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An Okanagan Story

and

**Women in the Woods: a Critical Reflection
on Pioneer Woman and their Legacy in
Canadian Literature**

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PhD in Creative Writing
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Abstracts

An Okanagan Story: a novel

Historian Mike Dunbar is at a crossroads in his career: it's publish or perish. He chooses publish, his subject: Scottish Settlers in the Okanagan, British Columbia, a fertile valley in the shadows of the Cascades, known for the lake, bountiful orchards, trendy vineyards, and pioneers, specifically, JD Ballantyne. JD is either an enterprising settler or criminal arsonist; nobody seems to know which anymore. But then Mike gets an email from Haley Gibson, JD's great-great-great-granddaughter. She's just lost her mother, her connection to the past. Soon, the two find they have more in common than JD. As Haley gets stuck unravelling her complicated family history, and Mike gets closer to solving the mystery of JD, will the answers be the ones they're looking for? And can their connection survive a breakup, family expectations, major life decisions, and the truth about JD Ballantyne's life and misdeeds? *An Okanagan Story* is a novel about Canadian family folklore, dealing with grief, and the realities of just getting by in a sometimes hostile world.

Women in the Woods: A Critical Reflection on Pioneer Women and their Legacy in Canadian Literature

This project examines how the pioneering experiences recounted in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* and Susan Allison's 'Recollections of a Pioneer Woman' contribute to the creation of the pioneer woman character, traditional stories about 'Canadianness,' and tropes that form a large part of 'CanLit.' The essay explores the ways both authors use the form of memoir, contemplating Sidonie Smith and Maggie Pickering's writing on how memoir allows women to write about their experiences in male-dominated spaces and overcome barriers that restricted women in the 19th century. The essay also examines how Moodie and Allison become 'literary foremothers' to Canadian authors by examining Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a narrative poem sequence which reframes Moodie's experience of pioneer life from Atwood's 20th century urban Canadian perspective. Finally, the essay asks why the story of the pioneer woman continues to appear in 'CanLit' despite the loss of the rural backwoods, utilising Helen Thompson's idea of a 'shifting frontier.'

Lay Summaries

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An Okanagan Story

a novel

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for A.R.F, still the brightest light.
&
British Columbia, my other home.

An Okanagan Story

Prologue

This story begins high up in the mountains, where the Cascades, the Columbia, and the Rockies meet. Long before a highway cut through the land and big box stores catered to the needs of a rapidly growing population; before light pollution broke through the low hanging clouds and reflected off the depths of Okanagan Lake; before tire tracks rutted the dry, dusty ground, lights illuminated a trail up to the top of the mountain, and men and women in expensive active wear took selfies along the cultivated trail; long before all of that, a lone fire sparked, bright against the rock and brush, which looked the same in 1874 as it does today. Sitting at that lone campfire was a man—we'd call him a boy today—John Duncan Ballantyne, hardly twenty years old. Lonely John Duncan Ballantyne was feeling the weight of the unnamed mountain rising ever higher into the impossibly large sky above him. He—JD to his friends, before he left them behind—sat at that fire and wondered, not for the first time, what in God's name he was doing sitting at the foot of a nameless mountain surrounded by trees, the dark nothingness of the lake, and the threat of the wilderness.

He dug the heel of his boot into the ground, watching as light brown dust rose up in clouds. His stomach rumbled, but he didn't reach for the provisions the priests had sent with

him. JD was used to existing on an empty stomach—with five brothers and sisters at home, he was content with never having enough. Well, he thought he was until he decided to risk it all in Canada. *Canada!* everyone back home exclaimed, and they all stopped what they were doing to contemplate that land across the sea. Canada was all their dreams combined: Canada was the future.

But the reality was that none of them knew what the young country was really like. JD wasn't the first young man to leave for the better life promised on the other side of the world, and he wouldn't be the last, but he was the one everyone worried about. He thought he'd prove them wrong. Now, sitting in front of a fire with nothing to protect him from the elements, he wasn't so sure.

Mike Dunbar watches the cursor flashing in a Word document, thinking, not for the first time, that he has no idea what JD was thinking as he sat below the mountain that would one day carry his name. This is the problem with non-fiction, the problem with history books, only so much of the past is readily accessible. He can set down the facts: John Duncan Ballantyne, nineteen, arrives in the Okanagan Valley in early 1874. He goes to the Mission first, because there really wasn't anywhere else to go, not long after he's one of the ranchers feeding the boom brought by the CPR. Okay, but what did he do in the six years between arriving and the coming of the railway?

Mike stretches his arms above his head, fingers intertwined. He exhales quietly, not wanting to attract attention. He's used to the anonymity of a city Starbucks: there, he's one of many sitting alone with a Macbook, headphones, and coffee kept luke-warm in a reusable bamboo cup. In Kelowna, he's surrounded by people who seem to have time to socialise over

coffees sipped slowly and fancy pastries left behind, half eaten. And not for the first time, he wonders what possessed him to seriously pursue this idea. There was that weekend trip last fall to Penticton with a woman he couldn't make his mind up about, and the Saturday night when they walked into a poetry reading on the beach. Mike has never called himself a fan of poetry, but he sat listening to a local poet perform a piece about a mysterious lake creature—*You know, the Ogopogo of Okanagan Lake*, Sara explained to him like it was something obvious. He went back to Vancouver knowing that the relationship wasn't going to get better, but that he'd rather learn about Okanagan lore than try to salvage things.

So while Sara removed herself from his life, he distracted himself by reading about Kelowna before it was Kelowna: the cast of characters that kept coming up. Father Pandosy at the Mission, Thomas Ellis the 'cattle baron' and founder of Penticton, Thomas Shorts, who captained steamships across the expanse of the lake, John Fall Allison, Justice of the Peace and his wife, Susan, sometimes called 'the mother of the Similkameen.' And eventually, John Duncan Ballantyne, entrepreneur or criminal, depending on where you looked. It was just a lucky click that took him from 'A Merritt-Man's View' to an email address for a Duncan Ballantyne. And even luckier when he got a response back, *Sorry to tell you that Duncan passed away last week. I'm his daughter and can probably help if you have specific questions?* Signed SB. Sandy Ballantyne, JD's great-great-granddaughter.

Sandy's emails have been full of anecdotes and stories passed down over the years. Not quite fact, but enough for him to put together a vague timeline of events. Born c. 1855, died 1936. Married, had kids, moved around a few times. *My great-grandfather said he was never without a dog. He could recite Shakespearean sonnets, even when drunk. He once wrapped a cabbage up and gave it to one of his boys for Christmas (he'd asked for a soccer ball). He never made it back to Scotland.*

But now Mike wonders if his luck is running out.

He looks back at the computer, the cursor still flashing. He reads through the paragraph he's just written and focuses on a line: *Lonely John Duncan Ballantyne was feeling the weight of the*

unnamed mountain rising ever higher into the impossibly large sky above him. He reads it through a second time, and then a third.

He concludes, not for the first time, that it's happened. He's writing fiction.

Chapter One

It's the beginning of March when Mike heads up to Kelowna for the weekend. As he drives through the city, he thinks about how the daffodils are just starting to bloom, and how the sun sets later and later. Sometimes, when his classes end on time (and he doesn't get stuck talking to students), he walks home in the daylight. The unpredictability of winter feels a long way away when he feels sun on his back and contemplates pushing up his sleeves. But he's had to get the snow tires back on his car and Drive BC says there's snow up Box Canyon on the Snowshed. He almost cancelled the trip. But he can't cancel, not now that his boss has become involved.

Last month, Call-Me-Doug waved Mike into his office one afternoon. *Heard you've been working on a new project.* Mike wasn't sure if this was an accusation or something else. But he'd confirmed that yes, he'd been doing some reading about European communities in the Okanagan. The building of the railways. The BC Tree Fruits Co-op. *Your ideas sound interesting,* Call-Me-Doug said, sipping his possibly Irish coffee, *But what's your focus?* That's when Mike said JD Ballantyne.

Call-Me-Doug's response was silence and narrowed eyes. And then he slapped a hand against his table and said, *Original research, Mikey!*

The stress of that moment evolved into a stressful month split between reading mid-term papers and exams and writing a research proposal. But now, as Mike drives down Highway 1, he thinks about his last visit to his boss' office. Call-Me-Doug had a paper copy of Mike's research proposal and outline. It was covered in notes and coffee rings. *Let's shoot for a couple of grants,* Call-Me-Doug said, sipping as usual from a probably Irish coffee, *I've been on a lot committees, Mikey, I know a project like this is very fundable right now. Get on it and then we'll talk about your future in the department.* That was the moment that hit Mike in the stomach. This is all he's ever really thought about doing. That's what he keeps thinking.

Let me write to an old friend of mine, Call-Me-Doug said, *he's a fixture in the history department up there and might be able to help,* and then began two-finger typing while narrating every other word.

Old, up. Vancouver, might, campus, tried Spotted Owl? Phil and I. Doug looked up from the computer screen saying, go back ages. He owes me many favours. He looked back down at the keyboard, carrying on. May-long, the wife, getting old, call me. And then he paused, hands poised over the keyboard, Tell ya what. You promise to get that work on my desk next week and you can stay in my condo in Kelowna. Judy and I usually only go up May-long. Mike turned in the work and Doug handed over the keys.

He can relax a bit now though because the roads are clear, the medians lush with dark green grass and trees coming back into leaf. He can handle this kind of driving. Once he gets past Chilliwack he even starts to lean into the curves, to speed up a little, to overtake when someone slow sits in the fast lane. And then he passes signs for Hope. The clouds get darker. These are untrustworthy clouds. Heavy. Churning. But there's a sign for the Othello tunnels; he was berated last time he was up this way because he didn't know what they were. He'd tried to search then and there in the car but, as on so much of this route, the 4G signal is non-existent. He'd left the search unfulfilled, only remembering when he was trying to look up vegan restaurants in Penticton. He doesn't remember if they ended up finding anywhere to eat, but he does remember reading that back in 1914, the CPR blasted through the granite cliffs of the Coquihalla Canyon. The story goes that the engineer (he was called Andrew McCullough) kept a copy of Shakespeare's works close to hand while working on the project. And when the Coquihalla line needed a station, he called it Othello.

From the highway, all that remains of the engineering feat are signs with the names of Shakespearean characters: Portia, Iago, Lear, Romeo. You can drive by without any thought of the railway line that used to carry passengers through the treacherous canyon. Just then, snow starts to splat against the windshield. Huge, gloppy, wet snowflakes. The kind that mean slick road conditions in the city, but here, where the road winds up and into the mountains, snow banks conceal concrete barriers, semi-trucks fish-tail down steep inclines, there are white-out conditions near the peaks, and crawling traffic, cars full of panicked drivers. Mike wraps his fingers around the steering wheel and checks the gas gauge. He's already passed the sign that

warns that there isn't another gas station for more than 100 kilometres. He wishes he could still take the train along the Kettle Valley line, safe and warm inside a climate-controlled train car operated by someone else.

He keeps his hands at ten and two, flashing back to the times he drove through the snow at home. Those rare occasions when Dad was at home, bored in the passenger seat. *You feel a little wobbly, you just slow down, Mikey. Take your time. That asshole might be in a hurry, but we aren't.* But snow on suburban Ontario streets is a different story to the snow you get on a mountain pass. Coquihalla Summit: 1,244 metres. Snow accumulates at ten centimetres an hour. The plows do the best they can, but this is a long stretch of highway. Mike passes through the Great Bear Snowshed, the bears etched into walls nearly obscured by the giant snowflakes. The lights glow yellow in the cavernous tunnel. He grips the steering wheel a little tighter. He's never driven the Coquihalla before. Despite living in BC for years, it's been easy to avoid the province's most dangerous stretch of highway. And back in September, when Sara wanted to go up to Penticton for a friend's wedding, he'd agreed on the condition he'd only do the city driving.

Outside the tunnel, he merges into the fast lane even though he's barely doing ninety. He turns the heat up another notch and returns his hands to ten and two. He steps on the gas pedal; up ahead is a semi with Alberta plates and a heavily loaded trailer, orange hazards flashing. The driver leaves a trail behind in the snow that doesn't follow the curve of the steep pass, let alone the road markings. Mike's ears pop as he climbs higher. The mountains stretch out all around him, grey stone covered in smooth white frosting. Evergreens poke out of the snow like pointy, many-limbed monsters.

When he finally gets to Merritt, his hands are shaking, and his fingers are stiff and claw-like. The whole way up was a white-knuckle drive. He fills up the half-empty tank and takes deep breaths, trying to steady himself. There's hardly any snow here, just a light dusting. Hopefully, a sign of what's to come. Before he gets back onto the road, he heads over to the Starbucks. The café is empty except for two baristas, a lady with grey curly hair, a big set of keys

around her neck on a sparkly lanyard, and a teenager with a dark mushroom cut. Mike orders his normal Americano with oat milk, thanks, and hands over his reusable bamboo cup. A gift from Sara. It's been what, two months since they broke up? But he's continued to order oat milk in his coffee, to go for veggie mince and meat alternatives when buying groceries and buy organic produce from Choices even though they're double what you pay at Safeway. When he was last at COFFEA during the week, Darren brought over an oat latte and plant-based croissant and said, *buddy, what are you, actually vegan now?* Mike just kind of laughed and shrugged. He liked the creamy oat milk in his coffee. And the croissants were good. But now he thinks about it, when was the last time he ate real cheese? Or eggs instead of a tofu scramble? Or even picked up a burger from McD's on the way home from work?

The grey-haired lady slides his drink across the bar. 'I like your cup,' she says, 'but I'll never trust those lids.' She points at the green lid he's left sitting on the counter.

'Better than something you have to throw away?' He says it like a question because he's no longer sure *why* he started bringing the cup everywhere. Was it because he thought it was a good idea? Or was it because of Sara?

He gives a final nod to the baristas and heads back out to his car. He's felt better these last few weeks. Maybe that's because Sara was right about the benefits of a vegan diet. The cup is hot against his cold hand. He looks back out into the parking lot, and though there are just a few flakes blowing around, he doesn't want to get back on the road.

CHECK YOUR FUEL NEXT SERVICE: 102 kilometres until he reaches West Bank and the outskirts of Kelowna. The drive out of Merritt was slow and dry. Surrounded by brown muddy hills and a few trees so small they could barely even be saplings, Mike felt ok, comfortable. Then he drove up and around the hill, getting even farther from the last remnants of city subdivisions. Now it's just rolling hills, cows grazing lazily, horses waiting to be saddled. Ranches. There's something inviting about that kind of life, far away from school politics and the relentlessness of student emails. He passes a sign for CORBETT LAKE COUNTRY INN, a

huge green trout jumping out of bright blue water. Years and years ago, he and Dad used to go to places like this, or Sixteen Mile Creek, if they wanted more peace and quiet. *Rivière do Gravois, that's Gravelly River*, Dad said as they stood knee-deep in the water. Mike always wondered why they called it such a boring name, especially when he learned the name the Mississauga gave the river: *niiꞤhoꞤaaginwan*, having two outlets.

And then the snow picks up again and he clenches his jaw and braces for the worst. Serious snow now, not the little flakes of the lower altitudes. But the road is clear, so he speeds up, hoping to beat the accumulation.

No such luck: snow blankets the incline up to Pennask, elevation 1,729 metres. The giant windmills next to the road cut through the snow, the manufactured blades stark against the white valley. He squints to make out the lines on the road, the concrete barriers reduced to lumps. He puts his lights on, knowing that, if nothing else, the red and amber tail lights will mark his presence on the road. Trains are no longer an option and flying didn't seem reasonable either, despite his boss' assertion that it was the best way to go. There was no way to justify \$500 for a weekend.

Make sure you go to Quail's Gate, Call-Me-Doug said when Mike went to pick up the keys to the Kelowna place, confirming all the details again, *and try the Syrah. Not technically research, but still research*. The older man waggled his eyebrows. Afterwards, Mike looked up the Boswell Syrah. At \$69.99 a bottle, it was unlikely he would be drinking any of it, research or not. It was just another reminder of the gap that exists between them: Mike, as a non-tenured sessional lecturer, and Call-Me-Doug as department head. It seems like the longer you work at the university, the more likely you are to forget how hard it was to get a job. Or maybe it was easier back then. Doug's been teaching for almost as long as Mike's been alive. The man has gone grey and lost his hair because of thirty-odd years of students. He's sat at the same desk since the building was new. And now, approaching senior's discount status, he'll carry on until, as he's known for saying,

they have to drag him out, spit dribbling down his chin. They share an interest in the past, but it's the present where Doug's ability to relate decreases.

Mike takes a sip of coffee. It would be so easy to be lulled by the rhythmic windshield wipers, the quietness of the snow, like everything is wrapped in blankets. He's got a long way to go.

More than an hour later, he's left the snow behind and reached the limits of Westbank. Kelowna sits on the other side of the bridge, skyscrapers appearing to jut out of the water. He's never been to the city before, but has been reading up on the history: things like the old Okanagan Lake Bridge, a floating pontoon bridge with a lift, the first of its kind in Canada. As he comes into the city though, the things he notices are the empty, rundown buildings with FOR LEASE signs and shiny new Range Rovers parked outside. He follows the instructions Call-Me-Doug gave him, driving at thirty down Water Street (*just follow Water Street, but don't look for water or you'll be in the lake, ha ha*). He's starting to sweat. It's nearly ten degrees warmer here than it was in the mountains. He puts the window down and is immediately met by a twangy country singer pouring from a neighbouring car, some sentimental cowboy singing about how tough his life is.

The condo is just beyond the big stadium. It's one of those plate glass and concrete monsters. It rises so high above everything else around, the sun reflecting off windows that don't look like they belong there. If this is Doug's second home, what's his first place like? Mike reaches for the keys in the centre console. *It's like Fort Knox, Mikey. Two security gates just to get into the garage.* He presses the remote and waits for the first barred gate to let him in. The tires squeal on the concrete, the sound echoing in the underground parkade. He drives past a series of expensive cars, all spotless and shining, and parks in his designated spot. How long before someone comes and tells him he doesn't belong? His car is so covered in mud and salty splashback you can no longer tell what colour it is. Next to him is a silver Porsche with one of those bougie personalised plates. ISUSHI. Really? He blinks and looks at it again. Yeah, ISUSHI. He grabs his stuff and heads inside, using a fob to get past another series of security doors.

When the elevator emerges from concrete he finally appreciates all the plate glass. He watches the lake as the elevator gets higher and higher up the side of the building. At some point, a couple about Mom and Don's age get in. The woman's carrying a little Chihuahua dressed in a pink coat and a glittery collar. The dog shivers. The man reaches over to scratch behind its ears. The couple have matching blue puffy jackets and sunglasses perched on their heads. This is probably their second home, too. Nobody says anything, but he can feel their eyes on him, taking in his jeans, plaid shirt, his toque pulled down a little too far down his head.

'Hi,' he says eventually, smiling to show that he's not a threat. He jingles his keys in his hand so they can see he's passed all the security.

*

Mike spends his first night in Kelowna intending to get on with his work. Instead, he spends nearly an hour attempting to master the super fancy blinds. There's a remote he can't figure out and no manual. He pulls at them. Nothing happens. He systematically goes through the remote, pressing each button. Nothing happens. Eventually, he sits on a low-backed black leather couch and looks at a wall of grey mesh. He imagines the lights from Westbank glittering on the dark surface of the lake.

The practical side of him says he doesn't need to see the view to get his work done. This is a short trip: he's decided he'll leave mid-day on Sunday since he's perpetually stuck with Monday morning classes. He has to prove his commitment, his work ethic, and his ability to Call-Me-Doug all over again. No procrastinating, a little voice says. He grabs his laptop from his backpack and searches John Duncan Ballantyne + Kelowna and clicks on the first link, though he's read through this page more than once. *The History of Ballantyne Mountain Park*, where Ballantyne is labelled *convicted felon* first, and *enterprising Scot* second. The article doesn't get into any of the specifics; it's just as vague as Sandy saying *he was wrongly accused*. But of what, exactly?

In those lost moments of the day, where before he'd find himself going scrolling through posts about marriages, babies, pets, and attempts at sourdough, he's started to scroll through

Twitter instead. It's probably not really any more productive, but everyone in the department (even sixty-something Call-Me-Doug) has an account. They retweet each other's posts about guest speakers, papers only other historians would find interesting, and these little cartoons that aren't really very funny. But when he's commenting on a post by one of his tenured colleagues, he almost feels like he's part of their club.

Now, with his legs stretched out across the giant sofa and his laptop warm on his lap, he's ended up at the account @historicalkelowna. The feed is all black and white photos: there's one with a couple of old cars--maybe they're Model T's—perched precariously on a dirt path with a crumbling cliff to the left, and two moustached men wearing caps at jaunty angles on the right. He clicks on the photo and glances at a couple of comments speculating about where and when the photo was taken. 1915 seems to be the consensus, and maybe a stretch between Kelowna and Vernon. A lot of the other photos feature Okanagan Lake and people with haircuts long out of style. And, an image that keeps popping up of a 1960s fibreglass statue of the Ogopogo. It's described as one of the city's most treasured pieces of public art, so he shouldn't laugh. But. The statue is of a green horned monster, its red tongue protruding from its snout. The monster, said to be a demon of the murky depths, looks something like a cross between a slug and Shrek.

Significance of Ogopogo story to JD?

Origins of name?

In this particular photo (*my grandparents and me with the new statue, 1960*, someone with the handle @rtrogrdnr52 has written) a crowd gathers on the periphery, waiting for their turn to pose with the lake monster. Nearly 200 people have liked and retweeted the photo.

Mike scrolls down and is relieved to find more than the cheesy nostalgia that seems to surround the lake monster. There's a photo of a tunnel cut into a rock face, a horse pulling a cart along train tracks that look like they lead to nowhere. *1913 view of the work leading up to Adra tunnel on the KVR near Naramata*. Below that, a photo of the lake and the mountains, labelled *1898 view*

of what would become the city of Kelowna seven years later. The view across the city is unimpeded by high-rises or the bright lights of the casinos. Ballantyne might have looked at the same view. Mike scrolls back to the top of profile and finds an email address for the page's curator. According to the profile, Clay Owen is an amateur historian, Canucks fanatic, and DIY Wizard. Mike types out a message, explaining that he's looking into the stories of Scottish settlers in the Okanagan, specifically John Duncan Ballantyne, that he's just in town for the weekend, and would Clay have time for a phone call? He presses send.

He's trying not to let the afternoon's failures get to him. He was so optimistic when he went out earlier with his new notebook in hand and had the idea of visiting a list of resources he'd bookmarked: the public library on Ellis, the Okanagan Heritage Museum on Queensway, the wine museum at the Laurel Packing House. The mountain loomed behind him everywhere he went. He imagined the paths a young Ballantyne might've walked. But when he got to the library he didn't even know where to start, so he headed towards the Museum. There he found a handwritten note on the door: CLOSED FOR "ESSENTIAL REPAIRS". SORRY FOR ANY INCONVENIENCE. He sat down on the wall, next to some flowerbeds full of weeds and cigarette ends. He didn't really want to go to the wine museum (that had been one of Call-Me-Doug's suggestions), and his plan to go the university seemed pointless. Phil Mercer, the alleged colleague and old friend of Call-Me-Doug emailed and not only said that he didn't owe any favours (maybe that was a joke), but also just happened to be out of town on the weekends and couldn't Mike schedule an appointment during the week? Mike takes another look at the list and scores out half the entries. He leans back into the plush cushions, staring up at the ceiling. There's a big crystal light fixture with lots of tiny light bulbs and reflective chrome. He covers his eyes. The last project he worked on didn't feel so important. And he was younger then, so maybe he was more motivated. He'd written a 5,000 word paper and presented it at a conference in Edmonton. It was all in aid of building up the CV. So when Doug casually mentioned that a tenure track position might be coming up, he felt like he was doing all the right things. Nothing

ever came of that, and the next term they hired Roger Alsop and gave him more classes, a better schedule, and half of Mike's office. Rog (because he's dropped the -er) is younger, spent a year at Harvard, and wears a lot of sweater vests. He's nice enough, but also, just the worst.

This time, there's more than the whisper of a job. Someone is retiring. But Mike has something to prove. With his boss so involved, even connecting the dots in his research topic—*Ballantyne and Dunbar, you're Scottish eh, Mikey? Why not look at the Scottish connection to the Okanagan?* Mike said he was Scottish in name only but was happy for the direction—he knows he has to get something done. Especially with Rog as competition.

And then there's Dad's voice. *You don't want to be an academic, Mikey. It's all bullshit. Get a job where you've got a little freedom. That's what a man needs.* Right after high school, Dad offered to get him a job. *Make some money, Mikey, and then go and have some fun while you're young. No point in tying yourself to anything.* So, he spent the summer working at a lumber mill in Thunder Bay. And hated everything about the job. He was glad he'd listened to Mom and applied for university; he started his BA in History the next September.

Many, many years later, still paying off student loans, he's usually sure that he made the right choices. But there are moments when researching dead people brings him down. On the other hand, isn't he bringing something to life? Maybe even telling stories that haven't been heard for years.

He knows though, that if he'd taken Dad's advice and gotten a job in oil, he could be sitting on his couch in his fancy Kelowna condo overlooking (he assumes) the lake. But would he want something like this for himself? He takes another look around the place: it's all open, big plate glass windows, a huge island, and monstrous appliances. The stainless-steel glows in the dark. Has that six-burner range even been used? There's minimal art on the wall, these huge canvases slashed with lines of red paint, dotted and orange, bumpy and riveted like the skin of a gourd. Everything feels cold, not like home. Probably because nobody lives here.

He looks back at the computer. A new message: Mom has sent him a video of penguins dancing in time to some pop song he doesn't know. She's really been going for it with the content lately. Hardly any of her messages contain any text. When was the last time they spoke on the phone? Too late to call her now. A new email notification, subject *The Gibson Family announces the loss of Sandy Gibson*. Gibson? He clicks on it and reads on, *It is with our deepest sorrow that we inform you of the death of our beloved Sandy Gibson (née Ballantyne). We invite you to join us for a Celebration of Life at the Merritt Civic Centre, Saturday, March 29 from 2 o'clock. Donations can be made to the Canadian Cancer Association in lieu of flowers.*

Mike puts his computer aside and stares at the greyed-out windows. He'd never really thought about Sandy as a person. That sounds bad, but they only ever communicated by email. She was only ever JD's great-great-granddaughter, answering Mike's questions in round-about ways and sending him weekly emails with subjects like, *Do ya know what to call a pile of cats?* And inside would be the answer and a gif, usually of cats. She'd written once saying she had lots of time and was bored. But she'd never said why. She'd never said anything about her life in the here and now, just the past. And he hadn't ever thought to ask.

Chapter Two

When Haley used to imagine this day (because she's imagined the Celebration of Life over and over; she's been writing the eulogy ever since Mum's diagnosis) she imagined the kind of rain that bounces off pavement, the clouds so dense and grey not even headlights can break through them. On a day like that, black is the right thing to wear. Now, the family, friends, residents of the city Mum spent all of her life in, look like they haven't gotten the memo about the sunny day. Mum would laugh at them.

Haley leans against the doorframe and watches the street. Just across from her is the war memorial, reminder that her tiny hometown has suffered great losses before, that they will recover from this. Her family name is carved into the marble. A great-great-uncle, the first to move West—though you can hardly call a move from the Okanagan to the Nicola a move West. How long did it take for him to become just a name on a monument, or part of an anecdote about the family migration? Her own move *all the way to the coast* is a move West. Every time she comes home, she's asked *why on earth* she wants to live in the big city. She wants to say *because I always hated it here, would've gone anywhere to get away from this place*, but instead she says things like *better amenities, more job opportunities, and have you seen the sunset over English Bay?* Her former classmates, neighbours, friends of friends, all of them look at her with puzzled faces and remain unconvinced.

Today, they don't ask about Vancouver.

She turns back into the room and is greeted by a giant photo resting against an easel normally used for the 65+ Art Class. This photo is of Mum at the hospital, dressed in a pair of navy blue scrubs adorned with little yellow Minions. The picture has to be at least five years old: Mum's curly red hair is huge, barely contained by the navy bandana folded into a headband. She's curvy, still with the doughnut of fat around her middle. She was always so self-conscious about that. She's got an arm draped over the should of an old man in a wheelchair.

Next to the photo is a table draped in a flowered tablecloth. Sunflowers. Their sunny faces are half-covered by the plates and dishes and bowls full of food: there's everything from boxes of donuts donated by Timmie's, to giant vats of Ethel's famous lasagne. People hover around the table with hands full of paper plates and plastic cups. They talk in hushed tones when Haley passes them. She watches as Kevin and Tim Carey shove jalapeño poppers into their mouths, cheese catching on gums no longer home to front teeth. Front teeth lost in the same hockey game played many years earlier.

She grimaces in their direction and remembers a time when her best friend Tara wrote their names down at the top of the comprehensive list they were making of the hot guys at school. Everyone said the Carey twins were so talented, future NHL stars! But here they are. Last she heard, Kevin was managing a grocery store and Tim was taking over their dad's decking business. Places like this have a way of doing that to people. Haley wanders away from the table. She isn't hungry anyway.

Towards the back of the room, she sees her dad standing between Auntie Karen and Uncle Bill. He's holding a plastic cup. He's spilled something on the blue tie Uncle Bill helped him with earlier. She expects to see him distraught, broken, shoulders slumped, stooping, half his normal size, but he looks fine. He drinks from his cup and even smiles. He runs a hand over his short hair and that patch where his hairline recedes just a bit more—normally hidden by the Canucks hat he always wears—and he looks like he's laughing. Uncle Bill wraps an arm around Dad's shoulder and the two men laugh. Maybe they've just shared a joke: *What do you call a cow with a twitch?* Uncle Bill asks. Dad says he doesn't know, but they share conspiratorial glances because they know the answer is going to be lame. *Beef jerky!* Bill says before clapping Dad on the shoulder. They've got their backs to another giant photo of Mum: in this one, she's wearing a pink bandana and waving a paddle over her head. Remission was a word they said a lot that year.

She spots Alex on the other side of the room, shaking the hands of her elementary school principal, Mrs Peters, and Old Alice, the school librarian. She can only imagine the stories

the two women have been sharing. *Did Haley ever tell you about the time she and her little friend...what was her name? The little girl had such a tragic home life...well, she and her little friend brought a container full of slugs for show and tell. And you know what happened? The darned things ended up smushed all over the classroom!* Alex being Alex, will laugh in the right moments, tell them that no, he hadn't heard that story before, and then compliment both on something because he knows how well flattery works. She's too late to stop this from happening. But then he's zeroing in on Dad, adjusting his tie as he strides across the room, preparing his next plan of attack. Dad doesn't call out bullshit; he'll just let Alex talk at him, uncomfortable, hardly speaking, hoping that he'll be left alone. She needs to intervene. She speed walks across the room, her heels slipping on the shiny wood floor, feeling like everyone is watching her—because they probably are. She puts a hand on Alex's arm and says, 'there you are,' and turns him away from her family.

Just to her left, there's another giant photo resting against an easel: the photo features giant Mum and giant Haley, at her university graduation. Her feet hurt just thinking about the shoes she insisted on despite knowing how long the ceremony would drag. And, just like Mum said, the navy polyester robe was so long you couldn't see the glitter heels anyway. Anyway. Haley leads Alex across the room, past another table lined with bottles of whatever people thought to bring (though none of the hard stuff, haha) the stacks of plastic cups waiting to be used, the collection of empties, of half empties, or quarter empties people have abandoned on another sunflower tablecloth. Haley doesn't stop until they're outside, away from the people who don't know what to say to her, away from their ears.

On the sidewalk, they're backed by long shadows. The cool breeze picks up, a further reminder that despite the bright blue sky and the intensity of the sun, it's still early spring and although the weather is temptingly good, it can be fickle and cruel. Winter conditions come out of nowhere at higher altitudes. When Haley eventually drives back to Vancouver, she could drive into a snowstorm. You just don't know.

Alex squints into the sun, his back to the community hall. He looks good in the suit he bought for his grandpa's funeral, ages ago. Of course he looks good. His sleeves are rolled up to the elbows, his freckled arms goose-pimpled as the breeze blows past them. She brushes something invisible from his shoulder and then is annoyed with herself. How normal it feels. The intimacy of such an action.

'I didn't think you were going to make it,' Haley says, quietly in the hopes she won't be overheard, 'when you messed up all of our plans. Again.' The words bubble up and over. She didn't expect to feel so angry, but they'd planned everything out nearly a week earlier. Alex would fly up the day before, she'd go pick him up from the airport, he'd be there to help, he'd be there at the funeral home, sitting next to her, putting everything else aside to support her.

'Let's not do this here. I already explained myself.'

An emergency at work, missed his flight, no other flights in time. He'd borrowed a friend's car and driven up this morning. Information conveyed in a string of texts. She only noticed he was at the funeral home when the service was over and they were all leaving. No apologies. She crosses her arms. But he also knows that's not the only reason why she's angry.

Alex looks over his shoulder. 'There's a lot of people here. She was loved.'

The hall is packed, full of the indistinguishable shadows of people. The room holds so much of the community, the people who have watched her grow up and think they know every detail about who she is, or was. Before today they would've commented on how she abandoned them for her *glamorous* life in the city. As if working in the public library and living in a tiny one-bedroom in Kits makes her life glamorous.

'Everyone has a lot of stories.' Alex scratches at a zit on his cheek. His skin is red from the wind. 'One of your old teachers was telling me a story about rogue slugs?'

Haley rolls her eyes. They're all so predictable.

'I was just on my way over to talk to your dad before you found me. I haven't had a chance to speak to him.'

Haley looks back into the crowded room, looking for Dad's baseball cap, forgetting he's not wearing it. She doesn't want Alex to talk to Dad. Especially not when she hasn't really talked to Dad since he called her to tell her to come home. That was nearly two weeks ago. But with Auntie Karen permanently installed in the kitchen, Uncle Bill helping around the house, the two youngest boys running around with Rocko the Rottie, and the local country station they blast on the radio, words haven't felt necessary. Haley comes downstairs and Karen asks how she is, if she wants pancakes, and how does she take her coffee? Oh, well Haley's a *city girl now*, she won't drink *country* coffee. Haley still isn't quite sure what *country* coffee actually is, but she sits at the kitchen table watching everyone else drinking it out of the mismatched mugs her mum spent twenty years collecting. Shit. But what she really doesn't want is Alex working Dad.

Yesterday, she and Dad took a drive out to the cemetery. Mum didn't want to be buried, but she did want her ashes taken to *visit* the family plot. The trip didn't require conversation; they got into the truck, Dad drove with one hand on the wheel, his other hand resting on the open window, and Haley looked out and wondered if it was possible for her to come back to this place and want to be here.

'Have you talked to your dad?' Alex turns the question around. 'You should, you know.' This is Alex Saying the Right Thing. 'Maybe it would give you some closure on your feelings.'

Closure? The word makes her jaw clench. Sometimes she feels like she's the case study he's working on for his master's degree. And then he pulls her into a hug.

She doesn't know what to do at first. The hug doesn't feel familiar. His suit doesn't smell like he usually does. And she doesn't want to cry. If she cries, her eyeliner will run everywhere because waterproof is never truly waterproof, is it? And she's already done so much crying. She pulls away, looking at him, trying to remember what she loved about him. The curve of his lips. The almond shaped blue eyes. There's a small part of her that wants to be glad he's here today, holding her. But she pushes him away. She wipes at her eyes. She'll talk to Dad because she wants to.

Back inside, she finds Dad sitting at a table with a heaped plate of lasagne. He holds a fork, like he plans on eating, but stares into the crowd of people as though he's looking for someone.

'Hi Dad,' Haley says, and she sits down next to him. 'How are you doing?'

Alex follows just behind and pulls out a chair, the legs scraping against the floor. He rests his elbow on the table, chin in his open palm. She half expects him to pull out a notebook so he can jot down facial expression, note verbal pauses, and copy each word she says for further interpretation. Or maybe that's just mean.

Dad puts the fork down, tines sliding between the layers of pasta. He wipes his hands on his pants as he says, 'Oh fine, hon,' and smiles in that way that says he'd rather be doing anything else than talking.

Mum was always the one with the words.

'Mrs Peters told Alex the story about the slugs,' Haley says, knowing that Dad will remember. He never forgets anything.

He nods and looks back into the crowd. 'I'm not sure where your aunt and uncle went...' If they were sitting at the table, they would fill the silence with chitchat. Mum always said Auntie Karen could talk for days and never run out of words. *We could try her as an alternative power source. She's full of hot air.*

'That's ok, Dad,' Haley says, but she wishes her aunt and uncle were there, too.

'It was a really nice service,' Alex chips in. 'The church was really full. She was loved,' he repeats the same phrase from earlier.

Dad nods, still staring out into the room.

Trinity United is the only church the family has ever gone to. They've never been religious, but Mum insisted on going to the Christmas service every year—*We clock this time with the Big Guy and we're good for the year*, she'd say as she forced them to dress nicely and sit through the local choir's slightly off-key singing. Haley looks at the people bunched into little groups

spread out across the room, and she knows, if this were her own Celebration of Life, most of them wouldn't be here. Mum always tried: there was the Christmas party at the community centre, and she would spend days cooking and baking in preparation. She organised Easter Egg hunts, summer fairs, farmers markets, blood drives, clothing drives, bake sales. She went to the schools and talked to the kids about things like lice and mono. She never thought about moving away.

Auntie Karen and Bill come over, each with a drink and a plate loaded with food.

'Ethel insisted on giving me the biggest piece of lasagne...' Auntie Karen pauses and points at Dad's plate, 'you too, eh? I don't know how I'm going to eat all of it.' She cuts into the pasta with the side of her fork and smiles. 'But nobody makes lasagne like Ethel.'

'If you can't eat all of it, let me know.' Uncle Bill winks at Haley. They all know Karen will clean her plate. The fluorescent lights glint off Bill's bald head. Haley remembers when he still had a long black ponytail and she watched it streaming behind him as he drove away on his motorcycle. He still has the bike, though it spends more time in the garage than it does on the road.

'You know what I was thinking?' Karen asks of nobody in particular. 'I was thinking we're celebrating the life of another notorious Ballantyne. Notorious B-t-y-n-e.' She laughs at her own joke.

'Another?' Alex asks, chin still resting lazily on his palm.

Karen turns to him. 'Oh, hello Alex. It's nice to see you again.' So formal it's painful to watch. 'Well, there was my dad, notorious in his own way, I'd say. And before him there was a great-great-uncle who they said was a rumrunner. And JD, of course.'

'JD?' Alex asks.

'John Duncan Ballantyne,' Karen clarifies, 'Haley's great-great-great-grandfather. Surely you've told Alex the story, Halestorm.' She uses the old nickname that alludes to Haley's

lackadaisical attitude towards doing chores. *Do you like living in filth, Halestorm?* Mum would ask. And Haley, always knowing she'd get away with being cheeky, would say yes.

Haley grimaces at the name and then shrugs. 'Not really.' There's never been a reason to talk about random relatives and the things they may or may not have done.

'Well Alex,' Karen leans forward, 'depending on which story you believe, he was either an entrepreneurial homesteader or a criminal. But we,' she says at her lasagne, 'don't think he was a criminal. He's got landmarks named after him. He can't have been that bad.'

'Depends on who you talk to.' Bill eats a forkful of pasta: sauce dribbles down his face, but he doesn't notice.

Karen reaches over and wipes the dribble with a thumb. She rolls her eyes.

'I can say it. He's not *my* relative.' They've been married for twenty years.

JD Ballantyne, Mum used to say, left his home in Scotland and ended up in the Okanagan. *That would've been months and months of travelling. Can you imagine going all that way on a ship?* Of course Haley couldn't imagine: she'd never been anywhere.

'Some people say he was an arsonist. And he stole his rival's cattle. And then his wife,' Bill says through another mouthful of pasta.

Karen rolls her eyes again. 'Maybe she went willingly, Bill. You know how good the Ballantyne genes are.' She bats her eyelashes. 'He was probably a handsome guy.'

'I'm sure he was, darling,' Bill says.

'Haley's Grandpa knew more,' Karen begins.

But then they all stare at the floor. It was less than six months ago that they were in this same hall, photos of Grandpa Ballantyne plastered all over the place.

Bill clears his throat.

Karen looks up and smiles, business as usual. 'Actually, I spoke to a man earlier who said he was doing some research on JD. Anyone else know about this?'

Dad and Bill shake their heads.

Haley's jaw clenches again. 'Why would someone doing research on JD come today?'

Surely this isn't the time or place. It's almost as bad as Alex and his notebook.

Karen shrugs. 'I think he said he'd been talking to your mum.'

More shrugs around the table.

'When?' Haley spent nearly every minute of the previous weeks next to Mum. When did she have time to talk to some random guy?

Karen raises her hands, 'I'm just the messenger. All he said is that he was doing this research, Sandy was helping, and he was sorry for our loss.'

'Is he still here?' Haley asks. She looks around the room for unfamiliar faces, but the building is still so packed it's hard to see. And even if she did find this guy, what would she do? Tell him to leave and make a scene?

'Changing the subject. Have you talked to Tara yet, Haley?' Bill asks.

Haley looks back at her family. 'Tara?'

'I guess someone must've told her. I don't know who keeps in touch with her now that her grandparents are gone.'

Haley looks around the room for the long dark hair of her former best friend, Tara, who she hasn't spoken to in nearly a decade.

'Why did you two stop being friends?' Karen asks, never able to resist a little bit of gossip.

Haley grimaces. That's not a story she wants to tell.

'Well, she's here now. And that's what counts.' Bill says, always the diplomat.

Nobody moves. If Mum were here, she'd say something like *Stop being such a baby and just go and talk to her, Haley*, with a hand on her hip and her voice raised at least twice as loud as it should be. And if you told her she was wrong, she'd look at you with her green eyes narrowed until you believed everything she said was right (even if it wasn't). That's just what she was like.

No fucks given after fifty: she'd cross-stitched the line onto a pillow shortly after the big birthday, just in case anyone needed reminding.

Alex looks around the room and then at Haley. 'Who's Tara?'

But Haley is already getting up, already crossing the room. Tara is standing next to the graduation photo. Her hair is still long and dark, she's still too tall, too skinny. Her makeup is impeccable, if a little smudged around the eyes.

'Hi,' Haley says. She's thinking about all the afternoons spent walking home from school. The sleepovers. Doing homework together at the kitchen table, Mum bringing them fresh baked cookies and big mugs of instant hot chocolate (always made with milk). Prom. Graduation. The text messages Haley almost sent saying that she was sorry, that it didn't matter, that she couldn't stand the Tara-sized hole in her life. And then moving away and deciding to just leave things be.

Tara doesn't say anything. Instead, she pulls Haley into a hug and it feels like the most normal thing in the world. For the first time today, Haley lets herself cry.

Chapter Three

They're eating again—lasagne brought home because even after Ethel served everyone the largest portions of their lives, there's still more. Kieran is poking at his plate, using a hunk of garlic bread as a barrier between the saucy pasta and his salad. He's already told them that this beef is the reason why the world is dying. Auntie Karen rolled her eyes in response and told him to eat his salad or starve.

On the other side of the table, Haley sits between Caleb and Jack. They've been fighting over some toy (she can't keep track of what) since they got home so, like Kieran's garlic bread, she's acting like a buffer. Caleb, who's ten and should know better, keeps reaching around the back of her chair to poke his brother. Jack, on the cusp of seven and missing his two front teeth, has tomato sauce all over his face and hands. 'Food hands, guys,' she keeps saying. She's worried she's going to find little red handprints all over her back.

None of the adults can settle on a topic, so they sit chewing, commenting on what the boys are up to.

But then Karen says, 'So Alex didn't even want to stay for dinner?'

Uncle Bill gives her a look.

Haley takes a big gulp of wine. 'No.' She's sure they all heard the conversation at the hall. No reason for anyone to bring it up again.

'He had to be back in Vancouver for what?'

'Hon,' Bill says quietly.

Karen takes a big chug of wine. Her cheeks are already red. 'Didn't want to share this lovely meal with us?' She waves a hand at the table. The space around their plates is full of Tupperware containers full of the leftovers they were sent away with.

'I thought he might want to stay and look at some places,' Bill says, 'I found a couple I thought would be perfect for you two.'

This time Karen gives Bill an exaggerated look.

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ Haley says, knowing that her aunt is trying to save her from feeling awkward. ‘We already knew plans were going to change.’ Before they knew how fast Mum was going to go downhill, the plan had made sense. They’d look for a place in Merritt: Haley would find a job locally, or even look into jobs at the university, where Alex would apply for his doctorate. It would be so much cheaper, they’d be closer to Haley’s family, and they’d finally get around to thinking about their future. House. Dog. Kids, maybe.

And then Mum got worse. Haley rushed back home and Alex had to stay. That wasn’t the part she was mad about, it was how casually he’d said that he didn’t see any point to moving. So cold. Like Mum was already gone.

‘So should we just put a pin it for now?’ Bill asks.

‘I guess so.’ Haley says. She hasn’t really thought about what would come next. And the only conversations she and Alex have lately are so frustrating. He’s been spouting lines from the Right Things to Say, but none of it has helped. And now she hasn’t heard from him since they said goodbye at the community centre. But she also switched her phone off as soon as they got back to the house. She knows her inbox is full of messages from people she hasn’t spoken to in years. All the people who need to tell her they’re sorry, that everyone loved her mum.

‘Well,’ Karen says, ‘Alex’s loss. This lasagne is equally delicious the second time around.’

There are some murmurs in agreement from around the table, except from Kieran, who just mutters, ‘Meat is murder’ like it’s his new catch phrase.

‘Did I see you talking with Tara?’ Karen asks.

Of course she did, everyone witnessed the reunion. The hug out of nowhere, the two girls who were once inseparable back together again.

‘Your mum would be so glad. That girl was like her second child.’

Haley pushes some food around on her plate.

‘Probably,’ Karen continues, though at a lower volume, as though she’s about to tell a big secret, ‘because of her family situation.’

Bill raises his dark eyebrows. ‘Ancient history, don’t you think, hon?’

Haley can think back to a lot of hushed phone conversations Mum had with, Haley eventually learned, Tara’s grandma. The end result was that Tara came home with Haley after school and sometimes stayed for days. And it was true, Haley never really felt like she was an only child, or that she was missing a sibling.

‘Your mum was pretty broken up when she heard that Tara’s grandma had passed.’

A few years ago, there was a small funeral at the church. Haley wanted Mum to sit at the back with her, but Mum dragged her up to the last row of occupied pews. *We’re not hiding because of some ridiculous argument*, Mum had whispered, a little too loud. Haley didn’t stay to offer condolences to the family. She couldn’t face Tara or her grandpa. Instead, Haley waited outside, around the corner, looking at the red slates on the church tower and the blue green hills. It was summer. Sweat rolled down her back. She’d chosen to wear a black dress despite Mum saying that wearing black was a stupid tradition. That was why she’d picked a navy dress with tiny sunflowers this morning.

Next to her, Caleb is squirming in his seat, pulling his feet under his bum, his elbows firmly planted on the table (just millimetres away from his saucy plate). Karen puts down her latest glass of wine and looks at him across the table, as if she’s only just noticing that he’s still there. Then she looks at Jack who, in an attempt to be just like Kieran, has decided that he’s not eating meat. There’s a little pile of ground beef on one side of the plate. The rest of the lasagne, however, has vanished.

Karen takes another gulp from her glass. ‘Don’t you boys have homework to do?’

They look at her. ‘I thought this was a holiday,’ Caleb says.

Haley knows he understands that Auntie Sandy is gone. And he understands that Haley is sad, that they’re all meant to be sad. But which holiday was he thinking of when he said that? Canada Day, when they eat red and white cupcakes, Dad and Uncle Bill fire up the grill, and they

let off fireworks? Or Remembrance Day, when he fidgets during the moment of silence and then returns to whatever he was doing before his mum told him to stop and reflect?

Karen, for once, doesn't seem to have anything to say. Then she takes another drink from her glass and says, 'It should be.'

'Go entertain yourselves, boys,' Bill says.

The boys get up and leave, Caleb nearly taking the tablecloth with him. Haley just manages to get a hold of his plate.

And then it's just the adults at the table, Dad at one end, Bill at the other. Karen's in Mum's usual spot, her back to the island. Mum used to sit there so she was closest to the kitchen. She would jump up and grab more if she noticed Haley's plate was empty. And when dinner was done, she'd be the first to start clearing the dishes away. But she always refused to fill the dishwasher. She'd leave the dirty stuff next to the sink, precariously piled. Dad cleans. Now, nobody rushes to clean up. Dad still has food on his plate. He occasionally pokes at it. Haley can't remember the last time he said anything. At the other end of the table, Bill leans on his elbows, his face in his hands. None of them know what they should be saying right now. Do they reminisce about the good times? List Mum's qualities? Make jokes about some of the silly things she used to say?

Six months ago, they sat at this same table after Grandpa's funeral. They'd eaten lasagne, also courtesy of Ethel. Mum was in her spot, though she wasn't jumping up to serve anyone. She'd just been through another round of chemo; she was pale, and while she'd put on a bit of makeup, it was obvious that she'd needed to draw on her eyebrows. She was wearing a colourful scarf tied in a knot behind her ear. Haley watched as the metallic threads picked up the light, glittering. Karen was talking about some of things they'd been finding while clearing out Grandpa's house.

'All of these boxes of newspaper cuttings and old photos—'

'What old photos?' Haley interjected.

Karen sighed. ‘Just random old photos. I didn’t recognise a single person in any of them. Who wants photos of randoms? Bill knows a guy in Kelowna who deals with that kind of stuff. He said he’d take it all, sight unseen. Boxes and boxes of it.’

‘You can’t just get rid of Grandpa’s stuff. It’s not right,’ Haley said, but nobody seemed to care.

They just wanted the stuff gone. Bill was going to put the house on the market right away. People were moving up from the coast. ‘I’m betting I’ll get multiple offers. All these young families wanting the quiet life.’

That was Grandpa’s research. They didn’t have any idea how much of it had been digitised—Grandpa had only learned how to use a computer a few years before and they all still got *how do you do this?* phone calls.

Haley looks around the kitchen. The room is framed by novelty by cookie jars (mostly animals, a red telephone box in one corner, an ice cream cone in another) arranged on top of the kitchen cabinets. Mum was up on the stepladder once a week dusting them all off. There’s the Felix clock with the eyes and tail that go back and forth. The collection of mugs (none of them matching) hidden behind cupboard doors. The cross-stitch art, some of it framed and on the walls, some in the form of throw cushions. The trailing plants hanging from the ceiling, or the one that snakes up the brickwork in the living room. How much of this stuff should they just box up and give away without a second thought? Will they be enlisting Uncle Bill to get the house on the market, advertising it as the perfect place for another family looking to experience the quiet life? Is that even what they had?

She heads towards the patio door, yanking it open and then sliding it shut behind her. From the other side of the glass, she watches as her family continues to sit in silence. The Felix clock ticks away the hours on the wall behind Dad’s head. Auntie Karen’s glass is nearly empty. Bill’s bald head is glowing. But the night is cold and clear. You can see so many stars because there’s so much less light pollution. When Haley exhales, she can just about see her breath. She

shivers a little. She's not dressed for the cold, she was just following an impulse. She wanted the quiet: there's just silence, too far away to hear traffic noise, sirens don't echo, and the next-door neighbours are far enough away that they only hear them when they're hosting a raging party (which they have done, over the years). She sits down on the top stair and looks out into the yard. It's a big lot, nearly an acre, dotted with groups of old cedars. They're the kind of trees you can't climb because they don't have low hanging branches, but Dad tried to compensate by rigging up a tire swing. There was a time when Haley liked to climb onto the swing and pull herself up the rope and onto the supporting branch. Now, she can barely get onto the swing at all. No arm strength; turns out you can't just take the occasional yoga class and expect to be fit.

Somewhere out near the back of the lot is an old greenhouse. They used to keep it up, growing things like tomatoes and peppers despite the cold climate. And they had a vegetable patch too, though last time she looked it seemed to just be weeds. Some summers, when Mum was too busy at work and Dad had a lot of jobs on the go, Haley would set up the pup tent and spend the evenings with her sleeping bag, a stack of books, and a flashlight. Grandpa, always the best babysitter, would come out onto the deck and yell, 'You still alive out there?' And she'd yell back that no, she was dead. 'Good. Less work for me,' he'd say before heading back inside to his cup of cold coffee and latest project.

She shivers again.

The door creaks open behind her. Dad sits down next to her and drapes a blanket over her shoulders.

*

On Sunday morning, the day after the memorial, Haley sits in a booth at the café in the old Coldwater Hotel. The building is the oldest in Merritt; Grandpa used to say it was haunted by the ghost of a coalminer who died under suspicious circumstances. And those circumstances changed each time he told the story. She's never seen the ghost, but she believes the café has the potential for visits from another realm: the place has hardly changed over the years. She

remembers sitting in the same booth by the windows, in between a pair of mismatched clocks, watching their gold pendulums swing back and forth. She'd watch the traffic go by on Voght, looking for out-of-province plates, and wishing that she could drive away too.

Today though, she's sat down willingly. She looks at the menu, protected under plastic, and thinks of Mum ordering calamari dinners on special occasions, the extra plate of bacon they always got, just in case, the summer she spent bussing tables. Now, she watches out the window for Tara, a real-life ghost.

Tara arrives a few minutes later with a series of apologies and a cloud of sweet perfume around her. Her long hair is wrapped into the kind of bun she probably calls messy but is actually perfect. She's in coordinating shades of pink workout gear, apologising that her yoga class went long. She sits down and puts her phone on the table. 'I hate to put a time limit on catching up, but I really do need to leave by noon. At the latest. We're going to look at a house. With your Uncle, actually.'

'Oh,' Haley says. When Bill said he was showing a couple of places today he hadn't mentioned who he was showing them to.

'I wasn't sure if he would've told you. I don't know if that's awkward or...?' Tara trails off and looks down at her phone. The wallpaper is upside down. A picture of Tara and Kevin with an impossibly blue sky behind them.

Haley shakes her head. 'It's not awkward. I'm sure he'll be able to find you something.'

Tara sighs. 'That's what I'm worried about. Anyway. Don't let me be late. I'm always late.' This is something new. Tara was always the first one up after a sleepover, always the first one out the door on the walk to school.

'You and Kevin look so happy together.' Haley says. If she says it, she rips the band-aid off. And she is happy they're happy.

Tara swipes something away on her screen and then turns the phone over. 'You know, we are happy. I'm just sorry he's the reason we fell out.'

‘No, I’m sorry.’ Haley shakes her head. ‘It’s so stupid. I was just jealous.’ She’s known for a long time that it was her fault that she lost her best friend. In the moment all those years ago, seeing Tara and Kevin drunkenly kissing at a sloppy, messy house party had seemed like the worst thing in the world. And then the yelling match they’d had the next day at the park, Tara crying and apologising, Haley screaming about betrayal and backstabbing when she and Kevin had barely even been on one date. The kind of melodrama encouraged by a place where nothing ever happens

‘I really did think about calling you so many times. It just got more and more awkward as the years went by.’

Tara reaches across the table to hold Haley’s hand. ‘I know. I wrote you so many emails and texts. And I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you and your mum. I used to see her around town. I always wanted to ask how you were doing. And give her a hug. Your mum’s hugs were the best.’ Tara wipes a tear away from her fluttery fake eyelashes.

‘They were the best.’ Even in those last days at home (because Mum had demanded to be taken home, she didn’t want to stare at the ceiling in a hospice, she wanted her own bed, her things, the smell of her own house), when she seemed so frail and had so little energy, her arms still seemed like the best place to be. ‘And now I’m going to cry too,’ Haley says, her voice breaking a little. It seems incredible that her body can still produce tears.

‘Let’s call the server over and have her awkwardly interrupt things. And then promise we’ll only cry happy tears.’ Tara sits up a little and waves at the server on the other side of the café.

Soon, they’re sitting with big serving-dish sized plates heaped with eggs, bacon, pancakes, generous globs of whipped cream on one side, plus plates of toast, a jug of maple syrup, cups of coffee, and a side plate stacked with just-in-case bacon. They each spear a piece of bacon and clink them together, toasting.

‘To Sandy. The best Mum I ever had.’

‘To Mum.’ Haley takes a bite of bacon. It’s crispy and fatty and just the way it’s supposed to be. This is the reason she still comes here, even if it doesn’t meet her aesthetic expectations.

‘So,’ she says, ‘tell me what it’s like to be with *the* Kevin Carey.’

Tara laughs. She scrapes the whipped cream from her plate and pats it on top of her pancakes. Then she drenches the stack with maple syrup. She always was able to eat tons of junk food, never worrying about zits or gaining weight. She cuts a triangle out of the stack of pancakes. ‘*The* Kevin Carey,’ she begins, her mouth full of food, ‘is a pain in my ass. He keeps setting up these house viewings—like the one today—for places here. Even though I’ve told him don’t just want to see places here.’ The day before, Tara explained that while they’d lived in Vancouver for over five years, Kevin had cold feet about getting onto the property ladder. They’d get so much bang for their buck (his words) if they ditched the Vancouver plan. ‘And he wants to go into business with Tim. They want to buy their Dad out so he can retire.’

‘What about your job?’ Haley asks.

Tara shrugs. ‘I guess he thinks I’d just get a job at the studio down the street? But I don’t want to be back here.’ She doesn’t need to explain that feeling. Haley still remembers when Tara first went to live with her grandparents. All the stuff with her mom. The drugs, the phone calls from the police. That was one of the reasons why Tara spent so much time at Haley’s.

‘But I guess he misses his family when he’s away.’ Haley thinks of the Carey brothers driving around in their teal Mustang with the top down. Everyone wanted a ride in that car.

‘He does,’ Tara says, ‘but you should hear what he says about Tim.’ She shakes her head.

First there was the accident that ruined his hockey career. And then he got his high school girlfriend, Carrie, pregnant. Now they have three kids. They bought the house next to Tim’s childhood home, just down the street from Karen and Bill. Karen says they never have any money, the kids run wild, and their dog has nearly bitten Rocko more than once. But Haley never knows how much to believe from Karen.

‘Anyway,’ Tara says, ‘as far as I’m concerned, the plan is to go for the condo. I love Queen E park, but I want to be near the beach. Now,’ she pours another glug of maple syrup onto her remaining pancakes, ‘tell me about your guy.’

Yesterday, Alex hadn’t given Haley the opportunity to introduce him to Tara. He’d hovered just in Haley’s line of sight and waited until there was a break in her conversation. Then he’d put his hand on her shoulder to interrupt the conversation and steer her away. She pokes at the whipped cream still sitting on her plate. ‘I don’t even know where to start with him.’

Tara raises perfectly microbladed eyebrows. ‘Name? Age? Career? How you met? You can tell me everything. All I know,’ she drops her voice slightly, ‘is what you made public on your Facebook page.’

Remembering the moment Haley realised Tara had deleted her on social media still hurts. But she starts with the basics: Alex Blanchard, 29 years old, broke psych student, ‘And we met at a house party, like people used to do, back in fourth year.’ It took another three years before they got together. He moved into Haley’s place almost two years ago, when he started his postgrad.

Tara nods along. ‘All sounds ok. Except for maybe the broke part.’ She raises her eyebrows again. ‘But? What’s going on with you two?’

