

Swan Song

The call came in at 1:24 p.m. I heard Ahnah answer, “Iqaluit Constabulary,” but my attention was focused on the Keurig coffee maker I had brought with me from Humboldt, Saskatchewan. This was only the third day the city’s new police force was officially up and running, and the plan was to slowly take over full responsibility from the RCMP. Good coffee would be critical.

As my dark roast continued to drip into a new blue and white IC coffee mug, I heard Ahnah’s soft voice in the background, but it was the silence that compelled me to turn around.

“Everything okay?” I asked our exec assistant.

“No,” she said. “There’s a dead body at the Tundra Inn and Suites. It appears to be murder.”

Before she could finish, I was reaching for my coat and yelling for the two constables in training, Kallik Redfern and Willie Appaqaq, to follow me. Our office was only five minutes from the hotel (although in Iqaluit, I was learning, you’re really only five minutes from anywhere). By the time we arrived, there was a crowd of people. That crowd included David Picco, the government’s elected representative for Rankin Inlet and the driving force behind the establishment of the Iqaluit Constabulary, a first for the 12-year-old territory.

“I was across the street at the legislature,” he said by way of explanation. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, “but it’s not good.”

People moved back to let us through, a consideration I was also learning is second nature to Iqalumiut. The hotel manager was waiting for us in the lobby. “Doug Brumal,” I said by way of introduction. “I’m the new police chief.”

“This is awful, just awful,” said the manager, a small, round man who in his distress had forgotten to give us his name. I nodded at Kallik who moved quietly to the front desk. He would get the names and contact information for everyone in the hotel at the time of the incident.

By now, the unnamed manager was leading us down a long hallway past the dining room and lounge to a series of meeting rooms. The first door on our left was the only one closed. When I opened it, I saw round tables with linen tablecloths positioned throughout the room. Two coffee urns and one teapot were resting on a tilted table. (Floors here often shift because of the ice and permafrost.) There were muffins, fresh fruit, and a cheese plate on the table. A large screen faced a projector, which held centre stage in the room.

Except, of course, for the dead woman on the floor. She was reed thin, about 5’ 8”, silver-grey hair that may have been dyed. She was wearing a black skirt, checkered jacket, and white blouse. Well, now the blouse was white and red. Blood red.

Willie moved forward and started taking pictures. I returned to the hallway and shut the door behind me. The manager was nowhere in sight, but a young, brunette woman was waiting for me. “I’m Elsa Nattaq, assistant manager,” she said. “I found the body.”

“Is there somewhere quiet we can talk?” I asked. Kallik had joined me, and we followed the assistant manager into an adjacent meeting room. As I was dropping my big butt (at 6’6” most of me is big) into a boardroom chair, I looked up to see Ahnah Friesen standing in the doorway.

“I thought you might want me to take notes,” she said settling into the chair on my left.

Elsa Nattaq didn't wait for our questions. We learned the dead woman was Eira Winter, owner of HR Exemplary, a training firm out of Calgary. Winter was a regular visitor to the hotel, a contractor from the south who flew into Iqaluit several times a year.

"I'll ask Carol Logan to drop by this afternoon to speak with us," Ahnah said as the assistant manager stopped to take a breath. "She's the training coordinator for the GN."

I had learned enough to know GN stood for Government of Nunavut. Apparently, I had not learned quite how sharp our admin support was.

The assistant manager assured us she had not touched anything in the room, including the body, and had locked the door after she backed out of the room. "Do you know who was on room duty over lunch?" Ahnah asked.

I didn't even try to mask my surprise. "Meeting rooms are cleared over lunch to make way for the afternoon break," she said looking me in the eyes. "I used to work here."

"But the room wasn't cleared," I noted, seeing where Ahnah was going. I also noted, to myself, that Ahnah had been in the murder room.

I thanked Nattaq for her help and told her we might have more questions. She agreed to let us use the boardroom for the afternoon. Then the three of us joined Willie in room 101. Another woman was also there. I recognized Kari Frost, the chief coroner.

Frost, a Southerner, was all business. "Dead as a nit," she said. "Stabbed, repeatedly, with what appears to be a steak knife." I looked over at Willie, who was holding up an evidence bag with a small bloody serrated knife.

