

The Quinzhee

An excerpt from a novel, *The Cantilevered Universe*

THE FLIGHT WAS CROWDED. THERE WERE A LOT OF SILENT, ROUGH-looking men—“probably they work in the big mine up there,” Louise said, as a jean-jacketed guy pushed past Emily to his seat. Emily held her eldest sister’s hand during takeoff, an unspoken, unwavering tradition. Jacob and Helen sat across the aisle. Emily had the window seat and watched the watery horizon tilt, replaced by mountains. They were flying to the Yukon, farther north than she’d ever been. Her mother, June, had a new job in a new town. And a new man, she’d told Emily on the phone. “You’ll love him, Em,” June had said.

It turned out that post-divorce life meant not just yearly parent swapping, but a series of introductions to a parade of their mother’s new romantic partners. Some of the relationships lasted a while and some didn’t. As a kid, it wasn’t always clear where to make an investment. Shortly after leaving her husband, June had moved to Nelson and hooked up with a hippie man who sold health food from a storefront and marijuana out the side door. This man was a gentle soul who let a toddler Emily loose on the lower shelves of the store every day while her mother taught school. Emily would pull down cans of lentils, run her chubby fingers through the bulk bins, occasionally puncture a bag of brewer’s yeast. Her mother’s new “friend” would laugh and sweep the mess, holding Emily on his hip while she locked and unlocked the

clasp of his overalls. June had broken up with him after two years. “He’s unmotivated,” she said. Emily had cried and cried. June had gone on to date a veterinarian, a banjo teacher, a mechanic, and two different ski instructors.

Now June had a new man they’d never met, and Emily, like her siblings, was careful with these strangers in the guise of parents. Polite, but very careful.

THEY HAD TO WALK down the folding staircase from the plane to the cracked tarmac, into the new air that was dry and smelled like cold, even on a bright fall day, and then back up some stairs and into the airport. It was a squat building with a gaudy green exterior and it didn’t even have automatic doors. June was at the gate, vibrating with excitement, when they straggled inside. A small man with a thick thatch of black hair was at her side. June reached out and wrapped an arm around Helen and the other around Louise, then tried to scoop her two other children into a family crush. “Oh, I can’t believe you’re here! You’re finally here!”

The man looked on with a crooked smile. He wore nylon pants, multiple-pocketed, and a ragged blue sweater. His stance was comfortable, betraying none of the usual awkwardness of the new step-parent. June turned to him, beaming. “Tuck, these are my kids! This is Louise, Helen, my youngest, Emily, Jacob—Jake, where are you?”

Jacob was standing off to the side, kicking at the baggage chute and affecting disinterest. Tuck walked over and Jacob extended a hand. The attempt was awkward but surprisingly grown-up, Emily thought. Tuck was laughing, though. He ignored the hand and gave Jacob a rough hug, then pulled Emily in. His sweater was woolly and scratchy on Emily’s cheek, and he smelled of wood smoke.

“Let’s grab the bags and get you home,” June said. “I can’t wait to show you this place. Tuck built it. There’s a loft like a treehouse—you’ll love it, Emily.”

Tuck drove a truck, an old one but with new roof racks, and in the back canopy, a handmade wooden bed platform and little cupboards. He threw the luggage onto the bed. “It’ll be tight, but I think we should all fit up front,” he said. The truck had a king cab, and Louise, Helen

and Jacob climbed into the back seat. Emily perched, her gangly legs folded under the dashboard, on June's lap. It was a bit undignified for a thirteen year old, she thought, but she was so small and skinny it always fell to her to be the last one, jammed in. They pulled out of the small airport parking lot.

From what Emily could tell, the airport was on the outskirts of town, and they appeared to be driving even further away from civilization. The roadside, as they pulled away from the last ratty gas station, was bordered only with scrubby trees and a few rutted dirt driveways. The forest was mostly dusty-needled evergreens. A few deciduous trees had leaves that were already brown and curled. "You didn't mention we'd be living out in the boonies," Jacob said.

