

# One

*Reeve's End is the kind of town every kid can't wait to escape. Each summer, a dozen kids leave and at least a quarter never come back. I don't blame them—I'll do the same in another year. We thought it was just something that happened in towns like ours.*

*We were wrong.*

“Twenty dollars an hour,” I say to the guy who's stopped me as I head for Doc Southcott's. I know his name. When your high school has only two hundred kids, you can't even pretend you don't. But from his expression, you'd think I've clearly forgotten him. Forgotten who he is, at least.

I lean against the crumbling brickwork. “You asked if I can help boost your math grade. The answer is yes. For twenty dollars an hour.”

“But . . .”

“I know, Garrett. You expected I'd do it for the pleasure of your company. That's what you're used to—girls jumping at the chance to spend time with you. You're a decent guy, though, so I'll warn that it's not so much *you* they're after as a one-way ticket out of Reeve's End. Preferably with a cute boy who'll earn a football scholarship . . . as long as he can get the grades for college. Which is why you're here.”

“Uh . . .”

I sigh and look down the road. There's nothing to see. Pothole-ridden streets. Rust-plagued pickups. Even the mutt tied outside the Dollar Barn gazes at the fog-shrouded Appalachians, as if dreaming of better.

I turn back to Garrett. "I'm happy to help. But you're not the only one who wants out, and college is expensive."

"Not for you. With your grades, you're guaranteed a full ride."

"Nothing is guaranteed. And I doubt I'll get a full ride for my post-grad."

"Med school?" He glances at Doc Southcott's office. "You're not serious about that."

"Are you serious about a football scholarship?"

"Hell, yeah. It's just . . . med school?"

Kids from Reeve's End don't go to med school. Especially those like me, who even here would be from the wrong side of the tracks . . . if Reeve's End had tracks. Sometimes I figure the train purposely diverted around us for the same reason we don't have buses or taxis. So it's harder to escape.

Tutoring won't get me through med school. Neither will working for Doc Southcott. But I've got a plan, and every penny counts. It's always counted.

"You have your dreams, Garrett, and I have mine. Yours will cost twenty bucks an hour. If you put in the effort, I can bring you up to a B. And the bonus to paying me? You won't need to flirt to win my help."

He shakes his head. "You're a strange girl, Winter Crane."

"No, I'm just strange for Reeve's End. So, do we have a deal? I've got one tutor slot open, which will fill in another week, when kids finally admit midterms are coming."

He agrees, still looking confused.

"Tomorrow, after school at the library," I say. "Payment in advance."

I have a short shift at the doc's that day. Mrs. Southcott has managed to convince her husband to take an extended long-weekend vacation, leaving this afternoon. I tried to argue

that I could do office work while they're gone, but apparently she figures Doc Southcott isn't the only one overdue for time off.

I head to the trailer park. My official address, even if I spend as little time there as possible. Mom died when I was seven. My sister left last year. It's just me and Bert now. He prefers Rob, but Bert better suits a guy who traded an engineering career in the city for a string of crap jobs that pay just enough to keep him in bourbon. He lost the right to be called Dad when he decided I was a burden to be borne and not gladly.

I pass our trailer and duck into the forest. My real home is out there—an abandoned shack that's far more habitable than our trailer.

Thick forest leads from the town to the foothills, and what used to be a good source of income when the local coal mine still operated. Shitty work—old-timers still cough black phlegm decades later. But that doesn't stop them from reminiscing as if they'd had cushy office jobs. There was money then. Good and steady money. Then the mine closed and the town emptied. Those who stayed did so because they had no place else to go . . . or no place else would have them.

My shack is nearly a mile in. That's a serious hike through dense forest, but it means I don't need to worry about local kids using my cabin for parties. Hunters do stumble over it in season—and out of season, Reeve's End not being a place where people pay attention to laws if they interfere with putting food on the table.

I check my boundary thread. One section is slack, as if something pushed against it and then withdrew. Humans barrel through without noticing, so I'm guessing this was a deer. Or so I hope, because the alternative is a black bear or coyote or, worse, one of the feral dogs that have been giving me trouble.

I tighten the thread and duck under. My shack is exactly that—a dilapidated wooden structure maybe eight feet square. It's empty inside except for a rickety chair near the wall. I

pry up a loose floorboard and remove my gear. Spread my carpet. Pour a cup of water. Set aside my sleeping bag and lantern. Home sweet home.

I write up a lab experiment while the light is good. Then I go check my snares, the bow over my shoulder doubling my chance to add meat to my ramen noodles. I forage, too, but it's the hunting that marks me as a girl who lives in a place like Reeve's End, as I discovered when a scholarship sent me to science camp in Lexington. Some city girls must hunt, but you wouldn't think so from my fellow students' expressions when I told them how I got my ace dissection skills.

"Aren't there supermarkets where you live?" one girl asked.

Well, no. Reeve's End only has a grocery and a small one at that. But food costs money, and as much as possible, money is for my savings account. At least I know where my meat comes from, which is more than I can say for those kids.

I'm drawing near the second snare when I notice something white lying beside it. I inhale, hoping it's not a skunk—polecat in these parts. But it's just white. Shit. I hope I haven't trapped someone's cat.

I jog over to see . . . a sneaker?

I peer at the surrounding forest, expecting a prank. My snares are far from the trails, and even if someone stumbled on one, the trap is hardly life-threatening. Yet from the looks of the flattened ground cover, this person fought hard to get free.

I examine the shoe. If the mate were here, I'd take it. At size eleven, it wouldn't fit me, but it's a nearly new Air Jordan, which I could sell for at least fifty bucks. I turn the shoe over.

