

EDGE OF REDFISH LAKE

A N O V E L

CONRAD JUNGSMANN JR.

A Killer Lurks in the Salmon Fisheries of Alaska

Alaska's salmon fisheries have long been the origin of adventure, intrigue, hard-earned money, danger, mystery, and tragedy. In 1988, as journalist Julian Hopkins tried to make sense of his best friend's drowning, he found out the fatally-beautiful Bristol Bay was also the lair of a killer ... an angered one who at season's end would follow him home and drag him into the heart of Seattle's most notorious unsolved serial murder case.

In his debut novel, Conrad Jungmann Jr. takes us on a suspenseful crime-legal drama, from rough-and-rugged Alaska to the edge of loyalty, loss, love, jealousy, justice, and vengeance. Full of hidden undertones and powerful epiphanies, *EDGE OF REDFISH LAKE* is the author's ode to the Alaska commercial fisheries, old-school journalism, the Green River Killer investigation, DNA forensic science, and plight of Pacific salmon.

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CHAPTER 1

THE TURN

June 3rd was the Turn in 1988 but hardly anyone knew it. Afterall, that Friday in Western Washington seemed so—ordinary. But if one had paused and consciously attuned, they might have sensed something unnerving, a hint of uncertainty, a low-lingering moon, a subtle moment of change rooted in waterways all along the Pacific coast. For on that day, deep in the water, an annual migration was triggered. And in an instant, aimless journey pivoted to a determined obligation to get home.

Acting as the catalysts for this sudden reversal, rivers, swollen with melted snow and spring rain, pressed their upper banks, gained momentum, and with each passing mile rolled longer and stronger downstream. As they clashed with saltwater, their volume, force, and silt unsettled ocean currents. Salmon, from the far depths of the Pacific felt it, the soundless drumbeat, the turbulent marriage of salinities. Unable to resist the pull or ignore its invitation, instinct took over. Now was their time. The Turn. They were at long last being beckoned from the sea.

Powerful enough to fully capitulate the elusive schools and draw them back to spawn and die in the rivers that had given them life, this magnetism was one of nature's most mysterious forces, invisible. It had no sound, smell, or taste. But as was sometimes the case, the primordial

energy of this phenomenon set in motion peripheral events, and an altering of paths, for a few *people* unintended.



Jesiree Vallesteros gave the candy-red elastic band one final cinch sideways to announce to her older sister she had finished braiding her hair. Now they matched. And not just by their jet-black braids so intricately woven the way their mother had taught them. They also sported identical jackets, jeans, and pearl-white tennis shoes too.

“There you go. Now the morning is simply full of wonder,” she sat back in her seat and giggled her approval. “And we’re on our way to Alaska.”

When her sister didn’t respond, she leaned back in. “Oh, c’mon Dari. Everything will be just fine.”

Things in fact, were not just fine, and hadn’t been from almost the moment they left their home, the day before, seven-thousand miles away in the Philippines. Amidst a panic caused by too many last second hugs spread across a large and loving family, they had missed their flight by minutes and had been re-routed to San Francisco rather than their intended destination, Seattle. The change and explanation delayed them in Customs for hours, leaving them with only one option they could afford. Racing to the other side of the beautiful foreign city, in a taxi, they barely made it to the station in time to catch the last Greyhound bus of the night. Dari had chosen seats three rows back from the driver, close enough for him to hear if they needed something, yet far enough away to make them feel like they were on their own. The sun, now fully risen on a less hectic day, found them tired, hungry, and nervous, but oh, so excited at the same time. They had finally done it. They had finally left home!

“Jesi, I hope Father called Mr. del Prado to tell him what happened,” Dari finally blustered in an accusing voice. Always punctual and precise to the point where it was often a problem, she still hadn’t forgiven her sister for making them late in Manila. After all, Venju del Prado had made it crystal clear when he hired them on the phone, a month before, if they weren’t at the company’s corporate headquarters in Everett, Wash-

ington *that night*, he would give their jobs to someone else. *Didn't she realize that?*

"Oh, lighten up, Dari please. I know you haven't slept but do chill out. We'll be there in a few hours with plenty of time to spare. And once we arrive, he won't care what airport we flew into." Jesi crossed her eyes and twisted her mouth into a contorted face that always made her sister laugh. It didn't work this time. "Oh, c'mon. We don't even need to tell him if you're afraid of what he'll say. Sure, he sounded tough, but all bosses do. Plus, he's old friends with our Father. He and his crew won't leave without us. I promise."

