

# Excerpt

## Prologue

Lake Baikal, Russia, 1909

The last day Priscilla Hadin was to see her husband alive was breathtaking: the air crisp and fresh, the sky a cloudless blue. Beyond the pier, the lake was a perfect mirror for the reds and golds of the trees bordering the shoreline.

She watched her husband cajole the stevedores as they scurried up and down the boat's gangplank carrying crates of all sizes and shapes. The pier thrummed with activity: throngs of natives, the babble of different languages, vendors hawking grilled meat and trinkets, the wail of boat whistles.

Something bumped Priscilla from behind and she turned. A goat was chewing at her fur boots, a gap-toothed woman tugged at the goat and kept walking. A far cry from Long Island, Priscilla thought.

"You there!" she heard her husband call. "Be careful, will you? Good man!"

Andrew Galbreth Hadin turned and flashed a grin at Priscilla. So like a little boy, she thought fondly. In many ways Andrew was a mystery to her. He had the courage of a lion and the dogged curiosity of a toddler who's just realized he's surrounded by a giant, fascinating world. Known in the newspapers as "Dashing Andy" or "The Millionaire Buccaneer", Hadin was renowned for his wild, globe-hopping explorations. If it hadn't been mapped, braved, or – better yet discovered, Hadin was game for it. During their marriage Priscilla had seen him off on dozens of adventures: Arabia in search of Ubar, the Atlantis of The Sands; Turkey, for Noah's Ark; Tibet in search of the Yeti... Wherever he went, however long he was gone, he always came back to her.

Why, then, couldn't she shake this gloom? It was silly. Andrew always came back. "Glorious day, eh?" he called to her, walking up.

"Yes, it is. These Russian folk are interesting."

"Hard workers, too. Wish I'd had them in the Congo. Wouldn't have been half as dicey."

"You don't suppose there are any of those Trotskyites around, do you?"

"No, dear, most of them are in Vienna. Some lake, eh? The Jewel of Siberia, they call it."

"It's beautiful."

"The oldest lake in the world; the deepest, too. Did you know that there are over three hundred rivers emptying into it, but only one going out – the Ankara?"

“No, I didn’t –”

“And over a third of its fish aren’t found anywhere else in the world. Legend has it there’s a tunnel at the bottom, a natural lava tube that leads all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Wouldn’t that be something to see? Perhaps I could find one of those bathyscapes–”

Priscilla put her finger to his lips. “Dear, perhaps you should finish this adventure first?”

Hadin grinned. “Yes, of course.”

“So tell me again, this place you’re going to...Tonga –”

“Tunguska, darling.”

“Tunguska. What’s so special about it? Something landed there?”

“More like slammed into, Pris. Nobody’s sure what happened. That’s what we hope to find out. Some say it was a space rock, others think perhaps an alien ship – from Mars, perhaps!”

“Oh, good lord, Andrew!”

“Anyway, whatever it is flattened hundreds of square miles of forest. Thousands and thousands of trees bowled over like toothpicks. Folks in Belgium could feel the impact. And we’ll be the first to see it! The trick, of course, will be finding it. Moscow is being rather stingy with information –”

“Then how did you get permission?”

Hadin grinned and leaned closer. “They think I’m on an expedition for the St. Louis Zoo. Not to worry, Pris. Nogoruk’s the finest guide around; he could track a snowflake across Alaska! We’ll follow the Selenga to the northeast, looking for clues as we go. It will be fantastic fun!”

The paddlewheel’s horn blew, echoing over the lake. Standing on the bridge, a squat man in a fur hat waved at Hadin. “That’s Nogoruk, Pris. We’re ready to go.”

Priscilla felt her eyes filling up with tears. “Must you?”

“I’m afraid so, darling. Chin up. Don’t I always come back to you?”

“Yes, but...” But what? She wondered. He did always come back. “When will you be back?”

“Hard to say. Four months, perhaps. We don’t want to get caught out when the snow flies. It’s fearsome, they say. First chance, I’ll send word.” Hadin kissed her. “My love to the children.”

He kissed her one last time, then started up the gangplank. At its head, he waved to her, then jumped onto deck and began barking orders. Crewmen cast off the lines and slowly the boat began drifting away from the pier as the current took hold. The horn blew once more then the giant water wheels started churning, froth and mist billowing around the stern.

A lone figure appeared on the afterdeck; tall and broad-shouldered, his cornstalk hair wild in the wind, beaming like a child on his first rollercoaster ride. Hadin raised his arms and waved at his wife.

She waved back.

Priscilla Hadin died 74 years to the day after her husband left, never having discovered what had become of him. Nor could she know what pivotal role his ill-fated expedition would play in saving the lives of four strangers carrying a secret that would decide the fate of hundreds of thousands of people.

Chende, China, 1990

Set amid the peaks and wooded valleys 150 miles northeast of Beijing, the Imperial Summer Villa had for centuries been the summer home to emperors hoping to trade the heat of Beijing in favor of the cooler mountain air. Since the 70's it had been one of China's most famous parks. In the two months he'd been in China, Briggs Tanner had spent many hours in Chengde, first posing as a westerner taking in the sights, and then as a deep-cover operative reconnoitering the ground on which he hoped to pull off the most dramatic defection since the Cold War.

