

I scanned the gravel pit. Parts of the recently butchered moose were scattered about like a grotesque jigsaw puzzle. I called Oona away from a bloody chunk of carcass. I felt sick and angry, feelings intensified by the crisp and beautiful landscape we'd travelled to get to this spot.

"C'mon," I called to the dog. "We're going back to the truck."

We crossed the West Kalum Road and made our way down the side road toward Dutch Valley. The route was lined with large rectangular shapes, some vertical, some horizontal, some leaning. They were unobtrusive, even attractive, covered as they were in a foot of snow. I would have found them more attractive if I didn't know that in a month, when the snow has melted, the foundation of those forms, old sofas, broken freezers, fridges, and stoves will appear as if they had burst from the ground like hideous plants craving light in the lengthening days of spring.

Instead of retracing our steps, I decided we should make the return trip alongside the river. Using small dry channels whose existence, until then, I was unaware, we were able to make our way downriver through brush so thick it would have been all but impenetrable otherwise. We reached an old road grown over to the point where it was barely recognizable. I stopped, sat on a log, and considered my first impulse,

which was to follow the old track to see where it led and to scout the land around at the same time.

The sun had gone behind Kitsumkalum Mountain. I glanced at my watch and found that I had less than an hour before walking in the bush would become problematic.

Oona was sniffing some shrubs next to an ancient cottonwood. The base of the tree was surrounded by wood chips. I walked up to it for a closer look. From the peeled sticks scattered throughout the area, it was clear beavers were working the area vigorously. From the gnawing at the base of the giant cottonwood, they had been active for a long time. Half the diameter of the large tree had been chewed away. The old fellow had a distinct lean toward the river. About 50 paces downstream lay a similarly proportioned tree that must, given the foliage growing around and from it, have fallen years ago.

I leaned my head back to see the topmost branches of the magnificent plant. They clawed at the cold blue sky like twisted



**SKEENA ANGLER
ROB BROWN**

Poachers 2

wind.

From there, we made our way down a branch of the dry channel that we'd taken thus far. There were more logs to duck under and clamber over, but it was a fair route nonetheless.

In short order we were walking across familiar beaver ponds. At the end of these we took a side channel. A few steps down it, we were startled by the unmistakable hoot of a great grey owl, so loud that it seemed to fill the valley. I scanned the limbs of the trees on the far side of the channel and

spotted a bird. It looked more like a raven. A few seconds later, a distinctive guttural croak proved it was. I hooted the same pitch. There was no response. Great greys like to swoop over open spaces. Side channels like the one Oona and found ourselves in, are perfect. Our great grey friend had to be sitting high up, its head swivelling like a gun on a turret, surveying the white expanse for a rabbit, or even a fox or a marten, the last two creatures being easy prey for big owls that possess wingspans rivalling those of eagles. Trying to find the owl in the failing light was next to impossible. It would have to stoop. The likelihood of prey appearing and that happening was slim, so we moved on.

It will be a landscape changing event. I was thankful there was no

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As we neared the truck, I saw smoke in the distance and heard voices. I saw the blue tarp on the top of the roof of the shack someone has built on the old backroad that runs alongside the swamp. The owner had some company over.

"How's fishin'?" one of them yelled as I passed.

"Too early," I called back.

"Good luck next time."

"Thanks," I replied.

Soon, we were back at the truck. I'd been thinking about moose, alive and dead, off and on the entire return trip.

... to be continued...