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SUSAN MEISSNER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Only the Beautiful*

WHAT
THE
RIVER
KEEPS

A NOVEL

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
CHERYL GREY BOSTROM

Praise for Cheryl Grey Bostrom

A thoughtful, insightful story of second chances, forgiveness, and how to let go of the wounds of the past while still cherishing the years that shaped us. Beautifully told.

SUSAN MEISSNER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Only the Beautiful*, on *What the River Keeps*

Cheryl Bostrom's gorgeous, lyrical writing invites readers on a poignant journey of exploration and restoration. With captivating characters and haunting prose, *What the River Keeps* unravels a destructive web of family secrets. Only the exposure of truth, the breaking down of dams, has the power to heal and restore life. A riveting story.

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*

Cheryl Grey Bostrom has a writing voice unlike anyone else. When you see the world through the eyes of her stories, you see a beauty and depth few authors can achieve. *What the River Keeps* is a deliberate and thoughtful portrait of a young woman searching for truth and for herself, perfect for fans of authors such as Erin Bartels and Leif Enger.

KATIE POWNER, Christy Award-winning author of *When the Road Comes Around*

Rich, moving, and deep, *What the River Keeps* invites you into the stunning, shadowed woods and waters of the Pacific Northwest by an author who knows it well. This is a finely crafted, timeless novel that will be read and revered a hundred years from now.

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of *The Indigo Heiress*

Told through the beckoning beauty of the natural world, *What the River Keeps* paints a vivid portrait of two broken lives desperate for air and forgiveness. Cheryl Grey Bostrom treks their turbulent journey from entrapments of regret, fear, and self-doubt to freedom found in truth and grace. A rich and compelling story blending the patient strength of friendship and love—beautifully, lyrically written.

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Hall of Fame author of *This Promised Land*

Bostrom’s novel reveals the full freedom we have in Christ while blanketing the story in the beauty of nature. This book is both heart-wrenching and heart-warming, with deep and true characters who will stay with you long after the last page.

CHRISTINA SUZANN NELSON, Christy Award–winning author of *What Happens Next*, on *What the River Keeps*

Cheryl Bostrom’s unique characters in *What the River Keeps* will take you on a fascinating journey through a beautiful location and deep into the human psyche. Don’t miss this stirring, redemptive story that will make you take a long look at the strongholds in your own life.

KAREN BARNETT, award-winning author of *When Stone Wings Fly*

Leaning on Air is a gem. . . . A poignant and authentic characterization of the power of love and of the land, and the capacity each has for restoration.

BOOKTRIB

Leaning on Air . . . [is] a book about the power of unconditional love to heal us as people and partners, to plant the seed of faith in our hearts, and to resurrect hope within us. And it's as gorgeous as the landscape in which it is set.

KELLY FLANAGAN, award-winning author of *The Unhiding of Elijah Campbell*

Bostrom's prose is propulsive and detailed. . . . A true page-turner all the way to the end. An engrossing tale of survival and redemption in the Pacific Northwest.

KIRKUS REVIEWS on *Sugar Birds*

Suspenseful. Lyrical. Redemptive. Bostrom's voice reminds me of Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

TARYN R. HUTCHISON, award-winning author of *Three Colors of Courage*, on *Sugar Birds*

A black and white photograph of a river flowing through a forested landscape. The river is the central focus, winding through the scene. In the foreground, large, flat rocks are partially submerged in the water, creating ripples. The banks are lined with dense trees, including tall evergreens on the left and deciduous trees on the right. The sky is bright and overcast, with some light rays visible on the left side. The overall mood is serene and natural.

