After River

Donna Milner

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Extract

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Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends …
What unites us is far greater than what divides us.

John F. Kennedy: Address before the Canadian Parliament
Ottawa, May 17, 1961

Chapter One

He came on foot. Like a mirage, he rose in a shimmer of heat waves above the winding dirt road leading to our door. I watched him from the shadows of our enclosed porch.

I was fourteen on that hot July day in 1966, would be fifteen in less than a month. I leaned against the porch doorway and squinted into the sun while the last dregs of water drained from the wringer washer behind me. Outside, the week's laundry hung limp and motionless on the three clotheslines stretched across the yard. Sheets, hurtfully white in the brilliant sunshine, created a backdrop for the orderly procession of our family's attire. Mom stood out on the wooden laundry platform, her mouth full of clothes pegs, her back to the road. She reached down and plucked a denim shirt from the wicker basket at her feet, snapped out the garment with a crack of wet fabric and pegged it to the line.

There was something different about my mother that day. On washdays she usually wore a kerchief tied in a rolled knot in the middle of her forehead. That afternoon, bobby pins and combs held up her hair. Wayward blonde locks and wispy tendrils escaped around her face and at the nape of her neck. But it was more than that. She was distracted, flushed even. I was certain she had applied a touch of Avon rouge to her cheeks. Earlier, she had

caught me studying her face as she fed my brothers' jeans through the wringer.

'Oh, this heat,' she said, then pushed back her hair and tucked it behind her ears.

Her attention was not on the road though, as she hung the last load, and I saw him before she did. I watched as he came around the bend by our bottom pasture. He crossed over the cattle guard, through the flickering shadows of poplar trees, and back into the naked glare of the day. He carried a large green duffel bag on one shoulder and a black object slung over the other. As he got closer I saw it was a guitar case bouncing against his back in the easy rhythm of his unhurried steps.

Hippie. It was a new word in my vocabulary. A foreign word. It meant oddly dressed young Americans marching beneath peace signs that urged, 'Make Love, Not War!' It meant Vietnam War protesters sticking flowers into the gun barrels of riot police. And it meant draft-dodgers. Some of whom, it was rumoured, were entering Canada through the border crossing a mile and a half south of our farm. Still they were nothing more than rumours. Rumours, and the snowy images from the hit and miss television reception in our mountain valley. I'd never seen one in the flesh. Until now.

'What's wrong?' Mom's voice broke my trance. She stepped in from the laundry platform and handed me the empty basket. Before I could answer she turned to look down the road. As she did, our cow dog, Buddy, lifted his head, then bolted off the bottom porch step where he had been sleeping in the afternoon sun. The border collie leapt over the picket fence and raced past the barn, a blur of black and white, barking a belated warning.

'Buddy!' Mom called after him. But by then the long-haired

stranger was kneeling in the dust on the road, murmuring quiet words to the growling dog. After a moment he stood and, with Buddy at his side, continued up to the yard. He smiled at us from the other side of the fence as the border collie licked his hand. Mom smiled back, smoothed her damp apron and started down the porch steps. I hesitated for only a moment before I put down the laundry basket and followed. We met him at the gate.

She was expecting him.

She wasn't expecting the heartache that would follow like a cold wind.

Chapter Two

I MUST HAVE known.

In all these years no one has ever said it out loud. But I could see the unasked question in their eyes. *How could I not have known*? Thirty-four years later, I still ask myself the same question.

Sometimes I catch myself falling back into memories. Back to the 'before' of my childhood. Before everything changed. Back to the time when it was unimaginable that my family would not always be together. To when my entire world was our family farm, four hundred acres carved out of a narrow mountain valley deep in the Cascade Mountains of British Columbia. Everything else, the town of Atwood three miles north, and its twenty-five hundred inhabitants, appeared to be only backdrop to our perfect lives. Or so it seemed until I was almost fifteen years old.

That's when the 'after' memories begin.

Sometimes I can stop them, those 'after' memories. Sometimes I can go for weeks, months, even years, pretending none of it ever happened. Sometimes I even believe it.

Still, it's impossible to forget that summer day in 1966. The day that marks the time when my family was whole and good and right, to the time when nothing would ever be the same again.

The beginning of the sequence of events that would change all

our lives wasn't catastrophic or earth shattering. It even looked beautiful for a while.

Afterward, Mom would blame everything that happened on the world encroaching upon our little farm. New highways were being built; one would connect our town to the Trans-Canada. In the East Kootenays, valleys were being flooded and dams constructed to carry electricity to a growing province – and, my father said, 'to our power-hungry neighbour to the south.'

'There's too many jobs available,' Mom had worried out loud during dinner the evening Jake, the hired hand who had been with us for as long as I could remember, left without warning. 'Who's going to be interested in working on a small dairy farm in the middle of nowhere?'

'We'll get along,' Dad said between mouthfuls. 'Morgan and Carl will take up the slack and Natalie can help in the dairy. We'll be fine.' He leaned over and patted her hand.

