Chapter 1

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

It was the last game of the championships. Travis High against rival McKinley High; the two best teams in Texas locked in a war of hoops on the court. One would emerge victors and the other second best. Paul wanted to make this shot to break the tie. Scouts were in the stands, and even though he was only a Junior, making the winning shot would put him on the scout's radar.

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

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

Coach Bradford joined the celebration for a moment with a few fist pumps, then shouted over the din for the guys to lineup for the postgame handshake. Paul glanced at the stands to see his mom and girlfriend, both wearing big smiles and cheering with the crowd. His mom had made time in her busy social schedule to make every playoff game. He waved toward them and forced a smile, but inside the empty seat beside his mom bugged him. His dad hadn't made a single game this season. He had promised he'd be there if they made the championships. Not only did he not make a single playoff game, he wasn't here now to see Paul win the game. As per usual, he was more dedicated to his job with RAM Oil than his son. Paul hated that place, and right now he hated his dad.

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

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

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

"Yeah!" He laughed and wiped fog from the mirror. His green eyes stared back at him. *Next year*. If he kept playing like this … next year he'd play his butt off and get picked up by the pros. If not the pros at least by some college and then the pros, but either way he'd get out of here and away from home.

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

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

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

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

Mills raised his palm to refuse the offer. "No thanks, I'm good. Fresh coffee." He lifted his cup toward his boss and decided to sit in one of the wide, low-set leather chairs across from his Stone's desk. He set the coffee on the floor next to his foot and nervously folded his hands. "It's gotten worse. We're—we're going to have to pull Anderson from Point Hope. If we don't, the press will eat us alive. They've turned it into a bleeding hearts human interest story."

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

"A solution!" Mills let out a nervous laugh and pushed his glasses into place with his index finger. "It's a mess up there! Since Anderson hit that kid on the ATV, things have spiraled out of control. You'd need to find someone who can win over the Natives. And that won't be easy! Some of them think we're murders, others think we are killing their way of life, and they're joined by the eco nuts who think drilling is killing the planet. On top of all that, we need someone who can handle the media and someone who isn't going to rock the boat with our uh…*strategy* for making profit."

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

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

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

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

"No kidding," Stone said sarcastically. "That's why he's the one to send. We don't need to fix the problem; we just need to send a guy like Lowick who has a squeaky clean reputation and no clue about what's going on." A cold smile stretched his lips showing off perfectly white capped teeth. "Even with Anderson out of the picture, we'll have enough men in place who are, shall we say, loyal and committed to company profits in the same way we are and we'll reward them so they stay that way. By the time Lowick figures out what's going on, he'll have been there long enough to take the blame if we're caught. Lowick will be the fall guy. We'll plead ignorance, he'll get fired, and in the meantime, nothing gets in the way of the profit we're pulling in using those seals."

Mills nodded with a smile of understanding as he scooped up his cup and took a sip. "I like it." He wiped coffee from his upper lip. "If we end up with a serious leak, it will be on his watch…nothing lost but his reputation, and well…" He shrugged. "…his job." His smile showed off coffee stained teeth as the tension eased in his face. "But that's a price I'm willing to pay." He laughed. "Really, it's a good thing Anderson hit that kid. With Lowick in there, he won't be able to rat us out if something goes south. And who knows, he might even be able to get the Natives on board with us drilling there."

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

The two chuckled and strategized how to present the promotion. They had to move fast. If Lowick was going to be their damage control, they had to get him to Alaska sooner rather than later. They agreed to tell him Anderson was leaving because he couldn't handle the guilt from the accident which had made the news. The courts had ruled it an accident, because the boy had slammed into the side of Anderson's SUV and broke his neck. That was the truth. Anderson's severance would be enough to help him live comfortably silent for the rest of his life.

What they wouldn't mention is that the natives were growing restless, and Anderson was a catalyst uniting the people against RAM Oil. They needed a new face up there, and Lowick's squeaky clean character fit the bill. They had a handful of men in their pocket who worked on the rigs. They could keep things running the way they had been by doctoring invoices and inventory records.

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

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

A pang of regret hit him again. *Paul will be upset*. Calvin was upset with himself, too. He hadn't made a single game this year, and while it wasn't important in the bigger scheme of life, he knew it gave Paul a way to shine. Soon he'd be off to college and there would be no more basketball games. Worry about why Stone wanted to see him, pushed thoughts of Paul and basketball to the back of his mind.

Cal had never been thrilled with Stone's management style, but he'd kept his nose clean and did his job. He came across as a bully more than a manager, and his people didn't respect them. They feared him. Cal searched his memory for any reason he might be in trouble. He couldn't think of a thing, but for that matter he couldn't think of any other reason Stone would want to see him either. Cal wasn't his type – a "yes man." At 40 he'd been overlooked for promotions and often given work below his grade level. He'd done what was expected and without complaining. RAM was more than Mr. Craig Stone. Cal believed in the company and that working for RAM was a way to serve his country.

He had learned his work ethic from his dad, who learned it from his dad. They had all been oil men, and Cal hoped his son, Paul, would follow in his footsteps once he got the silly basketball notion out of his head. Right now Cal's gut told him something wasn't right, but he had no idea what could be wrong.

He stopped in front of the mirrored double doors leading to Stone's office and wiped the sweat from his palm on his pant leg. His reflection's blue eyes stared back at him unsure. The overhead lighting highlighted the little bit of gray sprinkled through his dark brown hair. He straightened his tie one last time and glanced at the empty reception desk. The secretary had gone home two hours ago, so he'd have to announce himself. He straightened his tie and knocked. Even as he did, his large muscular hand looked out of place.

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

"This is going to be my last summer before college. I want to have fun. I like you Paul, you’re your life revolves around sports." She shrugged. "I don't want to play second fiddle to baseball. I want to do things."

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

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

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

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

Instead, he walked in the front door and closed it gently. Then he headed straight toward the hall and his room trying walk across the tile floor without a sound. His soles squeaked like the dog's chewy toy as he hurried. Halfway to his room his dad called him. "Paul."

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

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

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

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

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

A sinking feeling washed over Paul. "You…you lost our job?" Again, he looked to his mother but she only stared at her lap.

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

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

"Well." His dad shrugged his narrow shoulders. "It's a mixed bag of blessings."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He walked into the room with an uneasiness twisting his gut. He stopped beside his mother's chair, and put his hand on her shoulder. "Mom, are you okay?" She only nodded without looking up at him.

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

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

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

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

"Just like that!" Paul snapped his fingers. "You plan to move us without even talking with us? What about my friends? And – and basketball? We can't…I won't!"

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

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

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

Calvin ran his hand across his tired eyes. "I'm sorry, but it's not open for discussion. It a done deal." He raised his arms and let them drop to his sides. "RAM Oil is going to buy our house so we don't have to worry about selling it. They have a place for us to live. They're going to take care of everything. I'll be heading up there this coming week. You and Mom will follow in a couple of weeks after you pack up your personal things. RAM with pack the rest."

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

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

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

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

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

"Hang on."

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

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

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

His mom walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. Her weight caused Paul to tilt toward her. She always talked about losing weight, but never did, and hid behind claims that she wasn't really fat, just stocky. Her warm hand lightly rubbed his back smoothing his wrinkled shirt. "Honey, I know moving is going to be hard…on both of us."

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

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

"How long what?"

"How long before we have to actually leave?"

She let out a sigh. "Your father is leaving right away, like he said." She shrugged. "You and me will pack up our personal stuff, and RAM is doing the rest. We're guessing two weeks…maybe three. It will take that long for us to care for things on this end. At least RAM will pack up and move our stuff." Her eyes glazed, and her voice sounded flat. "I want to video tape everything first so we have a record. Then there's the small repairs that need to be done and things like getting the carpets cleaned." She let out a long breath. "I wish we could wait and move this summer. I would make it easier for us to get acclimated.

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

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

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

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

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

Enola's penciled eyebrows arched in surprise. "Paul! Watch your language."

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

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

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

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

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

Paul headed for Coach Bradford's office. He'd always been able to talk with Coach B about everything. The coach had played at a major college, even had a shot at the pros as low man on the roster. He ended up playing semi-pro for a couple of years before he gave it up to get married. He understood Paul's drive better than anyone. His stories fueled Paul's desire to play professionally.

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

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

Paul collapsed into the chair and buried his face in his hands. Tears stung his eyes. He didn't want Coach to see how weak he was. The older man stood beside him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "What is it, Paul?"

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

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

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

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

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

"When do you leave?"

"Two maybe three weeks; then I'm gone." He looked down at his Nikes and back up still hoping for a solution. Instead, Coach wrote a pass to exempt Paul from his first class to keep him out of trouble. "If there's ever anything I can do for you, let me know." Coach clapped him on the back again. Deep inside, Paul's hope died a slow death. He had wished Coach might make an offer for him to come live with him. Instead he clutched a stupid hall pass and walked out of the office feeling a little hollow. The bell rang and kids poured into the hall. For the first time in his life Paul felt alone in the crowd. *Yesterday I was a hero, today I am nothing but yesterday's news*.

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

"Got some bad news," Paul mumbled.

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

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

"Moving? Like away?"

"Like Alaska!"

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

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

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

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

At the end of the day, he bumped into Katy in the parking lot. She walked up to him and said, "I'm sorry to hear about the move." She looked at him with her big brown eyes, but that's all they were. Big brown eyes. That spark that once linked them was gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The muscles in her jaw tightened. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Let's just say, it went much the same as yours. All this time I felt like my life was making a difference with the charitable and volunteer work I've been involved with, but I'm not even gone and I've got people stepping in to fill my shoes because everyone…." She traced quote marks in the air with her fingers. "…knows how busy I'll be with moving. It's like I don't even matter!"

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

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

"Honey, it's not like he has a choice. They expect him to go, and we need to be proud of him…support him. This is a promotion for all his hard work, and we really need the money."

Paul yanked his hand free and stared at her with fire in his eyes. "You always take his side." He shot to his feet. His chair clattered to the floor. "If you loved me, you'd at least try, because I'd rather die than move to Alaska."

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

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

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

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

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

"Mom? What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

She let out a sigh. "We did. We paid off our credit cards and all, but that's when the economy crashed. We're upside down on the mortgage and up to our necks in debt again. All the credit cards are maxed out. RAM Oil is going to buy the house as part of the package they are offering."

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

*That does it*. "Let's see. There's that truck you drive and don't make payments on, the gas you charge to run around in the truck you don't make payments on, the basketball camp you go to for your technical basketball instruction…your intensive drill sequences, and all that other stuff you wanted!"

Paul sat stunned. His mother never lost it like this. Her face transformed from angry to apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She looked down, shaking her head. "This is all…difficult. But we all have contributed to our financial situation and now it's going to cost us."

"What about college?"

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

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

Chapter 3

Enola stood on a stepstool in the kitchen pulling her stemware from the top shelf of the cupboard. She just couldn't trust it to the movers. It had been a long time since they had used these glasses for entertaining. She wiped the dust from them, thinking of how much life had changed. When they were first married, they used to have people over regularly, but gradually life had gotten so busy. She had friends through her volunteer work, a few she played tennis with at the club, but who were *their* friends…as a couple? She wiped the dust from the glasses, wrapped them in tissue paper and stuffed them in one of the boxes she had purchased from the storage company.

The clock on the stove read 4:30. *Cal should be calling soon*. Since Calvin had started the new job in Alaska, he called most days during his lunch rather than in the evening because it worked best with the time difference. *Even on salary he acts like he's punching a clock*. *So like him.* She sealed the box, wrote "fragile" in bold letters on the side and top, and stacked it with the others collecting in the dining room.

The corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. *Funny, I think we talk more now than when he was here.* But even though they talked almost every day, she couldn't tell what to think. By the sound of his voice, it wasn't easy for him being in a new place but, of course, he wouldn't say that. Plus it didn't even get light until 8:30 in the morning, and by the time he got out of work it was dark.

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

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

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

"I miss seeing you," she said. Inwardly she contemplated her words and what they really meant since she hardly ever saw him even when he was still in Texas. "Still wish we could Skype or something."

"I know. The Internet up here is iffy at best and like I told you cell phone reception at the house is spotty…well not spotty…nonexistent. Wait till you see this place. It is on the edge of nowhere. Half the time I don't have any bars even on this phone RAM gave me to use. We'll have to get a landline at the house, I guess. Though it appears a lot of people use radios. I can't wait for you and Paul to get up here, though; it really is a beautiful place when the sun is shining."

