

*"Silver and gold are not the only coin; virtue too passes current all over the world."*

-Euripides

## **Prologue: The Present - November, 1906**

### **THE HUNTER**

Leaving a trail of paw prints beside the large, determined man-tracks, the husky padded through the frosted snowdrifts. It cautiously approached the edge of the cliff where the man stood, his hands at his side, observing the kaleidoscopic light show in the night sky.

With its tail down, wagging in anticipation as it neared, the dog gave a whine and brought its muzzle to the man's hand. It sniffed deeply at the bare skin, the callused fingers and rough flesh toughened by years in the harshest elements. It caught the scent of licorice from one of those sticks the man was so fond of chewing.

"Easy, Dunder," the man said, his voice cutting through the arctic silence. Unable to lower his gaze from the luminescent scenery, he felt humbled that after all these years, this snow-covered realm continued to affect him so powerfully. Below, reflections of the shimmering Northern Lights glittered like flakes of gold along the great ice-coated river.

As he stroked the dog behind its ears, the man traced the river's path, following as it sliced through the valley, winding toward the mountains hunkered beneath the constellations like shrouded behemoths. The mighty Yukon: the sacred and storied river that traversed this arctic realm, spilling from glaciers and lakes and merging with countless tributaries. Including, farther south, the grand Teslin River—a three-hundred and ninety-mile driving force that the natives in their Tutchone language called the Delin Chu, the river after which he had been named.

Delin Wetherwax sighed, and continued rubbing the husky beneath its chin. Delin's beard was a respectable length, if a bit ragged, and descended halfway down the front of his emerald green coat. His golden hair, salted with grey, tumbled in curls from a faded blue hat. Twin Colt

Dragoon revolvers of polished gold and ingrained silver rested in holsters on his belt, above canvas pants and bearskin boots.

He took a deep breath, as if he could force into his soul the utter stillness and complete calm pictured before him. The shadows grew and the silence deepened. The iron weathervane atop the nearby cabin stood as motionless as the other dogs, six of them still tethered to a sled a short distance away.

Suddenly, something shattered the silence, savage as an ax-blow, a sound at first so alien that the man hardly recognized it. But trained for years to heed the slightest danger, Delin reacted immediately and reached for his revolvers.

Dunder was facing the shadow-fettered woods, and a low growl emanated from its throat. It was this sound that set the clifftop in motion. Delin sprinted even as the form burst from the woods; and an instant before the bulk of white fur, immense arms and cruel talons tore past the vanguard of freshly-chopped trees, he fired twice and shouted a command to the dogs.

"*Ugiarpok!*" Just one word, an ancient Inupiaq verb, and Dunder and the other untethered husky—the one named Blitzen—tore from their stances and raced to attack.

Through the twin clouds of powder bursts, the Dragoons' blasts echoing in his ears, Delin bounded to the sled. Unsure if either shot had struck the rampaging beast, he shouted another command to the sled dogs, already in motion, heeding his unspoken request. The sound of snarls and yelps intensified as Delin leaped onto the approaching sled's runner boards. He perched, precariously unbalanced, as he slipped one revolver back in its holster and gripped the handlebar with his free hand.

The sled completed a sharp arc, then raced at the creature beset by the dogs. In the weak polar light the monster's hide almost looked blue, but the fur was pockmarked with blood, and crude holes had been torn from its flesh; its face was a mask of pain and savagery. Some weapon other than his had done this, Delin realized with a start, and pulled back on the lashings, slowing

his approach.

He took aim again. This was one of the largest Sesquats he had ever seen, easily over fifteen feet tall, and its immensity brought him back to a tragic night over twenty years ago when even the smallest of these beasts had dwarfed him. Grimacing with the resurging memory of kerosene fires and scalding flesh, he fired once, then again, taking care not to hit Dunder or Blitzen. He slid through the great puffs of smoke and saw fresh wounds in the creature's torso.

In the next heartbeat, as Dunder came down from a lunging attack, a great white fist slammed into the dog. The yelp pierced Delin's heart, and he had to turn away rather than watch the dog's shattered body tumble over the ice.

