

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

By Homer Kizer

Chapter Fourteen

Behind The Eye

Her orders are absolutely clear: everyone with knowledge or suspected knowledge of the infamous Committee's existence is to be detained and interred.

Erika— yes, she is today Erika Jones, daughter of the tax protester and patriot Les Jones, a commercial crab fisherman who was once an East Side setnetter, once a hard rock miner, once an outboard mechanic working for Shelikof Net there in Kodiak. Alaskans respect her father. She likes being accepted as his daughter. And she hates what she will have to do as she deals from both the bottom and the top of a stacked deck.

Estes doesn't believe that her father didn't know the trapper who rescued him. Estes believes that Jones sought the trapper out; he doesn't believe the story about Jones following a raven, what the trapper told the *Anchorage Times*. So the trapper is to be questioned and possibly detained— murdered most likely. That seems to be what actually happens to these Alaskan patriots.

But the trapper isn't a patriot, and according to Jabe, has never had anything to do with any of the patriots. He is a true innocent, which won't prevent an accident from happening to him.

As Caroline, she feels questions about her orders growl in her stomach like sour burps, and that's where she intends to keep those questions. She refuses to allow her mind to dwell on moral considerations. She has an assignment, several jobs to do, and no time to think about what she's become. The feel of silk both excites and repulses— she wants everything to turn out okay, but the cyst around the little bit of rot that poisons her soul hasn't yet callused. It itches, and she wants to scratch it, pick at it, tear it out. But she fears scratching will cause it to rupture, thereby letting its toxins spread throughout her like cancer but acting faster. She fears definition by action: she is not promiscuous. It's just that she has a job she must do.

The interment camp, wherever it's located, is complete enough to begin receiving detained dissidents. The trapper will be its first *guest*. Jabe would've been, but there are still five Committee members unknown to TAPT. Their hope is, as expressed by Estes, that Jabe will eventually supply her with those names. He has, but so far, she has been pretty closed-mouth about who members are and what they are doing.

Really, she likes him, much more so than she should. He's a nice guy. Naive, certainly. But genuinely caring. And she truly hates what she will have to do... she only wishes he were a little better endowed. Then she might at least get a little pleasure from what she has to do.

But what she has to do right now, as the on-site agent of record, is accompany the helicopter that will collect the trapper: Phillip Sharpe, age 33, height 73 inches, weight 210 pounds, an IndoChina veteran whose service record is sealed. She doesn't know what a sealed record means other than he did something that might still embarrass the Administration. If Estes knows why the sealed record, he hasn't said. So all she can assume is that the trapper was in black ops, reason enough to inter him.

She hopes her orders reflect increased trust in her ability as an agent. She suspects, though, that her role is to instill trust in the trapper— they briefly met when Jones was admitted to Providence Hospital— so as Jones' daughter she has reasons to come to his place and personally thank him. She should be able to slip in under his radar, and if her presence aids in his peaceful collection, especially so considering his sealed service record, then this long helicopter ride is worth the discomfort.

She closes her eyes and tries to sleep as she listens to the beating of the chopper's rotor. Below her should be Fire Island and the gray waters of Cook Inlet, visible in the leads of the broken ice floe. Visible, that is, if the sun rises today. In this land of gray skies and gray mud and gray snow berms, she is never certain that it will.

Late last evening, she purchased for herself a jade and diamond necklace— the gold necklace she bought last week is too heavy to wear often. Although her relationship with Jabe still feels tainted, she doesn't feel cheap, especially not after looking at furs. She likes sheared beaver. She decided that the next time she feels used, she'll buy herself a coat or a stole, perhaps both.

The Federal Marshall's office assured her that they could comply with the directive of the Security Council to exclude the FBI from participation in arrests. Again, fear of leaks. No one is to know about the interment camp. If someone finds out, that someone will be campbound before he or she can go to the press. The *Post* just thought Nixon had secrets. Its editors would pee their panties if they knew about what is presently happening in this land of frozen extremes.

She can't sleep, not with—

The helicopter suddenly drops. Her stomach feels like it's in her brain. Then the chopper's hurled upward, pulling her stomach back where it belongs before shoving it lower until she seems to sit on it.

The copilot turns to her and says, "A little turbulence."

