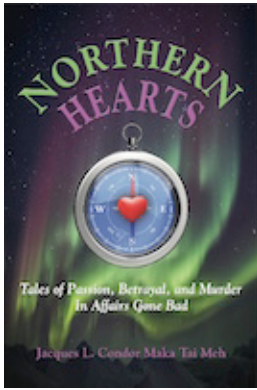


# NORTHERN HEARTS



*Tales of Passion, Betrayal, and Murder  
In Affairs Gone Bad*

Jacques L. Condor Maka Tai Meh



*What is this thing called love? Love might be a moment's madness, an emotional eruption of insanity. The first embers of love can burst into a firestorm to consume you or it can be like a soothing rain. Such are the love's verities. Alaska is the home of the strongest passions love can induce: love and passion are part of the landscape. Long cold nights produce peculiar effects. Love changes Northern Hearts and their behaviours.*

# Northern Hearts

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Jacques L. Condor  
Maka Tai Meh

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## 1: FOR LOVE OR MONEY

By the time she was nineteen, Millie Katchemak knew she only wanted two things from life: love and money. She was smart enough to figure out she could use one to get the other. Once she learned how to handle both with complete emotional detachment, she was on her way to becoming a very wealthy woman. Millie wanted to be rich and nothing was going to stand in her way. Millie Katchemak wasn't always the richest woman in Nunavunga. In fact, the way her life started out, it didn't look like Millie would end up with much of anything. She was born in Gambell village on Saint Lawrence Island, not an especially good place in 1926 for anyone to begin their life. She was a skinny, ugly child and no amount of eider duck soup or *muktuk* or seal meat seemed to fatten her up. In Yup'ik eyes, a fat child was a healthy child. Millie's mother was sure her child would die before she reached the age of five, so she tried not to become too attached to the little girl. Millie was given less love than her two other siblings, both older boys, and at times, she was downright ignored. Millie didn't die young, as was predicted, and she never forgot the way she was treated in those early years. She grew to adolescence. Her form filled out and her face lost its ugliness as if by a Shaman's magic trick. Millie wasn't round and squat like so many of the other village girls, instead she was lithe and taller than most. Her big eyes and her dimpled ready smile were part of a masque she created and wore to cover her remembered childhood unhappiness and the lack of familial love. When she was sixteen, boys found Millie and Millie found out what they wanted. It was love. At least, that's what they called the things they wanted to do with Millie. No matter what the boys called it, Millie wasn't fooled or impressed by the physical act itself. It was just something she could tolerate if a material reward was connected to letting the village boys use her body. The first time a boy gave her a silver dollar she decided this

‘love thing’ might be a way to many more of the shiny coins. Millie decided to find out if this was possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1942 the big war came to Alaska. The Japanese invaded and occupied the islands far to the southwest. The War. That was all the men in the village talked about. Millie’s father, Sammy, told everyone in the village the war could make them all rich if they worked things right.

“All these *Kabloonaq* workers and army men are comin’ into Nome and Nunavunga to build them military places. They is gonna have lots of *kina-uyaq*, white man’s money. They gonna want to spend it and I’m gonna make a place for them to spend it in,” he said. In six months, Sammy Katchemak accumulated a large supply of carved ivory items made from walrus tusks, several pairs of beaded mukluks, salmon skin bags, sea grass baskets, and other crafts through barter and badgering. He sold or traded away everything that might hinder his exodus from Gambell. His plan was to move to Nunavunga, find a large cabin, and set up a trading post. A week later, he dragged his reluctant wife and frightened Millie onto the mail plane to Nunavunga. He made his arrangements with the best carvers and skin sewers in Gambell to keep supplying him with their craft items. He left his two nearly grown sons behind to act as his middlemen in his new trading post venture. In Nunavunga, Millie’s mother found life wasn’t quite as bad as she had projected. Millie found life in Nunavunga much more pleasant than her past life in Gambell. For one thing, there were fewer older boys to pester her. They had gone off to serve in the Alaska front guard under Colonel Muktuk Marston. Also, no one in Nunavunga remembered her as the skinny, ugly embarrassment she had been to her parents. Millie felt free for the first time in her life. Her father, Sammy, didn’t waste any time. He found a place to set up his “trading post.” He traded two splendid parkas to a local man in exchange for six months’ rent on a cabin. The log-and-frame building was just this side of dilapidated. The old building would serve as a family home and a sort of “store.” He structure sagged on its poorly placed pilings and leaned into the