The Vallesteros sisters were not the only ones traveling north that day. Tens of thousands of people made the trek each summer to Alaska, flocking to canneries, processors, and fishing boats all along the six-thousand-mile coastline. Attracted by money, adventure, and more often than not, necessity, these seasonal jobs were perfectly timed to entice college students on summer break, ski bums clinging to memories of fresh powder, migrant laborers stalled between West Coast fruit harvests, and ex-convicts seeking work with only winks for background checks.

Dari tried to flush the negative thoughts out of her mind, but a portent feeling of dread wouldn't leave her alone. She took solace beyond the smudged pane of her window, where freshly cut farmland and mature cedars intermingled, and kept trying to convince herself that her younger sister was right. There was nothing to fret about. Soon they would meet the rest of their crew at the company bunkhouse, eat a good meal, and stretch out in a warm bed. None of them would care that they had missed their flight in Manila or that they'd been forced to take a detour through San Francisco. Tomorrow the whole team would fly out together for the final leg of their journey to the Bristol Bay in the great state of Alaska, a place she'd been dreaming about since she was a schoolgirl. They'd make lots of money and send some of it home to their family. Maybe they'd have enough time to travel around the country when the season was over. Perhaps they'd see a bear. Everything was going to be okay. *It was.*

As she marveled at dark-pine forests blanketing mountains that seemed to touch both water and sky, she played nervously with a salmon charm on a thin gold chain around her neck. Earlier that week, their

spiritual mother had blessed from evil spirits two matching necklaces, before ceremoniously presenting, one-by-one, to each of her daughters with a whisper.

“To the Native people of the land you are travelling, these totems are Nerka. They symbolize abundance, kindred, and renewal. Use its courage to aid you on your long journey. Draw on its determination to lead you safely home.”

While Jesi wore hers hidden next to her heart, Dari’s hands were inexplicably drawn to hers. As if it were a delicate piece of fuzzy yarn, she rolled the almond-sized pendant over and around until its two sparkling diamond eyes, and intricate hand-etched scales, were covered with a consistent blanket of link. When the amulet wouldn’t tighten any more, she gave it one final upward pinch, let go, and set it free. Like a tiny-lively bait on a string, it pirouetted into a bouncing, spinning freefall and disappeared inside her loose shirt.

“Dari, please stop that! You’ve been doing that for hours now and it’s driving me nuts.”

Eyes still glued on the rich cedar scenery sliding by outside, Dari smirked and began the tedious process of twisting the little golden salmon charm back up again, pretending not to hear another word her sister had to say.



Downtown on the Seattle waterfront, Julian Hopkins nervously bounced his leg in a lobby chair outside the office of Francis Bernard, editor-in-chief of the *Seattle Post-Register*. Blown-up, black-and-white photos of major news events past and present covered every wall. Hanging prominently by the door, two framed Pulitzer prizes confirmed the paper’s ongoing commitment to excellence, fairness, and credibility. Julian was grateful one of his professors had called in a favor and set up this job interview for him. In a window overlooking the vibrant harbor below, he did a double-take as his focus shifted from a distant white-and-green Washington ferry to his own reflection a foot away. Neither tie nor borrowed sport coat fit him naturally. Creases on his obviously brand-new white shirt were still

visible from the package he had opened earlier that morning. Inhaling sharply, he tried to wipe the imperfections away but quickly gave up and shrugged. Ever since rolling into town the night before he had been uncharacteristically nervous, but now that anticipation had caught up with real time, his anxiety was waning.

