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Fynn Haskin
THE MOON MAN

Blood on the Ice

A Greenland Thriller

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



Scandinavian Suspense
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PROLOGUE

A maze of ice floes lined the coast, white islands in the deep blue sea. There was a soft sound as Natuk repeatedly lowered the double paddle into the icy water, driving the *qajag* forward with short, powerful strokes.

It was the boat his mother had built for him – in the old way, with a frame of driftwood and a structure made of bone and sinew covered in seal skin. Not the way boats were made nowadays, of impregnated canvas or even fibreglass ...

The old way.

Natuk had learnt to sit and balance in it as a child. First in an outline of stones that was laid out for him on the ground, then later in a small practice boat. Holding your balance, even when something unexpected happened or the water got rough, had been essential once, had meant the difference between a living hunter and a dead one. And not only because a man who could not handle a kayak could easily drown. But also because anyone who wasn't successful at the seal hunt and returned home without a catch would slowly and miserably starve to death.

Natuk thought of his cousin Iggiaq, who had gone south to Nanortalik and organised trips for tourists there. Natuk didn't understand what all these people from distant countries wanted up here in the north. They weren't Inuit, they didn't know how to steer a kayak or throw a harpoon and yet they desperately wanted to try it. Iggiaq had told him that they laughed and had fun ... clearly, Natuk thought, there was not much fun to be had where these people came from. So they travelled to distant places to find what they were missing at home ... and yet they had understood nothing.

Natuk was thirty-eight years old.

He was grateful to his parents that they had raised him in the old way, even if the signs of change had already been very evident back then. They had taught him to read the clouds and the waves and to smell the snow and the ice. His father had been a hunter, as had Natuk's grandfather and his father before him; many generations, as far back as the memories went. Natuk would also have liked to have become a hunter like his ancestors, would rather have made his living from hunting seals than servicing motor boats in Illokarfiq harbour. But the times were different, the world was changing.

Everything was changing.

Even the ice.

During Natuk's childhood, the fjords north of Illokarfiq had been covered in a thick layer of ice in which you had to dig deep holes in order to hunt. Now the ice was much thinner, sometimes so thin that you could no longer walk on it. It forced the hunters to turn to the water – or to shop at the supermarket in Illokarfiq. Frozen meat from other countries, while the ice here shrank, a little more each year.

The kayak lay flat as a leaf on the water, whose dark blue colour told of the icy depth between the floes, while it grew lighter and more turquoise the closer you got to the ice. When Natuk was a child, it wouldn't have been possible to pass so close to the coast this early in the year. Now it was possible and, even though the melting and unpredictable pack ice posed a danger, he insisted on slipping into his seal-skin anorak and the polar-bear-skin overtrousers that his father had left him, to head out onto the water to trace the lives of his ancestors. And to occasionally throw his harpoon so he didn't get out of practice. The stuff from the supermarket might prevent starvation, but only seal meat could really feed a man.

The animals had also changed their behaviour; they didn't show themselves like they used to. And yet Natuk had spotted a silver shimmering back earlier, which had emerged from the water for a brief moment, only to disappear again – *natseq*, the most common species in the area. The foreigners called this seal species 'ringed seals' because of the markings on their fur. Natuk did not have much hope of actually catching the animal, but chasing it was a welcome distraction and would sharpen his hunting instincts a little. His father had been able to smell a seal in the water, to distinguish its delicate breath from the smell of the sea, the ice and other animals. Natuk's nose was usually filled with the stench of exhaust fumes, rust and old engine oil; as a result, he longed to head out to the fjord and smell the breath of nature, the cold and freedom.

But when he stopped paddling for a moment, closed his eyes and searched the air for traces of *natseq*, his nose detected another smell: strong, acrid, overriding everything else. Alarmed, Natuk opened his eyes and looked around. But the blue ice walls, several metres high, blocked his view. He manoeuvred the kayak out of the narrow passage with powerful strokes of the paddle – and saw the narrow column of smoke rising into the sky on the other side of the shore, silhouetted grey and dark against a snow-covered rock face.

Natuk's first reaction was joyful surprise: he knew this bay and the family who used to live in the hunting lodge there. As far as he knew, they had moved to one of the surrounding villages several years ago – maybe they had changed their mind and come back?

His first impulse was to visit them. But then he suddenly had a worrying thought: why would they have come back? It was too early to start the hunting season, the winter

storms were not quite over yet. Also, a column of smoke like that was a sign of an oven that wasn't working properly. What did this mean?

Natuk's initial natural instinct was to lower the paddle back into the water and to flee. But his sense of duty wouldn't allow it.

