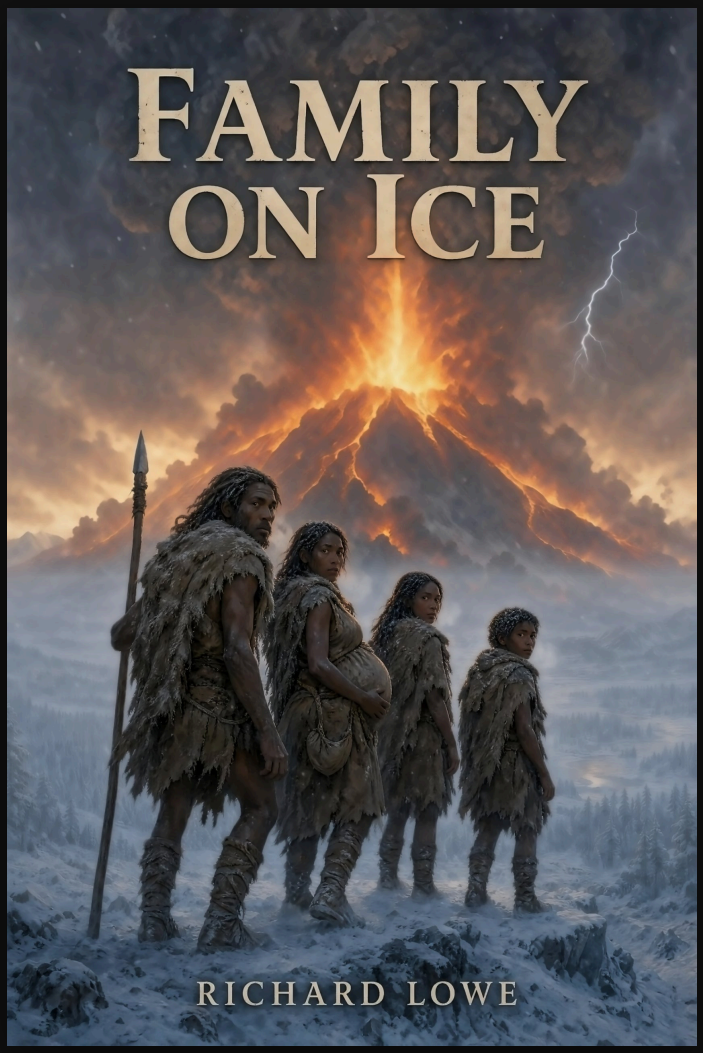
A FREE COMPANION TO FAMILY ON ICE

Again

Many winters before the ash, a girl named Ona watches the sun turn white, and learns what the old put into the young before they step back.



RICHARD LOWE

Again

The sun had no edge.

Ona saw it because her grandmother stopped digging. Tul was on her knees on the slope above the river with the digging stick in both hands, and she stopped with the point still in the ground and looked straight up at the middle of the day.

Nobody looked at the sun at midday. It hurt, and the hurt stayed in your eyes as a dark spot that followed whatever you looked at next. Tul looked at it the way she looked at a root before she decided it was worth the work.

Ona looked too. It did not hurt. The sun hung there white and soft, a disk she could hold her eyes on as long as she liked, and the sky around it was the color of milk thinned with river water.

"It doesn't hurt," Ona said.

"No," Tul said.

"It always hurts."

"Yes." Tul knocked the dirt off the stick against her knee. "The roots don't care what the sun is doing."

Ona was nine that summer, and she did as she was told. She dug.

The ground on the slope was soft and black from the spring melt, and the roots came up pale and thick, the kind that went sweet when you buried them in coals. She put each one in the bark tray and did not look up again until the tray was full.

When she did look up, Tul was still watching the sky.

* * *

The sunset that night was red.

It was red the way meat was red when you first opened an animal, a wet dark red that ran across the whole sunset side of the sky and stayed there long after the sun itself had gone down behind the ridge. The people of the camp came out of their shelters one at a time and stood and looked at it. Nobody said anything for a long while.

Ona stood with Kep on her hip. He was four winters and too big to carry, but he had wanted up when he saw the sky, and she had picked him up without thinking about it. He put his cold hands on her neck and said the red was pretty.

Her father came up beside Tul. Harn was a big man, slow to speak, and he stood with his spear grounded and his weight on it the way he stood when he was reading weather over a valley.

"Fire," he said. "A big one, far off."

"There's no smoke," Tul said. "Smell the air."

He smelled it. Ona smelled it too. River and wet earth and the cookfires behind them, and nothing else.

"Weather, then," Harn said.

"It isn't weather," Tul said.

Harn looked at her. Tul was his mother, and he did not argue with her in front of the camp, but Ona could see him wanting to.

