

THE LAZARUS KEY

RACHEL AUKES



WAYPOINT BOOKS

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A SAM BRODIE THRILLER

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ONE

Somewhere in the Canadian Yukon / One year,
nine months ago

The hunter's grip tightened on his rifle as he carefully stepped over the fallen oak. He scanned the area and listened intently, before turning to his bodyguard with a frown. "Where's it at again?"

The bodyguard shouldered his rifle and pulled out a small tablet. "It's still showing a couple of hundred meters out. That way, sir." He pointed north.

"Let me see that." The hunter snatched the tablet and studied the GPS tracking map. Two yellow dots hung close together while a red dot showed three hundred meters away. He groaned in frustration. "I swear we've covered this entire forest. How is it we're not catching up to it yet?"

"Because it's moving away from us, likely following the easiest terrain, sir."

"That was a rhetorical question, you dolt. Let's get

moving. I'm not going home without that trophy." The hunter picked up his pace, no longer worried about the occasional snapped branch or rustled leaves.

Several minutes passed before the bodyguard spoke up again. "I should advise you, sir, we have less than an hour before dark. Do you want me to call the helicopter?"

"Why would I want that?"

"Because it'll become a lot more dangerous out here after dark."

"That's why I pay you to watch my back," the hunter said.

"But what we're hunting—"

"Is going to be a trophy in my cabin this time next month. Now, do your job and quit annoying me." the hunter snapped. He was exhausted and starving, this hunt having taken much longer than he'd planned. They'd been walking this damp, evergreen forest, being eaten alive by bugs, for at least ten hours with only a few measly protein bars his bodyguard had carried in. "Where's that damned cat?"

The other man retrieved the tablet once more, but his brow furrowed in confusion. "That can't be right." He smacked the tablet.

"What's wrong?"

"This stupid tablet is showing all three dots at the same location. All these trees must be screwing up the GPS again."

"Well, reboot it." The hunter scanned the area. Everything had gone eerily silent—no birdsong, no insect buzz. A troubling sensation crept up his spine. Something wasn't right. He did a quick three-sixty as the bodyguard quickly unslung his weapon. Nothing.

A leaf floated to the ground. Both men looked up to see a saber-tooth tiger lunging off a branch above them, razor-

sharp claws extended, massive jaws open. Its two eight-inch fangs glinted in the dim light. The tiger landed on the bodyguard with a spine-tingling roar. He somehow managed to grab his rifle and squeeze off a shot before being skewered by the beast's unnaturally long canines.

The hunter stumbled away from the snarling tiger, horrified as it tore apart his screaming bodyguard. The cat looked up from its prey, blood staining its muzzle, dripping from its mouth. The hunter threw up, then turned and ran. He made it ten meters before the tiger slammed into him. Agony erupted across his back as claws dug in, smashing him face-forward into the ground.

He screamed, hands and feet digging at the soft earth, thinking of nothing but getting away. The weight of the massive animal crushed him, cutting off his cries and preventing him from breathing. Sunlight vanished as the tiger's mouth enveloped his head and clamped down. The pain was unbearable but lasted only four seconds—the exact length of time it took to snap the hunter's neck like a twig.

THE HELICOPTER HOVERED twenty meters above the pine trees as two snipers took aim. Below, the tiger was feeding upon its prey—something in brown camo. They fired the specially formulated tranquilizer darts that had been manufactured to take down a rhinoceros—more than enough to take down a tiger, no matter how massive this particular one was. The tiger snarled, jumped up, and began to run, only to stumble and collapse.

Once the tiger's body went lax, four well-armed mercenaries descended from the helicopter on ropes, quickly securing the area before giving a thumbs up to the two men

in suits still waiting aboard. The pair then attached metal harnesses to the rope—similar to what one would find on a zipline albeit far more high-tech—and slid down the ropes with ease. The ropes retracted as the helicopter flew away.

The two men were impeccably dressed in highly tailored suits and polished shoes, as if they'd come straight from a dinner party. The taller, older man glanced across the carnage, careful to not to give away any sign of emotion—emotion in a leader could be perceived as weakness, and weakness was something he could never abide.

“Everything’s clear, Mr. Angel. We’ll get the cat secured and call for pickup when you give the okay,” one of the mercenaries said.

“I won’t be long,” Angel replied, pulling off his leather gloves to smooth down his slicked-back salt-and-pepper hair.

