

THE HUNTER'S DAUGHTER

A Novel by Nowick Gray

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Author's Note:

The events and characters depicted in this novel are fictional. While the setting is essentially real--the arctic region of Quebec in the early nineteen-sixties--details such as place names have been selectively altered for the purposes of the story.

--Nowick Gray

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NILLIQ

JACK

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Chapter One

NILLIQ

When she heard a distant scraping sound from the bay-ice to the south, Nilliq thought it might be Pingousi returning from his hunt. She expected to see the approaching dogsled veer in to shore through an opening in the ice wall. But instead the driver headed straight toward her on the big rock.

She brushed her tears away and looked more closely. That gray-and-white lead dog was not one of Pingousi's. And the man now walking with the whip beside his sled had a long, drooping mustache.

The dogs halted at a soft command from their master and sat on their haunches, their tongues dancing, their pale blue eyes looking up at her. Nilliq kept her eyes away from those of the stranger. How well-mannered were these dogs of his! The man stood with sturdy legs planted in a wide stance, the whip hanging loosely in his hand.

Then his eyes caught hers. Nilliq tried to look away but it was too late. The man's eyes pierced her own--and then seemed friendly, almost familiar, with a slight

downward curve that reminded her of her uncle Quingak. Eyes of a hunter . . . yet with something other, a remote sheen, as of distant sea-ice.

His lips held the hint of a smile. When her own lips began to tingle and turn open, Nilliq quickly covered her mouth and coughed. She looked away, out to the open blue water of the bay where she'd watched two gulls dive in the pink morning light. Now in the faded dawn, she could see only flecks on the choppy water.

The stranger spoke to her: "Anything out there?" He tucked his whip under a thong on his sled and took a few steps closer toward the rock, peering out over the bay as if to see what she could see.

Nilliq could find no words. The feathers on her bird-skin tunic ruffled in the breeze, and she shuddered recalling her father's admonition against wearing it feather-side-out. She felt a shyness so painful it was like fear, and this made her turn her thoughts back to Aiti, and her mother. Both dead--

The stranger's voice came close and deep: "They're gone now."

She shrank away from him, her blood beating like furious wings. Her damp cheeks burned, hot and cold in the fresh breeze.

He backed off to a more respectful distance and said, "You looked like a pretty loon, sitting on that rock. But it's a little early, isn't it, to come out here for sun-basking?" He spoke her tongue, Inuktitut, with a slightly odd accent; and the rich, confident tones of his voice excited Nilliq, despite her apprehension.

Her cheeks flushed hotter. A pretty loon, indeed. With her long thin nose, her sticklike legs? At least, it was better than what the children called her, "caribou girl."

Aiti was the only person who had made her feel pretty; it was his voice Nilliq heard when the stranger spoke again: "Is anyone else awake in your camp?"

Blocks of fractured ice heaved behind them on the tide, groaning as if they were alive and dying. With a prickling on the back of her neck Nilliq pictured her father waking in his snowhouse to find her gone, out here talking with this strange man. Somewhere she found the courage to say, "The children should be up by now."

A camp dog barked. The ears of the stranger's dogs perked up. With cold eyes the stranger looked past her; even, it seemed, past the camp and the hill beyond.

He spoke almost as if to himself: "Maybe I should go on my way."

Now she had to say more. Boldly she asked, "Will you stop for a visit here?"

He faced her again, a little smile flashing. "That's why I'm here," he said. "Yes. For a short visit."

"You've been traveling all night?"

"The snow's better, frozen harder. So then I sleep in the daytime, like a lazy hunter. Ha! I catch no meat that way, it's true; but now I'm here."

The first rays of sun streamed out from behind the hill, highlighting the stranger's face: a strong and open brow, weathered cheeks, a wisp of beard. His clothing was of the old style, furs tightly stitched by a capable woman. His woman?, Nilliq wondered.

The stranger was looking toward the camp, squinting. "Today, though, I don't know if I will sleep."

Nilliq thought of the empty snowhouse--Aiti's snowhouse, with its winter roof now slowly collapsing.

He turned his eyes back to her and said, "You must be Nilliq."

"How did you know that?" She felt as if she'd been rudely touched by the stranger's rough hand.

He said simply, "I know people who travel this way."

Whom had he talked to? Why had he come here?

The stranger continued, "My name is Wallin. I come from down the coast, Poste-de-la-Baleine."

Nilliq's mood eased now with respect and larger curiosity. "Oh, the big settlement."

"The big one. Too big." He waved his arm toward the south. "For me, a change was needed. I'm not going back there. Too many khalunat."

A change was needed; he was traveling without a woman. For a brief, thrilling moment Nilliq saw the wide land, bright with the warming sun, open its immense arms to welcome the two of them: her and Wallin, together. But then she lowered her eyes and saw herself for what she was--a gangly, foolish girl, unworthy of this fine-looking hunter with his well-laden sled, his team of patient huskies.

A burst of ducks took off from the open water far out on the bay. Wallin stood shuffling his feet in the snow like a seal-hunter who has lost patience at one breathing-hole and is ready to move on to another.

Nilliqlik let words out flying: "I've heard of this Poce, Poce-Balen. Kujuarapik, we still call it. My people lived around there before I was born. They say it has lots of big wooden houses, that are warm all the time. And the houses have lamps that burn without oil, all night and day . . . is it true?"

Wallin's eyes wrinkled at the corners. He stopped twisting his mitts in his hands, and his arms relaxed at his sides. "Yes, those things are true. And instead of hunting for food, the people spend their days and nights playing khalunat games, and get their food from cans."

He leaned casually against the rock; Nilliqlik didn't move.

"I've tried the food from cans," she said. "Some of it tasted good--sweet."

"Aghh. Do you know what happens to your teeth when you eat too much khalunat food?"

"No." Now she had offended him. She averted her eyes.

"Well . . . you're lucky. Have you never been in a settlement?"

"I've been to Townsend Bay."

"Oh, that pile of tin boxes."

Nilliq noticed that Wallin was not too proud to carry a rifle, or to make his sled runners hard with steel instead of glazing them with mud and ice. In a meek voice she said to him, "The way you speak, you must have been very unhappy there, in the big settlement--"

"Ah," he said, looking at her so directly that she could no longer look away. "This is a question. You have heard the answer. I have made a decision: that kind of life is not for me. Not any longer. So maybe, you think, I'm looking for a camp such as yours?"

Nilliq said nothing.

Wallin leaned away from the rock. His gray-and-white dog stood up and wagged its tail. "Things are not as simple as they appear," he said then in the dry voice of an old man. "Even this camp of yours is a settlement--only a different kind. It's not just how big, or how many khalunat, but also: how you fill your days and nights; what pictures your thoughts make; what the animals say to you. Are you happy here?"

In his eyes Nilliq saw the brightness of truth-knowledge. Suddenly she was trapped inside herself again, perched on the cold, hard rock like some idiot sea-bird. She shifted her folded legs under her. Once more she felt her face grow red.

After too many moments she found a tiny voice that said, "We live in the old way here. My father, Sandlak, provides enough to eat. . . ." She turned back, with eyes growing wet, to look upon the four little snowhouses. She couldn't speak about what her father was really like, or about those who had died, or about her loneliness. "There are no

other young people, now, except Tiniq, who's not yet a man. And the smaller children.

The only woman who's not old and wrinkled is Palli, a wife to Quingak and mother of Avinga, Lialuq, and the baby Samik." Nilliq's voice began to choke shut. "My mother--"

Wallin interrupted her to say, "Maybe you're hungry. Come--" he nodded his head sideways in the direction of the snowhouses--"I have some fish; we'll bring some to Sandlak, your father. Would you like it cooked the way they do in Poste?"

This was an odd thing for him to say--a guest offering to serve food to the host. And the host, Sandlak!

Sandlak's daughter didn't know how to respond. If there was any notion in the stranger's mind to court someone named Nilliq, this was the worst way to go about it.

Suddenly a pair of ravens came swooping over the hill behind the camp, diving and circling: playing like children of the air. Then they disappeared behind the hill as quickly as they had come.

"Ravensway," Wallin murmured.

Nilliq hardly heard him, troubled as she was by the thought of his meeting her father. Her frantic thoughts ran aimlessly, like lemmings chased by a dog. Maybe they should not even go into camp, but should simply leave at once, this instant!

But the truth remained, the stranger had suggested no such thing. He had asked to come to camp with her and cook a fish for her father.

"Yes, that would be fine," a silly girl said at last. "Why not? Come with me and we'll have a meal together." Nilliq said this foolish thing, knowing that it was all wrong.

Wallin smiled in a satisfied way. "Good," he said. "I would like to meet your father."

Chapter Two

POSTE-DE-LA-BALEINE

"You're not gonna like this," she said almost cheerily as soon as I walked in the door. I looked up while trying to wipe the spring mud off the sides of my shoes. Nancy's bluejeaned legs were propped on the desk, and she was casually doing her nails. "There's been another one."

Yeah? I thought, and then it hit me. She means a murder.

"Oh, Christ. Where, this time?"

"Out on the land near Townsend Bay."

"Again?" I should have guessed. "Those poor suckers never get enough of it, do they?"

"You sound like it's their fault. I don't hear you saying that about cities down South, where there's lots of khalunat getting killed."

"Hey, Nance--you know me better than that. I'm not prejudiced. Eskimos, whites, Negroes, Chinamen, it's all the same to me. It's just that, after x number of incidents, a guy has to wonder. What do you think it is about that place? Bad blood in the families? Evil spirits? A low pressure area?"

My secretary just shrugged, painting her nails pink.

"Okay, more to the point: who told you about this one?"

Eyes on her nails. "Samwillie Kingak heard it from someone coming down the coast."

I cursed under my breath and kicked my shoe against the mat, twisting my foot just enough to send a bolt of pain through my left knee. So she was seeing Samwillie again. I told myself that I didn't even care.

"I guess I'll have to go over and have a talk with your friend Mr. Kingak."

"Heh--maybe next week. He went out hunting first thing this morning. Anyway, I can tell you what I heard."

She waited for me to ask.

"All right--so what did he tell you about it?"

"Just that it was a hunter killed this time. Maybe from the Townsend Bay camp. Pretty bloody, he said."

"That's all? Any name on the victim?"

Another shrug.

"Okay then, what about the guy who told this to Samwillie?"

"Gone down the coast."

I swore half-silently. "Excuse my French, but here we go again."

Nancy hid her smile behind a screen of slender fingers. She was proud that her people still followed the wild geese.

I considered my options: should I get moving on a field investigation right away, or prepare instead for an early start tomorrow? The old hockey injury, that shaky left knee, began throbbing at the prospect of the trip ahead.

"I'd better have a look at those files again."

"What files?" she said, black eyes all innocent.

She had a way of getting to me: pricking under the skin, and then softening the sting. When I told her to get me the file on Unnatural Deaths and the one on Townsend Bay, she slid her chair back so she could rummage through the filing cabinet without getting up. One hand riffled the files while the other held the hair out of her face, with fingers splayed to keep the wet pink nails free of the loose black strands. I was distracted for a moment, watching her movements, and those of the ravens knit into her cream-colored sweater.

Of course it fell to me to put the coffee on, even at ten o'clock in the morning. Nancy's nails came first. That's okay, I told myself. After all, her last name was Inukshuk; she was born here, in this territory now called "Nouveau-Quebec."

White man's percolator, white man's coffee from the Hudson's Bay store. I stood waiting for the black stuff to brew, hands in the pockets of my regulation trousers with their inane red stripes, stewing over the injustice of it all.

"No more cushy office routine for Constable McLain," I complained.

"No more reading past midnight," my secretary put in.

True enough, I had been up late the night before, this time to finish Live and Let Die. How did that guy Bond do it? It was just like the Mountie myth, which I had so far failed to live up to: he always got his man--plus the voluptuous female accomplice in the bargain.

I sensed a thin rivulet of sweat already trickling down the cool skin under one armpit. "Shit," I blurted out. "Wait till this new hotshot Henley down at HQ sees this week's report. He'll dredge up all the old cases, and then come storming up here gunning for you know who."

Nancy had never spoken with Henley; by intuition alone she had the voice down pat: "You can let this sort of thing go only so far, Constable." Smiling, she handed me the files. "But really, Jack, how do you know it was a murder?"

I slapped them down on her desk. "Hey, for starters, the word you used was 'killed.' You also used the word 'bloody,' if I remember correctly. But no, you're right. What do I know? I keep forgetting Rule Number One: Never assume anything. Maybe it wasn't a murder. Maybe just another suicide, some old guy who got tired of it all, sawed

off his shotgun and ate it for breakfast. Or another mauling by the infamous polar bear murderer. Or Christ, some pure and righteous act of religious fanaticism."

The coffee was nearly ready. I stood clanking a spoon in an empty mug; gazing absently at my dull black shoes with their muddy edges; thinking wistfully of the good old days, of dashing Barry Bickford and the clean confession. Back when the blue-lettered sign above our little plywood office still said "Great Whale River" . . .

"Anyway--"

"And anyway, it has been a long winter and it's about time I got out for a little ride before the ice and snow turn completely into porridge. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Well, you always tell me that too much office work is your 'chief occupational hazard.'"

"Right again. Coffee?"

"Thanks, Jack." Now a genuine, bewitching smile graced Nancy's lightly made-up, softly angular face. She tried to sip from the mug and put it down, too hot. She sat back and took up her book; and her loafers appeared again on the reception desk, skewing the little official R.C.M.P. plaque that proclaimed the power of our humble outpost.

Marjorie Morningstar. I thought the paperback was about a native girl, when I bought it in the Montreal airport as a little present for my secretary. I was wrong; but Nancy didn't seem to mind one bit.

The hot coffee cooled me off a little--but there was something missing. As I stood looking at the unopened files on the desk, wanting nothing more than to recover that false peace of mind I'd enjoyed before walking into the office, I shamelessly conjured up the taste of a healthy dash of good Irish whiskey.

Chapter Three

SANDLAK'S HOUSE

Nilliq felt like a gawky creature beside Wallin, as tall as he and with her feathers fluttering in the morning breeze. But that closeness, their matching of strides, warmed her heart. The team of eight handsome dogs walked ahead in a stately manner, ignoring the loud barking of the camp dogs. The children had stopped playing in the morning sunshine, and now retreated into one of the snowhouses. In a moment the faces of elders appeared to see who was coming.

Sandlak emerged from the ragged skin flap that formed the opening to his snowhouse. He stood up straight and still, with what appeared to be a smile on his face. When Nilliq saw more clearly, she could tell that it was not a smile, but a grimace. Sandlak turned and yelled a command to silence his dogs' racket. All the camp dogs stopped barking, and the other people quickly withdrew.

With a deft tug on the harness lines, Wallin brought his team to a halt. Awkwardly Nilliq slowed her own footsteps and, as she stood beside Wallin, facing her father, the bird feathers she was wearing began to tremble.

The white scar shimmered on Sandlak's cheek.

"So--" he began in a low, grumbling voice. Then he loudly cleared his throat and spat. "We have visitors." He looked at Nilliq as if she, too, were a stranger. Wallin removed his mitt and stepped forward with right hand outstretched. Sandlak stood still, then slowly lifted his own hand uncertainly in the air, halfway between the gesture Wallin offered, and the more upright style of greeting favored by his people because the pulled-away sleeves showed no weapons. Wallin took Sandlak's hand and clasped it gently, then squeezed more firmly. Sandlak's grip tightened as well, as if this were some contest of strength. Wallin's eyes sparkled with the challenge.

The men's hands abruptly dropped. Nilliq's father said, "I am Sandlak."

"Wallin is my name. I come from down the coast."

Instead of waiting for Sandlak to speak next, the stranger went right on talking, his unasked-for words spilling out like blood from a fresh-killed caribou. "My people are of the large settlement there, Poste-de-la-Baleine. I, however, am a hunter. I'm traveling on the land. I'm--"

"Looking for a wife."

Nilliq spun away as if she'd been slapped.

Wallin just laughed, though Sandlak's expression was as stony as Nilliq had ever seen. "Ai, ha ha. You can see I'm a man. But you know, I'm just looking at the land, and seeing people here and there. You, in this camp here, it goes well?"

This direct question was discourteous in its own way. It was unnerving for Nilliq to watch these two men behave so rudely to each other. And she was ashamed when she noticed that old Mariq, stooping out from her snowhouse with a sealskin urine bucket, was listening to every word. Mariq's ears were good enough when she wanted to hear.

Sandlak responded to the stranger's question with a more customary politeness:

"Ach, hardly, for poor hunters such as myself. We've been getting only a few thin seals, some bony fish. Right now, for instance, there are no fish."

"Oh? Well, it happens I brought some fish with me, from the mouth of the Kangsuk River." Wallin now took up the challenge to converse in polite fashion. "These fish too are long and thin and frozen, perhaps only fit for crosspieces on a broken sled . . ." and he sent an opening look Nilliq's way.

Avinga and Lialuq darted out of their snowhouse again and began chasing one another close by, stopping momentarily for a little whispering. Sandlak ignored them. Nilliq waited for her father to offer a meal; but then Wallin, glancing at the distracting children, was bold enough to say, "If your lovely daughter Nilliq will cook these few fish that I have, we can enjoy a little feast made the way my people like it."

Nilliq sent her father a pleading glance. She wanted to tell him that she had not told the stranger her name, but she could say nothing. Sandlak glared darkly at her, and then led the way into the low entrance.

Wallin brought from his sled a number of whitefish along with a rare thing Nilliq had seen only once before and never tasted: an onion. She hung the iron pot half-filled with water to heat over the flames of the soapstone lamp, as Wallin instructed her, and with her ulu began to cut the fish in pieces into the pot.

Sandlak settled on his usual spot on the sleeping platform. He began to roll a cigarette but continued to watch Nilliq. Wallin stood beside her also watching, with an amused expression on his face.

Nilliq didn't want to think about what was going to happen to her once Wallin was gone. As she worked the curved blade, her dream of the early morning came back to her, and she was filled once again with dread. In the dream she was scraping a newly stretched calf skin with her mother's ulu, softening it to make underboots for her father. With pressure from her hands the skin swelled out like the belly of a cow caribou her father had killed, had killed for this skin of an unborn calf. Then the ulu slipped, cutting through the thin skin. Moonlight poured through the gash and reflected back red from the polished half-moon blade. Nilliq had gasped . . . and awoken to the familiar sight of her father, still sleeping, his puffy cheeks sagging like the old skins overhead.

Now she tried to put these gloomy thoughts away from her as she stood beside Wallin, watching closely as he peeled the acrid-smelling onion with his own long knife and cut it into slices to join the fish. But then her eyes began stinging and she couldn't keep the tears from streaming down her cheeks. She sensed her father lying there sullenly

smoking, his eyes smoldering. With a quick glance, Nilliq saw his face, yellow like old caribou fat, not alive except as a piece of burning tallow is alive. Wallin, observing the flow of Nilliq's tears, smiled kindly and said to her, "Onions seem to make people feel a little sad. But then it passes; you'll feel better."

Nilliq noticed that the onions didn't seem to be making him sad. When she finally found her small voice and said this to him, Wallin just shrugged and said he was used to them.

Nilliq turned away from the cooking pot and rummaged in the box of supplies, then began to mix flour, baking powder, and salt together with water for bannock. Having heard Wallin's bad opinions of the khalunat, Nilliq now thought of her mother's familiar enamel mixing bowl as a foreign thing. The very food she was making was khalunat food.

Sandlak apparently had nothing he wanted to say to their guest. Wallin tried to make conversation about the improved seal hunting that would be coming with the spring weather.

"I expect you'll be hauling them in by the sled-load," he said to Sandlak.

Nilliq's father declined making any comment about his hunting territory.

Wallin persisted, saying that he noticed some promising-looking ice pans on his trip from the south early that morning. Sandlak bristled, scoffing, "Ahh, no seals are ever found around there."

Wallin let the matter drop.

The snowhouse soon filled with the fumes of the steaming onion and fish--an odor which overpowered the more familiar bannock, but mellowed as the food softened in the pot. By the time Wallin declared the meal ready to eat, Nilliq was nearly prepared to try some. She used the old bone dipper and took some of the limp onion shreds to her mouth. Their unfamiliar pungency was still too strong for her taste, and it was all she could do to swallow the one bite, stuff some bannock into her mouth after it, and then go on to the ruined fish. Wallin was watching her with an indulgent smile.

Sandlak sat up roaring with laughter. "Look at her," he said to Wallin. "No dog blood in her, would you say? The lovely bitch."

Nilliq could only scowl at him, fighting back tears. In another moment she forced herself to swallow a foul-tasting bit of fish, then sat on the supply box with a piece of bannock. Wallin looked uncomfortably into the pot.

Sandlak dipped a generous portion of food out of the pot with a large tin cup, blowing on it to cool it and then pouring it untasted into his mouth. He boasted about how he had grown accustomed to khalunat food at the boarding school "in Poste"--he used Wallin's term for the place.

"Oh?" Wallin said, sampling for himself a delicate morsel of fish. "I suppose that was a long time ago." He smiled at Sandlak.

Sandlak looked at him and coldly returned the smile. "Long enough," he said. "Before your time, anyway. It was, let me see, it would have been, what I learned in school, nineteen forty-three. You would never guess I was a schoolboy, would you?" As he spoke he held a white chunk of fish flesh delicately skewered by knifepoint up to his face, turning it as if he were roasting it before the slow fire of his eyes. "That little adventure didn't last long. Not even a year. No, but long enough . . ." He thrust the piece of fish into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

Wallin, taking the liberty of sitting down at the far end of the sleeping platform, began to relate the story of his own few years in the boarding school. When Sandlak interrupted to ask about Wallin's relations, Wallin answered, "Ah. Well, sadly, I'm an orphan. My mother died bringing me into the world, and later when my father went away, I stayed in Poste with relatives, people from around there."

When Wallin said no more, Sandlak remarked, "I, too have been without a mother from an early age."

Nilliq stared at the slick snowhouse wall, which was glazing over from the heat of her mother's lamp. We all three have this emptiness, she thought. She rose and hung the tea kettle to heat beside the pot of fish. That had become her duty as the keeper of the lamp. But she wanted no tea, nor further talk. She wanted the meal to be over with; to go out of that hot and steamy place.

The men continued to eat bannock and to talk of their travels along the coast.

Sandlak said to Wallin: "So you call yourself a hunter, do you? A settlement boy like yourself?"

"Oh, I hunted plenty, down around Poste. Lots of fox to trap all the way up to the Kangsuk, and caribou once you're there. You must know the place--the Caribou Crossing?"

Sandlak only grunted in reply, choosing that moment to pull his heavy tunic over his head, exposing his gleaming torso, the fat-padded muscles of his chest and arms. Wallin stole a glance Nilliq's way, as he had from time to time throughout the meal. Each time she would pretend not to notice.

Sandlak was glowering at Wallin. Wallin wiped his hands on the fur of his trousers, stood and adjusted the kettle where it hung over the flame--though it seemed to Nilliq to be heating just fine where it was. He appeared agitated, as if he were impatient to leave, or as if he were cold. But it was not cold in Sandlak's snowhouse that day.

There was still plenty of food left in the pot. The peculiar cooking smells had gone out through the vent hole and into the other snowhouses, and the appropriate length of time had passed. Now visitors came, curious to meet the stranger.

First to arrive was Pootoolik, the oldest person in camp, Aiti's grandfather. He grinned with a toothless smile at Wallin and then at Nilliq, and dipped his fingers readily

into the pot. Along with him came Tiniq, Nilliq's cousin. Tiniq wore what Nilliq thought of as the little brother of Pootoolik's fleece-lined canvas hunting cap, with the same hanging earflaps and dangling tie-strings. The boy followed the old man's example in sampling the food, adding his own flourish by licking his fingers well after each bite. He smacked his lips over what he called the "sweet" taste of the onion.

Sandlak sat up to make room on the sleeping platform for Pootoolik, who took the offer with a slight nod. Wallin continued standing near the pot, picking fishbones out of his teeth, and Nilliq remained sitting on the box on the floor, wondering who would come next.

Pootoolik began to roll a cigarette, smiling at Nilliq and, unmindful of her father, shifting his glance between her and Wallin. Though the stranger had come from the khalunat settlement, his bearing and his skin clothing showed his talent as a hunter. Nilliq could hear clearly the old man's thoughts: here might be a good hunter to replace Aiti.

"Coming up from the south, are you?" he said to Wallin.

"Yes, from Kujuarapik."

Pootoolik's wrinkled smile showed his pleasure at Wallin's use of the old place-name. "Those were my old hunting grounds, down around there. I probably know your people." His eyes twinkled at Wallin.

"Maybe so. I lived for a time with Changuk."

"Ah, Changuk. Yes . . . well. You are welcome here." Pootoolik glanced at Sandlak, who had not bothered to say as much.

Pootoolik said nothing more of the person named Changuk. "Wallin, perhaps you know that my people here, the people of this camp, used to come from that area, Kujuarapik."

"I may have heard this at one time." Wallin, slyly smiling, stole a glance at Nilliq, who quickly looked away.

Pootoolik took off his cap, exposing his bald head, and said, "Well, then. We have a long history there; perhaps you would be interested in hearing of it."

Wallin nodded. And so the bald one immediately launched his old boat into the waters:

"Our leader in those days was a strong and wise hunter named Samik. Unfortunately, as happens sometimes even to the wisest and strongest of hunters, he was killed--a fall from a high place during a hunt in the eastern mountains."

Nilliq was surprised to hear Wallin say, "Of that I have heard."

"Ah," Pootoolik said. "And of his two brothers, the lame one and the one who moved north to Smith Harbour?"

"Mmm, not sure. Who were they?"

"Naijurasuk, the one who was lamed when he became entangled in his dog's traces. He was the oldest of the three brothers. The youngest was named Nassak, later

Adamie Nassak. Besides these hunters, and myself, there was Nananga, Nilliq's grandfather. And of course the women. Samik's wife was Mariq--now, after all these years, my lampkeeper here in this camp. Naijurasuk took a wife named Maliqan. They had three sons: Konik, Umialuk, and Attongey. I imagine you have some acquaintance with the family."

"Oh, yes," Wallin said. "I know them."

"Good," Pootoolik said with a smile. "We have something in common. Well, where was I? Ah, how could I forget: I took a wife of my own named Sala, whom you may also find in this camp today--in another snowhouse, or somewhere she likes to go. She bore me the fine son, Pingousi, those many years ago. He's gone out hunting now--I hope you stay with us long enough to meet him."

Wallin merely cleared his throat quietly.

"Anyhow, a couple of years later, Samik and Mariq became parents of a fine boy named Dinut--sadly, no longer alive."

The old man fell silent a moment and looked at Wallin. Wallin made no comment, no movement. His eyes gazed blankly at the snowhouse wall, or beyond.

Tiniq had stuck out his lower lip and stood looking at the snowhouse floor. Tiniq was Dinut's son, who had come from Smith Harbour to visit after his father's death; Mariq was so taken with him that she convinced him to stay, to be as a brother to Aiti.

He pulled a jackknife out of the pocket of his little khalunat's coat and began playing with it. It had been his father's knife.

Sandlak grunted impatiently and got up to fill his teacup. Pootoolik continued: "In that same year of Dinut's birth, Nananga, on a trip north to this area, made a woman named Ainia pregnant with a daughter to be named Kaniga. Maybe, Wallin, all of this is not of much interest to you. But you might want to know that over time, Mariq's affections, as we might expect in the passage of the years, gravitated to this same man Nananga, and she gave birth to a daughter, Sijja, who was to become Nilliq's mother."

Nilliq's eyes misted with the memory of her; the old man looked away from Nilliq and went on. Now it was about how her grandmother Mariq, even after her time of staying with Nananga, had stayed loving toward Samik; so that when Sijja was still a toddler, Mariq gave birth to Dinut's younger brother Quingak. "We might expect," Pootoolik said, "to see Quingak presently."

It was the usual chronology of names, of marriages and births, that Nilliq had heard countless times before. The old man went on to recount stories of memorable hunts, accidents and deaths; to recall the seasonal movements of camps across the land, and the coming of the khalunat into the southern hunting areas. "The year after Samik's death," he said, "was the last of my people in the area of Kujuarapik. Too much bad luck; too many khalunat. When the khalunat war came, they really got busy down there and we decided to move north to our ancestral winter hunting area. Nowadays we only go back

south together in summer. And then it's not as far south as the settlement they call Poste-- but over to the old fishing places up the Kangsuk River where my grandfather used to take us. . . ."

As the old man droned on, Wallin seemed to listen with little more than civil interest. He appeared restless, shifting from foot to foot and casting his eyes about as if he wanted a place to sit down; but he remained standing by the pot. Tiniq stood nearby, gradually moving closer to Wallin as he warmed to the stranger's company.

Before Pootoolik had come to an end of his tales, others came: Quingak and his round wife Palli, with the baby Samik peeping with raven-bright eyes over Palli's shoulder; and their other two children, the boy Avinga and his younger sister Lialuq, trailing behind in a flurry of whispers. Quingak and Palli politely sampled the fish and onions. Then, with tea and bannock in hand, they took seats on the now-crowded sleeping platform. Nilliq gave small portions of fish to the two older children. Avinga wrinkled up his nose at the unfamiliar smell but ate it anyway. Lialuq put hers in her mouth but then made a funny firm-mouthed expression, apparently unwilling to swallow it until the soft white flesh dissolved. With their hands full of bannock the two children found places to sit, Avinga on Palli's lap, and Lialuq on Nilliq's. Pootoolik had moved on to tales of the present hunting camp, the death of Nilliq's grandfather Nananga, and, more recently, the deaths of Aiti and Nilliq's mother. With unsteady fingers Nilliq began to braid Lialuq's hair.

Sandlak chose a pause in Pootoolik's speech to blurt out, "Wait a minute, old man. You forgot to tell about Jiana."

Pootoolik looked spitefully at Sandlak.

"All right, then, I'll tell it," Sandlak said. "It was six winters ago, as I remember. Or five? Quingak?"

Quingak said nothing. Nilliq could sense that everyone's eyes, like hers, were lowered.

"Six, then," her father continued. "Anyway, there was this big, marauding bear. Stole some meat from Quingak's meat rack. Killed two of my dogs. A few days later Pootoolik's son Pingousi, his wife Jiana and their son Aiti were coming back from a hunting trip. At least that's what Pingousi called it. A woman on a hunting trip--ha! Anyway, listen to what happened--"

Wallin was listening. Lialuq squirmed on Nilliq's lap and put her hands to her ears.

"Pingousi came into camp alone. No dogsled, no family. Looking about as unhappy as a hunter can look. I said to him, 'Pingousi, why do you appear so sad? As if the bear has taken away your wife and child--' He just looked at me. As if to say, how did you know? Of course I knew. That full-of-shit bear killed two of my dogs, like I said. I didn't need to see her carcass on the sled. His son Aiti, the hero, had killed the bear, but too late. Now he was still up on the hill weeping over the piled stones on the

body of his mother, while Pingousi slunk back into camp. The great hunter had been out following tracks when the bear attacked. The whole thing was obvious to me. Now what did he have? No caribou; no wife."

Sandlak snubbed out his cigarette against the snowhouse wall. Pootoolik kept smoking his own cigarette and stared at the opposite wall.

No one said anything.

"Quingak," Sandlak said. "Was I right?"

"There was a bear . . ." Quingak said.

"'There was a bear.' Of course there was. So, Wallin, what do you think? What was I supposed to do, offer up my nicely budding daughter to him? That's what he wanted, of course."

Nilliqli nearly got up and left the snowhouse then, but Wallin ignored Sandlak's remark and looked at her, and the kindness and gentleness she saw there made her pause.

Then Wallin looked at Pootoolik, who sat as if in a trance. The snowhouse was deathly quiet. Finally Wallin ventured to say, "Pootoolik, about all these deaths, these misfortunes, these moves your people have had to undergo: wouldn't you agree that some blame should be laid at the feet of the khalunat?"

Pootoolik at first did not respond. So Wallin went on: "Consider how they troubled the animal-spirits, how they ignored the taboos. Consider their deadly weapons

and diseases, their unhealthy habits, the endless number of their unnatural ways. Would we not be better off if they had never come to our land?"

Before Pootoolik could answer, Sandlak broke in: "Huh--and what would you have us do, then, kill them all? I'm no friend of the khalunat; but what is the point of such talk? There was a bear, I tell you--just like with the boy, Aiti! It's not khalunat business; it's got nothing to do with them. It's what happens when Inuit behave foolishly. That goes for my own wife Sijja, as well; and her father, the great hunter Nananga--all of them."

Pootoolik also ignored Sandlak; instead, he spoke to Wallin. And, as only Pootoolik could do, he settled the matter: "Our people have always led a dangerous life, in this land of unforgiving cold--and yes, the land of the marauding bear--with the fickle Niviaktuk, from her lair at the bottom of the sea, holding seals back at her whim and sending killing storms out across the land. Our people's migrations to follow game, and our dependence on the hunt, whether successful or not, have always been necessary. Death is a part of our life. Even the khalunat, those who choose to come here, have this to learn."

Pootoolik had had his say, and the rest of the company were silent. Then Quingak began to speak with Wallin about the foxes thereabouts, the valuable fur ranging from white to red to prized blue. Nilliq didn't care much about foxes; as the two men spoke she noticed rather how much Wallin's long, wispy mustache resembled that of Quingak.

Before the visiting was over she was surprised to see Wallin reach in the pot for the heads of the fish and give one to each of the three children, Lialuq and then Avinga and finally Tiniq. They accepted their prizes with eager fingers; though the younger children, no doubt recalling the onion taste, waited for Tiniq's lead before digging out the tender eyes and cheeks. Wallin then retrieved another head and plucked out one of the eyes. Gently he put it to the lips of the baby Samik, while Palli stood by beaming. Nilliq noticed that her father watched these offerings with pursed lips and clenched jaw; for Wallin, by his generosity, had taken upon himself another small privilege normally reserved for the host.

Not long after this indiscretion, Quingak made a motion to leave; Palli followed him out with the baby, and Avinga and Lialuq ran out giggling after them, taking along the remains of their fishheads for playthings. Finally Pootoolik and Tiniq also took their leave, with smiles to Wallin and Nilliq, and not a word to Nilliq's father.

Sandlak stretched himself and sat up straight, reaching for his tunic. "As this day seems to be given over to visiting," he said with a kind of forced cheerfulness, "we might as well meet the rest of the camp."

Pootoolik's son was still away hunting; as far as Nilliq's father was concerned, missing Pingousi's company was no loss. That left Vaija, Sala and Mariq. Palli had mentioned that the old ones were down by the open water at the creekmouth, gathering

mussels. So Wallin, Nilliq and Sandlak went out of the snowhouse and walked away from the camp, northward under a darkly clouding sky. They'd missed the day's sunshine, sweating in that close, foul air.

Sandlak was pointing this way and that, telling Wallin stories of hunts and other memorable events, such as the time a raven dropped one of its young on top of a fox den on the nearby hillside. Wallin walked beside him with the easy grace, the soft tread of a hunter. Sandlak, with more than his usual self-satisfied swagger, waddled from side to side. He had rolled himself a cigarette for the occasion, and he didn't seem to mind blowing the smoke in the face of the man beside him as they walked. Wallin also didn't seem to mind.

Watching the quivering white scar that ran the length of Sandlak's cheek, Nilliq resented Wallin's friendliness with him. She wanted to think that Wallin was carrying out these social niceties for the right to enjoy further company with her. But how could she tell Wallin that whatever he did to please her father would be futile, that indulging him for her sake would only make matters worse? Even one more day together like this would be a day too long.

In a short time they came upon the three old ones sitting with a sealskin bucket by the mouth of the creek, cracking open mussels. The sun appeared through a gap in the clouds out over the bay, shining full on their wrinkled, leathery faces. Squinting into the sunlight, they greeted the stranger with wide smiles of worn or missing teeth.

Sandlak introduced him: "A visitor has come, from down the coast way. He is called Wallin, of the family of a--who is it again?"

"Changuk."

"Changuk, he says. Well, he's traveling to see around, to see who's here. So look: we have Vaija, father of plump Palli." At this, Vaija chuckled.

"And Sala, these many years tending Vaija's lamp. And Mariq, the mother of strong Quingak." Sandlak neglected to mention that Mariq was also Nilliq's grandmother, the mother of Sijja. But of these things Wallin had already heard.

The tattooed lines on Mariq's face seemed to swirl in the sunshine and the reflected light from the creek. She looked long and intently at Wallin, her smile gone, her thin lips dry and half-parted. Her eyes were like those of an old mother seal, black and shining with a distant light as one might expect to see from the depths, looking up toward the sun. Finally she spoke, in her croaking voice. "Ai, down the coast. We once lived there. I remember a camp, Kujuarapik, with many, thirty people. Samik was the leader, the best hunter. My little baby grandson is named for him. Samik was . . . my first husband." She smiled sadly and took up some mussels again.

Sandlak stood stiffly, looking at her with narrowed eyes, his very body watchful. Wallin merely smiled back at her serenely. "I have heard of this man Samik. My people tell a story of him, of his great hunts, and how he fell in the eastern mountains and was

killed. There are some who say that he was then carried up into the sky to live with the ravens."

Old Vaija of the gravely voice added, "And the ravens adopted him as their leader, to help them in their hunt."

"This I have heard," Wallin said.

"Did you hear the story of the fox and the wolf?" Sandlak broke in. He had turned to face Wallin and spoke directly to him.

No one, including Wallin, paid him any attention. Sala, the youngest of the three elders but the most frail in appearance--weathered like a slender piece of driftwood--looked beyond the two standing men into the hills and said, "I would tell rather of the raven who changed himself into the form of a man, who took a girl away to his home in the mountains . . ."

This Nilliq knew as the story of Niviaktuk, and she never tired of it.

The old woman splashed her hands clean in the creek and continued: "He did not tell the girl he was a raven, but every day when she was sleeping he unfurled his wings and went looking for fish. One day the girl awoke to witness this change and at once she wanted to escape."

Sandlak grunted with impatience and made himself another cigarette, which he was immediately obliged to offer Vaija before he could smoke it. He rolled another for

himself, while Mariq happily cracked mussels and Wallin and Nilliq squatted by the stream and listened like two children.

The story unfolded as it always had, with the girl's brothers coming to rescue her and taking her away with them in their boat. The angry raven found them and, beating his wings overhead, caused a storm to rise with waves crashing around the boat. "The brothers of this poor girl," Sala said, "blamed her for this evil magic and threw her overboard. Then when she tried to climb back in, the oldest brother chopped off her fingers, like this: chop-chop-chop!"

Nilliq was always frightened at hearing this part of the story. The girl slipped back down into the water and never was seen again.

"But it was she," Sala continued, "who became Niviaktuk, queen over all the creatures of the sea. She whose cut-off fingers became the seals. And it is only with her permission that one of her creatures may be killed by a man. That is why thanks must be given to her, and a drink of fresh water given to each of her creatures when it dies."

A drizzle of freezing rain had begun falling. The old ones seemed to take no notice, as they continued to crack the slick black shells, putting the morsels of flesh into the bucket, and the odd one into a toothless mouth. Nilliq was starting to feel chilled, but she did not look forward to the return to Sandlak's stifling snowhouse. She hoped that the foul weather would deter Wallin from traveling, so that he would stay in camp at least for the night. Then tomorrow, somehow . . .

Vaija began to tell another story, this one about a raven and a fox.

Sandlak shuffled his feet. "Nilliq," he said.

Slowly she stood up. Wallin hesitated a moment longer and then stood beside her.

Chapter Four

SQUARE ONE

Nancy appeared in the doorway of the partition we called the Great White Wall, holding up a large brown dog-eared envelope as if it smelled bad.

"Message from HQ," she said.

"What do they want now?" I tore open the envelope and held up the flimsy flag of an enclosed memo:

RE: FORM C-271 SUBMITTED DETACHMENT POSTE-DE-LA-
BALEINE QUE. 6 SEPT. 63.

REQUIRE FURTHER DOCUMENTATION PERTAINING
AUXILIARY STAFF SALARY RAISE CLAIM FOR J. NATSIK:
a. SUBMIT EMPLOYEE TIME SHEET PERIOD 9/9/63-15/3/64.
b. COMPLETE PERFORMANCE QUOTIENT RATING FORM C-47-87
ENCLOSED. RETURN BEFORE 31 MARCH 64.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I'd just about given up on Jimmy's raise, bugging them about it regularly, with no response for six months. Now this. But what did I expect? He'd only saved my life.

At least I had Nancy to complain to: "Naturally, there's no Form C-47-87 as advertised. How easy for some damned pencil pusher to have held the thing just long

enough to pull their fiscal year on us, now that we're into April already. Air courier--who are they trying to kid? For the same cost they could've sent a hundred-page dissertation on the subject of pay scales. Did you read this thing?"

"At least they're up to date on the name of the settlement," Nancy observed in her cheeriest voice.

"Big pissing deal. Poste-de-la-Baleine, Kujerapik--"

"Sheesh, how many years does it take khalunat to learn our language? It's Ku-ju-a-ra-pik."

"Whatever."

"Anyway, I'm glad it's just a scrap of onion skin," Nancy said. "My filing cabinet's already overflowing with their garbage."

"I like that. Your filing cabinet."

My secretary smiled coyly and made her way toward the office partition. At the doorway she paused and looked back at me, her fine black eyebrows raised smartly. "Why don't you just pad Jimmy's time sheets to make up for the lost time?"

I hesitated a moment. My signature would be on that bottom line. But how would anyone down at HQ ever know the difference?

"You've got a point, Nance. The guy hauls me out of an icy river, at great risk to his own safety, I say he gets rewarded. Maybe I'll put in the next one for you. But you might have to wait awhile to see anything from it."

"I might be an old lady with no teeth." She giggled and went back to her typing of the weekly report.

There wasn't much left of the morning. While I proceeded to work out a plausibly

inflated time sheet for Jimmy, in the back of my mind I considered what to do about the report. Should I leave out any mention of the latest killing, pending more information? Or would that just land me in bigger trouble in the end?

By the time the report was ready for signing, I had decided to buckle to the rule of "prompt dispatch." With Nancy standing over my shoulder, and my stomach growling loudly, I scrawled a brief addendum to the effect that there'd been a death up the coast, and that it would be investigated immediately.

"Here," I said to her, "can you package up all this stuff for the afternoon plane?"

Too late, I wondered if I should have said please.

"Why me?" my secretary trilled. "Can't you do it?"

"Yes, I'm capable of doing it. But hey--I've got to keep giving you something useful to do around here; or with the next little memo from our friends down South, they'll be ordering me to 'cut staff.'"

She took the papers from my hand, pouting.

"And I'm going to have to get cracking first thing in the morning, on that little trip up the coast."

Now a look of cloudy distraction passed across her eyes.

"So what do you think about that hunter? Does it really sound normal to you? 'Cultural,' as you would say? Don't you think it might fit with the murders we've been trying to solve, and give us the break we've been waiting for?"

In a flat voice she said, "Sure it fits. They all do, one way or another."

"Okay, okay, Fatima. Seriously, think about Matthewsie Konik, for instance, just last spring. And that murder in the Townsend Bay settlement in '61. Now add this one

in. You know at least half the people on this coast. Do you see where there might be some connections?"

"Seriously," she said, without batting one of those dazzling eyes. "There are a million connections. The tracks of a caribou herd, the many breathing-holes of a single seal. The question is, which ones do you choose to follow up? It might help to know who that dead hunter is."

Matthewsie Konik, the last victim, had been a friend of mine. He was a little younger than me, also a little heavier, paunchier. A little shy on the outside, but with a good sense of humor when you got to know him. He liked the Kingston Trio, and John F. Kennedy. He grew up in Poste, got good grades in school there, even went to Ottawa to finish high school. That was just as well, since Matthewsie's lame father had given up hunting and taken a job in town as the Hudson's Bay clerk. The boy never did get to learn much of the traditional way of life. When he came back from Ottawa he got a job working for the government agent. In '63 when the bureaucracy changed over from the federal DNA to the provincial DGNQ, Matthewsie kept his job in the same office, as a reliable local liaison. His first new responsibility was to scout out possibilities for a new settlement site on the Hudson Bay coast, up around the Kangsuk River. But at a place called the Caribou Crossing, he had been found with his head bashed in, stuffed into a fishing hole six feet deep in the river ice.

A younger Inuit man named Wallin had gone with Matthewsie on the trip. Wallin was headed south from the Kangsuk when I met him on my way there to investigate. Wallin admitted that he'd traveled with the deceased from Poste, claiming they had done a

little hunting on the way.

Wallin's face had seemed familiar, in a vague and disturbing way, as I interviewed him. His eyes seemed to look right through you, as if you weren't there at all. Poste was a big settlement, twelve hundred people or so; maybe, I thought, he'd seen him around town.

According to Wallin's story, at the place called the Caribou Crossing he and Konik had parted company. Wallin went on to Col-de-Corbeau, clear over on the Ungava coast, while Matthewsie stayed in camp to map and survey and fish. Then when he stopped by on his return trip, Wallin told me, he found his friend's dead body in the ice, his head caved in--apparently by means of the large, bloodied ice-chisel that still lay nearby.

Wallin's description of the body matched the one I had heard the day before from another witness, who'd passed the scene traveling south and reported the killing when he'd got to Poste. I recognized Moses Idluk as a resident of Poste. He was a wizened little old fellow in a Scotch-plaid hunting cap, whose eyes showed a little nervousness as he told me, {via Jimmy's translation} what he'd seen. He claimed that he'd gone north hunting, and encountered Matthewsie ice-fishing in the river at the Caribou Crossing. He stopped to have tea with him, and Matthewsie mentioned that he'd done a little caribou-tracking with Wallin on the way north from Poste.

Three days later, Moses told me, on his trip back home, he found the body in the ice. He lifted Matthewsie out of the ice to see what strange thing had happened. Then, at the sight of the battered head, he replaced the body just as he had found it.

He told me at this point that he had considered burying the body under rocks, or hauling it home to Poste, but had thought it best not to meddle with what appeared to be "the work of an evil spirit."

I looked at him doubtfully.

Then he added, with a twinkle in his eye, "It wouldn't look too good bringing in a body that someone had killed like that. Somebody might think I was the one who did it."

I did some checking around about Moses Idluk, and found nothing incriminating about him. If anything, the man had been on congenial terms with Matthewsie and his family. As far as I could figure, he was not a bona fide suspect in the case.

Wallin's description of the body, during that first meeting I had with him, matched Moses's description pretty well, but not exactly. Wallin didn't mention, for instance, that the body was upside down--until I asked him directly if he'd seen it that way.

I persuaded him to turn his team around and go back to the scene. I wanted to see how he behaved there. The body was gone. Wallin claimed he had moved the deceased from the hole in the ice to a crude rock-covered grave. The chisel was still sticking out of the ice, where Wallin said he had angrily thrust it on finding his friend dead. Now I was the one who was angry, telling Wallin you can't mess with the evidence like that. But of course blowing my stack was no help after the fact.

Wallin maintained a blasé attitude. I was struck by a cold, almost calculating intelligence in the man's eyes; yet nothing else about him told me he was a murderer. Wallin stuck by his story. And he seemed almost reverent when he showed me where he had covered the body with rocks in the proper way to keep the scavengers away from it.

He explained again that Matthewsie was his friend. Having just managed to cool down a little on the short hike to the grave, I lost my temper again.

What did you do in Col, I wanted to know.

I had business there, Wallin answered.

What business?

At this Wallin looked a little sheepish, and for a moment I thought I had him.

Wallin said he'd been collecting things that are best collected there.

I searched Wallin and his packed sled. There was a large pouch all tied up securely, stuffed full of raven feathers, eggs, dung. This is the sort of person, I thought to myself at the time, that you have to watch.

The other side of it was that you have to let someone like that go if you have no substantial evidence or cause for suspicion. Sure, the guy had been with Konik. And he hadn't gone out of his way to flag me down to report the body on his way back to Poste-- but that was no crime.

I had to face facts. I thought it unlikely that a killer would have stuck around that long--two days since the body had been discovered by Moses Idluk, possibly another between that discovery and the deed itself. So had Wallin killed Konik, disappeared temporarily, and then returned to bury the body before I showed up? Again, that was unlikely. And he couldn't have killed Konik before a round trip to Col, because that was a four-to-five day proposition at the very fastest, and Konik was reportedly alive in that period of time. While his alleged trip to Col was a questionable alibi, I still felt I had nothing solid on Wallin, for the time being, and let him go.

Wallin had claimed not to have seen anyone else on his return trip along the

Kangsuk, so there weren't any other leads I could track down instead--only a maze of crusty dogsled trails on the north bank of the river. From Moses Idluk I had got the same response: he'd seen no one else in the vicinity at the time he was there.

Wallin said also that he hadn't stayed with anyone in Col, that he'd camped alone outside the settlement. I was tempted to make the grueling trip there (at my speed, four days each way) just to check out whether anyone of Wallin's description had been seen in those parts recently. It was almost worth it just for the chance to visit with Father Tomlin, the priest I had got to know fairly well in Poste before he transferred to Col. But it was a long shot, and we weren't outfitted for such an extended trip. As a provisional measure Jimmy and I followed Wallin's tracks, still soft and fresh, east for most of a day--until we hit some bad weather blowing at us, decided to buy Wallin's story and turned back. I thought I would dig up more on Wallin back in Poste.

On the return trip from the Kangsuk, I asked Jimmy what he knew about Wallin. Not much, Jimmy told me. They moved, he said, in different circles. Oh, I wondered, what kind of circle does Wallin move in? Hard to say, Jimmy replied with that gummy grin of his.

I wondered why this Wallin, a much younger man, had gone along with Matthewsie in the first place. I knew that Matthewsie didn't have many friends; that's why he didn't mind spending a little time with the local "cop-man" jawing or listening to records. The only basis of Matthewsie's friendship with Wallin seemed to be their hunting together--a kind of universal bond among the Inuit which, as far as I could tell, didn't necessarily mean anything else. Except that Matthewsie was no hunter.

Nancy came up with the information that Wallin had lived in the household of

Matthewsie's family for a few years while growing up in Poste. He wasn't called Wallin then, but Charlie Tarqiq. It seemed he was an orphan, and Matthewsie was some sort of cousin. I checked with Matthewsie's parents and they gave Wallin a decent character reference, as far as it went. He'd moved out of their house at the age of nine, had lived in another house with Matthewsie for a couple of years; and since then they hadn't seen much of him. Wallin's--or Charlie Tarqiq's--school records were not all that unusual: he was bright, and he did well until grade five, at which time he dropped out. That was slightly earlier than the average.

So what had Wallin done in Poste since then?

"Oh, hung around," he told me during a second interview back in Poste.

I pressed his thumb firmly on the inkpad. "You mean, around town, or did you go out hunting?"

"A little of each," he said. He carried himself like a hunter: that calm bearing, the solid footing, the steady eye and hand.

"Who taught you how to hunt?" I asked him.

"Friends." A friendly grin.

