

Northern Lights

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ONE

EN ROUTE TO LUNACY · *December 28, 2004*

Strapped into the quivering soup can laughingly called a plane, bouncing his way on the pummeling air through the stingy window of light that was winter, through the gaps and breaks in snow-sheathed mountains toward a town called Lunacy, Ignatious Burke had an epiphany.

He wasn't nearly as prepared to die as he'd believed.

It was a hell of a thing to realize when his fate hung precariously in the hands of a stranger who was buried in a canary yellow parka and whose face was nearly concealed by a battered leather bush hat perched on top of a purple watch cap.

The stranger had seemed competent enough in Anchorage, and had given Nate's hand a hearty slap before wagging a thumb at the soup can with propellers.

Then he'd told Nate to "just call me Jerk." That's when the initial unease had set in.

What kind of an idiot got into a flying tin can piloted by a guy named Jerk?

But flying was the only sure way to reach Lunacy this late in the year. Or so Mayor Hopp had informed him when he'd conferred with her over his travel arrangements.

The plane dipped hard to the right, and as Nate's stomach followed, he wondered just how Mayor Hopp defined *sure*.

He'd thought he hadn't given a good damn one way or the other. Live or die, what did it matter in the big scheme? When he'd boarded the big jet at Baltimore-Washington, he'd resigned himself that he was heading to the end of his life in any case.

The department shrink had warned him about making major decisions when he was suffering from depression, but he'd applied for the position as chief of police in Lunacy for no reason other than that the name seemed apt.

And he'd accepted the position with a who-gives-a-shit shrug.

Even now, reeling with nausea, shivering with his epiphany, Nate realized it wasn't so much death that worried him, but the method. He just didn't want to end the whole deal by smashing into a mountain in the fucking gloom.

At least if he'd stayed in Baltimore, had danced more affably with the shrink and his captain, he could've gone down in the line of duty. That wouldn't have been so bad.

But no, he'd tossed in his badge, hadn't just burned his bridges but had incinerated them. And now he was going to end up a bloody smear somewhere in the Alaska Range.

"Gonna get a little rough through here," Jerk said with a drawn-out Texas drawl.

Nate swallowed bile. "And it's been so smooth up to now."

Jerk grinned, winked. "This ain't nothing. Ought to try it fighting a headwind."

"No, thanks. How much longer?"

"Not much."

The plane bucked and shuddered. Nate gave up and closed his eyes. He prayed he wouldn't add to the indignity of his death by puking on his boots first.

He was never going up in a plane again. If he lived, he'd drive out of Alaska. Or walk. Or crawl. But he was never going into the air again.

The plane gave a kind of jerking leap that had Nate's eyes popping open. And he saw through the windscreen the triumphant victory of the sun, a wondrous sort of lessening of gloom that turned the sky pearly so that the world below was defined in long ripples of white and blue, sudden rises, shimmering swarms of icy lakes and what had to be miles of snow-draped trees.

Just east, the sky was all but blotted out by the mass the locals called Denali, or just The Mountain. Even his sketchy research had told him only Outsiders referred to it as McKinley.

His only coherent thought as they shuddered along was that nothing real should be that massive. As the sun beamed God fingers through the heavy sky around it, the shadows began to drip and spread, blue over white, and its icy face glinted.

Something shifted inside him so that, for a moment, he forgot the roiling of his belly, the constant buzzing roar of the engine, even the chill that had hung in the plane like fog.

"Big bastard, ain't he?"

"Yeah." Nate let out a breath. "Big bastard."

They eased west, but he never lost sight of the mountain. He could see now that what he'd taken as an icy road was a winding, frozen river. And near its bank, the spread of man with its houses and buildings and cars and trucks.

It looked to him like the inside of a snow globe that had yet to be shaken, with everything still and white and waiting.

Something clunked under the floor. "What was that?"

"Landing gear. That's Lunacy."

The plane roared into a descent that had Nate gripping his seat, bracing his feet. "What? We're landing? Where? Where?"

"On the river. Frozen solid this time of year. No worries."

"But—"

"Going in on the skis."

"Skis?" Nate abruptly remembered he hated winter sports. "Wouldn't skates make more sense?"

