

# Cumberland



Michael V. Smith

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A CORMORANT BOOK

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**Cormorant Books Inc.**  
895 Don Mills Road, 400-2 Park Centre  
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[www.cormorantbooks.com](http://www.cormorantbooks.com)

*For the man who'll never read  
a book like this.*

# MID-MARCH



Malouf's was crowded, even for the afterwork rush. There weren't any free tables, which meant people came in and left, while others packed themselves around the bar, standing until they were lucky enough to nab a stool. The spring weather got everyone out of the house. See and be seen, as Bea understood it, was the driving principle for going out — aside from drinking. Women checked themselves in the bathroom, undoing a button on their blouses, or letting their hair down. A few drinks later, they'd reconsider their outfits, making even more changes. When they returned to their tables, they'd claim to be more comfortable and sit next to the man they were after.

Bea saw a lot of that. She knew the tricks. In some way, all they wanted was to be beautiful. Bea didn't blame them for how

they felt, though she herself tried to be less obvious. She wasn't a kid anymore, so there was no need to make herself stupid over a man who might very well not be interested.

Knowing this to be all too true, Bea couldn't help noticing that one woman had spent the better part of an hour watching Ernest. She wasn't attractive. She was much older than Bea, with grey hair, and hips so round she looked like she had watermelons in her pockets, but the attention she paid Ernest unnerved Bea.

The woman and the friend she was with, a big guy young enough to be her son, were getting their beer at the bar from Hank, so Bea didn't get to talk to them. They were in the front window. Two decades ago, Bea would have dumped a drink down the front of her, sending her home in a cab, or she'd have whispered something threatening or cruel, but she'd grown out of that. She almost lost a job once being smart to someone. The fighting wasn't worth the reward; she rarely achieved what she'd intended. Instead, when she brought Ernest a beer, Bea touched his shoulder, hoping the woman would see how they were with one another.

"I think you've got a girlfriend," she teased, testing him.

Ernest chuckled. "What do you mean?"

Bea kept her hand where it was, feeling the muscle under his flannel shirt. He was fifty-two, and his hair had gone grey. "That woman, the other side of the bar. In the corner with the big guy in the hat. See her? She's been looking at you all night."

Had she not been touching him, Bea might not have noticed — his expression barely changed, he was still smiling, but his shoulders tightened up. "I don't know her," he said, casual, but dismissive. He picked up his beer and took a drink.

“Maybe she’s crazy,” she said, taking her hand away.

Two young guys sat down at the other corner by the windows. Bea took their order and, as she headed to the bar, just to be certain she wasn’t making things up, she glanced at the woman again. Whoever she was, she gave Bea a definite stare, none too nice as far as Bea could gather. *Maybe she is a nut*, she thought to herself. Bea didn’t mind the crazy ones, but she hated trying to get them out of the bar. They were next to impossible to deal with at closing time. Hank gave her the beer, she brought them back to the table, and when she turned around, there was Ernest beside her, two paces from the door.

“I’m going early tonight, Bea. I’m damn tired,” he said, tucking his money in her front pouch. He was one of the few customers she trusted to pay at the end of his night. Ernest was a good man. She sometimes charged him a beer or two less, on the nights where she knew he’d lost count.

“Theresa’s closing, so I’m off at ten,” Bea said, “if you want a ride.”

“I’m okay, Bea. Just bagged.”

She cocked her head and took a long look at him. He had a hand on the door handle already. What was up? Maybe this woman *was* an ex. Maybe it was his wife, who lived in some other city. “We’ll see you later,” Bea said. She suddenly felt self-conscious. The other woman was likely watching them both now. Bea told herself she could do whatever the hell she pleased. She straightened her back and squared her shoulders as Ernest winked and stepped out the door.

A good ten minutes passed in which Bea noticed the woman looking at her, the expression on her face mixed. Bea couldn’t figure what it meant. Finally, when her big friend got up to go, the woman stood as well and untied her jacket from around her

waist. She walked past the bar and met Bea at the entrance to the back room.

