

Chapter 1

Liesl Tiomenen saw the man from her kitchen window. It was snowing so hard that he was barely visible, standing at the edge of the woods. He stared toward the house, his arms folded so his hands were clamped under his armpits. He wore a soiled canvas coat and gray trousers, but no hat. His stillness reminded her of the deer that often came into the yard to eat the carrots and apples she left for them.

Liesl went out into the shed and took Harold's .30-.30 Winchester carbine down off the rack, then opened the back door, holding the rifle across her chest. The man didn't move. The north wind chilled the right side of her face; her fingers on the stock felt brittle. He was young, not more than twenty-five, and she could see that he was shivering.

"All right," she said. "You can come inside."

He began walking immediately, his legs lifting up out of the snow that was almost to his knees.

"Slowly," she said. "And put your hands down at your sides where I can see them."

He stopped and watched her. Then he dropped his arms to his sides and continued on toward the house.

When the door opened, he had expected an old man or woman. Something about the house suggested that retired people lived there, the way it looked simple but well maintained. There were recent asphalt shingle patches on the roof, the wood storm windows had been freshly painted, and a lot of firewood was stacked against the shed. It was the smell of chimney smoke that had drawn him toward the house.

But it was a woman, maybe in her early forties. She was tall and her long blond hair was tied in a thick braid that hung over her left shoulder. Her hands were large, and one thumb appeared to be smeared with mud. When he reached her, she pointed the rifle at his chest and he stopped. She stared at him a moment, her blue eyes showing no panic or fear, only determination. He tried to quit shaking, but it only made it seem worse.

"Okay," she said, stepping back into the shed. This close he could see that there was something odd about her mouth; her lips seemed out of kilter. When she spoke there was a kind of sag to the right side of her face, as though the muscles were lax. "Kitchen's that way."

He stepped into the shed and opened the door to the warm, heavy air of the house. There was the smell of burning wood, and something else that he couldn't identify—a pleasant scent of damp earth. It made him lightheaded, and his shaking only got worse.

He fell to the floor, his palms slapping on the wood, and didn't move.

Liesl walked around him, watching his face. There was a small cut beneath his eye and twigs and pine needles were entangled in his short black hair. She poked him in the shoulder with the rifle, but he didn't respond. He wasn't faking. She went to the stove and turned on the burner beneath the teapot. Reaching into the pocket of her flannel shirt, she took out a pack of cigarettes. She held the tip to the flame for a moment, then raised the cigarette to her lips and inhaled.

When he opened his eyes, she was standing at the stove, smoking a cigarette, the rifle tucked beneath one arm and angled down. Not exactly pointed at him, but not far off either.

"Can you get up?"

"I think so."

"Then sit in the chair by the radiator and keep your hands on the table."

He watched her raise the cigarette to that mouth, then the tobacco glowed. He inhaled through his nose and the smoke helped revive him. For a moment she looked pleased, then she reached in the pocket of her flannel shirt, took out a pack of Winstons and tossed them on the kitchen table.

"Thanks," he said. There was a book of matches beneath the cellophane. His hands were shaking so bad the first match waved out; the second he had a hard time holding steady to light the cigarette. When he got it lit, he watched the match flame burn down to his fingertips. After it went out, he said, "Nothing. Can't feel a thing."

"Rub them," she said. "Rub them together."

He did, working the palms slowly against each other.

"When'd you break out?"

"Two days ago. Musta walked fifty miles."

She smiled crookedly around her cigarette. "You're not twelve miles from the prison."

"The woods they never stop up here."

"Why do you think they put prisons in the Upper Peninsula? You think you're the first one to try to walk away? They usually turn themselves in 'you're lucky you haven't already frozen to death."

The teakettle whistled and he nearly jumped up from his seat.

She did everything with one hand, hardly taking her eyes off him. When she placed the mug of tea on the table, she said, "Have you eaten anything?"

"No."

"You drink that. I'll feed you, but first I got to be able to put this thing down."

"I won't do nothing."

"If you had done nothing, you wouldn't be in that prison." She opened the shed door, reached around the jamb and took something that rattled off a hook. It was a chain, the kind used for towing, coiled up like rope. She unlocked and removed the padlock, then put the chain on the kitchen floor by his feet. "Now, you wrap that around your middle a couple times, then run it round that radiator foot." Putting the padlock on the table, she said, "Then lock it."

He chained himself to the radiator, then picked up the mug. The heat from the tea stung his fingers.