What the River Keeps

W H A T
T H E
R I V E R
K E E P S

CHERYL GREY BOSTROM



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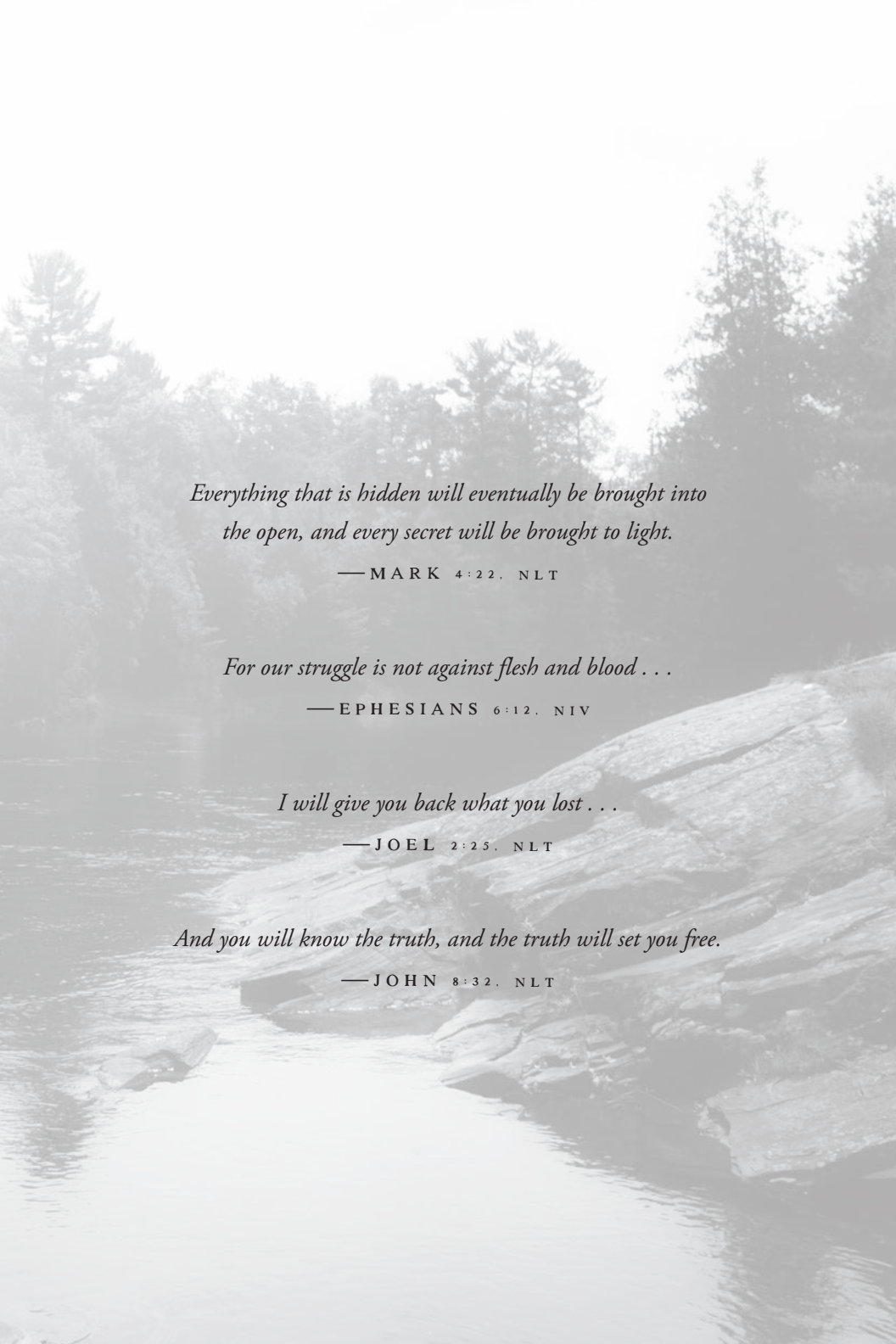
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*Everything that is hidden will eventually be brought into
the open, and every secret will be brought to light.*

— MARK 4:22, NLT

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood . . .

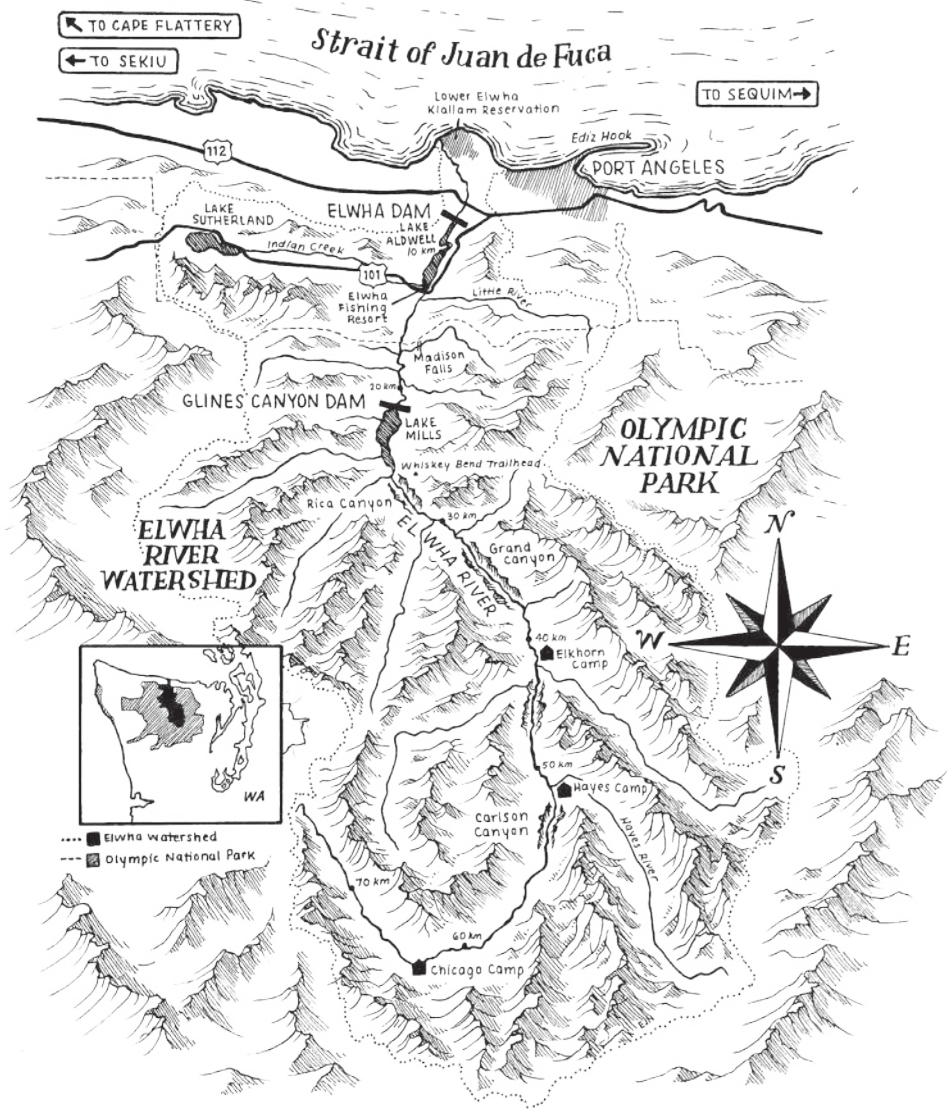
— EPHESIANS 6:12, NIV

I will give you back what you lost . . .

— JOEL 2:25, NLT

And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

— JOHN 8:32, NLT



PROLOGUE



HILDY

FISH

ELWHA RIVER VALLEY. WASHINGTON STATE
1985

On her tenth birthday, Hildy Nybo was casting a spinner under the Elwha River bridge when a streak of silver broke the surface. She whistled softly and pointed as the fish flicked its tail and disappeared into the pool's shaded depths.

Upstream, her father glanced, then threaded a night crawler onto a hook's shank. "I saw him." He raised his brow, aimed the hook toward the river like a dare.

The fingertips working Hildy's reel stalled, and she eyed the water, rapt. "They hush me, Daddy. Every fish I see."

"I noticed," he said. "Why, you think?"

She gazed into the water, considering. "It's like . . . like if I'm talking, I'll miss their music. It's like they're all little banjos, and somebody's strumming happiness on 'em."

She didn't notice her dad approach until he palmed her blonde head. Then he lifted his chin toward the forested foothills rimming their family's fishing resort, where the river entered sapphire Lake Aldwell. "Could be you're hearing his riffs."

"Whose riffs?"

"Your Banjo-Strummer. The Fish-Maker, Tree-Maker. Same, same." Dad shrugged, then thrust the tip of his rod toward his workshop like a band conductor's baton. "The music's in heartwood and burls for me, but maybe you'll hear him best through fish."

Hildy bobbed her line to her dad's words, sending concentric circles from the thin filament into the current. Would she? She'd love nothing more.



At bedtime, Hildy mentioned to her mother how she thought she met God through fish.

"That imagination of yours," Momma said. "If you know what's good for you, Hildy Rose, you won't mention *that* notion to a living soul." Violet fingered Hildy's braid with busy fingers, then crouched to eye level as she tucked the blankets. "Stick to facts, daughter. No more fiction. If you spread that God-fish story around the playground . . ."

Hildy read *hopeless* in the wag of her mother's head.

She bit her lip, squeezed her eyebrows together. "But Dad said—"

"He's pretending with you, as usual. Indulging that fantasy world of yours. You're ten now, Hildy. Old enough to give it up. You can't live on fairy tales."

Violet turned off the bedside lamp, but her voice found Hildy in the dark. "You don't want classmates to shun you again, do you, honey?"

