

A winter landscape with snow-covered ground and bare trees under a blue sky. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down a path of snow. The trees are thin and leafless, their dark trunks contrasting with the white snow. Long, soft shadows are cast across the snow, suggesting a low sun. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall mood is quiet and serene.

FREE LOVE

A novel by Annelies Pool

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Prelude Books

902 Finlayson CRT,
Yellowknife NT, X1A 3A6
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Cover photo by Dave Brosha

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Author's Note: *Free Love* is a work of fiction, set in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. While I have depicted Yellowknife as accurately as possible, I have taken liberties with geographical and historical accuracy: creating buildings that have never existed; placing Caribou Carnival in early April instead of late March; changing the vegetation of Joliffe Island; putting more houseboats in Yellowknife Bay than existed at the time, etc. All of these changes were made to maintain the mood and plot of the story.

Free Love has been written and published with the financial assistance of the NWT Arts Council and the Business Development Investment Corporation of the NWT. The author is grateful for this support.



Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9865600-2-6

For Joanne and Thelma

Chapter One

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, February 1984

After deciding that I didn't need medical attention, Faith, the night attendant at the detox centre, lead me into a room with two empty beds. I collapsed face down on the one near the window. I tried to sleep but the craving for a drink filled every nook and cranny of my soul. I couldn't stay still. Faith brought me a glass of juice but just looking at it made me want to puke. I was shaky and wobbly inside and, somewhere in the back of my head, a thought beat like a drum: "What is happening to me? What is happening to me?"

I finally dozed for a couple of hours but, when I awoke I felt like shit, even worse than the night before. I stumbled into the bathroom and retched but my stomach was empty. I came out and Grace, the day attendant, ambushed me with a bottle of Mr. Clean and a pair of rubber gloves. "Since you're spending so much

time in there, you might as well clean it up,” she said. “Everybody pitches in around here.”

“But I’m sick.”

“You’re lucky you don’t see snakes, like some people. Or spiders.”

I was tempted to walk out but the idea of going back to my cold, lonely house made me want to cry. I put on the rubber gloves and tackled the washroom, trying not to barf as I scrubbed the toilet.

When I was done, I went into the front room. Crazy Mary Thorn sat in a raggedy brown lounge watching Coronation Street on TV and clutching the remote, a poster of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and a depressing array of hearts and cupids on the wall behind her. Apparently, Valentine’s Day was later that week and volunteers had put the decorations up the day before to cheer up the inmates or “clients” as Grace called them.

Everybody in Yellowknife knew Crazy Mary. She was a burly street drunk who made pocket money clearing snow in the winter and sweeping streets in the summer, lording over a gang of fellow drunks as though they were her personal serfs. I’d heard that she’d run for mayor years earlier and come in second. Looking at her now, I had a vague memory of seeing her in the bar sometime last summer. She’d stuck her head in and screamed “wanna buy some fish?” then tried to bring her shopping cart through the door. The stench from whatever she had in the cart had nearly made me pass out. I never thought that my drinking was anything like Crazy Mary’s and I couldn’t believe that Grace was now introducing us like we were peers.

Mary told me to fuck off without taking her eyes from the TV.

“Manners, Mary,” said Grace. “Marissa just got in last night and is still feeling rough.”

“Hi,” Mary grumbled, her eyes riveted to the screen.

“Mary’s like that to everybody,” Grace said. “Everybody except me, that is. She does it to me, she’ll be out on her ass and she knows it. Come and meet Roy.”

Roy was a skinny guy with long curly hair who sat on a couch reading a Louis L’Amour western. When Grace introduced him,

he looked up briefly, turned three shades of red then dropped his gaze back down to his book. There was something familiar about him but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I stifled an impulse to run out of the room.

The final credits for Coronation Street were now rolling across the TV screen. "C'mon Mary. Time to chop onions," Grace said. Mary put down the remote and glared at me. "It fucking better be here when I get back," she said, before she followed Grace into the kitchen.

I lit a cigarette and poured myself a glass of juice from the pitcher on the side table. The drink was so cold it hurt my teeth. I looked through the battered paperbacks in the bookcase but they were mostly trash romances and blockbuster thrillers. The best I could find was a Robert Ludlum. I sat down and tried to read. I was still trying to concentrate when I heard a sniff from Roy's direction. His shoulders were shaking and his head was so close to the pages of his book that I thought he was going to snort them.

This place was a bastion of losers. What was I doing here with these people? I took the Ludlum and retreated to my room. Grace found me there five minutes later. "It's lunchtime," she said. "After that, I'd like you to watch a movie about alcoholism."

"Why? I'm not an alcoholic."

Grace sat down on the other bed. "If you're not an alcoholic, then why are you here?"

I didn't have an answer to that.

Chapter Two

Yellowknife, Christmas Day 1983 - February 1984

As long as I drank out of stemware, I was sure it was not possible for me to be an alcoholic.

I always drank out of stemware, even when I was in the bush where everybody else sucked their booze straight out of the bottle. Today, in honour of Christmas, I was drinking from a brandy snifter. I loved everything about this glass, the smooth feel as it sat in the palm of my hand, the way the stem fit snug between my fingers. This was the kind of glass used by a woman comfortable in her own skin, a woman who wasn't afraid to go into bars alone.

To go with the glass, I had a couple of forty-pounders of Black Label Scotch. I knew that didn't sound very classy and I'd had every intention of getting cognac or brandy or ... or at least a more expensive brand of Scotch.