She leaned the rifle in the corner by the stove and began to make him some eggs. Three scrambled eggs, with dark rye toast. When she wasn't watching him she listened to him; he was quiet and he hardly moved. When he finished drinking one mug of tea, she made him another.

She sat down across the table and watched him eat. There were acne scars on his neck, and his nose reminded her of boxers who have had the cartilage removed. She was surprised that he ate so slowly, that he didn't just eat like a dog. But he seemed to have trouble swallowing.

"Been so long since I ate," he said, when he was half way through the eggs, "my stomach hurts. But they're good. They just go down hard." He glanced out the window frequently, toward the driveway, and she could see when it registered in his eyes. He tried to conceal it, but the next time he looked at her he was shy, like a child with a secret.

She lit another cigarette. Looking out the window a moment she looked at the snow where the drive was the banks were over six feet high, and there were at least two feet of new snow in the drive. "My plowman came night before last," she said, "but it's been coming down so fast he can't get up the hill now. It's been like this all winter."

"Last year after we set the record for snow," he said, pushing away his empty plate, "we all thought this year couldn't be so bad."

"It's worse," she said. "We're more than twenty feet ahead of last year. At this pace they say we might get three-hundred inches."

One corner of his lips tucked in, creating a dimple. "My friend Bing's right. Says all people do outside is talk about the weather." He picked up the pack of cigarettes on the table and tapped one out. "You can't get out of here and the police can't get in. How you going to get me back?"

"That's what you want, right?"

"I stay out there any longer, I'm dead." He touched the cut beneath his eye a moment. "I know what you're saying. Guys inside tell you about other escapees, how they walk away, then give themselves up because of the woods and the weather. I didn't believe them."

"You're not from the U. P."

"No, I'm from below the bridge little town outside Mackinaw City. We get plenty of snow, but three hundred inches. Always heard about winters up here, but you just don't believe it. You think they got to be lying. But they weren't, I know that now."

She went to the sink, soaked a washcloth, and gave it to him. "You better clean that cut."

He daubed at his face, wincing and only smearing dirt. "It's fine."

"Right." She came around the table and took the washcloth from him. "Hold still." She put one hand on the back of his head and cleaned the cut. He stared up at her and didn't move, though when she touched the wound she could feel the muscles in his neck tighten as he tried to pull his head back against her hand. "How'd you do this?"

"Saw some coyotes on a ridge. Maybe they were wolves? I don't know. But they weren't no dogs. Then I tripped over a downed tree under the snow."

When she was finished she looked at the wound a moment before letting go of his skull. His clothes smelled bad and his hair was wet and dirty. "Where'd you think you were going?" she said as she went back to the sink to rinse out the washcloth.

"Dunno. Into Marquette and steal a car. I thought the snow would keep them from finding me. Got lost instead."

"Yes, you did." She turned and leaned against the sink, drying her hands on a towel. He smoked and gazed out at the snow. "You been in long?"

"Two years, seven months, three days."

"Why?"

"Assault." He drew on his cigarette, then crushed it out on his plate. "Had a girlfriend in Mackinaw City. Say I raped and beat her."

"Did you?"

"Sort of."

"How long you in for."

"Eight. Now, when I go back, I don't know what I'll get." He turned his head from the window. "What happened to you?"

"Car accident. My husband and daughter were killed."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"Yes, I am."

She went to the phone on the wall and picked up the receiver. There was no dial tone. She hung up.

He was watching her. "Dead?"

"I'll try again in a while."

He leaned back in the chair and the chains rattled. "So you live way out here alone?"

"Harold and I built this house together, when we were your age. It was about all I had afterwards."

He glanced toward the door to the living room. "There's a smell it's not the smoke, but something else."

She noticed that a puddle of water had formed around his boots. She picked up the rifle and put the padlock key on the table. "Come in here and take those wet things off."

He unlocked himself and put the key next to the plate; then he coiled the chain up, gathered it against his stomach, and led her into the living room, which opened on to a large studio with skylights. He looked at the shelves of clay sculpture and pottery, the wheel, the work benches, the kiln. "You can smell it way out there in the woods." He bent over and began unlacing his boots. "What if that phone doesn't come back?"

"We can always walk down to the store on the county road."

"How far is it?"

"A ways."

"Walk?"

"You ever wear snowshoes?"

"No."

"We could ski out, if you'd rather."

