got fifteen minutes to give us the girl, then we’re coming in.”

Billings lowered the rifle, staring blanky for a moment, and looked at his watch. Then he turned to his companion. “Ask the man inside when the plane is coming and radio them not to land. See if he knows a way out.”

Warren held his friend’s eyes for several moments. Then he turned with the pistol and ran in a crouch to the door, reentering the building.

Myra and Paschal were huddled over the driver who was alert and lucid but grimacing. A first aid kit lay open on a table. A gauze bandage covered the man’s wound, and the girl had her hand pressed hard against it.

“The bleeding has about stopped. If we only had something for pain.”

The girl was quite sympathetic for the young driver, but both she and the station attendant were anxious about what was next.

Warren told them what the gunman had said, they wanted Myra back, had given them fifteen minutes, then would attack. Hearing this, the girl became upset, almost in tears.

Warren calmed her. “You’re all right. We won’t let them take you.”

He turned to the attendant, asking about the aircraft that should have already arrived.

“The plane is running late. It’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

“Call them. The men outside mean to kill us, and the plane will be in danger. Tell them not to land.”

Paschal went to a radio set on a small desk in the back where he sat down, adjusting controls, picking up the handset, and making the call sign for the aircraft. He called out the short notification repeatedly, clicking a switch each time, listening for an answer. Hearing the captain's voice, he gave the situation on the ground, warning of the danger. The pilot began speaking, saying if he couldn't land, he would have to return to Fairbanks, but Paschal knew the plane was their only hope.

"Wait."

With the road blocked, there was no way out. It was barren land, open with no cover; gunmen in an all-wheel SUV could easily overtake them if they tried to get across the tundra. The aircraft was their only chance but would be an easy target for someone with a rifle.

Then Paschal thought of something risky that might work.

"Hold altitude and enter a holding pattern. I think there's a way for you to land. I'll get back."

Going over his idea, he looked around the room. The girl was with the wounded man, seeing that bandages were in place and bleeding was in check, talking softly to help him with the pain. The young man was grimacing, occasionally making a groan. It was time to act.

Paschal dropped the handheld transceiver on the desk and rushed to the front of the room, through the doorway toward the corner of the building where Billings and Warren were kneeling behind the front of the taxi.

Billings turned and shouted.

"Stay down!"

The older man crouched behind them just as they heard a sound in the sky. They looked up, seeing the de Havilland Beaver high, making a low wavering sound, holding altitude in a long, wide circle.

Billings said, "There's our plane." Then, he looked at Paschal. "You told them not to land?"

"For now, but I think there's a way out."

Now Warren looked too. Even as they listened, they glanced at the road where three gunmen were counting down seconds.

Paschal explained there was little chance where they were, the dock and facilities offering scant protection. Only the station building and the aviation fuel tank provided any cover. Fleeing over the barren tundra would be useless; men in an all-wheel SUV would quickly overtake them. With just the hunting rifle and handguns, making a stand at the station would only postpone the inevitable. The plane was their only hope, but landing would put it in range, allowing it to be picked off by the gunmen. There was another way.

Paschal explained. He would dump aviation fuel from the storage tank behind the building and divert it to the lake, setting it afire to make smoke that might partially hide the plane's landing. This sounded complex, but there was no time for debate. Billings looked at Warren, whose eyes told him he agreed with the plan. Time was short; fifteen minutes was nearly up. Billings turned to Paschal.

"Do it. We'll hold them off as long as we can."

As Paschal turned back, Billings looked through the rifle scope, seeing something that raised even more concern. The men on the road were moving. The older, shorter man had opened the back of the vehicle, unloading something, pulling out a different weapon, heavy, long, with a folded bipod under the barrel. As best he could tell, it was a sniper rifle.

Billings handed the scoped weapon to his companion. "Take a look. What do you see?"

Warren shouldered the rifle, the view piece to his eye. He was quiet for a moment, then replied, "They're bringing out the heavy stuff. Looks like a .50 cal. Barrett."

"You're right. I wanted you to know what we're up against."

Then they heard the man on the road, calling, "Your time's up. If you don't give us the girl, we're coming in."

Billings did not reply but held position, kneeling tightly against the edge of the building, the .308 shouldered and aimed toward the road, waiting.

Meanwhile, Paschal was on the other side of the facility in front of a long bin like a storage trunk built on the side of the building. The equipment box held various tools and parts for station upkeep. He opened it, tilting the lid against the wall, and began looking

inside. He found what he needed, two twelve-foot sections of flexible connector pipe. The metallic hoses had quick disconnects fitted at the ends, designed to be joined into flexible pipe long enough to transfer fuel from a tanker truck to the reservoir tank. But Paschal had a different purpose at the moment.

He reached down, grasping the end of a pipe section, pulling it out over the edge, clear of the storage box. He dragged it across the ground until next to the fuel tank. A drain valve stuck out near the bottom of the vessel. He hoisted the end of the flex-pipe to the face of the spigot, shifting the mating ring of the hose until it was flush with the valve and firmly seated; he closed the lever, clamping the fitting, sealing the connection. He went back to the storage bin for the other section, pulling it along the ground to the first one, connecting the two. Looking over the pipe, from the storage tank to its end, extending toward the lake, Paschal felt it would reach.

He walked to the pipe's open end, picking it up and dragging it to the nearby ditch, dropping it into the trench. He stood looking at the lengthy connection, pausing for a moment, feeling tired. Catching his breath, he turned and went back to the tank. Now he needed to release fuel oil through the pipe to the drainage ditch where it would flow to the lake. Grasping the valve handle, he twisted to open it, but it wouldn't turn. He tried both hands, changing his position, trying a better angle, but the valve would not give. He had to try something else.

He went back to the storage bin and looked inside for anything that might force the spigot. Stirring about, shuffling through tools and equipment, he found a large pipe wrench. He picked up the bulky iron, took it back to the tank, and adjusted the jaws of the tool until it fit snugly around the valve handle. He set the wrench in place and pulled hard, feeling the iron teeth tighten around the handwheel, then straining his arms, it turned, opening the spigot, the pipe now rippling with initial flow. He took off the wrench, laying it aside, turning the valve by hand until fully open. He looked at the end of the pipe where fuel oil was gushing out, dashing into the ditch, rising a moment, subsiding, and flowing rapidly down the

trench, spilling into the lake. Soon an oily sheen spread, covering a wide swath of water just beyond the dock.

A gunshot then a loud boom concussed the air, resounding across the tundra. Simultaneously, Paschal heard a sharp crack from behind, a hole blasting from the building then the high-pitched whine of something zipping the air like an angry insect. He rushed to the corner of the structure, stopping momentarily to look. Billings was half kneeling at the other end, sheltered behind the front of the car. Paschal ran in a crouch, coming up just behind.

"What is it?"

Billings turned. "They're using heavy weapons. Warren's inside, keeping the driver and girl down. Is your plan working?"

"Fuel's going to the lake. Should make a good screen once it's lit. Wind is from the southwest. It'll send smoke toward the road. I'll radio the plane to land when the smoke is up."

Then another loud blast came from the road, a heavy round zipping just over their heads, shaking the structure, debris flying from a sudden hole in the wall. This was accompanied by a series of smaller rounds striking the car and cinder block office.

As Billings looked through the scope, he heard Paschal rushing away, going into the building. The ex-cop had shifted firing position, now kneeling, with the front of the car as a shield and to avoid exposure, he was handling the rifle with his left hand. It was good he was ambidextrous with weapons. He was waiting for a clear shot on the road. So far, the three gunmen were staying down. The man with the .50 caliber was partly concealed on the right side of the SUV. Billings could see the muzzle blast with each shot. Looking through the eyepiece, a worrying thought popped in his head. *Was his scope properly sighted?* He didn't know and wouldn't think of it. When it was time, he would set the reticle for a correct sight picture and squeeze the trigger.

Meanwhile, Paschal was inside, staying down. He had gone back to the wounded man, now on the floor as everyone was low to avoid the heavy rounds coming through the cinder block walls. The girl too was on the floor with Warren beside her, kneeling, warning them to keep down, just as another round smashed through the building,

shattering a wall plaque to fragments, making high-pitched sounds striking other objects, ending with a sharp snap, passing through the far wall. Paschal got down, half crawling over to Warren.

“Fuel oil’s discharging in the lake. I’ll radio the plane to wait for the flames, then land behind the smoke. We need to be ready to leave once it gets to shore.”

Warren nodded he understood, helping the wounded driver and girl crawl to the door where he placed the packs and satchels, ready for departure. The older man made his way to the radio at the back of the room. Staying low, pulling the handset from the table, Paschal clicked the transmit key.

“S-B Seven, this is Nuiqsut ground. How’s your fuel?” He switched to receive and listened.

“Eddie, you know me. The auxiliary tank is full, enough to get a light load to Fairbanks.”

“We’re full today. Five passengers. But forget that, just think about getting out of Nuiqsut in one piece. About to light fuel. Land behind the screen of smoke. Try to avoid gunfire from SUV on road. Look for us on shore.”

“Over and out.”

Paschal lay the transceiver on the floor and paused, searching his mind to be sure everything was ready. Knowing the facility and lay of the land, he had come up with the only way they might escape. Now he wanted to be sure nothing was left out that might doom their chances. He sidled to the wall, reaching a shelf, making a fast grab for the box of matches, then dropped down and began a half crawl to the front, hearing small rounds hit the building and another heavy bullet pierce both walls. The large rounds terrified them, keeping them flat on the floor. Paschal moved as fast as he could, crawling to where the three sprawled at the entrance.

“Once the fuel is lit, get on the other side of the smokescreen fast, and wait at the water.”

Warren said he would alert Billings.

Meanwhile, Billings was growing tired, his limbs starting to ache pressed against the left front of the car. The three men on the road had not moved; the leader continued firing the sniper rifle from

the right of the SUV while another was using an AK from the left. The third man had disappeared. Was he trying to flank the station? That didn’t seem possible; the land was too flat and open. Billings thought his best target was the man with the AK if he would only show himself. Presently, the man was flattened against the vehicle, shooting from his left shoulder. But he seemed the only possible hit, so Billings steadied the rifle, fixing the scope reticle on the partial figure, like a faint smudge on the side of the SUV, and waited.

Then the man moved slightly from the car, reaching down for a fresh magazine, looking now like a small stick figure beside the vehicle. Billings moved the aim point to the center of mass, holding the rifle firm against the car, letting out a half breath, slowly squeezing the trigger.

The gun blast smacked his ears as he saw the man jerk back limply, sprawling on the ground beside the SUV. Billings worked the bolt, chambering a fresh round, steadying the rifle for another shot. Seeing the figure, spread and unmoving on the road, he figured the man was dead. He shifted the rifle, peering through the scope, looking for any movement. But all was strangely quiet. He wondered about his companions and the escape plan.

Then he felt a tap on his shoulder, hearing Warren’s words mixed with acute ringing from the shot. Now Billings felt better, knowing steps were in place, and they were about to leave. All that was needed now was for him to watch the road.

He shifted the rifle, peering through the rifle scope; the man with the Barrett was still on the right side, only the barrel showing at the top of the car. At that moment the gun fired, a spurt of flame appearing for an instant at the end, and separate jets spouting from ports of the muzzle brake. There was a loud boom, a resounding blast across the tundra as Billings and Warren heard a high-pitched zip through the air just before the heavy round hit the wall inches above their heads. Then a different sound was heard behind, beyond the building, like a rushing wind.

Just moments before, Paschal had gone to the storage bin and pulled out a dowel and a cleaning cloth, wrapping the rag tightly around the stick’s end, tying it snug with a piece of string. He kept

his head low; a heavy gun was sending big rounds through walls like they were paper. Although the split-second sounds were like angry hornets, he knew the unseen projectiles could dismember a man in an instant.

Crouching low, he hurried to where the pipe was pouring fuel in the ditch, plunging the stick in the liquid, rolling the knotted cloth, soaking it with petrol. Now he made his way toward the lake, stopping about six yards from shore. An oily sheen covered the water from the dock over thirty feet along the shoreline and an equal distance into the lake. Overhead, at a thousand feet, the droning of the de Havilland Beaver was heard, the plane moving lazily in a wide circle.

What he was doing was their only chance. Almost kneeling, with the torch in one hand, he reached in his pocket, fumbling for the box, laying it on the ground. He took a match, striking the holder, lighting it. He reached over, touching the light to the knotted rag, setting it afire.

To throw the incendiary to the lake and ignite the oil patch, Paschal would have to stand up. With no time to lose, he rose to his feet, leaning back, and sent the torch flying, end over end, landing several yards from shore, vanishing in the water. For a moment, nothing happened, then a flame appeared, growing slowly, spreading into a wall of fire, immediately swelling to roiling currents of air, like a sudden storm, swirling and rising with the sound of rushing wind. Billows of smoke, thick and black, rolled from the flames, spreading and ascending the sky. High above, the droning sound changed, rising in pitch, as the aircraft broke from the holding pattern, moving rapidly to another point in the sky for a landing approach. The plane would come from the southeast in a descent that would bring it to a touchdown on the water behind the smokescreen.

Paschal fell back, turning toward the building. Seeing the girl and wounded man coming, he rushed to meet them. He reached out, placing the man's uninjured arm over his shoulder and holding his waist, leading the two around the back of the building, passing the fuel tank to reach the ditch above the burning oil. On their left, flames licked the air as fuel poured from the pipe, burning liquid

flowing through the ditch to the lake. Paschal helped the two cross the upper trench, continuing in a wide sweep, avoiding the conflagration, going to the lakeshore where he expected the plane would pick them up.

Hearing torrents of air, Billings and Warren turned to see a whirlwind of flame and smoke rising on the lake beyond the dock. That was the signal for the aircraft to land. Even now they heard the changing sound of the droning plane as the craft left the holding pattern, moving to a different part of the sky to start the descent.

Knowing this was a critical moment, Billings leaned toward Warren.

"I got the one with the AK-74. The fifty is still in action. The plane will be an easy target until behind the smoke. Put as much lead their way as possible."

Warren nodded and both men began firing. Billings made precise shots toward the right side of the SUV where he saw the ringleader pulling the large Barrett rifle back and setting it atop the vehicle. The gunman was changing position to target the plane as the craft began the landing approach. The shooter was crouched low, but the heavy rifle was in plain view, now nearly perpendicular to Billings's shots. Billings fired once then realized he had to reload. Fortunately, Paschal had left a pouch of magazines. He dropped the rifle to the ground, releasing the clip and snapping in a fresh one. Then he returned to a shooter's stance, sending aimed shots careening across the top of the vehicle on the road. Meanwhile, Warren was firing his handgun in the same direction. Their best hope was to disrupt the .50 caliber fire to protect the plane. A solid hit from the heavy rifle would knock the aircraft from the sky.

Now the plane was making its descent, gradually coming lower, lined up to touch down on the far side of the lake, the pilot aiming south of the smoke barrier. If the Russians were going to down the plane, they would have to do it in the minute before the craft reached the protective screen.

The heavy rifle boomed as the man behind the SUV fired, shifting position slightly, adjusting aim. The plane was no more than a thousand yards off; its size and slow descent made it an easy tar-

get. But then, a shot from Billings .308 struck the barrel shroud of the Russian's weapon, bullet fragments flying, knocking it over, the shooter losing balance, falling to the ground, the heavy rifle dropping with him. His companion, concealed beside the front right of the SUV, continued firing a handgun.

With the danger ended for the moment, the defenders at the building held their fire. Billings, still concerned about the threat from the .50 cal. Barrett, paused to consider their next move. As Warren continued taking shots, Billings looked back, seeing the floatplane descending, reaching the protective cover of smoke where it touched water, skipping over the lake for perhaps fifty yards before settling in a smooth motion, heading for shore.

Then the small car shook violently, a heavy round smashing the engine block. Then another, the front of the vehicle shaking and heaving. With the plane hidden by smoke, the Russian had changed position, now firing on Billings and Warren. The ex-cop knew a few more rounds from the Barrett would crumble their defenses and kill them, but with the aircraft landed, it was time to go. Billings turned to Warren.

"Get the others to the plane. I'll cover us a couple minutes then join you."

Warren turned, staying close to the ground, running along the front of the building, disappearing around the corner. Billings lifted the rifle, looking through the scope, and squeezed a shot that hit the top of the SUV. He had just fired when a hole appeared in the front of the car, the large slug whistling through the wall behind him. He lowered the rifle enough to work the bolt, chambering another round, and began lifting the weapon for another shot when it left his hands, his exposed arm jerked back, throwing him to the ground. His arm was awash in blood where the .50 caliber bullet had smashed through muscle, nicking the bone just above the elbow. Nothing was broken, and Billings immediately ripped his shirt off and tied a makeshift bandage around the wound, knotting the end, pulling it tight with his teeth. This was a sign to leave. Slipping the magazine pouch over his shoulder, he picked up the rifle, beginning a half crawl across the front of the building, and, once around the corner, raised to a half

crouch, making a run behind the fuel tank, feeling the heat of fire rising from the ditch, the burning stream flowing to the lake where the conflagration was churning the water, flames rising ten feet in the air amid rolling billows of black smoke. Running low, his left arm hanging, Billings pulled the rifle by the barrel, dragging the ground.

Straight ahead, bobbing near the shore, the floatplane was safe. The pilot had cut the engine and jumped into waist-deep water, tugging a pontoon rope, pulling the craft around for takeoff. Paschal had gone into the water, helping the wounded man to the plane, Myra on the other side, assisting. Warren was at water's edge, Sig Sauer at the ready, waiting for Billings.

After swinging the plane toward the center of the lake, the pilot handed the rope to Paschal, saying to keep the craft steady, then hoisted himself on the pontoon, raising himself up, gripping struts as he clambered back to the cabin door. With a rope in one hand, Paschal lifted the cab driver on the pontoon with Myra's help, but the injured man faltered, starting to fall. Paschal dropped the rope and pulled himself on the float, raising up and turning, holding a strut, bending, and reaching for the man, pulling him from the water as the girl pushed from behind. The young man screamed in pain as Paschal laid him against the float strut.

"Hold on. Don't let go!"

Paschal turned, stepping up the crossbars of the struts to the passenger door, swinging it open, then stepping back to the injured man.

"There are two steps to the cabin. I'll hold you. Grab the brace above your head, and you can make it."

With Paschal supporting him, the man reached up, grabbing the wing strut, then stepping on the cross-links, struggled into the cabin. Paschal got in, helping him to the far seat then turned back. The girl had dragged herself onto the float where she was kneeling.

Meanwhile, the plane had drifted out of position. The pilot shouted.

"Get the rope and point us on the lake!"

Paschal looked. The plane had floated sideways. He stepped down the crossbars to the girl.

“Get inside and buckle up. We’re almost ready for takeoff.”

He jumped in the lake, pushing through the water to the rope, grabbing it and pulling tight, then, leaning forward, pushed against the water, tugging the line until the plane was set for takeoff.

Warren had been watching the others mount the plane while keeping an eye for Billings. He saw his friend in the distance, approaching awkwardly; something was wrong. He was moving slowly, left arm hanging limp, his right hand dragging the rifle. He had lost a lot of blood and, with a lot of ground to cover, needed help.

Warren headed toward him, breaking into a run. Billings saw his friend coming. He wanted to walk faster but was growing faint. He saw Warren stop fifty yards away, pointing the gun toward him and shouting.

“Get down!”

Billings dropped to the ground as Warren fired. He heard bullets splitting the air overhead. Then there was another sound from behind, the telltale shots of an AK-74 rifle. Staying flat, he twisted around, pulling the .308 close. He saw a Russian, tall and dark, who had followed and just crossed the upper ditch, and now was about sixty yards back, taking aimed shots with the assault rifle. Warren’s pistol fire was spouting earth harmlessly around the shooter. The Russian would likely bring down his foe any moment.

Billings ignored pain cutting his left arm, bringing the rifle to alignment just off the ground, and fired. The round struck the Russian like a fist in the midsection, bending him over, the rifle falling, and the man crumpling to the ground. Billings struggled to his feet, keeping his rifle toward his adversary, although he was certain the man had been hit hard. Hearing footfalls behind, he turned as Warren ran up.

“You’ve been hit. Let me get you to the plane.”

Billings turned back toward the fallen Russian. “Wait. Let’s check the downed man first.”

Warren made a pained expression like it was a bad idea. “You’re hurt bad. Get to the plane.”

Billings knew time was short, and the Russian with the heavy rifle was still a threat.

“Okay, I’ll head to the plane, but you go and check him out.”

Warren thought it unwise; his friend was pale and weak and might not make it to the aircraft. But Billings had already turned, walking slowly toward the lake. Warren immediately ran toward where the gunman lay still. Getting close, he approached cautiously with arms extended, holding his gun pointed at the figure on the ground.

The man was alive, breathing heavily, gasping for air, a pool of blood spreading under him. The AK-74 lay at his feet. Keeping his pistol on the man, Warren used his foot to kick the rifle away. He stepped closer, checking the man head to foot. There was no sign of other weapons. The man’s face was ashen, a trickle of blood at his mouth. Warren stooped down, patting the man’s clothing, checking pockets, loosening a button to open the jacket, checking inside, finding only a cell phone which he pocketed. The man was taking short breaths, rolling his head to the side to see who was there. Warren looked into the expressionless eyes, feeling sympathy for the dying man.

“It doesn’t look good.”

That was all he could say. The man had only moments to live. He didn’t expect him to answer. The man had just tried to kill Warren, and now the two were face-to-face, he kneeling over the other, eyes looking directly in his. He could do nothing but wait in silence; to turn and go seemed disrespectful. It didn’t seem right to die alone.

The man began to stir, his head rising to speak.

“Amorok.”

Warren leaned closer. “What?”

The man’s head fell back, his eyes now inert and his body still. Warren stood, turning to go. He stepped to where the assault rifle lay and picked it up. Seeing it empty, he threw it down and began running toward the lake. From time to time, he looked back. The last Russian with the .50 cal. was still out there, but he saw no one. Looking ahead, he saw Billings stumbling toward the shoreline, hardly able to stand. Warren caught up, taking the rifle, slinging it

over his shoulder, and reaching under his friend's good arm as support, reaching the lake, pushing through the water, trying to get to the floatplane preparing for takeoff. The engine was idling, the propeller making a lazy spin, and Paschal was crouched on the pontoon, waiting.

Moving through waist-deep water, Warren struggled with Billings, trying to keep him upright, but he was growing weak and starting to falter. At last, they reached the plane where Warren propped his friend on the pontoon, Paschal reaching down, grabbing the man's good arm. He began pulling him up as Warren held Billings's waist, both managing to get him on the pontoon where Billings collapsed against the strut frame. Warren passed the rifle to the station manager who placed it in the aircraft. With Paschal in the open door, he and Warren struggled with the wounded man, hoisting him into the plane, laying him on a seat.

The injured taxi driver, already in the back with seat belt secure, watched as Myra stood close to help Billings. He was conscious but quite weak, struggling to stand as the others helped him to a back seat beside the wounded driver. Warren closed the passenger door, turning to the pilot.

"We're all in, and the door's shut."

The pilot turned, considering where to seat passengers to balance the weight. Paschal had told him by radio there would be five on the flight. He looked at Myra.

"Young lady, sit here, upfront."

As the girl clambered forward, squeezing between the two front seats for the copilot spot, the captain gave final instructions.

"Everyone, put on headsets, take your places, and fasten seat belts."

Warren sat down directly behind the pilot. With the transceiver at his ears, he spoke to the captain.

"Take off quick. We're still in danger!"

"There's a full load. It'll be an effort to get in the air."

"Keep behind the smoke as long as you can and avoid the northwest shore."

The pilot throttled the engine, bringing the plane on a north-east heading, then pushed the control to the limit, the motor quickly at maximum rotation, becoming deafening as the craft began moving, rolling over slight swells in the water. On the left, a towering wall of flame poured dark smoke in the air. Moving deeper into the lake, the aircraft slowly gained speed. Everyone shrank in their seats as they neared the open when the sniper would have a clear shot.

Passing the edge of the flame barrier, the plane rose from the water, climbing slowly as the pilot veered east, holding the control bar in a delicate balance of measured pressure with restraint, trying to avoid stalling. The craft was banking right, struggling to stay in the air.

Tilted at an angle, Warren saw nothing but sky from the window at his left. Turning to the right, he looked down past the taxi driver, seeing through the side glass the surface of the water very close. Now airborne, the captain was trying to evade the threat on the ground, using the aircraft's full power to turn rather than gain altitude.

A shudder coursed through the airframe, becoming a constant rattling as the plane seemed about to break apart. The pilot was pushing the de Havilland at the limit.

Then a sharp crash broke through the cabin, two sounds, almost simultaneous, a heavy bullet smashing through, entering the port underbelly and exiting the upper right side, accompanied by a loud boom from below. The round came through at Warren's feet, missing him a hair's breadth, exiting above the glass of the right-side door. Then the only sound was the aircraft engine at full power, the plane convulsing, every rivet straining.

A sharp clang outside and boom from below meant the plane was hit again, but nothing inside was disturbed. Now on an eastward heading, the craft leveled off at a thousand feet, the pilot beginning a slow climb to cruising altitude.

Concerned with the bullet strike, Warren called to the pilot. "Did the last shot cause damage?"

"The indicators look okay. If anything changes, I'll let you know."



“Assuming we’re okay, can we get to Fairbanks?”

“Luckily, the spare tank’s full. It’ll be close, but we might make it.”

Now out of range from gunfire, the aircraft apparently with just slight damage, the pilot and passengers breathed easier.

## 16



### RUSSIAN PURSUIT

**T**he plane was quiet, the drone of the engine the only sound. The captain stared at the dials and lights on the control panel. But the indicators were normal, and the aircraft was performing well. He turned his attention to the passengers. “There’s a first aid kit in back. I’ll radio ahead for an ambulance.”

Warren turned, but the station manager was already out of his seat, removing the medical box from the wall. Paschal was a qualified medic, and he and Myra had helped the driver at the station, bandaging his shoulder and putting his arm in a sling. Now it was Billings’s turn.

Paschal put the case on the floor, opening it and shuffling through contents. He took out surgical scissors and antiseptic and began working, cutting away the piece of shirt knotted on Billings’s arm. Removing the makeshift bandage brought bleeding back. Paschal was worried at the damage; part of the upper arm looked torn away. Fortunately, the artery was not severed, but the man might require surgery to restore the use of the limb.

Swabbing a large gauze with antiseptic, he said, “This will hurt.”

He daubed the wound, pulling back and pressing again, looking for foreign debris. Billings winced, moaning, too weak to do more. Paschal placed a small basin under the elbow then doused the wound with antiseptic, flushing the tissue, the liquid flowing into the basin. He got fresh gauze, daubing the area, drying it as much as he could

then placing a bandage where blood was seeping, applying pressure to stop the flow, and wrapping surgical tape around the arm. He covered the wound with cotton gauze, uncoiling a rolled bandage around the limb until firmly wrapped. Finally, he fitted a sling, looping it around the man's neck to hold the arm in place.

He looked at Warren. "That's the best we can do till he gets to the hospital."

Noting Billings's ashen face and parched lips, Paschal asked the captain if they had water. The pilot said a supply crate was strapped in the back. Seeing the container behind the seat, Paschal went back, raising the lid to find emergency freeze-dried food and bottled water. He got a bottle, going to Billings, and holding it to his lips. Groggy and semiresponsive, he immediately began taking sips and would have drunk it all if the station manager had not pulled away, saying to slow down.

Paschal paused for a moment, looking at Billings. He pulled a thermometer from the medical kit, tore off the wrapper, shook it vigorously, and thrust it in the man's mouth.

"Hold this under your tongue. Billings, listen!"

At last, he complied, the end of the glass tube in place.

"Close and hold tight for a minute."

Billings seemed half conscious but did as he was told.

Paschal checked it. The reading was normal. He placed his thumb and index finger lightly on Billings's wrist, feeling the pulse while looking at his watch, and counted breaths over the span of a minute. Then he pulled a card from his shirt pocket, writing his findings. He would do it again in twenty minutes. He looked at the others.

"His temperature is normal, but heart rate and breathing are elevated. He lost a lot of blood but should make it to the hospital."

There was brief silence, then the pilot spoke up, "Eddie, you've known me a long time and may remember when I had the reserve tank installed."

"That was years ago, and today is probably the first time you ever used it."

"No, there was another time, a fuel shortage at a landing site. But today was different, quite different."

"Yes, all you could do was land, turn around, and take off."

They had been in the air for half an hour and were no longer in danger. Paschal had done all he could for Billings. Now he thought of the aircraft.

"Instruments normal?"

The pilot was continually scanning the gauges. "The indicators look good. That last shot must have just nicked the frame."

As ground manager, Paschal was responsible for the facility. He regretted the damage done, but when the station was attacked, people's lives were at stake, and he had done what he could to save them. There had been no time to figure a response; he had acted more on instinct than reason. The outcome was better than expected. Two injuries were bad, but they were alive and stable. They were all safe in the air and out of danger. Once in Fairbanks, the wounded would get medical care and likely fully recover.

It was now quiet in the cabin. Myra, in front, had said nothing since boarding. The injured driver had been silent and lapsed into sleep after the plane reached cruising altitude. In the seat behind, Billings was also asleep, but his erratic breathing, rapid, shallow breaths, bothered Paschal, seated across from him.

Everyone wore headsets, except for Billings, blocking most of the engine sound, but there were still vibrations through the airframe and seats.

Warren had been silent since they reached altitude. He was thinking of Nuiqsut. It was good he'd gone to the Dark Moon. They'd got Myra out. Remarkably, she had trusted them, asking two strangers for help. Although much younger, he felt kindly toward her even though they'd just met. And he mustn't forget Kate; he still needed to call and apologize. Suddenly very tired, he fell asleep.

Warren heard distant voices, then remembered he was on the plane. The pilot was talking with traffic control, approaching Fairbanks.

"Fuel almost gone. Must land at once."

The airport was at the southwest corner of the city, the runways at an angle just north of the Tanana River. The controller directed the pilot to fly on a heading from the west to land on a narrow lake, known locally as the float pond.