He began strolling, with his younger companion following behind. The grisly scene looked like something from a horror movie; blood and gore covered the ground, limbs torn and scattered. This wasn’t just a predator looking to eat, this was pure malice. A lone boot sat by itself, several meters away from the rest of the carnage, the tibia and fibula sticking out of it like some Halloween prop. The other victim’s back had been ripped to shreds, his head caved in from where the cat’s jaws—with their one-thousand pounds of pressure—had practically ripped it free of its victim’s shoulders.

Angel picked up a finger that’d been torn off at the second knuckle. He gave it a quick glance before giving it a casual fling.

“Looks like our kitty was enjoying its meal of your customer and his security detail,” John, the smaller of the two men, said.

“He told me he was this grand hunter. Clearly, he exaggerated his exploits,” Angel said.

“At least he didn’t exaggerate the size of his pocketbook. He paid two million in advance,” John said.

“We can’t make him disappear. He’s too well known,” John said.

“I don’t want him to disappear. I want his friends to know what happened.”

John stared at his employer in surprise. “You want his friends to know that he died on a hunt you arranged?”

Angel smiled. “Yes. These people are looking for a rush—that’s why they buy my hunts. What’s more of a rush than the very real risk of being killed by such a predator like this tiger? I believe rumors of this incident will be better for business than any of my other marketing efforts to date. Therefore, the world can know he died while hunting, but I only want his friends to know exactly what he was hunting.”

“Okay, but the body’s too messed up to have anyone find it. Not even a mauling by a grizzly bear would do that.” John gestured to the nearly headless corpse.

“Then place the body somewhere the local wildlife would eradicate the evidence, save for a wallet and boots, you get my meaning,” Angel said.

“And his bodyguard?” John asked.

“I don’t care. Toss him in a ravine. Nightshade’s already been paid.”

Angel then knelt by the tiger and examined the creature which seemed to be completely unharmed. The hunter hadn’t managed to hit it with even a single shot. He stood and turned back to his associate. “We can reuse this beast again. That saves me over four million dollars from having to create a new one.”

“Or you could have your own private hunt. Enjoy the product for yourself, for a change,” John offered.

Angel shook his head. “No. We need the revenue. My joy is found in bringing joyful experiences to others.”

A mercenary, having just noticed Angel, hustled over. “Be careful, sir. Just because it’s tranqed, doesn’t mean it’s fully out.” Just then, the tiger’s paw flinched. The man jumped and let out a high-pitched *eep!*

John chortled and Angel sneered at the soldier. “That’s completely normal while the animal is unconscious. Change your pants and prepare the animal for transport. And then get these bodies cleaned up. I want no evidence they were ever here.”

The mercenary swallowed. “Yes, sir. We’ll get right on it.”

Angel took one more glance around the carnage before speaking to his assistant, “Better make a note to assign more bodyguards to each hunter. Four—no, two—ought to suffice. If they want more than that, they can bring their own.”

“I’ll notify Nightshade. The next hunt’s coming up in five days, but they should be able to accommodate,” John said.

“If they balk, tell them we’ll use another company.” Angel watched as the tiger was lifted to a cargo helicopter. Then he paused and held up his hand to stop John. “Have the tiger delivered to the camp. This one’s feisty. It’ll put on a good show in the arena.”

TWO

Yellowstone National Park / Wednesday, June 9;
7:36 PM

I heard him before I saw him. A lone man rustling leaves and bragging to someone—or making a video, more likely—of his most recent achievement. I kept my pace slow, careful not to betray my presence. I'd been through this particular part of Yellowstone only a handful of times, but I'd been in woods like these for the better part of my life. Each step was calculated so that I didn't step on a twig or disturb crisp leaves on the autumnal forest floor.

He came into view beyond a bushy pine. A tall, lanky fellow who reminded me of a ladder—if that ladder was covered in camouflage and carried an AR-15 rifle. He currently had his rifle slung loosely in his left grip as he stowed his phone and then drank from a stainless-steel flask in his other hand. Before him, the wild boar he'd shot lay

still, a thin rivulet of blood still trickling from its neck wound.

At least the hunter's finger wasn't on the trigger.

I unsnapped my hip holster and drew my Glock. Poachers were a dangerous, antsy lot. They were the main reason why more game wardens were killed in the line of duty than any other federal officers.

Drunk poachers were even worse.

Cautiously, I stepped out from cover. "Fish and Wildlife Service. Set your weapon on the ground."

