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Opening extract from

Winterkill

Written by

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1

Out here, I can feel the dead in the trees. The Lost People rustle the leaves, muddy the shafts of light through the branches, whisper in my ear. They creep dusty fingers along my neck, tug at my braid, pull strands from my plait to tickle my face.

Or mayhap it's the wind.

I don't linger. I stuff the last of the spring beauty root in my satchel and push to my feet. I turn from my digging spot under the dogwood bushes and my bad foot catches on a clump of dirt. It sends a flare of fiery pain up my leg and into my hip.

'Almighty!' The curse leaves my lips before I can bite it back. I hold my breath and listen to the creaking poplars. I'm not in any real danger; it's not dusk for near three hours or more. But no good can come of taking His name in vain, alone in these woods.

When I get past the tangle of brush and onto the Watch flats, the air is warmer and the chill on my spine disappears. The wooden walls of the fortification are poker straight from this distance. I cut a wide arc around the walls and head towards the east gates, where people from my quarter bend to work, drying mounds of berries on

large hides. A group of youngsters chases crickets through the dust.

'Emmeline!' Tom leaves the hides and crosses towards me with giant strides, the smooth leather of his trousers whisking through the wild grasses.

A smile tugs at my lips.

Tom is my age, tall and lanky with gentle-looking hands despite their being scalded by wax so often they're forever scarred. He hooks two thumbs in his *ceinture* as he approaches, his head tilted in his thinking-hard way.

He's going to ask what I'm doing during free time. Often we venture to the river to fish or search for left-behinds from the Lost People. Nobody calls the Lost People that but me, and not many people find arrowheads or bones interesting anymore, but I hoard them. Those left-behinds tug at me, like they've got secrets etched in them.

Tom stops. 'You weren't at Virtue Talks last night,' he says.

I shift my sack of roots. Tom knows about my once-in-a-while truancy from settlement events. He must be teasing.

'I miss a new sermon? Some big fancy words?' I say.

He doesn't laugh.

'We going to the river today?' I say.

'Em . . .' Tom looks like he's searching for words. He never searches for words. His blue eyes are troubled, like the prairie sky with a storm brewing.

A hawk wheels above us, scouring for prey.

I look down and dig the toe of my bad foot into the soil, feeling a backwards kind of relief as pain washes my leg. A beetle crawls across the stubble of prairie grasses.

'Brother Stockham's wondering about it.'

My head snaps up. 'Beg pardon?'

'You not being at Virtue Talks. My ma took a crate of candles to Council this morning, and he asked where you were last night.'

A cold stone settles in my stomach. 'Your ma came to you and asked after it?'

He nods.

'And you said?'

'The truth. Said I didn't know where you were.'

I ignore the question there. 'Why'd he notice? Six hundred–some people and he notices *I'm* missing?'

'Don't know.' Tom runs a hand through his soft blond hair. 'But Em? Make sure you're there tonight.' His eyes are worried, not accusing-like.

I nod. I have no choice: one Wayward act earns a warning. But two? Two means you have to prove your virtues another way.

Like standing Watch on the fortification walls.

My skin goes prickly.

I'll be at Virtue Talks tonight.

*

'What's got, Em?' Tom's sister Edith pulls at my long shirt with one hand and jumps to snatch at my leather

satchel with the other. It's a right pitiful gesture – a field mouse pestering a bison. Her smock is smudged with ash. No doubt Sister Ann – her and Tom's ma – shooed her out from underfoot but told her to stay close. Edith's the curious sort you need to keep an eye on.

Her eyes are too large in her scrawny face; at four she's painful thin. Some babies are blessed with fat, but they lose it soon as they're weaned. Not many have the chance to carry extra weight, and the children, all tag playing and rough and tumble, are no different.

We are equal in all things: affluence and destitution. We survive together, or we perish.

Brother Stockham reminds us of it each Virtue Talks. Except it's not exactly true. There's Council, who never look to be wanting for much, and Watch, who are rewarded with extra rations for the risk they take each night.

I brush her off. 'Spring beauty root for Soeur Manon.'

'From under the wood-dog?' she asks.

'Dogwood,' I correct her.

She nods her blonde head, serious, like we're speaking on the most important thing Almighty created. 'Good job,' she says.

I smile. Got a soft spot for Edith. It's not just that she's Tom's little sister – and Tom is my only true friend – it's that she's always asking after my work for Soeur Manon, like root digging is something special. She listens to my every word, too. My brief trips to the edges of the Watch flats must sound real exciting. She's never been outside the

gates, except for that once. But no one likes to talk about that, and she's too young to remember.

