

The First Two Pages: *Hemlock Needle*

By Keenan Powell (Level Best Books)

Many Alaska Natives were raised in the Russian Orthodox Church, now the Orthodox Church of America, due to Russian colonization. The Orthodox religion celebrates Christmas on January 7. In rural Alaska, villagers go from house to house, caroling as they spin large colorful stars in a ceremony known as “Starring.” They sing songs in Russian, English, and their own languages, and are invited inside for food and drink before moving on to the next house.

Modernly, the Diocese of Alaska of the Orthodox Church of America has churches in rural towns and villages as well as in Anchorage, Alaska’s urban hub, where many Alaska Natives, including Yup’ik Eskimos, Alutiiq Eskimos, Aleuts, and Tlingits, have relocated.

In Anchorage, the Orthodox gather to celebrate Starring at the Alaska Native Medical Center, which has a large room set aside for large events. The first scene in *Hemlock Needle* was inspired by a photograph of a little boy sitting behind a forest of legs as he watched the spinners and carolers.

Hemlock Needles is about a young Yup’ik Eskimo chief financial officer and single mother, Esther Fancyboy, who walks out of Starring and into a blizzard. She is never seen again, leaving behind a seven-year-old son, Evan.

The local cops say she’ll come home when she’s done partying, but family

friend Maeve Malloy doesn't think it's that simple. She goes looking for Esther just as she's getting bad news of her own, a career-ending accusation.

When Esther's body turns up in a snow berm and a witness is shot to death in front of Maeve, she suspects Evan is in danger. Maeve must race against time to save the boy – along with her career, and maybe her life.

From Chapter I of *Hemlock Needle*:

*Monday, January 7, 2015
Russian Orthodox Christmas
Gathering Place, Alaskan Native Medical Center
Anchorage, Alaska*

Where did Esther go?

Evan Fancyboy searched the crowd for his mother. He squatted against the wall, arms around legs, chin on knees. A chilled breeze swept across the linoleum floor. Someone must have opened a door. Tiny stars of frost stroked his face.

He tugged at the neck of his t-shirt. If only his grandmother would let him take off his parka, he wouldn't be so itchy.

Grandma Cora was sitting with the elders in the front row, watching the performers. Dancers in flowered kuspuks waved fur-trimmed fans. Old men sang and beat drums. Maybe she couldn't see him take off the parka. Maybe Esther would hold it for him.

Esther, his mother, had been late coming home from work. Evan knew his classmates in Anchorage called their mothers "mom", but Evan still called his mother by her first name like he had in the village. Now he and Grandma Cora lived with Esther in Anchorage, two plane rides away from St. Innocent's.

Evan had never left the village before that day last summer when he and Grandma Cora boarded the little Cessna. As they took off and circled over the river, his house, his school, and the village looked like toys. The plane kept going up, creaking, bending and bouncing in the wind, as beneath them, waves of caribou ran across the tundra looking like ants.

Cora gripped the arms of her seat, looking scared, but Evan liked the bumps; they made his stomach feel funny. That night, they stayed in Bethel visiting relatives, then got on the big jet airplane that took them to Anchorage. Cora didn't like that either when she saw how far away the ground was. Evan was happy. He was going to live with his mother.

When they arrived in Anchorage, Evan found he didn't like the city. The noise. The big, smelly cars on the roads. Strange people going in different directions. But he was with Esther every day now. In the morning, he'd find her in the kitchen looking a little sleepy. She would give him her special smile, the one she gave only to him. He would watch her cook his breakfast and pack his school lunch. Every afternoon, she came home and the three of them, Cora, Esther, and Evan, ate dinner together. In the evening, Esther helped him with his homework, then kissed him good-night. His heart was happy.

Tonight, just before they left for the Christmas party, Evan was watching Grandma Cora in the kitchen when he heard Esther's car pull into the driveway. The car door closed. A few seconds later, the front door opened. Cold air seeped into the kitchen before Esther walked in.

Grandma Cora stretched plastic wrap across a bowl of akutaq, Eskimo ice cream, and slid a look in Esther's direction. Esther pretended not to notice.

"Waqaa," Esther said as she had ruffled Evan's hair. She gave him that special smile, just barely turning up the corners of her mouth, as if she and Evan shared a secret. Her smile blossomed inside his chest.

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While in high school, Keenan Powell illustrated the first edition of Dungeons and Dragons (known as Original Dungeons and Dragons) but chose not to pursue art as it didn't seem practical. Her grandmother, Mary Malloy Gannon, after whom her protagonist was named, urged her to go to law school. The day after graduation, she moved to Alaska where she has been practicing law ever since including ten years of criminal defense. Several years ago, she was retained by a group of Yup'ik fishermen to challenge the state fishing regulations, as a result she was visited Kwethluk, Alaska, during fishing season. She saw firsthand a fish camp where Natives live while they harvest, how they dried fish on outdoor racks, and went to dinner in one of the villager homes where fresh-caught salmon and akutaq

was served. That visit inspired *Hemlock Needle*, the second Maeve Malloy Mystery. To learn more about her writing, the Maeve Malloy series and Alaska, visit her website: www.keenanpowellauthor.com.