"The snowshoes'll be fine."

She stepped into the bedroom to get him some wool socks. When she looked up at the bureau mirror she saw that he was asleep on the couch, cradling the chains on his stomach.

When he awoke he lay beneath a wool blanket on the couch. His feet stuck out the other end; she had put wool socks on him while he slept and his toes were slightly numb but warm. "I thought I'd never feel my feet again."

She was sitting across the living room, the rifle resting against the arm of the stuffed chair. "You stayed out there much longer and you wouldn't have."

"I tried not to think about the cold, but it's all you think about. Same as being inside, really."

"What do you think about, inside?"

He gazed at the ceiling a long time, then he smiled. "I know what most of the guys would say."

"I do too."

He turned his head on the armrest of the couch. She had put on a green sweater that made her breasts seem full. He couldn't take his eyes off them. When he raised his eyes to her face she watched him with an even stare. He realized she was accustomed to men looking at her that way, that it was something she had endured for a long time. It appeared to bore her.

"Bing, he reads a lot and he tells me stuff. Says he has a theory: if you think about how some people have it worse, you won't find your situation so bad."

"Not a bad theory," she said. "What's he read?"

"All sorts of stuff. Lot of history. Tells me about battles and conquerors. Lately we've been into tortures. Bing found a whole book just on torture techniques. The Inquisition, Ivan The Terrible, Vlad The Impaler."

"Wasn't he the one Dracula's based on?"

"That's right," he said, staring at the ceiling again. "As a boy he had been a hostage of some sultan in Constantinople and he was buttfucked a lot. So later, when he's this fierce military leader he scares the hell out of his opponents because he impales his captors. He used a long, thin needle'greases it, then shoves it up their ass until it comes out their mouth. Did it in a way that it would take days to die. He'd do thousands of people at a time and stick them in the ground outside his camp to ward off the enemy. Thousands on a skewer."

He looked at her. She was staring very hard at him, and her cheeks seemed flushed. "And Bing thinks it takes your mind off prison?"

"Yeah, but it only works for while. You actually have to concentrate on that sort of thing and it gets old. Out there

in the woods, it didn't work at all. I tried to think of everything, believe me, but I was just too cold."

"So much for theories."

He couldn't tell by her voice whether she was making a joke or being serious. When he looked at her he couldn't tell either; her eyes were just as steady as when she'd first opened the shed door.

"When you came outside with the rifle and pointed it at me, what would you have done if I had, you know, tried something?"

"What would you have tried?"

"Take the gun away."

She turned her head and looked into her pottery studio. "I'm not sure. Suppose you had gotten the gun from me, what would you do?"

"Unload it."

She continued to stare at her shelves of pots, so long that he began to wonder if she'd heard him. "Well, you didn't, and I didn't, and it stays loaded." She looked at him. "Don't lose sight of that fact."

"I'm not dangerous or anything."

"Not now you aren't."

They didn't talk for a while. He stared at the ceiling. What he had thought were shadows he realized was smoke residue from the kiln. The wall and ceiling surfaces all had faint smudges built up around the slightest raised edge, whether it was a small imperfection in the wall, along the edge of molding, or around a light switch plate. It gave flat surfaces relief as though a someone had carefully taken a pencil and shaded everything, first using the side of the lead point, then smearing the gray with a moist fingertip. Then he saw, on the wall by the door to the bedroom, a small rectangle of white where a photograph had hung. His eyes were good and he could even see the small black hole where the nail had been driven into the wall. It was like her life here: a white rectangle surrounded by not so white, two shades so close you don't notice the difference right away.

"You try the phone again?" he asked.

"Twice while you were asleep," she said. "Still out."

"What are we going to do?"

"You feel like you could walk out there again?" she asked. "This time properly dressed and with snowshoes."

"I'm not in any hurry to get back."

"I suppose you're not."

"It's nice here. Warm. I see why you stayed after I see why you live here."

"We have to go soon if we're to get out before dark."

She gave him some of Harold's clothes: longjohns, wool socks, a flannel shirt, a heavy sweater, good insulated boots, gloves, parka, a wool hat that could be pulled down over the ears. She let him use the bathroom and change in there, telling him if he wanted to try and squeeze out the window he'd only get stuck in the drift on the north side of the house.

When they were both dressed they went out to the shed and buckled on the snowshoes. Then they went outside and began walking south down the drive, which was a wide snowbound path through the woods. He led and she followed with the rifle. He walked slowly, with his head down, concentrating on each step.

