

A
BURDEN^o
OF
ICE
AND
BONE^o

KYRA WHITTON

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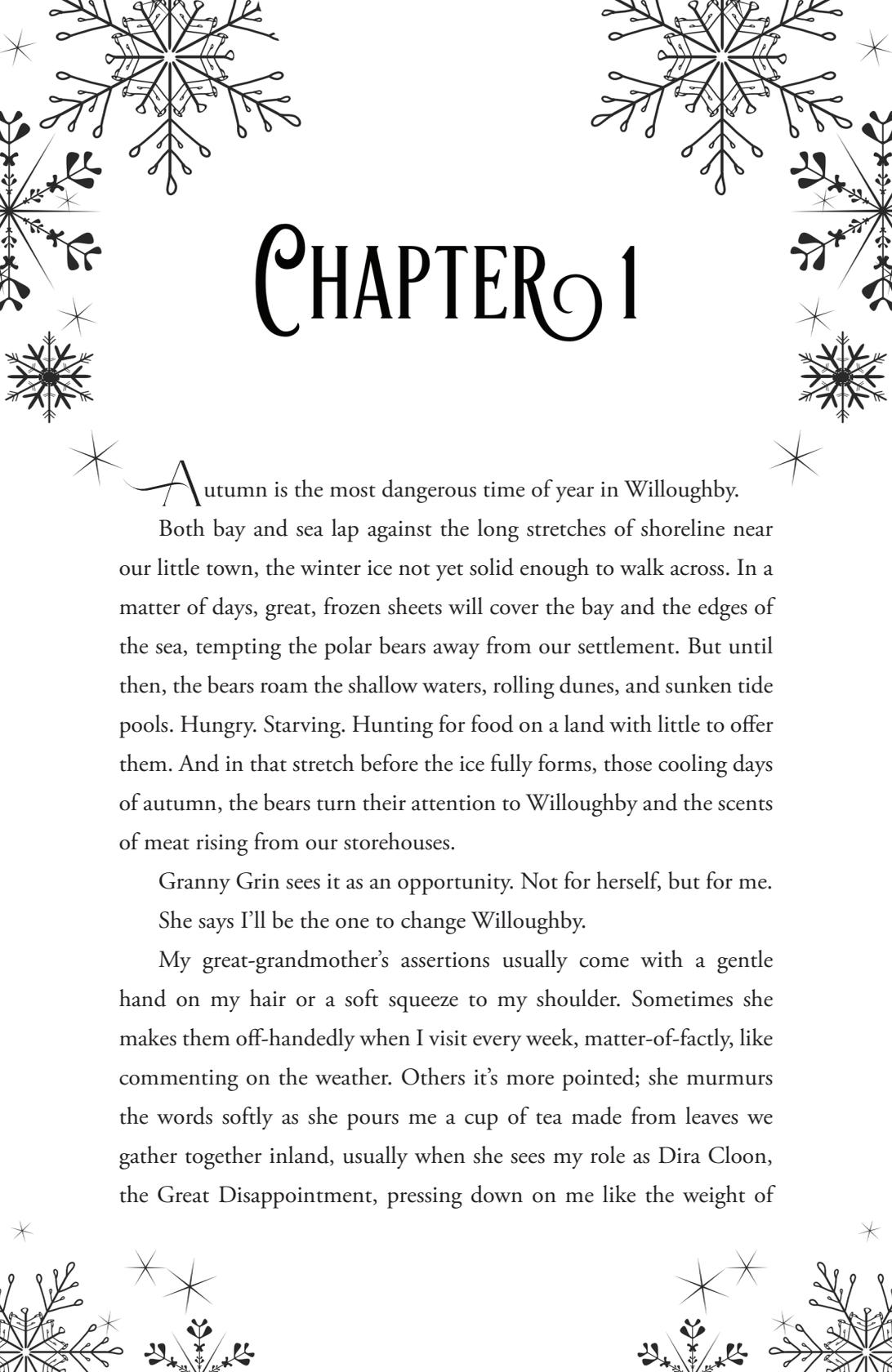
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In Memory of my brother, David.

I know you never would have read this because no one is brutally murdered by axe or man dressed like bat, but I still like to think you had something to do with it becoming a book.



CHAPTER 1

Autumn is the most dangerous time of year in Willoughby.

Both bay and sea lap against the long stretches of shoreline near our little town, the winter ice not yet solid enough to walk across. In a matter of days, great, frozen sheets will cover the bay and the edges of the sea, tempting the polar bears away from our settlement. But until then, the bears roam the shallow waters, rolling dunes, and sunken tide pools. Hungry. Starving. Hunting for food on a land with little to offer them. And in that stretch before the ice fully forms, those cooling days of autumn, the bears turn their attention to Willoughby and the scents of meat rising from our storehouses.