That's when I see the blood. Then I spot a red handprint on a sapling, where he must have righted himself after the trap. I figure "he" given the size of the shoe. That shoe also

means he's not from Reeve's End, where wearing three-hundred-dollar sneakers would be the equivalent of riding to school in a chauffeured Escalade.

I follow his trail for a bit. Mostly, I'm just curious. But as I track him, I start to worry. He's like an injured black bear, staggering and stumbling and mowing down everything in his path. Wounded and lost in what must have seemed endless wilderness.

I should try to find him. It's inconvenient, but it'll be a hell of a lot more inconvenient when some hunter finds his body, and I suffer the guilt of knowing I might have been able to help.

I continue tracking him for close to a mile. That's when I hear the distant growls of feral dogs.

## Two

Old-timers talk about the days when we had wolves and mountain lions in these woods, and roll their eyes at hunters these days whining about a few stray dogs. The old-timers are full of shit. At least a wolf or a catamount would slink off when they heard me coming. These dogs know humans, and we don't scare them.

I'm moving at a jog now, praying those aren't the snarls and snaps of a feasting pack. I found a body out here once. I don't want to ever do it again.

The light is fading fast. That's one problem with being on the east side of the mountain range. Once the sun drops behind them, it's like snuffing a candle. I've learned to hunt in twilight because it's the best time for game, but this is too dark for safety, so I clip on my headlamp. It's modified from old mining equipment, which we have plenty of. For a weapon, I'm more comfortable with my bow, but moving at this rate, the hunting knife is more reliable.

There's no doubt now that I'm hearing the dog pack. I slow and make sure I'm downwind so they won't smell me. Then I exchange the knife for my bow and turn off my headlamp. Each step lands in silence as my eyes adjust to strips of twilight cutting through the treetops. I can smell the dogs now. They reek like an old cat that's lost any interest in keeping itself clean.

I round a bush and spot Reject, the pack omega. She keeps to the edges, eating whatever the others leave. Last spring, she'd been pregnant, the dogs having apparently found a use for her. I never saw the pups. I suspect the alpha bitch killed them. These aren't wolves or foxes or even coyotes—they're half-mad beasts.

I pity Reject, but trying to tame her would be foolhardy—she’s as crazy as the rest of them. I keep an eye on her as I move closer, in case she notices me and sounds the alarm.

Reject stands on the edge of a clearing, watching the others. When I pass more bushes, I see them: Flea, Scar, Mange, One-Eye, and Alanna. I named Alanna after a girl at school. She’s the alpha bitch. The dog, that is. The girl is just a bitch.

The dogs are barking at something in a tree. When I see that, I exhale. I ease around the bushes for a better look, but even an unobstructed sightline doesn’t help much in the darkness. Whatever they’re barking at is just a shape in a shadow-enshrouded oak. Then I lean to the side and spot a white Air Jordan, dangling from a leg, at just the right height to convince the beasts that if they keep jumping they’ll eventually snag it.

Assuming the guy isn’t stupid enough to intentionally tease feral dogs, I’m guessing he’s unconscious. Or so I tell myself. He climbed up there and passed out. That’s all.

I could leave him and go for help. But there’s no guarantee those dogs *can’t* get his leg in a freakishly high jump. Nor any guarantee he won’t bolt awake and fall.

I survey my options, find a suitable oak, and shimmy up. Hunkering down on a wide branch, I notch an arrow and let it fly into the tree trunk, over the pack’s heads. That’s not a misfire. There’s no way in hell I can take down five dogs with a bow and a half dozen arrows.

The first arrow gets their attention. My second flies into the underbrush with a crackle and thump . . . and the dogs take off after this new threat. I jump down and race to the tree holding the one-sneakered stranger. I take a few precious seconds to fire another even more precious arrow. Three gone, and they’re good ones—carbon hybrids—a luxury I allow myself because they’re more effective. I’ll have to mentally map this spot and come back for them.

I climb past the stranger, well out of reach of the dogs. Then I look down. It's a guy, not much older than me. Dark hair hangs as his head lolls. His eyes are closed, and he's sprawled on the branch, as if he collapsed there. His shirt is bloodied and torn, as is one leg of his jeans.

I can't tell if he's alive. That's the main thing right now—not his age or his hair color or the condition of his clothing.

*Is he alive?*

The dogs are back, yipping and yelping as they scent their old enemy. I barely hear them, too focused on answering that critical question.

*Please be alive. Please.*

I keep seeing flashes of that other body—the one I found two years ago—and I'm shaking as I lower myself onto the branch beside his. My boot touches down, and I catch a better view of his face, battered and bloodied, and I'm trying to see if he's breathing and I lift my other boot, confident the first is securely planted. It isn't.

My foot slips.

As I drop, I wildly grapple for a hold. Alanna lets out a crow of victory. She jumps and her fangs graze my leg. Then my arm snags a branch, awkwardly caught in the crook of my elbow, my arm scissoring shut, pain ripping through my shoulder as my full weight slams down.

My free hand finds and grabs the branch as Alanna's fangs sink into my leg. My yowl only whips the dogs into a frenzy. I pull my leg up as far as I can, but Alanna is hanging off it, her teeth digging in.

I gather all my strength and kick. She might be fierce and wiry, but she's small, and I send her flying. There's pit bull in that bitch, though, and her teeth rake down my calf, furrows splitting open as I howl in pain.

