

FROM THE FILES OF

Gray  #7
Gaynes

A NEW HORIZON...

GRAY DAWN

THE CASE OF THE
FOOLPROOF
FRATRICIDE

A NOVELLA BY
RLAKERS



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THE AUTHOR HAS RATED THIS NARRATIVE

RL-13

INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 13

For the real-time portrayal of a brutal murder by firearm, the descriptive mutilation and dismemberment of a human body, discussion of illegal narcotics, and some profanity.

For John Paul,
who always showed such interest
in whatever project I was working on

Pronunciation Guide

Iñupiaq – in-YOO-pee-awk
(*pl.* Iñupiat – in-YOO-pee-awt)
— an Alaskan Inuit

Utqiagvik – oot-kee-AWG-vik
— largest Iñupiaq village and borough seat,
known as Barrow until 2016,
northernmost settlement in the United States

Nuiqsut – NOO-EEK-suht
— smaller Iñupiaq village,
150 miles southeast of Utqiagvik

tunnuq – TUHN-uhk
— Iñupiaq word for a non-Iñupiaq

Thursday, December 7th

U-Turn, Alaska



The aurora borealis glinted colorlessly off the windshields of the parked work trucks, the Northern Lights somehow magnificent even when reduced to gray tones.

Grayson Gaynes, TrepOil roughneck ‘fifth hand,’ hiked up one leg of his heavy coverall pants and kicked his boot heel against a truck tire—dislodging the stubborn clod of permafrost muck that impeded his gait. Straightening once more, he glanced both ways before crossing the street.

He wasn’t checking for traffic. He was checking for bears, which were known to roam freely through this semi-permanent oil field work camp known as U-Turn. It was a hell of a thing, seeing a grizzly or polar bear covered with trash as it rummaged through a dumpster. But there were no bears in sight this time, so Gray continued on his way, trudging across the frozen-dirt road. He wasn’t the only *human* out and about, but no one loitered long in these temperatures, even at the most active times of the day.

10 • GRAY DAWN

Aside from the light show above—and the occasional bear—there was little exciting about U-Turn, Alaska. A couple dozen modular buildings: offices, dorms, and cafeterias suspended above gravel pads. A fleet of diesel crew-cab work trucks plugged in and heated even when not in use, lest their batteries die or their oil freeze to gel. And, of course, this single dirt track road running through camp. No, not *through* camp; there was a reason they called this place U-Turn. When the rare commercial freight hauler arrived overland from the outside world, it had no option but to turn around to get back out again—retracing TrepheOil's spur road to the long, winter-only access trail that connected Utqiagvik with Prudhoe Bay.

In short, this place was the opposite of New York City, where Gray once lived and worked as a homicide detective. For that reason alone, he loved it. That and the fact that his day blindness was a non-issue during the months-long darkness of winter above the Arctic Circle. U-Turn had seen its last sunset of the year two weeks prior; and though there were still a few hours of murky twilight around noon each day, the sun itself wouldn't reappear until late January (and even then, for less than an hour).

The only building in U-Turn that wasn't dirty or pre-fabricated—in other words, the only cheerful destination for fifty miles—was Dawn's place. A simple clapboard structure on stilts, it was painted bright yellow (or so he'd been told) with a big fiery

sunrise depicted in red on one windowless wall. And though it was the closest thing U-Turn had to a restaurant, it didn't officially have a name. It was simply the place where a woman named Dawn offered modestly priced home-cooked meals and a taste of normality between shifts—something many of the oil field workers longed for.

Including Gray himself. Grateful at the prospect of warmth, for body *and* soul, he shuffled up the ramp and eagerly rubbed his boots on the block at the door, scraping off more of the ubiquitous mud and dust. That done, he pulled fabric booties over his shoes and stepped inside, closing the door quickly behind him. Removing the filthy boots entirely was not an option, not if he wanted to keep his toes.

“Gray!” called an upbeat voice. “Come in, take a load off. Your favorite table is open.”

Unzipping his parka and pulling the fleece trapper hat from his head, Gray surveyed the crowd and quickly picked out the speaker. Despite his face blindness—his inability to identify friends or acquaintances on sight, something most people managed intuitively—Gray actually *did* recognize *this* woman. Not her face so much as the tattoos inked upon it: a V-shape pattern emerging from her hairline to point at her nose; arcs crossing both cheeks; and five thin vertical stripes drawn from lower lip over her chin.

Dawn Atiqtalik Simmonds was Iñupiaq, a member of the Alaskan Inuit people. And if her

unique facial markings weren't a dead giveaway of her identity, her broad smile might be all by itself.