The fight a few weeks earlier hadn’t felt like it had come out of nowhere. It had been bubbling, slowly simmering like a pot of chilli on the stove. There were the months when Alex couldn’t pay his share of the mortgage. Or when he missed his turn to pick up groceries. All the times he was too busy to be somewhere on time. ‘And then when we knew for sure that Mum wasn’t going to get any better. He just,’ Haley feels her jaw tighten, ‘he just wasn’t there. I didn’t think he was going to come to the funeral. And he was so late that he couldn’t even sit with us.’

Tara reaches across the table and squeezes Haley’s hand. ‘That’s such a shitty thing to do.’

Haley nods. ‘Before I left we got into this big fight about the future. Maybe Bill told you, but we were supposed to be looking at places here too.’

‘He hasn’t really mentioned you,’ Tara says, frowning. ‘Typical Bill. But um, are you saying you might be leaving Van?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’ Alex’s voice echoes in her head. *Is there any point to moving up here, now that your mum is gone? Weren’t you doing this for her?* And now Haley doesn’t know. When she imagined that future, was it with or without Mum?

‘Oh Haley. Well, I’ll support whatever decision you make,’ Tara says and then jumps when her phone starts buzzing on the table. ‘Shit, is it already that time? I told Kev to come pick me up at quarter to. Did you drive?’

Haley shakes her head. Dad had just received a part he’d been waiting on: her car is probably still up on blocks, Dad tinkering underneath it.

‘Good, wanna wait with me?’

Outside, the sun is high and so bright Haley wishes she had sunglasses. She and Tara wait next to a bus stop (though the bus hardly ever comes), arms linked, reminiscing about the places they used to hang out (some of them gone now), the time they spent driving around with the windows down and music blasting, Christmas tree lightings, many years’ worth of country music festivals (dragged, because neither of them have ever liked cowboy music).

‘But remember,’ Tara says, ‘when you got that Billy Ray Cyrus CD for your birthday?’

Of course, Haley nods, she was ten and felt like her dreams had come true when she unwrapped the boombox from her parents. ‘I think we wore out the CD.’

‘That’s because it was the only one you had.’ Tara keeps checking her phone; Kevin is late. She shakes her head and puts her phone into her pocket. ‘What’s it like being at home?’

‘Loud,’ Haley says, ‘but there’s routine.’ Sometimes she picks the boys up from school, spending the walk home listening as Caleb and Jack talk about what they’ve been up to, though mostly about the video games they plan on playing when they get home. Questions about what they’ve been learning go unanswered, and homework doesn’t get mentioned until Karen gets involved.

‘Kids, eh,’ Tara says.

They were always the odd ones out at school, weird because they weren’t excited about the idea of getting married and having families. They wanted to leave and have adventures. See the world. Just clichés. What adventures has Haley had since moving to Vancouver?

Just then, Haley sees the glint of teal coming down the street. ‘Oh my god, do they still have the Mustang?’ She remembers the times she sat in the passenger seat, the top down, music blaring.

Tara rolls her eyes. ‘Don’t get me started on that car. It’s such a piece of shit. Kev says they’re going to fix it up. It’s always a miracle when they get the thing running.’

Kevin pulls up to the curb. The engine still rumbles in that way that made a teenage heart beat just a little bit faster. The top is down, the windows up, the country music blaring. Kevin turns the music down and rolls the passenger window down.

‘Hi Haley,’ he says. Is this the first time they’ve spoken in nine years? ‘I’m so sorry about your mom, Haley. She was a great lady. My mom’s been reminiscing about all the parties and events Sandy planned over the years. There were some good ones.’ He smiles. The smile isn’t gummy. There are teeth where there are supposed to be teeth. Had Haley imagined the gummy smiles and the jalapeno poppers?

‘Thanks,’ she says. She’s still trying to figure out how to respond to condolences. So far all she’s managed is a weak smile.

‘I’m glad to see you out,’ he continues, ‘and even happier to see you two together.’ He smiles awkwardly and Tara gives Haley a squeeze.

Out as opposed to what? Shut in at home crying? She smiles again.

‘Should we get going?’

‘Why don’t you come too, Haley?’ Tara asks and then she lowers her voice, ‘I could use your help.’

‘Sure,’ Haley says. It’s not like she has anything else to do.

Tara tips the front seat forward and lets Haley crawl into the back. She pushes aside some baby clothes and a grass-coated blanket.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ Kevin says, his eyes on the rear-view mirror. ‘Tim and I still share the car. He always leaves stuff in it.’

Haley buckles her seat belt. There’s still the faint smell of leather and teenage boy: sweat and too much cologne. Even after all these years.

‘So you’re in Kits, eh? Any chance you hate it there?’ Kevin grins with his perfectly white front teeth on display.

‘No way you’re winning this argument.’ Tara says.

‘Well,’ Kevin says as they head away from downtown. ‘This place is up off Juniper. A bit of a fixer upper, but it’s got a great view. And it’s a bargain.’

‘It is ridiculously cheap compared to the prices in Vancouver,’ Tara says, ‘and I do like the idea of DIY.’

‘Do you own your place, Haley?’

Haley nods at Kevin in the rear-view. She knows how lucky she is to be under 30 and a property owner. It took a lot of years of saving, plus her parents to co-sign on her mortgage. But owning put her into a much better financial situation: rents in Vancouver only continue to get more ridiculous. Well, she *was* in a better situation until Alex stopped contributing to the mortgage. It was just supposed to be for a couple of months, while he took some time off work to focus on his thesis. And then a couple of months became six and six became nearly a year. But she could afford to pay the mortgage alone and the arrangement was always about getting them closer to the big move. If Alex saved now, he’d have more to contribute later, when they bought a house together. Right?

‘Wherever we all end up,’ Kevin says as he turns left onto Nicola Avenue, the highway that cuts across the city, ‘we should go for a drink.’

She can't imagine going out for drinks with him. She's remembering when she used to sit behind him in Math class, admiring the way his light hair curled around his ears, the way his T-shirt stretched across his shoulders. And when she saw his notebook and it was covered in doodles of buildings, buildings like the Eiffel Tower and the London Eye. Places he'd definitely never seen before. She'd wondered how he knew to draw like that. Did anyone else know how good he was? But she says, 'Sure.'

They spend the rest of the drive talking about people from their shared past—those who stayed in town, the few who left. Tim and Carrie and their brigade of children. Kevin and Tara share looks and laugh about things. It makes sense, them together. Maybe they will get married and have beautiful babies and raise them in a house just minutes away from where they grew up. They head up Juniper, past the rows of giant RVs under make-shift tarps, or sheltered under carports, the trailer park, the junkyard full of old trucks. The hill gets steeper and the whole valley opens up: from up here, the sandy hills look all the more lunar against the lush green of the cultivated lawns below.

Kevin pulls into a sloping driveway in front of a single-story house with blue shutters and big cedar trees. Bill's already there, leaning against his white truck.

'Didn't know you were coming,' he says when Haley gets out of the car.

'Change of plans,' Tara explains.

Bill gives Haley a hug. 'You're not going to be fighting over places are you?' He looks at the three of them, his eyes narrowed.

'Not anymore,' Haley says.

Chapter Four

The day after the Celebration of Life, Mike wakes up early despite not setting an alarm and the darkness in the room. He stretches across the king-size bed, and then cocoons back into the duvet. Of course this is the most comfortable bed he's ever slept on. He's spent the last two weeks longing for it, remembering how the foam mattress cuddled his body, feeling every spring in his own shit mattress. Never again will he be convinced by a second-hand bargain. The feeling of contentment stays with him until he sees his black sweater draped over the back of a chair.

He thought he was doing the right thing by going to Sandy's memorial. It should have been the right thing. But in the moment, in the packed hall, surrounded by people he didn't know and photos of a woman he only knew from her words, well. He's trying not to focus on how out of place he'd felt, how quickly he went from feeling okay to panicked, sweating.

Later, he packs his laptop and notebook into his backpack. He thought about staying in, using the fancy built-in coffee maker, maybe even getting some fresh pastries from one of the bakeries he spotted yesterday, but he still can't figure out how to get the blinds to work. The weather app on his phone says it's sunny, but the grey mesh blocks all traces of light out. With the lights off, all he sees are glowing faces on the appliances. The failure rests heavy, especially considering his last conversation with his boss. *There's a remote on the coffee table. Academics, eh? No common sense.* Mike stares at the row of remotes on the coffee table, again. One for the TV; one for the stereo system; a sleek black one to ignite the slick fireplace; a fourth with a dimmer switch for the lights. No sign of anything for the blinds. He shrugs. Call-Me-Doug is wrong: it's nothing to do with common sense and everything to do with blinds needing a remote. Ridiculous.

Outside the sky is bright blue and the sun is high and brilliant. He almost feels too warm with a jacket on, but for the breeze off the lake. Down Water Street, the trees are still bare and the remnants of dirty snowdrifts cling to the sidewalks. A few cars go by, and a few people on serious bicycles. It's just after nine and most people are probably still asleep. Prime brunch time

won't be for another hour. He goes by the dolphin statue—they call it Rhapsody Plaza—and wonders how long before they turn the water back on. Rewind a little and you're back to December days, snow crunching underfoot. Dolphins encased in ice.

Luckily, the casinos are quiet at this time of day. The streets are lined with giant noisy cars like Hummers and Mustangs. And the gardens surrounding the casinos are so manicured each blade of grass looks the same height. This is the so-called cultural hub of the city, with Prospera Place home to concerts and hockey games, the Art Gallery, the Law Courts, and the Community Theatre. The buildings are non-descript beiges, concrete plazas pressure washed clean of debris. But there's always the pull of the lake. The wildness of the lake. Look left and the mountains rise up over the buildings and the tallest masts of the boats in the marine. The water is inky blue with hints of green, and tiny white peaks on tiny waves.

Beyond the roundabout, paths lead down to the beach, or into the grid of the compact downtown. Mike passes the BC Tree Fruits building: this city developed around orchards. Apples, mostly. The surrounding hills are still home to orchards, though families have branched out. (Haha.) Peaches, pears, nectarines, plums. And grapes of course, planted across the sprawling expanses of the vineyards.

When he first arrived in 1874, Mike wrote a few days earlier while trying to imagine JD seeing the Okanagan for the first time, maybe even picturing it as his own slice of Eden. But, he'd continued, Ballantyne didn't know anything about orchards or growing apples, cherries, and peaches, crops the Okanagan Valley would become famous for. Maybe he saw the trees at the Mission and asked questions. He wouldn't have known that the reason the crops grew so well was a combination of ideal climate and fertile soil. Maybe he even left with a pocket of seeds. But we don't know when he planted those

theoretical seeds: certainly, some time after the CPR moved on and the demand for beef went down...?

Mike kicks at a beer can, remnant of Saturday night not yet swept away; the can, emblazoned with metallic snow-peaked mountains, skids along the sidewalk on Water Street.

The lights at Bernard Avenue take ages to change. It's just him and an older couple, waiting. The folks he met in the elevator last time he was visiting? Today they're wearing matching technical blue jackets zipped to the chins and sunglasses with glowing polarised lenses. The woman carries the little dog, also wearing a blue jacket. When the light changes, they head across the street without any acknowledgment of him. Where are they going this early on a Saturday morning?

He follows them all the way to Bean Scene, the third highest rated café in all of Kelowna (and, according to Call-Me-Doug, the spot where all the academics convene). It's an old brick-fronted building with a couple of tables and chairs out front. They're empty, besides the local newspaper, tucked underneath a mug ringed with the dregs of someone's coffee. And he thought he was early. Inside, he orders a cappuccino (with normal milk) and sits down at a table along the back while. Next to him is a young woman, textbooks covering almost every inch of her table. Glasses sit perched in her hair and she stares at her laptop (balanced on top of a stack of books) like she's lost something. Maybe she has. It's nearly exam season and student stress oozes all over campus. His own students should be mid-way through writing their term papers. *Should be*, but probably aren't. He gave the whole spiel about not procrastinating, how he would know if they wrote their papers at the last minute, and how any attempts at copying would be systematically quashed. But he'll still get at least a few papers full of practically-plagiarised paraphrases and references to only the top search entries. If he gets the job (when he gets the job? If he says it enough will it come true?), he'll get to work with Master's students, not just undergrads, the majority of whom aren't even history minors, but the students who have to take the course to satisfy their degree requirements.

He opens his laptop and plugs in his headphones. He needs a playlist, something to get him into the right headspace. What kind of music would Ballantyne have listened to? Music meant something different back then. No curated playlists or mixes saved onto iPods or CDs or even tapes. Music meant gathering around live musicians. Singers singing songs passed down through the generations. Community coming together and sharing their homes, their food, their drink. Stories that change each time they're told. He'd heard bits and pieces of that kind of story yesterday. Communal memories of a woman who was gone. Now, Mike looks around the café, at all the people sitting alone at tables meant for more than one, their far away looks, laptops, noise-cancelling headphones. What would happen if they all sat together? When he works in the café on campus he often chooses to sit at the communal table. He's next to people, but he's not really *next* to them, because everyone still sits there with their laptops and headphones, and nobody talks to each other.

There's something to be said in 1874's favour. But, imagining Ballantyne sitting under the mountain, no cell phone, no way to communicate with his friends and family back in Scotland—besides letters that would've taken months to reach their destination—not even a place to shelter from the elements, yeah, Mike thinks he's okay with a little distance. And to be honest, he can't even make it through a self-imposed social media blackout; he always comes back. He's on the cusp of Millennialism and yet his life is so tied to the concept of instant gratification. If he woke up in 1874, would he survive? Debatable.

He opens the last email he got from Sandy, time stamped two and a half weeks earlier. He'd been asking about letters, if any still existed. *Probably*, Sandy wrote back, *I imagine anything like that would've ended up with Dad. I'm not sure what happened to his stuff. We packed his house up pretty fast—the family just wanted to get it sold.* He reads down to the bottom. *I'll see what I can find for you. SB. Ps- what do you call a fake noodle?* This was his prompt to write back. He'd started, the draft was still sitting there. *I don't know, what do you call a fake noodle?* There wasn't anything to tell him that just a few days later she'd be gone.

He types *Kelowna 1* at the top of a new document. He has to start somewhere.

He looks out the window: he's been thinking about going up the mountain, trying to find the spot where Ballantyne lived when he first arrived. The city's website says that the Apex Trail will take him right up to the top. It's described as 'more difficult.' More difficult than what? He could do the Paul's Tomb trail instead, though it's apparently also 'more difficult' in some places. He hasn't come across Paul the Pioneer before. Paul, who owned land up the mountain and might've been Ballantyne's neighbour. Mike types *Paul the Pioneer + Ballantyne Mountain* into the search and finds an article on the *Kelowna Daily Courier*—"So just who was Rembler Paul?" He bookmarks the article just as his coffee arrives.

The first sip of his cappuccino is...different? He takes a second sip. Then his phone pings.

Michael, he reads, *Sounds like an interesting project. Happy to help however I can. I'm about to head out of town for the weekend—but could meet you for a coffee. You've probably already found Bean Scene on Bernard? Regards, Clay.* He'd almost forgotten about the email he sent to the guy who runs the Historical Kelowna account. *Clay*, he types back, *I have found Bean Scene and am actually here now! No rush, happy to meet whenever convenient.* Another ping. *See you in 15? I'll be the big guy in the Canucks hat.* Mike nods at the screen and feels like this is a sign. If he believed in that kind of thing.

More like twenty minutes, a tall man with a blue Canucks hat and a plaid shirt walks into the café. There can't be too many Canucks fans in Kelowna, so Mike waves him over. They shake hands.

'Perfect timing,' Clay says in a louder than necessary voice. The student next to them glares. 'You just happening to be in town this weekend and me just happening to be around. The wife and I are going out to Keremeos. We've got a little place there. You ever been?'

Mike shakes his head. The girl is still looking at them. As if they aren't allowed to be talking in the café.

Clay ignores her completely and continues. ‘You should go. Our place is right on the lake. Picturesque.’ His eyes glaze over and he looks off at something above Mike’s head, as though he’s imagining himself relaxing, by the looks of him, with a beer in his hand. He blinks. ‘Anyway. What can I do ya for, Mike?’

Mike cringes at the expression. ‘I don’t know the area well,’ he begins to explain.

‘And I do,’ Clay interrupts, ‘lived here for most of my life. Except a few years down on the Coast. That’s where this comes from.’ The man points up at his hat. ‘Diehard fan now.’

Mike nods, though he’s never really gotten it. He’s a jump-on-the-bandwagon kind of fan. Seasons when the Canucks make the playoffs are the only seasons he pays any attention. His lack of interest only mattered when Dad was around. He’d pretend to have followed the Maple Leafs all year; he’d wear the jersey sent to make up for a missed birthday. Here in BC, not having a team is like not having a religion. People get so invested.

‘Anyhoo, I’ve got a pretty big collection of vintage photos I’m trying to digitise just now. And I get sent things all the time.’

Mike nods again. He’s not going to comment on the typos he spotted in Clay’s posts, or the amateur, sometimes even family photos. Dates written on the backs of yellowing photo paper. Stories passed down through the generations to accompany the posts. Lots of people asking for help identifying mystery faces. *The man to the left is my grandfather...but anyone recognise the young woman in the middle?* Most of the questions seem to go unanswered. And the faces go unnamed.

‘I did a quick search and there’s not a lot written about your man Ballantyne. Sounds like there was bad blood for a long time.’ The big man laughs and scratches at greying stubble. ‘The story I’ve heard is that’s why the family left. Some big to-do out at their place by the mountain. Ya know about the mountain?’

Mike types *to-do at house by mountain—connection to arson?* ‘I knew he lived by the mountain.’

‘Don’t quote me, but my understanding is that after the whole snafu they basically abandoned the place. Sold up and packed off to Merritt. But that’s probably just rumour.’ Clay laughs. ‘The thrill of the hunt, eh? Getting to be a detective is keeping me going in retirement.’ Clay the amateur historian. Clay the hobbyist sifting through old photographs and posts on social media. Clay who doesn’t have to worry that if he can’t produce an original work on someone else’s schedule, he’ll be out of a job.

Mike forces a laugh and says, ‘I’m a long way from retirement, Clay.’

Clay squints at him. ‘Never been a good judge of age in the here and now. Can date a photo like a pro, now. Anyway...if ya give me some time I can put some photos together.’

‘That would be great,’ Mike says. But he’s beginning to feel like the whole trip has been a bust. ‘I’ve had some bad luck with the research lately. Museum was closed last time I was here too.’

Clay laughs. ‘It’s been closed for a while now. That building took a real beating this winter. Damaged the roof. Anyway, I bet there are local Ballantynes.’

Mike’s guts twist. Clay doesn’t know. ‘There were.’

‘Oh?’ Clay scratches under his hat. ‘I’ve never known any myself. Just the mountain.’ He nods towards the window.

Mike looks at his cursor flashing just below his last thought. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘whatever you can do to help. I really appreciate it. I’ve had some leads dry up and I’m working on a bit of a deadline.’ Nothing he says sounds right. He sounds desperate, more desperate than he is. He leans back into the cushioned bench and feels his guts twist again. *You remember Steve Coulson’s kid? He’s about five years younger than you. He’s managing a mill now. Makes 90k a year. Dad’s idea of motivation.*

The big man frowns and scratches his chin. ‘I’ll do my best for ya. Might be worth a trip down the Nicola. You been to Merritt?’

Mike nods. ‘Yesterday.’ He thinks of his footsteps echoing against the floor, the feeling of more than a hundred heads turning to look at someone not meant to be there. How sweaty his palms were each time he tried to shake someone’s hand.

‘Oh?’ Clay says, waiting for Mike to elaborate.

‘Wasn’t there long.’

‘Well that’s probably a good thing. Not a whole lot there, unless ya like country music. Ya don’t look like much of a cowboy.’ Clay shrugs. ‘But a little detective work...Anyway,’ Clay pulls his phone out of his shirt pocket. ‘The wife’s waiting in the car.’ He stands up. ‘Don’t worry, she cracked a window.’ He chuckles at his own joke.

Mike smiles awkwardly and looks at his computer.

‘We’ll be in touch. Let me know how ya get on, eh?’ Clay reaches out a big hand.

Mike rubs his palm on his jeans before gripping the outstretched hand. ‘Thanks. I appreciate it.’ It’s the second handshake of the meeting.

Clay nods, but he’s already got his phone up to his ear.

*

After a second coffee and a lot of time spent staring at blank screen, Mike packs up his things and heads back out onto the street. The sun has disappeared behind angry black clouds. He can only cross his fingers and hope they won’t mean snow.

He walks along Bernard. Half the buildings look like they’ve been copied straight out of a sepia photo—except they’re not quite right, bricks the wrong colour, paint too bright. Peel back the layers and heritage style isn’t really heritage. Hipster renovations done by people trying to achieve a certain *aesthetic* without proper understanding of what that aesthetic actually looks like. But for a moment, he convinces himself he’s walking through an earlier version of the city. And then a shining new Ferrari drives by, country music blasting through open windows. He carries on down the street. Straight ahead are the Sails: the white statue curves up like a giant claw. The forty-foot statue isn’t meant to be sinister, but a meeting point. *Meet me at the Sails*. People have

been saying that since 1978. Mike doesn't have anyone to meet. The only person he knows in Kelowna is a dead man.

Out by the lake, the temperature has dropped significantly, and it gets colder as the wind picks up and the clouds churn. The cold creeps between layers of clothing. A white buoy bobs in the dark water. There are photos on Clay's page where the lake has completely frozen over. How long does it take for a 60-foot-deep lake to freeze over? Apparently, it hasn't been cold enough for that kind of ice since 1986. The year Mike was born.

One of the photos he remembers seeing featured a sternwheeler, the *S. S. Sicamous*, trapped in the ice. And there were years when the city officials used dynamite to break up the pack. People still needed to get to work. Without a bridge linking the two shores, what else they could do? There were even pictures of cars parked on the frozen surface. Imagine the sound of the ice under tires. Each creak could mean that the ice was splitting apart, ready to swallow you up. But back in the day, people casually drove across. They played games of hockey, they skated, they smiled because it was all good fun.

Ballantyne's relatives could've been in those photos. Ballantyne himself could be in some of the earliest ones he's seen. Yesterday, there were photos of Ballantyne's relatives decorating the community centre. Sandy featured in all of them. She looked smaller than he would've guessed and had a lot of red hair. On one side of the room there was a photo of Sandy standing next to a man in a Canucks hat. There were palm trees behind them. Mike stood next to a photo of Sandy and a woman with equally red hair, big green eyes, and wide smiles. He'd talked to that other woman. He'd found her standing next to a table covered in bottles and an assortment of glasses, mostly with abandoned dregs. He'd hastily wiped a moist palm on his jeans and stuck his hand out, saying, 'You must be Sandy's sister?'

'I am. Karen.' The woman took his hand and gave him a very obvious once over, her eyes narrowed. 'And you are?' she'd asked once she returned his gaze.

He'd explained that he worked at a university (*just a sessional, ha ha*) and that Sandy had been helping him with his research on JD.

'Oh right,' Karen said.

He assumed this meant that Sandy had mentioned him.

'No. She never said anything.' Karen continued to glare at him, like she was trying to unpick a lie with her mind.

He'd felt disappointed. He wasn't sure why considering the fact that he'd never even thought about Sandy's life beyond her connection to JD. Like she was some kind of encyclopaedia that fed back answers and always included bad jokes and animal gifs. 'Oh, well I thought I should come and say how sorry I was to hear the news,' he said in an attempt to recover. 'I'm so sorry for your loss. I didn't know her well,' or at all, he thought, 'but I could tell from her emails that she was a lovely person.'

'Mhmm,' was all Karen said in reply. She scrutinised him again. Behind her, a couple of kids were sitting on the floor with plates of lasagne on their laps and a big dog between them. She turned around then, just in time to see the dog chomp into the pasta. She turned back to Mike, 'I need to deal with that.'

'Just one more thing,' Mike said, and he fished in his pocket for the card he'd written his contact details on, 'I'm hoping you or someone else in the family might still be able to help me with my research.'

Karen took the card and gave it a glance. 'I-' she whipped her around and hissed something to the boys. 'Maybe.'

'Thank you. And again, I'm so sorry for your loss,' Mike said, feeling like the more he said it the less true it sounded. But Karen was already turning on her heel, reaching out to grab the dog by the collar and rounding up the boys with the other hand. Mike stayed next to the drinks table for a couple of moments. Would he hear from Karen, or any of the other Ballantynes? He looked around the room, stopping at a big picture of Sandy next to a young

woman in a graduation gown, the university campus in the background. His university's campus in the background. The two women looked so similar. Sandy had children. He scanned the room, wondering if Sandy's daughter was there, thinking for a moment that maybe she would just pick up where Sandy left off, answering his questions.

And then his search was interrupted by an elderly man wearing a plaid puffy vest and a trucker hat. He was shaking his head saying, 'Sad business, this. Sandy looked after me the last time I was in the hospital.' Then the man narrowed his eyes and looked at Mike like he was just seeing him for the first time. 'I haven't seen you around before. Are you one of Haley's friends from *down the Coast*?' The man said the last bit like it was something terrible.

'No, I,' Mike began, but his throat felt dry and his palms felt sticky again because he *was* an interloper, a stranger from *down the Coast*. He mumbled something about being sorry and then he was out of there, practically running back to his car. He drove straight back out to the Connector, forgoing any plans to wander around downtown to check out the heritage buildings (one of which was said to be haunted). He spent the first half of the drive going over every decision he'd made in the previous twenty-four hours, and then hit snow at Pennask. From then on, his every thought was focused on simply not dying.

Now, he sits on a bench across from the marina and looks out at the water. What would Ballantyne have thought of the lake freezing over? Would he have been used to that kind of cold, coming from Scotland, or would all the snow and ice of the Okanagan been something new? In one of Sandy's early emails, she explained that the Ballantyne family was from Aberdeenshire. Duncan, her father, had tracked them down to a town on the coast called Stonehaven. *It sounds like they were supporters of Bonnie Prince Charlie back in the 1700s—so they picked the wrong side and paid the price for it. If they had land/ money, they lost it. JD's family were probably fishermen.* The wind picks up off the lake and Mike tries to imagine a time before technical fabrics and jackets described as *windbreakers*. He takes a photo of the sun trying to break through the clouds over West Kelowna. Many years ago, Ballantyne would've looked across this same landscape. Nothing but the outline

of the mountains, blue green against the sky. It would've been so quiet. Mike sits there just listening to tiny waves lapping against the lakeside. He takes a deep breath; the air feels different here, fresh and cold, like it's just come down off some untouched glacier. For a moment, he forgets about jobs, Sandy, Call-Me-Doug, the calls from his dad he still hasn't returned, and just takes deep breaths.

Chapter Five

Haley wakes up on Monday morning to the light streaming into her childhood bedroom. She stretches, looking up at the glow in the dark stars still sticky-tacked to the ceiling. Some of them don't really glow anymore but look dark instead. Like they've given up, like stars collapsing into themselves. There's a knock at the door.

'I figured you must be sleeping when I got here and the house was completely silent,' Auntie Karen says as she comes in.

Haley turns onto her side and checks the clock: it's just after nine. 'I thought I might sleep in. I was tired from yesterday.'

Karen rolls her eyes. 'Tired from what?' She sits down on the corner of the bed. The springs creak.

'Just tired, I guess. And you know I can be on my own, right?' Haley says it, but she isn't sure if it's true. Even while sleeping she's felt an absence. How long since Alex was next to her, his back against hers, or an arm draped across her body?

'I know. You still have the poster, I see.' Karen points at the faded framed poster hanging over the bed. Remnants of a long-gone age. The Backstreet Boys pose against an industrial looking building and all of them (except AJ, because he always was a bit of a rebel) give moody looks to the camera.

'It's signed,' Haley says, 'so I thought I should keep it.'

'I know, I was there. Remember?'

Haley nods.

'We stood in that line for hours so you could see your favourite one, what was his name?'

'Nick.'

'Right, the one with the mushroom cut. And then we got to the front of the line, and you told him you loved him.' Karen giggles.

February 2001. Mum and Karen surprised her with a special girl's weekend in Vancouver. They stayed in a hotel, ate at fancy restaurants, they wandered around Robson Street window shopping at places Haley had never heard of before. The night of the concert, they took the Skytrain to GM Place, standing in huge line ups with thousands of other mums, daughters, aunts, all gushing about how much they loved BSB and how they couldn't wait to see their favourite. 'Nick Carter was the first boy I ever loved.'

'Hear from him much?'

'Ha ha.' On the last day of the trip, Mum drove them around Stanley Park. It was cold—one of those sunny days where the sun almost feels intense enough to warm your back—but Haley put the window down and leaned her head out, feeling the salty breeze on her skin. Or at least, until Karen told her it was too cold for that, and Mum said if she didn't pull her head back inside she'd get frostbite.

'You really loved being in Vancouver. I always wondered if that was when you got the idea to move there.' Karen fidgets with a stuffed elephant at the end of the bed.

'Maybe.' Haley doesn't know if there was a definitive moment when she realised how much she liked the feeling of salt in the air. She never liked the dry, desert summers she experienced each year in Merritt. And trips out to Okanagan Lake were never the same as the feeling of walking waist-deep into the ocean, looking up at the horizon framed by dark green often snow-capped mountains.

'Gosh, you really left a lot of stuff here though, didn't you?'

The walls are still covered with posters torn from magazines, shelves still covered with trophies from the days when she still played soccer, the stuffed animals she couldn't quite part with, the little piles of skipping stones she'd gathered from the river with Grandpa. Even her desk is still intact, the drawers, she's sure, full of the diaries with little gold padlocks and scented pages, the places where she wrote about her crush on Kevin Carey, or the time Tim 'found'

some weed and attempted to smoke it on the swings at school. ‘I guess it’s just stuff I didn’t need to bring with me when I moved.’

‘Well,’ Karen says emphatically, ‘when Kieran decides to move out, I’m going to be stricter than your mum was. He goes, his stuff goes. I’m not storing his crap forever. And besides, I have designs on that room.’

‘You do?’ This isn’t a line of conversation Haley’s heard before.

‘You get up and come for some breakfast and I’ll tell you.’

‘Is this motivation?’

Karen sighs. ‘So hard to please. You get up because I’ve made your favourite breakfast and then I’ll tell you.’

Haley sits up. ‘Blueberry pancakes? When did you have time to do that?’

Her aunt goes over to the desk and starts tidying things. ‘Honey,’ she says, ‘you know I’m up at the crack of dawn taking Rocko for his walk.’ These are walks everyone is always invited on. But Karen almost always ends up going alone.

‘Fine, I’ll get up.’

‘Good. The kids are at school, Bill’s working, and your dad’s off doing a job in Aspen Grove, so I’m all yours today.’

When Karen leaves the room, Haley feels relieved. The thought of being alone in the house, listening for things to break the silence. She pulls the duvet over her head, just for a moment, and curls into a little ball, pulling her legs close. Under the covers, she could be anywhere, anyone, safe.

Downstairs, Karen stands at the kitchen sink rinsing dishes, humming along to a song about how drinking can’t soften the blow of a breakup.

‘Happy song,’ Haley says. She sits down at the island. There’s a plate with a stack of blueberry pancakes, as promised, the bottle of pancake syrup (the real maple syrup only comes out for special occasions), and a flowery mug, waiting for coffee.

Karen turns the tap off and wipes her hands on a tea towel. ‘Was it? I wasn’t paying attention. You want some coffee?’

The tin of instant sits out on the counter. Bought in bulk, brewed in the old percolator, poured into mugs and forgotten about, heated up in the microwave: that’s the way Karen and Bill like it. Haley tries not to pull a face.

‘Okay,’ Karen says, ‘do you want to make your own coffee?’

Although the trip home had been last minute, prompted by a late-night call from Dad, resulting in a 5 am departure the next, Haley remembered to pack a canister of her coffee. Good coffee, from a Vancouver roastery, purchased in a café just down the street from her place. Each morning since she’s spent a few minutes brewing a cup of *city coffee*, as Karen refers to it. Even on the worst mornings, the process of spooning grounds into the filter, watching water meet coffee, listening to the trickle of the brew into the cup, all of it has helped just a little bit. Because it’s something she always does. This morning though, she opens the container and tips out a scoopful. Just enough for one cup. One cup and then what? She could use the last scoopful today (coffee and blueberry pancakes—what a dream) but what would she do tomorrow? Or the day after that? She stares at the scoop.

‘Something wrong?’

Haley turns back to the island, Auntie Karen is chewing a folded-up pancake, a hand over her mouth. ‘I’m almost out of coffee.’

‘Oh, honey. We can get you more coffee.’ Karen says through a mouthful.

But it won’t be the same.

‘I’m sure they’ll have something at the grocery store. For now, do you want some tea?’ Karen comes back around the island and gives Haley’s shoulders a squeeze before rummaging around in one of the cabinets next to the fridge. ‘I know there’s some in here.’ She rummages some more, before pulling out an old tin with a Japanese design. Cherry blossoms against a dark blue background.

Haley nods and sits down again. There's still steam coming off her pancakes.

'Oolong?' Karen asks. 'Or something that might be oolong?' She paws through the tin, looking for labels. But inside is just a collection of plain teabags tucked into plastic bags. Nobody in this house drinks tea. The only time the tea tin comes out is when someone they don't know that well comes visits. Like a new nurse, when Mum was still at home. Karen flips the kettle on and pops mystery teabags into mugs.

A couple minutes later, they sit at the island, steaming tea in front of them. Karen eats a couple of pancakes over her mug. Crumbs fall into her tea, but she doesn't seem to notice. Haley cuts through her second stack of pancakes in as many days, mopping up pancake syrup. There's a hint of cinnamon, just like Mum used to make them. A song comes on the radio, the lyrics playing with the classic *99 bottles of beer on the wall*. Country music gets weirder every time she listens.

'So, what did you *really* think about the house on Juniper?'

The house came up last night at dinner, Bill going on about how it was under market value, on a lot with a view, and that Kevin and Tara would be silly not to put an offer in.

'I thought it was nice enough.' Haley thinks back to standing out on the deck, looking out across the city. It was so quiet. No traffic, no sirens, just the wind in the trees and birdsong.

'But?'

Haley shrugs. 'I don't think it's what Tara wants.'

Karen steals another pancake. 'Why not?' she asks, her mouth full.

'Because I think she wants to say in Vancouver. That's where her work is.'

'But Kevin's family is here.'

Is this a thinly disguised attempt to talk about what *Haley* wants? They've been talking about The Plan since she came back home a few weeks earlier. How plans might change because the worst had happened with Mum's health. No positive outcomes.

‘But I guess they must come home every couple of weeks. I see them all the time. Did I tell you that already?’ Karen shifts the conversation.

‘Yeah, you’ve mentioned.’ Maybe Haley’s visits haven’t been like clockwork, bimonthly, write it down on the calendar in ink, but she’s always been sure to come back when she can. Sometimes it feels like everyone here forgets that she has her own life in Vancouver. She clears up from breakfast, loading dishes into the dishwasher and returning the pancake syrup to its spot in the fridge. She pauses, noticing the appointment cards, the prescriptions waiting to be filled, posted onto the fridge with plastic fruit magnets. She pulls them off, one after the other, until the white surface is stark and bare in contrast to the rainbow magnets.

‘I thought we might do a little tidy,’ Karen nods at the fridge, ‘start with your mum’s desk and see how we go.’

Haley chucks the stack of papers into the recycling bin. She nods.

The head up to the spare room. But when in front of Mum’s desk, tucked between shelves with boxes of Christmas decorations, long forgotten paperwork, and bits of craft stuff (including one bin actually labelled CRAFT CRAP), it feels wrong. This room, with the spare bed reserved for the out of town guests they never have, and Mum’s sewing machines, has always been a space Haley has kept out of. There was the threat of spoiling presents (*That’s where I keep the gifts Santa sends down early. You know, just in case he can’t get here in time. Why wouldn’t he get here in time? Sled broke down on the Coquihalla?*), or the potential of maiming by sewing machine (*it happens to approximately 52 little girls each year*), or to move something out of the designated spot. But now the gatekeeper is gone. Haley sits at the desk. There are stacks of paperwork, things tucked sideways into envelopes with haphazard labels, receipts held together by colourful paperclips, mugs full of stationery, and a row of tiny cactuses lining the windowsill. Forgotten, but somehow still thriving.

Karen pulls a chair over from the sewing table and grabs a stack of paperwork. ‘This is the kind of stuff I thought we’d start with.’ She flips through a bunch of things, discarding most of the pile on the floor.

‘Wait,’ Haley says, and she reaches down to grab some of the papers, ‘what is this stuff?’ She doesn’t know what she’s expecting to find. Something important? Or maybe just stacks of old bills. She turns a page over and is disappointed that it’s not even that, not even a boring noticed from a bank about a change in an interest rate, no, just page after page of print outs about alternative treatments, recommendations from physios about post-surgery exercises with bad hand-drawn pictures showing the steps. Haley picks up another stack and finds more of the same, plus some one-sheets for houses in Merritt and Kelowna. She remembers showing Alex the listings—there were a few places they made it to one weekend when Mum was feeling better. But Mum would walk into the house, touch a few walls, let the kitchen tap run, pop her head out a window, and then declare that this wasn’t *the* place. How will you know when it is *the* place, Haley had asked. *I can’t explain it, I just will.* Haley went to the next viewing on her own, and despite doing all the things, she felt nothing. Now, she throws the pages onto the floor.

The next thing on the pile is big manila envelope, marked with their address and SANDY B. in big block letters. It’s light, and when she tips it over, the only thing that falls to the desk is a business card. It’s plain white on one side, but the other has her old university’s logo on it. DR MICHAEL DUNBAR, SESSIONAL LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY. An on-campus address, phone number, email. The blueberry pancakes from earlier do a little flip in her stomach.

‘Is this the guy you talked to on Sunday?’

Karen looks at the card, turning it over a few times. ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘So Mum knew him.’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘How?’ Haley looks at the envelope. It’s postmarked October. Months before Mum took a downturn. Did they meet? Wasn’t there a weekend when both Mum and Dad came to Vancouver to visit? Haley scoops up another stack of papers, searching for whatever else might have been in the envelope. But the rest is just more of the same: old bank statements, tax documents, the occasional embroidery pattern. ‘Why didn’t she tell anyone?’

Karen shrugs. She’s collecting the piles of paper they’ve gone through already, shoving everything into a big green tote bag covered in frogs.

‘I mean, the only reason I can think of is because she didn’t want anyone to know.’ And why would she hide this from them? The only reason Haley can think of is an affair.

Karen puts the bag down with a thud. ‘I know where you’re going with this. Don’t be ridiculous.’ She puts her hands on her hips, emphatic.

‘I know, but—’

Karen shakes her head. ‘Not even a possibility.’

Haley’s heard the story about how Mum and Dad met a thousand times. Mum, eighteen, was driving back home to Quilchena in her little convertible, top down, music blaring. And then: a flat tire. Mum at the side of the road for ages, completely unable to fix the problem, the few other vehicles that passed not bothering to stop for her. Until a man came blasting up the hill on a motorcycle. He flew by, ignoring the young woman jumping and waving at the side of the road. Or did he? There he was, driving the wrong way down the shoulder. His bike purred. He took off his helmet. Dad, age twenty-two, with a luscious mullet. The rest is history.

‘Besides,’ Karen says, ‘the guy I met was probably mid-thirties. Too old to be a toy-boy.’ She giggles.

‘Ew, don’t even.’ Haley protests, but they all heard Mum talk about trading Dad in for a *new model*. *I’d also settle for Ewan McGregor*. ‘I just don’t know why she wouldn’t have told me about talking to a historian.’ How many hours had Haley sat there, the two of them watching movies on a laptop, or just sitting there while Mum slept?

‘Why is this so upsetting to you? Do you think she might’ve said something bad about the family?’ Karen teases, always the one to bring up the family rum-runner or talk about the time Uncle Bill got pulled in by the police in a case of mistaken identity.

‘No, that’s not it.’ Those stories are just stories, so far removed from today, from who they are as a family now, when the most noteworthy thing to happen to them was Haley leaving Merritt for Vancouver, the big city. ‘It’s about Mum’s time, how it was finite, and how much of it was spent talking to a stranger.’

‘You could always just email him and ask.’

‘What would I say? *Hey, you know how you were talking to my mum? Why?*’

Karen nods. ‘Why not?’

‘It just feels weird.’

‘Then don’t do it,’ Karen says, and she shrugs. ‘Now, what do you want to do with all this other stuff?’ she says, changing the subject, ‘Do you want to keep it or...?’ She gestures around the room. Neither of them are into crafting like Mum was and the boys aren’t likely to be interested.

They didn’t talk about where Mum’s stuff would go. Haley just assumed they’d think about it when the time came. Haley picks up an embroidery hoop with a partially finished project. LIVE. LAUGH. FUCK OFF. The words are in glossy black thread. There’s a pattern of little green dots, petals, and a needle looped with orange stuck in an unfinished flower. ‘Wonder where this one was supposed to go?’

‘You should finish it.’

Haley picks up the pattern. There’s not much left to do. But she remembers the last time she attempted cross stitch. She was twelve or thirteen and a friend gave her a kit with bug patterns. It wasn’t what she wanted, but she feigned enthusiasm and gave the friend a hug anyway. The kit got forgotten about until Mum spotted it under her bed. *Why are you hiding this? It was such a cute gift. We can do them together!* Haley reluctantly agreed to sit down at the kitchen table

one Saturday afternoon with cups of hot chocolate and Mum started one with a bee, Haley the ladybug. But she hated every stitch. She hated how many times she pricked her fingers, how clumsy she felt.

‘I’m sure your mum would’ve wanted you to.’

‘I guess so.’ She gathers the spools of thread, the pattern, and stacks everything neatly on the desk. The phrase echoes in her head.

Chapter Six

Haley gets back to Vancouver at the end of the week, a few days later than planned. It's nearly four o'clock by the time she's parking on the gravel shoulder across the street from her place. And then she's out of the car and straight into a pothole full of water. They've been writing to the city, trying to get someone to come and fix the road, but she's lived on this street for more than two years and she's never gotten any kind of response. The mucky water seeps up and over the leather of her boots, quickly soaking into her jeans, the tops of her socks. She rolls her eyes.

There's rain in the air: either it's rained quite recently, or it's going to start very soon. Hopefully it will wait until she gets inside. The drive back down was awful. Snow at the highest altitudes turning into torrential rain, the drops so huge they sounded like rocks smashing against the windshield. The wipers could barely keep up. It didn't ease until she went up the hill just before the 200th Street exit in Langley. And then she felt like she could breathe again. *That's what you get for living on the Coast.* Auntie Karen's voice. But, Haley counters, five minute walk to the library she works at, cafés and the ocean on her doorstep. She's going to make an effort to appreciate these things more. Something to do with Mum. You know, when someone dies and you start questioning your own mortality and you rethink the way you live your life. She's only just starting to take these conversations with herself seriously.

Inside the apartment, she's immediately shocked by how quiet it is. The radio isn't on. The boys aren't running around playing games. Rocko isn't trailing after them, his claws clacking on tile floors. Auntie Karen and Uncle Bill aren't endlessly talking. There's just silence. Well, silence and the hum of the fridge. There's a stack of mail on the island. A bunch of blotchy

brown bananas. A pizza box from Nat's on West Broadway. But no Alex. She texted him when she left Merritt, out of habit more than anything else. *Hope there isn't too much snow!* He'd written back, *Drive safe.* Nothing else. No emojis, nothing. And now, he's not at the apartment; he's probably still on campus, and he'll probably be in the office until late. She could spend more time thinking about why he isn't at home, there to make sure she's okay, but there's not really much point. He'd probably just say the same thing he always says, that he can't work at home. He's never been able to work in the apartment, despite the hours spent painting, attempting to turn the den (which is really more of a closet) into an office.

She opens the pizza box. Equally empty.

The bed is made and there aren't any clothes piled on the floor, or on the chair next to the window. It looks wrong, like nobody lives there. She props her suitcase against the wall and starts throwing things onto the bed, knowing she'll probably get bored and stop unpacking halfway through. Fair enough though, she's tired from the drive. And now she can't stop thinking about pizza. Her stomach rumbles, confirming that she's going to need to eat soon. She sits down on the floor instead. Pizza requires effort. Unless she gets it delivered. Is that lazy? She could walk there and back in ten minutes. She leans into the duvet. There's a good chance she could fall asleep now, despite the cold wood floor underneath her. Something about that stretch between Hope and Chilliwack that always makes her so sleepy. She rations her coffee so she has something to do. The valley closes in around you and when it's grey, the clouds look like fluffy pillows. But that stretch is full of slow curves and blind spots. If you fall asleep there, there's a good chance you're going to die.

She yawns, sliding her knees up to her chest. Once upon a time she would've texted Alex and he would've come home with her favourite pizza. He'd just know. When was the last time he did anything like that for her? She wants to take a nap. At least the fatigue goes away after a good night's sleep. It isn't like when you're jetlagged and you can't nap even when you really want to. Well, she assumes it isn't like jet lag. She still hasn't been on a plane and crossed more than one time zone. They used to talk about going to Europe. The grand tour. But it still hasn't happened. There's always another bill to pay, another semester before the end.

And Mum.

Haley pulls her knees closer. She keeps thinking about what Auntie Karen said, about what Mum would've wanted for her. *More than anything else, she wanted you to be happy. You know that, right Halestorm?* Now, she mulls the question over. What would Mum have wanted?

Haley looks at her phone. Still nothing from Alex. Isn't he wondering if she's gotten home safe? Doesn't he want to check in with her and make sure she's okay? Maybe they're too far gone. For months, she left things because it was easy not to deal with them. She'd go up to Merritt, he'd stay in Vancouver. But now she's tired. And her life has a giant hole in it.

Her phone pings. Auntie Karen. *Home safe? dog emoji, hug emoji, shark emoji.* Haley picks herself up off the floor and writes back, *Home now, all good, just hungry and nobody to feed me!!!* At least Auntie Karen wants to look after her. She goes back into the kitchen, hoping to find some leftovers she can pick at. Nothing. Alex doesn't cook when he's working and since he's always working he never cooks. She'll root around in the freezer later. Didn't she freeze some stuff last month? Or was it all just lasagne? She's had enough lasagne for a while. Her stomach rumbles in

protest. She looks around for distraction, something to tidy up, even mail to be sorted.

Everything is so neat. The throw pillows on the couch look like they've been plumped up and arranged. She settles into the sofa, moving everything around until it's all back to the way she likes it and looks across at the blank TV. She could watch something. What time is it? The living room window looks across West 4th, though the view is obscured by trees. It's hard to tell what time it is just by looking out at the sky; the days have gotten longer since she was last here.

Spring solstice has come and gone. She checks her phone. Nearly five. No messages from Alex, but another from Karen. *Come home and I'll make sure you never go hungry smiling devil emoji, winking emoji, frog emoji.*

Haley gets up again. She paces around, picking up framed photos, plant pots full of the cactuses Alex obsessively looks after, knick-knacks. She finds money on most surfaces and wonders if it's hers and if it is hers, would it buy a coffee? She starts counting but gets bored once she's just over a dollar. What did she usually do when she was home alone? All she can think of is hours spent on the phone with the family. The constant texts from Mum. The woman could be abrasive but she sure did love to send gifs. Gifs of baby animals being cute. All. The. Time. Haley throws the phone onto the couch and watches as it bounces off a cushion with a tie-dye elephant. She'll take a shower and maybe she'll hear from Alex. Not that she specifically wants to hear from him, it just seems like he should at least check in. Doesn't he realise that this time, the moments since she walked through this door are important? This is the first time she's spent at home as someone without a mum.

But she doesn't hear from him until it's nearly eleven and she's binged her way through four episodes of some overly dramatic crime series and a big container of lasagne (it just tasted so good). *Staying late at the office, don't wait up.* How many times has she gotten the same message? Not for the first time, she wonders if it's true or if he's actually using 'working late' as a cover for a clandestine affair. Or clandestine *affairs*. Because she's been to his office and she can't imagine staying there any longer than is necessary. He shares the space with a couple of other grad students, and while there's a common area with a table, and a couch that looks like it was rescued from the street, he's normally always hunched over his desk. His desk is a nightmare of mugs (usually with dregs of coffee and milk left to fester), more cacti, and these motivational quotes he prints from the internet and laminates. *OUT OF YOUR VULNERABILITIES WILL COME YOUR STRENGTH.* Does he even believe any of that bullshit? She turns the TV off and leaves the mess from her dinner on the coffee table. Nobody to notice anyway. In the dark kitchen, she listens to the hum of the fridge. The only sound. Is it nice to be away from the noise of home? The chaos with the dog and the kids and Auntie Karen drinking too much, Uncle Bill's constant phone calls, the radio playing the same songs in almost a perfect loop. Does she miss it now?

How many times does she have to say it before it's actually true? This is her home. She leaves her cup in the sink. She'll deal with all of it tomorrow.

*

But she doesn't deal with anything the next day, or the next. First she can't sleep, but spends hours alone in bed with the covers pulled up to her nose. Outside, the hum of traffic never ends, buses continue on into the morning, and sirens wail. She's forgotten this, so used to the noise

coming from inside the house, the quiet from outside. Eventually, she finds the earplugs she uses when her downstairs neighbour has parties that last until three am. Then she falls asleep, not waking when Alex comes home super late, not hearing him leave super early. She doesn't shower, she sleeps through breakfast, and then lunch, and when she does eat, she makes up two boxes of mac and cheese and eats out of the pot with a wooden spoon, noodles drenched in cheese sauce and ketchup. First, she ignores messages on her phone, then she turns it off and hides it in a drawer. She keeps the blinds closed and watches TV until her eyes are burning and her legs tingle with pins and needles. On Sunday afternoon (she thinks, she hasn't seen the sun since Friday), she finally flips the TV off and stares up at the ceiling. She traces patterns that aren't really there in the popcorn finish. She no longer knows how many days it's been since Mum died. She thinks about having more mac and cheese because she can't remember the last time she ate. For the first time in weeks, there's nobody around to explain her behaviour to. What she's doing now, the fact that she hasn't showered since Friday evening or changed her clothes in two days, it doesn't have to mean anything. She rubs at her eyes. Black spots, growing bigger. She blinks but they don't really go away. They start to merge, forming a chasm, an actual black hole that's going to consume everything in her life. Maybe she's being melodramatic but maybe she's not. Hiding her phone was really to stop the impulse to text Mum. Those texts won't go anywhere but the black hole.

The texting has been their thing for such a long time. It started when she got her first phone, the summer after she graduated from high school and she was already feeling herself because she was leaving to go to university. Dad bought a little convertible and was fixing it up

for her, and so the pink flip phone was really just the icing on top. The texts from Mum started the first night she spent alone in her campus housing. *TAKE YOUR VITAMINS AND WASH YOUR CLOTHES!* The messages were mostly instructions, important now Haley was in Vancouver and Mum was 270-something kilometres away. And while they talked all the time, there was really something about finishing a class and finding an *EAT VEGGIES also I miss you!!!!* message. More than ten years and probably about ten phones worth of exchanges. All just gone now.

This, she sits up and stretches her legs, trying to get the feeling back, is exactly why she's stayed at home with the family. It wasn't easy, but it was easier to feel normal when there was also something to do or someone to talk to. She's already said she'll go back to work tomorrow. Linda has been so understanding and has offered extra time, but Haley just needs to do something. It's been nearly a month since she had a schedule, since life felt sort of normal. The black hole fades away a little, residing in the corner of her eye.

She opens the curtains (to daylight! and sunshine!) and tidies the place up a bit, puts a load of laundry into the wash, and takes a shower. When she returns, she takes her phone out of phone-jail and switches it on, thinking she'll listen to a podcast while she slathers herself with moisturisers and tries to feel like a human being. Notifications pour in, more than she's ever gotten in her life. She ignores the messages she knows are about Mum, the updates on her post about the Celebration of Life, the comments from people she hasn't spoken to years.

A *working today* message from Alex. At least she knows where he is. *OK?* She doesn't know if that's in response to him working or if he's checking on her. She flips past to a message

from Tara: *Kev still going on about that house on Juniper. We're going to look at some places in K-town and Penticton but think I'm going to lose the fight* and a bunch of crying emojis. Haley doesn't see Tara living there, but she understands why Kevin is convinced: a house with a garden for less than half a million. *At least you'd be close to the beach in K-town or Penticton?* she writes back. Okanagan Lake might not be the ocean, but it is beautiful.

She flips through a couple of messages from some of the friends she shares with Alex. She doesn't want to read how sorry they are about Mum. They never met her.

A few messages from Auntie Karen. *Boys missing you. Bill says sounds like Kev Carey wants to make an offer on that house!* Does Tara know about this plan? Things have moved so fast. They only saw the place a few days ago. *What's been going on there? Have you spoken to Alex?* Alex was the other topic of conversation Haley didn't really want to get into. They were in Mum and Dad's bedroom, looking at some of the clothes in the closet. Karen said there were a few things she knew she wanted to keep. 'There was this one shirt she would wear and each time she'd say it would look better on me. But she never did give it to me.' Despite the similarities, Karen has always been that little bit taller and thinner than Mum was. *And, Mum would say, your baby fat ended up here*, she'd poke at Karen's bum and thighs, *while mine ended up here*, she'd clutch her spare tire. *The ol' muffin top.* It was while they were flipping through T-shirts emblazoned with sparkly elephants, or gossamer purple things with lots of inexplicable layers, that they found the wedding dress, tucked into a garment bag full of dresses usually reserved for Christmas dinner or events like graduations. Karen carefully extracted it and laid it out on the bed. It wasn't really a wedding dress, or at least, not in the conventional sense. It wasn't white, but an electrifying purple,

covered in sequins, huge tulle rosettes, with a mullet hem (all party in the back) that formed a glitzy train. They both stared at the purple monstrosity. 'I'm going to guess you won't be wearing this to your wedding,' Karen said.

It was an offhand remark, not meant to reference anything actually happening in the future. But it had caught Haley off guard. She'd never imagined getting married to Alex in the purple dress, never imagined riding off on a motorcycle, the ridiculous train flapping behind her. Any fantasy usually involved a more laid-back look, a beach wedding, a reception under twinkling lights. Things she'd seen on social media and mentally stowed away for later. And then she'd stopped imagining anything at all. When had that happened?

Karen put a hand on Haley's shoulder. 'Oh Haley,' she said, 'I didn't mean to be flippant, I just meant that this dress will never come back in style. It wasn't really in style then, either.'

Haley looked at the dress again. The purple, sparkles, it was all just so Mum. And now she was facing a future that didn't look anything like she'd once imagined. She went back into the closet and rummaged around for a garment bag it could live in.

'What are you doing?'

'Keeping it.' Haley tucked the hanger in, then arranged the giant puddle of tulle into the bottom. She didn't want to give it away, imagining it languishing in some strange-smelling charity shop, being laughed at or considered as part of a tacky 80's Halloween costume. She tucked the bag back into the closet.

'But what are you going to do with it?'

Haley shrugged. 'Leave it for now.'

‘Okay,’ Karen sighed, ‘for now. But eventually you’ll have to make a decision.’ She raised her eyebrows. It was clear she wasn’t talking about the dress anymore.

Haley sat down, in the closet, between the rows of arm-less sleeves ready to give ghost hugs. The closet light was so yellow; everything looked like it was bathed in egg yolks, white shirts looked old and stained even if they were new. There were stacks of shoeboxes and a couple of big plastic crates full of scarves, varying shades of purple swirled around like melting ice-cream. In that moment, she wondered if she should reach for her phone and call Alex. Tell him it was over and she wanted him to be gone before she returned to Vancouver.

But she hadn’t done anything, and now her pulse races every time she thinks she hears keys jangling in the hallway. *He’s been at the office since I got back*, she texts Karen. Will she confront him when their paths do eventually cross? She’s been trying to think of what she wants to say, but the words get lost. She wants to be back in Mum’s closet, smelling that mixture of lavender laundry detergent and mango lotion, a smell that still lingers everywhere.

We will support you whatever you decide, Karen writes back, followed by clover, dog, house, and thumbs-up emojis.

Haley leaves the phone on the bed and returns to her previously forgotten suitcase. Just a few things left inside now, she throws them onto the bed, and then zips up the main compartment. She unzips the front compartment and finds a white plastic bag with a big red logo on one side from the government liquor store Karen says is the cheapest. Which means Karen’s put the bag into the suitcase and not said anything. Haley dumps the contents on the bed: the embroidery kit, the instructions, thread, and an extra set of needles, a shimmery purple

scarf Mum used to wear wrapped around her head, a couple of drawings of Rocko from the boys, and the envelope marked SANDY B, the business card tucked inside. No hints about the contents. She looks at the envelope again: SANDY B. That's the part that she doesn't get. Those big block letters spelling out a name Haley's never heard Mum be called. Mum changed her name when she married Dad. In 1985. She was Sandy Gibson for most of her life. So how come this random historian, this stranger who just rocked up to the Celebration of Life, clearly uninvited, has a nickname for Mum?

Haley crumples the envelope up and throws it against the wall. It bounces off the closet door and returns to her feet. The big black S and A stare back at her. Who is this person? She picks up her phone and looks up Michael Dunbar Vancouver. Lots of entries. She adds History Department. The top entry is the staff profiles: mainly pictures of grey-haired men wearing polos or the awkward Hawaiian shirt and blazer combo. But Michael Dunbar's picture is just a generic greyed-out silhouette. Sessional Professor. History 101 and 102. An email address. She hits the link and a new email opens up. Subject: MY DEAD MUM. No, HOW DO YOU KNOW MY MUM? She clears the line again. Ballantyne Research Project? *Dear Michael, I understand you are/were working on a research project about my relative, JD Ballantyne, that you were in contact with my late mum, and that you attended her Celebration of Life (FUCK KNOWS WHY). I was just wondering why you thought you could be there, or how you thought it was okay to take precious minutes away from me. Delete all of that. I was just wondering what kind of information my mum passed on to you, and if it would be possible to see some of the work you're writing. As a direct descendant of JD, I feel like it's important that someone from the family has input on the project. All the best (but not really), Haley Gibson.* She saves the email to her

drafts. Does it matter now? That time is gone—no way to get it back. Isn't it almost a good thing that Mum had a life, interests outside of her tiny life in Merritt?

*

Haley has always liked the walk to work. The city is so different from Merritt, with the old trees that grow next to the sidewalk, their roots creating cracks and ridges, trying to escape. She tripped on those first walks to work, landing hard on palms braced for impact. Shaken, palms scratched and bleeding, she made a mental inventory of the most treacherous spots and vowed never to trip there again. But sometimes, if she's walking along with headphones in, music playing, texting, or reading—because sometimes she's that person, book held up in front of her face, navigating by touch—she forgets the spots and nearly falls. This morning, she walks with her travel mug full of coffee and her phone in her pocket. She wants to hear the city.

Birds chirp in trees overhead. Cars roll past her. Mothers shoo children out the door, yelling reminders about ballet at three, and has little Timmy remembered to grab his lunch from the counter? A few people go past her with similar cups of coffee in their hands. Her compatriots, the early risers, up and off to work while the sun is low in the sky, the morning brisk and still wet with dew.

She wants to think that the morning feels different, but it doesn't.

By the time she gets to the library, Linda is already sitting in the office with the coffee maker percolating. The older woman practically leaps out of her chair and rushes over, enclosing Haley in a hug before she's even able to put her things down. Her cup presses awkwardly into her co-worker's pillowy boobs.