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

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

Cal broke the silence. "Until y'all get up here, I've decided to stay at the Whaler’s Inn. It's a small motel right in Point Hope. It's only got 20 rooms, but I have a bed, refrigerator, and microwave. Plus there's a restaurant, if I want a real meal, and my phone works here. People who run the place were pretty friendly until they found out I work for RAM. Some of the Natives here don't want us drilling."

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

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

"He's about the same. Maybe a little moodier than usual, now that someone is interested in buying his truck. He's outside shooting some hoops. It's a good way for him to burn some energy. I don't think he's sleeping well."

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

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

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

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

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Cal hung up the phone and rubbed his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping well, but once he established some relationships and built a reputation as trustworthy among the men, things would change. It was hard though. Some of the Alaskan Natives wanted to work on the rigs because they could make good money, even without a college degree. But most of them looked at him like an outsider. The short, stocky waitress at the hotel restaurant confirmed this and had warned him that many of the Tikigagmuit did not want drilling. He had asked, "What is Tik—Tiki-ga-what-you-said?"

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

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

He had apologized to the waitress and told her he'd like to learn more…to understand the Natives. And he did. As a representative of RAM he had to help them understand RAM had their best interest at heart. They would be able to make more money than ever before, but for him it was more than that. He shared how his great-grandfather had been one of the first Texas oilmen, and about how his father went to Kuwait with the legendary Red Adair in the 1990s to fight the oil fires set by Saddam Hussein when his army retreated during the first Gulf War. He wanted her to understand he was part of a breed that brought up the oil without killing the land or the people who lived on it. He cared.

He sat at his desk studying some of the files he'd pulled. The office was cluttered and the filing a mess. He had put some of the files in order, but the disorganization drove him nuts. Files were not only misplaced, some things were even in the wrong files. It's like someone just stuck things anywhere in the drawer and called it filed. But as he worked on getting things in place, it started to raise some questions.

A few of the things he came across made it look like things didn't quite line up like they should with company policy and government regulations. And a couple of invoices showed conflicting information and a few safety reports raised red flags. If they were audited, as the project VP it would be a nightmare for him. He'd have to get to the bottom of this before they expanded drilling. Headquarters wouldn't be happy to hear that. He didn't dare approach them until he had proof and not just conjecture.

He ran his hands across his face, and pressed his eyelids with his thumb and forefinger to stop the burning. Before he could fix it, he had to understand the scope of the problem, or the fact that there was actually a problem -- but he didn't have time to deal with it during the day. In the short time he'd been here, he'd put in long nights getting things straightened out and organized. Now with the information he came across it was even worse, and he had a long way to go before the files were in any kind of useable order.

Right now it didn't matter what time he went "home" with his family in Texas, but they'd be here in a couple of days. He had hoped to have things in order before Enola and Paul joined him. He couldn't accomplish that even if he stayed awake for 48 hours straight. *How did Anderson function in this confusion?*

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

He leaned back and stretched his arms over his head. *I need some fresh air*. Cal pulled a pile of files and stuffed them in his briefcase. He'd get takeout and work in his room. At least there he felt like he could think without being interrupted by people acting suspicious. He grabbed the small collection of papers he had questions about and stuffed them into their own file, placed it with the others in his briefcase and snapped it shut. At this point, at least the items that raised questions were in one place. That way he'd be able to address them one at a time as he found answers.

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

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

"I didn't hear you come in. You just missed your dad's call. He says the house RAM is providing up there isn't furnished so we'll be bringing some of our stuff." She crossed her arms and leaned her backside against the counter. "But the house is smaller than this one, so we'll have to put most of our things in storage, until we find a place of our own."

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

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

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

"Hey, I'm hungry!"

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

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

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

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

She tossed the pizzas back into the freezer. "Okay, call it in."

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

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

Mills nodded. His bald head shone under the overhead lighting. "I spoke with Ethan Halverson. Lowick has been putting in a ton of extra hours trying to organize his office…the files haven't been cleaned up yet. I talked with Anderson, and he said the files are mess…and could be a smoking gun. He's not sure. Everything happened so fast. He's not sure what he got rid of and what might still be there." Mills talked faster and faster, almost tripping over his words. "If Lowick keeps it up, he could come across something Anderson overlooked." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "…and if there's one thing we know about Lowick; he's not stupid. If he comes across the right information, he could track it right back to us." He licked his lips and took a breath.

"Calm down Mills. We have Ethan Halverson there to keep a lid on things. And there are other people in place to take the fall before anything would ever be linked to this office." He rubbed his double chin thoughtfully with his sausage-like fingers. "For now, I'd say what we need is to keep Lowick busier. Get him out of that office and get someone in there we can trust to clean up the loose ends. I'm thinking now might be the time to move ahead with the project to drill two miles down under the sea and six to eight miles horizontally. It's controversial, so he'll have to deal with all that red tape, but if anyone can pull it off, I think its Lowick. He's as proud of his oil heritage as those stupid Eskimos are of their living off fish all their lives.

"Let Lowick know this project has the potential to be a 100-million-barrel reservoir, and we think he's the man to get it up and running." Stone stood with his hands behind his back, causing the buttons on his Borrelli shirt to strain across his girth. He rocked back and forth from heel to toe. "He's also the man who could bring us down if he gets a whiff of what's really going on. Tell Halverson we're sending someone to clean-up Lowick's office while he's out. He's to let Lowick know he's hired him a secretary to take care of all the…filing. We need someone thorough. Someone we can trust."

Chapter 4

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

The microwave beeped from the kitchen. Paul shuffled out there in time to see his mom slip a steaming cup from the built-in stainless microwave. She smiled. "Just realized we won't have a microwave when we first get to Point Hope." She dipped a coffee bag up and down as it steeped. "Coffee maker is packed so this is it if you want some coffee." She glanced at the clock on the microwave. "You better get your shower. We'll be picked up in about an hour and a half."

Paul frowned. "Why so early?"

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

"Whatever," he mumbled and headed toward the bathroom. A lump choked out anything else he wanted to say. The nightmare he'd lived for the last couple of weeks was coming to a head today and he couldn't do a thing about it.

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

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

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

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

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

"Enjoy your flight."

"Yeah, right." He hefted his duffle bag over his shoulder and walked down the ramp. It didn't matter when the people in front of him jammed the aisle. Somehow being on the ground in Houston was better than being in the air and on his way.

When they found their seats, he stuffed his duffle bag in the last available space in the overhead and took the window seat. His mom squeezed her bag under the middle seat in front of her. She no sooner got situated when her phone pinged. She read the message and her face blanched.

"What?" Paul looked from her to her phone.

"It's your dad. He is stuck out on a rig and won't be able to meet us."

Paul rolled his eyes. "So nothing's changed except that he's dragging us to nowhere to abandon us."

"Paul, don't start. This is hard enough without the attitude. He said the real estate woman is meeting us and will take us to the house."

"Real estate woman?"

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

"Hmph." Paul didn't say any more. No sense getting into an argument on the plane when the cause of the problem wasn't even here. Instead, he turned to the window and stared out at Houston. Not his favorite place being a Mavericks fan, but at least he was still in Texas.

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

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

His mom looked around and shrugged. "Paul, we can't change it, so you might as well make the best of it."

Once they got in the air, he eased his seat back. All the repressed emotion exhausted him. He stared at the clouds passing the window like fog on a cool Texas morning and fell asleep. His troubled mind dreamed of a chubby Eskimo lady wearing a fur-lined hood taking them to their new house. An igloo. He stepped inside where all their furniture was piled in the center of one big room to burn for heat. "Make the best of it," the real estate lady said.

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

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

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

He nodded, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and turned toward the window to avoid conversation. He wasn't okay.

The clouds cleared. He stared at the changing landscape. Snowcapped mountains, tundra, lakes, and rivers stirred a little curiosity in him for the first time. The captain's voice announced the flight was on time and would be landing at Point Hope Airport in about a half an hour. "Point Hope is located in the Lisburne Peninsula on the Chukchi Sea coast and is just 125 miles north of the Artic Circle. The weather in Point Hope is currently a sunny 15 degrees. Enjoy the rest of your flight."

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

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

Paul glanced around the plane at the handful of other passengers. All men. Some looked like natives, but most weren't. He wondered if they worked for RAM. *Why else would anyone want to go here?* For whatever their reason, the winter coats draped over empty seats beside them said they were more prepared than Paul. He turned his attention back to the blue water below. The Arctic Ocean made for a pretty picture from the air.

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

As the plane came to a stop, everyone stood, grabbed their belongings from the overhead compartment, and lined up in the aisle to disembark. Paul and his mom just sat there for a few extra minutes. A couple of the men walking by their seats talked about some upcoming festival with a Native American sounding name. *Maybe that's why they're here.* By the looks of the place there was nothing festive about it, and Paul wondered how anyone could look forward to anything this place had to offer. In his way of thinking, this would be his prison for a year and then he'd escape to college. Holding on to that one fact would be the only way to keep his sanity.

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

She pulled her phone from her purse and let out a sigh. "Me either." She stuffed it back into her purse and said, "RAM gave your dad a some kind of satellite phone that works up here. Come on, nothing we can do about it right now. Might as well get on with it."

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

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

Paul's mom smiled. "Guess that would be the real estate woman." She walked directly to the woman and introduced herself and Paul.

She was younger than the person in his dream. And though she had a round face, she wasn't heavy set just solid. She let go of the sign with one hand and shook Enola's hand. "Welcome to Point Hope. I'm Akna Qajak. Your husband asked me to take you to the house since he's otherwise engaged."

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

"Do you work for RAM?" Enola asked.

"Goodness no. Though I have benefited from them being here." She smiled and her full cheeks pushed her eyes into little slits.

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

Paul's mom stopped fighting with her suitcase. "Well she's got cell service, so there's hope." The two of them looked around at the flat landscape. A stiff wind raised a crop of goosebumps across Paul's skin and whipped his shaggy blond hair into a snarled mess.

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

Enola set her knuckles on her hips with a warning glare. "Paul, this is home. You can make yourself miserable, but don't pull me into your misery. Think of it like a new adventure…a fresh start."

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

"Look at it this way, Paul. If we were still in Texas, you wouldn't have gone to basketball camp anyway, because we couldn't afford it. And we would still have been moving somewhere else. Whether we moved her or not, our life in Richmond was done. You would still have changed schools and would have had to make new friends. So get over yourself and make the most of this new opportunity." Her tone let him know she had had it.

"Sorry." He finished fitting the luggage into the trunk and carried his duffle bag into the back seat of the car.

His mom sat in the front seat with the real estate woman and the two of them chatted away like old friends. But his mom had that knack. People liked her.

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

"What?"

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

"What about Internet?"

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

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

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

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

The woman left her card and told them to call if they had any questions. As her car pulled out Paul and his mom investigated. Paul found his room. His Jeremy Lin autographed poster and Dwight Howard poster decorated the walls of a tiny room. His twin bed filled more than half of it.

They sat in the two easy chairs in the living room across from the TV. The boxes his mom had packed were stacked against the wall in the hallway. A phone rang from the kitchen. His mom picked up the receiver on a white wall phone. His dad would be "home" in about an hour.

It had been a long day. Paul went to his room and lay on his bed and stared out at the clouds gathering in the sky. The real estate lady said the sun would set at 9:30. The wind howled through the eaves. He got up and dug through his backpack for his earbuds and plugged his ears.

Chapter 6

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

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

Paul thought about pretending to be asleep, but he'd have to face his dad sooner or later. It had been almost three weeks since they actually saw each other. He grabbed his phone and headed to the kitchen. He walked in on his mom talking quietly. Her back was to him, but his dad's eyes met his over his mom's shoulder as soon as he stepped in the room.

"Paul! We thought you were asleep." His dad stepped across the small kitchen, grabbed him in a bear hug, and clapped him on the back. "I've missed you son."

Paul stepped back. A light in his father's eyes told him he actually meant it. It left him speechless. A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he glanced at the worn linoleum. "I missed you, too," he mumbled and looked up. "So what's the deal with cell phones up here?" He held out his phone. "No reception…no wi-fi."

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

Paul stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I get that. So what's the deal though? We're in the middle of March Madness, need to check on my bracket and all."

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

"They do have service up here, right? I mean you called us."

"It's like a different world here. My phone works because it's provided by RAM and their satellite provides my reception. There is cell service but it's not like what you're used to. I started checking into it, and people use CBs more than they use their phones." He shrugged. "You'll have to ask the other kids about their cell service."