"It's kind of a waddle," he said over his shoulder. It was hard to hear him because the wind was at their backs. "I feel like a baby in diapers." There was some joy in his voice, something she imagined he expressed seldom now.

"You're doing fine," she said.

"How far is 'a ways'?"

"We should get to the store at the crossroads before dark, if we take a shortcut over that hill."

He looked to his left. "It's steep."

"It's that or walk five miles around it."

His snowshoes were old, the varnished wood frame worn and splintered, and the mesh broken and mended in several places with dirty white shoelaces. The snowshoes didn't hold him up on top of the snow like he expected, but allowed him to sink down in the powder a good half-foot; then he could feel the snow compress and support him. It was hard work, deliberately lifting his leg up and out of the snow with each step, and soon his groin muscles ached. By the time they were at the bottom of the drive, he had broken a sweat beneath the layers of her dead husband's warm clothes.

The road hadn't been plowed either and they walked down the middle of it, toward the hill. They were now walking east and the wind and snow struck them from the left. She walked to his right and a full stride behind, carrying the rifle across her chest. The wind was so steady the snow was horizontal.

"You mind if I ask your name?" he asked.

"Liesl."

"Norman. How long ago was your accident?"

"Five years ago next April. It was during a spring blizzard."

"What did Harold do?"

"Lot of things. Carpentered. Drove heavy equipment. Hunted and fished for much of our food. There's a freezer locker in the shed that used to be stocked with venison, smoked whitefish, and coho salmon all winter."

"You're one of those live-off-the-land people I hear about up here. He hunted and you did sculpture and pottery."

"Something wrong with that, Norman?"

"No. Seems like a lot of work though. I mean you can walk in the market and buy a piece of fish."

"It's not the same."

"What grade was your daughter in?"

"Wasn't in a grade." He turned his head until he could see Liesl. The left side of her coat and hood were covered with snow. Her eyebrows were white and her face was red from the cold. They made her eyes an even brighter blue. "We home-schooled Gretchen. She was seven."

She stared back at him and he couldn't keep his eyes on her. He turned, lowered his head against the wind, and watched his snowshoes.

They walked down the road about half a mile, then began to climb the hill. Liesl explained that in order to get up the hill they would have to zigzag, ascending very slowly. It was rough going. The woods were dense and they often had to push through branches. At times it was so steep they had to grab hold of a tree and pull themselves up to the next step. Liesl had slung her rifle over her shoulder so she could use both arms. Norman continued to lead, and occasionally he would set himself, holding a branch, then reach back and lend her a hand as she stepped up.

Once he lost his balance, and for a moment he had the gut-hollowing sensation that he was going to fall backwards and sail off the side of the hill. But he managed to fall forward awkwardly, and his arms went into the snow all the way up to his shoulders. "It's deep," he said, laughing.

Liesl had to help him to his feet. "See, you can't run away," she said. "And I wouldn't recommend trying to fly."

It took over an hour to reach the crest of the hill. Liesl said they should rest. She had brought some chocolate and they sat on a granite outcropping eating. They could see down through the trees to the next smaller hill. Norman kept scanning the valley.

"Where's the road?" he asked finally. "I don't see a clearing down there."

"It's on the other side of that hill."

"You didn't mention a second hill."

"Didn't I?"

"So, it's going to be like that?" he said, nodding.

"Like what?"

"All my life it seems people tell half of what they know. I believe 'em'then suddenly they tell me there's another hill." Norman took another bite of chocolate. "What kind is this?"

"Semi-sweet. It's one of my favorite things to eat."

"We don't get this in prison."

"I used to eat a great deal, particularly in winter. Harold and I were both large people. My jaw was fractured in the accident and my mouth was wired shut for a long time. I couldn't eat solid food and I lost nearly sixty pounds. I don't

eat like I used to, but in cold weather like this I love semi-sweet chocolate." She turned her head so she could see around the edge of her hood with one eye. He had the blue wool cap pulled taut over his skull so his ears were completely covered. He raised a gloved hand and tugged his cap farther down his forehead, so it came over his eyebrows. There was something about his eyes that was alert, even startled. She got out her cigarettes and after several attempts they both got one lit. "Norman, what do you mean you 'sort of' raped and beat your girlfriend?"

