

# LOST IN THE WILD

LOST IN ALASKA VOL 6

LEIGH MAYBERRY

# “Lost in the Wild”

A Cozy Mystery

Lost in Alaska Series

Volume Six

Leigh Mayberry

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Leigh Mayberry

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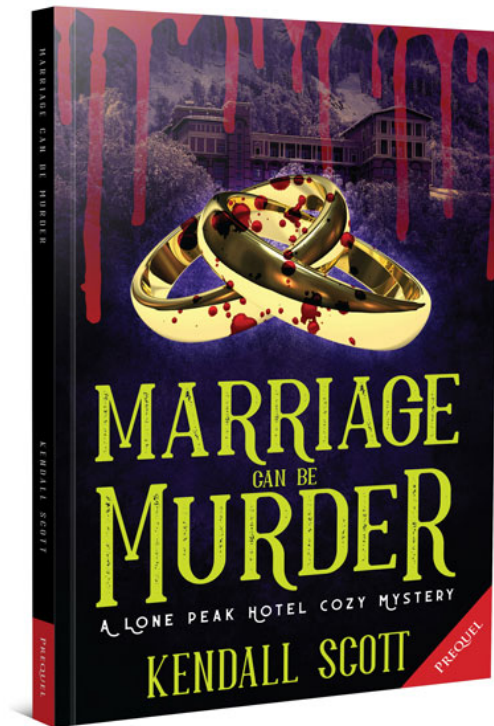
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## Chapter One

Memorial Day in Alaska was a big deal. In Kinguyakkii, a bustling rural community thirty-three miles above the Arctic Circle, it was the kind of celebration time that many villagers appreciated. It was a national holiday, which meant the post office, schools, and government closed. It was a time for many Alaskans to honor not only their fallen heroes from military service but to honor their fallen community members. In all matters culturally significant, they celebrated the anniversary of a person's death for years following their lost friends and family. No one put a label on the holiday or branded it for a single purpose. For people in the City of Northern Lights, it was a reason to get together, and party like it was the end times.

The local grocery and goods store, Alaska Merchandise Store, had pallets of plastic floral arrangements shipped into the village. People bought the plastic graveside flower wreaths to fill the Kinguyakkii Memorial Cemetery. For a brief, beautiful moment on the weekend for the last Monday in May, the disorganized and poorly arranged gravesites for the local people have pretty flowers and wreaths that pepper the wintery ground like the first flowers of spring determined to break through the snow and reach for the light.

The plastic memorial wreaths didn't need sunlight. The overseas suppliers that sold the merchandise to the Alaskan rural grocery chain didn't care what happened to the product. Alaska Merchandise Store management anticipated a spike in projected sales and counted on selling out all their drop-shipped pallets of wire, plastic, and cardboard containers. But like most things shipped to Alaska, the memorial arrangements never left.

If the Arctic winds caught the floral arrangements at the gravesites, the memorial wreaths usually swept out of the cemetery. They eventually made their way to Kinguyakkii Bay, where they floated in open water fissures between the drifting slabs of ice. No one considered their honoring the dead also congested the living. Merchandise sellers in Alaska never worried about environmental concerns or about how they polluted the tundra; they only cared about the bottom line.

Meghan Sheppard started a new community service program that got a lot of attention from the local media. It wasn't popular with a lot of

the residents who frequently came in contact with the Kinguyakkii Police Department. They quickly pointed out that Meghan and her Village Public Safety Officers used their undo authority to make people work as a form of punishment. They often suggested, usually at the moment of contact with the police, that Meghan and her officers harassed and profiled their suspects. Meghan quickly pointed out that knowing people by name upon the point of contact meant the police knew who they were because they committed crimes. If they stopped committing crimes, Meghan pointed out; she'd happily forget their names.

"What about the memorial wreaths?" Dana Wyatt asked as she stared at the rugged white landscape with the tired and broken fence that surrounded the overused graveyard.

She looked from the passenger seat of the cumbersome beat-up midnight blue Chevrolet Suburban. It had more rust and duct tape than pieces and parts. It was the official Kinguyakkii police vehicle. Meghan drove it most of the time, but willingly traded for snowmachines and four-wheelers when her officers needed something to transport suspects.

"They'll stay up for the weekend." Meghan looked through the passenger window, past her visiting friend. "If they survive the winds, sometimes people go back to pick up the leftovers. The rest blow away, and all of them end up in the trash or water, or somewhere on the tundra.

The wind picked up overnight before Dana's flight. After she landed, gusts averaged around 15 mph while the temperature hovered around 34°F.

The ground had an unreal pale gray quality with the springtime artificial colors over the harsh Alaskan dirty reality. Winter clung to the ground, but fresh falling snow was already weeks old. People had homemade grave markers on their deceased family members. Shipping granite and marble headstones to the village was costly. It made the village cemetery—a place older than the established community—more like a burial ground.

"You picked me up from the airport, and this is the first sight I see of your city," Dana said. She turned from the passenger window to face Meghan. "You haven't changed a bit."

Meghan shook her head. She pulled away from the broken property fence. “I didn’t take you by here to show you a cemetery. I wanted you to see a little of how we live around here. Memorial Day is a big deal here. It’s a celebration. You don’t just get a day off. They have a whole festival planned. You’re in for a treat.”

“Great, nothing like getting immersed in the culture,” Dana said.

Dana Wyatt was a long-time friend and part-time work partner of Meghan when she worked in the FBI resident office in Syracuse, New York. They stayed friends throughout Meghan’s tenure with the federal government. They kept in contact since Meghan said ‘goodbye’ to the real world and took the position as police chief for the rural Alaskan community. Dana was the closest thing Meghan had to a sibling. She was a forever friend, in fair weather or stormy nights.

It was on the off chance that Meghan used Dana in an official capacity to help solve the murder of her friend from Kinguyakkii Urgent Care, physician assistant, Jackie Qataliña. While Meghan didn’t agree with the outcome of the case, she reconnected with Dana. It allowed her to strengthen the bond with a current special agent with the FBI while Meghan currently tried to hide the added weight she’d packed on since leaving the bustle of the agency, and the congestion of Syracuse, New York.

Dana was a clear reminder of what Meghan left behind when she moved west and north. At forty-five, Dana chose her career over a husband or children. Never married, engaged twice, she liked the freedom of staying single without the burden of children or a spouse. Meghan didn’t like Dana’s choice when it came to describing her lack of marital commitments. Meghan never saw her daughter, Brittany, as a burden. Then again, Meghan hadn’t physically seen her daughter in almost a year.

“You’ll taste the local cuisine. You’ll mingle with the locals. They’ll sort you out. You’ll get a lot of offers for dating, and you might end up with a few more friends when you fly out on Wednesday.”

“You like it here, don’t you?” Dana asked. There was an allusion to disbelief in her tone.

“What’s not to like?” Meghan asked. She drove down Cemetery Access Road on her way to the house on Bison Street. A one-bedroom, pale blue pillbox house Meghan rented.



“It’s chilly,” Dana said. Meghan didn’t want to point out to her friend that it was the twelfth time she commented about the weather.

“It’s beautiful right now. We still see a lot of ice floe on the bay. A lot of the rivers are clearing.”

## Chapter Two

Unlike New York, where April showers brought May Flowers, springtime in Alaska was fleeting and sparse. Above the Arctic Circle, it sometimes happened in late June. A day before a bright summer day, when temperatures reached the sultry zenith of 69°F before the tundra claimed the heat and pulled it deep into the earth for another year.

“Is that a problem?” Dana asked.

Meghan knew her friend assessed the village in comparisons instead of quality. It was quantity for Dana, who lived in an upscale and progressive city in Central New York. Where Kinguyakkii was a place of sporadic low-level buildings, and no common threads of straight roads, Syracuse was older with straight lines and right angles, plus tall architecture that lasted centuries.

Kinguyakkii had some new development. There was a lot of potential growth as the city expanded, gained civilians. The progress stalled when Alaskalytical Construction shut down due to a case of death and greed between owners and friends. Meghan took a little criticism for causing the lack of future for the city. Mostly, it came from people who ran businesses. They were the same people who wanted her officers to act as private security guards instead of police when patrolling their commercial properties. Meghan got more criticism when she single-handedly closed down the traveling hairdresser who killed a boyfriend because she liked the boat he owned. It was a different world, but Meghan grew to love it. When people she knew came up from the lower-forty-eight, Meghan took offense when they didn't give Kinguyakkii a chance to grow on them. Many of the people who passed through the northern town thought something growing on them was half the problem.

Meghan pulled up to the house. The truck bounced in the divots left in the muck that made up the area where Meghan parked the vehicle. It wasn't a driveway as much as the designated space, within a few meters, where the Suburban sat. Lawn care or driveways weren't the kind of thing people worried about. Meghan didn't care as long as the property owner didn't mind the deep mud holes from heavy tires that sank deeper into the mud as the weather got warmer.

Dana packed light and carried her duffle bag from the back seat. Meghan wandered upstairs and opened the door.

“It’s not locked?” Dana’s razor-thin black eyebrows rose high on her smooth forehead.

Meghan shrugged. “I lock the door at night. Everyone knows where I live. Everyone knows who I am and what I do for a living. I lock the door when I’m home, which works.”

“Okay, that’s not weird at all.” Dana moved inside. She dropped her luggage without any concern.

Meghan shed her fair-weather jacket. It was a City Police black all-weather coat with a liner. The winter parka took a trip to Anchorage for the dry cleaners. It went out at the first signs of better days. It needed a full deep cleansing.

“So, I’m sorry they overbooked the hotel. I didn’t anticipate the holiday crowds.” Meghan moved through the living room after kicking off her boots. She wore thermal socks. “But, I admit, the couch is very comfortable.”

“I wasn’t planning to get a hotel room. I’ll take the couch,” Dana said. “I wanted to see you, spend time with my friend. I can’t do that if I’m at a hotel the whole time I’m here. The couch is fine for me.”

“Dana, dork, you’re almost a foot taller than me. You’re sleeping in the bedroom.” Meghan never let height get in her way. Sometimes, people looked down on her instead of looking at her. She knew enough psychology to use it against them.

Dana took a shower. Meghan fixed them some dinner. When her friend slipped from the small bathroom wearing t-shirt and sweatpants, Meghan felt like they were younger, spirited cadets ready to take on every bad guy on the planet.

Meghan saw Dana hadn’t lost her shape over the last twenty-three years. The last time Meghan saw her friend other than conversations through social media video calls, Dana took Meghan to the airport for her job in Alaska.

“You look great,” she said.

They sat at the small wobbly table off the corner of the kitchen, away from the counters and stove. The pseudo dining room opened into the living room, and the front of the house.

“I’ve been on a new diet,” Dana said. She eyed the meal. A simple rice and broccoli mix with frozen pea and carrots. It was a staple meal for Meghan.

Meghan sipped at her water. Dana had bottled water in front of her plate. Meghan drank out of the glass.

“Are you trying to say something about me being a foreigner?” Dana uncapped the water and took a sip.

“We’re coming out of break-out right now. That means the water treatment plant in town is working overtime, trying to eliminate all the critters that get into the town water supply.” Meghan tapped her glass with the fork. “You might end up with what the locals affectionately call Kinguyakkii crud.”

“Sounds divine,” Dana said, making a face. “I want to wait and see what I catch from my flights before I add some parasite infection from the water.”

Meghan nodded and pointed the tines at the bottled water. “There are a few cases around. As long as you didn’t drink any shower water, you’ll be okay.”

Meghan offered to take her friend to dinner at the Midnight Sun Café. It was Friday night, and after the whole day hopping commercial jets, Dana wanted to unwind, catch up and relax.

They sat in the quiet at the small round table. Outside darkness fell across town. The occasional rev of a snowmobile or four-wheeler made Dana flinch. The ATVs raced by the house on Bison Street.

“That takes some getting used to, I bet.”

Meghan shrugged. She stopped noticing the random passersby.

Dana ate most of what she had on her plate. She helped Meghan clear the table and clean the dishes. They went to the living room and sat on the couch together. Meghan read a few texts from her officers. She replied to one and put down the phone.

Dana drew up her knees pressed in the corner of the sofa and watched Meghan. Dana had a thin pear-shaped face, azure eyes and small mouth with thin lips. She wore her auburn hair shoulder-length, the governing style at the bureau. It lay limp and damp on her shoulders.

“You really like it here?” she asked. It came out a whisper as Alaska listened through the stilts that held the house a half-meter from the tundra base.

“It took some getting used to,” Meghan admitted. “It wasn’t like moving across the country. I had a little culture shock in the beginning. But there is a frontier quality that grows on you.”

“That’s what worries me,” Dana said.

“You can give it a few days. Tonight starts a three-day celebration. We’ll get people from the outlining villages coming into town. If they get through,” Meghan said. “I got a text from Oliver. They fished some people out of the lagoon. Their boat got shredded on the ice floe.”

“Is everyone okay?”

“Sure. They’re on their way to the clinic. The new doctor sometimes makes house calls. He’s been good about emergency help.”

“So, no ER? No ambulance,” Dana said.

Meghan pursed her lips and shook her head.

“It seems third-world around here.”

“We make do with what we got. It’s different, but it works. People come here sometimes and feel the call of the tundra. They settle here. Or they stay in Alaska if not the city.”

“And you felt the call, did you?”

“I don’t know. I know I finished my tour with the bureau. I didn’t want to go into law enforcement where I’d get overlooked because I have a vagina, and I’m a little older than they want to see as a trophy officer.”

“You look great,” Dana said. “I thought maybe you’d fall apart up here.”

“I feel like I weigh a ton. I try to exercise. We don’t have a local gym around here. Running outside isn’t exactly a balanced environment. Summer is good, but I don’t have time to stop my day to just go work out.”

Dana nodded. She assessed the small house. “This feels like a cabin in the woods kind of place.”

“I got a good deal on rent. The city subsidizes the place. I’m out of the way and still close enough to everything. You’re never too far away from anyone around here. It’s a lot better than the community housing at Mountain Manor near the grocery store. When I’m off duty, people tend to leave me alone.” Meghan read another text after her phone buzzed on the coffee table. She put it down again.”

“You’re never off duty,” Dana said.

“Neither are you. It comes with the training. I see you checking everything. Tomorrow when we go to the events at the school auditorium, you’ll scan the crowds.”

“It’s true.” She smiled. “What about that vagina of yours?” Dana asked. “Are you getting any use out of that?”

Meghan laughed and smacked Dana’s arm draped over the back of the sofa. They talked for the rest of the night. When Dana retired to the bedroom, Meghan curled up on the couch. She pulled the heavy blanket over her shoulders and thought about what kind of life she missed. Dana was what Meghan used to be when she had lived as a federal agent.

They shared a career. They went through the academy together. Meghan got Dana through the struggles of psychology tests and the bookwork of the business. Meghan scored higher in her combat and shooting skills. She scored higher in the aptitude skills. Meghan never compared herself to Dana in aspects of work. Both of them understood, without Meghan’s constant attention, Dana didn’t have the proficiency to graduate the academy on her own. It was Meghan that helped her friend secure the badge and ID.

Once they took assignments in Upstate New York—Meghan in Syracuse, Dana in Ithaca—they spent time together on various assignments. Though, Meghan moved up in the chain of command, while Dana stagnated as a people watcher and paper pusher.

Then it all changed when the dynamic changes happened inside the bureau, and Meghan almost lost her life to a suspect. It wasn’t something she thought about. When it came to the weeks of recovery, physical therapy, what kept Meghan going wasn’t the job. It was a dedication to her daughter.



Now, somehow, Meghan lived alone, divorced, and Dana's career took off. She took promotions and transfers, and Meghan got to talk to her daughter through social media instead of spending substantial time together between mother and daughter in the same house.

There were times when Meghan felt like she gave up life, that she ran away. Seeing Dana again, catching up on bureau gossip, and understanding the life behind the prestigious FBI moniker, Meghan felt the sting of regret before the inevitable sleep took over.

## Chapter Three

When the North Slope School District planned and constructed the mammoth high school gymnasium for Kinguyakkii—home of the Wolverines—they understood the lucrative investment opportunity that came from having a prominent gathering place for the residents of the city, and the surrounding villages. It was a hub of the social congregation. Not only for the endless indoor sporting events, booking the venue was nearly impossible and extremely expensive. Craft shows, traveling delegates, and social occasions, meant every weekend something happened at the sporting arena at the Kinguyakkii High School known as George Hall. The George family earned their name over the door because they devoted their time, energy, and, most of all, money to the preservation of Native Alaskan Rights.

George Hall was the prime weekend spot in the City of Northern Lights. Community members used the venue beyond the basketball games for ongoing fundraisers, bingo, and the special holiday extravaganza for the Memorial Day Celebration. For people of the north, May was the time when rivers thawed, the bay waters opened, and the caribou herds got closer to town, spreading north across the tundra. Subsistent hunting and fishing meant the sooner spring arrived in the Arctic Circle, the fuller their freezers for the coming winter months. Everything in the north for people who lived off the land, it came down to seasonal migration and clear waterways.

“You’re going to see what it means to live in Alaska,” Meghan said.

They arrived at George Hall Sports Arena shortly after seven that Saturday evening. Meghan did the customary and obligated tour of Kinguyakkii for Dana. They spent time at the police department, and Meghan did her best to avoid Duane Warren. The mayor, always looking for more about Meghan, knew Dana came to visit because Meghan requisitioned the time off. He wanted to meet someone from Meghan’s past directly. So far, Meghan managed to steer clear of the buttery man with the smooth tongue and overreaching handshake.

Duane once had complete access to the police department and all its business. Once Meghan took over, she moved the politics out of law enforcement. Duane didn’t resent Meghan for treating him like an ordinary citizen. Still, she knew he missed the idea that he belonged to the law enforcement side of the business, instead of someone Meghan answered to

when it came to doing her job incorrectly. Meghan knew to do her job right because it kept Duane away.

That Saturday night, KING-AM Radio DJs Dead-Air Dave and White-Noise Wayne took the stage to blare top 40 hits and country favorites for the swelling and dancing crowds. Meghan did her best to mingle, but work took precedence over trying to entertain her friend. Dana didn't seem taxed by the adventure after flying twelve hours across the planet.

"Who are you looking for?" Dana asked.

Meghan smiled. She relaxed a little. "Sorry, occupational hazard."

Meghan didn't have to explain it to her friend. Dana lived life. Law enforcement officers checked exits, made eye contact with more people. They watched body language and demeanor. Dana and Meghan both checked hands and waists of people enjoying themselves at the event. Carrying a firearm was prohibited on school property. Even with the gun laws in Alaska, allowing people to open-carry, and living in an area where polar bears sometimes roamed, having a gun in the bush meant life or death. Meghan had other concerns besides looking for weapons.

"I've got a problem with bootleggers," she said. "A town gathering like this is a prime location for people to smuggle booze. I'm always watching—what?" Meghan saw the bewildered look on Dana's face.

"I'm sorry," Dana said with a laugh. "I thought you said something about bootleggers or bootlickers." She waved her arms. "It's really loud in here."

The music drowned most of the conversations around them. No one seemed to mind the volume.

"I was serious about the bootleggers. That's a real thing. What in the world is a bootlicker?" Meghan asked.

Meghan and Dana walked around the main area where most people danced, and more stood on the sidelines watching. Meghan ignored most of the eyes on her. It was territorial and expected. In or out of uniform, Meghan Sheppard, Kinguyakkii Police Chief, was one person no one wanted to have on their heels. Her reputation and experience kept most troublemakers out of her line of sight.

"The city council keeps the town dry," Meghan explained. "I appreciate that because it makes my job a lot easier. They don't want

alcohol fueling more problems. If we contact someone intoxicated, they already broke the law.”

“What do you do if someone drinks and drives?”

Meghan shook her head. “They go to jail, just like everywhere else. I call the troopers. They send someone out here to transport the prisoner back to Anchorage.”

“What do you do with a prisoner until they state troopers arrive?”

“It depends on the severity of the crime. Someone drinking and driving isn’t going anywhere if we take away the vehicle. We know who he is,” Meghan said. “It’s not like we won’t find him again.”

“What if you get more than a few people causing problems, or you have to make multiple arrests?”

“We do the best we can. I’m down an officer and looking to hire another person. The problem we have is no money and no real place to secure prisoners. We take their state IDs, passports if they have them. We can wait for troopers to show up and collect them when we need to make arrests. We could let them go and pick them up again later.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Dana said.

Meghan understood that in real-world situations, contacting suspects meant to keep them until everything got resolved. Dana saw it as help around the corner that happened all the time, and everything was black and white with case procedures. It wasn’t like that in Alaska, not where Meghan worked. She did her job and wasn’t interested in getting a lesson of proper police procedures from a woman who had the entire federal government riding on her shoulders.

## Chapter Four

The evening events had most of the preliminary Alaska Games. Contestants from around the North Slope, as far as Barrow and Point Hope, to the south of Nome and Elephant Point, the young people keeping with traditional interests, competed for big money and scholarships.

The Native Youth Olympics meant any athlete had an opportunity to shine in traditional games, even if they weren't hockey or basketball players. It was the reason the Memorial Day Celebration had one of the biggest turnouts for people of the north.

Meghan and Dana watched children to elders showing off their skills in arm pulls, wrist carries, Eskimo stick pull, Alaskan high kick, one-foot high kick, and scissor broad jumping. The games had senior and junior divisions.

When it came to the seal hop, Dana saw what it meant to have the endurance to compete between the ages. The seal-like hopping positioned people on their hands and toes. They had to maintain a push-up posture and not allow any other part of their bodies to touch the floor. Boys and girls, men and women, competed between classes where they had to travel a designated distance across the floor, pause, turn 180° and return to the start position.

It wasn't about timing the contestant, though that was one of the significant factors. Athletes lost time or failed to maintain the mobile plank position. Once they completed the course, they had to maintain the position until judges measured the distance.

"I don't know if Navy Seals could do that," Dana said.

"A lot of these kids are in top form. It surprises a lot of people when they see what clean living does for the community."

The Native Youth Olympics went for the whole two days in and around the sports arena, with Sunday having outdoor presentations, including the blanket toss and kiosk vendors selling Alaska art and food.

"Are you enjoying yourself," Calvin Everett asked. He came up behind Dana and Meghan. The local reporter for the *Northern Lights Sounder* spent a lot of time at social events.

"This is Calvin Everett," Meghan said.

He shook hands with Dana. “You’re Dana Wyatt, FBI field office out of Syracuse, New York,” he said.

Meghan frowned because it wasn’t common knowledge. It wasn’t something she talked to Calvin about directly.

“You’re someone who pays attention,” Dana said. Meghan saw their handshake lingered, and Meghan suspected Dana increased the pressure in the grip. “You think that’s impressive, isn’t it?”

“Well, I do have my moments. But I promise I wasn’t trying to impress you.” He smiled at Meghan. It was a knowing smile. Calvin did his homework. His grounding meant Meghan turned into a cliché in his mind. It frustrated her because at no other point in her life did she think her life and friends were so predictable.

“So, you know me,” Dana said.

Meghan waited because it mattered how Calvin got his information. She knew no one in her department gave away details. She trusted her lieutenant and sergeant with her life and their discretion.

“I’ve wanted to do an exposé on Meghan since she got here,” Calvin said. “I did all my background work. I’m not spying on her, and I’m not trying to sound gauche, or crass, but I saw your photograph more than a few times in the articles I read about Meghan.” He smiled. “You’re hard to forget.”

“Oh, my, Calvin,” Dana said. Meghan saw her friend flush. “You’re smooth. I see you don’t wear a wedding ring. Are you single?”

“Still single, yes,” he said.

“Well, tell me, why hasn’t Meg given in to the interview?”

“That’s a good question. I’ve stopped asking. Maybe you can give me a few sound bites, and I can add it to my ongoing article.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Meghan said. It fell short between them. Dana managed to walk away from Meghan with Calvin at her side. They went to the buffet tables and continued to talk. She didn’t want to know if it had to do with her or not.

Meghan took in the rest of the scene. It was a perfect family-friend environment. She didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. She did her best to make eye contact with people she recognized. Mostly young men who



Meghan had professional contact with on various occasions, they saw her looking and moved out of view. Meghan knew it helped her cause when they suspected she paid attention.

“Your friend seems to have an interest in the reporter.”

Meghan shook her head and looked up at Neil Holt, a local bush pilot, and wilderness guide. He made it to all the social events when he wasn't on guide duties. It helped grow his business when he networked. People knew Neil by face and name. He was the kind of guy that was hard to forget. Tall, muscular, and a little over fifty, Neil spent his life in rural Alaska. Having a pilot's license put him at the top of most lists when it came to someone to know professionally and personally. Meghan relied on Neil because he was unafraid to lend a hand at any hour.

“She's giving Calvin an interview,” Meghan said. “Dana just doesn't know it yet.”

“Calvin's a good guy.”

“I know, but he's a reporter with a job to do. You think I'm always on duty, Calvin never stops writing.” Meghan included Neil with her statement. “You never seem to have extra time. You're handing out brochures.”

“Anyone who comes to something like this that owns a business needs to take advantage of free advertising.”

“Why aren't you wearing some t-shirt with your brand on it.”

“I don't like wearing t-shirts.”

Meghan knew a man like Neil with a triangular shape, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist was the kind of man the t-shirt manufacturers want to have on their payroll. Meghan saw the definition through the button-down flannel shirts Neil wore most of the time. Sometimes she caught sight of the pectorals and the clavicle, both snippets of a healthy male that reminded Meghan she was single. It didn't help Dana trying to kick-start Meghan's sex drive talking about her dating habits back in New York, or watching her friend devour the reporter with her eyes.

“You want me to make time for a flight?” Neil asked. The man had a business and never stopped working. It was a trend that Meghan noticed more and more around her.

“I think you can ask Dana. You know how I feel about flying.”

Neil laughed. They had a few missions together where Meghan had to fly, and it was never easy, and never a pretty sight watching her clinging uselessly to the seat grips with her eyes squeezed shut. Meghan liked having her feet on the ground where things made more sense.

Meghan watched a boy between twelve and fifteen, weaving through the crowds. He caught her attention as he looked for someone. He was the right age to participate with the other youths. Yet he wore a long-sleeve blue jersey and denim pants. The rest of the competitors wore uniforms of various colors. A lot of the kids wore shorts or sweatpants because it made competition easier in the proper attire.

When the boy moved by her and Neil, she saw him look at her before moving off. He was a Native Alaskan with a round face and choppy black hair, the length obscuring his eyes if he moved his head right. He darted through the throng and disappeared. Meghan filed it between a mother’s intuition and a cop’s instincts. No one pursued the youth. The boy didn’t look worried enough to chase after.

“And who is this beautiful tall man.” Dana’s flirtation bordered sexual harassment. Meghan always liked her friend’s forthright attitude when it came to speaking to men. Dana wasn’t afraid to tell a man that was staring at her breasts wasn’t going to make the conversation any different.

“Dana Wyatt, this is Neil Holt. He’s a guide and pilot.”

They shook hands. Meghan scanned the crowd again for the boy in the blue jersey and black sneakers.

“I was telling Meghan that I can show you the sights if you want to book a sight-seeing tour.”

“It sounds yummy, but I know Meghan isn’t one to get her feet more than a foot or two off the ground. I think it’s a little weird. She lives in a city that you have to fly out to go anywhere.”

“She’s coming around,” Neil said. “We’ve had a few flights together. I got her to sit in the cockpit once or twice.”

“Really?” Dana said, drawing out the word as her eyebrow arched. She looked at Meghan, and it was easy to read the innuendo without her having to say it.

“How long are you in town?” Neil asked.

“I fly out first thing Wednesday morning.”

“Well, I hope you come back again.” He nodded to Dana and Meghan. Neil slipped away, looking for somewhere to hide from Dana’s glaring that suggested she wanted to undo Neil’s job or buttons on his shirt.

“You’re awful,” Meghan said.

“And why are you not getting more use out of that V-jay-jay with all these hot guys around here? Honestly, would it hurt you to have a personal relationship again?”

“I’m doing just fine,” Meghan said.

“I saw your nightstand drawer. You satisfy your urges, but you’re not living in the world, Meg.”

Meghan blushed a little. She knew Dana liked the shock value of the statement. She wasn’t embarrassed by Dana, pointing out the obvious. “You stay out of my drawers,” she said.

“By the way, you need to replace your batteries.”

“I hope you washed anything you used,” Meghan said.

Dana shrugged playfully.

They found a place in line to try some of the Native Alaska traditional foods. Meghan had her limits. She had a strong stomach, but events like the Memorial Celebration pitted rival cooks together, and sometimes desperate measures meant for desperate times because the deeply planted clay jars of kimchi came out for everyone to try a little.

It wasn’t exactly sanitary or wise to test a year-old canned fish buried in the ground. Meghan knew a lot of the elders swore by the storage method. Meghan liked her canned foods from a factory that didn’t include stewing it and dropping it in a hole. Dana had a broader palette and was on vacation. Meghan warned her friend to taste but not overdo it.

They found a place across the picnic table from Neil and a young woman who had some interest in flying and kept asking Neil about acquiring a pilot license.

It was a few minutes after nine when the boy Meghan recognized milling through the crowds earlier came up to her from behind. He tucked

his hands in front of his stomach and addressed Meghan in an official capacity.

“Chief Sheppard,” he said. “I can’t find my sister.”

