

I came upon him, standing in my garden overlooking the lake. His silhouette reminded me of a young tree without its leaves, tall and lean, bowed in places from the wind. He was staring into the distance at the frothy white caps, or perhaps the two loons bobbing up and down on top of them.

I thought he might be lost, or maybe a father of one of the workmen or servants. I called to him, he turned toward me and I walked closer to ask what or who he was looking for. As I approached he swept his arms to encompass the acres of woods and cabins of Eagle's Nest and said, "I used to own all this."

It was William West Durant.

Stunned, I lost my sense of propriety and forgot to reach for his hand in greeting. He extended his and I took it in mine. Finally I said, "Forgive me, I was expecting you tomorrow."

He eyed me quizzically and a frightened look came over him. "I hired a cab at the station. I may have gotten my dates mixed up. That happens sometimes. Your caretaker said he would tell you I arrived."

"And that he did," I said, although I never was told; I'd been taking my morning walk and hadn't spoken to any of my staff. "It's quite likely I got the date down wrong myself," I said to allay his embarrassment.

I led William to the porch of the building he had constructed long ago, the one my father acquired in 1904 along with the land and passed on to me and my siblings. We each sat down on the porch, quietly contemplating what to say next. Finally, he turned to me.

"I understand you want to learn more about me and the homes I built here in the Adirondacks."

I nodded. "I'm writing a history of the region and speaking with you was at the top of my list."

"Yes. Indeed." Pleased to hear this, he crossed one long leg over the other and settled back in his chair. It came to me that this was a man entirely comfortable with his surroundings. There was no awkwardness or doubt over his position with me. Although, he had no airs about him.

He coughed and his shoulders shook.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"Slightly," he admitted.

"Well let's go inside then. I have coffee waiting. Will you join me?"

He smiled appreciatively and followed me into the great house.

We went into my library and I observed him out of the corner of my eye as he sipped his coffee, restraining myself from peppering him with the many questions I had. He was wearing a beige suit made of fine linen from another era, the lapel of his jacket too large to be modern. I noticed the frayed cuffs on his well-tailored pants. Even so, he had once had impeccable taste in clothing.

I was reminded of a recent visit to a camp nearby that was on the auction block. The owners had passed away and their descendants wanted nothing to do with it. Knowing the previous owners' propensity to hire local carpenters to build hand-crafted furniture, I thought I might be able to pick up a few pieces for the guest rooms at Eagle's Nest. When we entered the camp, probably built in the 1890s, furniture was strewn about the main parlor for viewers, dust clinging to everything like old memories. My eye was drawn to an armoire in the corner. It was a

handsome piece made of maple, and stately in an unadorned fashion; a piece that would serve its purpose with pride no matter what situation or arrangement it found itself flung into. The façade was unscathed by time. Even with the slight dings and scratches to its exterior, it remained dignified.

I cleared my throat. "Would you mind if I retrieve my notes? There are many things I want to ask you but my memory will work much better if I can read my notes."

His shoulders relaxed. "Of course," he said. He knew what I wanted from him because he had been asked so many times before: A personal account of how he went from one of the wealthiest land owners in the region to a clerk in a hotel.