Gray smiled genuinely in return. "Dawn, good morning. Colder than usual today, I think."

She gave a generous chuckle, though she heard weak jests about the cold and dark almost constantly from tunnuq—non-Iñupiat men like Gray. "Ready for some dinner?"

"Please!" Gray said enthusiastically.

She waved him to his preferred corner booth, where he pulled a well-worn paperback from one pocket before tossing parka and hat onto the opposite seat. Then he settled into his own high-backed bench and groaned, taking that load off as Dawn suggested.

It had been a long shift—they all were—working through the night from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. It was Gray's third season on the oil fields of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, or NPR-A. He'd started as a roustabout, doing unskilled labor and whatever odd jobs were needed, only this winter being promoted to roughneck or 'fifth hand.' Maybe he could have earned that promotion faster, but the fact was he liked the variety of work and relative lack of responsibility that came with an unskilled position. And when added to his NYPD pension, the pay was more than adequate.

But the work *was* hard, physically taxing even if not for the extreme conditions. A hot meal at Dawn's was his daily reward, and tonight that meal

was a hearty plate of meat and potatoes, the reindeer flank steak slathered in a savory sauce. He read from *David Copperfield* as he ate, trying not to spatter the ratty pages with too much gravy.

Dickens' semi-autobiography had become one of Gray's favorites, for he identified with its hero in so many ways, not least the tragic death of his wife so early in their marriage. Gray could only hope he emerged from his own challenges with half the positive attitude of Copperfield. He was certainly trying.

This existence on Alaska's North Slope was hard, but it was also a simple, honest life. More than seven years had passed since Gray Gaynes last investigated a homicide, and longer since his own wife was brutally murdered. He would trade that emotional toll for physical toil any day. Transplanting here, he had finally experienced some healing.

All too soon, his meal was done, and he waved off Dawn's offer of a second plate. He was already suitably drowsy. Carefully marking the place in his book, he sat back, content to people-watch.

The place was about three-fourths full 'tonight,' maybe twenty-five customers—all oil field workers like Gray, of course. A fair number sat at other mismatched tables that ringed the perimeter, but only because every barstool was occupied. That bar was Dawn's true pride and joy, an actual, lacquered, live-edge wooden surface that ran the length of the building. Not that Dawn served any booze here. In

14 • GRAY DAWN

deference to local dry laws—and for practical reasons—alcohol was prohibited in U-Turn. The workers who frequented this place before or after their shifts were here for the food, whatever rich meals Dawn chose to prepare (one breakfast option and one dinner option each day; there was no menu). The fact that Dawn offered a variety of glass-bottled soda pops and non-alcoholic beers, even a few mocktails, was simply a bonus.

Dawn's place *was*, to be frank, a dive. Poorly lit and with no windows, its dinginess was enlivened year-round by strands of Christmas lights—the old school chunky bulb variety, not LEDs. A jukebox played 80s and 90s rock lightly in one corner. And somehow, between those simple touches and that beautiful wooden bar, the place became homey and warm. Certainly, the atmosphere beat the hell out of the sterile, fluorescent-lit cafeterias the company employees ate at most of the time. And almost all of Dawn's regulars loved her for it.

Gray picked out the problem customer almost immediately. Booze or no, he was acting the part of the drunk, obviously accustomed to using that lack of inhibition as an excuse to behave poorly. With Gray's condition, there was no way to know if he'd actually met the guy before, but he rather doubted it. Probably a roustabout, one of this season's new hires. The man was talking loudly, shoulder-bumping his barstool neighbors in an overly friendly—and unrequited—manner, and banging his glass for a refill.

Ignoring his antics, Dawn made her rounds of the tables with a tea pitcher in each hand, sweet and unsweet. Topping off Gray's glass (unsweet, of course), she asked, "How's your dad? Still down in Anchorage?"

Gray shook his head in wonder. There were three hundred workers operating out of U-Turn at any given time, alternating in two-week 'hitches' with another group of three hundred on break down south. Sure, not all of them came through Dawn's place, but the woman clearly had a gift if she could remember a personal tidbit Gray had shared just once, last season. "Old Gray's doing well, thank you," he confirmed with a smile. "We share a house in Eagle River"—a suburb of Anchorage—"where he does a lot of reading, sipping his tea, going out to eat. Retirement... suits him," Gray concluded diplomatically.

"Like father, like son," Dawn smiled, indicating Gray's own book and tea glass.