She was even older than Bea had thought. Her face was round, keeping her complexion smooth, but her eyes were wet and glassy. The woman leaned in and whispered to her. “I don’t want to know what’s going on between the two of you, but if you’re sleeping with Ernest Mackey, I hope to God you don’t have kids,” she said coldly. She didn’t hold the look. Her expression melted into something more like embarrassment, then she turned as quickly as she could and left.

Bea was speechless, watching the woman walk out the door, until Hank came to the end of the bar with her order.

“Woo-hoo?” he said jokingly. “You napping?”



Nobody knew Ernest. He hated it, hated hiding at home and going to a new bar every few years because someone eventually got to know him better than he liked. He had friends at work, buddies from the bar, and not much else. Anything he had ever loved was in his past.

Sitting at the bar, Ernest had been telling Nick and Figgy about Carter. When he was seventeen, Ernest had lied about his age and got a job apprenticing as a welder for Walter Henley. It was good work for a young guy. He and his buddy Carter used to pick up his pay-cheque on the Thursday and take the car down to the beach with their two-fours in the trunk, one case for each day of the weekend. Ernest was only part-time and had Friday to Sunday off. Carter wasn’t working yet. They’d drink from noon till sundown because that was the hottest part of the day. Carter would walk around barefoot and he’d step on a bottle cap they’d tossed by the fire and missed, and he’d just

look up and lift his foot with the teeth marks from where the cap squeezed his skin and say, “Damn, those things.” He didn’t bother to put shoes on though. The more they drank, the more bottle caps he’d step on. Ernest would laugh and say, “Fuck you’re stupid, Carter, put some shoes on.” Two years running they did that, all summer.

And then Ernest got him a job at the plant the next year. They had to wait till he could pass for older because they only hired students who were at least eighteen, but Ernest got him in. So one Tuesday, Carter comes looking for him. Walter has Ernest working round the front of a pressure vessel while he does his thing on the opposite side and the sparks are flying and some guy has left a bucket of oil nearby and one of the sparks takes a nose-dive and next thing, whoosh, the bucket’s on fire.

“Now this ain’t pretty,” Ernest had said, “so old Walter picks it up by the handle quick as anything and tosses it out the open door of the place, only Carter’s come looking for me. You get the picture; there weren’t nothing left of him. Only the leather on his boots and belt weren’t burnt through. Sixteen. Went up like a marshmallow at a camp roast. That’s no way to go — screaming. You think he expected to go out like that? Sixteen?” And then, at that moment, Bea had set her hand on his shoulder. Briefly, he’d felt maybe she knew what was going on inside him. Instead, she was pointing out his ex-neighbour in the front window of the bar.

Ernest had had to leave, he was so unnerved by her. He thought she’d be dead by now, nearly thirty years later. He wondered if she’d happened into the place just this once, or if she’d be coming back. Ernest didn’t think he had the energy to find a new bar and start all over again. There weren’t many places left in the town to drink that he hadn’t already tried. Cumberland

was only an hour from Ottawa or Montreal, depending on the direction you drove out of town, but he couldn't move away, not now, at his age. He was comfortable at Malouf's. He liked coming with Figgy after work and setting himself down with Nick for an hour. The man was something to look forward to at the end of the day.

Out on the street walking away from the bar and this ghost of an ex-neighbour, Ernest felt his belly burn with anxiety. He didn't want to be alone forever. This is what he usually thought when he was drunk, heading home. The quiet walk by himself was the worst part of any night, anticipating the apartment being empty when he got there. The cold or the heat or the wet were nothing to the loneliness growing in him, welling up in his chest, his feet pulling it from the ground with each step.

Approaching the corner of Water Street and Johnson, too drunk to care what he was doing, he veered left into the entrance to the civic centre arena and its adjoining park. He was going to delay the feeling, if he could, or cut it short entirely.

He crossed the empty lot. The breeze grew cooler, coming off the river. The St. Lawrence was narrow at this stretch, narrow enough to see the houses across the way, on the island, which was the Mohawk reserve, set in the middle of the river between Cumberland and the U.S.