Linda holds her an arm's length away, looking her over, like anything wrong will be visible. 'How are you, honey? Are you sure you're okay to be back at work so soon?'

Haley nods; it's good to be doing something normal. Maybe this is what happens when you're prepared. When death is the inevitable you've been planning for. 'Happy to be back,' she says, smiling a smile she's been practicing: not too happy. Not too sad.

Linda nods a few times. 'Well, considering the circumstances...'. She pulls Haley in for a second hug. 'You just let me know if you need more time, or if you need space today. But I'm so glad you're back.' She lets Haley go and looks around the room, then drops her voice to a whisper. 'Connie has been a nightmare.' Constance, a fixture at this branch, has decided that her *twenty-five plus years of service* excuses her from doing any work. But with Haley gone so much, Connie has been forced to pick up the extra hours.

'How many times have you caught her sleeping in the kid's section?' Haley, Linda, and a couple of the other staff have a group chat, mostly devoted to ratting on Connie.

Linda stifles a laugh. 'Well,' she says, 'there were a few phone calls that began with fake coughs. And I got so fed up the last couple of nights that I had to send her home early.' Sometimes it's easier just to get rid of the woman than to deal with her complaining. In addition to her *twenty-five plus years of service*, Connie has an ever-changing variety of maladies.

'I'm back now. I can be your buffer again,' Haley says, 'no plans to go anywhere.' For some reason, Connie seems to like Haley best.

Linda stifles another laugh. She so rarely laughs without her hand over her face. 'I snort when I laugh out loud,' she explained when Haley first started at the library. 'And look at me,'

she'd gestured to her slightly turned-up nose and fleshy body, 'I already look like a bit of a pig, I don't want to *sound* like one too.' Haley's always liked the way the woman jokes about herself.

Linda would've gotten along well with Mum. If only the two had ever been in the same place at the same time.

'Right,' Linda says, and she goes over to the coffee maker. Following her usual procedure, she fills her *Reading is Sexy* mug three quarters of the way; she'll fill the rest with milk, then two teaspoons of sugar. The coffee will be more like hot chocolate by the time she's ready to drink it. 'I'll go open up and let you settle back in.'

Once she's alone, Haley sits down and sips at her coffee. *Her* coffee. She was relieved to find enough for one more cup in the glass cannister next to the kettle. She'd popped the lid off and practically squeezed her face inside, wanting to capture all the flavour in an inhale. This kind of coffee is motivation to get up in the morning. To walk out the door. To sit down at work and look at the long list of things she needs to catch up on. There was her feminist book club—abandoned when things with Mum got so bad—already with interest and meetings scheduled for the next couple of months. She'd asked if someone else wanted to take it over, but between work and Grandma-duties, Linda was too busy, and Connie, well, she'd gone off on a rant about how *real women don't need to go around telling everyone what they believe in*. Whatever that meant. Haley pulls her planner from her backpack and makes a couple of notes. If nothing else, it feels good to have a schedule again. To have a to-do list that's about her.

Linda pops her head into the break room, saying, 'Opening the doors now. Ready?'

Haley takes a deep breath and nods. 'Ready.'

*

By mid-day, Haley feels like she's settled back in her old routine. She answers a bunch of computer-related questions an old man has (and hears all about the memoir he's writing), she returns rogue books to the shelves, and stops every so often to breathe it all in because she's always loved the smell of a library, even this little library with the questionable roof and unreliable AC. She begins to forget that she's been away for so long, and for the worst reason possible. But she's doing okay. She tells people when they welcome her back, saying they've missed her book recommendations, or, says the old man with the memoir, her pretty face in the morning. She tries not to cringe.

At lunch, she eats a salad put together from whatever she could find in the fridge and returns to *The Handmaid's Tale*: it's the first book on the book club reading list. Despite feeling like she knows it well, she realises she hasn't read it since high school. It's just because it's so ingrained in pop culture now. And they watched the first couple of episodes of the TV show, before it became too real and just made them feel depressed.

She puts the book down. *They watched. They felt depressed.* How long since she felt like a *them* with Alex? She checks her phone: still nothing from him. If she still knows his schedule, he'll probably come home for dinner tonight. Monday is usually pasta night: they would always get down to Granville Island on the weekend, picking up fresh pasta, sauce, and a hunk of smelly cheese. When she got home from work, Alex would be prepping the ingredients, a tea towel draped over his shoulder. Waiting for her. *You're a better cook than me*, he'd justify. They'd open a

bottle of wine and pretend to know about body and tannins because they'd been on a wine tour through Aldergrove with Alex's parents. One wine tour.

Linda pops her head into the room again. 'Don't want to disturb,' she says and then laughs at herself, hand covering her mouth, 'but I just got an email I think you'll be interested in. No rush though.'

Haley looks at her salad. The slightly brown-tinged lettuce, the too-soft tomatoes, the cucumber that started as half a cucumber and ended up being a quarter once she'd cut off the bad bits. She puts the lid back onto the container and loads everything into her backpack. 'Mind if I go around to the café after you take your lunch?' She's imagining a toasted wrap with sundried tomatoes, avocado, and some kind of melted cheese from COFFEA, their local hipster café. She'll take the rest of her break later.

'If you bring me one of those salty brownie thingies, nope.' Linda's mind can always be changed when a *salty brownie thingie* is in front of her.

Back in the library, Haley stands behind Linda and waits for her co-worker to login— Linda's inability to do more than hunt-and-peck means Haley has a chance to take a look around and see who's there. Mostly just moms and babies in strollers; there's a little boy sitting on one of the bean bags while his mom, with a baby strapped to her, searches the shelves, not noticing that the little boy is sticking books into his mouth. Luckily, they wrap most of the kids' books. For this very reason. Haley turns back to the screen, surprised to see that Linda has managed to get back to her email.

‘See, response from Melissa at the Kelowna branch. Took her a while, but I think it’s good news, right?’ Linda looks over her shoulder at Haley.

Hey Linda, Nice to hear from you... the email goes on for a while, describing the gory details of a traumatic surgery Melissa’s husband has just recovered from, then a bunch of stuff about what kids and grandkids are up to. Haley skims until she spots her name: *If Haley is interested, we’re going to have a post opening up soon in our research library, working directly with the university. It sounds like she’d be just the type of person we’re looking for with her archival studies background. The post is dependent on funding, so we won’t have a start date until the university gets through all the red tape, but I imagine we’d be looking to have someone trained before school returns in the fall.*

‘Sounds good, eh? No mention of salary or anything though, or if they’d pay for you to relocate...’ Linda trails off as she returns to the screen, scrolling rapidly to the bottom of the email and into her own words. ‘Oh, wait,’ she says and then rapidly scrolls up again.

Haley wonders if you can get motion sick from looking at emails. ‘It’s okay,’ she says and places a hand on Linda’s shoulder, ‘I’ll have to think about it anyway.’

Linda nods. ‘I guess a lot of things have changed since we sent that email.’ She goes quiet.

Haley remembers the day they sat drinking coffee and talking about a potential move to the Okanagan. Linda kept brushing away tears. *I don’t know what I’d do without you, but it makes sense. I’d like to be closer to my family too. Even if they are a bit of a shitshow.* And then she’d gone on a rant about something her daughter spent mega bucks on and the seemingly infinite number of problems that caused.

‘It could be amazing,’ Haley says, ‘and it would mean getting to put all those years of education to use.’ She always assumed she’d only be at this branch for a while, making the right connections and adding real-life experience to the CV. But it’s been years.

‘Okay. Well we can hold off responding. Since it took her...’ Linda rapidly scrolls back through the email, again, ending up all the way at the bottom. ‘Never mind. It took her ages. No rush. You think you can manage all of this,’ they both look out into the library, ‘while I eat my lunch?’

Haley could be alarmed by the fact that the child on the beanbag is still trying to eat books, but it happens all the time. ‘Think I’ll be okay.’ There are a couple of carts with stacks of things waiting to be sorted. An email might come in. ‘And Connie’s in at one?’

Linda nods, ‘And Connie’s *supposed* to be in at one. We’ll see.’

*

Haley shades her eyes against the early afternoon sun. West Broadway is busy with traffic, cars going by with their windows down, music filtering from many car stereos. Somehow, she can still hear the birds chirping. She walks under the awnings; in the sun, she feels a bit like her skin is baking beneath the black cotton. But COFFEEA is just around the corner from the library, one of many iterations over the years, but probably the most hipster of them all. One wall is covered in foliage, planters filled with succulents divide tables, and all the baristas have tattoos, or wear slouchy toques, or overalls, or all three. They play music that sometimes sounds like it’s straight out of a 1970’s house party, but their food is good. And for that reason (and the fact that it takes her exactly two minutes from work to the door) she keeps coming back.

Today the owner, Darren, waves at her and calls, 'Hey, you. Haven't seen you in a while. Same as usual?'

She nods. Toasted wrap, two lattes (one with sugar), a decaf skim skinny something for Connie, and a salted caramel brownie. Sometimes Darren spots her when she's on the street and knows to have her order ready. She waits at the counter, next to the glass case full of towering slices of cake, *artisanal* donuts, and things Darren explained were cruffins (*a croissant/muffin hybrid with laminated dough, literally the best invention since sliced bread*). As someone who grew up on donuts from Timmie's covered in icing so bright she should've been suspicious, coming to a place like this has been a bit of a transition. But now look at her. Darren tells her that his wife is getting closer to her due date—that's why she isn't in very often—and asks after Linda. She's just about to answer when he fires up the coffee machine. She reaches for her phone, there's a message from Karen: *You know that envelope you found? With the business card?* And that's it. A shocking lack of emojis. *And???* she types back. But no response.

And then she remembers the email to Michael Dunbar, still sitting in her inbox. She reads it over again, remembering how angry she was when she wrote it. It doesn't sound angry: it's almost polite. She hits send. She thought she could let it go, that it didn't matter that this stranger was part of Mum's last month, but it does.

Chapter Seven

Mike takes the 033 bus home in the dark. The department meeting went on for so long he missed all the afternoon sun. Now, the bus is full of students with backpacks, they stand packed so close together Mike can smell the Axe on the kid next to him. He remembers those days: dousing himself in a scent with a name like *Anarchy*, or *Ice Rush*, a can shoved in his locker for the moments when he started to smell his own odour. He loops his arm around a pole near the back doors and is glad the trip is short. He attempts to summarise the department meeting, but he isn't even sure why, as a sessional, he was invited to participate. It isn't like anybody cares about his opinions on the department's long-term goals to up student involvement and enrolment.

He'd sat as far away from Call-Me-Doug as was possible, his laptop on, a document with a couple of notes about semester dates open in one window, a student essay in another, Facebook open on his browser. The many windows merge: *penguins play with bubbles/ and promote an imperialistic network based on the profitability of slavery/ in the summer term*. And then somebody mentioned an extended deadline for proposals for new classes. He'd shifted his focus back to his notes.

On the bus, he looks straight ahead and tries to focus on the sets of taillights lining up in front of the bus, but keeps remembering how Doug pulled him aside at the end of the meeting.

'Time's up, Mikey. I need some work on my desk. Pronto.' The older man was shoving a stack of papers into a tattered old laptop bag, so old the laptop pocket would've fit about two laptops and one of those massive art history textbooks so many of his students lug around.

Mike continued to stare at the laptop bag. He hadn't told Doug about the Celebration of Life. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how his mentor would respond to death. He wasn't sure he wanted everyone to know that his main source was dead and he was lost.

Call-Me-Doug stopped what he was doing and looked up, narrowing his eyes. 'Do we need to meet for a chat about your future?' The use of the word *chat* only served to make what he was saying sound more threatening.

Mike's palms started to sweat. He wanted to say no, that he was doing fine. But really, he'd spent the days since coming back from Kelowna staring at the screen, the programme for Sandy's memorial on top of his notebook. He felt guilty. He kept looking at the face of the woman he'd never met, the woman he'd now never meet, thinking about her bad jokes, the way she wrote about her family history with such pride, and the first time she'd responded: *I'm happy to answer your questions but first, tell me about you. I want the elevator pitch on Michael Dunbar.*

The bus lurches to a stop and he loses his footing, falling into the backpack of the Axed-up kid in front of him. Lost in a crowd again. When was the last time he felt like he was part of something? Probably when he was with Sara. And then he's thinking about the time they'd spend walking along West Broadway, stopping to buy things like kabocha squash from the produce market, or pausing in front of Solly's, taking deep breaths because even though the cinnamon buns were amazing, they wouldn't eat them, they had their principles. How, at the beginning of that relationship, each time he went by Solly's on his own, he did get a cinnamon bun. Because he wasn't really sure what his principles were.

Eventually, the bus pulls up at his stop at Macdonald and West 16th. Rush hour traffic. He stands at the lights, waiting in another crowd. Two cars make illegal turns once the light is extra red. He shakes his head. He could've taken a different bus, but everything else drove past the stop on campus declaring SORRY, NOT IN SERVICE. The windows were fogged up, but you could make out the outlines of bodies packed in tight. Besides, he likes the walk past the weird intersection at the Kitsilano Diversion, the heritage house on the corner with the circular window like a porthole. Sometimes he tries to imagine what the neighbourhood looked like before the Diversion bisected it, changing the flow of traffic forever. Some of these houses are nearly a hundred years old. They won't tear them down now: these are the properties people pay exorbitant amounts of money for. They renovate them, keeping the 'period features' while adding modern conveniences. Wonder what the Edwardians would've made of surround sound, or in floor heating.

He tries not to, but he does glance into the houses, imagining the people who have just returned home and flicked on the lights, not quite managing to close the drapes. Fishbowls. He imagines that he could have what they have. A home. Security. He knows that some of the people who live here are the same age, or even younger. The Bank of Mum and Dad. That's what they say now, because that's how these people get mortgages and afford to live in the heart of a neighbourhood like Kitsilano. Or, for that matter, any Vancouver neighbourhood. There's no Bank of Mum and Dad waiting to help him. He grew up with everything he needed; Dad provided enough financially, but they were never well-off. And Don spent thirty years painting houses. Self-employed. No pension. Spent his savings on the place in Mexico. He always says you can't take it with you. Mum didn't go back to work until Mike was fourteen and had a couple of recipes under his belt. She worked at a grocery store, late nights and early starts, depending on which department she was in. It didn't pay much, but she often came home with fresh bread, doughnuts, cakes even, when she worked in the bakery. He wouldn't ask them for anything now.

And Dad doesn't offer.

Mike crosses the street at West 11th, where the houses are a hodgepodge, fake heritage and untouched post-war bungalows. There's a crater where, two weeks ago, there was a little white house with a stucco exterior, a large yard with an elm, a tree as old as the house. Now the lot is full of dirt, with a backhoe at the bottom of the deep hole.

His place is on Stephen Street, a place he pays too much for that has a view to the Starbucks across the street. But soon, the trees will blossom, their flowers so pink, delicate, transient. In no time, the petals will rain down like snowflakes. They'll be picked up by the wind. They'll grow brown as they rot and the season ends for another year. But for that brief window! Facebook will be nothing but photos of the blossoms as everyone attempts to capture the fleeting seasonal shift.

He's started to dread returning home: the apartment is dark and quiet, save for the traffic noise from the street below. He flips the kitchen light on. There was a time when he'd come

home from work and Sara would be there, her legs draped over the arm of the couch, head propped up on a stack of pillows. She'd launch into a story about how she spent half an hour talking to an old man who didn't even understand what fair trade meant. And he'd say something like, *well, I'm sure you educated him. As you should,* and she'd pull him down onto couch, hands in his hair. Later, they'd stand at the sink peeling carrots, or talking about the spiraliser she'd just bought for him because she said he needed *zoodles* in his life.

He feels like he's lost something. If he were the dramatic type, he'd say it felt like losing a part of himself. But really, it was his decision to end things with Sara. Not for the first time, he'd explained that he just wasn't sure about their relationship. They were getting to the point where she was at his place all the time, she was probably waiting for him to ask her to move in, and he just wasn't sure. Yeah, they agreed about a lot of things, but what about shared interests? Buying expensive vegan food from Choices wasn't a hobby. And much as he'd found the spontaneous day trips to the North Shore, or the weekends on Hornby at her parents' summer place exciting, just being with her started to feel exhausting. He needed to focus on things; he wanted to build towards something. She teased him for it. *Ann, Mr Picket Fence, should we be thinking about mortgages?*

The end wasn't a pretty scene. *So what would make you sure, Michael?* She threw the spiraliser on the kitchen tiles. The green plastic shattered. And then he couldn't go back to the café she worked at. It was always one his favourites, not too far from home, but just far enough that he felt like he was going somewhere, doing something. That's where they met. One day not all that long ago, he was the 'old man' she spent half an hour trying to educate.

The truth is, he does want a place of his own. Somewhere to come home to. A mortgage. Stability.

But this kind of thinking isn't going to help with his meeting. He hadn't responded to Call-Me-Doug's threat of a chat, but his mentor had taken his silence as agreement. *Bring me something soon, Mikey.* He'd flashed a smile. Like a shark. Now, Mike turns to the fridge, still nearly

empty because he hasn't gotten around to shopping since coming back from the Okanagan. He digs in the freezer. Fries, a veggie burger, some freezer-burnt broccoli. Good enough.

He's just taking his last bites when he hears a knock at the door. He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, remembering when ketchup squeezed out between layers of bun. Sure enough, a red blob appears on the back of his hand. A quick swipe on the backs of his jeans (going in the wash anyway) and he answers the door.

'Hey man,' the upstairs neighbour, Jack, or maybe Jake says—the one who smokes right out front of the building even though it's against the bylaws. 'I've been stuck with the shit job of handing these around to everyone.' He passes Mike an envelope.

'What's going on?' Mike asks, already worried.

'I think we all knew it was coming,' possibly Jack begins, 'and it's taken a while to get a quote.'

Mike scans down the letter. There are lots of numbers that end with lots of zeroes.

Jack, or maybe Jake gives a wave and continues down the hallway. Mike has gotten stuck on the bit about *fixing the problem before more damage is done*, and the final number, an estimate for an amount of money he can't comprehend. He lets the door slam behind him and goes straight to his computer. An email to the landlord, a picture of the terrifying letter attached. This might be the one time he's glad he doesn't own the place: at least he won't be the one shelling out money for the repairs. How long does it take to fix a roof? And the noise (when he already lives on a noisy street). The giant sheets of plastic that will engulf the building and keep water out. It'll be like living in a plastic bag.

Maybe it's a good thing. He won't want to be at home, so he'll commit to spending most of his time on campus. Working. He'll get so much done: he'll finish his grading early (for once) and get lots done towards the project. So much that conversations with Call-Me-Doug will inspire joy rather than dread. Well. He flips back to the pages he's been working on. Almost ready for other eyes. He flips to his notes from the meeting. If he were to get a new class

approved...that would placate Doug. Buy him a little time. He watches the cursor flash next to the list he started earlier. The only problem? On top of everything else, he has no idea what to pitch.

Chapter Eight

It's Friday afternoon and Haley has just finished repeating her new mantra, counting backwards from ten, exhaling loudly through her mouth, to prevent herself from screaming. This time, the culprit is Connie, who has been sitting at the front desk, playing some kind of game on her phone, ignoring basically everything. Haley opens her eyes and finds Connie in the same place, her arms now crossed over her chest. Haley lets go of another long breath. 'That's fine, Connie,' she says, 'I'll just finish putting all of these books away in the ten minutes before I'm off.' She thinks sarcasm is pouring from each word. She isn't being subtle.

But Connie just nods. 'You do that.' Then she uncrosses her arms and returns to her game.

The problem is that Linda left early and in a hurry, a grandkid emergency, and didn't leave Connie with a list of specific tasks. And although Haley is technically a higher rank than her older co-worker, Connie won't take directions from her. *Just because you've got a degree*, Connie argues, emphasising the word 'degree' like it's something terrible. *I've got life experience*, her other go-to line, that seems to imply that because she's older she's also smarter. She says that, but she also doesn't vote because *voting doesn't do anything*, and she drives a monstrous diesel pick up because she thinks climate change isn't real. Linda says to take everything the other woman says with a pinch of salt. *Or a handful*. Surely Connie must be approaching retirement. This is what helps Haley return to the cart of books. But it's hard to stop herself from muttering curses under her breath.

When her shift finally comes to an end and she's gathered her things and said a courteous *have a good weekend* to Connie (though she hopes her co-worker has a terrible weekend), she heads out into the Friday afternoon bustle. The sidewalks are busy with everyone else leaving work at the same time, the roads congested and traffic backed up. Everyone looks stressed. Haley takes a couple of deep breaths and tries to remember the slow breathing technique she learned at a yoga class she went to a few years back. Then she starts walking. It's lighter now

than it has been, the days still getting longer, but there's no sign of the sun. It's been raining off and on all day, and the roads are dotted with puddles. The sky is grey and thick clouds swirl overhead. The heavens could open at any minute. A feeling which Haley has been experiencing, as equally off and on as the rain. One minute she's fine and the next she's just angry. Raging.

She turns the corner onto West Broadway and pauses to look in a store window. When she first moved to the neighbourhood, she visited the shop weekly, picking out a couple of things to buy with her grown-up pay checks. It was an expensive habit, and one she quickly realised was unnecessary when she discovered many of the items she'd coveted still hanging in her closet with the tags on. Mum always said everything was beautiful, but too expensive and impractical. *Only seven days in a week. When will you ever wear so many clothes?* But each time she visited she'd leave with a shirt, a scarf, a sweater, pilfered from Haley. Now, the window is full of brightly printed dresses, cropped jeans and shorts, a tray of sunglasses. Just beyond the window display is a wall of bathing suits. She looks at her reflection in the window: she is a blur of green and blue flowers with a red bun on top. *At first you'll wonder if wearing green when you have red hair makes you look like Christmas. Then you'll realise you love Christmas and why wouldn't you want to dress like it?* Tears prickle in her eyes. She wipes them away and then reaches for her phone.

The phone starts ringing almost immediately. Karen. 'Did you hear the news about Kevin Carey?' She jumps straight into conversation.

'Not yet,' Haley says, 'last I heard they were looking at some places in Vancouver?' She's had a couple of text exchanges with Tara, a few links sent for condos far out of budget. *But just look at the kitchen! Or, but isn't there so much potential?* Haley looked at all of them and felt her chest constrict when she looked at the prices. Half a million for a 'bachelor's suite.' \$650,000 for a one-bedroom place with a 90's retro kitchen and a 'flex room' that was basically just an awkwardly shaped closet.

'I figured you would've heard from Tara,' Karen says. 'Well, I'm spoiling the news for her but whatever. They've pulled the trigger on a place here!' She sounds delighted; Haley can

see her rubbing her hands together, like she's masterminded the whole thing and made someone else return to the Nicola Valley, abandoning their life on the Coast. 'Let me send you the link.'

Karen expects Haley to be happy and excited for Tara and Kevin. But Tara wants to stay in Vancouver. Now she'll have to give up her yoga studio. Kevin has won. Haley grips the phone a little tighter. 'I can't look at it now, Auntie, I'm walking home.' Her phone buzzes as she gets the message.

'You'll never guess where it is.'

'So it's not the place Uncle Bill showed us?' Haley asks, distracted by the smells. She looks in the window of the Chinese restaurant and imagines a heaping plate of egg fried rice. Her stomach rumbles. She wonders what to have for dinner.

'Just look at the link.' Karen says. Then there's the clinking of cutlery in the drawer, the sound of Rocko barking. 'I'm finally taking that air fryer you guys got me for my birthday on its inaugural meal.' It hadn't been much of a party back in January, but the air fryer had been a hit. Mum's suggestion. *She's one of only twenty-four women in the world who likes getting kitchen gadgets for their birthday.*

Haley's stomach rumbles again. 'I'm just about home now. Talk later?' She's thinking about the contents of the fridge, not the house or Tara, or even the air fryer.

'Okay,' Karen says, 'but let me know what you think of the place. I'm making fried chicken tonight. If you were here,' she almost sings, 'you could be having some too. Oh well, more for us.'

The words hang in the air for a while. Haley's barely been at home for a week and Karen's already guilted her into turning around for another visit. They say goodbye just as Haley turns the corner at Bayswater. She spends the rest of the walk rummaging in her bag for her keys, thinking about her place, the condos Tara was looking at, that house in Merritt they all said had so much potential. Inside the building, there's a notice about one of the units on the top floor being sale. Over \$600,000 for a place that's the same size as hers, but would be quieter (all

the windows face the lane, rather than West Broadway) and has a better view. She doesn't know what her place is worth these days but assumes the price has gone up since she bought it. Well, her, Mum, and Dad. Without them she probably wouldn't have gotten a mortgage. Realistically, she's not really sure how she'll ever qualify to buy something bigger. Bigger and still in the city. This is what Uncle Bill keeps saying. And why Karen is so convinced that everyone should forget the city.

Just then, the building door opens. It's Alex, phone in hand, his laptop bag slung over one shoulder and a shopping bag over the other. He looks up from his phone and his mouth drops open, like he's shocked to see Haley just standing next to the mailboxes.

'Hi.' Her heart rate speeds up. She tries to think of things to say but she just keeps thinking about the fact that they haven't had a proper conversation since the Celebration of Life.

He puts the phone into his pocket and clears his throat. But he doesn't say anything.

'I was just looking at this,' she points at the printout on the memo board, 'someone on the top floor is selling.'

He nods.

Her face is going red; she can feel it creeping up her neck. Why isn't he saying anything?

Alex clears his throat again. He adjusts the bags on his shoulders. 'This is getting heavy,' he says finally, 'we should...' he trails off but points in the direction of the elevator.

In the elevator, they stand shoulder to shoulder and look straight ahead. The printout for the condo is taped to the wall, next to the elevator controls. Haley looks over at Alex but he's just staring ahead, possibly watching as the lights illuminate each floor they pass by. She looks at the doors and waits for them to ping open. The elevator slows and then dips: this is a moment that Alex hates because it makes his stomach do a backflip. He usually doesn't use the elevator at all. *Taking the stairs is healthier anyway.* But really, it's because he's afraid.

Their steps are quiet on the carpet. It feels like the hallway stretches on for ages, much longer than normal. Alex unlocks the door and holds it open for her.

‘Did you get anything for dinner?’ she asks once she’s deposited her stuff in a heap next to the shoe shelf. The question feels normal which is good because everything else feels weird. Even the house smells different. Was it something she cooked? Or maybe the garbage she keeps forgetting to take out?

Alex unloads things from the bag. A loaf of bread. A glass bottle of the weird prune juice he says isn’t disgusting. A bag of apples. A container of salad. He puts things away and he doesn’t say anything.

She stands on the other side of the island, waiting.

Finally, the bag empty, he folds it up and tucks it into the drawer next to the garbage. He washes his hands then runs them through his hair. A couple of drops of water roll onto his forehead.

‘Where have you been?’ she asks.

‘What do you mean?’

She sighs. ‘I’ve hardly seen you since I got back.’

‘I’ve been working. I told you things were busy.’

Her neck is getting hot. Things have been busy for him? What about the things she’s been busy with? Instead of saying any of this, she reaches for a piece of paper—an old shopping list—and starts to make tiny folds. As she folds, she counts backwards from ten.

He opens the fridge and starts to pull things out: mayonnaise, mustard, half a tomato cut side down in a plastic container. He pulls things from drawers, a cutting board, a couple of knives, then he starts to assemble.

‘Are you having a sandwich for dinner?’ The question comes out in a different tone than anticipated. Each spread of mayo, flick of mustard makes her more angry.

‘I have to go back to the office.’ He cuts the sandwich in half and then reaches into the cupboard over the sink, the plastic container cupboard, the one they keep saying they’ll organise. But they haven’t, so lids tumble out as he searches for one suitable for rectangular food.

‘And when are you coming back?’

‘I don’t know. I might end up staying there.’

The thought of the gross orange and brown plaid sofa nearly makes her cringe. ‘And you’d rather be there than here, with me?’ She asks the question, but she isn’t sure if it’s what she wants. These days, all they ever do is argue. When was the last time they stayed in, made a meal together, just were together?

‘It’s not about you,’ Alex says and he packs the plastic container into his laptop bag, ‘it’s about the fact that I have deadlines coming up and I’m not going to make them unless I fully commit. And that means making some sacrifices. You know that.’

‘I do know that.’ Sure, they’ve talked about this situation, imagining the final push towards submission and the end of his degree. But that was before Mum. ‘But I guess I thought you might be around for me? Now?’ Haley picks up her piece of paper, continuing to fold, turning the paper over, folding, following a pattern learned during childhood. Imprinted in muscle memory.

He looks at her, his head tipped to the side and sighs. Then he carries on with repacking his bag, replacing stacks of paper with similar stacks of paper on the counter. When he’s done, he sighs again and says, ‘I’m sorry I don’t have time for this conversation. But I hear what you’re saying,’ another line from his book of *The Right Things to Say*, ‘and we can talk about this more later.’

‘Later?’ Haley stops folding and doesn’t even consider counting. ‘When will later be? Narrow it down for me.’

‘I don’t know. I have to go.’ And then he’s shutting the door behind him, leaving Haley alone at the kitchen counter.

She stands there for a long time, looking at the mess of cutlery and cutting boards he’s left probably assuming that she’ll clean it up. Despite her aim-and-throw method in every other part of the house, she likes the kitchen to be clean. In the *Before Times* (she’s going to start

calling it that, those olden, golden days) they'd spend Saturday making the place spotless. Sharing the chores so the same person rarely ever had to clean the bathroom two weeks in a row. It was a system that just worked; it required minimal discussion and rarely led to arguments. But then Haley started spending more of her weekends in Merritt and Alex got more and more busy. Now that she thinks about it, she wonders how many of those weekends Alex spent at home, carrying on with the normal routines without her.

She takes a deep breath. If she's honest with herself, does that even make her mad? Wouldn't it be easier if he just left? She picks up her phone and types *Just had a fight with A...don't know where things are going. Tell me everything about the house!!!* Tara will say the right things. How has she managed for all the years without a friend like Tara? She looks at her messages and scrolls through all the ones still unread since the memorial and then stops. The thread used to be at the top, those thousands and thousands of messages from Mum. Because Mum *always* knew what to say, even if her advice was annoying or unsolicited in the moment. Looking back, Haley knows that nobody will ever understand her like Mum did. That kind of knowing is basically built in. Part of the mother-daughter bond. She checks her email, expecting to sift through the normal subscriptions about sales and travel deals, but there's something else: a reply from Michael Dunbar. She'd forgotten about sending that email. She'd been so angry at the time.

Dear Haley, she reads, Thanks for your email. I'm sorry if I caused any offense by attending your mum's memorial. I really valued your mum's involvement and as I was in the Okanagan that weekend anyway, I thought it made sense to pay my respects. I'm sorry we didn't speak there. As far as being involved in the project goes, I would welcome your input. I'd be happy to schedule a time to meet. I live in Vancouver but will be continuing my research in the Okanagan in the next couple of weeks. All the best, Mike Dunbar.

So he's a Mike, not Michael. The last time she knew a Mike was in high school. That Mike was an idiot; he bought a motorcycle in grade twelve and took it out one night for a joyride. Drunk. That doesn't mean this Mike isn't an idiot, or balding and middle aged, or the kind of guy who tries to be *down with the kids* and never realises that the kids are laughing at him.

The thought makes her feel slightly better. It's a nice enough email. Maybe he was just being respectful. To be fair, they did invite everyone, from close friends to the ladies at the Timmie's over by the hospital. But nothing Mike has written explains how and why he got involved with Mum. Or how they were involved. *Thank you for the response, Mike. It was a busy day so no need to worry about not speaking to me at the memorial.* Haley composes and each word makes her a little more annoyed. He's the one who should feel bad in this situation. She takes a deep breath. She can schedule a time to meet with him and then yell at him. It's what Mum would've told her to do. *I'm based in Kits and work Monday to Friday, so weekends are best for me. Haley.*

She hits send.

She feels antsy, like she needs to be doing something. She's got nothing planned and with Alex away (for the night? Forever?) she doesn't know how to entertain herself. She decides to start by loading the dishwasher, tidying up Alex's mess, wiping down all the surfaces until everything glows just a little bit. Decide on dinner next. She opens the fridge and rummages around in drawers, trying to remember when the last time she went shopping was. Has she even been since she got back home?

Her phone pings again. *Last minute, but how does this Saturday (tomorrow) morning work for you? 11 am at COFFEA on West Broadway?* She puts down the container of tomatoes. *Mike*, she types, *Saturday is great and COFFEA is great.* She selects the last bit and deletes it. This guy probably has a PhD. She can't send him a message where she's used 'great' twice in the same sentence. *And COFFEA is one of my favourites.* Then she selects that and deletes. This guy isn't her friend, he's the person who somehow wasted Mum's precious time. Any eagerness on her part is because she's bored and doesn't want to spend the entire weekend on her own. *...and COFFEA is convenient for me.* She doesn't hit send. Instead, she puts the phone down and returns to the tomatoes. Mike Dunbar can wait.

*

Haley gets to the café so early that the door is still locked and she has to wait for the very young barista to let her in. They exchange awkward hellos and then Haley heads towards her favourite table by the window, choosing to sit with her back against the plant-covered wall. A trailing plant with heart-shaped leaves brushes against her shoulders, mingling with her hair. She wonders again if she should have tied it up, but did she remember to bring a hair tie? Possibly not. She'd spent so much time getting ready, trying to figure out if winged-eyeliner was too much for coffee at 10 am, or a power move. In the end, she'd gone for a subtle but smoky brown liner for more of a natural look. Then she'd needed to pick an outfit. She'd flipped through dress after dress, wondering exactly what message each dress sent into the world. Eventually she'd decided on a plain dress and a cardigan. Her attempt at being casual. Sometimes she'd be about to leave house and Alex would look at her dress and raise his eyebrows. *Do you think people take you seriously in a dress like that?* She'd laugh at the comment and say something like, *I'm perfectly confident even when dressing like a large child.* And then flounce out the door like she didn't give a fuck. That was how Mum would've responded. And so what if Haley's favourite piece of clothing *is* a dress with a book print?

She takes a deep breath and starts counting down.

Ten, nine—

But she's interrupted by the sounds of the espresso machine. The barista looks across the bar and yells out, 'Sorry, just dialling in for the day!' and then smiles a wide smile that also seems to say that he's only just had braces removed. His teeth glow.

'That's okay,' Haley says, 'I'm just waiting for someone,' though she doesn't know if the barista can hear her over the sounds the machine is making. She reaches into her bag for her book: a tattered copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* she's had since undergrad. She and Linda settled on a new date for the Feminist Book Club in a couple of weeks and Haley still hasn't finished reading the book. She cracks it open and sets it down on the table, placing the Garfield bookmark (a favourite purchased from a school book fair many moons ago with her allowance)

in the middle to keep her spot. She looks up, realising she doesn't know what Mike looks like. Each person walking towards the café could be him. The old man with the cane and the fedora could be him. A middle-aged man with a dog and a child strapped to his belly could be him. She returns to the book and gets halfway down the page when the old-fashioned bell above the door chimes. She keeps reading, remembering that she needs to seem calm and cool before she crushes this historian under the sole of her chunky boots and extracts all the information she needs.

'Haley?' A voice mispronouncing her name. HAY-ley when it should be like HAL-ey.

She closes the book and sets it down, ready to confront the interloper, Mike Dunbar with his bald head and corduroy elbow patches. But he's not middle-aged, he might be five years older than her, standing there with a hipster beard, a plaid shirt and a sporty looking jacket, jeans, and a pair of similarly chunky boots. The kind of unobtrusive outfit Alex hates.

'I'm assuming,' the man says, and he smiles, 'since you're the only person here besides Dakota. Is that *The Handmaid's Tale*? Read it before?' He points at her book as he pulls out a chair and puts his bag down.

'Only about ten times,' she says in a way that sounds more pretentious than intended. She extends a hand. 'Nice to meet you, Mike.'

He wipes his palm on his jeans before reaching for her hand. 'Sorry. Sweaty palms. It's surprisingly humid this morning.'

She nods. 'No rain in the forecast. But. We'll see.'

A few moments later and he's still holding her hand. He drops it suddenly and wipes his palm on his jeans again. 'Can I get you something? Coffee? Some kind of baked good?' He points at the glass display case full of cookies, squares, and overly generous slices of cake.

She looks at her phone. Ten past ten. It would be weird if she ordered a slice of cake. Who wouldn't judge you for that? 'Just a latte, please.'

‘Definitely don’t want a snack? I’m going to get a snack.’ He heads up to the bar and then turns on his heel. ‘What kind of milk? I don’t like to assume these days.’

‘Oh, just normal milk. I’m not one of those people who can’t eat anything. Or vegan.’

‘Ah, I am. Kind of.’ He smiles again. He turns back to the bar.

Haley looks back at her phone. He seems nervous. Good. *Call me after your meeting and tell me about how you ripped the old professor to shreds!* Last night, she’d called Tara to catch up on house stuff (she wasn’t really all that surprised to hear that the house they’d decided on is one block away from the Carey family home) and ended up telling her everything about Mike Dunbar. Haley flips her phone over and looks back at the bar. Mike inexplicably gives a thumbs-up. She doesn’t reciprocate and instead repeats her bullet points, rehearsed before she left this morning. Practiced because she wanted to make sure she gets all the answers she’s looking for.

When Mike returns to the table, he pulls a black hardback notebook from his bag and a pen. ‘Coffee is on its way.’ He clicks the pen a few times.

She nods. ‘I can see that. So. You’re vegan?’ The question comes out more violently than anticipated, like it’s full of judgement.

‘Uh, like I said, kind of.’ He runs a hand through his hair. A bit at the front remains standing up. ‘My ex was vegan and very against the idea of flexibility or being an omni. So no burgers, no scrambled eggs for a hangover. I guess I was easily convinced.’

Haley raises her eyebrows. An honest answer and no comment on her judgey question.

‘So, Haley,’ he says her name like he’s never said it before, ‘I haven’t seen it spelled that way before.’

She inwardly rolls her eyes. ‘Yeah, my parents tried to name me after the comet. But Dad spelled it wrong on my birth certificate.’ *I nearly throttled your father when I found out.*

Mike nods. ‘Good story.’

‘It’s helped to make a few awkward moments less awkward.’

He clears his throat and scratches at his beard. ‘So.’

What should be an awkward moment is interrupted by Dakota bringing their coffees. He distributes the two mugs on black saucers, a stack of napkins, a couple of forks, and a brownie on a teal plate. 'I brought two forks. In case you're sharing.'

Sharing a brownie? Does Dakota think they're on an early morning date? Haley pulls her coffee closer and pushes the forks and napkins Mike's way. 'Thanks, but it's just for him.'

'Okay. Sorry about the latte art. I'm working on it,' the barista says with a shrug before retreating behind the bar.

Haley wraps her hand around the black cup. An attempt has been made to recreate the classic swishy flower. Not a successful attempt. She takes a breath, the air is sweet with the smell of the freshly brewed coffee. Maybe made sweeter by the plants hanging above her. They say house plants purify the air. Not just pretty faces.

'So,' Mike says again, 'now that we've determined that I'm eating this brownie solo, where should we start?'

She takes a sip of her latte. Despite the terrible art, the milk is rich and the coffee is smooth, almost like chocolate. She tries to think back to her bullet points.

'Maybe tell me a little about yourself? What do you do?' he asks before she can form a coherent question.

'I'm a librarian,' she says and then adds, 'at the branch just around the corner.' She doesn't know why she says that.

'Yeah? I used to work there all the time when I was finishing my PhD.'

'And you're a historian,' she says, choosing to ignore Mike's comment. She narrows her eyes. He's transparent. Trying to get her to warm up to him by relating to her. *Oh, haha, we might've bumped into each other without even knowing!* This is the kind of nonsense she needs to shut down.

'More like trying to be a historian. Glorified babysitter of eighteen-year-olds. Marker of terrible essays.'

‘But it must be nearly summer break.’ And then he probably goes away on holiday or sits around all day reading books.

Mike laughs through a sip of coffee. A little bit dribbles down into his beard. He licks his lips, but the coffee remains. ‘Summer break? What’s that?’ He wipes at his face with one of the napkins. ‘Nah, I’m lucky if I get a contract for the summer. Otherwise, I end up doing odd jobs.’

‘Really?’ Alex prefaces so many of his sentences with the phrase *when I’ve got a teaching gig*. The two men probably work on the same campus; they might have passed each other while on their way to a café or something.

‘That’s part of why I’m working on this project. That and to get my boss off my back.’

The list of questions. She doesn’t need to ask a follow up question about Mike’s boss. ‘So how did you find my mum?’ She crosses her arms. Stay focused. Don’t be pulled in by the lame thumbs-up from earlier, the questions he’s asked about her. The attempt to relate.

‘Well, I didn’t find her. I found “A Merritt Man’s View” and fired off an email,’ he says.

Grandpa’s website. It’s still up and running? Haley remembers signing up for the newsletter, being excited when she read the emails that never came at the same time, were usually full of weird grammatical errors, and always made her think of Grandpa’s bedtime stories. She picks up her coffee in attempt to look calm, but her hands shake.

‘So it was really your mum who found me. She answered my email.’

Tears. Haley blinks away prickly tears. She’s imagining Mum in a hospital room, a limited number of days stretching out in front of her, wanting to have something else to focus on. Mike’s email arriving in an account Mum checked for what reason? Because she was missing Grandpa and that was a way to keep a little piece of him close? ‘Did you meet her?’

‘No,’ Mike looks down at the table. His cheeks are flushed. ‘I didn’t know she was sick. She never said.’

Haley laughs. It’s hard to stay angry. ‘No,’ she brushes away a couple of rogue tears, ‘she wouldn’t have. But she answered your questions? About JD Ballantyne?’

He nods. 'She did. She was very helpful.'

Haley tries to imagine which of Mum's stories could be classified as helpful. But she gets stuck on a single moment. She was six years old when Mum first told her about JD. She was sitting in the crook of Mum's arm, a fire crackling in the fireplace, snowflakes falling heavily against the window. She stayed home from school that day because she was sick. Really sick. Mum stayed home too, made her chicken noodle soup, broke up salty crackers and put them into a little bowl so Haley had something in her stomach. And later in the day, before Dad came back from a day of doing something like fixing skidoos and generators, Haley's fever started to break. They sat watching the snow. Mum stroked Haley's hair. And then she started to tell a story, 'Once upon a time, your great-great-great-grandfather sailed across the ocean on a ship made of wood and steel.'

That's all Haley can remember from that first version of the story, but it doesn't matter because that was the line Mum used each time she retold the story. *Once upon a time, your great-great-great-grandfather sat underneath a nameless mountain, counting an infinite number of stars, feeling his stomach rumble.*

And then she can't say anything else, can't form anymore words, practised or otherwise, because her chest hurts, tears are rolling down her cheeks. She wipes the tears away, but they keep coming.

Mike reaches out across the table. 'I'm so sorry,' he's saying, 'I didn't mean to upset you. So sorry.'

But she's getting up from the table, trying to explain that she's fine (even though she's clearly not), painfully aware that the whole of West Broadway is going to see her full-on bawling. She just needs to be alone.

Chapter Nine

Mike isn't exactly sure which thing he's said that brings on the tears. He tries to reach out and comfort Haley, tries to come up with a silly joke or throwaway anecdote to get her to think about something else. But despite the connection between them, she's a stranger, and before he can do anything, she's grabbed her stuff and pushed past him. He watches her run down the street.

'What did you do?' Dakota asks from the bar, eyes wide.

'We were just talking.'

He shakes his head. 'That might be the worst date I've ever witnessed.' He returns to half-heartedly wiping the counter.

Mike sits down. 'It wasn't a date.' Though if he's honest with himself, this isn't the first time a woman has rushed away, crying. How many public breakups has he had? More than he cares to remember have ended with tears and someone storming out. He looks back out the window: Haley has disappeared from view. He could try to go after her? Or maybe it's better just to let her go. He pulls his phone from his pocket and pulls up her email, typing *Haley, I'm so sorry to have upset you. I hope you're okay. Maybe we can meet again? Or even talk on the phone?* He adds his number just in case.

'Darren coming in today?' he asks. On the mornings he beats his old friend to work, he and the baristas shout out *what time do you call this?* when the boss finally walks in. Mike still can't believe Darren, his best friend for as long as he's lived in Vancouver, really is the Boss Man. He's come a long way from apathetic shift supervisor at Starbucks.

'Should be here soon,' Dakota answers.

For now, they're alone in the café. Mike returns to his laptop and a page called a 'Pictorial History of Kelowna BC.' He scrolls past a black and white illustration of a grizzly bear.

After some discussion, it was thought that 'Kelowna' the Native name for Grizzly Bear would suit. So Kelowna it was, and the new town site was duly registered under the name in 1892.

How strange the word must have sounded on Scottish tongues. But JD would've been a local at that point, living on the mountain for nearly twenty years. Maybe not so strange.

The other side of the page features a blue snake demarcating Okanagan Lake, and lines cutting across the valley for all the subsidiary rivers and creeks. The map is dated 1877. There's a couple of settlements at the Mission and not a lot else. JD was there. He might've had a log cabin with one room, one chimney, one fire to keep the whole room warm when the temperature dropped. He wouldn't have needed much else.

Mike clicks on the next page and finds a photo of Father Pandosy. This guy again. With his massive cross tucked into his belt, the white beard and sparse dark hair. Was his beard that white when he first arrived in the Okanagan? Or did that first year out at Duck Lake, when he and the other missionaries nearly starved to death, permanently mark him? They had to eat the horses. Mike touches his temple, site of a new grey patch. He's attributed it to student papers. He keeps scrolling. 'Pre-Emption Regulations,' from the *B.C. Settlers Guide 1885*. This was the kind of thing that got the ball rolling for folks like JD. Maybe it would be advertised in the newspaper, something like CHEAP LAND AND FREEDOM! And who wouldn't be swayed by that?

Any person being the head of a family, a widow, or a single man over the age of eighteen and being a British subject may, for agricultural purposes, record any tract of unoccupied and unreserved Crown lands, not exceeding one hundred and sixty acres in extent.

The idea of *unoccupied land* seems to be one people like JD were confused by. Mike adds *relationship with local indigenous population?* to his notebook. Kelowna is the unceded territory of the Okanagan or Syilx people. They were there when JD turned up. It's more that he chose not to see them.

The settler shall have the land surveyed within five years from the date of record. After living on the land for two years and improving the value of the land by two dollars and fifty cents an acre the land could be purchased

from the government. Cost of the land purchased was one dollar per acre. The payment for this land could be spread over four years.

Mike looks at his coffee. Two fifty even with his friends and family discount. Who wouldn't be convinced by such an offer? What does \$1/acre work out to when you factor in one-hundred and thirty plus years of inflation? He's never been very good at math, but it's probably still a pretty good deal. Who could blame JD for being convinced by such a scheme?

The bell on the door jingles and Mike looks up from his computer to see Darren rushing in with his bike. Darren shoots him a look and says, 'Don't say it, man. You don't know the morning I've had.' Joke killed. He carries on to the back of the café.

Mike keeps expecting Darren to re-emerge, but it's ten minutes before he stomps across the café and yanks a chair out from underneath the table. The aggressive movement sends Mike's open notebook and pen tumbling to the floor with a clatter.

He retrieves his things and pauses for a moment. Calm and cool. You don't want to poke a bear when it's already cranky. 'You want to talk about it?'

'No,' Darren says, and he folds his arms on the table and lays his head down. He's a green toque in a black hoodie, hardly a man at all. 'What are you working on?' The question is muffled.

'I'm reading about pre-emption. You heard of that?'

A muffled no.

'It's how settlers ended up with all the land. A dollar an acre, so long as your promised to increase the value after a few years.'

'Oh god. Don't talk to me about increasing property values.' Darren and Stacy bought a fixer-upper that was supposed to be finished long before the baby arrived. Now the baby is nearly here and they've only just returned the bathroom to a functional state.

'And I was thinking about how JD was lucky. Back then, a man could make a name for himself.' Mike feels stupid as he says it. Is that what he wants? To make a name for himself?

Darren groans.

‘I mean, I’m not saying I want to be a homesteader or anything, but...’

‘But what?’ Darren lifts his head up just enough to make eye contact. ‘You wish you were an old-timey rancher? You know you could just move to Alberta, right?’

Mike sighs. He doesn’t want to move to Alberta. It’s just the depressing cycle of paying an insane amount of rent for a condo he doesn’t love while working in a job that doesn’t get him anywhere. ‘I don’t know. It’s just research.’ He closes the laptop and piles his notebook on top. ‘Now you go.’

‘It’s a bunch of different shit,’ Darren starts, ‘renos, baby, stuff here.’ He points at the espresso machine. ‘Camilla, she breaks my heart.’ Camilla, the big red La Marzocco that Darren inherited from the café that was here before he and Stacy took over. ‘I got ninety-nine problems and she is ninety-eight of them.’ He looks back at Mike. ‘Didn’t you just have a meeting with your boss?’

Mike feels his insides tighten. ‘Not yet. He asked if we needed to *chat* about my future.’ He does his best Call-Me-Doug impression, looking over the top of his glasses. ‘And I found out there’s a tenure track position opening soon.’

‘You gonna go for it?’

Mike nods. ‘Don’t know if I have a chance though.’

‘You have zero chance if you don’t go for it,’ Darren says, attempting to motivate.

‘I’m not feeling so lucky right now. I also just found out my building has a leaky roof.’

‘No man,’ Darren pulls a scream face, ‘not you too?’

Mike nods. ‘They’re supposed to start work next month. And now I wait for the inevitable rent increase from my landlord.’ His landlord has never been too terrible, but each year an email pops into his inbox with a message like *hate to do this to you because you’re a good tenant, but rising costs and inflation means your rent will be going up by 6%*. And that percent never feels like it’s

that much until he realises that in the time he's lived in the place he's gone from paying a thousand dollars a month to nearly two grand.

'This is why you need to get on the property ladder.' Darren says it so matter of fact. Like it's just a thing that you go and do. Then he waves in the direction of the barista. 'You want anything else?'

Mike looks at the dregs of his first cup. When did he finish it?

Darren doesn't wait for an answer and instead nods in the direction of the barista. 'He needs the practice anyway.'

Camilla fires into action.

'Tell me again who you're meeting here?'

'I met her already.' Mike grabs his laptop and scrolls through his email. He turns the computer around.

'Ballantyne Research Project,' Darren reads aloud, his nose practically pressed against the laptop screen. Like so many of their contemporaries, he's in denial about the fact that he's not the young toque-in-all-weather guy anymore. He's the middle-aged toque-in-all-weather guy who probably needs glasses. 'Dear Michael. Fancy.'

Mike knows the rest. *I understand you are working on a research project about my relative, JD Ballantyne, that you were in contact with my late mum, and that you attended her Celebration of Life a few weekends ago I was just wondering what kind of information my mum passed on to you, and if it would be possible to see some of the work you're writing. As a direct descendant of JD, I feel like it's important that someone from the family has input on the project. All the best, Haley Gibson.*

'Hayley Gibson has a lot of sass. But also, you went to the woman's memorial?'

'It's pronounced HA-lee. But yeah, it felt like the right thing to do.' Mike shrugs. He's already told Darren about Sandy's emails, about how he enjoyed working with her. 'Maybe it wasn't.'

'It doesn't sound like Haley thinks so. And you met her. How did that go?'

‘He made her cry and run away,’ Dakota chimes in from behind the bar.

Darren glares across the table. ‘You made her cry?’

‘I didn’t mean to,’ Mike says, but he wonders if all of this has been ill-fated. He hadn’t found it weird at the time, Sandy mostly talking about her family in the past tense, but maybe it was. ‘I didn’t even know Sandy had a daughter until I got the email saying Sandy had died.’

‘Yeah, that was weird that she never mentioned that she was literally writing emails from a hospital bed. Like she was living a double life,’ Darren says.

Dakota arrives at the table with drinks on a tray. A glass carafe of coffee and a handle-less cup for Darren, another oat latte in a black cup with matching black saucer for Mike.

‘Gonna have to spend more time on the latte art, eh?’ Darren points at the attempt at a milky flower floating on top of the latte. ‘It should taste good. Even if it doesn’t look pretty. Now,’ he turns back to Mike, ‘tell me why you should become a proper professor.’

*

Things move quickly after the first mention of the job opening and by Tuesday, Mike has a meeting planned with Call-Me-Doug to discuss his *suitability*. He gets to the office early, with the idea that he’ll work until three o’clock and have something he can show to his boss. That work turns into attempts to tidy up the mess of papers—mostly half-filled forms he never remembers to turn in, or unwanted lecture notes—and stacks of books he’s been collecting for the project with the best of intentions. He scans the titles, hoping he’ll find something inspirational. No luck. He checks his email and answers a few with headings like *plz help with essay qs???* He stares out the window. Sometimes, if he squints hard enough, he’s sure he can see the sun glinting off the ocean. He isn’t far from the beach, you’re never really that far in Vancouver, but sometimes the tall buildings fence you in. He gets claustrophobic when he goes downtown. The skyscrapers get taller with every new building, barricading any view of the ocean unless you’re up at the top. Luckily, he rarely needs to be there. Down below, students stream from the buildings, stopping to talk to friends or scroll through phones. There’s a tree down in the square, surrounded by a

concrete retaining wall, the perfect height for sitting on. The tree is covered with bright green leaves, still unfurling after the long, cold winter they've had. Soon, the campus will be full of perpetually stressed people. Exam season is rough.

At quarter to, he starts to pace around. Too early to go to Call-Me-Doug's office, too late to do anything else. He sits down on the edge of his chair and scrolls through the pages he managed to scrape together last night. The stuff about the orchards, a potential meeting with Father Pandosy at the Mission, gaping holes he thought Sandy would be able to fill in. Too late now anyway: he'd emailed the work on to Doug as soon as he finished. Time stamp 3:12 am. Impressive. And then Rog bursts into the room, flinging the door open so hard it smashes against the wall.

'Hello Michael!' he yells. He bounces over to his desk and drops his fancy satchel onto his chair.

Mike doesn't turn around, and instead watches everything reflected in his computer screen. To turn around would be to give in. Admit defeat and succumb to Rog's enthusiasm for everything.

'I have a good feeling about today,' Rog booms.

Mike nods at the screen. Sure, that's why he's sitting at the computer counting down the seconds until his meeting. With sweat dripping down his back.

'How are you, Michael?'

Mike continues to stare at his screen. Conversations with Rog consistently make him feel bad.

'Everything okay?' Rog moves his bag onto his desk and wheels his chair over to Mike's side of the office. He peers over Mike's shoulder. The pattern of his sweater vest—black, blue, and white diamonds—repeats on the computer screen.

'Just working on something,' Mike says and then reaches for the mouse, hoping to make the bad document disappear, and with it, Rog.

But Rog is too fast. He pulls the mouse pad away and starts scrolling. ‘Is this from the new manuscript?’ He wrinkles his nose and his moustache bristles, like all the hairs are waving. His moustache looks like something straight out of the 80s. Magnum P.I. Rog’s students are too young to get the reference, instead they think he’s on trend—*he’s the hot professor who doesn’t even know he’s hot*, Rog read from a student evaluation.

‘I’m meeting Doug about it in a few minutes. You don’t need to read it.’

Rog leans on the desk, his face close to the screen. ‘I don’t know why you won’t ever let me read your work.’

‘I let you read my work,’ Mike says, though he doesn’t. He doesn’t want notes from Rog, superstar academic who never seems to struggle to put words together. ‘Just not right now. Because I need to leave.’

‘But his office is just across the hall. Can’t you spare a couple of minutes?’

Mike looks at the clock: 2:58 pm. Rog might get through a paragraph. He gets up from his chair. ‘I’ll send it to you later,’ he says and he grabs his things and books it out of the office, leaving Rog behind.

Call-Me-Doug is sitting at his desk with his phone in one hand, a pen in the other, as a pair of glasses (the drugstore reading variety, he says he doesn’t need *glasses* glasses) perch on the tip of his nose. He puts the phone down and pushes the glasses onto his head. ‘How are ya, Mikey?’

Mike sits in the chair on the other side of his boss’ desk. Winded. He won’t get used to Doug’s decision to call him *Mikey*. But he’s too afraid to mess with the balance of their relationship—integral to his success at this university—if he says anything. He nods and says he’s fine.

‘Counting down the days until another term from hell is over, like the rest of us? Look, I’ve actually been crossing them out.’ Doug points to the classic cars calendar hanging next to his computer. The days are crossed out with dark x’s.

Mike remembers doing something similar when he was about ten and waiting for Dad to come home. Was that the year Dad didn't show up at all? Either way, the action is tied to disappointment. But Mike laughs, because Doug thinks it's funny. 'Definitely looking forward to the end of exams,' he says after he's laughed for an appropriate amount of time. 'Just wish I could skip the marking.'

Call-Me-Doug nods. 'Marking is one of the things that makes me contemplate early retirement. You know what the other thing is?'

Mike shakes his head.

'Students!' Doug cackles. Then he vigorously rubs his eyes with his fists. His skin folds and slides around his face like dough. 'So,' he says, eyes still closed, 'you got something to show me? Or is this a different type of chat?'

Another threat. Mike wipes his palms on his jeans. 'Yes. I sent you some pages last night.'

'You got a paper copy for me to read?' Doug is old school—red pen on crumpled pieces of paper.

Mike opens his notebook and pulls the folded document out. 'But—'

'But what, Mikey?' Doug interrupts. 'Don't you want me to read it?'

Another trickle of sweat between the shoulder blades. Mike smooths the pages out and passes them across the desk. 'The thing is,' he begins, but he's still not really sure how to explain what the thing is to Doug. At least, not without explaining that Sandy's death has shaken him.

'Let me take a look.' Doug slides his glasses back down to the end of his nose. He takes the pages and immediately frowns.

The next few minutes go by painfully slowly. Mike's aware of each intake of breath, each time Doug smiles or grimaces or looks away from the pages to check the time. Turning the sheets over makes the loudest *smoosh* Mike's ever heard paper make before. He just needs the tick

of approval. Then he can get out of the office and away from the judgment of people much more successful than him.

Call-me-Doug comes to the end of the stack and waits a while before exhaling and pushing the glasses back up onto his head.

Of course Mike knows this isn't his best work. He braces himself.

'I like the new title.'

Under the Lonely Mountain: The Forgotten Story of John Duncan Ballantyne and the Scottish Homesteaders of the Okanagan. Mike typed out the title, formatted it, and was fairly certain he could visualise the rest of the manuscript. Or at least the title page.

I will approach the research question by engaging with the stories JD Ballantyne left behind, in the communities of the Okanagan, and with his direct descendants. This research takes the form of archival research, notably in the Kelowna Public Archives, located in the Okanagan Heritage Museum, where I will have access to significant documents regarding pioneer life. These documents exist both as personal records (i.e., correspondence, journals, etc.) and official documents (land titles, legal documents). The other aspect of this project involves interviewing Ballantyne's direct descendants, some of whom remain in the Okanagan, and documenting their stories.

Mike remembers when he'd sent that paragraph on to Sandy. *So will I get a mention in the acknowledgments? Maybe a cut of the profits?*

Doug sets the pages back onto the desk. He runs a hand over his face again, and then reaches for his glasses. The glasses end up upside down on the keyboard. 'So does this mean you managed to speak to the big man's relatives?' He nods a few times, like he's answering his own question.

