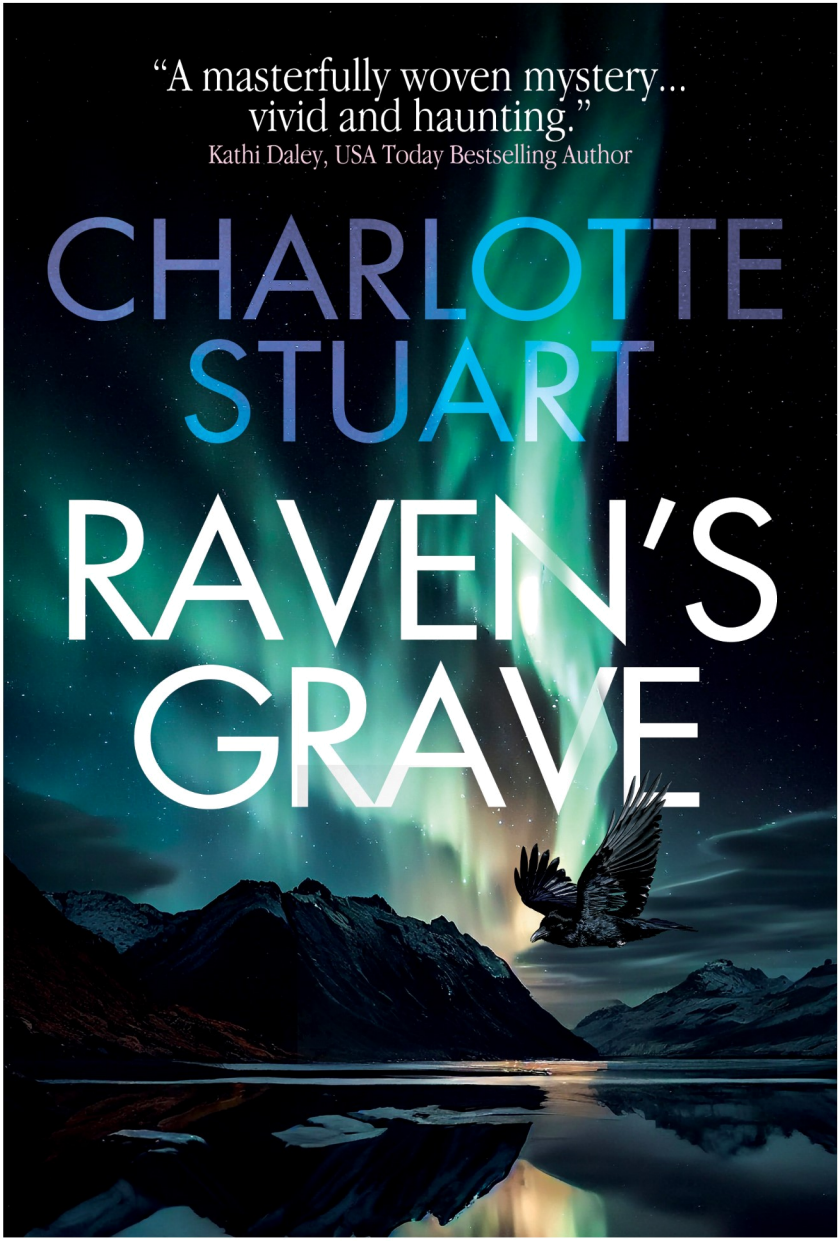

"A masterfully woven mystery... vivid and haunting."
Kathi Daley, USA Today Bestselling Author
CHARLOTTE STUART
RAVEN'S GRAVE

PRAISE

"Charlotte Stuart's evocation of the power of Alaska's untamed wilderness on its inhabitants and her readers is palpable and profound."
Gerald Elias, musician and author of the Daniel Jacobus mystery series

"Charlotte Stuart's masterfully woven mystery includes vivid threads describing the rugged Alaskan scenery, isolated native villages, local myth and tradition, and haunting images of the past."
Kathi Daley, USA Today Bestselling Author

"A deeply moving story of murder and cultural erosion in an Alaskan Tlingit fishing village during the late 1970s... Teeming with authenticity and rich cultural detail. A wonderfully satisfying novel."
James W. Ziskin, author of the Anthony, Barry, and Macavity award-winning Ellie Stone mysteries

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Stuart, PhD, writes about diverse topics such as hidden treasure, chimeras, commercial fishing, friendship and betrayal. Her books have received numerous awards including a Global eBook gold, two NYC Big Book Distinguished Favorites, and a Pinnacle Achievement Book Award.

