

**Sample Chapter of *From Thine Own Well*, a novel by Norm Hamilton
Prepared for Media, January 2014.**

The vastness west of Whitehorse was bathed in a golden glow as the sun rose over McIntyre Mountain. No stirring of animals or ruffling of birds signalled the beginning of the day; there hadn't been any for over 15 years.

Landon McGuire grunted as he rolled over on the makeshift bunk in his cabin at the south end of Coal Lake. He squinted against the blazing sunlight that flooded the single window beside the wooden slab door. The smell of the rough-sawn plank floor permeated the air and dust particles sparkled in the glowing rays that streamed through the chinks in the walls. The 45-gallon drum wood stove in the corner had seen better days as a pile of fine ashes dribbled on the floor beneath its door.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and pushed his six-foot frame to a sitting position. His head ached from the effort to drown his memories with home-distilled spruce gin. Gawd, he thought, my mouth tastes like sap. Breakfast was out of the question. After pulling his greying hair back and securing it into a pony-tail with an elastic band, he scoured the floor for his clothes.

His mind wandered back to the years he'd worked in mining exploration, spending weeks at a time in the wilderness staking claims. It had been a wonderful period in his life; time outdoors and Wenda waiting at home when he came back. He remembered the mines taking pains to ensure they caused as little interference to the environment as was humanly possible.

Then it had all changed. After The Agreement, the mining industry got careless in their approach to resource extraction. He became saddened and ashamed to be a part of it. His sadness had turned to despair when Wenda died. It was then that he had quit and moved to the cabin. He still questioned if the carelessness of the mines or oil and gas companies had contributed to her death. Since then, he'd sought solace as a recluse and had as little to do with other people as possible.

A scratching on the floor from beneath the mattress interrupted his thoughts and announced the awakening of his husky-shepherd cross dog, Bob. Landon interrupted his search to watch as Bob stretched, pointing one hind leg at a time behind him. Then, ears up and tail switching back and forth, he wiggled his white and black body over to Landon.

"What d'ya think, Bob? Should we head out to the horseshoe?" His question was met with a vigorously wagging tail. Landon was planning a hike to a hidden location where he could collect fresh water without having to purchase it from The Coalition.

His eyes took in the cabin—spartan, but always kept clean and tidy. Wenda had always insisted their home be spotless. A cracked mirror on the wash stand reflected a day's growth of stubble on his leathered face that he decided could wait another day. He pulled on an old pair of blue jeans and shoved his socked feet into a pair of well-worn boots. The early August sun beat down on the cabin as he stuffed a warm fleece and waterproof jacket into a backpack in preparation for the drop in temperature during the hike into the mountains.

Things have sure changed, he thought as he strapped a 44-magnum around his waist and slid a pair of throwing knives into sleeves prepared for them on his bandoleer. He could remember when there was no need for weapons other than a rifle in case of bears. Now, with the water situation, it was desperate people that were of more concern. After slinging a .308 calibre Winchester over his right shoulder, he headed out the door with Bob following close behind.

As soon as they were in the open, Landon stopped to listen, peering in all directions, looking for any indication of others. Satisfied that no one was around, he grabbed the handle of the cart with the empty water vessels and struck off on the 14-kilometre trek to the crescent-shaped bowl west of his cabin near Coal Lake that had been formed by the Ibex volcano in some distant past.

Clean water was no longer readily available as it was in the days before The Agreement. Even the water near his cabin was suspect. They were headed for one of the few spots left where the water ran clean and pure.

Landon smiled, noticing the forest trail was showing signs of lack of use as the vegetation began to overgrow it. He always liked it when nature reclaimed its space. As they walked, Landon kept an eye on Bob, watching for any reactions to their surroundings. The dog could feel, instinctively, when someone, or something, was near.

Kirsten settled back into the wooden corner bench of the coffee shop so she could see the sidewalk on Main Street but would still have a solid wall at her back. Her backpack rested on the floor between her sneaker-covered feet while she cupped her latte in both hands and stared at the chocolate swirl in the cream. Her only other apparel was a floor-length, loose fitting cotton dress. As always, her Virtual Portable Computer (VPC), was within reach on the table, its keyboard visible on the opened hardware, the hologram screen turned off for the moment. A brown envelope rested on top of the keys.

