

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

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Chapter Twenty Nine **The Storm**

The Storm, arriving before Phil is ready to go, the cold coming directly from Siberia, the wind from the Bering Sea— the two low pressure fronts combine to maul the camp. Driving snow crystals hard as sand, howling, slamming against the darkness, pushing it back, the snow quickly pushes down antennae, cutting the camp off from the world. It hammers into the hastily constructed camp, pulling nails, staples, bolts, pulling the camp apart. It pulls away wire coils, dragging them out into and across trackless snow flats. It pulls off sheets of tin roofing, twisting and crumpling the thin steel, tearing them in two as if they were paper. It twists buildings until even the few transmissions able to get through between the compound and its support base are distorted beyond recognition. It piles snow against doors, windows, walls. It isolates staff from prisoners, the tower from its base. It flushes away the camp's location from satellites, crossing overhead, sending garbled bytes of intelligence to gray men, faceless as moles burrowed deep under mountains in Colorado and in the Urals. It hinders even the French, who sell their satellite pictures to disorganized patriots searching for the camp, unable to find it in their overflights of the Brooks Range.

The cold will numb the wounds; Phil knows it will. It will also kill him if he gives it the chance. It will kill Peggy— she's too soft to escape, too soft to force herself to go when her body refuses to move, too soft to kill even herself to accomplish an impossible mission.

Every movement hurts. Moving causes the inside of his chest to burn; makes him puke as acid runs in his stomach. His bowels feel ready to explode. He is in no shape to walk to an outhouse, let alone attempt escape. He can't take a deep breath; he can barely breathe.

Peggy is in no better shape than he— she hurts where she was shocked. But his wife's toughness surprised him on many occasions. Same for some women he got to know in Laos. Peggy, though, is an academic.

Wearing the corpsman's almost new Sorrel boots, Phil gathers blankets despite the pain and the gas in his guts. The storm's fury will ease in two hours, or in four, or by tomorrow or the next day. Then escape will be impossible. The camp's staff will be better prepared for another storm, and the corpsman will never again allow him to get behind him.

His wounds limit his movements and his speed, but he isn't so many years removed from the jungle that even hurt, he had difficulty taking down the corpsman. He checks the tape with which he has bound the medic: blood still circulates in his hands and feet. "You're a decent enough fellow," he tells the corpsman. "Too bad you're on the wrong side."

"You can't make it. The wire is electrified and there're land mines between the coils."

"They might be a problem."

"They'll bring you back in here dead."

"They might, might not, but you tell your bosses I went to get my kid. Then I'm coming for them, every one of them."

"Your kid is dead, I told you that. They sent a helicopter to look for him."

"He'll be dead when I say he's dead. Until then, he lives."

"Let me go. I'll pretend this never happened."

"I can't do that."

Peggy shivers just thinking about the storm. She doesn't have boots; she has only the foot rags and mitten-like booties that Moses made and wrapped around her feet before he died, now an hour ago. He had helped her bend the ends of two of her bunk slats. He had shown her how to rig bindings of surgical tubing and tape before his wounds opened up and started to bleed again. He could have stopped. She tried to get him to lie back down. But he had persisted, repeating again and again that she had to tell the country about the camp and about what the Feds were doing in Alaska, that that was her obligation to him. He helped her shape two poles from a mop handle and a splinter from another slat. He told her that she could make it. And she wants to believe him, but she doesn't know. The storm is worse than any she has experienced before. Its fury, its raging stretches in all directions for farther than she can see.

Both Phil and Peggy have blanket leggings, and two blankets each with neck holes hang over their shoulders and chests like ponchos. She has a third blanket wrapped around her, and Phil has the corpsman's parka. His snowshoes are longer than her skis, but Moses insisted that she would be able to keep up because Phil would be breaking trail. He said that she'd have the easier going, and she prays that the old man was correct.

"If you're comin, it's time to get started." Phil takes the second scalpel he removed from the surgery kit and hands it to her. "Wrap this up so you don't cut yourself, but keep it with you. You'll need a knife sooner or later."

