

# SISTERS OF THE SPRUCE

*a novel*

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*To Granny K*

## ONE

It was late by the time we got there. The sky had turned into a large shadow, which crept this way and that, and threatened to become all I could see. But animal alertness was keeping my brain bright awake, my limbs restless. It made no difference that Dad kept telling me to sit still—my legs dangled off the pier. There I sat, nestled between my two sisters, as we all waited for whoever was supposed to be coming. Our eyes fastened on the glistening black water.

Early that morning, from the deck of a steamship, I'd watched everything receding and shrinking: the cluster of clapboard houses, the store, the saloon, the white cross of the church. Fare thee well, Prince Rupert. As I looked back at the town, icy spray settled on my cheeks and it all flattened into a thin grey line and vanished completely. Then, there was nothing except choppy waves, capped with white foam. The roar of the engine filled my body.

On the ship, time juddered by. I went inside, I came out again. In, out. I'd been in this position before—salt shower making me hoarse, wobbliness in the gut from nothing solid to stand upon—but somehow, it was worse this time around. We were starting all over again, once again. This time, we didn't even know where we were going. My eyes stared out at the colourless waters, cresting and breaking with a force that came from someplace invisible, relentless. This feeling had become all too familiar in recent years.

At some point, May came to join me on the deck and grabbed at my palm. Warmth from her hand flowed welcomingly into my body.

"It'll be nice there, won't it?" Her voice faded in the wind.

"Yes, nice. Very nice, I think." I tried to sound confident, but what did I know, really?

"We'll live in a real house again? Not a basement?"

I looked down at May's petal-like face and nodded, not trusting myself to speak. In Prince Rupert, Dad had been a janitor at a down-at-heel hotel, in exchange for which we'd been granted a couple rooms in the basement. It'd been a sad existence, compared to our lives before, in a bustling mill town called Skeena.

How frightened my sister appeared, barely daring to hope. She was only seven. I adored her and she expected me to be her big sister, so I forced a smile. "We'll get a lovely house again, with a large front porch."

"What will Otousan do for work?"

Although May spoke less Japanese than me, what few words she did have—*otousan*, *okaasan*—she clung on to, fiercely.

“Dad will log and fish again and you’ll play in the forest every day and everything will be just as it used to be. You wait and see. But no more questions for now, all right?”

She went inside, while I watched an albatross get flung across the sky like a tattered flag.

Nausea, fierce as an earthquake, came in spells that shook the walls of my stomach. Toward the end of the journey, it got worse than ever, the water suddenly all aswirl—as though a great fist were pulling us downward, toward our seabed graves. But then the fist released us, the waters calmed. And the seagulls. Always, the seagulls. You knew you were getting close to port when the flocks of gulls descended, swooping down so low that if you dared to stand outside, you had to protect your head.

And then a harbour came into focus: canoes lined the beach, boulders rising high behind. The clouds were streaked with moody violet, their upside-down images reflected upon the glassy surface.

It was the last and only stop. The few other travellers were getting off, so we did, too. We watched their backs shrink away from us, blurring into small dots in the distance. How I envied them for having purpose in their gaits, a clear destination. As we sat on the edge of the wharf, the sky darkened, engulfing us in shadows.

At last, the wood slats vibrated. A thin fellow with a weedy moustache and not much hair was approaching with a stiff wave. He was dressed in an old, crumpled overcoat and mud-spattered trousers. Without saying anything, it was clear that he was here on behalf of the Company. Mr. Brown, he said his name was. We’d have to walk to the Indian village, he said. Without asking any questions, Dad began to follow him along the beach, under the last ribbons of dim light, and so we made our way, too: me behind Dad, Mom and my sisters straggling at the line’s end. All our worldly possessions were in the bags we carried.

In the distance, a smattering of bleached-out houses could be seen blurrily on the shoreline, and a single totem pole shot up, like a wave of a skinny arm.

Mr. Brown led us to the largest house, which had a long veranda, newly painted white. He told us to wait out front, while he went inside. A few minutes later he came out with a tall Indian man, who, except for his caramel skin tone, didn’t much look like an Indian at all. He was dressed in a fine, dark jacket, with a matching vest beneath, the silver chain of a pocket watch secured to one of the buttonholes. His hair and moustache were more tidily groomed than Mr. Brown’s. Apparently this

fellow owned a boat and was going to be our skipper for the rest of the journey, down the strait into the inlet.

