

Excerpt from *A Killing Snow*

by

Dave Hoing and Roger Hileman

*Saturday, July 24, 1886*

Hartwig steered the horses in that direction and stopped in front of the door. He stretched his muscles and popped his joints before coming around to offer Mariel assistance. Her body ached, too, particularly at the juncture where she and the wagon converged. Were Hartwig not so close by, she might have massaged the affected area.

As Randall climbed down, Bruno woke briefly, sniffed the air, and curled up again. “No, you don’t,” Randall said, unhooking him from the trunk. “Mr. Hartwig will need his rig.”

“Perhaps Bruno would appreciate time in the bushes,” Mariel suggested.

“He ain’t the only one,” Hartwig said, which was more than Mariel desired to know—although in that regard she was in sympathy. “I’ll take him out back,” he said.

“You won’t escape that easy,” the man in the door bellowed. “I told you ten o’clock. Good thing you’re paid by the load, not the hour.”

“No offense, Mr. Hammon, but if I don’t go now, we’re gonna get a load nobody’ll wanna pay for.”

“Ever the poet, Clyde,” Mr. Hammon said. “Go on, git.”

Exigency overcoming distrust, Bruno allowed Hartwig to take the leash. As soon as they disappeared behind the hotel, Mr. Hammon motioned Randall and Mariel toward him. Oil lamps inside burned at his back, leaving his face in shadow. Mariel couldn’t get a clear view of his features, although she could see he had white hair and a long, unruly beard. He was wearing a brown vest over a stiff white shirt. She could smell the starch.

Randall ascended the three steps to the door. His height was no more than average, yet he towered over Mr. Hammon by a head. “Is it no longer customary for enlisted men to salute superior officers?” he said.

“I’d sooner salute my horse’s ass,” Mr. Hammon said, breaking into a grin. “Which, in your case, amounts to the same thing.” He straightened his back and crisply saluted with his left hand.

“Insubordination,” Randall laughed. He returned the sinistral salute.

The two men shook hands.

“You look like hell, Randy. Are you the knucklehead that tossed that bomb in Chicago?”

In May a labor protest in Chicago’s Haymarket Square turned violent when a radical threw dynamite at a police officer. “You know me better than that,” Randall said. “I’d have thrown it at the protesters.”

“So how you been?”

Mariel thought she heard wheezing when Mr. Hammon spoke.

“Same as always, only more so,” Randall said.

“You’re wearing eyeglasses now. When did you get old?”

“A day at a time. You look the same as you did twenty years ago. That’s hardly fair.”

Mr. Hammon yawned, then coughed. “I’ve given it some thought, and decided against dying.”

“Good luck with that. Hartwig says you don’t own the hotel?”

“Nah. Fiona Bohnet and her two sons do, but neither of those boys are worth a shit. I got some hope for the older one, Phinny, but Ned’s so stupid, he probably ain’t gonna live long enough to grow out of it. Fiona hired me and Phoebe to run the place. Speaking of wives...” Randall didn’t take the hint, so Mr. Hammon shouldered past him, hopped down the steps, and approached Mariel. He doffed his Panama hat to her, revealing a cowlick that rose straight up from his head like water from a fountain. “Since your husband’s still an ill-mannered lout, I’ll introduce myself. I’m Mike Hammon. You must be Mariel.”

“I am indeed, sir. Honored to meet you. I’ve heard many a story about your escapades.”

“Nothing true, I hope. You are a handsome woman, Mrs. Erickson. What madness made you settle on the likes of him?”

Mariel blushed. Randall hadn’t told her what a fine liar his old friend could be. She was stout as a barrel of pickles and encrusted in dried perspiration. She probably had bags under her eyes. Still, she lifted her bonnet to primp her hair, trying to stuff the stray strands back into her bun. “Equal parts pity and charity, Mr. Hammon.”

“Everyone calls me Mike, except that knucklehead out back.” He coughed again, pausing to catch his breath. The wheezing was more pronounced. “Long time since I had my eyes open this side of midnight.”

“Are you unwell?” Mariel said.

“Oh, it’s just this damned asthma. That’s why I left Illinois. Doctors said the climate here would help. I don’t know about that, but it’s no worse, I guess.”

“You should rest. You needn’t have waited up for us.”

“And delay meeting you? May I escort you into the hotel?”

Mariel took Mike’s arm and marched up the steps. She gave Randall a so there look. He put his hands on his hips and chuckled.

She heard Bruno barking at some real or imagined nemesis, and then he and Hartwig rounded the corner. Hartwig was still buttoning his trousers. Randall went to take the dog’s leash. “Will you retrieve our luggage?” Randall said.

“That’s what I get paid for.”

Mariel waited while Randall pulled Bruno up the stairs to her. When he handed her the leash, Bruno plopped down on the porch, looked up expectantly, and slobbered. His nostrils were quivering, as if he smelled something appealing inside.

“Somebody hit that dog in the face with a mallet?” Mike said.

“It’s the breed,” Randall said. “He can’t help it.”

“He was our daughter’s,” Mariel said.

“Well, best not let it wander too far. Coyotes are a real nuisance around here.”

Mariel was horrified. “Surely coyotes wouldn’t eat a dog?”

“Why not? Just another sack of meat to them.”

“Why don’t you shoot them?”

“We do, but it don’t make any difference. If we shot fifty a night till kingdom come, they’d still be out there howling in the dark. Come on in, I’ll introduce you to Phoebe.”

“Your wife?”

“She’d better be, or we’re both going to hell.”

Mariel tried to hide her amusement. The same coarse language she found offensive from Hartwig was endearing from Mike’s lips.

Whatever aroma was tickling Bruno’s olfactory fancy got the better of him, and he suddenly bolted through the door, yanking Mariel with him.

The parlor was spacious and pleasingly decorated. Bruno strained at his leash in the direction of what must be the kitchen. He sniffed the air, his slimy tongue protruding halfway to the wooden floor. Mariel noticed the planks were planed and varnished. This far into the wilderness, she’d expected a rough-hewn log cabin like she and her father shared in Ohio.

Hartwig thumped and bumped the trunks up the stairs, while simultaneously trying to balance their suitcase on top. “Lieutenant Erickson fell in a buffalo wallow,” he said, giggling like a mischievous child. The suitcase tumbled to the floor, nearly striking Bruno and eliciting a warning growl. “You should’ve seen it—”

“Clyde,” Mike said, “if you’d ever bothered to have a brain installed, you’d know when to stop talking. Take their things to the south bedroom. There’s a nice breeze through there.”

Moments after the drayman dragged the trunks down a hallway, a woman emerged from the direction of Bruno’s desire. She appeared considerably younger than Mike, perhaps Mariel’s age, but shorter and not as plump. Gray-flecked hair poked out from under a scullery cap. She looked worn out. Apparently she didn’t often see this side of midnight, either.

“We’ve been expecting you,” she said. “I made tea and biscuits.”

“Mother,” Mike said, “this here’s Randy Erickson and his wife Mariel.”

“How-do,” she said with a half-hearted curtsy. “Mike speaks highly of you, Lieutenant Erickson.”

“That’s only because it’s not polite to say what I really think.”

“Seeing you again,” Randall said, “makes me realize how little I’ve missed you.”

*A Killing Snow* is the story of a woman's grit and determination in overcoming both the deliberate misdeeds of people and the unforgiving capriciousness of nature.

TITLES BY DAVE HOING AND ROGER HILEMAN

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