

Ashley Luchinski

HANK
1984

Hank had shot many soldiers in the war. He also shot many people who were not soldiers. Once, he emptied his gun into a bloated cow carcass. But when he shot the fish he felt something different. What he did in the war, he was doing in war. It was for something, a cause that he believed in. Not in the end, of course, but that part of his life, that part that was selfish and terrified and without reason, he filed away deep in his brain some time ago. He believed, truly, that he was a different person then, fighting for something that felt real and true. And he was angrier then. Filled with something combustible. Something that could very easily get away from him. Something that was rooted deep, a coarseness that sanded away his insides. Then the war was over, and he took a warm shower, put on clean clothes, came home, and kissed the barefooted girl that would be his wife on the wide green of her parents' front lawn. He barely remembered her but she was also filled with something, something he'd forgotten in the jungle.

Mindy was warm and kind and strong with an energy that radiated from the surface of her skin. She was bright and calm and beautiful. And Hank became the kind of man that raked leaves and trimmed hedges and sat on the living room floor to fold laundry with his wife. The kind of man who rubbed her feet not because she had asked

but because he wanted to see her eyes close, that lazy smile come to shape on her lips, that sweet exhale. He became the kind of man who not only loved his wife, but who loved to make her laugh. He became a different man.

And maybe that's why the fish jolted him the way it did. Why the small pistol almost slipped from his hand and into the ocean, almost sunk the one hundred and twenty two feet to the mucky bottom where a weighted line, baited, had dragged until it caught the attention of a monster: a fish with both eyes on its one sand-colored side. Above water and slopped over the edge of Tommy's boat its belly glowed white with small pink tendrils against the dark bloody hole. The fish twitched and seemed so fragile, as smooth and breakable as porcelain.

Hank didn't see if its eyes dimmed, that slow drain, its muddy top faced Tommy who reached into the pocket of his rubber waders. Hank was able to graze that smooth white belly with his fingertips before Tommy pulled the hook from the monster's mouth with pliers and helped Marco, the deck hand, lift and drop the dying fish into a container broader than a coffin bolted to the floor of the boat. There was a splash as the fish landed, the sloshing of water, and then Marco slid the vinyl cover over the lip of the container and it was done, quiet except for the waves lapping the sides of the boat. Marco returned to his trolling pole and Tommy fit Hank's hook with a live fish the size of his hand. Beyond them the mountains rose from the water like gods, tall and silent

and unmoving, nothing but a thick layer of snow and a few whispers of clouds between their jagged peaks and the sky.

“Shit’s exciting, isn’t it?” Tommy tossed the weighted bait over the side of the boat with a splash. The line let out in a whistle.

“Sure is,” Hank managed as he stepped up to the pole. It was fit into a metal holder that was bolted to the side of the boat.

Tommy jerked his head towards the container. “She’s a beaut, Hank. A hundred thirty pounds, easy.”

“You think?” Hank watched his reel slow then stop. He clicked the bail arm over like Tommy had shown him and followed the taught, almost invisible line to where it broke water. Hank felt the boat shift beneath him on the ocean. The waves were larger than he’d thought they would be; sometimes so large that they knocked him off balance. Hank moved to grab the edge of the boat and felt the weight of something heavy and metallic in his hand. He realized he was still holding the pistol.

“Almost forgot,” Hank said and handed the small gun back to Tommy. As he passed it he noticed a red glint on the barrel. Tommy must have seen it too because as soon as he had it in his hands he wiped the surface across the exposed shoulder of his t-shirt, leaving a dark track on green cotton. Tommy put the safety on and shoved the gun into another pocket in his waders.

“You can’t be too careful with those big ones,” he said, and Hank nodded. “Men have been pulled clean out of the boat, isn’t that right Marco?”

“Yep, just heard tell of one last week. Lost the fish and his pole with it and almost drowned,” said Marco. “Water filled his boots like cement. Slipped out of them just in time.”

They all looked out to the ocean and Hank thought about what it would feel like to drown like that, being pulled down down down, and the monster fish swam, hiding deep and far away, the hook and line pulling at its mouth.

“So, what do you think? You up for helping us out?”

Hank looked out to the jagged inlet, those mountains. They stood still and beautiful against the tumbling ocean. It was May and shining. The spray of the waves dusted his face and clung to his stubble. The reason he was in Alaska was very simple. All he had to do was answer the question.

