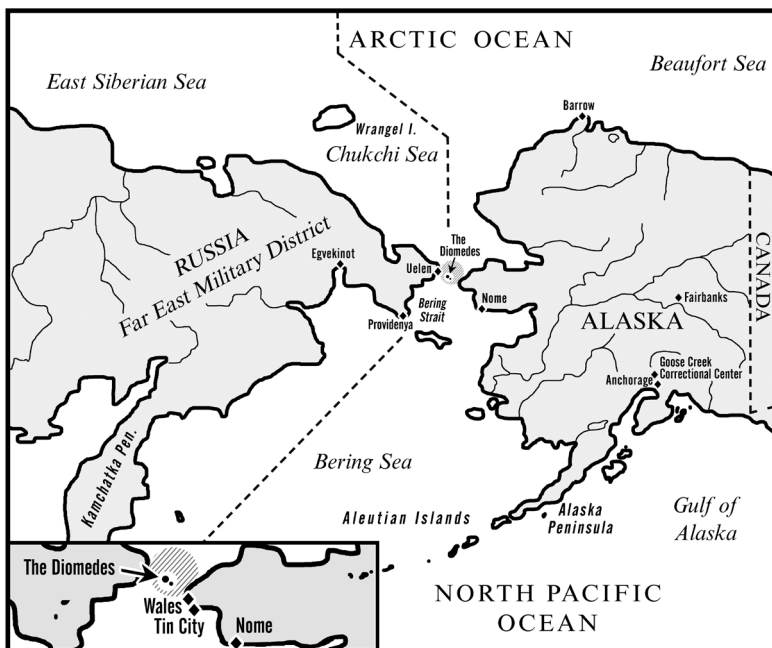


THE FOLLOWING TAKES PLACE IN THE TWO DAYS
BEFORE THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL
INAUGURATION ON JANUARY 20th



ONE

Little Diomedede, Alaska, USA

Thick mist hung over the frozen Bering Sea and inside the helicopter cabin a familiar voice broke through the static of Rake Ozenna's headset. 'We have an emergency evacuation,' said his adoptive father, in a tone that was calm but edged with urgency. 'How far out are you?'

'On the ground in about five minutes, Henry,' said the pilot.

Rake's fiancée unwrapped her arm from his shoulder and pressed the talk button on her headset cable. 'This is Dr Carrie Walker,' she said. 'I'm with Rake Ozenna. I'm a trauma surgeon. What exactly is the patient's condition?'

A woman's voice answered. 'This is Joan, district nurse. Akna's waters have broken.'

Joan was Henry's wife. Rake had told Carrie about them and his home island many times. Even so, he had been apprehensive about bringing her here and the past minute was proving him right. He tried to catch her eye, but she was concentrating, at work a hundred percent on her new patient. 'Thank you, Joan,' she said. 'Do you know how many weeks into the pregnancy?'

'We think thirty-five weeks.'

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

‘And how old is she?’

‘Fifteen.’

Carrie showed no reaction to the young age. She had seen far worse, so had Rake. She snapped open her bag to check her medicines. ‘Does she have a fever?’

‘A hundred and two.’

‘Thank you. Keep Akna comfortable—’

The pilot cut in. ‘We’re three minutes out. Henry, I need you on the helipad. The wind is everywhere.’

Carrie tapped her finger across packets of antibiotics and said confidently, ‘Reassure Akna that help is on the way. We’ll get her safely to hospital in Nome in a couple of hours.’

Rake wasn’t so sure, but he stayed quiet. It depended on exactly where Akna was. It could take half an hour to get her stretchered safely down to the helipad. In January, this far north, the sun barely broke above the horizon. Its dim light merged with the moon and stars to create a glow of daytime winter darkness, and now it was coming up to midday, but it could have been midnight. The way clouds were scudding meant frozen fog could move in at any time.