"All right--" I said, and I thought to myself, I'll talk to you again.

So far I'd gotten nowhere. It was like asking your teenager where they're going--

"Out."

The teenager I never had, and likely never would.

I put my feet down, swept away the fallout of crumbs from the caribou-on-Wonder sandwiches Nancy had brought in from the restaurant, and leafed absently

through one of the case files still on my desk. I couldn't help myself: I kept hoping that some dormant fact hiding between the lines might float up to daylight, making sudden sense of all the rest.

I heard Nancy come in; she hung up her coat and went right to her desk, switching on the short-wave for the afternoon rock-and-roll out of Montreal.

I tapped my pencil to the so-called music, until it was drowned out by a buzzing roar outside my window. Big George, at it again--

A pair of bright-scarfed shoppers shuffled out of his way. The shiny yellow front of his Hudson's Bay store, which usually dominated my view, was obscured by a cloud of exhaust from his power toboggan, the latest thing in white technology to hit the North.

George Langston was the manager of "The Bay," and naturally he was the first in Poste to own such a machine, running it at full pitch all over town, as if to advertise the thing. Scuttlebutt had it that in a few years--if I was still around--I'd be riding one of these "Ski-doo's" out on a case, with a sled half-full of gasoline instead of dog food. Back in town the shoppers would be roaring by my window, pulling sleds loaded with goodies from the Bay. Smelly, noisy, and by all reports, unreliable--it was only a matter of time before these machines would take over.

I began nervously tapping with my pencil again. Something had to break on this case. Sooner or later I was going to have to put a name, a face to these unknown causes of death.

I tossed the pencil down on the desk.

Not later.

Now.

I stood up, practically at attention, and picked up the files as though I were ready to approach the judge with them.

I walked into the outer office, plunked the files on my secretary's desk for her to replace in her inscrutable filing system, and poured myself a coffee. Nancy was sitting back in her chair vicariously living the life of Miss Morningstar.

"Nancy, remember that guy we had a talk with after Konik's death--Wallin, the guy who was with him on the trip?

"Yeah," she said without looking up from her book. "Charlie Tarqiq."

I scalded my tongue on the hot coffee. "That's the one."

"What about him?"

"I think it's time to have another talk with him. You seen him around town lately?"

Now she looked up at me, and speaking slowly, almost dreamily, she said, "He left a couple of days ago, on a hunting trip up the coast."

A series of bells started clanging away in my small brain.

The short-wave chimed in with the one tune I genuinely liked, Ray Charles singing "Hit the Road, Jack."

"You got hold of Jimmy, I hope?"

"Yeah; he was already half-packed to go hunting."

"Good, good. Now I can spend the rest of the afternoon poring over the population inventory. Great fun, eh? Then, tonight, after a little supper at the detachment house, I guess I'll turn in early, to rest up for the trip. Unless, that is, a better idea comes to me . . ."

Nancy had her nose stuck back in her book.

"Say, Nance, since this seems to be such a good time for hunting . . ."

I was thinking of Nancy's brother Lucassie, who shared a two-room plywood shack with her. Regulations forbid "cohabitation with members of the native population." But since I lived alone in the detachment house, they couldn't nail me on that one. If they were trying to be coy with the language of their regulations, that was their problem. What did they want from me, celibacy? I was no priest. Just a bloody cop--a man. They didn't want you married and yet they didn't want you screwing around, either. Well, my position was clear: the hell with them. Maybe Nancy wasn't Miss Right for me but I'd have been pretty goddamned lonely without her. So the keyword for me had to be "discreet." We had to get together at her place, and at that, lean on the side of the occasional.

Our sporadic schedule was fine as far as Nancy was concerned, because she enjoyed "dates," as she churlishly called them, with a number of young men of the settlement. I can't say I was thrilled by her other associations. But what could I do? Our relationship was tenuous enough. And I never was exactly what you would call a ladies' man. Especially ever since a big Cree defenseman bopped me in the nose at center ice when I was twenty-two. Now at forty-one my belly was starting to ride a bit on my belt; and the last time I'd fallen for anyone was a long time before Nancy--too long. Lily, the half-breed waitress in the truck stop in Wawa . . .

If anything, I figured I had to lighten up with myself about her other affairs. Better this, I told myself over and over, than the singles bars down South.

"Why don't you just say it?"

"All right. Are you open for a visit tonight?"

"As a matter of fact, not tonight. Sorry. Maybe next time."

"Who is it this time?" I didn't really want to know, but I couldn't help myself.

"Did you run into Samwillie Kingak again at the restaurant?"

"No," she said. And I could see by the look she gave me that I'd better leave it at that.

Chapter Five

AN ULU MOON

"I suppose you think you've got what you wanted, now. Flaunting yourself in those ridiculous feathers. I should have stopped this foolishness long ago. Sitting out there on the ice, like some--some khalunat woman, some idle dreamer, who knows nothing about what it takes to live. You knew I needed those sealskin boots before going hunting again--and it was you who let the dogs steal my others. So you can spend all night at it if need be. You've had enough dreaming for a while. We'll see what becomes of whitish men who would be cooks rather than hunters, what happens to khalunat-spoiled spoilers of good fish. And we'll see what happens to the girls who would be their women. Now get to work on those boots. And see that they're well oiled when you're done."

Sandlak went out of the snowhouse again, and Nilliq trembled to think of him going with his anger to Wallin. Then she heard the snarling of her father's dogs as he fed them. She sat, numb, against the wall of the snowhouse, feeling suddenly like a stranger.

The seal oil in her mother's stone lamp still shimmered behind a row of little flames. As Nilliq peered at the rippling surface she saw her face reflected there in an unfamiliar way: the long thinness of nose and jaw and lips were the features of a khalunat woman. The lips moved; the mouth opened; the white woman in the dark oil called out

to Nilliq, calling her away. Then the oil settled into a clearer stillness. Over the high taut cheekbones of her people, Nilliq's own eyes shone bright and black like eyes of the creature who so willingly had provided this oil.

Sandlak came back in bringing a haunch of seal from the meat rack. He started to curse when he saw Nilliq idling by the lamp and she moved quickly to take up the sealhide and the case of needles. He lifted his wet tunic over his head, his body gleaming like a freshly skinned carcass in the flickering light of the lamp his daughter had just nudged to life. "Here, hang this up to dry." He tossed the sodden thing at her and it knocked the needles out of her hands. He snickered as she had to crawl around finding them all again. Then before she could start on his boots he had her take out the pot of fish stew and throw what was left of it to the dogs.

Nilliq looked with anguish at the neighboring igloo. "You will come hunting with me," Sandlak had told their visitor in a low, quavering voice. And Wallin had calmly accepted the challenge. Her father had pointed to the snowhouse Aiti had built--its winter porch still attached, its snow roof half-melted and misshapen--and directed Wallin to sleep there. "There might even be a willow mat or an old skin still inside. You won't need a lamp. I'll be ready early tomorrow morning." And then Sandlak, muttering insults to his dogs and his troublesome daughter, had chased her with a kick into his own mean little house.

Nilliq came back inside. Sandlak seemed not in the mood for further talk. He had made his desires known, and now he was having his meat. When he finished his meal, he honed the blade of his long knife, cleaned his rifle, and sat back picking his teeth. Eventually he crawled into his sleeping-robos and, still without any further words with

her, fell asleep.

For once Nilliq was glad of her father's snoring. She knew now what she must do: steal out when her father was asleep, and go to Wallin. Her nipples quivered at the slightest brush against her tunic as she thought of the visitor, no longer a stranger, lying on his caribou robes in the neighboring snowhouse. She would tell Wallin that they must leave this very night, to get away while there was still time before tomorrow.

Nilliq continued to work the needle and sinew through the tough sealhide, making hunter's boots that would be strong and waterproof. In time she realized she would have to eat, and stopped work long enough to have a meal from the seal meat that her father had left. As she ate she reconsidered the wisdom of her newly-hatched plan. All she knew was her father's world, and with her first step out of the snowhouse this night, she'd be casting it behind forever. How could she leave her people, whom she had grown up with and learned from--those who had cared for her when she was small, and the younger ones she had helped care for? Where would she go, with this man she barely knew? Into the mountains to live with the ptarmigan? Would they try to live without others to share the hunting, the dancing, the play of the children?

She looked over at the sleeping form of her father; and at the emptiness beside him. A cold chill ran up her spine and she pricked her finger with her mother's needle.

Yes, Nilliq thought, him I could leave, and the sooner the better.

Her father turned, making a rough sound in his throat. She would be wise to wait a while longer. Again her fingers worked, and the cut edges of skin disappeared into a nearly seamless fold. The very stitches were invisible.

Sandlak stopped snoring. Then Nilliq thought she saw him looking at her with his wolf-yellow eyes. She looked again and the eyes were closed. Had she only imagined it? She shuddered as she tamped down the moss wick to form only a single small flame to last the rest of the night, and then climbed into her own sleeping-robess--still wearing her trousers and tunic, and with duffel socks and sealskin kamiks still on her feet. Lying in the darkness she conjured up the mirage of Wallin's eyes, with the light of warmth in them like that single small flame burning oil of seal, close by in the middle of the night.

She thought of putting the wick under, smothering the flame, to hide her exit in darkness. But was Sandlak more likely to awaken from unaccustomed darkness than from her stealthy movements in the dim, flickering light? In the end, after feigning sleep a while longer, she decided to risk the darkness. Carefully she reached her hand to the wick, checked once more to see that her father's eyes were truly closed, and pushed the bit of moss under, singeing her finger as she did so and then having to bite her lip to keep from letting out the little sound "Oh!" that tried to escape.

With her clothes still on she had only to slip out of bed, and slink low, silent, and quickly out the front of the snowhouse. To pull the flap open, but not so far as to allow rising moonlight and a sudden draft of cold air to sweep across her father's face. She stooped through, emerging into the great starry night which was made bright enough for traveling by the blade of the half-moon, clear and sharp as an ulu.

Nilliq was filled with exhilaration as she stood up in the cool spring air, breathing deeply and rapidly. She didn't fully know, yet felt sure of what she was doing. There was no going back. Her father could yell and curse in the morning till he was hoarse, if that

was what he wanted to do--she wouldn't have to hear it any longer.

She had forgotten about the dogs.

They were tethered in a group in front of Wallin's snowhouse, well away from Sandlak's dogs. Both groups of animals appeared to be sleeping still. Nilliq trod softly but rapidly the twenty strides to the snowhouse where Wallin slept. She was glad to see that the collapsing snowblock roof was well-iced and holding fast.

At Nilliq's approach, Wallin's gray-and-white lead dog raised its head. One bark, even one low growl, and all the dogs of the camp would be up baying and yowling. Nilliq glanced at its eyes--seeing there something of Wallin's eyes--then blinked once or twice, trying to show no trace of the anxiety she felt, and bent as casually as she could to the snowhouse entrance. The dog put its head back between its paws, and lay there looking at her. Nilliq's heart was pounding so loudly that her ears were ringing as with the sound of the shaman's drum.

Instead of a skin flap, there was a glazed old snow block at the entrance to the winter porch. Nilliq moved the block aside and wriggled in.

In that brief splash of moonlight she could see that Wallin was awake. Could he hear her pounding heart? Had her father heard? Inside there was no lamp to see by; no warmth except that within the sleeping-robcs. Nilliq felt the temptation to forget her good sense and to lie down beside Wallin without any thought of the morning--if he would have her. But she knew what she had to do instead.

He said, "I was waiting for you."

"Keep your voice down," Nilliq whispered, crouching low by the sleeping platform. "I don't want to wake my father. You didn't sleep?"

"I slept some. But not very well. I didn't know whether you'd manage to make it, under the great hunter's nose. I take it you finished his boots."

With Wallin's words Nilliq was ashamed to realize that her father's cutting speech had carried out of the snowhouse. At the same time she was horrified to remember that she'd neglected to oil the newly made boots.

Then Wallin reached out and took her hand, and it didn't matter anymore. He had been expecting her.

She sat on the platform on a corner of Wallin's sleeping skin, still careful to keep some distance between them in the darkness. She was burning with attraction to him. But again she reminded herself that to lie with this man, to giggle like a carefree girl in his arms, was a thing not yet to be.

"The boots are done," she told him, and then she said something that made her heart flutter like that of a ptarmigan, just to say it: "I've been waiting, too." Her hand was sweating, limp within his. Wallin put another gentle hand to her shoulder, then to her cheek. She couldn't help but think of Aiti.

She pulled back her hand.

"Wallin, I--"

She couldn't say it.

But there was no turning back. If she tried to return to her bed, and her father awoke . . .

What is it, Nilliq? What's the matter?"

"You mustn't go hunting with my father tomorrow. You must leave tonight. And--please, Wallin--you must take me with you!" Nilliq couldn't believe that she had said it.

Yet, it seemed that her words were not enough. Wallin didn't respond. Then he took his hand away from her cheek. She wanted, but could not bring herself, to reach out and cling to him.

Wallin stroked her hair. In a soft, comforting voice he told her, "Nilliq, you don't need to worry. You may leave with me, when I go. But not tonight."

Again Nilliq could not speak what had to be spoken.

"Ah," Wallin said then. "It's your father you're worried about, is it? His anger?"

She nodded, feeling like a child.

"Don't worry about him. I will go hunting with him tomorrow, and then you and I will go away together. Where is it you want to go?"

"No, Wallin, you don't understand!" Now it had to be said. "You can't go with him. I'm afraid--for you."

Nilliq was surprised when Wallin didn't question her further. He seemed to accept what she had said, and lay breathing steadily for a while. At last he said, "Look, Nilliq, it's his wish. Isn't it your custom, for a man to earn the right--"

"You have nothing to earn," Nilliq said suddenly, standing up as if to go. But there was no where else to go.

Wallin sounded hurt, as he reached a hand out to her arm: "But I thought you said, you were waiting--"

"It's by my wish, not his, that I want to go with you. You don't owe him anything."

Wallin sat up and pulled her gently down to sit once more on the willow mat beside him. "You don't need to be afraid for me," he said. "What's going to happen? I

can handle myself. I've killed polar bear, bull walrus. I've talked with the raven. Is this man Sandlak going to kill me? I don't think so."

Now that Wallin had spoken her fear, Nilliq felt some of its dark force drain away. Still, she was afraid.

There was a distant sea-roaring in her ears. "Listen," she said with some desperation, "If I hadn't come to you like this, maybe it would have been okay to go out with him. But I can't risk going back in there. And if he awakes and comes to find me here--" She gripped his arm. "Wallin, we can leave here, right now. We could keep going along the coast, Poce-Balen or Smith, wherever you were going. I don't--I can't stay here another day. Not now."

"We'll go from here," Wallin said with a little smile. "But I have some business with your father, first."

"There's nothing to say to him! Let's just go. Wallin, you can't go hunting with him. I know him, what he's like, what he looked like yesterday standing outside there with you, and what he said to me. He really might--" Nilliq bit her lip with this ugliest of thoughts. It was one thing for Wallin to say it. Still she could not. Yet, such things had happened. Here they were, in Aiti's snowhouse.

"It will be a fine day," he said simply. "And I am not ready to die."

As he said this, Nilliq realized she could make out the features on Wallin's face.

Chapter Six

FIRST BLOOD

They heard a low growling from Wallin's dogs, and the sound of footsteps crunching in the newly frozen snow. Then, an angry cursing as Sandlak, it could be no other, came through the low porch entrance. He thrust his head in, coughed and spat.

"Ha! There you are! It is not hard for a hunter to find a daughter when one knows where to look." He pulled the rest of his body in and squatted there near the entrance.

Nilliq cringed as she sat beside Wallin, who lay back on his elbows calm and unperturbed. Sandlak was in a rage, yet seemed to be enjoying himself. He was wearing his winter kamiks, no good for hunting on the melting spring ice.

He railed on: "Would you have me go out on the ice with these miserable things?" He held up the new pair of unoled boots, looking first at Nilliq and then at Wallin. "You see how talented my daughter is? She would make a fine wife for you, wouldn't she?" Then he stood up and said in a stern voice: "But she is not yet ready to be a wife. She still belongs to me." And he started to move toward them.

Wallin leaned up straighter on his arms and looked steadily at Sandlak. Nilliq wanted to crawl behind him for protection, but dared not move.

"She has behaved as no wife to me," Wallin said.

Sandlak looked surprised to hear this, and halted in his steps.

"I can see what I can see," he said to Wallin.

"You can see that she is fully clothed," Wallin said. "I have not touched your

daughter."

"I can see you lying beside her this very instant!" Sandlak yelled, and he moved again to take her.

"Wait," Wallin said, sitting straight up and putting his hand in front of Nilliq. "She has come here, it is true. But that is all. I tell you, she has behaved as no wife, but as any hunter's proper daughter."

"Don't fill my ears with your goose-slime," Sandlak snarled. He brushed Wallin's hand aside and reached for Nilliq's arm. She shrank away from him hoping that Wallin would intervene. But Wallin sat unmoving while Sandlak grabbed her and wrenched her up and dragged her whimpering out of the snowhouse, knocking the porch to pieces as they went through.

Nilliq's only hope now was that the hunting trip would be canceled. She held onto this bubble of sea-foam while Sandlak dragged her across the dirty snow to his house, beat her about the head and shoulders with the boots she had made for him, and then pushed her down at the entrance. She crawled inside, tasting blood on her lips. Could she really have expected Wallin to stop Sandlak from doing what he liked with her, his daughter? She could not.

If I were Wallin, Nilliq thought, I would simply leave.

Her father came in after her, tossed the new boots on the floor and said, "Now oil them. There is hunting still to be done." The rage had gone out of him; he said no more to her. He left her there and she heard him outside Aiti's snowhouse having more words with Wallin, these also not angry or loud but in the low tones of hunters making ready for a trip out on the land. He came back again and started taking things out of the snowhouse

to pack on his sled.

Nilliq turned to the lamp which she had let go out in the night, and dipped her fingers in, while tears and droplets of blood from her lip splashed into the oil. She rubbed the oil into the boots, because there was nothing else she could do. And she rubbed it in well, because she was angry at herself. If only she'd waited the night, and let the men go hunting together without interfering, she might have found a way to leave with Wallin after they returned. Now it was too late for such a fantasy, thanks to her girlish impatience.

Then the men were gone, and Nilliq cried herself to sleep like a child beside her mother who wasn't there.

The camp was quiet, peaceful as death.

The snowhouse was a grave, piled heavy with rocks.

She would never get out.

She had to get out, and never come back.

Nilliq jumped up from the sleeping platform and scrambled to the entrance. Now she was fully awake and realized she had been dreaming; but the dream was real enough. She took a last look around at her father's snowhouse: the fetid sleeping-skins, the scraps of old meat and reeking containers of fermented seal fat, the falling-apart crate of khalunat cooking supplies, the heap of skins yet to be worked, the cold stone lamp, the sour water in the old sealskin bucket--and knew that this place, these things were hers no longer.

She crawled through the entrance, and drank in the fresh outside air as if it were

her first breath. The sky was white, hanging close around the ground with a heavy stillness. The camp seemed empty, deserted. Even Wallin's dogs were silent. Nilliq saw that the hunters had taken Sandlak's dogs and sled.

A little fresh snow had fallen, but Nilliq could sense, as she had the previous morning, the coming warmth of spring. Tossing her hair to shake out the last of the sleep-spirits, she envisioned raven wings taking flight, and recalled the odd word Wallin had used: "Ravensway." On an impulse she slipped out of her tunic and turned it again feather-side-out, the way her father disapproved of but the way she liked to wear it when the warm weather came.

The warm weather was not here yet: Nilliq's bare skin puckered like that of a plucked goose. Quickly she put the tunic back on and could feel the smooth skin next to her, the skin chewed soft in her mother's mouth. A light breeze came up and ruffled the feathers, and she shivered with a momentary, secret delight. It was possible . . .

Avinga and Lialuq burst out of Aiti's snowhouse, giggling; they covered their mouths when they saw her. What were they doing--playing lovers? Nilliq scowled at them and told them to stay out of there. They shrank back and stumbled over the strewn snowblocks from the porch, nearly falling into the dogs. One of Wallin's dogs snarled and nipped at Avinga's trouser leg.

Nilliq walked over and stood at the entrance. Wallin's dogs began to whine pitifully at her feet. Were they hungry, or just lonesome in Wallin's absence? Nilliq went to Sandlak's meat rack and, ignoring his strictures against such a thing, took down what meat she pleased and took it to Wallin's dogs.

Watching them tear at the meat, Nilliq realized once more how easy it was for the

worst to happen.

Or maybe the two hunters would make a game out of it. Would the first man to catch a seal win the right to possess her? She had heard of such contests . . .

Without thinking Nilliq bit her bruised lip.

She drifted past the snowhouse into which Avinga and Lialuq had disappeared. Quingak had taken his sled and dogs. At the last house, Pingousi's dogs were still gone. It was a good time, it seemed, for hunting. Old Pootoolik was just harnessing his dogs to go somewhere. Nilliq offered him a passing greeting and ducked through the skin flap into the snowhouse. Mariq was sitting up on the sleeping platform tying Tiniq's hat for him, as if he were a small child, and saying, "Catch me a fine big seal, will you? You remember which part to save for me, the piece I most like, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, m'ma," her cousin said, shuffling his feet with impatience and turning his head to watch Nilliq as she came in.

"Here, here, keep your head turned this way; it's only Nilliq. Ai--that's good. Now remember--"

"Nilliq-ai," said Tiniq on his way out.

"Tiniq--ai," Nilliq muttered.

He paused. "What's the matter--miss your boyfriend already?"

Nilliq avoided looking at him.

Then he reached out and roughly tried to tickle her by the armpit of her tunic, just behind her breast. Nilliq turned on him, her nails ready to claw, and the boy ran giggling out of the snowhouse.

Her face was flushed as she turned to see Mariq smiling at her, leaning back in her

bed against a large pile of skins.

"Ai, little Nilliq," she said, still smiling. "But not so little any more, are you?"

Nilliq blushed and looked down at the dirty floor of the snowhouse. Her legs began to wobble and she sat on the sleeping platform, facing Mariq. Still she looked away, until at last she could bear it no longer and said, with a fierce gaze into Mariq's astonished eyes:

"I'm going to go away from here."

"Oh! With Wallin, are you?"

Then Nilliq fell sobbing into her grandmother's arms. She couldn't stop, heaving and heaving, drowning in the darkness of all her eighteen winters. After some time of this, Mariq said, "He'll come back."

"Do you know him?" Nilliq asked on an impulse.

Mariq was silent. Then she said, "An old woman like me can tell things by looking at a man."

"Mariq, where will we go?"

"Ai, an old woman I am, but I've not the sight of the shaman. For that question you need such a one as Entinada--the one who came at the time of your first blood."

Nilliq remembered her as from a dream: a withered rawhide-skinned figure with gray unkempt hair, strange stringy clothing, a voice of the ancients, a bone-and-teeth rattle and booming hoop-drum. It seemed an eternity ago. Entinada had appeared suddenly and mysteriously at the right time.

"Yes, I remember," Nilliq said. "She took some of my blood smeared on carved stone seal and threw it out onto the sea-ice, from the big rock. She told it to go down,

when the ice melted, as thanks to Niviaktuk, 'the great mother of all,' for the blood of the creatures that had been sent to feed me--'this woman-child,' she called me--"

"--and for the blood of the creatures Niviaktuk would send in times to come: to nourish those you will bear into the world."

"I remember how long and deeply she looked into my eyes. And up and down my body, while she shook that horrible rattle. I asked her what was in it, and she said human teeth. Do you think it was her own teeth?"

Mariq chuckled. "Who can know? One does not know the ways of the shaman without becoming one."

Then Nilliq remembered a remark Entinada had made about khalunat, in some reference to Nilliq herself which she never understood clearly. Nilliq shook the thought away as a caribou might flinch under the touch of a mosquito.

"Mariq, do you think I am attractive to a man, with this long nose of mine, this bird's body?"

"Oh, listen to you," the old woman scoffed. "After last night with him, you're asking that? Those things make you different, but not unattractive. You can always turn the feathers on that silly tunic of yours back inside, too, where they belong."

Nilliq chose to ignore this remark and asked, "What do khalunat women look like?"

Again Mariq chuckled. "You and your silly questions. Are you afraid you look too much like a khalunat woman? Don't worry, my doe. Compared to them you are plump--quite soft enough for some fine Inuk hunter. From what I have seen, khalunat women are thin-skinned, with not enough fat to keep away the cold. Their faces and

hands are positively bony. Walking skeletons, they are. The hair, on some of them, is yellow as a bear's pelt. Or sandy-tan like a caribou. Or like a lemming's fur, shit-brown." She threw her head back, cackling until she fell into a fit of coughing. "Aggh--where's my tobacco?"

After she'd found it behind the pile of skins and stuffed some into a pipe, the grandmother sat back puffing, looking at Nilliq with narrow eyes.

"But since you mention it," the grandmother resumed, "it could be that you have some of the khalunat in you."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Well, I've told you about what happened around the time of your birth. About the boy child, born dead from Sijja after Sandlak's return from the south. And about the khalunat pilot who fathered him . . ."

"Yes, but what does that have to do with me?" Nilliq cried, her mind all in a flurry, a feather-storm of confusion.

"I helped deliver you, Nilliqie. If you remember."

This crotchety attitude of the old woman's was maddening. "I just want to know what you mean about seeing khalunat, in me--"

Mariq kept her own composure, as she had learned to do so well in her many years. "Hard to say, exactly. Hard to get any straight answer from that shaman, I'll tell you. But I think this. I think some of that pilot's seed stayed alive in your mother, even after that boy baby grew inside her and died and was born dead."

"So you think the khalunat pilot was--that Sandlak is not my father, but just some hateful Inuk I was unlucky enough to have to spend my whole life living with, treating me

however he wanted--"

"I didn't say that."

Mariq's pipe had gone out. She put it down and waddled to the snowhouse entrance, lifting her skirt around the top of her trousers as she stooped to go through.

Nilliq knew a little about how babies were born, how they came into the world. About the spirits of ancestors returning, and about the love-making between a man and woman. But this idea of Mariq's, about the pilot's seed, was new to her. Who could tell? Maybe it was true.

Caribou girl . . . pretty loon . . . khalunat?

Aa--what did the old women know?

Nothing. Or everything. It didn't matter.

The grandmother came back in and asked Nilliq if she wanted some tea. Nilliq told her no. Mariq was carrying a loon. She picked up her ulu and nicked the skin, then began ripping the pelt in one piece off the bare red flesh of the bird.

Nilliq had had enough of the old woman's riddles, and didn't feel like eating, so left Mariq with her loon and went outside.

Wallin would come back. Mariq had said so, hadn't she?

A warm sun was burning away the white haze. The skin roof of Quingak's snowhouse steamed its moisture into the air. As Nilliq walked past Aiti's snowhouse, she noticed that the sunken old snow roof had finally collapsed. Wallin's lead dog wagged his tail at her. She paid him no attention, but continued walking out of camp into the hills.

The camp was out of sight below the high hill. The black rocks were warm to the touch as Nilliq clambered still higher, to the place of the ancestors, the place of the stone graves. The gray piles were always cold, even in summer. This was the resting place of Nananga, Nilliq's grandfather. Of other old ones before her time; and of more recent deaths. Of Jiana, Aiti's mother. Of Sijja, Nilliq's mother. Of Aiti himself. Of . . .

Nilliq stood with the wind blowing her hair, wondering why she had come to this place. She hadn't really meant to. But now she was here. Maybe one day her bones would be piled under rocks beside these. And maybe not.

A whoosh of wings went overhead--a solitary raven, heading north. Moments later, two others, flying together. They croaked at her, circling once. Then they headed off in the direction of the first one, chuckling to themselves.

Nilliq shuddered in the brisk air and walked on, descending in a wide arc northward around the camp. Here and there she saw patches of new spring moss and tiny flower buds peeking through the rocks and melting snow. A breeze blew steadily from the south, warmer at the foot of the hill. These signs of the coming season helped a little to cheer her, to give her hope.

At last she came around to the shore of the bay, and picked her way along the towers of ice southward again to the big rock she called her own. The sun was already lowering itself down toward the bay.

Gazing down through the blue ice into the invisible cold blackness below, Nilliq gave herself over to the will of Niviaktuk. She felt the goddess's power flowing up from below, from beneath the ice where Nilliq's first blood had gone down to the ancestor spirits. Nilliq knew that she must take courage, and from this power find the strength to

continue: even if forced to stay in Sandlak's snowhouse. Even if he felt justified, finally, in taking all liberties with her, by her being not of his blood. She would watch and wait in the night, if it came to that, and when he took his chance, she would--

A bank of dark clouds had come rolling with a heavy warmth up the coast, bringing no rain but a wheeling of ravens in loud cacophony. The black birds briefly whirled overhead and flew silently on to the north. Nilliq thought she heard then, in the distance, a low, persistent scraping.

Standing up and straining her eyes, Nilliq could see that only one man rode the sled.

Chapter Seven

THE HUNTING CAMP

Jimmy came by with the loaded sled, behind ten dogs panting and restless to go. As usual he was wearing blue jeans, a nylon ski jacket, and a simple black knit cap. I was dressed for exposure, wearing my fur-trimmed, pointy-hooded parka with police patches on the shoulders. I hefted my duffel bag of extra warm clothing into the cargo box. There I would ride behind my driver on a cushion of folded caribou skin, nestled amongst the assorted gear: extra traces for the dogs, cartons of ammunition, a transistor radio . . .

"Where's the grub?" I asked Jimmy.

"Right in there, at the bottom. We're only going to Townsend Bay camp, right?"

"Yeah, near there." I pawed deeper, thinking I should have had a bigger breakfast.

"And back home again. What are we going to eat? Fruit cocktail and biscuits?"

"Be some good hunting on the way up," Jimmy said with a yawn and a toothless grin.

He squinted into the foggy, early-morning sun. "Nice day maybe further up the coast."

"Let's hope so."

We ran out easy on the relatively smooth bay ice. The fog bank hovering around Poste posed no problem for navigation; we needed only to keep the stacked-up shore ice in sight. My objectives for this trip were modest: to find out what I could about the cause

of death, and, if there was any evidence of foul play, to establish some leads for follow-up. A hypothetical killer would have at least a five-day jump on us, by the time we could view the victim's body. At that rate, trying to chase down someone right away was less important than a studied consideration of strategy and, in the long run, perseverance.

But all that was for later. Lulled by the swishing sound of the sled runners on the smooth bay ice, I let my mind ease from the imponderables of my job into the sheer pleasure of riding behind a team of determined huskies and their dependable driver, northward in the brisk spring air.

"Lookee that." Jimmy pointed to a distant hill. At first I couldn't see anything. Only after intensely focusing in the afternoon glare did I manage to see a couple of moving specks.

With the dogs pulling mightily, we wrestled the sled through the heaved and fractured pressure blocks onto solid land. Then Jimmy guided us carefully to within stalking distance of the three caribou. Over a final low hill we could look down and see them pawing through the snow. Jimmy let me have the first shot. I missed; the animals just looked up at me disdainfully and kept on pawing. Jimmy smiled his toothless smile and said, "Try again, boss."

"Maybe we're too close," I said. Distances were deceptive in this kind of country. Jimmy put his hand on the muzzle of my rifle and lowered it a touch. I fired again and this time one went down. Jimmy grinned and said, "That's more like it."

Then, while I looked on, the young Inuit man went to work: quick deft strokes to slice the innards free, some nifty knifework to get the hide off clean, and finally the

uncanny joint cuts to produce pieces we could easily carry.

There were some fine loinsteaks to sizzle up on the campstove for supper and breakfast, and a load of hide-wrapped leftovers to bring home. Jimmy liked his meat raw; he still had his molars to work with, behind the toothless smile. He'd clamp down for purchase on a piece held at the side of his mouth, and carve it off with a knife, bringing the blade dangerously close to his lips. I shuddered and went to work with a knife and fork, a plate in my lap.

It was a good camp meal with fresh bannock, canned fruit-cocktail and canned pudding for dessert, and Red Rose tea to wash it all down. Finally I leaned back, well satisfied.

"Jim," I said, "you can talk all you want about your vitamin C and vitamin B and all the other things to be had from raw meat, but give me a good rare, lightly charred cut of caribou loinsteak every night and morning and I think I'll be as healthy as they come."

"I didn't say nothing about vitamins. Pass me some more of that fruit cocktail."

I cleaned up while Jimmy started setting up the tent. Finally we settled into our snug sleeping bags, ready for a good night's sleep before day two.

A little click--then crackling static, garbled music from all over the Southern map. A snippet of news about strontium-90 being found all over the arctic, on lichen, the caribou's favorite food: so much for healthy diet. Some commentary about "the price of peace." On to the top ten: "House of the Rising Sun," "I Get Around"--Animals and Beach Boys. I rolled over with a resigned sigh. We had worked this one out before. Jimmy had a half an hour to scan the airwaves; then it was click-off.

More steak in the morning, cooked for the two of us this time--Jimmy could take

it both ways. Beans on the side, leftover bannock, coffee . . .

"Storing up for next winter?" Jimmy said with a grin, glancing at my bulging stomach.

"You should talk, eating three platefuls to my two."

His cheeks full, Jimmy looked down innocently at his own flat stomach.

"It's easy now," I said. "Wait till you pass forty, going at the chow the way you do. When I was your age and played hockey for Sudbury, I had a stomach just like yours. I'm a bit stockier, mind you, more the kind of build that a center needs to survive in that league. You ever play hockey?"

"Nope."

"Well, it's a workout, let me tell you. Back then I could handle as much beer as I wanted, red-eye or salted, with hard-boiled eggs by the dozen. All that ice-time wore it off. But there was all this flak from the coach about training, even though I made the Northern Ontario All-Stars three years running, no problem."

Jimmy kept stuffing it in, looking off in the distance, hardly listening.

"Gotta get that pay raise you promised me, somehow, boss."

I had to smile. "This is true."

There were four snow-huts arranged along the foot of the hill. The bare black rock above dwarfed them, made them seem poor and insubstantial, even insignificant. But here, under the vague comfort of a cotton-wool sky, some dozen or so human beings still managed to eke out a meager existence. Evidence, on closer inspection, was everywhere scattered on the ground: patches of yellow snow or snow melted around

human stools, litter of bones that the dogs had gnawed into fuzzy and cracked shards, bits of fur and skin, or of wood and metal discarded in the making of the various implements required for survival. Packs of scruffy dogs howled from behind the huts.

The truncated igloos were covered, this time of year, with drooping skins made sodden by the freezing rain that had fallen all morning. Three of them, that is, were covered; the snow roof on the fourth had collapsed and had not been replaced by anything. A boy ran chasing a stuffed skin ball and then stood still before the broken hut: a statue, I mused, in a scene from a living museum. Only, they leave the garbage and waste out of the museum scenes, and they patch up the wreckage. Here was the smell of the offal and the dogs, and the muffled sighing of the wind from around the hill. Here the damp chill of the spring weather, neither truly cold nor truly warm, neither truly wet nor truly dry, just a damp chill that penetrated to the bones.

"Jack," I could hear my friend George saying, "you're doing the right thing. Follow the long-range program, and bring these people into the settlements. Give them numbers to keep track of them--and comprehensible Christian names for good measure. Put them in a warm house with a stove, and a big kettle full of hot water, and a honey-bucket in the corner which someone will be paid to come around and collect and take to somewhere else where it won't stink and spread disease. The schools are close by, there's a store at hand in case supplies run low, yes even a church if somebody's soul gets a little empty. And good old Jack's just around the corner if needed."

And good old Jack doesn't have to play boy scout for two days in order to come and see how they used to live.

Of course, I knew that when I got back home, I would have to pick up the battered

drunks outside the pool hall, or the punks who'd broken into George's blessed store, and I'd be singing the flip side.

But it was not for Constable Jack McLain to make the decisions, to come up with the program. That was for the politicians and bureaucrats in Ottawa, or Quebec City, or Washington, or wherever the hell it was that such things were decided. It was for me to carry out my lawful duty and see that justice was done.

We looked in at the first little hut. Jimmy coughed before we entered: you can't exactly knock on a hanging sealskin. An old woman was sitting there smoking her pipe, looking up with a face like a death-mask. I knew I wasn't going to get anything out of her. Beside her was the kid, about twelve, who had seen us coming and had run in here for cover. And there was a bald old man I took to be the old woman's mate, looking up from his whittling.

I was neither linguist nor priest; I was a cop. I pushed Jimmy forward to do the translating.

The whittler was called Pootoolik. Yes, Pootoolik said; he knew about the dead man. It was a hunter from this camp, named Sandlak. The name sounded slightly familiar to me, though for no particular reason that I could think of. I figured there might be someone in Poste by that name. Anyway--did Pootoolik find the body first?

"He says he can't say that," Jimmy told me. "Only that he found him." That was when? Four days ago. Could he take us there? Maybe tomorrow, the old man said, and looked back to his whittling. I'll come back to you, I said under my breath. But before we ducked out, I had another question. Did anyone else live here in this igloo? Yes, the

old man grumbled without looking up: Pingousi, who was away hunting. Oh? And how long has he been away hunting? About a week, the old man answered.

"You can't get any more exact than that?"

"They don't have weeks," Jimmy said.

I sighed. This was starting to sound familiar. "Ask him if this Pingousi left before the day of finding Sandlak's body."

The answer was yes.

"Okay. How many days earlier?"

Jimmy tried again. "He says maybe a couple."

"All right. We'll call that good enough for now."

I thought we'd impressed the kid, at least: his eyes were bright with fear.

We went out to try the second dwelling. People were standing outside of it looking at Jimmy's dogs, and then at us, the two uninvited visitors. Jimmy said hello to them. There were a middle-aged man and woman; three young kids, including a baby who had taken one look at me and burst out crying; and, the man said, a couple of old people still inside. I asked if I could have a peek. The children giggled and the mother and father scowled, but Jimmy said it was all right.

Two old people, man and a woman, just as advertised. I withdrew my head from the entrance. This camp seemed one big happy family. Everybody outside was smiling--except the baby, who was crying louder than ever.

The man, named Quingak, said he had gone to see Sandlak's body after Pootoolik had come back and reported it. Thank you very much; now how about this caved-in mess next door? Was anyone living there recently? No one was living there anymore, Jimmy

reported Quingak to say.

"Oh, really." I walked closer toward the wreckage and Jimmy remarked that it looked like a fairly fresh cave-in. How fresh was fresh? Three-four days, Jimmy said. We asked Quingak if anyone had been living there before it caved in. Quingak repeated that no one lived there anymore.

I ignored this charade for the moment and poked around in the crumbled ice and snow, finding small footprints, scraps of meat, a skin on the former sleeping platform. Finally I told Jimmy to tell Quingak that I could see that no one was living there anymore; and that what I wanted to know was, had someone used the hut as recently as, say, the past week? The two kids--a girl around six, the boy a little older--started to giggle and covered their mouths and ran into their own igloo.

"Maybe. Someone could have been in there," Quingak said--in words to that effect.

Ah, I thought, I love this work.

I knew I wasn't finished with this font of information; but I went on to the last igloo in the line at the base of the hill. Nobody home. The place was all set up with cooking supplies, a willow mat and nice bearskin on the platform. It took no special brilliance to guess that it was the home of the deceased. All right, I said to Jimmy, let's see what our hosts can tell us about this one.

"There was a wife, but she died not long ago. Coughing, like her guts were coming up. The daughter, she ran away."

"You mean, when the mother died?"

"No. Just couple days ago. When the father died."

Now we were getting somewhere. As to exactly where, that would take some more doing to find out.

I had turned away as if to go; then I turned back abruptly. "Say, you wouldn't know how the father died, would you?"

Slow head-shaking.

"I take it that's a no."

Jimmy said that was correct.

"Okay, then; thanks a bundle."

Finally, another quick one for the road: "See anybody else travel through here, last 'couple days'?"

No response. Flat, clouded eyes. But the older boy from the first igloo had been lurking behind the adults, listening, and now, hearing Jimmy's question, he said, "That Wallin." The kid, whom I guessed was Pingousi's son, seemed to be hiding behind Quingak.

"Ah, that Wallin," I couldn't help repeating, mimicking Jimmy's English.

I wanted to use my gentlest voice so as not to intimidate the kid, who was brave enough to come forth when the man's lips were sealed.

"And who's Wallin?"

Jimmy picked up my intention and softened his voice as well.

But the kid clammed up and ducked back out of sight. I thought: I'm glad I'm not one of the suckers trying to teach the kids in these Northern schools. I tried Quingak again, now that we had something to work with.

"Could you describe him, please?"

"Oh, sort of a regular Inuk man, you know, 'bout this tall, 'bout this wide, regular Inuk eyes, a bit of a little mustache and wispy beard . . . strong-lookin' guy, wouldn't want to mess with him."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"Well . . ." After some chewing of lips and shuffling of feet, Quingak said, "He's a pretty good hunter."

"How do you know he's a pretty good hunter?"

No answer. Maybe, I considered, that sort of thing goes without saying. But I tried again:

"Okay, suppose he's a good hunter; why does that mean you wouldn't want to mess with him?"

Then Quingak, perhaps impatient with all the white man's questions, came out with it: "He went hunting with Sandlak . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"He came back. Sandlak didn't."

"I see. And then did this Wallin run away, too?"

That got a nervous smile out of the man, and a flurry of commentary from the woman. She wanted us to know, Jimmy said, that the daughter was all right, we needn't go looking for her, because she'd gone with Wallin. Her name was Nilliq. They would be doing just fine on the land and wouldn't get lost. . . .

"Just out of curiosity, then . . ." I asked if the people knew in which direction Wallin and Nilliq had headed.

A little nod of the head from Quingak, and the woman said, "Siginiq"--south--and

pointed in the direction of Poste.

I offered my gracious thanks to the people and went with Jimmy back to the first igloo. We convinced the whittler to take us out to see the corpse but, as it was already late afternoon, the old man said we would have to wait until morning. Did the visitors want to sleep in the empty igloo, Sandlak's house? Jimmy looked at me. I said I didn't care to, thanks just the same; we had a tent. We took our leave. I still didn't like the way that old woman was looking at me. It was one of those little things I noticed, being up North, being white. Who knows, I thought--maybe we deserve it.

The body had been left lying, as a white man might say, in the middle of nowhere; meaning, actually, a couple of hours' sled ride northeast of the camp, going on the bay-ice toward Townsend Bay and then up a little frozen inlet to a barren, rocky plateau; abandoned there without so much as a thought of a decent Christian or even Inuit-style rockpile burial. A flock of ravens were feasting like buzzards, and they scattered from their prize with resentful cries at our approach on the two sleds.

A hodgepodge of other sled tracks led away in various directions. I asked Pootoolik why no one had bothered to bring the body back to camp; why the body hadn't been buried.

He shrugged and said with a sly smile that his people knew that someone would come and would want to see things as they were.

Touché, old man, I wanted to tell him. I'd got my wish: the word had got around that things were to be left camera-ready after a murder.

Pootoolik mumbled something more to Jimmy as he handed him a cigarette.

"What'd he say?"

"Uh, let's see . . ." Jimmy looked a little sheepish. "He says that, uh, the body's been lying here five days now. . . ."

"I know that. What, is it my fault?"

"No, boss. Just that--"

"Hey . . ." I noticed something through the corner of the Polaroid's viewfinder. "Look at this." Not far from the corpse, partially covered in snow, lay a frosty rifle. "It was good of the tourists to leave this baby for us."

Jimmy quickly spotted an empty bullet casing beside it, dully gleaming in the sun.

Checking the rifle over, I found three live rounds of the same caliber, thirty-ought-six, still in the magazine. I gingerly wrapped the weapon in canvas and laid it by the sled, then turned back to the task at hand.

Now . . . five days too many. There was nothing to be done but to get down to it.

The body was in pretty rough shape, unfortunately not very close to that theoretical state of "things as they were." Because of the thawing weather, it was not frozen. But I could tell that it had iced over and thawed a number of times, from the pasty, melted-wax texture of the skin, and the initial stages of putrefaction. The whole works stank to high heaven, and I realized I must have been visibly affected, when Jimmy said in an amused tone, "Haven't you smelled worse bodies down South where it's warmer?"

That might have been true, but I preferred not to recall such experiences. Instead I told Jimmy that the smell of a morgue was clean compared to this; that this was "the straight and natural stuff."

Jimmy laughed. Pootoolik seemed amused as well and giggled beside him. I felt dizzy for a moment and walked around to the other side so as to get some relief by standing upwind of it. This body--what was left of it--was not a pretty sight, nor an easy forensic study, since the foxes and ravens had been feeding from it. The parka, and the belly below the rib cage were torn open and the entrails spilled onto the ground. The throat, also torn wide open, had provided an invitation to explore upward into the head and down into the chest cavity. Still, as a careful investigator I was able to examine some remaining skin at the sides of the throat which showed the clean cut of a knife; and after checking unsuccessfully for any evidence of bullet holes in the clothing or head or back of the body, as well as in the wreckage that had been the front of this man, I could hazard a good guess that the knife slash was the killing wound. There was an empty knife-sheath strapped by a thong around Sandlak's former waist. The knife was nowhere in sight. I stood up, walked over to where Jimmy and Pootoolik were watching, and took a few deep breaths of pure arctic air before they lit more cigarettes.

I had to ask myself, as I did each time, if this was the work I should be doing. I was trying to prevent these things from happening--but they just kept happening anyway, and by the time Jack-in-stripes showed up it was always after, too long after the fact. My stomach was passably hardened to it, but the mind, the spirit always balked.

I almost promised myself, then and there, that once I found this murderer, I would consider my job done and find some more useful occupation. Traveling sales, maybe? Back down south, anyway, where I belonged. With a good woman, I could possibly even settle down. . . .

Dreaming.

I knew that when I found my man, I'd think once more that the North really needed me after all.

Well, I thought, that's then. In any case, I'm not about to quit before I've found him.

After piling rocks on the body, Jimmy and I left the old man in his camp and headed home, riding like commuters on our portable rails along the endless ranks of ice-blue skyscrapers. A last quick round of interviews at the hunting camp provided nothing more interesting than a description of the dead hunter's daughter, Nilliq; a surly reticence to speak of the dead man, Sandlak; and no indications of previous acquaintance with "the stranger," Wallin--in short, a few shrugs and a couple of they-went-thataways.

During a stop for tea I asked Jimmy what he thought of the notion of the absent hunter, Pingousi, being the culprit.

"Could be--you never know," I was surprised to hear Jimmy say.

My guide, I learned, had done a little fact-finding on his own, standing talking with the old man Pootoolik while I examined the corpse.

"So what did you find out?"

"Old Pootoolik is Pingousi's father. The mother is Sala, the old woman we saw in the second igloo."

"What about that grim-looking woman in Pootoolik's igloo?"

"That one's named Mariq."

"And the older boy--Pingousi's son?"

"Don't know."

"Okay, anything else?"

"Yeah; Pingousi's wife's was killed by a bear a few years ago."

"Oh, is that so? Named Jiana, by any chance?"

"You could understand what the old guy was saying, boss?"

"No, no. I got the report on it my first year here, from Hajdo, before you started working for me."

"You never came up here then?"

"Naw--what was the point? There were other things going on at the time, the business in Smith Harbour about the death of that guy Dinut, for instance. I was learning the ropes. Hajdo volunteered to come up here without me, to check things out. It was after he came back that he told me he was quitting. And I found out then that Jiana was his sister. He resented even my questions about her death; I guess he felt I was meddling in unpleasant family matters. Anyway, what else did you find out?"

"Well, that wasn't the end of it for Pingousi's family. They had a son called Aiti who killed that bear; but another bear got hold of Aiti a few months ago."

"So I heard. It's too bad." I refilled my mug of tea. "Listen, Jimmy, did you get any idea of what kind of guy Pingousi is? Is this killing of Sandlak something he might have done?"

"Jeez, boss. Hard to say. The old man said his son is quite a hunter, out all the time."

"He hunts alone?"

"I dunno. It can change while you're out there. Maybe he hooked up with guys from Townsend Bay, or other camps."

"I wonder if Pingousi was Sandlak's rival in the camp hierarchy."

"What that's mean, high-arc--?"

"Oh, you know, like who calls the shots. Who decides things, when to move, who gets certain hunting grounds or pieces of meat from a kill--you know."

"No, boss, I don't know. Seems to me like Inuit people don't work that way. Only khalunat."

Jimmy stood up and started packing up the tea things.

What did Jimmy know? He'd lived most of his life in Frobisher Bay.

We camped on the banks of the Kangsuk that night. I tossed and turned in my cold sleeping bag, my woolen underwear offering insufficient comfort. It had been almost two weeks since I'd slept with Nancy. I was missing her again, and resolved to do something about it when we got back to Poste. Finally I fell asleep, craving her naked body, her dark nipples, her triangle of writhing lust . . . and dreamed of her wearing a mocking smile, full of pointed dog-teeth. Her bold laughter, echoing.

Chapter Eight

TANGLED TRACES

The next day, Jimmy saw a bear on the ice ahead of us and had to give chase, and I was whisked away breakneck on a sleighride that would have been fine if we'd stuck to the ice, but the bear was foxy and turned inland up a rocky pass, and Jimmy unloosed the dogs to give chase but still the bear shook us, and I slipped while running and threw out my trick knee. (This was a recurrent penalty of mine for playing murder-on-ice in Nipigon one fateful winter night in 1940.) Even so, we managed to make it back in time for Halibut Night at the Poste restaurant.

Jimmy first took the dogs home and fed them, then met me in our usual booth at the back, the one nearest the jukebox. The check would be on me, because once again Jimmy had helped me out, practically carrying me back to the sled while the bear grinned at us from the safety of the hills.

"Does that mean dessert, too, boss?"

"Sure, sure, Jimmy. Why not? You only live once . . . unless your name is Bond."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

Jimmy put away three hefty filets to my two, cream sauce and all; not to mention

rice, and bread, and potatoes. I told him he must be making up for lost history in the carbohydrate department. Jimmy kept his attention on his plate and on the new, half-white waitress.

Before dessert was done we overheard some talk from the Inuit women in the booth behind us; Jimmy told me they were saying that there had been a fire in town.

"They say that somebody died--smoking in bed."

"Christ," I muttered; "as if there isn't enough to do already."

Back on the darkening street outside the restaurant, I thought about Nancy, but didn't feel up to taking the chance of appearing on her doorstep unannounced.

"Well, Jimmy, I guess I'll call it a night. I imagine you're pretty bagged, too, eh?"

"Me? Oh, I think I'm still good for a little game of pool or two."

"Suit yourself. Get some rest before Thursday, though. Chances are, we'll be heading out again. I'll be in touch."

I watched Jimmy waddle down the street like a heavy old man . . . past a stop sign which stood waiting for the trucks of summer, past a trio of dirty children playing in the slush under a streetlight, past a chained dog whining and groaning . . . until he finally disappeared between the plywood shacks.

A squashing sound of galoshes came up behind me. I knew that sound.

"Oh, hi, George. Out for your walk?"