The strip was deserted. Ernest hung out beside the hockey arena, watching the boats in the marina bob on the water, but no luck. Not a soul was out. Eventually, he continued down the trail that ran behind the arena and then the air force building and on into the bush where the paving ended and the small hiking trails began. By the time he was under the large bridge to the U.S., with its grey metal bulk above him, the large girders and rivets, he knew that nothing was going to happen tonight,

especially now, in the cold, when he didn't feel quite drunk enough. He turned towards Sumac, pissed off with the bar and himself, and picked up his pace for home.



Alphie had been wild when Amanda met him last summer, and she'd liked that. He had a habit of pulling the brim of his ball-cap down over his eyes and looking out at her with a grin, his hand sitting on top of the brim or still grabbing it, and his teeth so small and white. He had a cast the first five weeks they dated so Amanda thought him aggressive the way he'd grab her with his good arm and pull her into him. He smelled of cigarettes and sometimes cologne. The whiskers on his face would burn and scratch and she liked his tongue pushing against her lips and rolling down the underside of her mouth.

He was a boy, and eager. If she put her hair up with bobby pins he'd pull them out and drop them so she'd have scratches from when they made out on the floor. If she worked his cock up and down in her hand he'd play with both her nipples, flicking them with his thumbs, the one arm dirty white and crooked at the elbow. This is when she had him in control most, with her hand upon him and both arms working and he noticeably bent. She'd liked that, the way the cast seemed to make him jumpy with frustration, how he'd be wound up and aggressive and grin at her, eating meals too fast or drinking, lighting a joint and dragging half of it back with the first inhale.

The week the cast came off he seemed just about the same. When he picked her up at the curb after work, he was howling at the moon, he was so happy. He drove them the twenty minutes to the campsites further up the St. Lawrence, with a lot along the river and a tent all set up. Amanda liked facing the

tent towards the water, so that the first thing she saw in the morning when she pushed back the nylon flap was the river, and the small islands with pine trees on them.

The first night that weekend, they didn't go in for the usual drinking and carousing, so his friends came by, rattling on the tent flaps and making noises outside as a complaint. They shone flashlights on the canvas. Amanda was sure she made shadows next to it and wanted to stop, or get Alphonse to make them go away, but he wouldn't and she felt horrible with her legs hoisted up. She felt cheap. And crazily giddy from it all. Her stomach made somersaults and the sex felt wild and dangerous. She grabbed Alphonse's bare ass and hung on with her eyes closed till it was over.

Nothing got to be so reckless or uncomfortable after that, but the feeling stuck with her. She wasn't sure if it was Alphonse or just the whole business of that night bothering her. The thing was, the cast hadn't changed him like she'd thought. Without it, he was still wild, still skittery and pent-up. What she'd attributed to his being injured and limited, and so bound to disappear, stayed on and seemed worse. With two free hands Alphonse was simply faster, rougher, more difficult. His hands seemed to be everywhere. If she went to sit down he'd open a palm under her so she'd sit on it accidentally. Or he'd pull at her bra strap, tickle her ribs.

This was Tuesday night and they were out at a bonfire. It was early and already he was frustrating her with all his touching and pinches. She'd tried to be sweet with him by curling into his chest so that he'd come round to being cuddly back but he only wiggled a finger down her thigh with the other hand. It inched towards her crotch until she slapped it. Then he started all over. When she'd had enough she told him she was ready to go home and eventually they got in his car and left.

“So what do you want to do?” he asked. He drove them down the old Number Two highway that ran alongside the river.

“Go home.”

“I want to drive around for a bit.”

“But I’m tired.”

“We’ll get there. I’m just taking a bit of time to unwind,” he said, then added, “Relax, it’s early.”

He held his left hand on the steering wheel and the right sat on the stick shift. He booted it down the highway so the engine revved up. He jumped it into fourth gear for a few seconds, then coasted in neutral. He drove like this late at night and it made Amanda sort of woozy, but mostly irritable, to be starting and stopping like some damn fool.

“Let’s just go home. I’m *tired*,” she said again.

“That’s where I’m taking you.”

“In the opposite direction?”

