Excerpt from *Midnight Sun*

The dogs howled. Starting in one throat quickly joined by others till dozens of canine lungs were crooning at the moon, the sound climbed in a jagged chorus into the Arctic night and then suddenly collapsed, falling back out of the sky in disconsolate yaps and disheartened barks. Then silence.

The full moon kept on shining.

Except where it cast straight-edged shadows from roofs in the small, isolated Inuit village of Poniktuk, the moonlight fell only on natural outlines in a vast frozen landscape where ocean could be told from land only by its flatness. (But that was sometimes broken by pressure ridges of upthrust ice that zigzaged across the level surface like trails of giant burrowing worms.) Landward from Poniktuk for hundreds of miles the bucklings of the earth's crust, the hollows of valleys, and expanses of lakes reflected the moon's light with a uniform whiteness. Nowhere in the land was there a hint of color. Shaped and hardened by wind and cold, the snow sometimes rose into towering drifts and sometimes rippled into row after row of tiny ridges like ribs of sand on the ocean floor seen through clear summer water. But any release to summer of this white emptiness under an icy moon was currently unimaginable. Set on the edge of a frozen bay, the score of houses in the village huddled together like hunched victims of winter's storms.

The dogs howled again.

In his warm bed Simon Umingmak, chairman of Poniktuk's settlement council and uncle, brother, grandparent, or in-law to nearly everyone in the village, groaned in his sleep and rolled his large body toward his young wife's warm plumpness. Even in sleep it would have been beneath his dignity to do anything like snuggle, but as a heavy arm fell across her belly and a bent knee overlay her thigh, he sighed. And the bad dream went away.

By day the shrewd manipulator of all wieldable power in Poniktuk, Simon was often troubled at night by furtive anxieties that crowded his mind with frightening images. But embracing Ruby, recent bride and his dead first wife's niece ("That *Simon*!" female relatives had clucked when they married, and the men his own age in town had snickered), usually made the disturbing pictures go away. As it just had. Tonight the half-heard howling of the dogs may have helped. It was a sound from a happy childhood long before the creation of settlement councils or even of settlements, when he'd spent many winter nights in a warm igloo with his father on his trapline, their faithful dog team tied up outside.

Simon nuzzled his nose into Ruby's soft upper arm. The warm flesh had a pungent odor and bore a greenish bruise where he'd hit her when he was drunk two nights ago. Ruby lifted the arm and cradled his head against a darkly nippled breast. Simon sighed again and licked the nipple with his tongue.

In another part of town, another body turned on its side. Simon's nephew Nate, asleep in his parents' house, pulled the eiderdown tighter around his shoulders and drew up his knees. His young nights were untroubled by anxieties or his days by village politics. The year was nineteen hundred and eighty-two, and even more than most Inuit villages, Poniktuk (pop. 156) existed by and for itself, virtually undisturbed by intrusions from the outside world. Telephones connected the Poniktungmiut, the village's inhabitants, to each other and sometimes to other villages (the closest were nonetheless hundreds of miles distant). But the slightest quirk of atmosphere or weather could break that connection. Television was unknown in the village and only confusedly imagined. There were some radios in town, but they were useless. The land forms between Poniktuk and Nanuvik, three hundred miles away, interrupted and broke up signals broadcast by CBC Nanuvik, the only radio station in the region. By a freak of those same land forms and others across many more thousands of miles, an atmospheric skip did sometimes bring a radio program to Poniktuk – in Russian. The only certain communications from the outside world came in the form of mail delivered by the weekly scheduled flight (the

"sched") that originated in Nanuvik and touched down at several other villages along its flight plan. (Gossip also traveled that route.) But bad weather often delayed or canceled the sched.

While the rest of the world moved rapidly into the telecommuncations age, Poniktuk in nineteen hundred and eighty-two remained complacent and solitary, content to be ignorant of outside developments, technological or otherwise, and happy in its immunity to outside influences, social or political, that it could not, did not – and did not even want to – understand.

But there were tape recorders in town, and the mail-ordered tapes that arrived there were listened to by Nate and his friends with awe and fascination. They spent many hours sprawled on family couches and chairs listening to Kiss and Tiny Tim and Jefferson Airplane. Or if the urge to action seized him, Nate would try to persuade his father to lend him his snowmobile so he could zip around the frozen hills inland from the village, rifle slung on his back, hoping to see a wolf to shoot for his mother for parka trim but mostly just wanting to race across the hardened snow with his friends. There wasn't much else for a young man to do in Poniktuk in the winter. He slept alone.