No, I don't. Hildy curled toward the wall. Pulled the blankets to her chin.

“Let her be, Vi.” Her dad’s voice came from the hall. Seconds later, his hand touched Hildy’s shoulder, and she rolled toward him. His lips pressed her forehead before he stroked it. “Those banjos you told me about today? Keep listening, sweetheart. That mind of yours is a gift.”

She nodded. Closed her eyes against confusion.

A gift? She couldn’t imagine how. Her ideas made kids avoid her and, worse, made Momma unhappy, something she didn’t want, ever. If not for Momma . . . well, what would she do without her mother telling her which thoughts were right, or what to say or keep secret?

This time, Momma knew that if Hildy mentioned God and salmon in the same breath at school, *everyone* would call her Fish Girl—not just a few. Peers would mumble about her more than when she’d brought those trout gills for show-and-tell or wrote that report on the stabilizing properties of dorsal fins.

Even so, warmed by kindness at their next Sunday meeting, Hildy almost, *almost* told the group that Scripture verses reached her heart best when she thought about fish. The Lord on that cross? How better to illustrate than with iridescent salmon returning upstream, dying for their spawn? She raised her hand, nearly bursting with awe over her epiphany until, from across the circle, her mother caught her eye.

Violet pinched her lips and twitched a *no*. Instantly, a dark form Hildy sometimes saw around their house climbed her mother’s back and draped her like a heavy shawl. Hildy dropped her raised hand to her lap and cowered, scarcely breathing until it slid away.

She had to tell Momma. Outside, while Dad went for the car and her sister talked to friends, Hildy whispered to her.

WHAT THE RIVER KEEPS

Her mother crouched nose to nose. “Stop, Hildy. I mean it. Make-believe is one thing when you’re little, but at ten? *Ten?* One more wacked word to *anyone* about that creepy shadow and I’ll . . .”

Dad pulled the car to the curb, so Momma didn’t finish, but Hildy saw her eyes. On the ride home, the girl made two vows. First, she would never again mention this *thing* no one else could see. Second, she would keep the Fish-Maker to herself, too.

1



HILDY

UNDERGROUND

SEATTLE. 1999

Even if *not* wedged under her bed, Hildy wouldn't have answered the door. Instead, she shrank as the clapper struck the metal bell outside her basement apartment. One clang. Two. Loud enough to alert the too-close residents of her Seattle neighborhood that someone stood in the concrete well at the foot of her stairs, bugging her.

Again.

Mouselike, she peeked from beneath the bed rail, studying the window well closest to the door. Unlikely whoever was ringing would crouch and peer through the slatted blinds, but one never knew.

Something thumped the door. Footsteps scuffed a quick ascent. A truck rumbled and departed.

UPS. *Why* couldn't they deliver a package without ringing? They had to know she wouldn't answer. She never answered. Bad enough

that she lived smack in the sightline of all those houses, their windows full of eyes. But a knock or ring at her door? A trespass.

She exhaled and wiggled deeper into the cramped space, where she extracted her latest stone from a row of rocks beneath her headboard. The diameter of a driveway cobble, it size-matched hundreds more crowding the space under her sofa and along her baseboards. Pebbles, both polished and rough, overflowed from galvanized buckets in three corners of her living space. Large or small, she'd assigned a number and a memory to each.

She smiled at this new one—river-smoothed chert, formed in the magic concoction of silica and sediment and time. When this stone had called to her from shore, she'd answered, tucked it in her pack, and returned to count coho smolt heading to sea.

Squirring free of the narrow slot, she opened her bedside notebook, confirmed the rock's black Sharpie ID on its underside, and jotted more details about the day she found it. Then she squinted into the empty stairwell through the door's wide-angle peephole and slid the chain from its hasp. Quickly she toed the package inside, relocked the deadbolt and chain, and opened a small box of bagged powders.

"Grit for the tumbler, Butterness."

Sun through a tilted blind lit the cage on the table, where a canary chirped, cocked his head, and flapped to a higher perch. Hildy bent to the thin metal bars and pursed him a squeaky kiss as an older diary entry came to her—recorded on a brilliant afternoon the previous May. She lingered over favorite details: how she'd spotted the bird from the aviary's newest batch of fledglings, his bright yellow body, black crown and wings indistinguishable from the plumage of a native willow goldfinch. How she'd told herself he was *marked to be free*, then had brought him home.

Butterness eyed her, dropped to his cage floor, and pecked stray seeds.