Before she started writing full-time, she left a tenured faculty position to go commercial fishing in Alaska, spent a year sailing in the Washington and Canadian San Juans, and was a partner in a management consulting group. She lives and writes on Vashon Island in the Pacific Northwest and is the past president of the Puget Sound Sisters in Crime.

www.charlottestuart.com

CHARLOTTE STUART

RAVEN'S GRAVE



www.vineleavespress.com

Raven's Grave
Copyright © 2023 Charlotte Stuart
All rights reserved.

Print Edition
ISBN: 978-3-98832-022-3
Published by Vine Leaves Press 2023

No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. Under no circumstances may any part of this book be photocopied for resale.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between the characters and situations within its pages and places or persons, living or dead, is unintentional and coincidental.

Cover design by Jessica Bell
Interior design by Amie McCracken

To Sharon Dunn, the first person to read a draft of Raven's Grave*. Thank you for your cultural insights, encouragement and friendship. And to my husband, Don, for introducing me to the wonders of Alaska.*

PROLOGUE

KOLOSHAN, SOUTHEAST ALASKA – 1979

A full moon dusted the treetops with light. Far below, beneath the outspread branches, the forest floor was dark. It was a darkness filled with night sounds, clicks, snaps, leaves moving restlessly. The soft padding of a hunter. A wink of bright eyes, then nothing.

In a small clearing a bonfire licked the night. A slim figure stood before the fire, arms raised above the flames, motionless. Hands erect, eyes closed, waiting. In one hand he held a wooden rattle shaped like the head of a bird, its once-bright colors faded with age. In the other hand was a small leather bag containing his kuts, the source of his power as an icht'a.

Suddenly the young icht'a began to sing. The heel of his right foot pounded the ground in time with his music. Another figure appeared, howled like a wolf, and moved slowly toward the fire as if stalking prey. After the wolf came an owl, then a deer, two bears, and a frog, their movements rhythmic, keeping time to the singsong chant of the icht'a. The deer moved quickly, pausing to turn his

head from side to side as if alert for enemies. One of the bears fell in behind the deer, heavy, pursuing. Teenage actors dressed in haste—leather leggings and knee patches, T-shirt slogans half hidden by beaded jackets, eagle feathers drooping from athletic sweatbands.

At a bird-like cry from the icht'a, the drumming ceased and the dancers froze. A cloud covered the moon, leaving only a circle of light from the fire. Everything was still. Even the night birds fell silent.

The drumming resumed.

Ten-year-old Johnny sat on the ground. He had dutifully drunk the contents of the wooden bowl, as instructed by the icht'a. Sweat beaded his forehead and dripped off the end of his nose, leaving a wet spot in the dirt. He was sweating profusely, yet he was shivering. He stuck one foot out as if to get up, then leaned forward and opened his mouth wide. The throbbing of the drum, hooting of the owl, and droning chant drowned out his cry for help.

Tum tum, tum tum. Run, dance, leap.

Johnny cried out again, but again no one heard him. It wasn't until he toppled over, his body sprawled on the dirt face down, that anyone noticed.

By then it was too late.

TLÉIX'
(ONE)

The red caves were across the island from the village of Koloshan, facing out on an isolated inlet, a honeycomb of chambers slowly carved by nature into the side of a steep cliff. The area was considered sacred by some older natives from the village. According to legend, the earth in and around the caves was red because it had been soaked in the blood of the warriors who had battled there.

Jonah St. Clair, Koloshan's only police officer, knew that iron oxide accounted for the area's unique coloration. But it was a good story, one he had first heard from the Tlingit grandfather of a close friend, Dan. He'd met Dan the first season he'd come to Alaska with his father to fish for salmon. He was only nine then, but old enough to be a deckhand. Dan and Jonah had quickly become friends, and when they weren't fishing, they spent time together exploring the vast expanse of woods and water surrounding Koloshan.

One of their favorite places was the labyrinth of red caves. The countless stories told by the Tlingit elders

about the caves made Jonah envious of his friend's heritage, his own seeming anemic by comparison. The two boys had searched the area looking for artifacts, half expecting, half dreading that something mysterious and strange would happen to them. But nothing ever had.

