

# Yellowknife

A novel by Steve Zipp

The time is 1998. The millennium looms. Yellowknife, capital of one-third of Canada and home to beasts and bureaucrats, is about to become a major player in the world diamond market.

Electronic Edition 1.1



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## **For Joe and Haz**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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YELLOW  KNIFE

PART 1

*Old Maps*



The border

## CHAPTER 1

The border gave Danny a start. He'd been driving all day, no particular destination in mind, but with a vague stirring of unease at the diminishing traffic, the absence of towns and fields and power lines, the impenetrable canyon of trees boxing in the road.

Suddenly he found himself approaching a bouquet of flagpoles and a large sign that bore the stylized image of an animal, white with a large butt and three legs, and the words North-West Territory. In front of the sign was some kind of fortification, a row of concrete blocks, the sort of thing a person might be glad of in case of machinegun fire.

"Wow," said Danny. He'd heard of the North-West Territory, a vast tract of land perched at the top of Canada, but so remote it was almost mythical. He didn't know you could drive there.

He crossed the border and found a niche hacked out of the trees, just enough room for a smattering of simple buildings. The first was better kept than the others, with a low shady front and the vaguely official look of a frontier post. He parked out front half-expecting a uniformed trooper to appear and demand his papers. Inside, the building was dark and gloomy, empty except for a few flies and a woman snoring fitfully. A poster on the wall invited him to survive a bear attack, while brochures in wire racks threatened to give his pocketbook a mauling. Three chosen at random suggested he catch a fish, bag a bison, and sip champagne at the North Pole. The cost was so outrageous, so beyond his means, that laughter gurgled out of him.

The woman yawned and blinked and said something unintelligible. Danny wondered if she were talking in her sleep.

“What?” he asked.

“I said, ‘Welcome to the Mysterious North.’”

“Yeah, but in what language?”

“Slavey, one of our eight official tongues.”

Danny grinned. “That’s a lot of tongues. How many do you speak?”

“Just three.” She handed him a map, which he accepted gratefully, not having set eyes on one for days. His expression changed when he went outside and spread it on the hood of his car. There was an awful lot of empty space – just lake, forest, and tundra, overlain by three or four roads and the migration routes of mosquitoes. No wonder it was free. The cover said *Official Explorer’s Map*. Probably you were expected to fill it in yourself.

He got back in his car and drove to the next batch of buildings, a gas

station and café, both made from chinked logs and trying hard to look quaint. Several vehicles were parked in front of the café and displaying the most peculiar licence plate he'd ever seen, diecut in the shape of an animal similar to the three-legged one on the sign, but now compressed into a rectangular shape.

He filled up his gas tank, and when he went inside to pay, asked about the odd licence plate. "What's that supposed to be, some kind of rodent? A white rat maybe?"

The man behind the till looked up. "It's a polar bear, symbol of the Territory."

"No kidding? You get many around here?"

The man gave him a dry look. "What do you think?"

"I guess they don't go in much for trees."

The man's face softened as he handed across Danny's change. "Actually they like the shade. Keep an eye open, you might see one."

"Thanks, I will," said Danny. He stepped into the Border Café, its name spelled out with sticks over the entrance, the log walls dark with varnish and sporting a number of leaping fish and furry disembodied heads. The place was empty but for a shady crew of pipe-smokers, and a family of overfed tourists in gay summer clothing, sweating into plates of hamburgers and fries. He selected a place in the corner with his back to the wall and buried his face in a menu. His free hand came to rest alongside a bowl of condiments at the center of the table. After a while he peeped over the top of the menu and surveyed the café.

The family of tourists was just leaving. The other group remained in smoky conversation, gassing about their pipes apparently. Perhaps they

belonged to some sort of smokers club. Marsfontein was mentioned, but not briar or meerschaum, and there was much laughter when someone suggested passing around the peace pipe. Danny returned his attention to the menu and edged his hand closer to the condiments.

“Sputniki,” a character in a checked shirt was saying. The garment had lumpy pockets and was open halfway to his navel. “That’s how Chuckie found his first pipe.”

“One-More-Sample Chuckie,” said another, in a mouse-chew cableknit sweater. He ground his eyebrows together until they resembled a row of knuckles, and muttered something about a cartel.

“Alrosa,” chimed in a third, with short pants and scabby knees, and ears that looked as if they’d been squeezed out of a tube. “They inked a deal with De Beers worth \$550 million. That ought to keep Boris in vodka.”

“I hear Ekati’s going to use a voice stress analyzer.”

“Moneytown oughta get down and plant a juicy one on BHP’s ass.”

A chair scraped and someone on the periphery of the group thrust his elbows forward, a stocky fellow in a rumpled ill-fitting suit. He had blocky cheekbones and a low shelving forehead that compressed the rest of his features into a sharp animal face. He was the only one not smoking.

“Forget about pipes for a minute and ask yourselves this: how many louts does it take to stake half-a-million acres?”

There was a moment of puzzled silence, during which Danny’s hand pounced and carried off a packet of ketchup.

“Lots,” the man went on, “and all of them need logistical support, some place they can call up on the radio and say we’re out of beans and pancake syrup, and poor old Smitty blew the arse-end out of his long-johns and needs

a new pair, and while you're at it, could you send up the Saturday *Globe and Mail*? It's called expediting."

There was an awkward pause during which Danny pocketed more ketchup. Someone cleared his throat and said, "Personally I'd stick with chrome diopside."

Immediately others chimed in with cries of "Pyropes!" and "Ilmenites!"

The man rose out of his chair. "You guys might as well be playing the ponies," he sneered and exposed his hip like a gunfighter. From a holster on his belt he withdrew a palm-sized device, a remote of some sort, which he waved in the air like a weapon. His thumb jabbed down and outside the café a vehicle started up.

"Any of you idiots ever want to make some real money, look me up." He blew imaginary smoke from the remote, threw down a business card as though playing a trump, and walked out.

The pipe enthusiasts regarded each other in astonishment.

"What was all that about?"

"You know him?"

"No, I thought you did."

Danny looked out the window and watched the man climb into a fiery-colored half-ton with muscular fenders and snarling wheelwells. Then his view was blocked by a wide-hipped waitress, come at last to take his order. He put aside the menu and asked for a cup of coffee, waiting as she scribbled on a tiny pad. When she moved out of the way, the truck was gone.

The coffee tasted as though it had been brewed in a crankcase. He cut it with numerous thimbles of oily cream-substitute and sipped in a meditative

fashion, biding his time and continuing to pocket condiments. Finally the members of the pipe club rose to leave. By the time they reached the door, he was on his feet strolling past the table they'd occupied. The business card was still there. He scooped it up and gave it a quick sniff. The embossed text smelled faintly of aftershave.

Knave of Diamonds Expediting  
Carboniferous Building  
Yellowknife, NWT

On the back was the replica of a playing card, the jack garbed in a business suit and clutching a microphone instead of a sword.

Musing, Danny returned to his table. Something about the name, Yellowknife, tugged at his memory. Had it been in the news recently? He swallowed down the remainder of his coffee, now cold and anemic, then paid up and went outside. His vehicle was the only one left, a rust-dappled two-door with mismatched fenders.

“What make is that?” asked the guy who'd explained the polar bear licence plates. He was leaning against the wall, sunning himself.

Danny had no idea, and said so. The car was a mongrel, rebuilt so many times its identity was a mystery. “Say,” he added, “you know of a place called Moneytown?”

“Why, that would be our esteemed capital, Sombak'e. Yellowknife to you.”

“Moneytown,” said Danny. “I like it already.”

“Gold, diamonds, you name it.”

“Seriously?”

“You know what they say about the North. Land of opportunity.”

Inside the car Danny kicked at the gas pedal and stuck a piece of wire through a hole in the dashboard. He wiggled it as though tickling the motor. The car started up, its tailpipe wagging. As he pulled onto the highway, heading north, he racked his brain for everything he knew about the North-West Territory. There wasn't much. Snow and ice, mad trappers, ferocious beasts. And the Klondyke, of course, which was famous for something or other, he couldn't remember what. Wait a minute, hadn't a lot of people died trying to get there?

He knotted his hands around the steering wheel and thrust out his chin, alert for danger. Soon the avenue through the trees narrowed and the road fell into disrepair, giving way to long stretches of slippery gravel. Potholes made the car jump, and dust trailed from his wheels like smoke. A transport truck barrelled around a curve and nearly forced him off the road. A burnt-out RV went by in a ditch. Masses of bugs hurtled into the windshield as though defending their airspace, and ravens, banqueting on roadkill, waited till the last possible moment before heaving themselves into the air with an insolent shrug. One waited too long and Danny had to swerve to avoid hitting it. Instantly there was a grinding noise and the car reeled as though struck. He checked in the rearview mirror half-expecting to see pistons bouncing down the road.

Presently he came to the Mackenzie River, a broad surly flow spilling toward the Arctic Ocean. A ferry took him across and deposited him near the village of Fort Providence, aptly named, he thought, for it was providential he'd made it this far. The smell of hot oil pervaded the car, and the air over the hood was bent like rippled glass. At a truck stop he scraped bug jam off the windshield and exhausted the last of his money for gas and a

loaf of bread. Using the condiments he'd filched from the Border Café, he made himself a mustard, relish, and ketchup sandwich. Chewing, he considered whether or not to push on. Yellowknife was only hours away and there was no sign of darkness.

As he pondered the matter, he noticed a bearded oldtimer dumping a bag of ice into the back of a half-ton. Wondering why, he moved in for a better look and observed a cage with a bear cub inside. Its fur was the same color as the man's beard.

"Is that...?" he began in a wondering voice.

"Yeah, it's a polar bear."

"Wow."

He ogled the cub till the fellow drove off, then jumped back in his car and goosed the motor. Gamely the little vehicle roused itself and wobbled onto the highway. Beyond Fort Providence the road was straight as a ruler and coated with fresh blacktop, but the lack of potholes soon had an adverse effect on Danny. He began to nod off. He'd been wandering the road system for days, and even though the light seemed inexhaustible, he was not. He managed a few more miles, but his eyes were raw and grainy and his head felt heavy as an anchor. He had to get some rest.

He found a side road leading to a borrow pit, screened from the highway by a fringe of stubby spruce. He crawled into a frayed sleeping bag in the back seat, and fell asleep trying to imagine what Yellowknife looked like and why the name troubled him. In his dreams, he had a girlfriend with three tongues and they were rowing a boat across the Explorer's Map, followed closely by a spouting sea monster. A wind sprang up and the boat began to rock, slowing their progress. He stirred and opened his eyes. It

seemed to be morning. The rocking continued. What?

As he sat up, something very large struck the car with a crash, knocking him to the floor. He kicked off the sleeping bag and crawled into the front seat, just as the car shuddered again and slid sideways several feet. The door on the driver's side folded inward with a groan, the window fissuring. The door wobbled and squealed as something wrenched and tugged at it, then disappeared entirely. Through the open space Danny glimpsed a swirl of motion, a furious snorting face, and a massive shape bigger than the car. Desperately he yanked open the passenger-side door and fell out, then shot to his feet and raced blindly toward the trees. From behind him came the sound of rending metal and crunching glass. At the edge of the clearing he risked a glance over his shoulder. A bison was rampaging around the vehicle, the car door dangling from one of its horns.

Danny plunged into the trees, swallowing mosquitoes and inhaling black flies. Branches tore at his arms and punished his face, but he didn't stop until he reached the edge of the highway. He waved down the first vehicle that came by, a half-ton transporting what looked like a yellow battering ram, its blunt head overhanging the roof of the cab. A plastic rock deflector bolted to the hood said, "Denendeh, eh?"

The truck eased to a stop beside Danny and the window rolled down. A man of indeterminate age noted without comment the torn shirt, the blood dribbling down Danny's face from a dozen bites and scratches. He listened to Danny's gasped-out story, then turned to the driver. "He wants a ride to Yellowknife, says a buffalo wrecked his car."

The driver leaned forward for a look and said something in one of the Territory's eight official languages.

“Okay,” said the guy on the passenger’s side, translating. “But you’ll have to ride in the back. Can’t have you bleeding all over the seats.”

“Thanks,” said Danny and clambered over the side. He felt a brief pang of guilt at abandoning his valiant vehicle, but the little car was probably a total write-off. He still couldn’t get over how big the bison was, like a bank vault on feet. What on earth had spurred it to such aggression?

He made himself comfortable among the crates in the back of the truck. Above him, supported by a steel frame, was the yellow battering ram, which he now saw was equipped with fins. The shade of yellow was not warm and buttery, but that of mustard or jaundice, or gold nuggets fresh from the ground with the dirt brushed off, dull and strong. Hardy.

The observation dislodged a memory and all at once he realized why the name “Yellowknife” seemed so familiar. A book he’d read as a kid had taken place there. He couldn’t remember the title, but it was part of a series and others came rushing back. *The Phantom Fish*, *The Door in the Closet*, *The Secret of the Lost Voyage*. Such sweetly innocent books! Under their influence he’d carved a hidden compartment in the wall of his room, and tapped the phone line in his house by attaching earphones to a junction box in the basement. He’d carried a bicycle mirror in his pocket so he could look over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. He’d dusted for prints and memorized the licence plates of passing cars.

Eventually he outgrew the books, but not their influence. When high school ground to a close, he was as eager as everyone else to escape the dreary confines of his home town, but where others headed off in search of big bucks or higher education, he wanted something different. Over the next few years he bounced from job to job, province to province, busing tables,

picking apples, delivering pizzas. He sold magazines door-to-door, painted grain elevators, and raked asphalt till his skin cracked and bubbled in the summer sun. He donned a chicken suit and a sandwich board, and worked as a bum in a toilet factory testing new seat designs.

It seemed an aimless existence, but in fact he was trolling, not drifting. He was waiting for something to strike, though exactly what he could not have said. A predicament, perhaps, or a sudden complication. Was that not how most adventures began? Thus, when he was canned from an assembly-line job for joyriding on a conveyor belt, and evicted from a boarding house for causing a flood when he fell asleep in the shower, he did not curse his luck. Adversity, he sensed, was a sort of hazard or frontier, the kind that could not be actively sought or courted. It had to arrive of its own accord, like love or a bolt of lightning.

And sure enough, the very moment he found himself penniless and marooned in an area so remote it was not even a province, Yellowknife had materialized before him like a lost city. It was sitting at the end of the highway like a pot of gold. If he couldn't find adventure there, and fortune too, he would not find them anywhere. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine what fate had in store for him. A house on a cliff? A secret panel? An enigma or two? He didn't see why not. He had a feeling anything would be possible in Yellowknife.

Presently the road shaped itself around the northern end of Great Slave Lake and crossed another border, this one unmarked. It was a new geological province, a land of shear zones and volcanic rock and rich mineral deposits. The trees turned feeble and spindly, and the road began to ramble, twisting itself around warty outcrops of rock, until at last it arrived

at a large rent in the shoreline where 100 streets were scratched into primordial bedrock.

Yellowknife.

It was bracketed by a pair of mines, Con and Giant, their names reminiscent of a fable out of Aesop. A welcome sign stood next to a bulbous cargo plane that had crash-landed alongside the highway. Next came a shiny suburb of new homes, looking as if they were made of plastic, followed by a gypsy-like encampment of house trailers. The center of town was distinguished by a row of drab office towers that might have been airlifted in from some Eastern Bloc country. The roads sagged, trees were shorter than telephone poles, and gangs of ravens soared overhead like black-jacketed teens.

Danny detrucked at a traffic light and reached into his pocket for the business card he'd salvaged from the Border Café. A passerby pointed out the Carboniferous Building. A few minutes later he was inside the lobby, clutching the card like a lottery ticket and peering intently at the building's directory, looking for Knave of Diamonds Expediting. He imagined himself walking in, tossing the card on a polished desk and declaring, "Here's one idiot who wants to make some real money." If the card's owner wasn't there, Danny would plant himself and wait. He'd come back every day. He'd bowl them over with his tenacity. They'd beg him to take a job.

A mousy woman with a backpack strode into the lobby. As she pushed the elevator button, she glanced at Danny and noticed his bloodstreaked face. "You okay?" she asked.

The smell of shampoo and freshly laundered denim wafted over him as he showed her the card. "You know where this place is? It's not on the

directory.”

She took one look and her friendliness vanished. “Sorry, pal. Place went belly-up months ago.”

The elevator doors parted and she stepped inside, followed by a man with a briefcase. Danny let the card fall to the floor and jammed his hands in his pockets. He ambled down a long sloping hill where a bay sparkled in the sun. At the bottom, gathered around a huge loaf of rock, was an easygoing collection of shacks, docks, and dirt roads. Some of the places were wrecks, but most were tiny, neat and colorful, the sort of dwellings that hobbits, if they lived above ground, might build.

After a bit of searching he found an empty Skidoo crate in a vacant lot. “Arf arf,” he said, and crawled inside.

## CHAPTER 2

The elevator doors no sooner closed than a phone began to ring, an odd metallic jangling that seemed to issue from the walls. Nora assumed it was the guy beside her getting a call on his cellphone, but she was too annoyed to pay much attention. The business card still had her smoldering.

The ringing persisted. It wasn't the guy beside her after all. He was looking around too.

Her eyes alighted on the elevator controls directly in front of her – one button for each of the floors, buttons to open and close the doors, a red button in case of emergencies, and below that a metal panel with the word “Phone” on it.

She opened the panel and picked up the black handset. The ringing stopped. Wondering if there was some sort of emergency, she placed the

phone against her ear and said, “Hello?”

“Is this the Diamond Bureau?” The voice had a hollow sound to it, as though it were coming through a tube.

“No,” she said curtly, “it’s an elevator in the Carboniferous Building.”

“Sure, sure, I understand, you can’t reveal your location. I just want to ask a question.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you.”

“Wait, wait, don’t hang up. What I want to know is, when someone leaves the Territory, is their car searched at the border?”

A smile leavened Nora’s features. “Absolutely. They do a body cavity search as well. No holes barred.”

“Are you serious?”

“Shit happens. By the way, the Bureau traces all incoming calls.”

“Gotta run,” gulped the voice, and the line went dead.

The elevator had stopped and the man beside her was holding open the doors. There was a puzzled look on his face. “You get many calls here?”

“Wrong number,” she told him. She stepped out and headed down a short corridor lined with cubbyholes not much larger than closets, separated by movable wall dividers. Hers, one of the lucky ones with a window, was jammed with camping gear. There was a laptop computer on her desk, a framed photo of a skinny-looking guy in a bug hat, and histological slides stacked like dominoes. Several rollup blinds that served as scrolls were fastened to a windowless wall. Study skins spilled out of an open drawer, and a collection of tiny skulls grinned from a shelf. The skulls were real; she had collected and prepared them herself, first digesting the flesh away with an enzyme called trypsin, then bleaching the delicate bones to an

aesthetic whiteness. The hardest part was spooning out the brain through the *foramen magnum* at the base of the skull.

Removing her backpack, she powered up the laptop and stood for a moment regarding the skulls, then placed one in the palm of her hand and sank into a chair as though to meditate upon it. An identifying number was written in India ink across the cranium, but she knew all of her skulls by heart and this one in particular. It was a Richardson's ground squirrel, or gopher, a species that had played a pivotal role in her life.

She'd grown up in a prairie town with a couple of brothers who, at a certain age, had enjoyed snapping the eyeballs out of garter snakes, shooting down birds with slingshots, and drowning gophers. Why boys engaged in such activities was beyond her, but at the time just about everyone acted mysteriously – parents, teachers, even friends who sometimes talked of nothing but new Barbie outfits.

One day while trudging down a gravel road she spotted the oddest creature. It was just far enough away so that she couldn't see it clearly, but what she saw reminded her of one of those mythical beasts composed of two different creatures. The front half was gopher, but the back was like...well, she didn't know what. The way it scrambled across the road was so unnatural it sent a chill through her. Racing ahead, she saw it disappear down a hole in a vacant field. She stood there panting, looking at the dark entrance for a while and wondering what secrets it held, then she turned and ran all the way home. There was a way to unlock this particular mystery. She had seen her brothers do it often enough.

She found a length of string and returned to the gopher hole, making a noose in the end and spreading it around the entrance, then lying belly-down

on the hot crumbly dirt, her face shoved in a patch of weeds. Amazingly she did not have long to wait. The gopher's head appeared, its dark lustrous eyes peering cautiously in all directions. It looked directly at her, but apparently without seeing her, for it emerged a little farther out of the burrow. As soon as its front legs were clear, she yanked on the string. The noose tightened around the gopher's middle and for a moment she felt nothing but exultation as the little creature's struggles were transmitted to her hand by the string. Then she got a clear look at its hindquarters and all happiness fled.

From the midsection down, its body was a shrivelled hairless mass, the skin black and twisted like a crumpled glove. Its forelegs scrambled frantically as it tried to escape, dragging the useless remainder of its body across the ground.

Nora stared at it in horror, then dragged it to a nearby ditch where there was a bit of water, and drowned it. She was close to tears and unable to look at the misshapen body as she dug a hole and buried it. She did not mark the place with a cross of Popsicle sticks the way her friends did when a pet died, nor did she ever mention the event to another person. Afterward, though, she felt a vague sense of satisfaction, of having performed a difficult but necessary task. A day or two passed, and the incident was swallowed up in the recesses of her memory, not to reappear until years later when she was at university, studying wildlife biology.

She was drawn to this discipline not just by her love of the outdoors, but also by the type of people it tended to attract, people who were dedicated and committed, people who approached their work with a sort of evangelical fervor. Equally important, it was a field in which a woman might find a

place for herself and be judged on her own merit, though of course there were always a few bozos to deal with, relics and throwbacks with a bad Victorian attitude. She once had a prof who said women were unsuited for limnology because they could not pee out of motorboats. She created a sensation in class by offering to prove him wrong.

At length she found herself pursuing a doctorate at the U of S, where she renewed her acquaintance with *Spermophilus richardsonii*. There she learned that gophers had a darker side, hosting a flea with a taste for the plague. One day while performing a necropsy, she paused with scalpel in hand and was visited by the long dormant memory of the animal she'd slain as a child. At first the recollection intrigued her, for she found herself speculating about the nature of the injury it had sustained. Most likely a car had run over it, though the shrivelled appearance of the hindquarters suggested that the damage had not been recent.

She paused again, appalled by a sudden insight. Perhaps the animal had been coping with life very well. Perhaps crossing paths with Nora had been a far greater misfortune than its injury. Perhaps what she had supposed to be an act of mercy was really a shameless act of cruelty. A profound sense of remorse swept over her.

After graduating she decided to put some distance between herself and gophers, and came to Yellowknife to work for the Territorial government. Ironically, it was there she discovered that John Richardson, the namesake of gophers, had earned his fame in the North, not for scientific achievements, but his role in a certain ill-fated expedition, during which he put a ball through the brain of one of his companions.

“Alas, poor Yorick,” said a voice as she contemplated the skull in her

hand. Looking up, she saw one of her colleagues, a biologist named Smolt, grinning at her from the doorway.

“The North is full of hamlets,” she observed dryly, getting to her feet. “Is it time?”

“Afraid so.”

She returned the skull to its place on the shelf and headed down the corridor with Smolt, hazarding guesses about their new boss.

“It’s a direct appointment,” he told her. “Some guy from another bureau.”

“I heard they wanted to get rid of him so bad they were willing to lose a position to do it.”

“A backroom deal. I hate that sort of thing.”

“Me too, but look on the bright side. If he’s got no background in wildlife, maybe we can slip a few things past him.”

Smolt brightened. “Fluorescent bone labelling.”

“A new beetle colony.”

Entering a windowless boardroom and finding it empty, they flopped into chairs and put their feet up on the conference table. Presently three others drifted in. Like Smolt, they were bearded, clad in jeans and hiking boots, and armed with belt knives. They gave the impression of belonging to a fraternity, or perhaps a clan of hillbillies; and though they differed in age, girth, and height, it was principally the shape, color, and density of their beards that told them apart. Smolt was patchy and ragged, Ungle was a vigorous unchecked bush, Peck was so downy his chin showed through, and Vomer was a black troika of hanks that depended from his face like barbels.

“Ah, this must be the place.”

All conversation ceased as a pair of strangers entered the room. One was middle-aged and bald as a battering ram, the other a young man with a dongle in his nostril.

“I’m Harvey Brassclick,” announced the hairless one. He shut the door and strode to the head of the table. He was clad in a glaring yellow jersey with a large B on the front, the collar of a white shirt and tie just visible at the neck.

Peck hopped to his feet and stuck out a hand. “Dr. Peck, avifauna.”

“Avi what?”

“I work on birds, sir.”

They shook hands and Brassclick turned to the others, who introduced themselves one by one.

“Dr. Vomer, fish.”

“Dr. Smolt, fur.”

“Dr. Ungle, big game.”

Nora remained seated and did not offer her hand. “Dr. Lobachevski,” she said in a chilly voice, “small mammals.”

Brassclick looked puzzled. “You mean, like rabbits?”

“There aren’t any in the North,” she said contemptuously.

“No rabbits? But I’ve seen them myself.”

“In pet stores, maybe, but not in the wild. Hares yes, rabbits no.”

“All right, hares it is then.” He paused. “Anything else?”

“Voles, lemmings, shrews—”

“Rodents, in other words.” He inclined his dome at the fellow with the nose ornament. “By the way, this is Pfang. You and he have something in common.”

Pfang had a bland young face with epicanthic eyefolds. He said, “The p is virtual, like in psycho.”

The biologists looked at him blankly. They had no idea what he was talking about. “What’s your field?” asked Vomer.

“Mouses.”

The looks got blanker.

“So this is all of you?” Brassclick asked. “Five biologists? I thought there were more.”

“The rest are in the field.”

“Well then, I’ll keep this short. Basically I just wanted to introduce myself and say how delighted I am to be with a organ of government whose chief concern is the environment.”

“That’s not the impression you gave at the BEARP hearings,” said Nora.

Brassclick peered at her. “You mean EARP, don’t you? Have we met before?”

“You were pretty dismissive about the environmental consequences of dewatering lakes.”

“I was with Diamonds then. Now I’m working for Wildlife. Don’t worry, we’ll give those guys a good face rub at the next hearings.” His brow creased. “Lobachevski – is that Russian?”

“No.”

“I was in Russia recently.” He paused for a moment as though hailed by a passing thought. “It’s surprising how much we have in common. Did you know that the Slavic and Slavey peoples are distantly related?”

Nora straightened up in her chair to object, but he forestalled her with a raised hand. “Anyway, let me tell you a little about myself. I’ve worked for

the Territorial government for 20 years, I'm married with three kids, and I play hockey in the oldtimers league. As for my knowledge of wildlife, I readily admit I have none. That's your job. Mine is to sit through endless meetings, move mountains of paper, and wage holy war on other bureaus."

He rambled on a bit longer, hinting at future challenges, before departing with his flunky. The biologists immediately began dissecting his performance. Nora kept her views to herself, but her antipathy to diamonds was well-known. During the Bogus Environmental Assessment Review Process, as Nora preferred to call it, she'd intervened not as a government biologist but as a private citizen. She'd pleaded for the need to respect the land's spiritual values, knowing all the while she was not likely to exert one iota of influence, yet determined to have her say. She'd been especially critical of BHP's plan to "dewater" a number of lakes to expose the diamond-bearing volcanic pipes underneath. "Deflower" was more like it.

As she'd left the presenters' table, a fish in the front row of the audience had stood and bowed to her. It was only someone with a paper-maché head, a bit of theater dreamed up by local environmentalists, but it was the sole satisfaction she got for her efforts. By the end of the year BHP and its junior partner, Dia Met, had been granted approval to proceed with the construction of Ekati, Canada's first diamond mine.



The rest of the day she spent holed up in her office, toiling over a paper on the copulation dynamics of microtine rodents. In particular, she was working on a formula to determine if female remating improved the

survivability of offspring. There was lots of racy terminology – sperm choice, interejaculate, kamikaze spermatozoa – but the math was knotty and her progress slow. When the phone rang, she picked it up gratefully.

“Wildlife,” she said. “Lobachevski here.”

The voice on the other end was distorted by a ghostly twanging, as though the phone line belonged to a stringed instrument. She pressed the receiver more firmly against her ear and said, “Sorry, I can’t hear you. The line’s terrible.”

Something about offices?

The noise receded a bit and the word became clearer. “...orifices...”

“What?”

“I crave your orifices.”

She remembered the nutty conversation in the elevator earlier in the day, and wondered if the caller had somehow tracked her down to retaliate for her remark about a cavity search. Then the noise on the line disappeared completely and the voice became sharp and clear. “Nora? Are you still there?”

“Hugo,” she said, smiling in relief, her eyes going to the photo on her desk. They’d not seen each other in weeks. “Where are you?”

“Your place. I just got back. You leaving soon? It’s nearly five.”

“Soon as I get off the phone.”

“Good, I’ll pick you up.”

She was glad to get away. About all she had to show for the entire afternoon was the addition of another keyword entry for her paper: cryptic female choice. She took the stairs down to the main floor, stepped outside into a perfect summer day, golden with light and heat, and in a few minutes

was heading down the long hill toward Yellowknife Bay. It was here the town had first begun, crawling out of the lake during the Depression years like a newly hatched creature. In those days there'd been water taxis, and men whipsawing lumber, and an outdoor hotel that charged a buck a night to sleep under a tree, and characters like May Rice the flying housemaid, and old Tom Doorknob who'd made a fortune delivering buckets of water suspended from a yoke across his shoulders.

Since then Yellowknife had moved inland, eager to modernize, to shed its frontier image. Now it was as sterile and homogenized as any southern community, proud of its traffic lights and parking meters, its chicken joints and pizza mills. Only Old Town, a disorderly collection of homes and shacks and businesses scattered along the shore, had retained any northern flavor. Here floatplanes dropped out of the sky for sudden landings, and vessels of every description thronged the bay, including a community of jolly houseboats anchored off a nearby island.

At the end of a spidery dock Nora tugged off her boots and socks, hiked up her pantlegs, and sat with her feet in the water. Closing her eyes, she listened to the drifting cries of the gulls, the lazy slap of the waves, and soon a sense of peace flowed over her, dissolving away the day's cares and frustrations. Her new boss. Gophers and telephones. Diamonds...

Presently she heard the sound of an approaching motor, and rose as an aluminum boat angled toward her, Hugo in the stern, his arm bent behind him as he steered the outboard. His head was encased in a bug hat, and his t-shirt was stencilled with the image of a giant mosquito carrying off a caribou. His arms were peppered with insect bites.

Nora hopped into the boat as soon as it was alongside the dock, and

kissed him through the mesh that shielded his face. “Your poor arms,” she said as she sat down on a bench opposite him.

“No worse than usual,” he replied as he swung the boat away from the dock. “By the way, I have a surprise for you.”

“Is it my birthday again?”

“Nope.” He patted a field notebook that was resting on the seat beside him. “I haven’t had time to analyze the data yet, but I think I’ve found a new flyway. I traced it all the way from Coppermine to the East Arm.”

“That’s wonderful, Hugo.”

He picked up the notebook, orange hard covers enclosing stitched waterproof pages. “Not to mention some anecdotal evidence of a new species, one that’s remarkably resistant to the cold. It seems that –”

“Hugo, that’s not your only copy, is it?”

He looked up at the notebook, which he’d raised above his head. The pages were riffling in the wind. “It is.”

“Perhaps you ought not to wave it around so.”

“Right. It’d be a disaster if it went overboard.”

The boat was skipping across the waves yet his hand remained aloft, and now a saucy grin spread across his face. She looked at him warily. “Why do I get the feeling a disaster is about to occur?”

“Beats me,” he said with a shrug, and tossed the notebook into the air. It flapped briefly like a flightless bird and landed behind them with a splash.

“Oops,” he said.

“How clumsy of you.”

“Accidents do happen.” Lazily he swung the boat around and approached the notebook, which, instead of sinking to the bottom of the bay,

was somehow still afloat.

“I sewed a bladder into the spine,” he said happily as he fished it out of the water.

She nodded appreciatively. More than one field season had been lost when a canoe overturned. “Nice. Is this your surprise?”

“Nope.” Suddenly he was serious as a trout. He cut the motor and leaned forward. “Stuffing the bladder into the notebook made me think of you.”

“How romantic.”

“We’ve been together quite a while, haven’t we?”

Her heart sank. They’d had this conversation before. “Hugo,” she began, but he forestalled her by reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a small plush box with a hinged lid. She stared at it in despair, knowing what was inside.

Gently he shoved it into her hand. “Go on, Nora, open it.”

Reluctantly she lifted the lid and looked inside. All at once her face cleared and she laughed out loud. “Hugo, it’s wonderful!”

She slipped the ring on her finger and held out her hand to admire the tiny black stone. “What is it?” she asked.

“Anthracite,” he said proudly.

### CHAPTER 3

One of the first things Danny noticed about Yellowknife was the dogs. They were everywhere, and not just coddled pets or footloose vagrants, but working dogs chained to posts, and outdoor enthusiasts going for canoe rides in the bay, and celebrities with their own tour vehicle, a sort of mobile condominium in the back of a pickup truck, five or ten compartments to a side with straw bedding leaking out wire windows. Every year they competed in the Yellowknife Dog Derby, the Yukon Quest, the Iditarod.

At night Danny would lie on top of his crate and listen to their howling. He felt a certain kinship with them, though he couldn't say why. Perhaps it had something to do with his diet. Thanks to the huge canine population, he never went hungry. All he had to do was slide over a fence and empty a dog bowl into his pocket. If there was a mutt in the yard, it was more likely to

lick than bite. Sometimes, though, he'd arrive in a neighborhood to find the dogs worked up and their bowls uniformly empty. It didn't take long to figure out he had competition.

Ravens.

They worked in pairs, one of them acting as decoy while the other gobbled down food. They went about it with such gusto that it was difficult to tell which they enjoyed more – the eating or the hoodwinking. Clearly they held dogs in low esteem, mocking and ridiculing them at every opportunity, and occasionally hatching fiendish plots against them. Once, Danny saw a raven with a bone in its beak flying seductively low, followed by an Irish setter with a red bandanna looped stylishly around its neck. The raven flapped into the middle of a busy street and deposited the bone in the path of an oncoming car. The dog leaped forward and snatched up the bait, looking around in surprise as tires squealed and the car slewed to a stop. Tail aloft, it trotted away unconcernedly, looking back at the angry motorist and wondering what all the fuss was about, while the raven chortled in delight from a nearby lamppost.

Shortly afterward, Danny happened to spy a huge bag of dogfood in someone's front yard. It was a brand he'd never tried before. Impulsively he vaulted the fence and loped across the lawn. When he tore open the bag, what he discovered inside was not the usual slaggy lumps or tooth-jarring nuggets, but bone-shaped biscuits with a rich crumbly texture. Gleefully he plunged his arms in up to the elbows and raised a double handful to his nose so he could sniff the wheaty aroma.

It was only then he noticed a man leaning against the fence, watching him intently. Gulping, Danny let the tantalizing biscuits slip between his fingers.

Whenever he went foraging, he always equipped himself with a number of alibis, but in this situation none seemed appropriate. Never before had he been caught so redhanded, and there was little point in embarrassing himself further by uttering obvious lies. So without a word he straightened up, brushed off his hands, and left the yard peaceably. He decided not to bolt as he might have done on other occasions, but wait and see what fate had in store for him. Probably it would be nothing more than a good scolding. He didn't mind that. A good scolding never hurt anyone.

The fellow came nearer. "Ever try that stuff with milk?" he asked.

Danny didn't understand him at first. "What?"

"Dry dogfood. I did. Figured it might be like breakfast cereal. Big mistake, even with sugar."

He was shorter than Danny, with a crooked nose, mischievous eyes, and a few sparse hairs on his upper lip and chin. Though it was summer, he was wearing a down jacket that had seen better days and a pair of greasy snowmobile boots. His legs were skinny as twigs and slightly bowed.

"I'll tell you something else," he went on. "That stuff may be okay in summer, but you'll never last the winter on it. Gotta have fat." He looked Danny over. "You new in town?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

As they walked down the street he introduced himself as Freddy and began a mangled account of Yellowknife's attractions. He was particularly proud of the recent influx of fastfood joints and a reclaimed sewage lagoon with a nature walk around it. Overlooking the bay was Copilot's Monument, celebrating the oft-forgot heroes of northern aviation. The main

street, Franklin Avenue, was named after an explorer best known for his ability to get lost and inspire cannibalism among his followers. The ground beneath their feet was rotten with tunnels, the result of over 50 years of mining. The sidewalks were paved with gold ore.

Freddy stooped suddenly.

“What is it?” Danny asked, for he too had seen a yellow glint.

“Bottle cap.” Freddy pocketed it and indicated the building they had stopped before, a bar called the Gold Range. “This is the most famous place in town. Even the tour buses stop here. Town’s declared it an historic site.”

There was nothing special about it that Danny could see. “Why?”

“Sells more beer than any other place in Canada, and you know what that means.”

“Lots of drunks?”

“Lots of empties. At ten cents a pop, it’s a quick way to make a few bucks. Plus, an empty bottle is like a lottery ticket.” He spotted one standing at the base of a parking meter and snatched it up. “Here, take a look.”

Danny lifted the bottle doubtfully. “What am I looking for?”

“A mouse. Find one inside and the brewery will pay a fortune to hush it up.”

Danny held the bottle to his eye like a spyglass. “What about a cigarette butt? Is that worth anything?”

“Only if you smoke.”

The bottle went into Freddy’s pocket, and his recitation of the town’s features continued. There was a floating restaurant, and a church with scales like a fish, and a government building that looked like a tin can. An entire

subdivision of log homes was engineered to take advantage of the permafrost and produce sunken living-rooms. In winter there was a carnival, a snowmobile parkade, and an ice bridge that spanned Yellowknife Bay.

As Freddy spoke, fanciful illustrations sprang up in Danny's mind. He was particularly enchanted by the idea of a bridge made entirely out of ice, and was about to ask if only skaters were allowed to use it, when he noticed a tracked vehicle on the other side of the street. He'd never seen anything like it before. It was the size and color of a small schoolbus, casually parked beside a fried chicken joint as though waiting for take-out.

"Say, what is that, anyway?" he asked, pointing.

"A Bombardier. It's used for commercial fishing in the winter."

The name, given an English rather than a French pronunciation, conjured up a fresh image, that of fishermen lobbing bombs through holes in the ice. Sort of like mining for fish, he supposed. With Yellowknife being a mining town, explosives were probably as common as firecrackers. "Say, that reminds me, I got a lift into town on a truck carrying something an awful lot like a missile."

Freddy grinned. "A cruise missile, probably. The US was testing them in the Mackenzie valley when the staking rush began. They sold off the unused ones as surplus. Exploration companies picked them up for a song."

"To blow things up?"

"Why else would you need a missile? It's how they expose diamond pipes."

"Wow," said Danny happily. Yellowknife was turning out to be everything he'd hoped it would be.

At last they arrived at a cafeteria called the Greasy Nugget, a large and

busy place that rang with the happy clank of plates and cutlery, the chatter of numerous conversations, and the droning of a TV tuned to the weather channel. Danny sniffed the air rapturously and trailed after Freddy, who kept up his patter as he zigzagged through the tables.

“People come to Yellowknife for all sorts of reasons,” he said over his shoulder. “Gold and diamonds, sure, but that’s not all. Some come here looking for the damndest stuff, like bones. Really. Bones, fur hats, big fish, oil and gas. Missile testing grounds. Who knows what it’s gonna be next?”

He darted towards a table that had just been vacated and sank into a chair. “Trouble is, a lotta people make a big mistake when they come here. They figure the North is just like any other place, only colder. They don’t realize things are seriously different. Soon as they cross that border – ”

He paused, noticing something on the tabletop lying among the dirty dishes. It was a delinquent french fry. He picked it up and wagged it at Danny like a finger. “Soon as they cross that border, things change. And I’m not just talking about bad roads or higher prices. Borders exist for a reason.”

He looked at the french fry as though seeing it for the first time, and popped it into his mouth. “Of course, for some folks that doesn’t matter. All they want to do is hide, sink out of sight. Vanish. Others are just plain screwy. We get a lot of them. Something to do with the North Pole, maybe. It attracts them, I think. Like, there’s metal filings in their heads or something.”

He picked up a fork and poked a remnant wad of mashed potatoes on one of the plates. He flattened it so he could doodle on it, then stirred it into a slurry with a few blobs of gravy. Glancing up, he saw a look of raw hunger

on Danny's face and grinned slyly. "Oh, right, I almost forgot. Go ahead and order. Anything you want. I'll clear off the table."

Danny sprang to his feet and hurried over to the food counter, where he seized a tray and began piling on plastic-wrapped sandwiches, bowls of salad and jello, slabs of cherry pie and black forest cake, glasses of milk and juice and pop. His tray was nearly full by the time he reached a section where heated rectangular bins were set into the counter. Delicately he raised one of the lids and staggered back as an intoxicating brew of aromas wafted out. A woman clad in white moved into his field of vision.

"Anything from the grill?" she asked, tapping a menu board on the wall behind her. It was devoted exclusively to northern fare – fried ptarmigan, pike and chips, sweet and sour bearpaw, scrambled caribou brains on toast, detoxified polar bear liver and onions...

"I'll have one of everything."

The woman didn't bat an eye. "Better fetch another tray."

"Right." Eagerly he darted along the counter and snatched up not one, but two, just to be on the safe side. Returning, he waited as the woman relayed his order through a small window that communicated with the kitchen. She was almost done when she turned and asked:

"How do you like your brains, firm or runny?"

Danny opened his mouth to reply, then paused as though unable to make up his mind. A frown passed over his face.

"Well?" asked the woman.

"Just a minute."

He turned and scanned the cafeteria uncertainly, then stepped away from the counter.

“Hey, where you going?”

Ignoring her, he plunged in among the mob of diners, his pace quickening as he approached the table where he’d last seen Freddy. It was still laden with dishes, but not a morsel of food was left on them. They looked as if they’d been licked clean, and Freddy was nowhere in sight.

Instinctively he made for the door, knowing there was not a moment to lose. Outside he broke into a trot, angling across the street and dodging traffic. Somewhere behind him a horn began to honk, but he didn’t slow down or look back. His mind was filled with determination. The game was not over yet.

Down a number of blocks he sped, not slowing till he came to a familiar street. He eased up to a fence and hooked his elbows over it. Inside the yard, staggering up the pathway beneath an immense bag of dogfood, was Freddy.

“Well, well,” Danny said with a wolfish grin.

Freddy halted a moment, peeped out from beneath the bag, then scuttled up the walk to the gate. Danny got there first.

“Not so fast, Freddy, that bag belongs to me.”

“No way.”

“I saw it first.”

“It’s mine now.”

“Wanna bet?”

They struggled at the gate, Freddy trying to open the latch, Danny trying to seize the bag, each denouncing the other as a thief. As their voices grew louder, the top of the bag came undone and dogfood rained onto the walk. The front door of the house banged open and someone started hollering.

Danny whirled and ran. Halfway down the street he heard noisy footsteps behind him, but it was only Freddy chugging along in his snowmobile boots and trailing feathers from a fresh tear in his jacket. After a couple of blocks they both slowed to a walk, ambling along side-by-side as they regained their breath.

“I think there’s a moral here somewhere,” said Danny.

“There’s a moral in everything,” chortled Freddy. He reached into his pocket and his eyes lit up. Somehow a handful of dogfood had found its way there. He offered some to Danny, who, in accepting, decided it would be indelicate to bring up the business at the cafeteria.

“This stuff is packed with vitamins,” Freddy observed, his mouth full. “Twelve, I think. Plus shark cartilage. Said so right on the package.”

“Shark cartilage? What’s that for?”

“Keeps your coat shiny.”

“Cool. Why don’t you check your other pocket?”

Sure enough Freddy found another handful. He draped an arm over Danny’s shoulder as they walked along and munched. “I think you’re gonna like Yellowknife.”

## CHAPTER 4

Several years ago while paddling to work, Nora noticed a man standing motionless in a patch of horsetails. He was wearing chest-waders and entangled in some sort of floating cage. One arm jutted out at an awkward angle.

“Are you okay?” she called out.

When there was no response, she aimed the canoe in his direction and drifted closer.

“Buzz off,” he hissed. “You’ll scare them away.”

She looked around. “Who?”

“The mosquitoes.”

Then she noticed that his arm, which she’d thought was hairy, was covered with them. “What on earth are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m entomologizing.”

His name was Hugo Poisson, and he worked for the Mosquito Research Institute. Most of his summer was spent in the field marking mosquitoes with dots of paint so he could chart their ever-changing flyways. They migrated in the same fashion as caribou, forming hordes instead of herds, and the information he gathered was considered so vital to tourism that it was incorporated every year in the Explorer’s Map.

He was the gentlest person Nora had ever met, with a deep reverence for all living things. Despite his work, no insect ever had cause to fear him. He never swatted a fly or crushed a bug. When he and Nora went camping, he used a turkey baster to capture mosquitoes in their tent and expel them outside.

“Go,” he would say, “peddle your genes elsewhere.”

The relationship developed cautiously. It wasn’t till she got him into the sack that she learned why. His legs had been disfigured in a kitchen fire when he was a child in Montreal, and he’d grown up so self-conscious that he never appeared bare-legged anywhere, even at home. As a result he’d never learned how to swim, and the only sport he’d ever played was hockey, though not for long. He’d quit when the other kids teased him for arriving at the arena with all his gear on.

His legs looked as though they’d been assembled by piecework, a quilt of shiny crinkly skin with ropes of scar tissue defining the boundary of each graft. Somehow she managed to conceal her reaction. How could she tell him it was not the appearance of his legs that distressed her, but what they reminded her of? She looked deep within herself, trying to sort through the twisting skein of emotions, trying to isolate the thread called love, make sure

it was not tainted with pity or guilt. At times the task seemed impossible, and certainly wasn't made any easier when he starting talking about marriage, an institution she had little faith in to begin with.

It was the piece of coal that brought her around. What other man would have understood her well enough to flout convention in such a way? If she were going to get married, an overpriced diamond was the last thing she wanted as a symbol of commitment. Coal was far better. It was useful, it produced heat, it got your hands dirty. That's what love was all about – fire, not cold brilliance.

At work the first to comment on the ring was Peck, who plucked at his downy chin and declared in a squeaky voice, “What's this? A courtship display?”

Vomer leaned in for a look, exuding fishy breath. “Interesting stone. Say, who are you getting married to, the devil?”

“Is he a good dancer?” persisted Peck. “Lots of vocalizing and odd facial contortions?”

“Does he pick fights with complete strangers?” asked Ungle. “Does he run headfirst into trees?”

“Has his head changed shape?” asked Vomer.

“Freshly killed mouse on your pillow every morning?” asked Smolt.

Nora submitted to the kidding gracefully, knowing their delight in macabre humor. Only Clobbitt, the polar bear biologist, remained silent. He'd just returned from the Calgary Zoo where he'd taken an orphaned cub; its mother had been killed by an exploration crew on the Arctic coast. The cub was supposed to go by air, but got bumped when it reached Yellowknife. Clobbitt had ended up delivering it himself, renting a truck

and driving south. On the way he'd cleaned out all the ice in every gas station he passed, to keep the cub from overheating.

He was a taciturn individual, not given to interoffice visits, so Nora was surprised when he appeared in her doorway later that day. His beard was a snowy drift that veered to one side, full of knots and whorls. He was the oldest of the biologists and his job was the most dangerous. His own office resembled a weapons locker, with pepper spray, bird bombs, thunderflashes, a riot gun that fired rubber batons, and a .45 caliber revolver that he strapped to his parka when he was out on the sea ice, tagging bears. He was the most safety conscious of the biologists, yet had experienced more bad luck than all of them put together. He'd been mauled, wrecked, lost, blown up and shot at. Rumors swirled around him like a blizzard. According to one, he'd discovered a perfectly preserved mastodon while doing a denning survey in the High Arctic. Unfortunately he and his crew got weathered in, and ran so short of supplies they were forced to dine on prehistoric steak. When the weather finally let up, they'd eaten such a hole in the beast he never reported the discovery. From that point on, it was said, his ill fortune began.

“Article 35.18.1 of the collective agreement,” he began.

Nora was still laboring over her remating formula, bogged down with statistics. Thank god for pivot tables, she thought as she looked up.

“Pardon?”

“Marriage leave. You're entitled to five days, provided you give two weeks notice.”

He'd claimed it numerous times himself, though none of his unions had produced any offspring – a good thing according to the other biologists, in case the propensity of male polar bears to consume their young had rubbed

off on Clobbitt. The idea was hilarious, since everyone knew his vacations were devoted to visiting zoos he'd sent cubs to. When no one was looking, he'd remove a chunk of frozen seal blubber from a canvas bag and lob it into the enclosure.

“Hope you have better luck than me,” he said as he left.

Luck? She turned in her chair, musing over the leave form he'd handed her. Luck would have nothing to do with the success of her marriage. Of that she was certain.

Through the window she noticed a helicopter setting off on a geophysical survey, towing a cylindrical device used for measuring magnetic anomalies in bedrock. “Kimberlite torpedoes” the local press had dubbed them. To Nora they resembled nothing so much as giant phalluses.

Scowling, she turned her back on the sight and put the leave form in her “To Do” basket.



Later, Brassclick convened another meeting and announced his first official act as Head of Wildlife. He'd requisitioned a fleet of laserized paper shredders.

“Innovation, it's the only way to stay relevant,” he told them, though the announcement seemed at odds with the jersey he was wearing, a ghastly yellow replica from the earliest years of the NHL. On the chest was the silhouette of a pudgy bear with the team's name, Boston Bruins, arched above it in boxy letters. The sweater looked like an heirloom.

Nora glanced around, but her colleagues' expressions remained safely hidden behind their beards. At one time she'd thought the whiskers were

purely symbolic, a kind of metaphor for the Bush. Now she believed their chief purpose was to save face, to protect their owners from bureaucratic idiocy, and not just that of others but their own as well. Government had a way of warping thought and twisting speech. It was an occupational hazard.

“Very soon the North-West Territory will cease to exist,” Brassclick said.

The biologists nodded sleepily, and Brassclick droned on about new challenges, unprecedented change, the end of the century.

Ungle whinnied suddenly. “What do you mean, cease to exist?”

Nora sighed. The North-West Territory had been calving provinces and territories for over a century. Next year the Eastern Arctic would be sliced off to form Nunavut. As for the remainder, no one knew for certain whether it would keep its present name or adopt a new one. Denendeh, Arctica, and Rupert’s Land were being floated around, though popularity was growing for the waggish name of Bob. Uncertainty even extended to the bear-shaped licence plates. People in the West were loath to give them up, even though the majority of polar bears resided in the East.

Ungle listened as all this was explained to him, then straightened his beard and frowned. “What’s that got to do with us?”

“I’m told the border will cut across the range of several caribou herds.”

“So? It’s not like there’ll be a fence or anything.”

Brassclick leaned forward and raised his voice. “Pfang, wake up.”

Pfang lifted his head off the table, a diode dangling from the perforation in his nose. He was reputed to be a computer whiz, but so far his keyboard had gotten more use as a pillow than an input device. The only sign of life in his office occurred when his nose ornament got caught in the keys, and his

sole accomplishment appeared to be a ritualistic changing of screensavers, which he did on a daily basis. Lately an alternate but equally improbable theory had arisen, suggesting he was an Asian gang member from Vancouver hiding out in the North because he'd run afoul of the law. In either case his relationship with Brassclick remained unclear. Now he muttered sleepily, "Chaos theory, turbulence in complex systems, the weather, the stock market, the migration routes of caribou –"

"What are you talking about?" asked Ungle impatiently.

"Borders are strange attractors. You could lose an entire herd."

Beneath his jungly beard, Ungle's face turned livid.

"And not just herds," Brassclick resumed. "In a year's time this government will be unrecognizable. Positions are going to be lost, entire bureaus may vanish. It could get as messy as when the Soviet Union dissolved. By the way, your laser shredders should be here within the week."

The other biologists looked at each other in alarm and muttered into their beards, but Nora held her tongue. She wasn't buying into Brassclick's scare tactics. Every year there was some new wrinkle that got everyone worked up – devolution, block funding, strategic plans, pompous mission statements – but in the end nothing really changed. A tiresome business, but sometimes a period of turmoil was a time of opportunity, and there was something she'd wanted to get her hands on for a long time. At any rate it was worth a try, so after the meeting ended she grabbed a skull from her office and went to see Brassclick.

His position as Head of Wildlife was exalted enough to merit a corner office with a leather couch and a fine view of the bay. On the walls were

numerous framed diplomas and a leaping arctic char with its flank spray-painted a fluorescent pink. There was a coffee table on which rested a dented samovar, and a small bookshelf containing manuals for file and financial codes along with a miscellany of books with titles like *Thin Ice* and *The Puck Stops Here*. A reeking equipment bag lay in one corner of the office.

“Yes?” he asked without looking up.

She set the skull on his desk.

“What’s that?”

“Red-backed vole. We do a lot of school visits. It’s part of our job description, and skulls are a good audio-visual aid.”

Each biologist had a gimmick for dealing with short attention spans. Ungle strapped foam and wire antlers to his head, Vomer handed out fish candy. Nora passed around skulls. Some kids were fascinated, others repelled, but everyone paid attention. She always left one with the teacher, though this meant she had to replenish her collection on a regular basis, and cleaning skulls was a lengthy smelly business – unless you had a colony of dermestid beetles. The larvae cleaned off tissue in no time at all, and were especially good for hard to reach nooks and crannies.

Trouble was, dermestid beetles were also notorious pests, and if they escaped from their containers, the result could be disastrous. The Wildlife Bureau had already suffered through one such incident, many years ago, before Nora had come north. Beetles had engineered a dramatic prison break one weekend and gone on a rampage, demolishing rugs, couches, and an entire collection of stuffed animals. The building had to be evacuated and fumigated. Nora hoped Brasslick hadn’t heard about it.

“A mole?” he asked, staring at the skull on his desk.

“No, no, a vole. A mole is something entirely different. One’s a rodent, the other’s an insectivore.”

“I see. And they’re doing okay? Numbers up, no disease, that sort of thing?”

“Voles? Sure.”

“What about moles?”

She gave him a funny look. “I’ve no idea.”

“Why not? They’re small mammals, aren’t they?”

“The nearest mole is thousands of miles away. There aren’t any in the North.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

He pondered this for a moment. “I know geologists who said the same thing about diamonds. Maybe you should do a study.”

Nora looked disgusted. What the guy knew about wildlife could be written on top of his head, yet here he was lecturing her. “That’s ridiculous,” she said.

“Nora, I may not know much about wildlife, but I do know that nothing ever stays the same. Discovery of a rare species could mean a lot to the bureau.”

“So rare it’s non-existent?”

“All I’m saying is, you could arrive here one morning and find your office occupied by someone else.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. “Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s a fact of life, and it could happen to any of us, including me.”

This building is not an ivory tower. Wildlife management is a political activity, and the North is poised at the edge of great change. The bureau has to justify its existence the same as every other government body. The same as you, me, and everyone else on this floor.”

“You can’t bully me,” she said.

“I wouldn’t try. On the other hand, as I always tell my kids, life’s a rink.” He opened a folder with a red Urgent sticker on it and nodded at the door. “Close it on your way out.”

## CHAPTER 5

“The only problem with living in a crate,” Danny said, “is that it leaks, and you can’t stand up in it, and then someone comes along and chops it up for firewood.” He indicated a few splinters on the ground, all that remained of his former residence.

“That’s a drawback,” agreed Freddy.

“Now what am I going to do?”

Freddy thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers and started down the street. “Follow me.”

At first Danny thought they might be headed for Freddy’s place. After weeks of intermittent acquaintance, he still knew very little about his new friend. Now and then they joined forces to bamboozle dogs of their dinner, but as to where Freddy lived, or what he got up to when not boosting dog

chow, Danny had no idea.

One thing intrigued him in particular. Freddy's appearance remained suspiciously constant while his own deteriorated at a steady rate. Despite hasty sponge baths in public washrooms, his face always felt gritty and his hair looked turbulent. His clothing grew more soiled and wrinkled by the day.

Freddy on the other hand seemed unaffected by the toils of everyday existence. The clomping snowmobile boots never lost their shape, and the black down jacket, despite the greasy sheen and leaky plumage, failed to develop fresh stains. One day his jeans bore evidence of ironing, and a suspect fragrance lingered in his wake. It was nothing at all like the rough chemical smell of the public soap Danny used. Was it possible he had a girlfriend?

"Naw," Freddy replied when the question was put to him. "My wife wouldn't like it."

Danny stopped dead in his tracks. "Your wife?"

"Yeah, everybody should have one. Don't you?"

"No, but I came close once." He squirmed at the memory.

"What happened? Cold feet?"

"Cold shoulder's more like it. She didn't like the ring."

"Diamond too small?"

"No, it was huge. It just wasn't real."

Freddy groaned. "Danny, you can't get married without a real diamond. Everyone knows that."

"I didn't think it mattered. I thought a diamond was just a symbol."

"It is a symbol, that's why it has to be real. You give a woman a fake and

what's she supposed to think? You're a fake. The marriage is a fake. See what I mean?"

"I guess so. But how's a guy like me supposed to get ahold of a diamond ring? How'd you get yours?"

"I found it at the dump."

Danny wasn't sure how a diamond from the dump was any better than a fake, at least as far as symbolism went, but he didn't press the issue. "So what's it like, being married?"

"Great, but it's not all fun and games. There's a lotta responsibility. You know, like putting food on the table. It can be tough."

"Especially when you don't have a table."

"Right. Then there's the sex."

"Yeah, can't forget about that."

"It can really wear you out. I mean, every night."

Danny swallowed. "Every night?"

"That's why you should only marry someone beautiful. It's the secret of a good marriage."

"And your marriage is...good?"

"The best. You'll have to meet my wife sometime. Her name's Edna. She's down south right now. Toronto, I think."

Danny looked astonished. "Toronto? What's she doing there? She's not sick, is she?"

"Naw, she's an artist, has to go to all these shows. You wouldn't believe what people pay for her work."

A line of doubt appeared on Danny's forehead. He had a dim recollection that tall tales were customary in the North. Was that what was

going on here? A leg-pulling contest? “You must live in a pretty nice place if your wife makes a lot of money.”

“It’s okay.”

“What is it? A shed? A shack? A hut?”

Freddy smiled and looked off toward their left. They were passing a three-storey structure with a neon sign and an empty swimming pool out front. He waved at it.

“The Adventurer Motel?” asked Danny, reading the sign. His indignation was about to overflow when he suddenly recalled a neighbor back home, a man who’d fallen on hard times after the collapse of his business. The neighbor had moved away, but every once in a while he’d turn up in a seedy overcoat, jowls unshaven, having just flown in from New York or Chicago. He’d chatter away non-stop during supper, his arm flaring out in a royal manner as he told them about grandiose deals he was putting together. Later, Danny’s father would slip him a few bucks at the door. It was never clear whether the fellow was unhinged by the loss of his business, home and family, or just trying to preserve some dignity. Had Freddy suffered a similar tragedy?

Danny’s annoyance melted away, but Freddy’s arm remained aloft. His wave was being returned by someone who’d just emerged from the motel, a man with a flapping gray beard. He was pushing a two-wheeled oxygen cart and accompanied by a dog with a bandaged head. The dog wore a bowtie, the man a dog collar.

“How’s Chesterton today?” Freddy called out as the two invalids approached.

“Recovering nicely,” wheezed the old fellow, stopping before them. His

nasal cannula was attached by a length of flexible tubing to a silver bottle on the cart.

“And you?”

“Still avoiding the worms.”

“Me too,” laughed Freddy. He introduced the man as Father Brown, who promptly shook hands with Danny and asked if he played bingo.