Jerk let out a wild laugh as the plane zeroed in on the ribbon of ice. “Wouldn’t that be some shit? Skate plane. Hot damn.”

The plane bumped, skidded, slid along with Nate’s belly. Then glided gracefully to a stop. Jerk cut the engines, and in the sudden silence Nate could hear his own heart tattooing in his ears.

“They can’t pay you enough,” Nate managed. “They can’t possibly pay you enough.”

“Hell.” He slapped Nate on the arm. “Ain’t about the pay. Welcome to Lunacy, chief.”

“You’re damn right.”

He decided against kissing the ground. Not only would he look ridiculous, but he’d probably freeze to it. Instead, he swung his weak legs out into the unspeakable cold and prayed they’d hold him up until he could get somewhere warm, still and sane.

His main problem was crossing the ice without breaking his leg, or his neck.

“Don’t worry about your stuff, chief,” Jerk called out. “I’ll haul it for you.”

“Thanks.”

Steadying himself, Nate spotted a figure standing in the snow. It was wrapped in a brown, hooded parka with black fur trim. And smoking in short, impatient puffs. Using it as a guide, Nate picked his way over the ripply ice with as much dignity as he could muster.

“Ignatious Burke.”

The voice was raspy and female, and came to him on a puff of vapor. He slipped, managed to right himself, and with his heart banging against his ribs, made the snowy bank.

“Anastasia Hopp.” She stuck out a mittened hand, somehow gripped his with it and pumped righteously. “Little green around the gills yet. Jerk, you play with our new chief on the way from the city?”

“No, ma’am. Had a little weather though.”

“Always do. Good-looking, aren’t you? Even sickly. Here, have a pull.”

She yanked a silver flask out of her pocket, pushed it at him.

“Ah—”

“Go ahead. You’re not on duty yet. Little brandy’ll settle you down.”

Deciding it couldn’t make things worse, he uncapped the flask, took a slow sip and felt it punch straight to his quivering belly. “Thanks.”

“We’ll get you settled in The Lodge, give you a chance to catch your breath.” She led the way along a tromped-down path. “Show you around town later, when your head’s clear. Long way from Baltimore.”

“Yeah, it is.”

It looked like a movie set to him. The green and white trees, the river, the snow, buildings made of split logs, smoke pumping out of chimneys and pipes. It was all in a dreamy blur that made him realize he was as exhausted as he was sick. He hadn’t been able to sleep on any of the flights and calculated it had been nearly twenty-four hours since he’d last been horizontal.

“Good, clear day,” she said. “Mountains put on a show. Kind of picture brings the tourists in.”

It was postcard perfect, and just a little overwhelming. He felt like he’d walked into that movie—or someone else’s dream.

“Glad to see you geared up good.” She measured him as she spoke. “Lot of Lower 48ers show up in fancy overcoats and show-room boots, and freeze their asses off.”

He’d ordered everything he was wearing, right down to the thermal underwear, along with most of the contents of his suitcase from Eddie Bauer online—after receiving an e-mail list of suggestions from Mayor Hopp. “You were pretty specific about what I’d need.”

She nodded. "Specific, too, about what we need. Don't disappoint me, Ignatious."

"Nate. I don't intend to, Mayor Hopp."

"Just Hopp. That's what they call me."

She stepped up on a long wooden porch. "This is The Lodge. Hotel, bar, diner, social club. You got a room here, part of your salary. You decide you want to live elsewhere, that's on you. Place belongs to Charlene Hidel. She serves a good meal, keeps the place clean. She'll take care of you. She'll also try to get into your pants."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a good-looking man, and Charlene's got a weakness. She's too old for you, but she won't think so. You decide you don't either, that's up to you."

Then she smiled, and he saw that under her hood she had a face ruddy as an apple and shaped the same way. Her eyes were nut brown and lively, her mouth long and thin and quirked at the corners.

"We got us a surplus of men, like most of Alaska. That doesn't mean the local female population won't come sniffing. You're fresh meat and a lot of them are going to want a taste. You do what you please on your free time, Ignatious. Just don't go banging the girls on town time."

"I'll write that down."

Her laugh was like a foghorn—two quick blasts. To punctuate it, she slapped him on the arm. "You might do."

She yanked open the door and led him into blessed warmth.