"I'll know cause of death for certain once I do the autopsy. Likely hit a vital organ or two. Nasty business," Frost said, grabbing her crime scene bag and heading out.

I looked at my team already knee deep in murder. This wasn't what any of us had expected. Were we ready? As if she could read my mind, Ahnah said, "We're all good. I've set up an interview with Carol Logan for 3:30, and Paul Saila is coming in at 4."

"Who the hell is Paul Saila?" I asked.

"The busboy sent to tidy up the training room," said Ahnah. Seeing my confusion at her apparent psychic ability, she added, "Elsa texted me."

Almost as an afterthought, she said, "I also ordered some coffee, juice, and muffins for us in the boardroom. It might be a long day."

Promptly at 3:30 Carol Logan, a big-boned brunette with a warm smile, breezed in. After expressing her distress and her belief that she wouldn't be much help, Logan went on to give us much-needed background on our victim. An HR specialist, Winter had been conducting training sessions in Nunavut for four years. The 63-year-old was mid-way through a lucrative contract with an option to renew for another three years. That contract called on Winter's company to certify GN employees in human resources and payroll services.

"How important is that certification?" I asked.

"Without it, employees cannot continue in their jobs," Logan said simply.

Skilled labour is an ongoing issue for the GN, I knew. The Government of Nunavut had committed to creating a public service that is representative of the population it serves, and qualified Inuit applicants are given priority for all job competitions. It was the word "qualified," however, that posed significant problems. Indeed, it was the reason I was sitting in the police chief's chair.

"How many people fail?" I asked.

“In the last few years, not many. In fact, none,” Logan said. “But that may have been about to change. Eira and her partner, Crystal Pele, divide the curriculum. They don’t usually come together. You should talk to Crystal.” I could see Ahnah reaching for her phone.

“Did you like Eira Winter?” I asked.

“She’s very good at her job, and she has helped us advance our HR skills significantly,” Logan said. She didn’t meet my eyes.

Within seconds of Logan leaving the boardroom, a lanky young man in his late 20s was ushered in. I held out my hand and thanked Paul Saila for coming. He looked at the floor and mumbled something. I wasn’t sure if this was respect for an older person, shyness, or something else altogether.

“You know why you’re here?” I asked.

Saila nodded. “I need you to tell me,” I said without rancor.

“It’s about the dead woman.”

“What about her?” I asked.

“I was doing her classroom.”

“What exactly were you doing Paul?”

“I bring the food in and take it out,” he answered.

“Did you speak with Ms. Winter or see her over the lunch hour?”

Paul continued to look at the floor. “No,” he said. I didn’t know if he was telling me the truth.

“Did you like her?” I asked.

Saila shifted in his seat. “Didn’t know her.”

Crystal Pele was more talkative. The trainer showed up a few minutes after Saila left. (Ahnah's work, I presumed.) She entered checking her watch, hand outstretched. "I can't believe this. Who would want to hurt Eira?"

"We're hoping you can help us with that," I answered. "Why was she here on this trip?"

Pele appeared confused. "It's her job."

"I understand the two of you didn't usually come together."

The Calgary trainer nodded. "Yes. It's more productive for one of us to travel, where possible. But these are the final exams for the group, and we both felt we should be here."

"Why?" I pushed.

"It's about quality control and due diligence," Pele said, sitting a little taller and a little more stiffly. The educator's hat was on, but before she could explain quality control and due diligence to me, I interjected.

"I understand you oversaw exams individually in the past."

The stiffness remained. "We review each class and determine the schedule accordingly," Pele said. "In this case, we felt it would be beneficial for us both to be here."

"Why?" I persisted.

You could see Crystal Pele deflate. "There is a participant who is struggling. She may not pass. Eira thought we should both be here to break any bad news."

"Do you agree with that decision?" I asked.

"What decision?" Pele countered.

"To remove an employee from their job."

I watched Pele's jaw for a reaction. It clenched ever so slightly. "We work with every person to help them reach the best possible outcome. Some people just don't make the grade. Literally."