It was nearly nine o’clock at night and Amanda had been on her feet all afternoon. She only wore a short white top, sleeveless and cut above her belly button, with tights, a cut-off jean skirt and sneakers. Though she was cold and her uniform was in the knapsack on the back seat of the car, she wouldn’t put it on. The blouse was getting old and had stains in the front from tonight’s shift. Alphie had the blower on and she reached out and turned off the switch.

“What are you doing?” he asked and turned it back on.

“I’m cold.”

“You’ll be colder if you walk,” he said and chuckled, nudging her with his elbow. She didn’t laugh. He gave a sigh like he was disappointed in her.

“Why are you driving in the opposite direction?” she asked crossly.

“Because I’m high,” he said and his voice sounded like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. He revved the engine and jumped it into fourth again. When he came back into neutral he gave a sigh of satisfaction, then put his hand on his lap instead of on the stick shift. They coasted till his hand snapped out and turned the fan off and rested back in his lap again. He eased the car onto the gravel and turned at a driveway that led into an empty field.

“What are you doing?”

“Turning around,” he said, without making a move to put the car in reverse.

He looked at her for a while. Amanda thought his face seemed empty, as if he was still stoned (which he couldn’t have been by now) or he was dead stupid. She tried not to smile at the thought in case he got the wrong idea. She was angry.

“Well?” she said, trying to sound frustrated.

Though she hadn’t noticed him pull down his fly, he began fishing in his pants.

“Oh, Alphie,” she said. “Come off it.”

He grinned at her, with his swollen dick in his hand. The car was still running and their lights grazed the dried grass of the field.

Her voice was quiet and soft. “Give it up. I want to go home.”

Something inside her felt funny. He could be greedy, and she didn’t mind that so much if he was pressing down on her, or grabbing too hard, or just grabbing when he shouldn’t have been. She didn’t mind as much because at least it was about her, and what he wanted. Sometimes the greediness made her feel important. But every now and again he’d do this — whip it out as if it was something she hadn’t seen. Or in the middle of sex he’d just stop, pull out, and beat off over top of her until he came, which could be a while. How could she complain? What

do you say to a guy who does that, other than *don't*. It never seemed right, but he wasn't hurting her.

"I'd turn the car off if I was you. Someone might pull over to see what's wrong."

He was watching himself now and didn't look up. "If I leave it running I can just back out." His breathing was ragged. He held his balls in one hand and fisted his dick in the other. Occasionally he smacked it against the steering wheel. Amanda thought that was stupid. He looked small and ridiculous. She wanted to get out of the car and walk into the field to leave him to his business but was afraid he'd drive off without her. Maybe she was supposed to touch herself, or watch. She had no idea.

She sat beside him in the car and thought that if she hit him, he might just hit her back. She had to hold her hands in her lap so that she wouldn't strike out and scratch him, up and down his face.

"Having a good time?" she asked dryly. She gave an exaggerated yawn. He didn't answer. Amanda could only guess that he didn't realize what he was doing as he watched his right hand beat himself off, while the left had a glassy bit of precum on its thumb that he brought to his lips and smacked off. "Frig," she said. "Get it over with." She tugged on the loose weave of her skirt, pulling the stray ends off and rolling the white cotton bits together.

After his breathing sped up and the hiccup of his orgasm squirted itself out, Alphie leaned back in the bucket seat and closed his eyes with a long satisfied sigh. Amanda gritted her teeth. She wanted to bite him till she drew blood. Or hammer a pencil in his ear.

"That's it, Alphie. We're through." She felt very satisfied saying those words. She felt suddenly adult.

Without moving his head, he snapped open an eye. “You mad at me?” he asked innocently.

“Yes! Take me home.”

“If you’re mad at me, we should talk about this first.”

With her lip thrust forward and a set jaw, Amanda stared out the side window.

“Come on, baby,” he nudged her. “Come on, talk to me.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Alphie sighed tiredly, leaned an arm lazily across the top of the steering wheel, and smacked his gums. “Well what am I supposed to do about this if you won’t talk to me, huh?” He looked at her, then looked away. “Geez,” he said. “You’re frustrating me here. What am I s’posed to do? If you don’t tell me what’s wrong, I ain’t cold, we’ll sit here all night waiting.”

“Nothing, Alphie. Nothing. Everything’s fine.”