"I don't know what I did for certain," he said. "I was really drunk, and I'd done some stuff too, you know. My brother Warren, he deals a little so I always had access. No question I was thoroughly whacked out. Noel and I both worked for this company that made auto parts'she worked in the office, and I was out in the warehouse driving a forklift. We got engaged, but I started to wonder, you know, if she wasn't seeing someone else. A few weeks before the wedding, I walked into her apartment and found her in bed with Warren. We never got along so good. He's a couple years older and, well, we got in this shouting thing, and pushed each other around, until he left. Then I turned on her and I did what they say I did, I guess. I really don't remember. The rape business I don't remember at all, but I did hit her, I did shove her around, no question. She fell at some point and was knocked out, and she got a pretty good scar under one eye. Her father, Rejean Pronovost, he's tight with everybody it seems, and he and their lawyer got the judge to really go after me." Norman adjusted the cap around his ears. "I should have left Noel alone. If I was going to get sent away, I should have gone after my brother instead."

"Where are they now?"

"Oh, they got married and were living in Mackinaw City like I never existed, but I hear that they've split up now. My brother, I know he thought that getting married would make it all right what he did to me."

"If you had managed to escape, I mean, to really get out of the U. P., what would you do?"

"I don't know. I didn't really have a plan. I mean, my escaping was something that I just did, right then. I'm what they call a trustee and we get to move quite freely around the prison. It's the Level Fives, the crazies, that they keep really locked up. Nobody has contact with them 'cept the guards. A bunch of us trustees were unloading supplies in the kitchen, then we were told that one of the trucks got stuck in the snow on the road out to 41, so we went out to dig and push the thing out. The snow became an absolute whiteout, and I suddenly realized I could just walk into the woods and no one would notice right off. So I did."

"You're not answering my questions. Where would you go? Back downstate?"

He didn't answer right away. "No, I'd go far away. I'd try to be someone else."

"That, Norman, is impossible to do."

"Then I'd try to be who I was before any of this happened." Snow flakes had built up on his eyebrows and lashes. She thought it was a beautiful image on his hard, lean face. "Why couldn't I do that?"

"I don't know, that seems pretty hard too. It's what we all want." Liesl stood up and slung the rifle over her shoulder. "Ready? Going downhill in showshoes is tougher than climbing."

Norman led the way down the hill. The strain on the legs was worse and it was harder to keep balance. He often felt as though he would pitch forward and roll down the hill. He never took a step without having at least one hand on a tree trunk or branch.

They came to a trail in the snow, deep narrow tracks, frequent patches of urine, and small pellets. When they rounded a knob on the side of the hill they saw half a dozen deer standing in the snow. They were scrawny, their coats ruffled by the wind. All the deer started to move off, except one, a smaller deer, which simply stood still, with its head

turned toward Norman and Liesl.

She stepped past him. "Winters like this a lot of them starve. It takes a long time to do that, and they're so cold eventually they can't move. I see them around my house. They just stand there."

She walked toward the deer and stopped when she was perhaps ten yards away. The deer only watched her approach. Liesl unshouldered the rifle, took aim, and shot the deer in the chest. It fell over, its blood seeping into the snow.

Norman walked up to the deer. Though its eyes were open, it was dead.

"I used to watch the weak ones die, but finally a couple of years ago I went out and shot one. Now I do it when I'm sure they're not going to make it."

"There was a photograph on the wall by your bedroom door. It's gone now." She looked at him, surprised, then curious. "It was of your husband and daughter?"

"No, it was a photograph Harold took of the Chateau Frontenac." Something in her eyes told him she understood. "It's a huge old hotel in Quebec City, on a cliff overlooking the St. Lawrence. We went there on our honeymoon, then we went back with Gretchen when she was five. It's odd, photographs of Harold and Gretchen aren't so bad. I have several in the bedroom. I like looking at them. I do for long periods of time. But photos of places we'd been, especially Quebec, they're much harder. Maybe it's because they were places we visited and liked, and they're still there, in the world, so to speak. Places I'll never go to again. Something like that."

"The only thing I know about Quebec is that they speak French and the Nordiques moved to Colorado and became the Avalanche. And Noel's ancestors came from there."

They left the deer and continued down the hill, zigzagging slowly through the woods.

"Everything is in French," she said from above and behind him. "And the architecture is well, I've never been to France, but it feels like being there. Very old buildings, many with these tall steep roofs covered with copper, which over the years has turned a bright green called verdigris."

"I've seen that," he said.

