

# EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

By Homer Kizer

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## Chapter Four

A big man, a cautious man—perhaps, at times, too cautious—Jabe McCarver doesn't believe happenstance occurs twice. For him, the death of his brother and the sinking of the *Freedom* are too closely connected in time to believe either one accidental. He and the other known members of the Committee, operating on the assumption that there is a collaborator within their outer circle, have, like foxes, taken to ground, disappearing from public sight, leaving behind families and jobs, homes and most creature comforts. Their outer circle will continue to protest Federal intrusions into Alaska as well as gather converts, making disciples of those converts, while feeding and strengthening longtime patriots. But the Committee will proceed as iceworms with its rather simple plan to checkmate Washington, D.C.

Hugh's death and Jones' incapacitation have left him and Lars Gunnarson more or less in charge of the Committee...if their Movement has any weaknesses, those weaknesses are in its organization, or rather, its disorganization. So much had depended upon his brother and still depends on Jones. Hugh was a natural diplomat, a person well respected by both Republican and Democratic party officials. He was well enough liked throughout the state, in and out of the Native community, that his arrest would've united Alaskans just as the attempt on Governor Hammond's life would have if it had been successful. But accidents don't make martyrs, especially a traffic accident. Within a few months, his brother will be just a name. Within a decade, he will have been forgotten; within two decades, only his family will know he ever existed unless, of course, the Movement is successful. So yes, for him, Jabe McCarver, this struggle against Federal oppression is now personal.

Personal it is. He sits, his six foot six inch frame bent nearly double inside this tiny blind made from a white bed sheet and several shovelfuls of snow, and he watches an Alaska Railroad boxcar parked on a siding four miles south of Fairbanks, a siding laid the previous summer. His feet are numb. His hands are stiff, and his heart is heavy, for he knows the boxcar's contents.

Since giving up welding, he has been a hard rock miner. He is in the habit of checking the shoring before he enters a shaft. Jones, though, thinks in terms of action. No hesitation. No negotiation. No sitting in a blind waiting to see who comes to unload the boxcar.

For more than a month the Committee has heard rumors of a detention center being constructed north of Circle. A Russian-style camp. The Committee has been following up rumors of boxcars filled with barbwire and cyclone fencing being unloaded in the middle of the night. He checks his wristwatch. Eleven-fifty. Almost the hour when the bewitching begins.

Until yesterday, though, neither he, nor any other member of the Committee had substantiation of these rumors. But while flying the rail tracks yesterday, he located this car. He broke its seal. The railcar contains seventy thousand pounds of sintered steel razorwire, mean stuff, nasty.

He resealed the car with an unused grizzly bear tag, one he wasn't supposed to have anyway. And tonight, he has no qualms about blackmailing Washington. After all, the Feds, ever eager to appease human rights demands, seem to have no will to resist blackmail. Witness OPEC, Panama, Turkey, Iran, Israel. And hasn't Israel sent a man to confer with the Committee although now he doesn't expect anything to come from that meeting, the Israeli and any papers he might have been carrying being somewhere on the bottom of Shelikof Strait. But Alaska and the Movement have plenty of gold. They are accumulating a stockpile of high-grade uranium ore. And while the Movement doesn't have the means to enrich the ore and build a weapon, the ultimate threat, the Movement does have access to and control of the two resources the European Community needs most: oil and uranium. Stranger things have happened than for Alaska to make a deal with the Soviet Union, or Japan, or Germany, a treaty that grants resource availability for political security. With a weak President and a liberal Congress, who knows what can happen. After all, the first lesson of politics is that human logic can't explain why Cain's offering was rejected while Abel's was accepted.

Actually, he knows why Abel's offering was accepted. It was a lamb, a sin offering made with blood like the blood flowing through Abel's veins. Cain's offering wasn't for Cain's sins, which is why sin still lingered at his door. And if Alaska has to atone for its sins with blood, well, the State follows in the footsteps of righteous Abel.

It's not true that he has no qualms about threatening blackmail; for if the threat isn't treated seriously, then follow-through will be necessary. A lot of blood will be shed. American blood. The blood of friends and relatives, Congressmen and Senators. Much of that blood coming from folks as innocent as the lamb Abel sacrificed.

The sadness within him grows. *What has America come to that the destruction of millions of citizens has to be threatened to stop a judge in San Francisco or in New York from preventing the elimination of marauding wolves, those wolves killing chained sled dogs within the city limits of Fox, Fairbanks, North Pole.* His brother had been against the Committee's contingency plan from the beginning. But Jones' position was the one finally approved. No threats. No warnings. If the Feds refuse to negotiate their withdrawal from Alaska, then they will be ordered out of the Commonwealth, given forty-eight hours to vacate their holdings. They will be told only that the Commonwealth of Alaska is prepared to defend itself from foreign occupation, Soviet, American, or otherwise. Then a nuclear device will be exploded over Washington. Any warning increases the chances that their plan might be foiled. And it grieves him that even such a step has to be contemplated to assure Alaskans that they can be a free society as established by our forefathers.