Soon, a smartly dressed and bow-tied newsman appeared—silver hair groomed as meticulous as his mannerisms—and led him into an expensively furnished walnut room. “Julian, I’ve reviewed your resume and read your portfolio. And I must say, your writing has a spirited sense of energy mixed with thought-provoking style.”

For over two decades, Bernard had been recognized by both the community and his peers as a thought leader who set the very highest of standards of journalistic quality and integrity. Under his guidance a generation of trust had been established between the paper and its readers. Through the years he had trained his eye to discover fresh talent and he took great pride in his approach. Seattle was a two-newspaper town and most of the hiring managers he knew at his giant competitor down the street sought only seasoned writers. Bernard preferred to hire the young and hungry. Smart grads without bad habits who he could easily mold into his image. Writers he could cross-train to handle both breaking news and researched investigations. Ones who were quick, nimble, efficient, and willing. Just the way he liked it.

“Your professors speak highly of you and no doubt your accomplishments in college are impressive. So, tell me why you want to move to Seattle from Colorado and work for us here at the P-R?”

“To be honest with you, I’ve been moving around my whole life,” Julian grinned and drew Bernard in with his deep voice and confident tone. “I was born here locally, but we moved to California when I was four. I went to college in Colorado, and each year, to get to my summer job in Alaska, I’ve traveled to this area often. And for some strange reason, Seattle always feels like home. Coming back here is kind of a calling, if you will.”

Bernard shot him a questioning look. “So, you like to keep air under your wings?”

Julian reassured him. “Mr. Bernard, I’m ready to start my career. Sink some roots.”

Satisfied, Bernard asked Julian to walk him through his routine when he was the editor of his college newspaper. He wanted him to describe the thought process and steps he had taken when he had free-lanced an award-winning feature story for the *Rocky Mountain News*. The news manager directed the interview with fair but tough questions that challenged the new grad to think quickly. At times he pushed him out of his comfort zone before gently ushering him back in.

“Julian, a lot of good writers want to work here. Why should I hire you?”

“Mr. Bernard, in j-school we spent as much time talking about advancements in new technology as we did on fundamentals. Everything we did was on a computer. I know how to use them, I can help others, and I’m convinced that’s where journalism is heading.”

Bernard smiled and shifted the conversation light. As it turned out, both men shared the same sarcastic sense of humor and they both loved fishing. Julian mystified him with epic tales of wild Alaska. At the end of the hour Bernard’s phone rang. He didn’t answer it but rather looked at his watch regretfully.

“I’ll be honest with you, Julian. I took this meeting more as a favor to your journalism professor than anything else. But now that I’ve gotten to know you, I can easily picture you on our team. I can tell you’re a man of integrity and I like your outside points of view. And I especially appreciate your grasp of computers, emerging tech, and science. Different perspectives keep everyone on their toes, and Lord knows some of the ongoing investigations we have in this area could sure use a fresh set of eyes,” he pointed to a black-and-white photo of two detectives, one in mutton chops, carrying what appeared to be a dead woman out of a river. “And a new set of tools to get them solved.”

Julian nodded with the newsman even though he didn’t know what event the photo depicted.

“Jobs don’t open up here often and unfortunately I won’t have one available until the end of the summer. One of my best reporters has announced her retirement and we’ve already set the date. Of course, we’re

sorry to see her go, but as I always say, dark voids are made to be replaced with bright lights. Her desk is yours, if you can wait until then.”

Julian needed no time to contemplate and made up his mind before he even heard what the job paid. It didn't matter. This was the break he'd been dreaming about. “Mr. Bernard, that works perfectly for me. Dragline Fisheries wants me back for a fourth summer in Alaska. It's only an eight-week season, so I'll easily be back from Dillingham by the time your position is ready for me. If that timing works for you, I gratefully accept your offer.”

Bernard held out his hand, “Splendid. Should we plan on August fifteenth?”

Julian shook it, “August fifteenth it is.”



