

"I'm protecting my interests. Get back inside. Now."

"No," I say, even though my heart is pummelling out of my ribcage.

"There's a warrant for you both. It's my civic duty. Portia Steel put out a call herself."

"No!" I cry. "We're not going back. Not ever."

I keep my eyes on the blade. It's dirty – encrusted with blood – but still somehow catching the light of the morning sun. "Let him go!"

"Inside!" the woman hollers.

"If you send us back, they'll kill us. Both of us!"

The woman shakes her head.

"They want our blood. They'll take yours too, if they come out here. You don't know what the city's like now." I'm yelling at her. Screaming. But I'm pleading with her too. "Please! Please! Please!" There are beads of sweat, like dewdrops, painted on Bear's face.

The woman's moving her head from side to side, wildly. "I've been promised. By Steel herself. She'll let me back in, in exchange for you two."

"Why?" I splutter. "Why would you want to go back? The city's a prison!"

"It's my home!" the woman screeches. "I didn't ask to be sent out here. You think I wanted my blood to show up positive?"

"It means you can survive. And you have. You've

survived here!"

"I'm about the only one that did. You don't know what it's like. No soul to speak to except the voices in your own head. I'm not doing another winter out here. I can't! In the cottage. Now."

"And what if I don't?"

Bear's properly sobbing now. The blade's pressing against the soft skin of his neck. There's a madness in the woman's eyes. Now she's forgotten to smile I can see it. "I will do it," she says, pressing the blade harder, and I don't doubt for a moment that she will.

I turn back to the cottage and the woman turns too, to follow after me, but something comes from the wooded – a leaping, hurling thing, throwing itself against her. Our lynx cat. Our Ghost. Violet staggers, letting go of Bear as she hits the ground.

"Run, Bear!" I call, even as I'm hauling him up off the floor.

The woman's grabbing at my leg. Her thick calloused hand gripping tight round my ankle, like a claw. I kick out.

"Don't you dare!" she cries, incensed. "I've been promised! You're my ticket back in!"

"No!" I scream, lashing out. She's scrabbling for the gun with her other hand, but the leather strap is tangled up with the satchel.

I manage to move my leg up to her neck and start kicking