

SASQ'ET

(sas•ket) n. First Nation Halkomelem word for the giant wild being who lives in the forest.

Maxim Langstaff



MANHATTAN
BOOK GROUP

New York

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Sasq'et

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Inspired by true stories, this book is a work of historical fiction. The narrative, plotlines, and original characters are products of the author's imagination, and are not intended to portray a real person. While real historical and public figures, institutions, and events appear as themselves within the fictional story, they are portrayed in a manner consistent with available historical records. Any references to actual persons (outside of established historical and public figures), living or deceased, are purely coincidental.

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This book was written without the assistance or use of AI.

I have met countless people, especially indigenous people, who claim to have seen such a creature. As far as I am concerned the existence of hominids of this sort is a very real possibility.

Dr. Jane Goodall
Primatologist & Anthropologist

If there is no such animal then there must be some other explanation. There are thousands of recorded eyewitness accounts dating back more than 200 years.

Dr. Grover Krantz
Evolutionary Anthropologist, Washington State University

It seems more incredible to suggest this could all be dismissed as mere stories, misidentifications, and spurious hoaxes than it is to at least rationally entertain the well-founded suggestion that the legend of Sasquatch possibly has its basis in a real animal.

Dr. Jeffrey Meldrum
Anthropologist, Idaho State University

The whole history of scientific advance is full of scientists investigating phenomena that the establishment did not think were there.

Dr. Margaret Mead
Anthropologist

Prologue

Equinox

I never knew my grandfather until he was dead. Today I do. He didn't take his secrets with him. He left them for me. My name is Mallory Glessner. Most of the world thinks I am someone else.

The story I tell is a strange one. I find myself doubting what I know now to be true. I suppose as long as it made sense, it didn't matter. I simply needed to believe what I thought I knew.

I understand now the puzzle that was my life was missing pieces I was sure were there, but the picture I saw did not come together the way I had imagined. What I have, what I am left with, are pieces of a life scattered across the table that don't fit my story. I realize now my journey could not have been revealed from the pieces of the puzzle I had, only from the empty spaces of the missing ones. It was what wasn't there that held the adventure that was to come. What I knew, and what I had, did not matter. What I believed kept me from the world.

Fall here in northern New England is a coloring book scribbled in with crayon orange, yellow, and red. The world seems more alive at this time of year, filled in by the giddy promise of a child's imagination. The sky sparkles a crisp azure blue that stretches out against rolling hillsides frosted like Turkish candy. The dark mantle of deep green on the shoulders of the high peaks is the only constant from seasons past.

These are old mountains, worn and braced against an endless sky and the ravages of time. Beyond the deepening notches, hidden between the mountain ridges, spindles of wood smoke rise lazily from the farmhouse chimneys announcing each village and hamlet. Across the hardscrabble fields, a silent mist lifts from the headwater rivers of the Connecticut, Saco, and Androscoggin as they start their long journey to the sea. It is a time for gathering up, both a final flourish and a warning of the brace of winter storms that loom before us.

New England grit is born from this place. It is a stoic, rocky landscape, ancient and timeless, sometimes harsh, always hard. At this time of year, dazzled by the magic beauty of the autumn leaves and the bounty of nature's harvest, it is a reminder of the assuredness of change and the coming darkness through which we must inevitably pass. This is where I was born and where I live. It is who I am.

I am not sure this isn't my whole story. Not much of the rest of it makes much sense to me anymore. The past hovers like a flickering shadow, a whirr of movie frames from a made-up life- a fiction I simply chose to believe from a script I did not write. What I hold onto, what remains, is my memory of an adventure made possible by what I didn't know. What I didn't have. What I didn't believe.

We think things start at the beginning. They don't. They start where they start. For me, beginnings portend the end of something. The pursuit of some kind of bold design, some kind of meaning or purpose never really made sense to me. It sounds good in a book, but life just doesn't work that way, at least not for me.

In truth, I have been lost more often than not. The good thing is being lost urges you on. I'm not sure we can stop the inexorable, inevitability of our own movement. It's what life demands of us. Yesterday is today's lost opportunity. You can't get it back. Tomorrow is little more than an expectation. What we do is move toward it. It is this burden of time that provides perhaps the best definition of faith.

Is my story true? It is for me. The truth lies within. It's not somewhere else. I certainly cannot lay claim to yours. What I have learned, what my journey has taught me, is that sometimes the truth is best left unknown.

*Mallory Glessner
Bethlehem, New Hampshire*

Part One

THE SUMMONS

This is at the bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have the courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences... all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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Chapter One

The Phone Call

“Mrs. Glessner, there’s a phone call for you from Hamilton Jenness.”

“Thank you, Max. I’ll take it in the solarium. - *oh*, would you be so kind as to bring me my tea?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ham?”

“Hello Kate.

“What a delight to hear your voice! And to what do I owe the pleasure of your call so bright and early on this Monday morning?”

“Albert is dead, Kate.”

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Chapter Two

Albert

The New York Times, Sunday, September 1, 1996.

By Tom Hudson

Albert Pingree, timber magnate, conservationist, and great-grandson of essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, dead at 77

Albert Pingree, the only son of Hudson Pingree and Florence Coffin, whose family timber interests at one time made them the largest private landowners in New England, died yesterday of an apparent heart attack while walking near his cabin in British Columbia.

Pingree's family was a political and economic force in New England for more than 100 years. In 1918, a year before his birth, Albert Pingree's parents donated more than 500,000 acres of timber holdings to the US Department of Agriculture for the express purpose of creating the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire and Maine. Today, the 1,173 square mile National Forest is one of the largest protected areas in the eastern United States.

In 1973, Albert Pingree established the Pingree Prize in association with the American Museum of Natural History. The five-million-dollar prize is awarded to the winner of the annual scientific debate. Past participants have included Carl Sagan, Margaret Mead, Stephen J. Gould, Jacques Cousteau, Buckminster Fuller, Stephen Hawking, Silvia Earle, and Atticus Willey.

Born in Portland, Maine, in 1919, Pingree amassed the largest fortune in the history of the timber industry through a land lease arrangement with the Canadian government. Combining his interests in conservation and timber made him one of the richest men on earth. Forbes Magazine estimated his personal wealth at thirty-five billion dollars.

A long-time supporter of the Wildlife Conservation Society and the American Museum of Natural History, Pingree financed the Society's field

efforts to save the Siberian Tiger, the Mountain Gorilla, and the Java Rhino. His multi-million-dollar contribution in support of the Department of the Interior's Yellowstone Wolf Reintroduction Program assured their effort could not be stymied by political interests. His fortune helped seed national parks in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, including the 115,000 square-mile Chang Tang Reserve in China.

On the occasion of the American Museum of Natural History's one-hundred-year anniversary, Pingree donated ninety million dollars, the largest gift in their 132-year history.

Never one to seek the limelight, when asked about his anonymous philanthropic activities, he said, "Philanthropy should be about what it does, not who does it."

His thirty-million-dollar gift to Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine remains the largest ever received by the school. In his commencement speech to the graduating class of 1992, he assured the students, "A mind made up ensures a world undiscovered," warning them their success would have little to do with their scientific prowess, and instead suggesting service and humility the better teachers. "It is the surety of man wherein lies his demise. Man's salvation will depend more on a willingness to accept than a determination to know." His statement that science and technology would not provide the answers necessary for the survival of mankind was not well-received. His personal connection to the school is unknown.

One of the earliest investors in Texas Biomedical Research Institute, whose founder, Tom Slick, had been a classmate at Exeter Academy, Pingree was a staunch proponent of genetic research.

Albert Pingree held honorary degrees from numerous Universities, including Dartmouth, Tufts, McGill, China's Peking University, and the London School of Economics. A member of the Explorers Club, he served on the Boards of the American Museum of Natural History, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Texas Biomedical Institute, the Canadian Forestry Association, and the Society of American Foresters.

Boyhood summers spent at Pine Island and the Birch Island Camp in Maine ingrained in him a lifelong passion for the outdoors. A graduate of Dartmouth College, Pingree was an early advocate of downhill skiing and participated in cutting the first trails on New Hampshire's Cannon Mountain, establishing it as one of the first ski mountains in the United States.

Graduating from Dartmouth College in 1939, Pingree hired on for the summer as a timber cruiser for Crown Paper in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In 1941, college classmate Charles Minot Dole, founder of the National Ski Patrol, recruited him to join the war effort. Enlisting in the US Army,

Pingree helped Dole train the newly formed 87th Mountain Infantry Battalion at Fort Drum, Washington. By 1943, this elite, alpine fighting division would become the legendary 10th Mountain Division. His service was cut short when, in the spring of 1942, he was injured while rescuing a fellow soldier during a training exercise on Mt. Rainier.

By 1947, Pingree had become the Manager for Crown Paper's timber operations in the Pacific Northwest. A reputation for spending time in the woods with his cutters earned him the loyalty of the men he managed as well as the notice of Crown's executives. Quietly accumulating large chunks of Crown stock, by 1951, he emerged as the largest shareholder of the company. Assuming control of its board and nearly nine million acres of timber holdings, at the age of 32, Albert Pingree became the youngest self-made billionaire in American history.

His radical approach to timber management was unimagined by the logging industry in 1951. By re-planting as he cut, he accelerated the thirty-year harvest cycle, increasing profits for both Pingree Paper and the Canadian government without diminishing the country's natural resources. His model represented not only innovative forestry; it made his competitors unable to compete. Over time, his increased profits enabled him to lease millions of acres of Canadian land while purchasing large timber holdings in the western United States.

The largest private landholder in the world at the time of his death, Albert Pingree had amassed nearly forty million acres of timberland across Canada and the United States.

Awarded the Order of Canada, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1980. In presenting him the Medal of Freedom in 1994, President Clinton said, "Albert Pingree has taught us that with innovative thinking, economic advancement does not mean we have to sacrifice the natural world. To the contrary, with equal attention to both, such advancement gives us the best hope for the future."

Chapter Three

The Rocks

Bethlehem, New Hampshire, is a remnant village haunted by an earlier time. Tucked against the White Mountains, it lies two and a half hours north of Boston. Main Street's tired charm offers a lone coffee shop, an old-time movie theater, a hippy art gallery, and a gas station whose rusty *Esso* sign still promises to "put a tiger in your tank."

At eighty-two, Frank Murphy shuffles out seven days a week to wash windshields, check your oil, and pump your gas. "Cash preferred," the sign says. If you insist, he'll write you a receipt with the pencil tucked behind his ear.

"Fill'er up, Frank!" Mallory shouted. She was running late. "Hey, what happened to your vending machine?"

"Yestuhday, ayuh. I was pumpin' gas. 'Round closing time a big old beah walked right into the shop! Mustah' left the back door to the gahrage open. Anyway, she decided to help herself to some snacks. I chased her out with the hose, but twern't much left of that machine. Big ol' gal. Wicked cunnin'! Mustah' been near 400 pounds."

"Did you call Fish and Wildlife?"

"Not sure what that'd do. They'd likely just shoot hur, and I fighur'd she made it through anothah huntin' season maybe she'd urn'd a few snacks."

Along with his New England accent, Frank Murphy was an anachronism.

"Nevah liked stockin' that dahn machine anyways! Only folks from away evuh use it," he noted, reaching for the pump. "You headin' up to The Rocks, are yuh?"

"Kate's orders, dinner at seven."

"I thought dinnah was resurv'd for Sundays?"

"So did I," Mallory replied.

"Well, you bettah' skidaddle, It's ne'r seven now," he noted, squinting at the meter. "That'll be twenty even."

Mallory shifted the Jeep into gear. “Thanks Frank. See you next week.”
“Not if that old sow comes back!”

Frank’s grandfather had worked the farm at The Rocks. His family had been a part of the Glessner family for more years than he could count.

