

Young Adult Novel by John Halas, <https://WritersForHire.Com/>

Chapter 1

With the score tied and minutes on the clock, the crowds shot to their feet and cheered as the undefeated Travis High Wolverines regained control of the ball. Paul Lowick, the Wolverines' side forward, caught the pass with his shooting hand and immediately moved into a triple threat position. Without hesitation, in one fluid motion, he quickly dribbled to the right by extending his jab step penetrating closer to the net. He turned to square up to the basket from the 3-point arc. Teammates Marcus Johnson and D. J. Harris weren't open. A hush fell over the standing crowd. The squeak of sneakers jockeying for position filled the gymnasium. Players scrambled to keep up. Everyone on the court wanted this, but only one team would get it. No one wanted it more than the lanky, blond Wolverine side forward.

It was the last game of the championships. Travis High against rival McKinley High; the two best teams in Texas locked in a war of hoops on the court. One would emerge victors and the other second best. Paul wanted to make this shot to break the tie. Scouts were in

the stands, and even though he was only a Junior, making the winning shot would put him on the scout's radar.

The ball fit Paul's hands like part of his body. His heart beat in his ears. McKinley's Center, Bart Faringer, ran toward him. At 6' 2" he was six inches taller than Paul. The center ran toward him hoping to block the shot. But Paul knew Bart. He had more upper body strength than any player on the court, but his feet weren't as quick as Paul's. Paul shifted his weight to his back foot and pivoted. Bart sidestepped to keep up, but not quick enough. Paul jumped and popped the shot. Bart reached up to block a fraction of a second too late. The ball arced through the air.

Bart's fingertips stretched within a hair of deflecting the ball. He landed flatfooted in time to see the ball slip through the net. The Travis crowd roared! The buzzer made it official. Richmond's Travis High Wolverines were the champs. D. J., Vincent, and Marcus rushed Paul followed by the rest of the team as they turned into a mass of jubilation jumping up and down as one.

Coach Bradford joined the celebration for a moment with a few fist pumps, then shouted over the din for the guys to lineup for the postgame handshake. Paul glanced at the stands to see his mom and girlfriend, both wearing big smiles and cheering with the crowd. Even though she never had time to catch one of his regular season games, his mom had made time in her busy social schedule to make every playoff game. He waved toward them and forced a smile, but inside the empty seat beside his mom bugged him. His dad hadn't made a single game this season. He had promised he'd be there if they made the championships. Not only did he not make a single playoff game, he wasn't here now to see Paul win the game. As per usual, he was more dedicated to his job with RAM Oil than his son. Paul hated that place, and right now he hated his dad. One more year and he'd be free from his parents. He could hardly wait.

His thoughts must have reflected on his face because his mom's smile melted. He mechanically walked with the others shaking hands. When he got to Bart, the McKinley Center said, "Good game, you guys deserve it."

Shocked, Paul said, "Thanks!" Normally Bart talked smack. He'd call him "short" a "weak" player. Paul knew he was a weak-side forward but hoped to find a college where he could play guard...maybe even point guard. He'd make an outstanding guard in the pros with his ball handling and speed. All he needed was a chance to prove it.

As he walked off the court and headed to the showers all he could think was that Bart the fart cared more about him than his own dad. The team funneled into the locker room, and Paul hit the showers. All the guys talked about the game and Paul's winning shot. Within seconds he forgot about his dad. Minutes later he stepped from the shower, shook water from his blond hair and wrapped a towel around his waist. Coach B caught up to him. "Hey, Paul, great shot! You'll have some big shoes to fill next year! Your own!"

"Yeah!" He laughed and wiped fog from the mirror. His green eyes stared back at him. *Next year.* If he kept playing like this ... next year he'd play his butt off and get picked up by the pros. If not the pros

at least by some college and then the pros, but either way he'd get out of here and away from home.

His friend Josh slapped him on the back. "Great game, Paul. Bunch of us are gonna grab some pizza at Romanos. You coming?"

"I need to check in with Katy. If she's up for it, we'll catch up with you guys." For now, he pushed the thoughts of his workaholic dad from his mind. He wasn't about to let his no-show dad rob him of the joy of this moment. It wasn't every year you won a championship. Some teams never did. And he'd scored the winning basket.

Walter Mills walked into the office of RAM Oil's CEO carrying a fresh cup of coffee. It promised to be another long night. Craig Stone sat behind his oversized mahogany desk sipping bourbon on ice. Behind him, the sun painted orange and pink pastels as a colorful backdrop to the city of Richmond viewed through the floor to ceiling window.

"Make yourself a drink." Stone pointed his thick finger toward the mini bar near the bookshelves on the other side of the small conference table. Overhead lighting highlighted the diamonds of an ostentatious ring on his finger.

Mills raised his palm to refuse the offer. "No thanks, I'm good. Fresh coffee." He lifted his Starbuck's cup toward his boss and decided to sit in one of the wide, low-set leather chairs across from Stone's desk. He set the coffee on the floor next to his foot and nervously folded his hands. "It's gotten worse. We're—we're going to have to pull Anderson from Point Hope. If we don't, the press will eat us alive. The man who died in that explosion was the son of a native who's stirring up trouble. He was an only child and just out of high school. With the death of that kid, they've turned it into a bleeding hearts human interest story, even though only 3 other were released from the hospital with minor injuries."

"I know." Stone twirled the ice in his glass. "I've got a solution." His ice blue eyes, cold and calculating, looked at Mills.

"A solution!" Mills let out a nervous laugh and pushed his glasses into place with his index finger. "It's a mess up there! Anderson can't handle the pressure. Things have spiraled out of control and Anderson's a loose cannon. A slip of the lips could scuttle us."

Stone nodded. "Have you heard of the shell game?"

"S—shell game? You mean with the pea?"

A smile stretched Stone's lips into a smile. "The shell game is notorious for its use by confidence tricksters who typically rig the game using sleight of hand to move or hide the pea during play and replace it as required. In our situation, it's time for Anderson to take early retirement and replace him."

"It's an impossible situation. You need to find someone who can win over the Natives. And that won't be easy! Some of them think we're murders, others think we are killing their way of life, and they're joined by the eco nuts who think drilling is killing the planet. On top of all that, we need someone who can handle the media and someone who isn't going to rock the boat with our uh... *strategy* for making profit."

Stone leaned forward and placed his glass on a sandstone coaster. "That's why I called you in here. Do you know Calvin Lowick?" His chin doubled as he looked down at Mills, his white brows raising as he waited for the answer.

Mills shrugged. "I know who he is, can't say that I actually *know* him."

Stone eased back in his padded ergonomic chair, the leather creaking beneath his bulk. He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, steepled his fingers and tapped his chin with his index fingers as he thought. "We continually adapt our organizational models to address the strategic priorities of the times. This is no different."

A crease formed between Mills' knitted brows accenting his high forehead and receding hairline. "I don't follow. From what I know of him, there's no way he'd go along with our...uh...current policy."

"No kidding," Stone said sarcastically. "That's why he's the one to send. We don't need to fix the problem; we just need to send a guy like Lowick who has an impeccable reputation and no clue about what's going on." A cold smile stretched his lips showing off perfectly

white capped teeth. "Even with Anderson out of the picture, we'll have enough men in place who are, shall we say, loyal and committed to company profits in the same way we are and we'll reward them so they stay that way. By the time Lowick figures out what's going on, he'll have been there long enough to take the blame if we're caught. Lowick will be the fall guy. We'll plead ignorance, he'll get fired, and in the meantime, nothing gets in the way of the profit we're pulling in. I've weighed the gain against the potential loss should there be a spill and determined that, even with a mild environmental crisis, the gains offset any projected payouts in damages, governmental payouts, and payments to the locals for damages."

Mills nodded with a smile of understanding as he scooped up his cup and took a sip. "I like it." He wiped coffee from his upper lip. "If we end up with a serious leak, it will be on his watch...nothing lost but his reputation, and well..." He shrugged. "...his job." His smile showed off coffee stained teeth as the tension eased in his face. "But that's a price I'm willing to pay." He laughed. "Really, it's a good thing if Anderson...retired. He knows too much and he's gotten a little

squeamish since the *accident*. With Lowick in there, he won't be able to rat us out if something goes south. And who knows, he might even be able to get the Natives on board with us drilling there."

"I've got him coming in here in half an hour. I think it's time for us to promote him for all his hard work. How's project VP sound?"

The two chuckled and strategized how to present the promotion. They had to move fast. If Lowick was going to be their damage control, they had to get him to Alaska sooner rather than later. They agreed to tell him Anderson was leaving because he couldn't handle the local media pressure from the accident. The courts had ruled the collapse of one of the platform's legs an accident but not everyone believed that. Stone was concerned Anderson could slip up and say something they'd all regret. The solution was to get him out of there. His severance would be enough to help him live comfortably silent for the rest of his life.

What they wouldn't mention to Lowick was that some of the natives were claiming negligence. Anderson had become a catalyst uniting these people against RAM Oil. They needed a new face up

there, and Lowick's squeaky clean character fit the bill. They had a handful of men in their pocket who worked on the rigs and in the warehouse. With them on board, they could keep things running without changing anything – other than replacing Anderson.

Calvin Lowick tried calling his wife, Enola, again. He'd been trying for more than an hour. The cell rang unanswered one more time. All he wanted to do is let her know he wouldn't make the game. She either had the phone turned off, left it in the car, or most likely had let the battery die again. He looked at the time. *She's probably already at the game.*

He regretted missing Paul's game, mostly, because he'd promised to be there. Calvin Lowick prided himself on being a man of his word. Missing the game wasn't his fault, though. He'd worked hard to make sure he'd be off in time to make the game. Then Stone called. Wanted to see him at 7:00. Ever since the call, his mind had been preoccupied, wondering what Stone could want. *I'll find out soon enough.* He stuffed his cell into his pocket, picked up his tablet, and

headed to Stone's office. He walked past one empty office after another. Almost everyone had gone home.

A pang of regret hit him again. *Paul will be upset.* Calvin was upset with himself, too. He hadn't made a single game this year, and while it wasn't important in the bigger scheme of life, he knew it gave Paul a way to shine. Paul tended to be a bit immature. *When I was his age I couldn't wait to get out of school to work on the rigs full time.* Soon Paul would be off to college and there would be no more basketball games. *Maybe then, he'll grow up.*

Worry about why Stone wanted to see him, pushed thoughts of Paul and basketball to the back of his mind. Cal had never been thrilled with Stone's management style, but he'd kept his nose clean and did his job. The man came across as a bully more than a manager, and his people didn't respect him. They feared him. Cal searched his memory for any reason he might be in trouble. He couldn't think of a thing, but for that matter he couldn't think of any other reason Stone would want to see him either. Cal wasn't his type – had never been a "yes man" but ran things by the book. At 40 he'd

been overlooked for promotions and often given work below his grade level. He'd done what was expected and without complaining. RAM was more than Mr. Craig Stone. Cal believed in the company and that working for RAM was a way to serve his country. Unfortunately for him Craig Stone stood between him and the rest of RAM.

He had learned his work ethic from his dad, who learned it from his dad. They had all been oil men, and Cal hoped his son, Paul, would follow in his footsteps once he got the silly basketball notion out of his head. Right now Cal's gut told him something wasn't right, but he had no idea what could be wrong. But his gut didn't steer him wrong often. He opened the cover to his tablet and clicked on the app he used to make notes – verbal notes to himself. He'd record his conversation with Stone so he'd be able to 'recall' their conversation without error. Just in case he needed to cover his backside.

He snapped the cover shut, stopped in front of the mirrored double doors leading to Stone's office and wiped the sweat from his palm on his pant leg. His reflection's blue eyes stared back at him unsure. The overhead lighting highlighted the little bit of gray sprinkled

through his dark brown hair. He straightened his tie one last time and glanced at the empty reception desk. The secretary had gone home two hours ago, so he'd have to announce himself. He absentmindedly straightened his tie again and knocked. Even as he did, his large muscular hand looked out of place.

When he walked out of the room an hour later, he stood a little taller. He'd finally been recognized for his principles and methods of extracting oil. He thought of his father and how proud he would have been if he were still alive. His dad and grandfather both taught him to care about the land, the environment, and especially people. This Point Hope assignment had it all plus a raise and stock options. *They must be smiling down at me.* His family would be another matter. A move to Alaska would be a change...a big change, but he'd sacrificed everything for his career and it was finally paying off. His only regret was that he'd still report to Mr. Stone, but as a Project VP.

Suddenly he realized he'd forgotten his tablet on the chair in Stone's office. He turned around and knocked. He apologized for interrupting Mr. Stone and Mr. Mills, thanked them again for the

opportunity, and snatched his tablet from where he left it and excused himself one more time.

Chapter 2

By late that night temperatures had dropped to almost 40 degrees, Paul had the heat on in the truck as he pulled into the driveway about 1:00 a.m. Leafless trees surrounding his family's brick ranch swayed in the cold spring wind like arthritic fingers scratching at the sky in the moonlight. To his surprise, the living room lights were on. Not just the glow of someone watching TV, but the overhead recessed lighting, the lamp in the window, and even the lights hanging above the breakfast bar. A large moth circled the porch light they'd left on, too. It sent a chill through him not caused by the weather.

His parents never stayed up late. In fact, they considered *late* staying up to watch the ten-o'clock news. His mom knew he'd gone out celebrating with his friends, but there's no reason she would wait up for him...unless something was wrong. He squeezed the steering wheel. She couldn't know what had happened when he dropped Katy off at her house, *could she?*

They had sat in the car and talked for almost an hour. Not a good conversation. *Maybe Katy told Mom. They were sitting together at the game.* He spotted his mom's head peeking over the back of the recliner near the window. *I wonder if Dad is still up.* Paul was still mad at his dad, and after Katy's news, he just didn't want to deal with his dad tonight.

He and Katy had talked about her going away to college more than one time, because she was a year ahead of him, but tonight she made it clear she thought it best if they starting seeing other people -- now. "We can still be friends," she had said. He could still see her face as she said it; the way her brown eyes looked away from him. He could only think of all the girls he had used that line on. The "friends" line was the kiss of death to any relationship and everyone knew it, and now, for the first time, it had happened to him.

He had tried to talk her out of it. "Why not wait until you go off to college, like we talked about?"

"This is going to be my last summer before college. I want to have fun. I like you Paul, but you're life revolves around sports." She

shrugged. "I don't want to play second fiddle to baseball this summer. I want to do things."

It left him speechless. She kissed him on the cheek, stepped from the truck, and hurried into the house leaving him feeling empty. How on earth would he face his friends? He'd never had a girl break up with him and of all nights! He scored the winning points and all she could say is that she had wanted to break up for a while.... That she had waited until after the playoffs because she didn't want to be a distraction. What she had really done is turn him from a champion into a loser in one sentence.

Paul couldn't tell if he was more angry or ashamed. He shut his Ford-150 off and sat there for a few minutes preparing himself to face his mom. If she was around, she always knew when something wasn't right with him, even though they didn't really talk like they used to. She was pretty busy with all her volunteering, and he was busy with school, basketball, and life in general. As if on cue, his mom turned in her chair to peek out the window.

"No sense putting it off," he said to himself. He turned off the headlights and climbed out of the truck into the chill of the night and hurried toward the house. He knew it was supposed to get cold tonight but forgot to bring a jacket. Here in Richmond, it wasn't something he had to think about most of the year. It had been almost 70 when he left the house, and the only thing on his mind had been the game.

As he stepped onto the front porch, he glanced through the window to see his dad's wiry hands holding his tablet. He couldn't see anything more. *He's probably reading some dull oil-related stuff for work.* Paul's anger simmered. His dad always talked about integrity, but he couldn't even show up for the last game of the championships – when he said he would be there. He resented RAM Oil to his very core, because it was all his dad cared about. His fingers clenched into fists at his sides. Part of him wanted to walk in and tell his dad exactly what he thought of him, but then his mom would cry and he'd feel terrible. In another year, he'd be off to college or picked up by the pros; either way, he'd leave all this behind and he couldn't wait.

He walked in the front door and closed it gently. Instead of confronting his dad, he decided to head straight toward the hall and his room. He did his best to walk across the tile floor without a sound but as he hurried, his soles squeaked like the dog's chewy. Halfway to his room his dad called him. "Paul."

He stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. "No!" he moaned under his breath. "Yes?" he asked loud enough for his parents to hear him.

"Come in here for a moment, we have something to talk about."

Paul's shoulders slumped in resignation as he turned and headed back toward the living room, with his hands stuffed in his pockets. All he wanted to do was go to bed. He promised himself he wouldn't get into it with his dad again with his mom there. It never accomplished anything anyway.

He leaned against the arched doorway leading into the living room and looked from his dad to his mom. Her eyes looked like she might have been crying. Suddenly he forgot his own problems.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong son. I just wanted to apologize for not making it to the game tonight. I know I told you I'd be there, but Mr. Stone called a meeting at 7:00 tonight, and there was no getting out of it, because I was the only one meeting with him."

A sinking feeling washed over Paul. "You...you lost our job?" Again, he looked to his mother, but she only stared at her lap and wiped her nose on an already-used tissue in her hand.

His dad stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets and offered a weak smile. "No actually, they promoted me."

Paul glanced back at his mom. She wasn't looking at him. It didn't make sense. "So that's good news, right?"

"Well." His dad shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I've worked hard all these years and it's finally paying off, but it's a mixed bag of blessings."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He walked into the room with an uneasiness twisting his gut. He stopped beside his mother's chair

and put his hand on her shoulder. "Mom, are you okay?" She only nodded without looking up at him.

"For cryin' out loud, tell me what's going on. The way y'all are acting, I thought maybe grandma had died."

His mother stood and smoothed her palms against her thighs while holding the crumpled tissue in her pudgy fingers. "The good news is we are moving to Alaska." She forced a sarcastic smile in her husband's direction. "Please Cal, tell Paul all the good news." She drew air quotes around the word good to add to the sarcasm in her voice.

"Move!" Paul's green eyes grew wide. "A-A-Alaska? What about school?"

"You'll finish high school in Point Hope."

"Just like that!" Paul snapped his fingers. "You plan to move us without even talking with us? What about my friends? And – and basketball? We can't...I won't! Dad there were scouts at the game again tonight. One of them even talked to me."

"Paul, you'll make new friends, and you'll find other hobbies and interests. Besides, in a little more than a year you'll be headed to college and won't have time for basketball, anyway."

Paul's face heated in anger. "You—" he shouted and jabbed a shaky finger toward his father. "You don't understand anything!" he said through clenched teeth. "You're ruining my life! But you wouldn't even know that because you're not part of my life!" With that he pounded his fist against the chair where his mother had been sitting. She flinched.

"Paul..." She looked at him with those sad eyes. Well it wasn't going to work this time. She may roll over as the dutiful wife, but he was having none of it. "I'm not leaving!" He looked from his mom to his dad. "You can't do this to me."

Calvin ran his hand across his tired eyes. "I'm sorry, but it's not open for discussion. It a done deal. I've already accepted the position." He raised his arms and let them drop to his sides. "RAM Oil is going to buy our house so we don't have to worry about selling it. They have a place for us to live in Point Hope. They're going to take

care of everything. We'll be heading up there in a few weeks after we pack up our personal things. RAM with pack the rest."

Anger boiled in Paul's gut as he stormed out of the room. *A few weeks!* He headed to his bedroom. Thoughts spun through his mind looking for a solution. *This can't be happening. This can't be happening!* Maybe he could live with one of the guys on the team; maybe he could quit school...that wouldn't accomplish anything. Back in the living room he heard his dad say, "Enola go talk to the boy. He listens to reason when you talk to him."

Paul hurried into his room, slammed the door, and locked it. *'The boy!' He can't even use my name! I hate him!* He wasn't going to talk to anybody tonight. Heck, he might not even be here in the morning. He slumped onto his bed and grabbed his basketball, bouncing it against the door and ignoring his mom's call from the other side. Right now he didn't care if he ever talked to either one of them ever again.

The thwack of the ball against the door combined with the rebound against the floor drowned out his mother's pleas. She finally gave up. When her bedroom door closed he stopped slamming the

ball against the door. He turned it in his grasp staring at the pattern and finding comfort in the familiar feel. "Alaska," he muttered. They probably won't even have basketball. He leaned back on his pillow and spun the ball on his index finger like a crystal ball holding the answers to all the questions. *A few weeks? I don't even get to finish the year. What difference does it really make? I won't be here next year.* He grabbed his smart phone, pulled up his favorites to call Katy and froze. Now that they were "only friends" he knew she wouldn't pick up. Since they were "friends" he'd be lucky if she said hello. That's how it worked.

He glanced at the clock. It was too late to call or even text anyone right now. The more he thought about it, he didn't really want anyone to know what was happening, until he could figure out what to do. There had to be a way to stay in Texas. He finally drifted off into a troubled sleep with the ball clutched in the crook of his arm.

He woke to pounding on his bedroom door. "Paul," his mom called. He threw his legs over the side of his bed and ran his fingers through his blond hair.

"Hang on."

He shuffled to the door and unlocked it, lumbered back to the bed and collapsed faced down. "Come on in," he said into his pillow.

Enola Lowick opened the door just a little and peeked around the edge. "Are you going to school today?"

Paul lay there in his rumpled shirt and jeans and shrugged without turning to look at her. "I don't know."

His mom walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. Her weight caused Paul to tilt toward her. She always talked about losing weight, but never did, and hid behind claims that she was just stocky and big boned – sturdy Midwestern stock. Her warm hand lightly rubbed his back smoothing his wrinkled shirt. "Honey, I know moving is going to be hard...on both of us."

He rolled over to face her with heavy-lidded eyes. Her red-rimmed green eyes told him she was exhausted, too. None of this was her fault. A weak smile flickered across her lips. "We'll have to be there for each other, because we really don't have any other options."

Paul sat up next to her. He folded his hands and studied the floor. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long before we have to actually leave?"

She let out a sigh. "Your father said about three weeks." She shrugged. "He's got things to finalize at work and he's going to fly to Alaska to check out where we'll be living. You and me will pack up our personal stuff, and RAM is doing the rest. It could be as soon as two weeks...but probably three...at the most four. It will take that long for us to care for things on this end. At least RAM will pack up and move our stuff." Her eyes glazed, and her voice sounded flat. "I want to video tape everything first so we have a record. Then there's the small repairs that need to be done and things like getting the carpets cleaned." She let out a long breath. "I wish we could wait and move this summer. It would make it easier for us to get acclimated.

Paul looked at her. "Acclimated? Do people get acclimated to Siberia?"

Her bottom lip started to quiver, and she looked down at her lap. A large tear hit her leg painting a dark blotch on her light blue yoga pants. She wiped her face. "Sorry."

It was his turn to try and comfort. "It's not your fault, Mom. Heck, it really isn't even all Dad's fault." He hated to admit that, but it was true. "It's RAM Oil's fault. They don't think twice about the fact that their employees have families. All they think about is making money and to them people like Dad are disposable. Dad needs to learn to stand up to them. I remember when we used to have a life together when I was little and he was just a shift worker. Now I don't even feel like he is part of the family anymore. He still thinks basketball's a hobby, Mom!"

His mom grabbed a tissue from his nightstand table and wiped her nose. They sat in silence. She looked at him and forced a smile. "Well he is part of this family, and he is doing the best he can to try and support us. We wouldn't have any of the things we love if he didn't work so hard...like the All American Basketball camp...the fact that I don't have to work and can do my charity work...all the committees...."

Basketball camp! He didn't hear another word she said. He had played well enough to get into the five-star camp this summer and now he was moving! It was his chance to improve his technical and athletic skills...and to meet some scouts on a personal level. His anger and hatred flared with new heat. *I hate RAM Oil and I hate Dad for putting them before me...us.* He stood up and offered his mom his hand to help her from the bed. "Well, I guess he won't have to worry about paying for basketball camp this year, because we'll be in friggin' Alaska where they probably don't even have basketball."

Enola's penciled eyebrows arched in surprise. "Paul! Hush your mouth talking like that!"

"Sorry, Mom." But he wasn't sorry. He wasn't happy, and if there was anything he could do, he wasn't going to Alaska.

She patted his shoulder. "You're young, sweetie. You'll find other interests."

Paul closed his eyes and held his tongue. His parents didn't get it. Basketball wasn't a hobby. It wasn't an interest. It was his life. And he was ready to fight for it.

On his way to school, Paul mulled over all that had happened. Part of him wanted to pretend nothing had changed, but the fact that he drove by Katy's house without stopping to pick her up forced the new reality on him. He missed having her beside him, just to have someone to talk to. Especially now. By the time he pulled into the parking lot, he was thankful to be running late because most of the students were already inside and his friends would be headed into their first class.

He climbed out of his truck, grabbed his backpack, and hurried toward the double doors. A few other latecomers shouted their congratulations on the win. Suddenly he felt like that had happened a millennia ago. Instead of heading to class, he went straight to the athletic department to find his coach. He had to talk to someone who would understand.

Paul cut through the out office and went straight for Coach Bradford's office. He'd always been able to talk with Coach B about everything. The coach had played at a major college, even had a shot

at the pros as low man on the roster. He ended up playing semi-pro for a couple of years before he gave it up to get married. He understood Paul's drive better than anyone. His stories fueled Paul's desire to play professionally.

Somehow he hoped his mentor could help him out of this mess. He stuck his head in the door and spotted Coach B sitting behind his messy desk. Paul knocked at the open door and Coach B glanced up over his reading glasses. His eyes shined with that light that always told Paul he was welcomed.

"Paul!" He stood, slipped the glasses from his nose, and tossed them on the desk with a clatter. "Come in." He picked up a roll of athletic tape from the chair next to his desk and motioned for Paul to have a seat. "What a game last night, eh?" Suddenly his smile turned into a look of puzzlement as he checked his watch. "What brings you here at this hour? Shouldn't you be in class?"

Paul collapsed into the chair and buried his face in his hands. Tears stung his eyes. He didn't want Coach to see how weak he was.

The older man stood beside him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "What is it, Paul?"

Paul wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. "Sorry Coach, I didn't know where else to go. And...and I wanted to tell you first so you didn't hear it from somewhere else."

Coach sat back on the corner of his desk. "Katy's pregnant!"

"No!" Paul shot to his feet. A crease formed between his eyebrows. He looked away unable to face Coach as he told him the news. "Nothing like that! It's my dad." He fought to keep his lip from quivering. "He's been promoted and I'm fixin' to move...out of state...Alaska!" he blurted out. He spun around and looked Coach in the eyes. The sparkle died.

"Alaska?" He let out a slow whistle and rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. "I'm so sorry to hear that." He stared down at his desk for a moment. When he looked up tears swam in his eyes. Something Paul had never seen. "You're really going to be missed. Not just on the team, but here at Travis. Heck, I'm going to miss you."

He wrapped Paul in a fatherly hug and clapped him on the back.

He stepped back and wiped his eyes. "Have you told Katy yet?"

Paul swallowed hard and shrugged. He didn't want to talk about Katy. It was all too much to deal with at once. Right now all he wanted to do is save his basketball career. "Katy and I had already decided we weren't cut out for a long-distance relationship, so that's not an issue." He started to pace between the desk and the door. "Basketball's the issue. This most likely ruins my chance for a scholarship and for sure destroys my chances at getting picked up." He looked to Coach hoping for a solution.

"When do you leave?"

"Two maybe two weeks...end of April at the latest; then I'm gone." He looked down at his Nikes and back up still hoping for a solution. Instead, Coach wrote a pass to exempt Paul from his first class to keep him out of trouble. "If there's ever anything I can do for you, let me know. I can talk to your teachers about letting you take your finals before you go so you can finish your year out here." Coach clapped him on the back again. Deep inside, Paul's hope died a slow

death. He had wished Coach might make an offer for him to come live with him. Instead he clutched a stupid hall pass and walked out of the office feeling a little hollow. The bell rang and kids poured into the hall. For the first time in his life Paul felt alone in the crowd. *Yesterday I was a hero, today I am nothing but yesterday's news.*

His friend Josh spotted him and waved as he made his way toward him. "Hey where were you this morning? You didn't answer my texts."

"Got some bad news," Paul mumbled.

"Yeah, I heard about you and Katy. Harsh."

"It's worse than that, Josh. Dad got promoted and I'm moving."

"Moving? Like away?"

"Like Alaska!"

Josh stopped walking and the kid texting behind him bumped into him. The two exchanged words, but Josh let it go and jogged to catch up to Paul. "What are you going to do?"

Inside Paul screamed, *move in with you for my senior year!* But he certainly wasn't going to invite himself. They stopped at Paul's locker. "I don't know. Do me a favor. Don't tell anyone yet. Until I figure out the solution."

As the day moved forward it didn't get any better, except that he used the move as *his* reason for why he and Katy broke up. A few girls showed they were interested in a short term relationship and were all over him trying to console him. When they walked by Katy, her mouth dropped open and the look of surprise on her face gave him a little satisfaction. For the first time, he realized he didn't really like her that much anyway. Going to college was more important to him, and she was never ready to commit to a relationship. *Kind of like Dad and how his job always comes first.*

His phone didn't stop all day. Between calls and texts, he could see the news had spread. *So much for Josh keeping his mouth shut.* He turned the phone off. *I'll deal with it later.*

At the end of the day, he bumped into Katy in the parking lot. She walked up to him and said, "I'm sorry to hear about the move."

She looked at him with her big brown eyes, but that's all they were.

Big brown eyes. That spark that once linked them was gone.

Paul's mouth felt dry. "Thanks. I'll live." He got into his truck and closed the door. A lump choked out what he wanted to really say. He waved and pulled away. *I need to get my act together.*

When he arrived home, he walked in the door exhausted. He dumped his backpack on the vintage Swedish Sang Bench in the large entry and headed to the kitchen. "Anybody home?" No answer. "Of course not." He headed to the refrigerator, grabbed the half-empty gallon of milk and drank straight from the bottle. He scrounged for something to eat, found a couple of snack cakes, and moved to the table to deal with all the calls and messages. He still needed to change his status on Facebook and figure out if he was going to unfriend Katy.

Paul was still sifting through messages when he heard the front door open and close followed by the click of his mom's heels on the tile. "I'm in here," he called.

His mom walked into the kitchen and tossed her keys on the counter. "You're home?" She ran her fingers through her hair and let out a deep breath.

"No, I'm a figment of your imagination. Where else would I be?"

She threw her arms up. "I don't know! I'm used to you being...I don't know busy. You're never home." She pulled off her cardigan and hung it on the back of the chair.

Paul slumped back in the chair and crossed his arms with a shrug. "Well I don't have a life any more. I had planned to try out for baseball, but there's no sense since I won't even be here. My girlfriend...or should I say my ex-girlfriend actually congratulated me when she heard I was moving and, while everyone is *sorry* to see me go, no one really seems to give a damn." He slapped his palms against the table. "And so how was your day, Mom?"

The muscles in her jaw tightened. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Let's just say, it went much the same as yours. All this time I felt like my life was making a difference with the charitable and volunteer work I've been involved with, but I'm not

even gone and I've got people stepping all over each other to fill my shoes because everyone...." She traced quote marks in the air with her fingers. "...knows how busy I'll be with moving. It's like they're pushing me aside like...like I don't even matter! They can't even wait until I'm gone!"

She sat at the end of the table next to Paul and took his hand. "Somehow we'll get through this. I don't know how...but we will." She rubbed her face with her free hand and looked at him with bloodshot eyes.

Paul squeezed her fingers. "Can't you talk to Dad? Help him see this is a big mistake. It's going to kill my chances to play basketball."

"Honey, he's already accepted the job. They expect him to go, and we need to be proud of him...support him. This is a promotion for all his hard work, and we really need the money."

Paul yanked his hand free and stared at her with fire in his eyes. "You always take his side. He accepted that stupid job without even talking to us." He shot to his feet. His chair clattered to the floor. "If

you loved me, you'd at least try to talk him out of it, because I'd rather die than move to Alaska."

"Paul, sit down." His mom buried her face in her hands for a moment, before she looked up at him. She slapped her hands on the table with determination. "We need to talk." Her lip quivered and tears swam in her eyes and snuffed out his anger.