An hour earlier they had left Nome to fly over a flat white Alaskan emptiness until fog almost forced them to turn back. The pilot managed to climb above it and for a long time they could only see the top of a shimmering low cloud bank. When they descended again, two islands appeared, solid and dark, like guards keeping vigil on the ice-covered expanse. Rake pointed to the longer, flatter island on their left. ‘That’s Big Diomedé,’ he said to Carrie, tapping the window. ‘They call it Ratmonova. See, along the top, Russian military observation posts.’

MAN ON ICE

‘Oh, my God!’ Carrie looked in fascination and turned to see out the other side. ‘And you grew up over there?’

The helicopter shook as the pilot turned them into the wind at a mid-point between the islands, exactly where Russia and America met. The international dateline ran along the sea border. A few meters to their west, and they would drift into another day and another country.

As the smaller island on their right became more visible, Carrie hooked back her blonde hair and cupped her hand against the window. Light from outside the helicopter silhouetted her strong face, high cheekbones, and prominent jaw. An orange windsock on the helipad gave a splash of color against the grayness of the settlement, a pallid cluster of small buildings, dwarfed by the steep island hillside rising directly behind.

Carrie’s home could not have been more different to his. She was half Estonian, half Russian, and was raised as a Brooklyn Catholic, from a family of successful doctors. He was a native Eskimo from the Diomed Islands, which lay at the very edge of American territory and where ‘family’ held a looser meaning. Her father was a top cardiologist, her mother a gynecologist, and Carrie became a trauma surgeon. Rake had no idea where his mother or father were, could barely remember their faces. He had been raised by Joan and Henry Ahkvaluk, his father’s cousins. As soon as Rake was old enough, he had joined the Alaska Army National Guard. From the lowest rank of private, he broke through to reach captain in the 207th Infantry Group based at Fort Richardson outside of Anchorage, better known as the elite unit of Eskimo Scouts, perfect for deployment to mountain winters in Afghanistan, which was where a sensible

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

girl from Brooklyn fell in love with a wild boy from the Diomedes, at least that was how they told it to friends. Carrie and Rake met over a car bomb in Kabul.

It was more than ten years since Rake's last visit to Little Diomede. Jumbled images came to him of this place he knew so well and wished he could understand. Since then there had been Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Iraq again, Afghanistan again. And now he had Carrie, who had settled him.

Drab clapboard homes stood on layers of walkways, one above the other, up the steep slope. The helipad, a rough concrete square, jutted out from a coastline of huge boulders. To the left stood Rake's old school, its green walls and snow-covered roof shimmering under clear moonlight. Three steel dinghy boats were pulled up on the iced shingle of a tiny bay. Rake spotted the one belonging to Henry. In front, half a dozen snowmobiles stood on the sea ice and further along was the old, abandoned one, that Rake had ridden the night a polar bear had threatened the village. In the wildlife magazines, polar bears were made to look majestic. Close up, they were dirty, dangerous, eating machines. Henry rode out on the snowmobile with his two surrogate sons, Rake and Don Ondola, and showed them how to track and kill the animal. That morning, the whole village had walked across the ice to carve off meat and store it for winter. Don got the hide because he was two years older. He had been like a brother to Rake. But now he had gone mad and was serving time for murder, which was why the emergency radio call was so troubling. Akna was his daughter.

Carrie knew some of this, but not all. Rake had told her about the hunting of walrus, seal, and polar bear; the isolation, the

MAN ON ICE

winter darkness, the summer light; how the Eskimos had lost their language because the school only taught in English; how men away hunting had asked friends to look after their wives in their own beds in a practice called wife-sharing which is why Eskimos weren't so good at doing the mom, pop, and three kids nuclear-family thing; how missionaries had tried to change them but without much success, and had given up and were now gone from the island. That had made Carrie laugh.

He told her about the sacred ancestral graves on the hillside and how he could read the weather by the way the birds flew around the island. Carrie loved all that, but she was no fool. She would figure out the whole picture for herself once they got there. He hadn't reckoned on her starting even before they landed.

