

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

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Chapter Nine

Hastily gathered around the all-seeing walnut table that spends its days staring blindly about the windowless room, the thirteen members of the Taskforce on Alaskan Pipeline Terrorism (TAPT as it's come to be known since yesterday's meeting) stare blankly at each other. The table, itself, was also disfellowshipped from the Body of Christ by the good Master Edward Taylor. Its eyes saw both good and evil in the affairs of men, but it only caused the consciences of good men to squirm when their good deeds were examined to determine their motives.

"Gentlemen, and you, too, Peggy," Bob Estes adds as almost an afterthought, "there's a new wrinkle to this Alaskan affair. It seems that Israel has a missing scientist, a nuclear physicist."

The squirming intensifies.

Estes continues: "Caroline learned of a meeting between this physicist and Les Jones. We are, as we meet, checking the registers of all recent flights into and out of Kodiak, where their meeting occurred. We will shortly have the name of this Israeli, whom, we believe, entered through Fairbanks. Customs and the F.B.I. were tipped about a Mossad agent arriving to meet with our terrorists. They questioned a Dane, whom they suspected of being that agent, but they didn't find enough evidence to prevent his admission into the country, and they did turn around an Israeli arriving on the same flight."

"Why didn't they report this to us?"

Estes appears uncomfortable as he says, "We haven't been sharing information with the F.B.I., nor they with us. Whatever we tell them seems to get repeated inside the Kremlin."

"The name you want is Itzak Salmon," Peggy says. "Indeed, he came in through Fairbanks. He was being shadowed, but used Customs to rub off his shadow."

Each carved eye circling the table base seems to blink at the same time as everyone looks at her. All of the carved eyes silently argue for her to be disfellowshipped from the Body of Christ for possessing carnal knowledge.

No one says anything.

When the silence extends far in awkwardness, she breaks it: "Israel has sent an agent to get him out before we realize he's here."

"And your information comes from?" asks Florchiner.

Peggy smiles. "If I said the President, will that be enough to satisfy everyone?"

Again the silence: it gathers along the windowless walls like old men waiting for day work, one of whom has holes in his hands.

Her mouth dry, her tongue almost too thick to form constants, she confesses: "I went to a reception last night. For the president of Hebrew University. I was seduced... by the agent sent to remove Salmon."

"You were?" Estes raises his eyebrows. "Sounds more like tit for tat."

"It might have been, but I know this taskforce has a leak as well as the communication problem with the F.B.I. Israel knows about us, and about what we do here. Who's talking?"

Florchiner glances at Estes.

Peggy sees the glance: "So what's going on? What don't the rest of us know? haven't been told? aren't going to be, is that the story?"

The awkwardness of silence again fills the room as the carved eyes stare without blinking at old illusions standing with their backs against the walls, waiting for work, the hiring halls for day laborers closed for the season. Tears seem to form in the corners of the walnut eyes as little clouds drift like cigarette smoke between hell and the ceiling. A tornado spawned by that glance meanders from chair to chair.

"That is it, isn't it? You already know there's a leak, and some of us aren't to be trusted. We aren't privy to all of what's known. This taskforce is window-dressing. We're here to satisfy oversight committees, nothing more. And I'm the token women, you sexIST SONNABITCHES!" She's on her feet to go.

"Sit down." Estes points towards her chair. "We have another problem. Our infamous Committee has learned about the detention center we're building. We're certain they'll reveal its location to the press. We can't allow that. So in the spirit of candor I've called us together to authorize the incarceration and detention of all known participants in this affair. Do any of you have objections? Peggy?"

She's too angry to speak.

"If any of you object, now's the time to speak up. We don't want another Watergate with a deep throat. And we won't have one. No one outside of Alaska, press included, understands what's happening up there. It's the frozen North, a wasteland of igloos and penguins."

Peggy wants to scream, THERE'RE NO PENGUINS IN THE ARCTIC, but says instead, "Before we go farther, I need my status cleared up. How much am I authorized to discuss with this Israeli agent, and why can he tell me more about what happening in my own country and on this taskforce than you can?" She points at Estes' chest. If her finger were a pistol barrel, she'd shoot him right here.

"Give us this Israeli's name and we'll pick him up, hold him for a couple of weeks, then send him home. And maybe some of this is Bob's and my fault for not keeping everyone fully informed."

That is, she knows, as close to getting an apology out of Estes as anyone will ever come. In fact, if she hadn't heard him, she wouldn't believe he just said what he did.

"Name's Ben Levi. He might have diplomatic protection. And the irony is that he's staying at the Watergate."

Estes looks at Florchiner who picks up a phone receiver. Then he tells Peggy, "You should have come to us earlier."