wind like a drunk making an effort to stay upright. Its unpainted, weathered-to-a-silver-grey, box-like shape set it apart from the surrounding cabins. Millie's mother tried to make the two dingy rooms of their living quarters look like those in their comfortable cabin in Gambell. She didn't succeed, even though she was forever moving chairs from this place to that place or hanging skins on this wall and then another. She cut out calendar pictures and tacked them to the walls to brighten the place. Millie never knew from one day to the next where her favorite calendar picture of a kitten in a basket of yarn would end up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sammy Katchemak was a man shaped like a rounded cube with a barrel chest and almost neck-less head. His scraggly black beard and darting black eyes gave him the appearance of a ferret. Sammy appropriated the largest of the three rooms and dubbed the room "my store." He added display shelves to all the available wall space and filled them with carvings, masques, and baskets. He used the much-needed kitchen table chairs as stiff wooden manikins for his numerous fur parkas. Millie helped him hand letter a wooden plank to read: SAMMY'S TRADING POST. Her father nailed it above the sagging front door. Sammy declared his store open for business. And having started the business, he expected Millie and her mother to do most of the work. He kept the two women busy dusting and arranging the items for sale. The placement of items was based on his mood of the day. When his mood changed, so did the sale items. Every day Sammy sat in a fine white man's padded rocker in the center of the room and contemplated his favorite possession: a polar bear skin rug that hung on one wall. Only the head of the bear was a full mount, and its eyes bulged with a fierce determination and its pink plaster tongue lolled out over the pointed canines. Sammy killed the bear when he was a young man of twenty and the rest of his life—until he opened the trading post—had been anti-climactic. He loved the bear skin and what it said about him. When a customer from the military came in to look around, he always started every sales pitch the same way.

“What you think of that big bear, huh? I betcha you wondering about him. How he got there on my wall, huh? Well, I killed him with a spear and one shot from my rifle. Pretty good, you betcha. What you wanna buy today?” As repetitive as it was, the speech always made him a sale. Word of mouth about the fine Native craft items at Sammy’s place brought customers in droves. The dollars rolled in and went straight into a secret hiding place that only Sammy knew. Neither Millie nor her mother asked about the money, the *kina-uyak*, that Sammy put aside. Money had no purpose for her mother but Millie loved the green paper and the shiny coins.. Sammy kept his wife content with exotic canned foodstuffs he bargained from the military construction camp. Millie ate her first peaches from a can. It was the same with olives and pork and beans. Sometimes her father brought home outdated *Life* magazines and an occasional woman’s magazine with pictures of new clothing styles. Sometimes Millie found a *Screenplay* magazine, full of pictures of movie stars in the pile of old magazines. Millie had never even seen a movie, and the “movie star” concept was beyond her understanding, but she did recognize the aura of glamour and beauty the mostly blond women in the pictures projected. She wondered if she could make herself look like the one named Hedy Lamarr.

\* \* \* \* \*

Millie’s parents were in their late forties when she was born. They had not expected a child so late in life and Millie’s father looked at her birth as something of a miracle. Her mother regarded the incident as unfortunate.

“It is bad to be born a woman,” her mother told her. “Women have a hard life. Just look at me. Look at all the women in this village. See how they trudge along with children hanging on their *kuspuk-parka* hems. I wish you were born a man-child. See how the men do as they please and walk free? The only thing I wanted for you was to be able to walk free, like a man walks.”

\* \* \* \* \*



As she thumbed through a *Photoplay Magazine* one slow afternoon, Millie thought about her mother's words. She decided then and there she would never marry, never ever have children, and to be free as a man. For Millie, that way would be through *kina-uyaq*, money. Money would be the answer and her key to true freedom. Millie set herself a new course and sailed into a prosperous future.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next year, Millie turned seventeen. The men of the construction camp and the young military men from the new base noticed her and she noticed them. She also noticed they preferred her to wait on them instead of her aging mother and father. Millie's business acumen came out of nowhere. Perhaps it was simply a matter of paying attention to the client's likes and needs. Her months of drudgery in Sammy's store taught her many of the fine points of salesmanship. Two years later, she suggested to her father that the local *Yup'ik* population would gladly provide him with desirable craft items for the shelves in exchange for the canned goods and six-month-old magazines he brought home from the base and construction camp. Sammy let Millie try out her scheme and it worked. He told her she could keep seventy percent of what she made on any such items. Saleswoman Millie convinced the fawning young airmen from the base that she "*just might—maybe,*" go out on dates *if they would bring her all the old magazines they found lying around the barracks.*'