But Jean shanghaied me after work yesterday.

I got off early because it was Christmas Eve. I was on my way to the Super A to get sweet potatoes for the Christmas dinner potluck that Tina and Jim held every year in their big house on Latham Island. After getting the sweet potatoes I planned to go to the liquor store and then spend a civilized Christmas Eve at home.

But I never made it to the Super A. Or the liquor store.

Instead, Jean dragged me to the Gold Range. We ran into some people, got to talking, had a few drinks, then a few more and, before we knew it, the waiter announced an early “last call” and Bobby Macrow insisted that we come to his Christmas Eve party. It would have been rude to say no.

By the time the party was over, everything was closed and I was forced to resort to the bootlegger. All he had were forty-pounders of Black Label, about twenty of them lined up on his coffee table. “Ready for the holiday rush,” he said. I asked about sweet potatoes but he didn’t have any.

When I woke up this morning, I decided the hell with the Christmas potluck. I hated Christmas anyway.

I raised the glass to my lips and took a long, slow sip, then swished it around in my mouth like a connoisseur. It scraped my throat on the way down, velvet gravel, smooth and jagged at the same time, and then the warmth spread into my veins. I took another sip. After the third drink, I felt the familiar click in my head and the world snapped into focus.

I was propelled to my feet. I turned on the stereo and The Rolling Stones’ *Brown Sugar* filled the room. I raised my arms and bumped my hips to the beat, then the sounds of the saxophone reached out like tendrils and caressed my neck, my shoulders, my breasts and I was on the beach, squinting against the sun, sand squished between my toes. Just me, the sun and the beat.

I danced through *Symphony for the Devil*, *Wild Horses*, *Sister Morphine* ... until the tape stopped and I collapsed into the dump-rescue recliner, turned to the picture window, lit a smoke and poured another drink. It was only mid-afternoon but the sun was already going down. The snow-covered ice of Yellowknife Bay had faded into shadow and the trees of Jolliffe Island had become black silhouettes. I had a vague impulse to get out my paints and

capture the shades of the December nightfall on canvas. But it was too much effort to get out of the chair.

Instead, I watched pinprick stars punctuate the blackness one by one. I loved this time of winter when darkness shrouded me from the harshness of light. I was filled with a sense of well-being. I saw my life stretch before me in infinite, glittering possibility. I felt I was destined to accomplish a great task, the details yet to be revealed. If I wasn't an atheist, I'd swear I was having a spiritual experience.

I replenished my drink, tipped it back and, as suddenly as my spirits had soared, they crashed. The darkness filled up with demons on trains, severed limbs and blood. A savage voice in my head whispered, 'what the fuck are you doing spending Christmas alone in this freezing hovel?' A slime of self-hatred rose from my gut and I ground the lit end of my cigarette into my arm. I screamed, not at the pain of the burn, but because I realized that only crazy people did things like that and what if somebody found out and I ended up in a straightjacket on the psych ward?

I sucked the burn long and hard, hoping that when I stopped, it would be gone. But it was still there, an inflamed dot on my arm. For the first time that day, I felt the cold in the house. I wrapped myself in a sleeping bag and pulled my chair close to the vent to catch the trickle of rising heat. I burst into tears.

Damn Ed. Everything would be fine if it hadn't been for him. If only he'd fixed the fucking furnace before going on a year-long drunk and then gallivanting off to work at some god-forsaken mine in Nunavut, leaving me in a cold shack with four inches of frost on the inside of the windows. At least I didn't need spray snow in a can to make the place look like Christmas.

I threw my drink against the picture window. The brandy snifter shattered and sprayed shards of glass on the carpet but it left the window (the only one without frost), intact.

I needed to recapture my feeling of well-being. I took a drink straight from the bottle and then wiped my eyes with the edge of the sleeping bag. I took another drink and my gaze lit upon Sam, the tall dieffenbachia who lorded it over the living room like a tinpot dictator.

Sam was the only person I could trust.

I dribbled a tiny bit of Scotch into his soil. His leaves shuddered in pleasure.

Sam was our baby. Ed and I had found him a year ago, bedraggled and lonely in a corner of the Hudson's Bay Store. I felt sorry for him. Ed, who wanted us to have children someday, thought that taking care of a plant would be good practice for having a human baby.

We brought Sam home and loved him. He thrived. Well, that is, except for the time last Christmas when Jean and Ed never got around to cutting down a tree so, after demolishing a turkey, downing three bottles of wine, a half bottle of Scotch and smoking some of Jean's Montreal hash, we turned Sam into our official Christmas tree. We didn't have any decorations, so we sprinkled him with flour to make it look like he was covered with snow. Unfortunately we got a bit carried away with the flour. The next morning, I was terrified that we had smothered him.

"But I made it up to you, didn't I, Sam?" I now said as I stroked his leaves. I had sponged off the flour and proceeded to water and feed him plant food every day. I even played him music. He'd grown two feet and was now tall and handsome. I looked at him and felt as proud as though I'd given birth to him myself.

I took another drink and kicked a shard of glass across the room. The phone rang and the noise perforated my temples as though I had stabbed myself. It was probably Ed, the last person I wanted to talk to. I counted the rings ... six, seven, eight, nine. Finally, on the eleventh ring, it stopped. Then it started again. I threw myself on my bed, put a pillow over my head and hugged my plush tiger, Mr. Moffatt, as tight as I could. The ringing stopped and started again. It pierced my dreams and reverberated through my head in waves of pain and flashing lights. I screamed at it to shut up. Finally, I yanked the cord out of the wall, took the phone out on the back deck and buried it in a snowdrift.

