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SUSAN VREELAND

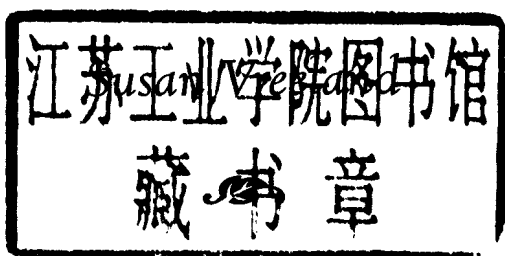


THE
FOREST
LOVER

a novel



The
Forest Lover



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For

C. JERRY HANNAH

who makes strong talk

There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood, the vastness, the Western breath of go-to-the-devil-if-you-don't like it, the eternal big spaceness of it. Oh the West! I'm of it and I love it.

—Emily Carr

Hundreds and Thousands, 1966

This is the forest primeval.
The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green
Indistinct in the twilight
Stand like Druids of eld,
With voices sad and prophetic.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Evangeline, 1847

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Stepping into the experience of another consciousness can be daunting, but Carr left volumes of journals and narrative sketches which made this a joy. *Klee Wyck*; *Hundreds and Thousands*, *The Journals of Emily Carr*, and *Growing Pains*, *The Autobiography of Emily Carr*, all published by Clarke, Irwin, and Company, and her correspondence, *Dear Nan*, edited by Doreen Walker, published by University of British Columbia Press, gave me her characteristic phrases, which, like her trees, "go whiz bang and whoop it up."

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May all of you find a moment in the book, personal to you, which recompenses in some small way what you have given me.

YUKON

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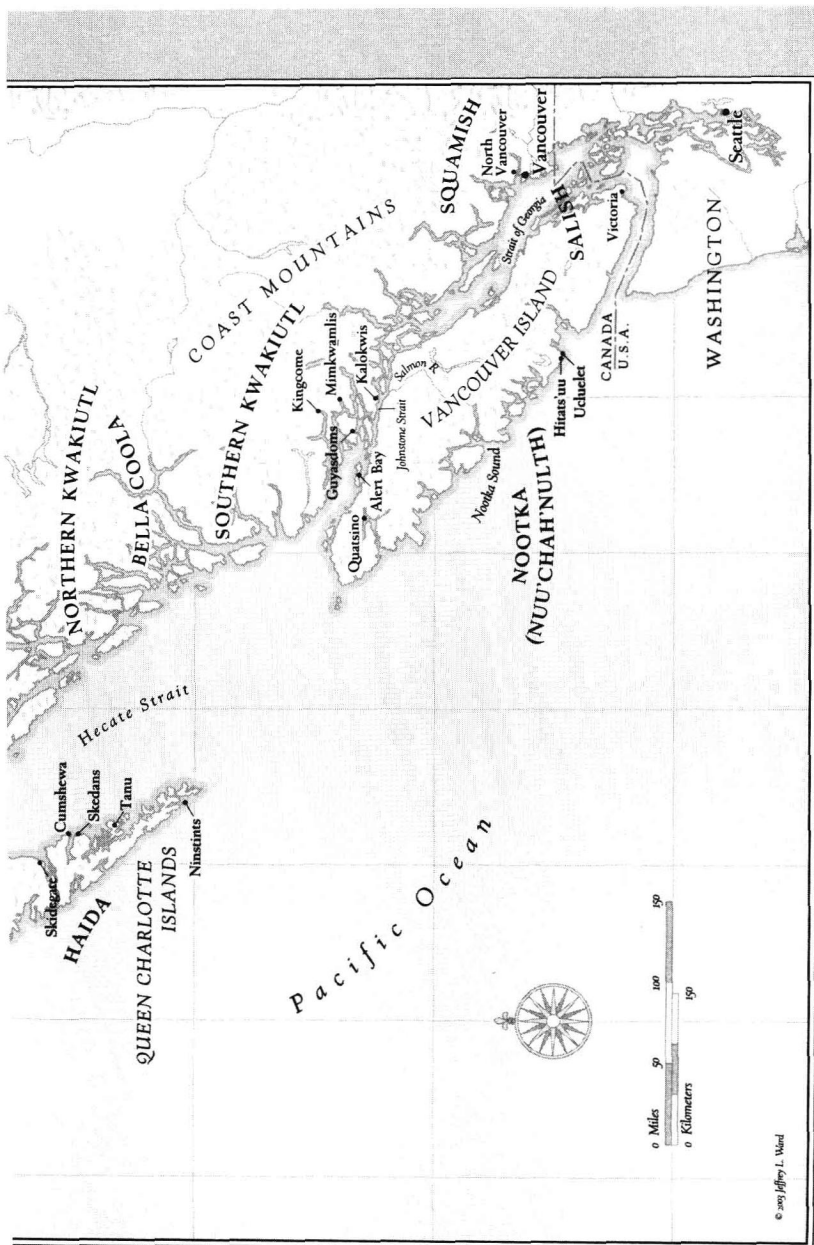
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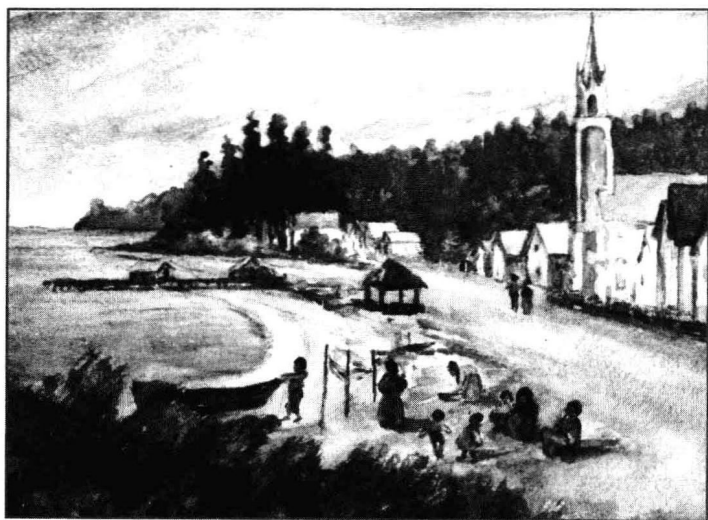
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Part I



