

STRIKING GOLD



TIANA WARNER



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WAGGON ROAD**

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VAN WINKLE

SODA CREEK

CARIBOO WAGGON ROAD

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San Francisco, July 15th, 1860

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

GRANDMA ALWAYS HAD HER ECCENTRICITIES, from her weekly moon-bathing rituals to naming her many house plan`ts after ex-lovers—but leaving me a chunk of wilderness in the middle of nowhere is a new level of weird, even for her.

As I hike up the steep slope, beads of sweat tickle my hairline, cooling fast in the breeze blowing through the firs and aspens. Forest air fills my nostrils as if this were a regular hike—except there’s no trail here. No destination. I don’t know where we’re going or what we’ll find.

My work boots handle the uneven ground as I pick my way through roots and rocks. Behind me, my sister’s white sneakers are no match for the mud, and she moans with each splatter.

“Why did Grandma never tell us about this place?” Olivia asks between labored breaths. “Did Mom and Dad even know?”

“No idea.” I squeeze through two spruce trees, their needles poking me through my sleeves, and pause at the top of a hill to catch my breath and check out what my new property holds. The two-hundred-acre parcel rolls and dips like ocean waves frozen in time. A forest covers it, the sort that teems with grizzly bears and moose. The evergreens look as rugged as the landscape, all rough bark and prickly needles, many gnarled and leaning, others dead from pine beetles. Patches of dirty snow left over from winter hide in shadows, and a network of cold, narrow streams rushes down the mountain-side. We drove through a lot of this on our way up the Cariboo Highway, until finally, we came upon a patchy section of land full of

excavated pits and decrepit log houses—as if someone had tried to build in this area and then threw in the towel.

I toe the hard, rocky ground, hunched against the wind that feels much too wintry for May. No wonder she never mentioned this place. The meadow we parked in at the end of the dirt driveway must be the most usable part of the property—maybe cleared long ago to make way for a home that never got built.

Now, this lonely plot of land with no house to speak of belongs to me.

Mumbled curses and rustling from behind tell me Olivia is locked in another battle with a branch that tried to clothesline her.

“Given any more thought as to *why* she left it to you?” she asks, echoing the question that’s kept me awake since we met with the lawyer last week. Why did Grandma leave me the untamed land and Olivia the sensible townhouse?

“All I’ve been doing.” What am I supposed to do with it? Keep it? Sell it? Do something fancy, like subdivide it?

It’s hard not to overthink Grandma’s final gift, which came with no instructions, just coordinates. The value of the property and townhouse are about the same, seeing as the townhouse is in Vancouver and the land is an eight-hour drive north, but they couldn’t be more different. Did she think that Olivia, the golden child and the baby of the family, deserved a house more than I did? Or am I reading too much into this and she basically flipped a coin to divvy up her assets?

“Maybe she thought you’d be the most likely to enjoy a couple hundred acres of weeds and a chance to pee in the woods,” Olivia says between breaths.

“Or Mom and Dad influenced her,” I mumble. What would their thorny eldest need with a house in the city when their more educated, more likable, prettier daughter could live in it while she studies to become a civil engineer?

At the flash of hurt on Olivia’s round face, I regret my grumbling.

“Ivy,” she says gently, “I’m sure they had nothing to do—”

“Never mind.” I look ahead, squinting as the trees open up to bright blue sky. “Come on. There’s a higher peak up this way. We might be able to see more.”

An uncomfortable silence falls between us, broken by the crunch of our footsteps and the screech of a hawk. There I go again, ruining our nice day together by being snarky. Why did I have to bring up Mom and Dad?

I reach the next hilltop and put my hands on my hips, panting.

“I think—we can conclude—there’s nothing here,” Olivia wheezes as she catches up.

I nod. There’s nothing, but there’s also everything. A hundred species of plants, abundant wildlife, cleaner air than I’ve ever felt in the city...

All this land is...mine? I silently ask Grandma, looking skyward. A tiny spark clicks inside me like an old, drained lighter trying to ignite. *Seriously mine? No catch, no fine print?*

Olivia pushes back a wayward lock of hair and takes a selfie, her scowl changing to a glowing smile for two seconds while she snaps the photo. She’s in full makeup as always, her chocolate-brown hair in a softly curled ponytail, a tight black sweater and yoga pants flattering her lean muscles—a total knockout next to my pale, makeupless face, forever-in-a-braid brown ringlets, and flannel.

She catches my eye and pockets her phone. “If you want,” she says hesitantly, “we could share both. Live in the townhouse together, sell the land, split the money.”

I smile at my little sister’s genuine concern, my shoulders relaxing. “That’s really nice of you. But let’s not do anything hasty.”

Her frown deepens, and she wobbles closer over the uneven ground. “But this place is just trees. What are you supposed to do with it if you don’t sell it?”

I don’t answer. I don’t *have* an answer.

But something about this place being ‘just trees’ is exactly what makes it perfect.

I never thought owning land was in the realm of possibility... Never considered what I might do with land if I had it.

Chewing my lip, I keep walking, not sure what I'm looking for. That spark keeps flaring deep inside me, getting stronger. Anything could be here. Anything could *go* here. Maybe that's an overwhelming prospect for Olivia—she's got other priorities like school and a boyfriend, not to mention a preference for indoor activities—but me? I've only got my job at the garden center and some house plants to water. Out here, each breath of crisp air, each chirp of a bird, each brush of my fingers over rough tree bark speaks to me, taking me further away from the stress of the city. Nature has appealed to me like this ever since I was a kid spending time outside with Grandma. A project in the woods might be exactly what I need to fill that hole called 'purpose.'