"What is it?" he said.

"I don't know," Tul said. "I know what it isn't."

She turned and went back to her fire. Ona's mother, Neka, watched her go and then looked at Harn, and the two of them looked at each other the way they did when they were going to talk later, after the children slept.

Ona carried Kep inside. Through the gap in the hide she could still see the red, and she lay awake watching it fade, and the last of it went brown and then black and then it was only night.

* * *

The summer went wrong slowly.

Nobody could say which day it started. The sun stayed white. The shadows went soft at their edges, so that a tree's shadow on the ground looked like a shadow seen through water, and Ona would stand and wave her hand over the grass and watch the gray shape of it go fuzzy.

The nights got cold. Not winter cold, but cold enough that the water skins had a skin of ice on them twice in the middle of summer, and Neka stood over the second one with her hand on it and her lips pressed together.

The berries on the slope came out green and hard and stayed green and hard. Ona bit one and spat it out and her mouth puckered for half the morning.

The birds were wrong too. The geese that came up from the low ground every spring had come, and then most of them had gone back. Tul pointed them out to her one morning, a long gray line of them going the wrong way over the ridge, toward the warm side, in a season when no goose went that way.

“They know,” Tul said.

“Know what?”

“Whatever they know,” Tul said, watching the line go. “Birds don't tell you. You watch where they go.”

* * *

The reindeer did not come.

They came every summer. They came down off the high ground in a river of brown backs and pale bellies, so many that the ground shook with them, and the men took what they needed at the narrow place below the falls and the women worked the meat for days.

Ona had seen it every summer she could remember. She had been waiting for it since the snow went.

Harn went up to watch for them. He went three times, and the third time he was gone four days, and when he came back he sat down at the fire without taking off his pack.

“Nothing,” he said. “Not old sign, not new. They went some other way.”

“Which way?” Neka said.

“I don't know.” He took a long drink from the skin she handed him. “Toward the cold, maybe, past the second ridge, but the sign there is old.”

Tul was sitting with her back to the shelter frame, mending a carrying strap. She did not look up.

“Toward the cold in summer,” she said.

“Yes,” Harn said.

She bit off the sinew and knotted it.

“That's three things wrong,” she said. “The sun, the geese, the deer. Three things is not chance.”

Nobody answered her. Kep was asleep with his head on Ona's leg, and she sat still so she would not wake him, and she listened to the adults not answer.

* * *

They moved before the first snow.

It was talked about for many nights at the big fire, the families together, the old ones speaking first and the hunters after. Ona was not allowed at the big fire, but she lay at the edge of the light with Kep and the other children and heard most of it. They would go down the river toward the sunrise, to the low valleys where the cold came later and the deer wintered.

Some of the old ones had been there. Tul had been there, when Harn was a boy.

On the morning they left, Ona watched her grandmother at the fire-stone.

Every camp had one. It was a flat stone at the edge of the worked ground, and you touched it going out and coming back, the backs of two fingers, quick, without looking.

Ona had been doing it since she could walk. This morning Tul stood at the stone and did not touch it that way.

She did the other one, the one for a camp you would not see again. Ona had seen it done only twice in her life, and both times by old people, and both times the old people had stood afterward with their hands at their sides as if the hand had gone heavier.

Tul did not stand. She turned and picked up her pack and walked.

Ona came to the stone last. She looked back at the camp, the bare frames where the shelters had been, the black rings of the fires, the drying racks with nothing on them. She touched the stone with the backs of two fingers.

Then she ran to catch up.

* * *

The low valleys were better for a while.

There were deer there. Not many, and thin, and wary in a way Ona had never seen deer be, but there were some.

Harn and the other men took enough to dry. The women worked hides in the white light and the shadows on the ground stayed soft and the sun stayed a thing you could look at.

That winter was long. The snow came early and lay deep and did not go when it should have gone. Ona was ten when the next summer came, and Kep was five, and it was the same summer again, white sky, cold nights, green berries, the geese coming and going back.

The second summer the tribe moved again, to a camp on a bench above a frozen lake that never fully thawed. Ona did not like it.

The wind came across the ice and found every gap in her skins. But the lake had fish under it, and the men cut holes and sat over them in the white daylight with lines of sinew, and the fish kept them.

It was at the lake camp that Pasi's child came.

* * *

Pasi was young. She was Neka's sister's daughter, only six or seven winters older than Ona, and this was her first child.

Her mate was a quiet hunter named Dorr who had a scar through one eyebrow and laughed at things nobody else thought were funny. He was not laughing the night it started.

The women sent the children out. Neka put Kep in Ona's arms and told her to take him to Tul's shelter and stay there.

Ona took him. She put him down in Tul's sleeping skins and he was asleep before she had the cover over him, because he could sleep anywhere and always had.