"I know I can get away this Saturday afternoon—if—if you can find me a couple of cans of coffee or some Hershey bars somewhere. We're completely out and I just don't know when we'll get a new shipment." Millie widened her eyes and smiled two dimples' worth to make her point seem honest and sincere, even though there never had been an order placed with any Outside merchants for coffee or chocolate bars. She conned the airmen and they believed her. She had no intention of leaving the store on a Saturday afternoon to go out with any of them. The smiles and the dimples of her ruse worked on the hormone-driven young men, who brought in more potential merchandise than she'd asked for. The excuses she made for not

being able to date them worked as well, especially if she smiled and widened her attractive eyes.

*"I really had planned to go out with you tonight, but Mama's sick and I have to tend the store."* She used this excuse and variations of it successfully for months. One particular Saturday afternoon, an older staff sergeant from the base came in to look around to see what he wanted to buy. Millie was what he wanted to buy.

"Little darlin'," he said in his buttery Georgia accent. "You are about the prettiest thing I ever did see. How's about you and me gettin' together tonight. I can make it worth your while." Millie laughed and flirted with the man who was at least ten or more years older than she was. "You guys from the base all say that. How can you be any different?" The sergeant stepped closer to the counter and leaned into to whisper to Millie.

"Because I'm the supply sergeant for the entire base, that's how. Everythin' that passes through the supply depot goes through my hands. I know just when and how much comes in and how much goes out to the squadrons. I can always juggle figures a little bit, if you catch my drift." Millie understood him completely. She knew a good business deal when she heard one and agreed to meet the staff sergeant on the beachfront by the sand hills at nine that night.

\* \* \* \* \*

She let him make love to her behind a dune. Under the faint glare of a midnight sun, she realized she gave her body for something more valuable in her eyes. Something within Millie began to unfold: it was understanding. With this man she had discovered the secrets of another route to success. Men needed women. These needs were especially strong in men away from home in a woman-less world for months. This miracle of men's needs was revealed in all its sweetness to her. The power of their need was unperceived by most men, but it gave Millie a great power she could use to her advantage. This perception prompted Millie to take another route to more profits. She saw the staff sergeant on a regular basis and did not ask for the gifts he continued to bring anyway. Instead, she questioned him about what

men looked for in women: what charmed them, what induced the most sexual fantasies, what did men want in the women they bedded?

\* \* \* \* \*

One windy Saturday afternoon up behind the dunes, she did ask for a special gift.

"I've been looking at all those pictures of fancy clothes in the catalogs and magazines. What I want most, more than anything, is some of those clothes—especially the lacy underwear stuff. It looks so pretty on the models."

"Say no more, little darlin'," the Staff Sergeant replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later, Sammy and his wife called for Mille to sit with them at the table in the other room. Her father delivered a sermon-like speech.

"I'm tired of this place. I'm tired of working in the store and I'm tired of all the stuck-up *Kabloonaq* who come in here trying to cheat me. I'm takin' your mother and we're movin' to Seldovia. I got lots of Aleut friends in Seldovia."

"But what about the store, Papa?" Millie's surprise made her question her father's decision.

"You can have it. I got enough money put away so I won't ever have to work again. I'm gonna buy me a little fishing boat and let other fellas—*Kabloonaq* fellas—do all the work for me." He snorted out a laugh at the thought of white men doing *his* bidding.

"You got to put all this down on paper. You got to make it according to *Kabloonaq* laws so nobody can ever take this store away from me. Will you do that, Papa?"

"You write up all the words and I'll put my name on the bottom," Sammy said.

On that day Millie officially took over the store, the staff sergeant drove up in a military pickup truck. In the bed of the truck were several large cardboard boxes marked with the logo of *Frederick and Nelson's of Seattle*.

“Let’s get these boxes inside before too many people see them,” he said. “I’ve made up a fake bill of lading in case anyone ever asks where they came from.”

Millie let him make love to her on her parents bed. She hurried him through the intimacy so she could go back into the store and open all the boxes.

Each box she opened brought another shout of delight. There were satin nightgowns, lacy panties, brassieres of all styles, Japanese kimonos of wispy silk and other pieces of lingerie she’d never seen before.

“Happy now, little darlin’?”