He aimed again and pulled out the other pistol as the sled came around, within thirty feet now. As Delin sighted, both arms outstretched, he scanned the creature's hide. *It's not the one*, he thought, failing to see the distinctive scarring he had been looking for. The Sesquats were dwindling in number since his childhood, in no part thanks to him, but he was still surprised by their resiliency; *and still he sought that one, hoping to have one more chance against it...*

As he sighted, something caught his attention: wrapped around the beast's right leg was a tangled mess of black netting. Startled as he was by this observation, Delin didn't see the two hunters emerge from the woods.

When he finally caught their movements, it was too late. The first hunter, taller and bulkier, his parka bulging with extra supplies, charged ahead with a rifle. Before he could shoot, the creature leapt at him. Astonishingly swift, the beast tore through the man, leaving a severed leg rooted in the snow as the rest of the hunter flopped into the air and sailed over the cliff.

The rifle finally went off just as the hunter dropped from view, and the gunshot drowned out his final scream. Blitzen raced forward and snapped, taking a chunk from the monster's calf just as the other hunter got off a shot that sailed wide.

Delin blasted away with two more rounds, then tucked both revolvers away and lashed

out with the whip, bearing the sled down to the lone hunter.

The Sesquat staggered back with twin impacts that only momentarily hindered it before it snarled and prepared to leap. Delin tugged hard on the gangline and cranked the handlebars, banking the sled and kicking up clouds of icy wake.

He sailed just past the Sesquat's lunging grasp, leaned over the side and reached out to the speedily-approaching hunter. His big grip caught him at the shoulder, and lifted the surprisingly light man off the snow. Delin managed to use the sled's momentum on a slight turn to flip the hunter through the air and deposit him on the empty flat bed.

With the howls of the pursuing beast in his ears, he shouted "Mush!" and they flew down the hill toward the woods and the path the dogs knew well.

Delin looked back and tried to see through the shadows beyond the hunter's hood, but couldn't make out a face. He was about to call out when the barrel of the hunter's rifle suddenly loomed in his face.

"Duck!" the hunter shouted, and Delin moved to the side an instant before the fiery cloud burst from the nozzle. Something screeched at his back just as the sled rocked to the side, teetered, then righted itself. Delin glanced back, and as the trees, frozen branches and boulders flew past in a blur, he saw the Sesquat rocking with obvious pain. Blood spurted from just below its throat. But it came on, pursuing relentlessly, hurtling fallen branches and throwing itself forward with immense leaps, gaining back the distance it had lost.

Sensing the pursuit, the dogs raced even faster, careening through the snow flattened from yesterday's trail-making, and they sped down the path as it grew steeper and steeper. Delin slipped an arm under the tow-wire to secure himself to the sled, then withdrew his own rifle from its side attachment. He shouted to the hunter, "Keep firing and slow it down!"

Delin cocked the barrel and balanced on the left runner board, giving the hunter a clear shot around him. Sighting along the barrel, he aimed in the opposite direction from the creature,

forward and down the side of the cliff.

"What the hell are you doing?" the hunter yelled, in a surprisingly high-pitched tone.

"Just fire!" Delin shouted, and then aimed, trying to recognize the landmarks. In a few hundred yards the path up ahead would bank sharply left and turn around in a great 'U', working its way down the cliff. At one spot after that turn, a group of miners had broken camp during the spring, excited with a substantial find. They had left all their belongings perched on the side of the cliff and had raced back to Dawson to convert their wealth and head home to Kansas. After their departure, Delin had been slowly taking their supplies; up until now, he'd had no use for the three barrels of gunpowder left behind.

Even in the thick snowdrifts, those barrels peeked out from their perch high above the sled path. If he could get a clean shot, at just the right moment...

Something whizzed past his cheek and acrid smoke stung at his eyes. Another howl from the creature, and Delin swore he felt its foul breath blow away the sulfuric gunsmoke. He risked a glance, and wished he didn't. The Sesquat seemed unfazed, even energized, as it leapt from moon-dusted tree to tree, merging with the deep pockets of darkness then bursting out like a white streak of lightning.

Delin cursed, but calmly extended his left hand only, gripping the rifle. He held his breath and fired—just as the hunter got off another round. The Sesquat bounded onto the path just ten yards back and lunged at them, only to be caught by both shells in the stomach. It somersaulted backwards, snarled, but then jumped up again, pursuing.