He froze. Seeing me in a game warden's dark green shirt and jacket should've cleared up any questions. As soon as he set the rifle on the ground, he returned to full height and flashed that smile—the one that men flash women when they're trying to get away with something. I doubt it's ever worked on any woman except their own mothers. I can tell you one thing: that crap's never worked on me.

"Uh, hey there, officer. What can I do for ya?" he asked, holding that same expression.

I cocked my head. "Funny thing, I thought hunting season didn't start for another three weeks."

"Hunting season?" he chuckled nervously as he tried to devise some excuse, but that would be hard to do when he had a rifle in his hands.

I kept my pistol gripped in my right hand and tapped the badge on my jacket with my left. "In case you hadn't noticed already, I'm a federal wildlife officer, and you're under arrest for hunting without a permit and for carrying a firearm into a national park outside hunting season. Oh, and don't forget the hefty charge for poaching."

"What poaching? I didn't shoot nothing. I, uh, found this pig like this," he griped. He'd clearly eluded the

Wyoming game wardens for so long due to luck because he'd yet to display any hints of skill or intelligence.

"What? You just so happened to be out hiking tonight with an AR-15 and came across a boar someone else had shot?"

"Yeah, that's it." He shrugged. "It's dangerous out here with all the wildlife. I like to play it safe?"

"And illegal." I scoffed. "Though, I gotta say, this runt you shot tonight is nothing compared to the 400-pound boar you shot last week."

"How'd you—" He cut himself off.

"How'd I know? Because I watched that nice little video you posted on Facebook. That was not a smart thing to do, Mr. Fettinger."

He gulped and then seemed to find his backbone. "Aw, c'mon, lady," he said. "I gotta feed my family. Besides, wild boars are an invasive species. You know that."

"Still doesn't make it legal to hunt them in a national park off-season."

He stared at me like a deer caught in headlights while his mind raced to choose between flight or fight. He drew a big breath, and I saw his legs bend and tense.

"Don't even think—" I began, but he rabbited back the way he'd come. He must've assumed I wouldn't shoot him in the back, and damn it, he was right.

I holstered my sidearm and took off after him. He was taller and faster, but I was in better shape. He bolted through the woods, tearing through shrubs, and shoving through branches. I dodged a branch that had come snapping back, only to get nailed across the forehead by the next one.

He bulldozed through thick underbrush. I veered to the left to avoid the bushes and hurdled a fallen tree trunk. It's

not smart to run through the woods. There are too many things that could snap or sprain an ankle, so all I had to do was keep him in sight while not getting injured and let nature help. When he tripped over a tree root protruding from the ground, I tackled him using my full momentum. The air flew from his lungs, and he hit the ground with a pleasantly brutal thud. I knelt on his back. “You know what else wasn’t very smart, asshole? Making me chase you down.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please, I can’t get another ticket,” he whimpered.

Six out of ten poachers went the begging route. The other four went the cursing and bickering route. I was relieved he wasn’t one of the meaner ones. I zip-tied his wrists behind his back, relieved him of a pistol and knife, confiscated his phone, and dragged him to his feet. “And now you can add evading an officer to your list of charges.”

“I didn’t mean no harm. I was just having fun. I didn’t hurt no one. Please, let me go. I gotta work tomorrow.”

“Walk,” I ordered. “And you did worse than hunt off-season. You hunted in a national park off-season. Judges especially don’t like poachers firing guns where tourists might be hiking.”

He pleaded, “I can’t go to jail. Please, can’t you just fine me? I can pay you, whatever you want.”

“A fine?” I chuckled. “I’m a federal game warden. We don’t even like to leave our office unless we get to use our handcuffs or gun. You’re lucky. Tonight I felt like going with the cuffs.”

“F’ing possum cops,” he muttered under his breath, but I still heard it. I just decided to let it slide. I’d been called worse, much, much worse.

Tonight’s poaching case was as run-of-the-mill as they

come, but if there's one thing I've learned after being a game warden for going on twenty years is that nothing's ever run of the mill, not when there're guns involved. So, I kept a good grip on Fettinger's arm as I led him through the woods. His pleading ran out sometime within the next ten minutes. He probably went quiet because he was struggling to walk with his wrists zip tied. It took us over thirty minutes to reach the trucks. On either side of his white four-by-four sat a green truck—each with the darker green Wyoming Fish and Wildlife Service logo on the door.

