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**KODIAK ISLAND**

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*A Mystery*

**EDWARD W. WILSON**

## KODIAK ISLAND

Edward W. Wilson

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*To my friends, editors, critics, and supporters: notably Caroline Wheat, Mike Sirota, Mary Ellen Barnes, and Judy Soled. Also, to my many friends and colleagues on Kodiak during my years on the Island (1987-2003) and especially to the public library on Mill Bay Road where I wiled away many a rainy day.*

**– Edward W. Wilson, Ph.D.**

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## PRAISE FOR EDWARD W. WILSON

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“Wow. Legendary Kodiak Island. Alaska attracts a pretty ‘diverse’ cross-section of humanity to start off with, put them on an island twelve hours by ferry from the mainland, throw in a bizarre murder or two and you’ve got the makings of a great story. Solid characters, a neat ending. A great read.”

– Stan R.

“I loved *Kodiak Island*! The first 3 paragraphs hooked me and the story kept me entertained for the rest of the evening and through the next day! I am a Jack Reacher fan but would become mentally drained after many hours. Ethan is as attractive and cunning as Jack, but doesn’t wear you out, you want more. I know you will love this novel. I can hardly wait for more “Ethan McLaren”.

– Mary Lou S.

“I enjoyed this book. It has excellent characters, who are not all in their early 20’s. It

has a complex plot with a fair number of surprises and it doesn't get boring. There is an interesting, if motley crew of "good guys" and some really nasty "bad guys." It would be fun to see this same cast of characters in another book someday. The book has some sex, a little bit kinky but done well and it is appropriate to the story line. I recommend this book if you like murder mysteries."

– Mary Ellen B.

"Edward Wilson's mystery novel, *Kodiak Island*, takes place on the isolated Alaskan island of the same name. This story grabs a reader by the throat and threatens to not let go, all the way to the shocking denouement. With a cast of believable, quirky—and sometimes terrifying—characters, this story is a must read for fans of the genre. Highly recommended."

– Mike Sirota

"What a gift! A new voice, funny, smart and sensitive...*Kodiak Island* is a great read and terrific story with rich characters you want to know, a mystery you want to solve (except you probably won't!) and a location that is just

foreign enough for most of us to be curious about...That, and some sweet and sexy scenes that make it all just so much fun! I couldn't stop reading it."

– Gail G.

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## PROLOGUE

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Thanksgiving  
November, 1968

A late afternoon wind swirled snowflakes across the ice and up against the front of the warming shed. Embers popped and crackled in the dying fire as the fading autumn sunlight reflected off the windows of houses along the parkway. Most of the day's skaters had left for holiday dinners in the homes surrounding Lake of the Isles and those who lingered were capped and gloved against the cold. They heard nothing.

Behind one façade of black stone and stained glass a different popping and cracking echoed. A gag

prevented any screams from escaping, but tears of pain and fear seeped from behind the leather blindfold that was secured below her beaded headband. The young woman, her bell bottoms and fringed vest in a heap nearby, stumbled on tiptoe, her manacled wrists tethered to an ornate overhead beam, as two teenagers tormented her.

A whip cracked and she jerked against the ropes, legs buckling, as the older perpetrator drew back the lash while the younger one groaned and caressed himself.

“Again! Hit her again!”

And the elder one obliged.



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## CHAPTER ONE

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Thursday August 5, 1993  
Homer, Alaska

“**H**ello, Ethan. This is Olivia. Do you still want to get married?”

This morning, killing time at the ferry dock on the end of the Homer Spit, her question reverberated, still mocking me two years later, still echoing inside my skull.

I'd gotten to Homer about thirty-six hours earlier and was waiting for the Alaska State Ferry MV *Tustamena* – the “Rusty Tusty” – to take me and my Suzuki Samurai mini-jeep to what passed for home - Kodiak. Before that I'd spent ten days driving north, escaping from two years of Olivia in Long Beach.

Sometimes my life revolves in these geographic loops and I meet myself coming and going. Exactly two years ago, in response to that phone call, I'd disembarked here on the Spit after the twelve-hour crossing and headed south. Now I was back on the same spot and it almost felt like the intervening twenty-four months were a distant nightmare, the events partially walled off in my mind, though the plaster was still damp.

I was startled out of further pointless ruminating by a voice behind me.

"Enjoying your stay in Homer?"

"Not especially," I said, resenting the intrusion but too tired to rebuff the older man who wore the clericals I remembered from five hundred boyhood Sundays.

"Is this Tom Bodett's hometown?"

"Motel 6? We'll leave the light on for you?" Seems like I'd missed Homer's favorite son again on this trip.

"Yes."

"It is," I said.

"You couldn't verify that 'leaving the light on for you' in August," he said.

"Nope," I said and kept looking out to sea while he took his time lighting an expensive looking cigar. I hoped he'd lose interest in conversation. No such luck.

“Are you waiting for the ferry? To Kodiak? Dutch Harbor? Somewhere in between?”

“Kodiak,” I said.

“I as well,” he said. “Your first visit?”

“No,” I said, and because of my maiden aunties’ hard drummed manners training reluctantly added, “you?”

“It’s my first trip to the island, though I was in Fairbanks once some thirty years ago, Mr...?”

“McLaren. Ethan McLaren,” I said.

“Barrett Ross,” he said, extending a hand I accepted. His grip was firm and the skin hard enough to suggest he wasn’t immune to physical work.

“What takes you to Kodiak?” I said, curious despite myself.

“I go to troubled parishes. It’s my particular calling to resurrect or close mission churches and I’m getting close to retirement. This will be my final assignment.”

“St. James the Fisherman,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

I took another look in his direction before turning back to the ocean.

Intelligence and curiosity seemed evident behind the gold-framed trifocals and the sun highlighted carefully barbered white hair and goatee. The clericals looked custom made, not that I’d know anything much

about that, and he looked to be about a dozen years older than my forty-eight, and a couple of inches shorter than my six foot five.

“You’ve been away from the island?” he said.

“Two years.”

“Why?” he said, then paused. “Sorry. That’s uncalled for nosiness.”

“It is,” I said, “but, the answer is simple. A woman.”

He laughed softly. “Simple, not easy? Difficult lessons learned the hard way?”

“Don’t chase ghosts, Father.”

The smile left his face and a shadow seemed to cross his eyes. What the aunties would have credited to a goose walking over his grave. But the mood passed.

“You’re a romantic, Mr. McClaren,” he said, his soft smile sympathetic.

“Hell, Father, I’m an Alaskan, what else could I be?”

“Touché,” he said, and the smile broadened. “How did you extricate yourself, if I might ask?”

“Badly, poorly, and late.”

“You’re still alive.”

“Barely.”

“You’ve recovered before?” he said.

“Yes.”

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“Then I imagine you will again – though I wonder how.”

“Slowly,” I said, hoping the monosyllables would end the conversation.

“I hope soon enough that sometime, you’ll listen and I’ll tell you of the ghosts haunting me.”

I only nodded.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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**T**he good Father rose to his feet, waved, absolution I suppose, and headed down the Spit to where the Tusty, fresh from Kodiak, was docked and disgorging vehicles while other cars, trucks, and campers queued up for loading. I didn't hurry to join in; last on equaled soonest off in my experience.

A few hours earlier I'd given up dozing in the Sukuzi, washed off with water from a jug in the back, brushed back my hair, and donned my "Thank You, Exxon, For Paving the Marine Highway" sweatshirt. I'd hit a diner for a lighter than usual breakfast, given the pending sea voyage and my unreliable stomach, and waited around to board.

That's when Ross had interrupted my dozen days

of solitary recriminations. How could I have been such an idiot?

Down towards the loading dock I could see him climb into a shiny British Racing – or possibly Kodiak Emerald– Green pickup and idle his way up the ramp and onto the elevator that would deposit him in the hold. An hour later I followed suit, waited until the Zuki was anchored down, and then found a spot at the stern rail, downwind from the ship’s stacks that delivered a nostalgic hint of diesel exhaust.

I was prepared to endure the twelve-hour Dramamine smoothed crossing, though I wasn’t oblivious to my surroundings. The ferry had been enlarged and refurbished while I was away. The ship’s dark blue and white and gold against the ocean and town and the green hills of the Kenai never failed to stir emotions I rarely acknowledged. Those of many an emigrant Alaskan – and that would be most of us, Service’s “race of men that don’t fit in...” – who’d found an unexpected home.

The ship’s foghorns sounded a warning and we moved away from the pier as I took a look around at my fellow passengers and prepared to watch Homer disappear astern. There were familiar faces, even if I didn’t know the names that went with them, and for the first

time in two years I felt like I belonged right where I was.

“Do you know many people on Kodiak?”

I jumped as his baritone voice came from behind me.

“Geez, Father, don’t sneak up on people like that,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I guess I got lost in my own thoughts. Travelers thrown together by circumstance. A bit of Chaucer in there somewhere.”

“Well, obviously I’m not the wife of Bath, though I could use one,” I said, “but Kodiak? The city has maybe 7500 people plus a couple of thousand Coasties. I lived there about five years. I maybe know a hundred to speak to; another couple of hundred are nodding acquaintances; recognize a thousand more. Why?”

“Who are they, Mr. McLaren?”

It was a good question. They, or we, weren’t exactly run of the mill.

“You’re familiar with bell-shaped curves?” I said.

He nodded.

“Most of us,” I said, “came North from somewhere else. The middle of the curve, normal folks, don’t move to Alaska, or anywhere else. They’re still within a hundred miles of where they were born.



Most of the ones who do relocate don't come up here.

"That means most Alaskans come from the ends of the curve: good/bad: smart/dumb; sane/crazy. The most normal of those settle in Anchorage or Fairbanks or Juneau. Kodiak gets you out to at least another standard deviation in extremes."

"Titration. Distilling down to extremes."

"We aren't in Kansas anymore, Dorthy" I said.

"A bit excessive in some ways?"

"Several thousand atypical folks, unrestrained by the proximity of families and communities of origin, and well lubricated by money and alcohol... Well, let's say that I didn't find anything in southern California I hadn't already met on Kodiak."

His eyes were far away when I finished, though whether in time or distance I couldn't guess, but they were focused and intent when he turned back to me.

"Do you believe in evil, Ethan?"

My curiosity perked up a notch.

"I'm a minister," he said, "so I'm supposed to, but events, not seminaries, educated me."

"And?"

"Years ago a person died who shouldn't have. Another, perhaps two, who should have, didn't."

He extracted another cigar from a silver case,

clamped it between remarkably white teeth, and looked out to sea.

“I’d like to find them.”

“They’re on Kodiak?”

“That would be the question, wouldn’t it?” he said, stopping to light his cigar.

“Thank you,” he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. “You’ve been generous with your time and attention. I need to learn a lot about Kodiak as quickly as I can, and your help is appreciated. Now I have an appointment to keep.”

“There’ll be another time,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “and I look forward to it.”

“It won’t be in church on a Sunday morning.”

“No, I didn’t imagine it would be.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Father Ross nodded and walked away, leaving me with half a day to kill en route. The year's overhaul and expansion were an improvement, but hadn't changed the feel much. It was still more Amtrak club car than cruise ship. Thank God for that.

Roaming the ship I saw that families had staked out spaces on the deck or in the lounges. The drinkers were getting an early start and a couple had found a semi-private groping nook. I could've envied any of them, but decided against it.

Up in the bow a couple in their late sixties looked ahead from the rail. "Ah, sure, it's different from the troop ship," he said, and I smiled at the old soldier's Lake Woebegone accent.

The ferry's crew was catching a cup of coffee and a

cigarette after the loading hustle and that looked good to me. Over the rim of my coffee cup, I saw a few familiar faces, but after two decades in Alaska I couldn't go anywhere without seeing faces I recognized, if not the names that went with them. Anonymity was the only thing I'd liked about California. That, and women unobscured by parkas or rain gear.

Eventually I settled into a lounge chair on the forward observation deck and read a couple of chapters of Garfield's *Thousand-Mile War* chronicling the World War II Aleutian Campaign. Soon I was doing more dozing than reading, naps interrupted by the occasional stroll around the boat. I caught glimpses of the good Father a couple of times, once pacing near the aft rail and later in the bow squinting into the spray, and then checking his watch. When I passed through the lounge around noon, he was talking to a woman in her middle forties, dyed red hair, anorexic thin, and vaguely familiar looking. Later, by a coffee urn that now dispensed stale brown dregs, he was deep in conversation with a man of roughly his own age. I wondered if he'd found his appointment, or merely another conversation. I figured he'd tell me eventually if he wanted to.

Having reached that conclusion, I resettled into napping in the forward lounge.

“Ethan?”

“Huh?” I mumbled, out of a half sleep. “Barrett?”

“Sorry to startle you.”

“It’s okay. I was only dozing.” I sat up, stretched and reflexively pulled out a cigarette. I’d quit for over a year in California but crisis always seems to send me scurrying back to one bad habit or another. This time around wasn’t an exception.

“What do you know about sex on Kodiak?”

I choked on half a lung full of smoke. Shit. Either I finally give up the damn things for good, or I quit inhaling around strange company.

“Some definitions here?” I said between gasps.

“Sorry, damn it, I didn’t mean to, well, do that. And, ah, I don’t mean the question personally, or anthropologically. I’m not asking in the Margaret Meade on Samoa sense. More in terms of, er, what goes on?”

He was flustered and I was glad. It covered up my muddle-headedness and gave me a little time to censor my first responses, Pretty good with Lynne... or less good on an Abercrombie picnic table in the rain...

“Look, Barrett, a lot of Kodiakians tend towards extremes. It doesn’t matter the category.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Sure. Anything else?”

He looked at me for a minute, deciding I guess.

“All those extremes must keep the police busy,” he said.

It was my turn to pause.

“Let’s say that the police don’t always come from the right end of the curve,” I said.

“Not a problem unique to Kodiak,” he said.

“True enough. Anyone in particular you’re interested in?”

“Perhaps, but that’ll have to wait.” He turned to head aft, glanced back. “Thanks, Ethan.”

I nodded and watched him disappear.

About an hour later, watching from the front rail, I saw the bridge spanning the channel between Kodiak and Near Island where wild cows grazed on the brush and grass. It was early evening and the sun was still high, lighting Pillar Mountain to the west and showing the island in all of its shades of green. Alaska’s Emerald Isle, the Chamber of Commerce enthused. Island Terrific in the North Pacific, aired KMXT Public Radio.

Home.

The ferry docked efficiently, the bells clanged, and the elevator soon began to disgorge vehicles from the

hold. I went below, sat in my car, waited my turn, and was soon signaled to my spot on the turntable by the first mate. The cables lifted and the deck ramps lowered. I eased off the boat and drove up the pier towards the center of town two blocks away.

A hundred yards up Main Street I pulled my Zuki to the curb and looked back towards the ferry and the harbor. On sunny days I used to come to the docks to eat my lunch, watch the boats and floatplanes ply the channel, and the seals frolic when the killer whales weren't cruising for their own meals.

Trucks, cars, and campers rolled up the pier from the ferry and dispersed through town. Commercial fisherman arriving from their Minnesota farms, crops planted, to work the salmon runs before returning to Mankato, New Ulm, Red Wing or Winona to harvest less watery fields there.

A Winnebago lumbered up the street. The driver was the veteran I'd heard make the "troop ship" comment to his wife. He'd probably spent his W.W. II days at Ft. Abercrombie awaiting a Japanese invasion from Attu or Kiska. An invasion that never came, to his relief I would imagine.

Ross' pristine green pickup truck – now close enough to identify as a 1937 Studebaker - slowly rolled up, the exhaust rumble hinting at more than the orig-

inal horsepower, the bed loaded and tarpaulin covered. Barrett cranked down a window. "Am I headed in the right direction?"

"Yep. Angle right across the main intersection and keep bearing to your left. You'll get there. About six or eight blocks, or so."

"Thanks. Stop up when you get a chance."

"Give me a day or two to get settled. I won't manage morning prayers but maybe morning coffee. You find who you were looking for?"

"Yes, and I need to talk to you about it."

"Why?"

"Because you know Kodiak and I don't." I saw that he'd chewed his way through most of his current cigar.

I considered my non-schedule. "Saturday? The parsonage?"

"I'll serve breakfast at nine."

He slipped the clutch, and the truck moved towards the hillside where his church awaited him.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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I stayed on the street and the wind shifted slightly. I could smell the island, the unmistakable stench of fish processing plants. I inhaled deeply and discovered that I was smiling, perhaps even humming. It'd been a very long time since I'd done much of either, never mind both. Best be careful or I'd find myself whistling too.

With the smile still lingering, I climbed back into the Zuki and headed through town, wondering what I was going to do with myself now that I'd found my way back to the island.

I drove the two blocks of Main Street to its intersection with Rezanof, turned right, drove past the High School and Middle School and, a couple of miles

further out, idled past Mill Bay where a handful of kids and their parents were probing among the tide pools. They looked like they were having fun and knew what they were doing.

Not my categories.

Another quarter mile and a dirt turnoff led me between towering Sitka spruce, their branches covered in thick beds of moss, into Fort Abercrombie State Park and Campground. I navigated the potholes for a half-mile or so up the steep road to sites on top of a bluff overlooking the sea and discovered my favorite spot, site #5, was unoccupied.

I parked, walked down to the registration box, checked in, put my fee in an envelope and through the slot.

Back at the site it didn't take long to settle. My tent went up and the camp kitchen got assembled on the picnic table. Foam mats and down comforters, pillows, books, and an old quilt completed the bedroom. I was ready for the night, the week, or the month.

I wasn't hungry. The ferry crossing took care of my appetite, but I made coffee and dug a flask out of the car's glove compartment. Coffee ready, I filled a mug and climbed the path wending through crumbling pill boxes to a promontory where naval guns scavenged

from a mothballed World War I French destroyer once guarded the channel. The barrels were still there and I sat, watching the puffins darting from their nests on sea stacks fifty yards away in the bay. A bald eagle soared overhead looking for easy pickings. I indulged myself - sip of coffee, a touch of cognac, and a slow cigarette.

I wondered about Father Barrett Ross. Damned if I knew why. I had enough memories of my own to fend off and maybe a passing interest in his would help a little. Kodiak, a priest, sex, and ghosts. A breakfast menu of conversation I thought I'd likely enjoy, whether he could cook worth a damn or not.

As I sat watching the puffins and smelling the sea, a woman emerged from trails across the way, paths that I remembered leading into salmonberry and raspberry patches. Though I'd never met her, I recognized her as some sort of college professor from Pittsburgh who, rumor said, had spent every August here making jam and jelly for over twenty years. She looked to be about my age, short, and tending towards the Rubenesque.

I also felt that delicate electric, physical surge as I watched her wander back into the brush, wondered what brought her back every year, and what she did besides make fruit spreads.

Fantasies, however, would have to wait. Walking

back to the tent, traveling done, I'm content to leave reassembling a life until tomorrow, at least. Tonight's fall-asleeping in the gray summer light to the sound of the wind in the old growth spruce, wild roses, and devil's club, with the surf on the rocks of Monashka Bay in the background.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Friday, August 6

I stirred at the sound of wheels on the gravel in the parking area and sat up as footsteps approached the tent.

“You in there, McLaren? I’ve got a quart of coffee and half a dozen donuts.”

I recognized this voice, unfortunately.

“I’ll be out, Ralphie.” I wasn’t enthusiastic as I slipped into my jeans and Kodiak Rain Festival (January 1st - December 31st) sweatshirt and backed out of the tent.

Ralphie’d settled himself at the picnic table and set out two paper coffee cups and torn the paper bag open exposing a half dozen assorted donuts.

“Help yourself,” he said.

I did, snagging the two powdered sugar ones, using them as cover while I studied Ralphie. He a city cop in his mid-thirties. At about five ten he’s your basic high school running back who’s avoided getting too soft. Blond hair’s just beginning to thin. The broken nose and crooked teeth might lead you to the mistaken conclusion that he’s dumb. The blue eyes say suggest otherwise.

“What do you want, Ralphie? It’s a little early for social and you and I’ve never been much for social.”

“It’s past noon, McLaren. Hardly morning except for idlers,” he said through a mouthful of chocolate icing. “Tell me about the Priest.”

“Hell, Ralphie, what priest? Place is crawling with priests. Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopal, and Moonies. New ones, old ones, and wanna be’s. And I don’t know squat about any of them. So what?”

“Dead one.”

“Dead one?”

“Yep. You know him.”

It was a statement not a question, and my sleep-clouded brain said, Oh, fuck. I covered my confusion by putting another donut in my mouth, leaving little room for my foot.

“I do?” I said, after swallowing.

“Came on the ferry yesterday same as you,” he added between bites.

“The Episcopalian? Ross? Up at St. James?”

“Right.”

That stopped me. I pulled my coffee closer and lit the day’s inaugural cigarette.

“What’s it got to do with me?”

“Probably nothing, but we’re asking everyone from the boat. Doesn’t seem like anyone here on the island knew him. Wonder what he mighta said to anyone during the crossing. Couple folks thought they saw you talking to someone looked like a priest.”

I looked at Ralphie a little closer. Ralphie’s a pretty good city cop. Fairly honest. Fakes being not-so-good and pretty dishonest and kinda dumb well enough to keep his job. Good and honest don’t last long in the Kodiak middle level hierarchy. Nor is smart a career enhancing trait. Given the khakis and oxford shirt, he’d made detective while I was away so he was still faking it pretty successfully.

“Briefly.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Just talked about the church rescuing business and how he hadn’t been to Alaska in over thirty years.”

“I didn’t know he’d been here.”

“Not here – Fairbanks in the 1950’s.”

“That’s it?”

“I think so. You busy detecting again?”

“Yeah, all the fucking time,” he said. “He was in his office chair early this morning. Tailor made suit, white clerical collar, sun shining through a little stained glass window lightening up that silver hair and gold-rim glasses. Looked like he’d died just sitting there.”

“What else?”

“Nothing in particular. Just seems odd, you know. Gets off the ferry, drives to the church, finds a reception party.”

“Reception?”

“Not a housewarming. Folks waiting to get a funeral done. Two drowned fishermen. Coffins on the pool table down at the Keg. Owner wants ‘em out of the Keg and into the ground so’s everyone can get back to drinking.”

“Welcome to Kodiak.”

“Little rude, even for here. So Ross does the rites, heads home, and about 7:00 this morning the secretary finds him. Half a bottle of good merlot on the desk, butt of a \$20 cigar in the ashtray. He say anything about any heart problems?”



“No. Talked a little about this being his last mission church rescue.”

“Well, he was right about that. Nothing else? Mention anyone he knew here?”

“No names came up.” I kept on cheating a little, omitting Ross’ references to the past. I wasn’t sure why.

“It’ll make my job easier if none ever do.”

“Thanks for the coffee.” I said, hoping the interview was over.

“Welcome. See you around.”

He left less quietly than he arrived, but at least he went. I didn’t want to get involved. Just wanted to be on Kodiak with the cliffs, the birds, and the occasional conversation. I wasn’t optimistic about my prospects. Or the day, come to that.

It was clear and warm by Kodiak standards, ones that happened to match my preferences. Maybe 55 degrees with a light wind. But I’d awoken to Ralphie, which was definitely not a preference. Besides, he hadn’t brought near enough coffee and I didn’t feel like making more.

Perversely, I felt relieved that Ross’ death had occurred before he and I’d gotten to know each other any better and I was ashamed of myself for that bit of self

serving stoicism. The mental and emotional oxymorons kept piling up as I reiterated my vow to avoid island drama, but couldn't quite extinguish my niggling curiosity about what had transpired on the ferry, which seemed likely to have provided the impetus for his abrupt demise.

Then again, I was still hungry, which was probably as much about denial of Ross' death as it was need, food wasn't going to fix itself, and I had an errand to attend to. A stop at Safeway for supplies then the drive to Mile 36, Chiniak Highway to pick up a friend. It should be enough to lay the very brief Father Ross chapter in my life to rest.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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I'd fallen asleep thinking about Reverend Ross, the berry-picking professor, and what the hell was I going to do on Kodiak now that I'd gotten myself back here. It wasn't like I'd done a lot of long term planning before I headed north. One thing I had considered was the possibility of reclaiming my dog Lilly, but that would wait another hour or two.

The island's mantle of fog and the long hours of daylight did obscure the time, and I'd been beat from the traveling and crossing but now I was ready for reacquainting myself around town. I get more attached to places than to people. Places don't disappoint you as much.

The Zuki still had a tank full of gas purchased in

Homer and I buttoned up my campsite in less than five minutes.

The Safeway on Mill Bay Road was open and ready to help me replenish the camp cooler. Currently, only some suspicious green slime remained from my drive north.

I roamed the store relearning the shelves as I loaded a shopping cart with necessities like Sailor Boy Pilot Bread, pickled herring in sour cream, extra chunky peanut butter, sweet pickles, ice, and toilet paper.

Halfway up one aisle I thought I saw a familiar figure - Lynne Daniels. I was momentarily distracted as older Kodiak memories overrode current culinary concerns. A black lace bra, a red dress, shared laughter, unexpected appetites and satiations.

I quietly nudged my cart up next to her. "Hello, Lynne."

"Shit!" Her right arm jerked and half a dozen cans of pineapple rings toppled to the floor. "God, Ethan."

"Yes?"

I noted the expensively tailored gray jacket and matching skirt, the pleated and dangerously stretched white silk blouse, and the expert, if subdued, makeup. Only the black seamed stockings and open toed and heeled, four-inch, CFM spikes hinted at the possibility

that something exotic lay hidden behind the obvious professionalism. That and my memory. Once invited, and thrice welcomed, I'd found preferences that had nothing in common with her conservative wardrobe.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Shopping."

"Damn you, Ethan. Not Safeway. Kodiak! Why are you back here?"

"Christ, Lynne, it's as close to a home as I've got. Why wouldn't I be here?"

"No. Damn it, no! You left and you can't..."

Dropping her blue plastic shopping basket against the shelves, she pivoted on her toes, and fled.

I stood, slightly confused, watched her exit, and decided the encounter provided an adequate excuse for postponing much more restocking. I also thought I'd prefer to get out of the store, certain memory flashes being better savored in private.

Sheepishly, I added deli fried chicken and grease glazed potato wedges to my cart. After navigating the checkout lane without a major incident, I stowed my modest gleanings in the back of the Zuki, got in and headed down island.

Regardless of interruptions, or memories, it was time to collect Lilly, my seven-year old Samoyed. Thinking I'd be in California less than a year, I'd left

her with my friend Tom. Now it had been two years. Would she even remember me?

I made a four block detour past St. James the Fisherman - not that there was anything to see – scooted through the three blocks of down town and out the dozen miles of paved road past the Coast Guard base where I used to see clients, mostly officers with career jeopardizing marital difficulties. Across the bay the marine impound lot held a pair of foreign fishing boats, seized for high seas violations, and awaiting the sheriff's auction.

Familiar sights helped with feeling like I was back: the ferry, the base, Abercrombie, even Safeway. Lilly was next. And Lynne Daniels. But I still couldn't get the minister out of my head. Maybe I'd spent too much of the past year wallowing in my own confusion and was relieved to focus on someone else's. Or maybe I was just back to being my usual nosey self. Either was an improvement.

After another mile or so, the pavement ended at Bell's Flats where the Chiniak Highway reverted to a meandering dirt and gravel leftover from the supply roads of World War II, and it took about an hour to negotiate the next twenty-five miles out to Tom's house. The road was as bad as ever: loose gravel, rock shards, deep potholes, hairpin switchbacks, wild cows,

and oncoming traffic, all obscured by intermittent thick dust clouds. My favorite kind of drive, and it reminded me that I was still pissed that they'd straightened, paved, and "improved" the Alaska Highway.

I slowed over the low Olds River bridge, looking up at the young eagles perched in the cottonwood trees surrounding the Kalsin Bay tidal flats. The tide was in and salmon were choking the river and streams, trying to regain their spawning grounds. Between eagles, gulls, bears, and the difficulty of the migration, the odds didn't look promising.

Another few miles and a long sloping drive climbed from the road to Tom's house on a hill overlooking the bay. Leaving the Zuki I heard a woofing sound behind me and froze. Warily, a long-haired white dog eyed me, nose testing the breeze. I waited. With a series of half whimpers she edged nearer until the wind informed her.

"Lilly."

Ears perked, she bounded across the intervening twenty feet, reared up and planted her paws on my chest as rumblings erupted from her throat.

"It doesn't seem like she's forgotten you." Tom was standing there on his back porch, smiling. "Welcome home, Ethan."

“Good to be back.” We clasped hands around Lilly who was attempting to burrow into my jacket.

“Do you want to come in for awhile? I was about to have some late lunch.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I want to get on with this first day. Do it right and it’ll feel like I never left.”

“I heard California was bad.”

“Could have been better.”

“You need a place to stay while you get settled back in?”

“No, I’m up at Abercrombie. With Lilly around I’ll be fine.”

“I’m gonna miss you, girl.” He scratched her ears and she whimpered a little, turning her head to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I didn’t think. If she wants to stay...”

“Up to her.” His gruff tone tried to cover the anticipated hurt.

We shook hands and I opened the Zuki’s door. Lilly looked back and forth, then, with her head and tail down, climbed into the car and curled up on the seat.

Heading back to town, I could feel the years drop away since the last time she and I drove up this road. It was a fall night, raining and dark. We’d rounded a



curve and skidded to a halt, barely avoiding the tiny Boreal owl sitting, blinded, in the middle of the road. I'd shut off the lights, picked up the dazed bird and returned it to a tree near the road. Turning back, I'd stopped for a minute and gazed up the bay. From the light of a full moon, and the misted rain, emerged a moonbow - a rainbow of moonlight that spanned the bay.

Odd, a certain juxtaposition of events: a rainy night, a late drive, a stunned owlet, and a moonbow that only I would ever see.

I thought about all of the unshared events, and the ones shared with now missing partners. There were too many of both. I couldn't fix the past, and doubted the future'd be much different, but I didn't like the feeling of being a ghost in my own life.

It was a relief to drive down the last hill before to the salt flats and the welcome distraction of feral cattle grazing on seaweed and, it was rumored, the occasional errant clam. Wild cows, descended from Scottish Shorthorn and Texas Longhorn ancestors. Bred to survive the cold wet climate and, possibly, three thousand hungry Kodiak grizzlies. Twenty-five generations later, survivors begetting survivors, I'm more afraid of the cows than I am of the bears.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Lilly and I returned to a quiet campground where I saw the elderly couple with a Winnebago setting up at the site just down the hill from mine. I wondered if he was an old soldier returning to visit, as I'd guessed when they drove off the ferry. The rest of the occupied sites were quiet. The cannery workers would still either be packing salmon or sleeping off the last 30-hour shift.

Half of the now cold chicken and potatoes disappeared as I sat on a corner of the picnic table and munched disinterestedly. Lilly daintily devoured the rest. I'd have to start feeding us better or we'd both blow up like the Hindenberg. But recent events kept taking precedence over menus in my thoughts.

Lynne Daniels and our short, intense history.

Barrett Ross and his questions about Kodiak and veiled references to other past events. I hadn't recognized either of the people I'd seen him talking to, so what had he heard that might require my opinions? Kodiak sex? Old evils?

My thoughts swirled like the fog, revealed even less, and Lilly was looking at me expectantly. I set off with her on a post-dinner stroll that didn't qualify as a power walk. We wandered to a cliff-top meadow behind the campsite and she romped and nipped at bumblebees. Have to get another Frisbee, I thought, watching her dancing among the wild roses.

A low whistle brought her back into step beside me for the short walk back to camp where the picnic table was inviting.

"The prodigal's returned?" a voice startled me from behind.

"You too, Doctor, ah, Dyson?" I asked, recovering some degree of poise. But why prodigal?

"Sue please. And, yes, it's Dyson, and I'm back every year." Somehow the L.

L. Bean boots, faded jeans, turtleneck and flannel shirt added up to provocative.

Especially with the smell of wet spruce, old moss, and campfire smoke for leavening.

“I thought you were the campground ghost who never talked to anyone.”

“I have a few acquaintances, but they keep it to themselves.”

“And now?”

“I need a match.” She waved a thin black cigarette in my direction.

I dug into a pocket and handed her a spare book of matches. She surprised me by sitting down.

“So, what’s it been?” I said. “Fifteen or twenty summers you’ve been here making jam?”

“This is actually the seventeenth.”

“You’re college faculty?”

“Outside, yes. Here I’m just your basic little old lady jam maker.”

Her eyes sparkled with intelligence and humor, both enticing.

“Why Kodiak?”

She paused and toyed with her cigarette. “My father was stationed here. He hated garrison duty but loved the island. Did his duty as he saw it and got himself assigned to the invasion to retake Kiska from the Japanese. He died there.”

“One hundred and sixty-seven dead, and there wasn’t a Japanese soldier on the entire island,” I said. “Friendly fire.”

She nodded and we sat quietly for a bit while Lilly watched from the tent's front entrance.

"Why have you come back, Mr. McLaren?"

I wanted to suggest that it wasn't any of her business, and the "prodigal" rankled - too close to my own opinion - but there'd still been too many nights with too little company. Especially a sane woman's.

"Alaska's home and Kodiak's my favorite room?" I said.

"Are you moving back to, or away from?" she asked, with a hint of a smile that took most of the sting out of the question.

"Both, I'd guess. It appears you are a bit more than an armchair shrink?"

"Probably a little more conversant than the usual curious layman," Sue said. "Academically, I'm an anthropologist with an interest in deviations rather than cultural norms."

"Makes Kodiak a busman's holiday, doesn't it?"

"It could if I let it, but I almost never do."

"Given that you're familiar with the jargon, consider two years with a bright, disintegrating, borderline personality disorder."

"BPD? Politically correct for female sociopath. You should have third degree burns covering most of your body."

“Mostly internal injuries.” I could still feel them but Sue’s company was a welcome diversion.

“Do you ever talk about it?”

“Not usually.”

“Damn,” she said. “No good stories.”

“Give me some time and I’ll winnow out any worth telling,” I said. “Promise.”

“Good, I’ll hold you to it.”

The conversation trailed off into a companionable silence she seemed perfectly comfortable with, no small matter in my personal catalog of admirable traits.

“Thank you for the matches, as well as the company,” she said, rising and pitching her cigarette butt through the fire ring grate.

“You’re welcome.” I watched her walk towards her own campsite on a knoll across the way.

“Careful, Ethan,” I said, very quietly, and to myself. I meant it, but doubted I’d listen. Women and “careful” hadn’t ever appeared together in any chapter of my life yet.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The rest of the day passed quietly enough. Lilly dozed and I read. A campground volunteer dropped by the site and checked my registration, but that, and suppressing any thoughts of Ross, were about it for activity. I should have been grateful, given my intention to stay uninvolved, but of course I wasn't and I'd have found some mischief on my own if someone hadn't saved me the trouble.

"You've been summoned," Sue's voice announced from behind me.

Summoned? Christ it's been thirty-five years since I've been to the principal's office.

"For someone who doesn't talk to anyone, we seem to be breaking some rules here," I said, as I turned

towards Dr. Sue - the jam lady - Dyson's second appearance.

"Can't be helped. When Martha Marie wants something the rules tend to fall away. This time she wants to see you."

It took a minute to assimilate the idea, and I covered my confusion with the usual gimmick, a cigarette that resisted being pried out of the pack, matches that didn't want to light, and eventual success. I suspected that my captor was familiar with all of these delaying tactics, but she had the good grace not to point and snicker.

"Why would the most enigmatic of Kodiak's senior widows want to see me?"

"She didn't say, she just said 'fetch'."

"You don't look like someone who responds to 'fetch'."

"I respond very well to the orders I wish to hear." There was that twinkle again.

"So hers was one you did not object to. Should I comply or object?"

"I think compliance would be more entertaining."

I pretended to consider that, though there'd never been any doubt I'd agree.

"I always imagined being 'summoned' would



involve gentlemen named Vinnie and Large Louis and a long black Packard," I said.

"I suppose you can call me Vinnie if it helps." She shook back her short graying hair, and seemed prepared to continue volleying for however long I wanted to play.

After another minute of feigned contemplation I gave up pretending.

"Okay Vinnie Sue, where to and when?"

"Ms. Martha suggests her house, and also that now would be a good time."

"Lilly will object to being left."

"Lilly is included in the invitation."

"Bonus points for Ms. Martha."

It was about ten minutes from Abercrombie to Martha Marie's house on Mission Road, that part of Kodiak's residential area that wasn't washed away during the Good Friday earthquake and tsunami in '64. Her house, much added to but still unified, overlooked the bay with a view towards Woody Island a mile or so away.

We entered through a door replete with porthole. In winter, the way would have been lit by old brass nautical lamps mounted along the oak boardwalk that led from the street. Inside the door was the carpet remnant common to Kodiak entries. It held several

pairs of shoes and boots and we added ours to the collection then sock-footed our way into the living room where an older woman awaited us by the fire. Lilly followed, sockless.

“Here he is,” Sue said. “Special delivery, as requested.”

“Thank you, Sue, and please come a little closer, sir. My eyes aren’t what they once were.”

I moved opposite her, the fire between us. Her eyes might be dimming, but I doubted her brain was. She was of medium height and build but there was nothing careless about her movements or her appearance.

“Shall I call you Ethan or Dr. McLaren?” Ms. Marie asked from her wingback chair with its view of the bay. No boat navigating the channel would go unobserved, if she wanted to watch.

“Ethan is fine.”

“What do you know about me, Ethan?”

“Not much. Fairly well off widow. Married and buried a commercial fisheries captain and former client. You’re not a part of the senior social web, but they are quite aware of you. So are the local charity fundraisers.”

“Very nicely put. I appreciate your delicacy and my vanity is pleased by your recognition. I had rather

thought that I had disappeared from public consciousness some years ago.”

Apparently feelings of ghostly invisibility were not mine alone.

“And your interest in me?”

“Since I am not 20 years younger, the answer is somewhat prosaic. I want you to find out who murdered Reverend Ross.”

“You’re a little ahead of me in the information department.”

“I would hope so.”

“I know that he wasn’t shot, stabbed, or beaten to death.” I needed to show that I wasn’t totally ignorant of either Ross’ death or the possibilities.

“He was poisoned.”

“The wine?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you care?”

Ms. Martha leaned back in her chair, peered out across the water, and took a couple of deep breaths before returning her gaze to me and continuing. “Reverend Ross was here because I helped arrange it. Now he’s dead and I take that rather personally.”

“You arranged it? He told me he didn’t know anyone on the island except possibly someone from

long ago and not from his earlier Alaskan visit. That wouldn't be you?"

"Correct. He didn't know me, but I knew of him."

"And why would you want to arrange his assignment?"

"This island is a nest of religious fanatics, as I'm sure you know. We've got the Russian Orthodox up the road, but they've been here for a couple of centuries and I don't mind them of course. But then there's Reverend Moon's world headquarters on the hill behind me and I do find that objectionable. Nor am I fond of the Mormons and I don't have a lot of use for the Calvinists either. That leaves the Catholics and the Episcopalians. I thought that Reverend Ross would be a useful addition to the balance."

"So you greased his arrival?"

"I did."

"Someone has spoiled your plans."

"They have," she said. "I want to know who."

"That's my part?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She closed her eyes and went back to that breathing and pondering routine again until I had about decided she'd fallen asleep.

"You are reputed to be annoyingly honest, but not

without humor, and you seem to be well regarded by certain elements of the community, and equally despised by others.”

“Two points for me.”

“Which is two more than I give most.”

“Perhaps, and you’re not the only one whose vanity appreciates nurturance. But...”

“Dr. McLaren, I am an elderly woman who wants a favor. You are supposedly a smart man with some hard luck behind you and uncertain prospects ahead. You need the money and I need an answer. I believe that that should qualify as more than sufficient.”

I was more than surprised by her familiarity with my current condition. “You can afford this?”

“I can afford any damn thing I please, thanks to, ah, interesting work and Captain Larson.”

“The business and the seaman.”

“Yes. There’s an envelope on the desk by the door for you to collect on your way out. It contains \$10,000 in cash. No, I do not want a receipt.”

“I’ll let you know.”

I’m not fond of being herded, and she was definitely shoving. On the other hand, I picked up the envelope.

“Dr. Dyson, if you would escort Ethan back to camp?”

“Cheerfully.”

‘Vinnie’ Sue and Lilly arose from the corner where they had quietly observed. Lilly’d silently voted each woman a point by raising no objections throughout the evening’s visit.

It was a quiet drive back. At #5 I tossed a match into the fire ring lighting the previously laid kindling. Lilly hunkered down in the tent with her head poked out, watching and snoozing.

“Doctor McLaren?” Sue said, as we settled on the picnic table’s benches. “I didn’t know that.”

“Recent addition. The only good thing I found in California.”

“You earned it the hard way?”

“The knowledge came hard, the paper was comparatively cheap and easy. But I’m more curious about the why and how of Ms. Martha.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that she’s been here since the early 1940’s and ran a brothel that catered to soldiers during the war and fishermen after. I’d heard that a boat captain among her clientele became her husband and she closed up shop.”

“Indeed. Anything else?”

“Speculation and rumor. That she’s from Eastern money; that she had a child who was whisked off

island at birth; that the captain died happier than most Kodiak fishermen.”

“Some of that’s true, but I’ll let Ms. Martha decide what to sort out for you, along with the if and when.”

“I’m surprised she knew anything about me,” I said.

“Surprised?” Her smile was attentive.

“Yes. I’m used to being invisible.”

“Invisible? You’re what? Six-five, maybe two hundred and thirty pounds, and look like what the typical white Alaskan male’s supposed to, but rarely does.” She paused. “You never notice the way women look at you, do you?”