"Impossible..." the hunter said, but Delin ignored him, turned around, cocked the chamber and sighted. The frosted trees hurled by like the flaps of moving picture frames he had witnessed once in Juneau, and a certain calm settled over his heart. His vision cleared and the darkness receded as if the moon had just tripled in size. There in his sights glinted the metal post from the old miners' camp, and just to the right—the rounded outline of the top barrel.

Delin pulled the trigger, then cursed when he observed the burst of snow just to the barrel's side. "Ah... missed it!"

The sled started to turn, and the terrain got bumpier as it descended. He sighted again, even as he heard the monster gaining on them. From just to his right came the horrifying CLICK of the hunter's empty magazine.

A gap in the trees appeared, and Delin focused. His finger clenched and the gun recoiled. Without looking at the result, he swiveled on the runner board, arched backward and turned. The Sesquat crashed through a low-hanging branch, shattering it in a cloud of dust and ice, and appeared right on top of them.

The rifle tumbled from Delin's hand, and in one fluid movement he now clenched both revolvers, bringing them together before his face. He fired. Again and again. Two more times, through the great clouds of smoke, the Dragoons spat out their fury, until finally, reluctantly, they were spent.

Holstering the weapons, satisfied that the beast was delayed if not destroyed, he turned and helped steer the sled. Only then did he follow the hunter's line of sight, and only then did he recognize the roaring sound echoing off the mountains. And only then did he notice the gushing black smoke, the fire shooting into the sky, the tons of ice and earth, exploding tree trunks and incinerated supplies.

He also noticed with growing dread that the avalanche, tumbling in a wave of relentless devastation, now bore down on the path ahead—closer and faster than he had anticipated.

"MUSH!" He lashed with the whip over the hunter's head. The dogs leaned into their task, aided by the steep angling and smooth trail. The wave of ice pressed on, smothering trees and gathering mass as it rolled ahead, cutting a swath fifty feet wide. A howling resumed behind them, and Delin heard the thunderous tread of the Sesquat as it gained.

The sled raced into the forefront of the avalanche, and to Delin it seemed as if he flew

into a mass of churning thunderclouds, strangely beautiful in its relentless approach. He gaped up at the avalanche and it seemed time stood still...

And then they were airborne, dogsled and humans serenely coasting ahead of the advancing force.

They emerged, bursting through with just a bump. Delin looked back, seeing only a wall of white, and for a brief instant, the look of shock and pain as the wall of death slammed into the Sesquat. The avalanche carried it over the side, rending the body into shattered fragments, pulverizing muscle and bone on the way over the cliff, and then tumbling hundreds of feet to the rocks below.

"Whoa!" Delin shouted, bringing up the rope and working the handles from side to side. The dogs slowed and tried to halt their speeding descent. But the hunter suddenly sat up and leapt off the sled, shouting. "NO!"

Delin reached for the parka, but it slipped through his grasp. The hunter landed awkwardly on his dismount, screamed and went down. In a second Delin was there, leaping off the runner board and reaching for him.

The hood had been shaken free, and an astonishing face, grimacing in obvious pain, winced up at him. Delin reeled in shock. The hunter had pale, high cheekbones set in a narrow face, auburn hair, naturally curly but in knots and clumps after what must have been weeks in the arctic elements.

"A woman?"

She groaned and rubbed her ankle. "You have no idea what you just did!"

Delin blinked at her, then looked at the aftermath of the avalanche, where the last few icy rocks tumbled over the edge. "Seems to me, ma'am, that I saved your life. I'm truly sorry, however, that I couldn't aid your companion in time."

Something behind the woman's eyes went dark, and she looked down. "I'm sorry for

Nathan, too. He was a guide I hired back in Dawson, but he knew the risks." She staggered to her feet and tried to put some pressure on the hurt ankle. She seemed desperate to reach the edge and look over.

"Risks?" Delin asked, suddenly recalling the net tangled up in the creature's leg. "You mean—no, I don't believe you were actually out here to hunt..."

"The *Sesquat*? Yes." The woman winced with every step. "We've been tracking it for three weeks, at considerable expense, traveling to this godforsaken place to investigate the rumors, and then return with one *intact*, if possible."