"Ha," Gray snorted. "No, always hot tea in his case."

"Earl *Grey*, I assume?" There was a sparkle in her eye.

Gray laughed delightedly. "Probably. He can be a bit pretentious. Dresses to impress, even if he never plans to leave the house."

Behind Dawn, the problem customer had begun banging his glass more insistently. With a

mischievous smile, the young Iñupiaq woman pointedly ignored the fellow. “Sounds like Old Gray is a character.”

“You have no idea. What about you? Do you have family?”

“No,” Dawn said promptly, then hesitated. “Well, not really. Parents are passed, and...” She looked a little guilty and shrugged, not elaborating further. With a sigh, she finally turned back to the bar. “Anyway, let me know if you need anything.”

The impatient bombast, whose stool was near the end of the bar closest to Gray, was now out of his seat. He seized Dawn’s arm as she tried to pass, causing her to slosh a fair volume of tea onto the floor. “What’s a man gotta do to get some service around here?” he very nearly slurred.

Dawn smirked. “I don’t know. Being more polite might be a good start.” This drew snickers from some of the other men. Gray himself watched the confrontation carefully, though he knew Dawn didn’t need rescue.

The man was unamused. “I want another beer. Now.”

“I think you’ve had one too many O’Doul’s already,” Dawn told him drily. “I’m cutting you off.”

The idiot’s expression turned ugly, but then he hesitated, noticing something for the first time. “That’s an awfully big gun for a little lady,” he actually said.

Ah yes, the revolver holstered securely at Dawn's hip. Alaska was an open carry state, no permit or registration required. Gray himself didn't carry anymore, not since that business in the Catskills seven-plus years ago, and oil field workers weren't allowed to do so anyway. But almost all of the locals seemed to.

In Dawn's case, that weapon appeared to be a Ruger Super Redhawk, a popular choice on the North Slope. Probably chambered with .44 Magnum 240 grain, specifically designed to stop a bear. An awfully big gun indeed.

"You compensating for something?" the idiot roustabout wanted to know.

Tea pitcher still gripped in each hand, one arm immobilized by the lout, Dawn actually threw back her head and laughed genuinely. "Of course I'm compensating. Aside from the bears, I'm one of... what, twenty women in this camp? I won't win an arm wrestling match against any of you men, so yeah; I kinda like the idea of carrying a weapon that can take a fellow's head clean off if needed." She inclined her chin and smiled sweetly. "But that's not needed *today*, is it?"

The man looked like he might disagree, but then he felt a hand on one shoulder—someone intervening. Dawn wouldn't like that. She really didn't need rescuing, and it might encourage future troublemakers if they thought she did. Regardless, the roustabout

turned with a sneer... and froze. “Oh, um, Mr. Thrasher.”

Gray straightened. Thrasher? That was the company man, the top-ranking official for Treadgold-Phelps Oil in the North Slope, and what passed for mayor of U-Turn. Of course Gray couldn't recognize him, but everyone else would.

“Release Ms. Simmonds and apologize,” Thrasher said quietly.

The bully quickly did so. “Uh, sorry, Dawn. I was just thirsty, you know?”

“I completely understand,” she replied with half a smile. “Just use your manners next time, okay?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Another O'Doul's for you then?”

The fellow blinked in surprise. “Uh, yeah, that'd be great.”

“Coming right up. As soon as you clean up this mess you made.” Now Dawn was smiling fully. “Let me get you a mop.” And only then did she casually retreat behind the bar, like nothing significant had happened. And truth to tell, nothing really had. These kinds of encounters weren't that unusual considering the rough-edged, predominantly male population of a work camp like this. Refusing to be intimidated, Dawn had a way of turning bullies into allies with her smile and wit.

She returned with a mop and bucket moments later, to find Thrasher still waiting... along with another man Gray hadn't noticed until right then.

This other man wore a police uniform.

Dawn eyed the cop, the sole representative of the NSBPD—the North Slope Borough Police Department—here in U-Turn. “Abe,” she greeted him warily.

“Dawn,” he responded simply, his expression unreadable.

“Sorry about this,” Thrasher interjected, gesturing to the roustabout who was now mopping the floor with unpracticed motions. “I’ll make a notation in his file—”

Dawn waved a dismissive hand. “Please don’t. It’s really nothing.” She jerked her head back toward the cop. “What’s going on? Abe here has the look of a man ready to be ill.”

Abraham Kanayurak had no tattoos, though Gray knew he was Iñupiaq too. And he did indeed have a sick look about him, which Gray recognized all too well from his own years with the NYPD.