'No,' Mom pulled away and stood up to get the coffeepot. 'You keep increasing the herd, and my boys keep quitting school. At least one of my sons is going to finish high school.' She didn't add, 'and go to university.' She never spoke this dream out loud any more. Carl was her last hope.

She hired the first and only person to call about her two-line ad in the *Atwood Weekly*. 'He has a nice voice,' she said after she announced it that July morning. She started to gather up the breakfast dishes. Then, as if it was an afterthought, she added, 'He's American.'

I glanced over at my father. His thick eyebrows lifted as he digested her words. I knew my parents held opposing views on the idea of young Americans fleeing the draft and seeking refuge in Canada. I wondered if, for the first time, I would see my parents

have a real argument. Dad was seldom cross with Mom, but then he wasn't used to her taking it on herself to make a decision without talking it over with him first. And certainly not over an issue she knew he held a strong opinion on. He said nothing. Still, by the way he stood up and snatched his snap-brim fedora – his milk delivering hat – from the peg by the door then slammed it onto his head, I knew he was not pleased.

'Well,' Mom said after the kitchen door closed behind Dad and Carl, 'I think that went well, eh, Natalie?' Then her face turned serious as she snapped on her rubber gloves and said, 'I refuse to lose another son to this farm.'

From the moment they could carry a bucket, my three brothers were hostages to the milking schedule. Each morning they woke up in darkness to step onto the forever-cold linoleum floors of the upstairs bedroom and pulled on their overalls. I still believe Boyer slept with his clothes on.

Boyer, the eldest, had a room – more of a cubbyhole – to himself in the attic. When he was twelve years old he got tired of sharing his bedroom with Morgan and Carl. So he made himself a nest among the rafters above the two upstairs bedrooms. He hammered together a crude wooden ladder to climb through a hole in the hall ceiling. When he was fourteen he built a real set of stairs.

That narrow attic room was so cold on some winter days that you could see your breath. In the summers even the open window would not let the stifling air escape. Boyer never complained. The room was his sanctuary, and those of us privileged enough to be invited in, to share his company and the books that eventually filled every available space up there, envied the world he'd created under the eaves of the farmhouse built by my grandfather's hands at the turn of the century.

I was the only girl and so had a bedroom to myself. It had been Boyer's room before I came along and threw off the sleeping arrangements. If he ever resented me for it, he never showed it. I would have gladly shared the bedroom with him. I was too young to understand his need to have a room of his own. It was a long time before I stopped asking why he had to sleep with my brothers, and then way up in the attic.

Every morning Boyer was the first one to make his way down the enclosed stairway into the kitchen. For many years he would stir the embers, then add kindling, to re-light the hulking cast iron cook stove for Mom before he headed to the barn. After we got the electric range in 1959 he would go straight to the front porch where he pulled on knee-high rubber boots, winter or summer. And every morning, at exactly ten minutes before five, Boyer let the kitchen door slam behind him. His cue to let everyone know he was on his way to the barn. In the early darkness he and Jake, the hired man who lived above the dairy, herded the cows in from the pasture.

Morgan and Carl were never anxious to begin the day. Most mornings my father would holler up and threaten his youngest sons with ice water. 'Mutt and Jeff,' he called them. Morgan was two years older than Carl, but from the time they were toddlers Carl towered over him. The two of them were best friends, inseparable. Once Morgan stumbled down the stairs wiping the sleep from his eyes, we knew Carl would not be far behind, his heavy woollen socks flapping out in front of his feet like so much extra skin. Mom was forever scolding him to pull up his socks, and we all wondered that he didn't trip over them, especially in the dark of the stairway, but they were as much a part of him as his toes.

My brothers' morning parade was as regular and expected as my mother's prayers.

Mom prayed at every occasion. When we were growing up she made sure we did too. At each meal we bowed our heads before a fork ever clicked against a plate. Every night after the milking, beneath pictures of Mary and Jesus propped on the mantel, beads in hand, she gathered us all together in the parlour. 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,' she led the rosary while I knelt beside my brothers on the scratchy pink and grey flowered linoleum trying not to fidget. Mom believed wholeheartedly in the saying, 'the family that prays together stays together'.

When I was very young I would peek up at my mother's bowed head and moving lips as she fingered her beads and think that if praying made you that beautiful, then I wanted to be sure to do it right.

Mother grew up Protestant. When she and Dad married she converted. She embraced the Catholic Church with the enthusiasm of a hungry lover.

'I knew the first time I walked into St Anthony's with your father, that I belonged,' she once told me. 'It was the feeling,' she said, 'the feeling of permanence. As if the building, the statues, the paintings, and icons had been there – would be there – forever. The light streaming in through the stained glass windows, the rituals, the perpetually burning candles, the incense,' she mused as if talking to herself. 'It all felt natural, right somehow.'

The rosary beads were her comfort, something real, something solid to hold onto. They moved through her fingers as easily as breath through her lungs. 'Converting,' she said, 'was like coming home.'