"Listen, Jake," his mother started but Tuck laughed and interrupted.

"I get antsy around too much asphalt," he said, "This place is great, close to good hiking trails, wilderness, there's even a little mountain with a couple of granite faces I'm thinking could be climbable . . . you rock climb?" he asked, directing the question to Jacob. Her brother narrowed his nose, shook his head.

"None of you?" Tuck looked around at their silent faces. "Your mom's a regular mountain goat."

Emily wanted to say something then, something to affirm the optimism in Tuck's voice and start the year off in the right way, but nothing came into her mind. Instead she gave Tuck her brightest smile and leaned back against her mother's shoulder. June gave her a squeeze, and Emily turned to look out the truck's dirty window at the forest going by.

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EMILY SURVEYED THE HOUSE a second time after the others descended on the kitchen and the sandwiches her mother had offered. It was slapdash and a bit batty, like many of her mother's finds. Only she guessed this place was Tuck's haven, a project he got to in-between trips to the mountains. It was made of rough-hewn logs and the floors were unfinished plywood, with old rugs scattered here and there. A big wood stove dominated the basement area. There were tiny bedrooms

partitioned upstairs, separated by particleboard walls, one for each of them. There was a makeshift climbing gym in the basement. Tuck told them he planned to put in a zip line from the upstairs balcony to the driveway.

Tuck was a mountain guide and worked for a heli-ski outfit. June had told her kids she'd met him in an avalanche safety course. He had a lot of enthusiasm. Emily watched her mother beam at him.

Emily claimed a tiny loft room above the stairs—you had to climb a short ladder to get there. June and Tuck shared a large bedroom on the main floor, off the kitchen. It had its own small wood stove and a claw foot bathtub right next to the bed that could be filled by bucket. “That’s from before I had the place plumbed,” Tuck said, “But it’s still nice now and then.” He looked at June and smiled. Emily had looked away.

Emily piled her clothes into a dented dresser and tacked a small photo to the wall. It was a yellowing Polaroid that captured her complete, pre-fractured family posing on her grandmother’s front porch in Vancouver. Her parents were seated, royalty-like, in two large wicker chairs. They both wore bell-bottomed jeans, June’s plump knees tucked into her chest, her hair clipped close to her head in a swingy bowl cut. The three older kids sat together on the porch steps, squeezed in tight, the infant Emily stretched along their laps. Emily was so chubby as a baby, with thick arms that stuck out at an angle over a bubble belly. The baby stared at her from the photo, dark-eyed, with a serious, knowing look.

Emily had inadvertently tacked the picture askew on the rough log wall and she reached out to re-pin it, then stopped, considering whether to take it down altogether. What was the purpose of such a photo? She felt no sadness, looking at it, nor any wish that her parents had remained together. Still, there was something about the picture that signified wholeness to her. It was more like an archaeological artifact whose meaning was known, than a keepsake whose significance could be felt. In the end, she deferred the decision, left the slanted photo in place, and headed downstairs. This was a temporary arrangement, after all.

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EMILY STARTED SCHOOL THE following Tuesday. June dropped her off. The junior high was a long, single-story building, slouched in a suburban neighbourhood. It bordered on a wooded area. Emily could see that wilderness pressed in on the town on all sides.

Emily waited outside the building after her mother drove away, stamping her booted feet in the dirty schoolyard. There was a small group of girls around the side of the school, smoking quietly. Occasionally they'd bend their heads together and emit harsh bursts of laughter, but she couldn't catch a word. Two boys kicked a partially deflated soccer ball between them. Once it veered in her direction, and she attempted a cheerful kick at it, but she missed and the boy brushed past her without a glance to retrieve it.

The people at this school were skinnier than the kids down south, she thought. Leaner, harsher. Maybe they burned off all their fat in the cold winters.