Driving past the old fieldstone church and town library pretty much marked the end of Bethlehem. The logging industry was gone. What scant employment there was, was mostly found with the big ski operations. The small family farms that dotted the river valleys were barely holding on. As the young people fled to find work in the cities, the forest slowly reclaimed the abandoned fields.

As Mallory pulled her Jeep through the crumbling stone pillars at the bottom of the hill, a swish of leaves rushed across the drive. It was often windy here. The stinging cold across her face was a welcome reminder.

She loved the old stonewalls that lined the long driveway. The granite boulders, dug from the land, offered memories of secret hiding places where she used to stash the little girl treasures she found in the woods.

Cresting the hillside in the fading light, the estate’s great fieldstone barn appeared, its giant buttresses gripping hard to the ground. The lights and sounds confirmed the evening milking had begun.

Surrounded by the great mantle that is the White Mountain National Forest, The Rocks and its 1,400 acres was once the largest private estate in New Hampshire. It was here, in the pre-dawn mornings before the bugs came out, she scampered to the barn in her pajamas to collect the unpasteurized cream and fresh milk for breakfast. And it was on crisp fall days like today she helped put the gardens to bed, lugging the last of the rutabagas and pumpkins strewn across the frosted ground to the root cellar until she could no longer hold up her arms.

Looking out across the darkening fields, her thoughts turned to the long treks she’d made through the drifting snow on her rickety snowshoes. She followed the animal tracks she found along the forest edge, and she could identify them all.

The old sugarhouse was still standing, a distant reminder of a time long past. Oh, to have that feeling again. Hauling sap buckets through the heavy spring snow, driving the great sled, an old converted farm carriage, and the utter exhaustion of pulling the tired, steaming horses through the mud in the wet and miserable March melt. Such was life at The Rocks. For Mallory, it was mostly an outdoor life shared with her mother.

Katherine Glessner was the last and only surviving grandchild of Chicago industrialist John Jacob Glessner. He built The Rocks in the 1880’s

as a summer retreat for his asthmatic son. A private conservation “laboratory”, he wanted to improve the farming methods commonplace at the time. As the co-founder of the agricultural machinery company International Harvester, his considerable wealth could support his vision, and New Hampshire’s cool summers and clean mountain air provided much relief from the stultifying midwestern summers.

More than 100 years on, black bears and moose still frequented the pastoral hillsides that pushed against the estate’s darker forests. Ancient sugar maples and paper birch surrounded the estate’s cottage with their blazing fall colors, while across the distant horizon, the looming specter that was Mt. Washington rose like an apparition. It was a place Robert Frost found *Misgiving*, Eliot Porter, a *wildness that was the preservation of the world*.

Frederick Olmsted, the American landscape architect responsible for both Central Park and the White House grounds, designed the estate’s sumptuous gardens. Katherine’s mother, Frances Glessner, lived at the cottage until her own death in 1962. Fiercely independent, she was the youngest of John Jacob Glessner’s children.

Sunday dinner at The Rocks was a weekly ritual. Only today it wasn’t Sunday. A formal affair with the family silver laid out, captains of industry, newspaper publishers, artists and musicians, scientists and writers; a veritable who’s who of the day’s leading minds often came across from Bretton Woods or up from Boston. The Rocks was a gathering place.

No matter how routine, the drive to the cottage always filled Mallory with a peculiar sense of sadness and regret. While the family estate represented a by-gone era, it was, for her, a stark reminder of so much of what has been lost. For all its antiquated magnificence, The Rocks reflected a world more connected to bigger things than the promise modern technology offered. It remained for her a sanctuary, a place whose kindred memories were very much alive and still necessary.

7:08, she’d almost made it on time. Kate stood waiting at the front door. She never did that- *and Uncle Ham!*

Chapter Four

Family Reunion

Kate embraced her with a quick hug. “Darling, thank you for coming. Ham, now be a dear and rustle us up some drinks. I’ll meet the two of you in the library. I’m going to check on dinner. Oh, and Mal, I’ve made up your room so you and Kemo don’t have to drive home tonight,” she insisted. “His food bowl is in the kitchen. Now, where is that dog anyway?”

“Probably chasing the deer out of the garden.”

“Good boy.”

Katherine Glessner was a woman in charge. Even at 76, there wasn’t a problem that couldn’t be solved if you put your mind to it. The definition of New England practical, she held no countenance for what she thought of as the self-indulgence of sentimentality. Her experience informed her, not her beliefs. For Mallory, that was “Kat”.

Mallory’s brother Jonathan was in the kitchen helping Max put the finishing touches on the cocktail snacks as Kate pushed through the door. In charge of the estate, Jonathan kept the lights on and the trains running on time. Max was Kate’s long, devoted butler.

“Jonathan, go say hello to Mallory,” she insisted, pushing him through the door. “Max, be a dear and fetch my scrapbook on the side table in my bedroom and bring it down.”

Living alone as she did, Kate felt it was good to have a man or two around. The nephew of her long-departed housekeeper, Jonathan, arrived from Memphis for a visit with his aunt one summer and never left. His father shot and killed his mother in a drug-addled rage, leaving the eight-year-old boy to fend for himself. Kate offered to raise him as her own, providing him a home and an education. His devotion to her was boundless. He was, for Mallory, the only brother she ever had, and the most capable man she had ever known.

Impeccably dressed in his dapper bow tie, Ham stood, staring out the study window. His presence always marked a special occasion. Holidays, birthdays, graduations, even Mallory's high school ski races. Uncle Ham was there, and the closest thing to a father she had ever known.

"What an unexpected treat!" she exclaimed, embracing him with a big hug. "When did you get here?"

"I arrived this morning. Something came up I needed to attend to with Kate. I thought it might be a great excuse to get out of the office for the weekend and come up and see you."

"You're still coming for Thanksgiving I hope."

"If you'll have me."

"We need you to carve the turkey- and I need a dance partner."

"I'm afraid, Mal, these near eighty-year-old knees are all worn out," he smiled.

Thanksgiving at The Rocks was a big affair. Kate opened the estate to the town for a grand harvest festival. After nearly forty years, it had become a beloved north woods tradition. Farmers came with fresh produce. Livestock was auctioned. There was the traditional sheep shearing, calf walking, pumpkin carving, taffy pull, and egg toss for the kids.

A great chicken barbecue was laid out on the lawn. The sweeping hillside overflowed with local honey and maple syrup. Families came from as far as Boston for the blueberry, raspberry, and blackberry jams, jellies, and baked goods. Farm fresh eggs, organic meats, vegetables, and dried herbs were set out on the rickety wooden tables.

For Mallory, the best part was the traditional contra-dance above the barn after dark. The cows didn't seem to mind. The dusty old stand-up piano was tuned up, and the Green Mountain Boys came across from Vermont. With a fiddle, a stand-up bass, and guitar, they led the whole town through the traditional jigs and reels everyone tried to remember from the year before.

Ice-cold cider, trays of homemade donuts, and steaming hot cocoa made the 'rounds. Before you knew it, the man behind the counter at the grocery store was swinging you around by the seat of your pants, every do-si-do spinning you off to someone new. Stepping outside into the frosty night air, exhausted and soaked from the heat on the dance floor, you were alive and the world was right.

Tonight, the warm glow from the Tiffany lamps in the library felt reassuring. The old glass windows, blurred by time, rattled in defiance as a bitter autumn wind whipped across the fields.

"Mal, can I pour you a drink?" Ham asked, standing at the cedar bar.

“A cup of coffee would be nice,” she answered, plunking herself down into the worn leather chair. “It’s been a long day.”

“Try this,” he insisted, holding out a drink. “It’ll slow things down.”

“Springbank?”

Ham frowned in mock consternation. He only drank single malt.

“O.K. you two, I’ve asked Jonathan to set us up for some light supper here in the library,” announced Kate, entering the room as Max followed, discreetly placing the scrapbook at her spot on the sofa. Kemo snuck quietly in behind, clutching a fat beef bone.

“Long time no see!” said Mallory, as Jonathan entered, placing the mixed nuts on the coffee table.

“Well, we’re always happy to see Kemo,” he smiled, swallowing her up in a bear hug.

“Jonathan made pea soup for you tonight, Mal,” Kate interjected, “with peas from the garden. I know it’s your favorite.”

Ham handed Kate her martini: Bombay, Lillet, a lemon twist, always shaken.

“Thank you dear, that looks lovely,” she said, settling down on the sofa.

“What’s the special occasion?” asked Mallory. “Oh, before I forget, did you hear that Albert Pingree died yesterday?”

Ham and Katherine glanced at each other. “Wasn’t he your commencement speaker at Tufts?” Ham asked, his tone easy. “He gave the Vet School a lot of money, as I recall.”

“He did,” Mallory nodded, “and it wasn’t without controversy. A lot of students thought he was trying to buy an honorary degree.”

Ham chuckled. “I doubt that,” he smiled, pulling a photo from the folder next to him. “I bet you remember this.”

“Albert Pingree!” Mallory exclaimed. “I sat next to him at the President’s Dinner the night before graduation. I’m still not sure why I was included ... *wow*.” Mallory paused, letting the memories flood back. “He was a sweet man... God, I made a fool of myself.”

“I’m sure you made quite an impression,” Kate remarked.

“You can see the scars on his neck,” Mallory noted, studying the photograph.

“Scars?” Kate was surprised.

“They were pretty hard to hide,” she said, handing her the picture. “He told me they were from an old boating accident. I told him I thought they gave him character, and he laughed at me. Where did you get this picture?”

“It was your grandfather’s,” said Ham without missing a beat.

Cold sleet struck hard at the timeworn windows as the wind clawed at the glass. Mallory looked first at Ham and then to Kate. "I don't understand. Albert Pingree is..."

"Oh, good, dinner is here," Kate interrupted. "Over there would be fine, Max," she said, pointing to the credenza.

A great tureen of piping hot soup, along with an assortment of cheeses from the farm, a fresh baguette, and a large garden salad, was carefully laid out.

"Will someone please explain to me what's going on?" Mallory insisted.

"Now, dear, don't get your knickers in a twist," Kate admonished. "We have some things we need to discuss and I need you to stay focused," she said, handing her a spoon. "Here's one for you, too, Jonathan."

"Is this why you asked me here tonight?" Mallory asked.

"Yes," Ham answered. "Given the circumstances, it couldn't wait."

"Circumstances?"

Hamilton Jenness was a self-contained man. He was steady and solid, always calm, always optimistic. Other than her mother, he was the person Mallory most trusted in the world. "It couldn't wait" was disquieting.

"I am the executor of your grandfather's will," Ham continued. "I am tasked with ensuring Albert's wishes are carried out with respect to the disposition of his assets and property."

"What does this have to do with me?" Mallory asked.

"It's a long story, dear," Kate interjected. "I'm not sure we'll have time for it all tonight, but we'll answer what we can. Now, eat your soup before it gets cold."

Mallory's head was spinning. She wasn't sure what to ask. *Albert Pingree?* "How did he die?"

"Heart attack," Ham answered. "His Indian caretaker, Daniel Stillwater, found him behind his cabin."

"How old was he?"

"Seventy-seven I think, right Kate?"

"Yes."

"Did you know him? I mean..."

As the logs on the fire shifted, Ham took a long, slow sip from his drink. "We were roommates in college."

"Dartmouth?"

"Yes."

Mallory never knew Uncle Ham had any connection to Albert Pingree. "Did *you* know him?" she asked, turning to her mother. *Any* explanation would do.

“I did.”

The warmth from the soup was cold comfort. Mallory sat, shocked. “My *grandfather*? You both knew him? How come you never mentioned him, never told me, *either of you!*”

Kemo rose from his spot near the fireplace and settled against Mallory’s feet. He was an English Shepherd. Any lack of civility was worrisome.

