

# RURAL TOURISM

Montserrat Valls Giner  
Juan Genovés Timoner

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First published: December, 2021 – Tab Editing

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ISBN:

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# **RURAL TOURISM**

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*For Bruixi.*

# INTRODUCTION

**L**ake Baikal is 25 million years old. It has seen wars and tsars, as well as the world's most famous train: the Trans-Siberian.

And now, with 2025 in full swing, it will be an impassive observer of what will happen to our characters on this journey to deepest Russia, to a rural tourism destination from which – though the tourists do not realize it – there is no return ticket.

## 01. THE LIST

### Lara

There is a village near Lake Baikal called Irkutsk. It is lovely, clean, and dull.

When Lara thinks back to her childhood, the first thing that comes to mind is the first time she flew on an airplane. Her grandfather went with her, explaining that she would feel butterflies in her stomach when they took off. When it landed in Siberia, she promised herself that she would always fly.

However, she found Irkutsk oppressive. She felt closed in.

She needed to get out of there, and she did. As soon as she turned 18, she set up a travel agency especially for rich people. She called it “The Blue Eye.”

After ten years of hard work, her agency was the busiest in Russia and across Europe. Her plans included becoming the top agent in Asia.

What they did not include was falling in love with Ivan. The best things happen when they are not planned.

It is two o'clock in the morning of the Russian summer and Lara wakes up with a start. Silently, she heads to the computer. The light of the screen shows the list of the new travelers coming in August. She starts to read the list until she hears Ivan's sleepy voice.

“Lara, what are you doing? It's two o'clock in the morning.” Ivan tries to sound commanding so that his partner will listen to him.

“I love your hair when you wake up in the morning.” Lara pokes fun at his coal-black hair sticking up.

That comment gets Ivan out of bed, and he tousles her red hair. Lara had always said that coal and Siberian forests in autumn are a bad combination. They were nothing alike. She craved travel; he fought to stay on solid ground. She was vegan; he was adept at devouring beef stroganoff. Nevertheless, there was something that united them: their sense of humor.

Ivan grabs her computer and takes it over to the bedroom window.

"I'll kill you if you pitch it, Ivan." Lara tries not to laugh.

"And what do I get if I don't?" Ivan is inching the window open on the starry night sky.

"Beef stroganoff with mushrooms and sour cream?" Lara knows it is Ivan's favorite dish; she already has the ingredients in the fridge.

"Blackmailing me with food?" Ivan walks over to Lara and returns her computer while his slender pianist's fingers gently brush against Lara's white breasts.

For a moment, Lara forgets about the list of travelers and immerses herself in her body's sweet cries with the black and white keys. The notes intensify; their sustained flatted sounds float out the window, lulling the distant seals.

Two hours later, Lara peruses the list of the people who will be her family for 15 days. She had always felt that there should be a family vibe that would build trust among the travelers for the group to work.

Philippe and Kathleen Anderson. A couple from New Zealand.

Allan and Belinda Crother. A couple from Tasmania.

Lee Ki-Woo and Haneul Sang-Ho. Friends from South Korea.

Marguerite Deuras. From Paris. The widow of the previous French president.

Scarlett Dern. A popular actor from New York.

The language understood by all: English.

Known allergies: Kathleen is allergic to penicillin and Scarlett to nuts.

The dawn gradually conceals the stars while Lara savors a honey-sweetened hazelnut. The light from the computer screen flicks off, and a chilling silence causes Lara to tremble. The howling of the wolves marks the beginning of a cold Siberian Monday.

## 02. ALLAN AND BELINDA (Tasmania)

### Belinda

Belinda is doing her PhD in ethology on Tasmania, which is why they've moved from Sydney to Hobart, the capital. Her attraction to the Tasmanian pademelon, Tasmanian devil, tiger quoll, and eastern ground parrot is nothing compared to her conviction that she will find proof demonstrating that the thylacine – or Tasmanian wolf – was not extinct.

At 35, she no longer fears anything; she has lost her entire family to accidents and neurological illnesses. All she had left was Allan, her husband, so now she can take a dip on the banks of the Franklin River without worrying about answering her cell phone every five minutes.

