

# BEAR WOMAN RISING

Two Women  
One Journey

Part 1, Chapter 1 Only

Dorothy Staley



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*Bear Woman Rising* in its entirety:  
ISBN: 978-0-9995419-7-5  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020910616

Cover Illustration: Britt'Nee Kivliqtaruq Brower  
[www.kivliq.com](http://www.kivliq.com)

Cover Graphics & Design: Bhakti-rasa  
Interior Design: Bhakti-rasa  
[www.inwordpublishers.com](http://www.inwordpublishers.com)

Author photograph: Lyn Larson, MAHAL Imagery  
<https://mahalimagery.com/>

Published in the United States by Inword Publishers,  
Gainesville, FL

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Genre: Fiction / Women / Empowerment

# Part I



*Iñupiat hunters walk out on tundra, watch for caribou.  
Stand on cliff, high place of looking, watch for whales.*

*What hunters do.*

*Go to new place, look around.*

*Come back, tell people what they see.*

Ben Ningeak

Nuvuk, Alaska, 1976





# Chapter 1



*May 31, 1976, Nuvuk, Alaska*

Sometime after 1 a.m., Jesse hears a chunk of shore-fast ice slither off the gravel beach and shish into the Beaufort Sea.

She had long ago stopped waking from the seasonal groan of ice scraping up beach debris and carrying it away. But lying alone in her bed, just hours before her flight to Fairbanks, the sound made her ache for her father and for Nuvuk and the life she was about to leave, the life she'd known for seven years. As she stared at the curved ceiling of her Quonset, an overwhelming sadness settled into her chest, the weight of grief she'd carried since her father's death.

"Just as well you're not here to see the fix I'm in," Jesse whispered.



She'd flown back from his funeral just as the sun set for the winter months this past November and tried to pick up where she'd left off—analyzing fecal specimens, recording temperatures from skin to fur tips in Arctic foxes, and observing pack behavior in the wolf run. Unable to accept attempts to comfort, however clumsy, from her Arctic cohorts, she'd marched through camp, head down, hood up, shouldering her workload as she shouldered a growing and bone-deep loneliness.

By the time Philip Conrad, Ph.D., Senior Scientist and her mentor, returned alone to camp in December, Jesse's observations and

lab notes on wolf pen behavior were ready as always. Over their six years of working together, she had overseen his winter research and he, in turn, had hinted that she'd be listed as co-author on his current paper, "Bioenergetics in Arctic Mammals."

Although Jesse sometimes felt his penetrating blue eyes unnerving, after witnessing the revolving door of female graduate interns who welcomed his advances, she'd decided early on that she would not go down that road. Besides, from her first summer, Jesse was drawn to his lively family. His wife, Marie, confided that Philip's research came first and she and the kids second. Happy to fill in for the absent Philip, Jesse often toured his family through the animal colony after hours and took them on tundra hikes. She taught five-year-old Lisa and seven-year-old P.J. to howl with the wolves, and she showed P.J. how to collect lemmings and deliver them safely to the scientists for study. His children's curiosity reminded Jesse of a younger version of herself and almost made her feel part of a family.

But during the continuous dark of this past winter, as she crunched through crusted snow alone from her home Quonset to the lab, cocooned inside her parka, the sound of her breathing became magnified in the frozen stillness. Her nose stiffened with each subzero inhalation. And each time she exhaled, more frost accumulated on the fine hairs of her wolverine ruff, diminishing her hooded window into the Arctic night. Every time she looked through it, Jesse glimpsed an emptiness, a looming hole in the universe where her father's life force had been.

Her loneliness would have become unbearable except for Philip. This time, she felt none of the old reservations. Philip provided the solid, steady presence that Jesse craved. Then, one night in early April, with wind-chill temperatures still hovering at minus twenty, Jesse drank more than her usual one-beer limit. Desperate for warmth from another human being, worn down by grief, and terrified of losing herself to the emptiness of the Arctic night, she let down her guard. Philip's arms seemed a welcome anchor. But, afterward, when he slipped from her bed and ducked out of her Quonset like a skittish wolf, Jesse stood stunned, her bare feet on cold linoleum, her face hot with shame. She was left to

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face camp gossips and, two months later, to cram her clothes in a duffle and catch the morning flight south.



Jesse boarded the 727, braced for takeoff, and pressed her forehead against the airplane window to take it all in one last time—white sea ice, deep blue sliver of open ocean, scattering of wind-beaten Eskimo houses. As the plane headed seaward, she turned her head just enough to follow the coastline north of Nuvuk village for one final glimpse of the military built WWII Quonsets, row upon row of navy-blue corrugated roofs. She spotted her Quonset, her curved roof cave, nestled among them. When the plane circled and headed south, she leaned across the aisle for one final view of the Arctic Research Camp’s laboratory rising from the fog on stout pilings—until it shrank and disappeared.



*June 1, Fairbanks, Alaska*

“We got ’er running pretty good now. How long was you up north?” The old man had to shout above the roar of a Ford pickup in the next bay, hood up, engine racing.