Perhaps it is better that Jones is incapacitated; perhaps aborting the baby is preferable to killing its mother.

Although the equinox has passed, the night's cold air seems to crackle, tinkle, as the snow squeaks. Off to the south, in the distance, he hears the rumble of a reverberating diesel stack as a truck slows for a curve. There hasn't been much vehicular traffic on the Parks Highway this evening, and with the way wolves have decimated the local moose population, he doubts if there has been much traffic of any kind on the plowed road.

Again he hears the rumble of stacks as the driver uses his Jake brake. The rumble comes from closer, probably from within a couple of miles.

Sound carries in the dense air of winter, the cold making the air into a thin fluid that behaves the same way water does. And he wonders if the cold also thickens time until it, too, flows like sap—the truck seems to be taking forever to get here.

The air continues to tinkle as he listens to the river ice snap, then crack with the bark of a .22 rifle.

He sits cramped, with time apparently frozen. The blind is to the side of a small black spruce growing through and between the rotting paddleboards of a sternwheel riverboat, a relic and all that remains of investors' dollars that never returned their anticipated profit. Seed money for the development of a nation. Sown on fertile soil. But what have they grown? Courtrooms full of attorneys filing motions and memoranda in support of grubbing out the wheat and weeds still flourishing in a few rich river valleys.

His thigh muscles cramp. He has to shift positions. And the snow squeaks when he does.

His mind really isn't on the boxcar, or even on Jones. Rather, his thoughts are of Erika: she seems like a nice girl, lady. She has grown up since he last met her, and she is much better looking, but she returned from Las Vegas with sorrows and secrets. Nevertheless, he'll enjoy seeing her again tomorrow night.

At thirty, he is the youngest member of the Committee. His parents were '59ers, having left Michigan that year to homestead near Palmer; he was then ten. He dropped out of high school to work as a welder in the oil fields (his dad was a welder), and he was in Kenai when the town virtually died in 1968. But he made enough money welding pipe for Alyeska to set him up for life.

He has seen the state grow and change since oil was discovered in Cook Inlet. He has lived through two booms and a bust, and he learned that money isn't everything, or even very important. The abstract concepts of liberty, justice, freedom—all exceed the worth of money. Meaningful tangibles such as home, family, health, self-reliance are of more value than money. So coupling money to his good health and the fact that he has a home, all that he lacks is a family of his own.

He likes Erika. When he stopped by her apartment last night, he didn't know that he would. All he had on his mind was her father: how was he doing? did he have any papers on him when found? those kinds of questions. But it's been since before he went to work for Alyeska that he has been with a girl who wouldn't use the men's restroom at a gas station. So yes, he likes her a lot. She is someone with whom he's able to talk about subjects that are important to him.

Again he hears the rumble of stacks, closer still.

The dynamism of the Committee was sapped by Hugh's death and Jones' incapacitation, the reason he's here alone and on his own. In all candor, the Movement needs the Feds to commit another overt act of constitutional illegality. What the Committee needs is a new spokesperson to surface, one filled with righteous indignation and possessing the ability to express those feelings. Perhaps someone like Erika.

Forcing thoughts of Erika aside, he struggles to recall the name of that one person in a thousand who has been able to make a difference in the affairs of humanity. There have never been many Ben Franklins, George Washingtons, Abe Lincolns, but there are more potential ones than have actually surfaced. Churchill needed Hilter, and Hilter needed the Wiemer Republic. The people who are able to make the difference appear like others until circumstances cause these people to bubble to the surface. And the Committee needs the Feds to stir the seething cauldron of unrest in Alaska. He's certain he isn't that person who will lead the Commonwealth to self-government.

Sometimes he thinks of Alaska as the State that it is; sometimes as the Commonwealth that it will be. The State is the shadow of the Commonwealth, just as the first Adam was the shadow of the second, our glorified Savior.

The rumble of the truck's stacks shake the night and vibrate snow from the spruce boughs above his blind as the rig turns onto the short spur leading to the siding. His heart trembles as fear grips his courage and dissolves his determination. He doesn't really want to be here. He'd rather be with Erika, lying between the satin sheets of her bed. But headlights now pierce the blackness between the small spruce trunks and budded willows.

The lights twist and turn with each bend of the spur as the stacks rumble until the night itself seems to quake. Finally, the eighteen-wheeler reaches the siding where the railcar waits. Pulling alongside the car, then backing around, pulling forward and backward, the rig stops with its trailer's rear door against the door of the boxcar.

Even in the cold darkness there is enough reflected light to enable him to read the two foot high lettering: *U.S. MAIL*. On the cab-over tractor's door, he recognizes Lyndon's Transport's logo. He feels muscles weaken, for he has seen this tractor-trailer rig many times, each time heading north, past Circle and towards Prudue supposedly. And beneath his breath he curses the men who rule Alaska from so far away.

