

Stanley

Forbes, AK

November 1987

The body would eventually show up on the rear doorstep of the Forbes Memorial Presbyterian Church. Mervin Wilson, a local bush pilot, had been stabbed in the stomach with one of his own hunting knives and bludgeoned about the head with a cast-iron skillet. Though neither weapon would be found with the body, the initial pathology report would suggest he had been unceremoniously dumped there around 3am on that snowy November morning. And there his body remained, slumped against the steps, for a further seven hours until the new minister, Rev Thomas Anderson, made the gruesome discovery while emptying the trash.

Reverend Anderson had arrived at the church just as the sun was creeping over the tree line of the peninsular across the bay. He'd entered the church through the front door and sat in a pew to pray a while in the frigid interior before making his way through an inner entrance to the church office, where he soon had the furnace running and a pot of coffee brewing in the adjacent kitchen.

Around 9.30am, his efforts to memorize a list of names set alongside photographs of his new parishioners were interrupted by a knock on the office door.

'Good morning...' he greeted the caller, a broad red-faced woman with pigtailed protruding from under the flaps of her hat, who had retreated to the bottom of the steps. Her face looked familiar, and he racked his memory for a corresponding name. 'Er... Noleen, right? From the post office?'

'That's right,' said Noleen, returning the minister's smile. 'Good morning, Reverend. Sorry to disturb you so early.'

While he was no good with names, Reverend Anderson could read a person's state of mind with uncanny accuracy, and although the woman on the doorstep wore a cheerful smile, he sensed she hadn't dropped by simply to wish him well.

'It's no bother at all,' he assured her. 'Won't you come in?'

The manager of the post office made no hesitation in puffing up the steps, stamping the snow from her boots before entering the office and explaining the purpose of her call.

'Like I said, I'm sorry to disturb, Reverend, but it looks like we've lost a pilot.' She smiled nervously. 'I don't suppose you happened to see Mervin Wilson while you were out walking this morning?'

The minister confessed that, no, he hadn't seen the pilot – one of the few local residents he knew by sight. 'Why do you ask?'

'He was due to fly out a load of mail this morning, but he never showed up at the airstrip. He's never missed a flight.'

'You've tried him at home, I take it?' the minister enquired.

'Well, that's the thing. I've just come from there...' There was a note of disquiet in her voice. Slowly, as if thinking things through as she spoke, she went on: 'His daughter, Becky, says she doesn't know where he is... and his wife won't come to the door... Becky says she's sick in bed.'

'His wife? I had no idea he had a family.'

'Hmm... Rita. They met out west, somewhere near Bethel, I think. Becky's her daughter from another marriage.'

'Well, that's odd,' the minister agreed. 'But I'm sure he can't have gone far – not without his plane, at any rate!'

Not in a joking mood, Noleen sat staring through the office window, lost in thought. 'Reverend...' she said at last, pausing as if trying to decide whether or not to continue.

'What's up, Noleen?' the minister urged.

'To tell the truth, Reverend... I'm a little worried. That's not a happy household... if you know what I mean.'

'Right.... Well... ' Reverend Anderson sensed a need for coffee before digging any deeper. When they each had a mug, he asked his visitor to describe everything she'd seen and heard that morning at the Wilsons'.

Noleen explained how when the pilot didn't show up at the airstrip, she had returned to the post office to see if he'd left a message. Her husband, Frank, who had been helping to sort the previous day's mail, reported he hadn't seen or heard anything from anybody. Concluding Mervin must have overslept, maybe having drunk too much – which, Noleen hastened to add, the pilot was prone to do – she did the next obvious thing and went around to the man's house. There, she'd been greeted by Mervin's stepdaughter Becky, whose clumsy attempts to conceal a black eye didn't fool Noleen.

Starting to get the picture, Reverend Anderson asked outright, 'You think Mervin gave her that black eye?'

'It wouldn't be the first time,' Noleen confirmed, lowering her eyes as she spoke. 'Besides, Rita wouldn't come out, and that's not like her at all. When Becky said she was sick in bed, I started to think something was up.'

'But Mervin wasn't there. You're sure of that?'

'Becky said they don't know where he is. They think he went out late and hasn't been home.'

'And you believe her?'

‘I think so,’ said Noleen. ‘His snowmobile wasn’t there – he usually gets around on that.’

With a sigh, Reverend Anderson abandoned his coffee and leant forward in his chair. ‘Noleen,’ he said at last. ‘You said this has happened before... well, hasn’t anyone done anything? Hasn’t anyone reported it?’

‘Sure, sometimes it gets reported. But the State Troopers can take a day or more to respond to a call out, and mostly by the time they get here things have simmered down and no one does anything about it. For most families it’s not worth the trouble. Besides, it’s happening all the time, and not just in Forbes. It’s a real problem nowadays.’

The minister wanted to ask if there wasn’t someone in the village with the authority and resolve to do something. But he decided that conversation could wait. For now, there was the more pressing question of the missing pilot and, of course, the need to check up on the man’s wife and stepdaughter. He’d just made up his mind when there was another knock on the office door.

‘Now, who we got here?’

‘It’s Abe – Mervin’s nephew,’ Noleen answered, peering through the window. She was on her feet and at the door before the minister to let the young man in.