Before I could speak, Pele continued. I'm not sure whom she was trying to convince. "It's best for everyone. If an employee can't grasp the HR essentials, it makes them feel inadequate, and it makes the government less effective and efficient."

I switched lanes. "When did you last see Ms. Winter?"

"We had dinner together last night at the hotel."

"You didn't see her today?" I asked.

"No, we decided only one of us would be needed in the classroom to oversee the exam itself. Eira drew the short straw. I slept in and ate breakfast in my room."

"Did you like Ms. Winter?" I asked. I could see the surprise on Pele's face. I didn't know if it was the switch in questioning or the question itself.

"She was my colleague. My partner," Pele said. She sounded a little breathless. Defensive perhaps. Or nervous.

"Not what I asked," I said. I could feel my team looking at me with a similar expression to Pele's. I made a mental note to discuss questioning strategy with them when we debriefed.

Pele sat up straighter. "Of course, I liked Eira. She was a dedicated, skilled professional who put her heart into everything she did."

"So you liked her." It was a question and a statement. And it got me a glare. "Did other people like Eira Winter?" I asked, veering slightly.

I could feel Pele relax—and hesitate. "Eira was a perfectionist, and she could be impatient. People may not have appreciated those qualities."

Now it was my turn to check my watch. I thanked Pele for coming and walked her out. Three sets of eyes were staring at me when I turned back to the boardroom. “What do you want us to do now?” Willie asked.

“Go home,” I said. “Enjoy your dinner. Watch some TV. Let’s meet tomorrow at 7:30 for a debrief and strategy session. We may have more information by then.”

“I’ll bring bannock,” Kallik said.

#

My government-provided apartment reminded me I was not home as soon as I pulled in front. Permafrost prevents buildings in Iqaluit being built from the ground up. I was on the first floor, a short walk up a small flight of steps with a clear view of the “stilts” on which the building sat. This was not familiar territory.

Before I had a chance to think about food, my phone rang. It was David Picco. “Have you eaten?” he asked before the word “hello” was fully out of my mouth.

“No,” I said.

“Do you want some company? I have char.”

“Come right over,” I said. I meant it. I really liked and respected David. He was gently and skillfully introducing me to Nunavut, the culture, and the role I would play in life here in Iqaluit. I also really liked Arctic char, a rich, delicate taste somewhere between trout and salmon.

David let me enjoy dinner – we pan fried char with a splash of lemon, boiled potatoes, and zapped some frozen peas. (In a community where a head of lettuce routinely costs \$6.99, frozen vegetables are more common than fresh.)

Over coffee and a plate of packaged cookies (brought from Humboldt), we got to the unspoken matter at hand. “Doug, do you have a handle on this?” David asked without any preamble.

“It’s been all of six hours,” I pointed out.

“Would you like to call in the RCMP for assistance?”

“I’d like to meet with my team tomorrow, review the forensics, and continue interviews,” I said. “If I feel we need RCMP support, I will ask for it.”

“This is the first test of the new force. Everyone is watching,” David said, reminding me of the pressure we are under to succeed. And quickly. “There are opponents, as you know, people who strongly objected to establishing our own constabulary.”

“We’re untested, and we need to find our footing,” I acknowledged, “but the team is trained, I’m experienced, and we’re following protocol. Give us a chance to breathe here.”

“It’s not me you have to worry about,” David said.

#

I arrived at the office at 7 a.m. The team was already there, and the bannock, a deep-fried bread, was warm. I brought molasses, a tradition passed down from my Newfoundland grandmother. Willie, Kallik, and Ahnah thought this was sacrilege but agreed to give it a try. Willie tossed his in the garbage when he thought I wasn’t looking, and Ahnah wrapped hers neatly in a paper towel, also when she thought I wasn’t looking. Kallik ate everything on his plate and reached for more bannock—and molasses.

After small talk and big bites, we got down to business. We reviewed what forensics we had, the most important being the knife. “Not a typical murder weapon,” I pointed out. “It’s too small to be guaranteed effective, if murder was what our killer had in mind.”

“So do you think this was a crime of passion?” Kallik asked. He’s clearly been reading mystery novels.

“It would appear to be spur of the moment,” I agreed. “Perhaps grabbing a weapon close to hand.”