Warren saw the city ahead, the Chena River, a thin line winding through the center of town then joining a bigger river, the two streams bordering the airport. The scene fell away, drifting left as the plane turned southwest, moving to a point where the craft would start the approach for landing. Again, the Chena River came in view, narrow and tortuous, snaking down to a juncture with the Tanana. The plane began a sharp turn, the starboard side tilting high as the aircraft banked left; Warren felt pressed against the door panel. Above him to the right, the injured driver shifted inside the restraint of the seat strap but stayed asleep.

The plane began to level, coming on a straight path in the final landing approach, a heading that would put the craft down on water between two runways, at the north end of the airport.

“The gauge shows empty; must be running on fumes.” The pilot was talking to no one in particular.

Warren looked ahead, the airport spreading out below, the lake they were approaching looking like a comb with a few large teeth at the ends. It was no different than his recent arrival from Anchorage. With the flight nearing end, no one had spoken except for the captain, who was inclined to say whatever came to mind. But now he was silent, holding the aircraft on a steady descent, adjacent runways sliding away, framing the lake, which was growing bigger, coming closer, rushing toward them, the water reaching out and sliding underneath, taking the plane, pontoons creasing the surface as waves churned into spray falling to the sides, the craft slowing in a steady motion, heading for a slip, one of several inlets for docking and parking.

Warren felt relief, safe at Fairbanks. The three-hour flight left him stiff. He had dozed in and out of fitful sleep. With the joint communication system, he would have had no private conversation, but he wished he could talk to Billings, who lay quietly in the rear seat on the other side. The man was in pain, and while not unconscious, he was mentally and emotionally adrift.

Warren’s thoughts flitted about. Too much had happened. Coming to Alaska, he had lived more violence than most investigators in a lifetime. He couldn’t get his mind off Nuiqsut. It was bad that others were killed, but it was the only way they got to the plane alive. He was grateful Billings had done it, and not him. The post office killing had stayed with him, a constant presence, like a heavy weight, never lifting.

The plane taxied across the waterway to the side of the lake, turning into a stub inlet where an emergency vehicle waited on shore, lights flashing. The pilot cut the engine, and the aircraft coasted to a small dock. A man at the landing leaned out, extending a pole with a prong hook to catch the pontoon braces, pulling the craft in, grabbing the rope, and tugging until the plane was secure at the quay.

The pilot, Warren, and Paschal exited on the left, clambering over the floats to the opposite side to help the others leave the plane. Warren and Paschal got the injured driver out first, helping him over the starboard pontoon to the dock where the pilot waited. The young man declined his assistance, walking unaided to the ambulance. Next, the two men took care with Billings, who moved unsteadily across the float to the landing where the pilot reached out, the three men helping him to the dock. He stood for a moment to get his balance then began walking slowly to the ambulance, Paschal on one side and Warren on the other. The pilot turned to the aircraft door and helped the girl, stepping to the pontoon and then to the landing. Meanwhile, the dockhand had gotten the luggage, putting the packs and bags on a cart, and rolling the carrier from the quay toward the office. Warren and Paschal stood silently as the medical personnel loaded the patients, got into the vehicle, and drove away.

As the pilot and girl walked up, Warren turned to them. “They’re being taken to the memorial hospital at center of town.”

The pilot spoke next. “We can wait at the office across the road. There’s coffee while we get started.”

All four knew there was much to do. They walked silently to the flight office where Paschal and the pilot would have to complete lengthy reports on the events at Nuiqsut. Once in the building, the two flight employees went to a back room while Warren and the girl

sat down in the waiting area. There was no one else except a young man behind a counter, staring at a computer screen. A small table to the side held a coffeepot and a stack of plastic cups.

Warren meant to call Kate, but he first wanted to settle his nerves and think things through. He had been shaken by what happened and wanted to be clearheaded before calling. Yet the girl beside him had been through much worse.

“Myra, what’s next for you?”

She was staring in space. “My mother’s in Anchorage. By now, my aunt has called. I want to go home.”

Warren knew they were still under threat from the Russians. The girl would likely be a witness in a prosecution and needed under police protection. Meanwhile, he was in charge; Billings was incapacitated and in the hospital. Myra had asked for help, and he would not abandon her.

“Let’s go slow. We’re not out of danger yet. You need to stay with me until the authorities have charge, and you’re protected.”

The two were quiet for a time. She had not objected; that reassured him. Perhaps she understood better than he thought because it was then that Warren felt her hand slip over his. She was ten years younger, and he felt no more than an obligation to help. The touch simply acknowledged what he said: She agreed and accepted him as her protector. It was a simple gesture, lasting a moment before she took back her hand.

Paschal entered the room, approaching the two on the couch. “I’ve talked with the police. They’re contacting the North Slope Borough. An officer from Utqiagvik will fly in to speak with us. Meanwhile, a local policeman is coming over with questions. We should stay put for now.”

Warren stood up, taking Paschal aside. “May I borrow your cell phone? Mine is unusable.”

Paschal was glad to help, handing him the phone, turning, and going back to the office. Warren put it in his pocket then looked at Myra. “Would you like some coffee?”

She managed a faint smile and nodded. He walked to a pot of brew, kept warm on a nearby table. He filled two cups and returned

to the couch, handing one to the girl, who thanked him. Other than water on the plane, she had had nothing to eat or drink since morning at her aunt’s house. She had grown drowsy toward the end of the flight and felt no better since landing. She took a sip of the dark liquid, finding it acceptable.

“Not bad. This should pick me up.”

Warren was pleased. “I’ll pick you up,” he said jokingly.

She looked at him with a dispassionate, absent expression. He thought he may have misspoken.

“That is, if you like,” again, jokingly.

She laughed, and he smiled.

Then the front door sprang open, and a neatly dressed middle-aged man walked in, athletic, with close-cropped hair, an air of authority. Warren knew at once it was a police detective. The man walked straight to the counter, addressing the young man there.

“I’m Detective Marks, here to see Eddie Paschal.”

“Just a moment. I’ll get him.”

The clerk stepped to his right, walking quickly to the office door, opening it, and calling out. “Someone to see you, Eddie.”

Immediately, Paschal appeared, coming out, introducing himself, and shaking the detective’s hand. “This way, we can talk in the office.”

The two went into the room, closing the door. Warren and the girl were silent, sipping coffee. Warren decided he had waited long enough and turned to Myra. “Excuse me. I need to make a call.”

He got up, walking to the front, going through the door outside, away from the building to a private spot. He had put off the conversation, not sure what he would say; but the longer he waited, the more awkward it would be. He felt anxious as he keyed Kate’s number on the phone.

He waited then heard her voice.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Kate. It’s Race. How are you?”

Warren felt his words were clumsy, but he needed to make things right.

“Race, I’m confused. You just left, vanished, without saying a word. How could you? No matter the reason, you could have, at least, let me know you were going.”

Warren groped for words. “Kate, I’m sorry. I found who I was looking for at the hotel. Something came up, very important, and I had to leave with him. There’s a lot I haven’t told you. People’s lives are at risk, and—”

She interrupted, “You didn’t have to tell me everything. All you needed was to face me and say you had to leave. I think I deserved that.”

The line went dead. She had ended the call. It was abrupt, leaving him confused. He was drawn back to recent events, the last night at the Ataqsut hotel. In the turmoil that evening, he had completely forgotten Kate, and too much had happened since with no time to explain. She knew none of this and could not understand his abrupt departure. Warren’s feelings for her made it doubly bad that he had treated her rudely.

He was standing mute, staring in space, when he heard the door open, Myra coming out and approaching tentatively. He turned as she came up, searching his face.

“Is everything all right?”

Warren dropped his eyes, not sure what to say. He was still confused by the unsettling call with Kate. “Coming to Nuiqsut was unplanned. I’d come from a village farther west where I left some people with no notice. I needed to call and explain.”

He looked up to see Myra fixated on him with a sad expression. She was almost staring but in a benign way. It was a look of concern; she cared for him.

He held her eyes for several moments then reached out, taking her hand. “Myra, I’m not sure what’s next, but I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

The girl hesitated, then leaned into Warren, spreading her arms, drawing him close. This lasted a moment then they went back inside to the couch. Paschal and the police detective came out of the office, walking to where they sat. Paschal stood aside as Marks addressed the couple.

“I need your names, please.”

He was looking at the girl. “I’m Myra Barrow.”

Marks scribbled on a pad then looked at Warren.

“My name is Warren, Racine Warren.”

The detective wrote the information down then looked at the girl.

“Ms. Barrow, I’ll take you first. Mr. Paschal is letting us use the office for privacy. This way, please.”

The girl stood up and followed Marks to the inner room where he left the door partly open.

Paschal sat down beside Warren. “Detective Marks was pleasant, just needed the facts of what happened. He wanted to know about everyone involved. I told him what I knew about the taxi driver and your friend Billings. The borough officer should be here later today, and we’ll have to do it all again.”

It was now early afternoon. Warren turned to Paschal.

“Eddie, we’re going to need somewhere to stay and need to check those at the hospital.”

“The lodge on the river is nice.”

Paschal agreed to arrange accommodations, and Warren would call the hospital. The older man went to the counter, picking up the desk phone and calling the lodge. Warren pulled out the cell phone and called the hospital. He learned the young driver had been treated and already discharged, but Billings’s condition was more serious, requiring he be held several days. Just as he ended the call, Paschal came back and sat down.

“I’ve got three rooms at the lodge. I guess you and I can cover the girl’s expenses.”

“No, Billings and I are responsible. I’ll take care of it for now. Billings is being held for another day or two to be sure he’s out of danger. The driver’s injuries were superficial, and he’s been released.”

Paschal was perplexed. “Marks said an officer would go there and interview both men. Perhaps the driver was questioned before being let go.”

Paschal clearly wanted a thorough investigation for the sake of his job. But Warren was silent; the taxi driver was not his worry. The

young man had been caught in a violent episode; quite unfortunate, but he had survived and been released. Warren was concerned with Billings and the girl.

Myra was kept for questioning longer than Paschal. The detective likely asked her about her time at the Russian House in Nuiqsut. That line of questioning could take hours. The office door was partly open, and he and Paschal could hear low voices but not what was said. This was not the appropriate place, and Marks was not the right person; a female officer trained in rape cases should handle it.

Growing restless, he felt relief to see Myra coming out followed by Marks. Warren and Paschal stood up, watching their approach. The girl's eyes were downcast as Warren looked closely. Other than looking tired, she had a blank expression. There were no signs of tears or hints of distress. As she got near, Paschal stepped back, the girl glancing furtively at Warren before dropping onto the couch, staring down.

"Mr. Warren, you're last. This shouldn't take long."

He followed Marks to the office where the detective closed the door. It was a small room, sparsely furnished, but cluttered. A metal desk with an armchair sat before a solitary window, and two plain bookcases were equally spaced against the wall. Marks had placed two chairs at the sides of the desk, pointing for Warren to sit in one while he took the other. The detective flipped the page of a legal pad, lay it on the desk, and began writing. He said Warren's full name as he scribbled words on paper. He paused for a moment then began.

"What brought you to Nuiqsut?"

Warren was careful to answer only what was asked, saying nothing more and giving no details. But the detective knew how to get information. He had been doing this a long time, and he brought his subject back to each point of inquiry, probing with added questions until satisfied. Despite his inquisitor having said it "shouldn't take long," the questions seemed never-ending. Marks showed no signs of frustration with Warren's short replies but, ever resourceful, came from new directions, rephrasing the query, returning again and again to a particular point until he got what he wanted. Warren feared his concise answers and tightly framed replies looked like he was hiding

something. Police detectives were good at sizing up a subject, analyzing mannerisms and behavior. After all, the Anchorage police were after him, and most likely Fairbanks had been alerted. He could only hope there had been a slip, and Marks didn't know.

At last, the interview ended, and he and the detective left the room. They walked to the couch where Paschal stood as the girl stayed seated. Marks faced everyone.

"This concludes the initial interviews. An officer from the North Slope should arrive later today to take over the investigation. I understand you're staying at the travel lodge. The officer will contact you there and let you know when you can leave town."

Marks gave them each a business card, ending with a cordial "Good day." As he turned to go, Paschal said he had a question and followed the officer outside. Warren sat down beside the girl, watching her closely. Staring at the floor, she, at last, raised her eyes, turning to him with a sad expression. Warren suspected the interview had gone badly.

"Myra, how was the questioning?"

She turned away, downcast and silent.

"He kept you a long time. Must have been unpleasant."

Warren waited. He had not seen her like this in the short time knowing her. Having been freed from the harsh life of the Russian House, and now in safety, she was coming to terms with what had happened, both the recent past and the previous twenty-four hours, her rescue, and the perilous escape from Nuiqsut.

She raised her head, turning to Warren. "He asked me about life at Dama Sasha's, about work. I have to do it, but that's not me."

She dropped her head, breaking into tears and sobbing as Warren leaned over, putting arms around her. He held her a long time until the weeping left, and she grew quiet. He gradually relaxed, removing his arms, leaning back to give her room.

Paschal came in, approaching the two on the couch. "The borough officer knows how to find us. It's been a long day. I've called a taxi. The lodge is close by."

The car soon arrived. Warren got his travel bag and backpack from where he'd left them against the wall, and the three went to

board the taxi for the short drive to the lodge. It was four-star rated, more expensive than Warren liked, but Paschal said it was close, and other places were subpar. It was on the Chena River at the northeast edge of the airport.

They came to the lodge, impressive, rustic looking, off the beaten path. Exiting the car, Warren asked the driver to wait. They entered the building, checked in, and requested three adjoining rooms. Both Paschal and Warren thought this was not just prudent but necessary. The desk clerk made a lengthy search at his computer and finally found three adjacent rooms on the third floor. When he asked for payment, Warren put it all on his charge, accepting three room keys. Then the three proceeded to the elevator, Warren the only one with luggage. He carried a backpack, a satchel, and Billings's baggage. On the top floor, the trio left the elevator and found the three rooms, Warren stopping at the middle one, inserting the key, and leading the others inside.

"Myra, this is your room. Eddie will be next door on the left, and I'll be on the right. If you need us, knock on the wall."

Looking around, he found a restaurant menu on a counter. "Don't leave the room. Call the front desk and have food left at your door." He handed her the room key, then paused. "There's something else." He pulled from his pocket a metallic disc the size of a small coin on a threadlike necklet. "Wear this and don't take it off."

He turned with Paschal and left the room. They stopped outside.

"Eddie, you need something to eat. The restaurant downstairs should do, but be quick and stay close to Myra. I'm going to the hospital to see Ron. I should be back in an hour or two. Call from the room if you need me."

Both men were conscious of security measures. Paschal had gotten the rifle from Billings when getting on the plane at Nuiqsut. After landing, he locked the weapon at the air service office. He carried a small handgun that was always with him. He turned to go to his room. Warren picked up his luggage, going the opposite way, entering his room long enough to drop the luggage, then left with the backpack over his shoulder.

Warren passed the elevator, hurrying to the end of the hall, taking the stairs, and leaving at the ground exit. The taxi was waiting near the entrance. He got to the car, opened the back door, and jumped in.

"Thanks for waiting. Take me to the Memorial Hospital."

The driver nodded, shifting in gear, and turning the car into the street. "Visiting someone?"

"A friend admitted earlier today."

The car went a short way, stopping at the junction with the airport road. Once traffic cleared, the driver turned left, going east on Airport Way. They passed under the Interstate 3 overpass, entering Fairbanks municipal limits. After a mile, the driver turned right, now on Cowles Street. The hospital complex came in view as the driver continued down the street and stopped at the main entrance. Warren paid, left the car, and headed toward the front of the building; an array of wide glass panels sectioned in aluminum frames.

Transparent doors moved sideways as he passed into a spacious entry hall where patients, visitors, and white-coated medical personnel walked in various directions. Seeing the reception desk at the center, Warren made his way to the counter and asked for Billings's room number. The attendant specified a ward and number, pointing to the elevators. He thanked the woman and headed across the atrium to a central wall, joining others waiting. Saying the room information to himself, Warren wondered how his friend would look in a hospital bed. The last he'd seen Billings, loaded in the ambulance hours earlier, he looked pale and weak.

A low purring sound beyond the wall signaled the conveyance was near. There was a short silence then a clatter as the door moved to the side, and passengers filed in. Warren shuffled to the back as his exit was the sixth floor. The elevator went up quietly, then slowed, stopping at various floors as people got on and off. When the number six lighted, the door opening, Warren stepped out and headed toward the nurse's area, a glass-walled counter halfway down the corridor. Approaching the control station, he saw a sign with the hall he wanted and turned that way. Soon he saw Billings's room number

and, coming to the half-open door, knocked. Immediately, he heard his friend's voice.

"Come in."

Warren pushed the door wide and entered a small, brightly lit room, open window blinds admitting the sun, an extended wall at the side enclosing a bathroom, the patient laying in a chrome bed, a shiny steel pole beside with IV bag dripping a clear liquid in a tube to Billings's right arm, his left heavily bandaged in a sling. The top of the bed was raised, propping him up, allowing easier interaction with visitors. They greeted each other.

"You look better than when I saw you last."

"Feel better too."

"What's in the IV?"

"Saline with a little pain killer. I was slightly dehydrated, and this is supposed to help, and the drug is mild, mainly to let me rest."

"Looks like they're taking good care of you."

Billings had been smiling but became serious. "How are the others?"

"The taxi driver came here with you. When I called, I learned he was discharged. A police detective questioned us at the flight office. We're at an airport lodge, and another detective from the North Slope is supposed to see us later for more questions."

"An officer came and questioned me. I told him we're still in danger, but he seemed unconcerned." Billings paused, holding Warren in a fixed stare. "The doctors want to hold me, but I've got to leave. My daughter's a captive, and I've got to find her."

Billings paused again, his eyes unmoving. "The man I shot at the lake, did you get anything from him?"

Warren shifted his gaze away, looking in space. Billings had saved his life at the landing, shooting the gunman, then sending Warren to check him. But the man had died.

Billings was getting impatient. "Did he say anything?"

Standing next to the bed, his friend insistent, Warren remembered the cell phone from the dead man. "There was a phone on him, nothing else. It's in my luggage."

Billings dismissed it as useless. "Guaranteed it's locked, take weeks to break. But did he say anything, anything?"

Warren thought again, recalling only that the Russian died when he got there. No, that wasn't right; he had mumbled something, a single word, unintelligible.

"Yes, just before he died, he said something, nothing I'd ever heard before."

Billings's attention roused, turning, and trying to reach; but grimacing in pain, he fell back. "Get the notepad off the table. There's a pen there. Write down what you heard."

Warren circled the bed to a small steel table; picking up the pen and pad prodded his memory. "He said 'Amorok,' must be Russian."

He wrote the word as it sounded on the notepad and lay it on the table.

"Think it means anything?"

"Not sure. But I've seen cases where small things turned out to be important. It's something; more than we had a minute ago."

Warren was pleased to see his friend alert and looking better despite a heavily bandaged shoulder. And the pain reliever dripping in his arm had not clouded his mind. He was perceptive and anxious to be up and on his way.

"Is the girl all right?"

Warren looked at his watch. It was well past visiting hours. He remembered his promise. He needed to get back. "She's at the lodge. Paschal's in the next room. She got grilled by the police detective, left her pretty upset."

Billings tensed as though about to rise. "She's in danger more than us."

Warren began thinking he should have stayed at the lodge near Myra. He would never forgive himself if anything happened. He had known her only twenty-four hours and was surprised at his feelings. She was beautiful, but it wasn't her looks. It was her manner, her eyes when she asked for help. Her plea was instinctive, catching him off guard, changing him in a way he only now recognized and understood. Despite his feelings for Kate, meeting Myra had changed everything. He felt a glow, the warm conviction he loved her.



## 17



## THE RUSSIANS STRIKE

A shrill ring came from Warren's pack on the floor: Paschal's cell phone. Feeling dread, he reached down, pulling it from an outer sleeve.

"Yes, what is it!"

Paschal was frantic. "The girl's been taken! There was noise in her room. I ran to the hall just as a man came out. We fired at the same time. I ran back to the stairwell and saw a second man bringing the girl, and they carried her off."

"Are you hurt?"

"Nicked my shoulder, nothing serious. I think my shot missed."

"Where are you now?"

"In the hotel lobby, police just coming in."

"I'm with Billings at the hospital. I'll be right there."

Warren ended the call as Billings began a flurry of questions. Warren told him the little Paschal said and, picking up his pack, turned to go.

"Wait!" Warren looked back, seeing Billings struggling to get out of bed.

"Come here!"

Warren could not believe what he was seeing. He came to the bedside.

"Pull this thing out." Billings raised his arm with the IV attached, looking insistently at Warren who reached over, easing the needle out and laying it on the bedside table.

Speechless till now, Warren finally reacted. "Where do you think you're going?"

Billings was now standing, reaching with his good hand toward the clothes rack on the wall. He pulled the shirt and pants from hangers, flinging them on the bed. "Help me get dressed."

His left arm was useless, tight in bandages and held in a sling, leaving him to struggle with his good arm. Without help, he would have had to bend and stretch with some inventive angles to get his clothes on; but with assistance, he was soon dressed, the left sleeve hanging loosely at his shoulder.

They left the room, passing the control station without a word, but were hailed by a solitary nurse who chased them down, pressing a clipboard and pen in front of Billings. He scrawled a hasty signature on the release form, pushing the pen back and leaving her behind. He reached the elevator, shoving by two doctors getting off, entering with Warren, feeling relief when the doors closed.

The two were leaning against the back wall, feeling the conveyance make a lazy descent, the numbers on the panel counting down. There were others around, but no one spoke. They came to a stop at an intermediate floor, the doors opening, the others getting off, leaving them alone.

Warren shifted, looking at his friend. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Billings was silent, stoically looking ahead. His mind had been set on one thing, to get his daughter back. But during the search, he had come upon obstacles, getting by them one by one, and in the process, he and Warren had met the girl at the Russian House who had thrown herself on them with pleas for help. With no hesitation, Billings agreed, and he and Warren had rescued the girl; but now in less than twenty-four hours, the thugs had her again. Billings saw Myra and his daughter on the same terms, and right now, all his attention was on Myra.

The matter was settled. Warren would not question his friend again. He turned to the front as the elevator reached the ground floor. The sliding doors opened, and the two men went out.

Leaving the hospital, Warren saw several taxis near the entrance, and they headed to the closest one. Warren helped Billings into the car and slid in beside him.

“Take us to the car rental.”

The driver got moving, pulling the car away from the hospital, going north the short distance to Interstate 3, turning west toward the airport.

Billings broke the silence, speaking low, “Paschal reported the police arriving as he ended the call, right? Once we get there, we’ll try to find out what the cops know. Maybe security cameras got something.”

Warren thought back to his meeting with Detective Roberts at the park in Anchorage. Because Warren knew the dead man, Roberts had let him in on the investigation, but that had been an exception.

“Police don’t give information to outsiders.”

Billings turned with a wry smile. “I’m a cop, twenty years. We’ll get what we need.”

They arrived at the car rental and picked one of many SUVs on the lot. Warren went to the passenger side to help Billings, but the older man pushed him off, managing to get himself in the car. Then Warren drove them from the facility to the main airport road bringing them to the turnoff, and in minutes, they were at the lodge.

Two police cars, lights flashing, were parked obliquely at the entrance. Warren pulled the SUV to the nearest open space at the building. He got out, circling the car as Billings opened his door. This time he let Warren help him from the vehicle. Once he was upright, he managed to walk unassisted. The two proceeded to the front doors, nodding at two officers they passed.

Once inside, they paused. Other police officers were busy, one talking to the desk clerk, another to one of the housekeeping staff. Looking around the room, they saw Paschal seated, speaking with a detective. Warren nudged his friend.

“That’s Detective Marks with Eddie. He interviewed us yesterday.”

As the two approached the pair on the couch, Billings spoke quietly, “Let me handle this.”

Seeing the two men approaching, Marks looked up. “I’m in the middle of something, gentlemen.”

“Excuse the interruption. I’m Detective Billings, with Investigator Warren, whom you’ve already met. We’re working on a human trafficking case. The young woman you questioned at the airport was just abducted.”

He showed a badge and ID, holding his credentials in plain view for the Fairbanks’s detective, who seemed satisfied, but returned Billings’s gaze with skepticism.

“I don’t doubt what you’ve said, but our investigation is barely started. Based on what we know, the case is under North Slope jurisdiction, and they’re sending someone. Certainly, if I’d known the girl was in danger, I would have provided protection, but you know the rule: We can’t do anything until there’s a crime. With the shooting here and the girl missing, it’s now my concern. I welcome your assistance, especially to find the girl.”

Billings was satisfied. “Warren and I will wait until you’re done.”

Marks turned back to questioning Paschal as the other two drifted to another part of the room. Out of earshot, Billings spoke to Warren.

“Once we get an idea where the Russians are headed, we’ll go after them. But we need the camera footage. There’s a lot we don’t know, the vehicle they’re in, if they went to the airport or taking the highway, and which direction. The security cameras will be a start, but we need Marks’s help.”

Warren led his friend to an isolated part of the large entry hall, finding a place to sit at a small table. “I need to show you something.”

He pulled a laptop computer from his backpack, setting it up and turning it on. After he made several keystrokes, the screen displayed a map with an indicator, a tiny circle on a highway, occasionally flashing. As Billings watched, the dot shifted slightly, moving southwest on the map.

Warren explained, “They’re already out of town, on Highway 3 to be exact.”

“You placed a tracker?”

“I gave Myra a GPS device at the lodge.”

“They probably forgot to search her in the rush to get away. But odds are, they’ll find it. It would help to have a vehicle description before we go.”

Warren closed the laptop, slipping it in the pack. They both looked across the room where Marks stood, talking with the lodge manager. Paschal had vanished.

Growing restless, Billings turned to his friend. "Let's see what they know about the cameras."

He and Warren crossed the room to where Marks and the manager were talking. The Fairbanks's detective looked up.

"Just in time. You two can come with Mr. Derrick and me to the office to view the security video."

Billings and Warren fell behind the others as the lodge manager led them past the front desk down a narrow hall to a small room where a young man sat at a wide-screen monitor.

Derrick explained, "This is Jason, our tech guy. He scanned all the overnight camera footage for the specified time frame. What have you got, Jason?"

Making rapid keystrokes, the young man brought up an array of box frames on the screen, a half dozen windows, each with camera number, time, and date stamp. "From the search parameters used, I found what I think you're looking for."

As he spoke, one window expanded as the others disappeared. The camera showed a corner of the building where two men were leaving with a young woman, going to a vehicle at the side of the lot. The timestamp showed 1:00 a.m. when there was least light, yet the persons' faces were visible. There was no doubt the girl was Myra.

Warren saw something else, speaking in a low voice, "It's the same black SUV at the lake landing!"

Billings placed his hand on Warren's shoulder as he spoke discretely, "This video tells us what we need. It's the same people who attacked at Nuiqsut, Russians in dark suits, same vehicle."

Marks asked the technician to examine the footage in more detail, to get the vehicle plate, and to put a copy on a disk, then turned to Billings, thanking him. "Appreciate your help. We'll canvas the airport for the suspects and put out an area alert."

Marks paused, looking with concern at his Tennessee counterpart. "Billings, you should take time off and mend."

The ex-cop smiled, turning away with Warren as the pair began looking for Paschal, finally finding him at the bar. Billings sat down beside him, moving slowly, taking care of his wounded arm. Warren stood nearby, waiting.

"Don't you think it's a bit early?"

Paschal smiled. "Not for what I'm drinking," lifting a glass of orange juice.

The two spoke briefly in light banter before the seriousness of the situation brought silence.

"Eddie, I need your .308. Race and I are leaving town."

"You need to be in the hospital. You're in no shape to travel."

With Paschal staring at him, Billings became grim, the pain in his arm and shoulder rising and beginning to impair his thinking. What Eddie said was true, but that would not deter him.

"I guess you would know. You said you were a corpsman in the army."

"Yes, I always wanted to help people. One reason I got on as station manager. Medical training was a requirement. But, no matter, I'm out of a job."

A brief silence followed as Paschal raised the glass, downing the orange juice. Billings did not notice his pain so much when the conversation focused on someone else.

"How's that?"

Paschal turned toward Billings with a blank stare. "My boss called late yesterday, quite upset over what happened. The fire destroyed the landing, with loss of over a thousand gallons of aviation fuel. Of course, he didn't see things my way. What I did on impulse, with no thought of consequences, caused the company a severe loss. I was only thinking of saving lives, but they see the outcome solely in dollars and cents. And to straighten the bottom line and adjust the balance sheet, I was terminated."

Paschal was silent for a moment, then continued.

"I'll get the rifle, but I'm coming too. You need medical care, and another hand will increase your odds."

Billings was against the proposal but kept silent, knowing the man was right. He turned to speak to Warren who had been standing nearby, waiting patiently, listening.

“You have anything to add?”

“Only that we need to get going.”

Warren stepped forward to help his friend from the barstool, but Billings motioned him off, exerting himself, sliding all the seat and standing erect, then walking toward the door. Following behind, Warren noticed Billings seemed stronger with activity and with his mind set on rescuing Myra.

The trio left the lodge and got into the SUV. With Warren at the wheel, they drove to the nearby airport, stopping at the flight office where the former station manager had stored the .308. Paschal got out and went into the office while the others waited.

Then Warren said, “I remember a coffee machine here. I definitely need one.” He looked toward Billings. “You?”

“No thanks. I may try a nap.”

Warren exited the car, entering the storefront. Soon both men came from the building, Paschal placing the rifle and a case of medical supplies in the back of the vehicle, then taking his place in the rear seat as he closed the door. Warren was now at the wheel, waiting for directions. Billings was curious about what Paschal had loaded.

“What’s in the case?”

“A complete field medical kit. Part of my company duties. Folks here don’t know I’m terminated.”

“Great.”

It was understood Billings was in charge, despite his wounds. He turned toward Warren and began going over plans, looking back toward Paschal every now and then. The laptop leaned on the seat divider, hooked to a power outlet, tilted toward Billings who watched it closely.