"And even if you don't speak French you quickly pick up enough to manage in shops, restaurants and cafes. Some Americans complain that Quebecois pretend not to understand them. But we never encountered that. We always found them friendly. I think that when they first look at you they make a distinction, something about body language or maybe our eyes, and determine if you're American or English Canadian. If you're American and you don't walk in expecting them to speak your language, they treat you fine. And the food! All you'd do is eat, then walk, then eat, then walk some more. Moules et frites' mussels and French fries, that was our favorite lunch. And when you're not eating or walking you make love in a room with a view of the river with French music on the radio."

Norman stopped and looked over his shoulder. Half of her mouth formed a smile, while the lax side hardly moved.

"Perhaps your friend Bing's wrong," she said. "Rather than thinking of tortures to forget the cold, you should think of things like good food and a long afternoon of fucking." She laughed. "Don't look so shocked, Norman, and let's get down this hill before dark."

They reached the bottom of the hill, crossed a narrow valley and climbed the smaller hill. It was not nearly as

steep and they made good time. It was late afternoon when they descended, and below through the trees they could see County Road 550. They didn't talk once they sighted the road, and Liesl began to worry about ending this. When Norman had first approached her outside the shed, she would have shot him if he tried anything. Now she wasn't sure she could. She wondered if he knew that.

As they neared the bottom of the hill, there were frequent rock ledges jutting through the snow. They were walking along the edge of one when Norman felt Liesl suddenly clutch at his arm, but she couldn't hold on, and she fell off the ledge. It was only about six feet into snow, but she lay still and looked up at him with an expression he didn't understand. He walked around the corner of the ledge, then made his way down to her. She hadn't moved. Lying in the snow, she looked like she'd been dancing, then suddenly froze in mid-step.

"It's my neck," she said. "I've had problems with it ever since the accident."

"Can you get up?"

Slowly she raised an arm toward him. "Pull."

He positioned himself over her, took her arm and helped her up out of the snow. Her body leaned against him and he held her as she breathed heavily.

"I don't know," she said, her voice shaking. "I don't think I can walk."

"It's not far to the road. I'll carry you. Let me get your shoes off."

As he crouched down, she kept both hands on his shoulders to keep herself upright. He removed his gloves and unbuckled her snowshoes—the leather straps were caked with ice, which he had to break off with his fingers. It took a long time to get her boots free of the harnesses, and his fingers were frozen. Finally, he got his gloves back on, then put his arms around the back of her legs.

"Are you sure about this?" She eased herself down as he stood up, so that she hung over his shoulder.

"I'm glad you lost those sixty pounds," he said.

"The rifle," she said. "It's way down in the snow."

"Fuck the rifle," Norman said. "Bambi'll have to starve."

He began walking. Her weight compressed the right side of his body, causing pain down through his hip and knee. It was only about fifty yards to the high snowbank on the side of the road, but he had to stop after each step and get his balance. Twice he put her down and shifted her to the opposite shoulder. When they were almost to the snowbank he lost his balance and fell forward. When he landed on top of her, she let out a cry.

"I'm sorry," he said. His face was against hers, and they both lay still, exhausted. Finally, he raised his head and looked at her. "I can't carry you any further."

Her eyes were watery and she whispered, "Go get help." She kept one hand on his shoulder for a moment, then dropped her arm in the snow.

He couldn't get to his feet—there was nothing to push off of because his arms sank into the snow. He took off his snowshoes, crawled up the snowbank, then rolled over the other side into the road. Standing, he could barely see the

store down the road. There was a tractor-trailer parked by the gas pumps, its taillights like beacons in the snow. He began walking, which now felt strange without the snowshoes.

After a while Liesl closed her eyes against the incessant flakes. Cold seeped into her back and shoulders. Her arms and legs were outstretched as though she were floating on her back, and she tried to imagine a lake with the blue sky of a hot summer's afternoon above her. But it wouldn't hold, and she opened her eyes again to the snow. The cold had worked its way up into her ribcage, causing her to shiver. She closed her eyes again and saw bearded men in robes and fur hats. They spoke a foreign language and watched her with interest. She smelled grease. When the sharp thin needle stabbed into her anus, she remembered Gretchen's birth. But instead of descending, the pain ascended, moving slowly up through her bowels, her intestines, her lungs, her esophagus, the back of her throat, then finally, as she opened her mouth, the warm steel slid along the tip of her nose, its bloody tip stopping right before her eyes.