Ahnah looked at the ground and shuffled her feet. “It’s a steak knife from the dining room,” she said. I nodded.

“Steak is only served on Tuesdays,” she noted.

I immediately understood the implication. “So, either someone took this knife from the dining room on Tuesday, the night before the murder, or someone with access to the kitchen grabbed it yesterday. Either way, it looks premeditated.”

Now, it was Ahnah’s turn to nod.

“So why would someone want Eira Winter dead?” I asked, more to myself than the group.

“She doesn’t sound like a nice lady,” Willie said. We all agreed, but we all wondered if that was enough for someone to want her dead.

In my experience, it wasn’t.

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Lumi Nakasuk showed up for her interview 15 minutes after our debrief. I wasn’t aware we’d booked an interview, but I wasn’t surprised when Ahnah told me Carol Logan had emailed the info last night about Nakasuk, an HR and payroll clerk with the Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs department. And the failing participant in Winter’s certificate program. I also wasn’t surprised when Ahnah joined us in the interview room.

Nakasuk, a plump, 5'3" woman in her early 20s, would be unlikely to take Winter down in a fist fight, but if she caught the trainer off guard, she'd have no trouble driving a steak knife into human flesh.

The young woman was clearly nervous, but then she had reason to be, even if innocent. There are two options for interrogation: tough cop, gentle cop. If the Iqaluit Constabulary was to be accepted in the community, we had to earn its respect. I opted for gentle cop.

"Thank you for coming in," I said. Nakasuk looked up from the floor for a second.

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"I'm sure you didn't," I responded, "but we understand you were having problems in Ms. Winter's program."

"No reason to kill her," Nakasuk countered quietly. So perhaps all the women in Nunavut will be one step ahead of me.

"Can you tell us where you were yesterday from noon to 1 p.m.?"

Nakasuk stared at me, then the floor. "We have Ms. Winter's calendar. It says she had an appointment with you yesterday over the lunch hour," I said, lying through my teeth. Gently.

"I went to meet her, but she was busy," Nakasuk said softly. I couldn't tell if she was lying.

"Doing what?" I pushed.

"She's not a nice lady," Nakasuk said suddenly and a little loudly. And here it is, the moment when the suspect let's go, says to hell with reticence and caution. "She's mean. She yells. She thinks she's better than everyone."

I waited. Nakasuk hesitated, but the gate was open. There was no going back. “I showed up yesterday, but she was yelling at someone. Really yelling. It was awful. I got the hell out of there.”

“Who was she yelling at?” I asked. This was why Nakasuk was holding back—the information she didn’t want us to have. But she was in too deep now.

“Paul Salia,” Nakasuk said. “She told him she couldn’t wait to leave Nunavut, to get away from all this crap, and no little pissant like him was going to stand in her way. She called him a thief. Said he was taking the food from the classroom for himself.”

Now she looked at me, defiant. “So, what if he was.”

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Once Nakasuk left, we gathered to review what we now knew and the implications of that new knowledge. Nakasuk was still a suspect, but she had moved way down the list. There was no duplicity in her. The story about Salia and Winter rang true.

“Is theft an issue at the hotel?” I asked Ahnah.

I could feel her tension. “The hotel has to throw leftovers out. So sometimes employees take home the fruit, muffins, and cheese.”

Without pause, she added, “The Southerners do the same. They take the food to their rooms and eat it for breakfast or supper.” I could understand why. Chicken fingers here can cost \$20 and a clubhouse even more.

“So maybe Salia was taking food home and Winter objected,” I said ignoring Ahnah’s tone and the bait. “Are a few muffins and cheese bites worth killing for?”

“They are if you’re hungry enough,” Ahnah said.

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I decided to walk home, about 10 minutes. I had been warned about the winter temperatures in Iqaluit, sometimes as low as -50° C. At that temperature, the hair in your nose and the cilia in your lungs can freeze. But this was October. The first snowfall had lightly blanketed the city of roughly 8,000. The air was crisp and dry. Without many of the daytime lights from offices and other buildings, it was dusky. Stars draped the sky. Few people were outside, and the city felt like it was my own. I breathed deeply.