The damned dogs join in, howling along, and rage fills me—frustration and fury, and there’s a split second where I almost drop from the tree. Drop to face them, armed with my hunting knife, like some crazed action hero pushed one step too far. Finally facing off against my canine nemeses, blade flashing, blood spraying, taking down one, maybe two . . . before they rip me apart.

*Here lies Winter Crane. So brave. So daring. Such a freaking idiot.*

I resist the urge to go Lara Croft on their heads and swing up my legs until I’m hanging off the branch like a sloth. I stay that way, catching my breath and ignoring the pain in my leg and the blood trickling down it. Then I clamber up and climb opposite the one-sneakered boy.

He’s dead. I’m sure of that now. With everything going on, he hasn’t even stirred.

As I lay my fingers on his neck, I get a better look at his face—inky black eyelashes against a pale cheek, dark stubble, arched brows, one split lip bitten under impossibly white teeth—and I have this bizarre urge to kiss those lips and see him wake, like Sleeping Beauty. Which proves I’m in a lot of pain and possibly hallucinating.

When I first feel his pulse under my fingertips, I don’t trust myself. I want it too much. I want this boy to be alive. I want to be the one who saved him, as if that justifies living in a shack and hunting rabbits and squirrels, because it means that I could be here for this stranger, to save him from the wild beasts.

Yep, pretty sure I’m hallucinating. I just hope that damn bitch isn’t rabid.

I check twice more before I am convinced the boy is, indeed, alive. Which only means that his heart beats. Not that he isn’t comatose or brain dead. Or that he’ll survive until I get him help.

*Well, that’s more like it. Welcome back, sunshine.*

I honestly can't do much more than confirm he's alive, as frustrating as that is. The dogs are still circling below. I'm stuck on this branch, unable to get close enough to examine him, and even if I could, I wouldn't, for fear of startling him into waking and tumbling to the jaws of the hellhounds below.

I can only wait until the dogs lose interest, however long that might take.

# Three

It takes a while, but the dogs eventually tire of their fruitless leaping. They still linger after that, not quite ready to abandon their prey, but when Alanna catches a scent in the breeze and takes off, the others follow. I wait until I hear the thunder of them chasing fresh quarry. Then I climb down.

Getting the guy out of the damned tree isn't easy. He must be close to six feet tall, with an athletic build. I'm in good shape but barely five six. It takes serious effort and even then it's more breaking his fall than lifting him down.

Still he doesn't wake.

I conduct a brief examination with my headlamp. His pupils are normal. The blood on his shirt seems mostly from his nose and split lip, the facial injuries that tell me he's been beaten. He's breathing fine, but when I pull up his T-shirt, I see bruising there too. Someone worked him over good.

I'm accustomed to treating the fallout from Saturday night fireworks. The fact we're in a dry county only means you shouldn't walk the back roads on a weekend night or you're liable to get hit by some asshole who picked up his booze next county over and couldn't wait to open it.

But this beating isn't frustration—it's rage.

There's a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and when I touch it, his skin is feverishly hot. That suggests infection, but I don't see anything worse than cuts and scrapes, none of them oozing pus.

I use both our jackets and some branches to fashion a makeshift stretcher, a little leftover knowhow from the summer Edie and I worked at a Civil War reenactment site.

Eddie Greene befriended me the summer after we moved here. She'd found me in the forest, sick from eating toxic berries, and got me to Doc Southcott. She's the one who taught me to forage, hunt, and fish. Eddie's been gone two months. There's nothing in Reeve's End for a girl from the hills who dreamed of a career in fashion design. Also no place for a girl who found her gaze as likely to stray to the cheerleaders as the football players.

Eddie would have done a better job with the makeshift stretcher, but it'll have to do. I get the guy on it. Then, with my headlamp affixed and my knife within reach, I start out.

Any hope of hauling him all the way to Reeve's End evaporates fast. My injured leg is soon screaming for mercy, and I veer to the shack instead, where he'll be safe while I go for help.

I pull him inside. Then I spread my ground sheet between him and the sleeping bag to keep the blood off it. It's an expensive bag, even if I did buy it secondhand, and I'm sure this guy won't begrudge me protecting my investment. I've already potentially lost three arrows helping him. Slashed up my leg, too, but it's my stuff I'm worried about.

Once he's situated, I clean his face to make sure I haven't underestimated the severity of his injuries. I haven't.

I squeeze a few drops of water between his parched lips. Then I stretch the cloth over his forehead and run my hands over his scalp, searching for bumps. When I touch a goose egg, he bolts awake, hands flying out, knocking me back.

"Don't move," I say. "You're—"

He grabs my wrist, and he holds me there, his blue eyes wide and unfocused.

"No," he says. "No, no, *no*."

He flings me away. "Go! Run! You need to get out of here!"

"I'm trying to help—"

“No! Just go. Now! Before . . .” He trails off, as if his brain sputters off midsentence.

He blinks. Then he runs his hands over his face and winces as he brushes his split lip.

“You’ve been—” I say.

“You need to go. Now. He’ll come back.”

“No one’s coming back. I brought you here.”

He’s shaking his head, and I know he’s delirious from the fever and can’t process my words. I clasp his shoulders to calm him, but he grabs me again and, *shit*, he’s strong. Fueled by that delirium, he’s one good twist from breaking my wrists, and I struggle to get free, but he doesn’t seem to notice, just grips me tighter.

“You need to go. Run! As fast as you can. I’ll—I’ll take care of this.”

“I’m fine,” I say, trying not to panic as he squeezes my wrists. As calmly as I can, I say, “You’re in my cabin. I brought you here. I need you to calm down so I can go for help.”