She promised her future children to the Catholic Church. But the truth was, except perhaps for Boyer at one time, none of us ever became as devout as she was.

Even our father, who had been born Catholic, was not as pious.

Every Sunday, before he started his milk deliveries, he dropped us off at St Anthony's. When his route was complete he picked us up. If the weather and roads were good, and the chores were finished at home, he headed back into town for a later mass. Mom would return with him, attending twice on those Sundays.

She said nothing about his sporadic attendance. She knew the farm came first: before church, before friends, before family, before anything. Still, he joined us every evening for rosary in the parlour, and when my parents went to bed I often heard them murmur prayers in unison. I imagined them kneeling beside their quilt-covered four-poster bed like two picture-book children, their hands folded in reverence, their heads bowed.

Prayers were not all I heard.

My brothers, although we never spoke of it, must have heard too. The open ceiling grates that allowed heat to rise to the second-storey hallway also allowed the noises of the night to drift up. Noises not meant for children's ears. Later, as a mother myself, I often wondered at that.

They must have realized to some extent that sounds carried upstairs, because my parents seldom had conversations in their bedroom. The only words I ever heard were the perfunctory, 'Goodnight, Gus,' and, 'Goodnight, Nettie,' after their prayers. Then I'd hear the slow groaning of springs as they climbed into bed. And sometimes the rhythmic creaks and muffled animal sounds, followed by a few moments of silence before the night filled with my father's throat-catching snores and my mother's quick sneezes.

It was not until years later, as I watched my mother hold herself together during the days following my father's death, that I realized my mother gave three stifled sneezes whenever she was holding back tears. I don't think my father ever realized it.

He seemed as oblivious to her nocturnal wanderings.

Often, deep in the night, I would awaken to the protest of bedsprings, then hear my mother's footsteps as she left their bedroom. Sometimes, when I was a child, I crept down the stairs on the pretence of needing to use the bathroom. If Mom wasn't sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and a book I went searching for her. I tiptoed around in the dark until I found her, either in the sunroom behind the parlour, or out on the front porch, staring into the night. Once I'd located her I slipped back upstairs before she realized I was there. I never once heard my father get up to join her or ask her to come back to bed.

During the day it was a different story. My parents were not above public displays of affection. They used any excuse to hold hands or put their arms around each other. Whenever they were within arm's length they touched. Like a teenage girl, Mom always sat right beside Dad in the truck. He would lift his chin and howl like an adolescent school boy – enjoying the embarrassment of whichever one of his children happened to be riding along – whenever he accidentally-on-purpose brushed Mom's bare leg with the gearshift. At the kitchen table, my mother constantly touched Dad's shoulder or stroked his arm while they discussed the business of the farm. And whenever they were outside together they walked hand in hand. Yet it seemed, when the day was done, as if all personal conversation was cut off at their bedroom door and they became intimate strangers. As if after settling in bed these two ceased to be, and whatever happened after that was not a part of who they were. I cannot imagine the strange couplings, which must have taken place through layers of nightclothes, leading to my mother giving birth to four children by the time she was twenty-six years old.

Years later, after my father died, my mother told me – in an

unusual late-night, soul-baring conversation brought on by grief and wine – that she'd never seen my father without his clothes on, and that he'd never seen her fully naked. From the way she said it I understood this was not her choice, but just the way things were with him. I was left with the image of each of them in opposite corners of the room, their backs to each other, as they changed in the dim light. I imagined my mother, behind her wardrobe door, slipping out of her printed dress and pulling a floor-length cotton nightgown over her head. And in the other corner, I envisioned my father stripping down to his woollen underwear. Longjohns. He wore them like a second skin, winter and summer; the only time he was out of them was for his infrequent baths.

My father refused to take regular baths like the rest of us. He swore that every time he bathed he got a cold, or pneumonia. He avoided the deep, claw-foot tub that took up half of our bathroom. Every night after the evening milking we heard splashing behind the locked door as he sponge bathed at the bathroom sink. Once a month he risked death and disease and took his ritual bath. And sure enough, the next day he was hacking and coughing and swearing he would never climb back into the tub.

Dad said he didn't need baths; his longjohns soaked up his sweat. He had three pairs, which he rotated throughout the week. Despite his refusal to bathe, I never thought my father smelled any different from the rest of us. We all carried that same barn aroma of cow manure, sour milk, and hay. The acrid-sweet smell was everywhere, in our clothes, in the house; it was as much a part of us as the milk that was our livelihood. When other children held their noses in the schoolyard it never occurred to me that those odours, so natural to our lives, were offensive to others. I didn't realize the truth of their taunts until the first time I returned home after being away for two

years. I can still remember how surprised I was when I walked in the door of our old farmhouse and inhaled memories.