## Chapter Five

Cecil Tuktu was thirteen years old. The impression Meghan got from the adolescent was his intuitiveness. He managed to articulate his concerns and got Meghan's attention. Dana got involved immediately. A missing child was something that took priority over everything and halted the festivities.

They used the sound system to broadcast to everyone in the sports arena. They had a missing child. Her name was Christine Tuktu, and she was ten years old. It went sideways for Meghan when Cecil and Christine's mother found her way to the front of the crowd, because the look on her face told Meghan everything she needed to know; the girl was missing.

"When did you see her last?" Meghan asked.

Joane Tuktu was a round woman with mild concern and long raven hair. "I saw her this morning." It came out in the same way someone put in an order for fast food at the drive thru.

Her partner, a man named Earl Melton, shook his head. "I didn't see her this morning. We left the house around noon."

"How about you and I go back to the house," Meghan said "We'll take a look. We've got an Amber Alert broadcast through the radio."

"I can take a look around the arena for you," Dana said.

Meghan gave her friend a look with a nod. She wanted Dana to stay out of it, but a missing child took precedence over jurisdiction. As she walked out of the gymnasium with Joane, Meghan called Oliver.

"Hey, take a look around, Shore Avenue. See if any of the kids are playing around the ice floe," Meghan said.

"I went by earlier before dark. I saw a couple of kids on four-wheelers. I didn't see anyone on the ice."

"That's good." Meghan wanted to talk more about the missing girl.

Having her mother riding in the passenger seat of the Suburban filtered her conversation with the sergeant. "We're heading to Joane Tuktu's house now. When you finish checking Shore Avenue, head back to the school. Ask around; see if anyone saw her leave the gym. I don't want anyone to panic." She glanced at Joane, who started fishing a cigarette from

her purse. Meghan caught the woman looking at her before she lit the cigarette. Meghan shook her head before the lighter touched the tip.

“I’ll meet you at the gym when we get back from the house.” Meghan ended the call as the truck bounced over the potholes at the intersection of Friend’s Way and Ptarmigan Way. After a few minutes of travel, Meghan noticed the woman didn’t appear worried. The fact her daughter wasn’t around during the event suggested Joane experienced something similar.

“Does she take off sometimes?” Meghan asked. She wanted it causal. Keeping a level tone showed courtesy without appearing anxious, meant to show interest without suspicion.

Joane waited to get out of the truck to light the cigarette. Parking was easy at Mountain Manor. The thirty units, three-story apartment complex without an elevator, and was only ADA approved for base-level living. The rest of the tenants had to take one of the two stairwells inside the overcrowded building. She managed a few deep puffs before tossing the smoldering cigarette in a snow berm.

Every time Meghan walked into the place, it reminded her of Nancy McCormick. The former tenant of the apartment complex and late sister of Cheryl and Brian Snyder, owners of the Midnight Sun Café, Nancy died at the hands of a real estate property manager. Meghan almost lost her life to the same man. Had it not been for an allergy to peanuts, Meghan’s career as police chief for the city of three thousand people almost abruptly ended.

Meghan saw the various characters peeking from the doors as Meghan followed Joane to the third floor. The few people who didn’t attend the big event at the sports arena stayed home to monitor anyone returning early. Meghan closed her eyes for a few seconds as Joane turned down the hallway. If the woman turned left, Meghan didn’t have to look at Nancy McCormick’s apartment. Joane turned right, and Meghan sighed, following the woman down the corridor. Outside some of the doors, cluttering the hallways, snow boots, cleats, and a pair of snowshoes made natural tripping hazards.

“No one’s supposed to leave anything in the hall,” Joane said. “Rowland comes by about once a week telling everyone he’s going to issue tickets.”



“Okay,” Meghan said.

She stepped over a pair of wet snow pants. Rowland Searson, Fire Chief for the Kinguyakkii volunteer fire department, had no legal authority to issue a citation. Perhaps the tenants of Mountain Manor were unaware of that. Either way, by the look at the cluttered hallway, it didn’t matter to anyone.

Meghan followed Joane through the door across the hall from late Nancy McCormick’s apartment. The design of the building didn’t put doors directly across from each other. That meant someone living across the hall where someone got murdered, didn’t have to look at the door every day.

The apartment had a new occupant. Someone hung a nontraditional décor arrangement on the door. It gave the place a lived-in look instead of a memorial shrine.

The first thing Meghan noticed when she followed Joane through the threshold of the apartment was the thick cigarette smoke clinging to every available surface. The building was nonsmoking, but people like Joane Tuktu thought the rules applied to everyone else except her.

“Two bedrooms?” Meghan asked.

“Yeah, I got one with Earl. Christine and Cecil share the other bedroom.” Joane went as far as the edge of the linoleum where the threadbare carpet took over the rest of the apartment. “Christine, you here?” she called.

“Is it okay if I look in their bedroom, Joane?”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. I think Cecil is causing trouble.”

“Is that something he does?” Meghan asked. She didn’t remove the boots because Joane didn’t seem to care either way.

The woman leaned against the counter at the edge of the kitchenette. Meghan ignored her lighting another cigarette. The ‘no smoking’ rule applied to everyone else, and only in the hallways.

Meghan scanned the bathroom as she walked by the open door. Dirty clothes on the floor, a stand-up shower, and the raised toilet seat meant a crowded place.

“You live here with your husband and the two kids?”

Joane scuffed in a way that suggested Meghan said something offensive. "I live here with Earl and the kids. I ain't married anymore."

Meghan turned on the bedroom light to the kids' bedroom. The boy and girl shared the space. It was a tight fit, no boundaries or privacy, but two parts to the same room. At thirteen and ten, children needed some independence and a little retreat.

"Cecil likes to read?" Meghan asked.

"Yeah, that kid always has a book."

The contrasting difference from the rest of the house and the bedroom of two adolescents took Meghan by surprise. She saw neatness and a clean, orderly bedroom. Cecil's side of the room had the closet without a door. He had a bookshelf over the bed. Meghan saw young adult fantasy and science fiction novels populated the ledge. More books stacked on the floor beside the small nightstand. His bed had a generic male-themed navy colored bedspread.

Christine's side of the bedroom had a floral little girl flavoring with stuffed animals, a pink comforter, and a bed skirt. Christine had a few posters on the wall. Movie posters, characters, and a popular boys' band filled the limited wall space. The children shared the other closet. It had a clear separation between the boy's and girl's clothing. The board games that occupied the closet shelf had crisp cardboard packaging. Meghan stared at the contents inside the closet for a while. She noticed the games looked well-used. Some of the cardboard had dog eared edges, but the corners had clear tape to keep from tearing or spreading. The games she noticed were in alphabetical order.

The children shared a dresser. Cecil had the top three drawers. Christine had the bottom three drawers. Meghan pulled open one drawer of Christine's side. The clothes, underwear, t-shirts, had neat folds. The socks had twin tucks and stacked on one side. She pushed closed the drawer, turned off the light, and returned to the smoke-filled living area.

The family spent a lot of time in the living room. It had a single recliner and a large couch. The coffee table had dirty dishes and an ashtray.

"Is that Christine?" Meghan asked. The school picture showed a pretty girl with dimples and missing a front tooth. Her silky black hair went to her shoulders, encapsulating her round face.

“Yeah.” Joane huffed on the cigarette. “Look, I know this isn’t a big deal. She’s hanging out with her friends. Cecil shouldn’t have talked to you.”

Meghan tamped down the anger because she didn’t want to wipe the floor with Joane’s face with a potentially missing child. Instead, she kept her temper down. She needed to get out of the apartment, fearing to burst into flames. The rising heat in the place meant the third floor got everything people used on the two levels below the apartment.

“If I needed a picture, is that current?” she asked.

Meghan went to the door. She opened it to get a healthy helping of fresh air since Joane used up the air inside the apartment, coating it with cigarette smoke.

“Yeah, but look, I’m telling you, Christine’s with her friends.”

“Call her,” Meghan said.

“I can’t call her, what do you think, I’m made of money. Christine don’t have a cell phone.”

“What about Cecil? Does he have a cell phone?”

“No.”

“Do you need a ride back to the school?” Meghan asked.

“No, I’ll get Earl to pick me up.”

“Look, Joane, I get you think Cecil made a big deal out of nothing. I agree with you. It’s probably nothing. Check with Christine’s friends. Get back to me when you find her. I am not concerned about this, just like you. She’ll turn up, I know it.”

Meghan closed the door. She shook her head and bit her tongue. A missing child, a concerned brother, Meghan didn’t know Joane Tuktu or Earl, but the moment she got back to the department, Meghan knew she’d scan for criminal history. No visible signs of abuse in the apartment. The kids’ bedroom looked well maintained. The kids took priority in the home.

Meghan didn’t judge the woman. A small apartment with a waiting list that stretched months, sometimes years, before space opened. Nancy McCormick died in her apartment. The moment the police cleared it and her sister, Cheryl Snyder, removed Nancy’s property, the place had a new tenant. Rental companies weren’t obligated to disclose prior tenant issues.

In a situation where housing was expensive and scarce, no one had a choice about where they finally got a place to live.

Back in the Suburban, as Meghan pulled away from the apartment complex, Oliver called her smartphone.

“What’s up?”

“Um, I think you need to get back here,” he said.

“Did you find Christine?”

“No, and I don’t think we’re in charge anymore.”

## Chapter Six

The FBI had a specific plan of action regarding the recovery of missing children. They worked closely with state and local agencies, relying on resources designed to locate children. It came down to a checklist of possibilities and focused on whether or not the child was a victim of abduction, endangered, or a susceptible subject for human trafficking.

It was the kind of thing that usually happened after local law enforcement agencies made their preliminary conclusions. What Meghan found the moment she returned to the arena was a mouthy woman who had people vacating the building. At the same time, the radio station DJs quietly dismantled their stereo equipment from the gymnasium sound system.

“I think the FBI is on their way,” Oliver said. He met Meghan outside while she watched several attendees fleeing the scene.

“What’s going on?”

“Your friend, Dana, she started talking to everyone. She used the PA system to call out Christine. When she started telling everyone, they had to stay in one place. Everyone started to leave.”

Meghan and Oliver slipped through the doors where the rest of the people tried to get away. She saw Dana giving Duane Warren a hard point with a finger to his chest. She saw Ulva, Duane’s wife standing quietly to the side, watching the interaction. Meghan knew out of the two critical figures in town, between Duane and Ulva, she’d take her chances with Duane. Ulva had a lot of leverage with the council, the school board, and family members in the Alaska senate.

Meghan saw Silvia Graves watching the confrontation between the mayor and the FBI agent. Silvia saw Meghan looking at her. The woman had the smartphone to her ear. Presumably, she talked to her husband, Lester, the lieutenant for the police department, and Meghan’s second in charge. He had overnight duties, and Meghan wanted him to come in later because she and Oliver intended to monitor the school until after the place closed for the night. Dana cleared out everyone a few hours early.

On the other side of the hall, near the banquet tables, Meghan saw Eric and Linda Kennedy sitting patiently at the picnic tables. Linda lifted a plastic cup in Meghan’s direction. Eric, the coroner for the city and contact

point for the medical examiner's office in Anchorage, gave Meghan a slow headshake that mortified her. Meghan knew when Eric saw something that caused problems in town. He made sure to point it out to her. Eric and Linda were good people and wanted only the best for the community. If something went amiss, both were reliable resources for recovery and prevention. At the moment, Meghan stepped into the vacated gymnasium. She knew Dana overstepped her margins by a few thousand miles.

"What are you doing?" Meghan asked.

"Chief Sheppard," Duane snapped. "This FBI agent thinks she can come here and mandate how things happen in Kinguyakkii."

Dana looked from Duane to Meghan. She saw her friend had that look of authority that suggested no one had control except her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"We've got a missing girl, that's what."

"We know that." Meghan kept her voice low, between her and the immediate company. Unfortunately, with the music off and the open space, the sound projected everywhere. "But what are you doing?"

"I'm doing my job."

"You're on vacation."

"There's a missing girl, Meg. What are you doing about it?"

"I'm doing my job. But I come back here, and I find you trying to do my job for me. You need to relax."

"Don't tell me to relax," Dana said. "You know what I see every day when it comes to kids. Every minute is crucial. What are you doing about this?"

Meghan saw Duane and Ulva watching her. They expected the police chief to have a handle on the situation. Meghan felt the grip wasn't tight, and the handle loosened as the hours stretched.

"I'm doing my job, Dana. I don't answer to you." She turned from her friend and addressed Oliver. "Did you talk to any of the kids?"

"I talked to a few who know Christine. I need to go to her best friend's house. The girl's name is Mirella Edmond."



“Okay, talk to her and her parents.” Oliver turned to leave; Meghan caught up and matched his steps on the way out of the building. “Should I be worried about Christine Tuktu?” she asked.

Oliver shrugged. It was something he often did when addressed directly. It wasn’t that Oliver feared confrontation. He was almost twice the size of Meghan and two sizes wider than most men. Oliver wasn’t overweight. He had a lot of muscles and layers. Meghan thought of him as an enforcer, but Oliver preferred dealing with things diplomatically. Meghan thought most polar bears handled their business with diplomacy; they used their claws to cut things down to bite-sized pieces.

“Cecil’s dad died about five years ago. He drowned during a seal hunt.”

Meghan nodded. The incident rang a bell. The body was never recovered. It was something she read in incident reports from the former police chief, Herbert Haynes. Meghan spent a lot of time reviewing prior cases from before she took over. Meghan had an extensive list of notes and a whole notebook devoted to the unsolved murder of a girl that happened over a decade ago. She took to reviewing cases involving deaths in and around the community.

“Clifford,” she whispered.

Oliver nodded. “Clifford Tuktu was Cecil and Christine’s dad. He went out seal hunting with his brother, Eugene. I saw Gene here tonight earlier.”

“What about Joane’s boyfriend, Earl? She and the kids live with him.”

“Yeah, Earl Melton,” Oliver said. “I saw him too talking to Gene.”

“Was this before or after Christine went missing?”

“After, about the time you left, I think. When I got here, Dana had half the place cleared out.”

“Okay. Oliver, do your best. Start checking around where the kids hang out. It’s Saturday night, I don’t expect anyone to be where they’re supposed to be, but we can narrow down where Christine went.”

As Oliver went toward the exit, Meghan scanned the leftovers. The stragglers and the gawkers, word got out fast. One person she saw was

Calvin. He sat on the edge of the stage, texting something.

She knew everything that took place before she returned to George Hall likely had a place in the latest edition of the *Northern Lights Sounder*. Dana made a big splash with the locals, and it took less than twenty-four hours. Meghan returned to Dana, standing in front of the mayor and his wife. They watched her while Dana sent a series of texts.

“What’s the news?” she asked. Dana looked up from the smartphone screen when Meghan didn’t answer. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Are you closing down the area? Did you call in the rest of your officers?”

“Dana, you need to relax. You’re taking this way out of proportion.” Meghan hadn’t intended to raise her voice. The last thing she wanted was a splash on Calvin’s social media page that quoted her saying that a missing or abducted child wasn’t a big deal. “I have Oliver checking on Christine’s friends. He’s headed to the places where the kids hang out.”

“Duane, you and Ulva can talk to neighbors. See if you know anyone who knows Christine. You can go home. Thank you for staying.”

“We’re going to have a conversation,” Duane said.

“I’d expect nothing less.”

Meghan saw Dana turn her back on her as she continued sending texts. Meghan left the center of the basketball court and wandered over to Eric and Linda.

“How well do you know the Tuktus?” Meghan asked.

“They seem like okay, people. They don’t shop at my store.”

Eric and Linda were owner-operators of the Ammattauq Native Trader Store. A traditional Native Alaska trading post which allowed rural subsistent families to barter goods from the Kennedys in exchange for Alaska Native artwork, gold nuggets, precious metals, and antique jade jewelry and anything that had value. Eric and Linda usually placed family heirlooms in safekeeping and loaned families supplies, until they got back on their feet. Linda was the local curator for the Native Alaska Heritage Center in Anchorage. She was the person who made sure people got fair

market prices for their valuable artwork. Eric paid the market price on gold for people who found nuggets or harvested gold dust in tundra streams.

“Did you see Eugene Tuktu here tonight?”

“I did,” Linda said. “I saw him talking to Earl Melton.”

“I assume this was before we had a missing child?”

“Yeah.” Linda leaned over the table toward Meghan and whispered. “She’s a little intense.”

“Well, you understand it’s all relative. When Dana hears about a missing child, it’s usually long after local law enforcement dealt with the disappearance. She deals a lot with missing and exploited children in New York.” Meghan didn’t want to downplay the potential for the same problem in Alaska, because it happened. She didn’t want to jump the shark either. “She has good intentions.” Meghan left it at that and returned to where Dana paced.

Meghan caught Calvin smiling at her. She veered toward him. He slipped off the stage and met Meghan halfway.

“Can I count on you to get the word out?”

Calvin held up his smartphone. It showed a social media page.

“I put out a message for any of my subscribers to look for Christine.”

“I don’t expect anything to come of this,” Meghan said. “But if you can get a picture of her from Joane and post it, that would help.”

“I’ll go find her.”

“Thank you, Calvin.”

He motioned to Dana with his chin. “She’s a little intense,” he said.

“Tell me about it.”

Meghan stood close to Dana as the woman paced in her tight blue jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. Meghan heard one side of the conversation. She knew Dana contacted someone from the agency. Her jaw muscles ached from clenching her teeth since Oliver’s phone call.

When Dana ended the call, she glared at Meghan.

“Are you done?” Meghan asked.

“I cannot believe you’re not making a big deal out of this. You got a girl who goes missing right under your nose and look at you. I thought you cared.”

“Dana, do not presume anything about me. I am doing my job. And now, thanks to you, everyone attending knows exactly what is going on. They already think the worst of it.”

“But you think you know what happened, and you’re doing nothing.”

“I went with Joane to the apartment. I saw the kids’ room, and I talked to her mother. I don’t have anything to go on right now. Except for the report from her brother, a thirteen-year-old boy.”

“Who happened to find you and asked you to help find his sister,” Dana said. “You used to be on top of this stuff. What happened to you? Your ass isn’t the only thing that got soft around here.”

Meghan shook her head and held back the insult. “Right now, everyone in this village is looking for Christine Tuktu. You did most of the work before I even got back.”

“You think nothing of this. You think that little girl is walking back through that door.”

“I’m hoping she will, yes.”

“And if she doesn’t and you didn’t respond immediately, what then?”

“What would you have me do?” Meghan asked.

“Close the highway.”

“The town is self-contained. We have about five miles of drivable roadways. That doesn’t include the four miles of Cape Blossom Road.”

“What about the airport?” Dana asked.

“The last commercial flight left here at six this evening. Children aren’t allowed to travel unaccompanied on charter flights.”

“What are you doing?” Dana asked. “You act like you don’t care.”

“Don’t you dare say that to me,” Meghan said. “I am doing my job. Just because I’m not stomping around and making demands like a lunatic doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I made some phone calls. I got authorization from my supervisor. He’s contacting the Anchorage field office.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Time is crucial, Meg, or did you forget about that living out here?”

“No, no way, you don’t come here and start telling me how I do my job. That’s not how it works. It’s been less than a half-hour, Dana. You’re way out of line.”

“And you’re too lazy to do what needs doing. So, I’m going to make sure something gets done properly.”

## Chapter Seven

There were more times than Meghan remembered or cared to think about given the current circumstances when she went out of her way for Dana. The woman had a good head on her shoulders but never rose to the level of quality expected of field agents. She had a beautiful face, a good figure, and the bureau liked using pretty people to sell the job. Dana was a mediocre agent at the best of times. She devoted a lot of time to her career, but in the fine-tuning of a case, the less Dana handled, the better off everyone was with the outcome. It wasn't something Meghan or anyone in the bureau shared with Dana. Her evaluations put her with 'room for improvement' notations. The FBI wasn't a place to fill with warm bodies. Everyone had a job to do. The problem with Dana, she never quite understood that doing her job right meant to allow others a chance to get something done first.

Meghan left George Hall Sports Arena shortly after eleven that night. She finished interviewing the few people who stayed for the show. The school custodians allowed her and Oliver to search room by room the entire school. They checked every available place on the property.

Cecil went home with Earl Melton to join his mother, waiting at the apartment. Anyone with cell phones and social media broadcast the picture of Christine across the entire North Slope. Lester Graves didn't go to the gymnasium when he started work. He rode the snow machine out to the lagoon to scan the boats making their way back upriver. There were very few people heading back to the villages that late at night.

Dana, in her fit, took a ride from Calvin back to Meghan's house. What Dana did once she got there wasn't Meghan's concern. If what the woman said rang true, by daybreak, City of Northern Lights would have federal agents storming the town.

Oliver started brewing coffee. He didn't drink it. He knew Meghan functioned better when she had a few cups to clear her head. Oliver knew after the pissing match between her and Dana, Meghan wasn't going home again until after they located Christine. She appreciated Oliver's anticipation regarding the coffee and the quiet space to cool off.

Meghan dropped heavily in the office chair and switched on the laptop. A few minutes into seeing the positive responses for spreading

around the Amber Alert about Christine Tuktu, Meghan heard Lester come through the front door of the department. She noted the time. From the desk in the private office, Meghan heard everything that went on in the lobby. It had a tremendous acoustical advantage that she appreciated. It gave Meghan a snapshot of complaints and a prelude to visitors. She heard Oliver and Lester mumbling. They knew Meghan had her ear to the door. She listened to the heavy boot treads across the threadbare grimy carpeting inside the situation room of the building. Lester appeared at the doorway.

He wasn't a man who spent a lot of time leading up to the main conversation with a lot of added small talk. He looked grim with the short black hair, brown eyes, mustache, with a smattering of gray that found its way through the black in single strands. Lester sat in the chair opposite Meghan. If he had news, it came out faster than him taking his time.

"Word got out fast," he said.

"I'm curious how much you know about the Tuktus," Meghan asked.

Lester nodded. He got up from the chair and left the office. Meghan followed him because she realized he sensed the freshly brewed coffee. They had ceramic cups. Lester poured Meghan's cup and then poured himself one. Oliver joined them when they sat at the giant conference table.

"I knew Clifford before he died. I used to hunt with him. Eugene works as a dockhand at the shipyard. He lived with Clifford for years before his brother died."

"So, I'm trying to work out the relationship between Joane and Clifford. They got married at some point. They had two kids."

"Well, they went to the magistrate and had paperwork signed. I think it was Clifford more than Joane. It seemed like they didn't get along from the time the ink dried on the marriage certificate."

"I am trying not to panic about Christine. I know there were about a hundred kids at the arena tonight. The Amber Alert went out about twenty minutes after I heard about it. That was thanks to Calvin. He got right on social media and started spreading the word. But I don't see anything that suggests child-endangerment. I know she's young, but kids around here are resilient."

"Well, she'll turn up."

“Joane doesn’t seem too broken up about Christine wandering off,” Meghan said.

“She’s not exactly ‘Mom of the Year,’” Lester said. “They don’t have a lot of money.”

“I checked the logs. We’ve never had a domestic call with the family. She lives in 3F, right across the hall from where Nancy lived.”

Lester sipped at the mug and nodded. “They lived there since Christine came along.”

“What about Earl Melton?” Meghan asked. “Is he Christine’s father?”

Lester waited to answer. His eyebrows did a little talking as they danced on his forehead.

“He works a lot of odd jobs now. He used to work construction when Alaskalytical was around.” Lester let it drop there. It wasn’t Meghan’s fault someone murdered the guy who ran the biggest construction contract company on the North Slope. She solved the crime, not shut down the business. “I think he hauls mail for the post office. There’s a close rumor that Christine is Eugene’s daughter. They got close after Clifford’s death. I don’t know much about that. I don’t know if they ever found out.”

“Again, he’s not in any incident reports. How does he fit into the picture with the ready-made family?”

“Well, he moved in with Joane as far as I understand it. That was about three years ago.”

“So, we’ve got a missing girl. A mother that doesn’t seem too broken up about it, and a town full of people looking out for her,” Meghan said. She rubbed a hand over her face and saw Oliver pressing his lips together. She narrowed her eyes at the sergeant. “You want to talk about the big elephant in the room, don’t you?”

Oliver looked around as if expecting to see the elephant. He took a sip of soda from the 20 oz bottle he carried from the front counter to the situation room. It meant to help break Meghan’s stare.

“I’m not saying anything about your friend,” he whispered.

“Well, I will, if you don’t.”



“She started telling everyone to stop dancing, to stay in one place. She wanted someone to bar the doors. When Duane went to calm her down, I think it was as bad as poking a stick at a wolverine. Everyone took off.”

“I saw a lot of that. I think it’s not over.”

“What do you want us to do?” Lester asked.

“What are we not doing now?” Meghan asked. “I checked the sex offender registry. Two known registered sex offenders are living in Mountain Manor. Both are currently up to date in registration. Neither fit the profile for child endangerment.

“In the morning, one of us needs to get to the terminal as soon as TSA gets there. Let’s make sure they checked the CCTV footage for the whole day. I want to know if anyone allowed Christine to board a plane with a guardian.” She took a deep breath feeling the weariness pulling at her shoulders and lower back. “This is one time when I truly appreciate living here.”

“Why, Chief?” Oliver asked.

“The entire town rallies together for a missing child. We don’t have to wait long before someone calls or brings in the child. It’s rare in the lower forty-eight when a community acts so fast to reach out and help. And right now, everything is on autopilot.”

Someone banged on the front door. After midnight, keeping the door locked at the police department, even with officers on-duty, was an added layer of safety for her crew. Oliver answered the door. Lester and Meghan exchanged glances when they heard Duane’s insistent voice. He barged through, banging the swinging gate as he passed through the archway.

Meghan saw Ulva walking quietly behind her husband. She smiled at Lester.

“What is going on around here?” Duane said. “Your friend, the FBI agent who wanted everyone to sit on the floor until she had a chance to interview everyone—” Duane said.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot that part,” Oliver added.

“She is out of control,” he said.

“Did anyone find Christine?” Meghan asked.

“Not that I know of,” Duane said. “What are you three doing, shouldn’t you be out patrolling?”

“Duane, in my experience, in a situation like this, burning up more gas, driving from one side of the city to the other, using a lot of added labor hours, isn’t in our best interest,” Meghan said. “We’ve had this happen before, and we’re doing what we always do.”

“Well, Agent Wyatt thinks you’re doing it all wrong.”

“She upset a lot of the elders tonight,” Ulva added. “I think it needed better handling.” There was a look from the woman that suggested Meghan had control over the federal agent.

“I agree,” Meghan said. “She’s a little outspoken.”

Duane shook his head. “She told us to stay out of the way. She refused to let us leave. We can do better as a community working together and out searching for Christine than waiting around for her to point fingers at us.”

“I had a conversation with her.”

“Well, we just saw her marching up Third Avenue on her way here, I presume.” Ulva had a small smirk that suggested a walk in the cold on a cloudless night above the Arctic Circle was a way to cool off after what Dana put everyone through.

“Why did you leave?” Duane asked.

Meghan wanted to remind him that what she did in the capacity as police chief had nothing to do with him. Instead, for the sake of Christine, Meghan gave a glimpse of what she did and how she prepared for a missing or endangered child.

“I went with Joane back to the apartment. I wanted to see the place. I wanted to talk to her one on one. Joane wasn’t too upset with Christine taking off from the school. Oliver and I walked the entire property with the custodians. Oliver spent time scanning Shore Avenue to see if any kids were hopping on the ice flows while everyone went to the celebration. Lester went to the lagoon and flagged all the riders leaving Kinguyakkii.”

“Everyone who took off knows we’re looking for Christine,” Lester said.

“We are doing everything we need to do this time of night.”

“What else can you do?” Duane asked.

“Well, I checked the registered sex offender list for Kinguyakkii.”

“Are there a lot?” Ulva asked. It was as if she half-heard the conversation until Meghan mentioned something she felt affected her directly.

Meghan gave the mayor’s wife a straight look that suggested more than she said. “It’s a free website. I don’t want to point fingers. You can look up anyone. But I am confident; the few people on the list, none are involved in anything to do with Christine.” She stood up and gave Duane the best look she had regarding the seriousness of the business. “We’re not shucking off our responsibilities, Duane. This is serious business. Just because you see us sitting here drinking coffee and soda, doesn’t mean we’re not doing something.”

After what they endured, Meghan felt Ulva and Duane needed to hear she did her job. The city paid her to do it.

“Go home, get some sleep. I will let you know as soon as we know, I promise.”

“Thank you, Meg,” Ulva said. Duane didn’t say anything as he left the three of them in the station. Oliver saw them out.

“Should I lock the door?” Oliver asked.

“Dana’s on her way here,” Meghan said.

“I know.” Oliver grinned.

Meghan felt a smile form on her lips. She shook her head. They had to wait for the FBI agent to show up at one in the morning. The day already started sour.

## Chapter Eight

Dana pushed open the door like something came out of the tundra and chased her down. She pushed through the small swinging white gate to face Meghan in the central area of the department. The look on Dana's reddened face made Meghan regret ever inviting the woman up to visit. She walked through the chilly breeze from Meghan's house, a good three-quarters of a mile. Dana dressed for fashion and not warmth. Her tight blue jeans made it look like she wore nothing against the elements as the wind chill dipped low.

"What are you doing?" she snapped. It wasn't the kind of greeting Meghan expected. Sometimes when people had a little time between conversations, they rehearsed, or they changed the tone. Dana failed to rely on the inner voice that told her to relax.