“Yes. Go. I’ll fix this.” He throws me off then, pushing me toward the door. “I’ll fix everything.”

“Okay, you lie down . . .”

Another vehement shake of his head. “No time. Just go.”

He staggers to his feet and pushes me toward the door. He wants me to escape his nightmare, and I realize the best way to calm him down is to pretend I’m doing exactly that.

I open the door. A startled grouse takes flight, the undergrowth crackling. The guy lunges and grabs me, saying, “No! He’s out there!” and I’m twisting to tell him it’s okay, but he’s put everything he has into that leap, and his injured leg gives way.

He smacks into me. My hands shoot out to break my fall, and I hear a crack, his head hitting the wall as he goes down. He collapses on top of me. I know he’s fallen, and it’s not his fault, but I panic under his dead weight, and I scabble out from under him, clawing and kicking and—

*Holy shit, Winter! Get a grip!*

I stop short and crouch there, heart pounding. Then I see him in a heap on the floor. I crawl over. He's out cold again.

No, "cold" isn't the word—he's burning up. Shit!

I make some effort to drag him back to the sleeping bag, but I'm afraid of hurting him, so I lay him on his back with my pillow under his head. I'm not worrying about bloodstains now. I'm freaking, knowing how dangerous a fever can be, but if I leave and he wakes up, delirious again . . .

*Cell phone.*

I don't have one, obviously, but he might. I check his pockets. There are people I can call, people who will come if I ask. I don't like to ask, but for this, I will.

His pockets are empty except for a wallet. I open that with some reluctance, feeling like I'm prying. No ID. Just money. A lot of money. A corner of my mind can't help seeing a wad of cash like that and whispering that a twenty or two wouldn't be missed. I close it quickly.

Someone took this guy's ID and left a few hundred in cash? Had he been dumped, left for dead, his ID removed?

I look down at him.

*What happened to you?*

Forget that. I need to get his fever down so I can go for help.

I pull my backup water jug from under the baseboards. I take out ibuprofen, too, and bandages. The dressings can wait. First, I grind the painkillers into water. I tilt the boy's head back so he won't choke and then drip the water through his lips. I'm patient. Drop by drop until it's gone.

Cold compresses follow while the ibuprofen has time to kick in. I strip him down to his boxers, lay water-soaked towels across him and open the door to let the night air in.

When I return with the bandages, he's already cooling. As soon as I'm sure the danger has passed, I shut the door before another kind of danger wanders in. Once he starts to shiver, I tuck my sleeping bag up to his armpits.

He needs a doctor. Which is a problem. Reeve's End has exactly one—Doc Southcott, who's gone out of state. I'll have to get him to the next town, twelve miles over, beg a lift, as uncomfortable as that will be. He needs help. I will get it for him. That isn't a question. I took on that responsibility when I followed his path, and maybe I didn't mean to commit myself to this, but there's no going back now.

## Four

I clean and bind my leg while he sleeps. Then I'm waiting for him to wake again, and I have my eyes closed, resting. When he gasps, I bolt upright.

"Hold on," I say. "You're safe. Just let me get some light."

I fumble to ignite my lantern. It hisses and casts a wavering glow over the shack. The injured guy is sitting upright. He sees me and gives a start.

"It's okay," I say. "You're safe."

"Where . . . ?" He looks around and then squints at me. "Do I know . . . ?"

"I brought you here. I found you, in a tree. Looks like you climbed up there to avoid the feral dogs."

"Feral dogs?"

"Like feral pigs, but even more dangerous." I smile, but he frowns, as if I'm talking nonsense. No feral dogs and pigs in *his* backyard, I'm betting.

He starts to push up, and I say, "Whoa, hold on. You're—"

"Naked," he says, looking down.

"I left your boxers on. I was going to say you hurt your leg. Best not to jump up."

"Also . . . naked."

"You had a fever." I retrieve his clothing and hand it to him. He looks at me, and it takes me a moment to realize why.

"You want me to turn around?" I say. "Pretty sure I've seen whatever's on display, being the one who undressed you."

He says, "No, that's fine," but his expression is somewhere between bemusement and bafflement, as if he expects me to turn aside, blushing and stammering at the sight of a naked

cute guy. And, yes, the word “cute” suggests I’m not oblivious. But it’s a cursory assessment, as neutral as noting he has a scar on his shoulder.

He pulls on his jeans. “So I was in a tree, escaping the, uh, feral dogs.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Nope. But it happens so often, they just blur together, you know? Another day, another feral-dog-escape.” A hint of a smile as he buttons his fly. “How’d you get me out of the tree?”

“Very carefully.”

“I bet. And then . . . ATV transport?”

“Stretcher.” When his brows rise, I say, “I fashioned a makeshift stretcher with our jackets and some branches.”

“Of course you did.” He chuckles, and I feel that familiar sensation, the one I get when I venture beyond Reeve’s End. The feeling I’m being mocked. Mocked and judged.

“You don’t believe me?” I say.

“Well, you said I had a fever, and I’m thinking maybe I still do. Treed by feral dogs? Rescued by a pretty girl who handily fashions a stretcher, drags me here, and nurses me back to health? Clearly I’m still delirious. Or dreaming.”

“If you were dreaming, I’d be wearing a string bikini and holding a pitcher of beer.”

He chokes on a sudden laugh and then shakes his head. “With the way my head is pounding, I think I’d better stick to water. And this isn’t really string-bikini weather.”

I move toward him. “I noticed you wincing when you laughed. Does your chest hurt?”