“It would only be for the summer,” Hank said and took the photo Tommy had sent out of the envelope. Tommy had his huge grin on and was standing in front of his boat, thumbs looped in his waiters. “Just for the season, to help him get on his feet.”

Mindy glanced at the photo for a moment before lifting her eyes to Hank’s face. One of her hands rested on her still flat stomach.

“You’re not due until September, Mindy. I’ll be back in time-”

“Why can’t he just hire someone there, who already lives up there? Someone who knows what they’re doing?”

“Tommy knows what he’s doing,” Hank said. He remembered Tommy’s voice cutting through the dark night, through the rain, as they squatted in holes they’d dug in the jungle. It seemed a lifetime away, like a memory that wasn’t quite his. “He’s been up there every summer since he was sixteen helping his uncle with his charter. And he has a trained man who’s already on board. He just needs an extra pair of hands to get the business up and running.”

“How much?” Mindy’s voice was flat, direct.

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

Mindy’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Maybe more, I don’t know. Tommy said you can never know who’ll want to go out on the water but, minimum, fifty thousand.”

“Fifty thousand,” Mindy repeated. “Hank, that’s a lot of money. Tommy doesn’t have that kind of money.”

“Not now,” Hank said. “But he will.”

The boat shifted underneath Hank's feet. He could still feel the weight of the gun in his hand, the sharp regret and thrill of it, but he also felt the salty air on his face and hair, the smoothness of the pole in his palm, and for a moment, the whole of the ocean beneath him, tumbling large and unknowing, and the monsters hiding in plain view in the muck at the bottom of it all. Hank smiled and turned to Tommy.

"I'm in," Hank said. As he reached to shake Tommy's outstretched hand, his bobber disappeared and the line whistled out and away from him again.

June unfolded like a sunrise, the days all bright and long, and Hank fell asleep and woke to sunshine. Even in the earliest hours the sky glowed pink and purple and orange on the horizon, the sun only disappearing a handful of hours. For a moment really, a blink. And the men, burly or small, with deep, new pockets in never worn waders, or those with the light in their eyes, all of their saved pennies in Tommy's hands, their poles ready and poised, shimmered with the prospect of standing next to a fish it took three men to hoist into the boat, so large its mouth could've opened and swallowed them all whole.

Once docked, Marco and Hank would drag the largest of the catch, only hours dead, from the boat and across the wood pier to the hook, an impossibly large three pronged barb they fished through the thick cartilage of the halibut's lip and then, together, lifted it to glory, its weight displayed for all to see by the rusty swinging arm

of a giant scale. Tommy would saunter off the boat, grasp the hand of the man whose face shone, the man as happy as a father holding his first born. They would take their places on either side of the stretched pink belly of the monster, suspended in the cool ocean air. There was no need to tell them to smile, the victor or Tommy. It was as much Tommy's prize as the man who landed the beast. Hank always took two photos with the Polaroid. One to give to the customer, proof that their fishing story was and would forever be true, and one to hang on the bulletin board in the office, the date and weight scrawled in Tommy's scratchy handwriting.

Most men tipped with large bills, fifties and hundreds, passing them to Marco and Hank with hands still wet and covered in blood and slime, bills that Hank unfolded later and still had stray scales clinging to them. Hank understood their eagerness, their excitement to shell out their savings to men who helped them heave in fish they couldn't fit their arms around, that outmatched them in weight and height, that pulled sweat from their pores and energy from their arms and wiped them clean of anything but the grime on their hands and a pride radiated, but Hank couldn't believe it. At the end of the week he separated his earnings into two piles: one to keep and bring back with him on the airplane, one to slip into an envelope, postmark, and mail to Mindy in Wisconsin. The envelopes he sent home were fat with bills.