A quarter moon now hung bright over Jolliffe Island and, for a moment, the night demons receded. I stepped out of myself and saw a crazy woman having a fight with an inanimate object. I wondered how it had come to this. Then I smashed back

into myself with a pounding head and dry mouth. I kicked the snowdrift, went inside, bolted the door, grabbed the bottle of Scotch and took another long drink.

Hung-over and shaking, I dragged myself back to my job at the library two days after Christmas and barricaded myself in my office. I was looking over a list of acquisitions when the phone rang. Stifling the temptation to run out of the room, I picked up and answered in my best librarian voice. It was my mother's holier-than-thou friend, Barb.

"How did you get this number?"

"Your mother gave it to me. Before she died."

My hands began to shake. "What?"

"You heard me, damn it! Your mother's dead. She passed away this morning. Breast cancer. They found it too late."

"Why didn't ..."

"I told her to call you but she wouldn't. She was in denial."

"But ..."

"She went into the hospital on Christmas Eve. If you'd bothered to call your own parents on Christmas, you would have had a chance to say good-bye. I'm helping your dad with the funeral," Barb said. "You'd better come home now. He needs you. He's sitting there, holding her library card and tears are rolling down his face."

"Dad's crying?"

"Yes, your dad's crying. This is hard for him. Come home."

"I ..."

"I know all about you and your dad but it's time to get over that and come home. It's what your mom would want."

I put the phone back on the cradle, put on my parka and walked out of the library like a robot. I hadn't seen Dad since I'd left home thirteen years earlier, right after I finished high school. I'd had lunch with Mom four years ago and I'd gotten mad and walked out on her. I never imagined that would be the last time I'd see her. I felt like a rope was tightening around my throat.

When I got home, I made a Scotch-spiked coffee to calm me down while I tried to decide what to do. I finally dug the phone

out of the snowdrift to see if it still worked. If it did, I would go back to Hamilton and if it didn't, I would stay in Yellowknife. The phone sprang to life with a dial tone as soon as I plugged the jack into the wall so, after a few more drinks, I called and reserved a seat on the next morning's plane. Then I phoned Jean. He was at my door with a couple of cases of beer within half an hour.

"Ahh, Mama, bad times, huh?" he said and put his arms around me. He was a woolly, barrel-chested man and I sank into the sweaty smell of him. He opened a couple of beer and we settled down on the floor next to Sam and the vent. Soon we were listening to BB King moaning about the thrill being gone. After about four beers, my head clicked and everything but the music and Jean disappeared. Sometime after dark, I boiled a couple of ancient hot dogs that were tucked into a back corner of the refrigerator. We ate them with stale bread and giggled that if they didn't kill us then nothing could. It was close to midnight when I remembered I had to catch a plane early in the morning.

"No point in sleeping now," said Jean. He fished a tinfoil package out of his pocket, opened it, and two bennies fell into his hand. The speed took twenty minutes to kick in, and then we were energized and the world was new. We talked, and talked. I bit my tongue and chewed the insides of my cheeks ragged and still we talked. The beer went down like mercury. We finished the second case and I was flat on the floor, the booze weighing down my limbs while the speed hurled thoughts through my brain like meteors. I remembered that somewhere, in another universe, my mother had died but I couldn't move. I couldn't move. I was still on the floor when I opened my eyes to the sun shining in the window.

"Merde!" Jean groped his way to a sitting position. "That stuff is bad shit, man."

The memory of my mother's death seared into my brain and the strangled feeling that I had the day before came back. I crawled up on a chair and looked at the kitchen clock. It was after noon. I had missed the plane.

"Bad shit," Jean repeated, rubbing his head. "The Russian army's marching through my brain. With its boots on. Got any smoke?"

I shook my head and stumbled to the fridge hoping to find a beer. It was empty. Rage swept through me. “She should have told me. She should have told me she was sick!” I banged my fists against the fridge until they hurt.

A few hours later, when the afternoon had already settled into the desolate darkness of winter, Jean pulled his truck into the parking lot of an apartment building on Franklin Avenue. Holding my hand, he led me along a path that wound through the snow to the balcony of Darrin’s apartment. There was a light on and, as I got closer, I could see a pair of pale blue jockey shorts draped over the lamp.

“The shorts are the signal,” said Jean. “When the shorts are on the lamp, he’s open for business.”

We climbed over the balcony railing and knocked on the glass door. Darrin let us in and I collapsed on the couch while he rolled a joint and handed it around. I took the smoke into my lungs, held it, and each time I let it go, some of the heaviness lifted and the light seemed brighter. By the time we finished the first joint, the blackness had retreated. I looked around the room with curiosity, saw the shorts on the lamp and broke into giggles.

“The shorts are the signal,” I said, laughing until tears streamed down my face. Soon all three of us were laughing and bellowing “the shorts are the signal.” Darrin plopped a bag of caramels on the coffee table. We demolished them. We crinkled the cellophane wrappers, hurled them toward the television and giggled like fools when they floated down onto the carpet. We were still laughing when Darrin let in two guys and lit another joint. The evening dissolved in smoke, beer and music.

Jean was supposed to go to Gjoa Haven on a construction job the following morning so he dropped me off at home just before midnight. I awoke the next day with the feeling that something awful had happened. I remembered my mother’s death and the silence of her absence roared in my head like thunder.