She doesn't know what to do with it. Nevertheless, she rolls it in a blanket scrap cut from their leggings, and she stuffs it into the top of her footrags, wishing as she does that she had boots, fearing that she'll regret going without boots, but knowing that there isn't another pair in the dispensary and that it's more important for him to have the corpsman's boots than for her. Unless someone escapes from the camp, its existence will never be known.

When Phil opens the door, he sees an arctic fox trying to dig free part of a bologna sandwich frozen into what was yesterday's mud. The fox has its back to the storm. Its fur stands on end— and it doesn't see him open the door.

Quick as a wolf, Phil catches the fox by the nape of its neck, and drops on it. His right hand grasping fur along the fox's back, his left knee coming down hard on the fox's ribs, crushing them, he kills again as easily as he had a decade ago. He kills without feeling pain, without feeling anything.

The fox is small, no larger than a house cat, and Phil says, "He won't be much of a meal, but he's a start and all we got. A good omen." And without seeming to use a knife to even start the cut, he peels its hide, literally turning the fox skin wrongside out. Then handing her its pelt, he says, "This'll keep one hand warm anyway."

She accepts the fur though she can't quite believe what she witnessed. Maybe they do have a chance. His wounds didn't seem to bother him. And how did he do that without getting bit?

The fences were topped by stretched coils of razorwire with a thirty foot or so gap between them. Even the wind couldn't cross them without becoming entangled— caught on the coiled wire, the storm had pulled itself free by ripping the wire loose and dragging it off. Phil, keeping his back to the fury, sees where snow has drifted over both fences and over the gap. He starts for the drift, his snowshoes clumsy, his wounds hindering his steps. He has to climb the drift, and his shoes want to slip on the snow. His boot toes don't push down far enough to provide traction, so he cribs his way up the crawling drift and over the first fence.

On top of the first fence, he feels like he's on top of the world even though the swirling, blowing, walking drifts limit visibility to a dozen yards. And when he's over the second fence, he begins shuffling his feet like a cow moose, the gait being one that devours distance. He leans

forward over his shoes, leans until his wounds stop his breath, and he slides one shoe forward to prevent him from falling. And still he leans as the wind pushes against him, not letting him straighten to ease the pain, as he slides the other shoe forward to stop him from falling.

He feels her hanging onto his coattail, but she doesn't seem to slow him as the wind pushes harder and harder, never letting him straighten up to breathe. The pain causes adrenaline to flow as his mind numbs, his thoughts reduced to fighting the pain, to keeping going, to sliding one foot after the other forward.

He doesn't once look back. It's as if the camp has ceased to exist. His concern is the storm and to keep moving and to turn time into space. His side hurts. Lungs hurt. So do his shoulder and gut. But the cold numbs some of the pain— and the remaining pain turns to anger as the wind carries him on wings of snow as it does migrating ptarmigan.

Feeling like he's flying, knowing that he's rapidly covering distance, knowing that he's traveling in a straight line, not knowing anything else except the severity of the pain, he hurries on as legs tire, cramp. A dark character in white space, driven by pain and revenge and the storm itself, he realizes that he hasn't felt her behind him for quite a while. Despite a desire to look, he doesn't turn his head. He hasn't the strength to go back for her if she isn't there, and he hasn't the heart to not return. So as long as he doesn't know for certain that she's not there, he can push ahead with sure knowledge that a helicopter will be sent after them as soon as the storm breaks. Maybe it will find her if she hasn't been able to keep up.

He has to reach cover before that helicopter can lift off. But how far away is cover? Fifty miles. Probably. A day at his present speed. Can he do that? Snowshoe for twenty-four hours? A Herculean challenge if he weren't shot up.

His mind produces thoughts that weren't there before as his thighs burn. A vertical line of pain reaches down across his right groin. A debilitating line of pain. A line of pain that grabs his leg and holds it and won't let him continue. But he must keep going. He can't stop. Eddie is out there. He has to get to him, has to try. And they won't send another helicopter out to look for him.

He slows down as he stands more upright, trapped in the storm, caught between the camp and the mountains that he knows are somewhere in front of him.

There's nothing behind him except whiteness and his tracks, already partially filled with snow.

Perhaps it's better that she didn't make it far from camp.