1: Salmonberry, 1906

Letting her cape snap in the wind, Emily gripped her carpetbag and wicker food hamper, and hiked up the beach, feasting her eyes on Hitats'uun spread wide beneath fine-spun vapor. Cedars elbowing firs and swinging their branches pushed against the village from behind. One wayward fir had fallen and lay uprooted with its foliage battered by waves and tangled in kelp. Wind whipped up a froth of sword fern sprouting in its bark. At last, she was right here, where trees had some get-up-and-go to them, where the ocean was wetter than mere water, where forest and sea crashed against each other with the Nootka pressed between them.

She had been to San Francisco and found it cramped, to London and found it stifling. She had ridden the Canadian Pacific Railway across the Rockies, breathless at their jagged power, and had galloped bareback across a ranch in the Western Cariboo, swinging her hat and whooping to the broad sky. She'd gone home to the starched and doiled parlor of the yellow, two-story bird cage of a house in Victoria, British Columbia, where she'd been born, and found only hypocrisy and criticism there.

But this, oh this, the west coast of Vancouver Island, wave-lashed and smelling of salt spray and seaweed, the teeming, looming forest alive with raven talk and other secrets, the cedar bighouses scoured by storms to a lovely silver sheen, the whole place juicy with life, was more wild, more free, more enticing than she remembered it when

she'd come here eight years earlier. Or was it she that was different?

Lulu, grown into a young woman now, clamming on the beach, remembered her as soon as she'd climbed out of the hired canoe that had delivered her here from the steamer dock a mile away. Now, with Lulu carrying Emily's canvas sketch sack, a pack of barking, leprous-looking dogs came tearing toward them. "Stay down," Emily ordered, planting her feet wide apart.

Lulu ran them off, her braids flying, her long indigo skirt billowing, clams clacking in the basket on her back. She came back to Emily. "Sorry. They awful mean."

They approached the largest of the bighouses, ancestral dwelling lodges of many families, this one painted with a huge faded red sun. Lulu held open a hide hanging in the doorway, and motioned her inside.

Don't you dare go. Her sister Dede's angry command issued in their parlor two days before still grated on her mind. *Just who do you think you are . . . ?*

A thrill of defiance rippled through her as she stepped in.

Smells of fish and grease and the rich spice of wood smoke engulfed her. Women in striped cotton dresses sitting on tiers of platforms around the fire murmured and gave her curious looks. Some stopped what they'd been doing. An old woman in a red head scarf watched her with narrowed eyes, probably wondering what a white woman wearing a strange plaid English tam perched on her head was doing in their isolated village.

"Hello," Emily said.

Only a twitch of her bottom lip showed that she'd heard.