Mike isn't sure if needs to respond. He could talk about meeting Haley. But what would he say that would interest Doug? *I've managed to make her cry and question what she knows about her own history?* All he feels is guilt. He shifts in his chair. He's a student waiting for his grade. He's holding his breath, certain he's failed.

‘This looks pretty okay, Mikey. I’ll have to spend more time going through it, but I’m no longer worried that you’re a freeloader staying in my place and enjoying an Okanagan holiday.’ Call-Me-Doug cackles again. ‘I hope you tried the wine this time.’

Mike just nods. He can breathe again. He wants Doug to repeat that the work is okay, just so he can make sure he’s heard right. Has he always been so dependent on someone else’s approval? That’s probably a question he doesn’t want to ask himself while sitting in his boss’ office.

‘What’s the next step, Mikey? What’s your timeline looking like?’ Doug sighs. ‘Give me something I could, say, give to the committee when I put your name forward for the job.’

Mike feels more sweat roll down his back. Is Doug looking for the real answer, or the best answer? How long has it taken Mike to get this much done? There was still lots of snow on the mountains that first weekend he drove up to Kelowna. Once he gets going with something he usually does okay. He said the same things to himself all through his PhD. That project feels very far away. He hardly remembers the early days, just the end, when he’d lock himself in his office and eat Costco-sized bags of chips or that cheesy popcorn stuff (if he was feeling healthy). His keyboard was perpetually covered in powdered cheese. He’d go through a flat of energy drinks so quickly he’s probably permanently damaged his heart. His friends complained they never saw him, and his off-and-on girlfriend decided it was better not to see the project out until the end. *There’s not a lot to like about you right now*, she’d said before leaving his apartment for the last time. And she was right, he didn’t like himself much by the end either. He had hoped for better times for this project. He was older, wiser, maybe a little jaded from spending the last few years teaching the same class over and over again.

And then Sandy died.

Doug sighs again. ‘Why don’t you at least send me another chunk in a couple of weeks?’ He shuffles the pages, almost like he’s shaking them up, expecting the words to move around and form more articulate sentences, more critical ideas. ‘Just remember that this isn’t like the

PhD, Mikey.’ He wasn’t Mike’s supervisor until the end of the project. He only stepped in after Mike’s first supervisor dropped everything and ran off somewhere in pursuit of either food, prayer, or love. None of them were really sure. But with six months of work left, Mike was without a supervisor and no idea what to do next. Call-Me-Doug to the rescue. The project was submitted on time. Everyone said it was a miracle.

‘This isn’t like the PhD,’ Doug says again. ‘I’ve been holding your hand so far, but I won’t be able to do that forever if you want a job. You need to prove you can do this on your own. Can you?’

The first thought that pops into Mike’s head is his normal non-committal response. Has he always been like this? The stakes are higher now. He realises, as he sits in Doug’s office, that he doesn’t want to let Sandy down. He feels like he owes her something. This isn’t just about him. He says, ‘Yes, I can do this,’ and thinks he probably means it.

‘Good. Leave this with me’ Doug taps at the pages, ‘and I’ll get you some notes soon.’ He puts his glasses back onto the end of his nose.

Mike doesn’t move, unsure if the conversation has actually ended. He looks at his watch.

‘Don’t you have somewhere else to be?’ Doug says, looking up over his glasses.

Meeting over. Mike jumps up. ‘Right. Thanks for the feedback.’ He backs out of the room like he’s just had an audience with royalty and it would be rude to turn his back. The door clicks closed and he pauses in the empty hallway. Students rarely make it all the way up here (unless they’re looking for last-minute advice or divine inspiration for papers they haven’t yet written). It’s quiet. Message boards are free of the brightly coloured posters about sushi fundraisers, or pillow fight parties at Totem Park. He’s free to spin on his heels because he’s written something Doug approves of enough to look over and make proper notes. This feels like success.

Mike returns to the office and braces himself for Rog’s presence and the questions that will inevitably follow. But. Silence. There’s a note sitting on Mike’s desk: *Gone to meeting about job!!!*

Send me some pages! Happy to read ANYTHING!! Rog. Mike crumples the note up and tosses it into the recycling bin next to his desk. Comments from Rog are the last thing he needs. And now he knows for sure that his nemesis is also his competition. Great.

He returns to staring at his computer, but after a long time and nothing to show for it, he decides to head home. Maybe stop at COFFEA and do some work there. All the plants help him think better.

His phone starts ringing when he's midway through locking the door. He answers without looking, phone in one hand, keys held awkwardly in the lock.

'Hiya, Mikey.'

For a moment, he thinks it's Doug. Dad. 'Give me a sec, eh? I'm just leaving work.' Mike doesn't wait for the reply and tucks his phone into his pocket so he can make sure the door is locked and keys are returned to the pocket in his backpack. He's been locked out too many times, lost too many sets of keys. He starts down the hallway, Dad still waiting in his pocket. He takes longer than he needs to, waiting until he's on the stairs.

'Sorry, Dad. Can't multitask.'

'No worries, buddy. I've got all the time in the world now I'm retired.'

Mike imagines Dad sitting in the little bungalow back home, the little bungalow that's the mirror image of the one he walked away from more than twenty years ago.

'You still at work?' Dad's three hours ahead, probably already cooking his steak and potatoes for dinner, maybe preparing to spend the evening in his leather recliner, watching whatever sport is in season, a beer in hand.

'Nah, Dad, just leaving to meet a friend,' Mike lies. An act of self-preservation. He needs a reason for the conversation to end. He steps out of the building and is surprised by the chill in the air. He wishes he'd brought a warmer jacket.

'Oh, well I won't keep you. Just wanted to catch up.' Dad's idea of catching up is updating Mike on all the scores. Today he starts with the basketball.

The next bus isn't for five minutes, maybe longer. Traffic. Mike throws an affirmation in every now and again. Dad knows he doesn't have any interest in sports, but they've always got to go through the ritual.

'It's too bad you didn't carry on with the soccer. You could've been good,' Dad says once he's finished talking stats.

Mike takes a long breath. Dad's forgotten the reason for the end to the soccer. It wasn't because Mike didn't want to play, but because Dad didn't want to keep paying. *Do you realise how much it costs me for you to play eight months of the year? Where's that money coming from?* And Mum, still without a job in those days, had to agree. Mike never really imagined that the soccer would amount to much; he was hardly a Neymar or a Messi with a ball at his feet (names he's picked up via Dad's phone calls), but he'd like to have continued all the same. He missed the friendships, the camaraderie cemented at away games. After he quit the team, his friends would come back with stories about all the hilarious things that happened on game days. They'd preface their stories with *but you had to be there*. But he never said anything to Dad. And what would be the point now, however many years later? Instead he says, 'Yeah, I really liked playing.'

There's some shuffling, then the sound of feet against the floorboards. A creaking hinge. The sound of another beer being cracked open. 'C'mon, Mikey,' Dad says, 'you didn't just *like* playing. You loved it! I remember you trying to play out in the backyard even with a foot and a half of snow on the ground.' He laughs, that throaty laugh Mike remembers from when he was a kid, back when Dad was away working and they'd schedule calls a couple of times a week. There'd be stories about polar bears and rides to the site on skidoos because it had snowed so much the night before. Mike savoured every second of those calls. He'd never admit it now, but those stories were what got him into history. He wanted to know how people survived so far north. His mom bought him books about the search for the Northwest Passage, an illustrated history of Canada, the story of the last spike. The obsession never really faded.

The bus pulls up to the stop and the doors whoosh open. It's nearly full, standing room only, and the bus driver calls out a gruff, 'everyone to the back!' before letting Mike and the other waiting passengers on board. Mike finds a pole to cling onto and sets his feet in the bus stance. He hasn't said anything for a while and wonders if he could get away with hanging up now and texting *Sorry! My phone died*. Sometimes he wonders if the words would be easier to say if they were sitting in the same place, face to face. He'd look at Dad, with his equally blue eyes—everyone always said Mike inherited all of Dad's traits, except the hair. When Dad had any, it was a bright yellow blonde—and tell him that he'd been a shitty father, that he's continued to be a shitty father. Instead, he takes another deep breath and says, 'Sorry Dad, I'm just getting on the bus. Can I call you back later?'

Dad clears his throat. 'All right, Mikey, but make sure you do. We gotta talk about you coming for that visit.' The visit. A threat hanging over both of them.

'Sure Dad.' Mike ends the call.

Next to him, a much shorter, much younger undergrad and her overstuffed backpack says into her phone, 'I just gotta make it through these next fifteen days and then I can sleep. Just gotta keep going.'

Mike wants to tell her she'll be okay, that she'll make it through. But when their eyes meet—her backpack wedged into his side, the corner of what's probably a giant bio or chem textbook poking through the fabric—she doesn't smile back at him, she scowls.

No, he thinks, he's not particularly happy either. The prospect of going back to Ontario for a visit with Dad makes his stomach feel like he's dropped three stories in the elevators he refuses to take. If only his relationship with Dad wasn't built on avoidance and denial. If only they were actually able to talk about things.

Every time Mike answers Dad's calls, he feels like that hurt pre-teen sits on his shoulder and tells him to just be angry, to just say *Dad, you let me down when you left us. Dad, I'm still mad at you. Dad, part of me will always resent you*. But then he imagines Dad sitting alone in the sad house

that kind of looks like the one he abandoned and Mike just feels bad for him. It's guilt that keeps him from saying anything real.

The bus comes out of the green of University Boulevard and crosses Blanca Street. There, traffic is backed up down West 10th. They crawl across intersections, lights reflecting off street signs with names like Tolmie and Sasamat. Sasamat, probably from the Salishan *Tsaa-tsmat*, cool place. There's a lake in Port Moody with the same name. He went out there, once. A footbridge stretched out across the still surface of the water, and it was early enough that the lake was deserted save a few fishermen, up to their waists in the cold water. Bright yellow hip waders glowing. He thought he almost missed it, fishing. He remembered when that was his happy place. He almost wished he still had his kit, that he hadn't said, *just get rid of it, I don't want to see it again*, when Mom was cleaning out the garage many years earlier.

But he had.

One morning not that long ago, he'd set out for a hike across Belcarra with Darren and Stacy. They lingered behind him, midway across the bridge, taking photos he knew they'd rapidly post on their joint Instagram. They used to have a travel blog, and that hike became a post, hashtagged *hiddengem*. He'd just wanted the peace of the forest, the crunch of brush underfoot, the mountains all around, ready to swallow up anyone who strayed from the path. Darren and Stacy used to send him postcards from places like the Maldives—a photo of bright blue water and the words WISH YOU WERE HERE written in Stacy's loopy handwriting. Now, Stacy blogs about babies. But they'd kept up the postcards, sending one from Grouse Mountain, a photo of two bears wrestling. On the back, Stacy had written *Cheer up, you've been miserable lately and we thought you needed to know that. We love you. Get over her.*

Sara.

The bus turns left onto West Broadway—still packed full of people, no longer picking up passengers. He gets off across the street from the Persian market. Sara always liked to poke around in there, buying spices like Baharat or Turkish saffron packed into tiny jars. Sara driving

up the Coquihalla that first time, gunning the engine up the hills, barely slowing down around the long curves. She'd brought a playlist, of course, an overwhelming collection of Backstreet Boys songs and she sang along, slightly out of tune and off time. She'd look over at him, grimacing, because he wasn't joining in. He feigned enthusiasm on the choruses, hoping to appease her.

He's been thinking about her less these past few weeks. She isn't the first thing that comes to mind when he's alone at home, or when he's walking home at the end of the day. The project. Sandy's brief time in his life. The leaky roof. The job. Haley Dunbar. He pulls his phone from his pocket. They've been texting since that first meeting when he made her cry. They've scheduled another meeting, and while she says she won't cry, he's worried. Is this the effect he has on women now?

Chapter Ten

The first thing Haley does when she gets home from meeting Mike Dunbar is crawl under the duvet. Safe in her blanket-cave, she realises that she's not crying anymore, she's just panting from exertion. Running home does that to you. She takes some deep breaths and manages to steady herself, then curls into foetal position and reaches for a pillow to hug. She replays the conversation in her head, pausing at the specific moments that turned her into someone who cries in cafés. Her phone buzzes in her pocket. *Haley, I'm so sorry to have upset you. I hope you're okay. Maybe we can meet again? Or even talk on the phone? Mike.* If she were still following her original plan, it would be easy to blame the historian for the tears. She'd say that he provoked her by asking deeply personal questions, questions that poked at raw emotions. But looking back at the conversation, even from her position under the duvet, she can recognise that *she* was the one asking the questions. And all he did was say he'd found Grandpa's website. And sent an email.

The answer to the big mystery is that Mum *chose* to be in touch with Mike. She actively decided that she wanted to devote the little time she had left to helping a historian with a research project dedicated to a man long dead. Haley thinks back to the moment before she started crying. That story Mum told her when she was sick. *Once upon a time...* Lots of Mum's stories started like that. As if they were fairy tales. Now, Haley snuggles closer to her pillow and tries to imagine JD's world, the world Mike is trying to figure out too, a world without hipster cafés with plant walls or vegan 'milk'. Once upon a time, it might have been easier for her to picture a place like Kelowna and strip it back to how it once was, the mountains, the lake, the bright blue sky on a sunny day. To picture those elements without the high-rises and jet skis and streetlights. So often, Mum would end stories with the question *can you imagine?* And no, Haley couldn't. She still can't.

She reads Mike's email again. Maybe he isn't the enemy. But that doesn't mean she shouldn't know what he's writing about. Somebody needs to make sure he doesn't write

something terrible about the family. Decide, let's say, once and for all, that JD really was an arsonist. Auntie Karen would be devastated.

Mike, she emails back, *I'm okay, I think I'm just processing everything and didn't realise how talking about my mum would make me feel. I'd still like to be involved and I'm happy to meet again.* She signs off with her phone number. They can meet in COFFEA again, she won't judge him for being *kind of* a vegan, and it won't end with her running out in tears. Probably. She crawls out from underneath the duvet and leans back against the pillows. As predicted, there's been no sign of Alex. Chances are he won't come back until he knows she's not going to be there. He'll be waiting around the corner, watching as she turns down West Broadway. She picks up the phone again. *Meeting ended in tears. From me. Are you in Van?* she types to Tara. With all the house stuff it seems like Tara and Kevin are in Merritt more than Vancouver, but are also still paying a ridiculous amount for a place in Mount Pleasant. Just because they made an offer doesn't mean they'll get the house. Maybe the deal will fall through and they'll have to keep looking. She doesn't want to crush their dreams (plus, it's not *really* Tara's dream), but she really doesn't want Tara to move away after they've only just reconnected.

I'm in Van! Want to go for a wander?

*

Haley doesn't get home until late on Saturday night. The wander turned into window shopping along 4th Avenue, and then at least an hour spent looking at everything in Ming Wo, homeware shop of dreams. Tara kept saying *I'm thinking that this colour* and she'd hold something up, like a pale pink teapot, or a turquoise salad bowl, *could be the inspiration for the living room.* And then coffee and a snack, more shopping (no longer window), and an extended dinner and drinks at Colony.

'Do you realise,' Tara said halfway through her third Bellini of the evening, 'that we've *never* done this before?'

She was right. Their friendship didn't make it to nineteen. Any drinking they did was illegal, and in significantly less glamorous locations than a trendy Vancouver bar.

Now, Haley flips the lights on in the kitchen and pours a glass of water. Maybe she needs to take something to pre-empt the hangover. She doesn't remember the last time she drank so much. She'd barely finish a drink before Tara was waving the server over and asking for another round. 'C'mon,' she said, we're celebrating!' It was possible that she had forgotten the reason why they started drinking in the first place.

Glass of water in one hand, a couple of pills in the other, Haley tilts her head back and pours both down, for dramatic effect, and then heads for the couch. She pulls up the listing for the house Kevin and Tara have made an offer on. '*The* house?' she asked towards the end of the night, 'As in, *the* house you've been looking for that makes all other houses look like rundown shacks?'

'Well,' Tara said into her glass, 'maybe not *the* house, but it is *a* house, and it's where Kevin wants to be.'

'Is it where you want to be?' Earlier in the evening, Haley had been more diplomatic, asking the question without actually asking, trying to get Tara to list all of the reasons why the place was right for them. But at the end of the night she stopped being subtle. 'Would you really want to leave all of this,' she spun around in her seat and pointed at the bar, all the people around them, the drinks and plate of nachos they ordered once they realised they were hungry again, 'to go live in *Merritt*?'

Tara took a long time before saying something like, 'Merritt has good things about it too?' And because it was a question, they tried to come up with a list of good things.

The list was very short.

Haley clicks through the photos again. The place makes her think of old people: lazy boy recliners. Doilies. Workout equipment with boxes piled on top. A craft room with a powered magnifying glass. Nothing in the house fits with Tara's moodboard. Maybe you do get more for your money, but are the things you're getting the things you want? Wandering around today

made Haley remember why she wanted to be in the city. You just can't do the same things in a place like Merritt.

Then she told Tara about the potential job in Kelowna. 'It's not a sure thing,' she'd said because Tara had started bouncing around in her seat, 'but it's a possibility.'

'But it's a possibility!' Tara echoed.

It was. It still is, though the other library hasn't put the job post out. It would mean more money than Haley can ever hope to make at her branch (unless she waits until Linda retires, or kills Connie, who has said, on multiple occasions, that she'll let Haley be her boss *over her dead body*). Kelowna, unlike Merritt, has something resembling a downtown. In some ways, with the competing high rises and the crazy expensive (even Michelin star) restaurants, Kelowna has echoes of a real city. Just in miniature. This plan used to feel like it had so much more behind it, back when Alex was involved and talking about doing a PhD at the university. *Smaller cohorts so more access to labs, facilities, supervisors!* He'd been so animated, even talking about becoming an *outdoor person. I've always wanted to pick up mountain biking.* They'd spent an afternoon looking up things like the Kettle Valley Rail Trail with its hundred-plus-year-old trestle bridges, the bright aqua Kalamalka Lake on the road to Vernon, finding reviews of local cafés, like the one in the old train station where they sold incredible looking donuts on Donut Fridays.

Haley looks across the dark room in the direction of the front door. If Alex were to walk in, right now, apologise for being an asshole, explain exactly what was going on with him (that he really just was under so much pressure, had been sleeping in the office, and was worried about burning out), and actually properly ask her how she was doing, what would she say? Would they be able to sort things out? They'd been through rough patches before: the relationship wasn't perfect. *But no relationship is. That's part of the fun. Dealing with all the shit-bitteth-the-fan moments and still realising that you wouldn't want to deal with that shit with anyone else.*

Maybe Alex isn't that person anymore.

*

On Sunday morning, Haley wakes up and rolls over; Alex's side of the bed is still warm. She sits up, rubs her eyes, and is surprised to find that she feels absolutely fine. No evidence of the lost-count-at-four cocktails from the previous evening. No evidence of Alex, either. He must have just left. And it's pouring. The rain she's been waiting for all week is thundering down, bouncing off the windows and the sidewalks, accumulating in the massive potholes on Bayswater. And yet another day will go by and nobody will come to fix them. The rain, and life, if she's honest, makes her contemplate pulling the duvet over her head (again) and retreating. Who's there to tell her that isn't exactly what she needs right now? The question is rhetorical, but life gives her some kind of answer when her phone starts ringing.

Home flashes up on the screen. 'Hi Dad.' He so rarely ever calls, and recently so many of his calls have been full of bad news. She sits up and clutches onto her pillow, wondering what else she could lose.

'Hi Haley,' he says eventually, slowly. There's the sound of country music in the background. But it sounds too echoey to be from the house; he's probably out in the shop, calling from the ancient bright yellow corded phone hung up above the work bench.

'Everything okay?' Haley prompts. If it is bad news, she'd rather he just got it over with.

'Sure,' he says, 'not much going on here now.'

'And you're okay?' How many phone calls are they away from him saying that he's gotten a bad diagnosis and doesn't know how much time he has left? He's never been one for *self-care*, never taken vitamins, or put any particular thought into a workout regimen. But he's also the one who manages to escape colds and flu each year. *An iron constitution, that one.*

'Oh yep, I'm fine enough.'

Haley balls up her fist. What does that actually mean? And would he actually tell her if he was, let's say, at death's door?

'Workin' on a few things for a few people,' he contributes without being asked.

'What kind of things?'

‘Oh you know, a few leaking washing machines, a jammed up lawnmower, that old Mustang the Carey boys still drive around in.’ He pauses and shuffles around a bit and then says, ‘between you and me, I don’t know why they want to fix it. It’s a rust bucket. Everything needs fixin’ as far as I can tell.’

Is this the most Dad has said over the phone...ever? She can’t remember conversations lasting very long before he was saying *okay, enough from me, I’ll pass you over to your mother now*, even when all he’d said was hello and asked how she was.

‘You plannin’ to come back up soon?’ The question has very little tone.

‘Do you need me to come back up?’ Maybe this is when he springs the bad news on her.

‘No, no, nothin’ happenin’ here, just wondered. Thought we might go fishin’ some time.’ He clears his throat. ‘I hear there might be a job for you up this way.’

‘Where did you hear that?’

‘Your auntie mentioned it.’

Haley rolls her eyes. She texted Karen and told her not to say anything until the interview was definitely happening. And Karen had said it was a good idea. Didn’t want to get Dad excited about something that wasn’t going to happen. Haley should’ve known better: Mum always said Karen couldn’t keep a secret.

‘Any news? I know you were looking at some houses with Bill last time you were here.’

‘No news, Dad. I promise I’ll let you know as soon as anything changes.’

‘And how’s Alex?’ The tone shifts slightly. Dad has never really gotten along with Alex (not that they’ve had many opportunities to spend much time together). *He’s a city boy; he likes city things.*

Haley wishes she could unleash like she would’ve with Mum, but instead says, ‘he’s fine.’ This isn’t a conversation for them. She goes to Dad when she needs advice about the changes she should make to her car insurance, or if something breaks down at home. They don’t do deep or emotional.

Silence. Then Dad says, 'I'll let you go now. You come home when you can.'

'I will. Love you,' she holds the phone a little tighter. These conversations, such as they are, feel so like they're so much more important now.

'You too,' he says. And then he's away.

She leans into the pillows, the phone still in her hands. It's always been like this, but she's never wanted to change things. He's always been there. Dad's just not the one to fill the space Mum took up. He just can't. Sometimes Alex says that what Dad needs is to speak to someone, a professional, that is, to get him to open up, explain why he's so close with his emotions. But Dad's just always been that. He was shy even in the mullet and motorcycle days. His badass look kind of made up for all the things he didn't say.

She imagines them out on the lake: that's what he likes best, those times when you want to be silent because you're listening for other things.

Her phone pings. *Hey there- just thought I'd check and see how you're doing, Mike.* Plus a smiley face. It's a nice sentiment, checking in, even if the 'hey there' rings in her ears like a phrase from a bad pop song. She doesn't know if there's much she can share that will be particularly illuminating to his project.

Haley's stomach rumbles. Still in pyjamas, she heads into the kitchen and opens the fridge. A glass of juice, first, and then maybe some cereal. She looks at the clock on the microwave. Just past noon. Maybe skip the cereal. She sits down at the island and wraps a hand around the cold glass. One conversation with Mike has her remembering stuff she hasn't thought about in ages. Like when she was a kid and both Mum and Dad were working, and Grandpa would be waiting for her after school. Diesel engine rumbling as he idled. She'd climb in (for a long time, actually needing to climb to get into the big blue pickup) and he'd be sitting with a copy of the local paper propped up against the steering wheel, radio tuned to the AM news station. He'd pass the paper over and she'd fold it up as they drove away. No words necessary. She'd talk about her day, never really noticing his silence. That was her time to tell

stories. And when they were at his house, Haley at her spot at the island just below where the beams for the kitchen and living room converged, Grandpa's voice would fill the entire space. She'd sit with a glass of juice, feet dangling above the ground, and he'd tell her stories as he made her a grilled cheese sandwich with ham, salsa, and those individually wrapped cheese slices—he always said they melted best. Even at six or seven, she never complained that the salsa was too spicy, and she never requested just cheese. Most times, she asked for more, Grandpa surrendering a triangle of his own sandwich. *Grandpa's Grill open again?*

They'd sit there for ages, Grandpa telling her about when he worked for the telephone company, his journeys up and down the Nicola Valley, the Similkameen, up to Prince George, Telegraph Creek, and a few times to Whitehorse, Destruction Bay, and on to Anchorage, Alaska. He'd take out his atlas—because this was a time before Internet searches and satellite view maps—and the big book would cover the entire kitchen table. He'd trace his routes, pointing out the lakes he'd stop at, his favourite spots to fish.

Haley's stomach rumbles again. She goes back to the fridge. Jalapeno Havarti. Salsa. She'll make a grilled cheese—not Grandpa's Grill quality, but close enough to satisfy her stomach.

Did Grandpa ever head east? Did he even have a passport? After Grandma died when Haley was just little, everyone said Grandpa's world got smaller and smaller. His house up the 5A, almost as far as Mammette Lake, that was his refuge. He puttered around in his garden, read the local newspaper, listened to classical music, and most of his trips out were only as far as Haley's school. When the Timmie's opened, he'd sometimes go there for a bowl of soup and a catch up with the other old-timers.

She returns to the counter with her sandwich. The first bite is gooey, peppery cheese and perfectly toasted bread. Tasty enough to satisfy a picky stomach. She opens her laptop and one-finger types 'condos for sale+Kelowna'. It's weird to think that Grandpa spent so much time there, working on an orchard, and now she's thinking of moving back. He sold up in the 1970s,

when everyone else did because the property was a hot commodity. That and he probably didn't want to watch as the land he grew up on got paved over for the arterial highway that cuts through the middle of the city. Sometimes, when they went to Orchard Park, Mum would sit down on a bench and say something like *Maybe this is where Grandpa had a tire swing. What do you think? Does it look swingy?* Then she'd make a fuss, spinning in circles when they were in the middle of one of Haley's favourite stores, saying *Or maybe it was here?* And Haley would just want to disappear.

Sandwich done, she realises that the reason why the photos of the condo she's looking at look blurry is because she's crying again. Not like before. Now, the tears slide down her cheeks like raindrops on a windshield and she doesn't bother to flick them away. If only Mum were here, looking over her shoulder, pointing out every flaw, every bad paint colour, every sunshine ceiling yet to be replaced. But she'd see the potential, too. When they bought the Vancouver place it was all 1990s décor and weird colours in each room. Now it may not be a palace, but it's been a place Haley has called Home number two of two for the last however many years. When the idea of moving back home, whether that was somewhere in Merritt, Kelowna, even Penticton, first came up, it always came packaged up with the idea of a career, husband, kids (around or on their way). If she was going to move back home and Alex were to move to the Interior, it would probably be to stay. They were talking Forever. She picks up her phone.

A response, moments later. *Super busy. Not sure when I'll be able to leave.*

She watches the cursor flash. The poo emoji feels like the response (and nothing but the poo emoji). But that probably isn't the mature or productive thing to do. *You need to call out their bullshit*, Mum would say on the subject of men, *call it out or they'll get away with it forever.* But maybe Mum isn't right this time. She scrolls down to the thread of messages from Mike. *It would be nice if there could be a next time!*, he texted. The exclamation mark. Someone who wants to speak to her, who thinks what she has to say is interesting. *How about tomorrow? 5ish at COFFEA?*

Sounds great. See you then.

She smiles at her phone, looking like the emoji with the red cheeks.

Then she cooks up a big pot of couscous, throws a bunch of veggies from the bottom of the crisper into some olive oil and garlic and calls it dinner. There's even enough for leftovers.

She feels like she's winning.

*

After work, Haley turns the corner and walks towards COFFEA. It's quiet inside, just a few students camped out at the back of the café, laptops open and headphones on. Again, her favourite table is empty and waiting. Darren waves at her from behind the bar. Today he's wearing a mustard orange toque. Does he have a drawer full of different colours? Or a partnership with a company that makes them? One day she'll ask.

'You having the regular?'

She shakes her head. 'Not yet. I'm meeting someone.' She sits down and arranges her skirt around her, brushing out any creases. She pulls her notebook from her bag and opens to the page she filled earlier with another list of questions to put to Mike Dunbar. She decided over the course of the day that she would ask very specific questions, and those specific questions would help to keep the conversation from getting too deep.

1. *What are your research aims? What do you intend on doing once the work is finished? (And how will you know it's finished?)*
2. *What information did my mum provide and how will you credit her?*

None of these questions make her want to cry.

She's tracing over the numbers when the café bell rings and Mike walks in. She closes the notebook as he gives a little wave before heading over to the table.

'How's it going?' he asks and he puts his bag onto the chair, just like last time. 'Have you ordered already?'

She shakes her head. 'I figured I'd be polite and wait.'

'Thanks. Appreciate that. Latte? With regular milk?'

‘That’s right.’ He can at least get her a coffee.

‘Cool.’

Again, she watches as he heads up to the bar. She hears him order: latte, oat latte, vegan brownie, he turns and smiles at her. Then, while Darren is making the coffee, Mike leans over the counter, like he needs to be involved in each step of the process.

‘You help make the drinks?’ she asks when he comes back to the table.

‘Nah,’ he says and then pauses like he’s going to say something. Instead, he leans down and retrieves the black notebook, the ballpoint pen and sets up just like he did the previous time.

‘I came up with a list of questions to ask.’

‘I did too.’

They both open their notebooks. Mike’s is full of upside-down chicken scratch and little doodles fill the margins. The list extends onto a second page. Which is intimidating.

‘Do you want to start?’ he asks.

‘Um,’ Haley looks at her list.

‘How about I’ll start,’ Darren says as he carries a tray with their order over, ‘my question is how do you two know each other?’

‘Haley is helping with my project. Remember? I told you.’ The two men exchange glances.

Darren looks confused for a moment. ‘Oh. Right.’ He nods at Mike.

A weird response. What have they been saying about her? Calm and cool. ‘And how do you guys know each other?’ she asks in the same tone.

‘He’s my best customer,’ Darren says, ‘well, kind of. He’s gotten a lot of free coffee over the years.’

‘I was going to say he’s my best friend. But sure, I’ll take customer.’

‘Okay,’ Darren rolls his eyes, ‘we’ve known each other for years.’ He empties the contents of the tray onto the table, not spilling a drop. ‘He’s basically family.’

‘Godparent to the future offspring.’ Mike says.

‘Maybe.’

‘Um.’

Then Darren laughs. ‘Kidding. I’ll leave you to talk. But just remember,’ he points a finger at Mike, ‘you remember that I’m definitely closing at seven tonight. As in, going to be ready to walk out the door and lock up at six fifty-nine.’

Haley looks at her phone. Nearly half past five now and they haven’t started talking about Mike’s project. She clears her throat and opens her notebook. ‘So,’ she says, ‘I wanted to ask you some specific questions. Starting with your research aims.’ The question sounds so formal. Maybe that’s okay.

Mike takes a sip from his coffee. ‘Research aims. Sure. Why don’t I just send you a copy of my research proposal? It’s not the most exciting read in the world, but it will answer all of your questions.’

She shifts on the wooden bench. ‘Um, I guess that works.’ She scans through her list again. ‘Next question: what information did my mum provide and how will you credit her?’ Again, the question sounds so formal, almost forceful.

‘Well, I told her she’d get a mention in the acknowledgments. And I’m of course referencing any outside sources,’ he says.

Of course, she nods. He’s stating the obvious.

‘As for what information she provided me with, I feel like it would be better to again just show you the work. I don’t know that I asked all that many specific questions. Aside from the easy ones like when and where was JD born, when did he arrive in BC.’ He counts the questions on his fingers.

But Haley doesn’t know the answers to any of these ‘easy’ questions. Shouldn’t she? ‘So do you know exactly when he arrived in BC?’ And before he can answer she says, ‘Mum always said he was a teenager. *Haley*, she’d say when she was telling me off for, I don’t know, not

putting my laundry away, *you know that your great-great-great-grandfather was the same age as you when he left home? No Mum to put his clothes away.*'

Mike laughs. 'She wasn't wrong.'

'And she'd carry on, saying that I was lucky to live in a warm house with my own room because *when JD arrived, he slept outside with all the animals and only the clothes on his back to keep him warm.*' Haley's Mum-voice sounds different from normal. All the stories over the years, but how many of them were true? How much 'history' did Mum make up just to teach Haley lessons? How much of those stories beginning with *once upon a time* were really fairy tales? She slumps back in her seat. 'I'm not really sure I can help you.'

Mike frowns. 'Don't say that. I think these stories are so interesting. They're like folk stories.'

'But this is *my* family. And I don't know the answers to your easy questions.' Who is the resentment she feels for? For Mike, for knowing the answers, or for her own family, who never thought to tell her these things?

Mike doesn't say anything for a while. They just sit there listening to Darren talking to someone at the bar, and the soft hum of the background music. Then Mike pushes the plate with his brownie across the table. 'I know it's vegan. But you can't tell.' He puts the fork down next to her cup.

It sits in front of her, an offering, a thick slab of chocolate on a black china plate. A bit of sea salt on top. *Go on, try it. A taste isn't going to hurt anyone.* She takes a deep breath and cuts into it with the side of her fork. Crumbs fly away. 'I'm not sure I've ever had a vegan brownie before.' She places the morsel on her mouth, hesitant. She expects it to be dry, but it's not; the brownie is rich and creamy, with the perfect amount of sea salt to balance out the sweetness of the chocolate. Is it vegan? Really? 'What makes this vegan?' she asks with her mouth still full of chocolate.

Mike shrugs. 'I don't know. Magic?'

She goes back for a second piece.

Chapter Eleven

Haley wanders through the produce aisle, rows of pallets piled high with precarious pyramids of apples, oranges, bananas, rock-hard avocados. She hadn't been prepared to run into Mike after the Feminist Book Club was unceremoniously cancelled moments before starting. Linda got another GRANDMA SOS message from her daughter and rushed off to Port Moody. And then Haley planned to spend her Friday evening alone at home, probably binge watching until Netflix asked her if she was alive. And then the rain. She hadn't been prepared for that, either, so she'd waited under the awning at the Persian market, safe next to the crates full of lemons, limes, bright red apples. She was going to just wait it out.

She passes through to the veggies, where stacks of potatoes look about to escape, a few rogues already forgotten on the ground. The sprinklers come on as she goes past rows of fresh herbs, bundles of spinach, carrots still with their leafy tops dusted with dirt that quickly turns to mud. Earlier, she'd spotted Mike coming down the street, his hood up, glasses in hand. His hair was plastered to his forehead. She'd given a wave and wondered if he'd even see her.

Her shopping cart remains empty because she doesn't know what she wants, but going down the aisles, vaguely hearing the tinny grocery store music, watching others fill their carts and baskets, is cathartic. *Whenever I'm feeling down or a little stressed, I just wander the grocery store. And when I come out, usually with a bag full of shit I shouldn't eat, I feel better. I just always feel better,* Mum would say and shrug, like it didn't matter why she was feeling bad. They didn't ever really talk about how Mum felt about her diagnosis, not at the end. At that point, a walk around Extra Foods wasn't going to cure cancer.

Earlier, it was Mike who reminded her that it had been a month. *A month since...?* She'd asked as they sat in the café, drying off; it seemed like the most logical thing to do when the rain was only getting heavier, the clouds more ominous. And then he'd asked her how she was doing.

How is she doing? Haley wanders over to the bulk section, the rows of plastic dispensers full of chocolate chips of varying quality, oat flakes, dried pasta, herbs, flours. One month since

they lost Mum. Eternity and yesterday all at the same time. She'd told Mike about the notifications. All the people telling her how sorry they are. *Yeab, that's weird*, he'd agreed. She stops for a moment and tries to visualise the cupboards: did she leave the olive oil nearly empty? If she wanted to make spaghetti, how many cans of tomatoes are left, and is there any pasta? Meal planning has never been something she's been good at, so when Alex said that he followed a lot of food accounts on social media and liked to cook, she thought she'd hit the jackpot. Alex, who kept saying things like, *All those people sending you messages are grieving, Haley*. And, in his best teacher-voice, *it gives them space to say things that make them feel better*. But she didn't feel better.

She wonders if Mike cooks. It's not a subject they've managed to cover yet. Even today, when it feels like they talked about everything *but* his project. Maybe he's like Dad, who can cook a couple of things pretty well, but is better left to barbecuing. She turns down the snack aisle, thinking of the Friday nights when they'd stock up on All Dressed chips and bags of gummy candies. Movie nights were never complete without a big bottle of root beer and a cheesy romcom Dad always fell asleep midway through. Haley grabs a bag of chips, squeezing gently to make sure the chips aren't all broken inside. She's given up the pop and candy (mostly because they changed the recipe ages ago, to Mum's disgust), but she can't give up the All Dressed chips. The bag looks lonely in the otherwise empty cart.

Haley gets home with a bag of chips, a frozen lasagne (again), a bag of salad, and a bunch of bananas. Sorted. Sort of. She struggles to find her keys, now buried underneath her shopping. The flyer for the unit for sale is gone from the memo board in the hallway. It's probably already sold. She wonders how long it would take to sell her place. She'll take a look at listings while she's eating more than half the lasagne, drinking a glass of wine. Then maybe she'll catch up with Tara. Still no news about the house. The longer it takes, the more Haley crosses her fingers and hopes it doesn't go through.

She opens the door and light floods the hallway. All the lights are on which can only mean one thing: Alex is at home. She shuffles into the hallway with her hands full and awkwardly closes the door behind her.

Alex is sitting at the counter, with one of his black, hard cover notebooks, a bottle of the cheap beer he only drinks when he's annoyed, and his laptop.

'I didn't realise you were going to be here,' she says in what she hopes is a neutral tone, 'so I didn't get much for dinner.' She unloads her bag, feeling silly as she puts her purchases into the fridge. She leaves the bag of chips on the counter. Alex hates All Dressed. Normally he complains, asks why she didn't get the sour cream and onion ones he says are superior.

But he doesn't say anything. He rapidly types something without looking at the screen. Then he writes something in his notebook.

She continues her routine, putting her phone down on the counter, unpacking her lunch bag, loading the containers into the dishwasher, shaking the few remaining drops of water from her water bottle. The phone starts to vibrate as Tara (notorious for texting one message per line) finally responds. Can Alex read the previews upside down? He looks at the computer and pretends like he isn't noticing. Maybe he isn't noticing. Maybe he really doesn't care. On the other hand, the rapid typing and ignoring act feels like a passive aggressive move. He's goading her into saying something. Well, two can play at that game. She reaches for her phone and leans against the counter, reading Tara's response. *No real news about the house. Sellers dragging their feet a bit because they want longer closing dates. Don't think they've found a place to go to yet. Also can't believe you were out with Prof M again!!! Is this becoming a thing?*

At some point, she'd told Tara she was into Mike's use of emojis. The phone pings again. *It's really not about the emojis anymore!!!*

She puts the phone down. Reading the messages hasn't been the power move she thought it was going to be. And it's just made her think about Mike. In this moment, she feels guilty about him. She starts counting down from ten. She hadn't planned on meeting him. She

looks up and sees Alex writing in his notebook. That tiny, painfully neat handwriting, everything capitalised. It used to make her cringe, seeing those words shouting at her (quietly, because the letters were so small) from a birthday card, or a note left on the kitchen counter. Is he writing about her? There was that time she found one of the notebooks left open on the kitchen counter: CASE 27- LAUGHED AT CIRCUMSTANCES OF GRANDFATHER'S DEATH. No identifiers saying that it was her except for the memory of the day she found out that Grandpa was gone. They were sitting at the kitchen counter, Alex holding her hand, and she'd been unable to contain her laughter. What did that say about her? But earlier, she'd ended up telling Mike about Grandpa. *He was still taking walks, still making a morning pilgrimage to Timmies for a double-double and a blueberry muffin. Then a heart attack. It was my dad who found him, his body splayed out next to the over-flowing squash patches. And there were squashes squashed all around him, like he'd fallen onto the squashes.*

Mike had laughed. *Squashed squashes.* And then put up his hand, apologising. *I'm sorry, that's just...*

I know. And she'd laughed too.

'Where were you this afternoon?' Alex asks. He closes his laptop for extra emphasis.

'Well, I had that meeting for work-'

'For the Feminist Book Club,' he cuts in.

She nods. 'But it got cancelled. So I went for coffee.' No sense in lying. And besides, she doesn't have anything to hide. All they did was sit there and talk.

'Alone?'

The question feels pointed, practically an accusation. She narrows her eyes. 'No,' she says slowly, 'I ran into a friend.'

'Which friend? Not anyone I know.'

The statement throws her.

‘Because I saw you. I thought I’d go pick up some groceries after work and then I saw you.’

She wants to say, so? So what if you saw me? What was she doing, just sitting there, talking about Mike’s boss, Call-Me-Doug, bugging Dakota about the new blue hair, both lamenting the fact that the young barista seemed to be getting progressively worse at his job. But there was the moment Mike said, *I’m a little intimidated by you*, and he’d looked at her over his glasses. Really looked.

‘Who were you with?’

‘So dramatic,’ she mutters before she can stop herself.

‘Which friend? He didn’t look like anyone I recognise. And I think I know most of your friends.’

He might have said *because you don’t have any of your own friends*. ‘A new friend.’

‘Which new friend? You looked pretty cozy.’

Cozy? They were sitting on opposite sides of the table. There was no touching (except for a weird hug, right at the end). What’s Alex talking about?

‘So, who is he?’

But she has nothing to hide. ‘He’s a historian,’ she explains, ‘writing a project about JD Ballantyne. Pioneers in Kelowna, that kind of stuff. I’ve got his card somewhere, if you need proof.’ She picks up her bag and starts rooting around.

Alex crosses his arms. ‘He didn’t look like a historian.’

‘What do historians look like?’ She remembers her initial assumptions, that Mike would be some balding, middle-aged guy who wore corduroy blazers with elbow patches.

Alex shrugs. He looks down at his feet. Yellow hamburger socks. He hates those socks. He’s hit the bottom of his sock drawer.

‘I’m helping with the project,’ she says, ‘with the family stuff.’

Alex narrows his eyes. ‘Why does he need your help?’

The question hits like another accusation. Why does he need *your* help? As in, what could you possibly have to offer anyone? ‘Why are we doing this, Alex?’ she says, throwing her bag back onto the floor. ‘What’s the point?’

‘You’re right. What is the point?’ And then, she watches him gather his things up, pack them into his bag, and say, ‘I’m going back to the office. Too much to do.’ No explanation about when he’ll be back, or if she should expect to see him again this evening.

She stands there in the kitchen for a while, replaying the whole scene. He’s never been jealous before, never accused her of anything when they’ve fought in the past. He always stays so calm, like he’s read about in his books. He asks questions in a way that make you answer even when you don’t want to. This is something different. She keeps hearing him say *why does he need your help?* and then she thinks about what she’s actually contributed so far. Almost nothing. So what is the point of the long conversations at COFFEA? She isn’t Mum, doesn’t have a funny anecdote to finish every conversation, or a poignant comment about the way things are. She doesn’t find the perfect gif to send at the end of an online chat. She doesn’t have all the answers, and she definitely doesn’t pretend like it’s okay that she doesn’t. She will never fill a Mum-shaped void in anyone’s life.

Chapter Twelve

Mike stands in the hall dripping from yet another torrential downpour, searching for his keys. The apartment is dark except for the green glow from the appliances in the kitchen. He forgot to open the blinds before leaving in the morning. He hates this place in the dark. He flips the lights on in the hall and the light glares off the white walls and dark floor. He's not so fond of it with the lights on, either. There was a time, a year ago, even half a year ago, when Sara was still around and the place felt different. He never noticed how much of her life moved into the apartment until it was all gone. His attempts to make the place feel like home look out of place: a glass vase he found from a thrift shop. He was going to buy fresh flowers to make the place brighter, like his mom said. He remembered again, a week or so ago. He'd been at Whole Foods deliberating between organic bananas (slightly too green), or non-organic bananas (yellow, but maybe too yellow), and he'd seen a bouquet of tulips. He'd walked home, his organic bananas packed into one of his cloth bags, the flowers in his hand. People smiled at him. *Anw, look at that nice man taking flowers home to his honey.* Instead, he'd come home to an empty apartment, plonked the tulips into the vase and immediately watched them droop. Now they're just floppy stalks surrounded by decaying petals.

He drops his stuff in a heap next to the closet. His first thought is a shower, but then he remembers about the essays. The essays: printed while thinking of his eyes rather than the environment. The guilt piled up as fast as the essays did. Three classes of thirty students (if he's lucky, some of them don't turn anything in), ten pages each, stacks of shit. He placed the finished documents onto the desk with a satisfying *thunk*.

What if the essays really are ruined? He opens the backpack, slowly, with his eyes half-closed, and then remembers that he'd had the foresight to put the stack of papers into separate plastic bags—more to keep them organised than because he thought it would start to pour just as he got off the bus. The bags are a bit damp, but inside, everything looks perfect. Well, not really perfect. A quick flip through the pages reveals typos, incorrectly formatted citations, and a

paraphrase that looks like someone has taken a thesaurus to each word. All common occurrences in first year papers. He lines the bags up along the wall, like he does when trying to remind himself to take out the garbage.

Damp clothes next. Everything sticks to his skin, and after walking and warming up a little, he feels like he's living in a swamp. He peels everything off in the hallway, throwing it all on the tile floor in the bathroom. Being naked in the hallway reminds him of the brief period of his life—right after he first signed the lease—when he thought he'd spend much of his time at home nude. It was the first time he could afford to live alone. Alone (nude or clothed) got boring pretty damn fast. He hates seeing his own stupid face flashed back in warped reflections. Mirrors, shining surfaces, even the kettle. That reflection is pale but freckled, even more freckled when the sun comes out. Coarse, dark hair. A predisposition towards being skinny—though he always puts on muscle when he actually commits to going to the gym. It's just the commitment part he has difficulty with. He heads into his room, taking care not to look at himself in the mirrored closet door. He grabs some clean clothes and goes back into the bathroom for a shower.

Later, when he's clean, dry, and fully clothed, he stands in the tiny kitchen and pushes some pasta around in a pot of boiling water. He's remembering cooking with Sara, how small the place felt when she was there, giving him instructions, her voice competing against the roar of the hood fan. He saw her, Sara, not that long ago, in the line at Solly's, probably waiting to pick up the café order (things she'd never eat herself). He'd gone in with the intention of a cheeky cinnamon bun and been caught. He'd turned around and tried to get out but too late. *Coward!* Sara called dramatically after him. He wasn't sure if she'd meant because of the breakup or because he was about to cheat on his vegan principles (if he ever had any).

Don't say that kinda crap out loud, Mikey. The timer on the stove dings, signalling that the pasta is probably ready. *Nobody wants to hear that kinda stuff from a man.* Dad's voice echoing in the silence.

Once he's added a jar of tomato sauce and a tiny sprinkling of parmesan cheese (always something he thinks about losing when seriously considering going vegan) he sits down on the couch and flips the TV onto the news. The TV was always tuned to the news when he was a kid. He watches the local channel to catch up, though he's never really sure he cares. When the weather comes on, the meteorologist makes some joke about raining cats and dogs. The joke makes his stomach turn. A Dad favourite, a Doug favourite. The two are equally capable of making him feel like shit. He puts his bowl down on the coffee table and reaches for his phone. Most of his recent calls are from Dad. He takes a deep breath and taps on Dad's number.

'Wondered if you were ever gonna call me back,' Dad says after the first ring, 'where were ya all that time?' He's practically shouting into the phone. His hearing has never been great—years spent working around heavy machinery. Mom always says it's because he has to be the loudest voice in the room.

'I was at work,' Mike says, trying not to sound rattled already.

There's a cheer in the background: Dad's got the phone on speaker while he watches whatever sport is playing. The crinkle of a bag of chips. Dad's always been a snacker, known to eat an entire Costco-sized bag on his own, if given the opportunity. Sometimes Mike finds himself picking up bags of All Dressed, an old favourite. He goes through the whole bag, thinking about humid summer evenings when Dad was home. He'd be grilling steak and corn on the cob, always wearing his 'Kiss the chef' apron. Mom would come out with the excuse of topping up snacks and drinks, but usually was checking to make sure that Dad wasn't overcooking. His version of well-done meant more charred than anybody else wanted to eat. And Mike would be there, kicking a soccer ball around, practicing his swing or his cartwheels, shouting 'Dad did you see?' followed by calls of 'Not now!'

Those evenings always went one way: his parents fighting in the yard. After dinner, they'd park themselves in lawn chairs, Mom with a glass of wine, Dad with a beer, and what would begin as a conversation would deteriorate into a yelling match. The charred steaks were

often a tipping point. Mike's room was at the back of the house, his window looking out onto the yard. His parents seemed oblivious to the fact that he could hear every shouted word. The only reason anything changed was because Dad stopped coming back home.

'Ya watch the game today?' Another crinkle of the chip bag.

'No, Dad.' He checks his watch. It's somehow been fifteen minutes. This is about all Mike can take, knowing that Dad's next line of conversation will be about the theoretical trip to Ontario. The Homecoming. When Dad thinks they'll unite and suddenly years' worth of problems will disappear. 'Listen, I've got some work to do for tomorrow—'

'You still doing that?' Dad groans. 'Working weird hours in a school? When are you going to get a real job?'

Mike clenches a fist. He's explained so many times that he doesn't just *work in a school*, he works at one of the top universities in Canada, that the job he has now is a foot in the door, that he's doing original research that may even get funded. But Dad doesn't listen. 'I've got an interview for a permanent job coming up.'

'Good,' Dad laughs, coughs, and then crinkles the chip bag. 'A man your age needs to start putting some money away. You got any money put away?'

'Yes, Dad.' There's no point saying otherwise.

Dad laughs again. 'Because I'm not going to be happy if you start asking me for hand-outs. No bank of Dad here.' Another cheer in the background. 'I don't know why you didn't just take my advice and do what I did.'

What, Mike wants to say, abandon your family? Leave your wife scrambling to get a job, pay for a mortgage, all while supporting a teenager?

'You could've bought a house in Vancouver by now.' Dad clears his throat, 'Two houses in Vancouver.'

'I know, Dad.' They've had this conversation so many times before. 'You know I didn't want to do what you did.'

‘Nothing wrong with what I did. Real work.’ Dad’s tone changes. There’s more rustling, he’s probably pulling himself up in his recliner, readying himself for battle.

Mike sighs. ‘That’s not what I said.’

‘You didn’t need to. I know you think the oil industry is evil and all that bullshit about global warming. You know what I saw every year? Snow. Global warming.’ Dad laughs. They’ve had this conversation before, too. Mike tries to explain that it’s climate change, not global warming and Dad denies that both exist. *The world would go ass-up without oil.* ‘I know, Dad,’ Mike says, trying to change the tone of the conversation. He knows he won’t win. Dad won’t change his mind.

‘You don’t know until you’re out there,’ Dad shouts, ‘working with some of the best guys you’ll ever meet. You don’t know.’

‘I know, Dad,’ Mike repeats, ‘but it’s getting late and I’ve still got some work to do.’

A long sigh. ‘All righty, Mikey,’ Dad’s tone changes. He’s settled back into his chair. ‘But next time we have to talk about ya coming to visit. I’m not getting any younger, ya know.’ A layer of guilt, spread thick.

‘I know, Dad. We’ll talk again soon. Night.’

‘Night, Mikey.’

Mike throws his phone onto the couch. He contemplates grabbing one of the pillows, yelling into it until his voice is hoarse.

The apartment feels darker now, though light filters through the blinds from the streetlight just out the window. He’s left it open just a crack and the evening air is surprisingly cold. Another sign that summer is still ages away. He gets up and closes the window with a snap, instantly muffling the sounds of West Broadway. The sirens. The commuters. He’s almost used to it. But someday, he imagines he’ll move out to a place like the cabin he once stayed in with Sara, Stacy, and Darren, that place out past Brohm Lake, near Squamish (*Sk̓w̓x̓w̓ú?mesh, sníchim, sníchim*, meaning language). A twenty-minute drive got you back into town, population 20,000, a

Save On, a Starbucks, and possibly the second biggest granite monolith in the world, Stawamus Chief (*Siyám Smániit*). Sara had spent the trip trying to convince him everything was romantic, and what if they just decided to climb the Chief? There was no way he was doing that, so he'd settled into reading the lore about *Simulhka*, the two-headed serpent, and the young warrior, *Xwechtáal*, tasked with killing him. Sara sent him pictures of other people climbing. He found out later she never left the ground.

Maybe when Mike is older, after he's been a tenured professor for an appropriate number of years, he'll buy a place like that cabin and keep it as his second home. He'll drive up for long weekends, for the months over the summer break, and eventually, when he's tired of students and university politics, he'll pack up his city life and move to the cabin permanently. He'll spend his days in his office, the desk positioned next to the window so he can write his (best-selling) books with the view of the lake. The simple life. All the bits of JD's life he wishes he could have in the twenty-first century.

He gets up off the couch and heads over to his computer. His desk is next to the window, but his only view is of the closed blinds, and beyond that, West Broadway. He clears away the piles of books he's been meaning to read and papers he needs to sort out. Residue from his PhD in the form of his thesis sits there too, *Gold in the Fraser: The BC Boom, 1860-63* published by the university press. He has Call-Me-Doug to thank for that. Now that a few years have gone by, the book doesn't feel like much of an accomplishment. His copies collect dust and are mostly used as paperweights. Nobody wants to read another account of the BC Gold Rush. He remembers being excited about it, once.

Mike opens his JD file and stares at the cursor, blinking underneath the last things he added. Just a few thoughts: *JD's friends? Storytelling, Scottish songs, research folk stories from his bit of Scotland*. He looks up Stonehaven again, wondering what he can glean from pictures of the former fishing village, the old harbour walls, that green coastline. He wonders if he'll get a chance to go there. Research trip.

His email pings. Subject: Boxes?? He opens the message. *Hiya Mikey, hope you're doing okay down in Raincouver. I've been going through some boxes and have found a few that look like they might be promising for your project. Let me know if you want to come take a look. Happy to pass on to you—I've got stuff coming out the wazoo and no way I'm going to be digitising any time soon!*

For a very brief moment, Mike wonders if this is when he'll hit the research jackpot. He'll be sifting through stuff, most of it just the kind of junk that people accumulate over the years, the clippings, pieces of mail, photos, whatever gets shoved into a drawer to be dealt with later (and then never is), when he'll come across an old shoe box. The box will be dusty, covered in yellowing tape, the labels so browned he can barely read that the box once contained a pair of brogues, school shoes, size 6. It will smell a bit weird, but he won't be put off. He'll pull the lid off and a heavenly chorus will echo because there, though it seems impossible, is a collection of JD's letters, tied together in neat bundles with faded ribbon.

But that kind of thing hasn't happened for him so far in his career as a historian. One time he did find a letter, tucked between the dust jacket of an old book, but it wasn't really about anything interesting. Anne loaned Shirley a mixing bowl and could she have it back? He never did find out if Anne got her bowl back—probably because he crumpled the letter up and threw it into the recycling.

But this, this has promise. *Hi Clay*, he starts typing, trying to contain any excitement he feels, *That would be great. I should be in the Okanagan next week. I'll get back to you once I know what my plans are.*

Mike leans back in his chair, which squeaks in protest. He needs to make sure he can stay at Call-Me-Doug's Kelowna place again. He was about to type out an email this afternoon when Rog walked into the office, declaring, *I did it!*

Mike collapsed on top of the pile of essays.

'Are you going to ask me what I did?' Rog said, never one to acknowledge boundaries.

'No,' Mike mumbled into the essays.

‘Submitted my application,’ Rog continued, ‘for the grant, of course. And I’ve been told my project has tremendous potential.’

Mike lifted his head a little, just in time to witness Rog pushing the sleeves up on his diamond patterned sweater. Who was saying Rog’s project had potential? Mike grumbled something about that being good in response. Then he sank back into the stack of papers.

What if it was Call-Me-Doug who told Rog his project had *tremendous potential*? Was Mike’s mentor giving Rog similarly rousing speeches and letting him stay in the Kelowna place too? He’s probably just being paranoid; there’s no way Rog is also working on a project about the Okanagan.

Doug—he starts a new email, *think I have an interesting lead to pursue in Kelowna. Is it still okay for me to stay at your place next week like we talked about?* He pulls his hand away from the keyboard and feels pathetic.

He leans back in the chair and stares up at the ceiling. He should be laser focused. He returns to his JD document: the other thing he needs to do is comb through Sandy’s emails again, make sure he’s used each scrap of information somewhere. But he hasn’t been able to, especially not since running into Haley last Friday. He picks up his phone. The screen is dark, dotted with fingerprints and smudges. New messages: Darren checking in, a picture of a beach from Mom and a something about being unreachable for the next few days, and a thread from Haley. They’ve been messaging all weekend. It started with a gif of a cat with rainbow hair—*do you think the cat knows what it looks like?* That had made him laugh out loud. Dakota seemed even more dazed than normal that afternoon. ‘When did the blue hair happen?’ Haley had asked. And Dakota had put a hand up to his hair and asked, ‘Blue?’

I’m really glad we ran into each other. Turns out you’re actually pretty good to talk to. Haley’s last message earlier today. *Maybe we can run into each other again soon?* His thumb hovers over the screen. He puts the phone down. In the long list of awkward things he’s done lately, he’d wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. A hug that lasted far too long. Why didn’t

he let go? Because he hadn't wanted to let go. Meeting Haley for coffee is starting to feel like the best part of his week. And that realisation makes his palms sweat.

Laser focus.

He turns the phone over, pushes it away, and then reaches for a book from the top of a pile.

Chapter Thirteen

Hayley spends most of the morning silent and stewing, unwilling to answer questions about how her evening was. If she told the truth, she'd have to say that she ate an entire family-sized lasagne in one sitting, straight from the tinfoil tray it came in, then crawled under her duvet and watched videos about building tiny houses while eating a bag of chips. And then there was also the point where she read through her entire messaging history with Mike and tried to analyse each word, looking for the moment when there was a shift in tone or emojis. Anything that would tell her conclusively that Alex was wrong and his jealousy was just his thing and nothing to do with her.

She takes a deep breath. In the Before Times, Haley would've called Mum on her lunch break and just word-vomited the whole story.

Instead, she goes on with her normal routine. It's a slow day so Linda says they can do their rescheduled Feminist Book Club meeting (*the first rule of Feminist Book Club is that you tell everyone about Feminist Book Club* they giggle). The next book on Haley's list is Alderman's *The Power*, because it feels like it works well with *The Handmaid's Tale*. Haley's halfway through and still can't decide if she likes it. Linda keeps saying she's playing *devil's advocate*, and then motions little devil horns poking through her curly grey hair.

'Does it matter if you like it? Are you sure it matters?' she keeps asking.

Haley rolls her eyes.

It's a productive meeting: Haley's notebook is full of talking points for the day the group meets up. And they've thrown around a few ideas for the next book in the series.

When they say their goodbyes at the end of the day, Linda says, 'Next time you can join us instead of sitting out here like a grump, Connie.'

Connie's eyes narrow. She clicks at the mouse, pretending like she's very busy at her computer. She looks up. 'Maybe I will,' she threatens.

Nobody wants Connie to join the Feminist Book Club.