Rob Richardson, wearing the red shirt of the Wyoming game wardens versus my dark green shirt of the federal game wardens, was sitting on the hood of one of the FWS trucks. He waved broadly, and I waved back.

"Oh, so you thought you hid your shiny truck really well, huh?" I asked. "You didn't do half bad, but I've seen a lot better." I paused. "Yeah, don't act so surprised. The Yellowstone Park Service called it in before you even turned off the engine."

He looked downward, slumped shoulders.

"What about my truck?"

"What about it?"

"What's going to happen to it now?"

"It's going to get impounded. You can pay the fine and pick it up once you're out of jail."

"And my rifle?"

I chortled. "I'm *confiscating* a weapon used to illegally hunt in this park. If you want to file a complaint, I'm Special Agent Sam Brodie with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service."

"Sam? That's a dude's name," he muttered.

"Not in this case." Then I turned toward Rob. "Took you long enough. I was beginning to think you'd rather stay

home and watch TikTok or whatever you do in your free time.”

“I told you my daughter put that on my phone, not me.” Rob chortled. “I had to drive here all the way from Cody where I was wrapping up another poaching call.”

“It’s been an awfully active off-season so far,” I said.

“If this is any sign of how hunting season’s going to be this year, I’m not looking forward to opening day.” He shivered. “Scariest day of the year.”

“Busiest. That’s for sure. Speaking of poachers,” I pushed Fettinger toward him. “He’s all yours to start processing. I’ve got to go back and grab his rifle and tag the boar. I’ll send you pictures to help speed up processing. Consider it a gift to help you hit your quota for the month.”

“We don’t have quotas, and don’t make me think you’d give me credit out of the goodness of your heart. I know damn well you’re just trying to pass off the paperwork.”

“So you don’t want this arrest?” I asked.

He frowned. “Of course I want it.”

I grinned. “And you state wardens are just so good at pushing paper. And I especially like the way you sign your name by adding that little happy face in the ‘o’ in your last name.”

He guffawed. “I don’t do—” He pressed his lips together. “I’ll see you back at the station.”

I opened Rob’s truck door, pulled out Fettinger’s personal items, and placed them in a lockbox. I glanced at the poacher before winking at Rob. “Have fun.”

Without being encumbered by a clumsy poacher, I reached the boar in under ten minutes. First thing I did was secure the rifle by unloading it and then slinging it across my shoulders. It clanged against my rifle, but there wasn’t much I could do about that. Then I pulled out a geotag—

the same tracker as all wardens wore on their belts—and used a zip tie to fasten it to the boar’s leg. That way, any warden or ranger could pick up the carcass, and I could get some sleep.

I was snapping pictures of the poached animal when my phone vibrated. I checked the caller ID—it displayed OLIVER CHAMBERLIN—and answered. “What’s up, boss?”

“Hey, Sam. You track that mentally deficient poacher yet?”

“Yeah, I found him. I handed him off to Richardson since I had to go back and secure the site.”

“Is it secure?”

I glanced around. “Secure enough. Why?”

“Something’s come up. I received a call about a wild cat sighting in the vicinity of Skunk’s Gully that I need you to help track.”

There were plenty of mountain lions around Yellowstone. They were a natural part of the wildlife. Any that posed a threat were scared off by park rangers or handled by the state wardens, which meant... “I take it there’s more to it than just a cat scaring folks.”

“The guy who called it in is a South Dakota game warden who happens to be on vacation here in Yellowstone. He asked for assistance in tracking the animal. I was going to pass it off to a state warden until he told me about it. He needs backup, Sam.”

I frowned. “Why would a mountain lion sighting require backup?”

“He said the cat was over two hundred pounds. Now you see why I’d rather us take point on this call.”

I wanted to ask what kind of wild cat weighed two hundred pounds; most cats weighed less than fifty. Instead,

I said, "I'll go check it out. Did he happen to give you coordinates?"

"I'm texting his last reported coordinates to you now. Your tag shows that you're within two miles of his location, so you should be able to reach him in no time."

I checked the coordinates and pinned them to my map. "Received. I'm on it."

The sun had set nearly thirty minutes ago, and twilight was fading to full-on night. The darkness would slow down my pace, especially since I had to watch my step *and* remain somewhat quiet to not spook a cat that was out there somewhere.