The storm blisters him with waves of driven ice pellets, wave after wave; so again turning his back to the wind, he drifts with the snow. A little more angry than before, he regrets letting her come with him. He liked her. She would've kept her promise to the old man. But a lot of people aren't going to make it before whatever is happening runs its course.

Politics is none of his business, and he resents having it made his business. He was living on Becharof Lake because he didn't want anything to do with suckasses in three-piece suits, with aldermen or building inspectors or union shop stewards. He didn't want to vote or serve on a jury or go to PTA meetings. He wanted to be left alone. He had enough of rules and regulations and red tape when he was in Laos. And treachery. Especially treachery. That's what he remembers most about those three years, the double-dealing of both Charley and of his own line Colonels. Hell, he left his Chinese squads to be killed by both sides. Orders. They didn't give him or them a choice. And they're not giving him a choice now, either. He has to follow the storm to cover, has to work his way south, and he has to do it right now, before another night passes if he can.

Although visibility is less than twenty yards and everything surrounding him is cold-white, he realizes that the moon somewhere far to the west has dipped to the horizon. It will soon be light.

But the temperature has been falling for awhile, a bad omen. The colder temperature means the storm center has passed, that daylight will bring clearing skies.

The camp probably won't send out a chopper until midday, meaning that he has maybe six hours to get somewhere.

He will have to hole up before the wind quits. He needs the wind to blow out his tracks, and he needs some way to stop detectors from picking up his body heat. And he resents the intrusion of technology into his life.

His steps have become robotic. He no longer bends knees. No longer can he see even twenty yards. No longer can he force cramped calves and thighs and now both groins to slide one shoe ahead of the other one. He has started stepping on the tail of his off shoe, not something he has done since the first time he wore snowshoes, and he trips himself, sending himself sprawling in the remaining darkness.

The second time he falls, his hands hit ice, not snow.

He lies where he fell, his brain not really able to comprehend what it is that his instincts are trying to convey. Something about having reached a river. Yet he sees no river, no water, nothing except darkness and blowing ice crystals and what might be a tree.

A tree? From the camp, there wasn't a tree in sight in any direction.

How far has he come? A good question: he doesn't even know for how much longer it will be dark, let alone whether, since he started stepping on the tail of his shoes, he has been traveling in a straight line or meandering.

The wind doesn't seem particularly strong, twenty knots, maybe a little more. Certainly not the sixty, seventy, eighty knots of earlier. And the snow covering the ice isn't deep. An inch, maybe an inch and a half.

The top crosspiece of his left snowshoe broke some hours ago. Now the binding of that shoe has slipped. It's easier to take that shoe off than to stand with it on— the ice under his left boot creaks, cracks. He shifts his weight to his right foot, dispersing his weight over the width and length of his snowshoe. And carefully, with one shoe on and one off, using the tail of his left shoe to probe the ice in front of him, he cribs towards what now appears to be a stand of ghostly, scrub cottonwoods.

Cottonwood snags, each gnawed half or more in two by beaver— that's what he was seeing. He's not on a river, but a creek that has been dammed and redammed by generations of beaver. Their dams are two and three feet high. Their ponds vary from thirty to sixty yards in width. And he realizes that he is at the top edge of a ravine or canyon.

He has, indeed, arrived somewhere, but he doesn't know Interior Alaskan geography well enough to even guess where he might be. What he does know, though, is that his time is short. Dawn twilight seem endless when sitting around a fire shivering, but in fact it passes quickly.

Enough storm still lingers to limit visibility.

Since it will soon be light, where one cottonwood has toppled against the base of another he piles grass and shredded bark and beaver chew. He pushes together a mound of mostly dry combustibles. He has matches in an inside pocket, and the skinned fox in an outside pocket of his parka.

Behind the logs and out of the wind, the dead grass catches. The little mound burns brightly as it sends spark flies upwards. He may regret starting the fire, but the fox is too stringy to eat without some cooking. And what he needs is water and food and a little bit of rest. He needs good daylight to see what's ahead of him, and to find a place to hide until it's again dark enough to travel. He needs to confuse a technology designed to locate Charley in his tunnels— he's certain the camp has at least what he had in 'Nam and in Laos. Of course, it didn't work very well over there, but that was a decade ago.