Our shoes crunch rhythmically for another twenty minutes, the up-and-down rendering us out of breath. The forest's earthy scent fills me up, calming yet energizing. We descend into a glade with knee-high grass and step over another clear creek, which fans out and comes together, burbling as it trickles along.

I crouch, letting the water run over my fingers. Unsurprisingly, it's freezing. "This creek seems to span the whole property. It'd be good for irrigation."

"Irrigation? What, you want to grow stuff here?" Olivia crosses her arms and looks around with distaste puckering her lips, her manicured fingers tucked into her armpits.

I stand and wipe my hand on my pants, possibilities flashing across my mind's eye. This meadow would make as good a spot as the one at the end of the driveway. "What if we built a cabin and used the land for family vacations? You and Jeff want kids one day, right? Imagine bringing them here during summers."

Olivia's cheeks dimple. But as quickly as the smile came, it transforms into a grimace. "To do what, though? Aren't vacation homes usually on a lake or something?"

I turn a full 360, trying to picture this place with some landscaping. No sparkling lake views, but the forest around us is spectacular in its own way.

The spark catches, the flame inside me growing brighter. "There are lakes and rivers all over that we could drive to. I could put in a

garden, a fire pit, a hammock, maybe get a telescope for stargazing and binoculars for bird watching..." I say all this with the confidence of someone who actually knows how to build stuff.

Olivia wrinkles her nose. "Look, I get it if you don't want to live in a townhouse together, but you could at least sell it and buy a condo in the city. You could afford a nice place for this price—probably not far from where you're renting."

"Yeah..." The word 'city' puts a sinking feeling in my gut. The noise and crowds have been eroding me for years, and while I like living close to Olivia, it hasn't exactly been my plan to stay in Vancouver long-term. "I think I'd look more toward the suburbs."

"That's good too," she says, apparently just pleased to hear me consider a more realistic plan.

I wade further into the glade, the grass dampening my ankles and calves. Olivia hangs back and eyes the ground as if scanning for creepy crawlies.

She might not be able to see the appeal, but what if Grandma knew I would? Did she leave me the land for a reason? It feels as if I'm standing on a blank canvas, and Grandma's handed me a paintbrush. I spent half my childhood learning how to garden with her, after all. While Olivia was in her after-school clubs and programs for advanced kids, Grandma looked after me, and I helped her with everything from the orchard to the blueberry bushes to the flower baskets by her front door. That was before Grandpa died—before she sold their one-acre farm and downsized to the townhouse.

Across the glade, the first sign that humans were here catches my eye: marks are etched into a boulder the size of a sheep. I walk closer, studying the three parallel lines—almost like the slash of a huge animal claw.

Olivia comes over to peer at it with me. "What is it?"

"Maybe it's some kind of land identifier or...a marker where they were going to drill a well or something? It's probably in a document somewhere."

We stare at it. If it *is* from an animal, yikes. I heard the grizzlies were big out here, and I suddenly feel very small and exposed.

We catch each other's eye, then turn away in unison, as if she's having the same thought.

"Ivy, building a cabin is expensive," Olivia says. "You'd use up all the money Grandma left you and more. Can you qualify for a loan?"

I cross my arms as if to defend myself from the harsh truth. She has a point. My garden center job might give me an excuse to spend a couple hours a day huddled in a tropical greenhouse pretending I'm in Hawaii, but it barely pays the bills. And it certainly hasn't prepared me for the mammoth task of building a livable structure from scratch.

"I at least need to do research and calculate what I can afford," I say. "Like...a shed or...a shipping container? I don't know. I just don't want to be hasty in selling this place and then regret it in a few years."

My sister nudges me as we continue on. "Well, if anyone can figure out what to do with empty land, it's you, Princess of the Backyard Tree Stumps. Remember our stuffie village?"

I smile at the ground.

"Ooh, look." Olivia stops at the edge of the meadow and points into the distance.

Across a vast, swampy lowland, perched on the highest point of the neighboring property, is a contemporary-style mansion that looks like it was plucked from Vancouver's north shore. The tiered yard is impeccably manicured, and though it's hard to see from this far away, there is quite possibly a gigantic pool in the back.

"Whoa."

"Well, no acreage is complete without snooty, rich neighbors," Olivia says with a sniff.

I laugh. "I hope they won't be disappointed if I build a shack next to their monstrosity."

She looks at me sharply. "You're really thinking about it, then? Putting a cabin here?"

"I mean, I *want* to...but I know it's a little..." *Starry-eyed? Unrealistic?* I shift from foot to foot, torn between dreaming and harsh reality.

"A project like that would take up all your time off," she warns. "You'd be sacrificing your social life."

"Not much of a loss," I mumble. These days, my social circle consists of coworkers and a few high school friends clinging on by a group chat.

"Oh, come on—"

"It's not like I have anyone tethering me at home," I say with a forced laugh. "I'm free to do whatever I want. And I like it that way."

I turn and keep walking, taking us back toward the car.

"But—" Olivia splutters and waves away a cloud of gnats, hurrying to catch up. "How do you expect to find a boyfriend if you spend all your weekends out here?"