The days melted into each other. I was in a bar with some bearded guy, then in the back alleyway with a short chick and we were both screaming our heads off. I was in somebody's apartment crawling on the floor without my pants on looking for my shoes, a stranger passed out naked on the bed. I was in a bar with Cookie from work, embarrassed because I couldn't explain why I had stopped showing up at the library. I was home, covered in paint, dragging a canvas into my bedroom and leaning it against the wall. I was on a bed and a face hovered above me, grunting "make me come, make me come." I got a letter from my mom, back from the dead. I was crazy dancing in the Gold Range and wearing some unknown guy's Labatt's T-shirt. I was home again lying on the floor looking up at Sam. I was drinking boilermakers with a bunch of guys in somebody's trailer.

One day I passed out alone in my own bed and, when I awoke, I noticed that my tummy had disappeared and that my jeans were hanging off my hip bones. I wondered what had become of me. I raided the kitchen cupboards but all I could find was an old box of cornflakes. I grabbed a handful, shoved it into my mouth and made myself chew but it sat like a lump on my tongue and I couldn't swallow. I spat it out into the sink.

There was a bang on the door and Jean let himself in. "What happened to you?" he said. "I'm gone for four weeks and you lose fifty pounds!" He wrapped me in his arms.

"You need some grub," he said, after he disentangled himself. "Wait here."

I listened to his truck pull away and I started to shake. I was still shaking when he came back with a bag of groceries. He put the bag on the counter and pulled out oatmeal, milk and brown sugar.

"I grew up on this stuff," he said, stirring the pot on the stove while I sat at the kitchen table. "It'll make you strong."

Jean ladled the oatmeal into a bowl, added milk, sprinkled on sugar and put it on the table in front of me. "I haven't had this since I was a kid," I said. I took a spoonful and then felt like puking before I got it to my mouth. I put the spoon back into the bowl. Jean sat opposite me, spooned up some oatmeal and held it

in front of my face. “Open the hatch!” he said. I opened my mouth and this time I swallowed. Jean fed me the whole bowl, making me feel like a little girl. I burst into tears.

“I can’t do it anymore,” I said. “I can’t do it anymore.”

“It’s okay, Marissa, it’s okay. I’ll take you to where it’s safe.”

That’s when Jean took me to the detox centre.

Chapter Three

Yellowknife, February 1984

I was in the detox lounge having an after supper smoke when the door slammed and the room was filled by a big woman in a long blue parka. She threw back her hood to reveal short dark hair and dangling earrings, a cupid on one ear and a heart on the other. Her eyes skimmed the room and settled on me.

“Well, hello there!” she boomed. “I’m Big Dot. Are you ready to go to the meeting?” She squinted her eyes as though she couldn’t see properly then leaned forward and softened her voice, “I’ll bet you’d like nothing more right now than to have a drink. You think you’re never going to have any more fun and that you’ll never get laid again.”

I blushed.

“Listen to me,” Dot said. “It’s going to get better.”

What was going to get better? Was she going to change the past? Bring Mom back to life? Cure Ed’s drinking problem?

She straightened up. “Are you ready to go to the AA meeting?” she repeated. “I come here on Wednesdays to take anybody who wants to go.”

Dot looked at Mary who was again in front of the TV with the remote in her hand. “Fuck you,” Mary said.

Dot turned back to me. “If you’re going to stay sober, you’ve got to go to meetings. C’mon.”

Dot was too big a force to resist. Struggling into my parka, I followed her out the door and we clomped down the steps to the parking lot. I looked at Dot’s high heeled boots. “How do you walk around the icy streets in those things?”

“I don’t walk,” said Dot. “I drive. And I’ll keep on driving until people in Yellowknife get their asses in gear and learn to shovel the snow off their sidewalks like they do in civilized places.”

She led me to a rusted-out van that discharged oily exhaust into the night.

The meeting was at the Friendship Centre in a smoky room full of people scattered on couches and chairs. A man wearing jeans held up by a string threaded through the belt loops talked to a fastidious woman in a pinstriped jacket. He looked like he was crawling with lice but the woman didn’t seem to care about his personal hygiene. Another guy sat alone on one end of a couch with his hands splayed on his knees, head hanging and eyes half-shut, while at the other end, a woman with messy hair and smudged lipstick crammed Oreo cookies into her mouth. Others lined up in front of a table that held a big over-iced cake, a belching coffee pot, a stack of Styrofoam cups and a giant jar of Coffee-Mate which everybody dumped into their coffee as though it was booze.

Big Dot led me to a chair, sat me down and left me there. I looked at the wall of AA propaganda, plaques with the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions, and slogans: First Things First; Easy Does It; Let Go and Let God, and was overcome with the panicky feeling that I had wandered into a cult. What would I say if somebody asked me to accept Jesus as my personal saviour? I wanted to ask Dot to drive me back to the detox but she was

hanging around the coffee pot, greeting and hugging people as though she were a red carpet star. Maybe I could sneak out before anybody noticed. But what if somebody stopped me and denounced me as a sinner?

When Dot finally returned, she was followed by a pudgy woman with lacquered nails and bleached hair. "Meet my new pigeon, Missy," Dot said, handing me a coffee.

"My name's Marissa."

"Yes, Missy."

The woman took my hand and smiled. "You are going to be so happy!" she said, through a miasma of perfume. I thought she was crazy.

Dot was now talking with a guy in brown cords and a flannel shirt whom she introduced as Tom. "We're celebrating Tom's birthday today. Three years sober. Tom gives good hugs," she said, giving my arm a yank to make me stand up.