“Come with me. I’ll show you how happy I am!” Millie led her sergeant back to the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, Millie put a cash down payment on two small cabins on the East Cape near the airbase. She had her supply sergeant wangle paint and plywood. She hired Little Daniel and Kakokto to build partitions dividing each cabin into two parts and install separate doors for each section of the cabin. She paid Little Daniel extra to redo the wiring so she could put tiny electric lamps on the nightstands beside the beds she’d ordered from Fairbanks. Kakokto painted each room a different colour and she hung fancy curtains and drapes on the windows. Millie piled the sateen covers of the beds with soft pillows of many shapes. She decorated the walls with framed pictures of *Vargas Girls* in provocative poses, pictures she cut from old *Esquire* magazines. Millie and her sergeant-accomplice in this conspiracy to provide “rest and relaxation” for the lonely airmen from the base were proud of their new business.

“You did good, little darlin’,” her sergeant said. “We’ll make more money here than at your store.” His prediction was more than accurate. Millie talked to some of the village girls who often accommodated the airmen in hurried couplings on the beach among the sand dunes. She picked the prettiest ones whose physical features or personalities met the stringent requirements that her sergeant had told her men desired.

The four she selected were grateful for the chance to make *kina-uyaq*. They eagerly accepted the new *Kabloonaq* names Millie gave them: Cherie, Gloria, Lynette, and Elizabeth. On the advice of her sergeant, Millie put the deeds to the two cabins in her father's name and distanced herself from the girls and their workplace in clever ways.

When the girls were ready for a customer, they sent an order for "groceries" to the store.

The potential customer came into the store. Mille cleverly utilized their sexual needs by turning the "johns" into "delivery boys" sending actual and very expensive items to the girls. The "johns" had to pay for the items, of course. Millie had an eye for her own business before their pleasure.

"Sweetie." She called to one of the horny airmen who hung around the store. "Sweetie, will you take this bag of groceries down to the second cabin on the bluff road, for me? It's an important delivery and I don't have anyone to take it down there for me. It comes to twenty bucks. You can afford that, can't you, sweetie-pie? I'm sure the girl down there will pay you well for your trouble."

The airmen knew how the system worked. They always obliged Millie and the girls always "paid" them well. The girls also charged a fee for the delivery which they split forty-sixty with Millie and the sergeant. No one ever complained about the cost or the groceries or the delivery fee.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1957, Millie's business experienced a new boom. The Cold War brought two new bases to the area and two thousand more military men. Her sergeant's tour of duty was up the same year, so she bought out his share of the business and sent him on his way. She'd never loved her sergeant. Love created problems. Millie had a way of avoiding problems in her life; she built a wall around her heart. But she *was* grateful to her sergeant. He taught her to see and think like a man and feel free. Her mother would be proud to see her hopes for her daughter came true.

\* \* \* \* \*

The money Millie earned over the years was too much to keep in the secret cache under the cabin floor beneath her bed. One box full or one trunk full at a time, she wrapped and taped shut before carting it down to the airstrip so the weekly mail plane could fly her dollars to the Nome branch of the First National Bank of Alaska. Millie's stack of bank deposit receipts kept growing and so did her fortune. She expanded her line of store merchandise to include groceries, sodas, and foodstuffs for the local residents. She sold island crafts, at a profit, to gift shops in Nome who carried tourist-style, less expensive souvenir items. The big buck high profit items were only available in her own store.

Millie acquired a liquor license because Nunavunga had never voted itself one of the dry villages in the Alaskan bush. The year Millie started selling booze over her newly constructed bar, some Alaskans were trying for statehood.

\* \* \* \* \*

When statehood came to the Territory in 1959, the "do-gooders" tried to shut down the open prostitution line that existed for years in the Territory. The people of Nunavunga saw no harm in prostitution and simply winked and looked the other way. Millie's "other business," the one no one talked about openly, went on as usual. Life was a bed of swan's down and pond lilies for Millie Katchemak. Her fame spread and everyone began to call her 'Rich Millie', which she was indeed.