Today, Jonah was in his twenty-foot Alumaweld boat, headed to the red caves to search for the young icht'a known as Chaaky, from tschāk, eagle. When Chaaky first declared himself a shaman, he'd chosen the eagle as his crest animal, his link to the spiritual world. The ceremony that had ended in tragedy had meant to cure Johnny of his limp that had been the result of an accident when he was only two.

Even though it was an official trip, Jonah enjoyed being on the water by himself. He knew he had a reputation for being independent, sometimes uncommunicative, but he didn't see himself as a loner, just someone who had close relationships with only a handful of people. His mother had died during a fishing season when he was thirteen, and his grief-stricken father had returned to the States by himself, leaving Jonah to live with Dan's grandfather. It was an arrangement that suited both of them at the time. Jonah didn't return to L.A. until his senior year in high school, when his father wanted him to come home. He stayed in L.A. to attend college, spent six years with the LAPD, and then two years in Nam before returning to Koloshan.

He knew most of the villagers and their families, including the boys who'd been at the ceremony. One of the boys had suggested Chaaky might have gone to the caves to escape the consequences of his giving a deadly

potion to Johnny. But Jonah thought it more likely that Chaaky had fled to mourn what had happened. Either way, it hadn't been a smart thing to do.

"Damn fool kid," was his unofficial pronouncement as he made his way to the red caves to search for the missing icht'a.

There was no trail leading directly to the caves from Koloshan. To get there by land involved following a series of animal paths that occasionally petered out and left one to push through thick underbrush until another path could be found. It was a lot faster to go by boat.

An afternoon breeze had come up. The waves were larger than they had been earlier in the day, capped with frothy white foam. Jonah had to work the throttle to keep from taking water over the bow—slow down, speed up, slow down. Water boiled around his outboard motor, but he didn't think the situation was serious enough to call for help, at least not yet.

Tapping the 35hp Evinrude motor, he said, "Don't crap out on me now."

He passed two white crosses along the western shore. They stood out against the natural backdrop of rocks and brush, a stark warning to beware of the power of wind and water. Jonah found himself reminiscing about times as a youngster when he'd listened to Tlingit elders telling stories about what happens when someone is lost at sea. Supposedly their spirit is forced to wander forever. Even then he'd felt that was unfair, that being lost at sea should be more like Catholic purgatory, a temporary stage of the afterlife.

As he rounded the north end of the island, the water grew calmer. He was able to make better time, speeding up the narrow inlet, caught in the red glow of the sun's descent. A gull flew overhead, its belly glinting pink in the vivid wash of color from the crimson sky.

As the caves finally came into view, their shadowy cavities looked sinister against the backdrop of the rocky hillside and fading sunset. Jonah felt the same sense of awe for the place that he'd had as a kid.

"A perfect setting for a bloody battle or the meditations of an aspiring shaman," he said out loud. "Or to hide out."

Jonah was aware that those who knew about the incident had already tried and convicted Chaaky. After all, Chaaky had made the potion that had supposedly killed Johnny. But Jonah's police officer training told him that until he had all the facts, he should withhold judgment. Even if something Chaaky had put in the potion had resulted in Johnny's death, it could still have been an accident. And, if Chaaky had retreated to the caves—either out of guilt or to mourn—what impact would their ominous presence have on a depressed and frightened young boy?

The tide was rising. In another hour or so many of the lower caves would fill with water. Once, when he was young, Jonah had gone into one of the smaller caves with his skiff, beached the boat on a rocky shelf, and climbed onto a ledge to explore. He had lost track of time and had almost been trapped inside by the incoming tide. By the time he had noticed what was happening, there was barely enough room for him to maneuver his skiff out

through the entrance before water sealed off the cave. If Chaaky was out there, Jonah hoped he knew what he was getting into.

Jonah slowed the boat and eased it toward shore. There was no sign of Chaaky, but he hadn't expected to spot him from the boat. If Chaaky was there, he had undoubtedly heard Jonah's approach. Sound traveled a long way over water. The boy would have had plenty of time to hide.

"Chaaky," he yelled. "It's me, Jonah. Please come out. We need to talk." When he didn't get a response, he proceeded with his plan.

There were quite a few caves to search. Jonah had decided to cover those accessible by water first. If he found no sign of the boy in any of the lower caves he would go ashore and search among the wind-stunted trees that clung to life along the clifftop. From there he could also reach some of the higher caves, although the task would be more difficult as darkness fell.