I shrug, hiding my discomfort as the topic of relationships comes up. "Maybe I don't want to date."

There's no pang of resignation as the words come out. In my twenty-five years, dating has always taken a back seat.

"You just haven't met the right person," Olivia says doggedly.

I sigh. "Liv, I've never had a relationship last more than four months because I can't make myself care enough to try. Maybe I'm meant to be single."

Olivia falls quiet, unconvinced, but unwilling to keep arguing.

Thank God. I could play Bingo with all the things people in relationships have told me. *It'll happen when you least expect it! You need to be happy with yourself before you can be happy with a partner!*

"For your sake, I hope your future husband likes hunting," she says. "It's about the only thing to do out here."

Ick.

I say nothing, giving her the last word. That's the thing with disagreeing with her: someone has to have the last word, and if I don't concede, the argument never stops.

So, I'll let her imagine that a husband in camo is on my vision board.

By the time we get back to my car, Olivia is splattered in mud and scowling, swatting away bugs, with bits of bark and leaves stuck in her hair. As for me... Being out here has made my step lighter and my shoulders relaxed, like Grandma's been with me the whole time.

She always did know me best. She let me be myself—hands in the dirt, bare feet, collecting wildflowers and mushrooms—whereas my parents would only try to force me to be a more dedicated student, a responsible daughter, a better version of someone I wasn't.

Grandma knew I would love this place. Now, thanks to her, I have an opportunity to build something on it. But...

A huge 'but.'

I need to be sensible. I know nothing about construction. I probably can't afford it, and in general, building a cabin in a remote mountain range is just a completely unrealistic thing for a twenty-five-year-old city girl to do. As much as I want to do this, I don't know if I can.

Reality wallops me like a branch to the forehead, and my throat tightens. Olivia's right.

Thank you, Grandma, but—

"Uh, Ivy?" Olivia says, coming to a stop.

I blink away the hot surge of defeat. "Yeah?"

She nods ahead of us. "There's someone in the driveway."

From the journal of Emma Thornton

June 12, 1863 - San Francisco

Left everything at home with \$200 in my pockets, savings scraped together from a year's work as a maid. Already down to \$185 after securing passage on the Commodore bound for Fort Victoria. The steamer is crammed to bursting with hundreds of men and a sprinkle of wives and daughters, but it seems I'm the only lass of eighteen braving this journey alone. One burly man with a large mustache scoffed as he jostled past me and grumbled, "You'd be better off panning for a husband than for gold, sweetheart. This ain't a picnic."

But I reckon I've got just as good a shot at sending home gold as anyone else climbing aboard. After all, Pa said I had a knack for panning when he showed me how to use a prospecting-pan, and Ma gave up on trying to teach me women's work long ago. I might just have to be a little smarter and a little tougher than the rest to stake my claim.

Though hope fills my heart, so does the deep ache of homesickness. As I prepared to board this morning, Jennie ran to the dock in a fit, her curly hair whipping in the sea breeze, redder than mine and just as wild. She was wrapped in Ma's shawl, tears brimming in her big eyes. Thirteen years old and still as tender as a child, my Jennie. She handed me Pa's old pocket watch and told me to keep it close. That nearly brought me to tears right along with her.

Eight years have passed since we fled that mud pit in Liverpool, following Pa's dreams of gold... This pocket watch was his first purchase when he washed up nuggets. It has his initials on the back—H.T. for Henry Thornton. He also bought Jennie and me dolls that day and a necklace for Ma. The river claimed his life a week later.

Rumors of gold have since trickled down from Fraser's River, and I have been determined to keep Pa's dream alive. Jennie deserves to live a good life with no more hunger—the life Pa promised us.

My eyes burned as I gave Jennie a tight hug, promising to come home with enough gold to ensure no more tears, only dolls and a house we don't have to share with mice. I will stay in the gold-fields until autumn, and then I will return with heaps of riches before the cold sets in. I will do as Jennie says and hold Pa's watch close to my heart while I am gone. Now, as I sit aboard this belching steamer with a better life on the horizon, Ma and Jennie might look on with worry, but I think Pa would be proud.

CHAPTER 2

A PEARLY SUV IS PARKED at the edge of my property, gleaming under the late afternoon sun and contrasting spectacularly with my dusty, metallic beige Corolla hatchback. A middle-aged white man in a suit stands at the passenger-side door with his hands folded, watching Olivia and me approach.

I slow my steps and reach for Olivia to make her do the same, unease coiling in my gut. Call me paranoid, but an unexpected visitor in the woods is a little suspicious.

“Can I help you?” I ask hesitantly.

He turns and opens the back door.

A slender leg emerges, tipped with a blood-red stiletto. I stop dead as a willowy woman who would look much more at home in a fashion agency slides out. Her straight, raven hair catches the sun, her cream silk blouse ripples in the breeze, and her pencil skirt accentuates her small waist and shapely legs. Between her flawless skin and the no-nonsense demeanor of an established businesswoman, her age could be anywhere from mid-twenties to mid-forties.

As she removes the large sunglasses framing her angular face, it’s like the air around her crystallizes. I’m pretty sure birds stop chirping.

She folds her sunglasses, the click-clack resonating, and sweeps her dark eyes over me from head to toe.

Under her cool confidence and arched, judging brows, a ripple goes down my spine, and my stomach does something weird. I fight the urge to smooth the frizz out of my braid. The intensity in her gaze makes me feel like I’m tangled in a net, and she’s come here to examine what her trap caught.

