

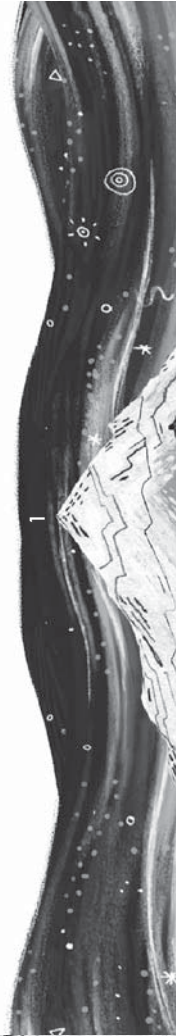


Chapter 1

LIFE WITH BEARS

Somewhere off the coast of Canada, in the deep and frozen north, is an island surrounded entirely by ice. It is not the kind of ice you will ever have known. It is luminous and strange, and there are lost things trapped forever inside it. The fin of an orca. A baby's boot. The figurehead of a ship.

In late spring some of the ice melts, giving way to a cold and wondrous sea. And from May till August the ice is no more than a whisper, glimpsed only on the surface of the island's rare, frost-glittered lake. But in autumn the sea begins to slow and freeze, taking its time, until not a single green wave is left. As the leaves on the island turn orange and gold and the nights lengthen to days of winter dark, that is when the bears come. Giants the colour of snow, lumbering in packs,



rolling in on silent paws. Their eyes hungry and bright, snouts sniffing at the crisp pale air.

The folk who live on the Isle of Bears are proud of its name and history. They love their ice-locked island, with its scattered wooden cottages, its small patches of Canadian forest, its rushing River Raven and its single mountain peak, upon which there is a sparkling lake that's always frozen. They love how even in summer you can skate on Lake Rarity and play hockey by the light of the faint Arctic moon. Or how in winter hundreds of visitors from far, unheard of places, pass through the town, taking refuge from storms or calling in on friends before they head further north. When the first snow falls, the townsfolk leave their doors unlocked and hearts open to welcome everyone. They light fires and head home early to drink hot chocolate and sing songs of ice legends and whisper winter myths, while beyond their windows white bears roam the streets.

Polar bear migration is what the scientists and environmentalists call it, but the islanders call it LIFE WITH BEARS and it's their greatest joy.

There are many dark and light stories on an island like this. Marv Jackson knew all about it. For what had happened to Marv on the River Raven on the night of his fifth birthday was not a story he would ever forget.

It was the kind of tale that worked its way into even the toughest heart, so wherever Marv went, the story

preceded him, and he was known as the boy who fought a bear—and lived to see the sunrise. Though that wasn't what had happened at all. But still people chose to think of him as a child cut from courage and hope, and quietly, they began to call him Marv.

The story according to the islanders went something like this:

On a cold and treacherous midwinter night Marv crept into his garden. He was new to the Isle of Bears. His family had come from Toronto—they hadn't been here more than a year. They were still adjusting to this wild, wintered island, so different from the city, full of starry darkness, mystery, wonder. Still learning its songs and late-night tales. Still getting to know its kind, hardy people.

Sure Marv knew the rules. It's the first thing the Polar Patrol officers tell you, the moment you step off the plane.

o Don't go out after nightfall.

o Never leave the house alone in a snowstorm.

o If you stumble upon a bear, never look it in the eye—get to shelter.

But he was only five, with an eager heart and eagle eye. No—he wasn't a trouble-seeker. He was simply a child drawn to the ice, like a ship to a star.

Marv was dressed from head to toe in his hockey kit, including, thankfully, the helmet. He crept out of his garden, stick in hand, skates laced loosely around his ankles, puck heavy in his pocket. And headed straight for the River Raven,

which if he'd followed south with a midnight wind at his back, would have led him to the Island's smallest lake: Lake Clarity. A sheltered little lake, no bigger than a large pond, where two larch trees had bent beneath the weight of snow to form a natural hockey net.

But Marv didn't reach Lake Clarity. The bear appeared on the River Raven, seized the child in its wintered mouth, raised him into the air. Marv yelled out, and both his family and many of the neighbours and winter visitors came running, hurling anything they could at the bear. China bowls, a broken chair, a single slipper. But the bear only raged into a deeper fury.