"Intact? Ma'am, you are lucky your condition still befits that description."

She glanced back at him, narrowing her eyes as if he had just shocked her with his vocabulary. "And who might you be?"

Delin stood up stiffly and spread out his arms. "Why, I'm sure my fame precedes me. I am none other than Delin Wetherwax, prospector in these parts and many others, and—"

"Yes, I've heard of you. Miners in Dawson City told me you live out here all alone. The more suspicious among them think you've got some kind of pact with the *Sesquat* creature."

"History, perhaps, but never any love lost between us." Delin's voice faltered at first as if biting down on a painful memory, then recovered. "But if you truly are out here on some sort of ill-advised zoological mission, I can scarcely believe you made it this long without being killed."

The woman leaned against a tree and looked down the twilight-speckled hill, where only a cloud of dust rose from the depths. "I'm not from the zoo."

"Oh, no? Then..."

"I'm here with a team of specialists. The others are compiling a geological survey of Alaska, while I volunteered to seek out this evolutionary throwback we'd heard about, and to bring one back for study, if possible." She glared at him. "We're from the Smithsonian Institution. I doubt you've heard of it."

Delin put a hand to his forehead and groaned. "I wish I could say that were true, ma'am. Unfortunately your Institution and the Wetherwax family have had... run-ins."

She looked up in surprise. "Who?"

"A man named Hall, a naturalist."

"William Healy Hall? You've met him?"

Delin nodded. "I was only fourteen at the time, but he traveled with my father and me up the Tanana River." He led her by the arm to the waiting sled. "Now, I have got to get back to my cabin and see about my dogs. And I must say that your ankle will need some attention."

"I'm fine."

"Suit yourself, ma'am." Delin backed away, hands in the air. "But I must tell you, unless you're awful clever at geography and can navigate by the stars, and unless you have supplies for at least a week, you may want to think about coming with me."

She narrowed her eyes, weighing some sort of response, while staring uneasily over the frozen landscape.

"Of course," said Delin, "if you're serious about locating another such creature, you're sure to be in luck. They're drawn to weak prey, and after a couple days out here alone..."

She swallowed. "Wait—how many more of those things are around?"

Delin sighed. "They are very scarce, almost extinct, but they're not just in these regions. I believe you'll find references to them in many parts of the world, especially at high altitudes. In Asia they are called Yeti, or the Abominable Snowmen. They go by *Sesquat* to the Salishan tribes. The Athabascans call them *Arulataq*—which means 'creature who makes a bellowing cry.' In Tlingit they are known as Kustaka. Then, there's what the Russian trappers called them—the *Almastay*."

He sighed and looked away, wistfully. "And there is at least one more that I know of, one I've been tracking for years."

"Any chance you'll find it soon?"

"Why? So you can study it, stuff it and put it in your museum?"

The woman grunted. She tried to walk past Delin, only to wince again and go down, reaching instinctively for him as she fell. Delin caught her in his arms, and their cold faces were but inches apart, their breaths steaming together in clouds.

After a moment of awkward silence, she angrily pushed free. "They warned me of other things about you as well, in Dawson."

"Fools!" Delin proclaimed, with a slight grin. "They're just sore that I don't go and spend my hard-earned gold in their taverns and toss my wealth upon their vaudeville stages."

"Nevertheless," the woman said, "might I just be permitted to go my way?"

"Of course," Delin said with a bow.

She looked ahead at the treacherous path and recalled the days spent meandering in the dark. The chill deepened, the stars burned boldly and the curtain-like aurora shimmered overhead. "Okay," she said, relenting. "We'll go to your cabin to get some supplies, and then you'll take me on your sled into town, for which I will pay you an adequate sum."

Delin shook his head and pointed through a crop of trees to the east. "I'm not going anywhere for the next week. Front's coming in. The dogs know it, the birds and bears know it. The very land expects it." He sighed. "When you chased that thing into my clearing earlier I was preparing for the storm, weighing the time left and readying my supplies."

The woman stared at the starlit sky just above the backdrop of the towering mountains. "A blizzard? Is this a joke you prospectors like to play on visitors?"

"No joke, ma'am. Miss—what can I call you? This anonymity grows tiresome."

She narrowed her eyes and pulled the hood over her face. Without extending a hand, she limped to the dogsled and called back, "Griffith. Eloise Griffith."