The fox is frozen.

He severs its front shoulders. Then holding each foreleg by its paw, he holds them over the fire and watches the white frostline push up the legs towards him. The fox has no fat. It doesn't sizzle, doesn't crackle, and the fire is small enough that it doesn't really cook. Rather, the film over the flesh thaws and dries and blackens as the thin shoulders soften.

Setting one shoulder atop the log, he rotates the other as he holds it over the flames, now died down to not much more heat than what a couple of candles would produce. He reaches to the side of him for more burnables, finds another piece of bark and a few more beaverchewed chips, a short length of a limb and a frozen moose turd. Adding these to the handful of fire, he stares into the flames, his eyes unfocused, his thoughts as frozen as the fox. So he doesn't see her—

"I thought you'd never stop." She falls headfirst across the log. "Saw your fire from way far back."

At first unable to truly accept her arrival, he stares at her as if seeing an apparition. He reaches to touch her shoulder, feels its solidity, then believes. "I'd given up on you."

"Hey, I'm tougher than you think, and you're wounded. You haven't been making the distance you were at first— and as skis, these slats suck." She sorta rolls over the log and lands half in the darkness, and seems to be only half there. "I'm not kidding about the fire. I could see it way far away... I lost your trail a long time ago and just been going since then. Wouldn't have found you if not for your fire."

Handing her the partially cooked leg, he spreads out embers and the still unburnt beaver chew with the other fox leg. He then scoops thin, fluffy snow onto everything red. Embers sizzle, steam, then go black. And the lingering twilight lightens until it seems that the new day has come.

"Gnaw on the end of that," he touches the partially cooked shoulder she holds. "That'll give your stomach something to growl about."

"You didn't have to put it out on my account."

"It served its purpose— "

"You're going tell me you lit it just so I could find you?"

"No. But you're right, with the storm ending it'll give us away. We'll have to eat cold meat." He looks at the fox leg. "We're on a creek that will eventually get us to the Yukon."

The embers are now cold. He pushes them against the log, under its curve, then removing his right snowshoe, he stands. "Are you afraid of tight places?"

"No, but somehow I think I should say yes."

"If this storm doesn't pickup again, we need to get outta sight asap."

"Agreed."

"As cold as it is, they won't have any problem picking up our body heat."

"So?"

"Well, we have to get going."

"I'm waiting."

"You don't get it. I'm thinking about spending the day in a beaver den if I can find where one has denned in a bank. Otherwise, it's a lodge. But they're liable to look there."

"Okay, but I'm not a mindreader. You'll have to spell out what you mean for me. I had no idea of what you were getting at."

Mary would've known... but she isn't Mary. She knows other things, maybe.

His problem now will be how to bust through the drifted snow without leaving a trail.

Actually, along the creek there isn't much new snow; the ground had been bare. Most of the snow followed the storm eastward. In places there is only an accumulated skiff. Nowhere along the creek does the storm's sugared snow seem to be more than ankle-deep, making for the probability that within a day or two another storm will dump a foot and a half of heavy, wet, marine snow, bringing right behind it warming temperatures, flooding and Breakup.

Now that daylight has come, able to see and carrying his snowshoes, he steps over the log and again onto the sheet ice that cracks under his weight. "We'll have to parallel the creek."

"Wait up for me this time, will you? I didn't ask before 'cause I knew you didn't want me along, but we have gotten this far. We can make it out of here if we work together. I help you and you help me."

"I would've helped you before if you'd asked."

"Well, I'm asking you now."

"Enough said, let's go."

"How can you see anything?"

"What do you mean? Sun's up."

"It is? Everything still looks dark to me."

He waves his hand in front of her eyes. She doesn't blink.

"How did you see the fire?"

"It was real bright—"

No, it wasn't. I didn't think I built that big of a fire. I know better than to do that.

"Seeing comes from eating caribou liver."

"I thought night vision came from eating carrots?"

"They both start with C."

"They're not hardly the same."

"Shows how much we know, huh?"