Detective Nick Nizzi drove the slow way home. He dreaded the conversation, and guaranteed confrontation, he was about to have with his wife. For the past four years, as part of a special forty-member team formed by the King County Police to crack the country's most notorious unsolved homicide case, he had worked both days and nights, weekends and holidays. While investigating leads that always petered into nothing, he'd immersed himself into the city's underbelly of prostitutes and pimps, delivering heart-wrenching news to families of victims, all the while tracking his activities on a brand new computer system neither he nor anyone else knew how to use. And now, just like that, it was over.

Somehow still stuck in the 70's but not giving a shit, Nick had long, signature, Elvis-like mutton chops and rumpled black hair. He wasn't tall, or short, or handsome, or homely. People came to him when they needed to hear the truth and avoided him when they wanted to brawl. Except for his wife. She picked a fight with him every chance she got. From his back pocket he tugged out a pair of black-callused leather gloves and tossed them into a banker's box on the passenger seat full of newspaper clippings and other items he'd swept off his desk. The sight of his handcuffs made him grimace. Once shiny, determined, and polished, the cuffs were now faded, weary, and worn. He'd snapped their heavy-

dull steel over the wrists of thieves, abusers, druggies, and drunks. But not on the killer who had left three dozen women in his wake. Not on the one who had littered the southern woods and hillsides with bodies. Not on the one who lurked in the shadows just beyond his reach. Not on the Green River Killer.

At a stoplight he slammed his forearms against the steering wheel. Goddam bureaucrats. Goddam city budgets. Goddam mayor. Goddam media. *Goddam it.* The investigation had gone cold. The serial murderer had stopped killing and the Task Force was now being slimmed down to a skeleton crew. Only the handful of detectives who had started it in 1982, the originals who had suffered through every one of the tough and painful early years, would remain. Nick Nizzi was not one of them. At thirty-two, he was suddenly off the case and being forced to choose where he wanted to be reassigned.

Even though he had joined the team later than some, a full two years after the first bodies were found in the river, the hunt for Him had still turned to obsession. No vacation he had ever taken was far enough away, and no hobby or diversion had ever allowed him to replace the unaccomplished feeling in his mind and in his life. As much as he tried, he had never been able to capture even a few minutes of peace. His first wife had left him because he hadn't been able to give her the attention she deserved. There was a good chance his second one would soon leave him too—probably less than ten minutes after he told her his news.

"Christ, the killer is still out there," he murmured. "Would I realistically be able to move a few desks down and swap homicide for regular police work? Until he is caught, no matter where I am, will I ever be able to think of anything else?"

He sat in his driveway for almost an hour before making his mind up for certain. He'd take the transfer to Everett, twenty miles to the north where he'd still be a homicide detective. At least a part-time one. Very few murders occurred there, maybe one or two a year, and the small suburb was generally sheltered from the problems of the big city. He swallowed the knot in his throat and trudged slowly to his front door. *Did I really lose my job before I could finish it?* Whether his wife liked it or not, he

was moving to Everett. With or without her. As far away from the Green River Killer as he could reasonably get.



As late afternoon turned to evening, the predator smoked in the shadows across the street from the Everett station: watching, waiting, wishing, wanting. From a steady stream of buses, he sized up each departing passenger like the elk and deer he had been hunting in the mountains his whole life. His adrenaline spiked each time a new carrier pulled up, but to anyone on the street passing by him he seemed plain, calm, quiet, unassuming. They paid him no heed. Always using the same proven techniques for luring, culling, and hiding his prey, he had lurked in places like this many times before. Practice had taught him how to detect vulnerabilities and single out his victims. The passing of time had taught him how to mask his inner pain. Deceptively intelligent, he had trained himself through the years to blend in so well with his surroundings that when he left a room people usually didn't remember he'd been there. On the exterior there was nothing to warn them of his deep-rooted hatred for humanity. His lack of empathy. No hint of the burning rage that had been simmering inside him since he was a child.

Earlier that day when he first pulled into town, he was anguished to learn the Mexican work crew, that he had been a part of the year before, hadn't yet arrived. They were still harvesting down south and might be delayed for weeks. *Damn his bad luck*. Broke and hungry after a seemingly endless winter during which he had run out of both meat and fish, those were weeks he did not have. As he waited in the hall for the janitor to come and issue him a bunkhouse key, Venju del Prado popped out of a door, yelling at someone back inside.

