

## *A Killing Snow, Sample Chapter*

### **Chapter Eleven: Saturday, August 14, 1886**

Mike Hammon, Mayor Goss, and Goss's wife Sadie accompanied Mariel to Kimball in the Abbot Downing mud wagon. Theo Parley, the tuba player, drove the stage. Since the day was fair, he left the canvas roof rolled up to allow the passengers the benefit of sunshine. Yesterday's rain had softened the ground, slowing their progress but keeping dust to a minimum.

The women sat facing the men. As they bounced out of Goss Valley, Mariel closed her eyes, hoping the clatter of the wheels might take her mind off Bruno. The poor fellow must have howled all night from the storm cellar. He was fussing when she fed him before bedtime and again, or still, at breakfast this morning. Tangling with a skunk certainly hadn't diminished his appetite.

Apparently Mrs. Goss was uncomfortable with silence. She proceeded to fill the void with the latest gossip, some of which included her husband.

Immediately upon hearing her say his name, Goss changed the subject. He nudged Mike, who was staring at the horizon. "How'd you like to be in the Sentinel?" he said.

"Fiona already paid for her ad," Mike said.

"I'm not talking hotel business. I'm talking stories of human interest."

"What's interesting about me?"

"You're too modest, Mike. You fought in the War—hell, most men over forty fought in the War—but you were in Andersonville. Everyone's heard of the place, but only you know what it was like on the inside." Goss took a notepad and pencil from his vest pocket. He started scribbling in shorthand. Mariel recognized the script but couldn't read it. "I'll pay you a penny a word and print it in the next issue. What do you say?"

Mike removed his Panama hat and scratched his forehead directly under the cowlick. His gray hair and beard glowed white in the sun. "No," he said.

Goss seemed surprised at the refusal. "If you don't tell your story, who will?"

"Who says anybody's got to?"

Mariel touched Mike's hand. "If it isn't too painful for you, I'd be interested as well."

He nodded and put his hat back on. "I got nothing much to say about me," he said, "but I can tell you about a Tennessee boy name of Tom Beecher. Tried to cross the dead-line. I don't want this in the paper, so put your pencil away, Herb."

"People need to read this, Mike," Goss protested. "History needs it."

"Don't go noble on me. You don't care about anything but turning a profit. Nothing wrong with that, but not at Tom's expense. You want to hear the story or not?"

With put-upon theatrics, Goss returned the pencil and pad to his pocket. “Go on. Who was Tom Beecher? A rebel?”

“Nope, he fought for the Union. He never told me why.”

Mike paused long enough for Goss to become impatient. “And?”

“In November 'sixty-three our regiment was captured. We got sent to Danville. On good days we ate wharf rat soup, when we could catch them. And the nights were so cold the whole damn Jim River iced up solid. I lost count of how many of us starved or froze.

“So a couple months later, when we heard we were being transferred down to Georgia, you can probably imagine the cheering. They told us the camp was right in the middle of a beautiful forest. Every prisoner got his own wooden shack and three squares a day. It was like a picnic. That’s what they said.

“Tom was no particular friend of mine, but we rode down in the same car. We couldn’t wait to get into that warm Southern sun. The minute we stepped off the train we saw what a lie we’d swallowed. Christ Almighty, it was like hell rose up to Georgia. Those poor fellas were covered in all manner of filth. They looked like skeletons. Only thing holding them up was guts and stubbornness. Most had scurvy and the bloody flux and God only knows what else. I heard later there were forty-five thousand souls stuffed onto twenty-six acres.

“Course there weren’t any wooden shacks, and not enough tents for one man in ten, either. Prisoners had to dig holes in the ground to get out of the sun. Nothing they could do about rain but take it as it came. The stream they used for drinking, washing, and relieving themselves was nothing but sewage and flies. For food they got a brick of johnnycake a day and salted pork twice a week. Only the South was short of salt, so they tried preserving with ashes, leaving more maggot than meat.

“The camp’s commandant was a vile little foreigner called Henry Wirz. You might’ve heard of him. After the war the government hung him. Although he did right by me after I escaped, no man ever deserved it more.

“Anyhow, first thing off the train the Rebs marched us Illinois boys into the stockade so Wirz could take roll call. He warned us right off about the dead-line.”

“Deadline?” Goss said.

“It was just a plank fence, not even waist high, nailed to posts that circled the camp inside the stockade wall. A man could hop over it easy—except if he did, a Reb sentry shot him down from the pigeon roost. Wirz wouldn’t let us bury our dead, or even hold services. If someone died, we had to push him under the fence. A wagon came by every morning to collect the bodies, then took them to a field and threw them in a hole like common beasts. We didn’t have room for the living, never mind the dead, but goddammit, we weren’t beasts. Even enemies deserve Christian respect.”