Paul blinked once. His mouth hung open. "Dad! You've been here three weeks! How am I supposed to stay in touch with Josh and my other friends back home! See any of the games! Duke's playing Gonzaga next week!"

His dad shook his head.

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

His dad's eyes narrowed. "That's enough, son. Life isn't always what you want it to be." He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "Sometimes new paths offer even better opportunities. It takes time. Give it a chance. And, really, I need ya'll to stay off my back. This is no cake walk for me, either. My new job…well it's like two jobs right now. Most of the people here are either suspicious of RAM while some downright hate us. I don't need the same from my family."

Paul leaned against the wall. For the first time he noticed the dark circles under his father's eyes and how tired he looked. His mom, too. *None of us wants to be here.* He hung his hope on that. *Maybe…just maybe there is a chance we'll go back to Texas.* "Sure. Sorry, been a long day." There was no sense fighting.

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

*That's an understatement*. Paul didn't know how to react. Everything that mattered was being stripped away. He just waited for his dad to let him go and said, "Been a long day, I'll see y'all in the morning."

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

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

"Actually pretty good considering it's almost 10:00 back home. Where's Dad?"

She let out a sigh. "You know. He left about an hour ago."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You want to come with me?"

She shook her head. "I think I'll stay here and work on unpacking and figuring out where everything is that was unpacked. We'll need to get you registered for school, today, and I can't stand operating in all this confusion. There's no doubt we're going to have to maximize the space we have here."

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Paul walked outside and surveyed the flat arctic tundra. The flatness stretched to bleached white hills in the distance. They looked like they might once have been mountains but now where nothing but the pathetic remains of the former peaks worn away by the blasted wind. It felt lonely and bleak. He zipped his jacket up under his chin and headed toward town. It didn't matter that his father had their only vehicle, because this place didn't really have roads anyway. …And *I don't have anything else to do*. A handful of kids running along what served as the street stopped and watched him. He smiled at them and said, "Hi."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm a junior. How about you?"

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

He shrugged. "Registering today."

"You're just in time for Spring break." She glanced up at him, her dark eyes shining. "So what do you like to do?"

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

"Really?" Her eyes brightened. "You're in time for the playoffs. This is the home of the Harpooners."

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

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

"A…Harpoonerette?"

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

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

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

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

"It's the whaling festival, Nalukataq. It brings friends and relatives from across the North Slope and the other regions of Alaska. Everyone comes to get a share of whale and join in the traditional blanket toss and dancing. It's a big deal and lasts throughout the night. You won't recognize the place with so many people."

Paul swallowed hard. The thought of eating whale grossed him out.

Kili glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's almost time for me to leave for school. You coming?"

"I'm not registered. Doing that today."

"That's good. School is closed for Spring break next week. At least you'll get to meet some of us before were off, cause the guys will be out whaling next week. Almost everything will be closed. Speaking of which, I need to get going."

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

"Soooo…you just close?"

She nodded. "People know I'm here in the morning before school. My uncle will reopen around noon. If people really want something they'll call him and he'll meet them here."

"If you want, you can meet me here tomorrow morning and you can ride with me to school. I could show you around if you like. I know first days can be tough on the outsiders."

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

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

He went with his mother to the Tikigaq School to register. It didn't look like any school he'd ever seen. What they called the "new" building had been built in 1980. The woman in the office was polite enough but not really friendly. When she stood at the copier making a copy of his birth certificate, his mom gave him a sideward glance with raised eyebrows. She felt it too. He was thankful he'd have Kili to show him around tomorrow, and even more thankful for spring break.

Paul spent the rest of the day helping his mom. She made spaghetti for dinner. His dad didn't make it home in time to join them. It rubbed him wrong. He couldn't get over feeling his father cared more about his job than his family. They were stuck here with no Internet, no TV, no phone right in the middle of March Madness. Dad had the only working phone. Paul had hoped he could at least use it to check scores and ranking.

For his mother's sake, he held his tongue. He went to bed listening to the wind howl outside his window. His mind drifted to Kili; happy he had met her. But he missed his friends and life in Texas. He pulled his pillow over his head to block out the noise of the wind. He tossed and turned. Muffled voices told him his dad finally made it home. He glanced at the clock. 11:00. He decided to stay warm and comfortable and finally fell asleep.

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

The pressure from Mr. Stone to have things up and running by mid-September for the new exploratory drilling put him at odds with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). They were urging the government to oppose the plan. And then there were other green groups and activists including some of the natives in Point Hope who were tied to whaling. For them the thought of more offshore drilling or an oil spill was terrifying. Today's phone call with Mr. Stone made it clear that he didn't care about the multifaceted problem. "We put you there because we thought you could get the job done. Don't disappoint me," he had said.

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

Start here Chapter 7

The following morning Paul sat up in bed feeling energized even though he hadn't sleep great. He reached for his phone out of habit. *I forgot to ask Kili about the service here*. He had no idea what time they were supposed to go the Nalukataq festival. To be safe he got up and took a quick shower. He'd be ready for whenever she showed up. Excitement stirred in his gut for the first time in months. Kili was friendly and pretty. He told his mom about his plans over oatmeal and coffee.

"Dad left for work a couple of hours ago."

After breakfast, he messed around in his room trying to make it feel like home. About 11:00 he heard an ATV pull up. He peeked out the window to see Kili in a Ranger ATV that looked more like a miniature truck. "She's here," he yelled to his mom.

Once he got to the door, he waited for Kili to knock so he wouldn't look desperate. When she did, he suddenly felt ashamed to have her see where he lived but too late. This wasn't really their house anyway, it was only temporary. He opened the door and Kili's smile made him forget about his concerns. A fur bordered hood framed her face.

Paul grabbed his jacket from the hook beside the door. "Hi, you found it."

She laughed. "You ready to go?"

Paul's mom stepped up behind him. "Hello, you must be Kili. I'm Paul's mom."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Lowick. You coming to the festival?"

His mom looked at him and then back at Kili. "I hadn't thought about it. Still unpacking. But I might just do that. I could use a break."

Kili pointed at Paul's head. "You have a hat? You'll need one."

He ran in to his bedroom and snatched his Mavericks gray "Champions" cap from his collected. He hurried back to the door, kissed his mom on the cheek, and stepped out into the windy sunshine.

"Have fun," his mom called to him as he climbed into the side-by-side next to Kili.

"This is an ATV on steroids! Wow! Seatbelts, windshield and everything." He fastened his seatbelt with a click.

Kili nodded. "My cousin, Pana, was killed in an accident last year. He was a year older than me and like a brother." She looked at Paul with moist eyes. "I've lived with Pana and his dad, my Uncle Steve, since my parents died. Now he's more overprotective than ever, but I can understand it. He bought this cause it's safer, and we can use it for deliveries."

Paul nodded and searched for something to say, but couldn't think of anything that didn't sound lame. He'd never lost anyone that mattered much less parents and a cousin. As much as his dad aggravated him, he would be devastated if he died. When he did the math, he realized the cousin would have been his age. He decided not to bring it. If she wanted to talk about it, he'd listen. But for now he figured it best to change the subject. "I've seen a lot of ATVs since I got here."

Kili slid the hood from her head, and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Yeah, it's how most of us get around."

Paul liked that idea. *Less expensive than a truck*. It wouldn't look like they were broke and he could still have wheels. "Is it always this windy?"

She threw her head back and laughed. "It sure is. Point Hope has the strongest winds in the entire state. And just so you know…" She pointed at his hat. "If you treasure that hat, I'd suggest you take it off and leave in the cab because it will not stay on your head."

"You're the one who told me to wear a hat."

"I meant something to keep your ears warm. I brought you a parka in case you wanted to dress for the occasion. It has a hood."

He shrugged. "Sounds like a plan."

They reached the festival grounds about 11:30. She climbed out of the Ranger and went to the bed that held something that looked like a large cooler. Paul joined her as she yanked a duffle bag from the box. Her hair whipped in the wind as she unzipped a duffle bag and pulled out the parka. She held it up. "What do you think?"

He grabbed it at the shoulders and eyed it. "So why did you really bring this? Are you trying to help me blend in?" He smiled.

She looked at her feet and nodded, then back at Paul. "Truthfully, some people…well let's just say it takes them some time to warm up to outsiders…and my uncle is one of them."

Inwardly Paul groaned at the news as he slipped his arms into the parka. Now he'd have to deal with Uncle Ogre to keep his only friend. The parka cut the incessant wind. When he slipped the hood up his body relaxed as it blocked the wind from the back of his neck. "This is great!"

She laughed. "Now all you need are some Mukluks."

"Mukluks?"

She lifted her right foot and showed off her boot. "Muckluks. These are made from reindeer skin…some are made from sealskin. I wear them for the festivals. They're traditional."

"Bet they keep your feet warm." Paul thought about pictures he'd seen of baby seals, but pushed the image from his mind.

Suddenly another voice filled the air from the walkie-talkie on her belt. *"Grocery Girl this is True Whaler, what's your ETA?"*

She snatched the radio from her waist. "I'm here, Uncle Steve. Just parked."

*"Hurry it up. Want my family here for the prayer."*

"On my way."

Paul followed a few steps behind her as she rushed ahead. The parka actually made him feel more like he belonged. "So you use walkie-talkies?"

She lifted the radio in her hand. "This is a CB…gets 40 channels. It's the best way to get ahold of me."

*She doesn't even have a phone!* All he could do is follow alongside Kili as she hurried. All this outsider talk made him feel…well like an outsider. He wondered about his shoes, but a quick glance at others milling around showed him he wasn't the only one wearing sports shoes.

"You ready for something to eat," Kili asked as she marched forward.

Paul did a double step to fall in step. "Yeah, I'm always ready for something to eat and I have to say something smells great."

"Do you hunt?"

Paul wondered at the way this girl changed subjects. "Did back in Texas. Why?"

"Did you eat what you killed?"

"Of course. Why?"

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

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

"You saw the groceries back at the Native Store? That's the extent of our packaged goods…groceries. Here we live off the land. It isn't just a sport. It's a way of life and a lot of our community activities revolve around our seasonal subsistence cycles. That's what Nalukataq festival is about. She grabbed his hand. Come on!"

Paul stood where he was for a moment. Kili's hand felt warm in his as she turned to look at him. "What's wrong?"

He stepped toward her. "Well, since I'm going to be living here, I'd like it if you didn't call me an outsider."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Deal. Now come on. You haven't lived until you've tried Caribou soup! Or you can try your first taste of goose soup. Up to you. And you're going to love all the various whale dishes. You won't want to eat dinner tonight."

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A group of men stood ready to raise the whaling crews' flags. Among them Steven Ahtuangaruak stood out. His stark white skin, black hair, and dark eyes set him apart from the others. The gray in his goatee betrayed his age, but other than that, his heavy muscular build made him a source to be reckoned with. And since the death of his son, his hot temper had a short fuse. Anyone who worked for RAM learned to cut a wide path around him. Some who had called him friend all their lives were worried about the effect his son's death was having on him. Now a little more than a year later, thoughts of revenge seemed to consume him.

He scanned the crowd looking for his niece, Nukilik. He finally spotted her working her way through the small crowd gathered for the opening prayer and breathed a little easier. She scolded him constantly for being over protective, but he couldn't help him after the loss of his son, Pana. He had been as full of life as Kili, but in one brief moment RAM Oil snuffed out his flame.

Kili pushed to the front row of those gathered in time for the traditional prayer. Steven and the others raised the whaling flags, and when he looked up, he noticed Nukilik talking with a blond-haired boy wearing a parka. He didn't know this boy, so it meant one thing. *He's the new RAM boy*.

After the opening ceremony he moved toward Kili to yank him away from the outsider, but a photographer, asked him to pose with the others in front of the flags. By the time they were done, the kids had disappeared into the crowd. *He would talk to her at home*.

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Paul enjoyed the food but, even more, he liked the singing and storytelling between events. This place had such a strong history and all the families were so close. He collected some of the food being distributed to bring home to his family. It included festival quaq (frozen whale meat) and muktuk (whale blubber and skin). He couldn't wait to tell his mom about all the things he learned. *It's too bad Mom and Dad didn't experience this*. He glanced around at the crowd and wondered if he might be the only person here without at least one other family member.

When the distribution were finished Kili and Paul brought their provisions back to the Ranger. "What's next?" he asked thinking they were headed home.

"The blanket toss!"

"The blanket…toss?" He didn't want to appear stupid, so he didn't ask. He'd watch someone else and give it a try. It didn't take long for him to figure out that it wasn't the blanket getting tossed. It was people.