Though 20 years her senior, Allan is – fortunately – in fine health. Their marriage is the envy of friends and strangers.

Belinda is turning all this over in her mind while she heads to Kirk's house; a local, he claims that he has proof of the marsupial.

As she approaches his cabin, her heart begins to pound. Managing to prove that specimens of thylacines still remain in remote places could be crucial to her doctorate.

The door is open and a man smoking a pipe greets her.

"Mr. Kirk, I presume."

"Pleased to meet you, Belinda. Please, have a seat. You're younger and prettier than I imagined."

Belinda's mane of dark hair allows for glimpses of her violet eyes.

"You have no idea how hard it was for me to find you." Belinda removes her jacket, drops her backpack on the floor, and sinks happily into the comfortable armchair facing Kirk. Although bothered by the smoke from his pipe, she ignores it and starts to look at the photos the elderly man hands her.



"I took them last month when I heard it barking and growling. Just having its picture taken scared it."

"My God, do you know what this proves? Look at that thick tail that's just like a kangaroo's."

"That's right, but it only comes out when there's a full moon."

"Are you kidding?" Belinda thinks that Kirk is trying to pull one over on her. For a millisecond, she thinks that the photos could be faked but dismisses the idea when she wonders what possible interest in lying could this serene man smiling at her have?

"Would you like a soda?" "She seems pale and nervous to Kirk. He is not a very friendly man, but the woman amuses him."

After they examined the photos closely, the elderly man invites Belinda to lunch. The conversation flows smoothly. Kirk is crazy about platypuses. She says barely a word as she listens to everything he knows about animal behavior without having once stepped foot in a university.

When it was time for dessert, Belinda feels she can fully trust Kirk and suggests that they meet again.

"By the way, Kirk, I have an idea. I wouldn't want to abuse your hospitality, but what do you think about me coming by next month during the full moon and you taking me over the route where you found the wolf?"

"Deal! But why next month?" Kirk was becoming fond of the girl; she reminded him of his granddaughter.

"My husband's bought a trip to Russia, near Lake Baikal. I'll come back when I return, if I'm not a bother. Of course, I'll pay for any lost time."

"Don't even think about it! At my age, young lady, I've got too much time on my hands. Besides, my granddaughter is coming in August. She'll love to come along."

The smoke from the pipe cloaks the cabin with mystery, while Belinda wonders where Kirk's wife is. A woman's jacket hung on the door makes her think that she has gone out.

All of a sudden, the door opens and a woman of Kirk's age enters.

"Kirk, the doctor told you that you can't smoke. Excuse me, you must be Belinda," the elderly woman says in a velvety voice.

I get up to greet her and then I see the light of my cell phone. I have six missed calls from Allan.

## Allan

Allan is a palliative care doctor in Tasmania. He used to work in Sydney, but with his wife's doctorate, they decided to move there.

Allan sets off to Inspire Hospital at a slow pace while recalling how hard it was for Belinda to come to the island after her mother passed away. At 70, Alzheimer's is very fast. The organs fail, and the memory inexorably begins to dim.

Inspire Hospital's architecture is made entirely of glass, so light floods all the rooms, making the stay cozier. However, this is all altogether pointless in Allan's department as his patients are already terminally ill.

Allan walks through long bright white corridors until he reaches the stairs leading to his department.

"You don't take the elevator, Allan?" a blond young man cuts him off with a smile.

"I'm 55, Marc. I need to take care of myself," Allan strokes his heavy beard while he takes the file Marc hands to him.

"These are the latest results of the patient who was admitted yesterday. The transaminases are still really high. We think he may go into liver failure at any time."

"What did the family say?" Allan continues walking and reading the results. Marc follows him quickly up the stairs.

"They don't want any palliative care, Allan."

"Why not? Don't they understand their mother is suffering?" Allan becomes exasperated as he speaks.

"They belong to a cult."

"What the hell, Marc! Which goddamn one?" Allan lowers his voice because they are close to the hallway where room 666 is, and they can make out the family members in the bright hallway.

"It's called The Children of the Frozen Sea," Marc murmurs.