She sat, twirling her blond hair in her fingers, her eyes circling around the bistro. The envelope came into her peripheral vision and she quickly turned away, and then focused on it. Her right hand inched forward, tentatively caressing the tawny paper and drawing it slowly forward. She picked it up and examined it. The answer she had been waiting for, the response from Macleod's Magazine to her submitted article on the political landscape in Yukon, waited inside.

Her left index finger dug under the flap of the envelope, tearing it open painstakingly slow. The letter was revealed and she began reading. "Dear Ms. Allerton," it began, "Thank you for your submission to Macleod's Magazine. Unfortunately, the piece that you have sent does not fit with our editorial requirements at this time." She read no further; she had seen enough rejection letters in her short twenty-five years. It had been five years since she'd finished journalism school in Toronto and she hadn't managed to get any articles published that were not favourable to the government or The Coalition.

Frustrated, she ripped it in half, then tore it again as she stepped around the corner to drop it into the trash. She realized that her backpack and VPC were unattended and turned on her heel to return to her seat. Her eyes filled with tears as she gazed out the window, oblivious to the pedestrian traffic that flowed down the Main Street sidewalk.

She tossed her VPC into her backpack and stormed out of the coffee shop, headed on a direct path across Front Street, past the White Pass Train Station to the embankment overlooking the Yukon River. She stared at the flowing water, her eyes unfocused, her mind a flurry of thoughts and questions. She wondered, why won't the mainstream press print anything that doesn't support government? She skidded down the bank toward the glacier-fed waters. What's the point in trying to get information out there?

She set her backpack on the large rocks beside the Whitehorse Wharf and sat down to unfold her VPC. She started drafting a new article, questioning why it was so difficult to get information published. Disheartened, Kirsten slammed her VPC closed and threw it into her backpack, leaving it on the rocks as she stood up stiffly, facing the water, not noticing the light rain that was falling. She wanted to scream.

"I sure hope you're not intending on jumping in?" came a voice from her left.

Kirsten jumped, startled; her left foot slid off the rocks and she lost her balance and fell backward. She rolled quickly toward the sound of the voice, prepared to defend herself. The high cheek-boned smiling face of a young First Nations man looked back at her from the shadows under the wharf. She scrambled to her feet and grabbed at her pack and VPC. Oh, shit, what have I gotten into, she asked herself as she scowled at him.

"Jesus. You scared the shit out of me, you asshole," she said, clutching her belongings. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She was immediately sorry for her outburst and glanced around for the quickest escape route.

"Hopefully stopping you from doing something foolish," he said softly.

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" she asked. "And why are you hiding under the wharf?"

She watched as he crawled out from under the concrete and stood facing her from about 7 metres away, a hand slid into one pocket. He was dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt with a pair of solid-looking hiking boots.

"Folks just call me Stone," he answered quietly. That had been John Stone's moniker since his family moved from Old Crow to Whitehorse when he was an infant twenty-nine years earlier.

He took a step toward her, balancing himself carefully on the huge boulders. She took a step backward and slipped, dropping her things. Stone leaped forward, catching her before she went down. He slid his arm around her waist and held her steady. She pulled away, her eyes wary.

"I think it's best we get off these rocks," he said. "You want me to grab your stuff?"

Kirsten shook her head as she stooped to pick up her possessions and then gingerly stepped down from the rocks onto the sandy bank beside them, a short distance from the wharf. Stone stepped off the rocks and stood a couple of metres away, facing her.

“You didn't tell me what you're doing under there,” she said as she connected with his smiling brown eyes.

“It's dry and quiet. Well, it's usually quiet,” he smiled. “I've been coming to the wharf since we moved here when I was a kid. Were you really thinking of jumping in?”

“No, but I damn near fell in when you showed up,” she said. “I thought I'd get some peace by watching the water flow by.”

Quietness overcame them as they stood on the riverbank facing the water.

“I remember when the salmon used to run in this river,” said Stone after a while. “At one time they were here by the thousands, then only by the hundreds and now so few they don't even bother counting them.”

“What happened to them?”

“It was overfishing, initially. But then something happened to the water and it was like they couldn't find their way back. Salmon have to find their way back to where they were hatched in order to spawn.” He had spent an entire summer studying the decline of the salmon population on his way to a B.Sc. in environmental science.

