

London: Chapter 1

Douglas Tank was born in northern England, in the county of Cumberland in the Year of Our Lord, 1731. Douglas' father, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers all worked deep below the Earth. They were coal miners, feeding the budding industrialization of Great Britain.

Douglas finished his formal education at age eleven, graduating from primary school with the highest marks in his class. His mother made him a special apple pie for his marks, and a second pie for the letter of praise from his schoolmaster. Douglas spent the next three days fishing and gallivanting about with his school mates. On the fourth day his father and brothers took him down into the black mines beneath Cumberland.

The foreman assigned Douglas the type of work typically assigned children. Douglas spent weeks squeezing in and out of the tiniest nooks and crannies in the mines, cutting his clothes and skin on the sharp jutting rocks that lined the impossibly narrow passages.

Douglas Tank was always an intelligent lad. Occasionally in this world, intelligence mixes with perseverance and a healthy dose of good fortune to bring about exceptional things for an individual. Earning good marks in school got him a pie all to himself. But his God-given gifts with all things mechanical changed Douglas's life.

The foreman was a sharp man himself and noticed Douglas's problem-solving abilities. He assigned Douglas to assist the engineer who ran the steam engines pumping water from the mines. Within a couple of years Douglas alone maintained and operated the water pumps in a dozen coal mines. Douglas loved his new job, building and rebuilding the single-piston engines.

When Douglas was seventeen, tragedy struck the Tank family. His father contracted the dreaded Black Lung. The family nursed the sick man for a year; the wives of Douglas's older brothers handling the brunt of the care-taking duties.

Death claimed Douglas's father's soul in the Year of Our Lord, 1748. The young man wept over his father's coffin for days, stopping only when the plain pine box was sunk in the Earth.

For a week after Douglas put his father in the ground, he didn't say a word to anyone. He broke his silence on a Sunday, at the dinner table with the entire family.

"I'm leaving for London in the morning," muttered Douglas.

Douglas's mother was the first to reply. "You can't go."

"I'm sorry mum," said Douglas. "My mind is made up."

"What'll you do in London?"

"I don't know," said Douglas, eyes down at his bread, hard cheese and bacon. "It doesn't matter. I won't labor down below anymore."

"You're a bloody ungrateful fool, Douglas Tank," said his mum. She slammed her palms down on the table and left the room.

The eldest Tank boy broke the uncomfortable silence that followed. "Good luck to you, brother."

"Mum's pretty upset."

"She'll be alright," said another brother.

"We've been talking a lot about the death that follows you down in the mines. We understand."

"Make your fortune in London."

"And if you need to come home, you're always welcome."

"Thank you," said Douglas to his brothers. He could barely get the words out because he was working so hard to keep the tears from falling.

The northern shoreline of New Grenada meandered along the Caribbean, coves and narrow beaches wedged between the salt water and the jungle. Anne Goulden strolled along a rocky alcove on a warm, late summer evening in 1888. She squinted at the

brilliant reds and oranges of the sun as it dipped beneath the horizon line where the sky kissed the jungle. The pebbles strewn across the sandy beach glistened like gray marbles trapping the sunlight.

The salty smell hung in the air, heavy and sticky, clinging to Anne's skin and seeping through her clothes. The evening breeze was still. Squawking gulls fought in twos and threes along the beach over scuttling crabs and rotting pieces of fish.

During high tide, the waves would push close to the jungle's tree line. For now, the ocean had retreated, providing a narrow beach for Anne to walk along.

This was Anne's secret place.

A narrow path cut through the jungle from her family's estate to the shoreline. Somewhere beyond the Goulden estate lay Cartagena, the capital of Queen Victoria's New Grenada colony.

The teenager sat on the rocky sand and sucked in the sea air between her teeth. She exhaled and reclined back on her elbows. She sat back up and tucked her trousers into her tall leather boots, twisted and tugged on her corset before reclining back on her elbows.

Her eyes flickered left and right across the horizon, spotting a zeppelin plodding its way west.

After the sun set, Anne stood up to find a place to bunk down for the night, closer to the tree line and away from the rising tide. She tripped over a broken branch from an avocado tree and stumbled to her knees. A tarantula the size of her palm dropped from somewhere over her head and landed on her arm.

Anne leapt up and sent the spider tumbling onto the sand. Acting on instinct, Anne stomped down on the tarantula. She heard hard fibers cracking, grinding the life out of the spider.

Lifting her foot, Anne bent over and examined the creature. Black fluid leaked from the spider's torso. A coiled spring unwound from the center of body, splitting the shell in half. Minute clockwork gears and springs revealed themselves as the creature's insides slid out onto a patch of gray marble stones.

Anne stood up and swept her eyes up and down the beach. The only other creatures there were the sea gulls, pacing the sand and yelling at each other. Her eyes turned towards the jungle a short few meters in front of her.

A black jaguar twice Anne's size perched near the top of a short, wide tree. She stepped back, slipping on slick stones and landing on her backside. The jaguar leapt from the tree, covering the distance between him and his prey in one jump. Anne shrieked as the cat unhinged its metallic jaws and swallowed her whole.