Two years ago Nate had dropped out of the high school in Nanuvik – the Poniktuk school went only to grade 8. A promising student urged by the teaching couple at least to try to continue his education and the only member of his small class to accept their challenge, he'd flown off in the Department of Education charter that had touched down in his village, full of a spirit of adventure and looking forward to learning the ways of a larger world than Poniktuk's. But separated for the first time from his family and friends and subjected to incomprehensible disciplines in a boys' residence run by the Anglican Church, he'd become instantly homesick. Demoralized and ashamed of these unmanly feelings but unable to master them, he'd soon sought escape from them in sports, especially hockey, which he played with a mixture of instinct, cunning, and ferocity that earned him some extracurricular fame. But these hours of happiness were short, and the hours of schoolwork and confinement to the Anglican residence were long. The unmanly feelings persisted, he became surly in class, making no efforts to

understand what his teachers were teaching, moped idly through the evenings instead of doing homework, and began to get into trouble -- pranks against the dormitory supervisor, a lay brother, infractions of rules like those against carrying food out of the dining room or wearing shorts to chapel. At night on weekends in more daring escapes, he sometimes slipped out of the dormitory alone when the bars in Nanuvik were closing and wandered around town till he found a party. Too young to drink in the bars, he felt like a man when he got drunk at a party.

Continuously haunted by longings for his mother's bannock and fresh caribou meat and raw frozen fish and for the company of his lifelong friends and failing all his courses, Nate quit at the end of the first half of the first year of high school just a step ahead of being expelled from both residence and school. He returned to the comfortable familiarities of Poniktuk.

But he'd seen something of the outside world. At a population of three thousand, Nanuvik was hardly a metropolis. But it had television, it had movies, it had bars, it had parties, and it had a huge Hudson's Bay store. Poniktuk, of course, had none of these. On many afternoons after or during school when he should have been elsewhere, Nate had walked up and down the aisles of the Bay gazing at things to buy in such abundance – games, toys, clothing, rifles, fishing gear, radios, cassette players, TVs, bicycles, snowmobiles, tapes, magazines, candy – that he couldn't resist shoplifting something. He had no money, but he *wanted.* He took only small things that fit into pockets and was never caught.

But the trove he brought home with him to Poniktuk and the stories he told of how he'd stolen each treasure made him a hero among his peers. His were the tapes of Kiss and Tiny Tim and Jefferson Airplane. In their parents' living rooms they listened over and over to these tapes in a trance of envy of the life of extravagance and orgy they heard celebrated in them. Stories of his own confused sexual experiences at two of the drunken parties in Nanuvik, remembered as causing sensations that were anything but extravagent or glorious, Nate kept to himself or had, by now, forgotten. But memories of other possibilities and goods that enlivened life in the outside world stayed with him.

Nate turned on his stomach and hugged his pillow.

At eighteen years of age, in a world of indulgent elders, peer admiration, and government welfare checks, he'd allowed the cunning and ferocity of his hockey days to slip into disuse and his willingness for adventure to atrophy. He lived a life given over to indolent longing to be and have what he had no hope or means of being or possessing. It was a life of sudden activity and chronic boredom. On the whole he didn't mind it.

The sun was rising.

The Arctic night gave up its stars reluctantly as the eastern sky turned gray and the moon set in the west. At the end of their tie-lines, the dogs curled into hollows their bodies had long ago melted in the snow and, noses tucked under their tails, went to sleep.

Daylight increased, the eastern sky turned from gray to pink to violet, and when the sun at last broke the horizon, its rays crept across the frozen land and, reaching Poniktuk, picked out the colors of its houses. Blue, purple, lavender, acqua, lime green, lemon yellow, fuschia, orange, and pink slats of siding came to light alongside roof-high snowdrifts that blizzard winds had wrapped around the houses' corners. Touched by sunlight the village homes, among larger shapes of school, fire hall, generator plant, mechanics' shop, church and mission building, now looked less like huddled victims of winter's storms than like cheerful hunkered-down survivors of them.

The sky turned blue, and people in Poniktuk, known in the rest of the region as the Poniktungmiut, began to wake up.

