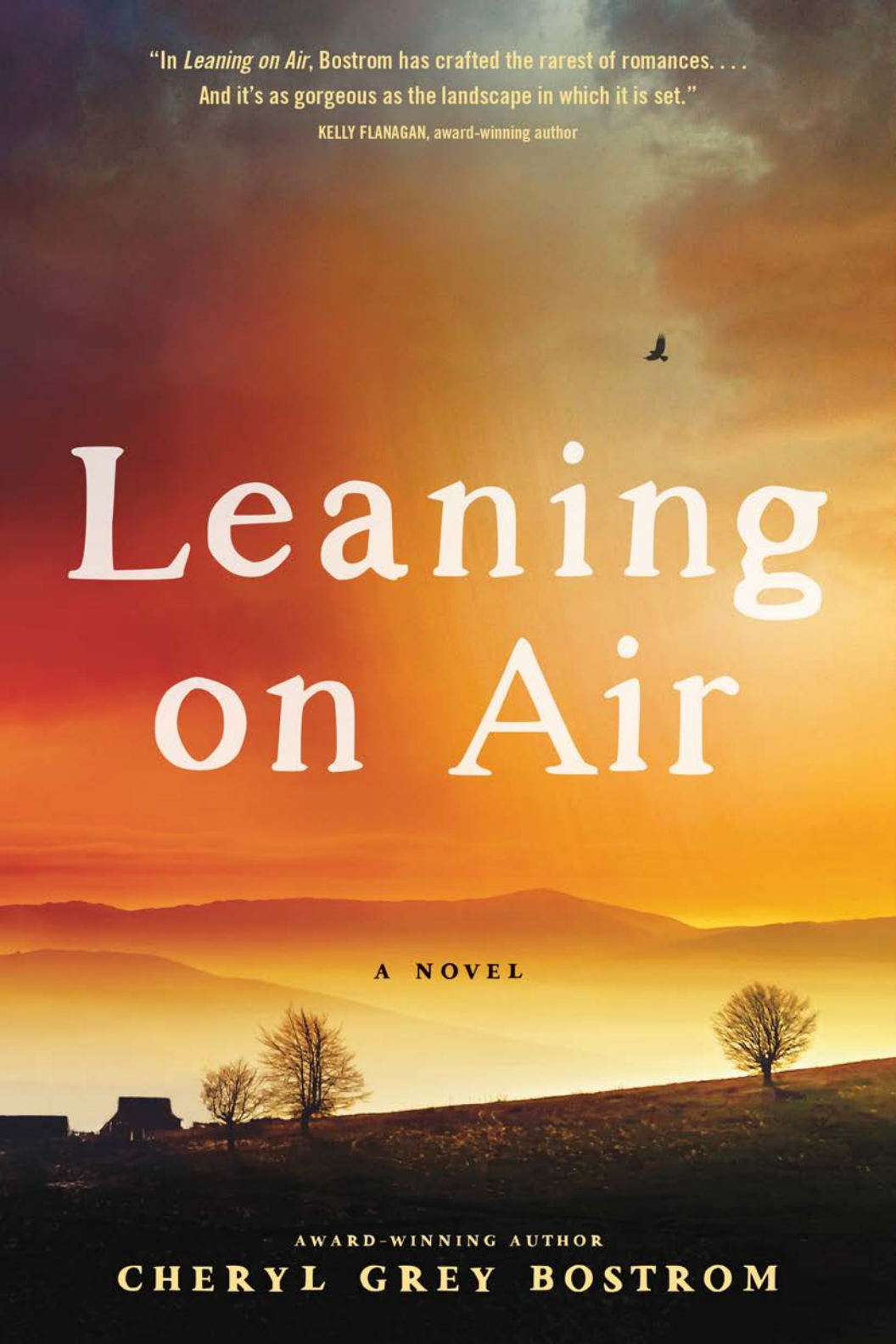

"In *Leaning on Air*, Bostrom has crafted the rarest of romances. . . .
And it's as gorgeous as the landscape in which it is set."
KELLY FLANAGAN, award-winning author
Leaning on Air
A NOVEL
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
CHERYL GREY BOSTROM

Praise for Cheryl Grey Bostrom

Fans of *Sugar Birds* will be delighted that the author has continued Celia and Burnaby's story in *Leaning on Air.* Bostrom is a fresh new voice in fiction, and I look forward to seeing what she does next.