He tossed his anchor into the water, not bothering to back down on it. The holding in the area was poor, but he doubted his boat would drift unless the wind kicked up. He flipped the rubber dinghy he'd brought along into the water, got in, glanced around, and headed toward the entrance of a cave to his far left. He would check out as many as he could from left to right. Systematically.

Just a few feet inside the first cave he passed into total darkness, surrounded by a musty scent of decaying seaweed. He switched on his flashlight and called out: "Chaaky! It's me, Jonah. I just want to talk to you." The words echoed back, eerie, inhuman. He almost expected old bones to rise up and dance.

Once the echo died, everything was still. With his flashlight, he could see a cleft in the back wall that he thought might be large enough for a boy to hide. He rowed toward it to get a better look, bumping along the jagged rock wall, mumbling a few swear words as he struggled to keep a few inches between his dingy and the wall. If he wasn't more careful, he would puncture the rubber sidewall of his inflatable.

The opening was about three feet deep, but there was no sign of Chaaky or any indication that he had been there. Jonah turned the dinghy around and rowed quickly toward the entrance, anxious to get back outside.

The sky had lost its brilliance, the dim glow of the sun falling off the edge of the world into the sea. Jonah looked at his watch. It was only 6:30. In the spring it stayed light nearly all night long, but in the fall and winter months the wilderness darkness came early with a black intensity unrelieved by the halo of streetlights, the shimmer of neon signs, the telltale luminous glow of televisions, or the flash and flicker of headlights.

Dusky water lapped at the rubber dinghy as he rounded the rock wall separating the cave he had just searched from the adjoining cave.

"Chaaky," he called. "It's Jonah. I'm not here to arrest you. I just want to talk." Something flapped its wings close to Jonah's head as it fled from his approach. "Damn," Jonah swore as he ducked. He had a brief vision of bats with red-veined wings and glowing eyes. But it was an ordinary sea bird, nothing more.

He turned into another cave, the sound of his oars kissing the water as soft as the pumping of bird wings.

After a brief look around at the barren, empty interior, he moved on.

The next cave was small, barely providing sufficient height to enable Jonah to maneuver the boat. He scraped against the side of the cave several times, bending down to keep from hitting his head.

"Hell. Dammit!" He cursed out loud as he pushed his dinghy away from the ragged rocks and ran his light around the cave. Nothing. Just his curses resonating back at him, unfriendly and alien.

He was just about to enter one of the largest caves at water level when he sensed rather than heard a noise overhead. Before he could look up a massive rock streaked past him and smashed into the water next to the dinghy, barely missing the small craft. "Holy crap—" The explosive sound of rock striking water spurred Jonah into action. He slammed his oars into the water and muscled his dinghy into the cave, stopping just inside the entrance to listen.

Everything was quiet. No sound from above. No more large or small rocks falling.

After a few minutes, he eased the dinghy out of the entrance and peeked at the top of the cliff, but it was already too dark to see anything up there clearly.

Had the falling rock been nature's way of reminding him that you had to stay alert to danger while in the wilderness? Or was the source of the incident human? Had Chaaky accidentally caused the large rock to tumble over the edge while trying to stay out of sight? Or was it a deliberate act? Perhaps he was up there somewhere staring down into the growing darkness, speculating on whether the rock had smashed Jonah's boat—or his skull.

"Chaaky!" Jonah yelled. "It's Jonah. Do you hear me? I need to talk to you."

Water slapped against the gravel beach. A bird shrilled. But there was no human answer.

The tide slowly pushed him back into the cave. Putting his suspicions aside, he dipped his oars in the water and steered the dinghy into the chamber. There was still the possibility that Chaaky was hiding in one of the lower caves. He had to keep searching.

His flashlight revealed watermarks on the cave wall. The water was already about even with one of the highest dark lines etched into the red rock. It was going to be an exceptionally high tide.

A sound overhead drew his attention. His light caught a flash of movement. An adrenaline rush pulsed through his system, focusing his attention, preparing him for action. Then two birds whooshed past him. A flutter of wings and he was alone.

He took some deep breaths to calm himself, then moved on, glancing upward from time to time, worrying about the possibility of another rock cascading from above. But the only motion was from his oars as they sliced into the water and slowly rose back to the surface.

The next few caves were impossible to enter. He leaned over the side of the dinghy and tried to see into their murky interiors on the off chance there would be a pair of eyes looking back.

"Chaaky?" he called at each entrance, in case the boy was inside.