“What about Tom Beecher?” Mariel said. “You said he crossed the dead-line?”

“Come August he just decided to go home, I guess. Sure enough, soon as he stepped over the fence, a guard put a musket ball in him. He fell back onto the prisoner’s side.

“I got a knack for setting bones and binding up wounds, so I was our regiment’s medic. When I got to Tom I rolled him on his side to have a look, but the ball had gone in the ribs and out the spine, and I knew it was hopeless. All I could do was take him up in my arms.

“He’d shit himself something awful. Wasn’t his fault. ‘I can’t feel nothing down there,’ he said. He must’ve caught a whiff of himself, because then he said, ‘That me?’

“‘You dumb jackass,’ I said, ‘why? You know what happens when we cross the line.’

“He told me to look in his trouser pocket. The Rebs stole our money after Chickamauga—Union greenbacks were worth ten times theirs—but they let us keep most our personal things. I pulled out a watch with a tintage of his sweetheart inside.”

Mike exhaled slowly and shook his head. “She might’ve had the blessed soul of an angel, but Lord, that girl was plainer than an old stump.

“‘She’s pretty,’ I said.

“‘Nah, she ain’t,’ Tom said, and he was smiling with a pride something fierce. ‘But she is the light of this world.’

“Then ol’ Tom, he left this world for the next. I laid him on his back and palmed his eyelids shut. The sun was just rising, but already the Georgia air was hot and wet as a swamp. I squinted up at the pigeon roost. With some passion I proceeded to inform the sentry of my feelings on the matter.

“‘Mind your tongue, sir,’” he shot back. “‘Want someone to blame, blame him. Anyone else foolish enough to run, I’ll give him the same. Now, send him over. Wagon’ll be along directly.’”

“The boy talked tough, but his voice was shaky. I figured he must be new to the War. He stood at his station and lifted his eyes to the sky. I don’t know, maybe he was praying.

“There was nothing I could do. I rolled Tom under the fence. Seeing his face in the sun, all handsome and dead, I thought about the news his sweetheart was about to get. That poor gal had waited all this time, loving her Tom. Then one day a letter would come. First she’d think it was from him, and when it wasn’t, I could almost see her sink down onto her Daddy’s porch and look out at the hills and the crops and maybe a little barn, all the things she and Tom might’ve had one day, and now wouldn’t.

“Made me want to jump the fence myself, climb the roost and teach that sentry what killing meant. But there’d be no sense in that. Plenty of Reb gals had sat down on their porches, too.”

“What did you do then?” Mariel said.

“I sang a hymn for him. A quarter-hour later the wagon took him away and dropped him in the hole.”

No one spoke. Mike’s eyes acquired a far-away look, a man revisiting a place he’d had no desire to visit the first time. Beneath his playful façade must reside a soul in pain.

Finally Goss said. “I couldn’t print ‘shit’ in the paper anyway.”

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Mrs. Goss had made this journey often enough that Mr. Parley knew exactly where to go first. The coach pulled to a stop in front of Hollingsworth's Fine Millinery. Next door was a boutique for ladies' dresses, and beyond that a haberdashery, no doubt the favorite shop of the Fragment Society. Mariel didn't want to buy a hat, dress, or sewing supplies. She needed a stationer's shop, which was next to a saloon across the street.

Mayor Goss got out of the coach with his eyes fixed on the tavern.

"*Herbert*," his wife warned.

"You know where to find me," he said, and scurried away before she could catch his arm.

Mr. Parley stepped down from the driver's seat, stretched, and yawned. "Believe I'll have a bite to eat," he said. "The restaurant serves a mighty tender beefsteak." His voice carried the deep rhythmic tones of the tuba he played.

"I'll go with you," Mike said. "I'd like to discuss your intentions regarding Lottie."

Mr. Parley looked as if he'd lost his appetite. He gazed at Mariel for help, but she could only shrug. She barely knew the man, and couldn't assist him out of his predicament if she'd wanted to. There were rumors of his romantic entanglements with Lottie, but she didn't know the truth of them.

"What do you mean, sir?" Parley said.

"Oh, for instance," Mike said, "when you see her, just exactly how *much* of her do you see?"

My goodness, Mariel thought, her cheeks burning. She did not envy Mr. Parley's next few minutes. This was not a conversation she needed to hear.

"Shall we shop?" Mrs. Goss said, and her face was also flushed.

To Mariel that seemed like a very good idea indeed. "How does one address the mayor's wife?" she said.