Stone moved closer to the water's edge and motioned along the bank with his hand. “See how far back the bushes are. Even the vegetation doesn't do well around this river anymore.”

Kirsten stepped nearer the river and stood beside him. The motion of the water flowing by mesmerized them into a state of calm. Kirsten leaned forward and pointed into the water.

“Where do you think that came from?” she asked as an oil slick, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, undulated past on the surface of the water.

“Who knows?” Stone said. “There's a number of creeks between here and Marsh Lake, so it could have come from one of them. Or maybe someone dumped something into the river up at the old Robert Service Campground. No one's looked after that for a long time now.”

Kirsten sat on a rock and turned to Stone. “Why did you mention the creeks?” she asked. “Are they that polluted?” Was this a story in the making, she wondered?

He moved closer and sat beside her. “Not usually. But if someone disturbed the ground upstream, I guess they could cause an old spill of some kind to get into the water. Heck, maybe there's someone mining up one of them,” he laughed.

“Is that possible?” she asked. “Could there be a mine somewhere that is polluting this river? This is the only water left in Yukon that is supposed to be protected from this kind of thing.” She was thinking of the amendments to the Navigation Protection Act that she had researched for an article a number of years earlier that had removed environmental protection from the majority of waters in Canada.

Stone's brow furrowed as he thought about her question. During his studies in environmental science he had researched the effect that careless mining had on the surrounding watersheds. “You could always go to the Mining Recorder Office and see if there's any mines registered around here,” he suggested. “I'd be happy to come with you, if you'd like. You've got my curiosity up as well.”

Kirsten locked eyes with him. She was hesitant to get involved with a total stranger, but the prospect of finding a source of pollution to a protected water system excited her. What a coup that would be. They'd have to publish that, she thought. "How about first thing Monday morning?" she replied.

Dust and rocks catapulted into the air as Paddy ground into third gear and wrestled the old Sportage around the next corner. Gwen leaned forward against her seatbelt and clutched the dashboard, staring straight ahead. Keira, 6, and Aaron, 12, laughed as they were jostled in the backseat. The air behind them reeked of burnt oil as the slick tires struggled to maintain purchase on the gravel road. The Doyles were on their way to experience some wilderness.

"That was the north end of Fish Lake we just passed," Paddy called back to the kids. "Let's find a place to park and get out and start hiking?" A short distance more, the road ended and he could go no further. He and the kids bailed out of the SUV and started checking out their surroundings. Gwen sat firm in her seat, her saucer-like eyes riveted toward the forest before her.

Paddy pulled the backpack they had brought with them from behind the back seat and then ambled around to the passenger side and tapped lightly on the window. The door handle had been useless for months. "Roll the window down," he coaxed.

Gwen eased herself back in the seat and slowly turned her head toward him. He grinned and tapped again. She leaned forward and grasped the window crank and gradually rolled down the window.

"It's great here. Are you coming out?" Paddy said.

Gwen was uneasy. "I don't think this is such a good idea, Paddy. We really don't know what we're doing and this old car isn't safe. I'm scared."

Paddy reached inside through the open window to open the door with the interior handle. As it opened he leaned in and gave Gwen a kiss on the cheek and a light hug. He loved the way the sunlight highlighted the red tones of her auburn hair.

"Aw, it'll be OK," he said. "We're not going very far and it's not that many kilometres back to town. Come on, it'll be fun."

Gwen raised her eyebrows at him. Then she smiled and accepted his outstretched hand as she slid off the seat and placed her flip-flops into the dirt. They hugged again and stared into the forest and up the trail they would follow. Gwen turned around and checked behind them.

"Where's the kids?" she asked.

"They can't be very far, we just got here," Paddy said. "Keira! Aaron! Get back here. You're scaring your mother."

A giggle from the other side of the Kia gave away the children's hiding spot. Paddy winked at Gwen, and started around the vehicle toward the front. Gwen went the other way. Everybody laughed as they converged and grabbed the kids, tickling and wrestling with them.

"OK, everyone, let's head up the trail," said Paddy.

He grabbed the pack of food and drinks and led the way up the narrow path. Aaron clamoured along behind him, trying to place his sandal-clad feet in his father's footsteps. Keira and Gwen brought up the rear, relaxed and happy in their new summer frocks.

