

DANA
STABENOW

A LIAM CAMPBELL NOVEL

FIRE
AND ICE



together; Nick went home to see if he could bag himself a Wassillie, Teddy went on up to Bill's to drown his sorrows. Reasonable response," Earl added parenthetically. "Hell of a thing to miss out on, herring. Enough money in one set for the boat payment and the insurance payment and a new engine and a trip to Seattle. If you make the right one in the right place."

Liam made a small noise that could have meant assent. He knew even less about herring fishing than he did about aviation, although in the case of the former it was distance and inexperience, not terror and intent that kept him ignorant.

"So, Teddy gets a little liquored up." Earl paused. "Well, okay, maybe a lot liquored up, and he takes exception to what's on the jukebox." A small shudder seemed to ripple up Jim Earl's spine. "Bill keeps a thirty-ought-six behind the bar in case of trouble. Teddy grabbed it and shot out the jukebox. Right in the middle of 'Margaritaville.' Dumb bastard." He shook his head. "Poor, dumb bastard." He spit out the window again and added, "Poor dumb dead bastard is what he's going to be if we don't get there in time."

They were in town now, a confused mass of buildings built on a series of small rolling hills that reminded Liam of sand dunes in shape and size, sand dunes covered with a thick encrustation of pine and spruce and alder and willow and birch. The town's buildings varied in construction from prefabricated corrugated metal to rickety two-story wooden plank to split log, lining the sides of a labyrinthine arrangement of streets. Paved streets, both Liam and Jim Earl's truck were glad to notice. They passed two grocery stores, one with its corrugated metal siding painted an electric blue and a small front porch that was crowded with a group of teenage boys.

As the Suburban passed the store, the group of boys spilled down the steps and into the street. Jim Earl leaned on the horn. The boys looked around, mimed astonishment at this appearance of a wheeled vehicle in the middle of the road, and one by one and as slowly as was humanly possible drifted to the curb.

One boy in particular, shorter and younger than the others, was even more obvious than the rest. He wore jeans that bagged out down to his knees and a baseball cap on backward. He stooped to fuss with a cuff, which although rolled three times, was still dragging the ground, and barely twitched when Jim Earl's horn gave another impatient blast. He took his time straightening up, adjusted his cap, and gave Jim Earl a sideways glance that bordered on insolence. He was short and stocky, with straight black hair and the classic high cheekbones, tilted eyes, and golden skin of the upriver Yupik. "Goddammit, kid, move outta the goddamn way!" the mayor bellowed out the window, and hit the horn again.

The other boys had retreated to the porch and were whistling and hooting and catcalling. The boy looked from them to the truck and back again, held a brief, internal debate, and

then with an almost imperceptible shrug moved ever so slowly to one side of the street. “About goddamn time,” Jim Earl bellowed again, and trod on the accelerator.

Liam twisted his head to watch the boy swagger up the steps to the porch, where he was greeted like a conquering hero, with a lot of back- and hand-slapping, shoulder-shaking, and fist feints to the jaw. The boy turned suddenly and caught Liam’s eye. He smiled, slowly, arrogant satisfaction sitting on his young face like war paint, and then the Suburban went around a corner and the boy was lost from view.

The potholes had given way to pavement, but the streets were a warren of sudden rises and dogleg curves. Jim Earl swooped down one such rise and around one of the doglegs, whipped past a large group of buildings on a wooden dock that could have been a cannery or the local fuel dock or the SeaLand warehouse—they were going too fast for Liam to be sure—and pulled up with a jerk at a sprawling, one-story building that featured a shallow-peaked tin roof and green vinyl siding. It sat in the middle of a large parking lot, about three-quarters filled.

The sight did not fill Liam with joy, who had visions of all the vehicle owners being held hostage at gunpoint. “Mayor—” he began.

“Call me Jim Earl,” the mayor said, turning off the ignition without bothering to throw out the clutch. The Suburban lurched and gurgled. “Everybody does.” With a protesting diesely rattle, the engine died.