Granny Grin sees it as an opportunity. Not for herself, but for me.

She says I'll be the one to change Willoughby.

My great-grandmother's assertions usually come with a gentle hand on my hair or a soft squeeze to my shoulder. Sometimes she makes them off-handedly when I visit every week, matter-of-factly, like commenting on the weather. Others it's more pointed; she murmurs the words softly as she pours me a cup of tea made from leaves we gather together inland, usually when she sees my role as Dira Cloon, the Great Disappointment, pressing down on me like the weight of

winter's ice. A nice sentiment, meant to placate me, to soften the blow of being the youngest in my family, the aimless, a survivor of our only enemy: the bears. As if it can erase the scars I already left on our town. But she never fails to say it. Just as I never fail to hope she's right.

Because changing twenty years of perception is a heavy burden.

My breath puffs out like fog rolling in over the bay as I stare up at a fading harvest moon with burning eyes. Sleep eluded me most of last night. I knew I would be waking far earlier than I am used to, and so, naturally, my brain refused to quiet. It ran through every possibility, every early morning patrol scenario. When Mama shook me awake in the still-dark hours, adrenaline coursed through my veins like the crashing waves of a summer storm. Even now, my heart flutters nervously.

The sun hasn't yet brightened the sky, but the edges glow a soft, murky purple. It won't be long before dawn stretches into morning, and I itch to get on with it, to take to the muddy streets. Making the rounds won't make the shift go by any faster, but standing here only plucks at my nerves, the buildings' walls closing in, blocking out the wide-open spaces of the wilds that call to me.

What's taking him so long?

The flurry-tipped winds tug at the hood of my parka as I wait outside the patrol office for my partner. Willoughby seems fresh and new, like the first day of winter come early, and I long to be traipsing through the wilds despite the hard, damp wind and the scent of ice in the air.

The whine of unoiled hinges drags my attention to the patrol office's front door, and my fluttering nervousness ebbs, replaced by the same hopelessness I felt the first time my older brother handed me a

rifle.

It comes every shift, the pull of emotions in every possible direction. Anxiousness always, but also fear. Doubt. Melancholy.

Autumn is the most dangerous time of year in Willoughby.

For people and polar bears.

Every day, I long to set down my rifle. But despite the wrenching in my soul, I reluctantly pick it up and prepare to save one by stepping between both.

“Moore and Linka encountered a large male last night near the Crevitt house.” The door bangs closed behind my eldest brother, Landry, as he sidles up beside me. I’m not sure who’s being punished by being paired together this morning, him or me. Since I joined the patrol last year, I’ve always done my rounds with one of the older members, like my uncle Thesper or cousin Joles. If my twin hadn’t decided to get engaged yesterday, I wouldn’t be out here at all. Instead, I’d be still snugly cocooned under my blankets at home. I certainly wouldn’t be spending the whole morning with the last person I want in charge of me: the same guy who shoved his dirty socks under my nose and dug his knuckles into my scalp when we were children.

Landry pulls his parka’s fur-lined hood over an old knit cap and buttons his collar up to his chin. “He was aggressive, took out three of Dorin’s reindeer before trying to break into the town market.”

Not much would be left in the market house after hours. During the day, villagers lay out crab and fish and whale blubber to trade for wool and cheese, ox milk, fresh honey, and venison. All of it is gone now, but the smells remain, stinking up the wood. And three reindeer out of a herd of a thousand isn’t significant, yet people tend to forget simple arithmetic when it’s livestock.

I lean forward to stare down the street where the market stands in the morning shadows, half-expecting to see the bear there now. But there's no sign of it, not even a paw print in the mud.

But in Willoughby, the people believe the bear will come back again and again once he knows where to find an easy meal. That he'll strike out at children next, and then the elderly. After that, it will only be a matter of time before the bear rips through everyone else, bloodthirsty and eager for a kill. And they think if one catches our scent, others will too.

It's happened before. Not recently. Not since I was seven, and that was a misunderstanding, an anomaly that hadn't happened in a hundred years and never repeated itself. But it happened, and once is enough for the people of Willoughby.

"Did either of them recognize it?" I try to hide the rush of anxiety marching through my blood at the thought of one of *my* bears. I've named the ones I watch from a distance, even though I've been told for years I shouldn't. But after that day more than a decade ago, I snuck around the curve of the shore to catch sight of them, my notebook and a pencil tucked under my arm to jot down everything I could observe. Hidden in the willow shrubs or high up in the trees, I could see what no one else even bothered to look for: their beauty, their majesty, their power.