"The Nootka aren't much for friendliness," the captain of the steamer had told her a couple of hours earlier.

"But I've arranged to stay with the missionaries," she'd said.

"They packed up and left a month ago. I'd reconsider if I were you."

She'd felt the captain's words as a blow beneath her ribs. Dede would have gloated if she knew. As it was, Dede had given her a tongue-lashing about her mania for tramping through the wilderness with Indians, calling it a disgrace to the family. Still, she'd stepped off the steamer onto the dock at Ucluelet, and now, in this bighouse, she shoved back the fear that she'd made a mistake.

Lulu nodded to a man who spilled himself out of a hammock hanging from thick beams still shaped like tree trunks. His hair was cut bluntly at his shiny copper jaw, and he wore loose woolen trousers and leather shoes, but no socks.

"Chief Tlehwituaa," Lulu announced, full of respect, and spoke a few words to him in Nootka, to which he responded.

Emily felt his milky-eyed scrutiny go right through her. Who are you? she was certain he was asking. It was the same question she'd often asked herself. Impulsive rebel or lonely old maid? Aimless hobbyist or committed painter?

"Chief Tlehwituaa say he knew another missionary family would come. Tide that go out always come back," Lulu said. The chief spoke again. "He want to know where is your husband."

"I'm not a missionary's wife! Tell him, Lulu. I only came to visit the missionaries before. Tell him you remember me. Emily Carr." She set down her bags and took off her hat.

"Not a missionary wife!" some other voice said in English.

Murmurs. Smiles. Someone laughed. A man slapped his thigh. The chief held up his hand and the room fell silent. Apparently he didn't remember her. Maybe it was her close-cropped hair. When she'd been here before she had long hair, wound and pinned up like any proper Victorian

lady. Now, to them, it probably looked like a bumpy brown knit cap.

The chief consulted with Lulu. "If not a missionary wife, why did you come? He want to know," Lulu said.

"I came to paint this time. Ask him if I may. The village, the beautiful canoes."

She dug out her half-filled watercolor book from her sketch sack to show her paintings of Beacon Hill Park in Victoria, woodland and seacoast in England. She felt apologetic. The English trees were puny compared to the mighty Douglas-firs and cedars here. Namby-pamby. A pathetic offering.

Why paint here, he might ask, and what would she answer? That she hoped that here she might discover what it was about wild places that called to her with such promise.

The chief made a circle with his hand, as if holding a brush, and nodded at her tablet.

"He want that you paint now."

"Now?"

Was this an invitation or a command? Better to assume it was a command. Could she paint under the heat of watching eyes, paint without sketching first? The years in art school in San Francisco and England hadn't taught her that. Time to prove to herself what, for the last dozen years, she'd only hoped she was.

She opened her watercolor set, a curiosity to him. He stuck his nose down over each color and sniffed while she looked for a subject. The raised platforms along the walls converged at a corner post carved into a man holding a fish, the most striking thing in the house. That would do just fine. It was a difficult perspective. She faltered. It wasn't right. She ripped off the page and people murmured. She began again, adding the fishing-man figure, baskets, stacks

of blankets, carved cedar chests, coils of bull kelp hanging on the wall, and, draped over poles, strips of dried fish looking like curled brown rags. She tried to work quickly, in case they made her leave. But where would she go? The steamer wouldn't call again at Ucluelet for a week.

When Emily finished, Lulu asked, "You want to paint me?"

Ugh! Portraits were either stuffy or dead. She wondered if Lulu had ever seen her own face. "Do you really want me to?"

Lulu thrust her head forward. "We don't say things we don't mean."

"Sorry."

Lulu knelt by the fire, and Emily began. Each time she looked up, Lulu's dark expressive eyes were watching her. Older children and the woman in the red head scarf cast surreptitious glances but did not venture to come close.

"You see Nuu'chah'nulth women in Victoria?" Lulu asked.

"You mean what white people call Nootka?" Emily felt embarrassed. She couldn't tell the difference between Nootka and Songhees. "Sometimes. Songhees women too."

"Where do they live?"

"Songhees live at a reserve. Maybe Nootka camp on beaches."

"What do they in Victoria?"

"Sell berries and fish and baskets."

She didn't want to tell her how the Songhees were being pushed out of the reserve in Victoria's Inner Harbor that had been promised to them forever.

"What more?"

She thought of Wash Mary starching her pinafores on the back porch when she was a girl. "A Songhees lady used to wash our clothes, but that was twenty-five years ago."