"My name is Sadie."

Inside, Mrs. Goss—Sadie—headed straight for the fanchon bonnets. A number of varieties were on display, arrayed in many colors and adorned with silk tulle, *roses de Mai*, and brides of quilled satin ribbons fastened with bows.

They were stunning, but it was a Kate Greenaway bonnet that caught Mariel's attention. She was partial to green, and this one was a lovely shade of silken emerald, with a frilly brim that encircled the face and radiated outward like the rays of the sun. She removed it from the peg with the intention of trying it on, but came to her senses before doing so and put it back.

If she'd worn it, she would have bought it. If she'd bought it, Randall would have scolded her. Between his salary and her upcoming stipend from teaching, they could afford it. But he

was jealous of their pennies, and every expense had to be justified. Even the cost of Bruno's care was a difficult pill for him to swallow, but he allowed it because of Ellie's childhood fondness for the dog.

A male clerk approached her—surprising, in a women's hat store—and asked if she needed help. She said no, but indicated her companion might. The clerk turned to Sadie, who at the moment was trying on a female's stovetop hunting hat.

“*Madame* Mayor!” he said.

“Halloo, Silas. How do I look?”

The clerk laughed. “Like Abraham Lincoln.”

“That,” Sadie sniffed, “is *not* the proper way to woo a lady.” She put the hunting hat down and went back to the franchons.

“You broke my heart when you married Herb.”

Sadie touched his arm in the familiar way that old friends had. “*That* is how to flatter a lady. Mariel, this is our dear friend, Silas Hollingsworth.”

“Mr. Hollingsworth,” she said.

“*Enchanted*,” he said, using the French pronunciation, *ah-shahn-TAY*, dropping some consonants and emphasizing the final syllable. He lifted her hand to kiss her fingers.

As Sadie and Mr. Hollingsworth chatted amiably, Mariel felt herself growing restless. She had no pressing reason to hurry home, but no further desire to gawk at hats she couldn't buy, either. Worse, she was convinced Sadie would insist upon visiting the dress store before the stationer.

Perhaps she was just anxious for the school term to start, even though that wouldn't be for at least six weeks. Goss Valley being a new place, and a new beginning, her excitement was more intense than it had been in Chicago. However, there was no reward in impatience. Buying paper, pencils, protractors, and rulers, whether now or in two hours, would not hasten the first day of class. In any case, Sadie was going to finish shopping when she finished shopping. It would be rude of Mariel to interrupt her when she was clearly enjoying this reunion with her friend.

She gazed out the large window toward the tavern. By now Goss had probably ingested enough whiskey to render him immune from his wife's gossip. Down the street, Mike was setting the unfortunate Mr. Parley upon the path of virtue, insofar as Lottie was concerned.

The clerk addressed them both. “Are you ladies in town for long?”

“Need I remind you that we are both married women?” Sadie said, her eyes bright with mischief. “What have you in mind?”

“I imply nothing improper, madam. I simply meant to say that a spiritualist is giving a reading tonight at Mrs. Bockhoven's house. I thought you might find it amusing. Her name is Professor Miss Dorothy Bedarius.”

Mariel shook her head. “I am not *amused* by chicanery, sir.”

“Her placard claims she studied with Cora Hatch Richmond herself,” Mr. Hollingsworth said.

Everyone had heard of that famous medium, but Mariel remained unimpressed. “I assure you, ‘Professor’ Miss Bedarius is a charlatan. If the Lord had intended for the living to converse with the dead, He would not have put a wall of separation between us.”

“Perhaps He has given some the gift to see beyond the wall,” Sadie said. “Have you never wished to speak one more time with your departed loved ones?”

“What I *wish* is of little consequence.”

“Are your mother and father still alive?”

Mariel paused as, uninvited, her old companion melancholy insinuated its way into her awareness. “Mother died when I was a child. Father drowned shortly after my wedding.”

“If Miss Bedarius could conjure them now, what would you to say to them?”

“Nothing, because *there is no conjuring!* Please don’t tempt me with things that cannot be.”

Mr. Hollingsworth patted Mariel’s shoulder. “I apologize for mentioning it. I didn’t mean to cause you distress.”

Sadie lowered herself onto a chair. “It’s my only hope,” she said, her eyes far away, tears gathering. “Do you suppose children grow up in heaven?”

Mariel knelt next to the distraught woman. “I don’t understand.”

Mr. Hollingsworth cleared his throat. “Sadie and Herb lost their little girl to scarlet fever when she was two,” he said.

“Alma,” Sadie said. “I should very much like to look upon her now, woman to woman.”

Mariel nodded.

Yes.

Now she understood.