“Nope,” said Danny.

“Good, the church doesn’t either. Just poker, every Friday night. Drop by sometime and make a donation.”

The bulldog was staring up at Danny with wide-set eyes. The broad face, flattened snout, and bandaged head suggested brain damage. The dog began to growl and scuff his feet on the ground before being reined in by a tug on the leash. The priest leaned down to pat his head. “Sorry, no free will for dogs.” Then he flipped his beard over his shoulder like a scarf, gave another tug on the leash and resumed his walk. As they moved away, Chesterton looked back at Danny as though studying his features.

“I don’t think that dog likes me,” Danny muttered.

“Don’t worry, he’s got false teeth. They both do.”

“Was he serious about poker?”

“It’s how he built the church. I wouldn’t advise playing with him though. He hides cards in his beard.”

They resumed walking and gradually the town receded behind them. The road slanted upwards until it mated with another at the top of a rocky ridge. One branch led to the airport, the other to Giant Mine.

“This way,” Freddy said, and they trudged in the direction of the mine. Presently a raw strip of road struck off on its own, piercing a chainlink

fence. Guarding it was a man in a booth and a metal barrier on a pivot.

“Hi Walt,” said Freddy.

“Freddy.”

“Any specials today?”

“Nope, just the usual crap.”

“Well, we’ll take a look anyway.”

“Sure.”

The barrier lifted. As they walked through, Danny asked suspiciously, “What is this place?”

“A gold mine,” Freddy replied.

It was exactly how Danny imagined a mine would look. The land was scarred and blasted, ripped open to get at the yellow metal beneath the surface. Tailings were strewn about like giant wormcasts, interspersed with pools of noxious liquid and monuments of flaking metal. Trucks scooted up movable hills, men in hardhats issued orders to each other, and the sound of crunching and grinding came from the hangar-like doorway of a nearby building. In the distance a pillar of smoke boiled upward.

“What’s that smell?” Danny asked, compressing his nose. But Freddy was already hurrying forward and Danny had to scramble to catch up. They passed a knackered Euclid, some stove-in fuel tanks, a rusty crop of wire rope, and a woman in an armchair reading a damp newspaper. A stand of greasy pallets was being attacked by men with axes, while a group of teenagers danced on broken phonograph records. Overhead wheeled a mob of shrieking gulls.

“What a dump,” remarked Danny, holding his nose. They crested a rise and looked out across an area that resembled a trailer park after a hurricane.

It was being worked over by a bulldozer. Numerous people were stalking through the rubble like herons, and a man in a bearsuit was pawing open a bag of garbage.

“Isn’t it great?” asked Freddy. “You won’t find a better selection of junk anywhere. Best of all, it’s free.”

Suddenly Danny understood. “It *is* a dump.”

“Like I said, a real gold mine.”

Danny looked back at the man in the bear costume. He was cramming something into his mouth. “That’s not a bearsuit, is it?”

“Don’t worry, he won’t bother you. Give me a hand, will you?” Freddy was tugging at a length of nylon rope.

“What’s that for?”

“You’ll see.”

After freeing the rope, they excavated a sheet of heavy plastic and rinsed it off in a pool of stagnant water. Dragging it behind them, they departed through a hole in the fence and plunged into a stand of stunted trees. Presently tents began to bloom like wildflowers – nylon domes and clamshells and jointed insectoidal shapes that looked as if they might crawl away in the night. There were bivouac bags and brush leantos, and shacktents with plywood floors, and army tents that smelled of mold. There were canopies fashioned out of tarps, and a pyramidal tent with a fluttering pennant, and even a mountaineer’s ledge tent suspended from a tree.

They found a private glade, strung the rope between a couple of jackpines, and converted the sheet of smudged plastic into a pup tent.

“Welcome to Dumpville,” Freddy said.

A hoarse croak caused him to tilt back his head as several ravens flashed

by. Two were making off with a pair of jeans, each clutching a pantleg in their claws. A third had a sock in its beak.

Danny laughed. “Looks like they just mugged someone.”

Freddy watched them intently, occasionally making a strange gurgling sound. His feet began to move in the direction the ravens had taken.

“Hey, where are you going?” Danny called out, but Freddy was oblivious to him. He disappeared into the trees.



Soon Danny was decently garbed and his pup tent furnished with a cot and sleeping bag. Out front was a waterlogged TV, the back seat of a Buick Skylark, and a liquor cabinet stocked with yellowing detective novels. In the evening he relaxed on the car seat, which smelled only faintly of cat urine. He read mysteries or stared at the TV and imagined sitcoms. Sometimes he joined the other denizens of Dumpville around a campfire and absorbed the lore of the dump, stories about costly antiques that had been rescued, wallets filled with cash, and discarded lottery tickets that turned out to be winners.

He also learned there was more to the dump than material wealth. Some people came looking for truth, beauty and salvation. A woman in a cape was said to be a conceptual artist. A missionary in a turtleneck sermonized daily from a pulpit of trash. For him the dump was a living parable on the evanescence of physical things. “Throw yourselves upon the dustheap,” he cried, “that ye may enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Perhaps the most intriguing person of all was a fallen academic in a

weedy jacket. The Perfesser, he was known as. “This is not garbage,” he liked to declaim, “it’s information.” He hired people to do piecework for him, reassembling shredded documents. Others scavenged data off discarded computers. The Perfesser absorbed it all, paying a penny for each item he received, whether it was a government memo or someone’s shopping list or an NWMP evidence tag. All of this he whirred and blended in his mind, and dispensed in oracular fashion to a steady stream of clients. Anglers, cuckolds, renegade geologists, even mutual fund managers sought his advice.

“We need more garbage, not less,” he told Danny one night as they sat before a campfire. “We’re exhausting the world’s resources at a furious rate. By producing garbage we’re giving something back to the earth. Millions of years from now, dumps will be compressed into deposits whose use we can only guess at. They’ll be as valuable as oil and gas reserves are today. Future generations will bless us for our garbage!”

But the dump also had a darker side. Danny’s joy at finding a shirt, neatly pressed and folded, was diluted when he learned it probably came from a dead man. Freddy, who joined him now and again to comb through the garbage, explained:

“Lots of loners in Yellowknife. They kick the bucket and a relative flies in to dispose of the belongings. Time’s short and shipping costs are high, so most of the stuff ends up here. You going to keep that shirt?”

Danny wavered between repugnance and desire. Who knew what its owner had died of?

“The way I'd look at it, ” said Freddy, “it's like an inheritance from an uncle I never met. ”

Danny kept the shirt. A few days later he got a stronger whiff of death when he saw something protruding from beneath a sheet of cardboard. It looked like a foot, but was all red and crinkly as though the skin had been peeled off. He lifted the cardboard, then reeled back with a cry. The foot was still attached to its owner.

Freddy came over. He studied the shape on the ground and shrugged. "It's only a bear."

The corpse looked uncannily human. Danny wondered if it was the same creature he'd seen on his first day at the dump, a poor brute like himself just trying to get by.

"What happened to it?"

"Killed for his bearsuit, I guess. This isn't the South, Danny. People still hunt and trap here."

Danny knew that. What bothered him was a notion that the bear, if not for the dump, might still be alive. The thought made him uneasy. It reminded him that nothing in life was free, not even at the dump.

A few days later he heard the sound of breaking glass, and traced it to a pile of computer monitors. A woman in a cape was hard at work with a baseball bat. It was the conceptual artist. She had a black bolt of hair that jumped with each blow.

"What are you doing?" he asked, coming up behind her.

She turned with the bat cocked, and he fell back a step.

"Damn," she said, seeing the look on his face.

All he could do was gape. He'd seen beautiful women before, but never up close. Was that why he could not tear his eyes away? Her beauty projected like a field, blowing his fuses, short circuiting his synapses. He

opened his mouth but no words came out.

“A little tongue-tied, are you?”

He nodded helplessly.

“Well, let’s speed this up a bit. You’ve just fallen in love, I’m the woman of your dreams, and you’d do anything to make me happy. Is that about it?”

“Yes,” he managed to say.

Her manner was neither coy nor arrogant. She merely looked him in the eye and said, “But you see, from my point of view it’s your own happiness you’re interested in, not mine. And that pretty much boils down to one thing – getting into my pants. If you’re like most men, you’d do anything to seduce me. Lie, cheat, steal. Right?”

“Yes. I mean, no.”

“That’s what I thought. How pathetic.” Turning away, she continued smashing monitors.



It was a cruel irony. Had she been beyond reach, on a magazine cover or a movie screen, he’d have forgotten her in an instant. But to meet such a woman at the dump, where anything seemed possible...

Disconsolate, he holed up in his tent and drowned his sorrows the only way he could, with cheap fiction. He guzzled paperbacks like shots of whiskey and awoke in the morning with a headache. His eyes grew red and bleary.

“A little hair of the dog,” he’d mumble, groping for another book. When he resumed rummaging through the dump it was only for more paperbacks.

He chose books with the most lurid titles and garish covers. He punished himself with corset-bursting romances and mysteries involving damaged men, hardboiled detectives who affected a cynical attitude toward life and dames. He took to wearing a battered fedora. At night, when he joined the other denizens of Dumpville around a campfire, it was like a scene out of one of his books. The firelight transformed the Perfesser into a pulpish figure. The way he spoke of gold and poison pills and hostile takeovers, he might have been Fu Manchu or Doc Savage. He knew the secret of Headless Valley and the true identity of the Mad Trapper. He knew that Alberta had resurrected its decades-old dream of helping itself to a slice of Territorial pie. He knew where the next set of diamond pipes would be found.

In short, the Perfesser's tales were better than any rotgut fiction. When Danny realized this, he knew his recovery was complete. He began feeding his paperbacks to the flames.

"There are many things the government does not want us to know," the Perfesser was saying. "The fate of Franklin. Kosmos-954. Radioactive fish. The connection between diamonds and Division."

"The North isn't dividing," interjected a new voice. "It's getting divorced."

Danny looked up. On the far side of the fire stood a caped figure.

The Perfesser nodded. "That's one way of looking at it."

The caped figure began circling the fire. It was the conceptual artist. When she reached Danny, she leaned down, rested a hand on his shoulder, and whispered, "Am I still the woman of your dreams?"

He stared at the hand like a dimwit, vaguely aware of its unusual flipper-

like shape. It was not until later, when he replayed the scene over and over in his mind, that he realized why. All the fingers were the same length. The three longest ones had been sheared off even with the pinkie. But at the time none of this registered, for his brain was also struggling to interpret the meaning of her presence, the implication in her words. For several seconds he stared at her hand, then he seized it and kissed it frantically.

“I’ll take that for a yes,” she said, still whispering. “Let’s get out of here.”

He lurched to his feet and thrust his muzzle against her neck.

“Down boy,” she said, pulling him away from the fire. “Where’s your tent?”

“This way,” he said, and stumbled alongside her, dazed with desire. He racked his mind for something to say as they moved through the trees, but all he could come up with was: “Smash any good computers lately?”

“Yes, a Hewlett-Packard.”

When they reached his tent, she raised her arms over her head and pulled off her shirt, then stepped out of her jeans. It was done with such grace and economy of movement, no fumbling or straining, that all Danny could do was stand there goggle-eyed. Her body was glazed with moonlight, her hair was a glossy raven’s wing across her back.

“Your tongue’s hanging out,” she said.

He ripped the buttons off his shirt and wrecked the zipper on his pants. He flung his clothes into a tree and threw himself at her feet. He ran his cheek along her thighs and inhaled her fragrance, not perfume but an honest delicate scent, soap perhaps or shampoo, familiar somehow...

“Okay, that’s enough foreplay,” she said, yanking him to his feet and

directing him to the car seat. “You’d better have more than one condom on you.”

He fell back, so overcome with desire he scarcely understood what she was saying.

“You’ve got some, haven’t you?” she said.

“What?”

“Rubbers. Safes. Dubes.”

His head cleared a little. “What?”

She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook. “We need a condom. No condom, no nookie. Understand?”

The answer was plain on his face. She might as well have been asking for a condominium. “Christ,” she muttered and reached for her clothes.

“No, wait, I can find something. A plastic bag. A rubber glove.”

“Look, all I want is some good healthy sex, uncomplicated by AIDS or VD. Know what I mean? Sex, not death. There’s a difference.”

Already she was half-dressed. Desperately Danny tried to salvage the situation.

“No problem, I understand completely. I’ll pick some up tomorrow.”

The cape settled over her shoulders.

“Do you have a favorite brand?” he babbled. “Any particular color or flavor?”

Her face softened and for a moment Danny thought he’d earned a reprieve. Her hand retreated into the waistband of her pants and made a plucking motion. “Here, a souvenir,” she said, and presented him with a pubic hair. Then she vanished into the trees.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get some tomorrow,” he called out. “Wait a minute,

what's your name?"

The next few days he spent taping together shredded documents for the Perfesser, and collecting beer bottles in the alley behind the Gold Range – alas, none contained a mouse. Finally he had enough to buy a package of Trojans, but it was no use. The woman of his dreams never returned. He scoured the town on foot and hung out on street corners determined to find her. Each night he sniffed the pubic hair. Days passed, then weeks. August was coming to an end and trees were changing color before he finally spotted her alighting from a taxi in front of the Adventurer Motel. As he rushed forward brandishing his box of condoms, a second person emerged from the taxi, a sawed-off dude with skinny legs and a greasy down jacket.

Freddy.

## CHAPTER 6

A bush wedding was what Nora and Hugo finally decided on. During the Christmas break they would charter a plane to a cabin she knew of, and take along a justice of the peace and a few friends. A nuptial flight, Hugo joked. After the ceremony everyone else would return to Yellowknife, leaving the newlyweds alone for a week in the wilderness. It was a far more sensible way of starting out a life together than carousing in a nightclub or bathing in carcinogenic rays on a foreign beach. The last thing either of them wanted was a honeymoon in Vegas or Acapulco.

The cabin wasn't much, she warned him, just a simple log structure with a wood stove. She imagined it nestled in mounds of snow, surrounded by dark spires of spruce. They would breathe the pure sweet air, and drink achingly cold water from a hole chopped in the lake, and ski for miles while

the Northern Lights swirled overhead.

Inside the cabin it would be clean and warm, lit by candles and gas lamps. They'd take along some wine and a few good books, and she'd do a little baking, just enough each day to fill the air with the rich smell of bread or cake or pie. They'd split wood and eat caribou steaks and screw like maniacs and be gloriously happy.

Her mother thought otherwise. "You'll be sorry," she said when Nora telephoned her with the news.

"Mom, I've given it a lot of thought. I know what I'm doing."

"He's a foreigner."

"He's from Quebec."

"A Separatist, no doubt. You're not pregnant, are you?"

"No."

"I know a good doctor if you are."

"Mom, will you listen to me?"

"I'm just trying to save you some grief. One day he'll run out on you, I guarantee it."

"He's not like that, Mom."

"And if he doesn't, you'll wish he did."

"I'm not stupid. If he turns out to be a jerk, I'll dump him." But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt terribly disloyal. "I won't have to, though. He's the gentlest person I ever met."

"Never mind that, what about orgasms? If you're determined to go ahead with this, you might as well have some fun. Make sure it's in the prenuptial agreement. Ironclad orgasms or no deal."

"Whatever you say, Mom."

“You never listen to me. If you did, you’d be a dentist.”

When Nora was little, she used to sneak into her mother’s bedroom and remove a wedding picture from its hiding place at the bottom of a drawer. In the picture her mother was trussed up in an ill-fitting satin gown and scowling at the camera. Standing beside her was some guy with a cigarette stuck in his mouth, looking off to one side as though already planning an escape. Glen. That was all Nora knew about her father, a faint and possibly incorrect childhood recollection of his name. Her mother referred to him only as “The Alien,” and maintained that men and women were so different they were virtually incomprehensible to each other. As if to illustrate this point, she was fiercely protective of her own sons, both pushing 30 and still living at home.

“So how are the boys?” Nora asked, changing the subject.

“Bobby’s fine, but Ricky’s coming down with the flu. I had to put a bucket beside his bed last night.”

“Any luck on the job front?”

“No, it’s so demoralizing. Sometimes the boys don’t get up till noon and I can’t blame them. It’s not their fault the economy’s a mess. I blame it all on Mulroney, that smug bastard.”

At times Nora felt an irrational sense of guilt; as though, being the eldest, she’d somehow usurped a portion of her brothers’ birthright. Her own feelings of independence and self-worth had been relentlessly nourished by her mother, perhaps in the assumption that such things came naturally to boys but not girls. Nora remembered being taken on a camping trip when they were small, and the instructions their mother had given in the event of disaster.

“If I die and the food runs out, you’ll have to eat me.”

It made perfect sense to Nora. Not that she had any intention of following her mother’s advice. It was just that in her rambles she’d seen many examples of similar parental devotion – killdeers, for example, faking broken wings or flying in the face of intruders. But her brothers felt otherwise, howling “Gross!” and pretending to gag and retch. It occurred to her that women were simply more tough-minded than men, and from that point on her self-assurance seemed to grow in direct proportion to her brothers’ expanding flab. While they spent more and more time rooted to the chesterfield, watching TV, she continued to tramp through the fields that bordered their home.

They lived on the edge of town, across the street from a big bowl of sky and a welcome mat of prairie that stretched all the way to the horizon. In the summer she ranged for miles exploring trails and collecting spear grass in her socks. She carried a jackknife in her pocket and wore a magpie feather in her hair. She witnessed a fight between a dog and a skunk, and watched two men catch a rattler with a forked stick and cut off its head. She knew the pure tumbling notes of a meadowlark, and where to find morels after a rain. In the winter she skied and skated, snowshoed and tobogganed, and every Saturday visited the library. Her favorite book was *Miss Pickerell Goes to the Arctic*.

An unforgettable landmark in those early years was a trio of mysterious houses outside of town. Identical in size and design, they stood in a prim row aloof on the prairie. Everyone called them the Three Sisters. During the day they seemed lifeless, deserted, but at night the windows blazed with light. Nora spied upon them a safe distance away, concealed in a willow

bush, and imagined herself living there – on the top floor in a room with a gabled window and a fine view of the prairie.

Years later, growing weary of Yellowknife's broken streets, carelessly strewn garbage, and sardine-can trailer parks, she thought of the Three Sisters and their splendid isolation. Why live in the North, she thought, if it meant being stuck in a crappy imitation of urban sprawl? So that spring she went to YK Welding and ordered a set of pontoons fabricated from quarter-inch steel. She hired a carpenter to build a tidy little dwelling atop them, and by summer's end had joined the community of houseboats in Yellowknife Bay.

Altogether there were only a dozen or so of them, a quirky assemblage that suggested a colony of nautical-minded dwarves. One structure looked like a converted tugboat, several were so tiny they might have been floating outhouses, and another was a three-storey behemoth built on a barge. They sported oddly sloping roofs with dormers and mushroom-sized balconies, comical weathervanes, brightly daubed walls, and canoes on davits floating in midair.

Nora's houseboat was modest by comparison, a simple structure with breakfast nook, kitchen, living-room, and sleeping loft. Though anchored only a hundred yards offshore, she was technically outside Yellowknife now. The town had no legal jurisdiction over her; it collected no taxes, provided no police or fire protection, no garbage pickup, no roads or sewers. She burned wood for heat, and supplied her own power using batteries, solar panels, and a gas generator. Her fridge and stove ran on propane, and her cellphone – which never left home – provided a link with the rest of the world.

She had a fine view of Old Town, with the rest of Yellowknife pleasantly out of sight. The far side of the bay was shaggy with brush and empty of habitation, while poised at the mouth was Great Slave Lake, ocean-like and eternal, waiting to pour in. In summer she rode out storms that jerked pictures off the wall and hurled dishes to the floor. In winter she lay awake at night listening to the eerie cracking and moaning of the ice, and sometimes, just before drifting off to sleep, she imagined there were patterns in the echoing whale-like sounds.

In short, it was idyllic, a lifestyle whose modern conveniences did not cram her into an urban template. She felt comfortable, yet adventurous; close to work, yet not far from nature. And when she met Hugo, and their lives became pleasantly entangled, she doubted that things could get any better.

One night as they lay in bed reading, he suddenly asked, “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

She looked up from her book, *Women Who Run with the Lemmings*. The title had been altered as a joke by one of her colleagues. “Lemmings” was typed on a strip of paper and glued to the cover. “Of course not,” she said.

He was reading a bulletin called *Vector News*. “It’s not as far-fetched as you might think. Take a look at a mosquito before and after metamorphosis, and you wouldn’t think it’s the same creature. In fact, the two forms look as though they belong to entirely different species. The larva is aquatic, the imago a winged creature. Who’s to say death isn’t something similar, a sort of pupa, a stage during which bodily tissues are reorganized.”

“Metamorphosis sounds better than death, I suppose. What’s an imago?”

“An adult.”

“It’s a lovely word.” She hooked her hands behind her head and looked up at the ceiling. “You know, a wedding is a kind of metamorphosis too, isn’t it? Two individuals becoming one, that sort of thing.”

“Sure.”

“That’s why I’ve been thinking of changing my name. It’d be a symbolic act, just like the rings.”

The day before, they’d gone to a jewelry store and purchased wedding bands. Nora hadn’t been enthusiastic about the idea, but it seemed silly to object when she was already wearing an engagement ring. In the end they’d found a pair of rings that suited them perfectly – plain, yet incorporating tiny nuggets of Yellowknife gold.

“I don’t expect you to change your name,” Hugo said.

“Not just me, both of us.” She was intrigued by the prospect of waking up one morning with a new name. Would she feel like a different person, or would it be like wearing a disguise?

“Maybe we should just leave them the way they are,” Hugo suggested meekly.

“What if I become pregnant? We couldn’t burden a child with a name like Poisson-Lobachevski.”

“I thought you didn’t want children.”

“I don’t, but accidents happen, and double-barrelled names have always struck me as pompous and not very practical. What if Arthur Quiller-Couch had married Vita Sackville-West?”

“Who?”

“Names would multiply out of control like cancer cells.”

“Well…” His attention wavered for a moment, caught by a circling

mosquito. He offered it his wrist.

“How about Imago?” she continued. “Nora and Hugo Imago. Doesn’t that sound great? Maybe we should change our first names too.”

“Why stop there?” he asked playfully. “We could dye our hair and get nose jobs.”

Nora turned to face him. She’d merely been thinking out loud, but once articulated, her ideas did not seem so far-fetched.

“Or we could just change your name and leave it at that,” she declared.

“My name?”

“Sure.”

“But...” He sensed he’d irritated her, but had no idea how. “I already told you, I don’t expect you to change your name.”

“But you wouldn’t object if I did.”

“Nora, it doesn’t matter. Keep it or change it, it’s all the same to me.”

“On the other hand, you’d never consider changing your name to Lobachevski, would you?” It was only then she noticed the mosquito feeding on his wrist. Its body had turned a translucent red. “I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Bites like this have changed the course of history,” he said pedantically, relieved to be back on familiar ground. “By the way, did I tell you I’ve been trying to breed a new variety of *hexodontus*, one that doesn’t need blood to produce eggs? I was thinking of naming it after you.”

“Females that don’t bite,” she said scornfully. “I suppose you’d be happy if I did become pregnant.”

“Sure.”

Her eyes widened. He was well-acquainted with her own views on

raising a family. The responsibility was too great, the risk of turning into a replica of her mother too huge. Had she not already conceded enough to him? “I have no desire to reproduce,” she said and turned her back to him. She fumed for a while, waiting for his touch, his whispered apology, so that she might spurn it. When none came, the feeling of betrayal deepened and something crumbled within her, releasing a torrent of old doubts and fears. She spent a miserable night, tabulating disillusionments. What was love but marketing and organic chemistry? When her father had walked out, it was not from dereliction of duty but because he’d fulfilled his genetic mandate. At work, the idealism that had once energized the Wildlife Bureau now seemed a thing of the past, trampled underfoot by myopic fools like Brassclick. He’d denied her request for a beetle colony, of course.

When morning came, she slipped out of bed and dressed, determined to leave before Hugo awoke. Outside the cool air and calm water had an immediate soothing effect. She untied the canoe and paddled away. Let him find his own way to work, she thought.

On shore she padlocked the canoe to its mooring and breakfasted at a dockside grill, patronized by tourists and jumpsuited crews from air charter companies. She ate a toasted wholewheat bagel and a dish of low-fat yogurt with fresh blueberries and chopped dandelion, followed by a cup of Labrador tea in which floated a decorative piece of sphagnum. Just as she finished she looked across the water and saw Hugo pacing the deck of the houseboat. He was scratching his wrist. The distance was too great to make out the expression on his face. A sliver of guilt passed through her. She paid and headed up the hill, past Wharf Rats and Trail’s End, wondering if she were acting badly. It wasn’t as though Hugo would be marooned. He

could snag a ride to shore with someone else.

She thrust him out of her mind and turned her attention officeward, in particular to a stack of histological slides that had been sitting on her desk for weeks. They contained thin sections of teeth collected from various rodent populations during the summer. A graduate student had done the slicing and staining, but failed to count the annuli before returning to school for the fall session. Now she'd have to hire someone else to finish the work, though setting up a contract had the potential to be more exhausting than the actual job itself. Woe to anyone who used the wrong financial code, or failed to follow the rigid tendering procedure, or allowed one of the contract's many colored copies to go astray. A misplaced sheet of goldenrod would have Finance sneezing for a week.

Sometimes she fantasized about quitting her job and taking up a simpler life. Yellowknife was full of people who'd made such a choice, people who'd come north to escape bureaucracy, not join it. Her gaze wandered across the street to a yellow Bombardier parked beside the Kimberlite Fried Chicken outlet. A woman in coveralls and ballcap was working on the machine, getting it ready for winter. Every time Nora bought a trout from her, she imagined the woman out on the big lake when the temperature was 30 below, setting nets beneath the ice. She was probably closer to nature than Nora could ever hope to be. The work was hard, no doubt, yet also satisfying in some deep elemental way. Did Nora have the courage to make such a career change?

Thus musing, she arrived at the Carboniferous Building. Moving vans were parked outside and padded blankets lined the elevator, but it was not until she arrived at her floor that she realized something was amiss. Men in

leather aprons were unbolting walls and forcing them into new configurations. An architect in a white hardhat was giving directions from an unrolled blueprint. Movers were pushing around desks and filing cabinets, and putting up racks of postcards and knickknacks. On the walls, instead of remotely sensed images showing ecotones and calving grounds, there were posters of grinning campers and a framed Explorer's Map.

Was she on the wrong floor?

Pfang appeared pushing a wheelbarrow full of sand.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Government's doing a bogo-sort."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Our stack's overflowed."

"Good grief," she muttered, brushing by him impatiently and stomping down the corridor with a nasty feeling in her gut. When she arrived at her office, she found it stripped bare. On the floor was a stack of cartons, their tops taped shut and a set of initials, not her own, scrawled on them. As she gazed around in stupefaction, a woman she'd never seen before walked in carrying a silver tea service.

"Hello," said the woman, setting the tray on a carton. "May I help you? I'm Jane Griffin." She had a round crinkly face and was dressed like an antiquated hippy, with feathers in her hair and an ankle-length dress of some heavy tawny material.

"What are you doing in my office? Where's my desk? My skull collection?"

Jane Griffin put a hand to her mouth. "Oh dear, am I in the wrong place?"

“You are.”

“But I’m certain this is the office I was assigned. I specifically told Mr. Brassclick I needed a view of the bay. I was very firm about it. Not for my sake, of course, but for Neptune’s. If he can’t see the water, he gets agitated.”

“Neptune?”

“My dog.” Turning, Jane called out in a low voice. “Here, Neptune. Come on, boy.”

From behind the cartons came a creaking sound as though something heavy were being lifted by ropes and pulleys, and up rose an enormous black dog, a shaggy brute whose back would have been level with the desk, had it still been present. Panting, he stared at Nora for a moment, then heaved himself up and placed his forepaws on the window sill.

“See,” Jane said happily.

Nora regarded them as though trying to decide which was loonier, the dog or the woman. “Let me get this straight. Harvey Brassclick gave you my office so it wouldn’t inconvenience your dog?”

“Oh dear,” said Jane, “now you’re upset. Would you like a nice cup of tea? It’s freshly made.”

Nora stormed out determined to get some answers. She went directly to Brassclick’s office, but the door was shut with the “In Conference” sign showing. The rest of the floor was in chaos, full of noise and people she didn’t know. Even Pfang had fled, after dumping his load of sand at the foot of his desk. She came across Peck and Smolt in the coffee room, but they were covered in plaster dust and insensible from a concoction of ethanol and fruit juice, which they were quaffing out of beakers. In frustration she

returned to Brassclick's office, knocked once and barged in without waiting for an answer. He and Ungle looked up in surprise.

"Nora," Brassclick said, closing a file folder. His hockey jersey was emblazoned with a bruin's head on a background of deep yellow, and the name of the team he played for, "Old Bearocrats."

"What's happened to my office?" she snapped. "Why have I been moved out?"

"Have a seat, please." He nodded at Ungle. "Later, okay Stan?"

When Ungle had left, Brassclick said, "We've been merged with Tourism. Two organizations crammed into space meant for one, and a couple of positions cut."

"Who?"

"Peck and Smolt. There are more mergers coming, and probably more downsizing when Division occurs. I'm sorry, but you could be next."

"No," she blurted, not for her own sake, but the position itself. "Small mammal populations are vital to all kinds of species. And what about the Hanta virus? What will you do when it reaches the North, if it's not here already?"

"I warned you about this –" He stopped in mid-sentence and swiped at a fly that was orbiting his head. It spiralled away safely and joined some pals investigating the malodorous hockey bag in the corner.

He looked back at her. "If you came up with something important, moles, say –"

Nora stood, suddenly no longer able to tolerate the ridiculous succession of hockey jerseys, the cheap diplomas and hideous fish on the wall, or even the way his bald head gleamed. What did he do, polish the damn thing?

“I told you,” she said. “There are no moles in the North.”

“Then do your job and find some,” he growled. “Or you won’t have a job at all.”

## CHAPTER 7

With summer coming to an end, Danny had more to worry about than bruised self-esteem. The nights were growing longer and the wind had an edge to it, ripping leaves off trees and stirring up whitecaps in the bay. Already Dumpville had begun to shrink. Only the hardiest people remained there year-round, and they were equipped with shacktents and airtight stoves. Either Danny had to winterize his tent and stockpile firewood, or he'd have to find another place to live. House-sitting was one possibility. If a furnace conked out while people were away on vacation, the water pipes would freeze and burst. They'd have to be ripped out of the walls and replaced.

“I know folks who haven't paid rent in years,” the Perfesser told him. “They just move from one place to another, house-sitting.”

It sounded too good to be true, sleeping in a real bed, taking hot showers, watching TV. There had to be a catch somewhere, and Danny soon found it when he began checking the classified section in the local newspaper, and reading the notices on power poles and public bulletin boards. Nobody was interested in admitting a complete stranger to their home. Everyone wanted references.

Complicating the search for new quarters was a guilty desire to steer clear of Freddy. Who knew what a wronged husband was capable of? Thus, whenever he caught sight of his former friend, he took to sliding into doorways and slinking down alleys. One day, however, the only available cover was a group of people milling about before a silvery church with walls of overlapping metal plates. The men were trussed up in suits, the women wore gloves, and a stretch limo was parked out front. A wedding, perhaps. Danny veered toward the entrance where a sign said "Our Lady of the Lake Trout." A man was giving out cards of some sort.

"Your hat, sir," said the man.

Danny had forgotten about his fedora. Removing it, he went inside, found himself a pew and fell to his knees in an attitude of prayer, shielding his face with folded hands and shooting surreptitious glances toward the door. When several minutes passed with no sign of Freddy, he sat back and looked around. It had been a long time since he'd seen the inside of a church. At the front was an altar protected by a low wooden barricade, while along each side of the building was a row of plaster saints interspersed with paint-daubed windows. At the back a wheezing organ was concealed in a choir loft. The congregation was restless and snivelling.

A shotgun wedding, Danny figured. The organ rose in volume, and a

small procession entered the church and moved at a stately pace down the center aisle. Only it was no blushing bride that was being escorted, but a weeping woman in black. He glanced down at the card he'd been given. "Rest in Peace," it said.

The congregation rose as Father Brown appeared in a chasuble of beaded caribou hide, his oxygen cart tended by an altar boy. There was no sign of Chesterton, but the brute was probably around somewhere. Danny would have to watch out for his ankles. He looked back at the card, which bore a picture of a stern-looking geezer, some stony verse, a brief bio, and a timetable that included prayers, funeral, and...

His mouth fell open. Lunch.

When the congregation burst into song, Danny joined in as earnestly as those around him. After all, he had as much right to be here as anyone else. Wasn't he wearing the shirt of a dead man? As he sang he wondered what sort of food people dug into after a funeral. Divinity fudge? Angel food cake?

There was a hitch, though. Food would not be served till seven o'clock, after the interment, which meant he had several hours to kill. He consulted a pocket appointment calendar in which he kept track of his loitering. There were any number of places where he could get out of the wind for a few hours, but he had to be judicious about it. Spread himself around, so to speak. Too long in one spot and he'd get the bum's rush. He'd already been banned from the public library for snoring. They'd pegged him for a drunk.

At length the service drew to an end and the church began to clear, but Danny remained in his seat. It seemed a shame to head out into the cold when he'd be returning in a few hours, yet he knew from experience that

churches were not as charitable as they made out. He'd tried to sleep in one once, but had been chased away by a nun with a mop.

Reluctantly he got to his feet and moved down the aisle, his eyes sweeping the church for boltholes and keeping a lookout for Chesterton. He stopped before a life-sized statue of the Virgin Mary, who was wearing a parka and gazing in adoration at an enormous purple fish cradled in her arms. At her feet was a metal stand with a built-in coinbox and rows of votive candles in jars of green pebbled glass. A woman in a ballcap was lighting one of the candles.

He moved on to the back of the church where a wooden wardrobe caught his attention. The entire front was a carved triptych portraying a boatload of apostles, their beards curling in unison with the surrounding waves. They were leaning over the side straining at a net from which arms and legs protruded. Danny ran his palm across the polished surface as though admiring the artistry, and fingered the curlicues on the brass door handles. A furtive glance told him the church was nearly empty now, the few remaining mourners on their knees facing the altar. He eased open the middle door for a peek, expecting a mob of coats or vestments. Instead he found a perfect sanctuary, a snug compartment equipped with a chair. Quickly he slipped inside and pulled the door shut, standing in the dark for several minutes before easing his backside onto the chair and congratulating himself on his resourcefulness. All he had to do now was relax and wait. He tried to stretch out a bit but the space was confining and the chair had not been constructed for comfort, being unpadded and all right angles. He squirmed and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, then crossed his legs and turned sideways. Before long his back grew sore and the air

became close. Doubts began to surface. How would he know it was time to leave when he didn't have a watch? What if the church were locked and he couldn't get out? The lunch was taking place in the basement, which probably had a separate entrance. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than a tentative scratching began, the sort of sound a mouse makes inside a wall. Intermittent at first, it grew steadily in volume and intensity until it became clear that something larger than a rodent was involved. A nasty hunch propelled him to his feet. Opening the door a crack, he saw that Chesterton had succeeded in tracking him down. The bulldog was pawing frantically, head bandage askew. Danny closed the door, but several seconds passed before the dog's brain processed the information acquired by its eyes. The scratching resumed, followed by a thud like the closing of a door. Either that, or Chesterton had hurled himself bodily against the wardrobe. Danny stumbled backwards in the darkness, throwing out his arms to brace himself and discovering by chance a movable panel on each side of the chair. He slid back one and explored the opening by touch. If he could squeeze into the neighboring compartment, he might yet avoid a confrontation with Chesterton. There was an intervening wooden grill, which did not seem very sturdy, but as he leaned close and hooked his fingers through it, he sensed movement on the other side. A puff of air struck his face and a voice said:

“Curse me, Father, for I have sinned.”

All at once Danny knew where he was. This was no wardrobe.

“At least, I think I have. There was me and this guy, see, and things got a little weird.”

It was a woman's voice, and for a moment Danny thought it was Freddy's wife, come to blab the attempt to adulterate her marriage.

"Technically it was a crime, yet how can it be wrong to take back something that was stolen from you?"

No, the voice was lower, huskier, and it wasn't sex she was confessing unless it had something to do with fish. He ground his knuckles into his forehead as the woman blathered on. How did he get himself into situations like this?

"Father, are you there? Can you hear me?"

There was no use stalling. Taking a deep breath, he flung himself forward and threw open the door, bowling over Chesterton and sending him directly into the path of Father's Brown's oxygen cart. The priest, who had just arrived to investigate the disturbance, reeled back with a cry, the cannula ripped from his nostrils. Danny plunged past him and raced out of the church, clutching his hat and expecting at any moment to have an ankle seized by Chesterton. He zigzagged down the street and did not relax till he reached the safety of the downtown core, where he ducked into a shopping mall and collapsed on a bench.

He sat there in a kind of stupor, recovering his breath and staring blankly at the antiseptic array of shops and a fountain that drunks sometimes mistook for a urinal. When his mind cleared a little, he replayed the events at the church and chided himself for being so impulsive. It was not the first time a rash act had ended in disaster. Yet how did one know whether a decision was bold or reckless, except in hindsight? Popular wisdom was muddled in this regard. He who hesitates is lost, his father liked to say, while his mother always begged him to look before he leaped.

He was still debating the matter when a man in a wrinkled suit walked by, digging into his pocket and exposing a leather holster on his hip. It was the bogus businessman from the Border Café. Danny had not given him another thought since arriving, but now he was filled with indignation. Narrowing his eyes and coiling his legs, he was about to hare after the fellow and demand an explanation for the fake business card when a hand clamped on his shoulder and a voice said, “Time to move along, buddy.”

It was a security guard with a ham-like head, looking as if he’d just woken up from a nap. His uniform was mussed and ill-fitting, burst threads protruding from the seams like tufts of hair. His body had a soft doughy look, as though a fist in the belly would sink out of sight.

“Let’s not have any trouble,” he warned, as though reading Danny’s thoughts.

“No problem, I was just leaving.”

The guard escorted him to the entrance. “Thanks for not being an asshole,” he puffed, and tipped Danny a quarter.

This small act of kindness, plus the realization that the church hadn’t been a total catastrophe, revived Danny’s spirits. After all he still had a meal to look forward to. He ambled away from the center of town where there’d be less chance of running into Freddy, and idled from power pole to power pole, inspecting notices but unable to banish from his thoughts the businessman whose card had brought Danny to Yellowknife. That card, with a jack of diamonds on the back, suggested a curious inclination shared by other Yellowknifers. There was a museum named after a prince, and a school and a pub that had been knighted, and a local celebrity known as the Snow King, as well as Camelot Motors and Royal Oat, the company that

owned Giant. Odd names for a town built by hard-knuckled miners. Had the presence of so much gold rubbed off on them somehow, the noble metal instilling noble pretensions? Or were the names merely a northern joke, a bit of frontier humor? At the museum (where his wanderings had now brought him) the portrait of a prince on a charger was so grandiose that it made Danny snort. He remembered a scene in a book he'd read as a kid, in which a duke and a dauphin had pranced naked on a stage, and he imagined the painted prince on a porcelain throne with trumpets farting and courtiers applauding a successful royal flush.

He chuckled and moved on, ambling among the display cases and dioramas with feigned interest until two exhibits, an igloo and a teepee, reminded him of his housing dilemma. "When in Nome," a bum from Alaska had once told him, but he doubted such advice applied to dwellings of hide or snow. Too impractical. He sat in the lobby till the museum closed, keeping a stuffed polar bear company and wondering if he could live in a den. Back outside, he sauntered in the direction of the church, stopping on a bluff overlooking the bay and gazing down at the houseboats. He'd always wanted to live on a raft. Could he build one using pallets and oil drums from the dump?

Presently he came to a power pole that was shaggy with notices, and amused himself by peeling off bits that touted concerts, fund-raisers, and articles for sale, until he uncovered a sheet that made him blink and rub his eyes in surprise. "No references required" was written in purple ink on a sheet of handmade paper. It came apart when he tried to remove it, so he jotted down the particulars in his appointment book, Stu and Donna MacBolt of Trail's End, and headed for a pay phone. With the quarter supplied by the

security guard he placed a call. A woman answered.

“You must be new in town,” she said.

“Yes, m’am.”

“Good. When can you start?”

“Well—”

“What about next week?”

“Let me check my calendar,” he said, not wanting to appear too eager.

“Is the weekend too soon?”

“No, it looks like I’m free.”

“Okay, let me talk to my husband. In the meantime, why don’t you drop by tomorrow and we can check each other out. You have the address?”

“Yeah.”

“Two o’clock, say?”

“I’ll be there. Say, you wouldn’t know what time it is now, would you?”

“Sure, it’s just past seven.”

“Great, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Danny hung up, scarcely believing his luck. Not only did he have a potential roof over his head, but it was now time for the funeral lunch. He trotted down the street rehearsing condolences. “Fine fellow. Terrible shame. Loved by all.”

When he arrived at the silvery-scaled church, the parking lot was nearly full and people were streaming into the basement by a side door. He joined the throng and was nearly at the entrance when he spotted Father Brown greeting people. Danny stopped and let the crowd flow around him. The priest might not have recognized him when he bolted from the church, but Chesterton had, and the dog was there too, sniffing pantlegs. Did he really

have false teeth? Somehow Danny doubted it.

He slipped away to crouch by a window and saw tables laden with food – platters of peanut butter sandwiches, a logjam of carrots and dill pickles, boxes of doughnuts slathered with sugary grease. His mouth salivated uselessly. He tore himself away and headed home, disappointed but not defeated. After all there was more than one church in Yellowknife. Funerals and weddings could keep him in vittles all winter.



Trail's End was a tiny trailer park down near the bay, overlooked by a tumbling spine of rock. There was a single loop of road along which mobile homes were lined up like a catch of sardines. One of them, an older model, sat opposite a vacant lot. The windows were set low in the walls, giving the impression that anyone inside had to stoop to see through them. The flat tin roof was like an upturned belly, and the trailer's backside, as though needing support, was pressed firmly against a rocky bluff at the rear of the lot. Danny squinted at the house number, which was shedding gold paint, and mounted the steps. Tentatively he knocked on the door. When there was no response, he raised his fist a second time.

The door swung open revealing a man clad only in sweatpants. His arms and shoulders were heavily muscled, his forearms were scribbled with tattoos, and his belly bulged like a medicine ball. He was foaming at the mouth.

“Mr. Stu MacBolt?” Danny croaked. “I spoke to your wife yesterday. About house-sitting.”

The man stared at him wordlessly, then brought his right hand up to his mouth and resumed brushing his teeth. With his left foot he flicked the door shut.

Frowning, Danny consulted his appointment calendar. Had he written down the wrong address? Should he knock again? As these thoughts rattled around in his brainpan, a Diamond Cab pulled up into the driveway and honked. Behind him the door flew open and a hand seized his collar, yanking him backward into the trailer.

“Don’t mind Stu,” said a woman with noisy jewelry, releasing her grip. Her hair was freshly crimped, her lips and fingernails tipped with red. “He’s not a morning person.”

“It’s mid-afternoon.”

“He does shiftwork. You must be Danny.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Donna. You’re a little late. I was starting to worry.”

“Sorry, I –”

Stu appeared with a suitcase in each hand. He’d donned a zippered jacket that matched his sweatpants. He marched past without a word.

“Never mind,” Donna said, “the taxi’s here and we’ve got to run. Help yourself to anything in the fridge and cupboards. Garbage pickup is on Thursday. We’ll be back in three weeks.”

“What?”

“We accept your offer to house-sit for us.”

She hurried down the steps with an overnight bag in one hand. Stu was stowing the suitcases in the trunk. He closed the lid and climbed into the back seat. His wife scrambled in beside him. As the taxi backed into the

street, she rolled down her window and waved energetically.

Danny waved back, then realized she was holding an envelope in her hand. He rushed down the steps.

“The keys,” she said urgently.

He took the envelope. Through the window he saw Stu lean forward and poke the driver in the back of the head. The taxi sputtered forward.



At first it was pure bliss. There was real food in the cupboards and a detective channel on the TV, which Danny watched till his eyes glazed over. He sprawled on a plump sofa in the living-room with his feet buried in shag carpet. At night he slept in a bed so soft it felt like a cloud.

A week later, Donna called.

“Just thought I’d check in, see if everything’s all right.”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“We’re in Vegas, by the way. Stu’s really enjoying himself.”

“That’s nice.”

“Did you get a chance to read the letter?”

“What letter?”

“The one in the envelope. With the keys.”

The envelope was sitting unopened on the kitchen table. There’d been no need for keys because he hadn’t ventured out since arriving. When he admitted as much, she said, “It’s in your own best interest to read it,” and hung up.

The letter paper was thick and ragged with coarse vegetable fibers

embedded in it. The ink was the color of a bruise.

Dear House Sitter,

My husband is a Good Man. He works hard and our home is Very Precious to him. That is why he Refuses to go on a holiday without a house sitter. Except the Last Guy threw a party and put a Few Dents in the wall, and when my husband found out, he put a Few Dents in the house sitter. Since then we've been Having Trouble getting people to house sit for us. So don't throw any Big Parties, or you could end up in the hospital with your Jaw wired shut. And for God's sake don't let anything happen to the Pitbull in the spare room.

Donna

“Pitbull?” cried Danny. “What pitbull?” Except for the TV, there hadn't been a peep in the trailer all week, let alone a bark. Nervously he advanced down the hall with a pound of bacon in one hand and a crescent wrench in the other. As he eased open the door to the spare room, he wondered which would be worse, a dead pitbull or one that was half-starved. He tossed the bacon inside like a hand grenade. When there was no sound of rending and tearing, no snapping of jaws and ripping of flesh, he entered the room with the wrench raised above his head, saying, “Here boy, come on boy, that's a good fellow.”

The room was used for storage. There was a weight bench, and parkas on hangers, and fishing gear in the corner, but most of the space was taken up by a motorcycle, a mean-looking brute with a lowslung seat and raked front wheel, a yellow stretch tank with black flames painted on it, and a headlamp gripped in the teeth of a chrome skull.

He lowered the wrench and uttered a shaky laugh. The machine was

made by a company called Big Dog Motorcycles. Pitbull was the name of the model.

Afterward, he realized the incident was a valuable lesson, for there was more at stake here than a broken jaw. A reference from the MacBolts could springboard him into another house-sitting position. He decided upon regular inspections as a precaution against lurking disaster, and each day went through the trailer from top to bottom. Of course, it was inevitable that he make some interesting discoveries. In Stu's sock drawer he found a Colt Python with checkered grips, and among Donna's undies there was a rubber dildo.

"Well, well," he said, "a private dick."

But the most intriguing find of all concerned the twin closets in the master bedroom. One was jammed with clothing, both Stu's and Donna's. The other was empty except for some mining gear – a helmet and rain pants, steel-toed rubber boots with lugs on the soles, a belt with two canisters, and a lamp attached to one of them by means of a cable.

"Hot diggity," Danny said. He tried on the helmet and belt, but the lamp slipped from his grasp and swung on its cable, striking the wall at the back of the closet with a hollow thump. He knelt and tested the wall with his knuckles. Every rap produced an echo. His eyes lit up.

"A secret panel!"

But no amount of pressing and prying could unlock its secret. The closet was built into the back wall of the trailer, which in turn was firmly pressed against the ridge at the rear of the lot. When he went outside for a closer look, he saw that pieces of wood sealed the gap between rock and trailer, with ropes of gobby caulking completing the union. He loosened one of the

boards and sniffed. A damp smell, like that of an old cellar, emerged. When he applied his eye to the crack, all he could see was a ragged edge of tin, as though the trailer's backside had been carved away by a giant can-opener. The arrangement convinced him there was a chamber concealed in the rock, a chamber that might contain anything from root vegetables to skeletons.

He was back inside the closet, searching for the mechanism that opened the panel, when the doorbell rang. It was a guy in a hardhat. They were doing some blasting in the vacant lot across the street, removing a spur of rock. He explained the blasting signals, adding as an afterthought, "Just to be on the safe side, don't stand in front of any windows."

In the street a crane was unloading immense rubber mats from a flatbed truck. They were made from long sections of automobile tire cabled together. From the look of them, they weighed several tons apiece. They were draped over the spine of rock after the charges were set, and everyone withdrew from the site. A horn blared, and Danny, who'd been watching from a window, stepped away reluctantly. He'd never seen anything blown up before.

There was a dull thump and the trailer shuddered as though a freight train had run into it. Dishes rattled, cupboard doors popped open, and a pot leapt off the stove. "Wow," said Danny admiringly. He peeked through the window expecting to see a smoking crater, but there was only a scattering of rocky rubble in the street and a cloud of dust above the blast mats. The horn sounded again signalling all clear, followed by a muffled thud that shook the trailer again, though not as profoundly as the first time.

Danny hoisted his eyebrows quizzically as several hardhats rushed into the street like disturbed ants. Had something gone wrong? He pressed his

face to the window so he wouldn't miss anything, but it soon became evident the men were just keen to get back to work. They rolled away boulders, shovelled up debris, and swept the street with such energy that tiny dust devils spiralled off the ends of their pushbrooms. In minutes the street was innocent of rubble, and Danny turned away from the window feeling mildly disappointed. But as he straightened pictures and tidied up in the kitchen, a tantalizing thought occurred to him. If the blast was strong enough to pop open cupboard doors, could it have had a similar effect on the secret panel? He hurried out of the kitchen and found the door to the spare room lolling open. A favorable sign, he thought, just as his foot found a sharp object on the carpet and caused him to yelp. It was a shard of rock. Wondering how it got there, he reached down to pick it up and at the same time glanced into the spare room. The Pitbull was stretched out on the floor, its beautiful yellow gas tank stove in. Next to it lay a football-sized rock, and above it a plume of fiberglass dangled from a hole in the ceiling.

## CHAPTER 8

When summer came to an end in the North, there was a sense of expectation, a quickening, as though the hot weather had been a brief aberration, an obligatory period of torpor that was mercifully over. The more golden the hills became, the more impatient people grew for winter. They changed the oil in their vehicles, topped up the antifreeze, tested their block heaters and battery blankets. They waxed their skis and sharpened their skates, and dragged their kids into stores to outfit them with new parkas and windpants and boots. Hardware outlets did a brisk trade in caulking compounds, weather stripping, and window insulation kits.

For houseboaters the change in seasons was more problematic. Every spring and fall there was a period of unsafe ice, during which they moved ashore, or booked off work for a week or so and holed up in their

houseboats. Last year Nora had stayed with Hugo, but this year she wasn't sure what would happen. Following their disagreement, he'd come down with a convenient fever. She'd played nurse somewhat grudgingly, for she always had trouble with traditional roles. Besides, she suspected him of malingering. He'd be fine for a few days, then not, retreating to bed and petulance. It was mothering he wanted, or so it seemed. His way of bending her to his will.

Finally she could stand it no longer and let a week go by without contacting him. She just needed a bit of space, she told herself. But with each passing day it became harder to pick up the phone and call, while fresh obstacles to their relationship multiplied in her head. Hugo was, she admitted, steady, principled, compassionate – the last person in the world who'd abandon his family and disappear without a trace. No doubt that was why she'd been attracted to him. The trouble was, could the complete opposite of her father be happy *without* a family? It seemed unlikely.

Then there was the matter of famous ancestors. On one of their first dates Hugo had casually mentioned that Simeon Poisson was a distant relative. Nora, not to be outdone, had responded with one of her own, Nikolai Lobachevski. It was an interesting bit of synchronicity, for the two mathematicians had been contemporaries. She'd been using one of Simeon's discoveries in her remating formula, a statistical test for randomness called the Poisson distribution. In it she saw a reflection of Hugo's personality – dry and methodical – whereas her own ancestor's achievement was so radical it defied normal understanding. He had formulated a non-Euclidean geometry.

Thus, where Hugo was cautious, she was bold and intuitive. Where his

life was ruled by a single-minded devotion to mosquitoes, she read widely and liked to ski. She went to the theater. She jogged. The prospect of even a week in his compulsively neat apartment began to feel onerous. How could they ever find happiness together? They were polar opposites.

He lived in monastic simplicity, sleeping on a steel cot and dining off tin plates. The clothes in his closet were filed alphabetically. His kitchen looked as if it had been denuded by locusts, for he shopped sporadically and often forgot to eat. The walls were bare except for a poster celebrating the Territory's official insect. *Vector News* was the principal reading material on hand.

When Nora hinted at the narrowness of his interests, he reminded her that mosquitoes had shaped western civilization by contributing to the downfall of ancient Greece and Rome. Mosquito-borne plasmodium had done for Alexander the Great and Oliver Cromwell. Malaria, dengue, yellow fever – all were great levellers of humanity conveyed by mosquitoes. Canada, he predicted, would become home to malaria once again. Worse, he wondered what new mosquito-borne illnesses were waiting in the wings, so to speak, ready to make the leap from animal to human host. What awful effects, what strange fevers and delusions, might they produce?

The North was a perfect petri dish for the incubation of such diseases. Mosquitoes were so numerous they could physically overpower a person, inflicting thousands of bites per minute and siphoning off half the blood supply of a full-grown adult in a matter of hours. The government tended to hush up such incidents as being detrimental to tourism, but for Hugo they proved there was no better place in the world to pursue his studies.

He worked in a dusty tin garage in Old Town, where he maintained an

office, an insectary, and a small lab. His field gear included nets, dippers, light traps, wrist and arm cages, and stable traps, in which a live animal was used as bait. A lot of his gear he'd made himself. For one of his projects – developing a variety of *Aedes hexodontus* that didn't need a blood meal to reproduce – he'd irradiated mosquitoes with americium, a radioactive element he'd obtained by disassembling smoke detectors.

No detail of their lives escaped his attention. He documented how they molted and hibernated and mated on the wing. He weighed fat deposits and described wing venation and tarsal claws. He made an exhaustive study of male genitalia, the surest method of identifying species, of which there were 27 in the North, though he was certain there were more, perhaps even some undiscovered ones. He'd heard occasional rumors of a snow white variety that was active during winter. It seemed an utter impossibility, yet Nature was full of surprises, especially in the insect world. Insects outnumbered all other kinds of animals in the North, and many had physiological adaptations that allowed them to operate at extremely low temperatures. Why not mosquitoes?



The irony, Nora thought, was that Hugo would have worked well in a large bureaucracy. He would not have ended up in a basement, which is where she found the contents of her office. Her desk was tipped up on end and her filing cabinet lying on its side, with everything else thrown indiscriminately into boxes – study skins, scat samples, fieldbooks containing years of notes, biological abstracts, hundreds of histological slides, minutes from the publication committee (“What is a publication?”), and of course her skulls.

Several had been pulverized, and two of the projects she'd been working on were hopelessly conflated, a rodent exclusion manual and a study of gustatory repellents. All but one of her rollup blinds had disappeared.

Wearily she rode the elevator to the floor she'd been evicted from. It was like entering a foreign country, thronged with people she did not recognize. Everything about them seemed different, their speech, their dress, their neatly manicured appearance. She wandered around like a rat in a maze and suddenly found herself at the entrance to her former office.

“Hello,” said Jane Griffin, putting down a quill.

The office looked like a curio shop, for assembled on the shelves was a global collection of bric-a-brac, all of it personal memorabilia that Jane had gathered in her travels around the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Russia, Japan and Hawaii, the New World. She gave Nora a quick tour, pointing out scrimshaw and lava, a lacquered rice bowl, a canopic jar, the tail of a marsupial wolf, and a stuffed European warbler, either a chiffchaff or a figpecker, she couldn't remember which.

Her papery brow crinkled. “By the way, would you know if dogs are covered by our health care plan? Neptune's been rather agitated lately. He keeps wandering off. You haven't seen him around, have you?”

Continuing her perambulations, Nora discovered Pfang wielding a rake in his office. He'd removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his jeans, and was spreading sand under the desk and into the corners of the room. They spoke, but did not communicate.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Debugging the sand.”

“Where are the other biologists?”

“In the coffee room, dumping core.”

“What?”

“They’re nyet-working.”

Giving up, she reentered the maze and presently located the coffee room, now diminished to the size of a broom closet. The number of biologists had shrunk again.

“It’s Clobbitt,” said Vomer. “He’s been exiled to Iqaluit, poor bugger.”

The move made sense, since after Division most of the polar bears would be in Nunavut. The logic was irrefutable yet demoralizing. Nearly half the biologists had now been culled, with the rest cowering in the coffee room like the last representatives of an endangered species. There was Ungle, absently removing twigs from his beard; Vomer, picking his teeth with a fishbone and making his barbels quiver; and Neddles, a botanist who’d just returned from an entire summer in the field. He was sitting bolt upright in a chair, his eyeballs big as gun barrels.

“It’s his first day back,” explained Vomer. “Either he’s in shock, or he needs to go into detox again.”

Neddles had a unique drug problem. He was putting together a handbook on mushrooms of the North-West Territory, and felt a scientific obligation to taste them all. As a result, he suffered frequently from hallucinations.

“This is very weird,” he said. “Like, where am I?”

“Settle down, or we’ll call an ambulance,” grumbled Vomer.

“Leave him alone. You’re just sore about the submersible,” said Ungle.

Vomer had put in a requisition for one, but Brassclick had nixed it. “I don’t understand. He wanted innovation. I’d have been the first freshwater fisheries biologist in the country to have one.”

“You’re not thinking big enough,” advised Ungle. “You should have gone after that decommissioned Russian sub, the one that was up for sale in Vancouver.”

“Right, I could have torpedoed anglers who were over their limit. Is that why your project got approved? You’re blowing things up?”

“I’m not allowed to discuss it.”

“A secret caribou project? Come on!”

Ungle’s face grew liverish. Of all the biologists he was the most intolerant of criticism. Some years back the Kaminuriak herd had disappeared and he’d cited over-hunting as the cause. It was a theory hotly disputed by local people, who claimed that caribou came out of holes in the ground, just like gold. That was why Ungle’s surveys had missed them. Just when the controversy was at its most rancorous the herd suddenly reappeared, and in greater numbers than before, an increase too large to be explained by natural reproduction. Ungle was publicly censured in the Legislative Assembly. Ever since then he’d been obsessed with increasingly outré methods of research. He found it particularly galling that the American military had better information on caribou numbers than he did.

“They have spy satellites flying over the North every day. If they can pick the numbers off a licence plate in Red Square, they can tell me how many caribou we’ve got. Only they won’t because it’s classified. So year after year I plug away doing antiquated aerial surveys, and whip up my figures into a population estimate that is 90% accurate nine times out of ten, which in plain English means I could be totally out to lunch.”

Vomer grinned. “You’re not thinking big enough. Launch your own satellite.”

“I’ll launch something, all right.”

Quietly Nora got up and left. As she strode down the hall, a large black shape loomed before her. It was Neptune, emerging from an empty office. He swung his heavy head in her direction, regarded her with world weary eyes, then plodded away. What had he been looking for? A better view of the bay? She peeked through the doorway, but all she saw was a suspicious damp spot in the carpet.



Descending to the basement felt like a journey into the subconscious. It was a dusty ill-lit place with bare concrete walls, a storage area for long-forgotten items. The low ceiling was webbed with pipes and ducts, and held up by thick pillars that groaned under the weight of the levels above. An ancient coal-burning furnace provided heat to the building, and was tended by the building’s custodian, a short wordless individual who wore a greasy bandanna and was coated in coal dust.