"You messing with me?"

"No, they're from northern Finland. They believe that pain is positive for the soul. Medicines are drugs that make it impossible to reach the sea that they believe in, a kind of Nirvana. But that's not the worst part."

"Spit it out, Marc. How much worse can it get?"

"The only person who spoke English is his grandson, and he had to leave urgently because of a problem in his company." Marc drops his voice even further when they reach the family.

“They only speak Finnish. This is a nightmare.” Allan sees Marc motioning him over to introduce him.

Allan greets them and enters the room. Lying in bed is a tiny, fragile old woman staring into space. Allan goes over to her and gives her hand a squeeze. It is nothing but skin and bones, but the old woman tries to manage a smile.

Then he remembers: his wife Belinda knows Finnish. Even if only by phone, she could serve as a translator.

He leaves the room in search of coverage. Marc follows him.

Allan calls his wife six times in a row, but there is no answer. She must be in the middle of the mountains, with the ethologist of the non-existing wolves.

Nothing. “Impossible. We’ll have to wait, Marc. She’s in a cabin with an ethologist. There must be no coverage there.”

“Allan, if you want, I believe there’s a Finnish nurse in Pediatrics.”

“Shit. What took you so long?” Allan sighs in relief.

A few minutes later, Marc arrives with a nurse on his arm. They are whispering, and he appears to be explaining the situation to her.

They come closer, and Allan blanches when he realizes that he knows the young woman.

“Allan, this is Ingrid.” Marc pronounces the letters in “Ingrid” as though it were life itself. He clearly feels attracted to her, which is why he did not notice the change in Allan’s complexion.

“We already know each other, Marc. Hello, Ingrid.”

“I can’t believe it. What are you doing here? I’ve only been substituting for a few days and I don’t know half the staff. Which department are you in, Allan?”

Allan does not answer; he tries to shake her hand, but she declines.

Marc answers for him.

“In Palliative Care, Ingrid...” Before he finishes the sentence, Marc watches in bewilderment as the nurse leaves, hurling insults.

Marc does not understand what is going on. He watches closely as his boss heads to a cigarette machine, leaving him with the words still in his mouth.

Allan tries to open the pack and heads to the hospital garden.

“Allan... what do I do with the family?” Marc looks desperate when he sees that his boss is leaving without any explanation.

“I don’t know, Marc. As soon as I finish this cigarette, I’m going home. Fill in for me today,” Allan does not look the younger man in the face.

Marc descends the stairs and heads to Pediatrics. After a few minutes, he finds Ingrid. She’s sitting on a chair, crying.

“What’s going on, Ingrid?” Marc puts his hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

“The man you work for is a monster. He killed two old ladies.”

Marc sits down by her side. The light from the hospital begins to disappear. Black clouds threaten a big storm.

## 03. SCARLETT DERN (New York)

### Scarlett

People think that the life of an actor is fun. They do not think about the six o'clock early morning wake-ups, nor the tons of makeup that does not let your skin breathe. This latter is the reason for the premature aging typical of this profession.

Scarlett's 25 years still give her no cause for concern, so she starts applying the current *eyeliner trend: orange floating liner* on her eyelids. She brushes her eyebrows and combs the dark roots in her platinum blond hair. Fashion is absurd. Before, she could not have gone outside looking like this. People would have thought she was a slob. Now, looking this way is chic.

She smiles at herself in the mirror while thinking about all this. She puts on a two-piece black *Versace* and goes outside, not before grabbing her pink *Dolce & Gabbana* purse.

Incredibly for this early hour, all the taxis are busy, so she puts on a pair of tennis shoes she always carries and stores her high heels in a small but roomy enough backpack.

When she reaches the set, she is ecstatic to see what top designer Elie Saab had designed in a film studio. A surrealistic house with curtains resembling waterfalls and lamps like marble puzzles. The red and black gives it a touch of mystery.

Scarlett bursts in; she is running late.

"Scarlett, so you finally decide to show up," yells Marcello, the director.

"Marcello, I'm only two minutes late," she tries to answer mildly.