"You know how it is," George said, patting his large belly. He was a big Newfoundlander who amply filled out a shiny, tan, wolf-trimmed parka that looked brand-new.

I said to him, "Yeah, I'm finding it hard to move, myself. Just got ambushed by

Halibut Night."

"Why don't you come join me for a nightcap?"

"That's all right, thanks. I'm pretty beat. We just got in from up the coast."

"Oh, more trouble?"

"You must have heard about it."

"Actually, yes. You mean the one near Townsend Bay?"

"Are there others?"

"Oh, well, not that I know of. Look, if I know you, Jack, it'd do you some good to come over, talk it out a little. Or whatever, shoot the shit . . ."

He laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I visualized the spacious living room with its glass coffee table and polar bear rug; the bucket of ice cubes.

"Well . . . sure; why not."

Out of a limited number of social choices, I found George Langston's company pleasant enough, if I happened to be in a drinking mood. Now that Matthewsie Konik was gone, I kept no regular company among the Inuit population, except Nancy. That was just as well, and in accordance with policy, especially if alcohol was involved: it was better to keep my distance. Occasionally I played a sober game of chess with Johnny Nuupak, a village councilman; or shot the breeze with Gilles Goudreault, the DGNQ mechanic. I avoided the hoity-toity clique of white teachers like the plague.

On the way to George's we passed the dingy back of the Hudson's Bay store, the roadway strewn with garbage. Two of the cans had been tipped over; and what was worse, dogs had been scavenging the "honey-bucket" bags collected from the chemical

toilet and piled there to await pickup, so that the contents of the ripped plastic bags mingled with the garbage underfoot.

"Fucking dogs," George seethed. "Look at this. And who do you think is going to clean it up? The council? No bloody way. The honey-bucket truck hasn't been by for a week. And as for the dogs, if something isn't done soon I'm going to take a little target practice myself."

"Now, George, you know the by-laws."

"Goddamn right. Shit collection twice a week. Dogs chained up. Don't by-law me. That's not your jurisdiction, anyway."

I shrugged and kept my mouth shut.

George's house was well enough upwind of the mess for him to have simmered down by the time we got there. A two-story structure, stoutly built and well-maintained, rose rather magisterially from a hill of rock at the edge of the settlement. "Langston's Castle," the people in town called it. The windows were ablaze with electric lights.

Parked below the first rank of stairs mounting the rocks was George's new power toboggan, his pride and joy.

"Had any second thoughts, yet, Jack?" George slapped the shiny yellow hood of the thing and paused expectantly. His little black eyes glittered; he smiled the smile of the proud new father.

"Ah, no, not really, George. HQ's working on it, I guess, studying the question."

"Oh, balls for your bloody HQ. It'll be another decade before they catch on. No, I mean you. You've got some pocket money laid away somewhere, for sure. Nothing else to spend it on up here--unless there's some big alimony you've never told me about."

"No, no; don't wish that on me. Anyway, what would I do with a machine like that, George? Go hunting? In all that spare time they give me? And get stranded out there when it breaks down?"

"What about your work, guy? It'd sure give you the advantage over all the stone-age criminals mushing around the territory with their fish-runners, rawhide harnesses, bitches in heat . . ."

"Maybe so, but I'd have to leave that decision to HQ. Since they're gonna have to foot the bill for the rescue mission when the thing breaks down."

"I haven't had the slightest problem with this baby. Starts every day. Like a Pontiac."

"Sure, in April. Wait till you get out on the land in January, forty below in the interior. There's a leak in your gas can. There's--"

"The technology's going to improve; I'll grant you that. Okay, let your money earn interest. But come see me in the fall when the new models come in. By the way--any luck tracking down the latest?"

I glared at him. We started up the steps to the castle. "I'll tell you all about it. What are we having, George, the usual?"

George lived alone. His house was handsomely equipped, with forced-air furnace, washer and dryer, and the latest model of stereophonic record player. A fine collection of prints and soapstone carvings from all the settlements were displayed over shelves of old leather-bound books.

I had officially stopped drinking, at least the hard stuff--except for the odd

"special occasion," like this. The tingling, cooling drink went down with a soothing rush of bubbles. After all, I thought, there was nothing better to do--though, since I was out and around, I might reconsider checking over at Nancy's place, a little later . . ."

"So," George said, "they're keeping you busy, are they?"

"Oh, if it's not one thing it's another. You hear about this fire in town, somebody died in it?"

"Yup. Some old geezer smoking. Happens in every settlement I've been in. You get to expect it after a while. Par for the course, kind of thing."

"I'm beginning to feel the same way about the crime situation--murders, suicides, what have you. It's gotten to the point where I'd almost be happy sitting in the office doing make-work stuff--even, God help me, population inventory." I downed what was left in my glass. "Maybe, if things got really boring, I could still handle the odd break-in over at your store, there."

"Hey, now you're getting personal, guy. Freshen your drink a little, while I'm pouring? You look thirsty."

"Yeah, thanks--a touch." George kept the mixings (rye, ginger ale and a bowl of ice), right on the table for handy reference. The gold-trimmed glasses, cut-glass coasters, and cocktail napkins were all emblazoned with the imperial logo of the Hudson's Bay Company. "George, to be honest, these deaths are getting to me. I've been starting to wonder if I shouldn't be doing something else. You think you might need a store detective, a floorwalker?"

"Hah. You're doing okay, Jack. What do you expect, Shangri-la?" He poured more for himself as well. George could drink all night and you'd never know it.

"No, no--but this camp up there, for instance. I mean the basic squalor, the goddamned damp cold is one thing. But it's one death on top of another."

George shook his heavy jowls in disagreement. "No, look. There's always been death in the arctic. It's the nature of the bloody place. It's harsh, buddy--beautifully, deadly harsh."

"I know, George, but it's getting out of hand. You hear about it all; you know the cases as well as I do. Maybe better."

The store manager just smiled and sipped from his glass.

"It seems like something more is going on, more than meets the eye. Something unnatural. Almost like there's a, I don't know--"

"Conspiracy?" This was George's favorite subject.

"Well, not exactly." I tried to steer the conversation away. "I was thinking more in general terms, about what's happening all over the North right now. Maybe 'upheaval' is a better word. Take the Belchers, for instance--what happened there a couple years back. How do you account for that bizarre behavior, twelve Eskimos frozen naked in the snow, kneeling in front of a cross-shaped icicle?"

"I don't know, Jack. Pretty stupid thing to do, I'd say. They must have been hepped up on something, is my guess. What's your theory?"

"'Religious fanaticism' is the term I used in my report--something like that. But I'd like to be able to get deeper, at what's really responsible. When I think of those poor misguided souls, I feel that as a white man and a Christian--I was raised as one, anyway--maybe I should take part of the blame. Hell, for that matter, the same goes for the deaths by gunshot, by alcohol--by who knows what roundabout route of cultural corruption . . ."

George broke in, "Hold on there, Jack. What bleeding heart preacher have you been listening to on your shortwave? It's not that simple, and you know it. Because I've heard you sit right there on that couch, with a drink of my whiskey in your hand--no, that's all right, but listen--and tell me, believing every word of it, that the changes we're bringing to the North are an improvement--an inevitable improvement, I think you said--to the lives of the Eskimos."

"Inuit, George." I said this to him even though I still used the old term myself. Habits die hard.

"Whatever. Is that why you're against these power toboggans? You think I'm corrupting these people's pristine, romantic, dog-shit lifestyle?"

"Not exactly. I didn't say that. Mind you, I must admit there is something, I don't know, nice about riding out there behind the dogs."

"Nice? Come on, Jack. Get with it. The dog-team is museum material. The twentieth century has arrived in the North. But at that, the changes happening now are only the next wave of the same tide that's been coming in for centuries. And like it or not--" he added in a jovial voice, "you, good old Jack McLain, RCMP, are riding right on top of that wave."

"Yeah, I know what you're saying." I stirred my drink with a red plastic swizzle stick marked in raised letters: "The Bay." I turned the stick in my hand and examined the regal crest of the company. Something in me rebelled against George's cavalier attitude. If only for the sake of argument, I said to him, "Don't you wonder, though, George, if we, well-meaning but maybe also ignorant intruders, might be responsible for some subtle disruptions in the people's lives, that--"

"Oh, come on--"

"No, wait--that, in combination and over time, drive some of them to commit some of these acts of violence, of suicide, for instance, or even murder?"

"Jack. I know they fed you a dose of sociology in the academy, down south there; but I mean, whose fault is it, these violent crimes, the break-ins, the vandalism that hits my store every couple of months? Are you blaming yourself--and me in the bargain--or them? Which is it?"

"Bit of both, I'd say."

"Bosh."

I finished my drink and poured another from the bottles on the table. "At least I'm trying to help matters," I said; "to get to the bottom of things."

"Very noble of you. And are you succeeding?"

George hefted his drink. I looked at him, the close-shaven pink cheeks, the smug wet smile on his little red lips, and had to admit: "Not very well, at the moment." I thought of the latest round of interviews, every scrap of information drawn like blood. "Up the coast I got the usual treatment, that I seem to get in every investigation I undertake in this fucking territory. But let me tell you, these people seemed a bunch of particularly weird fish. I couldn't tell if they were sad, or touched in any way, at the death of one of their few hunters."

"Maybe whatever they felt, grief-wise, got lost in the translation."

"'Grief-wise'?" I had to chuckle. "Yeah maybe. Or maybe it was spent in the five days before we got there." I picked my glass up but let it rest on a cocktail napkin in my palm. "You seem to do all right, George, in your dealings with the people. Always right

up on the latest gossip, I notice. Have you got any suggestions?"

"Who, me?" George laughed, a black-haired Santa, in his red, belly-swollen pants. "Well, my friend, I can tell you this. You have to be able to communicate with the people. On their level, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do."

"Oh, I mean, telling them what they want to hear. Giving them products they'll buy, in my business. For you, that means . . . I don't know. You have to earn their trust, their respect."

Trust and respect, was it? I drank deeply, reflecting on this truth. Then I said, "Look, George; I thought I had built up a kind of mutual respect and understanding with the people here after my first few years; certainly more than that pompous Bickford jerk I replaced. But then what happens in Townsend Bay, in 1961? A twenty-eight-year-old hunter named Masarak dies in his bed--of what, old age? There is an ugly purple line around his throat, but no one in the settlement will say how he died--only that he was found in his bed. Did someone cut him down after he'd hanged himself, or was he strangled? Was someone covering up for him, or for someone else? Everyone denies seeing any signs of struggle in the room, or even the marks on his throat. No one can imagine how he died--not even a certain young woman called Tella, reputed to be Masarak's girlfriend, whose bad luck it is to find him dead on his bed. Who, with worse luck, follows her lover to the grave the following year, another teenage suicide."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard about it; but Jack--"

"No. This is what we're here for, right, to help the people? Listen. I took it upon myself to uncover the corpse of Masarak from its rock grave and to inspect it. Not a nice

job, but that's what I get paid for. I found marks on that neck that were characteristic, to my mind, of murder by strangulation. I put Tella under suspicion until a relative vouched for her presence at another house. She maintained that, okay, 'maybe' she saw the marks on the neck, now that I mentioned it, but she was too upset at the time to really notice. I was losing patience, let me tell you. I asked them--"

"You mean you had Jimmy ask them, right? Who knows, maybe it's all a problem in the translation."

"Good Christ, George, that's a given. What am I gonna do, use sign language? I asked them--through Jimmy: 'Isn't anyone around here at least curious as to how this man died, or interested in finding the person who did it so that this sort of thing won't be repeated?'

"No response.

""You people--' I admit, I started yelling at them--'how can I do my job up here when no one wants to cooperate? How can I bring a case before the judge when there's no hard evidence, no accused?'"

"Jack, you don't have to yell here. I'm on your side."

""Oh,' the people said then--ever so politely and quietly--'yes we saw the marks on the neck, but we didn't know what they were. We thought it was the work of angry spirits.'"

I finished what was left in my glass and banged it down a little too hard on the table. "All right, I told them. It's on your own heads, then. And I remember saying to myself at the time, if this kind of thing keeps happening, it'll be my head that goes.

In the meantime, I had to go along with it, file it as, 'Cause of death, unknown.'

See, George, I was figuring that maybe the flap over the Belchers would cover my tracks for a while."

"Right." George drained his own drink. "And sooner or later you're going to have to bring someone in."

I looked at the Bay manager sitting there with his Churchill jowls, and saw Henley in his padded chair at HQ. I stood up. "It's been fun, George."

"Oh, Jack, the night's young. Have another." My host was already reaching for the ice. "You haven't even told me about this latest case."

I hesitated, an already dry tongue wandering in my mouth. It probably wasn't a good idea to try Nancy's, at this point. Okay, I thought; one more. I sat down.

George had already changed the subject: "Now look at this Kennedy thing. You can talk all you like about general forces, but that assassination was planned by real people, my friend. Now at the same time, there is more to it than meets the eye. It was convenient to blame it on some nut acting alone. But when it all comes out in the wash, you'll see: there were people pulling strings behind the scenes."

"All right, all right. I know your feelings about it."

"Not feelings, Jack. Facts."

"Okay, lets stick to facts. Maybe you can help me out on this one. I'm taking the approach, for now, of looking at one suspect in particular. Though there are other possibilities I'm not ruling out."

"Very good. Tell me about it. You want some potato chips?"

"No, are you kidding? I'm still stuffed full of halibut. You go ahead. Now, the thing is, there's this hunter, with a nice daughter ripe for the taking, and this guy shows

up--"

"Wallin?"

"How did you know?"

George's heavy eyebrows went up and he sat back on his couch with a self-satisfied grin. "Word gets around."

I pictured tusks hanging from that mouth, a bevy of female walruses wallowing behind the couch.

"Well, if you hear anything else along the way that might help me out, I hope you won't hesitate to let me in on it."

"Naturally. Whose side do you think I'm on?"

"Fine, George, I trust you. Okay. So Wallin shows up, goes hunting with the father, comes back alone leaving this guy Sandlak with his throat cut, and runs off with the daughter."

"Yeah . . ."

"Easy, right?"

"Sure; if you say so."

"If I say so. Okay, maybe you need to know more. This girl's mother died of pneumonia in January. In December a young guy named Aiti was killed by a bear. Aiti happened to be the most eligible bachelor around. Now jump ahead a few months. Wallin shows up, maybe not the first time either, and finds the girl, Nilliq, all sad but horny; he's not in the mood for playing niceties with the father. So the old man complains, let him complain. If he wants to raise trouble--well, go out hunting with him, play the game for half a day, and then jump him from behind. This is Inuit land, they say,

and they can do what they like. Well, this cowboy says they're mistaken."

"Hold on a sec. Jumps him from behind . . . with a knife, you mean? I assumed the guy was shot."

"Very astute of you, George. This is one of the question marks. Yes, the throat was cut. And yes, a bullet was fired; but I found no evidence of a gunshot on the body. Let's say the knife was Sandlak's, because the sheath on the body was empty. How did Wallin wrestle the knife away from him, especially when Sandlak had a loaded gun? Assuming, again, it was Sandlak's gun. I would say he was rushed from behind, his own knife pulled out and brought across the throat--"

"But why not instead a shot in the back? Murder's murder."

"Exactly, George. You tell me. Is there a code of honor here, like in the old West?"

George was warming to the subject. "I don't know about that, but listen: maybe it wasn't Sandlak's knife, but the other guy's. Sandlak could have left his own knife at home."

"We checked for it on our way back through the camp."

"Maybe the newlyweds took it with them, as a kind of keepsake."

"Quite likely."

"Okay, so what's the problem with going after Wallin?" George was pouring us both yet another drink. I stopped him at the halfway mark of my glass. George asked, "Do you have any other suspects?"

"Not really," I told him. "Wallin's the one who went out with Sandlak, and Sandlak didn't come back."

"There's no one else who might have done it?"

"Well, there's this other fellow, Pingousi, whom we didn't get to talk to because he was out hunting. His kid seemed pretty intimidated by our questions--and then came forward with Wallin's name. You know this Pingousi?"

"Pingousi. Yeah, I buy fox from him from time to time. He's okay."

"You know something else that just occurs to me, George. Pingousi's single, since his wife died a few years back. And I gather he's not that old . . ."

"Around your age, I'd say. Listen Jack, I've got it. Maybe there really has been some kind of conspiracy, a Kennedy-style coup, and they were all involved: Wallin, Nilliq, Pingousi, a few other friends and relations thrown in. Even the old women--don't let them fool you. Some power struggle going back generations, centuries . . ."

"George, I can tell you've been into those dusty old novels of yours again. What is it now, the Scott or the Hugo? No, I think I'd better go now, get a good night's sleep. I've got to go to work tomorrow. I'm a real-world cop. It's 1964. And a hunter has simply..."

"Had an accident."

"Well, been . . . killed. Thanks for the refreshments. Remember, if you come up with any more information--"

"Sure thing, Jack. My pleasure. Actually, the best advice I can offer you is to order one of these new Bombardier machines. You'd have the jump on anyone you wanted to track down. I just ordered one today for a guy come in from up the coast; it only takes a week delivery, and costs a little more by air cargo. Otherwise you have to wait for the ship at the end of summer."

"Well, I'll hope for a change of heart in headquarters by then. My guess is they're

just waiting for the Provincial police to bear that cost when they take over. And they're not convinced the bloody things are worth it, yet. What with cold-weather startups, breakdowns, that sort of thing."

"Oh, Jack, these babies are state-of-the-art. They--"

"Okay, George. I'll keep it in mind. Good night, now."

That night I dreamed the dream I never seemed to tire of: pounding spikes in the CN line in mid-winter in Wawa--the job I worked, bum knee and all, instead of going to war. I still didn't know which would have been worse. Most guys dreamed afterward of the war; I dreamed of those infernal spikes, years and years later, on the all-night shift.

I came to work stiff-legged but in one piece--a little late by Ottawa time--and propped the canvas-wrapped rifle in the corner.

"You look a little rough around the edges," Nancy said, lowering her book.

"What do you mean, edges?" I growled.

She watched me limp past her desk to the coffee stand, where the percolator sat cold and empty. I plugged in the kettle for instant.

Then she said brightly, "Hey, I heard you almost got a bear."

"Word gets around."

She said nothing.

"Yeah, you might say we almost got a bear; but we didn't. And I ratched my knee, in the process."

"So I heard . . . so I see. That's too bad. I guess it's what happens when you get old." She refrained from giggling.

"Whaddya mean, old? I'm only forty-one. I hurt this knee playing hockey, what-- nearly twenty-five years ago."

"Like I said. That was before I was born."

"So what?" I said testily. Her teasing smile only made her teasing almost okay.

"You're right, Jack; I don't really mind."

"Thanks, Nance."

When the kettle was ready I poured hot water into the mugs and stirred the coffee around. For Nancy's I added sugar, opened a new can of milk.

"Are they gonna let you keep playing policeman, limping like that?"

The nerve. But what could I do, fire her for insubordination? I said nothing.

She continued, "How come they hired you in the first place, if you had a bum knee?" This time she sounded close to sincere.

"It only goes out every now and then. Actually it tested just fine when they hired me. They're not as strict as the military about those things."

She accepted her mug with a genuine smile. "So otherwise, did you have a good trip?"

"We saw the corpse, if that's what you mean."

"And?"

I sighed, took my own mug of black and settled into the chair in the corner beside the shrouded gun. "The guy's throat was cut. We couldn't find the knife. And one shot was fired, it seems, from this rifle."

"Who was it?"

"You haven't heard? A man named Sandlak. Our friend Wallin was on a hunting

trip all right. He was seen leaving the camp with Sandlak to go hunting; then, only Wallin returns, and he promptly runs off with the daughter of the deceased. How's that sound to you?"

"A little like As the World Turns, Inuit-style."

"I agree. Where'd you ever see that?"

"Down south. When I was going to the school in Ottawa."

"Naturally. And do you wash your clothes in Fab, like they told you?"

"Silly. What do you think? That's the only kind they sell here."

"I wouldn't know." I sipped absently, admiring Nancy's lips.

"Who does your laundry?"

"Lizzie Pullak. Why, do you want to take on extra duties?"

At that she took her feet down off the desk and put her book away. "That's okay. I got enough to keep me busy."

I didn't feel like cross-examining her on that topic: it might get too personal. Instead I asked her if she'd heard any word of Wallin being back in the area. With or without a female companion.

"Nope, not at all. Why--are you expecting him here?"

"I don't know. The people in the camp said they went south. That's all I have to go on."

"But to Poste?"

"Who knows? They may have cut inland at any point."

"Maybe up the Kangsuk."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I don't want to make that trip this time of year."

"Oh, there'll be snow inland for another couple weeks, anyway."

"Yeah, right. Soft, melting snow. Say, Nance, what do you know about this fire in town?"

"Oh, that. The old man who lived there burned it down around himself, I guess, smoking in bed."

"Any foul play likely, from what you know?"

"Don't worry, Jack; you won't have to lose a day's work on it."

"Good. Though I guess I should exercise this leg of mine on a little walk over there to have a look-see. Meanwhile, what do we have from HQ, since I was gone-- anything sensible?"

"Not a whole lot. Just this little tidbit." She picked a memo off the desk and hung it in the air for me, so that I had to get up to fetch it. The dangling handkerchief routine . . .

I dove in and soaked up the bad news. It was my reward for doing what they wanted, filing a prompt report before all the facts are in. And I thought I was jumping to conclusions about this latest incident. The new supe, Henley, was convinced it was the latest serial murder. And someone at HQ must have let on as much to a reporter, because now Henley was all upset about bad press. The good name of the Mounties was in jeopardy, and so on. He wanted me to bring the killer in before two weeks was out, or they'd send a whole new detachment to help out. Otherwise the Provincial police would move on it; and the planned transfer of power which wasn't due to take place for another year would be hoisted right up to the top of the agenda. So, let's have one last glorious

fling for the Queen. . . .

I was fuming.

"So what do you think," Nancy said, baiting me.

"What do I think? What difference does it make what I think? Do you think anyone south of Poste-de-la-Baleine gives a bloody hoot what I think? But since you asked, I'll make a prediction. If their crack squadron wraps this thing up instead of me, I'll be packed outa here pronto; no waiting around for whatever ceremony they have in mind when the Sûreté takes over. It might get a little crowded in this office for a while, but you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Anakaaah. That's all we need."

"And you'd better start learning French in a hurry. You could enroll in grade one in the new Provincial school. That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"Aah, weewetitutaaluq."

"You said it." I tossed the memo back on her desk. "Anyway, I'll get him."

"Get who?"

"Whom. What did you take down there, Home Ec. and Soaps Two?"

"Big deal. You teachers. Anyway, who--Charlie?"

"You mean Wallin."

"Yeah; we always called him Charlie."

"Who's we?"

"The girls in school."

"Tell me something--was he a great charmer?"

Nancy turned red and muttered, "I dunno," and took up her book and pretended to

read.

She dunno. As I stood there in front of her desk I was afraid to say it, but I said it anyway: "Nancy, did you ever sleep with Wallin?"

She turned redder and said, "What a question! I'm not one of your witnesses, you know."

"Sorry. I thought you might be able to help me understand what's going on around here. All right, tell me this. Do you know if Wallin has a girlfriend up the coast?"

She looked at me startled, and her eyes said, "How did you know?" Then: "Not that I know of--at least not since Tella."

"What? Tella? The girl that froze herself to death? How do you know this?"

"You're prying again."

"You're goddamned right I'm prying. Don't you see that you've just implicated Wallin in the murder of Tella's other lover, Masarak? When was Wallin seeing her?"

"It would have been around, I dunno, three years ago?"

"Three years ago . . ." I said in a voice gone suddenly vague. I settled into the chair in the corner like a punch-drunk boxer. When I recovered my composure I asked, "Would that have been before or after Masarak was killed?"

"Oh, Jack."

"Don't 'Oh, Jack' me. Before or after--or was it during?"

"Oh, let me think. I guess, after. Before that, he may have gone up there, but she was Masarak's girl. From what I understood, he respected that."

I took a couple of long, deep breaths. I picked up the wrapped gun and began fondling it.

Nancy said, "You really think he's the one, don't you."

"He's looking better all the time, I must say."

"It couldn't possibly be anyone else? What about somebody from Townsend Bay?"

"Like who? There aren't many there to choose from. My old friend Hajdo, maybe? And he hardly qualifies because he lives in Poste now."

"What about Tella's brother, Wasik?"

"Oh, you know him? I never met him. He was gone, away on some school trip or something, when I was there. Anyway, what was he--fifteen years old then? Get serious. You didn't see Masarak's neck. He was a strong-looking guy: that was a crime of passion. Now I'll tell you who's a better bet, and that's a guy closer to my age, a hunter from Sandlak's camp named Pingousi. You know him, too?"

"No."

I told her about my suspicions, adding the unfortunate disclaimer: "With Pingousi, there's a basic problem: I have absolutely nothing in the way of real evidence against him."

"Well, what about Wallin? It seems to me like you're ready to jump to all kinds of conclusions about him."

"Three years ago, you said. Three years ago Masarak was strangled in his bed--" But it was really Konik's death I was thinking of, my encounter with Wallin at the Caribou Crossing . . .

"You suspect."

"Look, my dear, the evidence was there. And the next year Masarak's girlfriend--"

or Wallin's, then--wanders off into the tundra . . ."

"You're blaming Wallin for that, too?"

"Who knows how far it goes? Suppose he wanted to keep her from talking about the murder of Masarak. He shows up and says, 'Hey, honey, wanna go for a little walk on the tundra this balmy winter night? Just for old times' sake, whaddya say?'"

"Well, I don't know. There is one thing that occurs to me, though."

"What's that?"

"It would have been good to have had a talk with old Changuk."

"Changuk? I already talked to him, last year. He was useless. He said he showed Wallin how to use a bow and arrow when Wallin was ten years old."

"He was a shaman. He knew a lot."

"What do you mean, 'was'?"

"He's the old man who burned up in that fire."

Sometimes taking a deep breath did little good. "Christ, I can't stand it. How come you know everything, and just throw me these crumbs of information when it's too late? Why didn't you tell me to grill the guy before, if he knew so much? And how do you know what he might have known?"

She was calm as ever, sitting back with a Cheshire-cat smile over my frustration.

"Jack," she cooed, "it's not my fault if you didn't get anything out of him.

Anyway, it's obvious. They know everything, all those old shamans. It's their business."

"Oh, is that all. Shaman-schmaman. That guy knew so much, he just lay around in his shack smoking to death, until he smoked the whole works right down on himself."

"That's how much you know."

"What do you mean?"

"You know nothing about shamans' power."

"Oh, come on. He was smoking in bed, right? It happens all the time. Even down South."

"South-schmouth."

I was tired of her mouth and told her I was going out to have a look at the wreckage.

"No skin off my back," she said and went back to her book.

The place burned down, all right, probably in five minutes' time. To me it looked like no big deal. There was a layer of ashes around a blackened stove, an empty bedstead. I was a little disturbed by the absence of the bodily remains. When I asked around, everyone said that there was nothing left of the old man, who'd been inside and gone up with the flames. Several people said the old man liked to smoke in bed. I poked around again in the ashes, still not finding anything that looked like former flesh or bones; and with more pressing matters I decided to go along with what everyone was telling me. It must have been one hot fire. If on the other hand this was another snow job, and some family members had in fact come to spirit the remains away--well, I could let it go. I went away thinking that I deserved an easy report to make, once in a while.

I took the long way around on my way back to the office, so as to check out the shack where Wallin had lived the previous year. Empty. No recent sign of dogs. I stopped by the house of the parents of Matthewsie Konik, Naijurasuk and Maliqan. They told me they hadn't seen Wallin. They would ask their two sons if they had seen him.

Jimmy already knew to ask around, especially among hunters who would be familiar with the traffic in the wider area. This was all I could do for now.

By the time I made out a report on the fire, my stomach was growling. I sent Nancy out for sandwiches and sat brooding over the bulging case file which sat unopened on my desk. I wanted more than Nancy's gossip on Wallin, before setting out on some inland chase that would be my last chance before HQ decided to take matters into their own hands. Or, I wanted something on Pingousi that would justify a return up the coast.

Looking through the Townsend Bay file again, I recalled that Dinut, the victim of the hunting accident resulting in the '58 manslaughter case, had originally come from the hunting camp near Townsend Bay, and had been a classmate of Matthewsie Konik's at the boarding school in Poste.

Like Tella's suicide, this "closed" case began to rear its head again and I found myself wondering, could Wallin have been involved also in Dinut's death six years ago? The facts of the case said no. Adamie Nassak, a distraught man whose voice trembled with grief, confessed. Tried and convicted for manslaughter, he was given a suspended sentence. After all, Dinut was Adamie's own nephew.

Just the same, I thought it might be worth trundling over to the Federal school again to have a fresh look at what the principal called "the archives."

I met Nancy on the way and grabbed a sandwich from her to eat on the run. Time, it had occurred to me with a prickling on the back of my neck, was wasting. Two weeks, was it? Maybe I was barking up the wrong tree, but I had to get my tail wagging somewhere.

It was lunchtime at the gray and piss-yellow school on the other side of town, and dozens of children were running around in the slush. The older ones, the teenagers, the ones who had no families or homes here but had come as boarding students and were now committed to this new way of life, stood around shifting their weight from foot to foot, their fingers stuffed as far as they could go (about as far as the second joint) into their stovepipe pants pockets. The girls wore the same style of clothes as the boys, tight pants and leather jackets. Only their hair was longer, and some wore makeup. I wondered how the country girl--the hunter's daughter, Nilliq--would fit in with this crowd.

I went in to see the principal, Jerry Schaefer, who sat eating lunch at the desk in his office. He had thick glasses and unkempt, strawlike hair. I knew he had once taught in university somewhere, and I felt sorry for him here in this backwater box of a school. But at least Schaefer was head man here--a pretty good position to jump into, as he had, three years ago; possibly this was his true desire. Who was Jack McLain to judge him by some imagined failure in a previous career? He was entitled to his private destiny, just as I was to mine.

"Oh, h'lo there, Jack," the principal said with his mouth full of sandwich. "What's shakin' today?"

I wondered if Schaefer had picked up this lingo from his students, or if he taught it to them. He handled the grade 9-10 class as well as running the office.

"Nothing much. I wonder if you could let me have a look at some of your files again."

"Sheesh. More murders in the Rue Morgue?"

"You know how it goes. Never a dull moment."

"I know what you mean. What year are you looking for?"

"Let's try the '43-'44 again."

"More ancient history, eh? Well, down to the basement, I guess. Here, follow me."

We went down a winding staircase to the ground floor, where the oil-burner was chugging away and the dank walls were piled high with rotting cardboard boxes. "One of these centuries," Jerry said over his shoulder as I approached the stack, "maybe they'll send me an extra filing cabinet or two. In the meantime, help yourself. These boxes might have been rearranged since last year."

"Oh, is that right?" By reflex I wondered: somebody snooping, destroying evidence?

"Yeah, you know, teachers trying to find some new material, a new angle . . ."

"I know what you mean."

"Well, I'll leave you to it, then."

"Thanks." I looked around, started peeking in boxes and said, before Jerry left me alone down there, "mind if I bring a box or two upstairs?"

"No problem." The principal looked at his watch. "I've got class in a couple of minutes; you can use the office."

When I'd swept away the crumbs from the principal's desk and the dust and cobwebs from the box, I began to root into it: like a pig, I thought to myself. Those moldy report cards, lesson plans, and inventory sheets felt and smelled like so many old

mushrooms--or worse. But I was rewarded for my trouble with an unsought surprise: I found that in that grade nine class in 1943, were not only two young men named Dinut and Matthewsie Konik (sometimes spelled "Matthewshie"), but also their recently departed friend Sandlak (or "Shandlak"). Now I remembered where I'd heard this name before.

I had seen the class list on my previous visit to the school to investigate Wallin's and Konik's records. But of course the name Sandlak meant nothing then. Now my hound-dog's impulse to have another sniff at these records was vindicated. But what did I have?

I dug a little deeper. Matthewsie Konik, as a resident of Poste, had been enrolled in the new school from its beginning year, 1938. Dinut had begun the following year, returning north each summer to his family's camp. Sandlak, the same age as Dinut and from the same camp, attended for only one term, the fall of 1943. The boys were placed at three different grade levels, but with the small school enrollment they found themselves in the same classroom, comprising grades seven to ten.

Matthewsie Konik was an outstanding student, in grade ten that year, 1943. Dinut was considered by the teacher to be an average grade eight student. Sandlak, by the teacher's account, was a hard case. This Mrs. Simpson (I could picture her complete with her cotton print dress, tight hair-bun and British accent, a knuckle-cracking yardstick in her hand) noted that Sandlak had had some years of learning in the mission school in Smith Harbour, but that wringing it out of him was another matter. She must have been some battle-axe, I reflected, to be able to handle those would-be hunters. The young Sandlak in particular didn't sound like any pet. A dozen hours of detention a month.

Virtually no academic progress. Continual badgering of the other students and backtalk to the teacher. He was sixteen; that seemed to be the main reason he was in the high-school class at all.

In November Sandlak was reported absent from class for nearly a week with what was later called a "facial injury." Nothing more was said about that; but after finally returning to school, his sullen and disruptive behavior was reported as worse than ever.

Sandlak left at the end of the fall term that year and never came back. It was noted that his destination was "Townsend Bay Camp," where he'd come from. Nothing was said of how he came to that camp in the first place, presumably from Smith.

Dinut stayed through the year and then quit school. His record didn't say where he went after that, whether to his home camp or elsewhere. Perhaps he stayed in Poste. His place of residence at the time of his death fourteen years later was Smith Harbour; that was still all I had to go by. Another connection--or coincidence? There weren't many settlements to choose from.

Konik "graduated" that year, 1944, and went on to a real high school in Ottawa. All right, this I knew. I stuck the pile of records back in their dilapidated coffin. In 1944, I considered, Wallin was a little squirt playing in the mud. Nancy would have been even a smaller squirt, playing perhaps in the same mudhole. I decided to ask her more about him--and to clear out of the school office before the next bell rang.

Then, perhaps out of my habit of asking one more parting question--or a blind need to add one more random but eventually telling fact to my collection of apparently useless information--I plucked from the box a file that had earlier caught my eye:

"Preliminary Genealogical Survey of Hudson Bay Eskimos," Margaret Chandler, McGill

University, 1939. I opened it and scanned the first few pages.

Good, I thought, just what I need for a little after-lunch reading. Jerry won't mind if I borrow this one; maybe I can fill in some gaps in my cultural education.

By mid-afternoon, I was on the verge of an understanding, nearly able to see some pattern of death among this unfortunate clan who had established the Townsend Bay hunting camp. But the family connections, the result of multiple mating patterns, were mind-boggling. I followed the good scholar Chandler's information closely in making my own chart of the relevant names, linking them all with a series of lines which started to look like the wiring in my abandoned Dodge--or tatoos on an old woman's face.

The old woman Mariq, for instance, turned out to be Dinut's mother, as well as the mother of the man called Quingak whom I'd interviewed in camp. This same Mariq had also shacked up at one time with Nananga, and had given birth to a daughter, Sijja--who was to become Sandlak's mate, and Nilliq's mother. Through relations to Mariq how many deaths could be traced? Nananga, Dinut, Sijja--and Sandlak. Remembering her grim visage, I realized what a trail of tears she had suffered.

I set to work following the lines out into the extended family, who had dispersed into the other settlements; because there were still a couple of murders that, so far, lay outside this particular family web. Namely Masarak and Matthewsie Konik.

It didn't take me long to find another strand in the web--with another couple of flies stuck to it. It happened that the patriarch Nananga, sporting with another wife named Ainia, had had a daughter before Sijja: a Kaniga, who ended up living in Townsend Bay with a man named Hajdo--the same Hajdo who had quit my service, who

had performed in Jimmy's role for my illustrious predecessor, Barry Bickford. I already knew that Hajdo's sister was Jiana; now I discovered that Hajdo also had a half-brother. His name was Masarak.

My mouth became dry, my pulse unsteady. The connections were there . . . but so what? Everyone was related to everyone else. Jack McLain was related to Christopher Columbus, Jimmy Natsik to Elvis Presley. I couldn't make heads nor tails of it. What about Konik, for instance? How did he fit in?

This one took some more doing, but something appeared at last. Mariq's first husband Samik--Dinut's father--had a brother named Nassak, later called Adamie Nassak. This relationship I already knew about. But Samik had another brother who would stay south with his family when the rest of the clan moved from Kujuarapik (later Poste-de-la-Baleine) in the years after the population study. I knew a man in Poste by the same name, Naijurasuk--the lame-legged father of Matthewsie Konik. . . .

It was time for a break. I stretched and strode into the outer office, feeling light-headed.

"Jack," Nancy said even before I walked through the door, "I've got it. Maybe someone went out there and stole the knife. Maybe that Pingousi. Sort of like the old shaman's charms: the possessions of a person carry their power. Give me your knife, a button, a lock of hair, and I'll work magic for you--or on you. If Pingousi had some sort of rivalry going on with Sandlak--"

"Naw, naw. You mean after the guy was already dead? Who cares about the knife? I'm looking for the killer. Anyway, Pingousi was away hunting the whole time.

What are you reading now, occult mystery? Science fiction? There's no voodoo this far north."

"You never know. Maybe there is. And how do you know where Pingousi was when Sandlak was killed?"

"Look, I need something more relevant than old legends and imported religions to solve this thing. Like for instance, why might Pingousi have killed Matthewsie Konik, or Masarak over in Townsend Bay?"

"Well, okay, then; why would Wallin have killed Matthewsie, who was his friend and also his cousin?"

She had a point. I began to realize that Wallin, born the year after Margaret Chandler's census-taking, was stuck in this web a little farther than I had so far figured. As a cousin of Matthewsie Konik, Wallin would be also somehow related to Naijurasuk, to Samik, to Adamie Nassak, to Dinut . . . to everyone else in the two-dimensional rat's nest sitting on the desk in the inner office.

"It's funny," Nancy said. She took her legs down, closed her book and slapped it on the desk.

"What's that?" I asked in a distracted way.

Reeling from a sudden overgrowth of musty fungi in my head, I moved to get a cup of java to straighten things out. How could she really know what's what? She was just the secretary. Well, at least she'd got the percolator going.

"Last night I had a dream about him."

"Oh?"

And I thought, I'm away for a couple of nights and you dream about a murderer.

And she read my mind, or my face, and said, "I noticed that you didn't show up at my place last night."

"How was I supposed to know that your brother wasn't back from hunting?"

"You could have asked."

"Aw, Nance, I was beat."

"Suit yourself," she said. And then, "You weren't too beat to sit around drinking with your friend George all evening."

All I could do was sigh and sink into the plastic chair in the corner, thinking, it's not even worth asking how she knows. I picked up the shrouded gun still leaning against the wall, reminding myself that I still wanted to run a check for prints. "All right, so what about this dream? I don't want any bedroom scenes."

"No, no. And watch where you point that thing. What do you think, I wanna crawl in the sack with every able-bodied guy in this town? What a one-track mind. I was just watching him. He was out on the land shooting wolves. They were circling around him, and he was shooting them, and as they fell, they cried like children. When they stopped moving he went to look at them up close but then they just disappeared. And he had put his gun down, but when he went back to retrieve it, it was gone, too. I was watching all this from behind a rock. I was a young girl--shy of him, and afraid. Then he looked my way. I ran away, fast as I could. Then I looked back over my shoulder. He didn't seem to be chasing me, but still he was just as close, standing there, and smiling at me. I turned and kept running, then woke up."

"Hmmh. Sounds pretty weird. So what's it mean?"

"How should I know? You're the detective around here."

"How many of those wolves did he kill?"

"Oh, I don't know--a bunch. Maybe six, seven? Why?"

"Nothing. Just asking. Can't help myself, being the detective, you know. So how well did you, or should I say, do you, know this guy?"

"Jack, come on. I went to school with him for a while, in grade five."

"And what was he like then?"

"I didn't get to know him really well. He was a year older. And he quit school that year. It seemed like he had his own mind. And people said he was spending lots of his time with Changuk."

"Maybe you were right about getting more out of that old devil before he bought it."

Nancy gazed out the window. "You know," she said, "this dream, it's making me realize something. Wallin didn't really seem like an evil guy in it. Just strange, a different sort. He was like that, too. He'd just look at us kids going to and from school, and smile like that. Like he was much older than just one year older. Like he had some of that shaman's wisdom or power or something, whatever it is they have. Gave me the creeps. But at the same time I remember I almost, kind of liked him. You know the way girls are."

"No--I'm not sure I do."

And then I began to feel that old loneliness.

"Say, Nance . . ."

She had already picked up her book again. Not even looking up, she said, "Lucassie's coming home tonight."

Now how would she have know that? The ever-present, ever-greased grapevine?
Or was Lucassie a euphemism meaning man--any man she wished it to mean, except Jack
McLain? Forget it, rummy, I told myself: you've got better things to do.

Chapter Nine

CARIBOU CROSSING: A WARNING

With the crack of Jimmy's whip, thirty feet of braided sealskin smack over the ear of the lead dog, we were off up the foggy coast again to the Townsend Bay hunting camp. I wanted to interview and fingerprint Pingousi, who was still a long shot in the Sandlak case. Bad odds, but the detour could save me a much longer trip if it panned out.

The only prints on the gun had matched the dead man's and Wallin's. I suspected that even if I could hang Pingousi with the throat job on Sandlak, I wouldn't be any further along in solving the other murders. In all likelihood we'd wind up trailing Wallin into the high country of the interior, along the main eastern travel route up the Kangsuk River.

So this time I'd instructed my guide to load up on the canned stuff, along with plenty of ammunition and extra stove fuel. Good for the grace period I had left to work with; and after that the bozos down South could bring on the helicopters . . . spy planes, satellites.

Two weeks and counting.

Blue open water faintly visible to the left of us. High ridges of pearly ice sculptured in a skyline to the right of us. Whiteness all around . . .

Gradually the fog bank lifted, burned away by a blazing sun. The ice surface deteriorated, taking on the consistency of wet concrete. We had to get off the sled every half an hour, either to break up ice balls forming on the paws of the dogs, or to help the team haul the load forward.

By the time we reached the still-frozen mouth of the Kangsuk, I was tempted to forget about Pingousi and head inland without further ado, as Jimmy suggested. But I told him we'd be gambling too early that way; that we should stick to our plan and push on toward Townsend Bay. "We might as well cover the ass-end of this thing," I explained, "while we're up here."

Darkness was only a couple of hours off, and so we camped in the shelter of the hills north of the river. After a good night's sleep I kept my resolve.

Jimmy still seemed to think he knew better. But he followed my orders, cracking the whip out over his dogs with a vengeance. It occurred to me then that if Jimmy didn't like the color of my teeth one morning he could simply leave me out in the cold. I hopped on the sled as we picked up speed on a long run of smooth ice.

One cheerless line of thought led to another: I considered what Nancy would do if I ever complained too pointedly about her various other boyfriends. And then, riding so effortlessly, I started dreaming again, of what a "real relationship" would be like.

But where had dreaming ever got me, except headed further north?

Pingousi was still away hunting, according to his bald, smiling father.

"Still, or again?" I wanted to know.

"Still."

I was a little incredulous. "The guy likes to hunt, I take it."

I explained to the old folks the necessity to find something of Pingousi's, some tool perhaps, in order to get fingerprints. Just for the record. While the father rooted around in the rubble outside, and then inside the snowhouse, I kept my eyes peeled for a knife. As in the search of the previous trip, I saw none the size and shape of Sandlak's empty sheath; only a large snow-knife and a small, thin fish-knife. I went ahead and dusted up a sample of prints from a flat-file Pootoolik said belonged to his son--with old Mariq giving me the evil eye all the while.

"Where's the kid?" I asked by way of small talk.

Silence.

"The kid who was here last time I was here. About this tall? Pingousi's boy, right?"

Dead silence, dark burning eyes.

"What's the matter, Jim? Did I step on somebody's toes?"

Jimmy asked for me one more time.

"They say Pingousi's son is dead."

"What? Not another one!"

It turned out they thought I meant Aiti. The other boy, Tiniq, was not Pingousi's son at all but an orphan, a son of Dinut. He was gone out hunting now, with his uncle Quingak.

Outside, I observed only a few slimy hunks of meat remaining on the family's rack.

"Christ," I said to Jimmy, "no wonder this guy has to spend all his time hunting--

he can't hit anything. He's no killer."

Jimmy just laughed now, that quiet laugh of his.

I had a parting shot for Pootoolik: "The man who killed Sandlak--do you know who it is?"

"Aoka"--no.

"Any guesses, then?"

The old man just shrugged and pointed to the north.

"What's he mean by that?" I asked Jimmy.

Jimmy said a few words to the old man and received a few words in exchange.

"He says maybe Sandlak's killer went that way."

"What's this 'maybe'? I thought he didn't know who did it."

"You asked him what did he think. He thinks there's a spirit around."

"But he didn't actually see the guy leave in that direction?"

"No. He says he's tired now."

"Tired? Hey, tell him we're tired, too, of all this bullshitting around." Jimmy hesitated, hanging his head. I spat into the dirty snow. "Fuck it, then. We've already wasted a day. Let's get outa this stinking place."

Once we were clear of the hunting camp and proceeding inland back to the Kangsuk, our spirits improved. Jimmy had said the char would be running, meaning fresh food both for us and the dogs. The terrain would become rough and rocky at times, but at least my weak knee ceased its throbbing when the air got a little colder. And on flat stretches the snow already was firm and fast.

We indulged in a little bird-shooting in the low hills fifty miles north of the Kangsuk. Jimmy admired the trio of fat ptarmigan I held up in my hands, the white feathers fresh-bloodied.

"Lookin' pretty good, boss. Only six shots this time."

I let the sarcasm, if that's what it was, roll off my back. "If HQ wants to bitch about the ammunition, I can say I've been keeping my eye sharp."

"With a twenty-gauge shotgun?"

"Let them ask. Why should we have to stick to a diet of their canned crap?"

"Watch out, boss," Jimmy reminded me as we scrambled back down over the slick rocks with our hands full. "We wouldn't want to have to ship you outa here on a stretcher. They might not let you come back."

"Gotcha."

Jimmy cranked up the camp stove and brewed some tea to follow our afternoon snack. I had this to say about April: it was good to see the sun staying up so long. I squatted by the stove as Jimmy did, looking out over the land while the tea steamed from the warm tin cups.

This hunting life had a strong hold on me--maybe too strong for my own good. I loved to see the way Jimmy could strip a ptarmigan with one motion of his hand, and then with a few quick insertions of fingers extract the heart and liver to eat fresh. I don't know why it had such appeal to me, for I couldn't quite stomach doing the same. But framed by the stark hills and the timeless sky, it was such a picture of simplicity, of basic survival, that it appealed to my instincts as a being rooted to the earth.

I too was a hunter, but of a different kind. I couldn't just walk up any old hill and

blast away at a flock of harmless birds. I had to put all my rational faculties to use. I had to file my objectives and findings in triplicate. I had to be so selective, that it took all the spontaneity out of the chase. Was this bird or that one "guilty"? Did the pattern of color on the feathers match a certain description, a composite profile? If I couldn't back up my choice of target in court, I'd lose my right to carry a gun. No, come to think of it, I wasn't really a hunter at all. I was nothing but a bloody cop.

Jimmy reached in the pocket of his nylon coat and pulled out his transistor radio to see what he could snag out of the invisible airwaves. Still nothing but static. It was like hunting to him. Try it here, there, see what appears.

"I don't know why you bother," I said to him.

"Hey, boss, you never know what you might pick up. Maybe even some stray game, who likes Beatlemania."

"Game?"

"Sure. We use these radio in the canoe, hunting seal. They hear the sound; sound travels real good underwater--"

"I know that."

"And they pop up their head to see what's up. Boom!"

"Pretty good idea. You'll have to take me out and try it, when we get back."

He said nothing more, his ear glued to the buzzing radio.

By the end of the afternoon the sky had cleared completely, and the sun went down with a blaze of radiant warmth. This was not a good sign. A sun out all the next day would make traveling a brutal exercise.

Jimmy barked out his rough command for the dogs to stop--a harsh sound like a smoker's cough. Then began the nightly ritual: Jimmy would tie each dog to a long chain, digging in a snow anchor and tamping it solid at the end. I would unpack and set up the canvas tent, at some distance from the dogs. Together we would unload the meat or fish, fresh or frozen, chopping it up and doling it out to the dogs at the rate of four or five pounds per head. When those supplies ran out we had reserves of commercial dry feed. The whole operation ran to about an hour's time, every day on the trail. Hacking away at the mass of frozen fish, I couldn't help but recall George's plug for the new power toboggan.

At last, supper--more ptarmigan, saved from the afternoon's picnic--and then the blessed sack. I was to enjoy a solid, dreamless six hours . . . only to awake haunted by the image of Wallin. It was a pleasant kind of haunting, in a way: for suddenly I could recall why Wallin had seemed familiar to me during that first meeting near here a year ago. His was the face of a dogsled driver headed south from Smith Harbour, whom I had noticed in passing as I rode north with Sergeant Bickford to investigate the shooting of the seal hunter named Dinut. There was no reason to stop the guy for a chat; we already had word of a guilty party ready to give himself up in Smith Harbour. But I was struck by those icy eyes, that mouth so bitter for a young Inuit man.

Jimmy was putting on his boots. I told him what I'd realized: Wallin was in Smith Harbour in 1958 when Dinut was killed.

My guide didn't think anything of it. After all, he said, the Dinut case was long-closed.

"Yeah," I said, "but then what about after Matthewsie Konik's death, last year?"

Same thing, right?"

"Old history," Jimmy said. He cleared his throat, got up and went outside. There was the clatter of a pot on the stove as he started heating water for coffee.

As we headed to the Kangsuk on the morning of the third day out from Poste, the weather had changed back to the heavy, wet grayness that characterizes the whole coastal area for three quarters of the year. We weren't yet far enough inland to get away from it. The ice on the river would be tricky, and it would be tough going over the rough terrain to get there.

We didn't see any more game before coming to the river, and that was just as well, because we'd lost enough time. We came at last to the place called the Caribou Crossing. The water was wide there, and shallow; so that even at this time of year it was still covered with a sheet of ice and snow. We passed close by the fishing place where Konik had been found last year. No one had made a hole in the same place this year. The Kangsuk River roared out through a set of rapids not far downstream. We stopped for a midday meal on the south bank of the Crossing.

There were signs of someone else having been there: a ring of rocks left from a tent site; soft dog turds not old enough to have lost their smell; scraps of fish. And a trail was still visible, in the form of deep sled-tracks in the snow leading away to the east, upriver. No other tracks were evident.

Jimmy tethered the bitch and let the other dogs loose. They wouldn't go far with her there, and they could happily nose out all the interesting smells about the place--reinforcing, I figured, the scent they'd picked up at the hunting camp.

