

hunter's DAUGHTER



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BY NOWICK GRAY

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CHAPTER TWO

POSTE-DE-LA-BALEINE

“You’re not gonna like this,” Nancy said, her sing-song voice almost cheery, as soon as I walked in the door.

I looked up at her while trying to wipe the spring mud off the sides of my shoes. She sat back with her blue-jeaned legs propped on the desk, running that emery board across her nails and making my blood run cold.

“There’s been another one.”

“Oh, Christ,” I said. “Where, this time?”

“Out on the land near Townsend Bay.”

“Again? Those poor suckers never get enough of it, do they?”

“You sound like it’s their fault. I don’t hear you saying that about cities down South, where lots of khalunat get killed.”

“Hey, Nance — you know me better than that. I’m not prejudiced. Eskimos, whites, Negroes, Chinamen, all the same to me. It’s just that, after x number of these bloody so-called incidents, a guy has to wonder. What is it about that place? Clan vendettas? Evil spirits? A low pressure area?”

My secretary shrugged and began the next phase of the beautification project, painting her nails watermelon pink — like some gumshoe’s broad out of a pulp novel.

“Who told you about this one?”

Eyes on her nails, she took her sweet time with the response. “Samwillie Kingak heard it from someone coming down the coast.”

I cursed under my breath and kicked my shoe against the mat, twisting my foot just enough to send a bolt of pain through the left

knee. So she was seeing Samwillie again. I told myself I didn't even care.

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

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

She waited for me to ask: "All right — so what did he tell you about it?"

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

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

Another shrug.

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

"Gone down the coast."

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

Nancy hid her smirk behind a screen of slender fingers. Expert at applying just the right amount of makeup — courtesy of Revlon and the venerable Hudson's Bay Company — she remained proud that her people still followed the wild geese.

And I respected that. What stuck in my craw was the chronic elusiveness of straight facts, the tendency for obfuscation. Let's meet halfway, was my thought process. I'm not responsible for today's problem, even if the uniform I wear stands for something to resent. Problem, solution: same uniform, when it comes to that. Ergo, I'm neutral. I come from one side but I don't play sides. Let's work it out. I can help you, in fact that's why I'm here: *to serve and protect*.

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

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

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

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

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



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

Committed, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't subject myself to the baloney I had to put up with from those clueless blatherskites at

HQ and on Parliament Hill. As for the friggin' murders, they rankled, they didn't disappear, they lingered like meat our friend the polar bear cached in cold storage, tenderizing with time.

Crime's the given. It's what comes after that makes the mystery, and this dog could chew on that for quite some time, before the teeth wore down and broke, before all the juice was sucked out of the bone and it splintered and cut and fresh blood flowed.

So here we were, again.

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

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

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

Nerves of steel, is that what I lacked? Or was it rather a certain suave detachment?

In truth I felt no fear from an actual killer at large. More the renewed pressure of duty, driving past mere job security, to the actual resolution of trouble that had already touched me too close with the death of a friend, Matthewsie Konik.

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

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

I slapped the files down on her desk. "Hey, for starters, the word you used was *killed*. You also used the word *bloody*, if I remember correctly. But no, you're right. What do I know? I keep

forgetting Rule Number One: Never assume anything. Maybe it wasn't a homicide. Maybe just another suicide, some old guy who got tired of it all, sawed off his shotgun and ate it for breakfast. Or another mauling by the infamous polar bear ripper. Or Christ, some righteous act of religious fanaticism."

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

"Anyway—"

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

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

"Coffee?"

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

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

The hot coffee cooled me off for a moment; but I wished for that little something extra. As I stood looking at the unopened files on the desk, I missed already the false peace of mind I'd enjoyed before walking into the office, and with no shame I conjured up the taste of a healthy dash of good Irish whiskey, which in a lifetime past would bolster me on the investigative quest. Thus fortified by imaginary spirits, I picked up the files and retreated to my inner sanctum.