Somehow in the midst of the horror Marv managed to strike the bear in the eye with his hockey stick. Not enough to harm her, but just enough to stun her. For a moment the bear stilled, and Old Stoney shot at her—the bullet, like a dart of silver fire, grazed her sleek fur and pinged off a car. The bear dropped Marv and the crowd rushed in and saved his life.

That's how Marv became Marvel. He got away with his life, got a scar to mark his adventure. And you know what else? He got real good at hockey.

Marv had long stopped trying to convince anyone else outside his home that things had been different; it was easier to let them have their fairy tale.

What Marv remembered was this. It was his birthday—and his first-ever time at training. His Dad

had bought him all the hockey kit as a present. And Coach, their trusted family friend, had been there throughout, holding the hockey stick horizontally for Marv to clutch as he wobbled joyfully around the rink. He'd been so happy that when he had got home and blown out his flickering candles, he'd fallen asleep on the couch refusing to take any of the kit off.

He awoke to the sound of a baby crying.

The house was in darkness, the gleam of the streetlamp streaming in, making the frosted windows look like spun sugar. Looking up through the cage-like guard of his helmet, Marv noticed the digital clock in the hallway said 11.50. He didn't know what the numbers meant, but he remembered them.

The sound came again, a little yelping cry that burrowed straight into his soul. Marv stumbled blindly toward the back door, pressing his ear to it through the helmet. Like every back door on the island it was unlocked in case someone needed to escape from a bear. Or a traveller arriving late at night needed refuge.

The handle turned easily in Marv's small gloved hand and he peered out into the star-scattered night. A winter gale whistled past his ears and Marv shivered. In the near distance the baby gave an angry screech. Clutching his hockey stick to his heart Marv clambered out.

o Don't go out after nightfall.



A million snowflakes whirled through his visor, kissing his eyelashes and nipping at his cheeks. The wail of the baby became like an eerie lullaby, drawing Marv through the snowfall, out of his garden, across the deserted street to the banks of the River Raven. Thick ice mirrored the thunder-coloured sky, and tiny speckles of starlight glistened off it like magic. And there in the centre of the river, like a present fallen from a flying sleigh, was a wicker basket holding a restless crying baby.

Marv stood still, hypnotized by the odd wonder of the little scene. The strangeness of it felt like a moment out of time, as if midnight had ceased its chimes for the boy and the baby.

A large moon-bright snowflake blotted out Marv's vision and the baby's cry became his whole existence. A silvery thread sewn from sound, which knotted around him, pulling him forward. Even as the wind shrieked around him and fresh snow shuddered down from the sky, Marv edged forward.

o Never leave the house alone in a snowstorm.

It was too late for that now . . . Marv didn't think. He put his blades on the ice and using his stick to steady himself, wobbled uncertainly onto the night river. Twice he fell and clambered back up, his skates tied so loosely they dragged instead of glided.

The River Raven was much wider than it looked.

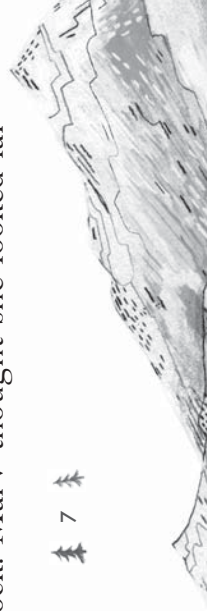
Marv felt like he was crossing an ocean, one unbalanced slide at a time. He was five or six steps from the basket when he felt the weight of watchful eyes.

*o If you stumble upon a bear, never look it in the eye—
get to shelter.*

Marv looked up straight into the gaze of the most astounding little snout-nosed face he'd ever seen. It nearly stole all his breath away. A wonderfully sweet cub with eyes like the forest at midnight was scampering toward him. The cub skidded here and pounced there, playful as a kitten. He chomped his sharp-toothed mouth at a drifting flake, did a tumbling roll, then began spinning around on his tummy like a furry starfish, and Marv couldn't help grinning.

The baby howled and kicked crossly. The cub blinked in the starlight, turning its small black snout toward the sound. With a little shake of his head, the cub scrambled up and bounded gleefully toward the babe. Marv felt a beat of worry pulse through him. Ever so slowly he shuffled himself around, so he was between the basket and the cub, stealing a glance at the wriggling child inside as he did.