Tul was not there. Tul was with the women.

Ona sat in the dark of the shelter and listened.

She could hear Pasi. It was not screaming.

Ona had expected screaming, from what the older girls said, and this was not that. It was a low sound that came and built and went, and came again, and each time it came it was a little longer and a little lower, and between them she could hear the voices of the women, Neka and Tul and the one called Yeda.

Yeda had come into the tribe from somewhere else before Ona was born. She was Neka's age, with wide flat hands and a gap where one of her front teeth had been, and the women went to her when a birth was going to be hard.

Ona did not know why. Nobody had told her.

The low sounds went on. Kep slept. Ona's legs went stiff from sitting still and she stood up and went to the flap and lifted the edge of it.

* * *

Pasi's shelter was close, and they had the fire built high inside it, and the light came out around the edges of the hides. Ona went across the cold ground in her bare feet.

She did not decide to. Her feet were moving and she let them.

She crouched at the back of the shelter where two hides overlapped and there was a gap the width of her hand. She put her eye to it.

The fire was in the middle. Pasi was on her knees on a bed of skins with Neka holding her from behind, under the arms, and Tul at her side with a skin of water.

Yeda knelt in front of her. Yeda's hands were on Pasi's belly and her face was close to Pasi's face, and she was saying words too low to hear.

It went on until Ona's feet went numb, and still she did not move them.

Then the sound changed. Pasi made a noise like a man lifting a stone too heavy for him, and Yeda's hands went down, and Neka said a word, and the child came.

It was gray.

Ona had seen newborn things. She had seen deer calves on the high ground, wet and folded, already kicking. She had seen a hare drop her young in the grass once, and the young had squirmed and squeaked before they were even dry.

This was not like those. This was small and gray-white and slick, and it lay in Yeda's hands like a fish on a rock, and it did not make any sound at all.

Pasi said, “What,” and then she said it again, and Neka held her harder.

Tul put the water skin down. She did not say anything. Ona saw her face and the face was still.

Yeda moved.

* * *

She did not hurry. Afterward Ona would think about that more than about any other part. Everyone in the shelter was frozen and Yeda moved as if there were plenty of time, as if she had done this many times before, as if the gray thing in her hands was a hide that needed turning.

She laid the child face down along her forearm, its head in her palm and lower than its feet. She held it there and pressed with two fingers of her other hand, flat, between its shoulders, and then lower, in a way that was half a blow and half a rub. She did it four times, counting under her breath.

Then she turned it over and cradled it close, and she put her mouth over its mouth and its nose together. Her cheeks went small. She gave it a breath so little that Ona could hardly see her chest move,

a breath like a bird would breathe, and she lifted her head and watched, and she did it again.

The child did not move.

She did it again. Her lips were moving between the breaths. Ona could not hear the words, but she could see the shape of them, the same shape each time. Yeda was counting.

Pasi was crying now, a thin high sound. Neka had her face pressed into Pasi's hair.

Yeda gave another breath.

The child's legs moved.

It was small, the legs drawing up and pushing out. Then its face folded and its mouth opened and it made a sound like a wet stick creaking.

Yeda held it and did nothing else. The sound came again, and then the child found its voice and used it, and it was a cry, thin and furious and alive.

Yeda put her hand on its head.

“Here,” she said.

“Here,” Tul said.

Neka said it. Pasi said it, through crying, with her arms already out. Yeda put the child in them.

Ona took her eye away from the gap. Her face was wet. She did not understand that, because she had not been crying.

Her feet had no feeling in them at all. She went back across the frozen ground to Tul's shelter and got into the skins beside Kep and shook until she was warm.

* * *

In the morning Yeda found her.

Ona was at the lake edge breaking the night's ice off the fishing holes, her work that winter, and she heard the steps on the packed snow behind her and knew them before she turned. Yeda walked with her feet a little turned out, like a duck.

Yeda crouched beside her. She took the bone pick out of Ona's hand and broke the ice on the next hole herself, three short blows. Then she gave the pick back.

“You were at the back of the shelter,” Yeda said.

Ona said nothing. Her face went hot in the cold.

“I saw your eye in the gap where the hides meet.” Yeda looked at the lake. “I've told Pasi's mother to fix that hide four times.”

“I'm sorry,” Ona said.

“Why?”

Ona had no answer.

“You watched,” Yeda said. “All of it?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what I did.”

Ona looked at her. Yeda's face was not angry. It was the face Tul made when she held up a root and asked what it was, the face that already knew and wanted to see if you knew.

Ona told her. She told it badly at first, out of order, the breath before the turning, and Yeda stopped her and said to start again from the beginning.