She walked toward the double entrance doors. Students were entering in bunches but the boy who went before her let the door go and it nearly hit her in the face. She held out a palm just in time and braced against the slap of the door. Inside, the hallway smelled of mustard and dust. There were faded posters taped between the lockers, advertising a spring dance. They hadn't even taken down last year's posters; what kind of school was this?

Her homeroom was filled with milling students and noise when she entered. All the empty seats were in the front of the room. Emily took one closest to the window, dropped her knapsack, and sat gratefully. She jiggled her knee, wished for a book to hide behind. She felt exposed with so many eyes on her. The bell rang. Emily jumped a little, squared her shoulders, and stared ahead.

WHEN EMILY GOT HOME Tuck was making stew. Louise was chopping carrots. She wrinkled her nose when Tuck pulled a bloody Ziploc bag from the refrigerator and started separating half-frozen chunks of meat with a cleaver. "I don't eat meat," Louise said.

"What? This is delicious moose meat. I shot it myself," Tuck said, "And with the greatest respect."

Louise looked horrified. "I can't eat that," she said.

“Could you maybe just fry it separately?” Emily said. “That’s what we usually do.”

Tuck’s face betrayed a slight annoyance. Then he shrugged and pulled out a second pan.

June set the big wooden table with mismatched plates. She was wearing tights and the old fisherman’s sweater she used for jogging on cool days. She looked fit: healthy, slim. Emily could tell June was feeling good by the way she wandered the kitchen in her sweaty tights, sneaking a taste of Tuck’s stew. June had been “cursed,” as she said, with a tendency toward plumpness, which she constantly battled. Her hips were naturally round, her bottom wide, and soft rolls would grow around her waist, like cake batter rising in a pan. Emily figured this didn’t fit with June’s determination to be a hard-bodied mountain woman, all taut and tight.

Emily had watched June battle her body like it was an alien trying to break through her skin. June forced herself into rigorous exercise regimes, leaving weekly running schedules taped to the fridge. Some of her boyfriends had encouraged her in this, whether it was because they liked her thin or because it kept her pliant and trying, Emily wasn’t sure. She hoped Tuck wasn’t one of those boyfriends, but she couldn’t tell either way yet.

They were all seated and Tuck was passing around big bowls of stew when Jacob walked in.

“Hey,” he said, and started downstairs.

“Aren’t you eating?” June asked.

“I already ate.”

Everyone looked at him. Jacob shrugged. “Look, I’m tired. I’m going to my room.” He was already on the stairs.

Emily saw Tuck bouncing a little on the balls of his feet, like maybe he wanted to go after Jacob. Good luck, she thought. Interfering with any of us is a rookie mistake. A classic step-parent misstep: trying to become a figure of discipline. But Tuck was looking at June and seemed to read caution in her expression.

“Well, I never,” June said. She tried to act hip but still used the antiquated expressions of her farming ancestors.

“Moose me up,” Emily said, handing her empty bowl to Tuck.

EMILY WENT TO BED early. Lying there, she felt the strangeness of this new world. It was too quiet here altogether. There were no street sounds, like in New Westminster: car wheels on rain, the occasional rattle of a shopping cart in the back alley. Sirens. Drunken shouts.

Here the night silence pushed on her ears. The house would occasionally make a loud crack as the evening cold descended, making her jump. Outside the window the spruce trees were still and black. Even the wind stopped for night.

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EMILY SPENT THE NEXT few days at school trying really hard. She followed Louise's advice: *walk fast in the hallways, pick a seat in the cafeteria like it was reserved for you, smile to yourself, even when alone. Pretend the world's a private joke. Let them come to you.* Only they didn't come. They went by.

After three days she scorned Louise's suggestions and brought a novel to school. Her best and truest skill was to let a book consume her. Two minutes on the page and it was all gone: the creepy classrooms, the cold landscape and its bleak inhabitants.