How's she to answer that? Her mind isn't awake enough to be witty. She'd have to be resurrected to be *dead on her feet*, she's that tired. But she understands the problem they face. They are, what, fifteen, twenty minutes, maybe an hour of flying time away from the camp. The storm is no longer severe enough to keep helicopters grounded. They have very little time before they can expect to be overflown.

Ten steps become twenty, twenty-five, thirty, fifty, a hundred, and she starts counting all over again. The makedo skis remain strapped to her numb feet. The mop handle and splinter are still her poles. Her right hand has blistered, but her left hand is protected by the fox pelt, its fur warm against the backs of her fingers.

She feels him touch her every couple of strides to make sure she's keeping up— and with the slats strapped to her feet, stepping over limbs and blowdowns and beaver toppled trees is difficult, especially when she can't see where she steps. But she suspects that he isn't having any easier time carrying his snowshoes.

Some of the new snow is over old drifts that without a crust don't support his weight, letting him sink to above his knees. He founders and she catches up, then falls behind again when there are two or three beavertopples together.

Wind continues to gust twenty knots or so as it sifts sugar snow from tree boughs to their trail, filling their tracks and those of an otter. Although she really cannot see, she tries to follow his foot steps exactly, hoping the trail of her slats will rub out his prints. She never expected skills developed on solitary weekend outings— weekends spent in Vermont and on Mt. Washington when all she wanted was to escape telephones and guest appearances and rubber chicken dinners— would get her through a night like this one, but she never expected to be trussed up and shipped off to Siberia as a political prisoner. That's what she is, a political prisoner. *Not in America!... But yes, here.* The camp might be a Gulag Archipelago of one, but one too many. And as far as she knows, there may be other camps. That's a frightening thought. Other camps? How would anyone know whether another camp exists? Surely there'd be rumors similar to those about what happened at Roswell. But who believes in space aliens? The same kooks who would believe a camp could exist. That's not a comforting thought. So if she doesn't tell the world about this camp—

Will she be believed? Probably not without a witness, without him. He's her credibility. And she silently prays to no particular deity that he isn't a crackpot of the sort so many reclusive veterans are. She needs him to be an unimpeachable pillar of integrity, someone whose word is unchallengeable.

What about what he said to the medic before they left?

She doesn't know, and she's too tired to put all of this together, and she's glad he's ahead of her, that she can follow him, that it is still dark, that he'd lit the fire and halfway cooked the fox that she really can't eat but might be all there is for awhile. She's glad to be alive— and it has been a long time since she thought that thought. She had begun to take life for granted, even though she knew better, knew how so many in other parts of the world live, knew about oppression and human slavery and mass starvation to achieve political solidarity within a nation. She knew how evil one human being can be to another, knew how thin the veneer of civilization really is, knew that any breakdown in society produces chaos. She saw that in Watts, then again the entire summer of '68. She saw that in Prague the same year. She just didn't think that this could happen here in America, didn't think it was even possible, still doesn't want to believe that any of this has happened. But it's all true. Every bit of it.

Her government has betrayed her. How else can she say it? She has been betrayed.

But the answer isn't building a bomb and blowing Washington back into the stone age... or is it? What else can she do, tell the President? What if he already knows? What if—

No, she is *not* going there.

Wind sprinkles glitter across the creek drainage as the sun makes its first appearance low in a pink sky.

"How much time do we have?" she asks, her voice soft but carrying far in the darkness ahead of her.

"Maybe an hour, no more.... There's a big pond ahead. I see it. Should be an old lodge on it and some open water. We're goin for a swim."

"We're going to get wet?"

"I don't know any other way to swim."

"Won't we freeze?"

"I imagine we'll get plenty cold, but what the hell, you can shiver next to me."

When he reaches the upper edge of the pond, he pauses. Twenty yards in front of him, the ice ends. There is thirty, maybe forty feet of open water too deep for him to see the bottom.