From the helicopter window, he saw Henry step out from a hut next to the old wooden church on a higher walkway. It used to be Don's house. Rake didn't know who lived there now. Henry was more than sixty years old, but skilled with his boots on the ice, faster than many men half his age. He started down the walkway to meet them.

The helicopter shuddered against a brutal surge of wind. She was a Bell 214ST, an old military transport warhorse, probably from Iraq, maybe even Vietnam. There were straps and buckles to lock in a stretcher, two if needs be. Carrie would insist on flying with Akna to Nome. She wouldn't have it any other way, which meant Rake would go too, so ten minutes on the ground. They would come back tomorrow, weather permitting.

Carrie tucked the ankles of her jeans into her heavy-duty hiking boots, then lifted her headset, pushed her hair under the

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

hood of her green parka, and zipped it up to her chin in preparation for the freezing weather outside. She held her medical pack on her lap. She turned her engagement ring towards him, green and blue, jade and sapphire, from an old gem shop in Kabul. She smiled quickly at him, as the ring vanished into her red Gore-Tex glove.

Rake pulled up his sleeve to remind her of the tattoo of his O-negative blood group on the inside of his right forearm. She had made him get it as a condition of her marrying him. He pulled his woolen hat over his ears and secured his green military Arctic warfare jacket as Carrie had hers. She was an inch taller than him, and would never let him forget it.

Akna's emergency was returning them to a familiar, professional place. Carrie was leading, Rake watching their backs, and, at that moment, a new unfamiliar voice came across the radio, nervous, tense. 'This is Wales. Mike, are you out there? We've got a man through the ice. Anyone from Erickson?'

Mike was the pilot, Erickson the helicopter company. Wales, twenty-five miles away, was the closest mainland settlement.

'This is Mike. I'm landing at Little Diomedé now. What's happened?'

A disjointed reply came with the ebb and flow of static. One of the elders of the settlement had been cutting through sea ice to catch crabs. The ice had broken, and he had fallen through. With climate change it was becoming impossible for even the most experienced to judge the thickness of the ice. Underneath, the water temperature wouldn't be much above freezing, which meant hypothermia setting in fast. They had gotten him out in time. But now he had suffered a heart attack.

MAN ON ICE

'I'm twenty-five minutes out from you.' Mike turned the aircraft side on and brought it in over the boats on the shingle until they were a few feet above the helipad.

Carrie flashed a worried look. 'Is a doctor there?'

The skids settled on the frozen helipad. The engine noise dropped, the rotor blades slowing. Mike turned to speak directly to Carrie. 'Yes, ma'am. They do have a doctor.'

'Best if we stay here,' said Rake. 'Mike goes to Wales and comes back. It'll be forty minutes' round trip. It'll take that time to get Akna down.'

That was it. The triage. The call on which casualty got treated first. They had done it together a dozen times. They wouldn't know about Akna's condition until Carrie had examined her. Rake and Mike knew this environment. Carrie nodded her agreement.

Henry pulled open the door, his weathered face clouded by his heavy breathing. Little in his craggy features had changed over the ten years. His marksman's eyes were as sharp as ever and he didn't look a day older. A gust of freezing air hit them, stinging their faces. Rake got down, wind roaring all around, and helped Carrie out.

'Fog's coming. We need to be quick,' said Henry. He embraced Rake, and firmly gripped Carrie's hand. He had raised a dozen children like Rake, their parents vanished or useless through drugs and drink. Rake and Henry were like father and son.

As Mike took the helicopter up again, they crouched, shielding luggage from the down draught. The sound of the throbbing rotor blades faded, leaving a sudden quiet. Carrie took in the island's desolation.

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

'I'll bring you both up,' said Henry.

Carrie hoisted her pack onto her back. 'Are Akna's parents with her?' she asked.

Without answering, Henry set off. That was enough to confirm to Rake what he had suspected. 'They're not,' he said, taking Carrie's arm to steady her on the slippery ground.