The books nearly always worked. Sometimes, though, she'd be flipping pages and get caught by a nearby conversation. Everything she overheard at this school seemed to her sinister. She heard a boy tell another he'd cut his balls off if he didn't shut up. She heard a girl tell her friend she was only eating cheese, everything else felt strange on her teeth. The girl was skinny and her skin was shiny. She heard a couple whispering on a bench nearby, and then they were kissing, but when they pulled apart Emily saw out of the corner of her eye that the girl was crying. Her face dripped with tears.

THE SHORT, CRISPY FALL season had gotten drier and harder and crunchier and then the snow fell. It was suddenly and fully winter. Emily went dutifully to school and was home, alone and buried in a book, by four o'clock. Like all kids accustomed to change, Emily knew her siblings would soon settle into a routine. And since they were

never around, she was pretty sure that it was okay if she hung around with Tuck sometimes. He was teaching her to belay on his homemade rock climbing wall, and when she tried to scale the wall, he said she had some of her mother's light-footedness, which pleased both Emily and June. Besides, she liked it in Tuck's climbing gym in the basement. It was warm down there by the wood stove, and with no windows you couldn't tell if it was night or day. It made Emily feel like time didn't matter. Time didn't grind, like afternoons in the classroom, or stretch, like the long nights in her bedroom. Tuck had installed fluorescent lights that were harsh but comfortingly bright. There were small molded pieces of plastic screwed to the plywood walls. These were called "holds," Tuck said. In some places he'd bolted parts of an old hockey stick to make ledges for feet. There was even a climbing rope stretched taut between walls close to the floor. "Try and cross it," Tuck said. "Take your socks off first."

Emily pulled off her wool socks and placed one foot on the rope. As soon as she placed her weight on the foot, the rope wobbled wildly. She held her breath, steadied, lifted her other foot. She managed only a few seconds of balance before she had to jump awkwardly to the floor. Tuck laughed. "Tough, isn't it?" he said. "It works all your muscles, especially stomach and calves."

He jumped up and walked quickly along the rope, making it nearly halfway across before teetering and hopping to the floor. "It helps to have climbing shoes on," he said. "Here, try again with my shoulder to lean on."

Emily stepped forward again. She could tell by Tuck's expression he would take it personally if she didn't try. He needed to show her it could be done, wanted her to succeed and to thank him for her success. He was one of those guys.

"Those guys" were the people who'd had things come easy: they were natural athletes, say, or they could take care of themselves in the woods. They weren't afraid of bears, or spiders in a mountain hut, or of heights, or of the dark, for that matter. That was okay. The tiring part was that instead of graciously accepting or even being grateful for their gifts—the gift of sailing through life with ease—they denied it. They said that anyone could do it if they tried hard enough.

These were the kind of men her mother picked: the teacher type. It could be worse, she supposed.

Emily let Tuck guide her across the rope. When she reached the far wall and lightly hopped to the ground, he was grinning.

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THE NEXT DAY dropped to thirty below. All the colours in the landscape got pale and shimmered blurrily through iced-over windows. The bell rang to signal the first class of the day. Emily sat in her homeroom. Her thighs burned hotly under her jeans. They'd been almost frozen, she thought, on the walk from the bus stop. Could one get frostbite on one's thighs, she wondered. It was her own fault for eschewing long underwear. The wind cut right through her blue jeans.

Emily's locker had a sticky door. She had to slam it hard several times to get the metal frame to align so she could slide her lock through the closure. She hated doing this, making this slamming noise. Everything in her knew that the quieter, the less obvious she was, the better. This school was a place to go unseen. She needed to slip through the school day like a ghost, get as small as she could.

She had skinniness on her side; she pitied the larger girls who clunked into the world's censure. Emily understood, now, the girls she heard quietly purging between flushes in the bathroom stalls, pushing away their soggy trays in the cafeteria. Ingesting life was like saying you were owed something. Girls needed to float, barely present, as though too good for the dirty world.