With his voice now full of concern, he asked, “You mean that? You’re okay here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Sure. Take me home. Call me tomorrow.”

“Maybe you’re getting your period or something. Is that it?”

“Yeah, Alphie,” she patted his shoulder. “That’s my problem.”



Aaron hated evenings. He hated his father going somewhere without him, as he often did after work, or supper, leaving Aaron at his aunt’s and picking him up when the night was over. As much as he loved his Aunt Lue, he couldn’t stand to come out of the school and see her car parked at the side of the road waiting for him as he had today. He and his dad used to play cards, or rent movies, they’d take walks by the river or go for ice cream in the summer when his mother was alive. They would all go.

Neither his Aunt Lue nor Uncle Gary ever mentioned where his father was, but Aaron knew he spent the evenings with friends at a bar. Aaron had been there before, nearly a year ago, and wondered why he couldn't go too. After his mother died, the waitress from there, Bea, came over to the house a few times and she and his dad would sit in the back room and talk with the door shut. Sometimes, when he'd heard the muffled sound of his father crying, he'd turned the TV way up until they'd come out. That didn't happen anymore because his dad spent more time at the bar, so no one needed to visit at home.

When Aaron had nearly finished his supper, his Aunt Lue asked him where his painting was from school. Aaron shrugged.

"Show your Uncle Gary the painting."

"It's downstairs," Aaron said, sounding as if that was too far away to bother.

"Don't I get to see it?" Uncle Gary asked.

He shrugged. "It's not so good."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to see it." Uncle Gary was smiling. It made Aaron angry.

"I can show you later," he sighed, exasperated, hoping they'd drop it.

"Mm," Aunt Lue said, noticing the tone in his voice. "What's it of?"

"A fish."

"A fish? That sounds like fun," she said. "What colour is it?"

"Blue, green and orange." He really didn't want to talk about the painting. He'd forgot it on the clothes pegs at school, but when he'd been about to get in Aunt Lue's car, Trisha Yardley had run towards him with the painting flapping in her hand. Aaron snatched it from her and jumped in the car without saying a word to her, which his aunt hadn't liked.

“You can’t keep this up forever, Aaron,” she’d said.

He’d looked at her, pretending he didn’t understand. She’d smiled sweetly at him, but he knew she wasn’t happy. “You know, kiddo? You’re going to have to get some friends eventually,” she’d said, though she had no idea what it was like for him at school. Being nice to Trisha Yardley wasn’t going to help him find friends. Nobody liked Trisha, not even the teacher.

So the last thing Aaron felt like doing was showing his aunt and uncle the painting. “I want to watch TV until my dad comes.”

Aunt Lue was going to say something but his uncle spoke first. “Sure, kiddo. I think the remote’s on the floor. Don’t step on it.”

Aaron got up from the table and took his dirty dishes with him. His uncle messed his hair as he passed, but his Aunt Lue didn’t say anything. Placing his dishes carefully in the kitchen sink, he had the urge to drop them, and call it an accident, but it was too late. He’d already set them down.

In the den, he turned the television on, but didn’t really watch it. He sat on the prickly carpet, his arms stretched across the coffee table holding the painting. He could hear his Aunt Lue running water, then the dishes bumping together in the sink and the sharper clinking sound as they were placed in the drying rack. Other nights, he helped her with the dishes. She’d call to him to come help, which he liked, because they’d paint bushy beards and eyebrows on each other with the bubbles. He knew she was upset with him, for some reason, because she didn’t ask him to come up.

He didn’t know why she was angry with him. Maybe because he wasn’t nice to Trisha Yardley this afternoon, though that didn’t seem fair.

Aaron took hold of the painting at the top edge and pulled in opposite directions, slowly so as not to make noise, splitting the fish in two. The paint was thick. Small bits flaked off like scales. He tore the page again, and again, watching the paint crack, then chip and fall in his lap. When the pieces were small enough, he tucked them in his pocket and brushed the scaly bits from his pants.