‘Night, Connie,’ Haley says. She winks at Linda, like she’s said something in their secret code. She wants to hold onto this feeling for as long as possible. So much of the week, the month even, has felt like a slog. Each morning it’s a chore just to get out of bed. Especially without Alex there to wake her up with his painfully loud alarm. This afternoon, laughing with Linda, she’s managed to forget how shitty everything has felt. Even the fact that the cherry blossoms are raining from the trees doesn’t seem so sad anymore.

When they get out to the parking lot, the rain has tapered off to a drizzle; the gutters spill over, full of the detritus the rain has washed away.

‘Now that we’re away from a certain someone,’ Linda says in a way that’s not subtle at all, ‘I can tell you the good news.’

‘What good news?’

Linda taps at her phone for a while and then says, ‘Read this.’

There’s a lump in Haley’s throat as she reads the email over Linda’s shoulder. Subject: Re: Potential Opening at Kelowna Library... *Really impressed with her resume.*

Really? She’d put her application together in such a rush, feeling very aware of her lack of relevant experience. There was a summer spent at the archives in Victoria during her degree. And then she got the job at this branch.

We’d love for her to come in for an interview.

‘Unofficial. I’m sure they’ll send you an email to arrange a time soon. But you should definitely go.’

‘I don’t know,’ Haley says, sighing. What plan is this part of anymore?

‘And you can take some extra time off to see your family.’

‘Okay.’ She knows she’s been putting a visit off for too long.

‘Sure you don’t want a ride, honey?’ Linda asks.

‘No thanks.’ Haley says, as usual, because even on a terrible day the thought of driving the few blocks home is ridiculous. ‘I need the fresh air.’

‘Have a good weekend then, hon. I’ll see you on Monday.’ Linda gives her a squishy hug before getting into her tiny car. Linda’s a big lady, and squished behind the steering wheel, she makes the car look even tinier.

Haley watches Linda drive away, waving. Then she heads up MacDonald without really knowing where she’s going. She doesn’t want to go home—not that she expects Alex to be there. The place has just felt off lately. Her house plants (ill-fated from the moment she brought them home) have started to die and she doesn’t know how to save them. And she’s been eating an alarming amount of pasta. It wasn’t just the lasagne. Giant pots of spaghetti, too.

She turns the corner, passing her favourite store without feeling any need to window shop; then she passes COFFEA, but she doesn’t want a coffee—though the door to the café is open and the smell is temptingly good. She pauses under the awning, watching for drips that intermittently splat down onto the sidewalk. She looks back into the café and there’s Darren, waving at her.

‘Wondered if you were going to walk right by,’ he says once she’s installed at her favourite table. ‘The usual?’

She nods.

The café is busy but quiet. There are students everywhere, their faces smushed into their laptops. Probably here for the free Wi-Fi. It must be nearly exam time; Mike has mentioned essays coming in, the frenetic energy on campus, the students he hasn’t seen all term suddenly showing up for office hours, demanding help. She hardly remembers that feeling: it’s been nearly seven years since she finished her undergrad, five since the end of her master’s, eleven since she first moved to Vancouver.

Darren returns, carrying a tray. ‘Donut? You look like you need the sugar.’

A cinnamon and sugar donut on a black plate. The sugar glistens.

He sits down. ‘Everything okay with you?’ Today, he’s wearing an orange toque and a black hoody. Like Halloween, just five months too early.

Haley pulls the donut closer. Is it weird to talk to Darren about her personal life now that she knows he's Mike's best friend? It felt safe before, like anything she said over the roar of the coffee machine would go no further. Confessional, almost. 'How's Stacy?'

Darren runs his hands over his face. 'Getting there. She says she's nesting, which really just means buying tons of shit.'

Don't have kids, they'll ruin your life Mum would say while wrapping Haley into a hug. Then she'd smile and say, *I'm being serious. My life is the worst.*

'She says I'm not reading enough of the books.'

Good parenting is 50% lying and 47% just making shit up.

'So now I'm terrified that I'm going to be a terrible dad,' he says, smiling.

'You're not going to be a terrible dad.'

'Anyway,' he pulls the toque up and scratches at his forehead, 'you and Mike get anywhere last time?'

'What do you mean?' She thinks of what Alex said. How they looked cozy.

'I mean, with his research,' Darren says, 'because you're helping him.'

'Am I?'

'He thinks so.'

'Did he tell you that?'

'Uh,' he scratches under his toque again, 'not specifically. You just seem to be working well together.'

'Oh.' Haley takes a sip of her coffee. But she's not sure what working well actually means.

They'd been laughing about Grandpa and the squashes. And then they'd laughed so much, their laughter turning silent, while tears rolled down Mike's cheeks. Despite what Alex's notes said, despite whatever diagnosis he'd gotten out of the DSM and written down in his notebook, it felt right to be laughing.

‘He’s a good guy, Mike.’

She nods.

‘I’ll leave you to your donut.’ Darren gets up, and is about to walk away, and then says quietly, ‘on the house. Don’t tell anyone.’

Her first free coffee donut and coffee. She bites into the donut and wonders if it tastes better. Because of Mike.

She grabs her phone from her bag. Nothing from him since the last time they were here. That hug. No updates from Tara either. Nothing from anyone. She should check in at home, talk to Dad, even though she knows it will most likely be a conversation about how he’s fixing someone’s lawn mower, or their washing machine, and the parts took ages to arrive, and then got sent to somewhere other than the house. Maybe there’s a deeper layer to these conversations that she just hasn’t figured out how to unpick. She hopes he talks to Auntie Karen and Uncle Bill, but it’s probably more likely that he spends his free time out in the shed. Somehow Mum could always tell what kind of mood he was in, or when something was wrong. Dad didn’t even need to say anything, she’d just know.

If Haley got the job in Kelowna, would that mean she’d spend most of her weekends in Merritt with the family? Would she make new friends? Maybe it wouldn’t even be worth it to buy a place in Kelowna. It might be more sensible to find something closer to the family and commute to work; it’s only just over an hour on the Connector anyway. That drive is just often one of the worst stretches of road: the whiteouts followed by snow at Trepanier. She should look at condo listings again, maybe even houses if she’s willing to live outside of the city. And there, sitting in her inbox is the official email with the invitation to come in for an interview next week.

She’s just leaving the café when the phone starts ringing in her hand.

‘You home from work, Halestorm?’

‘Just walking, Auntie Karen,’ Haley turns up the volume, straining to hear over the hustle of rush hour traffic. ‘How are you guys?’ Rocko barks in the background, and it sounds like the washing machine is enjoying its loudest spin cycle.

‘Oh, we’re all mostly fine.’

‘Mostly?’ Haley’s pulse quickens. She’s doing mental calculations, trying to remember the last time Dad sent her a text. There’s been so much going on. *I’m all thumbs*, was Dad’s grunt in response to being asked to text more often.

‘Nothing specifically wrong, don’t worry.’ Karen continues to be vague.

Haley stops in front of the Greek market. Normally she’d pop in for a tub of feta cheese, or some olives. ‘Okay,’ she says, wondering if she needs to start pre-emptively calming herself down, ‘so what’s going on?’

‘Well, we managed to convince your dad to come over for dinner last Thursday. I think the boys exhausted him. But Haley,’ Auntie Karen’s tone changes, she speaks uncharacteristically softly, despite all the background noise, ‘it would be a good idea for you to come home. Go stay with him for a bit.’

‘Okay—’

‘I know you don’t really want to do that,’ Karen cuts in, ‘but I think your dad needs you. And you know he won’t ask.’

‘Yeah.’ There’s a lump in Haley’s throat. There was that time Dad cut himself on a saw and he just wrapped it up in a rag and didn’t tell anyone until he came in for dinner. He ended up needing a bunch of stitches.

‘And the boys would love to see you.’ Karen switches back to her too-loud volume, ‘Did I tell ya that we drove out to Summerland last weekend? The boys wanted to go for a dip.’

‘Bit early for that?’ The change in conversation feels like emotional whiplash. Haley stops worrying for a moment, thinking about how the lake only starts to feel less glacial when temperatures push thirty degrees.

‘They went in up to their ankles and realised pretty fast. You should’ve seen the looks on their faces. But the day was gorgeous.’ Karen sighs. ‘Soon enough though, you just know the tourists will be back in their droves and we won’t want to go. Gotta enjoy this quiet while we can.’

‘Yeah,’ Haley sighs again.

‘I’ll let you go now but let me know if you’re going to come up. You should.’

‘Okay.’

‘We love you, Halestorm.’

Haley returns the love and ends the call. She carries on down the main street, planning her next trip. She’s still mentally planning when she gets back home, but the idea of a new job, a new start in Kelowna is at the front of her thoughts when she turns the key in the lock.

Surprisingly, for the second time this week, all the lights are on. The washing machine is going, and music with loud thumping base is vibrating from the speakers in the living room. Alex is in the kitchen, chopping vegetables while a pot boils behind him. The contents of his bag are spread across the counter and kitchen table, laptop open. Haley drops her stuff by the door.

‘Why are you cooking again?’

Alex puts down the knife. ‘What?’

She starts to repeat herself, then crosses the room to turn the music down. She’s never been able to understand his taste in music. The high-tempo dance stuff was okay in the days when they went clubbing downtown, but it isn’t what she wants to hear when she comes home from work. ‘I said how come you’re cooking again.’

He shrugs and picks the knife back up. ‘Why do you say it like that?’

‘It’s just weird.’ She flips through a stack of mail. Bills.

‘It’s not weird,’ he says, not looking up from the pepper he’s dicing, ‘I cook all the time.’

Haley takes a deep breath. What does she want to say? She takes another deep breath. 'It's not a problem, it just would've been nice to know you were going to be here. We haven't exactly talked much lately.'

Alex stops chopping. 'You haven't exactly been around to talk to. Between work, your family, your new friends,' he pauses, 'when was the last time you were here?'

She wants to start counting down, to keep herself in control, but the words, 'And you have been here?' come out before she can stop herself. 'We've hardly had a conversation since my mum died, Alex. You haven't been here when I've needed you.' Her hands start to shake.

'I tried to be. But I've had lots going on at work and school and you know I can't just abandon all of that. What did you want me to do, drop everything and fail?'

Tears. Again. 'Of course not. I know how hard you've worked. I'm not completely oblivious.'

'I never said you were.' He turns to the pot of water on the stove, stirring with a big wooden spoon. The extractor fan roars even louder as he switches it onto high. Then he returns to the vegetables on the cutting board: garlic, onion, zucchini. It feels like a familiar scene. How many fights have they had while cooking? How many times did they make up, sharing salty kisses and plates of food when all was said and done?

But this doesn't feel like one of those times. She wants him to stop what he's doing and listen. She doesn't want to yell over the sound of the fan, the music, even the *thwack* of the knife as it connects with plastic cutting board.

'But,' he cuts the end off a clove of garlic, 'you can't say you've been here. I don't know how many times I've come back in the evening and you've been out. Maybe with your friend.' He air quotes with his free hand.

Mike. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her mascara. She closes her eyes and tries to will away the whole situation. This isn't what she wants; she wants quiet, the sound of the frogs and crickets singing their out-of-synch songs on a summer night, or the noise

of her family, Mum's voice loudest of them all, *Now, who needs a hug? Limited time offer so get in here quick*. Haley opens her eyes again and Alex is still there, watching, waiting for her to respond, not noticing that the pot is boiling over.

While his back is facing her, she looks at him, really looks, at the blond hair she'd run her hands through, the shoulders she'd wrap her arms around. He looks the same, sounds the same, but something is different.

'I got an interview. For a job in Kelowna.'

He doesn't turn around and because the fan is still on high, she isn't sure he's heard.

'What?'

She repeats herself.

He turns around. 'When did you apply for a job in Kelowna? When were you planning on telling me? When you were moving out?'

'I did tell you,' she says, remembering a phone conversation they'd had a few days before Mum died. 'I just found out about the interview today. You're the first person I've told.' She would've told Auntie Karen, but the dramatic opening derailed any plans to share. And she didn't want to get hopes up. Everyone at home would be so devastated if she didn't get the job or decided to stay in Vancouver.

'Well that makes me feel better,' Alex says. He leans against the counter, the dinner prep forgotten. 'So what does that mean? Are you moving?'

Haley pulls a stool out from the island and sits down. She folds her elbows on the cold counter and rests her head on her cardigan. 'I don't know,' she says, her voice muffled by the soft cotton, 'everything is different now.' Saying that out loud feels like a release. Because it is. Everything is different.

'I thought we decided it didn't make sense to go forward with that plan anymore.'

'No,' she says, lifting her head up so that she can look Alex in the eye, 'you decided that. My family still needs me. That hasn't changed.'

‘And you, Haley? What do you need? I’m guessing it isn’t me.’

The words sound so final.

He sighs. Then he reaches for his computer, his notebook, the collection of random things spread across the counter, piling them one on top of the other. ‘I don’t want to be here right now.’

‘Why do you always do this?’ She didn’t think she wasn’t going to say anything. She didn’t want to be confrontational. But the words just spill out.

He pauses, his arms full of stuff. ‘Do what?’

‘Run away from conflict. I feel like that’s all you’ve been doing lately.’

‘That’s funny coming from you.’

She takes a deep breath. Nothing she says will make this better.

‘Sure, don’t say anything.’ He packs his things into his bag, shoves his feet into his shoes, puts one arm into his jacket and then opens the door. ‘You decide what you want to do. Go for the job. Move to Kelowna. But if you do, I won’t be coming with you.’ And then he slams the door and stomps down the carpeted hallway.

She remains at the counter, listening for his footsteps until she can’t hear them anymore. She imagines the empty sleeve of his jacket dragging along the floor. Like a tail.

She wipes tears away. She feels better. She looks around the kitchen, the pot on the stove still boiling away, the neat piles of chopped veggies, the package of fancy pasta from the Italian place at Granville Market. Her stomach rumbles.

Chapter Fourteen

Mike sits in his car, on the street next to a driveway with a big black truck parked diagonally, a bucket of soapy water next to it. It's Saturday afternoon and it seems like everyone has the same idea about how to spend the day. All down the street are similarly shiny cars, hoses slithering down driveways like rubber snakes. He remembers helping Don wash his work van. Don liked to keep it immaculate: *My name's my business*, he'd always say, *can't read my name if the van's covered in crap*.

Mike checks the address on his phone for the third time. For some reason, he imagined Clay's house differently. An amateur historian should live in a heritage home with a turret, creaky floors, and ghost stories. This house, up the mountain in a subdivision from the 1990s, looks like the kind of place where kids play street hockey, shouting *car!* and scrambling to move a net out of the road. It's the kind of place where a stay-at-home mom always has snacks ready for the neighbourhood kids. It's the house you move out of at eighteen to go to university and eventually find your room has been turned into a home gym that never gets used. He checks the address again and gets out of the car.

When he's halfway up the driveway, the garage door opens revealing Clay, dressed in a T-shirt with a thermal vest on top, and a camo Canucks hat.

'Thought I heard a car pull up,' the big man yells down the driveway, 'c'mon into my lair.' Clay gives him a clap on the back.

Clay shows Mike around the space, pointing to boxes of things, stacks of papers secured with random items: a chunky flashlight on one stack, a worn-out baseball glove on another. On the walls are flags, the red and white maple leaf, a couple of Canucks flags, and racks covered in tools, bikes hanging from the ceiling. 'Temporary solution,' Clay explains, 'until my wife moves some of her craft crap out of the basement. Women.' He snorts.

Mike just nods along.

'Ya know, she tried to feed me kale last night. Kale.'

Mike nods again even though he's always liked kale. Throw on a little olive oil, parmesan, roast it in the oven for a while.

'When she served the green stuff out onto my plate, I said,' the older man starts chuckling, 'what am I, a rabbit? She, of course, rolled her eyes in response. You married?'

'Not married, no.'

'Girlfriend? Guy like you must have a girlfriend.'

'Not at the moment.'

'Well,' Clay says, 'Don't. They ruin your life. Can't live without 'em though, eh?' He laughs and shakes his head. 'Ya want a coffee?'

'Sure.'

'Milk? Sugar?'

Mike shakes his head.

'All righty. Be right back.' Clay heads back into the house. He's wearing cowboy boots, the toes pointed and slightly upturned. The heels echo with each step.

Mike pushes his sleeves up; the sweat is starting to seep through his layers. He hadn't known what to expect when he packed for a week in the Okanagan. And there was snow up at Pennask. But no sign of that kind of weather now. Hardly even any clouds. The sky is just bright blue, bluer than you think is possible, and the sunshine warms your entire body. He's wandered through the ridiculously manicured gardens along the Waterfront Promenade, stopping to sit at sandy Tugboat Beach. People are already swimming, tanning (although he wonders how much of that is artificial sun), riding along the promenade on cruiser bikes, stereos blasting. The party has already started.

Clay returns a few minutes later, a Canucks mug in each hand. 'So,' he says, and he sits down at the big wooden desk he's positioned in the centre of the crowded space, 'how's the work coming along?'

Mike looks for an extra chair and instead finds a blue plastic stool, the kind you have in front of the sink when you're a kid and can't reach the taps without help. He remains standing. 'Coming along,' he says, 'just trying to put pieces together.' Colloquialisms usually convince the people who ask about his work.

'You keeping up with the photos I've been posting lately?'

'Yep, I really liked the one of the view down Bernard. Hard to imagine the street ever looking like that.' Mike takes a sip of his coffee. Instant.

'Yeah!' Clay slaps a hand against his desk. A bobblehead wearing a hockey helmet nods along. 'That was a belter. All that mist and those mountains. Did you catch the ghost horse?'

Yesterday morning, Mike sat and stared at the photo while eating fancy pastries. The view was of a dirt road cutting through the land, heading towards the mountains in the east. There were farmhouses, some with split-log fences, others with whitewashed picket fences. And the ghost horse, probably pulling a carriage behind it, moving too fast for the slow shutter of the camera. 'It was good.'

Clay grimaces. 'It wasn't just *good*,' he says the word like it's something terrible, 'it was one of the best I've had sent to me. Said 1905 on the back. Ya know that was the year Kelowna was incorporated?'

Mike nods.

'Not even that long ago. Anyhoo,' Clay gets up and starts looking around the garage, thumbs looped through his jeans, 'trying to remember where I put those boxes.' He moves around the cramped space, scraping things across the concrete floor, opening the tops of boxes. Then he comes to a stack next to a work bench. Two unmarked cube boxes, both looking a little beat up, corners broken down, and the flaps bent from being folded too many times. He waves Mike over. 'Think these were the ones.' He pulls out a newspaper clipping and hands it to Mike.

The paper is faded, and folded, cut into a weird shape that follows the small text. Mike wonders if it's okay for him to be handling it. Will the oils on his hands destroy it? Will this be

yet another dead end? He wipes his palms on his jeans, then squints at the type:

BALLANTYNE TO WED MISS ANNE MORRIS.

‘That’s your man, eh? I saw that right on the top and got straight to emailing you.’

Mike doesn’t know what to say. He skims through, noticing that JD is described as a rancher, owner of Mountainview. No mention of arson. But holding the old bit of paper makes his throat dry.

‘I don’t know what else is in there. Photos, lots of ‘em. Maybe some stacks of letters. Could just be junk mail.’ Clay laughs.

‘You don’t want to go through it first?’ Mike asks the question out of courtesy. It’s like he’s stealing something, or tricking Clay into giving something up.

‘Nah,’ the older man shrugs, ‘I would, but I get a lot of stuff like this, and I’ve got a backlog already. If you think this is bad,’ he points to the piles of stuff everywhere, ‘you should see the state of the spare room. Every time our daughter mentions coming up from Chilliwack we have to turn her down. No room for her! The wife’s not happy about it.’ Clay grins, like this is an accomplishment. ‘She’ll forgive me.’

They spend the next little while negotiating the terms of Clay’s contribution (Mike will take the two boxes home, catalogue the contents, and return them at a date in the future). Mike carefully sifts through the top layer of documents, spotting letters with local addresses tucked into stained envelopes, the broken-down corners of a notebook, or a ledger, maybe, with marbled edges, and stacks of photos that cascade into the box when his hand makes contact. He picks up a stack and flicks through while Clay talks about his plans for his new office.

‘Relegated to the basement,’ he complains, ‘but at least I’ll be able to work there during the winter. Do you know what it’s like to work in an unheated garage when it’s minus twenty?’

Mike shakes his head, but he’s not thinking about winter, he’s staring at a photo, taken during summer, everyone is wearing very short shorts and T-shirts. Except for the little girl posed with an arm wrapped around the Ogoopogo statue. The photo is faded, but it’s clear that

the little girl has red hair. Lots of red hair. He flips the photo over and reads: SANDRA MEETS OGOPOGO, 1972. He looks at the girl again. It could be her. It might be. He continues through the photos: strangers at a party, strangers posing in front of a sports car with mountains in the background, strangers on a boat, but no sign of the little girl. That doesn't mean anything.

'You find something interesting?' Clay asks, and he peers over Mike's shoulder. 'Ah, people pictures. Probably lots of those. We print out all these photos and shove them in boxes, forget about them, and then who wants them?'

'Family?' Mike thinks of Haley. If that little girl is Sandy, and he's pretty sure it is, then there's no question that Haley will want it.

Clay sighs. 'Sometimes. But so many times they just pack all this stuff up and give it away. And then people like you and me do our thing with it and family photos aren't just family photos anymore.'

Mike tucks the photos back into the box. 'I guess so.' He'll go through the boxes. It might just be the one photo.

'Car needs a wash,' Clay says once they've loaded the boxes into the back. 'You let me know what you find in those.'

'Will do.' Mike confirms. He honks the horn as he drives away, one of very few occasions warranting a honk. Just as he's heading back down the hill, his phone starts buzzing, the notification rolling into his directions back down the mountain. Dad.

Mike lets the phone ring.

And ring.

But he's driving. He can use not wanting to get a ticket as an excuse. The truth is that he doesn't have the mental bandwidth for a conversation with Dad. Instead, he's still thinking about showing Haley what he's found; he's imagining the two of them in COFFEEA, happy because these things she thought were lost forever aren't lost at all.

Chapter Fifteen

It's early, just after seven on Saturday morning when Haley leaves Chilliwack behind and speeds towards the Coquihalla. Her wipers swipe lazily across the window; the rain started almost as soon as she left Vancouver, and then it poured all the way from the Port Mann to Abbotsford. Now she worries about the fatigue that sets in on this stretch of road. She passes a sign for Bridal Falls and is glad to remember the Flintstones park that used to be there, the giant purple long-necked dinosaur you could see from the road. And beyond that, the waterslides. They stayed at the RV park one summer. Haley spent the afternoons floating down the lazy river or standing in a line up while the sun beat down, her pale freckled skin protected by the SPF 50 Mum had slathered on. That was the time when a lifeguard decided to group her with a couple of random middle-aged men rather than her parents. She sat at the front of the inner tube, completely disgusted as the guy behind her wrapped his hairy legs over the squishy blue sides. She didn't enjoy the wavy slide (always proclaimed to be the best in the park) because she was too busy thinking about the guy's hairy legs and how they were pressing against her back, her sides. She might've been about twelve then. Innocent. But she remembers feeling all wrong.

She focuses on the road again. The speed limit changes here and cops like to sit in the emergency pull outs, catching people who take the jump up to 120km/hour as encouragement to go as fast as they can. But Haley has driven this route a million and one times. Sometimes she jokes she could do it with her eyes closed. Not that she would.

When she called Auntie Karen and Uncle Bill's last night, it was Kieran who answered. He hadn't said much, just a series of grunts and grumbles in response to her saying she was going to set off first thing in the morning. *I'll tell them you're coming.* And then he hung up without saying anything else. Total call time, less than one minute. She hasn't thought about it much, but now that time stretches in front of her, she feels like it was just yesterday when she'd walk over to her auntie and uncle's place, homework in her backpack, and wait in the hallway as Karen went through the list of things Haley needed to know. Then she'd wave from baby Kieran's

window, watching as the newly-free parents rode away on their motorcycle. Inevitably, Mum would call, saying something like *Imagine having a little baby and a motorcycle. Ridiculous*, followed by questions about what state the house was in.

Two more kids, a Rottweiler, and now little Kieran has a job at Starbucks.

Haley turns the music up. It's so easy to get into these existential spirals when driving this route. Must be something to do with how alone you feel. Today, there's other traffic, but it's mostly semi-trucks grinding through gears as they go up the hills. Even her little shit box, the first car she drove down the Coquihalla, the car she drove to Vancouver when she moved there to start her undergrad, can fly by. The poor thing has been broken into, had the wing mirrors clipped off while parked on narrow Kitsilano streets, and despite Dad's best efforts to keep it up, always needs something replaced. Sometimes, she thinks about buying a new car, spending a lazy morning assembling a dream car online, complete with a custom paint colour (something like *habanero orange*, with metallic flecks) and all the fancy upgrades. But she hardly ever drives in the city. It was only when Mum started to get worse that she was putting the mileage on the car.

When she runs out of things to think about, she switches over to her road trip playlist, the one with the complete Backstreet Boys discography so she can sing along. Distraction. The trees start to form walls on one side of her, with sheer rock faces on the other. Water pours down, gushing from tiny waterfalls. She thought about texting Mike last night, to tell him that she was going to be in the Okanagan. But then she thought about what Alex said.

She stops at Britton Creek for a pit stop and a chance to stretch her legs. It's foggy, the view to the peaks, Guanaco to the north and Needle to the south, obscured by thick cloud. The cold finds her skin as she leaves the warm car for the bathroom. She can't stop yawning, tired after nearly three hours on the road. She made herself a coffee before she left, drinking it in slow sips, but the caffeine still hasn't kicked in. Instead, worry swirls around like the snowflakes Dad always tells her to watch out for, no matter the season. After a quick pee, she runs back to the car and cranks the heating up.

She settles back at the speed limit and tries to focus on the winding mountain roads. But mixed up with all the other things in her head is the conversation with Auntie Karen, the fact that Dad might be physically fine, but that doesn't mean he's actually okay. As the car complains up the mountains, Haley tries not to imagine how bad things could be. She knows he's eating, she assumes he's sleeping, and he's still got lots of projects on the go. But Mum was his life; she truly was his other half. Alex has been many things to her, but he's never felt like a *part* of her. How many people have relationships like Mum and Dad had? She hates thinking in the past tense when it comes to them.

Later, when the valley starts to open up and the forests give way to the rolling hills of the Nicola, she turns the music up even louder and attempts to focus on hitting the high notes of the old pop songs, the lyrics existing in the deep archives of her brain. She's alone with the trees, the cows on the ranches, their rickety old farmhouses. Homesteaders, like JD, setting out across the wilds of 1870's BC. The bits of Mike's research she's read have shown her how much she doesn't know. About her own family, about life before online shopping, cities with Starbucks on every corner, even indoor plumbing. Mum was right, she wouldn't have survived as a pioneer. Even Merritt feels remote now. She's become so used to Vancouver's noise, the crowds, the skyscrapers like mountains.

She pumps the brakes as she descends Hamilton Hill. Here, the city lights just pierce the low-hanging clouds. The urban sprawl of the last ten years is even more obvious in the morning light. Yellow lights encroach further into the hills, and big box stores bring ugly convenience and necessities to town. Merritt still feels like a place you could stop for a pee, a coffee, and never think about again. But, even if she wants to deny it, this is home, and she grew up wandering down the middle of Voght, playing chicken with cars; she worked a summer at the Timmie's when she was a teenager; she hung out with her friends on the rocky banks of the Coldwater River, watching as they lit things on fire and drank beer someone's older brother brought along.

When she pulls into the gravel driveway, the shop and garage doors are open, fluorescent yellow lights shining bright. Dad's got the truck parked outside. Her driving lights glint off the '57 Ford's cherry red metallic paint. She still remembers when the old beast arrived, rusted pieces packed into an equally rusty shipping container. She pulls on the e-brake. Dad waves, work gloves flopping on his hands. He looks confused, probably because Kieran never passed on her message. Gravel crunches underfoot. Paving the driveway was on Mum's honey-do list for twenty years.

Dad taps the window. 'Didn't know you were coming,' he says once she's rolled it down.

'Last minute decision.' She gets out of the car and gives him a big hug, burying her face in his flannel. This could be the moment when she lets everything, all the bullshit from the last few days, the last few weeks, come pouring out. All those feelings could be smothered by flannel.

'Okay drive?'

'White out near Pennask.' But the flannel smells different. She pulls away.

Dad nods. 'Any snow?'

'Not a flake. It's nearly May.'

He shrugs. 'That doesn't mean anything.' He's got a sixth sense about snow; he's more reliable than any weather report. He grabs her bags from the backseat and ushers her inside.

In the garage, tools are methodically organised on pegboards and shelves. Dusty bikes hang from the ceiling. Mum's car is on the other side, shrouded in paint-splattered drop cloths. The metallic blue peeks out between gaps. Dad never drives it, saying it's too fancy for what he needs. He had to get over that when Mum couldn't drive herself anymore and refused to be driven around in the truck. She was in pain and she wanted modern conveniences and a warm ass, dammit.

Haley pushes the heavy garage door open and steps into the dark laundry room, feeling around for the light switch. The old washboard is still hanging above the sink, precariously strung on perpetually fraying twine. But the room, like Dad's flannel, smells a little different.

Must be because Dad does his own laundry now, needs to buy his own detergent. She imagines him in the aisle with the household cleaners at Extra Foods, overwhelmed, surrounded by bottles proclaiming things he only half understands. She continues through the house, still knowing every piece of furniture, the slick spots to watch out for on the hardwood, the corner where she split her head when she was six. And everywhere she goes, that Mum smell lingers: coffee and mango lotion. The house holds on.

Dad drops her stuff at the end of the kitchen island. ‘So what brings you home?’ he asks as he washes his hands in the kitchen sink, wiping them on his jeans. *Grease on my clean towels! Wonder who did that?*

Haley leans against the counter, stretching her legs. ‘Thought I’d come to see you.’

‘Didn’t need to do that,’ he says. He opens a cabinet, reaching for a mug that doesn’t have flowers on it, or say BEST MUM. A Canucks mug. A Father’s Day present from a few years ago. He’d said *didn’t need to do that* after he’d finished unwrapping.

‘I wanted to see you. Thought we could spend some time together.’ She doesn’t mention the interview. She’ll tell him when they sit down for a proper talk. So they’ll sit down for a proper talk. The interview isn’t until next week. ‘Maybe go for lunch at the Coldwater?’ She can’t remember the last time they went.

‘Can’t today. Job out at Logan Lake.’

‘Oh.’

‘If I’d know you were coming...’

‘That’s okay. I’ll be here for a few days at least. If you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind. Lunch before I go?’

They sit at the counter eating sandwiches even though it’s still too early for salami and cheese.

‘You gonna see Tara?’ Dad asks mid-bite. Mustard trails down his cheek.

Haley shrugs. ‘Never sure where she is these days,’ she says through a mouthful.

‘House stuff,’ he nods, ‘Bill says it’s taking forever.’

Growing up around a realtor has meant understanding that sales are a process you can’t rush. But everyone always wants to.

Dad sweeps the crumbs onto his empty plate. ‘Better get going.’

‘You want to take some coffee with you?’ She motions to the Canucks mug, forgotten on the counter. ‘I’ll make some.’

Dad nods and says thanks before disappearing to get ready.

She puts the kettle on, finds the old blue thermos Dad insists on using (though it’s probably older than she is), and scoops grounds from the giant tin. Muscle memory. She used to beg Mum to teach her to make Dad’s coffee, thinking it was some complicated and scientific procedure. Was she disappointed when she found out that magic process was just mixing hot water with coffee grounds?

A few minutes later, she’s in the garage again, waving as Dad backs the old truck down the driveway. And then she’s alone. She didn’t want to be alone in Vancouver, but here, being alone feels different.

Back inside, she returns to her spot in the kitchen. She can almost see Mum standing at the sink, big red hair spilling out of a haphazard bun (she reaches up to pull her own big bun tighter), complaining about Dad’s dishes left stacked next to the sink. *Does he think I’m going to tidy up for him?* Mum gestures with her favourite mug in her hand: SASSY, CLASSY, A BIT SMART ASSY. *That wasn’t what he said in his vows.*

And then Haley blinks and Mum is gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Haley stands outside of the library after a nearly two-hour long interview. The sun is warm on her face and she feels good about how things have gone. She should: Auntie Karen insisted on spending every free opportunity asking mock-interview questions. ‘So you have answers to everything.’ And Haley felt like she did have an answer to everything.

Except what to do after.

She fiddles with the sleeves of her cardigan, brushes invisible dust from her navy dress with the tiny daisies. There are a couple of open houses she could check out. One of the places even had a lake view. But maybe a coffee first. And a snack. She heads towards Bernard. Morning shoppers pass by, traffic lines up as people wait for parking spots to open up, and the lake glimmers behind everything. She remembers the last time she came down this street. *We are women on a mission*, Mum said as they walked arm in arm. It was November, Haley remembers, because the Christmas decorations were just starting to appear in shop windows. The street decorations were up but hadn’t been flipped on yet. That was a good month; Mum’s oncologist had just told her that the treatment was working. She was walking faster and the colour was starting to return to her cheeks. Ever her hair—for so long, just a little halo of fuzz around her scalp—was starting to grow back in patches. Haley thought that a trip to Kelowna was too much for Mum, but Mum had, of course, bulldozed her way through any counter arguments. *If I say I’m fine then I AM GOING*. Then she went and strapped herself into the passenger seat of the car, keys in the ignition. She put the window down, yelled, *I’m waiting*, and honked the horn in three short blasts. It was a good day.

Now, Haley is in front of Bean Scene, deliberating. The patio is full of empty chairs and tables. Just one old man sits with his back to the window, a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Probably retired. Has all the time in the world. Haley has all the time in the world today, and that’s why she doesn’t know what to do with herself. She takes another deep breath: that fresh air also smells like coffee. Inside, she blinks a few times to adjust to the

light. She looks for a table and there, sitting in a corner, is Mike. He's got his laptop setup on the table, big headphones on despite the gentle acoustic music playing, and looks so focused that he hasn't noticed her. If she believed in signs, what would this one be saying? (*Go say hi. A coffee isn't going to hurt anyone.*) Mike looks up just before she gets to the table. He pulls the headphones off and shoots up.

'We have to stop meeting like this. I'm worried you only exist in cafes.'

He laughs. 'That might be true.' He gives her a big hug (not a half one this time) and he smells like coffee and pine needles.

'What have you been up to? Been a while...?' She trails off, thinking of the last time she saw him, then talking to Darren, Alex's insinuations.

'Sorry,' he says and he closes his laptop, 'I've just been busy with marking and stuff.

What are you doing in Kelowna?'

'I had a job interview.'

'Here?'

'Yeah, at the research library. It would be a step up for me.'

'Amazing. How did it go?'

'Good, I think,' she says and smiles. She felt so at ease talking to Charlotte. Maybe it was because they started out talking about how much they both love Linda.

'That's so great, Haley. Celebratory coffee?'

She nods. She looks around the café, with the exposed brick, metal air ducts, the minimalist lighting. On that day in November, Mum sat down and said *well it's not exactly cozy but we know the coffee is good*. She'd shrugged off her coat (no longer snug around the middle), unwrapped her scarf, and taken her toque off. The little strands of baby hair stood straight up. Like the fuzz on a chick. 'Last time I was here was with my mum.'

Mike looks immediately concerned. 'I'm sorry. Do you want to go somewhere else?'

'No,' Haley says, 'I don't need to go anywhere else.'

He reaches a hand across the table and squeezes hers. 'I'll go order. The usual?'

She nods. Her hand tingles from his touch.

A few minutes later, he returns to the table with a brownie and two forks. 'What do you have planned for the rest of the day?'

'Not much.' Haley says, thinking of the open houses she'd thought about checking out. Alone. 'What about you?'

'I was thinking about going up the mountain.' He cuts off a corner of the brownie.

Calling it *the mountain* is a misnomer. Ballantyne Mountain only rises something like 300 metres above the lake. You can reach the summit in less than half an hour (if you're in good shape). But the way it gets talked about around here, you'd think it was on the same scale as Everest or Kilimanjaro.

'I'm not really dressed for a climb.' She looks down at her yellow shoes with the block heel, picked out to match her dress and be easy to walk in. 'But I've got my boots in my car.'

'We'll stop at your car first then.'

That day in November, when Mum said she was feeling better than she had in months, and once they'd finished wandering through the stores (searching for little bits and bobs for the elaborate stockings Mum always put together for everyone) they drove over to the park and sat at the foot of the mountain. They looked at the side of the hill, where trails criss-crossed, lined by Douglas firs. It was mid-afternoon and the light was waning. Once, they would've bounded out of the car and up to the lower lookout to catch the sunset. Mum never made it up again.

The coffees arrive, steaming in their black mugs.

'Still ordering mine with oat milk,' Mike says. 'I think maybe I prefer it?'

'You sound convinced.' Haley picks up her cup, feeling the warmth against her palm..

'I don't know if I am. When my ex basically banned dairy I didn't really question it?' He shakes his head. 'But then I just kept drinking oat milk even after we broke up. And now I don't know if I was doing it for her or for me.'

Haley nods. 'I think I know that feeling.' She doesn't say anything else. She sips her coffee: it's strong and very hot, and much, much better than the coffee that greeted her when she woke up on Sunday morning. Auntie Karen had a pot going while she stirred a bowl of muffin batter. *Carrot raisin*, Karen said. She handed Haley a mug with Easter eggs on it (just about seasonally appropriate) and said, *I can microwave it if it's not hot enough*. Haley takes another sip. She declined the offer. There are some lines she'll never cross.

Almost an hour later, they get out of Haley's car, now parked in a visitor spot outside of Call-Me-Doug's building. She's glad Mike suggested moving: she's been ticketed in that lot before. Now, the not-mountain looms over them. She pulls her boots out from the trunk, socks still tucked inside.

They set off, Haley in her sunflower dress, tights with socks, and boots, and Mike with his backpack and plaid jacket; only one of them looks properly prepared, even for a gentle walk on a paved path.

'So that's Call-Me-Doug's second home?' she asks, pointing up at the gargantuan tower, glass panels reflecting the sun.

'Yep, all the way up on the twenty-sixth floor.'

'Do you think it's taller than the mountain? Can you see the summit?'

'Not from the condo, no, maybe from the roof?' Mike says. 'But I haven't been up yet. Too scared to meet the rich people up there with their glasses of wine and fancy steaks.'

Haley looks up again, a hand to shade her eyes from the afternoon sun. When the second tower goes up, will the mountain shrink back, knowing it's outnumbered?

'I'm guessing you'll know better, but everything I read online said the walks are easy. I'm not really a hiker.'

She points at her dress. 'Me neither.'

They get to the parking lot, full of massive SUVs, probably belonging to the many blond women in active wear, perky ponytails bouncing as they go up and down the paths.

‘We don’t need to go to the top.’

He nods and adjusts the straps on his backpack. He takes a deep breath, like they really are about to do something serious. ‘Okay, let’s do this.’ Then he squeezes her hand.

The trail isn’t really a trail, but a paved path so wide cars can go up with room to spare for walkers and cyclists. A few people with dogs pass in the opposite direction, waving politely. But she’s thinking about Mike’s hand, the hugs, how different it feels to be here in Kelowna with him, away from anyone she knows. No chance of running into Alex next to Okanagan Lake.

‘Do you know where JD’s place was?’ Mike asks. His fingers are looped through his backpack straps. His cheeks are red already.

More questions, more research. She thinks for a while, feeling her muscles straining, then says, ‘It’s just a vague memory, but I remember going up the mountain with Mum and Grandpa. Back then, Grandpa could beat both of us to the first lookout.’ When they finally caught up, she continues, they found him gazing across the city with his hands shoved into the pockets of his old work jacket. *Can you see where the orchard would’ve been from here, Dad?* Mum asked through deep breaths. This would’ve been years before her first diagnosis. Haley must’ve been about to finish high school. Grandpa pointed to a spot in the distance. *Around the parking lot.* Haley already knew that story—that they’d cleared the orchards and paved over the land to build a mall. Rather ironically, she always thought, naming it Orchard Park. The three of them stood there looking in the vague direction Grandpa had pointed.

Now, she and Mike stand in what could be the same spot up at the first lookout. The view has changed—the gaps in the downtown sprawl are starting to fill in with towers of various heights and shapes. Tower blocks are interspersed with the open spaces of parking lots, or gravel pits where more towers wait to be built. One day, will you even be able to see across to the highway? Or will the skyline be so densely packed with high rises that all you’ll see will be plate glass buildings reflected off more plate glass? To the right, though, the lake remains unchanged, framed by the hills of Westbank and the mountains beyond.

She crosses to read one of the old metal plaques: this one looks over the mill, where all different shades of brown float in the dark water and the industrial chimney belches out steam.

‘But no,’ she says, ‘I don’t know where JD ended up.’ She thinks about Mike’s hand in hers. Maybe this isn’t just about research anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

OGOPOGO

OGOPOGO KNOWN TO THE INDIANS AS NHAATIK, THE DEMON OF THE LAKE. LEGENDS WERE HANDED DOWN FROM FATHER TO SON ABOUT THIS MONSTER WHOSE HOME WAS BETWEEN SQUALLY POINT AND THE ISLAND.

Mike reads over Haley's shoulder.

HE HAD TO BE APPEASED OR HE WOULD CHURN THE WATERS IN FURY. OGOPOGO WAS THE NAME GIVEN BY THE WHITE MEN IN THE TWENTIES.

Strands of red hair escape from the bun at the back of her head, blowing in the wind.

The moment feels cinematic, maybe because of the epic view, or just the series of events leading up to this one. In the movie version of events, he would wrap his arms around her waist. They would stand cheek to cheek looking out over the practically mirror surface of the lake. There would be some perfectly timed declaration. Music would swell. But this isn't a movie and he isn't that kind of guy. He shoves his hands into his pockets and clears his throat. 'Have you seen the Ogopogo?'

'Of course,' she answers immediately and without further explanation.

He remembers the day in Penticton, when a poet stood on the beach, the water lapping at bare feet, and recited a poem about the history, the power, the mysteries of that water. The stories he'd heard about the monster from his father, and his father's father, and so on. Sara mumbling under her breath, *sure, cool story.*

'They say he lives on Rattlesnake Island. Somewhere over there.' She points beyond the bridge, beyond the edge of the city.

'N'xaxaitk', the Syilx say, meaning sacred spirit of the lake. The name *Ogopogo* came from an English song from the 1920s.'

'Huh. I didn't know any of that. What other Ogopogo facts do you know?'

He knows she's teasing, but he continues in his best professor voice, 'Ogopogo, and I imagine the statue down in City Park, was used to promote tourism.'

In the 1980s, the region offered a million-dollar reward to anyone who could prove the creature's existence. A few years later, Greenpeace declared the creature endangered. This version of "Ogopogo" exists in the stories of white settlers. For example, the so-called "Mother of the Okanagan," Susan Allison, details her encounters with the monster. In her memoirs, she explains how, while camped not far from Okanagan Lake, the indigenous guides told stories about the mysterious creatures that lived in the region, tales about how "one of the Big Men (giants) lived and had been often seen...This led to talking of the creature now called the 'Ogopogo.' The Indians did not say 'Ogopogo.' They looked on it as a superhuman entity and seemed to fear it, though none of our boys had seen it nor did they want to" (Allison). We can assume that JD, too, may have been witness to such storytelling while sat around a campfire. But would he, too, have had such a one-sided idea of the creature? Or would he have learned the Syilx, *N 'x̣ax̣aitkʷ*, practicing *n-ha-ha-it-koo* as he looked across the lake?

'Did you ever hear any stories about JD and the Ogopogo?' Missing pieces.

'I don't think so. But we always said that the Ogopogo was Nessie's cousin. And that the two communicate through sonar. Or maybe storms. The details were hazy.'

Mike nods. 'JD might've thought that too.' Maybe the story started with JD. It's possible that the lake monster was, like Nessie, less secretive back in the day, before everybody was watching for him, waiting to plaster his image on T-shirts and tacky souvenirs.

‘My mum used to threaten to throw me into the lake for the Ogoopogo to snack on if I didn’t behave.’

Mike laughs. ‘Of course she did. I’m going to imagine that small children wouldn’t be a lake monster’s first snack choice. Not enough fat on the bones. You know,’ he pauses for a moment, remembering some of the hazy details about his own history he’s heard over the years, ‘my dad used to say we had a distant relative, an aunt, I think, who liked to hike and was an amateur photographer. Apparently she saw Nessie and took a photo, but the photo was mysteriously ruined.’

‘Ah,’ Haley says, ‘proof gone. Too bad for you, Doctor Dunbar.’

Mike’s cheeks burn. ‘Nobody calls me Doctor Dunbar.’

‘Not even your students?’

He shakes his head. ‘Definitely not. I’m Mike if I’m anything. Except for when they email. Then I’m Doctor or Professor. It’s always awkward.’

‘Well, *professor*,’ she says, ‘why don’t you tell me about your family.’ She starts down the next path, not waiting to see if he’ll follow. ‘You know so much about my family, probably only fair you tell me about yours.’ The wind catches her hair, her dress; she looks like she could float away.

‘They’re not very interesting. At least,’ he says as he moves to catch up with her, gravel crunching underfoot, ‘not compared to your family.’

They stand at a junction of paths. A wooden arrow points right, to a path that immediately heads uphill. The second arrow points to a lower level, following the curve of the lake.

Haley starts down the path to the left. ‘I don’t like hills and you should see Paul’s Tomb.’

Mike runs a little to catch up with her, suddenly very aware of his backpack bouncing against his back.

The first path quickly disappears into the mountain side. There are trees above, trees below, trees hugging the skinny bit of shore that borders the water. He catches up and their steps synch up. Without thinking, he reaches for her hand and gives it a squeeze. Then he clears his throat. ‘Do you know the story about Paul’s Tomb?’ he asks. The name comes up each time he searches for Ballantyne Mountain.

A few weeks earlier, he’d started tentatively writing about Paul, in paragraphs flagged and highlighted. Connection to JD?

‘Nobody knows why it’s called Paul’s Tomb. Just that it’s a landmark on the way to a really nice swimming spot.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘So how did he end up with a tomb all the way out here?’ Haley asks.

They’ve passed a runner and a couple with a golden retriever, but otherwise, they’re alone. The only sounds are their voices and the occasional crunch and rustle in the hill above. Sometimes, Mike looks up and sees a grazing deer. The deer are uninterested in the human activity below. Out here, it feels like the rest of the world no longer exists.

‘The Paul family had a summer home. A cabin,’ he pauses, wondering if he’s switched back into nerdy history professor, ‘he built the tomb near where the cabin would’ve been.’ There are photos of the cabin online: a square log building with a covered veranda wrapped around. Dormer windows in a red roof. JD might’ve had a similar view: he imagines JD spending long summer nights, watching the sun glowing orange, red, dipping behind the mountains into a purple-blue sky.

‘Imagine what it would cost to buy a place with a view like this these days.’

‘A depressing amount of money. So depressing you could turn it into a drinking game.’ He doesn’t know why he’s said this; he can’t remember the last time he played a drinking game. Undergrad? Besides the occasional night out to celebrate somebody’s birthday, his drinking is normally restricted to a craft beer with dinner.

‘Drink every time you can’t afford to buy a house in BC? We’d all be wasted.’

Mike raises his eyebrows. ‘Maybe. Or maybe we’d feel better.’

Rocks skitter down the path.

‘I guess this would’ve felt like a long walk back in the day.’

Mike nods. The mountain wouldn’t have been criss-crossed with paths designed for pleasure walkers. There weren’t service roads, and there wouldn’t have been any need to worry about cell service.

‘But it is a beautiful spot. From what I remember.’

The further they go, the better he feels. His breaths are deeper and his muscles don’t hurt, despite not knowing when he last went for a hike. He’s not worrying about his project, or the job, Rog; even the existential dread hanging over him feels like it’s lifted. He’s more sure; today, this time with Haley isn’t about filling in the gaps in his research. He slows down a little so his steps line up with Haley’s; he wants to reach for her hand. It would be easy to reach for her hand. Instead, she reaches for his, looks up at him, smiling. Her eyes are half-closed, squinting in the sunlight. The day isn’t really perfect—the sun keeps dipping behind the clouds—but he wants to say that this is a perfect day.

Soon, they arrive at the tomb.

He paces in front of the crypt, just an arch marked 1910, the rest submerged below dirt and covered in tufts of yellowed grass. Buried. ‘I saw a lot of pictures so I knew what to expect,’ he says, ‘but I wonder if people get here and are disappointed.’

Their fingers are still threaded together. He can’t feel disappointed right now.

‘I was a bit sad the first time I came up here. I was expecting something spooky. You could walk past this and miss it.’

He nods.

‘Everyone says they buried it because it kept getting vandalised,’ Haley says.

‘Apparently grave robbers kept breaking in to steal stuff. Wonder what was in there? It’s hardly an ancient pyramid. Imagine old Paul filling his tomb with stacks of gold made on real estate, like a modern-day sleazy city realtor with a fancy convertible and his cell clipped to his belt in a holster.’

‘Sounds like my uncle. Except he’s not sleazy. And he drives a truck, not a convertible.’

They continue on the path, now sloping down, down, until the trees open up and suddenly the lake is right there, practically lapping at their feet. There’s a small rocky beach. Deserted. The water is bordered by hills, their dirt faces exposing the clusters of thick tree roots, perhaps reaching out for the water. Two pieces of driftwood are placed like benches, across from each other. It reminds him of a tiny amphitheatre. Symmetry. The view out to the water is equally unimpeded from either side. To the right, but far across the lake, are two houses sitting next to each other. Each has layers of glass patios and steep steps leading down to floating docks. Like twins. Did they decide one day that they would build identical houses, live identical lives?

Haley and Mike sit down on a piece of driftwood. The wood has been worn away, shaped to fit a variety of butts. Their fingers are still intertwined. He watches the tide coming in and feels...he pauses to think for a moment, looking at the lake water which is simultaneously so clear and so dark. Far in the distance, the mountains are blue and green. Unending, like the lake. It’s contentment he feels.

‘You never did tell me about your family,’ she says, interrupting the silence. Her legs are stretched out in front of her, the heels of her boots dug into the beach. Rocks skitter away as she moves.

He shrugs. ‘I guess I don’t think any of them are very interesting.’ He thinks about some of the things he’s found, the newspaper clipping with the wedding announcement, ambiguous articles about JD’s alleged crimes. He should tell her about the photos.

‘I’m interested,’ she says, giving him a nudge with her shoulder, ‘because I’m interested in you. What about your parents?’

‘Well, my mom lives in Mexico. And my dad lives back home. Near Lake Ontario.’

Haley nods.

‘Have you been?’

‘No, but I remember my social studies. I could probably point to it on a map.’ She picks up a stone with her free hand and runs her fingers across the surface. Then she casually turns towards the water and throws; the stone skips once, twice, three, four times.

‘Where’d you learn to do that?’ He’s never been able to skim stones, no matter how many times Dad said *Not like that, Mikey! It’s. All. In. The. Wrist.*

‘My grandpa. He was really good at it.’

‘You’re really good at it too.’

She skims another stone. The water is still, save a momentary ripple.

‘Should’ve brought a suit.’

‘You’re joking, right? Do you know how cold the water is?’

Mike shakes his head. ‘We’re hearty Canadians. We could take it.’ He puffs his chest out a little and flexes his arm. And immediately feels ridiculous.

‘Fine, you go test the water,’ she says, pushing him a little.

He gets up off the driftwood, wondering if he’s left a Mike-shaped imprint on the weather-beaten wood. He shakes his legs out. It’s probably the other way around: the driftwood has imprinted on him. Pebbles skid around him as he walks towards the shore. Tiny waves lap at the beach. Once he gets closer, the water changes colour, revealing waving tendrils of milfoil, the light brown sandy bottom. The water is less black and more green, almost blue at the surface. He pushes his sleeve up and crouches down on his haunches. He looks out across the lake: no power boats, not another person in sight. This is one of the things he always struggles to get used to in the Okanagan. How easy it is to feel alone.

But he's not alone this time. He turns around and finds Haley watching him.

'Go on then,' she says with a little smile, 'get it over with.'

He clears his throat. He's not sure what to expect. Okanagan Lake gets cold. It wasn't that long ago that he was reading about the great freezes. Locals went skating, drove their cars around on the ice. Sometimes they had to break the ice up with dynamite, carving a path so the ferries could still take people to Westbank on the other side of the lake. There are pictures of paddle-wheelers encased in ice. He lowers his hand towards the water. It's not going to be cold like that. It's spring now, and the weather has been so warm the last few days. His body tenses up anyway.

'Well?'

'It's cold,' he says, running his fingers through the water, 'but not too cold. You could come see for yourself.'

'And you wouldn't push me in?' That little smile again.

'Never.' He wipes his hand on his jeans and returns to the bench.

They sit there in silence for a while, listening to the waves rushing through the pebbles.

'I'm sorry I've been so useless,' Haley says out of nowhere.

'What? What do you mean? Of course you've been useful.'

'Have I, though? My ex couldn't believe that anyone would want *my help*.'

'I think your ex is an idiot.' The words come out so casually.

She turns to face him, cheeks a bit red from the breeze. 'Thanks. I just don't think I've been much use to anyone lately.'

'That's not true.' Mike thinks about what the last few months have been like. 'But if you have, you have a valid excuse. You lost your mum. I know I never met her, but I hope it's okay for me to say that I miss her. I miss her jokes and her stories...' he trails off, thinking about every time he saw a new email sitting in his inbox from Sandy. How there was always at least one gif that made him laugh out loud. Like the one of the capybaras sitting in a bath, orange yuzu

floating around them. *You need to be more like this*, she'd written. He'd put the gif onto his desktop, letting it play in a loop as he read through student assignments.

'Thanks,' Haley says again, 'but that's part of why I feel bad. I'm not the person who told the stories. I don't even know half of them. And sometimes,' she takes a deep breath, 'it just felt too hard to talk about her. Your questions brought everything back. All these little memories I never thought were important.' And then she tells him, words in a jumble, about how she drove up to Kelowna the day after her Mum's last diagnosis. 'Ended up next to the Ogoopogo statue.' She laughs. 'I hate that thing.'

He thinks about the photo. Haley with her equally red hair next to the silly monster. He's thinking about how he's asked her to talk about her mum, her family, all without really thinking about how it might affect her.

'I just sat there crying for ages. Knowing it was ridiculous to be crying next to the hideous thing, hearing Mum's voice saying *little girls are the monster's favourite delicacy*, wondering how much longer I'd get to hear her voice. And then I got in the car, went home, and put on a brave face.'

He doesn't know what to say.

'Prepared myself for the end. And then you came along, asking questions.'

'I'm sorry if talking to me has made things worse.' It's right to apologise, but it's not going to make the guilt disappear. His heart starts pounding.

'It's okay.' But she starts crying and she doesn't try to stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. 'What was I going to do, just move on? She was my mum.'

This is his nightmare, again. He thinks back to all the times he's made a woman cry and all the times he's sat there and done nothing because he didn't know what the right thing was.

'Don't cry,' he says, 'or do, if you want to.' And then he pulls her into a tight hug. He feels her shake against him.

She says something, but the words are indecipherable.

‘If you don’t want to talk about your mum anymore that’s okay. We don’t have to talk about the project at all if it’s too much for you. It doesn’t matter.’

She looks up at him, crying even harder. ‘Of course it does.’ She pulls away a little more, ‘Every time we talked it meant I had to face it all.’

He’s very aware of her face, how in some places her pale skin looks translucent, how green her eyes look when she’s crying. Is that green a family trait? He imagines JD in a portrait studio, dressed in his Sunday best. Photos taken for different reasons then. No time for filters or selfies in the 1880s. Instead, photos as proof of existence. Mike brushes a black smear from her cheek with his thumb. Her skin is warm.

‘All of it, I guess. Dealing with my mum’s cancer for the first time. And then all the times it came back. The hope. Trying to prepare for the worst. And I thought I was dealing,’ she sniffles, ‘but it turns out I’m just a mess.’

‘You’re not a mess. But I think being a mess is completely normal.’ He holds her tighter.

‘And you sat there,’ she looks up at him, ‘listening to me. You didn’t freak out when I ran away crying.’

He relives those moments of panic, ‘Might have been close to running away myself.’

She laughs. ‘But you didn’t.’

They’re cheek to cheek now, her breath hot on his face. ‘Because you were interesting.’ He wants to kiss her and tell her that everything will be okay.

So, in a moment that surprises him, he does.

Chapter Eighteen

Haley isn't sure why she decided to tell that story about crying next to the Ogopogo statue, or why she brought up Alex. But she liked hearing Mike call Alex an idiot. She feels safe sitting next to him, looking out across the water and knowing that they're the only ones around. She doesn't worry when he brushes what must be a mascara streak from her cheek. Instead, she leans into him, because he's been listening to her this whole time. And then she stops thinking because Mike's beard brushes against her cheek. Goosebumps. Their noses touch, hers probably snotty from all of the crying, but he doesn't pull away.

He leans closer and brushes his lips against hers. 'It's going to be okay.' He runs his fingers through her hair. Next, they're full-on kissing, as full-on as she was crying earlier.

When she next opens her eyes, his glasses are fogged up.

'Don't need to see.' He takes the glasses off and leans back in.

She lets herself look at him, really look at him, without worrying about boundaries or how anyone else might react to this moment. Nose, slightly too big, freckles across the bridge, dark beard flecked with grey, those long eyelashes gifted to men in a cruel twist of fate.

And then he pulls away a little, saying, 'I'm not very good at this.'

She wants to tell him that he's fine, that everything is how it's supposed to be. But the peace of the little beach is broken by the echoing sounds of tinny bass. A large man in a red kayak appears on the water, a trail of old school hip hop accompanying him. He's shirtless, with angry looking tattoos covering most of his skin, a shiny bald head, and a pair of polarised sunglasses. He stops paddling just where the land gives way to the lake, then rests his paddle across his body and pulls a water bottle out from the boat. He sees them, but he doesn't wave, say hi, or acknowledge that he's disturbed the moment. The kayak sends ripples across the water. They aren't powerful enough to make it as far as the beach. Then the man pulls some kind of bar out of the kayak, tears into the wrapping with his teeth, and eats the brown contents in two bites.

Haley holds in a laugh, and when she looks over at Mike, he's doing the same thing. The man in the kayak doesn't seem to notice: he just keeps chewing. Finally, his snack finished, he crumples the wrapper up and tucks it somewhere in the boat. He dips his paddle into the water on the left side, and then quickly pulls it up, a shower of water cascading over his body. The sun peeks out from behind a cloud and just for a moment, the droplets glisten against his skin. Bass punctuates the moment. Then the man dips the paddle into the water and turns, gliding away from the city.

'Well that was weird,' she says, 'were we invisible?'

'Maybe. It might've been better that way. Settle this one for me though,' Mike says, his arm draped around her shoulder, 'very loud, very old school hip hop, or very loud country music?'

'Hip hop. Back home the radio is tuned to country music 24/7. There are only so many times you can listen to someone serenading their cows.'

'Not a fan then?'

She shakes her head. 'Not so much. Spent too many years living in the city. You, however,' she puts her hands on either side of his face, 'have the right kind of face for a cowboy hat.'

Mike's mouth drops open for a moment. He runs a hand over the top of his head.

'Really?'

'Yep,' she says, 'ten-gallon, even. The bigger the better.'

'You're joking. You're joking?' he repeats, sounding much less convinced the second time.

'I'm joking.'

He looks relieved. 'Okay, good.'