But I couldn't help notice the odours on washday. Every Saturday morning my mother and I sorted the mountains of soiled clothes and linen on the floor of the enclosed front porch. Every week two pairs of father's longjohns ended up in a pile with my brothers' jockey shorts and T-shirts. My brothers refused to wear longjohns except in the worst of winter. Their underwear swished around with Dad's in the wringer washer, a grey swirl of man-and-barn smelling soup.

Mom once told me that it was interesting what you can tell about peoples' lives from their laundry. She knew my brothers' secrets from the state of their clothes and the contents of their pockets. Not that she ever used it against them. She adored her boys and was only surprised when she discovered some clue that betrayed they were human after all: the tobacco leaves stuck in the lining of their pockets, broken matches, snoose plugs and gopher tails. She read stains like a private diary.

Morgan was fifteen on the washday an unwrapped condom fell to the floor as Mom turned his jean pockets inside out for the last load. She leaned over and picked up the translucent coil of rubber. She glanced over at me with raised eyebrows as if she wondered if I knew what it was. I was twelve, old enough to have heard jokes at school and to piece it together in my own fashion. Growing up on a farm made animal mating as natural as grass growing, but human mating, well, that was another thing entirely, and certainly never spoken about out loud in our home. Still, I lifted my lip in a disgusted sneer as if I knew exactly what the foreign object was for. As my mother pocketed the wayward rubber in her apron along with the buttons, coins and other orphans of washday she

said, 'Just wishful thinking, Natalie. That's all this is. Just wishful thinking.'

After all the laundry was pegged out on the clothes lines and flying in the wind, Mom opened the door at the bottom of the stairs in the kitchen. It was unusual for her to go upstairs except to change the sheets and we'd already done that. I waited a few minutes then followed her up. I slipped into my own bedroom. After she had gone back downstairs I peeked into my brothers' room. There, in the middle of the fresh pillow on Morgan's bed, was the condom.

I never heard Mom say a word to him about her discovery. Morgan was quieter than usual at dinner that evening. He left the table before dessert and headed down to the barn even before Boyer.

I'm sure Mom read my laundry as easily as she read my brothers'.

She knew whenever I had been up in the hayloft in the summer. Our mother had a morbid fear of fire, and even though she agreed with Dad that her fears were unwarranted, she paid attention to her instincts. Everyone did. So in the hot days of August, after all the hay was in, and the loft was full, we were forbidden to play up there. It was one of her few rules.

She knew it was me who had sneaked into the root cellar and polished off three jars of canned cherries when I was seven years old. She knew I almost drowned a piglet trying to make it swim in the water trough. And she knew when, at thirteen, I was about to start my monthly period. I paid no attention to the pink streaks in my cotton underpants. But she did. Before I knew I needed them, a large blue box and an elastic belt with metal tabs appeared on my bed one Saturday afternoon. When I realized what they were for, I thought she had read it in my tea leaves.

My mother read tea leaves for her women friends when they visited. Sometimes, in the afternoons, when Dad and my brothers

were off haying or cutting firewood, she would say, 'Come on Nat, let's have a tea party.'

She would take out the good tea cups, her mother's china, from the glass-fronted cabinet in the parlour. I only call it a parlour because she did; it was really just a long room off the kitchen that served as both dining room and living room. She'd set our tea cups and cookies at the corner of the huge oak table and we 'girls' had our stolen afternoon while the 'men' worked. After I finished my cup of milked-down tea, she would have me flip the cup upside down in the saucer and turn it three times. Then she'd read my future and my secrets in the leaves.

Years later, when I had a daughter of my own, I realized it was really the laundry she read. The laundry gave away all our secrets.

So, when I think of everything that happened after that summer day, I wonder, how could *she* not have known?

Chapter Three

October 2003

My mother is dying. She's been threatening to die for the last five years. This time I think she means it. I hear it in Boyer's words. 'She's asking for you, Natalie.'

Still half asleep, I am unprepared for the quiet gentleness of my brother's voice. I can't remember the last time we spoke on the phone. It takes a moment to relate voice and message. An uncomfortable silence fills the line while I search for a reply.

That's how it is with Boyer and me. Our conversations are stilted, stop and go, static. They've been that way for years. On the rare occasions when we're together, we constantly cut off each other's sentences. It's as if we fear any attempt to repair the damage; damage of wounds so old, scars so smooth, so healed over, that to pick at them would be like taking a knife to new flesh. So, whenever Boyer and I find ourselves together during my hit-and-run visits to Atwood, we fumble with safe words; we talk about the weather, the road conditions, my trip. Anything, except what stands between us.

'I think you'd better come,' he says now. It's the first time my brother has given me advice, or asked anything of me in over thirty-four years. His words are enough – too much.

'I'll be there tomorrow,' I say and we mumble our goodbyes. He doesn't invite me to stay out at the farm. I don't ask.

After I hang up Vern rolls over and places his hand on my back.

'It's my mother,' I say into the darkness. 'I have to go to Atwood.'