After Fellini, Marcello is the most perfectionist of all the Italian directors. He is obsessed with punctuality. He rejects the girl with a



glance. He is influenced by the fact that he had made several advances towards her. He came on to her in her camper, he sent her orchids, he even bought her the most expensive perfume in Paris. It did not work.

Scarlette and Marcello begin to argue as usual, so the other actors go over their scripts. The artistic directors tweak the lighting, and the makeup artist slathers lip *gloss* on Scarlett's lips, oblivious to the yelling.

"What's your deal? I'm doing everything I can! I don't sleep; I'm spending hours in the hospital. My grandmother is dying, Marcello."

Marcello's expression gentles and he walks over to Scarlett.

"I know, I know; you warned me when I hired you. Excuse me," Marcello strokes her hair, abandoning his attraction to her and, finally, understanding her.

The sight of the director's human side elicits silence in the studio.

"Show's over. Everyone get to work. Either you nail the shot on the first take, or I fire half of the team," Marcello returns to his usual tone and Scarlett heads to the set.

"Clapperboard 66, *The Non-existent Hill*, action." A kid makes the sharp clap to begin.

In the movie, Scarlett is lying on her lover's bed reading letters. The camera moves closer to her face, and the actor's tears merge with the letters.

Just then, the director's assistant walks over and whispers to him.

"I'm sorry, Marcello. The hospital just called. Scarlett's grandmother just died. Should we cut the scene?"

"No way, Greta. Let's let her finish."

Marcello watches as Scarlett reaches out to the black dress; just then, a man walks on stage.

Though it may sound strange, the director is not thinking about her sensuality. He continues to film, but his mind is filled with the smell of the oranges his grandmother used to give when he was a child.

## 04. MARGUERITE DEURAS

### Marguerite

The French president's widow has always hated her name. The fact that she is always confused with the French writer Marguerite Duras drives her up the wall. Perhaps, though, it is not the name... since her husband's death, everything irritates her.

The building's receptionist examines her papers and flushes. She immediately returns her documentation and gives her a pass.

"Pardon me; I didn't recognize you."

Marguerite gives the woman a scornful look, although she is aware that she has changed physically in a year. Her gray hair, her face. Even the way she walks.

"Don't worry; I had an appointment with the prime minister," Marguerite takes off her gloves with great dignity.

"Please come with me, Mrs. Deuras," the young woman walks to the prime minister's office and, after knocking, opens the doors. She motions her companion to enter and discreetly withdraws.

The prime minister stands up from his office chair and walks over to Marguerite, giving her two affectionate kisses.

"Marg, I'm so happy to see you. You look great," he serves her a drink while she makes herself comfortable in a chair. Claude does the same.

"Don't lie, Claude. We've been friends for 30 years. I know that I look a fright."

Claude looks at her cream-colored dress, her matching shoes... her ravishing beauty, despite her 50 years.

"Your beauty cannot be easily undone by time nor..."

"Nor a widower, Claude." Marg cannot conceal her misty eyes.

"Yes, I understand you," he caresses her hand, but she abruptly pushes him away.

"You understand nothing. No one understands me. It's horrible. Journalists, people asking me for things, unbearable neighbors," Marg rises, crumpling the gloves in her hands.

"Relax, I understand your situation, but you're right. No one can put themselves in your place. Tell me what you need and I'll help you," Claude stands up, walks over to her, and shyly brushes her back with his fingertips.

"Claude, I need to get away. Specifically, to Russia, near Lake Baikal," From the office's pictures windows, Marge can see how it is starting to rain in the Elysée Palace Gardens.

"Why Russia?"

"I met my husband there. And I want a change of scene. Grief therapy, psychologists, friends... none of them have worked. There, I'll be with people I don't know, who don't know me from Adam."

"But they'll know you, Marg. You don't exactly fade into the background," Claude smiles ironically.

"I don't care, Claude. I need to go. Between the terrorist threats and everything that's gone on these past months, I know I'm asking you for a lot, but let me do it."

"It's not about letting you, Marg. I promised your husband that we would protect you. You can go there, but only under two conditions."

"Which ones?" Now she is the one smiling.

"That you give me the list of people going on that rural tourism trip... Well, whatever it is, I want the list of whoever is going."