"We're waiting for Christine to resurface." It was a statement that Meghan would later come to regret saying.

"Why aren't you out there looking for that poor little girl?" Dana wore a heavy winter coat, but the gloves on her hands were nylon knit. The kind that looks cute but wasn't functional. She stood in her thin boots, shivering.

Meghan got up and poured Dana a cup of coffee. She slid the mug across the table. Dana walked to the large conference table and picked up the mug. Meghan grabbed the box of facial tissue for Dana. Her red, wind-burnt nose started to run since she got into the warmth again.

"Look, things are a little different here." She lifted her hands, speaking to Dana. "I need for you to chill out—poor choice of words. Christine's mom isn't freaking out. We've covered all the angles. The only one going crazy here is you. I've heard a few reports about how you tried to sequester everyone who attended the event tonight."

"You're doing nothing. You're sitting in here drinking coffee and chatting like it's no big deal," Dana said. She sniffled and blew her nose in the facial tissue.

Lester stood up, moved around her like the volatile woman readied to explode. He and Oliver slipped around the archway, hiding from Dana's view at the front counter. Dana watched them depart like she felt they weren't worthy of her presence.

“I contacted Sergio Wilcox. I talked to Garret, too,” Dana said. “I thought he should know.”

“What are you talking about?” Who is Sergio Wilcox? And why did you call Garret?”

Garret McKee was a career administrator at the Syracuse field office. He was the man Dana answered to directly. Once upon a time, he was Meghan’s supervisor. He was a firm and fair kind of guy who had a level head and was a sight ton better in a critical situation than his subordinate.

“Special Agent Wilcox is the field supervisor out of Anchorage.”

“No, no, no, Dana, you are way out of line, you cannot be serious. We’re handling this—”

“You’re not handling anything, Meghan. You’re here in the warm office while there is a little girl out there, probably raped or dead, or both.”

“I get that you jump right to the worst. But we don’t have anything suspicious. Joane Tuktu and Earl Garret are dealing with this a lot better than you.”

“At least I’m doing something, not sitting on my ass drinking coffee and chatting with my friends.”

It came out like an accusation from a supervisor to a subordinate. Meghan had to wait to speak again. The paradigm shift meant to make Meghan feel insignificant.

“What do you suppose we do now? Everyone in town is asleep. The few people, who are still awake, besides us, are the mayor and his wife. Joane and Earl have our numbers. You put on a hell of a show at the gym. I’ll bet we have a nice little article that will show up in the paper. Not to mention the buzz you started in town.”

“I don’t care what they say about me. A child is missing. You of all people should feel something—oh, wait, never mind, you ran off from being a mother.”

It hit Meghan like a sledgehammer to the guts. She stood up but somehow managed to keep her mouth shut. It helped that she went cold and dry in the throat. Dana had something to prove. She had something to make of herself; Meghan wasn’t interested in the woman’s outrageous and

unfounded claims. Instead of saying anything she'd regret later, Meghan took her coffee and walked around Dana, still shivering and standing in the center of the situation room.

Meghan went into her office and squeezed her fist. It helped sway her from slamming the door on Dana's face.

"I want you to know that I am taking over operations here. I've mobilized Wilcox's team. We're expecting a team of cadets and junior agents to fly in first thing on the earliest commercial flight."

"Did you clear all that with the Alaska State Troopers?"

"Wilcox said he'd take care of the meet and greet."

"Dana, you are making a big mistake here. You're going to burn up a lot of labor hours for a child who at the moment isn't under any harm—"

"What are you talking about? The little girl is missing, Meg. That should get your blood boiling." Dana stopped talking for a few hammering heartbeats in Meghan's ears. She shook her head, furrowing those razor-thin eyebrows. "What happened to you? You used to care. You used to want to help people. All I see now is a woman growing fat on a city paycheck and a government retirement pension."

Meghan ignored Oliver standing behind Dana. He had an incredulous look on his face.

"Dana. I am not going to tell you again. I want you to listen carefully. Whatever you plan to do, whatever happens from this point forward, you are on your own. You coordinate with whoever you want, but I do not answer to you. I answer to the troopers. I will do my due diligence, and Christine will probably show up first thing in the morning. You think calling out the FBI field office is proactive; it's a preemptive logistics nightmare. If you worked with me, you'd see we're doing exactly the necessary steps we need to find the girl. You're taking it way out of proportion."

"All I see right now is a woman too lazy to do anything."

"Dana, you can try to provoke me all you want. You have something going on with you, not me, and if you think this is the way to prove something to yourself, you are not going to like the outcome."

“You’re afraid of something. Maybe it has to do with you getting shot. You gave up after that. I don’t know, and I read a lot of people experience PTSD when they face life-threatening encounters. I don’t think you need to worry about what happened to you. You need to worry about what could happen to the girl because you failed to act accordingly.”

Dana appeared haughty, her self-righteousness elevating her to a place in her mind that rose above the cold she felt during the short walk from Meghan’s house to the police department.

“I’ll leave you to your little world, and you can hide behind your little desk. This is my show, Sheppard, and you might want to pay attention.”

Dana walked out of Meghan’s private office. She closed the door behind her with a gentle touch. Meghan heard Dana begin giving orders to Oliver and Lester. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. When Meghan heard something drop on the desk blotter, when she looked down, it surprised her to see the tears fell like rain.

## Chapter Nine

The Amber Alert originated out of Kinguyakkii a little after midnight. Meghan followed up with social media posts and current photos of Christine Tuktu. The description of her last known location, and the outfit she wore at the time of the Memorial celebration. According to Joane, Christine had an oversized red winter coat from an online retailer. It wasn't the heaviest or best kind of jacket for the environment, but it was all she could afford. Earl supplied a picture of the winter coat from the online retail store. Meghan added it to social media posts. She spent hours at her desk, scanning pages of people who were still awake and trending the Amber Alert.

Lester and Oliver checked all the locations they remember where children liked to congregate. Lester took the snowmachine out to tent city and checked in with the transient locals. Many people who couldn't afford a hotel room, but wanted to share the Memorial Day weekend events, spent their nights in the sprawling dunes and muck north of the city along the shoreline. Lester confiscated two plastic bottles of whiskey and issued a summons for court appearances.

For the first time since taking the job, Meghan wanted out. Elected officials like sheriffs, didn't like the negative publicity that came with a missing child case. If it went wrong, no one recovered. With the disappearance of Christine Tuktu, Meghan had no grounded suspects, and Joane worried but didn't point fingers.

Oliver cleaned out the supplies in the Suburban. They needed the extra space because Meghan appointed him designated driver for the Alaska State Troopers and the FBI agents when they showed up.

After five in the morning, two Piper Super Cubs with AST liveries arrived at the airport. Oliver chauffeured two rounds of Alaska State Troopers from the airstrip to the office. Among the unfamiliar faces Meghan greeted, she saw Riley Winters. He gave Meghan a big bear hug without considering what it looked like to the other strangers around them.

Riley Winters, selected and trained by Meghan, went on to become a trooper recruit. He still had months left on his field supervision, but Meghan knew Riley was the right candidate for the rural posts. Trooper Sergeant Emanuel Reeve likely selected Riley for inclusion because he was someone



from the community. Born and raised in and around Kinguyakkii, people knew Riley. He had a winning personality and was an earnest young man. He didn't care about the professional discourse because Meghan played a mentor to him, and he knew without her guidance, he wouldn't be in the career.

Reeve was a man without humor and had a grudge against Meghan. It was a professional displacement between them, and Meghan didn't take it personally. Trooper pilot Clayton Chandler once explained why Reeve gave Meghan the cold-shoulder in a place where everyone needed a little courtesy and warmth. It had to do with her jumping the shark with violent crimes in Kinguyakkii. Chandler was an impressively tall African American man who wore the uniform in a way that made others cheap by comparison. Chandler transported the majority of prisoners from Kinguyakkii to Anchorage for the police. She got to know him relatively well over the years.

He was devoted to his career, his family, and flying. The pilot license came after his career choice as a trooper. Once he qualified to fly as a state official, his career blossomed. He held sergeant rank with the troopers but wasn't one to point out the obvious. His insightfulness to Reeve's issues with Meghan meant Reeve was the first contact when it came to violent crimes. Instead, Meghan had a direct line with the Anchorage-based trooper detectives. Gregory Anderson was her point of contact, and it worked out well so far for both of them. Reeve, on the other hand, the person who needed to know, usually found out after the fact. In his eyes, as Meghan saw it, boots on the ground early Sunday morning following the missing child, was a step up in communication.

Meghan waited until after six before she called Shelley Bass. As the mayor's assistant, she knew the location of everything in City Hall. Shelley gave Meghan a collection of outdated survey and zoning maps for the city. Meghan knew what to expect before the federal agents arrived. Meghan returned to the police station, letting Shelley go home again. She tossed the city maps on the table and ignored her friend. Dana took the sheets immediately and spread them across the conference table, making it look like it was her idea.

While Dana introduced herself to the six Alaska State Troopers, Meghan retreated to the private office. Out of the way, feeling a little

dejected, Meghan scanned the social media posts for the Amber Alert. Lester and Oliver took any available calls coming into the department. At seven in the morning, very few people in town called or texted or sent posts about Christine.

When the first commercial jet arrived at seven-thirty, Reeve had his troopers waiting on the ground to greet the arrivals. Meghan stayed at the office and out of the way. The FBI team included eight senior cadets on loan from the academy and two upper echelons from the Anchorage field office. Overstepping the Alaska State Troopers put Dana and Meghan in a precarious situation. Meghan understood the logistics to Activate the Amber Alert. Reeve got the alert and was the acting point man on the case, with Meghan as the tip of contact in Kinguyakkii.

Dana turned all that around by calling her direct supervisor in Syracuse. A man named, Garret McKee, once ranked as Meghan's supervisor, and now had Dana as an agent. He made the long-distance decision to call the Anchorage field office. Whatever Dana embellished with McKee worked its poison back to Alaska.

The troopers had an immediate response that coordinated with the Anchorage Police Department and Transportation Security Administration at the Anchorage International Airport. While TSA flagged all incoming flights from the surrounding villages, the Anchorage police contacted security at Merrill Field in Anchorage. It was the public-use aviation airport that handled the charter and private flights to and from rural Alaska. Meghan felt Alaska law enforcement agencies did fine without involving the FBI needlessly. Unfortunately, it was way over her head at that point.

Six troopers, eight federal agents, Lester, Oliver, and Meghan, it was a full house without adding Dana's inflated ego. Meghan stayed out of the way. She knew Lester took a position at the front desk. Oliver, enjoying the reunion with Riley, wasn't concerned with the lack of available space in the situation room. People saw Meghan in the office at her desk. The bay window and open door made it easy.

Meghan put in her obligatory efforts to stay professional and cordial. For the most part, and the hardest, she stayed clear of Dana. The multifaceted authority goo that caused most overlapping agency short-circuiting happened in real-time right before Meghan's eyes. With an

outside perspective, she saw how leadership shifted from Dana to Reeve, and finally to the senior federal agency supervisor.

Dana considered her rank, and federal credentials preempted any authority Reeve assumed. Meghan saw how Reeve's troopers took orders directly from him and not Dana's instructions that came from the hip. Meghan held back, breathing deep, paid close attention, but remained out of the way.

"How are you doing?" Chandler asked when he broke away from the milling group of blue uniforms. He took up most of the doorway to Meghan's office and had a little perspective on what happened around the station.

Chandler was tall and lean and handsome. Meghan liked him because he wasn't shy about letting her know when Sergeant Reeve had random village checks. What Meghan knew from the heads up, it was never random with Reeve.

"I am dutifully performing my civil duties and staying out of the way," she said.

"Good job on the Amber Alert."

Meghan only nodded.

"You think she's somewhere safe?" he asked.

"Am I allowed to have an opinion on the matter?" After saying it, Meghan pressed her lips together as they got away from her. She let the aggravation subside. "I'm sorry. It's been a long night."

"Well, from where I stand, it's going to be a long day." He pressed his fingers against the round brim of the trooper hat in a salute. Unlike the other troopers, Riley included, Chandler wore a hat instead of the black knit cap. Meghan thought he looked good in uniform and the hat.

Chandler left the doorway. Meghan scanned the room. She saw Dana and Reeve standing together, peering over the maps on the conference table. Troopers and some FBI cadets raided the coffee station. She saw how the cadets responded when the FBI supervisor moved through the ranks.

Sergio Wilcox, Special Agent in Charge for the Anchorage field office, seemed like an attentive older man with patience and an eye for trouble. Meghan got to view him from the side and didn't inject herself in the middle of the conversations between Reeve and Wilcox. That was

Dana's job, and she excelled at getting in the middle of everyone's conversations.

The cadet go-bags cluttered the far back corner of the station. They packed for cold weather and for an extended time. The occupancy of the police station didn't rate for eighteen people at one time. Lester monitored the front and kept the door locked. He texted Meghan from time to time about the growing crowds outside. People wanted to help. It wasn't her call, and they had to wait as long as she did.

The atmosphere had a little tension and a lot of body heat. It felt like a summer night after a thunderstorm when the ions collected against the skin.

Ten minutes after Wilcox arrived and Meghan watched the professional interaction, the man found his way to her office. Meghan stood beside the desk and shook hands with Wilcox. He was over retirement age for the bureau, a little older than sixty-seven by Meghan's guess. His trimmed bureau hairstyle and cold-weather clothing made him appear confident, and no stranger to the elements.

"Chief Sheppard," he said. The handshake was firm, and Meghan felt Wilcox took that time to assess Meghan.

"Special Agent in Charge, Wilcox," Meghan said.

It was unnecessary, but Meghan played the game long enough to know when she had to bend to the proper authority. The man didn't have all the answers, but from that point forward, it was Wilcox's show.

"I believe you have everything available to execute the grid search intended and make contact with the locals. I've included a phone contact list for the mayor, school officials, and other city agencies that can assist." Meghan felt the retired persona bubbling up from her past. Wilcox didn't expect or have time for surprises. She assumed he had all the relevant background information on the girl and her family.

With a case as crucial as an Amber Alert, small talk and interagency power struggles had no place. He stood beside the chair, facing Meghan. She remained standing and felt her spine stiffen at attention. Body language spoke louder than words.

Dana had successfully undermined Meghan's body image with many comments about her derriere. Meghan didn't allow personal feelings

to overshadow the real issues.

“Chief Sheppard, I appreciate you accommodating us,” Wilcox said. “Sergeant Reeve had some suggestions about how we take care of this business. I’m curious if you have anything to add that will enable us to utilize our people better.”

Meghan waited to answer. She took a breath. Meghan had all night to prepare and think about how she’d handle the operations if she were in charge.

“Take advantage of the people waiting outside. I’ll make sure we get a full list of names from the volunteers. Duane Warren, the city mayor, is the right person to make it look like an entire team effort instead of the bureau and troopers taking over the town. People want to see him among your teams.

“Split your teams into four groups. Start them at each end of the city and work their way back here. You’ll find more people will join in the search as they see the agents.

“If we don’t locate Christine in the first sweep, put a team in the Chena Hotel and another in Mountain Manor. Gerald Worsley is the hotel manager. He will provide you with information for anyone registered from outside Alaska. You may not get names without a warrant for guests. But if Gerald feels it is good publicity for the hotel, he will accommodate you.

“Contact the local radio station. Have someone address the listeners. DJs, Dave and Wayne, have PSA messages broadcast to all listeners. If you write up a statement, we might get more people interested.

“Take advantage of the local reporter, Calvin Everett. He dedicated a full night to posting on the news media page about Christine. He knows everyone. Everyone reads his online paper and follows his social media posts. If it looks like you’re including the press instead of hiding things, people will respond favorably.

“All we have now is a missing girl and no suspects. Any number of people saw her at the school gym last night. My lieutenant and I are following up on any promising leads we’ve received since the alert went out. You don’t need us underfoot. Please use my sergeant, Oliver Henry, as your point man. He is eager to find the girl as much as the rest of us. Oliver knows everything and everyone.” Meghan’s brain wound down, and she

had a few more ideas. With Wilcox still listening without interrupting, she continued.

“You might want to move your operations to the hotel if this goes longer than today. They have conference rooms available. I know the hotel is overbooked, but Gerald has several cots available and can set up everyone in one of the first-floor rooms. It will be more comfortable there than anywhere else in town.”

The look on Wilcox’s face was impossible for Meghan to read. He was a man of the bureau and understood ‘poker face’ better than most. He didn’t emote. Details inside Wilcox’s head didn’t register on his face.

“Thank you for your time, Chief Sheppard.”

Wilcox left Meghan’s office. She dropped into the chair behind the desk. Meghan ignored the stink-eye she got from Dana from the other side of the situation room. Meghan heard Wilcox begin addressing the troopers and cadets.

“We’re going to use the help of anyone willing to lend a hand. Let’s get a list of volunteers. Start with the people outside right now. Someone get in touch with Duane Warren. He’s the mayor. We need people to know this is a community effort, and we’re not here to take over. Get someone to contact the radio station and the local reporter. I believe his name is Calvin Everett...

Meghan looked through the latest early morning social media posts. She listened to Wilcox’s orders. It included dividing the groups into four teams for the door to door search for Christine. It included the additional searches for the hotel and apartment complex. Meghan didn’t put too much into what Wilcox told everyone, even if it sounded like her plan. He was a seasoned and experienced supervisor, and common sense put everything out in the open. The game wasn’t new, and most law enforcement officers knew how to play it.

## Chapter Ten

Meghan and Lester left the office shortly after noon. She rode on the back of Lester's four-wheeler. The bright clear day started at 29°F with weather updates anticipating the upper 40s before sunset.

Morning brought Joane the reality check about Christine. Panic set in, and Meghan did her best through text messaging to ease the mother's tension if such a thing happened.

Meghan had constant contact with Joane through texting on her private smartphone. Under normal circumstances, Meghan didn't give out her personal number. She was a parent. A missing child meant more than privacy at that point. Meghan knew Joane having direct contact with the police chief kept her out from underfoot, and in one place. Meghan wanted Joane, Cecil, and Earl to stay at the apartment.

Meghan gripped the rear rack on the four-wheeler. She kept her face behind Lester's shoulders to keep the wind from biting her cheeks. The heavily treaded tires thrummed under Meghan as she felt dread creeping into her belly. She missed her oversized parka and had to contend with the winter gear and lots of layers. At least, she had her bunny boots. The cold made Meghan anxious because a ten-year-old girl in the cold wasn't an image she wanted to see.

Lester drove along Shore Avenue north and turned right on Rurik Way. He pulled up to a wide rectangular house with plywood exterior paneling. It needed a paint job, but the front porch had refurbishing with replacement steps leading up to the landing in front of the door. Meghan noticed the divots where an ATV often parked in front of the house. She looked around to the neighbors' houses. The nearest residence had a view of the left corner of the house where Lester parked.

"Where are we?" Meghan asked.

"This is where Eugene Tuktu lives," Lester said. He regarded the new steps before making his way up to the door.

Meghan kicked at the hole in the frozen mud. "I don't think he's home."

Lester pounded on the door. Meghan stared at the four evenly spaced holes where Eugene managed to park every day. He wasn't home. Lester had an insight that Meghan caught up when she put it together. She

felt the jolt of realization, putting two random things together to make a parallel. Lester got ahead of her.

She ran up the three steps.

“Do you know if anyone saw him at the gym last night?” she asked.

Meghan banged on the door with her fist.

“No one I know who was there saw him. Silva didn’t see him or Joane at the school last night.” Silva Graves, Lester’s wife, sometimes worked dispatch for the police department when they were short-handed. “I left a voicemail on his phone last night and again this morning. He’s still out of range or something.” It was easier to drop the assumption than make speculations.

“So, we’ve got a missing girl and her uncle missing.” There was a moment when Meghan felt a little better about the situation. “Is there a chance he took her to Selawick or somewhere for the weekend?”

“Eugene does a lot of hunting, but if he didn’t check with Joane about taking Christine with him, I think wherever he now wasn’t broadcast to the rest of the family.”

“So, he lived here with Clifford?”

Meghan cupped her hands and stared through the front window standing on the tiny porch. Her boot kicked the coffee can overflowing with cigarette butts. She saw a disheveled front room with the large flat screen television taking up the lower half of the living room window.

The house had the same generic, prefabricated layout as the other houses around town.

“This is a three-bedroom house, isn’t it?” she asked.

“It looks like it,” Lester said. “I think Eugene probably built it with Clifford. That was before Alaskalytical Construction closed.”

Meghan winced at the topic. “Clifford worked for them too?”

Lester nodded. He stepped off the porch and scanned the roadway. Nine houses lined the street. To the left was the split where buildings sat on either side of Rurik Way facing Shore Avenue. Beyond the frontage road and the embankment, the Kinguyakkii Bay had chunks and large flat slabs of fast-flowing ice breaks near shore. Several meters from the ice blocks, the rest of the waterway looked clear. Winter ice made water travel



deceptive. People using flatboat boats fared better than the round bottom or displaced hulls. Ice crept underwater a few inches or a few feet before it bobbed to the surface and punched holes in boats.

Meghan turned the doorknob, and the front door swung open. It was warmer in the house, but not stifling hot. It meant Eugene had a fixed budget, and heating oil wasn't cheap.

"Eugene Tuktu, city police," Meghan called.

It was a single-level house on stilts like the majority of the residences and businesses. She saw down the hallway to the kitchen in the back of the house. To the right, the open living room with another entry to the kitchen from the right side. The bathroom parked between the front door and the hallway, with two of the three bedrooms to the left. One on the right of the hall before the wet wall separated the kitchen and bathroom.

She saw some dirty clothes on the worn-out chair in the living room. She saw a collection of footwear in the hallway. The boots were all adult size, all men, as far as Meghan noticed. She closed the door and sat on the porch, facing Lester leaning against the Polaris. Across the city, volunteers, the FBI, and state troopers went door to door searching for the missing child. The search didn't include Meghan. She felt like an outcast. Unlike Lester, who happily got out of the duty listening to people who all thought their ideas were better than anyone else.

"Do you think I did everything I should?" Meghan asked. She closed the door again.

"Do you feel like you should do more?"

"Listen, Dr. Graves, if I wanted a psychologist, I'd hang out with Oliver. I'm asking you as my friend. Look at this situation and tell me if we're doing everything right." She sat on the steps.

Meghan pulled off her ski cap and squinted in the sunlight. They had a few more hours before the sun slipped below the mountains on the other side of Kinguyakkii Sound. Snow clung to areas around the houses that saw mostly shadows throughout the day. The rest of the ground had that after winter, ugly look, made up of dead grass and black mud.

"I think your friend caused a lot of problems for us to do a proper investigation. We're playing catch up, and if something happened to Christine because of someone else, we're way behind now."

“I know I have no excuse for her. She sees me as a failure. She and I go way back, and now that she’s here, I wish she’d go way back to New York. I am sorry for her taking over like she did.”

“We can use all the help we can get. You remember it isn’t about how many chiefs we have. It’s about finding a child.”

Meghan looked up at the porch roof and then took in the rest of the portico. Eugene had reinforced the columns with new beams. New joists under the porch flooring stood on the newer elevated concrete footing with level piers. It was a professional job with the right materials, on an adequate house.

“Why don’t Joane and Earl live here with the kids?” Meghan asked.

“Maybe she doesn’t get along with Eugene.”

“Maybe,” Meghan said.

Living with the brother of a dead husband might get a little sticky. Then again, they lived in a cramped apartment with two kids. If she knew anything about family in Alaska, they usually stuck together through the worst of times. Finances were incredibly tight for many people in rural Alaskan communities.

She watched as a group of volunteers and one FBI cadet walked up the street with them. Meghan made eye contact with the cadet. He had a look of disappointment on his face but held back saying anything to her. Meghan didn’t want to think he saw her as lazy. She sat on a random porch of a vacant house.

“You have a radio?” she asked.

The cadet gave away the location of the radio with a shift of his right hand. He closed the distance between them. Meghan stood and eyed the eight villagers who walked with the cadet. It was a group of elders and two adolescents. She recognized four of them.

“Special Agent in Charge Wilcox, this is Chief Sheppard.”

“Go head, Sheppard.”

“Call my cell, please.”

“10-4,” Wilcox’s voice had a faraway and authoritative edge.

“Thank you,” she said. Meghan handed the two-way radio back to the cadet. She watched the civilians mumbling to each other behind them.

As Meghan pulled the smartphone from the inner coat pocket, it buzzed.

The cadet moved off with the rest of the volunteers.

“You might want to put Eugene Tuktu as a person of interest.”

“We attempted contact with Mr. Tuktu this morning about forty minutes ago.”

“Eugene’s not at his residence. His four-wheeler isn’t here. He may be out hunting. Might want to find out if anyone saw Eugene at the gym last night,” she said. Meghan considered her capacity in the investigation. Dana minimized her authority. Telling the senior agent in charge of how to handle his business wasn’t a wise way to keep her badge when the case closed.

“Will do, Chief, thank you.”

“We’re going to run over to Tent City and see if anyone saw Eugene. A lot of the hunters from the outlining communities stay there when the hotel is overbooked.”

“Is that location marked on the survey maps we used?”

“No, but it’s northeast of town. You take the road as far as it goes. You’ll see two oil drums mark the trailhead that leads to the inlet.”

“Thank you again, Chief Sheppard.”

“We’ll take a run along Cape Blossom Road,” Meghan said. “It’s the nature—”

“That’s fine, Chief. Keep me posted.” Wilcox ended the call.

Meghan felt a pang of guilt or embarrassment. It was the kind of feeling she got as a child when adults scolded her for something trivial. Wilcox had multi-facets of a job with several people looking to him. She was out of the loop.

Meghan looked at the house again as Lester climbed on the four-wheeler and started it.

“Can you call the title companies on Tuesday to find out who owns the house,” Meghan said.

“Doesn’t Eugene own it?” Lester said over the chugging engine.

“The bank doesn’t care as long as the mortgage gets paid.”

“You think the place belongs to Joane and Clifford?” Lester looked doubtful.

“I am curious, that’s all.”

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s head out to Cape Blossom. We can take the bypass on the other side of the airport and come up along the shore.”

“I wasn’t avoiding that,” Meghan said. She knew it was the right decision. “We have to do that.”

Meghan climbed on the back of the Polaris. Lester revved the machine and pulled away from the pale house on Rurik Way.

The last thing Meghan wanted to think was something awful happened to Christine. So far, over the previous twelve hours, they had a girl who went missing. Sometimes to get a little attention, kids will act out, hide, ‘cry wolf.’ The longer it went on, the more it looked like their worries became legitimate.

Heading to the coastline to check the ice blocks that hampered the shoreline seemed like the first place to look for some people. Meghan wanted to keep an optimistic approach. She was a realist. If Christine Tuktu decided to hop on the ice, then racing along the shoreline was the act of a desperate person who thought the worst.

Kids in the north faced the same problems as anyone else in the world. The opportunity came once a year when winter lost its clutches on the land and water. Jumping on pans of freed ice presented too tempting a curiosity for many of the younger residents of the city. Meghan and her officers warned children throughout the weeks’ long break up the season when open water wasn’t an option immediately, and ice roads turned risky. The sheets of floating ice weren’t stable. They were impossible to predict and never a good idea to play on. The trouble with teenagers and adolescents, the more someone said ‘no,’ the more they wanted to do it.

Since Meghan’s tenure as police chief, they had a few close calls, one set of teens who needed rescuing when their ice panning—jumping on ice floes—took them too far away from shore to get back without taking a dip. They returned to shore safely, and Meghan had their parents billed for the cost of boat fuel for the rescue. The problem with falling in icy water wasn’t necessarily hypothermia as much as getting crushed or trapped under the ice sheets. It was a popular and dangerous sport. The older people got, the more they realized how foolish they were as kids. Sometimes it was about a reality check and the death of a child that woke up a community to

traditionalism that needed a modern approach. Meghan knew kids did dangerous things sometimes and survived to look back and reflect on the near-death fun they had once they grew to adulthood. Sometimes it was to lament the few youngsters who never grew up.

## Chapter Eleven

The call came from Oliver while they were halfway along the elevated tundra trail way. It was an expansive project road set up by the state and city for the community to have a way to experience the tundra and wildlife outside town. Cape Blossom Road started as a contractor project years before Meghan arrived. She appreciated the scenic view and isolation occasionally. Mostly she drove it at night or during the summer when school let out and kids had nothing to do around town. The nature trail became a place to get away from adults. It was a place for parties, and sometimes, when people thought they got away with smuggling booze into the neighborhood.

That Sunday afternoon it was sunny and cold, a little windy away from town. Lester drove at a steady speed, looping back toward the airport.

“Hey Chief,” Oliver said. Meghan tapped Lester’s shoulder for him to slow to a stop. Oliver sounded far away and tired. “You need to get to the south side of town. “The Air Force patrol spotted something on the ice.”

It was enough for the cold air that surrounded Meghan to crawl inside her. She felt her blood run cold. It was the worst feeling next to the reality that what they fear and never expressed openly finally happened.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“I’m with Duane and Ulva.”

“Do they know yet?”

“Yep,” he said.

“Okay. Do your best to keep anyone who isn’t law enforcement away from the area. We’re about twenty-five minutes from there. We’ll take the east road to the fence and ride down. How far out is it?” Meghan avoided personifying whatever the military police saw. She kept it vague because it gave her a little hope.