The beaver lodge is at the far left side of the pond. It's surrounded by thin, snow-covered ice for fifteen or more feet. He points to the lodge as he says, "Don't know how deep the pond is. Looks like ten feet anyway so we will have to swim. What we don't want to do is leave any tracks near the lodge or break any of that ice. So we enter the water straight ahead of us, then paddle over to the ice by the lodge and see if we can find one of the tunnels. They'll be a ways under water and about a foot, maybe fifteen inches in diameter, sort of a tight squeeze. But keep your arms over your head. You'll be surprised at how small of an opening you can get through— and how long you can hold your breath. The cold water shortens the time, though, so be prepared." He reaches out to touch her shoulder as if to reassure her.

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

"There'll probably be somebody home so I'll go in first. Beaver aren't real brave, but I have been attacked by one that pulled thirty pounds of weight and thought it was a bulldog."

"You lost me."

"I caught a migrating boar in a drown set— the boar was too big for the set. He was waiting on the bank for me, damn near got me. I had to hit him a couple of times on the head with my axe before he became cooperative."

"You killed him?"

"They usually don't let you make plews from 'm till you do."

"I'm glad you still have a sense of humor."

"There ain't gonna be anything funny about getting wet. I'd roll one of those blankets up as tight as you can. Maybe the inside of it will stay a little bit dry." He takes off the parka. "I'm gonna cache these shoes under water. Might not need them again, but I don't want to leave them where they can be seen from the air— or found if someone gets out and walks around."

"You want to take my skis?"

"Nah, leave those boards on your feet till we get in the water. I've been watchin what you're doin. The track behind you looks almost like an otter's."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Never mind. Let's get moving. I'm already cold."

He eases onto the ice that cracks and cracks and sends ripples of cracks across it. Lying down, twisting half onto his right side, his parka and shoes in his left hand, he crawls forward half his length, then pauses and says, "You might as well give me those boards and anything else you want me to carry. We're gonna break through before we reach the edge."

His weight on the ice causes it to sag, letting water flow back into the depression, soaking the bottom of his right arm and shoulder, wetting him as far back as his hip.

"You have enough to hold. I'll get them." Although it remains dark, she sees well enough to lie on the ice just behind him and wiggles around until she loosens improvised bindings that were never intended to come loose. "I got them. Go on. I'll be right behind you."

"Yeah, well, I'm not all that eager."

Nevertheless, he squirms forward as the ice continues to sink, with more and more overflow backing up onto the ice, depressing it farther, washing away both their trail and their weight. And they, like two otters, slip into the pond that is shockingly cold. He tests the depth: the pond is over his head. And she sputters as the water gives her an instant headache.

Taking her arm, he kicks in a half dog-paddle stroke. Now that he is in the water and closer to the lodge, he sees the beavers' feedbank. There, under a sunken limb the diameter of his forearm, he wedges his shoes and her skis, the buoyancy of them threatening to float the limb. But the limb is well-anchored in mud. And when he pulls a second limb over them, they are down until retrieved.

At the edge of the ice surrounding the lodge, he again tests the pond's depth. It's still over his head but barely so.

The water is cold enough that little blood enters his hands, arms, feet. All of him is numb.

He hasn't climbed into a beaver lodge since he was a little older than Eddie. He isn't certain he still can. And just before he dives to look for an entrance tunnel, she asks, "Will there be enough air in there for us?"

"They don't have gills, they have to breath so there'll be a vent hole somewhere, a small hole not large enough for a wolf or coyote to open up and break into the den." He turns so that he faces her. "Look, if a helicopter flies over when we're in the lodge, we have to immediately get into the water. We should be able to hear its rotor if it's close.... The lodge will have at least two entrance tunnels. You take one and I'll take the other. We don't want them picking us up on infrared sensors. Just keep enough of your head above water to breath, and whatever you do, don't talk. They can pick you up on a mike, or at least we could pick up Charley in 'Nam."

"I understand."

"Hand signals only."

"Yes sir."

"That's more like it." And as if she were Mary, he pulls her towards him and kisses her forehead, her hair already plastered tight to her scalp.

He dives under the ice through which a small amount of sunlight passes and become trapped, thereby enabling him to see. He finds the bottom canals dug by the beaver during periods of low water, and he sees a dark hole where several canals emerge. An entrance. And he surfaces just beyond the ice edge, gulps air, points: "If I don't resurface in a minute, I made it in. Look where the canals come together. I'm gonna try that entrance first. It's small."