To open her locker, Emily had to brace her feet and lean back, using the weight of her whole body. She tugged at the handle, her arms vibrating in front of her like useless rubber bands. Today she gave three yanks but the rusty door wouldn't budge. She pulled a fourth time, bracing her sneakers on the dusty hallway floor and the door gave with an angry sudden squeal and she fell backward, into a body. The two of them stumbled together and then she felt the person shove her hard.

"Watch it, bitch." The words were spoken sweet and high.

"Sorry. I'm sorry!" Emily steadied herself, speaking into her locker. It didn't seem like a voice she wanted to look in the face.

“What the fuck. You hit me.”

She turned. The girl was red-headed and sneering, her cardigan askew where Emily had fallen against it. Her eyes were iceberg blue between thick slashes of eyeliner. Pancake makeup was failing to hide a few angry pimples on her nose. Even so, she was the kind of pretty that gets you things.

“Sorry,” Emily said again, feeling like a parrot. “It gets stuck.”

Now the girl smiled, and Emily had cause to ascertain that dimples could look sinister on the right face.

“Aw, it gets stuck, huh?” The redhead glanced at a couple of boys walking by, and raised her voice slightly. “It looks pretty darn loose to me. Maybe try some lube?” She giggled.

Emily turned away, reached for her textbooks, prayed for release.

The girl wasn’t quite done with her. “Watch yourself, bitch. You made me twist my ankle. It might be sprained. If it is, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Emily grabbed her books and left the locker door hanging. She made for the doors at the end of the hall, wanting to run and holding back, practically on tiptoes to keep her footfalls quiet. The other students mostly turned away, but some had begun to snicker. She could hear their nasty buzzing wherever she went now; it was a sickening sound, like a nest of insects behind a wall.

She pushed on the school door, realizing as the harsh air hit that she’d forgotten her jacket. Still, the fresh bite of wind was a relief.

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TUCK DECIDED EMILY NEEDED a pair of real climbing shoes. They drove into town on a Saturday. There was an outdoor store—“they mostly just sell the clothes, really,” Tuck said, “But they keep some actual outdoor equipment around to get guys like me in the store and give them cred.” Tuck knew the owner and said he’d get a “pro discount” on the shoes.

At the store the owner came over right away, even though he’d been talking to some other customers. “Tuck, my man,” he said—he was a paunchy guy with a slick smile Emily disliked immediately—“What can I do you for?”

“Rock shoes, for my climbing partner here,” Tuck grasped Emily’s shoulder.

“I knew you liked them young . . .” The man smirked, then, seeing Tuck’s frown: “This must be one of June’s kids.”

“Yup. One of June’s bugs.”

“What size you take?”

“I’m a size eight.”

“We’ll try a six,” Tuck said.

It was an effort to cram her feet into the tiny slippers with the rubbery smooth soles. “This hurts,” Emily said.

“It’s good pain, though,” Tuck said. “If they hurt when you’re standing, they’ll work when you’re on a vertical face.”

Emily skinned her nose at him. “Fine,” said Tuck, looking around for the owner. “Can we try a seven?” he called out.

The owner was talking to two young women. Emily felt her guts twist a little when she saw they were from her school: a tough athletic girl with straw-like blond hair and big boobs, and the redhead from the hallway, the one with the soft voice and the vicious streak.

When Tuck called out, Emily could feel the girls’ eyes on her, like little pinpricks on her skin. When the store guy brought the next pair over, the redhead sauntered along with him. She watched boldly while Emily jammed her feet in. Tuck was nodding. “Yup, those are good,” he said, “Let me feel your foot.”

Emily stretched out her leg.

“What are those for?” the redhead asked, her soft voice like chloroform.

“Rock climbing,” Tuck said, looking up.

“Huh,” the girl said. She cocked her hip and stood her ground. “Melanie, right?” she said, giving Emily an almost infinitesimal glance.

“Emily,” Emily and Tuck said at once. Tuck smiled. “You go to the same school?”

Sporty straw-hair joined them. “Well, hi there,” she said to Emily with suspicious enthusiasm. “I’m Clarissa,” she said, looking at Tuck.