'Can they find them?'

'I don't know.'

'She's a child. She'll need her mom with her.'

Rake wasn't sure what to say. Akna's father, Don Ondola, adopted son to Henry and adoptive brother and best friend to Rake, had murdered her mother in a drug-crazed rage. He was also the father of his daughter's unborn child.

TWO

Little Diomede, Alaska, USA

Carrie held her patient's feverish hand. Soaked in sweat, Akna stared up at this stranger. She lay on sheets on a lumpy black sofa in a hut built into the hillside next to the Catholic church that had fallen derelict when the missionaries left. She had a rounded face with a dimple on her left cheek. Her skin was creased and dried from synthetic dope smuggled onto the island. Her eyes carried an emptiness Rake had seen so often when the human spirit just gives up. Akna had shaved her head halfway up the skull leaving a neat ridge of black hair on the top. She wore a red T-shirt, with a silver heart on the front. She was a kid, like millions of teenagers who experimented with fashion and hairstyles as they grew up. Somewhere, in what he saw, was the little girl whom Rake used to put on the slide in the school playground. Akna was five when he last saw her, laughing and full of excitement. She was about to give birth or die but it was as if neither one meant anything to her. Her waters had broken thirty-six hours earlier, but she had told no one and infection had brought her temperature dangerously high. Now she was barely conscious.

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

‘We need to sit you up, Akna, to change you,’ said Carrie softly. The room was warm and Carrie worked, jacket off, in a red denim shirt, sleeves rolled up and hair held back with a rubber band. In an adjoining room, Henry and three other men prepared a stretcher to carry Akna down.

‘A helicopter is taking you to Nome. You’ll be fine, Akna. Just fine,’ said Joan, laying a towel wet with sterilized cold water on Akna’s brow. She wore one-piece blue dungarees and was a thin sinewy woman, with short black hair and wide concentrating eyes.

Rake’s phone lit with a message from the helicopter pilot.

Nome then back you.

That was bad. It should have been forty minutes. Now, Rake calculated an hour from Wales to Nome, fifteen minutes at the hospital, maybe another fifteen minutes for refueling, then an hour and a half back to Little Diomed. Maybe more. He touched Carrie’s shoulder. She followed him to the next room where Henry was. He spoke quietly. ‘Mike messaged me. There’ll be a delay.’

‘How long?’ asked Carrie.

‘A couple of hours at least.’

‘It’s too long, Rake. We need to get another helicopter.’

‘I’ll try.’

Carrie returned to Akna.

‘We’ll take her down to the school anyway,’ said Henry. ‘Get her close to the helipad.’

The National Guard in Nome kept a Black Hawk on standby, and Rake punched in the number and spoke to a duty officer who said they were handling a civilian emergency call a hundred

MAN ON ICE

miles north where bad weather had come down. Rake dialed his military unit at the Elmendorf-Richardson base outside of Anchorage. 'We might be able to lay our hands on a Black Hawk that's coming out of service,' said the sergeant who answered.

'Use my name, Captain Raymond Ozenna, and put us top to the list, sergeant,' instructed Rake, knowing that the chances of getting anything within a couple of hours was slim.

'Understood, sir.'

The hut shook as a wind gusted through the east side of the island. Rake pulled back a torn curtain and pushed open an ice-covered window to gauge the weather. The way clouds scudded across the property, snow was coming. A couple of hours and Little Diomedea could be wrapped in fog or howling blizzard. Henry was right. Temperatures and conditions could change in minutes

'They'll get back to me about a helicopter,' he told Carrie. 'We need to get Akna down to the school.'

'We can't move her, Rake.' said Carrie. 'She could die.'

'We have to risk it, Dr Walker.' Joan wrung out a towel and soaked it in fresh warm water. 'If she worsens here we can't even get her to the helipad.'

'There are signs of internal hemorrhage.'

'Henry and the men will take her. He's done this before.'

