

A year in Sitka is fact-packed fiction taking place in cozy Sitka, Alaska. Nestled in the mountains, alongside the ocean, you will follow a young, lonely woman through life changing events and unique experiences.

A Year in Sitka

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A Year in Sitka

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A Year in Sitka

Mark Deans

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Chapter One: New Year's Resolution

“Hello, my name is Rachel. I guess you already know that much. So you're going to be my silent, unseen companion for the next twelve months. Hopefully you'll stick around for the entire time as things can get somewhat tedious around here. I'll do my best to keep things interesting. Oh yes, Happy New Year to you. Indeed today another year begins here in good old Sitka. It will be my twenty-ninth one, with my birthday being in June. Twenty-nine has always been my lucky number, so I hope for the best this year. Why twenty-nine? My dad always wore a football jersey of the Bears. His parents came from Illinois. Anyhow, the jersey had the number twenty-nine on it. Also my baby brother was born on April twenty-nine.

“My father and my brother have been the most important men in my life up until now. I guess I should say were the most important men in my life because my father passed away a few years ago. I still talk to him at the cemetery. I talk to my mom too. They were good parents. They fought quite a bit, but there was never violence of any kind that I knew about. My dad worked hard for a living in the lucrative fishing industry we have here. He worked at the processing plant his entire working life, until he was called home by God. My mother never worked. She babysat for couples at the church, but I mean she never worked at a conventional job. Times were never too tight, but we had to conserve now and then.

“Maybe it's good that I didn't grow up with the proverbial silver spoon in my mouth. I make a good living at doing massage therapy, but I have to pay a hefty price for insurance. I've had to tighten my belt many times over the years. When my parents died, I sort of took over the house. I've never left this house. My parents died when I was twenty-four and I still lived here at the time. Those first few months were a nightmare. I hated it. I even moved in with my brother, who lives in Juneau, for two weeks. There are still days I sense their presence. One time I woke up to the smell of bacon and thought my mom was cooking breakfast. The wind was actually blowing the smell from a neighbor's house in through my cracked open bedroom window.

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“Yes this is an old house. I do my best to keep it up though. I have plenty of time to do this seeing how my social calendar is rather lacking for the most part. The house doesn’t get too dirty; cat hair is the biggest culprit. That’s right, you have to meet Frosty, my cat. I named him that because he adores the snow and he’s all white. He can play in the snow forever it seems. I was going to name him Snowball, but I think that name has been overdone. My yard is pretty small, I’m right in town, but Frosty is plenty happy with what he has. He’s a good cat and keeps me company regularly. I bought him as a kitten just after my parents died. It was my brother’s idea. Frosty has made the transition a little easier. If he ever dies, I’ll have to get another cat. I can’t live here totally alone.

“I suppose someday I’ll get lucky and find a man who will want to marry me despite my flaws. It’s not like there isn’t a surplus of men here in Alaska. They outnumber the women easily. With those odds how can I lose? I find it borderline pathetic that, at my age, I haven’t even had a serious relationship since high school, if you can call anything in high school serious. I’ve had maybe one date a year since high school. I’ve been tempted to do one of those dating services, but I chicken out every time. Who knows what kind of people resort to that?

“My brother found a good woman to share his life with. They fell in love right away and haven’t looked back since. They relocated to Juneau about five years ago now. That’s right, it was just a few months before our parents passed away. They have no children, but are expecting their first around mid-May. I can’t wait. I’ll be an aunt! I know they’ll be great parents. My brother works for the city, so when his wife quits her job, after the baby is born, they’ll still have enough income to get them by easily. I don’t harbor any resentment toward my brother as he has taken life by the horns and done very well, but sometimes I wish I had it that good.

“So did you make any New Year’s resolutions? Not me. I used to but they rarely seem to come to fruition. I shouldn’t say that. About ten years ago I made a commitment to taking a brisk walk every morning regardless of weather. I’ve only missed that walk three times. Twice due to illness, once due to weather. Okay, I caved in one time. It was freezing rain outside. We get a lot of rain here in Sitka. I have come to look forward to those walks. I take a different route each day of the week. Sometimes I have to look at my daily planner to remind myself what route to take. The walks are all about

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one mile long and I'm convinced they help keep me in shape physically and mentally.

"I used to have a real problem with weight gain. I was never huge, but chubby I guess you'd say. People would comment that I was well equipped for winter. There was this girl, back in junior high, who once said, 'I guess the humpbacks are coming early this year.' Humpback whales visit the area during winter months here and she got more than a few laughs with that one. By high school, I had enough of the jokes and cruelty. I dieted and exercised myself silly. I gave up my addiction of candy bars and substituted apples and oranges. At first I detested this change, but now I can't go a day without eating one or the other and walking. I can still put on the pounds if I let my guard down, so I don't let my guard down. Not even during these holiday seasons.

"Well, make yourself at home. I'd prefer you didn't sit in my favorite rocking chair. It used to belong to dad. The football games will be on now. We don't have to wait like you guys in the east or central time zones. I know our church attendance would improve if the pro games weren't on in the morning. I'm not a real big college football fan, but it passes the time. Nothing is open today anyhow. I'll make something to snack on soon, but don't expect junk food. We should hit thirty degrees today. Not bad really. Good walking weather. You can join me on future walks, but I'd prefer to go solo today. I'll be back before long."

Greetings. I will be your narrator behind the scene, giving you some inside info from time to time. So Rachel has left for her daily walk. You may have not taken notice, as you're not familiar with her, but Rachel wasn't totally herself. She didn't even show you around the place. Give her a day or two to get used to this arrangement. She is not at all accustomed to entertaining anyone, so this is very out of the ordinary for her. She's a bit uncomfortable, that's why she opted to walk alone. Fear not. As she said, you shall be joining her on future walks. I suppose you may as well watch a football game, like Rachel suggested, until she gets back. And she is very serious about the rocking chair request. Don't start the year off on the wrong foot.

"That was refreshing," Rachel said as she came back into the warm house after completing her walk. "I see you've found a good game on. There sure isn't much going on outside. I suppose most of the population is tired from a

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long night of partying and celebrating. I wish I would get invited just once. I don't drink much, but I'm sure there are other things to do. My brother and his wife get together with some friends and fondue. If you've never cooked fondue style you really need to try it. You can dip many varieties of food into melted cheese, chocolate or boiling oil. Personally, I love cooking chunks of steak in the oil. I have to limit my chocolate intake, and cheese isn't much better.

“This is really embarrassing. I don't know what else to tell you about. I don't consider myself a loner, but it sure appears that's how things have worked themselves out. The dictionary defines a loner as a person or animal that prefers to be alone. I would welcome friends, but I guess I don't go out of the way to make them either. Loners spend a lot of time reading, watching television, doing various hobbies and spending time with their pets. That's me in a nutshell. I read a lot. I read the local paper, books and what have you. Yes, I even read the dictionary as indicated earlier. I think it's neat to expand one's vocabulary. I only subscribe to one magazine and it's related to my career. You'd probably find it rather boring, but I've learned some things from it.

“As far as television shows, I watch whatever's on. I watch news, weather, sports, dramas, documentaries, comedies, movies and even on rare occasions cartoons. There are only a handful of shows I try not to miss, but please don't label me a couch potato. I honestly only watch maybe two hours of television a day and some days it's even less. I know that I should more actively pursue outside interests. I'm not real sure what I would like to try, but this year I will try something. I guess you can call that my resolution for the New Year.

“Pursuing something outside of the home would be a perfect way to meet friends. You know, I have this philosophy about friendship. It's a lot like panning for gold, which has a strong history here in Alaska. You use a pan to find the solid pieces and the small stuff gets sent back into the water. A real friend is like one of those solid pieces. You don't want to lose it. It has value. You meet so many people in life, but only a select few are important enough to hold onto. Although I'm not an expert on the subject, my guess is that a real good friend is far more valuable than gold.

“Not to change the subject, but have you ever noticed how the most bitter of enemies can become the tightest of friends. I've also watched the closest of

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friends become the worst of enemies. Why is that? There must really be a thin line between love and hate. How can one minute you loath a person and another minute love them? I can't really say that I've ever experienced this. I guess that's how a lot of divorces occur. I hope that if I marry I never get divorced. Nobody in my family has ever divorced. From the statistics I've read about divorce, I think my family is in the minority. Granted, some of these people don't always marry for the right reasons either. I'm not so sure why I got off on this tangent, but I must admit it's very nice to have someone to talk with who isn't a feline.