“Our friends are headed south on Highway 3. Let’s get going.”

Warren nodded, taking a slow sip of coffee, setting the cup in a holder, and began backing the car in a tight turn, then shifted to forward gear, driving on Float Pond Road to Airport Way on the fringes of Fairbanks, getting onto Highway 3, going north a few miles before taking the road west where it turned southwest.

# 18



## PURSUIT

The route was known as Parks Highway, stretching over three hundred miles, linking Fairbanks and Anchorage. Different from the North Slope, the land was diverse with foliage, various plants, wildflowers everywhere, and abundant conifers. Evergreens stood at modest height, but in low areas, many were short and thin, anemic, like decorative war lances thrust in the ground. The land was lightly forested with rises and declivities shaping the area. The road was mostly straight, shifting every few miles into slight turns, following the contours of the Tanana River seven miles away.

Billings was monitoring the laptop, seeing periodic movement of the signal showing the Russians and their captive were going southwest, ten miles ahead. Warren was driving fast to keep up but could not close the distance. Paschal occasionally leaned forward looking over the seat at the computer screen. Watching the map display, both he and Billings saw a change in direction.

Billings was first to say something. “They’re leaving the road, turning west. Why?”

Paschal, more familiar with the region, also thought it strange. “There’s nothing close except Nenana, and they’re turning off a few miles ahead of town.”

The tracking software showed no landmarks beyond the highway. The indicator, a tiny circle occasionally flashing, moved west in fits and starts, at right angles from the road. Since leaving Fairbanks,

Warren had seen few side roads but suspected one lay ahead if the Russians had turned. Closing the distance, he needed direction.

"If they left the road, let me know when to turn."

Billings looked over his shoulder at Paschal. "Any idea where they're headed?"

Although familiar with the territory, Paschal knew no reason for leaving the highway. Turning off the road where they did made no sense unless they were going to a remote cabin, but why? Paschal pondered this as he craned his neck at the display, the GPS marker floating in what looked like woodland. His two companions were waiting.

Then he remembered. There was a lake in the area the air service sometimes used for landings at Nenana. This seemed the only plausible explanation. "There's a lake used by bush pilots. They must be going for a plane."

Billings had been watching the roadside since learning the Russians had turned off. He now cautioned Warren.

"Slow down, should be a side road close."

Warren reduced speed but saw nothing different from before. Then a break in roadside foliage appeared. Billings felt sure this was where their quarry left the highway.

"Turn here."

Paschal's silence meant he agreed. Warren slowed and turned onto a seldom used lane cut through the trees, overgrown with wildflowers and seasonal plants, noticeably flattened by a recent vehicle coming through. Soon the computer indicator confirmed their turn, and they were behind the Russians.

They went up a slight rise, soon leveling and winding through a stand of larger conifers, the road quite bumpy at times. Billings became concerned about coming too near.

"Slow down. We don't want to give ourselves away."

As the computer display refreshed, a lake showed on the screen.

"Eddie, you were right. There's the lake."

"Yes, not much farther."

Warren slowed to the speed of a walk as the obscure lane went on in a westerly direction. Coming round a bend in the road, fringes of a lake appeared through the trees.

Billings called a halt. "Race, look for a place to stash the car." He pointed. "Over there. Go past the fir into the open space."

Warren pulled the SUV into a small clearing just off the road. Everyone got out, quietly closing doors, moving silently, opening the back hatch, and taking out gear. Paschal pulled the .308 from the carry case and slipped the sling of an ammunition pouch over his shoulder. He did the same with a canvas bag removed from the medical case. Already wearing a holstered pistol on his belt, he picked up the rifle. The other two men were wearing handguns. Warren slung the strap of a pair of binoculars around his neck then gently lowered the back door lid, pushing firmly until it locked.

Billings had been standing nearby, looking at the terrain as the other two strapped gear on. Now ready, they turned to him for instructions.

"There's a rise that way where we can see the lake. Let's circle around and come from behind."

Billings started out from the SUV, cutting sharply into surrounding brush, an uneven landscape of straggly conifers and scrappy shrubs. He moved slowly, taking care with his stiff arm not to lose balance on uneven ground, passing remnants of fallen trees, over ledges of rock protruding from the earth. For the moment they had gone away from the objective, making a circle, taking a round-about way to avoid the men holding Myra, losing sight of the lake since leaving the road, but Billings knew where they were and how far to go to reach the observation point. The other two followed, glancing around, staying watchful and alert. The way ahead became more open as they proceeded over rising ground, soon coming to the treeless high point. As they neared the crest, they could see distant reaches of the lake through intervening trees.

Billings went into a crouch, motioning the others to stay down, using his right arm to keep balance, working his way forward. Nearing the rim, the men went on their knees, crawling the final yards until they were in full view of the lake. Now they lay prone as they considered their position, looking over the interim ground spread before them. They were at the peak of high ground projecting

toward the expanse of water, a thousand yards away. It was a large lake, nearly a mile across.

Billings motioned with his hand, wanting the binoculars. Warren passed the glasses over as he and Paschal surveyed the area. There was no sign of the Russians, but they could see where the road ended at the lake, spreading into a graveled landing. Billings adjusted the field glasses, scanning lakeside and the extent of road visible through the trees. If Paschal's theory was correct, the kidnapers had brought the girl to meet a floatplane to get them out and likely return to Nuiqsut where she would be put back as forced labor in the sex trade.

Billings grew uncomfortable laying on the ground with the injured arm. He passed the field glasses to Paschal, signaling he was pulling back from the overlook. Warren indicated he would withdraw too, wanting to talk over strategy. Paschal raised the glasses to his eyes, looking toward the water's edge at the spot where floatplanes would tie up at the landing. He wondered if the Russians had a private aircraft or had contracted with a flight service. He continued scanning the trees, looking for any sign of the gunmen.

Billings turned, struggling in an awkward low crawl, making his way from the rim of the outcrop, the younger man following. Once out of view from the edge, the two paused, the older man leaning on his elbows as though studying something on the ground.

Warren grew concerned. "Are you all right?"

Billings lifted his eyes, not immediately speaking. He had a pained look on his face, groping for words. "I'm very tired, and to be honest, I feel awful. But it serves me right for rejecting medical advice."

Warren felt sorry for his friend, especially in light of what he was about to suggest. But they had limited options. He turned back toward where Paschal lay stretched at the rim of the overlook, fixed in position with field glasses at his eyes. Watching, he saw the man lower the binoculars, turn his head, and point to something below.

Warren turned back to Billings, speaking quietly, "Looks like Paschal sees something. Hold on." Warren low-crawled forward until he was beside the older man.

Billings saw them whispering as Paschal pointed to something in the distance. This went on another minute, then the scene reverted to what it was before, the man laying still, looking through field glasses as Warren crawled back to Billings, speaking in a low voice.

"We spotted the vehicle, partly hidden behind trees about two hundred yards from the lake."

Billings's eyes softened, but his face was rigid, taut from pain. "Now, what was it you started to say before?"

Warren explained, saying he felt they should stay on the aggressive, and he had an idea. "As best we can tell, we haven't been spotted. But we can't just stay in place and wait for them to move. Why not I scout their position while you and Paschal cover me from here?"

Billings agreed with the idea but not completely. "It's risky, but I think right. Take Eddie along, you in the lead. Stay apart, in sight of each other. I'll take position on the rim and provide cover with the rifle."

Warren preferred going alone but complied with Billings' wishes. He turned, crawling back to Paschal to inform him. The two waited as Billings came forward crab-like, dragging the .308 by its sling. Once they were together, the ex-cop took the field glasses and peered in the direction Paschal pointed. As the other two waited, Billings continued shifting the glasses, obviously not seeing anything.

Paschal spoke in a frantic whisper, "Just behind the group of three trees."

Billings adjusted the eyepiece, then grew still. "Yes, hard to make out, but now I see part of the vehicle." He lowered the glasses, handing them to Warren as he positioned the riflescope for viewing.

As Billings made adjustments, Warren whispered, "That's our objective. We'll get close enough to see what they're up to."

He paused, everyone quiet.

"If I can just spot Myra."

After a brief silence, Warren turned, crawling back from the overlook as Paschal followed. Moving on for several yards, both rose to a partial crouch, continuing in the same direction. Billings turned for a moment, watching the pair enter sparse vegetation, gradually turning right and disappearing in the trees.

Warren was out front, starting a slow turn to the right, sweeping in a wide circle, keeping to the woods to avoid being seen, making a slow and cautious approach to where they saw the Russian vehicle. Paschal was ten paces back and an equal distance to the right of Warren's path, separated to prevent both being taken if one was spotted. Both moved cautiously, handguns ready, through scattered brush, isolated shrubs, and a stretch of trees, picking their way among broken pieces of shale rock littering the ground.

He could have waited with the other two at the overlook until the Russians made a move, then react some way to rescue the girl, but Warren felt they should take the initiative, moving forward to gain information despite the risk. They needed to know the number they faced, how they were deployed, the condition of the girl, and how she was held. Knowing these things would reveal how to proceed. While a reconnaissance was dangerous, it seemed like their best move.

Now and then, he halted, making hand signals to Paschal to ensure they were acting in concert. Warren had preferred going alone. As it stood, half his attention was on Paschal, keeping him on track. So far, it was working; they had a good separation, able to see each other and provide support, yet far enough apart if one was attacked.

Reaching the road, he stopped, signaling a halt. They were several hundred yards from where the Russian vehicle was spotted. From here, they had to be especially careful. Standing at the side of the lane, Warren swept his eyes in a wide arc over the area, to the left and right of their line of approach, on both sides of the road, then as far ahead as he could see. There was nothing but the stillness of a mute terrain. He narrowed his attention to the immediate area, the lane scattered with droppings from trees, twigs, and pieces of broken branches, partially overgrown with seasonal plants, pressed down where the SUV passed earlier. He looked up, listening, but the only sound was faint wind coursing through the trees.

Turning toward Paschal, yards away and partly hidden in the brush, he waved him on. Warren crossed the lane, going well off the road into the fringe of trees, but keeping Paschal in view on the other side. The two continued this way, taking tentative steps forward while sweeping their eyes in a wide arc over the area to the front.

Warren now saw the partial eminence rising just above the trees four or five hundred yards ahead. He and Paschal had carefully detoured back and around to avoid the chance of being seen. They were coming in from the rear to where their quarry had stopped. The trek had been tedious, but cautious steps and strained alertness were required to get in position without notice.

Now abreast of the high ground where Billings waited, Warren raised his hand for Paschal to halt. Paschal was several yards off the opposite side of the road, partially hidden among spindly trees and small shrubs. They had reached a point where they might see the Russian vehicle. Warren raised the field glasses to his eyes, scanning the distance, looking for the group of trees they had seen from the overlook. Finally, he saw the black SUV partly hidden in the foliage. There was no movement, no sign of anyone, almost like the vehicle was abandoned. But the Russians had come for a reason, most likely to meet a plane to ferry them away—to where? Warren guessed they would go back to Nuiqsut to return the girl to the Dama Sasha. The girl was a valuable property in a very profitable business, and the Slavs wanted her back at work. Thinking of Myra that way made Warren cringe, yet he had to think like his enemies; it was the only way to beat them.

After several moments looking through the glass, he lowered the lens, letting it hang from his neck. He turned toward Paschal, standing silently in the trees across the road, watching, waiting for a signal. Warren raised his hand to indicate the objective was in sight and motioned to proceed cautiously. The older man made an acknowledgment, prompting Warren to turn and go forward, moving slowly but steadily in the direction of the black SUV, now two hundred yards away.

Seeing the vehicle with no sign of the Russians or the girl left Warren guessing. It made no sense; he felt growing tension, almost tasting danger. Advancing on the Russian position in a reconnaissance and seeing no one meant the adversary had the advantage. He felt a growing urge to stop. *Where were the Russians? Were they watching him and Paschal at that moment?* Warren began to feel he was walking into a trap.

He stopped, abruptly looking toward Paschal and signaling a halt. Paschal stopped at once, rigidly setting his gaze on Warren, staring as though immobilized. Finally, he raised his hand, giving a quick wave to show he understood. Now Warren stared as in a lapse but finally relaxed and turned again toward the SUV, sitting mute in the trees, no sign of anyone nearby. He glanced around to be sure nothing had changed, then raised the glasses to his eyes, examining the black vehicle and its surroundings. It looked the same, eerily vacant and desolate. At this distance, there was no way to tell if anyone was inside, yet parked off the road behind trees seemed meant to hide it. But Warren admitted this was supposition; the only way to know would be to get close enough to see himself. But maybe that's what the Russians wanted. It could be a setup, the hidden vehicle a decoy, a lure. Warren was stuck with indecision, motionless and considering their plight while Paschal waited for the signal.

# 19



## SKIRMISH AT LOON LAKE

**T**hen something changed, ending the uncertainty. Warren heard a far-off sound, the wavering drone of an airplane. There was no time to lose. He turned to get Paschal's attention, signaling him to stay out of sight and provide cover while he went ahead. He had to assume the plane was making a rendezvous with the gunmen. He had to act quickly if they were to stop the Russians.

Warren began moving, more rapidly than before. With the aircraft approaching, there was no time for caution; his adversaries would soon act, and he must try to catch them in the open, hoping he would see them before they knew he was there. He wanted to get close enough to check the SUV, spot the Russians, and find Myra. Moving faster, he dropped all hand signals and visual checks, trusting Eddie would keep him in view and back him if needed. He didn't know what kind of field operative the old man was, but he was a first-class medic. Things would have gone badly for Billings if Paschal hadn't been at the Nuiqsut landing.

Going past some trees, Warren came into full view of the black SUV, now yards away, parked slightly downhill off the road. He paused for a moment, looking around, then turning back to the vehicle, the windows all raised, glass darkened, no sound within. Listening, he heard something on the other side, a rustle in the grass, a brush with a plant, some slight movement on the ground.



With the .45 extended and ready, he began taking sideway steps, slowly circling, moving toward the rear of the vehicle, around the back, looking for what made the sound. Beyond the right back corner, he saw someone on the ground, leaned against the SUV, blindfolded, and gagged, arms tied behind, legs stretched out.

Myra!

Warren rushed up, dropping to the ground, loosening the bindings from her eyes and mouth.

“Race!” She took quick breaths, barely speaking over a whisper.

He threw his arm around her neck, partly embracing her, saying her name, and moving her away so he could get at the ropes. He had scarcely begun when she stiffened, crying out.

“Race!”

Warren was starting to turn when he felt the cold steel of a gun muzzle pressed hard behind his ear. Then a stern voice.

“Toss the gun back, slowly, and stand, hands high.”

The man spoke a distinct Russian accent, words harsh and cold. Lightly flinging the Sig behind, he felt the gun taken off his neck as he slowly rose to full height.

“Mr. Warren, is it?” The Russian paused. “We know all about you. Step back, slowly.”

Warren took tentative steps back, stopping, his eyes on Myra, still bound, her eyes locked on his. He tried talking to the man behind, saying the first thing he thought. “The police have been called. They know you’re here, and they’re on their way.”

“I don’t think so, but if they come, they’ll find what’s left of you.” The man paused, then raised his voice, saying, “Down on your knees!”

Warren had backed up several feet but ignored the order, playing for time. “You can’t get away. The police will be here any minute.”

Then he heard another voice. “Drop the gun!”

It was Paschal. He had worked his way behind the Russian and was now trying to gain control.

Warren couldn’t see what was happening, but stayed where he was, unmoving, hands raised, face forward, looking at Myra on the ground against the SUV. She could see behind, and her eyes told him

the danger wasn’t over. He heard movement and now, a third voice, sharp and insistent.

“No, you drop it!”

He heard a gun falling on the ground.

“Get over there with your friend.”

Someone was shoved roughly into him; it was Paschal, hands up, minus his gun. Warren felt his heart drop. The worst had happened. He and Paschal had taken a chance, approaching the gunmen, and now were themselves captured. He looked at Myra as a Russian rushed up, jerking her off the ground, removing the ropes, and pushing her toward the road. The one behind ordered them to turn around. At last, he could see what was happening.

There were three of them. The one giving orders faced him, holding a Makarov automatic, while one held Myra, and the other stood close by with an AK-74. Seeing a bandage on the leader’s head, Warren realized he was the one knocked out at the Russian House. Fortunately, the man had not seen who hit him.

Motioning with the pistol, the Russian ordered them toward the lake. “Start walking!”

Their captor was insistent as the sound of the aircraft grew louder, the plane now descending from the southwest in an approach that would bring the craft down on the near side of the lake to the graveled landing on shore. The girl was being hurried along, now at the road, as the others followed, the last two Russians coming behind.

The lake only a hundred yards away, Warren knew there was little time. He spoke to Paschal in a low voice, “At my signal, rush them!”

The Russian responded angrily, “Quiet! You’re almost done.”

Despite what Warren said, both he and Paschal knew there was nothing they could do.

Up ahead, seen through the trees, the plane was slowly descending, coming lower, until just over the lake, seeming to poise momentarily, then touching the surface, sprays of water flinging up and to the sides as the craft skirted ahead, gradually slowing, then gliding smoothly, coming toward the beach landing.

The group now reached the broad patch of gravel, perhaps fifty yards wide, forming a clearing at the edge of the lake. The crunching of their feet on broken rocks was the only sound other than the drone and throb of the aircraft as the plane navigated toward shore.

Warren thought of what the ringleader said, ominous words leaving little doubt of what the gunmen intended. The incident at the Anchorage post office had shown him what these men were like; he and Paschal would get no mercy. He knew the recon of the Russian position had posed a risk but believed taking action was better than merely reacting. Even now, he thought it had been the right thing. His one regret was he'd failed Myra.

"Okay, this is far enough."

The Russian leader had stopped near the middle of the clearing and was now facing the two captives, their hands high. The girl was several yards ahead with her captor. The man with the assault rifle stood with his back to the lake, beyond the leader.

The plane was floating, coming straight on, bobbing slightly in the water as it neared shore when the pilot cut the engine, opening the door, and stepping onto the pontoon, grabbing the tow line, and leaping into waist-deep water, tugging the rope, and pulling the plane toward the landing.

Warren and Paschal kept their eyes on the gunman who was growing restless, shouting an order.

"Down on your knees!"

As he spoke, the Russian gestured with the Makarov, wanting the two men down. Seeing hesitancy, he shouted, "Get down. Now!"

The men bent forward slightly, easing down, then dropping, their knees pressing into the broken rock. Their captor took several steps forward, stopping close enough to bring immediacy to what he was about to do. He paused for a moment, an audible click sounding as he retracted the hammer, aiming squarely at Warren.

"This is what happens when interfering in another's business."

A gunshot cracked from the trees, resounding across the clearing, echoing over the lake; the Russian wrenched sideways, the Makarov dropping as he staggered.

It was Billings, firing from the knoll.

Warren leaped forward, striking for the knees, the man buckling and collapsing on top of him. The other Russian with the AK-74 froze for an instant. Paschal reacted, pitching forward, scrambling for the pistol as the Russian came alive with a staccato of automatic gunfire, pouring shots toward them, bullets crackling into the gravel bed, splitting rocks, sharp fragments flying over the two men, one partly shielded by the dead body and the other flattened just behind. Stray bullets thudded into the body, making it quiver as though alive. Paschal got the Makarov, raising up and firing wildly at the advancing gunman just as the attacker ran out of ammunition. Needing to reload and facing pistol shots, the Russian turned, fleeing as he switched magazines on the run.

As the gunman fell back, Warren grimaced, shoving the dead man off with a shudder, grateful it had shielded him, wiping his hands on his shirt. He fumbled at the body, retrieving the weapons, tossing the 9mm to Paschal.

"Here's your gun back. Should improve your aim."

Paschal stood with a blank look.

Warren checked his own weapon. Feeling the Sig in hand got his mind on track. He stood, looking toward the lake. The man with the rifle was headed toward the floatplane where the pilot had just secured the tow line on a mooring post. The other Russian, pistol in hand, was trying to hurry the girl in the same direction, but she had begun struggling since the shooting began.

Warren turned to Paschal. "Get to the plane. I'll try to stop the other one."

Paschal nodded and set off as Warren made straight for the girl and her captor. She was fighting with the man, knowing he couldn't hurt her; she was too valuable. The struggle had slowed them, and Warren got close but didn't have a clear shot. He needed to distract the Russian and with nothing else, he fired to the side, prompting the Russian to turn and fire at him, but the girl grabbed his arm, foiling his aim. Warren straightened, watching the girl's struggle. But the Russian had had enough, striking her in the head a glancing blow with the back of the pistol. He turned, pulling the girl toward the plane, gun at her head as she stumbled forward.

By now, the other Russian was at the plane, shouting orders for the pilot to loose the mooring rope and prepare to take off. Seeing Paschal approaching, less than twenty yards away, the gunman raised the assault rifle and began firing. With nothing to shield him and seeing a drift log to his right, Paschal flung himself behind the deadwood, flattening as rounds splintered the ancient tree limb, ricocheting off nearby rocks. He kept his face in the gravel, not moving, yet surprised he hadn't been hit. When the shooting stopped, he took the risk of lifting his head, seeing the Russian loading a fresh magazine. He threw his arm over the driftwood, getting off a quick shot widely off just as the man raised the rifle and continued with automatic fire. Paschal got down, flattening on the gravel.

This time, the Russian came forward quickly, eyes fixed on the man who seemed impossible to kill. The gunman fired sequential bursts, saving shots, but keeping his adversary pinned, intent on getting close enough to finish him. Only yards away, the Russian unexpectedly stopped firing, holding rounds for the final burst. He watched the form, motionless behind the log, waiting 'til his opponent should raise his head so their eyes would meet at the triumphant moment. Surprised by the quiet and feeling the man near, Paschal slowly lifted his head, turning to see the rifle aimed straight, his eyes meeting the Russian's haughty glare.

Then it ended. Nearly five hundred yards inland from the crest of a knoll, the flash from a gun barrel was accompanied with the sound of a shot, and the Russian's eyes went blank as he was suddenly knocked backward onto the rocky clearing. Paschal hadn't moved, his mind spinning, one thought stark: *I'm glad I kept Billings alive.*

Echoes from the high-powered rifle died away, leaving eerie quiet as Warren faced the last of Volkov's men still standing. It was a stalemate, the Russian holding the girl limp at his side, a pistol to her head. Helplessly, Warren looked at Myra. *I must do something. I failed her once. I can't do it again.* The Russian had stopped when his companion across the clearing was killed but now continued trying to get the girl to the plane. Warren knew time was short.

"You're done. The others are dead. Let the girl go, and you can leave."

The Russian ignored him, dragging the girl slowly toward the plane, at water's edge. The blow to her head left Myra stumbling as she was pulled along by her captor. The gunman meant to get his hostage to the aircraft and take off. Warren stopped. There was no way to end the deadlock without endangering the girl.

Paschal was headed to the plane, hoping to stop the Russian from taking off. The pilot stood at the landing beside the mooring post where the aircraft was tied. He had been watching the strange scene and now looked closely at the man rushing toward him with gun in hand.

"Eddie, is that you?"

As Paschal ran up, he recognized the captain as an old friend.

"Rolf. Rolf Bevsky. You left the company years ago, rumors said for lots of money."

"For a private concern. I'm here to pick up a client group. What's going on?"

"You can see, it's a mess. The girl was held illegally. It looks like you're their way out."

"I work for Sergey Volkov, but I've never seen anything like this."

The Russian and girl were now a dozen yards from where Paschal stood with the pilot. Warren was the same distance behind, talking steadily to the gunman.

"It's over. You can't take the girl. Give her up, and you can go."

The girl was still and silent, the Russian holding her close with the pistol at her head. Looking back and forth, seeing he was confronted on two sides, the gunman grew frantic.

"No. She goes too."

Watching the scene, Paschal turned toward Bevsky then slowly raised the gun, pointing it squarely at the captain, and smiled.

"Sorry, Rolf."

The pilot raised his hands, staring awkwardly.

Warren saw this as he continued talking to the gunman. "Not on the plane. You don't have a pilot."

The Russian's expression changed. For a moment he seemed to question what was said, then he glanced at the aircraft and looked

back at Warren. He tightened his grip on the girl, retracting the hammer and pressing the gun harder against her head.

“Either we leave, or she’s dead.”

Warren almost sighed. The man was at an end; it was clearly a bluff.

“No, you won’t. She’s too valuable. You messed up, hitting her. If you do anything more, you’ll answer to Volkov.”

The Russian was unmoving, not convinced he was beaten. All was quiet as the others waited, knowing it was the Russian’s move.

A sound broke the stillness, movement from inland, just beyond the clearing. Someone was approaching. All eyes turned toward the trees as Billings came into view, walking slowly into the open, without a word, two canvas satchels slung over his shoulder, carrying a scoped .308 at the ready. The Russian stiffened. This was the unseen assailant in the woods who had fired twice, each shot killing one of his companions. Now the man was coming his direction at a measured walk, each step cracking on the gravel of the clearing. The gunman gripped the girl tighter. He was alone, and the one who killed his associates was coming straight for him. The Russian stared as the stranger stopped at a point equidistant from Paschal and Warren, like points of a compass, blocking him on three sides.

It was quiet as a light wind blew from the lake, no one saying a word. They waited as the gunman stood stiffly holding the girl. The Russian’s eyes went back and forth. He was boxed in, and his three adversaries would stay where they were for eternity, waiting. He looked around, searching, but there were no more moves. At last, he relaxed his grip on the girl, drawing the gun back to release the hammer, and tossing it to the side, finally raising both hands. The girl immediately broke free, running toward Warren as Billings advanced, his eyes fixed on the Russian.

“Down, flat on your face!”

The man got down, prostrate on the gravel. Billings pulled his handgun, training it on the Russian.

“Hands behind your back!”

Billings lay down the rifle and satchels. Retrieving a pair of handcuffs, he snapped them on the man’s wrists.

As Myra ran toward Warren, he reached out, taking her in his arms as she collapsed, breaking into tears. He kneeled, setting her gently on the ground, holding her close.

“It’s over. You’re safe.”

Warren watched as Billings marched the Russian toward the plane, Paschal and the pilot waiting. Paschal trained his pistol on the prisoner as he came up.

Bound in handcuffs with two men holding guns on him, the Russian complained, “Your friend there said if I let the girl go, I was free.”

Billings smiled. “You are free, but you’ll keep those on till you’re gone.”

Paschal introduced the pilot to Billings who then said there would be only one passenger on the return trip. Under questioning, the gunman said the plan had been to fly the girl back to Nuiqsut. Billings suspected it would not go well when the man got back without the girl. He told the pilot he could take the Russian wherever he wanted. He had released Myra, and that was all that mattered.

After seeing the manacled Russian onto the plane, Bevsky got back into the water, pulling the tow rope to turn the craft around with Paschal’s help, then jumping onto the struts and getting into the cockpit as his old friend pushed against the end of the pontoon, the plane floating from shore. The engine started, and the aircraft turned into the wind, the pilot gradually increasing power to maximum, the plane accelerating, skirting across the lake, soon lifting from the water, making a lazy curve, climbing higher, swinging around on a northward heading.

As Paschal and Billings watched the plane disappear, Warren and the girl walked up to join them.

“Eddie, can you look at Myra? She took a lump on the head.”

Billings had brought the equipment from the overlook in two shoulder satchels. Clearly in pain from the long walk, he removed the equipment, setting the bags on the ground. One contained items from the medical case left in the vehicle. Paschal brought the satchel to where Warren and the girl waited as Billings followed. He removed a small blanket, which he folded and placed on the ground. After she

sat, the medic lightly ran his fingers over her head, pulling her hair back to examine the injury.

Looking on, Warren felt anger. "I should have slugged the guy before he left."

Paschal gave his opinion. "It doesn't look too bad, a bump and abrasion."

He leaned lower, looking into Myra's eyes. "How do you feel? Dizzy?"

Watching the girl closely, Warren thought she was over the emotional turmoil she had gone through with the Russian.

She looked up, forcing a weak smile. "Other than headache, I feel okay."

Paschal applied ointment to the broken skin, then taped on a bandage. "That'll do for now. Say something if it gets worse."

She nodded, thanking him.

Warren helped her up, and they began walking toward the road with Billings and Paschal. They moved unhurriedly, exhausted from the ordeal, but Billings knew the threat wasn't over. The Volkov organization was ruthless and doubtlessly would send others to get the girl back and destroy the men opposing them. Billings felt grateful for how things had turned out, getting the girl out of Nuiqsut, and now foiling the kidnapping attempt. He couldn't think of his daughter now; he didn't know where she was and wanted his full attention on getting Myra to Anchorage. He knew they must hurry.

"Race, can you get the car?"

Warren nodded, pulling the girl close for a second, then starting a run down the road, and he was soon out of sight. Billings handed the rifle to Paschal who slung the weapon over his shoulder as the ex-cop clumsily put his good arm around the girl. She had been through a terrible ordeal and needed to be assured she was safe. There had been three violent confrontations with Volkov's men in their attempts to take her back. She no doubt feared they would try again.

The SUV came in sight, moving fast on the road, coming to a sudden stop just in front of the men and the girl. Billings led Myra to the back of the vehicle, opening the door and helping her in as Paschal raised the rear hatch. He unslung the rifle and satchels from

his shoulders, laying them inside. Closing the rear door, Paschal looked at Billings, who had a request.

"Do you mind driving?"

He nodded and went to where Warren sat behind the wheel, engine idling.

"Why don't I drive?"

Warren smiled. He got out and stepped to the back, getting in beside Myra and shutting the door. Paschal was now at the wheel with Billings at his right. The driver quickly turned the vehicle around and proceeded down the road. They continued along the winding, seldom used lane, back the way they had come earlier, soon reaching the highway.

Paschal stopped the SUV. He was frazzled and needed a moment to think. They had the girl back and needed to get her home to Anchorage. Familiar with the region, he knew what to do, pulling onto the road, turning right toward the village of Nenana, five miles ahead. The highway had gone southwest from Fairbanks, but at the next town, named for a Tanana tributary, the road turned south for the next two hundred miles.