“Everything hurts.”

He stops putting on his shirt and lets me examine his ribs. As I do, he says, “So what is this place?”

“My hunting cabin.”

“Hunting?”

“Not many girls do that where you’re from?” I say.

“Some, sure. You just don’t look like a girl with a hunting cabin.”

I’m wearing worn blue jeans with a butt patch. Thick socks because my boots are two sizes too big—another bargain. Secondhand sweatshirt. Oversized denim jacket. No makeup. Chestnut hair ruthlessly braided back. If there’s a type of girl who hunts, I’m pretty sure I fit the bill.

He continues, “Of course, you don’t look like a girl who can haul my ass out of a tree, either.”

I shake my head and continue my examination, concluding he has some bruised ribs but none seem broken.

“It’s Lennon,” he says when I pass back his shirt.

“Hmmm?”

“I just realized I completely skipped proper introductions. My mother would be appalled. I’m Lennon.”

“I’m Winter,” I say. “Winter Crane.”

“Cool.” He makes a face. “Sorry. Unintentional joke. It is a cool name, though.”

“Thank you. I usually get ‘That’s kinda weird.’”

“Join the club. With me, it’s teachers who misread the roster and call me Lemon. Which is awesome.”

I chuckle and hand him the water cup, telling him to drink more.

He does and then says, “I also skipped the extreme gratitude part. Thank you, Winter Crane, for saving my life.”

“It isn’t saved yet. I’m going to run into Reeve’s End and—”

“Reeve’s End?”

“It’s the nearest town.”

“Yeah, I . . .” He sits straighter, wincing again. “I’m familiar with the area. We used to have a summer place near here.”

“Unfortunately, the local doctor is away. So is his wife, who’s the nurse. The only other person who works there is, well, me.”

“Which explains the excellent care I’ve received so far.”

“I’m just a high school student. Which means I need to get you to an actual doctor. It’ll just take some figuring out.”

“*Do* I really need a doctor? It’s just bumps and bruises.”

“You had a fever, but there’s no sign of infection, which suggests you were already sick.”

“Actually, the fever was from me trying not to *get* sick. I had a flu shot, and it made me a little feverish. I’m guessing the tree ordeal made it worse. I’m fine now.” He taps his forehead. “Feel.”

“The fever is gone because I gave you something for it. You need a proper examination.”

“If I get worse, sure, but right now, I’m just suffering the lingering effects of stupidity.”

I sit on my haunches. “What happened to you out there?”

“I’m still sorting that through. Brain’s a little fuzzy right now.”

“Then how do you know you did something stupid?”

A wry smile. “I could call it a gut feeling, but it’s more a matter of probability based on past experience.”

“You were assaulted. You need to speak to the police.”

“And tell them what? For all I know, I got the shit kicked out of me because I was a smart-ass to the wrong person. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“When you were delirious, you thought we were being held captive. You kept telling me to escape before *he* came back.”

A strained chuckle. “Well, my brother always said I watch too many cop shows.”

He’s full of shit. But there’s a steel thread of determination in his eyes. If I try to force his hand, he can just leave, and he’ll get into worse trouble, lumbering around in the wilderness.

“Can I call your parents?”

“No need to notify them. I’m eighteen.”

“I’m not talking about legal obligations. Someone should know where you are, even if you’re living on your own.”

That’s an opening for him to supply more. He only says, “My parents are out east on business this week. They aren’t expecting to hear from me. My mother will suspect something’s up if I call, and I’d rather skip the drama. Let me get back on my feet, and then I’ll check in.”

“But you should notify someone. What about your brother?”

“Hell, no. Mom might suspect something was up. My brother would know it the moment I said hello, and track me down.”

“He’s overprotective?”

He shrugs. “We’re tight. But he won’t freak if I don’t call for a few days.”

“So no police, no family, *and* no doctor.”

“Because I don’t need any of that until I remember what happened. If you can help take care of me, that’s enough. I’ll pay.” He takes out his wallet and then quickly adds, “Paying for your nursing services. That’s only fair.”

“So I take your money and keep my mouth shut. And if you die from some internal injury I missed, I can probably pawn your shoes and jacket, too, if I can clean the blood off them.”

He shoves his wallet back in his pocket, looking abashed. “Sorry. I’m just . . .”

“Used to buying your way out of trouble?”

Another of those crooked smiles. “Yeah. It’s a family tradition. I’d have offered to pay even if you weren’t . . . you know.”

“From Reeve’s End?”

His cheeks color. “I’m digging this hole as fast as I can, aren’t I?”

“I come from a town where thirty percent live below the poverty line. I know my county’s rep, and it’s well deserved. If Doc Southcott was in town, I’d insist you get care, but as it stands, I’ll agree to drop it. With conditions. I’m going to check you over again. If I find a broken bone, I’ll get you to a doctor. If that leg needs stitching, I’ll get you to a doctor. If that leg shows signs of infection or your fever returns . . . ?”

“You’ll get me to a doctor. I agree to your terms, Winter Crane.”

He extends his hand. I don’t take it. I’m annoyed by the position he’s put me in.

“Shirt and jeans off again,” I say.

He opens his mouth, his eyes glinting as if he’s going to crack a joke. Then he catches my expression and begins to undress.

# Five

I head to town for medical supplies. I emerge behind the trailer, as always. There are good people in Reeve's End. The kind who keep too close an eye on a girl living with her drunk father. The kind who notice every bruise and don't accept "I fell" as an excuse. Also the kind who, if they knew I was living in the forest, would find a bed for me. I appreciate that. I just don't want it. This is another thing Reeve's End has taught me: pride and self-reliance. I'll survive and I'll escape and I'll do it on my own.