Hesitating, solicitous, Abe produced a manila envelope and pulled out a glossy 8x10 photo. “Does this look familiar?” he asked Dawn simply.

She glanced at the photo briefly, then scowled. “Sure. That’s David’s wristwatch.”

The cop traded a look with Thrasher.

“What?” Dawn demanded. “Did someone finally rob it from him or something?” Her usually friendly face was uncharacteristically sour.

“No,” Abe allowed, “at least, we don’t think so. The watch was found. We wanted to make sure it was David’s.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Dawn confirmed without bothering to look at the photo again.

“And when was the last time you spoke with your brother?”

Dawn’s eyes slid toward Gray, looking guilty. She was thinking how she’d dodged his question earlier, about family. Obviously Dawn’s relationship with her brother was complicated.

Gray was more interested in Abe Kanayurak’s behavior. The police officer was obviously here investigating, and not as part of any mere stolen property case. The man was tense. He had bad news to deliver, and little experience doing so. But why was he doing this *now*, so late at night?

Because he wasn’t, Gray immediately reminded himself. Objectively speaking, it was morning right now—about 8:15 a.m., judging from the neon-trimmed analog clock on Dawn’s wall. It only felt like evening because Gray was coming off night shift, which was easy to forget since the sun never made an appearance anyway. Dawn’s own work shift was even more complicated, serving breakfast from 4 to 6 a.m. *and* 4 to 6 p.m. (before each of the 12-hour shifts)

and pivoting to dinner from 6 to 9 a.m. and 6 to 9 p.m. (to accommodate workers coming *off* those shifts). But for anyone on a normal schedule—like Thrasher and Abe—the workday was only just beginning.

“The last time I talked with David?” Dawn repeated, pausing to think. “Months ago. September, before he motored south for the winter.”

Abe nodded, scribbling a note in a small spiralbound notebook. “Aboard the *Bowhead*?”

Somehow her scowl deepened. “Exactly. Have you ever met David? You at least know who he is, right? That marine biologist everyone always complains about—driving that flashy big boat around, the kind that doesn’t belong up here?”

“Uh huh,” Abe said noncommittally. “And September was the last time you spoke with him?”

“Yeah.” Dawn glanced back and forth between Abe and Thrasher. “Why? What’s this all about? And what’s it got to do with David’s wristwatch?”

“Well, we—that is to say, the NSBPD—don’t think your brother ever did motor south.” Abe opened his mouth to say more, and for a moment, nothing came out.

Here it was. Dawn sensed it too, and her face began clouding.

“See, that watch...” Abe said, taking a different tack. “Someone shot a problem bear outside Nuiqsut earlier this week. It was hassling the locals, you see, attacked a child.” He was rambling, not wanting to

get to the point. “Anyway, we did a necropsy—like an autopsy, but on an animal, you know?—and, um...” He spit out the rest in a rush. “And we found your brother’s watch in its gullet, along with human remains.”

Dawn reeled—actually, physically staggering until Thrasher caught and steadied her.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Dawn,” Abe said genuinely. “But we think your brother is dead.”

V

Gray did not rest well that night. Tossing and turning, he kept reliving the most difficult next-of-kin notifications he himself had delivered during his career as a homicide detective. Worse yet, his subconscious invoked the nightmare of waking in that hospital room eight years ago, when he learned about his own wife's murder for the first time.

Finally giving up around 3:30 p.m.—yes, that same calendar day, but really a new day from his perspective—Gray sat up and turned the light on. His depressingly tiny but blessedly private dorm room swam into view, little more than a twin size bed, desk/chair combo, and narrow closet. Rubbing his eyes, he grabbed some clothes and a towel, then stepped into the hall. Unfortunately, the bathrooms were *not* private, but at this hour he wouldn't need to fight over hot water, at least. Gray didn't bother locking his room; no one here did.

By 4, he was feeling slightly more human. Since he had more time than usual this 'morning,' he bypassed his usual coffee and breakfast at the company-owned dining hall (only stopping briefly to pack his lunch), intending to check on Dawn instead.

He didn't typically start his day at Dawn's place, and honestly, he had little in the way of a personal relationship with the woman. But after last night... well, he felt a deep sense of empathy for her. Having been told of her brother's untimely death, she had pushed her way out of the establishment, leaving it to her part-time helper Ephron to close up shop. Neither Abe Kanayurak nor any of the TrephOil employees had chased after her, and Gray certainly hadn't. Sometime in the night, however, he had resolved to speak with her. Gray had some rare perspective on what she was going through, and Dawn should know he was available as a listening ear.