Grinning, Delin followed and helped her get settled on the sled, seated amid his supplies.

"Eloise, from the Greek 'Helios'—god of the sun." He winked at her. "Ironic, that you should find your way here to this land in its time of near-perpetual darkness."

Eloise regarded him as if he were some strange creature in her zoology ward. "Can we just get someplace warm, quickly?"

"Very well," Delin said. He strode up to the lead dog, and after whispering something in its ear, the sled lurched forward, beginning the long trip up the winding trail. "I'll see you at the cabin. They can't pull two of us up the hill, so I'll head up alone on the direct route and meet you at the top."

Eloise looked around nervously, jostling with the lurching of the sled. "But..."

"At the top," Delin shouted, slinging a pack over his shoulder and then bounding into the shadows.

# # #

Nearly thirty minutes later, about the same time Eloise mercifully lost feeling in her feet, the dogs began yelping, and for a moment she feared her wish had been granted and another Sesquat had found her. In moments, however, the canopy of spruces thinned and shafts of pale green light pierced through. Mesmerized, Eloise stared overhead, immune by now to the jostling of the sled over the ice-crinkled terrain.

The shimmering aurora cast furtive glances through the eaves, playing a game of first-sight, and the dogs seemed caught up in the sport, rushing to burst free of the forest and bark up in wonder at the magical vision.

But when the sled finally emerged onto the clearing with an abruptness that shocked her, Eloise stared in wonder not at the celestial light show, but at the scene on the ice ahead, at the man kneeling beside two roughly-hewn graves, piled over lovingly with hard-packed snow.

All at once the sled slowed to a graceful crawl and the team let out soft whimpers, reverently approaching the site. Eloise propped herself up, and when the sled came to a stop, she

stepped off gingerly. Leaning on the rifle butt and limping, her boots crunched thunderous echoes across the polar stillness.

Delin's hat and gloves lay beside a pickax stuck in the ice. His blond curls were matted with frozen sweat and stuck to his face while his beard swirled in an unnatural wind; his eyes glistened with an oddly-tinted hue, absorbing the reflections from the cosmic spectator above.

Eloise stood and stared, wobbling slightly but ignoring the subdued pain and tingling from her feet. All the way up the hill she had practiced what she would say at this moment, prepared to show her fury and demand restitution. He had set her back months, and perhaps made her success impossible. Bad enough the others scoffed at her hunt for this legendary creature. She had argued that the Smithsonian should present just such anomalies to the cultured world, to illustrate how much of nature is still unknown and perhaps, unconquerable.

She had meant to prove the others wrong, and while they were out drawing maps and analyzing old rocks, she would come back with something truly astonishing—something to make old Darwin himself scratch his head in wonder.

But then this man, this wild mountain prospector, had rushed in and knocked the prize from her grasp. Granted, she had underestimated the strength of the creature, but once she knew its habits and its territory, she could have returned with a team of trappers and brought it back—perhaps alive.

If not for Delin. It had been right there for her—a chance at fame, success and immortality of a sort. Right in her grasp, and despite those who second-guessed her, despite her own fears, and despite the advice of the doctors about the nameless illness which often sapped her strength and held her back... Despite all that, she knew she still had a chance to make something grand of whatever life she had left.

If not for Delin. In her mittens, her hands were clenched into fists, and in her heart her anger was still seething, but as she limped closer, a different emotion took over.

He was crying. She saw it at once—the tears sliding partially down his face before freezing and clinging like stalactites from his cheekbones. Delin let a bare hand settle on each mound. "Rest well my friends." The words carried over the cliff like melancholy notes plucked from violin strings.

Eloise checked her anger and resisted a fierce chill that flared up her body from her toes. Her voice cracked, and she said the only thing she could think of: "What were their names?"

A thin smile tugged at Delin's mustache, curling to the right side of his face. He wiped away frozen tears as he stood. "Dunder and Blitzen! The pride of my team!"

From behind her, Eloise heard the other dogs give soft whines, as if acknowledging their own farewells. She blinked at Delin, then frowned, remembering something. "Do you know you named your dogs...after reindeer in a poem?"