A principal route, the road was well kept and good for travel. Paschal soon relaxed, driving at a fast clip, just over the posted limit. Despite the approach of evening, the sun was high, and there would be ample daylight all the way to Anchorage. He thought of his companion on his right, who seemed asleep.

"How's the shoulder? Bandages okay?"

Billings was slow but finally responded, "Feels sore. Maybe needs changing. At least it's dry, no blood or anything."

"When we stop for gas, I'll check it."

Billings looked over. "Don't think we should stop. Need to get to Anchorage. We'll be safer there."

Paschal looked at the fuel gauge. It would be close. "Might make it. We'll see how it goes."

Then they were quiet. Billings leaned his head against the side glass, going back to sleep.

A low voice came from the back. Warren was trying to comfort the girl. She'd been through a lot; he wanted to be supportive but not intrusive. He was grateful she was safe, relatively unhurt.

"How's the head?"

At first, she said nothing, making him think she'd not heard. He waited, not wanting to press her.

"Uh, the bump still hurts, but the headache's better."

The words were slow, almost painful. She had been quiet, reluctant to talk, but her stillness must belie inner turmoil. Warren was silent, feeling he'd said enough for now. He wanted to give her time for herself. If she felt like it, she could talk. His arm around her, he wanted her to know he cared and that he would protect her.

He felt badly about Fairbanks. The Russians had appeared without warning and taken the girl in a near clean getaway. He was not there when needed. Warren decided he would not let Myra out of sight, and if the Russians came back, he would stand between her and them. He would watch her until she was safely back in Anchorage.

No one spoke. The only sound was the hum of the motor and the sweep of the air as the car sped down the highway. Warren thought Myra was asleep. She needed rest, but even more, she needed recovery for her mind and emotions, things harder to heal than the body. It would take time; Warren wanted to help but was not sure what to do. For now, he would hold her, let her rest, and if she said anything, he would listen.

He opened his eyes. They had stopped. The sound of the car door opening and shutting had woken him. He was stiff from the long drive and needed to move around. He eased the girl from his shoulder, gently laying her against the seat, and got out, seeing Paschal behind with a pump handle, filling the gas tank.

"Where are we?"

"Talkeetna. Take over here. I need to put a fresh bandage on Ron."

Warren watched as Paschal went to the back, opening the hatch door for the medical kit. The pump spigot rested in the fill tube; the handle latch had not yet tripped. He listened to the rush of gasoline, throbbing through the hose as he looked around. Talkeetna was a

small town but larger than previous villages. In the waning light, he was in awe of the view of Denali, rising in the northwest.

The latch snapped in the handle, and he took out the nozzle, putting it back in the stand. After twisting the cap tight and closing the fuel lid, he pulled a paper cloth from the dispenser, wiping his hands as he walked to the other side where Billings sat in the open door, Paschal leaning over him.

"The dressing needed changed, but the wound's clean, no infection." The medic finished and helped Billings with his shirt.

The ex-cop was grateful. "Feels better."

Paschal cocked his head, looking closely, like a hen eyeing a chick. "Can you move the arm?"

Billings flexed, slightly rotating the arm. "A little stiff, but seems I have full movement."

"Good. As soon as you can, start physical therapy, and you'll be back to normal."

Knowing Paschal had been without sleep for more than twenty-four hours, Warren took over driving while the older man took the back seat where Myra remained curled on one side asleep.

Pulling onto the highway, they were impressed at the sight of the distant mountain, highest on the continent, anchoring the vast park and nature reserve they were passing on the right. The sun was below the horizon, and a bit of twilight lingered.

Feeling rested and with a fresh bandage, Billings was pleased Warren was in front, driving. "How far to Anchorage?"

Paschal spoke from the back, "A little more than a hundred miles."

Having accepted Billings as the leader, the two others were not surprised at what he said next. "Okay, when we get there, first thing, we go to the police."

The plan raised mixed feelings for Warren as he mulled the idea. "A few days ago, I would have objected. But with all that's happened [he was thinking of the girl], I don't think we have a choice."

Going to the police seemed counterintuitive. After all, when last they spoke, the Anchorage police detective said he would find Warren. Surprisingly, there had been no sign of pursuit. He was sure

Roberts was no amateur and would have found him if he wanted. Warren was perplexed but had thought little of the matter, caught up in the events in the North Slope. He would get an answer when they got to Anchorage.

They made good time, crossing a bend in the Susitna River where the road began paralleling the stream for twenty miles, then curving east through the towns of Willow, Houston, and Wasilla, coming to the junction with Highway 1, following that route due south across the Knik River, onward in a southwesterly direction toward Anchorage.

They stopped at a lonely motel on the outskirts of town where they could rest and freshen themselves after the long journey. Billings would take no chances, keeping everyone together until reaching the police. With two beds and a foldout sofa, Myra was given as much privacy as possible while the three men made do. As the others lay down for rest, Billings pulled a chair to the door.

“I’ll take first watch. Race, relieve me in four hours.”

As Billings sat down, Warren removed the cushions from the sofa, pulling the handle of the unit upward and out, extending the frame holding the mattress until it lay flat, set on metal legs. He located bedsheets and coverings on a shelf and made a place to sleep. He retrieved his pack from the floor, pulling his cell phone from a sleeve. Thinking of the coming meeting with police, he muttered to himself, “Won’t need this anymore.” He removed the foil covering from the phone, wadding and dropping it in a waste can. He then lay back and was soon asleep as Billings turned off the light.

## 20



### RETURN TO ANCHORAGE

**D**etective Roberts had the desk phone at his ear while scanning a computer display. He was working jointly with the Alaska Bureau of Investigation on a longstanding case that was about to break. Evidence had been gathered on the biggest crime organization in the state, enough for a judge to issue search warrants to be served the next week.

He was interrupted by a knock at the door which opened, a woman leaning in.

“Larry, some people here to see you.”

Roberts swung the chair around, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “Kind of busy, Angie. Can you make an appointment?”

“This is important, Larry.”

Roberts said a few words on the phone then hung up. He disliked interruptions but relied on his assistant to manage the schedule. “See them in.”

The door swung wide, and three men and a young woman came into the room. The detective rose from the chair, standing with a smile. “Mr. Warren, please come in, and your associates.”

As the group paused midway, Roberts saw Billings.

“I remember you also, a former policeman, but I don’t recall your name.”

“It was weeks ago. I’m Ron Billings.”

Roberts shook hands with everyone as introductions were completed. The detective looked to his aide. "Angie, let's make our guests comfortable."

She brought a chair from the corner as Roberts moved one from the side of the desk, providing four seats. "Please, sit down."

As they moved to the chairs, Warren was perplexed. He had dreaded coming to the police. There must be a warrant for his arrest, yet Roberts was acting nonchalant, as though he'd forgotten. His enigmatic manner was beyond understanding.

The group sat down as Angie stood to the side. Roberts was seated, looking across the desk at the private investigator.

"How may I help you, Mr. Warren?"

Hesitating, Warren chose his words carefully. He had come because of Myra, for her welfare. "Uh, I'm here to turn myself in."

Roberts had a busy morning and wanted to speed things along. "There're no charges against you, Mr. Warren. About what happened at the post office, we found you acted in self-defense. In fact, the investigation helped break another case. All we need is a statement. My assistant, Ms. Devereaux, will help you."

Smiling, the woman raised an arm toward the door. "Please, this way."

Warren was slow understanding. He had steeled his nerves to turn himself in, all for Myra's sake. Knowing now he had only minor paperwork and then would be free gave him a great sense of relief. Rising from the chair, he thanked Roberts and turned, following the assistant to the door.

The detective now looked at Billings. "I find it curious you're with Warren. How are you involved?"

Billings began. He refreshed Roberts's memory, telling his story, a former police detective from Memphis Tennessee, coming to Alaska in search of his daughter, taken by human traffickers, whom he had traced to the North Slope.

He explained how he met Warren, telling the complete story of rescuing Myra, fighting the Russians at Nuiqsut, the reversal at Fairbanks, and safely getting the girl back at Loon Lake. They had

come to Anchorage to get the girl home but, more importantly, to get her police protection.

Roberts had listened quietly as Billings told the story. Paschal listened too, watching, surprised at how well Billings had held up.

At last, the detective spoke, "Interesting story, quite interesting." Roberts paused. "As you know, the people who held this young woman and attacked you are a gang of traffickers, part of the largest criminal enterprise in the state. We're building a case against them with state and federal authorities. We will need statements from all of you."

Looking at the girl, Roberts spoke with sympathy, "Ma'am, your name?"

"Myra Denise Bannon."

"Ms. Bannon, I've just learned this is your home. Were you abducted in Anchorage?"

"Yes, living with my mother, I was kidnapped two years ago."

The detective paused, trying to go easy with the questioning. "Since we have jurisdiction, you're our responsibility. It will be difficult, but we have to ask about your abduction and time in captivity."

Myra dropped her head, looking at the floor.

"But that can come later. First, we will get you back to your family. Before you leave, there's some processing to do that will take about an hour. We'll contact your mother and let her know you're here, and you'll go home under our protection. You've been through a lot, but you're safe now."

Roberts paused, excusing himself, going to the door and calling someone in the hallway. After a moment, another officer appeared, coming with the detective into the room.

"This is Officer Felton. He will take you to a waiting area until we can get your statements."

Roberts shook their hands, speaking with Billings as the other two were led out.

"It's to your credit the girl is alive and free."

"Couldn't have done it without Warren."



Roberts wanted to be clear. “We are closing on the biggest trafficking ring in the state. We should soon know something of your daughter.”

Seeing he was being dismissed, Billings made a request. “Could you give me a little more of your time to discuss things in private?”

Roberts thought for a moment then turned toward the officer, looking from the hallway. “You can leave. Please shut the door.”

Letting the door close, Felton asked Paschal and the girl to follow, leading them down the corridor to a reception area where the officer paused.

“Please wait here until you’re called.”

He left and the two went to some empty chairs along the back wall.

Meanwhile, Warren was in a room nearby with Roberts’s assistant, Angie Devereaux. She sat at a small desk behind a computer, her fingers tapping away on the keyboard, taking testimony about the post office shooting weeks earlier. Now and then, she asked a question. At last, she reached an end, and a printer on a nearby table started up, discharging two sheets of paper. The woman left the chair and went to the machine, retrieving the printout. She took it to where Warren was rising to his feet.

“You’re a well-mannered young man.” She handed him the papers. “This is your sworn testimony. Read it and, if agreed, sign at the bottom.”

The document was official looking, each page numbered, sheets stapled at the top corner. Warren read it quickly, finding no mistakes, surprised it was verbatim. He lay the paper down, pulling a pen from his pocket when the woman stopped him.

“Show me your ID.”

Warren looked up, momentarily perplexed. The week had been long, his nerves still frayed. He sighed, pulling out his wallet and showing his PI license.

“Thank you. Now sign.”

As Warren wrote his signature on the paper, the woman retrieved an instrument from the desk. She slid the device over the document, pressing the handle to emboss an official seal beside the signature.

“All done,” she said. Laying the paper on the desk, she pointed to the door. “This way. I’ll take you to the others.”

She led him from the room, down the hall to the reception area, stopping in the portal.

“Once we have everyone’s statement, you are free to go. The young woman will be escorted home and provided protection while the case is pending. Call if you have questions.”

With that, she left, disappearing down the hallway. Warren entered the reception room, busy with people coming and going. Seeing his companions seated along the back wall, he headed their way, shuffling by an unkempt couple in rough clothes looking like they were from the remote interior. As he reached his friends, his phone rang.

Warren stopped, pulling the device from a pocket, hearing a familiar voice.

“Race, this is Mark Dunbar. I’ve been trying to reach you.”

Dunbar paused, but Warren did not immediately respond, so the professor continued.

“Kate let us know you called but said nothing of where you were or what was said. I’m calling to ask for your help.”

Warren finally spoke, “You should have gotten the coroner’s report by now.”

“We did. It came in a confidential envelope sent by an officer Billings, I believe. Don’t know how you did that but extremely useful. Confirms my theory. I will explain when I see you. Our work here in Ataqsut is done. We are flying to Anchorage for a seminar at the university to present our findings. I’m hopeful you can join us. As I said, we need your help. I’ll get to the point. The murdered woman had a young son who was put in foster care somewhere in the state. Knowing you used to work with Family and Children Services, I’m hoping you can navigate bureaucratic channels and find the child.”

Warren thought for a moment. “I have a friend in Nashville who does inter-state queries. Get me the information, and I’ll pass it on.”

“I’ll provide details when I see you. If you can, join us at the seminar. Of course, we’ll pay all expenses.”

"I just got to Anchorage, and I'll be here a while."

"Perfect! Sorry, I can't talk. We're boarding the plane. Hope to see you soon."

That ended the call. Warren was puzzled. What was Dunbar's theory? He would have to wait till he saw the professor. Nice to hear the research expedition would help with expenses. He had lived on a credit card so far, and the lapse with his client meant he hadn't been paid. After joining Billings, the ex-cop had helped; and providing the autopsy report for Dunbar had gotten Warren on the professor's payroll. He was thankful to have an income even in an unexpected way.

Coming to where his friends waited, Warren saw only Paschal and Myra on a bench. As he sat, he noticed the girl staring in space. He lightly put his hand over hers, glad she did not pull away.

He looked at Paschal. "Where's Ron?"

"He stayed, wanting to talk with Roberts."

After a moment, Warren slipped an arm over the girl's shoulder. She instinctively leaned into him, drawing close. "It's okay, you're almost home."

She remained silent. All that had happened the past three days had taken a toll.

Warren looked around. They were in a large waiting room, half full, among several low tables scattered with magazines, newspapers, a few paperbacks, a beverage machine in a corner, and squarely across from them dividing the room, a control station where uniformed officers sat behind a plexiglass partition. At that moment, a side door opened, Roberts's assistant coming through, walking to where the three sat.

"Ms. Bannon, we have your mother on the phone. Please follow me."

Warren stood as Myra rose from the bench, following Ms. Devereaux back through the door to the control section and disappearing at the back. He sat down, weary and a bit despondent, not understanding the girl's state of mind, but he desperately wanted to help her. Almost home and about to join her mother, she should be happy.

He turned to Paschal who was half dozing. "Has she said anything since Roberts questioned her?"

The older man straightened. "Not a word."

Warren sat back, looking aimlessly in the room. "Maybe speaking to her mother will help. I'm worried. She was more talkative when we were on the run."

He grew quiet. Paschal shifted nearby, propping himself against the back of the bench, shutting his eyes, and drifting to sleep. Warren looked on. It was good his friend could rest as they had been sleepless much of the past seventy-two hours.

Then Billings came in from the hall. He was moving better, not as bothered by the injury. Billings had been with Roberts a long time, and it appeared the meeting had gone well.

As Billings sat down, he asked about the girl, "Where's Myra?"

"The station got her mother on the phone, and she went for the call."

Warren was curious about what Roberts had said. Paschal was now wide awake. After a moment, Billings began telling what happened.

"Roberts told us he's part of a state and federal task force trying to break up the largest human trafficking organization in Alaska, a Russian enterprise. That was all he'd say, but as we were leaving, I asked to speak in private.

"I first met him weeks earlier, coming to the state to find my daughter Carrie, hired by Andrey Volkov, ostensibly to work at one of his hotels. Roberts told me then about the Russian trafficking, which I'd already figured out after she was abducted.

"Just now, he expressed regret I haven't found my daughter, but he was pleased we got Myra out. He seemed genuine during the conversation. While expressing sympathy for me as a father, he was guarded in what he said about the investigation.

"We hit it off well. I think because of similarities of age and comparable careers with the police. He gradually warmed to the conversation, lowering his guard a little, becoming more cooperative with a fellow officer while revealing as little as possible. As we talked, he grew to accept ours was a friendly conversation between peers,

and he became more open. Soon we were like two professionals on a case, and I began learning a lot.

“The gang of traffickers is statewide, started by Russian Sergey Volkov, former head of the organization, who returned to his ancestral country last year. They’re involved in drugs, gambling, prostitution, getting most of their income from the latter. They’ve found trafficking quite profitable. Human capital can be sold repeatedly, with minimal maintenance and upkeep. They are mostly in the larger cities but also operate in villages and small towns in the North Slope where many oil workers frequent the brothels. The current boss is Sergey’s son, Andrey, who has his headquarters in Anchorage. This is the man who was in love with my wife in college before I met her.

“Earlier this year, my wife took my daughter on a cruise to Anchorage, saying it would help motivate her to do better at college. Soon after they arrived, my wife had a chance encounter with Volkov. And within a few days, he offered Carrie a lucrative job at one of his hotels. My daughter looks just like Claire at her age. Now I know the meeting rekindled the romance between my wife and Volkov, and he used it to his advantage, offering Carrie the job as a ruse to kidnap her. Once I figured it out, I quit my job in Memphis, left my wife, and came to Alaska to find Carrie.

“Volkov’s headquarters is in Anchorage, and he has a large estate east of the city in foothills near the Chugach Mountains. Roberts implied the case against the Russians is almost complete, and the authorities will soon serve Volkov with a warrant. That didn’t concern me. My aim was to get information about my daughter, and I think I got it. I think Carrie is special for the Russian, and I hate to say, not as a person, but as a possession, someone he owns. Roberts said Volkov holds a stable of girls, a sort of harem. I’m almost certain my daughter is at the Russian compound, and I’m going there to get her out. This will involve more risk than the visit to the Dark Moon. The Russian’s residence will certainly have sentries, electronic devices, extra security measures. It will take all I can do to pull it off. I’ve already taken steps to better the odds, but going alone is impossible. I’m hoping you two will join me.”

Billings paused. Paschal felt on the spot.

“The law is closing in, shouldn’t we wait?”

Billings responded at once, “I won’t let Carrie be held a minute longer if I can prevent it. Think it over, and we can talk more later.”

## 21



## RECONNAISSANCE

**B**illings trudged on the path up the slope, leading toward a cluster of mountains. The trail lay at the eastern edge of coastal lowland known as the Anchorage bowl, the place where early settlements started the present city, including where he walked, an area inside the bounds of the state park named for the nearby mountains. In hiker's boots, dressed like a typical outdoorsman, a pack over his shoulder, he had been on the trail for nearly an hour. Seeing a flat boulder off the path, he walked over, removing his pack, and sat down. He unclipped a canteen, removing the cap, and raised it for a drink. After a moment, he put it back in the holder, taking a deep breath, exhaling, and looking around. The faint outline of buildings downtown lay toward the west, the blue expanse of Cook Inlet farther out. He turned his head, sweeping his eyes over the panorama of mountains, tendrils of snow on upper peaks. Despite the stunning and inspiring views, he was not out for sight-seeing nor even exercise.

He slid a small map from a sleeve of his pack, unfolding and laying it flat on the rock. Earlier, leaving the city, he found a road that ran up the slope beside the park, providing access for a large private estate. Billings now found it all on the map, running his finger along the line marking the road to where he had made an *x*. He was a mile from the location. If he stayed on the trail, he would come in sight of the residence of Andrey Volkov. It was late afternoon, and sum-

mer was officially ended, but daylight would last three more hours, enough time to look over the Russian's estate. Replacing the map, he lifted the pack to his shoulder; well rested, he set out at a faster pace.

He had seen no one on the trail, but coming around a bend, someone was approaching. The man was not dressed like a hiker but wore dark denim trousers, a matching shirt, and a military-style jacket. At a distance, Billings looked him over, then shifted his eyes off the trail. Just before they passed, Billings looked directly, nodding in greeting. The man met his gaze for a moment with no expression. They passed in silence, leaving Billings to think what it meant. The walker had Slavic features and was likely Russian. A slight protrusion in the man's clothing on his right side was probably a gun. This may have been a Volkov guard, Billings concluding he was getting close to the Russian's estate. Continuing a half mile, he stopped to fix his shoelaces. He looked back in search of the passerby, but the man was gone. He stood up, looking ahead and back quickly, then stepped off the path into dense undergrowth. He pushed through thinning foliage and made his way north, keeping the map's image in mind, sure he was near his destination.

Then he saw something different, a high-wrought iron fence in the middle of a cleared lane that ran through the woods. On the front of the close-spaced bars, there was a sign in Russian and English this was private property, all entry forbidden. Billings looked both ways along the line of cleared land, bare of all vegetation except for clipped grass, the six-foot barrier going as far as the eye could see, disappearing in the trees. He looked closely at the fence for signs of security devices and did the same for the cleared border, for metal objects, pipes, cameras, or sensors. Other than the fence, everything was natural. Billings figured this was an outer barrier to keep out large animals and the average hiker. Surveillance and detection devices would likely be installed nearer the house, perhaps at a second fence. He would only know for sure when he got closer.

He tossed his pack over the barrier, hoisting himself up, balancing precariously for a moment at the top of the fence before dropping to the ground, nearly rolling over. He stood up shakily; the rough landing had irritated the wound in his shoulder, not yet fully healed.

He picked up the pack and pushed ahead through the brush, finding the ground going north slightly downhill. Earlier on the trail, the way had been steadily rising toward the mountains; but now, he was moving diagonally on a downward slope on the grounds of the Russian oligarch's estate.

As he continued, the land became more open, vegetation thinning, and soon Billings caught sight of Volkov's mansion. As expected, an inner barrier surrounded the compound, a stone wall about ten feet high, set a hundred yards from the house. Billings now began taking extra precautions to avoid discovery. He paused, looking for higher ground where he could get a better view of the compound. Seeing a rise to the northeast, he headed that way, moving slowly, shifting his eyes constantly, looking at adjacent trees and shrubs, and sweeping everything in sight for signs of movement. Everything he saw convinced him the Russian estate was well protected. The secluded location, iron fence, and thick wall indicated the Russian had tight security. Getting closer, he was more likely to encounter a sentry, like the guard on the path, the increasing risk made Billings warier, taking care to stay out of sight.

He was moving east up a gradual slope toward a knoll high enough for a clear view of the estate. Approaching the hillock, Billings became more cautious, knowing the open ground could be seen from all sides. He began a wide sweep to the right, approaching the hilltop the opposite direction from the house. He came slowly and carefully, wary of guards, looking for signs of monitoring devices. There was nothing out of place, nothing disrupting natural foliage and vegetation. Now at the high point, coming to the rim, Billings dropped down, removing his gear as he stretched out, laying prone on the ground, his pack beside him. He pulled out a pair of binoculars, drawing the glasses to his eyes, scanning the Russian compound.

It was a stately mansion at the center of an expansive, well-kept lawn, divided with driveways curving through sculptured hedgerows. The house was magnificent, the first level almost a perfect square, like an enormous cube with a few windows, tall and narrow, shaped in stone. The structure had hard exterior walls, solid as rock but smooth, a masonry color, flat and velvety. The walls rose fifteen feet

to a flat top that went back six feet where the second story began, like a smaller box set on a larger one. The second level was twelve feet high, with a complex roof of mansard sections. The setback at the top of the first floor made a balcony going around the front and sides of the house. The open walkway allowed a clear view of the compound, the distant stone wall, and the surrounding forest.

Billings was not surprised to see a man on the balcony standing motionless behind the ornate railing that rimmed the walkway its entire length. The individual looked like the man on the path although this one was dressed military style, entirely in black. He had what looked like an AK-74 assault rifle slung on his shoulder and carried a small pack. As Billings watched, the man turned toward the far end of the walkway where a door opened, another man coming out, dressed the same, armed like the first. The two men met, talking briefly, then the newcomer proceeded along the balcony to the front corner, turning to walk across the face of the house, stopping at the far corner, taking a position, and looking around.

It all intrigued Billings, the protective barriers around the estate, perimeter fence, inner wall, the massive house, and guards. What else was there that was not seen, other protections, devices, and sensors? The fence he got over earlier was a physical barrier, mainly to keep out larger animals, and with warning signs, to ward off trespassers. But here, nearer the residence, there must be electronic measures built in.

He shifted the field glasses to the wall, studying the construction. While the face of the barrier was uneven, of stone and concrete, the top was perfectly flat, smoothly finished with cement. Looking closer, Billings saw a six-inch metallic housing mounted at the top; sweeping the eyeglass further, he saw identical objects widely spaced about every twenty or thirty yards. These must be security devices.

He reached for his pack, pulling out an optical unit resembling goggles, but much more refined and intricate. Slipping the device on his head, he made some adjustments, turning a small dial on the frame at his temple. He saw what he'd expected. Thin infrared (IR) beams in precise lines ran from module to module along the entire extent of the wall. Invisible, an intruder climbing over the barrier

would trip the beam, alerting security personnel. But Billings was somewhat surprised; the technology was outmoded, had existed half a century, and could be easily defeated. He would have expected the Russian to have a more sophisticated system. Billings wondered if there might be a more advanced monitoring device covering the wall, maybe in the same modules but a separate technology. Even so, he would be better equipped when he came back for the actual entry.

Before moving on, wanting to preserve what he'd learned, he made entries in a notebook, recording his findings, questions raised, and thoughts about what he'd seen. He'd also noted small protrusions along the base of the balcony atop the first floor, likely cameras. He sketched these in a rough drawing then closed the book, slipping the elastic band in place and putting it in the pack.

He had examined all he could from where he was. He looked around, choosing the best way to reach the other side of the grounds. Leaving the field glasses around his neck, he picked up the pack, rising in a half crouch and moved toward the woods.

He stayed in the area another two hours, going to the far side of the estate, finding things there much like the near side: the perimeter wall, electronic sensors, security cameras, and a sentry pacing the walkway. Satisfied, he turned to leave. Waning light gave enough visibility to circle the woods, reach the path, and make his way down the slope to the gravel parking area where his car waited. A moose walked haltingly from the clearing into a fringe of trees. Billings saw no one as he got in his car and drove to the highway.

\*\*\*\*\*

Early the next morning, the three were seated at the back of the restaurant of the hotel where they were staying. Paschal was sipping coffee, reading a complimentary paper he'd grabbed in the lobby. Warren sat to his left while Billing was across the table. Unfinished food lay in front of them as a server came up to stand momentarily silent. Warren and Billings were in conversation but paused as Paschal looked up.

"We're done, just more coffee, please."

The server reached for the plates, stacking them onto one hand. "I'll be back with coffee."

Warren watched as the young woman headed toward the kitchen. He thought of Myra who was now under police protection. "I feel better knowing Myra's with her mother at a secure place. It would have been unsafe at Ms. Bannon's house. The Russians seem able to find things out."

Billings shifted, straightening in his chair. "Let's go over the plan."

Paschal put the paper down, now paying attention.

"I've told you about the Volkov estate, and you have the copies."

Warren held a schematic he was studying, then looked at Billings. "Original construction blueprints, where do you get these?"

"Municipalities have codes. Records are kept. The data is on a computer or a file cabinet. It's all in the cloud. I'm lucky to have friends with access."

Warren slid his finger over the document, stopping at an object. "So you think this is the most likely spot, the outbuilding?"

Billings looked over. "Roberts said the Russian keeps girls at the estate, and I saw one escorted from the building to the main house. Also, bars are on the windows there, but nowhere else." He paused. "If we're lucky, she'll be there, in the secondary building."

The three had been through a lot over the past week with close calls that could have ended badly. Now they faced a greater challenge. Billings was trying to be honest in his assessment while showing optimism. "Security will be tight, but I'm getting equipment at the airport to give us an edge. I think we'll manage."

He asked if there were any questions, but the men were silent. Billings knew the plan fraught with risk, sensing the same concern in Paschal and Warren.

"I know I'm asking a lot, but I can't do this alone. I know this is different from last time. Previously, we faced even numbers in the open. This time, we'll be outnumbered, entering a secure, heavily guarded building." He paused, studying the men's faces. "Uh, if your hearts not in it, you can choose not to go. I'll understand. If she's in the auxiliary building, I might can do it myself."

Warren finally said something, "That's too great a risk. I couldn't stand by and let you go alone." He paused. "I'm in."

Billings shifted his eyes to Paschal. "And you, Eddie?"

Paschal hesitated, then said, "Yeah, me too."

The meeting ended at 8:30 a.m., each man knowing what was next.

## 22



## SEMINAR

Leaving Paschal in the lobby, Warren and Billings walked from the hotel entrance, the ex-cop leaving for the airport and the other going to a nearby taxi, telling the driver to take him to the University of Alaska campus. Warren had called earlier, learning the seminar began at 9:00 a.m. The university was in the middle of Anchorage, a fifteen-minute drive from the hotel.

The taxi came to Bancroft Hall, a four-story structure set back from the street by a wide esplanade of paving stones sided with low walls holding beds for flowers and several well-trimmed shrubs. The building was square, each floor smaller, like a stack of diminishing boxes, constructed of masonry with simple windows set flat in the walls, looking like a typical government building.

Walking toward the entrance, he wondered about the seminar's topic, what information the professors would present. Professor Dunbar's call days earlier had left Warren with many questions, and he was especially curious about the interest in the dead woman's son. If the child was in the state system, Warren could find him, but why the urgency?

He passed through two sets of glass doors into a large foyer where dozens of people mingled, talking in hushed voices. Warren paused, looking around. He saw open doors to a lecture hall where attendees were already taking seats. A placard on an easel read, "The Clash of Ancient Beliefs with the Modern World." Below the head-

ing, Professor Dunbar, Wildlife Biologist, and Professor Hartley, Cultural Anthropologist, were listed as guest lecturers. Looking at the crowd again, Warren saw the two scientists in a group, including Collins and Kate, at the far end of the entry hall. As he watched, Hartley saw him, excused himself, and came his way. Warren immediately walked to the professor, shaking hands. Hartley smiled.

“Glad you’re here. You disappeared so suddenly in Ataqsut. Kate didn’t understand, but I thought your note adequate. She doesn’t see things as they are; your business, of course, is quite unpredictable.”

“I called and tried to explain, but she obviously was hurt.”

Looking over Hartley’s shoulder, he saw Kate cast a quick glance in his direction, immediately turning away to start talking with another woman.

Just then, Professor Dunbar walked up, greeting Warren and shaking hands.

“If you hadn’t made it, I was going to call at first break. As I said on the phone, we need your help.”