It wasn't rock-solid, matching those tracks to the party we were after; but at least now there was a visible trail to follow. With luck we could track it all the way to Col-de-Corbeau if necessary, some two-hundred and fifty miles away. There I figured we could rest and resupply, check in with my deputy on that coast, and pay a visit to my old friend Father Tomlin. The priest kept his ears open; I might learn something useful, for a change.

Jimmy took his fishing jig and spear and went down to a quiet pool by the rapids. Before long we enjoyed a lunch of firm, pink char fried up on the camp-stove. I could handle it raw, if sliced thin enough; but given the choice, I'd cook it.

Looking around this crime scene of a year ago, I felt like an idiot for letting Wallin off the hook then. But of course, my original reason still held: there wasn't enough evidence to keep him in custody for the murder of Matthewsie Konik.

Anyway, I consoled myself--people don't just drop out of sight in this territory. There was always time. Where were they going to go? Montreal? Detroit? Tijuana? Where if one slipped through your fingers it was like tossing a fish back into the sea? No, there was no panic about it. Here they can always be found again.

But the truth of the situation stung: I wanted to land this baby myself. And what did I have left now, a week and a half before HQ moved in with the reinforcements?

After the meal I told Jimmy to go ahead with packing up the gear; I wanted to take a little walk along the river. I came to a fishing hole chopped through a foot of ice. There were tracks, of course, large and small. The print of a sealskin boot does not leave such distinctive identifying marks as a white man's boot; but the sizes told me what I wanted to know. And then, by the hole in the ice, I saw the knife.

Stuck upright, it seemed to quiver in the breeze. It was almost too obvious. Had they counted on me coming by here, and wanted to taunt me with it, waving it in my face?

I pulled the knife out carefully, with my mitts still on, so as not to smudge any fingerprints on it. In a few minutes I would establish that, like the rifle, it had two sets: Sandlak's, and Wallin's.

When Jimmy saw me walking back to the sled he said that it looked like I was "holding that knife pretty affectionate."

"Yes, I suppose I am. Can I get you to loosen the thongs on the sled there just a little so I can dig out my prints kit?"

No surprise--Pingousi was clean.

Jimmy asked, "And that's all you need to prove Wallin did it, even if nobody saw him?"

"I've seen guys convicted with less. What more do you want? Christ, this is quite enough for us to go mushing all the way to Col, if that's what it takes. What's the matter, you got cold feet now? Just keep your rifle handy."

Jimmy said nothing. He looked hurt.

I changed the subject while replacing the sled cover and tightening the thongs. "I can just see HQ complaining about the dog food budget for the month. And knowing them, they'll probably bitch as well about my leaving the office for so long. I can hear them whining now: 'What did you hope to find all the way over in Col?' Forget about the facts of the case; and their own bloody ultimatum--they'll look at the time and money logged in, and that's it. They'll think we're spending all our time out here gallivanting

around, shooting off our guns like some trigger-happy Buffalo Bill and company, having a good time."

"Yeah," said Jimmy. "Here, let me do that."

A couple of ravens flew squawking off to the east.

"Good job, Jim. Well, the meter's ticking. Let's hit the trail."

"Sure thing, boss."

Chapter Ten

FLIGHT

The sun left the sky. They were hauled by dogs in darkness across the cold land.

Nilliq had been so afraid that her father would be the one to kill Wallin. Seeing Wallin return alone from the hunt, she was confused. Where is my father, she asked him.

"Out there."

"What happened? Why hasn't he come back?"

"He's dead."

The words had no weight, no substance. He was gone--that was all.

"What do you mean? He had an accident?"

"No."

No. She began finally to hear the words: he's dead. Could it be so--how could it be?

"You killed him?"

"It's not that simple."

"But you said, he's dead. How did he die?"

"This you will know in time."

Nilliq felt at once enraged, and resigned. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"What did you do with him? You just--left him there? My father?"

"Yes."

"Did you cover him?"

"He will rest for five days, until his spirit is ready to go from there. It is as he would have wished."

"What, to feed the ravens and foxes?"

"Yes, to feed them."

She felt like crying out, could not.

Wallin took hold of her arms, made her look at him. "Do you still want to go away with me?"

She was a lifeless thing, empty. "I don't know what I want. I feel . . . alone now."

"You want your father back?"

"No." She said it without thought. It was true. And in saying so, she could breathe again.

"Well, are we going, then?"

"But so quickly . . . ?"

Then the others had come: Pootoolik, Quingak, Vaija, Sala and Mariq, Tiniq, Palli and the children. Where is Sandlak?, they all wanted to know. Their faces close around, hovering.

"Out there," Wallin said, gesturing with his arm. "Near the place Sandlak called 'the little bay.' He's not coming back."

Shining eyes hearing him, shining eyes approving.

"And you, Wallin, will you not stay with us in our camp?" Mariq was asking this, reaching to hold Wallin's wrist.

"No," he said. "I am going to find my own way. On the other coast, there are people making a new start. Away from the khalunat way. Nilliq will come with me. You people, in a couple of years, you will see, you will all have moved to Townsend Bay, or another settlement."

Blank faces, believing him.

Then--"Have good luck, Nilliq." Old Mariq's wrinkled eyes were smiling. "And make sure you are warm enough."

Biting her bruised lip, Nilliq went into her father's snowhouse one last time, to fetch her winter parka for the cold night travel. She also took her ulu, her packet of sewing things, and her lamp, all of which had been her mother's. The rest of it they left behind.

It was good to be out on the land, behind the dogs with their thick ruffles of fur rippling in the dry cold wind of their own making. Nilliq was looking forward, trying to leave memories behind. But when they stopped to rest halfway through the night, with the yellow half-moon rising in a haze ahead of them, she asked Wallin again why they were running away. Because of what happened, he said; and for that reason a white man from Poste was going to come after them, chasing them wherever they went.

"Then where can we go? How long must we run?"

"It is not for us to know how long," Wallin said. "Only that we must, for now. First we will go to Col-de-Corbeau, the place of the ravens. Then we will see what I am to do next. Where to go. Probably north from there."

"You? What about me?"

The moon rose higher, whiter, colder.

"We will see," he said again. He looked away from her, got up and poured more tea into his cup.

"Do you know anyone there? Do you have people there?"

"I want to see my friend, a khalunat shaman. Father Tomlin is his name. You will like him." Now he smiled.

"Yes? How do you know?"

"I have a feeling. Here, want some fish?"

Nilliq was hungry now. She liked the whitefish better frozen than cooked with onions. "Yes," she said.

Wallin told her that in Col the people were coming in from the land, to live in khalunat houses.

Nilliq said, "But I thought you were leaving the settlement life. Is Col better than Poce-Balen? Won't the khalunat man catch up with us then? What will he do to us? What did you do to my father?"

"Nilliq," he said. "We have nothing to fear from the white man. But if I tell my friend what happened, it will go better for us. Trust me."

It became cold again, snowy. The old way, winter. Then it turned to freezing rain, and in the returning daylight, warm spring rain.

Wallin commanded the dogs to stop. They had arrived at the Kangsuk River, at the place called Caribou Crossing. There was a heaviness in the air. The clouds were low and full, shrouding the surrounding hills. There was no sign of life.

No tracks of caribou, but Wallin said the char would be running under the ice. They walked a little way east along the river and Wallin chopped a hole with his long ice-chisel. Nilliq dropped a line in and quickly caught four fish.

"More," Wallin said; "we need more for the dogs." He walked back to unpack the sled.

Are we going to fish in Col?, Nilliq wondered. Where will Wallin go to hunt? Will he hunt the white man who is hunting us, and kill him like he killed my father? And then will another white man come to take revenge? Maybe the khalunat will hunt and kill me too. I have no gun to shoot back. I have nowhere to go but with Wallin. And somehow I am glad. I am glad, whatever the future might bring, to be free.

Nilliq caught many fish, strong heavy fish leaping out of the water on her hook. Wallin came back to see. She couldn't tell whether he was happy with her or not. But he asked her to come set up the tent with him. She felt shy; she walked behind him and didn't know what to say. They took the fish along, strung behind them as they walked, and fed the dogs, and then shared one themselves, slicing the pink meat thin with the ulu Nilliq had packed in Wallin's sled.

Nilliq helped Wallin hoist up the canvas tent and pull the lines taut around rocks. They got willow mats and caribou sleeping-skins from the sled and put them inside. She was tired from their all-night journey. Yet she felt that it would be difficult to sleep just yet. Still troubled by not knowing how her father had died, she didn't know how it would be between Wallin and her. Were they to be lovers, now?

They stood at the entrance, still outside under the gray sky. He bent to go in. She said, "Wallin, tell me how it was with my father." She had no tears for Sandlak; but as

she said this she was trembling.

Wallin hesitated, looking at the ground. He straightened up and looked at Nilliq, then up at the sky. He started to speak, looked at her again, and stopped. He began again: "Your father had his rifle out. But those caribou he said he saw, they didn't exist. He got his rifle out for me. I moved too quick for him, under his aim. I threw him backward, to the ground. The gun went off. I hit him with my fist, and grabbed the gun. Then he came at me with a knife--this knife," and Wallin reached down and pulled Sandlak's knife out from where it had been sheathed in his boot. "I had no choice."

Was that a trace of blood still on the knife, close to the hilt? Walrus blood, fish blood, father's blood. It was all the same to the knife. Just as sharp, just as long, just as ready to kill. The knife stared back at Nilliq with a polished glare. It slipped quietly back into Wallin's boot--noiseless but for the whisper of contact with the stiff sealskin hairs on his kamiks.

Could she now go in to sleep with this man?

Would he kill her, too? No, it was he who had brought her new life. She would go in with him and lose her old self forever.

As Wallin held her close to him, close to the urgency of his body, Nilliq held her body stiff, and her eyes wide open, alive and darting over the walls of his tent. She was afraid, because she'd never been this close to a man before. But Wallin was gentle. He soothed her by stroking her hair and face, by gliding his fingers softly over the tight skin of her quivering long body. Nilliq shivered as with winter cold; she was at the same time burning up with a mounting flame. Her eyes danced over him and she clenched her

fingers, waiting for him to do what a man can do. His hands molded themselves to the feathery texture of her breasts. Excited to a fever, she began to melt into a throbbing oneness with him. She felt his hot pressure on her thigh. She reached down with her fingertips and found with a tingling touch that softness that Palli called a man's love-sack . . . and then, rising above it, such smoothness and hardness, such gentleness and urgency-

Oh Nilliq, Wallin said. And he touched her here, and there, and her body jumped inside itself, a sleeping animal tickled alive. Nilliq sang with joy and new pleasure, inside. She let Wallin hear nothing but her breathing, until she could no longer contain her hoarse cries of need. She shouted at him to stop, to go on. He smiled calmly. This was not new to him. To her it was a peeling away of her skin, letting the real Nilliq out to see the world, for the first time.

Cold without her old skin, she huddled to him for warmth. Wallin held her. She had no father or mother any longer. She had Wallin.

Wallin smiled, but his eyes seemed focused on distant hills far removed from the walls of their tent. Nilliq started to cry. He held her. Then he was inside her, and she was filled with a blazing light. Her hands groped and clutched and felt of the rounded muscles of his arms and chest, his back and buttocks and legs. The light, the pain and the boundless pleasure mounted inside her until she could only clamp her screaming mouth shut, leaving deep teethmarks in Wallin's shoulder. He let out a long low moan, a hot exhalation of breath, warm and soothing on her neck.

Nilliq awoke still clinging to Wallin under the thick fur of the caribou sleeping-

robe, their breaths mingling and hanging in the frosty air, the gathering darkness.

Wallin's eyes were closed. Nilliq closed her eyes again. Her dream-thoughts were still with her, voices of the people who were gone: Sijja, and Aiti . . . and Sandlak. Now awake, she thought also of the others, the small ones, the old ones, the lone ones she had left behind. Palli would have to bear the brunt of the woman's work, with only the two grandmothers and little Lialuq to lend a hand. The little band was practically only one family now. In the summer they would move again, and by the next winter, who knows what would happen? Maybe they would end up, as Wallin had said, in one of the settlements--even Poce-Balen. Nilliq shook these thoughts away, opened her eyes again to the last of the soft light filtering through the canvas, and squeezed her arms around Wallin.

He grunted and gently bit the back of her neck. She giggled. He squeezed his arms around her and then sighed, "It's time we got going."

He stood up and began to dress. She watched him, thinking, yes, it's all right now; I feel lucky to have this man to be with, to go away with.

Yet there was a certain question, which had followed them here, quickly filling Nilliq's mind. She was almost afraid to ask it. The growing darkness made it easier.

"Wallin, who made your clothes?"

He laughed as he tied the thong of his trousers around his waist. "Ahh, that is a good question. And I have a good answer for you. It was a kind woman in Poste, a woman of the shaman's family. He, Changuk, was my friend, my teacher . . . like a father to me."

"You have no family there?"

Wallin, with a distant sadness, said no.

"And this shaman, Changuk--he, too, is gone now?"

"Not quite. But soon, I feel. He is old. I don't think I will see him again. He taught me many things, and I will not forget him."

Wallin turned away from her, blinking his eyes. Nilliq sensed that it would be best not to ask him more about his family. And it didn't really matter, for now. She was filled with a new, warm sense of fullness, of power.

Maybe, she reflected in the sweetness of this moment after sleep and before the open darkness, it was not such great power as a hunter possesses, before or after a kill; but a power more subtle, more like the force at work in spring upon the land: the force of a single flower, opening out of the moss.

When they finally carried out the sleeping things and took down the tent, Wallin seemed strangely quiet.

"Something's wrong," Nilliq said to him as they stood by the packed sled. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

"No--it's just this place. We need to go now."

This place. Nilliq remembered his conversation with Sandlak, the reek of boiled onions and fish: "You must know the place--the Caribou Crossing?" And her father had not really answered him.

"What about this place," she asked Wallin now. "Are there agiuqtuit here?"

"Bad spirits, yes. Let's go on."

He roused the dogs and Nilliq sat on the sled, looking up at the stars. She was

ready for the long ride. Wallin still walked beside as they started slowly moving. Then when they pulled opposite the fishing-hole in the ice, he stopped the dogs and walked onto the ice. He pulled Sandlak's knife out of his boot and stuck it into the ice beside the hole. The knife stood quivering, glinting of new starlight and father's blood.

Chapter Eleven

HISTORY LESSONS

With a waning, late-rising moon and the need to keep moving, Wallin was not able to hunt. But there were plenty of char, and some frozen whitefish besides; and they still had some bannock which Palli had given them before leaving.

Above them as they rode, shimmering spirit lights danced among the stars in the cold black sky. They rode all night, stopping only once for tea and a meal of fresh char. They had few words to say to each other--their spirits were still in motion. On the sled again there was nothing to hear but the sound of the runners going one way, the opposite way of the river.

They rode on through the dawn and didn't stop until the sun came up and started to soften the crusty snow. Again Nilliq helped Wallin feed the dogs and set up the canvas tent. She liked working beside him but in some ways he was still a stranger. His mind seemed to be elsewhere. He smiled at her from time to time, put a hand on her shoulder or waist, and it was so gentle . . . but he was somewhere else. He didn't speak to her as they lifted the poles and anchored the lines with rocks. Once more she started to wonder if something was wrong.

Of course it was wrong, Nilliq told herself. This man killed my father.

She was standing with a rope slack in her hands, and Wallin was staring at her. She looked around for a rock to anchor her rope. Despite everything, she wanted him.

"Let us go to the river for fish," Wallin said when the tent was up. He gave her a little smile.

He chopped the hole in the soft ice; and Nilliq fished, while he squatted beside her and looked off to the east. She didn't catch any fish there and after a while Wallin got up and moved to another spot and made another hole.

Finally, after a long time of sitting quietly together at the second hole, there was a tug on the line. Nilliq shouted and pulled the fish out of the water, falling backward into Wallin's lap. He started laughing, and he began pinching her around the waist where she was ticklish, and they went stumbling back to the tent, chasing and grabbing at one another and then tumbling in like a couple of bear cubs.

It was warm in the tent with the sun shining down on it, and now the lovers were both sitting up with the sleeping-robcs fallen down around their waists. The talk between them had become easier. In boyish sport Wallin had jumped up and run out of the tent in all his nakedness to fetch the fish; and Nilliq had giggled like a little girl.

He had come in with the big fish which she had caught, and they had eaten happily and well, and now the floor of the tent was littered with fish skin and bones.

Nilliq felt she was able to speak with him as with a new voice. "Wallin, I want to know more about this khalunat man, who is chasing us. Are there more like him in our land? Or in Col? What are you going to tell him when he finds us?"

Wallin didn't answer for a long moment. Finally he swallowed his last mouthful

of fish and wiped his hands on a bit of snow from the floor. "The white man I spoke of is a policeman: R.C.M.P. Do you know what that stands for in the khalunat language?"

"No." Nilliq looked up at him, then back to the snow floor with its bits of pink flesh scattered over it.

"It means Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

She had heard of Canada, and of the police, the R-C-M-P, but never really knew what these things meant. She asked Wallin to tell her.

"Well, Royal--because they work for the Queen. You know the Queen?" And he grinned at her.

Her thoughts were blank, far away. Nilliq had heard of the Queen, but never understood. She shook her head.

"Okay, it's like this. You know of Niviaktuk, who controls the movements of the sea creatures. Well, that's what the Queen does, except she tells people what to do."

"What people?"

"Khalunat, anyway. They listen to her. Even though she lives far away, across the ocean in a place called England."

"Ingaling?"

"England. Where most of the khalunat came from, a long time ago."

Nilliq thought: This is what Inuit children learn when they go away to school. I wish I had been sent away to school. I could have gone to the school in Poce-Balen, with Wallin.

"Tell me more," she said to him.

"Okay. Mounted: the khalunat who come chasing people are 'mounted,' which

means they ride. Down South it's on horses, here it's on sleds. They never walk, if they can help it."

Nilliq had heard of horses, had even seen pictures of them in a book Tiniq had. Strange, beautiful creatures, sleek as seals . . .

"And 'Canada,' you say you have heard of. Like an Inuk word, eh? The khalunat say we Inuit are living in the place called Canada. They say that Inuit were the first Canadians--or maybe the second ones, after the Cree. You would think that because of this, the khalunat would behave as guests of ours. But instead"--Wallin spit out a sharp bit of bone--"they think the land belongs to them."

"Hanuuk?" Nilliq said, meaning both "How?" and "Why?"

Wallin said, "I don't really understand how it works, myself. But they claim ownership of all of it: the land, sea, air, animals, people, stones, everything! So, if they own it--they say--they decide everything: who can do what, and what you can't do."

"Ai. Like killing people."

"A-heh. The police--the Mounties--they come to take people away with them, who do those things."

"What do they do to them when they catch them?"

Wallin seemed undisturbed by the question. "It depends," he said. "How bad they think you were, for whatever it is that they say you shouldn't have done."

Nilliq ran her tongue over her lower lip where it was bruised, now nearly healed. "Wallin," she said. "I don't think you were bad."

Wallin smiled at her and put his arm around her, and they lay back down together onto their caribou-skin bed, and felt the warm comfort of their Inuk bodies together,

without Queens or horses or khalunat policemen.

After a while Nilliq had to ask again what happens when a person is caught.

"How many of them are there, hunting for people? Will they try to kill you?"

"Sometimes they kill," Wallin said. "But stop worrying. I know these men, from Poste. A white man and a young Inuk guy who runs his dogs. I played pool with him before, Jimmy Natsik. They're not going to hurt us. You already said I did nothing bad. That's the truth, and so we have nothing to fear."

Nilliq remembered meeting a Jimmy Natsik once, who passed through Townsend Bay in the company of a man she knew, Hajdo. Smiling at her with no teeth. Maybe he would not try to kill them. But what about the khalunat man?

Nilliq kept the rest of her ignorant questions to herself. They lay side by side both looking up at the ceiling of the tent, at the hazy image of the sun filtering through the canvas. The sun had already moved past the middle of the sky on its way to another night.

Wallin turned to her and said, "Have you spent your whole life hidden away in that camp? Your family has never traveled anywhere?"

"No; only on the land. I have traveled as far as the summer camp; not far from here. Where the river turns north. My family has always stayed away from the khalunat, and from the settlements, except for a couple of visits to Townsend Bay. I've never even seen a khalunat. Anything I know about them, I heard from others. Like Sandlak, Quingak, Pingousi--or talking with my half-sister, Tella, in Townsend Bay. But it was always pretty confusing. When I was younger and heard the khalunat spoken of as 'those with beards and big bellies,' I thought even their women were like that."

Nilliq thought Wallin would be amused by what she had said. Instead he had that odd, distracted look, as if he were thinking about something else; as if something was bothering him.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

"Oh--" His attention returned. "Just that--I didn't know you had a sister."

"Not really a sister. But they say she was Sandlak's child, of the woman Kaniga. We got along pretty well, those few times I got to visit with her . . . before she died."

Then Wallin said, "I knew Tella."

No, Nilliq thought, how can this be? And her next thought was, did Wallin sleep with her? Tella was the same age as Nilliq--and one day two winters before, the word had come to Nilliq's camp that Tella had wandered off into a snowstorm and had frozen to death. This was after her man Masarak had been killed. Nilliq regretted not having seen Tella in that year before she decided to die like that. Now she found herself jealous because she thought Wallin might have enjoyed her half-sister first. But surely, Nilliq had already decided, there were other women besides.

And then, suddenly, she didn't care about the others, nor about Wallin's knowing Tella. She choked back whatever tears wanted to come back from that sad time.

"Wallin," she said in order speak of something else, "where are we going?"

"I already told you. Now we need to sleep."

She was making bannock, in a settlement house. She was going to cook it on a big stand-up oil stove, like the one in Tella's house in Townsend Bay. As she worked the white dough in her hands, it took the shape of a coiled snake--a beast she had heard a

terrible story of once, who lived in the land of the khalunat. She kept handling it, fearful but unable to stop. The serpent writhed, live in her hands; she flung it in the pot on the stove. It grinned up at her as it cooked, browning in the hot grease. Its little black eye laughed at her. She could not look away. Sputtering and spitting, it grew bigger and fatter and finally split its skin--as the snake in the story did--showing the white flesh underneath dry and airy. . . .

The door-flap of the tent was roughly pulled open, and a gruff voice said, "You're awake? We need to be moving on."

Nilliq got up without a word and helped Wallin take down the tent in the dark. He had already harnessed the dogs.

Were they to have no tea before they left for another all-night ride? That's all right, Nilliq told herself. There's no more bannock, anyway.

She stood at the back of the sled. Wallin looked at her, as if at a stranger, and then shouted at the dogs, sending his long whip cracking over their heads. He jumped onto the moving sled, and Nilliq ran a couple of steps behind, finally climbing on to sit behind him, her legs draped over the hard barrel of his rifle.

He was the hunter.

She was not, could not be a hunter. She was only a hunter's daughter . . . a hunter's woman. Would it be any different, with him, in the end? It was the only life she knew--to move camp with the seasons, following the animals to their feeding and migration spots along the bay or the inland waterways, following the undulations of the land--but was it the only life there was?

The moon did not come up until a few hours before daylight, and then it was

obscured by a misty sky, which turned to snow with a cold, biting wind. Nilliq's eyes stung with hard snow crystals which struck her face and melted down her cheeks. She was glad for the caribou and fox-fur parka over her light tunic--but not for that last entry into Sandlak's house to get it.

The travelers stopped to push the sled over some rocks. Nilliq slipped and fell into Wallin. She was afraid he would scold her but he laughed and held her closely for a moment. Even after he released her and they rode separately on the sled once more, she felt the tingling of feathers on her skin like Wallin's touch, light and thrilling.

Yet as they traveled on through the night, Nilliq felt uneasy. She wondered if they were being followed by evil spirits, if these agiuqtuit were the cause of her upsetting dream. She shuddered at the thought of them and jumped off the sled to run free; also to lighten the load for the struggling dogs, and to keep warm.

Nilliq could not run for as long as Wallin, and had to jump back on the sled to rest while he continued. It seemed he could run forever. The dogs had to be urged forward constantly with Wallin's shouts and the crack of his whip, as the wind and driving snow kept coming.

Halfway through the night the bad weather eased off, where the Kangsuk River turned north. Stars winked through the clouds while a heavy, chill air came down from the north along the river.

They stopped long enough to make tea. Nilliq told Wallin that nearby her people had made summer camp some years; had made a fish weir of rocks and had caught so many, wading through the shallows with the long spears, that she was sick of fish halfway through the following winter and never wanted to see another one. "Maybe this summer,"

she said, "my people will come here again."

"Maybe," Wallin said.

This river, Nilliq told him, continued all the way to Penassining Lake, halfway to Smith Harbour. Wallin reminded her that he was familiar with the territory.

"When I was younger," she went on gaily, "I thought that the Kangsuk River that flowed out of Penassining Lake was a different one than the Kangsuk River that ran past the Caribou Crossing. Then one summer here--maybe even on this very spot--I sat watching it turn from the north and understood that those two Kangsuks were really the same long, twisting river."

"Ai," Wallin said, "the same river." He smiled as if to himself, and tossed the last of his tea into the snow.

The fresh cold snow made for easier traveling. When daylight came, the difficulty was having to squint into the dazzling glare of the early morning sun on the snow. Wallin gave Nilliq his own carved-bone snow goggles and fashioned another pair for himself out of a piece of hide.

Finally they stopped at the foot of a hill where Wallin said they could build a snowhouse and stay for a day and a night.

"But the khalunat--"

"There are days enough before he gets this far, so that we can have a rest. Then with this cold snow we can travel in the daytime, and I might even catch some meat for us. Now, see that the dogs get the rest of the whitefish, and I'll start on the snowhouse."

Nilliq was glad that they still had a supply of char from the river--just in case

Wallin had poor luck at hunting here. After the dogs were fed she came over to pack the joints smooth as Wallin finished the top layers of the snowhouse. This was life in the old way; and it was good. When the snowhouse was finished they even brought out the stone lamp they had taken from Sandlak's house. The lamp was not painful for her to have, but comforting; for it reminded her not so much of Sandlak but of Sijja, her mother. Nilliq set up the sleeping-skins and started a flame in the lamp with matches which Wallin gave her, while he brought out a set of bolas and went off, as hunters did before the days of the khalunat, to get some ptarmigan they'd seen flying over the nearby hills. Nilliq thought it was childish of Wallin to use this old thong-and-rock method of hunting, as boys would to play at the ways of the legends. But she thought it best to hold her tongue and wait to see what came of it.

Wallin came back before long with enough birds to make a good meal. Nilliq was happy; she told Wallin she felt like the typical old Inuk hunter's wife.

"I didn't bring a shotgun," he replied, scowling. "Only my thirty-ought-six. But I know how to hunt."

Nilliq said no more of it. She handed Wallin the thin flat beater to brush the snow off his clothes before coming inside. The snowhouse was warm enough for them to remove their inner tunics. Wallin's eyes were flashing. Ulu and knife sliced through the rich red meat, and the snowhouse floor was soon littered with the birds' bones.

Nilliq and Wallin lay back with satisfied bellies under the soft light of the new snowblock roof. This, to Nilliq, felt like their own cozy home--though Wallin had already said they would be leaving again the next day.

She didn't mind too much; she was getting used to this traveling life. It was the hunters' way. She and Wallin would make other houses to sleep in, as nice as this one.

Nilliq lay with her head on his chest; he stroked her hair. He lay looking up, saying nothing, hardly breathing. Was he still thinking about Sandlak--or about some other, secret thing? Nilliq was afraid to say anything; she didn't want the agiuqtuit to come here while they slept. But now she had started thinking about Sandlak again. She had to say something to get that agiuqtuq out of her head.

"Wallin, are you happy with me?"

"Yes, Nilliq. Why do you say that?"

"The way you have been. At the Caribou Crossing, you said, 'agiuqtuit.' What is there?"

A dark cloud seemed to pass across Wallin's face. His eyes appeared hooded and faraway. He took a deep breath, and finally, speaking slowly, he said, "I'll tell you what happened, at the Caribou Crossing. There was a friend of mine, Matthewsie Konik. You've heard of him; when we were in your camp the old man Pootoolik mentioned him as a nephew of the great hunter Samik."

Nilliq nodded. Now Wallin drew another deep breath, said, "All right," and began speaking faster, as if he were relating an ordinary story about someone. "Matthewsie worked for the khalunat in Poste-de-la-Baleine. He was one who had done well in the boarding school there--so well that he went to Ottawa, down South to the big khalunat school there. He never really learned how to hunt, spending all his time in school; and besides that, his father was in no shape for taking him out on the land, because he had a bad leg.

"So. What happened. Matthewsie and I took a trip up to the Kangsuk together, a year ago. I showed him a little about tracking and shooting along the way. At the Caribou Crossing we stopped, so that he could begin to do his work, scouting a site for a new settlement.

"I left him camped there while I went on my way to the east--right along the route we're following, all the way to Col-de-Corbeau."

Nilliq wanted to ask Wallin why he left his friend, to go there, so far away. But she said nothing, waiting for him to go on. Wallin looked directly at her with his eyes now darkly shining, and it was as if he were looking straight through her. Nilliq had seen a look like that once before in her life--from Entinada, the shaman.

"I went there," Wallin was saying in a low, even voice, "to do my work, for Changuk. He sent me to collect the eggs of the ravens who live around there, and some of their feathers, and a certain amount of their droppings, of a certain age and dryness. This I did."

When he looked away from her Nilliq breathed easier. But she thought, who is this man called Wallin?

He gazed at the ceiling of the snowhouse. His voice sounded more normal as he said, "On my way back from Col, I passed a hunter going the other way, on the other side of the river. I thought nothing of it, at first. But then when I passed by the Caribou Crossing again, I found Matthewsie stuffed in an ice-hole, his head broken in by an ice-pick. The job was fresh."

"No, Wallin!" Nilliq clung to him, grabbing his strong bare arms in her hands. A memory of whispers in camp, and the crawling chill in her spine told her that there was

more, that Wallin hadn't said. She didn't want to hear it.

He paused, gently smoothing the hair on the top of her head. "It's all right," he said.

Nilliq trembled a little as she clutched him. She envisioned her father's body lying out in the air, food for scavengers. Tears came suddenly. She thought of Wallin's onions and this made her want to laugh but instead she only cried harder. Wallin held his arms tightly around her.

"Tell me about your father," Wallin said when her heaving had become still.

"What do you mean?" Nilliq said, sniffing. "You met my father. You killed my father." She turned away from him.

Still he held her, and she was glad for that. "No," he said. "I want you to tell me."

She started crying again. He held her. "Don't worry," Wallin said. "He's gone. It's over. I just want you to say what he was, to you. Was he really a father to you?"

Nilliq thought of the white man's, the pilot's seed. Was Wallin one of the angakot, the shamans? Does one shaman know what all shamans know? Or was it that "the caribou girl" really looked like a khalunat? She flushed and turned to Wallin and said, "How did you know?"

Nilliq turned away again.

"How did I know what?" Wallin said, gently.

Nilliq couldn't think of any way to say it, the old woman's, Mariq's belief. She didn't even know what to believe.

My father, she thought. Who was my father?

She looked blankly ahead at the empty winter parkas, and at her tunic with the

feathers turned out wilted and drooping, hanging to dry above her mother's lamp. She felt cold; got up and reversed the tunic and put it on; shivered and sat back down beside Wallin. "What do you want to know about him?"

"What it was like, living with him all those years, when you were younger, as you grew older? Did he ever . . . mistreat you?"

Nilliq whirled around angrily and said, "You saw how he treated me! You saw how he was! Why do you ask me these things?" Again she saw that deep light in Wallin's eyes.

Wallin said nothing, and Nilliq became calm again. His fingers brushed her cheek. She found herself saying, finally, "It wasn't so much that. Not so much what he did to me. More, what I feared was to come. I was always afraid of him; especially after I grew into a . . . a woman's body."

Wallin closed his eyes and tenderly held her, his hands pressing the feathers softly against her back. Nilliq felt that she was safe now, woman's body and all; that Wallin would care for her. He was right: whatever it was like for her before, was over.

Now it was easier to talk. Nilliq could feel Sandlak's spirit moving away from her. "After I lived twelve winters," she said to Wallin, "I began to think that there was something wrong. I don't know if I changed, to start thinking that way, or if something happened with Sandlak. When I looked at him sometimes, I had to close my eyes, to turn away. It was all darkness there, like the water under the sea-ice. Then, when I would look back at him, his eyes would still be on me. Or, other times, he wouldn't look at me at all, except for a glance very quickly. He was like a shy child, like a child who'd done something bad."

Wallin looked at her with his gentle, thoughtful eyes. "From my own experience with him, I don't imagine he let other men pay much attention to you."

"No," Nilliq said quietly, "it was always the same. I remember once when we moved camp upriver with people from the other camps. After riding on the sled all day, we encountered strangers, a family with a boy my age. My father forbid me to get off the sled even to relieve myself."

"Ai." Wallin shook his head, his lips in a thin line. "And later?"

"When he would go away on a long hunting trip, a wonderful lightness would come into my life . . . for that time. And then he would come back and begin mistreating my mother again, and eyeing me strangely in the way I have said. After being away, he would make more sure than ever that I stayed in his sight, under his power."

Wallin stopped her as one of his dogs moaned softly outside, like an old woman sighing, mourning. He cocked his head, listening.

"What?" Nilliq said.

The moaning had stopped. Wallin got up and put his own soft doeskin tunic on.

Did I really hear a dog, Nilliq wondered, or is Wallin playing an angakot's trick on me? Maybe we've drawn the agiuqtuit here by talking about Sandlak like this.

She remembered hearing Pootoolik say that shamans could turn people into animals, or animals into stones. Though she was a little afraid now, Nilliq decided to ask Wallin if such stories were true.

He looked at her seriously and sat down again. "Well--it seems we can let your father's spirit go for now--yes?"

Nilliq nodded, looking down at the snowhouse floor and back to Wallin with clear

eyes.

Then Wallin chuckled, his own eyes beginning to dance. "So: yes, yes, the transformations and so on, that's the way people think. But it's really not like that, not quite. That's the mystique of it, that goes along with the costume, with the charms and amulets and incantations. It's really more simple. Changuk taught me the songs, the drum-songs and the stories, for instance, and also some little tricks. But you know, there's a, a, how would I say it for you to understand? A depth of meaning, I guess, behind, below all that. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"I think so. Sort of. Like, the seal-mother, Niviaktuk, who provides for people who treat her with respect. But people have to believe in her, don't they, to make it work?"

Wallin chuckled again, and gave her a knowing smile. "Yes," he said, "it seems they do. Even the shaman, who knows better, or knows there's more to it, still has to keep the mask on, has to play the believer himself so that everyone else can believe. It's a tricky game to play, all right. Not for every soul to attempt."

"So you . . . do you consider yourself a shaman?"

"Not really. I have a feeling for it, an understanding; but I think Inuit people are almost past believing anymore. We have gone over too far to the ways of the khalunat: the laws of the Queen and the worship of white Jesus. Even your people, all our people, I'm afraid, are headed that way. Unless . . ." He fell silent, turning his head away. Several dogs could be heard moaning now.

"Wallin, what? Unless what?"

He looked at her sharply. "Well--you never know. Some magic left somewhere,

maybe? Under a rock, under some river ice, a fox kit or a spawning char--who knows? In me, in you, in the wavering skirts of those dancing women who will be up there in the sky tonight. . . . Now listen, what's that?" He sat straight up.

The dogs were whining, and starting to bark and howl. Nilliq knew what this could mean.

"Bear," Wallin said, grabbing his knife and jumping up. "I'm going out for the gun. You stay here."

Nilliq heard the tethered dogs, barking wildly, rush off when Wallin cut them loose.

They didn't have to run far. Even through the thick snowblocks Nilliq heard them snarling, circling the bear, snapping at it and driving it closer. She wanted to hear Wallin's gunshot. Why wasn't he shooting? Was he afraid of hitting the dogs?

She heard a roar and then the scream of a dog in pain. More furious barking. A scuffle against the snowhouse wall. Snow began to fall loose.

She thought of poor Jiana.

She looked around frantically for the ulu: where was it? A sleeping-robe had fallen on the floor: she snatched it up, and saw the curved blade. She grabbed for it.

With a sudden crash some snowblocks broke in--then the whole wall. Two massive paws swept past her and slammed down to the floor. The head with its red gums wheeled toward her. Quickly Nilliq lunged with her ulu and slashed down from the ear into the throat until she hit bone.

The bear pitched forward, groaning horribly with the rush of blood from its open throat. Nilliq dodged past the flailing paws and scrambled out through the broken wall,

yelling at the dogs to clear away. Wallin had run over and he too was yelling at them, standing with his gun ready to shoot. But the bear was thrashing weakly in its pooling blood, and in a moment more lay still.

The sleeve of Nilliq's tunic was ripped and dripping red, with feathers falling out; but the blood was not her own. Wallin laid his rifle down and came to her side, reaching out to see if her arm was hurt, and then trying to tell her why he hadn't been able to shoot.

Nilliq sat numbly on the snow, looking off to the cold horizon.

Chapter Twelve

RAISING THE DEAD

Nilliq wielded the whip to keep the dogs away from the dead bear, while Wallin grabbed them, one by one, and tied them up again.

When he was finished with his knots he took the whip away from her. "I couldn't get to the rifle soon enough," he explained to her again. "The bear was too close to the sled. I guess it was interested in that box of char."

"Yes," Nilliq said. "I guess it was."

"And then the dogs drove it toward the snowhouse. You did well, Nilliq."

She looked at the bear's body lying in the bloodied snowhouse; her torn sleeve.

"We'll have a nice skin," she said. "Could we sell it at the store in Col and then have money to spend there?"

Wallin looked at her darkly. "We'll see."

The meat from the carcass was wormy, unfit as food even for the dogs. Nilliq worked on the skin, scraping the fat and membrane away with her ulu, while Wallin carved blocks for a new snowhouse out of the deep packed snow farther along the foot of the hill. The fur proved thin and patchy, not as nice as she had hoped. But any bearskin was valuable, and Nilliq thought they could make still make a good trade for it at the

store.

When the snowhouse was ready and the bearskin cleaned, she was exhausted and wanted to sleep, but there was still work to do. She sadly plucked at the reddened feathers falling out of the rips in her tunic.

"Come to bed," Wallin said to her; "there's no hurry with that. We'll stay here another day,"

"No," Nilliq said. "It will wash better before the blood sets." She went outside with a pot of water and washed the blood off it as best she could. Back in the warmth of the new snowhouse, she mended the rips while Wallin silently watched from the bed. Finally she was satisfied and hung the tunic to dry above the lamp for the night.

She slipped out of her trousers and crawled into the caribou skins next to Wallin. He held her, gently stroking her all over. For warmth, at least, maybe she did need him. His body moved against her. She curled her knees against her chest.

"You did well," Wallin said once more.

Nilliq murmured something in reply and fell asleep.

Suddenly in the night she awoke, eyes wide open. Wallin stirred in his sleep, moaning. Nilliq got out of bed; her tunic was nearly dry. She put it on and went outside to urinate, looking up at the brilliant stars. The quarter-moon was just rising. Morning was not far off.

She went back in to find Wallin awake. She could see his eyes shining up out of the darkness of the bed. He said, "Changuk's dead."

Nilliq believed that he knew this by his dreaming.

Wallin said no more of it.

There was nothing to eat but the char saved from the trip up the Kangsuk. Nilliq thought Wallin might want to spend a little more time hunting in this area. They'd seen a few geese fly far overhead, and some faint caribou tracks which Wallin said were a week old. But he had changed his mind about staying and told her they needed to keep moving. They could be in Col in another day. Col-de-Corbeau was a settlement, Wallin had told her, almost as large as Poste-de-la-Baleine.

In the late afternoon, after they had stopped to make tea, Wallin spotted some movement to the northwest. "Caribou!" Nilliq said. But the black dots on the horizon soon became three men driving sleds.

Nilliq first recognized Pingousi, by his shiny gray cap with the earflaps that stuck out to the sides--like little wings, she had thought as a child. He gave Nilliq a wide smile when he saw who she was. Nilliq looked away, to Wallin.

The hunters uttered gruff commands to their dogs and tethered them to large rocks well away from Wallin's team. Nilliq recognized the swarthy, wiry man as Etuk, who years ago had lived in her camp and who now lived in Townsend Bay. He was the eldest of the three, almost a grandfather to Nilliq: he had lived once with the woman called Ainia, Ainia and Nilliq's grandfather Nananga also having shared a sleeping-robe for a time.

The tall man with the sad eyes and restrained smile was Adamie Nassak, the uncle of Quingak--and of Matthewsie Konik, the man killed at the Caribou Crossing. Adamie lived in Smith Harbour now, and Nilliq knew him from his occasional trip past her camp.

Pingousi remarked that Nilliq was a long way from home. He smiled as he said

this and looked a little nervously at Wallin.

So were they a long way from home, Nilliq answered, her voice shaky with a new fear. She had to wonder: had they come to take her back to her camp? Had Pingousi come finally to take her for a wife, now that Sandlak was out of the way?

Wallin seemed at ease with them, as if he knew them. He stood beside Etuk and was asking about the hunting.

"The geese are starting to come back," Etuk said. "Lots showing up around Penassining Lake."

"And we got a few ducks," Pingousi added, nodding toward his sled. But no caribou, yet. Have you seen any tracks?"

Wallin said, "Some just this morning, but pretty old. Heading south. Otherwise we saw none the way we came, along the Kangsuk from the west." Then he turned and said, "How's the trapping, Adamie?"

Adamie gave a broad grin and nodded in the direction of his sled, where some fox paws and bits of rabbit fur could be seen hanging out from under the canvas wrappings. "Not too bad," he said. "Considering."

"Ai," Wallin said.

Adamie walked slowly forward with a leaning gait, approaching the campstove and stooping down to take some tea. His face was weathered and there were wisps of gray in his hair that Nilliq hadn't seen before. Pingousi brought out a small canvas sack containing bannock and shared it around. The newcomers grinned over the fine weather and good hot tea, as they stood around the stove, looking now and then off in the distance.

Wallin began to tell them the story of the bear attack. They squatted contentedly during this entertainment, turning to the heroine with smiles and gleaming eyes when the tale reached its bloody end.

Nilliq couldn't help blushing. "What else could I do?" she said. "Offer the hungry thing tea and bannock?"

Her joke drew a hearty laugh from Etuk and Adamie. Wallin, still standing, looked somewhat surprised to hear her say it. Pingousi's eyes were lingering on Wallin, who had pulled out his knife in his re-enactment of the bear story and was still holding it loosely in his hand.

"I heard," Pingousi said, "what happened back in camp a few days ago."

Everyone who was chewing stopped. Eyes shifted to Nilliq and away again. Also to Wallin, to see there what could be seen.

Wallin's hand tensed on the knife. Then he stiffly bent over, sheathed it in his boot where he had earlier kept Sandlak's knife, and stood up tall again, looking off in the distance and a little skyward, his eyes squinting at the cold, bright sunshine.

"You have heard what happened," he repeated. "News travels fast." He made a strange little smile. The men resumed chewing, slowly.

Adamie looked at Nilliq, then away again. He began to speak, in an odd voice that sounded as if it were coming from far away, and as he spoke he stared at a point in the snow about a man's length away from him.

It was as if Sandlak's body were lying there before them. This telling of the person's life (as when Sijja's body was laid under stones forever) Nilliq shuddered and

shrank within herself, to have to hear.

"Your father, this man Sandlak--" Adamie spoke without even glancing at her--"I knew him when he was a young man, still a boy. He came to a hunter's camp outside Smith Harbour in 1940; he was only thirteen. He'd spent his life behind the skirts of the priest there, that Tomlin fellow. It wasn't a good life for an Inuk boy. But with us he was a quick learner, sharp with the rifle and a fierce and determined stalker of prey.

"He was determined, but impatient. He would scare the game away in his haste and excitement for the kill. From us he learned how to wait. He stayed three years with us there in that camp.

"But with the impatience of youth, he would not stay longer. For one thing, he hungered for the company of a young woman. He thought he was a man. And he left us, and you in the camp of Nananga know what happened after that."

Adamie's eyes turned on Pingousi, on Etuk, and then on Nilliq. She looked down, feeling shame for how her father might have appeared to others; and feeling somehow hurt that Adamie and the others knew something . . . not quite right about Sandlak. Etuk, who was there in those days, nodded. Pingousi, who had been a few years older than the young man Sandlak, remembered, too. "He arrived on the sled of a traveling hunter. . . ." Pingousi said. But he said nothing more. He stared off in the distance, at the pale blue sky, the windswept snow.

The body was still there in the snow: at "the little bay," and here before them. Nilliq sat against Wallin's sled. She counted back. Four days--and one more to go before Sandlak's spirit could go to the ancestors.

It was Adamie who spoke up again. "One remembers others, now, alongside

Sandlak, laid out. Nilliq's grandfather Nananga, for one. Then, Dinut Tapassinik, my own nephew. Him, too, I taught to hunt, in the old days at Kujuarapik when he was a boy. And he told me, one day as a young man--this was in the time after he came to live in Smith--something the rest of you might not have heard about, concerning the man Sandlak. About a fight those two had had, when they both attended school in Poste."

"I have heard," Wallin said.

Nilliq wondered how this could be. Had a fight among schoolboys passed into legend among the people of Poste?

Adamie went on, looking back at the empty place in the snow: "Those two had become friends, in the summer camp by the mouth of the Kangsuk River that year. That was before Sandlak was sent to go with Dinut to the school. But down there in Poste a bad thing happened. Sandlak got to drinking one night, and finding Dinut at the pool hall, began to boast in what he thought was a manful way. He told my nephew that he had killed Nananga; and, what was more, that he had possessed Nananga's daughter, the young Sijja."

Nilliq's ears roared now with the sound of old and secret truths spoken clearly at last.

"Sandlak had told the people in camp that Nananga had drowned during their seal hunt together. He said that the great hunter had fallen in the water while pulling in a large bearded seal. The seal, of course, got away.

"Oh, and how did you kill him?" Dinut asked.

"Sandlak replied with a proud smile, 'I shot him.'

"Dinut still didn't believe him. 'Oh, yes? What did you do with him then?'

"Pushed him out of the boat, of course. Let him sink to the bottom of the bay, like a lung-shot seal."

Adamie let the silence hang in the darkening air, then added, "Dinut didn't ask Sandlak for the details of his possession of young Sijja. For my nephew had cared for Sijja; she was his half-sister."

He reached for his cup and refilled it with tea from the kettle. Squatting once more, he stared ahead at the snow.

"I hope you don't mind my telling this, girl."

Nilliq felt a flash of sudden anger, because she didn't appreciate being called a girl--not any longer. But she hadn't seen Adamie in several years, and that is how he remembered her. So she said nothing and looked again at her own place in the snow. Let him tell his story, she thought. If this story is about Sandlak, the man who used to be my father, I don't care. Let it be told.

Meanwhile, like Dinut, she wanted not to believe.

"I know these things," Adamie explained, "because Dinut told me.

"My nephew was angry now and said to Sandlak, 'You're not man enough to have killed Nananga like that.'

"At this Sandlak puffed up his chest and started bumping him. Dinut brushed him away, saying, 'Anyway, even if what you say about Nananga is true, there is nothing that can be done now. But Sijja is only a child. You have no right--'

"No right?" Sandlak shot back. "What about your little wife Raniqa, I heard about? How old was she?"

"In truth," Adamie said, again turning his eyes to Nilliq, "Raniqa had been no

older than Sijja's thirteen years when Dinut took a fancy to her. Dinut by now had a three-year-old son to show for that adventure. He was a strong boy, this nephew of mine, and good-looking--like your friend Wallin, here."

Wallin shifted, reached for more bannock and refilled his tin cup; then sat gazing off at the western horizon. Pingousi offered one of his cigarettes to Adamie, who smiled, took one and lit it before continuing his tale:

"So Dinut stood his ground, but said nothing.

"Sandlak was not satisfied. He chose to rub mud in the wound: 'And I've seen you making eyes at Sijja yourself, Dinut, now that your child-bride is gone. Well, you'd better lay off her, because when I go back to that camp she belongs to me.'

"Now Sandlak had said too much. All this, remember, occurred in the pool-hall before the eyes of others. So the exchange of insults led to an exchange of blows; and when knuckles and elbows weren't enough to settle things between them, Dinut caught a pool stick in the eye."

Nilliq shrank back from the quick violent motion Adamie made with his hands. Though she hadn't ever seen a "pool stick," she could well imagine its effect.

Adamie paused, lowering his hands slowly. He looked off to the west, where the sun seemed a weary red hunter as it settled onto the horizon, lying down on a clean white bed. Adamie seemed lost for a moment in his recollection of the past. And then he stood up out of his trance, his head rearing up, his eyes glittering, his voice rising:

"Dinut was proud, but no fighter. He told me that he grabbed that pool stick right out of the hands of his former friend. He broke it over his knee and tossed it away. Then he spat on the floor in front of Sandlak's feet, and walked out. That was the last time, he

told me, that Sandlak dared to show his face there."

Pingousi stood up, stretched, and paced around in a little circle in the snow, then stood pawing with his foot like a caribou. He said to Adamie: "Sandlak told me that Dinut struck him in the face with a pool stick. He showed me the scar, and told me this when he came back to our winter camp after that time at school."

Adamie said, "Well, all I know is what Dinut told me later."

Nilliq said nothing. She remembered Sandlak telling her, when she was old enough to ask, that the scar on his cheek came from cutting himself once with a sharp piece of wood.

Now Wallin spoke up. "What Dinut told Adamie was true. I heard the story from Matthewsie Konik, who was there."

The other men looked at him.

Now Wallin stood up, poured out the last of his tea onto the ground and said, "Time we got some snowhouse up, eh?"

The others grunted in agreement; and soon they were busy together sawing and shaving the great blocks of firm snow for our night's shelter. They were only making one; Nilliq would be their lampkeeper. She went to work unpacking the bedding from the various sleds, as any grandmother would do. And when the new snowhouse was ready, she brought in her soapstone lamp.

They all settled back in the snug caribou-skin beds after a meal of ducks which the hunters provided. Nilliq lay between the snowhouse wall and the warmth of Wallin's body. As they had offered tea to the hunters that afternoon, the two of them took the

right-hand side of the sleeping platform, the position of the hosts. The other men were smoking, and talking together in low tones. A kettle of fresh tea sat steeping on a stove Adamie had brought in. Nilliq gazed at the flickering light cast by the yellow lampflames on the shiny snow walls, and felt the comfort of Wallin's arm loosely around her--like a brother's, she imagined.

Wallin spoke to her in a quiet voice, saying, "It must sadden you, Nilliq, to hear those things said about your father."

She almost cried then, answering, "I have not heard it all told like this before. In camp it was only rumors, dim and disguised. People would not say such things to me directly. Yet I sensed these things. That my father was that way. And more--though I can't, don't want to think--" and her voice choked shut.

The other men had fallen silent.

"It's all coming out," Wallin told her, "as it has to. Your father's soul will be able to go where it needs to go, when these stories end."

In a moment Adamie was up pouring tea all around.