The feeling of contentment lasted throughout the evening. I heated up caribou stew, compliments of Kallik's wife. (I really like her. Can't wait to meet her.) I put Elvis on the stereo and put my feet up on the sofa. This was not laziness, but ritual. It's my way of thinking through things. As *Suspicious Minds* played, I reached the obvious conclusion. I simply didn't know enough to think anything through.

I got up and grabbed my parka, rammed my feet into my Bugaboos and headed for my Ford F150. There wasn't going to be any more Elvis for me tonight. I'd be settling in with Eira Winter's laptop and the thousands of emails and files she had stored in hundreds of folders. Such a night.

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The first drips of coffee were winding their way from pod to cup when Ahnah walked into the office. "You're early," I said. It wasn't even 7 a.m.

"Couldn't sleep," she responded. "And I figured you'd want to speak with Paul Salia first thing this morning."

She was right. I did want to speak with Salia, I also wanted to speak with Crystal Pele. I needed to learn more about the victim to understand why someone would want her dead.

Salia proved to be elusive. He didn't show up for work at the hotel, and he wasn't at home when Willie and Kallik went to look. They continued the search starting with his mother's house. Meanwhile, Pele arrived, simultaneously uneasy and annoyed. Both are common reactions to police requests for an interview.

"I told you everything I know," she said before I could ask a question.

"Yes," I agreed. "Thank you."

That left her a little confused. Point one for the Iqaluit Constabulary. "I want to learn more about Ms. Winter. I was hoping you could help."

"How?" Pele asked. Her tone was not warm.

"We're getting the distinct impression your colleague was not a nice woman."

"So what?" Pele said. You could almost see her body resign itself to the inevitable.

I didn't have time for petulance or reticence. "Ms. Pele, we can do this one of two ways. Your choice. Good cop or bad cop." I saw Ahnah smile into her Dell laptop.

"What do you want to know?" Pele asked. The annoyance was gone.

"Tell me why someone would want to kill Eira Winter."

"She's mean, she's heartless, she's inflexible, she's arrogant...do you want me to continue?" Pele asked. She stared at the floor.

"Please," I said. My tone was not warm.

"Look, Eira was not an easy woman. She prided herself on being rigorous but that left little room for openness or flexibility. Eira defined fairness as treating everybody the same."

"Isn't that a good thing?" I asked.

"It could be, but with Eira it meant no exceptions, ever. For example, she didn't tolerate lateness. Arrive after class started and you weren't allowed in the room. It didn't matter if

someone had been up all night with a critically ill baby or the minister of health had called them in for a meeting. No exceptions.”

I could see how that would rankle. “How did she treat you?”

“The same as everybody,” Pele said. “But I have worked with Eira for more than five years now. I know how to avoid the outbursts, the cold shoulder, and the retribution. I also know what to expect when I’ve crossed one of her lines. We found a balance that worked for us.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Happens with what?” She seemed confused.

“With your work in Nunavut?”

“The contract continues,” she said. “This course is winding up; the next one will start in another month. If I need help, I’ll subcontract work just like Eira did with me.”

“I know this is a long shot,” I said, “but do you have any idea who might have killed Ms. Winter.”

Pele looked me in the eye. She didn’t hesitate. “Anyone who ever met her.”

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I grabbed a sandwich for lunch at The Snack. When I got back to the station, Willie and Kallik nodded toward the interview room. Paul Salia was waiting for us. Truculent and terrified.

“I didn’t kill that woman,” he said. Defensive and defiant.

I didn’t say you did,” I answered. “Want a coffee? Muffin? Piece of fruit?”

“Piss off,” Salia said, and deservedly so, but now I had him off balance.

“So you got yelled at,” I said.

No big deal,” Salia said trying to appear nonchalant.

“Not what we heard.”

“Okay, so the bitch tore one off me. Big deal.”

“It is if you lose your job,” I said.

“Then they’d have to fire everyone,” Salia snapped. “And I’d have another job five minutes later.” I looked at Ahnah. She nodded yes.

“Tell me what happened,” I said.