Over the years, I uncovered patterns, not just in how the bears behaved, but which ones summered along the uninhabited beaches outside of town. I have a few favorites, though I haven't seen most of them this season. Big Boy likes to lie in the willow shrubs with his belly toward the sky and his nose twitching in the wind. Bear Paws is missing a nail on the front left paw, so when he strolls through the

first snowfalls, he's easy to track. And Head Case; I've always liked him best, ever since Linka and I found him with his head caught in an old, broken crab trap on the bay side beach. I've never been sure how he got it off, yet the rip in his right ear might be a clue. But I haven't found the young cub with the pink freckle on his nose or the giant scarred male again. Maybe one day I will.

Patrolling the late afternoon shift has always been my preference because it gives me plenty of time to hike into the wilds in the mornings or evenings to watch the bears along the coast. But more importantly, the bears are least active when the sun is the highest and as it falls to the horizon in a thousand hues of gold and blue and plum. During my year on the patrol, I've never encountered a bear in town or along the outskirts.

And that's how I like it.

Because any bear that wanders through our invisible borders is swiftly and violently dispatched. And I can't bear to be a part of it.

Landry must sense my eagerness to know the bear's identity because his eyes narrow, and his mouth thins beneath the fringe of his mustache as he nudges me forward. "Come on, Whelp. Let's not spoil your first morning shift by romanticizing the monsters that want to rip your face off."

I start to protest, but clear my throat instead. He expects me to argue with him. He knows why I take the warmest hours of the day, even though they come with the least pay. And he doesn't understand why, not after what we both saw that day thirteen years ago. "They didn't take him down?"

Landry steers me west toward the bay side of town, and I readjust my rifle onto the opposite shoulder so it doesn't knock into his.

“No.”

“Why not?” I ask with as much innocence as I can muster.

He shoots a suspicious look down at me. I may be taller than most of the townspeople, but he still towers over me. Us Cloons are a mountainous lot.

“It was dark. They didn’t want to risk a stray shot.”

I nod sagely, but a smile threatens to take control of my lips. Who could the bear be? Perhaps a new one for my journal. I’ve recorded hundreds of bears as they flock to the coastlines when the ice melts away, and I’m always glad to find a new one. It’s one step closer to finding the bear from my childhood.

“Moore said they tracked him east but lost him in the surf. Dad thinks he might try to come back now that he’s caught the scent of food.”

“Think he’s still out there?” I stare down Main Street toward the shoreline, half expecting the bear to wander into my line of sight. But there’s nothing there that shouldn’t be.

“Probably. But we can’t go jumping off our route without any sign of it. Yet.” Landry turns his steel gray gaze on me and reaches up to pull on an escaped curl just over my ear.

He thinks he knows me so well. After all, it was Landry who usually caught me sneaking off when I was younger. Following instructions has never been my strength, and because of him, I had to become sneakier. I think he still suspects I spend time picking my way through the wilds alone, but he never says anything about it anymore.

I swat his hand away. “I wouldn’t do that.” And I mean it. Lately, I’ve been careful to toe the line, to do everything my father asks, within reason. His frustration with me is thinly veiled, especially after my

last expedition took me further around the bay than I intended, and I spent a night camping in the wilds alone. My parents worried their nightmares of me being mauled finally came true. Now my father watches me with more intensity than a red-tailed hawk, waiting for one more missed shot. One more claim of near-sightedness, and I fear he might disown me. Then the stars as my only blankets might become a reality.

Landry snorts and adjusts the rifle strap hanging off his shoulder.

“I know you better than you think, Whelp. At this very moment, the gears are spinning in that overly large head of yours, trying to come up with a way to distract me from the task at hand.” He lifts a shaggy eyebrow and his lips quirk into a knowing smirk beneath his scruff of tawny facial hair. “It isn’t going to work.”

Fine. Let him think whatever he wants. Adding a bounce to my step, I take the lead. “We have to start on the west side of town, anyway.” Eight of us are on patrol right now, and we all move in overlapping circles through Willoughby’s narrow lanes and outer perimeter. If a bear were to slip into the streets, one of us would come across it. The process works. At least that’s what my father, the patrol chief, would have everyone in town and on the governing council believe. Because no one has been attacked inside the Willoughby boundary lines, not since the patrols were set up a hundred years ago. We kill the bears before they can even enter.

“Good. Now, just stick to normal plans and procedures, all right? I promised Calla I wouldn’t let you do anything stupid, and I’m a man of my word.”

“Yeah, but if you were a smart man, you wouldn’t promise anything.”

“If I hadn’t been assigned to you, she wouldn’t have asked.” He glares pointedly down at me. Landry’s wife, Calla, always finds something to be anxious over, and most days, I think it’s me. I should put her fears to rest. But it’s a lot more fun stoking them.

“Just don’t do anything we’ll both regret. Please, Dira,” Landry warns as he swings his gaze back toward the bay’s shore.

But something in his voice changes, and I lean around him to follow his gaze.