Etuk leaned up on his elbows and said in a clear voice, "Adamie, I want to hear what happened with your nephew after that fight."

"Yes," Adamie said. "You will hear." He tucked his own legs back under a sleeping-skin, rolled a cigarette, and resumed his story:

"However you want to believe that fight went for Dinut, it ended badly for Sandlak. Dinut told me he could feel that Sandlak wanted another killing, then and there, but that too many people were watching. This, after all, was the town of the khalunat police. I had taught this young hunter Sandlak a necessary thing called patience, and now

he was patient.

"When Dinut finished school he came to Smith Harbour to live. Did he choose to do that because of Sandlak's presence back in the camp of Dinut's own people? I don't know. Dinut had lived in Poste most of his life. I'm flattered to think that he wanted to be near his uncle. But that's not important. I do know this: there was another fight with Sandlak in the Townsend Bay hunting camp when Dinut was traveling north, and that was my nephew's last visit there. He kept going north all the way to Smith.

"Dinut found a nice wife, of the Nowra family, and they had a son and a daughter. We enjoyed hunting together, my nephew and I. Until, one day . . . the day he was killed."

This was Adamie's sorrowful tale, which had been told and retold: the story of his accidental shooting of Dinut during a seal hunt. Nilliq was twelve in the spring of that year, when Adamie himself came to the camp, bringing sad little Tiniq, and told of what had happened. What Nilliq remembered of it was this: He had seen a seal basking on the ice in the distance; he raised his rifle to shoot; Dinut moved suddenly into the line of fire. Adamie's voice was heavy with the weight of the misfortune, even months after it had happened.

Now, six years later, Adamie's voice took an ominous, rather than a mournful tone; and the story he told was different: "We had only the one sled, and Dinut took it with him a little ways to the south after dropping me off at the first breathing-hole. He stopped at a place that was out of my line of sight behind some large blocks of ice. I waited for a seal to come. None appeared; though at one point I thought I heard a little scratching sound under the ice. In time I heard Dinut's dogs barking and soon the sound

of other dogs coming, pulling a sled from the south. I figured there might be tea to drink soon. But I didn't want to leave the hole I was watching--until I heard a shot. I ran over expecting to help with pulling up the seal, and I saw Dinut lying with blood around him on the ice. The other sled was already moving away inland.

"My nephew was still alive. Blood was bubbling out of his mouth. He could barely talk; but he told me to take care of his son Tiniq. He reminded me that the boy always wanted to meet his grandmother Mariq.

"Just then I didn't care about all that. I asked him who did this thing.

"Sandlak,' he told me. Dinut, my nephew, died on the way back to Smith."

Now there was a deathly silence in the snowhouse. Nilliq had nearly let the lamp go out. The men's faces were dim and Nilliq felt Wallin's body stiff beside her as they sat leaning back against the snowhouse wall. Trembling, she reached for his hand and it was a cold, hard object. For a moment she imagined that he, too, was dead but then Wallin squeezed her hand briefly in a warming grip, before letting go again. Nilliq felt him breathing beside her now, deeply, audibly, a long, slow sighing.

Her ears had begun to roar again. She felt waves crashing, like the waves that came in from the bay in the strongest autumn storms. She closed her eyes but could not stop the roaring.

She remembered that time, in the snowhouse, in the winter of her twelfth year, after her father had come back from a hunting trip up toward Smith Harbour. He would not look at her in the eyes for more than a moment, and then it was all darkness, like the water under the sea-ice. Nilliq felt scared--though she didn't know for what. She thought maybe her father was ashamed because he'd come back with nothing for the family to eat.

He said nothing of Dinut's death. He said he'd been hunting caribou inland near Penassining Lake. A couple of days later Nilliq heard that an accidental shooting had taken place near Smith Harbour. That a man named Dinut, who had once lived among her people and who was a son of Mariq, was killed. Her father appeared unmoved by the news.

Pingousi at once suspected Sandlak, and told everyone so, privately--though not so privately that Nilliq couldn't hear the whispered rumors that began to go around the camp. Then, when his wife was killed, Pingousi began saying that Sandlak was somehow responsible for her death; Nilliq never understood how. For a time there were the rumors of Nilliq becoming a new wife for Pingousi. Sandlak of course would tolerate no such idea.

Now in the growing darkness Nilliq opened her eyes, and felt Pingousi's eyes on her.

Pingousi broke the silence. "Killing Dinut, of course, was not the end of it. My wife Jiana died soon after that--and no one ever said Sandlak did it. I will not say it either. But I will say this. The spirits were not happy with our camp. Ask the bear that killed my wife. My son killed it; and Sandlak would have had us believe that it was the revenge of the bears for that action that later took my son's life. But it was no bear that did that, that tore the flesh of my son's body. It was Aiti's blood I saw on the mouths of Sandlak's dogs. That time, there was no bear."

This accusation Nilliq had heard already from Pingousi; for she, too, had seen the blood on the mouths of Sandlak's dogs, out behind the snowhouse when her father came

back with Aiti's ruined body. And she had heard this in the whispered rumors that followed. She had never wanted to believe it was true.

Pingousi had no more to say. Nilliq sank into a deep despair for her father's spirit, and for her own. Feverish with shame, she was also tired and would have wanted to sleep; but she could not sleep until the troubled spirits were set free.

No one else was sleeping; the men were all still sitting up, drinking tea, smoking. Their eyes were glittering points of light. Wallin lay unmoving beside Nilliq. She was afraid, with a feeling of heavy, clogging dread, of what was still to come.

Let it come, Nilliq thought. Already it is passing.

She leaned out from the sleeping-skins and moved a line of wick to catch the one remaining tongue of flame; then lay back under the sleeping-skins, waiting, watching the light dance with the shadows on the white dome overhead.

And now Etuk began to speak with his dry and rasping voice, telling of the discussions of the camp elders about these misfortunes, the deciding of what to do. How, even after the killing of Nananga, the people had known that something in the young stranger's story was not right, but they had not known what to do about it. When Sandlak had decided to go with Dinut to the school in the south, the people of the camp--Etuk included among them--had agreed that this would be the best thing, to be rid of him. But Sandlak had returned--"and it was not a happy occasion."

Etuk took a moment to cough raggedly and spit against the wall of the snowhouse.

"Not a time for celebration," the old man continued. "For Sandlak made no hesitation in taking Sijja away from Mariq's care, to do with her as he pleased.

"It was surprising to Sandlak how passive the people were before these advances. In a short time he discovered the reason.

"He heard about the party in Townsend Bay.

"In the fall, while Sandlak was away at the school, the whole camp had been to Townsend Bay, at a time when the Hudson's Bay agent was there: to buy new pots, bullets, flour and sugar, duffel cloth--all with fox furs we'd been saving.

"Another white man was staying with the agent--a friend of his, a pilot. And the pilot had taken a liking to Sijja, and to Sijja's mother, Mariq, and got them both a little wobbly.

"More than a little wobbly, I should say. All this at the agent's house, that nice red wooden house there. This was something.

"At the party were, besides me, Pootoolik, Mariq, Ainia, Vaija, Sala; the young people Kaniga, Hajdo, and Pingousi--remember, Pingousi? And your girlfriend Jiana was there, too--as well as Sijja, and the children: Masarak, Palli and Quingak."

Pingousi made a little sound of clearing his throat and let the old man continue his story.

"The children didn't try the bottle but Sijja did, direct from the pilot's hand.

"The agent was passed out in the corner.

"The children had run outside to play.

"Pingousi and Jiana, as I remember, found a shack to go to bed in."

At this recollection Pingousi uttered a boyish laugh which turned quickly into a cough; then he lay quiet again under his thin blue stream of tobacco smoke, listening.

"Kaniga and Hajdo," Etuk was saying, "went out roaming in the moonlight.

"Vaija and Sala put up a tent and went to bed giggling like a couple of youngsters.

"Mariq and Pootoolik had discovered one another's loneliness.

"And I paired off with Ainia for the night--though I was awake enough to realize later what happened.

"Sijja was left with the pilot."

Etuk paused to roll a cigarette of his own. No one else spoke.

"Now you have heard what happened in Townsend Bay.

"And I was telling about Sandlak having returned to the camp.

"He wondered at his wife's once-slim belly, by this time swollen with her first pregnancy.

"She denied everything, but this growing baby, Sandlak told her, was no Inuk Jesusee.

"Sandlak held his anger in; for as Adamie has said, he had learned patience.

"Was it the oldest man Pootoolik, then, who was responsible, or happily married Vaija? This is what Sandlak wondered.

"The manly Pingousi, or Sijja's young half-brother, the high-voiced Quingak?

"Pingousi had a new wife of his own now, the pretty Jiana from Townsend; and Jiana herself was pregnant.

"As for Quingak--it was said by Inuit in some camps that half-siblings should not marry; though some in other places disagreed.

"Who could tell how strictly the rules would be followed, in any one case?

"It should have been obvious to anyone that there had been no lovemaking with this boy Quingak.

"Yet, Sandlak considered, Quingak's brother Dinut had had a child at thirteen.

"But really, Quingak was still just a boy.

"What, then, about the one he had met once, the cocky, gruff-voiced Hajdo, my own son who had Tasiniq's, his mother's, eyes and who wore his hair chopped short and left his family to live in some shack in Townsend?"

"Did it matter?"

"It mattered; and it didn't matter.

"Sandlak had already moved in to live with Sijja in the snowhouse that had been Nananga's. The mother, Mariq, moved out to the snowhouse of Pootoolik, taking her son Quingak with her.

"We grudgingly took Sandlak back into the life of the camp, for we were a patient and forgiving people; and Sandlak appeared to be a strong young hunter, beside whom there was only Pingousi, and the stripling Quingak. Dinut, remember, was still in Poste.

"Most people believed, by the way, that it was Dinut who had put the scar on Sandlak's cheek.

"Dinut stayed to finish the school year in Poste. Then in the early summer he said good-bye to his little son, leaving him with his uncle and aunt and cousins, and he prepared to move north to Smith Harbour, where his other uncle, Adamie, lived.

"On his way north, Dinut returned to visit the camp of his people. Having seen the condition of his half-sister, and having heard of the party in Townsend the previous fall, he scornfully asked Sandlak if he thought the baby, nearly due, would be born with a white scar on its cheek.

"Sandlak rushed at Dinut but Dinut was too quick for him and dodged out of his

way, causing Sandlak to fall on the ground and bloody his nose on the rocks. Now others came by and Dinut walked away.

"Sandlak was in a fury and stalked off, back to his wife's tent. Harsh words were heard, and heavy blows, and in a matter of days her baby was born, dead.

"So much for the pilot's son, the whelp of the khalunat."

More clearing of the throat; clanking of cups; shifting shadows.

And a nameless, numbing ache within Nilliq's own womb.

The old man's words flowed on, moving around her like lapping waves of seawater; as if she were dreaming . . .

"Around that time Jiana gave birth to a healthy child, the boy Aiti. It was not until the following summer that Sijja became pregnant again, and in the winter of 1946 she gave birth to a daughter. We know this child as the one with us now; they named her Nilliq."

. . . as if she were not even there to hear.

"In the year that this Nilliq was born, Sijja became less and less interested in Sandlak's lustful intentions. The baby Nilliq was always at the breast, and not to be put aside day or night."

This fact of her infancy Nilliq had heard before. It amused her no longer.

"Sandlak, however, felt that he had another option.

"He had made the acquaintance of the Townsend Bay families upon occasion and had taken a fancy to Kaniga, who bore a certain resemblance to Sijja. Kaniga was the older and more rounded of the two, with fuller cheeks and a more developed woman's

body. In fact she was, Sandlak found out, a half-sister to Sijja, both of the lineage of Nananga.

"There was one problem with any romance between Sandlak and Kaniga, however. And that was my own son Hajdo, a couple of years older than Sandlak and every bit as strong. He'd grown up with Kaniga, been as a brother to her--except that they were unrelated by blood. Lately it was more serious between them.

"Sandlak got word of a hunting party that included Hajdo, going out on the bay to the islands in search of walrus. He picked this time for a trip of his own into the settlement.

"He went to Kaniga and forced his way with her.

"As bad luck would have it, she became pregnant.

"She would give birth to twins, as we know: the girl Tella and her brother Wasik.

"Hajdo came back from his hunt none the wiser. Kaniga, and anyone else who knew what had happened, kept silent, and Hajdo went on believing that these children were his, until one day some years later.

"He came home to see Sandlak leaving the front of his house.

"Hajdo accosted him: 'Hey, what's going on? Looking for me?'

"Sandlak laughed at him, 'No--I only came for your woman.'

"Kaniga denied everything, then admitted the truth. After Hajdo heard her out, he told her that there was always something he didn't like about those two children; as far as he was concerned, she and Sandlak could have them. And he moved out, leaving the twins with her.

"Nothing much happened after Hajdo moved away; he went to Poste-de-la-

Baleine. In Townsend Bay the people (Kaniga as much as anyone) came to think of the twins as Sandlak's children--especially as the boy, Wasik, grew to resemble him.

"Meanwhile, the girl, Tella, was ripening beautifully; unlike her brother, she had a most cheerful disposition. In a few years my younger son, Ainia's son Masarak, began making eyes at her.

"Masarak was a half-uncle to Tella, but the fact that the mother of one and the grandmother of the other were one and the same--Ainia--was to him as minor an inconvenience as the fact that he was nearly twice the girl's age.

"Kaniga approved of the match, and felt that it was only a matter of a little more time before the girl would be ready to be a wife for Masarak.

"Sandlak did not show his face in Townsend Bay much anymore. But now one day Sandlak appeared on Townsend Bay's single street, swaggering to Kaniga's door.

"She was at home, but she wanted no part of him.

""All right,' he said, 'then where is your daughter?'"

""You crazy man,' she said. 'Do you think I would tell you?'"

"He looked in the other room of the house. Tella was not there.

""Aha,' Sandlak said. 'But I know where to find her.'"

"And he marched out to the street again--stopping by his sled to finish a bottle that someone had given him. Then he threw it with a crash down onto the packed snow of the street. He lurched on to Masarak's house, the little one at the end."

"He didn't find Tella at Masarak's place: but only Masarak, sleeping in the late afternoon.

"Sandlak had expected to find them both there, and was in a mood for trouble.

"Now he was taken aback.

"But as Masarak peacefully slept, Sandlak had an idea. He saw a way to satisfy his desires, his jealousy against the man who would be Tella's lover.

"Or, as he would tell it--as he complained to me, and others, some time before this happened--he wanted to protect his daughter from the expected marriage to her blood-relation, her uncle Masarak.

"Who knows which reason was uppermost in his mind? No matter that they made no sense together; either reason was reason enough for him.

"So he walked softly over to Masarak's bed--and if we can suppose how it happened, since we weren't there, we might say that Masarak had just enough time to open his eyes. By the time he could cry out, Sandlak's hands had a thong pulled tight around his throat, and in a few moments my son was dead."

"Well. Hard as it is to say, and to hear, this thing happened. This, to my own son, Ainia's son.

"And Sandlak drove his team back to camp.

"He felt, I might say, a satisfaction by then familiar to him.

"And now we should be allowed to say that already he began to dream of the next one."

A father spirit somewhere, heavy with torn skin and ragged clothing, was flying.

Still, in the numbing, painful darkness, the old man went on speaking:

"Tella was beside herself with grief, when she found out. After talking with her mother, she knew who had done this thing.

"Everyone in Townsend Bay knew who had killed Masarak.

"And when word of it got to the hunting camp, everyone there had their suspicions as well."

Not quite everyone, Nilliq wanted to say. Her mother remained loyal to Sandlak and would not tolerate any such things said in her presence. When Nilliq came to her with tears in her eyes, telling what she'd heard people saying, Sijja told her to regard such rumors as worthless and malicious gossip. Nilliq didn't know what to think. So in her confusion she felt that she had to believe her mother.

Etuk continued, "We never told the Mountie, of course, what had happened--about this or any of the other killings. It was our responsibility to deal with it."

"Only you never did," Adamie broke in with a sullen voice.

"We did," Etuk said.

"Yes, but only after how long, how many deaths? Too late. I should have done it myself. Think of the risk I took--turning myself in for my nephew's death. I could be rotting in some khalunat prison to this day, for all you people cared."

"It was because of the split in the people," Pingousi offered. "Because some had moved to Townsend. People still living in the old way in the camp said, 'Yes, too bad, but that's their business now.'"

Adamie was not finished. Bitterly he said, "Your own son, Etuk."

The older man nodded his head slowly in the gloom. "Maybe you're right," he said finally, in a voice close to breaking. "Maybe it should have happened sooner. Right from the start. After Nananga, we thought, we're not sure what really happened, but no one wants to keep Sandlak in their snowhouse for the winter, so we'll send him away.

"After Dinut, we were sure; Adamie was there. This is serious now, we all agreed. Who knows what a man like that will do next?

"I was part of some of these discussions. People said, maybe he's had his grudge. Others said, maybe not. So, they muttered in such and such a way, but took no action. Maybe it's over, they said. But no. They had to let it go to my son, to Masarak."

Etuk stopped for a moment; then went on:

"Look, Adamie--there is some truth to this business about a split, that Pingousi mentioned. I remember how it was, that those of us who moved into Townsend, they called khalunat, and so on. But it wasn't so simple. For instance, I was back and forth, spending time in both places. I was still considered part of the camp--until I couldn't stand that man any longer and moved into the settlement, myself. But now what were we to do, send his own son Wasik against him?"

Wallin broke in at this point, asking, "Wasik? Why him?"

"Why not? Sandlak was never there as a father for him. And there wasn't a lot of choice. Hajdo, my son by my first wife, wasn't around any more, and besides, he was one of those who had disapproved of Masarak's interest in Tella because of the blood-relation."

Nilliq was surprised to hear Wallin say, "Just because her grandmother Ainia was Masarak's mother? If you had been also Tella's grandfather, Etuk, it might be different. But in this case it's not all that close a relation, I don't think."

And Etuk said, "I agree."

Nilliq didn't agree, and she didn't appreciate their point of view. But she kept her mouth shut.

"Anyway," Wallin continued, "what was Wasik's interest?"

"Interest, none. He's always been a loner who doesn't care for the affairs of others."

True enough, Nilliq reflected: the moody, sour-faced boy never paid any attention to her, the couple of times she'd met him in Townsend Bay. A stranger looking on wouldn't have guessed that they shared, so to speak, a father.

Etuk went on to say, "But by that same blood-relation, through his grandmother Ainia, Wasik was Masarak's closest surviving kin."

"Except for you," Adamie pointed out.

"Well--" Etuk replied--"but how were we to know there was more yet?"

"Because, then it was Matthewsie Konik, my other nephew," Adamie said.

"Wait!" Nilliq had to cry out at last, sitting up to face them all. "Maybe my father was responsible for those other things. Maybe and maybe not. But now you are blaming him for every death you've ever heard about. It sounds as if you wanted him dead--all of you. Aren't you satisfied now?"

Etuk said in a gentler voice now, "Nilliq has had something to say."

His voice did nothing to soothe her. She lay back down in a huff, holding within her the rest of the pain and hatred she felt.

Etuk went on, in that same slow, soft voice, "I will tell you what some people in her camp said, last year. They said that there was no real proof that Sandlak did this thing to Matthewsie Konik--only his hunting trip south around the same time. . . ."

Nilliq did recall something of that trip: the way her father looked on his return, his face so drawn and haggard. He spoke to no one for days, not even his wife. Soon after

that, the whispered rumors began again.

Etuk was still speaking: "And maybe, I thought to myself at the time, the doubters were right this time. Maybe some crazy person from Poste, or the Belcher Islands, did this to Konik."

"No," Wallin said suddenly. "It was Sandlak. I told you, Konik was there at the fight, all those years ago in Poste. He was laughing, he told me, out of nervousness and fright for his friend Dinut. The fat boy in the corner, laughing to see Sandlak's face with its mad and bloody grin--"

"Bloody?" Pingousi interrupted. "I thought you said earlier that what Sandlak told me about the fight was a lie."

"It was," Wallin said. "Dinut didn't cut him with the pool-stick. He broke the stick in two and threw it on the floor; and after he walked out leaving Sandlak in shame, Sandlak picked up one of the pieces and threw it against the wall. It bounced back in his face with the splintered edge slicing across his cheek. He just stood there glaring at the onlookers, with blood running down his face."

Nilliq could almost see the blood on Wallin's face as he spoke, staring at everyone like the man in the pool hall.

"Unfortunately Matthewsie's laughter, nervous though it was, was not lost on Sandlak. Only for the moment was that one's vengeful energy spent. We have been told of his patience. He would wait twenty years for Konik. I saw him traveling away from where I found Konik's body. He didn't see me. Still there might have been some question. I waited the long year. And finally I had my chance to confront him about it. Just before he died, he confessed that he was the one who killed Matthewsie.

"Anyway, it's done now." Wallin said this in a deep tone of voice that put an end to the arguments. He went outside the snowhouse. The other men lay back down and were silent.

Nilliq's eyes were squeezed shut when Wallin came back in and lay beside her, barely touching. She moved a dead arm another hair's breadth away. Then she tried to close her mind to everything. Lamplight flickered dimly through her eyelids. The lamp was nearly out again. This time she would let it die.

Chapter Thirteen

MAD JACK'S TEA PARTY

We rode out fast and even from the Caribou Crossing, covering probably thirty miles in four hours before pitching our tent under a crescent moon. Then Jimmy went off with fishing line to the icy river, and I remained with the sled to unpack the skins and sleeping bags.

Jimmy's part in this expedition was clearly essential; but it was Nancy's company that I missed now. I recalled a moment of tenderness--an imaginary moment, perhaps: Nancy resting her head softly on my shoulder, a red-painted finger stroking my ribs . . .

No, it wasn't real. I was a long way from such a vision, and headed in the wrong direction.

I chucked the bedding into the tent and crawled in after it. Twelve days had passed since Sandlak's murder. Still I was reasonably confident that Jimmy and I were on the right route, and that we'd catch up to Wallin and Nilliq sooner or later on this trip. Then I could lead a reasonably normal life back in Poste again.

Maybe it was time to get serious about Nancy. And if that knocked me out of HQ's little personnel profile, well, maybe they could find themselves another man, another Bickford. There were plenty more where he came from. . . .

My fantasizing came to an end when Jimmy returned with fresh char for supper. I ate my fill of it, still brooding and untalkative, as was Jimmy. Maybe Jimmy was homesick, too--whatever that meant, for him.

I fell asleep that night obsessed by the image of Sandlak's knife, obscenely sticking up from the ice, quivering, mocking.

We continued following, along the eastward course of the Kangsuk River, a line of sled tracks partially blown over by light, drifting snow. We came upon a tenting spot littered with fish-garbage. Again we set out under a hazy cloud cover. Everywhere was a uniform, monochrome barrenness, of low hill and riverbank, of black rock outcrop, of flat frozen lake. The lakes were blue-spotted where ice had started to melt.

In the afternoon the sky brightened, and the dogs started to flag. My legs were stiff with cold from a long stretch without a break.

We stopped for a snack and tea. It was time, I was thinking, to get down to business now: to start planning strategy.

"Do you think Wallin will be gunning for us?" I wondered aloud.

Jimmy snapped his head around. "What do you mean, 'us,'?"

Was Jimmy serious? The skin on the back of my hands started to prickle.

Then Jimmy broke into a big grin. "Just kidding, boss," he said.

I wasn't smiling. "Some joke."

"Saw it in a MAD Magazine," Jimmy said. "You know this guy called the Lone Ranger? Some cowboy with a mask . . ."

I nodded slowly, the meaning of Jimmy's quip dawning on me.

". . . and his Indian friend, Tonto. They're surrounded by other Indians who are shooting arrows at them. The heroes are cornered in the rocks; and the Lone Ranger says, 'Well, Tonto, I guess we're done for.' And Tonto says--"

"What you mean, we?"

"Right! Did you see that one, too?"

"Yeah. I saw it about thirty seconds ago."

"You're funny, boss."

"So are you. Now--assuming you're with me--what do you make of the situation? Do you think Wallin's liable to take a shot at us?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Unlikely."

"We'll have to be careful on the approach, anyway--like bear hunters, eh?--to see what kind of a mood the guy's in."

Jimmy said, "Sure." Now his expression was genuinely grim.

Perhaps, I thought, Jimmy wasn't going to be of much help after all.

But he had only hesitated, and had more to say: "Maybe Wallin's not the killer you think he is."

"What? Did I hear you right, Jim? After we've come this far? If you know something I don't, you better speak up now; we don't have to go another step toward Col."

But of course there was nothing to it after all; Jimmy had nothing to offer in reply but to pump the stove.

I chose to ignore his churlishness. "Well, let's hope Wallin behaves civilly, at least, even if he does decide to play innocent. What do you think, that he'll feed us a line about Pingousi, or someone else? Isn't it obvious to you that Wallin did it?"

With the snow in the kettle melting, Jimmy decided to ride along with that train of thought: "Sure. Maybe he'll just come quietly. Maybe Nilliq made him feel rotten for doing that to her father."

"So rotten--if we're lucky--that he spills the truth about the other killings."

"You call that lucky?"

"Sure," I said. "Lucky for us."

"Lucky for you, maybe. Hard to call all those killings luck, except bad luck."

"Yeah, but Jimmy, I mean to get to the bottom of it, to the end of it. Wouldn't you call that good luck, if we were able to do that on this trip?"

Jimmy just shook his head, stooping to stir the melting, steaming snow with his finger. I stared at him, resenting his intractable attitude. I was wrong--I was white--but couldn't I get a glimpse of the other view, the way Jimmy saw things? "No way, boss," Jimmy had replied, his black eyes glaring defiantly, the last time I'd requested entrance to the Inuit mind.

All right, I decided; I'll have to puzzle it out myself.

I wanted to believe that Wallin would give up peacefully. But we'd still have a hell of a journey bringing him back to Poste. And what about the girl, Nilliq? Was it my responsibility to ferry her back to Townsend Bay? I couldn't exactly push her off at, say, the Caribou Crossing and tell her to hitchhike home. Whatever--I'd have to see what we could work out. Nilliq was the least of my worries.

I had only one conclusion to sip with my tea when it was ready: no matter what happened now, I'd had it good so far. This had been the easy part.

Later that afternoon, back on the trail, Jimmy spotted a couple of hunters coming up from the south. Their sleds were loaded high, spiky with caribou antlers. They changed direction slightly and then came directly toward us. I half-expected them to veer off again as they recognized us. But they pulled up their teams to within shouting distance, staked their dogs there and approached on foot. They had a good cache of meat secured, along with skins of fox and hare, from the looks of it.

There was a tall, older man whom I soon identified as Adamie Nassak. He had grown a wispy mustache and a trace of a goatee. I hadn't seen him since his open-air trial for manslaughter--the shooting of Dinut Tapassinik--in the fall of '58. He smiled. I gave him a look back that said, Yes, buddy, I'm still around.

The man beside Adamie seemed about my age, with shifty-looking eyes in a round face. He came up saying something to Jimmy while offering him a cigarette.

"Hanui pit," I said, in what for me was a cheery voice.

The man with the cigarettes nodded, then offered me one. When I refused, he seemed to snicker to himself.

Maybe it's my accent, I thought, that puts them off.

Jimmy uttered a long string of something, and I found myself wondering what he was saying, and where his loyalty really lay.

Adamie stood talking rapidly to Jimmy for a couple of minutes, gesturing here and there, his hands finally flapping up into the sky.

"What's he saying, Jim? Did you ask him about the two we're after? Did they take wing and fly off into thin air? Can we at least expect to find their sled and dogs further up the river?"

Following Jimmy's translation of the questions, Adamie said something that included the name "Santa Claus" and all three Inuit men laughed.

Holding onto my patience, I asked Jimmy to find out if these hunters had been anywhere around this route about a week ago. This time I was told that they had.

Pointedly I told Jimmy to ask them if they'd seen a couple going east, if they'd passed anyone at all. Jimmy asked them. A meaningless grin remained fixed on Adamie's face. The smile vanished from the face of the younger one; but then he took a final puff on his cigarette and tossed it off into the air. He took aim at it with an imaginary gun and said, in perfect Canadian English, "Bang." This set them all laughing again.

"Christ," I said more or less to myself, "do you need a subpoena to get anything out of these jokers?"

The hunters muttered something to Jimmy about Jesusee.

I knew by now, judging from their childish evasiveness, that the hunters had seen the party in question. I just wanted to hear them say it. It was the principle of the thing. If the people in this territory were going to benefit from my peacekeeping efforts, they should appreciate it.

But it was my ass at stake now.

I said to them, straight out in English, "Did you see them or didn't you?"

They looked at each other. "Yeah," said Adamie.

"We saw 'em," said his sidekick.

A regular Mutt 'n Jeff, I thought. Okay, fine, now. Let's break out the tea.

"Do you know who it was that you saw?"

"Of course," Adamie said. "Wallin and Nilliq."

All right, we're getting somewhere.

"And did you hear of a killing near Townsend Bay?"

"Of course," Adamie said again, looking to his baby-faced buddy. "He's from around there."

"Who's he?"

"Pingousi."

Ah, Pingousi. I looked at him and thought, you're no killer.

"Tell me, Pingousi, where were you on the day of the--how long have you been out here hunting?"

"Tukisingilunga."

"He doesn't understand," Jimmy said.

"Thanks, partner. That much I can tukisivit myself. Translate for me, please, Jimmy. Ask him how long he's been out hunting."

Jimmy did so.

"He says, all his life."

"Ah, come on . . ."

Pingousi didn't crack a smile. Then he said, in English, "Mebbe coupla weeks."

"Maybe couple of weeks."

"Yeah, coupla weeks."

"Like, say, more than a week and a half?"

Pingousi said, "Hanuuk?"

"Can you translate, Jimmy?"

"Okay."

But the answer came back the same: mebbe couple weeks.

"All right. You two been together all that time?"

Mostly, they said.

"Anyone else with you during this trip?"

"Yes, an old man, Etuk, from Townsend Bay. He went back already."

"You guys headed back home?"

"That's right."

"Adamie, you still live in Smith Harbour?"

"Yes," he answered directly.

All right, about this knife. "Have you by any chance been by the Caribou Crossing, on this trip?"

They looked at each other, then back across at me as they squatted by the tea; almost in unison they said, "Aoka." No.

I had Jimmy ask Pingousi, "What do you think about this killing of your camp member, the man called Sandlak?"

"He was a bad man. Glad to see him gone."

"Would you have killed him?"

Pingousi laughed at this question.

"I would have, but I didn't have to," Jimmy told me he said.

"Who did kill him, then?"

"Who knows? The people say it was Wallin. But who knows?"

"What people say this? I thought you were out on the land."

"People. People around. Everyone hears."

And I started to think: What about the other guy--Adamie, the already-convicted manslaughterer, quietly sipping his tea? At it again, hot shot?

Or what about this old guy whom they mentioned, this Etuk? Is he their head honcho, maybe, pulling the strings? Was Sandlak (or Konik, or Masarak, or Dinut, for that matter) on some kind of hit list?

Yeah, sure; and "Jack McLain" is a cover for James Bond.

I remembered meeting a wiry old man named Etuk, interviewing him on that useless visit to Townsend Bay in 1961, following Masarak's death:

"What do you know?"

"I know nothing. I'm only an old man."

"Did you know Masarak?"

"Masarak was my son."

"But you don't know who did this thing to him?"

"Nobody know."

"How about Tella; do you know anything about her?"

"Tella my foster granddaughter."

"Was she having any problems with Masarak, that you know of?"

And I get the accusing, wounded eyes on me. It's my fault, for coming to find out who killed the old man's son.

I stood up and tossed my tea away into the uncaring snow. I had to be cop, judge

and jury all rolled into one. Sure, the manual said I was only supposed to "gather available evidence and take suspects into custody." But the reality here was a little different than the manuals in Ottawa would like to admit. It was really up to me to make the case in the office and in the field, so the judge on his one yearly trip could make quick work of it and be gone again. That's how we'd wrapped up the case concerning this man Adamie Nassak, back in the days of Barry Bickford. The good old days . . .

"Look, you guys," I said. "What do you think about all these deaths, lately?"

"Lately?"

"Yeah, the killings, the last few years: Masarak, Konik, Sandlak--in case you've forgotten. Not to mention the maulings, the accidents, the suicides. I'm talking about the goddamned killings."

"Masarak . . . Konik . . . Sandlak." The names rolled off their tongues, a series of low murmurs, guttural clicks. Souls reduced to syllables.

"We're used to death," Adamie said.

Right you are, I nearly said to him. Instead, I said, "Look, do either of you know this guy Wallin, personally? Ever hunt with him, talk with him?"

No answer.

Jimmy started to translate, but then Adamie said, "I've known him all his life. He's kind of like a nephew to me."

"Well, Adamie," I said, "I'm glad you told me that. You see, there's something I've been wondering about; maybe you can help me out. Wallin was in Smith Harbour around the time when . . . when Dinut was killed. Was he visiting you, by any chance?"

Adamie took a deep breath and muttered in Inuktitut to Jimmy.

Jimmy shuffled his feet in the snow, then almost painfully looked me in the eye. "He says, seems like it's time for you to know."

Now Adamie glanced at Pingousi, who shrugged almost imperceptibly. Then he went on, in English again: "I didn't shoot Dinut. And there was no accident. I was there, and I know who did it. It was Sandlak."

"What?" And my first thought was, how easy it is to blame a dead man, when you're trying to protect your own. "Adamie, how can you stand there and tell me that, now--after taking a conviction for manslaughter that, had it not been for the liberal sentiments of the judge that particular sunny day in Fort George, could have sent you up the river for twenty years?"

Adamie's brow was knitted with some wordless anxiety.

"What's that again?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh, fuck it," I said.

Now Jimmy spoke a few words that caused an even more puzzled expression to come over Adamie's face.

"I just want to know," I explained more patiently, "why this man took the rap for that killing."

Adamie kept his eyes on the ground like a chastised schoolboy, and answered directly, or thought he did, by saying "I dunno."

"Jesus fucking Ch--"

Pingousi decided to join the conversation at this point. "What this man says is true. Sandlak is the one who killed Adamie's nephew."

"And what do you know about it?" I asked him when I'd heard from Jimmy what

Pingousi had to say. "Were you there, too?"

"No."

"You're sure about that, are you?"

"Yes," Pingousi said. "And then there was my wife, Jiana. It was because of what Sandlak did that she died, too. His fault. He was a bad man."

"Wait a sec. I don't know if I got this right, Jimmy. He's telling me that Sandlak killed his wife, too?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, what, then?"

"It was his fault; Sandlak's the one to blame."

"Correct me if I'm wrong. Ask the man if it is or isn't true if a large animal, namely a polar bear, killed his wife. She's the one who died in '58, right?"

Jimmy talked to Pingousi and told me that that was correct.

"All right. Then what's all this bullshit about Sandlak?"

Jimmy's eyes quivered before he looked away.

"I want to know why they're blaming Sandlak for these things."

Jimmy spoke to the two hunters, and turned back to me again. He said flatly, "You've heard what they have to say. He was a bad man."

"Ask them if they believe what the people are saying, about Wallin being the one who killed Sandlak."

"They believe," Jimmy said in a plaintive voice.

"Ask them."

Heads nodded with grunted affirmation of the obvious.

"All right, then." The other two Inuit men had finished their tea and cigarettes and were starting to move away toward their sleds. "By the way, which way are you guys headed?"

Silly khalunat question. The hunters muttered, laughed, coughed, and walked away. Jimmy pointed to the north, smiling again. "That way."

Chapter Fourteen

A NAMELESS LAKE

The hunters went on their way, dissolving into a puff of snowy mist. "Nice company," I remarked.

Jimmy busied himself with the dog's traces.

I stood stewing in my own juices for a minute, before it hit me: the killer went north.

That's what old Pootoolik had said, in so many words, just before we'd departed the Townsend Bay hunting camp; and I had dismissed it as superstitious foolishness. After all, on the first visit there, I'd been told that Wallin went south. That much was pretty well established now. Wallin went south--fine; but the killer went north. Two different people. The one going north could have been Pingousi.

If that were so, Pingousi would have made quite the roundabout circuit to turn up here coming from the south. But it was conceivable.

Now Pingousi was gone again. Maybe we should--

"Which way, boss?"

Jimmy's reading of my momentary uncertainty irritated me. I snapped at him, "What do you mean, which way?" I wasn't really prepared to launch out on a silly chase

to overtake the hunters again when I still had nothing substantial to pin on Pingousi.

"Just asking."

"Yeah, but what for? Did they tell you anything about Wallin's whereabouts?"

"Nope."

"Well, then?"

"I dunno. You're the boss." Jimmy was suddenly surly.

"Fine. I'd say let's go on as far as the river runs east, and pitch camp there."

"Whatever you say."

"You have a problem with it now, Jim?"

He shrugged. "No problem. Maybe a big storm coming, who knows."

The sky now was clear, with only a light breeze blowing. We really had no business going anywhere but east. I said, "Let's get going, then."

A flock of snow geese arrowed overhead to the northwest. The low hills across the river flickered with their quick shadow flashing over. The dogsled sped along the river, where the long runs of open water rushing by gave me the illusion that we were traveling faster than we were.

Jimmy paused to look longingly at caribou tracks meandering across our path to the south. I told him to move on. He turned his head sadly and spun the whip out over the dogs. The lead dog flashed an angry set of teeth back in a futile gesture of defiance, before the whip on a second pass snapped him on the ear and set him straight. I always had my doubts about that dog but Jimmy was partial to him--and it was my guide's team to run.

At dusk we stopped to set up camp, having reached the northerly turn in the course of the Kangsuk. The snow was no good there for igloo-building, too soft and shallow. So we set up the tent, lit the lantern and stove and cooked a meal of rice, frozen caribou meat and canned vegetables. Jimmy ate most of the pot of rice, fingering heaps of the white stuff into his mouth. "Just like a Chinaman," I thought to myself.

I ate listlessly, still bothered by dissatisfaction with contradictory testimony, and with a growing intuition that we were on the wild goose chase I'd feared. Like Pingousi when he blamed Sandlak for the death of his wife, I had no clear reasons to pinpoint--just a feeling.

When the Laura Secord chocolate pudding tins were empty, Jimmy said nonchalantly, "I guess you might wanna know, some people saying that guy Sandlak was the one who killed Masarak."

"What? You too, Jimmy? Is that what those two hunters said to you?"

"No, Hajdo told me."

"Hajdo? That overaged punk! How does he know?"

"He used to lived there. He still goes back there now and then. He gets around."

"Does he. What else did he tell you?"

"Some stuff. Wallin was around sometimes, too. After what happened to Masarak, that girl Tella was Wallin's girlfriend for a while, I guess."

"Okay. Now you're talking sense. But Sandlak? Come on. I can understand Adamie trying to protect Wallin, his distant nephew or whatever--"

"No, boss--the people there saying."

"The people there didn't say that to me. They said nothing to me--not about

Sandlak, not about Wallin, nothing. You were there. Were you keeping something from me?"

"No--I heard this stuff from Hajdo couple days ago, in Poste."

"Jesus, Jim, you could have told me."

"I did tell you."

"I mean, as soon as you heard it. Not a week later."

"It's not a week. And anyway, you didn't ask."

"Jesus H. Christ."

"Boss, you never tell me--is that his middle initial?"

"You tell me. You've got all the information around here. Did Hajdo have anything else to say about Wallin?"

"Sure. We were talking about him. I knew you were on his case, so . . ." Jimmy rolled a toothpick around in his mouth. "What do you wanna know?"

"Anything. Everything. What kind of guy we're dealing with, for one thing."

"Well, he's a little different, I guess."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Oh, like he's against all this new settlement business, thinks Inuit should all go back to living in igloos again, that kind of stuff. Doesn't like khalunat."

A little buzz had begun sounding in my brain even before Jimmy finished. Wallin was "against all this new settlement business"; yet he accompanied the government agent's man, Matthewsie Konik, on a trip to evaluate a new settlement site. As it happened, the Caribou Crossing settlement plans had gone nowhere since Konik's death.

Double coffee rations with beans and hash in the morning--then off into the hill country that mounted eastward to Col. The snow turned slushy; the tracks Jimmy were trying to follow became practically indistinguishable. I spotted ptarmigan but said nothing. Jimmy surely had spotted them too but hadn't bothered this time to get my attention. We both bent to the task of manhandling the sled and getting some mileage out of the day.

Jimmy seemed distant and untalkative. I left him to his mood, and brooded over my own dilemmas. I was disturbed by the outlandish claims that the hunters (and apparently, other "people") had made about Sandlak. Whom could I believe, amid all this rumor and hearsay?

The sun burned brighter and hotter across the sky; the snow turned slushier; the bare rocks and tussocks pushed up more and more prominently into the path of the battered sled runners. At midday we came to a large lake bordered on both sides by craggy hills. The lake was covered by thawing ice and snow under a treacherous sun.

Jimmy got off the sled; the dogs immediately lay down and rested while we had the chance. Jimmy pointed to the faint sled tracks ahead, leading out onto the lake.

I was hesitant. "What do we do now?"

Jimmy put a toothpick into his mouth and chewed awhile. "Got your hip waders, boss?"

"Yeah, I have 'em. But--"

"It's a long ways, going around those hills. I think we can make it across here."

I could barely see the low outline of the other side of the lake.

"How do you know what it's like in the middle?"

"I been here before. It's long but shallow. We just keep pretty close to shore. The ice should still be frozen pretty solid."

The dogs began whimpering. They sensed what was coming and wanted no part of it.

"I don't know, Jim. What's it like, past those hills on either side?"

"Not too good. Both ways, steep and real rough. You wouldn't want to try it."

Jimmy certainly had more experience in such matters. Together we'd crossed lakes in spring before. It could be uncomfortable, even dangerous; but it was possible. I decided my driver was right: the craggy hills looked worse.

We donned hip-waders and goaded the dogs onto the wet, soft ice. The sled held. We inched forward, walking gingerly with the sled between us. Gradually we grew bolder and gained a fair walking speed. But progress was unsteady, as we had to slosh through patches of ice-water that were sometimes knee-deep.

Hours later, we were still afloat, so to speak, and the far shore was in plain sight. With every step I was feeling more and more hopeful of success; though I thought we had wandered too far from the left-hand shoreline. Jimmy was walking a little ahead, on one side of the sled; I brought up the rear, on the other. The runners had sunk to their full height in slushy water but were sliding dependably on a sub-surface layer of ice.

Then the bottom dropped out.

Jimmy went first, plunging up to his neck in water. As in a dream, I watched him. Jimmy made no sound. He managed to keep moving, grabbing for solid ice in front of him. Whatever he reached broke off in his hands.

I started to run around the front of the sled to help him if I could. The dogs were still pulling, but then the weakened ice collapsed under the front of the runners and the sled nosed down into the water. With a sickening crunch I felt the ice under my feet give way.

In desperation I lunged for the sled. The extra weight brought the whole thing toppling sideways, and I slipped down into the water, nearly going under. I gasped from the icy shock of it and in that instant almost gave up.

Somehow I held on and kicked to climb higher. But the sled only slipped further into the water with me, until it hung by a rear runner and the dogs' taut traces.

With sluggish arms I grappled my way forward to ice that would support my weight. My whole body was numb; it was all I could do to reach up an arm, and Jimmy hauled me out like a seal.

Was that a contemptuous sneer on the Inuk's face? It was the same look I had seen the last time this sort of thing had happened, six months ago on the Kangsuk. Now I found myself resenting Jimmy again, even at the moment of my own rescue. He was the one who had foolishly--or intentionally?--led us into this trap. I was too cold to vent these feelings. I just stood there shivering, my teeth violently chattering, wondering how I was going to get warm. It crossed my mind that Jimmy might not actually be able to save us now.

"C'mon, boss," Jimmy said matter-of-factly. "Let's get this sled up and those dogs moving."

The dogs had stopped trying to pull a sled that was now half-submerged, with its prow caught against the edge of the broken ice. They were whining, their legs and belly

hair drenched and matted.

I felt like one of them.

"Here," Jimmy told me, "hold my wrists and I'll kick that runner free."

Already soaked, Jimmy lay down in the slush and pushed the sled with his feet until it came away from the ice and started to sink. Quickly getting up and taking hold of the harness lines, Jimmy urged the dogs to start pulling again. I grabbed on, too.

"No," Jimmy said, "we have to lift, while they pull."

"Okay--" I almost added, "boss."

Water squeezed out of our mitts as, straining with every muscle, we managed to lift and tug the curved nose of the runners forward. But then the support for the rear was gone and the back of the sled plunged into the water.

Jimmy calmly said, "Now just pull."

We tugged harder--and fresh sections of ice broke under the pressure in front.

"Watch it!" I called out. "We're gonna go through again!"

"Just keep pulling."

We finally got the nose up onto ice firm enough to hold the weight. But the half-sunk load was too heavy to pull any farther.

"Now what?" my numb fingers were rapidly losing their grip on the harness lines.

Jimmy said, "We're going to have to unload some of this weight."

"Great idea," I grunted, "if we had two more people."

Still holding fast with one hand, Jimmy shook off a mitt and pulled a pocket knife out of his wet jeans. He handed it to me. "Cut the lashing. I can manage this." And he barked out a command to keep the dogs where they were, maintaining tension on the

lines.

I did as I was told, first having to use my teeth to open the knife. I reached what I could, unloading and piling it beside the sled: the skin cover, the sleeping bags which with great foresight had been strapped on top, the duffel bags with extra clothes which had not. Despite the exercise my whole body was starting to shake with the cold. My brain took refuge in a warm, cocoon-like fantasy: I was snuggling with Nancy dry and soft under a million feet of down.

I had to keep moving. Precariously balancing, fumbling with the wet rawhide lashings, I managed to retie the remainder of the load still weighing down the rear. Jimmy urged the dogs onward. I took my place beside him again, and finally we were able to lug the length of the runners out of the water.

While repacking, we had a look at the food boxes, which had been submerged. The grub box was a sad sight, with its sodden flour sack and once-frozen meat.

"Lucky we brought along plenty of canned stuff," I said.

Jimmy didn't respond. He was looking at the reserve bags of dry dog food, stacked in a pool of water in a larger box. Soaked through, the contents would be mush.

"Here," Jimmy said, "help me empty this water out." We tipped the heavy box on its side to drain out the water. The top bag flopped against my arm and split open, spilling soggy pellets into the slush. Impulsively I reached out to save it, and lost the whole works slumping out of the box.

Jimmy gave me a somber, condemning look, as if to say, "Now look what you've done."

Meekly I tried to scoop up what I could while Jimmy kicked at the growling dogs who'd come quickly to the party. The stuff disintegrated in my frozen hands.

"It's no use," I said to Jimmy. "Let's leave it and get outa here."

Jimmy replied, "These guys better have what they can get of it."

I was more worried about our immediate condition. "The dogs have work to do yet, before they eat. I'm cold, goddamn it--and I don't want to freeze to death out here while they gorge themselves, thinking it's bedtime. We can always hunt later for fresh food for them."

"You never know," Jimmy said. "You can't count on that."

"Then we can feed them some of that waterlogged meat of ours if we have to. We'll be in Col in two days."

Jimmy looked at the wet meat in the grub-box and said, "That stuff's not gonna make more than a meal or two for those guys. They're pretty cold, and they're gonna be plenty hung--"

"Damn it, Jimmy, I say let's leave it and get onto dry ground and start a fire going. Now that's an order."

My guide shook his head and turned to the dogs nosing eagerly in the slop. "Whatever you say, boss."

He grabbed up his whip and, doubling it over, beat down at the dogs. Still in harness, they bolted away, their traces in a tangle. As the sled jerked ahead, the unsecured load at the back tumbled off onto the edge of the ice, with boxes overturning and spilling supplies into the water.

It happened as if in slow motion: Jimmy's shotgun sliding out of sight forever, the

dogs' tie-down chain slithering away like an escaping water snake. It was most painful to watch the cans of food drift down in the dark water . . . the joints of meat, a little more slowly. Flour spread and dispersed like a cloud.

As the half-full can of stove fuel floated away, I instinctively moved to get it back--but ice cracking underfoot put a stop to that folly. Jimmy stood immobilized, watching me.

There was nothing to do then but let the dogs return to slurp up the remnants of their feed from the slush--first salvaging the easiest to pick up, along with what was left of our own food supplies. Jimmy used his whip to lasso the fuel can. Without speaking further we repacked the load and tied it down.

Finally the half-satisfied dogs were cowed into forward motion by what seemed to me a particularly venomous action from Jimmy's whip. We trudged behind them, on a path this time closer to the shoreline. Jimmy kept up a steady stream of cursing at the dogs, though without them we were dead men. It occurred to me that it might have been me Jimmy was cursing, through the dogs.

Oh for a blazing hot fire! That was the one thought that kept me going to the far end of the lake, and when we got there we were fortunate in finding, not far away, a good-sized patch of dwarf willows. Jimmy produced a supply of matches kept in a watertight container, and soon we had a large brush pile roaring before us. Once we got dry and warm, we would see to the rest of the camp setup.

I stood wrapped in my sleeping bag in front of the fire: a nice cozy picture, it occurred to me--except for the continual chattering of my teeth and shaking of my limbs.

My wet clothes hung on a makeshift rack while I shivered inside a damp suit of spare woolen underwear. Beside me Jimmy stood steaming in his own wet clothes, stoic, unmoving.

The dogs huddled as close to the fire as they dared, opposite us. They looked like wolves, with their black beady eyes . . . as if they were biding their time. They hadn't yet had their evening feeding. They'd been hastily staked with a short lead from their common harness, as we intended to dole out the small portion of food after warming up a little. I still felt we'd done the wrong thing in letting the dogs at that spilled food; but there had seemed no choice, with so much of our own food gone.

Suddenly a fight broke out: ivory teeth flashing through the flames. The harness was quickly tangled, and one or two dogs nearly got dragged into the fire. Jimmy leaped at them with a savage yell, kicking as close in as he dared. The black lead dog took a snap at him and just missed.

"Grab the stake!" Jimmy called out.

The anchor stake had come loose in the struggle, and the pack of dogs wasted no time in heading for the sled.

I leapt at the iron bar as it danced across the snow after them. Jimmy was still fighting the dogs for control of the harness. Catching hold of the stake, I dug in my heels. Together we brought the unruly team to a halt. Finally, using a length of rope as a substitute chain, we were able to tie the dogs down securely for the night.

I was all for cutting their rations, as punishment; I pointed out to Jimmy the effects of spoiling them already. But this was their "expected" feeding time, and Jimmy maintained that starving them would prove even more counterproductive. Once more I

gave in, and watched as the bedraggled team indulged in what might turn out to be their last "expected" feeding for some time.

Grim and exhausted, we retreated at last to the fire to warm up again before making camp. I preferred not to think about what it was going to be like to handle the dogs from now on.

The snow was no good for an igloo, so we put up the tent, shared a quick can of beans, and nestled into our separate cocoons, pressed together for additional warmth. I dreamed that night that we were out hunting, sighting caribou. I turned to find the muzzle of Jimmy's rifle at my head. He was smiling at me, a mouth full of perfect white teeth bristling with toothpicks.