On her thirty-fourth birthday, in 1960, a new military man walked through the door of her store and into Millie's heart and bed. His name was Captain Mark Michaels and he was, in Millie's words, "*absofuckinlutely gorgeous with a face you'd kill to kiss and a body you'd die to possess.*" Michaels was second in command at the USAF Security base and Millie soon learned that the young Captain had more power on the base and more skill in bed than her staff sergeant. Millie forgot all about walking free and she didn't even try to think like a man after Michaels entered her world. For the first time in her

life, she was in love. It didn't matter if he loved her as she loved him; he was with her and that was enough for Millie. Over the years she had turned crisp around the edges and hard in the heart; this new, first real love smoothed out the crinkles in her personality and softened her into the closest thing to a loving woman Millie could hope to be. She took Mark Michaels into her confidence too readily. She told him of her various business operations, her former association with the supply sergeant, and of course, she told him of her wealth. After all, the advice she read in the *Cosmopolitan* magazines in her store told her that you should "*trust and share with your man*," so she did. A year before, Millie would have had a great laugh at that idea, but the new Millie in 1960, found the message sensible and share she did. Unfortunately she trusted, too. She replaced her father's name on the deeds to the two cabins with that of the Captain and, in doing so, quietly made him a partner in the brothel business. Millie had no way of knowing Captain Mark Michaels was a married man with three children and a second wife back in Baltimore. He certainly hadn't divulged any such information. Nobody told Millie the Captain was not all that interested in her or her body, but that he *was* fascinated with the tales of her wealth, and she was so love-blind she couldn't see the facts for the fucking. He asked Millie for "small loans" to pay gambling debts at the officer's club or to buy a new this or that at the base PX. He offered to sign receipts for the money, but Millie said it wasn't necessary. He insisted. Millie obliged without suspicions until the demands for money became more frequent and for larger sums. They argued over money. They argued over what the Captain began to call "*my money from those whores on the East Cape*." One night in a heated argument the Captain slapped Millie. She hit him back. In fact, she hit him with such force that he fell backward over a footstool and landed on the floor. When he fell, Millie fell out of love.

"You bastard," she said.

"Eskimo bitch!"

Millie grabbed a harpoon from the display wall and chased him around the bedroom, the kitchen, the store and finally out of the house. She sat down and rocked back and forth in her father's old rocking chair while she thought like a man. "*What pissed him off is*

*I'm a woman. That hit him in his pride. If I were a man what would I do? I'd try to get even. That's it! The shithead will try to get me where it hurts and that'd be in my pocketbook. Well, I'll be ready for the bastard's tricks."* Hard-hearted, thick-skinned, rough-around-the-edges Millie was back.

\* \* \* \* \*

The summons arrived by the mail plane pilot. "Sorry to have to bring this to you, Millie, he explained. "I sure hated to do it but—"

"That's all right, Jake. Some poor bastard had to do it. No offense there."

"Nope. None taken. I deserved that," Jake said. Millie closed the store, packed her best dresses and shoes, and flew out to the hearing in Nome. She stayed at the Wallace Hotel and enjoyed the trip except for the confrontation with the Captain at the courthouse chambers of Judge Earl Cooper.

"Young woman, this man is accusing you of running houses of prostitution. What do you say to the charge?"

"Guilty, Your Honor."

"Just like that? You plead guilty? You know under the new law I have to fine you a hefty sum?"

"How much is hefty?" Millie looked into the old judge's kind eyes. The man had been in the Territory since 1900's and she imagined he was no stranger to whore houses himself. "How much?" she asked again.

"How much?" Judge Cooper repeated.

"What will I have to pay?"

"Five hundred?" His answer was a question.

"I have the cash with me, Your Honor. I will pay the bailiff, but first I'd like Your Honor to read this deed." Millie passed the folded pages to the judge. From the corner of her eye, she saw Captain Michaels blanch.

"Is this true, Captain? Are you part owner of the two whore houses in this case?"

Michaels stuttered, "Well—yes—but—actually I—"



“And did you ever receive any money from the whor—from the services the ladies working in these houses offered?”

Without hesitation, the captain said, “Never.”

Millie stepped closer to the table where Judge Cooper sat and spoke quietly. “Excuse me, Your Honor, but I have these.” Millie handed the judge a packet of receipts held together by a pink rubber band. “They are in order by dates, Judge Cooper, beginning with the day he signed the deeds.”

“Bitch!” Michaels exploded. “Eskimo bitch!” Judge Cooper jumped to his feet and slammed the table with his folded fist.

“Not in my court and not in the city of Nome as long as I sit on this bench will you call a woman what you just called this woman. My wife is a Yup’ik woman. I fine you five hundred dollars—no make that six—no—*seven* for contempt of court.” He sat back down and smiled at Millie. “You may pay the bailiff and go, Miss.” He turned to the Captain and scowled. “In addition to the seven hundred you owe in fines, I’m adding another seven as your fine for illegally operating a house of prostitution. Pay up or I’ll have you in jail or a military brig.” Lacking a gavel, Judge Cooper used his fist to dismiss the bewildered Michaels.