He smelled wood smoke and coffee, something frying with onions and a woman's come-get-me perfume.

It was a wide room informally sectioned into a diner with two-and four-tops, five booths, and a bar with stools lined up with their red seats worn in the center from years of asses settling down.

There was a wide opening to the right, and through it he could see a pool table and what looked like foosball, and the starry lights of a jukebox.

On the right, another opening showed what looked like a lobby. He saw a section of counter, and cubbyholes filled with keys, a few envelopes or message sheets.

A log fire burned briskly, and the front windows were angled to catch the spectacular mountain view.

There was one enormously pregnant waitress with her hair done in a long, glossy black braid. Her face was so arresting, so serenely beautiful, he actually blinked. She looked to him like the Native Alaskan version of the Madonna with her soft, dark eyes and golden skin.

She was topping off coffee for two men in a booth. A boy of about four sat at a table coloring in a book. A man in a tweed jacket sat at the bar, smoking, and reading a tattered copy of *Ulysses*.

At a far table a man with a brown beard that spilled onto the chest of his faded buffalo-check flannel shirt appeared to be holding an angry conversation with himself.

Heads turned in their direction, and greetings were called out to Hopp as she tossed her hood back to reveal a springy mop of silver hair. Gazes locked onto Nate that ranged from curiosity and speculation to open hostility from the beard.

“This here’s Ignatious Burke, our new chief of police.” Hopp announced this as she yanked down the zipper of her parka. “We got Dex Trilby and Hans Finkle there in the booth, and that’s Bing Karlovski over there with the scowl on what you can see of his face. Rose Itu is waiting tables. How’s that baby today, Rose?”

“Restless. Welcome, Chief Burke.”

“Thanks.”

“This is The Professor.” Hopp tapped Tweed Jacket on the

shoulder as she crossed to the bar. “Anything different in that book since the last time you read it?”

“Always something.” He tipped down a pair of metal-framed reading glasses to get a better view of Nate. “Long trip.”

“It was,” Nate agreed.

“Not over yet.” Shoving his glasses back into place, The Professor went back to his book.

“And this handsome devil is Jesse, Rose’s boy.”

The boy kept his head bent over his coloring book, but lifted his gaze so his big, dark eyes peered out under a thick fringe of black bangs. He reached out, tugged Hopp’s parka so that she bent down to hear his whisper.

“Don’t you worry. We’ll get him one.”

The door behind the bar swung open and a big, black truck in a big, white apron came out. “Big Mike,” Hopp announced. “He’s the cook. Was a Navy man until one of our local girls caught his eye when she was down in Kodiak.”

“Snared me like a trout,” Big Mike said with a grin. “Welcome to Lunacy.”

“Thanks.”

“We’re going to want something good and hot for our new chief of police.”

“Fish chowder’s good today,” Big Mike told her. “Ought to do the trick. Unless you’d rather bite into some red meat, chief.”

It took Nate a moment to identify himself as *chief*. A moment when he felt every eye in the room focused on him. “Chowder’s fine. Sounds good.”

“We’ll have it right up for you then.” He swung back into the kitchen, and Nate could hear his bone-deep baritone croon out on “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.”

Stage set, postcard, he thought. Or a play. Anyway you sliced it, he felt like some sort of dusty prop.

Hopp held up a finger to hold Nate in place before marching into the lobby. He watched her scoot around the counter and snag a key from one of the cubbies.

As she did, the door behind the counter swung open. And the bombshell walked out.

She was blonde—as Nate thought suited bombshells best—with the wavy mass of sunlight hair spilling down to brush very impressive breasts that were showcased by the low scoop of her snug, blue sweater. It took him a minute to get to the face as the sweater was tucked into jeans so tight they must have bruised several internal organs.

Not that he was complaining.

The face boasted bright blue eyes with an innocence in direct contrast with the plump, red lips. She was a little generous on the paint, and put him in mind of a Barbie doll.

Man-killer Barbie.

Despite the restriction of the outfit, everything that could jiggle did so as she strolled around the counter on skinny, backless heels, wiggled her way into the diner. And posed languidly against the bar.

“Well, hello, handsome.”

Her voice was a throaty purr—she must’ve practiced it—designed to drain the blood out of a man’s head and send his IQ plummeting to that of a green turnip.