“Don't get me wrong, I do have some friends. Not real good ones. We don't go out to dinner or shopping together much. We might speak on the phone once a month, or go to a movie or two each year, but that's basically the extent of it. The girlfriends I have are married and raising children. You just don't have much free time when you're in that position. If they aren't going to baseball games or gymnastics, then they're doing homework or hosting slumber parties.

“Parenting has got to be tough. Your entire world changes with just one child, let alone two or three or more. You can no longer sleep in on your days off. Things like the television, telephone and computer are now shared and you may have to wait a good long time before it's your turn to use them. You have more laundry to do, dishes to wash, food and clothes to buy. You have to be responsible and loving, yet in charge and nurturing at the same time. You make one slip in the public's eye and people talk about you and doubt your capability of raising a child. And all this assumes you have a perfectly healthy and cooperative child. I've gotten a lot of this from books and documentaries by the way. My two girlfriends have also told me bits and pieces that go hand-in-hand with what I've acquired on my own. I wonder if I'd be up to the task of raising children.

“My folks did a good job as far as I'm concerned. I'm not just saying that to be respectful to the deceased either. I know it's commonplace to compliment people when they've passed away, but I think my mom and dad did right by us. Charles, my brother, and I were always taken care of. We may not have had all the toys and best clothes money could buy, but we never went hungry. We did chores around the house. We didn't really get an allowance, like most kids at our school, but we didn't mind. Dad explained to us that we needed to learn how to be responsible even if we weren't always rewarded

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for it. We were brought up fairly strict, especially by today's standards. We did our chores, respected our parents and attended church every Sunday.

"Hey, you can go to church with me tomorrow. It's a beautiful church. It's no Saint Michaels, but it's nice. Saint Michaels has some great history. I think it was built in the mid eighteenth hundreds. In nineteen sixty-six Saint Michaels burned down. Now it's a focal point of interest to many tourists. It has some old and beautiful Russian artifacts. My family went there forever it seemed. My current church is more in line with American beliefs and Christianity.

"Yes, there is a Russian theme all over town. Lots of the local shops have Russian-style gifts and art. I like some of it, but I'm not as crazy about it as my grandparents were. They were my mother's parents and they loved anything to do with Mother Russia. Their furniture, their food and even some of their clothing were of Russian influence. I'll have to prepare you some Russian cuisine while you're here. I make a few dishes that I've come close to perfecting.

"I've actually inherited several authentic Russian recipes from my grandmother, aunts and even my parents. My brother hates just about all of it, but I like several dishes. Some of my favorites are mushroom noodle soup, beef stroganov and berry kissel, which is about the best dessert you can imagine. Plus, with it being full of blackberries and raspberries, it has some serious nutrients in it too.

"I'll tell you what; let me look through the cupboards and refrigerator to see if I have the ingredients to make any of those dishes. All of the sudden I'm starting to crave it. I guess we'll have to ride the remainder of this day out somehow. Food and football, now that sounds like a good day to me. I only wish the entire year would be this relaxing."

As you can see, Rachel is a very down-to-earth person. She means no harm to anyone, but doesn't have the confidence to get into the social scene. I suspect that spending a year with you will assist her in making that transition. And if not, there's nothing wrong with living a peaceful existence the way she does. Well enjoy the games, and enjoy the Russian fare that Rachel will likely make today. She's a pretty good cook, yet has nobody to cook for. You'll find that out for yourself, as well as a host of other things. After all, your year in Sitka has merely begun.

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Later that day the phone rang. Almost all of the phone calls Rachel received were either work-related or telemarketers. This time it was her brother, Charles, calling to wish her a Happy New Year. Whenever the two talked it was almost always Rachel who took the initiative to get in touch. This was a refreshing change of pace for her brother to make the effort.

“Hey, Rachel. Happy New Year to you.”

“Thanks, Charles, right back at ya. Did you have a good New Year’s Eve party?”

“Actually it was one of the better ones. We grilled, can you believe that? It never got too cold, so why not? It was our turn to host the festivities and Hope (Charles’ wife) agreed to do things a little different this year. We still had the fondue pot going, so it was kind of a ‘best of both worlds’ meal. We did cheese in the fondue pot this time, with broccoli and breadsticks. What did you do?” Charles asked this almost fearing a negative response.

“Same thing as last year, watched the various telecasts of different regions ringing in the New Year. I should really have come up with something better. Oh well, maybe I’ll start planning next year’s celebration a little earlier. How is Hope and my future niece or nephew today?”

“Still in bed. We were up until almost three a.m. so I’m the only one stirring around here. Hey, I have some serious cleaning up to do, so I’ll talk with you later.”

“Okay, thanks for calling,” Rachel said, wishing he would’ve talked longer.

“That’s Charles for ya, brief and to the point when it comes to me. He talks a mile a minute with other people, but I think he feels uncomfortable with me like he doesn’t exactly know what to say. I love him and all, but I wish he’d give me more of a chance to have an adult relationship with.”

Charles is an authentic good guy, but as Rachel suggests he has trouble relating to her. He can’t figure out why she would chose to live a life of solitude. Charles also feels a bit guilty having a spouse and many friends. He feels like Rachel is content on living in the past so to speak. While Charles bought a new all-wheel drive car and a big screen television with the money

he inherited from his parent's death, Rachel sank every dime she inherited into fixing up the old two-story house. Charles had hoped that by giving his sister a niece or nephew her life would come to be more complete and pleasurable.

“Charles and I used to be much closer. Though I don't fault my sister-in-law, Hope, for Charles' change in behavior, it started when he met her. I suppose it's only natural to want to spend more time with your girlfriend than your sister. Ever since then he's acted kind of reluctant to get close to me again. I don't recall doing anything to bring this on, but perhaps I did. The only adverse thing that may come from the birth of this new baby is the limited attention Charles now gives to me might be cut down even more. He'll have yet another person in his life that will rank higher than I do.

“Hope is really nice. She grew up in Juneau and her parents still live in the area. She is so excited to have this baby and to quit working. I envy her in a way. I wish to find a man like my brother, to take care of me and start a family with. Hope is very bright and attractive. She got her name because the doctors told her parents she would probably not live long after birth. She had some condition, I forget now what it was, which nearly ended her life just hours after birth. Her parents couldn't decide on naming her Faith or Hope, but eventually made up their minds. Obviously she overcame the odds and survived. I'm very happy that she's my sister-in-law and I know she genuinely cares for my brother. She will make a wonderful mother. I pray all goes well with her delivery, all things considered.

“And what an experience it would be to give birth. I'm not too big on pain, but it would be a dream to give life to a baby and bring him or her into a loving home. It sure would be a different existence than the one I'm currently accustomed to. I have very few sacrifices to make these days, and I can come and go as I please. Still, I hope to someday be able to raise a child alongside a husband who cares for me and the baby.

“I plan to be there, in Juneau, when the baby is born. Obviously I won't be in the delivery room, but this is a big moment for our tiny family. As the time gets closer I will let my clients know that I'm going to Juneau for a week in May. Boy that's one thing about working for yourself: No paid vacations. It will likely be the only week I will be taking off from my job this year.

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“I do have a great group of clients. I have so many regular and occasional clients that I rarely have to worry about paying the bills anymore. Keep in mind that this house is paid for, so that’s a big burden I don’t have to worry about. I charge a reasonable fee for my service and have two options for my customers. I offer a forty minute abbreviated massage or a full hour massage with lava stones. I have a few clients who come in every other week or so, during their lunch hour, and get the abbreviated massage. I also have two weekly regulars who get the one-hour package. I call those people my bread-and-butter clients. I can always count on them showing up. I really do enjoy my work despite the lack of benefits or co-worker camaraderie.

“There are also two other clients who were good friends of my parents. I’m almost certain the main reason they come here is out of a sense of wanting to be nice to me because they know what I’ve been through. I see one of these people at church, and I always want to come out and ask if they are coming to me out of pity. I never would be so bold as to do it of course, but I have my suspicions.