The man slams the car door, and I jump.

She tips her sunglasses to the side, and her driver takes them with quick, fluid movements, as if he's anticipating her every need.

"You must be Geraldine's granddaughters," she says smoothly, striding over on mile-long legs. She somehow doesn't wobble as her heels crunch on the dirt. "I'm Annie Lee."

"Ivy Wilson," I reply, my voice a little high. I clear my throat, trying to sound composed. "This is my sister, Olivia."

"Charmed. I live on the neighboring property." She gestures behind us without taking her eyes off me.

Olivia and I exchange a glance. *Of course this literal runway model lives in the mansion.*

The eye contact with my sister brings me back to reality—away from whatever spell this woman cast on me as she stepped out of the car.

"I knew your grandma well," Annie continues, her dark-lined eyes pinning me in place.

"Oh. It's...nice to meet a friend of hers." A pang of guilt hits me. Grandma and I were close—closer than I am with my parents—but she never mentioned this woman. How much of her life didn't I know?

"My family's bought several properties in the area since my grandfather's time," Annie says, "and I admit I've had my eye on this one for a while. When I saw your car pull up, I *had* to come make you an offer."

Her scarlet lips curve into a smile—or maybe it's more like the snarl of a wolf sizing up its prey. My skin prickles. An *offer*?

Olivia looks sharply at me, and I know exactly what she's thinking. *Take the money and run, sis.*

"I—um—" I stammer. She wants to buy it from me? *Now*?

Something about this woman's forwardness, the way she thinks she can swoop in and snap up Grandma's land before the dirt has even settled on her grave, raises my hackles. I return a forced smile. "Thanks, but I'm not ready to—"

"Name your price," Annie says, cutting me off with an unreadable glint in her eyes.

Olivia gives a tiny intake of breath, like she's forcing herself not to shout at me to accept the offer.

But though Annie's tone is friendly, her words burrow under my skin like ticks. I don't trust how forward she's being.

"Why do you want so much property in the area?" I ask.

One sculpted eyebrow lifts. There's the briefest pause before she says, "Call me sentimental. I've watched the sunrise over these hills and seen moose and bears roam across them since I was a girl."

Liar. As poetic as this sounds, nothing about her straight-to-business attitude or attire says *sentimental*.

I cross my arms as the icy breeze raises goosebumps. "Are you behind all the torn-up land we saw driving in?"

Annie's chin drops. The brief silence gives me my answer.

The patches of dug-up earth and the felled trees come to me in a new light—scars on the pristine wilderness. The weird part was that nothing was being built, and old disturbed patches had new growth. Why would she excavate land and do nothing with it?

"People have been leveling forests and redirecting entire rivers in this region since the mid-1800s, honey," she says, her voice a low purr. "I'm hardly the first person to break ground here."

I roll my eyes. "So are you buying land to be sentimental or to destroy nature? Pick one."

The smile vanishes. Her nostrils flare.

Olivia elbows me. "Ivy!" she hisses.

But I don't buy Annie's sweet act, and I can see it flaking away as I challenge her. Her offer is so cold and businesslike, with no regard for the delicate circumstance that led Olivia and me to be standing here. She didn't even give her condolences.

Her driver stands as still as a statue, his gaze flicking rapidly between the two of us. It's as if he's waiting for an explosive to detonate. Even the forest around us is eerily quiet.

"Surely this land has no value to you," Annie says. Her voice is sharp, quick, like I'm wasting her time—even though she's the one intruding. "It's a patch of dirt. Let me take it off your hands."

Anger bubbles in my gut. “This *patch of dirt* is a beautiful forest and my grandma’s legacy. I’m not interested in selling it to someone who wants to dig it up.”

Annie’s smile snuffs out, and her jaw flexes as if she’s clenching her teeth.

Beside me, Olivia puts her hands on her throat as if to protect herself from whatever deadly blow might come next.

“Miss Wilson, you’ve inherited a property you know nothing about, in a region you’ve likely never even been to before today,” Annie says, and it’s like I’ve flipped a switch. Her sharp tone is entirely different from the warmth she presented when she first stepped out of her car. Her eyes narrow, growing hard.

I splutter. She’s right, but she’s out of line. “That’s not—”

“You’re going to try to build something here, realize the ground is all till, the supplies are too pricey, there’s no septic, no well, and no electricity.” She steps closer, and though we’re the same height, she seems a head taller. “Cold and wet, you’ll go home. You’ll hold onto this place for another couple of years, hoping you’ll get the funds to try again, but you never will. So, you’ll decide to sell it. Except you won’t know its value and there’s no demand in this area, so you’ll get far less than what I’m offering you today. Now, do you want to accept my offer and go live in a farmhouse in the suburbs? Or do you want to be a fool and hang onto this land, only to regret it later?”

Her words leave me breathless, trying to find an argument. I fight the urge to shrink back. She isn’t just confident—she’s commanding, a woman used to getting her way. A woman used to being *right*.

Is she right about this? *No septic, no well, no electricity*. Not to mention my total lack of knowledge. I have nothing to start with, no foundation in any sense of the word.

“She might not be a builder, but she’s an expert on horticulture,” Olivia says sharply. “You don’t know a thing about her, so don’t assume what she’s going to do and how it’s going to go.”

I stare at her, grateful for her support as I stand here floundering.