"I'll say." She tries to rub the frost from her side window, but it's on the outside. Below her, the broken floe ice of the upper Inlet yields to long, curving, gray mud flats strewn with cakes of dirty ice, some of the cakes as large as railroad cars. But she sees only the frost, its crystals as small as poultry lice on the feathers veining across the window.

The mud flats give way to a few miles of rolling plains covered with naked cottonwoods mingled among small stands of white spruce. Still mostly frozen rivers meander through the lowlands, their channels entwined like the rags of a throw rug.

Passing beneath her now are timbered ridges, a sea of trees, green and rusty boughs hanging to the sides, squat stems like hollyhock skirts on clothespin dolls. Soon, though, they are replaced by jagged peaks that rise beside and above her. The helicopter rises into and through the clouds— the sky is bright blue and wind buffets them, sending the chopper reeling like a drunk in a bar fight.

Momentarily blinded by reflected glare off the snow, she becomes confused. Ears plug. Sinuses instantly swell. Her forehead throbs as her heart plugs her throat, causing her lungs to ache as the unpressurized craft rocks unsteadily up & over jutting outcroppings of windswept rock, where roily eddies of suspended ice particles churn and appear like smoke.

Without looking, she senses that despite his briefcase full of weapons and bulletproof vest, the Federal Marshal seated beside her is also nervous. She suspects his nervousness comes from the trapper having a sealed record. The marshal probably knows more than he has said, and if she could, she would pray the simple prayers for protection she had recited as a girl. If ever she needed protection, it is now when wind threatens to dash the chopper against one of the snow-covered peaks as the machine climbs like a kite with too-short a tail, and a veil of secrecy conceals their landing site.

The shadow of their Bell Ranger lies black and fragile on the snow ahead of them. It bumps hard against this mountain, then that one; it smacks into a cliff face, then gets lost in the blowing snow above a ridge. A harbinger of bureaucracy, it precedes them as a death angel might.

The trapper escaped the Park Service's attention when the official list of *in-holders* was compiled for the newly created Becharof National Park. He wouldn't have come to statewide attention if Les Jones would have been considerate enough to have died at sea, or in the mountains.

Struggling over one last ridge, the helicopter tips forward and descends through a serpentine pass between peaks. In a few more minutes, they are speeding over rolling hills, mostly snow covered. They pass over willows and moose, a pack of wolves crossing a beaver dam, more moose and willows and cottonwoods as they race across the immensity of the landscape. The helicopter with its beating rotor seems like a wasp above a field of white clover, unable itself to gather nectar, only able to prey upon the bees.

She finds it incomprehensible that Les Jones, delirious, with known heart problems, crossed the mountains over which they have just flown. She'd like to know how he did it, if he really did it. And

she wonders what the marshal thinks of having to evict the trapper and his family. A job is a job, she knows that. But she wishes there were a better way to move the trapper than simply flying in and burning down the trapper's home, wishes that interment wasn't their only option. However, it isn't her fault the trapper choose to build his cabin on land Congress would later designate as being of national importance and worthy of protection as part of the national trust. It isn't her fault that Les Jones staggered into his dogyard and had on him that secessionist document, which the trapper might have read. Just the trapper's bad luck. And she feels bitchy; she is again Caroline, the agent wanta-be who is really a secretary in a nightmare, a records clerk who has been promoted beyond her competence.

What does a sealed service record really mean? Could it be the only reason that the trapper is being evicted? She would like to think that— she would then feel better about what she has to do. But she suspects the truth is that the trapper is just in the way, merely one of many Alaskans who will have to relocate to villages so that the wildernesses can truly be *Wilderness*.

She really wishes she could've stayed in Anchorage. As an extension of the National Security Council, she possesses obscene power.

She doesn't expect the trapper to willing let his home be burned, nor to voluntarily be interred. She expects trouble, probably some shooting considering that sealed record. Despite her week of firearms training, she's still afraid of guns. She wasn't around guns at home; her father hadn't owned a gun. So she's apprehensive about the weapons in the marshal's briefcase.

The flight plan filed by the pilot before they left Anchorage called for refueling in either King Salmon or Port Heiden, she doesn't remember which. She imagines they have reached one or the other of the villages when they roar over several rusty quonset huts with wood smoke seeping from stovepipes protruding from arched roofs. The trampled mud and snow around the red rusty huts is littered with snow machines and skiffs and dog shit— dozens of barking dogs, chained to stakes, leap and snap at the low flying chopper.