She carried the open box to her cluttered table and brushed aside a robin's nest to make room. A tag protruding from the nest prompted her, and she pulled a different notebook, found the nest's number, and read the corresponding entry: *Thurs. Oct 22, 1998. 3:00 p.m. Scattered clouds, no rain. Eating PBJ. Left UW Fisheries Bldg for car in south lot past crimson sunset maple. Tree 70 percent denuded after 30 MPH morning wind. Exposed American Robin's nest within reach.*

She'd loosened the empty nest from a crotch in that maple and brought it here, to the table, exactly five months after she'd chosen her bird. She nodded, reviewing other hours that day, recorded before and after this entry. She remembered them all.

In the bathroom, she snipped open a small packet from the UPS box and scooped a tablespoon of gray grit into a pitcher-sized rubber barrel filled with small stones—twenty-one of them—from her three-week stint on the Nisqually River. She spritzed the rocks and grit with water from a spray bottle, seated the pliable barrel and its lid in the rock tumbler's metal frame, checked the screws anchoring the polisher to a plywood base, and plugged it in.

The motor hummed. The platform vibrated. Butteriness, his throat feathers fluffed and trembling, sang accompaniment. She swayed to his rolling trills and bursts, imbibing their froth like a dessert.

When he finished, she plucked a piece of romaine from the fridge, rinsed and clipped it to the cage. The canary sidled toward the leaf and nibbled ruffles into the edge. "My little singer," Hildy said, then squeaked him another chirpy kiss. She jotted bird and song and lettuce into her notebook before she spat on a dried sauce drip on the tiled floor and rubbed it with a stockinged toe. She closed the book and grinned. "I won't write *that*," she said.

She could, though, and no one would know. With the exception of her sister, Tess, for the last two of her five years in this

apartment, she had allowed no one inside, choosing instead to live alone below the small, hip-roofed main floor where silver-haired Mrs. Kraft padded softly and, evenings, played her harp. Hildy poked rent checks through the slot in the old woman's door and made no requests. In return, Mrs. Kraft, equally reclusive, never rang Hildy's bell.

But what if she did ring it someday? Hildy appraised her living quarters as Mrs. Kraft might. The woman's eyes would first land on beautiful Butterness, piping from his cage. If the woman were to come on a day like today, she'd likely watch the bird bathe in a slant of sunlight wending through a narrow south well. She'd surely appreciate Hildy's handcrafted bed and desk, too—there, under the west window, where Hildy could see sky above the well's concrete lip whenever she looked up.

Aagh. Hands at her nape, Hildy wadded her waist-length hair, blonde and kinked from the braid she only unleashed here, in her sanctuary, where no one could see. *Who am I kidding?* If Mrs. Kraft responded to the shelves and ledges and walls and floor like Tess did, the old woman would probably evict her.

On Tess's recent spring visit from Sekiu, she'd eyed Hildy's rocks and garage sale finds, then plucked a spiral bound notebook from dozens on a long shelf. She frowned at an entry.

"Stop it, Tessie." Hildy snatched the book. Re-wedged it into the sequence of diaries.

Tess balled her fists. "Do you need to write *everything* down?"

Hildy covered her ears, her mood gone to iron. "You know I do. You can burn them when I die, but don't try to stop me."

"Fine, fine. But all this *stuff*?" Frustration rode Tess's sigh. "Where did my sweet, funny sister go? Why are you living like this?"

"Like what?"

“C’mon, Hildy. This amped-up hermit thing? All this junk? It’s like a yard sale on steroids in here.” She batted Hildy’s undergrad honor cords and the UW master’s hood hanging between a child’s fishing pole and a kazoo. “No, it’s a doggoned *museum*. Ever since your boyfriend . . .”

“He has nothing to do with it.” She’d only begun adding physical specimens to her diaries’ detailed accounts two Novembers ago—long months after she and Cole split. He was the least of her worries.

“Well, something or somebody does.”

Hildy’s anxiety surged. Tess’s reaction clinched her growing resolve to refuse her sister’s visits, too. If Tess—who had grown up with her, for heaven’s sake—couldn’t grasp why she needed her records and keepsakes to jog her memory and keep her reality accurate, how could anyone else?

Only at work could she leave all that behind. At hatcheries or on Pacific Northwest rivers, when the wonder of fish eclipsed everything dark.



Though Hildy had spotted the old man in his yard on her undergrad visits to the Pipers Creek watershed, on the day she actually met him, she was wading a tributary of the Seattle stream, clipping DNA samples from spawned-out salmon. He stood on the low bank, his bunchgrass hair sparse and white, his shotgun a seesaw plank over one arm. She blushed and straightened. Sputtered about the fish count, stream health.