"And the second condition?"

"Pierre, the bodyguard, goes with you."

The rain is falling harder now, and Marg recalls her college years. Back then, she was free; now, her prison is disguised as the powers that be.

"Okay, Claude. All right. I'll pretend he's my nephew. Thanks."

As Marg takes her leave, Claude feels like he has won the argument a bit too quickly. Something does not feel quite right.

Marg smiles as she leaves. Pierre is instantly at her side with an umbrella and opens the door of the Rolls Royce.

"Everything okay, Marg?"

"Perfectly. We're going on vacation. You'll pretend to be my nephew."

Pierre looks at her in the rearview mirror as he drives. He nods, with a perfect view of her smile.

## RURAL TOURISM

Marg laughs aloud as she silently reads the rural tourism rules: “Contact with the outside is not allowed; the idea is to disconnect.” No way is she giving that list to Claude.

## 05. PHILIPPE AND KATHLEEN (New Zealand)

### Kathleen

Kathleen's house is magnificent: 6,500 hundred square feet with 2,500 acres of land.

It has a warm vibe, with Maori carvings on the walls and scattered photos of Mount Taranaki.

The fine wood everywhere makes it a wonderful place to write while her husband, Philippe, gives sailing classes in the Bay of Plenty.

Kathleen – who has short hair and a pale face adorned with freckles – is having kiwis for breakfast while simultaneously tapping out a new novel on her computer. She likes romance novels, stories that always end well and leave the reader with a Capraesque taste in their mouth.

The doorbell rings; she stands up mechanically and leaves the living room.

Lightly dressed, since they always enjoy a mild climate on the north island, she heads to the glass front door. Before she opens it, she sees that Deborah is the one who rang.

“Hi, dear. Why did you ring? It’s always open.”

“I don’t like to in case you’re writing,” Deborah looks at her doubtfully.

“You know my concentration is fragile,” Kathleen smiles broadly while the two sit down on a comfortable couch.

“Tell me what’s going on. You sent me a message, and it intrigued me.”

“Deborah, I didn’t think you’d returned from Stewart Island.”

I got back last night; the kids were already tired.”

“Well, that’s what the secret is about.”

“Islands?”



"Kids, Deborah. I'm pregnant." Kathleen caresses her belly as if that helped her to confirm the news.

"Congratulations! It's about time." Deborah hugs her.

"What do you mean it's about time? We're young," Kathleen says with a laugh.

"Thirty-six and forty is not young."

"Deborah, not everyone has them at 20."

"What did Philippe say?"

"He doesn't know yet."

"I'm glad to be the first to get the news." Deborah strokes her hand.

"I think it's fair; we know each other from before."

"I'm sorry, Kathleen," Deborah's joy fades, coloring her green eyes with tears.

"What are you sorry about, Deborah?" Kathleen asks by inertia, though she knows the answer.

"That things turned out like they did."

"There was no other way."

"Yes. Yes, it could have been different. I'm a coward. I should have left my husband. We could have adopted."

"And what would we have done with your kids?"

"I know. I know. We already talked about it. Besides, there's your mother. We wouldn't be able to pay the costs of her treatment."

Kathleen puts her index finger on Deborah's lips and starts to undo the buttons of her dress.

For now, the computer will have to wait so that the romantic story she is writing continues to evolve. After all, imagination can take its time, not so real life.

## Philippe

Philippe's sailboat is in the port since he is in a hotel.

A girl with long blond hair is putting on her makeup and looks at him from the mirror. Philippe watches her as she dresses.

"What are you looking at, Philippe?"

"At you, Anne. You're gorgeous."

"Don't start, Philippe. I don't want you to separate. I like working as a model; I don't want to lose my freedom. Your wife is a great person, and she loves you."

“Deep down, I love her too.”

“I know; I know you, Philippe.” Anne continues putting on her clothes.

“Guess what? I’m going to do some rural tourism, so you’ll get a break from me.”

“Rural tourism? What is that?” She walks over and sits on the bed with Philippe.

“It’s a place in Russia. You disconnect from everything. Lara, the guide, sent me the rules. Besides, Kathleen will explain what’s going on to me. She’s acting strange.”