Kili and Paul joined the crowd. "The blanket is bade from Bearded Seal skins," Kili said. "The person in the air is a blanket dancer." Her wide smile showed how proud she was of her heritage. As they worked toward the front of the crowd, Paul could see that a rope extended from each corner of the blanket which was pulled tight between four wooden beams using block and tackle. People lined the edges and pulled out the blanket to throw the dancer in the air.

"You have to be careful not to throw people to high or the wind will catch them. I've seen someone get tossed 30 feet away to the ground."

"Does everybody do this?"

"Captains and their wives go first." Suddenly something small flew past him. The person in front of him crouched to pick up wrapped candy from the ground.

"They throw out goods…clothing…sweets…different food from the air. It shows they were able to provide." She bent down and picked up a piece of candy from the ground. "For you." She took his hand and placed the candy in it. "You're first."

After the blanket toss, everyone was invited to dance. Kili invited Paul to dance with her. "I don't really know how," he admitted.

"Just follow me. It will be okay."

As they danced, Paul spotted a cluster of teens watching them. By the looks on their faces they are not happy. Kili took his hands. Don't pay attention to them. They'll come around once they get to know you. They took a break and Paul slipped the hood from his head to cool off. They watched groups perform, including some of the unhappy-looking teens. They performed traditional songs with drums. Paul liked this. He hoped Kili was right, and that the others would accept him. But a couple of guys their age stood close enough to make sure he knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"…no secret who he is. He's the oil executive's son—at the festival. It rubs some of us the wrong way. It isn't right…an oil outsider trying to act like he's one of us."

Chapter 8

Cal Lowick arrived at the office early because he couldn't sleep. The incessant howl of the wind and everything on his mind made him restless. Finally, he decided to get up and make use of his time by heading into the office. It had been weeks since he'd spent any time behind his desk. Not that he really minded an excuse for not sitting in his office. He wasn't a paper pusher by nature. Part of him was grateful for all the time spent on the rig. It gave him a chance to get to know some of the guys, but it also reinforced some of the questions he had.

He walked past his secretary's desk, thankful she wasn't there; marched into his office and directly over to the window that looked down into the warehouse. He closed the blinds and turned on the small desk lamp. It painted a small yellow halo of light over his clean desk. All he wanted was some uninterrupted time.

While the secretary they hired for him couldn't be more helpful, she was too helpful. In fact, she felt more like a guard always looking over his shoulder wanting to know what he was doing. Plus her name was Qailertetang. He couldn't even attempt to get his Texas tongue around that one, and so he tried calling Mrs. Q. Once. Her lips puckered like she'd been sucking on a pickle. Now, if and when he was in the office, he didn't call her anything to her face.

In his gut, he didn't trust her or that Halverson fellow who hired her. Not that he had anything concrete to point to, but his instinct had never let him down. So when Mrs. Q. messaged that she wouldn't be in today because she was going to some sort of festival he jumped at the chance to enjoy some peace behind his desk. And from the looks of things, about half the people who worked for RAM were at that same festival.

He plopped his briefcase on the desk-side chair and pulled together the fixin's for a small pot of coffee. The water cooler bubbled and gurgled as he filled the two cup carafe. The smell of fresh brewed coffee filled the air as he surveyed the office. Everything sparkled. Not a speck of dust or a stray paper. *I wish they would have just left it alone*. So different from the first time he'd stepped foot in here. Going through the mess had started to give him a sense of what was really going on here, and in the short time he'd been here, it was clear there was more than met the eye. Some things weren't adding up. The seals on the drilling rig weren't performing up to standards. It didn't make sense. In his mind, it was like a puzzle with pieces missing. He couldn't see the big picture. *Could the water temperature here in Alaska cause them to fail?* That didn't seem plausible.

Truth be told, he'd rather hang out on the rig than in the office but the answers he was looking for should be here. He hoped to take advantage of Mrs. Q's absence and spend some time behind his desk drilling for answers. To start, he'd take advantage of the quieter-than-usual day to go through the files he'd been lugging around in his briefcase for months. After pouring a cup of coffee, he settled in at his desk. He decided to tackle the files one at a time, just in case someone popped in with some urgent matter like always.

While on the clock, he hadn't had a spare minute to actually look at even one of these files. In fact, his briefcase had been locked in his truck because he didn't need it out on the rig. And by the time he got home, he was so exhausted he couldn't concentrate enough to try to make sense of anything. His goal today was to gather some facts, something he could bring to Mr. Stone.

A few loose papers sat on top of the files. He'd forgotten about those invoices. He'd set them aside with questions because they had the same date. They raised a red flag when he first saw them, and even more so now as he read through the information. Parts listed on one invoice were substandard to what they used. The other showed a list of quality seals and other parts. The Performance issues he'd learned about since he was here made him question whether or not the company was getting what they were paying for because if the seals were really the quality they were paying for…performance didn't match up. He walked over to the filing cabinet to pull the report for the same time period. Nothing was filed where he thought it should be. He didn't like it. *Are the reports even here?*

As he flipped through the folders, he came across a file of newspaper clippings and articles from various sources. He pulled it and walked back to his desk. Most of it was more promotional than anything else, including a glowing commentary introducing his predecessor, William Anderson. *Looks like RAM's golden child*. He flipped to the next page and stopped. *Local Boy Killed in Tragic Accident*. He read the article. This was the reason Anderson had to leave Alaska so abruptly. His SUV had collided with the boy's ATV. The kid's name was Pana Ahtuangaruak. According to the article, he was born the same year as Paul. The boy's ATV collided with the SUV striking the passenger door. He broke his neck and died at the scene. It was ruled an accident.

Cal thought about the waitress at the diner. Little things she said made it clear that not everyone thought it was the boy's fault. He had a clearer understanding why many of the local gave him the cold shoulder, but what still didn't make sense was the standoffish nature of the people here at RAM. A few of the guys on the rig were friendly but he still didn't really have anyone he could call friend. Harold was the closest thing he had to a friend, and he'd warned Cal to be careful. But as soon as Zeke Halverson was in the picture, most of the guys he did get along with treated him more like he was invisible.

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

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Enola sat on the sofa in the undersized living room of her small house staring at the boxes she had piled against the wall making it all seem even smaller. She was out of room and out of positive thoughts. *I don't even have enough room for Yoga*. Her fingers brushed the leather upholstery as she reminisced about the home she'd left in Texas. She burst into tears and let herself cry. After about ten minutes, she wiped her face with her sleeve and went over and grabbed a tissue from the box perched on the pass-through to the kitchen. *I wonder when we'll get the satellite hooked up?* At least the TV could keep her company or at least add a little background noise.

She leaned with her back to the pass-through and stared at her new reality. Without a car, what could she do? Back home she would have gone shopping. *Maybe I should have gone with the kids.* The thought of Paul going to the festival with Kili brought a smile to her face. *Send him to town to buy candles and he comes back with a friend. Wish I was more like that.*

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

She slipped on her jacket. If others could live here without a car, so could she. The sunshine felt good on her face, even though the wind stole its warmth. The coolness actually felt good on her puffy eyes. She walked down the zig-zag ramp-like stairs and sat on the bottom stair listening to the sound of the wind and the hum of the diesel generator that provided them with electricity. Part of her liked the remote feel of living in the middle of nowhere. It gave her a new start, like everything in life, until now, had been scrapped. She had a clean slate. Her eyes drifted toward the village. *What do you hold for me, Point Hope?* Even the name of the place hovered like an omen of good things to come. One thing she did know, staying in this little house with a husband who was never home and a son who was already making friends would not be an option.

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Anger bubbled in Steven Ahtuangaruak as he watched his niece disappear into the crowd with that RAM Oil kid. How could she betray him like this? How could she turn her back on Pana's memory? He finished up his part in the ceremony and strode off to find her. He didn't get far when a group of activists carrying signs cornered him. In his rage, he'd totally forgotten that they were meeting. An older Native woman grabbed his arm. "Steven, I've got a reporter coming to talk with you about how even though Point Hope may not be an appealing tourist spot doesn't mean it's not worth protecting. She's meeting us in like ten minutes."

Steven glanced at his watch and scanned the crowd looking for that blond-headed kid, but didn't see him. He let out a deep breath and nodded. Bringing down RAM's operation here was the top priority. If they hadn't come here, Pana would still be alive. Since his death, Steven had actively been cultivating this group. Though small in number, they were growing and determined to stop the drilling no matter what it would take. He'd catch up with his niece at home. She would not be seeing that blond-headed RAM Oil kid again.

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Kili pulled up in front of Paul's house. His was sitting outside on the stairs and waved.

"I have to work tomorrow morning," Kili said, "but if you'd like I could show you around tomorrow. Maybe shoot some hoops, too. Meet some of the other kids." She flashed a smile.

Paul nodded. "I'd like that. I can just walk over to the Native Store if you'd like." He grabbed the wrapped meat he'd received at the festival.

She shrugged. "That would be great."

Paul's mom walked over, "Hi you, two, have fun?"

Paul nodded. "You would have loved it Mom. A great way to get to know the people here."

Paul's Mom looked at Kili and said, "Speaking of which…I did volunteer work at home and was wondering if there's any place here that could use some help."

Kili's eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "The first place I can think of is the clinic. They'd love to have an extra set of hands. Tell them I sent you."

Chapter 9

Steven walked into his house with mounting frustration. Even though the interview went well, and the activists were gaining momentum, seeing Nukilik with the RAM Oil boy irked him to the core. *How could she?* When Pana was alive, even after his wife died, he knew how to relate to him. How to talk to him. But Nukilik was another story. Yes, both children were strong willed, but Nukilik, well she was like her mother…his sister. Too kind for her own good. That kind heart is what really killed his sister. She stuck with that no-good husband, and it was his drunk driving that took both of them.

Sometimes when Nukilik looked at him with those haunting, blue, almond-shaped eyes it was almost like his sister was there. She needed to stay away from the RAM Oil kid for her own good but, in his heart, he knew she wasn't likely to do that. "Just like her mother," he muttered as the door slammed shut behind him.

"Nukilik, are you here?"

"In the kitchen, Uncle Steven."

He walked into the kitchen to find her repackaging some of the whale meat for storage. She flashed a smile over her shoulder. "I've rearranged the ice cellar so we have plenty of room."

He walked over and kissed her on the cheek. "You need help?"

"No, I'm good. I came straight home and got started. I thought you would be home sooner."

"I had other things to do." He didn't mention the protestors or the interview. She didn't like his friends in the activist group. Eventually she would understand…he just had to find the right time. "So you came straight home after dropping off that blond-headed boy?"

She smiled. "Yes. His name is Paul. Paul Lowick. I'm going—"

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

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Kili blinked at her uncle's outburst. Since Pana's death, he was looking for someone to blame for his loss, and thanks to James Harris his grief had turned to a hunger for revenge against RAM Oil. The problem was that no matter who he blamed, it wouldn't bring Pana back. She missed him, too, it wasn't RAM Oil's fault. It was an accident, and really it was Pana's fault. But because the SUV Pana slammed into belonged to a RAM Oil executive, Uncle Steven blamed anything related to RAM for taking his son. It wasn't right, but there was no talking to him. This was the very reason she hadn't mentioned bringing Paul the festival. It was also the reason she didn't mention she was meeting up with Paul tomorrow. There was no talking about it, because Uncle Steven wasn't rational.

She studied his face with concern. His dark rimmed eyes looked almost black from lack of sleep. At first, she tried to tell herself it was just how pale he was that made his eyes look like that, but she knew better. He didn't sleep well, and since Pana's death, the bitterness was eating him from the inside. It broke her heart to see him like this.

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

He lumbered over toward her with a fierceness that scared her for a moment. Without a word, he started packing up the meat into his backpack which would leave his hands free on ladder into the ice cellar. He handled the packages roughly, taking out his anger on each one. She wanted to warn him to be careful or he'd rip them, but instead kept her eyes riveted forward to avoid looking at him. No sense engaging an angry bear, and that's exactly how she felt he was acting.

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The following morning Kili snuck out of the house quietly and headed to the store early while Uncle Steven snored in his easy chair. He'd never gone to bed last night. At the store, she wiped down the counter, counted out the change for the till, and thought about Paul Lowick. He seemed like a nice guy, and she felt bad for him. People like her uncle didn't want RAM Oil or anything RAM Oil related in Point Hope. And that meant Paul. It was hard enough being an outsider. That's the reason she left the festival early. She wanted to avoid Uncle Steven's protest against RAM, not that she was against protesting, it just wasn't a good way to welcome Paul. He couldn't help it that his dad worked for the oil giant.