They haggled. It seemed the price had gone up since last month. And there were more people in our family than expected. And we were late—it wasn't going to be easy to navigate in the dark, now was it? While the Indian stood his ground, Mr. Brown got all blustery and red in the face and threatened to leave us all there. The Indian remained unperturbed and said we were welcome to camp on the beach. Bees abuzz in my gut, I looked over at Dad expectantly, but he appeared pretty powerless. Back hunched, his eyes did not stray from his feet. Mercifully, Mr. Brown relented and thrust over a fistful of cash. We followed our skipper down to the water's edge.

His boat was a small schooner with white sails that caught the wind easily and like giant moth wings carried us along the current. The feeling thrilled me, while at the same time unsettling my stomach, the black forest on both sides getting even blacker, as the sky turned to sombre flatness. The trees were higher out here than any I'd seen before, their trunks thicker, too. They formed a fortress around us, a fortress topped by daggers, or pointy teeth.

Mr. Brown's face relaxed a little. "You folks *do* speak English, I assume?"

Of course we spoke English. Why else would the Company have hired us? Of all the yellow men in this part of the world, you wouldn't find anyone who spoke finer English than my father.

"Yes, sir," Dad said. "I even taught language classes back in Japan."

"You're pullin' my leg now." Mr. Brown shook his head, his eyes brimming with curiosity. "When did ya move here?"

"Over twenty years ago, if you can believe it." My father smiled. More a smile of exhaustion than pride. His hair was thinning, the cobwebby lines beneath his eyes more apparent than ever. Too many sweaty days under the northern sun had left their mark on him.

"What about yer wife? She speak English?" His chin wagged toward my mother, seated beside me.

"Yes. Well. Some English, anyway."

"Then why ain't she answerin' for herself? Cat got her tongue?"

I watched the back of Mom's head, her glossy hair still neatly swept up in a bun, barely a strand loose, even after so many hours of travel. The white ruffles of her high-neck blouse peeked above the grey shawl. She'd wanted to wear her best clothes to make a good impression on the Company. We'd been under the belief that the Company consisted of some very important, very rich white men—not this slouchy guy who smelled of tobacco and last month's laundry.

I gave my mother a gentle nudge.

“Yes.Yes...?” This came out as barely a whisper from her lips, in Japanese.

“So she ain’t mute, after all.” Mr. Brown laughed, a drop of spittle flying. “Don’t really matter, though. Don’t need to speak, in order to cook and clean.”

“My wife is indeed an excellent cook.”

The boat began to rock. We were passing a drift log spit and a desolate beach, where an old canoe had been left on its side to rot.

“Your name’s Sam Terada?” said Mr. Brown. “Sam’s not a Japanese name, though.”

“Well, it’s Sannosuke, really. But people have been calling me Sam for years.”

“You’re one of Will Henderson’s guys, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Dad said.

“You met Will back in Skeena?”

“That’s right.”

“Will says you can be relied on. Not that Skeena’s an example for anything, make no mistake!”

Skeena had gone belly up. It still upset me to think about all my family had lost there, the consequence being we’d had to move to ugly Prince Rupert. It’d been three years since we’d left Skeena, when the American company that’d owned the mill had pulled out.

I wondered if this man had lost big money in the venture, too. But then, he smiled—a reckless, fast smile—shaking off his mood. “We’re here now, my friend! That’s what matters, right? And there’s plenty of work to be done takin’ down these beauties.” He gestured at the shore, at the molasses shadows. “The government’s pourin’ money into it, big money. Did Will tell ya the news?”

Dad gave a small nod, while remaining quiet, attentive, like he didn’t want to deprive Mr. Brown of the chance to gab on about something that clearly delighted him.

“These Sitka spruce here on the Charlottes are the only trees in the entire British Empire strong enough to build our fighter planes from. Their wood refuses to splinter, even under a shower of goddamn bullets! So everybody’s countin’ on us now.”