The couple who used to live there, Stene and his wife Pipaluk, had been friends of his. Even if he hadn't seen them for three winters, they had shared food and fire, and seeing the grey-blue column of smoke coming from their former home made Natuk concerned enough to want to check on them. He carefully brought the kayak closer to the shore, where an arched outcrop would provide the opportunity to go ashore.

He could hear the soft cracking of the ice as he approached it, together with the paddles that now only whispered. Otherwise the water lay still; even the wind seemed to be holding its breath. A slight shudder came over Natuk, together with a thought that he quickly tried to push aside. But like all bad thoughts, it was persistent.

One of the things that Natuk's father had taught him was the conviction that nature did not belong to humans and animals alone, and that there was more between the ice and the sky than the mind could comprehend – ancient beings who had inhabited this land since the beginning of time, who fed on fear and whose element was the cold and darkness of the Arctic winter: demons and evil spirits.

The *qallunaat* might not believe in them, but they were as real as the wind that drove the clouds around, or the snow that fell on the ground.

Natuk could not stop his pulse from racing. He reached the shore and came alongside. He fastened the kayak with the ice anchor, then loosened the seal bone splints that attached his anorak to the rim of the boat, forming a spray skirt. As he got out, Natuk considered taking the harpoons that were fastened in their leather loops on the foredeck, arming himself in this makeshift way. But for one thing, such a weapon would certainly be useless against a demon, and, secondly, Natuk did not want to aggravate him. He went ashore without the harpoons.

The spot was well chosen; thanks to the outcrop, it wasn't hard to get onto the ice. Natuk had barely reached the edge of the scarp when he spotted the source of the column of smoke. It was indeed the home that Stene and Pipaluk had once lived in – actually an old transport container made of metal in which Stene had skilfully cut an opening for a door and another one for the chimney, from which the dark smoke now billowed.

The hut was protected from wind and weather by a steep rock face, yet it was lashed to the ground with wire ropes like luggage on the unsteady deck of a ship. Lonely stakes were stuck into the ice where Stene's sled dogs had once frolicked; the blue paint with which Pipaluk had painted the container several years ago had almost completely peeled off, and rust had appeared beneath it. The dwelling looked abandoned – if it

hadn't been for the grey-blue smoke that continued to rise from the metal chimney like a scrawny finger into the grey sky.

This was no longer a good place.

Natuk could not tell whether it was his father's teachings or his natural instinct that warned him, but he would have liked to turn back. Nevertheless, he pulled himself together and continued across the white expanse towards the hut. His gaze slid across the ground, but there were no tracks he might have read, neither human nor animals. And yet someone must have lit the fire.

Natuk's heartbeat quickened with every stride, as if he were approaching a prey, although he had the sense of being watched himself.

He looked around, agitated. The hood of his anorak restricted his field of vision, so he pushed it back. But regardless of where he looked – towards the rocky cliffs or the fjords – there was no-one but him.

He was just twenty strides away from the container now.

'Stene?' he called out loudly, if only to break the leaden silence. 'Stene, is that you? Are you back?'

There was no reply, and he wasn't even surprised. This was no longer a place for a friendly encounter. A sombreness had settled over it that could not be put in words. But Natuk could feel it. It had settled over him like a dark cloud and darkened his heart, and it got worse with every stride.

'Stene? Pipaluk? It's me ...' He broke off before he could say his name out loud. If a demon really was involved, he didn't want to make himself known too easily.

He finally reached the container. Scraps of faded colourful streamers hung from one of the rusty ropes. The indefinable fear that Natuk had felt earlier intensified. 'Stene?' he asked once more.

Again, no answer.

Natuk now wished he had taken the harpoons with him so that he would at least have something to hold on to; not just with his hands, but also with his mind. Then he saw a gap between door and hinge. The container was unlocked.

His heart was racing as he stepped forward and gave the door a push with his gloved right hand. It swung open with a creak, and Natuk bent down and leant forward to look inside.

The first thing he felt was the warmth emanating from the petrol stove. Perhaps something was blocking the air supply, preventing it from burning properly. That might be the reason for the smoke. Natuk was about to go in and deal with it when he became aware of the horrible stench.

The acrid smell of blood ... and death.

A half-smothered scream came from Natuk's throat, an expression of sheer horror when he realised that what was lying in front of the stove was a human body. He

recoiled in horror, slipped on the ground and fell. And at that moment, when his body was no longer blocking the entrance, daylight fell into the hut and tore the naked horror out of the semi-darkness.

Blood ...

There was blood everywhere!