The men were always filled with delight and the high of trolling and catching the beasts of fish wouldn't end until they climbed into their trucks or rental cars, their

fillets wrapped neatly under their arms, their hands waving from the rolled down windows. For Hank and Marco, the men's pride became their burden as soon as they pulled them from the water. They hauled the fish, prized and not, from the boat to the truck. Once back at the office they hung the fish on hooks in a row. More photos were taken before Hank and Marco picked them off, one by one, washed their cold bodies, sharpened knives, parted flesh from bone, skin from muscle, and pared them down to steaks they rinsed and vacuumed sealed, stacked and fit into boxes they packed with ice for long flights over the never ending forests of the Yukon and British Columbia to chest freezers and tables back home in the lower forty eight. Hank learned to keep his blade sharp, to pass it through meat like butter. He could skin a thousand fish and still be set on edge by the sound of a blade scraping scales. Hank learned to go with the grain. Learned to pare two hundred pounds into twos. Knew the weight of the thick white meat in his hand before it hit the scale. Became accustomed to the smell and heft of a day's worth of discarded heads, bones, skin, and bowels.

In the evenings, Hank let the men whose fish he'd transformed from something alive, thrashing and breathing and wild, into pearly white fillets buy him beers. And after he had a good buzz going they traded stories. Hank let loose the memories of him and Tommy in the jungle, rough tales he spent the summer carving to lovely and glowing gems. Towards the end of August, days from when he was scheduled to go home, Mindy now round and heavy with their baby, was when the pace of his days finally felt fluid. The hoisting, carving, drinking, the smelly men with fish blood

staining their overalls, the salt air and the sunlight were as easy as breathing and reminded Hank of his few, best days of war. Tommy had brought on a new man, Adam, a kid really, who Hank had been training and growing fond of. He felt pride when Adam did well and couldn't help but think of his own child, perhaps a boy, who he was sure would fill his heart with more joy than he would know what to do with.

The call came on Hank's last morning in Alaska. The sunlight was beginning to hide away for longer, the edges of the morning and evening were crisp, and Hank was drinking coffee with Tommy in the office and deciding what time they should leave for Anchorage to make his evening flight when the phone rang. Tommy's voice still had an edge of sleep in it when he answered the phone.

“Bottom Line Charters, Tommy here.”

Hank watched over his coffee cup as Tommy's eyes got large and he shot him a darting look.

“Yes sir. Hello. Yes, he was a great man. It should be no problem at all. Yes. Alright. Eight a.m. sharp. Yes.”

Hank took another sip of coffee as Tommy confirmed their address. Other than his wide eyes and his breathy tone it was like any other reservation Hank had heard Tommy take over the past three months. When he hung up the phone he stared at the

receiver and covered his mouth with his hand. He slowly ran it down the length of beard he'd spent the summer growing.

"You'll never guess who that was," Tommy said without looking up from the phone.

"I'm sure you're right," said Hank. He drank what was left in his mug and stood. "Well, I should be packing. We'll leave around one then?"

Tommy's gaze shifted suddenly to Hank. His eyes were still that scared wide and he let out a sigh that Hank had heard before, but not for many, many years. "I can't take to you to the airport," Tommy said. "The thing is, Hank, I'm going to need you to stay."

Hank laughed and pushed in the chair he'd been sitting in. "I can't stay Tommy. You know that. Mindy—"

"I know," Tommy said. "But you can't leave. Adam's still green and Marco and I can't handle the group he's bringing alone. I need your help."

"The group who's bringing, Tommy? I'm not staying. Why would I risk missing the birth of my child for some rich asshole who's looking to have us pull in a fish he didn't even work for. No. Tommy, I'm going home."

“Hank, it’s Jay Hammond. Jay Hammond is coming tomorrow with a group of state officials. Something about having ‘the Alaskan tourist experience.’ You can’t leave now. I need you.”

Hank felt the saliva disappear from his mouth. Jay Hammond. While Tommy taught him how to tow and fillet, bait and vacuum pack, he’d also spewed the politics of Jay Hammond as if they were gospel. Not only Tommy, everyone. The drunken men in bars, the rich bastards with their slick and clean galoshes who filled his waders with money, those who showed up with dirty hands and creased faces, the young kids who worked at the docks for the season. He was the people’s governor. A husky, mountain of a man whose voice boomed from the television and radio with power and authority akin to God’s. An Alaskan in every sense of the word. A legend, they said, that lived.

Mindy was exasperated at least, at most convinced Hank had lost his mind.

“But why?” she asked. “Yes, I understand this is a big deal for Tommy and the business but why do you have to stay?”

“Tommy thinks Adam doesn’t have enough experience,” Hank said. “And Jay Hammond, Mindy. It’s Jay Hammond. And you’re not due for a few more days.” The line was quiet.

