

Two Thousand, Twenty Six

The trip to the real North cost Doug way more than he'd planned. Over two grand more. He wasn't totally prepared for this motorcycle trip – how could he be? and he sure wasn't ready for this. Yeah, he expected deer, moose, maybe a few wolves, worse scenario an angry bear crossing his path, but this? A goddamn 400 pound sheep? or goat? or whatever it was. It was in front of him, glaring at him, its breath shooting from oversized, black, ooze-dripping nostrils, and poised like a barricade, blocking his path. Doug had come around a bend in the highway, driving slowly as the road was unpaved gravel mixed with mud, and there the animal stood. He looked at Doug like he was the enemy, some sort of challenge. "Shit," Doug said. He let out a breath. He swerved the bike to the left; mud and stones flew. The animal didn't flinch when mud splattered its chest and legs. Doug stopped no more than ten feet from the animal, and then cautiously rolled his bike back a few feet. He kept the engine running. The Dempster Highway was the only way to Inuvik and the Arctic Circle. The road was narrow, with smooth, rocky cliffs jutting up on either side; where the hell had this animal come from? Doug had seen plenty of sheep on the road, but they all scurried away long before he got close. None had been so bold to just stand in his path, looking pissed. Doug raised an arm, shouted Hey! but the ram only turned his head, as if to get a better look at Doug. He pawed the ground and mud splattered. He took steps toward the motorcycle.

"Hey!" Doug shouted again. "No way, man. Get away! Get out!" He raised both arms this time, and then waved his hands. The ram's eyes were glassy and unreadable, and his muzzle was dirty-white, dotted by two black, slimy nostrils. Doug could see the slits of each one, and tiny white whiskers on the animal's lips. The horns were hideously oversized, fat and curled, yet the ram stood tall and erect. He was bigger than any animal Doug had ever been this close to. He sure didn't seem afraid of Doug, and he wasn't going to move out of the way.

Doug had read all about animal encounters this far north, mostly bears and moose, but no sheep. Stay on the highway, and avoid confrontation the experts warned. Who's confronting who? Doug thought and he rolled the bike to the right. The animal moved, blocking his path. He was so close that Doug could have reached over and touched him. Doug could smell him, a fecund, fetid odor mixed with manure. Doug turned the bike to go around, but the ram only moved in closer. Doug gunned the engine and saw the animal flinch. He gunned it again, ready to pull out past the animal, but then the ram put his head down and took a step forward. Holy shit, Doug thought. The thing is going to charge me. What the fuck? Why is *he* so pissed? I'm the one who should be pissed.

The machine shop had been his dad's and had come to Doug when he died. It wasn't in his career plan, if he'd ever had one, but he took the shop and made it work. He had a press that made a part for seat belts, a small steel spring that held the belt tight. Thousands and thousands of seat belts on thousands and thousands of cars. It added up and made the payroll. Doug sure as hell hadn't needed an analyst or a forecaster to warn him what was going to happen; Detroit was hard hit. Seeing that Pontiac Motors was his biggest account, and in recent months, his only account, when they announced their end, Doug closed his machine shop and locked the doors. He didn't use words like "downsizing" or "layoff" with his crew; he told them the truth and let them go. He auctioned off most of the equipment and got a whopping \$33,632. He still owned the building and the property, but real estate in Michigan was no longer an asset. He divided up the cash among himself and the four men he had left; he paid some bills and taxes and gave the rest to his wife, Arlett. He tried not to worry.

"This will make the mortgage and utilities for a few months," he told Arlett. "Maybe I can send more." She didn't seem to question the send part. Like everything else, things between the two of them weren't so well. She had her own business, some internet bride thing that Doug paid little attention to. The back room of their house was filled with lace and ribbons, fake flowers and little plastic beads that Arlett advertised as genuine. Genuine what? She made fussy, frilly things and shipped them off to soon-to-be brides that shopped on the internet. The post office and Federal Express got big chunks of her money, but there was some income for her.

"I'm going to the Arctic Circle," Doug said. "I'm taking my bike. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

Arlett laughed. "Really?" she said. "Are you nuts?" You mean like the North Pole or something? Antarctica?"

"Antarctica's the other end of the globe, Babe. I'm going up north, through Canada, then over to Alaska. I've got time."

He had always wanted to go back to Alaska. After a stint in the military, he came stateside through California and didn't quite make it back to Michigan for almost a year. He had headed up the coast in an old Bonneville he bought in 'Frisco and just kept going. Alaska was everything the desert was not. He got a job welding and would have stayed for a lifetime, but came home to Michigan to help his mother bury his dad. But his help turned in to her

dependence, and then there was his marriage to Elayne, a son, Greg, the machine shop. And nearly twenty years.