'I'll drive you.' Vern reaches up and turns on the lamp above the headboard. That's my husband. No hesitation, no questions, just a direct route to fixing whatever needs fixing.

I turn to him and attempt a smile. 'No, that's okay,' I say, then throw back the covers. 'I can take the bus.'

The plane is not an option, and not only because of my irrational fear of flying. We live near the city of Prince George, in the centre of British Columbia. Atwood lies in the southernmost part of the province. There are no direct flights. With an overnight connection in Vancouver it takes two days to get there.

Vern pulls himself up and sits back against the pillows as I get out of bed. I know what is coming. We have had this conversation before. Although Vern and I have been together for almost ten years he has never been to Atwood. Never met my mother. Or Boyer.

'I want to go with you Natalie,' he says, disappointment seeping into his words. 'John or Ralph can take over the crew for a few days.' Vern has a tree-planting business. Most of his planters have returned to university for the year. We both know how hard it would be for him to take time off, yet I know he means it. 'We can get there much quicker in the car,' he adds.

'No, really, it's better if I go alone.' I pull on my dressing gown. 'I don't know how long I'll have to stay. And I don't want to drive myself in case there's snow in the mountain passes. I don't mind the bus. It will give me time.'

Time? Time for what? For Mom to die?

With a sudden pang of guilt I wonder if I have deliberately

waited too long. We each have our own secrets and regrets, Mom and I. Is it too late for the confessions and questions that I have yearned to voice?

I pat Vern's shoulder. 'Go back to sleep,' I tell him. 'I'm going to go and check the Greyhound schedule.' As I reach up and turn out the lamp Vern's sigh is heavy with frustration but he does not argue.

In complete darkness I make my way around the bed to the bedroom door. It's an idiosyncrasy left over from childhood, feeling my way in the dark as if I were blind, counting the steps, and knowing exactly where each piece of furniture is. Lately when I catch myself doing it I wonder if I am preparing myself for old age. Does my body know something that I don't? After fifty everything is suspect.

Moonlight spills through the windows in my home-office. I sit down at the computer without switching on the lights. I'm frugal with electricity. Forced habits stay with you.

The screen flicks on as soon as I touch the mouse. There was a time when the only meaning 'mouse' had for me was the wet grey lumps outside the kitchen door; gifts left on our porch by the barn cats. Now after years of making my living as a free-lance journalist, this plastic namesake moves like an extension of my body. Writing, once done in longhand then typed on my Remington manual, now flows from fingertips to luminous screen; even my mistakes show up neat and clean.

The Greyhound schedule flashes up. The next bus is at six a.m. With transfers and waiting in stations the trip to Atwood takes fifteen hours. It seems all the roads of my life have led me further and further away from that remote West Kootenay town; as if distance alone is enough of an excuse not to visit, to stay away from my mother and brother. And now my daughter.

I glance down at my watch. Eleven-ten. Too late to call Jenny? No, like her grandmother, my daughter is a night owl. She always has been. Her nocturnal wanderings are only one of the many inherited traits that by-passed me.

She looks nothing like me, this daughter of mine. She is her grandmother's child. The ash-streaked hair, the high, wide cheekbones, the robin-blue eyes, the small bump on the nose, and the flawless skin that soaks up the sun so greedily, all have skipped a generation. At least with the women. Boyer inherited those same features, only with an increased intensity and stronger angles. The eyes, the profile, the smile, all the same handsomeness that was – still is – so uniquely my mother.

Over the years I have heard many people call her pretty, but that was far too dismissive a word for my mother's classic beauty. My daughter now wears that same beauty with grace, along with her grandmother's intoxicating smile, a birthright shared with her Uncle Boyer.

Even now, anyone meeting these three would know that they are family. Mom and Boyer have often been mistaken for brother and sister. And my daughter Jenny looks as if she could be the child of either of them.

I inherited my father's brown eyes and hair, his milk white skin and blunt features. I look like what I have become, an outsider, a stranger.

I was named after my mother. Although everyone calls her Nettie, Mom's given name is Natalie Rose. Our first name is where the similarities end. I might have suspected I was adopted if I had not heard the story from Dad – so many times that I thought I remembered being there – of how, while he was delivering milk on the day of my birth, my mother walked the three miles into town and up the hill to the hospital.

I was born on August 12, 1951. On the exact same day my grandmother, Amanda Margaret Ward, was born sixty-two years before. She had been the first baby delivered in St Helena's, the brick and stone hospital whose windows overlook the main street of Atwood. Her great-grandchild would be the last. No one remembers this bit of trivia now except me and maybe, in her more lucid moments, my mother.

Tonight she lies in that same hospital, perhaps in the same room where I was born, and calls my name.

Chapter Four

Nettie

SHE HEARS THE baby crying.

The insistent mewing of a newborn drifts through the darkness and calls her from her unquiet sleep.

No, wait. That can't be right. The baby was stillborn. But he's crying. How can that be? The child is dead. He has gone to heaven. No. To purgatory.