“Hell, they never even see me, much less look.”

“Damn, Ethan, we just don’t let you catch us looking - we’re way too afraid you’ll know what we’re thinking.”

“It appears you’re looking.”

My right hand, fingers mimicking spider legs, advanced across the picnic table. An exploratory forefinger softly caressed the back of her hand and our eyes met.

“That’s because I don’t mind you knowing what I’m thinking,”

“And, given my observational ineptitude, what might that be?”

“Maybe it’s time I got to know another Kodiakian a little bit better?”

“And?”

“Ms. Martha is not the only one who has noticed that you might have some potential, Ethan.”

“For?”

“Ah, now that’s what might be interesting to find out,” Sue said. She rose as she made the comment and smiled. “Good night, Doctor.”



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## CHAPTER NINE

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Sunday, August 8

I was awake and sitting on the picnic table when Ralphie drove up late in the morning. A heavy fog was rolling in and a light drizzle was soaking into my denim jacket and turtleneck. He didn't appear to have any donutss or coffee along. Damn.

"Poison," I said. I was showing off and I'd probably regret it.

His mouth opened but it took him a minute to get some words out.

"Shit, how'd you fucking know already?"

I referenced the Alaskan rendition of the rumor mill. "Ptarmigan telegraph. In his wine?"

"Yeah. Means someone knew him." Ralphie sat

down on the other end of the table. “Knew he liked a little wine in the evening with his after dinner cigar, too.”

“Probably knew him well enough to know his preferences in wine, as well as his habits. What did they use?”

“Something with an X? Sounding like a Z?”

“Maybe Xanax? It’s damn lethal when mixed with a sufficient quantity of alcohol.”

We both thought about that for a minute. I offered Ralphia a cigarette, trying to lessen my smokers’ guilt as I took one for myself. He refused. Since he wasn’t helping me with my vices, I wasn’t going to feel bad about not helping him with his occupational duties. Nice rationalization, McLaren.

“It was injected into the wine with a hypo through the cork.”

“If they haven’t, the lab should check the alcohol content of any remaining wine.”

“They did. Reported it was too high.”

“Doubly spiked.” I said unsurprised. It’s what I’d have plotted out in all of the heinous crimes I’d fantasized about committing. “Dissolve the Xanax in some 200 proof Everclear, increase the alcohol content, decrease the amount he’d have to drink to swallow a lethal dose. Count on him being too frazzled from the

day to notice anything more out of the ordinary than the effects of the crossing and arrival. Also means someone knew an awful lot about the Reverend, and didn't care to wait around and be recognized."

Neither of us seemed to have anything to add to my summation.

"Appears you will be digging into his past and seeing who turns up. Digging into theirs too. Probably won't make you popular."

"Lotta 'pasts' here." Ralphie stood up, too pissed to sit still. "Christ! Why can't this of been fucking normal?"

"Normal's still back in Oklahoma or Nebraska, Ralphie. It sure as hell isn't here."

"Screw you, McLaren."

I'd have liked a donut to chew on about then, but Ralphie hadn't brought any.

"You call the church for his prior postings?"

"Yeah. He'd been in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and some little college town in Illinois, and a few more places before those."

"So it's easy, just figure out who's in Kodiak now who was in those places during the same years."

"Easy my ass. Half the population's from those places, and none of 'em're likely to take kindly to me poking into their personal history."

“Maybe you should just forget it. Bury him and lose the file.”

“That’s been suggested. But I can’t.”

“Duty, honor and service?”

I was – maybe - exuding just a tinge of skepticism.

“No. Somebody has enough muscle to keep it from just getting shit-canned. I’m supposed to go through the motions, not actually do anything.”

I almost felt sorry for him. He probably had everyone from local politicians to the guilty party wanting the minister forgotten and erased, but Ms. Martha wanted it dragged out into the open. He could end up like one of those poor bastards who got their ankles roped between two wild horses.

“Who?” I said.

“How the hell would I know? And I hate that too. You have any ideas?”

“You need to get a girlfriend,” I said, preferring therapeutic diversion to outright lying.

“What the fuck you talking about?” He was about beside himself, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Fuck. People who say it as much as you are ain’t doing it.”

“Fucking shrink!”

Well, I wasn’t either, actually. But I knew how to hide it better than he did.

He wound down in a bit, like I thought he would, and went back to questioning.

“Whatta you really know anyway?”

“Me? Geez, Ralphie, I’ve only been back two days. How the hell am I supposed to know anything you don’t?”

“You knew about the poison.”

Ralphie really isn’t as dumb as he pretends. I’d needed to watch that a touch.

“I didn’t know it. Just a guess. Your second visit seemed like enough confirmation.”

“Yeah, maybe. Then again, wouldn’t be the first time you knew more than you mentioned.”

A thin smile seemed sufficient answer.

“You think of anything you come and find me,” he added as he got back into his truck.

“Sure, Ralphie,”

The not bloody likely I kept to myself.

With Ralphie’s departure Lilly emerged out of the thicket of raspberries and devil’s club she’d been watching from, stretched, and looked expectant.

“Time for a walk?”

She grinned her genetic smile and we wandered off for a two-mile stroll. Down the road a ways, left across a stream, another left along a hillside trail back to the beach. Up from the beach to

the campsite. One morning's exercise regimen completed.

Lilly nosed her dish and I dumped in some almost-dry dog food. I gave up on breakfast, put old, cold coffee on to heat, and opted for the two-cups-of-Joe-and-five-cigarettes diet.

The day slipped by with the usual avoidant activities: reading, napping, coffee drinking, and the occasional thought that I had accepted money I wasn't earning. I distracted myself watching the occasional vehicle idle through the campground as one couple packed up and left and another arrived. Two sites away, off-duty slime line workers snored through their eight-hour break from the cannery but the onshore breeze pretty much overrode that annoyance.

Still, by late afternoon the guilt associated with not actually working on the case was ruining my reading. Lilly and I heightened our evasive actions with a stroll down to the outhouse and woodbin.

As we passed the Winnebago a voice called out through a window, "Young man?"

Must have been referring to me, unlikely as the epithet seemed, since no one else was around.

"Yes?"

"If you would come around to the other side of the camper? Please?"

Seemed to be a lot of summoning going on lately, but what the hell. I wasn't exactly overbooked.

Rounding the camper's corner I could see a fire in the grate, picnic table with actual food, three comfortable canvas camp chairs and an elderly man, seated, with his feet extended towards the fire. The woman who'd hailed me was coming out of the camper's door and motioned me towards a seat.

"My husband would like a word with you, if you would be so kind? Oh, and help yourself to the food, there's plenty and it won't keep."

That took care of any dinner concerns.

I filled a paper plate with lasagna, cut a little more onto another plate for Lilly, and settled into the proffered seat. Lilly, rapidly getting gastronomically spoiled, swallowed her share and lay down, a little closer to the remaining food than to me, as I studied the man.

His clear gray eyes looked back, intently, and humor wrinkled the edges of his mouth, slightly obscured by a droopy mustache.

"Name's Paul, Paul Arnesen. My wife's Grace."

"McLaren, Ethan, and Lilly. Arnesen with an 'e'?"

"Yes."

"Norwegian."

"Yes. Very astute of you Mr. McLaren."

“Spent some time in Minnesota, and half the people here are from the Northern Plains. Learned the different ‘Scandahovian’ spellings somewhere along the way. Osmosis most likely.”

“Really? Someone said you’d been on Kodiak before.”

“For years, then I found myself in California for awhile. Came back a few days ago, same ferry as you.”

“I thought I saw you on the boat. I haven’t been here since 1945. It’s my wife’s first visit.”

“Military?”

He nodded. “Right here where we’re sitting. I was mostly assigned to that pillbox over behind where you’re set up. We spent a little time test firing the French guns up at the point and a lot of time trying to stay dry.

“It was nothing like it is now,” he said. “Don’t think there were more than a few hundred people outside the military. This area was a fox farm, or had been until we showed up. There were a lot of fox farms on the little offshore islands. Men would fish and drop the catch on the islands. Fox couldn’t escape. They’d harvest them when the season was right.

“It was interesting. There were Roosevelt elk up on Raspberry Island and a cattle ranch on Sitkinak or some such name. A couple of placer miners on another



island I disremember.” He had that look I’d seen on the faces of a dozen old fishermen and miners. Eyes looking across some mountain or ocean I couldn’t see, to somewhere I’d never been. I wondered if I was developing that look too?

“The elk are still there, but the ranches are pretty much gone. Villages shrinking, I think, like they are across most of Alaska. All the little canneries are gone and a lot of the fish are being processed at sea. Frozen, not packed.”

He looked at me for something more. “I visited a lot of the islands a few years ago cleaning up Exxon Valdez oil.”

“I wish a few less things had changed. Too much has. It’s hell getting old.”

“You wanted to ask me something?”

“Yes.”

“Not about foxes and elk and horses?”

“No.”

I waited but no questions seemed to be forthcoming.

He leaned forward and seemed to make up his mind. “Walk up the point with me?”

I nodded.

“Grace? We’ll be back in a bit.”

I followed along, a step behind, Lilly a half step

behind me. The wind was blowing and it was turning chilly on the exposed headland. We passed the concrete bunkers and leaned on the gun barrels looking out to sea.

“We spent a lot of time up here looking for the Japs. Course they never showed up. I’ve never complained about that part.”

He stopped, turned, and looked at me. I guessed he was back from wherever his attention had wandered to.

“Sue Dyson, from t’other camp site?”

I nodded.

“I got to talking to her - turns out I was stationed here with her father - and she said you knew a lot about Kodiak.”

“I lived here for a few years and I’m nose-y.”

He shrugged. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

I didn’t see or hear any trace of humor. But maybe the third time, or mention of, is a charm?

“Depends,” I said.

“I don’t, except for the ones I make myself.”

I didn’t especially like the way this sounded, the direction it might be headed, or the familiar echo of Father Ross.

“In ‘44 this was a three-whore town. There was an older one, or she seemed like it to an eighteen-year old

boy, and two younger ones. The older one ran the show.”

Christ, I do not want to go down this road with this man.

“Don’t get me wrong. Grace has been a good wife. Our two daughters turned out okay. I got no complaints. Then after I’d passed sixty I started thinking more about the past. That happens when you know that the future’s looking a little short.

“I never really forgot that older woman, just sorta tucked her away in some drawer in the back of my mind and didn’t open it for near about fifty years.”

I think I could hear the smile back in his voice, and I still didn’t want to go where I was pretty sure he was heading, but I was still nose-y.

“Then you opened it,” I said, “and it turned out to be more like Pandora’s box?”

“Yah. We’re supposed to be here visiting where I spent the war.”

“Except you’re more interested in a woman you once knew and now can’t forget.”

His shoulders slumped and I could hear the sigh escape.

“It’s a hell of a note. Forty-eight years have gone by. The Japs never showed up. I never killed anyone and no one ever shot at me neither. I’ve led a decent

life, I think. Yet I'm tormented by the memories of that damn woman.

"She was smart, educated, fun and free. Not free when it came to money, but she lived free. Her terms. That's the part that's hard to forget. The part that came back a couple of years ago when I opened that drawer. She taught me stuff about living took another four decades to settle in and I never thanked her. I didn't know any better then and by the time I did it was way too late.

"Yes, sir. That Madam Marie was a real woman."

It was too late. I'd seen it coming but there was no getting out of the way. I was going to be a bug on his Winnebago's windshield as he cruised down his Personal History Highway.

"You had a question?"

"Sorry, old man lost at sea here. You have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"I've spent an awful lot of nights in campgrounds listening to a lot of folks talk about what they couldn't speak of to anyone they were ever apt to see again."

"So this is all in a night's work for you."

"Still haven't heard the question," I reminded him.

"I wonder whatever happened to her. Where she went. How she lived. When she died. Don't even

know how to begin to try and find out. You ever look for someone like that?”

That was way too close for comfort, I needed to deflect him, and why the hell didn't he ask Sue instead of me? Except I knew the answer to that one – you don't go asking the new surrogate daughter if she happens to know anything about “dad's” favorite old whore. Nope. Shit.

“Widow. Lives about three miles from here.”

He gasped and I can't say I blamed him.

“Ah...” he said.

“No. That's it for today. You got enough to chew on.”

Lilly and I headed back towards the campsites. I was pretty sure he'd follow, but I was going whether he came along or not. He'd gotten more than he'd bargained for and I wasn't going to give him a chance to stir up any more of my own ashes. I had more locked compartments - and more experience with the unpredictable results of opening them.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Monday, August 9

**A** morning with no visitors was a palpable relief. Uninvited company had been disconcerting of late. Lilly prowled around through the bushes looking for something to herd while I rustled up breakfast. The last Alaska-pack can of Danish bacon spattered in the pan while some stale sourdough bread heels charred on a wire rack on the Coleman stove. I tipped a cup of kibble into Lilly's dish and laced it with some bacon grease. Probably not the healthiest breakfast either of us ever ate, but neither the Surgeon General, nor the veggie chauvinists, were in evidence.

Across the campground I could see Sue break-

fasting with the old soldier. Maybe she'd learn more about her father. Remembering the other night's banter brought an increasingly common smile. "Never eat at a place called Moms; never play cards with a man named Doc; never go to bed with anyone who's got more problems than you do. I hoped maybe she hadn't heard about rule #3 for leading an untroubled life.

I went back to thinking about Ross. There didn't seem to be much proactive sleuthing I might do, but inactivity felt like cheating, and I didn't feel like cleaning my campsite. \$ 9,950 unearned dollars also nagged at my conscience. A visit to the church where the events had transpired seemed like an apt choice out of unpromising possibilities.

St. James the Fisherman was on a hillside overlooking the town and the old small boat harbor. There was a church building with an adjoining parsonage and street-side parking adequate for a tiny congregation. I parked the Zuki and Lilly and I went for a prowl.

Nobody was in the church, a single story rectangular building with its long side running roughly parallel to the shoreline. The entryway was set in the middle and the down-island end contained a modest chapel. Some police tape was strung across a door off

the foyer at the other end, indicating, I assumed, the crime scene location.

Knocking on the parsonage door brought no response, but it was open so I let myself in. A woman sat at a fifties vintage chrome and Formica table engrossed in conversation with a diminutive man in a black suit and string tie.

I'd have coughed or mumbled a greeting but Lilly had already edged her way past and laid her head on the woman's knee. Very unusual behavior.

The woman, startled, dropped her hand, then smiled and scratched Lilly behind her ears. The rumbling purrs emanating from Lilly's throat indicated her everlasting pleasure and approval.

"Lilly, what are you doing up here?"

"She's with me."

"Oh. Well, since I know Lilly, you must be the infamous Dr. McLaren?"

"If I must, though I prefer Ethan. And you?"

"Adele Hays, I'm the church secretary, and this is Calvin Dale."

Adele was not a bad sight to begin my morning with, nor would she be a bad one to conclude an evening with, come to that. Dark auburn hair brought out the green of her eyes, both enhanced by a purple dress. Early forties, I'd guess, with that sensual flow-



ering that comes around that age, and significantly equipped to occupy a man's attentions.

Mr. Dale, who wasn't looking altogether pleased by Lilly or our arrival, stood about five foot six and weighed in at around a hundred and thirty pounds. Fiftyish, with thinning hair, he extended a hand.

"Doctor."

"Mr. Dale." His hand was small but the grip was firm and his eyes were steady.

"I prefer Brother Dale."

"Minister?"

"More of an evangelical preacher. I have a small congregation here and just stopped by to offer my condolences. And see if I could be of any service."

"Brother Dale has been very good about stopping by and helping out these past few months."

I bet, was my ungenerous thought – but then I had too many memories of Great-Uncle Max, a silver tongued and haired evangelist who'd spend the post W.W. II years separating Phoenix widows from their money. Maybe Cal was different.

"Kodiak's a small place, Doctor, we all try and pitch in."

"Oh, dear," Adele said, "I'm forgetting my manners. Would you like to sit, and can I get you some coffee?"

“Just the chair, thanks.”

“What can I help with, Dr. McLaren?”

“Well, I met Father Ross on the ferry and I wondered what you might know about him?”

“You talked to him?” Brother Dale interrupted.

“Briefly.”

“What did he have to say?”

“Nothing much.” And that’s my story and I’m sticking to it, I reminded myself.

“I don’t think I know much of anything either,” Adele said.

“Excuse me folks, but I’m afraid I have to go now,” Brother Dale said. “A parishioner has requested a visit and I’m expected. I’ll check back, soon, Adele. You be sure and call if there’s anything at all I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“You too, Doctor,” he said, with a stiff salute in my direction. “Stop by or call anytime. I’m always available.”

“Right.”

I nodded an insincere acknowledgement as he headed out the door.

Lilly, who’d maintained her position beside Adele, now crossed the kitchen and flopped down in a comfy corner. I went back to trying to gather up a little information.

“Are you mourning your late employer today, Ms. Adele?”

“Not exactly. He was dead before I even met him. But do you have any idea how hard it will be to replace him?”

“Can’t say I’d thought about that.” Which was at least the truth.

“It wasn’t easy finding someone in the first place, even when you have applicants. Then there’s the problem of getting the congregation to agree. It’s easier to get the Senate to confirm a Supreme Court Justice.”

“Now you get to start all over.”

“Yes, and with the added burden of the last minister having been murdered his first day here. *Shit!* Oops, sorry, please excuse my French? Life’s been a little rough lately.”

“Hard to imagine how the help wanted ad will read,” I said, and toyed with that mental exercise, though not productively.

“It would be easier if we knew who did it, and why,” she said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“No, but you must have known a little about the late Reverend’s background?”

“We heard a little, of course, but not a great deal. Most of it was the usual stuff that comes on a resume. He went to college at Kenyon in Ohio, seminary at the

University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, and was ordained about 35 years ago. He had a history of resurrecting failing churches and was recommended by the Bishop for our position.”

“Why?”

“The recommendation? It seems Reverend Ross had some prior Alaskan experience, and we fit Ross’ criteria as a failing establishment.”

“Any problems getting him accepted by the congregation? Anyone seriously opposed?”

“I’m the secretary; I’m not in on all of those vestry discussions, especially the closed-door personnel ones. I know there was some concern, but I don’t know who expressed it.”

I thought that over a bit. I’d never met a secretary who didn’t know more than anyone else about what was going on. I doubted Miss Adele Hays was the exception.

“Maybe you could ask Tom,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Tom? Tom who kept Lilly for me? My atheist friend who owns the boat yard?”

“Yes,” she said, and a smile replaced her initial distracted and depressed air.

“Tom belongs to this church now?”

“Only for the past couple of years, so that would be after you had left the island.”

“And that’s how you know Lilly, and she knows you?” I asked, as I leaned my chair back on two legs in mild disbelief.

“Well,” she began, coloring just a touch, “I think that’s probably right.”

I’ll be damned. Tom Robinson, Chiniak reprobate and recluse, seduced into the arms of the church. Churches with female recruiters with similar accoutrements would probably crowd the pews on a regular basis.

“Tom was on the vestry search committee?”

“Yes, but we didn’t talk about it much.”

I suspected talking was not high on their activity list, but I didn’t fault them for that.

“I think maybe he did say something about there being some concerns about the Reverend’s activism.”

“Activism?”

“Maybe not quite the way that sounds,” she said, shaking her head.

“So, what was he? Anti-abortion? Pro gun control and fish farming?”

“No, nothing silly like that. More like him being too interested in community affairs?”

“Not the fastest road to popularity.”

“As you might well know,” she said, the first flicker of a real smile peeking through.

“Yes, indeedy.”

I dropped the chair back onto all four legs and leaned my arms on the table.

“So, what happens now? Close church pending a new, and brave, appointment?”

“No. The retired pastor from Seward will come over every couple of weeks for services. I’ll start going through the rejects and the Bishop’s office will put out another call.”

“You mentioned that this was a failing church?”

I hadn’t forgotten Ross’ comment on the ferry that his specialty was saving, or closing, marginal parishes.

“Yes,” she said. “The current financial base isn’t good. Some elderly members have passed away and there hasn’t been an influx of new members to replace them or their contributions.”

“What happens to a church that goes out of business?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” she said.

I doubted that, too.

“I appreciate your time, Adele.”

I needed to do a little digging into the church’s finances, though I didn’t have a clue as to how to go about that.

“And good luck with your renewed search, tedious as it’s apt to be.”

“God knows it was weary enough this last time. Eight months of looking that resulted in an appointment lasting just long enough to conduct one funeral service.”

“As well as providing the corpse for a second,” I added.

“Yes, but not for services here as far as I know.”

“For where then?”

“I don’t know,” Adele said.

“Maybe you could find out?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just wondered. Nosey, I guess, and you’ll be talking to the Bishop’s office and they’d likely tell you.”

“They might wonder if you called,” she said, “You haven’t changed, have you? Still butting into other peoples business?”

“True,” I said.

She considered that for a minute and, apparently, made a decision. “I’ll ask. Though I can’t imagine why, or what good it’ll do.”

“Good, and Adele? What became of Ross’ truck and his personal stuff?”

“He never had time to unpack more than a suit-

case, Ethan. The police towed the truck and I don't know where it went from here."

"Long as you're talking to the Bishop, ask what they know about any arrangements Ross had made regarding his family and the disposal of his things when he died?"

"I'll ask. Stop back in a couple of days."

"Thanks, I will."

And maybe by then, I thought, I'll know a little something about ecclesiastical property values and the fate of failed missions.



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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As usual, when I couldn't think of anything that felt productive, life devolved into "doing stuff," and there didn't seem to be any reason to abandon that habit now. Talking to Tom seemed a reasonable activity and he'd be down at his boatyard on Marine Way, saving me the necessity of another trip out to Chiniak. Of course I still felt bad about depriving him of Lilly's company but that couldn't be helped.

I parked the Zuki and Lilly loped ahead, apparently familiar with the docks. I found him next to a derelict seiner that sat rotting in the boneyard. Much whining and rubbing and scratching and petting ensued and I suppressed a pang of jealousy.

Swallowing back that childishness, I walked up to the two of them and watched as they settled into what

was likely a normal routine. Greeting ritual accomplished, Tom tossed Lilly half the doughnut he'd been breakfasting on and she retreated contentedly to a sheltered spot next to the boat.

"Appears you two had a fine time during my absence."

"Yes, we did," Tom said. "I miss her being around here during the days and again at home. She have any sisters?"

"Probably. I got her through Pets and Vets on Mill Bay. They can probably find you a cousin or two."

"I'll think about it. How's the homecoming going, Ethan?"

"Not as relaxed as I'd anticipated."

"Few things are." Tom smiled and folded his hands inside the bib of his brown canvas Carharts. Even in August it was chilly and damp.

"True. But I really hadn't expected to get dragged into a murder before my tent was pitched."

"So, you're up to your old habits. You sure you want to pick up that close to where you left off?"

"I'm damn sure I don't. This one came to me, not me to it."

"And now you're stuck with it?"

"Sorta."

"Whose fault's that?"

“Everybody else’s?” I smiled as my own hands sought shelter in my armpits, and the mist began to turn to rain.

“Not very damn likely. So, who did it?”

“I’d guess you’d be better able to answer that question than me.”

“Me? I don’t think so.” His smile dimmed a watt or two.

“I hear that Father Ross’ selection was not without opposition?”

“None of the candidates was without opposition, Ethan. Crap, every one of them had some idea or belief or position that riled one parishioner or another, sometimes all of them.”

“Who’d the good Reverend Ross bother?”

“That’s the funny part. He didn’t upset anyone as far as I know. Hell, we all managed to agree on him.”

“Isn’t that kinda surprising?”

“Yep. Especially since the Bishop was pushing pretty hard for us to select him. Usually that would have nudged us the other way.” The rain picked up and we followed Lilly’s example and cozied up against the hulk’s leeward side.

“Why the diocesan prodding?” I squatted down, hunched my shoulders, and speculated on how many BTU’s a cigarette would generate.

“I’m not sure – though that usually involves money somewhere along the line. I suppose some big contributor called in a favor, or bought one.”

I gave up the battle against temptation and lit the cigarette I’d wanted since the conversation had started.

“How many benefactors of that size does St. John’s have?”

“None that I know of. Hell, if we had any we wouldn’t have needed a fund-raising pastor, would we?”

“How long can the church last, now that Ross is dead and there’s no replacement in sight?”

“I don’t know. Adele’s talking about looking for another job pretty soon.”

I moved tighter up against the hulk as the rain increased and glanced at my watch, forgetting that I hadn’t worn one since I crossed the Canadian border. “So, you don’t really remember any specific objections to Barrett’s appointment?”

“That’s the funny part, Ethan. You know how this place is. Pretty clumped up. Fishermen stick with fishermen, school folks with school folks, Filipinos with their own community, Coasties with Coasties.”

“Yes?”

“Religion’s pretty much the same. I don’t know squat about the Moonies on the bluff, the Orthodox up

the hill, the Mormons in their, whatcha call it, tabernacle, or the Catholics up the street.”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to know diddly about the Episcopalians either, come to that.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a different story. Kind of a new one.”

“Ms. Adele?”

“Pretty much.” He blushed.

“So I gathered. But your point is?”

“Point’ll go better with some coffee, and this rain ain’t easing up none. Let’s go over to the office.”

We walked past a couple of other half-stripped out boats and into a sheet metal warehouse. Salvage, mostly fittings, anchors, engines and props, sat on the pallets we passed as we went into a small office crammed into one corner.

Tom poured coffee into stained and cracked mugs and handed me one.

“Well, thinking back, it seems like there was a little pressure from outside the congregation to pick someone else.”

“Where from, exactly?”

“I don’t know. Nobody ever talked to me. But word sort of filtered in that some of the other churches would be happier with a different choice.”

“Who? The Russian Orthodox? Mormons? Moonies?”

“No, none of them. Funny, I sort of know who it wasn’t, but not who it was.”

“No idea?”

“No. Course there’s a couple a dozen churches around town. Coulda been some of the Protestants, maybe. The Calvinists up there in the woods near the college. Or that Minnesota bunch. Wouldn’t have to have been churchgoers, either, I guess, but I still can’t think why anyone would much care one way or another.”

“I suppose it will shake out in time,” I said.

“With you doing the shaking.” Tom looked at me kind of hard. “Poking around won’t likely have you soaring in the popularity polls.”

“My rankings weren’t all that high to start with.”

Tom smiled at that and walked over to where Lilly lazed under his desk, scratched her ears, and slipped her a treat from one pocket or another.

While I watched him, I had a glimmer of an idea and I was beginning to wonder just how good Barrett Ross had been at his vocation of saving churches. Starting slowly for the door, I glanced back to see Lilly look at Tom, then at me, and make up her mind. Rising and stretching, she rubbed her head on Tom’s old

## KODIAK ISLAND

coveralls, then trotted after me. My earlier flicker of jealousy died. I doubted it would return.

“You think of anything...”

“I’ll let you know. And Ethan? You be right careful.”

“I will,” I said, as Lilly and I headed back out into the drizzle.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Later that afternoon, after a tour of the McDonald's drive through and a slow return to Abercrombie, Lilly voted for a nap. I'd have joined her except I couldn't doze when my brain was swirling aimlessly. Prospects for another evening of tossing, turning and irritating Lilly seemed good. No point in that either so I resorted to organizing my so-called investigation's gleanings, which were too paltry to irk anyone but myself.

About all I knew was that there was a dead minister and the question of whether he'd been killed because of something that happened long before he got to Kodiak, or because of something that was brewing here. I knew he'd been in places other Kodiakians came from, and that there had been both some opposi-



tion to his arrival, and some manipulation to guarantee it.

It also seemed likely that numerous people would be happier if nothing was done about his murder, Ms. Martha being the exception. I suppose I was another, but

I was being paid to care. I knew Ms. Martha was the philanthropist who'd greased his arrival and might be expected to have some continuing interest. Perhaps it was time to question her and see what might shake loose. At least it should prove entertaining. Besides, the evening's social schedule looked empty.

After I'd scraped together some dinner for Lilly, I saw my favorite berry picker lounging around her campsite across the way and decided to see if she wanted to tag along.

"Up for another visit with Ms. Martha?"

"Perhaps, though she is usually the one who does the scheduling," Sue said, with a smile.

"Yes, but she'll also have to adjust from time to time."

It took about fifteen minutes, Lilly having raised mild objections, in the form of a pout, to relinquishing her shotgun position to Sue in exchange for the Zuki's rear seat.

"Good evening, Ethan, Sue, though I don't

remember extending an invitation,” Ms. Martha said, as she answered my knock.

“You didn’t. I invited myself, and asked Sue to come along if she wanted.”

“So, is this visit an opportunity for you to report?”

She led the way to her living room, which reminded me of my maiden aunts’ - the spinster sisters Savilla, Marilla, and Clare’s - Victorian parlor, despite their wildly disparate lives.

“Sleuths are always reporting in those books I read.”

“This is more like interrogation time.”

“Does that mean I’m now a suspect?”

“Not in the murder, but in just about everything else.”

“I’m probably guilty.”

“Yes, I’d say that’s likely the case,” I agreed.

“So which of my manifest guilts are of interest at the moment? There are so many of them, you know, it’s difficult to keep track.”

Ms. Martha settled back in her chair, I sat on the footstool, and Sue and Lilly hunkered down in their preferred corner.

“What was so important about Reverend Ross that you arranged his posting to Kodiak?”

“Would you believe that I did it because he was very good looking?”

I did not buy her thoughtful look, but the underlying amusement seemed totally believable.

“No.”

“Then you would be partially wrong. He was also very intelligent, well read, pragmatic, wealthy, and only 10 years younger than I.”

“He was the answer to your personals’ ad?” I hoped I wasn’t showing all of the astonishment I felt.

“He would certainly seem to qualify as the answer to an elderly whore’s fantasies,” she agreed without a blush.

“I see,” I lied.

“I doubt you do, for all of your own past. What more do you know of my history, Ethan? Beyond the socially acceptable niceties you mentioned before?”

“Not much. You’ve been here forever. Operated a three-girl brothel during the war. Married and buried a former client. You’ve lived quietly in this house on the bay for twenty years or more.”

“That’s the outline and it’s true as far as it goes. Anything else you’re omitting?”

“The rumored child – a daughter I believe?”

A sad smile crossed Ms. Martha’s face, one of

patient weariness if I was any good at reading expressions after all of these years.

“It’s not a pretty story, Doctor.”

“My two years in California were spent working in an adolescent psychiatric hospital, Ms. Martha, and I spent twenty years in rural Alaska before that. You could hardly outdo what I’ve heard before.”

“My grandfather,” she said, her jaw hard, “had a taste for first his daughter and then for me. Do you understand what I am alluding to?”

“Yes.” I said.

“My mother ended up permanently imprisoned in a private hospital when she was fifteen, a year after my birth. Thirteen years later Grandpapa was scheduling a repeat performance while also turning his attentions to my younger cousin, Hayley.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Missing in action. She didn’t give a damn who he was diddling as long as it wasn’t her.”

I knew a lot about that attitude, and the various family permutations and combinations. The hospital had been filled with molested kids whose perpetrators crossed gender lines as well as the ethnic and economic ones.

“What did you do?”

“I knew that my fate was mapped out to parallel

my mother's. That being obvious, I collected Hayley before a suitable stud could be found and fled."

"Damn," I said.

"I had hoarded cash for a couple of years and, you can imagine, had no trouble passing for several years older than I was. Travel was easier then anyway. No one much carried about a couple of orphan sisters heading west by train."

"To?" I seemed unable to extend responses past the monosyllabic level.

"Wyoming. I had a great aunt there who'd been ostracized from the family."

"For?"

"She ratted them out, Ethan. You know what happens to the person who rats out the family."

Indeed I did. Personally and professionally.

"I delivered Hayley to her keeping. Auntie wanted me to stay too, but I was past ever letting anyone have a hold over me again, no matter how benevolent."

"So, you worked your way north."

Ms. Martha had settled back into her chair and was gazing out across the channel. A couple of seiners chugged by, low in the water and heading to off-load at the canneries' docks, and a Beaver on floats practiced a few touch and goes on the sheltered waters' surface.

"I eventually washed up here and stayed. Sue can

fill you in on those details if you don't already know them."

That reminded me that I hadn't arrived alone. A look, which Sue and Lilly both met, told me that neither were in any danger of falling asleep during the recital.

"In 1953 I had a baby and I knew I couldn't raise her here, given my history."

"Many a prominent Alaska family proudly lists the good-time-girl grandmother in the family genealogy," I said.

"Not until she's been safely dead for two generations they don't," she said, and I think I heard a chuckle too.

"There's that," I said.

"So, Ethan, baby Diana joined Hayley and Auntie in Wyoming. I haven't seen her, or them, since she was six months old and able to travel. Hayley disappeared into a proper marriage in 1963, Auntie died in 1967, and Diana, then fourteen, went to live with Hayley."

"Given what I know about families," I said, "it was decided that Diana would be better off if you were forgotten about."

"You really have been there and back again, haven't you?"

"More than once."

“The decision was as much mine as anyone else’s and I haven’t regretted it. I do sometimes wonder what she looks like and how her life is.”

“Or if she’ll ever come looking?” I said.

“I used to, though not anymore. She’s forty now and I think the time for that possibility has passed.”

I knew she was probably right so I didn’t extend the pain by suggesting that someday grandchildren might – even though it was true. People get curious about relatives who are only whispered about.

“We’re pretty far afield,” I said, “of what brought me this evening, or what you hired me for, come to that.”

“Yes. Still, it’s important to know who you are working for, I imagine.

“Back to Father Ross, who was of more immediate interest as a way of beginning to slip back into Kodiak society. I hoped that he would be charming and not mind acting as a cat’s paw for some of my intended activities.”

“You got interested again,” I said.

“I am afraid I had rather let my curiosity go into hibernation and I was distressed to realize just how out of touch I had become.”

“Might those interests include who might show gratifying attention towards a woman over seventy?” I

heard a cough cover a laugh from Sue's corner where she struggled to contain herself.

"Thank you, Ethan. I believe that you just embarrassed me and I haven't been embarrassed since about 1933. Another welcome youthful feeling I would not have anticipated."

"There's more to this story, I assume." I lit a cigarette and exhaled in the general direction of the fireplace. The smoke caught in the updraft and spiraled up the chimney.

"Yes. Kodiak has a little of everything, as you know. People from other places, a lot of cash floating around, lots of husbands out to sea most of the time. You've been in southern California, Ethan. Did you find anything in Los Angeles that you couldn't find in Kodiak?"

"No. It's just easier to find here."

"Precisely. But if I was going to have a little fun, nudge my way back into the loop, I was going to need help. Running a whorehouse was an excellent way to collect information, but that is, obviously, no longer either an interest or a possibility, so I needed to recruit an informant, if you will."

"Reverend Ross?"

"The reverend had a certain reputation for inquisitiveness in addition to his other laudable attributes."



“A trait that may have gotten him killed,” I said.

“Yes, that seems quite likely.”

I thought about Ms. Martha, Reverend Ross, and all of the possibilities for lethal interactions that Kodiak held. It wasn't a short list.

“He also had a background at least geographically similar to many of the locals,” I said.

“Yes. I thought that that might shorten the time it would take him to insinuate himself into the community, both his Midwest assignments and his previous Alaskan history. Both components seemed likely to ease his acceptance.”

“You were probably right, but they also may have greased his departure in a body bag. Perhaps someone else put your observations and expectations together, came to the same conclusions you did, and didn't like the prognosis.”

“So it would seem. Sadly, that possibility hadn't occurred to me until after the fact.”

“When I talked to him on the ferry he was expecting to meet someone. I saw him with a couple of different passengers and later, as he came off the boat, he stopped long enough to tell me that he needed to talk to me.”

“You didn't mention that before.” The sharpness in her response suggested that trying to slip something

past her would probably be a mistake, even if she appeared past her prime.

“No, and I still don’t know if it matters. However, I’m interested in a couple of local aspects where I could use your help. I imagine you still have a few contacts who have some insight into Kodiak finances?”

“Hiram Mansfield,” she said. “He was the director of the local branch of the Alaska National Bank of the North before it failed in that debacle in Fairbanks.”

“You can arrange an interview?”

Ms. Martha didn’t bother with an answer, beyond a look that again had me feeling like an errant six year old. She reached for the phone on the small four-legged carved oak stand next to her chair and dialed.

“Hiram. This is Martha. Could you favor me with a visit and some information? Would tomorrow evening be convenient? I will arrange for dinner and conversation at seven? Thank you. Good evening, Hiram.” She cradled the phone and looked back at me.

The silence was broken by Sue’s voice from the corner. “Shall I offer to cook for this dinner party?”

“If you would I’d appreciate it. It has been too long since you spoiled me with your kitchen skills.”

“Then I’ll be here about mid-afternoon for the prep. Ethan?”

“Sure.” I flicked the cigarette butt onto the hearth

and into the embers, and stood. "I'll tag along and play kitchen boy."

"Will there be anything else, Ethan?" Ms. Martha said.

"Can you get me a copy of the Tustamena's passenger list from last Thursday?"

"Of course. You can stop by the Alaska Marine Highway office tomorrow and someone will have it for you."

"Perhaps Sue could collect it?" I turned to her. "If you wouldn't mind? It'll be less apt to get noticed or connected if you go."

"It'll cost you," Sue said, and a couple of possible "payments" flashed agreeably through my mind.

I returned my attention to Ms. Martha. "So, what will you do for entertainment now that Barrett Ross is dead and you're out a recruit and up a stump, as the saying goes."

"Oh, dear no." her smile returned, broader than ever. "Now I've got you, and you are significantly more interesting than I had ever hoped the good Reverend would be. Plus there's the added benefit that you are working directly for me. That makes the arrangement so much cozier."

It was my turn to feel things I hadn't felt in awhile. Chagrin now heading that ever-growing list.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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I dropped Sue off at her campsite, received a sympathetic kiss on the cheek, and hunkered down in my chilly and mist dampened tent. I couldn't sleep. Ralphie's cop talk, Ms. Martha's offer, Lynne's Safeway snit, and Paul's confessions, never mind the allure of Dr. Sue, all swirled through the fog. Shortly before midnight I decided to quit annoying Lilly with my thrashing around. Instead, I sat on the picnic table, in what passes for Alaskan summer darkness, and wondered if there was actually any possibility that I could figure out who'd been responsible for the good Reverend's death? It didn't seem likely.

When it came to standard procedural solutions, Ralphie was properly equipped, but equally screwed. Whether the motive for the murder lay off island or on,

there was going to be a conflict between those who wanted to know, which seemed limited to Ms. Martha and maybe a few parishioners, and those who wanted things kept quiet. The latter included those with no religious affiliations to the priest, or his murder, but who might have other histories to hide.

I knew a few of the places Reverend Ross had been called to and if the answers lay there they might be accessible to the police, but not to me. I also couldn't see Ralphie asking for, or wangling, permission to spend city money traveling and exhuming pasts no one wanted dug up.

If the solutions were here then he wasn't going to get anywhere either, given Kodiak politics and the victim being an off-islander.

That left me poking around for an unpopular local solution since I had no intention of making a visit to the upper midwest. Not a lot of appeal in rattling Kodiak chains if I wanted to stay, but I'd taken the money, needed it, and I expected myself to earn it.

Lilly'd stuck her head out of the tent and I heard a soft rumbling from her throat before I saw the movement or heard the voice.

"Ethan?"

"Good evening, Lynne."

"Are you alone, Ethan?" her voice came from back

towards the pillboxes. She must have parked down at the Cry of the Wild Ram amphitheater and taken the paths up along the sea cliffs.

“Yes, except for Lilly.”

“I’m sorry about running out of the store the other day.” She moved out of the shadows and away from the trees. “I didn’t know you were back. I got frightened when, suddenly, there you were at my elbow.”

“Scared? Of me?”

“Just scared. I felt responsible when you left. Now you’re back, and I don’t know what I feel.”

“It’s past, Lynne. Over. Done. And it didn’t amount to much then.”

She’d edged around to where I could see her peripherally, and that last comment of mine had caused a flinch, as I’d intended. Maybe it had meant a little more to her than I’d thought.

“Ethan, there’s talk.”

“It’s Kodiak, Lynne, of course there’s talk.”

“Some folks are saying you’re looking to see who killed that minister.”

“Some’ might be right.”

“I’m afraid.”

I heard a whimper, not a common emanation from Mrs. Daniels. I turned to take a good, long look. She

didn't meet my gaze for a minute, but then raised her head.

"Yes, Ethan, there's all of the usual Kodiak soap opera, and, yes, I'm still in it. Other things, though, have gotten more, well, over the line?"

"How?"

"I can't say exactly. The others don't trust me as much since I was involved with you. Then it was just fun and games. Bored wives, husbands gone eleven months out of twelve. Too much money and time. Now..."

"Now?"

"I don't know, damn it, but something. You can't start poking around or God knows who or what you'll stir up." Her words didn't mean much, or tell me anything new.

Then I had one of those thoughts I get sometimes - damned if I know where from - but it was still one hell of an interesting idea.

"You were on the ferry, weren't you?"

Lynne just stared, frozen, suspended in time. "No!"

"You couldn't safely meet him anywhere on the island so you're one of the passengers he met on the crossing." Yogi Berra's *déjà vu* all over again. "I didn't see you 'cause you had one of the cabins."

“Ethan, don’t. Please?”

“You aren’t on the passenger list under your own name either, are you? What name did you travel under, Lynne? No, wait, don’t tell me. I’d rather figure it out myself. What did you tell him, Lynne? How’d you know him? Or did he know you?”

“That’s not how it was. Shit, Ethan, let it go!”