Doug loved his bike. It was a BMW GS 800, and he spent weeks getting it ready for the trip. He read books about Alberta and the Yukon Territory, searched the *Travel Channel*. He mapped out a route; he bought expensive tires and boots. He packed bear spray and his camera, and headed out the first week of July. Arlett told him to dress warm.

He headed west on I-94. He planned on a short stop outside of Chicago, to Rockford, Illinois, where Greg and Elayne lived. Just west of Kalamazoo, Doug stopped and gave Greg a call. He got Elayne.

"He's gone for nearly the whole month," Elayne said. "Basketball camp. I thought I sent you an email about that. You didn't get it?"

"Ah, maybe," Doug said. "I've had some computer problems." Not really problems, Doug thought. No access to the PC as Arlett spent hours in front of the thing; Doug didn't bother much with email anymore. "Sorry. I guess I missed it," he said. He told her about his plans. He told her about the route he'd mapped out, how he had time, it was good to get away, to see some things.

"Wow, good for you," she said. "I know you always wanted to head back up there. You alone?"

He answered, yes, he was, just how he wanted to travel. No one else to worry about, no real agenda. "Why, you wanna come with me?" he asked.

Elayne chuckled, sounded a little embarrassed. Then she asked, "You scared?"

"What do you mean? Of what?"

"I mean a kind of *good* scared, you know. Exciting, heart-thumping scared." She paused, and then said, "Wild animals, crazy weather, no people. A stronger spirit kind of thing."

Yeah, that was it, Doug thought. "Exactly," he said. "I knew you'd get it." He told her about closing the shop, selling the presses, and she told him she was sorry, too bad about all this shit happening. What would come of Detroit? He said he would send some money to Greg, to her, and he would sure find something else once he got back to Michigan. Or maybe something along the way.

He had met Elayne when she came into the shop one day, a sales rep for Tracco Tools. Not a lot of female tool sellers, but she knew her stuff. "Don't have much use for your line," Doug told her, "but we appreciate you coming in." Work on the floor had all but ceased when heads turned to look at Elayne. She was wearing a skirt and a jacket and carried catalogs and samples of steel gauges in a heavy, oversized case. She looked out of place until she opened

her mouth and started to sell her product. Doug let her go through her whole spiel before he told her he didn't use her tools. "Okay, then, thanks," she'd said. She left a calendar and her card on Doug's desk. He tossed out the calendar, but put her card in his pocket and called her three days later. The love and romance part was easy. The marriage had been hard.

Things in the shop had been going well back then. He landed some big accounts, had ten employees, and business was good. Was negotiating a contract with Pontiac and General Motors. Greg came along; they bought a house in the suburbs. But there was the drinking, the carousing with his buddies, too much time spent away from home, too much time spent on himself. By the time Greg was in fourth grade, Elayne had filed for divorce, and moved to Illinois to be near her family. Doug let it slip away. He took the blame.

"Okay, sure," she said now. "Have a great trip. Be safe. Take plenty of pictures and watch out for polar bears." She paused then and Doug thought he heard the smallest sigh come over the line. "Actually, I'm glad you called. I want to tell you something, something important," she said.

"Yeah, sure. Go ahead." Doug sensed bad news.

"I'm getting married. Well, married again," Elayne said. "We're planning for January, maybe February, early in the year, nothing fancy. I'm happy about it."

He waited. He knew he had heard what she said, but he wanted to pretend he hadn't. "Ah, wow," Doug finally said. "That's great. Good. Good for you, yeah." He shook his head. "Yeah, that's great."

Elayne went on. "He's a good guy. I think you'll like him. Greg likes him just fine, and vice versa, they get along great and Greg leaves for college in a year anyway. Everything will work out. He teaches economics and I met him at the public library, if you can believe that."

"Sounds great," Doug interrupted. "I gotta go. Tell Greg I called." He paused, hoping Elayne couldn't hear the crack in his voice. "I'm happy for you. Really. But I have to go now." He snapped shut his phone without even hearing her goodbye. He slipped it into his pocket and sped out onto the highway, not bothering to check for traffic.

Doug headed north to Muskegon, and waited overnight to board a ferry that crossed Lake Michigan. He met a family on the ferry, a man and woman and three kids, all their belongings crammed into a Chevy minivan. They were headed to Sioux City, Iowa, following a lead on a job. The sister-in-law there knew someone who knew someone. The three kids, all young, were pale skinned with dark hair and eyes. The parents, down on their luck, were hopeful. "Can't get much worse," the man told Doug. "Lost my job, lost the house. What the hell, gotta try, right?"