He was talking about the war. The past few years, everyone had been talking about nothing but this endless war. Although it was happening far away, over in Europe, Canada was helping out, doing its part. Sending men over. Sending bulletproof trees over, too. Life would be so much easier if only the war would end, everyone said. Or in any case, we’d all have a bit more to eat, which sounded pretty good to me.

I was ready for life to take a turn for the better.

“Back in ’14, I tried to enlist, sir.”

“Did ya, now? And let me guess—the army told ya they’re not acceptin’ any Japs.” Mr. Brown made a face, his moustache scrunching up. “Well, that’s government for you. Can’t see past its own arse. You ask me? What matters most ain’t a man’s skin colour so much as his willingness to get blown up. And in times of war, the more the merrier! But just as well that they let ya live, ’cause you’re needed here now.”

May had fallen asleep on my shoulder. That girl could sleep anywhere. Izumi, on the other hand, remained tense, alert, the cords of her long, pale neck like ropes about to snap. Her eyes flashed this way and that, as though a black bear was going to emerge from the trees at any second, rise on its hind legs and lunge toward the water. Izzy, we’d started to call her, as if that’d somehow help her adjust. To my mother, though, she was always Izumi-chan. It struck me as odd that Mom had taken to addressing her eldest by this baby name. Maybe this was Mom’s attempt to help Izzy feel more at home, to make up for all their years apart.

Nothing any of us did made any difference, though. My sister remained just as much a delicate, exotic flower as she’d been when she’d stepped off the boat from Japan, almost a year ago now. Everything about her baffled me, and it annoyed me that she so rarely smiled.

A sudden rise in choppiness made May come to, her eyes sweeping open. “Where... where are we?”

“We’re almost there,” I whispered, trying to sound certain.

Izzy put a hand to her stomach, gaze fastened on her knees.

We passed a large island, where our skipper told us there used to be farms, before the war. Before everyone with half a brain packed up and left. A couple of bald eagles swooped through the air, on the hunt for a bedtime snack, perhaps. At the bottom of the strait, where the water gathered force and the wind slammed against our cheeks, we passed a ghost town with a mill peeking out through the darkness. Little islands with sharp cliffs jumped out at us here and there. A spit jutted out, out of nowhere. Our skipper expertly steered his way around it all; nothing the landscape threw at him seemed to fluster him in the least.

Finally, we arrived at a stretch of beach. The black water was rippling with silver, with moonlight, trees rising, mountain-like, beyond.

At the edge of the beach, a crude dock had been built. We stepped off the boat and made our way toward the shore, the air abuzz with columns of insects, tickling and nipping at our skin.

On the pebbly sand, we peered into the ever-shifting shapes of

darkness, trying to get our bearings. Mr. Brown led us away from the water's edge.

"Where's the mill?" Dad said.

"The mill?" Mr. Brown sucked on his cigarette, an orange ember fluttering down, like a dying firefly. "It'll be down there, a ways. Hasn't been built yet."

"But... I thought..."

"So for now, we're tyin' it all into rafts and bargin' it to Vancouver."

"Oh. I see." Dad walked in a small circle, staring at the ground.

"The men'll build the mill next, don't ya worry. Give 'em till next Sunday!" A raspy cackle. "They'll get it done if they stay off the moonshine."

At the far end of the clearing, a dozen cabins had been built. They looked flimsy and makeshift, nothing like the real houses back in Skeena; my stomach sank. Logs were piled here and there for more cabins in the process of being built, tents clustered in the background. A campfire, with a cauldron hanging above it, was still smouldering.

"Do you live here?" Dad enquired.

"Nah, I'm over in the townsite. Will lives there, too."

"Oh."

"Don't look so glum, my friend! We've got a proper house for you, at least."

Mr. Brown led us to the other side of the clearing, where the gnarl of forest resumed. An old cottage stood there, its sloped black roof covered in a carpet of bright wet moss. One window had been boarded up, where the glass had been broken.

"Who lives there?" Dad said.

"You do, now." Mr. Brown laughed again, this time with a note of pity.



The mildewy sofa was itchy. May's head nuzzled against my chest, her body curling into mine. I blinked, the space slowly revealing itself in the pallid morning light. Water-stained slats ran across the ceiling. Tufts of dead grass poked up between battered floorboards. The bed in the corner was covered in faded blankets, bunched around our snoring mother. Dad was nowhere to be seen.