Olivia stares stubbornly back, my flesh-and-blood reminder of why I'm here in the first place. That hint of sauciness in her tone is Grandma through and through.

"*Horticulture*," Annie says, mock-impressed.

Grandma's lined face flashes in my mind, her kind blue eyes and encouraging smile. I can almost hear her voice: *You've got this, Ivy-girl.*

No, I can't let this land go. How *dare* this woman assume I can't build a cabin?

Digging my nails into my palms, I shove my doubts aside. Annie is trying to intimidate me into agreeing—but she's wrong. She's got no idea who I am and what I'm capable of.

Neither do I, mind you, but it's time to find out.

"I'd like to see for myself what the future holds," I say. "I don't need you standing here speculating about how I'll feel about this land in two years. My answer is no."

Annie stares at me, her eyes narrow, her lips set.

After a pause, she sighs. "I understand you must be grieving. Give it some thought, and when you change your mind..." She opens her hand as if to accept something from her driver.

He doesn't move.

She glares at him and snaps her fingers. "Brendan! Do I have to spell everything out? Honestly, the incompetence I have to deal with every day..."

He startles and reaches into his breast pocket, fumbling a business card as he hands it to her.

She snatches it from him and holds his gaze. Whatever passes between them makes the blood drain from his face.

Annie turns back to me and steps closer, right into my personal bubble. Her sweet perfume drifts under my nose—citrus and jasmine—and despite the agitation jittering through me, the scent is so pleasant that it calms me a little.

She extends the card between two fingers. "Call me. I'll have a contract drawn up and wire the funds to you within 24 hours."

I reach for it. Whatever it takes to make her go away.

As I take it, her cool, slender fingers slide against mine, sending a jolt through me.

Ugh. Either the bugs are making me jumpy or this woman has gotten under my skin.

She gives me one last haughty sweep of her gaze, then spins on her stilettos and struts back to her car, leaving her driver to hustle after her.

As her hips sway beneath the tight fabric of her skirt, her driver has to pick up a run to get to the car before she does, flinging open the door to let her inside.

“Have some composure,” she snaps.

Before she gets in, she turns back to us. “And for God’s sake, don’t hike out here without bear spray. There are mother grizzlies with cubs roaming around.”

Olivia swallows audibly. “Yes, ma’am.”

I nod curtly. I had no idea what we were getting into when we drove out here, and the property is much deeper into the woods than I anticipated. But I will not admit this.

As the door slams, Olivia blows out a breath. “Who peed in her organic oat latte?”

“Probably her driver,” I mutter.

A shiver tingles up my arm from where our fingers brushed. Something about Annie makes me feel like a target she’s set her sights on—like she won’t rest until she gets what she wants.

But why, exactly, does Annie Lee want this land? And why do I get the feeling this is about more than a simple property investment?

The pearly white SUV’s tires crunch as it disappears around the bend. Olivia and I climb into my Corolla, where I stuff the business card in the cup holder with trembling hands.

“That was— She’s so—” I shake my head and turn the key. I’ve never met someone so confident and forward, and the confrontation has tipped me off-balance a little.

“Yeah,” Olivia says, as if my spluttering made sense.

Exhaling shakily, I make a silent promise to Grandma—and to myself. I won’t let Annie Lee steamroll me with her frosty glares and fat checkbook. Since she stepped out of that car, my decision has solidified: I’m keeping this land, and I’m ready to do whatever it takes to protect it.

From the journal of Emma Thornton

June 15, 1863 - New Westminster

People from every corner of the world have come for the same purpose, and there is not enough of anything—space, beds, food, provisions. The stench of unwashed bodies fills the streets as people scramble to secure passage up the river. Had a wretched sleep on the cold floor of a saloon in Fort Victoria last night, interrupted every half-hour by drunkards cursing and singing, and I fear tonight will be the same.

Shattered remains of canoes litter the shores where men died trying to take their own watercraft up Fraser's River. It seems people will cast aside all regard for their own safety for a shot at finding gold. I must remember this and keep my sanity. I have my family to think of, and I refuse to become one of these gold-mad fools.

Here at the Hudson's Bay Company was my chance to purchase everything for my journey, including clothing, gum boots, a new pick and pan since Pa's was lost, and basic foodstuffs: flour, bacon, beans, tea, and salt. When I approached the counter, the clerk leaned over to look right past me. "Where's yer husband, lass?" It's as if he didn't think I could count coins or carry supplies myself! "He's just outside," I lied, in no mood to argue. This was met with a dubious scowl, but seeing as I stood there with a purse full of money, he proceeded with the transaction.

Amid the stares and grumbles I attracted as I waited at the counter alone, I found a glimmer of kindness. The man behind me, who introduced himself as Wei and had come all the way from China, stopped me from wasting money on a frying pan and bowl, demonstrating how I can use my prospecting-pan for that instead. He also stepped in to barter when the clerk tried to overcharge me. I walked away with \$114 left and a full pack, grateful for Wei's kindness. I hope to meet more good hearts like his, but Ma always said you can't trust anyone in matters of money.

Already, I hear whispers of thieving and murder, so I hold my purse and Pa's pocket watch close. I will keep up the lie that I am traveling with a husband as best I can—but at night, all I can do is tuck my hair into my hat and do my best to make myself invisible among these gold-hungry men.