Nancy appeared in the doorway of the partition we called the Great White Wall. From her outstretched hand she dangled a large brown dog-eared envelope, as if it smelled like a different part of the dog.

“Message from HQ,” she said.

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

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

REQUIRE FURTHER DOCUMENTATION
PERTAINING AUXILIARY STAFF SALARY RAISE
CLAIM FOR J. NATSIK:

a. SUBMIT EMPLOYEE TIME SHEET PERIOD
9/9/63-15/3/64.

b. COMPLETE PERFORMANCE QUOTIENT
RATING FORM C-47-87 ENCLOSED. RETURN
BEFORE 31 MAR 64.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I’d just about given up on Jimmy’s raise, bugging them, with no response for six months. Now they give me a deadline — last week — and there’s no Form C-47-87 as advertised. But what did I expect? Jimmy only saved my life.

At least I had Nancy to hear my complaint: “Air courier — who are they trying to kid? Did you read this thing?”

“At least they’re up to date on the name of the settlement,” she observed in her cheeriest voice.

“Big pissing deal. Poste-de-la-Baleine, Kujerapik—”

“Sheesh, how many years does it take khalunat to learn our language? It’s Kuu-juu-a-ra-pik.”

“Whatever.”

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

“I like that. Your filing cabinet.”

My secretary tossed her head and glided back toward the office partition. At the doorway she paused to look back at me, her fine black eyebrows raised. “Why don’t you just pad Jimmy’s time sheets to make up for the lost time?”

I hesitated a moment. Great idea — except for my signature on that bottom line. Still, how would anyone down at HQ ever know the difference?

“You’ve got a point, Nance. The guy hauls me out of an icy river, at great risk to his safety, I say he gets rewarded. Maybe I’ll put in the next one for you. You might have to wait awhile, though, with that sorry bunch of pencil-pushers.”

“I might be an old lady with no teeth.” She giggled and returned to her side of the Wall.

Without much left of the morning, I proceeded to work out a plausibly inflated time sheet for Jimmy. Besides saving my hide, he was a likeable chap, to use a Bickfordism. Had a bit of a chip on the shoulder, but who wouldn’t, taking orders from an outside force like me. Least I could do, hand back some chits of gratitude. I’m a realist, I told myself, signing off on the minor fraud. I don’t rewrite history. I just clean up after: a humble janitor. I know where the refuse goes, what cleaning fluids to use. Someone has to do it.

I could hear the insistent clacking of typewriter keys as Nancy prepared the weekly report, and in the back of my mind I debated how to handle it. Should I leave out any mention of the latest killing, pending more information? Or would that just land me in bigger trouble in the end?

By the time her report was ready for signing, I had decided to buckle to the rule of prompt dispatch. With Nancy standing over

my shoulder, and my stomach growling for lunch, I scrawled a brief addendum: there'd been a death up the coast, and it would be investigated immediately.

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

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

"Why me? Can't you do it?"

"Hey, I've got to keep giving you something useful to do around here; or with the next little memo from our friends down South, they'll be ordering me to cut staff."

Pouting, she took the papers from my hand.

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

Now a look of cloudy distraction passed across her eyes.

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

"Sure it fits. They all do, one way or another."

"Okay, okay, Fatima. Seriously, think about Matthewsie Konik, for instance, just last spring. And that murder in the Townsend Bay settlement in '61. Now add this one. You know at least half the people on this coast. Do you see where there might be some connections?"

"Sure, a million connections," she said, eyes flashing like northern lights. "The tracks of a caribou herd, the many breathing-holes of a single seal. Which ones do you choose to follow up? It might help to know who that dead hunter is."

What comes after. In this work you learn to tread cautiously, step by step. The river ice might hold here, and there, today and next week, but beyond that...it's like Jerry Schaefer told me is the schoolkids' favorite line: "*You* never know."

These Inuk kids, they're canny and cunning, and they can smell a fox a ways off in the spring breeze. They mouth a simple English

phrase we take for granted, and with just such an inflection of tone, like their Chinese ancestors, you might say, they give it a whole new meaning.



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