Now she knows where she is. With him. In limbo. Forever. She has condemned the unbaptized child to spend eternity in this nothingness. She deserves to be here, but he doesn't. She must tell someone. Tell someone he's crying.

'Hush, Nettie,' a soft voice whispers, 'there are no babies on this ward any more.'

She feels a warm hand on her forehead, pushing back the strands of hair. For a moment she thinks it's Gus. Should she tell him?

She swims up, against the current of drugs flowing through her veins. She surfaces to meet familiar eyes looking down at her. Kind, caring, eyes. They belong to Barbara Mann, the granddaughter of an old friend. Now she knows where she is. She's in the hospital. In the extended care unit on the third floor.

Barbara is the night nurse. Nettie used to change her diapers.

The voice, the touch, pulls Nettie back, but the drugs are stronger.

She fights to stay for a moment longer. She tries to clasp hold of the nurse's arm. She needs to tell her, to tell someone.

'It's all right Nettie,' Barbara croons. 'Go back to sleep.'

And Nettie calls from a long spiralling tunnel, 'Natalie …'

But it's the nurse's voice that answers, a singsong lilt, 'Hush, dear, shhhh … It's okay, Nettie. Just let go now.'

And Nettie calls back, 'Not yet. Not yet.' But it's too late. She slips through an invisible trap door.

Somewhere the baby cries again, but now Nettie is standing in her kitchen at the farm.

This is real, she thinks, the rest was a dream.

Everything is so clear. She studies the green-speckled linoleum tabletop. Her fingers trace the familiar rings left by a thousand coffee mugs. This table, built by Gus's father, is large enough to seat a dozen people. It's solid, real, and as old as the farmhouse. Everything of importance to her family, to the farm, has been discussed and planned at this table. All the preparations of life. All the chopping, dicing, canning, and pickling; all the plucking, gutting, kneading, and baking was done here.

She surveys the array of vegetables spread out on the tabletop. The aroma of rich, loamy soil still clings to the potatoes, carrots and beets. She must hurry to prepare them. There are mountains of meat to be chopped and ground, chickens to be plucked. She will never finish before everyone arrives.

Natalie's footsteps sound behind her. Her daughter is leaving. Nettie wants to turn and tell her not to go, but there's too much to be done. Her hands are busy. Chop, chop, chop. A pile of cubed meat rises in front of her. She hears the creak of the screen door. She grabs a handful of wet meat and tosses it into the grinder clamped to the end of the table.

The kitchen door slams; still she does not turn. She wants to call out, but she needs to get this done. Footsteps sound, unhurried, hesitant, on the porch stairs. Nettie counts each footfall, each step. On the fourth tread, her daughter stops and waits – waits to be called back. Nettie opens her mouth but no sound comes. She wants to call out. She wants to tell Natalie she heard the baby cry, but she cannot form the words. Too late. The last footstep echoes and disappears.

The tabletop swirls before her. She dives into the green linoleum sea. It swallows her up and she drowns in the darkness, the nothingness.

Chapter Five

In the glow from the computer screen, I press the first speed dial on my phone. Jenny's home number.

'Hello?' Nick's voice answers after one ring. Only a man will pick up the phone on the first ring. I haven't met a woman yet who won't wait until at least the second ring before answering. Is it because we can't shake the old notion of being thought too anxious, too available?

'Hello, Nick. I hope it's not too late to call.'

'No, of course not,' he assures me, then asks, 'How are you, Mom?'

Mom, how easily he has taken to calling me that. We chat for a few moments with the small talk that is expected. Nick Mumford, my son-in-law of three years is much more at ease with me than I have ever been with him. But time has eroded my resistance – a resistance I felt before I even met him. Nick, whose grandfather was our family doctor when I was growing up, is one of life's little twists that show up with an ironic sense of inevitability. Just like the fact that Jenny chose to do her medical internship at St Helena's Hospital in Atwood. The moment she told me she was dating old Dr Allen Mumford's grandson, I knew she would end up with him. And I knew she would end up staying in the town I have spent most of my adult life avoiding.

'Here's Jenny.'

'Hi, Mom. How are you doing?' At the sound of my daughter's voice I am overwhelmed with how much I miss her.

'I'm fine. I just talked to Boyer.'

'Yes, I know. I saw him at the hospital earlier. I asked him to call you.'

I'm not surprised. Jenny is like a typical child of divorced parents; always trying to mend broken relationships. When it comes to her uncle and me, she uses every excuse to force us to talk to each other.

'Jen, how is she really? I mean, how long—?'

'It's hard to tell,' she says, the professional tones of a doctor's voice overtake her words as she relates the prognosis. 'She's weak, but she could still rally or, well, we just don't know. Don't wait too long, Mom.'

'I'm taking the six a.m. bus,' I tell her. 'It should arrive at the junction at nine tomorrow night. Can you pick me up?'

The turnoff from the Trans-Canada Highway is thirty miles north of Atwood. The bus will only stop on that lonely piece of highway if someone is waiting for connecting passengers.