She was small and absolutely savage with rage. A halo of black curls framed her furious face, while she pummelled her woollen blanket with maddened fists, her tiny feet kicking at snowflakes, one in a pink boot, one in only a little sock. Marv thought she looked far



more feral than the bear cub. And yet, as he stared, he found there was something captivating about her. Her skin was the same autumn brown as Marv's own, and her eyes when she finally stared at him were endlessly deep like the dark between stars.


Nothing would stop her from living. Not the north winds, nor the mountains, nor the hunger of hunting bears. This child was demanding to be part of the universe, and the universe would simply have to listen. It would brighten its moon, untether its seasons, alter its stars for her.

The ice on the River Raven creaked and the night air seemed suddenly to smell of blood. Again Marv had the swift and chilling sense of being watched. He tilted his head ever so slightly, trying to peer out through the side of his helmet, and there on the horizon he caught sight of a monstrous shadow. A mama bear! She was the same Arctic shape as her cub only much, much bigger, as if crafted from wilderness and claws.

But she was far enough away that Marv had time. He just had to stay calm, and move slowly.

Only he couldn't just leave the baby.

Somehow he found himself sliding toward the howling baby, his skates slipping in all directions, his balance a gamble between life and death. He crouched down to try and lift the basket, but almost fell and squashed the baby! It was just too slippery on the ice. So



he shoved the basket lightly with his hockey stick and watched it glide easily down the River Raven and into a thicket of bilberry bushes. The baby was cloaked in shadows, almost invisible but for her cries. Marv tripped and traipsed after her, but his skates were slowing him down. He'd leave her there—she was hidden enough—and get help from home.

Then he thought he saw a figure on the ice in a long winter coat. He breathed a short sigh of relief. Help was here. The baby would be safe.

He began to scramble back toward the snowy bank when there came a roar that could shatter bones. That was when Marv realized how close the mama bear was. Too close, and suddenly he was trembling with fear.

And here Marv's memory seemed to have frozen. Perhaps he'd passed out and fallen into the bear's violent jaws. Perhaps his soul slipped from his body and drifted up to the trees ready to become stardust, or perhaps the terror of the attack was just too damaging to relive. Because the next thing Marv remembered was the sensation of flying, as a huge bear swung him side to side.

Marv forgot the baby and wintry figure and bellowed for his mom.

One moment the River Raven was empty and it was him, the moon, and the bear. The next it was crowded with people. He heard his mother's screams splintering

the night. He saw a single slipper sailing past him. He glimpsed the barrel of a loaded gun. He grabbed his hockey stick in both hands and shoved it backwards, striking something soft. The world went still. The crack of a gunshot deafened Marv and the cool ice kissed him as he fell from the bear's mouth.

When Marv finally opened his eyes he was at the small island hospital, which was no bigger than a house. His parents were both clinging to each other and quietly weeping. Doctor Marilee was smiling at him, though her eyes looked tired.

'Is the baby OK?' Marv tried to say, though the stitches tugged at his mouth and eye where he would be marked forever by a crescent moon scar. Nobody answered. They had thought Marv delirious.