“Strange? Do you think she suspects something?”

“No, no way. It must be something else. Should I read you the rules? They’re funny.”

“Read.” Anne’s blonde hair falls over the sheets of paper.

Rule one: No one can be connected to anything at all. Rule two: Nothing coming from animals shall be eaten. Rule three: each person shall sleep in a single room. There shall be no sex for fifteen days. Rule four: alcohol, tobacco, and all kinds of drugs are prohibited. Rule five, the last one: no children or pets are allowed.

“Honey, that sounds more like a jail than rural tourism.” Anne laughs and takes back the papers. She strips and all her skin slips into Philippe.

## 06. LEE KI-WOO AND HANEUL SANG-HO (South Korea)

### Haneul

Lee and Haneul met when they were little in Seoul. Their parents had been friends for years, and their endless nighttime conversations, together with the scent of sandalwood and their affinity, made the children inseparable.

On those nights, they would always pretend they were physicians. That would define their future professions.

After a few years, their fathers sent them to the United States. The two earned their doctorate cum laude.

Now, some years later, they had returned to Seoul to take care of Lee's mother. Already widowed when she was diagnosed with Parkinson's symptoms, her son went there to care for her. Haneul went with him. They requested a year's leave at the hospital so that, between the two of them, they could make that hell more bearable.

Lee's mother was going downhill quickly. She stopped walking; her feebleness was apparent. Due to her neurological illness, the woman whose beauty had once elicited wolf whistles was gradually losing muscle mass and – worst of all – her smile was fading away.

Lee neither slept nor ate. He saw that his mother was gradually slipping away and that he could do nothing as a physician.

Haneul wanted to help him but could do nothing in this case, despite specializing in palliative care. Lee did not want to hear anything about sedating her.

One night, the old woman wanted to talk to Haneul alone when everyone was busy in the kitchen. They were making her a surprise birthday cake.

"You're not cooking, Haneul? Sit down with me." Lee's mother rolls her wheelchair over to the armchair.

"You're not supposed to know they're making a cake for you." Haneul gives the old lady a wink.

"Haneul, I know you're doing everything you can to give me quality of life, but this is not a life." Lee's mother begins to weep inconsolably.

"Hush. Everything will be okay." Haneul caresses the little hair that she has left.

"You remember the fireflies when you guys were little, Haneul? Her eyes seem to remember.

"Yes, we used to say that they were the flashlights of our nurses." Haneul laughs, but inside he feels great sadness.

"There's something I never told you."

The scent of wild strawberries comes from the kitchen.

"What is it?". Haneul listens carefully to the tale.

"You see, one night, while you guys were playing with the fireflies, Lee's grandmother passed away. Remember?"

"Yes, you said it was a respiratory problem. He was really sick, pancreatic cancer, wasn't it?"

"He didn't die from a respiratory problem. He was suffering horribly, and we killed him, your parents and us. Your father was an expert homeopath and he gave her some herbs. When she got sleepy, my husband smothered her with a pillow. Your mother was a doctor and she filled out the death certificate." The old woman's hands are trembling more than usual.

"Ahh..." Haneul falls silent. He does not know what to say, but were he to do anything, he knows that it would be behind Lee's back.

Lee walks into the living room with a three-layer cake in shades of pink. The crimson candles light up the old woman's sweet face.

## Lee

The old woman died two weeks after the birthday party.

After his mother's burial, Lee tries to get back on track. He rereads the brochure Haneul gave him.

"What's this?"

"A vacation. We're on leave from New York. Let's enjoy it. Lee, you've suffered so much." Haneul hands back the brochure that Lara sent her.

“Look at what kind of vacation... no drinking, vegan food...” For the first time, Lee’s laughter sounds like it used to.

“But wait; I spoke to the guide. You’re disconnected from the world, Baikal is lovely, and you’ve always wanted to go to Russia.”

“Yes, but the Kremlin, St. Petersburg... Not a convent.”

“Lee, you organized our last vacation. What happened?