“I got all this third-party,” Oliver said. “I think it’s around the hump heading southward along the coastline. You know how the ice gets away from shore and drifts into the Sound? It’s probably along the peninsula arm.”

“Okay, thanks Oliver. Stay with the mayor. Have Duane help keep people back. The last thing anyone needs this weekend is more bad news.”

“Sure, Chief,” he said and ended the call.

Meghan shared a look with Lester.

“Where?” he asked.

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Four miles south of Kinguyakkii, the General Surveillance Radar station was an active long-range radar site that acted as part of the Alaska NORAD region. In 1958, the Army Transportation Corps completed the project to act as early warning defense system for the United States. The United States Air Force commissioned the construction for the Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron as an extended arm for the Air Support Group out of Elmendorf AFB outside Anchorage.

Since it began operations in 1958, the support barracks and ongoing construction created a township on the south peninsula arm of the Kinguyakkii spit. The personnel stations, power and heat plant, gymnasium, furl storage, and full facilities had an active military presence year-round that never interacted with the city. Meghan never worried about the place because the soldiers never went to Kinguyakkii. The barge dock and airstrip were off-limits to civilians.

Most of the radar dishes and civil engineering barracks meant the manned station had military personnel who completed tours and went directly back to Anchorage without interaction with anyone. The Air Force eventually had a five-mile road connected to the airport in Kinguyakkii and the high chain link fence had military warning signs. Even the wild youth of the north knew better than scale the fence and venture into federal lands. Sometimes civilian contractors stayed at the Chena Hotel during the summer when they continued performing top secret upgrades.

The military police had a fiberglass skiff with a trolling motor. They used oars to pull the boat over the submerged ice sheets, making their way to the object in the water. Something caught on a floe and colliding pieces caused the ice pan to tilt upward where the material snagged the crushed ice.

Lester pulled up next to the other snowmachines and four-wheelers on loan from the police department. Meghan saw Dana standing beside Wilcox and Reeve. Riley and Chandler had another flat bottom aluminum

boat they pulled behind the Honda. They had it in the icy water and negotiated their way offshore to aid in the retrieval.

Meghan saw Wilcox with a finger in his left ear with the smartphone pressed to the right side of his head. He had a phone call active while the others watched helplessly from the shore. Meghan and Lester stayed back out of the way. She saw the nylon fabric from the distance. She didn't want to admit what it looked like, but it was impossible to ignore. Meghan updated the Amber Alert after midnight to include the description of the winter coat Christine had on in the gymnasium.

Wilcox scanned the shore until he saw Meghan. He walked in their direction, away from the operations in the water several meters away. He finished his phone call before reaching Meghan and Lester.

"I've got a team in the apartments that have a suspect."

It took Meghan by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"We're treating this like abduction, Sheppard. That means when our boots hit the ground, we were actively looking for a perpetrator for the crime of kidnapping."

She knew better than say anything.

"I called the AG this morning for possible search warrants. We got one for Joane Tuktu's residence."

"Who is your suspect?" Meghan asked.

Wilcox scanned the smartphone screen. "A man named Vincent Atkinson."

"Why?"

"Atkinson lives in the apartment complex. He allowed one of my team to walk his apartment. Upon eyes-only review, the cadet saw a collection of women's undergarments. Among them were two adolescent female panties. We secured the active search warrant for Atkinson residence. He had a large collection of women and girl's undergarments." Wilcox shook his head. "Some of his neighbors witnessed Atkinson talking to the girl three days ago in the stairwell."

"Look, Special Agent Wilcox, I know Vincent. He's a little slow and he has a fetish."



“We’re sending the undergarments to Fairbanks for DNA analysis. The AG gave us priority over the other cases so we can get a quick turn around.”

He turned from Meghan to watch the progress to claim the garment caught in the ice. Meghan shared a look with Lester.

“Where is Vincent right now?” Meghan asked.

“We’re arranging transport from the apartment to the police department. I’ll calling in the rest of the team.”

Meghan saw Trooper Chandler climb on the ice pan and snatch the item before the ice sheet tipped from his weight and sunk deeper. He climbed back into the boat with Riley’s help. The military boat turned around and headed back to shore with the troopers. Meghan saw Chandler holding the coat up to examine it and inadvertently showing the rest of the people watching from the shore that the child’s jacket was identical to the coat last seen on Christine.

“We need to get divers in the water,” Wilcox said.

“Don’t do that,” Lester said. It was the first time Meghan saw her Lieutenant speak to the federal agent.

“Why not?” Wilcox said.

“We’ll get a few more boats out here. We can scan the waterway and ice floe better without worrying about a diver getting crushed between the ice sheets. It’ll be dark soon. We can use spotlights and they have a better penetration range at night. If she’s down there, we’ll see her.”

Wilcox considered Lester’s point. He pressed his lips together and nodded. “See if you can get some volunteers to loan us boats. I don’t want any civilians in the water. I talked to the capital at the base. They can get the Coast Guard out here in about four hours.”

“It’s better if we find her from the water,” Lester said. “The choppers stir up the visibility too much.”

“You have experience in recovery, Lieutenant?” Wilcox asked.

“I do, sir. Unfortunately,” he said. Lester was an invaluable asset for the community. It meant he endured a lot and saw even more.

Wilcox started back toward Dana and Reeve.

“I’d like to talk to Vincent,” Meghan called. “I know him. He’ll talk to me.” She had to shade her eyes because the sun began its descent along the western horizon. It hadn’t reached the mountaintops but the milky clouds on the far side of the Sound already had a pink hue.

Wilcox turned back to Meghan. He waited to answer.

“Have my cadets present. Make sure your interview is on record.”

“Thank you, sir.” Meghan turned to Lester. “Can you stay here and help them with the search?”

“I wasn’t going anywhere.” He climbed off the Polaris. Meghan straddled the saddle.

“Hold off on telling anyone. I have a feeling we’re already behind on the notification. We don’t have anything yet except a jacket. We still need to locate Eugene. I need to find out what Vincent knows. Are you going to be warm enough?”

Lester pulled at the rim of his ski cap. He pulled up on the zipper of his jacket. Heavy boots, snow pants and thick gloves, Lester knew how to protect himself against the weather. He turned away and tracked down the beach toward the rest of the crews.

Meghan throttled the four-wheeler, swung around and kicked up gravel from the beach racing back to town. She feared someone already cast judgment on Vincent. Meghan witnessed a miscarriage of justice earlier in the year when Riley’s ex-girlfriend went to prison for a murder she didn’t commit. Meghan wasn’t able to fight the charges. Hannah Payuk was wrongly accused and accepted the punishment without a trial. Meghan knew the real killer got away and left town shortly after Hannah consented to the crime. She couldn’t unpack the layers of psychological bubblegum that Hannah had inside her misguided brain. Meghan knew Vincent wasn’t a violent man or a pedophile in the same way she knew a dog could never be a dog. She knew if someone started leaning on him, Vincent might share the same fate as Hannah and accept a charge to a crime he didn’t commit.

## Chapter Twelve

Vincent Atkinson was pushing forty and looking guilty. Meghan saw he had red-rimmed eyes from uncontrollable crying. Two cadets brought him to the police station while handcuffed. It was standard procedure and not something Meghan could undo. He saw Meghan from the archway as he sat quietly at the conference room table. He had round prescription glasses that made his round face look chubbier.

Three troopers stood together with the two FBI cadets. Meghan unlocked her office and shed the coat. She tossed her knit cap on the desk. She collected the digital camera gear and motioned to one of the younger men to set up the camera.

“Chief Sheppard, I didn’t do nothing,” Vincent said.

“Hey, what did I tell you?” The cadet pointed the finger at Vincent as if to openly scold him. Vincent looked to his sneakers.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Vincent,” Meghan said. She ignored the young man glaring at her. She knew Wilcox authorized her to talk to Vincent. They didn’t stop her. “We’re going to set up the camera for documenting the interview. All this happens only if you want it to because I don’t know if these guys said anything, but you are here voluntarily.”

Vincent lifted his hands on his lap. The handcuffs weren’t something added for conversation.

“I know. It’s precautionary,” she said. Meghan used her cuff key to remove the handcuffs from Vincent. She handed off the cuffs to one of the cadets. “You and I will have a discussion.”

“If this is about Chrissy—”

Meghan lifted her hand, and Vincent immediately stopped talking. “Let’s wait until we get the equipment set up. This way, you won’t have to sit too long or answer questions twice.”

It took two cadets to set up the tripod and the camera. Meghan grabbed the laptop from the office and plugged in the HDMI cable from the camera into the computer. While the program started, Meghan sat in a chair with the lens over her right shoulder. The camera focused on Vincent.

Someone pounded on the front door. Meghan turned to the troopers.

“Can you guys see who that is, don’t let any civilians in here. Word might be out about finding the jacket.”

“What jacket,” Vincent asked.

Meghan ignored him for now. “If there are a lot of people out there, do your best to take names and keep them calm. We don’t know what’s happening yet, and with the agents bringing in Vincent, people might get the wrong impression.”

“I didn’t get the wrong impression when I saw that stuff.”

“What did you do with it?” Meghan asked.

“I left it in the apartment. My colleague is standing guard in the hallway until we get a federal warrant authorized to collect the panties.” When he said it, the cadet glared at Vincent.

Meghan shook her head. “You need to relax. You’re supposed to detach your feelings from your assignments. Remember your training.”

“What would you know about it?” he asked.

One of the troopers coughed, catching himself from laughing.

Meghan regarded the young man. He was all upper body strength, athletic lean with a thick neck that matched his sloping shoulders. He was the new breed of federal recruits. The kind of young specimen better serving in the military than the bureau, he didn’t read briefs, Meghan knew that. Wilcox was a man of little surprises. He had highlights for the cadets before they arrived in town. Knowledge was the best defensive weapon. He had notes that including biographies on all people involved, including Meghan. She wasn’t interested in refresher lessons.

“Get the camera started.”

He looked at the troopers as they moved through the archway before he followed Meghan’s directions. Meghan knew they did or said something that prompted him to act. She didn’t care what happened, only that he followed instructions.

Once they had the digital camera recording the interview, Meghan sat under the lens, watching Vincent. She took a breath, making sure he saw her relax. It wasn’t an interrogation.

“Vincent, can you state your name, occupation, and date of birth for the camera?” Meghan asked.

She saw Vincent look up at the lens and give the information.

“Now, I want you to know before we get started. At this time, this is an informal interview. You are not required to be here. I’m not going to read your rights because you’re not under arrest. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he said.

“How about you explain that back to me,” Meghan said. Active listening wasn’t easy to gauge on other people. Meghan wanted Vincent to know that he had rights, and no one tried to violate them for misgivings and misinterpretations.

Vincent did his best to give back what she said to him.

“At any point, you don’t want to continue, or you don’t want to answer questions, we will stop. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“Now, you know about Christine Tuktu, right? You know about the Amber Alert?”

“Yeah,” he said. Vincent squirmed in the chair. Meghan didn’t think it had to do with his nerves, only that his round bottom overlapped the edges of the plastic molded seat.

“So, you know why you’re here, right?”

“I guess,” he mumbled.

“I don’t care about something that isn’t actively hurting someone. But I warned you before about your little fixation. Some people have a problem with men having women’s undergarments. What I need to know, to cut through all of this, do you have a pair of Christine’s underwear?”

Meghan first learned of Vincent’s interest in ladies’ unmentionables when she investigated the strangulation death of Nancy McCormick. The former tenant in 3E lost her life. Briefly, Vincent showed up on Meghan’s radar because, in the course of routine interviews, she entered Vincent’s apartment. She found a collection of underwear that didn’t belong to him. One pair came from Nancy.

Dealing with Vincent through redirection at the time of the murder investigation worked to a point. The trouble with an obsession, it doesn’t go away. Vincent wasn’t charged with second-degree burglary or had to register as a sex offender because he didn’t collect the items from inside

people's residences. He stole them from the laundry room. No one ever filed a complaint with the police department. If anyone ever found items missing from their laundry baskets in a public use laundry room, they weren't concerned enough to care.

Meghan saw Vincent look from the camera to the other men in the situation room. As far as she understood, without looking around, they hid their emotions. Vincent brightened with embarrassment.

"We had a discussion a while ago about that, didn't we?" she asked.

"Yeah," he whispered.

"You understand that right now, with the cadet finding more items in your apartment, it doesn't look good, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you know, and I know that one or more of those items belong to persons under the age of sixteen. You know what that means, right, Vincent?"

"I guess so," he said.

Meghan rubbed her face. She leaned her elbows on the table. "Do you know if you have a pair of Christine Tuktu's underwear in your apartment?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, this is what's going to happen. You need to be straight with me. If you say something that gets under my skin, you and I are going to stop talking until after I read you your rights. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. But I don't know if those belong to Chrissy. I mean, I found them, but I didn't follow her or her mom around to get them. They were in the laundry on the floor between the washers. I just grabbed them."

"Is that how you get the other pairs?"

"Well, yeah. Sometimes," he said. Vincent looked at the floor again. His face looked so red, Meghan thought if she touched it, she'd burn her hands. "There're online girls, too, you know."

She nodded. Meghan knew. It wasn't a crime. It was a thing. Some men paid thousands of dollars for the right pair of panties. Meghan carefully avoided using that word. Men like Vincent, who had a fetish, it was a trigger word. Making money selling underwear through the internet

and the mail was a lot safer than a woman selling physical contact. Prostitution was dangerous and unsanitary. Online intimacy kept both consenting adults safe and clean.

“What we’re concerned about right now is locating Christine. When was the last time you saw her?”

Vincent waited a moment to speak again. He considered the timetable.

“I saw her and Cecil in the store on Thursday after three-thirty.”

“How do you know the time?”

“Most of the kids get out and head to the store. The store manager has someone standing in the candy aisle after school. I saw Chrissy and Cecil together. They didn’t look at candy. I think Cecil bought some bread and sandwich meat.”

Meghan waited, letting the information simmer. “I need to know how you are so sure what Cecil got on Thursday. It seems very precise.”

“Well, I was standing at the end of the candy aisle near the cooler doors. Cecil and Chrissy came into the store. They went around the front walkway and came up the dairy cooler side of the store. I saw Cecil with a loaf of bread, and he got cold cuts from the fridge while Chrissy said ‘hi’ to me.”

“So, you talked to her on Thursday afternoon. What time was that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe around four.”

Meghan used Vincent’s conversation to verify the time again. He answered without thinking about it. That was a sign he told the truth.

“Do you remember what she was wearing at the time?”

“No, I just remember seeing her and saying, ‘hi,’” Vincent said.

“Do you and Christine talk a lot?”

“No, I see her sometimes hanging out in the stairwell. She likes to draw pictures when she’s alone.”

“You see her drawings?”

He shrugged.

“Some kids like to show off their work. Did she ever give you any of her pictures?”

“No, and she didn’t like showing anyone her pictures.”

“So, you see her in which stairwell?”

“Sometimes the center one,” he said. “Sometimes, I see her in the side stairwell when I get home after work.”

“What time do you get out of work?”

“Depends on if I need to fill the eggs and milk before I go. I usually punch out around nine-thirty or ten. It takes about ten minutes to leave the store and walk up to my apartment.”

“You see Christine alone in the stairwell drawing at ten at night?”

“Yeah.”

“How often?”

“Not too much, I think. Sometimes a week or two goes by before I’d see her again.”

“What does she draw with?” Meghan asked.

“You mean like crayons or pencils.”

“Does she use a drawing pad? Something that keeps her work together, or is it a notebook or loose paper?”

“It’s a drawing pad. It has a black cover. Chrissy has stickers all over the cover.”

“Okay, good. You saw that she draws in a single drawing pad. When was the last time you think you saw her sitting in the stairwell?”

“I don’t know I think like Saturday night.”

“Last night?” Meghan asked quickly.

Vincent shook his head. “Last weekend,” he said. “I went to the Memorial dance last night.”

“Did you see Christine at the dance?”

Vincent waited to answer. Meghan saw him look up and to the right. He recalled the events yesterday. He shook his head.

“I didn’t see Chrissy. But I saw Cecil. I remember he was asking around for Chrissy. He didn’t talk to me. He talked to a few other people. But I overheard him.”

“What time do you think you saw Cecil last night?”



“I don’t know around eight or nine. Can I go now?”

Meghan sat back and drummed her fingers on the tabletop.

“Vincent, they are going to secure a warrant to search your apartment.” She shook her head. “Right now, with what’s happened, and what they found in your apartment, there’s enough probable cause for the warrant search.”

“Why? I ain’t done nothing wrong.” It came out with a pout. Meghan saw his eyes glass over with tears again. Vincent sniffled.

“This is a good time to tell me if they will find anything in your apartment. Do you have anything more than the undergarments?”

“I got stuff, you know.”

“What stuff?”

“Like, you know, sex stuff.”

“Vincent, no one cares about your stuff as long as you’re not breaking the law. What can happen if they find something you’re not supposed to have, aside from the ladies’ things, they can charge you with a crime. We’ve got a missing girl. You understand how important that is to all of us. You know Christine from the apartment complex. You talked to her before. If one of those pairs of underwear you took from the laundry has Christine Tuku’s DNA on it, you will be a prime suspect in her disappearance.”

“Do you need to explain that to him?” the cadet asked. He stood closer to Meghan’s chair than she realized.

Meghan stood up and turned around. “You’d rather keep a suspect in the dark? What good does that do, other than satisfy your little ego? You have a man here who indulges in something that others don’t understand. He has every right to protect his privacy and dignity. You have no right to broadcast any details of this interview to anyone, anywhere. That includes your mouth-breathing friends back at the academy. You don’t like what you hear right now. I suggest you find another job. You want to stay in law enforcement but can’t handle a little self-discipline when it comes to the inalienable rights of civilians. You should become a corrections officer. They’re hiring people like you who want to keep the public safe but can’t keep your mouth shut and grow up.”

“You act like you like his little panty fetish,” the cadet said.

He had close-set eyes and a beaky nose that ran almost flush with his forehead. The thing about the bureau, they needed pretty people and not-so-pretty people. Since the cadet had an obvious self-image issue, he overcompensated with muscle tone and bullying. It didn’t help with his looks, but it built up the confidence to overflowing arrogance.

Meghan ignored the two troopers peeking around the archway at the comment. The other cadets in the situation room stood back, monitoring the challenge. Meghan saw a young man who had more to learn about suspects, civilians, and authority figures.

“I am woman enough to know you feel threatened by things that you are unable to process mentally. It has nothing to do with what Vincent likes or doesn’t. You need to learn manners and how to conduct yourself as an FBI agent. In my opinion, you have a long way to go. If I were your instructor, you’d have a lot more to learn before you’re worthy of taking that oath.”

He squinted and towered over Meghan. It was something she dealt with her whole life. Men used height and strength to intimidate. Whatever he had to prove, the cadet needed an audience. Meghan had interactions with both state troopers who stood back, watching the young man. Vincent remained welded to the chair out of fear and fascination. Meghan smelled his lunch wash over her as he breathed something from the Chinese restaurant, something with ginger and onions.

“Step back, cadet. This isn’t the time or place for you to show dominance.”

He smirked, filling out the comment and adding his interpretation. “You want to find out about my dominance? Is that your thing too? Panty fetishes and dominant men, are you submissive too?” The words came out of his mouth around gritted teeth.

Any other time, any other moment, Meghan knew she’d respond in a manner that fit his demeanor. She had a case, and his attitude needed a lot more adjusting than she wanted to spend time doing. They had an interagency investigation to deal with a missing—possibly drowned child in Kinguyakkii Sound when she went ice panning at night while the rest of the

town, including the police, went to a holiday dance. It was a scenario that Meghan found incredibly hard to swallow.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said.

Meghan turned away from the cadet and his sour breath. She moved to address Vincent again. The look on his face suggested whatever he saw and heard meant to stay with him for a long time. Meghan intended to have it end right there. Then she felt it. The intentional unprovoked touch on her denim was something that took a millisecond to process. Her brain switched to primal protective mode. When it was over, between the witnesses, including Vincent, it was Meghan’s word against the cadet’s statement. The camera, still recording Vincent at the time of the incident, didn’t capture the moment.

He touched her left rear cheek with his right hand. It happened quickly, as if premeditated. But it was unmistakable. It was the kind of thing women understood because it wasn’t the first time it happened to Meghan. Because she was a little less than average height, men thought she had a little less than the average combat training.

The moment she felt his brazen fingers graze the crease of her jeans, Meghan snapped to respond. She turned right, swiping her hand down to deflect his fingers. It was instinct and muscle memory.

Meghan grabbed the first digit she contacted and heaved with all her weight, pulling and twisting. She felt the cadet’s thumb turn in a direction beyond human mobility. She felt the tension and then the thick ‘pop’ as if separating two sections of a turkey joint during the holidays.

When it was over, the cadet wailed in agony, cupping his arm, backpedaling away from Meghan the second she released the grip on the digit. His fellow cadets and the two troopers rushed to his aid. He stumbled away from Meghan, still standing with her back to the table, the camera set up, and Vincent.

The cadet slid along the file wall until he reached the archway. She didn’t get a good look at the hand, but from what she felt and the amount of pressure Meghan used to bend back the thumb, she knew something tore loose in his hand.

“You guys know where the clinic is?” she asked. Meghan walked toward the cadet. He scrambled to back up more, sliding along the wall, and

passing through the archway into the lobby. He almost fell over the knee-high wall and swinging door to the side of the tall counter. "Get him to the clinic. Tell Dr. Tate to bill the city for a visit."

Meghan approached the table again. She turned off the digital camera and closed the program on the laptop. Vincent sat very still as if considering the proximity of a predator.

"Help yourself to a soda in the fridge, Vincent. If you can hang out here for a while, I'd appreciate it. Someone else will come to talk to you."

"Am I under arrest?" he asked.

"I don't know, Vincent. Right now, all I care about is Christine Tuktu. If you're being honest with me, I am not going to arrest you. But you need to know if those female items come up with her DNA, we are all done. You and I being polite to one another, it all ends. You got that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked at the trooper, watching them. "Get Vincent back to his apartment. Sit with him while they secure that warrant. I don't want anyone thinking he's under arrest for the disappearance. Vincent doesn't need the added drama."

"I need to relay that to Sergeant Reeve, ma'am," the trooper said.

"I don't care, as long as you return Vincent to his house. Take my four-wheeler." She tossed him the keys. "He's not under arrest until you find something. Vincent is free to go. If Reeve has a problem with that, tell him to take it up with Special Agent in Charge, Wilcox. You'll see I'm right."

Vincent stood up from the conference table and zipped up his coat. He lingered by the chair, not sure if it was safe to leave. The trooper phoned Reeve, and she shook her head.

Meghan collected her laptop, left the camera on the tripod, and marched into her office. She had an incident report to draft. After all, she dealt with in the day; the last thing she wanted was a personal matter with a cadet showing signs of his future in law enforcement. Conduct unbecoming of an agent was a good lead on the report. It wasn't up to Meghan how the bureau handled it. All she had was her word against him. If it wasn't enough, it didn't matter. Meghan had had enough of playing nice while the state and federal agencies walked all over her town. She had a job to do. Up

to that point, using the unwanted physical contact as a jolt, Meghan decided to do her job. She wasn't taking orders from Dana, Reeve, or Wilcox.

## Chapter Thirteen

No school on Monday meant most of the kids in town were still up, wandering the streets, and interested in the additional law enforcement officers roaming Kinguyakkii. Meghan spent a few hours following the incident with the cadet writing the report on the matter. The young man she later found out named Aston Holmes returned to the Chena, where they had secured sleeping arrangements with the hotel manager. Meghan hoped after Memorial Day weekend, she'd never think about the misogynist again. It was after eleven that Sunday night before Meghan rode back out to the search site. It was a forty-minute ride on the four-wheeler.

The crew from the shoreline continued to work in shifts. Unfortunately, it was the beginning of another long night with no sleep. Oliver looked grim. Lester looked like a man about to fly apart in all directions. Whatever happened with the search and retrieval of the youth jacket, Lester had his fill of the others. Meghan understood the man had more experience than anyone else waiting and watching the joint operations. He didn't criticize the search pattern, but Lester didn't take orders from anyone when it was his time to search for the body. It was a hopeless endeavor. They knew collectively that a child of ten, approximately 70lbs and fifty-four inches in height wasn't enough weight or mass to quickly locate. The water temperature in the Sound was 13°F. Salt made it harder for water molecules to bond, forming water crystals. Salt molecules repel ice naturally. The debris in the water allowed ice to collect on objects, but the ocean didn't freeze solid in May. Anything below 32°F, the average adult had less than fifteen minutes before hyperthermia. A child without protection on grinding and random sheets and chunks of ice as big as cars had little to no chance for survival. It made searching incredibly tricky. The military used infrared scopes to scan the shoreline. The high-tech equipment reminded Meghan why they searched desperately, though fruitlessly.

Meghan ordered a stack of pizzas for the law enforcement agents and a case of water. They dealt with the situation in a remote area of the peninsula. The community had to wait for the interagency results. Everyone, Meghan soon learned, remained tight-lipped about the search. One thing she knew for sure and confirmed by the look on Lester's face, they would not recover Christine Tuktu's body. Nonetheless, the possibility

of her young soul added to the depth of the cold black sea was a distinct and very real possibility. Meghan stayed out of the search and hovered along the shore with the rest of the observers.

Wilcox looked like a man who carried his burdens in a travel case. He knew how to compartmentalize the various situations he faced. He had a lot on his plate. He looked cold and tired. Meghan added to his overflowing all-you-can-eat plate by assaulting one of the young men who Wilcox brought with him from Anchorage. They shared a look on the shore in the dark but did not talk about the incident. The military had several large canopy tents with portable generators and propane heaters. While the shifts on the ice got frosty, those waiting behind, got warm again.

Then there was Dana. The overzealous turncoat who had undermined all of Meghan's authority and personally disrupted the status quo for the rest of the community remained diligent and active. It was as if finding Christine was the purpose of her visit to Alaska. She had something to prove, and Meghan knew it wasn't Dana's bitterness toward her. It had something to do with a harbored professional guilt or secret or something she carried with her everywhere. Her presence, Meghan saw, was distant, as if Wilcox isolated her from the rest of the search teams. It was as if Dana was a virus personified; anyone who came in contact with her left feeling beaten up and worn out.

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It was never a good time to deal with the death of a child. The following hours, after retrieving the jacket from the floe, the military personnel, the state troopers, and the FBI field agents eventually came to a joint decision to wrap up operations after sunrise. Word didn't leave the teams and seep into the general public, which surprised Meghan. She saw Calvin in his lime-green Ford Focus, waiting at the edge of the Air Force property for the rest of the crews to file through the gates and return to the police department.

When Meghan rode by him, Lester cold and exhausted riding on the back of the four-wheeler, he knew by her look that the next piece of news wasn't hopeful. Meghan branched off from the other procession while Oliver drove a group in the Suburban back to the department. Meghan drove Lester home. She parked in front of his house.

Silvia heard the four-wheeler and stepped outside in her heavy robe and thermal pajamas. She stood at the top of the stairs leading into the arctic entry, watching her husband and Meghan.

“I need to finish my reports,” he said. It was a halfhearted attempt to stay with the rest of the group.

“I need you to go inside, get warm, and get some sleep. You’ve done more than enough. Thank you, Lester.”

He didn’t want kudos for not finding a lost child. Lester wasn’t a man who needed thanks for doing what was right. Meghan shook her head, looking up at Silvia. It was nonverbal communication that women shared and said more than words. Lester climbed off the four-wheeler like a drunkard. He’d spent hours and used up his energy stores for the sake of finding a child. Meghan, the pragmatic person, not one to shed tears or show emotion in public, had other ways of dealing with the haunting reality. Lester, a reformed alcoholic, needed a stoic support system that Silvia supplied him. After a hot shower and sleep, Lester could find a way to keep going without the need for another drink.

When Meghan returned to the police department, she saw Calvin standing beside his car. They shared a look, but he was patient enough to wait for the authorities to finish their work before he did his job. He wasn’t alone. Several people congregated outside the department, milling around in the muddy gravel.

Meghan saw Duane’s pick-up parked at City Hall in the ‘reserved’ spot. The only place in the entire city with designated parking, a mounted sign between the police contractor trailers and City Hall, Duane wanted to make a statement. It made sense, having the community come together for the terrible business, but it didn’t make it easier.

One thing that Meghan appreciated, in the darkest of times in the area, petty crimes dropped to nothing. The phone lines paused in reports from mischief and complaints. People banded together. It was a matter of drafting the report and communicating to everyone what took place. First, they had to deal with explaining the series of circumstances to the grieving mother and her boyfriend.

Meghan saw Joane and Earl waiting outside, among the others. Meghan saw Cecil standing beside his mother but looking around and a



little detached. Bringing in the family allowed them separation from the others. Meghan motioned for the small family as Earl crushed a cigarette under his boot tip in the mud. Closure was a long process, and Meghan hated the grieving process.

## Chapter Fourteen

A respectable wave of melancholy filled the space inside the police department. Six Alaska State Troopers, eight FBI personnel, took their time around the family. Reeve, Chandler, and Wilcox remained at the station but ordered their teams to dismantle operations and prepare for departure from Kinguyakkii. Dana occupied the other end of the conference table. She worked with her tablet and smartphone, working on reports. Meghan knew while Wilcox took point and was officially in charge in Alaska, Dana reported to her section chief in New York, Garret McKee. It was a move that Wilcox didn't care about, and Meghan saw Dana's tension spread to the operations leader.