CHAPTER 3

ORCHIDS TREMBLE ON THE CART as I fight my way through the crowds in the garden center, wincing with each elbow that nudges the delicate petals.

“Excuse me... Sorry... Excuse me...”

The Saturday rush and warm spring weather have brought in a deluge of customers. People swarm the aisles, chatter reverberates off the greenhouses, and the cash registers beep incessantly, blending into the perfect pitch for inducing a headache.

I finally make it to the tropical greenhouse, where the earthy, humid air wraps around me like a reassuring hug. I squat down and grab a plastic flat of orchids from the bottom. It’s heavy, and pain shoots through my fingers as the flimsy edge cuts into my skin.

“Need help with that?” Brett asks, trotting over.

“No, I got it,” I grunt, wobbling as I straighten up.

He sighs dramatically.

I place the flat on the end of the table and exhale, sweat prickling under my shirt. The orchids sway before coming to rest, ready for the crowd to swoop in.

Brett squints at me. “Girl, you’re allowed to accept help sometimes.”

I wipe my brow and pick up the pruning shears. “You love me this way.”

“Uninjured with your spine intact? Yes, I do.”

I smirk and nudge him with my foot. He’s my main source of joy at work, other than the plants—the sort of friendship built on gossiping about coworkers and venting about all the infuriating things your boss does.

While I move down the table to check each plant, he tugs along the hose and waters them behind me. “Hide me from Melanie,” he whispers. “She’s treating everything like a level-ten today.”

I suppress a groan. Our boss is intolerable on a good day, but a crowded day makes me want to grab her by the shoulders and tell her to chill the fuck out. Nobody is going to die if a shrub order gets fulfilled a day late.

A harried-looking customer appears beside us. “Where are the succulents?” she barks in my ear, making me wince.

I motion toward the back of the greenhouse. “Keep going. On the left.”

She rushes off.

Somewhere, a kid screeches, and my shoulders inch closer to my ears. I love spring—I really do. But at work, it means days like this. And days like this feel like a straitjacket.

I move from plant to plant, carefully removing the yellowed leaves and pruning each one into a perfect, healthy shape. The greenhouse air is thick and moist, and the earthy scent of potting soil and flowers ground me in comfort and help me to tune out the clamor.

You wouldn’t have to deal with this bedlam in the Cariboo, my inner voice taunts. I could spend all my time off alone in a greenhouse, tending to rows of vegetables that are all mine.

I let out a slow breath, inwardly drifting away to the silent wilderness, the open space, the endless possibilities...

Something slams into my legs, and I turn to find a little boy ducking under the table with an armful of decorative rocks. His father swerves around the end to head him off, shooting me an apologetic grimace.

I huff and return to my endless possibilities. Do I want to build an A-frame cabin, a yurt, a Hobbit house, convert a shipping container? How much can I afford? Do I want to figure out why Annie Lee is so desperate to acquire the property, or do I want to leave that mystery alone?

“Someone’s *pensive* today,” Brett sings. He moves across from me and continues watering, giving me a spill-the-tea look.

I can't help smiling, some tension draining away in his bubbly presence. "It's this property my grandma left me. I've spent days trying to decide what to do with it."

Brett's perfectly groomed eyebrows shoot up. "Tell me it's in the Caribbean."

"More like the Cariboo."

"Daaamn," he says in awe, dragging out the word for several seconds. "What are your options?"

I move along with the shears, and he follows with the hose. The flowers unleash their perfume as I work over them, the smell calming me.

"I'm thinking of taking vacation time and building a cabin. Maybe flying out there on my days off to continue. But I'd have to start from scratch—foundation, solar power, septic, water. I'd have to drill a well...and in the meantime, filter water from the creek and set up a rainwater collection system..." I trail off as the gigantic undertaking constricts my chest.

Dammit, I will *not* let Annie Lee be right.

Brett nods, giving me an impressed pout. "Ambitious. I love it. Would you add a garden?"

"Of course." My chest loosens. That, I can do. "It'd be tricky in that climate, but a fun challenge."

"And you'd be fine with doing more of this on your time off?" He wiggles his fingers at the spread of plants between us.

I let out a huff of laughter. "It would be a dream."

Gardening has been a part of me for as long as I can remember, ever since Grandma had me help tend her strawberry patch as a toddler.

"Then what's the issue?" Brett asks lightly. "Sounds like you've made up your mind."

I sigh wistfully. "Cost. Not knowing how to build anything. The fact that it's a day's drive away."

"Mmm, valid points."

My shoulders sink lower as all the reasons not to do this press down on me.

"Then again," Brett says with an encouraging head tilt, "sometimes, a change is exactly what's needed to shake things up, you know? Get out of our comfort zone, discover new parts of ourselves..."

I narrow my eyes at his teasing tone. "What's that supposed to—" "Which ones are partial shade?" a woman asks.

Brett points out a few while I keep pruning. I'd argue that being in nature is getting *into* my comfort zone, but maybe he's not talking about gardening.

"Anyway, what else would you do if you don't build a cabin?" he asks when he returns.

I lift my shoulder. "Sell it. Use the money to buy a more suitable place—a condo or whatever."

He scoffs. "Suitable by whose standards? Don't take this the wrong way, but your calling doesn't exactly seem to be in the city. You're the only person I know who has a favorite species of moss. Or who gets excited talking about worm composting. Or—"

"Okay, okay." I smile, grateful for his perspective. He knows me well, considering we spend at least thirty hours a week together. A lot of people might think the property is impractical, too remote and too undeveloped—but what do *I* think?