The professor pulled a sheet of paper from his coat pocket, handing it to Warren.

“We need to find a small boy in a state-sponsored home, the son of the woman killed in Ataqsut. This gives you the details. If I’m right, the child is in danger. Once we find him, we can work with the police to protect him.”

Professor Hartley nodded then interrupted. “It’s eight fifty-five. Since I’m the first speaker, I need to head to the front. We can talk more later.”

He left, filing into the lecture hall with several attendees as Warren turned to Dunbar, who continued where he’d left off. “Race, I’m grateful for your willingness to help. You’ve become an important contributor to our efforts. Jonathan and I have been up several nights preparing the lecture. A lot of the information just came in and had to be worked into what we already have. My presentation will be controversial, but the facts support my claims, and what is not backed by evidence remains credible.”

The professor was speaking mysteriously. Warren started to ask a question then decided not to. The scientists were at a higher level than he; he would save questions for later.

Dunbar looked at his watch. “About to begin. Let’s find a seat.”

The two turned toward the entrance of the lecture hall, Dunbar leading with Warren behind, going through doors held by an attendant preparing to close them. The room was slightly more than half full, mostly students, instructors, a few professors from the campus, and a handful of academics from out of state. Dunbar and Warren took a seat in an empty section at the center of the auditorium.

Hartley had just mounted the platform with the chairman of the Anthropology Department, Professor Edward Rasmussen, who stepped behind the podium as Hartley seated himself at the corner of the stage. Rasmussen began with opening remarks, welcoming the members of the audience and announcing the day’s program, part of a lecture series on the relation of aboriginal cultures to modern society. The first lecture would be presented by the University of Minnesota Professor Jonathan Hartley, notable authority on ancient Inuit customs, beliefs, and religion. Rasmussen cited a long list of Hartley’s credentials, awards, and achievements.

“The topic of the lecture is ‘Ankauits in Modern Society.’ Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Dr. Jonathan Hartley.”

Polite applause rose from the audience as Professor Hartley stood up, strolling to the lectern, shaking Rasmussen’s hand as the other man left the platform. Hartley smiled broadly, warming to the applause, delighted to be at center stage. The applause died down as he began speaking in a clear voice.

“This is my first time on your campus, and I find everyone welcoming and friendly. Professor Rasmussen and I go far back, and I appreciate the invitation to speak today. Most of my visits to your state have been on field studies of native cultures, primarily of Inuit tribes in the North Slope, the primary focus of my career.

“My interest in anthropology has existed most of my life, beginning at the age of twelve when I saw a film at school, *Nanook of the North*. Back then, the northern tribes were known as the Eskimo, but that label is in disfavor, considered a pejorative by many of today’s



natives. The government today employs the labels Inuit and Alaskan Native almost exclusively for aborigine populations, although other terms like Inupiat and Yupik describe subsections of natives based on language or region. Yet the word *Eskimo* is still used in some tribal legal documents.

“If you haven’t seen the documentary, I highly recommend it, an amazing piece of cinematography, made during the silent film era. Seeing it set me on track to become an anthropologist. It made a lasting impact, giving me a newfound respect for mankind, seeing how people in a brutally harsh environment could survive and adapt to extreme conditions by using and shaping what little nature provided and draw sustenance from the rudiments at hand.

“In the era when the film was made, the natives survived entirely from animals, for food, clothing, and tools. In the far North, plants were almost nonexistent. Moss could be found, which the natives gathered to build fires. But animals are what kept the Eskimo alive. The walrus, seals, caribou, and polar bear all provided food, the bones carved into tools and implements, the furs and skins fashioned into clothing, these things bartered with the white man at trading posts.

“The winter scenes in the movie were fascinating, the wind driving the floating ice from the sea into shore, wedging the floes in clusters and stacking mounds of ice, forming small mountains along the coastline. Here, Nanook and his band hunted the seal, their main source of food, scaling ice hills, searching the frozen sea caps for small holes, telltale openings where the ocean-dwelling mammals came every twenty minutes or so for a breath of air. When the sharp-eyed Nanook spotted a small hole, he kneeled, brushed the snow back to see better, and waited with harpoon ready, in upraised hand. Finally, a seal came, the animal’s snout thrust against the hole for air. The hunter plunged the shaft through the opening, sending the barbed tip deep into the seal’s skull, setting off a tug of war, Nanook leaning on his back, holding the line taut with locked knees, the animal beneath the ice struggling to get free. At times, the man drew the line, hand over hand, backing in a crouch, only to be overcome as the seal fought, pulling the cord with such force, the man fell rearward, holding tightly and sliding over the ice to the hole. At last,

Nanook’s companions rushed to help, pulling the line, dragging the animal until pinned and exhausted beneath the ice, then chipping away until the opening was large enough to kill the sea mammal and pull it out.

“The full-grown seal, bigger than a man, lay before Nanook and his companions. Using a crescent-shaped whalebone knife, the hunter made a ventral cut in a straight line from the animal’s snout to the tail bone, pulling away the thick coat of blubber in a single piece, leaving the animal’s inner musculature and bone covered in a thin fascia sheath. This was the moment everyone began slicing away, cutting the meat into small morsels, eating as they worked, and tossing bits to famished sled dogs nearby.

“The film was made at the turn of the twentieth century, depicting a culture that even then was passing away, a life quite primitive compared to today. Yet I felt an immediate affinity for the Inuit and wanted to learn all I could about them. I knew then my life’s work would be studying the native culture, not just through books, films, or classrooms, but through actual experience. After a year taking introductory college courses, preparing me in my goal of becoming an anthropologist, I took a few weeks on a solo trip to northern Alaska, meeting the Inuits for the first time.

“Of course, by then the natives in the film had vanished away. Inuits of today are equipped with modern tools and implements; the harpoon has been replaced with hunting rifles. Natives no longer live in igloos, although the ice houses are still used temporarily in remote areas. In today’s global community, Inuits are part of modern society, sharing common dress, homes, and transportation. Still, some Inuits retain many of their ancient beliefs and religious practices. Like any culture, the Inuits are identified by physical characteristics, language, and religious beliefs.

“More recently, I have given greater attention to a particular branch of Alaskan Native, an obscure offshoot tribe, known as the Ankait, indigenous to the central coastal region of the North Slope.

“It is generally believed that this distinct tribe came about during ancient times when geological forces gave rise to landforms, creating barriers over eons of time, isolating these people for hun-

dreds of years to become a subset of the Inuits, having a distinct dialect, coming to be known as the Ankait. While the Inuit population is slightly increasing with each passing year, the Ankait tribe has been in steady decline for as long as records have been kept. The community is close-knit and tribal-centric and particularly noted for holding strongly to their ancient religious beliefs.

“Like many primitive religions, these people through the ages worshipped the sun, moon, and stars. But over time, these celestial aspects of Ankait belief were supplanted by the deification of wildlife. Shamanism and, to a lesser extent, animism are the main aspects of the Ankait religion. Of course, these beliefs must be regarded by the scientific mind as rank superstition but, with the centrality of religion in native life, must be thoroughly studied to understand native culture.

“The dominance of religion in Ankait beliefs gives the shaman supreme power in the community and spiritual realm, making him the unchallenged leader of the tribe.

“A distinctive feature of their religion is the belief in shapeshifting, the idea that it is possible for a human to temporarily change into an animal. We shall see that shapeshifting is directed toward one or more animal species, and sometimes a species may be incorporated as a god to be worshipped, in such cases, a malevolent deity, what traditional religionists would call the devil.

“The transformation brought about by shapeshifting is quite difficult to achieve, requiring a special ceremony where the shaman acts with intensity and concentrated effort, speaking special incantations and carrying out dark rituals, all meant to appease the evil spirit of the animal god. This is the general understanding that the one wanting to become an animal seeks favor with the spirit of darkness, and it is through the agency of the evil spirits that the transformation takes place. Shapeshifting as a topic covers volumes. The idea has been around since the beginning of time, but as mythology, it’s an academic study based on historical records and books. It can be a dry topic in the hands of some authors, but even good writers may have trouble bringing the subject to life, so to speak. The only way to truly understand would be to see an actual shape-shifting ceremony and

document it for the benefit of students and readers. Amazingly, I was privileged to have witnessed this phenomenon.

“About two years ago during a winter study in the North Slope, I met a man who first told me of the Ankait, an obscure tribe living near the Arctic Sea. By chance, I learned of a secret ceremony taking place in a remote location at midnight under a full moon. I was warned to stay away because the ceremony is very private, and the group takes precautions to prevent interference from outsiders. But I decided to take the chance, to see for myself an instance of an atavistic practice.

“I came to where the rituals were to be performed and saw what looked like a very large campfire. I approached from a hundred yards, seeing a nearly naked man conducting a native dance at the fire with about a dozen natives in a wide circle, all dressed for subzero conditions. I was amazed at what I was witnessing, a modern-day instance of shapeshifting. A middle-aged native man, naked except for a loincloth and loosely covered in a wolf pelt, was chanting, gyrating, and dancing frenetically, while sweating profusely, despite frigid weather. And common in such ceremonies, he appeared under the influence of hallucinogens.

“I had brought a suitable camera with a special lens and was able to obtain photographs.

“An event like this is not just rare but is unheard of, and I was quite fortunate to see it. I watched the ceremony about twenty minutes before being discovered and was able to escape, under threatening circumstances, without injury.

“Soon afterward, I wrote down what I’d seen in a notebook with analysis and commentary. Studying the photographs, reading, and revising my description, I felt I had material for an academic paper in a professional journal. But after reflection, I decided against it. What I had seen was not meant for outsiders, and for me to publicize it, I believe, would have put my life in danger. The ceremony took place in a remote area at midnight, carried out by a group of religious fanatics with fantastic ideas and superstitions, believing that by consorting with the powers of darkness and carrying out the proper rituals, the shaman could be transformed into an animal—in this

case, a wolf. For unbelievers to witness the event would not only have tainted the ceremony but would have neutralized the ritual, depriving it of power. My presence was an immense setback for the cultists, and if I had been captured, I would likely have lost my life. In such circumstances, the sacrifice of an unbeliever witnessing the sacred event and defiling it is the only way to appease the dark powers.

“Of course, this is rank superstition. We study these things to learn how the beliefs shape the native’s reality and determine their behavior. All such beliefs are pragmatic in nature, having an evolutionary track. Somewhere in eons of time, such beliefs and practices came about to sustain the tribe and ensure its survival. As anthropologists, we investigate the superstitions and religion of these groups the same way we examine pottery, tools, and other relics from the past. Study of these tribes is meant to contribute to our knowledge of mankind. Understanding a remote and obscure group of aborigines leads to better knowledge of ourselves.

“This concludes the introduction of this lecture. Before we end the session, I want to touch on what follows, a report on the outcome of a field study just completed a few days ago. That, of course, is the reason for these lectures, to present our findings.

“Our expedition to the North Slope was organized rather hastily when learning of the murder of a young native woman under mysterious circumstances. We organized a multidisciplinary team tasked with investigating how the superstitions just discussed intersected with a murder in the tribal community. The death of a young Ankait woman in a remote North Slope village was quite strange and mystifying to the authorities. My colleague, Professor Mark Dunbar, a wildlife biologist, learned from an Alaska game officer of rumors the woman’s death was caused by a mythic creature, offspring of the shape-shifting ritual, the wildest of superstitions. While the authorities are mute on the cause and the case remains open, as an anthropologist, I have my own theory that the perpetrator was a native cultist under the influence of group hysteria.

“Mark and I are both on faculty with the University of Minnesota, but our work frequently brings us to your state. And over the years, we have made many trips to the North Slope. What

Mark learned, and he will explain in the following lecture, was quite fantastic, and we immediately set about organizing a scientific study to go to the village where the young woman died.

“I have described the expedition as multidisciplinary because we are looking at the woman’s death through the lens of anthropology and wildlife biology. You may be asking the reason for Professor Dunbar’s part, and some of you may have guessed, it’s the shape-shifting belief paired with the primitive worship of the wolf.

“I don’t want to spoil what Mark will say when he has his turn other than to point out his contributions will explain, from a biological perspective, how native superstitions involving animals can be an important determinant of behavior and, in this case, may have led to a young woman’s murder. While an understanding of wildlife biology is helpful in gaining a full perspective of events studied in our field excursion, it is only an addendum to clarify the impact of ancient religious beliefs. This is the essence of anthropology: to study the whole man, to see how belief systems shape human activity, how superstitions may cause aberrant behavior.

“Our destination was the village of Ataqsut, a remote settlement in the upper central North Slope. With a population of about two hundred, the town has the largest concentration of Ankauts in the region. It has one or two stores, a hotel/boarding house, a tavern, and a public building housing the native council, and local law enforcement, a Village Public Safety Officer or VPSO. Besides Dr. Dunbar and I, our team included my daughter Dr. Kate Hartley and graduate assistant, Doah Collins.

“After arriving at Ataqsut, we contacted the local VPSO for information about the recent murder, to the extent allowable. The young officer was helpful but could tell us only basic facts. The case was still active, and many details confidential. The victim, a young Ankait woman, was killed under mysterious circumstances. Rumors, rampant in the community, speculated wildly as to cause. Hearsay ranged from reports saying the woman was killed by cult members involved in forbidden ceremonies to others claiming she had been savagely mauled by a wild animal or mythic creature. But facts of the case dispute much of these claims. The motive for the

murder may have been connected to the woman's paramour, a leader of the religious cult.

"I don't mean to tease you with a few details and leave you with a lot of questions but to say more would be unfair to Professor Dunbar. While my lecture gives an overview of the Ankauit tribe, explaining the origins of our expedition and describing our activities for the past two weeks, my colleague will go into specifics of the murder case and how native superstitions may have played a central role. Meanwhile, we will take a break and return in fifteen minutes when I will conclude the morning lecture. I will take questions at that time."

Hartley gathered notes from the reading desk and turned to the side, stepping from the platform, and speaking with some people at the front before continuing toward the back.

## 23



### PROFESSOR DUNBAR'S REVELATION

**I**t was now early afternoon when Dr. Mark Dunbar took the stage.

"As my friend Professor Hartley said earlier, I'm the other half of the multidisciplinary team, a wildlife biologist specializing in the species *Canis lupus*, the common wolf. Love of the outdoors came to me in my earliest years, and having a career studying wild animals fulfilled my dreams.

"My father was an avid sportsman, hunter, and fisherman, taking his family on many camping trips in upstate Minnesota. But the most memorable trip was when I'd just turned twelve, and my father took me and my brother to British Columbia in the Canadian Rockies. It was early spring with cold days and some nights near freezing, but the chilly weather just added to the sense of adventure. The week could not have gone better, but on the final night, something happened that changed my entire life. We were sleeping in the open in trail bags, and I was attacked by a wolf. My father was able to get the animal off me, but the wolf would not quit, pressing the attack until my father managed to kill it. I was not badly hurt, and only a few scars remain on the back of my shoulder. I only mention the incident so you will understand why I chose my career.

“Although I’m a bona fide scientist, many of my colleagues consider me a fraud because of my wide interest in the wolf, an eclectic approach beyond the biological. Since high school, I’ve studied the animal in history, literature, and myth. These are not sidelines but central to my understanding of the wolf.

“We are all aware of folklore and children’s stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Pigs*. Such tales come from man’s earliest days, revealing our long association with the wolf.

“In the Bible, John 10:12, the hired hand guarding the sheep sees a wolf coming and flees. ‘The wolf catches them and scatters the sheep’. These references, from the beginning of recorded history, show that among animals, both wild and domestic, there is none more ingrained in literature, folklore, and myth than the wolf.

“These stories and references depict the wolf as villain, a threat to humankind, but in today’s world, the animal is seen more on the opposite end of the scale. This has led to a common misconception, often repeated, especially by conservationists and animal preservationists that there has never been an unprovoked attack by a healthy wolf on a human in North America. This view holds that while the wolf is a dangerous animal, if left alone, the animal avoids humans. In my case, when attacked as a child, the animal was nearly starved, but there have been instances of predation by healthy wolves, and these can easily be found in online searches. The episodes are not common, but verified cases are in the historical record.

“After years of work conducting field studies, examining generational studies of wolf families, extensive research of the historical record, and lengthy studies of the animal in literature, I have concluded that the wolf can pose a threat to humans.

“This introduction brings us to the main point of these lectures, the reason Professor Hartley and I organized an expedition to the North Slope to investigate a tragic killing in the Ankait community. Ordinarily, such events would be of no interest to an anthropologist or wildlife biologist, but as Professor Hartley said earlier, this killing is believed connected to religious cultists who were active in the community, led by a shaman conducting ceremonies involving ancient

forbidden rites. The shaman, called Tulok, was the paramour of the young woman killed.

“I first learned of this incident through a friend in the North Slope, a state game officer. The killing took place in the village of Ataqsut, a small community of mostly Ankait. Rumors in town said the woman was killed by an animal, some said a mythical animal, even though she was in a room in her house when attacked. My friend, the game officer, had long known of the strange religious practices of Tulok and his followers. He had even heard disturbing stories of a child sacrifice carried out by the shaman two years earlier, but these were disproved when the child was later found alive. When the officer heard about the young woman’s bizarre death, knowing of her connection with Tulok, he called me.

“When I informed Professor Hartley, we agreed to organize a two-week expedition to Ataqsut. The purpose of the study was to examine the superstitions, religious beliefs, and practices of the tribe and how these related to the woman’s death. The study would include investigation of the nature of the religious practices, the belief in shapeshifting, and the wolf as central in their beliefs.

“This gives you a brief sketch of our goal for the short expedition to the North Slope. What follows will show the field study succeeded beyond our hopes and expectations. In fact, I don’t think I’m overstating our accomplishments when I say we made some startling discoveries, and that you will find some of what I say hard to believe.”

Sitting in the audience, Hartley leaned toward his daughter, whispering, “What’s he talking about?”

Kate shrugged, still listening.

Dunbar paused as he turned to an image on a screen, an optical pointer in hand, a red dot appearing on a map. “For the past two weeks we were here, at the village of Ataqsut, centrally located in the North Slope, not far from the coast, meeting the Village Public Safety Officer who took us to where the young woman had been killed. We were only allowed to view the scene from the open door of the room where the death occurred. The officer provided limited information. Afterward, I was able to see the victim’s mother who had lived with the deceased and discovered the body. I explained I

was there in the interests of science and that our investigation was meant to gain understanding and that our findings might influence legislation to improve conditions for the tribe. The woman gradually began to talk and, after about two hours, had fully answered all questions.

“During our time in Ataqsut, we interviewed many people, mostly natives, but one was a white man who had married an Ankait woman. Although his wife was deceased, and he was estranged from the tribe, he provided much insight into what had happened. Through him, we learned of a cultic ceremony where a child sacrifice was attempted. Why would such a horrible thing be done? As Professor Hartley touched on shapeshifting, the case we studied involved a ceremony where the shaman sought transformation into a wolf. The ceremony may last hours as the leader appeals to a dark deity, seeking passage from the human world to the world of wild animals. When a session fails, the ritualistic ceremony is repeated over a prescribed number of weeks. In this case, after performing ceremonial obeisance and appeals again and again, ending with the same outcome, the cultists concluded their efforts were insufficient to please the dark forces. It was then the shaman went to the ultimate act of satanic worship, child sacrifice.

“As Professor Hartley explained earlier, these ceremonial rites are an appeal to the dark forces, for the power to be transformed into a wolf. Why would a man want to do this? That is a key question, studied extensively by various disciplines. There are no easy answers, but I have my own theory.

“In the Bible, in Genesis, man is tempted by Satan who says, ‘Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ This, it seems to me, is what the shaman is after, to know and experience the deepest and darkest evil. In the Ankait superstition, the shaman plumbs the depths of evil to satisfy the lust of his fleshly body. Among various desires arising from our humanity, the needs of hunger, thirst, and sexual desire are on a scale of human needs. The superstition posits the ultimate lust is drinking warm blood from a living human. A ghastly thought but precisely what researchers have uncovered that through shapeshifting, becoming a

wolf or wolf-man, the overpowering desire is to catch a human, tear out his throat, and slake a demonic thirst, drinking lavishly of warm blood. Our life is sustained by blood in our bodies, and for the dark creature we are speaking of, consuming the blood while the victim is alive satisfies the deepest and darkest evil, the ultimate lust of the flesh.

“Returning to what happened in the final tribal ceremony, according to an eyewitness, a child was sacrificed in the fiery pit, yet no human remains were found, and the police were left with the matter unsolved. Also, the Ankait leader disappeared after the incident, and although wanted for questioning, he was never found.

“But within a year, the case was broken when the small boy was found alive. Through the miraculous intervention of a wolf, a lactating female, the child was kept alive for several months until discovered and rescued by state game officers. Though quite rare, instances of wolves saving a child are documented in history. The most famous example is Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* where the fictional hero, Mowgli, was based on fact.

“As we near the end of today’s lectures, I’d like to summarize what we learned thus far. We know that an offshoot Inuit tribe, the Ankait, has preserved ancient religious beliefs to this day, which they still practice. A central part of their superstition is the shapeshifting belief, and we know the tribal leader has carried out ceremonies for months and possibly years, seeking transformation into a wolf for the reasons I have covered in the lecture. Nearly two years ago, authorities in the North Slope investigated a native ceremony, involving a child sacrifice, where, fortunately, the small boy was found alive and well months later. Most recently, the killing of a young Ankait woman set off a swirl of rumors, not only about secret ceremonies involving dark rites but also concerning the death itself. The most startling rumor was the woman was killed by a wild animal, but this was considered almost impossible because the death took place in the victim’s bedroom.

“Up to now, the best judgment of our team is that the woman was the subject of a ritualistic killing, designed to mimic an animal attack. The victim’s throat was ripped out in the same manner done

by a wolf. During our study, we learned of a key link between the principals in the story. The tribal leader, Tulok, and his paramour, the young woman killed, are parents of the child meant to be sacrificed. This is difficult to comprehend that a man would sacrifice his son based on superstitious beliefs.

“Yet child sacrifice has been documented through history, the Aztecs and Incas of South and Central America, the Druids of Europe, and the Old Testament Canaanites and Ammonites. The Old Testament refers to the pagan god Moloch, to whom child sacrifices were made as a fertility rite or for a blessing. In our understanding of the Ankait superstition, the attempted sacrifice of the child was to gain favor of the wolf god, Amorok, to be transformed into a wolf.

“This was our conclusion that the ancient tribal religion, fraught with superstition, was such a powerful influence in the Ankait community as to strike a triangle of man, woman, and child with a tragic end, the woman dead, the child scarred for life, and the man wanted for murder and attempted murder. This is our team’s conclusion, and the findings have been presented in today’s lectures, but there is more I would like to reveal.

“Since it is known the woman was killed in her bedroom inside a house with shut doors, the condition of the body indicating an animal attack has been attributed to the infliction of wounds to give such appearances. In other words, the murderer wanted it to look like a wolf killing, and this has been the consensus of our team. But among the many rumors we heard during our two-week study is something I haven’t mentioned yet, and I want to cover it as we conclude today’s lectures.

“Although I have not used the word *werewolf* today, with all the talk of shapeshifting, it is clearly a relevant topic. We commonly think of the subject from the cinema where a werewolf arises from the bite of an infected wolf. However, this is a Hollywood notion. History of the legend, in Europe and elsewhere, validates the Ankait superstition: A werewolf results from shapeshifting.

“The shaman’s overarching goal was to be transformed into a wolf, not as an end, but to experience the evil of his lust and slake his

thirst for warm human blood. I’ve already gone over this in detail as a theoretical construct explaining what drove the Ankait leader to carry out numerous occult ceremonies, culminating in an attempted child sacrifice. My belief, not shared by the others on our team, is that after months and even years of conducting dark rituals and demonic activities, the shaman, Tulok, achieved a breakthrough.

“Before today, this was my private theory, while outwardly in agreement with our expeditionary findings: that the woman’s death was at the hands of cultists mimicking a wolf attack. At the time, our findings were incomplete because the cause of death was unknown. The investigation was still open, and we had no access to the police report and autopsy results. We assumed if we were able to get the information, it would only confirm the conclusion we had already reached while realizing our research was incomplete and our conclusion only a theory. Yet we did not give up but persisted, using unconventional avenues of inquiry to try to obtain the information.

“I am delighted that, here, this afternoon, I can announce we have obtained the full police report and autopsy results. The documents arrived a few days ago, and with lengthy preparation for these lectures, I’ve only had a few hours to review them. But without equivocation, the reports conclude the woman’s death was caused by a wolf. DNA analysis of minute amounts of salivary fluid on the victim’s body and fibers at the crime scene prove this. In the analysis and commentary section, the document left open the question of how the animal got in the house to kill the woman and escape, with all doors closed. While the police reports avoid speculation, my own theory is the killing was done by a werewolf.”

A sound came from somewhere in the audience, an audible gasp.

Professor Hartley shifted in his seat, visibly agitated. Turning toward his daughter and Collins, he spoke in a low voice but heard by those close by. “The man has destroyed our credibility!”

On the stage, Dunbar ended the presentation. “And now, we’ll take questions.”

Hands went up across the room as members of the audience sought Dunbar’s attention. The crowd had clearly been roused by

Dunbar's claim a werewolf had killed the Ataqsut woman. Nearly every question concerned the professor's incredible idea a werewolf was real, and how a man of science could believe such a thing. Hartley found it too much to bear, quietly excusing himself and leaving the room. Some attendees followed, cornering him in the entry hall with persistent questions. He forced a smile, trying to maintain equanimity while responding to queries and remonstrations from the faculty of the University of Alaska. No, he had not known Dunbar would make such a claim, and it was a preposterous thing to say at a science lecture. Some of the professors suggested Dr. Dunbar should be referred for a psychiatric evaluation. Here Hartley demurred, saying, while his friend was a rank eccentric, he was quite sane. The others did not know, as Hartley did, that the biologist had been steeped in wolf literature and mythology his entire life, had studied everything he could find on the animal, trying to learn everything known about the species. Why, the wolf skin he had seen on the shaman in the midnight ceremony could have been the same pelt that made a rug in Dunbar's study. It was not surprising he believed in werewolves, but Hartley deeply regretted he had said it at their lecture. Growing weary of complaints and protests, Hartley left, going to the men's room and secluding himself for a time.

Meanwhile, Dunbar was fielding questions from the platform, arguing his claim was valid and that the evidence did not dispute it. Some questioned how he had obtained official police records. But Dunbar saw this as an ad hominem attack, saying the reports clearly proved a wolf killed the woman. Another said, yes, it was a wolf, not a mythical werewolf. The professor said a DNA analysis made no distinction, but only a werewolf could get in and out of the house, opening and shutting doors. His questioners asserted there had to be another explanation, not based on myth. The biologist did not relent but went on repeating his arguments, maintaining the facts supported him.

Finally, the questioners tired, seeing they could not dissuade the professor from his ironclad belief. The crowd gradually dispersed, leaving only two faculty members speaking with Dunbar. Hartley had returned, joining his daughter and Collins in the back, talking

with others. Warren stood to the side, avoiding Kate, who had not looked his way since seeing him arrive. He had stayed from respect of the two lecturers and out of curiosity. While Dunbar's theory was fantastic, he had to admit: the facts did not disprove it.

With his mind beginning to wander, Warren noticed someone seated alone at the back of the lecture hall. It was Detective Roberts, sitting quietly, watching. Their eyes met, and Roberts immediately approached him.

"Hello, Mr. Warren, nice to see you. Since you're here, you may be interested in what I'm doing, and you're welcome to join me."

Roberts wanted to see Professor Rasmussen, then talking to a colleague nearby. Seeing Roberts, the professor excused himself, going to join the detective and Warren.

Roberts introduced his companion. "Professor Rasmussen, this is a colleague, Race Warren. Race, this is Dr. Edward Rasmussen, chair of the Department of Anthropology."

Warren and the professor greeted each other, then Rasmussen turned to Roberts. "Detective, I'm sorry I could not decipher the relic, but the man I told you about is here, one of our guest speakers, Professor Jonathan Hartley. If anyone can identify the piece, it's Dr. Hartley."

By now, the only people remaining in the hall were with the two lecturers in the center aisle. Hartley was no longer miffed at his colleague; the two were speaking to each other and others in the group.

Rasmussen looked in Hartley's direction then turned back to Roberts. "Let's see if we can get Professor Hartley's attention."

The chairman led the detective toward the group as Warren followed.

As Rasmussen approached, Hartley looked up, seeing the chairman with someone he didn't know.

"Jonathan, I would like to introduce police detective Lawrence Roberts and his associate Race Warren."

Hartley smiled, shaking hands with Roberts and nodding to Warren. "I know Race from the North Slope, where he proved quite helpful."



Rasmussen got to the point. “Weeks ago, Detective Roberts sought my expertise on an artifact he found in an investigation, an ancient medallion, but I couldn’t make out the inscription. I suggested he speak to you.”

Roberts showed the metal disk inside a plastic packet, handing it to Hartley. “Professor Hartley, I’m hoping you can decode it.”

The anthropologist looked for a moment, handing it back. “I need my tools. Please wait.”

The professor walked quickly to the lecture platform where his business case lay and returned wearing white inspector gloves of fine cotton, snug on his hands, holding a magnifying glass.

“All right, let’s have a look.”

Roberts handed the plastic packet to Hartley, and the scientist sat down at one of the end seats, carefully removing the medallion. Holding the piece at the edges, he lifted it toward the ceiling lights, viewing through the glass.

“Ah, I see a small speck of blood.”

Hartley glanced momentarily at Roberts, a blank look on the detective’s face. The scientist turned back, closely studying the disk.

“The inscription is primitive Ankaudit, distinct from Inuit dialect. Never seen anything like it, but I think I can make it out.”

By now, the lecture hall was empty except for the other members of the expedition and a female student, talking to Kate and Collins at the side of the room. Dunbar had joined Roberts and Warren, watching Hartley. The room was quiet except for the low voices of the two women and Collins.

Finally, Hartley lay down the magnifier, carefully putting the disk back in the plastic holder, handing it to Roberts.

Dunbar broke the silence. “Well, what is it?”