Being a federal wildlife officer working in Wyoming, nearly all the cases I handled were in or near Yellowstone, and most of those calls involved either search-and-rescue or poaching. The rest were dangerous wild animal encounters. Two weeks ago, it was a bear. Last week, it was a monkey attack. Yeah, someone's pet *monkey* got loose in the middle of the night, snuck into a camper, and raised a ruckus. That one really should've been a park service call, but the wardens get called in far too often.

After all, we're the ones with the guns.

THREE

Yellowstone National Park / Wednesday, June 9;
9:32 PM

My usual shift ended three hours earlier, but that was the life of a U.S. wildlife officer. If there's trouble, you go, regardless of time of day. And if a game warden was in trouble, you go even faster.

I ducked to miss a low branch while hurdling a part of the cottonwood's root system that had grown above ground. Reaching the state warden's last reported coordinates, I found nothing. I continued searching the area, finally finding him tucked in behind a bush a hundred meters to the southwest. I gave a low whistle. Wardens tended to do that rather than calling out to each other since it seemed to disrupt nature less.

"Glad you could make it," the other warden said quietly without lowering his night-vision binoculars. Another thing we don't do is whisper. We talk quietly, so we don't startle

wildlife (or poachers), but we never whisper. People tend to over-express sibilants, especially the letter S, when they whisper. And the last thing a skittish animal wants to hear is something that sounds like a giant snake.

I sidled up next to him, took a knee, and set down the two rifles. I couldn't make out what he was looking at in the darkness, but the call was to provide support on a potentially dangerous wildcat issue. "So, where's this big cat?" I asked quietly.

He jerked even though he would've heard me settle in alongside him. "You're a woman."

"And you're black. Whew, I'm sure glad we got all that out of the way. Saves us from awkward conversation later, am I right?"

"It's just when they said they were sending someone named Sam—"

"I know. I get that a lot."

He held out his hand. "By the way, Murphy Barnes, at your service."

I shook it. "Sam Brodie, but you knew that already."

"So... Sam? Not Samantha or Sammy or something like that?"

"Sammy? My god, who'd name their kid Sammy?"

"Someone who's a fan of Sammy Hagar. Who'd name their daughter Sam?"

"My parents were expecting a son." I nodded in the direction of where he'd been looking when I arrived. "Now, how about you tell me where this cat is so I can get to the more interesting topic of why I got called in to assist a state warden who's way out of his jurisdiction but still carrying all kinds of fancy equipment while out of said jurisdiction. Makes it look an awful lot like you're working a job."

"I couldn't risk it running off." He eyed me. "I was

hoping they'd send in more officers. Two officers aren't enough to round up that cat."

"Showing up, I just doubled your odds of success at that," I said.

"Good point, I guess." He handed me his NVBs. "At your one o'clock, forty meters out. Just under the limestone ledge."

No wonder I hadn't noticed the animal in the deep twilight. Forty meters in dense foliage during the day was a long way to see. Even with his NVBs, it took me a good seven seconds to bring the cat into clear view. I refocused the glasses. At first, I thought it could be a tiger—the shape was right, but this thing was too big to be a tiger. It also had an unnatural look—its head was too big while its legs seemed too long and thin for its body. Its skull was dimpled and deformed rather than smooth and rounded. But what really threw me was its two long saber-like teeth... exactly how I envisioned saber-tooth tigers in my head. I continued to stare. "What the hell is that?"

"You see it?"

"Yeah. I see it." I was still working on believing it. I couldn't wrap my head around what I was seeing except that I was absolutely certain that cat didn't belong in Wyoming.

Murphy reached for the gun lying next to him on the ground. "I need to get within range to dart it, but it's skittish enough that I didn't want to risk going in without someone to cover my back."

In the dark, I'd mistaken the tranquilizer gun for a shotgun. "What are you doing with a dart gun in Yellowstone?"

"I always carry one in my truck. Guess I brought it with me on this hike out of habit. You always carry two rifles?"

"One for each hand, and don't change the subject. This

isn't South Dakota, which means you don't have the authority to carry darts in Yellowstone, let alone in Wyoming."

"I promise I'll give you a really nice apology later. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm a little curious about the giant cat over there because I can tell you one thing: we sure as bunny tails don't have anything like that in South Dakota."

"I might be a little bit curious about it myself," I admitted, then frowned. "You just happened to come across this beast on a random evening hike through Yellowstone?"

"I got a tip from another hiker this afternoon, so I thought I'd follow up on it," he said.

