

CHAPTER ELEVEN • SAM

50°F

We ran. We were silent, dark drops of water, rushing over brambles and around the trees as the men drove us before them.

The woods I knew, the woods that protected me, were punched through by their sharp odors and their shouts. I scrambled here and there amongst the other wolves, guiding and following, keeping us together. The fallen trees and underbrush felt unfamiliar beneath my feet; I kept from stumbling by flying — long, endless leaps, barely touching the ground.

It was terrifying to not know where I was.

We traded simple images amongst ourselves in our wordless, futile language: dark figures behind us, figures topped with bright warnings; motionless, cold wolves; the smell of death in our nostrils.

A crack deafened me, shook me out of balance. Beside me, I heard a whimper. I knew which wolf it was without turning my head. There was no time to stop; nothing to do even if I had.

A new smell hit my nostrils: earthy rot and stagnant water. The lake. They were driving us to the lake. I formed a clear image in my head at the same time that Paul, the pack leader,

did. The slow, rippling edge of the water, thin pines growing sparsely in the poor soil, the lake stretching forever in both directions.

A pack of wolves, huddled on the shore. No escape.

We were the hunted. We slid before them, ghosts in the woods, and we fell, whether or not we fought.

The others kept running, toward the lake.

But I stopped.

CHAPTER TWELVE • GRACE

49°F

These were not the woods that I'd walked through just a few days earlier, painted all the vivid hues of autumn. These were close woods made of a thousand dark tree trunks turned black by dusk. The sixth sense I'd imagined guiding me before was gone; all the familiar paths destroyed by crashing hunters in orange caps. I was completely disoriented; I had to keep stopping to listen for shouts and faraway footsteps through the dry leaves.

My breath was burning my throat by the time I saw the first orange cap, glowing distantly out of the twilight. I shouted, but the cap didn't even turn; the figure was too far away to hear me. And then I saw the others — orange dots scattered through the woods, all moving slowly, relentlessly, in the same direction. Making a lot of noise. Driving the wolves ahead of them.

"Stop!" I shouted. I was close enough to see the outline of the nearest hunter, shotgun in his hands. I closed the distance between us, my legs protesting, stumbling a little because I was tired.

He stopped walking and turned, surprised, waiting until I approached. I had to get very close to see his face; it was so close to night in these trees. His face, older and lined, seemed vaguely familiar to me, though I couldn't remember where in town I'd seen him before. The hunter frowned a strange frown at me; I thought he looked guilty, but I could've been reading into it. "Well, what are you doing here?"

I started to speak before realizing that I was so out of breath that I could hardly get the words out. Seconds ticked by as I struggled to find my voice. "You — have — to — stop. I have a friend in the woods here. She was going to take photographs."

He squinted at me, and then looked at the darkening woods. "*Now?*"

"Yes, now!" I said, trying not to snap. I saw a black box at his waist — a walkie-talkie. "You've got to call them and tell them to stop. It's almost dark. How would they see her?"

The hunter stared at me for an agonizingly long moment before nodding. He reached for his walkie-talkie and unstrapped it and lifted it up and brought it toward his mouth. It felt like he was doing everything in slow motion.

"Hurry!" Anxiety shot through me, a physical pain.

The hunter clicked the button down on the walkie-talkie to speak.

And suddenly a volley of shots snapped and snarled, not far away. Not little pops, like they were from the roadside, but crackling fireworks, unmistakably gunshots. My ears rang.

In a weird way, I felt totally objective, like I was standing outside my own body. So I could feel that my knees were weak and trembling without knowing why, and I heard my heartbeat

racing inside me, and I saw red trickling down behind my eyes, like a dream of crimson. Like a viciously clear nightmare of death.

There was such a convincing metallic taste in my mouth that I touched my lips, expecting blood. But there was nothing. No pain. Just the absence of feeling.

“There’s someone in the woods,” the hunter said into his walkie-talkie, as if he couldn’t see that part of me was dying.

My wolf. My wolf. I couldn’t think of anything but his eyes.

“Hey! Miss.” This voice was younger than the hunter’s, and the hand that took my shoulder was firm. Koenig said, “What were you thinking, taking off like that? There are people with guns here.”

Before I could reply to that, Koenig turned to the hunter. “And I heard those shots. I’m fairly sure everyone in Mercy Falls heard those shots. It’s one thing, doing this” — he jerked a hand toward the gun in the hunter’s hands — “and something else flaunting it.” I started to twist out from under Koenig’s hand; he tightened his fingers reflexively and then released me when he realized what he was doing. “You’re from the school. What’s your name?”

“Grace Brisbane.”

Recognition dawned on the hunter’s face. “Lewis Brisbane’s daughter?”

Koenig looked at him.

“The Brisbanes have a house right over there. On the edge of the woods.” The hunter pointed in the direction of home. The house was invisible behind a black tangle of trees.