“This is my, this is Tuck,” Emily said. The word “step” was not used in their family. The girls still stared. “Tuck lives with my mother,” Emily continued, finally.

“Oh, hi,” the redhead said. “I’m Janice,” and she stuck out her hand, like she hadn’t been ridiculing Emily in the school hallway just a few days ago.

Tuck shook it and looked happily at Emily. She smiled back queasily.

“We’re here for jackets,” the one called Clarissa said. She held up a powder-blue puffy down one.

“I didn’t know you were into outdoorsy shit,” redheaded Janice said, turning her full attention on Emily. Her lips stretched.

“Well, we’ve been practising . . . in the basement,” Emily said. It sounded weird.

“We’re thinking of going snow camping next weekend,” Tuck said excitedly. “Maybe even build a quinzhee. It’s like an igloo. You guys should come out. You could try out your new jackets.”

“Wow!” Janice said, “That sounds totally cool, hey?” She nudged Clarissa. The sarcasm in her voice was so very slight that Emily almost couldn’t detect it.

AT SCHOOL ON MONDAY, she passed Clarissa and Janice in the hall. When they saw Emily, they smiled hugely and falsely at her, and she heard laughter as she walked away. Later, Janice accosted her at her locker.

“Oh my god, hi, Emily,” she said. “Is there room in your sleeping bag this weekend at the igloo? Or does your stepfather take up all the room? Does your mother zip the bags together before you go or do you two wait until you’re in your little snow cave?”

Emily didn’t know whether to laugh as though this was a shared joke or snark back, but no witty comeback occurred to her. What came out was “Shut up!” in a hideous pained burst of laughter. She closed her locker and walked away as briskly as she could manage on wobbly legs.

TUCK MENTIONED THE GIRLS several times over the next few days. “You should ask Janice and that other girl about this weekend!” he reminded Emily, and each time she nodded, keeping her expression neutral and hoping he’d forget about it.

Finally she put him off before he could ask again. “I asked . . . those girls, but they said unfortunately they’re busy this weekend.” She couldn’t bring herself to say their names.

“Oh, too bad,” Tuck said. “Do you want to postpone?”

“No, that’s okay,” Emily said. “It’s really, really okay.” Please let this go, she thought, and maybe this did get through, even to easygoing Tuck, because he stopped asking about her “school buddies” Clarissa and Janice.

EMILY BOUNCED ALONG IN Tuck’s truck, the skin on her face burning with the heat from the air vents after their night outdoors in the cold. It had been icy clear and starry and great, a real adventure. Tuck was easy to be with and didn’t try to make a lot of conversation. He showed her how to mound the snow into an oval pile and poke sticks into the top of the quinzhee, to show them how much of the interior to dig out. “But first we wait an hour for it to settle. It’ll be really strong then.” While they waited, Tuck heated soup on a camp stove and they sipped it from plastic travel mugs.

They’d worked hard and when they’d finished the little snow dome looked cozy warm with Tuck’s lantern glowing within. “Snow is amazing insulation,” Tuck said. “It’ll be toasty for sleeping.”

In her sleeping bag in the darkness it felt a little strange to be there with Tuck. She didn’t know him that well, after all. But Tuck was comfortable, not intense or weird like some of June’s boyfriends had been. He was kind, too. After all, no-one else seemed to have time for her these days.

Emily’s feet were cold but she didn’t want to rustle around too much in case Tuck was asleep. She slowly moved them up and crossed them under her thighs.

“Warm enough?” Tuck said.

“Yes. Well mostly, just not my feet.”

“Are you wearing socks?”

“Yes.”

“Take them off. Trust me; it’s warmer.”

Emily reached down and pulled off her socks.

“Am I right or am I right?”

“Yeah, it does feel warmer,” Emily said, though it didn’t yet.

“I taught your mom that trick last winter when we went ski touring for a week in the backcountry. It was one of our first dates, actually.”