“Six years and counting,” Jesse hollered back.

The old man nodded. “Well, almost seven years standin’ still is hard on any car. Anyways, we put a new battery in while we was at it. Where’d you say you was headed?”

“Washington, D.C.”

The old man dug a rag from the pocket of his coveralls. “Going all that ways by yourself?”

“Yeah,” Jesse said.

“Ain’t you scared?” He shook out the rag and wiped his forehead.

“Nope.”

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“How come you ain’t?”

“It never occurred to me.”

All she wanted to do was climb behind the wheel of her ’65 Dodge van—the one good thing she got from her divorce—and make it to her two o’clock appointment. Step one of her plan. After that, get as far as the Tok junction campsite for the night.

The day she called to make her appointment, the receptionist asked, “Is there someone who could drive you home afterward?”

Her former professors in Fairbanks were always glad to see her, hear about her work, but, no, there wasn’t anyone. She could always get a hotel room in town.

“You won’t get far on these here tires.” The old man wiped his hands on a rag, one finger at a time.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“These here tires. Rubber’s rotted.”

Jesse did a quick calculation. “So, what do you think, retreads?”

“If you want to leave a trail of rubber from here to the Canadian border, sure, buy retreads.”

“Just trying to save a little money.”

“Lady, I’d be stealing your money if I sold you retreads. But look, I’ll give you a good deal on Michelins. They should get you down the Alcan, no problem. I’ll even throw in a spare.”

“Yeah, okay. Go ahead.” She glanced at her watch. Eleven twenty-five.

“Yes ma’am. We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“How long is no time? I’m in kind of a hurry.”

“See that bench out there?” He thumbed toward the front. “You just sit yourself down. Grab a soda. We’ll be done before you know it.”

The Coke was ice cold. The bench hard. Jesse sat alone, caught in a parallel universe, hundreds of miles from the Arctic Research Camp and thousands of miles from the farm in Wisconsin where she’d grown up. She broke open a package of saltines and reflected how little her mother had traveled in her own life. She would never have gotten farther than the next county if Jesse’s father hadn’t piled them into the truck one weekend and driven them all the way to Milwaukee to see Liberace. “So, what does that make me?” she whispered aloud. “Adventurer or alien?”



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She took a drink, held the bottle against her forehead and ticked off once more all the things she needed to do: (1) Car, check. (2) Clinic. (3) Supplies. (4) Head south.

She dug a rubber band out of her pocket, pulled her damp hair off her neck with one hand, and snapped it into a ponytail with the other. Then she leaned back and replayed her call to Dr. Calloway. Had she heard a tiny hesitation after she'd told him she'd take the job? No, probably just a long-distance hiccup. Calls from Alaska to Washington, D.C., were static prone.

Jesse's foot jiggled at the thought of getting on the road, going to a new place, new job—new bunch of scientists. How had Arnie, her favorite mess-hall cook put it? "Don't worry, honey. You seen one scientist, you seen 'em all."



Jesse arrived at the clinic thirteen minutes early, grabbed a pamphlet, took a seat on the far end of a couch, and tried to read.

"Quit it, Annie!"

Two young boys sat cross-legged on the floor, fitting Lincoln Logs together.

"Dad!"

Their father glanced up from his end of the couch, where he cradled a sleeping infant in his arms. "Just a second, boys." He reached into a diaper bag and brought out a bag of graham crackers. "Annie, come see Papa."

"No!" Annie grabbed a block and twisted out of reach. The baby jerked awake and waved her arms while crackers hit the floor.

Jesse picked them up. "Looks like you've got your hands full."

Annie ran behind a chair and popped the block in her mouth.

"Annie, no!" He scooted forward and tried to get up. The baby whimpered.

"Here, let me hold the baby," Jesse said without hesitation.

"Thanks." He slid the baby into Jesse's arms, grabbed Annie with one hand, and fished the block free with the other.

"Another disaster averted," he said as he sat back down.

"You're good," Jesse said, careful not to move. How did she end up with a baby in her lap?

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The door to the waiting room opened and a sallow woman motioned him forward. “Fred, the doctor wants to talk to both of us.” Darkened circles rimmed her eyes. Jesse spotted the glint of safety pins along her hemline. She glanced at Jesse, then back at Fred. “What’s wrong with Annie?”

Fred handed Annie the bag of crackers and stood up. “Not to worry. Sally, this nice lady saved the day. Held Bethy while I kept Annie from eating the toys.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry I don’t know your name,” Sally said with only a hint of discomfort as Fred moved to retrieve Bethy.

“Jesse Bookman.” And before she could stop herself added, “Must be doing something right, she’s asleep.”

Fred halted. “God, I hate to wake her.”

“Fred.”

Without thinking, Jesse blurted out, “I could hold her a little longer while you—”

“That’d be awfully nice. Sal? What do you think?” Fred said.