Hartley raised his head, looking at everyone. “A single word. In Inuit, it means *Amorok*.”

Rasmussen expressed surprise, “The word for *wolf*?”

Hartley added a comment, “Wolf, but with the connotations of *lone wolf* or *giant wolf*.”

Warren interrupted, “I’ve heard the word before.”

Looking at Roberts, he explained.

“Detective, remember our depositions at the station. At Nuiqsut on the lake, during the attack, falling back to the plane, Billings was wounded but shot the attacker. He went to the aircraft but asked me to go back and check the gunman. The man was fatally wounded, but just before dying, he said one word: *Amorok*.”

Robert’s eyes widened. “That’s a link.”

He looked at Dunbar. “I came in during your lecture. Interesting, the werewolf theory.”

He turned to Hartley, shaking his hand. “Thank you, Professor. You’ve been a great help.”

Looking at the others, Roberts said goodbye, turned, and left the building.

Hartley looked at Dunbar with a quizzical expression. “There goes a possible believer in your wolf fables.”

Warren glanced at his watch. He needed to see Billings and Paschal. “I’ll reach out to Children’s and Family Services and try to locate the child.”

Dunbar added, “We must do it quickly.”

Warren nodded he understood, shook hands with the professors, and left.

## 24



## ATTACK ON THE RUSSIANS

**W**arren caught a taxi back to the hotel. It was 5:00 p.m., and Billings would be back from his errands. There was much to do to get ready for the operation that night.

He got out of the cab and walked into the hotel. Passing through the lobby, he saw a familiar figure at the bar. Eddie Paschal was sitting alone with a glass in front of him. Warren strolled over, just as his friend downed the drink. He seemed distant.

“How are you, Eddie?”

Paschal looked up as Warren sat down. “Not bad. I went by the airport to flight services. Set for an interview. It looks good. Maybe I’ll be back at work soon.”

Although it was good news, Paschal was somber.

“Hope so, Eddie.” Warren looked at his watch. “I guess it’s time to see Ron, when you’re ready.”

Paschal was silent, staring hard at the empty glass on the counter as his friend waited. Finally, he turned, looking up. “You know... these are dangerous people. Someone could get hurt.”

Warren looked in space. Eddie was right but thinking that way was counterproductive. He looked at his friend, searching for words. “That’s true, but I think we’ll be all right. Ron will be out front. He won’t let us down. He’s got military instincts no matter what happens. You’re quite capable yourself. It was you who got us through at Nuiqsut. I don’t think Ron could have done it without you think-

ing of the smokescreen. You came through, and you and I will get through this with Ron. He’s shown he’s a leader, keeping the Russians off us and saving our lives at Loon Lake. We’ve seen what Volkov’s men do, but they haven’t beaten us yet. We’ve got to help Ron get his daughter. If we follow his lead, we’ll be okay.”

Warren meant well, but the words sounded hollow to Paschal.

Then the bartender appeared. “Another round?”

Shaking his head, Eddie laid down a bill for the tab. The two got up, leaving the restaurant bar, turning to a short corridor to the elevator, where Warren pressed the button and waited, both men silent.

The door opened with a soft whirring sound as the two stepped into the empty car. Paschal stayed quiet, and Warren too, leaving his friend to his own thoughts. They were soon at the proper floor, got off, and went to Billings’s room. After a short knock, they were let in, seeing two beds, one laid with manila envelopes, documents, and empty utility bags, the other spread with a heavy cloth mat used by snipers.

Billings led them to where large duffels lay on the floor, quite full, apparently holding gear for the midnight operation.

“At the freight hub, the equipment was packed in shipping containers, but I got it uncrated and into these army duffel bags to make it easier. It’s all here. We’ll be well prepared.”

Billings spoke with confidence, his words meant to reassure his companions.

“First, let’s go over the prints. We covered it at breakfast, but it’s got to be rock solid.”

He picked up a schematic from the table, stepping to the second bed, unfolding the document, and laying it on the mat. Warren and Paschal followed, standing beside him, looking at the diagram.

“This shows the ground floor. Pay close attention to the entrances and two stairways, the main stairs at the front, and the rear one which we’ll take if we enter the house. That’s only if Carrie is not in the outbuilding.”

Billings laid out a second diagram. “This is the second floor. These are the stairs we take once inside the house.” He moved his fin-

ger across the document. “This looks like Volkov’s master bedroom. I’m hoping we don’t have to go that far.”

Warren and Paschal glanced at each other, as Billings continued.

“As we get closer to the Russian, there’ll be more obstacles. Of course, once we have Carrie, we immediately withdraw.”

Billings pulled out a rough sketch of the Russian compound and immediate surroundings as he began the operational plan.

“The compound is surrounded by a ten-foot wall about a hundred yards from the house and outbuilding. The barrier is three feet thick and mounted with a security device, an infrared beam, outdated technology that can be easily defeated, and I’ve got tools to do it. We’ll get over the wall with ladder ropes attached to folding hooks.”

He then pointed to a roughly made sketch of the house, a square within a square, the smaller one representing the upper story.

“The second floor has an exterior balcony running around three sides of the house like a horseshoe. During my recon, there were two guards posted on the walkway. At first, you’ll take positions at the wall facing the back of the house, and I’ll be on high ground with clear sight of the house from the south and west. I’ll take out the sentries, disable the perimeter security devices, then give you the signal to cross the wall. You then move to the rear of the secondary building. Race, you’ll take the northeast corner. Eddie, you’ll be at the southeast. I will approach from the south, and, on my signal, we move to the door and breach the building. If all goes well, Carrie will be inside. Once we have her, we leave fast.”

Billings paused, looking at the two men, studying their faces. “Any questions?”

“What if she’s not there?” Paschal had a somber look.

Billings sought the right words, wanting to be clear, but also reassuring. “The girls should know where she is. If she’s not in the outbuilding, she most likely will be in the main house, and we go there.”

Billings waited. Warren had a blank look, but Paschal’s concern only deepened.

Billings wanted an understanding. “No plan is exact when executed. That’s a given, but whatever obstacles we come to, we will get around until we find Carrie and get her out.”

Billings paused.

“You both agreed, and the plans are for a three-man team. But if either of you have second thoughts, say so now.”

After another pause, he asked, “Race, Eddie, are you in?”

Both men nodded.

“Good. Along with the equipment, you have packets with maps, building diagrams, everything I’ve shown you.” Billings paused, looking at the two men. “Let’s get the gear.”

He cleared away all schematics and diagrams then hoisted a large utility sack to the bed and began removing various items. He handed each man a canvas utility bag with carry straps.

“Pack equipment in these.” He turned back to the duffel, pulling out black protective vests. “It will be cold tonight, near freezing. Wear thin layers, nothing heavy. Strap these over your clothing. They’re lightweight, latest technology, and will stop most common handgun and rifle rounds.”

Reaching back, he pulled out dark ziplock bags holding electronic gear. “These headsets will give instant communication. Very reliable, encrypted, and undetectable.”

Next, he handed out durable clothing, wrapped in clear plastic. “Outerwear, all black.”

Warren was giving his full attention but barely keeping up with Billings’s rapid delivery.

“Now, the firearms.” He handed them identical weapons, in cloth cases.

“We’ll carry MP5s with five magazines.”

Billings removed one, demonstrating its operation, pointing out the control lever, switching between positions, and attaching a magazine, working the slide, ejecting a round.

“Reliable Heckler and Koch, any questions?”

Warren spoke up, “I fired one years ago at a Kentucky machine-gun shoot. Light, easy to handle, perfect.”

Billings continued, "Good. They'll be held at ready by a retention sling on the chest and easily brought to a firing stance."

He then showed sidearms. "Standard military Berettas with integrated suppressors with three full magazines. These are your primary weapons. Stealth and surprise are essential, and these are quiet. The MP5s are backup if it's a fight to the finish."

Coming to the end of the segment on weapons, Billings said he would employ a Remington sniper rifle fitted with a silencer to initiate the operation.

Billings went for nearly an hour, rehearsing important details, stressing key things, and asking pointed questions on each man's part until satisfied they had a full understanding of the plan. He said they must be wary of the unexpected, but with special communications, they could make instant adjustments to any surprises. With advanced electronics, precise weapons, and middle-of-night execution, they had the best chance of getting into the Russian compound and rescuing his daughter. He stressed they had already gotten one girl from the traffickers, and he was sure they would save Carrie.

Finally, Billings ended the session. "I think we covered everything. You've asked questions, and I've quizzed you. I believe we've done all we can to make this work."

Billings forced a wry smile. "Try to get some rest with the few hours we have. Meet me at the car with your gear at midnight."

Warren and Paschal packed everything in utility bags and left, going to their rooms.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was unseasonably cold as the three men arrived at the trail-head parking area. The tract was empty except for a small car sitting at the edge of the lot as Billings steered the SUV to a remote spot before stopping. They got out of the vehicle, a sliver of moon shining dimly overhead. Each wore black clothing, tactical gloves, and a wool pullover cap. Their faces were smudged with dark paste. Walking to the back of the SUV, gravel cracked underfoot in the crisp air.

Billings motioned for the others to wait as he raised the rear door, reaching for his utility bag. He pulled out a goggle-like device, putting it on his head, making adjustments as he looked across the lot.

"Race, check the car. No one there but see what it is."

Warren walked quickly, dissolving in the dim light, then reappearing beside the car like a shadow. After a moment, he was back. "Abandoned, official label on it."

Billings had removed the headset and put it back in the sack. He pulled three bulky utility bags from the back of the SUV, gripping the carry loops, handing two to his companions.

"We carry these up the trail to the jump-off point, then we put on the gear."

Paschal undid the sling, adjusted the length, then hoisted it to his shoulder while the others carried their satchels by hand. The three set out on the trail leading to the Chugach Mountains. There was just enough light to see their way. From time to time, Billings looked at a special watch showing GPS coordinates marking the debarkation point. By then, they would see lights from the Russian compound a thousand yards off-trail.

The men were silent, Billings in front, Paschal following, and Warren in the rear. The path was easy, a textured surface of fine gravel, crunching softly underfoot, the only sound other than an occasional bird call from the forest.

Billings raised his right hand, the signal to stop. He held his other hand to see the wrist device. The map used two days before was in the bag; the coordinates were programmed in the watch. The jump-off point was another hundred yards, just off the trail, where they would complete final pre-op steps.

Billings motioned, and they went on. After ten minutes, he raised his hand, indicating they turn left, leaving the trail, entering thick brush. Warren and Paschal followed, passing through dense shrubbery a short distance until the foliage thinned. Billings stopped at the edge of a clearing.

"We arm up here and leave the bags."

They set the utility sacks on the ground, opening them, removing items, and fitting on gear. Soon they were ready. Each carried a sound-suppressed Berretta, an MP5 submachinegun strapped to their chest, magazine holders on their belts, and a light climbing rope carried in a pouch. Paschal also had a small medical box on his hip. Finally, each wore a communication set with a throat microphone and earpiece.

“Check your weapons. Full magazine, first-round chambered, and safety on. When ready to fire, don’t forget the safety.”

Warren thought Billings was doing things the right way by the book. There was little talk as the pre-op briefing had been thorough.

Paschal thought about the aid kit. He had been around guns all his life and knew how to use them. Weapons came naturally, and he would handle them well when the time came, but to his mind, the main job was looking after the other two, in case one was hurt or injured. He was well trained, had the proper equipment, and was ready.

Billings watched Warren and Paschal go through a mental checklist, counting, naming, examining weapons, gripping each item, twisting, and tugging, making sure all was secure.

“Everything checked? Communication clear? All good?”

The men gave an affirmation, heard distinctly in the earpieces.

“Even with voice communication, use hand signs when there’s visual contact.”

Billings paused, then signaled to move out, and the two men followed. The jump-off point they just left was due south of the Russian compound. The trek through the woods would be shorter than the earlier recon, the men following a precise plan. Soon a light appeared, a dim glow along the top of the trees.

They emerged from the woods, coming to the iron fence in an open lane, cleared of all foliage and vegetation, running east and west, disappearing in the darkness.

“This marks the perimeter of the estate. Let’s get to the other side and move out.”

Billings flung his satchel over, climbing the barrier quickly, and jumping to the ground. Warren and Paschal did the same as the

leader watched, waiting till they were ready. Once Paschal had his bag strapped over his shoulder, and the others had gear in hand, they set out, going due north, guided by the light from the compound twinkling through the trees.

As they walked, the scraggly mélange of trees in front began to change as something more substantial took shape, a solid continuum, formed along the ground. It was the stone wall surrounding the Russian compound, seen dimly in the penumbra of illumination from lights atop poles on the grounds and attached to the eaves of the building.

Billings raised his hand, signaling a halt. “This is close enough. From here, we’ll move to a rise where I’ll take position for the first phase. You’ll keep on and circle to the back of the east wall and wait for my signal.”

He lifted his hand, indicating they move out. He led them a short distance east to partial high ground, a kind of promontory, rising above the surrounding area. Gesturing to halt, he issued instructions. “Take position at the first set of coordinates, facing the back wall. Wait till I take out the guards and disarm security devices. I’ll signal when to cross the barrier.”

Billings watched as the two men disappeared in the darkness. Everything had gone well, but now came the critical phase: taking the sentries and breaching the compound. He turned and began walking up the incline, shifting to a half crouch as he neared the edge of the overlook. Placing the satchel on the ground, he took a sitting position and began removing gear. He pulled the rifle from its case, putting it together in the dark, extending the bipod, and laying the weapon in front of him. He took out the electronic viewing gear, fitting it atop his head, clicking it on, and making adjustments to clearly see the wall and objects beyond, all cast in green. The IR beams made straight lines inches above the wall. Everything looked just as during the recon. He removed the headset, laying it aside for the moment, picking up a pair of night-vision field glasses. He slowly swept the scene, moving the view field from side to side, looking at the house and its surroundings. His attention was on the periphery, the limit of his vision, looking for anything out of place, then he scanned in wide

sweeps, coming closer to the house until he had eyes on the balcony, peering through the glasses, covering the outside landing from end to end. He saw two guards. One was taking somnambulistic steps, moving across the front walkway, coming in Billings's direction, pausing midway, turning, and going back the other way, continuing to the corner where he disappeared.

This was worrisome, the guard being out of view. He hoped the sentinel was still moving, covering half of the balcony's full extent and reversing to retrace his steps. Meanwhile, he swept his view to the nearside of the house where the second sentry was standing close to the southwest corner, leaning against the railing, quite still. A stationary target at two hundred yards; it would be an easy shot. Meanwhile, he waited.

At last, he heard a voice in the headset. "Number one in position."

It was Warren, then he heard Paschal. "Number two in position."

They were set and waiting for the *go* signal. It was time to take out the guards on the balcony. The two sentinels were the only visible threats. Scanning the house and grounds through the glasses, Billings had seen no one other than the two men on the walkway. He decided that when the other guard came back, he would take the shot the moment the man turned at the midpoint of the balcony. He put the glasses in the case and stretched out with the rifle, pressing the stock firmly at his shoulder, relaxing in a shooter's position.

Billings waited. He peered through the nightscope, the field of view centered on the front balcony at the spot where he'd shoot, but the man had not yet appeared. Enough time had passed for the guard to get back to the front. *Had he stopped at the railing on the other side like his colleague on the near landing?* Billings had waited long enough. Warren and Paschal were poised for the signal. There was much to do, and steps must be done in sequence for the plan to work. It was time to begin.

Just as he started to shift his aim point, there was movement at the far side. The second guard came into view, rounding the corner in a slow, casual walk. Billings switched off the safety and began consciously controlling his breathing, setting the crosshairs of the sight

at the middle of the balcony. As the guard reached the center mark, pausing and beginning to turn, Billings squeezed the trigger. There was only a muffled *whoomph* from the edge of the woods as the .338 Lapua round struck the man in the head, crumpling him to the balcony floor. The bullet was a special composite, breaking on impact with little sound.

Billings immediately shifted aimpoint to the second guard who had heard the other fall. The man had turned, starting toward his prostrate comrade when struck by the silent round from Billings's rifle.

A low voice alerted Warren and Paschal. "Two sentries out. Moving to the wall."

Billings collapsed the rifle for carry, snapping the bipod flat on the barrel, folding the stock, slinging the weapon over his shoulder, and strapping on the utility bag. He turned, going down the incline to level ground, then circling toward the barrier. Within minutes, he stood at the bottom of the wall, looking up at a metallic module at the top, one of a series of devices set every twenty yards along the entire barrier. The beams of IR light had to be disabled before Billings and his men could get over.

Slipping the satchel off his shoulder, Billings set equipment on the ground, removing the coiled climb rope made of two strands with looped steps, fixed at top with a spring-actuated attachment. He snapped the release, and the device sprang into a three-prong grappling hook. Throwing it over the wall would trip the alarm; it had to be set in place carefully before he could climb the barrier and disable the sensors.

He looked around until he saw what would work: a forked tree branch several feet long. Pulling his combat knife, he began chopping and trimming the limb until he had a pole with a crooked end. He used the tip of the branch to lift the hook, setting it carefully on the top edge of the wall. Pulling down hard set the prongs in place. Finally, he removed a small tool bag, snapping it on his belt and climbing up, stepping in the loops of the rope.

He set the tool kit away from the security module, to avoid tripping the unseen beams. Opening the kit and taking out tools, he

began to concentrate, fixing his attention on what he was about to do. He could not afford slipups. He took deliberate steps, removing the device cover and tossing it behind him. Dropping something on the wall might trip the alarm, and a falling tool would cause delay. He strained his thoughts on what he was doing, carefully examining the assembly, finding it a simple design, running off a small power unit, connected in series, module-to-module, all along the wall, main power coming from a control station in the house. A green status LED on the printed circuit board was lit, showing the device active. Certain there were no trip wires or antitampering switch, he used a small cutter to sever the wire, disabling power, relieved to see the green light go out. He breathed easier, knowing they could now go to the next step.

He lowered himself to the ground, placing the tools in the bag and taking out the optical unit, mounting it on his head. Perhaps he was being overly cautious; he had just made the unit nonfunctional, but he wanted to be certain. Seeing no IR beams, he removed the head gear, putting it back in the satchel. Picking up the bag, he tossed it over the barrier and climbed again to the top of the wall, kneeling to dislodge the grappling hooks, pulling up the rope ladder while speaking in the comm unit.

“What is your status?”

Immediately he heard the replies.

“One, ready.”

“Two, waiting for go ahead.”

“Start phase two. Clear the barrier and proceed to next position.”

Working carefully on top of the wall, Billings picked up the rope bundle, moving it to the other side, slamming the hooks hard on the concrete, then throwing the ends down, dangling free. He lowered himself over, stepping carefully in the cross straps until on the ground. Raising the wrist device, he marked his position, leaving the climbing gear in place.

It was only a hundred yards to the house, the outbuilding just behind. The night vision gear was no longer needed. The facility had ample light from poles at the sides of the house and flood lamps along the edge of the roof. Billings moved quickly across the grounds over

a well-kept lawn. The grass was soft underneath, like plush carpet. He was tense, nerves at a high pitch, wary, ready for the unexpected.

Approaching the rear corner of the house, he was disturbed by a sound, barely heard, two shots from a sound-suppressed handgun. Then a voice in his ear.

“Guard encountered at back building.”

It was Warren. Silence, then a voice.

“Threat removed.”

Billings had the Beretta out and ready, going forward, moving cautiously, coming round the house to see Warren standing over a still form at the door of the outbuilding. He had already removed the dead man’s sidearm and was searching the body as Billings came up. Farther out, Paschal approached from the far corner, his weapon extended. Billings raised his hand.

“Eddie, stay there and keep a lookout.”

Paschal answered, “Roger that.”

Finishing a quick search of the body, Warren lifted a plastic card on a lanyard. “Looks like a key.”

Billings took it, looking closely, slipping the looped cord over his head. “We’ll try it, but first, let’s get him out of sight.”

After dragging the body around the building, they came back, and Billings signaled Paschal. “Eddie, we’re going in. Stay and cover us.”

Paschal acknowledged, moving in their direction as he looked around warily.

The two others had put on night vision gear for entering the building but were ready to take it off fast, depending on conditions. Billings held out the key card, pressing it at the door controller. Hearing a mechanical release, he turned the handle and the door opened. Slowly pushing the door wide, he stepped into a darkened room, Warren behind.

The interior was cast in green light as the two men stood just inside, viewing the room.

It resembled an open barracks, holding ten small beds with half-height partitions extending from the walls, separating the occupants.

Slender forms appeared on the beds, girls resting and still. Only soft breathing could be heard from the sleepers.

Closing the door quietly, Billings stood a full minute, scanning the room, checking everything in view. He signaled Warren to wait as he began moving to the back toward a single closed door. Once there, he stood silently for a moment then went in slowly, entering a large communal bathroom. Finding it empty, Billings returned to the large open room, silently moving to where Warren stood.

Billings took off the night-vision gear, signaling his companion to do the same. He was apprehensive, knowing one of the sleeping girls could be his daughter. He had thought of how he would handle the situation, deciding there was no easy way. He had shown his daughter's picture to Warren earlier, and now each one went to a side of the room, going from bed to bed with small lights, to see if they could identify Carrie. It was a difficult process, moving slowly and silently among the sleeping girls, taking care not to disturb them. If one were to awaken, Billings had decided to do or say whatever necessary, without harming the girl, to keep her quiet and not panic the others. They proceeded cautiously, passing each bed without rousing the occupant from sleep until there was only one girl left with her head covered. Billings leaned down, gently pulling the blanket back until certain she was not his daughter. Carrie had been born with little hair and it was months before she was known to be blond, her hair becoming more distinctive and prominent as she got older. Every girl he checked had dark hair, and he was sure it was the same for Warren, who had been silent, now standing across the room waiting.

He crept over to where the younger man stood near the entrance door and whispered, "She's not here."

Warren nodded, answering in a low voice, "No one like the photograph and no blonds."

Billings stood silently, staring at Warren as if he had the answer. They had hoped by now they'd have Carrie, but it hadn't happened. They could leave and enter the main house, but Billings needed more information. Time was running out. It had been over half an hour since he eliminated the guards on the balcony; someone would soon discover the breach.

"We've got to question the girls."

Warren nodded.

Billings turned, going to the first bed, getting down and leaning over the sleeping girl. He touched her, gently shaking her shoulder. The girl slowly roused, opening her eyes wide as she broke into a panic. Billings pressed his hand over her mouth, trying to calm her.

"I won't hurt you. I'm here for my daughter, Carrie. Do you know Carrie, where she is?"

He waited a moment, hoping the girl would settle down.

"I need your help. I'm going to remove my hand. Don't scream," he spoke in a low, calm voice.

"Nod your head if you understand."

The wild look in the girl's eyes went away, and she nodded her head. He slowly released his hand, allowing her just enough space to speak. She was breathing rapidly, taking short breaths, but remained silent. He asked her name.

Finally, she spoke, "Miranda."

"My name is Ron Billings. I came for my daughter, Carrie. Do you know where she is?"

The girl answered, "In the main house. She stays there."

Billings was relieved. At last, he'd found her. It didn't matter they were facing the greatest hurdle. He had considered this might happen and was prepared. But before they entered the main building, he needed more.

He looked down at the girl, speaking calmly, "How many are in the house?"

She spoke hesitantly, "Andrey for sure, and I've seen others, six or seven."

Billings listened quietly before speaking, "Thank you, and for your own safety, stay in your bed."

Billings rose, turning to Warren who joined him as he crossed the room, opening the door, both stepping outside, the door locking behind.

Paschal stood waiting.

"Eddie, you know what's next."

"Yeah, I heard."



Billings stood looking at the back of the house fifty yards away. Two stories, topped with a type of mansard roof, a plain rear wall, flat over its entire extent, with short railings, like clipped wings, on both sides at the ends of the second-floor walkway. The upper floor was slightly smaller, by the width of the balconies, like a smaller box on top of a larger one.

“Let’s go.”

Billings began walking toward the house. Warren fell in behind as Paschal followed, the men five paces apart. The light was just enough for them to see their way, and they crossed the open ground quickly. Billings reached the back door, pausing and slipping off the utility bag, dropping it to the hard surface at the rear entry.

Reaching in the bag, he gave instructions. “Wear night vision going in until we know conditions.”

The other two followed his lead, and the three were soon ready. Billings extended the key card, touching it to the door lock. Hearing a dull click, he gave a slight push, stepping through the entrance, followed by the others.

They were in a large room, with lofty ceilings, elaborately decorated, fringed with ornate moldings, arrayed with lavish furniture, everything shaded in green from the vision units. A striking glare in the corner indicated a light source. Billings pulled off the sight gear, finding the room equipped with low-level night illumination, sufficient to see around the house, but, if needed, the firearms had built-in LED modules that could be switched on.

Warren and Paschal also removed their units. They stood for a short time, letting their eyes adjust to low light. Billings scanned the interior, looking for anything that might be a threat. What he saw was not unexpected; the room size and layout were exactly like the prints. He turned to the right, seeing the bottom of the staircase. Even in dim light, the sight was spectacular. It was incalculable, the wealth needed to build such a home and furnish it so lavishly.

Billings was ready to move, but they needed more light. “Switch on gun lights.”

The men activated the LED devices on their handguns, projecting narrow shafts of light, fixed at the point a fired round would

hit. Pencil beams of light jerked here and there, shifting about, casting eerily over the steps, from the wall to the balustrade as the men mounted the sweeping staircase leading to the second floor. They moved the lights constantly, nerves taut.

Reaching the top of the staircase, Billings paused, signaling a halt. Whisking the light beam over the floor in front and across the wall, nothing looked out of place. The landing opened to a wide corridor leading to the master bedroom, the Russian oligarch’s quarters. This was likely where his daughter was held, a noisome thought Billings pushed from his mind.

“We’re close. Stay alert.”

He had scarcely spoken when everything became suddenly bright as lights switched on, leaving them exposed at the edge of the stair landing. For a moment, they didn’t know what had happened, only they were discovered and in danger.

Billings saw a man coming, approaching the stairs with an AK-74 assault rifle. Their eyes met, the three men on the landing trying to find cover as the Russian began firing, sending a stream of bullets across the top of the stairs, chipping the balustrade, and pockmarking the back wall. Billings, fully exposed, went to his knees, taking quick shots with the Beretta, striking close to the guard, forcing him behind the corner of a wall. No one was hit in the sudden spate of gunfire as Warren and Paschal reached a side wall across from where Billings crouched behind the curve of balusters at the stair top. Although a weak position, Billings chose to stay partly exposed to clearly see the gunman below. After a period of quiet, he checked with the others.

“Status? You okay?”

Both replied.

“I’m okay.”

“Same here.”

Despite being discovered and pinned down, Billings felt satisfied their plans had gone well so far. The urgency of the operation had allowed little time to prepare, yet they had got inside the Russian compound and were close to finding Carrie.

But now, they were in a bind, discovered and hemmed at the top of the stairs in a weak position. The Russians were alerted and likely getting ready to close in and finish them.

Billings glanced at his companions on the other side of the landing. Warren was half kneeling with the MP5 at the ready, eyes fixed on the room below. Paschal was there, slightly behind, partly concealed at the corner of the wall nearest the stairs. He turned to look at Billings, confusion in his eyes as if asking, "What now?"

The short silence ended as the man downstairs came out, firing away with his assault rifle. The Russian advanced toward the staircase in measured steps, directing fire in a sweeping motion, streaming bullets to both sides of the stair top. Seeing the cyclic sweeps, Warren stood at the right moment, unleashing a burst of fire, silencing the gunman who retreated to the near wall at the bottom of the stairs.

Billings had stayed down during the exchange, crouched behind the newel post of the balustrade. He thought the Russian's move risky, coming in the open without support. Then he heard Warren.

"I think I hit him."

"Yes, he flinched. Possible hit, but not down."

Why had the gunman come out alone, exposed, and shooting toward a much higher position? It had been a chancy move, one which may have got the Russian wounded. It had not been done at random or impulse; Billings suspected the move had a purpose. The other Russians in the house were now fully alerted and working with the gunman below. It was clear his advance on the stairs was a feint, a distraction, meant to draw their attention.

In the stark quietness, Billings heard a sound from behind, almost indiscernible, coming from the corridor extending the length of the house. He quickly reached in the utility bag at his feet, retrieving a small canister, breaking the release tab with his thumb, and flinging it down the dark hallway, leveling his handgun in the same direction.

The device burst, scattering white-hot particles, revealing two men in the corridor with AK-74s. Blinded by intense light, the gunmen shot their weapons wildly down the hallway as they clambered back, trying to reach safety. With steady aim, Billings fired twice,

knocking one man down, hitting the other, leaving him limping until he cleared the hallway. Billings kept his handgun on the still form in the corridor, waiting, knowing the illuminator would soon extinguish. If the man was alive and able, once the flare was out, he might try for the end of the hallway. Best to put another bullet in him to be sure, but strangely, the thought was unsettling. Then the man raised up, trying to stand. Billings reacted and fired, the shot striking his head, careening him to the floor, still and lifeless. The inert form grew dim as the light seemed drawn back into the cylinder, leaving the corridor dark.

"Billings, you all right?"

It was Warren breaking the sudden silence. He and Paschal were still in position across the stair landing.

"Yeah. Two guys tried to flank us. One is out, the other pulled back, hurt."

No more was said as Billings thought of what to do next. They had been quite lucky so far, getting in the house and close to finding Carrie. But now, they were discovered and surrounded; he hated to be dramatic even to himself, but they were in a tight spot. The Russians had the advantage and would no doubt make an all-out assault at any moment to finish them. The three of them could not stay where they were on the defensive. The outcome would not be in doubt. Billings knew their only chance was to take the gamble and advance, and they had to do it now. Putting the Beretta in the holster, he flicked the MP5 safety off.

"Warren, on my signal, we rush the master suite." He paused, wanting to be clear. "Eddie, stay back and watch the rear."

The two men opposite Billings knew this was the finale.

Warren looked at Paschal. "Eddie, I'm counting on you."

Eyes wide, Paschal nodded shakily.