“It’s your child, Hank. Your baby. And it’s me, your wife. I haven’t seen you in months.”

Hank's throat tightened at Mindy's voice, desperate. Almost a whisper. Your child. Your baby. Your wife. Months. Hank felt something in the pit of his stomach. Something inside him told him this was it. This was everything. This moment was the end and beginning of it all; this decision held the weight of his life and could, perhaps, change the course of it. The trouble was he didn't know, couldn't tell which course would yield the life he wanted and hoped for. Yes, if he missed the birth of their baby he would regret it, perhaps for the rest of his life. But they would have more children, surely. And he realized deep somewhere within him that this time, this summer in Alaska, was the last of it that would be his own. He would never set foot on a fishing boat again. He would never see Tommy or the deep, cold, grey-green, angry waters of the northern Atlantic again. This was it. So he made the decision he had to make. For himself to be the man he knew he would be for the rest of his life for Mindy. For his family.

"Tomorrow night," Hank said. "I'll stay to help in the morning but will fly home tomorrow night."

Mindy said nothing. He couldn't even hear her breathing on the other end of the line.

"I won't miss the baby, Mindy. I know this will work out. Trust me."

It took Tommy two hours, five phone calls, and five hundred dollars to secure Hank a ticket on the next evening's flight. Hank's inclination was to apologize for the trouble, to thank Tommy for his persistence, but before he could Tommy put his large and heavy hand on Hank's shoulder, his face radiating joy.

"Thanks a million," Tommy said. "I owe you anything. Everything. Thank you."

Hank smiled and put his hand on his old friend's shoulder. "Only for you, Tommy."

Tommy's hand dropped, a weight at his side, and he cleared his throat, face red and filled with gratitude. "Well, we better get the gear together." Tommy shouted for Adam and Marco, stepped out of the office, and barked orders across the lawn where they were smoking. Hank was alone and sure now, as close to positive as he ever could be, that this, deciding to stay one final day, was his golden choice, the right one.

Jay Hammond was everything Hank had imagined. The man who stepped from the old pickup walked with purpose, had an air of importance, of celebrity, of power, and was without a whiff of condescension. He was not much taller or stockier than Hank and was shorter than Tommy, but Jay Hammond seemed to take up an inordinate amount of space in the small cluster they had gathered in outside of the office. Besides Jay Hammond, there was Lowell Thomas, Jr., Lieutenant Governor of Alaska, and Jim Brooks, Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game. Jay Hammond had also

brought along an old friend of his, a fellow marine who had flown in World War II with Jay and Tommy's father. His was introduced as Bud and when he shook Tommy's hand, he cupped it in both of his and beheld Tommy with his kind eyes. Hank knew that look, knew Tommy knew that look, and when the moment was over, when their hands dropped back to their sides and waists, Tommy, Hank, Bud, and Jay Hammond were all misty around the edges of their eyes. War and men, Hank thought.

"Show us a good time, son," Jay Hammond barked and they were off. Tommy and Marco loaded the men into the van while Adam and Hank followed in the pickup. At the pier they stepped into the boat and their waders. Jay Hammond and Bud had brought their own. Adam fumbled to find the right sizes for Jim and Lowell but after some help from Hank seemed to compose himself. On the ride to the dock, Adam had been driving with both hands gripping the steering wheel. He was staring straight ahead, and when Hank asked him what was wrong he let out an exasperated sigh and let it loose: he'd never been around anyone famous, ever. He was worried he would make a fool of himself in front of the governor. Hank had clasped his hand on Adam's shoulder and Adam glanced quickly and nervously at Hank.

"Just be yourself," Hank had said. "You'll be fine."

Adam had nodded, unconvinced, and Hank smiled. He knew Adam wouldn't relax until they got on the water. He shone as the deck help, running bait and removing fish from the giant hooks, wiping up the blood and guts, untangling line and replacing

weights. The boy moved fluidly, like the wind, seemed unaffected by the rocking boat, and today, like any other day, was a wonder to watch move among the men, high, as they always were, no different from anyone else, on the fresh salt air, the wind, and the feel of a metal pole in their hands, the hope of a pearly fish, the big one, on the other end.