“No, dear. I don’t think so.” I took a step towards her but she backed away, retreating towards the security of the pillbox’s corners and shadows. “I still have a memory or two worth savoring of the only job interview I ever had on a ferry, or where the interviewer was half naked when I walked through her cabin door.”

I think she started to cringe, but managed to assert herself instead. “You passed the interview and got the job, didn’t you?”

“Only six hour interview I ever had,” I said, then, refusing more distraction, “and Reverend Ross? What did you offer him?”

“Nothing.” She did that thing women do when they want to lead you away from wherever you’re going: stood straighter, stuck her chest out in my direction, ran her fingers through her hair. All so natural and unselfconscious that I nearly reciprocated by sucking in my stomach. Almost, not quite.



I stuffed my memories of her back where they came from. “Why are you here, Lynne?”

“You will dig and you will find stuff. Damn it, Ethan, I know you. Just leave it alone!”

“No.”

She let out a sigh. “I knew it wasn’t any use, but I had to try. You understand that, don’t you Ethan?”

“You aren’t going to tell me about Barrett’s visit to your cabin, are you?”

“No. At least not tonight,” she said.

“I need to know what you told him, Lynne.”

“Maybe. I’ll have to think about it, Ethan.”

“Yes,” I said softly. She looked vulnerable, trembling slightly, and that unlocked memory drawer of mine opened a touch. As I watched, she looked away.

“It’s good to see you again, Lynne, though I’d have preferred different circumstances.”

She nodded, shoulders sagging and eyes down. “Me too, Ethan. I’ve missed you.”

“Maybe that evens us up a little. Still have that red dress?” I smiled and the drawer slide a little further open.

“Damn you!” But there was a smile interwoven with the words.

“I guess that means yes.”

“You’ll never know.”

She turned away from the pillbox and bunkers and almost made it out of sight, but not quite. At the edge, where the trail cut down along the bluff, she turned, pulled herself erect, and, just before she fled, stuck out her tongue.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Tuesday, August 10

Late the next morning Sue collected the manifest without difficulty and passed it on to me before heading back to camp and whatever she needed to tend to. I'd offered her a ride but she said she preferred the 1960's memories that hitchhiking the three miles conjured up. We'd arranged to meet later in the afternoon at Abercrombie and head over to Ms. Martha's for dinner prep and the meeting with ex-banker Mansfield.

I collected Lilly who'd been dozing in the Zuki's back seat and walked across the street from the ferry dock to the museum. On the porch we settled onto a visitors' bench and I considered the names the docu-

ment contained while she stretched, yawned, and went back to sleep.

The number of passengers the ferry had deposited here surprised me. I'd watched vehicles coming off that evening but there must have been a lot of foot traffic I hadn't noticed in addition to Lynne Daniels. According to the list, some eighty-three souls had disembarked before the *Tustamena* sailed west to Port Lions, Sand Point and Dutch Harbor.

I scanned the list and found Reverend Ross and myself without much difficulty. I wouldn't have been inspired by its usefulness if we'd been missing, and I hoped we weren't the only two I could easily rule out. There appeared to be a family of Kameroffs, a couple of Attunganas, and a Sakar it seemed safe to cross off. Common names in the Alaskan Native community, they weren't in the Midwest.

I also x'd out a few of the elderly from Kodiak's distant past, all only slightly senior to Ms. Martha both in chronology and tenure on the island. These included Mr. & Mrs. Harwood, Mr. and Mrs. Wiehl, and the Evans sisters.

Filipino names, which made up a third of the Kodiak phone book, but only a sixth of the manifest, seemed as unlikely as the Native ones to have any historical link to Ross. Those families' roots and ties

were still to their home islands, not the U.S. mainland. That knocked off another fifteen names.

After running down the list several times, and eliminating any others I was fairly sure of, I was left with some three-dozen possibilities. Lynne's name wasn't there, but I saw several that could have been aliases she'd acquired for the trip and I supposed I'd eventually link up the matching one.

For the rest, I was going to need help paring names down to a manageable level. And I didn't want to alert anyone on it in the process. I didn't know how I was going to do that and Lilly was getting bored, so while I mulled things over we walked to the Cy's Kodiak Sporting Goods and found her a Frisbee.

Settling into a game of fetch on the museum's lawn we burned up half an hour until I made another one of my many lousy throws. This time the Frisbee bounced off one of the whale bones that were gracefully disintegrating on the grass, skimmed along at an altitude of about three feet, and headed towards a woman sitting on the front porch steps.

I shouted a useless warning and the errant Frisbee, woman, and Lilly all met at the same moment. I subdued the momentary impulse to flee and jogged over to the spot where the colliders were untangling themselves.

“Sorry.” I offered a hand as Lilly mouthed the once low flying plastic saucer and ambled away, leaving me to mollification duties.

“Really?” she looked up with the greenest eyes framed by blond braids, and lips that seemed to be quivering with amusement. “You didn’t plan this?”

“No, though I’m flattered you think I’m that coordinated, and also capable of successful spur of the moment planning.”

She held up a petite hand. I took it, helping her to equally diminutive feet. Nothing else about her seemed small.

“Kate Parker,” she said. Relinquishing my hand she resettled herself on the edge of the porch.

“Ethan McLaren.”

“So, Mr. McLaren, what do you do when you’re not training your dog to provide social introductions?”

“Ah, er...”

“Though I don’t imagine you need your Samoyed to herd ladies where you want them very often.” The smile was still there, but so was a glint of something else. I didn’t know if I was seeing challenge – and another echo of my past. For years I had glimpsed “Olivia” in crowds and on sidewalk, in terminals and airports. Part of me was seeing her again.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Parker. I’m a little slow this morn-

ing. I apologize for my god-awful throw and Lilly's energetic reaction."

"I'd rather you called me Kate, and it's all right Mr. McLaren. I'm not hurt and I am much in favor of exuberant responses." Her smile teased.

"Thank you, Kate. And I'm Ethan. As to what do I do? Since I've just returned to the island I don't know yet."

"Ethan McLaren? Just returned? Do I know you from when you were here before?"

"I don't think so." I was quite sure I would have remembered.

"It's strange that we never met. Perhaps we can make up for that oversight."

An impatient Lilly rescued me. She trotted over, dropped the Frisbee on my foot, sat down beside me, and leaned on my leg.

"I see that your attentions are much in demand, and I won't keep you from what is apparently a pressing engagement." She stood up and smiled. "I'm usually here at lunch time on nice days, Ethan, and it's no trouble to pack a picnic for two – or even three."

She turned and strolled away without waiting for my reply. I watched her until she reached the street, turned, waved, and walked away.

Geez, McLaren, I wondered, when did you turn

into a magnet for the women you've always lusted after. Either I'd been blind, or women's tastes had changed. Maybe both.

That train of thought felt a little disloyal to Sue, and Lilly was getting restless, so I collected a takeout lunch from the nearby Subway and we drove back to Abercrombie.

Two hours later I'd bribed Lilly with half my meatball sandwich, a long walk, and another game of Frisbee. I was uselessly pondering the past days' events when I was rescued by the cute jam chick who appeared in her SUV ready to prepare the evening's dinner. I collected a change of clothes – fully intending to take advantage of our hostess's facilities – and the three of us descended on Ms. Martha's.

"Shall I peel potatoes," I asked, ten minutes later and noticeably more presentable, "prepare to carve the roast beast? Boil water and rip sheets into bandages?"

"How spiffy are your kitchen skills?" Sue's expression was as dubious as her voice.

"I was a poverty stricken male with a taste for bright well-rounded women a long time before I met you." I thought she could probably extrapolate enough information from that.

"Can I assume that that means you also bake?"

"Yes," I said.



“Then why don’t you forage for dessert possibilities and I will do the same with regard to entrees?”

“Done.” I turned and surveyed the possibilities of Ms. Martha’s kitchen. The area was about fifteen feet by twenty-five, one long side open to the living room with the work island doubling as a divider. The left wall consisted of a built-in pantry, double-door refrigerator/freezer, gas stove and counters that extended around to the triple stainless steel sink and more cabinets and countertop. We wouldn’t be fighting over prep areas.

The accumulated contents of the larder indicated that, if the house were a boat, we’d be stocked up for at least a one-year cruise. I raided various bins and drawers, assembling flour, shortening, salt, sour green apples, butter, eggs, cream cheese, sugar, cinnamon, pecans, maple syrup, and vanilla. Another foray yielded pie plates, rolling pin, and measuring cups.

“The setup would indicate that you may know what you’re doing – at least in the pie department.” Sue stopped her own collecting to assess mine. “Would I be amiss if I surmised that you like the baking itself as well as its seductive effects on various females?”

“Probably wouldn’t be good for one if I didn’t like the other.”

“I don’t suppose you have shared the secrets of your success with other men?”

My expression seemed an adequate response.

“I didn’t think so,” she said, and returned to her own preparations.

I made piecrust, enjoying the quiet afternoon companionability, while Sue prepared a standing rib roast and slid it into one of the two ovens. Ms. Martha wandered through, observed, nodded approval, started the coffee maker, and settled into her chair with a book.

Sue moved on to washing lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and mushrooms and peeling golden fleshed Alaskan potatoes. I mixed eggs, sugar, maple syrup, pecans, and vanilla for one pie and, when Sue was finished at the sink, peeled apples while cream cheese and butter softened for another.

It was almost possible to forget about Barrett Ross and the purpose of this dinner.

Hiram Mansfield arrived by taxi, promptly at seven as invited. He was short with a full head of white hair and a carefully trimmed moustache. He looked like a banker whose thick muscled hands said he’d known his way around hard labor as well as comfortable offices. He accepted a chair across from Ms. Martha along with a glass of very old single malt

scotch, no ice. The two of them reviewed the litany of whom they had outlived since they had last seen each other while Sue and I finished laying out dinner.

Conversation lagged when we got to the table. Some of it was due to the food, which was excellent, but some of it was everyone's awareness that this wasn't a purely social occasion. Eventually Sue and I cleared the table, poured coffee, collected an ashtray, and everyone elected to defer dessert until after business was concluded.

"What do you want to know?" Hiram sounded like the banker he'd been and I appreciated the professional attention he directed towards me.

"The current state of affairs of Kodiak private property and the possible worth of St. James's the Fisherman's acreage."

"You think someone may have committed murder to stop him from saving the church?"

"It's a thought."

Hiram leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs behind his suspenders. He was taking his time though I doubted he needed to think about the question.

"You know about Alaska's dearth of private property?"

"Yes," I said. "Ninety-five percent of the land is

tied up. A third's federal, a third state, and a third Native. The stake holders have changed in the past two decades, but the five percent left for development hasn't. The population has doubled in that time too."

Hiram had nodded as I'd ticked off the pertinent realities. "Well, Dr. McLaren, I assume you know that Kodiak is a microcosm of the situation statewide. Most of the island is tied up in the National Wildlife Refuge, and the city's already expanded to the limits of privately held property. All that's left is redevelopment and whatever land transfers the state or borough might process."

"When I left," I said, "the possibility of any transfers seemed remote since those who controlled the transfers were the same people who already owned land and benefited from the shortage."

"Welcome to Alaska," Mansfield said.

"So, what's the church parcel worth?"

"It's on the hillside overlooking the harbor in an area that's being redeveloped. It's above the tsunami's high water mark in the 1964 earthquake. In size, it's at least a triple lot. It's outside the post-quake Aleutian tract houses." He paused than apparently decided he'd answered my question, at least to his satisfaction.

"As is," I said, "would it bring a quarter to half a million dollars?"

“Maybe.” He nodded, keeping his attention on me. “That’s probably the right neighborhood.”

I thought that over, lit a cigarette, and considered it some more. “That doesn’t seem like enough of a reason to poison someone. Especially before it’s even been determined whether or not he’ll succeed in saving the mission.”

“Maybe,” Sue said, “there’s more than one factor involved.”

“What happened to Ross’ predecessor?” I suddenly felt stupid for not having asked that question days ago.

Hiram smiled as he unhooked his thumbs, leaned forward, “Reverend Trent never came back from some sort of church confab ten months ago.”

“Where?” I was pretty sure I knew.

“He went to Minneapolis, Dr. McLaren,” he said, leaning forward and placing his forearms on the table. “Just after the annual audit showed the church finances heading down the proverbial toilet.

“Now I think we’ve all earned dessert,” he added, smiling. “I’ll

have one piece each of the pecan and the apple cream cheese.”

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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I fetched pie and fresh coffee for everyone while mentally kicking myself for not having thought of that possible piece of pertinent history. I should have gotten some additional history from Adele and Tom, details previous to Barrett Ross's appointment. Crap.

I sat and toyed with my piece of pie while Hiram, Ms. Martha, and Sue gossiped about mutual acquaintances, Kodiak social history, current politics, and other topics that normally would have interested me. But not this evening.

Eventually the conversation died down and the elders adjourned to the living room. Sue finished clearing the table, stowing away the leftovers, and soaking the dishes.

I roused myself sufficiently to dry while she

washed and a half hour later order was restored to the kitchen.

“Ready?” she asked.

I nodded and headed for the parlor. “We’ll be going now. Thank you Mr. Mansfield for pointing out an aspect I’d overlooked.”

“You’re welcome. None of us can think of everything all of the time. Hell, Ethan – you don’t mind if I call you Ethan? – you’ve only been back a few days. Cut yourself some slack.”

“Yes, Ethan,” Ms. Martha said, “go to bed and get some sleep. You know more than you did, which, I believe, was the point of the evening. As a bonus, we all had an excellent dinner. We also now know you can bake and Hiram and I have enjoyed each other’s company for the first time in years. Tomorrow you can start in again.”

I nodded and turned towards the door where Sue was slipping on shoes and Lilly waited, her teeth clutching a beef rib. As I got to the door I turned back to the smiling couple and said, perhaps with just the smallest touch of misdirected anger, “Hiram. Can we give you a lift home?”

“Certainly,” he said, “just come by tomorrow morning. Anytime after eleven.”

Having lost that verbal sparring match, I drove

home to Abercrombie and dropped Sue off at her tent on the knoll. At site #5 Lilly'd immediately fallen asleep and I sulked. There are few things I hate worse than feeling foolish. The psychologist part of me says it's a vestige from being a smart sickly kid, the one who couldn't throw, catch, jump or run, and who was unfailingly picked last for every sport in P.E. The rest of me doesn't give a damn about "why" and just detests it.

Ms. Martha thought I was overreacting, but what else was she going to say? And even my dog had gone straight to bed when we got back – probably embarrassed.

When I start wandering that far over the self-deprecation line it's time for a distraction. Anything to reset the internal clocks, recalibrate the mental meters and gauges that are slipping away into LaLa land. Not my destination of choice.

Fortunately there was still some very old and vile coffee in the pot and maybe half a pint of cognac in the travel flask. It was gray, about 11:00 p.m. I guessed, and the clouds were scattered. It would start to drizzle before too much longer, but I thought it would hold off for a while.

I got an crumpled half-pack of smokes out of the Zuki and walked through the sleeping camp and on up



to the point. I was expecting to visit French artillery and puffins, while simultaneously imbibing depressants and antidepressants, but someone had beaten me to that idea too. Paul Arnesen was sitting under a gun barrel, smoking, and tending a thermos and a mug.

“Any objections to company?”

“No,” he said. I settled cross-legged next to him and laid out my own collection of potables. “Your coffee looks cold.”

“Yep. Coffee’s cold, cognac’s warm, cigarettes are squashed from where I sat on them. Matches are likely wet; the ground’s hard; and the company?”

“The company’s male.” He laughed. “Welcome to Kodiak, 1944.”

“What are you doing up here, Paul?” I lit a flat cigarette, inhaled, and felt my arteries contract. But the rest of me relaxed a notch.

“Feeling like an idjit.” We just sat for awhile, basking in each other’s company loving misery. “But at least my coffee’s fresh and hot. Help yourself, Ethan.”

I did, took a sip of cognac straight from the flask and offered it to Paul who accepted with an appreciative sigh.

“I’m kinda sorry ‘bout dropping all that old history on ya, the last time we were up here.”

“I wasn’t exactly kind with my response.”

“Funny, after you told me she was still here and alive, well, somehow, it didn’t seem so important anymore. Why do you suppose that is?”

“Not knowing,” I said, “no control or choice, those are the things make us crazy. That and lies.”

“I haven’t smoked since our first daughter was born.” Paul lit another unfiltered Camel, carefully placing the dead match into his pocket. “But here I am. Grace is gonna skin me alive.” His tone indicated that, just maybe, he was looking forward to that possibility.

“Location. Old habits show up when we return to wherever we acquired them, or practiced them.” I could see the remains of his earlier field-stripped smokes, tiny pills of rolled paper, shreds of tobacco and ash, all ready to be carried away on the breeze or ground under a boot heel. “It’s why geography cures – get the hell out of the environment and the feelings and behaviors may change.”

“Is that why you came back to Kodiak?”

“I came back to the last place I felt half-ways okay. I also got away from the woman who was incinerating my soul.”

A little drizzle started up but we didn’t pay any attention to it. Just kept sitting and letting our pasts and each other keep us company.

“I came to Kodiak looking to find out what

happened to Martha. You told me and that should have been the end of it. Then I met Sue and she and I got to talking about her father. Now I'm sitting here with you again and my damn history is all jumbled up."

"It'll sort itself out by the time you get home." I said that with more confidence than I felt, or had any reason to believe.

"What brings you up here tonight?" Paul's attention shifted from his muddles to my presence.

"I was looking into who might have killed that minister. The one who was on the ferry with us? Not looking too hard, but a little. Tonight I found out I missed a couple of important points. Got myself laughed at, I think. Idjit boy #2."

I could see the smile crinkling his leathery old skin and feel him trying to suppress the chuckle. He failed. First a snort, then a gasp, then a full bore laugh. Bastard was contagious. Half a minute later we were both rolling on the moss and rocks, laughing our asses off.

"We're two sorry sons-a-bitches," Paul said, as he wiped away tears with a carefully ironed and folded blue bandanna. "No doubt about it."

We both laughed some more, choked as we tried to light cigarettes, and burned our throats on the cognac

we swallowed to cure the coughing. We gave up about the same time, lay back on the moss, and waited for the giddiness to pass.

“Christ, Ethan. I feel about twelve years old. Out late sneaking smokes and brandy in the woods with my little brother.”

“I’ve spent more time in the last few days feeling six years old than I did when I was six.” And I knew it was true. “Guess I should be thankful ‘stead of resentful.”

Neither of us had anything more to add and I’d decided Paul had fallen asleep and was wondering whether to leave him or rouse him for the walk back to camp when he startled me with a question.

“So, idjit little brother, what do you do now?”

“Gather up some more marbles and get back in the game.” I surprised myself knowing the answer. “You?”

“About the same, so come on, let’s go home. We’re both too damn old to sleep in the woods.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Wednesday, August 11

**B**y morning, whatever had transpired between Paul and I had erased my depression, and anger got the upper hand. But regardless of my mood de jour I needed to do something or the blackness circling around me would settle in again, like vultures on fresh road kill.

Clearly a follow-up session with Adele was indicated. She'd been evasive and I wanted to know why.

Lilly complained but I left her zipped in the tent anyway. This wasn't going to be a social visit and I didn't want distractions or diversions.

The church was locked up tight when I got there and so was the door to the parsonage, but I could see

in through the curtained window. Adele had company. I didn't remember the man's name, but I knew he was a contractor and probably belonged to the three-quarter ton four-wheel drive pickup sitting at the curb. I decided to watch from the Zuki rather than interrupt, a decision that was rewarded when the man appeared almost immediately and drove away in the truck.

Nosey as ever, I followed out of habit without much worrying about being noticed. In small towns everyone looks familiar and so do their vehicles.

I hoped Mr. Contractor wasn't headed for Chiniak, Pasagshak, or some other dusty forty-mile cross-island jaunt. Happily he stopped at the Kodiak Borough offices on Mill Bay Road. He waited for a couple of minutes and a man in a suit and tie, unusual in Kodiak, came out of the building and climbed into the truck.

They went out to the airport where Mr. Suit got out of the truck, shook hands with the driver, and went into the terminal. The truck headed back into town and took a right turn just past the Westmark Hotel towards the marine supply store. I trailed along until he parked in the downtown lot and pulled over while he walked across to a flight of second floor access stairs.

Since I couldn't think of anything useful to do with

him, I went back to driving and returned to the church and my original plan.

The parsonage door was still locked and through the window I could see Adele looking off into space. She jumped when I knocked, ran her fingers through her hair, and came to see who was at the door.

“Ethan. I wasn’t expecting you.”

No shit Sherlock, I thought, saying, “I could use a little help Adele. A couple of questions have come up.”

“Oh, of course.” She crossed to the table and sat.

“Tell me about Father Trent.”

“Why?” Adele said.

Waiting seemed the apt response.

“Who’d you talk to, Ethan?”

“Would it matter?”

“Probably not,” she said.

I nudged her along just a bit. “How bad a shape was the church in when Trent took over – and how long ago was that?”

“It was solvent when Father arrived five years ago and still should have been when questions started to surface a year ago.”

“Who was asking?”

“A representative from the Bishop’s office came out for a couple of days worth of auditing.”

“And?”

“Nothing. The accountant, or whatever he was, went back to Anchorage and two months later Father Trent went to Minnesota. He never came back.”

“You didn’t mention any of this earlier?”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

She was lying, but I wouldn’t gain much by pointing it out. Adele inspected her nails, not meeting my gaze.

“Someone was leaving as I drove up. He looked familiar but I couldn’t place him.”

“I must have been in the bathroom and missed him. No one’s been here this morning.”

That was pushing it just a little too far. “Adele.” I said it hard enough that she jumped. “I saw the two of you sitting where we are now.”

She finally raised her eyes. “Jack Rodgers. He stopped in to see if I’d heard anything from Anchorage about either a replacement for Ross or the disposal of the property.”

“He’s a contractor isn’t he?” That was a little like calling Jimmy Hoffa a union guy.

His name had triggered memories. Jack held a monopoly on a number of construction essentials on the island – concrete, asphalt, heavy equipment – and hence the fate of every builder and project.



She nodded and it looked like that was all the answer I was going to get.

“The suit he picked up at the borough offices?”

“I don’t know.” She flinched in response to some unconscious movement on my part. “Damn it Ethan, I don’t.”

I watched her eyes widen as it occurred to her that I must have followed Jack after he left the parsonage and she corrected herself. “I think he has something to do with deeds or easements and waivers. Maybe he’s an attorney.”

“What have you heard from Anchorage?”

“Not a thing. And Doctor?” Her look was not inviting and her voice quavered. “Get out and leave me alone!”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**I**t was about noon when I came out of the parsonage and Jack Rodgers was sitting in his truck blocking my Zuki.

“Doc,” he said through his open window as I walked up.

“Mr. Rodgers? – though I’m guessing not Fred.” I stopped about an arm’s length away.

“Okay smartass, how’s about you climb in and we have us a little conversation.”

“How’s about we have it with me standing out here?”

He seemed to be thinking over the possibilities.

“Look, McLaren, I want you butting out of my business.”

“Didn’t know I’d butted in.”

“Following me around town qualifies as butting in, in my book,” he said.

Apparently he was warier than I expected – as wary as I should have been.

“We can discuss it at my office. More comfortable than standing here waiting for the rain and we can discuss it over a drink. Follow me down there?”

This was an invite I shouldn’t have had any trouble passing up, except I still didn’t know squat and here was someone offering. But what was old Jack really tendering? I guessed there was only one way to find out.

“Lead on.”

He started the truck, drove ahead fifty feet, and waited until I’d pulled up behind him.

I followed him down to the main part of town where he found a parking spot in the lot next to the Breakers Bar. I slid into another slot in a row further down and he led the way up a wet flight of stairs to an office suite above the storefronts.

The door opened into a small but expensively decorated reception area with three connecting doors leading, I supposed, to individual offices. We skirted the secretary’s vacant desk and entered the office to the right. It took up a moderately large corner with

windows on two sides that overlooked the old small boat harbor.

It was furnished in old brown leather, brass marine artifacts, and dark oak. The far wall included a small wet bar, an unmarked door, and a long purple brocade sofa. The sofa held a familiar reclining figure whose green eyes met mine with amusement.

“Good afternoon, Ethan.”

“It could be, I suppose. It’s still a little early to tell.”

Today Kate Parker wore her blond hair in a single French braid that hung down over her shoulder and across her breasts, falling to her knees. Her knees were together, and her ankles demurely crossed, but that merely heightened the effect of the calf-length black skirt, one side-seam cut from the hemline to several inches above her knees. *Deja vu* all over again.

“I seem to have won my bet, Ethan.” She swung her feet to the floor and resettled herself comfortably.

“Bet?”

“Jack thought you’d be too cautious, or frightened, to come.”

“I’d probably live longer if I was.”

“Ah, but would you have lived as well?” The smile promised something that probably translated into most any male’s idea of ‘living well.’

“The jury remains out on that aspect of my life.”

“Then let us hope that ample deliberation time will be available.” Ample was a word that had crossed my mind as well. It was difficult to believe that she could have been on the island without me ever seeing her.

“Cut the crap, Kate.” Jack Rodgers turned back from the bar with three tumblers gripped in one of his hands. “Scotch is what I’ve got so it’s what you get.”

I accepted a drink and noted that he didn’t seem to give a damn which glass I took. I hoped that meant he wasn’t serving Xanax again today.

“I want you to quit screwing around, McLaren. You’re slowing down the process of getting my new house and office built.”

“Ross died so you could build a house on the church site?”

“Fuck no. I didn’t kill nobody. Didn’t have to.”

“What were you talking to him about on the ferry?”

Jack gave me a hard look, tasted his drink, then bought some time by crossing over to the bar for a couple of ice cubes.

“No point denying it,” he said. “We were tidying up details of the sale and negotiating how long he’d have occupancy.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Paperwork would take a month or so. I told him he could have the use of the parsonage for another month. Hell, I’d be tearing down the church first anyway.”

“You didn’t think he just might pull off some last minute hail Mary and save the church?”

“He didn’t want to.”

Ross had pretty much said the same thing to me.

“He say anything about why he wanted to stay a couple of months?”

“Only that he was looking for a couple of people he maybe used to know.”

“Names?”

Jack just shook his head.

“You know who else he met on the ferry?”

“No. Don’t care either. Geez, McLaren, give it a rest. It wouldn’t do any good even if you found out who done it. Nobody gives a shit.”

“Actually, someone does.” I thought I was probably making a mistake, but it didn’t stop me. Never had.

“Who?”

“I do.”

“Don’t matter, McLaren. One nobody or twenty nobodies. Don’t make no difference. You can just butt out.”

“What do you think, Kate?”

“Nothing for now, Ethan, except Jack’s probably wrong about you being a nobody.” She stood up, eyes glistening. “Either way, I enjoy the testosterone fumes.”

I didn’t object to the estrogen filling the air either, but I kept quiet about it.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

I didn't think I'd gained much beyond a few puzzle pieces without a frame to put them in with my day's efforts. I was also developing a headache by the time I got back to the campground. I wondered if I had any aspirin anywhere.

I settled my butt on the picnic table as Lilly poked her head out of the tent long enough to see it was me and go back in. Apparently she was still pouting.

Across the campground I could see Sue walking down from her knoll-top site towards the Arnesens' Winnebago. A late afternoon break in the weather had killed the wind and random shafts of sunlight were running through the spruce as she made her way down the slope, alternately light and shadow.

As Sue disappeared around the camper I saw Paul



Arnesen's wife, Grace, come around the other side and look up towards me. I hoped I wasn't in for another traveler's true confessions visit.

But Grace wandered up to me anyway.

"Dr. McLaren?"

"Ethan, please."

"Okay, Ethan. Relax – please."

"Yes, Ma'am." I did seem to be getting a lot of orders lately. Uncharacteristically, I also seemed to be complying with them. Not that that had worked out badly so far.

"I am not here to grill you about my husband." She settled on the picnic table bench.

"No?"

"No. There is nothing about Paul that you could possibly tell me that I don't already know. At least not anything that makes any difference."

"Okay." I said, and waited.

"I really just wanted to give the two of them some time. It seemed like wandering off might be a good thing for me to do. Unhappily, I do not wander very well and, consequently, I need you to put up with me for awhile."

"There's cold coffee in the pot, if you'd like." I nodded towards the crusty looking percolator on an even nastier camp stove.

“No, thank you.” Grace wisely declined the offer, but then proceeded to surprise me. “Paul mentioned something about very good cognac?”

I fetched glasses, decided it'd probably be good for my headache, added a couple of ounces of spirits apiece, and handed one to her.

Grace nodded her thanks, took a sip. “Did Sue mention that my husband knew her father?”

“No, but Paul did.”

“That would have been the other night when the two of you were communing up at the point? Or was it commiserating?”

“Damned if I know,” I said, feeling caught in an embarrassing lapse.

“Never mind, Ethan. We'd all be better off if we had a few more of those kinds of evenings.”

“Yes, ma'am.” I smiled, and any contrition ebbed away.

Grace sipped at the rest of her cognac and went back to musing about Paul's army days.

“I'm not surprised that they knew each other. It was a small garrison here and there wasn't a lot to do.”

“Paul liked it here, didn't he?”

“Yes, though he never talked much about the people. He described the weather and the trees, the moss and ferns, the eagles and puffins, and the waiting.

He stayed behind when the others went west to Attu and Kiska.”

“He was lucky.”

“Yes. He knew it and he never pretended otherwise. I’ve always loved that about him. He never made things more or less than they were.”

We sat quietly for a bit until she handed me her empty glass.

“Thanks for the drink, Ethan. Walk me back down?”

“I don’t want to interrupt them.”

“You can’t interrupt a father and daughter. They will let us intrude or they won’t. Besides, it is a joy to see the two of them. He’s about thirty years old again, and she’s about seven. Just watching that was worth coming to Kodiak for.”

With Lilly trailing along – probably on the hunt for wild lasagna – we found the two of them comfortably reading.

“I see Grace found you,” Paul said.

“Yes. I hear you two have found someone in common.”

He and Sue exchanged smiles and, yes, I could see years dissolve. Seemed worth celebrating. “It’s Tuesday – maybe a slow night for the restaurants – dinner at the Buskin Inn - my treat?”

“Grace? You up for an evening out?” Paul said.

“Yes. I am very tired of this camper, cooking, and dishes. This may be a vacation for you, but we seem to have carried along my usual chores,” Grace said, but not with any malice.

“Sue?”

“They’ll never fit into your Zuki so I’m driving. And, yes, I’m ready for an evening out, too.”

I fed Lilly, domestic kibble she disdained, but the pasta had remained elusive, and I left her to guard camp. That didn’t please her, despite fifteen minutes of Frisbee in the campground parking lot, and she refused to budge from under the picnic table when Sue picked me up in her SUV. I’d have to remember to bring back a doggie bag for Lilly.

We collected the Arnesens for the fifteen-minute ride out to the airport. As we entered the hotel just off the terminal drive Sue said, “All these years and I’ve never been to dinner here.”

“I’m surprised,” I said.

“I just never got around to it, though no one ever asked, either.”

“Men are fools.”

“Yes, but then, so are women. Hence we have the current privilege of each other’s company.”

That would have been hard to argue, and why

would I want to?

The Arnesens had taken their time enjoying a restroom stop, always a treat after days or weeks of roughing it, but joined us a few minutes later. There was little conversation as we all concentrated on our menus. Camping has its points, but the cuisine, like the bathroom facilities, isn't usually one of them.

"Look!" Grace dropped her menu and pointed out the window by our table, "it's a bear."

The old grizzly lumbered up to the window, reared onto his hind feet, and observed us from three feet away.

"Geez," Paul said. "I sure hope that glass is strong!"

"He's been here several time over the past week," said the waitress who'd arrived to take our order. "I think he's looking to see what might be in tonight's garbage."

"I hope he isn't looking to see who might be a little slow crossing the parking lot," Sue said, as the grizzly dropped to all fours and shuffled back towards the brush and salmon stream fifty yards away.

"What'll happen to him?" Grace asked when the bear was gone and our orders had been taken.

"Hard to tell," I said. "If he doesn't create a problem he'll be left alone. If he does, he'll probably be

tranquilized and flown to a far corner of the island and released. If he comes back after that, I suppose he'll be killed."

"That'd be too bad," Paul said.

The conversation continued with references to bears, the war, and bears-during-the-war-stories. It all eventually came down to Sue's assessment. "Let's hope something entices him out of the trash barrels and back across the island where he'll be safer and so will we."

Dinner arrived, king crab for Paul and Grace, halibut for Sue and steak for me. Five seasons as a commercial fisherman in the 1970's had taken the edge off my appetite for seafood, and two years in California hadn't restored it.

I was pleased that everyone seemed happy with their choices and no one seemed inclined to disparage anyone else's taste. That was another nice change from Long Beach. I was glad to be home.

"How's the crime solving business?" Grace was looking up from her immense pile of crab shells and dabbing at the drawn butter on her lips.

"Dismal." I didn't see any reason to lie. "Not much effort and less results."

"You think it'll just get forgotten?" Paul was pushing back from his own meal's wreckage.

"That would be the Kodiak way," I said.

“Sure, but it wouldn’t be the McLaren way, would it?” Sue wore a mischievous smile, but I suspected she was also serious.

“If you don’t know who did it,” Grace said, “do you know why?”

I could only shake my head in response.

All three of my guests uttered sympathetic sounds and looked like they wished the topic hadn’t come up.

“It’s okay, folks. I don’t know what I’m doing, I don’t have any results, and my one idea about Ross’ death being related to the church property seems a little thin. Trouble is, I don’t have any other ideas.”

“What about the ferry list you had me collect?” Sue was poking through the rubble on various plates, apparently assembling a doggie bag for Lilly.

“That’s my last hope.”

“Oh?” Paul leaned forward, arms on the table, showing more interest than I felt.

“When I talked to Ross on the crossing he told me he was meeting someone on the ship, maybe a couple of someones. I saw him talking to a woman at one point and a man later in the trip.”

“You haven’t found them?”

I nodded. “I found the man, or I guess he found me. Jack Rodgers. He’s the local construction business godfather and he wants the church property.”

“So he kills the minister who’s supposed to save the place?” Grace was paying attention too.

“That’s what I thought. But he’d have gotten it quicker if Ross had stayed alive. Now he just wants me to let it alone so nothing delays his building plans any further.”

“You’re not going to do that.” I’m glad Sue’s comment was a statement, not a question. Right now I needed all the confidence I could borrow.

“No.”

“What about the woman Ross talked to?” Sue was getting more interested, hearing bits and pieces I hadn’t told her or Ms. Martha. Not that they amounted to much.

“There were two, at least. One I don’t know, thin, redhead. I’ve seen her around somewhere but I don’t remember when. The other one I used to know pretty well.”

Sue and Grace exchanged glances that said, ‘we know what pretty well means’ but I kept on anyway.

“I didn’t see her with Ross on the ship, but she stopped up to see me the other night and, like Jack Rodgers, strongly suggested I stop poking around.”

“You aren’t lettin’ up on account of her either, are you?” Paul had a smile I couldn’t interpret, but between him, Grace, and Sue I was glad I wasn’t being



investigated for anything more serious than my usual sins. At least I hoped I wasn't.

"No."

Everyone let the matter drop while we plowed through dessert, pie alamode all the way around. The conversation might have continued over coffee except Grace choked a little on her pie and that turned into a coughing spree that took awhile to subside.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. I think I'd best get back to camp and lie down."

"Don't be sorry, Grace. It's okay, and we've all had a wonderful dinner.

"Paul? Can you and Grace manage while Sue gets her car and I take care of the bill?"

Paul nodded and helped Grace up. As they headed for the lobby Sue made a beeline for the parking lot and I flagged down our waitress, paying the bill with a wad of Ms. Martha's money.

Twenty minutes later we were back at Abercrombie with Grace heading for an early bedtime. Paul waved a goodnight and Sue dropped me at #5.

"Are you up to company?" she said.

"As long as it's yours," I said.

"Give me a few minutes to park this thing," she said, "and I'll be back up.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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**W**hile waiting for Sue I retrieved the Finlandia and Kahlua from the ice chest I had behind the tent. A foray into a Blazo box of miscellany in the back of the Zuki yielded two cut crystal glasses, salvaged from California, and an ashtray made from part of a World War I artillery shell. The old gold miner on the upper Yukon who'd given it to me said he got it from Lawrence of Arabia but I didn't necessarily believe him. It was engraved with a lot of Arabic script I'd been meaning to get translated for about 20 years, but hadn't.

Sue reappeared carrying a bucket of ice she'd liberated – probably from the Arnesens'.

“Paul,” she said in response to my look. “He told me to pass along their thanks for dinner.”

“They’re more than welcome.” I put ice in the glasses while working my way up to asking for help. “Sue? You have any ideas on how I might shake some information loose?”

“Pass the vodka and I’ll see if I can come up with any.”

We sipped quietly on opposite sides of the picnic table, through half a Black Russian.

“I’m waiting.”

“I usually start talking with the second drink. Then you’ll wish you could shut me up.”

“Here.” I refilled her glass and dropped in a little more ice.

“Seems like you’re up a stump, but it also seems you probably like it there.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She gently swirled the oily brown drink in her glass. “I doubt you would volunteer for the position, but I imagine you’re pleased to find yourself there, especially if you’re able to hold someone else responsible.”

“I think the jam lady was more fun than the anthropologist.”

“Perhaps, though I doubt you’d stay interested in any woman with a single facet to her personality for very long, regardless of what that might be.”

“Some aspects are more enticing than others.” I rattled the ice cubes around in my empty glass.

“Which ones do you find most becoming?” She inhaled deeply, chest expanding provocatively.

“Brains, wit, and boobs, but the order can vary depending on what’s been most recently lacking.”

“I think I can safely say, that between Ms. Martha and I, you haven’t been deprived in the brains and wit categories.”

This conversation might have continued digressing in directions I liked if it hadn’t been interrupted. A genuine Kodiak squad car noisily climbed the hill to the campsites, lights flashing but siren, mercifully, off. A kid, one I vaguely remembered from a high school presentation some years back, plodded up to us, all starched creases, harness leather, hair grease, and acne.

“Ethan! Ralphie wants ya. Now!”

I sat and stared at him until his eyes faltered.

“I don’t much care what Ralphie wants and you are nowhere near old enough to call me Ethan.”

“Er, sorry, Mr. McLaren. But Ralphie ordered it. Said you’d come.”

“It’s Dr. McLaren. This is Dr. Dyson. We will consider requests which are appropriately and politely presented.”

“Ralphie didn’t say nothing about the jam lady.”

This time we both stared.

The kid shuffled his feet, shrugged his shoulders, stood a little straighter, removed his hat, and made another stab at it. “Dr. McLaren, Ralphie would like for you to meet him at the house out towards Anton Larson Bay.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. Just said it was important. Involved someone you knew.”

“Which house?”

“The one on the left about three quarters of the way across the island.”

I thought about the road across the island and I could only remember one house between the Coast Guard ski slopes and the Anton Larson Bay boat ramp. “The old homestead?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What do you think, Doctor?” I said.

“I don’t think we’ve gotten ourselves so deeply into either the vodka or the conversation that we can’t extract ourselves,” she said, draining her glass.

“No, I don’t suppose so. Damn it.

“Okay, Junior, radio Ralphie and tell him we’re on our way. Probably take about an hour.”

“Ralphie didn’t say nothing, anything about the, ah, Dr. Dyson,” the lad said, with a patronizing nod

that would have gotten him his shins kicked if he'd been a tad closer.

"Not his choice. It's both of us, or neither. We can always stay here and finish off the vodka, ice, and condoms."

Junior cringed and reddened. Nothing like reminding a kid about the possibilities of his parents' sex life to simmer him down.

"I'll tell him, but he don't think he's gonna like it." A minute later he was on the radio and leaving in a fishtail of mud and gravel.

It took us the full hour. We went through town, nearly out to the Coast Guard Base, then across the island. The road was narrow, potholed and made out of the dirt and the blasted rock shards that passed for gravel on Kodiak. It skirted an antenna field and the Coastie officers' nine-hole golf course. I saw a figure out of the corner of my eye as we passed the last green.

"The old bear, again." I nodded towards an opening through the roadside brush. "More than three thousand bears on the island but I've never seen one before tonight." We watched as the bear lumbered into the brush across the fairway and disappeared from view.

"After all my summers that's only my third sighting," Sue said. "Thank you."

Conversation lagged as we continued across the island, the road wending up to the summit past the Coasties' ski slope and then down the far side to the bay.

The house was pretty much as I'd remembered. Maybe a little shabbier. A small farmhouse left over from the early twentieth century cattle ranching days. It was surrounded by a lot of overgrown fields sprouting collapsed Quonset huts and ruined tractors.

Ralphie's car was parked in a weed-infested drive and he leaned on the hood finishing a cigarette. That boded ill given that Ralphie wasn't a smoker. We pulled in behind and got out.

"We're here. What's so damn important?"

"A friend of yours." He nodded towards the house.

"Inside?" I asked, pretty sure I didn't want to know.

"Yes. It isn't pretty, Ethan."

"Who?"

"It's Lynne. I thought you'd want to see. But I dunno. Maybe you should just go on back across the island and I'll finish up here?"

"Where in the house?"

"Master bedroom. In the back." We started across the yard. "Not you ma'am," he said to Sue. "There isn't any peanut butter and jelly in there."

“And being Mrs. Smucker isn’t what I do off-island.”

“Up to you.”

We climbed a couple of loose wooden steps and went across some rotting porch floorboards. The door was open and the inside was surprisingly neat and clean, a distinct contrast to the outside.