They turned back toward Billings. He rustled a canister from the utility bag, flicked the igniter, flinging it hard down the dark corridor. A second later, the device went off in a deafening explosion and blinding flash.

He called, "Let's go," leaping forward and rushing into the hallway, Warren following, both guided by shafts of illumination

from the compact submachine guns. Conical beams of light jumped about, jerking side to side, along the floor, and off the walls. They were moving rapidly, soon nearing the end of the hallway. The body of the dead Russian lay crumpled on the floor, head malformed from a bullet and drenched in blood. Billings was certain the second Russian, thought wounded, was out of view near the end of the corridor. Throwing the “flash-bang” device was meant to partly subdue the man so he and Warren could reach the oligarch’s quarters, but coming to the door of Volkov’s room, Billings changed his mind. He impulsively kept going, carried by momentum, light jerking from his weapon on the sides of the wall at the end of the hallway. Warren came up behind, aiming his MP5 at the same point.

Suddenly, two men appeared in the penumbra of light, firing bursts from AK-74s, raking Billings’s position, rounds puncturing the wall behind, two bullets striking the protective covering on his chest. Stunned, he got off a flurry of wild shots as he buckled and went down. Warren, standing just behind to the side, fired an aimed burst that knocked the Russians to the floor where they stayed. He went to his friend’s aid, supporting him, keeping him upright.

“Took the wind out of me.” Billings slowly raised to full height.

Warren looked with eyes wide. “Let’s get the vest off and have a look.”

Billings grew stern. “No time. We’re going in.”

He turned, breaking away from Warren, walking stiffly back to the closed entryway, trying the latch, and finding the door unlocked, pushed it open. He came into an enormous room, arrayed with lavish furnishings, vague paintings on the walls, obscure sculptures, antique objects, and historic weapons, some in glass cases and others specially mounted on walls, everything cast in the dim light of ceiling fixtures. With Warren just behind, Billings turned, looking along the greater extent of the room where an ornately carved bed sat covered in finery. He was jolted by what he saw: Beside the bed stood his daughter, held closely by Andrey Volkov, both in nightclothes, the Russian holding a Makarov pistol squarely at the side of the girl’s head. She was tied with a gag over her mouth, and her hands were bound behind.

Billings and Warren both stopped at once. Billings began lowering his weapon, slowly, his eyes fixed on Volkov as he spoke, “We’re putting down the guns. I’m here for my daughter, that’s all.” He then straightened with his hands high.

Warren followed Billings’s lead, slowly placing the gun on the floor, then standing upright with his hands in the air.

Billings started to say more, to stall, but he was cut off by the Russian.

“Here for the girl?” Volkov spoke harshly, quite angry. “You don’t understand. She’s mine. She came of her own free will, months ago, to work for me. She was introduced by her mother, a lover from when I went South for a university education. I had gone four thousand miles to a small school, met a woman, and we fell in love, neither expecting it to end. I wanted her to come back with me, but her Southern ways required she be married. I didn’t understand but moved on, graduated, came home, and made a good life.

“I forgot about her until summer when I saw her again, the first time in nearly thirty years, my old girlfriend with her daughter. It was as if my lover had come back, as though the years had not passed. She is the image of her mother, and like her mother, she fell in love with me.

“I had returned to my best days. She gave me back my youth like nothing else, not drink, drugs, the other girls. This one, my girl.”

The two men stood listening. They had not moved since laying their weapons down. Billings tried some words. “Then you wouldn’t hurt her if she means that much?”

“I mean her no harm.”

Listening to Volkov, no one had moved. What Billings said, trying to calm the Russian, had not worked. The girl squirmed and twisted in the man’s grip, her face growing red.

After a pause, the Russian continued, “No, I wouldn’t hurt her, but that depends on you.”

Staring at Billings, Volkov grew angrier. “You come four thousand miles after me, you and a private detective, stealing a girl in Nuiqsut, killing my men, then coming here, breaking into my house in the middle of the night like KGB, killing more of my men, and

why do you do this? Because you say you want the girl, a legal adult, working for me of her own will! She belongs to me!”

Only Volkov was talking. He seemed delusional, and any word from Billings or Warren would not only be provocative but futile and might bring the girl harm. His rage had grown with each word, leaving Billings feeling they were in the hands of a madman.

“Who are you? You’re an intruder in my house. I can kill you. The law would do nothing, nothing!”

Billings was inanimate, eyes locked on Volkov.

The Russian’s anger seemed to have peaked and now subsided, seemingly spent, as Volkov reached the end of the tirade.

The Russian’s sudden silence was a bad sign. Billings realized his ploy had not worked and that his time was up. He had taken a calculated risk, laying down the weapons, but it was the only move they had. He could not risk his daughter’s life. He had taken the gamble and lost. Regardless of what happened, there were no regrets; he had done it to save Carrie.

The Russian’s expression changed; the look on his face told Billings and Warren it was over.

Volkov spoke sternly, “It’s time for this to end.”

He removed the Makarov from the girl’s forehead as she squirmed, trying to speak through the tight cloth binding her mouth, but she was helpless in his grasp. He was silent, swinging the gun out, pointing it squarely at Billings, retracting the hammer, in an audible click.

A crashing sound erupted from behind, someone bursting through the door, rushing into the room. It was Paschal, turning with MP5 ready to fire. Jerking as if struck, eyes wide, Volkov shoved the girl away, firing wildly just as Billings and Warren dived to the floor, scrambling for their guns.

Grabbing the MP5, Billings looked up, ready to shoot, but the Russian had vanished, only a section of wall panel slamming shut. He rushed to his daughter, lying on the floor. He picked her up, removing all restraints as they embraced, and he helped her to her feet. Seeing she was unhurt, he rushed to the wall where Volkov had seemingly escaped through a false panel. Examining what looked like

ordinary wood parquetry, he ran his hand over the surface, finding the wall solid and unmovable, with no visible seams or crevices where he might try forcing it open. Yet he had seen it closing moments before, clear evidence this was the way Volkov had gone. He leaned against it, pressing his full weight, but it would not give. He pounded his fist on the planking, up and down, but it was solid. If he had not seen the panel move, he would have never suspected it was fake. Billings stepped back, knowing Volkov had won.

## 25



## FINALITY

**B**illings turned around and, for the first time, saw Paschal on the floor, Warren kneeling over him. He was in distress, having trouble. His breathing was labored, and he appeared to be struggling, his hands frantically groping his chest. Warren at first did not know what to do, gripping Paschal's shoulder, steadying him, and speaking, trying to calm his friend and himself.

"You're lucky. The slugs hit the vest, knocks the wind out, but you'll be okay. Want to try standing?"

Warren had hardly spoken before having second thoughts. There seemed more going on than what appeared. Paschal was flailing, weaving his right hand, making small circles in the air, his left hand reaching down his side, his head twisting and turning as though confused.

"What is it, Eddie? You crack a rib? How's the pain? Got your breath back?"

He seemed to come around, slowly, settling back, straightening his head, becoming calmer, finally speaking. He looked at Warren, tension welling in his voice. "I think I'm hit, below the vest, in my groin. Feels wet. I'm bleeding."

Warren stared in disbelief. "What?"

Looking down at the man's waist, he saw a swath of red spreading under him. And just below the man's groin, a pulsing flow of blood was coming from a hole on the inside of the upper leg, barely

rising, rolling, then falling, soaking the top of his trousers and coursing underneath on the floor, a steadily enlarging pool. Warren felt numb and momentarily confused.

Paschal said something, "I think the femoral artery was hit. You've got to apply pressure."

Paschal moved abruptly, straining to make the wound more accessible. "Place the heel of your hand directly on the hole, press hard, and don't let up."

Warren did as he was told, pushing forcibly, blood welling up from the soaked clothing, covering his hand, warm and sticky; but after a moment, the bleeding seemed to have stopped. He felt better. Billings was there, bending over, looking down at Paschal.

"Hold on, Eddie. An ambulance is on the way."

He was speaking loudly, as though Paschal was across the room, or maybe it was because things were bad, and the man on the floor looked distant like he wasn't going to make it. Warren was close, holding his arm stiffly on the wound, pressing down as hard as he could. He was almost in Paschal's face, and that was all he could see, the look in his eyes. The earlier confusion was gone, but the pallor of his skin was fading. He was looking at Warren with all fear gone, perhaps satisfied his friend had stanching the bleeding, and he was out of danger. He was a medical man and knew these things; he had told Warren what to do, and now they just had to wait for the ambulance. Although he'd held the bleeding in check several minutes, becoming afraid his hand and arm might grow numb, Warren felt he could go on indefinitely if this was what it took to save his friend's life. How ironic, Paschal the first aid specialist was the one needing help. Even though it was Eddie who got wounded, he had been quick to size up the injury, guiding his friend to administer the procedure to keep him alive. He was a first-rate medic who knew what it took to pull through.

Then Billings drew close, looking hard at Warren, speaking in a low voice as though it was just the two of them.

"Doesn't look good. He's lost a lot of blood. His face, losing color. He's going into shock."

Warren reacted with disbelief. It wasn't true. Billings was being pessimistic. They had control of the situation. After all, the bleeding had been stopped. But now, he wasn't sure. Without moving, he made a sidelong glance at the floor, surprised to see the pool of blood growing steadily larger. Billings was right. Looking at Paschal's face, he could see him slipping away. Suddenly, he was afraid. The three of them had gone through so much, and now Paschal was to die?

Looking at his friend, he wanted to speak, but had no words.

Then Paschal said something, "Thank you, Race, and you, too, Ron."

The words were feeble, barely audible. The man's breath was hardly enough to make a sound. "Don't worry about me. It's taken care of."

Still pressing his hand tightly on the man's wound, Warren didn't understand. "What?"

Kneeling closely, Billings leaned over, listening.

"The Lord Jesus Christ. He's got me covered."

Paschal said nothing more, closing his eyes, growing still.

Not moving, his hand still pressed hard, Warren felt Billings's hand on his shoulder. "He's gone."

\*\*\*\*\*

Detective Lawrence Roberts stood in front of Andrey Volkov's estate house, huddled with Billings and Warren as other officers, FBI agents, and members of the Human Trafficking Task Force roamed the grounds. The sun was rising in the distance, glinting off the Chugach Mountains. An ambulance had just left, transporting Eddie Paschal's remains to the coroner's building downtown. Carrie Billings was in a police van, talking with a female sex crimes officer. Roberts was explaining what authorities had found since arriving a few hours before.

"Volkov was clever. He knew he might someday be attacked. The house had special features designed for a fast getaway. In fact, his escape was like an old movie thriller. A false panel in the room hid access to a park-style slide. He got through the opening in seconds,

onto the slideway going to a subterranean garage, to a car, and then through a tunnel to a remote lane leading to the county road. There, he had a straight drive to the airport where a private plane was kept, always ready to fly at a moment's notice. In less than an hour from fleeing the house, he was in the air, presumably to Russia."

Roberts paused, noticeably changing his tone as if changing gears.

"And that is the problem we must address. I'll be frank. Months of work by scores of people, all aimed at Volkov's arrest, all for nothing. Mr. Billings and Mr. Warren, with all the laws you've broken, there will be charges. You obstructed an official investigation. You had possession of illegal weapons, and your rash actions cost the life of Mr. Paschal. Our task force was within days of taking the Russian when this happened. Your actions ruined months of work, but I must admit, the results are mostly what we hoped for, mostly."

Roberts paused again, his words hinting of sarcasm.

"Except one thing, most importantly, failure to arrest Volkov. With the amount of evidence gathered, the district attorney said we could put him away for life. But your meddling let him get away."

Roberts paused once more, now sounding conciliatory, his eyes on Billings.

"We are gratified you freed a dozen girls from the traffickers, and I am glad, Mr. Billings, you got your daughter. But the law holds. Stay in Anchorage, both of you, until this is settled."

Roberts was done. Billings and Warren walked away, across the grounds, passing men in distinct uniforms, local police, some with "FBI" labels on their backs, others in tactical garb, winding among various vehicles with lights flashing.

Billings made his way to the police van where the sex crimes officer was finishing with his daughter. Saying there might be more interviews, the female officer gave the three a ride to the trailhead parking area where they were dropped at the rental car, Billings driving them to the hotel where he began a long conversation with Carrie, seeking to renew the father-daughter relationship as Warren settled in his room, reflecting on the events of the past months and

making preparations to begin looking for the Alaskan Native boy lodged somewhere in the state foster system.

Within days, the three attended the memorial service and interment of Paschal's body at the downtown cemetery, a small gathering, mostly members of the local flight community. It was a somber occasion, the deceased having no next of kin.

A day later, after a short goodbye, but no explanation, Billings and his daughter left on a flight for Memphis. His friend had said nothing about possible charges hanging over their heads, leaving Warren perplexed. Did Billings know something he didn't?

The next day, he was called to the police station. Now, he would get answers from Roberts about the legal jeopardy and learn his fate. When he last saw Roberts, the police detective acted as spokesman for the task force, expressing restrained anger at their interference. His parting words were a warning that charges would be brought. Warren had worried ever since and was mystified when Billings ignored Roberts and left.

Now Warren strolled into police headquarters, a sedate look pasted on his face, despite qualms of uncertainty inside. He went to the control station in the waiting room, saying he was there to see Roberts. An officer tapped a keyboard, speaking in a headset, pausing a moment, saying the detective would be out shortly, and Warren should have a seat.

He turned, walking to the same place he had sat with his friends two weeks before. He still felt the pain of Paschal's death; the man had been a good friend after their chaotic meeting at the Nuiqsut station, becoming a member of the three-man team, serving well providing medical care, and handling firearms. The service at the cemetery had been somber and brief, then Billings left. Now, only Warren remained to face Detective Roberts's ire.

The depressive thoughts continued, stirring in his head, until he saw Roberts coming through a back entry, proceeding directly through the control room, passing through a secure door into the waiting area, and walking to the investigator, smiling brightly. Roberts's manner was surprising and perplexing and beyond understanding.

"Good to see you, Mr. Warren. Please come with me."

Warren followed the police detective into the hallway and down the corridor to the office, where he was ushered inside and shown a chair facing the desk. He stood as the detective went toward a comfortable-looking leather roll-about chair on the other side.

As Roberts took the seat, he saw his guest still standing. "Please sit, Mr. Warren."

As the younger man sat down, Roberts paused, a questioning look on his face. The quizzical expression vanished as he seemed to have a change of thought. "Of course, you're apprehensive. In our last meeting, I said charges would likely be filed against you and Mr. Billings."

Straightening in the chair as though he might miss something, Warren spoke in a conciliatory tone, "Yes, that was what you said."

"We were headed that way under direction of the district attorney. But before we got far, I got a call from, uh, let's just say, higher up. Quite simply, we were told to drop all charges. It was surprising, to say the least. Not the first time that has happened, but never in a matter this serious.

"I did some checking, and your friend Billings has quite a storied past. Out of high school, he joined the army and served three years, but his record is practically nonexistent, with hints of clandestine operations. It's all highly classified, but the little I found revealed an exceptional man, highly skilled, given some dangerous assignments which he pulled off, saving the lives of some foreign VIPs which kept our country out of a war. I only got this from badgering the one person in Washington who would talk to me.

"From there, he began university studies, going two years, then dropping out and joining the police department. After twenty years, his career with the department ended suddenly, when his daughter was taken by sex traffickers, and he went after her, going against a very dangerous Russian family. You became entangled in the plot, which brings us to the present. I suppose this is the best ending, at least in one regard: Innocent girls were freed. But because of you and your friend's interference, the bad guy got away. There should be repercussions, and I regret there aren't, but it's out of my hands.

Let's just say Billings has high connections, and all is forgiven. You're free to go."

Warren was speechless. He had never expected such an outcome and, for a moment, thought he should be happy. But he wasn't.

Roberts looked across the desk, a wry smile on his face. He stood up, ready to end the session, but then his expression changed, going back to the serious look.

"Oh, something else. I already told Billings when I last saw him, but he seemed uninterested. But you need to know, just in case. A few days after Volkov got away, the same intelligence apparatus that had been watching him over a year turned up something, a blip on the radar, you might say. A known Volkov operative entered the country from Russia. This is significant because that person has one job, one job only, sent on special assignments. He's an assassin, without a name, or, I should say, he's known only by the code word *Benaiah*. Calling him a hit man does him an injustice. He's a killer. He works mainly in Russia, and the little we know of him is based on activities in other countries, where he has never failed in what he was sent to do. Showing up now, inside our borders, is disturbing, and law enforcement agencies are looking for him and will pick him up if he's found.

"That he's here now, just after Billings wrecked Volkov's enterprise, is ominous, and we suspect Billings is the target. Of course, you're involved too. He was warned, and now we're warning you. If we learn anything else, we will alert you and Billings if he cares to know."

Roberts reached out and shook Warren's hand, smiling. "Good luck."

## 26



### THE CASA GRANDE

Approaching from the southwest, Warren saw the apartment building. He drove slowly on side streets, making a circle to see the facility from all angles. He had found the native boy living here with a foster mother.

The sheer size, covering most of a city block, was the most notable thing about the structure, but its overall appearance was unremarkable. The building was from another era, built solidly but economically with straight lines and simple construction and embellished with a fringe of Spanish tile bordering the roof, perhaps giving the name Casa Grande.

The building was constructed during the post-World War economic boom on a major street in the shadow of downtown Anchorage. The structure had a main building and two wings in a U shape, four stories high. The bottom floor was partly below grade with windows at ground level. Stairways were in open-faced towers where the structure's wings joined the main building. Exposing tenants to weather, the open fronts were lined with a raised edge, forming an adobe-style vaulted curve at the top. A matching tower at the center of the building held the only elevator. The building's flat top had a bank of terra cotta tile along the roof's edge, extending horizontally on all sides. The building had stucco walls faded with whitewash in need of cleaning and a fresh coat of paint.



The open part of the *U*-shaped structure faced downtown, only half-mile away. The ground was paved with ample parking. On the lot near the west wing, a covered bank of mailboxes stood on posts, a barrier separating the parking spaces from the building, but allowing a drive lane that curved around the inside of the *U*-shaped building. An additional parking area was behind the central building, marked for cars to park straight in. Concrete wheel stops kept vehicles from bumping the rear wall. The back lot sided an alley used by garbage trucks to access trash dumpsters. The asphalt surface was continuous around the building, providing more parking spaces behind the east wing. While the other sides were drab and rough looking, the west wing, facing a major street, was more presentable with a patch of grass and two young trees beside the sidewalk. The building and parking lots filled a city block in a choice location just south of downtown.

The apartment building was built sixty years earlier when the area was undeveloped. But now a new public school with a fine outdoor running track lay across the street and nearby neighborhoods had modest, well-kept homes. The Casa Grande stood out among adjacent houses and could have been considered a blight on the area.

The residential building had grown old and rundown from neglect. Maintenance on the gangly structure was expensive, and only minimal outlays were made for upkeep. The upper floors had external walkways across the front, providing entrances to the apartments, allowing free access to the entire level. A railing stood on the outside, made of construction lumber, two-inch square posts, spaced six inches apart, topped by plain two-by-fours. Common poultry wire was nailed to the inside of balusters to prevent anything from falling out. The railings had a rustic look, crusted with old paint and years of exposure. The gangways were laid with outdoor carpet, dingy brown, worn, threadbare, and stained. The facility had among the lowest rents in the city, appealing to the disadvantaged. Most tenants were on government aid and disability assistance, and a few were enlisted men attached to the two sprawling military bases in town.

Warren saw this as he pulled his car in front of the main building, the structure's wings rising on both sides like a horseshoe. Pavement within the curved building showed the effects of harsh

winters, asphalt cracked and misshapen. He stepped from the car, taking his pack, and swinging it over his shoulder, then headed for the entrance. His sources in government bureaucracy had said this was the home of the small native boy, Ujarak, in care of a foster mother, a single Alaskan Native. Once he confirmed the boy was here, he would get back to Professor Dunbar and see what was next.

A sign posted at the front gave the location of the administrative office on a lower floor of the main building, midway between the elevator and the west stairwell. Reaching the right level, Warren found himself following a Yupik woman behind a small boy, barely keeping up with the toddler. She walked awkwardly, her right leg bent with deformity. She apparently had lived with the condition a long time, moving with an economy of effort. Realizing the woman and child were going to the office, Warren also began to suspect this was Ujarak and the foster mother.

The woman called the boy to stop as she came behind him, opening a door with a sign showing business hours. Warren waited as the woman took the boy's hand and entered a smallish room, a bare wall on the left and a counter on the right, dividing the room in half, the greater part on the other side where a middle-aged woman sat at a desk, the walls holding shelves crammed with papers, forms, brochures, and books. The abundant clutter made the room seem even smaller.

Warren stopped just inside, shutting the door and waiting for the woman to conduct her business. It looked like she was paying monthly rent. Talking to the manager, a government subsidy was mentioned. Standing at the counter, the woman spoke with no accent as the boy sat down at her feet and began to play with a toy. The woman at the desk got up and came to the counter where she was handed some wadded bills. She returned to her desk, straightening the bills, placing them evenly in a metal cash box inside a drawer. She wrote neatly in a ledger, making a receipt, which she tore out, walking back and handing to the woman, who immediately turned to leave. Warren pressed against the wall to let the woman and child by.

As the door shut, the woman turned to Warren. "Can I help you?"

She stayed at the counter, showing a friendly smile.

"Hello, I'm Race Warren, and I'd like an apartment if one is available."

The woman showed immediate interest. "I'm Denise Lomax, manager. We have 320 units, and there's always something."

Warren reached toward his back pocket, feigning a perplexed look. "Oops, I forgot something. I'll be right back."

He turned to open the door, going out to the walkway. Seeing the Alaskan Native woman and child on the east side at the door of an apartment, Warren casually walked that way until they had gone in, then noted the number, 207, and returned to the office.

Someone had joined the apartment manager, a wiry man, deeply tanned, of medium height, dark headed, with loose, unkempt hair, sitting in a slouch on the side of Mrs. Lomax's desk. The manager was standing, going through papers on a wall shelf. Seeing Warren come in, she brought something back to him.

"This is an informational brochure about the Casa Grande, showing apartment size and features. What are you interested in?"

"I'm single and prefer a small room, an efficiency, if you have one."

She replied at once, "I have just the thing."

She half turned toward the man behind her. "This is Wayne, in charge of maintenance. Wayne, this is Mr. Warren. Show him 407."

Wayne stirred, rising from the edge of the desk and coming through the gap at the counter as Warren slipped the brochure into his pocket. The two shook hands as the maintenance man led the prospective tenant from the office to the outside walkway. He was older than Warren, looking like an outdoors type, lean with a weathered face, and he liked to talk. The two headed past the elevator tower to the end of the walkway, entering the east stairwell, taking the stairs up to the landing, looping left, climbing to the fourth floor, the top level. Here, they turned left into an enclosed corridor to room 407.

Wayne had been talking constantly since leaving the office. Fall weather was here, and he was lamenting he would soon have to stop

riding his Harley motorcycle. Turning the key in the lock and swinging the door, he led Warren into the room. The door swung back on a wall, straight all the way to a rear sliding glass door exposing a balcony. The room was narrow, with continuous wall on the left, and the right side in three segments.

Just inside the door, the front wall faced a partial wall, both with built-in shelves, making an entry to the door of the bathroom. On the other side of the partition, the room expanded to a small kitchenette. Further back, the room opened to its widest with space for a bed. The room was like three stairsteps, narrowest at the front with the bathroom, wider in the middle with the kitchenette, and fully open at the back.

Wayne gave a running commentary of apartment features. There were no amenities, just essentials, and even basics were minimal. The layout was spare, like a starving artist's atelier, a place for work, sustenance, and shelter. It was exactly what Warren wanted. He had no idea how long he'd stay, but the place was ideal.

The maintenance man had gone to the back, pulling the drapes, sliding the glass door open, stepping out, and sweeping his arm before a stunning view of the Chugach Mountains. Warren walked out and joined him on the balcony. Wayne was suddenly quiet, waiting for a reply. Warren was pleased.

"I'll take it."

On Monday, Warren made the rounds of secondhand shops and charity stores, picking up a small bed, clothes chest, some tables, and chairs. With enough furniture to get by, his room was not crowded. It was merely a place to stay, a base for operations.

That week, Warren took time to familiarize himself with the Casa Grande. He frequently saw Wayne wandering around the facility, smoking, endlessly talking with tenants and visitors, and loitering at the office. He and the manager comprised the staff, the sole employees during normal business hours. The maintenance man could be called in after hours for any breakdowns in a unit. On site, every day in the office, and constantly roaming the huge facility, Wayne knew everything about the building. It was his responsibil-

ity to escort clients to an apartment, show the room, and answer questions.

Warren was fascinated by the layout of the place. The outer walkways across the front of the three top floors turned into short halls at the building's wings, shielded from the weather but open on both sides, with a railing at the end like a balcony overlooking the parking lot. Warren's apartment was next to the last at the back corner, and the native woman had an identical unit, two levels down. Roaming the building, his walks always came back to the southeast corner where he kept an eye on apartment 207.

The following afternoon, he was on the second floor, standing at the end of the hallway, leaning on the railing, reading the brochure, feeling cool autumn air wafting off the parking lot. He was idling time, staying close, hoping to meet the native woman and child.

Hearing the door open behind, he turned. The native woman came out with a basket of clothing, the boy following. As the woman and boy turned toward the stairs, he approached them. "Excuse me."

The woman stopped and turned.

"Hi. My name is Race Warren. I just moved in apartment 407." He held up the brochure. "I'm looking for the laundry."

The woman smiled, pleased to help. "I'm Hanna Chulyin. You can follow me. I'll show you."

"Here, let me carry the basket so you can help your boy on the stairs."

The woman let Warren take the basket as she reached for the child's hand.

"This is Ujarak. Actually, he does well on steps. We could use the elevator, but this is better."

Warren understood. "Yes, makes him more self-reliant."

The three made their way slowly down a flight of stairs leading to the sublevel floor. The laundry room was in the east wing where it joined the main building.

The woman and boy led the way as Warren followed with the basket, entering the connecting hallway a few steps before a locked door on the right.

The woman leaned forward with a key.

Warren had one too, on the ring with his door key. She swung open the door and held it as the boy came in, followed by Warren. The room was large, longer than wide. Cheap plastic chairs were set along the front wall. The boy took a seat and began playing with a toy car brought by his caretaker. A woman was folding clothes on a table at the back of the room while another one sat, reading a paperback.

Washing machines lined part of the rear wall and the far-left wall. A row of back-to-back washers stood in the middle, dividing the room. A line of dryers was at the back and on the right wall where exhaust hoses vented outside to the subgrade well, the bottom of an open portion of the building where the ends of hallways made balconies.

The woman led Warren to an unused washer, lifting the clothes from the basket and dumping them in the machine. She shut the door, put in coins, and pressed buttons, thanking him as they went back, sitting down as the boy played.

Warren began a conversation.

"Thanks for showing me the laundry."

The woman smiled. "It's in the brochure if you look close."

Warren looked down for a moment with slight embarrassment.

"Oh, well. It's been good to meet a neighbor and see what the Casa Grande has."

Warren paused. "That's a fine-looking son you have with an interesting name, Ujarak."

The woman grew serious. "He's not my son. The state has custody, and I'm his caretaker. But he's a good boy, and I love him."

They sat quietly, the woman staring at the washing machines, Warren looking into space. The child played almost silently, running the toy over the arms of the chair.

Then the woman spoke, "What brings you here, Mr. Warren?"

Warren became uneasy. "Please, call me Race. It's short for Racine, after some relative from France. I've never liked it, and I've always gone by Race. I'm a private investigator from Memphis, Tennessee, sent to find someone. The job is done, and I'm tying up loose ends to go home."

The woman was older than Warren, middle aged. Her manner of speaking made him think she was educated, with no trace of an accent. So why was she in the dingy apartment building, probably barely getting by on state subsidy?

She continued, "Sounds exciting. Glad it worked out for you. I'm also in the people business, was a social worker for a long time when I had an accident that messed up my leg. The doctors did not believe the pain was as bad as I said, but a specialist testified the fracture had damaged a nerve. I thought I'd lose my mind until I found the right doctor that treated my condition so I could manage. My injury was permanent, and surgeries couldn't change that. But fortunately, they got me where I could walk. But I got addicted, pain killers. It went on over three years before I got in a rehab clinic, and it took another year to get back to something of a normal life. Now I live on disability and keep children for family services. Kids like Ujarak make it worthwhile."

Warren was touched by what he heard but also felt guilt at not being completely honest. He wanted to be more forthright but wasn't sure how to explain. "Hanna, the case I'm on was solved, but I got caught in a police investigation in the North Slope." Warren paused, choosing his words. "Did they tell you why Ujarak was put in foster care?"

The woman's expression changed. "Family Services doesn't tell everything, just what's necessary, in the best interests of the child."

Warren looked away for a moment, almost smiling, thinking of what she said. "Yes, I worked in Family Services for several years and heard that a lot: the best interests of the child."

He stopped, not completing the thought.

The woman waited a moment then continued, "I was told Ujarak suffered abuse or neglect. But I got him last month, he looked perfectly well and behaves normally for a two-year-old. They said it was the parents, but these native kids have lots of relatives who would take them. There must be something I wasn't told."

Warren decided he must say what he could to gain her confidence. He lowered his voice so the child wouldn't hear. "Yes, there is more. At the North Slope, I learned of the murder of a young

Alaskan Native woman, believed at the hands of her lover, an older man, the head of the Ankait tribe." Warren hesitated for a moment. "Ujarak is their son."

He waited, giving her time to understand. The woman's face now showed fear. She was an Alaskan Native and likely knew about the tribe.

"Hanna, are you familiar with the Ankait?"

The woman was hesitant. "Yes."

Warren chose his words carefully. "Then what I tell you, you probably already know. Early summer, I met an anthropologist and team of scientists studying the Ankait tribe. I learned Ujarak's father was into the occult, performing bizarre ceremonies involving shape-shifting. To put it bluntly, trying to be transformed to a wolf."

He paused, watching Hanna. She was looking at the child playing in the seat beside her.