Nora’s belongings were off in a corner where the concrete was crumbling and roots were forcing their way through cracks. She righted her desk and filing cabinet, and sifted through the wreckage in the boxes, and by the end of the day had achieved a semblance of order. The next morning she arrived with a gallon of latex paint and several throw-rugs for the floor. She cleaned, scrubbed, and redecorated, and by the end of the week had transformed her basement corner into a cozy hideaway. There was a flowered couch that the custodian helped move in, and a tiny fridge, and sprightly pictures on the wall. Best of all, there was no phone, and no

computer line so she couldn't be blamed for not reading her email, and no in-basket overflowing with urgent demands. If she was needed, someone could come down and get her. In the meantime she resolved to keep out of sight as much as possible. No one would remark upon her absence.

Biologists came and went as mysteriously as the creatures they studied. Besides, there was still a lot of cleaning up to do, the histological slides in particular. There were hundreds to sort through and organize before they could be examined.

Each contained a thin slice of tooth whose annuli, viewed under a microscope, resembled geological strata and were used to determine an animal's age. She'd been planning to hire someone to count the annuli, but the government had recently put a hold on all contracts. She'd have to do the work herself, which meant squinting through a microscope for days on end. Sighing, she spread out some slides on her desk and made a start at sorting through them, but her attention kept wandering. She got up and communed with the skull of an old friend, *Spermophilus richardsonii*, its teeth now fractured as a result of the move. She unrolled the single remaining window blind, which was fastened to the wall and used as a scroll, a compact way of presenting information. This one contained the dental formulas of numerous rodents. Her mouth twisted ruefully. Her mother had always wanted her to be a dentist.

She sank down on the couch and let her eyes drift toward another item on the wall, an Arthur Rackham print from *The Wind in the Willows*. Ratty and Mole were just setting off on a picnic. Ratty of course would be *Arvicola terrestris*, a European relative of Richardson's water vole.

She smiled to herself. Richardson again. How those explorers loved

rodents. They'd also tagged the arctic ground squirrel with Parry's name and saddled a race of the thirteen-lined species with Hood's, while *Spermophilus franklinii* immortalized the biggest buffoon of them all, poor old Sir John. If anything, his name should have been attached to a toad. That was who the old fool reminded her of, Toad setting off to navigate the North-West Passage in a sailing ship outfitted with a steam engine.

Poop-poop!

She fell into a pleasant reverie, imagining a picnic with Ratty and Toad and Mole. She'd open up a hamper and inundate them with reindeer cheese buttered bannock wolf chops ptarmigan pie jellied moosenose fireweed salad cranberry loaf and birch cordial. Afterwards she'd invite them back to her burrow and show them around. She was certain they'd find it every bit as comfy as their own.

## CHAPTER 9

“We’re at the airport,” Donna said the next time she called.

Danny’s heart sank. The man in the hardhat had plugged the hole in the roof and assured Danny that all damages would be covered by insurance, though exactly when he hadn’t been able to say. Meanwhile the Pitbull was still lying on its side in the spare room like a stiff-legged carcass.

Danny realized that Donna had asked him a question. “Pardon?”

“Did you read the letter?”

“Yeah, I did. Say, what kind of paper was that? There were lumps in it.”

“It’s made from muskox dung.”

“Funny, it didn’t smell bad.”

“I bought it at a craft shop. Listen, Stu’s really enjoying himself. In fact, he wants to stay a little longer.”

“At the airport?”

“He’s trying to get us on a flight to Acapulco. You don’t mind, do you? It would only be another week or two. Three at the most. He’s got a hankering for Mexican food.”

“You’re still in Vegas?”

“I told you, we’re at the airport. Is everything okay? You sound funny.”

“I’m fine. Listen, don’t worry about a thing. Take as long as you want.”

Donna’s voice dropped a notch as she confided, “Our wedding anniversary’s coming up. I think Stu’s planning something romantic.”

“He’s a very sweet guy.”

“Most people don’t realize how sensitive he is.”

Danny was glad to hear it. He might not have to get his jaw wired shut after all. Whistling, he borrowed one of Stu’s jackets and headed out the door for a celebratory lunch. There was a place he knew of that put on a decent buffet, if you didn’t mind dining in an alley. Just thinking about it made him salivate. He quickened his pace, and at the same time rolled up his collar and thrust his hands deeper in Stu’s pockets. It was nipier than he expected. The occasional grain of snow drifted past his nose and the sky was like a sheet of lead. By the time he reached the alley he was thinking a different venue might be advisable, one with a little less atmosphere.

He rounded the corner and came to a sudden stop. The alley was a rough cinderblock canyon with walls that had been scribbled and dribbled upon, and windows constrained by grates or made sightless with bricks. Lining the passageway were dumpsters and animal-proof wooden boxes that housed trash cans. Through oversight or overcrowding one of the cans had been left out and now lay on its side like a cornucopia, lid gone, garbage spilling out.

Two slices of bread were positioned on the ground before it like an unfinished sandwich.

The trash can rattled and shook, and a raven waddled out with a jar in its beak. It looked around cautiously, wings cocked, ready to launch itself into the air, then set down the jar and dipped its beak into it. The jar tipped over, and the raven pushed it around for a while before giving up and stepping back to consider a new approach. Several times it hopped nervously into the air, and once it stared hard at a shadowy area between two dumpsters. At length it returned to the jar, seized it with a foot, and twisted its head sideways, poking and scraping until its beak emerged triumphant, coated in peanut butter. It hopped over to the slices of bread, anchored one with a foot, and began wiping its beak on it. The sandwich was nearly complete when the raven gave a curious sideways hop and stared once more at the shadowy area between the dumpsters. It extended its wings and gave a half-hearted leap into the air, but instead of rising upward to safety it hovered for a moment, head ducking low for a futile grab at the sandwich. It was a costly delay, for at that moment a man came hurtling out of the shadows, arms extended, hands clutching a jacket. He fell upon the raven, and a commotion of noise and feathers ensued. The trash can went bounding away, strewing its contents across the alley. The man rolled about as though wrestling with himself, arms and legs whirling. Presently his struggles ceased. He sat up with the raven contained within a battered down jacket.

It was Freddy.

He made a crooning sound and slipped a hand beneath the jacket to calm the bird. His movements were soothing at first, but soon became strained. There was a fresh outburst of croaking and suddenly the jacket burst open.

Freddy fell back as though defeated, and the raven lifted into the air, wings squeaking and feet curled up like tiny fists.

Danny backed out of the alley and hurried down the sidewalk. At the Greasy Nugget he bought himself a cup of coffee and sat down to collect his thoughts. The mysteries surrounding Freddy continued to pile up. What in heaven's name had he been trying to do? Mug a raven? Hold it for ransom? Nothing about the guy made any sense. In fact, now that Danny thought about it, the same could be said for just about everyone else he'd met since entering the Territory. The MacBolts, Father Brown and his mutt, the whole crew at the Border Café. Why would someone hand out a useless business card?

"Aiye!" cried an old man at the next table. He had a weather-beaten head with heavy cheekbones, blocky forehead and chin, and skin the color and texture of a root. He was staring open-mouthed at a corner-mounted TV. Danny looked over at the screen, expecting a news bulletin, or maybe a fist fight or a car chase, but all he saw was a woman flinging her hair about in slow motion. It was a shampoo commercial.

"Aiye!" cried the old man again, this time clapping his hands in amazement. He sipped tea from a mug and gnawed on a bit of leather. When he noticed Danny staring at him, he held out a piece and said, "Dry meat."

"No thanks."

The old man seemed not to have heard. He swallowed the last of his tea, thrust a piece of meat at Danny, and wandered away looking for the exit. Danny examined the shaving of dried meat. It looked as if it had come out of the bottom of a shoe. He raised it to his nose and sniffed but detected the

scent of nothing edible, only wood smoke and spruce needles. Rising, he deposited it in a waste receptacle and moved his coffee to a new location, next to a table where three unshaven men were seated. One was slurping down fried eggs, another was passed out with his face in a plate of beans, and the third was telling a fish story.

“...so he gets the damn thing into the boat, but before he can bash it over the head it spits out the hook and starts flapping around. Makes a helluva commotion. Bernie makes a grab for it, but you know how slimy jackfish are. The next thing you know it’s gone, jumped clean over the side. Too bad, it was a good-sized fish, maybe 25 pounds. Then he notices blood on his hand, a lot of it. He looks closer and jeez if his little finger isn’t gone, bitten clean off.”

“Ouch,” said the guy with the eggs.

“Wait, it gets better. He slaps on a coupla bandaids and gets both his rods going, one in each hand, casting like a maniac. He’s got these motorized reels, Daiwo I think. Anyway, he gets a bite and reels it in, and sure enough it’s the very same jack.”

“How does he know?”

“He opens it up and looks inside, and sure enough there’s his finger. He hightails it back home, goes to the hospital, and gets it sewed back on. Trouble is, it looks like hell, and there’s no feeling or movement in it. All it does is get in the way. So one day he gets fed up and hacks it off with his filleting knife. The only problem is, he doesn’t know what to do with it. He doesn’t want to toss it in the garbage, or bury it in the back yard where the dog can dig it up. So he drops it in a jar of olives and sticks it in his tackle box. Guess what he’s going to use for bait next summer?”

Chuckling, the two of them got up and left, and Danny switched tables, easing himself into the seat beside the guy with his face in the plate of beans. Bernie, he assumed, for one of his hands was short a pinkie. Grabbing a hank of hair he lifted Bernie's head, scraped the beans off his face, and dug in. When the plate was clean, he restored it to its former position and sat back like a well-fed burgher. He drank off the last of his coffee and opened a discarded copy of the local newspaper, the *Yellowknife Blade*. He glanced at the lead story, about an expected crime wave in Yellowknife, the result of the new diamond industry. He chuckled over a comic strip named "Paws," read a column called "Tales from the Nuisance Grounds," and checked for upcoming weddings and funerals. Finally he looked at the Help Wanted section.

There were openings for a helicopter pilot, a Dogrib instructor, a scooptram operator, and a geologist with a specialty in plate and saucer tectonics. Nothing he could apply for, but a notice from the Government Employment Center caught his eye. It had been a long time since he'd visited one of those dreary places, finding them little more than federal make-work programs for the idiots they employed. Possibly it was different up North. Tomorrow the local office was hosting a demonstration by the YK Paranormal Society, which was offering personalized tips on job prospects. Throughout the day prizes were being awarded.

"Wow, and double wow!" he exclaimed. Maybe it was the beans, but suddenly he was struck with the conviction that tomorrow one of those prizes was headed his way. Even a job was not beyond possibility. He returned home in a buoyant mood and stretched out on the couch in the living room, intending to be well-rested for any opportunity that came his

way. He switched on the TV and watched the detective channel for a while. The heroes were an unlikely bunch. A blind man, a salvage consultant, a guy who lived in a trailer.

Presently his eyes began to droop. He dozed off thinking about private eyes, wondering if they actually existed. He'd never met one, or heard of anyone who had. Yet somehow they'd achieved a stature that was almost mystical. In books and movies and TV, it was never the police or the courts that desperate people turned to. It was always a PI, someone outside the system. A modern knight, tough and honorable, brave to a fault, solving mysteries and picking his teeth with the truth...

His eyes shot open. Faint sounds were coming from the bedroom, indecipherable over the babbling of the TV. He lay still for several commercials, trying to convince himself he was imagining things. Failing, he rolled off the sofa and advanced down the hallway on stocking feet. By the time he reached the bedroom the sounds had died away, and when he peeked through the doorway the room looked innocent. He checked under the bed, then rose as the sounds started up again, faint metallic whispers emanating from the closet. Facing it like an old adversary, he stepped forward and threw open the closet.

The secret panel was ajar. It swung back noiselessly with a touch of his hand, revealing a dark cavity. He studied it for a moment, then retreated into the bedroom for a flashlight. Thus armed, he passed through the closet and entered a rocky cleft that had been widened just enough to admit a man. It burrowed into the rock for a dozen yards and ended in a vertical shaft with the top of a ladder sticking out. He dropped to his knees and played the flashlight over the sturdy timbers framing the shaft. The ladder descended

into darkness. The air was cool and damp, and sometimes the clink of steel wafted upward, accompanied by the distant whine of pneumatic drills and the faint bray of a donkey engine. There might also have been a scrap of laughter and voices raised in song, but he couldn't be sure.

He sat there a while, thinking. Was Stu profiting from an illicit entrance to one of the mines? Was it merely a shortcut to work? Or was it something else entirely? Well, there was only one way to find out. He swung his legs over the edge and tested a couple of rungs. They creaked a bit but seemed solid enough. The wood was damp, but free of the moss that grew on the framing timbers. From lower down came the sound of trickling water, alerting him to the likelihood of a wet journey and making him ponder whether or not to go back for the raingear in Stu's closet. If he did, he could also pack a lunch and bring along something to mark his route, chalk or a ball of string. He wondered if he'd run into any bats or snakes.

As he deliberated, a new sound rose up the shaft, a series of rapid pops like firecrackers or distant gunfire. He turned and pointed the flashlight down in a single motion, but so quickly it slid from his grasp. Without thinking he made a grab for it and nearly followed it downward. The flashlight tumbled away like a flare, spinning end over end until it hit something and was extinguished, though whether it had reached bottom or was still falling like a dead sun, he couldn't tell. He clung to the ladder and steadied himself, then carefully climbed back up. Even he knew that proceeding without a light was foolhardy.

Back in the trailer, he filled his pockets with dog biscuits – having long since exhausted the food left by the MacBolts – and tried on Stu's gear. The helmet's brim came to rest on the bridge of his nose, but the webbing inside

was adjustable. The steel-toed boots were another matter. They were loose on his feet and caused him to stumble. One of the steel toes had suffered a blow, leaving a dent. As he ran a finger over it, more obstacles presented themselves. Explosions, cave-ins, pockets of deadly gas.

“Damn,” he muttered. How could he not explore the shaft? Wasn’t this the very thing that had drawn him to Yellowknife? Secret panels and lost tunnels?

A new thought occurred to him then, more sinister than the rest. What if the panel had not been jarred loose by the blast, or the impact of the falling rock, as he’d assumed? What if it had been opened by someone on the other side, someone who might return at any time, armed perhaps with a pipe wrench? Danny licked his lips and before he could reconsider gave the panel a tug. The locking mechanism snicked into place and resisted any further efforts at opening. He padded down the hall to the spare room and returned with the weight bench and a scrap of plywood. He covered the panel with the plywood and wedged it into place with the bench.

Regretfully, he shut the closet doors.

He hated being prudent.



In the morning he woke to find Yellowknife snug beneath a thick layer of snow, waiting like a gift to be unwrapped. He rushed outside and let the air flow over his face like aftershave. The blue reach of sky, the sidewalks full of skiers, the freshly minted landscape, all were powerful antidotes to the trailer’s dark confines. He started up the hill wondering what sort of prizes the Employment Center might be giving away. A food voucher or movie

pass would be nice. There might even be cash.

The Center was located in a building known as the Can, mainly because of its cylindrical shape and sheath of silver-gray metal, but also because it was a facility that housed prisoners. The building's correct name was the Employment and Correction Center, a combination that made perfect sense to its Federal masters, who considered themselves immune to the blunders of their Territorial counterparts. Inmates were lodged in basement cells, while the ground floor contained walk-in services for the unemployed, including rooms for seminars on how to find work. The middle storeys held office space for the staff of both agencies, while the top floor was given over to exercise and entertainment facilities for the inmates, a portion of which had been turned over to the YK Paranormal Society for the day.

A placard in the foyer directed Danny to the elevator, and as he rose upward it was hard not to feel his own fortunes were also in the ascendant, a feeling that was reinforced on the top floor by a window with a fine hubristic view. A second placard sent him down a corridor to the Craft & Self-Improvement Room, where a woman dressed as a gypsy was waiting. She handed him a ticket with a number on it and wished him good luck. Inside, people were lining up before tables where horoscopes were being cast, seances conducted, craniums calipered. A psychic gazed into a crystal ball, saw a large black dog in Danny's future, and suggested he look for a position at a kennel. A man with a polaroid camera photographed his aura and claimed to see the ghostly outlines of a hat, which implied a career in haberdashery.

"I *am* wearing a hat," Danny said.

"There you go," smiled the photographer.

Presently a magician in a dinner jacket rose to announce the winner of a draw. The prize was a job at the new diamond mine.

Danny's eyes bugged out. "Is that what the prizes are?" he asked the guy beside him. "Jobs?"

The guy had a face that could have split wood. "They're giving away other crap too, but jobs are the main ones, either at the new mine or one of the plants goin' up at the airport. You know, where they saw up the diamonds. One job every hour, but don't get your hopes up. So far the only people who've won are a hollow-earther and a weezy board artist."

The magician reached into a top hat and pulled out a ticket. When he read the winning number, there was a shriek from the tarot card reader.

"See what I mean," said the axe-faced man. "It ain't normal."

The awarding of each job was followed by a consolation prize, which played off the diamonds theme. "Instruments for cutting and polishing ice," quipped the magician, holding up a pair of skates.

"Shit," said the sharp-featured man. He turned and walked out the door.

Danny stuck around, convinced that fortune would smile on him, and sure enough his number was eventually called. Not for a job, of course, but one of the consolation prizes – a pair of ice picks joined by a cord.

"What the heck?" he asked the magician.

"You wear them around your neck when you're out on the ice. If you happen to fall through, you use them to haul yourself out."

It seemed an unlikely possibility. Danny eyed the other prizes, which were spread out behind the main counter. Among the rhinestone jewelry and Neil Diamond tapes was a paperback. "Is that a James Bond novel?"

The magician shrugged. "You want that instead? Sure."

It was the first time Danny had ever won anything, and convinced him that his luck had changed at last. As he walked back to the trailer, wild schemes ricocheted through his head, schemes for making money, for finding a niche, an angle. He didn't need anything grandiose. Something simple would do, like one of the Perfesser's sidelines, peddling treasure maps to tourists. The maps revealed lost mines, secret fishing holes, and rumored sightings of a mythical creature named Ol' Slavey. A local printer cranked them out by the thousands. The Perfesser aged them by burying them at the dump, or leaving them too close to a campfire. They sold like the dickens.

What Danny needed was something that did not require experience or equipment or startup money. A tall order, but today anything seemed possible. The main thing was to stay positive, not let anything dampen his spirits – like the patched roof of the trailer, or the discovery that his shiny new paperback wasn't quite what he'd expected. He could have sworn *The Diamond Sutra* was a spy novel.

He flicked on the TV but was too restless to watch. Success, he kept telling himself, was just an idea away. Up and down the hallway he paced, in and out of the living room, thinking, thinking, while wisecracking PI's solved cases and busted mysteries. Suddenly a wild notion took root in his skull. Grabbing the phone book, he flipped through the yellow pages. A smile spread across his face.

He sat down at the kitchen table and printed his name on a sheet of paper. He stared at it thoughtfully, then shook his head and crumpled it up. His real name wouldn't do. He needed a snappy moniker, like Gunn or Magnum or Hammer. How about Trigger? No, that was a horse.

Grinning, he tried again on a fresh piece of paper. Yeah, that was more like it. He imagined himself saying, “A hundred bucks a day, m’am, plus expenses.” Or was that exorbitant? He certainly didn’t want to price himself out of business. Maybe he should emphasize affordability.

He composed a couple dozen notices for posting on power poles around town. Once they were up, all he’d have to do was wait for the phone to ring. He didn’t see how he could miss. He’d be the only private eye in town.

## CHAPTER 10

One night an arctic front moved in, having somehow given weather satellites the slip. The bay froze over and Nora began sleeping on her couch in the basement of the Carboniferous Building. The gurgling pipes and wheezing ducts kept her awake at first, along with the sound of the custodian stoking the furnace from a coal seam. In the darkness she imagined his squat frame outlined by orange fire, and the hissing lumps of coal being compressed to a hard white brilliance.

A few nights later she was woken by a rumbling vibration, and shot out of bed in her flannel jammies thinking the furnace was about to explode. By the time she got the light on, the sensation was fading like the vapors of a dream, and when she reached the furnace room door all she could hear was a faint rasping sound. It was the custodian snoring. She shuffled back to bed.

Most likely the rumbling was a shockwave from Con or Giant, blasting a nearby stope. The rock beneath Yellowknife was rotten with tunnels, a legacy from 50 years of gold mining.

Her morning routine consisted of a splash of water in the face and a nibble of toast. She missed not having a shower but the inconvenience was temporary, just until the ice in the bay got thicker. Patting her hair into place, she moved to her desk and was instantly submerged in work. It was amazing what one could accomplish without meetings to attend, memos to write, phone calls to respond to.

Unfortunately her isolation was short-lived. One afternoon Jane Griffin appeared with a large basket on her arm. It was not guilt that had brought her, as Nora first suspected.

“Neptune’s gone,” Jane said, removing a hanky from her sleeve and dabbing at her eyes. “I can’t find him anywhere. He’s been missing for days.”

Nora made tea and they sat together on the couch. Jane said, “I don’t know how he’ll manage. He’s so old he can’t sleep without his mattress, and won’t eat anything but baked chicken.”

She was an odd bird, old-fashioned yet modern, blushing one moment, lion-hearted the next. She’d poked her nose into more odd corners of the world than anyone Nora knew. She’d travelled by dromedary and steam packet, climbed Mount Olympus, sailed around the Horn, descended into a mummy pit. She’d walked the plague-infested streets of Constantinople with a vinegar-soaked rag to her nose. She’d visited a harem, boarded an elephant, boated the Nile, met the pope. She’d suffered fleas, rats, fever, dysentery, hysterics, and the vomiting of blood.

But just as Nora was warming to her, Jane said, “By the way, Mr. Brassclick would like to know how your talpid project is coming along.”

Nora swallowed. “There are no talpids in the North-West Territory.”

“Oh.” Jane reached into her basket and placed several large bundles of letters on the desk. “He thought you might say that, so he asked me to give these to you.”

Each letter was stamped with the date of receipt and stapled to the envelope that had enclosed it. Nora glanced at a few of them. Someone from Ohio wanted to know if it was possible to drive to the North Pole. Another asked where the best place to see penguins was.

“No way,” Nora objected. “You’re a Tourism Officer, right? This is your job.”

“Mr. Brassclick said we’re all on the same team now and must help each other out. By the way, have you heard our new name? Natural Affairs. It’s much more euphonious than TWED, don’t you think? It was my idea.”

“TWED?”

“Horrid acronym. It’s what they were originally going to call us. Tourism, Wildlife, and Economic Development. One good thing, you’ll soon have some company down here. Won’t that be nice? It won’t be so lonely for you.”



A few nights later she was awoken by a heavy concussion, jolted out of a dream. The building was shuddering as though struck by a freight train. When she turned on the lights, there was a lump of concrete on the floor and a small hill of dirt beneath a hole in the wall where her Arthur Rackham

print had been. The aftershock trailed away like a battalion of tanks parading through the street.

Slipping into shoes and housecoat, she went in search of the custodian. He was sound asleep in a cot beside the furnace, fully clothed, hands folded beneath his shaggy head. His shoulder, when she gave it a shove, felt immobile as rock. Nevertheless his eyes popped open and he sat up without a word.

“There’s a hole in the wall,” she said. “Maybe you should take a look.”

He followed her back to her corner of the basement and stared at the damage, then picked up a broom and poked its handle through the hole, dislodging more dirt.

“Careful,” she warned as the broom handle snapped. He vanished into the darkness and returned with his coal shovel, which he applied to the hole in earnest, his bandy legs doing a dance as he levered out a second chunk of concrete. More earth cascaded across the throw-rugs.

“What are you doing?” she asked, but he paid no attention. He widened the hole until the shovel was of no further use, then began throwing himself against the wall. When fresh cracks appeared, he scabbled at them furiously with his bare hands. He leaned deeper and deeper into the hole until his legs were horizontal and kicking like a swimmer.

“Come back,” she yelled, as he gave a final wiggle and disappeared from view. She grabbed a flashlight from her desk and shone it through the hole. On the other side was a cavity of some sort, a narrow vault braced by timbers. When she explored it with the light, it lengthened into a black tunnel. The beam bounced off the custodian’s rapidly receding back.

“Bastard,” she cried, squeezing through the opening and setting off in

pursuit.

Why, she had no idea, but the image of Alice chasing the White Rabbit suggested itself.

The tunnel twisted downward like a corkscrew, collecting moisture on the walls and causing the custodian to vanish round a curve. She might have come to her senses and stopped, had not the sound of his footsteps drawn her on. He was just beyond the next turn, only seconds from her grasp. Then the tunnel levelled out and she could see him again, silhouetted against a distant light. He was farther ahead than she'd thought. He froze as though caught in the glare of a flashbulb, then ducked into an intersecting tunnel. His afterimage cycled colors behind Nora's eyelids. She became aware of a faint clatter, the rush of air through a ventilation system, the distant roar of loose rock tumbling down an ore-pass.

Her steps slowed. She'd come far enough for a woman in a housecoat. Besides, what was she hoping to accomplish? Teach the custodian better manners? Tell him how to do his job? Or had she been chasing another figure entirely? Her father, her boss, her fiancé? Or maybe it had not been pursuit at all, but flight – say, from a future like Jane Griffin's with a dog her only companion.

Or maybe she just needed the catharsis of an irrational act.

She moved forward to the junction. This new tunnel was wide enough for a truck, with light bulbs dangling overhead in little cages. Graffiti was spray-painted on the roughhewn wall and lengths of steel were cast on the ground like rusty baseboards. Farther down, embedded in the tunnel's flank, was a heavy metal door.

Nora looked both ways like a pedestrian at a crosswalk, then walked

quickly to the door. Scrawled across it were the words “Hoist Room.” She gripped the handle with both hands and heaved. The door opened a crack and a bubble of sound squeezed out – voices, song, the click of billiard balls. Men in hardhats were seated at plank tables, their heads tilted back and mouths open so wide she could see gold-capped molars. They were pouring ale down their throats from metal tankards. Others, still dressed in waterproofs and rubber boots, were standing around in groups, singing or throwing darts. Two were circling each other at a billiard table, using drill steel for cues and smacking oversized ball bearings. The lamps from their helmets swept the green felt like searchlights.

Nora peeked round the corner and spotted the custodian. He was barging along with his usual tact, shouldering people aside. Voices rose in protest and one miner turned with foam dripping from his upper lip and bounced an empty tankard off the custodian’s head, but the custodian took no notice. He ploughed ahead unconcernedly, making for an exit at the far side of the chamber.

“Hey!” shouted a miner, having spotted Nora.

She’d been leaning farther and farther forward to watch the custodian’s progress. Startled, she released her grip on the door and fled back to the darkened tunnel from whence she’d come, stumbling along in a half-crouch, chasing the beam of her flashlight and keeping her head low in case of projections from the ceiling. Presently her pace slowed, her breathing returned to normal. When she switched off the flashlight and listened, there was no sound of pursuit.

She started forward again, meditating upon her discoveries: an underground tavern and a secret entrance to one of the mines, either Con or

Giant. No doubt there were other surprises, if she cared to snoop around. She'd been so consumed by the evils of diamond mining that she'd forgotten about gold, about the underworld that existed beneath her very feet. The custodian had reminded her. He'd been her guide.

Back in the early 50s two children had died from eating snow laced with arsenic, a byproduct of the gold-refining process. Today a quarter-million tonnes of arsenic trioxide were stored somewhere in Giant's underground maze. It was a classic tradeoff, poison for precious metal. What would happen when the mine ceased production, the pumps stopped, the tunnels allowed to flood? How long would it take for the drums to rust through and the arsenic leak out? There was enough to poison all of Great Slave Lake.

Thus preoccupied, it took a while before she noticed the tunnel was sloping downward instead of up. At least, that's the way it seemed. In the darkness it was hard to tell. She tried to remember how long her descent had taken, and how long she'd been walking since leaving the Hoist Room, but her sense of time was distorted by the darkness. She knew there were hundreds of miles of tunnels beneath Yellowknife, and even experienced miners sometimes lost their way. Should she retrace her steps? She stopped to collect herself and rest, but upon rising found herself even more disoriented. Which way was forward, which was back?

She swallowed down the first stirrings of panic and got moving again. What was the worst that could happen? A dead end? Asking a miner for help? No big deal. But as she plodded through the darkness, more troubling consequences began to suggest themselves. She could tumble down a shaft or wander into a blasting area. She might end up in an arsenic vault or an exhausted portion of the mine that no one ever visited. Her feet were

sopping wet, her flashlight growing faint. Now and then she crushed tiny bones underfoot, the remains of animals lost like herself. Some stretches of tunnel were filled with clumps of mushrooms, others with chunks of rusty metal that might have sprung from a giant clock. Sagging mesh and drooping pipes clung to the ceiling, the walls looked as though they'd been pounded by hammers, and a thin stream of water flowed along the floor and collected in black pools. She sensed the crushing weight of rock overhead, and the unimaginable pressure it must be exerting. Even the air felt denser.

Finally a light appeared in the distance, a solitary incandescent bulb that illuminated a green panelled door like a painting in an art gallery. It was a very ordinary door, no different from the type found in a boathouse or potting shed. It was set neatly into the wall of the tunnel, with a previous coat of yellow showing through in several places. "Drill Room" said a neatly lettered sign.

She stood there uncertainly, her initial relief giving way to caution. Should she knock on the door or just open it and go in? What if it were another drinking den? Gingerly she pressed her ear against the door and listened for the sounds of carousing. All was silent. She stepped back and looked up and down the tunnel. At least she had a reference point now. Maybe she should turn around and head back the way she'd come. She was still deliberating when the door swung open and a woman appeared, a kerchief on her head and overshoes on her feet. She was holding a box covered in pink tissue paper, which nearly tumbled from her grip.

"Heavens, you gave me a start. Is it an emergency?"

"Sort of," replied Nora, looking contrite. "I'm afraid I'm lost."

"Lost! Oh my, do come in."

She guided Nora into a cozy chamber with a domed ceiling and a floor of worn brick. “You have a seat and I’ll fetch my husband.”

The woman departed through an inner door leaving Nora among furnishings that looked solid and reassuring. There was a padded armchair, and a straight-backed bench of the kind once found in railway stations, and a desk with a lamp shining brightly on an old-fashioned telephone. A double row of shelving along one wall held leather-bound books that leaned together in a companionable fashion, interspersed with other objects – a rock hammer, a geode cracked open to reveal the clandestine crystals within, a set of false teeth with a windup handle, a porcelain bear playing a flute, and a wooden rack holding syringes. Beneath the shelves was a wainscoting made of the same dark wood as the desk and bench. The remainder of the walls was plastered, whitewashed, and adorned with several framed prints. One of them was a tranquil winter scene with a stately moose in the foreground, a watch cap on his head and a scarf wrapped round his neck.

Nora eased herself into the armchair, which was rather oddly positioned in the middle of the room, but infinitely more comfortable than the wooden bench. Fatigue pressed her body deep into the cushions, and she made use of the padded extensions for head and feet. Immediately her eyelids began to droop. Her adventure had been more draining than she’d thought. As she fought off the impulse to sleep, her eyes chanced upon the inner door, which the woman had left open in her departure. Through it, the corner of an electric range was just visible. Its homey appearance made a final argument for rest that Nora could not resist, and she dozed until the sound of footsteps and a throat clearing politely penetrated her consciousness. Opening her eyes, she beheld a kindly-looking gentleman standing before her. He was

leaning forward in a solicitous manner with his arms behind his back. He had a small pointed face with whiskery jowls and wire-frame glasses that seemed embedded in his skin. He was wearing a white jacket.

“Hello,” he said, “how are we today?”

Nora yawned. “Better, now that I’m here.”

He moved over to the shelves. “Where does it hurt?” he asked, his back to her.

“All over,” she said ruefully. Her limbs ached and she was still groggy with sleep.

“Freezing?”

“No, I’m quite warm actually.”

He chuckled. “Well, don’t worry about a thing. We’ll have you fixed up in no time. Open up, please.”

“What?”

He was standing next to the chair, but somewhat behind her. “A little wider.”

It was at this point the kerchiefed woman returned, carrying a tray with cups and saucers. “I’ve just put the kettle on,” she said cheerfully. Then she noticed what her husband was holding and said, “Mr. C, she’s not here for an appointment. The poor girl’s lost!”

Nora turned in the chair and saw that he was holding a hypodermic the way a smoker cups a cigarette. She sprang to her feet. “Who are you people?”

◇◇◇◇

He'd been one of the earliest miners in Yellowknife, back in the thirties when gold was first discovered. In those days toothaches were fearsome ailments that drove men to desperate remedies. Hammering a sewing needle into a tooth, or administering battery acid with an eyedropper. Necessity made him a dentist. When he wasn't working underground, he was yanking out teeth with pliers or filing down busted bicuspids. Later, he rigged up a drill powered by a treadle sewing machine, and used it to clean out tooth decay. He liked the idea of extracting gold by day, and depositing it in miners' mouths by night.

People called him Cavity.

Later, even after Yellowknife became a government town and was choked with lucrative dental practices, miners came to him for treatment, oldtimers who had no time for flossing and didn't give a damn about tartar buildup. He kept all his dental equipment in an unused area of the mine, and sometimes he'd sleep there, in the big hydraulic chair, instead of going home at the end of a shift. His back was causing him trouble, and his hands were starting to swell and twist with arthritis, making it difficult to drill an eight-foot round each day. Finally his wife set up house underground so he didn't have to leave the mine, but even so his output dropped. He no longer made his bonus.

One day she bought him a bottle of gold schnapps, hoping to cheer him up. "You mine it, why not drink it too?" It was a clear liquid in which fine gold flakes floated. Cavity liked the taste and asked for more. Amazingly he began to feel better. Could it be the gold? He moved to a stronger regimen, injecting himself with gold salts, 20 milligrams in the buttock every week. After six months his arthritis ceased to trouble him.

He investigated other mineral cures. He took iron supplements for his blood, zinc lozenges for colds, kaolin for heartburn, and colloidal silver as a general antibiotic. He improved upon an ancient adage by eating a cup of dirt a day. Gradually he reduced his intake of meat, then vegetables, replacing them with unleavened bread made from salt, rock flour, and ice, which he claimed was a mineral.

“You eat dirt and rocks?” asked Nora, amazed. She drained her cup of tea and shook her head when Mrs. C offered to pour her more. In the bottom of the cup was a spoonful of gravel.

“Jolly healthy,” said Cavity. “No fat.”

“But you can’t survive on those things. They’re inorganic.”

“That depends on how one defines an organism, doesn’t it? Something that moves and grows, I should think, and you must admit rock does that. It flows, it propagates.”

“Mr. C,” interrupted his wife. “Nora will never get home if you turn philosophic.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t call our dear old planet inorganic.”

“Whether she would or wouldn’t is inconsequential.” She began clearing away the tea things, adding to Nora, “Mr. C will make sure you get back to the surface safely. I’d come along but there’s a function I must attend. I was just on my way out when you arrived.”

Cavity replaced his jacket with one of tweed. “With the change in our diet,” he said as his wife carried out the cups, “I’ve had to remove all our teeth and replace them with dentures. No need for incisors or canines. It’s molars all the way.”

He showed her the first set he’d made, using stones that made his mouth

look full of boulders. The only problem was, they kept breaking. He'd tried gold next, which worked tolerably well, but he'd been casting about for something harder, chert or topaz maybe. Recently he'd heard about a new mine out on the Barrens, a mine that produced something even better. Why not a set of diamond chompers?

His wife returned with a paper bag, which she gave to Nora. "Scones, in case you get peckish. It was lovely meeting you. Do drop by again for a visit. Mr. C can draw you a map so you can find your way back."

The couple stood side-by-side for a moment, kindly rotund figures of equal height. Then Cavity moved to the desk where he dutifully began drawing lines on a sheet of paper, and his wife picked up the pink-wrapped gift she'd been carrying when Nora arrived.

"It's for a baby shower," she said. "Have you started a family yet?"

"No."

"Don't worry, you will."

She bade Nora goodbye and left. Cavity, still working on the map, said, "Some of these tunnels have been here longer than the mine, faults that have been widened by hand and go all the way to the Barrens. Mustn't wander into one by mistake. There's things in them you don't want to meet."

The phone rang, a heavy black model with a rotary dial. "Hello," he said, settling the receiver against his ear. He listened for a long while before uttering another word. "Carats."

Ten minutes passed, fifteen. Nora looked over Cavity's shoulder. In addition to the map and phone, there was an appointment book on the desk and an envelope of handmade paper with a Mexican stamp on it, addressed to Mrs. C. She picked up the map and inspected it. It looked clear enough.

“I have to leave,” she said.

Cavity gave no indication he’d heard, so she opened the door and gave one final look before stepping into the tunnel. His sharp whiskery head was tilted to one side, looking as if he’d turned to stone.



The map turned out to be useless. She’d overlooked the fact that tunnels existed in three dimensions. Either she did not understand the notation Cavity had used, or there were passages he’d forgotten to mark. The latter, most likely. She’d always suspected that mining was a slipshod business, the mess on the surface reflecting conditions underground. Lost or misplaced tunnels were probably not uncommon.

Still, she did not grow alarmed. Cavity had mentioned there were over 20 entrances at the surface, plus another 10 or so that Giant didn’t know about. All she had to do was keep moving upward. The level they were on wasn’t very deep, and after a while she became aware of a set of narrow gauge rails, buried in muck and heavily rusted, running down the middle of the tunnel. Their presence was vaguely reassuring, companionable almost, and in a moment of whimsy she imagined herself striding along with the men who had laid those rails, stubby fellows with picks and shovels on their shoulders, singing “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho.” As she swung her arms to keep time, the paper bag she was carrying burst and the contents tumbled out – three smooth round stones that looked as if they’d been baked. She left them where they fell and carried on until the rails dipped beneath a pool of silent water. When she played her flashlight across the surface she saw the roof of

the tunnel curve gently downward until it too disappeared. Either the tunnel ended here, or the rest of it was submerged. She remembered that Giant mine extended for some distance beneath Great Slave. The thought was unnerving.

She backtracked until she found a side-drift that angled upward. Presently her flashlight began to flicker, but by then there was a cool breeze in her face, and it was freighted with a noticeable odor, a greasy animal reek that was somehow reassuring despite Cavity's mysterious warnings. She groped her way forward, tracking the tendrils of fat oily molecules that swirled through the air, parsing the scent into its constituent parts, dung and rotting garbage, spruce needles, honey and berries. The scent led her to an incline that arched so steeply she despaired of climbing it, till her hands encountered a length of heavy rope. It was lying on the ground, bristly as a tail but solidly anchored at the top. She hauled herself up to a passage that seemed more burrow than tunnel, and crawled along on her hands and knees. Gradually it constricted around her, forcing her to her stomach. She discarded the flashlight, useless now, and pushed her way forward, using her hands and feet like an animal. Her fingers touched something coarse and lumpy, like a cheap rug. At the same time the passage expanded enough for her to rise up on all fours, and a faint patch of radiance appeared before her. The rug shifted beneath her weight as she scrambled across it, and then she was plunging through a soft barrier of snow. Blinding sunlight struck her in the face. Blinking and sputtering, she hauled herself to her feet. She was on a rocky ledge overlooking Trail's End.

A snuffling noise made her turn, and the drowsy head of a bear protruded from a window in the snow. "Go back to sleep," she told it, and threw

herself over the brink of the ridge, landing in a little snowbank. She picked herself up and started running down the street in her muddy housecoat.

## CHAPTER 11

The first snow of the season was soon scoured away by wind and sun, but Yellowknife was not dismayed. Vehicles emerged from municipal garages to dump snow on the streets, snow trucks in from other areas. In no time at all the sidewalks were packed with skiers, and snowmobiles were zooming through town. Vendors hawked caribou sausage and porcupine kebabs from steaming braziers. People relaxed at sidewalk cafés bundled up in blankets, sipping lattes or frosty drinks in glasses made of ice. A snowmobile parkade opened up for business, and fastfood joints unshuttered their winter take-out windows, conveniently set at snowmachine height.

Meanwhile Danny was stuck inside the trailer awaiting his first case. He'd stocked up on dogfood so he wouldn't have to leave the phone, and occupied himself by sewing earflaps into his fedora and strips of insulation

into a trenchcoat he'd found at the dump. If he was going to be a shamus, he ought to look like one. He took notes when he watched the detective channel and fantasized about the cases he'd get. Probably there'd be a lot of divorce work. More interesting stuff, like blackmail and kidnapping, wouldn't come until Yellowknife's crime wave kicked in. He'd have to work his way up to murder.

But the days dribbled by without a call, not even a wrong number. Sometimes he picked up the phone just to hear the dialtone, and even tried reading *The Diamond Sutra*. He took to standing at the living-room window for long periods of time, watching people go by in snowsuits and muskrat parkas, moonboots and mukluks. He saw a dogteam pulling a man on a toboggan, and a woman jogging on snowshoes, and a family armed with hockey sticks, laughing and joking on their way to a shinny match. The big yellow Bombardier clanked by, driven by a woman wearing a ballcap. Even the old man he'd spoken to at the Greasy Nugget was on the move, pattering along on an ancient snowmobile. But it wasn't until he saw a young boy with skates slung over one shoulder and a fishing pole on the other that his resolve broke. He threw open the door and rushed outside in his stocking feet. He called out to the boy:

“Hey, where you going?”

The kid turned. He had a gap-toothed grin and fur-trimmed mitts joined by an idiot string across his shoulders. “Ice fishing,” he said.

“Fishing?” Danny repeated like a dope. “Where?”

“Where else?” laughed the kid, pointing toward the bay.

Danny stared after him, thunderstruck. He was living next to one of the largest lakes in the world and an unlimited supply of fish. Trout and pike

and herring and whitefish. He could see them sizzling in a pan, boiling in a pot, baking on a plank. He could have a different dish every night – cakes and kippers, crispy fillets, steaming bowls of chowder.

“Thanks,” he said. Back inside, he went directly to the spare room and picked out some hooks and a collapsible fishing rod that would fit into a pocket. Noticing a pair of skates, he took them too. He put on his trenchcoat and fedora, and was halfway out the door when the phone began to ring. He looked back in disbelief. Already his plan to be a detective seemed a million miles away, an embarrassing crackbrained scheme. As though testing its resolve, he let the phone ring three, four, five times. Finally he picked it up and recognized Donna’s voice. She and Stu were extending their vacation to include a cruise – round-the-world variety – to celebrate their wedding anniversary. She hoped he didn’t mind.

“No problem,” he said, clipping his answers.

“Don’t worry about the heat and power. Everything’s on automatic billing. The phone, too.”

“Terrific,” he said and slammed down the phone. He went outside and hurried to the government dock. There’d been no further snow or wind since the ice had formed, and now it stretched across the bay like a darkened window, flawless and perfect. He kicked off his boots and stuffed his feet into the skates. They were too big, of course, but he figured he could manage as long the blades weren’t dull. He tested the edges with his thumb. They felt okay. He eased himself onto the transparent ice. Directly beneath him was a patch of gently swaying weeds. He wobbled a bit, then bent his knees and pumped his legs, got his arms going. He picked up speed and suddenly was rocketing across the ice. An unexpected joy flooded through

him. He had forgotten how wonderful it was to skate.

He dipped one shoulder and banked, his hand brushing the ice. The muddy bottom dropped away like a cliff as he soared across the narrow strait to Jalopy Island where the houseboats were anchored. He curved among them, admiring their decks and ladders, their weathervanes and life rings, then cruised out to the middle of the bay and stopped in a flamboyant spray of ice. Ahead the bay opened like a funnel into the ocean-like expanse of Great Slave Lake. The ice seemed to stretch away to infinity.

He headed down the bay, looking for a likely spot to fish. He'd forgotten to bring a chisel, but the ice was only a few inches thick. The heel of his skate should do. He started chipping away but couldn't get much force into his kicks. Slivers of ice flew and several cracks appeared. Finally he got a bit of a hole going, and when he knelt to scoop out the ice fragments, he found himself staring at a fish. He could see it clearly, off to one side of the hole, its gill covers opening and closing, its pectoral fins rippling with a feathery motion. The ice was like a lens, magnifying every detail.

"Dinner at my place?" he asked in a conversational tone.

The fish darted off, returned, looked up at him.

"You'd look nice in a batter," Danny said, and continued kicking at the ice while the fish circled impatiently. He managed to deepen the hole until water oozed up through a small puncture at the bottom. Success, he thought, until his kicks ended in splashes. There was no way to widen the puncture without soaking himself. The damn hole was useless.

"Sorry, pal," he told the fish. "All I'm making here is a birdbath."

The fish looked up at him in disappointment, its mouth opening and closing as though trying to communicate.

“What is it, boy? You trying to tell me something? Is someone in danger?”

He took a few tentative strides and the fish matched his pace. “Maybe I won’t eat you after all,” he decided. “You could be my pet. I’ll come down to the bay every day and visit. In the summer we can go for a swim together.”

The fish speeded up.

“Oh, you want to race, do you?”

He lowered his head and pumped his legs, and left a spoor of graceful arcs in the ice. The fish kept pace, and together they proceeded down the bay until the lake filled the horizon. Finally he coasted to a stop, panting, enjoying the burning sensation in his thighs. As his breath returned, he looked out at the lake.

That’s no lake, he thought. It’s a bloody great sea.

The notion seeped into his skull that perhaps he’d been a bit reckless in coming so far. The black water under his feet suddenly seemed as deep as space, and far off where the horizon ought to be, there was a hint of motion. Waves? He couldn’t tell. The light was starting to fail, and the cooling sweat on his forehead, which a moment ago had felt so pleasant, now sent a shiver through his body.

He looked down and saw the fish hovering beneath his skates, quivering with excitement, encouraging him onward.

“Far as I go,” said Danny.

The fish threw itself against the ice as though in a rage, then departed with a disdainful flick of its tail.

“Cute,” said Danny. As he started back, he remembered a show he’d

seen on the detective channel, a murder mystery about an angler who talked to fish. The guy liked to lean over the side of his boat and whisper sweet anthropomorphisms as fish ate out of his hand. One day he was found dead with a hook through his lip. A kooky biologist was called in to solve the mystery, and the plot became as snarled as a knot of monofilament. The Mob was involved, a secret society of anglers, a giant fish –

Danny skidded to a stop. Up ahead a lone skater had materialized, wobbling on his blades and swinging his arms wildly. Even in a parka he looked frail, and there was something unusual about the shape of his head. As they drew closer, Danny saw why; it was enclosed in a bug hat. In one hand was a tiny dipnet, the kind used by aquarium owners.

“What are you after, minnows?” Danny asked.

The guy grabbed Danny’s arm to steady himself. “No, look.”

From his pocket he produced a clear plastic container with air holes at the top. He held it up before Danny’s face.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Mosquitoes!” exulted the guy. “Completely white. A brand new species.”

Danny scrunched up his face. He still couldn’t see anything, but the light was bad. “Where’d you get them?”

The guy looked at Danny as if he were nuts. “What do you mean? They’re all around us.” He returned the container to his pocket and bounded away on his ankles, lunging wildly with the dipnet.

Danny squinted into the gathering gloom but saw nothing. Suddenly he was cold and tired. Time to go home, he thought, and at the same time felt a thump beneath his feet. His fishy friend had returned. Crouching, he saw a

snout pressed against the ice and a cold eye staring up at him. The creature was larger than he remembered.

“Catch you later,” he said, rising. There was another thump, more forceful than the last, and the ice heaved beneath his skates, nearly throwing him off balance. He heard a loud crack, saw a spiderwork of fissures spreading out from his feet.

His mind cleared and an utter calm descended upon him. He knew with complete certainty that a false move would plunge him through the ice, a fall he was unlikely to survive even if he could claw his way out. He thought of the ice picks he’d turned down at the Employment Center, and smiled. The universe was up to its old tricks again. How was it that no scientist had ever postulated irony as a natural law? To Danny it seemed as irrefutable as gravity. In fact, if his own experiments had any merit – and why not, he was reproducing them all the time – the force was especially potent in the North. Perhaps, as Freddy had once suggested, the magnetic pole had something to do with it, attracting people with deposits in the head. Irony filings.

Looking down, he saw water collecting round his feet and wondered if he should dig in his skates and make a dive to safety, or fall prone to distribute his weight and roll away. All of this went through his mind in a flash, along with the knowledge that there was no time to dally. He made his decision and launched himself forward just as the ice gave way completely. His skates scabbled for an instant, seeking purchase, and then he sped away leaving a trail of broken ice in his wake and the sound of water splashing at his heels. Lowering his head and curving his back, he put all his energy into each stroke of his skates. Up ahead lights from the houseboats sparkled, and somewhere in the darkness a snowmobile was puttering along. The shore

was a looming presence on his left, more felt than seen. His legs were getting rubbery, and his mind, so lucid a moment ago, contained no other thought than flight, even when the sound of splintering ice faded away. He kept his arms and legs working, and when he reached the government dock he did not stop. He lurched up the road on his skates, running and stumbling until he reached Trail's End. At the trailer he cracked his mitts like eggshells on the porch railing. How the mitts had gotten wet he had no idea. His skates were encased in ice too, but he didn't bother removing them. He got the door unlocked and staggered inside. He stood there for a moment, wondering what to do next.

The phone began to ring. He stared at it stupidly, then clumped over and picked up the receiver. His lips and cheeks were so stiff he had trouble shaping words. "H'lo?"

"Dan Diamond, Budget Detective?" asked a woman's voice.

He had to think for a moment before grunting affirmatively.

"Good, I have a case for you."

## CHAPTER 12

Aftershocks from the recent upheavals were still echoing through the government. Rubble had to be cleared away, foundations tested, cracks plastered over. There were boundaries to probe and fortifications to erect, boltholes to dig and org charts to draw up – just the sort of thing *Homo bureaucrat* excelled at.

“You should have listened to me and marked your office,” said Neddles with a giggle. “Why do you think it’s called ‘Territorial’ government?”

“You mean, piss in the corners?” grumbled Vomer. “Did you?”

“No, but then I don’t give a damn.”

They’d both been kicked downstairs while Nora was recovering from her underground journey, but Neddles was delighted at the move. During the summer his family occupied a greenhouse outside town, where they grew

their own food, slept in flower beds, and frolicked *au naturel*. Winter accommodation was more problematic, changing every year as they sought a dwelling that allowed nudity without astronomical heating bills. Now he and his family had moved into the basement of the Carboniferous Building. The furnace room suited them perfectly, while the rest of the basement offered enough damp corners in which to cultivate their mushroom crop. Besides himself, there was his wife Marjoram, two daughters christened Panicle and Corymb, and a baby boy named after a fungus.

Vomer was less sanguine about the move, for he sensed the government was not finished with them yet. He sat glumly at his desk, eating rollmops and folding resumes into scale envelopes. He'd sent out dozens so far without a nibble. Behind him was an aquarium bubbling away like a caldron, and a locked cabinet containing rods, gaffs, harpoons, and fish spears. His office was curtained off by layers of stinking gillnets, behind which he entertained fishermen and lodge owners. The latter had been frequent visitors lately, frightened by rumors that southern crime lords, lured north by diamonds, had taken an interest in their operation. They nosed their way through the gillnets like nervous fish.

There was one other new face in the basement, a fellow with a lumpy skull and cigarette burns on his arms – the new custodian. At least this one could speak.

“Your new office,” he grunted when Nora returned from her underground journey.

He'd taken a sledgehammer to the hole in the wall and expanded it until her desk would fit inside. The tunnel itself was stopped up with cement, rugs covered the uneven floor, and roots dangled from the ceiling. There

was no sign of her couch or filing cabinet, but on top of the desk was a fresh deposit of letters and a sprinkling of dirt.

“It was my idea,” said Neddles, who was starkers. “Brassclick was going to put you in the stairwell.”

“We thought it suited your personality,” added Vomer.

Nora tried to mount some ire but failed. Instead she sat down, cleared a space on the desk for her head, and closed her eyes. Her underground odyssey had left her feeling a little unglued, even after three days’ sick leave, the most allowed without a note from a doctor. Each of those nights she’d re-enacted the journey in her dreams until she was no longer clear about certain details. When she thought of Cavity, it was Hugo’s face she saw, turned to stone. Hugo, who’d stopped answering his phone, even at work. What had they been fighting about anyway? It wasn’t like him to be so implacable.

She sat up suddenly, her mind swelling with premonition. Throwing on her parka, she rushed outside, clamped on her skis, and charged down the hill to Old Town. The Mosquito Research Institute was locked up, the entrance unshovelled. The only sign of life was a pair of ravens frolicking on the roof. They were taking turns rolling down the snow-covered slope, shooting off the eaves and righting themselves in midair. Their carefree antics and the mesmerizing way they tumbled, black shapes on a white roof, reminded her of spinning yin-yang symbols and the eternal polarity of light and dark, male and female, ones and zeroes, in an endless whirling embrace. For a moment her vision blurred and she passed a hand over her eyes, remembering something she’d once explained to Hugo, a logical conundrum known as the paradox of the ravens.

“If we make a generalization such as, all ravens are black, then the converse must also be true. This cup I’m holding is white; therefore, it can’t be a raven.”

“Naturally,” he replied.

“Every time we see a black raven it strengthens the initial premise. Likewise, the converse must also be true. Every time we see something that is not black and not a raven, it supports the initial premise.”

“Mmm.”

“In other words, this cup helps prove that all ravens are black.”

She waited for his objection, and an ensuing discussion in which they would try to locate the flaw in the reasoning, but Hugo’s attention had wandered. Had he been listening at all? How could he love and ignore her at the same time? It was a paradox.

Across the street was a general store called the Bushman, but no one there had seen Hugo in weeks, so she headed back uptown and let herself into his apartment. Nothing was amiss. He was not slumped on the floor, or rolling in the arms of another woman. The place had not been ransacked. There was no note demanding money. Everything was where it should be, except Hugo. She wandered from room to room, looking for clues, some sign of what he’d been up to. If he was away on a trip, he’d left without luggage.

On the night table next to his cot was a small stack of unopened paperbacks, purchased in a sly attempt to broaden his horizons. *Metamorphosis*, *Mosquito Coast*, *The Insect Wife*. All unopened, save for one lying on the floor with a bookmark protruding like a tongue.

She was pleased at first, until she picked it up and discovered he was

rereading the only novel he'd ever finished, *Huck Finn* – and that had been in high school. Like Huck, Hugo had also lit out for the Territory, not to avoid civilization but the wearing of short pants. He'd always wondered if he'd meet someone Huck in the North.

She peeled off her clothes and crawled beneath the blankets, his scent filling her nostrils. She could almost feel his presence. She closed her eyes and smiled, remembering his pet name for her, Nymph.

In the morning she awoke in stages, like a diver decompressing. She floated alone in bed, the blankets wave-tossed, the ceiling an empty sky. Hugo was gone. She swam to the edge of the bed and felt for bottom with her feet. Holding her stomach, she swayed to the bathroom. When she finished being sick, she called the police.



A few days later Jane Griffin, gloved and bonneted, came visiting. In the basket on her arm was a supply of prayer books, tinned meat, and whortleberry jam. She distributed these items to the basement denizens and commiserated with Nora over the disappearance of Hugo.

“I lost my own dear husband many years ago,” she said. “He went missing at sea. Would you like to pray?”

Nora knew she meant well, knew there was much to admire in this inquisitive and energetic person. Yet there was also something unsettling about her. She could be pushy one moment, blushing the next. She was restless yet retiring, shy yet indomitable. It was as though she were an amalgam of opposites, a conjunction of two different creatures. Her

predilection for travelling had a whiff of obsession about it, and her inquisitiveness was undermined by an earnest desire to lead others to improvement. She made Nora laugh and wince in quick succession, first by calling the other biologists hairy and disagreeable – “Their beards are odious!” – then by describing a misguided ecological effort of her own. She’d once lived on an island and tried to rid it of snakes by offering a bounty on them.

“My advice to you, my dear, is not to trust the authorities in this. They mean well, but lack perseverance. You must take matters into your own hands, as I have done. Offer a reward, consult a spiritualist, organize your own search parties. No person is too influential to besiege with letters – editor, king, president, or tsar.”

“You’ve done all that for Neptune?”

“He’s the last living link I have with my husband. I’ve even hired a detective. I can give you his number if you wish.”

Nora waited till she was gone, then laid her head on the desk. Vomer had been right. Viewing the world from a hole in the ground suited her fine. It gave her a sense of security. The coziness and bad lighting made it especially suitable for sleeping, which she seemed to be doing a lot of lately. When she wasn’t, she took up knitting, and whenever little Clavariadelphus crawled by, she picked him up and rocked him in her lap until Marjoram came looking for him.

The custodian installed a phone and connected her computer to a pendulous root. He also came by with scraps of food and bags of mail. The food consisted mostly of gruel made from rock tripe, while the mail now contained not just crap from potential tourists, but also inquiries from

businesses. Most of the letters she turned into origami and paper dolls for Clavariadelphus, or let him scribble on with wax crayons. They also came in handy as therapy. Whenever she thought she was losing her mind, she'd read a few and feel normal again.

They were written by people with a deep need to save animals or slaughter them. They came from missionaries who thought northern souls were nearer damnation than their own, and anthropologists who thought the opposite. They came from falconers who wanted to pick up chicks and entrepreneurs who trafficked in antlers, pizzles, and gall bladders. There were cultists and survivalists, and idiots lost in a time warp still proposing expeditions in search of John Franklin. The Mars Society was interested in setting up a boot camp on Devon Island. A guy from the States was looking for beluga whale caviar, and a group of Japanese tourists wanted to moon the Northern Lights to enhance their fertility.

Sometimes she actually responded, offering such advice as "Don't forget toilet paper," and "No spitting in lakes." To a group assembling for the first gay assault on the pole, she scribbled a cautionary note about safe sex. She sent her panties to a person inquiring about the gender of Ol' Slavey, and crayoned "Sucks to you" to anyone who confused Yellowknife with Whitehorse, or thought YK was an abbreviation for Yukon.

One day a letter arrived from someone whose name seemed familiar. Jack Wool. She repeated it aloud several times before associating it with the failed business, Knave of Diamonds Expediting. An evil cackle rose in her throat. "Dear Mr. Wool," she typed. "Your paperwork is incomplete." She got the biggest envelope she could find and filled it to bursting with government forms. She stapled it shut and was looking for an address label

when the phone rang. It was the NWMP.

“This is Constable Tungsten,” said a deep rich voice. “Could you come down to the detachment?”

“Is it about the panties?” she blurted out.

There was a pause. “It concerns Mr. Poisson.”

The words flowed through her head like an electric current. She could feel her brain cells lining up in neat rows. “I’ll be right over.”

The North-West Mounted Police detachment was only a few blocks away, a drab building indistinguishable from other government offices. Inside there was an air of disorder – untidy desks, crowded bulletin boards, men in uniform striding around with file folders in their hands and sidearms bolted to their hips.

Bureaucrats with guns, Nora thought.

Tungsten met her at the front counter, a bulky physical presence in ironed trousers and elevator shoes. He patted her down with his eyes, a blunt searching look that noted her appearance and assessed her mental condition. The room he escorted her to was empty except for a desk and two chairs, and a framed print depicting the Lost Patrol.

“Did Mr. Poisson like to skate?” he asked.

“No.”

“Does he own a pair of skates?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could he have borrowed a pair?”

“I suppose. What’s this all about?”

The constable opened a drawer in the desk and withdrew a plastic bag containing an orange notebook. Nora’s heart lurched.

“One of our Members was investigating an unrelated incident at the ice bridge, and found this,” he said. “Could you examine it, please.”

“It’s Hugo’s.”

“How can you be sure?” he asked, removing it from the bag.

“Look under the spine. You’ll see a bladder there.”

He did as she suggested, then handed over the book and asked her to examine it anyway. She riffled through the pages. The pencilled entries were hastily written and mostly illegible, but Hugo’s scrawl was unmistakable.