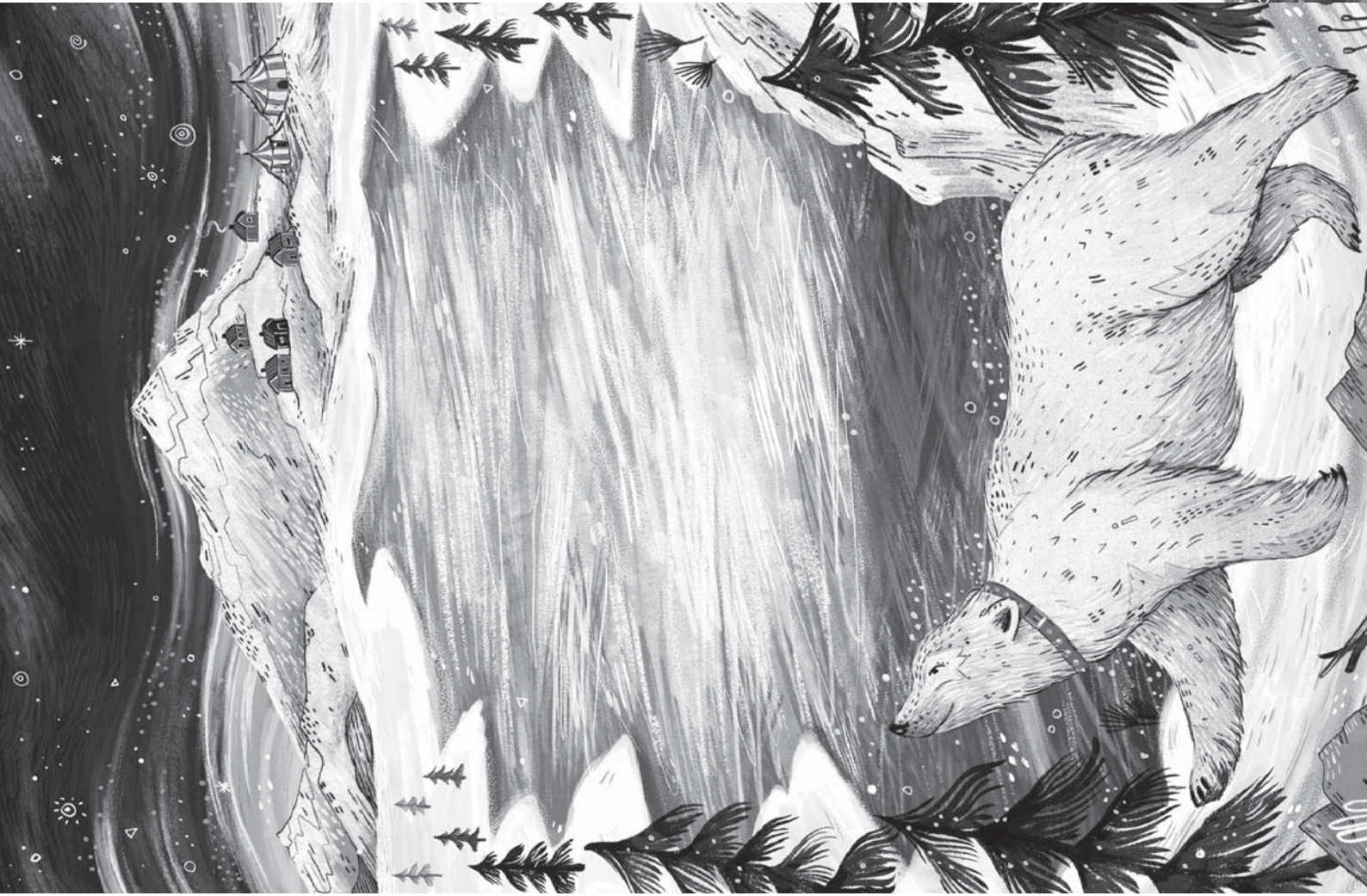
What baby? There was no one but you on the ice . . .

Marv tried to tell the story again and again, but no one could ever help him. None of the townsfolk, or the winter tourists, or any late-night travellers had seen anything.

You must have heard the whistle of the wind. Imagined it was a baby.

As the years went by the memory became hazy. Yet sometimes Marv dreamed of a girl with brown skin and jewel-bright eyes, living with a winter-white bear, dancing beneath the northern sky, adorned in a pink blanket that she wore like a cape, and he could never

quite let go of the hope it was the baby. For deep down in the most secretive chamber of his heart, Marv knew there had been a child. A child who had demanded to live.



Chapter 2

AUTUMN ON THE ISLE OF BEARS

Marv sat up and shivered hard, pushing back his green curtains and gazing out onto the Jacksons' small, ramshackle yard. Pale sunshine kissed the petals of vivid flowers, but the wind tugged swiftly at the grass. Seven, nearly eight years had passed since the bear attack, but still every time Marv felt summer slip swiftly into autumn, his memories of that night awoke, and he found himself dreaming more of the girl, and wondering about the mama bear, who had given him his scar. Would he see her again? Would she come back to the island this year? For she was still out there wandering the Arctic as if searching for something that she lost long ago.

Marv hopped out of bed and pulled on a pair of hockey socks, blinking at the coldness which swept through his

room. It was early September but already the air tasted of snow.

This'll make Mom happy. A proper winter, with thick ice.