While the timid and personal information came from Wilcox and Reeve, Meghan and the others stayed out of the way. Oliver, looking disheveled and worse for wear, found Meghan in her office as she stayed out the way.

Joane sat in the chair Vincent occupied hours before. Earl stood behind her. Meghan knew the rest of the scene. She knew how it went through the whole series of grieving and eventually would make its way through the rest of the town.

"You need to go home and get some sleep," she said.

Oliver stood in the small office, watching through the window. He didn't look at Meghan when he talked. "I feel like we should do more."

"The best thing right now is to let her begin the process. I'm glad Reeve had the jacket kept out of sight."

"She identified it," Lester said.

"I know. But I saw three people in town wearing the same jacket over the past two days."

Lester looked at her.

"It's common, and people are spend-thrifts when they need to be," she said. "Can you go home, please? I don't want you getting sick on me. We'll handle it from here."

Lester looked through the bay window again. "I heard what happened with Cadet Holmes."

"That the kid who thought it was okay to touch my ass?" she asked.

“Yup, I heard you dislocated his thumb.”

Meghan scuffed. “I don’t care.”

“Yeah,” he said. Oliver looked at her. There was a hint of a smile. Despite the drama, he had the twinkle of mischief. “I wish I saw that.”

“Go home, get some sleep.”

“What about them?” he asked. “Can we do something for them?”

“I’ll talk to Calvin and Duane. We can see about bringing together the community all at once. We can use the gym. Everyone in town has to know by now, but we’ll face it head-on and grieve together.” Meghan sighed. “Do you know if anyone found Eugene Tuktu?”

“Why?”

“No one saw him since Saturday night. I’ve left voicemail for him. Lester and I went to his house. I know he’s not one of the people outside. I’d like to know where Chrissy’s uncle is when everyone else is here.”

Oliver nodded. She saw the realization morph his face. Meghan had multifaceted ideas about the missing uncle. The darkest idea came with the fact that maybe they had two missing, presumed dead people, and not one.

Oliver moved to the doorway.

“Do me a favor, get some sleep, keep it quiet about Eugene.”

“Is that because of the FBI or your friend?” he asked.

Meghan shook her head. “Neither, when have you ever seen me worried about what other people think about me? I’m concerned because you will see how people who are nice to each other when things are right as rain can turn ugly when they get a whiff of a rumor. I believe in following up with all parts of the investigations. One part might not have anything to do with the other. But right now, we have the niece of a missing man who possibly drowned. That is too close for a coincidence.”

Oliver’s face went through a series of emoting as the thoughts banged around inside his skull. He opened his mouth to speak, but Meghan held up her finger.

“Later, get some sleep now. That’s an order. If these guys need to get back to the airport, I’ll shuttle them. I filed a preliminary Missing Person report on Eugene. I will talk to Reeves and Wilcox about it. Right now, you don’t need to do anything. You’ve done enough. Get some sleep.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Oliver slipped out of the office unnoticed. Meghan witnessed the hard truth of Christine Tuktu’s disappearance. Meghan also saw something else that others failed to miss. She saw the young man with bright eyes and adult patience. The boy started the whole situation with a few words to the right people.

Cecil Tuktu stood out of the way, passed by, and shuffled around. He wore a winter coat that was too small for his frame. He removed the blue ski cap and gripped it in his fists. The adults around him tended to his mother. Had Meghan not sat back out of the way, watching the reality show through the lens of the window that separated her office from the rest of the department, she would have missed Cecil too. He drew up into himself as they ignored him.

Meghan remembered the bedroom. The space distinctly divided between siblings. They made do with the area. They shared a room, and Meghan wondered if Cecil’s interaction with his sister was a positive influence.

She moved out of the office and slipped behind the grieving adults. Earl consoled Joane. Wilcox, Reeve, and Dana huddled together to discuss their next moves. Meghan went to the coffee station. She grabbed a mug, filled it with hot water, collected a packet of instant hot chocolate, a spoon, and got Cecil’s attention. Meghan ignored Dana, glaring at her. She moved back to the office and motioned for Cecil to follow.

Meghan kept a relatively clear desk. She placed the mug and packet on the counter. The invitation to a cup of cocoa proved too tempting for Cecil. Meghan moved the chair closer to the desk. He sat down tentatively. Cecil shrugged out of the tight winter coat, left it in the chair around him.

He saw the box of pizza on the filing cabinet. Meghan left one in the office while she took the rest out to the worksite.

“It’s cold,” she said. “I can warm it up.”

Cecil shook his head. He tore open the packet and poured the brown powder into the mug. He used the spoon to stir carefully. Meghan tore off a few sheets of paper towels.

She got a slice of pizza out of the box. Cheese pizza filled people without complaint. It was cheap and easy, and Cecil didn’t have to pick off

toppings before he took a bite.

Meghan sat in her chair, facing him. She glanced at Wilcox and Reeve watching her. Wilcox nodded lightly and went back to their close conversation.

“How are you doing?”

“I don’t, okay, I guess.”

Meghan didn’t judge Cecil’s indifference to the recent news that his sister presumably drowned. Children were resilient. Depending on his living condition and experience, Cecil had to deal with the information in his own way.

She watched him take small bites, chew with his mouth closed. He wiped his face and sipped at the hot chocolate. At thirteen, he was average height and a little less than the average weight for a child his age. He waited and watched, and as Meghan saw him take in the rest of the office, she realized there was a layer to Cecil that wasn’t open to scrutiny.

“So, you like to read.”

He nodded munching.

“You see your uncle at the Memorial Dance on Saturday night?”

Cecil stopped munching. He looked thoughtful for a second and shook his head.

“Do you spend a lot of time with your uncle?”

The headshake was short and pointed.

“I heard your sister likes to draw,” Meghan said. “I didn’t see pictures on her wall in the bedroom.”

Cecil shrugged.

Meghan removed a business card from the top center draw in the desk. She slid it across the surface. Cecil looked at it but didn’t pick up the card.

“I want you to call me, that’s my private number. It’s the same one your mother has,” she said. “I want to make sure you’re doing okay with all of this. It’s going to get harder before it gets better.”

“I know,” he said.

It wasn't the kind of answer that had an attitude. Cecil seemed precocious without being derivative, like the know-it-all attitude of teenagers. Cecil was a little underdeveloped physically, but Meghan suspected he occupied himself with science fiction and fantasy novels. He had an active imagination. Speculative fiction helped foster creativity. It allowed children to develop problem-solving skills, and above everything else, it was a healthy way for Cecil to cope with the intense emotions brought on by the sudden death of a family member.

"Did you like to read to Christine?" she asked.

Cecil shook his head. "Chrissy doesn't like most of the books I like. She likes the little kid stuff. I read all that stuff a long time ago. I don't want to reread it all."

Meghan nodded. She picked up on the present-tense of the answer. Cecil hadn't put it all together; they were dealing with the loss of his sister.

"Hey, Cecil, come on, let's go." Earl Melton stood in the doorway to Meghan's office. It wasn't an order. Meghan saw Earl held back his grief.

She watched as Cecil struggled to put on the coat. It took a little to fit his arms into the sleeves. He pulled on the ski cap again.

"Thank you for the cocoa and the pizza," he said.

"You are very welcome, Cecil. I am sorry for your loss." Meghan waited to see the response.

Cecil blinked at her as if not understanding how to answer. He kept his mouth tight as he turned around. Earl wrapped an arm around Cecil. At thirteen, kids weren't interested in physical contact with adults. They had a relation, a bond that meant Earl played surrogate, and it looked positive. Meghan didn't read into anything when it came to their family. They had a lot to work out and a whole town to face. Cecil was on the long road to adulthood, and the death of someone close took away the spirit of being a child.

## Chapter Fifteen

Meghan managed to manipulate the conversation among the adults in the room after the Tuktus left. It came to using Duane as her mouthpiece. Reeve tolerated Wilcox inviting the mayor. When it came to conversation about how to talk to the rest of the town, he was a good contact. She'd suggested the gathering, and Duane ran with it.

"We'll address the news delicately," Duane said.

At that point, it wasn't about what Wilcox wanted, or how Reeve reacted to the spread of information. It was up to the family; Meghan wanted Duane to understand the logistics.

"You might want to talk to Earl about arranging a vigil," she said. "We can manage a donation point here to keep an eye on the funds."

The idea took Duane by surprise. "Yes, we can do that, in the name of the town to help with coping."

Meghan held back from saying anything. She liked that someone else noticed the mayor's position.

"Don't make this about you," Wilcox said. "It's not a platform to run a reelection campaign. This is about everyone. I will follow up with Christine's school counselor to make sure they have the right plan for talking to her classmates."

Children in Alaska dealt with the death of friends more often than the rest of the United States. Despite its geography size, Alaska was a small community. With the least people per square mile in the US, most everyone knew each other. Statistically, people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were among the highest affected by depression and suicide in Alaska. Teenagers had a myriad of problems. Kids in Alaska had the same social issues as the rest of the lower forty-eight states. Then they sometimes had to compound the isolation factors and the cultural impacts.

Meghan didn't want to think that a ten-year-old child decided to take a walk on the ice alone while the rest of the town had their backs turned. Yet, there was no better time to get away than a holiday event. It was impactful and caught the whole region by surprise. If Christine Tuktuk wanted to leave the world with everyone remembering her, there was no better time than a federal holiday honoring people who died. Military

personnel aside, many families used the holiday as a reminder of their loved ones.

“You have a minute?” Reeve asked. He didn’t wait for Meghan to respond. Instead, he wandered through the group and went to Meghan’s office.

She closed the door behind her. It wasn’t before she saw Dana standing with Wilcox. She faced Reeve.

He had a large stature. Reeve took up a lot of space in the office without trying. He didn’t sit down and had shed his winter gear when they returned from the shoreline. Meghan refused to allow the man to intimidate her. The uniform worked on civilians. A semiautomatic pistol, taser, bulletproof vest with the AST sergeant badge on the front with the trooper logo across his back, he was a force of one. Reeve was also Meghan’s immediate supervisor.

“I wanted to let you know I’m filing a report the Borough regarding your current behavior. I talked with Special Agent Wilcox and Agent Wyatt already. Effective immediately, I am relieving you of your position as police chief.”

“Fine,” she said.

Meghan moved around the desk. She closed down the laptop. She began collecting the few items around the office that belonged to her.

Reeve appeared genuinely shocked by Meghan’s lack of retort. “Don’t you want to know why?” he asked.

Meghan removed the keyring from her pocket. She found the keys that belonged to the city and removed them from the ring. Meghan tossed them on the desk.

“I imagine you’ll give me some lame ass excuse about how I handled a delicate situation regarding the missing child. Or maybe you’re pissed about my incident with a sexual bully while interviewing a potential witness. Is there anything else?”

Reeve looked a little outside himself for a moment. He quickly recovered. Their conversation happened behind a closed door, but it was pointless. If both people in the station knew about it, the only other person who saw her interaction with the commanding officer was another potential boss. As mayor of the city, Duane was a direct conduit to the people who



mattered. Besides the Alaska State Troopers, the North Slope Borough held Meghan's contract with the city. Her actions reflected on their decision to protect her as their village police chief.

"It has a lot to do with your behavior, Sheppard. You think you're too good for this job. You think you can do whatever you want, whenever you want, and don't have to answer for anything. You're accountable for these people. They look to you as someone who upholds the law and enforces it justly, instead of someone who shoots from the hip and makes up stuff as you go along."

Meghan shook her head. "That's funny coming from a guy who had a known extortionist and bootlegger in this exact spot not too long ago."

"I'll admit that Haynes wasn't the right fit for the community. He's paying his penalties—"

"Penalties?" Meghan said. "This isn't some sports game, Emanuel. The guy ran a bootlegging business right out of this office. He had people on the payroll that turned the other direction. He was a police chief for twenty-three years. What else did Herbert Haynes get away with in all that time?"

"You're trying to fill big shoes. But you seem to take a lot of liberties around here and manage to stay inside the lines."

"I have—excuse me— *had* a whole town to watch over, plus how many communities to deal with, all the while shorthanded and without a gun. I think I did okay considering the circumstances."

Meghan pulled her coat from the rack beside the door. She put it on and put her modest collection of personal items inside the backpack.

"You never liked me doing this job," Meghan said. She pulled open the door. "You hate that I've left you out of how many big busts around here? The thing is, Reeve, if you came to me, if you said, 'hey, can you include me before you start talking to investigators,' I would have done that. Instead, I have to hear from others, like Detective Anderson, that you felt dejected because I didn't follow the proper chain of command."

"I do my job very well. I keep a whole community together, and I'm not at all complaining about what I don't have because I have the right people working with me. What's going to happen with Lester and Oliver?"

“They’re fine. They listen to orders. It’s you that has the problem,” Reeve said. “Cadet Holmes is looking to file criminal assault charges against you. Don’t go too far in case we need to find you.”

It was the training kicking in, and Meghan didn’t want to fall into that trap. Police officer training meant they had to use their negotiation skills to make arrests. It was counterintuitive to dealing with suspects. Meghan’s training with the FBI meant she had to listen first, and then react. Cops wanted to arrest people. It was what made them cops.

“Why not take a minute,” Reeve said. He’d lost one cadet to Meghan in the heat of a debate. The man was ill-prepared and mouthy. Reeve had a gun and set his feet firm on dismissing Meghan.

“I’m leaving. I’ll get out of Alaska as soon as I can.” She looked at Duane. “You make sure you take care of that family.” Meghan looked at Dana. She wanted to say something. She wanted to start somewhere. The trouble with Dana was that Meghan had so much to tell her, it was impossible to find a place to start. Instead, Meghan shook her head at her former friend.

She managed to close the front door without slamming it. With the backpack slung over her shoulder, Meghan ignored the rest of the people milling around outside. She slipped by Calvin as he tried to talk to her. He watched her leave, and Meghan hoped the man didn’t see the tears that froze on her cheek as she tried to hide her face from the world.

## Chapter Sixteen

Meghan wasn't someone to wallow in self-defeat for too long. It wasn't in her nature. When she bounced back from a close quarter gunshot wound to the chest, her trauma surgeon suggested Meghan's body refused to give up on life. The surgeon suggested Meghan had a lot left to do on earth before she left, and it didn't matter how many times her heart stopped during the procedure. Getting away from the department put her life into perspective. She took a few shortcuts; it was true. Meghan never gave up on her oath. She believed in the model. She believed in integrity. Unfortunately, sometimes people had more seniority than her, and no matter what she did in life, she still had to take orders from a supervisor.

Meghan wondered if missing the vigil for Christine was a selfish move, or the right one considering the whole town probably knew already that Trooper Sergeant Reeve relieved her of duties as Police Chief. Meghan saw he had the trooper IT department deactivate her access to the state email and access to the criminal database. She managed to upload Vincent Atkinson's interview following her incident with Cadet Holmes. She had a copy of the audio transcript on her laptop, which she promptly deleted.

By Wednesday, the realization that life changed hit Meghan like a bucket of icy water in the face. She had packed Dana's luggage and left it on the porch. It disappeared between Tuesday and Wednesday, and Meghan didn't care if someone stole it. Dana carried her passport and federal credentials with her everywhere.

For the first time since Meghan lived in town, she drew the curtains throughout the house. Meghan ignored the phone calls from anyone associated with the City of Kinguyakkii. She deleted text messages from the same group of people without taking the time to respond or read the texts.

Meghan ignored the few visitors who came by the house. It was easy to know who stopped by because they usually called through the door.

When Meghan finally got motivated to start looking at the future outside law enforcement, she needed a little inspiration.

"I didn't think you'd answer the phone," Meghan said. She reclined on the sofa with a blanket over her legs. It was a little after three in the afternoon, which translated to a little after seven in the evening on New York time.

“I’m fixing dinner for Dad,” Brittany said. “What’s up?”

“Oh nothing, I just wanted to hear your voice.” Meghan didn’t know what it was about listening to the soothing sounds of her daughter’s voice, but sometimes, even a few thousand miles away, Brittany helped Meghan cope with stress or loneliness.

“Well, that’s okay, I guess.” The noise in the background had a little music, tableware, and the general sounds of someone doing something that wasn’t related to Alaska or Meghan’s life. “Hey, I applied for a scholarship to UAA.”

The University of Alaska was a long way from New York. Out of state tuition was expensive. Brittany was pragmatic, like her mother, and frugal like her father. A teenager that never had to worry about a meal or a roof overhead didn’t understand how money worked. There was nothing wrong with Syracuse University. Brittany could live at her father’s house and commute to school every day. Yet, someone who had a college in her backyard didn’t want to go there. She wanted to explore other options. Meghan knew Brittany thought about Alaska because of her mother.

“Well, I hope you still apply for scholarships to Ithaca or Syracuse. You still have a whole year anyway.”

“I know, but it’s good to get a head start. Even if they reject me before the fall semester, I can apply for next year when I am out of high school.”

Brittany, the forward-thinking and conscientious young woman, knew she had actively pursued what she wanted in life because it wasn’t handing out rewards for complacency.

“Maybe you’ll change your mind. They’re big on volleyball at UAA, but I don’t think they have a track team.”

“What’s wrong?” Brittany asked.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the second time you subtly talked me out of applying to the university. Something happened, I know you.”

“I’m considering my options.”

“Oh? You mean like moving back to New York?”

“Would you like that?” Meghan needed to know what her daughter thought because after what happened and what Dana said, Meghan didn’t feel much like Mother of the Year.

“I like you living in Alaska. I think it’s cool. It’s a great topic at parties.”

“Whoa young lady, what parties?”

“We have weekend raves in abandoned buildings around Syracuse, where we do bath salts and dance around naked.”

“What did I tell you about that stuff?”

“Don’t dance naked?”

“That’s right.” They shared a laugh, but Meghan found it hard to feel the humor.

“Okay, Mom.” There was a clanging of dishes on Brittany’s side of the phone call. “What’s *really* going on?”

“I don’t know. I’ve had a few things going on at work,” she said.

“Anything interesting?” Brittany asked.

“I guess so,” she said. There was a point when Meghan wanted to spill it all out for her daughter. She held back because burdening her daughter with the realization her mother lost her job, wasn’t something Meghan wanted to talk about. It wasn’t right for the appetite, either.

“I’m thinking of taking a sabbatical from work.”

“You mean you’re quitting?”

“Not exactly,” Meghan said. “I’m considering my options.”

“Does that mean you’re moving out of Kinguyakkii too?”

“That’s a possibility.”

“That’s too bad. I kind of like that place.”

“You didn’t spend enough time here.”

“I’m coming back to visit. Maybe I’ll stay a year before I start college.”

“You are going to college as soon as high school ends. It’s easier for you, and you don’t have to deal with real-life drama until you’re a little older.”

“I don’t know if I want to deal with real-life drama at all. You’re a little older, and I think there’s a lot more going on with you than you’re telling me.”

“You know, I’d let you know if something happens.”

“You mean like the time some guy tried to strangle you, and you poisoned him with peanut butter?” Brittany said.

“That was not something I wanted you to worry about?”

“What about the time you fell in the ocean and almost drowned?”

“That happened because I was stupid and took a huge risk. That won’t happen again.”

“What happened this time?”

“I probably permanently injured an FBI cadet.”

“Oh, wow. What happened? What did he do?”

Brittany understood that it was likely the other party who started the situation. Meghan ended it. She hoped, leading by example, Brittany kept her temper in check when her mother acted out. She decided to keep the details of the incident quiet until she got arrested for assault, or eventually got out of the state.

“We’ll save it for another time.”

“It sounds like you’re all done with doing your job up there.”

“I think so,” she said.

“That’s too bad. I’ll bet a lot of people like you keeping them safe. I’ll bet they’ll be sorry when you leave.”

“I don’t know.”

It felt like no one cared about her and what happened to her. Meghan didn’t want to get too far down a depression rabbit hole because she ran out of pretzels and ice cream a few hours after she lost her job. She didn’t want to replenish her supplies because Meghan wasn’t interested in seeing anyone else. She suspected the whole town knew she’d failed.

## Chapter Seventeen

It was daybreak on Thursday morning when someone pounded on the front door startling Meghan out of a blissful dream, sleeping on the couch. She managed to check the time on her smartphone before sitting up, debating on answering the door. She wore black yoga pants and a heavy sweatshirt and thermal socks. Meghan hoped her hair wasn't too ratty. She knew showering and brushing her teeth weren't at the front of her self-quarantined house-arrest. Meghan didn't intend hugging or kissing anyone, so as long as she didn't get too close, what did it matter?

"Why don't you get dressed," Lester said. He walked inside immediately. Meghan stepped back as he stood on the floor mat in front of the door.

"Why do I have to get dressed? Are you here to arrest me?"

"What are you talking about?" Lester had a sense of humor. It sometimes happened when Meghan saw him smile or laugh. Give the recent turn of events; she gave him some license for the stony attitude. "I want you to come with me when I talk to Gene. He's back in town."

"I'm not police chief anymore, Lester. You don't have to pander to me."

"That's bullshit, and you know it. Reeve told me I was in charge for now. I'm not interested, but whatever is going on between you and him is your business. Right now, I want to talk to Gene about his niece and find out what happened to him."

"Does it look like something happened to him?"

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I? I haven't talked to him."

Meghan wandered back to the warm spot on the sofa. She pulled the comforter around her shoulders.

"You know he terminated me, right?"

"I know he submitted a review of your behavior with that idiot from Anchorage."

"How much do you know about it?"

"Vincent told me all about it."

"Did they arrest him?"

“No, but the FBI executed a warrant on his apartment. They collected his personal items. I think they want to test items found in his apartment against Chrissy’s DNA. Given that me and Oliver both vouched for Vincent, seeing him at the dance, I don’t think they plan to arrest him for anything.”

“I don’t know. I saw the underwear he had. I’m worried that his obsession got the better of him. He should know better. He’s not a pedophile, but if one person comes forward and identifies any of those items, Vincent will get a suspended sentence and have to register as a sex offender. He’ll lose his job and his apartment all for the sake of gratification.”

“I’m not judging him,” Lester said. “I am curious about what happened to Gene. I want to know why he’s been MIA for a while. He waits until after we hold a vigil for Chrissy.”

“I’m sorry I missed it,” Meghan said guiltily.

“I understand, but you owe an apology to the Tuktus.”

“I know. I’m planning on going to their apartment soon.”

“You know, I called the title company on that property,” Lester said.

“Thanks, but that’s not my business anymore.”

“The house is in Clifford’s name. It’s like you said. It belonged to him. Gene pays the mortgage, and that’s all the bank cares about.”

Meghan nodded. “You can talk to him about it. But I don’t know what good it will do. You can ask him to vacate the property, but he doesn’t have to leave unless the bank issues a foreclosure notice. They’ll take their time if he continues to pay the mortgage. Even if he stops paying, it could take years for the bank to foreclose on the property. It isn’t until that happens that you can arrest him for trespassing. He could squat there, and you risk playing security for the bank instead of a cop for the city.”

“How about you explain that to Gene when we see him,” Lester said.

“You know I’m a civilian now. You can’t take civilians on investigations.”

“Well, you’re all I got.”

“What do you mean? Where’s Oliver?”



“He quit as soon as he heard about what happened to you.”

“What? No way,” Meghan said.

“They need to replace him.”

“Do you have any help?”

Lester shook his head. “Reeve took everyone back to Anchorage. Agent Wilcox took his cadets back to the academy, and I took your friend to the airport yesterday morning.”

“I am sorry about Dana.”

“I don’t care. I’ll never see her again. I’m worried about what happens around here when people think they lost their police again. We started putting faith back into the department with you as chief. Now people are going to lose faith again. Not to mention what happens when people know we’re lawless again.”

“They got you,” Meghan said, trying to soften the edges. Oliver leaving his post out of some loyalty to Meghan made her feel wanted, but it was selfish on her part. Lester needed the sergeant. Oliver abandoned his responsibilities voluntarily. Meghan didn’t have a choice to leave.

Lester remained unmoved. Meghan stood up again; she left the duvet on the couch in the cocoon shape of her body. She moved around the furniture.

“Silvia wants me to transfer to the cable company or the power plant. She doesn’t want me doing this by myself.”

“That leaves a big hole,” Meghan said.

“You left a big hole when they let you walk out of the place.”

“I won’t take that as another reference to my weight, Lester.”

“I’m not doing this alone, Meghan. I am too old to stress about this. Come with me today. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Okay, let me get dressed,” she said. Meghan started to walk down the small hallway.

“It’s okay,” Lester said. “I can wait until you take a shower.” It wasn’t a suggestion, not by the look on his face when Meghan saw it.

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Meghan saw the beat up and muddy four-wheeler parked in the muddy divots in front of the house on Rurik Way. The wells were so deep that Eugene intentionally used the gouged earth as a kickstand for the machine at that point; it was a conscious decision to park in the same place all the time.

“Gene, it’s Lester Graves,” he said, banging on the door.

Meghan stood in the gravel facing the tiny porch. Lester stood in front of the door. With the house elevated off the ground, usually, people walking to the door made noise outside. Lester and Meghan didn’t hear anything. Lester banged on the door again.

“Gene, I know you’re in there.” He tried the doorknob. It turned in his glove, and he pushed open the door. “Gene?”

Lester and Meghan exchanged glances. Lester wore BDU pants, the button-down uniform top, badge, and the Kinguyakkii Police nylon insulated packet. His uniform gave Lester the authority to walk into Eugene’s residence for a welfare check. The moment Meghan walked up the steps and crossed the threshold, technically, she committed burglary, criminal trespass. If Eugene didn’t permit Meghan, she could face additional charges added to assaulting an officer. It turned into an extremely problematic Memorial Day weekend for Meghan. Some people looked for the best retail sales; Meghan had to consider the conditions of Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River, Alaska. It was her future home if Trooper Sergeant Reeve found out she helped Lester on a call.

Yet, the fact Eugene failed to answer his door put life over consequences when she followed Lester inside. She closed the door behind her to keep out the 34°F that clung to the day outside. Inside, Meghan felt the cool air and caught the scent of something familiar.

“You smell that?” Lester asked.

Meghan nodded. She scanned the visual living area. Boots kicked off by the door had thick pockets of mud clinging to the tread and leather top. She moved into the house on a mission. People were complacent in their homes. They moved around as if no one outside monitored their indoor behavior. That meant Eugene wasn’t actively hiding something from the police. She knew as Lester knew it, if they found anything, it was inadmissible in court.

Meghan ran her hands over the bulky coat on the rack next to the door. She found a bottle of whiskey in the pocket. Very little of the brown liquid remained inside the container.

Lester walked from the front door, down the hallway. He went room by room, opening doors, or looking inside.

“Back here,” he said.

Meghan left the bottle in Eugene’s coat pocket. She went down the hallway, where Lester stood facing inside the bedroom. Meghan peeked inside. She saw Eugene lying on his stomach, half-covered with the blanket. The bottom half of him, in the dirty underwear, showed quickly from the doorway. He snored lightly.

“Well, that’s an image I won’t get out of my head soon,” she said.

Lester pointed to the plastic bottle of cheap whiskey. It stood on the floor next to Eugene’s wet, muddy jeans. It had very little left inside the container.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“What do you mean? You’re the acting chief of police. What do you want to do?”

“Can I arrest him?”

Meghan looked at Eugene, still rooted in a drunken slumber.

“If you can get him to wake up and step outside of his house, you can make contact with him out in the open. That gives you enough probable cause for an arrest.” She pointed to the bottle. “You can’t get that without a warrant. You can’t get a warrant without having probable cause. You can’t get probable cause because you can’t see inside the house. After all, he has his bedroom window covered. The empty bottle I found in his coat isn’t visible without searching for it.”

“So, we wait until he wakes up? It could be hours before that happens. He could hide the evidence.”

Meghan nodded.

“What would you do?”

“You mean if I was still police chief or as a concerned citizen?”

“I need you to help me with this,” Lester said.

It was a plea from a man who knew working in a job alone that put him in contact with alcohol was a dangerous mix. Eugene's body odor gave off the telltale aroma of someone binge drinking. It was the kind of thing Meghan recognized from her job. It was the kind of thing that Lester feared because an addict never forgot. The body remembered when the brain wanted to block the signs.

"I think there's another way we can handle this," Meghan said. "We need to hurry because you want to catch him still asleep. We need to go see Joane."

## Chapter Eighteen

It wasn't easy walking into Mountain Manor again. Meghan felt the stares; she imagined she heard the wicked rumors echoing through the stairwell and the long corridor that led to the apartment. Lester knocked on the door. They had to wait, hearing the television blaring inside. Lester moved to hit again when the door opened.

Cecil stood in his Henley shirt, sweatpants, and white socks.

"Hello," he said. He looked around Lester to see Meghan standing out of the way in the hall. When he made eye contact with Meghan, he opened the door wider. "Come in."

Lester and Meghan moved into the house. The stacks of dirty dishes in the sink, the ripe scent of cumin and grease from the pan, told Meghan the family had a modest dinner of something resembling taco seasoned ground beef on white bread. She saw Earl sitting in the recliner watching TV. Cecil left the front door area where it overlapped the kitchenette.

"Hey, Earl," Lester said.

The man jolted, he hadn't heard them at the door. He fixed the chair in the upright position and stood to face them. Socks, boxer shorts, and a t-shirt, Meghan saw Earl's embarrassment. She wasn't concerned and didn't care.

"Is Joane around?" Meghan asked.