He picked up the chair and sat riddled with guilt. *It's not her fault.* He couldn't look at her. It wasn't fair to treat her like this. *If Dad really loved us, he wouldn't be doing this to us.*

Enola crumpled inwardly, but for her son, she wore all the strength she could muster like a mask. She was the only buffer between more bad news and her son's already strained relationship with her husband. She tucked a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Paul, there's more to this than you realize. Even if your father didn't accept the promotion, we still couldn't stay here."

A crease knit his brows into a slight frown. "What are you talking about?"

Fear constricted her throat. *How do I tell him we're broke?* She scratched an imaginary itch on her neck as she searched for the words.

"Mom? What are you talking about?"

Her emotions rose like a volcano. "We can't afford to stay here. We're broke," she blurted.

Paul cocked his head, his blond hair falling across his forehead. "What do you mean...broke?"

"I mean we are in over our head. Remember when we refinanced our house?"

"Yeah." His green eyes narrowed. "I thought you did that to get out of debt."

She let out a sigh. "We did. We paid off our credit cards and paid down other debt, but that's when the economy crashed. It left us upside down on the mortgage. Now...now we're up to our necks in

debt again. All the credit cards are maxed out." Paul opened his mouth to say something, but she held up her index finger. "Before you say anything, RAM Oil is going to buy the house as part of the package they are offering. That will really take a load off of us financially."

Paul sat with his mouth open staring at her as if she were crazy. "How can we be broke? Dad makes good money. What do y'all do that costs so much."

That does it. "Let's see. There's that truck you drive and don't make payments on, the gas you charge to run around in the truck you don't make payments on, the basketball camp you go to for your technical basketball instruction...your intensive drill sequences, and all that other stuff you wanted!" She slapped the table in frustration. "And that's just scratching the surface. I'm not saying you're the reason, I'm saying we all are. We live like we're rich and we're not."

Paul sat stunned. His mother never lost it like this. Her face transformed from angry to apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She

looked down, shaking her head. "This is all...difficult. But we all have contributed to our financial situation and now it's going to cost us."

"What about college?"

"Your father is hoping you'll be able to get a scholarship and other assistance. Maybe you can get an after school job when we get up to Point Hope and help save for college. That will give you a chance to meet some people, too. Who knows, maybe your father's promotion will be able to cover it."

Paul stood without a word. *And I thought it couldn't get any worse.*

Chapter 3

Enola stood on a stepstool in the kitchen pulling her stemware from the top shelf of the cupboard. She just couldn't trust it to the movers. It had been a long time since they had used these glasses for entertaining. She wiped the dust from them, thinking of how much life had changed. When they were first married, they used to have people over regularly, but gradually life had gotten so busy. She had friends

through her volunteer work, a few she played tennis with at the club, but who were *their* friends...as a couple? She wiped the dust from the glasses, wrapped them in tissue paper and stuffed them in one of the boxes she had purchased from the storage company.

The clock on the stove read 4:30. *Cal should be calling soon.* He'd flown up to Alaska to check things out. RAM had given him the time off to move, and instead he made a "surprise" visit to Point Hope, to "see how things are when they don't expect me," and "to see where we'll be living." He'd be up there for five days and promised to touch base around 4:30 each day because it worked best with the time difference. *Why he couldn't wait to go up there when we all go, I'll never know. So like him. The over achiever.* She sealed the box, wrote "fragile" in bold letters on the side and top, and stacked it with the others collecting in the dining room.

The corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. *Funny, I think we talk more with him gone than when he's here.* But even though they talked, she couldn't tell what to think. He'd been up there a couple of days and by the sound of his voice, it wasn't easy for him, but of

course, he wouldn't actually come out and say that. Plus it stayed light out for 18 hours a day so he wasn't sleeping well.

Her cell rang. "Cal Lowick" flashed on the screen with his new phone number. For some reason his personal phone didn't get service up there. Thank God RAM gave him a phone that worked even though he showed up unannounced. She scooped up the phone and answered. "Hi Cal." They talked small talk about the weather. She wanted to avoid talking about her own frustrations and Paul's sulky behavior so she steered the conversation to her husband. "How's work?"

The deep sigh at the other end told her he was having a hard time of it. "Truthfully, I'm glad I came up here for these few days. I'm learning my way around, but I have to tell you some of my team treat me more like I'm the enemy than their boss, and the regular guys act like they're afraid of me. I don't think they're used to running things by the book, and you know me." His dry chuckle reminded her just how well she did know him. *Maybe this move will be good for us.*

"It's kind of strange here, too," she admitted. "Some of the friends I volunteer with act like...well some ignore the fact that I'm moving and others ignore me like they want to pretend I'm not leaving...you know like it won't happen if we don't talk about it. I think it is how they cope with change. I've already been replaced on the social committee at the club...by Colleen...." Suddenly she felt like she was complaining too much. As a wife, she didn't want to talk about her own struggles; she wanted to encourage her husband. That was part of the role of a good wife, not to make him regret he accepted the promotion.

"I miss seeing you," she said. Inwardly she contemplated her words and what they really meant since she hardly ever saw him. "Wish we could Skype or something."

"I know. The Internet up here is iffy at best and like I told you cell phone reception at the house is spotty...well not spotty...nonexistent. Wait till you see this place. It is on the edge of nowhere. Half the time when I'm in that area I don't have any bars even on this phone RAM gave me to use. We'll have to get a landline at the house, I guess.

Though it appears a lot of people use radios. I can't wait for you and Paul to get up here; it really is a beautiful place."

Her heart fell. Living on the edge of nowhere was not what she signed up for. She wouldn't know anyone, and even if she did it sounded like her phone wouldn't work. *Yeah that's something to look forward to.* But she buried her feelings and changed the subject. "I've been packing. Is there room for our wedding china?"

"No." His voice grew quiet. "Nola, the kitchen is small. Think of our first apartment...like that size. Only bring the basics. Let RAM pack up the rest for storage, until we find something bigger. Stunned, she didn't know what to say. Everything about this move chiseled away at who she was. Silence hung between them for at least 20 seconds as she stared at all the boxes she had already packed.

Cal broke the silence. "If you need to reach me and this phone doesn't go through, I'm staying at the Whaler's Inn. It's a small motel right in Point Hope. It's only got 20 rooms, but I have a bed, refrigerator, and microwave. Plus there's a restaurant that serves pizza, Chinese food, and hamburgers. Food here is really expensive.

Like a gallon of milk is \$12 at the store and there's no alcohol to be had anywhere so I can't even have a beer – it's illegal. But at least my RAM phone works here. People who run the place were pretty friendly until they found out I work for RAM. Some of the Natives here don't want us drilling."

Enola realized she hadn't really been listening. Instead, her mind kicked and screamed about losing her gourmet kitchen.

He pulled her back to the conversation. "How's Paul? Has he snapped out of it?"

"He's about the same. Maybe a little moodier than usual, now that someone is interested in buying his truck. He's outside shooting some hoops. It's a good way for him to burn some energy. The school is letting him take his finals so he won't have to start school in Point Hope until the Fall.... I don't think he's sleeping well."

"I hope he's burning some energy by helping you get things in order. Make sure he videos everything for insurance purposes."

Enola let out a sigh. Paul was still so angry about leaving she didn't really want him to help with anything. "We haven't done that yet."

"Enola, I'm sorry about the timing of all this, but really I think it will be good for him. Might help him to get his head screwed on straight and realize what really matters. He's not a little boy anymore. He'll be heading off to college in a year. By the time his great-grandfather was his age, he was already one of the first Texas oilmen, and my father went to Kuwait with the legendary Red Adair in the 1990s to fight the oil fires set by Saddam Hussein when his army retreated during the first Gulf War. When I was his age, I was working and going to school. Paul's never had a chance to get his hands dirty with an honest day's work. We've pampered him too much, and it hasn't done him any favors."

Enola didn't go there. There was no sense. Her goal was to keep the waters calm and to avoid stoking the conflict between the two men in her life. She could see both sides, and yet neither of them seemed to recognize the validity of the other's situation. To top it off, neither of

them took any notice of her struggles with all this. This was stripping away everything she was. Anger simmered at her core. Anger that Cal didn't even talk to her about taking the job before he accepted. *It's like I don't really matter.*

Cal hung up the phone and rubbed his eyes. He hadn't slept well since he arrived, but he blamed it on the time difference and the long daylight hours. But deep down he knew what really bothered him. People here didn't trust him and they didn't even know him. *It will take time*, he reminded himself. Once he established some relationships and built a reputation for being trustworthy among the men, things would change. But it wouldn't be easy. He'd spotted several safety issues that would have to be addressed. And while some of the Alaskan Natives wanted to work on the rigs because they could make good money, even without a college degree, he could tell most of them looked at him like an outsider. The short, stocky waitress at the hotel restaurant confirmed this and had warned him that many of the

Tikigagmuit didn't want drilling. He had asked, "What is Tik—Tiki-ga-what-you-said?"

The waitress rolled her dark brown eyes and said, "My people – the Tikigagmuit. We have been here since before your people came to this continent. We have survived outsiders for more than a century, but many of the elders fear you outsiders with your drilling. That you will kill our way of life."

That explained a lot. But what didn't make sense is that the Natives working for RAM treated him like an outsider, too. Why would they work for RAM if that's how they felt?

He had apologized to the waitress and told her he'd like to learn more...to understand the Natives. And he did. As a representative of RAM he had to help her and the others understand RAM had their best interest at heart. They would be able to make more money than ever before, but for him it was more than that. He wanted them to understand that this job was part of his heritage. To let them know about his great-grandfather being one of the first oilmen and how his father went to Kuwait. He wanted the waitress to understand he was

part of a breed that brought up the oil without killing the land or the people who lived on it. "His people" cared.

He sat at the desk in his new office studying some of the files he'd pulled. The office was cluttered and the filing a nightmare. He had put some of the files in order, but the disorganization drove him nuts. Files were not only misplaced, some things were actually in the wrong file. *It's like someone just stuck things anywhere in the drawer and called it filed.* Plus there was a stack of filing to be done. He couldn't even call it a stack, though. Papers were scattered on the desk, some were in a wire basket on top of one of the filing cabinets, and he found some loose papers in one of his desk drawers. As he worked on getting things in place, he came across information that started to raise some safety concerns and questions.

A few reports made it look like things didn't quite line up like they should with company policy and government regulations. The number of safety-related accidents alarmed him even though most weren't significant, there were too many. Cleaning up safety issues looked to be the priority. He also came across a couple of invoices with

conflicting information regarding the purchase of seals. If they were audited, as the project VP it would be a nightmare for him. He'd have to get to the bottom of all this before they expanded drilling.

Headquarters wouldn't be happy to hear that. He'd check into it before he said anything. Perhaps the safety issues were all resolved and the reports were out of date, and as for the discrepancies, it could be as simple as a wrong shipment or a clerical error.

He ran his hands across his face, and pressed his eyelids with his thumb and forefinger to stop the burning. Before he could fix anything, he had to understand the scope of the problems. He'd have to find the service logs but he didn't have time to deal with any of this now. He'd be heading home in a few days to help finish up with the move. For now, he'd put in long nights getting things straightened out and as organized as he could. He had a long way to go before the files were in any kind of useable order, so anything he could get done in this short visit would be beneficial. He knew that once he came back up here with his family, he'd be too busy to think about files. By then they'd probably provide a secretary to help with all this. At least

he hoped so. With things in such disarray, he wondered if Anderson had any clerical help.

He had hoped to have things in order before they made the move so he could walk into an orderly office ready to go. With this mess, he couldn't accomplish orderly even if he stayed awake for 48 hours straight for the remainder of his visit. *How did Anderson function in this confusion?*

Unfortunately, he could see he'd be putting in some very long days for a while before he would have the project on schedule and running safely. That wouldn't make Enola happy. Plus, somehow he also had to find a way to convince more of the locals that RAM's presence was good for them. Maybe by then he'd find the desk under all the piles of paper.

He leaned back and stretched his arms over his head. *I need some fresh air.* Cal pulled a pile of files and loose papers and stuffed them in his briefcase. He'd get takeout and work in his room. At least there he felt like he could think without being overwhelmed by it all. He grabbed the collection of safety reports, invoices and other papers he

had questions about and stuffed them into their own file, placed it with the others in his briefcase and snapped it shut. He'd be able to address them one at a time as he found answers.

Paul walked in the door and tossed his ball on the bench. It rebounded, hit the opposite wall, skidded along the tile floor and rolled toward the hallway. He'd get it when he went to his room. Using the hem of his shirt, he wiped the sweat from his face.

Usually shooting hoops eased his stress level, but seeing the "for sale" sign in the front yard was an in-your-face reminder that his life would never be the same again. He walked into the kitchen. Boxes were piled in the dining room with others half-filled on the kitchen table. His mom was on the phone. She turned, surprised to see him. "Talk to you soon," she said into the phone and ended the call.

"I didn't hear you come in. You just missed your dad's call. He says the house RAM is providing up there isn't furnished so we'll be bringing some of our stuff." She crossed her arms and leaned her backside against beveled edge of the granite counter. "But the house

is smaller than this one, so we'll have to put most of our things in storage, until we find a place of our own."

"So what does that mean, exactly?" Paul shuffled things in the fridge but wasn't seeing anything worth eating.

His mom shrugged. "All I know is that it's small. No room for the wedding china in the kitchen. To be safe, we'll bring only what we really need. Like our beds, basic kitchen stuff, and linens so we can eat, sleep and take a shower." She smiled, but it didn't go to her eyes. She was just doing what she always did. Making the best of it. Her smile wavered and died. "In fact, your dad and I won't be bringing our bedroom suite. The master bedroom can't accommodate a king-size bed. He said it will be hard enough to get around with a queen size bed. So we'll use the furniture we have in the guest bedroom, for now."

She stepped over to the refrigerator as she rambled on about furniture and pulled the door from Paul's hand and closed it.

"Hey, I'm hungry!"

"Don't stand there holding the door open. It wastes electricity."

Paul rolled his eyes. Now that they were broke, she was on this new kick about wasting electricity. It was her stupid effort to save money, when they couldn't even stay in their house.

"Throw a frozen pizza in the oven for dinner." She opened the freezer and pulled out two. "Cheese and pepperoni or supreme?"

Paul looked from one to the other. "Let's order from Ramano's while we can. Who knows if they even have pizza up in no man's land."

She tossed the pizzas back into the freezer. "Okay, call it in, but just so you know, your dad says they have a restaurant that serves pizza...and Chinese food." She laughed.

Paul shook his head. It cost more to order a pizza than it did if he'd held the refrigerator door open for five minutes. *No wonder we're broke.*

Craig Stone stood staring out at the city from the panoramic window in his office. He turned to his right hand man, Walter Mills.

"Are you sure?"

Mills nodded. His bald head shone under the overhead lighting. "I spoke with Max Halverson. Lowick showed up a couple days ago and he's been putting in a ton of hours trying to organize his office...the files haven't been cleaned up yet. I talked with Anderson, and he said the files are mess.... He's worried Lowick could come across a smoking gun. Anderson tried to destroy anything incriminating, but everything happened so fast he can't guarantee there isn't something there that would raise questions. He hadn't planned to leave, and now he's not sure what he got rid of and what might still be there. Thought we'd take care of clean up before his replacement showed up." Mills talked faster and faster, almost tripping over his words. "If Lowick keeps it up, he could come across something Anderson inadvertently left behind." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "...and if there's one thing we know about Lowick; he's not stupid. If he comes across the right information, he

might be able to track it right back to us." He licked his lips and took a breath. "What's he even doing there? He isn't due to start for a couple more weeks!"

"Calm down Mills. We have Max Halverson and Gregory Thompson there to keep a lid on things. We have them and the people working with them in place to take the fall before anything would ever be linked to this office." He rubbed his double chin thoughtfully with his sausage-like fingers. "For now, we need to get someone in there we can trust to clean up the loose ends and to keep Lowick busy enough he doesn't have time to sit behind that desk. I'm thinking now might be the time to move ahead with the project to drill two miles down under the sea and six to eight miles horizontally. It's controversial, so he'll have to deal with all that red tape, but if anyone can pull it off, I think it's Lowick. He's as proud of his oil heritage as those stupid Eskimos are of their living off fish all their lives.

"I say we give Lowick a call and let him know this project we talked with him about has the potential to be a 100-million-barrel reservoir, and we think he's the man to get it up and running sooner

rather than later." Stone stood with his hands behind his back, causing the buttons on his Borrelli shirt to strain across his girth. He rocked back and forth from heel to toe. "He's also the man who could bring us down if he gets a whiff of what's really going on.

"Let Max Halverson know we're sending someone to clean-up Lowick's office while he's back here packing. Have him let Lowick know he's hired him a secretary to take care of all the...filing. We need someone thorough. Someone we can trust. No more paper trails. And be sure to fill Gregory Thomson in on all this. As Field Engineer I'm sure Lowick will search him out."

Chapter 4

Paul awoke with a kink in his neck. After arriving home late from his going away party, he decided to sleep on the couch rather than on the floor in his empty room like his parents did. The leather sofa creaked as he sat at the edge of the cushion. *I'll never wake up in this house again.* Only the two easy chairs from this room had left in the shipment of furniture headed to Point Hope so, in here, things still felt

like home. The moving company would come this week to pack up the rest and take it to storage.

The microwave beeped from the kitchen. Paul shuffled out there in time to see his mom slip a steaming cup from the built-in stainless microwave. His dad sat at the table reading his tablet with a mug in front of him. His mom forced a smile. "Dad was telling me we won't have a microwave when we first get to Point Hope." She dipped a coffee bag up and down as it steeped. "Coffee maker is packed so this is it if you want some coffee." She glanced at the clock on the microwave. "You better get your shower, too. We'll be picked up in about an hour and a half."

Paul frowned. "Why so early?"

Enola held her mug with two hands as she leaned against the Corian counter. "We have to be at George Bush Intercontinental at least two hours early. With traffic, RAM added another hour on to the travel time to play it safe."

"Whatever," he mumbled and headed toward the bathroom. An emotional knot choked out anything else he wanted to say. The

nightmare he'd lived since he learned about his dad's promotion was coming to a head today like a big ugly zit that would never go away, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

After his shower, he stuffed the rest of his personal care products into his duffle bag. He stepped out of the bathroom, dropped his bag in the hall and walked to his empty room. Even with his furniture and computer gone, the room held memories. Marks just inside the closet door offered a snapshot of how long he'd lived here. Fourteen years. His mom had tracked his height and written the date next to each mark. Once he turned nine, every inch he gained had fueled his dreams of one day playing basketball professionally. He rested his hand on the top mark, 5' 9". He'd told himself his height wouldn't get him noticed, but his moves would...and his record. *I've worked so hard, and for what? Now it's all for nothing.* Anger exploded in his gut. He slammed his fist into the wall denting the drywall and smashing the ink marks for the last couple measures.

"What was that?" his mom called from the end of the call.

"Nothing." He flexed his stinging hand and walked out of his room. Behind him the door shut on that chapter of life, and he headed down the hallway feeling like his life was a bigger wreck than the closet wall.

The attendant announced boarding for first class. Paul stared at his boarding pass. *Chicago*. He texted Josh. "Boarding plane in a few. Flying coach from Chicago to PHO – Point Hope other side of the world."

First class passengers had boarded and within minutes Paul followed his mother and father to the gate. The line moved forward. His phone pinged. A text from Josh. "Harsh. Miss you already bro." Paul stuffed the phone into his pocket and handed the boarding pass to the attendant.

"Enjoy your flight," she said.

"Yeah, right." He hefted his duffle bag over his shoulder and walked down the ramp. It didn't matter when the people in front of him

jammed the aisle. Somehow being on the ground in Houston was better than being in the air and on his way.

When they found their seats, he stuffed his duffle bag in the last available space in the overhead and took the window seat. His mom squeezed her bag under the middle seat in front of her. His dad took the aisle seat giving him a little extra room for his lanky legs. His dad's phone pinged.

"The real estate woman is meeting us and will take us to the house."

"Real estate woman?" Paul asked.

His mom shrugged. "She's the rental agent who's also working to find a house for us to buy."

"Hmph." Paul didn't say any more.

His dad stared at him. "Cut the attitude, Paul."

Paul clenched his teeth. "Cut the attitude?" he mumbled and turned to the window and stared out at Houston. Not his favorite place being a Mavericks fan, but at least he was still in Texas. While the

flight attendant went through the safety spiel, he stared out the window. Hot angry tears stung his eyes. Inside he wanted to scream about how unfair it was. *Why couldn't RAM have waited one more year...just one more year. None of this would matter then; I'd have graduated here...been discovered...here.*

The layover in Chicago didn't even feel like a layover. They grabbed a cold, stale, sandwich and sprinted to the other end of O'Hare to catch their connecting flight. The second plane was small and only a handful of people boarded. Paul shook his head. "Looks like a ton of people want to give up their life to live in this Point Hope place."

His father nailed him with those piercing blue eyes while his mom looked around and shrugged. "Paul, we can't change it, so you might as well make the best of it."

The muscles in his jaw twitched. Once they got in the air, he eased his seat back. All the repressed emotion exhausted him. He stared at the clouds passing the window like fog on a cool Texas morning and fell asleep. His troubled mind dreamed of a chubby

Eskimo lady wearing a fur-lined hood taking them to their new house. An igloo. He stepped inside where all their furniture was piled in the center of one big room to burn for heat. "Make the best of it," the real estate lady said.

"Make the best of it," his mom said.

"Make the best of it and grow some backbone," his father's voice said. "Hard work is good for you."

Paul woke with a start and put his seat in the upright position. His mom placed her hand on his arm. "Are you okay?"

He nodded; rubbed the sleep from his eyes and his mother went back to reading her romance novel. His dad sat sifting through papers in his briefcase. With his nose buried in paperwork, he wasn't present even when he was with them! Paul turned toward the window to avoid conversation if there was any. He wasn't okay and no one really cared. No one.

The clouds cleared. He stared at the changing landscape. Snowcapped mountains, tundra, lakes, and rivers stirred a little

curiosity in him for the first time. The captain's voice announced the flight was on time and would be landing at Point Hope Airport in about a half an hour. "Point Hope is located in the Lisburne Peninsula on the Chukchi Sea coast and is just 125 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The weather in Point Hope is currently a sunny 32 degrees. Enjoy the rest of your flight."

"Thirty-two degrees!" He stared at his mother. "I have a sweatshirt and light jacket!"

Worry lines creased her forehead. "We'll have to buy something warmer at the airport."

Paul glanced around the plane at the handful of other passengers. All men. Some looked like natives, but most weren't. He wondered if they worked for RAM. *Why else would anyone want to go here north of the Arctic circle for crying out loud? Whatever their reason, the winter coats draped over empty seats beside them said they were more prepared than Paul. He glanced at his father and for the first time realized he wore a warmer jacket. Yeah, he cares about US.*

He turned his attention back to the blue water below. The Arctic Ocean made for a pretty picture from the air. The fasten seatbelt light bleeped on and the captain's voice announced their final approach. Paul stared at the ground. The peninsula below looked like a pointy nose on an unfamiliar face. As they descended, he spotted chunks of ice floating in the water. The airport's one-and-only runway looked like nothing more than a long asphalt driveway. On the outskirts of the airport the ramshackle village of Point Hope looked like a combination of low-income housing and barracks set within a patchwork of white. Paul looked at his mother. The stunned look on her face told him that she felt the same way he did about their new home.

As the plane came to a stop, everyone stood, grabbed their belongings from the overhead compartment, and lined up in the aisle to disembark. Paul's father closed his briefcase and pinched the bridge of his nose. The three of them sat there for a few extra minutes. A couple of the men walking by their seats talked about some upcoming festival with a Native American sounding name. *Maybe that's why they're here.* By the looks of the place there was nothing

festive about it, and Paul wondered how anyone could look forward to anything this place had to offer. In his way of thinking, this would be his prison for a year and then he'd escape to college. Holding on to that one fact would be the only way to keep his sanity.

He held his cell phone to the window and snapped a picture to send to Josh. No reception. That didn't bode well. He looked at his mom who was getting ready to stand up and leave the plane. "No bars. If I can't get reception at the airport, that's not good."

She pulled her phone from her purse and let out a sigh. "Me either."

His father stood holding his briefcase in his right hand. "I told your mother that cell reception here isn't good."

His mom stuffed her phone back into her purse. "Oh that's right. RAM gave your dad some kind of satellite phone that works up here. Come on, nothing we can do about it right now. Might as well get on with it."

Paul stood next to his mom and pulled their bags from the overhead as his father headed toward the exit. Paul walked behind his mother and father as they shuffled off the plane thinking about her comment. That was her approach to life. *Just getting on with it and making the best of it. I want more out of life than that.* A blast of cold air rushed down the passage way. "Yeah, make the best of it," he muttered.

A thickset woman with a round face and dark hair stood near the gate holding a sign that read "Lowick."

Paul's mom smiled. "Guess that would be the real estate woman."

His dad nodded. "That's her."

They walked directly to the woman and Paul's dad introduced his mom and Paul.

The woman was younger than the person in his dream. And though she had a round face, she wasn't heavy set; just solid. She let

go of the sign with one hand and shook Enola's hand. "Welcome to Point Hope. I'm Akna Qajak. I'm sure your husband has told you all about the house. You'll see it for yourself soon enough." She smiled broadly showing off a gold tooth. "I'm here to drive you to your new home."

Paul let out a snort and rolled his eyes but didn't say anything.

"Do you work for RAM?" Enola asked.

"Goodness no. Though I have benefited from them being here."

She smiled and her full cheeks pushed her eyes into little slits.

The four of them walked out to the parking lot loaded down with luggage and packed it into Akna's car. Half-melted dirty banks of snow encompassed the lot. Paul's teeth chattered as they struggled to stuff everything into the car. The woman's cell phone rang. "Excuse me." She stepped away to the front of the car to take the call.

Paul's mom stopped fighting with her suitcase and rested her hands on her hips. "Well she's got cell service, so there's hope." She and Paul looked around at the flat landscape. A stiff wind raised a

crop of goosebumps across Paul's skin and whipped his shaggy blond hair into a snarled mess.

Paul zipped his jacket up under his chin. "Yeah, hope. Makes you wonder how this place got its name."

Enola cast him a warning glare. "Paul, this is home. You can make yourself miserable, but don't pull me and your father into your misery. Think of it like a new adventure...a fresh start."

Paul clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering as he glanced at his father checking emails on his phone. He didn't want a fresh start. He wanted the life he had cultivated in Texas. "I should be headed to basketball camp in about a month, meeting scouts, talking about my future. Instead I'm headed into no-man's land north of the Arctic Circle without cell service." He jammed his mother's cosmetic case into a space at the far end of the trunk. "With no prospects of even playing high school ball, exactly how is that a fresh start Mom?" He wrapped his arms around himself with his fingers tucked under his arms.

His mom glanced at his dad checking messages on his RAM phone and let out a sigh. "Look at it this way, Paul. If we were still in Texas, you wouldn't have gone to basketball camp anyway, because we couldn't afford it. And we would still have been moving somewhere else. Whether we moved here or not, our life in Richmond was done. Don't lose sight of that. You would still have changed schools and would have had to make new friends."

His father stepped close enough for Paul to hear, "Get over yourself, son. This isn't all about you. Learn to make the most of this new opportunity." His tone let Paul know he'd had it.

Paul fumed inwardly. It was easy for his dad to look at it as a new opportunity. For him it was. For Paul, it was more like a death sentence. He finished shoving the luggage into the trunk and carried his duffle bag into the back seat of the car where he had to hold it on his lap.

His father sat in the front seat with the real estate woman while his mom crammed into the back seat with Paul and his duffel bag. His

mom and the real estate woman chatted away like old friends. But his mom had that knack. People liked her.

"...pump toilets since 2003," he heard the lady say.

"What?" Paul thought he misheard.

The lady laughed. "I know it sounds unbelievable to some, but really, we didn't have sewers until then." She laughed again, but Paul had a sinking feeling. A place without cell service and people who thought flush toilets to be something special was just a little scary.

"What about Internet?"

"We have local dial-up. Most people just use it at work or the library, and don't worry, we have cable TV. But instead of a phone, you'll find most people around here use the CB."

"Dial up?" Paul hadn't gotten passed that first bit of information. *I'm living in the stone ages!*

"We do have limited access to a telecommunications network via satellite, but that is limited to the few who need access to higher bandwidth. It's RAMs satellite."

They pulled into a gravel drive leading to a small house that looked like a prefab trailer. It set on short pilings and had a ramp that zigged and zagged up to the front door. The lady unlocked the door and motioned for Paul and his parents to step inside. She walked in behind them and handed Enola the key. "I'm sure you'll want to rearrange things, but the people who did the unpacking put things into drawers and cupboards best they could. She opened the almost empty refrigerator and shrugged. "I picked up a few staples for you. You can go into town tomorrow to stock up. You'll want to be sure to get a few flashlights or candles to have on hand for when the lights go out, too. You can get everything you need at the Native Store."

The woman left her card and told them to call if they had any questions. As her car pulled out Paul's dad stretched out his arms and said, "Well this is it, such as it is."

His mom stopped in the small living room while Paul cut past her and found his room. His Jeremy Lin autographed poster and Dwight Howard poster decorated a tiny room with blue walls. His twin bed

filled more than half of it and made it a tight squeeze between his bed and dresser.

When he stepped back into the living room, he found his parents sitting in the two easy chairs in the living room across from the dark TV. Boxes his mom had packed were stacked against the wall in the hallway. A phone rang from the kitchen. His mom hurried to answer the white wall phone. It was a wrong number. She hung up and smiled. "Well we have a phone after all."

Paul stared at her. *A landline. No texting, no Internet...no privacy...and no place for me to sit.* "It's been a long day. I'm going to go to my room." He lay on his bed and stared out the narrow window at the clouds gathering in the sky. He'd slept on the plane, but still felt exhausted. If he could, he'd sleep through the next year and wake up and leave. The real estate lady said the sun would set at 9:30. The wind howled through the eaves. *I'll never sleep with that racket.* He got up and dug through his backpack for his earbuds and plugged his ears.

Chapter 5

He woke to find the wind still screaming through the eaves of the small house, but the layout made it easy for Paul to hear his parents talk from his bedroom. His dad complained about work and how they were driving him harder than he'd ever expected...doing the work of 10 men. "And I've walked into a social powder keg here. I knew the Alaskan drilling project was unpopular with the people here, but figured I could help straighten that out. Now I'm not so sure I'm going to be able to do that. I – I think RAM might be bending some of the rules, and if that's the case this whole thing could explode in my face.... Plus they're talking about starting some exploratory drilling."

The pause in the conversation told him his parents were probably kissing or hugging. "I'm glad you're here," his dad said. "It feels good to have someone I can talk to...who I can trust."

Paul thought about just staying in his room and pretending to be asleep, but he needed to get the low down on the phone situation. Paul grabbed his phone and headed to the kitchen. He walked in on his mom talking quietly. Her back was to him, but his dad's eyes met his over his mom's shoulder as soon as he stepped in the room.

"Paul! Good morning! We thought you were asleep."

Paul stepped back. This friendly act wasn't going to change things. He looked away and studied the worn linoleum. "So what's the deal with cell phones up here?" He held out his phone. "I know you said no reception...and there's no real wi-fi. So what are we going to do? I'm fixin' to go nuts."

His dad let out a long breath. "I know. I meant to tell you about that, just never found the right time to bring it up. I didn't want to discourage you."

Paul stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I get that. So what's the deal though? Houston Hoops is holding the Off Da Hook Spring Classic this weekend. I wanted to follow the results and all."

His dad rubbed the back of his neck and let out a long sigh.

Paul's stomach fell. "The real estate lady said Ram has service up here, right? I mean you called us."

"It's like a different world here," his dad admitted. "My phone works because it's provided by RAM and their satellite provides my

reception. There is cell service but it's not like what you're used to. Very limited from my understanding. Not even worth having a smart phone. I started checking into it, and people here use CBs more than phones." He shrugged. "You'll have to ask the other kids about their cell service."