They look at each other, and then back out at the water. A few moments pass in silence.

'What do you want to do now?'

‘Walk back towards town, I guess.’ She gets up from the driftwood and brushes off her dress. They’ll still be finding sand on their clothes once they’re back in Vancouver, hundreds of kilometres from Paul’s Tomb.

They walk back up the trail, holding hands sometimes. Mike puts his arm across her shoulder for a while. They make small talk and comment on the wildflowers—just starting to bloom, the occasional couple they pass on the trail, and the deer that watch them from the hillside, observing while eating, as if they, the humans, are some kind of entertainment. By the time they get back to the lookout, Haley wishes she’d brought a bottle of water and eaten something at the café. Her stomach rumbles impatiently.

Mike wanders back over to the Ogoopogo sign, hands in his pockets. She takes a picture, his back to her, the lake and mountains surrounding everything. She wants to remember this moment. She notices the way his hair sticks up at the back, a spot near his left ear where there’s a patch of nearly solid grey. She puts the phone away and goes to stand next to him, looking out across the lake and beyond. Down below, boats cut across the water. If they were down at Gyro beach, they’d already be dealing with drunk guys in their man tank tops and white sunglasses; it’s nearly summer to them. A soundtrack of roaring engines and bad music blasting from boat speakers.

‘I wanted to look at the signs again,’ Mike says, ‘because I thought they were weird before.’

She looks down at the bronze sign and traces a finger over the raised letters. ‘They’ve been here for as long as I can remember.’

He nods. ‘I’m just surprised they haven’t replaced them or put up another sign in explanation. Seeing the word,’ he puts a finger under the word *Indian*, ‘it’s just weird. The Okanagan Nation is made up of something like seven different bands.’

‘I don’t really know much about them—’

‘And stretches all across the Okanagan, all the way down to Washington State,’ Mike carries on as though he hasn’t heard her. ‘Different cultures, different languages. Using the term *Indian*,’ he lowers his voice, ‘is just...so out-dated.’ He looks at her now, like he’s expecting her to say something.

‘I don’t feel like...’ she starts, but doesn’t know how to explain things like Auntie Karen, married to Uncle Bill for how many years, and still goes around talking about the *PC brigade*. ‘I mean,’ she starts again because Mike is looking at her, waiting, ‘growing up in Merritt I knew the Res was right there, just on the other side of the river. Uncle Bill’s mum grew up there. But the only reason I heard about it was because kids from my high school went there to party.’ There were times when her parents ranted about what an eyesore the Res was. They never let her go to those parties.

Mike shakes his head.

They start down the trail again. Haley listens to the gravel crunching under her feet. She doesn’t know what to say. She knows she’s privileged. But she’s also the kind of person who only ever glances at headlines when they pop up on social media; she doesn’t watch the news because it makes her depressed, and she can’t remember the last time she picked up a newspaper. There was that time she downloaded a bunch of political podcasts and thought she was going to listen to all kinds of things while cooking or walking to work. Instead, she listens to pop music that makes her happy and her walks are so short she only gets through a few songs. A familiar feeling clunks into her head: this is another man she’s not smart enough to be around. Because she’s *just a librarian*, she doesn’t have aspirations to do a PhD, and she doesn’t spend her free time writing academic papers full of long, convoluted sentences, and jargon.

‘Haley?’ Mike stops walking and puts a hand on her shoulder. ‘Did I say something wrong? Are you okay?’

She brushes hair away from her face. Her skin feels hot and her eyes are prickling. Again. How many times has she cried lately?

A lady wearing a suit of pink spandex strides up the hill with a Staffy pulling on the leash. The dog has an equally pink, glittering collar on her neck. Mike and Haley have to step off the path to avoid being knocked over. But the lady doesn't notice, she's too busy having a very loud, dramatic conversation about something Chad said last night to the air. Or, they see as she goes by, to somebody on the other end of her headphones.

Haley is glad of the distraction: this woman and her extra dog make her feel a little bit better. She wipes her eyes. She's not going to overthink. 'Are you an optimist or a pessimist?' she asks as they continue down the path. Below, the rows of cars in the parking lot come into view, the field with the signs for frisbee golf (whatever that is), the old parts of the city and the ramshackle bungalows, the construction sites and sounds of machinery. It's amazing how different the city seems from fifteen minutes up a hill.

Mike doesn't answer until they've returned to the paved path. 'Pessimist, I guess. I feel like that's not a question I get asked very often.'

'Mum always said you could tell a lot about a person if they called themselves an optimist. She said they were probably lying, and it was better to be a glass half-empty type, but to know the bottle of wine was sitting nearby.' *And even better to be the person with an extra bottle in the rack. That's the point, Halestorm, always buy two bottles of wine.* Maybe that piece of advice wasn't so great when she was nineteen and in the liquor store for the first time, a bottle of wine in each hand.

They stop at the parking lot, just at the bottom of the path. The lot is busier, SUVs packed full of kids and dogs and tired parents coming and going.

'So, do you have to head back or do you want to...' Mike trails off, waiting for her.

'I'm kind of hungry,' she says. Her stomach rumbles. She wonders if crying makes her hungry.

'Anywhere you want to go?'

She shrugs. ‘Not really. I guess we just usually end up at one of the breweries.’ She thinks of a visit a few years before Mum’s diagnosis. She came home for the weekend and they drove up to Kelowna. A rare thing, getting Dad *to the city*. It was raining but warm and they sat out on a rooftop patio. On a sunny day, you couldn’t get a table there. In the rain, they had the place almost to themselves. She remembers fish tacos. *Fancy wine? Someone’s moved up in the world.* She’d just started her job at the library and Mum wouldn’t stop talking about Haley’s *big city career*. *Do you have a briefcase?* she kept asking. It feels like a recent memory; if she concentrates for a moment, she can almost hear the rain falling on the umbrella they huddled under.

‘BNA?’ Mike asks, interrupting the memory. ‘I went there once and had an IPA with dinosaur in the name.’

‘Is that what you look for in a beer?’

‘No, but it was really good.’

He takes her hand as they start down Ellis. The street is busy with noise: cars go by blasting country music; runners jog with dogs in tow; weeping willows hang over old cinder block walls, their branches dripping leaves all the way to the ground. Mike keeps talking about beer, pausing only to ask if she’s tried some IPA or stout with a silly name, or if she’s gone to a new brewery downtown. She wonders if this is when she tells him that she spent her formative years gunning Molson down by the river.

The brewery sits next to an empty lane, and next to that there’s an empty gravel lot with a massive yellow crane dormant in the middle. It used to be parking overflow when someone famous was playing a show, or the Rockets had a game at Prospera Place. She got a parking ticket there, after some country singer’s show went long. She’d been declared designated driver: Mum and Auntie Karen sat in the back seat, drunkenly singing all the way back to Merritt.

‘Did you know the British North American Tobacco Company once used this building to store tobacco and roll cigars?’ Mike asks.

She rolls her eyes to hide the fact that she's impressed; his knowledge of Kelowna feels encyclopaedic, not like what a local would know. 'No, Doctor Dunbar,' she says, 'I always assumed all the old buildings had something to do with the orchards. What else?' Haley puts a hand up to shield her eyes, tipping her head to take in the view. It's an old red brick building, one of the few remnants of a former version of the city.

'Well Haley,' he says slowly and deliberately, 'the Occidental Fruit Company moved in and it became a cannery. And then it sat empty for years.'

'Until the hipsters swept in.'

'I guess so. Also, there will be a test on this later.' He gives her shoulder a little nudge.

The patio is busy, mostly young guys in T-shirts, shorts, and baseball hats turned backwards. They lean back in their chairs and look across tables covered with empty glasses. And it's mid-afternoon. She takes a deep breath.

They've barely made it up the front steps when she hears someone saying her name. She drops Mike's hand.

Kevin Carey comes over from a table, smiling his surprisingly toothy smile. He has a pair of aviator sunglasses with reflective lenses nestled in his hair. 'Haley Gibson,' he says again, 'how the hell have you been?' He says it like they haven't seen each other in ages and comes in for a hug, like they're really good friends.

'Good to see you,' she says with her face turned away because his breath smells like beer. 'Is Tara here too?' Haley asks, scanning the patio for other familiar faces.

'What?' He's yelling now, trying to be heard over the sounds of the bass-heavy music and the noise of the big groups behind them.

'You guys want to join us?' Kevin asks her, and then turns to Mike as though he's only just noticed him. 'Hey man,' he yells, 'I'm Kevin.' He throws a tanned arm in Mike's direction. The two men clap hands and it looks like they're moments away from an arm wrestling match.

‘Nice to...’ but Mike’s greeting is overwhelmed by a roar of laughter from one of the tables behind them.

Kevin whips his head around and gives the rowdy group a thumb-up. ‘Come and sit with us. We’re just over there.’ He points towards the far corner, to a table full of bros in baseball hats and white sunglasses and very tanned women with shiny hair.

Haley looks at Mike, who looks back to her, his eyes wide, like he’s just as scared of joining this table of beautiful people as she is. ‘Uh, we’ll just get some drinks.’ She feels cold sweat dripping down her back. She wonders if she already smells like she’s been climbing a mountain. ‘See you in a bit,’ she says to Kevin, and then pulls Mike into the crowded pub.

All she wanted was to sit down with a cold drink and some food. Onion rings. Fries with heaped with parmesan cheese. Something greasy and comforting. The bar is illuminated with blue neon light, the shelves backed with mirrors. The whole wall glows. The bartenders look like they’re glowing, too. People a few years younger than her, but much cooler with their 90s baggy T-shirts and cargo pants, a guy with floppy hair and hoop earrings. She reaches for Mike’s hand as they get into the line behind a big guy wearing a Canucks jersey.

‘It’s almost playoff season,’ Mike explains. ‘But I haven’t seen a single car going around with flags.’ He has to lean in, his lips practically brushing against her ear.

The feeling makes her freeze. ‘I’m just going to go to the bathroom,’ Haley shouts, panicked.

‘Okay, do you want me to get you something? Or we can just wait to order until you come back.’

‘Pint of anything dinosaur themed?’

Mike responds with a big grin and a thumbs-up.

The walk to the bathroom feels long. She feels a trickle of sweat rolling down her back. The music is too loud and she keeps bumping into people. She’s not sure what time it is, but a lot of people are drunk already: they’re laughing too loud, flailing their limbs around, sloshing

their drinks everywhere, enjoying themselves too much. Or maybe that's what they're meant to be doing.

She pushes the bathroom door open with her shoulder, avoiding the gold handle covered in smeared handprints. Relief. The music is quiet, the lights dimmed. She pauses in front of the mirror to assess the situation. She doesn't look like she's climbed a mountain: her makeup is mostly in place, her hair just needs to be coiled up into a neater bun, and her interview-appropriate dress is fine. She could even get away with undoing an extra button. She just needs lipstick.

Just as she's about to swipe the lipstick on, the stall door directly behind her opens and Tara comes out.

'A bold choice.' Tara waves her hands under the tap.

Haley purses her lips together. *That's the perfect red*, Mum said the last time they'd gone to Sephora, *the only red that doesn't make people with our colouring look ridiculous. May it never be discontinued.* And Haley had bought two, just in case.

'What are you doing in Kelowna?' Tara runs a hand over her sleek hair, pulled back into two thick Dutch braids. Then she pulls a lip gloss from the designer bag she's paired with leggings and an oversized plaid shirt.

'I had that job interview. And then I ran into Mike.'

Tara stops mid-gloss. Her eyes look massive, surrounded by those huge, fluttery fake lashes. 'Is he here?' she whispers, her head whipping around like she's expecting him to be in the bathroom.

'You don't need to whisper. I left him in the line at the bar.' Haley smiles at her reflection, checking her teeth for lipstick. If she pretends that she's calm, will anyone else believe she is?

Tara rubs her hands together. ‘So I’m finally going to meet the famous Mike.’ Then she turns to Haley, placing a hand on her arm. ‘But wait, what does this mean, you being here with him? Did you break up with Alex?’

A middle-aged woman walks into the bathroom, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She scowls at them before disappearing into a stall.

‘Well, we had a fight. About Mike.’

Tara squeals.

Noises come from the stall behind them. Is the woman watching videos on her phone while sitting on the toilet?

‘I don’t know if we broke up,’ Haley continues, at normal volume, because she doesn’t want her thoughts to be punctuated with splashes and dogs barking, ‘but I was talking to Mike about my *ex*.’

Tara grabs her arm. ‘I am *here* for this drama. I need to meet this man and judge him for myself. Plus, best if we get out of here,’ she nods towards the closed stall.

Haley pauses a moment, letting the door swing closed behind her friend. She takes a deep breath. She could run away. *Or you could just dive in.*

The noise of the pub hits like a choppy wave on the lake: all at once, the bubble of the bathroom broken. Mike isn’t in the crowd at the bar anymore, so they head back outside. The sun is lower in the sky now, the hint of a cool breeze rising. Kevin waves them over to a picnic table in the corner, shaded by a big red umbrella. Tara plants a glossy kiss on Kevin’s cheek and wraps an arm around his shoulders. They are both so beautiful in the sunshine. Haley remembers the sweat dripping down her back. *But that red lipstick could solve all of life’s problems.* She purses her lips together and contemplates the end of the opposite bench, where Mike is sitting awkwardly: one leg under the table, one leg on the other side of the bench, his back to a large man in an old school Canucks jersey.

‘I ordered you a beer,’ he says, ‘it’s definitely named after a dinosaur.’ He pushes one of the glasses towards her. ‘I think it’s an IPA.’

She waits for a couple of moments, wondering if he’s going to swivel his leg around, but instead he gets up and offers her his spot.

‘I’ll perch on the edge,’ he says.

How to navigate a picnic bench in a dress? She scoots along from the edge, not taking any chances. Settled, she looks at the glass, condensation rolling down the sides; the contents are golden, glowing slightly in the sunlight. She draws a face, an upside-down U for a mouth.

The rest of the group starts talking about hockey. The playoffs have started and everyone is still going on about the last time they made it this far.

‘So, you’re Mike,’ Tara says, leaning across the table, ‘the historian, right?’ She asks even though she knows the answer and it’s obvious she knows. ‘And I’m Tara. Haley and I are old friends.’ Even the way she says that sounds suspicious.

Mike reaches a hand across the table. ‘Kevin was just saying that you’re in the process of buying a house.’

‘Yes, trying to,’ Tara pauses to take a sip from a pink cocktail, ‘but not having any luck. The deal collapsed on the most recent place. I told you this, didn’t I, Haley?’

Haley shakes her head. She takes a sip from her glass: the beer is very cold, slightly fruity, and doesn’t make her think of dinosaurs. Mike’s leg knocks against hers under the table.

‘It’s a long story,’ Tara says.

‘A sad story,’ Kevin contributes, ‘but one with a happy ending.’ He wiggles his eyebrows.

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Their table is covered in empty glasses. Haley can’t remember if she’s contributed three or four. Rounds just keep arriving, the glasses passed down without ever asking if anybody wants more. The big guy in the Canucks jersey has inched closer and closer, as if his already huge shoulders have grown with each pint he drinks. Occasionally, he turns to Haley and smiles, like they’re

sharing a personal response to a joke Kevin has told, though she doesn't know the guy's name and he doesn't know hers. But she is happy, no longer aware of sweat or thinking about the potential for smeared lipstick. Her skin prickles in the cold and at some point, without saying anything, Mike drapes his flannel over her shoulders, his arm lingering. They smile at each other and decide to share a basket of fries, and then more food arrives at the table: a massive pizza covered in creamy mascarpone, a plate of one-bite fish tacos dripping with chipotle sauce. Mike eats everything, happily, greedily reaching across the table for more, not asking if things are vegan (because nothing that arrives on the table is vegan).

She realises, with a slice of pizza in one hand and a pint in the other, that she's not just happy. She's free. She doesn't need to watch behind her for acquaintances who will recognise her and ask who she's with and who she's not with. Here, she's just Haley, who some of the guys around the table know from high school, or Haley, friend of Tara, or Haley, of Haley and Mike.

Then the lights flick on, an hour later than expected, the little glowing orbs strung across the pergola not able to recognise the recent seasonal shift. Everything sparkles. She can't remember the last time she was out on a night like this, surrounded by strangers, beer making the small talk so easy. At one point, the big guy in the jersey yells, *I'M JARED*, into her ear and pulls her into a hug. She still doesn't know who he is or how he knows Kevin and Tara, but she tells him they should be friends. Across the table, the power couple are glued to each other, not even pretending that there are other people at the table. And Mike, at the end, has been up and down a couple of times, phone in hand, returning with a look on his face that Haley doesn't know how to read.

'Everything okay?' she asks him a few times, but his answer is drowned out by another whoop of laughter, another hug from Jared.

At one point, Tara stands up and announces that she needs to pee. 'Come with?' she points at Haley. The bar is packed full of people, the noise even more intense than it was when they first arrived. Even the bathroom is full, hair being flicked and smoothed, lipstick being

applied, skirts pulled down. They huddle next to the hand dryers, both dancing from foot to foot because they've waited too long and had too many drinks.

'Where are you heading after this?' Tara shouts from the next stall.

'After this?' Haley shouts back. 'I was going to drive home,' she says when they're both standing at the sinks. She was going to drive home hours ago. Have dinner with the family. Relive the interview. Watch a movie picked out by the boys. Go to bed early.

Tara reapplies her lip gloss, hands steady despite the raspberry vanilla cosmos she's been drinking. She stares into the mirror. 'Girl, you are *not* driving home.' Then she starts to laugh.

Haley looks at herself, the remnants of red lipstick, the mascara under her eyes. She holds onto the sink to steady herself; the world is spinning ever so slightly, all the lights twinkling. This, she thinks, is the most beautiful bathroom she's ever been drunk in. 'Cab?'

'Are you so drunk you don't remember where you are? You're in *Kelowna*,' Tara draws out the syllables, 'a cab would cost you like,' she hiccups and starts to laugh again, 'two hundred bucks. At least!'

Haley looks at her phone: just after midnight. 'I could call my dad?' But they both know he's been asleep for hours. Now she's laughing. 'Where are you staying?'

'We booked a hotel. Everything was booked up last time we checked.'

'I did not think this through.' Haley says, still laughing.

'Oh well, maybe a solution,' Tara pauses to wiggle her eyebrows before whispering, 'will present itself.'

'I could always sleep in my car.'

'Not what I meant,' Tara says.

Haley fishes in her bag for her lipstick. *A red to fix every problem.*

They head back to the table arm in arm, laughing, and arrive to another round waiting for them at the table.

‘I thought you might like one of those pink things,’ Jared yells at her, ‘they look like your kind of drink.’ He gives her a wink and a pat on the back.

‘I’m glad you’ve made a new friend,’ Mike says, his lips brushing against her ear, ‘but I think I might be a bit jealous of this Jared guy.’

The back of her neck prickles. She can see herself reflected in his glasses. The lights continue to sparkle around them. She doesn’t remember the last time she felt like this. Everyone clinks their drinks together. Mike holds her free hand, tracing circles with his thumb.

Later, but a while after they’ve been told that the pub is closing and the bar is closed, Kevin gets up, sunglasses still on his head, and says, ‘I think that brings the evening to a close, ladies and gents.’

‘Some of us are thinking about heading to a club, or maybe Bry’s place,’ Jared says, his face close to Haley’s. ‘You want to come?’ His eyelids droop and his cheeks are flushed.

‘Um, maybe?’ She looks at Tara, who’s already up, and slinging her purse over her shoulder. ‘What’s everyone else doing?’

But her question is drowned out by Bry—known as Bryan during high school, someone Haley rarely spoke to and never felt any need to know better—leans across the table, ‘There aren’t clubs open tonight, Jare. My place?’ He looks around the table, waiting for everyone to say yes.

‘I think we’re gonna call it a night,’ Kevin says, his arm wrapped around Tara, who nods. ‘But the rest of you go.’

There are muffled responses around the table as everyone gets up off the picnic bench. Haley wonders if her ass is asleep, and she can barely feel her legs. She moves around a little, hoping to get the feeling back. They move as a unit, slowly, a couple of the guys stumbling across the patio and down the stairs, laughing at themselves before anyone else can. Then, on the sidewalk, they stop like they’ve all forgotten where they’re meant to be going. She can see her

breath; she pulls Mike's flannel close. Music still thumps in her ears and the lights swim in front of her eyes. She's a bit unsteady on her feet, but she keeps laughing.

'So,' Bry says, 'my place? I'm down Bernard.'

'We're going that way,' Tara points in the opposite direction. She moves around the circle giving everyone hugs, pausing when she gets to Haley, 'Do you know where you're going?'

Haley shrugs, 'Don't know,' she says, too loud. Her ears are ringing and her head is buzzing too much to think.

'Don't do anything I wouldn't do. And text me to let me know you're safe. Okay?' Tara looks at her; they haven't done this before, this exchange of girl-code.

'Okay.' Haley starts walking with the group, hoping to be absorbed, to keep this feeling going.

Kevin and Tara walk away, waving and blowing kisses until they disappear down the street.

'You coming to Bry's?' Jared asks over the noise of the rest of the group.

'Maybe,' she says. The stars are so bright here. It's easy to forget that.

'And your friend?' Jared yells.

She slows down. Mike. She looks around, finding him a few steps behind, walking next to some guy she doesn't know.

'I'm going to head home,' Mike says.

Jared looks at Haley.

'Uh, well, left my car at Mike's place,' she says, too loud again. She feels like her brain is frozen.

Then Bry interrupts, clapping an arm around Jared's shoulders. 'She's not leaving with you, man. Now let's go!' He raises an arm in the air like he's commanding the troops and surprisingly, they all start to shuffle in the direction of Bernard.

Jared is pulled into the group, but still yells, 'I'll get your number from Kevin. Let me know when you're next in Kelowna!'

And then it's just the two of them left standing in front of the pub. It's quiet now, though voices echo back down the street. They can see the massive tower from where they're standing, lights glinting off the plate glass.

'So,' Mike says, hands shoved into his pockets. Does he have goosebumps?

They look at each other, and then away, Haley laughing. She reaches for his hand. It's warm. Familiar.

The walk to the building feels like it takes ages, neither of them saying much. Then they wait in front of the elevator, the hall of the fancy building illuminated by lights that glow gold and flick on when they enter. The elevator pings open, doors revealing their faces in mirrors. She takes a quick look at herself, her hair falling out of the bun she'd retied when she thought it was getting in the way of the chicken wings she was trying to eat. The red lipstick is bright, bold.

'Floor 26,' Mike says as the elevator travels up. He leans back and closes his eyes.

'Are you okay?' she asks.

'Just not a fan of elevators. Or that guy Jared,' he peeks at her with one eye still closed.

'He didn't seem to notice,' she starts, but then thinks notice what? Notice that Haley showed up with Mike, which meant that they would leave together? That they were holding hands most of the evening? That they'd had a moment many hours earlier: the crying, the kiss, that feeling like something new was about to happen and all the doubts and hesitations that come with it. She could just stop thinking now. *You want something? Make it happen.*

The elevator doors ping open.

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Mike snores next to her, stretched out, one arm across her stomach, the other lost under the mass of pillows. There are too many pillows, four at least still behind them, a few more that fell to the floor and didn't seem worth picking up. Haley stares up at the ceiling, stretching her legs

against the sheets. Linen, kind of a sage green. The duvet is the kind you find in super fancy hotels. Puffy, like a cloud. Most of it has fallen onto the floor, too. She sits up, one hand holding the sheet in place. All the blinds are open, and, with the city illuminated, the lake glows, the multi-coloured lights flickering off the dark surface.

She hadn't thought she was paying attention to the place when Mike was fumbling to open the door with one hand, the other at the back of her neck. When she kissed him in the elevator, she went from a million thoughts to just a few: how it felt to kiss him, how it felt to be held, how it felt to be pressed up against him. And then he opened the door, they stumbled inside, and she found herself staring over his shoulder. While he was kissing her neck, she was looking at the view. She pulled him over to the wall of glass, her hands almost pressing against the panes; at twenty-six stories up, the view of the lake was uninterrupted. The dark mountains were like the spikey backs of sleeping monsters.

'I haven't figured out how to work the blinds,' Mike explained, 'they've been open the whole trip.'

The city was at their backs, glowing. It was more beautiful than she'd ever thought Kelowna could be. 'Leave them open.'

He looked surprised when she wrapped her arms around his neck again.

Now, the darkness is just starting to wane. Soon, the sun will be coming up over the mountains. She reaches for the glass of water on the floating bedside table. Nearly empty. At some point, they'd gotten up for water, leaning naked against the kitchen counter. Laughing. She poked at a big brown freckle on his left hip bone. *What does this button do?* The rest of the night is a blur. She downs the rest of the water. Her mouth feels like it's full of old socks. She gets up, looking over at Mike, not wanting to disturb him. He snores louder and rolls over onto his other side but doesn't wake up.

The bedroom, like the rest of the place, is just walls of huge windows. Her head is buzzing again. She reaches for Mike's T-shirt, draped over the bench at the foot of the bed.

There's a faint smell of beer, sweat, and something woody, like sandalwood. The carpet is plush beneath her feet. But the door creaks when she opens it. She looks back over at Mike, trying rapidly to come up with something to say, but he doesn't even move.

City lights illuminate her path to the kitchen. She fills up the glass from the water dispenser in the giant fridge (tap water in the Interior is basically undrinkable) and downs nearly all of it in one go. She fills it up again, drinking small sips this time. The condo is full of low-slung leather furniture with chunky arms. Everything is chrome. Huge canvases hang on the walls that aren't windows. There are orchids on most of the flat surfaces, stems heavy with flowers. This is something, the place and the lifestyle that goes along with it. She takes another gulp of water and leaves her glass on the counter, next to a bowl of fruit so perfect it might be fake.

And then she spots the boxes, piled next to the kitchen island, looking out of place with their wrinkled cardboard and dirty corners. Mike's? The top box is open. She searches for the lights, finding a set of switches in the hall. She tries the first one: lights under the cabinets flick on. Returning to the box, she can see photos, maybe newspaper clippings? She grabs a stack and turns to look at them in the light. The newspaper clippings are brittle, the print faded, too difficult to read in this light. She puts them aside and stares at the photo on the top of the pile. A little girl, an arm wrapped around the silly Ogopogo statue. A little girl with a huge mass of red hair. On the back of the photo, the name SANDRA in big block letters. The next photo is of a lone man, a row of trees behind him. She tips the photo under the lights. He's young, hardly older than she is now, hair slicked back, fingers looped through the belt loops of his jeans. The eyes. DUNCAN, 1968. She quickly slides through the rest of the photos, finding something she recognises in each one. Rummaging through the box reveals notebooks, all with the same initials: DGB.

She leans against the cold marble. This is Grandpa's stuff, or at least the top layer is. Family photos. Things Auntie Karen decided were garbage. And now she's looking at it in boxes

in Mike's boss' condo. Where did he find this stuff? How many chances did he have to tell her? They'd spent the whole day together and he'd said nothing. Maybe he wasn't going to. Maybe he was just going to use whatever was in the boxes for his research. Her heart is racing. He should've told her. He should've at least mentioned it. They passed the boxes on the way in. And then she feels a little sick, thinking about how she ended up here. It was her, drinking without thinking about where she was or what would happen next. She was just going along—*living in the moment*. All those clichés don't tell you that you'll wake up feeling a bit sick, the junk food and drinks coming back to her. She reaches for the glass of water and nearly knocks it on the floor.

The sun is more than just a faint glimmer now; it burns red against the dark blue mountains and sky. She follows the trail of clothes, gathering her things into her arms.

Mike is still snoring, flipped on his back, one arm up over his head, the other lost under the sheets. He doesn't notice she's gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Mike wakes up with the sun shining on his face. The blinds: left open by the cleaner, probably, who wouldn't have realised that the next person to stay in the place still wouldn't know how to use them. Each morning he's woken up like this, the sun warm, and each morning he's stretched, yawned really big, and been glad that he's not waking up to windows encased in tarps and scaffolding. The sounds of construction workers yelling over tinny music from a paint-splattered boombox. But this morning. He attempts to sit up and it's only then that it all comes back to him. His head pounds: the stream of drinks, the greasy chicken wings and pizza, the endless talk about the likelihood of the Canucks making it through the playoffs, and Haley. Haley. Haley, who isn't next to him, or the lump at the end of the bed (that's just the duvet). He gets up, collecting clothes from random places. T-shirt on the bench at the end of the bed. Boxers under the bed. Socks, one in the bedroom, the other hanging over the arm of the couch. Jeans on the floor next to the kitchen island.

She isn't in the kitchen, either. He checks the rest of the condo, but there's no sign of her. Did last night even happen? He's pretty sure they came back here; he remembers her standing next to the window, saying something about the view and how the city only really looks good when you're looking down at it. Everything else is a blur. It would be easy to pretend it had never happened, that she was never here.

And then he notices the boxes sitting at the end of the counter. The boxes from Clay. The top box is open and the piles of stuff look like they've been rummaged through. He takes a closer look, going through the photos that cascade as soon as his fingers make contact. He hasn't had a chance to organise anything, but wasn't the picture of the little girl and the Ogopogo on top? Hadn't he left it there thinking that he should show it to Haley? He'd forgotten all about it.

'Fuck.'

So she came into the kitchen to—he spots an empty glass sitting on the counter—get a glass of water. She finds the boxes and decides to take a look, discovering what’s most likely a photo her mum as a child.

‘Fuck,’ he swears a little louder this time and then winces as the sound echoes in his head.

And she thought? She probably thought that he was an asshole. Keeping things from her after everything she’s shared.

He grabs the jeans from the floor and checks his phone. Nothing. Now what? He’ll call her and try to explain why he didn’t tell her about the photo. He’ll apologise. He isn’t an asshole. (Or is he? This isn’t the first time he’s been called that.) It just goes to voicemail. He hangs up. What’s the value of an apology over voicemail? But yesterday. It was a good day, one of the best he can remember in ages. He calls again. Deep breath. ‘Haley,’ he says after the beep, ‘I’m really sorry. I meant to tell you about the photos. I was going to bring them to you. I just got caught up in everything yesterday. I wasn’t expecting...I’m so sorry. Please call me.’ He hangs up and feels like an idiot. Then he types *So sorry. Please call and let me know you’re okay.* Then a long sigh. This felt like something good.

He chugs a couple of big glasses of water to shake the hangover. Then a shower, water nearly cold, to wake up. He thinks he hears his phone buzzing on the kitchen counter, but when he returns, no notifications appear. He drinks a cup of coffee and stares out the window, watching boats down on the lake. If Haley were here now, would they have stayed in bed, drinking coffee with the sheets pulled up high? Failure. That’s what the silence screams at him. And then he remembers the phone call from last night.

He’d felt the phone vibrating in his pocket. An Ontario number. He stumbled away from the table to the lot next door. Gravel crunched under his feet.

‘Is this Michael Dunbar?’

‘Yes,’ he yelled over the noise.

‘I’m calling from Hamilton General. You’re listed as Peter Dunbar’s next of kin...’

Everything stopped for a moment; everything stops now as he remembers the call.

‘Is my dad okay? What’s happened?’ How many missed calls from Dad had he ignored since getting to Kelowna? Maybe he was calling to say something was wrong. Mike felt like he was going to be sick.

‘Sir,’ the voice on the other end said, ‘your dad’s okay. We’re running some tests now.’

There were more questions about if Mike was local, who else to call. He didn’t know the answers, he was drunk.

But he doesn’t know the answers now, sober. Dad doesn’t have friends, and the rest of the family is gone.

Last night, it was easy to return to the table and forget.

He stares at his phone for a while, willing himself to think of someone he could call. Someone who hasn’t been fucked over by Pete Dunbar.

He puts the phone down. He’ll get a call when they know more about Dad. Then he can decide what to do.

*

The next day, Mike leaves the archive in the middle of the afternoon, when he can no longer deny his rumbling stomach. His only thought is food and he practically runs all the way to Bernard, the contents of his backpack clanking around with each step. His mouth is watering before he even steps into the Mad Mango Café—still on his list to try—and the smells overwhelm him as soon as he opens the door. He gets shown to a green table next to an orange wall and orders without looking at the menu.

‘Vegetarian spring rolls and the tofu vermicelli bowl, please,’ he says in a rush. The thought of this meal has been getting him through: vermicelli, tofu, lettuce, carrots, cucumbers, broccoli, cilantro, and a spring roll, served with citrus fish sauce. He smiles at the student-aged

server and then his stomach growls in a way that he hopes isn't too obvious. He doesn't even feel guilty about the fish sauce. Not really.

He opens his laptop and returns to the document he was working on at the archives. He'd made the appointment a few weeks earlier, before everything happened. Yesterday, all he could do was stare at his phone trying to will a response, from Haley, and from Dad's doctors. Eventually, a doctor got back to him. *Your dad hasn't been looking after himself. Pre-diabetic. Too much alcohol.* The doctor had a plan. *Your dad might need extra help.* Mike asked about homecare. *Lots of options.* He took notes, all while wondering if he was a bad son because he wasn't on the first flight back home.

Today, he'd put the phone onto Do Not Disturb and shoved it into his backpack after leaving the condo.

Now, he returns to the laptop, cursor flashing midway through a sentence: in August of 1897 the regional newspaper British Columbia news reported, in a single paragraph, that a dispute between two well-known ranchers in Kelowna had, after many months, finally been settled. One of the gentlemen had agreed to pay a sum of money to the city. No names were mentioned, but based on the timing it seems likely the gentleman obliged to the city was JD Ballantyne. Early town records (remembering that Kelowna wouldn't be incorporated for another ten years) show receipt of that money. The money went on to pay for the building of the Free Presbyterian Church, which still stands at the corner of Bernard and Richter. Was JD repenting for the alleged arson? Or the affair that most likely led to the arson?

And that was the answer to the big mystery: JD, arsonist, paid off the city to atone for his crimes. Mike leans back in the green booth. He really thought there would be more to it. He

squints at the word count at the bottom of the screen. The archives didn't seem very impressive when a grey-haired woman with a nametag that said JOAN and was covered in sparkly animal stickers led him around. There was a re-creation of a pioneer home, some old maps that showed Kelowna before it was Kelowna, indigenous artefacts, and an entire room dedicated to the history of swimwear.

'What's the relevance of the swimwear, Joan?' he'd asked.

The woman giggled in response. 'I'm not Joan. Borrowed badge.' Then Not-Joan explained that they'd had a donation that included a collection of very old swimming costumes and since summer was coming...She trailed off as she led him into a windowless room full of shelves stacked with filing boxes, illuminated by yellow fluorescent lights. She took him to a series of tables in the middle of the room and pointed to a lone microfiche reader in the opposite corner, and a single computer on a long table piled high with books.

'I have to man the desk out front.'

They'd passed a reception/gift shop on the way through the museum.

'But if you need anything just holler. I assume you've used an archive before?' She giggled again.

He nodded. He'd never been left alone with materials. If he were a more nefarious person, he might have thought about all the old photos he could touch without wearing gloves, all the oils he could transfer with a single fingerprint. He got to work, pouring through catalogues. An hour in, he opened a box with a series of items that were linked to Mountainview, JD's ranch at the foot of the mountain. Sitting on top of the first folder he pulled out (while wearing gloves) was a very old photo of a house, a big log cabin with a single gable roof, a covered veranda with a rocking chair, and the mountain in the background.

MOUNTAINVIEW, 1905, the label read.

Now, waiting for his food to arrive, he thinks about that house. He can practically see JD sitting in that rocking chair, a pipe in his mouth, maybe a dog sitting next to him. He can imagine life going on inside the cabin, a fire roaring, wife Annie darning socks or writing letters.

He hopes he got everything he needed from the archives. The place was closing when he left and, Not-Joan said, wasn't going to be open again until the end of next week. *We're closed for May-Long, of course.* He wondered if Not-Joan, like Call-Me-Doug, had some fancy place with a view of the lake that she only visited during *May-Long*. He returns to his document. Approaching one-hundred pages now, though there are lots of pages with chapter headings followed by a couple of bullet points, text still to be written. Maps, early photographs of Kelowna, the mountain, the lake. He wonders if, one day, he could get that picture of Mountainview on the front cover of the book.

He closes the laptop and pulls his phone from his backpack and switches it on. A video from Mom of her and Don dancing to a mariachi band. And a message from Haley. He pauses before reading. *I'm sorry I didn't respond. I don't know if you're still in the OK, but if you are, would you come for dinner tonight?* What? he puts the phone on the table. Is this a trap? Is she going to yell at him in front of her family? He should probably say yes anyway. He should say yes.

Just as he's about to start typing, the server comes by with his order. The smell makes his mouth water. He'll answer later.

*

Mike doesn't remember the last time he sat at a table for a family dinner. Maybe with Sara's family for Thanksgiving. Was that last year? The relationship was over by Christmas. He spent Christmas Day with Darren and Stacy, his only friends in Vancouver 'grown up' enough to have a house, let alone a space big enough to host holiday celebrations. It was nice though. And then he video called Mom and Don in Mexico. They were really drunk and kept saying *Feliz Navidad* followed by choruses of Jose Feliciano's classic song. It snowed, briefly. He sent pictures to

Mom and got photos of her on the beach, pointing to her reindeer antlers. But a family dinner? With his family?

He's unprepared for the level of noise at the table. Haley's two young cousins sit in front of the TV for as long as possible, the oldest one, who emerged just as dinner arrived at the table, hasn't put his phone down. Rocko, the giant Rottweiler, the most enthusiastic to meet him, circles around the table, hoping for stray meatballs.

'C'mon Joe,' Karen yells, 'Hurry up or risk missing out on these meatballs. Now Mike,' she turns to him, giving him the same death glare she'd used when they met at Sandy's celebration of life. Then she smiles a big smile with lots of teeth. Maybe Haley hasn't told her what happened. She holds up a pasta lifter dripping with spaghetti, 'I already asked Haley here, but I just want to make sure. You're not of these *vegans* are you?' She says vegans like it's something horrible. A disease without a cure.

Mike shakes his head. He doesn't want to cause a fuss, not when they've invited him into their house. Especially not when he doesn't know where he stands.

'Good. Because this beef,' she points to a giant meatball she's just dropped onto his plate, 'is from just ten minutes up the road. We know the guy who owns the ranch. Hell, we may even have met the cow at one point or the other!'

At this point, the oldest cousin looks up from his phone. 'That's really morbid, Mom,' he says. Then he clears his throat, 'and actually kind of offensive.'

Karen rolls her eyes. She digs into the pot for another big scoop of pasta. 'Are you offended, Mike?' she asks as she piles more and more onto his plate. 'Because I think it's a good thing to know where my food is coming from. Don't you?' The glare again.

Mike nods. 'Yeah. I definitely like to know where my food is coming from.' He looks down at the plate. Five big meatballs he knows he has to eat. And he hasn't eaten beef for how long?

‘See, Kieran?’ Karen points the pasta lifter at the teenager, ‘Mike agrees with me.’ She drops a meatball onto Haley’s plate. ‘And he’s a *doctor*.’

Kieran rolls his eyes. ‘Not a *real* doctor.’ He returns to his phone.

‘I’m so sorry, Mike.’ Karen fills the remaining plates, ending with her own and just one meatball. ‘I know you’re a real doctor. That one,’ she points at her son with the pasta lifter again, ‘doesn’t understand. He doesn’t think he needs to go to university.’

Mike feels his neck start to get hot; he isn’t sure which speech he’s meant to give here. He thinks of his own dad telling him he didn’t need a degree to get ahead in life. And then he remembers the bleakness of working fifty-hour weeks in a job he hated. Spending all his waking hours with guys who longed for their days off and spent their free time drinking or doing expensive drugs. Or is the right story the one about how his student loan is still sitting at over sixty grand (despite making payments for the last few years) and that he still hasn’t managed to get a permanent job? Instead, he asks Kieran how old he is.

‘Fifteen. And a half,’ the boy says without looking from his phone, ‘and I know what I want to do after high school.’

‘Don’t even get him started,’ Haley’s Uncle Bill says. ‘Want a beer, Mikey?’ He gets up and heads over to the fridge.

The nickname comes as a surprise. Bill doesn’t resemble Dad or Call-Me-Doug in any way, but Mike still feels the normal twist of the guts in response. He shakes his head. ‘Have to drive home later.’

Bill returns with a couple of cans of Budweiser and puts them at opposite ends of the table. He cracks his open then returns to his spot by the window. The chair at the other end of the table remains empty.

‘What is your dad doing, Halestorm?’ Karen says. Then she yells, ‘Get your butt in here, Joe! Pasta’s getting cold.’

Kieran looks up from his phone again and rolls his eyes. ‘Do you have to be so loud?’ he mumbles. ‘Maybe some people don’t want to be here.’

Just then, Haley’s dad comes into the kitchen. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ he says. His chair scrapes against the floor. ‘You didn’t have to wait for me.’ He’s taller than Mike expected, with greying hair cut close to the scalp. Mike searches for traces of Haley.

‘Well don’t you look purdy,’ Bill says. He raises his can of beer in Joe’s direction.

‘You must be Mike,’ Joe says, his voice quiet. He extends a calloused hand across the table. The handshake is firm.

‘Thanks for inviting me into your home,’ Mike says, hoping if he’s polite enough he’ll make up for his appearance at Sandy’s funeral, plus everything else.

‘He didn’t,’ Karen butts in, still speaking several notches louder than is necessary for the situation, ‘but you’re welcome all the same. Any *friend* of Haley’s.’ She gives Haley a big, obvious wink, half of her face contorted.

Mikes looks over at Haley. She’s sitting next to him, her cheeks flushed. Pretty in a blue shirt, her hair up in a bun. Different from the last time he saw her. They haven’t had a chance to talk since he arrived; she didn’t even answer the door. Instead, it was Karen, standing there with a hand on her hip and that death glare. *So we meet again, Mr Historian*. Then she’d wrapped him up in a very tight hug and he hadn’t felt good about it. It was like a python trying to squeeze him to death. That’s when Haley came into the hall. All they’d managed was an awkward *hi* before Karen dragged him into the kitchen. He picks up his fork and twirls some spaghetti around it. When he looks up again, the little cousins are sucking individual noodles up between pursed lips, Rocko next to them whimpering for scraps, and Bill is shoving the dog away with an elbow. Chaos.

‘It’s always like this,’ Haley says in a whisper, leaning in close. ‘And you don’t have to eat the meatballs.’

‘Are you sure?’ he whispers back, ‘I don’t want your aunt to kill me.’ Mike takes a deep breath before cutting into the meatball and taking a bite. Maybe he’s thanking the cow. He’s being polite. But as soon as he finishes the first bite, he goes back for a second; they’re the best meatballs he’s ever had. He twirls pasta around his fork and goes back for more.

‘So Mike,’ Karen says, ‘tell us about what you and Halestorm have been up to.’ She wiggles her eyebrows.

‘Gross, Mom,’ Kieran says, ‘maybe you should leave them alone.’

‘Glad to know you are actually paying attention, bud,’ Bill says.

The oldest cousin looks up from the pasta he’s pushing around on his plate. He glares at his dad and sighs.

‘Were you ever like this, Mike?’ Bill points at the teenager with his fork. ‘What do your parents do?’

The question comes out of nowhere and Mike feels his stomach drop for a second time. ‘Oh, um,’ he pauses, ‘they’re retired.’ He doesn’t want to talk about Mom, unreachable on a beach in Mexico, or Dad, day-drinking himself into a hospital bed.

‘Can we not have the inquisition?’ Haley asks. She turns to Mike again, putting a hand on his shoulder, ‘you don’t have to answer anything else.’

He clears his throat. ‘No, it’s okay.’ He wants Haley’s family to like him. This is going okay. It isn’t like that dinner at Sara’s when her dad asked him repeatedly, at various decibels, why he thought it was fine to eat babies. *That’s what they are, Mike, babies!* Mike had pointed out, as he gladly cut into his nut roast, that he’d never tried veal, would never try veal, and had happily accepted every vegan alternative put in front of him. Sara’s dad (a retired lawyer and life-long vegan, she had explained once they were home) got increasingly drunk on the wine he’d made in his basement until he was basically just yelling random words. Despite the noise in the kitchen, the dog still whimpering for more meatballs, the country music playing a little too loud, this is still preferable.

Once the plates have been cleared away, the boys have returned to their video games—except Kieran, who leaves the house saying, ‘I’m going out.’ Death glare from Karen. ‘Where?’ ‘Just out,’ he yells in response. The door slams— and Rocko has feasted on leftovers, Karen brings out a tin full of Nanaimo bars and puts one on her plate. Bill takes four. Haley’s dad turns the tin away. Mike looks at the squares, contemplating the layers: the coconut and chocolate base, creamy custard in the middle, all topped with thick chocolate ganache. For the second time today, his mouth waters.

Haley nudges him. ‘Go on,’ she says, ‘you just ate all those meatballs.’

‘So, Mike,’ Karen says, a hand up to her mouth as she chews through her square, ‘how did you end up meeting Haley?’

‘You know how. His project about JD.’

‘I know. Remember, I met him first?’ Karen says. ‘But how did you two end up,’ she points at both of them, ‘in *this*,’ she waggles her finger around again, ‘situation?’

Guilt, or the beef, is making his insides feel like they’re twisting into knots.

‘How about,’ Haley turns to him, ‘you tell them about your project.’ She smiles a wide smile and her tone changes. Like she’s giving instructions to a small child.

He takes a deep breath. He’s not sure if he’s the small child in this situation or Karen is. Either way, talking about his project feels like walking into a trap. It isn’t the normal feeling of anxiety that comes over him when someone asks him to describe his work; no, this is something different. The stakes have changed. ‘Well, I’m researching JD, his journey from Scotland to BC. How he started as a homesteader and became a wealthy rancher.’

‘JD again?’ Bill says, mid-swig from his third can of Budweiser. ‘I feel like I hear about this joker all the time.’

‘Shut up, honey,’ Karen says to her husband. Then she turns back to Mike. ‘Carry on, Mike’

‘The guy,’ Bill says, raising his voice, ‘was an arsonist! And Karen here is determined. Determined to say he wasn’t.

Karen crosses her arms. ‘Because we don’t know for sure. That’s all just speculation. Where’s the proof? Huh? Show me the proof and I’ll believe you.’

Both of them turn to Mike, like they’ve just realised that Mike might actually have an answer.

Karen pours herself another glass of wine. She opened a second bottle halfway through the meal. ‘Tell us,’ she rests her chin on her hands, ‘tell us what you’ve discovered.’

Mike looks up at the chandelier hanging over the table. There are little ornaments suspended from some of the arms: crystal angels holding tiny harps or even tinier books. Occasionally, an angel turns in a half circle, the light glinting off the crystal. He imagines them on a sunny day. But now the lights feel like spotlights. Everyone at the table can probably see the beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. ‘What have I found?’ Once he’s said the question aloud he feels even worse. He thinks back to the paragraph he’d been working on earlier, where he basically said that JD *probably* was an arsonist. Why else would he give such a large sum of money to the city, if not because he was guilty?

‘Well?’ Karen prompts.

‘He doesn’t need to answer that either. Let’s stop the interrogation, okay?’ Haley jumps in to rescue him.

Haley’s dad clears his throat. They all look at him; it’s the first sound he’s contributed to the conversation.

‘And?’ Bill asks. ‘Cat got your tongue?’

‘Leave him alone, Uncle Bill,’ Haley says, ‘Hey Dad, why don’t we go sit in the living room? Maybe you could tell Mike about your truck.’

‘What about the JD story?’ Karen asks, but Haley is already standing, pulling Mike along with her. ‘Oh fine,’ Karen says, staring at Mike again with that glare, ‘but at some point we will settle this.’ She waves her glass in the air.

‘Don’t threaten the guests, hon,’ Bill says.

In the living room, Mike takes in the rows of photos—mostly of Haley at various ages. He points at one where she must be a teenager. ‘Black hair?’

She shakes her head. ‘Don’t ask.’

And above the mantle is a photo of Okanagan Lake at sunset: the mountains fade from dark blue to nearly white, the horizon is streaked with reds, and evergreens frame the still deep waters.

‘My grandma took that photo,’ Haley says. ‘She always called herself an amateur, but she was actually really good. She used to turn a bathroom into her dark room. Didn’t she, Dad?’

Joe just nods. He stands next to the fireplace, one arm resting next to a photo in a large silver frame. Haley in a grad cap and gown, her mum standing next to her. They both have huge smiles on their faces and there’s a lot of red hair. The same photo was on display at the Celebration of Life. That was when Mike realised that Sandy had a family.

‘Mhmm,’ Joe finally says, ‘lots of things to remember.’

‘I don’t think you’ve mentioned your grandma before,’ Mike says

‘Maybe you should consult your notes,’ Haley says, giving him a look that feels very much like Karen’s glare. ‘Sit down if you want.’ She picks a spot at the end of a big grey sofa covered in lots of cushions and a shiny blue blanket hanging over the back. She picks up a silver sequined cushion and turns it around so the metallic discs face away.

Mike sits down across from her, trying to settle into an oversized armchair also covered with sequined cushions in silver and blue.

‘Well,’ Joe says, ‘think I’ll head back out to the shed.’

Haley's dad feels like the only buffer between Mike and something terrible. He wants tell Joe, no, stay, why don't you tell me more about...your truck? Anything?

'Okay Dad.'

'Nice to meet ya, Mike,' Joe gives a little wave before rushing out of the room.

Mike had been expecting a handshake. Maybe a chance to thank Haley's family for inviting him into their house. Now it's just the two of them. He wipes his sweaty palms on his jeans. A clock ticks on the mantle.

'So.'

He smiles in response, waiting for Haley to start talking. But she doesn't. Outside the living room, the country music has been turned up again and Rocko is barking, awake after his post-dinner nap. Karen and Bill are yelling (or just having a conversation) over all the noise. He runs his hand along a row of sequins, flipping them the opposite way. They almost change colours.

'So,' he says, looking back at Haley, 'Thank you for inviting me to dinner.'

'Karen insisted. But you're welcome.' She's looking at him like she's waiting for him to say something. The right thing.

He can feel the meatballs sitting in his stomach. Lumps of local cow, a Merritt resident, probably with a name like Bella or Daisy (cows always have names like that). But that's not the right thing to be thinking. He's supposed to be apologising about the photos, for not showing her what he found. He pushes his glasses back up his nose.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

There's a lump in his throat. 'About what?' What does Haley have to feel bad about?

But she continues, 'The other night. I just got,' she pauses and runs her fingers down a line of sequins, 'swept up in everything. It shouldn't have happened.'

He swallows. It hadn't felt like a mistake.

'I like you, I really do.'

‘Okay,’ he says, but it comes out garbled, like it’s been the thing stuck in his throat.

‘But I’m confused. This is a confusing time.’ She gets up from the couch and stands next to the mantle, next to all those photos of her and her mum.

He could get up too, stand next to her, or hold her hand, maybe even give her a hug. Tell her everything is going to be okay. But he thinks about Dad, alone in the hospital. He doesn’t know if anything will be okay.

‘But I am glad we met.’

His stomach clenches; he’s heard this speech before. She’s breaking up with him before they’ve even gotten together. And he’s going to let it happen because what can he say?

But then she says, ‘Can we take things a few steps back? This might sound stupid, but I think we were supposed to meet.’

He swallows again. ‘Your mum.’

‘Yeah, my mum.’

*

On his last night in Kelowna, with the long weekend around the corner and Call-Me-Doug’s holiday plans on his calendar, Mike stands with one of the big windows open, feeling the cool breeze from the lake. The city is glowing; this is how he likes it best. Tonight though, the silence feels like it wraps around him. That’s all there’s been, silence, since coming back from Haley’s place. Silence and admin.

He got started right away, emailing Doug with some new work. *Found some interesting/useful stuff at the archives. Leaving tomorrow morning. Hope you enjoy your holiday. Weather has been amazing.*

My dad has been unwell. Planning to spend some time with him at home in Ontario.

He doesn’t know what to expect from his boss. Sympathy? Understanding?

It doesn’t matter: Mike will make the deadline for the grant applications he’s been working on and he’ll apply for the job. He writes the dates on his calendar and highlights them.

With no classes scheduled for the summer semester, he can look forward to spending some time back home. A long, hot summer by Lake Ontario. Maybe some trips out to Wasaga Beach, watching the sunset over Georgian Bay.

‘And you’ll have to talk to your dad,’ Haley said as they stood next to his car, ‘sort out some things.’

Mike hadn’t thought he was going to tell her about the phone calls from the doctors last night, his decision to go to Hamilton. The state of things with Dad. How his anger had just turned to guilt.

‘I’m glad you told me,’ she said, giving his hand a squeeze. ‘You don’t need to deal with this alone.’

Then the porch lights flicked on. Karen appeared in the doorway, like a chaperone checking in on her charge. ‘Didn’t know you were still here. See you again soon.’ She sounded less threatening this time though she was yelling.

‘Sorry. She means well.’

Just before he left, he thought he saw the blinds moving in the living room window. That might have been why the parting hug felt a bit off: he knew they were being watched. Or maybe it was just everything else.

The idea of Karen peering out the blinds makes him laugh now. It takes him back to the days of picking up his high school girlfriend from her house. Her mom calling *be back by ten!* as they walked through suburbia. It will be weird to return to those streets again. Revisit his personal landmarks and look back on his own journey across the country.

His phone buzzes in his back pocket.

STACY IN LABOUR. GOING TO HOSPITAL.

Next time he sees Darren, his friend will be a dad. Darren will have a kid.

Wild.

Chapter Twenty

Haley wakes up early the next day, wondering if she made the right decision when she told Mike they should move backwards. To what exactly, she's not sure. More chats at COFFEA? She picks up her phone, deciding to distract herself by looking at condos for sale. The listings are full of ones like Mike's boss' second home.

Just after seven, there's a knock at the door, followed by Dad saying, 'you up?' Haley tells him to come in, but he remains in the doorway, like he's afraid to cross the threshold.

'Morning. Nice day.'

She scoots out of bed and slips her feet into her old unicorn slippers before crossing the room to open the curtains. He's right: the morning sun is bright even filtered through the big pine trees in the yard.

'It's a little late but I wondered if you might want to go out to Corbett.'

'To fish?'

Dad nods. They haven't been fishing for years. 'Your gear's in the garage.' The way he says this makes Haley think he's still a bit sad she didn't take her tackle box or anything with her when she moved to the city. She used to love the time out on the lake, but it was never really about the fishing.

'Okay. Give me a few minutes to get ready.'

'Coffee's on.'

Haley grimaces. 'Great.' Dad's idea of coffee is the Folgers he puts on when he gets up in the morning, pours into his thermos, and drinks down to the cold dregs. Once or twice a month he might splurge on a double-double. But she thinks she needs to get over it. She and Auntie Karen found the French press she gave him for Christmas forgotten in a cupboard, collecting dust.

'Okay.' Dad closes the door behind him. She hears the creak of the stairs as he goes back to the kitchen. She imagines he's filling up the thermoses, assembling the cheese and ham

sandwiches he always likes to take. Probably wrapping them up in tinfoil despite the cupboards full of sandwich-shaped containers.

A few minutes later, her hair up in a ponytail and her face and teeth clean, she heads downstairs. It's quiet: Auntie Karen and Uncle Bill haven't made it over yet, the kitchen empty. Dad must be waiting outside. She grabs a couple of granola bars and a banana while concluding there's no time for her coffee.

She finds Dad sitting in the truck, the engine idling, all packed and ready to go. When they creep down the driveway, his arm across the back of the seat, his head cranked to look out the rear-view, Haley's glad to watch the house disappear behind the trees.

They drive in silence, but something occasionally clanks around in the bed of the truck.

'You can stop and check it at the Starbucks.'

Dad raises his eyebrows. 'I packed the thermoses.'

'I know you did. But you know I'm not going to drink that swill.'

'You sound like your mum.'

A throwaway comment. But it hits Haley.

Dad doesn't notice. 'More coffee for me.'

He pulls off De Wolf Way and into the parking lot of the only Starbucks in town.

The drop out of the truck always feels like a long way down. She shakes her legs out and takes a couple of deep breaths. She's wearing an extra layer now, while the dew is still cool and the sun still rising, but it's going to be warm. She heads inside for a venti-extra-hot-cappuccino.

Coffee in hand, she heads back to the truck. Dad's ducked under the canoe, making sure everything is secure. They get back onto the road but the clanking doesn't stop. He mutters under his breath each time the mystery object crashes, but they continue up the incline and out of the valley.

The silence only starts to feel too silent once Dad turns off the 97C and onto the nameless road towards the lodge. You could drive right past the turn-off and not even realise.

The Corbet Lake Country Inn sign is lost in the morning sunshine, now burning orange over the crest of the hills. There was an early conversation with Mike where she'd mentioned the fishing trips, all those mornings spent on Corbett Lake. *I remember driving by the sign, he'd said, made me think of fishing at Gravelly River with my dad. The music we used to listen to on the drive over.*

Sunshine turns the sandy hills yellow. The spindly trees that line the narrow road glow with the remaining dew. Haley listens to the soundtrack of Dad's long sighs and the rumble of the old engine. If she'd driven, she would've put some music on. *Dad likes Springsteen, Mike had explained, stories about men who work hard all their lives. I never felt like I understood.* Haley had nodded along even though her own Dad kept the truck's original radio, for authenticity's sake and usually all they listened to was static. Even now, modern technology doesn't help; they might get a few cracks and pops, maybe even some garbled messages from the transit authority's road safety station. Not that they need any warning of what's ahead—they've been coming to the lodge for as long as she can remember. She can't go inside without someone telling a story about her childhood. Even if she'd rather not relive that time she fell in the lake while learning to fly fish and old Terry Mason pulled her out by her pigtails. The guys stand around in their fishy flannels and scratch at their increasingly bald heads and laugh. She ends up feeling like she's about seven again. Her life in Vancouver evaporates.

This morning, Dad drives past the lodge, turning down the gravel road. Haley feels all of her bones rattling around. *I told your dad I'm not getting into that old jalopy again. I want my ass to be warm and my teeth to stay inside of my head.* Even out here, Mum's voice is loud and impossible to ignore.

They go over the crest of the hill and the sun glints off the dark water of the lake. The fish might be up close to the surface, sunning themselves. *Do fish tan? Have you ever seen a tanned fish?* Dad pulls at the e-brake and the truck lurches to a stop. Haley puts her coffee on the dashboard: steam rises from the cup, fogging up the windshield. She tucks her phone inter the glove box; there's no signal out here anyway.

They take the canoe down to the lake first. She remembers past trips out here, her arms aching, but she'd play tough and make jokes about the canoe being a really big hat. Back then, the bow dipped dangerously low, while Dad's end floated up in the air. Around thirteen, she had a growth spurt. The canoe still isn't level. They take their final steps down to the water.

Tiny waves lap against the pebbled shore. Grass rustles around them. They have to make a second trip for their gear (and her coffee).

Soon, they're out on the lake, the sun at their backs. They sit in silence. She tries to think of the last time she sat in the canoe, waiting for something to happen. It wasn't spring because she remembers being a lot colder, a coat zipped up to her chin and a toque pulled down over her ears. Was she already living in Vancouver? Maybe it started to snow. Dad would've been prepared. For him, the weather here isn't unpredictable. But Haley has gotten used to the dependability of Vancouver, where snow and freezing temperatures are replaced by cold, crisp days, endless blue horizons, and the salty breeze off the Pacific. Or it just rains. Dad's been happy staying in Merritt, population 7,000, one Starbucks, and a collection of bronzed handprints from the country singers who show up every summer—god knows why—and leave with little memory of the Nicola Valley.