Yes, it was a disaster. The people in Holland are weird... but the cheese was delicious.” Lee gives his friend a grateful look for all he does for him. His mother adored him.

“That’s why. It’s my turn this year. Besides, look at the picture of the guide.” Haneul shows him Lara’s photo on the computer.

“She’s gorgeous! Okay, you convinced me.”

“I knew she was your type.”

“Does the computer say whether she’s married?”

“No, but my brother knows her and she’s hooked up with a musician.”

“Okay, I’ll study the brochure. At least she’s not married.”

Haneul puts on a Mozart album. Right then, he tries to recall the fireflies, but he cannot. Lee’s mother’s last breath floods his thoughts obsessively.

## 07. THE HOUSE

**A**ngasolka is the quietest place on Lake Baikal. It is not easy to get there. You have to take the local train that runs from Irkutsk to Sludyanka and get off at Temnaya Pad. From there, you have to follow the train tracks and walk through the woods for an hour.

What no one knows is that there is a private 25-acre plot with a 2,600-square-foot mansion hidden in the middle of the forest.

Lara reaches the front gate, exhausted from her one-hour walk through the woods.

When she gets there, she sees a tall, albino man in a violet-colored suit waiting for

“Good day, Lara. I’m Vladimir.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Lara looks at the man with interest.

“Tired? I understand that it’s a long walk.”

“Actually, yes. By the way, I’m puzzled as to the no trespassing signs, and even more so by the nuclear testing ones.”

“Haha. You weren’t afraid, I hope.”

“A little, yes.”

“This mansion used to belong to the tsars, but it was always kept secret. The owner of the place has tried to keep people away from it.

Well, the codes for getting past the gates also help.”

“And they are changed daily, Miss Lara. I already told you that you’ll sign a non-disclosure document. You and your friends, too.”

“Clients, Vladimir. I’m only the guide.”

“Excuse me; it’s a way of speaking. “But everyone will have to sign. It’s the first time we’ve rented it out.”

“Why?”

“I don’t have that information.” Let us say that I am also a kind of guide for the owners.”

“By the way, Vladimir, I gave you the list.”

“Yes. We’ll also keep things confidential.”

“I’m saying it because of the French president’s widow.”

“Because of everyone. For the actor and – by the way – I love her movies. For the two Korean doctors, famous for their advances in palliative care...”

“Yes, but don’t forget that there are also two totally anonymous couples from Tasmania and New Zealand.”

“But with money, I assume... haha. Shall we go in?” He invites her in with a slight gesture.

“Yes, Vladimir. Cheap this trip isn’t. I’ll follow you.”

The sensor-equipped gates open as they walk, while music by Rachmaninoff simultaneously begins to whisper among the leaves of the trees in the immense park.

Lara gradually takes in the colorful lakes, the immense hedges trimmed into shapes, the blue roses, and the violet sculptures dotting the entire property.

Suddenly, she sees the house among the Siberian trees.

An enormous violet-colored mansion reminiscent of an enchanted castle, its pointed towers and gargoyles shaped like blue clouds give it a spooky vibe, despite it being daytime.

When Vladimir reaches the gigantic door, he inputs the code and invites Lara to enter.

For a moment, Lara feels dizzy.

“You have what is known as Stendhal Syndrome; you can’t bear so much beauty.” Vladimir holds her up by the arm.

“Thanks. Excuse me. I didn’t know it was like this.”

“I told you on the phone. There’s nothing like it.”

“That’s clear.”

“Miss Lara, did you tell the guests about the rules?”

“Yes. They all took it as something fun, except the Korean doctors. They’re young and think they’re not going to enjoy themselves much.”

“They’ll enjoy themselves, Lara. Don’t worry. Should we continue the tour?”

“Yes, yes, of course; excuse me.”

As the place’s sensor-equipped doors open in pace with their steps forward, Lara’s surprise gives way to disbelief. One by one, Vladimir shows her the rooms. He stops suddenly at one door.

“Miss Lara, for reasons I can’t explain to you, this door can never be opened. Don’t forget: NEVER.”

At that moment, Lara recalls her favorite movie, *Rebecca*. The sound of her high heels as she follows him is the only thing that breaks the silence.