She started again: the arm, and the head low, and the two fingers flat, four times, and the turn, and the mouth over the mouth and the nose, and the small breath like a bird's, and the watching, and again.

“How many times did I press?” Yeda said.

“Four.”

“Where?”

Ona showed her on her own arm, then on her own back, as far as she could reach.

“No,” Yeda said, and put two fingers on Ona's back, through the skins, a little higher than Ona had shown. “Here. Lower and you can hurt it.”

“Here,” Ona said.

“Again,” Yeda said. “All of it.”

Ona said all of it. Yeda corrected one thing, how long you waited between the breaths, and made her say it again, and then a third time.

By the third time Ona's voice had stopped shaking and the words came in order without her reaching for them.

Yeda grunted, the way Tul did when a root came up whole.

“Where did you learn it?” Ona said.

Yeda was quiet a moment. She took the pick from Ona's hand again and broke the ice on the last hole, though it did not need breaking.

“From the broad people,” she said.

Ona stared at her.

Everyone knew about the broad people. They lived on the high ground and in the deep valleys, shorter than Ona's people and heavier through the chest, with brows like a shelf of rock over their eyes. You saw them sometimes at a distance.

You gave them room. You did not go toward them, and they did not come toward you, and that was how it had always been, and nobody had ever needed to say so.

“When I was younger than Pasi, my mother's people had a winter worse than this,” Yeda said. “We camped near a camp of theirs because there was nowhere else to camp. My mother's sister had a child that came gray.”

She held up her wide flat hand and looked at it. “A woman from their fire came over without being asked and did what you saw, and the child lived. Then she showed me with her hands, because we had nine words between us.”

“Did the child live?” Ona said. “After?”

“He's a grown man with children of his own, three valleys toward the sunset.” Yeda stood up, and her knees cracked. “Their women have been doing it longer than ours have.”

She looked down at Ona.

“You probably won't need it,” she said.

“I know,” Ona said.

“But you should have it,” Yeda said.

She walked back toward the camp with her feet turned out. Ona knelt at the fishing holes long after, with the pick in her hand and the cold coming up through her knees, saying it over to herself: the arm, the fingers, four, the breath, again.

* * *

Pasi's child got its name at the first new moon, the way children did, once it was clear the child would see the moon. They called him Lim.

He was small and loud and he hated being put down. Dorr carried him everywhere inside his skins, against his chest, and laughed at things again.

Ona watched Yeda after that. She watched her at the next two births in the lake camp, from inside the shelter this time, because Yeda told Neka she could stay.

Neither child came gray. Ona was a little sorry, and then ashamed of being sorry, and she did not tell anyone either thing.

The light stayed white.

* * *

The hunger came at the end of that same winter.

It did not arrive. There was no day when there was enough and then a day when there was not. There was only less, and then less, and the less went on so long that she stopped being able to remember what enough had felt like in her stomach.

The fish under the lake ice thinned out. The men cut new holes farther and farther from the bench and sat over them longer and came back with two fish, or one, or none.

The deer had left the low valleys the summer before and not come back. Harn went out after them with three other hunters and came back after nine days with one thin cow between the four of them, and he sat down at the fire and put his face in his hands and did not take them away.

Neka counted the stores every morning with her lips moving. She did not used to do that. Ona watched her mother's mouth and tried to see the numbers in it.

Tul ate less.

* * *

Ona noticed it on a morning when the broth was thin, boiled bark and the last of the dried root and a little fat. Neka gave out the bowls. Tul took hers and ate two mouthfuls and then put the bowl down beside Kep without saying anything.

Kep ate it. He was five now, all knees and elbows and hunger, and he ate anything that was put in front of him and looked around for more. He did not notice whose bowl it was.

Ona noticed. She looked at Tul and Tul looked back at her, a plain look, and then Tul picked up the carrying strap she was mending and went on mending it.

It happened again the next morning, and the next. Some days Tul ate half, and some days two mouthfuls.

Once she ate nothing at all and gave the whole bowl to Kep, and said her stomach was bad, and went outside.

Ona followed her out.

Tul was standing at the edge of the worked ground looking at the white sky over the frozen lake. Her breath came out of her in small clouds.

She was smaller than she had been in the summer, Ona saw. The skins hung on her differently, and the bones of her wrists stood out like knots in a branch.

“Your stomach isn't bad,” Ona said.

“No,” Tul said.

“Then eat.”

Tul did not answer that. She looked at the sky a while longer.

Then she said, “Get your heavy skins. And a digging stick. We're going up the slope.”

“There's nothing to dig. The ground is frozen.”

“Get them,” Tul said.

* * *

They went up the slope behind the lake camp through snow to Ona's knees, Tul ahead and slow, stopping to rest every little way with one hand on her side. Ona offered to carry her pack. Tul said no.