The kitchen was on the right and living room on the left. A hall straight ahead led to a bathroom with bedrooms to either side. The kitchen showed the usual appliances. Dishes and silverware were visible in a draining rack. The living room was well furnished with a sofa and chairs of a somewhat Victorian vintage, a fireplace with an unlit fire laid, and a mantel devoid of pictures.

I glanced at Ralphie.

“Left,” he said.

It was ten long steps to a door I didn’t want to open. But I went anyway.

The smell wasn’t bad yet, so she hadn’t been dead very long. A few hours at the most. The room was about equal parts Victoria’s Secret and psych hospital supply house. The red dress I remembered was slit up the middle revealing ample breasts beneath. She knelt in the middle of the bed, suspended by a rope that ran from padded leather wrist restraints to one of a pair of



ceiling mounted brass pulleys and down to an old seawater bleached wooden boat cleat bolted to the wall.

Her eyes were covered by a padded leather blindfold, and a chrome bar ran between matching leather ankle restraints holding her feet apart, and keeping her from toppling over.

I kept having flashbacks - remembering her when she hadn't been dead. Those images kept trying to overlay the present one, to bring her back to life. It wasn't working.

"I'm sorry Ethan."

"Me too, Ralphie."

"What is this, Ethan? An accident?"

"How'd you find her?"

"Dispatcher got a call, said it was urgent, needed me out here. I was glad to get out of the station and away from the damn preacher's case. Glad until I got here."

"It's probably not an accident," Sue said.

"Why not?" Ralphie asked.

"There aren't any marks indicating strangulation, and I don't see any obvious wounds. She's also a little young for a heart attack or stroke."

Sue continued a fairly close examination of Lynne's corpse. "Given the accoutrements, and

barring a tox screen, I'd vote for a variation on erotic asphyxiation. Someone closed off the carotid arteries with their thumbs with just enough pressure to send her into unconsciousness. The hold was supposed to be released at that point and she would have gotten a revival rush that coincided with her orgasm. This time someone neglected to let up on the thumb pressure. The good news is that she never knew she was being killed until after she was dead."

"She volunteered for this?"

"I don't see any signs of unwilling participation."

"Ethan?"

"Seems probable. She was way too bright and strong for this to have happened without her cooperation." I left out the rest of what I knew, or guessed.

"She liked this?"

"What's the matter, Ralphie?" I felt my fists clench. "Bondage a little outside of your bailiwick?"

He blanched a little and I relented. He hadn't caused her death.

But I was afraid I might have. She'd warned me to quit poking around. She'd been scared. But I'd kept at it.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Sue said. "Where's the doctor?"

“I hadn’t called him yet,” Ralphie said, “but I will now.”

Ralphie went to his car to radio in for Dr. Bradley, who doubled as the island’s medical examiner. I went to a nearby birch tree and threw up. Sue lit three cigarettes and distributed them.

“Some son of a bitch is going to pay for this,” I said, quietly, as the three of us regrouped, leaned against Ralphie’s car, and looked back at the lethal homestead.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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**I**t was a quiet ride back across the island and home to campsite #5. The only sound was of weeping coming from somewhere nearby. Turned out it originated from me.

The tears turned into stomach spasms, and these convulsions led to another episode of retching in the bushes. I wouldn't have blamed anyone for leaving. When the worst seemed to be ebbing, and I could sit down, I found Lilly at my feet and Sue with a cold towel against the back of my neck.

"I guess you win the 'who's toughest' contest," I said.

"I didn't love her. Hell, I didn't even know her. It makes a difference." She sat on top of the picnic table and waited.

“You’re not ‘Mrs. Smucker’ off island?”

“Not even close.”

“What would be close?”

“You know I’m an anthropologist with a specialty in deviance.”

“You mentioned that before. Translation?”

“A professional voyeur.”

“I suppose that’s one reason why we get along. Same specialty. Just that mine’s been personal where yours is professional.”

“That could be, but there are other differences.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t try to fix my research subjects. I’ve learned to confine my involvement to getting to know them. Learning what they can teach me.”

“Envious.” I meant it and at the moment I felt it too.

“It helps that I have no interest in becoming ‘involved’ with them.”

That dragged me back to the weeping stage.

“I hate this,” I said. “Hate losing another lover to death or disintegration. Hate being dragged down into that blackness.”

“Then don’t go.”

“You think it’s a goddamn choice?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“There’s other choices? You think I wouldn’t take one if it was there?”

She slid down next to me, her back to the picnic tabletop. Her hand reached up and turned my head until our eyes met. “You’re the one electing despair. Apparently your emotion of choice in dealing with loss. The security of familiar goddamn miseries. Try something else for a change.”

Her eyes held mine and probed.

“Something else?” I said.

“Christ, you damn fool, you were pissed when we left the house. Typical damn man’s reaction. Now you’ve settled into a silly woman’s fearful tears. What changed?”

An instant later her hand lashed out and caught me across the left cheek.

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her up with me as I stood. Her arms reached around my neck, her legs around my waist, and she pulled herself tightly against me.

“Anger or fear?” was her last harshly whispered question as I carried her to the tent. Inside, my teeth sank into her shoulder as my hands shredded her clothes and engulfed her breasts.

She bit back, her nails raking my back.

“Please,” someone begged. Both of us answered.

I pinned Sue's wrists to the pillow above her head as our eyes locked and her legs spread. Her thighs parted and I roughly entered, the wet smoothness and warmth enfolding me as we lunged together, until her orgasm crested in an unvoiced scream. As she gulped for breath, I let her body swallow me up. Falling forward, clinging to her.

"Hold on," I pleaded, and she hugged me against herself until I too exploded.

Several times our positions reversed themselves until I lay on my back, eyes closed.

Warmth and wetness saturated us where we joined and her hands grasped my shoulders while her nipples idly explored my chest.

"Thank you," I said.

"Death begets need," she said. "A need to push it away."

"Which is why more men get laid on the day of their mother's funeral than on their wedding day," I said.

"Probably more involved in that paradigm than we need to consider just now."

I agreed, my hands cupping her breasts and gently squeezing her nipples between my thumbs and the sides of my hands. She shuddered, hips spasming as she moaned in response until I relaxed the pressure.

“I didn’t say anything about stopping.” She squirmed agreeably, but ceased when I didn’t reply.

“You’re missing Lynne?”

“At least the memory, though that feels like I’m insulting you.”

“No offense taken and I am, after all, the beneficiary of the moment,” Sue said.

I pulled her face closer and gently kissed her.

She returned it, broke it off, our eyes met, and she said, “If outliving children is hell, outliving lovers can be purgatory.”

She kissed me, and returned to teasing herself, gently rocking, breath just barely ragged.

I partially opened one eye again, enough to see her, kneeling across me, fingers interlaced through the short graying hair behind her head, breasts uplifted, nipples dark and erect. Backlit against the tent by the first traces of dawn on a rare clear day.

“Tell me.” Sue whispered the words as she lay down on my chest while my mind’s eye drifted far away in time and distance.

“I remember, tastes and smells on a summer Yukon morning...” but I couldn’t continue.

“Even for a romantic you’re pretty pathetic.” I could hear the smile as Sue shifted her weight agreeably. Feeling braver, I looked to find her resting her



chin on her knuckles, her hands overlapping on the middle of my chest.

A malicious look accompanied another wiggle.

“I’m glad your anatomy focuses better than your mind does.”

“Focus appears to be returning.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Thursday, August 12

**M**uch later, as I lay sleepless on my back, Sue rolled next to me and moved her leg across my thigh. Her arm settled on my chest, her fingers entwined in the hair on the back of my head.

“Ethan? Are you afraid?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Angry?”

“Yes, but under control.”

“Damn. Well, I suppose I can only hope for so much.” I could hear the tease as she paused for a moment or two.

“Ethan? I suppose I could feel guilty about enjoying

the benefits of your emotions, but I'm not really that much of a hypocrite. So, about earlier? I'm kind of a scaredy cat too. That's why I've usually been more of a paid researcher - voyeur really - than participant."

"I'm not criticizing your participation."

"Nor I yours."

The quiet settled over us again as I tried to figure out just what she was telling me. I wasn't making any progress and I thought she'd fallen asleep until, lying beside me, she spoke again, very softly.

"Lover? Do you know that, to me, your anger is preferable to the fear? Quite preferable?"

"Perhaps. But I never know what to do with it."

"That's not entirely true, as you demonstrated so admirably. So. Ethan, it's time to learn what else to use it for. What would you tell a client?"

"Find an active, productive outlet."

"So?"

That led to a minute during which I rolled onto my side and draped an arm across her. She responded and spooned herself back against me as I pulled her closer and felt her nestle into my arms.

So entwined, I let my desire to simply glide into a gentle sleep compete with my need to think about finding a killer. For the moment, thoughts of the deaths

of Lynne Daniels and Barrett Ross won. But just barely.

“Now I will find out who killed them, and why.”

“Ms. Martha will be pleased.”

“Damn Ms. Martha.”

“She didn’t kill them, Ethan.”

“She set the train running down the track.” But I knew I was blaming her out of my own guilt and frustration.

“She didn’t know there was a bridge out. She didn’t do it and neither did you.”

“After I’ve found out who is responsible, I’ll quibble with you over the details,”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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I should have slept longer and felt worse. Instead, morning found me burrowed into layers of sleeping bags and an old quilt, padded by three inches of foam, and with a quietly sleeping woman tucked under my arm. Lilly dozed at my feet and I could see across her and out the tent door to where the heavy ground fog was lifting and swirling through the old growth Sitka spruce.

“You’re awake?” Sue’s sleepy voice asked.

“Very.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“If I weren’t then I couldn’t be enjoying memories of momentary minglings.”

“I might remind you,” Sue said, stretching and

suppressing a yawn, “that there wasn’t anything momentary about it.”

“Coffee?” I said.

“Yes, please.”

I dragged on a pair of jeans and my old “Ain’t No Nookie Like Chinookie” T-shirt - a sentiment I definitely did not concur with this morning - crawled out of the tent and fired up the Coleman stove. Sue followed and went barefootin’ down to the outhouse, swaying breasts almost distracting me from noticing her black anthropologist’s T-shirt’s My Life Is In Ruins phraseology.

She soon returned, pulled on her pair of jeans, and took a seat at the picnic table. Physically we found ourselves sitting about where we’d been eighteen hours earlier. Situational similarities ended there, I thought, as I poured coffee. Regression in service of the ego is what some shrinks called it. Building high-level intimacy through primal, feral, sex. Worked for me.

“Now what, Sparky?” she said.

“I think I better start unraveling this.”

“Where do you plan on beginning?”

“When I talked to Father Ross on the ferry, he walked away saying something about having an appointment. At the time I thought it was a way of gracefully ending the conversation. But then I saw him

talking to a woman I've seen before – no, I don't remember where - and later I saw him with another man who turned out to be Jack Rodgers.”

“He wasn't just indulging in another random ship-board conversation?”

“I don't think so. After we landed he stopped again to say he'd kept his appointment and needed to talk to me about it. Plus the earlier part where he asked me about Kodiak sex.”

“He did? Geez, Ethan, it's too bad you didn't know as much about the subject then as you do now.” There was that smile. It was going to take work to sustain any serious conversation.

“Too bad I didn't know as much twenty years ago, comes to that.”

“That sounds like another conversation we'll cheerfully pursue one day,” she said. I didn't doubt her.

“Another point came up after his death.” I was having trouble ponying up the last very pertinent detail, even to Sue.

“Yes?”

“He also had a clandestine meeting with Lynne on board the Tusti.”

“What?”

“She told me – not purposely – the night she came up here to dissuade me from looking into his death.”

“She’s part of your request to Ms. Martha for a copy of the manifest?”

“Partly, and my suggestion that you pick it up in order to obscure things for anyone who might be paying attention. Otherwise I’m also wondering who else might have had a ticket for that crossing.”

“There’s a lot of possibilities, aren’t there?”

I only nodded. Lots of possibilities. Maybe zero probabilities.

“While I am playing errand girl at the ferry dock, you will be...?”

“Backtracking, I guess. Adele avoided a couple of questions by saying she didn’t know. When did you ever hear a secretary admit that? Even on the rare occasions when it’s true? Maybe I’ll try and talk to Tom and see what he can add.”

“You think he’ll help?”

“Probably not – but it’s something to do while I’m thinking. Hell, Sue, I don’t know anything about crime solving. In my work, clients are supposed to come to me and I sorta listen for a fifty-minute hour, and tell them what to do. That’s it. I’m not used to paying much attention to myself.”

“Well...”



“Yeah, I know. You’ll help.” We both laughed and it felt good. For the first time in a long time.

“Tom’s probably at his boatyard down by the ferry dock.”

“We’d be ill advised to go anywhere without a shower first – unless you want to ruin my reputation as an unapproachable enigma.”

“I’ve got a roll of quarters that’ll get us each half an hour at the harbor master’s bath house.”

“It’ll get us an hour if we only use one shower,” she said.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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**W**e used up most of the quarters. I offered to drive her back to camp or over to Ms. Martha's, but she decided she preferred to walk back to camp. I watched her stroll off towards Rezanof and I headed down Marine Way to the boat yard.

"I think you better leave, Ethan," Tom said, when I stopped the Zuki, and started to open the door.

"Adele?"

"You're making trouble where there ain't no call."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Then act like it. Go back to Abercrombie and forget you ever heard of Barrett Ross."

"What about Lynne?"

Tom didn't have an answer for that.

“Goodbye, Ethan,” was all he said before disappearing behind a barnacle encrusted hull.

I hated it. Now I’d lost a good friend and a second was dead, as was a man who might have been a third.

So I sulked. Poorly. Embarrassing myself into looking for a distraction. I could have gone looking for Ralphie and asked what he’d found out, but I was damned if I’d willingly reverse roles. Eventually I might have to talk to him, but it wasn’t going to be right this minute.

Getting nowhere with that line of thought, I sat in the Zuki and tried to remember who Lynne’s friends were. That made for two disparate lists: the ones who would have known her in her usual contexts, and those who might have known her more exotic side. The former amounted to about everyone in town, and the latter devolved to my own opinions. Or, in this case, opinion, since I could only think of one person, Jan Bradford, who might know something useful and who might also talk to me.

It was short drive to Kodiak College out on Benny Benson Drive. The campus amounted to a couple of small buildings nestled back into the spruce trees at the end of a short cul de sac. I parked and walked around but it was deserted except for the ravens, a

couple of summer maintenance workers, and a receptionist. Only the ravens vocalized a welcome.

As I muttered my way back to the car her voice stopped me.

“Look what the tide washed in!”

I didn’t turn around.

“Good morning, Ethan,” she said.

“Still teaching English, Miss Bradford?”

“Certainly.”

“Still dancing topless on the bar at Tony’s?” I said, reprising an old private joke as I turned around, a smile breaking through in my voice as well as across my face.

We both laughed. “My one regret. I always wanted to be a voluptuous party girl instead of a tweedy academic, but...”

“What would all of those fishermen’s and Coasties’ wives have done without their surrogate mother/aunt/sister?”

It’s strange to see someone after a couple of years, a friend whose image you carry around, and then try to overlay that picture on the present reality. Jan had added more crinkles around her eyes and mouth, and her hair was now gray with black streaks instead of the other way around. Time had rendered her into a finely honed sixty-something woman.

“What brings you to the college, Ethan?”

“Lynne.”

“Too bad,” she said. “I’m going to miss her.”

“Lots of us are going to miss her, but someone’s going to be relieved.”

“It is complicated,” she said, nodding her head. “Had she talked to you? Since you got back?”

“Late one night out at Abercrombie.”

“Why?”

“You know about the minister who arrived on the ferry and promptly got poisoned?”

“I heard about, or read about it in the paper. What does that have to do with Lynne? Or you for that matter?”

“Lynne and I were both on the same ferry and we both talked to Reverend Ross during the crossing, though I never saw her. After he was killed Ms. Martha hired me to find out who did it.”

“Geez, Ethan, how is my favorite adopted cousin?”

“Rejuvenated.”

“Ah. That’s good to hear. Damn, I should stop and see her. But that doesn’t help you, or poor Lynne.”

“No, it doesn’t. But you’ve been here a long time and might be able to help me figure out some of the connections.”

“Ross chats with you on the boat and dies that night. Lynne talks to you up at Abercrombie and dies

in a day or two. Now you're talking to me here at the college.

"I gotta tell you, Ethan, I'm not angling to be another name on your list of deceased reasons for poking into Kodiak's private goings on."

"Barrett, that's the minister's name, asked me about sex on Kodiak."

"I can imagine what you said." Jan smiled broadly, but I didn't respond with one of my own.

"Any ideas?"

Her smile disappeared. "You know that a lot of girls take classes here at the college to fill long days with husbands out to sea."

I nodded.

"They often take my writing classes – really journaling, and actually more low level therapy than anything else."

"You read what they write," I said.

"Yes, and sometimes it can be a bit disturbing, of course. The fantasy lives can be pretty edgy, and it isn't all fantasy. Of course there's also the smattering of long-time residents who take the classes as a way to get out of the house and hang out with friends."

"Or to hang out with Aunt Jan."

"I suppose, but that seems a bit far-fetched."

It wasn't. In her turtlenecks, jeans, Bean boots and

flannel she looked like the aunt you wanted to scurry off to and confide in. And she'd have been the right choice whether she wanted to be or not.

"Lynne was one of the latter," I said.

"Yes, and Ethan? Over the years I got the sense that she started liking to play ever closer to the edges?"

"Yes, though that doesn't make her unique. Not on Kodiak or anywhere else."

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant she might have found someone who played a little too hard."

"It's been suggested that her death was accidental. I'd really like to believe it. End of story." I sighed and shook my head. "But there's too many coincidences for me."

Jan looked at me for half a minute, then nodded. "Is Lilly in the car?"

"She better be since that's where I left her."

"Come on, then. Walk me over to say hello. By then maybe I'll know what I think."

At the car I opened the door and Jan stooped down, lifted Lilly's head between her hands, thumbs rubbing her ears. "Hello, girl. Shall I help out your lesser half here?"

Lilly whimpered with pleasure, tail beating the other front seat half to death, nose reaching towards Jan's cheek.

“Oh, all right, already. What do you want, Ethan? Do you have any general ideas for me to cogitate on?”

“You’re still too young to cogitate, but I’d appreciate it if you’d think over who Lynne might have been involved with.”

“Lord, Ethan, that could be half the island, though it won’t be the ‘usual suspect’.”

“Husband?”

“Hers, like most of the fishermen, is out to sea ten months a year, including this month.”

“Lotta men off island most of the time,” I said.

“Along with way too many women who never leave,” Jan said. “Bored, restless, and with a lot of cash. No family, no history, no inhibitions; and no lack of drugs and alcohol.”

We’d been standing next to a project cabin from one of the log building classes and I sat down on a porch step.

“I figure I’m looking for someone over forty and positioned about halfway between Fredericks of Hollywood and the Marquis de Sade.”

“Over forty and under sixty?”

“Old enough to have a history with the minister...”

“. . . and young enough to still care about being found out,” she finished. “That has some possibilities.”

I dug in my pocket for a folded sheet of paper.



“Here’s a copy of the passenger list from the day he and I crossed over from Homer. You might see if anyone’s name conjures up any possible connections?”

“I’ll take a look. Ethan? Who else is nosing around?”

“Just me, with interruptions from Ralphie, and some considerable help from Dr. Dyson.”

“The jam lady?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my. That’s a very entertaining picture.” She took time to study me a little more closely. “God, Ethan, how much does she know about you?”

“She seems to know a lot about any number of people. Why?”

“She herself is a very long-running riddle.”

“She’s interesting,” I said.

“No doubt. Tell me about the tattoos.”

“Tattoos?”

“Come on, Ethan. It’s hard to imagine that you haven’t gotten at least as far as her back. Is it really covered with some weird tattoos?”

“No.” I lied. It was easier to lie than to explain. That day in the Harbor Master’s showers I’d seen blurred blue lines cross-hatching her back that made no recognizable shape or outline. I hadn’t asked, and I wasn’t going to attempt an answer.

“You’re disappointing me.”

“Another day,” I said, getting up to go.

Jan smiled. “I’ll do a little thinking. Are you staying out at Abercrombie?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t suggest a visit. That didn’t work out too well for Lynne, as you noted. And I agree we don’t want you ending up in similar circumstances.” I paused long enough to consider the possibilities. “How’s about you drop by Ms. Martha’s and she’ll get whatever you conjure up passed on to me?”

“Good. I’m way overdue to visit Martha so thanks for giving me both a nudge and an excuse. But Ethan? You be careful. Very careful.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Leaving the college and “Auntie” Jan and heading to Ms. Martha’s, it occurred to me that Ralphie hadn’t dropped in lately. Maybe he was busy, maybe he was snubbing me, or, shit, maybe he was making progress. It seemed prudent to check.

The police station was between the library and the fire station and didn’t amount to much. A couple of cars were parked in front and the bored dispatcher barely glanced up when I walked in.

“He isn’t here,” she said, returning her attention to filing her nails.

“Gotta love that small town anonymity,” I said.

“What?”

“Where is he, since he isn’t here?”

“He’s out. He described you and that’s what he

said to say if you showed up.”

“Anything else?”

“Just that he’d find you.”

She looked at me again and went back to her nails, slathering on iridescent green polish that matched the station linoleum. I was glad I wasn’t interested in impressing twenty-something girls.

I went on over to Ms. Martha’s to see if old Hiram was still louting about. He was, and the cozy couple was watching Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest*. I didn’t appear to be distracting them with my entry nor by standing behind the sofa.

“Ready for that ride home, Hiram?” I said, wondering why the hell I was feeling so damn protective and possessive of my employer, who was a lot tougher and smarter than I was.

“Maybe another time, Ethan.” He waved his free hand dismissively, the other one being securely tucked around Ms. Martha’s shoulder.

“Ethan?” Ms. Martha’s turned her full attention on me. “What’s happened?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “An old friend was killed yesterday and her death was probably a result of my nosing around Ross’s murder.”

“Who?”

“Lynne Daniels,” I said.

“I’m sorry Ethan. I knew her a little. Liked her. She wasn’t usual, even for Kodiak. Smart. Fun. Alive. What happened?”

“Someone called the police and Ralphie went cross-island to Anton Larson Bay. The old homestead? He found her trussed up there and called for me. Sue and I drove across...”

“I see,” she said. I was quite sure she did.

“Yes,” I said.

“What else?”

“That would’ve been enough, but before that my last interview with Adele got a little heated and my friendship with Tom is suffering.”

“I’m so sorry, Ethan,” she said, and looked it. “My meddling has cost you a friendship and a friend. Would it help any if you just gave it up?”

“No, it’d make it worse.”

“Yes, I suppose so. What will you do now?”

“I don’t know. Oh, I saw Jan Bradford out at the college. I asked her to think over which of Lynne’s acquaintances might know something. She said she’d come by and let you know what she figured out, if anything.”

“Thank you, Ethan.”

“Thanks?”

“Yes. You know I’ve isolated myself these past

years and I've missed the people I knew. So thank you for arranging a visit for me with a friend I haven't seen in far too long.

"If death reminds me of anything, Ethan, it's how many people I've loved and never took the trouble to see again until after it was too late."

Too many images crowded into my head, jostling for attention – including Olivia's once again. With her I hadn't thought it'd been too late, and I'd taken the trouble. But it was and always had been. You can't ever tell about your luck at the time.

"Ethan? Are you all right?"

"Sorry." I shook my head, squeezing old memories out, making way for today's. "I better be getting back."

Hiram nodded from his seat on the couch. I couldn't imagine anything I could have said in his place either.

Ms. M got up, came around and hugged me and whispered, "You be careful, Ethan. With Sue, too."

I hugged her back, stepped away, nodded, and headed out the door.

At site #5 I was greeted by the sight of Ralphie's unmarked car parked in front of my tent. I pulled in behind him, strolled up, and knocked on his window. He'd been dozing and I startled him.

"Can I take your order, sir?" I asked as he rolled

down a foggy window.

“Cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake, and fuck yourself while you’re at it, McLaren.”

He stretched, muttered, and opened the door. I backed away to the picnic table, sat and waited.

“Any progress?” he asked.

“No.” I said it with a straight face and without even lying.

We both sat there awhile and let the rain drip on us from the surrounding Sitka spruce.

“You?”

“No. Even adding Lynne’s death, I’m still gettin’ blocked.”

“Suspects?”

“Nah. Where’d I start? A minister nobody knew and a woman everyone did.”

“Really narrows it down. Pick up anything on the priest’s history?”

“Nope. Nobody’s returning phone calls. Maybe he wasn’t the most popular fella off-island either.”

It didn’t seem like any response was warranted, or expected.

“Maybe there’s one or two things you could try,” I said, “if you’re willing.”

“Would I be sitting out here in the fuckin’ rain with you if I wasn’t?”

“Who owned the house where you found Lynne?”

“Nobody and everybody.”

“Typical rural Alaska land deal?”

“Pretty much. Original owners got title to about forty acres under the Homestead Act. Then they died with no wills or kids and the place ends up ‘owned’ by about forty distant relatives in four countries on three continents.”

“And with no taxes that amount to anything,” I added, “it never gets forfeited back to the borough to be auctioned off.”

“And none of the heirs ever manage to collect enough quit claims to own it.”

I knew how that went from personal experience, having once attempted to buy an old agricultural homestead on the upper Yukon. I hadn’t even gotten as far as the first of the thirty-seven Norwegian heirs.

“So how’d Lynne end up there?”

“She’d leased it, Ethan.”

I hadn’t expected that. “How the hell’d she do that?”

“Couple of the cousins who hold a piece of the claim to the property hired a lawyer to try and make some money off the place. He leased it to Lynne for five years, she paid in advance, and still had a year left.”



I thought about how little I actually know about a lot of women I thought I'd known fairly intimately.

"That legal?" I wondered about the scope of her extracurricular activities.

"Probably not. Doubt the cousins shared with their other relatives. But who's gonna know? Cousin Roald in Oslo?"

"So she'd had it for four years."

We sat and let the rain drip down our necks for a while longer. I sat staring at the moss growing on the limbs of the old spruce and wondering for the zillionth time if it was old enough to be rooted in ash from the 1911 Katmai eruption. As usual, with everything in my life, the answer was a real firm maybe.

"Dead end," I said.

"Yep," Ralphie said. "Her funeral's tomorrow. Body came back from Anchorage last night. Closed coffin."

"Her husband?"

"Coast Guard chopper picked him up off his boat. Got back a couple a days ago."

"He doing okay?"

"Seems like. Maybe relieved. Hasn't been much of a marriage, even by Kodiak standards."

"He's not a suspect?"

"No. Minnesota farm boy turned Kodiak fisher-

man. His idea of a big night was getting off the boat and blowing a couple of grand getting drunk at the Keg.”

I remembered evenings like that. Men just off of a crabber or seiner coming into Tony’s, the Keg or the Breakers and shouting, “Six pack the bar!” Nothing done small, as six of whatever you were drinking would appear in front of you. A man could go through a lot of money as word spread and the evening lengthened, especially when the bars didn’t close.

“So,” I said, “after treating half the town’s drunks to alcoholic freefall...”

“He’d go home, turning the rest of the cash, maybe forty-five or fifty grand, over to Lynne, get laid, and then beat it back to the boat for another twelve weeks up in the donut hole.”

I’d forgotten phrases of Kodiak argot like “donut hole” for the unregulated patch of Arctic water that fell outside of U.S. and Russian jurisdiction and I mulled over other Alaskan idioms from “tundra daisies” for fifty-five gallon drums to “Outside” for the lower forty-eight states.

If someone was down at Tony’s tonight, six-packing the crowd, maybe I could get a seat. I stared at the devil’s club, growing three feet high on a thorny

stem, and waiting for the careless to walk too close. I'd spent too many years brushing up against my share.

"You said you had a couple of ideas," Ralphie said, filling the silence"

"You due for a vacation, Ralphie?"

"Christ, Ethan, I've never taken one."

"Then it's time for one, and, yes, I do have a thought."

"Great. Where am I going and who's paying?"

"Minneapolis. I'm paying."

We'd been sitting in the drizzle long enough to have each gained about four pounds in rainwater. His wool jacket was starting to get a little smelly, too. I liked it. Reminded me of the fish processor smell when I got off the ferry. Smelled like home.

Ralphie was staring at me, but I wasn't noticing.

"Shit, Ethan, I ain't been off-island in years."

"Way overdue then."

"Why?"

"There has to be something in the priest's past to connect him to someone in

Kodiak now. If we don't know his past, we can't find the links. Nobody's being helpful long distance, but it'll be harder to refuse you in person."

"You go, Ethan."

"I don't have the badge, Ralphie. It'll open doors

and people I can't get to. Besides, it sounds like your department would be pleased to have you go away for awhile." I didn't mention that I'd be pleased to have him out of my way, too. I didn't need him trampling over possibilities I wanted to cover.

Ralphie was quiet for so long that I thought he'd either fallen asleep or suffered a stroke.

"I knew a woman in Minneapolis, once," he finally said.

"Geez Louise, Ralphie, who'd a thunk it?"

"I wonder if she's still there?"

"Sometimes they are, Ralphie," I knew from bitter experience, "sometimes they are."

I could tell I'd lost him in some old memories and I let him work his way through them. They were the easiest way to get him to go. It didn't take as long as I'd expected.

"When?" was all he asked.

"You go schedule some time off. I'll make the flight and hotel arrangements."

Ralphie grinned. "What the fuck can it hurt?"

I could have given him some examples on that latter subject, but who was I to warn him after I'd just talked him onto an outbound flight?

I hadn't listened to myself two years ago, and, besides, I didn't want him changing his mind.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Ralphie was gone and I was trying to think when I looked up and saw Mrs. Arnesen coming up the hill. I hadn't seen her or husband Paul since dinner at the Buskin.

"Grace," I said. "What brings you up the hill?"

"You had a visitor while you were gone, Ethan."

"This morning?"

"Yes. Showed up awhile before you got back and she was nosing around your site. I walked up and asked if I could help her with something. She wondered if I knew when you'd be back and I told her I didn't."

"She leave a name? Message? Ask you anything?"

"No. She didn't seem inclined to ask or answer questions."

“Can you describe her?”

“Well preserved, as we’d say at home, and about fiftyish, I’d guess. Five-foot-six, a hundred seventy-five or so pounds. No kids.”

My eyes must have widened at that last comment because Grace dropped her gaze and blushed.

“How would you know that?”

“Babies, Ethan, are tough on figures, and we women can also be a little catty, I’m afraid. So it’s either no kids or lots of surgery. But her bosoms were slightly different sizes so I decided no kids was the likely answer.”

“I’ll be damned. You just happen to notice anything else?”

“She wore her long blond hair in a single French braid. Green eyes. Lotta estrogen invested in those curves.” Grace sat down at the picnic table like she planned to stay awhile, skooching herself around until she was comfortable.

“Her name’s Katherine Parker and I’ve run into her in town a couple of times. And Grace? Thanks for keeping an eye on things.”

“No trouble, Ethan. Though you might want to watch your step there.”

I must have given her a look I wasn’t aware of.

“Okay, okay. I’ll mind my own bees’ wax, but in return, will you answer a question?”

I nodded and prepared to listen.

“You really do like it here, don’t you?”

“Yes – except when I don’t – then I really don’t.”

“Paul does too. I don’t know exactly why, but he does. I couldn’t stand being this far away from my family but I don’t think it’d ever bother him.”

She looked down towards Paul and their campsite. If it’s possible to radiate liking, then that’s what she was doing. As a result, I was doubly amazed when she added, “I always thought he should have married my sister instead of me.”

How the hell was I supposed to respond to that? “Your sister?” was the best I could manage.

“Val.” Grace was nodding. “She was the adventurous one. Learned to fly in the 1930’s and ended up ferrying aircraft up here.”

“She was a whatcha call it? A WASP? Women’s Airforce Service Pilot?” I was surprised I even knew the acronym and damn sure I didn’t know anything else.

“No. Val wasn’t good about rules.” Grace smiled at whatever memories had conjured up that assessment. “WASPs had rules. Especially about what aircraft women could fly. So, she freelanced.”

I'd run out of comments, so I hastily jammed my mouth shut and listened.

"Started by hitching rides outta Fargo with pilots who flew north during the Alaska Highway and Canol Pipeline construction. Pretty soon she was flying the planes and likely doing a few other things that contributed to pilot morale." Another smile softened the words.

"Where is she, Grace?"

"I don't know. The last letter we got from her was in 1944, postmarked in Nome. She wrote that she was taking a Lockheed Electra into China. We never heard anything more."

There was a tear running down her cheek, and I handed her an old, semi-clean tissue from my pocket. "Val must have been something." Still touching her sister fifty years later – how many of us will be that fondly remembered?

"She'd have wanted it that way," Grace added, "and in the same type of plane as Amelia Earhart's last flight."

"Paul married the right sister, Grace."

"Thank you. Mostly I know that, but sometimes I forget. They both loved it up here and sometimes I think... well, sometimes I just do. Now I have to get back down to camp and cook something.



“But, Ethan? You will remember to be careful too? I like seeing you and Sue together, so you two take care of yourselves and each other. You never know how much time is left.”

Grace left me with that cheerful thought, passing Sue who was on her way up the hill.

“What are you and Grace up to?” Sue asked.

“Nothing much. She reported that I’d had a visitor. A woman.”

“I believe I also saw Ralphie come and go?”

“Yeah. I have him departing the island for a vacation within a day or two.”

“Your new occupation as travel agent?”

“If there’s any useful information off-island,” I said, “it’ll probably be in Minnesota and he’s more apt to dig it up than I am.”

“And?”

“It’ll get him out from underfoot.”

“You don’t want him solving this, do you? Even if the chances of him doing so are slim to zero?”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s personal now, and I want him gone – for his sake as well as mine. Too many bodies already and I don’t have to like him to know he’s one of the good guys, really.”

“That’s sweet - ship him out of the way for his own good. You are one hell of a guy, McLaren.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t see any reason to disagree and Sue’s answering smile indicated that she didn’t expect me to.

“Has the day yielded any other results worthy of discussion?”

I hadn’t really culled through the day’s events for omens or significance.

“I talked to an old friend, one Jan Bradford, out at the college, and she will consider who among Lynne’s friends I might want to talk to.”

“You appear to have developed a colorful social life when you were here before, given that I am acquainted with Ms. Bradford who is capable, smart, and not unattractive.”

“Sounds like the same person.”

“One might wonder why you ever left for California.”

“God knows I have, but ghosts intrude into even the best of present possibilities,” I said. “I also stopped by Martha’s and told her about Lynne.”

“She’ll also be feeling responsible,” she said.

“Yes, but she knows it won’t do any good to stop now.”

“What about the female visitor Grace encountered?”

“Katherine Parker. Lilly knocked her over at the

museum when we were playing Frisbee and I ran into her again when I was sipping scotch in Rodgers' office. Now Grace tells me she's been up here a looking for me a little while ago."

"Shall I ask you for a description or wait until I see Grace?"

"Fiftyish, long blond hair, green eyes, substantial T&A."

"You're providing more information than I'd have expected so I won't grill you over details I can get from Grace. Should I plan on shooting her on sight?"

"Probably not, assuming you're armed, which wasn't the case during that recent strip search." I couldn't help but grin over those memories. "And she's no competition if that's what you're inferring."

"Grace's opinion would be...?"

"My impression is that she didn't like her. She also suggested that you and I should be appreciative of each other."

"I have noticed that Grace is very perceptive." Sue shivered slightly. "It's seems chillier after the rain, and since I'd started getting used to the warmth of your company."

"Sorry?"

"It could have been twelve or fourteen summers

sooner, and I wish to Christ I wasn't leaving in a month. You?"

"I had a plan when I came back to Kodiak. Stay here at Abercrombie for a couple of months; get to know my dog again; lose twenty pounds; stop smoking; observe changes; avoid involvements."

"So you're about one for six in those categories." She lit two cigarettes, and exhaled a perfect smoke ring – something I'd never managed even once in twenty-five years of trying – and handed me one. "Are you starting to pile up some regrets?"

"Regrets? Not exactly. I'm pissed that I didn't get to know Father Ross; sad and angry that Lynne's dead; and sorry I've alienated Tom. But if Barrett hadn't gotten killed I wouldn't know you beyond the passing fantasy stage, or Ms. Martha at all."

"Aren't you a most lucky fella?"

"Yes. And as a result, I think you should come over here."

Sue looked at me across the table, got up, flipped her cigarette into the fire ring where my joined it, walked around the table, and stood in front of me. With me seated on the tabletop, our eyes were at the same level. Starting behind her knees, I lightly worked my hands up the back her legs to her waist, where my fingers met on her lower vertebrae. I pressed her

towards me, and she knelt on the seat between my knees.

“You, sir, are very good at distracting me.” She leaned slowly closer until our noses touched.

I could smell the cigarettes, feel the tiniest shivers in her back, see her eyes half close.

“Tell me about the faded tattoos.” My voice sounded strange, reflecting all of the tension of my exotic fantasies, her closeness, and the adrenalin surges of the past days.

“No. Not now,” she said. “Perhaps sometime before I leave the island, but first...” Her fingers wove their way through my hair as she pulled my mouth down to hers. Tongues lashed out, probed, and tasted. Teeth nipped at lips and my right hand gripped the back of her head as my left hand loosened her blue flannel shirt and worked its way inside.

“Oh God!” Her breath came in gasps as her hips began their slow thrust. “There’s been so little, Ethan. For too long.”

I pulled my head back slightly and looked to see tears streaming down her face.

“Please, no,” she whispered, pulling me to her, “don’t stop.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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I stopped. I didn't want to, but a picnic table in a public campground, seventy yards from Grace and Paul's Winnebago, was not the ideal spot for what seemed likely to unfold. I'd probably kick myself for the rest of my life but I still stopped.

Sue nestled her head on my shoulder as I massaged her back and kneaded knots out of her shoulder muscles.

"I think we need a touch more privacy, as well as a little discussion about words like no, stop, and don't."

"The traditional woman's hedge?"

"You and I are each old enough," I said, "to remember when those words usually meant maybe."

"Yes. And now they are supposed to be taken quite literally."

“Therefore...?” I released her from my embrace.

“I prefer to use them in the old sense since those are the definitions my sexual and emotional self has inculcated.” She nodded as she stood and climbed up to sit next to me on the table. “I want to be able to say the words, but I also want you to know that it is preferable for you to ignore my protestations.”

“It’d be nice to have some mutual agreement about what actually means ‘stop.’”

“Yes, I know. Is there a particular word you would suggest?”

“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious?” I said.

“An excellent choice. No doubt a left over from your days of boffing that kinky Poppins chick. But I think something different will be required for a simple island girl.”

We smiled, stared at each other, and waited.

Sue eventually broke the silence. “Strange how some topics can be uncomfortable for you and I. You’d think, either individually or together, we’d be inured to embarrassment by now.”

“Maybe it should be easy.”

“Easy? I suppose, but, oh, I see. Easy meaning, ‘so let-up already?’”

“Yes, and appropriately descriptive of our usual way of being around each other.”

“It works for me, particularly as ‘easy’ is not a request that frequently appears in our lexicon of passionate utterances. Thanks, too, for not referring to us using that detestable euphemism, relationship.”

“Welcome. Now that that is settled, Doctor, there is another topic that I would like cleared up.”

“Yes, I know, my damn illustrated back. Light this damn cigarette and I’ll try and choke my way through the mid-length version.

“I was a newly minted, 28-year-old Ph.D., and he was a 58-year-old writer with a taste for tattoos. It was 1971 and we both knew he was a father figure and neither of us gave a damn. I was ‘liberated.’ He was a Bohemian who rode a 1941 Indian straight four motorcycle.

“We conjured up the design over many long nights, and bottles of good wine, drawing it out on me and photographing it. That fall he rode out to Minnesota, for what he called his autumn leaf tour, and I had the outline work started as a surprise for his return.”

She paused and I guessed the easy part was over. I didn’t nudge. She’d get to it when she was ready. Her eyes were misting when she continued.

“He was killed on the way back. Semi ran a stop sign just outside of French Lick, Indiana. He’d been



visiting memories of jazz festivals he'd attended there in the 1950's. I buried him, the Indian, and more of myself than I realized."

"And never finished the tattoos," I said.

"When my father was killed, part of my mother died. I swore that would never happen to me. I was wrong. With Edgar's death a chunk you could have driven that semi through died, and stayed dead for a decade. I'd never known my father, but when I lost

Edgar, I lost my mentor, my lover, my friend, and the only surrogate I'd ever known. After that I didn't start or finish anything for more years than I can remember."

"I'm sorry." I wrapped an arm across her shoulders and pulled her against my side.

"The upside is I made it back and everything's a little sweeter and dearer. Over ten years dead, but alive again for ten more. Please understand, Ethan, without him and those years, I couldn't let myself have you now."

"I'll thank him when I see him."

"You'd have liked each other." She smiled, not bothering to wipe away the tears. "I'd love to see the two of you together. Be the mouse in the corner."

"Not the tattooed nude on the divan?"

“Perhaps. If I could tolerate your liking each other more than you lusted for me.”

“Hard to imagine.” I raised the back of her shirt to reveal and trace the lines. My fingertip following the blue meanderings across her vertebrae and shoulder blades, narrowed waistline and posterior swells.

“You can’t make any sense for all of your finger tracings?”

“Nope. Too amorphous even for a damn Rorschach.”

“Well, damn. I can’t remember what it was supposed to be either, and I was counting on you to tell me.”

“You have the pictures.”

