

## **A Promise of Hope**

**Autumn Stringam**

### **EXCERPT**

Our family packed up and moved to the far northern city of Fort McMurray, which brought new schools, new work for Dad, and a new home—much smaller than the Grimshaw barn. This boxy split-level covered in aluminum siding had no personality. It was the same as every other house on the block, with its flat face, large front window pane to the right, two smaller windows to the left, and a screen door between. Three basement windows looked out to the front, their view guarded by overgrown bushes and a few scrawny flowers in a narrow, unkempt garden space. The only difference among the houses was the colour. Ours was cream, trimmed in brown.

Broken blocks of cement formed a sorry sidewalk that led to the rutted asphalt road. I could look across the road toward a new northern vista beyond, this one with more trees than in Grimshaw, this one promising eternal peace cloaked in green. I could go there to get away, walking among the tall swaying birches and thick stolid evergreens crowding each other, the birches spreading out at the top to steal the light, the evergreens spreading out below to get the better footing. The trees guarded my path through the damp undergrowth. My path. A path, deep and shady, at times dark. I would cut through the air, soupy with gnats and mosquitoes, and try not to inhale them with the dank smell of rotting leaves and fresh baby ferns.

Beyond the trees the land rolled into a deep valley, sopping wet with river and marsh. My path ended at a cliff overlooking a sea of green below, a sea speckled with housetops and parted at its deepest by a winding ribbon of crystal blue, the Athabasca River.

My spot. My one comfort, in the open where the wind could find me and dust away the sadness and lighten my heavy heart. Where the breeze could keep the legions of frenetic, spindly mosquitoes beyond arm's length. Here I was one with the trees, one with the soil and the ferns and the moss, one with the wind.

Here at least, in this singular spot on earth, life was good. I felt like a part of the greater creation. I went there often for renewal I could not find at home or in the new town.

In Fort McMurray there was a chance to start over—to make new friends and new reputations for ourselves. It worked for Mom, but she wouldn't let it work for me.

“Okay, so Autumn is a bit of a scatterbrain,” she said to a woman from our new church. “She's really emotional, y'know? Kids in Grimshaw called her Old Yeller.” She snickered and covered her mouth.

The woman had come calling, bringing a meal for the newcomers. My introduction.

“She's lazy and really has a tough time making friends. I get so frustrated with her. I'll give her a project to work on and she gets halfway and then never finishes it. She's got no attention span and no desire to stick to anything.”

Later I imagine how I might have introduced her to the same woman. *This is Debbie. She's a bit confused. Okay, so sometimes she thinks she's a mother and sometimes she thinks she's a sixteen-year-old. She's a bit mean sometimes. Oh, but she can be nice, too. Trouble is, you never quite know until she either kisses you on the cheek or smacks you in the mouth. Are you sure you want to be her friend? She can be a handful. Especially when she turns on you. Which she will do, eh? Well, hey, you can be her friend if you like. I mean, it's a free country. Okay, so don't ever say I didn't warn you.*

Of course, I could never have done that to her. Nine-year-olds can only think of rants like that in bed, at night. Never on the spot, never when it counts. And that's a good thing because had I ever said anything like it, she would have killed me.

I wanted to be done with Grimshaw. I wanted it to be my past. Instead, she made it the foundation for what I would become. Had she thought of me in that way all along? How did I miss it? How did she even notice what I was like in Grimshaw, where she was so engrossed in her turn at having fun that she had no time for her family? *That's what I was to her? Old Yeller? Lazy? Friendless? Shiftless? That's all?*

*How would I ever get those words out of my head?*

“Why are you crying, Autumn?”

My school teacher is leaning over my desk, sheltering my face from the other kids in the room. I can't get my feelings under control. I want to run out of the room but I'm not allowed to do that. She touches my shoulder, and I feel a charge of comfort and strength run through me. She's worried about me. She

cares. Her concern is all I need to stop the tears.

“I can’t do this math.” I come up with the most benign reason I can think of for crying.

“Well, maybe your school in the Peace Country didn’t keep the same schedule. Let’s see if we can do some review pages first.” She flips through my book to a section of grade three review. I plough through it in no time because I want to impress her, because I want to show her I am not lazy, not shiftless. She is left baffled, searching my swollen eyes for an answer I cannot give her.

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