They pass over a dilapidated wood building the size of a barn, then over an equally large wood building recently painted white, then over a roadway, a rusty crawler tractor, and a pack of dogs running loose. Lined by scrub willows, the airstrip seems a mile long. Finally, though, the pilot sets them down beside a large, black rubber fuel bladder.

The marshal leaves the helicopter to stretch while the pilot stands shivering beside the bearded attendant who emerged from a tiny shack to pump fuel. She sees the breath of all three so she remains seated while the copilot completes paperwork, every form in triplicate.

Despite the illusion of spring caused by willows swollen red and yellow from rising sap, icicles grow in the attendant's mustache. They lengthen downward and appear as canine teeth as his beard becomes sheathed in ice. She shivers just watching him drag the fuel hose away from their helicopter, a metal wasp that will soon sting.

The marshal returns, and the pilot starts the engine whirling, the rotor flailing above them.

The engine's whine becomes a scream; the rotor tips *pop*. As if by magic, the wasp lifts itself above the snow, tips forward, and speeds towards the mountains, racing its shadow to the hidden cabin of the good samaritan.

She tries to doze, but before she falls asleep, the marshal thumps her shoulder as he points to a smoking speck in the distance ahead. She again tries to wipe the frost from her side window. It's still on the outside, but through it she sees a squat log cabin with bare eaves and smoke rising above its angled roof. Beneath the eaves, a double tier of split firewood lies wrapped around three of the cabin's sides... it will burn hot and completely.

The ground surrounding the cabin is free of litter. One pair of long-tailed trail shoes, an axe stuck in a chopping block, a parked dog sled— the cabin has about it an aura of orderliness that extends to the elevated log cache built to its north side, and to the tethered huskies in a dogyard screened from the cabin by young willows.

They circle the cabin as the wasp slows, and a swirling cloud of frost crystals rises like dust from beneath the twirling rotor. As they set down, dogs yap and howl and strain tight chains. Several of the closer huskies bounce up & down on four stiff legs as they snap at nothing, and a man with a full beard steps around the corner of the cabin and hollers at the dogs loud enough that even inside the wasp and over its turbine, she hears him yelling. He casually carries a rifle with a hole in the end

of its barrel as large as the wood dowel in Erika's clothes closet; that is what she was told. She hates guns, most of all his, and she knows trouble is unavoidable. What's in his sealed record that the gun and the government hide? Obviously something terrible.

Telling the marshal, "Wait here," she unbuckles her seatbelt. She doesn't want to do what has to be done. It seems neither fair, nor right. And she catches the marshal staring at the rifle. "Give me ten minutes before you come after me."

As the rotor twists to a stop, its long blades drooping nearly to the ground, she squeezes past the marshal and opens the door. The noonday's bitter cold instantly passes through her wool pants and fleece-lined boots: it clenches her breasts and seemingly smites her. The muscles of her face shrivel and the lobes of her ears become stiff, then numb. She forces her feet to move, to jump down, and as soon as they touch the ground, cold penetrates the soles of her boots.

The heavy-set trapper waves her around to the front of the cabin. He holds open its single door as she hurries inside. And when he closes the door, he seemingly turns out the lights— the only light comes from a small, Visqueen-covered window to the side of the door.

The cabin stinks of rancid lard.

Standing a step inside, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness and her nose to the stench of stretched animal hides, she finds herself staring at the smiling face of an obviously Native woman about her age, a smile filled with black snags for teeth, the curse of orange-flavored breakfast drinks.

For a passing moment, her stomach becomes queasy as she feels her own teeth decay to snags. She imagines being unable to smile because her teeth embarrass her; she imagines feeling soup pass around the snags, feeling a snag snap as she bites into a steak, feeling her breath sucked through the gap. And she determines to do what she can for this woman.

Glancing around the cabin's interior, she sees the unlit kerosene lamp that sets on the half sheet of plywood serving as the table. A red Coleman lantern with a smoky chimney hangs from a nail driven into a log ceiling joist. A ladder of peeled saplings leads to a half loft. Over its edge hangs the foot end of a sleepingbag.