T. I. LOWE, author of #1 international bestseller *Under the Magnolias*

In *Leaning on Air*, Bostrom has crafted the rarest of romances, one in which distance desired and space granted are meaningful elements of a deeply romantic relationship. It's 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* and *Loveable*

Leaning on Air has everything I love most in a story: depth, nuance, rich detail, authentic characterization, and heart. It's a beautiful and worthy follow-up to *Sugar Birds* and a work of art in its own right. Cheryl Grey Bostrom is a must-read for me, and I am impacted by her words every time. If you love literary fiction that's filled with humanity and hope, you absolutely cannot miss *Leaning on Air*.

KATIE POWNER, award-winning author of *The Wind Blows in Sleeping Grass*

Engaging, insightful, and original, *Leaning on Air* is a reader's dream of a book. With wonderful characters and unexpected story twists, Cheryl Grey Bostrom opens up a world that is both unique and familiar. Do not miss this beautiful tale of love and family and learning to live with both.

GAYLE ROPER, award-winning author of *Sea Change* and *Prayers for a Widow's Journey*

Cheryl Grey Bostrom's latest book, *Leaning on Air*, is to be savored. Her penetrating prose and precise poetic language introduce beauty to the darkest of places and the most tattered losses in Celia and Burnaby Hayes's uniquely strained marriage. But through Bostrom's skillful pen, love looks unexpectedly courageous. With reverence for the land and its ability to turn our gaze upward, Bostrom aptly contrasts nature's beauty and power with life's hurts and betrayals, producing layers of suspense imbued with prayer and hope.

LINDA MACKILLOP, award-winning author of *The Forgotten Life of Eva Gordon* and *Hotel Oscar Mike Echo*

After reading and loving *Sugar Birds*, I wanted more of Celia and Burnaby's story. *Leaning on Air* delivered—in page-turning layers that don't shy away from difficult truths. Bostrom draws her characters with an artist's brush and exquisitely renders the natural world. Her writing is sheer poetry.

TARYN R. HUTCHISON, award-winning author of *One Degree of Freedom* and *Two Lights of Hope*

Leaning on Air reunites readers with beloved characters introduced in Bostrom's stunning debut novel, *Sugar Birds.* Like the birds she loves, Celia migrates home to Eastern Washington's rolling wheatland to sort through surprise, heartbreak, challenge, and joy. Masterful strokes of literary wordcraft paint us into the story, while pulse-pounding pacing keeps us there. Every golden hour spent within these pages is filled with grace. A complex, captivating read.

SANDRA BYRD, award-winning author of *Heirlooms: A Novel*

Cheryl Grey Bostrom has written another brilliant story in her newest, *Leaning on Air*. From Pacific Northwest forests and wheat country to Snake River canyons, characters live out brokenness and loss, romance and redemption that will echo in readers' own

messes and hopes. This book is a multilayered, cross-generational masterpiece—and a fabulous read!

JANET HOLM McHENRY, award-winning author of twenty-six books, including the bestselling *PrayerWalk* and *Praying Personalities*

Of all the books I've read, only one or two moved me as much as Cheryl Grey Bostrom's *Leaning on Air.* Breathtaking scenes transported me, and I found myself copying lines that were simply too beautifully written to just read once. I'm predicting a tidal wave of readers' love for this book.

SY GARTE, PhD; biochemist and award-winning author of *The Works of His Hands* and *Science and Faith in Harmony*

Bostrom's *Leaning on Air* pulls you right in, then keeps you turning pages in this can't-put-it-down narrative. At characters' twists and turns, heartbreaks and sweet spots, you'll gasp, wipe tears, and cheer. The writing truly leaps off the page in the author's majestic poetries of the land. At one with the earth and heavens, she draws us into their soaring, stirring depths. Many times I pulled out my pen to underline wonder and beauty she captured in ways I'd never imagined. She gently allows the holy to find its way in, and therein is a gift that won't leave you.

BARBARA MAHANY, award-winning author of *The Book of Nature: The Astonishing Beauty of God's First Sacred Text*

Mystery. Tragedy. Romance. The magnificent natural world of the Palouse. With deft artistry, author Cheryl Grey Bostrom melds them all in this astonishing novel. Both unpredictable and plausible, *Leaning on Air* soars like the red-tailed hawk at its heart. Though I'm a huge fan, my accolades can't do justice to this stunning work. Prepare yourself for phenomenal writing.

MAGGIE WALLEM ROWE, national speaker, dramatist, and author of *This Life We Share*

Cheryl's beautifully woven romance delights the senses, cradles the heart, intrigues the mind, and even boosts the reader's desire to be a braver and better person!