"By Clement Clarke Moore!" Delin said, eyes wide. "A Visit From Saint Nicholas." He stared at her, surprised that she recognized it. "My father used to read it to me when I was little. It was one of my first Christmas gifts."

"My grandfather read it to me," Eloise said. "He even had the original printing, with Thomas Nast's illustrations, from New York's *Troy Sentinel*, I think it was—in 1824."

"1822," Delin corrected. "Wish I could have seen those illustrations. Do you know that Dunder and Blitzen are Dutch for..."

"Thunder and Lightning! Yes," she said, "my grandfather was Dutch, and he just loved that poem, and the whole Saint Nicholas idea. I got three pieces of Dutch chocolate every Christmas Day."

Delin smiled. "It was hard to get chocolate up here, although we could always count on traders carrying soft Dutch treats like licorice candies or root sticks—which are my favorite, by the way, but most times I just received gold nuggets."

Eloise started to laugh, but then decided she wasn't sure if he was joking. "So were your

parents Dutch as well, or...?"

"My father was," he said, walking past her to pick up his hat and gloves, and the pickax, which he promptly began to toss in the air and catch as he walked. "Wetherwax is derived from *Weiderwacht*, which means loosely, one who watches over a meadow, or a field."

Eloise gave him a sideways look. "So I imagine you fancy this entire arctic land to be your stewardship?"

Delin ignored the question, returning instead to the earlier topic. "My mother wasn't Dutch, however, but Russian nobility."

Eloise struggled to move after him. The chill was spreading, but now she felt hot—a sweat had broken out under her hood, and her neck itched. Delin's revelation was still sinking in, and she opened her mouth to express her disbelief when her rifle point slid on the ice. Her ankle turned and something cracked as she fell with a scream.

Delin was there in a moment, catching her before she landed face-first on the ice. He turned her and gently laid her on her back. She bit her lip and struggled against the numbing pain. She sensed a tugging at her foot, then she saw her boot come off and heard a gasp.

"Miss Griffith. I'm sorry, but you're in desperate shape."

Eloise shook her head. "I'm fine. Just help me up."

"No. Listen, these feet of yours are very near frostbitten. You let them get wet, and out here, that's a mistake that might be your last. I've seen more men than I could count come up here on two feet, only to leave with none."

"Really? I don't feel anything."

"That's the problem," he countered. "And on top of the frostbite, your ankle's broken. That's easy enough to fix. I'm going to set the bone now. Expect a little pain, but then we must get you inside and care for those feet. Are you ready?"

"No!"

"Good," Delin said and made a motion. Something snapped, the sound echoing off the distant peaks and roaring into Eloise's brain, along with a searing agony that flared through her numbness and throttled her senses.

She collapsed, mercifully unconscious.

# # #

When she awoke, she thought she was back in her childhood bedroom in Washington, D.C. Her grandfather must have just left her, because she was thinking about reindeer and hoping to get some chocolate in the morning from Saint Nicholas. She lay under thick blankets, some of them unusually furry, like the pelt of a polar bear. Her legs and feet felt odd, tingling, but not unpleasant.

She blinked, and as her eyes adjusted she noticed with some alarm that the items on the walls were not hers. True, there was the Clement Moore poem, hanging in a frame on the wall beside the bed, but over there, to the right of the stove grinning its red-hot grin and pouring out heat, stood a bookshelf littered with heavy tomes. Books too thick for her to read at such an early age.

Eloise blinked again, and reality started coming back to her, even as she thought she heard the muted barking of dogs outside. She sat up in bed, propped up on her elbows, and noticed that she was dressed in clothes that seemed far too big for her—a huge nightshirt on top of several layers of undergarments. She continued to scrutinize the walls and shelves about the log cabin interior as the roof and walls shook in a rising wind. A heavy storm howled outside above the din of the barking dogs.

A wooden table occupied the center of the room and stood on a rug of stitched-together bear pelts. Just below the stove, beside a stack of perfectly chopped firewood, stood a pickax, a short-handled shovel, a cooking pot, some utensils, a teapot and four cloth sacks bulging with unidentified contents. On the left wall hung a rifle of the sort Eloise recalled seeing in very old

tintype photographs, carried by the men serving in the Civil War. Below the rifle, on a mahogany end table, rested an open cherry wood box; within, two revolvers reclined on a velvet interior. They glinted with gold engravings and sparkled with a silver finish.