Akna's eyes rolled; she was close to going into shock. 'Akna, are you there?' Carrie whispered, saying anything to keep the girl conscious. 'Stay with us, Akna. Tell me the name of your favorite song?'

Akna didn't respond.

Carrie checked the small front-room and kitchen. Dirty plates

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

lay around and there was a smell of drains and rotting food. She rolled in her lips, glanced at Rake, and moved her gaze quickly away. He had seen that look before, in a mess of a house in Kabul. But then they had shared their astonishment at the muddle and filth. This was different because it was part of the man she was about to marry.

Rake's phone lit. *Sorry. Fog.*

'Mike can't make it from Nome back until the fog lifts.' He kept his tone measured, but a thousand bits of anger tumbled through his mind. Why was there no helicopter? Why had this happened to Akna? Why was this Carrie's first encounter with his island? However much you love a person some things are best left unseen.

'Snow will be in by then,' said Henry with a look of genuine alarm.

'How long?' Carrie, like Rake, was keeping her frustration in check.

'Impossible to say.'

'We have to get her to hospital, Rake. We need to make it happen.'

Sometimes weather and technical problems cut Little Diomedé off for weeks on end. The islanders were meant to get flights every Monday and Wednesday. It rarely happened like that. Rake called back the desk sergeant at Elmendorf-Richardson and heard how they were already doing a medical emergency evacuation up at the Goose Creek Correctional Center, the big prison, and there were a couple of others that placed Akna's pregnancy way down the list of priorities.

Carrie read Rake's stressed expression. 'Let me talk to them.'

MAN ON ICE

They stepped out of Akna's earshot. Rake put the call on open speaker. "This is Dr Carrie Walker, sergeant—"

'Captain Ozenna has briefed me, ma'am.'

'I'm the doctor. You need to understand – if you do not airlift this teenager to hospital now, she will die.'

THIS WAS EXACTLY THE Dr Carrie Walker whom Rake had first laid eyes on outside Kabul airport when clearing the area after a suicide bombing. She had insisted on staying with a young soldier lying half out of a mangled and charred vehicle. Flames licked around the bodywork. It was only a matter of minutes before they would reach the fuel tank. An old minivan close by might be a second bomb. Anyone among the gathering crowd could have had a gun or grenade. Rake was no doctor, but knew that someone who had had both legs torn off in an explosion in Afghanistan had the slimmest chance of survival. If any. Period.

'Ma'am, you need to leave.'

'Take his arm,' she instructed.

'Ma'am. Leave. NOW!'

'I'm a doctor and this is my patient. Help me!'

Sirens filled the air. Gunshots erupted as police moved people away. This attack wasn't over. Everyone apart from Carrie, it seemed, expected something else to go down. Straight away he saw stubborn determination, the most difficult for a soldier to handle. But with her blonde hair tied back, and wearing a white medical smock, she made herself a ripe target for killing or kidnap. There was no time for debate. He slung his M-16 carbine

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

behind his back, lifted her onto his shoulders, and ran towards the airport gate. She yelled, but she didn't fight back.

The fuel tank blew, sending flames and metal shards into the air. Seconds later, the minivan went up in a much bigger explosion that sent a fireball down the road, engulfing people and market stalls. He ran into the airport compound until the heat faded and he felt winter cold on his face again. He lowered her to the ground. He expected her to be grateful or angry, but she was neither. She told him later that she thought she was being kidnapped and that he was an Afghan because of his Asiatic features.

'Are you OK, ma'am?'

She checked herself, quickly, professionally, patting herself down, running her hands up and down her arms and legs, testing vision, touching her nose, her ears, all in less than ten seconds. 'I'm fine. Your men?'

At least one was dead, John Tikaani, a twenty-year-old private from Nome, the one Carrie had been trying to save. 'We have casualties.'

As he turned to go, she saw that Rake's sleeve was torn and soaked with blood where something had ripped through.

'Wait.' She started cleaning it up. 'You need to get this treated.'