He worried that Chaaky had hidden in one of the caves rapidly filling with water and was afraid to come

out because he heard Jonah calling him. At that very moment he might be in some cubbyhole in danger of being swamped. If he was, Jonah hoped he had enough sense to know when it was game over.

A rocky outcrop extended into the water just before the entrance to the last cave. As Jonah pulled around it he went through a ball of herring, tiny fish jumping all around, making delicate, fluorescent rings in the black water. Slowly, he moved through them into the cave, probing the cave's secret curves and niches with his flashlight. Water licked the sandstone walls, eroding, carving the hollow still deeper.

There was a recess to the left that his light couldn't penetrate. "Chaaky?" he called softly. The cave murmured the name back at him: "Chaaky … aaky."

Jonah waited, trying to decide. From his youthful explorations with Dan, he remembered a narrow crawlspace that curved back into the cliff about ten feet. There was only a shallow clearance overhead, but it was definitely sufficient for a young boy determined to stay hidden. But for a man his size? Finally, he made up his mind to try.

"Hell, hope I can still fit."

He draped the frayed manila painter from his dinghy around a rock that jutted from the water near the shelf's edge and tugged at it a few times to make certain it was secure. Then he removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants, put his flashlight in his pocket, and, balancing himself the best he could by grabbing at rocks along the edge of the shelf, he stepped onto a slime-covered outcrop. Shells of sea animals pressed into the bottoms of his feet. Something made a popping noise. "Yuck," he

muttered. He felt an irrational urge to jump back into the dinghy.

He switched on his flashlight to get his bearings. It produced a thin glow in the large space, leaving most of the cave in shadow. Outside, under the dark night sky, there might be headless horsemen and Halloween nightmares, but water caves conjured up particularly bizarre images of evil creatures, death, and decay. He stood there, rigid, listening to water dripping somewhere off to his left. Suddenly water splashed around his ankles and up the inside of his pant leg, breaking the spell. "Okay." He had to get on with it, before the entire area flooded.

He carefully inched his way forward, across the slippery and uneven surface. Droplets of cold water landed on his head and rolled down his forehead into his eyes. He blinked hard to clear his vision, then swiped his jacket sleeve across his face. As he took the next step, something soft moved under his foot.

"Aww," he exclaimed, jerking his foot back and almost losing his balance. The flashlight fell from his hands and landed with a muffled splat in a tide pool, casting an eerie light across the floor of the rocky ledge.

"Damn stupid thing to do," he said as he retrieved the flashlight.

Losing his light or breaking it would make his search impossible and his retreat precarious. At the back of the cave, just as he remembered, there were toeholds made by other explorers who had climbed up to see what was there. He put his flashlight in his jacket pocket, reached up for something to hold onto, pressed his right foot into the first toehold, and pulled himself upward. A second

step and he was able to reach the top. Fingers digging into rapidly receding dirt and rock, he heaved his body onto the ledge. Rocks cascaded over the edge. He forced his body forward into the blank space to avoid getting caught in a landslide of earth and rock.

Finally, everything was still. His own breathing, uneven and heavy, the only sound. He felt like an intruder. He could imagine ancient voices telling him to leave, demanding privacy. Skeletons slumped against rock walls. He reached into his pocket for his flashlight and illuminated the hollow.

"Spirits from the past—where are you?" Jonah called out. "Come on, do your worst."

But there was nothing there. The emptiness was almost a relief.

Getting down was in some ways more difficult than getting up. Jonah slid part of the way, scraping his bare feet along the rock wall and landing with a loud splash in the now ankle-deep icy water. Shivering with cold, he made his way back to the dinghy and gratefully donned socks and shoes.

"Chaaky!" he yelled as he rowed into the night. "Chaaky, do you hear me?"

His voice was lost in the vastness of nighttime sky and water.

"I just want to talk. We need to talk."

"To talk, to talk," came the voiceless reply from the red caves. "To talk …"

DÉIX
(TWO)

A path led from the beach to the clifftop. It ran along the hillside, switching back and forth. The uphill side was grassy, but the downhill edge was eroded here and there, some areas dropping straight down to the beach. Tree roots bared by weather and time dangled over the cliff above Jonah. Moonlight skittered across open spaces, plunging in shimmering shafts into the dark water below.

His rifle slung over one shoulder and a coil of rope over the other, Jonah cautiously worked his way up the incline, stopping frequently to listen for a human note against the usual medley of night sounds. He heard nothing but his own breathing.