Nate's dwarf Auntie Akpa yawned and stretched her lumpy arms above her head, careful to not disturb the slender shape beside her, her thirteen-year-old niece Della, who'd slept over. In a moment she'd have to wake the girl and get her off to school, but for now she could let her mind wander into the day ahead. It was the day the weekly scheduled plane from Nanuvik arrived, bringing mail and who knew what other surprises from the Sears catalog for people in Poniktuk or for the village store. Her older brother Simon would as usual empty the mailbags on the store floor after the plane had left and hand out letters and packages as if they were presents from himself, calling the recipients

to step forward and often making jokes about what their letters and packages might contain. It was one of the few occasions when almost everyone in the village was together because, while mailing letters might go unobserved, this public receiving of packages and letters allowed those who were present to get a glimpse of each others' private lives. And who would want to miss a chance like that? Although she rarely received anything, Akpa was always there, on the lookout from the top of a stack of soda-pop flats and sometimes adding a bawdy speculation of her own to her brother's jokes.

Beside her, Della slept lightly, prolonging in her dozing mind a dream that some of the older boys in town had invited her to listen to tapes and that her cousin Nate, the undisputed hero among them, had smiled at her in a way that made parts of her body she'd only recently become aware of feel good. In real life, to her heartbreak, he never paid her any attention.

One surprise the plane wouldn't bring, Akpa reflected, was Father Evans. The Anglican priest who'd spent years in Poniktuk and been reliably her guide through many uncertainties both religious and practical would never come back. Over the last two years she'd watched him sicken and grow frail until a plane from the diocese had finally come and taken him far away south to a hospital. Word had reached Poniktuk a month ago that he was dead.

Akpa heaved a sigh and dug an elbow into Della's ribs.

"Up, girl! Time you stop dreaming and start thinking to get smart. Della! Up! Go to school!"

Della flinched and opened her eyes on yet another day of unrequited love.

In other homes other children were shaken out of bed, told to dress, given a piece of bannock, bundled into boots, jackets, mitts, tuques, and windpants, and sent off to school with stern urgings to learn. The young teaching couple, who with the departure of Father Evans were now two of only four white persons among a hundred Inuit in Poniktuk (the other two were the town mechanic and the nurse), were already at the school. In the 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade classroom they were studying the calendar and counting the weeks till the school year ended in June.

The mid-April sun had risen above the horizon into a cloudless sky.

At his kitchen table Nate's father Eli sat smoking his first cigarette of the day. He was the only person awake in the house and had already made himself coffee. He stared out the kitchen window at the frozen bay and remembered other April mornings when by now he'd have been out on the sea ice for several hours in sealskin boots and caribou clothing, a young man hunting basking seals and wondering if he'd meet a polar bear. It wasn't so long ago, and nobody had a house to live in then. They lived in tents and igloos. His youngest son Iku, given the birth name of his great-grandfather but usually called Nate, his baptismal name, would never, Eli reflected, do anything like that. Maybe it didn't matter, but he couldn't help sometimes thinking it did.

At the nursing station, nurse Ethel McGarr rolled onto her other side and told herself for the third time she really should get up. But there were no patients in her two-bed ward. Another few minutes of snoozing wouldn't hurt. She fell back asleep. And at the town garage, the town mechanic, nursing a hangover and ten minutes late to work himself, wondered sourly where his helpers were and if any would show up for work at all today.

Simon reached orgasm inside Ruby's plump body – no need for a pillow under *her* buttocks – rolled away and dozed off again wondering if his contact in Local Government in Nanuvik would manage to slip to the pilot of the plane scheduled to arrive today a forty-ouncer of Canadian Club in a disguised container for him.

Nate yawned and slept through the morning while the day became a perfect day of Arctic spring, cloudless, crisp, and sunlit.

When the sched arrived that afternoon, most of the population of Poniktuk drove out to the airstrip to meet it on their snowmobiles, young men at high speed standing up, hotdogging it, older people more slowly, knowing the plane would be there a while. Simon drove the town truck out and backed it up to the Twin Otter for the freight.

But before freight could be unloaded, the plane's two passengers got off. The first was seen to be a relative of Simon's and of many others in Poniktuk, Andy Kublu from

Seal Harbor, another village along the plane's scheduled route. When he'd backed down the ladder hooked to the Otter's exit door, he turned around and smiled at the crowd and then moved through it shaking hands with everyone, starting with Simon.

