

Chapter One

~ Part A ~

Kachunk! Klaas loved the sound of a freshly sharpened ax wedging its way into the side of a soft green aspen. He could feel the vibrations of its powerful impact shake the hollow dry ground beneath him like a giant, deep drum.

Kachunk! Ree-nggg! The ax sang, biting less deep on his lateral swings but shooting wood chips flying more aggressively as it completed each previous downward chop.

Klaas stopped for a moment to catch his breath and gaze over the late afternoon horizon, a haphazard collection of shark toothed Rockies, painted gold in the warmth of the descending sun.

“Something's not right with it” he thought aloud, his eyes glazed gold by the raw beauty now failing to compete for his attention. “I need to know why they want this so much.”

He took another swing and paused again, his eyes fixed emptily on the buried head of the ax

but his mind still pondered some evasive thought, some answer, a solution to some unspoken query he was piecing together in his mind. Slowly he shifted his weight, making ready to pull out the ax from its most recent attack, when he stopped. Even the cool breeze ceased while Klaas bent down to look more closely at the ax buried in the side of its woody prey and for a brief moment, everything seemed to bend ever so slightly as if listening for Klaas to notice.

“You've done it this time” he teased himself “that's in there pretty good. Who's holding who now?” The last words weren't even out of his mouth when a sudden gust of wind caught his back leaning him forward slightly. He extended his hand and steadied himself against the tree.

The bark was warm.

Klaas stepped back suddenly and looked at the tree. This was certainly interesting. He had been working on clearing this part of the hill for a few hours and while he had not been working on this tree too long, it was certainly long enough that if a bear or even a person had been leaning against it, the tree couldn't possibly have stayed warm until now. He looked up. The tree top swayed and he felt that familiar disoriented feeling you get when you watch swaying tree tops against a backdrop of moving clouds. The world around your feet disappears and for a moment you are transferred to the realm of the heavenly unknown.

But there were no animals hiding above him in the trees. Nor could he see any people. If he had, his heart would have stopped for certain. This hill had been his since he and his wife purchased the land 10 years ago in the late 1890's. It was such a perfect escape from the advancing world of change... here in the middle of nowhere... in the remote edges of Colorado's Rocky mountains. If someone had been watching him in the middle of this majestic wilderness, he would have sensed it, wouldn't he?

Klaas looked around now searching for some indication that he had not been alone. He seemed agitated now and exclaimed just above his breath “Perfect idiot. I've done it again with my dreaming. I should have been paying attention.”

His first quick scan didn't reveal anything around him, either below, on the roughly cleared open of the hill he had been facing as he chopped, or above him where the trees still stood, marking the rest of his monumental intentions. Klaas had been clearing the crest of the hill for most of the summer, preparing to build a larger house for he and his wife. But as he looked to the higher ground, seeing was difficult with the sun striking his eyes every few moments. He had put his hand over his forehead to shield the glare, to little avail, but was satisfied none-the-less that there was nobody on the hill with him.

He turned and looked at the tree again, touching it once more to feel the curious warm spot. Then he looked southward over the cleared area below him, and out further toward the horizon at the beautiful view he hoped would one day greet anyone resting on their front porch.

In the sky just above the horizon, his eye caught some movement. He adjusted his focus to catch sight of a bald eagle flying west, straight toward the late afternoon sun. He turned around again with a smile on his face as if to see whether they would be able to see such sights from his future porch. But once again, that glint of sunlight hit his eyes again making it difficult to look up the hill to the north.

Klaas looked back toward the eagle flying west, but then in a sudden rush, whipped urgently back around. With a fierce determination and seriousness wiping the smile off his face he began walking upward toward the crest of the hill. It seemed his mind had just clicked onto the fact that while the sun sets in the west, it should not be impeding his vision when he glanced

northward.

A few steps further and he could tell that the source of the sun's interference was coming from a small pile of something which appeared to be sitting on the small rocky crag at the very crest of the hill. There was definitely something sitting on the crag that had not been there the day before when he had taken lunch in that very spot. A few more climbing paces over the rugged terrain – Klaas was half walking and half climbing in places as there was no cleared walkway to the top – and he was close enough to see a pocket knife. He had lost his own up here some time ago and this one glinting in the sun at him now, looked deliberately familiar.