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

The morning went by quickly enough. People stopping in and talked about the festival. A few of them mentioned the "blond kid" they'd seen with her. Kili was wise enough to know who to talk with about Paul and who to avoid. When her uncle's friend, James Harris, walked in she welcomed him to the store and busied herself to avoid speaking with him. He walked directly to the counter and tried to engage her in small talk. She knew better. "Can I help you find something?" she asked.

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

She climbed the step stool and started to reorganize items on the shelf above her. "Yes it has." She didn't look at him.

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

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

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

Kili propped the knuckles of her right hand on her hip and twisted to face him. "Funny. My friends call me Kili. If you were my friend, you'd know that. You're right that we haven't talked in a long time, but that's by choice. We don't really have anything to talk about."

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

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

It was his turn. He leaned closer. She could smell his stale breath. "You will show me respect," he said through gritted teeth.

Kili shook her head. "I guess I'd have to respect you first, Mr. Harris. You see, I'm not a fake. I don't respect you because you're a bully." She threw her arms up and shrugged with her palms toward the ceiling. "Bullies just don't earn respect in my book."

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

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

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

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

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Paul walked into Point Hope with extra spring in his step. He wondered if he should bring a basketball or not, but since Kili Reed invited him to shoot some hoops, he figured she'd bring a ball. A cluster of younger kids stopped playing as he walked by. One of them was the little girl who had smiled at him the last time he walked into town. This time she waved, and he waved back with a smile. This place would take some getting used to, but it wasn't too bad.

Within 15 minutes he was in the heart of the village and heading down Qalgi to the Native Store. He checked his watch. *I don't want to get there too early…make it look like I'm desperate or something*. But inside he was both anxious and excited.

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

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

"You hear me good enough. You are not welcome. We don't want you here. Go home or you will be sorry." The man with the red cap walked away, climbed aboard an older ATV, started it and disappeared down the street. Paul stood there wondering what that was all about. He walked into the store pondering whether or not he should mention the crazy guy to Kili.

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

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

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

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

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

"This is Paul," Kili said.

"Hey, Dude, nice to meet you." Nut extended his hand.

Conner lifted the ball. "So you play?"

Paul nodded. "Sure do."

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

Kili peeled off her coat and Paul did the same and ran onto the court. In no time, Nut was guarding him man-on-man. He handed off the ball to Kili with a bounce pass. She dodged Conner and drove toward the net and scored.

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

Nut blotted sweat from his face with the hem of his shirt. "You sound surprised, Dude."

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

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

Behind them the door to the gym opened. A group of guys walked in, a few of them carried basketballs. Kili looked at Conner and Nut. Nut took a breath and let it out slowly. "It's only fair to let you know that most of the guys on the team might not be so ready to let you play." His dark eyes looked at the group drawing near.

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

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

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

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

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

**Chapter 10**

Steven Ahtuangaruak woke with a start. He shot up in his easy chair looking around with wild eyes. His recurring nightmare lingered with a vivid Pana screaming. The sound of a bomb ticking always propelled Steven toward Pana on the oil rig. In the dream if he could get there before the bomb went off, he could save his sun. But before he could get to the boy, the rig exploded. In a couple of seconds, he realized he was still sitting in his chair. The ticking of the windup clock on the end table beside him read 12:00. *Noon!* He collapsed back into the chair with a moan. Chaos ruled every part of life. He couldn't sleep, almost couldn't think. RAM Oil had robbed him of his peace and and his son. Until they were gone, his life would find no peace.

He shuffled to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. *What will it take?* He considered the activists in Puru who had given their life to save the forests. That got people's attention. New hope exploded within him. He knew how to take out RAM, and make them pay like he paid. He looked at his reflection. If he died, he'd be with his wife and son again. A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. *And if I take the blond RAM Oil kid with me, then the RAM Oil big wig will know what it feels like to have your child ripped away… and RAM will know they need to leave.*

He stood in front of the sink in the small bathroom and worked his head from one side to the other to work out the stiffness from sleeping in the chair. *No one cares about the risk of an oil spill.* When the government report said there was a 75 percent chance of a spill he thought that would end it, but the oil company's big money paid someone off. *That had to be it*. Not everyone at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management could be blind to the facts. *All outsiders care about is money*. *Their greed will destroy Point Hope if someone doesn't stop it*. No one cared that the drilling endangered his way of life – his heritage. *It doesn't matter if I live or die*.

The cancer took his wife, RAM took his son, and now they didn't care if they robbed him of his way of life. "Well, I won't go quietly," he muttered a he tucked his shirttail in. "A lone wolf can take down and elk if they can get it on the run. I'll gladly give my life to take you out RAM and if I take the boy with me, that should do it."

He slipped on his jacket, pulled his hat over his messy hair, and headed out the door like a roused angry bear. He headed to the last place he and Pana spent together. It was the once place he could hide from it all. His hunting cabin. It was the one place he could think, and it was where he stored the explosive devices he used instead of harpoons when whale hunting.

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Frustration mounted as Calvin Lowick headed to the office. He didn't want to think someone was deliberately hiding something from him, but it certainly felt that way. The data in his briefcase suggested leaks were increasing…that the seals were failing, but it didn't make sense. Now that the files he needed seemed to be lost, it left him suspicious. And there was no one he could trust, including his secretary. As much as he wanted to avoid Mrs. Q, he had to face her to find out about the files. He headed through the double doors. They swished close behind him as he headed up the stairs to his office. Mrs. Q's almond eyes grew round as he approached her desk in the area outside his office. She quickly covered her surprise. "Good morning, Mr. Lowick. I wasn't expecting you in the office today." She clicked the mouse in her hand and viewed her computer screen. "The calendar says you're on the rig today." Her brow furrowed slightly as she kept her eye on him and leaned forward to cover the papers on her desk with her forearms.

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

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

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

"And what happens to the paper files then?"

She shrugged. "We won't need them anymore. Once we have everything digitalized it will be so much easier to find things." Her lips drew into a thin line. "Right now the challenge is finding everything and getting it organized."

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

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

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

Her posture relaxed a little. Cal thanked her and headed back out the door determined to find answers. And he would start with checking on Mrs. Q's background. *Could she be…? What could she be doing?* The thought sent his mind racing. After all she'd come on board at the same time he did. What happened to Anderson's secretary…uh…personal assistant? Who was responsible for hiring her? He'd have to find out what he could before he contacted Mr. Stone. She may have been put in place by the eco activists just to make my job harder…or worse.

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

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

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

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

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

Behind them the doors to the gym opened, again. A middle-aged man wearing a hooded flannel shirt walked in. "Hey guys, how's it going?"

Andy and the group with him backed off, and glanced over their shoulders at the man. "Hey coach." Andy glared at Nut, daring him to say anything." Nut ignored him and kept his eyes on the coach. Paul breathed easier.

Nut called out, "Hey coach, this is Paul…Paul….?" He glanced at Paul. "What's your last name?"

"Lowick."

"Paul Lowick," Nut finished. "He used to play ball in Texas." Nut gestured toward the coach, "This is Coach Yazzie."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 11

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

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

Andy and two others laughed. Paul felt his face grow hot. "You mean they have to cheat to win?" The words escaped before he caught them. Nothing he could do but move to cover the guy. "He's not wearing a hat," he said pointing out what was already clear.

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

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

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

CoachYaz sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Silence hung over the small group as the coach stepped closer to Andy and stared him straight in the eye. "You're a good player, Andy. But if you're not part of a team, it won't matter in the long run. So if you want to play solo, let me know now so I can find someone to take your position."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andy dropped his hold on Paul's hand and wiped his palm on his shirt. Without another word he turned and walked away. Kili ran onto the court from the bleacher where she had been watching. "Don't let Andy bother you, Paul. He'll come around. He was a good friend of my cousin … the one who died. A lot of these guys were his friend. For some it will feel like you're trying to take his place, and the fact that your dad works for RAM…well, it will take time." She slapped him on the back. "You did a good job!" she said loud enough for others to hear.

"Thanks." Kili's words hit him hard. He wasn't trying to take the dead kid's place, but he could see why the guys might feel like that. While it was fun to play again, one thing was clear. He needed a lot more than skill and talent to become part of this team. The first thing he'd have to do is overcome the fact that his dad worked for RAM. That link and the memory of Kili's cousin and how he died made him the enemy, too. *How the heck am I ever going to do that?* He followed Kili over to where they had laid their coats and rode with her over to the diner.

When they stepped into the diner, Paul stood looking at the guys. Nut and Carter weren't there yet. "Where should we sit?" he asked Kili. She'd know better than him how to navigate this situation.

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

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

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

Kili sat on the other side of the Coach and nodded her agreement. "Hey Marni, get me a piece of that snow pie. It's on Coach Yaz!" The stocky waitress smiled; her teeth white against her olive complexion. "Sure thing, Kili."

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

"Sure thing…." She paused for a moment and focused on Paul. "You new here?"

"This here's Texas," Coach Yaz said.

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

"Good enough, Paul. I like that you look forward," Coach Yaz said.

Paul could see by the looks on a few faces that they liked that he was ready to make Alaska his home. Now he just had to figure a way to make it clear that he hated RAM Oil as much as any of them, if not more. After all, his hatred had grown over the last seven years as they lured his father away from his family to become a workaholic. RAM acted like they were doing his dad a favor, and his dad believed it. Anger flared in his gut.

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

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

Paul didn't know where to begin. He offered the coach the highlights of game. His excitement grew as he relived the game. As he did most of the other guys gathered around to listen. He could see by the looks on their faces that they were genuinely interested. For the moment, he forgot he was a stranger in a new town…forgot he was an outsider. "I jumped and popped the shot. Bart reached up to block, but too late. I watched that ball like it was in slow motion. It arced through the air and slipped through the net like a dream … like you'd see in a movie! The buzzer made it official. Richmond's Travis High Wolverines were champs. And there were scouts in the crowd. One of them even talked to me after the game. It was the best and worst day of my life."

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

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

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

He let out a chuckle. "You got that right, Nut. She said she waited until after the game so I wouldn't be distracted." He took a bite of pie. "Mmmmm. This is delicious!" He pointed his fork toward Nut and said, "And the night only got worse. When I got home, my parents tell me Dad got a promotion. I asked if that meant Dad would have more time at home. I never saw him because when you work for RAM Oil, it's like you sell your soul. Of course it didn't mean more time with Dad. That same night I find out the change was bringing us to Alaska." He took another bite. "I have to tell you, I was mad, but I had three months to get used to the idea. And now that I'm here, it's way different, but I think I'm going to like it here a lot. If I could just get rid of RAM from my life, this could be a great place to call home."

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

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

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

Paul swallowed the pie in his mouth. "Uh, yeah, sure I could do that." In his heart he knew his dad would have a fit if he did, but that might be the way to really show everyone how much he hated RAM. As much as his dad was around, Paul could be in college before he found out. *Might as well take advantage of the opportunity; I'll be off playing ball in college in a year anyway*.

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

Chapter 12

Paul walked toward the house feeling renewed. Coach Yaz had said he'd consider him for the team, and most of the guys seemed to have changed their opinion and warmed up to him. For the most part, he'd effectively shed the RAM oil stigma with almost everyone. Andy and a couple of his closest friends were still a problem, but Paul had momentum and numbers on his side. Even better, he was pretty sure Kili liked him. And he liked her. She was pretty, friendly, and she liked basketball. *What more can you ask for in a girl?*

He walked into the house. "Mom!" He couldn't wait to tell her about his day. School was a couple months down the road, but he was ready. "Mom?" He walked through the small house looking for her. His only answer was the wind howling in the eaves. She wasn't in the bathroom or her bedroom. "Where could she be?"

He checked out the back door. Not there. His mind started to race. She didn't really know anyone here. Just as his imagination started to take off and picture all kinds of terrible things that could have happened to her, he spotted the note on the refrigerator door. "Paul, gone to the clinic. Be back soon." "The clinic?"

A sinking feeling washed over him. His good day just took a turn for the bad. Why did she have to go to the clinic? Mom didn't go to the doctor! Her inclination was to follow natural homeopathic remedies. Dad even joked and called her a witchdoctor. So, for her to go to the clinic scared him because she really didn't go to the doctor unless she had to.

Just as he started to panic, he heard the door knob turn. His mother walked in wearing a new lightweight parka. "Hi sweetheart."