On the floor, on the few pieces of furniture, even on the walls – and Natuk realised with horror that it was blood that had caused him to slip. He was lying in it, in a sea of dark red lifeblood. It covered the white fur of his trouser, his gloves with which he had supported himself. He started to scream as he scrambled to get back on his feet. He didn't manage it straightaway; his boots could not get a foothold on the slippery metal. In his distress, he rolled over and pulled himself to his knees – only to find himself facing another dead body. Face to face this time.

The young man – or rather what was left of him – was lying on an old field bed, his limbs splayed in a grotesque manner, as if he were trying to wave to Natuk. His chest was a single gaping wound, his clothes soaked in blood. But the most horrible thing was his face, which stared at Natuk, pale as death, his mouth open in a silent scream. The dead man's one eye was widened in nameless terror, and a dark bloody hole gaped in his skull where the other should have been.

At that moment Natuk could not only sense the evil in the hut subliminally – it seemed to permeate every corner of the container and threatened to take hold of him too.

He only realised that he had been screaming the entire time, shouting out his horror and fear, when his voice suddenly failed him. Driven by panic, he finally managed to pull himself to his feet, and he rushed towards the door, wanting to escape from this terrible place where a cruel demon had raged.

But Natuk did not get far.

For a fraction of a second, before he could flee through the narrow doorway, it was suddenly darkened again – by a figure that stepped in from the light outside. An enormous, hideous figure that looked to Natuk like a shadow that had come to life. A shadow that was not from this world.

Natuk froze and threw up his bloody hands as if he wanted to hide behind them. 'Please,' he groaned, his whole body shaking with horror, 'not my ...'

He never got to finish the sentence.

A pair of huge teeth sank into him and caught him with murderous force. One pierced his shoulder, the other tore through his throat and carotid artery.

The howling sound with which Natuk Olsen had pleaded for his life died away in a gurgle. When the hideous set of teeth had released him, he toppled forward and hit the ground. The last thing he saw was his own blood pouring out of him, creeping across the threshold and staining the white ice red.

Chapter 1

Jens Lerby didn't like waiting.

He especially didn't like watching a clock go round with agonising slowness while also marking the passing of each second with a smug, mocking tick. And yet this is exactly what he did as he sat on a stark chair made of steel rods in a corridor that was no less stark, waiting to finally be let in.

For a change – or perhaps just as an idle activity – he cast a glance at his wristwatch and noticed that there was a good minute's difference. The question of which of the two timepieces might be right, the big official one that hung opposite the stairs with the neoclassical banister, or the puny little one that he wore on a leather strap on his wrist, was probably superfluous. For a moment, he considered pulling out his smartphone and letting it be the referee, but then he decided against it. It was ridiculous to use his smartphone as a watch. A telephone was a telephone. Not a camera, not a cinema. And definitely not a record player ...

'Inspector Lerby?'

A nervous looking *Politikadet* in an impeccable blue uniform appeared out of nowhere in front of him. Was this boy with the lick of blond hair actually bowing?

'Director Sørensen will see you now.'

Lerby nodded and stood up. It was harder than he had hoped. He could still feel the aftereffects of the previous night in his bones. And in his neck, which felt as if it were going to break off at any moment and allow his head to roll down the corridor, which would probably have suited Sørensen very well. But despite the pain, Lerby's neck withstood the strain and supported his head as he followed the uniformed man through an anteroom where an office worker in a flowery dress was typing up reports. A leather-framed door was opened, then Lerby found himself in his boss's office.

Many of the offices in this listed building, the Politigården in Copenhagen, exuded a kind of dignity. Green carpet, dark wood-panelled walls, a whiff of floor wax in the air. Lerby could vaguely remember standing in such an office for the first time as an ambitious young police officer full of respect and shaken by awe. Both these feelings had faded over the years – just like the hair on the head of the man sitting enthroned behind the massive oak desk that stood like a bulwark in the middle of the room.

Birger Sørensen, 50, *Chefpolitiinspektør* and Lerby's direct superior.

A not inconsiderable corpulence showed beneath the pink shirt with the ascot tie: his ascent up the career ladder seemed to have been only moderately strenuous physically; however, it had taken an all the more severe toll on Sørensen's head of hair. He looked at Inspector Lerby through the lenses of his narrow horn-rimmed glasses.

'Jens.' It sounded like a sigh. Perhaps it was a curse.

'Birger.'

'Take a seat,' his boss told him and indicated towards the velvet-covered visitor's chair. Sørensen was busy going through a report – presumably the one from the previous evening, as if he had to review the facts of the case once more. Eventually he put the document aside, took off his reading glasses and massaged the root of his nose. 'Jens, Jens, Jens,' he murmured, 'what am I to do with you?' He raised his eyes and looked directly at him. 'There was a time when we were alike, do you remember? Born in the same year ...'

'Seventy-two,' Lerby replied to save time.