The other passenger was a white man and a stranger. He too smiled when he got off, but he didn't go around shaking hands. He was a tall, rangy man with a prominent nose and a full-lipped mouth framed by a trimmed black beard, and he was dressed in handmade carbou-skin boots and a big store-bought down parka, its hood trimmed in some kind of fur nobody recognized. ("Whiteman fur," Akpa decided. "Cat?" Ruby wondered, having heard of cats but never having seen one.) While the men unloaded the plane, the stranger walked to the edge of the airstrip and stood looking at Poniktuk and at the land around it. If the smile on his face meant anything, he liked what he saw.

When the mailbags and flats of soda pop and other groceries and packages had been transferred to the truck, the pilot handed Simon a cardboard box labeled *Aeromint*. Simon climbed into the cab of the truck and set the box next to him on the seat.

"Come for coffee," he said to Andy Kublu before he drove off.

As the Poniktungmiut started back to town, Andy looked around to see where the stranger was, and the man, as if he'd been waiting for this signal, joined him without a word and walked beside him into the village. Nate, who'd ridden out on the back of his brother Wayne's snowmobile, walked behind them. The stranger came from the outside world he'd briefly lived in. If he followed the man and Andy Kublu to his uncle Simon's house, he might hear something interesting.

The plane taxied the length of the airstrip and took off.

When Simon drove the truck past the store and parked it in front of his house, everyone knew it was going to be a while before mail was handed out. Maybe even not till tomorrow. Because everyone also knew it wasn't candy bars in that cardboard box labeled *Aeromint.* They went back to what they were doing before the sched arrived, disappointed about the mail but not resentful. In a village like Poniktuk, you got used to disappointment. And Simon was the village boss.

Several hours later, the drone of the Twin Otter was again heard overhead, and as it circled around Poniktuk before landing on its way back to Seal Harbor and Nanuvik, Simon and his two guests emerged from his house and climbed into the truck. This time people stayed at home and watched the truck make slow, concentrated progress through the village. Simon was driving, Andy Kublu was beside him, and at the passenger window they could see the white stranger. He wasn't smiling anymore.

At the airstrip Andy, after several failed attempts to climb the ladder, had to be pushed from below and pulled from above onto the plane, but the stranger made it up on his own. The plane took off without his saying goodbye to Simon. Simon drove slowly home.

An hour later Ruby was talking on the phone to Akpa's sister Big Helen. Simon had passed out in the bedroom.

"He doing some kind of business with Andy Kublu and them others in Nanuvik," she said about the white man.

"Which ones them others?"

"You know, them others like Luke Tulimak from Uugaaqtuk came in here a while ago and talked to peoples?"

"About what?"

"I dunno. I never understood too good."

"So what they talk about today?"

"That white man keep saying something like . . . 'land rights'?"

"Oh? What he mean by it?"

"You better ask Simon when he wake up. Or maybe not. I think he don't like it too much."

"What else they say?"

"I never listen too careful. White man and Andy keep trying to talk Simon into something. I think they maybe want someone in Poniktuk should work for them. Simon get real pissed off at that, say he could do anything needs to be done around here and

don’t want to hear no more. So then they talk about hunting caribou and drink up that bottle of CC. But maybe ask Nate. He was there.”

When this version of the visit to Poniktuk by the fieldwork coordinator for the Aboriginal Rights Alliance, or ABRA, a regional Inuit land-claims negotiating group of which Andy Kublu was president, reached Eli’s house, he and his wife Ruth wondered what it meant. Nate had come home by then and overheard them talking. But their son couldn’t help them out because everything he’d heard in his uncle’s house was spinning around in his head in a muddle. Some isolated phrases were clear as a bell -- like “the peoples’ rights” and “game management” – but they had no meaning he could articulate because he couldn’t fit them together with other words and phrases he hadn’t understood in the first place and now could only half-remember. His uncle had poured him a couple of rounds of CC.

In the late afternoon, daylight still lingered on the snow-covered rooftops of Poniktuk, casting shadows that now lengthened slowly away from the buildings in the opposite direction from the shadows in the morning. But as the sun fell, the moon rose. At first it was only a pale pock-marked disc in the eastern sky. But when daylight finally drained away below the western horizon, following the sun, the moon grew brighter. Rising high into the sky, it took charge once more of the Arctic night.