"Mom! What's wrong?"

She unzipped her parka and set her purse on the counter. "Wrong? What you mean?"

He pointed to the note. "The clinic?" he asked with raised eyebrows. "You don't go to the doctor unless…well unless you're dying."

She chuckled. "I went to see if they could use a volunteer."

The tension melted from his shoulders. "Volunteer?" He let out a breath. "I was thinking you were sick or something. The way you don't like to go to the doctor I figured it had to be pretty serious for you to actually go to the clinic." He let out a light nervous chuckle.

"Well I'm not sick, but I will be spending time at the clinic. They were very happy to accept my offer. I start tomorrow." She hung her purse and parka on one of the empty pegs beside the door. "They are really short staffed and underfunded. They need the help. They take care of a lot of people who can't afford care. It's a great opportunity."

She turned to look at him. "How you doing? Want some coffee?"

"Yeah, I'll make it." He reached into the cupboard and grabbed the coffee. "I actually have had a great day."

It was his mother's turn to raise her eyebrows in mild surprise. "A great day? Not just good?"

The two of them sat enjoying a black cup of coffee, since they couldn't get the flavored creamer here. They didn't seem to notice as they talked about their day. The two of them were finding their way to a new normal in the Alaskan wilderness, and it wasn't so bad after all.

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Cal Lowick wandered around the oil rig looking busy but taking the opportunity to investigate. He pretended to ignore the looks from workers wondering what he was doing. The arctic-designed rig should have been able to operate about five months longer than rigs designed for milder climates. In fact, it should be able to run efficiently year round in temperatures ranging from 50 below to 80 above Fahrenheit. So why wasn't it? And why was everyone pretending it was? It didn't make sense. Whatever was going on, it would be impossible for everyone to be in on it.

He used his phone to snap pictures here and there when he was sure Halverson wasn't shadowing him. It was clear the rigorous maintenance program that had been set up wasn't being followed consistently. Halverson was in charge of overseeing maintenance…*and he hired Mrs. Q. That guy isn't on the up in up, and neither is she*. Cal was sure the man was behind the mystery, and would fire him in a heartbeat if he had any real proof. When he looked into Mrs. Q's background, he do the same with Halverson. The two had to be connected…working together. *But why?*

While Cal didn't have anything concrete to go on, he had some possibilities to consider. In fact, with all the people who wanted RAM out of Point Hope, the possibilities were endless. *Maybe they're working with that group of tree-hugging activists hoping for some kind of payoff for making the rig fail*. *Or* m*aybe they're trying to make it fail so they can collect a big settlement as employee/residents.* One way or another, money most likely played a role in the motivation behind whatever they were doing. *But how were they getting those seals to fail?* It was a smart ploy. If he hadn't seen those reports, he'd have no idea there was any problem. But he did have the reports, and they showed more than one of the seals experienced some level of failure. If the media got ahold of news about leaking seals, they'd be all over it.

The problem wasn't catastrophic yet, but it certainly had the potential. When they replaced those seals, were they checking them to be sure they weren't defective? *Are we really getting the seals we've paid for?* That was a concrete question. RAM was paying for top of the line equipment. Were they getting what they paid for? The only way he could see the seals they had in inventory was to find someone he could trust. Right now, that felt just about impossible. He needed someone to watch his back, someone who knew their way around the rig. Because if he didn't get to the bottom of this, it was only a matter of time until one of those seals would fail big time. The damage would be a financially devastating blow to RAM and could even shut down drilling in Point Hope.

Cal didn't just care about RAM Oil. He cared about the environment. He didn't want to see wildlife or nature suffer because someone lined their pockets by sabotaging the operation of the rig. He racked his brain, trying to figure out how and why.

He headed back to the boat to take him to shore. On the trip back he pondered what to do next. All of the equipment was proven efficient and sound for remote drilling operations in this climate. Someone was purposely causing the seals to fail. *But how*? Those seals were top of the line. He felt like he was beating his head up against a bulkhead.

If one of the seals totally failed, the resulting environmental crisis would close them down for sure, if not permanently it would still be months. Along with wondering how it was happening was the even bigger question of why? As he ruminated on the various angles, a plan started to come together. The first thing he needed to do was get a look at one of those seals. That was easier said than done. It would take a real plan, and it wasn't something he could do alone. He'd have to figure out who he could really trust, and he'd start with employee reviews. Anyone Halverson gave a bad review could be a candidate.

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Steven Ahtuangaruak lugged a couple of fuel cans filled with diesel from the back of his SUV into his small rustic hunting cabin. He didn't often drive the large vehicle, because it was a gas hog. But he'd been stashing the bags of fertilizer he'd pilfered from the Native Store into the truck one here, one there. That way there was no record of a purchase by him individually, and no one would be able to say they saw him driving around with them on the back of the ATV.

He set the fuel cans down next to the bags of fertilizer and drew his hand over his face and rubbed his weary eyes. His hand stunk like oil. He wiped it on the front of his parka absentmindedly as he looked around the cabin with a sense of accomplishment. Supplies crowded the little bit of space the cabin afforded, but he had almost everything he needed to create the bomb that would bring the oil rig down.

While he was no expert with explosives other than those used in whaling these days, he'd been doing his research. With these items, he hoped to make a bomb like the one used in the Oklahoma City bombing. Combined with the oil being pumped from the rig, the explosion should be able to take out the oil rig totally.

For a brief moment, his conscience pricked him with guilt over the innocent lives that would be lost along with that of the RAM Oil kid. People he knew. He pushed aside the sentiment and headed outside to close the door on the SUV. Simmering anger bubbled inside of him. "It's their own fault," he muttered under his breath. "They turned their backs on Point Hope, on their people, on our way of life." He slammed the door closed with the hot anger that seemed to erupt more and more often. "They turned their backs on Pana…like he never really mattered."

Once inside the cabin, he sat at the small table and looked around at his collection. He had all the components. Now he just had to figure out how to put it together and deliver it to the rig without getting stopped. Plus, he still needed to figure out how he was going to kidnap the RAM Oil kid without him knowing he was being kidnapped. Otherwise, there would be no way to get him on to the rig. *I certainly can't carry an unconscious body on to the rig*. Plus, the timing all had to be right, if he hoped to pull it off.

His posture slumped against the straight back chair where he sat at the small wooden table. He propped his elbows on the table, with his head in his hands. The cold air in the cabin smelled of fuel. He didn't dare light the stove. His eyelids grew heavy from his lack of sleep. He was tired. Not just from lack of sleep, but from the grief and loss of his son, the anger because no one really cared, and the betrayal of so many willing to be bought out. He lay his head on the table just for a few minutes. Within an instant he fell asleep, and dreamed of his coup de grâce with the rig exploding in a plum of fire and smoke to rival an atomic bomb blast. Pana stood at his side. "RAM Oil killed you, too, dad? Now Kili won't have anyone."

Steven awoke with a start. "I'm doing it for you, Pana!" he called out. "Pana." He reached for the fading memory, but the boy was gone. He blinked and stared blankly at the small cabin filled with the ingredients that would take him away from Kili and reunite him with his son. Steven's hatred for RAM Oil burned hotter. This was their fault. All of it. They would hurt Kili like they hurt him. RAM was forcing him to take to this route because they wouldn't leave.

Chapter 13

When Cal learned Halverson was tied up on a conference call, he headed to Human Resources. Even with Halverson busy, the more he moved around RAM Oil properties, the more he felt like he was being watched. The whole thing made no sense. At first he thought they were just treating him like an outsider and that it would pass once he proved himself. But it was more than that. They were trying to hide something, and he was going to get to the bottom of it. From the little he had gleaned from the reports he had stashed in his briefcase, it all had to do with the seals. Yet, he couldn't get near the dang things to check them out.

He walked up to the receptionist in HR, introduced himself, and flashed his security badge. "I've been here almost four mouths," he said as casually as his slamming heart allowed. "I'm having the darndest time trying put names with faces." He smiled and glanced at the name plate. "It can be quite embarrassing, Carla." He let out a long breath. "Is there any way…any way that I can see who is in shipping and receiving, and then maybe a picture of them? I was thinking if I could do that, I might start getting names right. You know, use it as a cheat sheet of sorts." He chuckled, but inwardly his heart beat faster.

The woman checked his badge. She squinted and leaned closer like she needed glasses. She straightened her shoulders and shrugged. "Well, Carla is on a conference call with the Richmond office…. I'm just filling in for a few minutes. She would be the one--"

He cut her off before she could finish her excuse. "Can't you help a fella out? I'm just terrible with names. And I'd appreciate it if you kept it just between us."

She glanced at his badge one more time and offered a smile. "I guess. What could it hurt?"

Cal followed the receptionist to a bank of computers. She walked to the last computer and pulled out the chair. "You can use this terminal." She plugged in an access code and showed him how to search. "You can search by name, by department, or by name or number."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "I certainly won't be searching by name." He sat in the chair and thanked her again. "I'll let you know if I have any questions."

She walked back toward her desk and wished him good-luck before she turned the corner.

He typed "Halverson" into the search bar. Since Carla was on a conference call and sounded like the one really in charge here in HR, he knew he had to take advantage of whatever time he had. It could all change in the blink of an eye. For all he knew, Halverson and Carla were on the same conference call. He wondered who else was on the call. Who were they talking to in Richmond? He reeled his thinking in. He had to stay focused. He'd look up Halverson, first, and then Mrs. Q. Then if he had time, he'd check out everyone else in shipping and receiving.

Halverson's page lit up the screen. Halverson, Ethan B., age 39. Cal scanned the information. The guy had started in shipping and receiving as a forklift driver. *Looks like he climbed the ranks rather quickly*. No real notes offered any additional facts. The scant few were generic saying things like "reliable, loyal, and trustworthy." Cal had thought maybe Halverson had been passed over for a promotion and that Cal had taken the job. That maybe the ill will and suspicious treatment were him acting out in jealousy. That if a leak occurred on his watch, he'd be fired and Halverson could step in. But there seemed no indication of anything like that. Instead of finding answers, the information raised more questions.

In Cal's book, Halverson was anything but trustworthy, and he questioned the man's loyalty. But he had to find proof. Cal clicked on the link to his resume. His previous experience showed no prior management experience. He hadn't even gone to college. While the information didn't offer much help, it did raise one big question. How did Halverson hire Mrs. Q? She had nothing to do with the shipping and receiving end of things, other than the fact that she was supposed to be Cal's administrative assistant. And why was he hiring anybody? Wasn't that Human Services role? The man's biggest accomplishment was his move to management over shipping and receiving, after just six months as a forklift driver.

Cal reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the scrap of paper he had used to Copy Mrs. Q's last name from the name plate on her desk. He knew better than to trust himself to be able to spell "Qailertetang." He typed in her last name into the search.

Qailertetang, Alexis M., age 52. He clicked on the link to her resume and stared at the information in disbelief. She had worked as an executive assistant in Richmond, Texas. "Richmond?" The information confirmed his suspicion that something was going on. But a link to Richmond scared him, because why would she relocate? At most it would be a lateral move? Plus, she knew he was from Richmond, so why would she act like she was from Point Hope, other than to cover something up.

His focus dropped to her salary. They were paying her more than he made, even with his promotion. *Why would an administrative assistant make the same amount as middle management?* He sat back and blinked at the screen trying to make sense of it. *That means there's a connection with someone who has the authority to okay that kind of pay…and with someone in Richmond*. He took out his phone and took a picture of the information.

His fingers shook as he moved to a department search for shipping and receiving. He thought about Mr. Stone's right hand man, Walter Mills, and what a basket case he was all the time. *Could he be behind this? Is that why he is so nervous?* Cal paused. Mr. Stone would give him a big promotion if he could prove that. Maybe even bring him back to the lower 48.

For now, he needed to find people who had been there longer than Halverson. The list wasn't long. The more he looked into it; Halverson's name was all over the place as the person responsible for hiring. Why wouldn't HR take care of that? As much as he wanted to ask the woman at the desk, he didn't dare. *Can't risk drawing attention to what I know*. He called up 'notes' on his phone and quickly typed in the short list of names. He brought up information on each one, and snapped a picture of it so he could read it later.

After the last search, he went to the computer's history, right clicked on settings, and erased the history. He didn't need anyone to know what he was looking for. Then he retraced a handful of his searches on shipping and receiving personnel, along with other departments. If anyone checked, they'd see that all he did was to familiarize himself with his employees.