When he got to the pile of strange objects he felt a sick sensation in his gut and a wave of evidence that some dark presence – a strange boding evil – had recently been here. The feeling was like the impending doom that clenches your gut while waiting in the woodshed for your father to show up with a switch and that look of consternation. You know his correcting strikes on seat of your foolishness will bring you the pain of experience and a new determination never to cross him again... at least not for several more weeks when your wounded backside heals and your memory of it waxes less convincing.

Only this was different because Klaas walked upright in his own honor and felt great satisfaction in the achievement of a clear conscience. He had often spoken to any he considered wise enough to heed, that “A clear conscience brings clear decision when considering conniving circumstance.” Today his conscience was clear, but the sense that something was about to assail him was as tangible as the objects before him.

By the black 'K' on its hilt, Klaas knew it was his pocket knife laying open, with its blade pointing due south and a barber's razor tied to it with thin twine, forming a crude cross. As it lay

on the hill, pointing downward to the south, the cross appeared upside down, and rested on what appeared to be a nest of small dried twigs and white bones; the bones resembling the remains of a Sunday chicken dinner. On the east and west sides were tufts of hair wrapped in tiny pieces of cloth like baby sheaves of hay. The objects were laid on a natural shelf like cut in the rocky crag. Above the rock shelf, like the headboard for a bed, were two perfectly cleaned bones, also white as though dyed or painted. The smaller one lay slightly lower, west of center and was the jaw bone of a small animal. The larger bone, one that appeared to be the femur of something a bit bigger, had been laid diagonally from Northwest to Southeast. Forming an X with the larger bone was a hunting knife whose blade also caught the sun's golden glints depending on the angle. Klaas moved as he had approached this ungodly habilitment of devilry.

He walked around behind it so the light wouldn't keep shining in his eyes. Looking down on this small alter he now looked at the dark reddish brown circle that encompassed these implements of ritual. There were also splotches of reddish brown sprinkled here and there all around and over the rock.

With his eyes, he followed the glint of sunlight shining off the blades of both knives, right down to the tree he had been cutting. "So that's why my tree was warmed..." he mused, though no satisfying look appeared on his face with this small riddle now solved.

He picked up the hunting knife and cut free his pocket knife from its bond to the razor. Closing it up and putting his knife back in his own pocket, he set the hunting knife and razor to one side and began kicking the rest of the pile of refuse off the rock.

"This is MY MOUNTAIN!" he screamed as his anger fueled the burst of rage now at work spewing twigs and bones flying down the hill. He bent down and picked up the jaw bone and

femur, turned to the north and yelled again as he hurled both items into the swampy thickets on the north face. “LEAVE US ALONE! I WILL NEVER LET YOUR WICKEDNESS HAVE THIS PLACE!” He stood panting, his face fully red from fury and then added “YOU WON’T HAVE IT NOW OR IN ANY GENERATION TO COME!!! DO YOU HEAR ME?!!!”

The hollow sounding pop he heard was out of place; familiar yet different. It sounded like a child popping a finger out of his mouth, or like the sound of cork coming out of a bottle of wine, preparing it to be poured. But the sound was accompanied a split second later by pain, like a sting. Klaas put his hand to the front side of his neck just above his collarbone. He pulled out what felt like a small twig with a tint of his blood covering the tip. He let it drop to the ground as he slowly looked up to the west. Through shimmers of piercing light, he thought he saw movement coming directly at him.

He felt relaxed.

The movement looked like red curtains wafting slowly in a large but gentle gust of wind. It was difficult to see because the west setting sun was now fighting to shine its golden fingers through the huddling villainous canopy of the yet uncleared forest.

He turned slowly south to look again at the beautiful majestic mountains on the far side of the horizon. The golden light in which they were painted now seemed liquid and flowed toward him. A smile broke lazily across his face and he felt the weight of his body leave him for a moment before the flowing gold was blurred and replaced by the ground as it rushed up to crush his face and chest. With one straining contraction he choked out a long gasp of wind from his lungs.

Then everything went black.