"What if I can't see the canals?"

"Can you see the lodge?"

"Barely. It's still awfully dark."

"Line up on the lodge— no... if I can get in, I'll come back and get you."

The opening isn't as small as it appeared. When he approaches it, he sees that it's half overhung— and once he's under the overhang, he pops up in the lodge where only two kits remain, their parents having bailed out an escape entrance. At first he doesn't see the kits that make little grunts when he pulls himself out of the water and onto the packed mud and stick deck. The inside of the lodge is almost totally black. And his concern isn't the kits but whether she can find the entrance even with him leading her.

But after a shivering moment, he realizes what he has to do. One kit backs away while the other doesn't move, it's mistake. He brings his fist down hard on the kit's skull. The kit kicks once, and the second kit squirts past him, dives, and is gone.

He leave the kit, breathes deeply, then slides back down the entrance tunnel. And when beyond the ice, he surfaces, locates where she remains; then grasping her arm, he pulls under and toward the entrance.

Splashing into the lodge, grasping as if she's been choked, she pulls herself forward as he pushes, hurriedly sliding her onto and across the mud and sticks as he loses his air.

"What the hell is that!" her question not asked but an exclamation when she touches the dead kit.

"A baby."

"A baby? That?"

"Yeah, well, it waited around for a dinner invitation... there isn't light in here for me to see to skin the little fart."

"A baby beaver? You got a beaver?"

"Yeah, there was two babies."

"Were two babies?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"No, you said *was*."

"What are you, an English teacher? This is one helleva place for a lesson."

"I'm sorry, but there are some things that annoy me."

"Yeah, well, at least I can still annoy you. That's a helleva improvement from where we were a day ago."

"Help me— I'm too cold to move."

"But not too cold to hear me say *was*." He slides his hands under her armpits and pulls her toward and onto him. The inside of the lodge is domed, three feet high at its highest and five feet across. Its platform deck is eight inches above the surface of the pond, and it stinks.

The smell is one she can't quite identify, a mixture of sour earth and musk, an earthy perfume she wouldn't wear even if her mother gave it to her. She has never before smelled beaver castor, and she hasn't felt but one man for a long time, that man the Israeli who got her into this mess. She thinks about quickly sliding off him, but she doesn't. She doesn't even try to move. She just lies there on top of him, her knees bent, her cheeks becoming flushed. She lies there feeling warmth beginning to flow into her chest, her shoulders, upper arms, loins. And exhaustion begins to shut her systems

down. All she wants to do is sleep, to never wake up, to lie here with him and on him and him on her and she actually hears herself snoring before her thoughts drift across time and continents to wind swept steppes where Scyths in covered carts drawn by oxen blur into darkness, unremembered dreams of ancestors or neighbors, she'll never know.

The platform might be large enough for three generations of beaver to breed and nurse young and weather-out storms, but it isn't large enough for the two of them to lie comfortably unless she lies tight against him, causing stirrings he shouldn't feel, not with Mary dead only days. Everything is all messed up. Her murder. His arrest. Their escape. Events have been salted and stuffed into sausage casings, smoked and served as Passover Lamb without their seasoning ever being sampled. A priest declared the finished links kosher, and no one seemed to notice his backwards collar and cross or the absence of bitter herbs as they now pass among themselves a cup of applejack for the remission of their sins. Nothing makes sense. Most of all her lying tight against him and his response. He wants to take her, make her his, but doing so will make him vulnerable to them using her to break him if they're caught. Doing so will link them in a way he's not yet prepared for. There may be a time when it seems right. He will recognize the time. Until then, he also needs sleep.

They don't hear the wind shift directions, nor do they see the white sky of midday as snow begins to fall in flakes like inverted umbrellas. They don't feel how warm their bodies heat the igloo-like lodge, nor do they see the return of a beaver nearly as large as they are. It doesn't stay. Rather, with its nostrils assaulted by their stench, it dives, swims underwater the length of the pond, climbs over the next dam upstream and slips into the entrance of a den dug by its parents after a wolf broke through the top of the lodge many litters ago.

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