The logs are chinked with pink spun glass insulation and moss, with more insulation than moss near a rusty, sheet-iron stove that occupies one front corner; bundles of furs are piled in the other front corner of the cabin. Leaned against the wall to the left of the stove are narrow, tapered boards with their edges round, some reaching to the loft. Nailed to the logs to the right of the stove is a wood dynamite box that serves as a bookshelf for a Bible, a couple of paperback Westerns, and a Betty Crocker cookbook. On a plank shelf above the table is an opened sack of Krusteaz pancake mix, a can of Darigold butter, a tin of Wisconsin maple syrup, and a jar of that infamous orange drink. Four blue enameled-ware pie plates and four cups of the same ware nest on the near end of the shelf. Between them and the sack of Krusteaz, a wood mixing bowl filled with handcarved spoons threatens to slide off the shelf's front edge.

Turning to the trapper, she says, "I'm sure you're wondering why I'm here... do you remember me?"

"I seen you before."

"That was my dad you found."

"Ah-kay, now I recognize you."

Nodding to the trapper's wife, she says, "I'd like to talk to you outside. About Dad."

"Sure." The trapper reaches for the doorlatch, a curved tree limb fitted into a notched two-by-four nailed to the jam. But before his hand touches anything—

The door flies open. She hears a *pop*, then a blinding flash stuns her as the shock wave knocks her flat. Redness and blackness seize her mind, the colors dissolving into brilliant whiteness as consciousness fails. But before she passes completely out, she hears cursing, the staccato rattling of automatic weapons fire...

How long she was unconscious, she doesn't know. When she opens her eyes, she isn't certain where she is. The pilot cradles her head. But all she sees is a doughnut around a red flash that seems to expand, becoming larger and larger, not going away when she closes her eyes, but continuing to get bigger, crinkling in its middle like a single color in a kaleidoscope. Prisms of redness. Twisted. Mirrors flashing redness against redness, the entire world brilliant red sickles slashing, slashing, slashing, bloody and dead.

She hears gasping breath, wheezing, the gurgling of blood, and for an awful moment she wonders if she is the person dying. She tries to move. Her hand works. Arm, foot, leg— all seem to be all right although they are completely red when she looks at each, the many parts of her comprising her red whole.

Outside, she hears dogs barking, then the finality of shots. One dog yips in pain. Another shot. Then silence, except for the gurgling.

She rolls over and draws herself into a fetal position. Pushing herself onto her knees, keeping her feet under her, with the pilot helping, she stands wobbly.

The fiery red flash shrinks to being bars imprisoning her mind: she can see between the bars, but she must tip her head side to side or up and down to focus her eyes. She sees the trapper sitting, leaning against the log wall with his wife's severed head on his lap. She looks away quickly.

There's no holding back the vomit she spews across the trapper's boots. She stumbles outdoors and pukes until racked by dry heaves. She pukes until tears wash bile from her chin. She wanted to help; her intentions were pure. Where did she go wrong? And no matter how tightly shut she keeps her eyes, she sees the smiling face of the severed head, mouth open, black snags for teeth.

Tears freeze on her cheeks, chin, throat. None fall. Their saltiness makes it impossible to re-swallow the foamy bile.

"Are you okay?" the pilot asks.

"I think so."

"A little gruesome, huh?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it." She takes a deep breath, then adds, "Guess the stun grenade got me, too."

"Why don't you get back in the machine. You don't have to watch the rest of this."

"Will the fellow live?"

"He's iffy. Has two bullets in his right shoulders, one in his stomach, one lower, a couple that don't amount to much. I'll be surprised if he makes it."

"See what you can do. We need him where he can answer questions."

The copilot enters the cabin to tend the trapper. The marshal steps close and says, "Yeah, I have some questions for him. We found small footprints over there by the dogs. A kid, maybe. You know if they had kids."

"He has a son."

"Yeah, well, he isn't here— and we can't wait for him to get back. We gotta go as soon as we get a fire started if we don't wanta spend a night on a snowfield."

"You're just going to leave his son?" she can't believe the marshal is that callous.

"Lady, the kid will make it to a neighbor's, or he won't. Either way, he'll be better off than us taking him." Left unsaid is any mention on interment.

"What will he do?"

"Live or die. Can you think of another possibility?"

"We can't leave him— "

"We are leaving him if he doesn't turn up in the next five minutes."

"No— "

"That blast effected your judgement."

The cabin burns as hot as promised. Flames burst upwards one hundred feet, two hundred, more, as they roar almost without smoke. Hoping to see the child, she looks back towards the blaze one last time. Nothing but heat and ash. Off to their right, their wasp-like shadow races them north.

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