To my relief, Bert's pickup is gone. I slip into the trailer and shower off the blood and dirt and any other sign that I haven't spent my evening studying. Then I re-dress my leg and head to Robson's Pharma.

I'm there in less than ten minutes. I cut through the food aisle on my way to the medical supplies. It's Wednesday, which is when the sales start. Protein bars are half price. Past the expiration date, but they're a cheap and easy meal. I'm dumping a handful into my basket when Mr. Robson comes by.

"Hey, Winter. You're out late."

"I lost track of time studying."

He smiles. "Course you did." He moves closer, voice lowering. "Can you tell your daddy I ain't gonna be able to pay the usual for his dope?"

Despite this being the pharmacy, "dope" doesn't mean drugs. It's the local term for soda pop. As for why Mr. Robson would be buying that from my father, it's food-stamp fencing. Bert buys Coke with his stamps and resells it to Mr. Robson for cash.

"Tell him I'm real sorry," Mr. Robson says. "But maybe this month he ought to use his stamps for food."

I resist the urge to snort. Mr. Robson means well. That doesn't stop me from taking advantage—just a little—of his discomfort, picking up one of the protein bars from my basket and saying, “Huh. I didn't see these were past the sell-by date.”

“Are they? Well, now, you're right. Good eye. How about I give you another half off? Take a few more if you want 'em.”

“I will. They ought to be good for a while yet. Thanks.” I grab another handful. “Oh, and if you hear of folks needing the doc's help, he's having trouble with a polecat coming round his chickens. He'd 'preciate someone getting rid of it.”

“I know a few families with little'uns who'd like to hear that. I'll tell 'em directly, Winter.”

I take my bars with another thank-you and head toward the medical supplies section, where I can hear an old-timer at the pharmacy counter.

“—just about ate up with the cancer, poor thing,” she's saying.

“Uh-huh,” comes the reply, in a voice I know well. Tanner Robson, the owner's son. I try to duck around the corner before he spots me, but he calls, “Hey, Winter,” hoping to free himself from the ear-bending.

I rescue him with some school chatter as I gather my supplies for Lennon. We lose most of the local dialect as we talk. We're taught “proper” English, but if we use it with older folks here, it makes us seem stuck up. We speak school English with each other and outside Reeve's End. Well, mostly. When Edie and I worked at the reenactment site, she'd ramp up dialect for the tourists—“Where y'all from?” and “An iPad? We ain't got nuthin' like that in the holler.” I'd rolled my eyes until I realized she was getting double the tips, and I decided I was fine with reinforcing cultural stereotypes if it fattened my bank account.

Tanner and I talk for about twenty minutes. I like him. As a classmate, that is. A kinda-friend. Nothing more, even if he's hinted—hard—that he'd like to change that. In

another life, I'd be happy to go along with it. He's shorter than me but cute, with a shock of blond hair, freckles, and a really sweet smile. He's smart too—he'll go to college for pharmacology next year. But then he'll come back and take over the store, and that's the problem. I'm afraid I'd fall for him and tell myself Reeve's End isn't such a bad place and decide to come back.

Tanner said that to me once. *Have you ever thought of coming back? After you're a doctor? Reeve's End could really use someone like you.*

I'd made some excuse and hurried home. I'd wanted to curse Tanner for being insensitive. Instead, I'd buried my face in my pillow and cried. I know Reeve's End will need a doctor. I know kids here need role models. But let that be someone else, like Tanner. Not me. Never me.

When I return to the shack, Lennon is awake but groggy. That alarms me, but the thermometer assures me he's only a degree above normal. I find no reason to insist he get help, not when that means a twelve-mile trip to a doctor who'll get pissy at a midnight call for a non-emergency.

I've brought my old sleeping bag, which smells faintly of mildew, and when Lennon insists on taking it, I let him. I still don't sleep well. I'm a mile from town, lying beside a stranger. Yet I can't leave him when he's injured. So I doze on and off until dawn seeps through the window boards.

Once I'm ready to leave for school, I wake Lennon to check him over. His temperature is back to normal. The cut on his leg is cool and dry. His chest still hurts when he inhales deeply, but that's to be expected—while bruised ribs hurt like hell, even Doc Southcott would only tell him to rest. I'm still not thrilled with the situation, but it's the best I can do for now.

## Six

I have Garrett's first tutoring session that afternoon. He shows up, pays me, and pays attention, which is all I ask for.

At the shack, Lennon is napping, and I wake him to check his temperature, but he seems fine. The grogginess still bothers me enough that I suggest that doctor visit again. At this hour, we could easily get a taxi from the next town over. It'd be a hefty fare, but the wad of bills in his wallet says that's not a problem.

"Do you *see* anything wrong with me?" he asks.

"Just because I don't see anything—"

"You want me to get undressed again? Just say the word. I don't mind."

I shake my head and touch his ribs, feeling for sore spots and asking if he's having any trouble breathing.

"I wasn't until you started running your hands over my chest. You sure you don't want me taking off my shirt for this? Not every day a guy gets to strip for a pretty girl who actually *knows* how to play doctor."

"I'm sure you know plenty willing to try. You don't need to do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend to flatter me, flirt with me . . ."

"It's not fake flirting or false flattery," he says. "But I get the feeling you don't appreciate either, real or otherwise."

"Good instinct." I back up and look around. "You need fresh air."

I pull the chair to the middle of the room, stand on it, and undo a latch on the ceiling.

