

Ten days later, Curtis was driving down a Maine woods road, following the written directions to Nahmakanta Sporting Camps, having heeded the warning that a GPS unit might malfunction or send him down the wrong logging road. Best to have written directions and a Delorme Maine Gazetteer & Atlas™ for back-up. And as forewarned on the website, the cellphone lost reception over ten miles back.

He must have been nuts to be going through with this. However, he had vacation time to burn and this would make for a cheap vacation and his wife had been nagging him to take some time for himself without the family in tow. And no way for anyone back at UNH to contact him out here. He saw on the website that they had canoes stashed at small lakes in all directions for nearly ten miles from the base camp. There was over thirty miles of hiking trails, too. He heeded the other warning on the website and had rented a high clearance pick-up truck for the week. The rental fee paid for itself in the final mile as the road was really rough. There was no way he could have driven it in the Honda Fit he used for his work commute. As he pulled up, an older gentleman in faded jeans and a light flannel shirt walked up to his vehicle.

“Dr. Devon? Neill Fournier. Welcome to Nahmakanta Camps. Do you need help with your gear? No? Then follow me.” He led Curtis to the eastern most cabin. “This is your home away from home for the coming week. Maple Leaf Cabin.” It was a rustic log cabin outside. “The structure is original and dates back to the late 1800’s when these sporting camps first started. We just remodeled the interior last year. You’ve got a chemical toilet in the back closet. There are showers and flush toilets in the main lodge. Spring water in the jug. It can be refilled anytime you need more at the main lodge. Breakfast is 6 am. Pack lunches to go provided at the end of breakfast so you can simply enjoy your day without worrying about missing lunch. Dinner is at 6pm. Cookie rings the bell for both meals and doesn’t wait. If you need anything, come to the lodge.”

Neill then looked around a moment and then leaned in closer to Curtis. “What do you know about my neighbors, Dr. Devon? Normally, those who have dealings with them rent the cabin for 2 to 3 days at a time, not a whole week.”

“Chit, chit.” They both looked up at the squirrel now perched on the edge of the roof. It looked about and then spoke quietly, “Neill, thank you for being cautious. It’s my fault you weren’t informed Dr. Devon would be staying longer than our usual visitors.”

Neill pulled his ratty baseball cap off his head and grasped it in both hands. “Can’t be too careful, Ms. Lady Slipper.”

Curtis was only slightly startled by the talking squirrel. Her voice was higher pitched than a human, but not as high as the cartoon Chipmunks, which is what he had half expected. He looked from her to Neill and back. “Mr. Fournier. I only half-believed the story told to me less than 2 weeks ago by one of my old scout leaders, Eugene Pomerleau.”

“Eugene? You know Eugene. Well, then, you don’t need to say anything further. My apologies for butting in. Like I said to Ms. Lady Slipper, one can’t be too careful.” He handed the cabin key to Curtis. “Again, if you need anything come to the main lodge and I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.”

Neill headed back toward the main lodge. Curtis looked up to find that Lady Slipper was gone. He looked about including up in the nearby trees and saw nothing. He opened the cabin door and found her perched on the small table near the front door. She pointed up with her tail and his eyes followed to see a small round door near the peak of the eve.

“I left it open so you could see how I got in ahead of you. Normally, I wouldn’t show-up this soon, but as I said to Mr. Fournier, I had failed to notify him that you would be staying longer than our usual business partners. As he said, welcome to Nahmakanta.”

“You don’t waste any time.”

She sighed and for the first time, he noticed her ears, paws, and tail tip were black. Otherwise, she looked like any other eastern gray squirrel. “Someone had to come meet you. Though Eugene vouches for you, I needed to make sure,” she looked him in the eyes. He found it hard to look away. The large pupil rodent eyes staring at him sort of unnerved him. She suddenly nodded braking him from the trance. “My apologies, Dr. Devon, a trick my predecessor taught me. She said, if you look deeply into someone’s eyes, you can tell their character. It has worked so far for me.”

“Please call me Curtis. And what if it didn’t work.”

The squirrel shrugged. “I’d probably be dead.” She giggled and chattered at the same time. “Where are my manners? Though Neill sort of introduced me. I am Lady Slipper, head of the Council of Elders. Like a city mayor among your people. Eugene explained to you what we need?”

“A consultant with knowledge of physics to review an accident and help you understand what happened.”

Lady Slipper nodded. “Please enjoy your stay. Take a couple days to relax. Then if you would still like to do the job, head for the far southeastern end of the lake. If you take a canoe, pull ashore near the lake outlet. Pull your canoe completely into the bushes and a scout,” she paused, “one of our squirrels is what I mean by that term, will meet you. If you want to hike down, take the Blue Trail that follows the eastern shore of the lake. After two miles, the trail turns away from the lake. Look carefully for what looks like a deer trail leading back towards the lake and follow it. Again, a scout will meet you and lead you the rest of the way.”

“You said, if I still take the job.”

“Yes. Eugene told me you’re not directly involved in the War. If between now and Tuesday you change your mind, stay here, enjoy the camp for the week as our thank you for coming this far and you can be on your way.”