“Oh hey, another thing you are going to need to get used to is the fact that in winter months the sun sets pretty early around here. As you can see the clock says it’s quarter past three in the afternoon and the sun is already plummeting out of sight. Yes, sunset is scheduled for something like three twenty-four today. It could be worse. Way up in Fairbanks the temperature this morning was negative five, and the sun sets forty-five minutes sooner. Not only that, but the sun doesn’t even rise until almost eleven a.m. up there. So while this is going to seem unusual, and maybe even depressing, just wait until the summer when you start to wish the sun would go away. Alaska becomes the land of the midnight sun.

“I earlier said ‘way up in Fairbanks’ and I meant it. Alaska is so big that even if you split the state in half it would be bigger than Texas. There were some folks in Texas that lobbied to get Alaska to split into two different states, as they wanted Texas to remain the largest state. Once they found out that they would then become the third largest state, well that proposal sort of vanished.

“And while Fairbanks is a long trek, I’ve heard a comparable distance would be from New York City to Nashville, Tennessee, there is still a lot of land further north. How about Barrow, Alaska? This has to be one of the

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coldest places on American soil and the darkest during the winter. It's dark basically twenty-four hours a day right now up there. I couldn't stand that. Sure I spend most of my time indoors, but could you conceive not seeing the sun for days on end?

"Imagine getting into your car to go to work. It's, say, twenty below zero with the wind-chill and pitch black. The further north you go in Alaska, you'll notice more and more electrical plugs hanging out of the hoods and front grilles on the vehicles. These are used to plug in battery heaters. Without them you'll be hard pressed to start your car in that weather. You also have to watch that you don't park in water, because if it freezes you'll have some serious trouble even moving the vehicle. It takes a hearty soul to spend your life up in Northern Alaska.

"I'm happy to say it's not like that here. No, even places in the northern half of the lower forty-eight states experience more harsh winters than we do. We see many days above the freezing mark all winter, but the downside to it is the rain. I'd almost rather have snow, especially when it becomes freezing rain. Frosty would more than agree.

"Hey, why don't I get started on some Russian treats for us? I'll turn on the lights outside and you and Frosty can go out and get some fresh air. It's not too cold and there's a little snow for Frosty to romp in. It won't take me too long and then you can get a taste of my favorite Russian dessert."

Say, it isn't too cold out here, is it? I suspect once the sun is totally gone things will cool off more. Anyhow, Rachel is making for you the Russian dish known as Berry Kissel. Watch Frosty now, we can't have him running away. Not that he has ever even tried such a stunt. As I was saying, this dessert is made from blackberries and raspberries, along with sugar, cornstarch and lemon juice. Don't get too hungry for it though. Once she's done preparing it, the dish takes a couple of hours to cool. Then again, she might set it out here and speed up the process. I suppose this will wrap up the majority of day one here in Sitka. Tomorrow you will accompany Rachel to church. She doesn't usually have much of a schedule on Sundays, so hopefully things won't get too tedious. Goodbye for now.

After some idle chit-chat and dessert taste testing, January first was in the books. Enter Sunday morning.

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“Sorry if I woke you, I usually get up pretty early to get ready for church. I don’t know why, it’s not like anyone takes notice of me from what I can tell. I guess this is the one time during the week I get to be around people. Some weeks it’s the only time I get out, so I feel I need to look my best. The weatherman said we should hit a high of thirty-three today. Let’s hope no rain is on the horizon since it could get ugly being so close to the freezing mark most of the day.

“Don’t get worried if you’re not a regular church attendee. This church is far from intimidating. The service doesn’t go too long and the people are mostly pretty nice. Some people even wear jeans, though most dress up a little. Our pastor is a good guy, younger than what most people think of when they hear the word ‘pastor’. He identifies well with the young adults, which is the anchor of our church. Hey, we should get going.

“This is my car, well actually SUV. I can’t walk to this church, unlike St. Michael’s. I bought it during the SUV craze, which unfortunately hit right before the gas price increase craze. It’s not a big vehicle; I have no need for that. Actually, I don’t really have a need for anything larger than a compact car, but I loved the look of this vehicle. I test drove it and was hooked. I love yellow and this little four-wheel drive is yellow personified.

“As you can see, I didn’t really go all out when I bought her. I have the manual windows and manual seats. It’s not like I need to unlock the other doors for anyone or ever lower the windows. Nobody else ever drives it, so I don’t change the seat position. I walk to the bank and rarely eat at the local fast-food style places so power windows aren’t necessary. I don’t drive very often, maybe twenty to forty miles during an average week. I try to get her on a good driving road for several miles a few times a month, which is pretty limited on this island. My brother says this exercise keeps it in shape and helps something called the EGR system. I don’t know what it is or what it does other than keep pollutants lower, but I trust Charles and want to keep this vehicle for awhile.

“Well, here’s the church. Obviously we won’t have any trouble finding where we’ve parked. Not only does the bright yellow of my SUV stick out, but this is not a very big church either. I bet next week it will be even less full as the professional football playoffs start up. I generally sit in the middle,

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on the left side, but I wouldn't mind if you'd rather be seated somewhere else. I just need to quick use the ladies room."

Allow me to let you in on a secret. No, it isn't the fact that Rachel is making sure she looks presentable in the bathroom either. That guy, in the navy blue shirt, in the third row actually likes Rachel. He's single, lives in town and has attended this same church since birth. He, unlike Rachel, isn't shy, yet he has only talked to her a few times. He wants to get to know Rachel better, but struggles with the right way to do it. Rachel is totally ignorant to this; at least I think she is. He started having feelings toward Rachel when her battery went dead, after she left her headlights on, and he helped jump start her SUV. That was a month ago, but he has yet to muster up the courage to follow up in his quest to get to know her better. Rachel is under the illusion that she is unlikable. I hope this young man acts soon, because I believe Rachel would be rather receptive to him.

"We'd better grab a seat; I hate to be one of the last people sitting down. I always think that people who can't manage to be seated in the minutes before the service starts should arrive earlier. I know I shouldn't judge, but we aren't here to socialize. You can do that after the service. Okay, time to be quiet."

The service was a well received one and Rachel got a little inspired by the message of trying to understand why bitter people are bitter and how to deal with them. Not that she encountered many unpleasant folks, but she was always one to enjoy learning about most anything. The young pastor dismissed his congregation right on time, which was pretty common.

"I thought the message was pretty good. Maybe it touched someone in attendance today. I could almost see myself being bitter toward the world over how circumstances have worked themselves out in my life. I've lost my parents. I have only a handful of friends, none of which are especially close. I have no husband or boyfriend and no immediate one in sight. Oh, speaking of men, you see that guy over there. My SUV's battery died some weeks ago and he bailed me out. We talked a lot and he seemed legitimately interested in getting to know me, but he hasn't spoken to me since. I don't ever see him with a girl, or a guy for that matter. Hey, you never know. We seemed to interact really well, but maybe he's that way with everyone. It was probably

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wishful thinking on my part to assume he actually wanted to get to know me. He was likely just being kind.

“You know, at this point I always head home and spend the day with some light exercising, reading and a little TV. However, maybe we should do something different. I don’t know, what would I want to see if I was visiting Sitka? We have a great bird sanctuary just up the road. It doesn’t really open to the public until spring, however. It’s the destination on one of my daily walks actually. I’ll make sure to take you with me when I go there next.

“The place is called the Alaska Raptor Center. There are many different birds of prey residing there and the workers take care of sick or injured birds as well. They mainly focus on bald eagles, but there are also owls and falcons and other birds. I’ll have to take you there in a few months when they’re open for tours. But for today, what else can we come up with? Our tourist season occurs when all the good things are going on and that isn’t for some time.

“Speaking of bald eagles, you’ll be hard-pressed to find a wider array of them outside of Alaska. While Hawaii may be the only state without bald eagles, they thrive here in Alaska. At almost any time you can look up in the sky, when it isn’t raining too hard, and see eagles flying above. They love to spend time at the waterfront, being birds of prey. Back in the lower forty-eight, you’d be more likely to see robins or sparrows flying around. Not here, we have eagles aplenty.