Mallory was incredulous. “Were you going to tell me?”

“He insisted you not know,” replied Kate.

“So, Albert Pingree knew he was my grandfather when he came and spoke at my Tufts graduation? This is... this is... *nuts!* If Albert Pingree is my grandfather, then who is my father? Who is my grandmother?”

“I am,” Kate answered.

“*What?*”

“I am your grandmother.”

Jonathan looked up, surprised.

“I know this is a lot to absorb, my dear, but we did what we did to protect you, to ensure *our* past could not compromise your future.”

“What began as a small confidence, Mal, we always intended to reveal to you.” Ham paused to gauge her reaction. “You were happy. You were loved. There didn’t seem to be any advantage in dragging you into the lives and choices of others whom you never knew. Neither Albert nor Kate wanted that for you.”

“Who is *we*?” Mallory demanded.

“Albert and *I* made the decision,” responded Kate. “We agreed I would raise you as my own.”

“Who then is my mother?”

“Your mother was mine, my child,” Kate answered. “She grew up in this house just as you did.”

“What happened to her? Where is she?”

“She died in childbirth... In 1969.”

“*Where?*”

“New York City.”

“What was her name?”

“Helen. Helen Glessner.” Kate’s words floated over her like a dream, someone else’s. “We called her Hanna.”

“Why wasn’t her last name Pingree?” Mallory asked.

“It would have complicated things. What she needed most was a family and a mother. Albert couldn’t provide that.”

“What happened?”

"I got a call one day from St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City asking me if I was Helen Glessner's mother. It was February 26th. I hadn't heard from her except for the odd card or note in nearly two years." Mallory could see Kate was struggling. "After she left for Columbia, she only came home once. I was told she was pregnant and decided to have the birth naturally, in her apartment, surrounded by friends."

"Apparently, there were complications," Ham interjected. "By the time they got her to the hospital, she had lost too much blood."

"Who is my father then? Where is *he*?" Mallory stumbled, dumbfounded.

"Your grandfather and I searched for months to find your father," replied Ham. "No one seemed to know who he was. By all accounts, your mother didn't even have a boyfriend."

"You have to understand, honey, things were different then, less conventional, certainly for her generation. For young people, the old ways didn't work anymore, so they set out to change the rules."

"What was she like, my mother?"

Kate paused. "She was passionate about music... the Weavers, Peter, Paul & Mary, Motown, Bob Dylan. Most of the old records you grew up with were hers. The last time she was here, it was just after Christmas, I think... 1964. She dragged me down to the movie house in Bethlehem to see *A Hard Day's Night*."

Mallory's head was exploding. "Where is she buried?"

"Her ashes are scattered under the maple tree in the garden," Kate nodded, glancing out the window as the sleet continued to pummel the glass. "Sweetheart, this is for you," she continued, reaching for the scrapbook on the side table. "Long overdue. There are pictures here of your mother and your grandfather, even Uncle Ham when he was a young man."

"Did she give me my name?"

"She did. She chose Mallory. It was I who added your middle name."

"I didn't know I had a middle name."

"We never used it."

"What is it?"

"Pingree." Mallory felt suddenly numb. "Albert never knew he had a child," Kate added. "I never told him. It was only after Hanna died, I asked Uncle Ham to reach out to him."

"You're not really my uncle, are you?"

"No, Mal, I'm not," Ham answered. "We will answer all your questions, but I need you to sign a few things tonight," he insisted, standing and walking to the bar. "Albert left a will, and you are named in it."

“What are you saying?”

“He was a man of considerable means,” Ham continued, pouring himself another drink. “He was also a public figure.”

Mallory looked down at Kemo gnawing blissfully on his bone. She guessed by now she was taking in less than he was. “You haven’t said a word, Jonathan.”

“I am a Black man living in a very white world,” he smiled. “As my wife occasionally reminds me, it’s not my fault you are all so pale.” Ham chuckled, grateful for the momentary relief. “I don’t know, Mal. Revisiting the past fills me more with doubt than gratitude, and there is nothing I can do about it. I certainly can’t tell you how to feel. I’ve learned if I can’t reconcile the way the world is with the way I want it to be, I’m going to be an angry man.”

“What nobody knew, what nobody knows, other than Katherine and I, and now you and Jonathan, is that Albert *had* a child, let alone a grandchild,” Ham continued, looking over at Kate. “Mal, you are named as the principal beneficiary in his will.”

“What does that mean? I can finally put a new roof on the barn?”

“You can,” Ham smiled. “In the simplest terms, it means that what was his now belongs to someone the world doesn’t even know exists.”

“How does this affect me again?”

“You are that someone.”

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Chapter Five

The Key

June 23, 1992

I, Albert Emerson Pingree, residing at One Pingree Square, Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia, Canada, declare this to be my Last Will and Testament, and hereby revoke any and all previous or contrary Wills, declarations, or codicils.

I direct my Executor, Hamilton McClintock Jenness, to pay any and all debts owed, ensure all existing trusts, promissory notes, and any and all payments previously committed, likewise, be fully paid and distributed, along with administrative or legal costs associated with the administration of my estate.

Not later than three years after my death, I direct 5% of the net value of my estate be divided equally between the Wildlife Conservation Society and the American Museum of Natural History.

Among my possessions will be found Theodore Roosevelt's handwritten manuscript "The Wilderness Hunter", which I direct be given to the Explorer's Club of New York.

To my granddaughter, Mallory Pingree Glessner, of North Conway, New Hampshire, I give all my remaining tangible property and all policies and proceeds from such property. This includes the transfer of all my physical property, as well as any and all of my business and personal assets and rights thereto.

Signed and declared this day,

Faithfully,

Albert Emerson Pingree

Mallory signed the papers as she had been told. Ham handed her an envelope marked simply, *Mallory*, in Albert's handwriting. The only item inside it was a key, an old key, the kind of key you might expect to find with an antique desk or cabinet. Ham and Kate seemed as surprised as she was.

A little more than two inches long, the key was cylindrical. Inscribed in cursive was the name *Joseph Bramah* and a date, *1784*. Simple in design, it had an old-world elegance unlike any key she had ever seen. What it might unlock, she couldn't imagine.

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Chapter Six

Durak! (Fool!)

Anatoly slapped his card down on the middle of the wooden table, scattering the cigarette ash as Ilia stared dumbfounded. “Shit.” He didn’t have a spade.

Inhaling the moment, the stub of Nikolay’s cigarette seethed an orange glow. “*Durak!*” Anatoly shouted, his hot breath rising like smoke as his stubby little hands reached for the pile of cash. “Ah, my dear Ilia.”

Nikolay watched, exhaling his cloud of haze across the table as Ilia grabbed the only remaining bottle of vodka. There was only one drink to ease the dark gloom of the frozen Russian Primorye, only one medicine. For rich and poor alike, through war and revolution, in the post-Soviet Russia, there was little more than the elixir of fermented potatoes to unify a national identity. The only thing Moscow shared with the Russian Far East was vodka.

Ilia leaned in. “Again?” he posed, gathering up the battered cards. Anatoly poured for them both.

Nikolay reached for another cigarette. “You cheat, Anatoly,” he spat, no longer able to hide the disgust that long ago infected whatever dim hope he once had. That’s what fermented potatoes did.

“Give me the cards, Ilia,” Nikolay demanded. “Of course he cheats, he’s a politician.”

“You voted for me,” Anatoly dismissed.

“You were the only candidate,” Nikolay muttered, shuffling the cards.

Anatoly brought his dirty glass down hard on the table. “*Yes.*” This was *his* game. “For you, I will pave our main street,” he promised, picking up his cards.

“There you go again,” Nikolay nodded with disgust. “Making promises you can’t keep.” Anatoly was an idiot.

“I wouldn’t want you to get rocks in your shoes.” Anatoly spat, his gray, rotting teeth amplifying his sinister laugh.

For Nikolay, conversation was simply a way of measuring time. “Where do you think we are going to go, Anatoly? The road leads nowhere.”

“*Indeed!* Where the road goes is of little consequence. In politics, progress does not require logic, only money.”

Ilia lit another cigarette as Anatoly again drained his glass. It helped him play the hand he’d been dealt. Outside, the familiar crunch of dry snow underfoot was but another tired reminder of the relentless winter. “Play your hand, Nikolay,” he commanded.

As the crude spruce door swung open, a harsh bite of arctic air raced across the floor. The makeshift stove, little more than a rusting steel drum, shuddered awake. Its loose stovepipe whined with excitement as it pulled the cold in to feed its dying embers.

“Tchyo za ga`lima!” (*What the fuck!*) barked Anatoly, through the haze of tobacco and vodka. “Close the door! Where do you think we are? *Siberia?*” That was funny. Why didn’t anyone laugh?

Ski masks and baklavas hid the frozen faces of the two strangers as they stumbled in, shutting hard the heavy door behind them. Anatoly scowled impatiently. “Put some wood in the stove, durak!” he snarled at Ilia.

Ilia did as he was told while Anatoly watched in contempt. Why did he bother? With all the vodka he provided his village, why did he get so little respect?

Stamping their feet, George Avery and Yuri Novikov removed their mittens and neoprene masks. In the Siberian winter, there was no such thing as outerwear. The dank, sweaty stench of the room, while fifty degrees warmer than the outside, was closer to freezing than not.

“Ah, my dear Dr. Avery, this is indeed a surprise.” Anatoly’s new guest was unexpectd. “How long has it been?” he asked, his crude charm more cautionary note than enthusiasm. “Have you come to save us from another man-eating tiger? Ilia, have you ever met a tiger more beautiful *alive* than dead?”

“I’ve never seen a tiger,” Ilia responded dully.

“Comrades, come, sit. Join us,” Anatoly insisted, reaching for the bottle of vodka. “Get our visitors some glasses, Nikolay.” Pouring first for himself and then for his guests, Anatoly turned to the two men. “Sit. Sit. You must tell the Mayor of Roschino about your dangerous adventures,” he demanded, glancing at the cards he’d been dealt, and then at Ilia’s. “You take too long, Ilia,” he grouched.

There was a routine to the social contract here. Settling into a few hands of cards, George knew he had to be initiated into the group before any real

conversation could be had. Fortunately, “Durak” was a game he remembered well from his first field trip to this remote outpost twenty years earlier. The key was to lose.

As a young field scientist, he had been searching for a tiger believed to have been little more than a myth. Long thought to be extinct in the wild, the Amur Tiger of the Sikhote-Alin Mountains was more the stuff of legend than anything real. While the supernatural stories the natives passed down for a thousand years painted one picture, George had been searching for physical evidence of the animal to prove it was more than just a folktale.

Pulling up a chair, Yuri looked around cautiously. He'd been tracking tigers most of his adult life. Tigers made sense. There was a sober integrity to their actions. These men were something different, something far more dangerous.

Yuri was the best tiger tracker in the Russian Far East. A former intelligence officer in the old Soviet Union, as a young man, he had been recruited to be a part of an elite Special Forces unit stationed at Sovetsky Airbase in the Ural Military District north of Sverdlosk. His tracking skills were of particular interest to a paranoid Soviet government convinced that a pending NATO incursion across the Polar icecap was imminent. His job was to recruit the local Mansi Tribesmen as scouts, track prisoners who attempted to escape from the nearby Gulags, and monitor any suspicious activities in the area.

Yuri came to George's attention through Albert Pingree, who'd met him at a conference in Moscow in 1960 regarding the Dyatlov Pass incident. While the mystery of the bizarre deaths of the nine young hikers was never solved, Yuri had led the secret military team tasked with trying to find them prior to the official investigation.

He confided to Albert that he did not think the Soviet government's explanation was credible. There were questions about a photo negative retrieved from a camera at the scene and barefoot tracks found around the tent site from which the hikers fled in the middle of a stormy, minus twenty-degree night. Yuri impressed Albert with his analysis. A few years later, when George was looking for an experienced tracker to help establish a protected area for Siberian Tigers in the Sikhote-Alin Mountains, Albert suggested Yuri.

Pouring into the Siberian forests in the late 19th century, Russian and Chinese settlers tried to eradicate the tiger. By 1930, no more than thirty remained. Today, it was estimated that only 250 to 400 survived. Sharing one of the most remote and complex ecosystems in the world with more than 60,000 licensed hunters, it was a creature so secretive and rarely seen

that the physical evidence was mostly reduced to finding footprints. In an unbroken forest as big as Washington State, one of the largest and most dangerous predators on earth roamed wild and invisible among nearly two million people.

After an hour of badly played hands and the loss of a few hundred dollars, George sensed his opening. "Anatoly, I have a gift for you."

"Are you trying to bribe a government official?" Anatoly mocked. The humorless undertone in his voice suggested more a warning than friendly banter.

"Of course, Anatoly," smiled George, pulling a case of Hershey's almond milk chocolate bars out of his pack. "I have traveled 10,000 miles to bribe you with American chocolate."

A broad grin spread across the dull Russian's pockmarked face. Grabbing George's cheeks in his fat, beefy hands, Anatoly kissed him. "My dear friend, I accept your gift on behalf of the people of Roshchino."

Anatoly unceremoniously tore open the box. He was likely the only man in the village with any chocolate and *American* chocolate at that! The fate of the Amur Tiger, George knew, might well depend as much on this box of chocolate as anything else.

"Nikolay! There are some cooked potatoes and greens near the back door," barked Anatoly. "Ilia, bring the venison and boar up from the cellar. We must celebrate!" Unsteadily crossing the room, he unlocked a cabinet and retrieved a bottle of Dagestani Cognac, itself the likely result of an earlier bribe. "Come, come, we will eat," he insisted.

Yuri stoked the fire in the stove to a near roar as George settled into the seat of honor. It was, of course, Anatoly's. After a few too many toasts of strong Russian brandy, a meal of cigarettes and vodka, raw chunks of venison, glistening slices of wild boar fat, pickled fiddleheads, and cold, boiled potatoes were laid out. The conversation drifted easily with Yuri as translator. For the people who inhabit the Taiga and Primorski-Krai of the Siberian Far East, America was more an idea than a place. While their curiosity could not easily be satiated, the answers to their hungry questions were, as often as not, met with ridicule and disbelief.

For the average family living in the Primorsky-Krai, five hundred dollars was more than most had to live on for a year. Plumbing and central heating were incomprehensible, vacuum cleaners' silly nonsense, and the purpose of a dishwasher unexplainable. Banks were for the rich, and supermarkets, with rows of packaged food and piles of fresh produce, fantastical. George had to be careful with what he said. He needed these men to trust him.

With the remnants of the feast they'd eaten scattered across the table, American blue jeans appeared. There was no commodity more precious, expensive, or prestigious in the Russian Far East except, perhaps, the carcass of a dead tiger.

Anatoly knew why George had returned to Roshchino. He knew also the American's presence was fraught with peril. "No, no, there have been no more shootings," he dismissed with the wave of his hand. "There are no tigers, only pigs and deer. If a tiger was shot, I would know. I am the mayor."

Unease seeped into the sweaty, smoke-filled room. It was illegal to kill a tiger in Russia. In the old days, poaching a tiger would bring a fine, usually in the form of a bribe to a local official. Today, a poacher faced up to ten years in prison.

Four days earlier, two tiger cubs were spotted on a nearby logging road. For the first time, it had drawn significant interest from the international press.

The initial investigation turned up no signs or tracks of an adult tiger. Tiger cubs cannot survive in the wild without their mother. The presence of cubs without an adult female was proof a tiger had been killed. George had to find out why. He had to find the cubs. To the locals, they were worth far more dead than alive.

"How can I be of service to you, Dr. Avery?" Anatoly asked.

"We need a snowmobile," interjected Yuri.

"Oleg Kyznetsov just bought a new sled," Ilia offered.

Yuri caught George's eye as Anatoly, barely able to suppress his anger, glared at Ilia. Snowmobiles were a rare and expensive commodity, well beyond the means of most of the town's inhabitants.

"Where can one buy a snowmobile around here?" George asked.

"You can't," Nikolay blurted out, absently shuffling the cards. "Oleg got his in Vladivostok."

Anatoly had heard enough. Anyway, it was nearly two in the morning. "Friends, comrades, it has been a long evening. Might I suggest we reconvene here in the morning, say noon? Dr. Avery, we will get you situated with all necessary equipment and supplies."

George casually turned to Nikolay. "How much do you guess a new snow sled costs these days?" he asked.

"Three years' wages. Oleg must have won it playing Durak," he smiled.

Anatoly watched his guests closely, searching for signs of suspicion.

"What does Oleg do for a living?" George asked him, as he and Yuri put on their hats and gloves.

“He’s a beekeeper, or maybe he makes candles,” Anatoly dismissed.

“He got his new sled when he took his daughter to Vladivostok,” Ilia explained. “Marina, his littlest, was born with a cleft palate. She has trouble eating, and none of the other boys and girls at school will play with her. Her father wanted to get the operation to fix it, but for a long time, he couldn’t afford it.”

“It’s tragic, really,” Anatoly nodded.

“Sounds expensive. I hope the surgery was a success,” George remarked, glancing at Yuri as Anatoly yanked open the heavy door.

“We will find you a sled,” Anatoly promised, pushing them out into the frozen blizzard.

As the door slammed shut, Anatoly paused to catch his breath. He needed another drink. *Why didn’t Oleg tell him the tiger had cubs?*

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Chapter Seven

“Tyger, Tyger”

*....Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?....*

*When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?....*

(William Blake, 1794)

Boris Popov raised chickens. If you lived in Roschino, you got your eggs and chickens from Boris. Most of the village homes had small gardens pushing up against the forest. Boris had a chicken coop.

Raising chickens in Siberia was not so easy. While they can survive in minus twenty degrees, egg production stops at about fifty-two *above* zero. For Boris, this meant attaching his chicken coop to the side of his small house so he could collect the eggs and stoke the coop's small wood stove without opening it from the outside.

Arriving midday, George and Yuri were greeted enthusiastically by Anatoly, who had suggested a little side-trip to Boris' home. Apparently, during the night, there had been some kind of commotion... a tiger, suggested Anatoly. Ever the helpful public servant, he hoped poor Boris's plight might serve as a useful ruse. How could a tiger have been poached if it was stealing chickens?

George and Yuri could see the back wall had been ripped off from the side of Boris's house. There were a handful of dead chickens on the floor and a

couple more on the ground outside. Other than a few broken eggs, little else was disturbed. There was no bloody carnage and almost no feathers. In spite of Boris's hysteria, it was clear to George that whoever had taken his chickens and eggs was not a tiger.

"Boris, put down the gun before you shoot somebody," said Anatoly impatiently. His head was still throbbing from the night before. "How big was the tiger?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" he shouted at him.

"I never saw it!"

"Well, it must have been pretty big to rip off the side of the coop here," remarked Yuri, inspecting the splintered pieces still attached to the house.

"How many chickens did you have?" Anatoly asked him.

"Twenty-two."

"What do you remember, Boris?" George asked.

"Nothing."

Anatoly was quickly losing patience. "What do you mean, nothing!"

"I was asleep."

Asleep? For God's sake! You're telling me a tiger came to your house, ripped the wall off your shed, raided your chicken coop, ran off with two dozen chickens, and you heard nothing?"

"Albina and I were asleep. It was blowing hard last night. We heard a big crack. I figured a tree had gone down in the woods."

"Didn't the chickens make any noise?" Anatoly asked.

"No. They get quiet when it's this cold. They go into a trance."

Yuri continued to inspect the side of the coop. 8' tall and 5' wide, it had been completely ripped from the building and was lying in the snow.

The day was grey and blustery. While the snow had stopped, the wind continued to create drifts, burying what few clues there might be. An obscured line of indentations led into the woods. Unfortunately, the tracks had been stomped all over by Boris.

"We had quite a storm last night," George noted. "Do you think the wind could have pulled that wall off?"

For poor Boris, the question only added insult to injury. "Then where are my chickens?"

"Probably buried out there in the snow somewhere," Anatoly muttered.

"What about these tracks, Yuri?" George asked, pointing toward the tree line.

Yuri knelt down, brushing away the filled-in snow as more blew in. "Too big for a fox."

"A tiger? Perhaps one of the cubs?" George asked.

There was much Yuri could tell by examining a tiger print. He could often calculate the rough age and size of the animal and, if he was lucky, identify a specific individual. But here, there was nothing to work with. Removing his glove, he moved his fingers along the edge of the indentation. "Not a tiger."

"That's good news."

"More likely human or bear. Look at the shape of the track. They're almost half a meter long."

"Somebody's got big boots," George mused. "Why would anybody be out in this kind of storm, stealing chickens no less?"

"They wouldn't." The two men moved along the tracks toward the edge of the woods. "Look at these indentations, they look like toes."

"It's not a boot, that's for sure," George agreed. "It has to be an animal of some kind."

"I don't see any claw marks," Yuri noted, "but then they probably wouldn't show in this kind of snow. Whatever it was, it was big. There aren't any disturbances between the prints."

George was getting cold. "What do you mean?"

"If a bear was moving through three feet of snow, its underbelly would leave drag marks. There would be scuff marks *between* the prints." Yuri paused to look at the tracks again. "I've seen this before."

"Where?"

Kneeling down, Yuri carefully cleaned out the print in front of him. "I'm not sure."

"Yuri, we don't know how much snow had fallen when the bear came through. Maybe the snow wasn't that deep then."

"Maybe, but the size of the tracks, they're too big to be a bear. Anyway, bears are denning at this time of year, not scavenging for food."

"It's early in the season, Yuri," George pushed back. "There are always stragglers."

As the wind whipped around them, the two men stood silent.

"Dyatlov."

"What?"

"Dyatlov," Yuri repeated.

George looked at him, astonished. "What are you talking about Yuri? Those Russian hikers who got lost in the 1950s? What's that got to do with anything?"

“My brother Ivan and I were the first on the scene. Kholat Syakhl. There were secret missile tests going on in the area. They wanted us to find out what happened, clean up any mess.”

“What’s Kholat Syakhl?”

“The mountain of the dead.” Yuri paused, waiting for the gust of wind to pass. “At first, we didn’t find any bodies, just a torn-up tent and footprints. Bare footprints.”

“Human?” George asked.

“Some of the prints were too large to be from the dead hikers.”

“What were they from?”

“We never identified them,” he said. “They were too degraded. But they looked like these. Ivan thought the students had stumbled upon an invading force.”

“A good story, Yuri.” It was time to move on. Yuri had confirmed what George needed confirmed. The mystery of the stolen chickens was not a human-tiger conflict. “Have you ever seen the Shipton photos?” George asked him, as they made their way back to the others. “The ones taken in the snow on Menlung Glacier?”

“I have.”

“They look like a barefoot human, but they can’t be. They’re too large, and at 18,000 ft., people aren’t wandering around barefoot in the snow.”

“Shipton thought it was something.”

“So he said,” George agreed. “The problem is, if it was a Yeti, then why haven’t there been similar prints over the years? Asiatic Black Bears are endemic to that part of the world, Snow Leopards too.”

“I cannot disagree. Overlapping bear prints often look human in the snow, especially if there has been some melting or evaporation.”

“My guess is what Shipton found were the footprints of an Asiatic Black Bear. They spend much of their early life in the trees to avoid attack from other, larger bears. As a result, their inner claw is trained to enable them to have an opposable grip. On snow, it gives an elongated, human-like appearance that looks like toes or thumbs. You’d think it was bipedal.”

“Whatever happened to those kids at Dead Mountain was not caused by a bear, and these prints look the same,” Yuri remarked, as he and George reached Boris and Anatoly.

“My dogs aren’t afraid of bears,” Boris insisted. “If it was a bear, they would have raised a ruckus. When I opened the door to feed the chickens in the morning, it smelled like a dead animal – and the dogs wouldn’t come out of the bedroom!”

"Tigers aren't known for their smell, Boris," Yuri reassured him.

Both George and Yuri knew how rarely tigers ventured into villages. They avoided people at all costs. Yet convincing anyone in this part of the world that whatever harm had befallen them was not caused by a tiger was impossible. Because the animal was held in such high regard, it was blamed for everything.

The tiger of myth and folklore was very different from the real animal. To the local inhabitants, however, they were the same. They believed tigers snatched women and children from their villages and carried them off into the forest. Many believed they were shape shifters able to come and go between dimensions at will; their supernatural powers both revered and feared.

As Boris continued to rant, Yuri pulled George aside to show him the wall lying in the snow. "Whatever it was had to be on its hind legs to reach the top of the frame," Yuri pointed out. "There are no claw marks. If a bear or tiger did this, they would have left claw marks, no?" George inspected the frame of the ripped siding. Yuri was right. "Whatever it was had to be very strong," Yuri added. "This wall was ripped from the building in one piece."

"A bear would have smashed through it to get to the chickens," George agreed. "A tiger wouldn't bother."

The Siberian Tiger was one of the largest predators on Earth. In the wild, it had been recorded as large as 11 feet and weighing 850 pounds. Paw prints had been measured more than 8 inches across. The only terrestrial predators on the planet larger were polar bears and brown bears. What mattered to George was not who ran off with Boris' chickens, but that they all came away agreeing it was not a tiger.

"Boris, our esteemed American scientist, is telling us we have a giant chicken-eating bear out there, I'm afraid," said Anatoly, fixing to sum things up.

"No," Yuri countered.

"Well then, what the hell *are* you telling us?" snapped Anatoly. *Why couldn't they work with him?*

"It's not a tiger either," said George.

"This happened last year too!" said Boris, thumping Anatoly's chest with his finger.

George was surprised. "What do you mean this happened last year?"

"Yeah, well, Boris claimed the same thing last year," Anatoly responded, shaking his head. "Someone in the village must have taken his chickens. I told Boris it was a tiger because that's what he wanted to hear."

Boris handed Yuri a dead chicken. “Whoever did this *twisted* their necks off.”

“Come, Boris, I have a bottle of vodka for you. At least no one got hurt.”

“Except for the chickens,” he said, following behind. Boris was bereft. For him, they were family.

Word would spread quickly through the village. The myth and romance offered by the Siberian Tiger made it an irresistible villain. George worried the truth would come too late for the cubs.

The illegal cross-border trade in tiger parts was the biggest threat to the tiger’s survival. The Chinese believed all parts of a tiger offered medicinal cures. The penis was used in soup as an aphrodisiac. Eyeballs were used to treat epilepsy and rheumatism. The teeth were used to treat fevers. Tiger bones were believed to have anti-inflammatory properties, while the claws were used as a sedative. Whiskers were used to treat toothaches, the tail to treat skin diseases, and the brain to treat laziness. Their feces were believed to cure alcoholism.

Hunting pressure on the tiger’s prey had also taken a toll. The kill rate required by an individual tiger to survive was about fifty large animals per year. For the estimated remaining Siberian Tigers to survive, that meant killing 17,500. They did this secretly, leaving little trace.

The Siberian Tiger’s habitat was unique for its competing diversity of Apex Predators. The Eurasian Lynx, the Asian Black Bear, Amur Leopard, Grey Wolf, and Ussuri Brown Bear all shared their habitat. George knew if he could save the one animal at the very top of the food chain, he might be able to save the rest. It was the only conservation strategy that offered any chance for endangered species, wherever they were found.

A dead Siberian Tiger on the black market could fetch well over \$15,000. In the Russian Far East, that was enough money to feed and clothe a family for years. The temptation was overwhelming. But protecting the few remaining tigers came at a steep cost, nearly twenty million dollars a year. Without Albert Pingree’s financial support, his efforts, he knew, would be for naught.

Anatoly turned to him. He’d forgotten about the crumpled telegram in his pocket. “Dr. Avery, forgive me, it arrived from Vladivostok this morning.”

George held tight to the thin sheet of paper in the blowing wind.

1:31 EST SEP 03 1996 BRONX NY

URGENT: FORWARD DR GEORGE AVERY

C/O MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES

SVETLANKAIA 690110 VLADIVOSTOK RUSSIA
RETURN NY IMMEDIATELY. PINGREE DEAD
LECTURE CONFIRMED 11.13 FELIDAE P. CONCOLOR
FUNDS & TKTS WIRED: ASIAN PACIFIC BANK,
VLADIVOSTOK
BRYCE DUNHAM, WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
SOCIETY

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Chapter Eight

Gulfstream

As Ham stepped into the plane's cabin, the steward handed him his *New York Times*. "Welcome aboard, sir."

Mallory followed, waves of exhaustion crashing over her. She'd barely slept since the previous night's dinner at The Rocks. Uncle Ham had organized this flight to Vancouver. Not only did he have a new passport for her, he had all the necessary paperwork for Kemo.

"Why don't you close your eyes for a couple of hours?" Ham suggested, escorting her to the back of the plane. "We'll have lunch when you wake up. There are fresh towels in the bathroom. Try the shower here in the master bedroom. The water pressure is surprisingly good. I'll come wake you in a few hours."

As her burning eyes closed, the Gulfstream V lifted off from Portland, Maine, for the five-hour flight to Vancouver, British Columbia.

Jerking awake, Mallory couldn't remember where she was. The door, someone was knocking on the door. "Yes... come in."

The steward entered with a tray of hot coffee, biscotti, fresh-cut fruit, and some homemade treats for Kemo.

"I hope you slept well, ma'am."

"I did, thank you," she smiled feebly. "And please don't call me ma'am. Mallory is fine. What time is it anyway?"

"1:20 central time. We're just southeast of Winnipeg, ma'am."

She was too tired to defend her youth. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About three hours. Lunch will be served shortly," he answered, excusing himself and closing the door.

"Rise and shine!" smiled Ham, looking up from his papers. "You look a little more yourself."

"Whose plane is this anyway?" Mallory asked.

"Yours. Did you try the shower?"

"I did," she said, joining him at the table. "I wouldn't mind having a shower like that at home."

"Ma'am, would you prefer red or white wine with your lunch?" the steward interjected.

"Coffee will be fine, thank you."

Individual cheese soufflés, lobster salad with endive and pomegranate, and a basket of assorted warm breads and muffins appeared out of nowhere.

"Eat," Ham insisted, pushing aside the disarray of papers spread out in front of him. "You'll need your strength. We land in Vancouver in less than two hours."

"Do you read all these papers?" Mallory asked. Albert Pingree was splashed across *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The London Times*, and an assortment of Canadian papers.

"I do. Many of our philanthropic priorities come from the press. Albert trusted media sources because no one was trying to sell him. Last month, we donated 25,000 respirators to the Republic of Congo to help them in their fight against Ebola. Albert read about the shortage in *The New York Times*."

"Do you spend much time on this plane?" Mallory asked, looking around.

The plane's galley was outfitted with a small kitchen. Fine Italian upholstered sofas framed the main cabin along with a birds-eye maple dining table, leather chairs, and a state-of-the-art media center. The built-in bookcases made it easy to forget you were traveling at six hundred miles an hour.

"Between Albert and I, the plane is pretty much in constant use. It was, for him, his home away from home. He preferred it to the hassle of checking in and out of hotels."

"Leased?"

Ham smiled. "No, we own it, Mal. It's a C-37A. The Pacific Northwest is not the easiest place to fly in and out of, so we had it outfitted with advanced military weather radar. We can fly at nearly the speed of sound at an altitude of 51,000 feet for 7,000 miles without refueling. Albert's taken the plane from Vancouver to Vladivostok without stopping in less than seven hours, where a commercial flight would take seventeen."

"Why would he want to go to Siberia?" Mallory asked, eyeing the blueberry crème brûlée placed in front of her.

"Tigers."

She assumed he was kidding. "All these art prints, where did Albert get them?"

Ham grinned. “They’re not prints, Mal. Most of the paintings you see, Albert inherited from his parents. The rest he collected himself.”

“That’s not an original,” she challenged, pointing to the painting above the credenza.

“It is. Winslow Homer... *The Portage*.”

“Wow...” Mallory stared at the painting, not sure what else to say. “It looks like the Allagash River in Maine.”

“It might be,” Ham replied.

“This pen and ink drawing next to it looks like Katahdin.”

“It is. Frederick Church, I think.”

“An original too?”

“All of Albert’s art is original, Mal. Did you notice the drawing in your bedroom?”

“*The Snow Leopard*. It’s one of my favorite Bateman prints. I have it in my office.”

“It *is* Robert Bateman, but it’s not a print. Your grandfather had a passion for wildlife art and American landscapes, particularly the Hudson River School.”

Mallory’s Bateman print, the one hanging in her office, was the most expensive piece of art she owned. It cost her nearly \$400! The original, she guessed, had to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The art on this plane wasn’t just paintings; it was iconography, the stuff you see in museums and on postcards.

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Chapter Nine

Lakes of the Clouds

Ham knew Mallory's life would be changed by Albert's death. He knew also he couldn't do much more than fill in the blanks for her.

"How did they meet?" she asked him, "Albert and Kat, I mean."

"It was 1937. Albert and I got summer jobs working for the Appalachian Mountain Club. Looking back now, I'm not sure we weren't crazy," he smiled. "We signed on to carry 130-pound packs all summer to supply the hut system in the White Mountains. It was grueling, but we thought we were immortal. Stupid is probably the better word. Occasionally, we'd be recruited to find lost or injured hikers. Nowadays, they use helicopters for all that stuff.

"Albert's family had been instrumental in the creation of the National Forest, so he was keen to explore every corner of it. The AMC was always looking for sturdy young men, and Dartmouth was an obvious place to recruit. At the time, it seemed an opportunity too good to pass up.

"We were assigned to the high peaks of the Presidential Range. Our primary supply route took us up through Tuckerman's Ravine and over the western shoulder of Mount Washington to the Lakes of the Clouds. We'd leave at dawn, hike fourteen hours, and arrive at the hut for supper. We had bunks in the back with the rest of the crew and generally spent a very stiff day chopping wood and doing light maintenance work before returning to the Notch. Your grandmother was the "Cookie" at the Lakes of the Clouds."

"The Cookie?" Mallory wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"That's what we called the person in charge of the Hut," he answered. "It's a term that originated in the Maritimes. In the 19th century, the whaling ship's cook was referred to as "the Cookie". Because he fed the crew, he was arguably the most powerful person on board. Kate cooked the meals for the hikers and crew, oversaw reservations and maintenance, and updated the weather reports. She'd provide us with a list of chores, and before we departed, the supplies she needed us to bring back on our next trip."

“Sounds like Kat.”

“She was a junior at Radcliffe. Like you, she grew up hiking in these mountains and was an active member of the Appalachian Mountain Club. Her mother, Frances Glessner, was a major donor to the Club in the early days.

“These were coveted jobs and connections helped,” Ham continued. “I’ll never forget our first night on the mountain,” he paused, remembering. “Arriving at the hut smelly and exhausted, we were a sight to behold. Kate came around the corner, took one look at us, and told us to go out back and clean up before we upset the paying guests. We were, I think, both shocked a woman could be in charge in such a rugged and remote place. Surely, this was a man’s job. But Albert and I did what we were told. Kate had a way about her. She didn’t so much ask as tell you.”

Mallory grinned, “Nothing new there.”

“There were no hot showers. A sponge bath with a bucket of ice water from the alpine lake, which we were, of course, assigned to collect, was the best we got. Adding insult to injury, we’d have to strip down in thirty-five-degree air! Once that water touched your body, some part would cramp up and you’d find yourself gimping around before falling to the ground in a heap.

“Kate came around the corner that first night. We were standing there in our birthday suits. I was trying to help Albert with a cramped calf. We had no towels, so you can imagine the scene: two men, stark naked, rubbing each other’s legs. She stood looking at us with a big, fat grin on her face. In spite of our humiliation, I think we both fell in love with her at that moment. It was obvious from the get-go, however, she and Albert were meant to be.” Ham paused, trying to shake the memory of his feelings.

“Kate was in charge, certainly of us. If she needed potatoes peeled, we peeled. If she needed wood split, we were on it. If she asked us to break the ice on the lake and collect fresh water, we jumped. We must have made a dozen round trips to the hut that summer. Kate was easy to love, but she only had eyes for Albert.... In many ways, I think that summer set the course for the lives of all three of us.”

“What was he like, Albert?” Mallory asked.

“He had a romantic goofball charm the girls found irresistible. He was thoughtful and kind. Yet for all his irrepressible energy, he had a sadness, a kind of melancholy he tried to hide.”

“I sensed that about him when he spoke at my graduation.”

“He never relied on or defined himself by his family’s privilege or wealth. Given Kate’s own upbringing, she found him irresistible. He gave her

permission to be herself. In each other, they sort of met their match. Neither saw the other through the lens of their respective social circles. They just saw each other, and that was enough." Ham paused again, looking at Mallory. "They adored each other, plain and simple.

"After that summer, every weekend we'd jump into my Duesenberg for the six-hour drive to Cambridge so Albert could visit with her. He needed a foil, and I was it. In those days, Mal, you couldn't call on a girl at school without a chaperone. We spent a lot of time at The Rocks too. The three of us used it as our base for hiking and skiing."

Mallory could hear in Ham's voice his devotion to Kate and Albert. She could tell it mattered to him that she knew. In all her years, this was the most he had ever revealed about himself.

"Albert and Kate had that special relationship we all hope for," he continued. "If you asked Kate to dance and she said yes, you *knew* you were something. Most of the boys in our class had a crush on her. As beautiful as she was, though, I think it was her free spirit that made her so mesmerizing. Your mother was too. She was a chip off the old block." Mallory listened, not saying a word. "They were mountain goats. Any chance they had to hike in the mountains, that's where they went. If they weren't on a trail, they were in a canoe on a river somewhere. It wasn't easy keeping up with them, I can tell you that!

"Their favorite thing to do, of course, was skiing. In those days, you had to hike to the top of the hill to ski down it. Looking back, I'm astonished at the things we did." Ham reached for the scrapbook on the shelf behind him. "I have some pictures here," he said, opening the worn leather cover... "Look at this, Tuckerman's Ravine. I must have taken that picture. You've skied it, haven't you?"

"When I was fifteen. Kat took me up."

"Here's another one I took. It looks like we were picnicking on top of The Old Man of the Mountains."

"They look happy."

Ham stared at the photograph. "They were blissful.... It was a long time ago."

"You all seem so carefree."

"Our world was laid out for us, Mal, completely conscribed. The Ivy League culture we grew up in was exclusively "blue blood". *White*. The families who made it through the Great Depression unscathed raised their children to believe they ruled the world, and, for the most part, we did. We were the chosen few.

“But Albert was different. I’m not sure, for him, it wasn’t a burden. Neither he nor Kate bought into the trappings of privilege, nor the pomp that went with it. Albert never wanted anything to be about him. What he and Kate found in each other, I think, was a kind of refuge.”

“I hope I can find a love like that someday,” she remarked wistfully.

“Unless you want to marry a moose, it may be a long time coming up there in the North Conway,” chuckled Ham.

“I could do worse,” she said, turning the page of the scrapbook. “It sounds like you spent a lot of time outdoors.”

“Albert did. He was most at home on a new trail, canoeing a new river. Fishing. I’m sure that’s what drew him to the job in Vancouver. He asked me to come along, but it all seemed a little too exotic for me. Vancouver. Where the hell was Vancouver?”

“I wish I had known him.”

“I do too.”

“What happened to him? Why didn’t he come back?”

“No one really knows, Mal.”

“But you were his best friend. He must have said *something* to you at some point in the last sixty years.”

“You’d think,” Ham agreed. “I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for you, Mal.”

“What do you *think* happened?” she pressed.

“Well... we both got accepted to Harvard. It was the spring of ’39. I was off to law school, and he, the business school. Kate was going to Europe with her mother, so Albert decided to go out west for the summer. I wanted to spend a few warm months lollygagging on the Cape. Albert and I agreed I’d find us a flat in Cambridge, after which I was off to spend the summer at the beach house.”

“The one in Eastham?” she asked.

“Yes,” he smiled.

“I remember going down there a bunch of times with you and my mo-” Mallory stopped, catching herself.

“Don’t be too hard on Kate, Mal,” Ham gently pushed back. “Growing up, she was the only mother you had. Their decision to keep things from you, right or wrong, at the time, they thought it was for the best. You have to understand, your own mother’s death was a devastating blow. There was a lot of guilt. They wanted to make things right for you, and you needed a mother.”

What Mallory needed was to change the subject. “Henry Beston was your neighbor on the Cape, wasn’t he?”

"Indeed, as far as we had any," Ham answered.

"*The Outermost House*. It was one of Kat's favorite books."

"Albert's too."

"Do you still have that place?"

"I do. I'm afraid it doesn't get much use anymore. I don't get down there as often as I'd like. I'd love it if you could make use of it."

Hamilton Jenness was a private man. Mallory had never seen him rattled or unguarded. Chivalrous and polite to a fault, he was, for her, the man who made things happen. But here, now, there was a resignation in his voice, a sadness she had never before heard. He seemed distracted, for the first time, old.

"Why didn't Albert come back?" she again asked.

"I don't know. Albert and I had it all figured out before he left for the West Coast. He was excited about things. He made me promise to secure reservations for the three of us at the Lakes of the Clouds Hut in September. He wanted to propose to Kate, he said. I think he thought of his summer job with Crown Paper as a last hurrah, a lark really, before settling into business school. Our expectations were he and Kate would marry, and we would both go to work for his father's company in Boston."

"When did he tell you he wasn't coming back?" she asked.

"He didn't."

"Did he tell Kat?"

"He wrote her a letter."

"Did he know she was pregnant?"

"Kate was in Paris when she realized she was pregnant. She knew Albert couldn't be reached, so she decided to give him the good news when they were together again at the end of the summer." Ham paused, trying to remember. "She didn't get Albert's letter until *after* she returned."

"What did the letter say?"

"You'll have to ask her, my dear."

"Why didn't he come back after Kat told him she was pregnant? I mean it was his child!"

"She didn't tell him," Ham answered. "There was something in his letter that made her choose not to."

"Why didn't *you* tell him?"

"Kate made me promise not to. She didn't want him to come back to her because of a sense of obligation. I suppose I would have told him except he had changed. Something happened to him out there. There was an accident... an incident."

“What kind of accident?” Mallory asked.

“No one really knows. Two fishermen found him. Indians. He was barely alive. One lung was collapsed. He had two broken ribs, a broken arm, and a massive gash on his neck. He managed somehow to pull what was left of his canoe out of the water, turn it over, and crawl under it. Wrapping himself in a wet blanket, he used his flannel shirt to staunch the bleeding. When the Indians found him, he was soaked in blood, drifting in and out of consciousness, but still gripping his gun.”

“What happened?”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it. Albert wouldn’t talk about it then, and he never spoke of it since, certainly not to me. I gave up asking years ago. At the time, he refused to answer any questions or participate in any inquiry. The paper company’s official report said it was a Grizzly attack. It was the only reasonable explanation. What was peculiar was the unwillingness of the Indian fishermen who found him to confirm the company’s conclusions. Very quickly, it seemed no one was willing to talk about it.”

“What do you think happened?”

Ham hesitated. “I don’t know. Albert was experienced in the ways of the woods. Living without the trappings of civilization was easy for him. I can’t imagine anything could surprise him out there.” Mallory could see Ham was hesitant, reliving what he had tried so hard for so many years to forget. “For my part, I was never fully convinced by the paper company’s report.”

“Why not?”

“His canvas canoe was totally destroyed, yet there were no claw marks on it. When they found him, he had a creel full of trout. If a bear had come into his camp, it would have gone after his fish. A Grizzly absolutely could have caused his injuries and shattered his canoe, but it likely would have killed him, or at the very least left marks on his body that he did not have. The only other information the Indians told us was something about a blood trail that led into the woods. Albert shot and wounded who or whatever he encountered. But again, he wasn’t talking.”

“How did they get him out?”

“The Indians stabilized him, stitched his wounds as best they could, and brought him out in their own canoe, which they set up as a sort of stretcher. They “lined” that canoe, with Albert in it, down more than 25 miles of class IV and V whitewater. Remarkable! Eventually, they got him to the Indian settlement at Port Douglas on the north end of Harrison Lake. Without their efforts, I don’t think he would have survived.”

“How long did it take them?” Mallory asked.

“Three days. Albert’s neck injury was pretty bad. When they got him to the village, it wasn’t clear he was going to make it. He was in a delirium. Word was sent downriver to Vancouver, but he was too weak to travel, so remained with the Indians for a month.”

“Did he eventually get to a hospital?” she asked.

“Remarkably, no,” Ham answered. “The care the Chehalis provided was nothing short of miraculous. The Sts’Ailes people, I think. After four weeks, refusing any additional treatment offered by the paper company, Albert walked out of that settlement on his own two feet.”

“When did you find out about all of this?”

“I was in Boston. Albert’s father called me and asked me if I’d accompany him to the West Coast, that Albert had had a terrible accident. Hudson Pingree was no fool. Crown’s report didn’t add up. How could a bear attack Albert while he was fishing offshore from a canoe? His father thought something nefarious had happened at the hands of the Indians. He didn’t trust them. You have to remember 1939 was only fifteen years after the last Apache War, and only six since the Mexican Indian War.”

“What happened next?”

“I met Albert’s father at Boston’s South Station. We took the train to Chicago and then on to Vancouver before boarding a floatplane to Harrison Lake. Albert had been there for ten days.

“Hudson arranged with Crown Paper to have a medical team meet us there, but there wasn’t a lot for them to do. They confirmed his injuries and determined he was in as good a state as could be expected. You have to remember, modern medicine, as we know it today, simply didn’t exist in 1939. In Albert’s case, traditional native medicine was as good, if not better than anything a Western doctor could provide.

“Albert’s father and I were surprised by the reception we got from the Sts’Ailes people. We expected savages, but they were extraordinarily kind and generous. We didn’t have a clue what they were doing to Albert, but they kept him alive. His father wanted to move Albert to a hospital in Vancouver, but he refused. It was strange. Albert was not himself.”

“How so?”

“He was distant and combative. I’d like to say he was glad to see us, but I’m not sure he really was. With little to do, after a few days, we left. I took the train back to Boston. Albert’s father stayed behind to try to get to the bottom of things.”

“What about Kat?” Mallory asked.

“To the best of my knowledge, there was no verbal communication between the two of them again until you were born.”

“That’s almost thirty years!”

Ham was reluctant. “After your mother died, Kate asked me to give Albert a letter.”

“What did it say?”

“Neither Kate nor Albert ever shared it with me.”

“How did he react when he found out about my mother’s death?”

“He was devastated. He wanted to make things right, but of course, he couldn’t. Kate assured him she’d raise you as her own, so Albert had me set up a trust for you.”

“I didn’t know about any trust,” said Mallory.