'Do you think you'll stay?'

Dad turns away from the lake, his expression blank. 'Stay?'

She wonders if she should've kept quiet. 'Stay in the house. Stay in Merritt.' The water remains still, like glass. She felt ripples. Currents. Waves.

He scratches under his hat. 'Guess I haven't been thinking about it.'

Maybe he doesn't hear Mum's voice echoing in the halls, calling *Slowpokes! Dinner time!* Maybe he doesn't imagine her standing next to the sink, a bag of chips in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other (*Food hands*), or sitting in the living room next to the fireplace, a book open on her lap and a glass of wine in her hand. And her collection of things, the favourite mugs, the reading glasses, the little tubes of hand cream, the tins of mango-scented lip balm. The

needlepoint cushions, the one with the little green canoe and the quote in black-threaded cursive: *Anyone can make love in a canoe: it's a Canadian who knows enough to take out the centre thwart.* The quote is followed by the name Phil Chester, mystery provider of wisdom. If asked about it, Mum would giggle uncontrollably. Haley always made sure to flip the cushion around when friends came over. Otherwise, Mum would start on the same story—*Remember that time out on Corbett Lake, Joe?*—and while Haley hoped she'd melt into the floor, her parents would share conspiratorial glances. Haley takes a sip of coffee. Her hands shake.

'Did you ever talk about what you might do...after?' She still can't get used to that idea. As if there could ever really be an After Mum.

'Well,' Dad scratches at his chin, 'I guess we always thought we might end up closer to you.'

'Really?' Haley's never heard this before. Mum's general disgust about *big city prices* (mostly based on a time when she wanted to buy avocados and they were a dollar more per bag) and the lack of available parking always convinced Haley that Mum's status in Vancouver was perpetual tourist.

But Dad nods. 'So you could take care of us in our old age.' Then he gets quiet again. They're still the only ones there. Maybe they missed the really serious guys, out on the lake at five in the morning, maybe they've come too early for the other dads wanting to spend time with their kids.

Haley has known for a long time that Mum wouldn't retire, that she wouldn't have a chance to *gracefully go grey*, or be at Haley's wedding, or be the babysitter for future children. She's imagined her own life without Mum. Not Dad's life without Mum. The different laundry detergent was just the beginning.

Dad clears his throat. 'Any news about the job?'

She takes a sip of coffee, the hot liquid slightly bitter. Not the coffee she usually makes for herself. 'Nothing yet.'

‘Patience,’ is all he says.

They return to silence. She drinks from her cup, still warm in her cold hands. She listens for bird song, rustles in the trees. It’s so quiet out here.

Then Dad says, ‘Maybe you wouldn’t want to stay in Vancouver, now?’

She looks at Dad, sitting there with his old flannel underneath his life jacket, the Canucks hat. Have they ever had a conversation with so many words? ‘What do you mean, now?’

‘I just assumed,’ he scratches at his chin, ‘that something must’ve happened with Alex.’ He clears his throat. ‘Because of Mike.’

Because of Mike. She takes another sip of coffee. She’s been trying to ignore the fact that life is going to look very different when she gets back to Vancouver. But what if she goes home and Alex is there? What if he didn’t think their conversation was a conclusion to anything? Or maybe he’s gone in the opposite direction and taken half of everything.

‘So,’ Dad says, carrying on, ‘what about Mike?’

Haley sighs. ‘I don’t know, Dad. We don’t need to talk about this you know.’

‘No, no.’ He adjusts his hat and repositions himself so he’s facing her side of the canoe. The canoe rocks back and forth, sending ripples across the water. ‘I want to talk about it.’ There’s a look on his face that says otherwise. He’s always been a man of so few words.

‘Well,’ she starts, but she doesn’t know how to continue. Dad’s never been out on the porch with a shotgun, or the kind of guy who judges based on a single handshake. Instead, he’s been the silent observer. Always surprising when you find out how much he knows.

Dad reaches across to put a hand on her shoulder, his knee steadied against the thwart. ‘You asked me about after...what about your after?’

After Mum. After Alex, too. She shifts on her wooden seat. This has felt like the only thing she’s been thinking about. Planning where she might live if she were to move to Kelowna and what the place would feel like: her place. Thinking about trips down the 97-C to Merritt on the weekends, or even just for dinner. Life on her own. But not on her own. There could be

dinners with old friends, sunny afternoons at the beach, skiing at Big White. Watching her cousins grow up. Getting to know Tara and Kevin as Tara and Kevin, power couple.

‘You like him, this Mike, don’t you?’

Dad hardly spoke a word to Mike when he was at the house. A few pleasantries and then he was back out to the shed, working on something. After Mike left, she went outside and found Dad under her car, tinkering away. Hiding.

‘I do like him,’ Haley says. Their lines are still in the water, but they haven’t made any effort to check them. Fishing without really fishing.

‘You just want some space.’

Haley looks at Dad, still sitting there with that slightly uncomfortable look on his face, arms crossed over his lifejacket. ‘How did you know that?’

He shrugs. ‘I listen.’

‘But do I want space here, or in Vancouver?’

He shrugs again. ‘That’s up to you.’

‘And what about you? Auntie Karen sounds so dramatic every time she brings you up.’

‘That’s one of her talents,’ Dad says, laughing. ‘I’m okay. I’m sad and I’m going to be sad for a good long while. But I’ll be okay.’ And then he smiles. ‘We’ll be okay.’

He sounds so sure.

‘I think,’ he says looking back at the lake, ‘that we’re not going to catch anything. Call it a day?’

Haley doesn’t know what to say, so she just nods.

‘Think it’s going to rain,’ he says once they’re out of the water and carrying the canoe back up to the truck. The weather report didn’t say anything about rain and the sky is still very blue, just a few puffs of clouds. But they continue to pack up anyway, securing the canoe on the roof, fastening everything down in the truck bed and double checking to make sure they won’t have a repeat of the mysterious clanking. They don’t say anything else.

It's when they're back on the Connector that raindrops start to splat against the windshield. Just little ones, and then sun breaks through the clouds and glints off of everything. There might be a rainbow, somewhere. They could have more days like this if she moved to Kelowna. They could be out on the lake super early on a Saturday morning to sit there for hours, thermoses of coffee ready to warm them up. New traditions.

But Haley has been so prepared for endings, she's not sure how to welcome beginnings.

Women in the Woods: a Critical Reflection on Pioneer Women and their Legacy in Canadian Literature

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Women in the Woods- A Critical Reflection on Pioneer Women and their Legacy in Canadian Literature

Introduction

I was looking for a man when I began this project. A specific man. His name was John Duncan Ballantyne and I thought he had a story to tell. Unfortunately for me (and the protagonist of my novel, historian Mike Dunbar), he never materialised. Instead, I encountered women. Their stories captured my attention even though they were stories about domestic life—mundane tasks like learning how to bake bread, or do the family washing—and not exciting adventures of entrepreneurial pioneers in the Canadian wilderness. As the project evolved and I wrote about JD's family in 21st century British Columbia, I ultimately realised that John Duncan Ballantyne would remain an enigma to me (and by default, Mike). His story, while interesting, wasn't the mystery I thought I wanted answers to. The spectral nature of JD meant that other voices could become clearer, and I could focus on the keepers of the stories. This meant that his family, and specifically, his great-great-great-granddaughter, Haley Gibson, became central to the plot. These stories centred around Haley's struggle following the death of her mother, Sandy, pillar of her family, and the ripple effects that loss has on every aspect of Haley's life. When I thought I was writing about Mike's quest for JD, I realised the crux of the novel was the relationship between Haley and Mike. JD was merely the catalyst that precipitated the relationship.

In my research, my search for a man led me inside the pioneer log cabin, those first settlements built by industrious pioneer men. I wanted to know how someone like JD Ballantyne survived the harsh Okanagan weather I had experienced from the comfort of my Kelowna apartment (complete with double glazed windows and electric heating). Inside JD's theoretical home, I encountered women like Susanna Moodie and Susan Allison, forgetting everything they already knew for practical knowledge that would help them survive. Their stories were quiet, their struggles masked in gentlewomanly language and social niceties, but it was clear that they

were struggling to stay alive. And it was those struggles, their stories of a past I felt echoed in my experience of Canada and Canadian Literature. But because their stories were not the stories I went looking for, it required me to shift my perspective to see their value in the terms of this project.

Devaluing Canadian stories is not a new concept or one specific to my research. There has been a long tradition of scepticism towards Canadian literature. This attitude began to shift in the second half of the 20th century. In 1971, Canadian Literary critic Northrop Frye wrote in the conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* that a ‘colossal verbal explosion has taken place in Canada since 1960’ (318). Like the Canadian Pacific Railway’s famous last spike, he says ‘Canadian literature is here’ (319). It seems strange to read this considering that, in 1967, Canada celebrated the Centennial, commemorating the anniversary of Confederation, and one hundred years of Canadian culture, heritage, and politics. But Frye (and his fellow editors of the volume) were writing about Canadian Literature at a time when ‘CanLit’ was considered provincial and not deemed worthy of critical study. CanLit was still emerging from the expectations of American and British literature. Considering this development, Frye wrote

Literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like become habits of metaphorical thought. In fully mature literary tradition, the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images (*The Bush Garden* 232)

Following Frye et al., Margaret Atwood published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), a ‘useful handbook to a little-known subject, a sort of early *Idiot’s Guide*’ (vi) that explores survival as ‘the persistent cultural obsession of Canadian literature’ (xx). This survival story relates to a number of motifs ‘that either did not exist at all in one of the literatures chosen for comparison,’ i.e., English and American, ‘or which did exist but were not handled in the same way’ (xx-xxi). Atwood explains that ‘the Canadian “immigrant story”’ (xxi) is one handled differently by Canadian authors; these are stories of ‘bare survival in the face of “hostile”

elements...carving out a place and a way of keeping alive' (27). The Strickland sisters, Catharine Parr Traill (*The Backwoods of Canada*, 1836; *The Canadian Settler's Guide*, 1855) and Susanna Moodie (*Roughing It in the Bush*, 1852; *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*, 1853) wrote extensively on the pioneer woman's experience of surviving the Canadian wilderness. Who is the pioneer woman? She is certainly not 'frail to be feminine, to be weak of mind and body' (Buss *Mapping Our Selves* 55) as women of the time were expected to be. Instead, Elizabeth Thompson explains that the pioneer woman can be characterised as a 'self-assured, confident woman, one who adapts cheerfully to adverse circumstances, one who is capable and active in an emergency, one who plays a vital role in pioneering,' (5) has 'strength to accept adverse circumstances on the frontier,' and 'the courage to attempt an improvement of these frontier conditions' (8).

Examining various early pioneer women shows that they share similar qualities. To be a good pioneer is not just to embody the pioneer 'spirit,' but also to come from a specific type of social and economic background. None of these women came from destitution; they were all born into wealthy families and had access to good quality education from a young age. They all had family connections and they took advantage of them. For example, the Strickland sisters had friends in the world of publishing in the UK and had help getting their work published. Susan Allison's wealthy relatives took her family in after her father's untimely death. Although the move to Canada was often driven by the search for a better life, none of these women arrived with nothing. Rather, they were all English gentlewomen.

According to Parr Traill, contemporary pioneer woman wrote to influence other potential pioneers:

for pioneering the best kind of women were not those who could haul the greatest number of logs, but rather, the woman who were well-educated and willing to test their independence and fortitude in the new land. This mind's education was the best kind of basic training one could possibly have, and by cultivating mental resources and utilizing the

“higher truths” a woman had learned, she could apply them readily to a new environment, such as Upper Canada (qtd. in Watson Rouslin 325).

The woman, then, that Parr Traill sees as the most suitable for life in the colonies is not the servant woman who knows about the practical management of a house, but a woman of a specific class and background. The woman Parr Traill has in mind is again, the English gentlewoman. Perhaps this judgement is made because Parr Traill was writing about her experiences as they happened, rather than with the benefit of hindsight. If she had taken time to look back on her experience, she probably would have realised that book learning was not going to help her to bake bread, look after sick children without the help of a doctor, or provide for her family through long, cold winters. Looking back at the qualities that made a productive pioneer woman, Thompson describes her ‘spirit’ by three qualities: ‘the ability to act decisively and quickly in case of emergency,’ ‘strength to accept adverse circumstances on the frontier,’ and the ‘courage to attempt an improvement of these frontier conditions’ (8). As this essay will go on to show, however, the pioneer woman is so much more than her socioeconomic background, or her ‘spirit.’

Memoir and Autobiography as the Medium

We have insights into the day-to-day lives of pioneer women, including their inner lives, primarily through the genre of memoir. Memoir, says Maggie Pickering, ‘is a constructive act,’ it is ‘an interplay between the experienced past and the imagination of the memoirist’ (404). The genre provided pioneer women with the space to write about (and therefore come to terms with) their ‘real existences, the personal life of family, relationships, and child-rearing, as well as their accomplishments as individuals in a context that gives meaning to, rather than seeks to transcend, life in the world’ (Buss ‘Pioneer Women’s Memoirs’ 60). On women writing in the genre of autobiography during a time dominated by men, Sidonie Smith explains:

Since the ideology of gender makes a woman's life script a nonstory, a silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture, the ideal woman is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, and her "natural" story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life but around the fluid, circumstantial, contingent responsiveness to others that according to patriarchal ideology, characterizes the life of woman but not autobiography. (50)

Smith's explanation makes sense of the quiet nature of pioneer women's stories. It explains why they do not write expecting praise in their (small) moments of triumph, and why so many of the stories concern various aspects of motherhood or are written from the point of view of maternal narrators. As Shoshana Felman further explains, 'unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women's autobiography is what their memory cannot contain—or hold together as a whole—although their writing inadvertently describes it' (16). The works are a mixture of practical how-to-be-a-pioneer guides, personal recollections, and in some cases, a space for elegant prose and descriptive poetry. In some ways, utilising the genre of memoir is almost a trick, a way to overcome, as Smith highlights, the patriarchal barriers imposed on female authors in the 19th century. Therefore, while women like Traill and Moodie claimed not to be writing about their adventures as pioneers in a new world like their male counterparts, they hide their adventures in a genre devoid of bravado and 'claim[ed] their accounts were merely to inform, or warn the folks back home' (Buss *Mapping Our Selves* 27). Perhaps one of the reasons we have so many accounts of pioneer life from Canadian women is the traditional division of labour between genders. As Atwood puts it, 'maybe, under frontier conditions, the men were kept so busy chopping down trees and strangling wolves that the arts came to be regarded as sissy stuff, and women were left to do the cushion embroidery, the flower-painting, and the poetry-writing' (*Strange Things* 110). This is an oversimplification, but there is some truth to the idea that women had the time and/or energy for 'poetry-writing.' Put even more simply, writing happened (and still does) indoors, and inside the home was, generally speaking, a female domain.

These pioneer women all write about difficult circumstances, circumstances which they faced regularly and without access to assistance. Helen Buss notes that ‘early women’s diaries displace their unexpressed emotions in subtle ways’ (*Mapping Our Selves* 45). Rather than dwelling on tragic events, these women writers had to find ways to ‘encode, both in unconscious ways, what cannot be openly expressed’ (Buss 45). One life event that many female pioneers write about is childbirth. There is no doubt that pregnancy and childbirth has always been, and still is, dangerous. When combined with the specific conditions faced by pioneer women, it became even more dangerous. These women write about needing to give birth knowing that a doctor will not make it to them on time, or if they do have help, that helper may not speak the same language or be versed in the same cultural conventions, rendering the experience more terrifying.

Another similarity across the works of female pioneers is their deep connection to the ‘old world,’ and their ‘unwillingness to let go of the old life and old connections’ (Buss 37) which often fuelled their desire to write. Susanna Moodie, for example, laments the loss of her ‘motherland’ (26), despite the knowledge that she cannot provide a good life for her children in England. When she writes her poetry, and later, her experiences in the backwoods¹, she writes for an educated, English audience. Those she has left behind feature in many of her stories.

These women were also outsiders—others—on the frontier. The majority of the population in white settlements were men: for example, ‘the male-female ratio amongst immigrants was a staggering 100:1 in 1865,’ at the settlement at Fort Victoria (modern day Victoria, British Columbia), ‘improving to 3:2 by 1881’ (Bridge 15). Susan Allison would have encountered a similar ratio of men to women when she arrived in Fort Hope (modern day Hope, British Columbia) in 1860.

¹ The term ‘backwoods’ is an Americanism dating back to the early 1700s. It refers to both ‘any remote or isolated are’ and ‘wooded or partially uncleared and unsettled districts’ (Dictionary.com). In Moodie’s texts, the backwoods refers to settlements around Cobourg, Upper Canada (now Ontario).

‘Shifting Frontiers’ and the Legacy of the Pioneer Woman in Canadian Literature

The pioneer woman appears in the works of early twentieth century writers like L.M. Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables* 1908); and later in the century, the work of Margaret Laurence. Laurence’s Manawaka Sequence (published between 1964 and 1974) depicts facing a different frontier, an ‘internal, personal one’ (Thompson 7). Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974), makes a direct connection between Parr Traill and the character Morag Gunn. Morag Gunn’s family ‘came to [Canada] so long ago, from Sutherland, during the Highland Clearances’ (Laurence 10). After losing her parents as a child, she clings to these stories about her past, not caring that the teller, her adoptive father Christie, may be embellishing with each retelling. Through those stories, Morag connects with another way of life, and when times get tough, she looks back to both her relatives and women like Parr Traill for guidance. When Morag wonders *What Would CPT Do?* and contemplates a more productive life, she is, according to Atwood, looking for ‘something she feels as a lack in herself: she wants to know how to cope’ (*Strange Things* 121). But it is more than that: Morag is looking back during difficult times to something she sees as both constant (the stories about her family’s journey from Scotland to Canada can be retold over and over again) and simple, understandable—a way of living to which a pioneer woman would have the answers. No access to coffee beans? Make dandelion coffee. Need to make it through a long, cold winter? No question: survive. If Morag Gunn is a pioneer, she is a pioneer on a different frontier, where the dangers she faces are not found in the backwoods (the place where she finds solace), but in the cities, in the modern ideas about life her teenage daughter brings home. For her, the answers are found by looking back to her ancestors, writing their stories in her own pioneer novel, *Shadow of Eden*, and finding a simpler, more fulfilling way of living. This message feels all the more important in the context of Laurence’s life: all of the Manawaka sequence takes inspiration from her own life, but Morag Gunn’s experience is the most biographical. Of *The Diviners*, Laurence said it is ‘about the need to give shape to our own legends, to rediscover what is really ours, what is *here*’ (Atwood Afterword, 506).

These shifting frontiers can be seen in more contemporary fiction, in the works of writers like Alice Munro (*The View from Castle Rock*, 2006), and Jane Urquhart (*Away*, 1993). Munro's exploration of her family history takes her on a journey, one both real and imagined, as she rewrites the story of her family's migration from Scotland. In *Away*, Urquhart charts 140 years of family history from Ireland to Ontario homestead through generational stories. Such novels feature women who are pioneers, or embody the pioneer spirit, often from a historical point of view and without any direct personal experience of the frontier. Thompson explains that although the 'frontier is redefined several times...with the redefinition comes a corresponding change in the nature of the pioneering process (or in the pioneer woman's interaction with the frontier)' (7). In Canadian Literature, this frontier begins as a physical place, such as the backwoods of Ontario described by Parr Traill and Moodie, or the interior of British Columbia experienced by Allison, and transitions to an experience no longer rooted in place, but experience 'internalized, referring to a personal dilemma to be solved by the protagonist' (Thompson 8). Although the frontier changes, the 'traits which identify the pioneer woman remain unchanged despite the shifting nature of her frontier environment, and can be quickly summarized: courage, resourcefulness, pragmatism, an ability to act decisively in the face of discomfort or danger' (Thompson 113); these qualities transcend their original context and permeate later conceptions of Canadian womanhood. The danger is no longer the threat of a snowstorm after a bad harvest, or an encounter with a hungry bear, but internal conflicts and societal pressures.

For Atwood, Munro, and Urquhart, the accounts of pioneer women continue to be compelling because their identity is so grounded in the pioneer outlook, where everything is new and yet to be discovered. Despite being plunged into an unfamiliar and challenging setting, pioneer women know who they are and what they need to do to get by in the world. The experiences of pioneer women have shaped the Canadian identity itself.

Questions of Identity²

The idea of Canadian identity, or the *lack* of Canadian identity is a common preoccupation in Canadian Literature. So you live in a landscape of ice and snow. Who does that make you? A Northerner—but Canada has a south, too—or maybe an outdoorsy person—but Canada is made up of metropolitan cities full of matching suburban sprawl—or someone who uses terms like *toque* and ends sentences with the expression *eh*. Maybe we watch hockey, drink beer, eat poutine, and have impeccable manners. Maybe that is what it means to be Canadian.

While I will not discount any of those things (I will always call a woolly hat a *toque*), they do not provide a conclusive answer about what it means to be Canadian. According to 2016 census information, only 30% of the population claim to be ‘Canadian’ (a term that is also exclusive of Indigenous peoples) (Statistics Canada). Everyone else looks further back. A question I heard a lot when growing up was *What’s your heritage?* I would answer simply, *Canadian*. The asker would look puzzled. *No, where are you really from?* My family history is a bit hazy, but I know I am at least third generation Canadian: all my grandparents but one (my paternal grandfather was born in Australia) were born in Canada. At least one of my great grandparents was born in Canada, with his family settling in Saskatchewan after fleeing either from Ireland (potato famine), or, more controversially, Russia (pogroms). The rest of my great grandparents probably came to Canada as teenagers, around the 1920s, from Scotland and England. So when answering *where I am really from*, I return to my original answer, the common denominator,

² I am writing from own perspective as a white, third-generation Canadian woman, whose links to the ‘old world’ are within living memory (my Scottish great-grandmother died when I was about six). By writing from this viewpoint, I am in no way seeking to misrepresent the viewpoints of immigrants or other gender identities. When I write about Indigenous culture, I am doing so as an outsider who has lived on unceded territory. My novel, *An Okanagan Story* is about Vancouver, which is the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Selilwiltulh (T’sleil-Waututh) Nations, and Kelowna, the unceded territories of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. I acknowledge and thank the Indigenous peoples for their care and understanding of the land. Any representation of Indigenous culture in the novel and this critical essay are based on my understanding of research, by both settler and Indigenous authors. I am in no way claiming any authority and instead seek to question my own notions of how Indigenous culture fits into my perceptions of culture, history, identity, and the politics of British Columbia and Canada. When quoting from other sources, if the original author has used the term ‘Indian,’ I will not change the quote. I will, however, refer to Indigenous people either with reference to the specific local area, such as the Syilx people of the Okanagan, or more generally as Indigenous people.

Canada. For a long time, this answer felt alienating. Atwood explains it well in the Afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. She says that Canadians are ‘all immigrants to this place even if we were born here,’ which is essentially like asking where a Canadian is *really from*.

In *Survival*, Atwood asks: what does ‘CanLit’ actually mean? What is Canadian writing? And what does it mean to be a Canadian author? She says, ‘if you aren’t too sure where you are, or if you’re sure but you do not like it, there’s a tendency...to retrace your history to see how you got there’ (120).

What this dissertation seeks to do is look back to the ‘foremothers’ of CanLit by examining the works of white settlers Susanna Moodie and Susan Allison, whose pioneer woman memoirs give rise to certain common tropes in CanLit. Chapter One explores Moodie’s *Roughing It In the Bush* as an establishing text detailing the experiences of an early white settler, while Chapter Two examines Allison’s “Reflections” as a text that builds on the work of Moodie and expands on the ideas of the connection to the land and Indigenous neighbours. These foremothers can be described as the ‘first wave’ of women to establish themselves in the harsh Canadian landscape. As we have seen, their stories of learning to live in the Canadian wilderness they once considered hostile, their ability to make something out of nothing, such as Susanna learning to make dandelion coffee, or Susan making a home as the first white woman in the Similkameen, can be seen to directly influence a ‘second wave’ of women. As Atwood explains this ‘second wave’ consists of ‘women of the twentieth century who followed these first women and either built upon, wrote about, or contrasted their own lives with those of their predecessors’ (*Strange Things* 117). The final and third chapter of this dissertation, therefore, considers Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and seeks to understand why a writer like Atwood, as a ‘second wave’ woman, looks back at Moodie’s writing when trying to answer her own questions about CanLit, and how *The Journals* reframe the experiences of *Roughing It* from a 20th century perspective.

Chapter One- Susanna Moodie (Strickland) (1803-1885)

I read *Roughing It In the Bush* after reading Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Take it or leave it, seemed to be Atwood's attitude in her Afterword. The sentiment was shared across some of the research I did, with some saying that Atwood's *Journals* could be read *instead* of Susanna Moodie's original text. Eventually, I decided that I would return to *Roughing It* and make my own decisions about the book. Susanna Moodie has become for me what Parr Trail is for Morag in *The Diviners*. She is a touchstone, or the Canadian literary mother I was looking for when I wanted to immerse myself in the pioneer experience.

Susanna Strickland was born into a wealthy family in 1803, in Suffolk, England. Hers was a family of writers, sister Catharine said that the 'Strickland girls at Reydon Hall' reminded her 'a great deal of the Brontë family' (*Roughing It In the Bush* vii). Their upbringing was comfortable, and even the girls had access to high calibre education. However, the situation changed during the depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). All the siblings were made to work, although in the most middle-class sense of the word: no hard labour contributed to the Stricklands financial situation; rather, 'the women did it by writing' (Watson Rouslin 321). At age nineteen, Susanna Strickland, with help from friends with literary connections, published her first novel, *Spartacus: A Roman Story*. She also published a volume of poetry commenting on her conversion to Congregationalism. She met John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie (1797-1869), an Orcadian army officer and also a published author, in 1831. They married soon after. The early days of the marriage do not feature in *Roughing It*, but it appears to have been a love match. However, the Moodies did not agree about the move to Canada. John Moodie was the advocate for emigration; Susanna, on the other hand, was 'at best a hesitant emigrant' (*Roughing It In the Bush* xi). John, having previously lived in South Africa, was significantly more prepared for the hard life of a pioneer than genteel Susanna. John originally proposed a move to South Africa. Susanna vetoed this idea due to an enduring fear of wild animals: she had heard too many of John's South African stories, those 'dramatic tales of encounters with elephants and lions'

(Gerson 533). Despite their collective literary success, the Moodies' financial situation was dire and their prospects in England were bleak. The only way to provide their children with a better life was to start fresh in Canada. They had support for this plan: Susanna's brother Samuel (1804-1867) set off for Upper Canada in 1825, and sister Catharine and her husband, Thomas Traill, followed in 1832. The Moodies sailed from Edinburgh in 1832 with 'the modest hope of salvaging a way of life threatened at home' (Stouck 431).

Susanna Moodie spent ten years putting *Roughing It* together. We do not know if these sketches were 'extracted from diaries or written as sketches entirely from memory' (Stouck 431), but the collection of character sketches, narrative, poems, and songs is sometimes at odds with its own message. *Roughing It in the Bush* is a story of multiple voices: with one voice, '[Susanna's] public voice, she attempts to affirm the pioneer experiences and lauds Canada as the land of future promise' (Stouck 426). There is also the voice of hindsight or the retrospective where, 'in the reshaping of the original experiences,' Moodie 'selects and omits details in response to the unconscious drift of her feelings and in accord with a dramatic sense of self' (Stouck 431). A third voice emerges when she discusses failure, but the moments of honesty are fleeting, and she often reverts to the optimism of the public voice, or the reflective retrospective voice.

Each chapter of *Roughing It* sets out to describe a character or situation (via a sketch); within these sketches, Moodie is generally quite judgemental, describing each character she meets from the position of a moral high ground. This position, she believes, is both due to her position in society (or rather, former position in English society), and her categorisation of herself as a Christian and gentlewoman. Many of the characters she meets in the backwoods are either not religious at all, or lapsed, and she often positions herself as unofficial Christian missionary. Her judgements are regularly followed by quotes from the Bible. Most of the time, these quotes do not have the intended effect on the folks they are directed at, but they are of importance when considering the intended audience of *Roughing It*, i.e., educated English gentlewomen. The

sketches, then, almost feel allegorical, where the characters explain a particular situation and Moodie makes a judgement and provides a moral conclusion.

At times one wonders: *why* were these people so willing to tell their stories to Susanna Moodie? Especially since, as Thurston explains, ‘she quotes the Bible not to edify her interlocutors, but rather to humiliate them’ (441). It is a question that remains unanswered. I was also struck by how the stories feel crafted, edited, and compiled for the ideal reader (i.e., women of education and social backgrounds similar to Moodie). These stories have purpose.

Each chapter ends with a poem. Some of these poems are penned by John Moodie and signed with the initials ‘J. W. D. M.’ Others were contributed by Susanna Moodie’s brother, Sam Strickland, who, having emigrated earlier than the Moodies, had a ‘wider range of backwoods experience’ (*Roughing It In the Bush* xvi). These other voices contribute to the number of voices with disparate intentions, but more positively, are pieces of the crafted patchwork. The rest of the poems are Susanna Moodie’s work. The first poem, for example, ‘Oh! Can You Leave Your Native Land A Canadian Song’ in the chapter ‘Quebec’ (22-23) was published in *Canadian Literary Magazine* in April 1833, less than a year after the Moodies arrived in Canada. Similar poems, published in a magazine based in York (now Toronto), confirm that Moodie established a contemporary readership based in Canada not long after emigrating. While her early audience may not have consisted of her neighbours, that her readership was composed of Canadians, or other British immigrants, speaks to her foundational role in Canadian Literature. By publishing poems about Canada as she was experiencing life in the backwoods, she was contributing to Canadian storytelling.

Another component of Moodie’s writing is her response to nature; her descriptions verge on the sublime, or an almost ‘Wordsworthian response to the Canadian landscape’ (Stouck 426). For example, upon arriving at their first Canadian home, she describes the nearby stream, Gage’s Creek:

I know not how it was, but the sound of that tinkling brook, for ever rolling by, filled my heart with a strange melancholy, which for many nights deprived me of rest. I loved it, too. The voice of waters, in the stillness of night, always had an extraordinary effect on my mind. Their ceaseless motion and perpetual sound convey to me the idea of life—eternal life; and looking upon them, glancing and flashing on, now in sunshine, now in shade, now hoarsely chiding with the opposing rock, now leaping triumphantly over it,—creates within me a feeling of mysterious awe of which I never could wholly divest myself. (Moodie 90)

The description of Gage's Creek is indicative of Moodie's troubled relationship with nature, where nature both induces fear and provides comfort. The descriptive language is an indicator of Susanna's educational background and is typical of 'educated British emigrants who brought with them a mental baggage of Burke's sublime, Chateaubrian's romanticism, Rousseau's Noble Savage, Wordsworth's pantheism' (Wood 90, qtd. in Glickman 491). These ideas, specifically that of the Noble Savage become increasingly complicated, especially when white settlers faced Indigenous populations, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Warnings of Failure and the (Quiet) Triumph of Survival

What becomes evident from the beginning of *Roughing It* is that the moral high ground Susanna Moodie positions herself on is faltering. The Moodies' complete lack of knowledge meant that although Susanna Moodie 'expected to achieve the financial independence suitable to her station in British society' (Glickman 509), the reality is that they are poor in Canada, both in terms of wealth and knowledge. In the backwoods, monetary wealth and knowledge are more valuable than religious beliefs or social position. Indeed, a successful farm *is* social position. The Moodies' lack of knowledge is reflected in the poor choices John Moodie makes, and Susanna Moodie's confessions that she cannot make bread, she does not know how to milk the cows her babies depend on (and is afraid of them), and she cannot do her family's washing. Her commentary on learning these mundane tasks is pitiful:

Some small baby-articles were needed to be washed, and after making a great preparation, I determined to try my unskilled hand upon the operation. The fact is, I knew nothing about the task I had imposed upon myself, and in a few minutes rubbed the skin off my wrists, without getting the clothes clean. (Moodie 91)

In other words, her attempts at doing everyday tasks result in failure; but because this is a book without bravado, she is honest about her failure and her complete lack of preparation for the world she finds herself in. She is also without help, for although the family arrives in Canada with a servant, they soon discover that it is difficult to maintain household staff. While having servants was a given in England, she soon discovers that people do not want work as servants because they, like the Moodies, believe they are entitled to more in Canada.

Despite this fall in social status, Moodie holds tight to her prejudices. This position reveals ‘a deep-seated fear of social contact, and her role as gentlewoman in the wilderness is clearly a vital defence against what she fears most’ (Stouck 428). In other words, while she needs to make connections with her neighbours and community, she deliberately makes those relationships difficult by passing judgements, especially about their ways of living, which she believes to be beneath her own. This makes the Moodies outsiders, and their position on the fringes of the backwoods means that when times get tough, they do not have connections to lean on for help.

The precarity of their situation is described in an account of the summer of 1835, when the financial situation was even more dire and, unable to hire any farm hands, they resort to putting Susanna to work. Of that time, Moodie explains, ‘My husband and I worked hard in the field; it was the first time I had ever tried my hand at field-labour, but our ready money was exhausted...we could not hire, and there was no help for it’ (236-237). As with most difficult situations she faces, she admits that she feels unprepared and that she ‘had a hard struggle with my pride before I would consent to render the least assistance on the farm’ (237). Manual labour, of course, not being on the list of acceptable activities for gentlewomen. Then comes the *but*:

‘but reflection convinced me that I was wrong’ (237) and she realises that ‘Providence had placed me in a situation where I was called upon to work—that it was not only my duty to obey the call, but to exert myself to the utmost to assist my husband, and to help maintain my family’ (237).

The passages that follow delve into Moodie’s religious feelings—remembering that her conversion to Congregationalism was momentous enough to warrant a volume of poetry—and discusses how ‘glorious poverty!’ (237) can bring someone closer to God. She explains, ‘The misfortunes that now crowded upon us were the result of no misconduct or extravagance on our part, but arose out of circumstances which we could not avert or control’ (237). It is easy to feel sympathy for her, to agree, that indeed, the Moodies have been ‘cajoled and plundered out of [their] property by interested speculators’ (237). But that is to forget the other half of the story: that the decision to try their luck in Canada was a choice, and that they (namely John) made bad decisions and invested in sketchy deals, like the ‘steam-boat stock’ which, at this point, ‘had not paid [them] one farthing’ (237). Like other descriptions of the bad times, the commentary on the summer of 1835 is followed by a message, followed by wisdom that can only come from hindsight. We are not privy to her immediate response to manual labour (though we can imagine that the ‘hard struggle’ with her pride may not have been one of her best moments), instead her explanation is moderated by reflection:

I can now look back with calm thankfulness on that long period of trial and exertion—with thankfulness that the dark clouds that hung over us, threatening to blot us from existence, when they did burst upon us, were full of blessings. When our situation appeared perfectly desperate, then were we on the threshold of a new state of things, which was born out of that very distress. (237)

During that painful summer, they did not know that their fortunes would change. What they did know was that they barely had enough to keep the family alive. ‘Oh well,’ says Susanna, with the kind of optimism you can only have when you already know how the story will end.

In Chapter Twenty-Three, 'The Outbreak', Moodie describes another dire situation in connection to political turmoil in Upper Canada: beginning in 1837, a movement led by 'radical' journalist and politician, Dundonian William Lyon Mackenzie, saw 'reformers [rise] up against British colonial rule to fight for democracy...and an end to the privileges of the aristocracy' ('Canada Hall: From Rebellions to Confederation, 1837-1865'). John Moodie volunteered to help put down the rebellion and was 'granted a captaincy in the newly-formed Queen's Own Regiment' (Moodie 280). He joined his regiment in January 1838, leaving Susanna in charge of the farm and family. Although he sent money home, the Moodies were indebted to many of their neighbours. Susanna was determined to pay them back, which meant spending almost everything John sent home, once again putting the family in a precarious situation. But through determination and perseverance, Moodie explains, she is once again able to capitalise on her abilities as a writer. John Lovell, a Montreal-based publisher behind *The Literary Garland* wrote to her 'with promise to remunerate [Susanna] for [her] labours' (280). Moodie explains how 'such an application was a gleam of light springing up in the darkness; it seemed to promise the dawning of a brighter day. I had never been able to turn my thoughts towards literature during my sojourn in the bush' (280-281). This was not just a bright moment on a dark day, but a shift in circumstances and success for the Moodies. Previous attempts at reviving her literary career had failed; for example, after being asked to submit to a Philadelphia-based publisher, she had 'contrived to write several articles after the children were asleep, though the expense even of the stationery and postage of the manuscripts was severely felt by one so destitute of means' (281). Not only was her writing dependent on having the time and energy once her household chores were complete and her children asleep, but the Moodies were also so poor that stationery and postage were luxuries. Ultimately, nothing came from the venture with the publisher. But perhaps the descent into poverty in 1838 motivated her to push for what she wanted; the publisher Lovell offered to pay for postage, and left Susanna Moodie to 'name [her] own remuneration' (281). Finding a publisher 'opened up a new era in [her] existence' and, she

explains ‘for many years I have found in this generous man, to whom I am still personally unknown, a steady friend’ (281). The resulting payment is one of Moodie’s triumphs, but as in most moments, her celebration is quiet: ‘I actually shed tears of joy over the first twenty-dollar bill I received from Montreal. It was my own; I had earned it with my own hand; and it seemed to my delighted fancy to form the nucleus out of which a future independence for my family might arise’ (281). While this may have been a ‘new era’ for the Moodie family, it was not the end of the hard times in the bush. However, it is important that this success was of Susanna Moodie’s making and capitalised on her literary talents; the accomplishment almost feels progressive for 1838, for it is a glimpse of a woman lifting her family out of poverty through her own monetary earnings.

Despite this moment of success, *Roughing It* is ‘no splendid celebration of pioneer life’ (Stouck 426). I, however, did not come to the conclusion that the book is story of failure. Instead, *Roughing It* seems to me to be transformational, in which Susanna Moodie portrays herself as ‘self-reliant and strong and brave to the point where she can be a model to others’ (Glickman 509). We must remember that Moodie’s reason for writing *Roughing It* was to inform potential pioneers about how to find success and avoid failure in Canada.

Susanna Moodie’s transformation into a successful pioneer is apparent at the end of *Roughing It*, when, after seven years in the backwoods, the Moodies leave the farm for town life. While it would be easy to assume that Susanna would be thrilled at the prospect of providing her children with something more akin to her own childhood, her reaction is quite the opposite. Moodie explains, ‘I clung to my solitude. I did not like to be dragged from it to mingle in gay scenes, in a busy town, and with gaily-dressed people. I was no longer fit for the world; I had lost all relish for the pursuits and pleasures which are essential to its votaries; I was contented to live and die in obscurity’ (322). Stouck comments that Moodie ‘remains emotionally fixated on the past’ and that her narrative ‘focuses on an impersonal image of growth’ (429), but I view Moodie’s reflection as evidence of a shift in perspective. Gentlewoman Susanna would have

longed for society's 'pursuits and pleasures,' but Pioneer Susanna rejects that way of life in pursuit of *something simpler*.

So, is the move from backwoods to Belleville an act of defeat or survival? Is *Roughing It* (written from the comfort of suburbia and with the benefit of hindsight) a celebration of pioneering triumph, or a warning to potential pioneers? As mentioned earlier in this essay, *Roughing It* is a book of multiple voices, and as such, it is a book with more than one outlook. The other voice, an inner, more private voice is a voice of reflection: despite Susanna's generally upbeat attitude, her fortitude when faced with a challenge, and her curiosity about the unfamiliar place she now finds herself, there are moments of absolute misery. In these moments, she even goes so far as to say that death feels like the default solution to all her problems. She cries over her situation in life. She cries a lot. But Moodie is also not coy about the kind of story she wants to tell in *Roughing It*. In the opening sections, she both hints at the struggles of an emigrant in a new land and puts forth a patriotic call:

British mothers of Canadian sons!...Make your children proud of the land of their birth, the land which has given them bread—the land in which you have found an altar and a home; do this and you will soon cease to lament your separation from the mother country, and the loss of those luxuries which you could not, in honour to yourself, enjoy. (Moodie 26)

This message of good will, of instruction to potential pioneer women is countered as she continues, 'you will soon learn to love Canada as I now love it, who once viewed it with a hatred so intense that I longed to die, that death might effectually separate forever' (26). In the times when things are so tough that only death feels like a potential reprieve, Moodie comes to realise that her 'social training as an English gentlewoman' (Thompson 4) is a hindrance, not a help in the bush, and it is the 'process of ridding herself of her prejudices about her fellow human beings and her set ideas of herself as a proper, well-brought up English lady' (Watson Rouslin 324) that allows her to succeed in Canada. Her lack of knowledge forces her, against her better

judgement, to seek help from her neighbours. When she puts aside her pride, she understands that practical wisdom and openness is the key to respect in this new-found community.

The shift in Susanna also comes through domestic development. Watson Rouslin suggests that domestic successes like ‘learning how to bake bread...finding her own natural substitute for coffee in the dandelion, making meals from Nature’s cupboard of nuts and seeds, and obtaining meat from the squirrels and deer in their ken, are part of her “coming of age” in Canada’ (324). In these moments, such as when she learns to make dandelion coffee, Moodie reverts to her other voice, the optimistic public voice, as she details how to brew the coffee and provides tips for ‘persons residing in the bush, and to whom tea and coffee are expensive articles of luxury’ (239).

Moodie’s Connection with her Indigenous Neighbours

The success Moodie describes in *Roughing It* would have been impossible without the help of the local community. As Atwood says, ‘the first Europeans in Canada literally could not have survived without the help of the Native peoples’ (*Strange Things* 48), and the same is true for the Moodies. Stories about Susanna’s interactions with her Indigenous neighbours are mostly recounted in Chapter 15: ‘The Wilderness, and Our Indian Friends,’ who she identifies as ‘Chippewa or Missasagua [sic] Indians’ (186). The Mississauga³ had most likely been in contact with white settlers since the 1650s (Mississauga First Nation). By the time the Moodies moved to the backwoods property on the Douro shore of Lake Katchewanook, or ‘Lake of the Waterfalls’—names which Susanna Moodie describes as ‘very poetical,’ like ‘most Indian names’ (183)—the local Indigenous population may already have started to dwindle.

‘These were the halcyon days of the bush’ (186), Moodie reflects at the beginning of the chapter, describing learning to paddle a canoe and settling into her new life in the backwoods. As

³ The Mississauga are one of seven Anishinaabe Indigenous peoples, whose home is Canadian and American territory around the Great Lakes.

Moodie describes her Indigenous neighbours, the difference between the sketches about her white neighbours is jarring. What does this difference say about her perception and her authorial intentions? She describes her first encounter with the Mississauga by explaining that they are ‘a people whose beauty, talents, and good qualities have been somewhat overrated and invested with poetical interest which they scarcely deserve’ (186). She justifies the nature of her anecdotes by explaining that ‘the real character of a people can be more truly gathered from such seemingly trifling incidents than from any ideas we may form of them from the great facts of their history’ (309). Which version of history is Moodie referencing? While Moodie’s motives concerning her descriptions of her neighbours are unclear (is she warning future immigrants?), it is clear that she lacks the awareness to recognise that her family has actively displaced the Mississauga by accepting a military land grant. She does, however, remark that the land ‘had been their usual place of encampment for many years’ (187). There is no mention of how the government acquired the land from the Indigenous peoples, or why the land could be so easily given away. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, a small amount of research uncovers shady agreements made between various government bodies and Anishinaabe chiefs, promises that were not kept, in line with many other agreements of the time. It was generally understood by white settlers that Indigenous peoples were a ‘fated race,’ gradually disappearing from the land. Unsurprisingly, it is the Mississauga who are the intruders, rather than the Moodies. Although we can critique Susanna Moodie’s lack of awareness, we also must recognise that her feelings about land and Indigenous peoples echo the common misconceptions many white settlers had about North America. It was commonly understood that it was ‘a place without a past’ (Gerson 536). According to this idea, Indigenous peoples ‘do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans’ (McClintock 30). This corresponds with the concept of *terra nullius*, explained by Carole Pateman:

Defenders of colonization in North America, including political theorists, frequently invoked two senses of terra nullius: first, they claimed that the lands were uncultivated wilderness, and thus were open to appropriation by virtue of what I shall call the right of husbandry; second, they argued that the inhabitants had no recognizable form of sovereign government. In short, North America was a state of nature. (36)

This understanding of land and ownership explains why the Moodies, like most white settlers, did not believe or understand that they were depriving the Mississauga of their home. Instead, they believed the land to be unoccupied because the Mississauga's ideas about land and ownership were radically different from their own.

Susanna Moodie's personal relationship with her Indigenous neighbours develops when her husband invites 'them to his own table' (187) to share a meal. Moodie describes how 'they soon grew friendly and communicative, and would point to every day objects that attracted their attention, asking a thousand questions as to its use, the material of which it was made, and if we were inclined to exchange it for their commodities' (187). This act of inclusion puts Susanna into her preferred position as observer. From this vantage point, she compiles a number of sketches, which constitute the remaining portion of the chapter.

Although Moodie may appear to be tolerant and curious, even, in these sketches, her previously cultivated prejudices remain. Again, we must question who Moodie was writing for and why. If we are to understand the outcome of her interactions with her Indigenous neighbours as instructive, what is the lesson? For example, she remarks that 'the vanity of these grave men is highly amusing. They seem perfectly unconscious of it themselves; and it is exhibited in a most child-like manner' (Moodie 189). The comment about her indigenous neighbours having 'child-like' manners highlights her understanding that they do not exist in the same social hierarchy as the Moodies. This judgement is made despite the implied understanding

that the Mississauga know how to survive the backwoods. On the other hand, families like the Moodies remain unskilled and dependent on everyone around them.

In other sketches of various neighbours, Moodie uses phrases like ‘dark strangers’ (187), ‘their dark eyes flashing’ (191), and makes generalisations about Indigenous peoples as a homogenous group, starting many of her sentences with ‘they’ before making assertions like ‘for they all walk like cats’ (191) and later, ‘they never forget any little act of kindness’ (191). While the assertions remain objectively positive, the fact that she sees all Indigenous people as the same (while recognising the cultural differences between other white immigrants) is of course highly problematic. Again, we must contextualise this perspective and consider Moodie’s audience—her white, educated, upper-middle class audience, who could read a book like *Roughing It* and come away feeling like Moodie confirmed every idea they had about ‘the very *beau ideal* of savage life and unadorned nature’ (197).

Despite an overall lack of awareness, Moodie’s sketches of the Mississauga highlight some ability to recognise the problematic relationship between the Indigenous population and the white settlers; she explains,

during better times we had treated those poor savages with kindness and liberality, and when dearer friends looked coldly upon us they never forsook us. For many a good meal I have been indebted to them, when I had nothing to give in return, when the pantry was empty, and “the hearth-stone growing cold,” as they term the want of provisions to cook at it. (Moodie 200)

The lesson Moodie is presenting appears to be that pioneers can count on their Indigenous neighbours for help. However, by telling other potential pioneers to look to Indigenous people for help, she is, perhaps inadvertently, perpetuating white settlers’ ability to take advantage.

Although the Moodies do not believe they are directly contributing to the Mississauga’s ‘precarious mode of life,’ (191) the message in *Roughing It* confirms harmful perceptions about white settler-Indigenous relations.

While Moodie's stories of her 'Indian friends' are constructed to show that her 'dealings with them were conducted with the strictest integrity' and that they 'became attached to our persons, and in no single instance ever destroyed the good opinion we entertained of them' (186), any work she could be doing as an emissary of white-settler Indigenous relations, goodwill, or open-mindedness is undone by her unshakeable prejudices, which remain even when it is clear that her family cannot survive without the help of their Indigenous neighbours. But, what is different about Moodie's representation of her Indigenous neighbours is her point of view as a woman. Her relationships with her Indigenous neighbours are different when compared to the relationships her husband cultivated. This difference is the result of the European-based social structure of life in early Canada, and the 'uncertain position of colonial women within normative patriarchal power relations' (Gerson 528). As previously discussed, her role in her marriage changes once the Moodies arrive in the backwoods. She is no longer just the caretaker of the children, or the housekeeper, but is also required to step into roles normally reserved for men. When male labour is scarce (i.e., in 1838-9, when John Moodie was away for months at a time), or money is scarce, Moodie describes taking on tasks as part of her duty to her family. Her understanding of duty drives her to negotiate a publishing contract so she can pay off longstanding debts incurred by her husband's mismanagement. These roles, however, are always temporary, and the normal social order is restored once the family leaves the backwoods. Susanna is 'powerful as white but disempowered as female' and consequently, she shares some 'marginal space on the outskirts of frontier culture' (Gerson 529) with Indigenous women. We can view both pioneer woman and Indigenous women as social others, however Susanna's writing makes it clear that she does not believe they share the same social space. As previously suggested, educated gentlewomen like Susanna do their best to reconstitute their ideas about social hierarchy in Canada, despite understanding that English gentlewomen have no purpose in the backwoods.

Mothering a Canadian Literary Tradition: Stories of Motherhood in *Roughing It*

It is not a coincidence that I found myself thinking about Moodie as a literary foremother; indeed, *Roughing It in the Bush* is full of the language of motherhood. As soon as the family arrives in Quebec, Moodie ‘not only brings into textual experience a universe populated by mothers and their offspring’ (Freiwald 474) as she describes being surrounded by the ship’s dog and her puppies and ‘boats heavily laden with women and children’ (Moodie 16), but also ‘marks herself as a figure of mothering’ (Freiwald 474). From the first pages, Moodie uses terms like ‘mother country,’ and ‘Divine Mother Nature.’ Her world is full of ‘an endless procession of “children”’: her children and other people’s children, as well as figurative children—children of the Divine Mother Nature, of “The Great Father of Mankind”, the sons and daughters of England and Canada, the native children of the land’ (Freiwald 477). The recurring combination of Mother Country and Divine Mother Nature are particularly interesting because her relationship with both Mother Country (England? Or Canada, Mother Country to her children?) and nature are very complicated. On the one hand, Mother Nature ‘never fails’ Moodie: ‘she is there reassuring, unconditionally loving’ (Freiwald 487). Indeed, when times get tough, nature is Moodie’s ‘chief solace’ and ‘has the capacity to lift her out of herself and make her forget her all-consuming homesickness’ (Glickman 490). The positive aspect of this relationship is evidenced in moments when Moodie’s tone shifts as she describes the setting. As previously discussed in this chapter, Moodie’s descriptions of nature verge on the sublime, but the other aspect is the effect being immersed in nature has on her. Moodie describes ‘a bright, clear afternoon, the first week in October, and the fading woods, not yet denuded of their gorgeous foliage, glowed in a mellow, golden light. A soft purple haze rested on the bold outline of the Haldemand hills’, and, she explains, ‘in the rugged beauty of the wild landscape I soon forgot the purport of our visit to the old woman’s hut’ (Moodie 86). The effect is that her anxiety about dealing with their landlord, Old Satan (someone she fears), is forgotten. The implication, then, is that Mother Nature provides as much as she withholds.

Although *Roughing It* is full of the language of motherhood, Moodie's own experience of motherhood is held back from readers. For example, although childbirth is a subject common to women's pioneer memoir and larger narratives, the act of birth gets little space in *Roughing It* and children appear almost out of nowhere. When her son Donald arrives in May 1836, it is during a time of extreme hardship for the Moodies. She is rendered unable to work and they are forced to 'borrow' (i.e., beg, a practice which receives her harshest criticism) from the neighbours. She explains:

On the 21st of May this year [1836], my second son, Donald, was born. The poor fellow came in hard times. The cows had not calved, and our bill of fare, now minus the deer and Spot, only consisted of bad potatoes and still worse bread. I was rendered so weak by want of nourishment that my dear husband, for my sake, overcame his aversion to borrowing, and procured a quarter of mutton from a friend. This, with kindly presents from neighbours—often as badly off as ourselves—a loin of a young bear, and a basket, containing a loaf of bread, some tea, some fresh butter, and oatmeal, went far to save my life. (Moodie 243)

'*The poor fellow came in hard times*' is as descriptive and emotive as Moodie gets about the conditions of her son's birth. We do not know the exact circumstances of the birth, or if a doctor is present—we can assume not based on previous stories in which Moodie explains that the doctors refused to attend to the family due to their remote location and lack of funds. The absence of details is frustrating for a reader like me seeking to understand how someone like Susanna Moodie managed to survive her time in the backwoods. Instead of providing insight, this sparsity reflects Moodie's 'reluctance to let go of certain Victorian ideals of feminine conduct' (Freiwald 481). However, if we return to Smith's explanation about women's autobiography, we understand that both genre and social conventions complicate which parts of the story Moodie is able to share; therefore, a birthing story in 1830s Canada (even one lacking in detail) can be read as 'a reclamation of a range of historically specific female experiences' (Smith

50). Consequently, the record of the birth experience alone is important (and the fact that it is told in less than positive terms) as it highlights the things left unsaid in *Roughing It*. This story is an instance where the gaps between what Moodie writes (that the birth was hard) and does not write but is implied (that the experience was traumatic) are crucial to the larger narrative. Moreover, coming to terms with moments like this in *Roughing It* are reminders that I am a 21st century reader with 21st expectations. This idea of expectation will be discussed further in Chapter Three, when I engage with Atwood's 20th century imagining of Susanna Moodie.

While critics hail *Roughing It in the Bush* as either a celebration of pioneer life or a story of failure and despair, Moodie is clear from the very start about the book's true purpose:

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain' (330).

This is an overt warning to potential emigrants, instructing them not to be tricked by the idea of Canada as a utopian wonderland. Moodie's reflections make clear that she was unprepared for the realities of life in the bush, unequipped for hardship, and so destined to fail. Despite this negativity, Susanna Moodie was, and still is, a woman whom other women want to follow.

Why? And why, if I found her judgements of both her white and non-white neighbours difficult to stomach, do I find her writing inspiring? Upon reflection, there are a few ways in which I feel an affinity with Susanna Moodie: first, I relate to her love-hate relationship with Canada. Although our experiences are vastly different (growing up in suburbia is most definitely the opposite of life in the backwoods), I understand her desire to be elsewhere while still recognising the beauty of the world around her. I also understand the experience of knowing that the wilderness, while beautiful, could kill you. I was never more aware of my insignificance than when I lived in Kelowna, British Columbia, and would drive the Coquihalla Highway (often in treacherous conditions) surrounded by sharp cliff faces, mountains with peaks concealed in

clouds, the knowledge that the nearest town was two hours behind me. Or, when I looked out my window during a dry, scorching summer, at Knox Mountain (the inspiration for Ballantyne Mountain in *An Okanagan Story*) and wondered: how long before it too, caught fire? But despite these feelings, I spent a lot of my time living in the BC Interior taking photographs. Now, from my desk on the other side of the world, I have tried to capture something of that landscape in *An Okanagan Story*. The process of writing about my own pioneer character, and how he understood the Okanagan when he arrived in 1874, has been instructed by my recognition of how Moodie came to terms with her backwoods home.

Secondly, putting her prejudices aside, I have come to see Susanna Moodie as a personal icon, possibly even a Canadian icon. As discussed earlier in this chapter, emigrating to Canada was not her first choice, but despite arriving without skills and unhelpful ideas about class, society, and her place in the world, she managed to make life in the backwoods work. And not just for herself and her husband, but also for their children. Moodie was industrious, resourceful, and in moments of crisis—and, as this chapter has detailed, there are many moments of crisis—managed to keep things together. Her story is one of heroism and survival, even if it is quiet and often understated.

Chapter Two- Susan Moir Allison (1845-1937)

I first encountered the name Susan Allison while attempting to research life in British Columbia in the 1870s. My fictional character, John Duncan Ballantyne, arrives in what is now Kelowna in the mid-1870s with almost nothing—save his pioneering spirit, of course. The land is completely unknown to him, but I imagined him (and wrote, through the lens of a fictional historian, Mike Dunbar) sitting at the base of Knox Mountain (turned Ballantyne Mountain in the novel), looking out at Okanagan Lake. This is a place I know well. I have hiked Knox in all conditions and at all times of the day, always on the lookout for the creature I know as Ogopogo, but who goes by various guises and is said to reside in the depths of the lake. Despite my relationship with the Okanagan, I knew nothing of Susan Allison. Not even the whisper of her name. Susan Moir Allison: pioneer woman, inspirational figure, lost historical detail. Allison’s life is well-documented. As a young wife, and a young woman living in the remote Similkameen Valley (located about 100 kilometres south of Kelowna), she wrote stories, journals, even poems. While in the BC Archives at the Royal Victoria Museum in Victoria, I searched through box after box of materials. Her dedication to recording her history was immediately evident: when she did not have access to paper, she scribbled on the backs of shop ledgers and notebooks. Her own thoughts are interspersed throughout documentation about the state of the family’s cattle ranch, and in ledgers from the time when her family ran a post office and shop. The quantity of materials is staggering—years’ worth of manuscripts reside in the boxes in the old building below the Royal Museum.

Susan Allison’s life and writing was compiled into the volume *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison* by Margaret A. Ormsby⁴ in 1976. It is a

⁴ Margaret A. Ormsby (1909-1996) was a pioneer in her own way; an expert on the Okanagan, she finished a PhD on the same subject in 1936, while also teaching at the University of British Columbia. After many years of experience in education, she went on to become the Head of the History Department at UBC in 1963; she was one of only a few women in such prestigious roles at the university. Her list of achievements and publications is long (including *British Columbia, A History*, referenced in my bibliography). It remains unclear how she became involved in the Allison project.

comprehensive work, and after reading it, I thought I knew exactly who Susan Allison was and how I wanted to write about her. I viewed her through the same lens as her predecessors, including Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, as a woman with a conventional set of ideas about the world and her place in it. When reading about Susan Allison's experiences in the Okanagan and Similkameen, I ascribed any deviation from conventional ideas down to the fact that she had spent the first few years of her life in British Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) and so was raised with a colonial mindset, but was perhaps more open to other cultures, languages, and religions. There is proof to back up the idea that both her early childhood and that she was the child of emigrants shaped some of her later ideas about the world. However, everything I thought I knew about Susan Allison, to put it simply, exploded after reading selections from *Okanagan Women's Voices: Syilx and Settler Writing and Relations 1870s-1960s*. In the early days researching Allison, it felt like she had been forgotten. None of the works about her were written within the last five years. And when I took my trips to the archives at the BC Archives in Victoria, accessing the Allison fonds required that they be brought from off-site. I imagined a dusty warehouse. It turns out I was wrong about that, too. Jeanette Armstrong, Lally Grauer, and Janet MacArthur were also reading through the body of work, flipping through grainy microfilm, and reading flimsy copies of stories and poems written in Allison's spidery handwriting. *Okanagan Women's Voices* was published in 2021 and I managed to get a copy at the beginning of 2022. Somehow, this book published by a tiny Penticton, BC press was available to buy from the local bookshop. But the conclusion they come to about who Susan Allison was completely obliterated everything I thought I knew about the woman I had spent years researching.