Paul blinked in disbelief. His mouth hung open. "Dad! You were up here for a week! How am I supposed to stay in touch with Josh and my other friends back home! I'm not even going to school here until next fall. Who knows when I'll meet someone to even ask about cell service!" He threw his arms up and let them drop. "How am I going to see any of the games! They're running March Madness reruns, showing the Duke game against Gonzaga!"

His dad shook his head.

"You mean I'm going to miss the Duke game? Dad! You can't mean it! First you drag me up here, and now you take away my last link to civilization!"

His dad's eyes narrowed. "That's enough, son. Life isn't always what you want it to be." He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers

through his hair. "Sometimes new paths offer even better opportunities. It takes time. Give it a chance. And, really, I need ya'll to stay off my back. This is no cake walk for me, either. My new job...it's like two jobs right now. Most of the people here are either suspicious of RAM or they downright hate us. And the home office expects me to pull a miracle out of thin air. I don't need the same from my family."

Paul slumped against the wall and rolled his eyes. "By all means, you certainly have to keep RAM happy. Then one of these days you'll get around to your family."

His father glared at him with those icy blue eyes, but for the first time Paul noticed dark circles under his father's eyes. *Man he looks tired. Mom, too. None of us wants to be here.* He hung his hope on that. *Maybe...just maybe there is a chance we'll go back to Texas.*

"Sure. You're right." Paul raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry."

There was no sense fighting because in this matchbook house there was no getting away from one another.

His dad leaned over and gave him a hug. "It will be okay, Paul. Change is never easy."

That's an understatement. Paul didn't know how to react.

Everything that mattered was being stripped away. A token hug from his dad wasn't going to change that. He waited for his dad to let him go unsure of what to say. His dad kissed his mom on the cheek and headed out the door. The noise of what sounded sort of like a mower roared from outside the kitchen window. Paul peeked out the small window to see his father ride away on an ATV RAM provided.

The following morning, Paul woke in his new room. He grabbed his cell phone to check the time. That's about all his phone was good for now. 5:57 a.m. *This feels like I'm in the movie Groundhog Day.* He sat up and listened to the sounds of this strange place as he calculated what time it was back home...9:57. A stiff breeze moaned outside his window. The clatter of dishes in the kitchen and the aroma of coffee lured him from his room.

His mom balanced on a short stool reorganizing a cupboard. She spotted him and smiled. "How did you sleep?"

"Actually pretty good considering the wind and the fact that it's almost 10:00 back home. Where's Dad?"

She let out a sigh. "Work. He left about an hour ago. You know how he is."

She was right. It didn't surprise him. "What are you doing?"

"These cabinets are so high I can't reach the top shelf. I'm just re-organizing things so I can reach the things I use the most without dragging out the stool." She nodded to the coffee maker.

"Coffee's hot."

Paul studied the cabinets. "That's weird. There's no soffit. That's what makes the cupboards so much higher."

She stepped down and glanced up at her handy work. "You're right. I was wondering why they seemed so much taller. Want some coffee?"

"I'll get it." He took one step and paused. "Where are the mugs?"

She pointed to the cupboard above the coffee maker. "You want a cup?" he asked.

"I've got one." She picked up her cup from next to the sink and took a sip. Her lips puckered like she had sipped vinegar. "Cold!" She looked around. "I already miss our microwave. I never finish a cup of coffee while it's hot. Just zap as needed."

"Well you could just pour yourself a half a cup at a time." Paul looked in the refrigerator for some flavored creamer. The shelves were almost empty. His mom shook her head and pointed to the powdered version on the counter. He rolled with it and changed the subject. "I was thinking of going in to town to pick up the flashlights, candles, and stuff the real estate lady talked about. She said the Native Store, right?"

His mom nodded and pulled out a little sauce pan from a drawer beneath the stove. "I guess it's the hardware store here." She dumped her coffee into the pot. "You can check to see if they carry microwaves while you're there."

"You want to come with me?"

She shook her head. "I think I'll stay here and work on unpacking and figuring out where everything is that was unpacked. I can't stand

operating in all this confusion. There's no doubt we're going to have to maximize the space we have here.

"And while they let you take your finals before we left Richmond to finish out the year, and you don't have to go to school until next fall, it wouldn't hurt if you want to meet the other kids and get to know your new school,. You could register here for the last month of this year."

Paul shrugged. "I don't know. I'll think about it."

Paul walked outside and surveyed the flat arctic tundra. The flatness stretched toward bleached white hills in the distance. They looked like they might once have been mountains but now they were nothing but pathetic remains of former peaks worn away by the blasted wind. It felt lonely and bleak. He zipped his jacket up under his chin and headed toward town. It didn't matter that dad's truck hadn't arrived yet, because this place didn't really have much in the line of roads anyway. ...*And I don't have anything else to do.*

A handful of younger kids running along what served as the street stopped and watched him. He smiled at them and said, "Hi."

One little girl with chocolate-brown eyes and dark shoulder-length hair smiled and waved at him. The rest of the kids watched him like he was a curiosity on exhibit at the zoo. It suddenly felt like an old episode of Twilight Zone. "Can you tell me how to get to the hardware store?"

The smiling girl pointed in the direction he was walking. "Native Store on Qalgi."

"Thanks, sweetie." He gave a quick wave goodbye and walked away. Behind him the kids giggled and ran in the opposite direction. A year in this place would be a challenge.

In short order, he spotted a hand painted sign identifying the Point Hope Native Store. Beneath it was another sign depicting whales. The artwork looked like cave dwelling drawings, and the building itself was nothing but a pole building. He walked inside happy to get out of the wind, but wondering if this was the right place.

A pretty native girl stood behind the counter. She looked about his age and smiled showing off white even teeth against her olive complexion. Her dark hair was pulled back into a long ponytail. "Hi, welcome to the Native Store," she said. "Let me know if I can help you find anything."

"Thanks." He decided to look around for himself, first, to kill a little time. He found the candles and flashlights, and a lot more including groceries, personal care items, hardware, lumber, and even a dusty microwave displayed on a shelf. After about a half an hour, he headed to the register. The girl smiled again. "Did you find everything you need?"

"That is yet to be determined." He wiped his hand across his face wondering what to say. "I just moved here."

She nodded. "I know. We heard you were coming, and since I don't know you, I knew you must be the new kid." She extended her hand. "My name is Nukilik Reed, but my friends call me Kili."

He took her hand shook it. It was soft and warm in his cold hand. "I'm Paul. Paul Lowick."

She listed his items on a receipt pad and asked, "So what grade are you in?"

"I just finished my a junior year, so I'll start next fall as a senior. How about you?"

"I'm a year behind you, but the school isn't very big. There's only about 70 kids all total. We're all friends and hang out together. You coming to school today?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided what I'm doing. They let me take my finals and finish out for the year before I left Texas so I don't really need to go until the fall. But I'm toying with the idea of going anyway to meet some of the kids."

"Truthfully, there isn't much. You're just in time for Spring break. Our break coincides with whaling season and so a lot of the guys are already out on crews and won't be at school even if you did go." She glanced up at him, her blue eyes shining. "So what do you like to do?"

He rested his hand nervously on the back of his neck. Here, he didn't know what there even was to do. "I like to shoot some hoops."

"Really?" Her eyes brightened. "You just missed the playoffs. This is the home of the Harpooners."

He could tell by the look on her face that she was something she was proud about. "Oh? What are the Harpooners?"

She laughed. "You want to be careful not to ask that again. You might hurt someone's feelings. It's kind of a big deal to all of us here. The Harpooners won the Class 2A Alaska State Basketball Championship two years in a row." She stood a little straighter. "I'm a Harpoonerette."

"A...Harpoonerette?" He couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

She nodded. "Girls team. We turned in a solid effort at the Class 2A state basketball tournament this past weekend. Took fourth in the final team standings. So if you like basketball, you'll have no trouble fitting in. Most of the year...the guys and girls get together every evening at the Tikigaq gymnasium to play if we can make it."

A wave of excitement washed over Paul. "That's awesome! I played varsity back home"

"Really?" she sounded a little impressed. "You'll definitely have to join us. Right now, though, like I said most of the guys are kind of busy...it's whaling time. From now through May. Most free time is spent helping family this time of year." She bagged his items. "Things will get back to normal after the festival, and by then school will be out. When I'm not working here or at home doing chores, I'm usually over at the gym."

He remembered the guy on the plane talking about some festival. "I heard something about a festival, what's it all about?"

"It's the whaling festival, Nalukataq. It brings friends and relatives from across the North Slope and other regions of Alaska. People have already started to arrive and it's still a month away. Two whales have already been brought in. Everyone comes to get a share of whale and join in the fun – the traditional blanket toss...dancing...singing. Seeing people you don't see all the time. It's a big deal and lasts throughout the night. You won't recognize the place with so many people."

Paul swallowed hard. The thought of eating whale grossed him out but he kept that thought to himself. He reminded himself he'd run in to plenty of people in Texas who felt the same way about eating raw oysters and he loved them with a little hot sauce. Maybe it would be the same with whale.

Kili glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's almost time for me to leave for school. Last day before spring break. Next week almost everything will be closed but if you'd like I can show you around."

Paul grabbed his bag and followed her out the door watching her switch the sign to closed.

"Soooo...you just close?"

She nodded. "People know I'm here in the morning before school. My uncle usually reopens around noon...except now he's out on the boat. If people really want something they'll call me and I'll meet them here after school. Next week, I'll be on call since I'm not going to be in school."

"If you want, we can meet here tomorrow and I can show you around after I work the morning, and I could show you around if you like. I know moving here can be tough on outsiders."

The term outsider caught his attention. But it was the truth. He didn't belong here. But he pushed aside his reservations and accepted the offer. "Thanks, I'd appreciate that."

He walked out of the store with his package and a lighter step. It felt good to know basketball was big here, and to have something planned. And at least one friendly face with a name. *And a pretty face at that.*

Later that day he went with his mother to the Tikigaq School to talk about registration and to lay the groundwork for the following year. It didn't look like any school he'd ever seen. What they called the "new" building had been built in 1980. The woman in the office was polite enough but not really friendly. When she stood at the copier making a copy of his birth certificate, his mom gave him a sideward glance with raised eyebrows. She felt it too. He was thankful he

wouldn't have to actually attend until the fall. Maybe by then he'd have some friends. And for now he had Kili willing to show him around.

With nothing else to do, Paul spent the rest of the day helping his mom. She made spaghetti for dinner. His dad didn't make it home in time to join them. It rubbed Paul wrong. He still couldn't get over feeling his father cared more about his job than his family. They were stuck here with no Internet, no TV, no phone and he couldn't even watch the Off Da Hook Spring Classic or see any of the current games. Even if they had TV, they probably didn't even get the sports channel up here. *And Dad has the only working cell phone.* Paul had hoped he could at least use it to check scores and rankings. The landline was pretty useless. Living here was a joke.

For his mother's sake, he held his tongue. He went to bed listening to the wind moaning outside his window. His mind drifted to Kili; happy he had met her. But he missed his friends and life in Texas. He pulled his pillow over his head to block out the noise of the wind. He tossed and turned. Muffled voices told him his dad finally made it

home. He glanced at the clock. 11:00. No sense getting up. He decided to stay warm and comfortable and finally fell asleep.

Calvin Lowick lay beside his wife on the queen size bed listening to the wind howl like a hunting hound outside the window. Enola had fallen asleep so easily, while he wrestled with his troubled thoughts. The scope of the mess he had inherited pressed in on him. If he hoped to quiet the environmental concerns of the people here, somehow he had to convince them that they had a big stake in oil revenue. The mess he inherited would make that job even harder. Things were much more complicated than anyone realized. Some of the mistakes and regulation oversights his predecessor had made could land the company in legal hot water... *and me if I don't get things straightened out.* He was purposely being kept in the dark and it was more than just because he was new, but because he didn't really know people it made it hard to get to the bottom of things.

The pressure from Mr. Stone to get the new exploratory drilling project up and running by mid-September put him at odds with the

Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). They were urging the government to oppose the plan because it required drilling two miles down and six to eight miles under the sea. And then there were other green groups and activists including some of the natives in Point Hope who were tied to whaling concerns. For them the thought of more offshore drilling or an oil spill was terrifying. Today's phone call with Mr. Stone made it clear that he didn't care about the multifaceted problem. He "wanted results, not excuses." He had said, "We put you there because we thought you could get the job done. Don't disappoint me," and hung up the phone without another word.

Cal rolled onto his side and pulled the pillow over his head. His thoughts drifted to his father. Even though he had passed, that's who he really didn't want to disappoint. Exhaustion finally claimed him and he fell asleep.

Chapter 6

The following morning Paul sat up in bed feeling energized even though he hadn't slept great. He reached for his phone out of habit, but caught himself. *I forgot to ask Kili about the service here.* He threw

the blankets back, climbed out of bed and headed into the hall toward the bathroom. The door was closed. He knocked.

"I'll be done in a minute," his mom's voice answered.

"Okay." He rubbed sleep from his eyes with the heels of his hands. *Why would anyone build a two bedroom house with only one bathroom?* This would take some getting used to.

The gurgling coffeemaker called him to the kitchen. His bare feet padded along the narrow trail of worn gray carpet between boxes stacked in the living room to the kitchen linoleum. So different from the Veneto Tavertine tile floor in the kitchen back in Richmond. The kitchen floor felt like ice against his bare feet because of the cold seeping from beneath the house. He ignored it and thought about meeting Kili. He breathed deeply of the fresh coffee aroma as he poured a cup and almost didn't notice the wind playing through the eaves of the house. Maybe he could get used to it. He headed back to his bedroom with his coffee.

While he waited for the bathroom to free up, he'd figure out what to wear. Not because he cared so much what he wore as he did about

staying warm without getting too hot. The first thing he did was pull on a pair of socks just to warm his feet.

When his mom finished in the bathroom, he took a quick shower. As the warm water ran across his back excitement stirred in his gut for the first time in months. Kili was friendly and pretty. *Maybe this place will be okay after all.*

He told his mom about his plans over oatmeal and a second coffee.

"I told you it would all work out." She smiled but her green looked sad.

"You okay?"

She nodded but not convincingly.

"Mom, what's buggin' you?"

"Dad left for work a couple of hours ago. You're fixin' to be off with a new friend, and ... well I feel like I don't fit? You know what I mean? I don't know anyone, don't have anywhere to be." She shrugged. "I'll get over it. The one thing I can say is that I have plenty

to do." She waved her hand toward the boxes in the living room. "I'll get plugged in, eventually. It's just a matter of time. I'll be okay. It's just a little overwhelming. I miss home."

He reached out and patted her hand. "I do too, but you're right. I know you. You'll get it all done and before you know it you'll be so busy we'll be eating take out...if there is take out. If not, maybe you'll learn to make gourmet whale dishes."

She pulled her hand away but smiled. "Hush your face."

They laughed as he walked to the sink to rinse his bowl. If there was one thing his mom had drilled into him it was to never leave dirty dishes in the sink. With the bowl in hand he looked right and left. For the first time he realized there was no dishwasher. He turned and looked at his mom. "No dishwasher?"

She just shook her head and let out a deep sigh. With a dismissive wave of her hand she said, "Just put it in the sink. It will give me something to do."

He grabbed his jacket from the peg next to the door and stopped. For the first time in a long time he felt bad about leaving his mother. "Love you mom. Feel bad leaving you here like this, but I really need to go."

"Honey, I really will be just fine. This will pass. Ya'll have a good day."

"Thanks." As he headed out the door he thought about her words. She said them like she meant them even though this move dealt her a harsh blow. At least he could leave in a year. Who knows how long she was stuck here. Dad could retire in 10 years if he retired early. The thought made him shudder.

He stepped out the door and the sunshine made him wish he had his sunglasses. The crisp morning air invigorated him as he headed toward the cluster of buildings that made up Point Hope. He still needed to get a warmer jacket.

While he wasn't ready to live the rest of his life here, at least it wasn't as bad as he thought it was yesterday at this time. The kids here sounded like they loved basketball. They even had a

championship team. And he'd made a friend. A pretty friend and they were going to spend time together today.

When he walked into the Native Store Kili waved to him from behind the counter. "You ready for your tour?"

He shrugged. "Sure," but really what he was ready for was spending time with her and getting to know her better. "I figure if I've landed smack dab in the middle of this place, best I get to know it."

"Smack dab?" She laughed.

He wiped his hand across his face. "Sorry. Guess that's my southern showing. Just means right in the middle."

She giggled. "I know. And don't apologize. I like your accent. The way you talk is kind of cute."

Paul smiled without a clue of how to respond to the compliment. He hadn't thought about his accent. For a brief moment it reminded him that he was an outsider, but her smile swept the concern from his mind.

"It's a good you're not starting school until next year." She raised her arms and wiggled her hands as if she were praising some sun god or something. "Yesterday was our last day until the 28th."

"That's a long break."

She nodded. "And it's not just school, the whole town is different at this time of year." Little lines wrinkled her forehead. "This time of year is very special to our culture. It's probably not the best time for you to try to mingle....so school could have been...weird." She threw up her hands. "Sorry, I'm sure I'm not making sense. I'm just saying that if I was you, and knew what I know, I'd have made the exact same choice. By the time we go back to school it's only a few weeks till finals and we're out for summer...and the festival. Everyone is going to be busy, and it won't be easy for...." She looked at him.

"Outsiders," he finished.

She nodded. "I've got the store, and I've got to clean out the ice cellar, get it reorganized, and everyone needs to get ready for the festival. In fact, I know we were going to hang out today, but I have to work in the ice cellar. Last winter was warmer than normal and for the

first time ever some of our food thawed. Anyhow, I've got to get it cleaned, organized and ready for this year's meat. They've brought in two whales so far."

Paul's heart fell. He scratched an imaginary itch on his collar bone. *She's trying to blow me off.* "So we don't get to really hang out. I get it." He swallowed hard trying to keep emotion from his voice.

"But," Kili said. "I was thinking ... if you want, I mean ... maybe we could go play a little one on one. Then maybe I could show you around between all the stuff I've got to do in a couple days. You know...teach you a little about my people...about Point Hope. It really will help you understand this place if you learn what we're about. Especially before the festival."

Paul studied her. She seemed sincere. "Like what kind of stuff?"

She held up her hand counted off starting with her index finger. "For starts, the old village. Second, the cemetery –"

"Cemetery?"

"You'll see." She put her hand on his arm. "There's not another like it in the world," she said with a teasing tone. She stepped back and her face grew a little more serious. "Really, it is special." She threw her hands up again and let them drop. "Up to you."

He nodded, but inwardly he thought about going home and helping his mom unpack. Not his idea of fun. "I admit I was hoping to meet some of the other kids sooner rather than later."

"You'll get to meet them soon enough. I feel bad. Not sure anyone will be getting together at the gym because so many are out on the water right now. Like I said, this time of year things are busy for everyone, but if we end up getting together for a little basketball, I can let you know. But for now, I have enough time to give you a run for your money."

"Oh really. I'll take you up on that. Anything I can help you with here?"

She reached to the floor behind the counter and pulled out a basketball. She tossed it toward him. "Think fast!" He grabbed it mid-air. "You can carry that."

His heart bit a little faster. Going to play one on one with a pretty girl beat visiting a cemetery any day. To Paul's surprise, Kili took him to an outdoor court at the school. "I thought you played in the gym," he said as he started to bounce the ball against the cold pavement.

"Usually do, but I thought I'd break you in out here. See what you're made of."

"Oh really?"

She stripped off her jacket down to a white sleeveless quilted vest that zipped up the front. "We'll play to 12," she said.

"Okay, you ready to start."

She propped her hands on her hips. "I'm always ready."

He started to dribble the ball with his fingers, keeping it low. His fingers felt stiff and cold but he ignored that. He switched hands rapidly and changed direction as he headed toward the basket. He made a wide step left with a good head fake. She fell for it. He shifted his weight and lowered his shoulder trying to make it look sincere and

slipped by her before she realized what he was doing. He tossed the ball through the air. It glided through the net with a whoosh.

Kili smiled. "Nice shot."

He tossed it to her. She moved right, but turned her weight and bounced the ball to her left hand. She executed an in and out move carrying the ball left then right in one fluid motion. She moved toward the basket quickly and spun. Paul was working up a sweat as he tried to spot her and block her shot. With the ball in her right hand she planted her foot forward changed the ball to her other hand, bounced it once, making a 360-degree rotation with her left foot. She scored with a jump shot.

Paul's pride was slightly wounded that she got around him like that, but he smiled as he unzipped his jacket and shrugged it off. "You're good!"

"Thanks. You are, too." She threw the ball back to him and backed up to defend.

He dribbled hard toward her. He paused and made a few quick stutter steps like he was going to dribble by her. Again she fell for the fake and he used the space to quickly rise up and shoot a jump shot.

The game went back and forth like this and Paul won, but he knew it was only because he had possession of the ball first. Kili was good enough to get a scholarship of her own.

He blotted sweat from his face with the sleeve of his jacket. "That really felt good. Thanks."

"It was fun. If I had time, I'd say we should go out and get a coke, but I really need to get home and start working in that ice cellar."

"You might think this sounds stupid, but what is an ice cellar?"

He walked her back to the store as they talked. "...we store whale, walrus, seal, caribou, fish and other traditional foods we get from hunting. Cellars are like 10-12 feet down so the permafrost keeps things frozen. Except last year it got warm enough that some of the food spoiled. First time ever in my lifetime. What a mess. Melted ice

made water collect. Between that and spoiled food I still need to do more cleaning and reorganizing before we replenish our store."

When they reached the Native Store, Paul offered to help her with the task, but she politely said thanks but no thanks. They said their goodbyes and Paul headed back to his house with mixed emotions. When he walked in the door, he found his mom standing on a stool still reorganizing the cabinets. Her wide-eyed smile made him happy he'd come home. She climbed down from her perch and with hands on her hips said, "So you were gone a little longer than I thought you'd be. What'd you do?"

It seemed strange having his mom interested in his life. In fact, he wasn't sure he liked it. Felt a little like prying, but he could see genuine interest on her face, so he told her about Kili, how the whole town was busy with whaling, that Kili thought it smart that he wait to start school next fall, and even explained how Kili had to go home to clean the ice cellar. Then he shared the real news. "We went over to the school and played a little one on one."

"You and Kili?"

He nodded. "And she is pretty good." He shrugged with hands toward the ceiling and let them drop. "And here I am."

"Another good thing about not having to go to school is that you'll have time to help me get unpacked."

He held his tongue and shrugged off his jacket and hung it on the peg by the door. "I'm going to start in my room. I have no idea how I'm going to fit all my junk in there."

She laughed. "Welcome to my world! Good thing we didn't bring any more."

Paul headed down the short hall and paused at the door to his room wondering how he would ever make such a small room his own. *It's only temporary*, he reminded himself. Once they found a bigger place, he'd have room for his stuff.

He unpacked the first box, and quickly realized he'd have to leave much of his stuff in that box packed. For now his trophies stayed in the boxes. He hooked his portable basketball hoop over the top of the door, but the door was too close to the wall for it to work. He'd

have to put it up and take it down to allow the door to open. For now he, tossed it onto his bed. Aggravation built as he opened box after box. Even though he was trying to be logical and picky, the pile of things on his bed that he needed grew while the majority of his things remained packed. After a couple of hours the stack had grown into a mess leaving him feeling overwhelmed. Nothing fit anywhere...just like him. He scooped the mess off his bed, dropped it onto the floor and flopped onto the mattress.

He lay staring at the ceiling. Tears of frustration stung his eyes. If only he had cell service or could get online and chat with his friends in Texas, find out what was going on in the world of basketball. He sat up. *Maybe Kili knows...* She loved basketball, and as far as he could tell so did a lot of the other kids here. *Maybe...maybe there's a place they get together to watch the games.* Maybe he'd walk back over to the school and shoot some hoops.

The sound of an ATV pulling up yanked him from his bed. He looked out the window facing the side of the house but couldn't see a

thing. His mom called from the kitchen, "Someone's here ... I think for you."

Chapter 7

Paul hurried into the kitchen and peeked through the blinds of the small kitchen window next to the door to see Kili in a Ranger ATV that looked more like a miniature truck. "It's Kili!" He opened the door and stepped on to the porch and headed down the zig-zag ramp.

"You found me! What are you doing here? What about the ice cellar?"

She slipped the helmet from her head and laughed. "It's not too hard to know where the new guy lives when you know the real estate agent. Like I said –"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm an outsider." He stepped up to the vehicle admiring it. "Nice wheels." He wrapped his arms around his torso to ward off the chill of the wind as it tried to erase the warmth of the sun. This ATV had a small bed and everything.

"I'm done cleaning up for today and thought I'd stop by to see if you wanted to hang out a little more, maybe go do something."

"Like visit the cemetery?" he teased raising his eyebrows.

But his humor was lost on her. She smiled. "That's a great idea! Better grab your jacket though."

Paul's jaw dropped, but he caught himself. Even visiting a cemetery would be better than dealing with the mess in his room. "Be right back." He ran up the ramp into the house. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he would rather visit a cemetery than be home.

"Kili's going to show me around," he said to his mom. He kissed her on the cheek and said. "Not sure when I'll be back."

He climbed into the ATV.

"Ready for your tour?" Kili revved the engine and flashed a smile. "First, I'm going to take you to the old village."

"Okay." He watched the landscape blur as Kili cut across open ground. His mind raced as he wondered what to talk about to end the awkward silence. He nibbled the skin around his thumb nail wracking

his brain for anything to talk about. Just when he decided to ask how her how she thought her exams went, she came to a stop and turned off the engine.

He glanced at his surroundings. "This? This is...was a village?"

She opened her door. "Come on. I'll show you."

He climbed out of the vehicle and caught up to her as she headed toward what he thought had to be remnants of ruins. Not even enough to really be called ruins.

Kili stopped and looked at him. "I'm bringing you here to help you. A lot of outsiders don't care about us or our history. As a result they remain outsiders." She shrugged. "You seemed to care so I thought I'd show you the Old Tigara Village." She gestured toward the large pieces of what he guessed to be wood. "This is what remains of a men's community house...they were sod houses called Oargi. They were made with bowhead whale bones."

"Those..." He pointed toward the towering bone, "...are whale bones? They're huge! Is this like ... a sacred place?" He stuffed his

hands into his pockets to keep them warm and worried about stepping on something holy or revered.

Kili smiled and let out a deep breath and nodded. In a way I guess you could call it that. It's prehistoric. The Tikigaqmiut people used to live here close together for the first half of the year in underground dwellings made of whale bone, driftwood, and dirt. They were connected by tunnels. Today we live in modern houses ... which some outsiders think are outdated." She stared at her foot as she ran it back and forth in the sparse grass then looked up at him. "I wanted you to see this so you'd understand. We're grateful for flush toilets, and heat, and running water."

Paul ran his fingers through his hair. He thought back to his reaction when the real estate woman talked about having flush toilets...and how backwards he thought the people here must be. Kili was right, this helped him to see a different side of things. "So why did they live here? Like this?"

"Do you understand what subsistence means?"

He shrugged. "Kind of, but not really."

"It has always been our way here in the village of Point Hope. We support ourselves by harvesting what we need from the land and sea. Food that's shipped in is really expensive. So we eat fish, marine animals, birds, gull eggs, and caribou and stuff like that. Historically, berries and roots were a big part of what we ate, too." She flashed another smile. "I still love fresh berries if you ever want to go picking with me when they are in season."

"Anyway like I said, they lived here during whaling season...the first half of the year. The remainder of the year they lived among rest of the people in houses made with frames of willow and insulated with moss and grass. So while many think we are backwards, we think we are living the way of our ancestors. Right now, during this time, we hunt murre eggs and bowhead whales. In the summer it is seals, salmon and berries. In the fall and winter we track caribou."

Paul loved to hunt. Maybe by the winter he'd have enough connections to hunt caribou. The guys back home would never believe it.

"So why did you bring me here?" He pointed to the mounded earth and whale bones.

Kili tucked a wisp of dark hair that had pulled free of her ponytail behind her ear. "I guess I thought it would be a good idea before you meet the other kids. You see we are proud of our heritage and our accomplishments. Today, Point Hope provides public electricity. We maintain a water treatment facility and a sewage pumping facility. We have trash pickup, a health clinic, a fire station, and even a senior citizen center. We have mail, public radio, cable TV, and phones."

"That reminds me," Paul said. "What kind of cell phone works up here?"

"Not many. Pretty much we have landlines. When we are away from the house we depend on CBs." She touched the radio at her belt. "My handle is Grocery Girl." She laughed. "I recommend you get one. That's how we all stay in touch. We sell them at the store."

He let out a sigh. That wasn't the news he was looking for. Without a phone, he would be cut off from his friends back home. And what about the NBA playoffs? He opened his mouth to ask, but she

stepped away while making a sweeping gesture with her arm for him to follow. As they walked, he spotted more large bones sticking out of the ground like monuments to another time.

"I'm guessing that's the cemetery?" He pointed.

She nodded. "Our burial grounds marked by whale bones. When my grandfather was young...in the late 50s, the government wanted to build an artificial harbor at Cape Thompson. They wanted to do it by burying and detonating a string of nuclear devices."

"What! That's crazy."

"No kidding! I can't even imagine them thinking like that. Anyway, long story short is that the people didn't want it and they stood up against it. And it didn't happen."

Paul could see pride in her eyes. It started to all come together in his mind. "I think I'm getting it. You all look at RAM just like the government. Coming in here and wanting to do things whether you want it or not."

Kili crossed her arms and eyed him with a look he didn't quite understand. Finally, she nodded. "Yeah, I think you go it. And you being the *RAM Oil kid*..." She shrugged.

"Ugh! Don't call me the RAM Oil kid. To be honest, RAM has done the same thing in my life. They don't care about people. My dad works his butt off but it's never enough, and when they gave him this promotion it was like he had no choice, and we had to move in weeks!" Paul threw his arms in the air. "I mean why couldn't they have waited until I finished the school year out? It was only about a month and a half. Instead, they ripped me away from everything!"

She squinted. "So they just uprooted you?" She snapped her fingers. "Just like that? No say so?"

"Exactly."

Kili and Paul climbed back into the ATV. "I have to say this is an ATV on steroids!" he said. "I've never seen anything like it. I mean seatbelts, windshield and everything." He fastened his seatbelt with a click.

Kili nodded. "My step-dad upgraded to this Ranger last year after my brother—step-brother--Pana, wrecked his ATV. She looked at Paul with moist eyes. "He was a couple years older than me and a real brother. He died in an explosion...at RAM. Three others were hurt, but Pana died. I lived with Pana and my step-dad, Steve, after my mom and him got married, but then Mom died from breast cancer. So, really my step dad is my real Dad and my only family. After all that's happened he's more overprotective than ever. He bought this Ranger because it's safer, and we can use it for deliveries, too."

Paul nodded and searched for something to say, but couldn't think of anything that didn't sound lame. He'd never lost anyone that mattered much less parents or a brother. As much as his dad aggravated him, he would be devastated if he died. When he did the math, he realized Kili's brother would have been about his age...just a year older. He wondered about the explosion, but decided not to bring it up. If she wanted to talk more about it, he'd listen but he wasn't going to pry. For now he figured it best to change the subject. "So

that's why your handle is Grocery Girl? Because you deliver groceries?"

She laughed. "I guess. Not my first choice, but I don't really mind. It is what I am to many of the people here." She started the ATV. "We'll have to figure out your handle."

Paul rubbed his face and looked at her through his fingers. "Just so it isn't outsider...or RAM Oil Kid."

They chuckled and pulled away and headed back to Paul's house.

The five-man whaling crew threaded through leads in the sea ice quietly paddling the seal-hide umiaq. Some crews used power boats these days, but this crew honored tradition and depended on one another. That was the way of whaling. Among the men Steven Ahtuanguaruk, Kili's step-dad, stood out. His stark white skin, black hair, and dark eyes set him apart from the others. The gray in his goatee betrayed his age, but other than that, his heavy muscular build

made him a source to be reckoned with. While the crew appreciated his skill and strength, since the death of his son most of them were leery because his hot temper had a short fuse. Not the best scenario when in a small boat. For now, he trained his eyes on the water's surface watching for a smooth black shape to rise out of the Chukchi Sea.

