

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

By Homer Kizer

Chapter Seventeen

Daylight sneaks in behind him, sits of the log beside him, and warms his back as he slumps drowsily. He hugs his .22. Finally, as if its fingers had grabbed his shoulder, daylight shakes him awake.

Eddie bolts up straight, his ears alert. Not turning his head, he sits like his dad does when hunting. Eyes moving. Thumb on his rifle's safety. Finger alongside its trigger. Waiting. Watching and waiting. Ready to shoot whatever it was that woke him.

A young wolf, its front shoulder bloody, lies three steps away; lies watching him, its eyes yellow and hurt.

Slowly, very, very slowly, Eddie shoulders his .22, and aligns its sights on the wolf's forehead. He carefully slips the safety OFF, but he can't prevent the little metallic click when the safety disengages. The wolf whimpers.

He doesn't shoot. He wants to, really wants to, but the wolf looks at him like Champ did the time Champ stepped in one of his dad's beaver traps. He's afraid of the wolf, already a little bigger than Champ; afraid of its fangs that are lots longer than Champ's. They stick down almost to the bottom of its chin, and they are bloody from having licked its wounded shoulder.

The wolf isn't one he shot— at least, he doesn't think it is. He thinks its one that the other wolves attacked when all the fighting was going on.

He's hungry, and he doesn't know what to do about the wolf. Maybe it will go away if he gets up.

It doesn't move. It just whimpers more as he stands and pushes unburned log ends onto the mound of gray coals, still hot an inch down.

What would his dad do? Get meat from the cache and cook it over the coals? Yup, that's what his dad would do. So he pushes his .22's safety back on, and he backs away from the wolf, not for a moment taking his eyes off it. If it moves, he'll kill it before it can attack him.

The fire didn't reach the elevated cache. Climbing its ladder, he finds the frozen moose haunch— and he almost cuts himself when his knife slips while trying to push it into the meat, hard as lake ice. Finally though, he pries more than slices off a hunk a little bigger than a sandwich. Then climbing backwards down the ladder, he sees that the wolf has crept closer to Champ and is stretching out its neck to try and eat his husky.

He pulls Champ away, and the wolf again whimpers softly. He thought the wolf would growl at him, but it didn't.

A little piece of scrap from where he sawed the meat off next to the bone with his knife hangs down from the hunk, already softening in his hand. He pulls at the ragged edge of the scrap part of the hunk, and when he tears it loose, he throws it at the wolf.

The wolf reminds him of Champ, not really, but that's why he throws it a meat scrap. That's the only reason. That and the wolf looks hurt, and doesn't look like it can hurt him.

The wolf flinches when he throws the piece of scrap, but when it sees the meat land near its shoulder, it reaches for the scrap, stretching its neck till it can wrap its tongue, curling its tongue backwards, around the little piece of moose.

He throws the wolf another piece, this one a little bit bigger. And again the wolf stretches and laps the meat off the packed snow where it lands.

That enough for the wolf: he's hungry and he doesn't know how he's going to cook the hunk. His dad would give it to his mom and she'd make stew from it, but he doesn't have a stove or a dutch oven or even potatoes. All he has is this piece of meat, and he doesn't know what to do with it but eat it.

It's tough and cold and he can't bite any of it off.

His dad once, when they were camping, cut a caribou backstrap into real thin pieces and poked a stick through them, then held them over the fire till they were done. He could do that, he thinks. He would have to find a stick, but there are lots of willows.

With his pocketknife, he cuts a willow shoot off low to the trampled snow, and he sharpens its small end. Four strokes with his knife and he has a point. He then tries to cut a thin piece of meat from the hunk.

He doesn't do a very good job, and he throws more scrap to the wolf that whimpered when it saw him start to cut the meat.

The slice of meat falls off the stick and lands in the ashes, settling down into the hot pile far enough that when he finally finds it, he has to scrap off the ashes and gray flakes and dirt with his knife. It still hot, but it doesn't taste very good. It's okay, and he gets it mostly chewed before he swallows it. And the wolf whimpers again when he starts to cut another piece.

He's still afraid of the wolf, but after thinking about it for a minute, he throws the wolf a bigger piece of meat, which it gulps without chewing. Well, maybe he saw the wolf chew the piece once, but no more than that.

More careful about how he puts the meat on the end of the stick, he again holds the stick over the coals, again holds the piece of meat too close to the heat, again has the meat fall off and into the ashes. But this time, he doesn't scrape off all of the ashes before he eats it. Instead, he sort of wipes away the worst of the debris, then pops the meat into his mouth, and begins cutting a third piece for both himself and the wolf.

They now share, one piece to the wolf, one to him until the hunk is gone.

The coals need wood.

Walking around the ash pile, which is a little bigger than his home, he picks up unburnt chunks and lugs them back around to where he spent the night with Champ. In a few minutes, he has flames showing. Then not knowing what else to do, he curls up beside Champ and stares at the flames... they'll come back for him, he knows they will. They have to. They can't leave him here, not forever.

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