But when Gray arrived at Dawn's, he found the door locked, a simple handwritten note stapled to the building's wood paneling:

Gone to Nuiqsut
Back in a few days

Gray couldn't help but smile at the sign. As a general (unspoken) rule, Dawn's place was open every day of the week from November through April—the winter drilling season—but she *did* sometimes take days off. When that happened, typically with no advance warning, she simply posted one of these signs the day of. Though Dawn had some part-time help running her little establishment, it wasn't enough to keep the doors open when she herself was gone.

As for traveling to Nuiqsut, that made sense. It was the closest permanent settlement, roughly fifty or sixty miles east as the snowmobile trekked. Not only was it where that problem bear was shot—and David Simmonds’ watch found—it was also, if Gray recalled, where Dawn grew up. (Her brother too, presumably.) And if David was unmarried, that made Dawn his closest surviving relative. It would fall to her to identify the man’s remains, assuming there was enough to identify, and collect his watch and other belongings. Gray wasn’t familiar with Iñupiat funerary customs, but he imagined responsibility for planning the disposition of those remains would fall to her too.

Saddened on behalf of the young Iñupiaq proprietor, Gray went about his day.

He met his crew on the shuttle bus at the usual place, navigating the mass of workers boarding multiple vehicles headed for different drilling sites. Settling into his usual seat, he smiled at the punchline to one of the usual jokes. They were only a couple days into their two-week hitch at this point, so spirits were still high. Gray knew from experience that guys would start getting snippy or incommunicative as the exhaustion of 12-hour workdays compounded, so humor was important—and Motormouth Miller was only too happy to meet this basic human need.

“So a man walks into a bar in New York City,” Miller said loudly, starting yet another witty yarn as everyone awaited the bus’s departure. “Don’t ask me

the guy's name or what he was drinking, but—oh, hey, Gaynes. I didn't see you there.”

“Miller,” Gray acknowledged, not buying it.

“Say, *you're* from New York City, yeah?”

“You know that I am.” It was pretty much *all* the crew knew of his past, certainly not that he was a widower and retired cop.

“So tell me, what's the guy's name?” Miller asked. “This man who walks into a bar in New York City?”

Gray chuckled. “Let's go with... Mack.”

“And what's Mack drinking?”

“A pint of Sam Adams, definitely.”

Miller's nose scrunched a little at this, but he rolled with it, turning back to the bus at large. “So a guy named Mack walks into a bar in New York City, and he orders three pints of Sam Adams. *Three* pints, mind you, all at once. Drinks all three, one after another. This goes on for a few weeks, whenever Mack goes to that bar, always three pints.

“Finally, the bartender asks him: ‘Why always three pints, all at once?’ And Mack says, ‘Oh, I have these two buddies. My pal Gaynes is working the oil fields in Alaska, and my other buddy—’” Miller stopped, glancing at Gray.

“Uh... Bobbi,” Gray provided.

“‘And my other buddy Bobby up and joined the navy.’”

“Not likely,” Gray laughed. “Not really her thing.”

“Shut up, Gaynes. So where was I? Oh right, Mack says, ‘My buddy Gaynes is on the slope and my buddy Bobby’s on a boat, and neither one of them’s allowed to partake of fermented beverages.’” The assembled oil field workers laughed a little. No one loved being told they couldn’t drink in their downtime here, but it was what it was. “‘So,’ Mack tells this bartender, ‘I promised I would do their drinking for them, for as long as they were gone.’ This makes perfect sense to the bartender, so he stops asking questions.

“Then one day, Mack comes in and orders only *two* pints. And from then on, it was only two. Concerned, the bartender eventually asks him, ‘Is everything okay with your buddies? Something didn’t happen to Gaynes, did it? I’ve heard life on an oil field is dangerous.’”

The men in the shuttle bus guffawed at this, though this whole story was a familiar setup.

“‘Nah, Gaynes is just fine,’ Mack replies. ‘A bit weird, wastes his time reading books by dudes hundreds of years dead, but in good enough health. And Bobby is okay too, so far as I know.’” Miller winked, and Gray gave the ghost of a smile. “‘Then why only two beers?’ the bartender asks.” Miller fell silent, glancing around at the expectant faces of the other oil field workers. “Well?” he demanded finally. “What did Mack say to the bartender?”

“I told my wife I’d stop drinking!” the workers chimed in, delivering the well-known punchline in near-unison. Then everyone laughed, especially a few of the newer roustabouts, who’d obviously never heard that one before. It was really for their benefit that Miller retold it, after all.