"Mom's in the bedroom," Cecil said.

It was the most offered as he retreated to the youth bedroom and closed the door. Meghan saw something changed in the room but didn't see enough inside to know what was different.

"We need to talk to Joane about some business," Lester said. He pulled off the beaver ushanka. He switched headgear depending on the weather and how much outside work he had to do. "It's important."

"She hasn't been well since, well, you know." Earl rubbed his neck. "Let me go see if she'll come out."

"It won't take a minute," Meghan said.

She wanted to see what changed in the bedroom Cecil shared with Christine. It had to wait.

It took a few minutes before Joane appeared. She looked like a broken ghostly version of herself. She didn't have a lot to offer her children. Cecil needed a new winter coat that fit him. They had unbalanced meals. The place was messy, and Joane wasn't functioning at her best because one of the two precious things that mattered most in her life had disappeared. Meghan knew the children, for all they had, were cared for and loved. It was evident in Cecil and Christine's bedroom. Someone spent more time cleaning their room over the rest of the house.

"Hi, Joane," Lester said. "We needed to ask you a few questions."

"Is this about Chrissy?" The moment she quickly said her daughter's name, Joane buckled with the word. It physically assaulted her.

"This is about the house where Eugene lives on Rurik Way," Lester said. He looked at Meghan to take over.

"Lester took the time to check with the title company regarding the legal owner of the house."

"Eugene owns the place," Earl said. "He got it from Cliff when he died."

"Do you know if he has any paperwork for the property?" Meghan asked. "Something like a quitclaim deed?"

"What's that?" Joane asked after she sniffled and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her robe.

"Its legal paperwork in Alaska used to transfer real estate property between two parties. The grantor gives away their interest in the property to the grantee." Lester explained the principle using his hands, gesturing from left to right representing the transaction. "I checked the title company to see if they had a quitclaim deed on file. They couldn't find any in the property listing. If that is something Clifford did with Eugene, maybe Eugene has a copy of it."

"So, I don't understand. What does it matter?" Joane asked.

"Lester also checked with the courts to see if you filed a divorce decree or annulment."

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. "We separated, but never got around to getting a divorce. Is that a problem?"

“No, no, you’re fine. You might have entitlement to benefits if Clifford had anything through his work. Something for the children,” she said and waved her hand. “What I’m, I mean, Lester wants to know is if you can give him access to enter the house.”

“That’s Eugene’s house,” Earl said.

“No, not legally, not if it’s still in Clifford’s name. Which it is,” Meghan said. “And technically, since you and Clifford never got divorced, the house belongs to Joane as the legal owner to Clifford’s estate.”

“Is that true?”

Lester nodded. “Right now, we need your permission to enter the house as the legal owner. If you want to dispute Eugene living there, we can handle that another time. Right now, we want to go into the house and talk to Eugene.”

“Is there something wrong with him?” Joane asked.

“He may be intoxicated,” Meghan said. “We want to do a welfare check on him. If you permit us, we can go in and see if he’s okay. We can look around the house, too, if that it’s okay with you.”

Joane waited to answer. Meghan held her breath. It hinged on her because there was no other way for Lester to get a warrant. He’d have to wait for Eugene to leave the property with the empty bottles visible. Lester had no way to stop and frisk him unless Eugene was publicly intoxicated.

Joane slowly absorbed the information. Meghan saw the realization open up her face like a flower reaching for sunlight.

“Gene told me Cliff gave him the house. I asked because I know the mortgage is about \$500 less a month than living here. Back when Cliff and I separated, he talked about moving to Anchorage because the construction business ended in Kinguyakkii. There was a contractor who wanted to hire him to travel for work.

“Then Gene moved in with Cliff not long after he got back. Then Cliff drowned.”

Joane’s faced a lot of hardship in her life. Meghan read the history in the way the woman caught up to her words. She shook her head.

“Where did Eugene come back from?” Meghan asked.

“Gene lived in northern California for a few years,” Earl said. He rubbed on Joane’s shoulder, enveloping her under his arm and held her. “He went down to rebuild houses after those fires. Then he ran into some troubles, I guess, and Cliff had him come back here.”

“What kind of trouble?” Meghan asked, pressing the envelope.

“Can we have your permission to get into the house?” Lester asked.

Meghan held off. He worked with her long enough to know Meghan multitasked on the job. She went down several paths at once and eventually came back around. Meghan knew they had pressing matters and had to prioritize.

“Yes, of course,” Joane said.

“Thank you, Joane.” Lester shook hands with Joane and Earl. “Come to the department sometime soon. We can go over the proper way you can claim the house if you want it.”

“What about Gene? He’s lived there a long while after Cliff died,” Earl said.

“He deceived you,” Meghan mumbled. “That seems like a good reason to have things done legally.”

“If you have a lawyer, it’s a good idea to let them know. They can draft a writ, and I can execute the duties to evict Gene from the property.”

Joane nodded. There was a lot more to absorb. By the look of the sleeves on the robe, Joane wasn’t able to absorb much else after all the crying.

“Listen, Joane, is it okay if I peek in on Cecil?” Meghan asked. She caught the scowl on Lester’s face as he turned to leave. “It will only take a minute.”

Meghan didn’t wait for Joane’s response. She stepped to the bedroom door and rapped lightly on it. She heard Cecil call from inside the room.

“Come in,” he said.

Meghan opened the door gingerly as if expecting it to break apart. Inside the room, Cecil had a small desk lamp on the nightstand by his bed. It wasn’t sufficient light for reading, but Cecil had a book open, sitting on the made bed with his back against the wall under the bookshelf.



“Hey, Cecil, I wanted to see how you were doing.”

She stood just inside the doorway. Cecil’s bed took up space next to the closet on the other side of the small bedroom. To Meghan’s immediate right was the divided area where Christine’s bed had a unicorn print pink comforter. The blank walls and the empty dresser top told Meghan that likely Cecil began housekeeping. He removed Christine’s posters. He cleared off the girly stuff that cluttered the dresser top. The immaculate room and the organized closet told Meghan that the brother grieved differently than the rest of the family.

A closet without a door wasn’t surprising in a place like a rundown apartment complex. At least, in Meghan’s view, the walls didn’t appear to have any noticeable holes. Many of the clothes that once occupied the hangers left gaps on the left side of the closet. Meghan wondered if she’d find differences in the dresser drawers. Some of the apparel belonged to Christine. A limited amount removed from the closet, more possibly removed from the drawers, but not all the clothes.

“So, I am just checking on you,” Meghan said. She took a step deeper into the room. Lester shuffled his boots by the door in an attempt to get Meghan’s attention. She ignored him. “I heard Christine liked to draw.”

Cecil had the book open across his knees. When he heard Meghan’s question, he looked up from the novel and nodded. “Yeah, she likes drawing a lot.”

“She didn’t hang any of her drawings around? I see you took down the posters she had on the walls. Did she ever draw for you?”

“Yeah, sometimes,” he said.

“Can I see something she drew for you?”

“Can we go now?” Lester asked.

Meghan understood the urgency. Catching Eugene before he destroyed the evidence lent to a better case and a solid conviction. Meghan felt Cecil’s interaction meant more than a little bootlegging, at that moment.

Cecil dropped a bookmark in the leaves of the book and closed it. He placed it on the bedspread and climbed off the bed. Meghan saw him open the bottom drawer of the nightstand. He removed a school folder with robots firing lasers from their eyes. He carried the folder to Meghan and handed it off.

Meghan spent the next four minutes going through the file. Christine had talent. At ten years old, she understood depth perception. She understood shadowing and shadow, light perspective, and clean, sharp edging.

“Oh my,” Meghan said.

It was unlike her to express surprise. Meghan saw a lot in life, far too much to find surprising things. The girl had talent. She felt her insides heat up. A talented individual with so much potential and infinite possibilities ahead of her, Christine lost her life before she’d reached her prime before she saw an opportunity.

The first picture was a cat. The next, a dog playing catch, and the other picture was Cecil, sitting on the bedspread reading his book. Christine got the detail of his pants. She captured the wispy strands of black hair that clung to the wall because static pulled at his scalp.

Meghan closed the folder and handed it back to Cecil.

“You should frame those pictures.”

Cecil shrugged and returned the folder to the desk drawer. He closed it gently and returned to the bedspread.

“So, doesn’t Christine have a drawing pad she used for her work?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I saw the pictures in the folder have the same textured paper—the kind used from a drawing pad. The top edges of the pictures have perforation, where the pages clung to the ring. Did she have more than one pad? I’d think your sister had so much inside that she wanted to get it all down on paper.”

“I think she has a drawing pad.”

“Did she have more than one?”

“I think so, why?”

“I wanted to see what she drew.”

“I don’t know where they are,” Cecil said. He made a face that looked like he had an upset stomach. “I could ask mom.”

“No, that’s fine. Maybe some other time, if you happen to find them, I’d love to see more of her work.”

“Okay.”

“I am so sorry that something happened to Christine. You can call Lester any time if you want to talk about it. I know it’s hard sometimes talking to people about that stuff. But we’ve all had someone close to us who isn’t here anymore.”

Cecil frowned. “You gave me your business card. You’re not around anymore?” He compared Lester’s uniform to Meghan’s civilian clothing.

“I’ll be around for a few weeks, maybe. But I might be leaving Kinguyakkii.”

“Did you get into trouble?” he asked.

“I did, yes.” Meghan felt dealing with children when they heard honesty; it made them feel better. Most kids got used to hearing lies their whole lives that when an adult condescended to a child, they learned to accept it without putting it to mean anything useful. Meghan knew children respected adults who didn’t tell lies. The Easter Bunny, Santa, the little harmless things sometimes led to more elaborate tales that didn’t serve a purpose or point a child in the right direction.

“What happened?”

“We need to go,” Lester said. He tugged on Meghan’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Cecil, you take care of yourself.”

“Thank you, Chief Sheppard.”

“It’s only Meghan now.” She smiled at him and closed the door.

## Chapter Nineteen

Lester drove back to the house on Rurik Way, using more turns than he needed. Meghan understood he avoided the main roadways. He went around businesses and homes where people lived and worked for the city. They were the kind of people who knew Meghan on sight and might phone in a sighting if they felt she needed to leave well enough alone. Meghan didn't want another dispute or clash with the mayor.

"I'm worried someone will see me and call Duane," Meghan shouted over the drone of the engine.

"What are they going to do?" Lester asked. "I'm all they got."

"I am disappointed Oliver quit and left you working alone."

"I'm still mad you had a pissing contest with the FBI and lost."

"Yeah, well, I don't mind the occasional ogling, but when it comes to touching, that is a privilege one needs to ask for before they do it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I'm talking about handling Christine's Missing Person's case and letting your friend move in and take over like it was all her idea."

"Well, I don't have any excuses for Dana. She's always been a little high strung. But, like you, all that took me by surprise."

"I saw how she acted and talked down to us. I've seen that from time to time. People think we're a bunch of inbred Eskimos up here. They see the color of our skin and the shape of our eyes and they think we're unable to formulate intelligent conversations. They think we're stereotypes, or simpletons. We're incapable of being active people."

"Once upon a time, I'd argue against Dana showing racial tendencies. Now I see a woman who doesn't grasp the sense of the world around her. I feel like she doesn't see how much she doesn't get what's going on and thinks it's okay to take over." Meghan gripped the back rack on the four-wheeler as Lester went around the corner, gravel spit along the side. "I can't apologize for her. But I understand how you feel."

Lester pulled up short and skidded to a stop in front of the house. He dismounted quickly, bumping Meghan before she could move out of the way. He took the few steps to the top and opened the front door.

Meghan followed Lester into the house. There was a point where she thought backing up Lester meant to protect him. Once he got on the scent of alcohol in his town, she knew to protect Eugene from Lester. He did not want booze in his town. They arrived in time to see Eugene leave the bathroom. He still wore the boxer briefs that looked a few months old without washing and a t-shirt. He looked at them with genuine surprise.

“Eugene, where did you get the booze?” Lester asked.

He stepped away from Meghan before she hooked a hand around Lester’s elbow.

“You can’t come in here,” Eugene sputtered. He waved a pointed finger at Lester. “You get out—ouch!”

Lester grabbed Eugene’s arm by the wrist in a move Meghan taught him. He tweaked the wrist, forcing Eugene to turn away. Lester leaned into him, pressing Eugene against the wall. He pulled the right arm up between Eugene’s shoulder blades with one hand while driving his left elbow against the man’s neck. It forced Eugene’s face against the drywall.

“Please don’t break his arm like the last guy,” Meghan said. There wasn’t a last guy for Lester. Planting the idea in someone’s head was mean, but drinking in a dry town was illegal. It was cruel, but Meghan knew she couldn’t get fired twice.

Eugene repeated the words Meghan said, only it came out, “Mass my?” because Lester had Eugene’s lips against the wall.

“So, Gene, it appears you’ve been drinking,” Meghan said.

She moved around Lester’s feet as he pinned Eugene in the hallway. She went into his bedroom and retrieved the plastic bottle of cheap whiskey—the bootlegger favorite for Kinguyakkii, purchased by the case in Anchorage and smuggled out to the villages. The 750ml bottle sold between \$250 and \$300. It was a lucrative and thriving business. In all the time, Meghan worked as Police Chief, she never plugged the hole where the creeps go into town.

Meghan collected the bottle in Eugene’s bedroom. She made a ‘random’ search of his jacket on the coat rack by the front door. Meghan carried both bottles to the side table near the front entrance.

“Where did you get them?” Lester asked.

As Eugene made noise, Lester put pressure on his neck. Meghan walked back to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. Blinded by rage, Lester fought two demons, himself, and the bootlegger who continued to poison the North Slope.

“You can’t come into my house. You ain’t got no right,” Eugene said.

“Actually, this isn’t your house, Gene,” Meghan said.

While Lester kept the man in check, she continued to scan the rest of the house. She found another bottle of gut-rot whiskey in the kitchen cupboard next to the box of cookies and cereal. It still had a seal, full and unopened. Meghan carried it back into view of Eugene. She saw Lester look at the bottle. There was a change in his eyes. Meghan moved it from his sight.

Lester handcuffed Eugene and pulled on his elbow to make him sit on the couch. Meghan collected the rifle from the hall closet. She pulled the bolt and emptied the chamber of the bullet. Meghan put the bullet in her coat pocket.

“So, you’ve got an unopened bottle of booze, Gene. You know what that is?” Meghan asked.

“It’s one to five years for bootlegging,” Lester said. He was out of breath. Meghan suspected it was stress more than the arrest.

“It’s my bottle; I wasn’t going to sell it.”

“How do we know that?” Lester asked. “The way I see it, we charge you with possession, bootlegging, and distribution.”

“I didn’t sell any booze,” he said. Eugene whimpered.

“What about the other guy drunk downtown?” Lester asked. “Did you see him buy the bottle?”

Meghan waited, watching Eugene. There was recognition on his face. Lester didn’t tell her he arrested someone else for alcohol possession. She wasn’t a cop anymore, so it wasn’t any of her business.

“Where did you get the booze?”

“This is stupid. It’s legal everywhere else.” He squinted at the two of them. Meghan suspected Eugene saw more than two people standing in front of him.

“What have I always said, Gene?” Meghan asked. “Every time we have a social event that gets everyone together, what do I always say to everyone?”

He looked at his knobby naked knees. “It’s illegal to drink in the Borough, if you don’t like it, move out.”

“That’s right. So, you’re listening.” Meghan waited because it wasn’t her show. Lester looked bleary with anger. “Where were you the last few days?”

“I went out hunting. I got some traps north of here.”

“Gene, you can’t trap this time of year. You know it’s illegal,” Lester said.

“Shit, man, I’m sorry. Please, let me go. I won’t do it again.”

“Which part are you sorry about, Gene? Killing animals out of season or bootlegging?” Lester shook his head. “We’ve been trying to call you since Saturday night.”

“People saw you at the dance, Gene,” Meghan said. “You’re telling us, you left the dance and drove out of town trapping?”

“Yeah, I was, that’s what I did.”

“I don’t believe you,” Meghan said. “Do you believe him?”

Lester shook his head. “Where’s your phone?”

Eugene shook his head. “I dropped it in the mud. Go check. It’s in the pocket of my pants. I want to have the phone company repair it, or I guess they replace it.”

Meghan left the living room. She went into Eugene’s bedroom. A collection of clothes covered the faux wood laminate flooring like a makeshift throw rug. Meghan didn’t bring surgical gloves. She used two fingers to lift each set of pant legs to shake contents out of the pockets. Eventually, she got to the last pair of pants. Muddy and damp. She shook loose the smartphone. A cracked screen and caked with black mud.

Meghan turned to carry it back to the living room when something caught her eye. Eugene had a set of bedside nightstands. She saw something under one nightstand on the side where he spent most of the time sleeping. Meghan squatted to look under the nightstand without touching. It was a ringed hardcover notebook. The kind of department store inexpensive plain

black cover notepad with a ringed binder that people bought when they couldn't afford better quality paper. Meghan saw a pen on the top of the nightstand.

Using the pen hooked through one of the rings of the binder, Meghan pulled the notebook from under the nightstand. It had stickers on the cover. They were the kind of labels that appealed to little girls, fairies, and unicorns, with cats and dogs. Meghan flipped open the top page using the pen.

"Everything okay in there?" Lester called from the living room.

Meghan stared at the first page. She turned the book, so it showed the image straight. She used the pen to flip to another random page. She turned the next page and the following page.

Meghan left the smartphone on the floor beside the notebook. She stood and walked with purpose back to the living room.

"Did you kill your niece, Eugene?" she asked. It felt as if broken glass churned in her stomach. She felt a burning in her throat.

"What? What are you talking about?" Eugene had a look on his face like his best friend just stabbed him in the gut.

"You tell me right now," Meghan said. She stormed to the couch and kicked Eugene in the kneecap. He bellowed in pain. "Right now, right now, you tell me exactly what you did and where you've been since Saturday night."

"I don't understand," he said before Meghan kicked him again.

She felt Lester's hand on her shoulder and shrugged it off.

"You saw Christine on Saturday night at the school gym."

He shook his head. "I went to the Memorial dance. I didn't see Chrissy. I saw Joane and Earl. I saw Cecil."

"You took off with Christine at what time, Eugene?"

"I didn't," he said.

Meghan kicked him in the kneecap again. He bellowed in pain. He fell to the side across the sofa, drawing up his legs. Still handcuffed behind his back, Eugene couldn't fight back.

"You need to step back," Lester said.



“If you saw it, Lester, you’d probably kill him. I’m saving his life.”

“What’s going on?”

“That sick bastard killed Christine. He took her from the school when everyone else had their backs turned. He took her out on the ice and threw her in.”

“Why? Why would I kill Chrissy? I love her. She’s my blood. She’s my brother’s daughter. I don’t understand. I don’t understand.” The rest of the words buried in the cushions.

“She’s your blood. You disgust me, Eugene. You are the worst kind of man. You prey on children. On your own family,” Meghan said.

“No, what are you talking about. I love Chrissy. Why are you doing this?”

“I’m tired, Eugene. I am so tired of people lying to me. I am tired of people using the system to get away with murder. I am all done. I’ve had enough.” Meghan broke away from Lester and snatched Eugene by a fistful of greasy hair. She wrenched on his head, forcing his neck to stretch hard. “I should take you out on the ice and throw you in, see how long you stay up.”

“I don’t understand.” Eugene cried and pulled tighter into the fetal position. “What are you talking about?”

“Chrissy’s dead,” Lester said. “She drowned in the bay. We recovered her jacket.” He watched Meghan. She saw him debating on pulling her off. “Gene, did you do it?”

“No, no, I swear, I didn’t do it. I didn’t know. I didn’t see her Saturday. I went with Nate. We bought some whiskey. We went drinking down in the cabin by the inlet.”

“Who were you with?” Lester asked.

“Nate. Me and Nate bought the bottles.”

“You have \$900 in booze, Gene. Where’d you get the money?”

“I made some money doing repairs in Kiana last month. The guy finally paid me.”

“Who did you buy the booze from?”

“Chrissy’s dead, Lester? Are you serious?” It sunk in, and he began gasping and sobbing.

Meghan moved away from the couch. She wiped her hand on her jeans. Staring at Lester, he had to make the decisions.

“You can arrest me for assault. I don’t care.”

“Who can vouch for you at the cabin?” Lester asked.

“Nate. I was with Nate; we spent the last five days there. I got back and went to bed. Then you bust into my house and tell me my niece drowned.”

“This isn’t your house, asshole. This house belongs to the woman who you just stole a child from. You probably killed your brother when you found out Cliff wanted to move out and give the house to Joane.”

Meghan took several deep breaths. She waited for Lester. He stood facing the couch, watching the transformation of a guilty man. Eugene began the deep descent into his darkest nightmares. His body shook violently as he screamed and bawled. The snot and spit bubbled and oozed out of him. His breathing hindered the crying. His shoulders drawn tight to his head; Eugene responded to Meghan’s accusation like a madman finally unburdened by the past.

“Gene, did you kill your brother?” Lester asked. He kept his voice even, pressing down the overwhelming sensation that a man just involuntarily confessed to killing his brother. It came six years late.

“I didn’t mean it,” he sobbed. “I didn’t want to do it.”

Meghan had enough. She waved away the degenerate blubbering on the couch and wandered outside. The chilly air felt good on her sweaty and angry face. She didn’t wait for Lester. With Eugene handcuffed, he didn’t pose a threat to the acting police chief. She turned right on Rurik Way, and Meghan walked back to her lonely little house on Bison Street.

## Chapter Twenty

Meghan walked home from Eugene's house and took a long hot shower. She wanted to scrub away the images in her head from the drawing pad. She tried to disinfect her brain and hope that a man, who got away with murder once, wouldn't get away with it again. Meghan tried scouring away the lies with body wash and a luffa sponge. She had had enough of the troublesome trickle of lousy faith and conniving people. Meghan knew in her time as police chief there were a few people in Kinguyakkii who she talked to face to face that deceived her. Criminals exhibited criminal behavior.

She moved from the bathroom to the bedroom and climbed into bed. Meghan plugged in the smartphone charger, muted the ringer, and pulled the comforter up to her neck. Sunlight pulled at the curtain edges in her bedroom. Meghan turned away from the light, curled up and closed her eyes. Even if sleep didn't come right away, she knew if she waited long enough, at least night happened, if rest didn't.

When Meghan opened her eyes and saw daylight still fingering its way into the house, she thought only an hour or two slipped by. She retrieved the smartphone from the nightstand and disconnected it from the charger. She lay in bed, scrolling through the social media posts from her daughter. She checked the text messages from Brittany and sent a few replies. A day got by her, and it was the middle of the afternoon on Saturday. Meghan didn't want to think she'd slept through an entire weekday. Her back ached, and her thigh muscles suggested she lay in bed for too long.

Meghan ignored the text messages from Lester. She ignored one from Oliver. She ignored the messages from Calvin. The list of voicemails from Duane, Trooper Sergeant Reeve, and several from private numbers suggested, in her time of solitude, a lot happened. She got out of bed and wandered into the kitchen in her yoga pants and t-shirt. Coffee took time to brew, and she relished the sound of the coffeemaker while the rich aroma filled the kitchen. She read the current news for the rest of the world on her phone, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Shut out of the administrative email from the city, Meghan saw several emails from officials in law enforcement personnel. Meghan deleted the emails without reading them. She deleted the voicemails without

listening to them. She removed the hosts of text messages from everyone except Brittany. With the digital tethers gone, Meghan thought her phone felt lighter. She knew it wasn't possible, but the tangible links to the rest of the world made her feel forgotten by the rest of the world. The only person who mattered to her still had a connection in her texts.

Meghan dreaded having to leave the house. She wasn't a sentimental person, but the few pieces of Alaskan artwork she collected over the years mattered to her. She wanted to pack up the essential bits and leave anything that couldn't fit in the luggage she stored in her closet.

It was a bright and surprisingly warm day outside. She wore sunglasses and a ski cap over her ears, down to her eyebrows. It was after one before Meghan left the house and marched down Shore Avenue.

Saturday meant substantial business for the Ammattauq Native Trader. Several customers milled around the small store, checking prices for bulk supplies. Meghan kept her head down and was wearing civilian clothes. No one paid attention. She was as insignificant as everyone else. Meghan didn't want to stand out; she wanted to do what was right. Sometimes it took a sharp tongue or a heavy boot to make a difference. She had to consider life without the badge. To do that, she had to get out of Kinguyakkii.

"Do you want some coffee?" Eric asked. He leaned against the back supply wall facing the counter. His arms crossed over his chest.

Eric Kennedy was a man who Meghan admired because he made a difference to the community without a badge or an attitude.

She pressed her fingers on the glass countertop. "I'm here to see if you have any extra packing boxes. I don't want to go to the Alaska Merchandise Store unless I have to," Meghan said.

"I think I have a few you can have." He stepped through the door to the back room of the store. It took a minute before he returned with a stack of boxes flat with twine tied around them.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"I want a few minutes of your time," he said.

"I don't know if that's a good idea. I think the faster I get out of here, the better for everyone."

“Really?” he said. His face remained neutral. “I disagree. But I’m not debating with someone determined to forge a path leading away from the people who care about her.”

“That is nice, but I think it’s not exactly true.”

“Give me five minutes,” he said.

“You’ve got customers.”

Meghan looked around for Linda. Eric’s wife wasn’t in the store.

“You folks don’t mind waiting to check out a few minutes while I talk to our police chief, do you?”

Meghan winced at the question blurted over the store. Head lowered, shoulders up, she didn’t look around before slipping through the break in the counter to follow Eric into the backroom.

“I think I’d rather pay for the boxes,” she said.

“I take donations for the boxes, Meg. I keep them for families who need them. The money goes into the food pantry.”

Meghan pulled a crinkled \$10 from her front pocket and slapped it on the desk. Eric stood beside her and watched the monitors in the backroom. No one made off with supplies. Meghan suspected he knew everyone in the store. If they shoplifted, Eric would add it to their family accounts.

“Let’s talk about Chrissy,” he said.

“I can’t, please, Eric. I don’t want to talk about her. I am mad and sick about it.”

“I heard a rumor that you managed to solve a murder no one else knew anything about.”

“That’s not true.”

“Well, I have it on good authority that you did that and managed to catch a child predator all without wearing a badge.”

Meghan sighed. She felt that hot knotted gutful of broken glass roiling inside her. It was a classic tale of predatory convenience. The estranged uncle preyed on the innocence of a ten-year-old girl.

“The worst of it,” she said finally. “I wonder how long it went on. How long did Eugene put his hands on that little girl?” She shook her head.

“I keep thinking that it wasn’t the fact Clifford told Eugene he wanted to give the house to Joane and the kids. I think he found out about Eugene. That’s when he killed his brother. It’s the same reason he killed Christine when he saw the drawings.”

“I heard about the drawings.” Eric sipped from his mug. Meghan had her fill of coffee that morning. She needed a ticket out of town and a new start. “You found the drawing pad.”

“She had a lot of talent, Eric. I never saw that much experience in a child.”

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that in the few days you went into hibernation, a lot happened.”

“I don’t want to know.” She shook her head. “We found out that Eugene went drinking with Nate. The only Nate I can think of is Nathaniel Warren. That means Lester has to talk to the mayor’s son about the bootlegging in this town.”

“Lester quit yesterday.”

“What? No.”

“Meg, what did you think would happen?”

“I’m pissed Oliver quit and left Lester in a lurch.”

“He didn’t quit. Is that what Lester told you?”

“Yes.”

Eric shook his head. “He had a confrontation with Duane after they terminated you. Oliver tried standing up for you, and Duane terminated him. It was a premature and underhanded move if you ask me.”

“Why would Lester tell me Oliver quit?”

“Probably because he thought you’d go to Duane’s house and assault him if you found out.”

Meghan felt the smirk on her face. It was impossible to avoid. “Eugene Tuktu had it coming. Anyway, Lester told me about Oliver quitting before I kicked Eugene.”

“You should know that this place will implode without you around here.”

“They don’t need me. They don’t want any part of how I conduct business. I invite one person to town who I thought was my friend, and she managed to destroy everything I thought I had under control.”

“Well, perhaps your friend, Dana Wyatt, punched holes in your operation because you failed to reinforce it.”

“Is this some metaphysical thing?”

“No, all I’m saying is some people think they know how to do it better than others. She came here, and you allowed her to walk all over your business.”

Meghan shook her head. “You know how cliché it is when the FBI shows up, and the local sheriff is all up in arms about the feds taking over their case? That wasn’t something I wanted to repeat.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard from you on more than a few occasions, you’re not the sheriff. And from what I know, you were former FBI. I’d think that counts for something.”

“I feel like a complete failure. I feel like I let everyone down,” she said.

“You got a murderer to confess to killing his brother five years ago. I don’t call that a failure.”

“He got away with molesting a child in all that time.”

“You can’t control that. Look what you did for Vincent.”

“You mean how I got his privacy exposed to everyone?”

“No, Lester told me the FBI issued a formal apology to him. They returned his property, and Vincent is back to being, well, Vincent. I know no one’s talked about what happened at the department that day. I mean, I know, but you know, it’s me.”

“How do you know about all that?”

“Let’s say that your actions will become legendary in time.”

“I don’t want legendary status. I want a normal life.”

Eric burst into laughter. He almost spilled his coffee. “If you wanted a normal life, Meg, you’d never come to Alaska. This isn’t for someone who wants a normal life. We’re all here because we choose to live outside of normal. You are one of us, and you know it.”