"They should've called the Wyoming wardens."

"Evidently they didn't know the scary-big cat protocol around here."

There was a lot not adding up about this call. "Nice of you to call it in."

"You're welcome. Now, ordinarily, I'd say we sneak up closer to get a clean shot, but it seems more than a might skittish, so I parked myself here to give it time to settle in, but it's getting fidgety again. I think it's going to move soon. It's a predator, so we might be able to encourage it to come closer instead of spooking it away. What d'ya think? Draw its attention?"

"You think, 'here, kitty, kitty' will work?"

"Has that worked for you in the past?"

"Not yet. But if you're dead set on enticing that cat in our direction, my vote is you drawing its attention, and I dart it."

He grimaced. "I thought you might say that. We're going to have to get a lot closer first. There's way too much brush out here."

I handed the NVBs back to him and pulled out my own binoculars to see the strange cat in a more natural way. Cats were more nocturnal, but they were also lazy. This feline was typical in that it was currently taking a catnap under a ledge before it would soon launch into its nighttime activities. It didn't seem skittish to me—the opposite, in fact—but then again, I'd just arrived and maybe it'd been even more sluggish before I got there.

Two very large, long teeth glinted in the moonlight. Those still confused me. No current breeds came to mind that had such distinct teeth. The cat was obviously some type of tiger. The stripes, coloring, and size gave it away, but I'd never realized tigers were so big, not that I'd ever seen one outside a zoo or the internet. Its long tail flicked away bugs while it rested.

“Good plan. What weight are those darts good for?”

“They'll take down a bear.”

“I hope you're talking a big mean grizzly and not one of those cute little black bears you have in the Black Hills.”

“I am.”

I checked the confiscated AR-15 rifle as quietly as possible, making sure the mag was full before holding it out to him. “Here, just in case the dart just pisses it off.”

“Good plan,” he echoed my earlier words as he slung the rifle over his shoulder.

I checked my rifle. We then made our way forward at a creeping pace, moving as silently as possible. With every step, I put weight on my toes before my heels. It was an old Indian trick I'd picked up back in Montana, but I still needed to keep a close eye out for twigs and dried brush.

We paused every five yards or so to look through our binoculars. The cat was still lying down, but it had changed positions. At twenty-five yards out, our luck held, but we

still had a stream to cross. It would be quieter than dry land, but there was always a risk of slipping on a loose rock and causing a splash. Since Murphy held the dart gun, he maintained lead going into the water while I trailed behind him, a few feet to his left so I could have a clear shot in case crap hit the proverbial fan.

When we were about halfway through the stream, a shot rang out from our right. Something big. Sounded like a .300 Winchester Magnum. Easy to tell because it's a favorite caliber of big game hunters. We ducked and dove for cover at the water's edge, making a splash and getting soaked. The cat had sprung to its feet at the first shot. Two more shots echoed in quick succession, followed by the cat's screech.

We were both on our bellies in the mud, and I scrambled to bring up my rifle, though I didn't know whether to aim in the direction of the cat or the poachers, not knowing which posed the greater threat. The cat helped me decide when it ran directly at us. Even injured, it was covering several meters with each bound. My compatriot swapped the tranquilizer gun for his rifle. Darts were always preferred, but they took much longer than bullets to bring down an animal. With how fast the cat was coming, darts would never take it down in time.

I thumbed the safety off my rifle just as the cat tore through the brush in front of us. It opened its mouth wider than I would've thought possible and leapt with a feral growl that would've made anyone piss their pants.

The other game warden and I fired simultaneously, hitting the tiger multiple times in its head, neck, and chest. Our rifles barely made the cut to take down a bear. They were nowhere near what we needed for a cat that size but put enough holes in anything, especially at short range, and

you'll bring it down. The cat continued forward, stumbled, and crashed a mere three feet from our position.

I stared at the wheezing tiger as its dying breaths whistled through bloody, gurgling holes in its chest. The majestic beast seemed impossibly large up close—its saber-like teeth even larger. I clenched my jaw as a vise squeezed my heart because I'd been forced to kill something so incredible. I clenched my jaw. These guys were going to jail, definitely.

The dirt kicked up next to me just as more gunshots rent the air. These shots sounded to be from rifles like the AR-15 I confiscated from the poacher rather than from the .300 Winchester.

“Hold your fire! Law enforcement agents! Hold your fire!” I yelled.

They didn't.