In the distance he spotted a fleet of RAM Oil vessels cutting through the gray waters under the overcast sky. Gulls called to one another as if to say "this way" but Steven did not hear them. He was upset with the President. He'd gone back on his promise and agreed to allow RAM to explore for more oil in the Chukchi Sea. If RAM hadn't come...the explosion would never had happen and his son Pana would still be alive. His activist group and others worked hard to block drilling, but big money won out and those who said they cared turned a blind eye to the plight of his people and their way of life.

Steven counted the ships in the fleet... looked to be about 20, with one larger than the rest. He pulled out his spyglass for a closer look. The others in his boat stopped paddling and waited for his report.

"Twenty five of 'em, come to kill our way of life," he said. "The big one is a drilling ship ... name on the side ... Arctic Pioneer." He said the name like spitting rancid oil from his mouth.

The crew in the umiaq grumbled. RAM Oil was not only threatening their way of life, but their very life. Without food they would die or be forced to relocate. Steven set his jaw. The path of activism was too slow – inadequate. The arrival of this drilling rig was proof of that. He would have to find a way to make them listen ... make them pay. A way that would send a clear message. They were not wanted, and they would pay for their encroachment – for the death of his son. For it was not right to take away what was brought into existence for a purpose.

A whale's spout broke the surface, between the boat and an ice ridge. A small school of whales breached the surface. Glaucous Gulls flocked to site. Their shrieks and flapping wings stirred a sense of excitement. Everyone in the boat forgot about RAM. With practiced ease they paddled the boat in close enough. Steven hefted the heavy brass shoulder gun. The man beside him aimed the second darting

gun. Steven shot. A wooden shaft 1.5-2 m long tipped with a detachable steel harpoon cut through the space between the boat and the whales. Fifty-five m of strong nylon line floated on the air behind it.

The harpoon's steel tip sliced into the whale's hide at the postcranial depression just forward of the back. The plunger trigger-driven gun fired an 8-gauge brass bomb. Steven's crew-mate readied the second darting gun to deliver the second bomb, but it wasn't needed. Steven had hit his mark and the whale had given its life to feed his people.

Paul and Kili sat in the ATV outside of his house. "Do you mind if I ask you something?" he asked.

"Of course not."

He held up his hands with his palms facing her. "Now don't get me wrong. I really just want to understand."

Kili's dark brows knit together into a frown. "What?"

"It's about the whales. I mean, aren't they endangered?"

Kili nodded. "Yes they are, but not because of us. Commercial fishing almost wiped them out. We only take what we can eat. Our hunters honor the animal by utilizing as much of it as possible. It's a way of giving thanks to the whale for giving itself to the village.

"Point Hope uses every part of the whale for the community. Only the skull is put back in the ocean and the next spring another whale will come back to the community to be used as food."

Paul was speechless. It was like whale-hunting was a religion. He didn't really know how to respond so he said, "Well thanks for helping me understand."

"I've got to work extra at the store tomorrow because my step-dad is –"

"I know whaling." He cringed at his own town and hoped he didn't sound too harsh but he was sick of hearing about it. It was bad enough he had to move here, but now it was like life was on hold because of whaling! Kids weren't playing basketball because of whaling.

Kili raised her brows. "I thought you might understand better now." She crossed her arms. "I guess I was wrong."

Paul felt like a real idiot. "I'm sorry. Guess I'm just a little frustrated. Everybody is whaling and I'm not part of it. I'm not part of school. I'm not part of anything!"

Her expression softened. "Yeah, I guess that would be hard. It's bad enough for me because most of my friends are guys and this time of year I feel pretty much like I'm on my own." She chuckled. "So tomorrow when I get off work you want to go shoot some hoops again?"

"Yeah! For sure!"

His mom walked up to the Ranger, her blond hair blowing wildly in the wind. Paul opened the door and she leaned to look over at Kili.

"Hi you, two, have fun?"

Paul nodded toward Kili. "Mom, this is Kili Reed. Kili, this is my mother Enola Lowick."

Paul's Mom squatted slightly, reached into the Ranger and shook Kili's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"So you plan to work or stay at home?" Kili asked.

Paul's mom's eyes widened. "I did volunteer work back home...I mean back in Texas and was wondering if there's any place here that could use some help."

Kili's eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "The first place I can think of is the clinic. They'd love to have an extra set of hands if you're willing to volunteer your time. Their budget can't support any more staff. If you decide to check it out, tell them I sent you."

"Thanks, thanks a bunch sweetie." She backed away from the ATV. "I'll let you two talk, I just wanted to say hello. Nice to meet you –"

" She pulled a strand of wind-blown hair from the corner of her mouth and gathered it into a hand-held pony tail. "And thanks for the tip on the clinic."

Kili smiled warmly. "Sure thing."

Paul watched his mom walk up the ramp into the house and thanked Kili again. "I appreciate that."

"What?"

"Telling mom she can use your name as a reference." He studied his fingers for a moment trying to work up the nerve to ask if she'd like to come in. "Would you like to come in for a little while?"

"I'd love to, but I have chores I have to take care of." They chatted a little longer, and talked about getting together the following day to shoot some hoops. "You need to get yourself a radio, too," she said. "That way we can be in touch."

He nodded. "Good idea. I'll look at them soon. You'll have to help me think of the right handle, too."

"Just so you know, sometimes handles pick you. Believe me, Grocery Girl wasn't my choice." They laughed as he stepped out of the ATV and waved before heading up the ramp into the house. His mother met him at the door and glanced over his shoulder at Kili as

she pulled away. "I can't wait to hear all about it. She's beautiful! Where did you go! What did you do?"

He turned, waved one more time and followed his mom into the kitchen as she backed in the door. The two of them sat at the table and sipped a cup of coffee together as he retraced his day for her. The history interested her. She asked a slew of questions about their culture that he didn't have answers for. "It's fascinating! And I'm going to go to the clinic like she said..."

It amazed him that his mom showed real interest. He couldn't remember her ever being really interested in anything he did. This was nice. But what fascinated him most was most Kili and tomorrow afternoon he'd be shooting hoops with her.

Chapter 8

Steven hadn't been home for days. He walked into his house exhausted. Pulling the whale ashore had taken hours. Cutting up the carcass so the meat could be hauled to food caches took his last ounce of energy. He just didn't have the stamina he had when Pana

was alive. Thankfully, his share of the whale meat had been delivered earlier today so he didn't have to unload it himself.

Regulations didn't allow him and his crew to catch another whale for days, and he was thankful for a chance to get some sleep before heading back out on the water. But as he stepped into the small house frustration overshadowed the fact that he and his crew landed a whale. Seeing that RAM Oil fleet was a sign they were losing the battle. RAM Oil didn't care about Tikigaq or his people or their way of life. They just kept coming like an invading force...a force that needed to be stopped. His friend Jim Harris added fuel to his discontent when he told him his niece Nukilik had been seen with the son of the new RAM Oil exec.

He stopped inside the door and listened. The house was quiet.

"Nukilik, are you here?"

Sometimes when Nukilik looked at him with those haunting, blue, almond-shaped eyes it was almost like her mother was there. She was kind and giving, but just as stubborn and independent, too. She needed to stay away from this RAM Oil kid for her own good but, in his

heart, he knew she wasn't likely to do that. "Just like her mother," he muttered. "Always trying to be kind to outsiders."

"In the kitchen, Dad," Nukilik called.

He walked into the small kitchen filled with their portion of the whale. She stood at the sink repackaging some of the whale meat into smaller portions for storage. She flashed a smile over her shoulder. "I've rearranged the ice cellar. We have plenty of room."

That was putting a positive spin on the warmer-than-usual weather last year which caused water to leak into the cellar and spoil some of their food, for the first time ever. That was her way, always looking for the bright side of things. But he couldn't complain. She'd cleaned things out and reorganized the ice cellar to make room for the fresh whale meat. Steven walked over to his daughter happy to be home and kissed her on the cheek. "You need help?"

"No, I'm good. So you and your crew got a whale!" She smiled. "When I got the news I came straight home and finished getting the ice cellar ready. The whale made it here before you." She cast a glance at him. "I thought you would be home sooner."

"I had other things to do." He didn't mention talking with Jim Harris or the handful of activists about RAM's latest move. She didn't like his friends in the activist group, so he avoided the topic. Eventually she would understand...he just had to find the right time to help her see it was the right thing to do. "So you came straight home after dropping off that blond-headed boy?"

She smiled, but it wasn't her real smile. He had caught her in a white lie. "Yes. And his name is Paul. Paul Lowick. I'm going—"

In a flash, Steven's anger spewed like a boiling volcano spitting boulders. "I don't want you hanging around with that RAM Oil kid!"

Kili blinked at her step-father's outburst. Since Pana's death, he looked for someone to blame for his loss, and thanks to James Harris his grief was turning into a hunger for revenge. She missed Pana, too, but his death was an accident. The real problem was that no matter who her dad blamed, it wouldn't bring Pana back. She wanted to remind him that that Pana would have been gone away to school now anyway chasing his dream of becoming a journalist. It was as if her

dad totally blocked out the fact that Pana planned to leave Point Hope. Pana had only taken the job with RAM to write about it from a first person perspective – from an young Inuit's point of view, but Dad didn't know that.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she thought about how he'd make up fake news stories about Point Hope until they laughed so hard she cried. She missed him. If she could talk to him, she'd ask him about the accident. *How did it happen? What went wrong? If only she had something to give her dad some peace.*

But he had anything but peace. Since the accident her step-dad seemed to blame anything related to RAM for taking his son. It wasn't right, but there was no talking to him. People said time would heal him, but for now his thinking was the very reason she hadn't mentioned Paul. It was also the reason she decided not to mention she had introduced Paul to their way of life, or that she was meeting up with him again tomorrow and even planned to invite him to the festival. *I like him.*

She studied her dad's face with concern. His dark rimmed eyes looked almost black from lack of sleep. At first, she tried to tell herself it was just how pale he was that made his eyes look like that, or because he had very little sleep while processing the whale, but she knew better. He didn't sleep well. Since Pana's death. It broke her heart to see him like this and there was nothing she could do to help.

She let out a long calming breath and said, "You know what? I could use your help. You could start moving this meat to the ice cellar while I make some dinner."

He lumbered over toward her with a fierceness that scared her for a moment. Without a word, he started shoving the packaged meat into his large backpack which would leave his hands free on ladder into the ice cellar. He handled the packages roughly. She wanted to warn him to be careful or he'd rip them, but instead she kept her eyes riveted forward to avoid looking at him. No sense engaging an angry bear. She longed for a way to help him through his grief.

Kili woke early and snuck out of the house quietly while her father snored in his easy chair. He'd never gone to bed. At the store, she wiped down the counter, counted out the change for the till, and thought about Paul Lowick. He seemed like a nice guy, and she felt bad for him. People like her step-dad didn't want RAM Oil or anything related to RAM Oil in Point Hope. And that meant Paul. It was hard enough being an outsider, and he was really a nice guy.

It surprised her that her father had already heard about her spending time with Paul, but it shouldn't have. In the same way, he wasn't aware that she was in touch with much of what he was involved with. It was the way of small town living.

She knew that her step-dad and his activist friends were in the process of planning a protest against RAM at this year's festival which was now less two weeks away. Her thoughts drifted to Paul – she liked his blond hair and green eyes. He had already become her friend. In fact, she liked him more than a friend, but she wouldn't admit that to anyone besides herself. *He can't help it that his dad worked for the oil giant.*

Her real concern was that some of the guys on the Harpooners had issues with oil drilling in Point Hope, too. She'd radioed Conner and Nut (Nutaralak) to let them know about Paul last night. They were the two guys she knew who didn't care about RAM Oil one way or another. They were on the same crew as her dad so they'd be off for a couple of days. So they agreed to meet her and Paul to shoot hoops this afternoon when she got off work. After that, when the rest of the team showed up, she had no control over how things would play out. No doubt Paul would have a rough go of it, but she certainly wasn't going to contribute to the situation.

The morning went by quickly enough. People stopped in and talked about the whale her step-dad's crew brought in. A few of them mentioned the "blond kid" they'd seen with her. Kili was wise enough to know who to talk about Paul and who to avoid. When her father's friend, James Harris, walked in she welcomed him to the store like she did every customer, but then busied herself to avoid speaking with him. He walked directly to the counter and tried to engage her in small talk. She knew better. "Can I help you find something?" she asked.

He slipped his red knit cap from his head. His short cropped hair stood on end with static. "How are you, Nukilik? It's been some time since we talked."

She climbed the step stool and started to reorganize items on the shelf above her. "Yes it has." In her heart she wished he'd just leave. She didn't look at him.

"I saw you driving into the village yesterday." He paused. She knew he was going to go in on her for being with Paul.

She stopped messing with the things on the shelf and glanced at the man over her shoulder. From this perspective she could see his scalp shining through his short-cropped thinning hair. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harris, but I have work to get done. Is there something I can do for you."

"Nukilik, as your friend, I'm here to tell you to stay away from that RAM Oil boy."

Kili propped the knuckles of her right hand on her hip and twisted to face him. "Funny. My friends call me Kili. If you were my friend,

you'd know that. You're right that we haven't talked in a long time, but that's by choice. We don't really have anything to talk about."

His face flushed, his high cheekbones accentuated even more as his eyes turned into suspicious slits. "If you want your father to be happy, you'll stay away from that boy."

Kili jumped to the floor and walked over to the counter. With her palms flat on the counter, she leaned forward and looked Mr. Harris directly in the eye. "My relationship with my father is my concern. My relationship with the RAM Oil "boy," is my concern. I don't tell you how to live your life, and it isn't your business to tell me how to live mine!" Her voice grew louder. "In fact, I think my father would be better off if you weren't his... *friend*."

He leaned closer. The muscles in his jaw twitched. His stale breath brushed her face. "You will show me respect," he said through gritted teeth.

Kili shook her head. "I guess I'd have to respect you first, Mr. Harris. You see, I'm not a fake. I don't respect you because you're a

bully." She threw her arms up and shrugged with her palms toward the ceiling. "Bullies just don't earn respect in my book."

He slapped his hand on the counter. "I'm telling you, stay away from that boy!"

She looked at him with hooded eyes. "And I'm telling you, it's none of your business who I see. I hardly even know him, but with the way you're acting we might just become best friends!"

Mr. Harris raised his head high. "I thought you cared about Point Hope. I thought you believed in your heritage. But you bring shame to your family." His voice grew quiet. "Good day Miss Reed." He yanked his cap onto his head and strode to the door.

She watched him walk out of the store and let out the breath long breath. Her hands shook, more from anger than fear.

Chapter 9

Paul walked into Point Hope with extra spring in his step. A cluster of younger kids stopped playing as he walked by. One of them was the little girl who had smiled at him the first time he had walked

into town. This time she waved, and he waved back with a smile. This place would take some getting used to, but it wasn't too bad.

Within 15 minutes he was in the heart of the village and heading down Qalgi to the Native Store. He checked his watch. *I don't want to get there too early...make it look like I'm desperate or something.* But inside he was both anxious and excited, not just about playing ball, but about spending time with Kili again.

As he approached the Native Store, a short, thin Native wearing a red cap walked out of the store. He spotted Paul and paused. Paul tipped his head, "Hello." The muscles in the man's jaw clenched. It didn't take a rocket scientist to warn Paul to stay clear of this guy. The man stepped forward and blocked Paul's path. "You listen to me RAM Oil boy. We don't want you or your kind here. Go back home."

Paul baulked at the RAM Oil slur. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me well enough. You are not welcome. We don't want you here. Go home or you will be sorry." The man with the red cap walked away, climbed aboard an older ATV, started it and disappeared down the street with a roar. Paul stood there wondering

what that was all about until the sound of the ATV faded into the distance. He walked into the store pondering whether or not he should mention the crazy guy to Kili.

He stepped into the dimly lit store.

"Hi Paul, you're a little early," Kili greeted from behind the counter. "But that's good, come over here. I wanted to show you this before we leave." She lifted a CB radio in her hand. "This CB gets 40 channels. It's the best way to get ahold of me – really the best way to reach anybody living here.

Paul took the radio in his hand. It was bigger than a phone, but just holding it made him feel connected. "I can't pay for it right now," he said. "But I want it. You'll have to show me how to use it and the lingo and all that."

She laughed. "There really isn't much to it. And if you want, you can open a tab for your family and just pay it off at the end of the month."

"Okay sure!" Paul stared at the buttons and controls. "I'll need one of those doohickeys that let me attach it to my belt."

She laughed.

"What?"

"Doohickey?".

Heat burned across his face. He just shook his head.

"That could be your handle." Her eyes shined with laughter.

"Dookickey?"

She nodded. "Why not? If I'm Grocery Girl, you can be Doohicky."

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

She shrugged and pushed a form toward him. "Just fill this out and we'll open an account." Paul started to fill it out when she asked, "Do you hunt?" He looked up from the form wondering at the way this girl changed subjects. "Did back in Texas. Why?"

"Did you eat what you killed?"

"Of course. Why?"

Kili shrugged. "To be honest some of the outsiders who come here have a thing against hunting and living off the land."

He nodded. "I get what you're saying. We had the same kind of nuts in Texas."

"You've seen the groceries here at the Native Store? That's the extent of our packaged goods...groceries. If you don't see it here, it probably isn't in Point Hope. People can't afford to buy foods transported to the Arctic. They are so expensive that in many cases, it takes a family's entire paycheck. A lot of the people here are afraid one oil spill will wipe out their way of life."

Paul stared at the stock on the shelves. He hadn't thought about it. "My dad said something about how all the residents of Point Hope will get a check from the state every year instead of income tax."

Kili let out a sigh and nodded. "That can help, but if someone wanted to pay you not to play basketball would you want to stop playing? Here we live off the land. It isn't just a sport. Like I mentioned

yesterday, it's a way of life and a lot of our community activities revolve around our seasonal subsistence cycles. That's what Nalukataq festival in a couple of weeks is about."

Paul nodded wondering where this conversation was going. He just wanted to learn how to use the CB, and go shoot some hoops.

"My step-dad's crew brought in a whale. You'll probably hear about it today as you're out." She grabbed his hand. "About my dad." The twinkle in her eyes blinked out replaced by concern.

"What? Did something happen to your dad?"

She shook her head and looked at the counter. "No it's nothing like that. It's just that – you see that RAM explosion that killed Pana – well he blames RAM for the death of his son." She let out a deep sigh. "I just wanted you to know."

Paul's heart sank. He stood where he was for a moment. Kili's hand felt warm in his as she turned to look at him. "I'm sorry. He kind of blames RAM and at times everyone connected to RAM."

He stared at her hand on his, thankful she was willing to reach out even with her father feeling that way. "Well," he said, "I can't do anything about that, but since I'm going to be living here, I'd like to ask you a favor."

She looked at him with expectation. Her blue almond eyes searching his. "What?"

"I'd like it if you didn't call me an outsider...or the RAM Oil kid."

"So you think Doohickey would be better than either of those?" She laughed. "I'm kidding. Ready to go shoot some hoops?" She lifted her hands and motioned as if she were lining up a shot and let it go.

"For sure!"

As they headed to her ATV she said, "Oh, by the way, a couple of my friends will be joining us at the gym."

Enola sat on the sofa in the undersized living room of her small house staring at the boxes she had piled against the wall making it feel like the room was closing in on her. She was out of room and out

of positive thoughts. *I don't even have room for Yoga.* Her fingers brushed the leather upholstery as she reminisced about the spacious home she'd left in Texas. She burst into tears and let herself cry. After about ten minutes, she wiped her face with her sleeve and went over and grabbed a tissue from the box perched on the pass-through to the kitchen. *I wonder when we'll get the satellite hooked up?* At least the TV could keep her company or add a little background noise.

She leaned with her back to the pass-through and stared at her new reality. Back home when she felt like this she would have gone shopping. Shopping here meant going to the Native Store. She thought of Paul's friend Kili who worked there. It brought a smile to her face. *Send him to town to buy candles and he comes back with a friend. Wish I was more like that.*

I've only been her a few days, she reminded herself. The sound of an ATV drew her to the window. It wasn't Paul, just someone driving by. For the first time it dawned on her. The last car she had seen was the one she rode in to get here. Even on their way to the house, she hadn't seen any other cars driving...though there were a

few here and there parked next to some of the houses most people were on these ATV things or walking.

She slipped on her jacket. If others could live here without a car, so could she. She stepped outside, and the wind tugged her hair in different directions. It didn't matter. The sunshine felt good on her face, even though the wind stole its warmth. The coolness actually felt good on her puffy eyes. She walked down the zig-zag ramp and sat on the bottom stair listening to the sound of the wind and the hum of the diesel generator that provided them with electricity. Part of her liked the remote feel of living in the middle of nowhere. When she stopped to think about it, it actually felt good not to be overcommitted. Her memories flashed to her last days in Texas, and how the people she had spent so much time with volunteering or organizing didn't really seem to care she was even leaving.

She took in a deep breath of fresh air. *Moving here gives me a new start, a clean slate.* Her eyes drifted toward the village. *What do you hold for me, Point Hope?* Even the name of the place hovered like an omen of good things to come. One thing she did know, staying in

this little house with a husband who was never home and a son who was already making friends would not be an option. She decided to take a walk into town and look around, maybe even check out the clinic Kili told her about.

Chapter 10

Anger bubbled in Steven Ahtuanguaruak when he overheard a couple a boys talking about his daughter playing basketball with that RAM Oil kid. How could she betray him like this? How could she turn her back on Pana's memory? In his burning fury he wanted nothing more than to hunt her down and bring her home. He had forbid her from hanging around with that kid and she defied him! Publicly! He splashed some water on his face. He needed to get going. His crew was heading out, but he would deal with Nukilik, he wasn't sure exactly how.

Last year they only brought in three whales. Then with the unusually warm weather many families had lost food stored in their ice cellars. He had to get back out on the water ... had to do his part for his people. Even as he drove to meet the others, first he went by the

school. His eyes scoured the area for any glimpse of Nukilik and the blond-headed RAM Oil kid. But no one was at the school. After he had wasted enough time, he headed toward the water and ice ... to one of the few places left in his world where he felt like he belonged.

Before he headed out, he talked with a few of the young men from the Harpooners that were helping to finish up the last of the processing. As he and his crew headed out, he spotted the RAM Oil rig in the distance. Without a doubt, what he needed to do was to bring RAM's operation down. It was the top priority. If they hadn't come here, Pana would still be alive. Nukilik would not have betrayed him. A plan began to hatch in his mind. A plan that would guarantee she wouldn't be seeing that blond-headed RAM Oil kid again.

Margaret Perry sat behind the clinic's reception desk with the stethoscope still around her neck. Her frustration mounted as she sifted through piles of paper work looking for a misplaced insurance form. As a nurse practitioner at the clinic the red tape made her job

more about dotting the i's and crossing the t's than it did seeing patients. That is if they wanted to get paid.

The door to the reception area opened. Wind blew across the desk and scattered some of the papers onto the floor. Margaret took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as the shadow of the next patient blocked the sunlight leaking through the half opened blinds. Margaret grabbed a clip board and shoved it onto the counter without looking up. "Sign in and fill this out."

"Excuse me, but I'm not here to see the doctor."

Margaret looked up over her reading glasses to find a middle aged woman with blond hair holding the clipboard.

"Then what is it I can do for you?"

The woman smiled. "Actually, I came to see if you need help."

Margaret spread her arms out motioning toward the mess on the desk. "Yes we need help." She shook head. "The problem is there's no money in the budget to hire someone. Sorry."

The woman extended her hand. "Then this is your lucky day. I'm here to volunteer. Name's Enola Lowick."

Margaret blinked. "Vol-volunteer?"

The Lowick woman's head bobbed up and down. "If you'll have me."

Margaret stood up. "If? My God woman you are a dream come true! When can you start?"

"Well, now I guess."

"Come on through that door there." She pointed to a door that said *employees only*. "You can fill out the paperwork and I'll help get you set up."

Margaret Perry glanced over Enola Lowick application information. "You and I are neighbors," she said. "I live a couple doors down from you." She continued scanning the information. The woman was a real God-send, but the fact that her husband was the new RAM bigwig left a sour taste in her mouth. RAM had promised her husband steady employment and benefits and then fired him for no real reason.

On top of it, he wouldn't even talk about it. Said it was political and they didn't need any more problems. He was right about that. Jobs were scarce other than RAM and so far no one wanted to hire him. If it wasn't for her work here at the clinic they would have lost their house.

Two guys played one on one when Kili and Paul walked into the gym. Paul stood listening to the sounds of their shoes on the court, drinking in every detail of the Tikigaq gymnasium – home of the Harpooners. For the first time since his move, he felt at home.

"Hey, Conner ... Nut! Come meet Paul," Kili called out.

"Just a sec," the shorter of the two called back while the taller boy kept the ball low and dribbled with his fingertips. Kili leaned her head toward Paul while she watched her friends. "The guy with the ball is Nutaralak, better known as Nut. The other guy is Conner.

Nut stepped toward the right with a head fake in the same direction. Conner moved right. Nut shifted his weight and bounced the ball to his left hand and went all the way to the basket.

Conner scooped up the ball after it slipped through the net, and headed toward Kili. Nut hurried to catch up. Paul greeted them with a smile. "Hi, nice to meet y'all."

"This is Paul." Kili motioned toward Paul with a tick of her head.

"Hey, Dude, nice to meet you." Nut extended his hand. Just the way he said 'dude' reminded Paul of Josh back home.

Conner lifted the ball. "So you play?"

Paul nodded. "Sure do."

"Let's go!" Conner ran back on to the court bouncing the ball in front of him. Nut followed and yelled. "We'll play you two."

Kili peeled off her coat and Paul did the same and ran onto the court wondering if they were really allowed to be playing in their street shoes. But he quickly let go of all such distractions. Nut was guarding him man-on-man. He handed off the ball to Kili with a bounce pass. She dodged Conner and drove toward the net and scored.

An hour later, they all sat on the bleachers talking. "Y'all really play well," Paul said.

Nut blotted sweat from his face with the hem of his shirt.

"You sound surprised, Dude."

"I hate to say it, but I figured I was moving to the middle of nowhere. I didn't even think y'all played basketball up here."

Conner laughed. "Well you were right about the middle of nowhere."

Behind them the door to the gym opened. A group of guys walked in, a few of them carried basketballs. Kili looked at Conner and Nut. Nut took a breath and let it out slowly.

"What are they doing here?" Kili asked.

Conner leaned in toward Paul and said, "It's only fair to let you know that most of the guys on the team might not be so ready to let you play." His dark eyes looked at the group drawing near.

Paul's heart fell. He cast a glance toward Kili. She shrugged. "Some will think you're an outsider, but worse your dad works for RAM."

"But I hate RAM! It's like my dad's their slave. He never has time....." He swallowed the rest of his defense as the others walked up to them.

One of them bounced the ball he was carrying and snatched it midair. "What's going on, Nut?"

Nut stood to his full height. "Just shooting some hoops, want to join us?"

"Kili's father told us you might be playing here with that." He nodded his head toward Paul. "Said it was important that we protect our heritage against the hostile takeover of big oil on every front ..."

At that moment, Paul hated RAM more than ever. Not only did they ruin his family, now they were going to ruin his social life, too.

Chapter 11

Paul stood in the gym outnumbered. Even if Kili, Nut, and Conner stood up for him, things didn't look good. Every muscle in his body tensed ready to run, if he had to. He learned a long time ago not to stand and fight when you knew you couldn't win.

Nut stepped forward and shot the ball from the middle of the court. It slipped through the net. A few looks of approval flashed across the guys' faces, but the normal whoops and claps on the back were stifled by the heavy weight of unspoken threats between Paul and the newcomers. Kili inched closer to Paul and took his hand as a show of support; her touch warm and reassuring.

The group that had just walked in stepped closer. One of them stood chest to chest with Nut. "You know the rule. We don't play with outsiders."

Nut stood a little taller. "Dude, he's not an outsider. He lives here in Point Hope. Just because he lived somewhere else shouldn't mean he can't play. I mean, your family is only second generation Point Hope." Nut tipped his head to the side. "So that would mean you're an outsider, right Andy?"

Andy's dark eyes flared with anger. He stood nose to nose with Nut. Paul felt like he'd found a new best friend, thankful Nut was willing to make a stand and support him. Tension hung over the group. Paul wondered if he should just forget it and walk out. *But that's what*

they want. He squeezed Kili's hand as if she could read his thoughts.

I'm here to play.

Behind them the doors to the gym opened, again. A middle-aged man wearing a hooded flannel shirt walked in. "Hey guys, how's it going? Thought I saw you head in here. Surprised you're not out on the water."

Andy and the group with him backed off, and glanced over their shoulders at the man. "Hey coach." Andy glared at Nut, daring him to say anything.

Nut ignored him and kept his eyes on the coach. Paul breathed easier. Nut called out, "Hey coach, this is Paul...Paul....?" He glanced at Paul. "What's your last name?"

"Lowick."

"Paul Lowick," Nut finished. "He used to play ball in Texas."

Nut gestured toward the coach, "This is Coach Yazzie."

The coach stepped forward with a smile and extended his hands with his palms toward the ceiling. "The kids call me Coach Yaz. So you play?"

Paul nodded. His heart started beating a little faster. "Yeah, yeah. I played side forward on the Wolverine varsity team back in Richmond. We took the championships this year."

"Interesting." Coach Yaz pressed his fingertips to his forehead like he was thinking. He snatched a ball from the floor, turned to the other guys. "Let's shoot some hoops." He turned back to Paul and passed him the ball.

The rest of the guys started to strip off their jackets and piled them on the floor. Paul stood wondering what he should do. Not only wasn't he part of this team; most of these guys hated him. He started to dribble the ball and passed it to Nut. The coach put up his hand. "Okay, hold on. Line up for a friendly game of pick up."

Paul did as he was told. Kili walked over and sat on the bleachers.

"Count off in twos," Coach said. "One, two, one, two...."

Andy stood first in line. "One." Each player counted off. Conner stood between Paul and Nut. When it came to Paul, he said "two" with relief. Right now wouldn't be the time to play on the same team as Andy. Nut gave him a high five, "Dude you're on my team."

The group broke in to two teams and headed onto the court. "Half court," Coach announced. "We'll play to seven baskets. Scoring team, starts with the ball." A couple of players grumbled a little. Coach shouted, "It'll be good for you—force you to play good defense."

Paul liked this coach already. A game of pick up let everyone play without designated positions. He could be himself. Better, he could prove himself to the guys and the Coach. Just one thing, he didn't really know who was on his team, other than Nut. Paul raised his hand. "Coach, I don't know all the guys so I won't know who's on my team other than Nut here."

"Good catch, Dude," Nut said. "We can play caps and scalps."

Andy's team grabbed their snowcaps and slipped them onto their heads. "We're ready. Now you'll know whose going to beat your butt."

Nut stepped close behind Paul, and spoke under his breath. "Dude, stay in the paint, post up, rebound and defend. Nobody here is going to care how good you used to be in Texas. Don't try to be a scoring machine or you'll end up making enemies. Think team."

The advice bugged Paul a little, but he knew Nut had his back. He nodded. The pickup game started and Paul found his groove. He ignored the elbowing and holding from the guys trying to get under his skin. If there was anything he didn't need right now, it was drawing that kind of attention to himself. *This is just a pickup game. Just show them you know what you're doing.* His natural talent was clear. He'd let that speak for itself. He grabbed a rebound and spun to pass. A guy without a hat called for the ball. He passed it. Nut groaned. "Texas, what you doing? He's not on our team."

Andy and two others laughed. Paul felt his face grow hot. "You mean they have to cheat to win?" The words escaped before he

caught them. Nothing he could do but move to cover the guy. "He's not wearing a hat," he said pointing out what was already clear.

The laughing stopped. Paul wished he hadn't said it. He cast a worried glance toward Andy. His icy stare bore into Paul. *I didn't make any brownie points there.* The coach stepped in with a whistle. "Okay guys, that's not clever or funny and you know it. That's not a turnover...it's a turnoff. Have to say, not a great first impression. We're done here for today."

Moans and groans of "not fair" and "we were just kidding around" didn't cut it. The coach held the ball in the crook of his arm. "It's no secret that this team is tight-knit, but it is also no secret that we need a few new players. Is this how you're going to welcome your new teammates?"