A cabbage moth flitters past and her eyes light up. She turns and gives chase, heading for the corner of our shared quarters building.

'Don't go far!' I call after her. 'Your ma will be looking for you.'

On cue, Sister Ann's voice comes from inside. 'Edith? Edith!'

Before Sister Ann pokes her head out to find Edith, I turn and head for the Healing House. A thin line wisps from the chimney of the weathered wooden building. My knock is answered by a gruff '*Entrez!*'

Soeur Manon is bent over the hearth stirring a pot of simmering herbs, her snow-white hair the one bright spot in her sooty kitchen.

'*La racine.*' I gesture to my satchel, and she waves her hand at the table. Soeur Manon doesn't talk much. There's a bit of a lag in our understanding one another, though I suspect she speaks more English than she lets on.

I gather for her poultices and rubs: horehound for birthings, sage for belly upsets, spring beauty root for bone setting and such. Thanks be, she still has a dusty old book she's guarded for years that has little pictures of the roots and herbs I'm to gather; otherwise I'd be bringing back every plant on Almighty's green earth, trying to match up what she describes in her hurried French. Sometimes I pretend I'm looking at her plants book and flip through the

other books she has: the ones with pictures of people and animals I've never seen. I suspect some of those animals live far across the sea, or in someone's mind only. Some of them – horses and oxen – I know were once real. They died alongside half the settlement when we arrived five generations ago.

I pull out the root and place it on the table, step back, and wait for something more. She adds dried leaves to the pot. Stirs. Finally she turns and sizes me up with her watery eyes. Her face is lined with more creases than the river has fish, and her shoulders are thin.

'Emmeline,' she says, '*ton pied. Tu l'as blessé aujourd'hui, non?*'

Now, how could she know I hurt my foot? It hurts more than usual, all right, but I'm not moving on it funny. I always walk normal-like, or close to, around the fort. It gives me an awful dull ache in my leg, but Pa and me are already Stained; I'm not inclined to give people another reason to eyeball me. Limping around wouldn't do me any favours. Still, somehow she knows.

'*Oui.*' I nod.

She gestures for me to take off my moccasin. When I do, she drops the ladle on the table, hobbles forward, and bends to gather my foot in her knobby hands.

She presses at my woollen sock, peering at it this way and that, but, Almighty's grace, leaving my sock on. I don't like looking at the unnatural dark skin, the misshapen toes – and I like it less when others look.

She clucks her tongue. 'You do this on purpose.'

I stare at her. Again, she's right: snagging my foot in the woods was a mistake, but leaning on it in front of Tom was purposeful. He caught me unawares, though, with his Virtue Talks business; I can hardly be faulted for it. And hurting yourself isn't a Wayward act.

'Can I help you with something else?' If I can't, I want out of here, away from her eyes that see too much.

She levels me a look. '*Non*, Emmeline.' She places my foot on the floor real gentle. 'Do what you like.'

*

'We extend the Peace of the Almighty.' Brother Stockham begins Virtue Talks, looming straight and tall behind the pulpit.

The air in the ceremonial hall smells of sweat and unwashed hair.

I'm wedged between two women from the north – the Watch quarter – tucked away from my pa's sad eyes. He beckoned to me when I showed up but I pretended not to see, scuttled into the crowd away from him. I have enough to worry about right now without weathering his anxious look.

I turn to the bone-thin woman on my left and offer her the Peace, placing a hand across my chest and nodding my head. I recognise her haunted face; no one here is a total stranger. Her response is quick, though her eyes are low, like she might catch something if she looks on me too long.

The woman to my other side looks right knackered, her belly swollen with a child whose life no one will celebrate until it reaches its first year. So many children die that a celebration before their first life day is considered short-sighted and a waste of stores.

I want to ask her if she has to Watch in her state – if the extra rations are worth it – but of course I don't. I'm not in the habit of speaking to people I don't know well.

Brother Stockham calls us back to attention. 'November tenth. The day our settlement formed, the day we learned to survive this harsh land. Next month we will celebrate that date at Affirmation. For three days we will give thanks, and affirm our commitments to the virtues and to our settlement, before *La Prise* is upon us.'

The woman to my right stiffens at the words '*La Prise*': the deadly winter. It's plain she's thinking on that unborn child.

'Year round we work hard to survive. But these weeks before Affirmation will reveal our commitment to life, or to death.'

There's a soft murmur through the crowd. *Our commitment to death.* It's a strange thing to say, though I suppose it might be a roundabout way of telling us to work hard, that anything less than upholding our virtues is courting disaster. And, like he's answering my thoughts, Brother Stockham launches into a sermon about our three virtues: Honesty, Bravery, Discovery.