“Yes, it’s his,” she repeated.

“It was frozen into the ice.”

Her eyes widened as she realized the import of this. “You think he fell through?”

“It’s one possibility. There are others. Yellowknife is a very transient town. People come and go in the blink of an eye. Mr. Poisson may have left town without telling anyone. Was he engaged in any illegal activity?”

“Of course not!”

“What about his family? Have you been in touch with them?”

“I’ve never spoken with them. They live in Montreal.”

“Is there anything about his disappearance you’re not telling us?”

“No.”

“I understand you were engaged to be married?”

“That’s right.”

“And you were getting along fine? Everything going smoothly?”

Her voice grew faint. “We haven’t spoken in a while. He’s been ill. There was a disagreement.”

“Is it possible he might have changed his mind?”

“Run out on me, you mean? I don’t think so.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Um...” She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to remember. Her memories were like snapshots torn from an album.

“Before freeze-up, or after?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ms Lobachevski, do you know what the date is today?”

She shook her head.

“The month?”

“November, I think. Or is it December already?”

“It’s nearly Christmas, Ms Lobachevski.”



Outside, a public works truck was spreading snow on the road, and the sidewalks were full of skiers, but Nora was oblivious to them. All she could see was a lifeless shape with twisted legs, floating in dark water. The gopher she’d killed as a child, the man she’d driven away as an adult.

At the Carboniferous Building she removed her skis and secured them with a bicycle lock in the rack by the entrance. The elevator enclosed her like a sarcophagus, and startled her when it lurched into motion. Which button had she pushed? The movement was disorienting, as though the elevator were travelling sideways. She kept her hand poised by the control panel, ready to snatch up the phone should it ring. Who might the caller be this time? A spirit? A ghost?

The doors opened, expelling her into a spacious area of fat carpets and subdued lighting. There was a convention of armchairs off to one side, a frosted slab of glass, the piped-in sound of a freshet. Lustrous photos beamed from the walls – happy campers and orgasmic fishermen, a sunrise of nuggets, the icy brilliance of cut diamonds.

Natural Affairs, said a sign. She wandered about like a lost child. On the entire floor she recognized exactly four people. Jane Griffin, ensconced in Nora’s old office, looked up from her keyboard in mid-peck.

“Did you know that word processors can run out of words? Mr. Pfang told me. He said we should never delete a document, and reuse existing words before typing new ones. I’m sending round a memo.”

Mr. Pfang was crashed out in a lawn chair underneath a bamboo plant. He was wearing white deck pants and a black t-shirt that said “Uncle Ho.” His eyes looked puffy and his feet were buried in sand.

Brassclick, armed with a red pen, was stick-handling his way through a variance report, while Ungle stood beside him like a punkah wallah, fending off flies with a swatter. Coils of sticky flypaper dangled from the ceiling like party decorations.

Nora wavered in the doorway. “I’ll do it,” she said.

Brassclick stared at her with a puzzled look, as though trying to place her. “What?”

“The mole survey. I’ll do it.”

He scowled. “I thought there weren’t any in the North.”

She leaned against the jamb. “Did I say that?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe I should look, just to be on the safe side.”

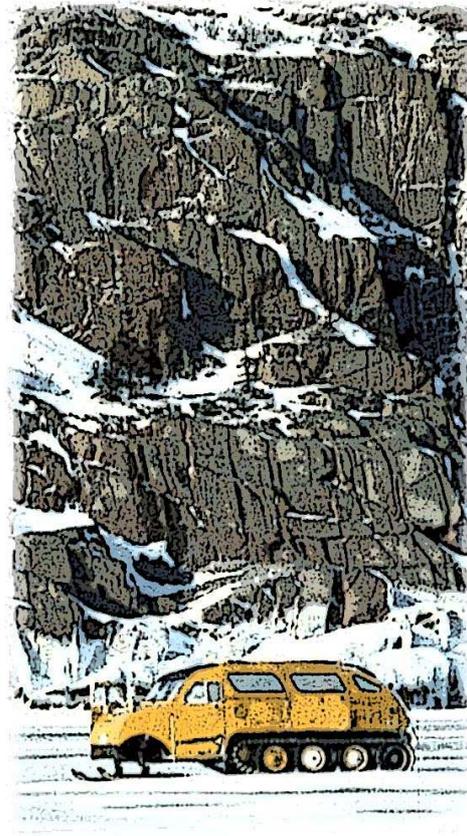
Brassclick opened his mouth to reply just as the flyswatter descended upon his dome. He yelped and rubbed the spot where he'd been struck, dislodging a crushed fly. He flicked it away with disgust and glared at Ungle.

Beyond them, through the window, the bay was visible. Its surface was covered with snowdrifts, save for a few places swept clear by the wind. The houseboats were frozen in and a lone snowmobile was making its way across the ice. Farther off a helicopter was towing a phallic instrument, prospecting for diamonds.

The sky was heavy with cloud.

PART 2

*Divisions*



Bombardier

## CHAPTER 13

Anyone wishing to escape Yellowknife by road had two routes to choose from. One curved around the North Arm of Great Slave Lake before dropping south to Edmonton, 2000 kilometers and a punishing two-day drive away. The other route was rather shorter. In summer it got no farther than a ghost town a half-hour east of Yellowknife, after which it disappeared under a lake. In winter, however, an extension was grafted onto the end, adding another 600 kilometers to its length and taking it far beyond the treeline. Built almost entirely on frozen lakes, it opened around the end of January or as soon as the ice was thick enough to support 18-wheelers, which ferried fuel and explosives to mines out on the Barrens.

The ghost town was a bicameral community with a half-life that equalled the seasonal existence of the ice road. There was a Quonset hut the size of a

skating rink, which serviced the steady parade of vehicles passing through its hangar-like doors – graders and plows, bulldozers and water trucks, and Zambonis equipped with cabs for outdoor work. When those doors lifted it was as though a dark cavern had appeared by the side of the road.

Electrodes sparked in the gloom as welders reattached pieces of metal that had snapped off in the cold. Shadowy figures carried tools as big as the leg bones of mammoths. Chains rattled, pneumatic wrenches snorted. The traffic was so crucial to the mines that it never stopped, and the mechanics worked 24 hours a day, falling asleep over engine blocks so they could tighten bolts in their sleep. They were paid astronomical wages and ate nothing but white-bread sandwiches that bore the imprint of their own grimy thumbs.

Across the road was the other half of the community, a rambling roadhouse for hunters, tourists, and other travellers. It had begun as a simple gas stop but over the years had evolved into something more gothic, a citadel of cabins and trailers stacked together and linked by opportunistic doorways carved into walls. Though it bore no sign, everyone knew it as the Ice Road Café. The interior was hot and steamy, filled with shouts and laughter, the clatter of pinball and pool, and a cash register hoarse from ringing up sales. The floor was perpetually damp, and the place smelled of grease, both edible and not. Tables were scattered around in a haphazard manner, occupied by hunters, truckers, and wide-eyed tourists. Heat was provided by oil-burning space heaters and a wood stove that was surrounded by people melting icicles from their whiskers and driving frost from their limbs. Predominant in this group were those who tried to save money by pumping their own gas. The price differential between full-serve and self-

serve varied according to the temperature outside. Since there were no underground tanks, gas was pumped from fuel drums using a rotary hand crank. At minus 40 the service charge was ruinous.

But gas sales were only one source of income for the café. Another was the restroom, a simple outdoor latrine with a row of seats and an open front. Tour groups in minibuses drove out to stand in line and drop their drawers for candid group photos, and take close-ups of the frozen pillars of poop that rose out of the stygian depths. It was the Perfesser who had first realized the outhouse's potential as a tourist destination. He spent the winter months in the café laboring over a monumental book on the psycho-geography of the NWT. He had a room deep in the café's interior where he lived and wrote, pulling information from land-use maps that resembled line drawings of complicated knots. He also consulted newspapers, native legends, police files, archeological records, and the journals of explorers. Whenever he needed a break, he wandered through the café's recesses and usually ended up in a smoky room where a poker game was always in progress, played on a wooden spool that once held wrist-thick electrical cable. Only loonier variants of the game were allowed – Bicycle, Screwy Louie, Blind Baseball, Spit in the Ocean – and the hands were played so quickly that only experienced players could understand what was happening. Cards were constantly shuffled and dealt, tossed in, drawn, and redealt. Just as quickly items were thrown into the middle of the table – folding money from distant countries, boxes of ammo, watches, cigarettes, car keys. Currently a game of Seven-Toed Pete was under way and the dealer was Father Brown, oxygen cart by his side and Chesterton at his feet.

“Raise,” said a hunter with a frost-blistered face. He laid a caribou

tongue on the table.

A Japanese adventurer bowed happily and disgorged a wad of bills. He was planning to ski to Russia over the polar ice cap.

“That’s a heap of yen,” observed a helicopter pilot, returning the bow. “Never seen a man so determined to lose his money. Look what I’m showing.”

“A Gretsky? I hope you fly better than you play,” grunted a photographer on a nature shoot. One of his lenses went on the table, followed by a scornful glance at the pilot’s pair of nines.

“I’m in,” declared a boozy commercial fisherman, contributing a scaly paycheck.

A businessman at the end of the table threw some crumpled bills into the pot and then it was Father Brown’s turn. All eyes were upon him as he reached into a black leather satchel and withdrew a golden chalice. “The Lord’s work,” he explained. “How do you think I built that fine church in town?” He tossed his beard over his shoulder and sent another round of cards spinning through the air. The cards landed face-up.

“A bullet for our hunter, a suicide king for the man with a death wish, a lucky lady for the pilot, Mr. Lenscap draws a duck, Iggi gets a fishhook, and our friend at the end of the table is showing puppy’s feet.”

He paused dramatically before turning over his own card. “And the dealer takes a humble tray to remind us all of the blessed Trinity. Now gentlemen, don’t be shy. The church has a leaky roof and heating costs are high. Into the collection plate, if you please.”

The betting went round the table until it reached the businessman, who pushed back his chair and stood. It was Jack Wool in a rumpled suit. He

reached into his pocket and held up a bone between thumb and forefinger. It was several inches long and unnaturally white and shiny. When he tossed it onto the table, the other players looked at it in astonishment.

“What’s this worth, ten cents?” asked the hunter. He tapped it against the table, snapping it in half.

Wool glared at them and threw open his jacket like a gunfighter. “It’s worth more than you can imagine,” he sneered. “Any of you fools ever want to make some real money, look me up.” He drew a remote from his belt and stomped away, clicking furiously.

The Perfesser slid into the vacated seat.



At a nearby table an old man named Jonah was drinking tea, eating dry meat, and watching a soap opera on TV. His face was expressionless except during commercials, when he would cry “Aiyee!” or shake his head and laugh, and wipe tears from his eyes. Occasionally he looked around the café as though seeking a familiar face, or perhaps wondering where he was and how he’d gotten there. Finally he put on his parka and made his way outside.

In the parking area was an ancient motorized toboggan called a SnoRoller, produced by a company that no longer existed. The cowling had a large crack in it, which had been mended with stitches of brass snare wire. Animals, either dogs or a bear, had destroyed the seat by taking big chewy mouthfuls out of the foam. It had been replaced with a rolled-up blanket and a piece of canvas serving as a cover. Attached to the snowmobile by means

of a shackle was a set of steel-shod runners with a low plywood box built on top.

Jonah started the SnoRoller and pulled away from the café, but instead of following the ice road, he departed by a narrow trail heading north. Within minutes he was enveloped by the kind of wilderness where people who were unskilled or unprepared could disappear without a trace, and end up donating their bones to future archaeologists.

Jonah was not unskilled or unprepared. He was personally acquainted with every lichen-covered rock, every tussock and ripple and hoary branch between Yellowknife and the treeline, or so he claimed. As he drove, he examined the forest the way other people read books. He saw jokes, essays, financial statements, love notes, short stories, myths and sagas, memos, obituaries and baffling mysteries.

Once, when he was asked to appear before some kind of panel, he claimed residence in the Yellowknife area since before the world began. The members of the panel looked uncomfortable, embarrassed somehow, but Jonah's people loved him all the more for it, and recounted the tale many times with a wonderful mixture of humor and respect.

In fact, Jonah's age was an unsolvable mystery, for his birth had gone unrecorded and he had outlived all his contemporaries. His own recollections had begun to blur, merging with stories and reminiscences passed on by his father, who in turn had been a repository of tales from previous generations. Sometimes he would halt in mid-step as a memory overtook him, and relive the event. He remembered wearing hareskin socks, and hunting ptarmigan with blunt arrows, and patiently digging through snowbanks for spent musket balls. He remembered coming upon a circle of

muskoxen in the Thelon, their heads facing the wrong way – inward as though in conference. He remembered what life was like long before Canada existed, when people still used Russian knives and the first strangers crept into the land, their names heavy on the tongue, Hurn and Makenzy and others...

He travelled all day, the trail a rosary stringing together immaculate lakes, the sun a pale presence behind a plate of cloud. To the northeast, the Barrens were scarcely 100 miles distant. A wind sprang up and set the black spruce nodding their heavy tops, and began filling in the snowmobile's endless footprint. By four o'clock darkness had fallen, the sky was swept clean, and Jonah had disconnected the snowmobile's headlamp so he could travel by pure moonlight. When the motor began to sputter, he lifted the cowling and urinated in the carburetor to thaw the speck of ice lodged there.

In mid-evening he pulled into a notch in the shoreline of an unnamed lake. He got off the machine brushing snow from his shoulders and reaching for his axe. With a few flicks he severed a number of saplings and stripped them of their branches, laying down a springy carpet of boughs. Above them he hoisted a canvas walltent on a ridgepole of dry spruce, neatly trimmed of bark. Inside, by the light of a lantern, he joined together several sections of stovepipe. He installed one end into a cheap tin box on the ground, and elbowed the other through a hole in a tent flap. Soon he had a fire roaring, and by the time his gear was moved into the tent, it was warm enough to remove his parka.

He set a pot of snow on the stove, and found a whitefish in a bag, the head still on but the gills and guts removed. He worked a piece of snare wire through its mouth and suspended it from the ridgepole, letting it hang

next to the stove to roast. He unrolled a caribou hide and spread it at the back of the tent, sitting on it cross-legged and listening to the popping of the fire, the trees shifting uneasily in the wind. He thought of simpler times, when he was young and inexhaustible, able to travel fast and light in minus 40-degree weather with no tent or sleeping bag, only a Hudson's Bay blanket to wrap himself in before a snapping fire. After a few hours of sleep, he'd be off again to set more traps, and when he was done he'd race home to his young wife, striding on snowshoes he'd made himself and singing love songs to the empty forest.

A delicious aroma filled the tent. He took down the fish, which was dripping juices into the floor of spruce boughs, and laid it on its side. The skin and scales lifted off easily with a knife, and the flesh was white, firm, and moist. He ate off a dented tin plate with a tea towel for a placemat, and drank tea from an enamelled cup.

Afterwards he selected a piece of firewood and used his axe to shave off broad curls thin as paper, and pencil-sized sticks that fell with a musical sound. He piled them in a heap by the stove, then turned off the hissing gas lantern and crawled into his sleeping bag fully clothed. That night a caribou visited him in his dreams.

"I am old and weak," it said. "I can no longer keep up with the herd."

"Mahsi," said Jonah, raising his rifle.

"Mahsi," replied the caribou before the shot rang out.



In the morning Jonah lit a fire with the shavings he'd prepared the night before, and stayed in his sleeping bag till the fire was roaring, then pulled on a pair of worn duffle socks. Grabbing a towel, he stepped outside and padded down the trail a way, bending over a patch of creamy snow and scooping up a double handful. He rubbed it over his face, the cold bite bringing an involuntary gasp and jarring loose a memory of similar mornings long ago when he and his father had leapt naked from a hide tent to roll in the snow.

As he dried his face, a movement caught his eye. It was a marten stepping boldly onto the path. In his lifetime he had trapped thousands of them. Usually they were huddled into frozen balls when he found them, but occasionally one was still alive, hissing and snarling when he approached, and he'd stun it with a tap from his axe handle, and silence its heart by clamping his jaws around its narrow chest and squeezing.

This one was not restrained by any trap, yet held its ground and glared at him resentfully, producing a sound that was midway between a growl and a hiss. Jonah gazed at it thoughtfully. He was well-acquainted with the workings of a hot mustelid brain. There'd been moments in his life when the barriers of flesh had dropped away and he'd shared a powerful kinship with other creatures. Seen the world from their point of view. Sensed their thoughts. Once, after tumbling off a ledge and crashing into a pile of rocks 15 feet below, he'd awoken to find a wolf standing over him. For a long time they'd stared into each other's eyes, then like a ghost the beast had melted away.

He returned to the tent and pulled on calf-high duffle liners. Over top of these went a pair of mukluks with soles of smoky moosehide and uppers of

caribou skin soft as glove leather. Outside he could hear the marten vocalizing its displeasure at his slowness. He donned his parka, added more wood to the stove, and left the tent. His snowshoes were stuck tail first in a snowbank beside the sled. He tied them to his feet with lampwick and nodded at the marten. Instantly the little creature bounded away in a fluid hopping gait.

It chose its route without any consideration for Jonah. When it scampered over deep snow, its feet barely disturbed the surface. It raced along the trunks of leaning trees and darted through tangled brush with interlocking limbs. Anyone less experienced than Jonah could not have followed. Somehow his snowshoes did not hook themselves on branches or hidden snags beneath the snow. They hindered him no more than a moose was hindered by its great palmate rack. Nimbly he worked his way through the dense bush and wondered where the marten was leading him. There was no telling what he'd find. The twisted remains of a downed aircraft, piloted by a skeleton? A deranged trapper? A blubbering tourist? Jonah had seen them all, and more.

Abruptly he stopped. The marten went straight up the bole of a swampy tamarack and posed on a limb, hissing angrily and showing the orange blaze on its throat. Then, its task apparently discharged, it sprang to a neighboring tree and vanished.

Jonah examined his surroundings carefully. At first he noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and wondered if the marten had played a trick on him. But immediately he discarded the idea. Marten had no sense of humor.

Then he noticed the snow was littered with flakes of bark, twigs and cones, and snapped-off branches. Looking up, he saw that the trees' thick

crowns were bent beneath something white and heavy. It wasn't snow. Cautiously he moved forward, bringing more of the thing into view. It was a manmade object, about the size and shape of a rat canoe, cradled by the dense spruce tops. It had a flattened snout-like nose, a sleek tail assembly, and a pair of tiny wing stubs.

“Aiyee!” he cried.

Back at the tent, he made a fresh kettle of tea and breakfasted on bannock and dry meat, then lay back to think. Clearly there was no question of avoiding the task that had been thrust upon him. The marten had done its duty, now so must he. There was no mistaking the evil intent of the flying canoe, as he came to think of it. It radiated menace, serving a purpose so dark it could only be guessed at. The thing had to be disposed of. But how? Lighting a fire under it might burn it into submission, or set free some greater evil lying dormant within.

Moving it, then, seemed the safest option. But where? He could transport it far out onto the ice of Great Slave Lake and wait for spring. Closing his eyes, he imagined it tumbling end over end into the black depths where only the elder fishes resided, their gills scarcely fluttering as they hung suspended above the rocky bottom. He imagined the device settling among a parliament of trout, each one huge and incredibly old. How would they respond to this intrusion by such a vile object? Would they only shake their heads at human folly and drift away to another bed? Or would they see it as an offense, a violation of trust, and stop visiting his nets? No, the risk was simply too great.

What then?

The consequence of failure was too terrible to consider. Once, back in

1929, he'd made an unwitting but grievous mistake, befriending a man named LaBean who showed up on the east side of Great Bear Lake looking for rocks. Amused by the man's childishness, Jonah mentioned a copper bloom at the entrance to Echo Bay. The claims LaBean staked there produced findings of silver and pitchblende, and ignited interest in the North-West Territory as never before. Soon men were pouring into the Bear Lake area, men who later drifted southward to the stewpot of people and gold that became Yellowknife. LaBean's claims were developed into the mining community of Port Radium, which during the Second World War supplied fissionable material to the Manhattan Project. To Fat Man and Little Boy. Poof, 100,000 dead in an instant.

Today Port Radium was nothing more than a bad memory, having been dismantled and ploughed under. But below ground the maze of drifts and shafts still remained. Jonah could see them clearly enough, if he tried – a ghostly, three-dimensional fretwork of pale blue flame that seared the surrounding rock.

Suddenly Jonah was overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. The eradication of single flying canoe would not deter men like LaBean, whose numbers grew every year. They roamed the woods driven by appetites too peculiar to understand, seeking oil, fur hats, big fish, the North-West Passage. What next?

No, the task must be passed on to someone else. To someone younger, someone who understood the present world a little better than he did.

Sighing, he got to feet and unpacked the radio he'd brought with him, a Spilsbury & Tindall single-sideband radio in a green metal box. He connected it to a dipole antenna strung between two trees and switched it on.

The batteries were weak, so he dropped them into a pot of water on the stove and boiled enough life back into them to transmit a message to Yellowknife. Then he put on his parka and slid a rifle from its sleeve of soft hide, a .30-30 carbine bound together with wire and tape. He slung it over his shoulder and set off on the SnoRoller, following the twisted shore of the lake with his eyes in constant motion, probing the dark trees, the snow-covered ice, the overcast sky.

At length he recognized the place he was looking for. He got a fire going, thumbed a cartridge into the rifle, and began to sing, his voice rising and falling in a quavering chant. Presently a caribou walked out onto the lake, an old bull with a fine set of antlers.

“Mahsi,” Jonah said, and killed it with a single shot.

He unrolled a piece of cloth with three pockets sewn into it. They contained a knife, a file, and a spoon. He tested the knife for sharpness, then cut off the caribou’s head and ran the blade along its belly and legs. With the flat of his hand he worked the hide loose from the flanks. It peeled off the back like adhesive tape.

Next he opened the abdominal cavity and reached inside, his hands burning as though he’d plunged them into a furnace. The paunch rolled out like a leathery cushion, followed by a slithering tangle of guts. Leaning closer, he extended an arm up inside the ribcage to free the lungs. A few slashes of his knife, a few deft strokes with his axe, and the caribou fell apart, rendered into four quarters, two sheets of ribs, a neck and backbone. He laid out its organs on the snow – kidneys, liver, the heart sliced open to drain the blood.

He returned to the fire with three glistening ribs and impaled them on a

pole to roast. He found a clean patch of snow and scraped away the fluffy upper layer so he could fill his kettle with the dense crystals underneath. He balanced the blackened pot carefully on two blazing poles. When the boiled water was infused with tea, and the ribs charred and dripping with fat, he knelt down to eat on a carpet of spruce boughs. He gnawed the ribs until nothing remained but greasy arcs of bone. He picked out the larger bits of ember floating in the smoky tea, and gulped it down well-sugared.

“Mahsi,” he said.



Around noon the next day a snowmobile pulled into camp and a young boy entered the tent. Jonah was sitting cross-legged on a caribou skin, motionless as a forest idol. His great head was still for a moment, then creased in a smile.

“Tyrone.”

The boy said nothing. He was perhaps four years of age with a face that had a blank unfinished look, as though it had not yet been licked into shape. He dropped his mitts and took a GameBoy out of his pocket. Behind him a man stooped into the tent, a scruffy fellow in greasy snowmobile boots and a down jacket that had been patched many times. His head was bare, his nose was bent, and there were particles of frost clinging to the few sparse hairs on his upper lip and chin. In one hand was a small parcel.

“Freddy,” said Jonah.

“Hello, grandfather.”

“You left this morning? You must have driven very fast.”

Freddy grinned and flipped open the tent flap. Outside was the sleekest

snowmobile Jonah had ever seen, a smooth black beast with running lights on the side and a windshield that was little more than a paring of smoked plastic. The skis were mounted on a suspension system that bulged like coiled muscle.

“Won it in a card game,” Freddy said. He handed to Jonah the parcel, which contained fresh batteries, and poured himself a mug of tea. He added sugar from a canvas pouch and offered it to Tyrone, who shook his head. The boy was immersed in the game he was playing. Except for the movement of his thumbs, he was perfectly still, like a creature that had not yet been hatched.

“Are you hungry?” Jonah asked.

On the stove was a pot of caribou porridge. Freddy scraped the contents onto a plate and began feeding Tyrone, who opened his mouth and chewed without diverting his eyes from the game. After a few mouthfuls, he wanted no more. Freddy ate the rest, then picked up the empty pot from the stove and peered at it from different angles. He tried to get his head inside, hoping for a few licks. He gave up and grinned at Jonah, a couple flecks of porridge stuck to his head.

Jonah rose and they all trooped outside. There was no need for snowshoes. The trail he’d made the previous day was now firm and easy to negotiate. They moved in single file through the trees, Jonah leading the way and Tyrone falling behind, his head bowed over the game.

The flying canoe was still poised in the treetops. It reminded Jonah of the first time he’d seen a star move, hustling across the night sky on some unfathomable mission of its own.

“Do you know what it is?” he asked, chilled by its crippled beauty.

“Sure,” grinned Freddy, “it’s a cruise missile.”

Tyrone looked up. When he saw the missile, he began jumping up and down excitedly. “Wocka wocka,” he kept saying. “Wocka wocka.”

## CHAPTER 14

Every February hunters drove up the ice road and returned with their trucks piled high with carcasses, the legs sticking up comically. To newcomers it all looked so easy, like a trip to the corner store. Many rushed out and bought rifles and drove along the road and seasoned the land with lead. They also got lost and plunged through the ice and winged each other in the carburetor. One year Jack Wool picked up a guy in street shoes. He was speechless with cold. When he finally revived, Wool reprimanded him for not being adequately prepared.

“But I have a survival kit,” the man protested. He pulled from his pocket a wallet-sized package.

“A southern concept,” Wool said scornfully. “When you go out on the land you have to be properly prepared. If you are, a survival kit is

redundant.”

“I guess I should of bought a bigger one.”

It was useless to reason with him. The man came from a culture where fastfood attitudes predominated. He didn't know kit from kaboodle, a realization that prompted Wool's first foray into the world of business. After all, he knew his way around the bush as well as anyone. He'd done his share of guiding, outfitting, prospecting. If idiots insisted on buying survival kits, why not profit from it?

So he took out a loan and produced a line of three kits – Lite, Regular, and Deluxe – and came infuriatingly close to breaking even. He ate the loss, but kept revisiting it to understand where he'd gone wrong. He was determined to succeed. In the natural world, niches proliferated at the intersection between different habitats. Its equivalent in the world of commerce was the technology sector. Edge habitat for businessmen.

Take fish finders. They were comparatively recent devices, yet already no serious fishermen was without one. Imagine how hunters would react to a caribou finder. Wool actually had such a device in his possession. He'd used it successfully for several years, but could not think of a way to bring it to market. It would lose its effectiveness if sold in large quantities. There was another drawback: it was illegal. The situation made him want to weep.

The device was housed in a battery-warmed shockproof case with a pair of flaps giving access to a keypad and liquid crystal display. With it he was able to interrogate caribou for their position. This year it had brought him to the shore of a small unnamed lake.

He slid off his snowmobile and unlashed the fastenings on his sled. His rifle was a flat-shooting .243 with a scope. He removed it from its scabbard

and donned shooting gloves, then took off his helmet and pressed foam plugs into his ears. He chambered a round and knelt in the deep snow, his right leg doubled beneath him. On the far side of the lake a small band of caribou appeared. Their dark coats and creamy markings matched the indistinct color of the forested shore.

He uncapped the scope and brought the rifle up to his shoulder, stinging his bare cheek as he nestled it against the polished walnut. He steadied his left elbow on his left knee and inspected the caribou through the scope, searching for the one that was collared. He didn't want to hit it by mistake. The collar contained a GPS receiver that recorded position, and a VHF transmitter that sent the data to an ARGOS satellite in low polar orbit. Wool had borrowed it from a biologist – for a fee, of course.

The caribou drew closer but he held his fire. He'd seen too many animals walking around with a dangling leg or their guts hanging out, the result of a rushed or indiscriminate shot. Patiently he let them approach, shifting his aim from animal to animal then lifting his head to check the field of fire. On more than one occasion he'd been sighting in on a caribou, thinking he was alone, when some yahoo opened up behind him or roared by on a snowmobile. That was why he always hunted by himself and never on the weekend.

The caribou came within 40 meters of him before stopping. Several stared in his direction, others milled around uncertainly, and one urinated in alarm. Their breath was visible in the air. He centered the crosshairs on one that was broadside to him, just behind its front shoulder. Exhaling gently, he squeezed off a shot. The animal made a startled half-leap and broke into a run. The others followed, their hips swaying and heads thrust forward, their

backs curiously level, their broad hooves churning the snow.

Could he have missed from such close range? No, the one he'd fired at suddenly collapsed and the others swerved away in confusion, reversing their direction. He picked off two more before lowering his rifle. The caribou swirled around the lake and finally blundered into the trees. Unloading the rifle, he drove to the slain animals and with a few quick slashes removed the tongues and quarters. The ribs he didn't bother with, knowing they'd be clotted with blood and splintered from the impact of the bullet. Nor did he bother skinning the quarters. He could do that at home in the comfort of his garage. He loaded the meat onto his sled, a sleek metal shell with strips of teflon bolted to the underside, then drank a cup of tepid coffee from his thermos and ate an energy bar.

As he finished, he noticed a pair of wolves watching from within easy shooting distance, large dark brutes with lank tongues and faces full of intelligence. It was unusual for wolves to show themselves so openly. Normally the only sign of their presence were pawprints around well-chewed caribou remains.

"Patience," he told them as he settled onto the contoured seat of the snowmobile. It was a top of the line model with heated handlegrips, remote control start, and onboard GPS. His parka was an accessory. From a small pocket in the sleeve he paid out a length of electrical cord and plugged it into a socket on the snowmobile. Metal filaments were embedded in the parka's lining. Warmth trickled across his back and down his arms.

He fitted the helmet over his head and pressed a button to call up his first waypoint. It was comforting to think that miles overhead satellites were keeping track of him. He remembered the St. Christopher's medal his

mother had installed in a succession of family vehicles. GPS was better.

With a salute to the wolves he set off, following his own trail back to the ice road and checking over his shoulder to make sure the sled was tracking properly. The winter-shortened day was already coming to an end and soon there was little to see except the wobbling patch of light cast on the snow by the headlamp. Yet strangely enough this was the most stimulating part of the trip. Somehow the tedium of driving liberated his creativity, and his mind became a pot of simmering ideas. Last year as he was returning he found himself thinking about ice fishing. He imagined people hunched over holes in the ice, giving their lines an occasional twitch, while below them fish swam past with bored expressions on their faces. What people needed was a simple device that jigged lines automatically. Or even better, a battery-powered hook, one that did more than move up and down. Self-trolling, he'd call it. Programmable. Everything was computerized nowadays, why not fishing lures? At the very least he could buy up a quantity of discontinued chips, epoxy them to cheap lures, and sell them as novelty items.

He'd actually worked up a business plan and fired it off to the Bureau of Tourism. In it he'd emphasized a key concept – it was more important for a fishing lure to attract people than fish. He'd asked for a modest grant, a mere \$10,000, but his proposal had gone unacknowledged. Not long after, the government underwent another of its endless transformations and Tourism ceased to exist, at least as a separate entity. There was no telling where his proposal was now. Probably sitting on the desk of some thick-witted creature inhabiting a windowless cubicle. He'd have to make a few phone calls, shake a few trees. It was the only way to get action where the

government was concerned.

In the distance a row of lights appeared. He'd reached a lake of substantial size, bisected lengthwise by the winter road, along which a convoy of transport trucks was proceeding. The lead vehicle was equipped with an enormous plow, a double-winged blade with a sweptback point that gave it an apocalyptic appearance. It was clearing recent drifts from the road. The other vehicles were tractor trailers, tanker trucks, and flatbeds carrying colossal pieces of machinery. Bringing up the rear like a caboose was a Zamboni, filling in cracks and smoothing over bumps. They all crept along at 30 kilometers per hour, and as they rolled past, Wool felt the ice, several meters thick, sway up and down like a gentle ocean swell. Steam rose from the veneer of hot water laid down by the Zamboni.

The winter road had a legacy stretching all the way back to Port Radium, which in its final years had been resupplied by a similar road from Yellowknife. When Port Radium shut down for good, its owner built a gold mine on the Barrens called Lupin and a new road to service it in winter. Now, with the price of gold taking a nosedive, Lupin had been mothballed, but fortunately for hunters another mine had just gone into operation and had taken over the construction of the winter road: Ekati.

The convoy was a sour reminder of Wool's own failed incursion into the world of diamonds. All he had to show for it was a busted bank account and a pocketful of worthless business cards. Printing those babies hadn't been cheap. He kept a few in his pocket, handing them out whenever his self-esteem needed a boost. But really, what hope was there for him as a businessman if he couldn't cash in on the most lucrative mineral play ever to hit the North? Already rough stones from Ekati were being sold in Antwerp,

and public hearings were under way for the construction of a second mine, Diavik. At the Yellowknife airport a sorting and evaluation facility had just been built, and a cutting and polishing plant was under construction. Everyone but him, it seemed, had snagged a piece of the action, even if in name only. Diamond Cabs, Diamond Pizza, Diamond Construction. Even the Bureau of Education had gotten into the act, using the word to add some sparkle to a school in Hay River.

The expediting fiasco taught him a painful lesson: he would not find success by following in others' footsteps. As proof, he need look no farther than the geologist who'd discovered the diamond field. Chuck Fipke had been scoffed at by the entire mining establishment when he suggested there were diamonds in the North. Yet One-More-Sample Chuckie had persevered, using his own geochemical process to follow a glaciated mineral trail across the North. It took 10 years to do it, in the course of which he revolutionized diamond exploration. He'd even outthrustled and outsmarted De Beers. And that was how Jack Wool would find success – not as a herd animal, but as a maverick, a lone wolf bucking conventional wisdom.

Many years ago he'd guided some canoeists who wanted to retrace a route taken by Sir John Franklin on one of his expeditions. A screwy bunch, he thought at the time, but every summer thereafter he noticed that Franklin's name was in the news. Old Sir John, his two ships, and all his men had gone missing on his third expedition. They'd vanished with scarcely a trace over 150 years ago – an enduring mystery that was still luring people North. People who needed a place to lay their heads, souvenirs to buy, and guides to lead them to the actual sites where bones had been found. The North-West Territory was known for its hunting and

fishing and naturalist lodges. Why not one for Franklin buffs? It was something that had never been tried before.

Blueprints were already drawn up and a catchy name decided upon: Starvation Cove Lodge. The next step was to generate media attention and attract investors. In his garage back home were several boxes that had just come in by air freight. They contained candy bones in the shape favored by dogs on Saturday morning TV. He was going to use them for promotional purposes.

Later, when the lodge was built, he'd engage a medical supply house to make replicas that were anatomically correct, complete with saw marks for authenticity. These he would scatter around the barren landscape for tourists to find, simulated remains of Fitzjames, Crozier, and the 127 others who'd traded their lives for immortality. What wonderful souvenirs to take home. Other entrepreneurs would groan at their lack of vision and wonder how they had missed such an obvious opportunity. Yellowknife would toast his success. He saw himself giving inspirational talks to fellow businessmen, and leading them on snowmobile trips to stimulate their creativity.



Wool guided his machine onto the winter road, his headlamp picking out several red specks in the distance. He reached into a pocket for his remote control and thumbed a button. The red specks blazed like hot coals that had been breathed upon. Slowing down carefully so he wouldn't jackknife the sled, he pulled up alongside a half-ton parked by the side of the road. It was locked and empty, nuzzling a snowbank with a two-wheeled trailer hitched

up behind it. The motor was idling smoothly.

He unloaded the meat into the back of the truck, then shoved the sled on top and tied it down. The snowmobile he drove onto the trailer. His parka went into a zippered case, and his boots, which were daubed with frozen blood, he bagged and placed in the back. Inside the truck it was hot as a furnace. He slipped his feet into a fresh pair of boots, finished off the coffee in his thermos, and ran a comb through his hair before getting under way.

The road was little more than a path scraped across a chain of frozen lakes. In most places it was broad as a highway, but when it bumped up onto land it became a narrow jolting track with enough potholes to grow knots on unsuspecting heads. A private road, hunters and sightseers used it at their own risk. It was up to them to stay out of the way of transport trucks, even if it meant driving into a snowbank. There were no signs or gas stations. The only roadside attractions were frozen gut-piles hard as concrete, and parked vehicles whose owners were still chasing caribou. A few of these vehicles were diesel-powered, left locked and running, but most were cold and silent, their batteries slowly losing their charge, their engine oil getting thicker by the moment. Their owners, if they stayed away too long, were risking a long walk home.

Wool slowed his speed as several transport trucks appeared. Ice was elastic, he'd been told. Vehicles travelled in a slight depression of their own making and created a bow wave. Travel too fast and the bow wave would shatter ice when it hit shore, or when it intersected with the bow wave of another vehicle. Rarely did a winter pass without a truck or two breaking through. Usually there was no loss of life and the vehicles were rescued. Sometimes dynamite was needed to break them free, but most often it was

simply a matter of winching them out or hoisting them up by helicopter. One year, though, an 80-ton rig had disappeared without a trace.

Wool always drove with one hand on the door handle and his seatbelt unfastened. In the event of an emergency there were a few seconds in which to react – just enough time to get the door open, toss one’s parka to safety, and jump out after it. If you went into the drink with your parka on, you probably wouldn’t get out. A parka could sop up 45 kilos of water.

Despite the danger, most truck drivers found the trip so boring they read paperbacks as they crept across the ice. It had even been suggested that the driver of the vanished rig had become so engrossed in a book that he’d missed a turn somewhere. Most likely he’d ended up at the bottom of a lake, but occasionally a wild-eyed hunter reported seeing an 18-wheeler barrelling across the tundra like a modern Flying Dutchman.

Wool didn’t read as he drove. Instead he listened to inspirational tapes. Currently he was working his way through one called “Ten Steps to Financial Nirvana,” which he’d ordered over the Internet. He knew such products were of questionable value, yet he found them irresistible and studied them the way an archeologist might pore over an ancient tablet with cryptic markings. There was always a chance they might contain some grain of truth, some key piece in the puzzle that had eluded him for so long: success.

By late evening he reached the Ice Road Café, and noted in the parking area a herd of thumper trucks bedded down for the night. The local press had dubbed them “dancing elephants” because of their size and the way they thumped the ground with their bellies to create seismic waves. Wool was tempted to pull in for something to eat, maybe create a few vibes of his own

at the poker table. The truck drivers would be southerners, and southerners generally placed bets as though they were buying souvenirs.

But he was tired and home was less than an hour away, so he carried on without stopping and increased his speed on the all-weather road. It took him past Preposterous Lake, Giant Mine, and Dumpville, before depositing him in a subdivision of log homes with birchbark shingles. He pulled up in front of a darkened house that was not quite level, opened the garage door with his remote, and began carrying in the meat. The front quarters were frozen solid and had to be pried apart with a crowbar. They made a hollow clacking sound when he dropped them to the floor. The hind quarters still had some jiggle to them. He could feel it as he lugged them up the driveway, one in each hand. His back was bowed, his head lowered, his mind completely absorbed in the task, until something made him look up, some movement in the garage. His legs, functioning on their own initiative, took him closer, bringing into view the furtive shape of an intruder.

It was as if his brain had not yet reached the town limits. His ears twitched, his forehead shrank, his face became as sharp and pointed as a chisel. A sound boiled up out of his throat, a feral hiss born of fear, exhaustion, and the accumulated disappointments of a lifetime.

A monstrous black dog lunged forward with something clamped in its jaws. Not, as Wool first thought, a hard-won quarter of meat, but one of the bones he was planning to hand out at Caribou Carnival. He aimed a wild kick at the dog but missed. Enraged, he pounded after it, then stopped so abruptly that spittle flew from his mouth. In the blink of an eye the dog merged with the night, vanishing so utterly it might never have existed.

## CHAPTER 15

Every winter a woman in a ballcap sold fish out of a Bombardier in a downtown parking lot. Her boyfriend, Iggi the Finn, liked to tease her because it was right beside the Kimberlite Fried Chicken outlet.

“Smells like fish, tastes like chicken,” Iggi would say.

“Get outa here,” she’d reply, giving him a shove.

Her name was Suzi Otter, and her cap had the word “Princecraft” stitched across the front. Instead of a sign she used a clothesline with a few fish hung up by their tails. They’d just come out of Great Slave Lake, netted beneath a meter of ice. Flung dripping on the snow, they’d flop around for a few minutes before freezing solid. Then they’d be stacked like firewood inside the Bombardier, mostly whitefish and lake trout, but with the occasional burbot and pike.

The Bombardier was always attended by a polite audience of dogs, waiting alertly for a single fish to be bestowed on one of them at the end of the day. They knew that Suzi had a sharp eye and long memory, and that rude or boisterous behavior was never rewarded.

Standing next to Suzi today was Freddy, whom the dogs viewed with suspicion. One Saturday when Suzi had been sick with internal parasites (something the dogs could sympathize with), Freddy had offered to help out since Iggi never missed the weekend jam session at the Gold Range. The dogs were a little nervous at this change in routine, and sure enough at the end of the day the fish Freddy handed out was made of rubber, a fact the luckless dog who received it did not discover until too late. It took him a week to pass it.

This time, however, Suzi wasn't sick and Freddy was simply hanging around. As the afternoon wore on, he became more and more impatient, inspecting the slowly diminishing stack of fish with greater frequency. When a woman showed up looking for a lake trout, Freddy spoke a few earnest words in her ear and sent her away with a skinny jackfish tucked under her arm like a loaf of French bread.

Suzi, who'd been busy with another customer, regarded him curiously. "She never buys anything but trout."

"None left," Freddy said innocently.

"So she took a jackfish instead?"

"I told her it was river trout."

Suzi groaned. "Freddy, there's no such thing."

"How do you know? Besides, just think of it as marketing. You ever heard of dogfish and chips?"

At this, the dogs pricked their ears and sat up a little straighter. “No,” Suzi laughed.

“That’s what they sell in England, only they don’t call it that.”

“Dogfish?”

“Yeah, it’s a kind of shark, very fond of dogs. Goes after the ones that fall overboard.”

The dogs looked indignant, and Suzi frowned as though she were having misgivings about the deal she’d struck with Freddy the day before, a deal in which the words “marketing” and “promotion” had figured prominently. He’d even offered to sign a contract. “You’ve been hanging around lawyers too much,” had been her reply.

A customer wearing a Caribou Carnival button appeared, taking her mind off Freddy and getting her thinking about the booth Iggi had promised to build, and the chowder she still had to make. Or maybe she should cook up something different this year. Fish cakes? Fish burgers? Boil up some whitefish pipes? And while she was mulling this over, another customer came along, and then another, and before she knew it all her fish were gone except one, and Freddy was climbing into the driver’s seat of the Bombardier.

“Wait a minute,” she called out as the Chrysler V8 rumbled into life. She took down the clothesline and wound it around her elbow. “There’s a needle bar in the back,” she told Freddy through the window. “You’ll need it for the pressure ridges.”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied, working the gas pedal, impatient to be off.

“Don’t forget to stop at the fish camp.”

“I won’t,” Freddy said, and popped the clutch.

The vehicle lurched into the street, leaving Suzi with a vague sense of regret. She watched it clank down the hill toward Old Town, then she turned to the dogs who were still waiting patiently. She gestured at one that seemed leaner than the rest. It had a metal ring around its neck instead of a collar. Trailing from the ring was a length of hose.

As the dog trotted forward, a hush fell over the others. They watched with rapt attention as the fish was placed in its mouth, then parted to form an aisle as it moved away like a communicant. For a moment, as it stepped out of shadow, its head was englobed in a saintly halo of light.



The Bombardier was a 12-passenger vehicle with a curved yellow body that resembled the carapace of a beetle. A pair of insect-like skis sprouted from the front, and along each side was a rubberized track mounted on four wheels, and a row of circular windows like portholes. Inside, there were bucket seats for the driver and one passenger, and behind, in lieu of more seats, a cargo area where Suzi and Iggi piled their fish. The motor was in a compartment at the rear, accessed by a panel on each side. The radiator faced backwards, protected by a hinged door, and was flanked by twin gas tanks that Freddy filled at a service station in Old Town.

The attendant, a kid with a cast on his arm, put down his comic book when Freddy came in. “That’s some relic you’re driving,” he said, and promptly launched into a description of the latest model of Arctic Cat, a liquid-cooled high performance machine with triple carbs, tuned exhaust, gas shocks.

His voice petered out when he saw the credit card Freddy placed on the counter. He picked it up for a closer look, then turned it over and examined the signature on the back. "Tapedeck?" he asked in a disbelieving tone.

Freddy put both elbows on the counter and leaned forward in a confidential manner. "Like it? It's yours if you want."

The kid looked at him in surprise. "The card?"

"No, the name. I've been thinking of changing it again."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I'm getting tired of it."

The kid blinked and studied the card some more, turning it over in his hands. "What would your parents say?"

"I dunno, I grew up in an orphanage. They had to call me something, so they decided on Thomas Tailfeather. I never cared for it much and changed it as soon as I was old enough. After a while I got tired of it and changed it again. Now I do it every few years. You oughta try it sometime. It's fun."

Reluctantly the kid swiped the card, then seemed to vacillate between relief and anxiety when the transaction was approved.

"Have a nice day," Freddy told him and walked out.

His next stop was at the Bushman, an unobtrusive general store at the heart of Old Town, in the shadow of Copilot's Monument. He inquired after an order he'd placed the day before, and was presented with two cardboard boxes and a galvanized anchor. On impulse he added some candy from the display next to the cash. He carried his purchases outside and got the Bombardier going again, taking a shortcut through someone's front yard and down onto the snow-covered ice of Back Bay.

It was a fine clear day, the sun still high in the sky, the temperature a

balmy minus 20. Skiers glided gracefully across the ice, a Turbo Beaver floated down for a landing, and a dogteam trotted along with tongues flapping and bells jingling. In the middle of the bay was a congregation of tents enclosed by a temporary palisade of log slabs. A bulldozer was clearing a parking area in front of the palisade, and men were spray-painting arrows on snowbanks. Trucks were hauling in logs and equipment and blocks of ice from a quarry on Great Slave. A sign over the entrance said “Fort Caribou.”

Freddy swung round the end of Loppam Island, which jabbed into the bay like a crooked knife. He drove past the government wharf and the houseboats, following the shoreline until a rampart of granite hid the town from sight. Up ahead the ice bridge came into view, a lacy confection of snow and frozen water arching across the bay. It was a beautiful gimmick dreamed up years ago by the Chamber of Commerce. Barely strong enough to support its own weight, it was a structure for the eyes only, a fabrication of length without width, form without content, melting in the spring and rising again each winter like a frozen phoenix. Tourists were ferried out daily on snowmobiles so they could admire the spiderwork of spans and trusses that glittered in the sun, and photograph the leering gargoyles carved out of ice. Regular maintenance was a necessity, and a crew was there now patching it with slush mixed up on mortarboards, and spraying it with a fine mist using portable pumps, fed through holes drilled in the ice.

Freddy drove beneath an arch with a keystone flown in from a glacier, and passed between squat pillars that were veined like marble. He emerged on the other side and continued down the bay. A little farther on, beyond the Con mine property, he headed for shore and pulled up alongside a rickety

dock. A pocket of spruce spiralled upward from a notch in the rock. As he made his way through the trees carrying one of the boxes of supplies he'd purchased, dogs began to bark.

A log cabin came into view, then a small unpainted shed and a teepee sheeted in with scrap plywood. A pile of spruce poles lay beside the shed, neatly limbed and waiting to be bucked up. At the edge of the clearing several blue-eyed Siberian huskies were chained to stakes, the bases of which were so thick with frozen urine they looked like stalagmites.

Freddy opened the door of the cabin and walked inside. The place was small and sparsely furnished, with a stove made from a 45-gallon drum radiating waves of heat, and several wooden racks fastened to the rafters by string. Suspended from one were pieces of dark twisted meat, looking like a colony of dried bats. The other racks supported lacy folds of mesentery fat, lank sheets of ribs from which the bones had been removed, and greasy clusters of tongues knotted at the roots.

Jonah was sitting at a table with a man in a blue frock coat, while Tyrone was stretched out on a rough cot, his feet wedged between it and the wall. He was immersed in a game of *Battletoads*.

Freddy unpacked the box, placing on the counter several cans of peaches and packages of dried soup, and one bag each of flour and sugar. When he was done he set the box on the cot and Tyrone immediately climbed inside, sitting like a hatchling in its shell and still playing his game. Freddy broke off a piece of dry meat from an overhead rack, spread a knifeful of lard on it, and settled down on the cot beside Tyrone.

The man in the frock coat looked over at them. "I had a child once," he said vaguely. "A daughter, I believe. It was a long time ago."

Jonah's hands, gnarled lumps that looked as if they'd been uprooted, were wrapped around a cup of tea. "For us, everything was long ago."

"Her mother died when she was an infant. I married again, but..." He shook his head. "The two of them did not get along. They quarrelled over everything, even my will."

"Nothing makes sense anymore. It's the fate of old men."

"My new wife was a restless person. Always travelling or doing good works. When she was home, I never got a moment's peace."

"Sometimes I feel I've lost my place in the world. Swallowed up by the times."

"The pole moves. My wits wander."

"Canoes fly through the air."

"Now they tell us that apes were our ancestors. Do you believe that?"

"No, my people are descended from hares."

Presently the man in the frock coat took his leave, and Freddy began gathering up Tyrone's belongings. These consisted of a few spare clothes and a beaded shell bag that contained a thousand dollars worth of game cartridges. The boy had spent the past week with Jonah while his parents' divorce was being finalized and the details of his own custody arranged. During that time Jonah had shown him how to make a drum and weave a willow-root net, how to melt snow without a teapot and track caribou to their secret lairs. The boy had been patient and uncomplaining, but whether he'd absorbed anything was questionable. He'd scarcely spoken a word and retreated into his electronic world at every opportunity.

"Thank you, grandfather," Freddy said as they gathered at the door. He looked at Jonah expectantly.

The old man shook his massive head. “I sense something in the boy, but what it is I cannot say. It is hidden from me.”

Freddy’s face betrayed no hint of disappointment. He merely shrugged and opened the door. “By the way, I haven’t forgotten about the missile. I have a plan.”

“Missile? What missile?”

“The flying canoe. The device in the trees.”

“Ah yes, that one. Good.”

The door closed and Freddy headed down the path with his son. They were nearly out of the trees when something caught his eye, something dangling from a branch. At first he thought it was a steel trap. Oldtimers sometimes did that, hanging up traps they weren’t using. But as he stepped off the path for a closer look, he realized it was a pair of skates.

He hefted one in each hand, wondering how they had gotten there.

## CHAPTER 16

Actually Wool wasn't all that crazy about caribou. Usually he gave the meat away. What he liked was the hunt itself, and being able to say afterwards, yeah, I bagged a couple on Drybones Lake, or wherever. He liked chatting about the number of animals he'd seen, what kind of rifle he was using, how his snowmobile had performed, stuff like that. It changed people's opinion of you. You could see it in their eyes. People respected success. That was why a good hunt was so important, it got the new year off to a promising start.

And sure enough, a few days later after returning from the bush, he got the sort of phone call he'd been waiting for all his life.

"Computerized fishing lures," said a voice. "Cute. I'll take ten thousand."

His name was Vincent Hatband and he owned an upscale fishing boutique in Toronto. He also distributed an elite line of angling gear and wanted to add computerized lures to his catalog.

“You have a name for them yet?” he asked Wool. “How about Fishware? Or CompuLure? Or Fishin’ Chips?”

His voice was warm and oozy, spilling over with enthusiasm. When asked how he’d got wind of the project, he answered, “Step number one, Mr. Wool. Know your fish.”

“Pardon?”

“Ten Steps to Financial Nirvana. When you ordered it from us, you mentioned certain goals. Computerized lures was one of them. Send me a sample, then we’ll talk.”

“Sure.” He jotted down an address.

“Taut lines.”

“What?”

The phone went dead. Wool looked at it in surprise, but already his mind was racing ahead. He could throw together a few samples easily enough, but to fill the order he’d need a chunk of money. The best thing to do was chase down the proposal he’d sent in to Tourism. Except Tourism had vanished, and many of the government phone numbers he tried were discontinued. Only three bureaus remained after the recent reorganization, each bearing a name that offered but a vague clue as to its function – Natural, Mechanical, and Intellectual Affairs. Everyone he spoke to seemed as confused as he was.

Finally he gave up and headed downtown on his snowmobile. He left his machine in the parkade and hurried outside, so preoccupied with plans and

deadlines that he ran straight into a pair of louts with foam antlers on their heads – Caribou Cops – who threatened to throw him in the clink if he didn't produce a Caribou Carnival button. Shaking them off, he rushed across the street and into the Carboniferous Building. He took the elevator to the basement and stepped out into a murky warren of subterranean offices. Gnomish men in beards scuttled about, desks were crammed together or piled on top of each other, papers leaked from stacked boxes, and shelves groaned under a burden of books and rocks and bones. The dim cramped quarters made him think of a tarpit filled with living fossils slowly being compressed by the weight of the building overhead.

He found Vomer lurking behind a curtain of gillnets, eating kippers out of a tin. A poster on the wall portrayed a zeuglodon and other watery cryptids. The screensaver on his computer displayed dead tropical fish. On his desk sat a bowl of ootoliths like tiny mints. "I don't sell angling licences," he grumbled without looking up.

Wool placed the caribou finder on the desk. Vomer dropped his fork and whisked the device away. "Be discreet," he hissed.

Wool sat down.

"Were you successful?"

"I bagged a few."

"I hope you had sense enough not to shoot any that were collared."

"Relax, everything's copacetic."

"Good." He chuckled. "Not that it would matter, I suppose. Ungle's always losing caribou."

Wool leaned forward. "There's something else I want to talk to you about." He explained his predicament.

“Tourism?” asked Vomer. “You’ve come to the right place. But computerized fishing lures? Isn’t that illegal?”

Alarmed, Wool loosed a few vague disclaimers until Vomer halted him with a weary gesture.

“It’s a technicality, nothing more. Come on.” He got up and led Wool down a jagged passage. “Laws change all the time,” he explained, “and often they’re unclear or unenforceable. Besides, the courts don’t give a damn about wildlife infractions.”

They came to a part of the basement where a section of wall had been chiselled away and a desk thrust into an earthen alcove. Roots dangled above it and clods of dirt were scattered across the desktop.

“There’s the person you want to talk to,” said Vomer, indicating a woman lying underneath the desk, curled up in a ball.

“Good lord, what’s wrong with her?”

“We’re not sure. There’s a rumor she’s gravid. Or she may be hibernating, a perfectly reasonable response to northern winters.”

Vomer brushed dirt off the mousepad and thrust his chin at the monitor. “She’s been stuck with bullshit like this ever since we merged with Tourism. You should see some of the asinine projects people try to get money for.” He clicked open a file. “Ah, good, she’s got you entered. Now, how much were you looking for? Five thousand. Ten? How about fifteen?” He winked at Wool. “I’ll code it to her budget.”

A few minutes later Wool was out on the street, blinking in the bright winter sun, elated, though not without a splinter of indignation at the arbitrary way in which the money had been disbursed. He’d never been a huge supporter of government handouts. Still, a smart businessman never

spurned an opportunity, and once things started to click it was important not to falter.

As soon as he got back home, he packaged up some lures and sent them off to Hatband. He also banged out a number of calls, arranging for various supplies to be air freighted in from the South. He spread the cost over several credit cards, all of which were carrying larger balances than he cared for. Vomer had warned him not to expect a check for at least six weeks, but that was okay. He'd become an expert at juggling finances. What he was hoping, the fishing lures would bring in enough cash to advance the project he was really counting on.

There was a cardboard box on the floor beside the desk. Reaching for it, he unfolded the top and removed a long white bone, a tibia, wrapped in tissue paper. At one end several words were inscribed in India ink: "Souvenir of Starvation Cove Lodge." He contemplated it for a while, running his hands along its length and admiring its workmanship. Light, dry, brittle – for all he knew it could have been the real thing. This was the sort of replica he'd use when his lodge was built, not the cheap candy crap he had now. Reverently he returned the tibia to its resting place.

It was time to get to work. After changing his clothes, he stowed tools and a portable generator in the back of his truck, and drove to Igloo Building Supplies where he picked up lumber and nails before continuing on to Back Bay.

Fort Caribou was almost complete. The main concourse, a double row of striped tents with a snow stage at one end, a miniature ice palace at the other, looked ready for business. The starting lanes for the dog derby had been ploughed, the jailhouse built, the parking lot cleared. Now it was mainly last

minute stuff people were engaged in, unsnarling cables, hoisting signs, setting up tables. Deliveries were coming too, truckloads of bison meat, logs for the sawing contest, and blue-white blocks from the ice quarry on Great Slave Lake.

Wool's site was in an alleyway off the main concourse, between a camper and a sort of leanto constructed out of weathered boards. He unloaded his lumber, started up the generator, and got to work. What he really wanted to build was a scaled-down version of a three-masted sailing ship, but of course he had neither the time nor the skill. Instead he did the next best thing, a simple booth with a false front that resembled a cartoony pirate ship. He worked quickly, knowing he'd left it a little late, eyeballing instead of measuring and breaking a blade in his jigsaw because he was hurrying. He used two-by-fours for the masts and bowsprit, and a few lengths of polypropylene rope for the rigging. The whole thing was built atop runners so it could double as a float for the Caribou Carnival parade.

By the time he was done, it was nearly dark. Quickly he tidied up, then stood for a moment admiring his handiwork while lights pierced the shore of Back Bay and the sounds of the Carnival site muttered around him. The clink and scrape of tools, the twang of wire guys, a radio playing somewhere.

"Oh no," said a voice, "not another chowder shop."

Turning, he saw a man emerging from the leanto beside his booth.

"Pardon?" Wool asked.

The man gestured at the outline of the ship. "That's what you're selling, right? Whitefish chowder?"

Wool smiled at the thought. "Don't worry, I'm not running a

concession.”

“That’s a relief. Say, you look kind of familiar. Didn’t I see you out at the Ice Road Café?”

“I don’t recall.”

“We were playing poker, but you got smart and left early. That damn priest cleaned us out. You heading uptown?”

He introduced himself as Iggi the Finn and told Wool that he and his girlfriend had been selling bannock and bowls of chowder at Caribou Carnival for years, but this time they were trying something different. He didn’t say what it was, and asked to be let off at the Gold Range. Wool refused the offer of a beer.

“Don’t drink?” asked Iggi sadly.

Actually a beer was exactly what Wool had in mind, but not at the Range. He dropped Iggi off and went straight to the Adventurer Motel. The parking lot was overflowing, thanks in part to the popularity of the swimming pool, which opened only in winter. As he headed for the entrance to the bar, he could see tourists in wet suits floating on styrofoam ice pans. They were barking like seals.

The bar’s decor was intended to suggest a previous but undefined age of muskets, hand-drawn maps, and muddy oil paintings. Service was provided by a trio of anachronistic waiters. One wore tights and had a thick ruff around his neck, which made his head look as though it were sitting on a platter. Another was dressed as a naval officer in full fig, his rank indicated by markings on the collar, lapels, cuffs, pocket flaps, and epaulettes of his frock coat. The third looked little better than a tramp, a short monkey-like fellow in dirty trousers and patched moccasins.