“I’ll pay his fines, Judge Cooper,” Millie smiled defiantly at the Captain. As they walked the corridor toward the bailiff’s table, Millie whispered to Michaels, “Win some, lose some, isn’t that what you intended to say? Well, remove your name from all my deeds to the properties so I end up the winner, and I’ll pay the fines. Agreed?”

“Bitch,” he hissed.

“Careful, Captain Michaels, that’s a very expensive word you’re tossing around. What if Judge Cooper should hear you?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Millie shared the town’s only taxi with Michaels. It was a six-mile trip to the airport. The atmosphere inside the cab was as chilly as the outside temperature. Millie thought like a man and offered her hand.

“No hard feelings, Mark. It just didn’t work out for us, did it?” Captain Michaels didn’t answer her. His jaw muscles twitched as he clenched his teeth in angry frustration.

“Look at it this way, Mark. It didn’t cost you anything but your pride back there in court. Be a man. Take it on the chin. I didn’t mind paying the money. You got off cheap. We both did.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Michaels said. They lapsed into mutual silence again.

Millie spoke first. “Why are you going to the airport? I thought you were on leave. That’s what the court clerk told me.”

“I am. Going to fly to Anchorage.” Michaels kept his answers short and terse.

“Let me buy your ticket,” Millie said. “Just to show there’s really no hard feelings on my part.” Michaels mulled over the idea for a minute and then smiled at Millie

“Sure. Why not?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Michaels waited in the *Airways North* passenger lounge with the ticket Millie purchased clenched in his hand, Millie went back to the ticket window.

“One way to Nunavunga on the afternoon flight ”

“Didn’t you just purchase a round trip to Anchorage on *Airways North*?”

Millie nodded. “That was for a friend of mine.” She pulled out a roll of bills to pay the ticket agent. When he saw the money, he quickly asked Millie if she’d like to purchase insurance on both passengers. “I make a twelve percent commission on the insurance sales,” he said.

“How much for each of us?” Millie waited while he did calculations from a flyer.

Millie didn’t hear his reply clearly because the scratchy, muffled message over the loudspeaker distracted her.

“What was that?” Millie asked

“A call to board—I think. But not your flight. You’ve still got two hours to wait.”

“No. No, I mean what was the amount you said?”

“Fifteen dollars for minimum coverage—forty-five each for maximum coverage.”

“What the hell, I’m not a gambler but shoot the limit.” Millie handed the young man a hundred-dollar bill and said, “Keep the change.”

“One copy for you, one copy goes to Seattle to the insurance company,” the agent said.

“I’m glad you explained that,” Millie laughed. “If the plane goes down with you and your copy of the insurance, who’s to know? That’s a good racket they’ve got going.”

The young man blushed. “This is a very reputable insurance company, Ma’am. They’d take care of your beneficiaries.” He bent over his desk and filled out the forms.

He gave the copies to Millie. She shoved them in her purse and hurried to the *Airways North* section of the lounge. It was empty. She looked out the window and saw the blur of the blue and white plane as it revved its motors and leaped into the sky. Millie watched the plane circle the airfield until it turned southeast toward Anchorage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six months later, two young white men came into her store. One of them was a cute blond kid who wore the white cross-bandolier, helmet and gloves of an Air Force military policeman. When she saw him, Millie’s first thought was about her liquor license and any violations she might have made against it, as far as base personnel were concerned.

“May I help you, Airman?” Millie asked.

“I’m looking for Miss Millie Katchemak. You’re her, aren’t you?”

“Yes. What is it you want?”

“I’ve sure heard a lot about you. I’m sure glad to meet you,” The boy almost stammered when Millie looked directly at him.

“Thank you. What can I do for you, Airman?”

“I’m Corporal Gordon Jenson, Miss Millie. I was assigned to drive this man out here from the base. He’s from Seattle.” The blond

boy named Jenson faded into the background and a middle-aged man, balding, pasty-faced, and a little paunchy, came up to the counter.

“Miss Katchemak, I’m here on behalf of Prudential Northwest, Incorporated. Your claim has been validated and approved.”

“What claim?”

“We’ve approved your claim as beneficiary to one Captain Mark Michaels.”