PAM FARREL, bestselling author of fifty-nine books and co-director of Love-wise on *Leaning on Air*

Bostrom's prose is propulsive and detailed. Aggie is a wonderfully magnetic character: a scrappy, stubborn preteen whose father has taught her to survive off the land. The supporting characters are equally strong, including the teenager's bird biologist grandmother and Aggie's autistic brother, Burnaby. The story is 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*

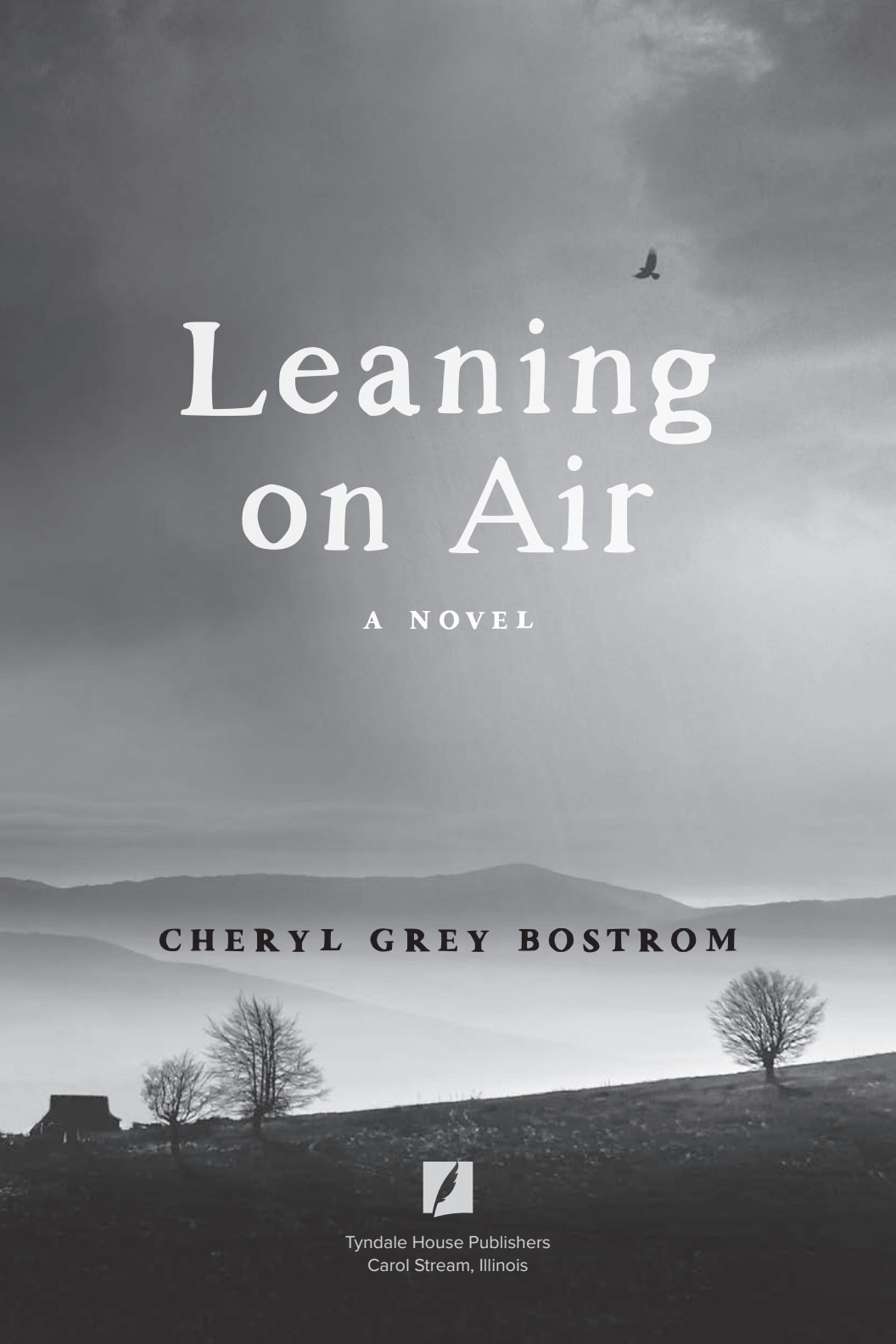
Bostrom takes her readers gently by the hand and plunges them into an immersive tale straight from page one. *Sugar Birds* is a powerful coming-of-age story of betrayal and loss, rebellion and anger, friendship, forgiveness and redemption, all woven into a testament to the wondrous natural world . . . packed into one heart-pounding read. Highly recommended!