“Another neat thing we could, nay should, do is visit the Isabel Miller museum. If you want to learn quickly and abundantly about our culture and history, stopping there is a necessity. You see, not only do we have a rich heritage from Russia, but before they arrived here a group called the Tlingits were already here. They are this area’s version of Native Americans. Being winter, the museum isn’t open on Sunday. Boy, this may not be a good day to do much. It’s the dead of winter, it’s a Sunday and a holiday weekend at that. I guess we’ll have to do those excursions, amongst some other ones, later on. At least you were able to see my church.

“Back in the early eighteen hundreds, the Russians actually battled with the local Tlingit people here. The Tlingit clans, I have been told that there were three in all around here, also carved many totem poles. Not so many years

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ago some of the Tlingits made a thirty-five foot tall totem pole to honor those who have gone before them. They have a strong sense of family.

“Speaking of which, I should also take you to Juneau to meet my brother and his wife. Obviously I’ll be going there in May for the birth of their child, but that is so far off. I should warn you there really isn’t an easy way to get to Juneau from here or from anywhere. You see, you can’t merely drive there. I have to take a ferry and it isn’t a quick ferry either. It literally takes a half day and costs over two hundred dollars round trip. For this reason I don’t go there too often, nor does my brother return to Sitka frequently. You can bring your vehicle along with you, which I do. Actually it is a nice system and what else can you do? Okay, one could fly commercially. I suppose I could also arrange for a charter flight, but I personally am not too sure I want to attempt my first flying expedition on such a small airplane.

“No, I’ve never flown before so I’m somewhat apprehensive about it. I have read that it’s thirty-seven times safer to fly than to drive. I’m willing to try it, mind you, but I’d prefer my first flight to be on a big jet and not a little plane. There is so much in life that I have never done. Partly because I’m secluded here in Sitka and partly because I guess I just don’t have the ambition to do it. Maybe with you here this year, I will attempt to do some new things. After all, we do have a little airport just minutes from here. We even get airline service to places like Seattle and Juneau. I’ll have to fly to Juneau when I get the nerve to. The obvious drawback to flying is not being able to bring my SUV. It would take far less time to travel, however, and if I booked the ticket far enough in advance it would be cheaper than the ferry as well.

“Wow, we’re already home. The time flew by having someone to talk to. I’m so glad I have this garage to park my SUV in. I couldn’t bear to have her out all night in such a climate. I made an observation while shopping around for a car. Do you notice that there are no vehicles named after cities or states east of the Mississippi? Think about all the ones named after cities like Laredo, Sante Fe, Tacoma and Tahoe. Or even states like Montana, Colorado and the Dakotas have vehicles named after them. They even name vehicles after things that are associated with the west like rams and avalanches. At least they gave Alaska one with the Denali.

“Sorry I couldn’t come up with something more amusing to do today. At least church was good. You’ll have to forgive me, I really don’t entertain

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much. Okay, I never entertain. I do have some movies I've only watched once or twice that we could see. I love horror movies. Well, tasteful horror movies which kind of sounds like an oxymoron, but there are some out there. I like the chick-flick style movies too, but they sometimes depress me because almost every one ends with the girl finding a great guy who loves her.

"I tell you what, why don't we take a walk to the waterfront. It's nice enough out and no rain is in sight for the time being. We should probably go right after lunch because, lest you forget, the sun will set not long after. Now what to do about lunch? I don't want to overkill the Russian thing so I'll make my favorite meal done Mexican style.

"Now even if you really enjoy this meal, like me, I can only make it sparingly in the winter months. You see, to buy vegetables out of season in Alaska is very pricey. Why a single tomato alone can cost in the neighborhood of more than a couple bucks. Outrageous, isn't it? Well, imagine how much the shipping costs involved are. Add to that my need for oranges and apples and I can pay a hefty amount for my produce during these cold months.

"Keep in mind, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. We, here in Alaska, enjoy something no other state does. The residents here, young or old, get a nice little check every year from the profits of the Alaskan oil pipeline. You receive it for simply being a resident of the Final Frontier. How neat is that?

"Back to the Mexican food I plan to make for lunch. Now I like hot things, but not super hot. I use jalapenos and other spices to liven up the food, but I don't go all out with stuff that is going to make your eyes water for an hour. I love cooking with cilantro. Sometimes I look for recipes to add it to when the recipe doesn't even call for it. Sometimes I think I would love to visit Mexico. I can't imagine how hot it gets there or all those dangerous and venomous creatures they live with. Maybe someday I'll sneak aboard a docked cruise ship here and eventually end up south of the border.

"Again, back to the food. I keep getting sidetracked here. The dish is called chile cheese casserole. It's not exactly the chili you're probably thinking of. It's actually green chiles, along with corn, cheddar cheese, eggs and some

other stuff. Once you melt the oleo, you add some flour and other ingredients. Typical baking stuff here. It takes a good forty-five minutes to cook, so I'd better get started or we won't have time to walk to the waterfront in the daylight.

“Isn't this pathetic? You've been here not even two full days and again I find myself making a big deal out of the food I'm preparing. What's so great about that? Everyone makes food. This just goes to show that I have no life. I've acquired this stance of looking forward to the small things in life. So many times people go through life bored and looking for something exciting that time passes them by. They miss all the little things because they're too consumed with finding the big things. I look forward to my daily walk, my monthly magazine to arrive, a television show here and there and going to church. Without these little things, big things don't mean as much because you'd have nothing to compare them to. I guess I'm blessed that way. I look up and watch the eagles, which is nothing special in these parts to most people. I enjoy watching my cat play in the snow. Most people send their pets on their way, out of sight out of mind. I realize I might not feel this way if I had a family or a big career, but I'm glad and I do feel blessed with my simple life.”

Lunch came and went again. Rachel proved herself worthy of the title “good cook” as her Mexican meal was exceptional and, like most of her meals, healthy as well. After eating, and getting dressed for the walk, Rachel had one thing to do before commencing to the Sitka Sound.

“I have to catch a quick report on tomorrow's predicted weather forecast. I just love watching these reports, though I don't spend too much time out of doors. There are days I'll watch the local weather report a few times. I also watch the reports for other places in the U.S. and Canada. Hey, it's going to hit forty-two tomorrow! The down side is that it's going to be very foggy and drizzle-type rain is expected for the first several hours of the day. I'll take it, I suppose. Are you ready to head to the waterfront? Let's be off then.

“Sitka is one of the best places on earth for salmon fishing. I went a few times with my dad but don't quite understand how someone could get hooked, no pun intended, on fishing. I do enjoy the taste of a well cooked salmon though. Okay enough about food. My dad processed many fish out of these waters during his time with the processing plant.

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“I thought about following in my father’s footsteps and getting a job at the plant. I knew my dad was always hoping Charles would do this, but he opted to go to college in Juneau. My dad wanted to start this tradition of the Ford family at the plant, but Charles wanted nothing to do with it. Oh he worked there for one summer and pretty much hated it. It took my dad awhile to forgive Charles for that though in reality my brother did nothing wrong. When I suggested to dad that maybe I could work there, he didn’t get too enthused about it so I kind of backed away from the idea. I’m probably better off doing what I’m doing anyhow, although I’d actually have health benefits at the processing plant.

“My father enjoyed it, for the most part, but I don’t think yours truly is cut out for gutting and cleaning fish or packing cans and boxes of seafood. My dad came home smelling of fish everyday, not something I found too alluring. In May and June the halibut and king salmon run wild and dad had to work like mad to keep up with the catches. It’s a manly profession though several women can be found working at such places. Not only fish, but plenty of crab and shrimp are found in these waters as well. Forgive me but one thing I can’t resist is crab meat. My dad would sometimes bring some home for us and I always looked forward to it.

“If you’re interested, there are many charter boats you can take to experience deep-sea fishing Alaskan style. I’m not necessarily talking about day trips either. Some of these charter sailings last a week! Personally, I think one day would suffice but there are plenty of avid fishermen who go for four, five or even seven days at a time. These charter companies think of everything too. You get your airline ticket right into our airport, transfers, meals, fishing licenses and your bait.

“Isn’t this some gorgeous scenery? I have looked upon these waters and those mountains thousands of times and it never really gets old. Mount Edgecumbe, in the background, is awe-inspiring. I didn’t start appreciating the view until after high school, but now I think this has to be one of the most beautiful places anywhere. Okay, admittedly I’ve never visited anywhere outside of this area except some nearby Canadian cities, but what could top this panorama of sights?