On another series of shelves built into the wall were other unusual items: a long bladed knife with a half-moon design carved into its hilt. Next to this, a small bird-headed totem pole on a stand. The highest shelf held a trophy in the shape of a vase. A time-worn tintype hung above it, presenting the image of a grinning young boy on a dogsled holding up the trophy.

Other photographs called to her from under a set of caribou antlers. Eloise strained to make out the images there, but could only see in one—a dual-image stereograph—what looked like two well-dressed men standing and shaking hands, while in the background, enormous mountainside factories worked heaps of ore.

Small kerosene lamps rested on the wall in copper sconces, and native tapestries decorated the remaining blank spaces, while a dreamcatcher descended from the ceiling—and spun in a sudden gust.

The door blew open, then shut just as suddenly. Snowflakes cascaded across Eloise's vision, fluttering like butterflies and scattering playfully.

"Ah! Good, you're awake. Have you had some tea yet?"

Eloise blinked at the visitor. Still struggling with the shock of disassociation, she could only shake her head.

"Just as well, it's still steeping," he said. In a flash, he was out of his coat, and it was hanging on a hook on the door, along with his gloves and hat. He kicked off his boots, sending them into a corner, then reached for the teapot and two cups from behind the stove.

"Ancient Tlingit remedy, steeped in the bark of Echinacea root soaked in mint leaves." He grinned at her, and huge snowflakes tumbled from his mustache and plunged from his beard.

She took the cup in trembling hands and sipped at the steaming brew as Delin pulled up a

chair, turned it backwards and sat facing her, drinking from his own cup. The dogs had quieted down, but the storm increased its pitch, howling as it slammed against the walls and tried to pry its way inside.

Delin cocked his head. "Storm got here a little early by my reckoning, but not much."

Eloise took another sip, relishing the sensation of warmth spreading through her body.

"How long was I out?"

"Six hours. Sorry for the ankle, but it had to be done."

"Can I walk?"

"Not without a crutch. Probably two or three weeks before you should put serious weight on it. But I'm no doctor."

Eloise let her eyes glance over to the bookshelf again. "Are you sure? Seems you have books on everything over there."

Delin smiled. "Relics from old friends. Something to pass the time and dispel the loneliness."

Eloise regarded him again in the flickering firelight. Steam issued from his mouth when he talked, and the air still felt chilled, but it was nothing like the days and nights she had spent outside with her guide, tracking their quarry. "Thank you," she whispered.

Delin raised an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

"You heard me. Thank you. For the ankle. For saving my feet. And my life. I can still feel them—my feet. That's a good sign, right?"

"Tingly and itchy?"

She nodded.

"Good. I've also had your feet soaking in a special warm mixture for several hours."

"Another native recipe?"

"Of course."

"How did you learn all this?" Eloise asked. "Wait—don't tell me, besides your Russian descent, you're also part Eskimo?"

Delin shook his head. "No, but I lived with a Tlingit tribe for many years. You don't believe me, do you?"

Eloise shrugged. "Prospectors are prone to exaggeration." She narrowed her eyes at him, risking a little playfulness. "Maybe you think to impress me with such claims?"

Delin lowered his head. "Miss Griffith. If I aimed to impress you I'd have you take a look in any of those four sacks over there."

She looked at the stuffed bags. "What's in there, the diggings you'll wash in the spring for a few flakes?"

Delin smiled in the dancing scarlet light. "Not quite." He folded his arms and seemed to be judging her, looking into her soul, gauging her motivations. His smile faded.

"No," he said after a moment, and in a note of complete sincerity. "I don't think someone like you would be dazzled by the results of my 'diggings', as you correctly put it."

"Oh? And you think you know me so well already?"

"Maybe." He turned and rummaged around in some jars on the table, then faced her, grinning and holding two pencil-sized objects. "Licorice stick?" he offered.

"Huh? No, I'll stay with the tea for now."

"Suit yourself," he said, gnawing into one and closing his eyes. "Mmmm. Love these things!"

Eloise laughed. "Interesting. So—you think you know me? How many women exactly have you met out here?"