Sally studied Jesse. “You sure you don’t mind? I wouldn’t impose, but we had a hard-enough time getting here.” She sighed. “And honestly, it would be nice to have an adults-only conversation for a change.”

“Besides, the boys can help,” Fred said more to his wife, than to Jesse.

Sally nodded. “Okay, but Matt, Donny, are you listening?” They turned their faces to her. “I want you boys to stay put, keep an eye on Annie, and help Mrs. Bookman, understand?”

“Uh-huh,” said the oldest.

“What’s that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they answered in unison.

“Thanks, boys.” Fred reached into the diaper bag and pulled out a pacifier. “Oh, and Jesse, when all else fails, plug her in.”

Jesse stared after them, then down at the baby. Bethy jerked awake and a silken cobweb of baby hair brushed Jesse’s arm.

“Hi, Bethy,” Jesse whispered. The baby’s eyes widened, and her bottom lip poked out. “Oh, now, please don’t cry.” Jesse showed her the pacifier. Still, Bethy began to whimper.

“You gotta put it in her mouth,” Matt offered.

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“Right,” Jesse said. She carefully brushed the pacifier across the baby’s lips. Bethy turned her head, and Jesse slipped it into her mouth. Bingo.

Bethy relaxed in Jesse’s arms and started making small sucking sounds. “Did you just hum?” Jesse whispered.

“Yeah, she’s kinda noisy when she sucks,” Donny piped up.

Jesse studied the liquid depths of the baby’s dark, staring eyes. A moment later, Bethy kicked Jesse’s arm and the pacifier popped out. Her mouth kept moving a beat or two, then she arched her back and cried. “Sorry.” Jesse grabbed the pacifier and chased the baby’s mouth with it until she latched on once more. “She seems okay now.”

Donny glanced up. “As long as she’s got her plug.”

Bethy hummed. “Hear that? She’s doing it again.” Jesse smiled down at the baby. “You are a little hummingbird.”

Just as Jesse glanced up at the clock above the receptionist’s window, Bethy kicked away her blanket and it slid to the floor. Jesse reached for it with her free hand, gave it a shake, and drew it across the baby’s tummy. Bethy’s tiny fingers grabbed hold of her thumb, and Jesse felt her throat tighten.

A moment later, Bethy scrunched her little face, spit out her pacifier, and fussed in earnest. “What now?”

“You could try walking her,” Matt said, acting out a mother’s walk. “Just hold her like this and walk up and down.”

“Sure, okay.” Jesse boosted Bethy onto her shoulder and got up. Bethy cried harder.

“Helps to jiggle her a little bit,” Donny said.

She jiggled, bounced, and rocked back and forth, but Bethy was still crying when her parents appeared in the doorway.

“See, Fred. I told you she’d wake up,” Sally said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault, Jesse. Once she’s awake, show’s over.”

“She’s so small. I was afraid I might jiggle her too much or something.”

“Aw, she’s stronger than she looks. Come here, Miss Fussy.” Sally lifted Bethy out of Jesse’s arms.

“She’s beautiful,” Jesse whispered.

“Thanks. Beautiful or not, these better work.” Sally flashed a packet of birth control pills and slipped them into her pocket with her free hand.

“Glad to help.” Jesse’s arms dropped. Then she added, “I wish you the best. Really, she’s a wonderful baby.”

“Most of the time.” Sally smiled and leaned close. “Look. It’s none of my business but seems to me anyone can handle just one baby. You’ll do fine.”

The outside door swung shut and the room became quiet once more. Jesse sat back, her hands heavy against her thighs remembering how Ben had said about the same thing.

“You make fine mama,” Ben had told her. “You’re tall. Baby very small. Hard to tell you’re pregnant. But Iñupiat women know.”

“I’m what? No, I . . . are you sure? How did you know?” she’d asked.

“My wife say, ‘Jesse’s pregnant.’ Then Jesse’s pregnant.”

Stunned, Jesse had put her head in her hands. “Oh, Ben, I can’t believe I let this happen.”

“It happen. You not the first.”

He was right about the pregnancy, of course. But she was sure he was wrong about her. All she ever wanted to be was a scientist. She never, not ever considered being a mother.

A door slammed in back, and Jesse glanced up at the clock: 1:49.

She could still smell the essence of baby—shampoo, talcum powder, milky breath. Jesse rubbed her thumb where Bethy had wrapped her tiny fingers. Savoring the last of the baby’s lingering aura, Jesse closed her eyes. Her hands, of their own accord, found their way across her stomach until her fingers interlocked.

*Then again, what if Ben is right? What if . . .* She got to her feet, felt once more the weight of Bethy in her arms, the baby’s breath against her cheek as a new possibility surfaced. She’d been frantic to get out of Nuvuk. Didn’t have time to study the situation as she’d studied every other challenge in her life. But now . . . it occurred to her she didn’t have to decide immediately. She could research . . . alternatives. She still had time.

She stood stiffly, reached for her day pack, and said out loud, “Dammit, Ben.” Then she slung her pack onto her shoulder, pushed open the door, and headed for her van.