“Hold on a minute,” Liam said, raising a hand. “You’re saying there’s a man in there with a gun, right? How many other people are in there? Is he holding them hostage? What kind of gun does he—”

Jim Earl snorted again, spit again, and slammed open the driver’s side door. “Shit, Liam, Teddy don’t got no gun. Bill done took it away from him.”

“What?” Liam got out and slammed shut his own door. “Then what the hell am I doing here?” Ten miles from what might be a real murder scene, and farther than that in space and time from Wy. Suddenly he was furious. “Now, look, Jim Earl”—it was difficult to separate those two names—“I just set foot in Newenham, and I know, because you’ve told me, that your local force is shorthanded, but I’ve got some real work to do out at your airport, and—”

Mayor Jim Earl snorted, spat, and swore all in the same breath. “Shit, boy, I didn’t haul your ass all the way in from the airport to take Teddy into custody.” The tall, grizzled man walked around the hood of the car and poked Liam in the chest with a bony finger. “You’re here to save his ass. You don’t understand: Teddy shot the jukebox in the middle of ‘Margaritaville.’ He’ll be lucky to get out of there alive.” He grinned for the first time, displaying a set of large, improbably white teeth. “I wouldn’t care but he’s my son-in-law,

and I don't want the raising of his kids. Hellions, every one of them. You might be arresting me for murder my own self, should I be fool enough to take on that job."

And with that he vaulted the faded gray wooden steps and disappeared inside the building with the sign on it that said in unprepossessing black block letters, BILL'S BAR AND GRILL.

From the top of a nearby streetlight, an enormous raven surveyed the situation with a sardonic eye and croaked at the mayor's receding back. When Liam looked around to meet the black bird's steady gaze, the raven clicked at him, a series of throaty cackles that sounded somehow mocking.

It was the last sound Liam heard before he went in the door of the bar, from which he promptly came staggering out backward, falling down the stairs and landing with a thump on the pavement, fanny-first. "What the hell?" He looked up just in time to see a tangle of bodies roll down the steps and right over the top of him, to hit hard against the already bruised bumper of the construction orange Suburban. The tangle resolved itself into three people, two men and one woman. One of the men had a rifle and the second man and the woman dove on top of him and the resulting scuffle looked like something out of a Tom and Jerry cartoon.

He fumbled to his feet, brushed off the seat of his jeans, and tried out his trooper voice. "Now, just hold it right there!"

The scuffle paused, looked him over, saw a tall man with an authoritative frown but nothing much else to recommend they obey him, and resumed the scramble. The man with the gun managed to get his finger on the trigger and the gun fired, *bang!* The bullet glanced off the windshield of the Suburban but there were already so many cracks in it Liam couldn't really tell if it had left a mark.

Enough was enough. He waded into the fray and grabbed someone by the scruff of the neck and someone else by the seat of the pants. "Hey!" a voice said indignantly, and he looked down to see that he had the woman by the seat of the pants.

"Sorry," he said without apology, dropped her and the unarmed man, and grabbed for the rifle, which went off again just before his hand closed around the barrel. The bullet sang past his ears and clipped the branch the raven was sitting on. The bird rose up in the air with an affronted squawk and a tremendous flapping of wings to hover over the shooter and unload a large helping of bird shit down his cheek and the front of his shirt. He squawked again, a somehow menacing sound that promised more of the same should he be disturbed a second time, and went back to the spruce tree to land on a branch a little higher up the trunk.

"Eyaaaagh!" said the shooter, and the woman, glaring at him, snapped, "Serves you

goddamn right, you nearsighted little bastard! If you'd just buy some glasses maybe once in a while you could hit what you aimed at!" She hauled him to his feet by the collar and hustled him up the steps.

"Wait a minute—" Liam said, standing still with the rifle in one hand.

The second man followed the first two up the steps.

Liam stared at the door. "What the hell?"

From his new branch, the raven croaked at him. "Who asked you?" Liam retorted.

He climbed the steps again, keeping to one side this time. The door opened inward, and he hooked a cautious eye around the edge.