“I can’t help feeling like I should have done more for Joane. I feel like the whole world took a dump on her. I can’t imagine how Cecil will handle all this.”

“I think Cecil might surprise you. He is a very gifted young man. Linda handles the online Native Alaskan museum forum, and Cecil’s teachers encourage him to explore our culture and history. Linda sees him posting on the museum forum a lot.”

“I guess that’s good. I feel like he’s going to miss out on a lot without his sister around.”

“I know, but at least you stopped a predator from hurting anyone else.”

“He’ll probably beat the pedophile charges. Detailed drawings of Eugene’s anatomy aren’t enough to convict him, just enough to convince me what he did with the girl.”

“Lester got his warrant. He had Trooper Reeve, Chandler, and Riley here collecting more evidence from the house, including Eugene’s laptop. There is enough on there to go after a few more of his online friends. When they showed up, that’s when Lester quit.”

“So, who’s running the police department now?”

“No one.”

“Come on. I’d think Duane had someone in line to take over.”

“He did, but Reeve wasn’t interested in hiring a guy that had a domestic violence charge in a criminal record. It’s good to hire a cop who actually hadn’t broken the law.”

“Well, they will find someone, I’m sure.”

“Maybe,” Eric said with a shrug. The indifference of lawlessness wasn’t something he panicked over. He lived through a corrupt police chief and a posse of criminals. Not having a police department for a while meant little to Eric. “Are you thinking about talking to Duane or Trooper Reeve again?”

“You are kidding, right? They don’t want me here. I don’t think Duane ever wanted me here.” She picked up the bundle of cardboard boxes leaning against her feet. “Thank you, Eric.”

He lifted his mug to Meghan. “That is why I’m here.”





## Chapter Twenty-One

Meghan left the native trading post and took a deep breath. She faced the wide-open bay, staring at the enormous globs of ice that rushed by the shoreline. The floe banged and groaned, and Meghan didn't want to think about a lost little girl caught up in that violent and frozen misery.

She turned right to make her way up the shore, walking away from the breakers. Meghan saw children playing on the bank. She swallowed and tipped her head down and turned right again on Silver Fox Road to cut between the bank and the First Baptist Church.

Before Meghan crossed in front of the bank doors, she saw someone she recognized come out of the bank. He had a flat rate priority box in his arms. Meghan thought about calling out to Cecil. She wanted to tell him that she didn't forget about him. Something kept her tongue still in her mouth. She watched him wander out of the bank and walk with purpose along Silver Fox and turn the corner, heading down George Fox Way toward the post office. It was in the opposite direction.

She waited, standing a little way from the front of the bank. Cecil Tuktu was a bright and studious boy. He seemed in control. He seemed unsurprised by all of the news that surrounded his sister. Meghan didn't know if Cecil knew about his uncle's illicit business with Christine, or the fact the man killed his father. Something prompted Meghan to turn around and head back toward Shore Avenue.

Meghan picked up her feet, her boots shuffling in the wet gravel. The summer season started as soon as the ice cleared the waterways. The kids dared each other to hop on a swift-moving ice sheet. Meghan saw the tallest of the group, push on the shoulder of a small boy trying to prove something to his peers.

Meghan dropped the bundle of flattened cardboard. She snatched the tallest of the group.

"The rest of you get out of here," she shouted. Meghan held the boy by the coat sleeve. He wasn't going anywhere until she released him. "What are you doing?"

"Get off, pig," he said.

Meghan saw him lean back, taking a deep breath. She knew he got ready to spit on her. Meghan flicked his throat, causing him to sputter.

“You assaulted me,” he shouted. “Hey, she’s assaulting me. Someone get this on video.”

Meghan turned her fist, forcing the teenager to bend over. No one pulled out a phone. No one came to his rescue.

“What’s your name?” Meghan asked.

“None of your business, pig.”

“You talk like an old hippie. Do you think that works for you? No one uses that term anymore.”

“Get off me,” he said, struggling.

Meghan pulled on his sleeve, kept him pinned close to her and off-balance.

“You’re on your own. Look around, you don’t have any friends. You think it’s fun to tease the kids, see if they’ll jump on the ice. How about if I threw you out there? What then? You know we lost one kid. You know that?” Meghan shook him.

“Yeah,” he said. The fight drained out of him.

“There’s no law around here anymore. I’m not a cop anymore, and you’re all alone. You watch your back because if I see you down here near the ice again, you’re not going home again.” She let go of his sleeve.

He stumbled, getting away from Meghan. She didn’t watch him run in the other direction.

Meghan left the bundled cardboard on Shore Avenue and ran toward the post office.

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Cecil waited patiently in the line leading to the windows. Meghan saw him shifting the package weight from left to right. It was a large flat rate box. He didn’t talk to anyone. He didn’t bother looking around. Cecil stared at the address on the box or the area closest to him.

When he finally made it to the postal worker, Meghan saw Cecil paid cash for the box. He took the tracking notice, the receipt, and ignored the woman. She said something about Christine. He didn’t reply and had avoided eye contact with everyone, still waiting in line.

Meghan didn't know how much the rest of the public knew about Eugene Tuktu. If word got out about his uncle's arrest, it was a matter of time before the details went public. She saw a boy shying away from attention as best as possible in the small town.

Meghan stayed out of the way, watching from the corner of a post office mailbox alcove. When Cecil walked out of the building, she went to the package pick up door and rang the buzzer. After waiting too long for someone to answer, Meghan pressed the buzzer again and held it down.

"What the fu—" the young man said. "Oh, hey Chief Sheppard, what can I do for you."

"It's Meghan, and I'm not the police chief anymore. I want to talk to Barbara McKenzie."

He looked as if Meghan gave him a surprise oral exam, and he didn't know how to answer. "I can see if Barb's around."

"Yes, please, I need to see her."

He closed the door, and Meghan paced a little in the lobby. She scanned the area. Looking for anyone who pointed fingers at her or wanted to give her a piece of their mind. No one paid attention to her. Even with the sunglasses and ski cap, the postal worker recognized Meghan.

"Is everything okay?" Barbara asked. She gave Meghan a small embrace.

She had tired eyes and smelled like cigarettes. The woman saw some hardship in the last year. Losing her lover, losing her mother, Barbara was a person who didn't give up. She was the right person to request the favor.

"I need you to do something for me," Meghan said. "It's going to sound strange, and I don't want you to get into trouble. But I must see the address on a package that Cecil Tuktu dropped off."

"You know it's—"

"I know Barbara. I understand. I mean it. If there was another way, I'd do it. But I think it is really important to see that package."

"When did he drop it off?" she asked.

"Like a minute ago. He just walked out of here."

“They’re loading packages for Anchorage right now. What did it look like?” she asked.

“It was a large flat rate priority box.”

Barbara nodded. “So, it looks like about five thousand other packages. Let me see if I can find it.”

“I swear, all I want to do is look at the recipient’s address.”

The door closed again. Meghan did her best to remain calm. She had a million ideas in her head. She considered how to get the information out of Cecil if Barbara couldn’t locate the package. If Meghan caught up to him near the shoreline, maybe she could threaten him like she did the random bully.

The door opened again. Barbara held a large flat rate box in her hands. “Make it quick.”

“Thank you, Barbara.” Meghan snapped a picture of the address label. It was a residence in Wasilla, Alaska.

“What’s this about?” she asked. “Does it have anything to do with Christine, Cecil’s sister?”

“I don’t know yet. But as soon as I know, I promise, you will know. Thank you again.”

“Did I hear something about you quitting the police department?”

Meghan shook her head. “I didn’t quit. But I can’t talk right now.”

“We can get breakfast together tomorrow.”

“If I am still here, I will call you.”

“You won’t be here tomorrow?”

“Barbara. I have to go. Thank you so much.” Meghan hurried out of the building.

As she made her way back to the house, Meghan called the airlines to see if there was a seat left on the flight leaving Kinguyakkii. She had about an hour before the last commercial flight left town until morning. Meghan didn’t want to wait that long.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The Alaska Airlines flight touched down at the international airport after nine that night. Meghan had a backpack carry-on and didn't have to wait for baggage check. She exited the gate in the terminal and wandered down the hallway. Local flights had very little foot traffic in North Terminal. Most of the food kiosks closed until morning. One of the fast food places stayed open all night. Travelers gathered around the service window placing orders.

Meghan moved through the hallway and down the escalators to the main lobby. She walked by the musk ox inside the wall display and the giant polar bear inside the center floor glass case. It was dark outside and Meghan walked into a haze of vape smoke from a traveler who thought the designated smoking area was meant for cigarette smokers, not electric cigarettes.

She saw Gregory Anderson leaning against the black Dodge. He talked with airport police officers. When he saw Meghan, he waved to her. The airport police moved off as Anderson stood up. He attempted to suck in his gut and adjust his belt under the blazer. Both actions didn't work and he walked around the driver's side as Meghan opened the passenger door.

"Thank you for picking me up," she said.

"It's not a problem. But your request is a little bizarre. You sure you don't want me to take you to the hotel first?"

"I really want to drive out to Wasilla tonight." It was almost nine-thirty. "How long before we get to that location?"

"Well, it's about forty-five minutes on a good day. I think getting out of Anchorage takes longer than getting on the Parks Highway. We'll probably get to the apartment around eleven."

"Good. Thank you."

Meghan sat back in the passenger seat, snapped the seatbelt as Anderson stepped on the accelerator. She put the backpack between her feet on the floorboard and leaned her head against the headrest.

The radio chatter reminded Meghan of the past. Years in the real-world listening to the background noise of active police calls, and chatter

between agents, hearing Anderson's police radio in the car made Meghan feel a little regret.

She'd turned her back on law enforcement. Meghan left the Bureau because of one little incident skirting death. A straight shot to the chest, a mild case of heart-stopping surgery, and a mild case of coma afterward, made Meghan rethink her career path. Leaving New York wasn't supposed to run away from her broken marriage. She never wanted to leave her daughter behind. While Brittany was a strong and independent girl, Meghan wondered if being in her daughter's life more would have shaped Brittany differently. They were fast friends, having a level of communication that Meghan knew other parents lacked. Meghan understood Brittany told more to Meghan than she shared with her father and his live-in girlfriend. It didn't seem to bother Brittany that her mother took a job on the other side of the country. In the Alaskan frontier people chose to live in harsh environments because there was a sense of propriety and community unmatched in other parts of the country. Meghan turned her back on her community again, and she had to find some redemption.

Meghan had to be the maverick, the divorcée and progressive mother. She was the one who didn't take a failed marriage out on her ex-husband. She gave Brittany a choice of where she stayed. The girl chose her father. It wasn't because Meghan was a lousy mother. It had to do with her work, and how it took her away from Brittany. Her father had an ordinary job with regular hours. He was the one at home, awake for breakfast to see Brittany off to school. The girl grew up in a household where Meghan spent more time away than her father.

"So, I heard about that blowout with Sergeant Reeve and you," Anderson said. His words woke Meghan from a light doze as they headed north out of Anchorage.

She opened her eyes to see the cityscape begin to thin out the further from the airport and downtown they drove.

Detective Gregory Anderson was an Alaska State Trooper investigator for the Violent Crimes Division based out of Anchorage, Alaska. Anderson was Meghan's first random contact within the troopers during her first murder investigation in Kinguyakkii. Anderson wasn't her point of contact in the troopers. It was something she learned to regret later, but his ranking over Sergeant Reeve meant Meghan didn't need to step

through the channels to get to the person she first had to report. Reeve hated her for it. It made him look incompetent.

“I think it is ridiculous that people care more about their careers than solving a crime. Murder is more important than another chevron on a sleeve,” Meghan said. She’d held in that tidbit for years. It felt good to get it off her chest.

“So, you quit because you solved how many violent crimes in Kin guy kiki?” Anderson said.

He had to draw out the name because he wasn’t from Alaska and it didn’t matter how many years someone lived in the environment, he didn’t work to speak the dialect. Sometimes people could roll their tongues speaking Spanish, sometimes they couldn’t. At least, he tried to pronounce it right.

“I didn’t quit, Reeve made it clear I was terminated. He suggested the feds were looking to arrest me for assault.”

“Seems to me, you took it a little too far,” he mumbled.

Meghan sucked in a deep breath. For most men across the planet, it was impossible for them to sympathize with what it meant to be groped by unwanted hands. It was the kind of thing them might *empathize*, but Meghan knew men were a basic creature and the idea of touching a woman’s ass appealed to more of them than they cared to admit. She held back because she didn’t want to lash out at Anderson. Not when he gave her a ride up north. They had an hour in the car together. It smelled like beef and cheese, probably from one of the many fast-food bags in the back seat Meghan saw, but he was a friend.

“I might have overreacted,” she mumbled. It was true. If the cadet needed pistol certification, it was likely a long time before he’d gain full use of his right hand again. There was a devilish delight in the idea he’d remember Meghan every time his wrist or thumb ached.

“I don’t think Emanuel is very happy with you making a citizen’s arrest either,” Anderson said.

“I did what?” It was news to her.

“I got a copy of the complaint from Acting Chief Lester Graves. Reeve passed it to me because we had another homicide attached to it, something that wasn’t on the books.”



“Oh,” Meghan said. It was the most she wanted to talk about it.

It made sense suddenly. To keep the heat off Meghan, Lester drafted the arrest report as a witness to a citizen’s arrest case. The Alaska statute allows a peace officer or a private person without a warrant to arrest someone for crimes committed in their presence. Or if they have reasonable belief the person committed a felony, even if they weren’t present. Of course, it meant the private citizen had to use nonlethal means to subdue the suspect. Meghan’s knee and shin kicking weren’t lethal or permanent.

“We got the guy on murdering his brother and the disappearance of that little girl.” Anderson rolled his shoulders in the seat. He stifled a yawn with the back of his hand. “I don’t think there’s enough evidence to charge the guy with killing the girl.”

“I don’t think that will matter.” She felt Anderson’s eyes on her. Meghan glanced at him in the ambient interior glow of the Dodge.

“I didn’t expect to hear you say something like that,” he said. “I know you like to keep things close to the chest sometimes. I’m not questioning why you have me going out to the valley so late on a Saturday night. I know it’s your way of a surprise.”

“It’s not a surprise. I’m not trying to be vague.” Meghan stared at the darkness across the Palmer Hay Flats. The wild protected lands stretched like fertile plains from the skirt of the mountains overshadowing Eagle River on Meghan’s right. The great swampy flatland extended beyond the Knik River that snaked through the landscape.

The Chugiak Mountains butted against the Parks Highway headed north into the valley that went on for miles, a midnight jagged black under a starry sky. Sometimes, in the right light, the right time of day, commuters saw Denali Mountain peak. Once known as Mount McKinley, it was North America’s highest mountain. It was five hours north of Anchorage, and nothing but a black smudge on an inky skyline at that time of night.

Meghan took a breath again, fighting sleepiness.

“Lester and I visited Joane Tuktu while she and her boyfriend dealt with the loss of a child. I see Cecil, their thirteen-year-old son isn’t handling the girl’s disappearance the way he should,” Meghan said.

“What do you think?”

“Well, right now it’s all speculation. And who am I to judge how a child deals with the loss of a sibling. I’m following a hunch that’s cost me the price of a plane ticket, and a ride in a car with a friend.” Meghan included the description to reinforce her relationship with Gregory Anderson. She knew he was another man who resisted the urge to put his hand on her backside.

“Cecil came to me at the Memorial Day celebration last Saturday night. Cecil told me he couldn’t find Christine. I remember seeing him spending a long time looking for his sister at the dance. As soon as she heard Cecil, Dana Wyatt stepped in and took over.”

“I heard a little about your friend.”

“Well, I can’t say I blame her for the fast response. We had the Amber Alert active within an hour after we found out about the disappearance. But I think about the whole thing, I know Cecil found me. And it was a snowball from there.”

“What are you thinking?”

“It’s dark thoughts, I know,” she said. “Cecil played me and Dana. He had all of us running around looking for his sister. No one we contacted ever remembered seeing Christine at the school that night.”

“What about her parents?”

“Earl, the mom’s boyfriend, thought she went to the dance, or was gone all day. Joane wasn’t much good either. I remember seeing kids earlier in the day ice panning.”

“What’s that?”

“Kids like jumping on the flowing sheets of ice as they speed along the shoreline.”

“We get kids joyriding. You get kids thinking they’re immortal and waterproof.”

“We get joy riders too,” she said. “This whole thing got me thinking.”

“Is that why we’re out here in the valley?”

“The address on the package Cecil sent today. It’s in Wasilla.”

“It’s right up here according to the Google maps.” Anderson flipped the blinker, taking the exit for Trunk Road. The Mat-Su Regional Hospital

sat to Meghan's right, and the exit ramp roped around it. "It's to the left here."

Meghan sat up and rubbed her eyes. Anderson turned left down a frontage road. Blue Lupine snaked around away from the hospital and traced along the main highway. She saw the digital map on Anderson's smartphone put the fourplex townhouses to the right, and Anderson pulled into the gravel drive full of cars and potholes.

He turned the spotlight on the second door from the right.

"Want me to go with you?" he asked.

"You can, if you want." Meghan released the seatbelt and got out of the car.

It was a little after eleven and the living room light glowed through the drawn curtains. Meghan heard the dog barking inside the townhouse. When she climbed the wooden stairs, the porch light snapped on. Anderson stood behind her in the lawn, waiting.

A woman came to the door. She looked Native Alaskan and terrified. Her round face paled when she realized the police showed up at her door.

"Hi, my name's Meghan Sheppard. I was the Police Chief in Kinguyakkii." She waited a moment. The woman in her forties drew up her thin blue robe around her neck. "I think you know why we're here."

"Yes, I know." She nodded. "I told him it wouldn't work. I knew it wouldn't work."

"Well, what if I told you, it did work?" she said. "Can we come in?"

"Sure, if you don't mind dogs. She sounds mean, but she's a pussycat."

"I love dogs," Anderson said.

It was a tight fit. Meghan and Anderson didn't move too far into the apartment. The tiny living room had a doorway that led into the kitchen. The thin stairwell went up the right side of the room.

"Want me to get her? She's asleep upstairs."

"What's your name?" Meghan asked.

“I’m Nicole Whitley. I’m Cecil and Christine’s auntie. We’re not related, but they grew up with me until I left Kinguyakkii two years ago. I remember you,” she said. “You’ve done good things for that town.”

“Does she know what’s going on?”

Nicole shook her head. I came to town on Friday and picked her up. Cecil, he’s a bright boy. It’s hard to say no to him.”

Meghan nodded. “I understand.”

Nicole climbed the stairwell as the steps groaned under her weight. Meghan squatted to play with the dog that continued to nuzzle her crotch like it was normal behavior for a dog.

Anderson cleared his throat. Meghan looked at him.

“You got to be kidding me,” he said.

Meghan shook her head.

The light in the hallway at the top of the stairs turned on. Meghan saw little feet in pajama pants and a matching top. She saw the dimpled face as the girl yawned and rubbed her eyes.

“Do you know who I am?” Meghan asked.

“Yes, you’re the police chief.”

“Think you can come home, Christine? Your mom’s worried about you.”

“Okay,” she said. It was as if sleeping in a friend’s bed five hundred miles from Kinguyakkii was a normal thing.

“Am I in trouble?” Nicole asked.

Anderson laughed. “You’re not in trouble,” he said. He reached into his coat pocket for the smartphone.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

They had to wait until morning to leave. Meghan got a room at a motel in Wasilla while Anderson drove back to Anchorage. Nicole picked up Meghan before the morning light. She had to stay behind while Meghan and Christine Tuktu got shuttle service from a valley Alaska State Trooper to the airport.

Returning to Kinguyakkii, Meghan wasn't interested in the spotlight. She managed to sleep on the plane despite her aviophobia. Sometimes the fear of flying had to take a break when she didn't get enough sleep. Before Meghan fell asleep, she had a brief conversation with Christine about what happened between her and her uncle. Meghan wasn't an expert with child sex crimes, but she knew enough to understand when the girl buttoned up when it got uncomfortable. They spent more time talking about Christine's detailed drawing style. Christine opened up more about her love of animals and the use of a pencil. Meghan felt confident that whatever damage Eugene did to Christine, it wasn't permanent.

Anderson went through all the necessary channels for Meghan's return trip. Trooper Chandler flew the lost little girl and the stubborn former police chief without much conversation or intervention between them. She sat beside Christine as the girl stared out the window of the Piper Super Cub looking down at the swirling colors and dancing mountains. Christine didn't have a fear of flying. Meghan put on a brave face for the girl.

Meghan glanced out the window to the dirt and gravel roads, the shanty houses, the piles of broken machines around the clusters of civilization. Meghan saw the patch of melted earth of the cemetery where the layers or artificial flowers looked like spring blossoms on the tundra.

The trooper pilot landed in the familiar setting of Kinguyakkii. She saw Joane, Earl, and most importantly, Cecil waiting near the secured state hanger. Lester and Oliver stood beside them. Meghan saw Duane, and Ulva waited in his pick-up truck outside the gate. There wasn't a homecoming fanfare. Only a few people knew of Christine's return.

Meghan and Chandler waited by the plane while Christine ran to meet her mother, gathered up by Earl, who cared for the girl as best he could, never concerned she wasn't his blood. Family wasn't about shared genes, only bonded feelings.

“You did good,” Chandler said.

Meghan saw the smile on the man’s face. He wore the trooper hat and snapped a picture on his smartphone of the reunion.

“I did what anyone would do.”

“No, Meghan.” He looked at her. “You did it because it’s who you are. You see things the rest of us miss.”

“Well, maybe I can get you to write me a letter of recommendation for my next job.”

“Oh? Are you leaving?”

Meghan walked away, waving to Chandler without turning around. “See you around, Trooper. Stay safe.”

She stepped lightly toward the family. Meghan had to know one thing that bothered her.

“Thank you so much for what you did,” Joane said. She fell into Meghan’s arms. The woman trembled as she squeezed Meghan.

“I’d like to talk to Cecil a minute, if it’s okay with you and him, of course.”

“Yes, sure,” Joane said.

His mother looked at Cecil. He gave a mild nod with a look of worry, squeezing his cheeks around his eyes. The jacket on his shoulders fit so tight the boy couldn’t zip it closed. He compensated with more layers, a shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt under the coat.

Meghan walked a little way from the family. Cecil caught up to her. They walked in step a few meters from the rest of the people near the private airport hangers for small planes.

“So, you know you’re not in trouble, right?” she asked.

Cecil nodded. He stared at his boots. Meghan wondered if his boots were too tight on his feet.

“I need to know if you put your sister’s coat on the ice.”

Cecil waited. He kicked at loose pebbles on the tarmac. Meghan saw him nod again.

“Christine didn’t go to the Memorial Day dance, did she?”

This time Cecil shook his head.

“You made sure to make everyone think she went to the dance. You wanted us to believe she absconded from the dance. Do you know what that means?”

Cecil brightened as he looked directly at Meghan. “It means to leave secretly,” he said.

Meghan nodded. Cecil was almost as tall as her. At thirteen, he was wiry, too thin.

“You know, sometimes I feel like I’m the smartest person in the room,” she said. “It’s arrogant. I know that, but when you’re dealing with criminals, you have to outsmart a lot of them. I feel standing beside you; you’re the smartest person in the whole town.”

Cecil’s face shifted. He fought back the smile that eventually came. Meghan saw neglected dental hygiene in his mouth. None of it was his fault or his mother’s fault. She knew that. Joane and Earl did the best with the little they had to give.

“Do you know how long your uncle—”

“Don’t call him that.” The flaring anger showed where happiest just died on Cecil’s face.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“I think I knew for a while,” Cecil said. “I saw the pictures in one of Chrissy’s drawing books. She had two books. One held the good pictures. The other held the bad ones. I noticed she only drew in the bad one when she spent time with Eugene.”

Meghan understood the separation. Likely, Cecil didn’t want to have a surname linked to the monster.

“You had us running around looking for your sister, and she had already left on the plane Friday. Where did you get the money for the ticket?”

“My mom saves our PFDs for us. She wants a better future for us. She does her best, and I want her to use the money to help Chrissy. She wants to make sure we have something because she never did,” Cecil said.

It was a rare gift with the obvious financial struggles the family had, that Joane put free money into saving accounts for her children. The Alaska Permanent Dividend Fund paid Alaska residents at any age as a kickback

for fossil fuel reserves statewide. It was a finite system that still worked for the time. No one knew about the future. Joane wanted more for her children.

“You put Chrissy’s drawing pad in Eugene’s house, didn’t you?” Meghan said. “You put it where you thought someone might find it.”

“I put it where I knew you’d find it.”

“Me? How did you know I’d find it?”

“Because I knew you’d figure out what I did. I wanted Chrissy out of here before you got Eugene.”

Meghan took a deep breath, breathing in the arctic air that she felt invigorated her lungs. It made her feel more energetic. Meghan knew it was psychological, but she was too tired to fight the physiological impact.

“What was in the priority box? More of Chrissy’s clothes?”

Cecil nodded. It made sense. Piecemeal the clothes to her during the time of her mother being distraught, and she’d never notice.

“Did you know Eugene killed your father?”

“I remember when they went out that day. Dad talked to me about him leaving to get construction work in Anchorage. There was a contractor who wanted to hire him. Eugene came back and lived with Dad for a few years. Dad told me not to worry because he wanted Mom and us to move into the house.” Cecil’s face changed when the memory caught up to him. She saw his shoulders sag. When the tears came, they soaked up her shoulder because Meghan wrapped her arms around him and let him cry. She didn’t care who saw her holding the boy, waiting for the sorrow to drain out of him. “I never saw Dad again.”

They talked for a while about how Cecil orchestrated the hoax of his sister’s death. She found out details of Nicole Whitley’s involvement. Their social media connection had a lot to do with her willingness to take Chrissy away from the secret abuse. Eventually, Meghan led Cecil back to his family.

Meghan avoided the family reunion. She weaved around them, using the fence as a guide to get back to the gate. Oliver and Lester veered away from the others. They caught up to Meghan as she moved by the pick-up truck. Duane pulled away from the fence and drove back toward town.



“You want a ride?” Lester asked.

“You still police chief? Or did you quit because you couldn’t deal with the politics?”

Lester gave Meghan a long look. She saw him hold back something negative. “I’ll see you around,” he said finally. Lester got on the four-wheeler and kicked up gravel, pulling away from her and Oliver.

“You want to talk, or do you want me to give you a ride?” Oliver asked.

“I’ll take a ride, thanks.”

As they drove up Third Avenue from the airport, Oliver spoke to Meghan over his shoulder. Meghan held onto the rear rack staring out at the town that grew on her.

“Duane terminated me,” he said. “Think you can write me a letter of recommendation.”

Meghan laughed. “I wanted a letter from Trooper Chandler.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea. You think he’ll write me one too.”

“I hate you lost your job because of me,” Meghan said.

“I don’t care. I trust you. I think it was wrong. They got rid of you because that lady came to town and got into our business. I thought we did alright here.”

“Apparently, it wasn’t good enough for the people who make the decisions.”

The four-wheeler slowed down before Oliver turned down Bison Street. He pulled up in front of Meghan’s house and parked. He sat on the seat, watching Meghan climb the small creaking steps to the front door.

“Do you know what you’re going to do now?” Oliver asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll run for sheriff somewhere in the Midwest. I’d like to stay out of the cities.” She unlocked the door. It was an exercise she had to get used to doing again. “Want to come in for a cup of tea?”

“No, I got to help my auntie pull the boat out and prep it for the coming season.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do now?”

Oliver shrugged. "I'll find something. Do you know when you're leaving?"

"No, I contacted the landlord about the house. I submitted the thirty-day notice. He already has someone renting as soon as I leave."

Oliver nodded.

"I have to take care of my severance package with the city. I suspect the Borough will want to take time to scold me."

He shrugged. "See you around," he said.

"Hey, thanks for fighting for me with Duane."

"I knew he'd fire me. I didn't care." Oliver revved the engine and rode off.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Monday, midmorning, brought a stranger to Meghan's front door. She'd slept late. She had coffee brewing and needed to make another trip to Ammattauq Native Trader Store for a new bundle of boxes since she lost her last batch chasing leads that weren't her business. Yet, something made it worthwhile. As a pragmatic, Meghan knew Christine's relocation would not stay secret. She knew the state had ways of handling child endangerment. Cecil used his cunning to make a difference. In her eyes, more people should listen to him instead of seeing a child.

She opened the door to a man she met once in her career and never expected to see again.

"Can I come in?" Sergio Wilcox asked. He wore civilian clothing, the cold weather insulated jacket, cargo pants, and hiking boots. He looked like a rugged outsider in the northern landscape.

"If you don't mind, I'm wearing my pajamas," Meghan said. She moved away from the door in the sweatshirt and yoga pants.

The Anchorage field office Special Agent in Charge walked into the house and closed the door. Meghan went into the kitchen and got a second mug for coffee. She leaned against the counter when Wilcox followed her, scanning the place for all available exits, and any dangers. It was in the eyes. It was in training. He picked up the ceramic mug and took a sip.

"It's good," he said. "Thank you."

Meghan waited. A man like Wilcox, with an entire state to monitor for the FBI, needed a good reason to fly back to Kinguyakkii.

"I want to issue a formal apology from the FBI." It came out with a hint of irony. Meghan didn't read much into Wilcox's inflection. It was the statement that mattered. "I don't know if you're aware, but the interview of Vincent Atkinson continued during your interaction with Cadet Aston Holmes."