“Tomorrow the normal routine starts over again. The holidays are about over and work, school and the other normal daily duties will resume.

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Monday is when one of the two gentlemen I refer to as my ‘bread-and-butter clients’ comes in. The other one comes in on Wednesdays. Believe me, I schedule my shopping, appointments and what have you around those two guys. If I were to lose either one, my budget would certainly be compromised. They’re both good guys, similar in many ways and different in others.

“Tomorrow you meet Mr. John Radisson. He is the owner of one of those aforementioned fishing charter companies. He’s loaded, trust me. I usually don’t talk a lot to my clients, as was mentioned, but he has offered me a free off-season day fishing excursion. I told him that I plan to do it but not until it’s warmer. He’s in his sixties. John’s on his second marriage and has a son with his first wife. His son, like my brother, lives in Juneau.”

John Radisson is what you’d call a good ol’ boy. He’s from Broken Bow, Oklahoma and still acts the part. His family was always into the recreation business. In Broken Bow, his parents owned a golf course and a canoe rental outlet. John wanted to take this ambition to new places. His love for fishing helped make his decision to buy and run his own fishing charter company. He settled in Juneau at first, and then soon moved to Sitka. John is a little overweight and short. He can often be found wearing a cowboy hat. He’s friendly to those who are friendly to him, but he’s a nasty person to tangle with if you’re not.

“On Wednesday afternoon you will meet Mr. Nick Brezhnev. His real first name is Nikolia, but he never goes by it. He is obviously of Russian descent. I honestly don’t know that much about Nick. I don’t ever hear him mention a wife or family, but who’s to say what his marital status is for certain. He’s a businessman, but in what capacity I’m unsure. He travels frequently to places like Seattle, San Francisco and Anchorage. He looks to be in his mid-thirties. He’s very well built and takes exceptional care of himself. He doesn’t talk with an accent, though his great, great grandparents moved here from Russia. I recall him saying that, while he isn’t fluent in it, he does know how to speak Russian fairly well.”

Nick Brezhnev is Rachel’s favorite client. He’s generally quite shy, but doesn’t act this way around Rachel much. Nick doesn’t like to talk about himself. He’s single and lives in town. As Rachel mentioned, Nick travels on

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business nearly every week. Nick isn't exactly model material, but he's a nice looking guy.

John and Nick schedule their weekly appointments with Rachel for two very different reasons. John, like Rachel assumed, is wealthy. A weekly massage is a perk for him. He has no back pain. John figures he has worked hard for his money and deserves to do something nice for himself. Of course the Lincoln Navigator and personal yacht fall into that category as well.

Nick travels often. He is subjected to sitting on planes every week. His back can sometimes pay the price. His employer recognizes this and has agreed to pay for half of Nick's massage bill. His employer has one other employee whom he offers this same benefit to, but that employee goes to a different therapist who works out of a professional building. Nick was less intimidated by the backdrop of Rachel's small house. Nick was slightly embarrassed the first time around, but now looks forward to his Wednesday time slot.

"Let's just sit here for a few minutes and watch the boats and see if anybody has had a good day at sea. Word to the wise, don't get caught sitting under an eagle at the wrong time if you know what I mean. You think it's bad getting hit by a seagull? Don't press your luck with a bald eagle. I think I'm going to stay out here and watch the sunset. It won't be much longer. Yes, tomorrow I'm back in the old routine. But for right now, I'm going to enjoy the view of what has been used as the setting for countless pictures and paintings."

Chapter Two: Slave to the Grind

“**B**efore Mr. Radisson arrives, I’m going to take my morning journey. He’s like clockwork and always arrives within two or three minutes of his ten a.m. appointment. See you soon. Wait a minute. Would you like to join me today? I made you stay home the previous two mornings, why don’t you start coming with me.

“On Mondays my route takes us to Lincoln, and then to Monastery. After that, we cut across Sawmill Creek Boulevard. From there we venture up Halibut Point road for a little while, and then retrace our steps back home. We get to walk by Swan Lake on the way, so the scenery is nice. Heck, the scenery is nice anywhere you walk in Sitka. Let’s get going, I have a feeling we will be getting some heavier rain later today. There’s barely a light mist right now, so let’s head out.”

The walk provided a nice change and a chance to get some fresh air and exercise. The light drizzle started to become more noticeable toward the end of the walk, but you’re in the wrong place if you hate rain. You’ll have to wait until October to get the brunt of the rainfall here. Sitka averages around fourteen inches of rain during October. This month you’re looking closer to eight inches, so trust me it gets worse. You’ll see a steady decrease until late summer.

“A rain coat and boots are essential here as you can tell after that walk. You’ll experience many walks in the rain like this, but even worse. The rainy season is going to slow down soon. I need to get the studio set up for my first appointment today. Hopefully, I will have at least one more. I usually perform a couple massages a day.”

Rachel had a tiny little room set up for doing her massage work. It used to be her brother’s bedroom. She had a radio that was locked to a classical music station and a few lights with sixty watt bulbs so it wouldn’t be too bright. Rachel would close the shade and turn the music on at a low volume during all of her massages, unless otherwise requested. Nobody ever

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requested otherwise. Conversation was limited to enhance a peaceful environment.

In fact, the only person who Rachel saw on a regular basis that did like to talk was a woman who would usually come during her lunch breaks every other week. This woman, who was sent there by her husband, worked full-time and would get the abbreviated massage. Her name is Jolene Hart, and her husband felt badly that she had to work full-time to make ends meet so he would pay for her to get a massage twice a month.

Unlike her other regulars, Jolene had no set day of the week. Sometimes it would be Monday, sometimes Thursday, but it could be any day of the week. The only certainty was that she would be there during her lunch break from work. Jolene had one child, who was often put in a local daycare as he was only four and not quite ready for school. Jolene felt guilty about this and would often vent to Rachel in reference to it as well as other turmoil in her life. Despite Rachel's lack of social skills, she spent far more time listening to Jolene than responding to her. Sometimes Rachel was glad Jolene only came twice a month, because she would find herself not concentrating on giving the best massage she was capable of and instead listening to Jolene's stories. But enough about Jolene, Mr. Radisson has just arrived for his weekly massage. At this point you're kind of out of the picture, but feel free to listen in.

"Hello, John," Rachel said with her trademark greeting smile.

"Good morning, Miss Rachel. Hard to believe it's Monday already. Did you have a nice New Years?"

"It was what it was. Nothing special. How about you?"

"It was rather nice. For a change, the wife and I got together with one other couple and we occupied ourselves with board games and a movie. Generally we go all out, dressed to the nines, and attend a lavish dinner party. Despite having a good time with our close friends, I think next year will see a return to the party."

"Either one sounds fun to me. Well, let's get started."

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So John took off his coat and prepared himself for his Monday massage. As usual there was very little conversation between him and Rachel. You could sense that Rachel was ready to get the massage started, and there was a two-fold reason for this. She knew how punctual John was and she wanted to oblige him in this way. The other reason was Rachel felt somewhat pitiful, almost embarrassed, not having done anything over the holiday weekend.

“Miss Rachel, you are a wonder worker,” John commented when the massage had come to an end. “I don’t know how I would ever manage without you. I feel rejuvenated and ready for anything.”

“I appreciate the business, Mr. Radisson. Good luck with the charter fishing business.”

“Ha, in Alaska you don’t need luck when you’re in my industry. People line up to take a chance on catching the big one, and several of my customers have done just that. No, the only time you need luck is when you’re on the waters of the Pacific trying to catch some keepers. I’ll see you next week, Rachel.”

“Goodbye, John. Take care.”

“Isn’t he the nicest guy? I’ve always wondered why his first marriage failed. He seems so kind and happy. He’s got a good sense of humor and has all kinds of money and friends. I wonder if it was he or his ex-wife that wanted the divorce. Hey, it’s not any of my business. He’s found love again and re-married. I’d be happy with finding it once.

“I would never want to be divorced. Of course it has been said that it’s better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all. I’m still at the ‘not to have loved at all’ stage. I wonder if that cliché is really true. I can’t see either one being any better than the other. I have to go to the bank now. John always pays with a check. He’s the only person who does. It’s a bit inconvenient, but far be it from me to tell him this. I need to get some gas in my vehicle as well. I hope to book another massage today, but the phone hasn’t rang yet. Maybe when I get back there will be a message.”