"The thing is, I already had a buyer make an offer, so I could easily take the money and do something else with it," I say, my lips tingling as the words come out. Am I blushing?

"Really? Who?" he asks.

I turn away to check the plants behind me so he doesn't see my red face. "Some investor. She didn't even give her condolences for Grandma's death before getting straight to business."

He scoffs. "Rude."

"Right?" I exclaim.

Thinking of Annie Lee, my blood boils all over again. She looked so out of place in the wilderness, with her ruby lips and that pencil skirt wrapped around her long legs. Who wears stilettos in the forest? She's lucky she didn't get mosquito bites all over that perfectly smooth skin of hers.

"What are you two doing?" Melanie snaps from the greenhouse door. "Ivy, get on cash! Now! Brett, there's a spill in the ferns."

I cringe as her shrill voice hits me like sandpaper. Red splotches cover her pale skin, probably exertion from shouting at people.

The door claps shut, a harsh *pop* in my ears.

Brett and I exchange a long-suffering look and leave our tropical sanctuary, heading back to the cool, dry air of the main building.

I pause at the tomato seedlings to adjust the grow lights—they're going to become leggy if they keep reaching for the light like this—but I've hardly paused for two seconds before Melanie marches over.

"Earth to Ivy!" She snaps her fingers in my face. "Look behind you and tell me what you see."

She smells like tuna and has probably just come back from having lunch.

My stomach clenches into a ball as I follow her narrowed gaze. "I see lots of people."

"All waiting at the checkout counters," she says in her signature nasty, syrupy tone.

I nod curtly. "On my way."

"Don't make me ask you again," she calls after me.

I ignore her.

As I squeeze past people browsing seed packets and potting soils, Brett's encouraging questions settle into my chest, stoking the flame that's trying to roar to life. What if I let myself imagine building something from scratch, of waking up to crisp forest air, of having endless land to grow vegetables instead of confining them to the corner of my apartment?

"Excuse me, where are the bonsai trees?" someone asks, stopping me before I can get to the line of impatient faces at the cash registers.

I turn to find an extremely pretty blonde woman addressing me. She's about my age, short, fit—and holding the hand of another woman who's in a masculine hairstyle and outfit.

My heart does a weird little somersault.

"Are you looking for indoor or outdoor?" I ask, stammering a little.

"Indoor," she says.

"Right over here." I lead them to our small collection of indoor bonsai trees, my feet clumsy.

It's not the first time this has happened when I see a same-sex couple...and not the first time I stomp on that feeling until it's buried very deep where it belongs.

Their light conversation floats past my ears. "We could put a fern on the bookshelf... I like the look of that palm tree... We need more color..."

They're so comfortable with each other.

I've never had that with anyone. I've dated guys on and off since high school, but it was always more of a hassle than anything. Downloading apps, texting, trying to look nice for a date, all when I'd rather be doing something else.

And women...

I've looked. Noticed. Wondered where the line is between appreciating beauty and wanting to *be with* someone. Like, I can acknowledge that Annie Lee was probably the most stunning person I've seen in real life, and I can accept that the sight of her made my stomach flip over—but everybody feels that when they see a beautiful person, right?

Okay, there's more to explore here. But I don't even know where to start—it's not like I have any queer friends to talk to. Well, Brett might be, but he's never talked about his love life, and I can't just *ask* a coworker about his sexuality. More importantly, even if I were brave enough to do some self-exploration, imagining coming out to my family makes me want to curl up in the bottom of a planter and die. I already disappoint Mom and Dad in so many ways—I don't need to add 'will never settle down with a husband' to the list. They're too set in their beliefs to understand, and I've heard their scoffs whenever they see anything gay on TV.

"This one's the most beginner-friendly," I tell the couple, pointing to a little Ficus Bonsai.

Movement in my periphery catches my eye.

Shit. Melanie.

She stops dead, her eyes bulging so she looks murderous, and jabs a finger toward the long line at the cash registers. "*Now*," she mouths.

I nod.

As the couple examines each tiny tree from all angles, I bolt to the cash registers—but I can't stop my gaze from pulling back to them like a magnet.

They make companionship look easy. But how much time and effort did it take them to get to that place?

I stand by what I told Olivia about being better off single. A relationship isn't a priority right now, and it might never be. And as of recently, I officially have other things to focus on.

"I've been waiting for ten minutes," an older woman snaps as I open the second till. Behind me, my coworker Patricia scans items as fast as she can, sweat beading on her forehead.

"Sorry about that," I trill with a forced smile. "We'll get you moving right away."

I start ringing through customers, my least favorite part of the job. Life drains from my body like a plant left in high temperatures, leaving me depleted and wilting.

Forest. Birds. Empty space. Nobody for miles.

The property beckons me until I keep looking out the window, antsy.

The lesbian couple comes through my till with the Ficus Bonsai, snapping me back to reality.

"We'll give this one a shot," the blonde says.

"Great!" I scan it, fumbling a little.

Why is my face burning up? Am I seriously being awkward right now?

The embarrassment only amplifies the embarrassment until I'm caught in a loop of mortification like a snake eating its tail.

"Hun, look at this," the masculine one says, pointing to a book on the rotating display by the cash register. Amid the gardening manuals, there's one with a cozy cottage on the cover and the title, *Homesteading for Beginners: A Step-by-Step Guide to Living off the Land*.