At the top of the slope there was a rock face that caught what sun there was, and under it a lip of stone like a brow. The snow had not got under the lip. Tul crouched and pointed.

"Look," she said.

Ona looked. In the dry dark under the stone there was a scatter of small gray-green leaves, flat to the rock, so dull she would have walked past them every day of her life.

"That one you can eat when there's nothing else," Tul said. "Boil it twice and throw out the first water. It won't fill you, but it keeps the gums from bleeding."

She touched a stiff brown stalk beside it. "That one, never, though it looks like the other one when it's dry. Smell it."

Ona smelled it. It smelled like a fox's den.

"That smell means no," Tul said. "Say it back."

Ona said it back. The gray-green one, boil twice, throw out the first water, for the gums. The brown one with the fox smell, never.

"Again," Tul said.

Ona said it again.

They did that all day. They went from rock face to rock face along the slope above the lake, and under every lip and in every crack where the snow had not reached, Tul showed her what grew and what it healed and what it harmed.

There was a moss that went on cuts, and a root you could dig even in frozen ground if you found it where the spring water came up and kept the earth soft. There was a lichen for the bowels and a bark for fever.

Ona held it all. She had a good head for holding things, everyone said so, and she put each plant in beside the place where it grew and beside the plant before it, so that if she lost one she could find it again by the ones around it.

By the time the light began to go her head ached with it.

"Why now?" she said, on the way down.

Tul was ahead of her on the slope, picking her way in the blue dusk. She did not turn around.

"Because my head is full," she said. "And yours is empty."

"That isn't why."

Tul stopped. She stood on the slope with her back to Ona and her breath going up in clouds. Then she went on down without answering, and Ona followed her, and neither of them said anything else.

* * *

They went up the slope again the next day, and the day after. Tul showed her the places in the valley where the water came up from under the ground and never froze, three of them, and made her say the way to each one from the camp and from each other.

She showed her how to read the ice on the lake by the color of it, the white ice that would hold and the gray ice that would not, and how to put your ear to it and listen. She showed her the slow way to make fire when your hands were too cold to work the stone quickly.

Some of it Tul had already shown her, summers back. Some of it Tul thought she had shown her and had not, and when Ona said she had never heard it, Tul stopped and looked at her.

"I was sure I told you that," Tul said.

“You didn't.”

“No.” Tul rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. “Then I'm telling you now.”

Every night Tul gave her food to Kep. Every night Ona watched her do it.

* * *

The big fire came on a night when there was no broth at all.

The fish were done. The men had cut the last of the holes they could cut and the lake had nothing more to give. There was talk of the high ground toward the cold, where Harn had seen old sign of a big herd going, two summers ago now.

There was talk of the river valleys toward the sunset. Nobody knew. The light was white and the snow was deep and there were children in the camp who coughed in the night now, and Lim was one of them.

Ona lay outside the firelight with Kep asleep against her and listened.

They would go toward the sunset. Four days' walk, maybe five in this snow, to a river that the old people said ran all winter, where the deer went when the high valleys were bad.

It would be a hard walk. Not everyone would make it.

Nobody said that last part. Ona heard it anyway, under everything they did say.

Then old Orr spoke. Orr was the oldest man in the tribe, older than Tul, with a voice like a dry branch rubbing on another. He did not speak often at the big fire anymore.

“I'll keep this fire,” he said. “Someone should.”

Nobody answered him.

Then Tul said, “I'll keep it with him.”

* * *

Ona did not move. Her whole body went cold and still the way it had gone at the gap in Pasi's shelter, and she lay there with Kep's breath warm on her neck and her eyes open in the dark.

Harn said his mother's name.

Tul said, “It's done. Don't make it a fight.”

“There's no need,” Harn said, in a voice Ona did not know. “We'll carry you and go slow.”

“You'll go slow with me and fast without me,” Tul said. “And you can't go slow, not with the children like this.”

Her voice was level. “My mother's mother kept a fire in a winter like this one, when I was smaller than Kep. I remember her sitting at it when we walked away, and she waved.”

Nobody said anything. Snow slid off a shelter roof somewhere behind the fire and landed soft.

“It's the way it's done,” Orr said. “When it's this bad. It's always been the way.”

Ona heard her mother crying. She had never heard her mother cry. It was a small sound, held in, and it stopped almost as soon as it started.

The fire talk went on to who would carry what, and which bank of the river to follow. Ona did not hear any of it. She lay outside the light and held on to Kep until he woke and complained that she was squeezing, and then she let go.

* * *

She went to Tul's shelter after the fire broke up.

Tul was sitting in the dark with a small fire of her own going, no bigger than two hands. She was mending a strap.

She was always mending. She looked up when Ona came in and then looked back down at her work.