Andy's brows arched in surprise. He pointed toward Paul. "You mean him! You've already decided he's on the team?" His voice finished with a crack an octave higher.

Coach Yaz sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Silence hung over the small group as the coach stepped closer to Andy and

stared him straight in the eye. "You're a good player, Andy. But if you're not part of a team, it won't matter in the long run. So if you want to play solo, let me know now so I can find someone to take your position."

The muscles in Andy's jaw tightened and his nostrils flared. He glanced down at his shoes and back at the coach. "My bad. Sorry Coach."

"Good, now shake hands with Texas over there."

Andy rolled his eyes, shuffled over to Paul and extended his hand. "Sorry, Texas."

"No biggie," Paul said. "I understand."

Coach Yaz bounced the ball and snatched it midair. "How about if I make a shot from here we all go out to the diner for a piece of pie?"

The mood lightened. Most of the guys cheered and whooped. The noise died as Coach Yaz set up to take his shot. With one effortless movement, he shot up and out, extending his arm. The ball hit the backboard, rolled around the rim and dropped through the net.

Andy dropped his hold on Paul's hand and wiped his palm on his shirt. Without another word he turned and walked away. Kili ran onto the court from the bleachers where she had been watching. "Don't let Andy bother you, Paul. He'll come around. He was a good friend of my brother A lot of these guys were his friend even though he was a few years older. He was on the Harpooners. The fact that your dad works for RAM...well, it will take time." She slapped him on the back. "You did good!" she said loud enough for others to hear.

"Thanks." Kili's words hit him hard. He could see why the guys might feel like that. While it was fun to play again, one thing was clear. He needed a lot more than skill and talent to become part of this team. The first thing he'd have to do is overcome the fact that his dad worked for RAM. That link and the memory of Kili's brother and how he died made him the enemy. *Plus the whole environmental thing. How the heck am I ever going to overcome that?* He followed Kili over to where they had laid their coats and rode over to the diner with her.

When they stepped into the diner, Paul stood looking at the guys who arrived before them. Not everyone was there yet, including Nut

and Connor. "Where should we sit?" he asked Kili. She'd know better than him how to navigate this situation.

The coach sat at the counter, "Hey, Texas, over here." He waved for him to join him.

Andy sat in a booth with three of the guys who had been on his team during the pickup game. Paul nodded toward him. Andy pretended not to see him. Paul shook it off as he straddled the stool beside Coach Yaz. "What's that?" He pointed at the slice of creamy pie with a chocolate crust. The top of the pie was sprinkled with what looked like shards of crushed red and white peppermint candy.

"Peppermint snow pie." Coach shoveled a forkful into his mouth. "It's great. Might want to give it a try."

Kili sat on the other side of the Coach and nodded her agreement. "Hey Marni, get me a piece of that snow pie. It's on Coach Yaz!"

The stocky waitress smiled; her teeth white against her olive complexion. "Sure thing, Kili."

"I'd like one, too, please," Paul added.

"Sure thing...." She paused for a moment and focused on Paul.

"You new here?"

The question felt good. The first time someone didn't act like they already knew he as coming. Coach Yaz answered for him,

"This here's Texas."

"Really my name is Paul. I moved here from Texas, and if it is all the same to ya'll I'd like it if you called me Paul. Texas is behind me now. Alaska is home." He shrugged. "So I'd rather look forward...." Paul's face heated as he let his sentence drop. He didn't know what else to say.

"Good enough, Paul. I like that you look forward," Coach Yaz said. "Guess we could call you Alaska." He chuckled at his own joke.

Paul could see by the looks on a few faces that they liked that he was ready to make Alaska his home. Now he just had to figure a way to make it clear that he hated RAM Oil as much as any of them, if not more. After all, his hatred had grown over the last seven years as they

lured his father away from his family to become a workaholic. RAM acted like they were doing his dad a favor, and his dad believed it. Anger flared in his gut at the very thought.

Marni placed the slice of pie in front of him. "Here you go, Paul. Welcome to Point Hope." Her smile reached her eyes. For the moment, Paul felt really welcomed. He pushed his anger aside and thanked her.

Coach Yaz, scraped the last remnants of pie from his plate and licked chocolate crumbs and cream from his fork. He pushed his plate away. "Love that pie." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and turned to Paul. "Now that you've made it clear that you've left Texas behind, before you do, I'd like to hear about your championship win and how you got here." He pointed in front of him. "In Point Hope."

Paul didn't know where to begin. He offered the coach the highlights of the last game. His excitement grew as he relived the game. As he did most of the other guys gathered around to listen. He could see by the looks on their faces that they were genuinely interested. For the moment, he forgot he was a stranger in a new

town...forgot he was an outsider. "I jumped and popped the shot. Bart reached up to block, but too late. I watched that ball like it was in slow motion. It arced through the air and slipped through the net like a dream ... like you'd see in a movie! The buzzer made it official. Richmond's Travis High Wolverines were champs. And there were scouts in the crowd. One of them even talked to me after the game. It was the best and worst day of my life."

"Worst day?" a few different people asked at one time and drew in closer to hear what he had to say.

Paul nodded. "Yeah, after the game my girlfriend let me know she was breaking up with me."

"That's messed up Dude," Nut said. Paul hadn't even seen him come in.

He let out a chuckle. "You got that right, Nut. She said she waited until after the game so I wouldn't be distracted." He took a bite of pie. "Mmmmm. This is delicious!" He pointed his fork toward Nut and said, "And the night only got worse. When I got home, my parents tell me Dad got a promotion. I asked if that meant Dad would have

more time at home. I never saw him because when you work for RAM Oil, it's like you sell your soul. Of course it didn't mean more time with Dad. That same night I find out the change was bringing us to Alaska." He took another bite. "I have to tell you, I was mad. I didn't even have time to get used to the idea. Now that I'm here, it's different. I think I'm going to like it here a lot. If I could just get rid of RAM from my life, this could be a great place to call home."

Coach Yaz looked at him with wide eyes. Well as wide as his almond shaped eyes would go. He glanced from Paul to Marni who stood on the other side of the counter ready to collect empty pie plates. Even Andy stood at the edge of the small group gathered to hear Paul's story. His mouth hung open.

Paul took the last bite of pie. "This stuff is delicious!"

Marni wiped the counter and leaned in toward Paul. "It might be counterintuitive, but you could always join the activists who are trying to put an end to the oil drilling here."

Paul swallowed the pie in his mouth. "Uh, yeah, sure I could do that." He picked a piece of peppermint stuck in his molar. In his heart

he knew his dad would have a fit if he joined such a group, but that might be the way to really show everyone how much he hated RAM. As much as his dad was around, Paul could be in college before he found out. *Might as well take advantage of the opportunity; I'll be off playing ball in college in a year anyway.*

Nut clapped him on the back and suddenly all the guys crowded around talking to Paul. It felt good. Not like an outsider but like part of the team. Kili smiled at him and that was even better than the pie.

Chapter 12

Cal Lowick couldn't sleep. The incessant howl of the wind and everything on his mind made him more than restless. It gave him time to think. By four in the morning, he decided to get up and make use of his time by heading into the office. With the responsibility of trying to get the exploratory rig off the ground, it had been weeks since he'd spent any time behind his desk or even had enough time to sift through the files that had raised questions in his mind. Since he'd been assigned his new secretary maybe the files would be in order enough that he would be able to find what he needed. Though he

wasn't all that sure about his secretary. She was friendly and helpful...but only on the surface. Instead of being his assistant, she felt more like a guard.

When she first arrived, he was happy to have the help because he wasn't a paper pusher by nature, and she attacked the mess Anderson left behind and started organizing the mess with a whirlwind of energy. Having her there freed him up to spend time on the rig and gave him a chance to get to know some of the guys, but it also reinforced some of the questions he had.

He walked past his secretary's desk, thankful she wasn't there this early. Just seeing her Ms. Qailertetang name plate filled him with tension. He couldn't even attempt to get his Texas tongue around that one, and when he tried calling her Mrs. Q. her lips puckered like she'd been sucking on a pickle. Now, if and when he was in the office, he didn't call her anything to her face.

He marched into his office and went directly to the window that looked down into the warehouse. His fingers quickly twisted the wand that closed the blinds. *It's crazy that I have to sneak around in my own*

office. He clicked on the small desk lamp. It painted a small buttery halo of light over his clean – no more than clean – his office looked like it had been staged for a stock photo shoot. It all made him nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rockin' chairs.

In his gut, he didn't trust her or that Halverson fellow on the rig. Not that he had anything concrete to point to, but his instinct had never let him down. As a foreman, Max Halverson acted more like he was the RAM Oil Czar, he hadn't even met Gregory Thompson who oversaw receiving, storage and distribution of service parts materials. The guy was responsible for monitoring the budget for supplies to ensure expenditures were within guidelines and he was never anywhere to be found. And Mrs. Q. treated him like an imbecile who didn't know how to file or find a file. She would "get him whatever he needed." So when Mrs. Q. messaged that she would be late today because she was part of some festival committee, he jumped at the chance for some peace and privacy behind his desk in his own office.

He plopped his briefcase on the desk-side chair and pulled together the fixin's for a small pot of coffee. The water cooler bubbled

and gurgled as he filled the two-cup carafe. The smell of fresh brewed coffee filled the air as he surveyed the office. Everything sparkled. Not a speck of dust or a stray paper. *I wish they would have just left it alone.* So different from the first time he'd stepped foot in here. Going through the mess had started to give him a sense of what was really going on here and gave him a heads up regarding some safety issues. In the short time he'd been here, though, it was clear there was more going on here than met the eye. Some things weren't adding up. He'd been tackling the safety issues, but the seals on the drilling rig weren't performing up to standards and that didn't make sense. The same top-of-the-line seals had never failed in Texas. In his mind, it was like a puzzle with pieces missing. He couldn't see the big picture. *Could the water temperature here in Alaska cause them to fail?* According to the specs, that didn't seem plausible.

On top of all this Mr. Stone was pressing him to get the new exploratory rig up and running. He didn't really want to do that until he could figure out the problem with the seals, otherwise he was just

multiplying the risk for a major leak. Plus he still needed to find a way to let the people here know that RAM cared about the environment.

He settled in at his desk with his cup of coffee and let out a deep sigh. Truth be told, he'd rather hang out on the rig where he could get his hands dirty, than sit within these four walls hunting for reports and invoices. But the answers he was looking for should be here. With Mrs. Q's absence there was no better time to drill for the answers he was looking for. To start, he would take advantage of the quiet to go through the few files he'd been lugging around in his briefcase for over a month – a task he'd started several times but never really delved into thoroughly because of interruptions, or because his briefcase was still at home because he didn't really have a safe place to keep it here at work, and driving an ATV didn't allow him to lock it in his vehicle.

He admitted to himself that part of it was plain ol' procrastination. Every time he started looking at the papers he'd squirreled away, it gave him a sense of dread in the pit of his stomach. One report hinted at issues with the seals leaking but the safety issues were his main concern. He felt like he was trying to catch a fat, slippery greased pig.

This time he'd tackle the files one at a time, just in case someone popped in with some urgent matter like always. His goal today was to gather some facts, something he could bring to Mr. Stone.

A few loose papers sat on top of the files. He'd forgotten about those invoices. Originally he'd set them aside with questions because they had the same date. At the time they raised a red flag, but he thought it was a clerical error. Now he wasn't so sure about that. This time he compared the two more closely. Parts listed on one invoice were substandard to what they used. The other showed a list of quality seals and other parts. "The performance issues..." he muttered to himself. As he dealt with the performance issues on the rig he'd wondered if they were getting the quality parts they were paying for, but Halverson and his goons didn't let him near enough to inspect the problem. *Why would there even be an invoice listing these substandard seals? Unless ... someone is doctoring these invoices! Are we using substandard seals! It made sense. That's why performance isn't consistent. And Halverson's in on it. That's why he's made sure I don't even see a seal when it's being changed.*

He walked over to the filing cabinet to pull the report for the same time period. Nothing was filed where he thought it should be. He wasted a half an hour trying to find what he was looking for. *Are the reports even here?* He didn't like it. This whole mess stunk to high heavens.

As he flipped through the folders, he came across a file of newspaper clippings and articles from various sources. He pulled it and walked back to his desk. Most of it was more promotional than anything else, including a glowing commentary introducing his predecessor, William Anderson. *Looks like RAM's golden child.* He flipped to the next page and stopped. *Local Man Killed in Explosion.* He read the article. This was the reason Anderson had to leave Alaska so abruptly. He'd never heard the details. One person was killed and three others injured in an explosion on the oil rig. The explosion happened about 4 p.m. on board the oil rig roughly 12 miles off the coast of Point Hope. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) reported that the three injured workers underwent treatment in a medical facility on the rig. Their conditions

weren't immediately released. The oil rig which was owned by Richmond-based RAM Oil reported the explosion which wasn't in production at the time of the explosion. The damage was limited to the explosion area and no pollution was reported. The cause of the explosion was unclear and the BSEE was investigating.

Company officials blamed the incident on the collapse of one of the rig's legs. The man who died was Pana Ahtuanguak. According to the article, Ahtuanguak was born a couple years before Paul. A sense of sadness washed through Calvin. The article said the young man was working to get money for college.

Cal thought about the waitress at the diner. Little things she said made it clear that not everyone thought the accident was an accident. With the safety issues he'd already uncovered, he wondered if there was any truth to what some of the locals thought. What about Anderson? Between the safety reports that didn't line up with what he found and those conflicting invoices in the mess he left behind. *Was he involved?*

He could understand why many of the locals gave him the cold shoulder, between the accident and the threat to the people's culture and lifestyle, but what had left him puzzled was the standoffish nature of most of the people here at RAM. Now it was starting to make sense. If substandard seals were actually being used, and RAM was paying for the top-of-the-line, then someone was pocketing the difference. And it was a big difference. Halverson could be lining his own pockets and paying off workers who were in on it. And what about Thompson? He's never seen the inventory at the warehouse either. Was he in on this? But how could he even get close enough to see if he was right?

Cal paused. *Am I jumping to conclusions? Who could he trust?* A handful of the guys on the rig were friendly but he still didn't really have anyone he could call friend. Harold who worked in the warehouse was the closest thing to it, and he'd warned Cal to be careful. But on the rig as soon as Max Halverson was in the picture, most of the guys he did get along with treated him more like he was invisible.

When he found the report file, misfiled, he also found it lacking. Some reports weren't there, and others were missing pages. Mrs. Q was either really bad at her job...or really good. Depending on who she was working for. *Looks like it's time to get to know Harold better.*

Walter Mills sat before Criag's Stone's desk in one of the low-slug chairs. Sunshine filtered into the office making him fidget with the collar of his shirt. "So, you think it's working? Stone asked?"

Mills nodded. He's asked for upgrades – all dealing with safety."

Stone paced with his hands behind his back. "Good, good. Halverson and Thompson have both been a little jittery feeling like Lowick is digging, but they're just not used to a guy doing his job. And if there's one thing about Lowick, it's that he follows the book."

Mills nodded and looked at his tablet. "He's requisitioned a second safety ship."

Stone stopped pacing and turned to look at his right-hand man. "For the second well?"

"That's what he's saying."

Stone's eyebrows raised. "He certainly can get things done. Give it the green light."

Mills tapped his screen. "Done."

"Can't believe he cut through all that red tape so quickly. This well has the potential to be a 100-million-barrel reservoir. Of course we will send a safety vessel. Let him know it will arrive sometime early in June."

Stone rocked back and forth from heel to toe. "Getting this project up and running will definitely keep Lowick distracted."

The sound of the church bell rang in the distance. A big, older woman wearing a checkered scarf on her head rushed into the diner. "They're bringing in a whale!"

As one, people rushed to the door, Kili scurried a few steps with the others and stopped. She turned and looked at Paul. "Are you coming?"

Paul blinked. "Is it okay?"

"Okay? Of course it's okay. Everyone goes out to see the whale brought in." She shrugged. "Anyone who isn't an outsider that is."

He smiled. "I'm in." He hastily joined the others including Coach Yaz. His heart slammed with excitement as he climbed into the Ranger beside Kili. A couple of guys climbed into the small bed and they tore out toward the coast. When they got there, he was amazed at the crowd, but even more impressed with the block and tackle pulley system used to drag the harpooned whale from the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean.

Paul took in the scene. Tents set up reminded him of what he had learned about the people living underground during whaling time. *Now they must live in tents.* The crowd was mostly women and children. The guys from the basketball team went over to where the whale was being pulled in and added their strength to tugging the nylon rope.

"Go on and help them," Kili said.

"Aren't you coming?"

She shook her head. "Only men ... in the boat ... butchering ... just the guys." She waved him with a dismissive hand. "Get over there where you belong."

He spotted Nut and headed over and grabbed the rope. Adrenaline rushed through his veins, as he watched the mammoth animal draw closer.

"It's huge!"

"Yeah, Dude. It's a whale."

They both laughed and continued to tug. Paul wondered at the pulley system. It was probably the same way the men brought whales out of the water a century ago.

"Really for a whale, this one isn't huge. Probably a teenager, but that's what we like. When they are too big, they're tough and way too much work."

One young father encouraged his son who looked to be 12 or 13 to join them. "Without the whale," he said, "we wouldn't be who we are."

Paul's palms burned from pulling the rope, but he didn't mind. The exertion warmed him. He glanced over and looked for Kili in the crowd, but didn't spot her.

With the whale partially out of the ocean, Nut said, "Now the real work begins."

Paul warmed his hands in his armpits as he watched the flippers being cut from the whale. It took at least three people to carry just one flipper. The large fins were rushed back to the village as the church bell rang over and over. "What are they doing?"

"They bring the flippers to every home of all the elders for careful inspection."

Paul turned his attention to a huge chunk of blubber being cut out of the back of the whale.

"First, we'll eat," Nut said. "Then the hard work begins."

Paul followed Nut around helping to gather needed equipment to finish pulling the massive creature from the ocean. "What's that smell?"

"That's the blubber being boiled. It will give us energy to get that whale out of the water the rest of the way."

Chapter 12

As an elder, Steven examined the whale flipper and headed to the shore to help process the whale before he headed out with his crew later today. He was happy about that because the wind was supposed to shift to a strong south wind later that afternoon. That would cause the drift ice to close the trails made through the ice. That might mean he could go home for one more night, because if hunters didn't pay attention to such weather changes, they could find themselves stranded, and truthfully, he was tired. Tired to the bone. He still hadn't recovered from the 17 hours it took to process the whale his crew landed.

Frustration mounted as Calvin Lowick struggled to put the pieces together. Missing files were just the tip of the iceberg. He didn't want to think someone was deliberately hiding something from him, but it certainly felt that way. The information in his briefcase showed safety had been overlooked for what...profits? And he hated to admit it but it seemed to suggest oil leaks were increasing...that the seals were failing, but it didn't make sense. Now that the files he needed seemed conveniently lost, it left him suspicious. And there was no one he could trust, including his secretary. He heard Mrs. Q's keys jingle as she unlocked her desk.

Cal quickly tucked his files and papers into his briefcase. No one could know he had any of this information until he knew who could be trusted. As much as he wanted to avoid her, he had to face Mrs. Q to find out about the new filing system. He stepped from his office to find Mrs. Q already at her desk working. Her eyes grew round as he approached her desk. She looked at him like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar. She quickly recovered and leaned forward shielding the papers on her desk from his view with her forearms.

"Good morning, Mr. Lowick. I wasn't expecting you in the office today." While still leaning forward, she clicked her computer mouse and viewed her screen. "The calendar says you're on the rig today." Her brow furrowed slightly as she kept her eye on him.

That does it, Cal thought. What is she hiding?

"I'm headed to the rig, I just wanted to stop by and check with you. I was looking for some invoice and report files, and I haven't been able to find what I'm looking for since we reorganized everything."

She scooped up the papers on her desk, tucked them in the center drawer and stood. "Oh my, I'm sorry. Things were so disorganized when I started that I'm not finished finding everything myself. Corporate has me creating digital files because we are going paperless. Once that's finished, we'll be able to find everything with the click of the mouse."

"And what happens to the paper files then?"

She shrugged. "We won't need them anymore. Once we have everything digitalized it will be so much easier to find things." Her lips

drew into a thin line. "Right now the challenge is finding everything and getting it organized and scanning it."

Cal held his anger in check. He couldn't let on that he knew anything. In his heart, he thanked his lucky stars he had grabbed those first suspicious files when he did. "That will be great, I just wanted to be sure we didn't have a bunch of missing files in case we ever got audited."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "My goodness, hopefully that won't happen until we have things straightened out. Is there anything special I can help you with? What exactly are you looking for?"

Cal zipped his jacket to his chin. "No, no. I was just fixing to figure out what we have in inventory to make sure we have everything we need before winter hits and to prepare for the new drilling project. When you come across that information if you could email it to me that would be great."

Her posture relaxed a little. Cal thanked her and headed back out the door, with his briefcase in hand, determined to find answers.

He would start with checking on Mrs. Q's background. *How is she involved in all this?* He knew nothing about her, and the question sent his mind racing. After all she'd come on board almost the same time he did. *What happened to Anderson's secretary...uh...personal assistant? Who was responsible for hiring Mrs. Q or assigning her to him?* He'd have to find out what he could before he contacted Mr. Stone. *She may have been put in place by the eco activists just to make my job harder...or worse.*

Cal sat on his ATV wondering what to do next. He stared out at the RAM Oil warehouse and the administrative building. "This is crazy," he muttered to himself. He paused with his hand on the key, but he didn't have anywhere to go. His eyes fell upon one of the security cameras. He scanned from one to another and suddenly felt exposed. Was he being watched? It wasn't something he'd paid a lot of attention to.

Suddenly an idea came to him. Maybe he could use the cameras to his advantage. He started his ATV and headed back to shipping

and receiving but took his time eyeing the placement of surveillance. When he pulled around to the docks, cameras were situated to cover the comings and goings of deliveries. The bad thing was that Cal would be on the security footage now and they'd know he was snooping around. From here on out, he'd have to plan his appearances in front of the camera. He noted cameras covering most of the docks, but if he was right, the southern-most dock would be conveniently off camera.

That gave him what he needed. He headed straight to security. This time donned a baseball cap from the center compartment of the ATV and did his best to hide from the cameras. When he walked in the door, he found two men sitting at a bank of screens watching everything going on, around not only the warehouse and administrative offices, but out on the rig, too. One of the two men looked up at him with raised brows.

"Only authorized personnel in here." The guy stood with his hands on his hips on either side of his paunch.

Cal smiled. "Sorry, you might not know me yet." He stretched his hand toward the guy. "Calvin Lowick. I'm still kind of new here but part of my job is to coordinate the rig's materials requisitions, maintain warehouse inventory levels within established guidelines, and to be sure warehouse activities are carried out in a safe and prudent manner. I figured this is the place to come if I want to get a look at the big picture, right?" He flashed his RAM i.d.

The man stood and shook Cal's hand a little tentatively. "Yeah...I guess." He turned to look at his coworker who only shrugged.

"What is it you want to see?"

"I'm going to start with the loading docks. Most security professionals say loading docks are normally the weak point of any warehouse operation. With the number of people coming and going and trucks and other vehicles entering and leaving it's a large area to be protected, and as we gear up for the new exploratory drilling project I want to make sure we don't have any weak points that can be breached by the activists who don't want it to happen. I figure you

guys know this place better than anyone. And who better to turn to for help to improve security?"

The two men nodded. "So what do you need?"

"Well I was thinking I'd just sit in here and watch with you fellas but looks like you need a bigger office." He pointed to all the monitors.

"And trying to watch all this, you might even like an extra set of eyes."

The guy standing smiled and nodded his head. "You got that right.

There's no way we can be looking at all these monitors at once."

Cal pulled out his tablet. "Additional security staff to monitor surveillance." He tucked his tablet into his back pocket. "So how does all this work?"

For the first time since his arrival, these men cooperated with him. "It's a large centralized video surveillance system equipped with high performance cameras in conjunction with multiple servers with dedicated tasks." The guy with the paunch moved within the bank of monitors. "A master server controls the system and decides what kind of video is stored at what storage server." He shrugged. "It lets us

balance the load and can even add more storage servers when we need to do maintenance without bringing the entire system down."

Cal's heart beat a little faster unsure how far he could push, but he had to do it. "Storage? You mean I might be able to view footage without trying to squeeze in here for hours?"

"Hours?" The man standing amid the monitors blinked at his coworker with wide eyes. He scratched the back of his neck. "We've never done anything like this—"

Cal clucked his tongue and leaned in close like he was telling a secret. "I won't mention that to anyone if you don't. And do me a favor and keep this between us. I don't want people changing what they normally do, otherwise I won't know what improvements we need to make."

"Uh," the man shifted nervously looking for help from his friend, a younger man with sharp features.

"Have him use the surveillance station," the younger man said. "From there he can watch live feeds or play back recordings." He stood. "I'll show him how to use it."

They walked into a small anteroom equipped with a couple of desks with what looked like a regular computer. "You can sit here," the man said.

Cal sat in a squeaky desk chair and thanked the man. "I didn't catch your name."

"Norm...Norm Weaver." Cal looked the man in the eye. He seemed a sincere type. He could only hope he didn't bring any trouble to these men for helping him. But he had no choice.

"So all I want to do for now is look at footage of the docks...you know the comings and goings of shipping and receiving."

Norm turned on the screen and clicked through the password faster than Cal could follow. A drop down menu allowed them to choose a date range. "You have a time you want to view?"

Suddenly Cal worried that the man was suspicious. "Not really," he said. But he did have a specific time in mind. "Let's say sometime early last November."

Norm's body language relaxed as he typed in November 1. He went on to show Cal how to start, stop, and even back up the footage. "It will all be about the same. Hope you can stay awake." He chuckled and walked back to the door. "I'm right in here if you have any questions."

Cal thanked him again and as the door closed, he started watching the footage. He fast forwarded to two days before the date on his mysterious conflicting invoices. He wiped his moist palms against his thighs. Trucks pulled in and out and just as he thought, the southern-most dock was just out of sight. But at least he could see any trucks that pulled in there.

The day of the delivery played before him. He slowed it to see if he could make out the truck driver. Suddenly movement in the forefront caught his attention. The top of a knitted cap poked up from the bottom of the screen. It was someone crouched next to some

crates stored there. Whoever it was raised an electronic device as if taking a photo. Cal watched in disbelief. Whoever this was knew what he wanted to know.

The person stood and for a brief moment, Cal saw him. A young fella with dark hair wearing a blue and black backpack, but he took off running. In the background Halverson ran after him. That was it. He couldn't see the delivery, but if he could talk to this kid.... He rewound the footage and took pictures on his tablet. Then he let it play on, but nothing else happened worthy of note.

Norm stuck his head in the door. "You doing okay?"

Cal stretched like he was bored. "Yeah, you're right. I think I've seen enough. One day's about the same as another." He stood up and yawned. "But I saw a few things we can improve." He clapped Norm on the back. "I'll see what I can do to get you some help in here, too. If there's anything else you need just call my...." He almost said office but thought better of it. A call from security would only raise questions from Mrs. Q. "You know what, call my cell. It's the best way

to get ahold of me and that way I'll for sure get your message."

He handed him one of his cards with his cell number circled.

A smile flickered across Norm's face. "Thanks. To tell you the truth we pretty much feel like we're forgotten here. And our job is important."

"You are one-hundred percent right," Cal agreed. The two of them stepped into the room full of monitors. "Thanks for letting me use the surveillance station. I'm sure you'll be seeing me again. This is just the start and it really helped."

As he left, he wondered if the two men would keep his secret long enough for him to at least find out who the kid on the video might be.

Maybe Harold would know.... But he was torn. Could he trust Harold enough to show him pictures taken from the surveillance footage. If he showed his hand, it could cost him what little proof he had about the possibility of inferior seals.

For now he headed to the rig.

Steven Ahtuanguaruak woke with a start. He shot up in his easy chair looking around with wild eyes. His recurring nightmare lingered with a vivid Pana screaming. The sound of a bomb ticking always propelled Steven toward Pana on the oil rig. In the dream if he could get there before the bomb went off, he could save his son. But it always played out the same. Before he could get to the boy, the rig exploded. He blinked. Within seconds his small living room came into focus. He was still sitting in his chair. The ticking of the windup clock on the end table beside him read 12:00. *Noon!* He collapsed back into the chair with a moan. Chaos ruled every part of life. He couldn't sleep, almost couldn't think. RAM Oil had robbed him of his peace and his son. Until they were gone, his life would find no peace.

He shuffled to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He should be at the whaling camp, but the change in the weather and grounded the boats. And while he could have slept at the camp, he didn't want to leave Kili alone with that new RAM Oil kid hanging around. *What will it take to get rid of the iriuakt i -- murders?*

He dried his face and considered the activists in Puru who had given their life to save the forests. That got people's attention. New hope exploded within him. That's how he could to take out RAM and make them pay like he paid. He looked at his reflection. If he died, he'd be with his wife and son again. A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. *And if I take the blond RAM Oil kid with me, then the RAM Oil big wig will know what it feels like to have your child ripped away... and RAM will know they need to leave.*

He stood in front of the sink in the small bathroom and worked his head from one side to the other to work out the stiffness from sleeping in the chair. *No one cares about the risk of an oil spill.* When the government report said there was a 75 percent chance of a spill he thought that would end it, but the oil company's big money paid someone off. *That had to be it.* Not everyone at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management could be blind to the facts. *All outsiders care about is money. Their greed will destroy Point Hope if someone doesn't stop it.* No one cared that the drilling endangered his way of life – his heritage. *It doesn't matter if I live or die.*

The cancer took his wife, RAM took his son, and now they didn't care if they robbed him of his way of life and even his daughter was ready to accept RAM. His life no longer had purpose, if he stayed. "Well, I won't go quietly," he muttered as he tucked his shirttail in. "A lone wolf can take down an elk if they can get it on the run. I'll gladly give my life to take you out RAM and if I take the boy with me, that should do it – and Nukilik will no longer be tempted to betray her people."

He slipped on his jacket, pulled his hat over his messy hair, and headed out the door like a roused angry bear. He headed to the last place he and Pana had spent together. It was the one place he could hide from it all. His hunting cabin. It was the one place he could think, and it was where he stored the explosive devices he used on his harpoons – a good excuse to make a visit.

Chapter 13

Paul walked toward the house feeling renewed. Coach Yaz had said he'd consider him for the team, and most of the guys seemed to have changed their opinion and warmed up to him. For the most part,

he'd effectively shed the RAM oil stigma with almost everyone. Andy and a couple of his closest friends were still a problem, but Paul had momentum and numbers on his side. Even better, he was pretty sure Kili liked him. And he liked her. She was pretty, friendly, smart, and she liked basketball. *What more can you ask for in a girl?*

He walked into the house. "Mom!" He couldn't wait to tell her about his day. "Mom?" He walked through the small house looking for her. His only answer was the wind howling in the eaves. She wasn't in the bathroom or her bedroom. "Where could she be?"

He checked out the back door. Not there. His mind started to race. She didn't really know anyone here. Just as his imagination started to take off and picture all kinds of terrible things, he spotted the note on the refrigerator door. 'Paul, gone to the clinic. Be back soon.

"The clinic?" A sinking feeling washed over him. His good day just took a turn for the bad. Why did she have to go to the clinic? Mom didn't go to the doctor! Her inclination was to follow natural homeopathic remedies. Dad even joked and called her a witchdoctor. She really didn't go to the doctor unless she had to.

Just as panic started to set in without any way to call his mother to find out what was going on, he heard the door knob turn. His mother walked in wearing a new lightweight parka. "Hi sweetheart."

"Mom! What's wrong?"

She unzipped her parka and set her purse on the counter. "Wrong? What you mean?"

He pointed to the note. "The clinic?" he asked with raised eyebrows and a tone that said *duh*. "You don't go to the doctor unless...well unless you're dying."

"Dying of boredom maybe." She chuckled. "I went to see if they could use a volunteer."

The tension melted from his shoulders. "Volunteer?" He let out a breath. He had totally forgotten about Kili mentioning the clinic. "I was thinking you were sick or something. The way you don't like to go to the doctor I figured it had to be pretty serious for you to actually go to the clinic." He let out a light nervous chuckle.