The name of the bar was the Lost Explorers Lounge, and the three waiters were impersonating Henry Hudson, John Franklin, and Jack Hornby. Purists cavilled at the latter's presence since his fate, unlike the other two, was not a mystery. His defenders, however, claimed that Hornby had actually been more lost than any other soul in the history of the North-West Territory. It also helped that he was popular with customers, having an inexhaustible store of anecdotes that he doled out one at a time with each drink he served, reminiscences about the winter he spent in a wolf den, and hunting caribou by running them down with a tireless jogtrot, and showing off the wounds he'd received in WWI, in which he'd served as a sniper.

A different sort of bird, but no less popular, was Henry Hudson. His dour manner was offset by his flamboyant garb, while the pathos of his final voyage gained him instant respect from the bar's patrons. When he could be persuaded to loosen his tongue, he spoke mainly of life in Elizabethan times, of the plague, and attending The Globe for a performance of *The Tempest*, and turning back the Spanish Armada with his pals, Drake and Hawkins. It was, in fact, his very reticence that earned him as large a following as Hornby. People frequented the bar night after night hoping to pry from him a clue about the manner of his passing. How long did he survive after being set adrift by mutineers? Was it his body that was found in a grave on Spitzbergen Island in 1823? The manager of the lounge, always looking for new ways to sustain his patrons' thirst for history, hired a young man to portray Hudson's son, who as the ship's cabin boy had followed his father into eternity. Now, barefoot and costumed in rags, his sole task was to trail Hudson from table to table and look sorrowful.

But as colorful as Hudson and Hornby were, it was Franklin who

interested Wool. He beckoned him over and asked for a bottle of Arctic Diamond, a local brew. The old boy nodded and vanished for 20 minutes. When he finally reappeared, he was carrying a glass of claret, half of which he managed to spill on the table. He sopped it up with the sleeve of his frock coat and said in a dismal voice, “Two pounds, sir.”

His ineptness as a waiter, according to the lounge’s regulars, should have come as no surprise. His dubious fame as the man who ate his boots, the commander of cannibals, the captain who got so lost that 150 years later people were still searching for him – nothing suggested competence. Dough-faced and balding, he had none of Hornby’s energy or Hudson’s mystique. He had not been sent into oblivion by heartless mutineers, he had gone willingly and taken 128 lives with him. Even his final moments were bungled, for he’d died so early in the expedition that he was as ignorant as the rest of the world about the final resting place of his two ships, jokingly known as the *Error* and the *Terebus*. This knowledge was the one thing that might have redeemed him in the eyes of the people he waited upon, but lacking it he was reduced to a figure of fun. When he lost his way among the tables and peered around with a helpless expression on his face, someone was sure to call out, “Come on, guv’nor, it’s not the North-West Passage.”

It was, Wool thought, a clever bit of theater, though it had taken him longer to realize it than he cared to admit. But eventually he recognized the waiter’s incompetence for what it was, a performance, a reflection of history’s dismissal of Franklin as a blunderer. So when the old boy spilled drinks, or claimed one of the reasons he’d gone on his final expedition was to escape his meddlesome wife, he was merely giving listeners what they expected, what they were in effect paying for.

The brilliance of this conceit made a lasting impression on Wool, and gave him the idea for Starvation Cove Lodge. He'd give people something they'd been wanting for 150 years.

Fishing a bone from his pocket, he said to the waiter, "Got something here I want you to look at. By the way, can you get the weekend off?"



It was late and the house was dark when Wool arrived home. He parked the truck in the garage and got out, pleasantly tired after the long but fruitful day. At the bar he'd stuck with the claret, unwinding over a couple of glasses before grabbing a bite to eat. Now he was ready to fall into bed.

But as he turned toward the door, a sound in the street made him falter, and instantly all his good humor vaporized. A couple of dogs, dachshunds of all things, were coming down the street, yapping their fool heads off. They were such ridiculous beasts, all stubby legs, flopping ears and dragging bellies, yet here they came, obviously intent on upholding some sacred canine principle. Just once he'd like to know what went through a dog's brain. He was in his own front yard, for heaven's sake.

Stooping, he found a rock on the ground, flat but with a good heft to it, and drew back his arm, trying to gauge speed and distance and time, and combine them into a single workable equation. A well-placed throw, one that bounced the rock right under their noses, might deter them. His arm snapped forward and the rock sailed through the air, spinning like a saucer. Only it did not land as he intended. Instead it clocked the lead dog gloriously on the head. Immediately both animals wheeled and headed back

the way they had come, the one that had not been struck yelping as loudly as the one that had. They disappeared into the darkness.

It was one of the most satisfying moments in Wool's life, even though he hadn't hit the brute intentionally. And funny? The way the dogs had reversed direction, it was as though they'd been rehearsing it for weeks. Too bad there'd been no one around with a camcorder to capture it. And the throw he'd made! Delivering the rock with such pinpoint accuracy was a feat he could never hope to duplicate.

By god, what a wonderful day!

## CHAPTER 17

The Bombardier was a dinosaur, a hulking beast from an earlier automotive age. It pounded over snowdrifts like a tank. The drifts were hard as rock and snapped with annoying regularity the metal cleats that held together the Bombardier's tracks. Grumbling, Freddy would get out with a ratchet in hand and replace the broken cleats.

Very quickly he grew bored.

He let the RPMs run up until the motor overheated, and nearly broke off one of the skis when he hit a drift at the wrong angle. Grudgingly he reduced his speed, but resisted Suzi's injunction to get out and check each pressure ridge with a needle bar, and as a result nearly put the Bombardier through the ice.

It was an innocent enough ridge, modest in height, nothing at all like some of the others, miniature mountain ranges that zippered across the lake. It was old and half-covered with snow, and bore the imprint of numerous snowmobile tracks, so he didn't bother stopping, just slowed down a bit as he crossed. All of a sudden the front end of the Bombardier tilted upwards, filling the windshield with sky as they teetered on a shelf of ice. He pedalled the clutch and gas furiously, gearing down and searching for traction and trying not to stall the machine. For one precarious moment they slid backwards, then the tracks dug in and the world became horizontal again as they moved forward to safety. He glanced at his son in the seat beside him, but the boy was oblivious to everything except the game he was playing. The bag of candy Freddy had given him lay untouched at his feet.

“Wasn't that fun?” Freddy asked. “Want to do it again?”

Tyrone bobbed his head without looking up. Smiling, Freddy brought the Bombardier to a halt and got out. Behind them a section of the pressure ridge had crumbled into a watery gap. Quite likely it was nothing more than a bit of overflow caused by lapped plates of ice, but for a moment he pictured the Bombardier plunging downward like a sinking ship with Tyrone's face pressed against one of the porthole windows. He got back inside and opened the hatch in the roof.

“In case of an emergency,” he told Tyrone. “A Bombardier sinks fast, so you gotta be quick. You first, then me, okay?”

Tyrone lifted his head and regarded the opening solemnly.

Freddy shut the hatch but left it unfastened, and set off again. They passed Suzi's fish camp at Fool Bay without stopping, then angled toward shore where a seismic line emerged from the bush. It was a wide avenue

that sliced through the trees, cut many years earlier by a company exploring for oil. He goaded the big machine up a rocky slope and headed inland, crunching over slash. On each side was a wild tangle of spruce and jackpine, their branches weighed down with snow, their colors reduced by winter to a drab chiaroscuro. The only sign of life was a flitting whiskeyjack and the spoor of a marten.

Freddy slowed to a crawl. The snow here was soft and deep, cushioning the big machine from the rough terrain, but also becoming an obstacle in itself. Several times they got stuck, and he had to shovel out packed snow from beneath the Bombardier's belly, then jack up the rear end and reverse his way out.

The hard part came when they reached a trail he had widened the previous week with a chainsaw. He turned off the cutline and wedged the vehicle onto the ragged path. Branches raked the sides as they burrowed deeper into the forest. Snow sifted across the windshield, dislodged from branches and mixed with particles of lichen and scabby bark. The Bombardier bucked and lurched like a carnival ride.

“Almost there,” he told Tyrone.

Finally the slim white shape of the missile came into view. It had shifted since they'd last seen it, settling lower in the thicket of trees that supported it and compressing the springy trunks into sharper curves. It was much smaller than he remembered, only a few meters long and devoid of insignia. Americans had been testing cruise missiles in the North for a decade, though supposedly not since 1994. The obvious conclusion – that testing had continued in secret – had filled him with joy. Politicians were so much fun to taunt.

“You stay here,” he told Tyrone as he got out.

He looped ropes around the missile, fastened the ends to trees and tightened them up with come-alongs. When the ropes were taut as bowstrings, he felled the trees that cradled the missile, leaving it suspended in midair on a web of ropes. He drove the Bombardier underneath and backed off the come-alongs until the missile rested comfortably on the roof rack.

He took a break and got a fire going, bringing out a bucket of half-frozen chicken and opening a can of pop for Tyrone.

“Drink it before it freezes,” he said, then stuck a chicken wing on a willow rod and handed it over. “It’s already cooked, you just need to thaw it out.”

Tyrone held it in the general direction of the fire, and Freddy settled down beside him to mull over the problem of the missile. He’d readily agreed when Jonah asked him to dispose of it, thinking he’d have a bit of fun first. How often did one get their hands on a cruise missile? His imagination had soared. This would be his best joke yet, or so he’d thought.

Unfortunately the detached and methodical execution of an intricate scheme was not his style. His most brilliant work was always ad-libbed, stimulated by the presence of a foil, an adversary. Hence his disappointment when there was nothing in the news about a lost missile and no search parties were sent out. Who gave up on a lost missile without a search? After several weeks the explanation seemed unavoidable – it wasn’t a missile after all, but something with a smaller comic payload, perhaps one of those devices used to prospect for diamonds. His interest waned as other concerns, legal and marital, rose to the forefront, and his promise to Jonah

lapsed until Tyrone tugged his sleeve one day and said, “Wocka wocka.”

Freddy groaned at the reminder. All at once the caper had become a chore, a duty with very little promise of fun. Worse, he had to act fast since winter was drawing to a close, and the easiest solution, dragging the device out onto the ice, would not do. It was certain to be spotted by passing aircraft before breakup. Where else could he move the blasted thing? There was only one choice.

Yellowknife.

Automatically he thought of the dump, but it was too public. What he needed was a quiet out-of-the-way spot where he could stash the device until summer, after which he could bury it, or drop it into the bay one night, or drag it onto Giant property where it would blend in with the decaying buildings and rotting machinery. Not an inspired plan to be sure, but it would suffice. Perhaps the divorce was affecting him more than he realized. Even amicable breakups could be difficult, especially when kids were involved.

Getting to his feet, he unpacked the second box of supplies he’d purchased the previous day. It contained brushes and several tins of the Bushman’s all-weather fast-drying bitumen-based arctic-and-marine paint. The colors were white fang, yellow belly, dorsal green, and eyeball red. He climbed up on the Bombardier’s roof and began applying paint by the light of the fire, working fast and without mishap except when the brush snagged on a projecting latch. As he finished each color, he stamped the lid shut and tossed the tin and brush into the cardboard box on the ground. When the last color was done, he cleaned up with a varsol-moistened cloth. The solvent was bitterly cold.

“Tyrone,” he called out as he jumped down. The fire was reduced to a pile of glowing embers and a few lazy flames, so he resurrected it by throwing on more wood and it blazed up obediently. Tyrone’s willow stick lay untended on the ground and the attached piece of chicken was slowly turning to charcoal.

“Tyrone?” he called again, circling the campsite. A freshly made trail led off into the bush. It was little more than an indentation in the soft snow, but it could only have been made by his son. He grabbed a flashlight and plunged along it in pursuit. The boy couldn’t have gotten far. The wandering track wove in and out of thickets, and finally came to an end at the base of a partially toppled jackpine, where a thick root arched above an opening that looked like a whirlpool in the snow. The top of Tyrone’s head was just visible, and a faint musical jingle from the GameBoy floated through the air.

“You rascal,” Freddy cried in relief, scooping him up. “You scared the pants off me.”

Back at the camp he got his son fed and settled in for the night on a mattress of spruce boughs and caribou skins with an opened Five Star sleeping bag as a blanket. Sparks from the fire whirled upward like incandescent wires.

“You’ll be going away with your mother for a while,” Freddy said, stretching out beside him. Tyrone’s face was pressed close to the backlit screen of the GameBoy.

“But only for a little while. In the summer you’ll come back for a visit. That’ll be fun, eh? We’ll go fishing.”

Tyrone gave no sign he heard.

“From now on you’ll have two homes. Isn’t that great? Homes are something you can never have too many of.”

Still nothing.

“Hey, did I ever tell you the story about a little boy who lived in a tree? He was about your age.”

The motion of Tyrone’s thumbs slowed.

“It was a big spruce tree with branches that came all the way down to the ground. No one knows how he got there, or where he came from, or how long he lived there. He was put in a school with a lot of other kids. It was run by priests. The little boy liked them because of their long black cassocks. They flapped like wings when they ran after the little boy, which was often, because he was always getting into trouble, mostly for digging up their garden. It wasn’t vegetables he was after. It was worms. He’d dig them up with a shovel and gobble down as many as he could. They’d still be hanging out of his mouth when the priests dragged him inside. It was considered a great step forward in his development when he began rinsing them off before eating them.”

He had Tyrone’s attention now, and ran a hand through the boy’s hair. “He was a lot like you, actually. He never said much. People were always pestering him about who he was and how he ended up alone in the bush. Trouble was, he didn’t remember much – just the tree, and the taste of dirt and spruce needles, the feel of bark under his hands as he scrambled up the branches, listening for the sound of wings...”

Freddy fell silent for a moment, lost in his own thoughts, until Tyrone’s grubby fist gripped his sleeve and tugged. Freddy smiled. “It was ravens that kept him alive. They brought him food and clothing and shiny things to

play with. At night they roosted together in the branches. The ravens crowded around him and kept him warm, even in winter. That was how he survived. In the morning they flew off and he'd be alone until they came back at the end of the day. Sometimes while they were gone he'd run around waving his arms and leaping into the air. How he wanted to fly! If they returned early and caught him at it, they tormented him with laughter."

Tyrone reached up and patted his father.

Freddy smiled. "Ravens have a great sense of humor. In time the little boy developed a sense of humor too. Tomorrow night I'll tell you about some of the tricks he played. Would you like that?"

Tyrone's head bobbed.

"Good. Now it's time to sleep. We've got a busy day coming up. I hope you like parades."



They set off early next morning, Freddy driving cautiously while Tyrone slept in the seat beside him, wrapped up in blankets. It was just turning light when they arrived at Suzi's camp in Fool Bay. There was a shacktent on skids, sitting on the ice as though abandoned, and a stage with a canvas walltent erected atop it. The stage rested on poles frozen into the ice, elevating it a good three meters in the air. Wrapped around each pole was a length of stovepipe to keep out raiding wolverines.

"Anyone here?" Freddy called out as he approached the shacktent. He went inside and found the place empty, though the stove was still warm. Dirty dishes and tattered paperbacks were piled everywhere. On the floor

next to a rumpled cot lay a fat Stephen King with a protruding bookmark, which Freddy moved to a new location in the book before returning outside. It looked like he was going to have to load the Bombardier himself.

He scrambled onto the stage using a log with steps chopped into it and threw down all the frozen fish in the tent. After stacking them inside the Bombardier, he got out a cordless drill from Suzi's toolchest, climbed onto the roof of the Bombardier, and drilled a hole in the tail of the device. Using a short length of wire, he attached the anchor he'd bought at the Bushman. When he was done, he jumped down, roused Tyrone, and together they inspected his handiwork. The device was mostly green now with sags and wrinkles in the paint that suggested vermiculations. At the front was a pair of baleful eyes and the glimmer of jagged teeth. At the back the anchor dangled like a treble hook.

"Walla, a giant fishing plug," Freddy said, and Tyrone nodded sleepily.

They set off again, following the shore to Yellowknife Bay and passing beneath the ice bridge, which was now approaching the end of its lifespan. The warmth of the late winter sun had reduced its dimensions, melting and polishing the ice till it shone like a crystal necklace across the white throat of the bay. Even the gargoyles looked frail, their faces blurred and resigned. One of them, as the Bombardier passed beneath the bridge, toppled over and smashed to a thousand glittering bits.

The Caribou Carnival parade was pooling in Back Bay. There were floats with miners and dancing girls, and people capering around in woolly underwear, and Caribou Bobbies with antlers stuck on their heads. There was a Nodwell in the procession, and scooptrams from Con and Giant, and a phalanx of machines from the Antique Snowmobile Club. A Mad Trapper

hurried past with his snowshoes on backwards, followed by a red-serged Mounty driving a dogteam. Then came a succession of scrofulous half-tons competing in the Ugly Truck and Dog contest. One of them had an outhouse in the back.

“Parade time,” Freddy informed his son.

Tyrone stared him blankly.

“Wanna ride the wocka wocka?”

Tyrone nodded and Freddy boosted him onto the Bombardier’s roof. When the boy was safely astride the fishing plug, Freddy handed up a cardboard sign that said, “Suzi’s Fish.”

“You hold that up,” Freddy told him. “Be careful you don’t fall off.” He scooted back into the Bombardier. Revving the motor, he cut in front of a float from Walleye Optical.

The parade straggled up the hill led by a stately group of reindeer, and entered the downtown area, where the streets were lined with people. Adults applauded politely and children scrambled after sweets being hurled from the floats, while ravens delivered raucous comments from lampposts. Freddy chucked out the window the candy that Tyrone had shown no interest in – licorice pipes, foil-wrapped chocolate coins, and several bags of gold dust gum. When that was gone, he reached behind him and started lobbing frozen fish.

They wound through the streets at a leisurely pace, leaving behind a trail of dog turds, mushy snow, dribbles of oil, and the occasional fallen body. Finally they circled back in the direction of Old Town, and halfway down the hill Freddy left the parade as abruptly as he’d joined it. He turned into Trail’s End and pulled up before a trailer with a patched roof. He shifted

into reverse and was just about to back into the driveway when he noticed a face in the living-room window.

“Damn,” he muttered. He turned off the ignition and hopped out. The door of the trailer opened cautiously and Danny appeared, pale and unshaven.

“Freddy,” he said, his voice sounding a little rusty.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding. I haven’t seen you all winter. Whatcha been up to?”

“House-sitting.” Danny’s eyes moved past Freddy’s shoulder and settled on the Bombardier. “Yours, I suppose?”

“Naw, I borrowed it for the parade. See the fishing plug on the roof?”

“Parade? What parade?”

“For Caribou Carnival,” Freddy replied, sounding surprised. “You must be the only person in town who hasn’t heard about it. Don’t you know that people who stay cooped up all winter have a tendency to go crazy and start shooting things? That’s what Caribou Carnival is, a cure for cabin fever.”

“I’m not living in a cabin, and I haven’t been cooped up all winter. I’ve been working.”

Freddy grinned. “That’s right, you’ve got a new racket going. Budget detective.”

Danny moved his chin as though avoiding a punch. “Some racket. I’ve had one case since I started and I can’t even solve that. If you can call it a case. I’m looking for a dog.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“I’ve looked everywhere. The dump, the kennel, the dog pound. I’ve checked every street and alley, every front and back yard in town.”

“Every place except the Carnival. It’s not just for people, you know.”

“Come on, Freddy, get serious.”

“I am. There’s the Frozen Dog Film Festival, the Ugly Truck and Dog Contest, and the YK Dog Derby.”

“A dog derby? What’s that, some kind of hat?”

“A race. Biggest event of the Carnival. Mushers come from all over – Canada, the States, even Europe. There’s a \$15,000 purse. Everybody comes to watch, even the dogs. If your pooch is still around, he’ll be there.”

Danny’s nose twitched. “When’s it start?”

“Any minute now.”

Danny wavered in the doorway. “By the way, missiles aren’t used to hunt for diamonds. You told me that once, remember?”

“Hey, I was just kidding. You better get going if you want to solve that case.”

“All right, but I have to make a call,” Danny said and vanished inside. When he returned, he was wearing a stained trenchcoat and a fedora with earflaps. “Thanks,” he said as he rushed down the steps.

“Hold on, you gotta meet my son.”

Danny looked over his shoulder. “Oh, you’re a father now. That was fast.”

“His name is…” Freddy began, then his voice faltered.

“Sorry, I have to run.”

Frowning, Freddy came down the steps and circled the Bombardier. He opened all the doors and checked inside and called out his son’s name, but there was no sign of the boy. Could he have fallen off during the parade? The float that had followed him was a paper-maché version of Ol’ Slavey, a

long-necked beast equipped with a giant pair of spectacles. He imagined Tyrone falling beneath its tires, or wandering the streets alone, oblivious to everything but his GameBoy, easy prey for drunks, kidnappers, wild animals...

A flurry of electronic notes made him look up. They swirled through the air like snowflakes and drew his attention to the Bombardier's roof. Clambering up, he noticed a latch on the fishing plug. The inspection panel it served was slightly ajar. When he swung it open, music poured out.

"Tyrone!" he cried. The boy had crawled inside, attached his GameBoy to some loose wires, and loaded up a game called *Duke Nukem*. Freddy hauled him out and planted a kiss on his forehead. "No more disappearing acts, okay?" He sat him on the edge of the roof, then jumped down and reached up for him. The boy came willingly into his arms.

When they were both inside the Bombardier, Freddy backed the vehicle onto the lot and said, "Now you stay put."

Tyrone was silent, but not the game he was playing. "Let's get radioactive," growled Duke Nukem in a cigar-chomping voice.

Freddy got out and untied the ropes that held the fishing plug in place and heaved it off the Bombardier. It fell with a thud, buckling the metal on one side and causing the inspection panel to spring open. When he tried to snap it shut, he noticed lettering on the inner surface, red text that had been applied with a stencil. Some letters looked normal enough, but others were reversed and several he'd never seen before. One looked like a squashed bug. None of it made any sense, although four letters at the top seemed oddly familiar – CCCP.

## CHAPTER 18

Spring carnivals were a tradition throughout the North, a way of shaking off the winter doldrums. Every community had one, Jamborees mostly. The Beluga in Tuk, the Muskrat in Inuvik, the Beavertail in Fort Simpson. The activities centered around races and contests of skill. Tea boiling and bannock making, flour packing and log sawing. Snow golf tournaments were popular, as were helicopter rides, ice sculpting, and outhouse races.

In Yellowknife two of the more popular attractions were the Snow King's Winter Palace and the Snowmobile Regatta, in which drivers attempted to cross a 50-meter expanse of open water. Another colorful event was the Gold Brick Carry, the contestants lugging a 35-kilo ingot through the town's streets. The finish line was the entrance to a bank. Anyone who reached it was allowed to keep the brick, something that had happened only twice in

the entire 45-year history of the carnival.

The parade was the Carnival's official kickoff, and one of the participants was Jack Wool, driving his snowmobile and towing the booth he'd hammered together. Inside was the doughy-faced waiter from the Lost Explorers Lounge. Wool had hired him for the weekend. At the man's feet was a box of candy bones. He was tossing them out to people in the street.

The friendly approbation of the crowd cheered Wool greatly. He knew it was not aimed specifically at him and his lodge, but it gave him the feeling that success was finally within his grasp. He imagined the lodge completed and fully booked, the guests poring over maps and formulating search plans before venturing out with guides to scour their chosen areas. He saw them returning at the end of the day, exhausted but happy, their backpacks stuffed with bones. There would be extensive records to consult, and a rising excitement as the identity of bones was narrowed down. Was it the gunroom steward, Richard Aylmore? Or the caulker's mate, Francis Dunn?

And why limit it to bones? Why not a whole range of artifacts? Plate, medals, anything that could take an engraving. Why not some sheets from a journal, filled with the eye-wrenching longhand that Victorians used? Anything that guests could trace with a bit of historical sleuthing.

Of course, for those of a more sedentary nature, the gift shop would suffice.

And then, as he glanced back at Franklin, he had his most inspired idea yet. Why not the real thing, so to speak? Why not a group of actors stumbling across a frozen landscape, emaciated, their clothing in authentic rags, their gums black from scurvy, their teeth falling out. Some would be dragging impossibly heavy sledges, while others crouched over a fallen

comrade, sawing off a limb. He could have bleachers built.

A disturbing thought occurred to him then. Very likely some real artifacts would turn up. That was fine, it would only serve to enhance the lodge's reputation. But what if a major discovery were made? What if Franklin's grave were found at last, or his ships located? That would be a disaster. Once the mystery was solved, his bookings would fall off. The conclusion was inescapable. He'd have to suppress any important discovery, or pass it off as having been staged by the lodge.

He checked over his shoulder, making sure the old boy hadn't fallen off the float. The parade was coming to an end now, fragmenting as it went down the hill to Old Town. Wool continued on to Fort Caribou. There was no time to lose; already people were streaming into the site. He maneuvered the booth into place, activated the security system on his snowmobile, and dispatched Franklin to distribute more bones.

"Don't forget to tell people about the booth," he said. "We're right beside the place that sells—" He glanced at the sign Iggi had put up that morning. "Dogfish and Chips," it said.

The old boy wandered off while Wool got busy in the booth, setting up a cardboard model of the lodge, and stacking up pamphlets so they'd be within easy reach in case he got mobbed. Not that he expected to be overwhelmed, but it was best to be prepared. Sometimes you never knew when an idea would take off. Overnight successes did happen. He'd read about them in books.

People began to drift by, mostly adults towed by their children. He held up a pamphlet and tried to catch their eye, but without any luck. He raised his voice and got some patter going, and finally attracted the attention of a

woman in a Mother Hubbard parka with Delta trim.

“What’s this?” she asked when he handed her a pamphlet. “A menu?”

“It’s a tourist lodge dedicated to the search for Sir John Franklin. Find the man who’s been lost for 150 years and win a cash prize. Every guest is guaranteed at least one historically accurate souvenir.”

“You sure you don’t have anything to eat?”

“There’ll be a gourmet cook on staff, and field rations of historically accurate tinned meat, guaranteed not to be rotten or tainted with lead.”

She leaned forward and tried to look inside. “No hamburgers or hot dogs? Everyone’s got them.”

He gave her a bone, but even that didn’t satisfy her. “Starvation Lodge,” she said derisively, “you got that right.”

He watched her join the cue next door, where Iggi was shovelling fish and chips into cones of newspaper. For the first time he felt a splinter of concern. Perhaps he needed to ramp up his sales pitch, be more aggressive. He began to holler out like a sideshow barker.

“What’s the real story behind the Franklin disappearance? Why have his ships never been found? Was he on a secret mission? What does the government know that you don’t? Find out for yourself at Starvation Cove Lodge, the only tourist facility dedicated to solving the Arctic’s greatest mystery.”

At first he thought he was getting some results. People were at least stopping to listen, though he could tell from their reactions they weren’t terribly interested. They’d look in his direction now and then before shuffling sideways a few steps. It took him a while to realize they were lined up for fish and chips.

He couldn't believe it. Three pamphlets he'd handed out so far, while Iggi was swamped with customers. Meanwhile not a single bone had gone past. There ought to be a few people crunching on them by now. What had happened to that fool of a waiter? Had he gotten lost?

When his cellphone rang, he snatched it out of his pocket. "It's about time," he shouted. "Where the hell are you?"

There was a slight hesitation before a voice replied, "Have I caught you at a bad time? Should I call back?"

It was Vincent Hatband, the man from the fishing boutique in Toronto.

"Not at all," said Wool, modulating his voice to a deeper, richer tone.

"Good. I was just wondering, what kind of fish are we talking about? You get any bass up there? Muskies?"

Collecting his wits, Wool lurched into a fishy blurb. "Monstrous pike, rivers boiling with grayling, lake trout the size of small children."

"Where are you again? Whitehorse?"

"Yellowknife."

"I always get those two mixed up," Hatband said, as though the matter needed further investigation.

"We're on Great Slave Lake, deepest lake in the continent. You want a trophy, this is the place."

"Did you mention pike?"

"Big enough to take off your leg. They look like baby crocodiles. You ever come up this way, I'll take you out myself."

"What about field testing, Wool? What kind of results did you get?"

"With my lures? You mean, like, for durability?"

"No, success rate. Five percent? Ten? I rate all the lures I sell."

“Well – ”

“Service, Wool, that’s what it always comes down to. Going the extra mile for the customer. It’s what I do, and it’s what I expect my suppliers to do.”

“Absolutely.”

“You’ve got a wonderful idea, the sort of product that will make people walk up and shake your hand. I really mean that.”

“Thanks.”

“Can you hold for a moment?”

“Sure.”

Wool waited until the line went dead. He glared at it, filled with an evil premonition. Was the deal going sour? He’d couriered samples to Hatband, and the components for his production run had begun to arrive. Soon he’d be able to assemble the lures. Everything had been going so well it was almost scary.

Should he call Hatband back? He decided not to. It was imperative not to sound desperate, and besides, at the moment he had bigger fish to fry. If he didn’t generate enough publicity, his lodge could end up in the toilet like all his other failed enterprises. Hastily he closed up the booth and went off in search of Franklin. He plowed through tents and crowds for nearly an hour, even making a side trip to the snowmobile venue, where a demolition derby was in progress. He checked the beer tent, the *Cabane à Sucre*, and the jigging stage where fiddlers were warming up, all without success. His head was starting to thump from the tumult and frustration. The rank smell of buffalo burgers had gotten up his nostrils and made them feel greasy.

Abruptly he whirled and headed back to the booth. He was wasting his

time looking for Franklin. What he ought to be doing was figuring out a way to salvage the weekend. Move the booth to a better location perhaps. The carnival organizers wouldn't like it, but by the time they realized he wasn't going to listen to them, the weekend would be over. Sometimes you had to break a few rules to be successful.

He elbowed his way through the lineup to Iggi's booth and unholstered his remote. The snowmobile started instantly. He unhitched the booth so he could scout out a new site, and shouted at the people blocking his way. All he got was a sea of vacant looks. His irritation rising, he hollered again. At the very head of the line, a man in a frockcoat turned, a cone of newspaper in his hands.

"Where have you been?" shrieked Wool, stomping up to him.

It turned out he'd been nabbed by a pair of Caribou Cops and tossed in the Caliboose for not wearing a carnival button. He held out a chunk of fish like a peace offering. "Very tasty," he said innocently. "No bones."

Wool flung it to the ground. "I'm not paying you to stand around and eat," he cried. "And speaking of bones, where are yours?"

The truth was, they were lost. After getting out of the clink Franklin had wandered into the bingo tent and been drawn into a few games of Sputnik and Crazy L. While he was thus engaged, someone had made off with his bag of bones.

"You old fool," shouted Wool, seizing him by an epaulette. He was so enraged that he did not see the lineup part like a curtain, or the huge black beast that galloped forward. The first indication of trouble was a jarring blow in the back, which sent him sprawling on the ice. He lay there stunned, twisting and gasping in pain. When he looked up, he saw Franklin

embracing a dog. It was the same one that had pilfered a bone from his garage.

“Neptune,” the old man cried out, “is it really you?”

Rage exploded inside Wool. Springing to his feet, he lashed out with his foot but the dog absorbed the blow without a sound. It was like kicking a fire hydrant. Only then did Wool understand how huge the beast was, and that his hasty blow might have been ill-advised. The dog reared up, for a moment matching Wool not only in weight but height. Wool threw out his hands as Neptune crashed down upon him, pinning him against the idling snowmobile. As they grappled, Wool found himself staring into Neptune’s chops and getting a faceful of reeking dogbreath. He wrenched himself free and rolled away. Neptune lunged forward, claws slipping on the ice and causing him to sprawl across the snowmobile’s seat. As Wool scuttled away, Neptune lunged again, this time fetching up against the handlebars. He scrambled to free himself, but his fur became entangled in the throttle cable. Suddenly the snowmobile leapt forward, scattering the “Dogfish and Chips” crowd.

Wool wobbled to his feet as Neptune sped away, his great body thrust forward against the handlebars. He managed a few indecisive steps in pursuit, then faltered to a stop. People who’d dived to safety were picking themselves up and checking for bruises, while others who had missed the entire incident were looking around in confusion. Franklin was white as a ghost.

“You...you...” sputtered Wool.

The old man backed away, his eyes wide with alarm. But it was not Wool he was retreating from. Two people had suddenly thrust their way

through the crowd. One of them was Danny in his fedora and trenchcoat.

“Anyone seen a black dog?” he asked.

The second person was Jane Griffin. She rushed past Danny and threw her arms around Franklin. “Oh, John,” she cried, “I’ve found you at last.”

## CHAPTER 19

At first glance the interior of Freddy's home was as cabin-like as Jonah's. Nearly everything was fashioned out of peeled spruce – the walls, the bed, the table and chairs. There was a commercially tanned bear rug on the floor, and a 45-gallon steel drum made up to look like a stove. A pair of snowshoes was bolted to the wall. The lights were rigged up to resemble lanterns. The bathroom masqueraded as an outhouse.

Beyond the door all pretense ended and a carpeted corridor took over. Freddy lived at the Adventurer Motel, occupying one of the theme rooms whose walls were cloaked in wood, or canvas, or surrogate snow or earth, portraying cabin, tent, igloo, and bear den. Tourists found them irresistible, especially Japanese, whom Freddy often met in the hallways, dressed in buckskins and feathered headdresses, or in the game room where he and

Father Brown fleeced the daylights out of them at three-card lowball.

Now he pulled back a cloth curtain and inspected a closetful of black jeans and identical grubby jackets. Hidden among them was a tux he'd last worn when he and Edna were married. He pulled it out and examined it. There was a hole in one of the elbows and a grease spot on one of the satin lapels. He'd found it at the dump.

Putting it on, he tucked the trouser cuffs into a pair of fancy mukluks and examined himself in a mirror. He liked what he saw. His face in particular, with its bent nose and scraggly hairs on upper lip and chin, went well with formal dinner wear.

"Time to go," he announced.

From somewhere beyond the room came a brief fluttering sound followed by a hoarse grunt. He unlatched a rough wooden door and swung it open, revealing a tiny balcony that had been turned into an aerie. Sticks were woven through the steel railing and scattered across the floor. He'd made these alterations himself so that his winged guests might be more comfortable. One of them was there now, newly arrived from the Barrens, perched on the lip of this oversized nest. Its plumage was as glossy as Freddy's tux, its eyes like polished coal.

Freddy leaned against the rough balustrade, taking in the view. The ground was still covered with snow, but there was a mildness in the air. The cold dark days of January and February were long past. The light was returning.

"Feels like spring," he told the raven.

"Kronk," came the reply.

Freddy slipped an arm around the bird, holding it securely against his

chest. With his free hand he untied a pouch strapped to one of the bird's legs. He slipped it into his pocket.

"Thanks," he said. Sometimes the birds were not so cooperative.

The raven regained its balance on the railing and gave Freddy a withering look. Then it spread its wings and leaned forward, ejecting from its mouth a stream of guttural croaks and clicks and chortlings.

"Same to you," said Freddy and went inside, closing the door behind him. "Okay, Tyrone, let's go."

With a rustling sound, Tyrone wriggled out from under the bed. Freddy led him to the bathroom and worked the handle of a small iron pump, dispensing water into a basin. He scrubbed the boy's face and hands, slicked down his hair, and upholstered him in a wrinkled shirt, Mickey Mouse tie, and pleated trousers.

They took a taxi to a waterfront joint called Wharf Rats, a long weathered building with a dim interior, smelling of oakum and tar. It was the most expensive restaurant in town, providing nautical dining even in winter thanks to a combination of electrical elements and underwater turbines that circulated the water to keep it from freezing. A barefooted man in deckpants welcomed them with a bow and led the way along a boardwalk of aged planks. Tied up on each side was an assortment of vessels – scows, dories, yawls – each one sporting a table. Water lapped softly against their sides.

The waiter halted before a rope barrier with a Reserved sign on it. Drawing it aside, he swept his hand toward a pinnace, which they boarded by means of a gangplank. He seated them at a table set for three, lit the candle in the center, and snapped open a wine list.

"That'll do," Freddy said, pointing out the most expensive selection.

“Very good, sir.” The waiter bowed deeply and departed. He returned with a dusty bottle that he presented across a raised forearm. At Freddy’s nod, he gripped the bottle between his knees, inserted a corkscrew, and began hopping about. The cork, dry and recalcitrant, resisted his efforts. When it finally yielded, he splashed a bit of wine into Freddy’s glass. Freddy raised it to his mouth, sniffed delicately, sipped and gargled. The expression on his face altered. His mouth puckered. He turned away from the table and spat over the side of the boat.

“Anything wrong, sir?” inquired the waiter.

The pinnace swayed as Edna stepped onto the gangplank. She was wearing a cocktail dress made from seal intestines. Her hair fell down her back like a bolt of black silk. “Actually he hates wine,” she said, “I don’t know why he orders it.”

Freddy held the bottle up to the light. “You know, sometimes a mouse gets inside.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“It happens with beer. Why not wine?”

“The wine is perfectly all right,” Edna told the waiter. “You can leave it.” For herself she ordered a bottle of 10,000-year-old meltwater from a glacier on Baffin Island, and for Tyrone a cream soda. She glanced around. “Where is he, by the way?”

Freddy groaned. “He was here just a minute ago.”

They found him hiding under the table, engrossed in a game of *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*. Tenderly Edna drew him out by the arm and smothered him with kisses.

The waiter returned with their drinks and distributed menus. “If you’re

interested in an appetizer, I recommend the moosenose canapés.”

Freddy opened his menu and skimmed through it quickly, but he already knew what he was going to have. Instead he lifted his eyes and stared across the table at his wife, thinking back to the first time they'd met. It wasn't her beauty that had attracted him. In fact, he was oblivious to it. In the early days of their relationship she'd asked him what he liked most about her. His reply: “Your way with locks.” It wasn't her hair he meant. He thought she was a thief, a cat burglar.

He was nearly right.

The first time he saw her break into a house, he thought the door had been left unlocked. Some people still did that in the North. But in fact she'd goosed the lock with a bobby pin. When he found out she wasn't actually stealing anything, his disappointment was brief. To enter homes and take nothing, to leave no trace of one's presence, was a far better prank than any crass break-and-enter. He was besotted.

Marriage ensued, happy enough at first, and reaching a joyful crescendo with the birth of Tyrone. After that, things began to alter. It was as though the baby was a catalyst, an agent of change. She became an artist. She developed a taste for raw meat and an interest in politics. She came to dislike their motel room and discovered a repugnance for trees. She wanted to go home...



Her first memories were of a hospital in Montreal. Her mother was there too, but which of them was sick, she couldn't remember. Sometimes it was

her mother wearing a hospital gown, sometimes herself. The food was awful – no seal or muktuk or caribou – and Edna whined endlessly, wanting to go home.

Her mother, whose name was Tooley, grew steadily thinner and more haggard, and at times seemed oblivious to their situation. Edna had to yank hard to get her attention. One day Tooley gathered her up. There was sorrow in her eyes. “Okay, Edna,” she said, “time to go.”

They walked out of the hospital, just like that. Edna was happy to be outside, even if the air was filled with bad smells. The sidewalks reminded her of bald ocean-swept rocks. She held onto her mother’s hand and they walked down the street in their hospital gowns. When darkness fell they took refuge in a park. They set a bench on fire and cooked a pigeon, and spent the night in an unlocked car.

They walked all the next day, and the next, with Edna constantly asking when they would get home. “Soon,” her mother replied.

At some point the question faded away. Their nomadic existence became a diverting mixture of the new and the familiar, with her mother adapting her survival skills to a southern environment. They caught goldfish from ornamental fountains and dragged ponds with mesh stripped from old hockey nets. They ate roadkill, and slept in parks and golf courses, and one night found their way into a zoo, where they discovered a caribou in a compound. It came right up to them.

“Thank god you’ve come,” it said.

Tooley killed it with a single slash across the throat, and they gorged themselves on its flesh.

By the time they reached Toronto, Edna had learned how to read and

write from billboards and neon signs. Puberty arrived during the long hike through northern Ontario. By Winnipeg she was a moody teen, filled with impatience.

“This way,” she commanded as her mother hesitated on Portage Avenue, uncertain of the direction to take. They continued west across the prairies, and any town with a library was sure to lose a few titles to Edna. Sea tales enthralled her, particularly those of Melville and Conrad. In Edmonton she discarded her virginity on a city bus.

By then Edna was shouldering most of the duties, and putting her thumb to use because of Tooley’s growing frailness. She brought many a vehicle to a screeching halt, only to have it speed away when her mother hobbled out of the bush. Still Edna persevered. She knew no other way of life. Their journeying had become a reflex, its purpose forgotten by her until they arrived at the 60th parallel.

“We’re home,” Tooley said as they gazed upon the sign at the border. She recognized the stylized polar bear, but seemed confused by the trees. She gave Edna a fierce hug, hanging on so long that her daughter had to pry herself free.

“What are you talking about?”

But Tooley fell silent, and not long after disappeared. “I think I’ll go for a walk,” were the last words she spoke.

Edna searched for several weeks, by turns sad, angry, puzzled. Clearly her mother had no intention of being found. And what had she meant, home? Without her, Edna felt homeless for the first time in her life.

Continuing on to Yellowknife, she settled in at the dump and eked out a fragile living by recycling trash, mostly cracked coffee mugs, old mustard

jars, and pieces of cowling from wrecked Skidoos. She painted “Souvenir of the Yellowknife Dump” on each and peddled them from a roadside blanket. Yet the rudderless feeling remained. She felt adrift in a foreign land, and no one but the Professor seemed to notice. One evening he invited her back to his tent.

“I’d like to get to know you better,” he explained.

His tent was not crammed with books, boxes, and file cabinets, as she’d expected. It was compact and orderly, with a few sticks of furniture and an electric light powered by a portable generator.

“Please, make yourself comfortable,” he said, patting his bed invitingly. He served coffee with a dash of liqueur and did most of the talking, trying to set her at ease, rambling on about his computer and satellite connection to the Internet, where he stored his data and conducted day trades on the TSE. Finally he took her empty cup and suggested she lie back and close her eyes. She did as he asked, but it wasn’t sex he was after. He filled his pipe and pulled his chair closer.

“Now, tell me about your childhood.”

Seeing no harm in it she recounted the broad details, working her way back in time until she was once more at Jewish General Hospital in Montreal.

He indicated her hand with the truncated fingers. “Was that why you were there?”

According to Tooley, Edna’s fingertips had been sheared off by an outboard motor. Of the incident itself Edna had no recollection. All she could remember was an image of her hand swathed in bandages. Had it been that way at the hospital? She didn’t know.

Nodding, the Perfesser closed his notepad and knocked the dottle from his pipe. An hour and a half had passed. “Shall we continue tomorrow? I’m sure we can get to the root of your problem. Psychiatry is a hobby of mine.”

But she could not shake the feeling that he was using her in some in fashion, so instead of going back she embarked on a program of her own, a little therapeutic break-and-enter. Was this her home? Or this? She searched each place for clues, for an insight into her past, for anything that might tell her where she fitted in.

Nothing felt familiar, until she noticed the soapstone carvings that sat in positions of honor like household gods. There were shamans and caribou and muskox, but the ones that attracted her were those that depicted marine life, the dancing seals and jousting narwhals. On impulse she touched one to her cheek. It was as cool and dark as the sea. An image formed in her mind, a picture of the rough hands that had shaped the carving.

From that point on her life had purpose. She set out methodically to investigate every dwelling in Yellowknife, to collect what impressions she could from the vast storehouse of carvings in people’s homes. Each one surrendered an image or sensation – a whiff of the sea, a taste of raw seal liver, the cry of a pomarine jaeger. When she pressed a walrus to her forehead, she saw the beast rise out of the water rolling its bloodshot eyes. She saw it lunge at a boat with its tusks, and recoil when a harpoon penetrated its leathery side. She smelled a pot of stew bubbling on a green primus stove, chunks of coarse meat mixed in with sections of intestine that looked like oversized macaroni.

It was while she was assembling these fragmented sensations that she met

Freddy, and confused roots with marital ties. She was still operating under a vague belief that she was home. Wasn't that what her mother had told her?

When Tyrone was born, she placed him instinctively in an amauti, and the soft weight of his body unlocked the memory of what it had felt like, being carried around on her own mother's back. She began to remember snippets of camp life on southern Baffin Island, and recalled the faces of other children who might have been brothers and sisters. She flew to Iqaluit on a voyage of discovery and found it difficult to return. She got caught up in the excitement of Nunavut. Her mother, she realized, had brought her home only in the most artificial, the most colonial sense of the word. She stopped shaving her armpits and began to carve. Her work appeared in local galleries, and became increasingly minimalist as her popularity grew, finally evolving into pure concept. She exhibited rocks untouched by chisel or drill, and characterized by lengthy titles. Her best known piece was "Descendants of Captain Ahab Lured North by a White Submarine." Between shows she always returned to Yellowknife and made a ritual of visiting the dump to smash something.

"We have different destinies," she told Freddy when she moved out in the fall. She celebrated by having an affair and paying a visit to a lawyer. The divorce was amicable: Freddy agreed to support payments, she to shared custody of Tyrone. The only unusual aspect was her insistence on the date: she wanted the divorce to become effective on the same day that Nunavut came into being: April 1st, 1999.

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“Put your game away,” she told Tyrone when the food arrived – ptarmigan fingers for him, shavings of raw frozen char for her. On Freddy’s plate was a large furry mound – baked siksik. It was stuffed with wild rice and cranberries, and released a delicious jet of steam when he cut into it.

The waiter hovered around the table with a tray of sour cream, chives and minced caribou hair. “Enjoy,” he commanded, and was about to retire when he noticed that Freddy’s wine glass was still empty. As he lifted the wine bottle and tilted it, a soggy mass rose to the surface inside.

“Look at that,” said Freddy happily, “a mouse.”

The bottle slipped from the waiter’s startled grasp, bounced off the gunnel and ended up in the drink. Overflowing with apologies, he tried to get Freddy to accept a replacement, but failed. To make amends he rounded up several of his mates and sang “Happy Divorce” in rousing barbershop style, then presented them with a cake at the end of the meal, the same sentiments having been repeated in icing. The bill was delivered with much bowing and scraping.

Freddy reached into his pocket and looked surprised. “Oops,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” asked Edna.

“I left my wallet at home.”

She gave him a warning look. “Just pay the bill, Freddy.”

“Okay, okay.” He went through all his pockets and dumped on the table a handful of stones, coins, bottlecaps, and colored glass. The waiter poked among them doubtfully and shook his head. Freddy checked his pockets again and this time discovered the pouch he’d taken from the raven. Inside was a folded piece of paper and inside that a tiny octahedral pebble that magnified the candle’s yellow flame. The waiter wedged a loupe into his

eye and bent low.

“A pleasure serving you,” he announced, passing a hand over the paper and making it disappear.

Outside Edna laughed. “Did you put that mouse in the bottle?” she asked Freddy.

“Who, me?”

They shook hands, and Freddy gave Tyrone a hug. “See you in the summer,” he said.

## CHAPTER 20

A picture of Neptune riding off on Wool's snowmobile found its way onto the front page of the *Yellowknife Blade*. The dog was leaning over the handlebars, its mouth hanging open in a sappy grin. The cutline read, "Doggone it, where's the clutch?"

Good for a cheap laugh, but what it failed to mention was that his snowmobile was gone. By the time Wool had collected his wits, dog and machine had vanished, their trail lost among a thousand others on the lake. He reported the theft to the NWMP, but the officer he spoke to made little attempt to conceal his amusement. The worst was when he paid a visit to his insurance company. There he learned that theft by definition required human agency. Theft by a dog was considered an act of god.

"Is that a joke?" Wool wanted to know.

“Not at all. Now if this dog has damaged your snowmobile, that’s another matter. All I have to do is verify the damage, get a couple of estimates, and we’re away.”

“How can I verify the damage?” snarled Wool. “The machine is gone.” He stared at the insurance agent as though memorizing his features, then stamped out. The snowmobile was the least of his problems; it would turn up eventually. Far worse was the lost opportunity of promoting the lodge. He’d counted heavily on attracting enough media attention to get Starvation Cove Lodge into the public consciousness. A newspaper story, interviews with CBC North, phone calls from potential investors...

Instead, nothing. It wasn’t a fatal blow, he kept telling himself, just a setback. But his credit was exhausted and without money there would be no going forward. To make matters worse, an envelope arrived from the government returning every single licence and permit application he’d labored over. The proposed lodge no longer fell under the jurisdiction of the North-West Territory. He was advised to contact the new government of Nunavut located in Iqaluit some 3000 kilometers to the east.

Nunavut? He tore the letter to shreds and threw himself into therapeutic activity, assembling and packaging lures. For a week he did nothing else. He put in 15-hour days, listening to “Financial Nirvana” as he worked, until the entire tape was etched into his brain. By the time he was finished the ends of his fingers were raw from paper cuts, staple punctures, and soldering gun burns. He taped them up and called Toronto, but Hatband was too busy to talk. He was caught up in the development of something that would revolutionize angling. He promised to call back.

Twice more Wool phoned before they actually had a conversation, and all

Hatband wanted to talk about was the new system he was developing. “I’m coming at this from an entirely different direction,” he said. “Anglers have been focused on the wrong end of the line. Tell me, have you ever been out fishing with a bunch of guys and you’re all using the same lure, but only one of you catches any fish?”

“Sure,” said Wool.

“So how can you explain that? Luck? Chance? I don’t think so. When we cast our lines into the water, what we’re really trying to do is communicate. It’s like talking on the phone. Whether or not the fish answers our call depends on all sorts of things, not just the hook. Anglers telegraph down that line all their worries, fears, insecurities. Fish can pick those things up. They’ve got more senses than we do. And you know how well water transmits sound – they can hear every word we say.”

“Speaking about hooks –”

“So what I’m trying to tell you is that I don’t see a big future in hooks. Hooks are old technology. That’s why I’m setting up a series of lectures all across the country. *Get Reel*, I’m calling it. ‘Reel’ with two e’s. Catchy, eh? I’ll be in Edmonton the first week of July. Can I sign you up?”

Wool looked at the receiver. His vision wavered and his chest grew tight. He felt as though he were underwater.

“Wool, you still there?”

“I have your order ready to ship.”

“What order? I never placed an order.”

He didn’t remember hanging up. What he remembered was sitting in the living-room, surrounded by cartons of neatly packaged lures. His body was a distant presence, as though it had been rented out to someone else. He

could feel the planet turning beneath his feet. Outside the sky grew dark as though from disuse, and a new set of shadows walked across the land. For a while the windows of other houses flickered with electronic fire, the pale flame of television, then fell quiet.

A movement in the street gave his mind a nudge. Deep within him, buried somewhere in the sack of ash he'd become, something stirred, an emotion of some sort, an ember.

A dog trotted into view, a collie with a silky coat and elongated head. Wool leaned forward a centimeter. His face sharpened, his mind cleared. In the dog's carriage he detected a pampered existence, a creature showered with undeserved affection, brushed and petted and embraced, crooned at in baby talk and dining only on the leanest cuts of meat. An aristocrat of the worst sort, brainless, effete, contributing nothing to society.

He got up reaching for the holster on his hip. Framed by the window, he aimed the remote at the dog, clicking furiously.

The dog gave him a moronic look and continued on its way.

Wool hurled the device, cracking the window, and strode out of the room. His gun cabinet was in his office, dutifully locked, obeying a law he suspected few others did. Opening it, he examined the various firearms as though seeing them for the first time, noting the different actions and calibers. Yes, the Ruger was best, though the scope presented a difficulty. Well, no matter, here at least was one problem he could solve.

He went off in search of a tool and returned with a hammer, seduced by its comfortable foam grip and empowered by the sweet weight it made in his hand. He swung it again and again, beating the scope into submission, turning it into a broken rod of metal and enjoying the sting of glass

fragments when they struck his face. Finally he set the hammer aside and completed the task by wrenching off the scope's twisted remains.

"Better," he said out loud and laughed.

He dropped several boxes of ammo into his pocket, little plastic containers with sliding lids, the shells lined up like tiny lead soldiers waiting to do their duty. Words stuttered through his mind as he tried to recall the rallying cry of the French Revolution.

Liberty, quality, eternity!

He went out the back door filled with purpose. Behind the house was an undeveloped area, a tangle of moonlight and shadow threaded with skidoo trails. Striding along with the Ruger in hand, absorbed by the night yet bathed in lunar armor, he felt empty and complete. He felt invincible.

Suddenly on the path ahead of him a four-legged beast appeared, a powerful-looking creature with a dense coat and an enormous ruff on its shoulders. They came to a stop at the same instant, eying each other cautiously. No inbred pooch this, Wool realized. No cringing cur or spoon-fed pet, but a true lord of the forest, a long-legged wolf, earning its keep with fang and claw.

"Good hunting, brother," said Wool, raising the rifle in salute. It gleamed in mystic fashion, silver light plating the barrel's stainless steel finish, the stock a shadowy black polymer. And the wolf, calculating with fine precision Wool's demeanor, intent, and capability, trotted past.

Wool continued on until he came to a shelf of moon-splashed rock and began climbing. When he reached the top and looked down at the streets below, he contained an impulse to throw back his head and howl. Instead, he loaded the rifle's magazine, thumbing in the tiny rimfire cartridges one at

a time. Then he lowered the rifle and stood like a statue, waiting, while stray thoughts bombarded his head like cosmic rays, disconnected images and wild theories. He thought about his lost snowmobile, and the gaily colored lures he'd assembled, and the last of Franklin's men marching to their death, gaunt as scarecrows, teeth falling out, their bones an historical footnote.

Motion in the street below.

He shouldered the Ruger and sighted along the barrel. There was no problem picking out the front sight, a single gold bead. His finger tightened round the trigger, his lips curled back from his teeth. There was a brief twinge of disappointment when he realized it wasn't the collie after all, or one of the dachshund brothers, or any other sycophantic canine satellite, but a painfully thin mongrel trailing a length of broken rope, its head strangely illuminated in the lunatic light, as though radioactive.

Well, no matter.

When the range was perfect, a spark jumped inside his head and the auto-loading Ruger rained droplets of lead upon the street, the curb, the sidewalk, and the unsuspecting dog.

PART 3

*New Territory*



Houseboat

## CHAPTER 21

One night after the bay froze over, Jonah dreamed he caught a fish. He remembered it the next day when he went down to the lake for a bucket of water. He could hear the distant cries of skaters and the sharp rap of hockey sticks as he stooped over the hole in the ice. Suddenly the dream returned to him in a rush, and he remembered exactly what he'd caught.

A talking fish.

He'd taken it home and fed it and given it a place to sleep, but had no recollection of what it said. He dredged his memory for details, then shrugged and carried the bucket back to the cabin. He knew what had to be done.

There was a shed behind the cabin with a piece of caribou antler for a door handle and a gnawed workbench overlooked by three small windows.

The walls were festooned with neat rows of tools, rusty steel traps, Dene-style drums made from spruce and caribou skin, a rack of upside-down rifles whose stocks were held together by wire and tape, and a pair of oversized snowshoes for use in the spring when the snow turned to mush.

In one corner a washtub contained a heap of gray netting. He picked it up and carried it back to the cabin, sitting down in front of the stove and draping the diamond-patterned mesh over his knees like a blanket. The last time he'd used it, a loon had become entangled in it and drowned, leaving a huge tear. He sewed it up with a fisherman's needle, replaced a section of frayed sideline, and installed several new floats and sinkers. Always meticulous, today he took special care in his work. Since his catch would be no ordinary one, he did not want to offend it with sloppy repairs.

By the time he was finished, the winter-shortened day had already grown dull. Undeterred, he loaded up his sled. The snowmobile started with a tired cough and carried him down to the lake, where habit took him south along the shore, toward a fishing ground that he used in early winter. It wasn't far, and with the ice relatively thin and free of snow, setting the net would be a simple matter.

As for what he'd find when he lifted it, anything was possible, even a fish that could speak. The lake was huge and harbored many secrets. There were stories about fish that walked on their fins, and fish with teeth like a fox, and fish that were impossibly large. Once, on an early summer day when the lake was in a trance-like state, a school of minnows had skipped past his boat like a handful of thrown dimes. Intrigued, he'd watched their panicky flight until another fish appeared in pursuit, its back breaching the surface like overturned canoe. In remoter sections of the lake there were

odder creatures, including a beast in the East Arm so cloaked in superstition that sensible people avoided it even in conversation.

Thinking on these things, he looked out across the frozen bay and noticed a solitary figure lurching over the ice. The skater was either a drunk or a novice, for his progress was as erratic as an insect's. His arms whirred like wings. He stumbled and fell, bounced back up, swerved crazily and went down again.

Jonah angled the snowmobile in his direction, but resisted the impulse to speed up. The ice afforded so little traction he risked spinning out of control and jackknifing the sled. He crept forward, following the watery pool of light cast by his headlamp and searching for the skater who was now lost in the gloom, until one of his skis struck a pane of ice and sent it skittering away. Jonah released his grip on the throttle, and the snowmobile, lacking brakes, coasted to a halt beside a jagged hole. Floating among the broken chunks of ice was an orange notebook.

Jonah eased himself off the snowmobile, scooped up his net from the sled, and pitched it into the hole. He grabbed a pair of trailing ropes and worked them hard in his big fists to keep the net from fouling on the ice. When it sank out of sight, he closed his eyes and began to sing, imagining the net slowly unfolding in the dark water beneath his feet. He hauled and released, hauled and released, spreading the net like a sail as he circled the hole, not getting too close to the edge, plumbing the depths until he felt an increased resistance, an added drag, and then he put the ropes to his shoulder and heaved.

The net came up slow and heavy, finally appearing at the edge of the break, a tangled mass enclosing the dark shape of a man. It snagged on the

ice with a tearing sound, and for a moment Jonah thought he was going to lose his catch. Then it came free with a jerk and the netted man flopped on the ice. Jonah pulled him away from the hole and loaded him into the sled, net and all.

The cabin was not far, but by the time they reached it, the net and the man's outer clothing were a frozen shell, and Jonah had to use a filleting knife to free him. The skates were harder, but finally they too came off and he got the naked man stuffed into a sleeping bag. The ends of the man's fingers were raw and there was a nasty gash on his forehead. Jonah bandaged these up, and pounded a drum to alleviate the pain of thawing limbs.

Days passed. The man remained in bed, scarcely stirring. Sometimes his eyes were open, sometimes closed. Food placed in his mouth sat there unnoticed, and his bowels remained as inactive as his mind. Despite this, Jonah made no effort to seek help or notify the authorities. Behind that blank facade something purposeful was going on. The man had come to him for a reason, the way an insect burrows into the ground to achieve metamorphosis.

Jonah tended him patiently, applying unguent to his swollen hands and feet, and squeezing sugared tea into his mouth from a cloth. Days became weeks, and winter made itself more comfortable, thickening the ice and piling up the snow, and Jonah went about his daily tasks with the placid stoicism of someone for whom time was meaningless. He sharpened his axe with a file, skinned out a mink or two, shot some ptarmigan, and set hooks through the ice for trout.

One day he went out for a load of firewood and came back to find the bed

empty, the sleeping bag cast aside like a spent cocoon. Nothing was missing, and the only clue was a half-thawed trout resting on the counter like a farewell gift. Jonah checked outside, but the freshly fallen snow offered no clues. The stranger had gone naked to his destiny, departing as mysteriously as he'd arrived.

Jonah shrugged. Life in the North was full of sudden arrivals and abrupt departures. Still, he could not help feeling a twinge of disappointment, for the visitor had not spoken a single word during his entire stay, and Jonah had very much wanted to hear him speak.



Everything happened so fast there was no time to react – the ice bursting beneath his feet, the shocking cold of the water, the frantic flailing of limbs. His parka was a soggy mass and the skates were heavy as anvils, hampering his movements and dragging him down. With a desperate lunge he reached the edge of the break, but the slick ice gave him no purchase. He threw off his mitts and tried to claw his way out, but with each assault he rose a little less high out of the water, and finally all he could do was hang there and pant. Panic drained out of him and exhaustion took over. His hands lost their feeling, his mind congealed.