Tom was a big man and when he enfolded me into his arms I felt like I'd disappeared. I tensed and waited for him to make a move, to grab my ass or grind his groin against me, but all he did was hold me for a few seconds. Then he looked me in the eyes and said, "It's going to be okay." He turned and melted into the crowd while Dot introduced me to a tall native man wearing a red shirt and cowboy boots. It was a blur, one name after another, people talking to me in platitudes: 'You're in the right place;' 'Keep coming back.' Everybody was so friendly, it scared me. When would one of them snap, grab a gun and go shoot up the nearest MacDonald's? Or maybe the Kentucky Fried Chicken. There was no MacDonald's in Yellowknife.

A voice thundered. "Hello everybody, my name is Bob and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Bob!" Everybody chanted in unison, rekindling my suspicion that this was a cult. Bob picked up a big blue book and began to read in a monotone that almost put me to sleep. I thought of the time that Ed and I had decided to test whether we were alcoholics. I had read that an alcoholic couldn't stop after the first drink so we went to the bar, drank only one drink and left, thereby proving we didn't have a problem. Then we celebrated

by drinking a couple of cases of beer. Jean came over with some Montreal hash and when we were feeling good, we decided to pretend that we were at an AA meeting. Jean confessed to being an alcoholic, dropped to his knees and made a solemn vow never to drink again. I laughed so hard at the look on his face that I had a coughing fit. Remembering it now gave me the giggles and I couldn't help letting out a snort. Big Dot gave me a look and I wondered if I would ever get invited to another meeting.

When he finished reading, Bob announced that Tom was celebrating his third birthday and would be the speaker for the meeting. Everybody clapped and cheered as though Tom had won the Nobel Prize. I was tempted to whisper to Dot that I didn't know that they awarded the Prize for staying off the hooch but everybody was so serious that I kept my mouth shut.

Tom started by saying that he was a grateful alcoholic and then he droned on about how wonderful the program was and all the people who had helped him and ... I stopped listening and imagined myself in a red sequined top, holding a glass of Scotch on the rocks with my red-tipped fingers while listening to soft jazz in a piano bar. I gave the pianist a sultry look while I swayed to the music. He couldn't resist me and as soon as he finished his set he came over, ordered me another drink and brushed his lips against the back of my neck ... I felt a dig in my side from Dot's elbow and remembered I was at an AA meeting.

Tom stopped talking, blinked, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said after he got control of himself. "I never thought I'd get one year of sobriety, let alone three ... The day before I sobered up, I woke up from a drunk and realized I'd nearly killed a man."

Nearly killed somebody in a blackout? Holy shit! I'd had blackouts but I had only done stupid things, like dancing on a table in the Range or sitting in a room screaming or falling in bed with some guy I'd only just met. I'd never tried to kill anybody. At least, I didn't think so.

"What I remember most about that day is the stink of the carpet. It smelled like ten years worth of stale puke and beer," Tom was now saying. "I passed out on the floor of a party house

somewhere in Edmonton. That stink was what I woke up to. Beside my head was a pizza box full of old crusts, cigarette butts and ashes. A few feet away a guy I didn't know lay on his back. He had a gash on his forehead and blood had seeped into the carpet beside him. There were pieces of broken glass around him. That's when I noticed the broken bottle in my hand."

Tom had dropped the bottle as though it was on fire. He crawled over to examine the unconscious man and, to his relief, the man was breathing and had a steady pulse. The cut had stopped bleeding.

"I had never done anything like that before," Tom said. "Not that I could remember."

Tom left the house and staggered down the street, expecting at any moment to hear sirens behind him. He felt as though everybody on the street was silently accusing him, calling him a murderer. He made his way to the Cecil Hotel in downtown Edmonton where he ordered two glasses of draft beer to calm his trembling. Two glasses weren't enough. It took more than eight for him to relax.

"I told myself that while it had been a close call, the guy was still alive and I had nothing to worry about," he said. "But I couldn't get the picture of that guy lying on the floor out of my mind."

At eleven o'clock at night, Tom stumbled out of the Cecil and crossed the street to the bus terminal.

"I don't know why I did that. There was no bar in the bus terminal," Tom told the meeting. His comment broke the tension. Everybody laughed.

The Edmonton bus terminal was dirty and depressing. The only other people there were a kid playing pinball who kept saying 'what the fuuuuuck' and a guy in mismatched sneakers jiggling his leg like maniac. Tom sank into an orange plastic chair. A bus pulled into one of the stalls outside and a handful of people straggled through the door, bringing a cloud of diesel exhaust in with them. One of them, a middle-aged man with a heavy backpack, fell into the seat beside Tom.

After introducing himself as Alphonse, the guy said that he was waiting for the midnight bus that would take him back home to Yellowknife. Alphonse had been an oil patch drunk around Calgary for twelve years, making a ton of money and then drinking it all away in an endless cycle that left him either drunk or broke. Finally, after a particularly vicious hangover, he decided he'd had enough and he quit, took a bus to Edmonton and spent a few months working at the Salvation Army.

Now he was going home, going home to heal. "Yellowknife is a healing place," he said. Tom asked him how the air was up north and Alphonse said it was the best air in the world: crisp and clean.

"I hadn't been able to get the stench of that carpet out of my nostrils," Tom said. "And I couldn't separate that smell from the guy I'd hit. It was the thought of crisp air that made me decide to go to Yellowknife."