"Well I'm not sick, but I will be spending time at the clinic. I think they were impressed that Kili recommended me. They were excited to accept my offer. I start tomorrow." She hung her purse and parka on one of the empty pegs beside the door. "They are really short staffed and underfunded. They need the help. They take care of a lot of people who can't afford care. It's a great opportunity. Who knows, maybe I can use my fundraising skills to help that way, too."

She turned to look at him. "How you doing? Want some coffee?"

"Yeah, I'll make it." He reached into the cupboard and grabbed the coffee. "I actually have had a great day."

It was his mother's turn to raise her eyebrows in mild surprise. "A *great* day? Not just good?"

The two of them sat enjoying a black cup of coffee, since they couldn't get the flavored creamer here and even milk cost way more than back in Texas. They didn't seem to notice as they talked about their day. The two of them were finding their way to a new normal in the Alaskan wilderness, and it wasn't so bad after all.

When Cal learned Halverson was tied up on a conference call, he headed to Human Resources. Even with Halverson busy, the more he moved around RAM Oil properties, the more he felt like he was being watched. The whole thing made no sense. At first he thought they were just treating him like an outsider and that it would pass once he proved himself. But it was more than that. They were trying to hide something, and he was going to get to the bottom of it. From the little he had gleaned from the reports he had stashed in his briefcase, it all had to do with the seals. Yet, he couldn't get near the dang things to check them out.

He walked up to the receptionist in HR, introduced himself, and flashed his security badge. "I've been here almost four mouths," he said as casually as his slamming heart allowed. "I'm having the darndest time trying put names with faces." He smiled. "It can be quite embarrassing..." He glanced at the name plate. "...Carla." He let out a long breath. "Is there any way...any way that I can see who is in shipping and receiving, and then maybe a picture of them? I was

thinking if I could do that, I might start getting names right. You know, use it as a cheat sheet of sorts." He chuckled, but inwardly his heart beat faster.

The woman checked his badge. She squinted and leaned closer like she needed glasses. She straightened her shoulders and shrugged. "Well, Carla is on a conference call with the Richmond office.... I'm just filling in for a few minutes. She would be the one--"

He cut her off before she could finish her excuse. This was a blessing he hadn't expected. A fill-in at the reception desk! Now all he had to do was convince her that he was harmless. "Can't you help a fella out? I'm just terrible with names. And I'd appreciate it if you kept it just between us." He leaned forward on the counter and whispered, "It is so embarrassing"

She glanced at his badge one more time and offered a smile. "I guess. What could it hurt?"

Cal followed the receptionist to a bank of computers. She walked to the last computer and pulled out the chair. "You can use this terminal." She plugged in an access code and showed him how to

search. "You can search by name, by department, or by name or number."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "I certainly won't be searching by name." He forced a chuckle, sat in gray scoop-back plastic chair and thanked her again. "I'll let you know if I have any questions."

She walked back toward her desk and wished him good-luck before she turned the corner.

He wasted no time. He typed "Halverson" into the search bar. Since Carla was on a conference call and sounded like the one really in charge here in HR, he knew he had to take advantage of whatever time he had. Everything could all change in the blink of an eye. For all he knew, Halverson and Carla were on the same conference call. He wondered who else was on the call. *Who are they talking to in Richmond?* He reeled his thinking in. He had to stay focused. He'd look up Halverson, first, and then Gregory Thompson. Then if he had time, he'd check out Mrs. Q and everyone else in shipping and receiving.

Halverson's page lit up the screen. Halverson, Max B., age 39. Cal scanned the information. The guy had started in shipping and receiving as a forklift driver. *So how did he climbed the ranks rather quickly and end up as the head foreman on the rig?* No real notes offered additional facts. The scant few were generic saying things like "reliable, loyal, and trustworthy." Cal had thought maybe Halverson had been passed over for a promotion and that Cal had taken the job. That maybe the ill will and suspicious treatment were him acting out in jealousy. That if a leak occurred on his watch, he'd be fired and Halverson could step in. But there seemed no indication of anything like that. Instead of finding answers, the information raised more questions.

In Cal's book, Halverson was anything but trustworthy, and he questioned the man's loyalty...at least to RAM. But he had to find proof. Cal clicked on the link to his resume. His previous experience showed no prior management experience. He hadn't even gone to college. While the information didn't offer much help, it did raise one big question. How is it that Halverson hired Mrs. Q? She had nothing

to do with the shipping and receiving end of things, other than the fact that she was supposed to be Cal's administrative assistant. And why was he hiring anybody? Wasn't that Human Services role? The man's biggest accomplishment was his move to management on the rig, after just six months as a forklift driver. *What the heck?*

He moved on to check out Gregory Thompson. Thompson, Gregory, age 45. His information was just as helpful and suspicious. He moved into his job within a couple of weeks after Halverson moved to the rig.

Cal reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the scrap of paper he had used to Copy Mrs. Q's last name from the name plate on her desk. He knew better than to trust himself to be able to spell "Qailertetang." He typed in her last name into the search.

Qailertetang, Alexis M., age 52. He clicked on the link to her resume and stared at the information in disbelief. She had worked as an executive assistant in Richmond, Texas. "Richmond?" The information confirmed his suspicion that something was going on. But a link to Richmond scared him, because why would she relocate? At

most it would be a lateral move? Plus, she knew he was from Richmond, so why would she act like she was from Point Hope, other than to cover something up. And how is it that Halverson was the one who hired her? It was a definite link between Richmond and Halverson.

His focus dropped to her salary. They were paying her more than he made, even with his promotion. *Why would an administrative assistant make the same amount as middle management?* He sat back and blinked at the screen trying to make sense of it. *That means there's a connection with someone who has the authority to okay that kind of pay...and with someone in Richmond.* He took out his phone and took a picture of the information.

His fingers shook as he moved to a department search for shipping and receiving. He thought about Mr. Stone's right hand man, Walter Mills, and what a basket case he was all the time. *Could he be behind this? Is that why he is so nervous?* Cal paused. Mr. Stone would give him a big promotion if he could prove that. Maybe even bring him back to the lower 48.

For now, he needed to find people who had been there longer than Halverson. The list wasn't long. The more he looked into it; Halverson's name was all over the place as the person responsible for hiring. Why didn't HR take care of that? As much as he wanted to ask the woman at the desk, he didn't dare. *Can't risk drawing attention to what I know.* He called up 'notes' on his phone and quickly typed in the short list of names of those who had been here longer than Halverson. He brought up information on each one, and snapped a picture of it so he could read it later. He almost felt relief to find Harold Krummert on the list. His gut had told him the guy was okay.

To his surprise, the list brought up former employees, too. Again, he took a picture of the list with his phone. He could try and find some of them and see if they'd be willing to help him fill in some of the missing pieces.

After the last search, he went to the computer's history, right clicked on settings, and erased the history. He didn't need anyone to know what he was looking for. Then he retraced a handful of his searches on shipping and receiving personnel, along with other

departments. If anyone checked, they'd see that all he did was familiarize himself with his employees.

By the time he was done, his stomach was grumbling. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. For now, he'd head home and have dinner with Nola and Paul. For the first time, he realized he hadn't eaten dinner with them since they'd arrived in Alaska. He pulled out his phone to call his wife but stopped. *Nola's phone doesn't work here.* He'd been so consumed with this mess at RAM that he'd hardly even talked with his family or thought about their needs...like phones and Internet. He felt his father's presence chastising him. "Family first, always."

That night he sat at the table listening to Nola talk about starting her volunteer work at the clinic and how much they needed the help, and Paul talked about basketball. But Cal had a hard time paying attention. The Richmond connection bothered him. It cut him off from asking for help until he knew exactly who the connection in Richmond was.

As he climbed into bed he thought about that kid on the surveillance video. If he could find out who he was and learn what he

found out that day, he might find some of the answers he was looking for.

Steven Ahtuanguaruak lugged a couple of fuel cans filled with diesel from the back of his SUV into his small rustic hunting cabin. He didn't often drive the large vehicle, because it was a gas hog and fuel was very expensive here in Point Hope. But he and Jim Harris had been stashing bags of fertilizer pilfered from the Native Store into the truck one here, one there. Now he was transferring them to the cabin. This way there was no record of a purchase by him individually, and no one would be able to say they saw him driving around with them on the back of the ATV.

He set the fuel cans down next to the bags of fertilizer and drew his hand over his face and rubbed his weary eyes. His hand stunk of oil. He wiped it on the front of his parka absentmindedly as he looked around the cabin with a sense of accomplishment. Supplies crowded the little bit of space the cabin afforded, but he had almost everything he needed to create the bomb that would bring RAMs safety vessel

when it arrive in Chukchi Sea. His activist friends had attempted to delay it but it was due to arrive about the time of the festival. That vessel would clear the way for RAM to start it exploratory drilling. Jim Harris had said, "We need to blow that boat out of the water" but most everyone else thought he was kidding. Steven grabbed hold of the idea as inspiration.

While he was no expert with explosives, other than those used in whaling these days, he'd been doing his research. With these items, he hoped to make a bomb like the one used in the Oklahoma City bombing. He hoped to commandeer the ship and steer it toward the working rig before blowing it up. Oil pumped from the rig would add to the explosion offering a spectacular show that would take out the oil rig and safety ship. All the media at the festival would have a real story to cover. It would shut things down for years.

For a brief moment, his conscience pricked him with guilt over the innocent lives that would be lost but he desperate times called for desperate measures. He was willing to give his own life in the same

way. He pushed aside the sentiment and headed outside to close the door on the SUV.

Simmering anger bubbled inside of him. "Really, it's their own fault," he muttered under his breath. "They turned their backs on Point Hope, on their people, on our way of life...all for money." He slammed the door closed. "They turned their backs on Pana...like he never really mattered. Moving on with life as if he was never born."

Once inside the cabin, he sat at the small table and looked around at his collection. He had all the components. Now he just had to figure out how to put it together and deliver it to the rig without getting stopped. His mind wandered as he daydreamed about the RAM Oil kid being with him when the ship blew. Jim Harris said it was a way to hurt them the same way he'd been hurt but Steven had dismissed this idea. But at this moment, he imagined the RAM Oil executive grieving for his son and it felt right--retribution. The idea transformed from a daydream to a plan. *How could I get him onto that boat? I certainly couldn't carry an unconscious body onto the rig.* Plus,

the timing all had to be right, if he hoped to pull it off. Then he got an idea. *This could work.*

Funny, he felt the tension melt from his neck and shoulders. He finally had a plan...a way to make them pay for the loss of his son. His posture slumped against the straight back chair where he sat at the small wooden table. He propped his elbows on the table, with his head in his hands; his fingers icy against his face. He didn't dare light the stove. The cold air in the cabin smelled of fuel. His eyelids grew heavy from his lack of sleep. He was tired...so, so tired. Not just from lack of sleep, but from the grief and loss of his son, the anger because no one really cared, and the betrayal of so many willing to be bought out. Now they'd all be sorry. He lay his head on the table just for a few minutes. Within an instant he fell asleep, and dreamed of his coup de grâce with the rig exploding in a plum of fire and smoke to rival an atomic bomb blast. Pana stood at his side. "RAM Oil killed you, too, dad? Now Kili won't have anyone."

Steven awoke with a start. "I'm doing it for you, Pana!" he called out as he grasped at the gossamer threads of the false reality. "Pana."

He reached for the fading memory, but the young man was gone. He blinked and stared blankly at the small cabin filled with the ingredients that would take him away from Kili and reunite him with his son.

Steven's hatred for RAM Oil burned hotter. This was their fault. All of it. They were forcing him to make this choice. It would hurt Kili like they hurt him. RAM was forcing him to take to this route because they wouldn't leave.

Enola enjoyed her work at the clinic. It was so different from the boards she served on at the country club and the social and fund raising events they planned. Helping at the clinic felt more purposeful...meaningful. And Margaret Perry amazed her. She did the work of five people, with a locum tenens physician making the circuit to visit Point Hope twice a month. A couple of young women rotated days working as Margaret's assistants. Before Enola, they all tried to keep up with the Medicaid forms and other insurance but it had turned into a mountain of filled out forms that still needed to be submitted or followed up on.

"I finally have it sorted into three categories," Nola said to Margaret. "Medicaid, Medicare and other...which is pretty much RAM Oil's medical insurance."

Margaret nodded. "Process the RAM oil insurance claims first."

"Because they pay faster?"

Margaret shrugged. "That and the fact that they may let a person go and once they do you'll be lucky to collect."

Bitterness in her tone surprised Enola. "What do you mean?"

Margaret propped her hip on the edge of Enola's desk. "I know your husband works for RAM. Can you just keep this between us?"

The two women made eye contact and Nola nodded. "Sure."

"My husband worked for RAM. They made all kinds of promises. And the money was good. He worked his way up to supervisor of shipping and receiving. Everything seemed great, and then things started to change. Someone planted evidence that made it look like he wasn't doing his job. By the time he caught on, it was too late. Martin

thinks the guy who replaced him was responsible, but it was too hard to prove."

Something about Margaret talked about her husband struck on nerve in Nola. Even with this busy job, her husband was a priority. She could tell by the way she talked that she and her husband shared in the struggles related to the loss of his job. It made Enola realize how much distance had really grown between her and Cal and she longed to change that.

"Maybe my husband could help," Nola said. "I mean if Martin would want to talk to him."

Margaret shook her head. "I don't know if he'd be willing to do that or not. Are you sure your husband would be willing to stick his neck out like that?"

Enola thought about it. Long ago, she could have answered that in a heartbeat. Even though it seemed like the right thing to do, she wasn't sure if Cal would be willing. "I'll ask him."

Cal Lowick wandered around the oil rig looking busy but taking the opportunity to investigate. He carried a clipboard holding the safety protocols to look "official" and pretended to ignore the looks from workers wondering what he was doing. The arctic-designed rig should be able to operate about five months longer than rigs designed for milder climates. In fact, it should be able to run efficiently year round in temperatures ranging from 50 below to 80 above Fahrenheit. So why wasn't it running efficiently? And even more important, why was everyone pretending it was? Whatever was going on, it would be impossible for everyone to be in on it. His goal was to find those willing to talk about what was really going on.

He used his old personal phone to snap pictures here and there when he was sure Halverson wasn't shadowing him. It was clear the rigorous maintenance program he had set up wasn't being followed consistently. He found safety issues with fixed ladders, safety requirements for scaffolding, blocked exit routs and more. And he wasn't really looking for this stuff. Halverson was in charge of overseeing maintenance...*and he hired Mrs. Q. That explained the*

new filing system. And who knows about Carla in HR. She was in on that conference call with Richmond. Cal was sure that on this end, Halverson was the man behind the mystery, and based on what he saw in the personnel records Gregory Thompson was probably the rotten apple in the warehouse. He'd fire both of them in a heartbeat if he had any real proof. Now that he'd looked into Mrs. Q's background, he do the same with her. The three of them had to be connected...working together with someone in Richmond. *But why?* That was the big question that had to be answered. If he could figure that out, it would be easier to trace who in Richmond was involved. Until then he couldn't say a word.

While Cal didn't have anything concrete to go on, he had some possibilities to consider. In fact, with all the people who wanted RAM out of Point Hope, the possibilities were endless. *Maybe they're somehow connected with that group of tree-hugging activists hoping for some kind of payoff for making the rig fail. Or maybe they're trying to make it fail so they can collect a big settlement as employee/residents.* One way or another, money most likely played a

role in the motivation behind whatever they were doing. *But what about those failing seals?* If he hadn't seen those reports, he'd have no idea there was any problem. Luckily he had the reports in possession, and they showed more than one of the seals experienced some level of failure. He wished he could get an updated report, but he didn't dare ask about it. It would only warn those involved that he was on to them.

If the media got ahold of news about leaking seals, they'd be all over it. But the conflicting invoices raised even more questions. If his hunch was right, the seals being installed, were not the seals RAM was paying for. Suddenly the light went on. If RAM was paying for quality seals, but someone was installing inferior seals.... *They're pocketing the difference!*

The problem wasn't catastrophic yet, but it certainly had the potential. With all the other safety issues being overlooked, it was clear that when they replaced those seals, they weren't being checked to be sure they weren't defective? *Especially if we're not really getting the seals we've paid for?*

That was the real concrete question that had to be answered. RAM was paying for top of the line equipment. Were they getting what they paid for or not? If he could prove they weren't he'd have the physical proof he needed to bring it to Mr. Stone. But the only way he could see the seals they had in inventory was to find someone he could trust. Right now, that felt just about impossible. He needed someone on the inside to watch his back, someone who knew their way around the rig.

One way or another, if he didn't get to the bottom of this, it was only a matter of time until one of those seals would fail big time. The damage would be a financially devastating blow to RAM and could even shut down drilling in Point Hope.

Cal didn't just care about RAM Oil. He cared about the environment. He didn't want to see wildlife or nature suffer because someone lined their pockets by sabotaging the operation of the rig. He headed back to the boat to take him to shore. On the trip back he pondered what to do next. All of the equipment was proven efficient and sound for remote drilling operations in this climate. The seals

were supposed to be top of the line, and his gut was telling him they weren't. By using inferior seals, someone was purposely planning for the seals to fail. But he couldn't even get near them to prove anything. He felt like he was beating his head up against a bulkhead.

If one of the seals totally failed, the resulting environmental crisis would close them down for sure, if not permanently it would still be months. As he ruminated on the various angles, a plan started to come together. The first thing he needed to do was get a look at one of those seals. That was easier said than done. It would take a real plan, and it wasn't something he could do alone. He'd have to figure out who he could really trust, and he'd start with those employee reviews he had on his phone. Anyone Halverson gave a bad review could be a candidate and it wouldn't hurt to talk to people who had lost their jobs.

And then there was that kid in video. He saw something that day because in the background Thompson had taken off after him. Somehow he had to find out who the kid was and hope he'd be willing to talk.

Kili closed the door to the Native Store and locked it. She flipped the light switch. "Dad?" she called out. Her father was supposed to be there, and it didn't even look like he had shown up today. She let out a long breath and tucked the key in her parka pocket. This whaling season was the first since Pana's death and her father had really dealt with his grief. She tried to reach him on the radio, but he didn't answer. At first she thought of calling some of his friends, but she didn't want to draw attention to his mental state. She jumped back into the ATV and went to the whaling camp. No one had seen him there. She headed back home. In her heart she hoped he wasn't with Jim Harris. That guy brought out the worst in her step-dad.

A few minutes later she pulled up to the house. The SUV was gone. She looked around the house for a note. Nothing. It didn't look much different than when she left that morning. The blanket she had used to cover him in his chair sat crumpled in a pile on the floor. She did a quick check of the kitchen. No dirty dishes, no evidence that he'd eaten anything. *Where did he go and why did he take the SUV?*

He had changed so much since Pana's death. It's like it switched something in his brain, and she couldn't get it to switch back. She stood in the kitchen wondering who she could even talk to. Her mom had always been the one she went to, now she really didn't have anyone like that. She thought of contacting Paul. He was easy to talk to and didn't know many people. She wouldn't have to worry about him talking about anything she shared. But he didn't have a radio.

A recurring dread filled her. She worried that in his grief, her dad might even commit suicide. *What can I do?* She wrestled between her limited options and her own inaction. She sat at the table trying to rub the tension growing at the back of her neck. *Maybe I could talk to Coach Yaz.* No. Even though she trusted the coach not to gossip, he'd probably confront her step-father. Insist he get help. Then she'd have to live with the angry bear.

Kili stood up and grabbed her parka from the peg next to the door. She'd take her chances and head over to Paul's house. Maybe he could bring a fresh perspective and help her figure out a way to help her reach her dad.

Steven sat outside the cabin away from the diesel fumes and drank in the beauty around him. Out here in nature, it almost felt as if nothing had changed. He felt a measure of peace. The wind sang through the trees, and in the distance he saw a small herd of elk grazing. A large buck raised his head and sniffed the air. In the past, Steven would have been ready with his rifle, but now he just sat there thinking of how Pana would have bragged about bagging the big one. Tears stung Steven's eyes.

He watched the herd for a few seconds more. They still needed to put up meat for next winter. Not taking a shot would be like saying no thank you to the mighty hunter who dwelled in the sky. And if he brought home meat, it would explain where he had been. Otherwise, Nukilik would pester him with a thousand questions.

He walked over to his vehicle with slow movements trying not to spook the herd. He opened the door, and with the light click of the door latch he looked up to see the last of elk disappear into the trees across the field. He sat back down on the overturned bucket and

waited with his gun ready. Yes, coming home with meat would provide the perfect cover and food for Nukilik this coming winter. A lump formed in his throat thinking about not being there for her, but Jim Harris was right. He was the perfect choice for making the point that RAM Oil needed to leave.

Chapter 14

Kili sat at the small kitchen table in the Lowick house sipping iced tea. "I've never had cold tea like this. It sure is sweet."

He laughed. "It's called sweet tea. Back in Texas, I drank it all the time. Here, not so much." Paul stuffed the pitcher of tea back into the refrigerator and joined Kili at the table. He flipped the kitchen chair around, lifted his leg and straddled it. With his arms propped on the back of the chair, he rested his chin on his hands. "So you said you wanted to talk about something?"

Her smile faded. She studied the ice floating in her glass and nodded. "But..." She looked up at him. "You have to promise not to talk about it with anyone else. It's...." She shrugged and let out a deep

breath. "It's personal...very personal. And I don't know who else to talk to."

Paul swallowed hard wondering what could be so serious. On a base level, it kind of scared him but it also made him feel special that she'd trust him like this. "I hardly even know anyone here." He tried to joke but it didn't work; her eyes held a sadness he hadn't seen in her before. "The only person I really talk to is you," he said. "So you don't have to worry about that. I can keep a secret." He reached out and took her hand. Her fingers felt cold against his skin.

Her blue almond shaped didn't shine with their normal sparkle. Whatever was wrong, Paul wanted to fix it. He hated to see her like this. "You can talk to me about anything."

Her eyes grew wide at the sound of an ATV pulling up outside. Paul hurried to the small window and peeked out to see his dad. "It's my dad? Wonder what he's doing home in the middle of the day. Maybe we should go out for a walk or something."

She nodded. "Good idea."

The two of them grabbed their jackets and headed out the door. "By the way, my mom got the job at the clinic."

"That's great." Kili smiled but it flickered and died. Paul introduced Kili to his dad, but as per usual his dad said hello and nice to meet ya, but hurried into the house like something else was more important. Paul apologized for his dad's behavior as he and Kili walked around to the back of the house where the sun warmed the cement stoop. "Speaking of dads," she started I'm kind of worried about mine." The house blocked the wind as they sat on the porch talking about her father.

Paul was a little distracted that his father was home this early in the day. He wondered if something was wrong, but Kili drew him back into their conversation. "He really is a good man," she said. "But family is...was everything to him. He lost his first wife and then my mom – both to cancer. Now he's lost his son. I'm afraid losing Pana has pushed him over the edge." She pulled a locket from the neck of her jacket and opened it. "This is Pana." She stared at the picture with love. "Since he died, I still talk to him, but that's not helping anymore."

Paul looked at the picture. Pana looked young, strong and healthy...and happy. "He was good looking."

Kili nodded as she snapped the locket shut and tucked it back next to her heart. "You would of liked him. Everybody did. He was a creative spirit and my dad's pride and joy. I should let you read some of his stuff...." The light had come back into her eyes, but it died. "Now he's gone and that pride and the joy is missing. Dad has no joy. He's not sleeping well, and I can tell he's angry. I think because the accident was something no one was held responsible for that it's hard on him. If RAM wasn't here the accident that killed Pana wouldn't have happened. I think he is starting to be consumed with getting RAM to leave...." She shook her head and looked up at Paul with a half-hearted smile. "And we both know that's not happening."

She leaned with her elbows on her thighs and stared at the ground. "I just don't know how to help him. Dad has become more involved with the environmental activists who are trying to get RAM shut down and they aren't just locals. Their measures seem to get

more and more drastic and it's like he's...I don't know. I'm just worried."

Paul nodded and for a moment, a comfortable quiet hung between them. He placed his arm around her shoulders. It felt good to hold her. "You heard what I said at the diner. I'm not a fan of RAM oil either."

"Yes, but some of the people my dad is hanging around...well I'm not sure about them. They seem a little too extreme. Maybe even a lot extreme. I don't want him mixed up in something he'll regret...or that I'll regret. I just want my dad back."

She covered her mouth for a moment, hesitant to say anything more and looked at Paul who was nodding. "I can so relate to that."

She moved her hand to her cheek and said, "I'm worried he might do something...harm himself...." Her voice quivered. "And I can't talk to anyone about it, because if he finds out, that could be the thing that really pushes him over the edge." She threw her arms up. "I just don't know what to do. I want to help him." She tucked her hands between her legs to warm her fingers. "I thought maybe if I talked to

you about it, you might come up with another point of view. An answer...a suggestion maybe?" She raised her eyebrows and looked at him with expectation.

Paul let out a long breath and stared out at the barren back yard toward the rear of the house behind theirs. "I don't really know your father." He glanced at Kili. "But maybe if I join that activist group I could get to know him...help keep an eye on him so you know what's going on. We have a couple of things in common. We both don't like RAM and we both care about you." A wave of fear shot through him. *Why did I say that!*

Kili smiled. "Thanks." She laughed lightly. "I like you, too." But her laughter faded and little worry lines worked across her smooth forehead. "The problem is that it's not going to be as easy as you think. People here look at you as the RAM Oil kid. You saw what it was like with the team."

"Yeah, but think about how that turned out. Joining with the activists will help me put distance between me and RAM. I might even be a benefit to them. And remember that Marni is the one who

suggested it. And if it causes problems at home, it won't matter in the long run, because I graduate in a year and I'll be out of here. In the meantime maybe I can help with your dad."

She blinked. "You're leaving?"

A grin tugged the corner of his mouth. "I'm hoping to play basketball at least on a college scholarship, but really hoping to get picked up by the pros. That is if I can get on the Harpooners...and noticed." His smile died. "That's my secret, okay? I don't want Coach Yaz or the guys to know how important it is to me. You see basketball is my life, but I want to earn my way."

"You're leaving?" she asked again as if he hadn't said anything else. "I thought Point Hope was going to be your new home. You just got here."

"Well yes, but I'm graduating this coming year, then at the least there's college. But my dream is to get picked up by the pros. They had their eye on me in Texas." He smiled at the thought.

The roar of an ATV stopped out front interrupting their conversation. "Sounds like Mom is home," Paul announced. "Margaret gives her a ride home since she lives a few doors down. Mom really likes working there, and she is still home more than she ever was in Texas."

Kili stood up and brushed the back of her jeans. "I'm happy it worked out for her. I guess I should be going. If my dad gets home I don't want him wondering where I am...and then find me with the RAM Oil kid. I appreciate you listening."

Loud angry voices carried on the wind. Paul shot to his feet and stood next to her for a brief moment, looking down into her icy blue almond eyes. "I think that's my dad."

Her eyes grew wide. "And I think that's my dad!"

They both shouted "oh no" as they ran around to the front of the house. As they turned the corner, Paul's mom ran up the ramp to where the two men stood locked in a shouting match. "Cal! Cal!" she called out, but her cries fell on deaf ears.

Margaret sat staring from her ATV.

"I had nothing to do with the death of your son," Paul's dad shouted. "I don't even know who your son is!"

Kili's father raised his fist. "You! You think his death meaningless. You will pay. You'll see."

Paul's mother stood between the two men hugging her oversized purse in front of her. "Please, please, stop." The three of them turned to see their children come around the corner and stop with their mouths agape.

Margaret dismounted her ATV and took a step toward the house.

"Dad what are you doing here?" Kili hurried up the ramp to where her father stood.

"I saw your Ranger." His eyes narrowed. "The question is what are you doing here with this murderer?"

"Dad, we are peace-loving people. Don't do this." Her hand rested on his arm. Anger shone in his eyes as he looked at Paul's father and back at her. Then he offered a resigned nod.

"Please," Paul's mother said. "This is all a misunderstanding. Please come in. Let's sit and talk this through."

Margaret walked up the ramp. "Nola, you need some help?"

Nola shrugged and Margaret came to stand beside her. She said, "Steven, this is the Lowick family. They have only lived here a little more than a month. They didn't know your boy."

"Please," Nola said. "Let's calm down. Come in the house and let's talk."

Calvin looked at Steven and the two men reluctantly agreed.

The sparkle came back to Kili's eyes and she let out a sigh of relief.

She leaned close to Paul and said, "They don't seem so bad." She nodded toward his parents.

He let it drop.

"You want me to come in?" Margaret asked.

Nola shook her head. "I think we'll be fine."

Tension hung in the small kitchen as the two men sat at the small table. For lack of room, Kili and Paul moved into the living room and sat in the two easy chairs. Steven felt trapped. He caught a glimpse of the boy walking into the other side of the house while the wife flitted about the kitchen and served coffee and cake. Steven hated being among the enemy, but it was the perfect opportunity to scope out the house. When the boy stepped away from Kili he excused himself to use the bathroom. As he walked into the living room, Kili stood. He grabbed her upper arm reprimanding her in a harsh whisper. "How could you betray our family...our community?" He glanced at the layout. It was much the same as many of the houses here, but from this vantage, it looked like the boy's bedroom was off to the left.

He released her with a slight shove. "We are leaving." Kili looked at him defiantly, but she obeyed. She apologized to the boy's parents as he forced her to the door. "Thank you," he said, "but we can't stay."

The wife stood with her mouth open holding a dessert plate with a slice of cake. "Don't you want some cake?" she asked.

He ignored the woman and lightly shoved Kili out the door into the late afternoon. "We'll talk at home," he growled.

"Dad, you're wrong about these people—"

"I said—at—home."

She huffed away from him and climbed into her Ranger and slammed the door shut.

Paul hurried out the door to catch up with Kili, only to see her ATV pull away followed by her father. As he turned toward the house, he spotted his mother peeking through the kitchen curtains. He shook his head. The curtains snapped shut. *Why do things have to be so complicated?*

As he stepped back into the kitchen, Paul's father pushed passed him mumbling about how he didn't need this. "Lunatic. I don't need any more problems." With that he shut the door behind him. Paul stood staring at his mom. She looked as dumbfounded as he felt.

"What just happened?" she asked.

The two of them talked while Paul helped his mom make dinner. He needed to do something to keep busy. His mom rambled on about how she thought it was going to come to blows between the two men as she had walked up to the house. Paul let out a long sigh. Being attached to RAM Oil was like an anchor around his neck.

The kitchen phone rang. Paul looked at her mother as she wiped her hands and answered it. He could tell from the conversation that it was Margaret Perry checking to make sure everything was okay. She had seen Kili and her dad leave followed by Paul's dad. The two of them talked for a couple of minutes, and Paul realized that his mother had a real friend here. She actually said she was worried. Didn't know where his dad had gone.

Margaret was more than someone she volunteered with who wanted her to do something more. She wanted to know if she was okay. He wondered if anyone from Texas really missed her...or him. For the first time he realized he didn't really miss Texas or the people there as much as he thought he would. What he missed was the

connections he had to help him achieve his dream of playing basketball.

When his mother hung up the phone, he tried to change the subject because none of this was his mother's fault. It was his dad's stubborn attitude and unwillingness to see that RAM could be at fault sometimes. And Kili's dad was just as bad. Why on earth would she want to stay here with that? Inside his anger simmered and he wondered if he'd lost his only real friend over this mess.

He could see his mom was upset, too. As he poured the canned carrots into the pot to heat he said, "I miss having fresh produce. I wonder if you can grow food here, like in a cold frame."

"Hmm, we'll have to look that up...when we have Internet. In the meantime, I could look it up at the clinic. They have access. But I don't have much free time. There's a lot to do there. I don't know how Margaret and the others did it without someone at the desk."

Enola patted the ground meat mixture into the loaf pan and thought about how things had changed. Margaret had become a dear friend – something she hadn't had in her life for a long time. She didn't really care about being online. The changes she saw since the move were good. Paul hung around the house more, and without the Internet, they talked more. She knew what was going on in his life like when he was younger. It felt right. Working with Margaret has helped her see that. She longed for the same with her husband again, too, but the best she could hope for these days was that he would make it home early enough to eat dinner and then go to bed. But tonight she worried about where he'd gone. He was angry, but was he angry enough to follow Kili's father and pick a fight?