“Sit,” she said.

Ona did not sit.

“You heard,” Tul said.

“Yes.”

“Then sit. It's cold with the flap open.”

Ona let the flap fall and sat. The little fire popped. Tul's fingers went in and out of the hide with the bone point, steady, in and out, the way they always went.

“That's why,” Ona said. “The plants and the water places, all of it.”

“Yes.”

“You could have told me.”

“I am telling you.”

“You could have told me before.” Ona's voice came out higher than she meant. “You let me think it was just plants.”

Tul set down the bone point.

“If I told you on the first day, would you have heard a single plant?” she said.

Ona opened her mouth and shut it again.

“No,” Tul said. “You'd have heard this every day and nothing else, and the plants would have gone in one ear and out the other.”

She picked the point back up. “I needed them in you. Now they're in you.”

Ona put her arms around her knees. She did not cry. She was too angry to cry, and she did not know who she was angry at, and that made it worse.

“I'll carry you,” she said. “I'm strong. I carried Kep all of last summer.”

“You'll carry what I gave you,” Tul said. “That weighs enough.”

* * *

They sat a long time. The fire burned down. Tul did not put more wood on it. The wood was counted now, and the little fire was all Tul would let herself have.

At last Tul put the mending away. She reached across the coals and touched Ona's temple, the side of her head above the eye, with two fingers.

“I go with you,” she said. “In here.”

Ona held still.

“Say me the water places,” Tul said.

Ona said them: the one below the black rock at the head of the valley, the one where the two streams met under the leaning tree, and the one at the back of the ravine on the sunrise side, where you had to go through the willows on your knees.

“Again,” Tul said.

Ona said them again. Her voice shook the second time and Tul did not stop her for it.

“Good,” Tul said. “Go to sleep.”

* * *

In the morning the tribe packed.

It went fast. There was not much left to pack. The shelters came down and the hides were rolled and lashed, and the people stood in the white light with their breath going up and their packs on, and the

children were quiet, even Kep, because the grown people were so quiet.

Orr and Tul sat at the old fire. Someone had built it up for them and piled wood beside it, more than they needed and less than they would need. Orr had his robe pulled up over his head like a hood.

Tul sat beside him with her mending in her lap. She was not mending it.

People went to them one at a time. Some spoke, and some only stood.

Harn knelt in front of his mother and put his forehead against hers and stayed that way until she pushed him off with her hand flat on his chest, and he stood and walked away fast without looking at anyone.

Neka went. Kep went, and Tul held his face in her two hands and told him to eat everything they gave him, and he said he would, and he did not understand anything.

Ona could see that he did not understand anything. She was glad of it and could not have said why.

Then it was Ona's turn and she could not make her feet go.

Tul looked at her across the fire. She did not call her over. She lifted one hand a little off her lap, and then put it back.

Ona went.

She did not say anything. There was nothing she could find to say, nothing that was not already said in the dark the night before. She crouched in front of her grandmother and Tul looked at her with her small dark eyes, steady, not wet.

"The brown one with the fox smell," Tul said.

"Never," Ona said.

Tul nodded.

That was all.

* * *

The fire-stone at the lake camp was a slab of gray rock by the path to the shore. The tribe went past it in a line. Each person touched it with the other gesture, the one for a camp you would not see again, and went on, and none of them looked back.

Ona came to it.

She knew which gesture was right. She had watched Tul make it at the first camp, two moves ago now, when the sun first went white. She knew how it went and what it meant.

She touched the stone with the backs of two fingers. Quick. The way you did when you were going out and meant to come back.

Behind her at the fire, Tul said, "That's the wrong one."

Ona did not turn around.

"I know," she said.

She went on down the path after her mother and did not change it.

* * *

The walk to the sunset river took six days.

On the fourth day they saw a mammoth. It came out of a side valley ahead of them, alone, huge and dark against the white snow, and it crossed the line of their path at a walk and did not look at them.

Harn stopped the tribe with his hand and everyone stood and watched it go. It took a long time.

When it was gone up the far slope, Kep asked what it was.

"You watch it," Harn said. "It goes. You remember what you saw."

Ona remembered. She put it in beside the plants and the water places and the four presses and the breath.

On the sixth day they came to the river, and it was running.

* * *

The light came right the summer after.

Nobody could say which day that happened either. Ona was gathering on a slope above the new camp, digging with the stick Tul had left her, and she looked down at her own hand on the stick and her hand had a shadow under it.

A real shadow. Black, with an edge to it, sharp as a cut.

She stopped digging. She held up her hand and turned it and watched the shadow turn with it on the ground, clean and dark, the way shadows had been before. Then she looked up.

The sun hurt.