CHANTICLEER REVIEWS

Cheryl Bostrom's hard-to-put-down *Sugar Birds* reminds me of the classic, *My Side of the Mountain*—one of those rare books that appeal to every age; full of depth, pages that turn quickly, and most of all, ebullient truth.

KATHERINE JAMES, award-winning author of the memoir *A Prayer for Orion*

Leaning on Air



Leaning on Air

A NOVEL

CHERYL GREY BOSTROM

Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Cover designed by Libby Dykstra

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

Published in association with the literary agency of Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409.

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Leaning on Air is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

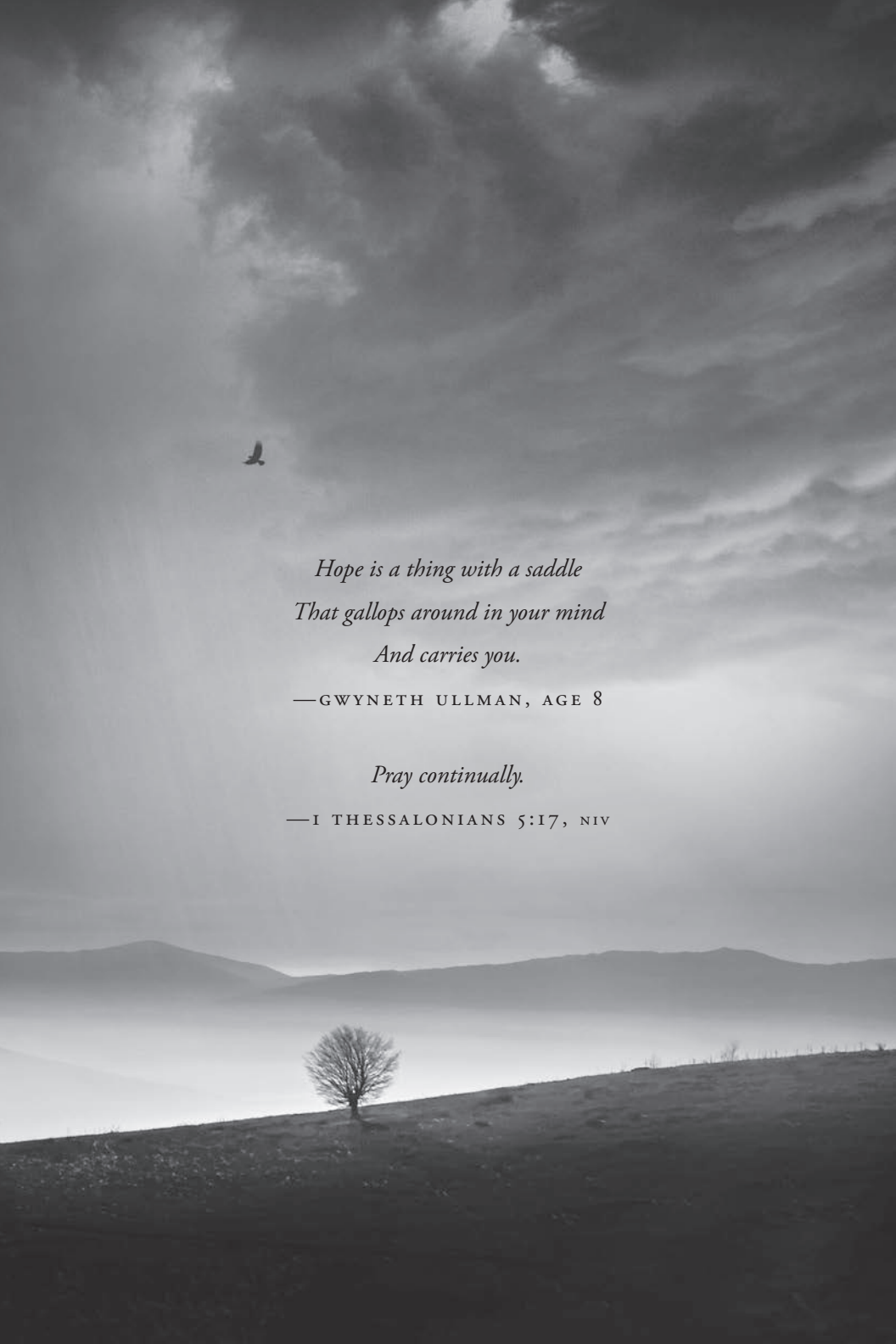
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-8152-8 (HC)
ISBN 978-1-4964-8153-5 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

30 29 28 27 26 25 24
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Graham,
with more love
than all seeds
since the beginning.