“Hey Rourke, where are *you* from?” Miller asked one of the new guys.

“Quincy, Florida!”

“Oh. I was gonna say, next time, that’s where the man walks into a bar, but... do they even have bars in Quincy?”

“About as many as U-Turn!”

More laughter. Motormouth Miller kept up a steady stream of bawdy jokes and edgy stories as the bus finally got underway, easing down the dirt road and out of camp. Some of it was reused material (“What did the hole in the ground say to the oil rig?—I’m bored!”), and that was fine. A lot of roustabouts only lasted one season on the slope, so every winter saw fresh faces. But plenty of Miller’s routine was original too. Gray honestly didn’t know where the man got new material, day-in and day-out. He probably spent an hour scouring the Internet every night before shuteye.

Soon U-Turn was in the bus’s rearview mirror, and they began the slow, 10-mile journey to their rig—which would require half an hour at the speed they were forced to drive on the packed-down snow

road. Gray's eyes traced the miles of above-ground transmission pipelines for a while, then stared off across the almost-flat tundra, which faded quickly in the gloomy distance. It was crazy to think that during the summer, much of this terrain was actually crisscrossed by narrow waterways, making shallow-drafted boats the best way to get around. Then every winter, when the water froze over entirely—as far out as fifty miles from shore!—massive snowcats spent weeks recreating these snow roads from scratch.

They passed a few of TrepheOil's other drilling sites on the way, some retired, others in full operation: clusters of industrial structures and still more modulars, clumped around derricks, all of it bathed by bright spotlights. The active sites were made obvious by the presence of gated checkpoints manned by company security personnel. Locals and even tourists or journalists (rare though they were) were not permitted to enter, for safety reasons.

When the bus finally passed through security at their own site, Toolpusher Tim got the crew started on today's assignments. Yes, that was actually his name, and that was actually what an oil rig's senior on-site supervisor was called. There was also the driller and his assistant running around giving orders, and the derrickman who climbed up in the superstructure to manage the mud-driller. The mud logger, the machinist, the wireman, even an EMT just in case—a guy named Cedrick that Gray rather liked. Company man Thrasher made an appearance most shifts, though

he oversaw *all* of TrepheOil's wellsites on this field, so he seldom stayed long. And of course there was Motormouth Miller, so-named in part because he *was* the crew's 'motorman'—the specialist in charge of maintaining all the rig's pumps and engines. The rig itself was sardonically known as Ole Orful.

As for Gray, he was down near the bottom of the pecking order. He and the other roughnecks worked on the rig's drill floor, one of the most dangerous places to be, with equipment and pipes and chains constantly swinging around. Constant vigilance was critical to maintaining safety, though Miller still found opportunities to play a prank now and then. His antics were never truly dangerous, and in their own way, they actually kept the men alert. Last and not least among all the workers were the roustabouts, the unskilled laborers who did whatever cleaning or run-and-fetch tasks anyone asked of them.

The cold was the biggest danger. That night shift, it got down to the negative twenties—and with steady 10 mph flurries from the northeast, windchill was below -40° Fahrenheit. As gentle breezes went, it was brutal... and the workers were subjected to all of it, only partially sheltered from the elements by surrounding buildings. Their best protection was multiple layers of clothing, every inch of flesh kept covered, faces too. Gray even wore multiple pairs of gloves, though he had to keep changing the innermost pair whenever his own sweat started freezing to his

hands. He tried to forget that temps were only going to drop further as the season progressed.

Fortunately, the constant strenuous labor also helped keep his body warm—or at least less dangerously cold. And whenever there was a momentary lull in work, he and others would drop and do pushups. Actual breaks were brief and taken inside, because his body's fluids needed to be replenished, and a cup of water would freeze instantly outside. Whenever they did retreat indoors, the men scarfed down granola bars and other snacks to keep their energy up. Lunch was whatever calorie-rich fare they had packed at the cafeteria that morning; in Gray's case, a thick roast beef wrap, two bananas, and a bag of large nuts—foods he could handle with numb fingers. He washed it all down with a thermos of strong tea. By this point in the shift, just past midnight, he needed the caffeine.

After lunch—a mere half hour break—Toolpusher Tim barked an order, and everyone filed back out. Miller cracked another joke on the way, and the crew laughed... but the sound was muffled by all those layers of gaiters and balaclavas they wore beneath their impact-resistant face shields.