It hurt the way it was supposed to hurt, a hard white blaze she could not hold her eyes on, and she looked away fast with the water running out of her eyes. The dark spot came and floated over everything she looked at after, the slope and the grass and the river below. She stood there with her eyes stinging and let it float.

The sky around the sun was blue.

* * *

The tribe was smaller.

Ona counted it that night at the fire, the way Neka had taught her to count the stores. She went face by face. Some were gone that she had not thought would be gone.

Two of the old ones, Tul and Orr, at the lake. One of the hunters on the walk, who went down in the snow on the fifth day and did not get up. Three children over the winter at the river, from the cough.

Lim was not one of them. He was walking now, falling down, getting up, shouting at the falling. Dorr laughed at him every time.

Ona held all of the counted faces, the gone ones and the here ones, side by side.

* * *

Later that summer Yeda was called to a birth and she took Ona with her.

She did not ask Neka this time. She came to the shelter and said, “Bring your hands,” and Ona went. The child came fast and pink and screaming and did not need anything from either of them, and afterward, washing at the river in the long light, Yeda flicked water at her and said, “Tell me what you'd have done if it came gray.”

Ona told her: the arm and the head low, the two fingers there and not lower, four presses, the turn, the mouth over mouth and nose, the bird breath, the watching, and again.

Yeda listened with her head on one side.

“Good,” she said. “Who are you going to give it to?”

Ona looked at her.

“You don't keep it,” Yeda said. “You hold it till someone needs it, and then you put it in them.”

She stood and shook her hands dry. “Think about who.”

* * *

That night Ona lay awake in the shelter with Kep breathing beside her and the summer dark outside, the stars sharp and white through the smoke hole the way stars were supposed to be.

She said the plants. She said them in the order Tul had given them, slope by slope, rock face by rock face, what each one healed and what it harmed. She said the water places, all three, and the way to each one.

She said the ice, the white and the gray. She said the four presses and the breath.

When she got to the end there was no one to tell her to start over. So she told herself.

"Again," she said, and began.

The World of Family on Ice

Who's Who

The people of the novel as you first meet them, in the first spring of the ash. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Dak	A hunter who reads ground, sky and animals better than anyone he knows. He starts every fire with his father's old strike-stone. The middle finger of his right hand never closed right, and his knee complains in the cold.
Sela	Dak's mate. She counts everything: food, fuel, water, days, people. She knows plants the way Dak knows ground, carries two smooth river stones she never explains, and is pregnant when the ash begins to fall.
Fen	Their daughter, about fourteen winters. Restless, quick and always ranging farther than she was told. She marks the ground she reads on bark and carries a reddish flint she picked up when she was small.
Tev	Their son, eight winters. Quiet, precise and watching everything. He keeps a set of counting stones from the riverbed near their first camp and says what he has found only when he has it.
Ona	The oldest person any of them knows. She holds plants, places and ways of healing that live nowhere else. She has seen wrong light once before, as a child.
Hura	An old woman of Urg's people who knows a place toward the far cold and can show the way there.
Urg	A broad, heavy-browed man of the people who range the valley on the sunrise side. He does not move until he understands what he is looking at.
Voh	A young man of Urg's people. Fen first knows him as the boy with the bark, because he marks the ground the way she does, with different signs.
Gur	The man at the head of a camp half a day toward the ash. Gray at the temples, pleasant on the surface, and hard to read.
Asha	Gur's mate of many winters, a woman about Sela's age who wastes nothing, including what she sees.
Renn	Gur's son. He and Fen were promised to each other in a pairing their fathers settled when they were small.
Brak and Mora	Old friends of Dak and Sela. Brak is the largest man Dak knows well. They have several children.
Kiva and Ral	Brak and Mora's eldest daughter and her mate, who range together as a pair.

In this story only: Tul, Ona's grandmother; Harn and Neka, Ona's father and mother; Kep, her little brother; Yeda, the woman the others go to when a birth will be hard; Pasi, her first child Lim, and his father Dorr; and old Orr.

Timeline

From the oldest memory in the novel to the night the families meet to decide where to go.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Many winters before	When Ona is a girl, younger than Fen, the light goes wrong for a summer. The animals move wrong for two seasons. Two winters after, the hunger is bad enough that the old ones step back, and the tribe moves three times. *Again* takes place here.
Long before	Dak's father teaches him the fire-stone, the strike-stone and the ways of the animals, as his father's father taught him.
Five winters before	Gur and Dak settle the pairing of Fen and Renn.
Three winters before	Dak's family finds the bowl between two ridges and keeps coming back to it.
Before	Far toward the ash, a mountain that has been grumbling for three days opens.
A few days in	A fine gray ash begins to settle on everything. The game moves wrong and the cold does not break.
The first morning	The dawn comes the color of old bone. Dak reads the sky and cannot name what he sees.
Soon after	Sela goes to Ona, who has seen this light once before. Ona takes her to Hura, who draws in the ash the way to a wall two days toward the far cold.
The same days	Tev finds the water source going cloudy. Ral and Kiva come back from the migration ground and find it empty. Fen meets the boy with the bark.
Then	Brak and Mora arrive with children who cough. Two days later Gur comes with six others, unannounced, to talk about moving together and about the pairing.
Spring	The day of the spring ritual comes and nothing returns. Sela says the three things anyway.
The meeting	The families gather at the flat rock above the river to settle where to go. What they choose is the novel's to tell.