The blonde picks it up and flips through it. "Ooh, the dream..."

Something stirs inside me, coming to life. Not related to the couple—though I really need to unpack what's going on—but the book.

On the back is a grid of photos: a tomato plant, a chicken coop, a homemade windmill, a wooden compost bin, a beehive. All the pieces of a thriving, self-sufficient homestead.

A jolt of excitement shoots through my veins.

Would I be happier with a simple, old-fashioned lifestyle? Not just building a cabin for getaways, but *living* in it? How much more satisfying and affordable would life be if I grew my own food and lived off the land? I don't need anything extravagant. I can start with the essentials and spend years slowly upgrading.

They return the book to the rack, and I hand them their receipt and wish them a good day, hoping I'm not still blushing.

Melanie speed-walks by with her usual air of looking hectic without seeming to actually do anything. "Pick up the pace, Ivy," she sings.

I glare at her as she disappears behind the seed displays.

Never thought I'd hate a job where I get to garden all day, but here we are. Fuck this place. Beyond the window, the parking lot is a mess, cars honking, shopping carts from the nearby grocery store scattered in disarray, garbage littering the pavement.

Meanwhile, the homesteading book sits in front of me, practically glowing in a beam of sunlight.

Since graduating high school and moving out of my parents' house, I've lived my life in shades of gray, searching for vibrancy by diving into all these peonies and tulips. I've tried to find my own path while keeping my parents from breathing down my neck, but that's an impossible scale to balance. Landing this job? Fine, but it's not a 'real career' like their finance business or Olivia's engineering plans. My rented apartment in the city? Okay, but better save for a down payment on something nicer. I haven't achieved the degree or the corporate job or the husband and kids they envisioned for me, and I haven't fully embraced what *I* want either. The result is this constant state of feeling like I'm disappointing everyone, including myself. It's like I'm halfway to rebelling but too afraid to make the leap.

It's time to change that and go all-in on my life. Starting with leaving the city for good.

As the line dies down, Brett slinks over on tiptoe. "I'm supposed to go on break," he whispers. "Think she'll let me?"

"Nope." I rub my throbbing temples. "I'm so done."

"Same."

"But like... I'm *really* done," I say, my pulse quickening as a revelation hovers within reach. I close the cash register and face him. "Nothing about city life fits me, Brett. It's like I'm a wildflower seed trying to sprout in astroturf."

He stares at me, his eyes widening. "You've made a decision?"

"Yes." I grab the homesteading book, cradling it in my palms. "I can make it work. I don't need anything fancy to be happy. Just a tiny house and a garden."

"Ooh, and beehives," he supplies, pointing to the picture.

Slowly, a smile breaks across my face. "I think this is my calling. I need to stop being afraid of who I am and what I want."

Screw my parents' expectations, and screw Annie Lee and her cash offer. She'll have to pry a bill of sale out of my cold, dead hands.

"Yes!" Brett grabs my shoulders. "But wait—are you still talking about just going there on your days off?"

I shake my head, my heart skipping. "I'm done with pretending to be someone I'm not. I want to move there."

Brett covers his mouth. "So you're quitting?" he says into his hands. "Can I watch while you tell Melanie to shove it?"

I laugh, a wild, elated sound bubbling out of me that Melanie would surely disapprove of.

I'm going to do it—I'm going to use my inheritance to move to the Cariboo and build a homestead.

From the journal of Emma Thornton

June 16, 1863 - Fort Yale

The cramped voyage by boat is behind me, but I fear what perils lie ahead. Even the wild beauty of this land, with its snow-tipped mountains, crashing waterfalls, and sheer cliff faces, does not seem so splendid now that I must continue on foot. Rumors are that the route to the Cariboo gold-fields can be deadly, which I must remember at summer's end so I do not begin the journey home too late.

I cannot afford the \$130 luxury of a stagecoach, and anyway, the driver barely spared me a glance when I asked about the fare. So, I am joining a pack train for \$20. My supplies are on a little chestnut mare who's got a real temper. I quite like her.

It's noisy here, all the pack trains and stagecoaches competing for business. As it happens, these gold-crazed men have dreamed up an even worse idea than the flimsy canoes littering the riverbed: camels! Men brought the beasts over by boat, thinking they would be better for packing. Alas, their wretched smell terrifies the horses and mules, and their feet are not meant for this hard, rocky terrain. I suspect I have only seen the beginning of the lengths people will go to for a bit of gold.

The journey to the gold-fields, a town they call Barkerville, will take us a month. I do hope I like the folks I'll be traveling with. There's Jonathan Clarke and his wife, who only introduced herself

as Mrs. Clarke. (I swear women aren't allowed to be their own people sometimes, especially out here.) The Clarkes are weary and thin after a long trek from the east. There's also Silas Dawson, a seasoned prospector who first washed up riches in 1848 in California. He's rather grumpy and, after eyeing me up and down like I was a dog with fleas, warned me that, "only men with experience, capital, and determination strike it rich panning for gold, missy." I have no experience nor capital, and I am not even a man, but I reckon I have enough determination to make up for the rest of it. Besides, I've come this far, and I'll hang before I let the fear of failure stop me. I am as capable as any of the men on this muddy road, and I will send home riches, no matter what it takes.

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STRIKING GOLD

BY TIANA WARNER

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