Doug agreed.

The ferry, huge and heavy, seemed built for the ocean, and Lake Michigan, cold and dark blue, resembled a large, vast sea, treacherous and deep. There was no land in sight. The man and Doug stood on the top deck; Doug squinted into the wind. He let out a long-held breath. "Beautiful," he said. "And scary."

He landed in Green Bay just before a thunderstorm crashed down. It was his second day out and he was barely a state away. The storm followed him all the way across Wisconsin and he traveled over 600 miles before he saw the sun. It was summer, and it was cold. Doug stopped nearly every three or four hours to stretch his legs. He felt out of shape and old and was glad there was no one with him, no one to complain to. After only four days out, he doubted his decision about this trip. He slowed down.

He made it to Dawson City on the sixth day. He met a woman there and stayed for nearly a week. He stayed in her house, a beautiful log cabin with plenty of glass. Her name was Claire and she was a retired dermatologist from Portland. Doug asked her, why the Yukon?

"Look around," she said. "Who could resist all this?" It was quiet and undisturbed with breathtaking views out every window. Trees and wildflowers covered nearly every inch of her property and the house was warm. She told him how she was tired of her patients in Portland, how she felt impotent, not much like a doctor. "These are people who spend way too much time in front of their mirrors," she went on. "I made a lot of money, then got out. I work only part time now, at a walk-in clinic. I can suture like no tomorrow."

Doug didn't sleep with Claire until the fourth night of his stay. He got up from his bed in the spare room and went into her bed where she silently welcomed him. She was a generous lover, unassuming, relaxed. Doug wasn't really sure how she made him feel so vulnerable, but after the sex, he opened up. Maybe it was the wine they drank. He told her about Detroit, it closing up, a tragedy, a nightmare, he said. He mentioned the family he'd met on the ferry, how they lost everything but were still looking for the good. He told her about closing his shop, his lifeless marriage to Arlett, about Greg, and Elayne. Claire was quiet but Doug could tell by her breathing that she was awake and listening. Then, "I wished I loved her," he said.

"Your wife?"

“Arlett, my wife. Yes. She deserves a better husband. I think I married her on impulse, but I don’t know,” he said. “It was a mistake.”

“Can you fix it?” Claire said after a while.

“Can’t seem to,” Doug said. “I still love my first wife.” He talked about Elayne getting married again. “What about this guy, who is he? What if he’s some asshole?”

Claire was silent in the dark, but then Doug heard what sounded like exasperation in her voice. She said, “Don’t be that guy. The jealous, angry ex.” She spoke as if she had known Doug and Elayne for years, how she understood his doubts, but why go down that road? “Don’t be a cliché,” she said.

Doug thought she might be right, but it didn’t change how he felt.

He left early the next morning. Claire was up and they had breakfast together. She told Doug he could come back. “Maybe after the cold and beauty and twenty-two hours of steady daylight have cleared your head, you can come back. I like you.” She smiled. “You’re good company,” she said. He thanked her for everything. She told him to be careful. “Watch out. It can be pretty rough up there,” she had said. “The Dempster isn’t just scenery and blue skies. There’s a lot to look out for.”

Was I to look out for this? he thought now. A goddamn psycho *sheep*? No way, you crazy shit, no way are you going to ram me with that head of yours. “No!” he shouted. “That’s it! No fucking way! Stop!” He held fast to the handle bars and gunned the engine. He planted his feet. His shouts were unheard and the animal came at him with such a force that the entire front end of his bike came up off the ground and Doug was tossed in the air like he weighed no more than a toy. He landed hard on his back, about six feet from his bike. Pain, but no stars.

He stared up at the sky and took short breaths. “Jesus fucking christ,” he said. “What is your problem?” He sat up on his elbows and watched the animal again ram his BMW, now on its side, the front wheel spinning and spraying dirt. The noise of the contact was similar to the sound one of his press machines made: not metal against metal but a crushing noise, the noise of pressure. Doug got to his feet. The animal took steps back and lifted its head. He looked toward Doug, but made no move. Doug’s heart was pounding in his ears and his tailbone throbbed. He stared at the ram, then moved toward the bike. The animal watched him lean down and turn off the engine. I should run, Doug thought. Run and climb a tree or something before this creature puts a horn through my gut. He tasted blood and realized he had bit his tongue when the ram hit. He wiped his face on his sleeve.

Then he said, "I'm not running, you stupid thing. Don't know what *your* goddamn problem is, but I'm going up this road. Go! Move it!" He waved an arm and leaned over to pick up the bike. "Go! Get out!" he said again. Fury over fear, he thought.