By the time he was done, his stomach was grumbling. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. For now, he'd head home and have dinner with Nola and Paul. For the first time, he realized he hadn't eaten dinner with them since they'd arrived in Alaska. He pulled out his phone and to call his wife but stopped. *Nola's phone doesn't work here*. He'd been so consumed with this mess at RAM that he'd hardly even talked with them or thought about their needs…like phones and Internet. He felt his father's presence chastising him. "Family first, always."

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Kili closed the door to the Native Store and locked it. Her Uncle was supposed to be there, and it didn't even look like he had showed up today. He had never dealt with his grief and it was twisting him into someone she didn't know. She tried to reach him on the radio, but he wasn't answering. She jumped back into the ATV and headed home.

A few minutes later she pulled up to the house. The SUV was gone. She looked around the house for a note. Nothing. It didn't look much different than when she left that morning. The blanket she had used to cover him in his chair sat crumpled in a pile on the floor. She did a quick check of the kitchen. No dirty dishes, no evidence that he'd eaten anything. *Where did he go and why did he take the SUV?*

She worried about him. He had changed so much since Pana's death. It's like it switched something in his brain, and she couldn't get it to switch back. She stood in the kitchen wondering who she could even talk to. Her mom had always been the one she went to, now she really didn't have anyone like that. She thought of contacting Paul. He was easy to talk to and didn't know many people. She wouldn't have to worry about him talking about anything she shared. But he didn't have a radio.

A recurring dread filled her. She worried that in his grief, her uncle might even commit suicide. *What can I do?* She wrestled between her limited options and her own inaction, but what could she do? She sat at the table trying to rub the tension growing at the back of her neck. *Maybe I could talk to Coach Yaz.* No. Even though she trusted the coach not to gossip, he'd probably confront Uncle Steven. Insist he get help. Then she'd have to live with the angry bear.

Kili stood up and grabbed her parka from the peg next to the door. She'd take her chances and head over to Paul's house. Maybe he could bring a fresh perspective and help her figure out a way to help her reach her uncle.

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Steven sat outside the cabin away from the diesel fumes and drank in the beauty around him. Out here in nature, it almost felt as if nothing had changed. He felt a measure of peace. The wind sang through the trees, and in the distance he saw a small herd of elk grazing. A large buck raised his head and sniffed the air. In the past, Steven would have been ready with his rifle, but now he just sat there thinking of how Pana would have bragged about bagging the big one. Tears stung Steven's eyes. *His life snuffed out to soon*.

He watched the herd for a few seconds more. They still needed to put up meat for the winter. Not taking a shot would be like saying no thank you to the mighty hunter who dwells in the sky. And if he brought home meat, it would explain where he had been. Otherwise, Kili would pester him with a thousand questions.

He walked over to his vehicle with slow movements trying not to spook the herd. He opened the door, and with the light click of the door latch he looked up to see the last of elk disappear into the trees across the field. He sat back down on the overturned bucket and waited with his gun ready. Yes, coming home with meat would provide the perfect cover and food for the winter.Chapter 14

Kili sat at the small kitchen table in the Lowick house sipping iced tea. "I've never had cold tea like this."

"Back in Texas, I drank it all the time. Here, not so much." Paul stuffed the pitcher of tea back into the refrigerator and joined Kilie at the table. He flipped the kitchen chair around, lifted his leg, and straddled it. With his arms propped on the back of the chair, he rested his chin on his hands. "So you said you wanted to talk about something?"

Her smile faded. She studied the ice floating in her glass and nodded. "But…" She looked up at him. "You have to promise not to talk about it with anyone else. It's…." She shrugged and let out a deep breath. "It's personal…very personal. And I don't know who else to talk to."

Paul swallowed hard wondering what could be so serious. On a base level, it kind of scared him. "I hardly even know anyone here." He tried to joke but it didn't work. "The only person I really talk to is you. So you don't have to worry about that." He reached out and took her hand. Her fingers felt cold against his skin.

"You can talk to me about anything." He looked over his shoulder into the living room wondering where his mom was. Under his breath he said, "My mom is home, maybe we should go out for a walk or something."

She nodded. "Good idea."

The two of them grabbed their parkas and headed out the door. They walked around to the back of the house where the sun warmed the cement stoop. Here the house blocked the wind so they sat on the porch talking about her uncle. "He really is a good man," she said. "But family is…was everything to him. He lost his sister…my mom. He lost his wife, and now he's lost his son. I'm afraid losing Pana has pushed him over the edge. It's like he has to find someone to lash out at…someone to blame."

She leaned with her elbows on her thighs and stared at the ground. "And even though the accident was Pana's fault, he blames RAM Oil." She looked up at Paul. "The driver of the vehicle worked for RAM…as you know. Now he has joined these environmental activists who are trying to get RAM shut down. Their measures get more and more drastic and it's like he's…I don't know. I'm just worried."

Paul nodded and for a moment, a comfortable quiet hung between them. "You heard what I said at the diner. I'm not a fan of RAM oil either."

"Yes, but some of the people Uncle Steven is dealing with…well I'm not sure about them. Part of me is afraid they will try and use you. They seem a little too extreme. Maybe even a lot extreme."

She covered her mouth for a moment, hesitant to say anything more. She moved it to her cheek and said, "Aside from that, I'm worried he might do something…harm himself…or worse." Her voice quivered. "And I can't talk to anyone about it, because if he finds out, that could be the thing that really pushes him over the edge." She threw her arms up. "I just don't know what to do. I want to help him." She tucked her hands between her legs to warm her fingers. "I thought maybe if I talked to you about it, you might come up with another point of view. An answer…a suggestion maybe?"

Paul stared out at the barren back yard toward the rear of the house behind theirs. "I don't really know your uncle." He glanced at Kili. "But maybe if I join that activist group I could get to know him. We have a couple of things in common. We both don't like RAM and we both care about you." A wave of fear shot through him. *Why did I say that!*

Kili smiled. "Thanks." She laughed lightly. "I like you, too." Then little worry lines worked across her smooth forehead. "The problem is that it's not going to be as easy as you think. People here look at you as the RAM Oil kid. You saw what it was like with the team."

"Yeah, but think about how that turned out. Joining with the activists will help me put distance between me and RAM. I might even be a benefit to them. And it doesn't really matter in the long run, because I graduate in a year and I'll be out of here."

She blinked. "You're leaving?"

A grin tugged the corner of his mouth. "I'm hoping to play basketball at least on a college scholarship, but really hoping to get picked up by the pros. That is if I can get on the Harpooners." His smile died. "That's my secret, okay? I don't want Coach Yaz or the guys to know how important it is to me. You see basketball is my life, but I want to earn my way."

"You're leaving?" she asked again as if he hadn't said anything else. "I thought Point Hope was going to be your new home."

"Well yes, but I'm graduating this coming year, then at the least there's college. But my dream is to get picked up by the pros. They had their eye on me in Texas." He smiled at the thought.

Kili stood up and brushed the back of her jeans. "Well, I should be going. If my uncle gets home I don't want him wondering where I am…and then find me with the RAM Oil kid. I appreciate you listening."

He shot to his feet and stood next to her, looking down into her dark almond eyes. "No problem. I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done to help me. I certainly don't want to be known as the RAM Oil kid."

The sparkle came back to her eyes and she laughed. "Can't blame you." She started to walk away but turned to look at him. "By the way, you need to get a radio."

He nodded, "Yeah, I know."

He hurried to catch up with her, walked her back out front to her ATV, and said goodbye. As he turned toward the house, he spotted his mother peeking through the kitchen curtains. He shook his head and waved at her. The curtains snapped shut making him laugh.

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Paul helped his mom make dinner. He read the label on the can of carrots. "I miss having fresh produce. I wonder if you can grow food here, like in a cold frame."

"Hmm, we'll have to look that up." She patted the ground meat mixture into the loaf pan and thought about how things had changed. She didn't really care about being online. The changes she saw since the move were good. Paul hung around the house more, and without the Internet, they talked more. Like they used to do when he was younger. She knew what was going on in his life. It felt right.

"So when are we going to get Internet?"

She shrugged. "I found out we can get on the Internet at the library. And I don't know about you, but I've gotten used to not having it. If our smart phones worked here it would be one thing, but they don't. What we need is a radio. If the clinic needs to get ahold of me, that's what they use. In fact, it's what everybody up here uses."

"I know, right? Kili says the same thing."

His mother laughed. "I like that girl more every time I meet her."

Paul dumped the carrots into a pan. "Yeah, me too."

"So what movie do you want to watch tonight?" Paul's mother jumped at the sound of the back door opening.

Paul stood with his heart pumping at the unexpected intrusion. "Dad?" Paul was stunned. "You're…you're home?" He stared at his dad like he was a stranger walking into the house carrying a bag.

"Yeah, I'm surprised you recognized your long lost Dad."

Paul's mom rushed to the door and hugged her husband. "Cal, I'm so happy to see you." Tears glistened in her eyes. "How did you get off so early?"

"I just left. I haven't even had dinner with ya'll since we moved here, and I couldn't stand the thought of missing another." He handed a bag to Paul and one to Enola. "Brought you a little something, too."

Paul tore open the bag. "A radio!" He held it up to show his mother as she pulled her own radio from her bag. "We were just talking about getting one of these!"

"And I have one, too." Paul's Dad held up another. "Now we can be in touch. And they're cheaper than a smart phone."

Paul laughed. "Now all we need to know is how they work."

His dad smiled. "I can show you if you'd like."

After dinner they sat and talked instead of watching a movie. Paul told his father about Kili, about playing ball, and his mother talked about the clinic. For Paul, it felt like a dream. A good dream, but he could see stress etched around his father's eyes.

"How are things going at RAM?" Paul asked.

Cal shook his head slowly. "Not as well as I'd like." He paused. "I don't mind the work, but I feel like I'm butting my head into the wall at every turn. There's no team work…no cooperation." He glanced at his wife. "And there seems a problem with telling the truth."

Paul looked at his mom and back at his dad. In his father's book, 'lying was never okay. It was wrong. Period.'

Chapter 15

Kili wiped the counter down and rechecked the change in the register for the fifth time. Life had turned into such a roller coaster, but the fun of the ride was overshadowed by fear. Fear for Uncle Steven. She glanced toward the back of the store where he moved the ladder to reorganize and dust a few small appliances like blenders and toasters.

She was relieved to have him home but still worried about his grasp on reality. He seemed better, but she hadn't found the right time to talk to him about Paul for fear she'd send him into another episode.

She glanced at the clock hung over the shelf lined with large tins of lard. The second hand counted down the minutes until Paul would walk in the door. Her palms felt clammy. She had tried to tell Uncle Steven about Paul. But she had been so relieved to have him safely back home and that he seemed more like himself. Hunting and fishing were good for him. When he spent time away like that it seemed reset his mood. She didn't want to ruin that. *I need to tell Paul not to come*.

She had hoped to talk to her Uncle about Paul in a natural way. Not forced, but just part of the conversation. To explain he was a good guy. To try and let him know there was no love lost between Paul and RAM Oil. She tried to bring it up when she helped him carry the elk meat to the cellar, but the timing just wasn't right. She had to let him to know Paul was interested in connecting with the activists, before he showed up. Paul could be good for him, if he gave the guy a chance.

Her eyes drifted to the CB on the counter next to her purse. She needed to let Paul know that the time wasn't right. Her focus drifted back at her uncle. *Uncle Steven will the time ever be right?*

She slipped on her parka and grabbed the radio. "Uncle Steven, I'll be right back."

He turned on the ladder to look at her. "What?"

"Just stepping outside for a minute. I need some fresh air."

It was something the two of them said to each other often. They were born to be outdoors and not cooped up within four walls filled with inventory.

"Okay, I'll take care of all the customers breaking down the doors." He smiled.

It warmed her to see that smile. Did she dare risk putting him back in that despondent mood…or whatever you called the way he became? It was more than depression. It was more like a possession. She tucked her radio in the back of her pants and pulled her shirt over it.

"Be back in a few."

The door closed behind her with a quiet click. She hurried to the side of the building to get out of the wind and out of the line of sight, in case her uncle decided to come after her. She pulled out her radio to call Paul.

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Paul ran around the corner to the door of the Native Store. He didn't want to be late for officially meeting Kili's uncle. As the door shut behind him it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. He glanced toward the counter. Kili wasn't there. A feeling of uneasiness washed over him. He scanned the store, but didn't see her. Footfalls moved along the aisle coming from the back of the store. He spun to face Kili with a smile, but it died on his lips. "Hello…a…Mr. Atuga—Ah…."