Izzy was also up, or her eyes were open, in any case, glazed, expressionless. She sat perfectly still, straight as a rod, in the armchair where she must have slept. The chair was leaking stuffing from holes where mice might've burrowed to escape the cold. A second sofa, in not much better



shape, stretched emptily across from us, abandoned by her during the night. A damp, earthy smell filled the air, like the ground was thawing.

“Izzy? You all right?”

My sister murmured something in Japanese, something I couldn’t really understand. She buried her face in her hands, shoulders gently rocking. She got like this, from time to time. It was hard to believe that she was sixteen, when she acted like this snivelling baby. Although I felt flint-hearted just thinking it, the truth was that I preferred how things had been before she arrived, before I’d even known she existed. When I’d still believed that *I* was the eldest. Despite being two years younger, I still felt like I was—by a long shot, if you want the truth.

A wood stove sat in the corner, squat and sooty, an axe leaning against it. Disentangling myself from May’s arms, doing my best not to wake her, I got up and inspected what remained of the fire. Using a stick, I swept the last embers into a fiery bud and sprinkled a handful of wood shavings on top to get it going again. Then I laced up my boots, grabbed the axe and headed outside.

A stone’s throw away, the water spanked across my gaze. It’d thinned to a sheet of silver, reflecting the dawn sky. Sand patches and torn-off branches and islands of craggy rocks were scattered about, puncturing the surface of the low tide. Mist hung in the air: a never-ending cobweb of droplets catching the pink light.



Mid-morning, Izzy was taking a nap, while my mother and I unpacked and set up the cottage.

Mom stretched her arms overhead, like her back was giving her grief again. “Get some water for us to drink, will you, please?”

“But where?” I had no intuition of the closest spring.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask, I suppose.”

That would mean talking to the strangers on the other side of the clearing. All morning I’d been keeping my distance, watching them from the corner of my eye. By now the men were long gone; only a couple of womenfolk remained behind.

I went outside and spotted a youngish woman with a cloud of brown hair and a beaky nose. All *hakujin* people had rather pointy features, like their faces had been whittled with a knife. As she turned in profile, I saw the baby strapped to her back, held in place by a blanket of sorts.

There was also an older Oriental lady with a broad chin and hips to match. She was sweeping the cabins, and every so often the tip of her broom flicked out a doorway in a swirl of dust.

I approached the unlit communal campfire, carrying a pot I'd found in the cottage. The cauldron, above the charred wood, contained about a half-foot of water.

"Excuse me," I called out, feeling uncomfortable. "Is this all right to drink?"

The Oriental came outside and said something in a harsh, clacking tongue. I figured she must be Chinese.

"I'm sorry, but I only speak English." This wasn't true, really. I understood quite a bit of Japanese, which my mother always addressed me in, even if I couldn't speak it so well or read it at all. According to Mom, my Japanese was about as good as a small child's.

But what could you expect? At school in Skeena and Prince Rupert, all the lessons had been in English, of course. And the novels that Dad occasionally bought from peddlers and passed along to me, after he'd finished them, had names like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*. He said there were no such tales in Japan, where literature was all about rich rulers and beautiful courtesans, rather than ordinary folks out and about in the world.

"You can drink it," the brown-haired woman said, approaching.

"Mind if I boil it?" According to Dad, it was only safe to drink water that'd been freshly boiled.

Striking a match, she lit the fire.

Her baby started to fuss. As she rocked back and forth on her heels, the whimpering subsided. Her hair blew upward, exposing watchful eyes, a tired, jumpy energy about her, and I could see that she wasn't as young as I'd first assumed. She was wearing several layers of men's shirts, with a shapeless brown sweater that was unravelling at the neck overtop, no coat. Not that I had a coat either, the damp chill seeping into my bones.

"I saw you choppin' wood this morning."

I nodded. An ache still lingered in my lower back.

"You're not bad with that axe."

"Thanks." I shrugged. The wood wasn't going to chop itself.

"How long you folks stayin' here?"

"A while, I guess. We've been hired to run the camp."