She couldn't quite tell, but it seemed his cheeks reddened suddenly, and when he looked away, the licorice stick dangled from his bushy mustache. "Point made," he said. "But still, you might find something here of greater interest than mere rocks plucked from the earth."

"And what would that be?" Eloise asked, taking another sip. She suddenly realized that this man she had just insulted about his lack of experience with women had recently undressed her, bathed her feet and cared for her while she was helpless.

Delin leaned back, tilting in the chair so he could toss another log into the stove. The fire crackled as he turned to her. "I know how you valued the poem read to you by your grandfather, and I can sense the magic you felt, the anticipation when the stairs creaked as he climbed up to your room with a book in his hands. Your little heart would leap as you waited under the blankets for your bedtime tale."

Eloise choked down the knot in her throat. Her eyes glazed over, and she looked beyond Delin's shoulder to the firelight.

"I think," said her rescuer, "that you might like a story."

# # #

Her fingers trembled again, and without offering, she felt Delin gently take the cup away from her. The wind slammed against the cabin again in a renewed strike, but then, spent, retreated while a calm silence surrounded them.

"Yes," she whispered, without really hearing the word. Something else worked through her mind—an idea blossoming into a purpose. Her quarry may have escaped, and her initial mission may have been lost, but there could be salvage here after all. William Hall wrote volumes about the conditions, the people and the wildlife up here. That author, Jack London, had his own success.

She regarded this giant of a man, mythical already in her mind by his heroics on the cliff and his compassion thereafter. Intrigued by the artifacts in his cabin and fascinated by the hints of his heritage, she began compiling the elements of a grand story. Something to present upon her return, something beyond a mere carcass of flesh and fur: the living words of a man who embodied the spirit of this frozen world, a man who had battled elements as well as beasts the

rest of us could not comprehend. And if the items here in his cabin were any indication, this tale might be astounding in its own right, yet deeply personal.

"Wait." She lifted a hand, focusing now on her plan. "I do want a story, you are right about that. But I want to know about all this," she waved her hand around the cabin, then pointed to the sacks by the stove. "As well as that."

Delin opened his mouth, then closed it. His heavy black sweater appeared to itch him suddenly. He stood up and started pacing the floor. "It will take some time."

Eloise shrugged, then motioned to the door with her head. "As you said, the storm's here. Do you have enough supplies, food and tea for two?"

Delin nodded. "I'm always prepared for guests, or folks that just plain get lost."

"And do you also share stories with them?"

"I do. But never such a tale. Pieces of it, yes, but for what you are asking, I have to be much more thorough." He twirled his mustache, then scooped up the pickax on his renewed pacing. Unconsciously, he started flipping and catching it as he walked and spoke to her.

He shot her a sideways look. "I assume you'll also be wanting a complete perspective on the great Rushes of history, the gold and silver strikes that lured hundreds of thousands of men into the harshest of conditions."

Eloise choked on her building excitement, envisioning sweeping storylines held together by the personal revelations of a man's history. "Yes," she whispered. "All of that."

The wind whistled its intention to remain for the telling as well. Several of the dogs whined, and the cabin creaked.

"Very well, then," Delin announced, catching the pickax. He set it down, then went about lighting more lamps. "I will start the tale here in the Arctic, when I was just a little tyke, and I'll work in the rest—the good bits about how my father got up here in the first place, how I was born and learned the trade, and all the rest. You'll have to be patient, though. Think you can do

that?"

Eloise glanced around the cabin again, listening to the storm raging outside. She shrugged and was about to respond when Delin said, "We're going to start with me, of course, but I assure you, I'll get to the part about how California fell into America's hands after the Mexican War—and how a pair of down-on-their-luck soldiers deserted their posts and made their fortunes in the hills of San Francisco; and how my father's best friend quickly lost his soul, how Benjamin Quitch forged an empire on the broken backs of honest men, how he sent my father out into the hills again and again to find the next great strikes, only so that Quitch could then level mountains and pry apart the land in order to slake his thirst."

"Hold on," interrupted Eloise, excitedly, her eyes blazing, heart hammering in her chest. "First, bring me some more tea. Oh—and a pencil and a notebook from my pack." She smiled and settled back against the pillows. Snuggling under the blankets, she waited for his creaking footfalls and the start of the story.