Four men, each wearing insulated coveralls, each burly, slide or step down from the cab-over tractor. Two of the four stretch while the third pisses as the fourth, using a steel bar a couple of feet long, rips the seal from the car door.

For several anxious moments, Jabe waits to see if the seal is examined, and he prays the darkness and cold will prevent the tag from being inspected--that metal bear tag can be traced back to him.

His cramped left leg knots, and he almost cries out in pain. He has to move, but when he does, the snow squeaks beneath his bunny boots, and the lemming-like cries seem loud in the cold stillness. He can't imagine how loud would be a wince from the pain.

The three men join the fourth as he trips the latch for the boxcar's double doors, then slides the rusty doors open as easily as if they were on greased rollers though the doors squeal every inch of the way. A hand lantern is produced, and the fourth man shines the inside of the car. Then arming themselves with leather gloves and a pallet jack, the four begin transferring the barbwire to the trailer.

His knotted thigh continues to cramp as he crouches, shivering, sweating from the pain beneath the sheet. He would like to stomp his feet, but he fears being heard; he fears even the tinkling of the darkness. And doesn't know how he will hold in the moan that has formed in his throat and threatens to slip between his lips. So he draws his parka tightly around himself as if hoping its fur ruff will catch any sound that might slip from between his clenched teeth, and he feels the hardness of the camera he has been keeping warm inside his shirt. He knows there are photos he must take, but he fears the loudness of the camera's flopping mirror.

The risen moon casts black shadows across the stark white snow. These shadows shorten as the moon creeps higher.

Ample light, he doesn't have. He doubts there is light enough to photograph the four men, but he needs their pictures. When they are identified, their names will be added to the list of individuals asked to leave Alaska when independence is declared.

A corner of the camera body gouges his ribs.

Ever so slowly, he shifts his numb feet as he shivers while drawing the camera from inside his shirt. Small beads of sweat from the pain of the cramp dot his forehead as he twists a four hundred millimeter lens onto the camera's front bayonet mount. Then using a tripod much too flimsy for his needs, he views the faces of each of the four through the long lens.

By pushing his film speed to 6400 and waiting until one or another of the men's faces cross the beam of the hand lantern, he photographs each of the four. The flopping mirror does, indeed, sound loud enough to be heard by the four, but other than himself, no one seems to hear the banging.

He checks his watch: two-ten. What seems like hours barely has been. Time melted once the men started moving the razorwire.

He's glad he isn't paying this crew by the hour: they are slower than mush ice the first day of freeze-up. If they don't hurry, dawn will arrive before they finish thereby creating a different problem for him. He actually needs to be going although it will be difficult to brush out his tracks in the dark. So with his camera again inside his shirt, his mittened hand lifts the sheet covering the back of the blind—

He hears the tearing of cloth, and feels his heart flutter. But when he hears the muttered cursing coming from inside the railcar, he realizes the ripped cloth wasn't the sheet but the clothing of whomever examined the barbwire a bit too closely.

Shadows cast by the moon have lengthened, but the night sky has brightened. He checks for clouds while he waits for work to resume. What few clouds he sees are far from the moon and wafer-thin. They seem embarrassed by what's occurring beneath them.

The cursing ends. Again he hears the creaky wheels of the pallet jack being rolled across the uneven decking of the railcar's floor.

Three o'clock. He continues to watch the moon arch across the sky. There is one cloud that might mask his entrance into the black & white still life existing beyond his blind. And when the moon and that drifting cloud start to cross paths, he lifts the edge of the sheet to go—

He drops the edge as if the sheet itself burnt his hand: he was about to go when a red pinprick flared, then glowed in the shadow of a black spruce. Someone had struck a match not fifteen feet from his blind, and he hunkers, fearful of even breathing.

Afraid to move, he remains motionless, exhausted by the cramp in this thigh that has now eased, leaving his muscle weak. But the snow squeaks beneath his knees as he waits and sweats, shivers, sweats, waits and shivers.

Finally, he hears snow sizzle when the cigarette is thrown away. Through the front slit, he sees the fourth man return to the truck's cab.

No one likes admitting to feeling fear, what his size instills in others. But he is neither particularly brave nor foolhardy. Again, he checks the shoring when he enters a mineshaft.

He never fought as a kid, never had to. The draft wouldn't take him. Enlarged heart. He worked in the oilfields for a decade and never had a fight, never found the occasion when he had to prove himself. He has always been able to avoid trouble, has always practiced restraint. So here he is now, a person turned to jelly by that glowing red pinprick; here he is challenging the Federal Government's right to be in Alaska; here he is taking on Goliath, and he isn't very good with a sling. He questions his sanity.

What is courage? He summons all he has and lifts the edge of the sheet. The moon and the cloud are about to cross. Perhaps the one cloud will hide that hanging mirror long enough for him to sneak from shadow to shadow without him seeing his white face.

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