“Charlene, you behave.” Hopp rattled the key. “This boy’s tired and half sick. He doesn’t have the reserves to deal with you right now. Chief Burke, Charlene Hidel. This is her place. Town budget’s paying your room and board here as part of your pay, so don’t feel obliged to offer anything out in trade.”

“Hopp, you’re so *bad*.” But Charlene smiled like a stroked kitten as she said it. “Why don’t I just take you up, Chief Burke, get you all settled in? Then we’ll bring you something hot to eat.”

“I’ll take him up.” Deliberately Hopp closed her fist around the key, letting the big black room number tag dangle. “Jerk’s bringing in his gear. Wouldn’t hurt to have Rose bring him the chowder Mike’s dishing up for him though. Come on, Ignatious. You can socialize when you’re not so ready to drop.”

He could’ve spoken for himself, but he didn’t see the point. He followed Hopp through a doorway and up a flight of steps as obediently as a puppy follows its master.

He heard someone mutter, “Cheechako,” in the tone a man uses to spit out bad meat. He assumed it was an insult, but let it go.

“Charlene doesn’t mean any harm,” Hopp was saying. “But she does like to tease a man to death given half a chance.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mom.”

She gave that foghorn laugh again, and slid the key into the lock on room 203.

“Man took off on her about fifteen years back, left her with a girl to raise on her own. Did a decent enough job with Meg, though they’re at each other like she-cats half the time. Had plenty of men since, and they get younger every year. I said she was too old for you before.” Hopp looked over her shoulder. “Fact is, the way she’s been going, you’re too old for her. Thirty-two, aren’t you?”

“I was when I left Baltimore. How many years ago was that?”

Hopp shook her head, pushed open the door. “Charlene’s got better than a dozen years on you. Got a grown daughter nearly your age. Might want to keep that in mind.”

“I thought you women got off when one of your kind bags a younger man.”

“Shows what you know about females. Pisses us off is what it does, because we didn’t bag him first. Well, this is it.”

He stepped into a wood-paneled room with an iron bed, a

dresser and mirror on one side, and a small round table, two chairs and a little desk on the other.

It was clean, it was spare and about as interesting as a bag of white rice.

“Little kitchen through here.” Hopp walked over, yanked back a blue curtain to reveal a pint-sized refrigerator, a two-burner stove and a sink the size of Nate’s cupped palm. “Unless cooking’s your passion or hobby, I’d take my meals downstairs. Food’s good here.

“It’s not the Ritz, and she’s got fancier rooms, but we’re on a budget.” She crossed to the other side, pushed open a door. “Bathroom. This one has indoor plumbing.”

“Woo-hoo.” He poked his head in.

The sink was bigger than the kitchen’s but not by much. It didn’t rate a tub, but the shower stall would do him well enough.

“Got your gear, chief.” Jerk hauled in two suitcases and a duffel as if they were empty. He dumped them on the bed where their weight sagged the mattress. “Need me for anything, I’ll be downstairs grabbing a meal. I’ll bunk here tonight, fly back to Talkeetna in the morning.”

He tapped a finger on his forehead in salute and clomped out again.

“Shit. Hold on.” Nate started to dig into his pocket.

“I’ll take care of tipping him,” Hopp said. “Till you’re on the clock, you’re a guest of the Lunacy town council.”

“Appreciate it.”

“I plan to see you work for it, so we’ll see how it goes.”

“Room service!” Charlene sang it when she carried a tray into the room. Her hips swayed like a metronome as she walked over to set it on the table. “Brought you up some nice fish chowder, chief, and a good man-sized sandwich. Coffee’s hot.”

“Smells great. I appreciate it, Ms. Hidel.”

“Oh now, that’s Charlene to you.” She batted the baby blues,

and yeah, Nate thought, she practiced. “We’re just one big happy family around here.”

“That were the case, we wouldn’t need a chief of police.”

“Oh, don’t go scaring him off, Hopp. Is the room all right for you, Ignatious?”

“Nate. Yes, thanks. It’s fine.”