Everyone on the island lived for ice. And everyone was gravely concerned that each year the sea froze later and later. Marv's mom, Indi, was more troubled than most, as part of her role at the research centre was to study climate change and try to protect the island from ice melt—and the bears from going hungry.

Marv wriggled into his jeans and slipped on an oversized hoody, excited by the thought of the river and sea freezing earlier. It meant more skating by twilight, more deep snowfall, more hunting time for the bears.

Marv at once felt hugely hopeful.

Winter's going to be awesome!

He glanced in the mirror, lowering his hood: dark eyes flecked with green peered back at him. Brown skin marked forever by a silver scar. Marv grabbed his favourite cap and tried to flatten his untamed hair with it.

He pretty much wore the cap everywhere he went. It was faded burgundy with his team's logo depicted in gold thread: a single mountain peak with a polar bear raising its nose to the moon. The team's name *The Ice Bear Miracles* had once been stitched beneath it, but the thread had unravelled over time. He pulled the last of it away and bounded downstairs, helping himself to a

piece of French toast from the stack on top of the oven.

'Don't sit up there honey, sit at the table,' came Indi's voice from the corner. It was the last Saturday before school started, but Indi always rose early, to go jogging round the island, checking on her plants and experiments, popping to the research centre even on her days off.

'It feels cold Mom,' said Marv, remaining on the counter—his favourite place to sit—and flashing his mom a playful grin.

Indi raised her eyes from the article she was studying. 'It does,' she said, finally giving into her son's quiet charm. Marv couldn't see it, but his smile was the loveliest thing about him. There was so much joy in it. A lopsided little grin that pulled up higher on the scarred side of his face and filled the world with light.

The kitchen door burst dramatically open and Mya came scooting across the floor in her slippers. 'Marv, did you finish the syrup again?' she cried.

'Nope.'

Mya glared at the almost empty glass bottle. 'That's not enough for anyone. Mom, tell him not to be such a greedy little cub.'

Marv gave a loud fake yell and mimed being greatly injured as Mya punched him on the arm.

Indi did not smile. There were some things she would never smile about; one was her son being likened

to a bear.

Indi had made her peace with the bear attack, of course. The Jacksons had come to the Isle of Bears for her work, a brilliant and challenging research post studying bear behaviour. Leon, Marv's dad had been enchanted by the idea of living in the wilderness, almost off-grid. A place where many northern cultures crossed paths, and everyone belonged. But they had stayed for the island. For the friends who rushed to hold them when they were afraid, for the neighbours who rescued Marv, for the doctor who carefully stitched their son back together and told them in a voice as gentle as snowflakes: 'The wound is the place where the light gets in.' And for wild winter nights where the community came together to sing and laugh and weep in wonder of this strange, miraculous place they called home.

'I expect there's more syrup in the fridge,' said Indi, rolling her eyes at her wrestling children. Mya was almost two years older than Marv but believed herself to be a lot more sophisticated. She had the same wavy dark hair and brown skin as her brother. But her eyes had more green in them, like Indi's, whereas Marv's were mostly brown the same as Leon's. Mya was several inches taller than Marv and wore her confidence like a snowflake-gittered robe, while Marv tended to keep his gaze low. And then, of course, there was the scar.

Mya called it his moon mark. She'd been nearly seven



when it happened but she remembered the horror of that night and how the next day at school she was no longer Mya Jackson, that girl from Toronto. She was Mya Jackson, sister of a bear fighter.

'Get me the syrup!' she screamed, shoving Marv to the floor.

'I can't move! My leg's completely broken,' Marv insisted.

Mya grabbed Marv's cap, and put it on backwards so the peak covered her neck. She thrust her hands deep into her dressing gown pockets and began stomping heavily about the kitchen. 'That leg's not broken!' she growled in a rough voice. 'You're an Ice Bear Miracle—now get up and play!' Even Indi began laughing. Mya had a particular knack for imitating Coach.

All the kids on the island loved Coach with a fighting pride, and spent many hours impersonating him. The Jacksons knew him better than most—he had been so welcoming when they arrived, he felt more like family than their coach. That was how Mya, who had never had any interest in hockey, nor even been coached by him, had managed to capture him just right.