Slowly he slipped below the surface, revolving as he sank with arms flung out like wings. He could hear the sound of air streaming out of his mouth, and the clink and rattle of loose ice above. The light dimmed, and a pleasant feeling seeped through him as he waited for the review of his life to begin. He had a theory that just before death the mind jettisoned its

memories in much the same way that the body, in the final stages of hypothermia, directed blood away from less vital areas of the body. If such were the case, what insights might be revealed to a mind swept clear of bias? What mysteries solved, what superstitions demolished? He tried to pluck the fieldbook from his pocket to jot down a few notes, and wondered why he'd paid so little attention to the watery kingdom on his doorstep.

Ghostly shapes flitted past and rows of shining eyes materialized in the semi-darkness. It was a troop of whitefish, gallant in their silvery chainmail, apparently as interested in his own demise as he was. Intelligent chaps, by the look of them. No wonder fish were considered brain food. He gave them a friendly wave inviting them closer, but a look of consternation appeared on their faces. They gulped and backed away, then departed so quickly the backwash spun him around. He felt himself buoyed up as though lifted by a pair of arms, propelled toward a net that hung in the water like a rippling aurora, and bundled inside. "Interesting," he thought as he slowly began to rise. He fetched up against a ceiling of ice, scraped along it for a short distance, emerged in a pool of open water, and was hauled out and flung gasping and sputtering into a wooden box. He flopped about until his clothing stiffened into a suit of ice. A motor started, the box began to move, and a strange feeling of comfort settled over him. Only the outer layer of his clothing froze; the layer next to his skin, though still soaked, was growing warm. Like a wetsuit, he thought. Really, it wasn't so bad.

It stayed that way until they arrived at the cabin, then a dull pain entered his limbs and quickly escalated into agony. His hands and feet felt as if they were being crushed. He twisted and writhed in the sleeping bag until a face appeared above him, a face he'd never seen before, the head like an old

stump, the skin rough as bark. Rooty-looking hands sponged away the frozen blood from a cut on his temple. An insistent rhythm worked its way into his consciousness and the pain went away.

The next day his eyes opened, but his mind was still submerged, numb with cold, suspended in the watery void. For weeks he drifted aimlessly and imagined himself undergoing a strange transformation – a shifting of internal organs perhaps, or a restructuring of his psyche. When the changes were complete, he spiralled upward and found himself lying in bed as though floating on a pool of water, his face just breaking the surface. He could hear the purring of the stove, and smell the aroma of fried caribou, and see the smoke-darkened roofbeams.

Then the old man went out and the cabin fell silent. He could hear snow falling on the roof, and trees shifting their branches, and dogs curling up beside their posts. Presently footsteps creaked up the path. The door opened and there was an unfamiliar tread on the floor. A hand shook his shoulder and he looked up into a woman's face.



The end of January was the gloomiest time of year, with Christmas a distant memory, the temperature resolute at minus 40, and daylight limited to a few gray hours on either side of noon. Even machines found it difficult. Spark plug wires snapped like twigs, rubber tires froze into lopsided lumps, oil turned into tar. It was also the time when Iggi was at his most unreliable, year after year phoning in drunk from increasingly distant locations, Hay River, Edmonton, Seattle.

When that happened she'd scour the streets, even visit all the bars, hoping to hire someone for a day or two. If she had to, she could lift the nets herself, but it was customary not to travel alone, an extra risk that most people declined. This time, though, she was out of luck. A production company had blown into town to make a TV movie. It was hiring extras by the dozen.

"Free coffee, sandwiches, and donuts!" exclaimed one of her regulars. "And all we do is sit around."

So she readied the Bombardier and set off by herself, stopping briefly on the edge of town to drop off a fish for Jonah. At first she thought the cabin was empty, then she noticed a stranger stretched out in one of the beds. She shook him awake.

"Where's Jonah?"

He sat up and stared at her with a blank look on his face.

"Well?" she asked suspiciously. Then she remembered that the ancient SnoRoller and box sled were not in their usual places outside. No doubt Jonah had gone to check traps or cut firewood. "I'm Suzi. Who are you?"

There was no response – obviously another burnt-out case befriended by Jonah, who had a habit of taking in strays, a practice she disapproved of and one of the reasons she wanted him to move into town, where there was more suitable housing and she could keep an eye on him. Helping strangers was a risky business, and not just on a personal level. Entire cultures had been bankrupted. The ravishing was still continuing in the North, and she for one could stand idle no longer. Had, in fact, mounted an active resistance in the summer, though the morality of it had troubled her at first, and sent her to the confessional.

“Say, you wanna make a few bucks? I could use a hand out on the lake.”

He opened his mouth and croaked, his voice rusty from disuse.

“Too nice a day to stay cooped up inside. What do you say? You like fish?”

His eyes grew large and his head wobbled. “Fsh...fsh...fsh...” he stuttered.

“Attaboy. Where are your clothes?” She gave the cabin a cursory look. “Never mind, I’ve got extras.”

She was already heading for the door. There was a slop chest in the Bombardier where she kept spare clothing in case she got wet. She rummaged around in it and returned a few minutes later with her arms full. “Here we go,” she said, dumping the clothes on the bed. “Hop into those and we’ll get going.”

When he didn’t move, she unzipped the sleeping bag herself. She wasn’t squeamish, having recruited street people in the past. Once they were sobered up and out on the land, they were generally fine. It was getting them out of town that was the hard part. Nor was she put off by scrawny arms and a sunken chest, or even badly burned legs. She’d seen worse.

She got him dressed and into the Bombardier, and made sure he ate as she drove – coffee from her thermos, and a couple of chocolate bars for energy – but the one thing he won’t do was speak. He remained silent as a sphinx until the first net was lifted, then the words poured out in a torrent. Only he wasn’t talking to her, he was talking to the fish, snatching them from the net and holding each one up to his face and jabbering at it.

Holy mackerel, she thought.

It was almost biblical – a wild-eyed prophet trying to multiply fish, or

maybe convert them. She couldn't make out what he was saying. For all she knew he was speaking in tongues. Between nets he never opened his mouth, and at the end of the day when they retired to a shacktent on shore, he was docile as a child. She gave him a bag of ripple chips to work on while she fried up some moose burgers. When they were ready, he ate three without comment, guzzled a couple of cokes, and went to sleep as though a switch had been flipped in his head.

The next day he refused to return to Yellowknife. "Fish," he said over and over again after they'd checked the last net. "More fish."

The childlike concern on his face was comical. "We're all done," she told him, and trod a little harder on the gas pedal. "Time to go home."

When he realized she wasn't going to stop, he opened the door and leapt out.

"Oh shit," she said, but in the end there was nothing she could do. He would not get back in the Bombardier. He returned to camp on foot and put his hands over his ears when she tried to reason with him. After a couple of hours, she gave up and left. He'd be okay for a day or two, she persuaded herself. There was enough food and wood to last that long, and by then she'd be back with a few friends who could remove him by main force if they had to. But it wasn't a great plan, and the longer she drove the worse it seemed. Could he keep the fire going? What if he burned down the tentframe?

The minute she reached home she began making calls, only to be stymied again. The production company had left town, but now people had money in their pockets. Call me in a few days, most of them said. Others were on vacation or humping pipe or working a shift at Ekati. As usual, she was

going to have to handle things herself.

But first there was fish to unload, supplies to replenish, and maintenance to be done on the Bombardier, mostly checking fluid levels and replacing broken cleats. Nothing onerous, but it all added up. Then Iggi called, still hammered, no idea where he was, wanting money to get home. By the time she was ready to leave, a whole day had passed and she was growing increasingly edgy. To make matters worse, she hit overflow on the way out and was forced to make a wide detour through rough ice.

Arriving at last and finding the camp exactly as she'd left it, and not a smoking ruin, was almost anticlimactic. Then she looked inside. The shacktent was empty, the stove cold. A quick check revealed no fresh tracks leading off into the bush, so she jumped into the Bombardier again and conducted a brief search. Several miles away she found him marching across the ice with his arms full of fish, followed by a tactful fox.

“Fish,” he said happily when she pulled up alongside him. He still refused to get in the Bombardier, but aside from a patch of frost on each cheek, he seemed fine. She paced him back to camp, and purposely refrained from lighting a fire or preparing a meal. She particularly wanted to see how he handled an axe. But again he surprised her, managing tolerably well in all departments, though admittedly there was not much skill needed to open a can of stew.

The next day she followed him on foot while he checked the nets. She watched him chisel away the ice, chipping a hole deeper and deeper and expecting him to drive the blade into his foot and wondering if it might not be a good thing. His energy was astonishing and his capacity to startle her unlimited. Some of the nets he'd obviously checked the day before, since

tied to the mesh were soggy bits of paper with scribbling on them, now half-washed away and illegible. The harvest from these nets was remarkable. Not just lakera and whitefish, but the occasional oddity that had no right being there, like salmon and char.

Two days later she returned to Yellowknife alone, the Bombardier laden with her best catch of the season. Hugo – he'd remembered his name by then – remained at the camp and continued to fish obsessively, seven days a week. He was so productive that all Suzi had time for was shuttling fish and supplies back and forth. It was not an arrangement she would have chosen, but it was a workable one and Hugo was content, though after a couple of weeks he insisted on moving camp.

The new location was not only farther away from town, but so unpromising Suzi despaired it would produce a single fish. She could read the shoreline as well as anyone, and knew what kind of bottom gave the best results. Or so she thought. Hugo appeared to operate under different criteria, as though he had a fish finder in his head. The new site proved more bountiful than the old, producing incredible quantities as well as an unusual salmonid she'd never seen before, a strange-looking thing with an extra fin. She dismissed it as a freak until another curiosity turned up, this time at their next camp, a fish whose scales were not a uniform size. It happened every time they moved camp. They'd haul in at least one sport, and the farther east they went, the weirder the sports became.

It never occurred to her to show them to a biologist. Contact with the government was the last thing she wanted. Instead she borrowed some books from the library and tried to identify the fish herself, but had trouble with the keys. "Boring," Hugo said after taking a look. He'd been changing

too, but in reverse proportion to the strangeness of their catch. He no longer talked to fish or wrote them notes. He spoke in complete sentences, and spent his spare time reading paperbacks he'd unearthed at the camp, humming as he turned the pages.

The weeks flashed by and suddenly the gloom of winter was gone. The days were long and bright, and there was a sweetness in the air. At times the sun became so hot they worked in shirtsleeves. Their faces darkened, and the hard drifts on the lake melted away to nothing, leaving a cracked white plain that stretched to the horizon. On shore the woods rang with birdsong. Frogs thawed out and squirrels chattered from treetops. Even the whine of early mosquitoes had a friendly sound. A reckless optimism infused the air, a feeling of such joy and freedom that it was impossible for Suzi and Hugo to remain unaffected. One day as they released fish from a tangled net, a feverishness overcame them both. They'd started at opposite ends, and when they arrived at the center their hands touched and continued to move, only now it was each other's clothing they were freeing. In moments they were flopping around on the ice as urgently the fish they'd released, grappling with arms and legs and tongues, and rolling naked among their slippery catch until it became apparent that Hugo had no idea what they were trying to accomplish.

Suzi rose up on one elbow and tipped back her cap with the Princecraft logo. It was the only article of clothing she'd not removed. "You've never done this before, have you?"

He seemed a little confused. "I don't know."

She smiled and touched him gently, as though softening a blow.

“Actually that’s not the only problem we’ve got, but don’t worry, I know what to do.”



A few days later a band of water formed along the shore and Suzi decided to haul out the nets for good.

“We’ve still got a few more weeks,” Hugo objected. He was stretched out on a blanket reading a Stephen King novel.

“Yes, but I need to cache some gas in the East Arm before the ice gets too thin.”

“The East Arm?”

She pointed it out on a map. “The deepest part of the lake. The cliffs are spectacular. There’s a few sport fishing lodges, one of them with an airstrip big enough for a 737.”

Till then, Suzi had been vague about her plans for summer, while Hugo maintained a steadfast refusal to return to Yellowknife, even for spring breakup. Of the events leading to his dunking in the bay, he still had no memory.

“So that’s where we’re going in the summer? The East Arm?”

“Yeah, I grew up out there, a little village called Lutselk’e. Last summer I went home for a visit. Things got a little weird.”

A mosquito, still groggy from overwintering in a rocky crevice, blundered past his face. He brushed it away. “What do you mean, weird?”

“While I was there, some anglers pulled in, hollering and shouting. They’d landed a couple of 50-pounders. They weren’t going to eat them, of course. They were going to send them to a taxidermist and have them

mounted. It was such a waste. I imagined those fish in a faraway city, their skins stretched over styrofoam forms and stuck on the wall of a basement study, and I said something that surprised the heck out of me. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever blurted out something you had no intention of saying?"

"No," he said. The mosquito had taken refuge on his wrist, and as he stared at it a succession of unusual words bubbled through his mind – coastal vein, siphonal tuft, imaginal eye. Each was accompanied by a clear image of an anatomical feature as seen through a microscope. It was like viewing the mosquito through someone else's eyes.

"Iggi was the only one who heard me. The fishermen were too wound up to notice."

"Who's Iggi?" he asked, raising his thumb.

"An old boyfriend. We spent the rest of the summer cruising around the East Arm. He's coming along with us this summer. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, why should I?" His thumb descended and the entomological lesson faded away, but not the feeling of dislocation. Other images flashed through his mind, snapshots from a past life. An apartment, a lab in Old Town, a houseboat in the bay.

"Good. We'll pick you up after breakup, unless you've changed your mind about staying here."

"Nope." He flicked the crushed mosquito away. "So what was it you said to the fishermen?"

"I called them a pack of thieves."

## CHAPTER 22

Nora liked it under her desk. Sometimes she spent the whole day there sleeping. She liked the feel of warm earth against her body. There was something comforting about it. Womblike, almost.

When she did emerge, she sat at her desk in a torpor, overwhelmed by fatigue. Dimly she was aware that something strange was going on within her, but why, or what it was, or how to deal with it, she had no idea. Finally the NWMP intervened. Constable Tungsten rang her up one day and asked if she could come down to the detachment. When she arrived, he took one look at her and closed the file on his desk. Her clothing was in disarray and there was dirt in her hair.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

He drove her to the hospital in a ghost car and waited until a doctor had

examined her. She came out looking dazed.

“No wonder I haven’t been myself,” she told the Constable.

“Why’s that?”

“There’s two of me now. Us, I mean. We’d like to go home.” She’d found a mole, all right. It was growing inside her, complete with a tail. Ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny.

He took her home, driving out onto the ice of Yellowknife Bay and pulling up alongside her houseboat. It was dark by then, and hers was the only one without a light in the window.

“You going to be okay?” he asked.

“Of course.”

In the weeks that followed, the fatigue and nausea continued, the seesawing emotions, the strange swellings, the loosening of her pelvic bones. Sometimes she was overwhelmed by the loss of her individuality. She was a biological cog, nothing more than a vessel to bring forth another organism. The whole thing was a cheap stage trick, her uterus a substitute for a magician’s cabinet. A transporter in a science fiction yarn. Nora, this is your kid here, beam me through, will ya?

Other times she was overcome with awe, with the mystery of life, the creation of a new individual through the mixing of a few molecules in her womb. It was nothing short of a miracle. She felt a kinship with all living things, a wisdom and purpose in the universe that surpassed human understanding. Her body was a temple and all conceptions were immaculate. “I am god,” she murmured.

She went on maternity leave and holed up at home, rarely going out and not returning any calls except Constable Tungsten’s, though he never had

anything to report. Finally he was taken off the case.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’ve been reassigned to the Diamond Squad. Another Member will be handling this case. In the meantime, if there’s anything I can do...”

“Well,” she said slowly, “there is something. I have a rather unusual craving.”

There was a brief silence on the line. “I guess that’s normal. What is it?”

“Montmorillonite.”

Another slow pause. “It’s not a drug, is it?”

“No, no, a mineral supplement.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

A few days later he showed up at the houseboat with a small plastic container. He’d had it flown up on the police plane.

“Thank you,” she muttered as she tore off the lid, revealing a thick muddy substance. She scooped some out with her fingers and placed it in her mouth. It was smooth and cool and heavy on her tongue. When she swallowed it, her eyelids fluttered with pleasure.

Earlier that morning, drinking a cup of herbal tea, she’d tasted not just the leaves but the faint contribution that bark and roots had made, and even the surrounding dirt. A strong desire to lick things, to investigate surfaces with her hands and skin, sometimes came over her. When she hefted a chunk of pine into the woodstove, she sensed the drama concentrated in its rings, in the centuries of growth about to be converted to heat for the benefit of herself and her unborn child. Tears formed in her eyes at the connectivity of the world, at its intrinsic mystery and beauty.

“Taste good?” asked Tungsten.

She opened her eyes and saw something in his expression that she'd failed to notice before. "It's an edible clay. Come in, Constable."

"Tom," he said, closing the door. "I always wondered what it was like inside a houseboat."

While she was making coffee, he checked out the battery bank and power inverter, and peppered her with questions about the solar panels, the propane lighting, the composting toilet. When she mentioned that the houseboat had two anchors, an engine block and the blade from a bulldozer, he looked at her with frank admiration. He swallowed down two cups of coffee and listened raptly as she described how one of the houseboats had broken loose during a storm and been beaten to pieces on shore.

"Must have happened before I was posted here," he said wistfully.

The next day he was back, this time with dessert. "Mud pie," he grinned. Soon he was a regular visitor, chopping wood, hauling water, and scarfing back the meals she prepared in return. During Caribou Carnival they went to the dog races where Nora had her first good laugh in months. The race had no sooner started than a skidoo blazed past, scattering the teams.

"Neptune!" she cried in delight.

"Who?"

"The dog on the skidoo."

When they returned to the houseboat, he gave her a backrub and regaled her with some of his droller experiences as a police officer. Once, while stationed in Fort Smith, he'd pulled over a lone speeder who promptly slid into the passenger's seat and claimed that someone else had been driving. In Inuvik he and another Member had responded to a dispute between neighbors, one of whom complained the other had a death ray. They hadn't

been sure who to bring in on that one.

In due time his scent replaced Hugo's on her pillow. As for sex, where Hugo had been diffident, Tungsten knew exactly what he wanted. He went about it in an authoritative manner, making love to her as though interrogating a witness, turning her this way and that and probing her from bold new angles. The Musical Ride he called it, especially when she donned his hat and dress tunic. The latter was the color of engorged blood vessels and the hat looked like a starched foreskin. Member, indeed, she thought as she climaxed. All at once pregnancy without sex seemed unnatural. She was bursting with life, why not joy? Her orgasms became detonations that cleared away the hurt and turmoil of the past year. She felt renewed, revitalized. A different person. Everything was unfolding as it should, till one night as she lay exhausted in Tungsten's embrace, he stunned her with an announcement:

"I've got a new posting. It's with the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit."

She chuckled, not understanding. "That's a mouthful."

"It's staffed by people from different agencies. They investigate organized crime."

"Don't tell me. You're going to be their expert on diamond smuggling."

"Right."

"It doesn't sound much different from what you're doing now." In fact, she was rather pleased he'd still be able to toss people into jail for diamond-related offences.

"It's a promotion. The unit is based in Toronto."

She was getting big by then, wearing baggy clothes and feeling a bit

unsteady on her feet. The houseboat was a mess, cluttered with baby paraphernalia – a crib, diapers she bought whenever they were on sale, tottering piles of books on childbirth and childrearing. She'd ordered a bellymask kit and a birthing pool, and was searching for a doula.

“Do you have to?”

“Be a mistake to turn it down. Career-wise, I mean. What else can I do?”

“Marry me,” she said, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

They looked at each other in horror. Until this moment marriage had never occurred to either of them.

“I can't believe I said that,” blurted Nora.

Already Tungsten was up and sliding into his pants. “I'd better be going.”

“Yes, yes.” Suddenly she couldn't wait for him to leave. It wasn't anger or disappointment she felt, but shame. She nearly pushed him out the door.

A week of guilty silence followed, after which Tungsten returned one evening to pick up a few things he'd left behind. She had them ready in a bag by the door – his hat press, a tin of shoe polish, a Depot coffee mug, a spare clip for his revolver. It was all very civil, except for the baby, who kicked her in the stomach.

“You okay?” Tungsten asked, noticing her grimace.

“Yeah,” she replied, holding her side. “Kid figures he's a gymnast.”

After he left, Nora eased herself onto the couch. She'd been flipping through of a series of sonograms that charted her pregnancy. The baby – a boy she knew by then – was shown in various poses. Yawning, lying on his side, sucking his thumb. At least, that was what the doctor claimed. In fact

the sonograms were little more than muddy blobs. Images of interstellar nebulae would have been clearer. They looked like fetishes from a witch doctor.

Well, why not? Occult changes were happening within her. The baby was tampering with her body chemistry to optimize his chances of survival, ramping up her maternal instincts. Casting a spell over her. When he was born, all he'd have to do was coo or gurgle and she would do his bidding instantly. From now on her life would be secondary to his. There would be a seamless progression from bibs and bedtime stories to swimming lessons, homework assignments, lectures about sex and drugs, and worrisome nights when he came home late. Even after he was grown up and on his own, she would fret about his welfare, reminding him to eat well, dress warmly, and practise safe sex.

Just like her own mother.

A few nights later Tungsten returned unannounced. She opened the door on her way out to fetch some water and there he was, waiting silently in uniform, a dusting of snow on his muskrat hat. He hadn't knocked. There was no telling how long he'd been standing there. Wordlessly he reached into his raspy blue parka and handed her an official-looking document. It began with the words, "On Behalf of Her Majesty the Queen."

"What is this, a warrant?" she joked.

He seemed incapable of speech. In fact, he looked as if he wanted to run away. All he could do was nod earnestly at the document.

She skimmed it, reading aloud. "The Information of Constable Tom Tungsten...reasonable and probable grounds...on or about the date of...various acts of passion...publicly declares his love..."

She looked up at him blankly.

He reached into his parka a second time and gave her a little box like the one Hugo had once offered her. This one contained a real diamond. “Girl’s best friend,” he croaked.

An unexpected feeling of joy flashed through her. “Why fight chemistry?” she said, and the baby did a backflip.

Tungsten didn’t catch her meaning exactly, but that was all right. Once, she would never have considered a mate whose pursuits were not as intellectual as hers. Now she had different criteria to consider. After all, marriage was a pact, a bargain. One had to make concessions. She could be a dutiful wife if it guaranteed her child’s safety, and in that regard what could be better than police protection?



A few days later she called her mother and told her about Tungsten.

“Does he have a gun?” was the first question.

“Mom, he’s a Mounty.”

“What did I tell you about men with guns?”

“Mom –”

“They have deep psychological problems. Why don’t you find a nice young woman and settle down with her? Become a lesbian.”

“You don’t become a lesbian. Either you are one or you aren’t.”

“You could try.”

“Mom –”

“Are you eating well? Taking folic acid supplements?”

“I’m fine, the baby’s fine, everything’s fine.”

“I’m coming up.”

“You can visit after we’ve moved.”

“You’re moving too? Well, isn’t it wonderful to get so much news at once? Tell me, will I need a dogteam to get there?”

“We’re going to Toronto.”

Her mother sniffed. “The real Toronto? Not Toronto Creek, or Fort Toronto, or Toronto-on-the-Tundra?”

“The Jays and the Leafs, Mom.”

“What about your work?”

“I’ve sent in my resignation.”

“I mean, after the baby.”

“Just get out the ironing board and call me Mrs. Tungsten.”

There was a long silence on the line. “You’re trying to provoke me, aren’t you? Listen, Nora, marry a man with a rocket launcher, live at the North Pole, I don’t care, just don’t be a stay-at-home drudge.”

“I didn’t even know I was pregnant. Some biologist.”

“It happens.”

“Wildlife biology is a dead end. It’s too political.”

“Honey, everything’s political.”

“At least my kid won’t grow up without a father.”

“That’s what I said when I got married.”

The conversation petered out after that, leaving Nora with the usual residue of dissatisfaction. She hated to admit that her mother might be right about something. Sure, the marriage could turn out bad, but it was Tungsten who’d rescued her from the awful state she’d been in. He was willing to

play father to another man's child.

Besides, she was ready to leave Yellowknife. She'd been aware for some time that the Arctic was growing steadily more polluted, but it was a bloodless kind of information, like knowing the statistics about breast cancer. Pregnancy had sensitized her to the issue. She'd begun wearing a mask due to the arsenic dust in the air, and stopped eating fish because of elevated levels of mercury in certain lakes, but the only way to avoid the organochlorides that were collecting in the North was to leave. Furans, dioxins, and hexachlorocyclohexane were creeping in from places as far away as India and Siberia. Nor was she willing to expose any child of hers to the worsening moral climate associated with the production of diamonds. According to Tungsten, the NWMP identified bikers and the Russian Mafia as the most likely groups to usher Yellowknife into a new era of crime.

One day a voice on the phone triggered a toxic discharge of another kind, memories she'd stored in her skull the same way Giant had ditched its poisons, hoping for time to bring a safer method of disposal. It was Pfang, of all people, inviting her to a farewell gathering in her honor at the Carboniferous Building. Her first inclination was to snub the invitation and stem the vitriol she felt. Her second was to release it on Brassclick's glabrous head in front of the entire Bureau.

"What should I do?" she asked Tungsten.

"I dunno. I'll go along if you want, have a few words with the guy myself."

She smiled. "What would you say?"

"I hope it's broken."

She didn't understand at first. When she did, she searched his face for a

sign of humor. His jaw looked as if it had been stamped out of steel.

“No thanks,” she said, though the offer touched her. A smack on the nose wouldn’t solve anything. Brassclick needed to be pummelled by words, not fists.

She went outside to think, englobed in a jacket and sitting in a weathered deck chair. It was June and the landscape was brimming with life. The snow and ice had vanished, and the conifers on shore were a rich saturated green. A muskrat swam past, then a pair of lovestruck mallards, their webbed feet revolving like paddlewheels. The baby turned inside her.

“I spent 10 years in Yellowknife,” she said aloud. “I don’t want to slink away like a whipped dog.”

A few days later Tungsten loaded her into a boat using a davit and a bosun’s chair. He dropped her off at the Carboniferous Building and she waddled inside for the last time. The lobby was smaller and darker than she remembered, and smelled of cabbage. Missing letters gave the directory on the wall a toothless look. The memory of her final few months at work came back with a rush, nightmarish, surreal. Had she actually wandered about underground in her nightgown?

The elevator opened its jaws, inviting her in. She’d been thinking of a quick visit to the basement to rescue a few personal items, as well as notes and data and some unfinished reports. Now she abandoned the idea and pressed a numbered button on the control panel. The elevator jerked upward but the button remained unlit, as though taking her to a secret destination. On impulse she picked up the telephone, but the line was dead.

The elevator wheezed to a halt and spit her out on the edge of a vast carpeted plain. The floor was vacant. No people, desks, cubicles. Nothing.

Just a ring of staring windows.

She nodded once, as though confirming a theory, and wandered down a vanished hallway, the imprint of walls and room dividers still visible in the carpet. Without walls, the areas allotted to each office and workstation seemed absurdly small. Staples and paperclips littered the floor, and in the corner that Brassclick had occupied there were drifts of dead flies.

Turning, she noticed a glow of light on the far side of the elevator column. The floor was not deserted after all. A single office still remained, its dimensions marked off by a rectangle of neatly raked sand, its lone occupant slumped across the desk, sleeping. There was a lawn chair beneath a bamboo plant, and a carved wooden altar bearing a ceramic dragon.

“Hey, Pfang,” she said, removing her mask. “Wake up.”

He raised his head off the desk, revealing bloodshot eyes and a creased face. A computer chip dangled from one nostril. “Nora,” he yawned. “You want some cake? I compiled it myself.”

Resting atop a file cabinet was something resembling a crushed hat, coated with frosting that was riddled with crumbs.

Nora eased herself into a chair. “Sure.”

He cut her a slice but it fell apart as he placed it on a paper plate. He looked at it in disgust. “The cake’s buggy.”

She pinched up a crumb and put it in her mouth. “Tastes okay. You probably forgot the eggs. Got a fork?”

He pillaged the top drawer of his desk and handed her one made of plastic with three tines still intact. “I’m a noob when it comes to birthday parties. Never had one until I was ten, and it was pretty cruffy.”

She guessed that was not a good thing. “How so?”

“My parents put grilled snake in the hot dog buns. When the kids found out, most of them bufferchucked and that was the end of the party.”

“Oh no,” cried Nora.

Pfang grinned ruefully. “My parents never really adjusted to Canada.”

Nora swallowed another mouthful. “By the way, am I the only person invited to this party? Where’s Vomer, Ungle, and Neddles?”

“Quit, laid off, and hospitalized.”

“Brassclick?”

“Moved to the Diamondiferous Building.”

“The rest of the Bureau?”

“There’s just me left.”

Nodding, she finished the cake and struggled to her feet. “Thanks, Pfang, I really appreciate this. I’m glad I came.”

“Wait, there’s giftware.” Sitting on the sand beside the desk was a tin box with a perforated lid. He offered it to her.

Months ago she would have suspected his motives. Now she accepted the box without a qualm. “My goodness,” she said, feeling movement within. She lifted the lid and peeked inside. “A beetle colony!”

He grinned shyly. “I guess we share an interest in bugs.”

“Oh Pfang,” she said, giving him a hug.



The last thing she did before leaving Yellowknife was visit the dump. The houseboat was sold and her belongings were already on their way to Toronto, but the marital bonds had yet to be tied. That would take place in

the South. They'd agreed to wait until the baby was born.

The NWMP crewcab came to a stop, sending up a flapping blanket of gulls. There was a fine stink in the air, fish offal ripening under the hot July sun, mixed with the acrid smell of scorched rubber. A man and his son, both in hipwaders, were probing the sea of garbage with fly rods, while overhead ravens engaged in an aerial tournament, jousting with sticks in their beaks, flying upside-down and whacking each other.

Tungsten unloaded a dresser with the help of another constable. In it were the last of Hugo's belongings – his bedside books, the mosquito costume he wore on Halloween, and a few clothes, which Nora had ironed and folded. She'd planned to say a few words or perform a symbolic act, but her back and legs ached, and the heat was oppressive, so she remained in the truck. In moments they were on their way again.

At the airport she grunted, "Get a wheelbarrow," when Tungsten opened the door.

They were flying out on the police plane, a turboprop with the sleek lines of an executive jet and the NWMP blazon on the tail. The passenger compartment was configured with eight seats, four to a side. Nora sank into hers gratefully.

Tungsten sat across from her, opening his choice of reading material for the flight, a Canadian Tire catalog. Nora was content to sit back and close her eyes, absently revolving the new ring on her finger. She was thinking about names for the baby. Hugo? Or something mosquitoish, like Culex? Her due date was August 20th, World Mosquito Day.

Glancing out the window she noticed a group of men on the tarmac, loading fishing gear into a Twin Otter belonging to Delphos Lodge in the

East Arm. Americans, probably, in their Tilley hats and phase-change socks. When she giggled, Tungsten looked over.

“I read somewhere that ‘delphos’ means fish in ancient Greek,” she said. “It also means womb. Gives a whole new meaning to angling, doesn’t it?”

Tungsten looked puzzled.

“Men with big rods. Trying to catch wombs.”

He nodded uncertainly. In the distance a coxcomb of smoke rose into the sky.

“Forest fire,” he commented, before opening the catalog at the power tool section.

## CHAPTER 23

As soon as the ice was off the lake, Suzi returned to Fool Bay in an 18-foot Princecraft with a cranky Sea Horse strapped to the stern. The hull was layered with coats of paint, and Iggi lay in the bottom with a wet towel over his head.

“What’s the matter with him?” Hugo asked as he scrambled aboard.

“Hangover. Iggi, say hello to Hugo.”

Iggi groaned, and they set off for the East Arm via the inside channel, an historic maze of reefs and islands where the chance of damaging a prop was 95%, or so the charts stated. The ancient route was not much used any more, but Suzi threaded her way through without difficulty.

“Easy once you know it,” she commented. “Not like river channels, changing all the time. Then you’ve got to know how to read the water.”

She turned over the kicker to Iggi once his hangover eased, and moved forward to sit beside Hugo. “I have a surprise for you,” she said as they leaned together. She took a plastic vial from her pocket, twisted off the lid and tipped into his palm several diamond-shaped pills. They were small and pale blue with letters stamped on each side.

“Hardest substance known to man,” she said with a grin. “Or woman. We’ll be stopping soon. Why don’t you take one now?”

“What is it?” he asked as he picked one from her palm.

“Viagra.”

A few minutes later Iggi angled the boat toward land and beached it on a narrow gravelly verge. Beyond was a mixedwood stand with an untidy understory, and a balsam poplar that long ago had fallen parallel to the shore. Iggi tied the boat to one of its branches, while Suzi opened a can of tobacco.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Hugo said.

“I don’t.” She sprinkled a bit of tobacco into the lake. “I’m paying the water. It’s an old custom.”

They collected wood for a fire and unloaded a few essentials from the boat, but as soon as Suzi began laying out sleeping bags, Iggi grabbed his pack and started down the beach. “I saw an interesting formation a few miles back,” he said over his shoulder. “Take me at least an hour to get there.”

They watched him disappear around a bend. “He’s a rockhound,” Suzi explained, and soon she and Hugo were curled up in each other’s arms.

“How long before the pill works?” he asked.

“Any time now.”

They chattered away happily as they waited, backfilling details in each other's month-long absence. He told her about a white bear he'd seen out on the ice one day, and how he'd nearly knocked himself silly when he loaded up a 12-gauge shotgun and fired off a practice round. Suzi laughed and told him about a military pilot who'd scored a hole-in-one on the Yellowknife golf course when a Sparrow missile fell off his CF-18. Hugo responded with an amusing scene from a thriller he was reading, which involved a trip to the northern pole of inaccessibility. Suzi complained about the increased difficulty of obtaining parts for the Bombardier. She'd had to order a new driveshaft from Alaska.

"Anything yet?" she asked.

"No, maybe I should take another pill. Where did you get them from?"

"Through the Internet. Someone emailed me a great offer. Let's wait a bit longer."

It was pleasant to lie together in the drowsy sun, and before long their conversation trailed off and their eyes began to droop. They slept luxuriously and awoke to the sound of a crackling fire, and the aroma of fresh coffee and bacon roasting on sticks.

"Smells wonderful," Suzi said, stretching her arms.

Iggi was composing a bannock in a large frying pan. "I thought you guys were going to put up the tent."

"We decided not to."

Hugo sat up looking glum, but Suzi tipped back her ballcap and whispered in his ear, "Don't worry, we've got all summer."

As it turned out, they didn't need a tent. The bacon, bannock, and coffee were so delicious, so revitalizing, they decided not to pitch camp and set off

again. The lake was at its most tranquil this time of year, lit by 20 hours of pure daylight and conducive to travel without reference to time. They stopped whenever the inclination took them, to eat or nap or cast a hook into the clear water. They anchored in sheltered bays with fanciful names – Le Nez, Devil’s Channel, Hole in the Wall – and loafed through the bottleneck of fractured islands that clogged the entrance to the East Arm, squeezing through narrow defiles and peering up at cliffs that lunged out of the water.

Iggi continued taking long walks whenever they made camp, even though Suzi informed him it was no longer necessary. His interest in geology was genuine. He pointed out stromatolites and lava pillows, and black rocks containing wolfram and tantalum. At his urging they visited several abandoned mines, most of them in an advanced state of decay, nothing left but collapsed buildings, flooded shafts, and trenches gouged into the rock. About some of these sites, nothing was known. Iggi recounted tales of mother lodes and exotic rare earths, of wildcatters and shady individuals who salted old mines.

He made himself agreeable in other ways as well. He replaced loose rivets in the boat’s hull and tinkered endlessly with the outboard. He fabricated a pawl from a tin can and mended a crack in the skeg with native copper smelted in their campfire. He had watery blue eyes and a granular complexion. Most of his adult life had been spent in the bush, cruising timber, operating skidders, hammering in claim posts, always moving farther north until he finally reached the Territory. As for his name, Iggi, it wasn’t Finnish as most people thought. It was a shortened form of his given name. Ignace, according to his mother. His father maintained it was Igneous.

Suzi smiled. “When I was little, my father used to call me Trout.”

A memory stirred within Hugo, then vanished as he leaned forward to speak. He sat back and shrugged. Having a past as blurry as the mirages on the lake didn't bother him. Since breakup he'd felt like a new person, liberated somehow. His speech was more forthright, his gaze less introverted. The rippled skin on his legs evoked nothing but a vague curiosity. He was no more self-conscious than Suzi when they threw off their clothes and plunged into the frigid water, or reclined shirtless in the boat, plastered with sunblock. Even his impotency did not weigh heavily upon him.

“Just a matter of time,” Suzi reassured him, and he knew she was right.

They ate mostly trout, panfried, poached, baked in clay, layered pink flesh that separated in their mouths along succulent fault lines. When they needed a change they boiled up a pot of whitefish stomachs, or feasted on grayling from the Hoarfrost River. Suzi recounted an old tale her father had told her, which credited grayling with the ability to skim across the water by hoisting their sail-like dorsal fins.

Her father'd had an endless supply of such tales. They'd endowed the world with magic and filled her childhood with laughter and delight. He'd drawn his last breath on the East Arm's northern shore and was buried in a pocket of overburden, a tiny plot marked off by a weathered fence of hand-carved pickets. Suzi had brought along a tin of white paint, and as she brushed it on, she told them how he'd walked to the Barrens every summer following the sound of a stick being dragged ahead of him. He was blind.

“Yet any location he was in he could describe from memory. Whenever he went fishing he never came back empty-handed.”

Iggi spoke in a low voice. “Mom used to say that Dad became a

geologist because of the fishing, but after the war he gave away all his tackle. In Finland, World War II was not one, but three separate wars. Twice he fought against Russians, skiing alongside tanks and serving up Molotov cocktails. Then he fought against Germans. A lot of the battles happened in the winter on frozen lakes, and he was afraid of what he'd catch. That's why he came to Canada, so he could fish again."

"During the war my father worked at Port Radium, carrying uranium ore in gunny sacks. It's why he went blind."

"Dad was fishing when he passed away. I found him slumped over in a rowboat. We buried him with a rock hammer in one hand and a fishing pole in the other."

Suzi recapped the paint tin and stepped back. The gleaming fence endowed the grave with the appearance of a shrine. They stood before it with bowed heads, then went down to the shore and picked up their rods. Their arms drew back in unison – a three-rod salute – and the hooks lofted through the air, hitting the water in the same instant and producing simultaneous strikes. The rods bent, the lines came in, and three trout were hauled ashore, identical except for a tiny antenna sticking out of the back of Hugo's fish.

"What the heck?"

"It's a radio transmitter," explained Suzi. "Some kind of study."

Hugo was astonished. "What about the effect on the fish? On its balance and buoyancy? What if it's eaten by another fish? A bird?"

"I caught one that was playing music once," said Iggi. "It was picking up a radio station in Yellowknife."

Hugo cleaned the fish with his pocketknife and held up the transmitter

between finger and thumb. It was encased in a milky resin with an address stamped on the side. Send it in, or keep it as a souvenir? Neither option appealed to him; the thing was an affront. Setting it down, he smashed it to bits with a rock.

They packed up in silence and headed across a seven-mile expanse of water, aiming for a great claw-like peninsula that sliced through the top of the East Arm. Before they were halfway across, the sky turned gray and a wind came out of the north, heaping the water into long swells. Suzi kept looking over her shoulder to make sure they wouldn't be overtaken and swamped. As they neared land, another boat came into view, fishermen by the looks of them, their heads down, drenched by spray. One of them raised an arm in greeting, but Iggi and Suzi were oblivious to it. Something in the set of their shoulders, the look in their eyes, suggested to Hugo that the holiday was over.

They rounded a point of land and entered a broad funnel-shaped bay called Lost Channel. At the end of it was a brief portage. They hustled the boat across on log rollers just as rain began slanting down, but instead of putting up the tent as Hugo expected, they made ponchos out of green garbage bags and launched the boat into a long sheltered bay. The south side was edged with limestone cliffs that were seamed, crumbling, and pierced by occasional openings.

“Prospectors,” Iggi said through the rain, “blasting for gold.”

One of the openings was at water level, a dark cavity whose height shrank and expanded with the swells. Suzi maneuvered the boat in front of it.

“Duck,” said Iggi.

Suzi gunned the motor and the boat shot through the opening, the roar intensifying into a barrage of sound, then receding as the walls fell away and semidarkness engulfed them. Suzi hit the kill switch and Iggi made thumping noises as he searched for a flashlight. Presently a spear of light appeared. They were in a cavern the size of a large bungalow. The roof was composed of piano-sized blocks loosely wedged into place.

“Prospectors did this?” Hugo asked, the chamber making his voice sound oddly hollow.

“Yeah, there’s an adit over there.”

The flashlight’s beam picked out another opening in the rock, this one several feet above water level and prefaced by a jutting shelf. Rough steps led down to a natural stone pier, on which stood several rusty 45-gallon drums.

“Feel like a bite to eat?” Iggi asked as he tied up the boat.

“Here?”

“Why not? It’s out of the rain.”

A mere technicality, Hugo thought, since their clothes were soggy, the cave damp, and water was pattering down somewhere. But Iggi produced a driftwood log out of the darkness, splashed it with gas, and ignited it. The leaping flames revealed a few things the flashlight had missed: a picnic table, a barbecue pitted with rust, a decaying hammock suspended from rock bolts, exhausted tins of hawser-cut tobacco, and a set of moldy antlers fastened over the tunnel’s entrance. A wooden dynamite box with dovetailed corners was broken up and added to the fire.

Coffee and bannock followed, but after that there seemed nothing else to do but unroll their sleeping bags and crawl in. It was still raining and the

darkness invited sleep. Iggi and Suzi soon dozed off, but Hugo was kept awake by the slap and drip of water, and sometimes by sounds from farther off. Once, he thought he heard an outboard pass by, and later, just as his eyelids began to droop, the faint clang of steel and distant hoots of laughter.



A few hours later they exchanged darkness for cold gray daylight, and were coasting along a smooth hump of shoreline when a yodel floated across the water. Hugo, remembering the laughter in the cave, looked around doubtfully, but this was no phantom. The others had heard it too. Suzi silenced the motor. There was no wind to batter the sound; it came from a distance, ebbing and surging, and sometimes cresting into whoops and shouts.

“That way,” said Iggi, pointing.

The shore curved away to the east. They sped along it full of purpose, Suzi standing in the stern, shading her eyes as she drove, and Iggi leaning forward, one hand gripping the gunnel. Their faces seemed altered somehow, sharper, as though honed to an edge by the elements. Gone was the leisurely pace of the last two weeks. Now there was only tension and urgency.

Another boat appeared, a 16-footer with two men squatting amidships and a third in the stern, controlling the outboard. One of them leaped to his feet and threw up his arms in a wild semaphore. Suzi altered course and the two boats angled toward each other. The words “Delphos Lodge” became visible on the prow of the other boat.

“Everything all right?” Iggi asked as they drew alongside.

“Close call,” gasped one of the anglers. The sleeves of his parka were soaked to the elbows. “Damn near capsized. Ass over teakettle if it hadn’t been for George.” He nodded at their guide.

“Big one?” asked Iggi.

“Big’s not the word,” said the other angler. “Forget big. It towed us for an hour, and when we finally got it alongside it bit the goddamn net in half.”

“Too bad.”

“Are you kidding? This is the greatest day of my life. Take a look.” He reached down and flipped back a tarp, revealing a lake trout curled up in the space between two benches. “We oughta be charging admission. I got a 12-year-old kid back home that’s not as big. George says it might be a world record.”

Iggi whistled and straddled the two gunnels for a closer look. “You weighed it?”

“No, it’s too big to weigh in the boat.”

“You want to do that right away. It’ll lose three, four pounds by the time you get back to the lodge.”

The first angler looked back at George. “That right?”

George nodded.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Iggi said, slipping over the gunnels and into their boat.

“No, wait –”

But Iggi already had his cheek pressed against the fish and was working his arms around it. “Get the scale,” he puffed as he rocked back on his heels and lifted, the savage head on his shoulder, the tail still dragging. His feet

did a slow dance as he struggled to maintain his grip and balance.

“Put it down,” yelled angler number two, lunging at him.

The boat rocked violently and Iggi, still hugging the fish, tottered and fell.

“No!” shrieked both anglers at the same time.

The fish flopped across the gunnel and slipped over the side.

“Oops,” said Iggi and scrambled back into his own boat.

The faces of the two fishermen were frozen in horror.

Iggi gave the other boat a shove with his foot. His face was red, his shoulders trembled, and a strange sound escaped his mouth. A gasp, a sputter, a choked-back giggle. Finally he could contain himself no longer and a great gust of laughter exploded out of him.

Suzi twisted the throttle, speeding them away.

## CHAPTER 24

Harvey Brassclick, when he made the request, had a notion the DM didn't like him. This was back when people were just starting to realize that diamond mining was no pipe dream. In the Legislative Assembly an MLA known for his cupidity said, "We know gold and silver, but diamonds are a different ballpark."

Politicians and civil servants rushed off on fact-finding tours, and South Africa, a country not known for its harsh winters, was a popular destination. Even the NWMP got into the act. A staff sergeant from the Yellowknife detachment was sent to Australia, where he visited a mine named after a diamond-patterned sock. The purpose of the trip was to study security, and the mine obliged by strip-searching him down to his argyles.

Harvey, who'd never been to Europe, thought Antwerp merited a visit.

After all, wasn't it the center of the world diamond trade? He mentioned this to the DM and a few weeks later was summoned to his office.

"I talked it over with the Minister and he thought a trip was a good idea. But not to Antwerp. He's got another place in mind."

"Sure," said Harvey agreeably. He'd never been to Africa or Australia either. "Whereabouts?"

The Deputy Minister was a vast bear of a man with a body that seemed in constant readiness for hibernation. But he also had a shrewd mind and a commanding presence. When he spoke, people listened.

"Russia. He wants both of us to go."

Harvey was appalled. Travelling with one's boss was bad enough, but to Russia? It would be like going to Baffin Island, only worse.

"The second largest producer of diamonds in the world," the DM explained, "and they do their own cutting too."

It was at this point that Harvey remembered where 99% of all Russian diamonds came from. "Siberia?" he croaked.

"It'll be an education," said the DM, giving him a sharp look. "We've got a lot in common with Russia, you know."

It was senseless to argue. All he could do was put on a brave face and repeat the usual catchphrases. Frequent, sudden, or unusual travel was a badge of honor among his peers, and bemoaning jetlag and hotel food was a well-established ritual. So in public he uttered mild protests about this latest demand on his services, a tiresome trip to a foreign country. Polite sympathy was the usual response, but this time the target he presented was irresistible. Co-workers wondered aloud about the nature of his transgression. Why exactly was the DM escorting him to Siberia? Did he

have a return ticket? Was a visit to the salt mines part of the tour?

His sole consolation was that the trip was scheduled for the summer, still several months away and during which anything could happen. He prayed for a crisis and got one. Its exact nature was never spelled out, but it was serious enough to put the DM on a jet to Ottawa the day before they were to leave the country. His secretary relayed the news to Harvey: he was to make the trip alone.

He slipped away from work early, not to pack as he claimed but simply to put an end to the mock farewells. At home there was genuine enthusiasm for the trip. His three boys, all in minor hockey, were demanding autographs from Pavel Bure and Sergei Federov. They pored over a travel guide he'd bought, and the youngest, looking at an Orthodox church with a bulbous spire, said, "Daddy, is that a soviet onion?" Their tenacious hugs the next morning made him wince, his arms still sore from the exhaustive course of inoculations. At the airport his wife surprised him with a present, a talking dictionary with a keypad and a display window. He slipped it into his pocket and kissed her.

"There's a new jar of head wax in your shaving kit," she said.

"Thanks."

A Widgeon Air flight carried him west to Whitehorse, then on to Anchorage, where a tourist brochure reminded him of Alaska's Russian heritage. He transferred to a grimy tri-jet with Cyrillic markings and a muscular undercarriage, and flew across the Bering Sea. There were no safety cards in the seat pockets, but someone identified the plane as a Tupolev-154. It carried a half-complement of passengers, an odd mixture of missionaries, fly fishermen, and business executives. Each was keen on

mining the new Russia, whether it be for lost souls, hard currency, or Kamchatka steelhead.

They landed in the Russian Far East exactly one day after take-off, courtesy of the International Dateline. The terminal was 50 km from Magadan, a mountain-ringed port on the Sea of Okhotsk and sister city of Anchorage. Inside, the executives were whisked through Customs without a hitch, while the fishermen's tackle boxes and rod cases came in for closer scrutiny. The missionaries' suitcases were x-rayed, dismantled, and their contents emptied out on the floor.

Harvey was the last in line, papers and pocket translator ready. "Dokumenti," grunted the border guard.

Harvey handed over his passport and visa, air ticket, hotel reservation, letter of invitation, and proof of medical insurance. Each was carefully inspected, then the border guard snapped his fingers. Harvey responded with his driver's licence, social insurance card, birth certificate, and (for good measure) his Blockbuster video card. The guard raised his slab-like eyebrows and looked momentarily impressed. Then he snapped his fingers again.

Harvey peered into his wallet one more time. His hand hovered and dipped, selecting a single item and depositing it on the guard's outstretched palm. The guard looked down, his face clouding over when he realized it was not money he was being offered, but a photograph. Then his expression softened and he took a closer look.

"Magadanskii?" he inquired.

Earlier in the year Harvey's oldest boy had participated in the Arctic Winter Games. He'd played against a team from Magadan and had his

picture snapped with some Russian lads after the game.

“Hockey,” said Harvey.

The border guard nodded and grinned. “Bubby Or. Win Gritski.”

“Valeri Kharlamov. Vladislav Tretiak.”

“Da, da.”

The stamp hammered down on Harvey’s passport.

A few hours later he was back in the air, this time in a bulky twin-prop with an oversized tail. The interior was even more austere than the Tu-154’s, but triggered no complaint from the other passengers, at least as far as Harvey could tell. He tried out his pocket translator, wanting to know where the seat belts were, but when he hit the “Talk” button no sound came forth. The flight attendant gave him a suspicious glare, the kind reserved for spies, then got into a shouting match with a man carrying a chicken in a string bag. The dispute concluded when the chicken was shoved squawking into an overhead bin. Feathers were still floating in the air when the plane took off.

Harvey stared out the window hoping he was on the right flight, and watching the wrinkled mountains and larch-filled valleys until his eyes slammed shut. When next they opened, he received his first lesson in Russian geography: the mountains were just beginning to subside into Siberian bog and taiga. He looked at his watch and whistled. Over three hours worth of mountain ranges and now he was on the edge of Siberia, itself greater in size than all of Canada. Enormous distances and awe-inspiring vistas were nothing new to him, but this was landscape on a new scale.

Shortly afterward the plane set down at Yakutsk, a sprawling river port of docks and cranes and massive chunky buildings. The airport was a brisk

modern structure, designed, he learned later, by a Yellowknife firm. His passport got another thumping, and then a short wiry Yakut seized his arm and led him to a wide staircase, which dropped through a circular opening in the floor.

“I am Slava, official guide and interpreter, speaking perfect English. You are welcome to Autonomous Republic of Yakutia.”

He collected Brassclick’s suitcase and scuttled ahead, spilling fractured sentences and leading the way to a tiny Zaporozhets in the parking lot. Its doors were hinged the wrong way and there was a removable floor panel for ice fishing, which nearly cost Harvey his foot once they got going. They slithered through suburbs of sunken log houses and apartment blocks hiked up on concrete stilts, linked by tattered pipes from a central heating plant. At the city’s center Slava pointed out the gesturing statue in Lenin Square. Did Harvey know that Vladimir Ilyich had drawn his revolutionary name from the great Lena River that flowed past Yakutsk?

“Vladimir who?”

“Lenin. Man of Lena.”

Finally they arrived at the Hotel Siberia, a crumbling heap of Stalinesque architecture. A group of functionaries awaited them in a reception room off the main lobby. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder around a baize-topped table with zakuski platters and bottles of oily vodka in which floated tiny pickled herrings.

Harvey was introduced as a Canadian bureaucrat and toasted with much enthusiasm. In turn he met officials from increasingly bizarre Ministries: Agriculture, Coal and Diamonds, Sports and Culture, Eternal Frost, and Outhouses.

Harvey glanced at Slava. “Did I hear that last one right?”

“Outhouses. Places of shitting.”

Harvey made a comment about paperwork, which Slava translated.

There was a roar of approval and the introductions continued, each one followed by a toast. Harvey tried to minimize the effects by gobbling down food from the platters – smoked sturgeon, salted carrots, pickled mushrooms, and aged reindeer cheese. But he’d started out on an empty stomach, and by the time he got to the representative from the famous Chelyabinsk tractor plant, and assorted flunkies from cabbage farms and ball-bearing factories, he was hopelessly drunk.

He got into several heartfelt conversations, one with a bull-necked fellow from Magnetogorsk who was interested in paper shredders, and another with a representative of a joint-stock company hoping to build a highway to Canada. The Bering Strait was to be conquered by means of a tunnel or a suspension bridge, or dammed up completely.

Sometime after that he sang a naughty ditty about going for a dip in the secretarial pool, and eventually had to be carried to his room and rolled into bed.

“Not worrying about mattress insects,” Slava reassured him with a wink. “No bugs of any kind infest these premises.”



Yakutsk and Yellowknife. They’d signed a treaty of friendship acknowledging the shared ancestry of their native peoples and a hopeful future in gold and diamonds. They sat at the same latitude on bodies of

water ranked among the largest in the world – one a lake, the other a river. At times Harvey felt a powerful sense of déjà vu, as though images of the two places were overlapping in his mind: the broad faces, the miscellany of tongues, the bad roads and dusty streets, the drunks spouting Pushkin and Jack London, the triumvirate of garbage and ravens and Siberian huskies. Even John Franklin was there, his photo adorning a museum wall alongside that of Bedford Pym, a British naval lieutenant who'd passed through Yakutsk while conducting a secret expedition in search of the missing ships.

But despite such interesting similarities, Yellowknife was not centuries old or home to a quarter-million people or memorialized on the game board of *Risk*. It did not harbor reconstituted mammoths or autos that looked equally obsolete, clunky Zhigulis and Volgas and Sputniks that stampeded up and down colossal Lego-block canyons. Its inhabitants did not use satchels as wallets, or go fishing for giant river trout – 150-pound taimen – with ropes and shotguns and hooks baited with live muskrat.

Then there were differences that went beyond mere scale, beyond simple head-smacking reminders that Siberia was a land of extremes. He was told of secret nuclear cities and Army & Navy stores that sold tanks, missiles, and submarines. He travelled to Mirny, or “Peaceful,” a diamond-mining center built next to a giant borehole more than a mile across – the Peace Pipe. From the air it looked like something out of the imagination of Poe or Verne, a whirlpool with an entire city poised at the edge, on the verge of being sucked into the depths of the earth.

In the mountains he visited a former gold operation that was being resuscitated as a tourist site. There was a gargantuan dredge resembling a beached riverboat surrounded by a palisade of rickety sluices and catwalks.

Harvey tried his hand at panning, or “washing gold” as Slava put it, without success.

Slava squatted on the bank and took swigs from a bottle of kiosk vodka. He said, “Here my father worked.”

Harvey looked up. “He was a miner?”

“No, a paintbrush maker, denounced as elitist for using tail hairs of sables. Should have used proletarian squirrels instead.”

Was he serious? Harvey looked around and all of a sudden it was as though a switch had been thrown, the entire setting deconstructed by a single remark. The purpose of the collapsing towers and rusty barbed wire was not, as he’d thought, to keep people out. The place had been a forced labor camp, a gulag.

“In former Soviet Union,” Slava said, “people were renewable resource.”

Something shiny appeared in the bottom of Harvey’s pan, a tiny golden lump. He couldn’t tell if it was a nugget or a dental filling. “Jeezus,” he said.

But there was more. The next day they took a noisy biplane to a couple of diamond mines operated by Alrosa, a state-run company. They overflew Aikhal and inspected the site where a PNE had been detonated. A peaceful nuclear explosion.

“Twenty kilotons,” shouted Slava over the noise of the engine. “For geological survey.”

The underground explosion had broken through the surface and slain a forest. Close to the nearby city of Udachny, or “Lucky,” a second PNE had gone wrong. Its purpose had been to create a reservoir for a new diamond mine. Fifteen years later plutonium was still leaking into the soil. Even the

droppings of reindeer were radioactive.

A thought occurred to Harvey. They were flying directly over ground zero of the second explosion. “Are we safe?”

Slava shrugged and took a swig from his bottle. “Sure.”

“What about radiation?”

“You get used to it. Here.” He handed across the bottle and Harvey swallowed a fiery mouthful. The vodka tasted as though it had been cut with diesel fuel. There was no label on the bottle.

Slava grinned at him. “Is better than lead.”



On his next to last day in Yakutsk there was nothing scheduled, so he decided to do some shopping. Slava took him to the central rynok, a large open-air market, assuring him he would find there whatever he wanted.

“Even skin of Siberian tiger, big endangered species, no problem.”

“A few souvenirs is all I need,” Harvey replied. He bought some lacquerware, a few tins of caviar, several onion dome suckers and Rasputin t-shirts, some baubles made from mammoth ivory, a Hero of Soviet Agriculture medal, and a set of ironic matryoshka dolls, portraying not pretty peasant girls but the diminishing stature of the country’s leaders, Lenin incorporating Stalin, who enclosed Khrushchev, who contained Brezhnev, and so on.

Afterwards they retired to an unmarked café and dined on horsemeat, Yakutia’s national dish, followed by a bowl of Lenin berries in reindeer cream.

“Where now?” Slava asked. “Any place you wish. State Opera, Kultury Park, Institute of Cosmophysical Research.”

Harvey shook his head. He’d had his fill of official destinations.

“Must be something. Last chance in Yakutsk. Think, dear Harvey, think.”

In fact, an idea had been lurking in his mind ever since he’d arrived, but it was nothing more than a daydream, a fantasy.

“Speak,” urged Slava. “Is free country now. Anything is possible.”

With a little more prying the secret came out, though Slava didn’t understand it at first. “Ice? Is slang for diamonds, yes?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. I’m talking about real ice. A skating rink.”

“Ah,” said Slava, comprehending at last. He went away to make a phone call, and when he returned there was a smug look on his face. “For small fee your dream can be real.”

“How small?”

“One hundred dollars, hard currency. For ice time and equipment rental.”

The price was a little steep, but what the hell. “Okay.”

They went back to the hotel and Harvey stretched out on the lumpy bed to steady his nerves. He’d only been a kid in 1972, but the Summit Series was part of the hockey mythology he’d grown up with, and the remarkable comeback of the Canadians was embedded in his psyche. All through minor hockey, two seasons in the OHL, and the oldtimers team league in Yellowknife, whenever he needed to pump himself up, he thought of Paul Henderson’s series-winning goal scored with less than a minute to go in the final game.

At seven o'clock he met Slava in the lobby and they drove to the Palace of Sport, a heavy-browed concrete structure propped up by pillars. Inside the entrance was a wide shabby vestibule and the smell of damp wood. Shouts and sharp reports echoed from deeper within the building. Rounding a corner, they came upon several sheets of ice encircled by waist-high boards and baggy mesh like gillnets hung up to dry. Speed skaters coursed around one like greyhounds, twirling ice dancers occupied another, and on a third a muzzled bear was learning how to skate.

"For circus," Slava said.