'Next time, when a soldier says go, you need to go,' he said gently.

'I won't. Not while a patient is alive.'

She had said she fell for him because he made her feel safe without suffocating her. Carrie was neither an easy nor a settled person, and out there amid the heat and bombs, you didn't go for a man because of the cut of his suit or because he made you

MAN ON ICE

laugh. She admitted she never really understood Rake, but he satisfied her longing for the unusual because he came from a remote Alaskan island that sounded contradictory, stark and romantic like a poem, and because Rake himself was smart and rough.

After their first night together, she told him he was not like any previous lover, mostly doctors who knew the human body too well to enjoy it. Rake had not been over-eager to please nor selfishly fast. He was unrefined. He hadn't read manuals and worked from instinct. He was generous, but knew what he wanted. Carrie said she had never had sex like it before. It might have been the best ever; impossible to say because it was so different.

One evening, when things had quietened, they had dinner and he found she spoke fairly good Russian, much better than the Russian he had learned with the Eskimo Scouts. He asked where she was from.

'Brooklyn, to be quick,' she answered, but with her eyes wide open, alive with mischief.

'And if you want to be slower?' he said. 'If the person asking is curious?'

'Like you?'

'Could be.'

'And if I liked them?' She kept her expression straight, her eyes still dancing.

'Yes.'

'I'm half Estonian, half Russian. My parents married as young medics at the huge Soviet submarine base in Estonia. They were Soviet citizens. That collapsed, and those historical hatreds

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

erupted. The Estonians hated the Russians as occupiers worse than the Nazis. The marriage became strained and they saved it by moving to work in a private hospital in Calcutta, India, where I was born and raised until I was eight. I saw my first corpse when I was five. And my first firefight when I was seven. We were out in the countryside when an insurgent gang attacked. I learned to do bandages and morphine injections. My mother said she had never seen a steadier hand with a syringe. It should have repelled me. But it didn't, and that was when I knew I wanted to be a trauma doctor and that's why I stick with my patient until they are dead or safe.'

'So that's why you did what you did back at the airport.'

She stopped playing him with her eyes. 'That's what I am, Rake. I work for an international hospital group which has sent me to Malaysia, Bangladesh, Kenya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It's based in Brooklyn, where I have an apartment next door to my younger sister. She's a doctor too, except she doesn't remember much about India, so she's not like me and by this stage I would expect most people to say this is all too much information.'

'I would say not enough.'

'I've never told anyone like this before, all at once, like in a stream of consciousness.'

He laughed, and that made her laugh, a kind of belly laugh that lifted the coiled tension of months in Afghanistan.

'So where are you from?' she asked.

'That's what they say as soon as you step into an army camp,' he said.

'What do you tell them?'

'Alaska.'

MAN ON ICE

‘That’s it?’

‘Or if I want a game, I tell them China or Korea. A lot of people don’t like Eskimos.’

‘I thought Eskimo was a derogatory term.’

He explained that Eskimos were Alaskan and Russian, Inuit were from Canada and Greenland. It was about language, tribe, disputed history, and they were all family. Then just a few minutes after the laughter and he was telling her this, his phone had rung. Seconds later, hers rang too. Another bomb. Familiar territory.

RAKE LISTENED AS CARRIE, in her medical-crisis voice, challenged every reason the duty sergeant gave for not sending a helicopter for Akna.

‘There’s weather all over the state, Dr Walker,’ he said. ‘We will get to you as fast as possible.’

‘When?’

‘You need to allow twelve hours.’

Carrie no longer held back her exasperation. ‘In twelve hours, you’ll be airlifting out a corpse.’

‘Your patient is fortunate that she has you with her.’

‘She is dying.’

‘You have my word, ma’am. We’ll be as fast as we can.’

‘Make it faster.’

Henry brought in the stretcher and laid it by the sofa. He and Joan quietly prepared for the journey down to the school.