Leon Jackson put his head round the door. 'Can't you take it outside?' he muttered, his voice thick with sleep from the late shift at the airport.

'Dad! You're up!' screamed Mya, skidding across the kitchen and flinging herself into his arms.



'I am now,' grumbled Leon.

'Honey, go back to bed. Kids—enough noise already. You've woken your Dad up—again!' But neither child was listening.

'Hey Dad,' said Marv, settling back on the counter.

'Hey son,' croaked Leon, ruffling the boy's hair. Marv loved it when his dad was up early at the weekend. It felt like a treat. During the week Leon worked late at the airport and was often asleep when Marv set off for school. He was a man well suited to winter, Marv often thought, content in the endless dark, at peace with the moon. Leon had never missed a hockey game though, and sometimes he came to training, hanging out with Coach and offering encouragement.

Mya squished up on the counter beside Marv.

'Both of you get down,' Indi sighed. Neither of them moved.

The counter creaked heavily beneath their weight and Leon frowned. 'Better listen to your mo—' he began, but both brother and sister tumbled to the floor, tugging him with them, and bursting out laughing. Indi rolled her eyes and went to get more syrup.

Half an hour later, Marv opened the back door and picked his way across the garden to grab his kit for training. Their white wood home with its sky-blue roof and matching doors was set a little way up a sloping hill, and the garden, which was no bigger than a yard,

slanted away from the back door at funny angles. It was full of unexpected things that Marv had to cut a path around. An old wooden crate they used as a bench. Half of a rusted snowmobile. A swing that both Marv and Mya had outgrown, though on nights when the dream woke him, Marv liked to perch on it and wait for the summer moon to creep through the fleeting dark.

He reached the shed with its broken door and slipped inside. Piles and piles of the Jacksons' snow gear was crammed into every space: skis, boots, snowboards, a sledge, a million scarves, hats, and gloves, and heaped upon every surface were skates upon skates upon skates. The Jacksons' skate collection had begun when they arrived from Toronto, and was small compared to some of their neighbours.

Marv fished out his hockey gear—which Indi refused to have in the house because of the smell—checked his kit bag, then with a movement that was so automatic he could have done it with his eyes shut, he slung the bag on his back, skates across his shoulders, angled his cap down, grabbed his hockey stick, and set off for the rink taking the long route.

He had plenty of time to get there—and also Marv didn't fancy running into Kobi Stone. He and Kobi had a long-standing rivalry; Marv had lost a milk tooth to Kobi's fist when he was seven. And been 'accidentally' tripped up by him countless times on the ice. That was

before Marv got fast, so fast no one could ever catch him.

Marv hadn't seen Kobi all summer. Hockey season ran through the winter months, and though the rink was always open, Marv and his best friend Sol and a few of their teammates practised outside on Lake Rarity, the island's miraculous mountain top lake, skating late into the pale northern nights.

Marv's street ran parallel to the River Raven, and as he climbed up the hill, the houses thinned out and were replaced by patches of wind-stunted forest.

Autumn on the Isle of Bears had its own strange splendour; the way the trees were adorned in the most fabulous colours moments before the wind tore the leaves away. *Autumn is when the island shows its heart* his mom always said, and as Marv breathed in the crisp mountain air, he could see what she meant.

It was then that he had the creeping sensation of being watched. He snapped his head left and right, trying to feel through the air around him, to pick up where the gaze was coming from. It was far too early for ice bears, but there were many other wild things on the island that might be watching him.

Ever since the bear attack, or maybe even before, he'd become hyper-alert to the world around him. It was one of the things that made him an excellent hockey player. He was aware of everything. All the time.

As he cut through the amber-gold forest, Marv thought he heard a twig crunch behind him, but there was no one there, so he pushed on, taking his time. He paused to peer through a gap in the woods at the view of Mount Maplewood, the island's only real mountain, named after the thicket of sugar maples that grew at its summit. The trees shouldn't have been able to survive here, but they did anyway. The island was full of wonders like that. The frozen lake at the top of Mount Maplewood. The Ice Bears.

Somewhere far behind Marv came the gentlest stirring of leaves. Marv span around, cap pushed back, staring intently into the trees.

'Hey Marvel,' came a voice from somewhere far off.