Chapter Fifteen

FOXES IN A DEN

A dozen ravens pecked at the remains of a bear carcass, in a smashed and bloodstained igloo. Reluctantly the birds flew off, leaving the scene to us, the human intruders.

I kicked out at a lingering raven, chasing it away with the others.

"How long ago would you say this happened?" I asked Jimmy. The bones were picked nearly clean.

"Maybe week and a half."

"About right for Wallin and Nilliq coming by here, wouldn't you say?"

"Guess so." Jimmy looked like he was anxious to move on.

I poked the bear's ribs with my foot. "I guess this guy was trying to do my work for me, eh?"

"Yeah. Looks like his luck wasn't so good."

Farther into the hill country west of Col, the air thickened to a white haze which blotted out most of the sinking sun. The wind picked up, throwing snow in our faces, and obliterating animal tracks as well as the occasional trace of a dogsled trail.

More and more the new snow drove against us, piling up under the sled runners and slowing the dogs. Finally Jimmy stopped them, saying it was time to dig in for a big storm, a long night or more.

In the snowpack against the hills my guide probed with his snow wand and found solid material for igloo-blocks. He proceeded quickly to fashion a sturdy shelter for the night. I helped out with smoothing loose snow into the cracks: a routine task, but in this case practically unnecessary, for the snow blowing out of the sky was nearly as efficient in filling every crevice in the snowhouse wall.

The dogs were whining, howling, circling after their tails and getting tangled in their traces. The lead dog and another began fighting. Jimmy kicked them apart. They bared their fangs at him but shrank back, glowering.

Jimmy said, "They're gonna have to eat, now, boss."

"Yeah, I know. Go ahead. Give them whatever you think."

He tossed the dogs a portion of the meat; they snarled and fought over it with more than their usual desperation. It was already almost dark, and I threw the last of the food tins into the igloo with the bedding. This storm seemed like the sort of blizzard that could go on for days.

The thick walls of the igloo muted the sounds of the howling wind and the yelping dogs; and yet I imagined I could hear above it all a dull and distant roar, the sound of a jet far overhead, carrying people from somewhere to somewhere in a clear blue-black sky. Farther beyond shone the constellation of the great bear.

Jimmy said, "Say, boss--what's the H. stand for?"

Light flickered against the walls of the igloo; the gas lantern whispered on into the night, that we were still masters, we of the new world, we of the canned beans and meat stew.

Jimmy sat with a bemused expression on his face, his legs outstretched, blue jeans on a willow mat. He'd brought in a piece of walrus tusk and had started to carve something out of it with a knife and file. He seemed comfortable as ever in his blue nylon ski jacket, his black knit cap. I took the fetal position inside my sleeping bag, still feeling, deep in my bones, the cold from our dunking two days before. One thing I was sure of: I wasn't here for my health.

The night was young. Maybe, I thought, some work could be done from the prone position.

"Jimmy, I'm still curious about that information you got from Hajdo, to do with Wallin. You two guys get along pretty well, do you?"

"Yeah, Hajdo and me pretty good buddies, since I first came from Frobisher."

I thought it best not to press, but just to give Jimmy a chance to talk.

He responded in another minute by elaborating: "I guess Hajdo liked me for some reason, maybe 'cause he wasn't from Poste, either. He taught me a lot about playing pool. He practically lives in there, that guy. I've seen him sleeping on the floor."

"What about Wallin?"

"Wallin, no, you kidding? He doesn't waste his time around there, shooting pool with us guys. I saw him there once, few years ago. Hell of a corner shot. Anyway, Hajdo, he was the one who told me about this job with the Mounties."

"Hmmh. All this time, I didn't know you two were close friends."

"Sure, what's close? He's older guy, what, almost forty I bet, with a wife back in Townsend Bay--nice woman named Kaniga. A real crazy laugh, that woman has. I guess there was some problem between Hajdo and her."

"Kaniga--isn't that Tella's mother?"

"Yep. We talked to her when we went up there a few years ago. You remember pretty good, boss."

"She wasn't laughing then. So you've been there since, have you?"

"Sure, little bit. With Hajdo."

"Was Hajdo Tella's father?"

"Who knows?" Now Jimmy became silent again.

Had I offended him somehow? I lay back, stared at the white walls.

The absurdity of it all: two men in an egg.

I tried to make amends. "Well, Jimmy, when are you getting married? Got any hot prospects?"

Jimmy almost cut himself with his knife as it slipped over the ivory phallus-shape he was working on.

"What do you care?" he shot back, flashing a defensive grin above an upraised knife blade.

I let it go. "Sorry I asked--forget it."

Jimmy taunted me: "Eh, boss?"

"I said forget it."

The walls of the igloo were close, fuzzy, wavering in the muted light. We were like rabbits in a warren--or foxes in a den.

"Fucking khalunat," I thought I could hear Jimmy say under his breath.

Was this what Barry Bickford had warned me against? "You start going bonkers," the sergeant had said, "getting bloody bushed. Oh yes, my good fellow, it happens to the best of us. And when it does, you'll do well to get out while you can." As Bickford did, going south to recover his copacetic je-ne-sais-quoi: selling cars, insurance, suburban lots....

Now Jack McLain, Bickford's protégé, held open the carpetbag of his life and looked inside. What could I do to follow the Bickford plan? Go back to northern Ontario, Manitoba, the Territories? And do what--seismic or survey work? I could improve my image by doling out social assistance. I had valuable experience in the North after all; I knew the people; I had a little of the language--

Hanuiipit . . . khalunat.

Jimmy appeared unconcerned that we were being slowly buried alive. He merely looked up at one point when the lamplight began to fade, picked up his slender snow wand and poked it through the roof hole, to keep an air channel open. Then he sat back down in the same position as before and took up his carving again.

I felt an inner chill, a bitter loneliness. I closed my eyes and saw Nancy, her breasts swaying over me . . . and felt only more empty. What was that deeper ache? Something powerful inside me, craving her. Was it merely sexual, or was it what people call love?

With Nancy, I didn't feel I was too particular or too demanding. I just wanted someone to care for, and someone to care for me. Sometimes, like now, I wondered if I

deserved her at all.

My chest felt tight, constricted. It occurred to me that if growing up meant figuring out the answers, I was growing old without ever having grown up.

I curled and turned over on my side. As far as Nancy herself was concerned, these questions probably didn't even matter. More khalunat bull. So why should I care?

Yet, still, I missed her; I knew that much.

Rasp, rasp, rasp went Jimmy's file. It was goddamned boring in there. I sat up, thinking I might start some snow heating for tea, and possibly resume civil conversation as well.

"Jimmy," I said casually, "I'm just curious. Have you got any girlfriends?"

Jimmy looked back down to his carving. "Why--you need another one?"

A laugh exploded from my chest. I had not permitted myself to think beyond my situation with Nancy, but now Jimmy's bizarre suggestion struck me with a wild and perfect logic. Maybe that was the real problem: it was time for a trade-in. "Sure," I answered without thinking. "You have anyone in mind?"

Jimmy looked up and smiled slowly. "Maybe," he said.

And before even finding out what he had to offer, I said, "What do you think of Nancy?"

Now Jimmy avoided my eyes. The prospect, I thought, had touched him. He seemed at a loss for words.

Then it came. "Look, boss, I think it's time you knew. Nancy and I been doing it for a while now already."

I was stunned. I knew that Nancy slept with other guys. But Jimmy was

different--I had thought--Jimmy was my employee, and therefore loyal in all respects.

My tongue rubbed the layer of congealed caribou fat on the roof of my mouth. The adrenalin was flowing: but there was nothing to be done with it; not here, not now.

"Well, I'm glad you told me--I guess. And when did this romance of yours start, if I may ask?" My voice was shaking.

Jimmy answered nonchalantly, "First year I came here. After first coupla months, I guess. She's pretty nice-lookin' girl." Jimmy wore a gentle, self-satisfied smile. Everything had happened, from his point of view, in the proper way.

"Yeah," I said, so that Jimmy wouldn't say any more.

She would have been seventeen then, I thought. I had waited until she was twenty; by then she'd worked for me three years. I was attracted to her all the while, biding my time. We were "getting to know each other." The way I'd been raised to do, the proper way in my world. Only I never followed through with the traditional McLain wedding. Nobody up North worried about such formalities, except Father Tomlin and some of his hard-core flock. That was just icing on the cake.

I found out soon enough that there wasn't even a cake. Nancy had been sleeping around, and continued to do so; I hadn't. But I learned to accept that and live with it. Now it finally hit me: it was all wrong from the beginning . . . from the first time I kissed her, after she told me she liked the color of my eyes, my blue-gray eyes.

I looked at Jimmy, who was carving away as if nothing had been said. You little punk, my tongue said secretly.

It was strange: in a way, I felt like a protective father to Nancy. Other words came blurring out of my mouth: "So you two are still, 'doing it,' are you, behind my back?"

"Behind your back?" Jimmy smiled that evil little smile of his that he showed when he was having his fun at my expense. "Sure, like you're the boss. But you don't know nothing. You come to the North, you tell us what to do. But you don't know what to do. And then you blame me for taking what's mine?"

"How do you figure, what's yours?"

"Mine, my people."

"I'm that different, am I?"

"Yeah."

So it was that simple. I had a brilliant retort: "What if my mother was Inuit?"

Jimmy laughed. "It might be different. But she wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Ha, ha, man. I know." And then came the clincher: "You guys, you think it's all so great while you're here. But then you'll see. Next year, or the year after, or who knows--it could be a transfer out on the next plane. You're gone. So what are we supposed to do?"

Jimmy was right, of course. I crawled into my sleeping bag, leaving all my clothes on. I stared at the ceiling: a circle of ice glowing with the cold white fire of the lamp.

What are we supposed to do? Good question, that; but for an answer, for Jimmy and for the white man of the day, there wasn't a whole lot of choice. Hunker down, hole up, watch the breath condense, and when the storm decided to lift, dig ourselves out. The spring sun would be shining on new snow. There was justice to be done.

I drifted off toward sleep, feeling the endless folds of white snow collecting overhead, the silence of it punctuated by the persistent scrape, scrape, scrape of Jimmy's knife on his piece of ivory. What the hell was he making? Was it some talismanic sea-beast fashioned to call the storm away? It didn't matter--it was none of the white man's business.

I fell deeper in. Melting through the floor, through tortuous chambers of the cold earth, to surface in the black spruce forests of northern Ontario. Alone and forlorn at first, then comforted by a steaming hockey-day breakfast served under silver domes. Back onto ice, but then melting through, into baggy clothes and teen romances. Assorted, jumbled days at the mill and the rink and the academy. Women and girls I had known, ranked together as in a mug-shot lineup; the one I wanted, missing. Finally, running long chases in the northern Manitoba night, Mountie Jack in a souped-up Plymouth carrying out random vehicle inspections and breath checks, frisking destitute natives by flashlight on roads going nowhere.

Another day came with soft white snow-light. My back was stiff, every joint sore from sleeping in the damp cold. My left knee especially ached. Jimmy still lay unmoving in his sleeping bag. I crawled over to move the door block for a peek outside: thick snow falling, still falling steadily, gusting and driving, piling on. The dogs were moaning hungrily. We had gone without supper or breakfast, and now apparently faced another day and night of hunger before traveling again. There were a couple of cans of beans left, and a couple of lean caribou ribs.

I crawled back and stuck Jimmy's snow wand up through the breathing hole--like

an idiot seal, I thought, under the nose of a hunter poised for the kill. Then there was nothing to do but start the stove for heating breakfast, a can of beans and tea.

Jimmy said, "Morning, boss." As if things were the same as always.

After all, weren't they?

"Morning," I grunted back. After a moment I added, "Hey, Jim, I want you to know I don't really hold it against you . . . I mean, about Nancy."

Jimmy nodded, a glimmer of thankfulness showing in his eyes.

"It wasn't really going anywhere between me and her, anyway. I knew she was sleeping around."

Jimmy merely cleared his throat.

"But just out of curiosity, I was wondering, the night before we left, were you with Nancy then?"

Jimmy gazed at the wall for a moment, spat and looked at me. "Yeah, I went over there."

"Her brother was back, wasn't he?" I felt petty for asking, but I wanted to know the truth.

"Naw, he was away hunting."

That empty feeling gnawed into my gut again, right through the beans and tea.

"And the night before the first trip?"

"Yeah, I stopped by for a while."

"So, about how often, if you don't mind my asking--"

"I dunno." Now Jimmy looked a little wounded, shrugging away, his eyes narrow.

"Like, both those times, two nights in a row."

Ah. I heard a little echo: "I heard you almost got a bear." And another one--after she'd gone to tell Jimmy to pack for the first trip: "Sorry. Maybe next time."

A dog howled piteously. Samwillie, Jimmy, what did it matter? I blinked rapidly, choked down some tea.

"I'm going outside for a leak."

The dogs were looking at me, their eyes sad or angry, I couldn't tell which. Their bodies were buried in the snow. The falling snow appeared to be lessening. I had a cruel and foolish impulse to fish out the meager ribs from the grub box and throw them to the dogs to fight over. I went back inside.

Jimmy had brought out his carving, still unfinished. His legs were stretched out as before, the age-old posture of the Inuit toolmaker. Only the trade had changed, from toolmaker to artisan.

When I came in, Jimmy got up and went out. I took a closer look at the carving. It was no sea-beast: but a little man with a Panama hat, a jaunty fellow with waistcoat and trim. Was it Bickford or a voodooed McLain? White, in any case.

I wanted a crossword puzzle, a James Bond book. I sat back on the bed platform looking at the ceiling, trying to forget about Nancy. Jimmy came back in, shaking the loose snow off.

I asked him, "How long do you think this stuff is going to keep up?"

"What," Jimmy said, "the snow?"

"Yeah, the snow."

"All day, maybe. Maybe more. Hard to tell."

"You don't seem too concerned about it."

"Why worry? We can't go anywhere, so what the hell. You want something to carve?"

Jimmy's offer took me aback. "Uh--I don't know. I mean, sure, why not? But I don't know what to do, how to do it."

"Ahh," Jimmy scoffed. "I'll show you." And he went out again to the sled, and brought back a chunk of soapstone and a file. "Here, this is easier to work with, to start." He handed them to me.

I sat looking at the lifeless objects in my hands. "But what do I do?"

Jimmy laughed. "Just make whatever you want. Animal, a person, igloo, face, whatever."

It was just a hunk of rock. "Where do I start?"

"Doesn't matter. Just start and the thing'll come out as you work."

I shook my head, but started scraping away just the same. It surprised me how easily the stone came away in white, chalky dust.

As I worked I started thinking of Nilliq. I had never met her in the flesh, but still the stone face came, taking its own shape, its dark eyes blank and mysterious, its cheeks high-boned, its lips fine-lined.

Jimmy took a look at my handiwork from time to time, saying as the rough form appeared, "That's fine, boss, doing fine. You've got it. Be selling to the Co-op in no time."

When the features became clearer, smoother, the Inuit carver ran his fingers over the image my hands had shaped. "Pretty good, boss. Looks kind of like Nilliq."

Jimmy's comment was doubly startling. "What makes you say that? How do you

know what Nilliq looks like?"

"I met her once, in Townsend Bay."

"Really?"

"Sure."

"What do you mean, 'sure'? When?"

"Couple years ago. Hajdo introduced us. She's a pretty girl. Seemed really shy, though. Wallin must have a way with them."

Just like you must have a way with them, I thought. Then: just let it go.

"I wouldn't mind seeing her again," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, me too." I looked down at the face in my hands and couldn't do anything more with it.

We passed midday with no lunch.

Sometime in the afternoon a commotion came from outside. Jimmy was up quickly to see what it was about and I followed him out.

A dog, with an all-black coat under clinging snow, sprang up from near the sled and slunk over toward the others. The lead dog, the defiant one. The ragged section of caribou ribs was clenched in his mouth; shreds of harness, chewed through, hung from his neck.

The other dogs jumped up snarling with what strength they could muster. The thief kept a safe distance, growling and backing against the drifted snow.

"I'll handle this," I said and went for my rifle.

"No," Jimmy said, holding his arm out against my chest.

"What do you mean, 'no'? You'll have that fucker eating the last of our food? I'll eat him!"

"Not my dog, you won't. If we were starving, then we might think about it. But not when we're only a day from Col. We got a ways to travel beyond there, maybe, and a long way back home, and we'll need this guy."

"But I am starving! We have what--a can of beans, a lousy tin of Spam left, that's it! What if we're stuck here a week?"

But the sky, even in the passage of the afternoon, had already lightened, the snowfall become almost sparse. The wind still gusted. The dog sat back half-crouched, snarling.

"Those ribs wouldn't be much for us," Jimmy said. "He might as well enjoy them. I'll tie him up later. He's not going anywhere in this snow."

"And what about us?"

"We'll be outa here tomorrow. You'll live." And he patted my belly.

My thoughts turned to the image of a rifle rusting in the snow, a ribcage picked nearly clean.

Chapter Sixteen

RAVENSWAY

It was a long night and before it was over Nilliq dreamed of her father, alive but invisible, talking in the darkness in an unfamiliar tongue. When she awoke, shuddering, her thighs were wet and sticky: the time of her blood had returned.

Wallin lay with his back to her, breathing heavily. Adamie and Pingousi were still sleeping. Etuk was lying on his back smoking a cigarette. He glanced at her without expression and looked away again at the ceiling of the snowhouse. Nilliq quickly put on her tunic, took a pot of water and went outside to wash.

In the brightening eastern sky, a sliver of moon rose over the white and gray hills. Nilliq tried to imagine Col, what it was like. A Townsend Bay many times larger?

She heard Etuk cough, other men stir. Wallin's voice, the voices of the others. Wallin was one of them; and his voice made her happy no longer.

She went back into the snowhouse. The men stopped talking. There was more coughing, followed by grunting movements to get out of bed. They spoke jokingly to Wallin as they put on their outer clothing. No, they would not wait for tea. They would have a bite of bannock at their own sleds. When they walked away they smiled at Wallin and avoided Nilliq's eyes.

Wallin began to make tea; Nilliq brought out some fish to eat. Two sleds moved off to the south, and Etuk headed westward to his home in Townsend Bay.

Nilliq ate silently, watching the sleds disappear in the distant hills. She was free of these men and their tales now, free of her father. But full of questions about what was to come. She knew everything--and nothing.

Where, she wondered, would she go after Col? To which village or camp, which lake or river? She could not travel alone.

When the sleds had gone out of sight Nilliq said to Wallin, "How did you know those men?"

"We hunters know one another," he said, "in our travels."

He was telling her something smaller than the truth.

Ravens came and flew over their heads.

Wallin moved away from her and busied himself with sled lashings. Nilliq went into the snowhouse for the skins and mats. The sled was made ready for travel again, and Wallin lifted his whip arm and commanded the dogs to pull.

Her head tossed from side to side with the swaying of the sled. She felt the slow trickle of blood from her womb, and in a silent voice Nilliq began to chant: Entinada, you who blessed my blood in the name of Niviaktuk, hear the song of my new blood.

Niviaktuk, let my flowing blood join me to you now, as I approach this other coast, the one that faces the white queen so far away. Will your creatures still follow me this far, through the cold waters that flow around the top of this land? Will they give their blood to me, so that I may live, and to my offspring to come?

She felt a power answering her that all would be well. But with this confirmation

came another question.

Wallin had been there, in the place of her blood. Would she allow him there any more?

She rode behind him on the sled, watching for the sky to change. It remained white, clearing slowly.

"What are you thinking of?" Wallin said to her when they stopped for tea.

Still a shadow was hovering. Nilliqli told him simply, "my father."

"Yes, and how is it with you and him now?"

"I'm still--sad, I guess."

"For his spirit, or yourself?"

Nilliqli resented these questions, thinking: Is this how Inuit learn to be, going to schools? But she answered anyway.

"Sad about him, and for me." She looked at the steam rising from the kettle.

He waited for her to say more.

"What we were talking about before. His--jealousy about me."

"Jealousy?"

I thought he was going to kill me after he found out from Wasik that I'd said a few words to Jimmy Natsik once when we were in Townsend Bay."

"Jimmy Natsik--" Wallin spit out the name, as he rose quickly to look for tea bags.

"I don't think much of him either."

"What's wrong with Jimmy? He seemed friendly enough to me."

"Friendly enough to work for the khalunat cop," Wallin said. "Anyway, it wasn't

just strangers, was it? Because to your father everyone was a stranger."

"I'm not sure I understand you."

"I'm thinking of your friend Aiti."

Nilliq's lower lip began to tremble. Biting her lip gently where Sandlak had bruised it, she made it keep still. Abruptly she stood up and started to walk away. But there was nowhere to go.

"I know you wanted Aiti," Wallin said.

Nilliq did not respond. With shaman's eyes Wallin could see her thoughts; what more could she tell him?

Then she felt a tenderness coming out from this man toward her, and she looked at his face, soft and understanding; and it made her feel more easy, almost welcome, to tell of Aiti. The true story. She took a deep breath.

"My father . . . yes: he could see how I made excuses to be close to Aiti whenever I could. He tried to keep strict control; but he could not stop my feelings. Aiti had become a man, obviously handsome, and a capable hunter, having learned well in his outings with the men, including Sandlak himself."

"Surely Aiti knew how your father felt about him."

"Aiti knew that he had to be careful, that my father always resented our time together. Yes, he knew that it wouldn't take much for Sandlak to turn on him. And yet he wasn't, or didn't seem to me ever to be afraid."

"And what of your mother? Wasn't she afraid? Didn't she warn Aiti, didn't she wonder what was going on, what your father had been doing on certain of his hunting trips . . . what he had done to her father?"

The weight of it all was coming back. Nilliq tried to bring her thoughts back to the present, to the melting snow around the stove, the slowly clearing sky, the resting dogs with their noses in the air.

But she saw her mother sitting in the snowhouse, sewing skins, sadly biding time. Locked in the old way.

"No," Nilliq said, "my mother never allowed herself, or me, to believe the whispered rumors about Sandlak that were going around. As for Aiti, though he didn't seem afraid of my father, still he would not approach him to ask for the right to have me, that he might at last be free with me--"

"Do you think he ever considered the other choice?"

At first Nilliq didn't know what Wallin meant, and nearly asked. Then a strange word came into her head and she knew: Deathsway.

"No, never," she said slowly. She felt for that moment that Aiti had been a better man than Wallin.

Yet, Aiti was dead, and Wallin was here in front of her to hear the story. The words came painfully and clearly:

"Aiti didn't know what to do and so he went to my grandmother Mariq for advice. Mariq told him that there was little hope going to that man Sandlak, the way he was. 'But,' she said, 'Sandlak has to learn that his daughter will be set free. Nilliq has already come to me about this. I am ready to move back to Pootoolik's igloo with my grandson Tiniq. You can live here with Nilliq. It's all set up, with good bedding, a lamp which can stay here, the racks in place and meat in the little porch. But first you must somehow get their permission. You are not the kind of young man that Sandlak was. You go to Sijja,

she will say yes. Leave it to her."

Wallin was listening closely, squatting by the stove, the dry tea bags squeezed in his hand while the water came to a boil.

Nilliq went on: "But what could anyone do without Sandlak's approval? He was my father. My mother knew him better than Mariq did."

Wallin tossed the tea bags into the kettle and asked, "Was Sandlak convinced that he was your real father?"

"I don't know." Nilliq thought once more about the pilot, the father of Sijja's first child who had been born dead.

Wallin was looking at her, kindness still showing in his eyes.

"What do you think?" Nilliq asked him. "Maybe you know something. Was he my father?"

"Yes," he said. "He was your father; and if he behaved to you as you have said, it is not because you were some other man's daughter, but because you were his. And, because of who he was."

Nilliq dipped out a cup of tea, held it in her hands. She thought once more of Tella, of Etuk's story of Sandlak in Townsend Bay. She looked down at the dark tea as if it were her own steaming blood--or that of Aiti.

"Aah," Wallin said, sipping.

Nilliq, recoiling, spilled half her cup into the snow.

It was clear black tea, not Aiti's blood soaking into the snow. But Aiti's spirit had taken hold of her and shaken her, and she let out more words, to tell Wallin what Sandlak had done to the young man, and what led up to it: of her father's argument with Sijja after

Aiti had come to her with his proposal, of the hunting trip that followed not long after that, and finally of Sandlak's return with the bloodied dogs, with Aiti's mangled body on his sled. Of Sandlak smiling as he came into the snowhouse and told of what had happened. He said they'd seen a bear, and that the dogs had worried the bear, but before he could get a shot off, the bear had lunged at Aiti.

"Smiling!" Nilliq's eyes blazed at Wallin. "And when I ran out screaming, my father laughed. His dogs had bloody mouths, all right. Aiti's throat, clothing, legs were torn, flesh missing.

"Pingousi was out there too. He looked grimly at the body of his son. 'No five days in the open air for this one,' he said. And Pingousi said another thing, that I barely heard as he turned away to get his own sled. 'This was no bear. This was a death by dogs.'

"I ran away shrieking, not wanting to believe him, out away from the camp. My mother followed my tracks in the moonlight, chasing me for half the night. Soon after that, the sickness began, a sickness in her lungs that took all her breath away. Before the moon was full my mother followed Aiti to the place of the spirits; her body was put near his under stones on the hill behind the camp."

There was no more to say of the dead. Nilliq wiped tears from her cheeks and looked off into the eastern sky.

Wallin rose and tossed the rest of his tea, and that from the kettle, into the snow. He folded the stove parts together and placed it and the cup and the pouch of tea bags under the lashings on the side of the sled. Then he turned to Nilliq and with a quick sideways motion of his head indicated that they were to go.

Onward they rode through rough terrain to Col. Nilliq watched the stony land pass cold and silent, and from its stillness she felt an inner peace. Let Wallin go where he will, she thought. And take me as far as I might decide. I am I now, I alone.

The sky had cleared but remained a dim, pale blue--more, it appeared to Nilliq, the color of the fall than that of spring. They saw no more game, except, far overhead, the formations of geese returning north.

Col first came into view through a cleft in the hills. They came to a stop and looked down at the town, the people moving through its streets tiny as lemmings. In some ways, this place was not so very different from Townsend Bay, except in size. Nilliq noticed the same kind of rusting oil barrels, the same flag flying half-shredded by the wind. But never had she seen so many dwellings in one place--far more than in Townsend Bay, and better-built, from the looks of them. The air was busy with the sound of hammers and saws. Skeletons of new houses were going up everywhere.

Wallin pointed out a high-peaked house with a cross on the top. There, he told her, people came to see the khalunat shaman, the priest. Another, a shiny, new-looking building, was the school. There was a Hudson's Bay store, and a nursing station; Wallin told her a little of what they were like inside. Of all of these Nilliq wanted most eagerly to visit the store.

They heard the roar of a plane overhead--circling, Wallin said, to land on an airstrip on a flat plain outside the settlement. On its last approach they could see faces at the windows looking down at them; khalunat faces and Inuk faces, fresh from a trip to the

South.

A lone raven came squawking then from the direction of the airstrip, low over their heads. Nilliq shrank away from it for an instant, as if she'd become Niviaktuk, the girl taken away by the raven.

Wallin didn't seem to notice her reaction as he was looking at the village, and at the land to the north of it. "Do you know," he remarked, "that this settlement, and this little pass we're standing in, were named for the raven? Col-de-Corbeau. A long time ago Inuit had a similar name for this place: 'the pass where the ravens fly.'" Nilliq recalled that Wallin had once used a shorter Inuktitut term with the same meaning: "Ravensway."

The raven was gone southward, chattering senselessly to itself. Nilliq was surprised at her own childish fear, and told herself that she was too grown-up to take these old tales seriously. Ravens were nothing but silly black birds. She was with Wallin, a man. She did not have a crew of evil brothers to come after her.

Wallin looked so unhappy, standing there.

For a moment Nilliq forgot her aching resentments of him, and her lonesome and airy notions of freedom. She stepped closer to him, held her arms around him from behind.

He stood stiffly with her there. She could not tell what he was feeling. They had not made love for three days. Dried blood pinched her thighs. The time was not right yet; would it ever be again?

She dropped her arms to her sides. He seemed to have become so distant from her--or she from him. Nilliq wanted them simply to be happy, while they were together.

She had been thinking that they might live together in Col . . . forgetting that they were running and would need to continue running away.

At least, Wallin would need to keep running.

Wallin turned, saying that he remembered standing on this very spot a year ago, not yet knowing about the murder of his friend, Matthewsie Konik. "And now," he remarked, "I stand here again, beside his murderer's daughter."

Nilliq was stung by Wallin's speaking of her in this way. He turned to look her in the face and continued:

"And stranger yet, we are running from the Mountie who would arrest us as murderers. Let's hope the agiuqtuq is finished now, that from here we can go free of it."

She was a frail creature standing bare, without a skin. The word for "evil" was not used lightly. "You said your priest would help us," Nilliq said hopefully.

"Yes, I did," Wallin said. "I'm sure he'll do what he can. He spends his life doing that, trying to put evil out of the world, out of people's hearts."

"Is it like Changuk's work, like what the shaman taught you?"

Wallin's eyes darkened, then cleared. "Not exactly. Alike in some ways, different in many ways. As to the agiuqtuit, Changuk didn't believe they existed separate from people, or from the evil things that some misguided people seem driven to do. He would not have used such a word, though some other shamans do. For Changuk, the world was as it was, people's hearts are set this way or that, and it is our fate to follow in the footsteps of our spirit-selves, on the way to the final reckoning at the bottom of the sea. From there we will be sent forth again to find new bodies to inhabit, either as babies born to the ones of two legs, or as sleek sea beasts meant to provide food for those luckier

ones."

His tone changed abruptly as he noticed something.

"Now. Here it is, what is happening around us. Look there--"

Wallin pointed beyond the town to the north, where a line of four sleds could be seen approaching in the waning light of the afternoon. Loaded sleds, piled high, it seemed, with all those people's belongings.

"What is it with such people?" he said in an irritated voice. "Have they been starving? Has the hunting been that bad? Or have they become so bored with their life on the land that when they heard of something new, a restaurant, a pool hall, a wood framework for a new house, they packed up with no thought?"

Abruptly Wallin turned to the sled and roused his dogs to readiness with a sharp command. Nilliq ran to take her seat, and held on tightly as they bucked forward down the hill.

But they would not be going into Col just yet. Wallin made his dogs turn along the side of the hill to take them toward the airstrip, where the land was flatter. Nilliq could see the plane on the ground, people coming to meet it and people going away on dogsleds and power toboggans. Then the sled veered behind a ridge that cut off sight of both the airstrip and the settlement; and it was there that Wallin chose to make camp for the night.

Chapter Seventeen

FATHER TOMLIN'S HOUSE

Wallin struck the heavy wooden door with the knuckles of his fist. Nilliq thought the man inside would appear angry when he came and pulled the door open, but instead he appeared with eyes sparkling and a big grin showing large yellow teeth. Never had she seen such a long, bony nose on a man.

Wallin, with the bearskin draped on his shoulder, extended a hand and said, "Hello, Father Tomlin."

"Wallin, my friend." They shook hands. "Welcome--to you and your lovely companion. Goodness, what have you brought? Don't you know I have a rug already? Ah-ha-ha-ha. Come in, come in." Nilliq was appalled to hear her people's language spoken from such a face: its long jutting jaw like that of a caribou, a high squarish forehead, skin white as a dead man's. Gaunt and tall, the priest was dressed all in white and black.

"A gift for you," Wallin said solemnly, handing the skin Nilliq had prepared, of the bear she had killed, to the khalunat shaman.

"Why, I'm most grateful. This is very generous of you." And the priest took the bearskin and held his door open to the great hunter and his woman.

They stepped across the threshold of the khalunat house. Inside, it was gloomier than Nilliq had expected, with little sunlight allowed to come in through windows that were hung with dark fabric. The light fell in streaks of airy dust, onto floor coverings of elaborate but faded and worn designs. The priest, walking slightly stooped, with his head leaning forward, led his guests into a room with large soft chairs covered with embroidered cloth designs.

"Have a seat." Father Tomlin extended his arm to the various chairs. Wallin and Nilliq both remained standing. The priest said to Wallin, "You must have come in from a long journey, no?"

"We did," Wallin said. "Yesterday."

"Well," the priest said. "It's good to see you again. I must hear what you've been up to. But first, would you like some tea and 'ginger snaps'?" He still used Inuktitut, except for naming the cookies. He looked to Nilliq.

She blushed and looked at the floor.

"No," Wallin said.

Nilliq glanced up again at Father Tomlin, who looked at her with his bright eyes and friendly smile and repeated his question.

Hastily she said to the priest, "Yes"--though she didn't know what exactly he was offering with the tea. She guessed it was some sort of food.

Wallin glared at her for a moment longer and then turned away with a snort. Father Tomlin took the bearskin and went out of the large room they stood in while Nilliq looked around at the house and the furnishings, at the huge wooden beam on the ceiling, the wood wall-paneling with its framed pictures of ships and white men with golden

circles around their heads, the faded fabric on the floor and the wood floor itself made of individual planks joined perfectly together, and many other things she had never seen before. Wallin stood looking out of the tall window. When the priest returned he was carrying a tray with a teapot, cups, and a plate of little cookies. He smiled with his big yellow teeth.

"Sit down, sit down," Father Tomlin said once more, holding the tray until the visitors did as they were told.

"New people moving into town, looks like," Wallin said, choosing a small, upright wooden chair to sit on. Nilliq went for the big soft-looking one. Father Tomlin offered the plate of cookies to her.

Nilliq had eaten cookies before, brought from Townsend Bay. She thought Wallin silly for wishing her to refuse them, and took a modest handful to nibble as she pleased. Wallin had eaten that foul khalunat onion, hadn't he? What was the difference? Did it have to taste bad? These cookies had a sharp taste, almost burning--yet they were also sweet. Nilliq finished the first one quickly.

Father Tomlin settled into a third chair, nodding and answering "Yes" to Wallin's observation about Col's growth. He put the plate of ginger snaps on a small carved table. "The government agent is quite happy about how the settlement program is working. There've been a couple of families every week coming in."

"Are there still many people out on the land? This time of year they should be starting to move to their summer camps, instead of coming here."

"Yes, but the hunting has been very poor the last couple of years. The people know that there's always food on the shelves at the Bay, and social assistance checks to

pay for it all--if they're settled here to collect it. It's hard for them to go wrong, really. And, of course more will be attending church, which I have to say I'm pleased about." Father Tomlin poured the tea.

"But--"

"I know you, Wallin. You're of the old ways. And I admire your convictions in holding to your customs. But the old ways are passing." The priest handed a cup to Nilliq, and one to Wallin. The steaming tea had an aroma of spring flowers. "I'm sure that your charming friend here . . ."

"Nilliq."

"Ah, very pretty." The white man settled back and looked at her over his cup as he sipped. Then he spoke to Wallin again. "I was going to say, she'll not have to stir the fat any longer for light to sew by. Why, she can have her own Singer sewing machine for not much more than the first government check."

"Ai," Wallin said with a sour expression on his face; "I'm sure she could." He stood abruptly as though to leave. "I think I misjudged where we might find help, Nilliq. We'll do better to carry on with our journey. Let's go."

Nilliq was not as ready to leave her soft chair. Never had she sat in such comfort--especially after so many long hard days and nights of travel by dogsled. She had not even tasted the tea yet. But Wallin had made his desire known. The tea and the remaining cookies were a small matter; she could not very well go against Wallin's wishes if he was leaving.

Father Tomlin in a hurt voice said, "Wait, wait, come sit down again, Wallin. I'm sorry to have offended your ideals, my friend. My tongue got the better of me. Now it is

you I want to hear about, what brings you here . . . you and Nilliq."

Nilliq avoided Father Tomlin's eyes and kept looking at Wallin, and almost got up to leave with him. But her tired limbs would not move from the soft cushions. Then Wallin grunted and sat down again stiffly on the round, smooth seat of his wooden chair. He just looked at his tea in its pretty little cup; he hadn't touched it yet. Then Wallin began saying what he had come to say.

"You remember my last visit here, last year."

"Yes, of course I do." Father Tomlin had quickly become solemn and attentive.

"Then you remember the mission I was preparing for. Well, I was a little too late, because on my way back home along the Kangsuk I found Matthewsie Konik killed--his body in a fishing hole, his head broken in."

"I heard about that. It was most unfortunate."

"The day before I got there, I passed a hunter across the river going the other way. Only I didn't realize who it must have been until I found what he had done to Matthewsie--and then met him face-to-face, for the first time, a week ago."

Wallin was silent for a few moments, looking at his sealskin kamiks on the frayed edge of the carpet. Then he continued, glancing briefly at Nilliq and back to the priest. "After that trip last year, the job was easier for me to do, even clearer than it had been. And all the more urgent."

"Yes, I understand," Father Tomlin said. "So it was him again. Most unfortunate. But why Matthewsie Konik? What did he have against Matthewsie?"

"Remember me telling you of the fight in the pool hall in Poste, between Sandlak and Dinut?" Wallin went on to explain how Matthewsie was involved.

"So now, there's just one problem," Wallin concluded.

Father Tomlin glanced at Nilliq, then asked Wallin kindly, "Are you wanting to make a confession now, my son? Remember, he was a carrier of an evil spirit. Though he himself did not realize that the source of the pain within him was the evil that had spawned him . . ."

The khalunat shaman was talking about her father. Nilliq tried to shut her ears to it. She heard the echo of how he called Wallin: "my son." Wallin had told her of the custom of addressing the priest as "Father," but not of the other way of it. Or could it be that Wallin was the real child of this man?

"No, Father," Wallin answered, "I have nothing to confess. As it turned out, I did not have to--"

Then he looked at Nilliq and stopped himself.

"My concern in coming to you," Wallin said instead, "is that McLain is going to be trailing us to charge me with the murder of Sandlak. That's trouble enough to talk my way out of. But it's worse than that: he'll want to bring me in for killing Konik as well. He met me near the Crossing on his way up to see about that one. He acted like I did it."

"But that's ridiculous," Father Tomlin said. "You were here in Col. I could have vouched for you."

"Not then, Father. This has been my job to do, not for him to meddle in. You can speak for me now that it's done. I know that he'll trust you."

Father Tomlin said, "I'll certainly do my best." He looked at his black shoes and tattooed socks, then glanced at Nilliq. "On top of it all, Nilliq is, may I take a guess--"

Wallin nodded--"Sandlak's daughter."

"It won't look good, to an outsider."

Both men looked grim. After a moment Wallin said, "By the way, Changuk is dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the priest said. "I hadn't heard. When did he go?"

"Couple of days ago," Wallin said.

"But how did you get here so soon, then? You've got a Ski-doo, now, have you?"

Wallin just looked hard at the priest and said, "We rode my dogsled. We were halfway here when I knew he'd gone."

"Ah," the priest said gravely--yet with a trace of a twinkle in his eye. "I think I understand. Remarkable man, Changuk."

He reached for a ginger snap and munched thoughtfully for a moment. "So my friend Jack McLain will have no one really to talk to but you, and me, will he?"

Wallin didn't answer.

Nilliq had to wonder, suddenly, what she would say if the policeman asked her about Wallin. Could it be that all these tales and discussions were lies, woven like a string-game to blame her father--who was now conveniently dead--for Wallin's crimes?

Nilliq's legs tightened with the sudden idea that they wanted to run somewhere. But there was nowhere to go; she remained in the soft chair in the white priest's house, staring at her sealskin-covered feet.

"Don't worry, my friend," Father Tomlin said. "I'll have a chat with our friend Mister Jack."

Our friend: Now it appeared that everyone was Father Tomlin's friend, even the policeman. So if Wallin were guilty, why was this priest, who was against evil,

protecting him?

Nilliq felt then she had to face the truth that everyone was telling her: Sandlak was the guilty one. Father Tomlin knew how it was. He would talk to Mister Jack.

"Thank you, Father," Wallin said. Once more he rose to leave, this time slowly, heavily. And this time Nilliq found herself rising to go with him.

She picked up another cookie, managing a meek smile to show her thanks to Father Tomlin for his hospitality. The priest got up to walk with them out of the room.

"Have you got a place to stay?" he asked Wallin.

"Yes," Wallin said curtly. "We sleep in my tent, outside of town."

"Oh, fine, you're all set up, then." And with a chuckle Father Tomlin put a hand on Wallin's shoulder and guided them to the door.

Nilliq observed that this house was certainly large enough to hold many soft khalunat beds, in the other rooms hidden behind doors, or on the floor over their heads. But Father Tomlin hadn't invited them to stay. Maybe he knew how Wallin would have answered such an offer. Nilliq wasn't sure that she really wanted to be up there, anyway, in that gloom at the top of the stairs. With a shudder she turned to follow Wallin out the door as quickly as she could, to the fresh cool air.

They walked down the slushy streets of Col-de-Corbeau. It seemed that everything was in Father Tomlin's hands now. But what if the policeman didn't listen to him? When Mister Jack finally caught up to them, would Wallin be ready to shoot first? It wouldn't, Nilliq considered, be so easy to kill the Inuk policeman, Jimmy Natsik.

Nilliq pushed her worries away; there were new people and things to see here.

More khalunat appeared--passing them by without even saying hello. Wallin began pointing out the buildings they'd first spied from the hill of the ravens. The church behind Father Tomlin's house . . . over there the nursing station . . . down that street the large school building . . . and at the far end of town, the Hudson's Bay store.

Nilliq was drawn to go into these buildings to see how people--whether Inuit or khalunat--lived in them, and what sorts of things people did in such places. But Wallin would not permit it. "They don't want visitors," he told her brusquely.

Nilliq knew what a store was, enough to say that yes, they did want visitors. She wanted to inspect the shiny new pots, the mirrors, the bright-colored dresses, the boxes of crackers and cookies. . . . But Wallin said no, they had no money, and without money they were not welcome. Within sight of the store he stopped walking and said they were not going in.

Nilliq nearly left him there in the street, so that she could join the smiling Inuit who were walking in to get things, the smiling ones coming out with their full bags and bulging packages. But she no longer had the bearskin to trade. It was true what Wallin had said--without money they could have nothing from the store. So she turned with him to go back the way they'd come, not walking beside him but following his steps as a child would behind an unsmiling father.

When Inuit people passed, polite smiles and words of greeting came from some. Wallin answered a guttural "Ai" and walked on. Nilliq remained silent, her own words of greeting like young birds still unhatched in her mouth. Inuit and khalunat alike wore jackets and trousers of khalunat cloth, and large, heavy-looking khalunat boots. Nilliq's thin body shrank still thinner in her baggy skin clothing; her feet, however, enjoyed the

lightness of her sealskin kamiks.

Near the edge of the town she asked Wallin, "Do you know anyone who lives here, any Inuit?"

"No," he said, as if he didn't even want to.

They walked out of the settlement, beyond the last house where Inuit children ran and played in the street. As the children watched the strangers pass, they called out and then hid their faces behind their hands.

Nilliq heard a roaring sound and looked behind. A boy who looked a little younger than herself was riding out of the settlement with terrifying speed and a deafening roar, on a metal sled with no dogs. He passed them without so much as a glance, intent only on where he was going. Nilliq had to jump out of the way. Wallin shook his head, his lips pursed--whether out of disgust at the boy's reckless behavior or envy of the new machine, Nilliq could not tell. Her own body was nearly shaking with a strange kind of excitement.

The hunters in her camp, even Sandlak, had been talking more and more of these new sleds lately, wanting to try them but lacking the money to buy one. It would require no dogs to feed, to untangle, or to stake away from meat or leather things. As she watched the boy glide effortlessly up the hills outside of Col, Nilliq could appreciate that such a machine could easily pull a heavy sled behind it, and that there would be no need to walk beside it, pushing and pulling a load through the endless rough inland terrain, the slushy lakes, nor the broken bay-ice on the coast.

Then it was all the more difficult for her to follow behind Wallin with trudging steps in the soft snow up the hill to their tent, where they would have a bit of dried meat,

or the last of the old char, and look at one another without speaking, and wonder what would become of them. She would light the stone lamp, and cast her eyes up at the blank canvas . . . dreaming pictures there of the home that was home no longer, or trying to dream pictures of a new home, one which did not yet have any shape at all.

Wallin had kind words for his dogs. They sat with their tongues out, panting, their proud eyes approving him. They knew his strength. Nilliq realized that she had been forgetting the burdens that were weighing him down. Had she become another such burden? Had she been a burden for him all along? She felt shame for herself, and renewed affection for him. She touched his back with her hand.

After the evening meal, they lay together soft and tenderly, in a way they had not before. Wallin's desire for Nilliq was not so urgent; hers for him was obscured by the scenes of the settlement passing through her mind, and the echoes of Wallin's conversation with the priest. She felt both close to Wallin and more distant than ever, and felt she had to know more about some things that were troubling her.

If she brought up the question of the ginger snaps, or of sewing machines, or of sleeping in khalunat beds, it would surely lead to an argument. There were other, deeper questions to settle, however. She fished for words and was at last able to ask him, "Are you a real son of the priest?"

Wallin laughed heartily and explained that it was merely part of the custom of address. He lay looking at her and was silent then, some mystery still flickering in his eyes. Nilliq tried to pull the other question up like a seal to its breathing hole: Had Wallin really come to her camp with the prearranged plan to kill Sandlak? If so, his story

of acting in self-defense lost some of its truth. Perhaps Sandlak's crimes had justified his death. But Nilliq wasn't sure she agreed with this kind of justice. Maybe the people should have left it for the khalunat policeman to deal with.

"Something is on your mind," Wallin said.

She brought the seal to the hole, but could not pull it out.

"How does a sewing machine work?" she said instead in a high voice, her eyes on the dark yellow tent canvas overhead.

"Ah, is that it?" he said. "I'm not surprised you'd want to know. Well, it's really quite clever. Little wheels and bars are set up to move the thread through, the needle in and out, to make stitches quickly and straight. . . ."

Little wheels and bars . . . quickly and straight: with his words Nilliq pictured not a sewing machine but a traveling machine, like the one that had come past them with its jarring roar.

"It's the kind of thing these people are coming into the settlement for. To make life easy, they think."

Nilliq wanted to share his understanding, if not his vexation, and asked him how these changes had come to their land. He explained that the khalunat had come to the North long ago to catch whales, or to persuade the Inuit to catch foxes, or, in the case of those like Father Tomlin, to capture Inuit souls. Now, Wallin told her, the khalunat leaders were trying to catch all the Inuit into settlements: to count them and give them all numbers and khalunat names; to put them into houses and give them khalunat food and clothes; and to give them money to buy more and more khalunat things. What they were really trying to do, Wallin concluded, was to turn all the Inuit into khalunat.

"Why?" Nilliq wanted to know.

"That's a good question," Wallin said; but he did not attempt to answer it.

In hearing all this Nilliq was troubled by another, more important riddle. "Why," she said, "do we Inuit let the khalunat do these things to us?"

She could barely make out Wallin lying beside her in the dim light at the end of this day, his upturned head resting on his arm. His other arm lay in its length upon her, his hand still firm and gentle on her thigh. Nilliq admired his wisps of beard, the strong lines of his mouth, his thoughtfulness. Finally, with his eyes fixed above on the taut canvas, he spoke to her question: "Many reasons. Knives and rifles. Tea, flour, sugar. These things we are so used to, we think they are ours. Jesusee. Same thing with him. And really, it's just the easy way: the food without hunting, the warmth of the four-walled wooden house, the so-called fun of the all-night pool hall, and the quick shaman's trance for everyone, found in a bottle. No drumming needed. Just drink it, you're gone flying somewhere. Still, as you say, there's the question why." He turned his head to look at her. His eyes were shining. "Maybe," he said to her, "you know the answer."

Chapter Eighteen

FALLING STAR, BLACK MOON

"Back," Wallin had said. "We're going back."

Now they were traveling north up an unfamiliar coast, where huge gray cliffs towered over the gray-green water: the bay called Ungava. Their supply of dried meat was running low, and they had found no fish in these rivers. So they stopped to raid birds' nests, by climbing carefully around on the rocky cliff ledges, and sat in the cold wind, cracking and slurping the raw eggs. Then it was on again, with the dredging of the sled runners through the melting and crusty snow, over tracks of other sleds which had traveled the other way.

Once they stopped to talk with a family that was camped by a stream. In front of a tent a small woman was playing, with her child, some sort of game with a thong. The woman smiled and rose at the approach of the strangers. She had fine, youthful features, but many wrinkles around her eyes. The man was fishing; he waited for Wallin to approach him and ask how it was going.

"Pretty good," the man said when asked. At his feet lay several fat char. He stepped back off the rocks he was standing on and pointed to the fish with his spear. "We'll try some."

The woman had started water to heat in a blackened kettle on a green willow rack over a fire. She squatted and added more twigs to the little flames. "No more gas," she said to Nilliq with a chuckle.

Her little girl toddled over to Nilliq, reaching up. Nilliq picked her up and bounced her for a few moments, laughing with the woman tending the fire.

The man, with Wallin beside him, came over carrying two fish. He laid them on the ground. "Here, Sappora," he said to the woman. "Food for our visitors."

The woman began to cut up the fish.

Wallin nodded his head in the direction of the sled and said to the man, "Moving to Col, are you?"

"Yes, well, hunting's been poor," the man answered with an uneasy smile. His face, like the woman's, was leathery brown--not like the pale faces of the Inuit in Col. Their smiles and laughter indicated that maybe the hunting and fishing hadn't been all that poor. But here they were, their sled piled high with the materials of their former life, ready now to try life in the white man's houses, on the white man's streets; to eat, Nilliq supposed, the white man's sweet foods.

"I had 'gingie snapsa,' in Col-de-Corbeau," she said, a little proudly.

The woman laughed. The man kept wearing his uneasy smile. Had Nilliq said something wrong, used the wrong words? They were the same words, she was sure, that Wallin and the priest had used.

The woman said, "Khalunat cookies, those are--too sour and hot-tasting. What you should have tried is 'Oreos' from the Bay."

Nilliq blushed and looked at the fish. She was no longer very hungry. But the

woman kept slicing away at the cold, oily flesh, and handed her a piece, and Nilliq took it and put it in her mouth. It was tender, nourishing, almost sweet. Even so, she said that she thought she might like to try, just once, those "Oreos."

"I don't go in for all that pap," Wallin said to no one in particular. He gazed fixedly at the fire.

The other man continued to smile, and reached for a piece of fish.

"It's not like the old days," the man observed. He seemed a few years older than Wallin. "I know what you mean about that kind of food. But on the other hand, I like a little game of pool now and then. You shoot pool?"

"Now and then," Wallin said hesitantly. He took a thick slice of fish into his mouth and chewed slowly. "These white men . . . do you know what it is that they really want here, in our land?"

The other man looked searchingly at Wallin. "Hmm. I don't know as I could say. What do you think?"