On the fourth sheet a few oldtimers were just taking the ice, bulky guys with seamed faces, gray hair leaking from their helmets. Hockeywise, anyone over 35 was an oldtimer.

"That's them?" asked Harvey.

"No, your opponents."

Slava led the way to a dressing room. Stationed at the door was a member of the militia in a steel-gray uniform and an overly large hat with a red band and plastic visor. Inside, players were hunched on the benches lining the room, already dressed, skates on, sticks in their heavy gloves. Their fleshy mugs swung in Harvey's direction as Slava strode about, waving his arms and speaking rapidly. A man with a torso like a steel drum got up.

"This is Yermak Timofeyevich," said Slava. "Team captain."

"Kanada," he said, crushing Harvey's hand.

One by one the rest of the team rose and Harvey made his way around the room, shaking hands. When the ritual was over, Yermak spoke rapidly and Slava translated. "Now is time to pay."

Harvey reached into his pocket. He'd left his wallet at the hotel and brought only money, pristine American bills, but as he handed over the agreed-upon amount he noticed the militia man watching from the doorway. The fellow fired off a volley of words.

"He asks if you have permit," said Slava, his face neutral, betraying nothing. "Hockey permit."

The dressing room grew still, the seated players reminding Harvey of the poker faces at the Ice Road Café. Only Yermak and the militia man showed any expression. Yermak was alert and amused, the militia man stern, full of bluster. Harvey swallowed down his indignation. One of the things that stuck out in his mind about the Summit Series was the way the Canadians had stood up for themselves. Espo making a point, tapping the referee's chest with his finger. Pete Mahovlich climbing over the boards and fencing with Soviet militia. J.P. Parise raising his stick like a club above an official's head. He'd often wondered about the subversive effects of those images. The games were broadcast across the Soviet Union. What a revelation it must have been, watching the Canadians challenge bad calls and corrupt officiating. Did they put the first cracks in the USSR's foundation? He liked to think so.

Bluff, call, or raise?

He reached into another pocket for the extra 20 he'd brought along, and the militia man stepped forward, hand outstretched. Very deliberately Harvey gave the bill to Yermak. The militia man started yammering only to be cut short by a single blow from Yermak, whose fist descended on the top of his head like a pile-driver. The militia man staggered and his hat fell to the floor, crushed. He picked it up and backed out of the room, holding his

head and releasing a shrill torrent of abuse.

The amused expression had never once left Yermak's face. He spoke to Slava, who skipped across to a battered locker, dragged out equipment, and fired it in Harvey's direction. Tube skates, quilted hockey pants, shin pads with plastic kneecaps and little sticks sewn into the felt to protect the shin. He stripped off his own shirt.

"You're going to play too?" asked Harvey.

"Of course, I'm translator."

The other players remained in their places, watching as Harvey and Slava donned the equipment. "They're going to wait for us?" asked Harvey, feeling a little self-conscious.

"Naturally," replied Slava, "we are team."

The gloves were falling apart, the socks a collection of holes, the cup hammered out of an actual tin cup. The jersey was moldy, but the number on the back, even though it was fashioned out of hockey tape, was a sweet surprise. Henderson's number. The hockey stick, in contrast with the other equipment, was the sturdiest Harvey had ever come across. The shaft and blade were formed from a single piece of wood and looked brand-new, as though it had come directly from the trunk of a tree.

"What's the team's name?" he asked, pulling on the sweater.

"Ancient Cossacks," Slava replied.

"And the other team?"

"Old Bolsheviks."

The ice surface was immense, wider and longer than anything Harvey had ever played on. It was in good shape though, better than summer ice in Yellowknife. He circled it, limbering up his arms and doing some stretches.

The edges on his skates were fine but the hockey stick was a problem. There was no curve to the blade. He tried a few shots on net and nearly broke his wrists trying to raise the puck.

The ref blew his whistle and the teams retired to their benches. “What about body contact?” Harvey asked as he sat down beside Slava.

“Nyet. Is oldtimers, right? Nice friendly game.”

The teams lined up at center ice for the opening face-off, the Ancient Cossacks in their aging white sweaters, the Old Bolsheviks in red with the letters CCCP across the chest. The referee dropped the puck and the game got under way. The pace was relaxed, but Harvey, waiting on the bench for his first shift, decided to play conservatively, no razzle-dazzle. The reputation of Russians as tireless hockey machines still lingered in Canada, along with a queasy feeling that no lead was so great it could not disappear in a sudden onslaught.

Both teams were changing on the fly. Harvey went over the boards as his man came off, but before he could take up his position on the wing, the referee halted the game and started jabbering at him.

Harvey looked around in confusion. “What?”

Slava skated over laughing. “You got penalty, big guy.”

“No way, I just got on the ice.”

“Too much men. It’s your mistake.”

There was no sense arguing, so he simmered in the penalty box for a few minutes; he was certain it was more than the regulation two. When he finally got out, his next shift went a little better. The larger ice surface gave him lots of room to maneuver, but the heavy stick made it difficult to corral a pass, and when he tried to stick handle it felt like he was using a two-by-

four. He wondered why no one else was having the same problem, until he realized that he was the only one on the ice with a straight blade. He got in one more shift before the period ended. The team had four lines, the shifts were two minutes long, and they were playing straight time, 20 minutes per period, the clock ticking away even during a stoppage in play. About ten bucks a shift it was costing him.

They changed ends with the score tied, both teams having pumped in a couple of goals. Harvey took to the ice again, determined to get his money's worth. He was warmed up now and managed several weak shots at goal. The leisurely pace of the first period was gone and the play was getting rougher. Harvey was in the corner digging out the puck when a sixth sense made him look up and step back. Another player came flying in with his elbows up. He crashed into the boards like a freight train, then toppled over when Harvey inserted the butt end of his stick into some ribs and lifted.

“Keep head up,” Slava advised when they came off.

“Don't worry about me. I like it when it gets rough.”

The teams traded goals, and then the Bolsheviks struck quickly for two more and the period ended with Harvey's team down 5 to 3. As he sat on the bench, sweat pouring down his face, he realized they were in exactly the same position as Team Canada in the final game of the Summit Series.

“No way we're going to lose,” he declared as the third period got under way, and sure enough they found the back of the net after some good work in the corner. The puck went top shelf, cutting the Bolshevik lead to one goal. Now the play was up and down the ice with good chances at either end. A white-shirted Cossack was left all alone in front of the net but shot wide. The Bolsheviks had a two-on-one but failed to convert.

Halfway through the period the referee stopped the play and the teams changed ends, as per international rules. Almost as soon as the game resumed there was a wild scramble in front of the Bolshevik net and someone banged in a rebound, knotting the score. Everyone on the bench leapt to their feet and roared, and there were answering shouts from people surrounding the rink, brought in by the game's increasing intensity. Figure skaters, speed skaters, even the bear was watching.

Harvey got in another shift and came off frustrated, his heart pounding. He rode the bench impatiently as the players swirled up and down the ice. He looked up at the clock. There was less than a minute to go. He jumped to his feet and waved at the left winger.

“Get off,” he shouted.

The guy obliged by circling back to the bench. Harvey jumped on just as Slava was bringing up the puck. He dished it off to Yermak, who lifted a long shot at the goal but missed. Harvey took a wild stab at the puck, fell on his ass, and ended up behind the net out of the play. He leaped to his feet and got out front just as Slava snapped off a shot. The goalie made the save but Harvey picked up the rebound and fired. Again the goalie kicked it out but now he was flopping around, out of position. The puck came back to Harvey. He knew there were only seconds left. There was an opening beneath the goalie...

Then someone cleared him from the front of the net with a thundering body-check, and the next thing he knew, he was lying on his back in the dressing room, looking up at a circle of faces.

“What hit me?” he croaked.

“Ask Yermak,” said Slava.

There was a huge grin on the Cossack captain's face. His jersey was off, revealing the most sinister piece of hockey equipment Harvey had ever seen. It looked like a coat of armor.

"What the hell?"

"Steel shoulder pads," said Slava.

Yermak said something and the rest of the team dissolved in laughter. Slava translated: "Is how kapitalism works, right? Everybody is enemy. Remember Bubby Clark in '72, broke Kharlamov's ankle? Very good. Now we break ankles too. It's a living."

They helped Harvey up and slapped him on the back and stuck a paper cup in his hand. He guzzled down half of it before the taste hit him.

"What is this?" he sputtered.

"Kvass," said Slava.

"Tastes it's made from like burnt toast."

"It is, it is!" cried Slava happily.

The players were wandering around in various states of undress, lung-rasping cigarettes dangling from their lips or tucked behind their ears. A card table was set up and bottles of vodka appeared, along with several kinds of salted fish, none of which Harvey had ever heard of – omul, muksun, lenok. Players from the other team drifted in to shake his hand and join the party. One of them unfolded a page from a magazine showing a seductively dressed woman.

"Canadian girls seek Russian husbands," translated Slava. "Is true?"

"Absolutely."

Toasts were proposed, voices rose to a babble, and Yermak made a gift of the hockey stick Harvey had used. Harvey responded by reaching into his

pocket and handing over his malfunctioning translator. Slava relayed Yermak's thanks, adding, "Maybe we do some more kapitalism together."

"Sure," said Brassclick.



Two days later he was back in Yellowknife, absorbing another body-check: his transfer to Wildlife. Only quick thinking enabled him to bring Pfang along. He'd always been good at sensing which way the wind was blowing, and this time he detected a gale. Fortunately the Wildlife Bureau was not a tightly run organization. A mouse biologist, for crissake, and a mushroom addict, and a fellow who smelled like a smelt. Plus that fool Ungle using a magnifying glass to count caribou on photographs. No wonder an entire herd had gone missing.

He set Pfang to work.

Meanwhile packages began arriving in the mail. A teddy bear, an astrakhan hat, a jar of pickled mushrooms. He supposed them a pathetic attempt at bribery, though in exchange for what he had no idea. He began tossing them unopened into the hall closet until his wife complained, so he carted them out to the car intending to take them to the dump. A padded envelope slipped from his grasp, so small and light it appeared to be empty. Intrigued, he opened it and found inside an Aleksandr Yakushev hockey card. The Big Yak was the top Soviet scorer in the Summit Series, a lanky left winger who reminded people of Jean Beliveau.

He sat down and opened a few more. There were replicas of a religious ikon and a Fabergé egg – at least he assumed they were replicas – a set of

car keys, a letter offering a free ride in a MiG-29, and a 9mm Makarov. The gun rested comfortably in his hand. When he pulled the trigger, there was an efficient-sounding click.

Interesting, he thought.

A few days later the cruise missile arrived.

## CHAPTER 25

“It’s not the angling,” Suzi explained, “it’s the trophies. The fish Iggi threw overboard? Hatched in the 1800s. We have laws to protect artifacts that old, why not fish?”

Hugo was skeptical. “A trout over 100 years old?”

“The water’s so cold, they don’t reach sexual maturity till they’re 12 or 13,” said Iggi.

“People fly in, catch 50 or 100 trout a day. Sure, they release them, but how many survive?”

“And if they do catch a trophy, where does it end up? On a wall somewhere, gathering dust. A souvenir, a knickknack. An empty symbol. It’s gone on long enough.”

Their victims were unsuspecting at first, then paralyzed with

astonishment. They had difficulty grasping what was going on. Tears stormed down their faces. Some offered money, others dropped to their knees and pleaded for mercy. The few who tried to resist changed their minds when they spotted the rifle propped up in the bandits' boat.

Iggi explained why it was so easy. "The government hushes up problems because bad publicity would kill tourism. They'll probably send out a couple of narcs posing as fishermen. It's what they did last summer." He laughed. "But don't worry, they won't accomplish anything. How can you stake out an entire lake?"

Nevertheless, they took precautions. Sometimes they wore bandannas over their faces, or drooping mustaches, or glasses with false noses. They camped in a new location every night, hauling the Princecraft out of the water and covering it with brush. The tent was hidden among trees. Inside they slept in a neat row with Suzi in the middle. The cave was held in reserve, a secret hideaway to be used only in necessity.

One night Hugo awoke to the sound of stealthy footsteps outside. A shadow fell across the tent. He nudged Suzi.

She lifted her head. "It's just a bear. Go back to sleep."

In the morning they found wide plantigrade tracks all around the tent but none of their food had been disturbed. Suzi set out an offering before they left – a piece of sugared bannock and a trout that had not been gutted.

For weeks they quartered the East Arm, sticking up powerboats, sailboats, cabin cruisers, and men fishing off the pontoons of floatplanes. They sped down blue lanes between steeping cliffs, while eagles floated overhead and oldsquaw ducks skimmed the waves in low twisting flight. The lake had a numinous quality that infiltrated their souls – the purity of the

air, the smell of the water, the stacked and folded hills. They ate fish steaks, and fish soup in which eyeballs floated, and flakes of dried fish peeled from leathery skin. Each mouthful was like a sacrament, a commingling of flesh.

Then the weather turned and they found themselves stuck in a tent for several days. Hugo read happily as the rain pelted down, Iggi kept himself busy tinkering with the outboard motor, and Suzi related some of her father's hunting stories. How he'd trailed a moose for days by the sound of its heartbeat. How he'd loaded his musket with stones when he ran out of shot, and on one occasion only stunned an animal, which suddenly staggered to its feet as he leaned over it. In a trice he'd found himself straddling the beast and galloping through the forest.

It was after one of such tales that she got out her skinning knife and began sharpening it with a file. "Good weather for hunting," she said in answer to Hugo's questioning look.

"In the rain?"

"Keeps the scent down."

"You'll get soaked, even with a rainsuit."

"You're right," she said, and stepped out of her clothes.

"But we're on an island."

"I need meat," she replied, and disappeared into the bush, naked except for her cap.

"She can find caribou anywhere," Iggi remarked, and several hours later she proved it by returning with an entire animal on her back. It was field-dressed and bundled up into a single package wrapped in hide, which she carried with the aid of a tumpline. She went down to the lake to wash the blood from her back.

Later, as they feasted on fried caribou, she told them about some of the characters her father had met during his long life – Cosmo Melvill, Warburton Pike, and Critchell-Bullock, the Bengal lancer who'd ended his life as miserably as Hornby, not in a hovel on the Barrens but a hotel room in Africa. Changelings, her father called them, people born in the wrong place and doomed to wander. Such tales had made her shiver when she was a child. People in them seemed like creatures from another world, ogres and trolls who strode across the land in seven-league boots, propelled by unfathomable urges and debauching the North with their names. Even when she grew older, she could feel their ghostly presence lingering in certain places. Hearne and Hornby Channels, Lady Jane Bay, Back River. The names, themselves a species of theft, were plastered across the scenery like billboards. In her they awoke the first stirrings of rebellion.

The rain cleared a few days later, and they were back on the lake near Utsingi Point when they intercepted a pair of canoes. The men in them were paddling hard. Their beards were filthy and their clothing coming apart at the seams. They were recreating the voyage of some 19th century traveller. They'd gotten as far as Great Fish River, where they'd raised a cairn. Then they'd turned back. It wasn't clear whether this was part of the recreation. There was a guarded look in their eyes, and they kept glancing over their shoulders. They had the lean look of starving dogs.

One of them whined. "We're hungry. Give us something to eat." He was bailing as he spoke. The birchbark canoes, which they'd made themselves, were shipping water.

Suzi gave them the last of their meat, a leg of caribou whose outer surface had thickened like shoe leather. The canoeists accepted it

wordlessly and set off, digging their paddles into the water and casting renewed glances behind them.

Suzi watched with narrowed eyes, then set a course for Great Fish River. At its mouth she found the cairn and dismantled it, hurling the rocks away and erasing every vestige of its presence. The scrap of paper that had been left inside, listing names and purpose, she tossed into the campfire.



In August the sky turned gauzy with smoke, and the scent of burnt wood infected the air. The color of the lake faded to a dull gray.

“Forest fire,” said Suzi. Every summer there were hundreds of them. Sometimes the smoke came from as far away as Saskatchewan.

All at once their prey became wary. Fishermen wore a sullen dangerous look. One of them attacked Iggi with a dip net. Another threw hooks. Several times the boats simply took off at high speed. There was no chance of overtaking them.

“Word must be getting around,” said Suzi.

“What do we do now?” asked Hugo

“Pack up and go home, I guess.”

“Wait a minute. Couldn’t we sneak up on them while they’re eating shore lunches?”

“On land?” asked Iggi doubtfully. “We’ve never done that before,”

They decided to give it a try, and the next day crept up on a party of fishermen. “Hand over all your fish,” shouted Hugo, leaping out of a bush. The fishermen looked at each other in amazement, then one of them got to

his feet. Very deliberately he raised a forefinger and pointed it at the would-be robbers.

“One, two, three,” he said in a singsong voice. Then he turned his finger on his own group and counted again. When he arrived at “four,” his face lit up with pleasure. Slowly he reached down and picked up a rod; his buddies did the same. With a shout they rushed forward and nearly overwhelmed the fish bandits. Desperately Suzi and Iggi parried the attack with their own rods, giving Hugo a chance to escape. When he returned in the boat, they cut their way to the water and flung themselves in. Hugo gunned the motor with the two of them clinging to the gunnels. Suzi was unharmed but Iggi’s cheek had been laid open.

“A duelling scar,” she said tenderly. To stop the bleeding, she applied to the wound a bit of beaver fluff plucked from her slipper.

After that they retired to the cave for a few days. The sense of sanctuary was a relief. The water-carved rock was smooth as a pillow, and the darkness imbued their sleep with a timeless quality, as though they were beyond the reach of the world.

Hugo awoke first, to the sound of lapping water. He’d been submerged in a dream, drifting beneath a sheet of ice, his clothes billowing around him. He’d gone for a skate thinking it might cool his brain. He’d been feverish for weeks, had suffered hallucinations. There’d been an itchy mosquito bite on his wrist, and an argument with a woman named Nora. They were going to be married.

He sat up abruptly, aware of a new sound in the cave. Something metallic and purposeful, like the clink of a tool. He reached for his flashlight. The beam wandered over damp rock and came to rest on Suzi

and Iggi, both sound asleep. The sound came again. He flicked the beam around in nervous swaths, illuminating objects – the boat, the picnic table, the rusty barbecue stand, the open mouth of the tunnel. Had anything been disturbed since their last visit? No one had thought to check.

His light kept returning to the tunnel and the moldy antlers fixed above it. The passage was not very deep, Iggi had said. Most likely it was the work of one or two men operating on the sly. It sounded as though someone was in there now, chipping off warts of gold.

He crept to the entrance and probed inside with the flashlight. The passage was little more than an extended alcove, a long finger poked into the rock. The sagging roof was propped up by hand-hewn timbers, the floor strewn with metallic shapes anonymous with rust.

Puzzled, he moved inside. The walls contained no secrets, but underfoot he found a heavy grating, like the kind found in street gutters. As he bent to inspect it, a few sounds wafted upward – the scrape of a boot, a fragment of whistled tune.

Instantly he doused the light and held his breath. When no more sounds emerged, he hooked his hands through the grate and lifted it aside, then swung his legs gingerly over the edge, feeling for the short length of ladder he'd glimpsed. He tested each rung before putting his weight on it, and went down in the darkness until his foot touched solid rock. He stepped away from the ladder. He was in a long curving tunnel with narrow gauge rails embedded in the floor. The walls shone damply, like a coalface, illuminated by a faint glow from beyond the curve. As he moved in that direction, he heard voices and the rattle of tools.

Two men came into view, short and squat with pointed faces, working by

the light of a lantern. They were wearing leather aprons and hardhats too small for their heads. One of them was on his knees holding a steel wedge in both hands. The other, hefting a sledgehammer and bracing his legs, swung with all his might. A sound like a clock tolling a late hour rang through the tunnel. After several blows he stopped and wiped his brow, and retreated to a device that resembled a portable cement mixer with a bellows attached. Donning a pair of gauntlets, he raised the lid. A reddish glow suffused his face. He picked up a heavy ladle and reached inside. It came out dripping molten metal, which he poured into the crack they'd been widening.

Suddenly the men cocked their heads to one side, listening, and for a moment Hugo feared he'd been discovered. The two fellows hissed to each other, then collected their tools and flung themselves against the wheeled base of the forge, slowly edging it into motion along the track. A few minutes later they were out of sight.

Hugo hurried forward. There was a tremor, a faint vibration in the air, but he couldn't leave without seeing what the men had been up to. It would only take a moment. Crouching, he played his flashlight over the spot where they'd been working, and found an answering gleam. He bent closer. It appeared to be a freshly poured vein of gold.

Meanwhile, the vibration continued to grow in intensity until it became a steady rumbling. He got to his feet and shone the flashlight down the tunnel. A faint breeze caressed his cheek, its damp touch reminding him of something he'd overlooked till now, that he was probably below the surface of the lake. If a section of tunnel had collapsed, a wall of water could be rushing toward him this very moment. He threw himself forward, his

clothes billowing around him as though he were already underwater.

When he reached the ladder, his mind cleared a little. He rested his foot on the first rung and told himself to calm down. He was panting, not drowning. Indeed, the sound that filled the tunnel had lost its fluid quality. Now it was more like dry thunder, as though a column of troops, not water, was advancing. Again he shone his flashlight down the tunnel. Was there movement at the very edge of the light? An oscillation in the air?

All at once shapes boiled out of the darkness, a solid wave of creatures plunging toward him on furious hooves. He spurted up the ladder, hoisting his legs just as the animals swept past, pelting him with mud and dung. At the top of the shaft he tumbled out and scrambled away on all fours, feeling for the grate. When he slid it back in place, a thick vapor engulfed him, the rank fume of too many bodies pressed together in a confined space. He rolled away gasping.

When it became clear that nothing but sound and stink were following him up the shaft, he crawled back to the grate and peered through the bars. Already the noise was diminishing. His flashlight was gone, but he could just make out a trickle of motion below, a few animals' backs topped by an occasional set of antlers.

An underground caribou herd?

He stumbled into the cave, eager to blurt out his strange adventure. It was morning and a faint gray light was leaking through the outside entrance, just enough to confuse rather than illuminate. Unlikely shapes were conjoined – the boat and picnic table, the barbecue and fuel drums, Suzi and Iggi moving purposefully among the tangled sleeping bags, silent but for an occasional stifled gasp.

## CHAPTER 26

When Vincent Hatband was a kid he found a fish washed up on shore. No one had caught a thing all day, so as a joke he shoved a hook in its mouth and returned with the dead fish dangling at the end of his line. His parents were so thrilled he couldn't bring himself to spoil their fun. By the time his father cleaned the fish and his mother got out the frying pan, the whole business was out of control. When everyone sat down to eat, little Vincent said he wasn't hungry. The rest of the family dug in. Odd expressions appeared on their faces.

“Kinda mushy,” his father commented, but cleaned off his plate anyway. He was a firm believer in not letting food go to waste.

Fortunately no one got sick and Vincent's secret remained intact. After that he always scavenged the beaches for dead fish, and found enough to

maintain his reputation as a fisherman. But aside from the accolades this garnered him, there was only one other thing about angling he enjoyed. The rest he hated: the guts and slime, getting up at four in the morning, the smelly beaches and grubby shops that sold bait and rented boats. How a worm felt in his hand when he threaded it on a hook.

What made up for all this unpleasantness was his father's tackle box. He loved the way it opened up like a tiny stadium, the bleachers packed with dazzling lures and mysterious implements. The plugs and spoons and bobbers, the packages of snelled hooks, the filleting knife with its wicked blade, the jawed hook remover. At home he'd take out all the lures and play with them, admiring their bright colors and expressive names – spooks and vamps and wobblers, cracklebacks and pink ladies, river runts and daredevils. They had their own personalities – fierce, timid, clever. At school, while other boys drew pictures of tanks and warplanes, he filled his art paper with fishing lures.

Later, while he was at university, the tackle box became part of his inheritance. The first thing he did when he took possession of it was open a bottle of wine and set to work with a toothbrush, scrubbing grime out of the many corners. When he was done the box seemed radiant. It reminded him of how he'd perceived it as a child, a secret universe whose orderly compartments were filled with magic, beauty and danger.

Not long afterwards he dropped out of school and opened up a shop in Yorkville called The Artful Angler. The items he stocked had no other use than to bring beauty into the world. There were enamelled brooches and pendants, framed plugs with jewelled eyes, ceramic rods and porcelain reels. Many were handcrafted by artisans following his own designs. At night he

fell asleep anticipating the joy of sharing his artistic vision with the world.

Not surprisingly business was slow at first, but he expected that. Any new enterprise took time to establish itself, especially one that did not advertise. He preferred to sink his capital into decor and product rather than blatant self-promotion. A good reputation, he figured, was the best advertisement of all. But after several months there were still days when not a single person entered the shop. To pass the time he surfed the Net on his Mac, and engaged in the only kind of angling he'd ever enjoying, playing *Trophy Bass* for hours on end. When the emptiness of the shop became unbearable, he loitered in the doorway, staring hungrily at passersby. Sometimes he imagined holding an actual rod in his hands and reeling in customers.

It was at this point Destiny intervened.

He'd noticed a dog hanging around some of the other shops on the street, New Age joints that channelled and herbalized and flogged extraterrestrial rocks. It was a poodle down on its luck, a female with a shabby coat and no collar, cadging food. The sight sent a shiver through him, as though he'd glimpsed his own fate. Taking pity, he enticed her home with the offer of a meal, got her cleaned up, and gave her a place to sleep. She was a medium-sized dog, solidly built with a curly black coat and webbed toes. Her appreciation was sincere but restrained.

The next day he took her in for a clip, and discovered she wasn't a poodle at all but a Portuguese Water Hound, a seafaring breed that had once carried messages between ships, secured drifting cables, and herded fish into nets. The knowledge struck him with the force of an omen and as far as he was concerned, sealed their relationship. He named her Destiny, and it was her

companionship, her steadying influence, that helped him keep The Artful Angler afloat long enough for his first big break.

It came in the form of an unlikely fellow with pasty skin and dandruff-flecked shoulders. At first Hatband thought the guy had wandered into his shop by mistake. If anyone needed a herbalist, it was him. But no, what he sought was a lure made by the Bomber Bait Company.

“I’m sorry,” Hatband said tiredly. It was not the first time an angler had wandered into his shop by mistake. “My lures are not intended for fishing.”

This fellow was aghast at the thought. “The model I’m looking for was made in 1949. It’s far too valuable to throw into a lake.”

In this fashion Hatband was introduced to antique fishing lures and quickly made room for them on his velour-lined shelves. He scoured the Internet by day and hit the garage sale circuit on the weekend, accompanied by Destiny. In a few short months he put together a satisfying collection of angling artifacts. He even found a 1949 Bomber. He sailed into eBay one day and there it was. He snapped it up for a song and called the guy who wanted it. The flake said, “Is it in the original box?”

All the lures Hatband had collected were in mint condition, quite an achievement considering some of them were 70 or 80 years old. But the packaging? It had never crossed his mind. He squeezed the phone in frustration, and for some reason recalled the trick he’d played on his parents as a child. The words spouted easily from his mouth: “The original box? Of course.”

It was ridiculously easy to counterfeit, and after that his antique lures never went unpackaged. For the first time The Artful Angler showed a profit. As for the morality of it, it didn’t seem any worse than picking up

dead fish and bringing them home for his mother to cook. The lures, like the fish themselves, were genuine.

The next stage in the evolution of his shop occurred with the arrival of another customer, a mean-faced guy in a suit. He looked solid as a side of beef.

“Good day,” said Hatband. “How may I assist you?”

The man glanced around the shop as though Hatband weren't there, then joined him behind the counter.

“Hey, wait a minute,” said Hatband, backing away.

The side of beef opened the door into the back room and checked it out, then left the shop without a word. A few minutes later another man entered, a short dapper fellow reeking of cologne. The side of beef was stationed outside the door, blocking the entrance.

“I never been fishing before,” said the dapper man after a quick look around. “But I gotta go up North for a while, do a little business. I may even have to catch a fish, and I don't wanna look like a fool. So let's see your best hook.”

The man's air suggested he had little patience with obstacles, so Hatband, instead of the usual disclaimer, said, “Certainly,” and selected one of his favorites, a five-of-diamonds spoon with actual diamonds incorporated into the design. Who cared what customers did with their purchases after they left the store?

The dapper man poked at it doubtfully. “This come with a guarantee?”

“The diamonds are half-a-carat each and certified to be conflict-free.”

“Conflict-free?”

“They're not blood diamonds.”

The mention of blood caught the dapper man's interest for a moment, then he pushed the spoon aside. "No, you know what I mean. The kinda hook I want, maybe it's kept in the back room. You know, where the game wardens won't see it." He removed a moneyclip from his pocket and began peeling off bills. "How much you gonna soak me for it?"

Hatband stared at the pile of money and tried to organize his thoughts. "If you could be a little more specific? About the nature of the guarantee?"

"All right, how's this sound? You sell me a hook and every time I use it, I catch a fish."

Hatband grew very still, becalmed for a moment by the absurdity of the request. It, and the frustration of the last few months, might have overflowed into caustic comment were it not for Destiny. She'd been snoozing somewhere in the shop, and now appeared behind the counter, her muzzle finding his hand. He looked down at her. Very deliberately she closed and reopened one eye. It took Hatband a moment to understand. She was tipping him a wink, giving him a vote of confidence. Telling him to go for it. He leaned down and caressed her head lovingly. "Man's best friend," he murmured.

"Well?" asked the dapper man impatiently.

Facing him, Hatband said in a firm clear voice, "Normally I don't stock such an item."

"But you can get one for me, I bet."

"It would be a special order."

"How long?"

"Two weeks."

"Make it one," the dapper man said, and left.

Already ideas were tumbling through Hatband's mind. Electrofishing was one, sardine-shaped Semtex was another, detonated by remote control. But what he finally decided upon was a rotenone-filled canister with treble hooks mounted at each end purely for looks. A messenger at the tip of the rod, when released, slid down the line and opened a hinged lid, freeing the ichthyotoxin.

"Best of all," Hatband said a week later when he handed over the device, "the fish are safe to eat."

For the first time the dapper man looked dangerous. His nostrils inflated and his eyeballs seemed to rocket around in their sockets. "Listen, I got fish jammed down my throat every Friday when I was a kid. It's why I ran away from home. Fish makes me puke."

And with that, he grabbed his purchases off the counter – the canister, a supply of rotenone, and a dip net to retrieve the poisoned fish – and stalked out.

By the time Hatband realized he'd been stiffed, it was too late. He raced out into the street but the dapper man and his beefy henchman were gone. Perhaps it was just as well. Who knows what would have happened if he'd caught up with them? He seethed for a while, but when he finally cooled off his resolve was still intact. If anything, it was strengthened. From that point on, lures became nothing more than a commodity, a means to an end. The magic had gone out of his father's tackle box.

In deadly earnest now, determined to succeed whatever the cost, he changed the shop's name to Hookers, and published an online catalog enlivened by photos of naked women in hipwaders. He set about developing a line of illegal tackle, which he financed with sales of fake Viagra and a

few well-chosen phishing excursions on the Net. He pirated an audiotape called “Ten Steps to Fishing Nirvana,” which he picked up for a buck at a yard sale and sold under various titles, adjusted to suit the customer’s aspirations. That was how Jack Wool and his computerized lures had come to his attention. Hatband suckered him with the promise of an order, then backed out after getting a boo at the samples, which were so corny they just might work – circuit boards cut in various shapes, speckled with resistors and diodes, and powered by watch batteries in waterproof compartments. Some had glowing eyes, others twitched and jerked, and one had a retractable hook. He intended to incorporate what he liked into his growing collection of black tackle. If Wool ever discovered he’d been duped, which wasn’t likely, there was nothing he could do about it. The poor slob had failed to patent his designs. It was a fish-eat-fish world.

Meanwhile his cash flow had skyrocketed, but so had his overhead, while his profit margin remained stubbornly flat. He ransacked his brain for a fresh approach, something that would put him in the clear once and for all, and thought he found it one night when he stumbled across a Christian channel on the boob tube. A preacher spouting hellfire. Hatband nearly laughed out loud at the fish symbol on the pulpit. Didn’t the sap know it was a pagan emblem for a vulva? But then he got to thinking. Those Bible-humpers really knew how to sop up money. Why couldn’t he do the same? Deliver a series of thundering lectures that promised fish instead of salvation. Angleism instead of evangelism. He’d wear a white suit. He’d have people up on their feet, waving their rods in the air and shouting his slogan, “Get reel! Get reel!”

He was still working out the details when he overheard a couple of

customers mention the world record for largemouth bass. Twenty-two pounds and a few ounces. Whoever broke it, they said, would reap a million bucks in endorsements and appearances. The prospect of such wealth and adulation sent Hatband's mind spinning off in a new direction. The record had stood for decades and was unlikely to be broken, though people had devoted their lives to it. But what about other species? Why waste time chasing bass when other game fish were substantially larger? After all, that's what it was all about. Size. He imagined setting off into darkest Canada for lakes that were terrifyingly deep. His guide would be a toughened veteran of the fish wars, skeptical at first, watching with disdain while Hatband ran through a few tai chi routines on the morning of battle. When they cast off from shore and Hatband revealed their destination, the guide would blanch and say, "Not there! No one ever goes there!"

"Precisely." And they would head out to a spot so deep and remote that even Grendel might find it appealing.

The more he dwelt upon it, the more possible it seemed. Finally he roused himself and fired up his Mac. A quick search on the Net for a suitable lake – one that was large, remote and deep – brought up Great Slave. He remembered Jack Wool.

A thrill went through him then, a certainty that this was the right thing to do, that a fish was there all right, not a measly pound or two over the record, but an absolute monster, a behemoth, one that would make his fortune and immortalize his name. And with the devices he kept in the back room, the enterprise would be no more difficult than, say, going for a stroll along a beach and picking up a dead fish.



At the Yellowknife airport a solidly built man with a low forehead approached him, hand extended. “Vincent Hatband? I’m Jack Wool.”

They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, sizing each other up. Both were clad in suits, Wool looking somewhat lumpish in wide lapels while Hatband’s boutonnière and folded silk handkerchief gave him a touch of class.

“Everything set for tomorrow?” Hatband asked.

“Plane’s booked, gear’s ready. So are my lures. I can start shipping any time you want.”

“As soon as we get back. That’s the deal, right? You’re guide and outfitter first, supplier second.”

“Right.” Wool stopped. “Hey, didn’t you say there’d be two of you?”

“I did. Here she comes now.”

The luggage track started up with a clank and the first thing out of the chute in the wall was a cage. Hatband lifted it off.

“How’s my girl?” he crooned as he edged through the mob. “My pet? My doggie darling?”

Wool was at his elbow, not so friendly now. “A dog? You didn’t say anything about a dog.”

Hatband set the cage down. “Is there a problem?”

Wool’s forehead slowly uncompressed. When it reached its normal limited size, he said, “No, no problem. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting a dog.”

“I don’t go anywhere without her. Besides, she loves boats.” But no

sooner were the words out of his mouth than Hatband realized Destiny might never have set eyes on a boat, or for that matter a body of water larger than a bathtub.

Wool, as though reading Hatband's mind, looked as if he were going to explode into savage laughter, then abruptly busied himself with the rest of the baggage. They drove into town in Wool's truck, all three of them packed into the front seat. Wool was still scowling and Hatband's mood was deteriorating. It was one thing to sit in Toronto and plan a wilderness excursion, quite another to actually do it.

To begin with, Yellowknife was not the quaint log cabin village he expected. It was a rough unlovely place with swaybacked streets and trailer park ghettos, surrounded by scraggly trees and ridges that had a raw scraped look. He wondered how people could live in such a place. Humanity, whatever its origins, was now an urban species, and places like Yellowknife were anomalies that would either die out or evolve into proper cities.

The motel was a disgrace. No doorman, and the person at the front desk made a fuss about Destiny, which wasn't resolved until the manager appeared. Hatband had some choice words for him. Later, when he came downstairs to eat, he spotted a menu posted by the entrance to the Lost Explorers Lounge and nearly gagged. He wasn't expecting haute cuisine, but this... Lichen salad and fishbone consommé. Roast boot and something called "long pork." Tinned gristle with lead sauce.

He could only guess what the dining room was like. He returned to his room for Destiny and together they ventured outdoors. There had to be at least one deli in town that sold a decent pâté. Vain hope! The town was a nuthouse, the sidewalks thronged with louts and mutts, all of them shaggy,

shabby, and unnecessarily loud. When a drunk with a face like a swollen purple fruit blocked their way, he veered from the main street and became disoriented. During his wanderings he came across a lake, one of several within town limits, which had once been a sewage lagoon. Nearby was a street sign with, appropriately enough, the word “Ass” on it.

Eventually he found a grocery store but the selection of goods was pathetic. Even the bottled water looked murky. The only thing he could bring himself to buy was a tin of cream biscuits. He called a cab and returned to the motel and tried to get some sleep, but the day remained stubbornly bright. Light leaked around the curtains, brilliant as flashbulbs. When he called room service for a sleep mask, none could be found.

Morning found him in a churlish mood, ready to call the whole thing off, especially after getting a look at the plane that Wool had chartered. The bloody thing was named after a rodent, which hardly inspired confidence. Why not an Eagle? A Falcon? Christ, even a Chickadee would have been better. The pontoons were half-full of water and needed to be pumped out, the seats little more than folding chairs. As the plane took off, Hatband closed his eyes and harbored unkind thoughts about his parents for introducing him to fishing.

Somehow the plane lifted into the air and Yellowknife diminished to a minor abrasion in the landscape. There was an interlude of rock and forest, a jigsaw of lakes, an algal stew of bogs and ponds before the East Arm appeared. Wrinkles crawled across its surface with a lacy confection of whitecaps. As the plane circled lower, the wrinkles expanded until they were humping along like rabid beasts, gnashing their teeth upon the shore.

The plane banked toward a great talon of land that sliced through the East

Arm, and set down in a long sheltered bay. The plane was rapidly unloaded and sent on its way, and Wool got to work making camp. Meanwhile Hatband strolled down to the shore's edge and tried to entice Destiny into the water. He splashed his hand invitingly and tossed in sticks, even a cream cracker, but the beast remained stubbornly indifferent. Hatband frowned. Perhaps she was a poodle after all. He wondered if he could get her into a life jacket.

"I could use a hand here," Wool sang out.

"Sorry, I don't know anything about tents," Hatband replied, and proved it by looking inside once Wool got it up. "There's only one room."

"Tents don't have rooms," Wool snarled.

"So where are you going to sleep?"

Outside, it turned out, since Hatband refused to share the tent. He also spurned the meal Wool cooked up, a pot of fish chili made with a freshly caught trout. Instead he fashioned one from his own supplies, freeze-dried lasagna and imported wine crystals. The bowl of chili that Wool offered him he gave to his dog. Immediately Wool leaped to his feet and stalked away. He returned carrying a rifle.

"What's that for?"

"Bears."

"Put it away, will you? I don't like guns."

"I don't like dogs."

"You think I'm enjoying this? If I can stand your company for a day, you can put up my dog for that long."

"We'll be out here longer than that."

"Not if I can help it. Take a look at this." He hauled out some of the

gear he'd brought with him. "Sonar to locate the fish I want and a remote-controlled hook to bring it in. See, there's a miniaturized video camera in the nose. I can fly it right down a fish's throat."

Wool set the rifle down. "Sounds interesting."

By the time they turned in a few hours later, they were on a first-name basis and discussing plans for a Yellowknife branch of Hookers.

## CHAPTER 27

Hugo persuaded Suzi and Iggi to stick it out a few more days, with disastrous results. A trio of thuggish fishermen lured them alongside, then came up swinging solid oak priests, truncheons used to brain fish. Only quick thinking by Suzi saved them from being boarded. She cranked open the throttle and for an instant the three fishermen were suspended in midair between the two boats. As they went into the drink, one of them snaked out a hand and dragged Iggi in.

Suzi kept going. When Hugo realized she wasn't going to stop, he turned and watched the three men clamber back into their boat. They shook themselves like dogs and laughed. Of Iggi there was no sign.

On the far side of a promontory, out of sight of their assailants, Suzi beached the boat. "Don't worry," she said, "he'll be fine." She stationed

herself behind a fallen tree and kept vigil until a ripple and a splash announced Iggi's arrival. His head popped up, then the rest of him appeared, water sluicing off in sheets as he staggered ashore. He was shivering with cold. Suzi met him with a blanket and a hug.

"Iggi," she said tenderly.

They got him into some dry clothes, poured hot coffee down his throat, and set off for the cave. No one spoke. There was no need to state the obvious: the raids were finished. The only question for Hugo was whether he would return to Yellowknife or bail out at Fool Bay. Neither option appealed to him. It was pretty clear his relationship with Suzi was over. As for Yellowknife, he had no desire to return to a past stage of his life. He was a different person now with no allegiance to his previous incarnation.

Back at the cave he moped around with his hands in his pockets while Iggi packed up and Suzi prepared a farewell meal, their last in the East Arm. She'd been hoarding several tins for this purpose – ham, potatoes, and peas – brought out months ago with the fuel cache.

"And since we're heading back tomorrow," she said, producing a small box that had been carefully hidden away, "I thought a toast would be in order."

The box had a spout. Iggi let out a whoop.

Disgusted, Hugo wandered over to the tunnel and stood beneath the moldy antlers to ponder his future. Perhaps he could stay behind and do a bit of exploring. Track down the stubby fellows he'd seen, and try to figure out what they were up to. Some sort of scam? Salting a played-out mine?

Grabbing a flashlight, he slipped inside the darkened mouth and knelt at the grate. The flashlight's beam showed pools of water on the floor of the

tunnel below, and walls that gleamed as though they'd been washed down. No sign of caribou, of course. When he'd mentioned them to Suzi, and said he was thinking of staying behind, she'd merely looked thoughtful.

"Food's ready," said Iggi, appearing at the entrance with a cup. "Wine?"

"No thanks."

Iggi saluted him and sipped. "These tunnels are pretty old," he said as they withdrew. "I wouldn't wander around in them."

Suzi was forking sliced ham out of a frying pan. "You've heard about mad trappers? In the old days there were lots of mad miners too. Some of them built locks so they could flood their workings if anyone came snooping around."

Iggi drained his cup and dug a fist-sized hunk of rock out of his jacket pocket. "This is an ancient part of the world," he said, handing the rock to Hugo. It was striped like a zebra. "That's tonalite gneiss from a craton just north of the lake."

"Craton?"

"A really old chunk of the continent. You're holding a piece of the earth's original crust. Four billion years old."

Suzi spooned potatoes and peas out of a common pot. "You never know what you'll come across out here. Remember those strange fish you caught in the winter?"

"Sure."

"Relicts from an earlier era," said Iggi between gulps of wine. "Just like this rock."

"Or sports," Suzi added.

Hugo thought she was referring to anglers. "You mean those so-called

sportsmen from the lodges?”

“Not that kind of sport,” she replied with a laugh, and told him a story as they ate.



Back in 1978 she was living in Lutselk'e, or Snowdrift as it was then called. One day a stranger arrived by canoe. His name was Tucho and he had some disturbing news. Big trouble was headed their way, a poison that no one could see or hear. It would make people blind. They would sicken and die.

What shall we do? they asked.

Don't worry, he said. I have medicine for this particular problem, but it will take all my strength. Give me a tent to live in and bring me a fish head every day to eat. You may hear strange sounds coming from the tent, but don't worry about it. Whatever you do, don't look inside. Is that clear?

The people agreed and set up a tent for Tucho. No one saw much of him after that. Every night they placed a fish head outside the tent, and in the morning it was gone. Sometimes they could hear him making medicine inside, but usually he was quiet. This went on for a long time and people began to grumble.

How do we know we can trust this fellow? Why should we keep giving him free fish heads? Maybe he just sleeps all day.

The next morning there was a terrible commotion in the tent. Tucho appeared and he was very angry. He shouted at them.

I was nearly done. Most of the poison has been taken care of, changed into something harmless. But before I could finish the job, someone looked inside the tent and my medicine escaped. Who was it?

No one said anything.

This poison is very bad. It will melt your bodies. It will turn your children into monsters.

The people were very afraid. Please help us, they cried. Is there nothing more you can do?

I have several kinds of medicine, but nothing as powerful as the one that escaped. I'll see what I can do.

He returned to the tent and did not come out till dark. He was very tired, and he was carrying something in a moosehide bag.

Stand back, he said. I could not get rid of the remaining poison, so I rolled it into a ball and put it in this bag. Now I must take it to a place where it will do the least harm.

He walked into the darkness toward the lake. People heard a splash and Tucho was never seen again, though his canoe remained on shore.

(Suzi paused for a sip of tea, and Hugo said, "So who looked in the tent?")

("Wait, I'm not finished.")

Not long afterward a group of soldiers approached the village wearing masks and yellow suits. They took readings with handheld instruments and left. Later a meeting was called. A general addressed the people.

A satellite has fallen out of the sky, he told them. It disintegrated over the North-West Territory spreading radioactive debris across the lake and into the Barrens.

Don't worry about it, he said. We're going clean it up.

("Cosh-mosh," interjected Iggi, his speech getting a little mushy. He reached for the wine box.)

(“Kosmos-954,” said Suzi. “A nuclear-powered Soviet spy satellite.”)

The largest and most deadly pieces had fallen into the East Arm, and for the rest of the winter the sky over Great Slave was full of unfamiliar aircraft prospecting for fallout – Hercules flying search patterns, Chinooks and Twin Hueys marking hot spots with dye-filled condoms. Soldiers popped up everywhere, shovelling snow into garbage cans. Contamination was found as far away as Hay River and Pine Point, where the Arctic Winter Games were being held that year. A warning about eating bones was issued.

Still, there was nothing to worry about.

The cleanup continued into summer, but despite the massive effort, less than one percent of the reactor core was recovered. The official view was that most of it burned up on re-entry, but no one knew for sure. It was thought to contain 110 pounds of enriched uranium, but there could have been more. The Soviets were coy about details.



“Twenty years,” said Hugo. “Not enough time to cause mutations in fish, if that’s what you’re getting at.” Then he remembered his own attempt to produce a new variety of mosquito. The element he’d used, americium, had come from the spent fuel rods of nuclear reactors. “Insects, maybe, but not fish.”

Iggi wagged a finger at him. “Fosh-ill re-akter.”

The phrase suggested an image of glowing dinosaur bones. “What?”

“There’s one in Afer-ka, buried in an akwa-fer.”

Suzi translated. “Apparently there’s a uranium deposit in West Africa

that began to fester away on its own. It happened when uranium was much more abundant than today. Enrichment wasn't necessary for fission to occur."

"So?"

"There's lots of uranium around here. What if there's a similar deposit at the bottom of the East Arm, where the water and the pressure could moderate a chain reaction?"

"Highly unlikely."

"Trooth is stranger than fission," Iggi decreed and toppled over.

Hugo tried to help him up but Suzi said, "He'll just fall over again."

"He drinks like a fish."

"Swims like one too," she said fondly.

They went to bed soon after, but Hugo lay awake thinking while the others drifted off. He was no stranger to fantastic stories, having heard them whenever he'd visited a community to propose a mosquito study. Villagers would listen, give input, and decide whether or not to allow a research permit to be issued. Invariably mention would be made of prophets, evil spirits, talking animals, and giant beavers. Such tales distressed him on several levels. They lacked symmetry, and had a surreal element that went contrary to his training and education.

Still, community involvement was vital to his work, so he made an attempt to arrive at some sort of accommodation with the tales. At length he decided they were a way of offering advice without being confrontational. Harmony was essential for people who lived in isolated close-knit groups. Instead of issuing orders, they told stories. It was a non-scientific way of storing knowledge gained through centuries of experience. Places to avoid,

situations that were dangerous. The embellishments themselves were unimportant, a smokescreen almost.

Nora had challenged him on that. “That sounds so patronizing. Besides, their stories are no wilder than Greek myths. I mean, look at Bulfinch.”

He thought she was talking about some mythical creature, half-bird, half-bull. “Never heard of it.”

“Science is a just another human construct, useful but not infallible.”

“So I should believe in giant beavers?”

“No, just sacred cows. Science is one of them.”

Hugo was taken aback, knowing how deeply committed Nora was to her work. “How can you say that? You’re a scientist.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.”

“Than what? And who’s Horatio?”

“An old boyfriend.” Then, seeing the bewildered look on his face, she’d laughed and given him a hug. “I’m teasing, Hugo. Watch this.”

She drew a line on a sheet of paper, added a point above it, and handed him the pencil. “Now you draw another line. It has to be parallel to my line and it has to go through that point.”

When Hugo was finished she said, “Is that it? Only one?”

“Of course, it’s self-evident.”

“Not in saddle-shaped space.”

He groaned, recognizing the reference to hyperbolic geometry and the Lobachevski who’d made an end run around Euclid. “Not Nikolai again.”

Thinking about her brought back a hatful of other memories. The sound of her laugh, and the slightly cross-eyed look on her face when they made love, and the happy arguments over which had killed more, malaria or the

plague. He remembered skating past her houseboat on some mad mission and seeing her silhouetted in a window. She must have missed him dreadfully. All at once his mind was made up.



In the morning he told Suzi of his decision, and she nodded her head in agreement. “We were afraid you were going to stay,” she said.

“I got the message. By the way, you never mentioned who looked in Tucho’s tent.”

“A little girl who didn’t know any better.”

They extricated Iggi from his sleeping bag and loaded him into the boat. Hugo propped him up beside Suzi, wrapped a tarp around them, and took up position in the stern beside the old Johnson Sea Horse. They’d decided to skip breakfast and get an early start. In a few hours they’d stop somewhere to eat.

He squeezed the bulb in the gasline, gave a few tugs on the rewind starter, and steered the boat out of the cave. Another dull day, but the wind in his face felt good, and the waves chopping at the metal hull made a pleasant sound. He opened up the throttle and headed down the bay, a wall of limestone on their left, a low sloping shore on the right. Presently the two constricted into a narrow passage called The Gap, with ancient shaggy cliffs rising up on either side. It was the sort of place a U-boat might lurk, the far end guarded by Fortress Island, its name bespeaking its appearance. Beyond stretched the open lake. The sky was banked with smoke, the air heavy with the odor of burnt wood. The water looked muddy.

They emerged from the bay and continued west, now hugging the shore of a long talon of land on their right. The chop gave way to longer swells that made the world rise and fall around them. Suzi and Iggi huddled together, heads bowed, snoozing probably. Hugo's own mind was pleasantly adrift. He watched the travelling shore, noticed an eagle in the sky, and gazed at a dark speck up ahead, low in the water like a loon, bobbing in and out of sight. His thoughts turned to Nora again. He imagined her surprise when he climbed up the ladder to her houseboat and enfolded her in his arms. "You were right all along," he would breathe into her ear. "About marriage and kids. We don't need them to be happy. I've been a fool."

The speck drew nearer. Realizing it was no bird, he reached for the binoculars. His ears flattened against his head. Two men in a Zodiac. Correction, two men and a dog, heading in the same direction as Hugo and company, keeping the great expanse of open water to their left. They didn't seem to be fishing.

He lowered the binoculars and twisted the throttle slightly to close the distance between them. There was something odd about Zodiac, though he couldn't say what. Gradually he overtook it, coming close enough to get a better look without the aid of binoculars. One of the men was wearing an ascot. He glared at Hugo.

Hugo smiled and eased off the throttle a little. They had fishing gear, all right, but of a type he'd never seen before. Something very much like a TV was mounted on one of the gunnels. If it was a fish finder, it was the biggest one he'd ever seen.

The two boats continued in tandem for a while, skirting the underside of

the peninsula, then the Zodiac veered away, heading straight out toward the middle of the East Arm. Without thinking, Hugo turned with it. One of the men in the Zodiac looked back. When he realized Hugo was still following them, he spoke to the other fellow and both of them began to shout and shake their fists. Hugo just smiled.

Suzi lifted her head. "What's going on?"

"Couple guys in a Zodiac up ahead."

"So?"

Hugo shrugged. "Be nice to end the summer on a positive note."

Suzi inspected the Zodiac for a moment, then stood up and looked around. Already they were nearly out of sight of land. The sky was a solid bank of smoke. "Are you sure this is a good idea? Iggi's not feeling well."

"Just look at them. One guy's wearing in an ascot."

"But what do you plan to do? Skulk after them till they catch something? They're not fishing."

"Let's just see what happens."

Iggi roused himself and looked around with bloodshot eyes. "Maybe they're not fishermen."

"No," said Suzi, "I can see a downrigger. They're going deep."

The land dropped away and the waves turned into oceanic swells that rose and fell with impressive regularity. One moment the water made a valley, the next a hill. The sun was a hunk of molten slag that turned the water's rippled surface into hammered bronze. The air tasted of fire and smoke, yet all around them was nothing but water. It was as though the world had been reduced to its most elemental form.

The Zodiac slowed and one of the men leaned over the side of the boat,

cradling something in his arms. The object, as it slipped into the water, looked more like a weapon than a lure.

“No hooks,” said Hugo. “Did you see that?”

“Maybe they’re scientists,” said Suzi. “I’ve never seen a reel that big.”

The Zodiac began paying out line, while one of the men crouched over the TV, operating a joystick.

“They’re just circling. Iggi, how deep is it here?”

“I don’t know. Half a kilometer.”

Hugo brought them in a little closer. Occasionally a scrap of oar floated across the water.

“I’ve got a funny feeling about this,” said Suzi.

“Yeah,” said Iggi, “let’s clear out.”

“Wait a minute,” said Hugo. “I think they’ve got something.”

The Zodiac lurched and line began stripping off the downrigger’s spool. One of the men lunged at it, activating the brake. The spool slowed down, reversed its direction, and churned away for several minutes. Then it stopped without warning and the line went slack. One of the men shouted, pointing at the monitor’s screen, while the other tried to push past him. At the same time the dog began to bark. The two men continued to push and shove, but whether they were squabbling or just getting into each other’s way, it was impossible to tell. Suddenly the dog flew over the side of the boat, either pushed or leaping of its own accord. The men separated, and one of them came up with a rifle.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” said Iggi,

The man with the rifle put one foot on the rounded side of the Zodiac and leaned over the edge. He started firing into the water just as something

slammed into Suzi's boat. Hugo felt himself being tossed into the air, arms and legs whirling.

Not again, he thought as he crashed into the water.

## CHAPTER 28

Danny was just sitting down to a meal of peanut hulls, beet pulp, and spray-dried chicken when a car pulled up outside.

“About time,” he grumbled. A woman from the insurance company had called earlier to announce the arrival of a check. She apologized for the delay and offered to send it over by taxi. It was the long-awaited reimbursement for repairs he’d made to the trailer. Using money from his first case, he’d had the roof mended. The Pitbull was next, if he ever landed another case. Freddy had kindled brief hope when he showed up again at Trail’s End with a scrap of newspaper in hand.

“Guess what? Government’s looking for a detective.”

Danny didn’t believe him at first. He was more concerned about the giant fishing plug Freddy had dumped on the lot. “You have to get rid of it.

Stu and Donna won't be on vacation forever.”

“Forget about them, and feast your eyes on this.”

It was a piece torn from *The Blade*. Danny examined it suspiciously, but for once Freddy was telling the truth. The government really was hiring a detective.

“The pay's great,” Freddy said, “and think of all the perks. Coffee breaks, sick leave, and if someone punches you in the mouth, there's a dental plan.”

Danny filled out an application, and waited with dwindling hope as the summer droned on. The TV glowed with happy improbable dicks who were spoon-fed a weekly diet of crime, while Yellowknife remained remarkably innocent of foul play. Ekati had been operating for nearly a year, yet there'd been no crime wave, no daring heists or suspicious characters in double-breasted suits and diamond stickpins, shoving people off sidewalks. It was very disappointing.

Food at least was no longer a problem. With the arrival of summer, Danny had given up crashing funerals and returned to his old staple. He'd become something of a gourmet, turning up his nose at Milk Bone, Kibbles 'n Bits, even Gravy Train. Now he dined exclusively on fare that was extruded in small batches, free of hormones and preservatives, rich in antioxidants, omega acids, and chelated minerals. Just reading the list of ingredients was enough to make him salivate: chicken digest, fish pulp, tomato pomace, wheat middlings, dried kelp, cheese butts, steamed bone meal.

Outside, a car door slammed.

He rose from the chesterfield, dipped his hand into a bowl of herbal mini

chunks, and moved to the window. There was a taxi in the driveway, and a woman with a red mouth and monumental earrings was headed for the steps. He met her at the door.

“We’re back,” she said.

He looked at her quizzically. “Where’s the check?”

Instead of answering, she pushed past him and marched inside as though she owned the place.

“Hey,” he said as the taxi disgorged a second person, a bulky figure in a tracksuit who dragged four suitcases out of the trunk. He shoved one in each armpit, and jammed his paws through the handles of the remaining two.

Stu.

Gulping, Danny retreated inside. Surely Stu would understand that the damaged Pitbull wasn’t his fault. He squared his shoulders and hitched up his pants, but as he was assembling an explanation he heard a gasp from the hallway. Donna was becalmed in front of the spare room. The door was open. Her mouth too.

“Welcome home,” he babbled.

The trailer shuddered as she turned her face toward him. Stu was mounting the front steps. “Use the side door,” she urged. Her earnestness suggested that anything other than flight was a waste of time.

“Good idea.”

But the door, seldom used, was balky, and he fumbled with the handle. By the time he got it open, he could hear suitcases thumping down in the living-room.

“There’s no steps,” Donna warned as he threw himself out the door. The drop was a short one, but capable of twisting an unwary ankle. Groaning, he

hauled himself up and limped to the front of the trailer, praying the taxi was still there. It wasn't, of course, and now in addition to the pain in his ankle there was a ringing in his ears. He hobbled down the driveway just as a shout scalded the air. He cut across a weedy expanse of lawn, only to lose precious seconds by catching his foot on the anchor attached to the giant fishing plug. Cursing, he picked himself up and carried on, but by then footsteps were pounding after him. Explosive gusts of air struck the back of his neck. There was a final menacing grunt, a moment of silence, and he was mowed down by a crunching tackle. A hand seized his collar and jerked him upright. He found himself face to face with Stu. He closed his eyes.

“Telephone,” Stu said.



The Diamondiferous Building was a recent addition to the town's core, only three stories tall but with 58 exterior surfaces resembling the facets of an ideal-cut stone. The entrance area was called a pavilion and overlooked by security cameras. A guard escorted Danny to an office on the top floor. A bald man in a hockey jersey looked up from his desk. On the wall behind him was a hideous pink char.

“Dan Diamond,” he said, “we meet at last.”

“We do?”

“I'm Harvey Brassclick. I meant to have you in sooner, but there was a problem with your application. It got shredded by mistake. Took us half the summer to put it back together.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Not your fault. You're taller than I expected.” He squinted at a rumped

sheet of paper. "Midget detective, it says here."

"Budget, sir. Cheapest rates in town."

"Ah, I see. So what kind of cases do you handle? Divorce work? Runaways? Stolen bicycles?"

"That's confidential, sir."

"Good, discretion is important. What about shadowing a suspect? You know how to do that?"

Danny answered without hesitation, for he'd seen it done many times on the detective channel. "Yessir."

"Can you tap a phone?"

"Been doing it since I was a kid."

"Shake a tail?"

"Absolutely."

Other questions followed, but the only one that gave him pause was the last. "You know how to handle a kicker?"

"Sure," he replied with more confidence than he felt. He hated fighting.

"Good, there's a little problem out on the East Arm I want you to investigate."

"You mean I've got the job?"

"I'll give you a contract for the rest of the summer. Don't forget to pack a rod."

Danny gulped. A contract? "Guns make me nervous, sir."

"Guns? Who said anything about guns?"