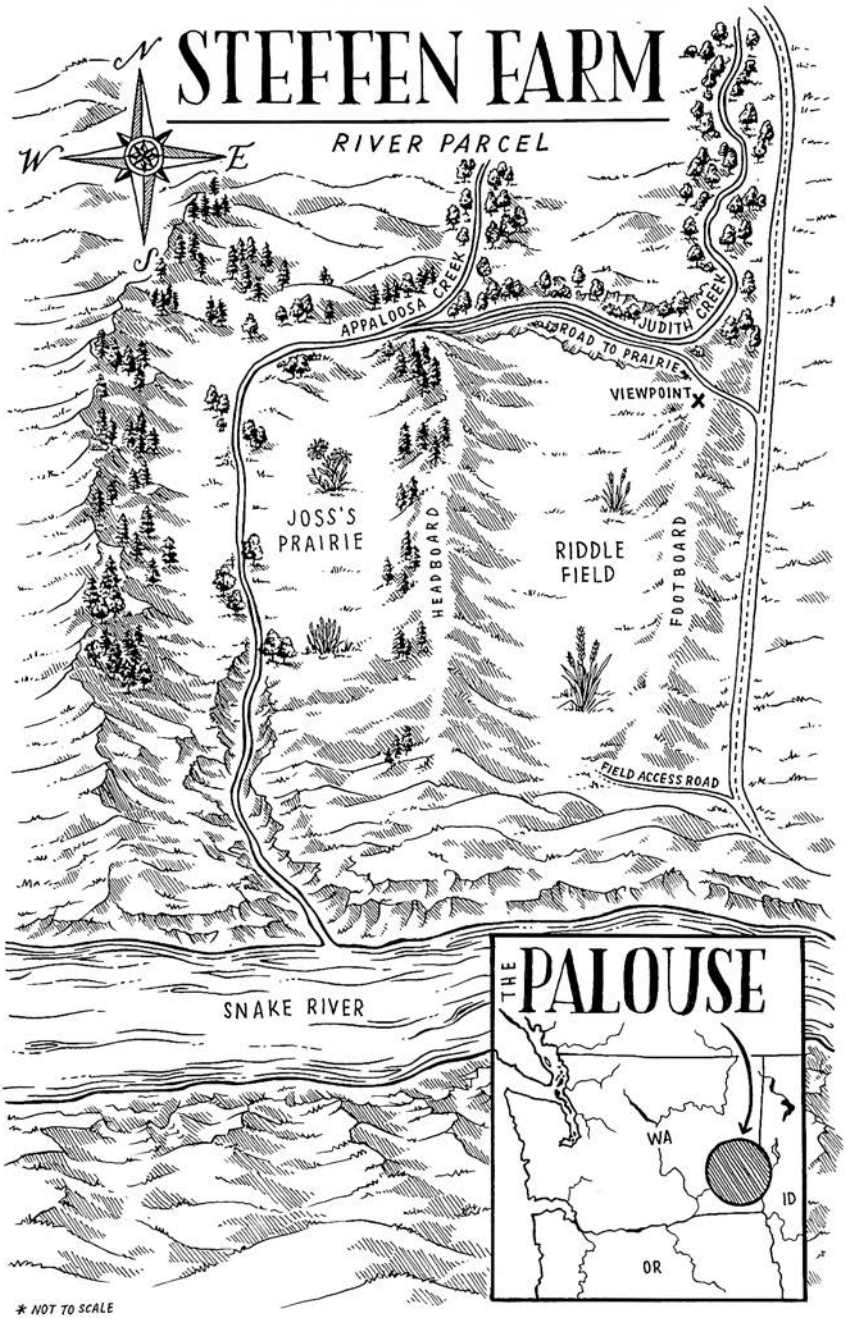


Hope is a thing with a saddle
That gallops around in your mind
And carries you.

—GWYNETH ULLMAN, AGE 8

Pray continually.