"Is that an escape hatch?" he says.

“A skylight. I needed to board up the windows on account of the dogs, so I made this.”

“You cut a skylight into your roof.” He smiles as he shakes his head. “You are remarkable, Winter Crane.”

When my eyes narrow, his hands fly up. “That is not flattery. It’s honest admiration. Whole different thing. And you can’t ban me from saying nice things altogether.”

“I can try.”

His smile grows as he shakes his head and says, “You sound like my brother. He hates compliments. And he gives that same look when he gets them.”

I reach to open the hatch. A tendril of hair falls from my braid, and I shove it back in.

“He does what you do too,” Lennon says after a minute. “Dressing down. You don’t want anyone to notice you.”

“Practicing for a degree in psych?”

“Nope, just experience. With him, there’s more to it. Same as you, I bet.”

“Possibly so I’ll be left alone, and not have to worry about guys pestering me because I’m not paying them the attention they think they deserve.”

“Mmm, no. Partly, maybe. Not entirely. And, yes, you’re taking a jab at me there, but I am ignoring it. You’re an interesting girl—an interesting *person*. I’m trying to figure you out, and I don’t believe in hiding that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me contacting your brother? It sounds like you guys have a good relationship. Maybe he could help.”

The animation falls from his face as he glances away. He’s brought his brother up a couple of times now, and there’s obvious affection, but I sense discomfort, too, and I wonder if they had a falling out.

*Now who’s practicing for a psych degree?*

I can't help it. When he talks about his brother, I think of my sister, Cadence. I grew up dogging her footsteps. Then . . . things changed. Changed so much that she's been gone over a year now and didn't even send a Christmas card. I understand how desperate she was to leave and why she doesn't want to talk to me, but it still hurts. Hurts so much.

I hop off the chair. "I need to check my snares." I glance at him. "Yes, I have snares."

"At this point, I don't doubt anything you tell me. You're like something off a reality show. Med-school-bound student by day, Appalachian survivalist by night."

"The second part isn't really a life choice," I say, and my tone is soft, but his smile falters, and he says, "I know. Can I come check traps with you? I can clean anything you've caught. This city boy is still a Kentucky boy."

"All right. But we aren't going far, on account of the dogs. If the traps haven't caught anything, it's protein bars and soda pop for dinner."

"Suits me fine," he says, and waits outside while I get my knife and bow.

# Seven

Lennon is quiet as we check the snares. He's listening for the dogs, his gaze swiveling with every noise. It's only after I find a rabbit that he clears his throat. "I want to talk to you about why I was here. In the forest."

"I thought you didn't remember."

"I don't know exactly what happened, but I remembered why I was here. There was a girl. Actually, a lot of stories about me getting into trouble start with a girl. But this one I met last year at a concert in Lexington. She's from Reeve's End."

I cut the dead rabbit from the snare. "What's her name?"

"Edie Greene."

"What?"

"You know her?"

I nod.

A look flickers over his face, and I tense, but I stop myself before asking if Edie's okay. Of course she is—she's in New York at design school. We talked just a few weeks ago.

"So you met Edie . . ." I prompt when he doesn't go on.

"We hung out after the concert," he says. "And kept in touch after. I'm guessing she never mentioned me?"

"I know she met a guy at a concert and stayed in touch. That's it."

"We went out a couple times, but it didn't work. I liked her, though, as a friend, and we talked maybe once a month. Then on Tuesday she called, middle of the night, in trouble. I was heading to Reeve's End to help."

"But Edie's in New York."

“Not on Tuesday. She’d hitched a ride from Lexington, and then she was walking to Reeve’s End when . . . I don’t even know what happened, exactly. I could barely make out what she was saying. It sounded like someone was following her. Someone in the forest, and she was freaking, and I asked where she was, and I was going to tell her to call the police when the line went dead. I took off to find her. I found the spot. There were signs of a struggle in the dirt. I was crouched, checking them, when I thought I heard someone behind me. That’s the last thing I remember.”

We’re sitting on the roof edge, having moved up there when the light got low. While my roof hatch is technically a skylight, I do use it for an “escape hatch”—escaping the dingy confines of my shack. It reminds me of when Cadence and I were young, after our mother died and Bert started the wandering that eventually landed us in Reeve’s End. Wherever we were—a townhouse, an apartment building, a hotel, a motel . . . the endless series of deteriorating residences—Cadence and I would find a place where we could sit on a roof, each time telling ourselves the next one would be better. Maybe our father would find a decent job. Maybe he’d meet a nice woman. Maybe he’d stop drinking and start smiling again. Maybe, maybe, maybe . . .

We’d sit on those roofs and dream of life after one of those “maybes” fixed the life we had. Then we got to Reeve’s End and the trailer park and, after that, Cadence never wanted to hear another “maybe,” never wanted to climb another roof, never wanted to talk about the futures we could have, never wanted to talk to me about much at all.

“Winter?” Lennon says. There’s genuine concern in his voice.

“Sorry. You were saying . . . ?”

“I know you’ll want to go to the police, and I’m not going to stop you. But my gut says we should check a few things first. If I took this to the city cops, they’d tell me Edie’s eighteen, and unless I have proof she’s in trouble . . .”

It’s worse here. Our sheriff keeps his position only because no one dares run against him. The mayor is eighty-seven, in poor health, and does whatever the sheriff wants. And what the sheriff wants is an easy job with a good paycheck for him and his family—one deputy is his son, the other his son-in-law, and his wife and daughter do the clerical work. The last time we had a murder in Reeve’s End, by the time the state police showed up, Sheriff Slate had already arrested the poor guy who reported the crime, trampled over the scene, and forgotten to notify Doc Southcott.