By 6 a.m. quitting time, Gray's body was complaining it had reached its limit. And yet he knew he'd be wise to spend some time at the company gym facilities before bed, working muscle groups that *hadn't* been used today. He didn't want to think about

32 • GRAY DAWN

that right now, though. First he was jonesing for a hot meal and some down time.

Back at U-Turn almost an hour later, Gray climbed off the bus and began his daily trudge toward Dawn's place. A couple other men turned the same direction, though most headed for one of the company-owned dining halls (unlike at Dawn's, meals there were actually free to employees), and a few guys raced to the dorm to fight over the shower. Unwinding at Dawn's was the only option for Gray, though, an almost nightly ritual since arriving in the North Slope two years ago. That habit was so thoroughly ingrained, and he was so mentally exhausted, that he completely forgot Dawn's place was closed until he got there and saw the handwritten sign again.

One of the two men with him cursed. It wasn't fifty yards back to their dorm from here, but it still felt like a monumental waste of effort given the day they'd had. The third man, scowling openly, dug a sharpie from a pocket of his coveralls and made an addition to Dawn's sign:

Gone to Nuiqsut 
Back in a few days

With a sigh, Gray turned and followed the others to the overly-sterile, fluorescent-lit company cafeteria. It was going to be a *long* few days.

Monday, December 11th

U-Turn

W

Dawn's place was still closed Saturday afternoon before shift, and Gray didn't get another chance to drop by over the weekend. But Monday morning after work, he heard the welcome news as he and his dorm hallmates were jockeying for shower time: Dawn was back. Gray set an alarm for early wakeup and was waiting at her door by 3:45 that afternoon, a quarter hour before her normal p.m. opening time.

Hunkering down within his parka, Gray berated himself for showing up so early. This was the warmest time of day and it still felt like -20° F when you accounted for windchill. That was practically balmy compared to the negative forties he had suffered in recent night shifts, but... well, twenty-below was still twenty-below, not the sort of weather he normally chose to endure if avoidable. Rubbing his hands together through his gloves, he inspected the four-foot-tall stylized sunrise Dawn had painted in red on her yellow building. It was all just shades of gray to him, but even color blind, he could still appreciate the

loving care she'd put into each lick of flame that curled out from that celestial fireball. Gray usually just blew right past the mural—everybody did—in a hurry to get inside and thaw out. The fact that Dawn would take the time to paint such elaborate flourishes anyway said something about her.

Idly, he found himself pondering the mystery that was Dawn Simmonds. She was such an atypical member of the oil field community, and not only because she was female and Native Alaskan, in a predominantly male tunnuq populace. The woman's personality, her *smile* shone all the more brightly amidst the rough and tumble crowd of laborers. Even her name was ironic for a person born this far north of the Arctic Circle, considering whole months passed in winter here without a single sunrise.

Gray waited the better part of twenty minutes, shivering and stomping. But like her namesake, Dawn never made an appearance.

Instead, it was Abraham Kanayurak who appeared just before 4 p.m. At least, Gray *assumed* it was Abe, for the man was dressed in the uniform of the North Slope Borough Police Department, and there was only one NSBPD officer in U-Turn most of the time.

Abe gave Gray a solemn nod and proceeded to staple an updated sign over top of Dawn's handwritten note. This one had been computer-printed in Times New Roman, all bold and all caps, the sheet of printer paper laminated:

cLOSED

iNDEFINATELY

Questions? Call 907-555-0161

Gray pulled out his smartphone—for which he, like many ‘sloper,’ had satellite service—and did a quick Internet search. Apparently, this was a non-emergency number connected to NSBPD headquarters in Utqiagvik.

Which begged the question of *why*.

U-Turn’s sole cop was already trudging away. “Wait, Abe,” Gray called. “What’s this all about?”

Abe turned, cocked his head at Gray, then glanced pointedly at the sign.

Gray gave him a patient smile. “I’m not asking them. I’m asking you.” His smile faded. “What’s up with Dawn? Is she okay?”

“I can’t talk about it,” the cop said.

Gray felt his old instincts tingling. “Police business?”

Abe gave a slow nod, clearly out of his depth and unsure how he was expected to behave in this situation.

“You can tell me,” Gray found himself saying. “I used to be a cop myself.”

Abe looked at him skeptically. “You?”

“Yeah, NYPD.”

Skepticism deepened to amused disbelief.