I tick through them in my mind. Honesty is always

telling the truth, following settlement rules like completing your duties, attending settlement events, staying inside the fortification borders. Bravery is doing what's asked, taking risks that benefit the whole and not jawing on about it when you do. Discovery is using the brains Almighty gave us to find ways to improve our lot – without risking everyone's safety.

I fail upholding Honesty every other day.

I try, but some of the things I wonder about make it right tricky. My thoughts fly back to gathering today, when it felt like the Lost People were hanging off the boughs and watching over me. The outer woods are forbidden, but some days I can't help but think about walking off into the trees, heading into that darkness beyond the first line of scrub where there are no wary stares.

There's an itch between my shoulder blades. I twist one arm behind my back and reach as far as I can. When I elbow the hard-looking woman to my left and receive a sharp look, I stop.

'The virtues have kept us safe thus far,' Brother Stockham affirms in English, and again in French. His voice carries through the hall, through the mass of silent bodies. Even children hush up when Brother Stockham's speaking, even though we've all heard versions of the speech so many times it's beyond familiar, it's deadbore.

I know a lot of the women aren't even listening. They just look it because they're busy making moon-eyes at Brother Stockham. I spot Macy Davies doing just that – her

big brown eyes wide like she's drinking in his every word, twisting a lock of her shiny copper hair in her fingers.

She's probably hoping he'll ask her to be his life mate. His position, given over by birth, makes him the most respected member of our settlement. And everyone wonders why he doesn't have a life mate yet. It is strange; he's easily twenty-five, mayhap twenty-six. Well beyond binding age. Mayhap he's too busy upholding his virtues. Can't say I think too hard on it. He's handsome, sure: tall with glossy black hair cut off just below his chin in sharp points. But something about his hawk eyes has always skittered me. Or mayhap it's that he can mete my punishment if I'm Wayward.

Brother Stockham's wondering about it.

My stomach gets tight. I'd rather gather roots at the Crossroads, under the hanging skeletons of the Waywards, than be punished with Watch.

I glance around the hall. Six Councilmen stand together at the far side: vultures watching over carrion. I turn my head before I catch their eye. And spy a boy watching me. He's wedged in the crowd about ten bodies closer to the pulpit, but there's a gap that gives us sight of each other.

His eyes are big, making him seem young, but looking closer, I see he's my age. His hair is shaved close to his head, so he must be from the south quarter, Storages and Kitchens. Instead of looking like most of the south residents, though – who look like they're missing an important feature, like a shorn sheep – his shaved head gives him a kind of stark beauty. A lone poplar against the prairie sky.

I lower my eyes, sure he'll do the same, then risk a quick look at him once more.

He's still looking at me, but it's not the usual wary stare – it's real friendly. The corner of his mouth curls into a secret-joke kind of smile, and then he's gone when a large man shifts his stance.

There's an unfamiliar fluttering in my chest.

I try to prick my ears to Brother Stockham's sermon, but it's near impossible. Silent, I curse the man between that boy and me. I don't consort much with anyone outside the east; until we turn sixteen and become eligible – of binding age – we're kept close to our quarters. And of course we're kept inside at dark. We don't have much chance to get friendly with people from other sections until we get older.

But I should know him: everyone knows everyone. I just don't recognise him because his head is shaved.

And then I place him.

He's the oldest Cariou boy, from the south quarter. *Kane.* As a child he was forever chasing his age-mates about the fortification, a tangle of bone-straight, dark hair streaming behind him. In the past three years since I've been gathering, I've seen him playing hoopball on the flats and hauling skins in past the gates. For years, he's been hidden in a group of boys, behind his hair, hovering on the outskirts of Virtue Talks.

His head is shaved now, which means he's turned sixteen and can work inside the Storages and Kitchens, doing more important work.

When I turn sixteen in a few days, I'll start learning Soeur Manon's trade, how she makes her poultices and such, instead of just gathering for her. I'll also start delivering gatherings to Storages.

A thought lodges in my mind: I'll be seeing Kane regularly.

My stomach flips over and I press my weight into my bad foot.

'Adherence to the virtues is our only hope,' Brother Stockham says, his eyes sweeping over us. 'Waywardness breeds chaos, and chaos brings destruction.' His gaze rests on mine and for half a moment it seems he's talking right to me. He looks away. 'Remember and adhere to your virtues daily. For yourself, for your children, for our continued safety and prosperity.' He puts a hand across his chest once more, and we are released.

I go slow, following the bony back of the Watch woman, hoping my pa won't wait. I'm in luck; as we shuffle from the hall I can see him far ahead, heading back to our quarters with Tom's parents.