Swallowing a bit of fish, Wallin extended his arm and swept it out in a wide arc over the land. "Power," he said. "Power over our lives. To keep Niviaktuk beneath the sea forever, and all her animals. To keep the ravens away with the sound of generators. To cover the land with their works, until nothing more grows or moves."

He brought his arm back down to his side and paused to look at Nilliq, the other man, and the other woman, in turn. "To bring us into their houses and towns and raise us like their children to do what they do. And do you know the first thing we do, our childish people? We eat their sickly food, and keep eating it until our teeth fall out."

The man smiled nervously at Wallin, exposing a couple of holes in his mouth

where teeth were missing. Then he and the woman looked at each other, appearing a little shamed by Wallin's speech.

Wallin went on: "Meanwhile we lose the desire to hunt, or to fish for our food. Finally we discover we have forgotten how to hunt, how to catch fish. So we sit in the boxes the khalunat have built for us to die in, and there we try to remember the images of the animals, to carve in stone for the white man's fine houses down South. These images, catching the very souls of the animals that in another time would have sustained us, we sell for money so that we can buy a few glittering things that catch our eye. We will think we are happy because we are warm, for the moment, and because we have these shiny new things." Wallin paused to look at the child, who was playing with a fish-eye. "And because somehow we continue having happy children. But one day, when these children grow up, they'll look around and they'll see what has happened. And what will be left?"

The man was silent, no longer smiling. The woman had stopped chewing her fish; the little girl came to her and sat on her lap, reaching for a breast under the woman's parka.

Nilliq's eyes were stinging at Wallin's words.

"You are from the other coast," the man observed.

"Yes," Wallin responded. "And you?"

The man hesitated, looked hard at Wallin, and decided to continue trying to be friendly. "I came from Smith Harbor, several years ago. Moved down along the north coast. Lived in the camps, even some time down in Col; up and down. Not much animals, anymore."

"Everybody's leaving, then?"

"No, not everyone. There's a group pretty determined to keep living on the land, north of here if you keep going that way about a day or so. They call it 'the New Camp.' Nothing new about it from what I could see. They're looking for fish, going inland and hoping the caribou will show up soon. The seal-hunting's no good around here."

"What kind of people are they?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Old, young, men, women? Would they appreciate having us join them, do you think?"

The woman, who was looking up at Wallin, giggled, then stopped herself with a hand at her mouth. She glanced at Nilliq and quickly turned her attention to the child at her breast.

"Maybe," the man said. He cast an appraising eye on Nilliq. "There were four other families when we were with them."

"No, five, remember?" the woman put in.

"Oh, yes, at first, that's right. People like us, regular folks. And like you two, I guess. Just trying to get by, you know, following the old ways." He paused, looking down at his feet. "It can be pretty tough sometimes."

Wallin nodded. He reached a hand to his mouth and flung a fishbone onto the ground. "Smith Harbour, eh? I have some people there."

"Yes?"

"Adamie Nassak, a great-uncle of mine. Also a connection with the Nowras."

"I know the Nowras pretty well. Adamie, not so well. He was mixed up in that killing about five years ago--"

"Yes," Wallin said carefully. "Six years ago."

"Well--you may know more about it than I do. I've heard that he's not the one who did it, even though he took the blame."

"Oh?"

"You're from the Hudson coast; ever hear of a man named Sandlak?"

Wallin hastily glanced at Nilliq. She nearly gave voice to an animal cry that struggled to come out. Wallin said, "It may be that I know something of him."

"Yes, well, the story is that he's the one who killed Dinut Tapassinik. And it was no accident, either."

"Of this I also know," Wallin said grimly. When he said nothing more, the man went on:

"I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but I can believe it from what I knew of that guy Sandlak. He used to live in Smith Harbour. I remember him from when I was a kid, and he was one of the older boys. He used to give us young guys a rough time. We used to call him names behind his back. We knew his father was a khalunat--a German sailor, people said."

Nilliq sank back with the weight of the words. She regarded her long, thin legs with new eyes.

"I can tell you," Wallin said to the man, "that your story now has an end."

"Is that right?" The man paused, without asking more; he seemed to know what Wallin meant. "I suppose that's all to the good. I suppose that Adamie will be happy to learn that there is an end to it. I will tell him if I see him."

"He already knows," Wallin said.

"Ah," the man said. "And so another has done the required thing that Adamie so long prepared to do."

"Yes," Wallin said shortly. "Since that is what was needed. Another. 'So long prepared,' you say. And with others dying. So it came to me, finally. You say he was prepared to take the action himself?" Wallin glared at the man.

"Well, he, yes, only from what I heard, you see--"

Wallin spat. "He prepared, and the people deliberated, and my friends died, waiting. This Adamie once was a relation of mine; no longer."

"And so you--you did this thing?"

"Dinut was my father."

The stranger saw something in both Wallin and Nilliq that signaled an end to the meeting. He said something to his wife and they began packing up their things.

Wallin was standing with his back to Nilliq, looking out toward the bay where the stream disappeared beneath the ice. The man and his wife continued to pack and were soon on their way, without more than a troubled glance over their shoulder as they left. At the last moment Nilliq wanted to break free and go with them on their journey to Col; to leave Wallin standing there transformed into stone. But her feet, too, were as still as if they were frozen to the spot.

At last she and Wallin were alone, and Nilliq turned on him: "How could you do this to me? How could you lie with me in the manner of husband and wife when we are cousins? How could you do this thing and never tell me the truth of who you are? Do you think you can do whatever you please with whomever you please, because you

believe yourself to be a shaman? What about the agiuqtuq that will come to us now, that has no doubt come to us already? What kind of child do you think I might give birth to after such a violation? Would you throw it into the sea or would you leave me to do it?"

"There is no child," Wallin said coolly.

"How do you know? Twice you have lain with me, in the manner of--"

"Your blood came three nights ago, did it not?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then there is no child."

Was this some true shaman's knowledge, or a trick to put her off? Nilliq could not be sure. But she wanted to believe it was true. Then somehow there might still be hope.

As for the evil spirits . . .

"And there are no agiuqtuit," Wallin added. "Look, we are only half-cousins, anyway. In Bathurst Inlet the people prefer cousin marriages. It's not an absolute taboo. You have obviously not heard that the great shaman of the whites, who lives across that ocean and sends his spirit around the entire world, has allowed that among our people it is proper for half-cousins to marry."

"Proper, is it? For one such as yourself to do the bidding of the khalunat leaders, when it suits your own desires? This is not the way of our people. For us, cousins are cousins, related by blood. In Bathurst or wherever, I don't know; bands somewhere else, of other customs. Or khalunat, I don't care. My people do not live like this. My people who, once, were your people. You're right about the settlement life, if this is what happens to Inuit."

She stood chilly in the cold, salt-smelling air. Wallin looked down at the ground, feeling her words as he stood unmoving, still facing out to the bay. Somewhere deep inside herself, Nilliq felt she had known about Wallin all along, recognizing something of him too close, and something else too far away. Now she could let him be, a man with his own path that was no longer hers.

Such were her thoughts; yet there they stood against the sky, and when the words had passed they still had to have somewhere to go, some life of a people to be part of. Slowly, as if sick, they got back on the sled, and continued their journey north.

The snow was getting softer, and frequently they had to help the dogs push the heavy sled along. But it was necessary to travel by day like this, for the nights were dark and moonless now.

When evening drew down they made camp. As they were putting up the tent, Wallin pointed up at the sky and Nilliq saw a light traveling fast down toward the horizon. She thought of her father's spirit: perhaps already birthed, by the moon in hiding, into a new form returning to earth.

"Do you know what that is?" Wallin asked her with a smug smile on his lips.

Meekly Nilliq told him what she believed.

"It's a satellite," Wallin corrected her. Without success he tried to explain what that was.

And what, then, would become of Sandlak's spirit? This question Nilliq held for herself.

They went into the tent, together, to go to bed. But there was no more pretending

they might be husband and wife.

Wallin turned away from her as he removed his clothing, and covered himself again with the sleeping-skin. Nilliq climbed into the bed beside him, their bodies not touching. Then she began to cry softly for what had happened between them already. Wallin kept his face turned away.

After a while Nilliq said to him, "Things would have happened very differently if we had grown up together, in my camp."

He turned to face her, to speak to her again as a different man. "Yes," he agreed; "but some things may have turned out the same."

"My father . . ."

"Your father, as he was. Maybe I would not have been trained as a shaman. But something would have had to be done. I was still Dinut's son."

"And so it was true that you came to my camp to kill my father?" It was so easy now, to bring the seal up through the broken ice.

Wallin's face hardened as he looked at her. "You don't quite understand yet," he said, "but I think you will. You know now how it was with your father. And I will tell you how it was with me."

Wallin began relating the story of his growing up in Poste: from the death of his mother, Raniqa, in childbirth, and Dinut's leaving him in the care of his great aunt Maliqan, to his short time in school and his moving into the little house of his older cousin Matthewsie Konik. "In another year's time," he went on to say, "I'd tired of school and taken to spending days going hunting with my cousins Attongey or Umialuk, or

exploring the big settlement, or roaming the hills around. On one of my expeditions I heard an eerie sound, like that of some animal but one I'd never heard before, and following it I came across an old man in a skin hut along the beach. I crept up closer, listening, and finally decided to walk in and see for myself. It was Changuk. I still remember how he looked to me that first time, with a strange light in his eyes, with the weird sound becoming a kind of chant. After a moment he stopped. 'Who are you?' the old man said. 'Charlie,' I told him.

"My real name," Wallin explained to me, "was 'Tarqiq,' but I'd attached the name 'Charlie' to it when my cousin Konik was baptized and took the name 'Matthewsie.'"

"Baptized--what's that mean?"

Wallin sounded irritated by the question. "It's a ritual of the khalunat shaman, who puts water on the head, water carrying the spirit of Jesusee. You've heard of Jesusee, I expect."

"Yes, a little. I've always wondered--"

Wallin cut her off: "I didn't go for all that but I was impressed with my cousin's new name and so decided to take a first name, too. Anyway, the shaman either saw right through it or knew somehow who I was.

"That is not your real name,' Changuk said. 'But it doesn't matter. I've seen you around, shooting your play arrows, beating on your small drum. You don't go to the school?'

"Not any more,' I answered.

"Good,' the old man said quickly. 'Then you can begin learning the raven's way, here, with me.'

"His offer took me by surprise," Wallin said. "I must admit, I felt a little flattered. He'd got me interested. I made so bold as to ask the man what he was chanting about.

"He laughed in a cracked and ancient voice. 'Aha,' he said. 'This you will learn. If you are ready.'

"I am ready," I said immediately, still not knowing whether this was serious business or not, but determined to find out what the old man was about.

"He peered at me with that powerful gaze straight through my eyes so that I was compelled to look around to see what the old man saw behind me--and I saw something move away and disappear like a quick shadow, and turned back a little afraid. 'From now on,' I heard Changuk say, 'you will stay with me. I and my helpers are your family now.'

"Now this was all getting too big for me, all of a sudden. I didn't want to stay with this old man, in his skin hovel. I was happy enough living at Matthewsie's place. But there was something in his voice, in the old man's piercing eyes, that held me there. I was not able to refuse. But neither did I say I would stay, just yet.

"I had to tell Matthewsie what had happened. He scornfully advised me against going back to the old man, saying that Changuk was a sorcerer and that such men in the old days were known to eat young boys. He sounded deadly serious.

"Then Matthewsie laughed and said to me, 'But you don't believe those old tales, do you?' Before I could answer, he said, 'I don't. Go stay with Changuk for a while if you like. It won't do you any harm.'

"Right away I packed my things to move. And I went to live with Changuk in that skin hut on the beach. There I learned the old ways, the secret old ways that even my father's people, your people, who had stayed away from Poste and the other khalunat

settlements, had forgotten."

"What things?"

"You see--even in your camp it is forgotten. I'm speaking now of the very ancient ways. The chants, the oldest stories, the spirit songs. How to make and use the amulets, fetishes, and charms, made of bone, of teeth, of ivory and shell and blood and precious stone; all the lore of the various masks, fangs, and blood-bag tricks. How to throw my voice so that it sounds like it's coming from somewhere else, outside my body; and how to capture the voice of any animal or spirit, whether helpful or hurtful.

"At first I was just fascinated by all the paraphernalia. In time I came to know the ways of the shaman as spiritual ways, the paths of the soul. It was not an easy training; not meant for everyone. There were special diets and fasting, icy baths and fiery baths, long treks into the trackless tundra; prayers to the spirits and the ancestors and the powers within. Changuk gave me to believe that the inner powers held the real meaning; the rest was just for show.

"He taught me the healing powers of the wild plants, and the ways of all the animal-people--especially the ways of the raven. I learned to hear the voices of the dead, and of the unborn. To converse with the spirits of the land, water and air, the spirits of the five directions, and of the sky-women who dance at night with their skirts whirling.

"As one who can understand the needs of the spirits, the shaman is the one who tells the people all the things one must do and not do. That one must always give a few drops of water to a freshly killed seal, for its journey through the spirit world back to the bottom of the sea, or Niviaktuk will be displeased. That one must never whistle at night when the sky-women are out dancing, or they will be offended and bring misfortune.

That one must not eat the bear whose flesh has the worm, nor even feed it to dogs. All these things, and more that cannot be repeated."

There was something that had to be repeated. Nilliq turned to him, to the blackness between them and said, "And not to make love with one's blood-cousin? Didn't Changuk teach you that?" With difficulty she tried to ask this in a calm way.

Wallin turned so that his eyes appeared with light from somewhere shining. "Yes," he said slowly. "He taught me that. And later when I met the priest in Poste, and found he was a friend of Changuk's, I learned that other Inuit have no such taboo; that some even value such a match above all others and arrange marriages at the birth of cousins of like age; and that the high priest of the khalunat church, whom they call 'Pope,' especially decreed that such marriages were to be allowed among Inuit."

"That seems strange to me. Why among Inuit? Did this 'Pope' man want to be seen to give Inuit something that he thought we desired? No one asked me about it, or my people. I think you, for instance, might have asked me. Certainly you should have known better."

Wallin reached a hand out to her shoulder. He heaved a great sigh, looked down at the snow floor and then pleadingly into her eyes. "I know. You're right, Nilliq; I admit it. The truth is, I felt love for you . . . and I still do."

Nilliq put her own hand on Wallin's and removed it from her shoulder.

The tent canvas flapped in the night wind. Sleep did not come. Nilliq told Wallin she wanted him to go on with his story: she wanted to know how he had come unrecognized to the camp of his own people, to his meeting with her father.

"All right," he said quietly. "The ancestors knew who I was. But it was not for everyone to know. I was the stalker, to avenge the death of my father. To come unknown to the one who did this thing. Even on my first trip, up to Smith Harbour, I had my own mission. To travel freely and unseen was part of my training, part of the discipline. Not to move in the circles of family, but to be loose, in the spirit world. I was now of Changuk's family. Of the raven world. Yet Dinut was my father. Maybe some in your camp did know me. The young ones, no. I avoided that place. In my hunting, yes, I had seen Pingousi. But in my travels I went as Wallin; not as Tarqiq, Dinut's son."

"You say you went to Smith Harbour, when Dinut was killed. But you did not avenge his death then."

"How could I? My own uncle Adamie took the blame for it, saying it was an accident. He lied to me, his own nephew, as well as to the khalunat. I couldn't believe that he had done it, the way that he said. But I figured he was wanting Inuit to deal with the real killer, whoever it was, in our own way. Maybe he thought I wasn't ready, wasn't the right person to do it. After what this fellow from Smith has said, it appears to me that Adamie wanted to save the job of revenge for himself, but then never got around to it. In any case, I wasn't stopping there. I went back to Poste; I bided my time for a couple of years. And then one day Matthewsie Konik happened to tell me the story of the fight in Poste between Sandlak and Dinut, and I had an idea of where to look for Dinut's killer."

"But then you still didn't act--"

"I took a trip up to Townsend Bay with Hajdo to find out more about Sandlak. I knew Masarak and went to see him. He told me of your father's disapproval of his match with Tella because of the blood-relation--as you have heard from Etuk. And I told him of

my suspicions about my father's death. He seemed only a little surprised.

"'It seems to me,' I told Masarak then, 'that Sandlak is going to come and go as he pleases, with no one to stop him the next time he has a dislike for someone. For someone, I imagine, like you.'

"At this Masarak nodded. 'What you say could be true,' he said.

"I can see him now, sitting there saying this to me, holding his chin in his hand.

"I said to him, 'Do you want to get rid of Sandlak?'"

Wallin was speaking of her father's murder as casually as if it were a bear hunt. Nilliq said, "So you, like your uncle, wanted someone else to do the job, as you call it, for you. Without proof that my father killed Dinut, or anyone else. Is this the way you and your friends would save our people from the khalunat?"

Wallin just went on with his story, responding only by saying, "The khalunat--this is what Masarak was worried about. 'What about that McLain fellow?' he grumbled to me.

"'We don't have to worry about the khalunat,' I told him. 'We'll just do what Adamie did, and call it an accident.'

"'It's easy to talk about what "we" will do,' Masarak complained, 'but somebody will have to take the blame--just as Adamie did. Me, I don't want to do it, or take the blame for it.'

"I looked at him carefully, and said, 'Even if you found him with Tella?'

"At this Masarak was silent. Then he asked me: 'Are you suggesting I use her to bait a trap?'

"'It's that,' I told him, 'or let him steal the bait with no trap.'

"Masarak said, 'I don't really think he would go for her. She's only fifteen--not half his age.'

"'You must be close to thirty, yourself,' I reminded him. 'And consider, Sandlak's wife was only thirteen, when he killed her father, Nananga. Another so-called hunting accident, remember?'

"Masarak said, 'I only remember what the people said. I was just a kid then.'

"I suggested to him that the next time Sandlak came into the settlement, he could take his chance to jump him. I told him he could slit your father's throat--I'm sorry, Nilliq, but I had good reason even then to believe he'd killed my father.

"Anyway, Masarak didn't go for the idea. I started to get impatient with him, seeing clearly what was going to happen if he didn't do as I said. He was worried about the RCMP taking him away. 'Just claim he was raping your mother, or your cousin,' I told him. 'Claim he came at you with a knife. As he surely will if you don't act first.'"

Nilliq realized that this was the very same "claim" that Wallin had made in describing his fight with Sandlak: that her father had attacked him, and that Wallin had struck back in self-defense.

Wallin was still speaking, saying, "I told him, 'Look Masarak, people here will back you up. It's got to be done.' Finally my friend got tired of listening to me, stood up and said, 'Why don't you just go out and do it yourself, then? Just shoot him.'

"'I cannot do that thing,' I said.

"He wanted to know why not. 'After all,' he said, 'you're Dinut's son.'

"'Dinut's son--and a follower of Changuk's spirit-path,' I told him. 'For me to act in such a manner would offend the spirits.'

"Masarak said, 'Well, then that goes for me, too.'

"I tried to tell him that he was mistaken, that it wasn't the same for him, he didn't have my training, and he was in some danger himself. He wouldn't listen. 'All right, my friend,' I told him. 'But don't say you didn't have a chance.' And I went on my way."

"Is that when you met Tella, on this journey of the spirit?"

Wallin's lips tightened with surprise and annoyance at Nilliq's question. He didn't bother to answer it. He uttered a sigh of great heaviness and lay on his back again, looking once more at the dark canvas stretched overhead, beneath the moonless night.

"The shaman is not removed from the daily needs of the people," Wallin said.

"He is responsible for keeping up the health of the people, and the health of a people does not provide for the presence of a murderer among us, acting alone and for some empty purpose of a wayward spirit. That is Deathsway."

"But you murdered my father!"

"No. Not murder. It was decided by the people. It was decided by Sandlak himself."

"It was decided, and carried out, by you! You came to him! All right, he invited you to go out hunting with him. And you said he aimed his rifle at you, attacked you with his knife. But you killed him."

"No," Wallin said evenly. "He killed my father. Just as he killed your grandfather Nananga. And Matthewsie Konik, and Masarak, and your friend Aiti. And in the end, he killed himself. He slit his own throat with that knife."

Even as she still wanted to believe that Wallin was lying, Nilliq began sobbing uncontrollably.

He held her; she let him hold her. She shook and shook--convulsing, it might be said, in the manner of one who has just drawn a sharp hunting knife across one's own throat . . . or of a woman in her lover's arms.

As she became more quiet, Nilliq turned away from him. Her heart had flown from her chest and gone looking for the black moon, to see the work that might be done there to bring dead spirits back to another life. Wallin took his arms from her as slowly and gradually as if he were melting away.

Chapter Nineteen

REVELATIONS

We came swooping over the clean whiteness of new snow to the rocky prospect overlooking Col: that dank Ungava metropolis with its ancient faded church, its humming power plant and bright store, its ramshackle collection of tin and plywood shacks . . . and new framing going up to the sound of hammers.

"I don't know about you," I said to Jimmy, "but I'm looking forward to a good square meal and a warm bed."

At Jimmy's suggestion, we first parked the dogs in an open area across the street from the Co-op store, and purchased a load of fish for them from the walk-in freezer. At the same time we were able to reserve an upstairs room, which would be accessible after-hours by a back entrance.

The half-starved dogs went wild seeing us carry out those cardboard boxes full of fish. While standing there watching them gorge, I saw walking toward the store a man I'd been planning to meet upon reaching Col: Matsimmiq "Timmy" Epoo, the local RCMP deputy.

"Hey, there's Mister McLain," Timmy said in an affected jovial tone. He walked over to me and we shook hands once, lightly, in the Inuit style. "No charter plane ride this time, eh?"

"For real work, are you kidding? If I'd so much as asked for it they would have had my stripes."

The deputy shook with laughter. He was a big, blocky man with short black hair on a squarish head, heavy cheeks padded around a broad and fleshy nose. He wore an old leather police jacket that might have come off an Ottawa Sally Ann rack, still sporting its original O.P.P. shoulder patches. His status here was a step above Jimmy's, but a step below mine since Col was technically within my area of responsibility.

He proceeded to speak with Jimmy in Inuktitut. Never having met, they seemed to slip easily into a humorous conversation, gesturing at the dogs and also, once or twice, at me.

I had met Timmy once before, at a 1962 conference in Col, when a thinner Mister Epoo was a fresh appointee, part of an experiment in giving some autonomy to Inuit in running their own affairs. "The wave of the future," the brass had called it.

"So how's it going, Mister Epoo?" I put in when they let me have the chance.

"Pretty good, pretty good," Timmy said. Things are not too busy over here lately, which is just the way I like it."

"I wish I could say the same, over Hudson way. Which brings me here, as a matter of fact. I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

"Oh?" Timmy looked a little dismayed.

"Look," I said, "we've hardly eaten in days, and we're anxious to set things straight at your restaurant here. How about joining us?"

When the big man hesitated, I added, "It'll be on me."

I started to fill Timmy in while walking there. It seemed the local deputy was

already familiar with the basics, via an HQ memo. When I went on to describe Wallin for him, and got Jimmy to add his memory of Nilliq, Timmy said, "Sure, sure. But no, I ain't seen nobody like that."

We arrived at the restaurant, a carbon copy of the one in Poste. Jimmy squeezed into a red, plastic-upholstered booth and I followed, Timmy sitting opposite.

"What have they got that's good to eat in this place?"

"The roast caribou's pretty good. You can't go wrong with the chocolate cake, after."

"Sounds good to me."

A waitress came, homely and pleasant. We went ahead and ordered, my stomach churning with anticipation. The small talk quickly became a private conversation between Jimmy and Mister Epoo. I bided my time, watching other diners arrive and talk and eat.

When the feast was delivered, the quality was unimpressive--it was the quantity that counted. Thin-sliced, if overdone roast, piled high beside massive mounds of mashed potatoes soaked in almost warm gravy; ample portions of peas and carrots . . .

The rest of the talking had to wait until this more vital work was done. Timmy matched Jimmy and me, famished as we were, bite for bite.

Finally Jimmy said, "I'm gonna get going." He belched quietly and started to get up.

I slid out of the booth to make room for him. "What's the hurry? You don't believe Timmy's pitch about the chocolate cake?"

"I had enough," Jimmy said, putting his arms in his jacket sleeves.

"I guess our company's not the most lively." I glanced at Timmy, who continued mopping up the last of his gravy with a slice of white bread. "So where are you headed, over to the pool hall?"

"Yep."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yep. He told me." A nod towards Timmy. "It's just around the corner."

"All right. I'll see you later back at the hotel. I expect we'll be heading out in the morning. The dogs will be okay where they are overnight?"

"Yeah. They'll be okay." He walked out, seeming distant, preoccupied. Maybe he had a hot date in mind, someone Timmy had told him about. What the hell, I thought; that was his business.

Timmy and I both ordered cake.

"I wouldn't mind a good piece of her, too," Timmy said in a barely lowered voice as the waitress went to the kitchen with our supper plates.

I wasn't so moved. I wanted to get back to the subject at hand.

"We figure they most likely would have come through about a week and a half ago," I told Timmy again, hoping to jog his memory.

The deputy nodded, a blank expression on his face.

I considered that Timmy might be hiding something; but maybe he was just shut off from the local grapevine. After all, he was a part-time cop.

"What exactly have you heard from HQ about this case?"

Timmy snickered. "I don't know if you want to hear it."

"Christ, what now?"

"Oh, they're all set to jump," Timmy said with glittering eyes and a confidential laugh. "It sounds to me like Henley himself is thinking about a little vacation. Maybe he wants to come up and do a little huntin'."

"Right," I said. "Let him get into a shootout with an Inuk hunter and see what happens."

Timmy looked at me with suddenly wide eyes--in what I took to be a put-on manner--and said, "Hey, it's like that, is it? What about you, Mister McLain? You up to it?"

I didn't like the way the big man was smiling. He chose to ignore the question, and asked, "So is Henley planning to come up with his whole goon squad, or is he going to play lone ranger?"

Matsimmiq Epoo just raised his short eyebrows and broad shoulders in a larger-than-life shrug.

The cake arrived. It was stale, dry, and far too sweet. I no longer had much appetite; but I dug into it anyway.

Timmy watched, slowly sipping his coffee. In a moment he, too, picked up his fork and began to eat.

When we waddled out of the restaurant I said a curt good-bye and began walking alone to the far side of the settlement, to the house of my old friend Father Tomlin, the Catholic priest. Tomlin was a survivor: he'd served all over the region, from Smith Harbour to Poste and now the Ungava Coast. I'd had good dealings with him in Poste.

He'd helped me out on a couple of minor cases, one having to do with someone bringing in planeloads of booze and selling it off, another involving a break-in at the post office. When he left for Col in '60 I was left a little lonelier in holding the khalunat fort. Recently I'd heard that people were arriving in steady numbers to live in his parish.

I wasn't naive enough to believe he'd suddenly become more charismatic; the population drift doubtless had more to do with oil-heated houses, nursing stations, and government offices dispensing checks. Tomlin was all for the resettlement program, even if it meant hauling in the natives and plunking them into cracker boxes in desolate places like Townsend Bay. We'd discussed the matter at length in his house on my last visit to Col, when there was the big powwow with brass from various agencies meeting on that very question. My private colloquy with Tomlin wasn't heated; just lively. Like me, he was just trying to do a job, to help the people the best way he knew how.

In my reverie I nearly stumbled over a dead dog chained to a collapsed shed behind the new school building. I shuddered and walked on.

And what had come of all the high-flown liberal sentiments expressed that lovely weeked in June of '62? Instead of moving ahead with new settlement plans, the bureaucrats had simply consolidated services in Col itself--as they had, on the other coast, in Poste-de-la-Baleine. That way money was saved, so the big guys could get together in France or Florida next time, where at least they could dine at a real restaurant that served appetitifs. But what did I know? I wasn't ambitious to be in their shoes. As a kid I never wanted to be anything but an ordinary policeman. Not a fireman, cowboy, or even a hockey star. Just one of the grunts--like Father Tomlin--trying to make the world a better place.

Tomlin's house was a somewhat mossy, cardboard castle in gray shingle, standing at the edge of town. I knocked on the door, imagining the priest inside reading some Gothic mystery for his Friday night entertainment.

The door creaked open. "Well, well, my friend Mister Jack." The priest showed me a smile of ancient, crooked teeth and stood a little stooped in the doorway, more grayed and unkempt than when I had seen him last. I had a sudden feeling in my overfull stomach that my old friend was not going to be of much help. We exchanged pleasantries as he showed me in. He hardly seemed surprised to see me.

The priest's house was a study in mustiness--the doilies on the carved tables, the overstuffed couches and armchairs, the print wallpaper, the smell of cabbage and ginger in the air. The few windows were darkened with drapes of indescribable hue, somewhere between brown and purple--puce, I thought, would be an apt word for it. Lampshades threw out a yellowish light somewhat brighter, but not much, than that of the moss wick of an Inuit soapstone lamp. "Have a ginger snap?" the priest offered, reaching for a plate of cookies and crumbs, and smiling at me. In such light his teeth appeared a dull, gleaming yellow.

Out of politeness I took a ginger snap into my mouth, and the sharp sweetness of it nearly cut through all the mustiness.

Tomlin refilled a cordial glass from a decanter on the sideboard. "And will you join me in having one of these?" It looked like creme de menthe.

With ginger snaps? "Not for me, thanks. A glass of water would be fine."

I sank deeper into the velvety cushion of the armchair and felt as if I might never get up again. God, I thought to myself, am I getting so soft in my old age? This trip

wasn't all that long. I've been all the way to Baffin Strait before, with no soft beds or couches to rest on--

Tomlin reappeared from the kitchen with the glass of water.

"Thanks. Now look," I told him, "I've got this sticky case. Sticky with blood, don't you know."

The priest showed me a wider sick smile, with those teeth more crooked than I had recalled. I reached for another ginger snap.

"And . . ." Tomlin said, taking a seat in the middle of the sofa.

"And I was wondering if you could help me out. The thing is this. I've got a hot trail on this couple from the other coast, came this way. Have you seen a young woman in the company of a--a kind of a squat, burly, long-haired, wispy-mustached guy--"

"Named Wallin," Tomlin said. "And his pretty mate Nilliq."

"Mate?" This was news, a late-breaking development. "What makes you say that? Did you tie their knot?"

"Oh, ha ha, ha ha, no, no, I'm just saying it the way it looks to me. 'Mate' by their terms, I would say, not necessarily by the terms of the Church."

"All right. And what do you know about them? Are they still in Col? When did they get here?"

"Ah, over a week ago, I would venture to say. And still here?--harder to say."

"You're sounding cagey, Father."

"No, no, my boy. What do you take me for, the all-seeing lord of this windswept manor?"

"I must say, Father, you're perfect for the part. Now seriously, is that all you

know? What's your take on them, may I ask?"

"Take'?"

"Look, Father, we could be dealing with a dangerous felon here: a serial murderer, if you want to know the truth."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Now--"

"There is one thing I know," the priest said.

"Yes?" My ears perked up like those of a timber wolf too long on the barren tundra, who hears the hushed vibration of distant hoofbeats.

"Maybe not exactly what you would call a witness."

"That's all right, Father, you can tell me."

"You know, I still am bound to hold the name of this person in my confidence."

"We've been through it before," I practically snarled. "You can tell me the story or the storyteller, but not both."

The priest acknowledged the rules of the game with a nod and the briefest of smiles, and proceeded to say, "What this person told me happened downriver on the Kangsuk, at the place called Caribou Crossing, a year ago. It concerned a man named Matthewsie Konik, who died there--apparently killed, judging by the way my informant found him stuffed in an ice hole--"

"I know the case," I said with some impatience. "But go on, what else did your 'informant' tell you?"

"He said that--"

"So it's a he, is it?"

"Ah, you're too sharp for me, Mister Jack. Maybe I shouldn't have started telling you this."

"Come now, Father. I'm the law. You have nothing to worry about. I don't know the guy's name, right? Now what did he see?"

"A man on a sled, going east from the Crossing, about a day's run upriver. The other man had been there, it was clear from his tracks. My friend figured Matthewsie hadn't been dead for much more than a day."

("My friend"--I could hear Wallin saying--"Matthewsie was my friend.") "Wait a minute, Father. You mean your anonymous friend passed the other man while traveling downriver--from Col, by any chance?"

Father Tomlin's eyes twinkled. He reached for a ginger snap. "Well, yes, as a matter of fact; I can say so because he had been to see me here before his trip back."

"His trip back to Poste."

The priest blinked rapidly several times, then nodded with a tight little smile, all the while steadily chewing.

"Now, Father, about this other man--was your witness able to identify him? Christ, Father--oh, sorry--but listen, why didn't you contact me about this before?"

Tomlin waved off the indiscretion with a little flutter of his hand. "You do your work, Mister Jack, and I do mine."

I glared at him. And I had thought of Tomlin as a "friend" of mine.

Then he said, "Actually, my witness did put a face to the other man; not immediately, but on another occasion."

"And--"

"His name was Sandlak."

"Sandlak! You mean Sandlak was your witness?"

"No; Sandlak was the name of the man my friend saw riding away from the scene of Matthewsie's murder."

My skin tingled. My mouth went dry. My brain whirled, freewheeling with the simplicity of it all. So this fellow Sandlak really was a murderer, as everyone seemed to think. And this last hit by Wallin on Sandlak himself was a revenge killing for the death of Matthewsie Konik.

There was not much more for me to do, really. I was sitting in an overstuffed armchair, cookie crumbs scattered on the husk of my chest, a half-empty glass in my hand.

Then the gears caught and ground to a stop, and started to move in reverse.

What about Masarak's death? Wasn't it still true that Wallin had benefitted from that unfortunate incident?

Tomlin was gazing at me, his fingers laced on his chest.

And I got the idea, finally, about what was going on here.

"Father, can you tell me when you obtained this information?"

The priest hesitated.

I put it straight to him: "Look, what's the big deal with confidentiality unless there's something worth hiding? Are you protecting a criminal? You're not playing games with me, are you, Father?"

The priest laughed. "Ah, come now, Mister Jack. You know me better than that."

God, I thought, those yellow teeth give me the creeps. Too many ginger snaps.

But I popped another into my mouth. Rising from my chair, I said in a casual voice, "Well, you've given me something to go on, anyway. I appreciate the situation with your professional ethics. Thank you, Father. You're a gracious host."

Tomlin walked me to the door, his head bent as if in deep reflection.

As I turned to go, I said in my most personable way, "Can you just tell me if you've seen this person recently, Father?"

The priest looked up and his eyes glittered in comprehension. It seemed to me that he could see the gambit and yet played right along.

"Why, funny you should ask," Tomlin said. "I did, not too long ago."

"How long ago?" I persisted, pressing my luck.

"Oh, maybe a week and a half."

"Ah, over a week ago."

Tomlin looked sheepish hearing his own words repeated; the truth was obvious now. "I may as well tell you it was our friend Wallin," he admitted at last.

"Our friend, is he? And have you decided that he has done nothing contrary to the law, either God's law or the Queen's?"

"You may not be convinced, but I am."

"Maybe I'd better have another one of those ginger snaps."

Dinut, Father Tomlin told me, was Wallin's father. After the shooting in '58, Wallin went north to Smith to find out for himself how this thing had happened. The eighteen-year-old Wallin was no doubt bent on revenge, at least until he met up with his great-uncle Adamie.

Adamie apparently gave Wallin the same story he gave Bickford and me: that it was an accident, that he himself was responsible.

I asked Tomlin how he knew all this, and, since he was leveling with me, if he'd heard Adamie's latest version.

"Oh, yes," the priest chortled, "that's old news. Adamie confessed the truth to me after the charges were laid. He knew that lying was a sin, but he had a worse one on his mind. He was going to revenge himself on Sandlak. I kind of talked him out of it, I think."

My irritation at being an outsider to such information was soothed somewhat by my appreciation for Tomlin's success as a peacekeeper--a success which was qualified by what he had to say next.

"The upshot of it was that it went to an old shaman in Poste, by the name of Changuk."

"Changuk!"

"Yes, you knew him, I suppose? Wallin told me he passed away recently."

"Yes, that's right; but how did Wallin know about that, when he was on his way to Col by then?" Had Wallin somehow, I said to myself, arranged the fire in order to keep the old man from talking?

The priest said, "Maybe Wallin learned something from the old shaman about the ways of the spirit. You see, he was already training with him six years ago when Dinut was killed. Changuk gave Wallin, who was called Charlie Tarqiq before--"

"I knew that," I said with some lame pride.

--the name Wallin. And from then on, he was more or less on a mission. Wallin

even tried to recruit a man from Townsend Bay named Masarak to do the dirty work. But Masarak didn't go for it, and ended up, for all his integrity, the next victim--as you were no doubt made aware."

"Was he killed by Wallin?" I had to ask. But by now I knew the answer I would get.

"Certainly not. It was Sandlak, who was attracted to Masarak's girlfriend, the unfortunate young woman Tella. I'm sure you know of her case, as well."

"I'm afraid so."

"Anyway, Wallin heard about the killing and felt terrible for Masarak, having some foreknowledge of the danger Masarak had been in and the means to have prevented it."

"You say he tried to recruit Masarak to kill Sandlak. You realize that even if it had worked, he would have run up against the law on charges of conspiracy."

"I suppose," Tomlin said vaguely. Then his voice took on a more strident tone: "As it was, Sandlak should have been up against the law already three times over, and instead he was a free man."

"Three times? Who was the third?"

"That one goes way back."

"I'm all ears."

The priest leaned forward and finished off his creme de menthe. "All right. Wallin took his case to Changuk--"

"Hold it. I thought you said Changuk had already put him up to it. And what about this other murder of Sandlak's?"

"I'm getting to that. Changuk was moving slowly. Wallin was impatient and went to see Masarak on his own. After Masarak was killed, Changuk told him: okay, it's time to get serious, this thing has gone on long enough. You see, he'd been hearing from the elders about this guy Sandlak since way back in '48."

"What? Sandlak would have been only a kid then."

"Old enough to kill. Ever hear of a man called Nananga, killed on a seal hunt off the coast near Townsend Bay?"

"Yes . . ." I said in a daze.

"He was the father of a young girl Sandlak wanted to marry--I use the term loosely here. The people in the hunting camp there listened to Sandlak's story of the accident, but decided to get rid of the young man by sending him away, to the boarding school in Poste. So Changuk had a chance then to form his own impressions of Sandlak as a teenager. When Wallin learned about all this, he challenged Changuk as to why something wasn't done right at the beginning. Changuk told Wallin, 'We cannot act on the first offense.'

"What about my father, then?' Wallin wanted to know.

"Nor the second,' Changuk said.

"So Wallin said, 'No? Then what about now?'

"Now,' Changuk said, 'now is different. There is cause for action.'

"And the white man, this McLain?'

"We will do it our way,' Changuk told him.

"And Wallin said, 'I am ready.'"

Tomlin settled back with his hands laced over his chest again. He stretched his fingers momentarily open. "Is there anything else you want to know? More ginger

snaps? I don't actually know if I have any more. Shall I make you some tea?"

"No, no, I'm fine. This has been very interesting, Father. I should hand over my badge to you, I can see."

The priest merely smiled.

"But I don't quite understand you. I was about to walk out the door, and you wouldn't have told me all of this."

"I didn't know how to tell you so that you would believe it."

I pursed my lips and nodded. I had to give the old guy credit for reading me correctly on that one. As for the puzzle that was falling into place, there were still some missing pieces. "What I don't understand is, how come they didn't go after Sandlak right away then, before he got to Konik?--assuming what you say is true."

"Traditional slowness. No hurry. Observe all the taboos, the ritual preparations. That was the old shaman's way, at any rate. 'First,' he said to Wallin, 'you must prepare yourself. You must go to the place of the ravens, near Col-de-Corbeau. There you must collect so many of their eggs, and so much of their droppings, of a certain age and dryness, and so many of their feathers. Bring them to me. I will make a charm for you. This will all take time. Then you must undergo more training with me. Special training. I will not be many more years in this world. Stay with me and learn the teachings I have to give. The songs, the chants, the stories. Practice the hunt, for without the hunt a man is nothing. This will all take time. Don't worry about Sandlak. He has had enough for now. I know. Have patience, and all will go well.'

"Well, Jack, you and I both know that Changuk was proven wrong in that one particular, in the space of two more years. Ironically, it was on that trip to the Caribou

Crossing with Konik that Wallin was seeing to the, what we might say was trivial, matter of some ritual artifacts. But soon he would be ready for the real work to begin."

"Father, you say he met with you in Col at that time."

"Are you trying to implicate me, my friend Jack? Did you want me to tell you these things I have in my confidence or did you not?"

I put my hand out like a traffic cop. "No, no, Father, listen, you're safe. I can't help resenting how long it's taken for you to come forward with this; that's all. Do you know that in a matter of days we could be seeing a whole squadron of Ottawa-ites, my own personal and fraternal order of red-coated colleagues, tramping across the North frisking and enumerating as fast as you please to start from scratch the work I'm trying to bring to a close before they boot me out of here forever?"

"I understand the position you must be in."

"So please, go on."

"All right," he said, "but there's nothing much more to tell. A year ago this fellow Wallin, whom I knew already from my days in Poste, came in here on that trip. It was around Easter-time, I remember, because he was collecting eggs, don't you know."

Tomlin presented with this last information a large show of teeth. "He said he was performing a shaman's duties. We had a nice talk about religious practices, about one's attitude to the congregation, one's responsibilities to the parishioners, one's personal faith in the spirit world--in God, shall we say--and how one uses this connection to remind the people when they have forgotten their own connection to the divine. At any rate, I learned from him that he was on this particular mission from the old shaman; a larger mission that, if you don't mind my saying so, brings him as close to your profession as to

mine. Sure you won't have more ginger snaps? If not then I'll have the last one."

"No, thank you, Father. I'm good."

I wanted to understand why these "elders," whoever they were (and I had some ideas: Etuk, Mariq, Pootoolik . . .) had moved so slowly, if the evidence against Sandlak had indeed been so compelling.

Tomlin explained that even after the murder of Konik there had been some resistance, some claims that still there was no solid proof against Sandlak.

I could appreciate all too well this syndrome so integral to the justice trade: the necessity to establish guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt." For my own part I still had questions; I wondered what Sandlak's motivation might have been for killing Dinut, or Konik--was the latter's death politically motivated? The murders of Nananga and Masarak at least made sense as matters of lust or passion.

As I followed this line of questioning, Father Tomlin told me that Wallin knew something the elders didn't account for: that Konik had witnessed a poolhall fight in Poste between Dinut and Sandlak, back in the days when the three teenagers were attending school there together. Sandlak had come out of it poorly and, more to the point, had caught Konik laughing at him. Both Dinut and Konik were marked from then on, as far as Sandlak was concerned.

I had little choice but to agree with the conclusion that was staring me in the face. The possibility that Tomlin was merely put up by Wallin to tell me all of this, and that Tomlin had bought it or for some secret reason had chosen to go along, all to transfer suspicion safely to a dead man, was by now seeming rather far-fetched.

Yet I was less than satisfied. I'd heard a number of circumstantial accusations, but

few reliable pieces of evidence with which to seal the book on the series of deaths. I still knew virtually nothing about the man Sandlak. As for this business of a general conspiracy, that in itself was a whole can of worms which I doubted I would have the stomach to open up, even if I could guarantee immunity to the priest. And in this business, in this territory, nothing was guaranteed.

"Father, could you tell me anything more about Wallin, as a person, I mean. You seem almost fond of him."

"Oh, well, I've known him for years, but not very well, really. He does have a way of earning respect, I must say. Personally, I don't know, hmmm. I'd say he's a rather cold fish, not your sort of, what, family man--except, now that I think of it, in one rather important particular."

"You mean blood-revenge."

The priest nodded.

"Father, what about Sandlak? Did you ever make his acquaintance?"

I could see that I struck a nerve with that one. Tomlin sank back against the softness of the couch, his arms spread wide along the backrest, his legs crossed at the ankles, his head cocked slightly sideways: a regular hung Christ in deep reflection.

"I did," Tomlin said in a low, gruff voice. "I was stationed in Smith Harbour, as you know, many years ago, my first posting in the North. The year was 1925, if I remember correctly, and there was a case of rape, an Inuit woman, by a German sailor who'd come ashore one foggy September morning when his ship had put in for some repairs. The following summer there was a baby. When the fog rolled in again in the fall, the mother contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis, and that baby, Sandlak, was

offered by relatives to the care of my mission. I took it on as a great responsibility, still enlisting help, you know, in the way of nursemaids and what not, but feeling almost as if the boy were my child. At first, that is. But I was severely tested. I remember telling myself--and it was against all my principles to say it--this is a bad boy. Always griping, always with a chip on his shoulder. I took it personally, of course. And I thought it was because I was white. He accused me all too often of having taken him away from his real parents. He always seemed envious, jealous with no apparent object, needy of something undefined; and he was always blaming others: for not fulfilling these needs, I suppose. He drifted off down the coast on his own in '41, when he was about fifteen; and not long afterwards, I was transferred to Poste.

"I saw him around town, occasionally, when they ended up sending him to the boarding school in Poste. Naturally he ignored me completely, after the first little shock of recognition. He didn't last long there. The people in the camp had sent him away after that business about Nananga, and Nananga's daughter, Sijja; and then they were stuck with him again, and for good this time. You probably know he ended up having a daughter by Sijja."

"That's right. Nilliq--the one traveling with Wallin."

"I suppose there is redemption in the world, after all."

"I don't know about all that," I said. "She's carrying the genes of a rapist, is what comes to me after hearing your story."

"But Jack, she's a woman."

"That's something."

Tomlin smiled beneficently, almost sweetly, bringing his arms down and folding

his hands in his lap.

"What's she like?" I asked him.

The priest giggled. "Oh, not bad looking, not bad at all, if I do say so. Rather thin, quite as tall as Wallin, face of a madonna, with that raven-black hair, of course; yes, you'll find her quite attractive, I should say."

"Father, you're embarrassing me."

"Forgive me. I don't imagine Wallin would appreciate my making such comments."

"You're forgiven." I had heard enough, and was ready to finish my trip, for better or worse. I rose abruptly and extended my hand. "Thanks, father. I'd better go now."

I tossed my traveling bag on the bed--one of two tiny cots in a chilly, bare room above the darkened Co-op store. The only other item of furniture was a rusty oil-burning stove which had no oil. I found my flask; sat on the bed and sipped. This was the one time in a case, at the end, when I could savor a drink with a clear conscience. In this case, I still hadn't "got my man." Yet like a stone weight in the pit of my stomach, I felt a certainty that it was already over.

Wallin was guilty only of the one action--and in that, probably justified . . . except for the disturbing fact of his timely elopement with the victim's daughter.

The skeptic in me died hard. Was there really a widely orchestrated conspiracy to kill Sandlak? Or would Sandlak's daughter have been reward enough for Wallin to kill a possessive father? Maybe once I saw her for myself I would know the answer.

I took a long draw from the flask. Liquid fire. This was my ritual, my reward to

myself. I felt I owed it to myself for the work on the case; but there was an additional reason why this modest ritual was important to me. I'd once been on the verge of throwing away whatever potential I had--maybe not a whole lot, but in any case all I had--for the bottle. It hit me all at once, one night long ago in the middle of the pub with the guys, a glass of red-eye in my hand, that I deserved better. I walked out and never went back.

At least, not to the everyday kind of boozing.

Now, nearly two decades later, I had no quarrel with the maxim, "An alcoholic is never cured." But I never signed my name to the corollary, "An alcoholic can never say 'just one.'" Maybe that made me a true alcoholic, and I would pay for my heresy in the end. But so far, it worked for me, to take just one. Or a few, on a special occasion.

Part of the ritual were the silent affirmations: It's easy enough; it does a little job well; it calms the nerves and gives a good start to a night's sleep.

One more taste and I was ready for the sack. I figured Jimmy could stay out God knows where, doing God knows what, as long as he was ready by the sled in the morning.

As I put the flask away and my hand was in the traveling bag, my fingers touched cold smooth stone. I brought out the primitive cameo, the amateurish carving that Jimmy had said looked like Nilliq. And I held it in my hand, looking into the hard unseeing eyes until I could hold my own eyes open no longer.

Chapter Twenty

BUSHED

When morning came, I was groggy and unwilling to get out of bed. It was as if I had a hangover; but not from that little nightcap I'd indulged in. No, it was bigger than that, nothing less than the whole shebang. I knew I still had to go out and bring Wallin in, if only for the one murder. But my heart was no longer in it.

I sat up, noticed the other bed still made, and rubbed my sleep-numbed, bristly cheeks. I pulled on my striped woolen pants, one leg at a time. Now I had a chance to do the job right, and couldn't even see the point any more. Wallin had simply done what I would have had to do, in effect, if I'd been smart or privileged enough to know where to look. What good would it do now, to drag him down South to some concrete dungeon, a death sentence one way or another?

Oh, the Inuit people would love me then, for protecting them from this criminal, this Wallin. I'd be at the top of everyone's list, then.

There was a bucket in the corner, with enough water to splash on my face and--no, after a closer look at it, I decided to pass on shaving. I wasn't exactly going to visit the Queen today. I dry-brushed my teeth, and spit into the bucket for the next sucker.

Outside the hotel, I filled my lungs with the crisp morning air. Dogs were barking from their chains, children playing in the frosty mud streets. Ah, Saturday: no school today.

Down the street toward Tomlin's stood the empty schoolhouse: a low, rectangular building with a fenced playground, its flag wind-shredded. The windows ranked along the side of the building were all shaded shut--and, I guessed, would remain so when school was in session, while outside the wind howled, and the wild animals roamed away, and the parents sat in their heated box houses listening to the radio and wondering how long it would be before they had TV.

I turned up the other way to go for breakfast. Jimmy's dogs were moaning as if they'd never had their supper. To shut them up I brought out a handful of the fish that we'd bought and stashed under the sled cover, and tossed it in their midst; but it depressed me to have to witness the vicious snarling that resulted from this generosity.

The restaurant wasn't open yet. So I went to the pool hall, where the young men hang out day and night. I stood and watched for a while, my stomach growling and turning under the assault of stale beer fumes and constantly replenished tobacco smoke. The Saturday morning clientele there didn't say anything--just quietly shot. And shot well.

Colored balls clacked on the green felt field.

Finally I asked if anyone had seen a Jimmy Natsik around. A tall wall-eyed youth spoke up, saying that Jimmy had left with some wandering female in the early hours. I thanked my informant and, squinting into the morning sunshine again, marveled that I'd actually got some straight information for a change. But the question remained, where

was Jimmy now, in this town of six hundred?

I hadn't even bothered to ask about Wallin's whereabouts. But then a smaller guy with slicked-back hair and a black leather jacket came out and, eyes averted to my red-striped trousers, said to me, "Guess you're wanting to go north today, eh?"

"Oh?" I was almost hopeful of some new lead. "Why's that?"

He shrugged and turned back into the shadows. "I dunno. Seems like the right direction." A quick, insolent grin, and he was gone back inside.

"Nakomik," I said to the closed door. Thanks for nothing.