Paul pulled her from her worries. "So when are we going to get Internet?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Margaret says we can get on the Internet at the library. And I don't know about you, but I've gotten used to not having it. If our smart phones worked here it would be one thing, but they

don't. What we need is a radio. If the clinic needs to get ahold of me, that's what they use. In fact, it's what everybody up here uses."

"I know, right? Kili says the same thing."

His mother laughed. "I like that girl more every time I meet her."

Paul stared at the carrots in the pan. He worried about how would Kili react to him now that their fathers almost came to blows? It wasn't worth mentioning now. "So where did Dad go?" Paul asked.

Paul's mother shrugged. "I guess back to work. Though he might have just wanted to go cool down. He was pretty upset. That many was calling him a murderer and the look on his face.... It was scary."

The two of them jumped at the sound of the back door opening. Paul stood with his heart pumping at the unexpected intrusion. "Dad?" Paul was stunned. "You're...you're home? I thought you went back to work!" He stared at his dad like he was an alien from another planet walking into the house carrying a bag.

"I'm sorry about what happened earlier. I had to get out of here and clear my head."

Paul's mom rushed to the door and hugged her husband. "Cal, I'm so happy you came back home. I thought you went back to work." Tears glistened in her eyes. They were actually all going to be here for dinner at the same time. "Where did you go?"

"You're not going to believe it when I tell you. I actually caught up to Kili at the Native store and apologized to her for all that happened. She's a nice girl." He handed a bag to Paul and one to Enola. "Brought you both a little something, while I was there."

Paul tore open the bag. "A radio!" He held it up to show his mother as she pulled her own radio from her bag. "We were just talking about getting one of these!"

"And I have one, too." Paul's Dad held up another. "Now we can be in touch. And they're cheaper than a smart phone."

His mom set her radio on the counter and grabbed the meatloaf to put it in the oven. "Good thing, cause the cost of groceries sure makes up for it. This meatloaf cost us about \$7.00!" She slid the loaf pan in the oven. "And coffee is more than that!"

Paul laughed. "Now all we need to know is how these things work."

His dad smiled. "I can show you if you'd like."

Paul stared at his father. "So what did Kili do when you walked into the store?"

His dad shrugged. "I could tell she was uneasy, but she welcomed me to the store, so I went right over to apologize and she seemed to relax. She said, she was sorry, too, and hopes we'll all be able to get along in the future. But she said it will take her dad time.... She even gave me more tips on using the radios."

Paul relaxed when he heard things went okay with Kili. His family practiced what they knew with their radios while the meatloaf baked, and joked about possible radio names to use. Cal looked at Enola and said, "Now that you work at the clinic you can be Candy Striper."

They both laughed. "And you can be cowboy," she said. She walked over and kissed his forehead. "You've always been my cowboy."

Paul sat back watching the ease of the two of them joking. It took him aback for a moment, but it kind of felt good.

"What about me?" Paul asked.

"Well usually, you don't name yourself," his dad said. "It's something that just kind of evolves from life. What do your friends call you?"

"Friends? Making friends here isn't easy." Paul told his dad about meeting the coach, playing ball, and going to the diner.

"Everyone was calling me Texas, and I told them this is my new home, and that I've left Texas behind. And I told Kili I would take just about any handle but 'outsider' which is the way a lot people look at us. And then she let me know I'm mostly referred to as RAM Oil kid, and that's for sure not a name I'd want to use."

Cal studied his son as he rambled on. The way he used the RAM Oil name was clearly derogatory and it bothered him. He had hoped this move would help his son realize the value of RAM. It raised his hackles but he decided to let it go for now. Enough drama had invaded their home for today and he needed a break. He'd address it

at another time. Cal said, "I'd say Texas could work...or probably something to do with basketball, don't you think?"

Paul couldn't believe his dad said that, but he agreed. "Kili is Grocery Girl, I'm going to try and call her after dinner, or whatever it is you do with a radio. She said the same thing – that your name kind of picks you instead of the other way around. I guess Texas wouldn't be too bad as my radio name."

After dinner they sat and talked instead of watching a movie. Paul relaxed a little and told his father more about Kili, about playing ball, and his mother talked about the clinic. For Paul, it felt like a dream. A good dream, but he could see stress etched around his father's eyes.

"How are things going at RAM?" Enola asked.

Cal shook his head slowly. "Not as well as I'd like." He paused. "I don't mind the work, but I feel like I'm butting my head into the wall at every turn. There's no team work...no cooperation." He glanced at his wife. "And there seems to be a problem with telling the truth."

Paul looked at his mom and back at his dad. In his father's book, lying was never okay. It was wrong. Period.'

"What's going on, Cal?" Enola asked.

He went on to tell her about some guy named Halverson, and his suspicions that things weren't as they seemed. I'm thinking of going to talk with a guy by the name of Martin Perry. He held Halverson's job before Halverson."

Enola's eyes widened. "I work with his wife! She said he was let go unfairly."

Cal sat up straight. "Really? Can you tell her I'd like to talk with him?"

Nola nodded. "I had told her that I'd mention it to you...that you might be able to do something."

Cal shook his head and let out a slow breath. "I don't know about that, but maybe if he is willing to talk to me that could be a possibility." He'd love to see Halverson out of there, but he knew he was a long way from that ever happening.

"I'll talk to Margaret tomorrow."

Cal pulled a paper from his pocket and unfolded it and showed Paul. "Have you seen this boy around?"

Paul blinked at the picture. It looked like a screenshot taken from a surveillance video. It was the same face Kili held next to her heart in the locket she wore. "I haven't met many people yet," Paul said evading the question. "Why are you looking for him?"

Paul's dad folded the paper and stuffed back into his shirt pocket. "I think he might hold the answer to some of my questions."

Paul shrugged. "Sorry I don't know him." Then just to see what his dad would say, he said, "I could show his picture around if you like."

His dad's eyes rounded and his posture tensed. "No! No one can know I even have this lead. I mean, it could be detrimental to the kid for all I know."

Chapter 15

Paul woke with Kili on his mind. *Did she leave with her dad because she wanted to or because he made her? Is she in danger? And why did his dad have a picture of her brother?* Now he didn't know what to expect. Point Hope was full of all sorts of trouble.

His thoughts drifted to his father and some of the things he talked about but even more he pondered what he didn't talk about. How did Kili's brother fit into all this? He could tell by the picture that he was at the docks, and his father said "it could be detrimental to the kid" if others saw the picture. Fear washed over him. His dad didn't realize that the picture was Kili's brother who was killed in that RAM explosion. Was the accident that killed Kili's brother really an accident, or was her father right?

In the photo Pana held a device about the size of a phone like he was taking a picture. *I wonder when that was taken?* His mattress creaked as he rolled onto his side and grabbed his new Cobra radio. He had hoped to talk to Kili last night but by the time his dad gave them the radios and a quick overview of how to use them, it was time to eat. He planned to call her after dinner, but by the time his dad

pulled out that picture and talked the little he did, it was already 9:30 and too late to call her by his family's rules.

He checked the radio to be sure it was on AM mode. Between what his dad showed him last night and what he had learned from watching and talking to Kili, he turned the channel to 10 first. Out of the 40 channels, people used 10 to contact the Native Store, so he'd start there. He carefully clicked it on 10 and not nine since nine was reserved for emergencies. He still didn't like the idea of shared channels, where anyone could listen in. But it was better than walking in to town only to find out she wasn't even there, yet. His biggest concern with using the radio was really that he didn't know what to say...like CB talk. Heck, he didn't even have a real CB name...er...handle yet.

All he really wanted to do is surprise her and let her know he finally had a radio. He shoved his concerns aside and pushed the button. "Grocery girl, you there?"

No answer. Maybe he wasn't doing something right. Or maybe she didn't hear him. He felt stupid. It was times like this he missed the

Internet. With the Internet he could have looked up a YouTube video on how to use a Cobra and he'd be a pro in no time.

He'd have to start going to the library to get on the Internet. That's what most of the kids did. Instead of making a fool out of himself, he decided to wait. He'd see Kili in about an hour, anyway. Today, he was originally supposed to meet her father officially and find out about joining the activist group. Now he wasn't so sure. How would he feel meeting the son of someone he called a murderer? Everything was a mess. All he could do is show up and see what happened.

Cal drove around RAM's complex when his radio bleeped to life. "Cowboy this is Candy Striper." A smile tugged at his lips. "Hey Candy Striper, see you learned how to use your gift."

"Sure did, Margaret here at the clinic helped me. By the way, what we talked about last night is a go."

Cal's mind raced. *Does she mean Perry is willing to meet with me...talk with me?* If so she was smart enough not to broadcast it over the airwaves. "Let me know when, where and all that and we'll call it done." He heard muffled chatter in the background. "Any time is good on this end, just give me a call when it's good for you."

"Got it, will do. Cowboy out."

He clipped the radio back onto his belt. His schedule was more or less his own. He'd hoped to visit security again today, but decided his time could be better spent talking with Martin Perry. Around 11:30 he contacted Nola. It took her a moment to answer but she understood his message. "I'll be at the clinic about 12:00 think that could work for you?"

Again he waited. She was probably checking with the nurse. When she came back on the radio she said, "That's a go Cowboy. Here at the clinic at noon."

When he pulled into the clinic lot, there were only a couple of ATVs parked out front. He walked in and slipped his hat from his head. Behind the desk Nola looked up at him with a smile, but it

wavered as there was one other person in the waiting area. "Hello," Enola said, as if she were talking with a stranger. "Fill this paperwork out and I'll be with you in a moment." She handed him a clipboard. On it was a note. Martin Perry was already there and waiting in one of the examination rooms. After a fair amount of time, he walked up to the counter and handed the clipboard back to his wife. "Okay, let me see if you've filled everything out. Come on back here and I'll get you weighed and get your vitals." She motioned him to the door.

When she ushered him to the exam room a middle-aged man with a scruffy beard wearing a heavy flannel parka looked up from reading a magazine. "Cal, this is Margaret's husband Martin."

Cal held out his hand and Martin accepted it. "Nice to meet you."

"I'll leave you men alone. Let me know if you need anything."

The two men talked heart to heart. Martin said, "The bottom line is that Halverson planted evidence to make it look like I wasn't doing my job. Then I was fired based on that."

"I don't trust Halverson as far as I can spit," Cal said.

Martin smiled. "That's wise."

"What I don't know is who I can trust. Not only that, but I feel like I'm being watched constantly."

"You probably are. You're an outsider. I don't just mean new to Point Hope. You're not in their little group that has control over what's really going on there."

"So what is going on?" Cal asked. "I promise I won't point a finger in your direction, I just want to see if what you know lines up with what I suspect."

Martin confirmed that Max Halverson was connected to someone with authority, but he wasn't sure who. One thing for sure was that Gregory Thomson was involved. "However, I do have a few friends still there that you can talk to. I'll set up a meeting with a guy in the warehouse you can trust."

"Do you think he could let me see the seals we're using?"

Martin scratched his unruly hair. "Seals?"

Cal nodded. "Yes, I want to make sure we are using the seals we're paying for."

Martin's eyes grew wide. "I knew it! I kept questioning the reports. The seals were failing...."

Hope surged within Cal. "Yes! That's what I'm seeing." He decided not to mention the conflicting invoices. "I'd love it if you could set that up."

"I'll line it up. The guy's name is Harold...Harold Thomas."

Cal nodded. "I know Harold. I thought he was trustworthy. And I have another lead." He pulled his phone from his pocket and showed Martin a picture of the kid at the docks hiding behind crates.

"Is that surveillance footage?" Martin asked.

Calvin nodded.

"Wow, I'm impressed you got this."

"I think this kid might took a picture of something going on at the docks, and truthfully, his life could be in danger. We need to find out who he is."

Martin Perry wiped a callused hand across his face. "That's going to be a problem. He's the young man who was killed in the explosion on the rig last fall."

Kili wiped the counter down and rechecked the change in the register for the fifth time. Life had turned into such a roller coaster, but the fun of the ride was overshadowed by disappointment. While she really liked Paul, he planned to leave in a year. And her dad didn't want her near him. Plus she worried about her dad. She glanced toward the back of the store where he moved the ladder to reorganize and dust a few small appliances like blenders and toasters.

She was relieved to have him home but still worried. That outburst yesterday at Paul's house wasn't just embarrassing, it was scary. He seemed better today, but just wasn't himself. When all this started, she figured it was because Pana wasn't here for this whaling

season. But even when his crew brought in a whale he remained rather sullen and kept to himself. With all that going on, she hadn't found the right time to talk to him about Paul wanting to join the activists. And part of her wasn't sure that was even a good idea anymore.

The second hand of the wall clock above the shelf lined with large tins of lard counted down the minutes until Paul would walk in the door. Her palms felt clammy. She didn't want to ruin her dad's improved mood. He seemed more like himself. Bringing up Paul could cause him to relapse.

If only she could reach Paul. His father had picked up radios last night...maybe she could try. Her plan had been to talk to her father about Paul naturally in regular conversation. She wanted to explain he was a good guy. To let him know there was no love lost between Paul and RAM Oil. That they were actually on the same side.

She made one attempt to bring it up casually when she helped him carry the elk meat to the cellar, but the timing just wasn't right. Somehow, she had to let him to know Paul was interested in

connecting with Point Hope and the activists, before he showed up. Paul could be good for him, if he gave the guy a chance. She let out a sigh. But he wasn't really wanting to connect with Point Hope. He was ready to leave as soon as he could.

Her eyes drifted to the CB on the counter next to her purse. She needed to try to let Paul know that the time wasn't right. Hopefully, he had his CB turned on and charged. She slipped on her parka and grabbed the radio. "Dad, I'll be right back."

He turned on the ladder to look at her. "What?"

"Just stepping outside for a minute. I need some fresh air."

It was something the two of them said to each other often. They were born to be outdoors and not cooped up within four walls filled with inventory.

"Okay, I'll take care of all the customers breaking down the doors." He smiled.

It warmed her to see that smile. Did she dare risk putting him back in that despondent mood...or whatever you called the way he

became? It was more than depression. It was more like a possession. She tucked her radio in the back of her pants and pulled her shirt over it.

"Be back in a few."

The door closed behind her with a quiet click. She hurried to the side of the building to get out of the wind and out of the line of sight, in case her step-dad decided to come after her. She didn't want him to catch her contacting Paul. She pulled out her radio.

Paul ran around the corner to the door of the Native Store. He didn't want to be late for officially meeting Kili's dad. As the door shut behind him it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. He glanced toward the counter. Kili wasn't there. A feeling of uneasiness washed over him. He scanned the store but didn't see her. Footfalls moved along the aisle coming from the back of the store. He spun to face Kili with a smile, but it died on his lips.

"Hello...a...Mr. Atuga—Ah...."

"Ahtuanguaruak," Kili's father said. "What are *you* doing here?"

Panic set in. *Where is Kili? What do I say?*

The radio on his belt came to life. "*Paul? Paul do you hear me? What's your twenty?*" Kili's voice sounded loud in the quiet store. Her dad's eyes narrowed.

Suddenly Paul felt like a bacteria being studied under a microscope as her father skewered him with his eyes. Paul grabbed the radio to answer. "I'm in the Native Store. Where are *you*? Over?"

Silence. Paul swallowed hard, wondering what he should do. He looked from the radio to the burly man staring him down and back at the radio willing it to speak. Behind him, the bell jingled as the door opened and Kili walked in. She let the door shut and leaned against it. "I was trying to catch you before you got here."

Paul looked from Kili to her dad with wide eyes. *Now what?*

The scowl on her father's face made it clear things were going to pick up where they left off yesterday.

Her father spoke in a low growl. "This is that RAM Oil kid!"

Kili placed herself between Paul and her father. She raised her hands. "Just wait. Before you jump to conclusions there's a couple of things you need to know. First, he hates to be called the RAM Oil kid. Second, he hates RAM!"

Her father leaned to the left to look at Paul around Kili. Paul nodded. "It's the truth. Honest." His voice had a squeak to it that made him blush.

"He actually came here to talk to you, Dad. I just didn't know how to tell you." She backed up a few steps to stand beside Paul." They glanced at each other. For a brief moment, he could see in her eyes that she felt the same way he did. Unsure and nervous.

Her father stepped close. His face just inches from Paul's. His breath smelled like he brushed his teeth with tuna. But Paul didn't flinch. He needed to get beyond the issues with the man if he hoped to have any kind of relationship with Kili. "I know you think you don't like me," Paul started. "But you don't know me. I was talking to Kili about getting involved with the activists who are trying to get RAM shut

down." He glanced in her direction for a moment. She took his hand and squeezed it. "She said you might be able to help me."

Steven Ahtuanguaruak straightened to his full height, but the kid was an inch or so taller than him. As much as he hated everything about this boy, Jim Harris was right. He could be the key to hitting RAM Oil where it hurt, and here he stood in the store. This could be the opportunity to befriend the kid, if he played his cards right, the kid would trust him. "Is that so?"

The kid nodded. "I want to help."

Steven took a step back. It wouldn't be easy to convince the others in the group that the boy wasn't a plant. "You say you hate RAM, I ask why." He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

The kid's adam's apple bobbed. "Well, it's complicated. But I hate the way they treat my dad. It's like he's their slave. I almost never see him!" He threw his hands up and let them drop. "He's gone when I get up in the morning...we've only had dinner together once since I

moved here. They don't care about him or us. All they care about is making money."

For a moment, Steven believed him. RAM didn't care about anything but making a profit. But he hardened his heart toward the boy. He couldn't get emotionally involved. This kid would provide the perfect way to make his point in a big way and avenge Pana's death.

Kili's eyes moistened as she looked from the boy to him. It ignited a spark of anger in his gut. He didn't need her complicating things. "Fine, I'll introduce him." He rubbed the back of his neck trying to avoid looking at Kili. She knew him too well. "We're meeting tomorrow. Here." He pointed to the floor. "Be here at 6:00."

The RAM Oil kid let go of Kili's hand and grabbed Steven's hand and shook it. "Thanks. Thanks so much. Kili said you'd be able to help me."

Steven yanked his hand free. "I've got to get back to work." He hurried toward the back of the store with his emotions colliding. The kid's enthusiasm reminded him of Pana. But RAM left him no choice. He knew what he had to do. It was RAM's fault.

Start here Cal walked out of his office purposely "forgetting" his company phone on his desk chair as if it had carelessly fallen there. He walked by Mrs. Q's desk. "Have a good day," he said without stopping. Before she could ask him if he had his phone, or where he was headed, he pushed through the double doors and into the warehouse. He did his best to look like business as usual, but took long strides straight out to the parking lot. The wind chilled him through his jacket as he rushed toward the ATV designated for his use around the RAM complex.

He drove to the south-most pole building and pulled around the corner. Once he was out of sight of the security cameras, he crouched beside the vehicle and pulled the screwdriver from his pocket. It only took a couple of minutes to disconnect the GPS module on the undercarriage. His heart quickened as he dropped the gadget on the ground. He didn't know how closely they tracked his movements, but it was pretty dang close. If he was right, it wouldn't take long for them to

figure out he didn't have his phone and that they couldn't see him on the surveillance.

After talking with Martin Perry, many of Cal's suspicions were confirmed. That fact emboldened him, and he was willing to take more risks to find the truth. Even if it meant his job. Perry had agreed things weren't as they seemed. "Watch your back or you'll be out of a job," he had warned. "Especially that Halverson. I know he planted evidence that made it look like I wasn't doing my job. He got me fired. And he'd have no trouble climbing over your dead body following an *unfortunate* accident."

Cal shared some of his own concerns without going into details of where he got his information. No one needed to know about the hard proof he had in his possession. Perry confirmed Halverson and Thompson wielded a lot of authority -- authority that could only come from Richmond. When Cal had mentioned concerns about the seals failing, and how he couldn't get close enough to one for the proof he needed Perry had said, "The man you need to talk to is Scott Benally."

That put things in motion. Martin Perry contacted Benally, and Benally showed up at Cal's house. "Sorry," he had said. "Can't risk emails, radio, or even phone calls. They can be monitored." The two of them sat in Cal's truck which had finally arrived from Texas and talked. "You're on to something," Benally said. "I noticed we received the wrong seals, returned them. We have the right seals, just enough inventory to make it look good if we are audited. But I'm telling you, someone in procurement has switched to a cheaper seal and hides the fact with bogus paperwork. But they've gone to this paperless system, and I never thought to save any of the invoices I questioned." He shrugged. "And when I did question it, my boss told me to keep quiet or to suffer the consequences."

"Your boss – that's Gregory Thompson?"

Benally took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, looked at Cal and nodded. "After Martin lost his job, I confess, I've been just doing as I'm told. I can't afford to lose my job. But it isn't right. I didn't know what else to do."

That's when they'd hatched this plan. Benally was the one who told him to ditch his phone and disable his GPS. Now he was on his way to meet Benally to see the inventory of seals while Halverson was tied up in another conference call. The window of opportunity was short. Timing had to be perfect.

Cal pulled out his personal radio to contact Scott Benally. They had set up a code. He would use channel 6. It almost guaranteed the signal would bounce. In CB lingo it was called "skip." Benally would answer and they would know whether the meet was on or not.

Cal pushed the button. "Uh, hello, I'm trying to reach the main office."

"Who is this? What's your handle?" Benally answered.

"Sorry, I'm new to this radio lingo. I've lost my phone and wanted to let the main office know."

"Your name...what's your name?"

"Lowick, Cal Lowick."

"You've reached shipping and receiving. Sorry."

That was the code. "You've *reached* shipping and receiving was the go ahead." Cal pulled the ATV around the back of the building out of camera range and drove north. "Okay, thanks, I'll just head back to the office and see if I left it there. Sorry to bother you."

If anyone listened in on the conversation, it would buy him a little time off the grid. Once he got to shipping and receiving it could be a different story.

Chapter 16

Cal pulled his ATV between two empty tractor trailers and switched off the motor. His heart pulsed in his ears as he sidled up next to one of the trailers and peeked toward the loading docks watching for Scott Benally. If he stepped out on the dock wearing his orange blaze safety vest and an orange knitted cap it was a go. No vest and a black hat would send Cal back the way he had come.

Cal stood near the last bay where the surveillance cameras weren't monitoring. It seemed like forever. A hundred scenarios played through his mind while he waited – all bad. He put each one to rest as he pushed it from his mind. Not doing something could be

even worse. And he'd learned a long time ago, that worrying didn't accomplish anything. He'd come this far and there was no turning around now. He spotted Benally's orange cap and vest as the bearded man stepped out on to the dock and looked around. That was the signal. Inside, the security cameras were being fed a loop that would repeat the last 20 minutes recorded. After that, the cameras would be rolling in real time. He had to hurry.

He sprinted from his hiding place between the trailers and cut across the far end of the lot in a straight line. "This way, Cal." Benally motioned with his head toward the open bay. The two men hurried into the warehouse. "Just walk with me," Benally said.

Cal took long strides to keep up. The two of them walked past piles of pallets filled with 55 gallon drums. Somewhere within the maze the sound of a forklift warned they weren't alone. Benally led them through the stacked pallets on a path that kept them out of plain view. The walls of inventory changed from barrels to boxes, and big bags. "Over here." Benally headed to a caged area at the end of a row

of pallets. He whipped out a ring of keys and unlocked it with a shaky hand.

"Hurry up, in here." He waved his hand motioning for Cal to step inside. On the other side, he pulled out his tool and sliced into a large box. "This is what you're looking for." He started yanking on the seal pulling it from inside the box. "This is a two man job. Give me a hand." The two of them slid the seal half way out of the box.

"That's enough." Cal yanked his personal phone from his pocket and snapped a couple of pictures of the substandard seal. "We're paying top dollar for the best and this is what we're using?"

Benally nodded. "And the records still show we're installing what we're paying for. This is a disaster waiting to happen."

They pulled it out of the box to get a picture of the serial number. "This is what I need," Cal said. "Now to figure out who to talk to...who to trust."

"Can't you go straight to the top? Mr. Stone?"

Cal let out a long breath and shook his head. "Right now, I don't know. I'm pretty sure this is all linked to Richmond. Until I know who in Richmond, I can't tip our hand, or all this will be for nothing and you and me will be looking for handouts in the unemployment line."

The two men struggled to get the seal back into the box. "I'll tape it up later," Benally said. "You need to get out of here before the cameras start recording in real time."

The two of them hurried through the stacks of inventory. Cal followed behind Scott Benally thankful that the man knew his way around the warehouse. The sound of the forklift brought them both to a stop. Benally held up a closed fist signaling Cal to stop. He peered around the corner. Cal checked his watch. His time was almost up. If the cameras started recording, how would he get out of here without proof that he'd been here.

"Oh my God, Thompson's coming." Benally plastered himself against a pallet of barrels. "What are we going to do?"

Cal raked his fingers through his hair. "Do you think he's looking for you?"

Benally shrugged. "I never know. He's in here a lot. I thought we'd have a little more time with him on that conference call."

"Does he usually talk to you?"

"Yeah, you mean check up on me."

"I'll stay out of sight. You need to get out there." Cal pointed toward Thompson. "The sooner he sees you, the sooner he's out of here."

"Stay safe." Benally grabbed a clipboard from a nail and stepped out into view as if distracted by paper work.

"Benally, there you are." Thompson walked over to him. Benally chatted as if everything was normal saying that he'd been double checking things were where they belonged, and the two of them walked away from Cal's location. For the first time, Cal feared for his life and that of Benally's. If they were caught, it wouldn't be hard to stage an unfortunate accident.

It's bigger than me, he reminded himself. The use of inferior seals was a deliberately being covered up. And such a cover up was

far reaching, starting with the doctored invoices. *It IS the money!* For the first time he realized what it would mean to the bottom line. Someone was making millions. But without the quality seals they were supposed to be using an environmental catastrophe was inevitable. *And I'm the one who will pay – the scapegoat.* The limited data he had showing the leaks were getting worse, and pictures of the substandard seals still wasn't enough. His neck would be on the line for it. He had to find a way to link the evidence to those responsible. Now that he found out that the kid on the surveillance was dead he wondered what happen to his phone...the one he used to take a photo at the docks! Maybe that could give him something tangible to go on.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The leaks were slight enough most people with an untrained eye would overlook the data, but Cal knew better. *That's why all the reports went missing.* *This is orchestrated from the top.* This wasn't a promotion. This was a cover-their-butt maneuver. *They set me up to be the fall guy.*

He ran to the open bay door with three minutes to get to his ATV.

Paul walked into the house. "Mom!" No answer. She was probably still at the clinic. He hung up his coat and scrounged around for something to eat. He settled for a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers. Killi had invited him to join her and some of the guys to shoot some hoops later, then he'd be going with her father to the meeting in the evening. Kili was right about that man. He needed help. Paul felt sorry for him.

The sound of an ATV pulling up drew him to the window thinking Killi had come over to talk. He blinked in disbelief. It was his dad! On an ATV. *What's going on?* He opened the door to ask, but his dad was already running up the ramp and into the house.

"Dad? What's going on?"

His father hurried into the living room and powered up the computer. I've got some pictures I want to import from my phone. If I had Internet, I'd have emailed them to myself. Can't really talk about it right now. I need to get back to work before someone realizes I'm missing." He looked up at Paul. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything."

Paul nodded. He'd never seen his father looked so intense. "Pictures of what?"

Cal plugged in the USB cable and paused to look Paul in the eye. "It's probably better if you don't know. It's BIG. I need to trust you on this Paul. I don't even want you mentioning to anybody that I stopped home. Not even your mother. Unless...unless something happens to me."

Paul nodded, but all the mystery piqued his curiosity. "Like what do you mean?"

"Anything," his dad said. "Some kind of accident."

An accident! That scared him. He stood in silence wondering what to say. Kili's voice on the radio broke the silence. Paul jumped. His dad gave him a stern look and whispered. "Not even her. It's really important you don't say anything to anyone. It would put them in danger."

His father's tone alarmed him. *Dad doesn't scare easily.* He stepped out of the room to talk to Kili. It was almost time for them to go to the gym. "I'll come pick you up," she said.

"No, I'll meet you at the store. I'll leave now." He could tell his answer surprised her, but he couldn't have her come over and see his dad home...not right now any way. "I've got to go Dad, otherwise Kili will be coming over here to get me. "

Cal looked up at his son. "I appreciate it son."

The way he said it stirred Paul's emotions. He really did appreciate it. "If there's anything I can do, I'm here for you."

"I know. I know. Now go have fun with you friends." His father started uploading the pictures, and Paul walked to the kitchen, grabbed his jacket from the peg and paused. "Oh, and I won't be home for dinner. Let mom know." Paul headed out the door before his dad could ask about his plans.

He stepped into the cool breeze and headed toward town and the Native Store. He'd take a peek at the pictures later to see what all

the ruckus was about. Right now he'd have to figure out what to say to Kili about why he chose to walk. He had about 10 minutes to come up with that answer. Then tonight he'd have to figure out what to tell his parents.... He certainly couldn't say he'd gone to an activist meeting.

But his mind didn't linger on coming up with excuses. He couldn't shake the urgency in his dad's voice. His concern for the safety of anyone who knew what RAM was really doing. Tonight he'd be meeting with the very people that would love to have such information. He let his imagination wander and, in his mind, he and the activists saved the day for his dad. He turned down Qalgi and headed toward the Native Store with a smile.

Cal pulled his ATV into the designated space and braced himself for 100 questions. His long legs carried him into the office. Mrs. Q looked up from her computer with haughty eyes. "There you are! Where have you been?"

"Actually, I've been looking for my phone."

She pinched his work phone between her fingers like a dirty sock. "You left it on your office chair. Where exactly were you looking for it?"

The word "left" made him wonder if she suspected. He raised his brows in surprise and snatched it from her hand. "It must have fallen out of my pocket. I've been retracing my steps." He checked his messages. "Wow you called...9...no 11 times. What did you need?"

She focused on shuffling papers on her desk and mumbled, "I took care of it."

"Great." He fought a smile as he slipped his phone into his pocket. "Well, if you don't need me, I'm going to head home."

She glanced at the clock on the wall and gave him the slacker look, but at this point he just wanted to get home and print out copies of the photos. "I promised my wife, I'd make her dinner." He walked toward the door and paused. "By the way, I probably won't be in the office tomorrow. I'll be playing catch up after today." He stepped through the door and walked out to the parking lot with wide strides. As he stepped into the cool wind, he spotted a guy on the ground next

to his ATV. He didn't need to be a rocket scientist to realize the GPS tracker would be back in place.

He climbed into his truck and wiped his palms on his coveralls. For the first time, he wondered if his truck had a tracker he didn't know about, and if it did then they'd know where he'd been...and he planned to go see Scott Benally. And if they tracked Benally, they'd know the two of them were together.

"Am I being paranoid?" he asked himself, but he had no doubt. It wasn't paranoia. RAM's operations here in Point Hope were corrupt and corruption started in Richmond. He had hoped to revisit the guys in security, but he didn't have time for that. The way things were moving, he'd have to get to the bottom of things quickly. *I need to find out if the phone the kid on the video used is still around.*

Cal walked in the door glad to be home. Part of him regretted ever leaving Texas, but his gut told him he was here for a purpose. Like it or not.

Paul walked into the small kitchen his hair still wet from taking a shower after playing basketball with his new friends. "Dad! You're home?"

Cal let out a sigh as he shrugged his arms from his jacket and hung it up on the peg. "Yeah, is your mom home?"

Paul shook his head. "Not yet."

Cal rubbed his rough hands across his face and looked at Paul through his fingers. His son had grown up and he'd missed out on a lot. For RAM. Cal pulled out a chair and sat slouched looking at Paul.

"Son, I look at you and see a young man where a boy once stood. And I missed it."

Paul's green eyes grew wide. He hurried to the table and sat kitty-corner from Cal. "What's going on Dad?"

Cal rubbed the stress at the back of his neck. "Paul, if I tell you what really going on, you've got to promise not to talk to anyone. Not even your mother. I don't want her worrying. But truthfully, I've got to make sure someone knows what I know...someone I can trust."