'Of course I'll be there.' Jenny says. 'We can stop in at the hospital and see Gram on the way home.'

'Good,' I say then hesitate. 'I'm going to stay in town at the Alpine Inn though.'

'Why?' she asks. The doctor's voice is gone now, replaced by the whine of a daughter's hurt feelings. 'We have lots of room in our new house, Mom. You haven't even seen it yet.'

'I know, and I will. I will. It's just that I can walk next door to the hospital from the Bed and Breakfast.'

'You can use one of our cars while you're here.' When I don't reply

right away she adds with an impatient sigh, 'You can't even see the farm from where we've built our house.'

I know. I know exactly where her new house is.

'Please. Please just understand for now, Jenny. I want to stay in town. Just pick me up, okay?'

'All right,' she says with resignation. 'We can argue about it on the drive into town.' There's a moment's silence on the line before she adds, 'There's something else I need to talk to you about, Mom.'

My empty stomach lurches. I manage to keep my voice even as I ask, 'What is it?'

'Not on the phone.'

Back in bed I am unable to sleep. I am tempted to get up and read to pass the night away. *God, I'm finally turning into my mother*. I wish I had her faith at times like this. And her belief in the power of prayer. But I lost that a long time ago.

Beside me Vern's even breathing fills the quiet while I fight the images of my estranged family.

It wasn't always this way. There was a time when I couldn't imagine my family wouldn't always be together. There was a time when all I wanted was to be with my oldest brother, Boyer, whom I idolized during my childhood. Back then, my favourite part of the day was sitting in his room playing 'penny words' – a spelling game Boyer had taught me as soon as I was old enough to talk. And in the evening lying in bed listening to my mother playing my favourite song on the piano downstairs in the parlour.

When I was young I thought she had made up that song just for me. And whenever I asked her, no matter what she was doing, my mother would always, always, stop and sit down at the piano and play 'Love Me Tender'.

I can almost hear it now as the north wind plays through the branches of the fir trees outside our bedroom window.

The alarm rings. As if he has been waiting for it Vern sits up. He pulls back the covers and swings his legs over the side of the bed with slow deliberate movements. I know he thinks I'm still asleep. This has become our morning routine, Vern getting up first and letting me sleep until after he takes his shower and makes the coffee.

'There's a bus as six,' I say as I climb out of bed. I explain the schedule as I follow him into the bathroom. He offers once again to drive me.

'At least to the Cache Creek junction,' he says as he glances up from the sink. 'It will save you the wait there. This way you can get a few more hours of sleep before you go.'

I pull out my make-up case and begin tossing in toiletries. 'I can sleep on the bus,' I tell him, but even as I say it I know it's not true.

Vern squeezes the tube too hard and white toothpaste spurts into the sink. 'I want to be there for you, Natalie,' he says. 'I'd like to meet your mother before she—' he bites off the word before it escapes from his mouth. 'While I still have the chance.'

I stiffen. 'There's lots of time, I'm sure. I'll call you when I get there. When I know more.'

Vern raises his eyebrows. 'Promise?'

'Promise.'

'Stubborn,' he mutters with a mouthful of toothpaste. But his eyes smile back at me.

I stand at my sink and study him in the mirror while I brush my teeth.

We've been together for almost ten years now, married for seven of those years. He was the one who pushed for marriage. I resisted.

Given my track record, I warned him, I wasn't a very good bet. 'If you don't get married, you don't get divorced,' I told him.

After two failed marriages I wasn't anxious to try a third.

'You just hadn't met the right one until now,' Vern insisted. Eventually he wore me down.

We met while I was living in Vancouver. Early one rainy morning we ran into each other on the Stanley Park seawall. Literally. We were both about to pass slower joggers from opposite directions when Vern's elbow clipped mine and sent me sprawling onto the wet blacktop. After that we began greeting each other on our morning runs. Before long we fell into an easy routine of running together. That led to after-run coffees at Starbuck's on Denman Street and then to dating.

Besides running, we found we shared a passion for reading, sushi, and oldies music. Before long he infected me with his passion for fly-fishing.

Vern was a widower. He had sold his logging company on Vancouver Island to move closer to the clinic where his wife eventually lost her battle with breast cancer. Afterwards he remained in Vancouver to re-assess his life.

When we first met he was in the throes of starting his tree-planting contracting and consulting company.

'It's karma,' he joked, 'from forest-destroyer to forest-restorer.'

Now as I watch him brush his teeth, I am still taken by how handsome he is. Vern is five-foot ten, not much taller than I am, perhaps three inches at the most. At fifty-five he still wears jeans without embarrassment, although lately I have begun to notice a thickening around the waist. He blames it on his too-successful business, which requires him to spend more time in the office and less in the field.

His olive skin, thick dark hair, and black-brown eyes hint of First Nations ancestry somewhere back down the line.