“What the hell are you talking? Beneficiary? I haven’t had any contact with that man in months.”

“Our information says you purchased the maximum insurance policy for accidental death from an agent Gerald Higgins in Nome earlier this year. Is this true?”

“Yes. I did buy that insurance to help out the kid, but I didn’t fill out the forms. The agent did.”

“That doesn’t matter. Your name was listed in the form as beneficiary. *Airways North* flight 216 crashed into the Chugach Mountains north east of Eklutna hours after it left Nome.” The insurance representative paused to let the information sink in.

Millie shook her head as if that would dislodge the unpleasant news that had invaded her brain. “Oh, my God. How awful for Mark.”

“Yes.” the insurance agent said without a hint of empathy. “I am here to present you with the first of three cheques totaling six hundred thousand dollars. The others will be delivered to a financial institution of your choice over the next year.”

“Say that again,” Millie whispered.

“I’ll repeat the important part. Six hundred thousand dollars in three equal payments.” He handed Millie an envelope.

“I’ll be damned—I mean, can you beat that?” she said.

“Some people try,” the agent replied. He turned to Corporal Jenson and spoke authoritatively. “I’m finished here and I’d like to return to civilization as soon as possible, Corporal.” He moved rapidly toward the door of the store with Jenson following him.

“Wait! Let me buy you both a drink. I mean, death is nothing to celebrate, but well, six hundred thousand bucks certainly deserves at least one toast.”

The agent bristled and turned in the doorway. "I am not a drinking man, Madame. And if I were it would not be with the likes of you." He stepped out into the fading daylight.

"He's a real butthead, if you ask me," Corporal Gordon Jenson said. "I'm off duty at six. If the offer of a drink still stands, I'll be back."

"You're on, kid. Get your cute ass back here and I'll show you what 'celebrate' means." After the two visitors left, Millie analyzed her situation and her feelings.

Deep inside, she felt nothing; no pain or regret except for the other passenger and the pilot of the small plane. She poured herself a tumbler half full of her best cognac and took a seat at the bar. "*Six hundred thousand dollars!*" Millie was richer than she ever hoped to be. She was in control of her life more than ever. That kind of money would let her walk taller than any man. There was freedom in money, more than she'd felt before. Mama would be proud of her ugly duckling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Millie lit two cigarettes and passed one to the young man at her side.

"Wow, just like in the movies," Gordon Jenson said. "After they make love, you always know they had a good time when they light up cigarettes."

"Sweetie we didn't make love. I don't like that word anymore. I don't even believe real love exists. We had sex—great sex, in my opinion. How was it for you? Or need I ask." She reached under the covers and groped him. He arched his back in response to her touch and moaned.

"The best I ever had. What a way to celebrate."

"Money's money, honey," she laughed. "Lots of money coming your way is always a time for celebration. Money is something you can believe in and don't you ever forget that. It's better than love anytime."

"I'll remember," he said. "Are you really as rich as they say?"

Millie kissed his cheek and whispered, “Richer.” She added, “And this afternoon when I was handed that checque for two hundred thousand, I learned of a new way to make *kina-uyaq*.”

“What’s kinny oo-yak?” Gordon Jensen asked.

“What were we just talking about?”

“Money?”

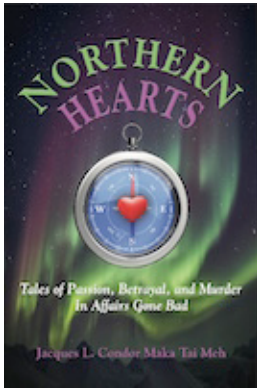
“You got it, honey. Now, if you ever want to fly anywhere, sweetie, come and see Millie first. I’ll pay for your ticket in exchange for a beneficiary’s form.”

“You mean that, Millie?”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got leave time coming up. I’d like to go to Anchorage.”

“Sweetie, let’s not talk anymore until we celebrate some more. You up for it?” Millie reached under the covers again and said, “Yep. You’re up for it. Come here to Millie, you blond *Kabloonaq* lover boy, you.”



*What is this thing called love? Love might be a moment's madness, an emotional eruption of insanity. The first embers of love can burst into a firestorm to consume you or it can be like a soothing rain. Such are the love's verities. Alaska is the home of the strongest passions love can induce: love and passion are part of the landscape. Long cold nights produce peculiar effects. Love changes Northern Hearts and their behaviours.*

# Northern Hearts

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