“I was cleaning up the room and taking some of the leftovers when that woman walked in. She screamed at me. Called me a thief. Called me a low life. Nothing I haven’t been called before. Said I wasn’t going to ruin her reputation.”

“And then…” I prodded.

“I got out of there fast. She was alive and foaming at the mouth when I left. Calling me nasty names. Screaming something about me trying to ruin something for her and not letting her go in peace.”

Salia was almost out the door when he turned. “Don’t know if it matters,” he said, “but she was really upset about some bird that was singing.” He grinned at Willie. “Qugjuk.”

I looked at Willie in bewilderment. He shrugged. “It’s nothing. Guy’s an idiot. He’s spent so much time down south he doesn’t even know his own language anymore.”

#

I told the team I was making a Timmy’s run, which they understood but found a little strange. We have coffee in the station. I returned with hot chocolate and doughnuts. That enhanced the understanding significantly. A few minutes later Carol Logan walked in. She grabbed a Boston cream and said, “I understand you wanted to see me.”

I looked at Ahnah. “About the contract,” she said. Apparently we have the most fascinating floors.

Carol followed me to my office. “I brought a copy with me.” She handed me a fairly thick wad of paper. “But it may be easier if I walk you through it.”

The Government of Nunavut had a four-year contract with HR Exemplary, Winter’s company. The contract was worth at least \$250,000 a year, and automatically renewable for another three years. There were standard clauses for indemnity, termination, and confidentiality. If something happened to Winter mid-contract, it would be fulfilled by Crystal Pele.

“There’s nothing sinister in that,” Logan said as if sensing where I was going. “Same clause as in the previous contract, and Winter lived through that.”

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The remainder of the caribou stew was settling nicely in my stomach and Elvis was mid-way through *Don’t be Cruel* when I sat upright. I needed to get my hands on three things: Eira Winter’s contract, her laptop, and an Inuit dictionary. The first two were at the station; the other was on the Internet.

I texted the team. Thirty minutes later everyone was sitting in my small living room. Willie had made a Timmy’s run.

“Let’s go through what we know so far,” I said. “We’re close.” I could feel the pride. I could also feel the surprise.

Willie and Kallik thought Paul Salia the most likely suspect for obvious reasons. I thought the murderer was Crystal Pele. Ahnah agreed, but she was uncertain of the motive.

“Pele stood to lose a very lucrative contract,” I pointed out.

Ahnah frowned. “But she wasn’t losing the contract.”

“Yes,” I said. “She was.”

“How do you know?” Willie asked.

“Paul Salia told us.”

Now everyone looked at me in bewilderment. “What’s a qugiuk?” I asked.

“It’s a big white bird,” Willie said, still puzzled.

“Yellow around the eyes,” Kallik added.

“It’s a swan,” I said. “That’s the bird that was singing for Eira Winter.” Three pairs of eyes looked at me blankly.

The phrase “swan song” may have mystified the team, but the termination clause in the contract was crystal clear. If Eira Winter chose to terminate the contract, Crystal Pele was out of a job. And nestled in her laptop under a file called, aptly, “Swansong,” was Winter’s letter bringing her contract with the GN to an official end.

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Crystal Pele was arrested at the Tundra Inn before she finished her Caesar salad. It took less than an hour for her to confess. Actually it was more of a declaration than confession. Winter was retiring, closing her company’s doors, and Pele was out. This final trip to Iqaluit was Winter’s swan song. Pele wanted to make sure it wasn’t hers.

#

Ahnah beat me in to work the next morning. Coffee was on, and there were fruit, cheese, and muffin trays, compliments of the Tundra Inn and Suites.

“You know you don’t have to come in early every morning,” I said with a smile.

“I have a question,” Ahnah said without a single glance at the floor. “Pele has money, a job, a career. She likely has a house, a car, a vacation every year. So why kill Winter?”

“She was hungry,” I explained.

“She had plenty of food,” Ahnah said.

“Not that kind of hunger.”

I’m not sure Ahnah understood, but she would, especially when she became the first female constable of the Iqaluit Constabulary. But that was a path yet taken.

Ahnah turned to go to her desk but stopped after a few steps. “I forgot to tell you. Carol Logan texted. All the participants in the current course passed their exam.”

-The End-