"Damn those two sisters," the Filipino boss bellowed. "They're late! They should have been here long before now!"

A Filipino voice from inside responded, "Calm down. I'll call the Seattle airport to see if they even got on their flight."

"I bet they changed their minds and stayed in Manila," said another. "This happens every year with young women."

"Damn them," stomped del Prado. "They could have at least called. If they're not here soon, I'll have to give their jobs to someone else. I have no choice. We leave in the morning!"

The predator remembered some overseas workers the year before had flown to San Francisco before riding a bus north. He snatched a key from a nail on the wall and snuck out without being seen, eyes sharpened with a hint of hope. Tonight, he'd hunt with a purpose. Premeditated and desperate, a kill would land him an immediate cash job for the summer at Dragline.

A bus pulled up. Nothing. Then another. His heart raced. There they were. He watched them skip down the steps. Sisters. It had to be them. He flicked his burning Salem Menthol onto the sidewalk where it landed next to eight others just like it and opened his door.

Like a phantom with slicked-back, oily, charcoal hair disguised by a deliberate, meek demeanor he stalked across the street and melted into the melee of pickups and drop-offs. One girl carried a backpack sporting a patch that read: "Far Eastern University, Manila." He trailed his marks closely. Venju couldn't know they were here. No one else could either. The killer's instincts felt right. The glister in his eye turned to glazed intent. When the taller of the two asked an attendant for directions, he craned towards her foreign accent from three feet away. Satisfied, he rushed back to his truck and calmly pulled up beside them as they skipped away from the station. With a trusting smile he rolled down his window, tapped his wrist, and shook his head with feigned dismay.

"You're late," he slavishly grinned. "I'm your ride to Dragline Fisheries. Venju and the whole team is waiting for you to arrive. Hop in."

"Sorry we're late. We missed our Seattle flight and got rerouted," confessed Dari.

"To lovely San Francisco!" quipped Jesiree. "See, I told you everything would be okay." She reached around and pinched her sister's butt. They both giggled as Dari tried to return the gesture, forgiving her in the process. Relief replaced worry in the older one's eyes. Lulled into complacency by his contrived and well-rehearsed pleasant personality, the girls had no reason to be alarmed. They smiled as he lifted their heavy packs into the back of his truck and sweetly thanked him as he opened

their side passenger door. The commotion of other passengers filled the air. No one had any reason to look their way.

As he eyed a stone club strapped behind the seat, and slammed his door shut, he felt no love or kindness. No empathy or remorse. No sadness or regret. For him, murder had always been a prideful game, unspeakably mean, cruel, quick, and calculated. He killed when he got angry. He killed when someone did him wrong. He killed to steal or when killing benefited him in any way. Throughout his adult life he killed anytime and anyplace he had an opportunity, and about his heinous crimes he had never whispered a word. Indifferent to age, sex, race, and religion, sometimes he killed simply to kill.

Hours later, when he pulled back into the gravel lot and parked behind the Dragline bunkhouse, he didn't notice Jesiree's small backpack fall out and roll under his truck. His eyes were too mesmerized by Dari's salmon charm necklace, erratically swaying from his rear-view mirror, lost, —like a gasping fish—freshly jerked from the water.

conrad Jungmann jr.

AUTHOR & SCREENWRITER



Conrad Jungmann Jr. earned his Master's in Journalism at the University of Missouri before embarking on a twenty-year career in journalism and digital marketing. While working at BELO, KTVB-TV, KING-TV, Microsoft/ MSNBC and his own company that he founded in 2006, LION Digital Media, on advertising campaigns for some of the world's most prestigious brands, his mind often wandered to the Alaska adventures of his youth and he vowed to someday share those stories with others. *EDGE OF REDFISH LAKE* is Conrad's debut novel and first feature screenplay. Conrad lives in Lynnwood, WA. with his wife and three children. He is an avid fisherman and outdoorsman.

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