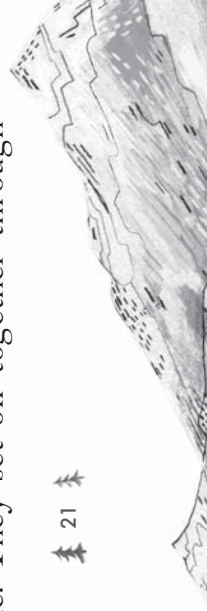
'Hey?' he answered, as a tall man stepped out of a clearing, axe in hand, a black dog with yellow eyes at his ankles.

All Marv saw was his shadow stretching out before him, yet he recognized the voice and smiled. It was Trucker, one of the woods-folk.

The woods-folk, or forest-folk, were exactly as they sounded: individuals or families who chose to live in isolated cottages, scattered throughout the woods.

'Off to training?' asked Trucker. Marv nodded. 'Got time for a hot chocolate? Rae would love to say hi.'

Marv gave a slow grin, he'd left the house early enough—he had time. They set off together through



the trees, the darker-than-night dog leading the way. Rae was in Mya's year at school, but Marv knew her pretty well too as the Jacksons were Rae's snowstorm family: the house she went to when the weather was too bad to get home in. Trucker's shack was cosy and small, and strung with a row of colourful lanterns, twined with winter-flowering plants.

Marv settled down on a log as Trucker melted chocolate into tin mugs over a little crackling fire. Trucker's partner Juniper was away visiting family in Russia, but Rae came out and added some milk, giving some to the dog. Marv noticed the animal's eyes were bright like the moon and realized she was part wild.

All three of them perched on the log in an easy, leafy silence. The scent of wonderfully sweet chocolate curled up through the trees.

'Tastes like snow,' said Trucker sucking in air as if he were inhaling smoke.

Trucker would know thought Marv, as he'd got his nickname from being an ice road trucker, driving in the harshest conditions. He used to pack up his family and bring them with him, but now Rae was at school, she and Juniper tended to stay on the island.

'We'll have early snowfall, like we used to,' Rae said softly, and she turned to Marv, an inquisitive gleam in her eyes. 'Does your bear still come and see you?' Marv gave a firm nod. Rae had been at the Jacksons'

house once on Marv's birthday, when the mama bear had returned to sing her soulful song outside Marv's window. It happened every year. The same bear, with her silver bullet scar, came calmly and in peace. 'It's like she's mourning something,' said Rae.

'Yeah,' Marv agreed, 'or trying to say sorry.'

Trucker grinned. 'That's the spirit Marvel. Those bears are far brighter than we give them credit for.'

Marv finished his hot chocolate and went on his way. It was such a comfort to be able to speak so openly about his bear to someone beyond his family. Trucker, Juniper, and Rae made up the few folk who had never doubted him about the baby. They knew that northern nights kept many secrets, and the ice held many myths. So they listened quietly and gave Marv hot chocolate and told him stories of the Nevkians, a legend all islanders loved to tell:

Warriors made of snow with glowing eyes. Who only appear during winter and are said to share souls with bears.

Marv found the Nevkian myths strangely heartening. There were many different stories, tales of fierce women who could soothe an angry bear with a song, or appear if a bear was in danger and freeze bear hunters to death with arrows of ice. And one about a Nevkian mother whose soul was paired with such an aggressive bear that she left her snow-child with a mortal family until the girl had grown tall and enchanting. Then she came

back at the first frost to claim her.

It was that myth in particular that clung to Marv like mist, even though he knew the baby he had found on the River Raven had been real, and not cut from ice.

And no matter how many winters past, Marv knew, he just *knew*, she was out there.



Chapter 3

TUESDAY

As Marv made his way to the rink, somewhere across the glittering green sea, in the farthest reaches of the Arctic, a girl sat up in a cage and hugged her beloved bear.

Siberian sunlight slanted in through the shutters of small wagons built upon sleighs, and The Carnival of Northern Stars, a little band of performers who travelled by husky, darted into the day and began quietly searching for ice.

The carnival which had begun as a small puppet show telling macabre Russian fairy tales had now grown to include a family of acrobats, a Shetland pony who could leap through rings of fire, a fortune teller who supposedly summoned the dead, and a girl and a polar bear who skated hand in paw across the ice with a grace beyond enchantment. *Winter's Promise and Moonrise*