At the top he made an attempt to search the line of trees that bordered the cliff. But it was too dark to see much. If someone was hiding there, they could easily stay hidden. And if Chaaky was in the area, and if he was trying to stay out of sight, it seemed possible, even likely, that he had retreated to one of the higher caves. There were routes over the cliff face that a boy familiar with the area might safely traverse in the daylight, and

the caves offered protection from animals and, to some extent, from the elements.

Jonah didn't think he could maneuver across the cliff face in the dark, so he planned to lower himself over the edge by rope. It was a relatively quick and easy way to reach some of the higher caves. He had plenty of experience rappelling down cliff faces during the years he had tried his hand at rock climbing. And, given his size and physical condition, he didn't think he needed to fear being overpowered by a skinny, unathletic boy.

"Okay," he said as he tied one end of his rope around a sturdy-looking tree just above where the caves began at the south end of the cliff. Then he doubled the line, passing it under one thigh and over the opposite shoulder. "This should do it." Leaving his rifle propped against the tree, he tugged on the line a few times to make certain it was secure, then put on a pair of leather gloves, pushed off from the ridge, and began his descent.

The rope pressed against his thigh and his arms felt the strain of keeping his body from free falling. It had been a long time since he had been trained in emergency mountain rescue maneuvers. But he didn't have far to go, and he was confident the rope could easily hold his weight. It was just a question of staying in control, of not letting the rope slide through his hands too fast. "Just take it slow and easy," he said to himself. "Slow and easy."

In just a few minutes he eased himself into the first cave. Still holding onto the rope with one hand, he ran his light over the angular cave walls. There were bits of foliage growing in the red dirt near the entrance. There were no footprints in the dirt. Toward the back, he could

make out a line of water following the curvature of the rock. But there was no sign of Chaaky. One down. Time to move on.

He tried to swing to the next cave without returning to the clifftop, but he couldn't reach far enough to the side. He hauled himself back up, moved the rope to another tree, and rappelled over the side a second time. He had to repeat the process several more times to reach other caves. It was a tiring process, tiring and somewhat surreal. Out there, in the darkness, hanging from a rope over the face of a cliff, with the sound of water moving against the rocks far below, he felt weightless, free, on the verge of flight. It was a heady feeling, like skiing downhill at breakneck speed or soaring high in the air for the pole vault.

He was lowering himself to the last of the caves when the rope trembled for a moment, then suddenly went slack. "What—" he exclaimed, losing his balance and slamming hard against the cliffside. The next thing he knew he was falling through space. His thought processes accelerated. He visualized how he had checked his line before starting his descent. At the same time, his brain sent his hands a message to grab onto the rope. His fingers found the smooth nylon line, but it was slack, falling through the air at roughly the same rate as he did.

The impact came unexpectedly. He landed hard on a damp, unyielding surface, his breath knocked out of him with a whoosh of air. There was the shock of sudden pain, then something scraped across rock, traveling away from him. Seconds later he heard a faint splash, as if something had landed in the water below. At the same

time the line had grown taut across his body, a steady, pulling weight.

He lay there trying to catch his breath, assessing his level of pain. Gradually his mind cleared and he figured out where he was. He had ended up at one of the lower caves where the entrance protruded from the cliff like a huge open mouth. The rope he had fastened to the tree at the clifftop now dangled from his body, reaching down to the water and rocky shore.

What on earth had happened?

Jonah inhaled deeply and wiggled his fingers to see if they were okay. Then he moved his feet back and forth. His hip and elbow hurt. He must have landed on his side. But everything seemed to be in working order. And, most important, he was alive.

Did he make a mistake when tying the rope to that last tree? Or, like the rock that had almost fallen on him, had this been an attempt to thwart or even kill him? Was it possible that someone had deliberately cut him loose?

The tree where he had tied the rope was some distance back from the edge, and the lip of the cliff curved away at the top. He tried to imagine himself as an assailant, releasing the rope, then hurrying over to view the results of his handiwork. Could they now see Jonah lying there in the shadow of the cave entrance? Could they see the rope dangling over the edge?

When Jonah first went hunting with his father, one of the lessons had been the art of patience. That was also one of the messages reinforced by Dennis Gray, Dan's Tlingit grandfather and Jonah's surrogate grandfather, although he always called him Dennis. Dennis had

explained that it was patience that kept his Tlingit ancestors from going hungry. They knew how to lie in wait until the moment was right. Patience. It was a survival trait. Whether hunting for food or facing an opponent. Patience. Never give your position away. Let the enemy or the prey come to you.