Gray sighed. Wondering why he was even doing this—he’d gone to such lengths to find a fresh, anonymous start in this place—he said, “Look me up.” He gestured with his smartphone, pantomiming another Internet search. “Grayson Gaynes, retired NYPD detective.” Gray actually had an official ID issued by the State of New York that proved exactly this, as well as a badge stamped RETIRED, but he was hardly in the habit of carrying either one around. Fortunately (or maybe unfortunately), there was another way to convince the man. “Seriously,” he repeated, “look me up.”

So Abe did. And of course, search results quickly directed the local cop to Gray’s short but informative wiki article. The former NYPD detective watched the NSBPD officer’s eyebrows climb as he skimmed. “*Homicide* detective!” Abe exclaimed at one point, then, “The Mad Batter case!? Wait, that was *you* on that old video—”

“Yes,” Gray admitted. “Not my finest moment.” Inwardly, he was groaning. The video Abe referred to, of Gray beating a handcuffed suspect, was undoubtedly still online somewhere—its number of views probably in the multi-millions by now, and likely to get another bump over the next week if Abe was hooked into the local gossip network. Still, Gray hoped the revelation bought him a little street cred.

“So, cop to cop, you can tell me. What’s up with Dawn?”

Abe hesitated just a moment longer, then relented. Gray wasn’t surprised. The man had to be lonely, without any colleagues in town he could talk to, face to face. “Dawn’s been arrested,” the other man admitted, obviously feeling conflicted about it.

“Arrested!” Gray blurted. “For what?” But as soon as he asked the question, he realized there could only be one reason.

Abe glanced left and right to confirm there was still no one else in earshot on this darkened dirt road in U-Turn, Alaska. He lowered his voice anyway.

“For *murder*,” he hissed. “On orders from HQ, I arrested Dawn Atiqtalik Simmonds just after noon today for the murder of David Agviq Simmonds, her brother.”

Gazing into Abe Kanayurak’s troubled eyes, Gray thought long and hard about this—Dawn, a murderer?—and decided he simply didn’t believe it. He didn’t know Dawn well, but she *was* a bright spot in this little community. No matter the brokenness of the woman’s relationship with her brother, Gray couldn’t believe she would have murdered him *or* anyone else. Not and continue to shine so brightly. “You must be mistaken,” he told the other man.

Abe stiffened.

“Sorry,” Gray said, immediately gesturing apologetically. “Of course you had to arrest her if you have probable cause. But...”

“But I have a hard time believing it too,” Abe admitted, his shoulders slumping.

“Dawn is still here in U-Turn?” Gray asked.

“Yesss,” Abe said slowly. “Over at my NSBPD substation.”

Gray nodded thoughtfully. “I’d like to speak to her,” he found himself saying.

“Um, no,” Abe said flatly.

Gray blinked. But then, what was he expecting? There was only so far collegial regard would get him; he *was* now a private citizen, and well outside his original jurisdiction. Gray knew as well as anyone that suspects in police custody could receive visits only from certain authorized individuals. Personal visits weren’t allowed until transfer to an actual jail—which in North Slope Borough probably meant transport to Utqiagvik.

“Um, please?” Gray asked lamely, thinking furiously and coming up with nothing.

“Not unless you’re her lawyer,” Abe said drily. He sighed. “C’mon, man. Cop to cop, do you want to get me in trouble?”

Gray hung his head. Why *was* he trying so hard? He had no personal relationship with Dawn; and he certainly had no professional interest in any murder investigation, because it was no longer his

profession. Quite simply, he had no stake in this matter. “When is she being transferred?” he asked.

Abe glanced at his watch before catching himself. “That information is not public. Look, Gaynes, if you really care this much, call HQ in Utqiagvik. But I can’t help you any further. I’m sorry.” And with that, the cop spun on his heel and crunched away across the filthy permafrost road.

Gray wasn’t paying attention anymore anyway. Abe had checked his watch when asked about Dawn’s transfer, which meant it was happening today—likely in a matter of hours.

That didn’t give Gray much time.



LISA DAWN THOMPSON

R.L. Akers loves stories. He loves hearing them, telling them, embellishing them, and forging them from raw materials. He remains convinced that every person who ever lived has an interesting story, including that one guy who tried and failed to prove otherwise.

Holder of an undergraduate degree in computer science and a master's degree in business administration, Akers has worked in software development as well as non-profit fundraising and publicity. He loves children and has served them in various capacities over the years, both at his church and within the foster care system. His interests include graphic design, orchestral movie soundtracks, home improvement, and other creative pursuits.

Akers lives in West Virginia with his wife Sarah and the four children he loves most in this world... except when some of them are off at college. Visit him online at RLAkers.com.