

Prologue

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.

Chapter 1

Thursday August 5, 1993

Homer, Alaska

"Hello, 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."

"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.

Chapter 2

The 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."

Chapter 3

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 original 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.

Chapter 4

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 catagories.

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 asleep 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.

Chapter 5

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.