Sure enough, and in typical fashion, there was indeed a message left on Rachel’s voice mail. It was from an individual who attended the same church

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as Rachel and somehow through the grapevine found out about her profession. He was a worker at the same processing plant where her father once worked and had hurt his back on the job several days ago. This individual figured his body would recover on it's own as it had done so many times in his career. On this occasion, however, the pain did not subside so he was directed to Rachel's practice by a friend in the church. He was hoping for an appointment that evening after he wrapped up his work day. As you might expect, Rachel was more than happy to set up an appointment for him.

"Does five-thirty work for you?" he asked, wanting to get right in after work, yet wanting to take a quick shower beforehand to eliminate the fish odor.

"That arrangement would work out just fine." Rachel concluded the brief conversation with directions to her house. And in Sitka, directions to anywhere take but a minute to go over.

"I'll admit, sometimes I worry I won't have enough business to pay the bills, yet every week I manage to have enough. I'm trying to think if I know this person from church, but I can't place a face with the name. I wish it were that one young guy who helped me with my dead battery, but it's someone from the fish processing plant. I may want to burn some scented candles for this one because the smell of raw fish will permeate the air unless he showers before arriving.

"You never know who will walk in for a massage, and believe me I've had all kinds. Most people are kind and are simply here to get the massage and go. I have had a few with other agendas. They assume that things will get erotic and this will lead to that. Not here. I'm a professional about things and far be it from me to turn this place into a prostitute palace."

Truth be known, Rachel actually did have a couple instances where her clients were trying to get more than a massage out of the deal. While shy and sometimes timid, Rachel would not even come close to succumbing to these men. Thankfully, this type of thing was extremely rare. Thomas Riley, the individual who called, arrived when he said he would. Thomas had never received a massage and was a bit tenuous about the whole idea. He was not totally comfortable with the prospect of a strange woman touching him all over. Rachel had a way of putting new clients at ease, but it took Thomas

longer than most. A knock on the door was followed by a somewhat tense introduction.

“Hello, I’m the guy who called you about an appointment tonight. My name is Thomas Riley.”

“Come on in, Thomas Riley. I do recognize you, though I don’t recall ever being formally introduced. My name is Rachel Ford and welcome to my home slash massage parlor. If you would take off your shoes and jacket, then I’ll lead you to the room I have set up.”

As if poor Thomas wasn’t already unsettled enough, now came the part where Rachel asked him to remove all his clothing save for his briefs. Rachel handed him a small blanket to cover himself with as he lay down on the table. Rachel exited the room so Thomas could do this. He wondered if his being there was really necessary, but did end up doing as Rachel asked and climbed up on the massage table making sure the blanket covered as much as it possibly could. Rachel knocked on the door to be sure Thomas was ready and then proceeded to start her routine.

“So you work at the local processing plant,” Rachel mentioned, to get Thomas settled. Rachel would usually talk for the opening minutes with new clients.

“Yes, and that’s the cause of my being here today. I do a good deal of lifting at work and while I always bend with my knees, I somehow still ended up getting hurt the other week.”

They didn’t talk at length about life at the plant, but Rachel just had to ask Thomas if he had ever heard of or worked with her father. Thomas mentioned he did indeed know her father, but never worked closely with him. They also talked briefly about the church they both attended and then it was mostly silence. Thomas opted for the less expensive, forty minute session. This way if he felt uncomfortable, he wouldn’t have to endure as long a session. When all was said and done, Thomas felt much better about how things went than he had anticipated at the onset.

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“Well, I certainly do appreciate you being available on such short notice,” Thomas said as he put his first of two shirts on. “I don’t expect to be fully healed now, but I believe this massage therapy did some good.”

“I hope so, Thomas. If you ever want to return here, you might want to splurge for the one hour treatment. I use lava stones during that session and people really seem to like them. Thank you for stopping by this evening.” Thomas then left after thanking Rachel.

“He seemed like a nice guy. I sure am glad he stopped by. I’d like to see him return in the future. Not that I wish continued pain on him by any means. I’m not like that. I aim to help heal these people. I get some folks I just cannot help though. They need to see a doctor or chiropractor. I guess Thomas will be my only other client today. I generally take people up until eight o’clock, and even later if there’s a dire need for it. That is one of the few benefits of a limited social schedule.

“Time to make some dinner now. Tonight it’s nothing elaborate or nothing Russian. Just a big salad full of turkey, eggs and tomatoes. I wish I didn’t like tomatoes so much, as I mentioned before they’re pretty expensive this time of the year. I stick to fat-free dressing. I hear so many people say how you sacrifice taste when substituting normal salad dressing for the fat-free variety, but I simply don’t see it that way. I notice a little difference, but not enough to warrant me buying the fattening brands.

“It looks like I might be done for the day. I guess, all things considered, it isn’t a difficult profession. I mean look at my dad and probably Thomas for that matter. They had to work pretty hard, and most of the day, to earn a paycheck at the processing plant. How long did I technically work today? Not quite two hours. So I don’t make as much money as my dad did, I don’t need to. I’m not feeding and clothing a family of four. I only take care of my cat and myself. Dad also had two cars to pay for, plus much bigger electric and water bills than I have. Still, I hope tomorrow I’m a little busier. I do have one appointment at three in the afternoon, but nothing else as of now.”

After dinner, and catching up on the local news, Rachel logged on to her computer to educate herself on whatever she felt like at that particular moment. Of course she also wanted to see what tomorrow’s weather had in store.

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“Wonderful, it looks like we’re in store for a warmer albeit rainy day. We should hit a high of forty-two tomorrow with light rain dominating the morning and afternoon. That’s just a tad above normal for us. And what’s cool is that our lows never really get very low here. For example, tomorrow’s low is expected to drop to thirty-two. Now check out Barrow’s forecast. A high, yes a high, of negative twenty-three degrees.”

At this point we are going to fast-forward to Wednesday. We will be doing a lot of fast-forwarding throughout the year. Once you learn Rachel’s routine, it would be pointless to continue discussing it over and over again. Tuesday was one of Rachel’s many routine days. She had two people show up for massages. The first decided on the forty-minute version and the other opted for the full hour. Neither were frequent clients, but both of them had been to Rachel prior to this. Now, Wednesday was the day Nick Brezhnev made his appointments. Like John Radisson, Nick scheduled his one hour massage every week. Nick’s slot was usually in the afternoon, and this Wednesday would be no different. Rachel had already finished one massage that day and had one scheduled for seven that evening. Rachel loved this kind of day as it was extra income for her.

“Hello, Nick, come in,” said Rachel with all smiles. Out of all her clients Rachel liked Nick the best. He was handsome to her, in good shape and very kind. You could almost say Rachel had a thing for him. This was one client she had no reservations whatsoever about giving a massage to.

“Hello, Rachel. How is the world treating you today?”

“Par for the course I would say, and yourself?”

“Quite well, thank you. Did you have a nice weekend?”

“Actually, it wasn’t all that. I probably should have gone out with friends or something, but I ended up staying home for most of the holiday weekend. I hope you had a more lively New Year’s.”

Rachel wanted to give Nick the impression that she had the option of hanging out with a group of friends, which was not true, to give the illusion she had a more exciting life than she actually did. I suspect a few of you have done so yourselves. Okay, probably most of us have done something similar.

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“No, my New Year’s wasn’t all that, as you say, either. I thought I was coming down with an illness, but it turned out to be some fish I had for lunch on Saturday which my body didn’t agree with. I only started feeling better Monday afternoon.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Nick. Life sometimes has bad timing. At least it’s been a mild winter, yet again. I follow weather reports all throughout America and Canada, and how those people put up with what they do is amazing.”

“You aren’t kidding around. I have read many a story on the harsh Russian winters my not-so-distant family has endured. Mother Russia and Old Man Winter must be an item, because he’s surely spent a lot of time with her.”

The conversation, as has been suggested earlier, did not continue much after this. The soft music was playing and Nick let Rachel and her massage techniques take over. Rachel felt at ease with Nick, unlike some of her clients. Nick had a type of personality that made it a pleasure to be around him. In fact, Nick’s weekly visit would often be Rachel’s highlight for the week.

