Chapter One

Isabella Stone could hardly believe all the attention was for her and her best friend Layla Harris. “You’re speaking first Isabella, and you’ll go next, Layla. Are you ready?” asked the reporter as they stood next to the white and red news van. Behind them, another member of the news team got his camera ready to film.

Bella and Layla were surrounded by friends and their proud families, and behind them was the vacant lot and the narrow strip of water that had earned them this interview. “I’m ready,” Layla said, a big smile on her face.

“Me too, and it’s just Bella, not Isabella,” she replied.

“OK then Bella, I’m Angela Jung from Global News Vancouver. We’ll start recording in a couple of minutes. Are you nervous?”

“Not really,” Bella replied. This was the first time she’d been interviewed, but with the hundreds of posts she’d made on YouTube, Instagram and Tik Tok, Bella Stone had nearly five thousand followers, and media attention was nothing new. The Global News story, however, was her first real interview, and though she didn’t admit it, Bella did feel a few butterflies in her stomach.

“I love your style,” said Angela as they waited. “Where did you get that sweater?”

“Bella loved that sweater as well. “I like to thrift and go to craft fairs. I got this one from a second-hand shop. It’s vintage homemade, from the Seventies, I think. I just can’t buy the things everyone else wears. I can’t support companies that make clothes overseas and pay their workers next to nothing and besides, I’m not the kind of person who two-hundred-dollar yoga pants are made for.”

“Well I think you look great,” Angela said. Then, at the signal from the camera operator, Angela Jung counted down, the red light on the camera blinked on, and the interview began.

“This unassuming vacant lot near the corner of King Edward and Arbutus Street, on Vancouver’s West Side, was set to be turned into a large and very expensive condominium development until last fall when Bella Stone and Layla Harris, high school seniors at nearby Dunbar Secondary School, discovered a Coho Salmon swimming in what most people in the neighbourhood had assumed was nothing more than a ditch. As it turns out, this so-called ditch was Cunningham Creek, a small stream, forgotten for decades, now running through culverts and even underground in places, down to the Fraser River not far from the Musqueam First Nation.”

Bella watched as the camera turned from her to the small stream that ran beside her. “This fish had no business spawning here. No salmon had been seen in Cunningham Creek for more than a century. Its discovery shocked wildlife biologists. and prompted the two grade twelve girls to create a social media campaign to stop the condo development and save the salmon and its habitat. They struck a nerve and their posts went viral, creating both an enormous amount of support for their cause and criticism about the project, ending only when the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, stepped in and ordered a halt to the development. It was a high-profile win in the girls’—and the salmon’s favour.”

Angela turned the mic to Bella. “Bella, most kids this close to graduation would be focusing on their grades and getting ready for prom and their university applications, but instead, you and Layla poured all your attention into saving this fish and the creek through an incredibly successful social media campaign. Your advocacy forced a multinational construction company to cancel a two-hundred-million-dollar development and sell the lot back to the city, who then announced they would not only turn this expensive parcel of land into a park, but would also

work to rehabilitate the creek to ensure this one salmon will be joined by more in the future. How on earth did you do it, Bella?"

"All we did was bring attention to the situation. There are a thousand places to build condominiums, but people understood that the salmon and Cunningham Creek needed to be saved."

"Bringing attention to the situation is something of an understatement. The Musqueam First Nation very quickly jumped in to back you, and I understand that the city has also agreed to the Musqueam request to change Cunningham Creek's name back to its original Indigenous name."

"I was really proud of that," Bella said. It was an outcome she'd never expected, and she felt a lot of pride that the Musqueam had supported her role in saving the creek.

"How many views did your campaign get?" asked Angela.

"Nearly one hundred thousand on Tik Tok, and Instagram, and we even got five thousand members signed up on the Facebook page my mom suggested we set up— for older people."

Angela laughed. "By older you mean those of us over thirty, but no matter what platforms you used, it was a hugely successful campaign. I also heard that unlike some social media influencers, you've not monetized your sites. That surprised me."

"Making money from a cause like this isn't something I feel comfortable with," Bella, replied. When she said that Layla rolled her eyes. This was the one thing the two friends disagreed on, but if Angela picked up any tension, she didn't mention it as she continued with the interview.

"Bella, you've been nicknamed the Greta Thunberg of Vancouver, and like Greta, you've got a lot of fans, but you've also earned your fair share of detractors. With a shortage of fish in

an insignificant waterway. Some people even went so far as to accuse the two of you of planting the fish there."

Bella and Layla's actions had created backlash and conspiracy theories online. Some of the comments had been cruel and Bella had reported or blocked many of them. "That's true but it's not about the likes and the dislikes. It's about knowing what's right and doing what's right, even if people disagree with you."

"And what's right for you is continuing your education in September, correct?"

"I've been accepted into the Environmental and Sustainability Studies program at the University of British Columbia," Bella said.

"But that's just the first step in your journey, isn't it?"

"Yes. With a bit of luck, I'll continue into grad school and hopefully keep going until I get a Ph.D. That or law school if my mom has anything to say about it."

"From what I hear, you haven't even begun your undergraduate studies, but one of the most prestigious universities in the world is already interested in you.," Angela said.

"Informally, but yes." After the decision to stop the condos, Bella had received a congratulatory email from a professor in Yale's School of Environmental Management asking her to consider Yale for her Masters work. She'd never thought about attending university in the States, but this was an amazing offer.

"You have a history of activism Bella. You are on your school's Student Voice Committee, you're president of the Vancouver School District's Sustainability Club, and you're one of Greenpeace's youngest members. Your passion for social and environmental action is inspiring. Where did it come from?"