A plane buzzed in the distance. That would be, I thought idly, the QuebecAir flight from Schefferville. I wandered around for a while, watching cute little girls giggle and duck back into doorways, an older man glance my way and then back to his sled lashings, two boys running with little bows and arrows. When I saw that the restaurant was open I stopped in and sat at the bar for coffee, hash browns, caribou steak and eggs. I still had a couple of lean days to make up for; HQ could bitch about it all they liked--or not reimburse me, what did it matter anymore?

The two waitresses at first were friendly, almost flirtatious, but then they caught my mood and retreated to whispers behind hands in the kitchen door. I turned my attention to a month-old newspaper that lay beside me.

In a little while the door opened and another khalunat walked in, wearing a silver hardhat and carrying a briefcase. The open neck of his wolf-trimmed parka revealed a tie, a white shirt, a suitcoat. I thought, What's he trying to prove?

He sat down beside me, taking off his hardhat and looking at the stripe on my pants. "Morning," he said with a French accent.

"Morning." I looked at his blue-green eyes and he looked away, to the waitress who came promptly to take his order. "You just come in on the plane?" I asked him.

"Yeah. That cheap outfit does not even serve breakfast."

"Ah, well. Chalk it up to the old expense account, eh?"

"You have it." He smiled proudly at me, shifting the position of his briefcase and opening his coat.

"That thing doesn't keep you warm, does it?" I motioned to the hardhat now resting at his feet.

"Oh, you'll be surprised. See, I put this liner in, of felt. It's quite warm."

"Hmm, yes; good idea."

He lit a cigarette. "So how is the job going, officer?"

"I'm a constable," I said. "Are you referring to something specific?"

"I've been read some paper about a crime wave or something, up here."

I glared at him.

"I mean, not here in Col, exact, but in the territory. Hudson coast, I guess it was, mostly. Some murders or something? It must be exciting work, for you."

"At times it is," I said. "What's your line of work?"

"Exploration of the minerals. Some also, of the oil and gas work. That is depending on what show up."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

The radio--local FM with an Inuk announcer--blared rock 'n roll from the kitchen.

"The people here like our music, no?" the man observed as the waitress brought him his coffee.

"Sure, they like it. It's the big city here. But wait till they hear the same tunes a couple of thousand times. I predict they'll move back out to the land soon enough."

"Oh, you really think so?" the man said. "I have doubt about that. Besides, there is going to be lots of thing happening out there on the land. They might not like it so much, after a while."

"What do you mean?"

The man received a plate of breakfast and began immediately to eat. "Oh, well, you know, seismic line, to begin with. Mineral developments. Hydroelectric. There's big things in the plannings. You don't read the business pages of your newspaper here, eh?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Yuh, it's a one-way street, the way I see it. They bring their sleds in, certain, and spend their first welfare checks on the booze; but watch, when these new Ski-doo start arriving in good numbers, the dogs will certain be shot."

He waited for a reaction and I gave him none.

"It's their choice, no?"

"Sort of. Who knows, maybe you're right." I tossed down the last of my tepid coffee and folded the newspaper neatly beside me. "Time to go to work," I said to the man.

I guess he glimpsed something of my morale, finally. "Oh, well," he said as I stood up and put on my coat, "I guess this is better for you than the Parliament Hill job, eh?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Haven't you been listening the news lately? You will be standing there tapping your, what do you call, your truncheon in your hand while the peaceniks stand around waving their crayoned signs inviting the Russians." The man smiled and took a sip of coffee.

"Hard to say." I stood waiting for the waitress to figure out what to do on the cash register. When she rang up the total I paid quickly, without tipping or collecting my receipt, then stalked back toward the hotel.

I encountered Jimmy feeding the dogs again, and gave him hell for it. Didn't he know we had a day's travel ahead of us?

"They need to get their strength back," he said. "A little extra's not going to hurt them any." He went about his business lashing the sled tight, muttering something more about whose dogs they were.

It wasn't worth arguing about anymore.

"We goin' north?" he said. No "boss."

"Is that where you heard they went?"

"'Bout a week ago."

"Ah. So you made yourself somewhat useful last night, eh? I guess we have no choice, then, do we?"

Jimmy made no answer.

"I see the store's open now. Let's get the rest of our supplies taken care of."

We proceeded to shop--in the mood, I imagined, of a couple who were married too long. I noticed that Jimmy lingered over the rack of new shotguns. Whose fault was it that his was lying on the bottom of a nameless lake? "Let's go," I told him.

We started off on foot, on the stiff muddy streets. Chained dogs snarled at our team and Jimmy shouted commands for his dogs to keep their noses clean. Out of town we followed the main trail from the camps. The snow cover was patchy and so we had to continue walking a good part of the time: a plodding exercise, I thought grimly, to finish what we'd set out to do. I hadn't told Jimmy the whole story yet, fearing that if my Inuk companion knew the truth he would simply refuse to go on with it.

The further north we headed, the worse it was going to be coming back; and the passage of days toward the deadline was not slowing down. It was already the eighteenth: we had less than a week. But still we were closing in on our objective. By the time Henley and all his king's men showed up as threatened, Corporal McLain would have a killer in the bag. I tried to imagine them, the little general marching at the head of a column of frozen-footed troops. Or would they come in a roaring parade of shiny new Ski-doos, brandishing rifles and flags?

The second day out, the dogs were treated to a good stretch of snow on a vast plain, and I exulted in the rush of cool air, the shushing sound of runners on spring snow, the panting breath of the dogs steaming up into the air, the clearing sky ahead. Then we were back to fighting the thawing tundra; back on the job again. We stopped everyone we met for a chat. But information had become scarce again. Maybe we'd missed Wallin and Nilliq by too long, or maybe the incoming and outgoing trails had diverged. Or maybe nobody felt like talking. Jimmy said he had a little trouble with his dialect on this coast.

Finally we hit something: a family, of sorts, headed south. They were a middle-

aged man, a young teenaged girl, and two women of indeterminate age, who could have been wives, sisters, mother and daughter; it was impossible to tell. This man said they indeed had met a Wallin. And just as I started to wonder if this shyly fetching teenager was Nilliq herself, Jimmy reported the man to say that Nilliq, too, had been with Wallin in a place called "the New Camp."

It was unclear what was meant by this term. Something to do with a few people staying out on the land, stubbornly resisting the movement into Col. The older members of the party we met seemed to share a sneering attitude about them. The teenager was noncommittal. There was a kind of joking attitude, too, about Wallin: a reference about "the lawman" and his woman.

That was a disturbing translation. I asked for clarification. Did they mean the man fleeing the law? Did they confuse the question, and were referring to me?

Jimmy confirmed that they were referring to Wallin.

The family proceeded on their southward journey, their sled laden high with all their worldly belongings which they would soon discard in town. I could smell the rotting skins as they passed.

On the night of the third day out from Col, Jimmy stopped to make camp along a swift-running, narrow river. I expected that it would be our last night headed north-- actually northwest, by now. We had veered inland following what information we could gather and were within a couple of hours from where we expected to find the "New Camp." I heated up the water for tea and sat on the sled munching a piece of Co-op jerky while Jimmy went off with his spear. Something--the fresh air and open spaces, getting

back to the routine of the trail, the prospect of fishing--had put my guide in good spirits again. He chirped, "Fresh food for supper coming up, boss."

"That's good, Jim." Boss?, I thought. We're just two guys out for a picnic. One happened to be native, one white. Did it matter? Jimmy's skin was nearly as white as mine.

I poured the boiling water and fetched a little Co-op jerky to eat while I waited for him. Munching on the tough dried shreds of caribou meat, I reflected on my chances of survival up here as a hunter. I was a fair shot, but there was more to it than shooting. Maybe the thing would be to marry into an Inuit family, so I could learn the skills I didn't have yet. I wasn't too old to switch careers. . . .

After half an hour Jimmy arrived from upriver with a string of char. I came to my senses and was disgusted at my own daydreaming foolishness. Did I really think I could last even one short and drippy spring in their squalid little snow huts? Or stay out exposed on the land in summer while being devoured alive by the mosquitoes? What would happen to my educated brain, my South-grown body, during the deadening cold of those long winters when food was scarce? Even these people were leaving that kind of life to come live with me and my kind in the settlements. I represented their future, not the other way around!

Jimmy looked at me oddly as he plopped the fresh char at my feet. There I was, mesmerized by my fantasies, still sitting on the sled while the dogs were becoming impossibly tangled in their traces. But he too ignored them for the moment and, squatting beside me, began slicing a fish into fat, greasy chunks. He handed a piece to me, but, though I was hungry, it didn't catch my fancy.

"No thanks," I said.

He looked at me strangely again and then turned on his haunches to look out the other way, over toward the river. He went about his own business of putting a large chunk of fish between his teeth and slicing it off, bite by bite, with his knife. I returned to my troubling thoughts. What could I do, realistically? File for another transfer and find work back in HQ in Ottawa, shuffling papers on the twentieth floor and slogging every day through the filthy slush back to my tenement room, to my lonely hotplate in front of the goddamned hockey game?

Or would I stick with my decision to quit the force altogether--for by now a portion of these scenarios, however implausible, had taken on a life of their own, cumulatively forming a "decision"--and look for work as a Zamboni driver at some junior league hockey rink, citing my vast experience driving sleds over the ice?

No, no, I was too far gone after six years of life up here for a so-called normal life back in the South. I knew then, in my groaning stomach and sinking heart, that it was true what they said, when they called a Northerner "bushed." You can never go back.

Jimmy had turned to face me again. "What are we gonna do with them when we find them, boss?"

"Good question," I said. "What do you suggest? You could ask them if they want to go fishing."

Jimmy laughed, his mouth still full of fish. "Oh-ee, you're funny, boss. Ohhh-eee, ha ha ha." Then he was serious all of a sudden. "No, I mean, are you gonna shoot him, or what?"

"Now who's trying to be funny?"

"Okay. But I mean, are we really gonna try to take them all the way back to Poste?"

"I don't think so, Jim. Somehow, I don't think so."

"Well, what's gonna happen, then?"

"Let's figure it out. I agree: we need a contingency plan. Let's take the worst case, and suppose that he's trigger happy, and paranoid--"

"I didn't sign up to be no man-killer."

"I didn't say you had to do it."

Jimmy shook his head. "I don't like it. If you go in expecting that, all ready for it, then that's how it'll happen. Otherwise, it might be better. To do it peaceful- like."

"Again, I agree. I'm just saying what if."

Jimmy took a seat on the sled and stared at his feet, the toes of his felt-packs wagging from side to side.

I tried to cheer him up. "I remember you saying before that you didn't think Wallin was the dangerous killer I thought he was."

"I said maybe not."

"Actually, Jimmy, I agree with you now." I hesitated before saying more. Then: "I learned from Father Tomlin that Wallin is innocent of all the murders but Sandlak's-- and he probably had some pretty good reasons for that one."

Jimmy showed no surprise at hearing this. But his brow wrinkled and he asked, almost angrily: "If he's not our murder-man, then what are we goin' after him for?"

"He still killed Sandlak, and that's against the law. If indeed that is what happened--and that's what we need to establish--I'm bound to arrest him, much as I can

sympathize with his reasons for doing it. And maybe it even boils down to self-defense, once he got into the situation. Put it this way: at least I want to meet him and ask him a few questions. I still need to make a final report on the circumstances of Sandlak's death."

Jimmy listened patiently, sitting on the sled with his legs stretched out and feet crossed, his eyes on his feet. Then he looked away to the northwest, his head and upper body going back and forth with little rocking movements.

"Okay," he said finally, turning to look me in the eye. "So he's not such a bad guy. But here we come on top of them, surprising them in their little hidden camp, and he's not gonna know what we're thinking. Even if we want to do it peaceful, he might not see that. We'd still be taking a chance. You talk about self-defense. He might take one look at us and feel like he has to protect himself."

"You're right, Jimmy. What can I say?"

Without expression Jimmy said, "'Welcome to the Mounties,'" and gazed off into the gathering darkness.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE NEW CAMP

"There was an old raven," Wallin was saying, "a chief, and a great hunter. He had two sons . . ."

Kita stared blankly into the flames of the lamp; Ashoona into the darkness of the night. Their three children were listening closely, eyes fixed on the tent's ceiling as they lay completely still in their sleeping-skins.

". . . and when the great chief raven died, his two sons divided his hunting territory between them. The elder son took the south, and the younger son, the north.

"One day a wolf came to the house of the elder son.

"'I'm a better hunter than you,' the wolf boasted.

"'We'll see about that,' said the raven."

The older boy laughed. Wallin stopped until there was silent attention again.

"So they went hunting in separate directions, to see who would catch the most. The raven knew where to go, of course, since it was his territory. He brought back lots of juicy meat: hares, ptarmigan, lemmings. The wolf came back empty-handed. So after the raven shared some of the meat with him, the wolf slunk away back to the north country.

"Some time later the raven went north to visit his younger brother. That same

wolf came around and said to him, 'Now I will challenge you where it is fair, in my territory. Let's see who is the best hunter now.'

"The elder raven agreed to take up the wolf's challenge. He got his younger brother, who lived there, to tell him just where to go. Again he came back with meat before the wolf did. Then the wolf was angry at the visiting raven, saying he had cheated.

"The elder raven just laughed, and the wolf slunk away. Then the raven said to his younger brother that he liked this north country and might just fly on farther to see how it was.

"Indeed, he liked it better than his old home. He liked the rolling hills that came down to the bay; he liked the abundance of game. He found a wife and had two sons of his own. And so the elder raven lived peacefully and well there, until one day the old wolf came trotting up and challenged him to another hunting contest.

"This time, the wolf had an idea."

Ashoona whispered something to Kita and left the tent. Kita remained with her children, whose eyelids were starting to droop.

Wallin appeared to take no notice of Ashoona's leaving. "When the raven went off," he continued, "the wolf circled back and followed him, and while the raven was stalking a lemming, the wolf jumped him from behind and ate the big black bird right up, feathers and all!" Wallin said this with a louder, faster voice that startled the youngest child awake again. The other children, too, shrank back with eyes momentarily alert, almost frightened.

"Then the wolf returned home and did the same trick to the brother, so that he had the southern territory all to himself and his lovely twin daughters.

"Years passed; until one day a son of the elder raven came down and paid the wolf a visit.

"'Aha,' said the wolf to his daughters, 'you see this young upstart? Watch and I will show you who is the better hunter.'

"The contest was arranged as before. The clever young raven flew over the land to where people were fishing and managed to steal a few fish for himself. He flew as fast as he could, carrying the fish in his claws and beak, and arrived at the starting place just before the wolf arrived with his own catch, a poor hare.

"'Where did you find that fish?' the wolf demanded.

"The young raven said untruthfully that he had caught the fish from a certain large lake he had passed over. The wolf immediately demanded to be taken there to try his luck.

"When they got there, the young raven pointed to the middle of the lake, and laughed to himself as the wolf plunged into the cold water and started swimming out from shore. It wasn't long before the wolf tired; and having gone too far to swim back to shore, he drowned.

"The young raven then flew back and chose the shyest of the wolf's daughters to marry, consoling her over the death of her father."

Nilliq averted her eyes from Kita's glance. Wallin glanced at her only briefly and kept speaking.

"'I'm not sad,' said the wolf-daughter. 'My father was very stingy and never gave me any of his catch. I had to fend for myself, getting scraps left from the foxes.'

"Now the raven and the wolf-girl went off happily together to the country of the

east, where the grandfather raven had once hunted in days gone by.

"When they got there, they discovered that a fox had followed them all the way. When the fox found them he said, 'You're the ones who have been taking all the leftovers from my kills. Now I want you to hunt for me to make up for what you have taken.'

"'Nothing doing,' said the raven. 'But I will show you how to fish the way the ravens do.'

"'All right,' said the fox.

"They went to the river where there was open water next to the ice. The raven stuck his tail in the water and said, 'Like this. Wave it around a little and the fish will be attracted to it. When it bites, pull it up.' And he did, and there was a fish.

"The fox was impressed. 'Let me try that,' he said.

"He put his bushy tail in the water. He waited. Nothing happened.

"'Nothing's happening,' he said.

The two younger children were asleep by now, but the older boy was still awake and laughed again.

Wallin took no notice, and went on: "'That's all right,' said the raven; 'sometimes you just have to be patient.'

"After a moment the raven looked around and discovered that the wolf-girl had gone off. 'Look,' he said to the fox. 'You stay awhile and I'm sure a fish will bite. I'm going to find my wife.'

"The raven flew off and the fox stayed with his tail in the water. Most of the day passed, and when the light began to fade, the raven decided that the wolf-girl had truly disappeared, and he finally gave up. When he flew back over the river he saw a sight that

made him smile. Ice had formed in a tight ring around the fox's tail.

"By this time the fox was quite unhappy about having to wait so long to catch a fish. When he looked up and saw the raven returning, he became excited with anger and pulled up his tail with a yank. But the ice held it fast and he came up without it. He howled in pain and rage.

"The raven took pity on him. 'Here,' said the bird, 'try pasting on some of these.' He pulled out a few of his tail feathers and dropped them fluttering over the tailless fox, then flew away chuckling to himself."

Kita stirred as if to leave. The older boy sat up. "What happened to the raven then?" he asked. "Did he ever find his wife again?"

Wallin looked at the boy. He was slow to answer. "No," he said finally. "After that the raven had to live alone, for he never found his wife."

Then Wallin looked at Nilliq, and there was a glittering sadness in his eyes.

Nilliq looked away.

Kita, leaving the children in the tent, went out into the night. The older boy got up with a whimper and stumbled out after her.

Nilliq's stomach groaned with hunger; she tried to ignore it but couldn't. She turned away from Wallin and lay facing the blank wall of the tent. She had felt hunger before; but this was worse.

"What's the matter?" Wallin said to her.

She might have told him of her hunger, or of the other emptiness in her. But what was the use?

He said, "You're tired of me, now that I've served my purpose."

Tears began to well in her eyes.

"This I have heard," Wallin said, "in what the spirits say. And this I see before my eyes. You are the wolf-daughter, and you will leave me."

She turned back to him, unafraid. "How can you say such a thing to me--as if I were your wife? You know how it is with us. We're cousins! Do you think you can convince me to forget that?"

"In my visions--"

"Your visions! The cracked wisdom given you by that ridiculous old man. We have no meat, but we have your visions. Where do you go when I, when these children here, are hungry, but 'to a lonely place'? A place with no game, certainly. And do you think of us, of anyone but yourself there, or your vanished friend Changuk? Do you think of hunting, as Ashoona has been doing without success, and Shaniviak as well, and Linuuk? No. At least they are trying to get food for us. You go to rub a stone in a circle on a rock. You go to conjure up a storm that you imagine will slow down the khalunat. You go to enjoy your fasting. Instead of meat you bring back a silly children's tale, animals turned into words. Well, the rest of us are not enjoying it. The rest of us--"

"You have no respect for the spirits," Wallin said flatly. "None of you. That is why the animals do not come. It is my business to communicate with these spirits to find out what we must do so that the animals will return."

"Animals? It is we who are being hunted like animals, and when the khalunat gets here we will be shot like a couple of starving caribou. What are we doing here?"

"I know what I'm doing here. I will deal with the khalunat when he gets here . . .

if he gets here. Maybe he's given up by now--bad weather, better things to do."

"So, you'll deal with him, will you? Just like you dealt with my father?"

"I told you what happened with your father."

"You have told me many things. I don't know what to believe any more. What I want to know is, what's going to happen to me?"

"You?" Wallin sat up and gazed out through the partly open flap of the tent into the darkness. He was considering this question, it seemed, for the first time.

"Yes, me."

Wallin turned and looked at her with a gaze as cold as stone. "You might have to ask yourself that question."

"You brought me here."

"You came with me."

"But I--"

"You what? You wanted to stay in Col? With the pool-hall crowd? The white teachers, the nurses? With Father Tomlin, perhaps, and his fine stock of ginger snaps? Is that what you want?"

Nilliq could not answer him.

"Well, maybe it's time you started to figure it out."

And he walked out through the door flap, leaving her in the flickering lamplight alone with the two sleeping children.

In the morning the children awoke whining for food. Nilliq had none to give them. Their supplies from the sled were gone three days after arriving in this "new

camp," and they had gone three more days since then with no fish, no meat, a few biscuit-crumbs and a little flour that people had been scraping from the bottoms of their food boxes. Nilliq told the children to go to their own tent to see if there was any food left there. She had to shoo them out crying, the pitiful little girl and her baby brother toddling after her. She couldn't stand any longer to see them hungry.

Wallin had not returned in the night.

Nilliq imagined the taste of the ginger snaps in her mouth. She had forgotten exactly what they tasted like, but she invented a taste to suit her hunger. Maybe, she thought, she could convince Kita and Ashoona to leave this camp and go to Col, and she could go with them. At least there was food there. The children would not have to go hungry. She could learn to speak the khalunat tongue, to dance in the khalunat way--assuming that they did dance. What people cannot dance?

She might even find her way to another settlement: Smith Harbour, or Poste, or an even bigger khalunat place. Maybe she would be swallowed up in a great khalunat settlement so vast that she'd be as a bird among the flocks at the times of migration. She could find out what it is to be such a bird . . . or a woman, to find a man she truly loved. She would give herself to him as he would give himself to her, and they would go on finding their way together.

She looked through a rip in the tent canvas at the white sky. Enough dreaming, she thought. This is what I must do--mend the rip. She brought out the sewing packet she had brought along. But her thoughts slipped back to the night she had made the sealskin boots for her father. As she took the needle into her fingers, she felt as if she'd returned to the snowhouse she thought she'd left behind forever.

She could not bring herself to start the mending. This was Wallin's tent, and he could find his own woman to do his mending. She put the needle and heavy thread away and got up and walked out.

Around her were three other tents like this one--each with a woman to tend it. Each with a hunter to go out on the land, to bring in food--when food was available. Perhaps this was a good spot for summer camping, as Shaniviak had assured them. But as yet, even the stream rushing by not far from the new camp had yielded no fish. Perhaps it was too early, and only a matter of waiting awhile longer till the fish, till the animals came. There was a warm dampness in the air, an overcast sky.

Wallin came out of Shaniviak's tent. He stopped and looked at Nilliq, then came walking up to where she stood with her empty fingers fidgeting.

"It's time to pack," he said without ceremony.

"Oh? So easily is it decided."

He eyed her sharply, and said, "We're going to another camping spot, to the river at the mouth of this stream."

"There are fish in the river," Nilliq said, "but not the stream?"

"Shaniviak says the lake that the river flows out of is full of fish. We can't go there because we want to stay away from the khalunat mining survey people that come around there. But if we want to eat, we should go up that way, at least for a while. It's a couple of days' journey."

"But if there are no fish in the river--"

Wallin spoke quickly, angrily. "Shaniviak says there are fish. You may pack with me, or you may stay, as you choose. All the rest of us are leaving." And he immediately

set about loosening tent ropes from their anchoring stones.

Nilliq went into the tent, muttering at Wallin for his angry haste in taking down the ropes before the inside things had been taken out. Still, there was nothing to be done but to help him. They gathered their few belongings into disorderly piles by Wallin's sled. There were the tools for scraping and sewing and cutting and drilling, the handfuls of dried moss for packing in boots, the soapstone lamp, the little bag of seal oil, cooking utensils, an empty food box. Finally the tent pole came down and together they rolled the canvas up tightly.

The dogs were whining, as they knew what was coming, and would have to bear their load with empty stomachs. Nilliq watched as the other families broke camp and made ready their sleds in the same way.

Wallin arranged things in the way that he preferred, covered everything with the skin sled cover and lashed it tight, pulling the thongs and tying them off. Then Nilliq saw the soapstone lamp sitting partially buried in the snow near the front of the sled.

"Wallin," she said in a high, thin voice, still wary of his mood. "Look, there's my lamp still. You forgot to load it on."

"Your lamp. Ah, so it is. I forgot, did I? And what have you been doing while I've been sweating over this load? Thinking about the fine houses in Col?"

"I thought I would be in the way."

"Thinking, perhaps, about your khalunat friends who are going to have to keep looking for you?"

She could hold back no longer. "You don't know what you're talking about! I'll tell you how it is for me. It's easy for you and Shaniviak to talk of going farther north, of

living away from the settlements. To complain about the khalunat and the loss of our traditional ways. Because it's for you and your proud companions to go running around all over the land on your hunts for visions: for me and my kind to stay behind with the squalling children to wipe clean, the slimy skins to chew; smiling on your return and laying back for your seed; taking a beating for saying or doing the least little thing that doesn't suit your fancy--"

Wallin's dogs had sat up and started barking as Nilliq spoke, so that she had to raise her voice above the noise. Wallin had been stonily looking at them; now he turned to her and calmly said, "You are invited to come along; or you can stay, as you choose. Shall I pack this lamp on the sled or not?"

Now the barking of his dogs was raising a din from the other teams as well.

Nilliq had no choice to make. "We'll need it, won't we? I just thought that--"

"You thought. That's what they claim to teach in khalunat school: thinking. You want to go to that school in town? Here, see if you've graduated from Inuit school first. See if you can think how to tie up a sled properly." And he lifted the heavy lamp out of the snow and reached over the front of the sled to hand it to her; but in doing so, his foot slipped, and in trying to regain his balance he dropped the lamp. It fell against the upturned, steel-edged toe of the sled runner and broke into two pieces.

It was at this moment that Nilliq saw another dogsled appear from around the hill, with two men riding it: an Inuk and a khalunat.

Chapter Twenty-two

THE WORLD TURNS

Nilliq was standing in front of Wallin looking as if she were about to cry; he appeared ready to shout at her. A snatch of conversation came into my head, from an eon ago: "As the World Turns, Inuit-style." Now as they noticed our approach, they stood frozen in a tableau.

I said over Jimmy's shoulder, "Maybe we should just go on and leave them to it."

Jimmy acknowledged my remark with a bitter smile. He halted the dogs and anchored the harness. I considered my rifle, but, seeing Wallin's strapped on his sled, decided to leave it and told Jimmy to do the same. This meeting would be man-to-man.

They stood waiting: Wallin in his steady, alert stance gauging the situation; Nilliq gaping wide-eyed. Nilliq was surprisingly tall, very nearly matching Wallin's height. I was charmed by her appearance, despite the unwashed hair and tearful expression. She had high narrow cheeks and a fine-lined nose, under gentle black eyes. As she stood there slender and graceful, wearing a birdskin tunic with its feathers ruffling in the breeze, she seemed poised as for flight.

I walked closer, against Wallin's steely glare. Involuntarily I looked away, taking in the larger scene. This "New Camp," it seemed to me, was nothing new at all, was not

unlike the Townsend Bay hunting camp where Nilliq had grown up. A few canvas tents had just come down; sleds were being loaded for travel.

Wallin called out something to the others, who had paused in their labors to gawk at us. After some apparent grumbling they went back to packing.

Then Wallin took a few steps forward, away from his sled and the gun strapped on it.

I knew a little Inuktitut and so introduced myself. My efforts brought a smile to Nilliq's lips, despite her obvious nervousness. Wallin, frowning, looked like a bear ready to spring.

It occurred to me that I didn't want to run afoul of this man on account of his mistress.

Then, seeing the two of them together, despite their dissimilar expressions, something clicked in the back of my brain, something once tangled and now clear, names fitting together: Dinut, Mariq, Sijja . . . Wallin's father and Nilliq's mother were both children of the old woman Mariq.

Wallin and Nilliq were cousins.

Nilliq attempted to repeat my name. Finally she got it nearly right, tacking a syllable of her own onto it: "Jack-ee." It was the first time I'd been called that in over thirty years. I liked the childlike lilt of her voice as she said it, the high tremolo, the pitch of a young raven's tongue.

And in one enchanted instant I imagined her eyes saying "I want to run away with you."

"So we meet again," Wallin said in English. Those square-hewn muscles, the skin

stretched taut across his broad face, the firm mouth framed by the Fu Manchu mustache, all presented a formidable sight. He looked disdainfully at the red stripes running down my trousers.

I was glad for his competent English; it was always safest to be able to talk to a dangerous man directly. "You don't need to worry," I began in an even voice. "We've been trailing you for a long while, as you may have guessed, but I want you to know that I understand what has happened."

Wallin's eyes narrowed; at the same time I could see the tautness in his cheeks relaxing. "If you understand," he said with an uneasy smile, "then why did you come here?"

"I had a chat with our mutual friend Father Tomlin," I said. "He gave me to understand that you had a mission, just as I had. To bring a murderer to justice. Your way was a little cruder, perhaps, more direct, but I understand the need for it. I'm willing to testify for you, to give you every benefit--"

"You mean if I go with you, under arrest. Into that whole legal system. You mean, maybe I can hope to get off easy, like Adamie Nassak did."

My adversary had an uncomfortably direct way of speaking. "Why don't you just think of it as coming in for questioning?" I said. There's a good chance we can swing a deal before trial. At this point I think that's the best I could offer you."

"You ask your questions right here, right now."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be good enough to satisfy my superiors. A crime has been committed and I have good cause to suspect you. Look, you don't want to just keep running, do you? It's only going to get worse for you, that way. If I don't bring you in

now, there're going to be a bunch of trigger-happy khalunat cops coming up first thing next week, and they're not going to stop until they've found you. Of course, I'd have to cooperate with them, so it wouldn't take them long. I'm genuinely sorry about this. As I said, I--"

"Yes, you understand. At least, you think you understand. But I'm not stupid. I know that if your superiors, as you call them, have their way, then I'll end up hanging from a rope--"

"No, no. You'd have due process--"

"Or however they like to do it. The slow death in prison, then. You talk about justice. Suppose it happened like you said--with the ones who are 'trigger-happy.' Tell me, Mister McLain, would they punish those guys who come to gun me down? Hah--I don't think so."

I didn't know what else I could say to him.

"Suppose," Wallin went on, "I never come to that camp to settle business with Sandlak. Then 'khalunat cops' come instead and do it their way. Maybe it would be Mister Jack McLain himself. I promise you, you would need to defend yourself. And what if you get lucky and capture him alive? Then for Sandlak it's the slow, long way around, with many lawyers and desk-men and policemen to put in time and get paid, a lot of papers to be filed. But the same ending for him. Is this not true?"

I nodded. "I have no argument with the point you're making." I glanced at Jimmy, wondering if we were up to the task of forcing Wallin to come with us, especially with the other hunters still watching as they packed. Jimmy was speaking to Nilliq, presumably translating for her the gist of the exchange. She listened carefully, without

visible emotion. I cast about for an alternative course of action: could I possibly justify simply letting Wallin go?

"You think you understand," Wallin said to me then. "But I'll tell you what happened. The man, the bad man killed himself. Do you know what I'm saying?"

I wasn't sure. Did Wallin mean that Sandlak earned his execution?

"It was like this," Wallin went on. "I'm trained as a shaman. I was working for a shaman, my teacher--the one who burned up in his house in Poste. When I went finally to find this man Sandlak, I took the risk of being killed myself; you know all about that kind of risk. But I went. And I went out hunting with this man Sandlak. Hunting--he said. He meant to kill me, that was clear. But when his moment came, he couldn't do it. He recognized something in me, the power I brought from my training. Or maybe he saw me as the right person to take his daughter away from that camp--"

Jimmy must have been quick to translate that last remark, because Nilliq reacted right away. She started to say something but Wallin stopped her with an arm across her chest.

"Who can read a dead man's thoughts? Sandlak put his rifle down and invited me to shoot him. I refused. He asked me what I was going to do with him then. I told him that there was nothing I had to do. It depended on him. Such a man has to find his own way to die. He took his knife out and slashed his own throat, wide open." Wallin mimicked Sandlack's last ghastly act. "I thought then that I might have to shoot him after all to end the suffering but it was over quickly, and I fired a shot with his rifle, the bullet that was meant for me, into the air to tell the ravens and the foxes to come."

When Jimmy finished translating, I noticed that Nilliq had edged closer to him,

away from Wallin. Her face was clear and shining.

"And so," Wallin concluded, still speaking in English but looking at Nilliq, "it was like that."

He looked back at me with a direct gaze, his eyes deep and calm.

Eyes of the ages, I thought. Wallin knows what he's about, all right. If anyone could do to a man what he claims to have done to Sandlak, he could.

Wallin turned away to his dog team. Sure, measured paces. The other sleds were ready to leave. The people looked depressed, hungry.

"Wallin--" I called out--"do you, do your people need food? We don't have much ourselves, but--"

Wallin gave a sharp negative movement of his head; but there was a flicker of thanks in the eyes. Then he drove his dogsled away, with the others following. To the north, upriver. He never even said good-bye to Sandlak's daughter.

Jimmy said something to Nilliq and received a brief answer. "She wants to come with us."

"Fine by me," I said, as if there were any choice to be had. She shyly smiled (a smile so quick-flashing, was it there at all?) and took a seat at the rear of the sled, riding beside me. I had a moment of hesitation at this arrangement, wondering if I'd receive a knife in the back for this indiscretion; for though we sat sideways, I usually looked forward. But I felt it worth that slight risk to please the young lady, on what might have been some critical point of native etiquette.

We took off back toward Col, a three-day journey. If the timing worked out just

right for a courier packet via QuebecAir, I would make my deadline. I rode light on the sled, with a great sense of relief. I could only hope, for everyone concerned, that HQ would buy my (which is to say, Wallin's) version of what had happened. The cases of Masarak and Konik were also neatly tied up now; and a reevaluation of the deaths of Dinut and Nananga could be thrown in for good measure. Wallin's involvement could be written off as coincidental--call him a suitor to Nilliq--thereby sweeping the whole messy conspiracy business under the rug. If HQ didn't buy it, well, screw 'em. I had my own life to think about now.

On the fast stretches Nilliq's long black hair flew back in the wind like raven wings, and she flashed a healthy smile. My heart beat unsteadily, more so as I realized what was beginning to happen. I hadn't felt this way in a long time, since before Nancy. Way before.

It was ridiculous, though; I was old enough to be her father.

During a stop for tea, Nilliq and Jimmy talked together. Her voice sounded small and hidden, as if it were coming out from some deep subterranean channel, or on some other frequency. I wanted to make conversation with her, to find out what she was like. I felt nervous, as if I were back on the singles circuit. I asked Jimmy to translate: "You ever been around here before? Do you have any brothers or sisters?" It didn't matter what I asked; I still felt like a cop.

Nilliq's answers, via Jimmy's translations, were brief. "No." "Sort of: there's Wasik; and there was Tella."

"Oh, right." I sure blew that one. But what else does a guy say for openers?

We got on the sled again; this time Nilliq took the middle. I didn't mind--I got to

spend more time looking at her. I wanted to put my arms around those fluttering bird-feathers. I didn't want to overdo it, though; whenever she turned her face to the side, I looked away.

The moon rose, huge and swollen. In the tent I made a bed for myself out of the skins from the sled cover, and gave Nilliq my sleeping-skins.

She set up against the far wall, with Jimmy taking the middle. She pulled her tunic off, and her head shimmered once more of raven wings in the lantern light. I marveled at the soft, white, near-transparency of her skin. It was whiter than mine. Was she a ghost, an angel, a figment of my imagination?

Jimmy smiled a gummy good-night before turning away toward her, and for a while I promised myself I would stay awake and vigilant all night watching those two. When nothing happened I gazed instead at the curly hairs on my own chest (some brown, some graying) and allowed myself to imagine her long soft hair playing there in the moonlight. In the end I slept; and in the morning everything started out friendly and innocent between the three of us.

Nilliq had a way of making small, effortless movements. I was fascinated by her quick hands, for instance, as she made bannock for us. She'd loosened up a little, had even giggled over some lemmings scurrying around the breakfast area. Jimmy too had opened up and found more and more to say to her. I made another promise to myself that I would make a serious effort to learn the language.

Then as I finished my tea I recalled the dream I'd had during the night. A good-bye scene with Nancy.

I had just arrived back in Poste and had gone to see her at her place. "Nancy," I said. She was at me already, trying to remove my shirt. I put my hands on her wrists. She looked a little alarmed.

"What is it?"

"Nance, it's no good anymore." Did I really mean to say that, so final? "I've met someone--the young woman, Nilliq, who was traveling with Wallin. He left her behind. She wants to stay in Col now. With me. I've quit my job. I'm leaving, Nance, but I want you to know--"

She pulled her hands free. "You don't have to say those things to me that they say in movies. I can handle myself. Jimmy came back with you, I hope."

So, it was done that easily.

And so (my dream-self had gone on) if that was how things were to be, I could only wish Nancy and Jimmy happiness together by whatever arrangements suited their fancy, while I settled my affairs in Poste and moved to Col.

But then there was another fragment of dream: Nilliq in Col, getting on a plane to go south--a plane with Henley and his troops grinning out the windows. She was already pregnant, by a man named McLain.

Nilliq sat looking sweetly out over the land. Christ, I thought, she's probably not even twenty. And here I am, dreaming that I've stuck it to her.

"Time we should get going again, eh Jackie?" Jimmy stood up and poured the remaining tea from the kettle into the snow.

I ignored his impertinence; I had an idea. I walked over to where Nilliq was sitting on the sled. Politely I reached a hand down to her arm to help her up: a simple, gentlemanly gesture, I thought.

Her arm was as insubstantial as a bird's wing. She looked up at me with huge, wary eyes, like a frightened animal.

Shit, I said to myself, you did it again, you stupid cop. I let her go, my ham of a hand hanging by my side.

Nilliq stood up slowly, by herself, and looked at the ground.

I wanted to say something to her to apologize for my gauche behavior, but of course I didn't have the words, in her language or mine. I heard Jimmy clattering the tea things together and muttering to the dogs, and turned to help him get ready. As I did so, I thought I glimpsed the trace of a forgiving smile on Nilliq's lips.

Chapter Twenty-three

JACK

We sweated and pulled for all we were worth, putting in an extra shift in the early hours of the final morning; but as bad luck would have it, we heard Friday's plane to Schefferville buzzing away before we even caught sight of Col. "There goes my famous report," I said. "Come Monday, Jim, I guess you'll finally get to meet Inspector Henley." Ravens came to pay their respects, laughing loudly: "Kak--kak kak kak kak kak," as we scraped the rest of our way into town.

Jimmy, Nilliq and I stood on the dirt street of Col-de-Corbeau, our faces browned, the dogs lean but healthy-looking. They lay down panting on the cool, sandy earth, soaking up sunbeams.

"Tell you what," I said to Jimmy. "How about I take Nilliq over to Tomlin's, introduce her to him--"

"They've already met, when she came through with Wallin."

"Ah, so they would have. Well, the thing is, I thought I might see if he had room for her to stay there for the weekend."

"What about you and me?"

"Co-op hotel, I guess, unless you have somewhere else you can stay. You seemed to make out all right last time. Whatever you want."

"Couldn't we stay at Tomlin's, too?"

"No," I replied curtly. "I don't think so. He's kind of touchy about having people stay there. I thought he might make an exception for Nilliq. That hotel's pretty seedy."

Jimmy stood with his jaw jutting out cockily for a moment, then turned to Nilliq

and said something to her. I heard the name Tomlin mentioned. She looked at me, lowered her eyes and then spoke a few words to Jimmy.

"What does she feel like doing?"

"She's not really sure. It kind of depends."

"On what?"

Jimmy spoke to her again. She answered and then looked at me with kindness in her eyes.

"Kind of depends on you," Jimmy said.

"Oh?" My heart started beating fast as a schoolboy's, when the girl with the long golden braids, the cute one with the freckles, passes a note that says she likes you.

"What are we gonna do now, anyway?" Jimmy went on to say. "Are we going back to Poste, or what?"

I took off my fur hat and scratched my greasy hair. "Good question, Jim; but I'm afraid the answer to that depends on Henley. I think we'd do best to hold our ground here until he shows up. And if he doesn't show up, I should send that report down to him pronto so that he doesn't have to bother. I can request further instructions when I do that. If he's pleased by our work he might just spring for plane fare back to Poste. If not--well, it might be a long summer here in Col. We could go to work for our friend Mr. Epoo." I hoped I was kidding.

"Yeah, right." Jimmy squinted off into the distance, the brilliant blue of the late-morning sky in the west. "With this kind of sun, it'll be a long trip back the way we came. I don't know about waiting to hear from this guy Henley, though. That might take another week."

"It very well might."

"So maybe it's now or never, with the dogs."

I had a sudden idea, a much better one. "You think you could handle the trip back alone? We could outfit you with any grub you wanted--even throw in a new shotgun.

You could hold down the fort there in Poste until I got back."

Yes, there was something to this brainstorm of mine, that put me in a right jocular mood. "Hell, suppose I don't make it back all summer. Suppose they fire me. You'd have the inside track on my job, there. Just like Timmy Epoo. You'd be the boss. How would you like that? I'd certainly put in a good word for you."

Jimmy didn't react right away. He gazed off again, this time to the southwest where Poste lay some three hundred miles away; he sucked in his upper lip for a minute and then said, simply, "Okay . . ." At first it sounded tentative. Then he looked at me with a flat smile, narrow eyes blinking. "Yeah, I'd appreciate that. Maybe it's a good idea."

Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. I was going out on a limb and it was a little frightening but also exhilarating and I kept telling myself that it was all right, even if there was no turning back.

Jimmy told Nilliq what was happening. She seemed confused. He explained some more. Her face brightened and she said something to Jimmy. He said, "It's fine with her."

She avoided my eyes, looking away in the direction of Poste, then down at the ground at her petite, mud-smeared sealskin boots.

"Good, good. When will you be wanting to start? In the morning, or--"

"No, tonight. Good moon, better snow. Best just to get on with it. Maybe I'll sleep a bit today somewhere I have in mind."

I chuckled. "All right. What about those supplies from the store, then? You want to go over there now, charge things to the account?"

"Sure." He looked at Nilliq, spoke with her briefly. "She wants to come over there with me. She's never been in a real store before."

I hesitated a moment. "All right," I said. "I'll get a room for myself and work out something for Nilliq. When you're done shopping, if you want to go somewhere and she

wants to sleep, bring her around to the hotel and check with me to see where she'll be staying. Then maybe I'll grab a nap, myself, if I can manage it. And how about we meet again at the restaurant this evening to see you off. Say, around six. Put a good meal under your belt to hold you till--what do you think? If you make good time you'll get in for Halibut Night in Poste. Five days?"

"We'll see," Jimmy said.

I lay on my hotel cot, trying to sleep. But instead of sleeping, my mind was racing: Why should I care if he showed her around the fucking store?

I realized then that I felt more for Nilliq than I had dared admit to myself. My body was tingling with anticipation of the evening, when Jimmy would be gone and I would have Nilliq to myself. The visit to Tomlin's had proved fruitless, but I figured it was all for the best. I'd gone ahead and booked a room for Nilliq at the Co-op hotel where I was, and I did this mostly for form's sake, because my real hope was that she'd share my room. This afternoon would be pushing it, but maybe tonight. If not, then maybe tomorrow night, or the next . . .

After a while of lying there wide-eyed, I got up with an idea. With a few simple alterations, I could improve my image considerably. I already had a pair of unstriped trousers to wear. Now if I just took a razor blade to those damning police patches on the shoulders of my coat . . .

Who cared about Humpty Henley or all the Queen's airplanes? I had nothing to go back to Poste for.

My addled brain buzzed: What were those two doing? Looking over every item on every shelf? Maybe he took her to the pool hall.

Sitting on the bed with the patches in my hand, I thought I should get that final report written. Henley deserved that much from me. But when I leaned back against the pillows to draft it, my thoughts whirled back to Nilliq.

This was just crazy--or was it? I ran it all over again in my mind, again and again. It came out the same, each time.

The trouble was--and it wasn't the only trouble with it, but it was the only one that counted--when I finally got up shaking with the undeniable truth of my condition, it was too late.

I sat in a booth alone watching the Friday night crowd come and go, picking at the food I finally ordered, wiping the sweat from my palms. It was past eight. By this time I knew that no one was going to show up; and that when I searched every street in Col for the dogsled, I would find it gone.

And Jimmy had translated oh so politely: "Kind of depends on you. . . . It's fine with her."

What had really happened? I could see a limited number of possibilities. One, he abducted her, by force or threat of force. Two--and this was harder to stomach--she went willingly. Three, they were still in Col somewhere.

Once a cop, always a cop. I wrung another napkin to shreds, deciding I'd wait five more minutes and then go looking.

Outside the bright and senseless din of the restaurant, it had started to rain. First stop was the pool hall: a gallery of sardonic grins. Next, the empty hotel room I'd booked for Nilliq; and even, why not, my own room, with nobody there but Mister Flask, patiently waiting for me. Let him wait; his time would come. I wandered down the muddy streets in the dying daylight, introducing myself to every ragged dogteam in the settlement. At the end of my futile search, I briefly entertained the wild idea of commandeering a team and sled and chasing after the runaways, damn the freezing rain.

Instead, wandering with eyes down on that last nameless street, I resigned myself to a certain, uncertain fate. In an equally nameless bar in northern Ontario, an ex-Mountie rants to a jaded listener: "That little bitch, she just fucking led me on. I gave up

everything for her. She actually had me thinking I could live with them, in their way in their land; in the old way, y'unnerstan' me, in the way of her people." (Pause for a hefty slug of whatever it is this time). "It would have taken time, sure. I would have had to earn her trust. But no. She didn't give me a snowball's chance in hell. It's funny; I should be thankful, really. I'd be just like one of them in the city. If I were stuck out on that frozen wasteland, I'd drift from one seal-hole or caribou trail to the next, catching nothing--maybe not even seeing tracks. I'd squat in their miserable hovels with 'em, wondering what interesting thing to say, after the hundredth time yawning through the real hunters' success stories or the children's fairy tales. No more Shaw or Shakespeare, no Frank Nitti and the Untouchables. No jazz--just hoop drums. No education or progress: only one channel, one show: the Twilight Zone, with one commercial: the weather. Hors d'oeuvres, raw meat. Entree, cooked meat--and with any luck, a little bannock. Dessert, frozen meat. Beverage--ice water, seal-flavored. For the special occasion, a party punch of warm blood, fresh from the pumping heart of some poor beast given up for the sacrifice, the holy transformation of animal to human flesh. Wait, don't go; I'll buy you another--"

I had walked to the outskirts of town, muttering more or less audibly in such a manner to my imaginary listener who was really myself, until I found myself stopped at the edge of the airstrip, looking out into the darkness.

I was as good as drunk, though I hadn't touched an actual drop. And while there was no one else listening, not in Timmins or Kapuskasing, neither in Col-de-Corbeau, still the smashed mind plowed forward, seeking a place to rest. I'd talked myself all so self-righteously now into spurning the northern life that had spurned me, but I also knew deep down that there was nowhere else to go. And so my thoughts began carving doggedly away at the cold stone of the arctic, making for myself a niche: plenty of space, I considered, enough game to shoot a caribou or two a year, a bunch of geese, no problem. Room to change, too. Who said I had to live like them--or like the teachers or

the priest, either, for that matter? I could find my own way. Why not? It was a country as free as it gets.

I still burned inside with desire for Nilliq: she was still out there somewhere. Who said it was over? We hadn't even begun yet. If I could create my own life in the north, then she could be part of it with me. It would be a great experiment. Not assimilation, nor going backward, but the true marriage of the cultures. The sensible middle ground.

A new inner voice cast away my cloak of despair: "If only she'll go for it, is all. If only I can catch up to her again, and let her know what I'm really like, not just a khalunat cop but a man. Forget Jimmy Natsik: he's a nobody. I have a good idea where they're headed. After all, it was my idea. It's a small pond, by golly, and this big ugly fish ain't croaked yet. I'll find her, I'll turn her head around, I'll . . ."

A light in the darkness came wobbling over the airstrip toward me, accompanied by a growing roar. Gathering speed across the wide, flat airstrip, this phantom Ski-doo nearly ran me down before the driver saw me in his lights and swerved to a stop.

"Hullo," he said, panting with the thrill of it all. He sat back beaming, straddling his sleek prize, awaiting my praise and envy.

He was short and broadly built, with a round, puffy, pockmarked face gleaming weirdly in the reflected light from the snow. His choppy, brownish hair, hatless, stood straight up in testament to constant wind. His mouth was turned down in what I took to be a permanent scowl, yet turned up just enough at the corners when he tried smiling, to become more of a sneer. He wore an army surplus fatigue jacket with "JONES" penned in on the name strip. I guessed his first stop would be the pool hall.

An enticing idea began to itch at me.

"Hi," I smiled back. "Pretty nice machine you got there. How do you like it?"

"I like it fine."

"Pulls that sled no problem, I take it."

"Yeah," he boasted, "I made pretty good time. I left yesterday from the other coast. It's pretty sloppy out there in some places." He cut the engine and light and got off to stretch his stiff legs by walking around a bit, flexing his bluejeaned knees testily.

I shook my head. "Oh, what I'd give for one of those. At least, until it broke down, anyway."

"I know how to fix it."

"Hmm, good for you. I bet the gas is expensive, though, eh?"

"Yeah--but that's not the main problem. It's finding it. I carry lots those jerry cans, though." He motioned behind to his sled which was half loaded with the green army surplus canisters. A rifle lay prominently on top of the rest of the load.

Now in the diffused moonlight of this foggy night, my itch had become a brilliant beacon. "Say, would you be interested in a little job, paying job, to go out on a trip with me tomorrow?"

He eyed me, his own eyes narrowing. "Maybe, maybe not," he said, waiting to hear more.

"You see--Jones, that's not your name, is it?"

He barked out a staccato laugh, his eyes slanted up at the outside corners. "Naw--I got this jacket down in Ottawa when I was there."

"Ottawa, eh? What, taking grade ten, eleven there?"

"Hah! Not me. I kinda went along for the ride, on one of those exchange trips, with the school group going down from Poste. You a teacher? You look kinda familiar."

"Me, no." I was glad now that I'd changed out of my red-striped pants and sawed off those shoulder patches.

I forged ahead with my plan.

"Look--I'd kind of like to catch up to some friends of mine who headed out of town earlier today. I was supposed to go with them, and, uh, kind of missed the boat. Did you pass a couple of people on your way in, a man and young woman, going by

dogteam?"

"Nobody."

"Which way did you come, if I may ask?"

"Down past Penassining Lake--from northwest."

"I see. Well, just the same, if you're interested in a little cash--"

"I got better things to do," he said, cracking a broad but quickly passing smile and sitting astride the machine once more. He looked like he was waiting for me to get out of his way.

I didn't want to give up on such a chance so easily. I stuck out my hand. "Name's Jack," I said. "Jack Green."

He shook my hand, hesitantly: halfway between a limp Inuit-style and a firm white man's handshake.

"And yours?" I pressed him. If I couldn't convince him now, I wanted to be able to look him up, to try again tomorrow when he'd had some rest. We could still catch them at the turn of the Kangsuk, maybe.

"My name is Wasik."

My heart skipped a beat. For an instant I thought, I'm right back in it again.

Then, before starting up the engine, Sandlak's son said to me, "Maybe you can help me with something. You seen a guy around here named Wallin?"

"Wallin?" I said just as cool as you please. "Never heard of him."

THE END