Four months earlier, Chief of Staff for the People's Liberation Army, General Han Soong, had secretly passed a note to an attaché during a reception at the US embassy. The missive was short and direct: Soong wanted out. The stunning request was hurriedly passed on to the CIA, who in turn immediately arranged to send a controller to oversee the operation.

Tanner had spent his first five weeks in-country running a small network of support agents and laying the groundwork for Soong's escape before turning his attention to the nuts-and-bolts of how he planned to spirit Soong from the country.

He chose Chengde for several reasons: its distance from Beijing and the city's ubiquitous police force, its popularity with not only tourists but with Beijingers as well, and lastly, its setting.

Encompassing some 1400 acres and surrounded by an ancient stone wall that measures six miles in circumference, Chengde is a warren of grasslands, wooded hills, blooming gardens, dozens of miles of landscaped paths, and over a hundred buildings, from traditional Chinese pavilions and temples to rustic long houses that had once served as barracks for imperial guards.

Armed with a camera and a map, Tanner walked every corner of Chengde until the layout was embedded in his brain. He knew where every path began and ended, where they intersected with others, where they shortcuts and dead-ends lay. He could stand at any section of the wall and know precisely what lay on the other side. Above all, he knew the best meeting places and the vantage points from he could survey them.

The November day Tanner was to put Soong into "the pipeline" dawned crisp and cool.

Chengde's trees blazed in a thousand shades of red and gold. Before first light fell over the park, Tanner was in position at an overlook near Gold Mountain Temple. The park was all but deserted, with only a few caretakers going about their business. Below him, a quarter mile

distant, lay Ruyi and Jinghu lakes and beyond them, west of the Front Palace, Dehui Gate, the park's main entrance. Fifty yards down the central path lay the fountain at which he and Soong were to meet.

Tanner checked his watch. Forty minutes to go. He felt a flutter in his belly and took a deep breath. Relax, Briggs, he commanded himself. Almost there.

He aimed his camera's long lens on the gate and saw the day's first tourists entering the park. He scanned the paths and courtyards until he had a rough count of several dozen people, an even mix of Chinese families and western sightseers.

He got up and wandered the paths around the temple for twenty minutes, snapping the occasional photo and studying his map, all the while keeping one eye on the main gate. Five minutes before the meeting time, Briggs was scanning the Front Palace when something caught his eye.

A Chinese mother and father with a child were stopped beside the fountain feeding the ducks when suddenly the toddler lost his balance and plunged into the water. The father rushed forward to help. As he stooped over to pick up the child, his coat swung open, revealing a shoulder holster.

Heart in his throat, Tanner tightened on the man and saw, trailing from his left ear, a nearly transparent wire that led down into his collar. What the hell is this... He checked his watch.

Time. He swiveled the lens to the main gate. As if on cue, General Han Soong stepped onto the path.

No, no, no...

Briggs looked around. In a nearby garden bed, a caretaker knelt in the dirt with a trowel. The man looked up, caught Tanner's eye, then glanced away. Briggs felt his heart lurch. They were here, the Guoanbu was here. A dozen questions whirled in his brain, but he quashed them. The "how" of it didn't matter. He and Soong were standing in the middle of a trap.

Tanner's mind raced. This couldn't be happening – shouldn't be happening, but it was.

At the main gate, Soong was strolling toward the fountain. From his vantage point, Tanner could see them now, Guoanbu agents moving in, exiting nearby pavilions and walking along the trails on either side of Soong. Oblivious, Soong kept walking.

From the corner of his eye Briggs saw the caretaker raise his wrist to his mouth and speak into the hidden microphone there. Calling in backup, Tanner realized. Having assumed Soong's controller would be close to the meeting site, they'd moved in too early, leaving Tanner outside their perimeter. He still had a chance. But what about Soong?

As he asked the question, he saw a pair of agents trot up behind Soong and grab his arms.

Tanner was torn. Leave Briggs, get away! There was nothing to be done for Soong now. Forcing an easy pace, he turned and began strolling back toward the temple, a hundred yards beyond it he could see the vine-draped wall. He mounted the temple's wooden walkway.

"You there! Stop!"

Tanner glanced over his shoulder. The caretaker was charging toward him. Tanner broke into a sprint, turned the temple corner, then stopped and flattened himself against the wall. The pound of feet drew nearer. The caretaker barged around the corner, saw Tanner, tried to backpedal.

Tanner grabbed him by the collar, pulled him close, and lashed out with a short jab to the man's kidney. He gasped and arched backward. Tanner slammed his fist into his temple, knocking him unconscious.

He pulled back the man's sleeve, revealing the microphone. "I see him!" Tanner shouted in his best Mandarin. "Bifeng Temple! Hurry!"

He sprinted to the wall, took a bounding leap onto the vines, and started climbing. At the top, he stopped, turned back. He focused his camera on the main gate. There, being let away by a dozen men, was Han Soong. Just before he disappeared from view, Soong glanced over his shoulder.

Looking for me, Tanner thought in anguish. God, I'm sorry Han.

He tore his eyes away, rolled himself over the wall, and started running.