After a couple of hours of stepping over fallen logs, slipping on large stones, but continuing their trek up the hillside, they found themselves at a fork in the road. By that time they had reached the far end of Fish Lake and were beginning to get tired. The trail expanded into a small clearing in the bush.

"Let's take a break and have some lunch," Paddy said. "We've brought some really great stuff."

Gwen helped pull the pack down from his shoulders, and then opened it to take out their picnic. She spread a blanket on the ground and laid the containers of fried chicken, potato salad and cookies on the blanket. She took two large bottles of soft drinks out, opened one, and drained it into glasses. She watched lovingly as her children devoured their meal. After the long walk and a large meal they found themselves pleasantly full and tired.

"Maybe we can just stay here for a while and take a break," said Gwen.

"Great idea. What do you guys think?" Paddy asked the kids.

"Aw, let's keep going," called Aaron from inside the bush where he had gone to urinate. "I want to see more."

"I'm tired," said Keira as her eyelids became heavier.

"It's settled then. We'll take a little break and then go a little bit farther," said Paddy. Aaron scrunched his face, but settled into a quiet space beside his dad. In a few minutes he was sound asleep. Keira curled her body and rested her head on Gwen's lap and was soon snoring softly. Gwen stroked her copper tresses. Paddy and Gwen smiled quietly at each other as they watched their kids sleep.

An hour later they were on their way again. They hiked another kilometre and found a creek flowing across the path. Gwen bent to pick Keira up and carry her over the water. That's odd that this path goes through a creek, she thought as she studied the flow. She wondered if the stream had always been there. When she got to the other side she set Keira down and continued up the path. After a few steps she glanced back to see Keira kneeling at the stream's edge, scooping water into her hands and drinking it.

"Don't drink that," Gwen called to her. "I'll give you some from our water bottle."

"But it tastes good, Mommy... and it's cold," Keira smiled.

Gwen laughed. "I know it does, Honey, but it might not be safe; remember we are only to drink water we buy. Come on, catch up. Let's get going. Daddy and Aaron are getting way ahead of us."

They started up the trail, calling ahead to let the others know they were coming; all the while they could hear Paddy and Aaron laughing and talking to each other. Another half-hour lapsed before Keira began to lag behind.

"Come on Keira, we have to catch up," encouraged Gwen.

“I'm not feeling very well Mommy. I feel dizzy and my tummy hurts. My tummy really hurts.”

Gwen frowned, but kept moving forward. She froze a few minutes later when Keira stopped in her tracks, and then sat down. “Mommy it really hurts.” She lay on her side, drawing her knees to her chest and began sobbing.

“Keira! What's going on? What's wrong?”

“My tummy hurts so bad. And I'm so thirsty.”

“Paddy!” screamed Gwen. “Get back here! Something's wrong with Keira!”

Paddy and Aaron wheeled around and ran back. They had stepped over a couple of fallen trees on the path and now leaped over them in their haste. Paddy slipped and fell forward onto a downed tree. A broken branch punctured his right shoulder and blood oozed out onto his cotton shirt. He scampered to his feet and kept running back to Gwen and Keira.

“What happened? What's wrong with her?” he asked, breathless.

“I don't know. She says she's sick and now her tummy is sore,” said Gwen. “I don't know what to do. We have to get back home.” She turned to Paddy and saw the bloodstain on his shoulder. “My God, what happened to you?”

“It's nothing. I slipped and fell. Let's get back to the car.” Paddy knelt and scooped Keira into his arms, supporting her weight with his left arm while favouring his right. He stood, panicked, his eyes darting around the bush.

“I think it will be quicker if we just cut straight across instead of following the trail,” he said. “A straight line is always shorter than a crooked one. Let's go.”

They charged into the forest with Paddy leading the way back to the car. Aaron began to cry as he ran; confusion and fear overtaking him. Gwen moved swiftly behind him, reassuring and consoling him as they struggled to keep up with Paddy.

Paddy dropped his eyes from the trail to his daughter's face as he felt her go limp in his arms. He stumbled to his knees, then dragged himself erect again to struggle up the next hill. We have to get to the car soon, he thought.

End of Sample Chapter

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