Tom spent the last of his money on a bus ticket to Yellowknife. He sat beside Alphonse and, as his last drunk dissolved into his last hangover, Tom listened to Alphonse's story of how he had sobered up.

"I don't remember a damn thing that Alphonse said," Tom said. "But I remember the feeling. It felt like I wasn't alone anymore. I told Alphonse that too. He said that was the power of stories. I've never forgotten that. The power of stories. When the stories start to get better, you know you're healing."

The bus arrived in Yellowknife late at night after twenty-two hours on the road. When the two men got off, Alphonse gave Tom twenty dollars and disappeared down the street. With nowhere to go, Tom found the RCMP station and asked to stay in one of the cells overnight. The next morning, he found a job ad for a carpenter in a newspaper while having breakfast at the Miner's Mess. The job was in Hay River. He applied and got hired on the spot. "They got me a plane ticket and, by that night, I was living in the hotel in Hay River with three squares and money coming in," Tom said. "I haven't looked back. But one day, I'm going to find the man I nearly killed and make an amend."

The room stayed quiet for a few moments after Tom finished his story, and then everybody burst into applause. I thought

of my own drinking and all the stories I had made up about it. The truth was that my drinking experiences had never been like I imagined. Even if I started drinking from stemware in a fancy place, I always drank too much too fast and managed to end up in the Gold Range with a posse of farting, belching miners. There was always somebody to tell me how I'd passed out with my head down on the table. Or how I'd mouthed off at the bartender and been thrown out onto the street.

Maybe I was an alcoholic. I felt like crying. It was like being an eight year old all over again.

The meeting ended with everybody holding hands in a circle and saying the Lord's Prayer. I whispered to Dot that I was an atheist but she didn't seem to hear me. Both Dot and the man on the other side of me grabbed my hands and launched into the prayer, making me feel like I did when I was eleven and got caught putting buttons into the church collection. When the circle broke, the candles on the cake were lit and everybody sang *Happy Birthday* as though we were all in kindergarten. It made me feel like drinking.

Dot took off to hug and chat her way to the cake table and left me leaning against the wall, trying to look nonchalant. Like I wasn't thinking about have a drink. A short native woman with long braids and a red sweatshirt brought me a piece of cake. Her face was lined and there was a peaceful quality about her.

"I'm Eliza," she said. "You look like you're new."

"Um, yes but I'm not ..."

"I'm not working right now," she said. "If you want to talk, you can come see me. If you feel like drinking, call me first." She handed me a slip of paper with her name, address and phone number. Before she could say anything else, Dot appeared beside her, winked and said, "Ah, I see you've met the Grand Poobah! Our Elder. She was one of the first AA members here in Yellowknife. Her and Frank."

Eliza put her hands on her hips and said, with an exasperated sigh, "Don't listen to anything Dot says. I'm just a drunk, same as everybody else, eh?"

Dot chuckled and gave Eliza a squeeze. Eliza tried to look stern but I could see from the merriment in her eyes that she wasn't mad at all.

"Time to get you back to detox, Missy," Dot said. "I have a hockey game that needs my attention." As I followed Dot toward the door, Eliza called after me not to forget what she had said. I looked back and nodded but I couldn't imagine ever calling her.

After Dot dropped me off at detox, I fell onto the couch in front of the TV. I was half-watching an episode of Dallas, along with Mary and Faith, when an RCMP cruiser's lights flashed outside the window. The door opened, and a white-faced waif, dressed in a toque, layers of sweaters and a pair of rubber boots stumbled into the room ahead of an RCMP officer. She reeked of booze and her eyes were glassy and distant. Mary took one look and grabbed the remote. "Drugs," she snorted.

"We picked her up running down the middle of Franklin Avenue, screaming nonsense," the officer said.

"She's so young!" said Faith. "She can't be more than nineteen."

The girl tilted her head back, stretched out her arms and ran around the room, making airplane noises. Then she collapsed on the floor into the foetal position, covered her head with her arms and let out a moan that carried a world of loneliness and pain. She grabbed her stomach, squeezed her eyes shut and tears spilled sideways down her cheeks. A dark stain formed at her crotch and leaked red onto the carpet.

"She's haemorrhaging! Must be a miscarriage. I'll call an ambulance." Faith stormed out of the room. "Marissa, get some blankets and cover her up."

I tore the covers off my bed, placed them over the still-moaning girl and sank down on the floor beside her. I didn't know what to do. Everything – my mom's death, detox, the meeting – was too much for me and again, I wanted, more than I had ever wanted anything before, to have a drink. I wanted that feeling of euphoria that you get after the right number of drinks. Even if it only lasted for a moment, I wanted it. The girl's face was so white it was almost translucent. She looked vulnerable, unequipped to

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handle the world. Something inside me shifted. I put a tentative hand on her head. When she didn't flinch, I stroked her soft and tangled hair.

Chapter Four

Hamilton, Ontario, December 1962

I had waited forever for the snow to come. Finally, on the Saturday before Christmas, I awoke to a sparkling world of white. I wanted to play outside so bad that I decided to go, whether Dad like it or not. I pulled on my favourite pink sweatshirt that Mom said clashed with my red hair, and opened my bedroom door a crack. The house was quiet. I listened for the rustle of a newspaper but heard nothing. Snoring started up in my parent's room and a grin split my face. Dad had gone back to bed after driving Mom to work. The coast was clear.