Places

- **The bowl.** Dak's family's camp, a shallow bowl between two ridges, the higher one blocking the worst of the winter wind. Two ways out, both passable in snow.
- **The ridge and the col.** The ridge above the bowl, and the col where two ridges meet. From the col you can see three valleys toward the ash.

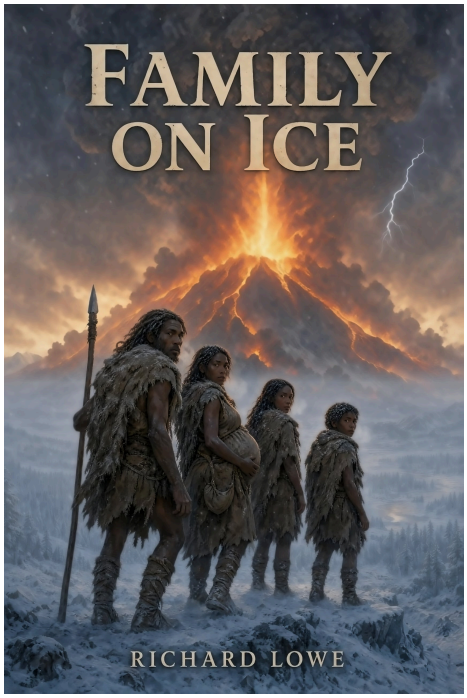
- **The half-day source.** Water that comes up from underground, a half day's walk uphill from the bowl.
- **Ona's camp.** Over the ridge from the bowl, toward the high ground.
- **Gur's camp.** Half a day toward the ash.
- **The valley on the sunrise side.** Where Urg's people range, camp and leave their signs.
- **The flat rock above the river.** The old gathering place between the camps.
- **The shelf.** A rock shelf with a partial overhang, a day's travel toward the sunset, which Gur knows.
- **The wall.** As Hura describes it: a wall of ice toward the far cold, so tall its top cannot be seen, with an arch at its base where a clean river runs out and the wind stops.
- **The mountain.** Far toward the ash, farther than anyone in the novel has ranged.

Glossary

- **The ash.** Fine gray grit that falls without weather in it. It tastes of rock and gets into the water, the lungs and the tinder.
- **The wrong light.** The yellow-gray daylight of the ash, which flattens shadows.
- **The trouble direction.** Toward the ash, where the sky is worst. The far cold lies the other way.
- **The fire-stone.** A flat stone at the edge of a camp's worked ground, touched with the backs of two fingers going out and coming back. A camp you will not see again gets another gesture.
- **The strike-stone.** The flint struck against the yellow stone to make fire. Dak's came from his father, and his father's father.
- **Counting stones.** Tev's stones, each with a feel he gave it, laid out in the same order to hold a count.
- **Bark marks.** Scratches on bark that hold the shape of the land. Fen makes them, and so does Voh, with different signs.
- **The trading language.** A small, blunt language that different peoples share some of. When it fails, hands and demonstration take over.
- **Urg's people.** Shorter and broader than Dak's people, with heavier brows and deeper chests. The rules for meeting them are not spoken; they are known. In *Again*, Ona's people call them the broad people.
- **"I see this."** What you say on entering a place another creature used first, such as a cave bear's ground. Dak's mother's people add: I am passing through.
- **The spring ritual.** At midday on the turning day, you face where the sun returns and say the three things.
- **The earth breathing.** An old story from Dak's grandfather's grandfather: the earth breathes rarely and slowly, and you feel it in your body.
- **Here.** The word said to a newborn when it cries. The name comes later, at the first new moon, once it is clear the child will see it.
- **Animals.** Red deer and elk, which Dak hunts; aurochs; mammoth, which you watch and never hunt; cave lion, hyena and bear; ptarmigan; wild horses; wolves, which decide about you; and the raven, first to know.

Read the Novel

Ona was nine the first time the light went wrong, and she has carried what Tul and Yeda put into her ever since. In Family on Ice the light goes wrong again. The ash begins to fall, and Dak and Sela must get their family, their friends and a neighbor they cannot read somewhere the cold cannot reach.



Family on Ice

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