◇◇◇◇

Back at the trailer, Stu dragged Danny into the spare room and insisted they pose together beside the Pitbull, its dented gas tank looking like a caved-in skull. After Donna snapped a photo, Stu broke out a bottle of tequila he'd brought back from Mexico. There was a worm at the bottom, fat and white. It tumbled and swirled when he filled Danny's glass.

"Did I pick the right guy or what? We come home and there's a missile in the front yard."

"Fishing plug," said Danny.

"And our house-sitter's a private eye!"

"Public eye, actually. It's a government job." Danny could hardly believe his luck. He'd been issued maps, camping equipment, a boat and motor, a satellite phone. It had all happened so fast.

"What's the case?" Stu asked.

"All I can say is that it involves fish pirates in the East Arm." He unfolded one of the maps. "By the way, where is the East Arm?"

Stu pointed it out. "Take you a day or two to get there, depending on the weather. Only you can't follow the shoreline, too many reefs. You want to take the outside channel. Just follow the buoys."

Danny nodded. It seemed straight-forward enough, especially after a slug of tequila. "I'll leave tomorrow, soon as I pick up some supplies."

"Fish pirates," Stu said wistfully, and refilled their glasses.

Danny spent the night on the couch and awoke to the aroma of steak and eggs. He scarfed down everything on his plate and wiped it clean with a heel of toast. He was anxious to get started.

"Stu still in bed?"

"Here he comes now," Donna replied as a Land Rover pulled into the

driveway. It had been stashed in a garage somewhere. Danny hopped in and Stu chauffeured him around town, picking up supplies charged against standing purchase orders. At a government compound they took possession of an 18-foot Lund with a 50-horse outboard and drove to the public boat launch in Old Town. Stu backed the trailer into the water, while Danny floated the boat off and moored it to the dock. Together they rolled a 45-gallon drum of gas aboard and stowed the supplies. It was around this time that Stu began to express misgivings.

“Say, what’s all the dog food for? And how long are you going to be out there? An 18-footer can be tough to handle alone, especially if the weather’s bad.” He watched Danny yank away at the outboard. “You gotta prime it first. You’ve used a kicker before, haven’t you?”

“A kicker?”

“Outboard motor.”

“Sure.”

“What happens when you catch one of them pirates?”

Danny indicated an aluminum case they’d loaded earlier. “That’s what the satellite phone is for. I call for reinforcements.”

Stu remained skeptical. “Wait a sec.” He went to the Land Rover and returned with a tackle box. Kneeling at the edge of the dock, he opened the box and removed a nickel-plated .22 revolver. “Better take this along.”

The weight of it in Danny’s hand was disconcerting. “Why do you keep a gun in your tackle box?”

“Lots of big fish in this lake. Friend of mine caught a 50-pounder once. Got it in the boat all right, but the more he clubbed it, the wilder it got. Tail hit him smack in the face and knocked him out cold. When he woke up, it

was gone. Wouldn't have happened if he'd had one of these."

"But what if you miss and hit the boat?"

"That's the beauty of a .22. Small holes."

Danny shook his head. "Thanks, anyway." He handed it back and starting flailing away at the outboard again, and this time it spat and gargled. Slowly the boat lumbered away from the dock.

"Use the depth finder," Stu called out.

Danny waved and headed down the bay, past Con mine on the right and Detah village on the left. The land fell away on either side, crumbling into a maze of islets, and the lake came forward to meet him. The water roughened. Waves no longer parted gracefully, but pounded the boat and flung sheets of spray over him. He wiped his face and drew on the parka he'd been issued. Now and then other craft passed by, speedboats with windshields, fiberglass yawls, sailboats and freighter canoes, but these diminished in number as the day wore on. Doggedly he bore eastward, following the buoys like a line of breadcrumbs. Sometimes he had trouble picking them out, and paused frequently to consult his map until a gust of wind ripped it out of his hands.

When the light began to fail, he beached the boat on a small island and tried to get a fire going, but the wood was damp and the matches would not stay lit. Finally he ate a can of cold dogfood and crawled into his sleeping bag, pulling the tent over him like a blanket. Sometime during the night it began to rain. The tent blew into the trees and he awoke in a soggy sleeping bag. Getting up to fetch some dry clothes, he discovered the boat was gone.

It had been too heavily laden to haul out of the water, so he'd tied it to an exposed root. Sometime during the night the knot had come undone. He

stood shivering on shore, squinting at the waves as though the boat might suddenly appear if he looked hard enough. Finally he began collecting driftwood, but his brain was so numb from cold and misfortune that it took a while for an insistent sound to register. It was an odd rhythmic clunking. He dropped the wood in his arms and barged round a point.

In the next bay, the boat was thumping gently against the rocky shore.

He splashed after it with a shout of relief. There was a foot of water in it, which had to be bailed out before he could heave it to safety. He unloaded everything except for the drum of gas, but even then the boat would only come partway out of the water. The rest of the day was spent drying out his gear and rebuilding his resolve. After a single night on the lake his map was gone, he'd nearly been marooned, and the simplest tasks were turning out to be more arduous than expected, like refilling the gas tanks. He had to heave the 45-gallon drum to an upright position in the boat and hold it there while sucking on a hose to siphon out the gas. Towards evening his spirits were revived by dry clothes and a fire-blackened steak.

Morning arrived with the lake so calm, the sky so chaste, that he skipped breakfast to take advantage of the weather. Right away a new problem presented itself. There was no buoy in sight. He headed off in a vaguely eastern direction, but when a half-hour passed and still no buoy appeared, he swung about to retrace his route and found himself facing a solid line of islands. The rest of the morning was wasted in useless blundering. He tried to reconstruct the lost map in his mind, but the only thing he could remember were the many warnings of foul ground and magnetic disturbance. Finally he gave up and headed eastward again. He would arrive in the East Arm eventually. All he had to do was keep an eye on the depth finder and

watch out for other boats, from whom he could ask directions.

As though in response to this last thought, a cabin cruiser appeared in the distance. Danny sprang to his feet, waving both arms. Presently the craft altered its course. As it drew nearer its sleek lines were distorted by a tube-like device on the port side, giving the vessel a warlike appearance, like some sort of torpedo boat. When it came alongside, a familiar face appeared at the railing.

“Hey Budget, how’s it going?”



The *Edna* was a trim 28-footer with an aluminum hull and mahogany trim, powered by twin inboard/outboards. The cabin was equipped with a folding table, propane fridge and stove. An opening next to the steering console revealed a sleeping area under the foredeck, with two bunks curved against the bow. Danny sank back on a covered bench with a mug of coffee. Freddy’s miraculous appearance, welcome though it was, brought with it an unsettling epiphany. “I’ve been in Yellowknife for a whole year,” he said, “and what do I know about the North?”

Freddy grinned. “Dick all?”

Why had it taken him so long to realize that Freddy was no mere street bum? “You really *are* married.”

“Sure.”

“And you have a son and you live in the Adventurer Motel.”

“Right. Hey, that reminds me.” He lowered his head through the opening into the sleeping area and called, “Tyrone,” but there was no

answer. He looked in the cupboards beside the fridge, then stepped out of the cabin and gazed around the tiny afterdeck. He stooped to lift the engine well hatch cover, revealing a pair of MerCruisers. “Four-point-three liters each. They’ll do 30 knots.”

“What would Tyrone be doing in there?”

“He likes to hide.” Freddy replaced the hatch cover and turned his attention to the giant fish plug lashed to the narrow stretch of deck on the cabin’s portside. He’d cut away part of the boat’s chrome railing to make room for it.

“What’s that for?” Danny asked. “Another parade?”

“You told me to get rid of it, remember?” Freddy opened a hinged panel in its top, and the face of a little boy appeared, pale and blinking. Freddy lifted him out. “Thought I’d find you here.”

“Wocka wocka,” said Tyrone, clutching his GameBoy.

Back in the cabin Danny outlined his assignment while Freddy fried up some fish. He diced an onion and sautéed it in butter, then added chunks of trout sprinkled with pepper. The flesh was a deep orange.

“Fish this good, you don’t cover up with batter,” Freddy said. For Tyrone, he warmed up a tin of Alphagetti and placed a couple spoonfuls on a plate, which he set inside a cupboard. Tyrone crawled in and closed the door behind him.

When they finished eating, Freddy sat down in the captain’s chair and started the MerCruisers. He eased the throttle levers forward, taking up the slack in the line that fastened Danny’s boat to a stern cleat.

“Where we headed?” Danny asked. The question was a tacit acknowledgement of the change in their relationship.

“The East Arm.”

Had it been, “Home,” Danny would not have objected. “What are our chances of solving the case?”

“None,” said Freddy happily. “The lake’s too big. Your boss knows that. Best thing to do is sit back and enjoy the scenery. Catch a few lakers.”



They kept close to shore and trolled all the way to the East Arm. Freddy said they didn’t have to go deep for trout because the lake stayed cold all summer. Besides, he couldn’t swim.

He’d brought along a thicket of maps, but never referred to them. “The charts are wrong anyways,” he explained. There was a fish finder attached to the stern of the boat, which he used to check water depth. As for his tackle, it consisted of a few barbless hooks, a chipped rod with a missing eyelet, and a cranky spincast reel that ate monofilament line. He baited his hooks with whatever was handy – eyeballs, string, flagging tape, a sock with a hole in it. Once he simply spit on the hook. Another time he nicked his finger and dripped a bit of blood into the lake. One night he soaked his hooks in a jar of fish slime. For every 19 casts, he caught 20 fish.

At least that was how it seemed to Danny. His own luck was spotty at best, and after a while he noticed he never got a bite unless Freddy’s line was in the water too. Probably the fish went after his hook by mistake, thinking it was Freddy’s. Most spat out the lure or tied a knot in his line before he could land them.

“Fishing is all in the head,” Freddy explained. “You’ve got to think like

a fish. Imagine what it's like down there. Visualize them taking your hook."

He reached into Danny's tackle box. "Now tell me, does this look appetizing to you?"

The lure was sleek and blue, shaped like a minnow, with a transparent dive plate in its mouth.

"I guess so," Danny said.

Freddy chucked it overboard. "See, that's why you never catch anything. If you think it looks good, don't use it. Fish don't have the same taste as we do."

"So I should only use crappy hooks?"

"The uglier the better, but it's not just that." He wagged his fishing rod. "You've got to think of this as a magic wand. You cast spells with it, not hooks. Watch."

He tied a teaspoon to the end of his line, flicked it into the water, and promptly got a bite. He gave the rod a few gentle tugs and looked thoughtful. "About seventeen-and-a-half pounds, I'd say." When he brought it up to the boat, they saw that the fish had clamped its teeth around the spoon and refused to let go.

"Lake trout are dreamers," he said as he bashed it over the head. "That's why they're so easy to catch. They're curious about what it's like up here. They'd give anything to drive around in a boat."

They'd reached the East Arm by then, and the scenery was getting as improbable as Freddy. and islands that tilted like sinking ships. The sky was veiled in smoke, yet the water was so clear trout could be seen lazily swimming away. The sun hung in the air like an orange party lantern.

Danny, remembering he was supposed to report in when he arrived in the East Arm, dug out the satellite phone. Inside the aluminum case was a keypad, speaker, microphone, and telephone handset. He dialed Brassclick's number and a torrent of unearthly sounds poured out of the speaker, words and tones sizzling on a cosmic griddle. Suddenly a voice sliced through the static.

"This is your satellite operator. We're experiencing technical difficulties. One of our satellites is down. Please try again later. Your call is important to us."

Danny snorted and hung up, and was about to close the case when he noticed Tyrone watching him intently. "Want to take a look?" he asked, offering the microphone.

Most of Tyrone's time was spent inside the giant lure. When he did emerge, he liked to sit beside the fish finder, gaze at the tiny icons swimming across the screen, and work the buttons.

"It's all right," urged Danny. "Go ahead."

Tyrone held the microphone in his hand, clicked a few buttons, and placed the handset against the GameBoy as though encouraging the two devices to communicate. When his interest waned, he stared out at the lake with the bag of game cartridges in his lap, deliberating what to play next. His hand dipped into the bag and came out with *Day of the Tentacle*, and he retired to his nest in the lure.

Danny boiled up a pot of coffee. He poured two cups and handed one to Freddy. "Where are we?" he asked, looking at a hydrographic chart.

"Redcliff Island. Tomorrow, if the weather's good, we'll cut across this stretch of open water and make for..." His finger moved across the map.

“Fortress Island.”



The next day the smoke from distant forest fires was particularly bad, thick as soup, and the taste of burnt wood was catching in their throats. The horizon was hidden, the air was flecked with ash, and the sun glowed like a volcano. The boat rose and sank on oceanic swells.

“I hope you know where we are,” Danny said as he compared GPS readings with a topo map.

“Those things aren’t very reliable, you know. They have a built-in inaccuracy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re right,” said Freddy, shifting the engines to neutral and stepping out of the cabin.

“What are you doing?” Danny asked, following him.

Freddy untied the rope that held the giant lure in place. “We’re over the deepest part of the lake.”

“So?”

Freddy opened his mouth to answer, then frowned and looked around, the rope still dangling from his hand. His features grew keen as he scanned the humping swells and featureless air. The sparse hairs on his upper lip bristled.

“You hear anything?”

Danny listened to the quiet burbling of the motors and the sound of water rinsing the hull. “Nothing,” he was about to say when the air was split by several sharp reports. His eyes expanded in their sockets.

“Gunfire!” he shouted.

It was followed by a confused medley of barking, shouting and thumping, then abrupt silence.

Freddy threw the motor into gear and the boat surged ahead. He navigated by some magic of his own, angling this way and that over the endless swells, until at last a hat floated by, and a loaf of bread in a plastic bag, and a 5-gallon gas container. Then, coming over the next swell was something larger and less recognizable, an overturned rubber boat with its outboard motor sticking straight up in the air. A second boat appeared, upended as well but surrounded by a flotilla of bobbing objects. Several people were clinging to the hull.

“There!” shouted Danny.

Freddy reduced speed and calmly surveyed the wreckage, his eyes flicking here and there. He leaned over the gunnel and dipped his hand in the water. He raised the hand to his nose and sniffed. His eyes widened.

“Freddy, let’s go.”

“Wait a minute.” He offered Danny one end of the rope he’d just untied. “Fix this to the lure.”

“Never mind about that, Freddy. We’ve got to save those people.”

“That’s what I’m doing.” He pushed Danny out of the way and scrambled into the bow, leaning out over the water. He fed one end of the rope through a ringbolt at the front of the lure and tied it off in a bowline. Then he hurried back to the stern and fastened the other end to a cleat on the transom.

“Watch out for the anchor,” he said as the lure went over the side.

Danny suddenly realized what he was up to – making room in the boat.

The lure remained alongside for a moment, then the rear started to sink, dragged down by the anchor. Freddy rushed to the motor and eased open the throttle. The rope tightened and for a moment the lure was alongside Danny's boat, then it swung past.

“Watch this,” Freddy said, a feral glint in his eyes.

But before he could put into action whatever crazed scheme he had in mind, a terrible thought struck Danny.

“Where's Tyrone?”

Freddy staggered back as though struck by a blow. He looked around wildly, then whirled and threw himself into the water.

## CHAPTER 29

None of them was wearing a life jacket, but that didn't explain why Hugo went under so quickly. Something had to be dragging him down. He jettisoned shoes and emptied pockets, but could not bring himself to release the banded rock Iggi had given him. What if it really were four billion years old? Or, as Iggi had called it, the original rock? A standard tenet of evolutionary biology was that life on earth had somehow sprung from non-living things. Could the rock be his ancestor?

Meditating on this profundity, he sank gracefully into the darkness. His life was not flashing before his eyes, but unwinding like a newsreel in reverse, taking him backward in time. He arrived in Yellowknife, toiled through university, lay in a hospital bed while his legs mended, did a frog-kick in his mother's uterine sea. His body was deconstructing, being refined

down to its most basic constituents, until there was nothing left but the magic kiss of life, the mating of two cells.

One of the wilder ideas he'd encountered in university was the theory of continuous creation, an attempt to explain the expansion of the universe by the spontaneous formation of hydrogen atoms throughout the depths of space. It had seemed a ridiculous theory, something more suited to astrology than astronomy. But now it seemed to Hugo no less preposterous than the millions of human embryos that daily popped into existence in womb-space.

Atoms or embryos, was there any difference?

His former self had viewed the world as an orderly place. The unknown was merely the unmapped. His new self held a different view. Scientists might catch the world in a net of invisible lines, but they could never be sure they were harvesting reality and not themselves. A lipogram was as meaningful as a seismogram, the paradox of the ravens as relevant to ornithology as to logic. Math was a human myth, physics a point of view. Justice, truth, and beauty were trees that fell unheard by other ears. Every being was a chimera. At heart the universe was a mystery.

He looked down at his legs, the skin shiny and crinkly like glaciated rock. Because of them he'd never learned how to swim. Soon he would reach the bottom of the lake, where his body would in time be silted over and invaded by minerals. His bones would become fossils. Or in hundreds of millions of years the carbon in his body might be folded beneath the earth's crust, where it would be squeezed and baked, then shot to the surface in a blunderbuss of magma, transformed into bort, carbonado, and diamond.

A new Poisson distribution.

As he mused upon these things, a phosphorescent speck appeared in the watery firmament beneath him. It expanded with an undulating motion, rushing upward with immense speed until it blotted out everything else. He felt a nudge, a reversal of motion. Slowly at first, then with increasing velocity, he felt himself being propelled upward, swept along by the sudden current. There was a roaring in his ears and a rushing bubbling disturbance all around him, as though he were a spacecraft re-entering the earth's atmosphere, temporarily held incommunicado by an envelope of ions. His mind bulged.

A silvery membrane appeared directly ahead of him. Embedded in it like a toy was the Zodiac's hull. Just before he exploded into the air, he saw bullets drilling downward, hyphenating the lake. Then he was gasping and sputtering, and the next thing he knew Suzi and Iggi had hold of him.

"It's okay, we've got you," said Suzi, hatless for the first time since they'd met.

They moved purposefully through the water escorting him back to their boat, which was swamped but still afloat. They hoisted him inside and told him to start bailing, while they clung to the gunnels. His teeth rattled with the cold.

The water was a shabby gray, rising and falling in huge sleepy swells. The Zodiac appeared in a nearby trough, floating upside-down and escorted by its former occupants, who were now clinging to its side. Their life jackets made them look like accessories of the rubber craft. Bobbing in the water beside them was a dog. A gull drifted overhead like a pirate eyeing a wreck.

All at once the men began to shout. The dog barked briefly, then

vanished beneath the surge. A shape rose out of the water, long and gray, humping itself into a smooth glistening length. There was a moment of frozen silence, the illusion of stillness, until it became clear the shape was still in motion, not holding its position but uncoiling new portions of itself as it breached the surface. An appendage sprang out of the water, a fin or a flipper. Attached to it was the dog, firmly anchored by its teeth.

The scene dropped out of sight. What happened next was like a badly edited movie, chunks of it excised by the intervening swells. When the action resumed, the stage had been swept clear of all but the two men from the Zodiac. They were frantically making their way toward the boat in which Hugo sat like Archimedes in his bathtub. Suzi and Iggi conferred in low tones and released their hold on the gunnel. The space between them and the boat widened.

“What are you doing?” Hugo chattered.

The lake heaved, shifting players into position for the next scene. Suzi and Iggi were shuffled offstage, the two men from the Zodiac were positioned closer to Hugo, and another boat was introduced. Rescuers, he assumed, until he realized the newcomers were ignoring the people in the water. Rather, they were deploying what appeared to be a giant fishing plug. But no sooner had it splashed into the water, than something went catastrophically wrong, for one of the men suddenly threw himself over the stern. He seized the rope that tethered the giant plug, and then the scene dipped out of sight once more.

When it reappeared, the man in the water was just hauling himself aboard the sinking plug. He threw open a hatch and looked within, but it was impossible to tell whether he found what he was looking for. He straddled

the plug, hooked his hands over the hatch's lip, and yelled out something. The words floated across the water, and like everything else that had gone before, they made no sense at all.

“Troll, Budget, troll.”

Once more the scene dropped out of sight. When it returned the two men from the Zodiac had just reached Hugo. The boat tilted as their faces rose above the gunnel, slick and menacing, pleased to confront their pursuer at last. “Flip you for it,” one of them said, but Hugo wasn't listening. He was still scanning the waves.

The giant fishing plug was gone.

## CHAPTER 30

Donna was doing the washing up when she heard the news on the radio, a boating mishap in the East Arm. The survivors had been brought in by helicopter. Removing her apron and rubber gloves, she roused Stu from the sofa and they drove to the hospital, where they waited patiently until Danny was released. They took him back to the trailer, plying him with steak and tequila before he dozed off. Donna made up a bed in the spare room alongside the Pitbull. When he awoke a day and a half later, the first thing he said was, “Have they found Freddy?”

They knew by then the broad details of the incident. There was an account in *The Blade*. Four people missing, all presumed dead. Three of them, two men and a woman, were as yet unidentified. The fourth was Mr. Frederick Tapebeck, who’d leapt into the water under the mistaken notion

that his son had fallen in. Mr. Tapedeck did not know how to swim and was not wearing a life preserver. The boy, Tyrone Tapedeck, had already been reunited with his mother, who'd flown in from Iqaluit.

As for the two men rescued by Danny, they'd issued a joint press release thanking the Coast Guard for their speedy response to the distress call placed by satellite phone. They also took the opportunity to announce the opening of a new tackle shop in Yellowknife. That one of them was the fraudulent businessman from the Border Café made Danny feel all the worse.

"You did what you could," said Stu. "Nobody could of done better."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want," Donna added.

For the next few days Danny said little, but there was a faraway look in his eye. Most of the time he holed up in the spare room, staring out the window or reading *The Diamond Sutra*. Occasionally he heard Stu raising his voice when a reporter came calling. One, more persistent than the rest, tapped on Danny's window late at night and called out questions about Ol' Slavey, until Stu sent him away holding his jaw.

"It's time to move on," Danny said the next morning.

"Where?" Donna asked, thinking he meant other accommodation.

"Down south."

Their objections were met with quiet conviction, and gradually changed to offers of a plane ticket. The most he would agree to was a lift out of town.

"I need to be on the road again," he said. "I need to think. Hitchhiking is good for that."

On the morning of his departure Donna cooked up a gargantuan breakfast, pancakes topped off with sausages and eggs. Danny tucked away

what he could, and accepted a brand-new packsack with a clean change of clothes inside, plus a few northern delicacies to munch on – muskox jerky, a box of pilot biscuits, and jars of blueberry compote and jellied moosenose.

They got into Stu's Land Rover and headed out of town. There'd been no mention as to where they would part company, but when Stu said, "We'll take you to the border," it seemed a sensible destination. The tires hummed, the trees slid by agreeably, and the Land Rover whittled away the miles. The road was like a tonic, a meditation that calmed the spirit. When a bison appeared in the middle of the road, no one remarked upon it. Stu applied the brakes, bringing the vehicle to a respectful halt. The bison stood its ground, watching them carefully as if to divine their intentions, then stepped aside to let them pass.

At the border they went into the café for a final coffee. The place was empty but for several rough-featured men, all smoke and dreams, jawing in the corner. They were talking about diamond pipes. According to one of them, De Beers had grown tired of sitting on the sidelines and was about to make a move.

"Watch and see. They'll snap up a property and bring it into production. It'll be mine number three, after Ekati and Diavik."

Stu reached into his shirt and set a poke on the table. "Personally, I'd stick with this," he said.

Danny picked it up and felt the weight of it in his hand. He opened the drawstring and looked inside. "Gold dust," he said.

"A little something to keep you going. A grubstake."

Danny considered it briefly, then shook his head. "The Tathagata has said, that which is treasure is not treasure. Therefore, it is treasure."

Stu shrugged.

Outside they shook hands and Donna gave Danny a hug, before he trudged across the border. The last they saw of him, he was sitting on his pack by the side of the road, *The Diamond Sutra* open on his knees.



Back home, Stu said, “I’ve sat around long enough,” and donned his steel-toed rubber boots and bibbed rainpants, his hardhat and the canister-laden belt. When he was ready, Donna handed him his lunchbox.

“Tongue-and-pickle sandwich,” she said. “If you see any mushrooms, bring some back.”

She watched him switch on his headlamp, duck through the closet, and lower himself into the shaft. When he was out of sight, she retreated to the living-room and set up an ironing board in front of the TV. She was feeling as restless as Stu. It wasn’t just Danny’s departure. It was the town itself, some subtle but important change they’d noticed on returning from their extended holiday. Noticed, but were unable to put their finger on. New buildings had sprung up in their absence, not just the Diamondiferous Building. There was also a diamond-sorting plant and a cutting and polishing facility, both at the airport. But it wasn’t only that. There was always new construction going on in Yellowknife.

True, the price of gold had dropped below \$300 an ounce, a near historic low, and Giant mine had shut down after 50 years of operation, but gold’s influence on the town had been diminishing for quite a while. There was something else, something intangible...

She put down the iron and cocked her head to one side, listening to a distant rumble. She thought it was an explosion at first, an underground blast, and felt a surge of concern for Stu. But the sound kept growing louder and louder, as though it were coming right down the street, raw and deep-throated. When it reached their driveway and stopped, she recognized it for what it was. Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. The front door opened and someone stepped inside. Donna remained where she was, the iron raised like a weapon. A man came round the corner, a bulky guy in a jean jacket with the sleeves ripped off and a cobra tattooed on his face. Oily hair leaked from a steel helmet with a spike on the crown.

“Donna,” he said, his face lighting up. “I thought I had the wrong place.”

“You do.”

“Nice dump you got here. Say, I haven’t caught you at a bad time, have I? I can come back later, if you want. I know how Stu hates it when his hankies aren’t ironed. Where is he, by the way?”

“What do you want?”

“A cold beer would be nice. It’s a helluva lot hotter up here than I expected.” He stepped into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and returned with a bottle. He pried off the cap with his teeth.

“You don’t have to do that anymore,” she said. “You can just twist it off with your fingers.”

He looked at her boldly. “You’ve put on weight.”

“And that tattoo looks ridiculous. Why don’t you just tell me what you’re doing here?”

He tipped back his head and drained the bottle in a single long gulp. “Club’s moving north,” he said with a belch. “We’re opening a chapter

here.”

“It’s got nothing to do with us. The past is over and done with.”

He smiled, revealing a tiny diamond embedded in one of his incisors.

“Now that’s the interesting thing about the past, Donna. It ain’t never over.

Tell Stu I’ll be seeing him.”

He dropped the bottle on the floor and walked out.

PART 4

# Y2K



Yellowknife

## CHAPTER 31

Jonah had a radio in his cabin, a small metal box with chipped green paint. It was a battery-operated Spilsbury & Tindall, a single-sideband radio with microphone, squelch control, and dipole antenna. Every night he turned it on and listened to people who were camped out on the land. Sometimes the voices swelled and faded, or were blotted out by static. Sometimes he picked up transmissions from as far away as the new territory of Nunavut. Sometimes there was just an eerie wavering hiss, an aetherial music almost, as though he'd tuned in to the Northern Lights.

He loved the radio, for it spoke to his spirit in a way that other modern appliances did not. Its magic matched his own understanding of the world, of the lines of invisible force that linked all living things. Sometimes, when he lay in bed at night, his spirit would fly out the window and weave through

trees like an owl, or soar on ghostly radio waves over the undulating tundra. He would note where a moose had bedded down, or a new beaver subdivision was springing up. He could see boats speeding across wrinkled lakes, and far beneath their keels rich pools of fish.

But when summer came, smoke from distant fires wrapped the sun, ash floated down like snow, and the land looked strange under the filtered light. His dreams grew muffled and radio reception turned bad. His gillnet was acting like the radio: tuned to the wrong channel. He'd trimmed away the ragged middle section and stitched the ends together, reducing its length by half but still maintaining a serviceable size. Nevertheless, no matter where he set it, its lacy folds seldom produced a fish. Perhaps he'd cut out its heart, or perhaps the man he'd caught in it had exhausted its magic. Over his long life he'd heard similar stories. A kettle that no longer boiled. A rifle that went bad, refusing to strike down anything except its owners.

In September the last of the lingering smoke was swept away, but his dreams remained clouded. When people asked his advice about the fall hunt at the edge of the Barrens where the dwarf birches turned red as fire, his words were toothless. When winter came, his snares stayed empty and only a few animals entered his deadfalls. Radio reception remained feeble. He bought new batteries, and when that did not help, he took the radio in for repairs, paying for it with a single marten skin.

The fellow behind the counter was short and round; he snapped the cased fur expertly. "Our technician has done what he can for your radio. You know, you ought to consider switching to a cellphone. This model here, it'll fit in your pocket and do a heckuva lot more than a single-sideband radio. We're talking fax and email, text messaging, three-way calling, and

customized ring tones. Go ahead, try it out. See how light it is.”

Jonah looked down at the cellphone, which the salesman had placed in his hand. It reminded him of the toy that Tyrone had played with. As he stared at it, a couple of lanky teenagers sloped up to the counter. Their hair was glossy and their features sharply handsome. Their jackets hung open and their shirts were unbuttoned halfway down their chests. Their knuckles were stained with inky letters applied by a tattoo gun made from a Bic pen.

“Hello grandfather,” said one.

The other took the phone out of his hand and placed it on the counter.

“No good for the bush.”

The salesman widened his eyes. “Oh, he lives in the bush? Well, maybe he’d be interested in a GPS or a PDA? We’ve got palmtops the size of a credit card, folding keyboard, expense tracker, currency converter...”

The boys retrieved the radio and escorted Jonah out of the store. “My sister went out with that guy once,” said one of them. “She said he powders his privates to make them smell nice.”

“Aiyee!” Jonah cried, clapping his hands together in astonishment. The boys laughed.

“It’s full of people like that, people who never leave town. They think being in the bush is like going to a summer cottage.”

On the mushy sidewalk outside they joined a steady stream of skiers, briefcase-wielding businessmen, and tourists in color-coordinated snowsuits. There wasn’t a single face among them that Jonah recognized. Not so long ago he’d known everyone in town.

“Where do they all come from?” he asked. “They’re like lemmings.”

“It’s the economy, grandfather. It makes people swarm.”

“Economy?”

“It’s like bingo with guns.”

“Aiyee!”

“You can’t trust anyone these days. Just walking down the sidewalk can be dangerous.”

The boys stopped, looked up and down the street, then pulled Jonah into an alley. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

One of them flicked open a knife, while the other peeked round the corner. “There are people in town you must watch out for, grandfather. Here comes one now.”

A man appeared for a moment in the mouth of the alley, a bulky fellow wearing an overcoat with an astrakhan collar and a fur hat that engulfed his head. As he passed by Jonah caught a glimpse of his face. It looked like a well-travelled piece of luggage.

“Stay away from that one, grandfather.”

The knife returned to its pocket, and they to the sidewalk, just as the man in the fur hat sent a skier sprawling with a well-placed elbow. The man continued on to the street corner, where he was joined by a fellow with a tattooed face and another who managed to look dapper even in a parka. The three of them made a great show of hand-shaking and back-slapping.

“It’s safe now, grandfather,” said one of the boys. They left the alley and escorted Jonah to the snowmobile parkade, started up his SnoRoller and handed him the radio. “Mahsi,” they said, shaking his hand and then each other’s for good measure. “Mahsi, mahsi,” they said, laughing and bowing.

“Make sure you lock your door tonight, grandfather,” they said before strolling away, their chests still exposed to the freezing air.



Back at the cabin Jonah set up the radio and turned it on, but it worked no better than before. The static seemed slightly louder, that was all. Frustrated, he switched it off. He was beginning to think the problem lay with himself and not the radio. After all it was the fate of old men to decline, for their strength to fade and their eyes grow dim. He knew his human span must soon draw to an end, yet his grip remained firm, his back strong. He could still break trail all day with snowshoes.

No, it wasn't a question of physical vitality, at least not yet. Rather, it was as if the world had switched to a different wavelength, or was operating on a new set of principles. Sometimes it felt as if he'd been swallowed up by the times. Surrounded by things he did not understand – cellphones, videogames, flying canoes.

He had not thought of the flying canoe in a long time. Had Freddy failed to dispose of it? Could that be the cause of his distress?

He got to his feet and went to a shelf on the wall, a single plank of shaved spruce. It held a gilt-edged bible, a cribbage board, a bottle of liniment, a tin of Sportsman tobacco, and some game cards that Tyrone had left behind. They were stacked like poker chips. He looked at the labels but the words meant nothing to him: *Katharsis*, *Meat Puppet*, *Three Dirty Dwarves*.

He pried open one of the cartridges with a knife, revealing a tiny circuit board embossed with a runic design. He ran his thick finger over the silvery lines. Such magic they contained! An entire world in the palm of his hand, a world he did not understand.

He thought of Tyrone then. In the past, parents had often left children in his care, hoping he might awaken in them a nascent power. The practice had dwindled of late, with Tyrone being the first in many years. But the boy had proved a mystery. Not empty of medicine, of that much Jonah was certain, but it was a kind he knew nothing about.

Reassembling the wafer, he bored a hole in one corner with a hand drill and looped some sinew through it. Then he reached inside his shirt and removed a scapular he'd worn for decades. It was made of soft brown cloth. There had once been a picture on it, St. Francis of Assisi preaching to a flock of birds, but it had long since worn away. Father Brown had given it to him many years ago, long before the church was built. The priest had celebrated Mass in a tent and instead of hosts used thumb-sized pieces of dried caribou meat, which he placed on people's outstretched tongues at communion time.

Jonah held the scapular in one hand, the game card in the other, as though weighing the merits of each. Well, why not? He'd switched from dogs to snowmobile, musket to high-powered rifle. The world would not stand still just because he was growing old.

He drew the game card over his head.

## CHAPTER 32

It started out with games. He played them obsessively, climbing, jumping, shooting, looting, chopping, maiming, saving. It didn't take long to discover there were hidden attractions. If you pressed a certain combination of keys and typed in a codeword, you would be granted invulnerability or unlimited ammo. The codeword might be the name of the programmer's girlfriend, or his favorite restaurant, or a string of gibberish. Discovering the cheats became more fun than the games themselves, and shifted his focus from playing to modding. He created new skins for his favorite games, and new landscapes using built-in level editors. He learned how to disassemble programs and rummage through their contents, altering certain bytes and breaking copy protection.

He began skipping classes. The school tried to contact his parents, but

his mother and father worked long hours and spoke little English. He rarely saw them himself, and usually only late at night when they'd tell him to go to bed. "I can't, I have to save the world," he'd reply, and they'd nod uncertainly and retire. Probably they thought it was homework. Canada was such a strange country.

One day a teacher cornered him at school and, concerned about his absences, asked him straight out if he'd joined a gang. When he nodded, the teacher looked as if she were going to weep. Another life ruined. He didn't tell her it wasn't one of the gangs that controlled the marijuana trade in East Van. It was a virtual bunch called the Hackencrack Crew. They traded warez and indulged in Internet vandalism, trashing personal webpages and working their way up to government and business sites.

Exhilarating stuff, but it was also shortlived. As soon as he realized that his e-buddies were interested in nothing more than braggadocio and senseless destruction, that they would never mature beyond the level of warez dudes and script kiddies, he quietly left the group and prowled the Internet alone, honing his skills and exploring banks and military installations for the pure fun of it, and strolling the electronic hallways of Microsoft's Redmond campus as easily as Bill Gates himself.

By then he'd become something of a polyglot, absorbing languages with childlike facility, picking up what he needed in order to tweak existing tools or develop his own. He conquered Visual Basic without batting an eye, moved on to C++, then tackled Assembler. He was looking for a language that did not trade speed for ease of use, clarity for efficiency. Finding none that suited him, he wrote his own. He grew impatient with the sloppy bloated code that other programmers got away with, thanks to speedy new

chips and the ever-expanding capacity of hard drives. Fed up with Windows, he wrote his own operating system.

Then he graduated from high school.

A typo on his diploma, Pfang instead of Phang, appealed to him, and before accepting a position with a software joint in the States, he had his name legally changed.

He worked on a number of games – *Warhog*, *Dragonslobber*, *Atomic Chicken* – putting in the requisite easter eggs, some of which he forgot about until years later when he dusted off the games and went for a scroll down memory chip lane. He moved on to a company called Reality Software, creating a 3D graphics engine for them and receiving a pay stub every second Friday. Reality checks, people called them. It was one of those witticisms that programmers take such delight in. He would have walloped cards for the pleasure of it. Well, for a few weeks anyway.

Afterwards he moved away from gaming companies and worked on more sober projects, seldom staying longer than six months at a time. What he remembered most about them was their codenames. Baudbarf, Tourniquet, Millennium. For a while he was with the R&D Division of a company that peddled antivirus software; his job was to write and disseminate new viruses. He wrote a data miner for a dot-com startup, and implemented a product key database for a Wall Street company, and developed an encryption algorithm for a defence firm. Finally he wound up at NASA debugging software for an upcoming Mars mission. By then he was growing tired of working for suits and set up his own consulting firm, DataPoop. His rates were astronomical, but he offered a money-back guarantee if he failed to meet a deadline.

He crunched through billions of lines of code before suffering his first setback. It came on a trip to Tokyo. He boarded his plane with a Japanese primer in hand, after assuring his employer that he would arrive with a working knowledge of the language. He'd always been able to absorb huge amounts of data in short periods of time. Japanese, he figured, could not be any worse than Lisp, or dog forbid, APL. But he was not prepared for the triple whammy of syllabaries, Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. He was still debugging them when he arrived at Narita. "Konichiwa," said his contact, and all he could answer was "Moof!"

It was the first time he'd ever failed to perform as advertised, and from that point on his cockiness began to leak away. The classic software boners no longer seemed quite so hilarious – the baggage handling fiasco at Denver airport, or NORAD's radar system mistaking the moon for an incoming missile, or F-16s flipping on their backs when they crossed the equator.

His speed slowed, his nerve began to crack. He stopped saying, "That's not a bug, that's a feature," when a bank lost millions in cyberspace, or another satellite whizzed off into the unknown because of a missing NOT statement. Stealthily he gathered programs responsible for the most horrific accidents, in order that he might ferret through them and understand what had gone wrong. His private library included code from the Patriot missile system, whose rounding error allowed a Scud to take out an army barracks in Saudi Arabia; from Therac-25, a cancer radiation machine that had burned holes in patients; and from a Japanese auto plant where a worker had been assassinated by a robot.

As the century wound down, a new bug raised its chitinous head, the Y2K problem. Knowing as he did the fallibility of software, the glitches in

the uncountable trillions of lines of code that made the world go round, he began to fear the Y2K bug would act as a fuse, igniting a cascade of catastrophes when the century rolled over. He looked around for a quiet spot to hunker down in and chose Yellowknife. Remote but not impossibly so, handy to an unlimited supply of water and protein, which needed no infrastructure to survive; big enough to marshal essential services in a time of chaos, yet not too big to collapse under its own weight; in short, it was an ideal location in which to go to earth. What clinched it for him was Yellowknife's local handle. He would ride out Y2K in YK.

Before heading north, he went to Vancouver to collect his parents and found them, as per his instructions, packed up and ready to leave. They'd divested themselves of home and business and looked like refugees again, wizened oldsters in cheap cotton clothing and straw hats as big as cymbals. Their luggage consisted of three bamboo valises bound up with rope. At the airport their behavior was childlike. They had a tendency to wander off, and when they reached the Air Canada check-in counters, they refused to join the line.

"Wrong place, wrong place," they kept saying, and showed him their tickets.

He opened them up, scarcely believing what he saw. "Singapore Airlines?"

Their minds were made up. They'd had enough of Canada. Vancouver was too cold and didn't get enough rain. Its dragon fruit failed to measure up. They missed the temples and floating markets and bamboo forests. It was time to go home, to return to the land of their ancestors. Everything was arranged – passports, visas, shots.

When they suggested that he come too, a surprising thought entered his mind. His parents were survivors. His mother had been pregnant with him when they left Saigon in a leaky boat. Were they fleeing another calamity?

“I can’t,” he said. “I have to save the world.”

They nodded sadly.

And so he headed north alone, consoling himself with the thought that if he failed, if the sky did fall, his parents would probably be safer in rural southeast Asia than the industrialized West. In Yellowknife he slotted himself into a vacant government position with a few taps of the keyboard, and immediately set to work invading computers around the globe, plastering them with Y2K patches. He was in the midst of subverting a file-sharing program called Napster, thinking he might be able to use it for his own ends, when his new boss reminded him of certain assigned tasks, including the untangling of an urgent problem.

“Dehose it yourself,” Pfang said.

A defining characteristic of government work is its glacial pace. Even getting fired takes time. Eventually Pfang received a pink slip, but he paid no attention to it. He simply reinstated himself. When he showed up at work the next day, Brassclick was flabbergasted.

“You’re out of here,” he said.

“No, I’m not.” And sure enough all references to his firing had been deleted from government files.

This scenario repeated itself several times before Brassclick got the error message: waste of time, waste of time. After that he kept his distance, though he must have sensed he had a genie under his command, at least nominally. One day he said to Pfang:

“You know, we’ve got a lot in common. You deal with programs, flow control, record management. So do I. The only difference between us is the hierarchies we handle. You hack code, I hack people. We’re both bureaucrats.”

Pfang said nothing. The MP3 files he was infecting would soon spread their DNA around the world.

“So I was thinking, if a project came along that really interested you, we could work well together.”

Pfang still gave no sign he was listening. His fingers danced across the keyboard.

“You probably haven’t noticed, but the latest government fad is downsizing. Stupid, of course, because pretty soon the pendulum will swing the other way and we’ll start hiring like mad. But no matter, at present the government is keen on slicing itself to bits, and part of my job is to help facilitate it. So far it hasn’t been terribly successful, because while it’s easy to cut positions, the same amount of work remains. But just the other day a solution occurred to me: virtual government.”

Pfang stopped typing.

“Reduce entire departments to an Internet presence. The idea would have to be tested out first, but fortunately I’ve just been transferred to a bureau that’s losing its relevance in today’s business-oriented world. It’s become an obstacle. No one would mind seeing it disappear up its own ass. What do you think? Are you interested?”

It was exactly the sort of challenge that Pfang could not resist. What better place for the government than on the Internet where it could be freely accessed by all? It would mean true democracy at last. There would be no

back rooms for politicians to scheme in, no corridors of power to walk down. The intervening layer of bureaucracy would be transparent. Eventually the Prime Minister would become nothing more than a sysop, a webmaster, bowing to the will of the people.

So Pfang accompanied Brassclick to the Bureau of Wildlife, and spent the first few months there gathering information. He'd always thought of biology as a sloppy science, and evolution – a brute force method of biological engineering – as inelegant. Well, he couldn't do much about the latter, but he could put biology on a sounder footing by removing the middle men. He'd dealt with field servoids before and knew their effectiveness was inversely proportional to the time they spent out of the office. Fieldwork may have been unavoidable in the past, but at the end of the 20th century there were more efficient ways of gathering data. Ground truth was an oxymoron.

He began by compromising various spy satellites that swung over the Arctic, and developing algorithms to extract what he needed. It was all there, information on birds, ungulates, furbearers, waiting to be plucked or skinned or mounted in whichever way desired. He put in 80-hour weeks, working at home all night and going to the office only to sleep, converting positions to programs, automating the collection and analysis of data. When it was finally done, the biologists had been reduced to a handful of EPROMs. The sole mistake he made was allowing Brassclick to talk him into using a cruise missile for caribou surveys. The information it collected was worthless, corrupted somehow, suggesting that caribou were lurking underground.

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The year 2000 arrived, but no planes fell out of the sky, no cities ground to a halt, no nations collapsed. How much of this was due to his own efforts, he couldn't tell. Had he misread the danger, or had it been nullified in time by the parasite he'd released into the planet's digital bloodstream? The feeling of anticlimax was heightened by Nora's absence. He'd been a little in love with her, and too late regretted his role in expunging her position. Of all the biologists she was the only one who'd left the North. The others had been snapped up by diamond mines, and at much better pay, where they conducted studies and monitored environmental impacts. He still bumped into them from time to time.

Now it was mid-January and he was heading off soon to visit his parents. He wore a fishhook in his nostril these days, and had assembled a shrine in his office celebrating four traditional emblems – dragon, unicorn, phoenix, and tortoise. He was cultivating a Fu Manchu moustache. Time hung heavy on his hands, so naturally his thoughts turned to revenge.

He dwelt in a bachelor apartment unremarkable except for a matching pair of fridges and an untidy heap of computers, each running a different OS. One was overclocked and used a coolant system instead of fans, another was rigged with foot pedals and a tachometer, and a third was hooked up to a hacked VCR, which he used as a clandestine tape drive, storing his work on video cassettes that revealed nothing but static when played. He made daily backups using five tapes and a schedule that allowed him to recover data up to a month old:

ABAC ABAD ABAC ABAE  
ABAC ABAD ABAC ABA

A mathematical rhyme whose elegance delighted him no less than its name:

Tower of Hanoi.

As for the extra fridge, it was jammed with racks set inches apart. The racks held cookie sheets and the cookie sheets were solid with what looked like currants. Only they weren't currants, they were big fat houseflies. He'd paid neighborhood kids to catch them in the summer. It had taken a bit of experimentation to get the temperature setting right, but after that the flies had snoozed peacefully all winter, held in low-level stasis by the cold. Every week he'd taken a bottleful to work and decanted them in Brassclick's office.

A sweet irony, the software guru propagating real bugs, but he'd got out of the habit when Brassclick moved from the Carboniferous Building. Now, with Nora gone and the world apparently safe, he could think of nothing better to do than inflict a fresh plague upon his boss. No Y2K bugs? Okay, Pfang would introduce a few of his own, ones that were significantly more nasty than houseflies.

Late one evening, well past the time when any cleaning staff would be present, he disabled the Diamondiferous Building's alarm system from his apartment and set off with a tin box beneath his parka. The town lay quiet under a blanket of ice fog, a sure sign of bone-chilling cold. Icicles dangled from the ends of his moustache. The growth was coming along nicely, he thought, and entirely appropriate since he was, by default, the last biologist. Should he let his chin sprout as well?

He entered the building through a back door using a key he'd hacked. The place was dark and clearly empty, which should have been reassuring; instead it seemed to emphasize the need for stealth. He decided to skip the elevator and use the stairs, but soon regretted it. The stairwell reminded him

of a mineshaft and smacked of claustrophobia. He hurried up it and was out of breath by the time he reached the third floor. He paused among the ghostly shapes of desks, and noticed that his boots were leaving glistening damp spots on the floor. As he stared down at them, wondering if they'd dry by morning, the elevator made a noise, a soft rattle of doors three floors below, followed by an approaching whirr.

He fled down the hallway and threw himself behind a filing cabinet just as the elevator clanked to a stop. The elevator doors hissed open and the overhead lights flared. Footsteps approached – two men jostling words. Brassclick's voice he recognized, but not the other. It was thick and heavily accented.

“Nice place you got, Kanada.”

“Listen, Yermak...”

They walked past and entered Brassclick's office, leaving Pfang to consider his options. He could sneak down the stairs and return another day to unleash his bugs, or stay where he was and wait until Brassclick and his pal had left. Each course of action held its own dangers. He wasn't used to skulking around in the flesh.

Of course, there was a third option. He peeked around the filing cabinet, then scuttled forth on hands and knees, picking his way among the desks like a crab. He approached Brassclick's office from a safe direction.

Downwind, he thought with a grin.

“You get missile, yes?”

“No,” Brassclick said.

“This piss of pepper, is your signature, yes?”

“No.”

“Kanada, be fissionable.”

“I tell you –”

There was a sudden scuffling, a wet meaty smack, a gasp.

“Is simple,” continued Yermak in a reasonable tone. “You will dig, but not for diamonds. For information. Here, we toast.”

There was a liquid gurgle and the clink of glasses, followed by “Perestroika!” and deep exhalations like the venting of steam. Then the two men came out of the office, Yermak in a dark coat with an astrakhan collar and a monstrous fur hat on his head. His arm was heavy on Brassclick’s shoulders.

“What is called? Mouse? Rat? Cute animal living in ground, always digging.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Yermak halted and withdrew an electronic translator from his pocket. “Your gift to me, Kanada. Remember? Is how I learn English. Otherwise, I am still in Yakutsk, stealing hubcabs.”

“But it was broken,” complained Brassclick.

“No, just need batteries.” He tapped a few keys and the device responded in a tinny voice, “Mole.”

“Yes, good. That is you, Kanada. You are mole.”

“There aren’t any in the North-West Territory,” said Brassclick petulantly.

Yermak gave him a casual backhand, snapping his head back. “Is now.”

They continued toward the elevator, Brassclick dabbing at his lip with a handkerchief. Yermak pressed a button and the doors opened. As they stepped inside he said, “Ekati. Is short for Ekaterina, yes?”

Pfang remained where he was, reflecting on what he'd just witnessed. Physical violence made him queasy, even when inflicted on someone like Brassclick. Should he be punished further?

Pfang might have relented, had he not thought of Nora. He slipped into the office, opened the tin box and released its contents onto the carpet, a boiling mass of dermestid beetles. They were adults and would do their share of damage, but it was the grubs that would do the real gruntwork. He wondered how long it would take to strip the office once a colony was established within the walls. With luck they might even devour the whole building.

“Eat well, my beauties,” he whispered.

## CHAPTER 33

Only faintly did he understand what was happening. His ears were stuffed with a mighty roaring, his body rumbled and shook. Shapes flew by, arms waved, mouths opened in surprise. Grimly he hung on, for he was tenacious by nature, even when caught up by something he did not understand. So he rode the event, or was carried along by it, in much the same way he'd been transported through the decades, until at last he was tossed aside, landing on a reef of rock and denting his ribs. He lay draped over it for days, staring up at the sky. How like water it seemed.

I will drink the sky, he thought.

A whiskeyjack landed on his shoulder and looked him over. Are you dead? it asked.

Not yet.

Take your time, I can wait.

Sorry to inconvenience you.

No problem.

There was pain when he breathed, but it was surprisingly distant. An inconvenience, really. More troubling was the awareness of a deeper fissure. The fall had broken more than ribs, but what it was he could not say. Perhaps it was only the nearness of death. He imagined himself as a ball of string that was slowly unravelling.

A little later he felt the spidery touch of bird feet on his head. The whiskeyjack leaned over his shaggy brow, its beak dangerously close. You still there?

Yes. I'd appreciate it if you didn't peck out my eyeballs just yet.

The whiskeyjack tried to compose itself. I'll try.

The sudden rattle of ice caught the bird's attention. It stared hard at the lake, which was still frozen to the horizon and puckered with pressure ridges. Something large and white, like an ambulatory block of ice, was heading toward them.

Curses, said the whiskeyjack and departed.

Ponderous footsteps approached, followed by exploratory sniffing and a grunt as something large and heavy sat down beside him.

Excuse me, said a rich deep voice, but are you a seal?

No.

Are you sure? You bark like one, and you're hauled out on a rock like one. Perhaps you're some sort of land seal.

No.

Do you have a name?

Yes, Neptune.

The god?

No, the dog.

Charmed. I'm Orion.

The constellation?

No, the bear.

Twisting his head with some difficulty, Neptune saw that Orion was no ordinary bear.

You're a long way from home.

Orion chuckled. Yes, most of the creatures around here think I'm a ghost.

I've seen ice bears before. I spent many years on the coast.

You're a traveller then, like me.

Yes, a pilgrim.

Perhaps I won't eat you after all. By the way, are you hungry?

Very.

Orion got to his feet and shuffled off. When he returned, there was a squirrel dangling from his mouth.

Hey, yelled the squirrel. We can work this out. Don't do anything rash.

Orion spoke between clenched teeth. Sorry, Neptune, this is the best I could do. Open your mouth.

My family's very well off, babbled the squirrel. If it's a ransom you're after, they can afford it. How much do you want? Fifty nuts? A hundred? They can raise it.

Release him please, said Neptune.

Thank god, gasped the squirrel.

Orion opened his mouth in surprise, and the squirrel scampered off.

I'd prefer a salad actually, Neptune said. I've only just realized it this moment,

but I'm a vegetarian.

Are you mad?

Yes, I think so. Have you noticed I don't get thirsty? It's because I drink from the sky.

Orion decided to stay with Neptune and nurse him back to health. Even when his muzzle turned green from salad-making, he remained. Gradually Neptune's strength returned, his ribs healed. Soon he was able to sit up with Orion's help.

You're heavier than you look, the bear grunted.

I have lead in my bones.

They sat together on the reef of rock and looked out over the decaying ice. The sun was hot, ducks splashed noisily in the band of water between ice and shore.

I ate a man once, Orion said thoughtfully. His body was cast up on shore. It was full of chemicals.

You are what you eat, said Neptune.

I've been restless ever since. Do you know where England is?

Across the great water.

I may go there. What will you do?

Keep wandering, the same as you.

They shook paws, then Neptune trudged east along the shoreline. He walked through spring and summer without apparent purpose or destination. He was old and his coat was heavy. He fell into a long discussion with an owl. He knocked on the doors of mouse holes and said hello. He munched bark with a beaver family. No one knew exactly what to make of him, but his reputation grew as the months passed. Strangers addressed him as the Dog Who Drinks The Sky. They sat at his feet and listened raptly while he told them of his travels to other lands, places he had visited before coming North.

The journey restored his body, got the blood swishing through his arteries again. He threw off the ill effects of years of soft beds and baked chicken. His heart creaked less, his muscles regained their elasticity. His mind felt sharp as a stick.

One day towards the end of summer, when smoke wreathed the sky, he heard gunfire. He stood looking out toward the middle of the lake, recalling naval battles he'd been present at. Copenhagen, Trafalgar, New Orleans. Presently he noticed a dark spot making its way toward land and wondered if it might be his master. They'd been together a long time.



The old boy had come North on a wooden ship, a navy dumpling of a man, jolly enough on the outside, but within consumed by bitter determination. On a previous voyage he'd won notoriety for leading a fleet of birchbark canoes across the tundra. It was a daring gambit, a Victorian soap opera with a clever mixture of science and murder. Over half the men in his command had snuffed it.

But his subsequent voyages turned out to be dull disappointments. He advanced in rank while his reputation diminished. He did his best to get lost again, this time in the southern hemisphere, but the attempt was a failure. There was no loss of life and no one got eaten. Humiliated, he returned to England and pleaded for another crack at the Arctic. When he got it, he knew it was his last chance for immortality, and this time he performed masterfully. He set out with two ships and 128 men, and promptly sailed into oblivion, or rather, eternal fame.

Midway through that final voyage, after resolutely embedding his ships in ice, he went over the side with Neptune. No one saw them leave. They retraced their

route, Neptune hauling a sledge while his master trudged alongside. Methodically they destroyed all the cairns the expedition had erected. They knew which way immortality lay. Mere death was not enough. There had to be a mystery.

Once every vestige of their voyage had been removed, they wandered the desolate wastes, searching for a final resting place, at times unable to tell if they were on frozen land or frozen sea. They wandered for months, but nature refused to take its course. Occasionally they glimpsed sailors from the ships hauling enormous sledges, struggling in the traces like dogs. Most were gaunt as scarecrows with blackened gums and teeth falling out of their heads.

“They’re going the wrong way, aren’t they?” remarked Sir John. He was holding a frozen fish, licking it like a popsicle.

Towards the rear of the straggling line were those who’d paused to rest and would rise no more. They sat tilted at strange angles, snow creeping into their laps. A few others, a little fitter than the rest, crouched over one or two of the fallen, industriously sawing away at an arm or a leg.

Somewhere along the coast master and dog became separated. After that Neptune wandered alone, tracing the final link in the North-West Passage himself, back and forth, year after year, along the Queen Maud Gulf. Others were looking for his master too, but he avoided them all until whiffing a familiar scent. Not his master’s, but his master’s wife.



Neptune went down to the shore, but it was not a man who emerged from the water. It was a dog with a curly coat. They smelled each other briefly.

A female! Neptune exclaimed.

Without a word she set off along the shore.

Wait! he cried, hastening after her.

She scrambled over a fallen tree and trotted along the wave-rimmed shore, which curved away in a series of shallow arcs overlooked by a dark tangle of spruce and willow. In places the footing was tricky.

If it is your master you are looking for, Neptune puffed, his chances for survival are not good. Humans do not have the stamina of dogs.

An orange life jacket was bobbing and lurching in the breakers up ahead. The dog with the curly coat surged forward and leapt into the water. She used her teeth to get a grip on the life jacket and pull it out of the water. It came away with ease, humanless. There was a long gash across the padded back, and white fluff was leaking from it.

Neptune caught up with her, saying, Even if your master made it ashore, he would not last long.

Undeterred she set off again, but this time Neptune kept pace with her. They trotted together along the sloping shore, slipping and sliding on stones.

Do you have a name? he asked.

She laughed sharply. Take your pick. I've had as many names as masters.

You should take your own pick, said Neptune.

What's that supposed to mean?

They rounded a point and saw more objects flung up on the shore. A paddle, a rubber boot, a plastic tackle box, a length of floating rope. The dog with the curly coat investigated each one methodically, moving from item to item, until she spied something that caused her to utter a sharp cry and bound forward. Low on the gravelly beach lay the figure of a man, arms akimbo, feet still lapped by waves. As the two dogs dragged him to a bed of pale green lichen, he vomited forth water.

Is it your master? asked Neptune.

No, I have never smelled him before.

He lives still, but he needs fire and we have none.

There might be some in his pocket.

No good to us. We do not understand fire.

What must we do then?

Nothing, said Neptune. We do not need humans to survive. In fact, we are better off without them. Listen.

And while she kept vigil over the fallen man, he told her about a saintly laika, a homeless dog like themselves. She was called Barker by her friends, and lived in the streets of a faraway city called Moss Cow, scavenging her food and trying to make ends meet as best she could, like many a poor dog. One day she was seized without warning by the secret police, found guilty of crimes against the state, and transported to a place called Barkonur. A terrible sentence was imposed on her: she was tied up, shoved in a barrel, and placed on a hill of explosives. The fuse was lit, but something went wrong. Instead of destroying her, the explosion hurled the barrel high into the sky, so high it never came down for months. The humans were outraged. The first earthling to orbit the planet was not one of them, but a humble dog.

There was a quiet rustling in the trees that edged the shore, and several animals appeared – a fox, a wolverine, a moose, a family of excitable lemmings. A delegation of birds fluttered out of the sky – an eagle, a salty-backed gull, a crane with a bad case of goiter. A muskrat burst from the lake with a splash. The dog with the curly coat growled.

It's okay, said Neptune. They mean no harm.

The moose, who was wearing a muffler and watch cap, came forward and

bowed courteously. Oh Dog Who Drinks the Sky, tell us another story.

A sea yarn, said the gull.

The tale of a thousand and one lemmings, said the lemmings.

The fable of the great bird who laid an egg in the sky, said the eagle.

Another time, said Neptune. He got to his feet and turned to the dog with the curly coat. It is time to leave. Will you come away with me?

The indecision was plain on her face. She sniffed the man on the ground. He lives yet, she said.

His fate is not our concern, said Neptune. Come with me and be my mate, and we shall we love each other with a purity that transcends comprehension. We shall raise litter after litter of puppies, whom we shall send forth into the world as artists and philosophers and mathematicians. We shall honor and esteem each other until we are old and infirm, and our bones are weak. Even after we are dead and the earth has passed away, we shall continue to love each other.

The man groaned and stirred.

Where would we go? she asked.

Wherever we wish. We shall be each other's destiny.

She smiled a secret smile. I'd like that.

Then let us begin, he said, and together they plunged into the bush.

Wait, wait, shouted the other animals, hurrying after them, all except the lemmings, who were unable to contain their enthusiasm and kept rushing off in several directions, each one shouting, This way, this way.

– END –



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