Bea knew better. She was forty-three and had lived with a real bastard for six years and was all the wiser for it. While she'd been sick of him it wasn't enough to end it because it kept her busy — moving inside all that hate and loathing and trying to make do — but one day she woke up and realized she didn't give two shits for him anymore and kicked him out. She wasn't so bad off. She was just over thirty then. Now her hair was growing in grey and looked a bit more frazzled with the grey ones coming in thicker and kinky but she dyed them and still made a good blonde. Her figure was decent, her clothes clean and simple and not too showy, if a little mismatched. Bea didn't care so much because she'd settled herself into being single and had planned to stay that way. She really couldn't care less what people thought; as long as she was clean she didn't think twice about all the rest of it.

And then, to her surprise more than anyone else's, something changed. She met someone, and he was interested in her, and the thought of him didn't displease her, or make her uncomfortable. The first night she'd caught sight of him, it had been a long shift. Bea's feet weren't sore too often because, apart from buying good shoes, she'd been working standing up for twenty or more years and barely noticed anymore, except that that

particular weekend her shoes were new and Saturday had been a busy day so she could feel the skin of her soles. They felt hot and flat, as if two coins were pushing into them. The sweat collected under her arms and dropped occasionally down her shirt or ran into the curve of her elbow. She remembered the day was that hot, and her feet stinging, and an hour or so left to her shift when this man came in and sat himself directly at a table. She hadn't seen him before, but he walked in as though he knew the place already; he didn't stand in the doorway to look around. He was a stocky guy — broad shoulders and thick arms — in a short-sleeve cotton shirt with two buttons undone from the top. The hairs on his head and chest were all grey, though he didn't look very old. He wasn't a senior. She guessed him around fifty, and thought maybe that that was too old as well.

What struck Bea was how tired he seemed. It was midnight on a Saturday. She'd been working seven and a half hours already, her hair out of whack, beer spilled down the front of her and sticky on parts of her legs, most of the customers bombed or carrying those too drunk to get to their cars or cabs. But this man, sober, clean, his hair combed back, and buttons undone, looked tired in a way Bea wasn't. Like she hadn't dared see this kind of tiredness before because it filled the room. Everyone, when she looked around, carried a piece of it. All the bodies moved slowly the way this man moved, they all lifted themselves with the same precision and difficulty, drank with the same need, filled themselves with what they could and looked empty. For a second, the sight of him sickened her and she felt herself sink a little into the floor, her knees going soft.

She did her work and came around asking what he'd like and when he looked at her, the feeling left. As quickly, and as easily,

the air was light again with smoke and the noise from people and the jukebox.

Nothing remarkable happened, he said very little and what he did say was polite, if brief. He was a guy. They were in a bar, and she was tired. He left, without ceremony, about two minutes before closing. It was when she'd locked up with Hank and he walked her to her car that she felt it again. The heaviness in her knees. Like he was around the corner and she could feel him there, walking home after one-thirty in the morning, with her hand on the door to her LeCar. Sometimes it came back when she saw him. Not always, but it was there when she wasn't expecting it. This man was Ernest, and he became just one of the faces in the bar that she happened to like, compared to those she could do without, but every now and again, out of the corner of some place he kept hidden, the heaviness would spread itself out and colour the room, muffle the music and the people until it tumbled away and dissolved.

She liked him. She'd admitted that to herself after he'd come in a few times. He was quiet enough, though he had his moments of boisterousness. The evenings with Ernest were usually engaging and playful in a quiet way. He was a decent-sized man with large thick hands he'd worked with so many years, and he knew how to tell a good story and how to ask or answer a question. There were nights he didn't do so well, where he was almost morbid, and in the last few months they'd increased in number, but Bea liked him for the respect he gave her. He flirted, he wouldn't have been a man at that bar if he didn't, but it was friendly, and he shared it with her. He didn't make like he owned it, he simply brought that playfulness out of the both of them and turned it around and handed it back to

her to use as she wished. Not like some of them, who were clumsy or rough with the feeling inside them, their words harsh or the look of them too screwed up or deflated. She liked Ernest. He knew how to treat her and treated her that way always despite his mood, unless it was low, and then they both left each other be.