Lowell and Bud caught a cod each before Jim pulled in the first halibut. It was a bit bigger than average, about seventy-five pounds of muscle and spastic thrashing, and Jim's cheeks were red and eyes beaming as he pulled it over the side of the boat. From there it was one after another, four hours of shuffling fish after fish the few feet from the edge to the stock container in the middle of the boat. Hank hung back, let Adam do what he did best, and only jumped in when he was busy or if one of the men had a question.

With an hour left the biggest catch was Jim's first pull. The men were happy, each having caught two, Bud three, but Tommy seemed determined to impress the governor, and decided to reel in the anchor and go deeper into the inlet. Hank stood next to Tommy as he directed the boat north and then west towards the snowy peak of Mount Redoubt, who last spewed ash in 1966. Tommy slowed, cut the engine, released the anchor, and let two hundred and twenty feet of line out.

"This is it boys," Tommy called out. "Another hour here and we'll head back in." By now the men in the tour had the routine down and all Marco and Adam needed to do

was double check the bait and make sure the poles were fit in their holders. Hank watched as Adam checked Bud's bait, nodded and gave Bud the go ahead to let out his line. Hank couldn't hear it whistle out from this distance with his bad ears but knew the sound so well it was if he could. The line must have slowed and stopped because Bud flipped the bail and slipped the pole in its holder attached to the boat. Adam spotted it as Hank did, the pole turned the wrong way, and moved to fix it. He removed the pole from holder, and in that moment, just as Hank opened his mouth to remind Adam to flip the bail arm back over, the pole gave a lurch. Adam's arms jerked up and over the edge of the boat, Hank sure he would let the pole go and watch it sail out and over the side, but instead Adam held fast just as a large wave hit the opposite side and Hank watched, feet stuck where they were, as Adam was thrown from the boat, and disappeared with a large and almost silent splash into the steely ocean.

Bud had one leg over the side of the boat before anyone else besides him and Hank knew what was happening and Hank lunged towards him, pulled him off the edge and let him fall before loosening his waders. Someone, Tommy probably, had thrown the life ring preserver over towards the dissipating foam where Adam's body had landed. For a moment everything was still except for Hank, stepping out of the thick boots, the rubber overalls, and then Adam's face and arms surfaced, he sputtered, eyes closed and then wide and terrified, feet from the floating ring, and then he was gone again. Hank was down to his jeans. He pulled out and unfolded the knife he kept in his pocket, clamped it between his teeth, the broad side against the corners of his mouth,

and lifted one socked foot to the lip of the boat, moved his energy there, propelled his body up, and dove into the dark water.

Hank was expecting the cold, the shock. He had trained as a lifeguard in May in the freezing waters of Fields Lake, but there was something about the salt here, the difference of weight in his body that momentarily confused him. Hank opened his eyes and through the murk he could barely make out Adam's arms, his mass of black hair, a few feet in front and below him. Hank kicked and reached out, grabbed the strap of the rubber overalls filling with water and dragging Adam down down down. The knife slid through the strap like halibut flesh, smooth and quick. Hank took Adam's arm near the shoulder and held it against his body. He felt the weight pulling them both under and quickly found the other strap, slid it from Adam's shoulder and kicked up hard. His knife and the waders were gone, sinking down and towards, Hank imagined, the fish who dragged the heavy pole through the mucky inlet floor. The water was clearing, the light filtering in, and Hank kicked, Adam's arm held fast between his own. When they got to the surface the ring was there. Adam coughed and sputtered, and the waves calmed enough for Hank to tread water while the men pulled Adam back into the boat before throwing the preserver back out to Hank. They hauled him up and as soon as he was over the edge he was on the metal floor, looking up at the clear, bright sky, chest heaving. Someone took Hank by the hand and he was yanked up to his feet, into the wide chest of Jay Hammond who pulled Hank's wet body into a hug.

“Well done, son,” Jay Hammond said. Hank could feel the vibrations of his voice through their chests. He gave Hank a rough pat on the back and said again, voice thick with emotion, “Well done.”

At that moment, three thousand miles away, as Hank was nestled in the governor’s tight embrace, panting and eyes locked with the boy on the floor of the boat, wet and cold and grateful, who he had just pulled from the ocean’s depths, Mindy let out a deep, feral groan and Hank’s only child, a girl, his Rita, slipped into the world without him noticing.