“Yes, actually, I do. It surprises me that I never burned them. I think it’s because they are all I have of his work. I was the canvas: physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually, his final, unfinished, project.”

“Tell me,” I said, smoothing her shirt down over her back as I slipped down beside her.

“Fix me a drink. That should keep you busy long enough for me to compose myself and then I’ll decide whether or not to tell you any more.”

I looked at her until she looked back, then I asked, “What’ll you have?”

“There’s glasses and ice in the back of my car, but

it'll have to be your booze. All I've got is Chablis and I can't handle the connections between him, the tattoos, and wine. At least I can't manage it and talk too."

I walked over to Sue's site and found the glasses and ice without difficulty. As I was walking back Grace called out through the window of the Winnebago, "Ethan? Would you come here for a minute, please?"

Crap, I thought, damn interruptions. And just when things are becoming even more interesting. I walked around the corner of the camper, knocked at the door, opened it, and stuck my head inside just as Sue's knoll-top campsite exploded.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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“Grace?” I shouted. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. See about Sue.”

“Ethan!” I heard all of Sue’s fear and loss in that single word, and looked back to see her running down the slope. Her vision and direction were fixed on her own site where I’d just been. She hadn’t seen me start back and turn off at the Arnesens’.

“Here,” I shouted as she slowed, face crumpling, unbelieving. “We’re okay, Sue.”

“Ethan?” This time it was a question, as she dragged her eyes away from the destruction fifty yards away and focused on me.

She moved tentatively closer to me, an arm outstretched until her hand touched my arm. She hugged me to her and buried her face in my chest.

“Damn it, Ethan. I was so afraid you were gone and that I’d sent you to your death. Forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive, sweetheart.” I took her head in my hands, raising it until I could see her face. My palms covered her ears, fingers massaged her scalp, and I smiled.

“With you I’ve found something that I thought I’d buried with Edgar. Feelings I didn’t think I’d ever be able to retrieve. Paul Arnesen’s given me a piece of my father

I never had. I couldn’t bear to lose either of you after so little time.”

I held her close until we heard the approaching sirens. Someone must have heard the blast as the sound reverberated across the park and phoned it in. Paul and Grace were quiet as they followed along.

When we arrived at the edge of the destruction I stopped. “There may have been more than one charge set so let’s wait for someone who gets paid to poke around.”

A few minutes later a police car arrived, followed by a truck from the Women’s Bay Volunteer Fire Brigade. The fiftyish male who lumbered out of the car wasn’t Ralphie and he waved off the truck when it was clear that no fires had been started. Lights and siren quelled, the pumper

executed a U-turn and headed back for the fire station.

“What the hell have you been up to now, McLaren?”

“ID?” I asked knowing it would annoy the shit out of him and I wasn’t flattered by his recognition.

“Who’d you get killed this time?”

“No one, Mr. Wannamaker. Not even minor injuries. But you better get up there before the trail grows cold.”

“The only ‘trail’ anyone’s interested in is yours leading out.” He pulled out a cigar case, removed one, moistened it, bit off the tip, and lit it. “You’ve got twenty-four hours to clean up the mess before I cite you for littering and send the city boys to haul the wreckage to the dump.”

“Good to know that Kodiak’s standards for police work haven’t eroded during my absence.”

“You seem to be a trifle slow in the head, McLaren. Anyone with any sense would’a got the message by now.” He turned towards Sue. “Lady, get off the fucking island before this creep gets you killed – or worse.”

That said, he climbed back into his car, gunned the idling motor, and left in a hail of spruce needles and gravel.

“Christ,” Paul said, as Grace stood, speechless and ashen.

“I don’t think he likes you,” Sue said.

“I certainly hope not, otherwise I might feel bad about what he told us.”

“I missed something?” Sue asked.

“Nothing that you could have known.”

“So spit it out before that Cheshire grin splits your face.”

“Chief Wannamaker likes cigars, and the ones he’s currently enjoying were Barrett Ross’s; so was the case he took it from.”

The three of them were chewing on that bit of news when Ralphie drove up in his unmarked car.

“Looks like I’m making a timely visit.” He nodded towards the remains of Sue’s campsite. “You two’s passions getting a little out of hand?”

“Funny. You can go look around since it’s what you get paid for. We’ll stay here in case we have to notify your next of kin.”

Ralphie parked and walked on up. We watched him poking around the remains of Sue’s SUV and flattened tent, using his government-issue pen to prod through the debris, though it looked to me like a shovel, or a backhoe, would have been better suited to the task.

After a few minutes he looked down at us, shrugged, and walked back.

“Vehicle’s dead. Looks like the bomb was on the transmission or transfer case and blew out from under, sorta, towards the tent. Force would have turned you into pâté whether you were in the car, the tent, or at the table. You’ll be picking stuff up all the way out to the bluff.”

“Better than you picking up parts of us from the same vicinity.”

“Probably.” He walked to his car and I could hear that he was on the radio. I also caught the crackle of the dispatcher’s replies.

He returned, but he looked annoyed. “I hear I’m not the first one on the scene.”

“No,” Sue said, “you had a predecessor, though hardly your superior.”

“I’m sure you communicated that impression to the Chief?”

“It would have been difficult not to.”

“Yeah, well, in that case, I’m glad I’m leaving – assuming the offer still stands, Ethan?”

“It does. I’ll meet you here about noon with the tickets and details.”

“Do you two have someplace safe you can go?”

“There’s always the Westmark.”



“Then go. I’ll do a little work here, take some pictures. See you in the morning.”

I knew he was right, but I still hated being herded off to a hotel. I’d have balked, but Sue intervened.

“Come on, Ethan. We’ve got things to attend to.”

“Paul? Grace?” They’d been quietly standing by through all of this. “Ralphie’ll check the camper before he leaves.”

“Just go,” they said, in unison. “We’ll be fine. We’ll wait for Ralphie to look things over. Go take care of yourselves.”

I nodded. Sue and I, with Lilly trailing along, walked to the Zuki and two minutes later we were headed down the hill and out of the park.

“Tomorrow,” Sue said, as I turned towards town, “will be a better day.”

“It damn well better be. We won’t survive a worse one.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Friday, August 13

Last evening, after the blast, I'd called Ms. Martha to report. Then I'd parted with enough of her cash to get us a room on the Westmark's first floor and off the rear parking lot. Sue'd smuggled Lilly inside and we foraged for a few necessities, showered, eaten, and settled in with Lilly occupying enough of the bed to discourage romantic pursuits.

This morning found us at Ms. Martha's. She had pulled a few of her apparently endless supply of strings and Ralphie's tickets and reservations had arrived. An Alaska Airlines pilot had personally dropped them off at her place where I collected them. Sue stayed to give an update on the previous day's

highlights and Lilly found a corner to curl up in. I returned to Abercrombie and waited for Ralphie to show up.

An hour later he emerged from his car. "Ethan? You doing okay?"

"I've been worse. Not too long ago, either."

"You know ya have to be careful? I mean even more careful?"

"The Chief isn't going to be looking out for my well being?"

Ralphie gave me a long dour look, the sort you might get from someone who'd just heard you had three months to live. Part of it was feeling sorry for me. The other part was being glad it was me and not him with the reduced life expectancy.

"The Chief didn't get to that position by looking out for tourists and trouble makers, but I guess that isn't news."

"I know, Ralphie, and thanks. I'll be as careful as I can. So will Sue. Any other problems?"

"I don't know what to pack. Shit, I don't even know how to pack."

"Time you learned, but someone else will have to teach you. You call that woman in Minneapolis yet?"

"No." He stared at his feet. "I'm scared."

"Most men, and all women, would tell you to call

first. I don't think so. Call after you're there. Don't give her a lot of time to think."

"Thanks, Ethan. I'll wait til I get out there. I'm too nervous to try and get her on the phone anyway."

"Here's most of what you're apt to need." I handed him an envelope with flights and confirmation numbers, addresses, a couple of names and phone numbers. Then I added a second, bulky envelope to the first.

"What's this?"

"Wouldn't know. It fell out of your pocket when you got out of your car."

"In that case, I better put it back." He eyed me carefully as he slipped the second envelope with my and Ms. Martha's thirty-five hundred in cash into his pocket. "How am I going to get ahold of you?"

"Call Ms. Martha and she'll find me. Number's on the list I gave you."

I could almost hear the gears mesh and the pins drop.

"That's who's got the muscle? Christ, Ethan, you're moving in different circles than you used to. A whole 'nother set."

We just looked at each other for a minute. "She pays the bills," I finally said.

That seemed to be enough of that topic, at least it

was for me, so I diverted us both. “Ralphie? How many people from the ferry did you talk to besides me?”

“Couple a dozen anyway, maybe thirty or so altogether. Why?”

“Anybody interesting?”

“Shit no, Ethan. You were the only one who even admitted knowing who I was asking about.”

“Anybody strike you as worth a follow-up?”

“No,” he said, “though there were a few we never found. Woman named Crowley out in Chiniak somewhere, and a rinky-dink minister this side of Dark Lake. Name of

Dale, I think.”

Ah, Brother Dale, I thought, but didn’t say. “Anyone else come to mind?”

“I was just startin’ to think about Lynne’s friends, but never got around to talking to any of them.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to a few folks and see what washes up.”

Ralphie stood there staring for another minute, but there wasn’t anything left to say. Finally he turned and walked away. From the safety of his car, he nodded and drove back to town.

As I headed back to Ms. Martha’s I felt some relief. Ralphie’d be off island and might even dredge up something useful. At worst, I wouldn’t have him

nosing around. With him gone, maybe a few other people would relax a little too. They probably wouldn't relax into total stupidity, but I could always hope. He'd also be one less potential victim to worry about.

"Ms. Martha wishes to confer," Sue said, when she opened the door to my knock. "Apparently her sources have yielded some opinions about various names."

She led me back inside where I deposited my shoes and we sock-footed our way into the living room where our hostess was already ensconced in her spot by the fire. I looked over to see Sue settling into her usual corner, apparently getting comfortable to enjoy whatever show she was expecting us to put on. Lilly lay down beside her and rested her head in her lap.

"Missing anything besides a large popcorn and bottle of soda?" I asked.

"Not with Lilly here to provide warm, furry, undemanding company. And I'm looking forward to watching you earn your keep in more traditional ways than I've observed to date."

Ms. Martha, probably wisely, ignored us both.

I directed my next comment directly to Ms. Martha.

"I need for you to know, that looking has become

totally personal. Whether or not you're paying me won't make any difference."

"Thank you." She looked up at me and nodded. "I'm sorry this has turned out to be so emotionally costly you. I never anticipated it. Still, I'm glad to know that you will not be renegeing. Do you need additional cash?"

"No. I gave Ralphie enough to keep him off island for a long time, but there's plenty left and my expenses are minimal. For now I'll be tracking down names from the manifest."

"Speaking of which, Jan from the college dropped by and we had an excellent, if somewhat, malicious conversation." Ms. Martha nearly rubbed her hands together in appreciation. "I've always liked her and hadn't seen her in years. It was very enjoyable."

"And?"

"She mentioned two of Lynne's friends, a Kendra Hamm and a Jeanie Taft who she thought might be helpful. Another, Toni Mueller, could probably offer some insight. Jan said to be careful with her. Other than those, she didn't have any other possibilities to offer."

"Thank you. I'll see what they may know. I've also got some names from Ralphie."

"It's time for my afternoon nap and you two have

been roughing it enough. Sue, take Ethan down to the lower level, to the suite overlooking the bay. It's been prepared, I think. At least I sent the Filipino cleaning girls down to tidy up and they came back all atwitter. Who knows?"

Sue smiled and held out a hand and I walked over and levered her to her feet. She crossed over to our elderly hostess, leaned down, and gave her a hug. What the hell, so did I.

A glance at Lilly showed her to be settling more firmly into her corner, back against the wall, and displaying no interest in moving. Suited me. Three to a bed was not my usual preference, even if I loved both of them.

Sue led the descent along a steep staircase that dropped us about a level and a half. It ended in an eight-foot square anteroom with doors on each of three walls. She led the way to the middle door, turned the key that protruded from the lock, pushed, and entered as the massive oak door swung easily on well oiled iron hinges.

"Christ!"

"Welcome to the guest house," Sue said, laughing. "God, wouldn't you love to have this room at home?"

The room, square, thirty feet across, was paneled in mahogany. The floors were oak and the ceiling was



cream colored, textured plaster. The impression was of a captain's massive stateroom.

"Ms. Martha once told me that she and the captain hauled out a half dozen ships down at the breaker's yard to get the lumber, fittings, and other materials for this house and the various rooms."

"There's more?"

"Yes, though I've never seen it all. Even after all of these years of visits there are parts that she lets no one into. Wouldn't you love to see what she keeps locked away if this is an example of what she shows?"

It was both nautical and massive. Block and tackle sets festooned walls. Anchors leaned in corners. Unlit candles stood ready throughout the room in wall sconces and candelabra.

"I wonder what else she's stashed in here?"

"We can look if you like. Ms. Martha doesn't mind explorations once she's decided to open something up. It's the uninvited intruding she won't abide." Sue crossed over to an oak bureau.

I joined her and we looked through trays of necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, some of it old enough to have been leftovers from Martha's earlier vocation.

We poked around the room finding one closet full of dresses and blouses in a variety of styles and another

of men's clothes that must have been hanging there since Captain Larson died.

Sue eventually tired of poking and sat down on the bed. "What do you think?"

"Great room."

"And?"

"Look at me, please?" It was an unnecessary request since she already was, but I needed to be sure.

"I need the eye contact, to see you, to be seen. I do not want either of us hiding, or being hidden."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, lover – and I believe that's what we're growing to be – I am absolutely serious."

"You're sure you're ready?"

"No." I shook my head. I wasn't going to start lying now. "I'm not sure about anything, except you feel very real, and so do I, when you're around."

Our eyes met as she began unbuttoning her shirt and my left hand moved behind her head, fingers closing in her hair, my right hand pulling at my own buttons and belt buckle.

Somehow clothes disappeared, blankets got turned back, pillows were strewn, and Sue ended up on her back, my left hand pinioning her wrists above her head as my right explored, caressed, intruded.

Her eyes closed and her back arched as a moan

escaped her lips. Her hips thrust spasmodically and, with another increment of pressure, her legs thrust hard against the mattress as she gasped.

“Requests?” I said, relaxing as Sue to melted back against the sheets.

“Only the one I have made on previous occasions - don’t stop.” She drew a deep breath as if she was about to sink into the deep end of a warm, dark, welcoming, and unfamiliar pool. Maybe that wasn’t too far from the reality.

I complied with Sue’s ‘don’t stop’ request. Sorta. Rolling onto her as she opened herself in welcome, I again grasped her wrists, stretched her arms above her head, pinned her arms with my forearms, and waited until she opened her eyes.

“I want you.” I couldn’t remember when I’d meant those words more.

“Then take me.”

We were good, not nice. Rough, not easy. I stepped outside of myself just long enough to reflect that it would be a long time before the bite marks disappeared from her shoulders and the scratches healed on my back.

Then I heard her. “Please.”

“Oh, God.” I groaned as she clung to me.

Minutes later we lay gasping and shuddering

through a whole catalogue of spasms. Our arms binding us together as the continuous ripples of release – hers, mine, ours – consumed us until we relaxed, exhausted, back into each other’s welcoming embrace.

“Hold me, please.” Sue’s voice was very soft and gentle as tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

I rolled carefully to the side and enfolded her against my chest, our legs comfortably entangled.

“Thank you, lover. Oh, Ethan...”

It was the last thing I heard as I whispered, “and the same to thee, Li’l Dyson.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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I awoke alone, momentarily disoriented, and sprawled in the middle of the massive bed with nothing but the quiet for company. Memory quickly flooded back and I indulged in a bit of congratulatory self-satisfaction. Always a mistake.

“Master awakes?” Sue asked as she came through the door. “Geez, can’t get them to settle down til they get laid, then you can’t get them to do anything but sleep.” But she was smiling as she crossed over to the bed, sat beside me, and ran a hand over my stomach and chest.

“Thank you, Ethan.”

“And you. It’s been too long.”

Neither of us seemed inclined to argue with that.

“I hate changing the subject, but Ms. Martha has a suggestion.”

“Ménage a trois?”

“Only in your dreams. She thinks we should salvage whatever’s left of my stuff, pack yours, and move in here for the duration.”

“If we do that we may never leave.” It was the most attractive thought I’d had in months.

Sue nodded. “‘Together’ - it’s another risk I’m probably long overdue for taking.” I hadn’t expected her to take my comment seriously, but I didn’t object either.

“Did our hostess issue any other directives?”

“Only that she’d meet us up at Abercrombie in an hour.”

“Likes getting her own way, doesn’t she?” Herded again, but I’d probably keep moving, and smiling, all the way to the slaughterhouse.

“So do you and I, except when I decide to let you be in charge,” she said.

“Since you decide, doesn’t that actually mean...?”

“Probably, I’ll let you know when I decide the answer to that question too.” I like the smile that accompanied that bit of riddling non-answer.

“So, may I now get dressed?” I said. “We have an appointment with Ms. Martha – or so you say.”

“Yes, but Ethan? Don’t let the afternoon’s activities go to your head. I’ve resurfaced, I’m back in control, and I can always shove you under if necessary.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Anything you say, Ma’am.” Good to be smiling again on a semi-regular basis.

In half an hour we were on our way to Abercrombie.

We found Ms. Martha enthroned at a picnic table, while three women picked, sorted, and bagged whatever was left of Sue’s belongings. Across the way two others were packing up my things at Site #5 and loading an old black Mercedes sedan. I still thought it should’ve been a Packard, but I guess I can’t have everything.

Paul and Grace’s Winnebago was there, locked, but they weren’t. I was relieved; I wasn’t near ready to referee a reunion between Paul and Ms. Martha with Grace in attendance.

Sue headed up to the remains of her camp and I parked the Zuki, walked across to the table and sat down across from Ms. Martha.

“I haven’t been here in over forty years, Ethan. After the war there wasn’t any reason to visit anymore. It was just crumbling concrete and rotting wood and emptiness. Then for thirty years I was busy. The business and, later, the Captain and a different life. By the

time all of that was over, I'd forgotten all about this place."

I lit a cigarette and when she nodded at me I lit one for her as well.

"Cigarettes. I could always take them or leave them. They do stir up memories just like sitting here does. That old pillbox behind you?" She laughed so hard that she choked. "Oh, my. The things we did in there." Tears ran down her face and the smile and the blurring of smoke gave me just a momentary glimpse of Madam Martha Marie at age twenty-five. She'd have been stunning in that role as she was now in this one.

"Who would have thought that I'd live to be over seventy, and be sitting here forty years later wondering whatever happened to all of those poor, frightened boys who came to Kodiak and became men?"

"I would." I decided to keep my thoughts of Paul Arnesen to myself.

"I suppose." She stubbed out the cigarette. "But you are a damned idiotic romantic."

"Appears I am in good company." We turned to watch Sue coming down the hill towards us.

"I see you two are comfortable."

Ms. Martha and I nodded our cheerful agreement.



“What’s the prognosis?” I asked Sue.

“Not much is left that’s salvageable, but I can replace most of it from things I have in storage. The SUV’s a total loss of course, but it was on its last legs anyway.”

“Maybe we should go and dig out your spares? Can you and your elves finish up here?” I asked Ms. Martha.

“Oh, yes. They’ll take care of the winnowing, packing, and sorting and I’ll see to it that the ghosts are entertained.”

They aren’t all ghosts yet, I thought.

I looked at Sue who nodded back. We climbed into the Zuki and coasted quietly away. It seemed somehow sacrilegious to interrupt her reveries with engine noise.

A half-mile past the park entrance we stopped at the island mini-storage and Sue directed me to her small rental unit. Roughly four feet wide by eight feet deep and eight feet high it was an efficiently packed walk-in closet for the transient or homeless. Sue qualified in either category, her tent and SUV were both toast.

“It’ll just take a couple of minutes. All of this is organized so I only need a couple of boxes.” She pointed to one, then another, and then hefted a Blazo

box with a hinged and padlocked lid. I collected the first two as she carefully carried out the third. With the boxes stowed in the back of the Zuki, Sue relocked the unit and we drove slowly back towards Ms. Martha's B&B – or so it had become to us.

“And for an encore...?”

“How about some actual sleep?” Sue sounded like she shared my ambivalence as well as my tiredness. Tough not to try for an encore. But it would have to wait.

“I'd guess that would be the best prescription. Tomorrow may be busy.”

“You have plans?”

“Yes. I need to make a call or two and see Adele again.” I'd have continued the list of errands and interviews except I heard the brief warning of a siren and saw some accompanying flashing red lights. My rearview mirror told me it was a State Trooper, not a city cop, and I decided I was in for my first round of being harassed about my California license plates.

I rolled down the window and prepared to be appropriately surly.

“Hello, Ethan.” I knew the voice, but couldn't place it. It took a long look and the rewinding of a lot of years to identify the man. All the way back to my first month in Alaska.

“Virgil Morgan,” I said. “Damn, Virg, how’d an attorney for the Alaska Federation of Natives turn into a State Trooper. And what the hell are you doing on Kodiak?”

“A lot of years, miles, and mistakes. How about you?”

“About the same.” I hoped his mistakes hadn’t been as painful as mine. “This about the California license plates?”

“No, Ethan. I heard you were poking around and I was wondering if you might need some help?”

There was an unlikely notion. There’d been years when I’d have welcomed a Trooper’s help, but they rarely showed up back then. And when they did it usually resulted in worse messes being created than cleaned up.

“Why would I need police assistance?”

“A minister you’ve just met gets poisoned; your friend Lynne’s dead, and it wasn’t because she didn’t play nice. Your friend’s car and campsite are all blown to scrap meat. Geez, Ethan, I don’t know. What the hell would you need help with?”

“I’ve met Wannamaker and I remember the sort of help Troopers tend to give. I’m not overly confident I can afford official assistance.” I wished I hadn’t meant it.

“I wasn’t offering police help, Ethan. I was offering mine.”

That, I admitted to myself, made a difference.

“I could maybe use a hand with a detail or two, But, Virg? I won’t tolerate being jerked around.”

“Apparently I still have a little more faith in you than you do in me, but, then, you aren’t the one wearing a uniform. That’d probably put me off, too.” He said it with a little crooked smile I remembered from long gone days.

“I’ve got some names and I could use locations. I also want to know what happened to Ross’ truck and the other things he brought to the island. And I don’t want you doing anything more than mapping exercises unless I turn up dead.”

“I should have all of that by tomorrow morning and you can pick up the details at the office.”

I scribbled out a list of names and handed it to Virgil who nodded, got back into his Trooper-mobile, and killed the flashing lights.

I sat with my thoughts of twenty years past until Sue interrupted. “You neglected the introductions.”

“Seeing him was a surprise, and I’m still kinda pissy about some of those early years. Him showing up pulled me back. Sorry I was rude.”

“Apology accepted, and unnecessary. I usually

## KODIAK ISLAND

don't talk about Edgar and the tattoos, you don't have to explain Virgil, or anyone else for that matter."

"Another day." I restarted the Zuki, and pulled away. Virgil watched us till we were out of sight. What he did after that I couldn't say.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Saturday, August 14

I awoke early and left Sue snoring lightly. Or maybe the sounds were coming from Lilly, who'd slipped into the room and onto the bed sometime during the night. Wedging herself between us, she reminded me of my first Alaskan winter and my dog Kiana.

The cabin I'd built was small and the wood stove would go out at night. Kiana would begin the night asleep on the floor at the end of my bed. As the cabin cooled she'd move to the foot of the bed, then to a position on the bed, between the outside wall and my back. When the temperature inside continued dropping below her liking she would brace her back against the wall, put her paws against my back, and shove me out

of bed. At that point I'd refill and light the stove and fight with her over who owned the warm spot I'd just vacated.

Too damn many empty years, I thought, as I quietly left the room, climbed the stairs, and found a coffee maker ready to go. I pushed the switch, set out sugar and creamer beside a cup, and took a seat at the table.

Ms. Martha wandered out just as the coffee finished perking. I looked up at her and she nodded, so I fixed two cups and brought them to the table where she joined me.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. I had no idea what I was stirring up when I had Father Ross assigned to the island. Damn, I still don't know what ant hill I poked a stick into." Her eyes were red and she looked ready to cry. I wasn't up to dealing with her tears in addition to everything else that clamored for my attention.

"You didn't do it, but if it makes you feel better, I kick myself too, for getting Lynne and Sue involved."

We sat quietly. Long enough for the coffee to cool.

"I need to talk to the Bishop," I said, "about Reverend Trent's abrupt departure from Kodiak, the status of the church, Ross's arrival, and the likely disposal of his stuff."

“I have his private number. Do you want to talk to him now?”

“Not much point in waiting.” She went to the phone and dialed.

“Good morning, Father, it’s Martha on Kodiak.” I didn’t catch the next couple of phrases, but I heard “Here’s Dr. McLaren.”

“Thank you for talking to me, Father. I could use some answers.”

“I imagine you could, Doctor. God knows I could as well. What matters are you particularly interested in?”

“What’s the current status of the church, now that Barrett’s dead?”

“It’ll be sold.” I thought I heard regret in his voice. “Please be aware, that was always the plan.”

“I thought that was Ross’ decision? At least he told me that he went to mission churches, evaluated them, made a decision as to their viability, and left when they were either rescued or pronounced dead?”

“Normally that was the case. This time, however, the decision had been made and he was merely ratifying it and tidying up the details.”

“Tidy isn’t the first word that comes to mind.”

“No.” I think I could hear sorrow or regret. Maybe



both. "I would be quite appreciative if you could see about rectifying that."

"I can't sweep it under the rug and doubt any other solution will be neat."

"Dr. McLaren, I am unfortunately familiar with Kodiak's methods and standards of justice. I want Father Ross' murder solved and the culprits punished. I do not have any expectations that the island's authorities will accomplish either of those ends."

"Killing him didn't speed up the process for someone who wanted the property?"

"Quite the contrary, Doctor. It has delayed it for several months."

"Crap." I thought I'd said it to myself, but apparently not.

"Precisely. Freeing up the property for sale will not suffice as a motive."

"From my brief conversations with Barrett on the ferry, it appears that he may have known someone on the island. Do you know who that might be?"

"No. I know he was anxious to go to Kodiak even though it wasn't his usual duty to dispose of property. Your employer Miss Marie was also, ah, persuasive about his assignment."

"Yes." I said. "But she didn't know him."

“I’m afraid I don’t have any knowledge of any connections he might have had there. What else can I do to help?”

“He had his Studebaker loaded when he drove off the ferry. Since then I haven’t seen either the truck or the contents. Adele, St. James’ secretary, says she doesn’t know where his things got to. Could you find out?”

“I can probably inquire and get an answer, even on Kodiak. Shall I do that and forward the information to Miss Marie?”

“Yes,” I said. “Please. And, Father, need I bother asking about Father Trent and his departure?”

“I doubt it. He got himself into an unrelated mess from which I reluctantly extricated him. He will be doing penance for the foreseeable future.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I agreed with the ‘unrelated’ aspect. Little on Kodiak failed to fit into some larger frame, but it seemed pointless to insist on details.

“Thank you. That’s about it for now.”

“You will let me know what you ascertain?”

“If I come to any conclusions, and if I act on those, I will let you know. If I can.”

“Very carefully put, Doctor, though I imagine I would be equally circumspect in your position. I do

have one request in return for having answered your questions as candidly as a Bishop can.”

“Yes?”

“Watch your ass, Dr. McLaren.”

“I’ll try,” I said as I cradled the receiver.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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**M**s. Martha was carrying fresh coffee to the table when I returned from the phone and resumed my seat.

“I gather that he wasn’t entirely helpful?”

“He scuttled my preferred motive. The church was closing despite Barrett Ross’ arrival, and both he and the Bishop knew it. Seems likely Jack Rodgers did too since he told me the same thing His Eminence did – that Ross’ death only served to delay the disposal of the property.”

“Then why do you think he was killed?”

“Beats the hell out of me, but whatever the reason is, it probably includes all of the other goings-on: the meetings on the ferry, Lynne’s death, and the explosion at Sue’s campsite.”

“So, now you will...?”

“I don’t know,” I said, as Sue, in a long, fuzzy, black robe, accompanied by a yawning Lilly, appeared at the top of the stairs. She grinned and said, “What a wonderful way to start the morning, hearing a man admit that he doesn’t know something.”

“Harrumph,” I said, while she and Ms. Martha chuckled. “No coffee for her.”

Sue crossed to the counter and filled her own cup as Lilly sat down expectantly next to an antique bone china serving dish that occupied a kitchen corner.

“Appears Lilly has acquired some class.”

Ms. Martha reinforced my observation, giving her a slab of meat she’d taken out of the refrigerator. It was a hell of a long ways from kibble.

“There’s no reason for the dog to suffer,” she said, “just because we can’t figure out what the devil’s going on.”

“None at all. Any suggestions this morning, Dr. Dyson?”

“Yes, Dr. McLaren. I have some details to take care of so why don’t you go and investigate something?”

“Why didn’t I think of that? Okay. I’ll go see what Virgil has dredged up. Would you fill Ms. Martha in on Virgil and she can tell you about my conversation

with the Bishop? Maybe by lunch time I'll know enough to plan the rest of the day."

I refilled my coffee cup and headed for the door.

"I suppose we'll manage your abandonment, but don't forget to come back." Sue leaned towards me and let the robe fall open.

"Not likely," I said, pausing long enough to consider staying.

"So go, already." Ms. Martha ordered.

It was a ten-minute ride to the Troopers' barracks. I parked in the lot and Virgil came out as I was exiting the Zuki. Perhaps my arrival wasn't a cause for celebration among the ranks.

"Out here," Virgil said, indicating a picnic table that probably got used for lunches during those thirty warm sunny days a year we Kodiakians enjoyed. Today was overcast but calm and I was content with the temperature at sixty. I followed Virgil and sat down.

"Tracking down information for you isn't making me a most popular fella. In particular, inquiries into the whereabouts of the late Reverend's vehicle and personal possessions have been met with suggestions that I perform various impossible acts upon myself."

"I take it that rumors of your hermaphrodite nature are unfounded?"

“Perceptive as always.”

“Wannamaker?”

“How’d you guess?” He didn’t need or expect an answer, but I gave him one anyway.

“When he was up at Abercrombie after the explosion he was smoking Ross’s cigars from Ross’s case. That was my first clue.”

“Pretty typical of our Chief. Takes a personal interest in crime scenes with opportunities for looting.”

“He appropriate the rest of the minister’s stuff too?”

“Rumor has it that the truck’s parked out at that A-frame at the end of the cul de sac on Dark Lake. No one’s speculating on the fate of the contents. Or on the minister either.”

“How about locations to go with the names I gave you?”

“That was a little easier. Ms. Toni Mueller lives on the other side of Island Lake. She’s down close to the water in an old log cabin with a little lawn. One of the lads suggested that there may be land mines in the area but I think that just means he deals poorly with rejection.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Moving right along, Rosie Crowley lives somewhere out in Chiniak though exactly where is uncer-

tain. Rumor has it that she can be found at the End of the Road bar most weekend evenings, and should be approached early as she is occasionally busy later in the evening with such employment as comes her way.”

“The minister?”

“Calvin Dale.” Virgil nodded as he continued. “He has a little chapel on the back road past the Mormon Tabernacle and a mile or so before you get to the Moonies. No rumors about him are circulating at the office.”

“Jeanie and Kendra?”

“They aren’t party girls or pros. If they’re involved in anything it’s private. Here’s a couple of home addresses and that’s all I could come up with.”

“Thanks.” I decided to take another chance. “See what you can come up with on a Katherine Parker?”

“Ah, Mistress Kate.” The name had him smiling and nodding. “She’s more interesting than the others and I know a little. No visible means of support, as we used to say, but a lot of money seems to swirl around her, as well as a lot of people who probably shouldn’t. Thanks for the excuse to dig around a little.”

I nodded, got up, and extended my hand. “Maybe we can catch up when this is over.” He took it and the smile was as warm as I’d remembered.



## KODIAK ISLAND

“Just make sure that you’re the one still standing when it is.” His smile disappeared with the words.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Leaving Virgil to the Kate Parker research detail, I considered the day's options. The End of the Road Bar in Chiniak was fifty odd miles away and it was already close to noon. Maybe Sue and I could drive down for a late lunch.

From the Troopers' I hung a left on Mill Bay Road then a right into the post-earthquake Aleutian Housing development and caught the back road to Dark Lake. I liked to reconnoiter before I walked into someplace new so I drove past Dale's "Calvary Faith Four Square Chapel" about a half mile past the Mormon Tabernacle.

Another mile farther along I passed Reverend Moon's World Headquarters and wondered, for about the two hundredth time, why the hell he'd chosen

Kodiak? I still didn't have an answer, and other concerns seemed likely to take priority as I drove the mile back to Ms. Martha's.

Sue was dressed, damn it, when I got back to Ms. Martha's, but it was probably just as well since I wanted her company for the visit to Chiniak and Rosie Crowley.

"There have been developments," I said, "and I think an excursion is in order."

"So much for the possibility of afternoon delights," she said.

"I'm afraid so, much as I would prefer a resumption of yesterday's investigations. But Virgil has ponied up locations on some of the ferry passengers I ought to talk to."

"And?"

"Up for a ride?"

"I gather you aren't talking dirty again?"

"No. Regretfully I am referring to Chiniak, a late lunch, and the possible elimination of another potential suspect."

It took more than an hour and a half to negotiate the miles out to End of the Road. When I wasn't concentrating on my driving I was enjoying the view as we skirted one bay after another, though I think Sue may have been concentrating on averting stomach

heaves as we lurched around switchbacks and hairpins. I know she was holding on tight and looking a little green. I was familiar with her grip, if not the color.

There were still eagles in the trees where we crossed the Olds River bridge and took the left hand fork to Chiniak instead of the cross-island Pasagshak Bay branch. I also remembered, as we passed Tom's house on the right and a micro-bakery on our left, that I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast coffee. I hoped the café was open for business.

The bar and restaurant, at what was nominally the end of the usable road, were leftovers from when the Air Force had operated a communications base a few miles farther out the road. There was a battered car in the parking area, a 4X4 pickup on blocks in the back, and a couple of all terrain vehicles cozied up next to the door, close enough for their owners to stagger back to without incurring undue exercise.

Inside we found a booth that offered a view of the bar and dining area and I slid in while Sue excused herself in the direction of the Ladies' Room. I didn't warn her about what to expect. She'd see for herself soon enough.

"Nice places you take your women friends to," she said upon her return.

"Homey."

“Perhaps, if your idea of homey facilities comes from the set of Deliverance.”

Eventually the bartender/waitress approached and wandered off again after noting our orders for coffee and menus. The coffee was muddy and burned more often than I’d been, but I remembered that the lunch offerings used to be edible. If so, then nothing had changed much in my absence.

Better than passable steaks and baked potatoes appeared, as ordered, and occupied our attentions for half an hour. A couple of folks I recognized as locals came and went. If they recognized me they weren’t showing it.

After that, an aging anorexic-looking female pushed through the door and claimed one of the four bar stools with a familiar air of ownership. “Be there in a minute, Rosie,” the waitress’s voice informed us from the adjacent kitchen area. That turned out to be literally true, as she slipped behind the bar, tossed a couple of ounces of Southern Comfort in with two ice cubes, and settled the glass in front of her regular customer in just slightly more than sixty seconds.

“Thanks, dear,” Rosie said. “Saw the boys’ ATV’s out front. Where are they?”

“Still sleeping off last night,” was the unsurprising reply. “They were in that old pickup camper last I

checked. Didn't sound like they were close to surfacing again just yet, but that was an hour ago."

"They were easy enough pickin's," Rosie said. "Assholes probably think they got what they paid for." She and the waitress enjoyed a conspiratorial chuckle, which ceased when they turned and saw us watching.

"Something we can do for you?" Rosie asked.

"Your friend could bring us the bill," I said, "and you could tell us what you and the minister talked about when you came over on the Tustamena."

Her look was calculating. "The one ended up dead?"

"That's the one."

"What's it worth to ya?"

"Appears you have some difficulty with delivering," I said. "Maybe we'll just pay the bill and move along."

"Whoa there, fella. Don't get all antsy. Send the chub butt out to wait in the car and you and I can discuss things."

I could feel Sue stiffen beside me, and was glad I couldn't see her expression.

"What makes you think I was even on the boat?"

"Your name's on the passenger list."

"Coulda been someone else, using my name."

"But it wasn't – since I saw you talking to him."

Rosie paused, threw back about half her drink, started chewing on an ice cube, and kept on thinking while I waited.

“He wanted something, didn’t want to pay for it, didn’t get it,” she said.

“What did he want?”

“Same thing you do.” Her smile sent spasms of nausea through my stomach.

“Really? I don’t think so.”

“What’s a matter, numb nuts, pussy whipped by the fat broad?”

It was way too easy and much too gratifying. My eyes never left hers as I moved, like I’d practiced in the mirror when I was twelve. Emulating my most threatening Richard Boone imitation from *Have Gun, Will Travel*, it took four easy steps to reach her. I palmed the back of her head, fingers threaded through her short hair, and tilted her gaze upward till our eyes met.

“Why the appointment?”

She mumbled a curse and tried to lean back towards the bar but couldn’t. “Someone paid me to meet with him on the ferry.”

“Who?”

“I dunno. There was just an envelope in my P.O. box with a note and some cash. Said I was to give him a ‘welcome ride’. Bastard didn’t want one.”

“What did he want?”

“Wanted to know if I knew anyone interested in whips and such. I said no. What did he think I looked like, anyway?”

“Like three things penicillin won’t fix?” I let her go, dug in my pocket, tossed a couple of twenties on the bar, and was turning towards Sue when the gun went off.



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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I didn't feel shot, or at least what I'd always figured getting shot would feel like. I didn't seem to be falling down or dead. And there was some screaming that wasn't coming from me.

Rosie, I discovered, was now leaking blood from her right hand and Sue was grinning as her hand appeared above the tabletop. The .32 she held seemed content with having made its single comment.

"Bitch was about to perform kidney surgery." Sue nodded towards the knife that lay on the floor. "Personally, I like your back the way it is."

"Ladies, always a pleasure. Dr. Dyson? After you." I motioned towards the door.

"Christ," I said, from the relative safety of the car,

“when I mentioned eliminating a suspect I didn’t mean permanently.”

“Ms. Crowley, is, I think, only temporarily incapacitated.”

“Where the hell did the gun come from?”

“Same place as the tattoos.”

“But that would be another conversation?”

“Yes.” This time thoughts of Edgar produced a slight smile rather than a tear.

We rode along in silence for a few miles as the adrenalin wore off. When we got to where the road branched off back to town, I kept going straight and drove the few miles to Pasagshak Bay, parked the Zuki, and we took a walk on the south beach. There was a lot of seaweed, washed ashore and decomposing in the sun, along with a beached whale’s remains that had been reduced to a fifty-foot string of bones and a slight lingering odor.

“This isn’t going to get any easier, is it?” Sue asked.

“I hate grilling people. I’m much better at letting the clients find me, sitting in my chair, and injecting the occasional therapeutic ‘Ummmm.’”

“You’re the tightrope walker who’s afraid of heights?”

“On some days,” I said.

“Virgil gave you locations on a few more of the people from the manifest?”

“Two more. A man and a woman.”

“The beach is nice, Ethan, but how’s about we get them out of the way and call it a day?”

She was right and her prod was enough to overcome my preference for inertia. Not to mention that she was the one with a gun.

“Island Lake or the Calvary Faith Four Square Chapel?”

“Calvary Faith Four Square Chapel?” Sue hooted. “You’re not serious?”

“Serious as that .32 you’re packin’, though I’m still wondering where you’re hiding it.”

“Later, perhaps, you can do a search.” I could hear her smile broadening.

We moseyed back to the car and headed to town, admiring a baby buffalo and its mother grazing where the hills met the beach along the way. Kodiak. Always something new and unexpected.

“Now, about that church’s name. What’s your take on the psychology involved?” Sue said.

“Napoleonic overcompensation. He knows he’s a little pipsqueak operation, so he tacked on as many adjectives as he could dredge out of some tele-evangelists’ wet dreams.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.”

“Your opinion?”

“I didn’t say I disagreed.” I didn’t hear any of the discomfort I’d noted on our outbound drive. Maybe the excitement had offset the carsickness.

“Who’s on Island Lake, Ethan?”

“One Toni Mueller. She does not rate highly on the constabulary’s propriety scale.”

“So let’s do this geographically. The chapel, Island Lake, then home for dessert?”

Despite the sign at the preacher’s door reading “Knock And It Shall Be Opened Unto You,” we found no one at home. We walked a circuit around the half-acre property, inspected the rotting picket fence, and moved on to Miss Mueller.

It took perseverance to reach the cabin. A lot of the Island Lake houses were built off serpentine drives rather than streets and lacked any straightforward access. But we eventually succeeded, and parked close, with the Zuki facing out in case a quick exit became necessary. Maybe we were learning something.

The woman who answered the door invited notice. Reddish brown hair, straight, and falling to the middle of her back accented a slight almond slant to her eyes that hinted at the possibility of Inyupik influence. A full soft roundness bespoke estrogen, not silicon.

“Ethan McLaren and Susan Dyson,” I said. “We’re wondering if you could spare us a few minutes?”

“Mr. McLaren and Ms. Dyson, or is it Doctor Dyson? Your reputations precede you in either case.”

“Perhaps we can settle for the egalitarian Ethan and Sue?” Sue suggested.

“Excellent – and I prefer Toni when I am with friends, as I’d would certainly like to think of you.