“Oh, yeah?” This was weird to talk about, her mother on a date. Still, it meant Tuck thought she was grown-up.

“Yeah.” Tuck laughed. “I liked that about your mother, that she’d be game for that kind of a date. You’re like that too, Emily, you’re not afraid to try things.”

Emily waited a minute. It was so quiet out here in the snow. “Actually, I am,” she said finally. “I am afraid, a lot.”

“Of what?”

“Lots of things. The middle of the night. Being alone in the house, sometimes. The kids at school, and the kids at next year’s school too. I’m no good at it, I always say something stupid. Or I can’t say anything at all.”

“I had a hard time at school sometimes too.”

“Really?” Emily couldn’t keep the skepticism from her voice. Tuck was like one of those popular kids that talk about how “shy” they really are.

“I was never very good in school. I was dyslexic and when I had to read aloud, people laughed. It wasn’t until I got good at sports that I found a great group of buddies.”

“Huh.” Emily couldn’t see anyone at her school ever meeting the description of “buddy” and her ribs gave a lonely clench at the thought, but there was nothing to say about it. So she didn’t say anything else. She’d let Tuck’s attempt at a parallel experience be enough for her.

She thought he might say something else; the air in the quinzhee felt full of thoughts, in a nice way, like they were both pondering. But Tuck stayed quiet and so did she. For once, Emily found she could stay present, right where she was, something that felt harder and harder to do. After a while she heard Tuck’s breathing change, go soft and loose. Sometime after that she too fell asleep.

Now, as the car rounded the last corner on the way home, Emily turned to Tuck. “Will you practice climbing with me tomorrow?”

“Sorry, pal. I’m out guiding all week.” Tuck tapped his fingers on the dash to a beat in his head. He already seemed half gone.

“Okay,” Emily said. She turned her face to the window, and felt the scenery fall away. The light contracted, the colour leached to black outline. She blinked hard to keep hold of herself.

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WHEN TUCK AND EMILY pulled into the driveway, June ran out in her unlaced snow boots, without her jacket. She bounced there, arms wrapped around herself, then pulled Tuck in for a kiss as he got out of the truck. Then she ran around the truck and hugged Emily. Did it mean something that Emily came second? Thinking the question hurt. She pushed the thought away. It was a good thing, Emily decided. June happy was better for all of them, and she wanted her mother to make this one work.

“You survived! How was the igloo?” June released her daughter.

“Quinzhee.”

“Sorry, quinzhee.”

“It was cool,” Emily said, looking at Tuck. “I thought it was really cool.” Tuck was pulling their gear from the back of the truck. He didn’t say anything.

THAT NIGHT EMILY HEARD them arguing. She’d gone downstairs for a glass of milk, looking for something to help her sleep. She stopped, arrested at the entrance to the kitchen by the sound of June’s voice, tense from the adults’ bedroom, and her own name.

“—what Emily wants . . . that decision was made a long time ago.”

She crept closer until she heard Tuck so clearly that the hair on her neck tickled: “She’s having a hard time, June.”

“Yeah, well, they’re teenagers; things change overnight with them.”

Tuck snorted.

“She’s a sensitive kid, always has been.” June sighed. “Don’t give me a hard time, hon.”

“I just think she might be happier down south. Kids need stability, or consistency, or something, don’t they?”

“Well, maybe if you were around more. . .”

“Jesus, June. My job is ski guide, not parent. That’s your job.”

Emily stood frozen. She felt nauseous, pathetic for being discussed like that, tempered by a small warmth at hearing Tuck stick up for her happiness. Then again, his only suggestion was to send her away. Clearly, he wouldn’t care if she weren’t here.

“Well, let me do it, then,” June said. From the tone, Emily could picture her mothers’ lips pursed, tight. “You can’t have it both ways.”

There was no more talking, only rustling, like someone had turned over in bed, turned away. Emily stepped backward until she reached the stairs. She couldn’t hear her own footsteps at all.