

Ladies of the North

John M. Floyd

Hank Stegall saw her as soon as he stepped outside the building.

She was standing alone on the walkway that encircled Resolution Park, near the corner of Third Avenue and L, her arms folded on the wooden railing and her gaze fixed on the blue mountains on the other side of the inlet. Those mountains, Stegall had heard, were forty miles away, but on this spring day they looked close enough to touch. Far beyond, the always-white peaks of the Alaska Range marched across a cloudless horizon.

Stegall focused again on the woman. It bothered him that he couldn't place her. The park was a favorite lunchtime spot for the employees of the magazine where he worked, but he knew most of those people. Was she a tourist? Probably not; he saw no camera.

He approached to within ten feet or so, then stopped and leaned against the railing, studying her profile from the corner of his eye.

She was between thirty-five and forty, he guessed, and pretty in a kind of tomboyish way. Rosy cheeks, strong chin, short blonde hair that rippled in the breeze like a field of yellow wheat. She wasn't warmly dressed – a white blouse and green skirt – but the coolness of the wind seemed not to bother her. A practical-looking leather purse hung from one shoulder. Beneath the purse, and clipped to a pocket of her skirt, was a plastic ID badge with the magazine's blue-and-red logo. Good, he thought. They were colleagues after all.

He inched closer, and she gave him a sidelong glance. Her expression was neutral – neither friendly nor unfriendly. Hank Stegall, a man accustomed to being frowned at, took that as a positive sign.

Suddenly she turned and looked him straight in the eye.

He retreated a step, cleared his throat. "Good morning," he said. "Ah . . . nice weather, for April."

Her face softened a bit. "It's afternoon. But yes, it is nice." With the hint of a smile, she went back to her view.

Stegall glanced again at her badge. "You're fairly new, aren't you?"

"Actually, I'm fairly old," she said, without turning. "But yes, I'm new to town."

Stegall didn't know how to reply to that. He wasn't sure whether she was teasing him or snubbing him.

"Do you always correct a person," he asked, "and then agree with them?"

Ladies of the North

When she looked at him this time, he saw an amused twinkle in her eye. "It's 'him,' not 'them.' And yes, I suppose I do."

Her tiny grin took the sting out of the grammar lesson. He grinned too, a little lamely, but she had already turned away again.

Stegall hesitated. She had smiled at him – twice – but he wasn't at all sure what that meant, if anything.

"Ah . . . do you mind if I join you, here?" he asked.

"It's a free park."

And free parking's hard to find, he started to point out, but didn't. This playful banter was okay if you were a quick thinker. He wasn't, and he knew it, and if he wasn't careful she'd know it too.

Instead he just leaned over the railing six feet from her elbow and stared out over the water for a while.

"She really does look like she's asleep, doesn't she?" the woman asked.

Hank Stegall blinked. He followed her gaze, saw only mountains and sky and water, and looked at her again. He had no idea what she was talking about.

She turned to face him. "Susitna," she said. "It lives up to its nickname, if you study it awhile."

Stegall looked again at the blue mountain across Cook Inlet. Suddenly he remembered. Mount Susitna was called The Sleeping Lady, not that he had ever given it much thought. He was, after all, a writer, not a tour guide. Staring at the mountain now, though, he could see the reason for the name. Its shape looked like that of a woman lying on her back, her head aimed south and her feet north. He had probably seen the view a thousand times, but had never taken the trouble to make the connection.

A silence passed. Out on the tidal flats between the park and the water, something moved. Stegall squinted at it a moment, then realized it was only a brown paper bag, tumbling end over end in the wind.

"Do you work at *The North Woods*?" she asked, tipping her head toward the building behind them.

"That's right," he said, glad to get back to more comfortable topics. He started to ask her if she worked there also, then remembered that he already knew she did, from her badge. That threw a snag into his train of thought, and before he was able to formulate another question she solved the problem.

"Me too," she said. "This is my first week."

He had a flash of inspiration. "Third floor?"

"Yes." She cocked her head, studied him more closely. "Have we met before?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm just. . . ."

"Perceptive?" she said.

Ladies of the North

Hank Stegall put on a smug look. If there was one thing he was not, it was perceptive. But he had heard that two new secretaries – administrative assistants, they called themselves – were about to be hired. And he had enough sense to know that the best and brightest were always assigned to the third floor. The rest went to the less prestigious offices downstairs, like circulation and accounting and advertising --

"I didn't catch your name, Mr. --"

"Advertising," he said, then blushed a deep scarlet. "I mean Stegall. Henry Stegall. You can call me Hank."