I crept down the stairs and tiptoed through the front hall. Quiet as a mouse, I stepped into my blue Salvation Army snowsuit. I yanked at the zipper but it got stuck just past my belly button. I pulled and pulled but it wouldn't come loose. Tears squeezed from my eyes without permission. The toilet flushed upstairs. Dad

was awake. I grabbed my long scarf, stuffed it into the gap in my snowsuit, shoved on my boots and hurried out.

Made it! A thousand elastic bands inside me let go.

The snow was up over my ankles and hung from everything: roofs, telephone lines, trees. The parked cars were white bumps. I imagined crawling into one of them and curling up inside, a cozy snow cave where nobody could find me, where I could read with a flashlight and eat Oh Henry bars, as many as I wanted.

A man in a fur hat came out of a house across the street, carrying a shovel. That reminded me that Dad always looked out the front window as soon as he came downstairs. What if he saw me?

I hurried down the street, careful to lift my knees high because I was making the first tracks and I wanted to leave neat footprints like an elf, not draggy ones like Frankenstein. I turned the corner onto Ford Street, raced past the field and Mr. Smithers' house (making sure to keep my fingers crossed to ward off evil spirits) until I came to a stop in front of Nina's grey stucco house across from the railroad tracks.

Nina was my best friend. She was allowed to play with Barbie dolls and go downtown by herself. Her older brother George was dreamy with curly hair and long, feathery eyelashes. I didn't care that Nina's father was German but Dad said they were Nazis and that I was betraying my Dutch ancestry by being friends with Nina. It wasn't fair. I didn't have any other friends and Nina had never done anything to Dad. Plus, I didn't understand how Mr. Bauer could be a Nazi when he didn't even speak with a German accent.

I knew somebody was awake at Nina's because there were footprints in her yard, so I yelled for her to come out and play. She zoomed out the door in her new red snowsuit, spread her arms, yelled "snow angels" at the top of her lungs and dropped into the snow. I threw myself down beside her. We swished our arms and legs to make the angels' wings and skirts and then we got up and did it all over again until there were angels all over the backyard. We were lying on our backs looking up at the bright blue sky when Mr. Bauer came out of the house. I suddenly had a bad feeling like

I'd been doing something wrong. My body stiffened and I made myself as small as possible.

But Mr. Bauer wasn't mad. "There's a whole heavenly choir of angels here," he said and then called me over so he could fix my stuck zipper. He had crinkles in the corners of his eyes, just like Dad when he was in a good mood. I wondered if he ever got mad and yelled at Nina.

After he zipped my snowsuit, Mr. Bauer got busy sweeping the snow off his car. Nina grabbed a handful and rubbed it on my face. I paid her back, she knocked me over and, giggling and shrieking, we rolled in the snow. A door slammed and George came out. I just had to look at him. He was super cute in a black toque with a stray curl peeking out over his ear. I wanted to kiss him and I could feel my face turn red just thinking about it

"Dad, I'm going to shovel walks. Make some money," he said.

Nina jumped up. "Can we go too? I need money for new Barbie clothes."

"Get lost," George said.

"George, take the girls, just this once," said Mr. Bauer.

"Aw, Dad!" George said but Mr. Bauer shot him a look that made him mumble something under his breath and then say "okay, okay, they can come."

Snow shoveling with George! I thought I would swoon. Mr. Bauer found us a couple of shovels and we followed George down the street. He stopped at spooky Mr. Smithers' house and grinned in an evil way. Nina made a shocked horror movie face which I ignored because I didn't want George to think I was a scaredy-cat. I made myself grin as widely as George, then went and stood beside him while he knocked on the door.

Last summer, Nina had double dared me to play knock and run at Mr. Smithers' house. He must have been waiting because as soon as I knocked, he opened the door. His hands shook, he smelled like a garbage can and he had hair growing out of his nose. "Yesssssss," he said and gave me the evil eye. Nina and I screamed and ran into the field, not stopping until we got to the other side and could no longer see Mr. Smithers' house. Then we laughed so

hard we nearly peed our pants. After that, I always crossed my fingers when I passed his house.

Today, Mr. Smithers was different. He was clean, his hands were steady and there was nothing hanging out of his nose. He acted like he had never seen us before and said he would pay us three dollars to shovel the walk. Nina shot me a round-eyed look of surprise and I started to giggle. George started to shovel but Nina and I couldn't stop laughing. "He must have trimmed his nose hairs," she whispered. Then she pitched a handful of snow at me. I threw some back at her and soon we were rolling in the snow again. When George finished shoveling, he wouldn't give us our share of the money because he said we hadn't done any work. Nina and I shoveled like crazy the next time, but Nina still had to threaten to tell Mr. Bauer before George would pay us.

By lunch time, we had shoveled six walks and I had three dollars in nickels, dimes and quarters. Feeling grown up, I jingled the money in my pocket and wondered if I should buy myself a Barbie. The only problem was that I would have to hide it because Mom said Barbies were too old for ten-year-olds, even grown up ones like me. Maybe I should do a grown up thing: give the money to my parents to help out with expenses.

Even though Mom and Dad tried to keep it a secret, I knew my family didn't have much money. I'd heard them talking about it when I was supposed to be asleep but was really reading under the covers. Mom wanted Dad to get a job instead of playing around with the upholstery business. She said that if he would get a job, it would be easier to put food on the table, and also easier for him to support his cigar habit. Dad said he was the man of the house and every man had a cigar and, besides, she smoked cigarettes, didn't she? Mom said the cigarettes were a small reward for spending eight hours a day cleaning up after old-age home patients who did nothing but sit and drool in their wheelchairs. Dad said he'd get a job but nobody wanted to hire foreigners.