'Seventy-two,' the other man confirmed, nodding. 'We were at the academy at the same time, graduated in the same year. This here,' he added and made a gesture that seemed to include not only his office but the entire venerable Politigård building, 'could have been yours a long time ago.'

'Thanks,' Lerby replied sourly. 'I do already have an office, you know. It's not quite as spacious and impressive as yours, but ...'

'Was that really necessary?' Sørensen asked. The gaze from his pale blue eyes was penetrating. 'Rude backchat against the police chief? On the day of his well-deserved retirement of all days?'

'I'm a truth-loving man,' Lerby growled in his defence.

'You're going to ruin everything for yourself,' Sørensen predicted. 'What the hell is wrong with you?'

'Are you asking me this as the police chief?'

'No, as your colleague ... your friend. We've known each other for so many years.'

'Many years.' Lerby nodded.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Lerby's gaze and expression remained unmoved. 'Have you looked in the mirror lately?' he asked. 'Asked yourself what you've achieved in the half century since 1972?'

'Is that it?' the other man replied. 'Are you trying to tell me that you're going through a crisis because you are over fifty? Is that why you are behaving strangely?'

'Define 'strangely''

'Stubborn as a bloody teenager!' Sørensen said sharply. 'I mean, you've always had a mind of your own, but this recent indifference, this tendency to insubordination ...'

'When you say it like that it sounds threatening,' Lerby said drily. 'Now I am worried.'

Sørensen sighed again, apparently resigned.

'Why can't you just screw around like others your age? If you fancy a change, then go crash your marriage, but not your career.'

'You mean like you?'

Sørensen frowned. His gaze involuntarily fell on the spot on his desk where, between the computer monitor and a rack of sharpened pencils, a simple frame made of pine wood used to stand, with a picture of his wife and two daughters when they were young. Now the spot was empty.

'You were once the best crime analyst this department had,' he changed the subject.

'Were?' Lerby raised his brows.

'I won't beat around the bush. Your recent reticence and stubbornness ... the younger colleagues are avoiding you; they think you are unpredictable and moody. Some are actually afraid of you. And after last night ...'

'What are you getting at, Birger?' Lerby asked with a calmness that surprised him. Like many things he had discovered about himself recently. 'Come on, tell me straight. I am a big boy.'

'Voices in the Ministry of Justice have demanded your suspension, but in view of your achievements, I was able to prevent that – instead, they have agreed to assign you a new case.'

'As a punishment?'

'As a chance to prove yourself,' Sørensen corrected. 'And also as an opportunity to gain a little distance.'

'Distance?' Lerby inquired. 'Where are you sending me? Aalborg? Læsø?'

'The case I am talking about,' Sørensen continued, 'concerns a whole series of unexplained deaths.' He pulled open one of the drawers of his desk and brought out a brown envelope, which he slid across the polished table. Lerby caught it, opened it and held the large-format prints of three photographs in his hand.

The predominant colour on each of them was an ugly dark reddish brown.

The colour of dried blood.

A lot of blood ...

'Unexplained?' Lerby looked disdainful. 'I would say they have a problem with a butcher going on the rampage.'

Sørensen's gaze clearly conveyed how inappropriate he found the remark. 'What happened is for you to find out,' he said. 'The local police department is overwhelmed and is supposed to get support from an experienced crime analyst.'

'Who?' Lerby asked again because he already expected he would not like the answer.

The two men's eyes met across the desk, and for a moment there was an icy silence in the venerable office.

'Illokarfiq,' Sørensen finally said.

'Illo-what?'

'Greenland,' was the explanation. 'Illokarfiq is a settlement on the southern east coast.'

'Shit!' Lerby said openly. 'And that is not supposed to be a punishment?'

'You've been there before ...'

'I was in the capital of Greenland for three weeks. I held a seminar in Nuuk,' Lerby recalled.

'Nevertheless, since Tjeborg's departure, you are the one in my department with the most Greenland experience ...'

'...and also the one who gave rude backchat to the chief of police.'

'You called him a stupid arsehole in front of everyone at his leaving party.'

'A smug arsehole,' Lerby corrected. 'And that carries the maximum penalty?'

'Believe it, or not, you would have been given this case if you hadn't called the outgoing police chief a ... you know what.'

'I *don't* think so,' Lerby assured him.

'You can choose to see it that way. It's your decision. Just as it's my decision to send you to Illokarfiq. And that decision has been taken.'

Lerby took some deep breaths. All sorts of thoughts ran through his head, but none of them were really useful, let alone sayable.

'When?' he just asked, at last.

'If I were you, I'd go home and pack – you're booked on the first flight tomorrow morning.'

[END OF SAMPLE]