

1

IT WAS A THURSDAY WHEN THE SQUIRRELS FELL from the trees. I knew I shouldn't have stayed at George's after school, but she wore a really tight shirt that day, and besides, she was freaking out over four questions she knew she got wrong on her AP chemistry test and wanted to cry on my shoulder—how could I say no? Still, by the time the windstorm started, I was almost regretting it; shingles were ripping off the roofs and flying down the street. I braced myself against the wind as those squirrels fell, one after another, claws gripping at the sky, squirrels falling like acorns.

Earlier on that same Thursday, Mr. Jenkins, the crazy guy on the edge of town, the guy who owned an exotic zoo filled with tigers, panthers, hyenas, and elephants and the like but who never fed them very well (they all had ribs poking out like the black keys on a piano)—he decided to go and shoot himself dead, but not before opening up all the cages and letting his animals loose. Of course, in that windstorm, the animals—being caged

2 • CRYSTAL CHAN

up for years and years—freaked out and ran. So there we were, Makersville, Indiana, the sudden focus of TV reporters and animal rights groups and gun rights advocates, thrown in the spotlight when we hadn't hardly existed just a couple hours before. Goes to show what a tiger can do.

So everyone was running around with their cameras and cell phones, then running around some more and telling people not to run around and to stay in their homes. Then a couple reporters got on TV and started talking in Really Excited Voices because two giraffes had been mauled and gnawed on by the Bengal tiger. I mean, really, people? Makes sense to me: The tiger had been starving, windstorm or no windstorm, and it's not like it was going to saunter through the fast-food drive-through and order the double-cheeseburger meal deal. And this hubbub was *before* folks learned that the python was nowhere to be found.

Maybe it should have bothered me more that these animals were on the loose and hungry, but in light of what had happened six months before *that*, I wasn't bothered at all. It's funny how relative life is: If you have a boring life where nothing much happens and suddenly there's some big cat out there, I suppose that would be a good reason to get upset. But if your dad tried to kill himself but messed up and just hurt himself really bad, well, some cat somewhere out there isn't all that awful. I mean, the cat could be anywhere. Your dad lives in your *house*.

I was straining into the wind along Oakwood Road—with the nice network of roads for all the new houses in the new part of the

neighborhood so only those who live there could ever, *ever* find their way out—when another squirrel dropped right beside me, making a grotesque cawing sound as it fell. I jumped, scared, then glanced around to see if anyone had noticed.

That was when I saw the boy. He was small, about Mina's size, and he was maybe ten feet behind me, heading in the same direction. I was surprised he wasn't blown away, he was so small; if there were chain-link fences, I'd have encouraged him to hang on to them and crawl his way home.

There was no one else out on the street. Who would be out in a windstorm with squirrels falling through the sky and lions on the loose? Not that anyone here actually uses the sidewalks for walking—they're just big, empty spaces that you have to shovel in the winter or your neighbors get pissed at you and start talking behind your back. They're perfect, these sidewalks, flawless, except everyone uses cars.

I continued to walk home, squinty-eyed into the wind, my face at an angle to the sheer, and I could swear that the kid was following me. He had on a hoodie and was using his forearm to protect his face from the wind.

I turned around and staggered a step toward him, the wind blasted my back so hard. "Where are you going?" I shouted to the kid. "You're crazy for being out here."

He said something, but the wind carried his words away.

"What'd you say?" I shouted.

"Give them back," he yelled.

4 • CRYSTAL CHAN

“What?” I shouted.

“Give them back,” he repeated.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said.

“They’re not yours,” he yelled, leaning into the wind.

I stared at him like he was an idiot, and he turned his head away. With his hoodie he almost hid it, but I got a split-second look at his face. Pale. Mousy. Intense. And the way he looked at me, I knew—I *knew*—this kid needed something freaking bad.

Maybe if I were a better guy I’d have talked to him, found out what was wrong. But at that point a jigsawed shingle fluttered down the road, branches were down everywhere, and Dad was probably pissed he didn’t know where I was, which meant Mom wasn’t much better. That’s really what I was thinking about, not some little kid falsely accusing me of shit. So I turned around and kept walking.

But he kept right up with me; he made his little legs go twice as fast, and he stayed a couple feet behind. I kept catching him out of the corner of my eye, thinking he’d turn off at Allerton Drive or maybe when we came to the cul-de-sac where that new family moved in last week. But no. He stuck by me like a bad shadow.

I spun around, and he nearly bumped into me. “Go away!” I said, and I still needed to shout because the wind nearly dissolved my words. “I didn’t take anything, and I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

At that point he must have seen that I was getting pissed, and he dropped back about twenty feet. But freaking-A, he still followed me.

I thought again about talking to him. Clearly, he was confused. But what could he be talking about? The thing is, figuring that stuff out takes time; while I was more than happy to let George cry in my arms all day if she'd like, I didn't know this kid, and I'd be damned to let him cry on my shoulder about whatever problems he had. Besides, there were squirrels falling from the trees and a couple cats on the loose.

My house was coming up. In a strange way it was a serious relief with this hoodie kid trailing behind me. He still had that really intense look on his face: the look of pure, absolute need. I didn't know what to do, and I think a part of me stalled a little, like a funky engine, because when I got inside the house and turned to close the door, there he was—just like I knew he'd be—standing outside the door, looking at me like of course I was going to invite him in.

“What do you want?” I said, trying not to show that this was creeping the shit out of me.

“I want your jeans,” he said.

“You want *what*?” I asked.

“Your jeans,” he said.

“Fuck no,” I said. “Now go away.”

He stood there.

There was nothing more natural than to close that door in his face. So I did. I locked it for good measure. You never know what people will do, even when they're young. Especially when they're young.