"I didn't think much about it."

"Upon reviewing the audio footage, the Bureau felt Mr. Holmes wasn't the kind of person we wanted representing the United States Government."

Meghan bit her tongue to stop from saying anything contrary to the oversight.

“He agreed to not press charges for assault after I recommended we’d not pursue sexual assault against him. I think he didn’t want to end up on the sex offender website.”

Meghan sipped at the coffee to keep from saying anything negative about the former cadet.

“What about Vincent? Are you leaving him alone?”

Wilcox nodded. “You know we’re not interested in whatever he does, as long as it doesn’t involve minors. I’d like to have someone talk to him about the choice in what he collects from the laundry.” Wilcox gave Meghan a look that suggested he held back more than he said before starting on a different topic. “Turns out, Kinguyakkii is without law enforcement for the foreseeable future.”

Meghan liked that Wilcox took the time to pronounce the name of the town.

“I’m sure Duane and Reeve will find someone to fit into the office again.”

“Regarding Trooper Sergeant Reeve, he’s taking a posting in Ketchikan. It’s effective immediately. I don’t know if that matters to you.”

“As long as someone’s not cutting heads on my account,” she said.

“Why not? You think that’s a bad idea?”

“I think I’ve worked here long enough to understand how my community works. I had your people move into my town and take over before I had a chance to figure out what happened.”

“Yet, even after you walked away, you brought a child back from the dead.”

“Chrissy wasn’t dead. She was a victim of a bastard, and her brother is smarter than anyone I know. He arranged everything and set us on a path. He knew she’d eventually come out of hiding. But he wanted to make sure Eugene Tuktu went down for the continued sexual assault against his sister.”

“You make a citizen’s arrest against a suspected pedophile, and you get the guy to admit to fratricide. Who does that?” Wilcox shook his head.

“What happened to you, Special Agent Sheppard? You should be section chief somewhere instead of holed up in a tiny village on the top of the world.”

“I’m not in the FBI anymore, Sergio. Don’t try to butter me up about it.” Meghan shook her head. “I don’t know that line of work anymore. After last weekend, I don’t want any part of that anymore.”

“I talked with Garret McKee yesterday. When I heard about you collecting the Tuktu girl, I thought he should know Special Agent Wyatt had a lot more to apologize for than just walking over your business and thinking it’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care about that. I loved the FBI’s immediate response to the Amber Alert. Cecil Tuktu’s ruse worked better as soon as Dana jumped on her high horse and rode it all over this town. She got you here with a bunch of raw cadets. That is the kind of thing people will talk about for ages.”

“No, you don’t get it. They will talk about you. They see you as their savior. You found that little girl. You found that predator. And you found a murderer that no one else knew existed.”

“It makes me sick to my stomach that this place will put someone else in charge that’s just as bad as Chief Herbert Haynes. That is the kind of thing that bothers me the most.” She thought for a second. “Also, Lester found Eugene. He went after him for the bootlegging.” She felt a surge of anger. “It pisses me off that Haynes didn’t follow up with Eugene. He didn’t look into the death. He took it at face value, and as long as it didn’t interfere with his business, he let it go. If he took the time to press Eugene, that poor girl wouldn’t have had years of mental and sexual abuse. He’s lucky we’re not allowed to carry firearms in the line of duty. It was dumb luck I found the drawing pad.”

“You found it because it’s in your blood. You found it because you’re not lazy and you care. It’s the same reason why you didn’t try to walk back everything Agent Wyatt started when she called in the extra troops. You wanted that girl found, and getting help mattered more than your ego.”

“I don’t have an ego.”

“That is why you’re better suited for the Bureau.”

Meghan shook her head. “I can’t go back. I don’t want to go back.”

“If we had more people like you, we’d have fewer negative stories about our misdeeds.”

“You’re spreading that butter on thick again,” she said.

“I’m not trying to recruit you, Meghan. I want to extend an olive branch. I want you to know that your work is important to this community.”

“They deserve as much respect as anyone else. People think anyone living in the bush or above the Arctic Circle is a bunch of inbred idiots. I hate the stereotypes, and I hate the bigotry.”

“I think if you want your job back, you can have it.”

Meghan held her breath. It was something she suspected, but a little piece of pride lodged in her throat and made it hard to ask favors.

“Detective Anderson started Trooper Sergeant Reeve on the right path. This business with Agent Wyatt, it was poorly handled by her and the Bureau. My office came in and took over, and I am responsible for my cadets. This is a learning curve, and we need people like you who know the right way of handling the environment to make us see what works in one place isn’t a fit everywhere. Whatever you and Agent Wyatt have, that isn’t my business. All I can do is see what went wrong and make sure not to repeat it.”

“I don’t think Duane wants me back. I lost my lieutenant and my sergeant.”

“You have people devoted to you. I know if you’re back, they’re back. If that’s what you want.” He finished the coffee. “You have a list of demands. I’d be happy to take them to the people who matter.”

“You have a secret agenda, Sergio?”

“What? Me? No,” he said. It sounded hollow. “I want what’s best for the community. Just like you want what’s best for the community. If I can’t recruit you back in the Bureau, I’d like to make sure Kinguyakkii has someone who cares about the people and this place.”

“You think you’re so smart coming here looking at me face to face,” Meghan said. “You know damned well I want to stay here. You know this is my home.”

“You’re stretched thin. You need more help.”

“You think you have the authority to move mountains? Duane got what he wanted. He got me out of his town, and short of running me out on a rail, he got the satisfaction of seeing me leave in humiliation.”

“Yet, this comes from the woman who just said something about not having an ego.”

“Saving face has to do with maintaining authority. If I have a community full of people who think I’m incompetent, I might as well leave tonight.”

“You don’t keep up with social media, do you? You might want to check out the exclusive *Northern Lights Sounder* published. It has most of the details regarding Tuktu’s arrest. It went national. I know the blog went to McKee’s desk because he called me. I suspect your friend, Dana Wyatt, read how the FBI interfered with the local police chief’s investigation into a missing child. That is just the start of it. I know Valerie Hicks demanded your letter of resignation from Mayor Warren. When he didn’t present it to the North Slope Borough Council, they refused to accept his claim that you quit on your own behalf.”

Valerie Hicks, the voice of reason and accountability on the Council, wasn’t someone Meghan needed as an enemy. She knew the woman had enough political pull to render Duane’s position moot if she didn’t like what happened with the police chief.

“They must know about the problems with Reeve and the situation with Dana.”

Wilcox nodded. “They knew all that and a lot more. It was the Borough’s intervention that released Reeve from his posting. He willingly took the transfer. They appreciated the FBI’s diligence in helping with locating the missing child. But Mrs. Hicks issued a statement that denounced Agent Wyatt’s handling of the situation, including the fact she took over a case while vacationing in a state where she doesn’t have agency support.

“So, a lot happened since you brought back the girl and solved a murder to boot. I’m here officially to offer our services whenever you need, and to make sure you have everything you need when you’re ready to return to work.”

“Do you know Valerie Hicks?”

“She was instrumental in the sting operation that removed Haynes. I know because the Council approached us to make sure all law enforcement officers handling the operation weren’t in Hayne’s pocket at the time.”

“You want more coffee?” Meghan asked after she poured a second cup.

“Nope, I came here, said what I needed to say. I offer you a formal apology on behalf of my colleagues, both current and former. I want to know that you commit to doing what you clearly are the best suited to do, given the circumstances. I feel better knowing you’re here doing this job, Meghan. All that has to do with if you still want it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Wilcox laughed and strolled back to the front door. Meghan followed him.

“I hope you decide what’s best for everyone, and if you ever need a letter, you let me know. I know Mrs. Hicks is on a conference call with the mayor. They are looking at what’s best for the community.”

“Thanks, Sergio.”

“I could use a ride back to the airport. I want to catch the evening flight out. Uber around here isn’t working on my phone,” Wilcox said.

Meghan laughed. “I don’t have a vehicle anymore. They took the—”

The rusty midnight blue Chevrolet Suburban sat out in front of the house. Wilcox handed Meghan the key to the truck. She shook her head.

“Can I at least get dressed first?”

“Sure, whatever you want.”

Meghan suspected after the field supervisor for the FBI made a special trip to talk to Meghan, she’d hear a lot more of that in the near future.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

She didn't have a list of demands, only a few strong suggestions. It surprised Meghan that Wilcox decided to stay for the conference call from the Council regarding Meghan's future. Whatever happened at that moment meant Meghan had complete autonomy moving forward as police chief, if she wanted to keep the job.

"We're prepared to offer you compensation to ensure you want to extend your contract with the city, if you want to renegotiate." Valerie Hick's voice rang though the situation room in the police department.

Sitting at the table with Meghan and Wilcox, Duane had a look that suggested he didn't like his authority manipulated by others. Meghan knew how that felt. It was uncomfortable.

"I don't want more money," Meghan said. "I'll sign the contract. I'd like for the city to increase my Sergeant's wage to reflect his position. I'm still interested in finding a suitable replacement for Trooper Winters' former post in the city."

"That is still in the budget," Valerie said. Meghan heard some whispers through the intercom phone system from other board members. "There is room to increase Sergeant Henry's wage as long as he's willing to sign a contract."

"I assume you want one from Lester too," Meghan said. "I am fine with that."

"Are you confident you will reclaim your officers? I know the troopers have offered to help alleviate the pressures in case you're taxed on hours."

"I always appreciate the help. If I can get everyone onboard, and find another officer, I think we'll be right as rain." Meghan didn't want to appear smug in front of Duane. It was impossible at that point.

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Inside the terminal, waiting with Wilcox for his flight, Meghan knew to make sure their professional relationship had a foundation worth building on. Meghan suspected that if she ever needed a hand from Wilcox all she had to do was ask.

"Are you going to call your former supervisor?" Wilcox asked.

Meghan watched the other travelers leaving Kinguyakkii. Most of the people she recognized were day travelers, people who spent a few hours commuting to Anchorage or Fairbanks for business. Very few people left on a Monday evening flight. That meant she had some privacy sitting in the terminal with Wilcox.

“I don’t have anything to say to Garret. We had our conversations years ago. I don’t want to go back again.”

“I can appreciate that. This business with Wyatt and you should get resolution. It’s not good to let friendships stagnate over poor business dealings.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” Meghan shook her head. “I felt like she had an agenda the minute she got here. All these years, I thought she was a better friend than an agent. I can say that because I don’t think I’m out of line with that observation. She made it her mission to destroy my credibility and almost got me fired.”

“You might want to reconsider that last part. You almost got *you* fired. Wyatt put you together with other agency professionals, and you know how it all works. You’re not new to that. This business between you and Wyatt doesn’t have anything to do with how you handled the situation with Cadet Holmes. I’m surprised you let him get the better of you. But you probably ruined his career in any law enforcement capacity. You likely caused permanent nerve damage and tore the ligaments around his thumb.

“I won’t condone excessive force. I only wish the camera wasn’t focused on your suspect at the time you took care of Holmes. I can tell you that Vincent Atkinson’s face at the time you broke Holmes’ thumb was priceless. I’m not surprised if his reaction won’t become some interoffice meme at some point.”

“I know it wasn’t my best moment. And it won’t help the guy if I said sorry.”

“I think you shouldn’t worry about what happens to Holmes. You don’t need me to tell you to not allow your emotions to get the better of you. This business with Holmes or that business with Eugene Tuktu, you kicking him, I don’t want to see you strong arming people to get confessions out of them.” Wilcox held up his hand to stop Meghan from launching into protecting a predator. “You don’t have to worry about Tuktu.

We claimed his laptop and have IP addresses for a few of his friends he's sharing images, a few of them are here in Alaska. The FBI will take care of the rest of them. My point is, I know you're allowing your work to get the better of you. I've seen good agents fall under the pressure of catching bad guys. I hate the Bureau lost you because of what happened. Don't let these people lose you because you're leading with your emotions instead of your head."

Meghan needed to know. "Did Garrett say anything to you about Dana?"

"You should ask him."

"You know that's not going to happen."

"You know we spend a lot of time trying to strengthen our ties to local law enforcement. We're looking at the model created here to make sure it doesn't happen again. I don't know what your relationship was with Agent Wyatt, but I can tell you from direct observation, she wanted to prove something to you. I saw it in how she handled the Amber Alert, and how she handled the on the ground operations." Wilcox waited to talk again, listening to the intercom boarding announcement.

Meghan never saw a point using the intercom in the Kinguyakkii commercial flight terminal. The space was a little bigger than the whole police department. It had a luggage claim area that was literally a hole in the wall where cargo handlers fed passenger baggage down a small chute with a collection bin. The desk attendant only needed to speak at normal volume to reach everyone inside the place. It was a system that she didn't control and on top of all the things that happened over the last week, Meghan didn't worry about it.

"My relationship with Dana isn't what I thought it was," Meghan said. "I guess I realized that it wasn't as friendly as I thought when she got here."

"I know she's not a good fit for the Anchorage office."

Meghan frowned. "Is that what she wanted?"

"She expressed some interest in it when we came here."

"That seems weird to me."

“Well, I think it has to do with you. She saw how you have a perfect operation and walk in a big shadow.”

“If I had a perfect operation, none of that would have happened.”

“You made that happen, Meghan. It wasn’t Dana. You allowed her to control the operation. I came to you and was ready to hand it all over to you. Instead, you let us keep it, and you did your own thing.”

“I agree that I did my own thing. And I think if I had the rest of the operation, Eugene wouldn’t face the charges he has now.”

“I agree. Just don’t let it happen again.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Leaving the airport when Wilcox boarded the plane, Meghan had a sense of pride she hadn't felt in a long time. She didn't go back to the police department immediately. There were a lot of emails and reports to catch up, but Meghan wanted a little more time by herself to take in the rest of what she almost lost. Living in Alaska wasn't for everyone. Living in Kinguyakkii took a particular type of person. Meghan knew she had both pieces to make up the whole. As the night fell over the city, a wind picked up. She made a phone call as she saw the truck surveying the neighborhood and the large two-story house where the Warrens lived.

"Hey, what's up, I'm on my way to a track meet. It's the last for the year."

"You know how I talked about getting out of Alaska," Meghan said.

The noise on the other end had a lot of female laughter. Brittany, among her friends and teammates, the line picked up everything. "Did you change your mind?"

"You think you're so smart, don't you?"

"Well, I have my moments. Does this mean I'm still coming up in a couple of weeks?"

"Well, that might be difficult. I think I lost my rental property. The landlord doesn't want to extend the lease again because I gave him thirty-day notice, and he already has a renter."

"Oh, no, what does that mean for you?"

"It means I might have to sleep in the Suburban for a while or the police department."

"You'll freeze in the Suburban."

"Summer's coming."

"Didn't you tell me, summer happens one day a year, usually when you're not looking?"

"Yes, it's true." Meghan didn't argue with the weather. It was a losing battle.

"So, you're staying because of that little girl?"

"How do you know about that?"

“You act like you’re on another planet, Mom. I subscribe to Calvin’s blog and the *Northern Lights Sounder*. I know you made the Associated Press again. That’s awesome.”

“I didn’t read the articles yet.”

“Well, I can tell you they are badass, and I know my friends want a mom as cool as you.”

“That makes me feel a lot better, Brittany.”

“I will call you later. I got to get on the bus. We’re going over our rotations.”

“Okay, I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom. I’m glad you’re staying.”

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Meghan’s next two stops had to do with business. She made up her mind. Since it meant she took the job to do it right, Meghan wasn’t backing down again. After all they went through, Meghan felt there were a few loose ends. It started with getting back her team.

“Want to come in for dinner?” Silvia asked when she answered the door.

Meghan stepped into the warm house. She smelled the aroma of baked bread and casserole. Silvia Graves made some of the best-smoked salmon dip Meghan ever tasted. She didn’t see any on the table over the woman’s shoulder.

“I don’t want to interrupt.”

“You’re being silly, come in.”

Meghan closed the door and stepped out of her boots. The three of them sat at the dining room table. Lester said very little and sipped at sweet tea in his tall glass.

“I’m not here to apologize,” Meghan said. “I think you and I have some unfinished business.”

“You mean between us, or the police department.”

“I meant the police department. Do you think we have something between us we haven’t addressed?”

“I’m concerned about you kicking a suspect.”

“You and I both know Eugene deserved a lot more than that.”

“I agree, but that doesn’t condone your behavior. And you know he’s not going anywhere for a while.” Lester shook his head at something and felt Silvia’s hand around his on the tabletop. “I have to say that you seriously impressed me with bringing Chrissy home again.”

“It wasn’t me who saved Chrissy. After what I experienced, I feel like we’re all part of Cecil Tuktu’s world. He is incredibly intelligent.”

“I wish he came to us with what he knew instead of turning the whole town on its ear.”

“I don’t know. I think if I faced what he did if I found out about the business with Eugene, I would have killed the guy.”

“Meghan, we don’t like that kind of talk in this house.”

“I’m sorry, Silvia. It’s true.”

“I know, but we’ll save that for somewhere else.” She waited a second before adding, “Do you think Chrissy will be okay?”

“I’ll follow up with her school counselor. I’ll talk to Joane about getting someone involved from the court system. I know the FBI has a great program for missing and exploited children. I think with Chrissy’s artistic outlet, she’ll do well. I know Cecil will have a lot to do with how she handles the future.”

“They are moving into the house within the week,” Lester said. “I suggested to Earl to get Eugene’s PO Box key and have the mortgage company change the box address to his and Joane’s address to ensure they get the bill. I’m not getting involved with the details of how they pay the mortgage.” Lester chewed some of his dinner. “So, what do you want to do now?” Lester asked.

“You know I’m back, right?”

“I didn’t think you ever left. I know you had some things to work out.”

“What about you? Are you ready to come back?”

“I got a new contract from Duane. He called me as soon as you had your conference call. I know he wasn’t happy about the FBI chief from Anchorage sitting in on the call with the Council. He sent an email to Oliver too.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t have much choice. Someone has to keep an eye on you.”

“We need to do something about getting a clothing drive started for the Tuktu kids. Cecil grew out of his jacket. Maybe we can use some of this momentum to rally around them and get the family better settled with some community help,” Meghan said.

She ate some of the food and savored the taste. She made up her mind that things had to change. Meghan knew she had to get back into shape. It wasn’t about self-image; it was about how she felt about her circumstances and why she allowed someone else to make her feel bad with their words. Silvia and Lester’s dinner table was a place to make amends, but she had lots more to do.

“Are you up for an adventure tonight?” she asked.

“Don’t you think we should try to make the rest of Kinguyakkii feel like they’re under police protection again?” Lester asked.

“Well, actually, for at least one more day, I want to allow some people to think they are living in the Wild West.”

“Why do you want people to think that?” Silvia asked with a grin.

“If I can borrow your husband for a few hours, I’ll let him tell you later.”

Silvia patted Lester’s arm again on the tabletop. “You know, you might want to think about getting your own husband, now that you’re sticking around.”

The idea made Meghan laugh. “I can handle one crisis at a time. I’m not too concerned about my love life right now.”

“When did you want to go?”

“I want to pick up Oliver and leave as soon as we can.”



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Building material wasn't readily available above the Arctic Circle. People who had money to build remote cabins didn't put them where they went unused and inaccessible. When it came to hunting cabins, it was in title only and ended up as something resembling a piecemeal shack fixed together with manila rope, bungee cords, and duct tape. Walls of recycled exterior and interior paneling and drywall with floors of wood pallets, it kept the elements out but wasn't made for extended times of comfort.

It was the kind of place where people went when they didn't want to be noticed, because the sort of things they did inside the hut weren't legal on the North Slope.

Lester and Oliver knew about the cabin. The place where Eugene said he and Nate went to drink their shared bootlegged prizes. They borrowed the *flat-bottomed boat* with the two-chined hull from Lester's friend.

The inlet had less ice than the bay, which had something to do with the undercurrent from the sound. It allowed for easy mobility through the waters in the dark. Meghan wore a life vest and allowed her sergeant and lieutenant to track the waterway to the cabin. It came up like a yellow beacon on an otherwise black shoreline in the dark. Meghan knew that was a good sign of life. Occupants lit the fire throughout the night to keep warm, stave off the saturation from the riverbank.

"Who else knows about this place?" Meghan asked. She whispered because in the dark on the cusp of June, sound traveled.

"Most of the people who come out here use it for the same reason as Eugene," Lester said. "I think it's been here since the '80s. I know people add layers and reinforce it when they find additional construction material."

"I knew it was here," Oliver said. "I never come out this way."

"You think someone's home?" Meghan asked.

"Yeah, they wouldn't leave the fire burning otherwise."

"We can wake up whoever's inside. Does this land belong to anyone?"

"Nope, it's state land."

"So, the cabin doesn't belong here."

“No one complained before,” Lester said.

“Did you have any idea people came out here to get drunk?” Meghan asked.

“I suspected. I never followed up.” Lester stared at her in the dark. “I had more pressing matters in town than worry about what happened out here.”

“Do you think the bootleggers use this as a hub for distribution?”

“I doubt it. Everyone knows about it. Sometimes people come out here salmon fishing. It’s too exposed,” Lester said. “We can see it from here.”

Meghan gauged they were almost a kilometer from the location. She saw something floating in the water. It clunked against the hull. She plucked it out of the water and tossed it in the boat. It was an empty, plastic whiskey bottle.

Meghan pointed at it. “This is something the three of us need to put a stop to,” she said. “We’ve got to find out who supplies the town.”

“Do you think Eugene will give away where he got the booze if he got a reduced sentence?” Oliver asked.

“I think murder and child molestation are a lot more severe than bootlegging. We’re better off doing this and see what happens. Anywhere else, we’d have surveillance and watch who came and went.”

“What about a couple of trail cams?” Oliver asked.

“There’s nowhere to mount them. You’d have to drive posts into the ground. I don’t think they’d stay upright. You’d risk losing the equipment.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Lester cut the motor, and they used the momentum to coast along the shore. Oliver kneeled in the bow and used the oar to guide them closer to the shoreline.

“What if they got guns?” he asked.

“Everyone has guns,” Meghan said. “We hope they’re not stupid enough to use them.”

Once they found a place to step out of the boat and haul it ashore, Meghan crouched, watching the flicking shape of the hut. It didn’t have a

pitched roof, more of a lean-to, which redirected the rain using vinyl and aluminum siding as roofing bits and pieces. Meghan saw details of the place as they huddled near the boat. People used it as a dumping ground, throwing away trash that eventually made its way to the inlet. The currents finally dragged everything out to sea.

“What are they using for fuel?” Meghan asked.

“It depends. By the look of it, it’s either a propane stove or some open-source fire,” Lester said. “You ready?”

“What are you going to do?” Oliver asked.

Then two people burst from the door on the other side of where they huddled. They got confident and too loud. As Oliver jumped up to give chase, Meghan halted him.

The rev of the snowmachine meant the strangers had a way to make it overland. The snowmobile allowed them to use the swampy terrain as a platform. As long as the driver kept the momentum and the throttle up, the heavy machine wouldn’t sink into the melting tundra. Meghan thought stalling in the muck might help their cause. It was impossible to walk over the ground without snowshoes or something to keep from sinking into the mire.

She trudged through the thick mud to the open door, cautiously watching for anyone still hiding inside the cabin. It smelled like seal oil and urine. Meghan saw the oil lamp inside.

“That makes sense,” Lester said. “I didn’t think about using seal oil.”

“It’s a firetrap,” Oliver said. He waited until Meghan turned on her LED flashlight before he removed his from a pocket. He scanned the exterior of the place. Everywhere around the muddy earth, empty whiskey bottles. Meghan saw a few broken beer bottles among the trash heaps.

“This is a place used by a lot of people,” she said. “How am I just finding out about this?” She flashed the light over Lester and Oliver’s face.

“You never asked before,” Oliver said innocently.

“Well, I’m asking now. Is there anywhere else that either of you know where they like to come to drink?”

Far off, they heard the snowmachine revving as it cut across the landscape. By the time the police got back to town, the culprits had a few hours head start.

Meghan went inside. It had a low ceiling. She saw the wallpaper was layers of nude magazines. The place had been around so long, men used print media as wall covering. She saw Oliver looking sheepish when he saw the interior. She kicked around more empty bottles. The ones inside the shed had residue. Under the ragged blankets and nylon torn sleeping bag, Meghan found a new container, unopened, still sealed. She picked it up. Lester eyed it cautiously like it was a wild animal in her hand.

“This is state land?” she asked.

Lester nodded.

“No one owns this place as far as either of you knows?” she asked.

Both men shook their heads.

Meghan left the shed. She took her time to walk around the shell of the hut. Meghan kicked away the four-wheeler tires stacked against the back wall. She cleared away anything that looked like rubber or plastic. It took a few minutes. Lester and Oliver waited, watching her.

“I’m sending a message tonight, gentlemen. We need to face these assholes. I am tired of the bootleggers in my town.”

Meghan broke the seal on the unopened bottle. She saw Lester’s nostrils flash in the dark. Meghan returned to the interior of the hut, poured the whiskey over the fabric and newspaper and piles of urine-soaked junk. She tossed the bottle on the collection. Before Meghan left the shelter, she used the tip of her boot, the same boot tip she kicked Eugene Tuktu, and knocked over the glass lantern filled with seal oil. The spilled accelerant flared and claimed the rest of the debris.

Meghan marched back to the boat as the area illuminated in erupting firelight. Lester and Oliver cast off. Lester pull-started the motor as Oliver pushed away from the shore with the oar. Meghan sat in the center of the boat, snug in her life vest, watching as the flames climbed into the sky. She knew it was a fire they’d see for miles. It was a fire that meant she had enough. Meghan wanted to show the occupants of her city that the police weren’t interested in extorting people. They weren’t bullies, they were law enforcement officers, and that’s precisely what she intended.

There was a sense of relief, as if burning the shack on the edge of Hotham Inlet not only sent a message to the bootleggers and the residents of Kinguyakkii, it cleansed Meghan of doubt. For the first time since she accepted the job and took up the shield, Meghan felt like she wasn't an outsider anymore. She was part of the community, and she belonged there. Moving forward, Meghan knew it was a different game. She wasn't afraid of stepping on toes or worrying about what the mayor thought of her performance. Meghan had a lot more people on her side than she realized. It felt good to come home again.

"They can see that fire in town," Oliver said.

"I know."

"You think someone will call Rowland?" he asked.

Meghan winced. Rowland Searson, the fire chief and only paid member of the volunteer fire department, wasn't a proactive man. "I think we'll be okay," she said.

"What's your next plan?" Oliver asked. She saw the delight on his face, even in the dark.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Duane Warren arrived at City Hall a little after nine on Tuesday morning. Meghan, Lester, and Oliver only returned to Kinguyakkii within the hour after sunup. They smelled like tundra and oily smoke. Meghan sat in the office at the conference table with Oliver and Lester. She had bottled water in her grimy hands. Showering had to wait. They still had another matter to handle before she went home to shower.

Ten minutes after Duane pulled the pick-up into the reserved spot between City Hall and the contractor trailers that made up the police department, he stormed into the office.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “What happens when the tourists show up?”

“I’m sending a message.”

He looked like a man caught between the pit and the pendulum. Meghan knew whatever authority he had over her ended the moment they had the last conference call with the Borough.

They spent a few minutes devising the sign they wanted to use to broadcast Meghan’s return to the police department. Oliver had leftover spray paint and had relatively good penmanship when it came to writing on a slice of plywood they claimed from under the trailers.

“It sends the wrong message,” Duane said. She knew he held back. He wanted to say more to her, but the look suggested he knew better.

Meghan stood up from the table. Lester and Oliver followed her through the archway and swinging door to the lobby and out the front door. The new sign was a temporary fixture. As far as Duane knew, there wasn’t a time limit on how long they left the makeshift sign.

“You can’t do this,” he said.

Duane followed them outside where the sign began attracting attention from morning commuters. People traveling on foot and four-wheeler slowed long enough to absorb the message.

“I can do this, and I am going to keep it up as long as it takes,” Meghan said. No longer afraid of Duane or his constant warnings to shutter anything Meghan wanted when it came to handling city police business her way, she frowned at him.

“Why are you worried, Duane? Do you know something?” She stepped closer to him. “You want to know something? Eugene said he took off with someone on Saturday night. I should talk to him again. Eugene said him and *Nate* went out to the cabin. Last night we went out there. Two people took off on a snowmachine before we identified them. One thing I know, Duane. The only Nate I know is someone you might know. I suggest if your son is involved in the ongoing business around here. He might want to find another place to live. Even if I don’t catch him bootlegging, if I get one whiff of him involved in this, I will arrest him. Do you understand? You want to relay that to him.”

The phone rang in Meghan’s pocket. She had carried the city police cordless phone with her outside. Meghan smiled and held up the receiver to show Duane. She wiggled it in his face.

“You think this is someone about the sign, Duane?”

“The city won’t pay it,” he said. Duane turned and marched across the gravel back to City Hall. He didn’t look back.

Meghan answered the phone as she looked at the new sign propped against the platform leading to the front door of the police station.

“This is Chief Sheppard Kinguyakkii Police Department, what can I do for you on this wonderful day?” she said into the receiver.

In front of her, neatly written in legible longhand, the sign read: *\$500 reward offered for information leading to indictment and arrest of anyone wanted for bootlegging.*

Meghan felt it sent a very clear message. It was her town now, and she was coming for the troublemakers.