Paul nodded. "I promise. I won't say anything."

Cal talked to Paul about his hunches, and went on to tell him about the proof he'd gathered. "If anything were to happen to me, I want you to take it all to the authorities."

"Why not do that now?" Paul asked.

"Because I don't have enough and this goes to the power at the top. I'm sure they'd just turn it around to make it look like I was trying to cover my own butt." He took in another long breath and let it out slowly. "But if something happens to me...like an industrial accident...anything that doesn't make sense...that would be added proof to the case. Then I think they'd listen to you."

"Dad! I don't like this. What are you going to do?"

As he studied Paul's face, he saw a hint of fear, and he didn't blame him. But for the first time in a long time, he and his son were on the same page. "Well, that young man I found on that surveillance video. I think he might have had some kind of evidence on his phone or tablet. Couldn't tell for sure what it was. He took a picture of

something going on at the docks. That's the kind of proof I need. But he was the casualty in that RAM explosion last fall."

Paul nodded. "That was Kili's brother." He let the statement linger between them. His dad would know what to do.

His dad looked at him straight on. "Her brother?"

Paul nodded.

"That explains why her father was calling me a murderer. He blames, RAM."

Paul nodded.

Cal had an idea. He grabbed Paul by the shoulders. "Do you think we can trust Kili to help us?"

Paul shrugged. "Help how?"

He pushed to his feet and paced in the small kitchen. "Don't say anything just yet. I need time to think. To figure out what I need to do."

Enola sat at her desk in the clinic listening to a couple of patients waiting to see Margaret. Her ears perked up as the one woman mentioned Steven Ahtuanguaruak. "I don't want them drilling here either, but Steven is losing it. Have you seen him?"

"I'm worried about him. Thankfully he has Kili to keep an eye on him, but last time I saw him he almost looked a bit so troubled. My husband said his temper explodes often. I don't really like to think of them out there in the boat together."

The second woman coughed and then shook her head. "I think he is a bit unstable."

The first woman placed a hand on the woman's forearm. "Can you blame him. If I lost my husband or son like that, I can't say what I'd do."

The second woman nodded. "I guess. But I'm afraid he could do something everyone would regret."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure, but he wants to make someone pay." She shrugged. "I don't know how you can ever make someone pay for something like that, and it doesn't really do any good. His son is gone."

A patient stepped out of the exam room and up to the desk, and Enola lost track of the conversation but it troubled her. It wasn't the first time she'd overheard rumblings of revenge and the possibility of some sort of event. She didn't like it.

Chapter 17

Anger bubbled in Steven Ahtuanguak as he thought of his niece with the RAM Oil kid. How could she betray him like this? How could she turn her back on Pana's memory? A small group of female activists carrying signs walked into the store. In his rage, he'd totally forgotten they were gathering early to get some footage, and now the RAM Oil kid would show up before he had a chance to really let the others know what was going on. An older Native woman walked right over to him and grabbed his arm. "Steven, I've got a reporter coming to talk with you about how even though Point Hope may not be an

appealing tourist spot that doesn't mean it's not worth protecting. She's meeting us in like ten minutes."

Paul walked up the street toward the Native Store with butterflies doing nose dives in his stomach. Lights set up outside brightened the storefront in the dusk. A guy with a camera stood filming a reporter talking with someone while a small cluster of people, mostly older women, walked in the background with signs like they were protesting. Paul pulled up his hood to keep the wind off his neck and hurried toward the activists feeling like a double agent. A double agent with loyalties and reservations about both sides. *But really, it's all one side.* He reminded himself. *Getting my face on camera for something like this could go a long way.*

As he neared the small cluster of people Paul slowed his pace. *It's Kili's dad they're interviewing.* He stepped close enough to hear what was being said, and tried to work his way around the protesters to a spot where he'd be seen on camera along with all the anti-drilling signs.

"We want the President to stop RAM's drilling operation in the Chukchi Sea. This is a direct threat to the Inupiat and their rights to continue to live their traditional whaling culture." Kili's dad grew more animated waving his arms as he talked. "We've lived this way for thousands of years. This is just another way to take our land from us."

The woman reporter raised her eyebrows and leaned back to avoid his flailing hands as she nodded. "Some suggest that oil and gas and our animals – our lifestyle can live in harmony by ensuring that the oil and gas development is done in a manner that won't affect the wellbeing of our subsistence resources. What do you have to say about that?"

"It has divided us. Many want the jobs so their families can survive and even more don't see the issue with accepting high paying jobs just to suck oil out of the ground. Others are worried that our people will become dependent on RAM. You know the old saying...divide and conquer. That is what they are doing."

The reporter's question hit Paul hard. He knew the truth. RAM only appeared to be "living in harmony" while they were really risking a

huge spill. Everything in Paul wanted to run up to the camera and blurt out the truth...to tell the world everything he knew...but he'd given his word not to talk about it to anyone. Not yet. If they really wanted to keep the lifestyle and wildlife of Point Hope safe, he had to keep his mouth shut until they had hard proof.

A voice beside him startled him from his reverie. "What are you doing here? I told you we don't want you or your kind here."

Paul recognized the guy only because he wore the same red knit cap he had on the other day at the Native Store when he told Paul to basically get lost. Suddenly Paul felt like he'd moved from a crossover to a combination running full tilt on the court. His pulse sounded in his ears as he looked the guy straight in the eye. He mustered all the courage he could find and said, "Listen; it's bad enough my father works for RAM. I *hate* them." He drew on the very real hatred he harbored for the company. "I'm here to find out how I can help." It was easy to be convincing because he meant every word.

The man eyed him through slitted eyes. His nostrils flared. "You? You want to help?"

Paul's heart slammed like he was running the court for a breakaway setup. "Yes, sir." His mind grasped for anything else to say but came up with nothing.

The man's lips stretched into a smile as Kili's father joined them. "Back off, Jim. He's with me." Paul stood stunned. This was the first time her dad had thrown him a breadcrumb of kindness. Paul, forced himself to relax, but the tension in his neck and shoulders stayed put. He trusted these two guys about as much as he trusted RAM.

Anger flashed in the man's squinty eyes, but when the two men exchanged looks, a look of understanding passed between the Kili's father and the man with the hat. Mr. red hat seemed to calm down. Paul didn't like it. Something was fishy.

"He said he wanted to help," Kili's father said. "I told him he'll have to prove himself. And he had the nerve to show up. And he even stood with the rest of them," he ticked his head toward the activists filing into the store to get out of the wind. "Was willing to go on camera."

The man in the red hat smiled wider, but it didn't look friendly. More like the cat that swallowed the canary. Everything within Paul told him to turn tail and get out there, but he wasn't just here for himself anymore. Now he was here to see if he could learn anything to help his dad. He drew on the hate he had when he first moved here and said, "Why wouldn't I? RAM Oil uprooted my family, pulled me away from all my friends, the place I'd lived all my life, and they keep my dad so busy that I never see him. I like it here, but I want to go home. I'm a Texas boy. The only way I can see that happening is to shut RAM down here." He jabbed his finger toward the ground for emphasis.

"You hunt?" the guy with the red hat asked.

"Of course." Just the way the guy asked the question offended Paul. Like he was a wuss or something. "Listen, buddy, I'm from Texas." He puffed out his chest and stood at least three inches taller than the guy. "Of course I hunt."

The guy stepped closer...inches from Paul's face.

Paul balled his fingers into fists. Oh man, he wanted to punch the smug look off this old man's face.

Just as the static between the two felt ready to explode, one of the older women joined them and the two men blanched. She extended her hand toward Paul. "You must be Paul Lowick. You look just like your mother." She smiled a genuine smile. "I work with her at the clinic."

Paul suddenly realized his mother had no idea he was here and he wanted to keep it that way. "Please don't tell her I was here. She might say something to Dad. This is...well it's important to me, but I don't want her to worry about me and I don't want it to be a problem between my mom and dad either."

The woman's brown eyes shined with the warmth of understanding. "It will be our secret." She leaned in close. "Unless she watches TV, because you'll probably make the news tonight."

Paul let out a sigh. "I hadn't thought about that."

The woman put her arm around him and said, "Don't worry about it. Your mom is a sweetheart. Besides, she thought of coming here herself, but she didn't want to upset your dad or put his job at risk. She'll be proud of you. It's not often we get young people to join us. I for one am happy to see you here." She cast a stern look at Kili's dad and his friend. "Come with me and I'll introduce you to everyone."

Paul breathed a sigh of relief as she led him away to meet the other women. They didn't feel like a threat. He couldn't really say that about Kili's father or his friend. The rest of the meeting was basically what Paul had expected. Someone would gripe about something, others would agree, but as a group they weren't united in finding solutions. *They're not a team.*

The topic of the meeting was a safety vessel by the name of the Ferric. It was scheduled to arrive in Chukchi Sea just before the festival. The activists had attempted to delay it, and many showed frustration. "It clears way for company to start drilling deep enough to hit oil from the second rig. A spokeswoman for the company says they have the permit to drill deeper in this exploration well."

The statement stirred a buzz. Disappointment and worry showed on many of the faces. A woman wearing her hair in a ponytail asked, "What is a safety ship? Isn't that something good for us?"

The man doing most of speaking said, "The Ferric carries a capping stack, a device that can be lowered on to a leaking oil well to control a blowout. Arctic operating standards, formed in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, require this device to be available within 24 hours." He leaned with his hands on the small podium. "So it looks to me like they are expecting trouble.

The second rig is ready to begin drilling. As much as we've worked to prevent it all we have to show for our efforts are federal regulations governing noise disturbance to local walrus populations. It means both rigs cannot drill at the same time."

As the meeting broke up, Kili's father walked up to him and extended his hand. "I'm sorry we got off to a rough start."

Paul accepted his hand and shook it but couldn't help wonder why the guy had a change of heart. "It's okay, I understand." But he didn't understand.

"So you like to hunt?"

"Oh yeah!"

"There's no better way to get to know a man than to hunt with him." He looked right then left and leaned in to say, "I have a small cabin and I've seen evidence of Dall Sheep on my property. If you'd like to join me...."

Paul blinked. "Sure...but when?"

They set a date for three weeks out. Kili's dad said, "So do me a favor and don't say anything to anyone. You're not exactly ... well you know."

Paul nodded and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, I know." The two of them said goodbye and Paul walked away feeling a little guilty for not trusting the guy, but he didn't.

Light shined from the small kitchen window as Paul headed up the ramp. He walked in the door to find his mom and dad sitting at the kitchen table. A smile quivered on his mom's lips, "Hi Honey, I put some dinner in the fridge for you."

He glanced at his dad. "I told your mother everything son. Grab yourself some dinner and fill me in on how it went tonight."

Paul grabbed the plate his mom had stashed in the refrigerator and heated it in the countertop microwave. He glanced at his mom and dad and his heart welled with emotion. It had been so long since he'd felt this...this sense of really being a family. He quickly poured himself a glass of sweet tea and guzzled half of it trying to erase the lump forming in his throat.

He brought his plate to the table and the three of them talked...about real life...about things that mattered.

Paul filled his parents in on everything he'd seen and heard at the meeting. "And I'm going to be on TV, so that might cause you some problems dad."

His dad smiled. "Well you know how teenagers are."

"And mom, I met a lady you work with. Nice lady. She kind of rescued me from Kili's father and this friend of his. I'm tellin' you Dad, they're not to be trusted. And I'm goin' hunting with him in about three weeks."

Paul's dad rubbed his face with both hands slid them up to the top of his head and sat like that staring at his son. Once again, Paul noted the dark circles under his dad's eyes. "Who else is going?"

Paul shook his head. "No one. He doesn't even want me to tell anyone, because in his circle of friends no one wants me here." Paul got up and grabbed his plate and scraped the last of his dinner into the trash. He turned and looked at his parents. "I don't trust him. And that friend of his, "Jim...Harris I think. *That* guy is not all there. I mean I really don't trust him...."

"What are you saying, Paul," his mom asked.

He let out a sigh. She always wanted to see the best in everyone.

"Let me put it this way. If I go hunting with Kili's dad, I wouldn't be surprised if some kind of hunting accident happened. Like I'd be hurt...or even worse."

His mom gasped. Her hand shot to cover her mouth as she looked wide-eyed from Paul to his father. "Cal, we need to leave here."

"No honey, the most important thing we can do right now is find out who the kid is in that video. And Paul, you can let Kili's father know that your parents don't want you to go hunting."

Paul nodded thoughtfully. "I'm not sure he'll believe that. He knows I'm from Texas. And I already told him I hunt."

The following morning Paul woke before his alarm went off. Nervous energy had kept him tossing and turning through the night, but he didn't feel tired. In fact, he felt invigorated. He gulped down a bowl of cereal, took a quick shower, and got dressed. His dad had already left for work, but this morning it didn't bum him out. He

understood. His dad had a lot to do besides his expected responsibilities.

When he walked into the kitchen, his mom leaned against the counter sipping a cup of coffee just like she used to do in Texas. She smiled. "You doing okay?"

He nodded, poured himself some coffee and didn't even bother doctoring it with milk or sugar.

His mom raised her brows in mild surprise. "You're drinking that black?"

"Don't have long," he said as he sipped it. "Kili will be here any minute. We're getting together to play a game of pick up before she goes to school. Paul glanced one more time at the copy of the picture of the kid that his dad printed for him. Last night as he tossed and turned thinking about all that was going on, he'd come up with a plan. It might help his dad, and Kili's dad if he could pull it off.

He refolded the picture and stuck it in his back pocket as he heard Kili's Ranger coming toward the house. His main goal today

would be to talk to Kili to see if she would help him. He slid his cup of unfinished coffee onto the counter, gave his mom a quick peck on the cheek. "I got to run."

Kili pulled up in front of his house and waved as he cut across the crunchy dry grass to climb into the passenger side of the Ranger. He shut the door against the wind and leaned back in the comfy seat. "Does the wind ever stop here?"

Kili flashed a smile and shrugged. "Not often."

She pulled away and they headed for school. "Well?"

"Well what?"

Kili rolled her eyes and gave him a look. "You know. How did it go last night?"

Paul smiled. "Well good and bad. I think your dad might be warming up to me...but my mom and dad saw me on the news...with the activists outside the Native Store."

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

"Actually, to my surprise my mom said she had thought about going to the meeting, too. My dad just shook his head, but he knows she's always been against drilling off shore, even in Texas."

Paul hesitated. He didn't have time to procrastinate. He needed to talk to her now. "Kili, I have something important to talk about but you have to promise not to breathe a word to anyone."

She cast a sideward glance toward him. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. In fact, let's go the old village so we can talk."

She blinked her icy blue eyes in disbelief. "This must be really serious."

He nodded and looked out the side window thinking about what he was about to do. "It is."

When they reached the ruins, they stayed in the Ranger. She turned off the key and turned toward him. "So what's up?"

"I told my dad I wouldn't talk to anyone about this, so what I'm about to tell you really has to stay between us."

She stared at him with a hint of fear. "What?"

He told her that her dad was pretty sure things were going on at RAM that skirted the regulations. "He told me that if something happens to him he wanted me to know what was going on so I could go to the authorities."

"What? What do you mean?"

He explained his thoughts and told her about the young man on the surveillance video. "Do you know who it is?"

He nodded and pulled the picture out and handed it to her. She unfolded it and stared in disbelief. "Pana?"

Paul nodded. "Do you know if that phone or tablet he's holding in the picture is still around?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know. My dad kind of shut up his room and no one goes in there. It's like it was when he died...like he could come home any minute."

He placed his hand on Kili's leg. "Don't you see? Pana could help bring down the corrupt part of RAM?"

She frowned. "How?"

"You said he wrote. Maybe he wrote something about what he saw. Or maybe we could find the picture he took at the docks." Paul shrugged. "I don't know but part of me wonders if his death was an accident. I think you and I should look through his stuff and see if we can find something that can be used."

Paul waited for her answer. Everything in him hoped he hadn't made a mistake by telling her.

"It's complicated," she said. "My father will have a fit if he finds you in Pana's room."

Paul pulled his hand away and looked down at his hands.

Kili brushed his cheek with her hand. "I understand how important this is, and I will go through Pana's things and see what I can find."

He placed his hand over hers on his cheek. She leaned close and kissed him. All his worry drained from him for that moment as he closed his eyes and kissed her back.

"Everything will work out," she said as she ran her fingers through his hair.

He nodded. *I hope she's right.*

Steven Ahtuanguaruak stared at his face in the bathroom mirror. Everyone kept telling him he looked terrible and he had to agree. The circles under his eyes looked like purplish bruises. He didn't sleep much last night, again. The RAM Oil kid showing up for the meeting last night bothered him. The kid was actually likable. He pounded his fist against the mirror in frustration, and it cracked. His splintered image blinked back at him. "That's how I feel." He set his jaw. Life felt like nothing but little pieces anymore, and most of them were not important. He had to do what he had to do to get RAM to leave Point Hope for the future of his niece. She was all he really had left.

He pulled a hat over his disheveled hair, stuffed his muscular arms into his jacket and headed toward the Native Store to put a sign on the door that he'd gone hunting.

Cal pulled up in front of the Native Store. A sign on the door written in marker fluttered in the wind. The store wasn't open. That was a good thing. Scott Benally climbed in on the passenger side. "Let's go back to your place," he said. "I don't want to chance being seen here."

Cal threw the truck in reverse and backed out. "Anything going on that I need to know about?" He cast a quick glance toward Scott.

"I'm not sure. I'm afraid Halverson might suspect that I've been talking to you."

Cal pulled up at his house and sat for a moment with the engine running. He gripped the steering wheel tighter. "This is crazy. Just crazy." He turned off the truck. "I've got something to show you."

He unzipped his jacket and reached into his shirt pocket and unfolded the picture he captured from the surveillance video. "Do you know who this kid is?"

Scott stared wide-eyed at the photo. "Yeah, that's the kid that ran into Anderson SUV."

Cal blinked at the picture in disbelief. "What? Are you sure?"

Scott nodded. "Absolutely. His face was all over the news. Where did you get that?"

Cal hesitated. "I got it off the surveillance video from the docks."

The two of them stared at each other. "When?" Scott asked.

Cal rubbed his fingertips across his forehead trying to recall the exact date. "It was November. I'd have to check the exact date."

Scott drew his hand across his face and let it rest across his mouth. He looked out the passenger window for a moment and turned back to Cal. "You realize that kid was killed in November."

Cal didn't say a word. His mind raced trying to fit this new information into the puzzle. "You think his death wasn't an accident?"

Scott shook his head. "I don't know what to think any more, but if his death wasn't an accident, it's getting too risky for us to talk like

this." He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket. "I've written down everything I can think of that you'd want to know. I'm afraid, Cal. Especially now that you can place that kid on the docks in November...the same month he was killed."

Cal nodded numbly as he took the paper from Scott. He glanced at it but it was a full list. "I'll check all this out. I really appreciate your help, Scott."

"It's the right thing to do."

"We need to be careful. We're getting close to the bottom of all this."

Scott nodded. "Yeah, I'm afraid that's what got the kid killed."

"So you don't think his death was an accident?"

"I always wondered...seemed suspicious what with Anderson driving out that direction. There's nothing out there. Just the trails."

"Trails?"

"ATV trails. Just something people do for fun. Mostly the kids....
Now the fact that you can place Pana Ahtuanguaruak at the docks....
That could be enough to make even the authorities question
whether or not his death was an accident."

Cal nodded. "You're right. We can't risk being seen together.
I've got an idea. You just keep making your lists for me, but get them
to my wife...she works at the clinic. Enola Lowick."

Scott Benally laughed. "I'll know which one she is...the
only person working there that I don't know."

Paul stood in the hallway outside gym waiting for Kili. The guys
had already headed toward classes, but Paul lingered at the trophy
cases looking at the inscriptions. Coach Yaz still hadn't invited him to
join the team. It worried him some. If he didn't play next year, his
hope of getting a basketball scholarship would be out the window.

He studied the team pictures. Andy looked kind of smug even in the pictures. Then he spotted the kid he was looking for – right beside Andy!

"That was a great team," Kili said as she walked up behind him.

"Who's the kid next to Andy?"

"That's my brother – Pana – the one I told you about."

"The one who was killed in that accident?"

She nodded.

That news gave Paul the creeps. Pana had taken pictures of something at the docks. Could he have been killed because of that?

"Are you okay?" Kili studied his face. "You look a little pale...even for you."

Start here

Cal at work – maybe cut back to a scene with Mr. Stone

Enola at the clinic

Steve A. making plans and explosives

Paul doesn't find the nerve to tell he can't go hunting – because her father is an activist

Channel 9 reserved for emergencies

Paul enjoyed the food but, even more, he liked the singing and storytelling between events. This place had such a strong history and all the families were so close. He collected some of the food being distributed to bring home to his family. It included festival quaq (frozen whale meat) and muktuk (whale blubber and skin). He couldn't wait to tell his mom about all the things he learned. *It's too bad Mom and Dad didn't experience this.* He glanced around at the crowd and wondered if he might be the only person here without at least one other family member.

When the distribution were finished Kili and Paul brought their provisions back to the Ranger. "What's next?" he asked thinking they were headed home.

"The blanket toss!"

"The blanket...toss?" He didn't want to appear stupid, so he didn't ask. He'd watch someone else and give it a try. It didn't take long for him to figure out that it wasn't the blanket getting tossed. It was people.

Kili and Paul joined the crowd. "The blanket is made from Bearded Seal skins," Kili said. "The person in the air is a blanket dancer." Her wide smile showed how proud she was of her heritage. As they worked toward the front of the crowd, Paul could see that a rope extended from each corner of the blanket which was pulled tight between four wooden beams using block and tackle. People lined the edges and pulled out the blanket to throw the dancer in the air.

"You have to be careful not to throw people too high or the wind will catch them. I've seen someone get tossed 30 feet away to the ground."

"Does everybody do this?"

"Captains and their wives go first." Suddenly something small flew past him. The person in front of him crouched to pick up wrapped candy from the ground.

"They throw out goods...clothing...sweets...different food from the air. It shows they were able to provide." She bent down and picked up a piece of candy from the ground. "For you." She took his hand and placed the candy in it. "You're first."

After the blanket toss, everyone was invited to dance. Kili invited Paul to dance with her. "I don't really know how," he admitted.

"Just follow me. It will be okay."

As they danced, Paul spotted a cluster of teens watching them. By the looks on their faces they are not happy. Kili took his hands. Don't pay attention to them. They'll come around once they get to know you. They took a break and Paul slipped the hood from his head to cool off. They watched groups perform, including some of the unhappy-looking teens. They performed traditional songs with drums. Paul liked this. He hoped Kili was right, and that the others would accept him. But a couple of guys their age stood close enough to make sure he knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"...no secret who he is. He's the oil executive's son—at the festival. It rubs some of us the wrong way. It isn't right...an oil outsider trying to act like he's one of us."

Steven glanced at his watch and scanned the crowd looking for that blond-headed kid, but didn't see him. He let out a deep breath and nodded. Bringing down RAM's operation here was the top priority. If they hadn't come here, Pana would still be alive. Since his death, Steven had actively been cultivating this group. Though small in number, they were growing and determined to stop the drilling no matter what it would take. He'd catch up with his niece at home. She would not be seeing that blond-headed RAM Oil kid again.

Steven walked into his house with mounting frustration. Even though the interview went well, and the activists were gaining momentum, seeing Nukilik with the RAM Oil boy irked him to the core. *How could she?* When Pana was alive, even after his wife died, he knew how to relate to him. How to talk to him. But Nukilik was another story. Yes, both children were strong willed, but Nukilik, well she was

like her mother...his sister. Too kind for her own good. That kind heart is what really killed his sister. She stuck with that no-good husband, and it was his drunk driving that took both of them.

Moved text may be used or deleted:

Once he got to the door, he waited for Kili to knock so he wouldn't look desperate. When she did, he suddenly felt ashamed to have her see where he lived but too late. This wasn't really their house anyway, it was only temporary. He opened the door and Kili's smile made him forget about his concerns. A fur bordered hood framed her face.

Paul grabbed his jacket from the hook beside the door. "Hi, you found it."

She laughed. "You ready to go?"

Paul's mom stepped up behind him. "Hello, you must be Kili. I'm Paul's mom."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Lowick. You coming to the festival?"

His mom looked at him and then back at Kili. "I hadn't thought about it. Still unpacking. But I might just do that. I could use a break."

Kili pointed at Paul's head. "You have a hat? You'll need one."

He ran into his bedroom and snatched his Mavericks gray "Champions" cap from his collection. He hurried back to the door, kissed his mom on the cheek, and stepped out into the windy sunshine.

"Have fun," his mom called to him as he climbed into the side-by-side next to Kili.

Kili slid the hood from her head, and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Yeah, it's how most of us get around."

Paul liked that idea. *Less expensive than a truck.* It wouldn't look like they were broke and he could still have wheels. "Is it always this windy?"

She threw her head back and laughed. "It sure is. Point Hope has the strongest winds in the entire state. And just so you know..."

She pointed at his hat. "If you treasure that hat, I'd suggest you take it off and leave in the cab because it will not stay on your head."

"You're the one who told me to wear a hat."

"I meant something to keep your ears warm. I brought you a parka in case you wanted to dress for the occasion. It has a hood."

He shrugged. "Sounds like a plan."

They reached the festival grounds about 11:30. She climbed out of the Ranger and went to the bed that held something that looked like a large cooler. Paul joined her as she yanked a duffle bag from the box. Her hair whipped in the wind as she unzipped a duffle bag and pulled out the parka. She held it up. "What do you think?"

He grabbed it at the shoulders and eyed it. "So why did you really bring this? Are you trying to help me blend in?" He smiled.

She looked at her feet and nodded, then back at Paul.

"Truthfully, some people...well let's just say it takes them some time to warm up to outsiders...and my step-dad is one of them."

Inwardly Paul groaned at the news as he slipped his arms into the parka. Now he'd have to deal with Kili's ogre-like father to keep his only friend. The parka cut the incessant wind. When he slipped the hood up his body relaxed as it blocked the wind from the back of his neck. "This is great!"

She laughed. "Now all you need are some Mukluks."

"Mukluks?"

She lifted her right foot and showed off her boot. "Muckluks. These are made from reindeer skin...some are made from sealskin. I wear them for the festivals. They're traditional."

"Bet they keep your feet warm." Paul thought about pictures he'd seen of baby seals, but pushed the image from his mind.

Suddenly another voice filled the air from the walkie-talkie on her belt. "*Grocery Girl this is True Whaler, what's your ETA?*"

She snatched the radio from her waist. "I'm here, True Whaler. Just parked."

"Hurry it up. Want my family here for the prayer."

"On my way."

Paul followed a few steps behind her as she rushed ahead. The parka actually made him feel more like he belonged. "So you use walkie-talkies?"

She lifted the radio in her hand. "This is a CB...gets 40 channels. It's the best way to get ahold of me."

She doesn't even have a phone! All he could do is follow alongside Kili as she hurried. All this outsider talk made him feel...well like an outsider. He wondered about his shoes, but a quick glance at others milling around showed him he wasn't the only one wearing sports shoes.

"You ready for something to eat," Kili asked as she marched forward.

Paul did a double step to fall in step. "Yeah, I'm always ready for something to eat and I have to say something smells great."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Deal. Now come on. You haven't lived until you've tried Caribou soup! Or you can try your

first taste of goose soup. Up to you. And you're going to love all the various whale dishes. You won't want to eat dinner tonight."

Anyone who worked for RAM learned to cut a wide path around him. Some who had called him friend all their lives were worried about the effect his son's death was having on him. Now a little more than a year later, thoughts of revenge seemed to consume him.

He scanned the crowd looking for his niece, Nukilik. He finally spotted her working her way through the small crowd gathered for the opening prayer and breathed a little easier. She scolded him constantly for being over protective, but he couldn't help him after the loss of his son, Pana. He had been as full of life as Kili, but in one brief moment RAM Oil snuffed out his flame.

Kili pushed to the front row of those gathered in time for the traditional prayer. Steven and the others raised the whaling flags, and when he looked up, he noticed Nukilik talking with a blond-haired boy wearing a parka. He didn't know this boy, so it meant one thing.
He's the new RAM boy.

After the opening ceremony he moved toward Kili to yank him away from the outsider, but a photographer, asked him to pose with the others in front of the flags. By the time they were done, the kids had disappeared into the crowd. *He would talk to her at home.*

Cal pulled out his tablet and searched for the recording he'd made of his interview with Mr. Stone. After a few clicks on wrong files, he found it.

"Calvin Lowick, this is my assistant Walter Mills. Come in, can I get you a drink."

"No, no thank you. I don't really drink."

A low chuckle that sounded forced. "Perhaps after our little chat you'll be willing to make an exception tonight."

Silence stretched for a moment. Cal remembered his relief at that moment thinking he wasn't in trouble after all.

"What can I do for you, Sir?"

"It's not what you can do for us at this moment, Calvin. It is what we can do for you. You've put in two decades with us and your record is impeccable. We have an unexpected opening that needs someone with your integrity and work ethic."

"What happened," Cal voice sounded surprised. "I mean why is there an opening?"

"The man currently in the Project VP position can't handle the stress. You know how it is in the oil business. We have vocal environmentalists, safety issues, and in this location cultural issues, too."

"If I may ask, what is the location?"

"Point Hope – Alaska. We need someone who know how to work with people and who knows the oil business inside and out. From my standpoint, that's you. You've been a derrick hand, a roustabout, and MWD Field Engineer. I think it's high time you're rewarded for all your years of loyal work. What do you say?"

"I – I -- yes. I say yes! I'd be happy to help, sir."

"Great, we'll need you up there ASAP. Within three weeks at the least."

Silence.

"Is there something wrong?" Stone's voice sounded gruff.

Calvin let out an audible sigh. "No, it's just that my son is in high school and it would be nice if he could finish up the school year."

"I didn't mention that RAM is willing to buy your house."

"Buy our house?"

"We know you're upside down on your mortgage, and we're willing to buy your house for what you own. Consider is part of your signing bonus. We'll provide your housing until you find something. It's the least we can do to get someone of your caliber in that position...so what do you say?"

"Yes! Of course! I'd love to take on the challenge."

"We need you up there in 2-3 weeks. RAM will pack and move you, and we'll pay for storage for whatever you need to store until you find your own place."

As Cal listened to the recording, he could almost hear his father's voice saying, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

I'm such an idiot! I was blinded by my own ambition. That's probably why they chose me. Knew I'd take the job without all the details. Well that was about to change. He was going to get to the bottom of this. Why did Anderson really leave? And why me? Somehow he knew he wasn't going to like the answer, but he couldn't live within himself until he knew the truth.

"So I was thinking more about you starting school," Kili said. "I'm not trying to discourage you or anything, I'm just saying this week marks the end of the quarter, and most of the classes will be taking exams. It won't be normal." She stepped from behind the counter and slipped on her jacket.

"You'll probably be bored to death. A lot of kids tested out early. Like I told you, it's whaling time. They're already out on the water with their family. The kids who are in class will be there to take finals."

She tugged her long hair free from the collar of her jacket.

"So what's your schedule?"

He tugged his schedule from his pocket and handed it to her. She studied it for a minute. "That's what I figured." She refolded the schedule and handed it back to him. "I just don't want you to judge the school by your first day. Or for the rest of this week for that matter."

Start here Paul sat listening to his dad with mixed emotions warring inside him. His dad was being real for the first time in ages, and now Paul was the one keeping the secrets. But if he told his dad about going to the meeting tonight, he might not let him go. It's a risk he decided to take.

Start here "Dad, there's something I've got to tell you." He lifted his hands palms toward his dad in a calm down gesture. "Before you get mad, I want you to hear me out on this."

Paul gave him an overview of the struggle he'd experienced because people looked at him as the RAM Oil kid. When he got to the story about what happened at the diner, he stayed true to the facts. "And I told them I hated RAM, too, because they'd robbed me of my dad...and how work became more important than family."

His dad's eyes grew moist, and Paul looked at the table top as he revealed his plans to go to the environmental activists meeting with Kili's father. He looked up to see a smile play across his dad's lips.

"What?" Paul asked. "What are you thinking?"

NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS....