

In The Raven's Shadow Prologue

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 Mallory Pingree.

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 Pingree
Bethlehem, New Hampshire

Chapter Six

Durak!

Anatoly slapped his card down on the middle of the wooden table, scattering the cigarette ash as Ilia stared dumbfounded. “Shit.” Ilia 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 in the center of the table. “Ah, my dear Ilia.”

Nikolay just 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,” demanded Nikolay. “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 assured him, reaching for 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.”

Ilya 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 under foot was but another tired reminder of the relentless winter. “Play your hand, Nikolay”, Anatoly commanded.

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

Chapter Fifteen

False Bottom

Bracing herself as the plane shuttered 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 second 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 barely 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.

Albert Pingree - 082639 / 492530 / 1220143

Chapter Sixty-Three
Roadkill

“Dr. Glessner, you’re needed on an emergency call.”

“Send in Dr. Stephens to close,” Mallory responded, removing her surgical mask.

“I’m right here.”

“That was fast! This is the last one, Dill,” she promised, tossing her gloves into the “Hazardous Waste” bin. “This better be good,” she turned to her assistant.”

“There’s been an accident on the Kangamagus Highway, near the Greeley Pond trailhead”

“What kind of accident?”

“A woman from New Jersey hit a moose.”

Why is it our emergency?” Mallory asked.

“The moose is still alive.”

“Shit.”

“And pregnant,” her assistant continued. Mallory hated these calls. “Bard Tibbetts from Fish and Wildlife called it in. He specifically asked for you.”

“Do I have what I need?” Mallory asked, grabbing her coat.

“Everything’s in the Jeep, ready to go. Six syringes have been prepped with Telazol along with three IV feeds. You’ve got enough Pentobarbital to put an elephant down. It’s all in the cooler.”

“Three?”

“In case there are twins.”

“Oh God, I hope not.”

“Your twelve gauge is in the back, locked and loaded, along with your side-arm,” her assistant confirmed, following her out. “I threw in your chain saw too, along with your surgical supplies.”

“How long will it take me to get there?”

“It’s about 35 miles, so probably an hour. Bard will meet you there.”

“Come on Kemo.”

“You won’t be able to reach us once you get onto Rt. 112,” she yelled after. “There’s no cell coverage.”

“Tell Bard I’ll have my radio on. He can reach me that way,” Mallory shouted back.

The Kancamagus Highway, twisting through the heart of the White Mountain National Forest, was treacherous even on a good day. Too fast around Hancock Overlook and you wouldn’t make the turn. On one side an endless forest canopy opened up as far as the eye could see, on the other, sheer rock walls had been vertically blasted to make way for the road. Weaving along the dirt shoulder, Mallory’s jeep was ushered in by the State Police.

The road was chaos, jammed with flashing lights from the fire trucks, tow-trucks, ambulance, and half the dozen police cruisers. A crew was working the “Jaws of Life”, trying to pry open what had once been a mini-van.

“What’s going on?” Mallory asked Bard, as Kemo scrambled off the seat. “Why all the police?”

“It’s Bad, Mal,” explained Bard, as they walked toward the crash site. “As best as I can piece it together, it looks like the moose came up over the embankment and crossed the road. Trapped by the cliff, it panicked and tried to cross back when the mini-van hit it. The driver veered off the road over here and slammed into the rock wall.”

“Is he alright?”

“She’s dead. Seven months pregnant.”

“What about the baby?”

“Dead too.”

“*Jesus...*” Mallory was shaken. “Where’s the moose?”

“Over here,” he pointed, crossing the road.

Lying on its side, the moose stared back in suspended disbelief. Its back-end had been crushed and was bleeding badly. Mallory checked her breathing. It was shallow.

“Jesus Bard, why didn’t you just put her down? There’s nothing I can do here.”

“Look at her belly.”

Pressing her hand against the cow’s belly, Mallory could feel the faint thump.

“Here, take this,” she said, handing him the cooler. “Grab my gun out of the back of the jeep.”

Kemo licked the moose’s eyes and snout, trying to comfort the dying animal. “Good boy, Kemo” she said, unpacking her gear as quickly as she could.

Pulling Kemo away, Bard dispatched the animal with two shots to the head. Killing an animal in distress was not something Mallory could explain to him.

Dropping down on her knees, her hand on the dead moose's side, Mallory felt for any signs of life. She had done dozens of breached births with dairy cows and sheep, but a dead pregnant moose? This was a first.

There were twins. Reaching her arms into the bloody uterus as far as she could, Mallory grabbed the first calf by its hips, just above the hind legs. There was no movement. The baby was lifeless. Smearred with blood and tissue, she again pushed her arms up into the belly cavity to reach the second calf. It was kicking, weakly. She had to be careful. If the animal's legs got entangled, they'd break while she was pulling it out.

"Get me a knife, Bard."

Bard handed her his Buck Knife. Cutting the calf's umbilical cord, Mallory quickly tied it off. The newborn animal was breathing. Kemo went to work cleaning off the blood and birth fluids. She couldn't tell if it was injured or simply amazed to be in the world, but it was alive. "It's a boy!" she shouted, as the police officers and rescue crews gathered burst out clapping.

Mallory worked quickly, setting up a drip feed for the newborn. "Bard, hold this bag up. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Where are you going?"

"Down to the river to wash this blood off."

Grabbing her satchel from the jeep, Mallory disappeared over the bank. She always kept an extra set of clothes in the car. Covered in blood from head to foot, there was no easy way to do this. She'd have to strip down. Holding her breath, she plunged head first into the gin clear water. Standing midstream, the cold air on her wet body stabbed at her. She was naked and alive,

watching, as the blood drifted away in slow motion. Unmoving, tears streamed down her face, joy and sorrow the same. She wasn't sure if her tears were for her or the Moose.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Muchalat Harry

The Benedictine Monks at Mount Angel Abbey were kind and solicitous. Mallory wasn't sure if it was because of her donation, or their pious commitment to whatever it was they were committed to.

Established in 1882 by a handful of monks who emigrated from Switzerland, the seminary provided academic programs in theology and philosophy. Today it was home to 125 monks and aging priests, a research library, and a museum filled with twelfth century European manuscripts.

Father Anthony was waiting for Mallory and Kemo on the front steps of the old stone chapel. "Welcome to Oregon. You must be Mallory Glessner," he guessed, rising to greet her.

"Father Anthony?"

"Last I checked," he smiled warmly, shaking her hand. "You've come a long way young lady. I imagine you and your four-legged companion here might like to stretch your legs a bit. Perhaps a short walk?"

"That would be lovely. Thank you for meeting us. This is Kemo."

"Hello Kemo," he said, reaching down to give him a pat. "Based on our conversation on the phone, Harry, I'm sure, would have appreciated your interest."

The aging priest first met Muchalat Harry as a young missionary when he was sent to Nootka in 1938 to provide spiritual guidance to Harry's people on the remote northwest coast of Vancouver Island. Harry was a much-admired villager, known for his hunting prowess and good

humor. Most members of his tribe liked to hunt in groups. What made Harry different was that he went out alone. He was widely recognized as the best hunter in the village.

Walking across the great lawn toward the seminary's residences, Father Anthony recalled how helpful Harry had been in introducing him to the community at Nootka when he first arrived there.

"He harvested my wood, chopped and split it for me. If someone in the village had a problem, Harry brought them to me. He didn't drink or smoke."

"What happened to him?" Mallory asked.

"It was just after my second Thanksgiving there," recalled Father Anthony. "I was living with two other men from the seminary in a modest second-floor flat right off the harbor. There was a great commotion. Someone came running, pounding on our door, telling us to come at once. It was Muchalat Harry, they said. He's dead! Everyone in town knew Harry and I were friends so I suppose it made sense for them to come find me. I grabbed my boots and coat and raced down to the landing."

"What did you find?"

"Harry certainly *looked* dead!" smiled Father Anthony. "He was lying in his canoe wearing the remnants of what can only generously be described as his under garments. He had no shoes. His hands were blistered and bleeding. Fishermen found his canoe floating just off shore. He had no supplies, no pelts, not even his gun. We pulled him out of the canoe and carried him up to my small room. It wasn't until we got him onto the bed we realized he was still alive. He was delirious at first. When anyone came near he'd lash out. We arranged for the doctor to see him and I secured some nursing help from a local village woman." Mallory was amazed at

Father Anthony's recall. After more than fifty years, there wasn't a detail he couldn't remember.

"Eventually we were able to get some food into him. We cleaned up his wounds. He had cuts and scratches over his entire body. I'd never seen a man injured like that."

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"Not at first. No," he answered "After a few weeks Harry began to look more like himself. He ate ravenously but wouldn't say much, not even to me. He was changed. I hoped it would pass with time but it didn't." He stopped and turned to Mallory. "The most astonishing thing was his hair. Almost overnight it turned sheet white."

"What do you think happened?"

"The Conuma River is 45 miles from Nootka through open water. The Nootka Indians are hardened coastal people. They understand water, both fresh and salt, and Harry was a tough man. The trip from the head of the Conuma to Nootka isn't easy, but it was routine for him. He did it every year for as long as people could remember. Some marked their calendars by it because he always came back with goods to barter."

Father Anthony paused, looking out across the lawn. Mallory sensed he had never fully reconciled the events he was describing to her. The story seemed to swallow him up. It had become something he had simply to accept, something he took on faith. Something best left alone.

"I don't know what happened to Harry.... For weeks he wouldn't speak. When he finally did, it came in fits and starts. He seemed to be in a kind of shock. I ministered to him on a daily basis. He needed calm and quiet. I'd tell him the latest village news but he was indifferent.

Eventually, his story began to come out. Every week he'd tell me a little more about his trip, but

then he'd get to the same point and stop. He'd freeze up. If I pressed too much it could take days to calm him."

"Did anyone in the village offer any insights?" Mallory asked.

"I talked to other hunters in the village, friends of Harry, to try to understand what could have happened to him. No one gave me a satisfactory explanation. They all agreed life in the woods was a pretty simple affair. The biggest dangers seemed to be drowning or a broken bone. Most hunters went into the woods to get away from the difficulties of village life, not the other way around. It was *easier* out there, they said, not harder."

"Did Harry eventually talk?" Mallory asked.

Father Anthony brought his hand to his chest in a gesture to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. "I gave Harry some Benedictine." Benedictine, Mallory knew, was a French cognac believed to have medicinal qualities. Originally developed by Monks in Normandy before the French Revolution, its recipe was a closely guarded secret. "I thought it might help," he said, apologetically.

"Did it?"

"At first he just cried, sometimes for hours, then he'd collapse in a stupor. I worried what the liquor was doing to him. Over time though, it calmed him. One day, at the spot in the story where he had always stopped, he kept going."

"What did he say?" she pressed.

"You have to understand, it didn't come out as if he was telling a story," Father Anthony clarified. "I had to paste it together as best I could after weeks of conversation, if you can call it that."

“What did he tell you?” she asked again.

“He said he was kidnapped... carried off in the middle of the night.”

“Kidnapped?”

“At first he said they were Indians.”

“Could he describe them?”

“Over a period of weeks he did, in extraordinary detail actually. But what he described didn’t make sense. I mean, you hear stories. A bear perhaps, but there wasn’t any bear bigger than a black bear on Vancouver Island in those days.”

“I thought he said they were Indians?”

“In one breathe, yes. In the next, he said they couldn’t be.”

“Did he tell you what they looked like?”

“He said they were different sizes, but all big. The largest he thought was over seven feet. They were covered in hair except on their face and hands. I remember he said he saw a female nursing a baby. When I suggested a bear, he got agitated. He said they had fingers not claws.”

“Did he tell you anything about their feet?” she asked.

“Just that they were barefoot.”

“Did they harm him?”

“No. He was very clear about that. At first they were curious and then, as the hours passed, he said they seemed to lose interest. The young ones would come, sit, pull and poke at his union suit, and then wander off. What he remembered most was how much they smelled. Worse than a whale, he said. I’m not sure what that means, but I gather Whales are smelly.”

“People can pass out from the smell of a dead whale. Even seagulls will stay upwind,” Mallory confirmed. “It sounds to me like he paid close attention, kept his wits about him. Did he try to talk to them?”

“He didn’t think they *could* talk. They moved about making gibberish sounds, he said. Clicks and whistles.”

Mallory was having trouble reconciling a native who couldn’t read, who had no prior first hand knowledge of such a creature, describing exactly the same thing people hundreds of years apart, in different geographic locations, saw. All these people couldn’t possibly be describing identical delusions or flights of fancy. Nor could they be a part of a conspiracy. These descriptions could *only* be possible if they were seeing the same thing.

“Where’d they take him?” she asked

“Based on his description, my guess is he was taken inland, up into the mountains.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Harry said he was able to find his way out by scrambling down hill until he got to the river where his camp was.”

“That must have been a relief.”

“Just the opposite I think. Nothing was disturbed. His pots, pans, fishing rod, clothes, food, axe, gun... everything was as he left it.”

“Why didn’t he stop? At least to get his gun,” It didn’t make sense, thought Mallory.

“Harry was running for his life. The undisturbed condition in which he found his camp, I think, only added to his fright. He kept saying to me no one would leave such a cache... no Indian, he repeated, no Indian!”

“Were they chasing him?” she asked.

“He wasn’t sure and didn’t wait to find out. But I can tell you this. He clamored through those woods along that river for twelve miles until he got to his canoe. He pushed off and paddled without stopping for three days, eventually collapsing from exhaustion.”

“Are there *any* grizzly bears on Vancouver Island?”

“No, not then anyway.”

Mallory couldn’t help but wonder if a surprise grizzly encounter might not have morphed into something else in Harry’s mind. Surprising an angry thousand pound bear in the wild could *only* be terrifying, even for a hunter. The problem is bears don’t walk on two legs and cannot carry a man. They’d kill first and then only drag the body on the ground a short distance before eating or dismembering it. “How long did it take to get Harry’s story from him?”

“Months.”

Mallory sensed the re-telling was making the old monk unsteady. Kemo came over to him as he sat down on the bench. “You have a nice dog here,” he remarked, scratching his ears.

“He knows what’s what.”

“How long was it before Harry went back to get his gun and traps?” she asked, sitting down next to him.

“He never did. He never left the village again.”

“I would imagine that was valuable stuff for a native, expensive too,” she noted. “He made his living as a hunter and trapper.”

“Indeed, he did,” Father Anthony nodded. “I encouraged him to go back. I thought it would be good for him. I even offered to arrange for a group of men to go with him.”

“Whatever happened to Harry?”

“He’s here,” Father Anthony replied.

“*Here?*”

“When I left Nootka, some thirty years after his run-in, he came with me. He couldn’t take care of himself. He had no money or family to speak of, so with the blessing of the Archdiocese I brought him out with me.”

“How long has he been dead?”

“He’s not dead.”

“Oh my God! How old is he?”

“Ninety-four.”

Mallory sat astonished. “Can I see him?”

“Sure. He’s very clear-headed and I’m sure would love the company,” said Father Anthony, rising slowly to his feet. “He doesn’t get many visitors.... Just don’t ask him about the incident.”

“Do you believe his story?”

“Of course.”

“But all you have is his word,” Mallory challenged.

“I’m a man of faith,” replied Father Anthony gently. “It is not for me to judge. A man’s soul will reveal his truth if you look hard enough, or wait long enough.”

“So, you believe he was kidnapped by Sasquatch?”

“I’m not sure what else there is,” he remarked after a moment. “I’ve known Harry for more years than I can count. He doesn’t know how *not* to tell the truth. Anyway, he has no reason to lie. He’s never talked about what happened in the woods except to me, and I haven’t talked about it with *him* in nearly sixty years. He certainly did not wish upon himself what his life became. What other evidence do I need?” He handed Mallory a small Tupperware container as they passed the nurses’ station. “Here, take these.”

“What is it?”

“Frozen banana slices. They’re Harry’s favorite,” he said, approaching the door. “He may ask for a kiss, but he’s harmless.”

Muchalat Harry was delightful. His eyes, frail and piercing, lit up when Father Anthony came into the room. His long white hair, tied neatly behind his head, was a striking contrast to his dark weather-beaten skin. He didn’t have any teeth, which explained the frozen banana slices. The nurse said the cold soothed his gums. Mallory half expected a blaring television, but all was quiet in Harry’s little room. Between slices of banana, she got through most of a game of checkers with him before he fell asleep.

“For much of the day Harry sits in his wheelchair looking out over his small flower garden,” explained Father Anthony, as he and Mallory exited the room. “For hours he stares out at the mountains. It doesn’t matter if it’s raining or sunny, he rarely moves.”

“Father Anthony, can Harry read?”

“No. The native people along the coast live by oral traditions and the Nootka are no exception. Their stories are conveyed through storytelling, song and dance. The lives they live are more experientially directed than ours, shared and passed on through daily living.”

“But they have a language,” she said.

“Yes, however learning for them it is not something to be found in a book. What they know is taught to them by the world around them.” Reaching the door, he paused, turning to her. “I’ve lived among these people for most of my life. What I have learned is that they don’t need our religion. Certainly not mine. They don’t need to learn how to be in the world, how to conduct themselves, or how to acquire good moral character.”

“Why do you think that is?” Mallory asked, astonished by his admission.

“They have what we are still searching for.”

“What is that?”

“Grace... they live in a world of gratitude and humility. Because they are connected to the land they don’t need to reinvent the world in their image. They don’t have to justify themselves. They know who they are. The mirror that is nature reminds them.”

“It sounds like heresy to me,” she said, surprised by his candor.

“Exactly,” smiled Father Anthony.

As Mallory and Kemo made their way back across the great expanse of lawn to their car she couldn’t help but feel there was something peculiarly tragic about the whole affair. As it was with Albert, a missionary priest and Native American shared a secret the world could not hear. She wondered how much it mattered.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

Undiscovered Country

.... “Here, I think we’re right here,” said George, shining his flashlight on the map.

“There’s nothing here, just contour lines,” said Mallory. “How do you know?”

“I don’t really, but we’ve been following this watershed northeast,” he pointed, turning the map around. “At least I think we have.”

“We’re lost, aren’t we?”

Yuri smiled. “That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

After nearly three weeks in the woods it was obvious they didn’t know where they were or how far they’d traveled. “We’ve covered about 110 miles,” George was sure. What he didn’t say was what Mallory already knew. They were entering the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world, 34,000 square miles of untracked wilderness. There was a reason people rarely ventured into this country. There were no trails. Anything was possible all the time.

Chapter One Hundred and One
Mallory's Journal: September 2

September 2 - *There is something metaphysical that haunts this forest. You can't help but be changed by it. It is something the animals carry with them and the wind pushes along, something deeper than what the view offers. I wonder if the price of change is found in what I've lost. Are the changes I feel, and even the ones I don't, only mine, or does the world change too?*

Those things that so mattered to me have begun to drift away and with it my certainty. What once dictated now only informs. I catch myself talking to Albert in my head. I think he wanted me to get lost. He gave me the key.

I see now my expectations are the product of my accumulated memories. We all, I think, live in the past. I cling to mine. I don't know how not to. Without my memories I am lost. But the nature of this place disagrees, stripping me of everything but now.

Chapter Forty-Four

49° 25' 30"N / 122° 01' 43"W

September 17

In spite of my own injuries, were it not for the grisly object staring back at me, I am not sure I would believe any of what happened. The events I am forced to accept challenge my sanity and what I know to be true. What happened is not possible. Yet, what I have before me is the irrefutable evidence it did. What I remember I will try to recount without embellishment. What I fear is that it is true.

It was August 26. I was excited to be coming out of the woods. I had not seen or spoken with another human being for months. I packed up my wanagan before first light. I thought if I could catch a few fish, I'd make camp for breakfast before heading down river on what I knew would be an arduous two-day trek to Harrison Mills and a hot bath. With any luck I'd be back in Vancouver in four days and east by train to Boston and Kate in ten. All that was left to do was turn in my equipment, file my report, and collect the remainder of my \$400 paycheck.

It was a morning like any other. The mist on the water gave way to a perfect blue sky. The sun was just beginning to push back the shadows of the darker forest. After my cold night the warmth felt good. Letting the canoe float freely in the glassy water I marked my last coordinates: 49° 25' 30"N 122° 01' 43"W. Casting toward the shore, all was serene and quiet.

What I remember next is a blur - the feel of water rushing over me, the sound of splintering wood and ripping canvas. The side of the canoe was stove-in. I tried to sit up but the searing pain in my arm and shoulder pushed me back. Rocks rained down, smashing my canoe.

I tried to grab the paddle with my good arm but it had floated out of reach. Lunging for my gun, I fired blindly toward the woods, again and again. There was a scream. It was a human scream, then silence.

I don't remember how I got to shore. Waves of nausea overcame me. My arm was broken and my shoulder separated. What else I wasn't sure. My attacker was gone. There was blood, a blood trail leading into the woods. Much else of what I can recall is likely to be the product of what others have told me.

I would not be confident in my story had I not the evidence before me. I don't know what it is evidence of, only that it is evidence of something- right now, the only proof I have that my faculties have not deserted me.

I am not sure if it is what I don't know or what I do that eats at me most. I fear I have killed a man. What it makes me in the eyes of God I cannot reconcile. The world is no longer round. It is, for me, now proven.