This chapter, therefore, has been rewritten to incorporate a completely different outlook on Susan Allison's life and work. Rather than just seeing her as another white settler, albeit one whose story was and remains, important because it is a record of the early days of a woman in British Columbia, I also now see her as a pioneer and advocate for Indigenous rights. And this reframing is massively important, both for my own views on white settler relations with

Indigenous peoples, but also for the attitudes and ideas I have had engrained in me as a white person who grew up on unceded territory. I had intended to write about how Susan Allison capitalised on and appropriated the culture and stories of her Indigenous neighbours, but will instead explain how her story of survival is not just a record of pioneer life, but also contributes to the survival of local Indigenous culture and stories.

Susan Louisa Moir was born on 18 August, 1845, and spent the first five years of her life in Colombo, British Ceylon. Susan's experiences of colonial life, and her stories about them and 'the Moir family's long record in the colonial service often emphasize their colonial sense of adventure, which may account for her own adaptability as a settler' (Armstrong et al. 170). The family was forced to relocate to London, England, after the untimely death of Stratton Moir Sr. in 1849. Like Susanna Moodie, Susan Moir was fortunate to be given the opportunity to attend a private school and receive an education notably better than many other girls of the same period. Indeed, she 'received such good training in languages that she retained to the end of her life familiarity with Greek, Latin, and French' (Ormsby xi); this education is reflected in her 'sophisticated diction, and many references to Greek mythology, the bible, history, and literature in her writing' (Armstrong et al 170). Susan also obtained the more socially acceptable training in 'the fine art of being a lady' (Wright 123). Notably, there was nothing in this education about 'patching overalls, cleaning brook trout, bandaging mangled fingers and killing rattlesnakes' (123), all tasks that she writes about facing in British Columbia. However, such training provided her with the background Catharine Parr Traill would have thought perfect for pioneer life. It was Susan Moir's stepfather, Thomas Glennie, 'a gay and charming Scot' (Ormsby xii) with a less than charming penchant for wasting money, who dreamed of Canada. Despite his lack of funds or financial wherewithal, Glennie 'aspired to the role of country squire in a virgin country' and was quickly swayed, like the Moodies, by 'reports reaching the English newspapers of the need for permanent settlers in the gold colony and the enactment there of measures to make land

available on easy terms' (Ormsby xii). Those easy terms probably meant pre-emption⁵, whereby any (male) British subject could purchase 'any tract of unoccupied and unreserved Crown lands' for one dollar an acre. The family, except for Susan's older brother, Stratton Jr., who stayed behind in London, set sail for Canada.

After a fifty-two-day long journey from Southampton, England, to Esquimalt, British Columbia, Susan and her family finally arrived in Fort Hope on 18 August, 1860, her fifteenth birthday. During the early years in British Columbia, Susan's stepfather Glennie followed through on his bad behaviour and disappeared. Like many bad situations Susan Allison and her family faced, 'little mention of this desertion is made in 'Pioneer of the Sixties' (Armstrong et al 171), the first instalment of Allison's recollections. Instead, she writes about 'the routine of dances, dinners, horse races, leisure trips, visits, and so on' (Armstrong et al. 171). The decision to omit the details of Glennie's departure reveals her approach to writing about the difficult times. Susan Moir met John Fall Allison and despite a twenty-year age gap, the couple was married on 3 September 1868. John Fall Allison (1825-1897), like John Moodie, was already familiar with pioneer life, having first moved with his family from Yorkshire to New York in 1837, and then on to California during the Gold Rush (1848-1855). It was gold that first brought John Fall Allison to British Columbia; in 1861, he settled in the Princeton area, where, on pre-empted land, 'he began to raise cattle for the coastal and other markets' (Armstrong et al. 171).

Susan Allison's Relationship with the Syilx Okanagan People⁶

When Susan Allison arrived in the Similkameen in the late 1860s, she came 'with conventional views of the inferiority of the Indigenous people' (MacArthur 143-44). Some of her early writing, written during the 1870s, such as 'Some Sketches of Indian Life', is not dissimilar to Susanna

⁵ see the 'Pre-Emption Regulations' from the 'B.C. Settlers Guide 1885'

⁶ The Allisons' neighbours were part of the Syilx Okanagan Nation, which is comprised of seven communities based in the Okanagan region: the Okanagan Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Penticton Indian Band, Upper Nicola Band, Upper and Lower Similkameen Indian Bands, and Westbank First Nation. The Syilx Okanagan Nation also has connections on the American side of the 49th parallel.

Moodie's sketches discussed in the previous chapter. Tonally, this early piece of writing is 'condescending and sardonic' (Armstrong et al. 173), and like the sketches in *Roughing It*, is full of sweeping generalisations. For example, Allison describes

the Indians as [possessing] a singular degree of acuteness and penetration, but at the same time they are also very childish, confiding, and sensitive; they have a great idea of their own dignity, and are as proud and jealous as the Highlanders of Scotland were two centuries ago ('Some Sketches of Indian Life' 1).

The connection made to the 'Highlanders' is interesting considering the family's own connections to Scotland, but this should not be confused as an attempt to make a personal connection. Also notable is the description of her Indigenous neighbours as childish and proud, echoing Susanna Moodie's similar statements. Allison also claims that 'the Indians' religion is purely emotion' and that they 'think nothing of lying, or petty stealing' (2). She is critical of their attitudes towards marriage which do not resonate with her own, but comments that 'polygamy is dying out.' Despite witnessing the everyday lives of her Indigenous neighbours, Allison states that 'There seems to be no real love or affection amongst them' (2). She comments on a home, the young and elderly, and uses adjectives like 'appalling,' 'gaudy,' 'excessively,' 'cunning,' and even the phrase 'untidy young savage.' The entire passage is an interplay between a reflection of a peaceful scene and a disdain for, simply put, a different way of living. The piece ends with a comment on the relationship between Indigenous people and white settlers:

When the old savagery in their nature breaks out the fault nearly always lies with whiskey and unprincipled traders. If left alone to the priest without the temptations few white men can resist, they would soon form a useful and orderly class of people (9).

Allison assigns blame to both Indigenous and white man: the Indigenous man is at fault for not having the willpower to abstain from vice, and the white man is at fault for a lack of principles. But she refrains from a final comment about *why* whiskey is destroying Indigenous culture. In fact, she writes earlier in the essay that

their civilization is very much retarded by their passion for strong drink for in spite of the stringent Canadian Laws the Indians in the interior of BC can get all the whiskey they want—and they do get it, the settlers are all too indolent and apathetic to try to put an end to practices that may eventually bring ruin on themselves as well as demoralizing the unfortunate savages. (3)

Despite the description as ‘indolent and apathetic,’ Allison is reluctant to state that the white settlers were the ones who introduced whiskey and are consequently to blame for the ‘ruin’ she predicts. What ‘Some Sketches of Indian Life’ shows is both Allison’s desire to write about her Indigenous neighbours, but also that, like Susanna Moodie, she was writing for a ‘non-Indigenous reader interested in the peculiarities of native people of North America’ (Armstrong et al. 173).

However, unlike Susanna Moodie’s writing, there is a definite shift in Allison’s attitude towards the Syilx Okanagan People. This shift is evidenced through her writing, including her memoirs, non-fiction, and approach to poetry. So, what brought about this shift in perspective? This is where the research I had done since starting this project in September 2017 got upended, as detailed in the introduction to this chapter. One of the most shocking parts of the Susan Allison story has always been the written appearances (and disappearances) of her Indigenous neighbours. This absence is most notable when looking at the character Nora, who appears in ‘Pioneer of Sixties,’ but without explanation about her connection to the family. In my early research, I soon discovered that Nora had been married to John Fall Allison; the couple had three children before John Fall married Susan Moir in 1868. The research was scarce, but by trawling through articles and even a few family history blogs, I gathered that she lived a life adjacent to the Allisons, with some significant overlaps. This research also intimated that Nora and John Fall’s children were around the Allison home, perhaps not as half-siblings to Susan’s children, but potentially as farmhands or home help. The conclusion I came to was that this adjacent arrangement was racially motivated: I believed that Susan Allison would not accept

Nora and John Fall Allison's children because they were 'halfbreeds,' or at least because they were not biologically hers. Again, this perception fell apart after reading *Okanagan Women's Voices*, and I was forced to confront my own ideas about relations between white settlers and Indigenous peoples.

Nora was Nora Yacumtecum (1847-1926), niece to the chief of the Similkameen, Quiniscoe, sister of Charlie Yacumtecum, both of whom are characters who feature in Allison's poems and stories. As previously mentioned, Nora Yacumtecum and John Fall Allison had three children: Elizabeth Lily (Lily) (1863-1943), Albert (Bertie) (1865-1933), and Charles (Charlie) (1868-1913). Nora Yacumtecum was effectively an entrepreneur, her business involved leading pack trains that took white settlers from Hope to the interior. It was probably on such an expedition that she met John Fall Allison. These facts are about all we know about Nora Yacumtecum and John Fall Allison's relationship. Reading *Okanagan Women's Voices* quashed my theory that John Fall Allison tossed Nora Yacumtecum aside for Susan Moir, a more socially acceptable bride. Instead, it seems that Nora Yacumtecum decided to return to her people, and her descendants confirm that 'all the white [Allison] kids knew that Lily was a half-sister and they were all great friends...There was no animosity' (MacArthur 147). Susan does mention Lily several times in 'Recollections,' 'though she is not identified as John's daughter' (147).

On a personal level, I am relieved that my theories about Nora Yacumtecum and John Fall Allison have now been proved wrong. I considered a storyline for *An Okanagan Story* involving uncovering secret Indigenous relations and the fallout from the discovery. Instead, I decided that one of my supporting characters, Uncle Bill, was part Indigenous and made a reference to his mother growing up 'on the Res.' Using Indigenous relations as a plot line never felt right to me.

Returning to Allison's writing, Nora Yacumtecum makes an appearance during a visit from 'a niece of Quinisco [sic], the "Bear Hunter" and chief of the Chu-chu-ewa Tribe' ('Pioneer of the Sixties' 23):

She [the visitor] was dressed for the occasion, of course, in mid-Victorian style, a Balmoral petticoat, red and gray, a man's stiff starched white shirt as a blouse, stiff high collar, earrings an inch long, and brass bracelets! I did not know my visitor seemed to think she ought to sit upright in her chair and fix her eyes on the opposite wall. I think 'Cla-hi-ya' was the only word she spoke. I was not used to Indians then and I knew very little Chinook. I felt very glad when her visit was over. I know that I should have offered her a cigar and a cup of tea. (23-24)

In addition to the visit being uncomfortable because the two women do not share a language—Allison's knowledge of Chinook⁷ is minimal in the early days—Allison explains that she is unaware of culture practices and commits a social *faux pas*. When first reading this exchange, I viewed this purely as motivation to learn Chinook and an attempt to understand local Indigenous culture; I believed this to show Allison's curiosity about other ways of life. While all of this may be true, the passage is even more interesting when considering the details that are withheld; namely, that the visitor is Nora Yacumtecum, John Fall Allison's first wife, and mother of Lily, Bertie, and Charlie. When reflecting on why this passage is included in 'Pioneer of the Sixties,' and why key details are omitted, we again must think about Allison's readership. Unlike Susanna Moodie's educated British audience, Allison's contemporary readership was more nuanced; her audience can be categorised as 'white Vancouverites at their Sunday papers'—the 'Recollections' were first published as thirteen issues in the *Vancouver Sunday Province* starting in 1931 (Ormsby)—or as 'an "insider" white and / or Indigenous reader who knew the contact history of the Syilx and the Allisons' (MacArthur 155). Understanding the composition of Allison's readership (and the associated social implications) means recognising that information was deliberately held back to keep Nora Yacumtecum's identity, and relationship to the family, secret.

⁷ Chinook, or Chinuk Wawa is 'a hybrid lingua franca consisting of Chinookan, combined with contributions from Nuuchahnulth (Nootkan), Canadian French, English, and other languages. It originated on the lower Columbia River' ("Chinuk Wawa").

As discussed in Chapter One, the dynamic between white settlers and Indigenous people shifted from the times of early contact through the latter half of the 19th century. Allison's handling of this story reflects her understanding⁸ of the 'severe penalties for disclosing the existence of a union between Syilx and settler, or white paternity for their offspring' (MacArthur 155). By including the above passage in her 'Recollections', she is commemorating her friends and the impact they had on her life, and by keeping Nora's identity hidden she is protecting both her Syilx connections and the privacy of her immediate family.

What Susan Allison Leaves Unsaid

The omissions concerning Allison's Syilx relations connects with the larger trope of women's writing from the time, where writers reveal a lot about less socially accepted issues by saying almost nothing. As discussed in Chapter One, in other writing by pioneer women, expressions like 'how can I describe' is used to downplay experiences. By claiming not to have the words required to explain the situation, they avoid having to say anything at all. Like Susanna Moodie, these silences are felt when Allison describes her experiences of childbirth and motherhood. Susan and John Fall Allison had fourteen children, all of whom miraculously lived to adulthood. Like Moodie's descriptions of motherhood, it would be easy to characterise Allison's writing about her children as cold and unfeeling; the children are mentioned in passing and often, are part of a running tally, or a way to mark the passage of time. For example, in 'Pioneer of the Seventies,' Allison details how she and her husband rented a Hudson's Bay Company house in Keremeos (just over an hour south-west of Kelowna; I once drove through and will forever remember the colour palette: slate grey on the mountains, emerald evergreens, brilliant orange, yellow, and red gourds at a roadside farmer's market stall. I imagine the Allisons' view was

⁸ Allison's understanding of these Racial and Social contracts is also explored in a less personal story about Annie McLean, a mixed-heritage woman whose brothers are jailed and executed while attempting to seek justice for their sister's mistreatment by a white man. Allison's retelling of the story comes across as an admonishment of the behaviour of the McLeans, as opposed to expressing her support for their claims for justice ('Pioneer of the Seventies' 46).

similar), and in a paragraph, writes about her neighbours, their jobs, the house, and in one line, the birth of her first daughter: ‘My first daughter, Beatrice, was born in the Hudson’s Bay Company house that February, 1873’ (‘Pioneer of the Seventies’ 38). The tone is matter of fact and the details sparse, even though the experience of birth would have been traumatic.

A further example of the way Allison writes about childbirth also connects with her writing about the Syilx. Concerning her first pregnancy—and the difficult delivery of a premature baby in July 1869—she never explicitly states that she is pregnant. Instead, she explains that while trying to make a packed lunch for a Mr. Tait⁹, she goes into labour:

I was all doubled up with pain—I did not know what to do. I called my husband and he came with the only two medicines we possessed, Castor oil and pain killer. I swallowed both and then exhausted by the pain fell asleep only to wake again worse than ever...I think I would have swallowed anything to get rid of the pain. About nine o’clock the next day my baby was born two months too soon, the first white child in the Similkameen Valley. I had intended going to Hope for the event but Mr. Tait’s wonderful ride stopped that for at least a month.’ (28)

Here we learn that Allison planned to travel to Hope (where her sister and mother were living and where she would have access to medical assistance) for the birth of her child, which she labels ‘the event.’ Rather than explain that the premature birth was the reason why she could not ride on to Hope, she says that Mr. Tait’s arrival changed her plans. She goes into further detail about this ride from Hope to Keremeos (today a journey of 199 kilometres, or just over two hours east), writing ‘it really was a hundred miles of mountain road in one day’ (‘Pioneer of the Sixties’ 28). The new child is not referred to by name, but instead as ‘the baby.’ More

⁹ Tait is a name on a long list of people who unexpectedly show up in the ‘Recollections;’ unlike Moodie, Allison does not detail who these people are, or what they do, in sketch format. Instead, explanation is given in the book’s notes: Tait is Chief Trader John Tait (1832-1911). At this time, he would have overseen the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post in Keremeos.

importantly, it is this event that brings her Indigenous neighbours to the house; while Allison is in labour, John Fall Allison turns to the Syilx for help, ‘returning with one of Quinisco’s [sic] sisters, Suzanne’ (28). Suzanne, Allison describes, ‘was very good to me *in her way*’ (28, my emphasis), but explains that, ‘I thought her rather unfeeling at the time. She thought that I ought to be as strong as an Indian woman but I was not’ (28). Within this statement, Allison ‘states two opinions of the same event,’ i.e., her view of the experience of childbirth versus Suzanne’s as an Indigenous woman, ‘allowing the reader to reach their own conclusion’ (Pickering 411) about her ideas of female strength.

The establishment of this relationship underscores how European ideas about gender roles dictate how white settlers interact with Indigenous men and women. John Fall Allison already has a connection to the Syilx through his role as a pioneer. At the time, this connection was not considered taboo, as marriages between white men and Indigenous women were not ‘perceived as “illegitimate” in the fur trade era and early settlement days’ (MacArthur 155). Instead, marriage to an Indigenous woman increased the possibility of survival in the unforgiving British Columbian landscape, and ‘companionship, security of passage through Indigenous lands, business dealings, translation and safety as one began to “prove up” an isolated pre-emption’ (MacArthur 155). Therefore, this established relationship between John Fall Allison and the Syilx allows him to turn to them in times of need. Susan Allison, on the other hand, must go through the experience of childbirth to forge a connection with Suzanne; Allison’s perception of her own strength allows her to contemplate other ways of understanding the experience of childbirth, and even Indigenous knowledge and medicine.

Susan Allison’s Writing

Indigenous knowledge and culture becomes a part of Allison’s experience and understanding of the land and contributes to her success as a pioneer; she learns to make ‘moccasins, braid straw for hats, and strand and braid lariats’ (Ormsby xxx), in addition to baking bread, curing fish, and

preserving meat. Additionally, as a partner in the pioneering experience, she helps her husband with the running of the goods store, and a 'primitive post office' (xxx). Within the pages of the account books she was meant to be keeping are 'jottings of stories, based on her family's experiences in Ceylon and notes of Indian customs' (xxx). In the early days in the Similkameen, Allison uses writing to offset the loneliness of pioneer life. One such example of early writing is 'A Day in the Life of a British Columbia Storekeeper' (1868). In the piece (the only copy I could find is written in spidery handwriting on yellowed foolscap), Allison writes that 'like a poet he [a storekeeper] is born not made,' because the storekeeper is faced with such varying, and 'trying' experiences. One of Allison's own experiences as a storekeeper involved getting to know Tamtusalist, a Syilx 'disabled elder and knowledge keeper' (Armstrong et al. 174), who, while his son was running the local ferry, stayed at the store. Tamtusalist is a recurring name in Allison's later creative work, and so lasting was his impact on her life that he is 'acknowledged as the source of a number of works of prose and poetry on the Syilx that she identifies as "Tales of Tamtusalist."' (Amstrong et al. 174).

Allison's interest in the traditional stories of Syilx people is immediately apparent in 'Pioneer of the Sixties.' While travelling to the Similkameen as a newlywed, she writes of sitting around the fire and being told the stories she would later go on to 'translate'. Here it is important to explain why I use 'translate' in quotations: there is some controversy surrounding Allison's poetry about Indigenous folklore. For example, an undated, typed copy of the story 'Ne-Hi-La-Kan' is designated 'By Tamtusalist' and "Translated by Mrs.L.Allison." The first two paragraphs explains that although Allison has attempted to 'invest the story with theromance [sic] and poetry of the original narrator [it] is indeed a difficult task and I ask pardon if I fall short in my humble attempt to translate a story told by one of nature's orators into common every day English' ('Ne-Hi-La-Kan'). In an undated, typed copy of 'Tales of Tamtusalist', the opening paragraphs state that

in giving these tales to the public I have called them translations but who can translate accurately a language that is in part voiceless, for Indians convey their meaning by gesture and facial expression as much as by work spoken. The mind of the listener must be enraptured with the mind of the narrator to give their full meaning. I have, therefore, written these tales from the impressions received by mind from the Indians' mind.

Allison, therefore, is using 'translate' as a placeholder for the work she is doing by documenting and retelling traditional stories. This explanation makes the 'translations' more interesting than controversial. For example, Allison's interpretations of the stories she hears around the campfire include the first mention of 'Ogopogo':

We sat and talked till late, the Indian boys sitting with us and telling us the stories of the place. Here, Yacumtecum said, one of the Big Men (giants) lived and had often been seen. Cockshist said they also lived on the Okanagan. This led to talking of the creature they now called the 'Ogopogo.' The Indians did not say 'Ogopogo.' They looked on it as a superhuman entity and seemed to fear it, though none of our boys had seen it, nor did they want to. ('Pioneer of the Sixties' 21-22)

The creature 'Ogopogo' appears in more of Susan's writing, including a piece called 'What I know of Ogopogo'¹⁰(undated). Due to my own interest in the folklore of the creature known by the Syilx as n'x̣äitk^w (pronounced na-ha-ha-it-koo and thought to be a water spirit rather than a monster), I was particularly excited to find the original handwritten manuscripts in the Allison fonds; however, my plans to read the story were foiled by fragile foolscap and spidery handwriting. It is hard to describe the joy I felt when I opened my copy of *Okanagan Women's*

¹⁰ This version of 'What I know of Ogopogo' is undated and unsigned. It is unclear if Allison copied it, or if it was copied after her death, when her daughter, Alice Allison Wright, was attempting to organise the manuscript for publication. This is an interesting deviation from the standard, as both Susan Allison and her daughter were very good at signing the work.

Voices and found ‘What I know of Ogopogo’ listed in the index. The story is a mixture of recollection, including another account of the first time Allison heard about the creature while on her 1868 trip to the Similkameen, descriptions of Okanagan Lake, and a collection of folklore. ‘What I know of Ogopogo’ is particularly interesting because of how it expands on moments from ‘Pioneer in the Sixties.’ In the piece, Allison writes that she never knew the real name of the creature, but explains:

I suppose the Okanagan Indians had a name for it in their own language and the Similkameen Indians had a name for it in theirs. But to me they generally spoke Chinook—and it was spoken of as “Ook-ook-mis-achie coupa Lake” (the wicked one in the lake) or as the ‘hyas-hyas gust scapa cupa Lake” meaning the “huge one in the Lake.” This creature they seemed to dread and spoke of it with lowered voices. (‘What I know of Ogopogo’)

Here, Allison explains how using Chinook as an intermediary language changes the meaning of the creature’s name. As a result, the story Allison shares with her audience is not the same story she was told. Moreover, ‘What I know of Ogopogo’ highlights the unique relationship Susan Allison had with the Syilx, and how it differed from the relationship her husband had with their Indigenous neighbours. In the piece, she explains that

my husband told me the Whites spoke of it as “The Monster” but he said that none of the white men had seen it though the Indians seemed terrified, he did not believe it. Well I listened to the stories of the Indians with an open mind—(and being Highland Scottish on my father’s side)—I partially believed in the monster.

Here, Allison highlights how her husband understands the creature as a ‘monster,’ but is reluctant to believe in it because he (and other white settlers) have not seen it. She, on the other hand, describes a willingness to believe the story without proof (even if that willingness is quantified by her ‘Highland Scottish’ heritage). Allison hears such stories many times and, as pieces like “Sketches of Indian Life,” one of her earliest publications show, these stories quickly

become part of her narrative. She also passed these stories on to the next generation via oral stories: one visitor to the Allison household noted that he ‘found the younger Allisons’ whiling away the long evenings with story-telling, “the mother collecting the wild fairy legends of the Indians, and dressing them in familiar language for her children” (Ormsby xxx-xxx). Like the story of the ‘Ogopogo,’ Allison absorbed Indigenous stories into her own narrative, and either due to gaps in language or her inability to ‘translate’ accurately, the stories changed. Within those changes another narrative develops, contributing to something like folklore¹¹ for white settlers: these are some of the stories that second generation women like Atwood heard from their grandmothers.

Allison’s first book, a book of poems called ‘In-cow-mas-ket: A Poem of Indian Life’, was published with Chicago-based Scroll Publishing in 1900. Most notably, the book was published under the pseudonym ‘Stratton Moir’ (her brother and father’s name), highlighting the social attitudes towards women, even so-called pioneering women. Despite much searching, I have never come across a copy. The book is interesting for a number of reasons; firstly, because it illustrates how different Allison’s journey to publication was versus Susanna Moodie, who, as discussed in Chapter One, had published prior to her arrival in Canada; secondly, because of the treatment of Indigenous subject matter. I encountered the handwritten manuscripts when in the BC Archives; the manuscript included an Introduction which seemed to display a departure from the tone I had previously associated with Allison’s writing. In a few paragraphs, she explains how she came to write the poems in the volume and her motivations:

This must be taken as a part of my recollections, for it is an account of the lives, manners and customs of the Similkameen Indians as I knew them in the sixties, seventies and

¹¹ An interdepartmental memorandum from Prof. Wilson Duff of Anthropology and Society at The University of British Columbia dated April 1971 contests the value of Allison’s writing as ‘Indian legends *per se*’ and he states that he ‘could not recommend that the money be spent to publish them on anthropologic or folkloric grounds’. Instead, he says that the work has value ‘as examples of her own literary methods’ and concludes that the stories can be published if they are all explained as being part of Allison’s ‘Recollections.’ This decision, like those made by Scroll Press in 1900, misrepresents her desire to publish the stories.

eighties, while they were still a people—I may say a passing people. Now they are nearly gone—just a downtrodden remnant whose land is coveted and whose end is eagerly waited for by most of their white neighbours. ('In-cow-mas-ket' 183)

She continues, 'The white man has much to be ashamed of in his treatment of the rightful owners of the land,' (183), and explains that some of her early readers criticised the poems, both as bad poetry, and for the content. However, Scroll Publishing chose not to include this introduction in the published volume. This decision by a presumably white-run publishing firm silences Allison's strong message of admonishment towards white settlers and solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Consequently, her white readership goes unchallenged. Moreover, Allison's Introduction explains that the poems in the volume 'show the Syilx as 'free people' with 'beautiful religious ideas and their own manners and customs' (183). Although the poems put the readers into the world of the Syilx through the use of an unnamed, third person omniscient speaker, without the explanation provided in the Introduction, the white settler perspective of the *belle sauvage* remains unchallenged. Consequently, Allison's intentions behind the volume of poems are obscured by the choices made by the publisher.

Perhaps because the introduction was not included, Allison had a career as a writer. Indeed, her writing and her position as one of the first white women in the Similkameen contributed to her legacy, and she was 'often called upon to give accounts of the "early days" and she obliged, speaking and writing numerous pieces for the local newspaper' (Armstrong et al. 173). Despite the 'fame' she encountered in her lifetime, her motivation to write her 'Recollections' is survival. This echoes Susanna Moodie's experience, as discussed in Chapter One, when her publishing contract helped to keep the family out of poverty. The Allisons, on the other hand, saw periods of relative success, and the family was never destitute or surviving solely on charity. After John Fall Allison's death in 1897, Susan Allison managed to maintain the farm for a number of years; she eventually moved to Vancouver to live with her youngest daughter in 1928, when she was eighty-three years old. Despite age-related health concerns, she

began writing her ‘Recollections’ in 1930. But, she wrote to one of her daughters, ‘it is only need that has made me write and I have left untold more than I have written’. In an earlier letter, she writes that she’s ‘behind with [her] house payments—as long as we have a roof over us we can manage for food’. There are further references in this letter to the family’s state of poverty in Vancouver, joy at being paid \$10, and ‘shivering’. Unlike Susanna Moodie, whose success in the backwoods resulted in a move to the relative comfort of suburban Ontario, Allison spends the latter years of her life feeling the impact of the Great Depression (1929-1933), when ‘30 percent of the labour force was out of work’ (Canadian Encyclopedia). She writes, ‘if Mr. Scott [editor at the *Province* newspaper] would help with my book, it would, I humbly think, sell looking back on my past life with all its pleasure and pains’. These personal letters to Allison’s daughter show she was willing to bear the pain of remembering if it meant helping her family through the Depression.

Like the revelations about Nora Yacumtecum and the Allison’s Syilx connections, understanding the position from which Susan Allison wrote her ‘Recollections’ completely changed my outlook on the work. The letters to her daughter Louisa are held in a private collection, and as a result I did not have access to this personal correspondence until reading the transcriptions in *Okanagan Women’s Voices*. In the letters, Allison is free to say what she feels without the pressures of social expectations. She is therefore able to write, in detail, about difficult things that often go unsaid in ‘Recollections.’ Without these letters, my perception of Allison’s body of work was that the intended purpose is to celebrate pioneer life. Unlike Susanna Moodie and other early pioneer woman, Allison’s ‘Reflections’ are not intended as manuals or how-to guides for white settlers. As with *Roughing It*, it would be easy to classify the ‘Recollections’ as either a celebration of pioneer achievements against the odds, or as a problematic account of white settler-Indigenous relations. To do so, however, is to downplay the internal struggle Allison faced while writing. By acknowledging this struggle, we gain perspective on Allison as a whole person, rather than just as a pioneer, an observer, or even a writer. The

letters also show that she was interested in writing a longer book, but old age and ill health meant she was reluctant to undertake a project that ‘would have meant further confrontation with the ghosts of the past, and her white status and the cultural capital it had accrued compared to the sad legacies bequeathed to her Indigenous friends and relations’ (MacArthur 166). Writing ‘Recollections’ then, was itself a pioneering act.

During my visits to the BC Archives in summer 2018 and again in summer 2019, I felt as if I were the only person trying to forge a connection with Susan Allison. The Allison fonds were dusty and the materials held off-site. I had to wait; the archive was a busy place, with a chatty security guard who talked to me as I sat in the lobby, and checked on me when I was working late. As I flipped through a stack of sepia photographs, an elderly archivist told me off for not wearing gloves; the younger, more helpful archivist failed to mention the gloves at all. That second summer, armed with an idea of how things worked, I sorted through folder after folder of materials, feeling like any mysteries about Allison’s life were unfolding in front of me. I squinted at the handwriting on yellowed paper, snapped photos, took notes, and responded with as much enthusiasm as I could manage each time the security guard did a round of the otherwise empty room. His presence was both comforting and unnerving; I’d just watched the film *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018) on the flight over to Vancouver and was thinking about how Lee Israel visits libraries and archives only to pocket and forge valuable letters. I stuck with my photos. Sadly, it did not feel like the Allison fonds would be worth anything to anyone. When I left, I wondered how long it would be before anybody else requested those dusty boxes from storage. I wondered if she deserved to be forgotten. I wondered if we are actively losing part of the Canadian identity as the woods recede and the frontiers continue to change. When I thought Allison was just another white settler celebrating colonisation and not taking any responsibility for her part in the destruction of the Syilx way of life, I questioned if it was worth remembering her stories. I read her ‘translations’ of traditional Syilx stories and wondered just how much she gained by appropriating stories that could never belong to her. However, the emergence of new

research and a new way of framing Allison's life and work has changed my mind. I really do hope that Susan Allison will return to a position of cultural and historical significance in the story of British Columbia and be remembered for her ability to survive a world that demanded she silence a part of who she was.

Chapter Three- Margaret Atwood Reimagines the Pioneer Woman

This essay began with a quote from Northrop Frye, explaining the creation of myths, of folklore, of stories unique to Canadian culture, that have shaped CanLit and the modern Canadian identity, connecting to Margaret Atwood's questions of identity and the idea that we look backwards when we want to find answers. Through the writing of Susanna Moodie and Susan Allison, we have seen Canadian stories develop as acts of survival, about getting through the tough times, about the relationship with landscapes that want to kill you. We have seen relationships grow and develop between white settlers and the Indigenous neighbours that helped them to survive, and we have seen those stories disappear only until recently, through a reframing and retelling of those stories. In this chapter, I will discuss how Atwood's cultural and personal connections with pioneer stories come to impact her trajectory as a writer, and her outlook on CanLit as a whole. By focusing on her narrative poem sequence, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, I will explore how she reframes and reinterprets the pioneer woman story with a 20th century outlook. Through this outlook, I will examine how Atwood uses a reinvented Susanna Moodie to question what comes after suburban progress and the erasure of the backwoods.

When Margaret Atwood's first volume of poems, *The Circle Game*, was published in 1964, the Canadian cultural, political, and physical landscape had changed. Frontiers no longer meant pre-emption or survival in the backwoods and being a pioneering woman did not require knowledge of dandelion coffee or baking bread without an oven. Those are the stories of Atwood's grandmother. But they are stories Atwood knows, and indeed, has had a lifelong connection to: *Roughing It* was one of the books that lived on the bookshelves in her childhood home. However, she resisted reading the account of pioneer life until she was a university student, citing that she 'tended to shy away' from such books, especially ones about 'people living in a log cabin in the bush' (*Moving Targets* 34). This was because she 'spent a large part of [her] childhood in cabins, log and otherwise, in the bush, and did not find anything exotic about

the notion' (34). She happened upon Susanna Moodie again as a young student. Although she connected with the story (the students were assigned the task of reading about one of the fires at the Moodie house), she explains that 'every author in the grade six reader came to us clothed in the dull grey mantle of required reading, and I forgot about Susanna Moodie and went on to other matters, such as Jane Austen' (35). Atwood's 'third experience with Susanna Moodie was of an altogether different order' (35), and this time her outlook on Moodie changed. After this reading, Atwood was able to disentangle her personal connection to the story from her more academic understanding of the cultural significance of Moodie's texts.

The Journals of Susanna Moodie certainly ticks all the CanLit boxes. Published in 1970, *The Journals* are a narrative poem sequence inspired and/or based on Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*. Atwood's Afterword is almost as interesting as the poems; there, she explains in a very matter-of-fact way how 'the poems were generated by a dream' (*The Journals* 62) and how she came to write about Susanna Moodie¹². Atwood makes clear that she remained discouraged, dismayed, and disappointed by both Moodie and her text. As a result, *The Journals* feel rife with resentment, almost as if Atwood is channelling her frustrations towards Moodie for not quite being the pioneering trailblazer she was looking for. Atwood further explains that one of the reasons for this resentment was the fact that 'the prose was discursive and ornamental and the books had little shape: they were collections of disconnected anecdotes' (62). This idea is expanded upon in *Moving Targets* (2004), where Atwood states that there was a 'patina of gentility that offended my young soul, as did the asides on the servant question and the lower-classes of many of the migrants already in place' (35). As Chapter One has shown, Atwood's judgement is not necessarily wrong: Moodie's prose is flowery, *Roughing It* does feel curated rather than honest, the moments where she uses her 'private' (and consequently, more authentic) voice are minimal,

¹² This story is expanded upon in *Moving Targets*, where Atwood explains that she dreamed about writing an opera about Moodie, 'and there she was, all by herself on a completely white stage, singing like Lucia di Lammermoor' (35)—Lucia di Lammermoor is an Italian opera by Gaetano Donizetti (1835) and an adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) (The Metropolitan Opera). Undertaking this project, even with the resources at Harvard University, proved difficult due to the lack of writing about Canadian Literature at the time (*Moving Targets*).

and her judgements are tinged with hypocrisy. Despite Atwood's critique of *Roughing It*, she justifies her interest in the book by explaining that Moodie's personality keeps *Roughing It* together: 'the only thing that held [*Roughing It*] together was the personality of Mrs Moodie, and what struck me about this personality was the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us' (*The Journals* 62). I agree with this assertion. *The Journals* are an example of themes that go on to be ubiquitous within Atwood's larger body of work; the poem sequence explores the concept of Canadian identity, specifically, the identity of Canadian women, and the Canadian relationship to the wilderness. Other scholars have noted the connection to earlier poems published in *The Animals in that Country* (1968), and more general themes, including 'the split between the rational and irrational minds, the need for individual growth and self-discovery, and the lack of understanding between men and women' (Glickman 495). Writing about these poems in my own work also felt relevant given the current political context in Canada, where the question of what it means to be Canadian has become highly polarised as the right wing 'Freedom Convoy'¹³ supporters have appropriated the flying of Canadian flags to symbolise solidarity with the problematic movement.

The Journals were published three years after the Centennial in 1967, and critics have noted that the content of the poems reflects Atwood's 'feeling about the way "we" live in Canada' and the 'problem[s] in contemporary Canadian identity' (Glickman 506). Although things have changed in Canada, the larger issue concerning Canadian identity remains central; the particulars may have changed, but the argument about 'Canadianness' or lack thereof remains the same.

Perhaps to solve some of her own questions about 'Canadianness,' Atwood's poem sequence 'does not merely replicate but interrogates and comments on Susanna Moodie's presentation, a reactive mode which points to negative influence' (Johnston 1). In the poems,

¹³ See 'Some thoughts on Canada's "Freedom Convoy" and the settler colonial state' by Peter McLaren (Educational philosophy and theory: Vol. 54 (7), 2022) for more on the movement.

Atwood becomes Susanna Moodie, but her persona is a speaker who knows both the backwoods world of Canada in the 1800s and the urban sprawl of Canada in the 1960s. This split is reflected in Atwood's statement that the Canadian identity is like 'paranoid schizophrenia' (*The Journals* 64). According to this idea, the Canadian identity is defined by being 'divided down the middle' (64). As to this speaker's intentions through the sequence, she might be coming 'to terms with the landscape and thus herself' (Relke 36-37). Similar to the multiple voices found in *Roughing It* and Allison's 'Recollections,' Atwood's interpretation of Susanna Moodie is also multi-voiced, though the loudest voice in *The Journals* is the one missing from the other two texts. This Susanna, through Atwood's 20th century reframing, is able to say the things left unsaid in the 19th century. In later writing, Atwood explains that she and Susanna Moodie were 'each other's obverse': she states that although they shared the experience of living in a log cabin in the bush, she 'got culture shock from flush toilets, [Susanna] got it from mosquitoes, swamps, and the thought of bears' (*Moving Targets* 36). As discussed in Chapter One, this statement echoes with my own feelings about Susanna Moodie, where, although our lived experiences are separated by many years of suburban development, there is something shared in our connection to and understanding of Canada, specifically our understanding about the perilous beauty of the landscape.

Atwood's Poetic Interpretation of Susanna Moodie

The Journals are divided into three parts: Journal I covers the years 1832-1840, from Susanna's arrival in Canada, her backwoods experience, and leaving the bush for suburban Belleville. This section follows the narrative covered in *Roughing It* and portrays Susanna as an 'invader who does not conquer the wilderness but is traumatized by her encounter with it' (Jennings 136). Journal II covers the years 1840-1871, while Susanna is living in Belleville and finding success as a writer—Susanna Moodie published *Roughing It* in 1852; followed by *Flora Lyndsay* (1854), a novel based on her experience, which she said was 'a thinly veiled work of fiction based on [Susanna and

John's] marriage and difficult decision to emigrate' (*Roughing It* xvi); *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853) which is a 'collection of sketches about her Belleville experiences' and meant to be 'an informed look at life in settled Canadian towns' (xvi). Atwood describes this section as when Susanna accepts 'the inescapable doubleness of her own vision' (*The Journals* 63); Journal III covers 1871¹⁴-1969, following Susanna through the final years of her life, and ultimately, to her death in 1885, and mostly importantly, beyond her death.

Atwood claims that, to get to the heart of Susanna's message, you can forgo the original text, reading the poem sequence instead. I disagree: *The Journals* are overly tidy and sanitised, as if Susanna's most authentic thoughts (and specifically the things she does not say in *Roughing It*) are distilled into a neat, albeit brief, package. But Atwood's interpretation cannot truly be Susanna, as such an interpretation negates the 20th century perspective through which Atwood becomes Susanna. Moreover, the questions about identity and relationship to the land that Moodie answers in *Roughing It* are not the same questions Atwood asks of the text. Firstly, the wilderness that Moodie encounters in *Roughing It* is not the same wilderness Atwood encounters in 1960s Canada: Atwood views Susanna's world with the knowledge that white settlers like the Moodies were instrumental in perpetuating the destruction of the land Atwood witnesses throughout the 20th century. Here, it is easy to link the theme of survival to another theme dominant in Atwood's body of work: that of surviving a pre and/or post-apocalyptic world where the perpetrators of such violence can be traced back to the colonial and expansionist practices of white settlers. Jennings explains that

for Atwood, colonial expansionism and the ensuing histories as well as practices of ecological devastation function as extensions of settler politics and imperialist, patriarchal perspectives that expect "Nature" or the "wilderness," as both imagined and real places to conform to Eurocentric paradigms. (132)

¹⁴ 1871 was the year *Roughing It* was finally published in Canada.

In other words, settlers like Susanna Moodie and her family bring with them a certain set of expectations and, in finding that nature is hostile and takes more than it provides, the solution is to destroy to impose order, rather than to seek understanding. Atwood's Susanna eventually *becomes* nature (or Mother Nature) and prophesies human destruction. This theme is most prominent in *Journal III* (1871-1969) and will be explored later in this chapter.

Reframing Settler-Indigenous Relations

The poem 'First Neighbours' (14) highlights Susanna's discomfort in her new surroundings as Atwood reframes the way Susanna interacts with both her Indigenous and white neighbours. The poem begins with a typical Susanna Moodie judgement: 'The people I live among, unforgivingly/previous to me' points to the perceived social inequities but continues 'grudging/the way I breathe their/property, the air', turning the situation so the neighbours are the ones doing the judging. In this situation, Atwood's Susanna is aware that she cannot do anything right and that she is not in the position of power. The line 'though I tried to adapt' hangs between stanzas, emphasis of the fact that this Susanna attempts to fit in. A 'girl in a red tattered/petticoat' 'jeer[s]' at Susanna for her 'burned bread' and someone says, 'Go back where you came from.' This Susanna, too, knows that retreat is not an option, as 'England/ was now unreachable, had sunk down into the sea/without ever teaching me about washtubs.' Atwood's Susanna gets 'used to being/a minor invalid.' In the poem, the situation is experienced in reverse, with Susanna understanding that she is the one found lacking.

In the second half of the poem, this inability to fit in culminates in the expectation that she will make 'inept remarks.' One such remark occurs in an exchange with an Indigenous man:

(asked the Indian
about the squat thing on a stick
drying by the fire: Is that a toad?
Annoyed, he said No no,

deer liver, very good)

Atwood's Susanna, too, does not understand Indigenous culture and jumps to conclusions based on the stereotypical knowledge gathered from her European education. In the stanza, she 'misreads the object', asking if the Indigenous man is planning to eat a toad, an idea that she finds repulsive, 'because she already misperceives the natives to be savages' (Jennings 140). This exchange also shows how 'Atwood subtly signals...the dependency of the white settlers on the indigenous peoples' (Jennings 140). The idea of the interconnected relationship between Indigenous peoples and white settlers is further explored in Atwood's collection of essays, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (2004), where she explains that,

In Canada, most tribes were never exactly conquered; more typically, they were done out of their land through trickery involving legalistic paper slight-of-hand or through simple encroachment. Apart from that, the Indians were at first an essential part of European foreign policy. Indian natives conducted diplomatic missions and negotiated treaties, and alliances with them were vigorously sought. (48)

As discussed in Chapter One, Moodie is explicit in *Roughing It* about the dependent nature of her relationship with the Mississauga but does not recognise her role in the degradation of Indigenous culture; however, as discussed in Chapter Two, Susan Allison is cognisant of her family's dependence on their Syilx neighbours from the beginning, starting with Nora Yacumtecum's help getting John Fall Allison to the Similkameen, through Susan Allison's first pregnancy in the isolated valley, and later on through inextricable family connections. Her texts make a concerted effort to protect Indigenous culture, even if decisions made upon publication attempted to undo that work. In *The Journals*, Atwood gives Susanna the words to express this connection to her Indigenous neighbours, and because this is a reimagining, Atwood also gives the Indigenous man words to 'explain this world to her by assuring [Susanna] that deer liver is "very good" and an acceptable source of food' (Jennings 140).

After acknowledging her lack of understanding about both Indigenous and white settler customs, Atwood's Susanna resolves to change. This is a physical change: 'Finally I grew a chapped tarpaulin/skin,' where this new skin is meant to function as a barrier between Susanna and the things she does not understand. But, 'Inaccurate. The forest can still trick me' (*The Journals* 15), she says, signalling that, as Jennings explains, Atwood's Susanna has 'learned perhaps the most useful lesson; she cannot trust her perceptions of the world because the world enacts its own agency' (141). This idea made me think about *An Okanagan Story*, specifically where my characters discuss the danger of snow on the Coquihalla Highway in May: you just never know, they say.

'Nature the Monster': Atwood Reimagines Susanna's Relationship with Nature

Just like Susanna in 'First Neighbours,' Atwood explains in her CanLit handbook, *Survival* (1970), 'Canadian writers as a whole do not trust Nature, they are always suspecting some dirty trick' (45). In the chapter 'Nature the Monster,' Atwood explains how European authors learned in the 'cult of the sublime and picaresque' (46), those, like Susanna Moodie, with a predilection towards Wordsworthian descriptions of nature, struggle with the realisation that nature is beautiful *and* dangerous. Atwood uses Moodie's description of Quebec as evidence to show 'the tension between what you were officially supposed to feel and what you actually encountered when you got here—and the resultant sense of being gypped' (*Survival* 47). In *Roughing It*, Moodie describes journeying down the St. Lawrence, 'basking in the bright rays of the morning sun,' calling Grosse Isle 'a second Eden,' and with the benefit of hindsight, explaining how she loves 'to recall, after the lapse of so many years, every object that awoke in my breast emotions of astonishment and delight' (24). This moment of tenderness, however, is followed by the declaration that 'you [potential immigrants] will soon learn to love Canada as I now love it, who once viewed it with a hatred so intense that I longed to die, that death might effectually separate us for ever' (26). Atwood explains this contradiction—where Moodie swings from loving the landscape to hoping

for death—as ‘Mrs. Moodie’s determination to preserve her Wordsworthian faith collid[ing] with the difficulty she has in doing so when Nature fails time and time again to come through for her’ (*Survival* 47). But before Atwood’s Susanna can come to terms with her place in nature, she, like the Susanna of *Roughing It*, must concede that she does not possess the knowledge or skills necessary for success in the backwoods. In *The Journals*, Atwood’s understanding of Susanna’s place and feelings about nature manifest in the style and shape of the poems. Where Moodie’s prose is gushing and extravagant, Atwood’s poems are sparse, pared back, and utilise white space to denote this cutting.

This action/reaction to nature’s autonomy is further explored in the poem ‘The Two Fires’ (Journal I): Atwood’s Susanna experiences life-threatening fires:

One, the summer fire
 outside: the trees melting, returning
 to their first elements
 on all sides, cutting me off
 from escape or the saving lake

Atwood does not explain how the fire started or provide any context, but we know this first experience is about the summer of 1834 and is covered in *Roughing It* (Chapter Sixteen: ‘Burning the Fallow’). Atwood’s language is sparse and pragmatic; this Susanna sits in the house ‘between that shapeless raging’ (i.e., the fire outside) and her sleeping children. Instead of thinking about the inevitability of death, she focuses on the house itself:

concentrate on
 form, geometry, the human
 architecture of the house, square
 closed doors, proved roofbeams,
 the logic of windows (*The Journals* 22)

In the second stanza, Atwood's Susanna believes the things that will keep her family safe are the things they have created, that 'human' building, with its 'proved' roof, and 'logical' windows. In a world where she does not feel secure, and in a moment when her safety is at jeopardy, Atwood's Susanna looks for the answers in the building she understands. However, the circumstances of the fire can only mean that the safety of the home is temporary, and the external and uncontrollable fire will consume them. In *Roughing It*, Moodie describes clutching her children tight and waiting for the end, 'while inwardly I thanked God that they were asleep, unconscious of danger' (207). When it begins to rain, she thanks God for saving them. Atwood's Susanna does not thank God for her family's deliverance or acknowledge the powerful storm that saves the Moodies. Instead, the fact that they live through the first fire is signalled by a new stanza and explanation of a second fire: 'The other, the winter/fire inside' (*The Journals* 22).

As in the first half of the poem, the contextual details are missing from the explanation. The episode is recounted in *Roughing It* (Chapter Twenty-Two: 'The Fire') and occurred in the very cold winter of 1837. This time, informed by the experience of the first fire, Moodie's response is action. Atwood's Susanna, however, again focuses on the house:

the protective roof
 shrivelling overhead, the rafters
 incandescent, all those corners
 and straight lines flaming, the carefully-
 made structure
 prisoning us in a cage of blazing
 bars (*The Journals* 22)

Unlike the experience of the first fire, when Susanna believes that the house will keep the family safe *because* they built it, the second fire is inside, and the home is a 'cage.' Atwood's Susanna is forced outside into the snow, her children safe but her home destroyed. Ultimately, she is 'informed' by the two fires. She now knows that: '(each refuge fails/us; each danger becomes a

haven)' (23). The two fires leave 'charred marks/now around which I/try to grow' (23). This final stanza signals a shift in Atwood's Susanna, where she can finally comprehend that nature is both 'Monster' and the 'Divine Mother.' This recognition of growth is interesting when compared to how the story ends in *Roughing It*. Like Atwood's Susanna, Moodie moves her children from the burning house and attempts to save as many of their possessions as possible. Afterwards, others comment on her heroics, but her explanation is framed with the phrase 'Reduced to plain prose' (*Roughing It* 265), a phrase which echoes the 'how can I describe' often used by women in autobiography and memoir to signal that they either do not have the language to celebrate their efforts, or to downplay something momentous. In a moment of surprising honesty (and with the benefit of hindsight), this Susanna explains the lasting implications of the fires: 'These circumstances appeared far more alarming as all real danger does, after they were past. The fright and over-exertion gave my health a shock from which I did not recover for several months, and made me so fearful of fire, that from that hour it haunts me like a nightmare' (*Roughing It* 265). While Atwood's Susanna does not experience a haunting per se, as we will see in the next section, the realisation about her connection to nature and growth can be tracked through the next poems in *The Journals*, and manifest as the double voice, where this Susanna becomes something else.

Atwood Resurrects Susanna

The shift in Atwood's Susanna's voice is especially marked in the remaining poems in Journal I; in 'Looking in a Mirror,' the image she sees reflected at her is not the one she expected to see when first arriving in Canada in 'Disembarking in Quebec.' Atwood uses nature to describe this different Susanna: she has 'white hairs of roots,' 'fingers/brittle as twigs' (25). In 'Departure from the Bush,' Atwood's Susanna explains 'I, who had been erased/by fire, was crept in/upon by green' (26). She is preparing to move to the city but her recognition of the power of nature has physically altered her and changed her desires. This voice carries through Journal II,

influencing how she sees other settlers ('The Immigrants' 32; 'Charivari' 37), in dreams, and in the final poem 'The Double Voice' (42). Here, Atwood's Susanna recognises the split between the self that arrived in Canada, the English gentlewoman, and the woman the Canadian experience creates: 'The other voice/had other knowledge' (42); it is important to remember that this self-awareness is missing from the Susanna of *Roughing It*. In Journal III, dated 1871-1969, Atwood's Susanna grows old and frail ('Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age' 48), undergoes a 'metamorphosis' ('Wish: Metamorphosis to Heraldic Emblem' 49), and dies. According to Relke, 'The death of Atwood's Moodie, with all its references to disintegration and decay, is analogous to the erosion of women's literature by male defined literary criteria and the consequent erasure of women's names from literary history' (45). But Atwood's Susanna continues to have a voice after death, and the final poems consider her reflections on her legacy as a pioneer, the urbanisation of the backwoods, and the destruction of nature.

While each stanza in 'Solipsism While Dying' (52) 'includes the word 'produce,' the poem is ultimately about death and disappearance—Susanna's disappearance and the loss of the world she knows. The final stanza signals disappearance and decay, starting with the line 'Where will be Belleville?' then simply 'Kingston?' The poem ends with a thought sprawling out of a single parenthesis

(the fields

I held between. the lake

boats

t o r o N T O (53).

In this final placement of 'Toronto' on the page, the word explodes across the page, the last three letters capitalised, almost as if they are being shouted. Perhaps this is Susanna's last word, a final living demand to go to Toronto to see what it has become, or perhaps just an exhalation, the conclusion to her life.

In 'Thoughts from Underground', Atwood's Susanna is honest about how she 'hated' Canada and 'hated it more each year' (54). Her descriptions of the landscape are more evocative than in previous poems, but they focus on the negative: 'the heat/thick as a swamp/the green things fiercely/shoving themselves upwards/the eyelids bitten by insects' (54). She explains her doubling, where part of her feels she must love Canada, but the other part of her recognises that she hates it:

I felt I ought to love
this country.

I said I loved it.
and my mind saw double.

I began to forget myself
in the middle
of sentences. Events
were split apart (54-55).

In some ways, this echoes Moodie's conclusions in *Roughing It*, where she refers to her Canadian home as the 'prison-house' (330) and hopes to warn potential settlers from the kind of suffering and hardship she and her family faced. However, the final lines in *Roughing It* are delivered in poem-format: 'The Maple Tree' returns to flowery prose and praise for the 'the maple, tall and green,' 'the glowing saffron sky,' 'the Indian' with his bow, an unthreatening, pastoral version of Canada. The poem, therefore, softens the ending of *Roughing It*, leaving readers with a positive view of the country. Atwood's Susanna, on the other hand, understands the impact that nearly one hundred years of development has had on the land:

due to natural resources, native industry, superior
penitentiaries
we will all be rich and powerful

flat as highway billboards
 who can doubt it, look how
 fast Belleville is growing
 (though it is still no place for an english gentleman) (55)

In these final stanzas, Atwood's Susanna recognises how the success of her family, and other families like hers, is the result of exploitation—in this case, of 'natural resources, native industry' and 'superior penitentiaries'—but also that Canada is 'still no place' for someone of her social class. This line echoes the last paragraphs of *Roughing It*, where, in Moodie's final warning to potential pioneers she says that life in the backwoods offers zero advantages to 'poor gentlemen' (330).

In 'Alternate Thoughts from Underground,' Atwood's Susanna can see Canada beyond the stark dichotomy of backwoods versus comfortable Belleville. The poem features a dead but conscious Susanna coming to terms with her new home as part of the earth. Here, Susanna describes urban progress: the first stanza ends with the line 'the shrill of glass and steel' and continues, the 'invaders', 'the inheritors', 'the raisers/of glib superstructures' (57). She reluctantly acknowledges that her way of life is gone and prays that the 'glass pride, fireless/riveted babylon' topples. 'But they prevail' she says in the next line, followed by the word 'Extinct' sitting between full stops. In the next stanza, she compares herself to the dinosaurs, 'the bones of the giant reptiles', who were 'done under by the thing/(may call it/climate)' (57). But Susanna is not 'done under' by a cataclysmic asteroid, nor is she warning readers of one. Instead, the poem ends 'nested in by the velvet immoral/uncalloused and armourless mammals' (57). The warning, therefore, concerns the destruction of nature by 'armourless mammals,' the humans that live on.

In the final poem in the sequence, 'A Bus Along St Clair: December' (60), Atwood returns Susanna to the land of the living, fulfilling the idea of resurrection described in the previous poem ('Resurrection' 58-59). This new Susanna is angry about the way things are and that anger is given space in the text. This fury is apparent in the third and fourth stanzas:

though they buried me in monuments
of concrete slabs, of cables
though they mounded a pyramid
of cold light over my head
though they said, We will build
silver paradise with a bulldozer

it shows how little they know
about vanishing: I have
my ways of getting through. (60)

The voice, in part, feels in keeping with Susanna's judgements in *Roughing It*, however, this Susanna is not worried about social conventions or offending her audience. Instead, the rage in the poem is directed *at* her readership through direct address and specific instructions. 'Turn, look up,' Susanna says, demanding that readers to look for her on a Toronto bus in the 1960s: 'I am the old woman/sitting across from you on.' This is not, however, the elderly woman regaling fellow passengers with nostalgia about the Toronto of yesterday, instead, Atwood's Susanna is 'destroying/the walls, the ceiling' (61), until she destroys all that progress has built. The final stanza continues

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty (61)

This poem shows Atwood reframing Susanna's instructive voice in *Roughing It* for a different purpose: rather than advising her audience on how to be successful in the backwoods of Canada (the world she knows), Susanna destroys the modern world (that Atwood knows). According to

Freiwald, 'A Bus Along St Clair: December' 'reaffirms the power of the creator over the created, as a resurrected Susanna defiantly rearranges time and space to establish the co-ordinates of an all-devouring identity' (479). In the Afterword, Atwood explains that Susanna 'turn[s] herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated.' According to Davidson, Atwood takes 'the historical writing of the actual woman,' Susanna Moodie, and makes it 'mythic' (19). Atwood's Susanna is given the power to remake the world as she sees it.

Ultimately, in *The Journals*, Atwood uses the pioneer woman, integral in her own way to the development of modern Canada, to recognise and tell others about the destructive power of suburban progress, until finally, she destroys everything the next generations have built. Atwood's Susanna, who, like the Moodie of *Roughing It*, once hated Canada, returns the 20th century city landscape to 'the centre of a forest', the backwoods once more.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined how the real-life pioneer stories of Susanna Moodie and Susan Allison have impacted CanLit and the idea of ‘Canadianness.’ I have questioned why *Roughing It in the Bush*, and Allison’s ‘Recollections’ should continue to be read despite relaying problematic messages about Indigenous peoples. I have considered how Margaret Atwood reframes and reimagines Moodie’s pioneer story, asking Susanna, a 19th century woman, for answers to questions faced in the 20th century. Maybe that is what I have been doing as well by looking back to Allison and Moodie as literary foremothers. I have looked to these pioneer women to understand my place in the world of CanLit, my idea of ‘Canadianness’, and even how to write about Canada in the 21st century.

Although I began this research in the hope of understanding the experience of pioneer life, I think I have ended this project with more questions than I started with. I was looking for guidance, wanting to create a fictional pioneer in *An Okanagan Story* whose existence felt rooted in historical truth. While in the early stages of this project, I set to reading historical accounts—and specifically, historical accounts written by men—but I failed to connect with their stories about finding ‘virgin’ land and freedom in Canada. Their experiences felt alien. In the end, I abandoned my plan to give my pioneer, JD Ballantyne, his own storyline. Although he is an important part of the story, he remains elusive, and my historian character, Mike, comes to the end of the novel feeling disappointed. In some ways, this disappointment echoes how Atwood felt about Susanna Moodie. JD just was not the pioneer Mike was looking for. Now, having examined *Roughing It* and the ‘Recollections’ in many different ways, I wonder if, like me, the pioneer Mike was looking for was a pioneer woman. What secrets could she be hiding as she, like Moodie, learns to make dandelion coffee? But this is an idea for another project.

Similarly, I am aware that there are many other topics to explore within the works of Allison, Atwood, and Moodie. Future work on the relationship with nature described in *Roughing It* and Allison’s ‘Recollections’ could examine the texts with an ecofeminist focus—utilising

Buell, Heise, and Thornber's definition of ecofeminist criticism as 'politically engaged discourse that analyses conceptual connections between the manipulation of women and the nonhuman' (qtd. in Vakoch 9). Such an outlook could provide a backdrop for exploring how the descendants of pioneer women experience nature in CanLit. For example, those pioneers facing new, contemporary frontiers, like Morag in Munro's *The Diviners*; or works in the sub-genre of 'wilderness writing' as described as 'not a deep bush or far north country but a "pseudo-wilderness" such as a rural area or camp' (Murray 62), i.e., spaces outside of the urban environment in which many contemporary Canadians live and write about. The larger question centres around the focus of Atwood's Journal III of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, where Susanna's understanding of the world resembles Atwood's 20th century knowledge: what would happen if we replaced urban sprawl with forests? This perspective could offer a valuable way of understanding the contemporary Canadian relationship with nature as described in current CanLit, especially for those characters whose ties to the country are entangled with the white settler colonial past. How can we conceive of a future (and a future relationship with the natural world as we know it) when we know our own family members are responsible for the destruction of the backwoods we once feared?

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