He listened, nodding, then asked her name. Frowned at her reply. “Every time you come around, I swear you’re my Dee,” he said. “My girl come home, thirty years younger.” He doddered ten feet up-trail toward his yard before he turned back to her. “Can I show you?”

From midstream, Hildy eyed the man and the neglected bungalow thirty feet past him. Considered the gun.

The man chuckled, tapped the weapon's carved stock. "Aw. Don't mind this old relic." He jerked his chin toward a run-down trailer park next door. "I bark at the dopers when they sneak over here, but I don't bite."

Relic. The gun or him?

He leaned the weapon against a tree. "Ain't loaded, anyway. No need. One look at these double barrels and them miscreants hightail it back to their tuna cans."

Creek water curled around her boots. She locked her knees, didn't move.

He looked at her curiously, then held a finger aloft. "Forgetting my manners." He tapped his chest and shuffled sideways. "Name's Everett. You wait. I'll get my pictures."

Wearing loneliness, she thought, then waded to shore, stood on tiptoes, and peeked over the cutbank after him. Inside a mullioned window, he pulled a book from a shelf.

Hildy climbed the slope as he carried the album to a pair of lawn chairs and wiped the seats with his sleeve. "You have time to set?" he asked.

She surprised herself by sitting.

He flipped pages and tapped snapshots of two girls, as blonde and slight as she was. "Both gone east," he said. "Both grandmothers now."

He pointed at the taller of the two teens straddling a log at a lake somewhere. "My Dee. In the Carolinas for thirty years now. Waynesville. Great Smokies—with a raft of kids and grandchildren. Says she'll drag me out there, if she has to."

The girl looked more like Hildy's sister than Tess ever could. "Think you'll go?"

Everett rocked, his gaze on the photo. "Feels good to be wanted

like that. Never mattered to me before my Margaret passed last year. Dee's fixed up a little apartment for me in an old chicken coop. At first I balked—get it?”

At the pun, his grin framed cracked, brown teeth. Her mouth bent like a canoe.

“Looks right nice inside, though. Last month she sent me pictures and a ticket to Asheville.”

Hildy scanned his treed, unkept yard, the weary home. She could practically hear the house crying to her. “You want a renter? Better than leaving it empty.”

His eyes narrowed, traced her face. “Took me two dates to know my Margaret was the one. Got that good sort of feeling about you, too, Miss Hildy. The way you nurse that creek? Talk to those fish and birds? I'd be glad to know you're here, tending. You can send the checks to my Dee for putting up with me.”



A month later, she took Everett to the airport, installed a driveway gate, and moved from her basement apartment on Seattle's Capitol Hill to the nine-hundred-square-foot bungalow. Despite her protests, Tess made the four-hour drive from Sekiu to see the place. “You're nuts,” she said, after she assessed the run-down yard and dilapidated trailers next door. The house's stuffed, decrepit rooms.

But Hildy loved the place. Filtered by trees, east and south light streamed through age-worn wooden windows, brightening worn plank floors and shiplap ceilings like those in their cabins back home. Here she had an extra bedroom and storage and salmon in the creek swimming right past all those messy trailers to spawn in her backyard tributary. Her own paradise, at the end of the road.

Even before the trailer park sold, she cleaned flower beds. And while the developers bulldozed and smoothed the vacated land

next door, she replaced the bungalow's rotted boards and painted everything, tapping into years of working alongside her dad at their family's lakefront fishing resort. Before builders framed the first house on that old trailer ground, she screened the property line with laurel and cedars, red osier dogwoods and firs, and she tended them with fertilizer and care. One at a time—and in the order of their acquisition—she placed her numbered stones around her gardens.

When she finished, the transformed cottage crouched hidden on a soft fescue lawn in a creek-side haven where, as before, she lived alone. *By necessity*, she reasoned. *No one* could begin to understand that keeping her records and memorizing her days demanded her full concentration—and every square inch on her walls.

For more than ten years she gathered deliveries from the coded box beside the gate only she passed through. Filled her diaries with detailed accounts of her activities and her rooms with mementos linked to those entries. As she worked the gamut of regional rivers and taught about them, she interacted with her colleagues and students and family only when required, living only for aging Butterness—and for fish and their watery world.

Until, on February 23, 2010, her ringtone chimed from one of the few numbers she chose to answer.