"Ahtuangaruak," Kili's uncle said. "Can I help you?"

Panic set in. *Where is Kili? What do I say?*

The radio on his belt came to life. "*Paul what's your twenty?*" Kili's voice sounded loud in the quiet store. Her uncle's eyes narrowed.

Suddenly Paul felt like a bacteria being studied under a microscope as her uncle skewered him which his eyes. Paul grabbed the radio to answer. "I'm in the Native Store. Where are *you*? Over?"

Silence. Paul swallowed hard, wondering what he should do. Behind him, the opened and Kili walked in. She let the door shut and leaned against it. "I was trying to catch you before you got here."

Paul looked from Kili to her uncle with wide eyes. *Now what?*

The scowl on Uncle Steven's face made it clear that something had changed. "This is that RAM Oil Kid!"

Kili placed herself between Paul and her uncle. She raised her hands. "Just wait. Before you jump to conclusions there's a couple of things you need to know. First, he hates to be called the RAM Oil kid. He hates RAM!"

Uncle Steven leaned to the left to look at Paul around Kili. Paul nodded. "It's the truth. Honest."

"He actually came here to talk to you, Uncle Steven. I just didn't know how to tell you." She backed up a few steps to stand beside Paul." They glanced at each other. For a brief moment, he could see in her eyes that she felt the same way he did. Unsure and nervous.

Her uncle stepped close. His face just inches from Paul's. His breath smelled like he hadn't brushed his teeth in a month. But Paul didn't flinch. He needed to get beyond the issues with the man if he hoped to have any kind of relationship with Kili. "I know you think you don't like me," Paul started. "But you don't know me. I was talking to Kili about getting involved with the activists trying to get RAM shut down." He glanced in her direction for a moment. She took his hand and squeezed it. "She said you might be able to help me."

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Steven Ahtuangaruak straightened to his full height, but the kid was an inch or so taller than him. As much as he hated everything about this boy, this could be the opportunity he'd been looking for. If he played his cards right, the kid would trust him. "Is that so?"

The kid nodded. "I want to help."

Steven took a step back. It wouldn't be easy to convince the others that the boy wasn't just a plant. "You say you hate RAM, I ask why."

He watched the kid's adam's apple bob. "Well, it's complicated. But I hate the way they treat my dad. It's like he's their slave. I almost never see him!" He threw his hands up and let them drop. "He's gone when I get up in the morning…we've only had dinner together once since I've been here. They don't care about him or us. All they care about is making money."

For a moment, Steven believed him. RAM didn't care about anything but making a profit. But he hardened his heart toward the boy. He couldn't get emotionally involved. This kid would provide the perfect way make his point in a big way and avenge Pana's death, too.

Kili's eyes moistened as she looked from the boy to him. It ignited a spark of anger in his gut. He didn't need her complicating things. "Fine, I'll introduce him. We're meeting tomorrow. Meet me here at 5:00."

Paul let go of Kili's hand and grabbed Steven's hand and shook it. "Thanks. Thanks so much. Kili said you'd be able to help me."

Steven yanked his hand free. "I've got to get back to work." He hurried toward the back of the store with his emotions colliding. The kid's enthusiasm reminded him of Pana. But RAM left him no choice. He knew what he had to do.

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Cal walked out of his office purposely "forgetting" his company phone on his desk chair as if it had carelessly fallen there. He walked by Mrs. Q's desk. "Have a good day," he said without stopping. Before she could ask him if he had his phone, or where he was headed to, he pushed through the double doors and into the warehouse. He did his best to look like business as usual, but took long strides straight out to the parking lot. The wind chilled him through his jacket as he rushed toward the ATV designated for his use around the RAM complex.

He drove to the south-most pole building and pulled around the corner. Once he was out of sight of the security cameras, he crouched beside the vehicle and pulled the screwdriver from his pocket. It only took a couple of minutes to disconnect the GPS module on the undercarriage. His heart quickened as he dropped the gadget on the ground. He didn't know how closely they tracked his movements, but it was pretty dang close. It wouldn't take long for them to figure out he didn't have his phone and that they couldn't see him on the surveillance.

He had followed up on the list of names from the HR computer, and contacted Martin Perry. The man Halverson had replaced. The guy was forthcoming. Now Cal was willing to take more risks to find the truth. Even if it meant his job. Perry had agreed things weren't as they seemed. "Watch your back or you'll be out of a job," he had warned. "Especially that Halverson. I know he planted evidence that made it look like I wasn't doing my job. He got me fired. And he'd have no trouble climbing over your dead body following an *unfortunate* accident."

Cal shared some of his own concerns without going into details of where he got his information. No one needed to know about the hard proof he had in his possession. Perry confirmed that Halverson wielded a lot of authority -- authority that could only come from Richmond. Cal had mentioned concerns about the seals failing, and how he couldn't get close enough to one for the proof he needed. "The man you need to talk to is Scott Benally," Perry had said.

That put things in motion. Martin Perry contacted Benally, and Benally showed up at Cal's house. "Sorry," he had said. "Can't risk emails or phone calls. They can be monitored." The two of them sat in Cal's truck talking and hatched this plan. Benally was the one who told him to ditch his phone and disable his GPS. Now he was on his way to meet Benally to see the inventory of seals while Halverson was tied up in another conference call. The window of opportunity was short. Timing had to be perfect.

Cal pulled out his personal radio to contact Scott Benally. They had set up a code and a plan. He would use channel 6. It almost guaranteed the signal would bounce. In CB lingo it was called "skip." Benally would answer and they would know whether the meet was on or not.

Cal pushed the button. "Uh, hello, I'm trying to reach the main office."

"Who is this? What's your handle?" Benally answered.

"Sorry, I'm new to this radio lingo. I've lost my phone and wanted to let the main office know."

"Your name…what's your name?"

"Lowick, Cal Lowick."

"You've reached shipping and receiving. Sorry."

That was the code. "You've *reached* shipping and receiving was the go ahead." Cal pulled the ATV around the back of the building out of camera range and drove north. "Okay, thanks, I'll just head back to the office and see if I left it there. Sorry to bother you."

If anyone listened in on the conversation, it would buy him a little time off the grid. Once he got to shipping and receiving it could be a different story.

Chapter 16

Cal pulled his ATV between two empty tractor trailers and switched off the motor. His heart pulsed in his ears as he sidled up next to one of the trailers and peeked toward the loading docks watching for Scott Benally. If he stepped out on the doc wearing his orange blaze safety vest and an orange knitted cap it was a go. No vest and a black hat would send Cal back the way he had come.

It seemed like forever. A hundred scenarios played through Cal's mind while he waited – all bad. He put each one to rest as he pushed it from his mind. Not doing something could be even worse. And he'd learned a long time ago, that worrying didn't accomplish anything. He'd come this far and there was no turning around now. He spotted Benally's orange cap and vest as the bearded man stepped out on to the dock and looked around. That was the signal. The security cameras were being fed a loop that would repeat the last 20 minutes recorded. After that, the cameras would be rolling in real time. He had to hurry.

He sprinted from his hiding place between the trailers and cut across the lot in a straight line. "This way, Cal." Benally motioned with his head toward the open bay. The two men hurried into the warehouse. "Just walk with me," Benally said.

Cal took long strides to keep up. The two of them walked past piles of pallets filled with 55 gallon drums. Somewhere within the maze the sound of a forklift warned they weren't alone. Benally led them through the stacked pallets on a path that kept them out of plain view. The walls of inventory changed from barrels to boxes, and big bags. "Over here." Benally headed to a caged area at the end of a row of pallets. He whipped out a ring of keys and unlocked it with a shaky hand.

"Hurry up, in here." Inside, he pulled out his tool and sliced into a large box. "This is what you're looking for." He started yanking on the seal pulling it from inside the box. "This is a two man job. Give me a hand." The two of them slid the seal half way out of the box.

"That's enough." Cal yanked his phone from his pocket and snapped a couple of pictures of the substandard seal. "We're paying top dollar for the best and this is what we're using?"

Benally nodded. "And the records still show we're installing what we're paying for. This is a disaster waiting to happen."

They pulled it out of the box to get a picture of the serial number. "This is what I need," Cal said. "Now to figure out who to talk to…who to trust."

"Can't you go straight to the top? Mr. Stone?"

Cal let out a long breath and shook his head. "Right now, I don't know. I'm pretty sure this is all linked to Richmond. Until I know who in Richmond, I can't tip our hand, or all this will be for nothing and you and me will be looking for handouts in the unemployment line."

The two men struggled to get the seal back into the box. "I'll tape it up later," Benally said. "You need to get out of here before the cameras start recording in real time again."

The two of them hurried through the stacks of inventory. Cal followed Scott Benally thankful that the man knew his way around the warehouse. The sound of the forklift brought them both to a stop. Benally held up a closed fist as he peered around the corner. Cal checked his watch. His time was almost up. If the cameras started recording, how would he get out of here without proof that he'd been here.

"Oh my God, Halverson's coming." Benally plastered himself against a pallet of barrels. What are we going to do?"

Cal raked his fingers through his hair. "Do you think he's looking for you?"

Benally shrugged. "I never know. He's in here a lot. I thought we'd have a little more time with him on that conference call."

"Does he usually talk to you?"

"Yeah, you mean check up on me."

"I'll stay out of sight. You need to get out there. The sooner he sees you, the sooner he's out of here."

"Stay safe." Benally grabbed a clipboard from a nail and stepped out into view as if distracted by paper work.

"Benally, there you are." Halverson walked over to him. Benally mentioned that he'd been double checking things were where they belonged, and the two of them walked away from Cal's location. For the first time, Cal feared for his life and that of Benally's. If they were caught, it wouldn't be hard to stage an unfortunate accident.

*It's bigger than me,* he reminded himself*.* The use of inferior seals was a deliberate covered up. And such a cover up was far reaching, starting with the doctored invoices. *It's the money!* For the first time he realized what it would mean to the bottom line. Someone was making millions. But without the quality seals they were supposed to be using an environmental catastrophe was inevitable. *And I'm the one who will pay – the scapegoat*. The limited data he had showing the leaks were getting worse, and pictures of the substandard seals wasn't enough. His neck would be on the line for it. He had to find a way to link the evidence to those responsible.

The leaks were slight enough most people with an untrained eye would overlook the data, but Cal knew. *That's why all the reports went missing. This is orchestrated from the top*. This wasn't a promotion. This was a cover their butt maneuver and he was set up to be the fall guy.

He ran to the open bay door with three minutes to get to his ATV.

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Paul walked into the house. "Mom!" No answer. She was probably still at the clinic. He hung up his coat and scrounged around for something to eat. He settled for a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers. Killi had invited him to join her and some of the guys to shoot some hoops later, then he'd be going with her uncle to the meeting in the evening. Kili was right about that man. Something was off with him. He needed help, but Paul felt sorry for him.

The sound of an ATV pulling up drew him to the window thinking Killi had come over to talk. He blinked in disbelief. It was his dad! On an ATV. *What's going on?* He opened the door to ask, but his dad was already running up the ramp and into the house.

"Dad? What's going on?"

His father hurried into the living room and powered up the computer. I've got some pictures I want to import from my phone. Can't really talk about it right now. I need to get back to work." He looked up at Paul. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything."

"Say anything about what?" Paul had never seen his father looked so intense. "Pictures of what?"

Cal plugged in the USB cable and paused to look Paul in the eye. "It's probably better if you don't know. There's some stuff going on that I can't really talk about…its BIG. I need to trust you on this Paul. I don't even want you mentioning to anybody that I stopped home. Not even your mother."

Paul nodded, but all the mystery piqued his curiosity. Just then Kili's voice on the radio broke the silence. His dad gave him a stern look and whispered. Not even her. It's really important you don't say anything to anyone. It would put them in danger."

His father's tone scared him. *Dad doesn't scare easil*y. He stepped out of the room to talk to Kili. They would be meeting with the guys and a couple other girls at the gym to shoot some hoops. "I'll come pick you up," she said.

"No, I'll meet you at the store. I'll leave now." He could tell his answer surprised her, but he couldn't have her come over and see his dad after everything he had to say. "I got to go Dad, otherwise Kili will be coming over her to get me."

Cal looked up at his son. "I appreciate it son."

The way he said it stirred Paul's emotions. He really did appreciate it. "If there's anything I can do, I'm here for you."

"I know. I know. Now go have fun with you friends." His father started uploading the pictures, and Paul walked out the kitchen door. He would take a peek at the pictures later to see what all the ruckus was about.