Assuming Abe had come looking for his uncle, Noleen wasted no time in telling him, ‘He’s not here, Abe. And the Reverend hasn’t seen him either.’

But the young man’s face fell blank. ‘How do you know he’s missing?’

‘Your uncle didn’t show up for the mail run this morning,’ Noleen explained. ‘I couldn’t track him down so I came here.’

‘But I’m not looking for Uncle Mervin – I didn’t even know he was missing.’

There was a moment of confused silence, broken at length by Reverend Anderson:

‘But, Abe, I thought you just said someone was missing?’

Abe’s face seemed to have dropped, as though the information about his uncle was of some new and disquieting significance. Shaking his big shaggy head, he started to explain himself. ‘No... no... I’m looking for Stanley.’ Then, turning to Noleen, ‘You remember, Becky’s boyfriend?’

‘Oh, sure,’ said Noleen, remembering at last. ‘I didn’t know he was in town.’

‘He showed up yesterday – kind of a surprise visit. Seems he came to ask Becky to marry him. Only Uncle Mervin went crazy. He won’t allow it.’

‘Crazy?’ the minister fished for more details.

‘U-huh. He wants Becky to stay in Forbes, but Stanley wouldn’t take him seriously. They got into a major fight about it.’

‘Had he been drinking?’ Noleen interrupted.

‘Uncle Mervin? Oh, sure...’ Abe confirmed the worst. ‘They were fighting when I arrived – Rita was crying, and Becky was screaming at Mervin to lay off. So, I broke them up and took Stan out for a drink.’

Noleen threw up her hands up in despair, shooting Abe an accusing stare.

‘Well, he was really mad,’ Abe said. ‘I thought he could use some cheering up. Better than getting his face smashed in, right?’

‘He was angry so you thought getting drunk would help?’ Noleen could hardly contain her frustration.

‘I thought this was supposed to be a dry village,’ Reverend Anderson interjected. Abe pulled the hat off his head and sat quietly stroking his chin, leaving Noleen to explain to the minister that despite liquor having been banned in Forbes, it was commonplace for people to brew their own.

‘Some law,’ said the minister, rolling his eyes.

‘You’re telling me,’ Noleen agreed, then rounded on Abe again: ‘So, who was catering last night’s little get together? Reuben Adams, I’ll bet.’

Under the circumstances, Abe seemed willing to come clean. ‘U-huh. But I don’t know what happened to Stan in the end. I went home around midnight, and Reuben says Stan left about an hour later. But I’ve searched the whole village and can’t find him anywhere.’

‘Have you been round to see Becky?’ said Noleen.

‘Yeah.’ Abe shot Noleen a knowing glance – clearly he’d noticed the black eye as well. ‘She says she doesn’t know where he is. Though Rita says she heard Mervin’s snowmobile during the night, and it’s not in the shed now.’

‘But that doesn’t explain why Mervin never showed up at the airstrip,’ the minister observed. ‘Unless he was still drunk and rode off and had an accident or something.’

‘Maybe. But that doesn’t explain where Stanley is,’ Abe pointed out.

‘How old is this Stanley?’

Abe frowned. ‘I dunno... younger than me. Becky’s age, I guess. Maybe seventeen, eighteen.’

‘Well, okay...’ Reverend Anderson began, getting to his feet and reaching for his coat. ‘I say we go have another word to Rita and Becky.’

While the others gathered up their own hats and coats, the minister collected the coffee cups and dumped them in the kitchen sink before emptying the filter from the coffee pot into an already overflowing trashcan.

‘Just give me a second to empty this trash,’ he called to the others from the kitchen. With the knotted trash bag in hand, he made his way back through the office, into the main

church and down to the vestry to the left of the altar. In the yard behind the vestry was where the dumpster and incinerator were located.

And so it was, that when he opened the door to the rear yard, Reverend Thomas Anderson discovered the missing pilot's bashed and bloodied body lying crumpled in the snow. Dropping the bag of trash where he stood, he rushed forward to confirm the obvious – the man was certainly dead. And it was definitely the missing pilot. He could tell, despite the blood that had frozen dry over his head and face.

A moment later, the minister reappeared in the office looking and sounding decidedly agitated. 'Abe, do you know how to ring the church bell?' he muttered, fumbling with a bunch of keys.

'Yeah, I think so,' replied Abe. 'How come?'

'I'll explain later... here.' The minister handed Abe the key to the bell tower. 'Go... ring the bell... give it two minutes. Trust me, this is important.'

Taking the minister at his word, the young man took the key and slipped away to the bell tower without any further questions.

'Reverend, what's going on?' asked Noleen. 'You start ringing that bell and the whole village is going to think the worst.'

'I'm afraid it is the worst, Noleen,' replied Reverend Anderson, reaching for the phone on his desk. Remembering Noleen's comment about the time taken for the State Troopers to respond to emergency calls, however, he replaced the receiver and paused to gather his thoughts. Brow bent in concentration, he ran through all the details from the previous half-hour's conversation – Becky's black eye, the drunken argument with Mervin Wilson, Abe's missing friend, a snowmobile taking off in the night...

'What is it, Reverend? What on earth's happened?'

Outside, the church bell started to toll.

'Noleen,' said the minister gravely, 'we need to find this Stanley character. And fast.'