Inside, it was a bar like any fifty other Alaskan bars he'd been in, from Kenai to Ketchikan, Dutch Harbor to Nome, Barrow to Anchorage. He stood in the doorway, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dim light. A bar ran down the left side of the room; booths and the jukebox lined the right side. There was a stage the size of an end table against the back wall with an even smaller, imitation parquet dance floor in front of it. The rest of the floor was covered with tables and chairs. There was a window into the kitchen through the back wall, and the air was filled with the tantalizing odor of a deep fat fryer on overdrive. The floor was gritty beneath his feet, and the rafters were unfinished timber festooned with caribou racks, lead line, cork line, green fishnets, and various animal pelts. Neon beer signs glowed from every available inch of wall space. There were two windows overlooking the parking lot, grimed with years of condensed fat. More signs blinked on and off in them.

Something was missing. It took a moment for Liam to realize what it was. There wasn't any television. No thirty-two-inch screen blaring out the latest Madison Avenue seductions into overspending your income on like-a-rock pickups, after which tall black men would chase after balls of assorted shapes and sizes, unless it was short white men whacking the hell out of a puck, when they weren't whacking the hell out of each other. Sports made no sense to Liam. The only form of exercise he considered worth pursuing was undertaken horizontally. "Push-ups?" Wy had asked oh so innocently when he had propounded this theory to her. "Bench-pressing? Oh, I know, wrestling," and she had tumbled him back onto the bed and demonstrated various holds.

The memory, flashing in from nowhere, halted him in his tracks. He came back to himself and, flushing slightly, looked around for Teddy, whose ass he was there to save.

It wasn't only that there was no television and that the jukebox wasn't playing—the bar was quiet. Too quiet, especially for a bar in the Bush at the beginning of the Fishing season. The booths and tables were full, the bar was lined with patrons, and there should have been talk, laughter, more than a few feminine shrieks of delight or dismay, and at the

very least two men arguing blearily over who corked who during last summer's salmon season.

But it was quiet instead, with a quality of silence Liam might have expected to find at a drumhead court-martial. There were maybe thirty people present, most of them standing in a semicircle a respectful distance from the action without being so foolish as to put themselves out of range of hearing every word. Liam cast a quick eye over the group. It was a varied bunch, about two-thirds male, white, Native, mixed race, and what appeared to be a couple of heavy equipment salesmen from South Korea who looked delighted with fortunes putting an event in their path that had previously only been granted them via John Wayne movies. There was an ethereal young blonde with a bar towel wrapped around her waist, one hand on her hip, who was tapping an impatient foot as if to indicate she was ready to get back to generating tips now, thanks. Their shoulders stooped and hands crabbed from a lifetime of picking fish, three or four old fishermen in white canvas caps worn a dull gray watched everything out of bright, avid eyes. In a back booth one man had his head pillowed in his arms and was sleeping through it all. A barfly with glassy eyes and a lot of miles on her hung affectionately on the arm of the man Liam recognized from the altercation outside, a stocky young man with a merry grin that displayed irresistible twin dimples. "Come on, Mac honey," the barfly said in a slurred voice. "Les go back to my place, hmm?"

Mac honey was sober enough to catch the barfly's hand as it slid to his crotch, and to get while the getting was still good. "Sorry, Marcie," he said, draining his beer and setting the empty bottle on the bar. "I've got a party to go to, and a girlfriend to keep happy."

He threaded his way through the throng, nodding politely as he passed in front of Liam, and the sound of the door closing behind him was magnified by the hush surrounding the main event. The only noise came from a man Liam recognized as the Old Fart from the plane that afternoon. He was standing in front of the jukebox, whose clear plastic lid was marred with a neat round hole surrounded by a starburst array of cracks. The lid was back, and the Old Fart was tinkering with the insides. He looked around once when Liam came in, said "Huh!" in a loud voice, and selected a larger screwdriver before returning to his work.

Liam looked further for the source of quiet. It wasn't hard to find. It hadn't taken them long, once they got him inside; the man who had been separated from the rifle was seated in a chair and immobilized with enough bright yellow polypropylene line to restrain King Kong. He was maybe thirty years old, five-eight, thickset, with matted brown hair and terrified brown eyes that stared at Liam over the bar rag that had been used to gag him.

Teddy Engebretsen might be drunk, but he wasn't so drunk he didn't know his life was