“Now I can’t say that I’ve been expecting you,” she said. “Still, I’m not surprised, since I was on the ferry with you and the priest, Ethan.” She stepped back from the door, leaving us room to enter the small cabin. Its interior was divided into a kitchen and bedroom with a walled off corner that probably concealed a bathroom. Through a large double barn sash window I could see a banya between the house and lake with a moss-encrusted boardwalk connecting the two.

“Can I offer you a drink?”

“Thank you, no,” Sue said.

“We’ll only need a moment. Did you know the priest, or speak to him on the boat?”

“No.”

“Lynne Daniels?” I said.

“Of course I knew her, who didn’t? We didn’t move in the same social circles and, no, I don’t know details about her extracurricular activities.” Her

almond eyes exuded more enticements than information.

“What about Kate Parker?” I added the name on a whim, wishing there was somewhere other than the king size bed or floor cushions to sit.

“Ah, now Miss Parker is a different matter, not that our interests intersected.” She crossed to the bed, leaned back against the headboard, tucked her feet beneath her, and appeared ready for any number of possibilities.

“Maybe you could clarify that?”

“I could, I suppose. But should I? Sue?”

“I imagine that would be his decision,” Sue said.

“You are judicious, doctor, but are you any fun?”

“You might want to ease up just a touch.” I leaned against one of the log walls a dozen feet away from our possible informant. “She’s already shot one woman today and it isn’t even dinner time.”

“Excellent! Damn, the two of you do brighten up an otherwise dreary and unpromising afternoon.” Toni laughed, rolled onto her stomach, and propped her chin on her hands. “My tastes are both small ‘c’ catholic and unorthodox, but I’m not a pain slut.”

“Meaning?”

“Just that. I don’t fancy pain. Neither as the purveyor, no matter how sweetly you beg, nor, most

definitely, as the recipient. Those are my only limits, but they're hard ones."

"And Miss Parker?"

"Ah, well now, Ethan, consider - pain may be in her repertoire? Both ways?"

"I see." I was afraid it meant that Lynne had slipped away in directions I wouldn't - and couldn't - have gone. "Her involvement with Lynne?"

"I don't even know if there was any. As I mentioned, we didn't move in the same circles."

"Any other thoughts you'd care to share?"

"I think perhaps you would be entertaining - either individually or together." Her eyes narrowed slightly, and her smile deepened as her tongue moistened her lips. Departure seemed the prudent course.

"Thanks. If you think of anything..."

"...I will find you. I won't forget, and now you know the way here, too."

I left feeling that somehow it'd been a narrower escape than the one from Rosie's knife.

As we rejoined the main road back towards the park, Sue asked, "Do you suppose they're all going to be like those two?"

"It is Kodiak," I said.

"Christ, Ethan, if you wanna be a pimp you could take over Fairbanks with a half dozen like Rosie; and

an equal number of Toni's could make you mayor of Seattle."

"I think Toni invited us back," I said.

"You go back there and you're on your own. Hell, it'd take more than me and a pistol to save you from her, assuming you'd want saving."

Much as I'd have liked to, I couldn't find anything in her assessment to argue with.



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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Dinner was quiet. I'd outlined the day's gleanings for Ms. Martha and Sue filled in the color, but we all knew that real progress had been close to nil. Even Lilly had left food in her dish and retired to her pillowed corner.

"I think I will make an excursion this evening," I said over coffee.

"Seeking the Golden Fleece?" Sue said.

"No, though it might be easier to find. I'm wondering if Ross might have left something behind that Ralphie hadn't found. I'd like to look around the church office. The parsonage too, with Adele safely at home with Tom."

Sue nodded and got up, left the table without a word and descended the stairs to "our" room. I was

about to follow when she returned, carrying the padlocked Blazo box she'd collected from her Mill Bay Road storage unit. She set the container on the floor, extracted a set of keys from her pants pocket, and sat down again.

A small key opened the lock and the hinged top creaked open, revealing a small armory. Sue removed a revolver encased in a clip-on holster and turned her attention back to me.

"This is a .38 caliber Colt Python. Do you know how to use it?"

I nodded, took the proffered piece, removed it from the holster, swung out the cylinder, inspected the five rounds it contained, closed it, empty chamber under the hammer, holstered it, and clipped it to my belt in the small of my back.

Sue watched and, apparently satisfied, turned her attention to removing powder solvent, cleaning patches and a ramrod from her portable gun smithy, disassembling her .32 and cleaning away the day's detritus.

"I won't be going until later," I said. "I'd wait until dark, but that's a month away and I don't think I can delay quite that long."

The joke fell flat and Ms. Martha and I both simply sat and watched Sue go though the cleaning

and reassembly process like it was a spectacular and fascinating feat.

The task completed and materials stowed, Sue rose, gave Ms. Martha a hug, relocked and picked up the box, beckoned me with a nod of her head, and disappeared back downstairs. I hugged our hostess and followed.

Sue lay on her side on the bed, fully clothed, and when I got to the room, she motioned me to join her. I crossed over and lay down, and she pushed me gently onto my side and “spooned” me from behind.

I was just beginning to allow myself to relax into her embrace when a smothered laugh burst out of her and she rolled away from me.

“The pistol’s gotta go,” she said. “It’s a discomfort, both physical and Freudian, though it did help lighten my mood.”

I reached behind, removed the offending artillery to a bedside table, and kissed her softly on the forehead. As I resumed my position she scooched back in behind me and held me while we napped.

Two hours later I watched from bed as the usual evening grayness was further deepened by wind driven rain. The weather was turning ugly and I was relieved. My chances of being an unnoticed intruder at St. James seemed infinitely enhanced.

Sue awoke as I got off of bed. We shared an affectionate kiss and I clipped the gun back into place. Upstairs I found Ms. Martha dozing in her chair by the fire and I stopped long enough to administer a shoulder squeeze before stooping at Lilly's corner to scratch her behind the ears.

Departure rituals accomplished, I pulled an ancient hooded mackinaw from a coat hook in the entryway, ducked my head against the rain, and scrambled out to the Zuki.

A few blocks down Mission I took a right onto Cutoff, crossed Rezanof, passed the College and East Elementary, hooked a left onto Mill Bay and meandered through the post-tsunami Aleutian homes neighborhood. That left me a couple of blocks above the church where a small park shared a cul de sac with a treatment center and women's shelter. I doubted anyone would notice my car if I stopped by the church, but still didn't see any point in advertising.

The streets were empty as I pulled a flashlight and an extra large screwdriver out of my toolbox. I headed down the steep gravel alley that led two blocks to a drive that worked its way across to the parsonage. I wondered whether the house or the church was the more likely location for finding anything Ross might have had, and might have stashed. Something no one

else might have found. That was a hell of a lot of might-have's, but it wasn't like I had a lot of other brilliant ideas. So I tried playing detective and deduced.

I knew it had taken Barrett Ross a fair amount of time to drive from Minneapolis/St. Paul to Kodiak, and I knew my own travel habits. If he and I had enough traits in common, then any important papers would either be in his truck's glove compartment, or in some sort of briefcase or folder. I used my Zuki as a mobile filing cabinet, but Ross' Studebaker wasn't here. I hoped the late Reverend wasn't that much like me.

As to the parsonage or the church? He'd died in his office with a glass of wine and a cigar in attendance. If he were using the office for thinking, then he'd use the same place to stash anything of importance.

I watched the neighborhood for another minute, walked across the church's porch and tried the door. Damn. You'd have thought someone could have forgotten to lock up just this once.

It was still easy, since I didn't mind leaving tracks. No one was going to get excited about some kids breaking into a building slated for demolition. The more mess I left the better. Probably should have brought a few empty beer cans and a couple of condoms, though that might have been pushing it.

I pushed the screwdriver between door and jamb and pried. Crude but effective. Very high school, I thought.

I'd been in the church before but drooping crime scene tape would have led me to the office anyway. Kicking the door beside the knob had the desired effect. Damn those teenagers, no respect for churches, or the dead.

A quick look around didn't reveal anything of interest. Neither did poking about in drawers or the closet.

Following my Ethan-as-Barrett model I settled myself into his swivel chair, tilted it back, crossed one leg over a knee, let a cigarette stand in for his cigar, and waited. I don't know what I was waiting for – Godot, Mickey, the Robert E. Lee? – but nothing showed up.

I sat thinking about his only evening in Kodiak. He'd just finished performing his first funeral, which certainly would have reminded him of why he'd come to the island, and he was indulging in a bottle of wine and a cigar. If he had anything tangible, he sure as hell would've kept it close at hand.

But it didn't matter how much I looked, reached, touched, or listened, I couldn't find a damn thing.

I imagined him realizing something wasn't right

and trying to hide whatever it was he had. The whole useless exercise was becoming a royal pain.

In point of fact, it was Barrett's chair that was causing a literal pain. I got up and took a closer look.

It was one of those upholstered leather deals with a square cushion that was attached in the front but lifted up from the back. Son-of-a-bitch. Under the seat were a manila envelope and beaded headband. The latter was cut, red stained, and missing some beads but it'd still been thick enough to feel through the cushion.

The brown envelope contained a typical embossed business envelope which, in turn, held a single folded sheet of stationery. I opened it, scanned the few lines, and whispered, "Thank you, Barrett."

I got myself out of there, hurried back to the Zuki, climbed in, and started the motor and heater. Anxious as I was to more inspect what I'd found more closely, I also wanted to put a little distance between me and St. James the Fisherman.

Fifteen minutes later found me at Ms. Martha's dining room table with the headband and envelopes. I was being quiet, and kept the light low, not wanting to wake anyone.

I set the headband carefully aside, looked at the white envelope, and squinted at the particulars:

Kodiak postmark from two months ago; addressed to Barrett Ross in Minneapolis; and carefully slit open.

I again extracted the single sheet of City of Kodiak stationery, unfolded it, held it up to the dim overhead light and read:

*Father Ross,*

*I hear you're planning on taking Trent's place at St. James Church here on Kodiak.*

*Don't. You wouldn't want to butt in, stirring stuff up, would you?*

*Remember Alice.*

*Sincerely,*

*Smith Wannamaker, Chief of Police*



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

---

**A**lice? Who the hell is Alice?  
“Home is the sailor...” Sue said as she came up behind me. I hadn’t heard her approach and jumped about half a foot. “Steady.” She laid a hand on my shoulder.

I relaxed a little, and handed the letter to her.

“Alice?”

I shook my head.

“Wannamaker knew something about Barrett Ross and someone named Alice?”

This time, for variety, I just shrugged.

“I imagine it behooves you to find out?”

“What time is it in Minneapolis?” I said.

“It’s after eleven here, so it’s after two a.m. there.”

“Then he’s probably in bed.” I went over to the

phone, dug a number I'd scribbled on a slip of paper out of my wallet and dialed.

"University Hilton," the night operator said.

"Ralphie Lee, and, yes, I know what time it is. Ring his room anyway."

"Huh?" was the sleep-encrusted answer I heard across the wires.

"It's Ethan, Ralphie. Wake up."

"Ethan?"

"Yes. You awake enough to listen and remember?"

I reached into my pocket for a cigarette but came up empty. Phones and smokes, a near inseparable connection in my personal behavioral catalogue. Shit.

"Listening? Alice somebody with a connection to Barrett Ross."

"Alice." He mumbled. I hoped he was writing down the name.

"Yes, was. Dead before he came to Kodiak but that's all I know. You find out what you can and get back to me. Noon today!"

"It's Sunday!"

"There's a coincidence. It's Sunday here too. And, it's been awhile, but I seem to remember churches being open on Sundays. Get on it." I disconnected before he could irritate me further with more objections.

While I was issuing orders to Ralphie I'd been thumbing through Ms. Martha's copy of the Kodiak phonebook. I was surprised to find the listing: Morgan, Virgil, but there it was.

He answered on the third ring and didn't sound like I'd just woken him up.

"I'd like to confer."

"Are you still staying at Martha's?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'll be over in about half an hour." I heard the phone click and looked over at Sue.

"Company's coming. Maybe we'd better put on the coffee."

"I'll do that while you tell me about Mr. Morgan," she said.

It was a long complicated story but I gave her the synopsis. "Twenty-three years ago Virgil and I were both VISTA Volunteers in western Alaska. He was a lawyer working on the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act and I interpreted federal and state bureaucracies to village councils. We each lasted out our year and signed up for a second." I stopped talking, picturing us as we'd been back then.

"Something happened?"

"Governor Bill Egan booted the program and the

volunteers out of the state. Only time it ever happened anywhere in the country.”

“You were a pain in the ass way back then already,” she said, giving me a few seconds to continue.

“We were technically federal employees working for the Alaska Federation of Natives under State of Alaska supervision. Stretched between the three combatants in the Land Claims litigation, with Texas oil money buying the outcomes.”

“You and the other young and idealistic VISTA’s?”

“Most took their tickets and left the state. Troopers burned a few others’ cabins and put them on planes to Seattle. Those returning from leaves were pulled off planes in Chicago or Seattle or not allowed to disembark when they got to Anchorage or Fairbanks.”

“I would guess that your story has a somewhat different ending?”

“I was upriver when they came for me. They didn’t burn my cabin so I sold it, used some of the money to fly into Anchorage, and talked my way into a teaching job in the Arctic. But I haven’t forgotten.”

“Hence your antipathy towards the supposed guardians of law and order? As well as your surprise at Virgil’s current occupation?”

“That’s part of it. Other experiences since haven’t elevated my opinion much.”

“You haven’t changed much, Ethan. It’s a credit to you, really. Most would have been more embittered than you. Christ, you’re still a silly optimist romantic.”

I grumbled, returned to the table, and sat as Sue walked from the kitchen and joined me. I appreciated that she didn’t ask any more questions as I thought back through those outrages and disappointments. I wasn’t sure about idealistic, optimistic, or romantic, but I damn sure wasn’t young anymore.

I must have sunk pretty deep into my reveries because the next thing I heard was a soft knocking at the door.

I let Virgil in and he crossed over to introduce himself. “Virgil Morgan,” he said, extending a hand. “I don’t think Ethan properly introduced us the other day.”

“Susan Dyson.”

“It appears that Ethan’s luck may be improving.”

“I couldn’t comment on his, but mine certainly has.”

“Touché,” he said, and smiled.

I handed him the letter and gave him a minute to read it.

“Who’s Alice?”

“I don’t know – but I woke Ralphie up to find out.”

“Ralphie Lee? Kodiak city cop? What’s he got to do with this?”

“I persuaded him to go to Minneapolis and do a little background investigation on Ross.”

“How’d you do that? Crap he never leaves the damn island from what I heard.”

“I’m not sure what her name is....”

“Christ, I should have known it’d involve some broad.”

Sue and I just looked at him.

“I can’t imagine,” he said, with a judicious change of topic, “that Kodiak actually paid him to go to Minnesota and look into something nobody much wants solved.”

“Kodiak didn’t.” I started patting my pockets in search of a long deferred cigarette. Sue came to my rescue and rolled one of hers across the table. I lit it, sat down, and indicated a chair for him if he wanted it.

Apparently he did, since he took it, reversed it, and sat down with his forearms crossed on top of the back.

“Ah. But you’re paying?”

“Indirectly.”

“I think maybe I am beginning to have some of this pieced together. Your elderly hostess had some connection to Ross and hired you. For your part, though, you’re really looking because of Lynne.

Ralphie, I'd guess, is in the picture 'cause he isn't as corrupt as the local constabulary generally.

"But," he turned his attention towards Sue, "I can't figure your part."

"Ethan's G.I.B."

"He's what?"

"Good-In-Bed."

I think he blushed.

"Which gets us around to you," I said. "Why are you aiding and abetting in this unpopular cause?"

"You know how Kodiak is, Ethan. Hell, how the Bush is. By the time we hear about something, and go out to investigate, everybody involved has their story straight and we end up with a whole lotta nothing. I'd like to see something turn out the way it should occasionally."

The three of us sat quietly for a few minutes.

"Bucket of crabs."

"What?" Sue asked.

"If you pull crabs out of a crab pot and toss them into a bucket, you don't need to cover it. Anytime one of the crabs is about to escape, the others reach up and drag it back down. Just like sick families, drunks, and various lowlifes."

"And if the 'crabs' here can't manage to drag you down to their level," Virgil added, "they'll either starve

you off the island, or..." He didn't need to continue that thought.

"And that connects to Father Ross' death and Lynne's how?" Sue said.

I'd wondered about that too. "I'd guess that Barrett Ross's murder is unrelated to current Kodiak intrigue, and that Lynne's is related to both. Someone was afraid of what he might dredge up out of the past, and what she might know, tell, or figure out. She mighta been dumb about some things, but she sure as hell wasn't stupid."

"Works for me," Virgil said. "What else can I do here at two in the morning?"

"Kate Parker?"

"Oh, yes, my assigned chore. I'm afraid I don't have much more now than I did this morning, Ethan. No past history anyone admits to knowing about, or current one either, come to that. Bank deposits seem to show up regularly from a trust somewhere."

I waited.

"Okay, Ethan. Put away the look. I still have friends in Anchorage and one of them took a wee peek at her accounts."

"Where's the money come from, specifically?"

"He'll get back to me on that one."

"Anything else – an address?"



“Go out past Abercrombie a mile or so and take a right on Three Sisters Way or maybe Marmot? It’s on the right about a half-mile. Looks like the set for House of the Seven Gables.”

“That may help, I suppose. Assuming she knows anything.”

“Hope she helps ‘cause that’s all I’ve got. Not even any local gossip. You’d expect there’d be a ton of it, given the ambiguous past, obscure vocation, and personal, ah, demeanor?”

“One would think so.” I guessed I’d have to research Ms. Kate myself. I couldn’t see her role in all of this, but she did keep bobbing up in the vicinity.

“Thanks, Virg. Sorry to get you out of bed.”

“Don’t suppose you’d like to share how you came by that letter, would you, Ethan?”

A smile was all the answer I had for him.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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Sunday, August 15

**B**y three in the morning Virgil'd gone home and Sue and I'd gone to bed. I dozed a little but my head was catapulting through too many puzzle pieces for me to really sleep. I got up around six, tried to map out the day's activities, failed, and fretted.

It was too early for visiting and I'd about decided to take the neglected Lilly for an early morning walk when the phone rang.

"Ethan?"

"What's up, Ralphie?"

"Um, ah, the priest?"

"Spit it out, Ralphie."

There was more hemming and hawing, enough to

have me rolling my eyes, but eventually he did get to the point.

“Alice was Barrett’s younger sister. Murdered thirty years ago, but the old crime scene pictures and file notes are just about identical.”

“His sister? She was poisoned?”

“Oh, shit. No. Strangled, like Lynne. Tied up, you know.”

“Never solved, I take it.”

“Cops thought, maybe, they knew who, but before they could question them, they disappeared.”

“They?”

“Couple of juveniles.”

“Names, pictures, fingerprints?”

“File names don’t match anyone I’ve heard about on the island, and there aren’t any pictures or prints.”

“Swell.”

But it was something. It’d be a motive for the priest’s murder, and two might be easier to find than one, assuming Ross’ information was correct and they really were on the island. His death seemed to vouch for that and I was beginning to wonder if I might have any candidates for the roles. It was worth pondering.

“Did you get a copy of the file?” I asked.

“It’s coming. Overnight mail to you.”

“You could have just packed it and delivered it personally.”

“Ah, er...” and the verbal inarticulateness recommenced.

“Ralphie!” I was feeling like getting a touch harsh with the lad.

“I kinda want to stick around for awhile longer, Ethan. See what develops here.”

I’m an idiot. “What’s her name?”

“Ah...”

“Don’t make me hurt you, Ralphie. Or send Sue out to collect you.”

Sue appeared at the top of the stairs and issued a snort that probably refuted any notions of me “sending” her anywhere.

“Elaine.” He said it quietly so she must have been nearby.

“So, has she taken you to Minnehaha Falls yet? Walked around Lake of the Isles?

Had dinner at the Black Forest and drinks at the Artists’ Quarter?”

“Ethan, please?”

“Been to the piano bar at Nye’s or Harrigan’s? Dropped my hard-earned money at the Mall of America? Had lunch at Sergeant Preston’s or a coronary bypass at the U of M Hospital?”

“Ethan, damn it. Yes! You happy now?”

“All of it?”

“Everything but the bypass.”

“Shit, Ralphie, You run out of cash yet?”

“No.”

“Well, don’t bother coming home ‘til you do. And I hope you’re still thankful when you get back. Try to make it by Christmas.

“Oh, and Ralphie? What do you know about a Trooper named Morgan?”

“New. Smart is what his record says. Dumb is what getting posted to Kodiak says. Maybe honest, too. Why?”

“I just wanted your opinion.”

“He’s probably okay, for a Statie.”

I heard giggles from the other end of the line, then the crash of a dropped phone and more laughter, but it seemed either pointless or prurient - maybe both - to keep listening so I hung up.

“I gather shipping Ralphie to Minneapolis to run errands has produced results?”

“Alice was Barrett’s younger sister. She was murdered around 1968 and the crime scene had, at least according to Ralphie, a lot of similarities to Lynne’s.”

“Any suspects?”

“Two of them, apparently. Juveniles. Disappeared.”

“Your shipboard conversations with Barrett would indicate that he had some reason to believe that they were here on the island?”

I nodded and headed for the kitchen to make coffee and rustle up some breakfast. Progress was making me hungry. Lilly must have detected that. She'd followed Sue upstairs and was escorting me to the refrigerator. Possibly wishing to be of assistance should any errant bacon strips attempt to escape.

By the time the coffee maker was chugging along, and the eggs, bacon, potatoes, and bread had found their way to the counter, Sue had settled at the table.

“So you now know that your surmises were right,” she said.

“Yes, though I still don't exactly know how it all fits together here on the island.”

“Wouldn't that be more a question of who rather than how?”

“Same difference, I suppose.” I thought about that while the bacon started to curl in the pan and I sliced potatoes to fry in the grease.

I muddled through details and piecing things together until breakfast was ready then carried mugs and plates to the table where Sue'd laid out the

napkins and silver. Lilly pouted next to her empty bowl but she'd just have to wait until her portion cooled.

"So where do you start today?"

"I want to talk to Jeanie and Kendra, Lynne's friends whose names Ms. Martha got from Jan. Then I want to see Kate Parker, given Toni's comments, and later I should dig out Brother Calvin. I probably have a couple of questions for Jack Rodgers and, I'm afraid, I also ought to talk to Adele again."

"Busy day ahead so I'm glad to see that you're eating properly." She smiled at me as I chewed on another mouthful of very good bacon with buttered toast. "And now that you have all of this new information, who did it?"

"You've seen the letter. You tell me."

"You're still stuck with the priest no one knew and the woman everyone did, aren't you?"

I just nodded as I mopped up the remains of three eggs and waited for Sue's evaluation.

"It could be almost anyone."

"Anyone between forty and seventy, though the police report should narrow down the age range some."

"Ralphie didn't provide a lot of specifics?"

"He was entangled, shall we say? But, no, he didn't

pony up as much as I'd have liked and I didn't ask enough questions either."

"He is sending the report on Alice's murder?"

"Overnight mail."

"How long will that take? Really?"

"Let's hope that storms and volcanic eruptions don't interfere and it gets here within forty-eight hours."

Sue nodded, collected our mugs and headed to the kitchen for refills. "Who do you want to see first, and do you want company?"

"Miss Parker lives out past Abercrombie and I thought I would do that first. I suspect that she might be more forthcoming if I arrive unescorted?"

"You're probably right, though I don't like admitting it. I think I will go on out to the campground and see how the Arnesens are. Perhaps we can meet there after you've interrogated Mistress Kate?"



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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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**I**t was about ten o'clock when I got out to the Parker residence, which seemed late enough to go knocking on doors, even on a Sunday. Apparently I was right as Kate was up, dressed, and smiling when she answered the door.

“Good morning, Dr. McLaren. I’m pleased to see you, and that you have found your way here, though you have kept me waiting longer than I’m accustomed to.”

There was a tinge of something coloring her tone, but I couldn’t have said just what. Then again, I might just be hearing things. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Kate led me into a small living room where a couple of logs burning in the cast iron fireplace took away the morning’s chill and dampness. Settling onto

the sofa she indicated a chair to her left. "What brings you into my parlor, Ethan?"

"You knew Lynne Daniels, and you're acquainted with Jack Rodgers."

"You're wondering what I might know that would be relevant to her death and that of Barrett Ross?"

"Yes."

"Would you accept 'nothing' as my answer?"

"Only reluctantly."

"How familiar were you with Lynne's ah, shall we say, social orientations?"

"I knew Lynne before I left and worked for her occasionally." I was willing to go that far in hope of eliciting a productive answer.

"I imagine you knew her a lot better than that, but I won't fault you for your discretion. It's actually rather charming."

We sat there looking at each other, wondering who'd blink first. To my considerable surprise, she did.

"Lynne had some involvement with a local minister for the past year or two. I don't know that he had any direct connection with Barrett Ross, other than being in the same line of work, but I've heard he was also involved with Adele Hays."

"The secretary at St. James."

"Yes."

“The attentive minister would be Calvin Dale.”

“Very good, Ethan. You catch on admirably.”  
Kate’s green eyes were very intent and I felt myself both responding and repulsed.

“What is your interest in all of this?”

“I enjoy many amusements, Ethan, including watching the various Kodiak soap operas. A pastime you would understand, I think.”

I nodded and wondered whether prying further was apt to be productive.

“Your connection to Reverend Dale would be...?”

“None at all. I prefer my men older, smarter, taller, and endowed with, ah ... wit? Poor Calvin is lacking in those and other categories as well.”

“Jack Rodgers?”

“Jack is entertaining in other ways. Perhaps instructive is a better word. You are aware of his pervasive influence on Kodiak’s economic affairs?”

“I know that he controls most of Kodiak’s construction business, both private and public. He profits from the work whether he does it or allows someone else to do it for him.”

“Then you can appreciate how he might offer examples in how to be equally successful in other areas of island affairs?”

I could see Jack as a mentor in successful commu-

nity manipulation. Apparently Ms. Kate didn't think small. Not a surprise.

"Adele?"

"I know nothing about her beyond her job at that ill-fated church and her reputed involvement with Cal. I think, perhaps, they have some past connection that would explain the attraction. God knows his apparent attributes don't."

"If you don't have anything good to say about anyone, come sit beside me." I said it, thinking it might be a mistake even as I prattled.

"Alice Roosevelt Longworth, I believe?"

I smiled my agreement.

"It could," she said, "be your detective's motto, couldn't it?"

"Works for me."

"I have indulged your curiosity, Ethan. Now will you indulge mine?"

"You can ask."

"Dr. Dyson will be departing the island in a couple of weeks as usual?"

I nodded, even as the question surprised me.

"You will be staying?"

I offered another nod, though I wasn't happy with where this appeared to be headed.

"Good. I'll mark my calendar. Now you'd best go

before I change my mind.” Her smile held any number of possibilities – shades of Olivia - as she walked me to the door.

“Thank you Miss Parker. You’ve been helpful.”

“I’m sure I’ve been more than that, doctor. Just don’t forget to schedule a September house call.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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**K**ate had provided me with a lot of grist for my mental mill and I'd need more than the ten-minute jaunt from her house to Abercrombie to wade through it all.

From the campground access road I could see that Ms. Martha's efficient cleaning crew had tidied things up. I parked, saw Sue poking through the remains of her own site, sat myself down on a picnic table to indulge in a few memories.

"We're real sorry, Ethan," Grace said, having walked up behind me. "Are you and Sue all right?"

"It's okay, Grace. Nothing's gone that can't be replaced. How are you and Paul managing?"

"I expect that this is a bad time, Ethan." I heard a shift in her tone. "But that's all I've got left."

That jerked me back to the present and I looked at her sharply. "What are you talking about, Grace?"

"That explosion was close, Ethan. Close for you and for Sue and it reminded me how close things are for me. I can't wait any longer, and I need your help."

"With?"

"Paul."

"He seems pretty well looked after," I said.

"He is. He's earned it. He's taken care of me and our children for the better part of forty-five years."

"And now?"

"Now, Doctor, I'm dying."

"Crap," I said, very professionally.

"Yes. But, unavoidable."

"Your kids will take care of things."

"They could. They would. He wouldn't last a year."

"That's not uncommon."

"He's earned more, Ethan, and it's his turn."

"For...?"

"He loved it here, Doctor. He never made any big deal about it, but he loved it here. He put that aside for us. I don't want him putting it aside again."

"You are a generous person," I said.

"No. I am a fairly selfish one. If I had to live here with him, be 3,500 miles away from my children and

grandchildren, I wouldn't do it. Not for more than one summer and

I'd begrudge that. But I don't have to live here. The children have their own lives. Time he had his back, too."

"What do you want from me, Grace?"

"I want you to help him. Help him stay. Help him past the guilt. Look after him."

"How long do you have left, Grace?"

"I'm already overdue, Doctor."

"Why me?"

Grace nodded up towards where Sue was still surveying what little evidence of her campsite remained.

"Sue was down there again yesterday. When he's talking to her he looks, and sounds, about thirty years old. Sue seems about ten. He has something back, and she, well, a father she never had. They both have that because of you."

"No."

"Yes." She held up a restrained hand, but it was the tone and look that kept me from protesting any further. "I know, you didn't do anything intentional, or heroic. But you still allowed it to happen, just because it's what you do."



“Then let Sue look after him. She can be his Kodiak daughter.”

“Ethan! Yes, I said Ethan. Now you need to listen up, and Dr. McLaren needs to butt out. In a month I will be gone. Sue will also be gone, though I hope to a different location than I’m headed for. When that happens, you and Paul are going to need each other.”

She had a point.

“What’s he know?”

“He knows I’m sick and probably not getting better. He doesn’t know how little time’s left.”

“Tell him.”

“If I do he’ll want to leave, take me home.”

“So let him. Fly out of here. Go home. Say goodbye to your children and grandchildren. After you’re gone he’ll have to come back for the camper anyway. It’ll give him a reason and I’ll help with the excuses for delaying his departure again.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“If you died here your children would never forgive him. He wouldn’t forgive himself, come to that, and he’d never be able to stay.”

“I don’t want to spoil it for him. I want him to have whatever he has here for as long as he can.”

“Then tell him. This evening.”

Grace nodded, smiled, and turned to go back

down the hill to the Winnebago. I reached out and stopped her, turned her to me, hugged her close, and whispered, "You're one hell of a woman, Grace Arenesen. Never doubt that, or that he married the right sister."

She looked up at me with a smile and a couple of tears. I guess we matched in that regard. She nodded and mouthed 'thank you'.

As Grace walked back down to the Winnebago she met Sue heading up. They talked briefly, exchanged hugs, and continued on their separate ways.

"It feels like you and Grace were conspiring about something, though I suppose you'll both deny it."

"We were, but I'd prefer to mull it over a bit before I share it. Can it wait till we're back at Ms. Martha's?"

"I suppose it'll have to. But as compensation, how did the visit with Miss Parker go?"

I considered that while Sue made herself comfortable at the picnic table.

"I don't know."

"There's that endearing phrase again. Either you actually don't, or you've learned to use the words to seductive advantage. Which is it? No! Don't you dare say it again."

"She offered up a lot of information that should be useful. But, I don't know why she talked, nor do I

know how to fit the pieces together now that she's provided them."

"Examples?"

"Evangelist Calvin may be, or have been, 'involved' with Adele, and they may have some mutual pre-Kodiak history."

"A lot of 'maybe's' in there."

"Yes. Kate also reports that Jack Rodgers is merely her mentor in things Kodiak, though they have different spheres of interest."

"I bet." Sue's smile was not the warm one I'd been experiencing lately.

"She also expressed some interest in you." I didn't see any need to elaborate and I wanted Sue's unprovoked response.

"As in what my life expectancy might be?"

"Something like that."

"I have a feeling that leaving you to look after yourself next month may be a mistake."

"If it is, it won't be because of Kate Parker." I spoke with unaccustomed confidence, surprising myself.

I wasn't immune to certain women's pathologies, but I finally understood, and occasionally heeded the warning signs.

"Where'd you go? Ethan?"

"Sorry. Goose walking on my grave, I guess."

“You okay, McLaren?”

“Yes, just a touch of the bends. You know. When something from the awful past gets dredged up by some reminder in the present?”

“Kate?”

“She induces echoes.”

“California?”

“Olivia Foster’s her name,” I said, continuing with the same synopsis I’d given Barrett Ross in Homer.

“Jesus,” was her summation.

We were both quiet for a while. I was grateful for that.

“You lost a decade to memories, too.”

“Turned out I was the only one who’d carried them. Now she was in deep trouble and I was the last fool on her list.”

“How’d you survive?”

“I don’t know if I have.”

Sue got up and came around to my side of the table, stood behind me, and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, pulling me back tightly against her.

“You’ve done better than survive, Ethan. You’re awake and alive.”

“I did not wish to take a cabin passage through life, but rather to go upon the deck of the world,” I quoted my bit of Thoreau.

“...and you haven’t gone below,” Sue paraphrased, “even though you keep getting washed overboard. That’s enormously important, and very rare.”

She continued to hold me, rocking us from side to side until I collected myself.

When I couldn’t take any more I loosened her arms, turned her, and hugged her to me. “Time to go, dear. I need to talk to Ms. Martha, and you and I need to confer about the Arnesens.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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**M**s. Martha was dozing in her chair by the fire when we got back to the house around 12:30 p.m.

“The Arnesens?” Sue asked.

“How much do you know? Or have you guessed?”

“She’s dying, they’ve each mentioned that, and sooner than he thinks, if I’ve read Grace right.”

“You have. Probably a few weeks are all that’s left. She wants me to look after him when she’s gone. Help him stay here on Kodiak.”

“I’m glad that you made that resolution about avoiding involvements,” Sue said. “Does this mean they’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say to precipitate this departure?”

“Told her to inform him that time was up. Go home, spend the last of her time with her family. Make it all right for him to come back.”

“So you have them booked out on the next ferry.”

“Not enough time for that, Sue.”

I watched her think through that detail. “Okay, fly out. Then what?”

“He’ll have to come back for the Winnebago and I’ll see what I can do to help him stay.”

“Why would he come back here?”

“Winnebago’d be the excuse.” I stalled just a little.

“Ah. But the reason?”

“He knew Ms. Martha back during the war. He hasn’t forgotten.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

No further response on my part seemed called for.

“So what will you do?”

“Nothing for now. They’ll leave, maybe you could see if any help’s needed? I’ll look after the camper and figure the rest out when he returns. If he does.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

“Yes.”

“You’re okay with it?”

“He’s seventy and our hostess is older. They could have some interesting years. What’s for me to object to, in any case?”

“Actually, in a rather odd way, it’s almost inspiring. Perhaps a metaphor for you and I?”

“Let’s hope, in that case, that I have a few good years left, too.”

“I’ll be pissed if you don’t.”

“And what have you told her?” Sue nodded towards Ms. Martha’s fireside chair.

“Nothing, and I’m going to leave it that way.”

“One of the advantages of being over seventy,” Ms. Martha opined, as she leaned forward far enough to turn and look at us, “is that people always assume that you are both asleep and deaf, though I am rarely one and never the other.”

“Shit,” I said.

“So, how is the Arenesen boy these days?”

“He’s fine,” we said in unison.

“Good. I was remembering Paul rather fondly just now, but you can tell me all about that later. I would not want to contaminate rather torrid old memories with current realities and I believe that you have more pressing matters to attend to?”

“I have a couple of more people to talk to after grabbing something to eat. Sue?”

“I’ll go back out to the Arnesens’ and see what I can do to help.”

“Good,” Ms. Martha nodded her agreement.



“Lunch will be ready in thirty minutes, and I had the banya started. It should be ready for you by now.”

Sue and I took the hint and decamped for the bathhouse where the fire was burning, the rocks were hot, the water buckets full, and towels awaited us.

“What’s next?” Sue said, through steam that was both personal and water generated.

“I’ll do those last couple of interviews.”

“Then you will return home...?”

“To find you suitably arrayed?”

“Only in your dreams,” she said, though her soaped and slippery embrace suggested otherwise.

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## CHAPTER FORTY

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**R**alphie'd said he "overnight mailed" the police reports on Alice, but rural Alaskans know that you send stuff overnight mail when it absolutely, positively, HAS to be there next month. Senator Stevens may have successfully kept all of Alaska a local postal zone, and required the Post Office to subsidize the bejesus out of every bush pilot with an engine and a wing, but not even Ted could dictate the weather.

So, after steam bath, interlude, and lunch, I headed off to visit the two women whose names Jan had passed along via Ms. Martha as possible sources of information regarding Lynne's social calendar. Jan'd also left addresses and directions so it only took me fifteen minutes to track down the first house.

Kendra Hamm and Jeanie Taft made matters

simpler by being together at Mrs. Hamm's when I arrived. They made it more complicated by not being especially amenable to company.

"Ethan McLaren. I'd like to talk to you about Lynne Daniels – and Barrett Ross."

Reluctantly they allowed me in the door.

"I appreciate your time," I said, sitting down in an overstuffed chair as if I'd been invited to stay. "I am trying to figure out who killed the priest who arrived on the ferry I was on – the same one you two were on. I also think it's the same person, or people, who killed Lynne Daniels a few days later. Since she was a friend of yours, as well as mine, I expect you will want to help."

"Who says she was a friend?" Kendra said.

"Yes," Jeanie agreed. "Who says?"

"We can play 'who said, you said', from now 'til the next tsunami, but it isn't going to solve anything, and it is going to prolong my interrupting and annoying you. Your choice."

They looked at each other and, apparently, came to a mutual decision.

"We don't know anything about the minister," Jeanie said, suggesting that she was the spokesperson for the pair as Kendra stashed a roach in an Altoids tin, sank into a sofa that matched my chair, and started

rolling a joint.

“You didn’t talk to him on the ferry?”

“Not on the ferry, not before, not after, and Kendra and I didn’t attend the funeral. We didn’t, for other reasons, attend Lynne’s, either.”

I nodded and kept my eyes on Jeanie’s.

“Perhaps we should simply run your ass back outta here and forget you?”

“It’s been done before.”

“But, if we wanted to help, and didn’t want to end up dead?” she asked, as she tucked her feet up under her.

“You could tell me what you know about Lynne’s connections, the ones that might have gotten her killed.” I settled back, ready for however long it took.

“Lynne liked things a little over the line,” Jeanie said. “You know what I’m talking about?”

“I saw her preferences in cuffs and stuff.” Apparently Toni might not have been exaggerating.

“She wasn’t a total masochist,” Jeanie said, “but she liked things pretty rough. Maybe she just played too hard?” She said it with hope, maybe, but without any conviction.

“Too damn many coincidences would be necessary for that to be the case. Lynne was killed, though a

friend observed that, ‘she didn’t know it till after she was dead.’”

“The jam creature tell you that?”

“Careful.” Our eyes locked for just a second.

“Okay, just checking.”

“You could ask.” I said as Jeanie motioned to Kendra for the joint she’d been rolling while the conversation seesawed.

“It’s more fun this way, but, yes, I’ll be a little more careful.” Her smile made me doubt that.

“So, back to rough?”

“I could make guesses.” She took a long hit off the joint and a longer time exhaling. “But they’d be just that. Kendra and I are more careful socially than we once were, so any opinions of ours are apt to be a little out-of-date.”

I waited while she thought.

“There’s a minister,” she said.

“Oh, shit! NO! Jeanie, don’t!” Kendra’d been quietly rocking on the couch while Jeanie and I sparred, but now she was verging on panic.

Jeanie glanced at her, then back to me, and her expression wasn’t warm. “Kendra had a little thing that turned into a problem. He didn’t believe in ‘NO’.”

“He raped you?” I turned to Kendra who was cringing.

“Yes.” Jeanie answered for her. “She ended up with a couple of cracked bones, a lot of contusions, abrasions, and pain. Enough to require a hospital stay and some fancy story telling. She was also scared half to death for quite awhile after.”

“No complaints filed, charges leveled, or apologies forthcoming?” I said.

“He said he’d fucking kill me.” Kendra’s whimpers held real fear, not fantasy.

Another minute’s worth of thoughts drifted between the three of us, swirling with the smoke. Jeanie moved over next to Kendra, slipped an arm around her shoulders, and let the frightened woman curl up next to her.

“He mean it?” I asked.

“Probably,” Jeanie said. “You know about this town?”

“Yes.”

“Then you didn’t need to ask, did you?”

“No.”

“I’m scared,” Kendra said, and her whimper was a child’s. He’d done that to her and I’d remember it.

“You know he could kill Kendra and get away with it.”

“Yes,” I said. “I promise if he’s looking to cause trouble, I will see to it that it finds him instead of you.”

“His name is Dale, Calvin Dale. He has a church on that back road running from downtown over to Dark Lake.”

“I know where it is. Calvary Faith Four-Square something or other.”

“That’s the one.”

We all took another minute for reflection.

“Watch yourself if you go messing around with him. He’s tougher than he looks. And a lot meaner.”

“But perhaps not as tough as I am.” I hoped that sounded more reassuring than it felt.

Kendra didn’t look very convinced, but Jeanie nodded. I suspect she’d have liked to assist with Reverend Dale, but there was only so much help I could accept or accommodate.

“Try dropping in on him early in the morning,” Jeanie said. “I’ve heard that’s when he likes to hold his by-invitation-only services.”

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## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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I decided to head back to Ms. Martha's to consider Jeanie's contributions and to see what Sue'd worked out with Grace and Paul.

The house seemed empty but a note on the counter read, "I've gone down." I didn't even attempt to suppress my smile as I descended the stairs.