And how do you think Nick sees Rachel? In actuality he’s in somewhat of a similar position. Oh, he has more friends and a better social life, but he’s single with no brothers or sisters. His father passed away and his mother remarried and moved to British Columbia, Canada and has little to do with him. As mentioned, he does travel a lot for his employer. He doesn’t zigzag the country, but spends a good amount of time traveling to and fro. He always manages to be in Sitka on Wednesdays though. Most of his travel involves leaving Sunday afternoon and returning Tuesday evening, or leaving Thursday morning and flying back to Sitka Saturday morning. It’s not an easy life, but the pay is good.

“Again a splendid job,” Nick proclaimed as he readied himself to depart. I don’t know how many other massage therapists practice in Sitka, but I’m glad I found you.”

“You’re far too kind, Mr. Brezhnev. I am honored to have been chosen by you. We shall see you next Wednesday.”

Mark Deans

“I’m counting the hours already. Good day.”

Kind of cute. You could almost say there was a very slowly developing chemistry between Rachel and Nick. And when I say slowly, I mean it. These two have been playing these “feeling out” games for a few years now. You can almost sense Nick would like to be better friends, at the least, with Rachel. You can easily sense Rachel would like the same thing. Yet neither of them does much about it. Maybe they’re both waiting for the other one to make their move. Maybe a rejection from the other would be intolerable and the business relationship the two share would cease to exist. Hey, there is one way we could find out exactly what Mr. Brezhnev thinks about our heroine. Ask the man. Yes, we will be asking people from time to time just how they perceive Miss Ford. Our first interview, so to speak, will be with Nick Brezhnev. Let’s go outside, away from Rachel, and see what Nick thinks of her.

“Hello there. Yes, I have been acquainted with Rachel for two, going on three, years now. I truly enjoy her massage therapy and it generally ranks as one of my bright spots during the week. Rachel is a charming girl, and quite bright from all I can ascertain. Granted, we spend only a small percentage of our time together chatting. I sense she longs for company, well other than her cat. Once I even entertained the idea of asking Rachel out to dinner. I refrained from that thought as I did not want to jeopardize our current relationship. Oh who knows, maybe one day I will ask her out. I must be going now; I have a trip I need to pack for.”

Nick appears to be a nice guy. He seems to hold Rachel in fairly high favor. I wonder how Rachel would react if she knew Nick was pondering asking her out on a date. We’ll have to keep an eye on this state of affairs. For now, however, we shall again fast-forward. We are going to skip to Saturday. Rachel begins every Saturday with her trademark walk. Saturday might be her favorite walk of the week. It takes her to the Raptor Center and back home.

“What a perfect day for a walk, let’s head out. Okay maybe not perfect, but for the second week of January I’m happy to settle for these partly cloudy skies and a brisk forty degree temperature. Our winters average around thirty-six inches of snow, but we’re well behind that statistic. I hope we don’t end up catching up in the months ahead. Maybe you’re getting the wrong

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idea about Sitka's climate. Just because we have a mild winter does not mean our summer is so great. In July, we average only sixty-one degrees. We have a very small scale of temperature range here. That's partly because of the Japanese current and our rainforest environment.

"I love my Saturday walk. This will be the first time I've ever had anyone join me. So what did you think of my clients this week? I really like them all to varying degrees. Jolene is quite the chatterbox, but she's harmless. You'll probably be seeing her soon. John and Nick are great. I dread the day one of them stops coming to me. You'll meet another bi-weekly client in the weeks to come. She's nice too. She has her lineage with the local Native American faction. She doesn't talk as much as Jolene, but every now and then she'll tell me these really neat stories about her ancestry.

"We are about to walk over the Indian River just up ahead. Sometimes you can watch the eagles as they search for a meal out of the river. There are hiking trails up in the hills that follow the river. I believe the Indian River Trail itself is about four miles. I've taken the trail once before. There are some other trails that are a bit more challenging up in the mountains. After all, this island is a hundred miles long and most of it is uninhabited. There are a few points where the elevation in these mountains is over three thousand feet. Maybe later this year we can tackle one of those trails.

"You may have noticed we are on Sawmill Creek Road again. On Monday we were going the opposite direction while on this road. If we kept on walking down this road another few miles we'd end up at Whale Park which, as the name suggests, is a good place to watch for whales in Silver Bay or Thimbleberry Bay. We should drive out there sometime, though humpback whales are more likely to be seen in late fall and early spring. Whales are plentiful here, and some sightseeing tours actually guarantee you'll see at least one whale or your money back. I've taken three of those tours and have never been disappointed. The best instance was when we spotted a family of orca whales swimming alongside the boat.

"Of course we have plenty of other big animals in the area. Alaska is home to some of the biggest bears in existence. You people on the mainland are kidding yourselves if you think you can lay claim to having big bears. I have seen dozens of bears during my lifetime, but I have heard some stories involving bears here in Alaska of such size that even I was taken aback. The

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Kodiak brown bear can weigh over a thousand pounds. Of course there is the well-known grizzly bear, or as it is often referred to here as the Alaskan coastal brown bear. They generally range from five to nine hundred pounds and stand an intimidating nine feet tall.

“Again, there I go spouting off all this knowledge that I’ve acquired through reading and watching documentaries. Hey, sometimes I look smart with this info. I don’t get to share it very often, but with you I can recite all kinds of facts. I’ve talked with you more than I have with anyone in years. I have a dark feeling that when our year together is over I may experience some slight depression. Of course if we can fix me up with a man between now and then, that problem will be solved. Okay, that’s probably not going to happen. There’s always an off chance of finding someone at church. A hope and a prayer may be all I have, but I’m taking it to the right place.”

Sometimes one needs that hope. For Rachel, the likelihood of finding a man seems to get less and less with the passage of time. As you can tell, she doesn’t go out of her way to find one, though she does long for a human companion. Your presence in her life can only aid her in this endeavor. With you, she can practice acting out her social skills, something that has slowly diminished ever since her parents died. We’re going to pick up again with Rachel on Monday. Her walk already completed, she is now waiting for John Radisson. She also has two other appointments from occasional clients, making this one of Rachel’s busier days. She’ll share an observation while John Radisson is en route.

“Boy is it misty out today. You get a lot of this foggy, misty ocean weather. It’s so eerie, but I think it’s peaceful. Charles would always get frightened, when he was a boy, by the mist. I think he watched too many horror movies. This mist occurs when the ocean water is warmer than the air above it, and you see it often in Sitka. Here comes my second favorite client now.”

“Good morning, John.”

“Hello, Miss Rachel. Oh how I love the smell of the ocean, especially on mornings like this. There’s just something about that ocean air. Say, I feel rather embarrassed to ask, but could I trouble you for a drink? I’ve been running around all morning trying to set up a fishing package for this group

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of tourists from Texas and I haven't taken the time for breakfast. I grabbed a quick donut and now I'm parched."

"You most certainly may. I just opened a new container of cranberry juice or I have orange juice, some soda or plain old-fashion ice water."

"Oh, the water will be fine. I can't wait the entire hour for the bottled water you send home with us."

Rachel was a proponent of encouraging plenty of liquid, mainly water, after her one hour massage and would include a complimentary bottle of cold water to her clients. The water helps get rid of the toxins that get jostled about during such a massage. Rachel would tell her clients the more water the better, but realized such advice was often blown off. She figured the complimentary water would be a good idea for those who forgot about or ignored her recommendation.

"So you have a group of eager fishermen ready to tackle these waters?"

"Fishermen and their wives and families. Twenty people in all and I want to make this a vacation they'll remember forever. I received an email from them and they wanted help in arranging a trip here. Now I'm no travel agent, but rest assured I'm not about to let a financial acquisition of this magnitude escape. Since Sitka is a small city, and I have connections around town, I told them I would help get them lodging and transportation if they took care of their own flight to get here. Usually folks from Texas and Oklahoma are pretty competitive with each other, but this is business. I welcome my Longhorn rivals."

"What made a group of people all the way from Texas, which has its own ocean, decide on coming to our little corner of the world for their vacation?"

"Good question, Miss Rachel. Apparently they do this sort of vacation every other year. One year they all take separate, more traditional family vacations and the next year they all get together and go on some unique fishing excursion. The individual who emailed me made mention of visiting Mexico one year, Florida another and now they want to try Alaska."