"I'm starving," said Nina. "Let's go to my house for lunch. This afternoon we can play at your house, okay? It's your turn."

I didn't know what to say.

"Well?" she said. "You never invite me over."

Finally I said, "I'm not allowed to have people over. My dad has bad nerves."

"Oh. My uncle has bad nerves. He was in the war. Was your dad in the war?"

"It's because he doesn't ..." I stopped myself before I said Dad didn't like noise because he had a whining Wilma for a mother and a selfish brute for a dad who never took the time to teach him how to be considerate of others. Mom said I should never repeat the things that she'd said about Dad. Plus, I didn't want Nina to know how weird we were.

"Yes, he was in the war," I said.

Back at Nina's, Mrs. Bauer met us at the door. Mrs. Bauer was fat but Nina said that was only because she was going to have a baby. Her face was settled into a frown but it broke into pieces as soon as she looked at me.

"Your dad called," she said. "He wants you to come home right away." Then she stroked my head and gave me a kiss.

I snuck into the house hoping to creep up to my room before Dad saw me. It didn't work. He caught me in the hallway as I was struggling out of my snowsuit. His face turned purple.

"Where in God's name have you been?"

I plastered a grin on my face but I was shaking inside. "Dad, I've been working. Shoveling snow and earning money." I pulled out the change and held it out to him. "Three dollars. It's for you and Mom, to help pay the bills."

"Oh, you are now a big money-maker, are you?" he said. "You are going to pay the mortgage now, are you?"

He sideswiped my hand and the change went flying. Nickels, dimes and quarters rolled down the hallway and, when he hit me again, my head filled with tears and my pride over earning money shriveled so that I felt like I was the stupidest person in the world for thinking that anything I could do would ever matter. He hit me again and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop the tears from coming.

"Stop your goddamn bawling," Dad yelled and then he slapped me until I fell to the floor.

I sobbed into the linoleum and hated myself for it. I reached into myself, deep as I could go, trying to pull the tears back into my head and then I felt my guts turn to ice so that I didn't care anymore. I left myself and hung around the ceiling. As I looked down I realized that I wasn't a real person. The tears went away and I watched as Dad stopped hitting me and retreated into the kitchen. I watched as I picked myself up and hung the snowsuit in the closet. I followed myself up the stairs and into my room. I closed the door and used all my might to shove the dresser against it so Dad couldn't come in.

I sat on the bed, picked up Mr. Moffat and hugged him as tight as I could and then I came back into myself. I didn't want to but I started to cry again. It wasn't fair. All the other kids got to play in the snow and shovel walks. I was just trying to help. Why did Dad have to be so mean? I cried and cried, longing for somebody to hold me. But nobody was going to come. The only thing to do was to stop crying and pick myself up.

The sun shone through my bedroom window. My dresser was still jammed against the door, bare and silent. I looked out and saw the two little kids across the street dragging a wagon full of snow down the sidewalk. It got stuck in a drift and, when they tried to get it loose, it tipped over and dumped its load into the road. The big kid pushed the little one into the pile but the little one pulled him down and soon they were both rolling and play fighting in the snow just like Nina and I had done. I wondered if I would ever be allowed to play in the snow again.

I did what I always did when I felt bad. I took out a big pad of paper and began to draw. I drew Nina's house and the field, all covered with snow and then I put in the three of us, Nina, George and I, walking out of the yard with snow shovels over our shoulders. When I was done, I opened my box of sparkle paints. I'd gotten them for Christmas and loved the glittery paints but I didn't like the paint-by-number pictures that came with the set. I liked to draw my own pictures. I gave myself a glittering red snowsuit and Nina had a blue one. George got a purple coat. I made all the snow look like diamonds and then decided it could be night so I made the sky dark blue and full of bright stars. As I

worked everything disappeared, our house, my dad, everything, until there was nothing but me and my picture.

When I was finished, the afternoon had gone and I heard Mom come home from work, open the fridge door, pour herself a glass of apple juice and then sigh the way she always did when she came home. She came up the stairs and I could tell by the shuffle of her feet that she was tired. She was always tired.

She knocked, and tried to come in but the dresser was still against the door. "Marissa. Daddy says you're upset. Open the door. Please."

I put my shoulder to the dresser to push it back against the wall but a corner of it got stuck in a hole in the lino and it wouldn't budge. I gave another shove but it ripped the linoleum. I tried to lift the dresser up over the tear but I wasn't strong enough. I gulped. "Mom, Promise you won't get mad?"

"What's going on?"

"My dresser's in front of the door. Please don't tell Dad."

But Mom had to tell Dad because she said that the only way to get me out of the bedroom was to climb in through my window and she wasn't going to risk her life on a ladder in the middle of winter. I wrapped myself in a blanket, cowered on the bed against the wall and waited. "I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry." I said it over and over again.

When Dad got the window open and came in, his eyes were soft and he was wearing his good mood face. He examined the linoleum, said it wouldn't be too hard to fix and then lifted the dresser away from the door. Him being nice almost made it worse. The tears rolled down my cheeks again without permission.

Dad reached into his pocket and gave me his giant handkerchief. I took it and wiped my eyes. I gave it back and he smiled at me in the way that buried his blue eyes in an ocean of wrinkles. His red hair was messy like when he had just gotten up in the morning. He leaned forward and kissed my nose. For a moment, it seemed like the bad mood Dad didn't exist.