“He didn’t want you to, and Kate agreed not to tell you,” Ham answered.

“What was the trust for?”

“To pay for your education and any expenses you and she might have. She’d receive the interest from it as income for life. The principal would then pass to you when she died. Obviously, his death changes all that.”

“How much was it?”

“Thirty million dollars.”

“Thirty *million*?”

“We can get into the details tomorrow. There’s much we still need to sort out, and we will, my dear, I promise,” Ham replied matter-of-factly.

“*Thirty million*?” Shifting uncomfortably, the key in her pocket bit into her leg. She’d forgotten about it. “Do you have any idea what this key is for or why *I* have it?” she asked, pulling it out.

“Remarkable, isn’t it? But no, I don’t.”

“Have you ever seen anything of Albert’s that it might be for?”

“I have not,” Ham answered, taking a long look at it before handing it back to her. “Perhaps there’s something at his cabin that it will fit. I’ll fly you up there later this week so you can have a look around.”

“Where’s his cabin?”

“Chehalis Lake, northeast of Vancouver, about a forty-minute flight.”

“Is that where he was found?”

“Yes.”

Mallory continued to peruse the scrapbook without speaking. *Lakes of the Clouds, 1937-* she recognized Kat’s handwriting. Albert was carrying her on his shoulders. They were laughing and looked like they were about to fall over.

“He was a remarkable man, your grandfather,” Ham remarked.

“*As we begin our final approach to Vancouver International Airport, please take your seats and check that your seatbelt is tightly fastened. We will be on the ground in seven minutes.*”

Chapter Ten

Field Zoologist

Climbing the gangway of the Trans-Siberian Train for Moscow, George felt like an animal being caged. He worried what impact Albert's death would have on the plight of the Siberian Tiger.

Yuri would continue the search for the tiger cubs. Six baited cages, monitored by camera traps, had been set out along the abandoned logging roads surrounding the village. If any sprung, the movement would trigger a ping from the camera to a small hand-held device Yuri carried on him. Once tranquilized by the drugs in the meat, the cubs would need to be reached quickly, or they would freeze to death.

Dropping down on his bunk in the 1st Class compartment, George read again the telegram from the Zoo. *Felidae P. Concolor* was the scientific name for a Mountain Lion.

In addition to his train ticket, the envelope left for him at the Asian Pacific Bank included \$5,000 cash, an Aeroflot ticket, and a faxed copy of the program for the Pingree Lecture in New York. Apparently, he had been selected to debate the head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As flattering as it was, it irritated him that Albert had chosen him. Albert knew damn well he wasn't much for political theater. He had little patience for the bloviating ineptitude of government agencies.

The politics of conservation was a grind. Defining the value of an animal or ecosystem as a "natural resource" infuriated him. Such thinking made it nearly impossible to make a difference in the States anymore. Humanity's best hope was in the places where people had not lost their connection to the land, where the Grizzly and wolf remained something more than a zoo animal to be gawked at or demonized in books, movies, and on TV.

Left alone, animals could take care of themselves. They didn't need us. That's what we didn't get. Humans are driven by their egos. No other animal spoils its own nest. No other animal kills for pleasure. No other animal looks

at the world through the lens of “rights” or kills itself in such large numbers. George often wondered if humans weren’t engaged in some kind of collective, slow-motion suicide. It seemed obvious enough.

Departing Vladivostok, his four-thousand-mile trip would take him across 14 regions, 90 cities, 9 time zones, and 120 stops before arriving in Moscow. From there, a ten-hour flight from Sheremetyevo to JFK, and he’d be home. The distance and time it would take him to return from this last refuge of the Amur Tiger, he knew, offered perhaps the best last hope for this mythic creature.

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Chapter Eleven

Breakfast Time & Money

At a height of 707 feet, One Pingree Square was the tallest building in Vancouver. The headquarters for Pingree Holdings, Albert had it built at a cost of 400 million dollars. Apparently, it was now Mallory's. The absurdity of it made her angry.

Looking out across Vancouver Harbor to the North Shore Mountains from her penthouse suite, she wasn't sure if she was floating above an endless wilderness or standing at the edge of a precipice. It was a world she could see but not touch.

While she would have preferred breakfast at a local diner, the restaurant downstairs in the Four Seasons lobby could only be a relief from the pampered private dining offered in her suite.

As the maitre d' ushered her to her seat, she reminded herself to save some extra bacon for Kemo. Uncle Ham was settled in with his paper. "Good morning," he said, folding his paper and standing. "You slept well, I hope."

"Like a log."

"May I take your order, ma'am?" the waitress interrupted, appearing from behind. Mallory looked up, startled. She was still more asleep than awake.

"Uh, I'll have the Florentine Eggs Benedict with Dungeness crab and hollandaise, a side of hash browns, and the blueberry pancakes with extra maple syrup, the kind that comes from trees. That should get the job done, given my life is about to come to an end."

Ham laughed. "No coffee for you this morning!"

"Excuse me, ma'am, did you say trees?"

"Not to worry," Ham interjected. "Your syrup will do just fine."

"And for you, sir," the waitress asked.

"The oatmeal, please. Thank you."

Mallory closed her menu. "Forget what I just said and make that two. *Oh*, and can I get an apple?"

“An apple, ma’am?” The waitress looked at her, confused. “I can offer you the mixed berry jubilee here on the menu.”

“Never mind.”

“Don’t you like berries?” Ham asked.

“I do. I just can’t see spending thirty dollars for ten berries.”

“I think you can afford it, Mal,” he teased.

In spite of her irritation, Mallory was grateful for Ham’s patience. She felt like she was assuming a new identity in the witness protection program. What she wanted was her life back. Except for Albert’s philanthropy, not much of what Ham had talked about all week mattered to her. She tried to listen politely and ask probing questions, but it was mostly gibberish to her. It wasn’t her life. Corporate governance, quarterly earnings, and capital investments were a world away from veterinary medicine.

“Why didn’t you set Pingree up in Boston?” she asked, as the waitress topped off her coffee.

“Crown’s operations were here in the Pacific Northwest,” Ham answered. “Albert didn’t own the company in the beginning.”

“Were you and Albert always partners?” she asked.

“After law school, I became an investment banker at Merrill Lynch in New York. After Albert’s father died, Albert inherited his estate and was looking to invest in timber. It made sense given his family’s history, so we started acquiring stock in Crown together. I suggested diversifying his portfolio, but he was fixated on Crown. Even then, I always thought he would make his way back east, reconnect with Kate. But over the years, whenever I suggested he do so, I was met with a deafening silence. Anyway, we were having enormous success, so I left it at that.”

“I don’t even know what a billion dollars is,” Mallory grumbled, shaking her head. One billion seconds is nearly thirty-two years. Did you know that? Thirty-five billion is more than a thousand!”

Ham sensed her agitation. “You’ve got time, Mal. Give it time.”

“But I don’t want to be a billionaire,” she argued. “I mean, what does that mean?”

“It means whatever you want it to mean,” he answered.

“Anything?”

“Just about.”

“But I like my life *now*. It *does* mean something,” she insisted. “And until now I thought I knew what that was.”

“Mal, nothing has to change unless you want it to. It’s all about perspective.”

“And you don't think thirty-five billion dollars won't change my perspective?”

“It won't if you don't want it to.”

“This is crazy!”

“I understand.”

“But *I* don't!”

“Think of it this way,” he grinned. “You've got plenty of time to figure it out. By your own accounting, a thousand years!”

“You're not helping. This is depressing.”

“It need not be, Mal. Look at it this way, Kemo doesn't care.”

“He will when I start feeding him filet mignon.”

“Yes, I imagine he might. But that decision is yours.”

“Well, since I now own this restaurant, this hotel, and this building, is breakfast free?”

Ham chuckled. “Nothing is free, Mallory.”

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Chapter Twelve

Recipe for Poaching

Anatoly paid the village beekeeper \$8,000 for the dead tiger. Together, he and Oleg cut their prize up with a small band saw, careful to remove the skinned fur intact. The organs were carefully divided into plastic bags. After scraping the underside of the tiger's skin, they rinsed the remaining blood off the fur and hung it up to dry.

Flesh and tendons were cut away. The two were careful to remove any bullet fragments the authorities might trace back to them. The bones were dumped into a large pot and boiled down in batches. It was a messy, painstaking job best done late at night. Vodka helped.

Once the head was cut off and the eyeballs, teeth, and brain removed, it too was boiled to clean off any blood and remaining detritus. What was once a 450-pound tiger was neatly laid out in guts, bones, and fur. What remained would stay frozen, hidden under the canvas tarp they'd spread out behind Oleg's stacked beehives. Anatoly would take what was left of the big cat across the Chinese border. If he was lucky, he'd triple his money.

* * *

The small beam of light from the Buran 640 Snow Cat was just enough as it droned steadily on through the black forest. It was a moonless night. Anatoly was surprised by how well the skis skittered across the crusty snow. It was good to know these forest roads, he thought.

He had 50 kilometers to go before reaching the Ussuri River at the Chinese border. At this speed, he'd be there in three hours. His rendezvous was just north of the outpost at Lazo, where a small, uninhabited island straddled the remote river border between the two countries. The sale price agreed upon was only \$11,000, but it would have to do. He needed to get rid of his prize. Yuri Novakov was sniffing around, and secrets didn't last long in Roshchino.

Turning southwest at Novopokrovka, there was nothing in front of him except miles of uncharted forest. Nothing could stop him now. In a few hours, he'd be a rich man. This was the hand he had longed to be dealt.

As the minutes and miles passed, the condensation on his cheap goggles began to freeze up from his hot breath. Reaching up with his left hand, he removed them, steadying the machine with the other. The burning frigid air was blinding, but he wasn't going to pull over now.

A shadow, in front of him... something was moving up ahead... a *huge bear*... in the middle of the road! *It was on its hind legs!*

As the sled surged forward, the animal stood, unmoving, its indifferent eyes reflecting back the dim light. Anatoly swerved hard, but it was too late. He was going too fast.

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Chapter Thirteen

The Cabin

Looking out the window of the penthouse suite reminded Mallory of driving through a car wash. Relentless sheets of rain buffeted the glass, obliterating her 35th-story view.

Ham had made arrangements for the flight to Chehalis Lake but wouldn't be joining her, he said, "due to other pressing matters". Mallory sensed it was more than that. What was it he had said to her at the end of their dinner last night? "*Say hello to Ulysses.*" When pressed for an explanation, he just smiled.

By slipping out the side door, the car service Ham had arranged would remain dutifully parked out front. The creature comforts provided to her were stifling. The price of entry into the world of the rich and powerful was already feeling more costly than liberating.

Arriving at the dock, a dismal morning fog hung over the water like an alien spaceship. On the side of the rundown shed at the end of the pier, faded lettering spelled out *Pin ree Aviation*. The "g" had long since worn off.

"Louise, up at the office, told me to expect you," came a voice from behind. "Dave Mattox. I'll be your pilot. Damn shame about Albert. Just a damn shame."

"Do you think we'll be able to make it to Chehalis today?" Mallory asked.

Dave paused, looking out over the water. The cloud ceiling that had rolled in overnight sat unmoving. "Come back around 11:00, I'll have her fueled up. Shouldn't be so bad once we get over the mountains."

Vancouver seemed strangely quiet, thought Mallory. Everything was neatly in its place. What it lacked in personality, it made up for in small-town friendliness and staggering beauty. People were happy, which, given the dreary weather, seemed incongruous. Nature was intimidating here. It swallowed you up. Bald eagles and killer whales were not somewhere else; they plied

the air and water here as their own. Black bears tromped through suburban backyards like Jurassic raccoons. Everything leaned in. The forest and the sea still controlled men here. There was a kind of kind of inevitability about the place in spite of what people were doing... something else.