—1 THESSALONIANS 5:17, NIV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FOOTBOARD
FIELD ACCESS ROAD
SNAKE RIVER
THE PALOUSE
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OR
* NOT TO SCALE

1

CELIA

SCRAPE

NORTHWEST WASHINGTON STATE, 1997

Above the pond, a cloud of gnats shimmered in the June morning as a Canadian goose rousted her brood through reeds of yellow iris toward a floating gander. On the opposite shore, Celia Burke leaned against a fat alder tree and watched the goose family cross the pond like a giant centipede.

Over them all, its white head a beacon in the green-black needles of a Douglas fir, an enormous bald eagle aimed its beak toward the paddling geese. Celia raised her binoculars slowly, anticipating the apex bird's strike, her eyes peeled for the twin metal leg bands her grandmother had spotted during repeated sightings of this aging raptor.

She didn't wait long. The eagle lifted its wings in feathered angles, flapped, swooped, and snatched a downy chick from the swimming spine of birds. The gosling's parents—their honks frantic, necks

extended—launched their heavy bodies after the attacker. But the eagle rose nimbly out of range, the chick in its talons.

Celia dropped her field glasses and sprang from beneath her tree's leafy cover. The raptor passed overhead, swift and low and parallel to the narrow road beside the pond, the gosling a mere ladder's reach away.

She sprinted after it, her ridiculous urge to prevent the baby goose's demise as reflexive for her as breathing. For the next few seconds, she chased the eagle, propelled by the illusion that she could mob the raptor like a crow, that she could startle it into dropping the chick. She ran with abandon, watching the bird, not the ground, prepared to catch the baby when those wicked feet let go.

Instead, a rise in the country road caught her sneaker edge and sent her sprawling. Midair, she twisted, then hit the road's rough surface in a skid. From her outstretched right arm to her ankle—wherever her tee and jean shorts weren't covering skin—gravel, secure in its tarry substrate, scraped her raw. The spectacular tumble entered her memory in vivid, agonizing slow motion.

A goldfinch sang from a nearby field. Celia lay in the road, listening to it and a distant rumble. Numbed by endorphins from her sprint and the sweet relief of adrenaline, she felt oddly peaceful. Only her hip throbbed. Detached, she envisioned its purpling contusion as she ran her tongue over her teeth. Finding them intact, she inhaled a lungful of fresh rural air. On her exhale, a wave of pain arrived with a motorcycle's roar.

And with a motorcycle. Its tires crunched the shoulder's gravel as the engine's RPMs slowed and stopped. A kickstand scraped, and heavy footfalls hurried toward her. She pushed herself to an upright position with her good hand.

"No paralysis. That's favorable."

She twisted toward the deep, steady voice and craned her neck at the helmeted man in a brown leather jacket and goggles who shaded her like a tree. A smiling tree, with a two-day's growth of blond beard and a wide mouth of straight white teeth.

She rolled her shoulders. "I couldn't jump off a dime right now."

"Think you can stand?"

She nodded, reached, and the man pulled her upright with a leather-gloved hand.

"Oof. Hip pointer." Groaning, she cupped the bony protrusion at the top of her pelvis with her uninjured hand and winced at the condition of her other palm—and the arm attached to it. Blood dripped from her elbow.

"No doubt." He scanned her body-length abrasion. "I do not believe that hip is your immediate concern." Stripping gloves from huge hands, he pulled a thermos of water and a packet of gauze from a saddlebag on his bike, then held the supplies toward her. "May I?"

"Let me get this right. I trip, out here in the boonies, not a soul in sight. Fast as gossip you show up out of nowhere with road rash supplies."

"Ha." He crouched, inspecting her bloody leg. "I'm still awaiting permission."

"Fine. Have at it. I've got a mile hike home and I'm not going to carry half the road with me." She plucked a seed-sized stone from her forearm and flicked it away. "Dang. I'm sandpapered."

"An apt description." He turned from her to the bike, removed his helmet, and placed gloves and goggles inside it. His hands made one smoothing pass over corn-colored hair.

Celia eyed the backs of his ears, tight to his head, their lobes plump and flared. She'd know them anywhere, though nothing else about him matched the seventeen-year-old she hadn't seen for . . . what, almost twelve years? Well, apart from that hair. And his height, though this man seemed even taller.

"Burnaby?"

He answered with a grin, also unfamiliar. Back then, she'd spent a summer coaxing the corners of his mouth to rise.

"Hello, Celia."

She jigged with pain as he knelt on the road beside her.

"Here. Plant your heel here." He tapped the ground and pressed

firm fingers inside her knee until she steadied, then he sluiced blood from her skinned leg. She looked away at the sting, then back to his hand, wielding gauze like an instrument to remove bits of gravel. "Superficial scrapes, but I'll need tweezers, unless you'd prefer an aggregate tattoo to commemorate this event."