"Knock, knock," I said, rapping my knuckles on the open door.

"Come into my parlor." Sue's laugh held an array of spidery possibilities.

"Thanks." I dropped into a chair that faced the bed where she lay- clothed damn it - in work-a-day cotton and flannel.

"Are you here for my orders," she said, "and could you come a little closer?"



“Not exactly, and I think I’ll sit right here where we’re both relatively safe.”

“Fraidy-cat.” She yawned, stretched, and displayed impressive breasts against a black, size medium, Hell’s Mensans T-shirt emblazoned with a descending white owl sporting a consequently provocative wingspan.

“Give me a few minutes to finish waking up,” she said.

I settled myself more comfortably into the chair, snaked an ottoman into position with my toe, and waited. I felt relief at the momentary inactivity, and hunkered down with a view of Sue and the north Pacific. Life felt disconnected, but blessedly peaceful.

“Sleeping?”

“No,” I said with a start, from where’d I’d slumped in the chair. “Coasting.”

“Would you care to define that?” Sue sat up, leaned back against a pile of pillows, and lit one of those nasty black cigarettes she occasionally indulged – perhaps as a smudge pot to ward off everything from mosquitoes to rutting bull moose.

“Not awake, not asleep, not quite dreaming. It mostly happens early in the morning when I’m waking up, but before the ‘have-to’ list - get up, go to the bathroom, shave, go to work - shows up. Coasting.”

“Should I apologize for disturbing you?”

“No. There’s too much happening for me to be drifting off to yaya land.”

“Anything you want from me?”

“Yes, most definitely, and I want it right now. But let’s skip what I want and go upstairs where there’s probably coffee and fewer distractions.”

She nodded, rolled out of bed, and crossed over to stand in front of me. She held out a hand and I took it, steadying her as she straddled my legs, and wedged her knees between my thighs and the sides of the chair. She leaned forward, her head higher than mine, looked down at me for a long half-minute, and kissed me, lips parting, tongue darting. Once, twice, thrice.

She broke the embrace, lifted her head, arched her back, and gently leaned in to smother me against those outstretched owl’s wings. I nibbled, less gently, and felt her respond.

“Don’t start what you can’t finish,” she said.

“Wasn’t me who started it.”

“True, but that’s my prerogative. Women’s rules...”

“...are not applicable at this location.” She pulled back, slid to her feet, and turned to flee as I aimed a hard slap at her butt. I missed, of course, but she kindly stopped and retreated a step to give me another try.

“Damn!” she said when my hand met denim with

a resounding report. But she smiled as she headed for the stairs, stopping only long enough to look back at me over her shoulder. “Another time we should explore that activity a little more?”

I smiled back as I got up and followed along, thinking about how often I’d wished for a lover who’d make the suggestions I wouldn’t, or couldn’t, articulate. I hoped we’d have the time some day for all of the propositions she cared to offer.

Ms. Martha roused herself from where she’d been napping by the fire as we reached the top of the stairs. “Ethan? Sue?”

“Yes?”

“There’s a package on the dining room table. Fernando dropped it off about an hour ago.”

“Fernando?”

“My housekeeper’s husband works in the Post Office. I’d told him to watch for it and to bring it as soon as it came in.”

I should have been able to predict that, but I was always lagging behind Ms. Martha Marie. I didn’t expect I’d ever catch up as long as she was breathing.

I went to inspect the package’s postmark – Minneapolis- and contents.

A copy of the police file, much abridged I

suspected, was inside. As Ralphie had reported, neither photographs nor fingerprint specimens of the suspects were included. I wasn't surprised when another detail emerged, one Ralphie hadn't mentioned, that I'd begun to wonder about. The two original suspects were a boy and girl, aged fifteen and seventeen. That would make them forty-five and forty-seven now.

They were listed as Marilyn Jansma and Dale Zoetewey. The names were Dutch and I guessed that Brother Dale had shifted his first name to surname and, somewhat perversely, adopted Calvin from the Dutch Christian religious tradition. He'd probably found that amusing as well as a useful part of his current vocational guise.

The mailer also included pictures of the crime scene. More than I needed to see and I could have used a couple of ounces of vodka to go with them. The basic outline wasn't much different from what we'd found with Lynne, but the details were. Lynne had gone easily and quietly. Not so Alice.

I looked up to find Sue and Ms. Martha eyeing me.

"Sister Alice?" Sue asked.

"Yes." I nodded at the file, trying to reconcile the nineteen year old with the waist length hair, head-

band, beads, ruffled blouse, and bell bottoms, with the beaten and mutilated victim shown in the photos.

“Unlike Lynne, Alice didn’t consent and she didn’t die easily, quickly, or unknowingly.”

They looked at me and Ms. Martha shook her head sadly.

“What else?” Sue eyes were focused and intent. I’d seen that look when we were wrapped up in each other’s arms, and after she’d shot Rosie down in Chiniak.

“The suspects were two teenagers – a boy and a girl.”

“Teenagers two and a half decades ago? So they’d be our age now.”

I nodded. “Give or take a couple of years.”

“Who’s older?”

“The girl.”

“Means they could be you and I.”

“I guess so. Or Tom and Adele, or Calvin, or Kate, or any combination thereof.”

“Have you cast you vote yet?”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid to.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never in my life voted for the winning candidate.”

Ms. Martha'd been watching as Sue and I volleyed and now both of them waited for me to continue.

"I think we're running out of time. I'm going to go see Jack Rodgers about narrowing down the slate of possibles. Then I'll go see Adele, and maybe Tom, too. After that we'll see what else we can do about shaking things loose."

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## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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**I**t only took me about ten minutes to get down to Jack Rodgers' office. I was fairly confident he wasn't responsible for any of the murders – it just didn't feel like him. Additionally, he was too old to have been a teenage perpetrator in 1968. But I was also reasonably certain he could help me sort out who was involved.

I found him at his desk and I think he was a little surprised to find me across from him on a late Sunday afternoon.

“Doc.” He leaned back in an old high-backed leather swivel chair. “What’s up?”

“I’m tired of screwin’ around with this.”

“So was I, the last time we met. Meeting didn’t do me much good, as I recall.”

“You’ll still get your hands on the property quicker if some of the snarls are unraveled.” I helped myself to a chair.

“Maybe. Maybe not. What’s it to you?”

“Nothing. But if I solve this, to the Bishop’s satisfaction at least, that roadblock will be out of your way.”

“So?”

“Help me and I’ll toss in a good word to the diocese.” I sat back and gave him some time to think.

“Help how?” At least I had his attention.

“Barrett Ross was killed because he came here to find the two people who murdered his sister twenty-five years ago. Lynne Daniels was killed because she knew something about the connections. My friend Sue was almost killed. I think to scare me away.”

Rodgers had been nodding as I recited the litany. “Why haven’t you been killed? That’s what I’d have done.”

“I know. That’s one of the reasons you’re off my suspect list. But I can’t answer your question either. Hell, it’s what I’d have done.”

“What do you want?”

“Informed opinions.”

“About?”

“Adele Hays and Kate Parker. Tom Robinson and Calvin Dale.”



“It comes down to one of them?”

“Two, I think.”

“Calvin used to be involved with Adele, may still be, though I’ve heard that Tom is now. Tom’s been here a long time too, but you know that.”

“Adele?”

“She hasn’t been around as long. Ten, twelve years, maybe.”

“I remember seeing her around before I left the island. Funny, but I don’t remember Kate or Calvin.”

“Kate’s been around about eight or ten years, I’d guess. Calvin a little less – five or so.”

“He’s looking good as one of Alice’s killers.”

“Calvin’s a nasty little piece of shit. I wouldn’t put anything past him. Wouldn’t turn my back on him either. Phony minister, if that ain’t redundant.”

“Kate?”

Jack inspected his hands for a bit then slid his thumbs under his waistband, leaned back. “What the hell. Why not?”

He looked back up at me with a trace of a smile, but it held frost, not humor.

“Miss Kate’s collected a lot of information on quite a few people. She is nearly as successful in her line of work as I am in mine, and for some of the same reasons.”

“Blackmail?”

“Ugly word. No call to use it. Friendly persuasion is all that’s needed. Most people here can be very reasonable, Doctor McLaren. Present company excluded, of course.”

“Your vocabulary’s improving.” I tossed that out as I worked to absorb the bones he was throwing me.

“Yeah. I modify it to suit the company and the impression I want to make. This time I’m just being my usual articulate self.”

“Your business interests don’t intersect with Miss Parker’s?”

“No.” He stopped and thought for just a moment. “How many competitors do I have on the island, doc?”

“None that I’ve ever heard of.”

“So,” Jack said, “if she was one, well, she wouldn’t be here either.”

It was me who took the next bit of thinking time.

“Why help me out on this?”

“Miss Parker doesn’t interest me. Neither do any of the others you mentioned. So it’s no skin off my ass if I offer you an opinion or two.”

“I can’t see you being so damn helpful without some ulterior motive involved,” I said. “Something beyond my promised good word to His Eminence in Anchorage.”

“None of the people you mentioned are of any use to me.”

“I’m not either.”

“But you’ve got potential and one day you might be. I like to buy in early, and cheap, if I can. In your case, I can.”

“I probably won’t stay bought.” I hoped I was right about that.

“No, you won’t. But you’ll remember. That’s better.”

I nodded, rose and left as quietly as I’d arrived. One stop completed and one to go.

Adele was sitting at the parsonage’s kitchen dinette set just like the last time I’d been here. Her head was down, resting on her forearms. The door was unlocked and I opened it when she didn’t respond to my knocking. When I got closer I could see why.

A large red puddle was spread under her where her blood had drained from an ugly and ragged exit wound at the small of her back.

It took me awhile to figure out what to do.

I couldn’t afford to get tied up in any investigation that Wannamaker and the city cops might undertake and I wanted to avoid delays in running down my own suspicions. I decided to wait until I got back to Ms.

Martha's and then call Virgil. He could decide what to do after that.

Poor Tom, I thought. He was going to blame me for this. I guessed I might let Virgil take care of the notification details, too. But when I climbed back into the Zuki I was mad.

"Screw it." I said it hard, not loud, and rolled down the eight blocks from the church to the boatyard.

"I told you to stay away." Tom was coming towards me from his office. He didn't look friendly.

"Stop." I was surprised when he did.

"Spit it out, Ethan."

"It's Adele, Tom."

He guessed and he crumpled. I ran to him, got him back on his feet, and into the car. Five minutes later I was helping him out again and into Ms. Martha's living room. She took one look, rose and helped me guide him into her fireside chair.

"Adele's dead. Shot," I said. That answered Sue and Ms. Martha's questioning looks, gave Tom the confirming detail, and let me ask him another question.

"She knew something, Tom. Do you know what?"

He shook his head and started to say something but couldn't.

We all gave him a few minutes and Ms. Martha

rustled up coffee for everyone and a bottle of Scotch for anyone who wanted it. No one did.

“I need to make a couple of calls,” I said. Sue and Ms. Martha nodded and I went to the phone.

“Virgil in?” I asked when the Trooper desk eventually picked up.

“Hello?” I was glad he’d been available. It’d cut down on explanations, at least for now.

“It’s Ethan. Adele, the secretary at St. James, is sitting dead in the parsonage kitchen.”

“You notify the city boys?”

“No.”

“She didn’t die of old age?”

“Shot. Carefully.”

“She have any local family?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Okay. I’ll take a look.”

“Thanks, Virg. I’m at Martha’s with Tom. I’ll take care of that part.”

“We’ll need to talk about this eventually.”

“I know.” I added “thanks” as I hung up.

I dialed a second number connecting me to my M.D. of choice, Doctor Brad Mays, answered on the first ring.

“I need you out here at Ms. Martha’s, Brad.”

His voice was low and I could barely hear him.

“What? No, Martha’s fine. It’s Tom from the boatyard. His friend Adele’s been killed and I think a sedative is called for.

“He’ll be along,” I said as I hung up. “Is there a room where we can put Tom?”

“Of course there is,” Ms. Martha said.

I gathered from her irritability that she hadn’t taken kindly to Dr. Brad’s assumption that she was the one requiring medical attention.

Sue nudged Tom, who managed to let her help him into a bedroom off the kitchen. It was probably, with the walnut paneling, brass hardware, ivory paint and sculpted plaster, the nicest room he’d occupied in his life. Too bad he’d never appreciate it.

Sue and I left him with Ms. Martha and returned to the coffee at the table. Sue shook a couple of smokes out of her pack of thin black French ones and we each indulged. Geez they were awful.

But there were worse problems at the moment.

While we waited for the doctor I filled Sue in on my visit to Jack Rodgers, my stop by the parsonage, and finally the boatyard.

“Is Adele one of the murdering adolescents from twenty-five years ago?” Sue asked the question, but I think we both had the same answer.

“I sure as hell hope not – for Tom’s sake if nothing else.”

“Unless Tom killed her.”

Once again Sue managed to view things a little more dispassionately than I could. She might be right. I hoped she wasn’t.

“For the moment I prefer Calvin Dale for the perp role. At least that’s how I’m going to look at it.”

“You don’t see Adele as the older accomplice?”

“No. Not easily. The description in the old file is close, but not close enough. Not even after twenty-five years. And I don’t think she was bright enough to have pulled off the deception. Mostly, though, I don’t want it to be her.”

“Which leaves Mistress Kate...”

“...or an unidentified suspect.”

“Still not voting, Ethan?”

Before I could answer that, or even stall, there was a knock at the door and Ms. Martha came out of Tom’s room to answer it.

“Ma’am. Virgil Morgan to see Ethan?”

“Come in, Mr. Morgan. Help yourself to coffee on your way to the table.” She escorted him in via the kitchen counter and they both joined us at the table.

“Dr. Dyson, nice to see you again, though the circumstances could be better.”

“You too, Mr. Morgan.” Sue smiled at the formalities.

“Virgil.” I looked at him and waited.

“It’s messy, Ethan, physically and jurisdictionally. I took a look but I had to call the city.”

“They wanted to know how you got there?”

“The proverbial anonymous phone call?”

“Works for me. Thoughts?”

Virgil leaned back in his chair and tried the coffee, found it satisfactory, and drained half his cup.

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“Here.” I slid the police report folder across the table and we all waited while he skimmed through it.

“Adele transform herself from Marilyn Jansma when she got to Kodiak?”

“I doubt it, but maybe you could see what her background is anyway?”

“Who gets tagged for the Zoetewey role?”

“Calvin Dale seems likeliest.”

I got up and retrieved the coffee pot and filled cups while the three of them sat and looked at one another.

“What’s next?” Virgil asked the big question when I’d sat down again and I didn’t have an answer beyond a shrug. “City boys are going to come looking eventually, you know.”

“I know.”



“They’ll also get to asking me questions I have the answers to. Answers I don’t think you want me giving them.”

I only nodded my agreement.

“I’ll stall as long as I can, Ethan, but you better step it up if you don’t want more trouble biting you on the ass.”

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## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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Monday, August 16

When Virgil left an hour later I still hadn't known what I was going to do, beyond trying to get some sleep. But between the day's events, Adele's death, two gallons of coffee, and the pressure I felt to figure this out, I hadn't gotten much of that. Sue had been equally wakeful and even half an hour of tossing and turning together hadn't helped us to doze off.

Five a.m. found Sue finally asleep and me prowling through the house. I checked on Tom, who was dozing with some help from the doctor. Lilly lay next to him, head on his stomach, apparently having

decided he needed her more than I did. I'd been neglecting her lately and I felt relieved that they had each other back again, though not enough to ease the load of guilt I was amassing.

I couldn't decide whether to visit Calvin before or after I saw Kate again, but that looked like the next step either way. I made coffee, fried three eggs, and ate them with a couple of pieces of toast. I wasn't hungry but it filled the time while I muddled along.

At six I got dressed, kissed Sue lightly on her forehead, let myself out, and locked the door behind me. Securing doors wasn't common in Kodiak, but I wasn't taking any more chances than I could help. Not with the way things had been going lately.

Sometime during the past hour I'd decided to visit Calvin first. Maybe it was Jeanie's comment about his private six a.m. "services" - or it might have been that he was the only player I hadn't really ever talked to. Whatever the reason, it was time for another stop at the Four-Square Whatchamacallit Chapel.

I thought about Alice Ross as I drove. The file and the crime were old but that didn't make things less chilling. The report speculated that she'd been tortured over a period of days and her body left, like Lynne's, positioned on a bed in a seemingly abandoned

house outside of Minneapolis. Investigators had eventually narrowed the possibilities down to a pair of pseudo-religious fanatical teenagers. A boy and girl who appeared to be throwbacks to the Spanish Inquisition.

The cops had moved in, but they had apparently been tipped off and fled. The file referred to pictures and fingerprints of the suspects, but I wasn't surprised to find them missing. Kodiak authorities weren't, unhappily, unique in their corruptibility.

A brief description of the woman remained: five feet five inches, blond hair, green eyes, one hundred sixty pounds. It sounded like it could refer to either Adele or Kate, unfortunately. An equally terse description of the man matched Calvin Dale.

It was close to seven a.m. and heavy dew had settled out of the gray morning fog. I parked in the Mormons' lot and walked up the road to Dale's chapel.

My view in through a side window showed Preacher Dale affecting an ornate black vest and open tuxedo shirt with black riding boots. Black leather pants completed the ensemble and the overall impression was one of thin sinewy strength that was more genetic than earned. His fairly diminutive size appeared to support my earlier Napoleonic overcompensation diagnosis, but he still didn't look like a wimp

and I didn't want to make the error of assuming he was.

Especially if he turned out to be what I thought he was.

A woman – an early morning ‘communicant’ - was nude, unrestrained, and spread-eagled on the carpet in front of the altar. She didn't seem unduly distressed as Calvin dripped hot votive candle wax onto various sensitive spots and her writhing didn't appear related to any objections. Quite the contrary.

I watched, feeling like I was the pervert here, as the party progressed. The woman looked to be in her early thirties and I hoped she was a fairly new recruit. Calvin would, I guessed, start her out at a low level, develop her interest and trust, and then she'd become prey.

I shifted my attention away from the woman and focused on Calvin. I confirmed my thought that he was a reasonably good match, modified by thirty years, for the description in Alice Ross' police file and tried to think of a good excuse for interrupting them. One that would get me more information than it cost me by alerting good old Cal.

“Shit,” I said quietly, reminding myself of who the slime-ball here was.

The church's double door was locked but years of

rain, moss and mold had rotted the frame. I pulled hard on the iron handle and the hinges buckled enough to let the doors open.

My entry hadn't made much noise and neither Cal nor his congregant had heard my approach.

"Say goodbye to the lady, Cal."

He jerked upright, swiveled to confront me, and then smiled.

"Dr. McLaren. Good of you to drop by. Darla and I were just practicing for roles in the Exorcist."

"Goodbye, Darla," I said. "It's nice to have met you, but now it's time for you to run along."

Her glance flickered between Calvin and me. She didn't seem to be in any hurry to depart.

"Now, please," I said.

"Sure." She nodded in my direction. "Cal's kind of a bore anyway."

Darla slipped into a three-quarter-length coat she didn't bother to button and a pair of heels. Walking up beside me, she handed me an engraved paper rectangle. "Here's my card. Stop over sometime and help me with my coat?"

She didn't look back as she passed through the open doors and I only glanced at the card's Darla Flickenger, Attorney at Law before shifting back to Cal.

“Tell me about Adele.”

“Terrible, Doctor. Just terrible. That fine woman...”

“Cut the crap, Calvin. What was your personal relationship with her?”

“Personal? Why, none. Why would you think anything else?”

He wasn't a terrible actor, but he wasn't good either. Maybe it was the hour, the surprise of my appearance, or just that he was used to directing questions, not answering them. Whatever the case, he was lying.

“Did you know her before you got to Kodiak, or did you only make her acquaintance after?”

“I didn't know anyone here before I took over the Chapel.”

“Not even Barrett Ross?”

He stared at me but didn't speak.

“Or his sister Alice?”

“I don't know what you're implying and I don't care, Doctor McLaren. Just leave.”

“I'm quite sure you know exactly what I mean, Cal, so don't be surprised when I come back.”

“You can't prove a thing.”

“This isn't court, there isn't a jury for you to play

to, or with, and, just so you'll know, I've reached my verdict."

He started to say something but stopped when I shook my head.

"No Brother Dale, I'm not your keeper, either."



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## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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The fog was lifting as I left the chapel and Kate's voice stopped me as I neared the gate in the picket fence.

"Early morning confession, Doctor McLaren?" An amused smile decorated her face, but didn't quite hide whatever mysteries lay behind her eyes.

"You're out early this morning, Miss Parker."

"Our conversation yesterday morning aroused my, ah, curiosity, shall we say? I thought I would refresh my memory with regard to Calvin. Perhaps you have had a similar experience?"

"I came across a piece of his past. Along with a couple of other people's."

"And?"

"Marilyn Jansma and Alice Ross." Close as I

watched I didn't see any reaction in her face or posture.

"Who would they be?"

"Barrett Ross' younger sister, murdered twenty-five years ago."

"That would be Alice, but Marilyn, what's-her-name?"

"Jansma. One of the two killers."

"You believe Calvin to be the other?"

"Yes."

"Who do you suspect Marilyn of masquerading as, Ethan?"

I didn't have any answer I cared to give to that question.

"Does your silence mean I am a suspect?"

"It's possible."

"Twenty-five years ago? I would have been a child of, oh, shall we say ten?"

"Or you have taken quite excellent care of yourself."

"Come now, Ethan." She moved closer, arching her back and moistening her lips. "A closer inspection would convince you that I am nowhere old enough to be the other villain, I think?"

"Perhaps. But not this morning."

"I'm not a patient woman, Doctor." A frown

appeared and deepened. “Should I help you resolve your distracting little mystery in return for your undivided attention?”

“I’d appreciate the help. I can’t promise the other.”

“The Dyson person?” Kate nodded her head, but continued. “Or Adele Hays, one of Calvin’s cohorts?”

“I think that Adele would have been more past tense than present, especially since she’s dead.”

“She’s dead? How?” For once she did register surprise.

“Shot. Sometime yesterday, most likely.”

“Calvin?”

“I don’t know.”

Kate reached out a hand and laid it on my arm. “Perhaps she’s, ah, was, your Marilyn person?”

I shrugged.

“I think you’re probably correct about Brother Dale, Ethan. It now appears he has simply erased his old accomplice and link to their past crimes. Mystery solved.”

“Maybe.”

“Christ you are stubborn!” Hands on hips, she was nearly stamping her foot in exasperation. “What’s wrong with my solution?”

“Nothing I can point to, but I still need Cal’s concurrence – to all of it.”

“Is that all?” I could hear the sarcasm, and see the anger.

“Almost.”

“Only almost?” Her bitterness was palpable.

“I’d have to believe it, too.”

We stood looking at each other and this time I was the one who broke it off while she continued to study me.

“Calvin has a play house.”

“In addition to his play church.”

She nodded in response. “Out towards Anton Larson bay.”

“The old homestead where Lynne’s body was found?”

“Yes.”

“And you know this how?”

“It’s a small town, Ethan.”

I thought about it while I finished the smoke.

“It’d help if I could find him returning to the scene of that crime – especially since the only records tying anyone to the place are in Lynne’s name.”

Kate also took her time in responding. When she did it was simply with a nod. Then, she turned and walked away.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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Virgil was right, my pace needed to be stepped up. Calvin wasn't going to let me meddle forever, not if the events of the past two weeks were any guide.

I also decided I could use some help and found myself stopping by the State Troopers' office and asking if Virgil was available.

"He's out somewhere," the dispatcher said. "Who's asking for him?"

I was glad that the man didn't already know. It felt better than being recognized during my forays into the city police station.

"Tell him it's Ethan."

I heard the mumbling back and forth over the radio for a minute and then the results.

“Virgil says he’s out at Lash Dock checking out an abandoned vehicle. He’ll be there another half hour or so if you want to meet him.”

“Thanks.” Lash Dock, I thought, how goddamn appropriate is that?

It took about twenty minutes to drive out through town and past the Coast Guard Base entrance to where the old dock sat, still used but less busy now that the container ships came into the new facility near downtown. Virgil was leaning on his official truck, arms crossed, waiting, apparently confident that I’d be along.

“City take over looking into Adele’s murder?” I said.

“I’m sorry, Ethan, there isn’t anything I can do. Not our jurisdiction. I had to turn it over.”

“I suppose that’ll be the case when I end up beside the road or in a landfill someplace in the not too distant future.” I hoped I wasn’t whining, but I probably was.

“If that happens I promise to personally fix it – just like you’re doing for Barrett, Lynne, and Adele.”

“If I’m dead too, it’ll mean I messed up.”

“So don’t screw it up, Ethan.”

I nodded as he got into his truck and drove off with a casual salute.

Maybe I hadn’t needed help as much as permis-

sion. I was going to need a lot of that if things panned out like I thought they might.

“But now, Brother Calvin Dale, I know you.” I said it aloud to any of the ravens, feral cattle, eagles, or migrating salmon that happened to be listening. “Only your accomplice remains to be positively identified, the sentence passed, the penalty calculated, and collected.”

I knew I was the civilian who’d drawn that particular cleanup assignment.

Things didn’t get much more Alaskan than that.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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“Are you confident that you know who is responsible for Father Ross’ death?” Ms. Martha asked as the three of us had finished a quiet lunch. We were trying not to disturb Tom, though that was unlikely through the haze of sedatives Dr. Brad had administered.

“No, and I’m not totally clear as to why. I assume it was Calvin, a.k.a. Dale Zoetewey, or his accomplice from Alice’s murder, but I’m stuck with wondering why they’d bother. Especially since they seem immune to arrest or any other sanctions.”

“I can think of an answer to that.” Sue said it, and we both looked at her expectantly. “No one here cares about anyone’s history prior to their arrival on Kodiak. Likewise, no one off-island gives a damn about



anything that happens here. And the perpetrators bought immunity from local authorities somehow.”

That’s not exactly news, I thought, trying to work ahead to the punch line without any success.

“Maybe I’m dense, but what made Reverend Ross different?”

“He wouldn’t be if you hadn’t been hired to poke around. His murder would have been written off and forgotten. Who’d even remember after a couple of weeks anyway?”

“So we know how I got to be a pain in ass, which may explain Lynne, and the attack on you, but why bother killing Barrett in the first place?”

Even as I said it I could feel the mental gears mesh. If I hadn’t spent enough time on the island to become a part of its incestuous craziness I’d have seen it sooner.

Sue saw the lights go on, smiled and nodded to me as she lit up a congratulatory smoke.

“You thought of it first,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“It’s his sister and the church.” I nodded agreement. “Your turn, Ethan.”

“With his connection to his sister’s death and his place in the church, he could have brought mainland attention to Calvin and whoever his old accomplice is, or was. Barrett would have had influence off island that they couldn’t control. But with him dead, every-

thing goes back to the status quo, except they need me to stop digging. I'm not exactly a danger, but I am a nuisance."

"A rather handsome one," Sue said, "and I hope your ego isn't bruised by being regarded as a problem rather than a danger."

"Lucky me."

"Yes." Her look turned serious. "But you'd still better watch yourself. You're becoming a danger and apt to end up like Adele. Or Lynne."

"I think it's pretty clear that either I eliminate the threat, or it will eliminate all of us."

There was a pause while we all thought that over a bit and Sue refilled coffee cups. We sat awhile longer until Ms. Martha spoke up.

"Sue is leaving shortly. Ethan, you could go as well and things would just go back to what passes for normal here on the island."

"I doubt it," I said. "Kate would punish you for stirring things up, Paul Arnesen would come back to a mess, and more people, like Adele and the woman I saw this morning at the Foursquare Chapel would fall victim to Calvin."

"I'd never be able to come back again," Sue said, "and neither would Ethan."

"Ralphie and Virgil would be stuck with having to

eat another case that they'd known the solution to, but couldn't prosecute because this is Kodiak and that's how things operate on the island."

We each thought through those bleak prospects for a half-minute.

Ms. Martha eventually broached an answer. "I can't, myself, think of a great many alternatives, Ethan."

"I can only think of one," I said.

"Are you going to be able to manage it?"

"I'm not sure. You know how it feels when what has to be done is way beyond your experience, and something you've never imagined actually having to do?"

"Yes, actually I can," Ms. Martha smiled, "having run away from home and become a whore at a very young age. Now for you, as for me sixty years ago, it may be necessary and the only alternative, and you have all of the reasons and justifications, but there's still the matter of whether or not you can actually do it. Can you?"

"It'd help if I was sure who Calvin's accomplice was."

Sue looked at me for a bit. "Adele or Kate?"

"Seems like. Adele looks good from a knowledge and opportunity standpoint – ability to inquire into

Ross' personal habits for lacing the wine, and access to the scene itself for starters – but why would she end up dead now? Kate has the edge in brains and guile. They're both the right age, though Kate passes for younger, and both have the green eyes mentioned in the police file on Alice.”

“Your preference?”

“I'd rather it was Adele in terms of justice already having been served without me having to administer it.”

“But?”

“I'd rather it was Kate for Tom's sake, and her personality's a better fit.”

“How will you decide?”

“Calvin's going to tell me – or Kate.”

During lunch I'd reported on my meeting with Calvin, including Darla, but I hadn't gotten around to my conversation with Kate. Whether I was reserving that to think it through a little more, or just to keep something to myself, I couldn't have said.

Whatever the reason, I'd now ratted myself out, and explanations were going to be called for.

“Mistress Kate is now your confidant? Your informant?” Sue sounded derisive rather than skeptical, but I couldn't fault her tone. In her place, I'd have sounded worse.

“Seems like.”

I didn't know what to say at that point so I just sat and looked back at the two of them.

“We're waiting.” Not patiently, I could have noted, but wisely didn't.

“I ran into her when I was leaving Calvin's chapel.”

Sue's look was close enough to exasperation to keep me talking.

“I intimated that perhaps she was the Marilyn Jansma associated with Alice's torture and death. She indicated that Adele was the better candidate.”

Sue toyed with a book of matches before responding.

“She admitted knowing about Alice?”

I shook my head. “She didn't admit to anything.”

“Including being enamored of you?”

“That's probably an exaggeration.”

“In heat?”

“Enough,” I said, “I'm not arguing semantics and I'm going ignore Kate's motivations for the moment. So, continuing on, she indicated that the homestead where we found Lynne was also Calvin's playhouse. I allowed as to how it would be good to catch him out there. She appeared to think that that could be arranged.”

“How?”

It was my turn to fiddle with the matchbook.

“I don’t know.”

“You think that she is Calvin’s old partner in crime, that she’s responsible for Alice’s, Barrett’s, Lynne’s and Adele’s deaths?”

“Not Adele’s. She seemed genuinely surprised when I mentioned that.”

“How does that square with the two of them as a working partnership of twenty-five years or more?”

“It doesn’t, unless they’re getting tired of each other.”

Ms. Martha had been unusually quiet while Sue and I volleyed.

“It wouldn’t be unusual,” she said, “for the two of them to have been bonded together by their past deeds while growing fractious since.”

“Kate,” I said, “might be seeing this as a chance to leave Calvin, their shared past - and current crimes - behind. Permanently.”

Sue treated me to a confirming nod and grim smile. “In which case Miss Kate Parker might just deliver on what she’s implied.”

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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The afternoon passed quietly while we all waited for whatever results my morning's forays had stirred up. Ms. Martha spent the time looking after Tom, who moved from a drugged stupor to a dazed semi-consciousness. Sue read and kept an eye on me when she thought I wasn't looking.

I took Lilly for a walk but stayed close to the house the rest of the time. I didn't want to miss any calls or visitors and I wasn't confident about our safety either. Even if Sue was better with a gun than I'd ever be.

The break came when we were each scrounging through the kitchen for snacks none of us felt like eating. We about fell over each other when the phone rang but I had the longest arms and got to it first.

"Ethan?"

“Yes, Miss Parker.”

“Calvin will be out at the homestead tomorrow evening.”

“Alone?”

“No. He said he was taking a new initiate.”

I wondered if it was Darla from this morning but decided not to ask.

“Ethan?”

“Sorry, Kate. I was thinking.” Thinking that the connection between Kate and Calvin was looking a little stronger all the time.

“Will you be going out there? Alone?”

“Seems likely.”

“Be careful, Ethan. He’s a lot more dangerous than he looks.”

And what about you, Mistress Kate? I thought, but didn’t say.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome – and Ethan? – you owe me.”

“I won’t forget.”

“See that you don’t.”



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## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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Tuesday, August 17

**I**t was about seven in the morning and Sue was sleeping quietly. I could smell bacon frying as I climbed the stairs to the kitchen, where I found Ms. Martha prowling and cooking.

“Sit, eat something, and listen.” She pushed a cup of coffee across the counter in my direction, pointed to a chair, and began filling a plate. I sat.

“I know what you are probably going to have to do, and I believe you’re up to it. But, I got you into this when I hired you to find out who killed Barrett Ross. Once, long ago, I might have had the sorts of friends who’d get the details taken care of. Then you could have gone back to bed and Sue’s considerable charms

until it was over. Sadly, I don't have those kinds of resources any more."

"I won't say I wouldn't have been tempted to let you," I said. "So, thank you for considering things even if there isn't anyone else to handle it.

"Remember, though, it isn't just about you, Ms. Martha, and Reverend Ross. It's also about Alice and Lynne, Adele and Tom. Then there're all of the ones we don't know about, and the others there will be."

I leaned back and thought. Christ, I'd only been back twelve days. What had happened to R&R? Maybe tomorrow?

"Whatever the reasons, it's mine to finish."

"I understand." I was quite sure she did. "But Ethan? Be careful and come back safe."

I nodded, finished my breakfast, checked and reholstered the Colt, leaned down and kissed her gently on top of her old gray head, and went out the door.

I spent the rest of the morning visiting the Kodiak I loved.

At Abercrombie I sat on a picnic table and reviewed the half dozen summers I spent at campsite #5. Old memories of a German chef named Edgar who baked salmon on the fire ring grate with butter, garlic and unfamiliar herbs.

There were the other nights when I'd fallen asleep

to the sounds of gunfire from the neighboring amphitheater's annual production of *Cry of the Wild Ram*, a local play about the Russian arrival on Kodiak in 1784, but suspended this year until a more politically correct rewrite was accomplished.

And the evenings I'd passed overwhelmed with loneliness and loss.

There'd also been that last visit with Lynne.

But especially there were the nights with Sue who'd led me, reluctantly, to emotions I thought I'd never feel again.

I shook myself, feeling a little unreal, and walked up to the point. There I sat under the French guns and watched the puffins flying, diving, and returning to their nests on the black sea stacks.

Proximity reminded me of the two strange evenings I'd spent up here with Paul Arnesen – and I wondered how he and Grace were doing.

I drove away from Abercrombie and past all of the houses I'd occupied: a basement apartment on Rezanof, an A-frame on Dark Lake, another chalet on Island Lake. I remembered the women whose company I'd shared, and drove past a couple of those houses too.

I parked at the marine hardware and walked the old small boat harbor docks downtown, looking into

the cold dark water for the anemones on the pilings. Later I drove across the bridge to Near Island to watch the seals on the breakwater that protected the new rows of docks and boats.

Finally, after a last drive up to the top of Pillar Mountain and a view of the town, I went home to Ms. Martha's. And to Sue.

I wrote a couple of letters and then we spent the afternoon making gentle love and napping. Neither of us spoke. There wasn't anything to say.

At about 8:00 p.m. the phone rang.

"It's Kate, Ethan. Calvin's just driven up and he isn't expected - or welcome. Do you suppose you could..."

"I'm on my way."

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## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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Fog was drifting across Three Sisters Way fifteen minutes later as I drove through the mud and potholes towards Kate's house. Her distress call had been cut short when the phone was disconnected and I'd responded as quickly as I could. Maybe she'd fought him off, maybe she was dead, or dying, maybe it was a trap. Regardless, I drove past the house, saw nothing, went another quarter mile, and executed a quiet U-turn.

I parked just in time to see them leave the house by a side door. Calvin was propelling Kate, whose hands were bound behind her, into an old Land Rover. I could see that she was gagged and he carefully loaded her, then secured her seat belt before climbing into the driver's seat and heading back towards Rezanof.

It seemed like Kate was probably safe for the moment, at least long enough for me to make a quick call. I left the Zuki by the roadside and hurried to Kate's. I wasn't surprised to find the door open and it didn't take long to find the phone and dial the number.

Sue answered on the second ring.

"It's Calvin. He's got her and I imagine that they're headed across the island."

"It's not some trick to lure you there?"

"I don't know. She was bound and gagged for whatever that's worth."

"You're going after them."

It was a statement, not a question.

"Ethan?"

"I've gotta go, Sue."

"At least call Virgil. Or let me."

"No. He can't help. You can talk to Ms. Martha about that if you want, but don't call anyone."

I hung up before she could respond or argue. This was going to be impossibly difficult no matter what, and officials would only hinder, prolong, and possibly prevent what had to happen.

The late Alaska evening sun still shone when I drove by the house and parked a quarter mile away. Old safety habits die hard and I took a minute to slip a sixth round into the empty chamber I usually kept

under the Colt's hammer. I hoped I wouldn't need it. That accomplished, I headed back up the road.

There was a little breeze in the willows. An eagle flapped away from its nest in a cottonwood about fifty yards off the road and I could hear a late-running salmon jump in the bay, but nothing else.

I didn't see anything out of the ordinary as I walked carefully towards the house. No lights showed and no smoke rose from the fireplace chimney. The collapsed Quonset huts were still flattened and the ruined tractors still sat forever idled. The moldy haystacks may have grown another layer of moss, but those were about all of the outward changes.

I eased up to the house's front corner, the one farthest from the main bedroom, and stopped to listen. I didn't hear anything from inside.

The wind shifted away from the road to the brush off to my right. The rustling of twigs and leaves accompanied the familiar garbage dump smell of grizzly that wafted in.

A bear – probably the old one we'd seen at the hotel and again on the golf course, working his way across the island – wasn't too far away. I wished I could afford to make some noise. Bruin and I weren't the ones who were supposed to be in for surprises this evening.

I looked off into the wild roses, devils club and salmonberry thickets but couldn't see him. He probably couldn't see me either, but if I could smell him that meant he'd scented me before the wind shifted. He was solitary and past his prime. I hoped I didn't exude an aroma that advertised easy pickings.

I might have stood there dithering half the night but the bear's presence did provide motivation to get inside. I pressed forward along the house's west wall to the corner, turned, and stopped by the window leading to the unused bedroom. There wasn't any noise coming from it and the window was locked. I considered forcing the lock, but I wanted to hear, not be heard.

The second window had more potential. I couldn't see in, thanks to heavy drapes, so I held my breath and got my left ear next to the glass. The muffled sounds were just loud enough to be recognizable: the thwack of leather on skin; the muffled squeal escaping past a gag; the stomping of high heels on hardwood.

From the earlier visit I pictured the room and remembered Lynne. I could also imagine the current occupants. Tonight, someone else would be strung up by the wrists, tethered via the ceiling mounted pulley and the wall cleat, while another entertained himself with such accoutrements as the room offered. This



time it was Kate, feet pounding out an arrhythmic beat on the floor, who was trussed up and dangling.

The picture I conjured up was a touch too vivid for my comfort. I could visualize her naked except for the knee-high black boots with four-inch heels. Leather cuffs, roped together, holding her arms overhead, keeping her standing but mobile. Gag muffling her protests. The waist length blond braid unwoven. Green eyes blurring as she slipped spasmodically out of control.

She wouldn't go easily. He'd earn whatever jollies he got from driving her, plunging and gasping, wherever he intended - over the edge of erotic unconsciousness.

Careening between worries about the old grizzly's proximity, and the increasingly disturbing mental images, there didn't seem much point in lingering outside, playing bear bait and tormenting myself. As busy as Cal was with Kate, he wasn't apt to notice anything going on outside of that one room.

I could, I thought, enter the house with impunity, and take him after he'd exhausted himself on her. Somehow, I wasn't feeling much urgency to rescue Ms. Kate.

It was more of a plan than I usually managed. I hoped it would be enough.

I retraced my steps, rounded the corner of the house, intent on the front door, and a little too careless about my surroundings. The bear “whoofed” from a dozen yards away, tested the breeze with his nose, and looked like he was trying to get his eyes to focus on me. He did a sort of half rear and I eased back around the corner.

Shit.

Useless as it was, I couldn't help reviewing all the advice I'd ever given about surviving bear attacks: feed everyone else bacon for breakfast; always travel with people who run slower than you do; never carry a gun – bears are unpredictable, but wounded bears are extremely predictable; and, always run downhill – bears are top heavy and can't run downhill. Of course I had no companions, a useless revolver, and was at sea level where the terrain's kinda short on downgrades.

Reduced to hoping I could lure the bear away from the front door, I cautiously crept around the house, circling back just in time to see him prowling along my back trail. I waited until he was out of sight, slipped onto the porch, and tested the door. Locked.

Damn.

But the old knob lock wasn't much of a deterrent. My pocketknife's blade snicked back the tang and I eased the door open. Slipping inside, I pushed it shut

and hoped that old Bruin B. Bear didn't have a pocketknife and didn't know how flimsy the door was.

A glance around the living room revealed that nothing had changed since my previous visit.

The bedroom door was closed, but considerably more noise escaped through the thin wood panels than had through the floor-length drapes and double-glazed windows.

The thwack of leather, and boot heels on the hardwood floor. The muffled moans.

I hoped that they'd been at it for a while. I could hear additional whimpering protests, followed by higher pitched yelps. Her vocals had an involuntary, unaffected, timbre that suggested her control was slipping away. So was mine.