As the DeHavilland Beaver lifted off the water, there was little to suggest anything but a dreary, bumpy ride. Climbing sharply, the small seaplane jerked and slid as the Pacific winds yanked at her wings. Mallory sat stiff-armed in her metal jump seat. The Spartan interior seemed confirmation enough tin cans could fly. For Dave Mattox, it was routine. He'd been a combat helicopter pilot in Vietnam. Unfriendly conditions he knew.

Arching over Lion's Gate Bridge and Burrard Inlet, the compass eased in an easterly heading, as sheets of rain pummeled the plane's small windows. Twenty minutes in, just east of Slave Lake, the sky cleared, leaving only the wind to do battle as they began their descent toward Chehalis Lake.

Six miles long and 453 feet deep, Chehalis was a fisherman's paradise. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains and an unbroken forest as far as the eye could see, the first word that came to mind was *remote*. You had to *want* to live here. There was no town. There were no roads.

Skidding across the choppy water, the plane slowed as it neared the small landing at the south end of the lake. Coming to a stop, she could see a lone man standing on the dock. He grabbed the nose cone and tied it off. "I'm not staying, Daniel," Dave yelled out. "Say hello to Mallory and Kemo. I'll be back to pick 'em up around four," he shouted, as the giant propellers continued to whir.

"You look like Albert," Daniel remarked, as Mallory stared across the water, watching, as the plane taxied down the lake.

"You must be Daniel Stillwater," she said, turning as Daniel lifted Kemo onto the 26-foot Lyman. Climbing aboard the classic wooden boat, restored to within every inch of its life, made her feel like a character in *Yachting Magazine*. With his nose to the wind and eyes half shut, she could tell Kemo approved.

Uncle Ham had told her about Daniel Stillwater. It was he who found Albert. His grandfather, Harry, worked for Crown and had outfitted Albert when he first came out in 1939.

Daniel was the caretaker of Albert's property. He kept track of the comings and goings, needed repairs, wood, food, and fuel. The compound was just as much his home as it was Albert's. Other than Louise, Albert's ever-dependable assistant, Daniel was the person Albert most relied on.

Hugging tight to the edge of the water, endless giant fir trees passed them by. The densely covered shoreline dropped steeply to the water's edge. Waterfalls tumbled past, as they made their way north along the eastern shore. Rounding a small point, a hidden cove suddenly appeared along with a boathouse, a dock, and two cabins. Mallory watched, astonished, as a 400 lb. pig ran gleefully down the dock, grunting with unbridled porcine enthusiasm. Kemo was beside himself.

Killing the engine, Daniel sidled the boat up against the dock. Unable to contain himself, Kemo leapt out in full pursuit, as Mallory grabbed the line and tied it off. "That's Ulysses," said Daniel, matter-of-factly, handing her up their supplies. Whatever she had expected, this was not it.

Solar panels lined the roof of the larger cabin. A pair of Adirondack chairs stared back from the front porch. The wooden screen on the front door reminded Mallory of home. Ulysses pushed past as they stepped into a large mudroom lined with Shaw & Tenney canoe paddles, Sage fly rods, snowshoes, skis, and an assortment of hand tools.

What struck Mallory was the cabin's simplicity. There was no grand staircase or entryway. There were no cathedral ceilings or designer windows. The interior was constructed of unpainted rough-cut timber. The rugged charm was undeniable, just not what you'd expect for the home of a billionaire.

A great fieldstone fireplace rose at one end, merging into a kitchen at the other. Opening like the side of a freight car, onto the back porch, was a herb garden.

The artwork and the Persian carpets provided an informal elegance. The sofas and chairs were well-worn. The large farm table separating the kitchen from the living room was strewn with old newspaper articles, a few odd tools, and what looked like an old candle box. On the floor by the rocker lay *The New York Times*. Mallory noted it was dated August 29, two days before Albert's body was found.

The cabin had a lived-in smell. It was alive, scattered with Albert's life. He must have been sitting in the rocker, reading the paper just before he died. The thought made her suddenly uncomfortable; life and death staring back, one and the same in equal measure.

There were books everywhere you looked. The painting above the mantle, an eagle in flight among Maxfield Parish clouds, could only be a Robert Bateman.

Music LPs lined the hallway- Caruso, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, blues, jazz, folk. It was hard to tear herself away. Albert had every John Prine record!

Wherever her eyes wandered, authors, philosophers, poets, and playwrights surrounded her. First editions of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell lined the shelves along with Emerson, Thoreau, Carson, Beston, and Muir. An 1846 folio of *Lucy Crawford's History of the White Mountain* caught her eye. Carefully pulling it from the shelf, a small card fell to the floor. It was Kat's handwriting!

My dearest Albert, 76 peaks!

With admiration and abiding love, K. - Christmas 1938.

New England, Mallory knew, had 76 peaks that were 4,000 feet high. This book contained the stories Kat read to her before bed. The adventures of Ethan Allen Crawford filled her dreams. He was her hero.

The genius of the cabin's design was that it didn't crowd your mind. It was a living space without the junk of social aspiration. It struck Mallory how difficult that was in her own life. She couldn't help but wonder if that wasn't why Albert's home was so remote. It was hard to give yourself permission to be yourself in the modern world. There were considerations to manage, expectations, especially if you were Albert Pingree. This wasn't a house. It was a sanctuary.

The dovetail craftsmanship on the antique candle box resting on the table caught her eye. Its shape was odd. It was wider and longer than the decorative candle boxes at The Rocks. Glancing around the room, she looked to see where it might hang.

There was a gun rack built into the wall along the hallway leading to Albert's bedroom. She was familiar with sporting guns, often joining the boys from the Fish and Wildlife Service at the shooting range back in New Hampshire. But these were different. The Smith & Wesson 500 was the largest pistol she'd ever laid eyes on. It could take down an elephant in a single shot. The Remington 870 twelve-gauge could blow a three-foot hole in the side of a barn. The Marlin 1898 pump action she'd seen before. It was the legendary big game firearm favored by guides in the Alaskan outback. Ham had told her Albert wasn't a hunter. Most peculiar, they were all loaded, with extra boxes of seven-hundred-grain ammunition tucked in next to them.

Stepping outside, a dozen cords of hardwood lay stacked neatly under the eaves around the side of the cabin. Across the field, a vegetable garden, surrounded by an eight-foot fence, was strung with bells. Mallory guessed it was to discourage the bears and deer. Closing the gate as she approached, Daniel looked up. "Tea?" Daniel's eyes were penetrating. Strangely, he made her feel immediately safe, or perhaps, known; she wasn't sure which.

Sitting on his little cabin porch, warmed by the sweet hot tea, Mallory finally summoned the courage to ask him where he'd found Albert. Following him back to Albert's cabin, Daniel stopped where the firewood was stacked. "Here," he said, pointing to the ground. "It was on Sunday. Albert took me down to the boat landing at the south end of the lake to meet the plane that would fly me to Harrison Lake. I brought the usual list for food and supplies. Dave would pick up what was on the list, along with whatever mail or paperwork Louise sent up from the office. When I returned at the end of the week, Albert would meet me in the boat. That was the routine."

Daniel explained he went home to his family at the Indian settlement in Port Douglas every six weeks. His wife refused to live on Chehalis. Most of his people believed it was home to powerful spirits called "Skookum".

"For hundreds of years, tribal hunters have mostly avoided this territory," he continued. "Fishermen don't come further north than the outlet below the lake.

"When Dave and I landed, there was no boat. Dave keeps a canoe and a seven-horsepower motor strapped to one of the plane's pontoons. We decided I should take the canoe up the lake, check in on Albert, and return with the boat. Dave would wait with the plane.

"I knew something wasn't right as soon as I came around the point. Ulysses wasn't anywhere to be found. His food bowl hadn't been touched. A pig doesn't much chew his food, he inhales it. If his food was still in his bowl, something was wrong.

"There had been a light snow the night before, but there were no footprints anywhere. I checked the cabins and the boathouse but could find no sign of Albert. The boat was here. The living room lights were on. The bed was made. But the cabin was empty. There was a record skipping on the turntable." Daniel paused. "The forest was still. When I came around the side of the cabin here, there was Albert. He was face down and lightly covered with snow, the pig pressed up against him, shivering." Pigs, Mallory knew, were smart. Ulysses was trying to protect Albert. "I turned him over. He was dead. I called down to Dave, and he called in the helicopter from Vancouver."

"What do you think happened?" Mallory asked.

"Heart attack, they said."

"What was he doing out here, collecting wood?" It didn't make sense, she thought. There was plenty of wood in the cabin.

"I don't know," Daniel answered. "But we need to get back."

Mallory wasn't sure what there was left to explore, but decided to take one last look inside the cabin while Daniel went ahead to gas up the boat.

Tucked in a small closet against a wall in Albert's bedroom, she found a fold-out desk where his Ham Radio sat. There was a journal. She picked that up.

Walking through the front door, Kemo was on his hind legs, pulling the candle box off the kitchen table.

“What is it, Keems? What are you doing?”

Taking it out of his mouth, she couldn't help but notice it had an elaborate antique lock at its base. Candle boxes didn't have locks. Looking closely at it, she could just make out the engraving above the keyhole: *Joseph Bramah, 1784.*

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Chapter Fourteen

Lies and Tigers and Bears

The email from Yuri was disappointing but not surprising, thought George. Field conservation was a messy business, sometimes deadly.

One of the tiger cubs had been captured alive. The other froze to death. Nothing had registered on the camera traps set up behind Boris' chicken coop. Oleg, the beekeeper, had committed suicide. Anatoly was dead.

Sitting at his desk in the Heads and Horns building at the Bronx Zoo, it seemed so very far away. He had papers to grade, a debate to prepare for, and an expedition to central Africa he had still to put the finishing touches on. Siberia seemed, well, just that. He read the email again.

A local hunter found Anatoly's smashed snowmobile and body, along with a tiger pelt and the animal's body parts. Afraid he'd be accused of being the poacher himself, the hunter reported what he found to the authorities. Because the body parts of a tiger were found, the police called Yuri in to investigate.

Yuri's report indicated the snow sled hit a tree, killing Anatoly instantly. His neck was snapped, and his body frozen to the sled's handles. There were two distinct sets of tracks. One from the hunter who discovered the body, and an older set that came out of the woods in front of the tree, crossed the road and disappeared into the forest on the far side. Yuri's report said they were fifteen inches long. He indicated they were a bear's. What remained of the tiger had been sent to Moscow for DNA analysis to determine if it was the mother of the two cubs.

Trying to turn his attention to the upcoming Pingree Debate, there was something about the report that didn't sit right. It was odd that the bear had not come back for the tiger meat. It certainly would have smelled it, even frozen, even through the plastic. And what was a bear doing wandering around in the dead of winter, anyway? They didn't do that.

Chapter Fifteen

False Bottom

Bracing herself as the plane shuddered in the crosswinds, Mallory slid the key into the candle-box. Clicking into place, the metal bit grabbed hold, shooting out the bottom of the box. Beneath where the candles were supposed to be stored was a hidden compartment!

Inside, a smaller container made of woven sweet grass was toggled shut with a piece of bone. It looked to her like ivory. She felt suddenly uneasy. Everything about this candle box, the lock, the hidden compartment, and the delicately woven container suggested an unusually deliberate undertaking. She felt like she was trespassing on the most intimate secret of someone she didn't know.

Pulling on the carved toggle, the hand-woven strap released. Lifting the top off, she could see there was something inside. It was covered in cheesecloth. Whatever it was smelled like paraffin wax. Underneath was a carefully folded, yellowed piece of paper. She could just make out the faded handwriting.

If this box has reached you, then you will know, contained within, is an item of a most disturbing nature. It is my fervent wish that upon my death, what is contained herein will prove a mystery that can yet be solved, confirming what I could not.

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