A white speck against the gray morning sky.

I lift my binoculars.

Lumbering along the edge of town, a large bear, male by the size of him, lifts his nose into the air. Coming in from the ocean side, the wind ruffles the plaits woven tightly against my scalp, pulling strands free before it drives across the narrow stretch of land toward Willoughby Bay. The wind carries the scent of me, of Landry, the whole town, toward the bear.

He’s well outside the town boundaries, off the circular path we’re supposed to follow. He should be safe.

My heart rate kicks up as I lower the lenses and Landry murmurs, “There he is” from beside me. Excitement colors his voice. “Let me call it in.”

I turn to glance up at him as a sick feeling settles into my stomach. “Why? He’s way over there. He’s a safe distance away.”

My protest falls on deaf ears as Landry unhooks the radio from his belt and trudges forward, his long strides eating up the mud. “Come on.”

I drop the binoculars so they swing down from the strap looped over my neck and rest my hand on the butt of the rifle. We shouldn’t be

going forward. “But what about the route?” I call after him.

Ahead of me, Landry cranks the two-way radio, the gears whirring as he powers it up. Ignoring me.

My pulse beating wildly in my throat, I trot forward, my boots slapping in the mud. If I can get ahead of the situation, I can control it. Yes, that’s exactly what I’ll do. Landry might be my lead, but he’s distracted.

My pace slows as I reach the last few clapboard houses huddled at the edge of town. If we get too close too quickly, the bear might see it as a sign of aggression and charge us. They can run faster than any human, and once we step onto the open beach, there will be no place for us to duck and hide. I don’t want him to charge—that will be a sure, swift death for him. It’ll have to be. But maybe if he sees me, he’ll wander off, find an easy meal rather than something he has to fight for.

The bear lifts his head as I approach, unconcerned by the firearm at my back. He’s huge, one of the largest I’ve seen, well over half a ton, with thick, sturdy front legs and a twitching black nose. A scar gashes his left cheek, just missing one of the obsidian eyes staring back at me.

I stop, my feet spread apart as our gazes clash. The scar on his cheek is the same as the one that’s sped into my dreams since I was seven. I’ve watched for him every day since, waiting until I might see him again.

My pulse pounds in my neck. It can’t be the same bear. And yet it has to be. His gaze bores into me, seeing me as I see him, recognizing something that only two spirits linked as we are can. Every fiber of my being wants to rejoice, and yet I stand there, rooted, not a muscle twitching.

Landry’s boots crunch on the gravelly shore behind me.

“I don’t care where it is. Take it out. Is that clear?” crackles our

father's voice over the little radio. He's been patrol chief since before I was born. No one has dealt with more polar bears than Dad. And because of it, he thinks he knows how they move, where they go, what they think, how to deal with them. Everyone sees him as the authority.

But he's wrong. They're wrong.

And this is my chance to prove it.

"Perfectly," Landry rumbles back as he comes to stand beside me. He lowers the radio to his hip, sliding it back into a pouch hanging from his leather belt, and heaves a heavy sigh. "I'll do it. Put your rifle away." He glances down at me. "I know you don't have the stomach for any of this—shit!"

My gaze flies to my brother and then follows his unblinking stare. Just down the shore, a lone boat rows up onto the sand. The air knocks out of my lungs as I take in the familiar vessel, the pile of crab traps, and my best friend's dark hair.

"Beren!" I scream, but the wind slaps his name back into my face.

The bear lifts his nose into the wind, then follows it toward Beren's fresh haul of crabs.

But Beren doesn't notice, his back to us as he splashes into the shallows and grabs hold of the boat's sides to drag it out of the water. Between the distance and the crashing waves, he doesn't hear my screams as the bear trots closer.

Landry swings his rifle around, checks his ammunition, and thumbs off the safety.

No. I want to holler it until my throat scratches in pain, to distract my brother, to scare the bear. But as my heart thunders erratically, I can no longer find the air. I swing my gaze back to Beren. If I don't do something, my best friend could be gone in an instant. My gaze

bounces between the two of them, and my pulse screams in my ears, echoing the words I can't say—won't say.

Don't shoot him now that I've found him!

In all my days on the patrol, I've made sure I've never seen another bear get shot. Today won't be the day. This won't be the bear.

But Beren— If we don't do something, circumstance will take another Metz from us—the last one. The bear could be on him in seconds, toss him like a ragdoll, snap his neck, rip his face from his skull.

A thirteen-year-old memory of the first flurries of winter, the sound of crashing waves, and sand covered in the deep red of blood blots out the scene in front of me. I can't let that happen again.

I have to choose.

The bear.

Or Beren.

And I have to make a decision before my brother makes the choice for me.

Time slows as I firmly press the rifle into my shoulder and take the bear into my sights.