I do need more. I need to confirm Lennon’s story. Maybe that sounds unreasonable—why make up something like that when I’ve said I know Edie, meaning I can just call her and straighten this out? Why make something like this up at *all*? The truth is that I don’t know Lennon. I must confirm his story, as best I can.

When I last spoke to Edie, she never mentioned coming home. Still, she *is* impulsive, and if she made the decision last minute, it’s not as if she could just text my cell.

I’ve made my mental list of ways to confirm his story—call Edie, talk to her family, take him to check the spot where he says she was taken. And until all of that is done, I’m certainly not going to the police.

# Eight

As Lennon roasts the rabbit, I add a pot of water to the fire for ramen noodles. We talk as we cook and as we eat, and as night falls, I'm faced with the same predicament as last night. I don't like sleeping beside a stranger, but I'm terrified that I'll return to find him dead, the feral dogs having come across him wandering deliriously through the woods.

"I'll be fine," he says as he sips his water.

"Hmm?"

"You're trying to figure out whether it's safe to leave me tonight."

I arch my brows. "Mind reading?"

"Nah, just following the clues. It's dark, you've stopped talking, you're looking between the sleeping bags and the door. You don't want to leave me on my own, but I'm not your responsibility, Winter. You rescued a total stranger from a tree, braving feral dogs to do it. That's quite enough."

"Anyone would have done that."

He laughs so loud he startles me. "Uh, no. The only other person I know who would have done that is my brother. *I'd* have gone for help."

I'm ready to change the subject, but he says, "I don't need a nursemaid tonight, and you shouldn't sleep next to a guy you barely know—though, arguably, one who's very cute and charming and witty, which I know, makes it much tougher to leave. But, having forced me to promise not to flirt with you, I'm afraid you don't stand a chance of a good-night kiss."

"Well, damn. There goes my reason for staying."

He grins at that. "I'm sure it was. But I'll be fine, and you'll sleep better at home."

Not true, but I only say, "I'll go soon."

“I’ll walk you.” He lifts his hands. “No argument. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Says the guy who got treed by feral dogs. You’re not walking me back.” When he opens his mouth to argue, I lift my hands. “I’m not leaving yet, anyway. I need to get my homework done first.”

I pull books from my backpack. He takes my copy of *Heart of Darkness* and flips through it.

“Read that one?” I ask.

“Nope. If they don’t assign it, I don’t read it. Drives my brother nuts, because apparently I am totally missing the opportunity to expand my understanding of the world through classic literature. He’s a little weird. But I remember him trying to get me to read this one. Do you need it right now?”

I shake my head. He takes the novel and lies on his sleeping bag to read. I open my biology text and get to work. Less than ten minutes later, I hear the sound of soft snoring, and look over to see him with the book fallen on his chest.

“That good, huh?” I murmur, and take the book away.

I’m having the nightmare, the one rooted in that most terrifying of places: memory. I’m returning to the trailer after working at Doc Southcott’s, and I catch Cadence burning something in the fire pit. When she sees me, she tries to shove the pages in quickly, but I see the Western Kentucky University logo on one and I snatch it. I back away, reading the paper as I pinch the flame devouring one corner.

“You got in,” I say, and I turn to her, grinning. Then I look from the fire pit to her.

“Cady . . . ?”

“I’m not going,” she says.

“Is this about Colton? Seriously, Cady? You’d give up college for a guy whose big dream is expanding his parents’ pot farm?”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t.” When she tries to retreat to the trailer, I plant myself in front of her. “You say you love him and he loves you. Well, let him prove it. Either he goes with you to Bowling Green and gets a job there or he waits here until you’re done with school. That’s what *girls* do if they love a guy who goes off to college.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It damned well should be.”

“Stop swearing, Winter. You only do that—”

“No, I don’t only do it to piss you off. Shockingly, I don’t do *anything* to piss you off. I just do. By existing apparently.”

“Let’s not—”

“Fight? Yes, let’s fight. You’re my big sister. I know we aren’t close anymore, and I’m not really sure why, but I still want the best for you. And throwing away college for a boy is nothing but trouble. You’ll resent him for it. You won’t mean to, but you will. If you love him, then you can’t start like that.”

She stares at me. Then she hugs me, and I’m so shocked I think she’s moving forward to hit me and I stumble back, but she pulls me into tight embrace. She says, “I’ll think about it.” A week later, she tells Colton she’s going to college.

And then . . .

And then . . .

I jolt awake, hearing something outside the cabin, and I’m trapped in that nightmare, in the aftermath. When I wake hearing movement beside me, I think it’s her. A figure rises, and I grab it and blurt, “Don’t go out, Cady.”

Lennon falls back, his eyes wide.

“S-sorry.” I drop his arm. “I was . . .” I swallow. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Who’s Cady?”

I shake my head, and I’m trembling. He ignites the lantern and reaches for the bottle of water and hands it to me. Then he stops, his head tilting as if he’s heard something.

A creak sounds outside the door. The hair on my neck rises. The wind whistles and something hits the door, making us both jump.

Lennon’s on his feet, darting toward the door, and I’m opening my mouth to stop him, but he’s just checking the latch. He puts his shoulder to the door, as if to stop anyone coming through. I turn down the lantern until it’s only a dim glow, one that casts his face into half shadow. He shuts his eyes and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. He glances over, sees me watching, and leans against the door, his ear to it, listening—

*Thwack.*