The way the bike had tipped made it difficult for Doug to lift. His feet slid on the dirt and he couldn't get the right leverage; the bike seemed to weigh more than he remembered. It took him more than one try to balance the bike and get it standing. The handlebars and the front wheel were both bent; there was no way he could ride the bike. "Shit," he said. "Probably cracked the axel, you stupid fuck," he yelled to the sheep.

The ram stood still and tall with its head high. It had been watching Doug wrestle with the bike and now it looked as if it was listening to him, the way a bad dog might listen to its owner rant over some misdeed. Doug sucked in cold air. He said again, this time evenly and without moving or waving his arms, "Go." The ram turned slightly. He calmly lowered his head and sniffed the ground. He pawed the dirt and a small cloud of dust moved around his ankle. He pulled up his head, moved it to the right and then to the left and in one quick motion, turned and ran off. He headed north up the highway, and about twenty yards from where Doug stood, the ram turned and climbed the cliff. He was gone from sight.

Doug stood in wonder for a long time. What the hell just happened? *How* did that just happen? He inhaled deeply and felt the pain in his back. He felt a cool mist settle in the air and realized it was late afternoon. He started to walk, pushing the bike through the dirt.

He walked for nearly an hour. A semi passed, heading south, and the driver gave him the thumbs up as he passed, the truck spreading gravel and dirt. Then Doug saw the mark, just a tall, wooden sign between two posts, bolted on a small slab of concrete. The sign said in green letters: ARTIC CIRCLE, LAT 66° 33'N. He was there. Just some topographical line drawn around the globe by mapmakers, but he was at that place. He propped up the bike, and then sat under the sign.

Even though the sun hadn't set, and darkness wouldn't fall for hours, if darkness was what it could be called, the sky had gone from a pale, lofty blue to a darker, deeper blue. Doug looked up and didn't see any of the clouds that had been there earlier. The air was cool and clean, and when he looked to the north, he saw the tops of ice covered glaciers. He felt his muscles relax, and the pain in his back seemed to dissipate. He didn't hear chirping birds, or see a double rainbow, and heard no trumpets. But he felt he was, for just that moment, an extraordinary man.

He wasn't sure just how long it was before a guy pulling a trailer full of truck parts and hockey equipment came along. He loaded Doug's bike into his truck, obliged him by snapping a picture of him standing under the sign, and together they rode into Inuvik. Doug told him the story of the ram charging him, how he couldn't stop it from happening, the weird thing of it all. "No shit," the guy said. He handed Doug a beer from a small cooler, shook his head and said, "Unbelievable, man."

Inuvik turned out to be a great place, but one that insurance adjusters seldom visited, so Doug chose to fix his bike and later file his own claim. He had to wait ten days for the parts, but he found a guy who said he could fix the BMW. "It's gonna cost you," the guy said. "I mean the whole front end is messed up."

"Well, I figured. How much?" Doug asked.

"Around two grand." He pulled out a list of charges and showed it to Doug. "\$2026 to be exact," the guy said. "How do you want to pay?"

His bike took weeks to fix, not to its original condition, but Doug wasn't going to get mad about it. He made friends with a breeder of sled dogs; he ate his breakfast each morning in one of the town's only diners. The weather became colder and colder with each day, but Doug welcomed it. He drank beer with the men in a small saloon at the end of a narrow street. He told his story over and over, the ram getting uglier or more beautiful with each telling. Doug laughed about it. He told his new friends how he walked to the Circle, how he came upon the mark and sat right down. "It was all worth it," he said. "I came a long way to get here." He didn't mention how, after sitting under the sign of the Arctic Circle for a long time, he called Arlett.

"I'm here," he'd said to her.

"Where is that, exactly?" she'd asked.

Doug let it pass. He told her he was sorry, sorry about everything. They both knew things weren't working, didn't they? She could have the house; he would work it out when he got back to Michigan. There was no shouting, no tears, just a solemn, "we'll talk" from the other end.

He'd called Greg. "You won't believe where I'm sitting right now and you wouldn't believe what happened to me," he told his son. He told Greg about the angry ram. "But I'm okay. Everything's okay," Doug said.

"Wow, that's something, Dad," Greg said. "I'm glad you're all right. Boy, that is really something."

Then, "Tell your mother I'll be there, at the wedding I mean. Tell her I wish her the best. Tell her that I'm happy for her."

Greg said sure, he would do that. "It'll be good," he said.

"Just give me a date, I'll be there," Doug had said.

He left Inuvik at the end of August. Snow flurries were expected. He headed back down the Dempster Highway, on his way to Alaska. Things were good. The money, the two thousand twenty-six dollars, Doug knew was a small price.