They waited until the wind dropped. Rake opened the door to check. The island glimmered in pale daylight. A line of low-lying fog spread across the shoreline. ‘Let’s go,’ he said.

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

'Akna. Can you hear me? Look at me, Akna,' Carrie said.

'What's happening?' Akna hadn't spoken before. Pain creased across her face.

'Your baby is coming early. We're taking you to the school to wait for the helicopter.'

Akna grimaced. They wrapped her in woolen blankets, lifted her onto the stretcher, laid a seal skin on top and then another blanket. Henry made sure her face was covered, no skin exposed, and secured a rubber tube to her mouth for breathing. The temperature outside was minus 15 Celsius with a wind ferocity to double that. If they made a mistake, Akna could die on the short journey to the school. Henry and the three other men carried her.

Carrie took the rear, her medical pack slung over her shoulder. Joan walked alongside Akna. Rake led.

At the end of the walkway, he took them down steps past an old military observation post, abandoned by the National Guard nearly thirty years earlier. There had been no government presence on the island since. Step by treacherous step, he guided them past the front doors of homes marked by drying seal skins, tied meat, and the skulls of walrus and polar bears.

Rake kicked a fallen ice block off the next walkway, testing the surface underneath, and brought them off the hillside to rocky ground wide enough for Carrie to join Joan and check on the patient. On one side was a shop called the Native Store and on the other an old wooden building that housed a laundry and a clinic where Henry got the stretcher from.

Rake crossed the small playground, testing the safest way through the red swing and the yellow and blue slide and on to

MAN ON ICE

the ramp to the school, the sturdiest building in the village, warm, with stocks of food and hot water.

Wild birds flew out of the hillside and Rake caught their smell in the air. They swept back and forth, shadowing through the dim daylight, but seemingly going nowhere. They had distinct styles of flight to mark the weather. Henry had taught him how they flew one way as the hunting season approached and another during the summer weeks of the midnight sun. They had a way of flight with fog, early snowfalls, full moons, and the seasons. Now they were different again. This was how they flew when a helicopter was approaching. You saw the birds long before you heard the engine.

The birds went into a frenzy. Then he heard an engine.

‘There’s a chopper,’ he said, wedging open the door for Akna to be carried into the school. But how? Maybe one of the private companies had taken the risk, maybe not from Nome, but from Wales or Teller, the closer mainland settlements.

Carrie’s eyes brightened. ‘Well done, Rake!’ She looked around. ‘Where?’

‘From the north. See the birds?’

‘Amazing. You can tell from them.’ She followed her patient into the warmth inside to get her ready.

A balcony wrapped around the school. Rake ran onto it, checking his phone on the way. There was no message from Nome or Anchorage, no missed calls. To the south and north, he saw nothing. He looked back up the hillside. Nothing.

The noise became louder. Then, straight ahead, he worked out what was happening. The helicopter had been impossible to detect with the naked eye because it was camouflaged against

HUMPHREY HAWKSLEY

the dark ridge of Big Diomedede. Now it rose up – a Russian two-engine 38, lit like a beacon with the Red Cross of a medical aircraft illuminated clearly on its sides.

It took a second for him to absorb what was before him. What he was seeing was unbelievable. But it was there, real and close.

Navigating the icy rocks on the pathway, he ran down to the unlit helipad to guide the aircraft in. He prayed that fog and wind would keep away. He held up his flashlight with both hands, flashing the traditional SOS Morse Code emergency signal. The helicopter snapped on a search lamp that caught him full in the face. He turned against the imminent down-draught of the rotor blades, looking back towards Russia.

His tongue suddenly dried in his mouth as he sifted through what was happening. Rapidly, he processed what he saw and it didn't make sense. It was an incredible sight, a terrifying one, and he had no idea what it meant.

Spread right across the ridgeline, seven more helicopters ascended from behind the larger island. He recognized three as troop carriers and four as new Russian attack helicopters, two on each flank, flying low and heading straight for his island.