Someone appears at my elbow. I somehow know it's him without looking, but when I do raise my eyes, my breath hitches.

Kane is a mite taller than me, but he's no longer the scrawny youngster who used to chase ground squirrels; working in Storages has filled him out. I can tell this by looking at the bare arm next to mine: his shirtsleeves are rolled to the elbows, which somehow feels terrible

intimate. He smells of sage and woodsmoke.

'Emmeline, right?'

I nod, trying my hardest to walk normal-like. What does he want? Why is he speaking with me?

We step into the dusk, where the crowd is scattering. The north quarter is heading to Watch, lighting torches from the burn baskets.

He gestures to himself. 'Kane.'

We stop and turn towards one another. In the half-light, his eyes are black pools.

'I know.'

He nods towards my quarters. 'How're things?'

'All right.'

'Mind if I ask how old you are, Emmeline?'

I feel a thrill hearing him say my name – the way he speaks! His voice is a lazy river, winding over to me, honeying my ears. We should be getting to our quarters, not bandying about, but I can't stop staring at him.

'Fifteen.' I correct myself quick, 'I mean, sixteen – next week.'

'So I'll be seeing you at Storages soon.' He's not asking.

'That's right.' I'm trying to sound casual, but I know I look like a cornered deer. It's like he was able to read the thoughts I was having moments ago at Virtue Talks.

His gaze is steady. 'Mayhap we'll work together.'

This levels me. Surely he knows I'm Stained? Ever since the Crossroads was built, there have been people who carry the shame of something a family member did to end

up there. No way he doesn't know about my grandma'am. And it's addled enough we stand here jawing on while everyone prepares for dark, but to suggest that we should spend time together . . . in that inviting way . . .

My chest swells. I open my mouth to offer a response, but a voice from behind breaks in.

'Sister Emmeline, a word.' It's Brother Stockham.

My blood freezes.

Oh, not here, not now.

Something flickers across Kane's amused face. I swallow before turning to face the Good Brother.

He stands with his arms crossed in front of his dark cloak, his hair shining.

'Yes?'

'I have knowledge of your Waywardness. Skipping Virtue Talks is an offence.'

My face flushes hot. I look to the ground, willing Kane away with all my might. People already think I'm more prone to Waywardness on account of my Stain. And now . . .

I clear my throat. 'Apologies, Brother Stockham. I wasn't feeling so good.'

'If you are unwell, you need to be seen by Soeur Manon.'

'I should have told someone. I'm sorry.'

'I'm sure you are. And I'm sure you are equally sorry for skipping the Thompson life day ceremony two weeks ago?'

The flush rushes over my entire body, my chest seizes with panic.

'This Waywardness requires penance.'

I nod again, hoping with every inch of me that he doesn't mean—

'Watch on the fortification. Tonight.'

My breath leaves me. 'But I don't know how—'

'You will learn. Go to the north quarter. I will alert your father.'

Pa's going to die a thousand deaths over. Being punished for two Wayward acts . . .

Brother Stockham puts a hand under my chin to raise my eyes to his. 'Sister Emmeline. Never again. Do you understand?'

I want to answer, but my mouth is dry. I blink. Pa's sad eyes fade in my mind because there's something curious about the way Brother Stockham is touching me – is looking at me. He drops my chin and steps past, heading in the direction of our quarters.

A strange feeling shoots through me. Brother Stockham was irate, but there was something right gentle about his touch. I shiver. Then I remember Kane and hope he had the good grace to excuse himself from my tongue-lashing. I pivot and find nothing's going right.

Kane is still there, and his jaw is hanging open. 'Why would you do that?'

For an addled moment I don't know if he means skip a life day ceremony or ponder Brother Stockham's touch.

'Two Wayward acts in two weeks?' There's something in his eyes that doesn't quite match his words. Like he's

horrified *and* having a laugh at me. 'You got a death wish?'

My temper flares. The only reason he knows about my Waywardness is because he's toying with it himself – waylaying me before Dark!

'No,' I retort. 'Just rather do Watch than work in Storages with the likes of you.'

I spin on my heel and stride away before he can answer, trying to feel satisfied with the look of shock on his face. But around the corner of the munitions shack, I stop and wrap my arms close, angry tears biting my eyes. My heart leapt when he talked about us working together. Did I think for a moment that he wanted to spend time with me? He was probably sent to talk to me on a dare. His age-mates will have a good laugh now.

I stamp my bad foot hard on the earth, then clench my jaw and scrub my sleeve across my eyes, turning towards the north quarter. I'm still dreading Watch, but the humiliation burning in my body distracts me, dulling my fear.

Thank Almighty for that.