His lips curved upward, wry, and he laughed again—a single-syllable marvel. Burnaby had cried back then, but laughed? Never.

"Which event? Skid of the Year? Running into you? Finding our eagle?"

"Our eagle? Millie?"

"Pretty sure she's the bird I was chasing. That wing you rebuilt has carried her into old age."

"The bald eagle population here is—is significant. What makes you think—?"

"How many bald eagles hereabouts have a red band on one leg and a chartreuse one on the other? I watched you attach them."

A new smile spilled into his cheeks. "A delightful find, Celia."

Delightful. He said *delightful*. Who was this remade man?

"Are you staying at Mender's?" He dabbed her congealing wounds.

"Yeah." She wanted to say more, but the hurting half of her body stung the talk right out of her.

"I'll take you back. Think you can hang on with that hand?" He inspected her palm's scuffed heel.

She wiggled unaffected fingers and nodded.

"Good. Climb on. Once we're underway, please don't lean."

"My binoculars. By the tree where I—"

"Right. I'll get them."

Celia boarded gingerly. With her cheek pressed to his spine and her good arm tight around him, her abraded limb's fingers hooked his belt. She was actually *clinging* to Burnaby Hayes, a fact that astounded her. Little more than a decade earlier, he'd flinched when she so much as touched his shoulder. Curiosity rattled her, competed with her pain.

The cruiser rumbled forward, first to the field glasses, then back

up the empty, narrow road. A mile later, Burnaby turned the bike onto her grandmother Mender's treed lane, drove past the cavernous barn, and parked at the hilltop farmhouse.

Inside, Celia slipped off her shoes. Burnaby studied a framed photo on the entry wall of Celia, her father, and her grandmother, their identical eyes wide and dark, their cheekbones sharp. A blurry Ferris wheel filled the background and the three of them grinned over double-scoop ice cream cones.

"Our last pic together," she said. "Look at us. Not a care in the world. That fair was in August, and he was gone by December."

"I'm sorry, Celia." His index finger tapped the glass over her grandmother's gray braid, then outlined her father's face. "A good man."

Celia shrugged.

"Is Mender here?"

"Gone for a week. She took six flats of strawberries to her friend Imogene in Sequim. They'll make jam 'til they run out of jars."

He peered down the hallway, up the stairs, and into the kitchen before he crossed to the wide living room windows, where the blue Hawley River ribboned through mixed forests and fields below them. Past the farmland, the North Cascades rimmed the valley like a jagged fence. "Nothing's changed out there."

"Nothing, and everything." Celia parked herself at the kitchen table and picked another rock from her forearm. "We were kids then."

Burnaby unzipped his jacket, hung it over a chair, then sat beside her in jeans and a gray cotton tee, its sleeves and shoulder seams tight against bulging deltoids and biceps she'd never have guessed possible for the skinny boy she'd known. He looked good. Better than good.

He laid open hands on the table. "Let me see that arm."

She eased her forearm to him, and he lifted it, inspecting. "Does Mender still keep those sterile supplies beside the dryer?"

"Yeah. Doesn't rehab birds much anymore, though. I can't blame her. She turns eighty next year. Third drawer—"

"I remember." Water drummed in the laundry sink after he left

the room, and he returned holding a small metal pan of surgical instruments. Sunlight poured through an east window and raised a sheen on his damp hands. He chose tweezers and set to work on her gravelly arm.

"So. Catch me up, Burnaby. I think the last time I heard from you, I was at Texas A&M, right? My sophomore year?"

"Yes. I last wrote you from MIT in—in January 1989. The fifth letter to which you didn't reply." His voice still lacked inflection and caught in those little stutters now and then, but sounded warmer than she remembered.

"Sorry about that. I met a guy that fall."

Burnaby tweezed another stone. "Are you still with him?"

"No," she said, scoffing. "Distant history."

"Others, then." A conclusion, not a question.

She cringed as he plucked. "Ow, Burn, you're hurting me."

"Hold on. Got it." He pulled a sharp-tipped sliver free of her palm. "I heard that after College Station, you left Texas."

"And you know this *how*?" *He kept tabs on me.* She watched his face but saw nothing to read. His eyes remained on her hand.

"Dad kept me apprised. He said you studied avian sciences at UC Davis."