Sometimes she'd give him a ride home if he seemed too drunk or it was too cold to be walking, but not often. Having a man in the car was a luxury she'd once taken for granted and now could appreciate again. So she kept it seldom, lest either of them grow too attached to the idea; not that Ernest ever asked for a ride, he always said no the first time she offered and then seemed thankfully surprised when she asked again. It was herself she didn't trust so much.

And then one night last month her car made a racket when she was taking him home and he said it was just the muffler and he could cut her pipe shorter if it wasn't too bad, and the next day he walked over to the apartment with his hacksaw and did it. Free of charge. He looked sexy walking off with the hacksaw in hand. What could she think of that? Amanda giggled at her and Bea felt embarrassed, though she didn't know why, really. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

When the buzzer from the hall went off, Bea noticed she was thinking again of Ernest. For a second, she half-thought it might be him, but Ernest wouldn't be coming by her place after ten in the evening. It was Nick, who Bea had talked to for a few months after his wife passed away. Bea had made herself available because, at a time like that, you needed someone, and Nick hadn't been talking to anyone about it, that she could tell.

She was a little concerned when she saw him at the door. "Everything okay, Nick?"

“Yeah,” he said, cheery. “But you forgot this.” He pulled a large can of maple syrup from behind his back. She’d forgotten it after he’d brought it to the bar for her. “I figure you’ve paid for it, you might as well have it,” he said, smiling.

She thanked him and invited him in for coffee.

“Tea’d be nice,” he said, stepping through the door frame.

“Sure,” said Bea and turned for the kitchen. As she unhooked a cup hanging inside the cupboard, she called out to him, “Ernest left in a rush tonight.”

“Welllll, it wasn’t a good night for him,” Nick answered.

“No?”

“He was talking about a buddy he saw burned up at work.”

Bea came around the corner. “Today?” Nick was on the couch, bent forward, with his legs spread and his arms resting on either knee. His brown hiking boots were by the front door.

“No, no. When he was a kid. Thirty years ago. Some kid working at Combustion. Ernest and he were buddies and he saw the kid burn up at work. A bucket of oil on fire. Some guy shot it out the door as the kid was walking in and ‘Whoosh,’ Ernest said, ‘Like a marshmallow at a camp fire.’”

“God that’s rough,” Bea said, pausing. The thought travelled through her veins in a chill. She went back to the counter for the teabags, gently changing the subject. “I wonder where Amanda is. Have you met Amanda, Nick? She’s the girl that lives with me.” Bea didn’t like it if Amanda stayed in her room when Bea had company. She worried Amanda didn’t feel wanted. Bea hoped she’d come out if she heard her talking about her, partly because of this, and partly because Bea didn’t want Nick to feel like she’d orchestrated their being alone together. She liked Nick, he was a good guy, but she wasn’t interested. He was a man from her work who turned out to be

the cable guy. So they kind of knew each other better than most people from the bar knew Bea.

“Don’t think so,” Nick said.

“Oh well, you will. She’s come into the bar to drop stuff off a couple times. She doesn’t stay. She’s just seventeen.”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick said. Bea could tell he was curious why the girl was living with her. She peeked around the corner again and whispered to him, “I’ll tell you later,” with a little nod.

The door to Amanda’s room opened just then and the girl almost caught her whispering.

“You are here,” Bea said, looking up the hallway to see Amanda in a jean skirt and tights, with her hair tied back.

“Mhmm. I just got home before you. I was listening to music on my headphones.” When she walked to the end of the hall she stopped just short of stepping into the living room.

She looked at Nick. “Hi,” she said.

With a quick nod, he answered, “How are ya?”

Bea introduced them and offered Amanda tea too.

“Only if we have cookies,” Amanda said and went to get them. She brought the bag into the living room and set them on the coffee table.

Bea poured the tea and brought them out each a cup, then got hers and set it down. When she noticed the bag of ginger snaps on the table she went back into the kitchen and came out with a plate.

Amanda had taken the chair next to Nick so Bea sat on the other side of the couch. She opened the bag of cookies and arranged them on the plate.

Amanda asked, “So where do you work, Nick?”

He picked up his tea and leaned back, cradling it in his lap. “Rogers.”

She looked blankly at him but he didn't add anything else.