"Is that so? Hired by...?"

"Will Henderson. You know him?"

A hint of mockery twisted her lips. "Oh, *him*. The boss man."

I didn't know what to say. Why did she act like it was a joke? Uncle Will—as I'd been calling him since childhood—*was* the boss.

"So, what's yer name, kid?"

I shifted my weight from foot to foot, worrying I'd already told her too much. "What's *yours*?"

"Irene."

Irene looked perplexed when I shared my own name, hesitantly. Khya. It was an odd name, no doubt—not very Japanese sounding. Dad had concocted it, because back when I'd been born, he'd had high hopes for our life in Skeena. So he'd named me after the Khyex River, a little tributary right near the mouth of Skeena River.

As if being called Khya wasn't unusual enough, I looked on the strange side, too. I was used to people's baffled stares, as though they couldn't quite figure out where I fit into their scheme of things. My hair was cut fairly short, in the shape of a bowl. It'd been that way since I was a kid. My mother kept urging me to grow it out, but I was very much a creature of habit. And I could get away with it because I appeared younger than my age. I was short and slight, like Dad, though we both had a wiry strength.

I didn't mind looking like a boy. It was safer that way, and it had been the case for as long as I could remember. You heard too many stories about the terrible things that happened to pretty girls when they got chased through the woods. So I learned to stand with my feet planted wide apart and cross my arms, just like Dad, and if people mistook me as his son, we never corrected them.

The water was starting to steam now. "You live in one of these cabins, Irene?"

She shook her head.

"What about your husband?"

Something in her face wobbled, like a puddle hit by drops of rain. "He ain't my husband. And that man can do whatever the hell he wants!"

While she kept staring at me, as if daring me to be shocked—or not be shocked—the air seemed to tremble between us.

"Then what are you doing here?" I said, puzzled.

"My baby's father can't forget all about us. Can't forget he's got a wee mouth to feed."

"Will you be sticking around, then?"

"You think I got time to laze around? Somebody's gotta put bread on the table."

There weren't a lot of jobs women could do, in these parts. "Where do you work, if you don't mind me asking?"

Whatever I'd said must have provoked a sudden thought. Irene was looking at me with needles of interest shooting from her eyes.

"How old are ya, hun?"

“Fourteen.” An oddly naked feeling washed over me, like I was a goose and she was appraising my plumpness for Christmas dinner.

“With a bit of lipstick and rouge and your hair curled all nice, I bet you could pass for sixteen.” She pulled my shawl off my shoulders, scrutinizing my chest. “Don’t think that you’re foolin’ anyone with this tomboy getup, hun.”

My cheeks burned. The chirping birds faded away, like I was hearing everything through a thick, woolly layer. All I wanted was to stay as I was—halt time forever. Yet I knew it was as impossible as stopping the blood from flooding out between my legs or soothing the raw nerve endings that sent strange itches through my blistering, budding nipples.

As the woman continued to assess me, I noticed traces of fiery lipstick on her chapped mouth, cigarette-stained teeth peeking through, in the hint of an enquiring smile. At that instant, I knew who she was, what she was. In Prince Rupert, I’d seen girls like her beckoning and calling out to men on the street, from shadowy doorways, their faces painted bright as wild roses. My mother would always tighten her grip on me, as we’d rush past.

“We could use a little Oriental thing, at the house where I work. Not only for the Chinamen, let me assure you.”

I backed away, startled.

“Does yer daddy treat ya nice? Or is he a mean old coot?”

A crackling shudder came over my skin. I shook my head.

“Well, that’s a pity. If ya change yer mind and need an escape route”—she grabbed my wrist—“you can find me at the Rosewater Hotel in Port Clem. Just walk along the shore, headin’ south. You’ll have to raft over for part of the way, but you’ll get there eventually.”

I wrested my arm back, awash in humiliation. Who did she think she was talking to? It was bad enough that she’d pegged me as a girl, but did I look like *that* kind of girl? As I filled my pot with trembling hands, a shower of hot flecks hit my skin. I turned to leave.

“I hope yer mama knows how to take care of herself,” Irene called out at my back.

“Of course, she does!”

“Good. ’Cause there ain’t a lot of women, up in these parts.”