"I'm Alice Findlayson. You can call me Alice." She smiled again, not terribly friendly even yet, but certainly not the get-lost look he normally received from people who had known him awhile.

She turned again to the view.

So did he. Miles away, across the blue inlet, Mt. Susitna slept on.

After a moment, afraid that she might bring up some other local geographical fact of which he was unaware, he asked: "Where were you before?"

"Before Anchorage?"

"Before . . ." He thought for a second. "Journalism."

"The Park Service," she said.

"Municipal?"

"National."

He nodded. That made sense. She was too classy to sit at a desk in some city hall.

"I write a piece, myself, on area wildlife," he said. "Moose, bear, wolves, eagles, you name it."

Her smile returned. "That sounds interesting. I suppose you're outdoors a lot, then?"

"Almost all the time." He jerked a thumb at the building. "This is my first day in the office in a week. They give me pretty free rein here."

"I understand. Field experience is a big plus." She glanced at her watch.

"Well, I've had more than my share of it," he said, puffing his chest out. "I've been all the way to Valdez in a kayak, and once spent a whole winter trapping on the Yukon."

She was still smiling politely, but seemed distracted. Suddenly he wanted very much to impress her.

"I was the one," he said, "who shot old Three-Toes, a few years back."

She looked up. "Excuse me?"

Ladies of the North

He smiled to himself. Everyone in Alaska had heard of Three-Toes. The giant grizzly had killed seven people in the mountains near Willow before he was finally tracked down and shot in the early nineties.

"I don't like to talk about it," he said. "It was touch and go. I'm lucky to be alive."

She studied him a moment. "You *are* an interesting man, Mr. Stegall."

"Hank," he said, basking in her gaze.

She was still staring at him when Zack Benning appeared. Benning was Ad Services Coordinator, on the second floor. As usual, he had his shirttail out and his pipe clamped between his teeth. He might have been smiling, but no one was ever sure: a thick beard covered his face from the nose down. "Afternoon, comrades," he said, around the pipestem.

Alice turned and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Benning. We were just enjoying the warmer weather."

Hank Stegall, annoyed at the intrusion, said nothing. After a moment Alice Findlayson hitched her purse strap a bit higher on her shoulder and pushed away from the railing. "Well," she said, "duty calls." She nodded to Stegall. "A pleasure meeting you, Mr. --"

"Hank."

"Yes. Hank Stegall. I'll remember the name." With that, she nodded to Benning and left.

"Nice lady," Zack Benning said. He had produced a pipe tool from somewhere and was tamping down his tobacco.

Stegall shrugged as he watched her enter the building. "Like all the rest." He wiggled his eyebrows. "In a month or so she'll just be another check mark on my scorecard."

Benning placed his pipe between his teeth again and lit it with a wooden match. "I'd be careful there," he said, puffing.

"Would you now. And what would you know about her that I don't?"

"Well, I know she's the new managing editor. Took old man Boggs' place, two days ago."

Stegall blinked. "But she said . . . I thought she was a secretary. On the third floor."

"You're half right: she's on the third floor. But she has a secretary of her own. Not to mention an army of peons like you and me." Benning paused. "Tell me you didn't try to snow her."

Hank Stegall frowned, remembering. He had stretched the truth a little, sure – he always did. But what business was it of hers that he'd never been inside

Ladies of the North

a kayak in his life, or that the winter he'd spent on the Yukon consisted of an hour inside the terminal at the Dawson airstrip?

In fact, he began to feel a little annoyed that she hadn't told him about her position. There had been plenty of chances for her to do it. The more he thought about it the more annoyed he became.

"Why the hell do we need a woman running a sportsman's magazine anyway?" he said. "She wouldn't know a rifle from a damn shotgun."

"Don't bet on it." Benning turned his head and blew a smoke ring. "I hear she comes highly qualified."

"At what?"

"At rangering, for one thing."

"The Park Service?" Stegall barked a laugh. "I got news for you, Zack. Pushing paper and tracking litterbugs ain't rangering."

"That's not the kind of tracking I'm talking about."

Stegall's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"She's the one killed old Three-Toes," Benning said. "Ten years ago."