"Oh," she said.

Bea piped up. "TV. He hooked up our cable."

"Oh, right," she said. "Of course." Then she offered him a cookie.

"I bought a big tin of real maple syrup for us. Nick was at McAllister's today."

"Great," said Amanda. "You drive, Nick?"

"Yup." His mouth was full of cookie.

"What do you drive?"

"A Range Rover. I got some insurance money last year so I spent it. She's a nice vehicle."

"I love those. Lots of room in the back."

Bea's teacup made a clatter when she set it down. The girl could be so obvious. Why the heck would she be hitting on Nick? He was nearly old enough to be her dad.

"Not bad," Nick said. "Eight cylinder, four wheel drive."

"Do you camp?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, sometimes."

"I bet it would be a great truck to go camping with."

"It's not a truck," Bea corrected.

"Range Rover," said Nick with a chuckle.

"Whatever. Truck, Grange Rover, I know. What colour is it?"

"Green."

"Dark green?"

"Pretty much. You like green?" he asked, picking up another cookie and smiling.

"Definitely. I'd get a green if I had a car. You should've got a green car, Bea."

"I got mine second-hand. As long as it runs smoothly. Fine by me." Bea couldn't stop herself from sounding curt, but she

tried to smile. "You'd like the maple syrup camp. They have a horse there, I think."

"Do they?" Amanda answered, and turned to Nick to explain. "I rode horses with my mother's boyfriend a few summers ago. I was pretty good. He said I had great form."

"Do you still ride?" Nick asked.

"Not there. My mother dumped him."

"That's too bad for you."

"Not really. He was gross. I never liked spending the day with them much. He'd feel my ass when he pushed me up in the saddle."

"Didn't you tell your mother?" Bea asked.

"No. I didn't want to make her feel bad. He did it to her too and she'd giggle. It was really gross."

Nick laughed and picked up another cookie. "Does she still live near here?" he asked.

Bea looked to Amanda but the girl didn't take her eyes off him. She didn't so much as blink.

"River Heights," she said. The tone in her voice dropped as she reached out and touched Nick's sleeve. "We don't talk to each other any more," she said, trying to sound mature.

Bea wanted to help out, but couldn't think what to say.

"It's a good thing you've got Bea here to talk to. She's got a good head on her shoulders," Nick said.

"Yup." Amanda smiled.

"So how about if I make pancakes tomorrow, Amanda? Will you be here in the morning or are you going back out — tonight?"

There was a pause. Bea almost said *with your boyfriend* but decided against it, though she wanted to, and Amanda seemed to notice. She leaned back into the chair, then pulled part of her

hair out in front of her face to see how healthy the ends were.

“Don’t know. Maybe Nick will take me for a ride in his Grange Rover.”

“Could do,” said Nick, smiling again. Bea could tell he thought Amanda was cute. He watched her separate the strands of her hair. “I’ve got to pick up my kid at his aunt’s so I can’t be too late,” he said, “but I can take you for a spin if you want.”

“Great,” Amanda said, dropping her hair. If she’d heard the part about his boy, Bea didn’t see her let on.

“Do you want to come along, Bea?” Nick asked.

“No. Thank you, Nick,” she said too politely. “But say hi to Aaron for me.”

Again Bea wasn’t sure if Amanda had heard her as the girl ran into her bedroom for her keys.

Bea looked at Nick. He smiled at her, a little awkwardly, so that she didn’t know what was going through his mind. *Be careful* she wanted to say, but didn’t dare. It wasn’t her place to be saying anything. He was a grown man and knew what he was doing. But Amanda. Bea knew better. Amanda was wild yet and didn’t seem to understand certain things about the world. Then Bea thought that maybe Nick didn’t know the girl was seventeen. Bea considered saying it again, only Amanda reappeared. After Nick thanked Bea for the tea and put his boots on, off they went.

When the door shut, Bea stacked their cups, picked up the plate and cookies and carried them all into the kitchen. She threw the teabags out, poured the excess down the sink, picked up a washrag and walked to the table in the living room, wiping up the last of the crumbs they’d left behind. By then, she realized there was something she needed to do.