Assuming his fall was no accident, Jonah knew that the enemy might still be up there, waiting to see if his plan had succeeded. Jonah waited and listened. He maintained his position even after his muscles became cramped. Unmoving. Silent. Listening.

He didn't know how much time had passed until he finally decided to move, to see if he could stand and walk. He flexed the muscles in his legs and arms and leaned forward. Then he paused to listen again. Finally, he got on his knees and slowly began to draw up the rope a few inches at a time. It snaked over the edge, a muted slithering sound, almost invisible against the dark rock surface. Just a hint of sound and motion.

Jonah traced the smooth weave of rope with his fingers to its abrupt end. There were no frayed edges. A clean cut. Someone had cut his lifeline. Someone had intended that he fall to his death.

In spite of everything that had happened, he had a hard time picturing the intentional cutting of his lifeline as something that Chaaky would do. He had known Malcolm Holman—Chaaky—since he was a baby. Hair curly instead of straight, sandy brown in color, Chaaky had always stood out from the other kids in Koloshan. It was rumored that his father beat his wife and children, although no one ever made a formal complaint. Jonah

had been keeping an eye on the situation when, a little over a year ago, the man disappeared, taking his family's meager savings with him.

Mrs. Holman had put on a brave face and managed to eke out a living for herself and her two children on a combination of public assistance and the occasional part-time job. Chaaky wasn't bitter about his situation, but it had shattered what little confidence he'd managed to scrape together before his father's desertion. Frail, gangly, self-conscious, different. A troubled boy, yes, but a murderer?

Even while he defended Chaaky in his own mind, Jonah realized what that meant. If Chaaky wasn't responsible for the rock or the cut rope, then there was someone else out there trying to kill him. Someone who knew he would look for Chaaky at the caves. Not impossible, and the perfect opportunity to use someone else as the fall guy. Still, he couldn't think of anyone who would go to this much trouble to do him in.

Jonah unwrapped himself from the rope and slowly got to his feet. At first he felt dizzy, but it quickly passed. His ribs seemed okay, painful when he took a deep breath, but okay. He could move his arms and legs without much discomfort. And he didn't seem to be bleeding anywhere as far as he could tell. For a man who had just taken a long fall onto a rocky ledge, he was in remarkably good shape.

Bracing himself against the side of the cave, he leaned out and looked up. It was too dark to see much, but there didn't appear to be any sign of movement at the clifftop. Then he looked down. It was about another thirty feet to

the rocks that dotted the shore. To the left, the drop-off was sheer, but to his right and down about ten feet, there was a promontory that jutted from the cliffside. From there he should be able to make his way along the hillside and back to the top. As quietly as possible. In case his assailant was still there.

Getting down to the promontory was risky. He could fall. Or someone might see him. Another option was to wait in the cave until morning, when it would be easier to make his way across the cliff face. That was probably the sensible thing to do, but he didn't want to wait. He wanted to get out of there while there was still some chance to catch up with the person who had cut his rope. And when he did—

Jonah knew that judging distances in the dark could be tricky. He went over his calculations several times before finally making the leap in the direction of the promontory. As he landed, one foot found a hold in a narrow crevice, but the other skidded out from under him. He fell forward onto the rocky slope and pressed his lips together so as not to cry out. Both feet flipped into the air as he felt himself slipping sideways. His fingers scraped across the rock, searching for a hold. Bits and pieces of earth came loose and tumbled over the edge, landing in the water with a series of tiny splashes. A lot of noise if someone was still out there lying in wait for him.

He rolled onto a level spot and came to a stop, his heart pumping wildly. After a few moments he got to his feet and began feeling his way across the uneven surface. Pebbles shifted under his feet, making headway difficult. He moved along in a half crouch, conscious of being

silhouetted against a moonlit backdrop of sky. What if his attacker had a gun?

The other side of the promontory was steep, but not too steep to traverse. It was shadowed though, and that made it hard to see where he stepped. At one point he tripped over a jagged rock and tumbled forward, landing on one knee. A "Dammit" escaped his lips, sounding eerily loud against the backdrop of the forest at night. He got up immediately, staying crouched over as he moved upward, using his hands to guide him over the uneven surface. Keeping his mouth shut.