“Not to offend anyone, but I’d have trouble getting myself to cross the street to go fishing let alone go to such lengths. Each to their own, I suppose.”

“Now hold on, don’t knock it until you try it. I’ve invited you to come along on one of my sails at no cost and you have yet to accept. Until you at least try it, you don’t know what allure it holds for people. Come on, Rachel, what have you got to lose? So maybe deep-sea fishing isn’t on your list of top ten things to try, but how bad could it be? Well, as long as you don’t get seasick.”

“You’ve got me there, John. Maybe I should finally take you up on your offer. For now, though, let’s get down to business.”

Actually, it’s not so much the fishing aspect of John’s proposition that has Rachel reluctant. It’s the idea of spending four or more hours surrounded by people and having no one acknowledge her that makes Rachel hesitant to go. She’d be much more receptive if she could bring a friend along. John has even suggested she bring a friend, but Rachel has no idea of who to ask.

That single stumbling block is what’s holding Rachel back from attempting deep-sea fishing. One of Rachel’s monthly clients, Heidi Simpson, is as close a friend as any of Rachel’s clients. Heidi’s parents were good friends with Rachel’s parents and the two got to know one another because of this. Heidi has two children and is happily married. Since she feels bad for Rachel, she sometimes puts on a front that her marriage is less than ideal.

Heidi makes a point of getting together with Rachel a couple times a year. Last October, the two went Christmas shopping together, which isn’t exactly like going to the malls in the big city. They made a day out of it. They picked a time when Heidi’s husband could watch the kids on a Saturday. It was an act of charity on Heidi’s behalf, but she also didn’t mind escaping the house and its daily duties. Rachel suspected Heidi was doing this to be nice, but she welcomed the change of pace.

So at this point we are going to have our second interview. Heidi Simpson is due for her monthly massage treatment today but, before she goes inside, let’s see what Heidi thinks about Rachel. Take it, Heidi.

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“Hi there. Let’s see, well I have known Rachel Ford forever. Really, our parents attended St. Michael’s and we’ve known each other since I can remember. While we were never inseparable, we were always friends. Rachel was so quiet and some of the kids made fun of her weight. I never made fun of her, though thinking back I don’t recall ever defending her either. More often than not we were in the same classes at school and would occasionally hang out together growing up. I always had one or two girlfriends that I liked better than Rachel, so we were never best friends.

“The two of us have never lost contact and I’ve gone to her house for massages for years now. When her parents died I felt so badly for her. I cried with her. She had to live with her brother after it happened. My heart was broken for her. My parents were crushed too. It took Rachel months to come to grips with living in that house alone. She bought a cat to help her, but it took a long time before she started to really heal.

“These days I do my best to include Rachel on my social calendar a few times a year. She’s not in my small, close-knit circle of friends, and honestly she wouldn’t fit in. We’re all married and have families. Today I’m going to ask Rachel to see a movie with me sometime soon. I know she can’t leave her house during the week until after dinner, so we usually do our things on Saturday. I know she’ll say yes as she has never declined one of my invitations. Well, I’d better get inside; my appointment is in two minutes. It was nice to meet you.”

You can see Heidi is a pleasant individual. As she indicated, her friendship with Rachel was on the limited side of things, and it has been since they were toddlers. While Rachel would have welcomed a stronger friendship with Heidi, especially in grade school and high school, Heidi always had other girls she preferred the company of. Heidi was never cruel to Rachel, but there were an ample number of times when she distanced herself from Rachel. Truth be known, if Rachel’s folks were alive and well Heidi wouldn’t be getting massages every month. Rachel is pretty bright and realizes this is likely the case. Rachel is also intelligent enough not to let it bother her.

“Hey there, Rach. What have you been up to?”

“Same old, same old, Heidi. How is the family these days?”

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“Keeping my blood pressure off the charts as usual. The kids are fine actually; my youngest is having trouble realizing that she does not run the house though. Nate (her husband) has been working less lately and it’s putting a bit of a strain on our finances. I’m sure business will pick up eventually, winter is traditionally a slow time in his field.”

After the one hour session was over, Heidi asked Rachel if she wanted to catch a movie or go out to dinner in the coming weeks. Rachel predictably responded favorably.

“Sounds great, Rach. Sometimes I really wish Sitka were a bigger city. We go to the same stores and restaurants over and over again. I may have grown up here, but there are times when I wish we would move somewhere else. I love the scenery and the people, but what I wouldn’t give to try life in a big city like Anchorage or somewhere back in the states.”

“I sometimes think about life somewhere else myself. My grandparents came from Chicago. Could you imagine what a transition it would be to go from little Sitka to the Windy City? I can’t get over the fact Sitka used to be the capital of this state. If next Saturday works out for you, we could get together then.”

That particular Saturday did not work out for Heidi, but the following one did and, surprise, Rachel had no plans so they agreed to see a movie that afternoon and get some dinner afterward. Now Saturday, the twenty-second of January, actually had something written in on Rachel’s calendar in the kitchen. Usually the only things written on that calendar were her client’s appointments.

In the days between that Monday and the twenty-second of January very little noteworthy occurred, which was, as you might guess, commonplace. Rachel got her SUV out on the road, for as long of a drive as her environment would allow her, to keep the vehicle in good running condition. She watched as the football teams fought it out for a chance to make it to Superbowl Sunday. She continued with her not so stringent exercise regimen. Rachel watched as the sun was just a little more in attendance each day. Finally, she agreed to go on a fishing trip with John Radisson. Rachel wasn’t counting down the hours to her day out with Heidi, but she was looking very

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forward to it. Let's move ahead and pick up on their conversation at dinner the evening of the twenty-second.

"I really think we could've seen a better movie, Rachel. The picture had its moments and all, but it certainly isn't going to gather up too many awards."

"I tend to agree with you, Heidi. I think the directors were aiming this movie at a younger, less mature audience. I've seen worse though and, like you said, it did have a few good scenes."

"At any rate, it's nice to sometimes get away from the family and do fun things with another adult. I love my kids and husband, but Lord knows they are a trying gang. What are you going to order tonight?"

"I think I'm leaning toward the fish dinner with a salad, fat-free dressing and a dinner roll. There sure are plenty of appetizing things on the menu, aren't there?"

"I know. You're such a health nut, Rachel. Are you sure you don't want a mouth-watering steak instead?"

"I know this is kind of a special occasion, but I don't like to let my guard down. I'm pretty sure you recall that I was not in very good physical condition back in school. I dread the possibility of returning to those awful days. I think I'll stick to the fish and salad."

"I remember those days back in school. Kids can be so cruel, especially that one girl who would call you...well who cares about that."

"A humpback whale. Yes, kids haven't the capacity to realize just how cruel they can be nor the long-term effects they can leave one with by their careless words and actions. It would be silly of me to dwell upon all the teasing that I endured. I've moved on. I hold no resentment or ongoing grudges."

"I should hope not. You look great these days."

"And I have those school days to thank for it. I try to look for a silver lining and had I never been ridiculed for my weight it's possible I would have never

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stopped eating all those candy bars and never started walking a mile a day. I also do a light aerobics workout a few times a week.”

“And believe me, Rachel, it shows. I only wish I had the time and willpower to exercise and eat better.”

“Well, with a family to care for it isn’t always easy to come up with extra time, but think about this: The better shape you’re in, the better you can keep up with the pace of caring for your family.”

“Wow, that makes a lot of sense to me. I think I’ll have the fish dinner too and start thinking about taking a more healthy approach to life. It sure wouldn’t hurt to have a little more stamina and a little less weight. There’s just one thing though.”

“What’s that?”

“I think I’ll stick to normal salad dressing on my salad. I hate fat-free.”

It was one of the few light-hearted moments the two shared that evening. Rachel always tended to be serious; her sense of humor was dormant most of the time. But toward the close of her night with Heidi, she smiled quite a bit. So both casual friends came away with something. Heidi was motivated, at least for the time being, to commit to a healthier lifestyle. Rachel enjoyed some informal time with someone other than you. No offense.

A year in Sitka is fact-packed fiction taking place in cozy Sitka, Alaska. Nestled in the mountains, alongside the ocean, you will follow a young, lonely woman through life changing events and unique experiences.

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