'When I retire, I'll take up genealogy and trace my roots,' he once said with his lop-sided grin.

Vern's mouth is asymmetrical. The thinner left side of his lip rises higher than the right and twitches when he is smiling. It can be difficult to tell if his smile is genuine, or if he is trying not to smirk. And it can be rather unnerving; it would be easy to doubt his sincerity – if it weren't Vern.

I think this little tic adds to, rather than takes away from, his rugged good looks. I can see that I'm not the only one who finds him attractive. Sometimes, when we meet women, or even men, for the first time, I catch that flicker, that what's-he-doing-with-her look in their eyes. Sometimes I wonder myself.

Vern says it was my independence he was attracted to. Now he calls it stubbornness.

He leans over the sink to spit. As he straightens up he catches me studying him in the mirror. 'What?'

I open my mouth, a word or two away from giving into the temptation to accept his offer. How easy it would be to have him come with me, take care of me. But I have never burdened him with my past. It's too late to start now.

I reach up and stroke his cheek. 'Nothing,' I say then turn away to switch on the walk-in closet light.

As I rummage through my underwear drawer I am suddenly startled by the thought of what to wear to a funeral.

My mother's funeral. Vern's unspoken thought is more reality than probability.

The idea of attending a ceremony in St Anthony's Church, of sitting in the front pew while a priest's monotonous voice chants

the ceremony and speaks of my mother's life, is almost too much. I stand in the middle of my closet, underpants in one hand, and bras in the other, and hold my breath to stifle the sneeze I feel building between my eyes.

At the downtown bus depot, Vern unloads my suitcase from the back of his pick-up truck. Pink light from the streetlamp filters down through the grey stillness of the early morning air. The smell of pulp, a rotten egg aroma, intensified by the heavy autumn mist, hugs our bodies. Long-time residents of Prince George seem to be immune to the pungent smell from the pulp mill; sometimes even I forget it. But on fall mornings when cold, dense air, presses down on the sleeping city, the odour is so thick I can almost taste it.

As if he has read my mind, Vern wrinkles his nose. 'Mephitic,' he says referring to the noxious odour.

And as clearly as if I could turn around and see him standing in the morning fog, I can hear Boyer's youthful voice saying, 'Well, there's a ten-penny word for you, Nat.'

Inside at the counter I ask for a ticket to Atwood. The sleepy-looking attendant wears a blue-striped shirt with a name embroidered in red on her pocket. Brenda.

'Atwood?' Brenda repeats. It's obvious she has never heard of it. Why should she have? The old mining town, turned ski-resort, with a population of less than three thousand, is not exactly a prime destination. She punches the computer keys, her ink-stained fingers moving with a studied effort. Her eyebrows raise and I assume she's located it. 'One way or return?'

'Return,' I tell her. *Oh, yes, return. Soon, I hope*. Then I realize what soon could mean, and I feel the guilt of wishing to hasten my mother's demise.

'One hundred and forty dollars,' she says and attacks the computer again. She is all efficiency now, back in familiar territory. 'You have a two hour wait in Cache Creek …'

After I purchase my ticket I rejoin Vern outside. He has placed my suitcase in front of the only occupied bus stall. A young couple stands nearby, huddled in the cold, saying their goodbyes. White puffs of breath fill the air between them. The bus doors are closed and I can't see through the blackened windows. I hope the bus isn't crowded. I don't want to have to sit next to anyone and make small talk.

'I want to be there for you,' Vern says again. He takes my hands as he searches my eyes. 'At least promise me you will let me come down and get you.'

I slip the return ticket into my pocket as he takes me into his arms.

'I feel like I'm losing you,' he murmurs into my hair.

'I'm just anxious to get going,' I say and start to pull away.

'Not just this morning,' he says. 'Lately I feel like you're getting ready to bolt.' He releases me, then steps back with a crooked smile. He holds his arms out in an open-handed gesture of surrender. He won't keep me against my will, I know, but he'll do his best to interrupt this dance of leaving.

That is Vern. His strength is what has kept me with him this long, his strength in being able to let go. But he's right. It's just a matter of time. This is what I do. I run. I leave. He's the first man to recognize this, or the first one to place it in the light where we both have to look at it. And he's the first one who will not be surprised when I go.

The bus driver strides out from wherever it is bus drivers hide at these stops. He walks with the swagger of someone who, for the moment, has the destiny of others in his hands. The semantics of

his job pull him back to the reality of the morning as he lifts the sliding luggage compartment doors and begins to throw bags into the belly of the bus.

Behind me the bus doors fold open with a mechanical sigh. I put my arms around Vern for a final hug. He hangs on for a moment after I let go.

A part of me wants to tell him I'll call for him when the time comes. That I will cry on his shoulder, lean on his strong body. But we both know it wouldn't be true. Besides, I tell myself, there's no need for him to be there. He only knows my mother from what I have told him. And she doesn't know him at all. My mother gave up on the men in my life after my second husband. And for the last five years she's been too busy dying.