When Jonah arrived at the clifftop in one piece he was almost as surprised as he was thankful. He didn't stop until he was safely in the trees and out of sight. Then he took a moment to rest and assess his situation. He couldn't afford to delay too long. If he was going to be hunter instead of prey, he had to get going.

Ignoring his protesting muscles, all of his senses on high alert, he made his way cautiously through the trees until he reached the tree where he had left his rifle. Even before his hand reached out for the cool, smooth surface of the barrel, he knew it wouldn't be there. He felt around on the ground to make certain, but he wasn't surprised to find nothing. He swallowed an oath, mentally kicking himself for not being more careful.

A few feet further on, he found the tree he had tied his line to. The rope was still securely tied but cut off just below the knot. Had his assailant hung around to see if he had succeeded or to perhaps finish the job? Or was he already long gone?

There were two trails leading away from the cliff, the one he had taken up the hillside from his dinghy that continued northeast, and another that meandered into a ravine toward the interior of the island. Jonah thought a moment, then made his decision and started into the ravine.

Tall trees blotted out the moonlight, leaving the forest in almost complete darkness. His feet searched out the path while his hands kept him from running into obstacles. At times the path disappeared, but Jonah kept going. If his attacker had come from Koloshan, this was the most logical escape route.

After a while, he heard faint footfalls and saw a tiny beam of light moving back and forth across the trail ahead. Whoever it was, he was moving very slowly and making no attempt at concealment. Why was he calling attention to himself? Did he think Jonah was dead or incapacitated? Or did he know Jonah was in pursuit? Maybe he was confident because he had Jonah's rifle or another weapon. Maybe he *wanted* Jonah to catch up with him.

Then suddenly it occurred to Jonah that there could be more than one person involved. Two enemies waiting out there for him. He hung back, wary of a trap.

The footfalls ahead faltered. The light was extinguished. Jonah stopped, listened a moment, then moved off the trail into the trees. He heard a noise in the underbrush to his right, coming from below. He drew out the knife that he always carried and waited. Let the enemy come to you. Be patient. Don't give away your position.

Even after five years, memories of Vietnam sometimes pressed in on him without warning. He could feel sweat breaking out at the back of his neck as he envisioned the enemy in dark gray creeping toward him through the brush. He tightened the grip on his knife. It felt small and useless in his hand. For a moment he longed for the heft of an M-16. He had to remind himself that this was Alaska and the rules were different here than they were in Nam. It wasn't a case of kill or be killed. Here, you let the law decide punishment.

"Let the enemy come to you," he said under his breath.

Suddenly something crashed from the underbrush onto the trail, eyes bright, head working nervously back and forth. Jonah sensed rather than saw the animal form, but he immediately recognized the breathy snorting noise deer often make when alarmed. He wiggled a branch and the deer bolted, fleeing down the trail into the ravine. Moments later a shot rang out. Then another. Someone had a gun. And the deer had spooked him into using it.

Jonah waited.

The person ahead started down the trail again, faster than before, his light bouncing up and down. Ignoring the possibility that there could be more than one attacker, Jonah picked up his pace. The light disappeared around a corner. Jonah slowed down, cautiously approaching the bend as the trail veered sharply to the left, leading down toward the water. When he reached the corner he couldn't see anyone. Trying not to make too much noise, he hurried down the trail with a headache building between his temples.

Did the person ahead know Jonah was there? Or had the deer made him jumpy? It could be a trap, a plan to lure Jonah into a vulnerable position between two opponents. Jonah let the distance between them increase. If he'd had a gun, he wouldn't have been so cautious, but he felt like his best chance was to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to take the person by surprise. The hunter and the hunted … but which was which?

The land leveled off. He could still hear someone up ahead. He maintained his pace, grateful for the threads of moonlight that occasionally penetrated the branches. The ground was getting softer, damp, spongy. He stopped to listen and realized how quiet everything had become. He had a sudden burst of insight as he recalled another cove in the area. He began racing forward along the trail.

When he heard the sound of an engine start, he knew he had miscalculated. "Damn, damn, damn," he swore as he sped up. Even running as fast as he could, he wouldn't get there in time. But one thing he knew for sure—it wasn't Chaaky he'd been pursuing. Chaaky didn't have a boat.

When he reached the water's edge, the boat was no more than a small dark shape in the distance, trailed by a thin line of phosphorescent wake.

MONDAY