"Even worse, when the child was hardly a year old, the father used him in a ceremony, intending him harm. The police were called, and the child was missing for over a year. Ujarak's mother was murdered. The child's father is the chief suspect, terrible things for a small boy. It's obvious why he's in state custody, but the authorities don't realize he's still in danger. As long as the child's father is on the loose, he may come to harm Ujarak and you."

The woman seemed confused. "Why would he?"

Warren inhaled deeply. His own words sounded strange in his ears. "His name is Tulok, and the last ceremony was at a firepit, to sacrifice the child, incredible as that sounds."

The woman raised her head, looking at Warren. "That explains the scars on his face and arms, burns."

"Yes, but fortunately, he survived." Warren paused. "I came to warn you and offer my protection."

The woman had a quizzical expression. "What about the police?"

He felt better. She had not rejected him, not yet.

"I had to find you first. I'm working with Professors Dunbar and Hartley, the scientists who uncovered all of this. Now that I've met you and found Ujarak, we'll contact the police, and they can protect

you and the child. I'm just above in room 407." He reached in his pocket. "Here's my business information and cell phone number."

She took the card and put it in her purse. Seeing the washer had stopped, she asked Warren to watch the child and carried the basket to the machine where she moved the wet clothes to a dryer and returned.

They continued to talk. Warren was amazed at the boy. He was in his own world, moving the toy along the chair arm, making a wide sweep through space, returning to the solidarity of the chair, moving over the arm to the back, turning again to go where he had been before. The toy was an extension of himself, taking flight and moving around, choosing where to go.

The woman seemed to have accepted what he said. She was educated and already suspected the child had a bad history. She grew more relaxed talking while Warren listened. She repeated what she said before but grew more expansive, telling her life story.

She grew up in Anchorage, an only child of Yupik parents, attending community schools and going to the local university where she studied sociology. After graduation, she went into social work with Alaska Family Services. Her interests were in her job and her friends from her circle at work.

Her life seemed normal, even mundane, until one winter she had a terrible accident. Her small car lost control, crashing into a logging truck, pinning her inside, and crushing her leg. This began the worst years of her life. Her parents were dead, and she had no one for support. She was an invalid for over a year until multiple surgeries, followed by physical therapy, helped her regain the ability to walk. During this time, she became dependent on pain medication, taking three more years to beat addiction. This left her a different person, unable to work. She did get back with Family Services as a foster parent, more for the joy of helping children than for the small stipend.

Warren listened closely, glad the woman was talking. It boded well for what he was trying to do; she seemed to be accepting him in their lives. Although the dryer had stopped, she continued telling her story. Warren felt sympathetic. The woman had been hit with

disaster while still young, but now in her forties, her life was limited; and he could see plainly, she was quite lonely.

The child let the toy drop on the floor. He left the chair, becoming restless, starting to wander. The woman got up to take his hand. She turned to Warren with a wan smile.

"He's tired. He's nearly three but doesn't talk, just mumbles. I was told he suffered isolation and deprivation, but now that he's with me, he should grow out of it."

She slipped the child's hand into Warren's. "Hold him. I'll get the clothes."

She took the basket to the row of drying machines lining the wall. Watching the woman as the child tugged his hand, Warren picked up the toy and held it for the boy, but he was uninterested.

"Ujarak, here's your car. Want it?"

The boy looked for a moment then turned, pulling away, looking toward the woman, returning with the basket of clothes.

Warren stood, taking the basket from the woman. "I think he's ready."

The woman bent down, taking the child's hand as their eyes met.

"We'll get back to the room, and you can rest."

Warren put the basket under his arm, walking with the two to the stairway where they began a slow ascent, the boy mounting the steps, holding the woman's hand. The child brightened, taking the steps one at a time to the middle landing then hurrying to the other side so he could continue. The woman shared the boy's excitement at mastering his surroundings.

Warren left them at apartment 207, returning to his room two levels up.

Sitting at a cheap table, he thought of the Memphis office where he had a fine mahogany desk that he had made a few years earlier. He wrote briefly on a legal pad then picked up his phone to call Dunbar. The professor answered, anxious to hear from the investigator.

Warren told him what had happened since their last meeting, how he'd found the child and was rooming at the same building. Dunbar was pleased, saying he would inform Detective Roberts, and

urge him to put the child and caretaker under protection. He would let Warren know how it went. Other members of the expedition had just left on a flight home, but he was staying a few days, hoping to see the child's situation concluded. Meanwhile, Warren said he would keep an eye on the woman and boy at the apartments.

Dunbar was grateful. "I added you to the grant supporting our work. You'll receive a modest stipend plus expenses until the expedition officially ends. I am grateful for all you've done." Dunbar ended with a comment on the weather. "It's November. The first snow is coming, and it's going to get quite cold."

## 27



## A M O R O K

**T**hat evening, Warren sat at the table near the back of the room, sketching on a legal pad. Earlier, he had recorded the day's events in a moleskin notebook, but now he was writing on yellow paper, drawing a schematic showing his upper apartment directly above the room two levels down where Hanna and the child stayed.

Growing stiff from sitting too long, he pushed the chair back, bumping the bed as he stretched. He stood up and went to the sliding door, looking at a thermometer outside. The column of mercury read three degrees below zero, and it was only six-thirty in the evening.

Bits of snow were coming down, flakes dropping in slow motion in still air, vanishing beneath the balcony ledge. He shifted his eyes to the white-capped Chugach Mountains dominating the eastern horizon. A full moon shown faintly through clouds covering the sky. This was the first snow of the season, and soon the landscape would be covered in white.

Warren moved the slide to unlock the door and went outside, the frigid cold hitting him like hard iron. The frayed carpet was starting to disappear under a dusting of snow. In light clothing, he could stand it only a moment, the air tightening in his chest. Turning back into the room, he shoved the glass to the end stop, toggling the slide to lock the door. He went to the right side, pulling the drapery cord to close the curtains.

He returned to the table, sitting down and shifting the chair to where he felt comfortable, picking up the pen and rolling it in his fingers. He thought of the woman and child, two levels down. He was not fully convinced their lives were in danger, but Dunbar thought so and had enlisted the PI for help, making him a grant money recipient; therefore, Warren would protect them until the police took over.

His thoughts were interrupted by the cell phone ringing on the desk. He picked it up, seeing it was from the woman in room 207.

“Hanna, this is Race.”

She was frantic. “There’s someone at the door, trying to break in!”

“Call the police. I’m coming down!”

He stood up, grabbing his coat from the wall hanger and throwing it on. He leaned over, grabbing the backpack off the floor. It had everything needed, the holstered Sig .45 just inside the flap. He slung it over his shoulder, rushing to the front, and opened the door, stunned at what he saw.

An eerie fog floated in the hallway, thick from floor to ceiling, and filling the junction of the east wing corridor with the main hall. The vapor seemed confined within the covered portions of the building. Warren saw the fog coming from the right, at the open end of the corridor, rolling over the balcony, growing dense in the enclosed hallway, drifting to his left, and dissipating to the outside where the hall opened at the stair landing.

Warren put his pack down, getting the handgun, then reshouldered his gear and rushed to the stairs, bounding down, finding the stairwell mostly clear. Coming to the third level, the density increased, the vapor concentrated in the enclosed part of the stair landing.

Descending the stairs, he realized the fog was from the basement laundry. Washing machines were spinning, while dryers full of wet clothes were tumbling, forcing warm moist air through vent pipes to outside openings. The external ducts released the exhaust in a below-ground well at the open end of the basement. Colliding with frigid air, the exhaust instantly formed steam, billowing upward, rolling over the railing at the open end of the first corridor, pressing into the enclosed spaces, and spilling down the hallway of the east wing. Rising from just

below ground, the fog rose to each level with the same effect, thick, blinding vapor, rolling into the half-closed spaces of the building.

Knowing the cause was no comfort as Warren hurried down the last flight of stairs, slowing as he came to the second level where the stairway vanished in dense fog. Entering the mass of vapor was disconcerting and disorienting. Ambient light gave the mist an eerie glow, the thick steam blotting sight completely.

He stopped, raw fear rising, bringing him on the verge of panic. The gun was useless. He couldn’t see a thing. Although perplexed and confused, he had to do something.

Standing in the middle of the corridor, unable to see, was not a plan. He hadn’t heard anything, but he had to get to Hanna and the child in the room, ten or twenty steps away. First, he must get oriented and find the wall at the side of the corridor. The only way to navigate the fog was to feel his way. He extended his arms and began moving slowly and cautiously until his palms touched the wall. Now with his bearings, he could use touch, moving sideways until he came to room 207.

Then he heard a scream, Hanna in the room, and the sound of scuffling twenty feet away, like an animal clawing on wood to get out—or in.

He shouted her name, pausing for a moment, then turned away from the wall, moving slowly toward the sound, leaning back slightly, using shoulders to feel his way, bumping, and brushing the wall, taking sideway steps, the gun pointed toward the sound of scraping just ahead.

The noise stopped. Warren froze, his finger tightening on the trigger. There was a strange silence, a maddening quiet. The fog was consuming, leaving him detached as though floating in a void. He needed to be grounded and reflexively tilted back, touching his shoulders to the wall. It was solid, but he felt he was sinking, becoming confused in a kind of *déjà vu*, like at the airport, the eerie dread at the wolf display. He felt it now, a convulsive chill sweeping him, a shudder racking his body, leaving him weak.

The quiet was broken by an unearthly snarl, jolting his senses, shaking him to a sharp awareness. Something was coming close. A foul animal breath assaulted his nostrils. The thing, whatever it was, must be right next to him.

Pointing the pistol, Warren fired. The blast bounced from the walls and ceiling of the enclosed hall, from the open ends, resounding from adjacent houses and echoing within the curvature of the apartment building. Warren heard something else, a quieter sound, heard because it was inches away: the harsh thud of the bullet on flesh. He fired again and again, raising a cacophony of blasts, resounding through the building, until no rounds were left.

Certain the shots found their mark, Warren stood motionless, waiting for the animal to fall. There was momentary quiet, taking the longest time, then a strong arm swept across his body, knocking the gun from his hand, the thing crashing into Warren, sending him sprawling to the floor.

For an instant in the choking mist, he saw it, a vague human form, yet like an animal, covered in hair, standing erect, but awkward and stiff, like a carnival dog on hind legs. The short, violent brush with the creature told Warren he faced something wild, a feral animal, strong and vicious, but also like a man. A werewolf!

Stunned for a moment, Warren gathered his senses. He felt the beast coming close, bending over. A kind of face appeared, as through steamed glass, a large head and prognathous jaw, all thick with hair. Again, the noxious breath on his face, chilling to his center, the animal drawing close, suddenly the head rolling away, maw opening, showing discolored teeth, dripping saliva, making an unearthly howl. Warren saw it vaguely in thick steam, then he felt it coming back, quickly, and silently, poised at his throat.

The creak of a door, turning on hinges, was heard through dense vapor. Warren felt the creature shrink back, starting to rise, moving away. Hanna had opened the door, perhaps thinking the spate of gunshots meant Warren was there. Whatever the reason, she and the child were in great danger, and Warren was their only chance.

The wolf thing stood erect and began moving through the fog, heading to the open door where the woman stood. Unaware of danger, she called out.

“Race?”

When Warren fell, his pack had been knocked away. If he could get to it, he might find something to fight the beast. There was a sheathed knife inside. The bag had to be close.

Rolling over, he began crawling through the fog, feeling for the pack, running his hands in half circles over the coarse carpet. His fingers brushed against the bag, ruffled, and spilled on the floor. Feeling for the open flap, his fingers touched a wood object that had fallen out. Hard and solid, a weapon? It was his grandfather’s swagger stick from World War II, made of hardwood with a metal endcap. Warren grasped it firmly as he tried to stand.

A scream tore the vapor. He heard a scuffle, a series of gruff snarls; the creature was attacking Hanna! Warren rose, rattled, and partly disoriented from the fall, staggering to where the clipped scream had been followed by ghastly sounds of the woman’s body being torn amid inhuman feeding noises, gulping and slurping, engorging blood. It would be over quickly, and the beast would go for the child, cowering somewhere behind.

He got to the wolf thing as it was done, now sated, dropping the woman’s body to the floor. Although futile, Warren still determined to fight hoping somehow to save the child. He brought the cane down hard on the creature’s head. Surprised, the animal jerked away, seeming to hesitate before turning on him. Warren struck again on the animal’s face, then thrust the stick violently straight on, the metal tip striking the creature’s forehead a solid blow.

The thing was now facing the man to finish him but seemed stunned, not moving. Confused at the creature’s response, Warren went on, striking with the cane, pummeling the creature’s head and face as the beast shrank back, starting to pull away. Despite growing fatigue, Warren did not let up, knowing if he did, he was finished.

The creature began turning away, slowing, now moving toward the child. Incredibly, the blows from the cane had weakened the animal, saving the man from the woman’s fate; and seeing it could not finish him, the creature was turning its remaining strength on the child.

To save the boy, Warren kept beating with the cane, but he was becoming ineffectual. Finally, totally exhausted, Warren almost fell backward.



A beam of light suddenly pierced the fog, illuminating the creature as it lunged for the child. A cacophony of gunshots echoed through the breezeway, stunning the wolf thing, the creature howling, turning in a run to the end of the landing, leaping over the railing to the parking lot below, crossing the asphalt at a lope, between cars and trucks, disappearing in half darkness and falling snow.

Warren propped himself beside the open door, taking short breaths, hardly able to move. He could see better now with light breaking through, carried by the shooter who had driven the werewolf away. It was Detective Roberts, walking rapidly from the head of the stairs through waning vapor. The machines in the basement laundry were done with drying, and the fog was dissolving. The detective stopped in front of the open door, shining the light on the woman's crumpled body, throat ripped out, ashen face, inert eyes open, like a ruined mannequin.

The sight made Warren look away, and then he thought of the child. As Roberts was about to speak, Warren called out, "Ujarak," stepping over the body, his eyes searching the room. He found the child huddled beneath storage shelves just inside the door. Carrying the boy, he carefully stepped around the dead woman as uniformed men came up.

A female officer took the child, wrapping him in a blanket, turning back to where numerous emergency vehicles filled the courtyard, bright lights flashing. A police photographer was already taking pictures as crime scene technicians began inspecting the body and immediate area.

Seeing the young PI distressed, Roberts gently touched his shoulder. "Race, come with me to the command van, get out of the cold and get some coffee."

They walked together down the stairwell through the arched entry into the parking lot past emergency vehicles scattered among cars and trucks of tenants. Bits of snow filled the air as Roberts led Warren to a large government van, flashing with lights, going inside, passing a man at a console in a headset, facing three large screens. The interior was filled with electronics. The detective guided Warren to a chair in a cubicle while stepping to a counter with a coffee maker.

Roberts came back, handing Warren a steaming cup. "You must be exhausted from the ordeal. Drink the coffee. You'll feel better."

Roberts waited to give Warren a moment's quiet before continuing. "I learned of your situation from Dr. Dunbar. He called yesterday, saying you were here, the same place as the refugee child. I didn't know about events at Ataqsut until I heard the professor's lecture, then I searched records and became convinced it was connected to the city's park killing last summer where, you recall, we met. Then the next day, you popped up again. It's rare to have two killings that close, but when called to the post office shooting, evidence showed you were the prime suspect. Fortunately for you, we learned quickly it was justifiable homicide. We still needed a deposition, but I figured you would turn up and take care of that. The main thing we learned was the assassin's identity, building our case against Volkov.

"Then you arrived a few weeks ago, as I expected you would. Your statement closed that aspect of the case, then your friend Billings made more trouble for me, with you and the unfortunate Mr. Paschal, assaulting the Russian compound in the east hills. Of course, his motives were good, and I'm glad he got his daughter, but it was done in violation of a host of laws, local, state, and federal. You two might have served time, but he had connections that I still haven't figured out.

"So all is forgiven, but I never had any hard feelings toward you, Mr. Warren. In fact, I have a fondness for you. It may be we're in the same trade, or it may be your polite Southern manner, but what I really think: You remind me of a younger brother I lost long ago."

Roberts grew quiet. Warren was beginning to think more clearly. Roberts had purposely recounted the time since their first meeting, perhaps to help him over the moment.

Warren cleared his throat. "How did you get here in time?"

Roberts shifted positions, still standing beside a chair he had put in place but had not yet taken. "Hearing Dr. Dunbar's lecture, I began to consider what it meant. I've been doing this a long time, and what keeps me at it is the, uh, the satisfaction of getting it right, gathering evidence, seeing it make a pattern, a logical pattern that ends up being proof. The mental part is what I like, not the physical stuff in movies.

I never reject a theory based on how it looks or sounds, no matter how crazy. If evidence supports it, I accept the facts.

“When this case began leaning toward the supernatural, I was reluctant to consider the werewolf notion, but the evidence was too great. If you studied philosophy, you know the Coherence Theory of Truth. It’s sort of common sense, like fitting pieces in a puzzle. That’s how it looked, an accumulation of evidence pointing toward a perp with both human and wolf characteristics, and I just took the next step and called it a werewolf. Knowing it would attack again and I might face it, I wanted to be prepared. Based on the lecture, I placed a requisition for silver and had the armory technician make special bullets, enough for a full magazine. I kept the clip with me constantly.

When the call came this evening, I was alerted. I heard the recording and knew at once what it was and brought everything we had. The fog could have been trouble, but the tact light spectrum filter let me see well enough. The instant the beast turned from you to attack the child, I had a clear shot and fired. The bullets worked, driving the animal off. Unfortunately, the woman did not survive, but you got the child, and he’s safe.”

Warren listened closely, sipping coffee. Now he understood why his grandfather’s cane had worked, partly subduing the creature after it killed the woman and drawing it away from the small boy. He could have kept the animal off as long as his strength held, but with growing fatigue, he was seconds from being finished when Roberts showed up, firing bullets to drive the beast away.

The coffee cleared the remaining fog in his head. “Professor Dunbar was right. What happens now?”

Roberts had been standing the whole time but now relaxed. He took the chair and looked at Warren. “The child will be held in our department’s protective custody while we work with the feds on a permanent arrangement to keep him safe for a long time.”

“The witness protection program?”

“Yes.”



## EPILOGUE

**T**he next day, Warren was in the residential office telling the manager he had to break the six-month lease, signed ten days earlier with great difficulty since an annual agreement was the standard arrangement. The woman was disturbed by the tenant murder the previous evening, saying it was the worst thing that ever happened. She was unpleasant handling the request until learning it was Warren who saved the child’s life, then her manner changed completely. Breaking the lease incurred additional fees, which he didn’t mind, and he was set to leave on the weekend, glad his work in Alaska was over.

The police had reported the crime was by an unknown intruder who escaped. Only Roberts, some top police officials, Dr. Dunbar, and Warren knew the truth. He had called the professor, telling him what happened, that the child was safe, under police guard, and they were taking steps to get him in federal protective custody. Dunbar thanked the PI, saying the stipend would last until the grant expired the following month. With work concluded, Dunbar was returning to Minnesota the next day. Meanwhile, Warren would relax his remaining time in Anchorage.

The afternoon of his last day, he took a stroll, heading in a roundabout way toward downtown. A walk would do him good, clear his head, and ease the stress from the encounter with the so-called werewolf. Even now, he had a hard time accepting it. It was more than a bad dream; the encounter in the fog was unspeakable, a nightmarish excess. And Hanna, killed so brutally. He couldn’t think of it. His mind went blank as he walked.

It was cold. He was dressed for the weather, bundled in heavy clothes, his backpack over his shoulder, trudging through snow a

foot deep even as more began to fall. The snow was different from what he'd seen down South, tiny flakes coming down in the still air, descending in slow motion, seeming to never stop. Yet the streets were kept clear, heavy equipment continually roaming, plows throwing waves of snow to the roadside. At shopping centers, front loaders scooped snow, dumping it in heavy trucks that went to backs of lots to upend their loads, creating white mountains that would stay till spring thaw.

Warren had taken these excursions before from the apartment. He always found a brisk hour's walk good exercise, a sort of tonic. While walks helped, things were different now. Since coming to Alaska, he had changed. His innate optimism was gone, and he feared things would never be the same. Abrupt sounds made him jump, and his mind seemed fixed on morbid thoughts. When these became overwhelming, which was too often, he was usually able by dint of will to blot them out.

He was walking in a northeasterly direction toward Fourth Street. He came to an open area formerly occupied by a car dealer that had gone out of business. What used to be a sea of cars was now a snow-covered wasteland for blocks. It was strange, like tundra in the heart of Anchorage. Only the utility poles, starkly erect on empty streets, broke the evenness. But like elsewhere, snowplows had cleared roadways here, leaving an intersecting grid on the snowscape.

He started down a side street, walking at the wayside. The vacant area had few cars, making it easier to stay in the street, free from having to trudge snow, thinking quiet thoughts common with walking. Although it was near zero, he was comfortable, properly dressed, the exertion warding off cold.

Then he heard a sound like someone at work, which was strange because the area was empty, nothing for blocks. It was like a hammer hitting steel, a loud resonant clang, sounding at regular intervals like the measured strike of a blacksmith pounding an anvil. With nothing nearby and the sound so close, it couldn't be real. Was it recent trauma, an auditory hallucination? It was disturbing, bringing Warren to stop. He stood, confused and vaguely afraid.

Then he saw it a half-block away, a raven on a utility pole. The bird was stark still, facing him, watching, uttering the strange call. Warren knew the cawing of a crow but had never seen a raven until Alaska and was now hearing the bird's call for the first time, surprised at the sound. He started walking again, going the same way, toward the street corner where the bird was perched. He walked until at the bottom of the pole, stopping and looking up. The raven had not moved, still making the rhythmic clanging sound, looking down at the human. The bird seemed unafraid, even unconcerned with the man standing beneath him. As a species, the raven was regarded as one of the most intelligent of birds.

Warren thought the sound was impossible, like metal on metal with the timbre and resonance of a church bell, coming from a bird. He stood silently a full minute, looking up, watching the raven, thinking of Poe's poem. The bird suddenly flexed its wings upward and out, showing its full size without changing the sound. Then it pulled its wings in, becoming almost still, turning its head side to side looking at Warren. Spreading wings may have been bluster, the bird showing he had no fear, all the while making the strange call. It was beyond comprehension. Warren had lingered long enough. The raven was an enigma, another mystery of Alaska.

At the corner, he turned on a street headed north, hearing the sound clearly, walking two more blocks, leaving the emptiness of the deserted tract behind. He was on the east side of downtown, walking past older buildings, coming to Fourth Avenue, a street showing signs of modernity while clinging to the past. Turning left, he heard the pealing of the raven far off, but the sound was lost going west.

Snow was coming down in the still air, bits of white falling in slow motion. The tiny flakes would build up and after several days would be a sizable accumulation. There would be no thaw until spring, each snowfall adding to the previous one, leaving distinct layers, visible where the plows sheared the snowbank siding the road.

There were not many people on the streets, a beggar with a sign in front of a souvenir shop whom Warren gave money. Further on, he came to the old theater, boarded up with painted murals on the front and sides. He lingered, studying the artwork, a blended theme

of wilderness and modern day. He thought of the antiquated theater in Memphis that had been restored over a period of years to its former glory. The Fourth Avenue Theater could be returned to days of splendor if the community wanted.

Warren turned and walked on, going through snow that had fallen that day. Cart-size machines cleared sidewalks, but none had reached Fourth Avenue. He crossed the street at a diagonal, heading toward a photoshop decked with Christmas decorations. Stopping in front, he looked over a notice that Santa Claus, a helper, and reindeer would be there the following week every evening until Christmas Eve, available for pictures. The falling snow made the season real. Warren would be home in another day, going back to a city where a white Christmas was almost unheard of.

He left the storefront, returning to the walk, moving slower than usual. The early darkness and ambient specks of snow seemed to heighten his somber mood. He had determined to think as little as possible of what happened in Alaska; he wanted to get back to the way it used to be. He knew he couldn't, but he had to try. He must put tragic events behind and look to the future.

The police central building loomed ahead. One reason for the walk was to see Detective Roberts and say goodbye. Another was to get a final word on Myra, although he suspected he knew the answer. Getting to know Roberts had been good, and even though the detective tended to be aloof, he had been a true professional, helping him in various ways, and he seemed like a friend.

Warren cut across the esplanade in front of the police building, heading to the steps on the west side. The courtyard was strung with lights, reflecting eerily in falling snow. He got to the stairs, mounting the steps to the entrance, going inside to the reception hall. Approaching the security window, he identified himself, asking to see Detective Roberts. The officer asked him to sit in the waiting area while he notified the detective.

Warren had hardly sat down when he saw Roberts coming through a side door.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Warren. I was getting ready to call. Please come with me."

Warren was surprised the detective appeared so quickly and intrigued by what he said. Why would he call? It seemed every time he saw Roberts, he was taken by twists and turns, always in unexpected ways. He followed the detective to the office, Roberts closing the door, showing Warren a chair across the desk from where the officer sat down.

Roberts looked straight at Warren with a dead-serious expression. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your friend Billings has met with terrible misfortune. I just learned there was an attempt on his life, and sadly, his daughter was killed. This happened in Memphis, and Billings's life is hanging by a thread. The Russian assassin Benaiah is believed responsible. As part of the Volkov case, any sightings or activities linked to him are communicated at once. The information came in half an hour ago. At my last meeting with Billings, I alerted him of the assassin entering the country and that he was the likely target. I regret this has happened. I hope he makes it."

Warren was silent. He had been trying for days to get his thoughts on a positive track. He thought all the trauma was behind, and Roberts's notice two weeks ago had seemed more a theoretical possibility than an imminent threat. But now the worst had happened, and Billings might not make it.

Roberts had paused, giving Warren time to take in the bad news, but the detective finally spoke, "I know this is difficult, in light of what you've already been through. Any questions?"

Warren was quiet for a moment before speaking, "I was going to ask what happened to Myra."

"She and her mother were processed by the federal arm into the protective witness program, same as the small boy you saved at the apartments."

It was nice Roberts made him the hero of that awful evening when they both knew it was the detective who saved them. But he couldn't accept Myra was gone, forever.

"So you know nothing more. I've seen enough movies that once someone's in the program, they essentially vanish."

"In that regard, the movies are right."

Warren felt bad. He wished he had said more to Myra the day at the station. He last saw her leaving the room to take the call from her mother. Now he would never see her again. He sensed Roberts had told him everything, and it was time to go. He would return to Memphis, hoping Billings would live long enough so he could see him. Billings was tough; he had certainly come back quickly after being shot at Nuiqsut.

Warren stood and reached to shake Roberts's hand. "Where was Billings taken?"

"He's at the Med trauma center in Memphis."

"Thanks for all you've done, Detective Roberts."

"Goodbye, Mr. Warren."

Warren turned, leaving the office, proceeding down the hall, and leaving the building, continuing the walk through falling snow and getting back to the Casa Grande twenty minutes later. In his room, he looked around, making sure he had all personal items, everything secured in the backpack and hand satchel. The day before, he had shipped the Sig Sauer pistol by parcel service to be held in Memphis. He left everything in the room. The furnishings had served the purpose and cost little. He went by the office, dropping the keys, saying goodbye to Denise and Wayne.

Leaving the apartment complex, he felt he'd been there longer than a few weeks. So much had happened in a short time, leaving him sad, feeling regret. Crossing the front of the building, he passed a pickup truck with a plow blade pushing snow to a far corner of the lot. Warren walked on, heading for the street west of the apartments. He expected he would see a taxi, but there was none in sight. He began walking south in the direction of the airport. Chagrined at the lack of cabs in cold weather when needed, he went on, snow falling steadily, vanishing in the whiteness on the ground. He would arrive at the air terminal hours before departure. His flight was at 12:30 a.m., but he would be there by nine. He'd rather spend time there than somewhere else. It was a matter of freeing his mind of tasks, leaving him with nothing more than going to the gate and boarding.

At last, he saw a taxi beside a small strip of stores. Walking ahead, he came to the driver's side, asking for a lift to the airport.

The cabbie was prompt, getting out to open the trunk where Warren dumped his pack and satchel. The three-mile ride to the terminal went quickly, the cab stopping at the departure lane, the passenger receiving his carry luggage, and proceeding into the building.

After getting his tickets, Warren left the atrium, proceeding to the corridor leading to the gate. He stopped at one of the eateries at the side of the hall. He got in a short line, placing an order, and going to the end of the counter, waiting a minute, then getting a tray with food. In no hurry, he took his time, eating leisurely, thinking about the trip ahead. Once in Memphis, he would go immediately to the hospital. Incredibly, Billings was not killed outright by the assassin. At least, he had a chance.

Warren got up, slinging the pack on his shoulder, grabbing the satchel, and heading toward the gate.

Walking down the hall, he saw again the wood geese on the ceiling every twenty or thirty feet. The carved replicas were mounted in flight, headed for the interior. Travelers just off a plane might think the birds were guiding them inland.

But what if you were leaving?

Approaching the gate, Warren remembered the strange sensation months earlier at the wolf display downstairs. That was when he first arrived, one of his first impressions after he was on the ground. A lot had happened since then and now he was leaving.

As he passed the last replica just before the gate, it seemed pleasantly familiar and then he was boarding the plane, finding his place and when he'd left the ground he was asleep.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T**his is J. L. Askew's first novel. The author previously published *War in the Mountains*, a partial history of his great-grandfather's Confederate unit in the War Between the States.

A lifetime reader, habitual writer, and diary keeper, Askew began composing family histories, case summaries, and court reports as a social worker with a baccalaureate in psychology from the University of Memphis. After obtaining a technical degree, he spent thirty-four years as a field engineer with international corporations working on MRI machines. While based at a home office, his last twelve years included teaching at a technical center, traveling to hospitals around the nation for machine-down emergencies, and technical writing.

The author is blessed with a daughter, Bethany, and son, Jonathan, and seven grandchildren, who reside in Buena Vista, Colorado, and near Austin, Texas.

After living thirty-three years in Cordova, Tennessee (away one year in Alaska), Askew recently relocated to Buena Vista, a beautiful mountain town where he is writing the sequel to *Alaska Deadly*.