Christ!

It took a few seconds to regain my composure, slip across the living room, and edge down the hall. I stopped at the door, avoiding, delaying, listening.

"That's my girl," Calvin said. I heard the something strike and another sound, perhaps a whip.

"Yeeeeee!" Her muffled response carried through the door and I felt chilled, fascinated, repulsed.

"Now, my wanton bitch of a sister!" Another blow landed and Kate responded with a shrieking moan.

Sister! Sweet Jesus.

My right hand tightened its grip on the revolver as my left tested the door. Unlocked and well oiled, it swung open easily and quietly. Sweating, I stepped through while Cal, his back to me, intensified his assault on Kate's body.

The scene exceeded even my imaginings. Kate was tethered to the ceiling, as I'd guessed, though the bed was gone. A weighted gold chain connected brass clamps that squeezed her dark tumescent nipples and draped down across her rounded belly.

The black boots were laced from her toes to her knees, and the matching leather gag cut off her voice, but not her breath. Wrist cuffs knotted to the ropes that suspended her completed her ensemble.

Kate saw me almost immediately.

Her eyes danced and brows rose as she turned slightly towards me. Oblivious, Cal's left hand applied the crop and Kate's head rocked back in excruciatingly painful delight and the sounds I'd heard through the window and door emanated from her throat.

Her boot heels stamped out a corresponding beat as she straightened up in time to cast me a predatory look before Cal's right hand lashed her with an eight foot single-tail that coiled around her torso like a boa constrictor. He pulled back hard, pivoting her on her feet.

When Kate stopped turning she didn't topple or slump over. Nor, apparently, was she looking at Cal the way he expected. Instead, her eyes met mine, her legs spread and her knees locked as she defied Cal and enticed me.

Confused, Cal turned to see what had stolen her attention.

"Asshole!" He screamed and his whip hand again flexed back then forward. The long lash encircled my right wrist like hot barbed wire as I tried, too late, to bring the gun up. Cal jerked the whip back and my gun fell, skittering across the floor towards Kate. Seeing that my hand was caught, he pulled back again, harder, playing crack-the-whip with me on the wrong end of the chain.

I stared into his eyes, and saw their malicious gleam, just before my momentum carried me headfirst into the far wall.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY

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“Is that all, wimp?” I heard her voice say. “Harder!”  
I was lost in a welter of shifting shapes, confusing voices.

“Yes!” her screaming pain-driven ecstasy dragged me back to consciousness.

I came to in a state of confusion. Shoulders aching, legs and feet disconnected and far away. I couldn't separate my hands and my fingers had lost some of their feeling. I was sweating, and cold. What sounds I heard seemed to come from far away.

I opened my eyes a bare slit and what I saw didn't help. A half dozen feet to my right Kate hung slumped from the rope that ran from her wrists to the ceiling and down to the wall cleat. She was breathing heavily but not moving much.

I'd been strung up via the second ceiling pulley, much the same as Kate, though judging from how I felt, I undoubtedly looked a lot worse.

Cal sat on the floor across from us with his back to the wall. The whip lay coiled in his lap and my revolver was next to him. He didn't look any happier than he had when he'd slung me headfirst into the damn wall.

"God damn fickle bitch!" He glared at Kate. "Why the hell..."

I tried to put a little weight on my feet without attracting attention, but the effort and the pain had me slipping towards unconsciousness again. I saw Cal's attention shift to me as I blacked out again.

This time I actually woke up, but that didn't make it any better. I was still trussed up like Kate's twin, my shoulder joints about to pop out of their sockets with most of my weight hanging from them.

"Boring little parasite." Kate's voice oozed disdain. Not hatred or anger.

"Fuck you!"

"Try it, little brother."

I heard all of Kate's unveiled contempt.

"Why him?" Anger replaced Cal's whine. "Tell me, damn it, why him?"

"Beg, little Callie boy, and maybe I'll let you watch

and then you'll know. I'll be like mommy and let you..."

"Bitch! Shut up or I'll gag you again!" He leapt to his feet and shook out the whip.

Kate laughed as the lash licked at her torso. He ducked back just in time when she raised her feet and swung from the suspension rope like a trapeze artist – aiming a lethal boot heel at his face.

"Screw you, sis. You watch." He said it softly as he moved out of her range and faced me.

The whip seemed to unfurl towards me in slow motion until Cal's wrist pulled back at the perfect moment. The nylon popper broke the sound barrier just as it touched the skin on my chest, its micro-sonic boom no match for my scream.

A dozen more lashes seared my back and stomach until I drifted off, away from the pain, abandoning that writhing person who hung helpless and dying.

From some inner vantage point I could see Kate reacting to the violence, hips gyrating, breath coming hard and fast.

Cal smiled, lost in the sadistic joy of his work.

Idly, I saw Sue's face and I tried to smile goodbye – saw us making love at Ms. Martha's.

As I pivoted on the ropes my fingers found that the



wrist closures were Velcro – not straps with buckles and locks. Safety releases. But how to get the dozen seconds I needed to open the cuffs and get to Cal?

He heard it before I did and the whip faltered as he turned towards the door.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

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Sue's gun appeared first, then her head, but by that time the whip was snaking out and reaching for the pistol, as it had my Colt. And again, the lash reached her hand before she located him, and the gun clattered to the floor as he hauled her to him like a freshly hooked halibut.

Sue's face, lurching towards him, only had time to register surprise before his fist connected with her chin and she dropped in a heap.

"Christ," Cal said. He leaned over her and rolled her onto her back. "Where the fuck did you come from?"

Good question, I thought as my numbed fingers tore at the fasteners while Cal was distracted by Sue's entrance. But the sound of the Velcro closure ripping

open warned him as I broke out of the cuffs. I was too weak to attack him directly, so I'd decided to go for my gun, Cal being between me and Sue's, which was still lying next to the wall. I didn't make it even a third of the way.

The whip reached out again, coiled around my left wrist, giving Cal the grip he needed to divert me.

With no point in resisting, I surprised Cal by lunging towards him with what force I had left, my forearm catching him under the chin, and my bloody torso bulling him back against the wall. I heard the "umph" as the air went out of him, but I also felt his knee as it jerked up into my crotch. I lost my momentum and my grip as I dropped to my knees and Cal lurched to one side.

We were still connected by the whip. He couldn't get his hand out of the loop that kept it secured to his wrist, and I couldn't get the lash unwrapped from my own wrist. I tried crawling towards where my gun lay, but Cal saw what I was doing, hauled back on the whip again, and kicked the revolver towards Kate. That stopped me, but it didn't help him.

Or so I thought until he pulled the eight-inch, thin bladed filleting knife out of his boot.

He smiled and started towards me as I rolled after the gun, using up the slack in the whip as he came

closer. I ended up about six inches from Kate's boots. I looked up and caught a glimpse of Kate's face, eyes wide, hips thrusting as Cal and I fought. I could hear a high-pitched keening, the sound of a teapot about to boil, escaping from her mouth.

I should have been paying more attention to Cal and less to the floorshow. He wasn't left handed, and his right was still snarled up with the whip, but the knife came too damn close anyway. I rolled out of the way when he pounced just as Kate's boot kicked my Colt across the room and into the far corner. Shit!

I was down on my back with barely the strength to get up and Cal was clambering back to his feet. He had a smile, a knife, and definitely the advantage. But he should have been paying more attention to killing me and less to performing for Kate.

As he started towards me, Kate's foot, accidentally or purposefully, snaked out and tripped him. He went down in a sprawling heap as I regained my footing.

Dragging Cal behind me, I made it to the corner and retrieved the revolver.

"No you don't, mother fucker," he said as he struggled upright.

Kate was dancing like a puppet with a few cut strings and I thought, shit, I've never shot anyone in my

goddamn life, I'm a terrible shot, and I don't think I can do this.

But Cal wasn't calling a time out. He charged forward as I dropped to the floor and rolled onto my back. I raised the Colt as he pronounced the final benediction of his ecclesiastical career.

"Now asshole, crawl on your goddamn belly and die!" he said, as he reached up to plunge the knife down, theatrical to the last.

The Colt jumped with the shot's recoil and the slug caught him under the chin. It lifted him as it exited out the crown of his head, then deposited him in a heap. A fair amount of blood and brains went with it, splattering Kate from forehead to knees with scarlet gore.

Her eyes flashed, she screamed, and went slack.

I sat up, amazed. I'd actually shot him. I was even more surprised that the bullet had gone roughly where I intended.

I dropped the gun, unwrapped the whip's lash, stood, and limped over to where Sue lay.

God, don't let her be dead.

She wasn't. Knocked cold but breathing evenly and the pulse in her neck felt steady. She'd sustained a cut lip that bled a little and she'd wake up with a lot of aches, pains, and questions, but those would wait.

My question was how the hell did she get here? Her SUV had been blown to shit and I thought I'd left her safely with Ms. Martha. Whatever the case, I needed to get her out of the house before Kate came to. My evening's work wasn't over yet.

I picked her up as gently as I could, carried her out to the front room, and laid her on the sofa. I carefully opened and peered out the front door, stepped onto the front porch, and looked for the bear.

I didn't see Bruin, but fifty feet away I saw a black 1950s model Mercedes Benz sedan with the motor running and its elderly driver hunched over the steering wheel. I guess that answered any questions regarding Sue's arrival. I wanted to be angry about their following me out here, except I'd be dead if they hadn't.

I waved to Ms. Martha and motioned for her to drive closer. She nodded, eased the car into gear, and pulled up almost to the porch steps.

I walked over the passenger side door, opened it, and stuck my head in.

"Didn't know you could drive," I said, as I noticed the Winchester Model '97, 12-gauge shotgun that lay across her lap, the barrel resting on the driver's windowsill.

"There's probably a lot of things I can do you don't

know about, Doctor, including dealing with anyone besides you and Sue who came out through that door.”

“Good.”

“Now where’s Sue?”

“Inside.” She started to ask another question but I raised my hand. “She’s okay. Unconscious, but otherwise intact. I’m going to carry her out here and you’re going to get her back across the island just as fast as you can.”

“You’re not coming along?”

“I’m not quite finished here.”

She looked at me for only a second and nodded.

“After Dr. Brad takes a look, you are going home and you will stay there. Am I making myself clear?”

“Very.” She looked at me and a soft smile broke across her face as a tear trickled down her cheek. “You sound so much like the captain, Ethan. Thank you.”

I didn’t have any answer to that so I just turned, went in, picked up Sue, and carried her out to the car. Between us, Ms. Martha and I got her loaded in and secured the after-market seatbelts. That done, I closed the door, rapped my knuckles on the roof, and watched as Ms. Martha reversed carefully, backed out onto the road, and headed across the island in a hail of gravel.

That only left Mistress Kate. Time to see what she was hanging around for.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

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**K**ate was still out when I got back to the bedroom. I dragged Cal's body into a far corner, being careful not to look too closely at the damage the bullet had done, and kicked his knife to the wall from where it had fallen beside me.

I collected and pocketed Sue's pistol, realized that my whiplash wounds were pulling and hurting with every movement, and, finally, lit the cigarette I'd wanted for an hour, and waited for Kate to revive.

It took awhile. She hadn't fainted, or died from fright. I walked to the wall and started to untie the rope from the cleat and lower her, but thought better of it and left her hanging. I lifted an eyelid, exposing one rolled back eyeball. Her breathing was returning



to normal and her pulse was regular so it didn't seem likely she'd stroked out. More's the pity.

I finished the cigarette, ground out the butt on the floor, leaned back against the wall, slide down to the floor, continued to avoid looking at Calvin's remains, and waited some more.

"Ahhhhhh," she exhaled. "Oh, Ethan! Jesus!"

I didn't have any response to that, for which I was duly thankful.

"God, Ethan! That's the best it's ever been!"

I kept on waiting. Besides, what was there to say?

"Son of a bitch! Suddenly you were here like I planned. Then you and Calvin are fighting over me and, and, god, he knocks you out and strings you up.

"Shit, Ethan, I thought it was all over for both of us. But then that meddling fat bitch comes out of nowhere. How'd you arrange that?"

I didn't say anything. No need to. Mistress Kate was wound tight already.

"Then she's down and you're loose and Calvin's after you again. Jesus' shit! Your gun goes off, Cal's head explodes, and so do I! Oh, damn, Ethan. Can we do it again? Please?"

Narcissistic bitch, is what I thought, along with a couple of things I didn't even want to confess to myself.

“I don’t think we’ll be staging any repeat performances.” I felt more frightened now than when I’d been battling Cal.

“Of course we will, Ethan. We can’t stop now. We’ve just started.”

“No.”

“Damn it, Ethan, I didn’t set this up just to get rid of Calvin. You owe me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You let me down. Now!” Her anger was getting the better of her.

And Calvin hadn’t used safety cuffs with Kate. Hers were securely locked. Thank god.

“I think I’m safer with you this way.” I watched her, still wondering about the details.

“Why the kidnap scene, Kate? Why not just drive out here with him?”

“It’s part of an old game, Ethan, dear. We haven’t played it since we were kids. Except this time I don’t think Calvin was playing. It certainly got me going too – just like it used to.”

I didn’t have any response to that, except to wait for the changes I knew would follow. My clinical experiences relocated, amplified, more grotesque.

“Ethan,” she pouted, “if you won’t let me down, can’t you at least enjoy me? I’m all wet and ready. Cal

got me started and you sent me over, now it's your turn and I want seconds. And thirds. Please? Oh, please..." she continued, fueled by all of the genuine anger and false seduction.

"Oh, Daddy. Take me now, Daddy. Please, Daddy. Use me Daddy." Her knees bent and legs spread. Her hips thrust in my direction.

"Please?" she simpered.

Her eyes never left mine as I watched, one act following another. Faster and faster. Scanning, searching. Alternating anger with seduction. Seeking the right combination that would return control to her. She was very, very good.

But not quite good enough. Listening to all of those lost children in the psyc hospital had inoculated me, even if Kate's crimes hadn't.

I turned away from her, avoided looking, and listened as she wound down.

"What are you going to do, Ethan? Take me back to those stupid police? How will you explain Calvin? The police won't touch me either. I have the pictures, the tapes, the videos, the letters. And fat dumb old Wannamaker."

"Adele?" I said, turning back. "Explain that."

"Stupid Calvin," she said. "He always dealt poorly with rejection. But, Ethan, it's too late to prosecute

him for that. Or to tie me to it. But it's not too late to tie me to something else."

I knew she'd never give up.

"I could send you Outside. Alice, the minister's sister. That's still an open case." I knew I couldn't, but I was shakier and weaker than she realized and I needed to keep her at bay long enough to steel myself for what had to be done.

"Tell me about Alice, Kate."

"Weak, stupid ninny," Kate said. "Whined for three days before we stopped her miserable begging."

"She was your first victim?"

"Yes, brother Cal and I were just getting started."

"You're siblings? Really?" Ah, traditional Midwest family values, I thought.

"Half-brother. Different fathers. Mother trained us well. Come here, Ethan, let me show you all of the things mommy taught us."

I needed the subject changed. "You don't seem to be mourning brother Cal's recent passing," I said as I turned back to face her.

"He'd gotten very boring. But you, Ethan..." she was on the offensive again, eyes, lips, tongue, torso and thighs all conspiring, "...you aren't even a little bit boring. And, really, you don't have any choice." She

continued, as she dangled from the ropes, to aim slow hip thrusts in my direction.

When she didn't get any response from me, her tactics changed again.

"You'll never get me off the island, you know. Hell, you'll be dead before you've even made a decent try at it. So will your damn meddling friends."

"I'd thought about that, and I'm grateful for your confirmation. If it helps any, I agree. That's about how I've got it figured too."

"Good." She smiled again, confidence returning. "Sooo, it's still your choice. Take me now or save me for later? Maybe in those rooms I've heard Miss Martha has, after we dispose of her? The interfering bitch."

She was making it easier, and I could have thanked her for that. But I didn't, and I still had a few questions.

"Why Lynne?"

"Why? Because she knew that Calvin and I were connected. Not all of the details of course, but too much for comfort. Then I heard she'd met with Ross on the ferry crossing. That did it. Besides, I worried you might lose interest in the minister's murder and I didn't want that."

"You didn't kill her to scare me off?" I was

incredulous.

“Quite the contrary. I killed her, and made Calvin call it in, to make sure you’d keep coming closer without tying me to Alice. So now, darling, take what you know you want.”

“But, Kate, or Marilyn, or whoever you are, you tried to blast Sue into scrap meat at Abercrombie.” I still wasn’t connecting every last fragment.

“No. I was watching and did the detonating myself. It wasn’t on a timer, daddy, but I am and mine’s running down.” Her eyes locked on mine again as her legs spread farther yet and her hips thrust emphatically towards me.

“You put the bomb in Sue’s car and set it off as another inducement?”

“Cal planted it. He thought I’d use it to get rid of you two. Silly Calvin. I just set it off before he could hurt the wrong person. He liked his toys.”

As I walked across to her, she smiled, arched her spine, threw back her shoulders, and thrust her breasts towards me. When I was near enough, she hung her weight from her arms, swung herself back, then forward like a gymnast, and encircled my waist with her legs.

“Take me! Now!”

“Oh, yes.” She moaned softly, eyes nearly closed.

“Yes. Oh, oh, please, Daddy.”

I stepped back as her heels dug into the small my back and her eyes opened. “No, Daddy. Come closer, Daddy. Closer.”

Our eyes met as she willed my return.

I pulled back, broke her legs’ hold, and retreated ten feet to lean my wounded back against the opposite wall again - the pain less intense than my fear of Kate - feeling far more comfortable next to Cal’s dead body than to her live one.

“Come on, Ethan. This isn’t fun anymore. Take me home and we can play whatever games you like. Please?”

I looked at Kate and thought about Lynne. I added mental pictures of Barrett Ross, his sister Alice, Adele and all the others I’d never hear about. That inventory of evil shored up my ebbing resolve as I leavened it with a glimpse of Sue lying limp on the floor after Cal’s assault.

But I still knew I couldn’t just kill her in cold blood and leave her hanging there – no matter how necessary. How justified. Or momentarily satisfying.

I think she glimpsed my hesitation, smelled victory, and congratulated herself.

For just a moment.

“Ethan!” she said, and her eyes widened as she let

out a shriek and jerked upright to her full height.

My peripheral vision caught a glimpse of a brown blur to my right, as the bear, drawn to Kate's noise and movement, pushed through the doorway, crossed the room - his old dim eyes missing my presence against the wall - and reared up on his hind legs in front of her. Whether I'd left the door ajar, or he'd found another way in, I couldn't say, but here he was.

He roared and Kate roared back. Standing, the old grizzly reached out and pulled her close into a deadly bear hug, his jaws going for her throat as she screamed defiance.

It was over in seconds.

I edged along the wall and backed out through the door, trying not to attract his attention, my movements covered by the carnage he was wreaking.

Closing the bedroom door on the horrific scene, I fled through the living room and out the front door. I closed the door behind me though I doubted Bruin would be following along anytime soon.

From the porch I took a deep breath, then several more, looked up and saw the eagle glide back to its nest, listened, and heard another salmon jump in the bay.

Then, without looking back, I ran to the relative safety of my car.



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## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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I started back across the island and after a few miles pulled over in the deserted ski slope parking area. I got out of the Zuki and leaned on the fender looking back towards the house and bay. The gray sky was beginning to lighten, but there wasn't anything to see.

And listening probably wasn't a good idea, either. I sighed, got back into my car, and headed back into town.

At the hospital's emergency entrance Dr. Bradley was on duty.

"Sue and Ms. Martha here?"

"I sent them on home, Ethan. Sue was awake when they got here and didn't seem concussed or anything else very serious."

"Good. Thanks for taking a look, Brad."

“They wouldn’t tell me what happened. I don’t suppose you will either, will you?”

I just shook my head.

“I didn’t think so.”

He wasn’t happy when I left without being examined and attended to, but I wasn’t asking permission. Not tonight. Not from anyone. Not for anything.

I parked in front of Ms. Martha’s, walked up the boardwalk, and stumbled in through the unlocked front door. For once I forgot to shuck off my boat moccasins. Both Sue and Ms. Martha’s eyes turned and a sigh escaped from one or the other of them, maybe both.

I must have looked even worse than I felt since the next thing I remember is leaning on the two of them and being helped into a chair. I sat there as my shoes got removed and a drink appeared on one arm of the chair.

Rarely in my life have I felt so well cared for.

“I don’t think we will be troubled any further.” I even meant it, no bravado involved.

“The details can wait. Forever, as far as I am concerned,” Ms. Martha said. “Sue? We need to patch the man up and you can put him to bed.”

“No,” I said, “not quite yet. I need a little time and both of you close.”

They stayed, perched on chair arms on either side of me, while I finished the drink.

Nodding my readiness, Sue helped me out of the bloody shirt. That accomplished, she and Ms. Martha got out the alcohol and disinfected the lash wounds on my chest and back. It took awhile to recover from the pain of their attentions.

An hour or so later, ricocheting between pain and sleep, I levered myself out of the chair and, with every muscle and joint complaining, descended to the lower level bedroom. Sue drew the drapes, blocking out the advancing morning light, and waited while I undressed and climbed into bed.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“All of it. For chasing after me out there and saving my sorry ass. For being who and what you are, but, mostly, for teaching me to live again when I’d about given up.”

Then, with my head nestled against her breast, I slept.

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

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Wednesday, August 18

**W**hen I awoke it was early evening. There was fresh coffee on the bedside table and I hadn't had more than a swallow when Sue came back to sit beside me.

"How's the detective?"

"Sore everywhere and numb around the edges. How's the chin?"

"Nothing wrong with me a little dull routine wouldn't fix. Do you suppose we can arrange a day or two like that?"

"We can try." I felt a bit of a smile trying to work its way across my lips. "How's Ms. Martha?"

"I don't know. She's sitting in her chair and staring

into the fire, but she isn't saying anything."

"I'd better go up and see her."

"Yes, but it can wait a little while longer. I need just a bit more of you first, make sure that most of you came back last night."

I didn't want to look back at the previous evening, but couldn't avoid it.

"I've never killed anyone before."

"They're really dead? Both of them?"

"Yes. I killed Cal outright. The bear took her."

"Jesus." She said it very quietly.

"How are you feeling, Ethan?"

"Better than I should." It was true, which surprised the hell out of me. I felt more guilt about feeling good than I did about the killing. I wasn't sure what that made me, but for the moment I didn't care.

"Go on up and see her then. I'll be here whenever you come back down."

"I want you. Now. And I'll want you more when I come back down."

"Spoils of war." She smiled a familiar smile and lay back on the bed. "I shall be suitably arrayed and awaiting your pleasure – as well as my own."

Ms. Martha was sitting upright in her chair, unblinking, and I went and knelt beside her, wrapped

my arm around her thin shoulders and pulled her close.

“Oh, God, Ethan. What have I done?”

“Nothing that didn’t need doing.” I said it softly, and held her while she wept.

After a time she shook herself, straightened and turned to look at me. “If it hadn’t been for me Father Ross would still be alive.”

“And so would the pair who murdered his sister and who knows how many others? Besides, this is where he wanted to be.”

“I can’t repay you for everything you’ve lost.”

“You don’t have to. I came back to the island bereft and afraid. Now I have you and Sue for Christ’s sake. Never mind standing invitations from a couple of the more exotic women on the island.”

“I doubt many of those so-called invitations involve much standing.” I was glad to hear a snort returning to her vocabulary.

I smiled at her and squeezed her thin shoulder. “And don’t forget, that Arnesen boy will likely be back in a few months and wanting to visit.”

“You know, don’t you, that the room and the house are yours for as long as you want them, or need them?” she said, transparently changing the subject.

“I know.” I said it softly, having my own problems keeping a tear or two at bay.

“We never settled on your fee.”

“It’s been more than covered.”

“Perhaps, but I’ll still be visiting my banker tomorrow and there will be another envelope on the table, and you will take it, and keep your damn mouth shut.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Now get back downstairs and bed that woman. She’s been waiting for you and I can’t be expected to take care of every last detail.”

I stood, leaned down and hugged her as she glared at up at me. “Whatever you say, Ms. Martha.”

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## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

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Saturday, August 21

Virgil pulled me over near the Gibson's Cove turnoff as I was driving in from the airport. Reverend Ross' body had been flown back from Anchorage at Ms. Martha's insistence and expense. I'd seen to the details of getting it transported to the church for services. The Bishop was flying out from Anchorage to officiate at the funerals, both Barrett's and Adele's. Ms. Martha hoped Reverend Ross would have wanted it that way and I agreed.

It seemed likely that the services would be the building's last.

"How have you been keeping, Ethan?" He leaned



against my fender as I climbed out of the Zuki and joined him.

“Not so bad, Virg. Yourself?”

“Okay. You know there was another mess over on t’other side of the island?”

“Oh?”

“That house where you, Ralphie and Sue found Lynne.”

“A mess?” My hand was pretty steady as I lit a cigarette.

“Couple of bodies. Or, more accurately, remains of pieces of bodies.”

“Mutilation?” I managed to meter just a hint of surprise into my voice.

“No, not exactly.” He let out a long, knowing, sigh. “Bear.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Probably, knowing you, but, since nobody is claiming to know anything, and a number of folks are looking relieved, why should you be any different?”

“There’s that.” We discovered we didn’t have anything else to say. “Well, I guess I better go see to the rest of the priest’s funeral arrangements. Good luck with sorting out what happened.”

“Ethan? Just in case you might wonder, there

won't be much of an investigation. Hell, whatever happened, I figure the Island took care of it."

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## EPILOGUE

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Labor Day, September 6

I suppose a lot happened in the nineteen days since that night, but in comparison, it didn't seem like much.

Sue delayed her return to Pennsylvania for a month and we spend a lot of the extra weeks getting to know each other better. We hiked around town and chartered a plane to fly us around the island to browse around old cannery and saltery sites.

As Ms. Martha's guests we flew out to a National Wildlife Refuge cabin at O'Malley River cabin and spent three days watching the bears we'd come to feel a special relationship with. Other days we spent beach-

combing on deserted inlets and collecting glass Japanese fishing net floats.

With our hostess' permission we explored rooms she'd kept locked and barred for years. She wouldn't talk about the contents, including a barely used cradle, but she did encourage us to keep looking.

Mostly, though, we slept late, cooked, read by the fire, and made love, both gentle and rough. Neither of us able to get enough of being entwined in each other's arms.

Ralphie was still in Minneapolis, maybe returning by Christmas. Possibly with company. Someday I might tell him how things panned out. Then again, maybe I wouldn't.

Grace Arnesen had died, peacefully, surrounded by Paul and her children. I wondered if he would be back for the holidays.

Tom had put his Chiniak house, with its painful memories and broken dreams, up for sale and moved into his boatyard office. I'd stopped by one afternoon, dropped off Lilly - who knew where she was most needed - waved to him as she went and stood beside him, and drove away. He waved back with one hand as the other dropped to scratch her ears.

Ms. Martha had invited me to stay for the winter and it looked like I'd probably take her up on the offer.

Today, on this holiday evening, Sue and I drove out to Abercrombie in the Arnesen's Winnebago. A nostalgic visit to where it had all started.

We sat at the picnic table at campsite #5 and shared vodka and cigarettes just as we'd been doing before Ralphie's boyish deputy had interrupted us and sent us out to Anton Larson Bay and Lynne's death scene. It seemed like months had passed.

"You ever going to finish telling me about the tattoos?" I asked.

"No." She was smiling broadly as she answered. "I've had a better idea."

"Which is?"

"For that you'll have to wait, but I'm planning a Christmas visit, if that meets with your approval." She looked at me for a long seductive moment.

"It's only you leaving at all that I disapprove of." I was going to miss the hell out of her and I wasn't even slightly tempted to deny it.

"It's been a long time," I said, "since I looked forward to Christmas."

"You know," she said, "that you mean more to me than anyone since Edgar ever has?"

"And for my part, when we're together, Dr. Sue, I feel like I have come home, except I've never had a home to come to before you."

“It isn’t just me who feels this way?”

“No, love, it most assuredly is not.”

“So for today’s Labor Day celebration, my somewhat battered, infamous, and disheveled lover, have you ever done it in a motor home?” Her eyes twinkled as she unfastened the top buttons of her blue checked flannel shirt to reveal breasts cresting above a black whalebone corset she’d liberated from Ms. Martha’s collection.

“No,” I said.

“Good. I’m glad we each have these shreds of virginity left to trade.”

“Not for long,” I said.

“I should hope not.”

– THE END –

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## HARBOR LIGHTS

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*The next Ethan McLaren Kodiak Island  
mystery will be available in 2020!*

### **Harbor Lights: Prologue**

It was very quiet in the gym at midnight and she loved the stillness as she lay back lengthwise on the narrow bench, enjoying the sensation of the leather on her skin, and looking up at the barbell lying across the support pegs on the rack overhead. Above the bar her spotter smiled confidently down at her.

“You can do this!”

She gripped the bar, her hands measuring the right balance points, felt confidence grow, and nodded.

“One, two, three,” the spotter said helping with the lift off.

Elbows locked until the bar stabilized, she began lowering the weights towards her chest. The forty-five pound bar with fifty pounds of added weight at each end would be a personal best in the bench press – 145 pounds.

As she dropped the bar towards her chest she became aware of the spotter’s hands hovering, poised to help if the weight was too much.

The bar touched for an instant across her breasts and she felt the momentary thrill as she began pushing it back up, feeling the physical and mental rush as her muscles responded and she knew she could do it.

Halfway up the spotter’s hands gripped the bar.

“What the hell,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m not in trouble. Let go.”

“I’m afraid you are,” was the answer, as the hands pushed the bar down and across her neck. “Though this lift was, forever, your personal best.”

## **Harbor Lights: Chapter 1**

It was 4:00 in the morning when Sam maneuvered his aching body out of his battered white pickup in the Harbor Lights Gym parking lot. Though stiff from



seventy odd years of wear and tear, injury and illness, his weight lifters body still incited younger men's envy – and a number of women's lust. Sam didn't object, merely ignoring the former, and indulging the latter.

He stretched in Kodiak's early morning October cold and looked up at the moonlight gleaming off Pillar Mountain's recent snowfall. How quickly the island had gone from summer's emerald green to the brief autumn gold, to winter white. Sam frowned to himself, thinking how the daylight had shrunk, from June's twenty hours to today's fourteen or so, and with another two months of additional encroaching darkness to go until the December equinox.

He thought about his own shortening days as well, shivered, then laughed aloud, and hobbled across the lot favoring his misshapen left leg. The moon's glow, in the early hours of a rare clear morning, reflected off his full head of white hair as he bent over and fitted the key into the front door's big Schlage lock. The deadbolt turned easily and Sam felt his way inside to the alarm panel, punching in the code with a practiced touch before flipping on the light switches.

His smile faded as the hundred watt bulbs lit up the weight racks, benches, leg presses, treadmills, cross trainers, ellipticals, cable weight machines – and her

body. He didn't need a closer look to know she was dead.

"Shit!"

Sam snapped the lights back off and relocked the door from the inside. Feeling much older than he had a minute earlier, he crabbed his way through the dark to his office, retrieved the phone by touch, and punched in a number he hadn't called in a long time.

## **Harbor Lights: Chapter 2**

The ringing phone had me trying to focus my eyes enough to read the clock dial's blurred green glow. No such luck. My right hand - forgetting I'd quit a month ago - groped for a pack of cigarettes on the nightstand. My left finally found the phone on the fourth ring just before the answering machine kicked in. My right eventually remembered I'd kicked the butts and quit looking.

"Hello?"

"It's Martha, Ethan."

"What's the matter?" Not that anything necessarily was when it came to my elderly - and she'd decapitate me if I ever used that word within earshot - landlady and friend. A Seventy-something, long retired madam and widow, she was tougher than snot,

and not inclined to permit anything to be “the matter”. Fit, active, and with a plethora of gentleman callers, she was also used to getting her way.

“It’s Samuel from down at the gym.”

“Sam? Jim?”

“Ethan!”

“All right,” I said, and sat up. “I’m awake. Try it one more time. Please.”

“Samuel called. He owns that old workout gym down by the small boat docks.”

“Oh. Harbor Gym?”

“Yes. When he opened up at this morning, about ten minutes ago, he found a woman’s body.”

“Not an accident.”

“No. He called me. I said I would collect you and we’d be along.”

“Why’d he call you?”

“Because we remember, and honor, old favors.”

“Good for us,” I said as I snapped on the bedside light and looked around for socks, underwear, jeans, turtleneck, and boat mocs. My flannel jacket still smelled of cigarettes as I pulled it on three minutes later and I wished to hell I could have one now without slipping back to two packs a day.

Ms. Martha declined to be seen riding in the much-modified Studebaker pickup truck I’d sort of

inherited from the Episcopal church. Nor did she trust me with her venerable Mercedes. Consequently the October night found us purring down Rezanof Drive with her at the wheel. Always in character, she ignored the town's solitary signal light and hung a brisk left on red. Life was always an adventure with Ms. M.

Three minutes later we were parked next to Sam's truck, and crossing the lot as he opened the gym's door a foot, taking a good look at me. I don't know what he saw beyond the usual out of shape guy nudging fifty. Six foot five, 240 pounds, most of my own hair and teeth. Hair going from brown to gray and thinning, teeth beginning to show the effects of thirty years' of nicotine, and coffee.

"He okay?"

"Would he be here with me if he wasn't? Get a grip, Samuel."

"Sorry, Martha. It's been ..."

"Samuel, Ethan. Ethan, Samuel. Now that that's out of the way, step back and let us in. It's cold out here."

"Sorry," he said again - and I suspected the word wasn't part of his usual vocabulary - opening the door a little wider. I followed Ms. M. into a room straight out of my worst memories. I hadn't been in a gym since

high school, and never voluntarily. I wasn't thrilled to be back.

And the body didn't help.

"Ethan?"

"Not an accident and not suicide."

"We knew that," she said.

"Good," I said. "Now that makes three of us."

"Christ!" he said. Apparently Samuel wasn't getting the sort of help he'd expected.

"You call the police?" I knew it was a stupid question. If he had, he wouldn't have called Martha, and they'd be here instead of us. That would have been okay with me.

"I didn't think so," I said when he just looked at me. "Why not?"

For that answer he looked at Ms. Martha.

"Samuel does not care for the local officials," she said to me. Adding, "Nor do we," with a look at him.

I wasn't sure if that was meant to reassure him or to remind me. Most likely both.

"Well, Samuel," I said.

"Sam," he said. "You call me Sam."

I didn't detect friendliness in the tone.

"Okay, Sam. Who is she?"

He shook his head.

"Not a member?"

“No.”

“If he knew her, he’d tell us,” Ms. Martha said. “He certainly wouldn’t forget her. Given your preferences, Ethan, dear, neither would you.”

She was right about that. The woman was about 5’6”, around 155 pounds, I’d guess, brunette, short-cropped hair, somewhere between 45 and 55, and in very good shape. In every sense of the word.

I wondered if I’d seen her around town, but maybe she just looked like someone I’d wished I seen around town. Either way, I didn’t know her.

“Ideas?” I said.

“Get her to hell outta my gym,” he said.

“Certainly,” Ms. Martha said. “Ethan?”

“Shit,” I said. But saying it wasn’t going to get me off the hook.

I could have argued, but my several months’ experience with Ms. Martha had taught me that that was pointless. I could have refused, I suppose, but that wasn’t going to help either. She’d just find a way to do it herself. And on my mental balance sheet, I still owed her. Always would.

Whatever we did was probably going to screw up anyone catching the killer. Who’s going to solve an unknown murder? I didn’t like that, or being party to it.

“It’s a crime scene,” I said.

“Only until she’s somewheres else,” Sam said.  
“Not my problem after that.”

“You’re right, of course, Ethan. Moving her will make it our problem.”

“Door locked when you got here, Sam?” I said.

He nodded and frowned.

“Then I guess it’ll stay your problem, moved or not.”

“Samuel cannot afford publicity, Ethan. Not the kind that might spread off-island. Therefore we shall have to accommodate him, but he will return the favor. Without comment or complaint,” she said, when he looked like he was about to protest.

“Very well. We will remove the body and you will cooperate with Ethan while he learns who did this.”

“Him?” Sam said. “Yeah, right.”

“Just because there was a time you could dribble him around this gym like a basketball doesn’t mean he couldn’t manage you now. He’s handled tougher. If necessary, he could simply call the police and let you stew.

“Shit, Martha.”

Ms. Martha just waited while I hoped I wouldn’t have to try “handling” Sam – looked to me like a good way to get hurt.

“Okay,” he said. “Whatever you say, just lose the damn body.”

A wise decision,” she said, “though I imagine Ethan would have preferred another.

“Ethan? What shall we do with her?”

### **Harbor Lights: Chapter 3**

Cutting her up in little pieces and feeding her to the family beagle over the next year flashed through my mind, but Jazz, Ms. Martha’s recently acquired hound, was used to more gourmet fare. Besides, that’d leave me without a murder to solve and I felt a need to offset the guilt I was rapidly amassing.

“Ethan?”

“We can’t leave her anywhere in town, that’ll just get the locals stumbling around muddying things up. Outside the city limits will make it the Troopers’ jurisdiction.”

“Virgil isn’t stupid,” Martha said. Virgil Morgan was a State Trooper recently assigned to Kodiak. We’d been friends some twenty or so years earlier and had just started getting reacquainted around the matter of a murdered minister. And Ms. M. was right – he wasn’t stupid.

“That’s the risk,” I said. “He might unravel this



faster than we can control it, but he'll also want it solved. He might, you know, end up helping more than hindering. Hell, if he gets too close, we'll just throw him Sam."

Sam just glared at me.

"It'll be alright, Samuel, he's joking."

I wasn't but I let it go. They'd both be happier with the illusion.

While they silently reassured each other I finally walked over to the body.

She was still looking up with empty eyes and her hands had fallen away from the barbell. She'd seen it coming and fought back, the skin on her palms torn from the bar's knurling as she'd pushed against the descending weight. The bar and plates added up to 150 pounds, I guessed.

She looked like she could have handled that amount of weight so it wasn't a training accident.

The woman's throat was crushed but there wasn't any blood. That helped, I guess, in terms of concealment. I wished things were messy enough that there was no chance of doing what I was about to.

"Sam? Get me a blanket."

He nodded and headed for his office. Ms. Martha didn't smile at me, but her expression conveyed that

knowing approval that'd keep me doing whatever she asked.

"Open the car trunk, Ms. Martha. Now. We're running out of time."

She hurried out the door and Sam and I lifted the body onto the blanket he'd spread. We rolled her up carefully, and I lifted her gently, carrying her out the door and curling her into the Mercedes' trunk.

"What..." Sam said.

"No," I said. "What you don't know you can't tell. Martha may trust you, but I sure as hell don't. Just make sure your customers don't notice anything different this morning."

Ms. Martha already had the engine running when I climbed in beside her.

"Where to, Ethan?"

"Where else? Ft. Abercrombe."

We drove the three miles from town to Ft. Abercrombe State Park in silence and turned off the pavement onto the muddy park access road while I was still trying to figure out what to do. The road, flanked by ancient moss encrusted Sitka Spruce, wound up a steep hill for half a mile before emerging onto a campsite dotted bluff. Around the perimeter stood the remains of World War II era bunkers, observation points, and shore batteries, their concrete slowly disin-

tegrating in the island's sixty some inches of annual rainfall.

"How about the pill box?" I said, pointing to a fairly intact observation point with a view of Manashka Bay.

"No, Ethan, not that one," Ms. Martha said. "I have far too many good memories with the soldiers there."

"If we eliminate every place that conjures up all of your encounters going down Carnal Lane we'll have to find a different island," I said.

"There is no need to be crude, Ethan."

"Okay, romantic trysts then, but there is still some need to get this done before we have any company."

"No one comes up here this time of year."

"Assuming no one else has an inconvenient body to dispose of," I said.

She responded by maneuvering the Mercedes around the campground parking lot and backing up to Site #4, the closest one to the pillbox.

"Have it your way," she said, "just don't ask me to help."

I didn't. She turned off the motor and handed me the keys, I climbed out, popped the trunk, and lugged the body across the moss and rocks and down the couple of narrow steps to the pillbox's roughly four

foot by eight foot interior. I didn't feel good about leaving her lying on the icy cement floor even though she was long past caring.

That nauseating feeling was exacerbated by the problem of her attire. It wasn't going to take genius to figure out that the woman in the workout suit probably didn't die in a leftover WW II fortification.

"Shit," I said, compromising things further by quickly stripping her down to her bra and panties.

I rolled the tank top, shorts, shoes, and socks into a wad, stood up and felt Ms. M. behind me.

"I'm sorry," she said, though not to me. "He can't fix it, but he'll find out who killed you and they shall pay for it."

I'm glad she was certain, cuz I most surely wasn't.

We made our back to the car without another look. I, at least, had already seen more than I'd wanted to, or would be able to forget.

"Collecting keepsakes?" Mz Martha said, nodding at the clothing collection I'd tossed on the seat between us.

I just stared back and handed her to keys.

"I'd have taken you for more the leaving mementos than taking them sort," she said.

"Virgil sees a body where it obviously doesn't

belong, and it's dressed all ready for the gym, he isn't going to wonder where to start looking."

"You have a point," Ms. Martha said, as she started the motor and headed back out of the park. "We're compounding felonies, aren't we?"

"Wouldn't be hard to make a case for us being accomplices after the fact, at least. You know we're going to have to fix this?"

"Yes."

"I hope Samuel's worth it."

"He isn't," she said, as we turned off the gravel road and back onto Rezanof for the ride back home.