“Put some food in your belly and get some rest,” Hopp advised. “You get your second wind, just give me a call. I’ll show you around. Your first official duty will be attending the meeting tomorrow afternoon at Town Hall, where we’ll introduce you to everybody who cares to attend. You’ll want to see the station house before that, meet your two deputies and Peach. And we’ll get you that star.”

“Star?”

“Jesse wanted to make sure you were getting a star. Come on, Charlene. Let’s leave the man alone.”

“You call downstairs you need any little thing.” Charlene sent him an invitational smile. “*Any* little thing.”

Behind Charlene’s back, Hopp rolled her eyes toward heaven. To settle the matter, she clamped a hand on Charlene’s arm, yanked her toward the door. There was a clatter of heels on wood, a feminine squeak, then the slam of the door behind them.

Through it, Nate could hear Charlene’s hushed and insulted: “What’s the *matter* with you, Hopp. I was only being friendly.”

“There’s innkeeper friendly, then there’s bordello friendly. One of these days, you’re going to figure out the difference.”

He waited until he was sure they were gone before he crossed over to flip the locks. Then he pulled off his parka, let it fall to the floor, dragged off his watch cap, dropped it. Unwound his scarf, dropped that. Unzipped his insulated vest and added it to the heap.

Down to shirt, pants, thermal underwear and boots, he went to

the table, picked up the soup, a spoon, and carried both to the dark windows.

Three-thirty in the afternoon, according to the bedside clock—and dark as midnight. There were streetlights glowing, he noted as he spooned up soup, and he could make out the shapes of buildings. Christmas decorations in colored lights, in rooftop Santas and cartoon reindeers.

But no people, no life, no movement.

He ate mechanically, too tired, too hungry to notice the taste.

There was nothing out that window but the movie set, he thought. The buildings might have been false fronts, the handful of people he'd met downstairs just characters in the illusion.

Maybe this was all some elaborate hallucination, born out of depression, grief, anger—whatever ugly mix had sent him pin-wheeling into the void.

He'd wake up back in his own place in Baltimore and try to drum up the energy to go through the motions for another day.

He got the sandwich, ate that standing at the window as well, looking out at the empty black-and-white world with its oddly celebrational lights.

Maybe he'd walk out there, into that empty world. He'd become a character in the odd illusion. Then he'd fade to black, like the last reel of an old movie. And it would be over.

As he stood, half thinking it could be over, half wishing it would be, a figure stepped into frame. It wore red—bright and bold—that seemed to leap out of that colorless scene and thrum movement into it.

Those movements were definite and brisk. Life with a mission, movement with purpose. Quick, competent strides over the white that left the shadow of footprints in the snow.

I was here. I'm alive and I was here.

He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, or a child, but there

was something about the slash of color, the confidence of the gait, that caught his eye and interest.

As if sensing observation, the figure stopped, looked up.

Nate had the impression of white and black again. White face, black hair. But even that was blurred with the dark and the distance.

There was a long moment of stillness, of silence. Then the figure began to walk again, striding toward The Lodge, and disappearing from view.

Nate yanked the drapes over the glass, stepped away from the window.

After a moment's debate, he dragged his cases off the bed, left them dumped, unpacked, on the floor. He stripped down, ignored the chill of the room against his naked skin, and crawled under the mountain of blankets the way a bear crawls into his winter cave.

He lay there, a man of thirty-two with a thick, disordered mass of chestnut hair that waved around a long, thin face gone lax with exhaustion and a despair that blurred eyes of smoky gray. Under a day's worth of stubble, his skin was pale with the drag of fatigue. Though the food had eased the rawness in his belly, his system remained sluggish, like that of a man who couldn't quite shake off a debilitating flu.

He wished Barbie—Charlene—had brought up a bottle instead of the coffee. He wasn't much of a drinker, which he figured is what had saved him from spiraling into alcoholism along with everything else. Still, a couple of good belts would help turn off his brain and let him sleep.

He could hear the wind now. It hadn't been there before, but it was moaning at the windows. With it, he heard the building creak and the sound of his own breathing.

Three lonely sounds only more lonely as a trio.

Tune them out, he told himself. Tune them all out.

He'd get a couple hours' sleep, he thought. Then he'd shower off the travel grime, pump himself full of coffee.

After that, he'd decide what the hell he was going to do.

He turned off the light so the room plunged into the dark. Within seconds, so did he.