Koenig seized upon this bit of information. “I’ll escort you back there and then come back to find out what’s going on with your friend. Ralph, use that thing to tell them to *stop shooting things*.”

“I don’t need an escort,” I said, but Koenig walked with me anyway, leaving Ralph the hunter talking into his walkie-talkie. The cold air was beginning to bite and prickle on my cheeks, the evening getting cold quickly as the sun disappeared. I felt as frozen on the inside as I was on the outside. I could still see the curtain of red falling over my eyes and hear the crackling gunfire.

I was so sure that my wolf had been there.

At the edge of the woods, I stopped, looking at the dark glass of the back door on the deck. The entire house looked shadowed, unoccupied, and Koenig sounded dubious as he said, “Do you need me to —”

“I can make it back from here. Thanks.”

He hesitated until I stepped into our yard, and then I heard him go crashing back the way we’d come. For a long moment, I stood in the silent twilight, listening to the faraway voices in the woods and the wind rattling the dry leaves in the trees above me.

And as I stood there in what I had thought was silence, I started to hear sounds that I hadn’t before. The rustling of animals in the woods, turning over crisp leaves with their paws. The distant roar of trucks on the highway.

The sound of fast, ragged breathing.

I froze. I held my breath.

But the uneven gasps weren’t mine.

I followed the sound, climbing cautiously onto the deck, painfully aware of the sound of each stair sighing beneath my weight.

I smelled him before I saw him, my heart instantly revving up into high gear. My wolf. Then the motion detector light above the back door clicked on and flooded the porch with yellow light. And there he was, half sitting, half lying against the glass back door.

My breath caught painfully in my throat as I moved still closer, hesitant. His beautiful ruff was gone and he was naked, but I knew it was my wolf even before he opened his eyes. His pale yellow eyes, so familiar, flicked open at the sound of my approach, but he didn't move. Red was smeared from his ear to his desperately human shoulders — deadly war paint.

I can't tell you how I knew it was him, but I never doubted it.

Werewolves didn't exist.

Despite telling Olivia I'd seen Jack, I hadn't really believed it. Not like this.

The breeze carried the smell to my nostrils again, grounding me. Blood. I was wasting time.

I pulled out my keys and reached over the top of him to open the back door. Too late, I saw one of his hands reach out, snatching air, and he crashed inside the open door, leaving a smear of red on the glass.

"I'm sorry!" I said. I couldn't tell if he'd heard me. Stepping over him, I hurried into the kitchen, hitting light switches as I did. I grabbed a wad of dishcloths from a drawer; as I did, I noticed my dad's car keys on the counter, hastily thrown next

to a pile of papers from work. So I could use Dad's car, if I had to.

I ran back to the door. I was afraid the boy might've disappeared while my back was turned, a figment of my imagination, but he hadn't moved. He lay half in and half out, shaking violently.

Without thinking, I grabbed him under his armpits and dragged him far enough inside that I could shut the door. In the light of the breakfast area, blood smearing a path across the floor, he seemed tremendously real.

I crouched swiftly. My voice was barely a whisper. "What happened?" I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear him speak.

His knuckles were white where his hand was pressed against his neck, brilliant red leaking around his fingers. "Shot."

My stomach squeezed with nerves, not from what he said, but the voice that said it. It was him. Human words, not a howl, but the timbre was the same. It was *him*. "Let me see."

I had to pry his hands away from his neck. There was too much blood to see the wound, so I just pressed one of the dishcloths over the mess of red that stretched from his chin to his collarbone. It was well beyond my first-aid abilities. "Hold this." His eyes flicked to me, familiar but subtly different. The wildness was tempered with a comprehension that had been absent before.

"I don't want to go back." The agony in his words immediately transported me to a memory: a wolf standing in silent grief before me. The boy's body jerked, a weird, unnatural movement that hurt to think about. "Don't — don't let me change."

I laid a second, bigger dishcloth over his body, covering the goose bumps as best I could. In any other context, I would've been embarrassed by his nakedness, but here, his skin smeared with blood and dirt, it just made his condition seem more pitiful. My words were gentle, as though he might still leap up and run. "What's your name?"

He groaned softly, one hand shaking just a bit as he held the cloth against his neck. It was already soaked through with his blood, and a thin red trail ran along his jaw and dripped to the floor. Lowering himself slowly to the floor, he laid his cheek against the wood, his breath clouding the shiny finish. "Sam."

He closed his eyes.

"Sam," I repeated. "I'm Grace. I'm going to go start my dad's car. I have to take you to the hospital."

He shuddered. I had to lean very close to hear his voice. "Grace — Grace, I —"

I only waited a second for him to finish. When he didn't, I jumped up and grabbed the keys from the counter. I still couldn't quite believe that he wasn't my own invention — years of wishing made real. But whatever he was, he was here now, and I wasn't about to lose him.