"Yeah, first Aggieland then the Aggie Pack school. Funny, right? Reminders of your sister wherever I went." She laughed as an image of Burn's tiny, tree-climbing sibling, Aggie, came to mind. "I loved Texas, but I loved California more."

"I imagine so."

"Where's Aggie now?" Another friend, left by the wayside.

"Kenya, but when she's not on assignment, she calls Denver home. A freelance wildlife photographer she's been working with, and dating, broke his leg a—a week before he was slated to shoot a *National Geographic* piece on Grevy's zebras. The team was scrambling for a replacement, so he recommended Aggie. With her—her inoculations and passport already current, they spliced her in. Needless to say, she

jumped at the opportunity." Burnaby pointed to his thigh. "You can stand, or place that leg right here."

"Well. I'm happy for her," she said, though guilt stained her long neglect. How many of Aggie's letters had she ignored? She slid her chair next to Burnaby's, stretched her calf across his lap, and rotated her foot laterally so the wide, stone-pocked scrape faced the ceiling. He rested the side of his hand on her heel and chose his next embedded target.

"Both your MS and PhD behind you now." He nodded thoughtfully. "What's next?"

His interest surprised her. *Buttered* her. "I thought I had a research grant at Davis, but the funding never came through. Hope to be here 'til August. I still have a couple of options in the hopper for next year, but if neither pans out, I'll stay here, submit a paper or two on West Nile virus antibodies in raptors. I can help Gram until I find a position. Ouch, Burn. Easy."

While the blond giant excavated her leg, Celia rewound more than a decade. Remembering the half-formed boy a year her senior, she hunted for evidence of him in this appealing man who was already, literally, under her skin.

"What about you, Burnaby? Four years at MIT? Sorry, but I lost track of you."

She wished she hadn't. Her intense study regimen and a string of demanding boyfriends for whom she fell too hard and fast had consumed her completely—and shelved relationships she now wished she'd nourished. She'd returned home to Houston, and her dad's hospital bedside, four days before he died of pancreatic cancer. And until this trip, she hadn't seen Mender since his funeral, two years earlier.

So much lost time.

"Yes. I studied physics at MIT until 1990, then attended Cornell for—for veterinary school. On May nineteenth I finished my residency in orthopedic surgery. I'll begin work as an—an associate professor at Washington State this fall."

Bones. Of course. He had reconstructed skeletons when she last knew him, had been *obsessed* with them since childhood. "Congratulations, Burn. That's a good gig."

He scooted his chair nearer and began swabbing her thigh, close enough for her to detect his fresh sweat, sweet breath. Did he smell this wonderful before? She couldn't remember.

A hank of straight hair fell past his forehead as he worked on her. "This summer's the first I've spent in—in the Northwest since I left for college. My parents are expanding Hayes Seeds, so Dad asked me to help him build a new equipment shed. He and Mama bought the former Hillman land, east of the home place."

"And in your off hours you patrol country roads on that Triumph like some sort of mobile medic. You tow that bike here from Ithaca?"

"I rode it. I shipped my belongings to my parents' place and gave myself two weeks to cross the country."

"Ah. Nice. You follow an itinerary or just wing it?"

"Celia. Can you imagine me without a plan?" He lifted his chin and looked sidelong at her from under thick blond brows. "I altered the schedule as I went, however, to deter my compulsivity. I slept outdoors whenever an inviting location presented itself."

"You camped on *whims*? Multiple nights? Burnaby, I'm having a little trouble with all this."

He shot her a worried look. "What kind of trouble?"

"Well, not trouble, exactly, but I really, *really* don't get it."

"Get what?"

"How did you . . . Unless I miss my guess, tests would have landed you on the autism spectrum when I first knew you. Or at least earned you an OCD diagnosis. But now? You're *better*." Her cheeks heated instantly. "Sorry. I mean—"

"Ha. Not cured, and I can't say I want to be. You—you are correct, however. I have mitigated some problematic behaviors." His smile held briefly. He finished swabbing, opened a tube, and dropped islands of ointment along her leg. In slow circles over her calf, knee, and thigh, he finger-painted the length of her leg.

"But *how*?"

He taped gauze loosely. Twice before he answered, he opened his mouth to speak but stopped himself. "Judah Kemp, mostly."

"Pretty cryptic there, mister."

He checked his watch. "Roof trusses arrive in an hour and Dad's counting on me. May I share the story over dinner? Pick you up at six?"

"On your bike?"

"Yes. Dress accordingly."

What on earth would "accordingly" mean to Burnaby Hayes?