"How much earlier could I have come forward? It all happened last night, this morning."

"You did fine. We'll get him." Estes turns his attention to the members of the taskforce. "Gentlemen, if there are no objections, we'll adjourn until our next scheduled meeting Monday morning... Bill, will you stay for a moment."

Although she perhaps understands more about detention and internment than anyone else in the room, Peggy decides now is not the time to make an issue of a camp that will be built with or without her being in the information loop. Yes, she objects to the construction of such camps. Yes, at the breakfast table this morning Ben told her about the Urals camp where he lost his life. Yes, she will report this to the President. Yes, by her silence she has

approved of TAPT's plan to detain dissidents. And she closes her eyes as she leaves the room.

While the others file silently out, Florchiner changes chairs. Now seated close to Estes, he and Estes wait for the room to empty. When they are last alone, he asks, "Are you sure you did the right thing telling everyone we're building a camp?"

"It's better, after what that damn skirt brought up, to tell everyone now than to have them stumble across some reference to the camp next week or next year. What I want is your feeling about telling Caroline."

"Why not. She's doing a good job for us. I read the transcript of her last phone call. She's penetrated the Committee. And she can be removed if her knowing becomes a problem."

"Then you think we can trust her?"

"I don't see where we have a choice. We might want to send in another agent later, but right now, I think she's capable of handling the situation. And we do have budget considerations. Another person means more money. That peanut farmer already has me cut back to where the bureau bleeds peanut oil."

"I hope you're right. The President will hang us all if you're wrong."

"If I'm wrong, it's nobody's fault but his. He was warned against provoking those dissidents before we rounded up all of their leaders. Now look where we are. We only have three of the twelve names of their little infamous Committee, and we can't locate the one person we know for sure is on that Committee."

"Who's fault is that?"

"Not the Agency's or the Bureau's.... Bob, we fucked ourselves with Gunnarson although we might get him yet, but not with Jones. Those popcycles up there get all the credit for Jones. His disappearance isn't Caroline's fault, isn't ours, isn't the Marshalls. If it's anybody's, it's yours for not telling the hospital of our interest in him."

"Maybe so— but what about this Israeli?"

"Which one?"

"The one up there."

"I don't know what's happened to him. Disappeared. But I doubt he can build a bomb even if he had all the uranium he needed. Hell, it took years and a whole team of scientists for us to build our first one. They might get a little theory, but it takes more than theory to even build a firecracker."

"It bothers me that we haven't seen him."

"Maybe he went down on Jones' boat and is now crab bait."

"How did he get to Kodiak? Somebody would've had to have hauled him so I don't think so. I suspect he's still in the Fairbanks area. And I think we need to send up another agent just to locate him. See what you can do. The best you have."

"I told you, Bob, I don't have the budget for another man."

"The Security Council will cover your shortfall."

"You're determined to send someone north?"

"I am— and I don't want the taskforce to know about him."

"Okay.... I have a man who grew up in Montana, and who's between assignments. He's good. Name's Jim Calkins. He'll fit in like he's an Alaskan himself."

"Send him."

"Instructions?"

"Set him up with a drop. Maybe a post office box at the college there outside of Fairbanks. Get him on his way today."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Then I'll see you Monday." Florchiner rises to leave.

But before Florchiner reaches the door, Peggy bursts in: "I got clear out to my car before I realized I'd forgotten my purse. She hurries across the conference room to where she had sat, bends over and picks up her small handbag from the floor. Straightening, she says, "Excuse me," as she pushes past a very surprised Florchiner. In the doorway, she turns, nods goodbye to both men, then hustles along the corridor towards Security.

As she approaches the security station, she opens her bag and presses the eject button on the tiny recorder hidden in her purse. She slips the miniature cassette inside the lead foil envelope Ben gave her, and she strides briskly past the station and through the polarized X-ray fog designed to expose film and scramble magnetic tape. Her purse will be inspected before she leaves the building, but before she reaches that final security station, she will have to powder her nose. She'll listen to the cassette in the restroom before erasing the tape and flushing it down the toilet. She will then decide if Ben needs to know what was said after the taskforce left the room.

Meanwhile, Florchiner, always the agent, asks, "What do you think, Bob?"

"I think she forgot her purse."

"Why today?"

"Have you ever met an intellectual who could remember his ass if it weren't attached. How would I know why today? If you want her tailed, it comes out of your funds so it's up to you if you think something's amiss."

"I'll find the money somewhere, at least for a couple of days." Florchiner checks the eyes around the table legs as if they might be conspiring against him. "We have a leak, and it might be her. I don't think she can be trusted."

"There isn't anything we can do about her but humor her."

"Oh?"

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