

CHAPTER ONE

• GRACE •

So now I was a werewolf and a thief.

I'd found myself human at the edge of Boundary Wood. Which edge, I didn't know; the woods were vast, stretching for miles. Easily traveled as a wolf. Not so easy as a girl. It was a warm, pleasant day — a great day, by spring-in-Minnesota standards. If you weren't lost and naked, that is.

I ached. My bones felt as if they'd been rolled into Play-Doh snakes and then back into bones and then back into snakes again. My skin was itchy, especially over my ankles and elbows and knees. One of my ears rang. My head felt fuzzy and unfocused. I had a weird sense of *déjà vu*.

Compounding my discomfort was the realization that I was not only lost and naked in the woods, but naked in the woods near civilization. As flies buzzed idly around me, I stood up straight to look at my surroundings. I could see the backs of several small houses, just on the other side of the trees. At my feet was a torn black trash bag, its contents littering the ground. It looked suspiciously like it may have been my breakfast. I didn't want to think about that too hard.

I didn't really want to think about *anything* too hard. My thoughts were coming back to me in fits and starts, swimming into focus like half-forgotten dreams. And as my thoughts came back, I was remembering being in this moment — this dazed moment of being newly human — over and over again. In a dozen different settings. Slowly, it

was coming back to me that this wasn't the first time I'd shifted this year. And I'd forgotten everything in between. Well, almost everything.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I could see *his* face, his yellow eyes, his dark hair. I remembered the way my hand fit into his. I remembered sitting next to him in a vehicle I didn't think existed anymore.

But I couldn't remember his name. How could I forget his *name*?

Distantly, I heard a car's tires echo through the neighborhood. The sound slowly faded as it drove by, a reminder of just how close the real world was.

I opened my eyes again. I couldn't think about him. I just wouldn't. It would come back to me. It would all come back to me. I had to focus on the here and now.

I had a few options. One was to retreat back into these warm, spring woods and hope that I'd change back into a wolf soon. The biggest problem with that idea was that I felt so utterly and completely human at the moment. Which left my second idea, throwing myself on the mercy of the people who lived in the small blue house in front of me. After all, it appeared I'd already helped myself to their trash and, from the look of it, the neighbors' trash as well. There were a lot of problems with this idea, however. Even if I felt completely human right now, who knew how long that would last? And I was naked and coming from the woods. I didn't know how I could explain that without ending up at the hospital or the police station.

Sam.

His name returned suddenly, and with it a thousand other things: poems whispered uncertainly in my ear, his guitar in his hands, the shape of the shadow beneath his collarbone, the way his fingers smoothed the pages of a book as he read. The color of the bookstore walls, how his voice sounded whispered across my pillow, a list of resolutions written for each of us. And the rest, too: Rachel,

Isabel, Olivia. Tom Culpeper throwing a dead wolf in front of me and Sam and Cole.

My parents. Oh, God. My parents. I remembered standing in their kitchen, feeling the wolf climbing out of me, fighting with them about Sam. I remembered stuffing my backpack full of clothing and running away to Beck's house. I remembered choking on my own blood. . . .

Grace Brisbane.

I'd forgotten all of it as a wolf. And I was going to forget it all again.

I knelt, because standing seemed suddenly difficult, and clutched my arms around my bare legs. A brown spider crawled across my toes before I had a chance to react. Birds kept singing overhead. Dappled sunlight, hot where it came through full strength, played across the forest floor. A warm spring breeze hummed through the new green leaves of the branches. The forest sighed again and again around me. While I was gone, nature moved on, normal as always, but here I was, a small, impossible reality, and I didn't know where I belonged or what I was supposed to do anymore.

Then, a warm breeze, smelling almost unbearably of cheese biscuits, lifted my hair and presented me with an option. Someone had clearly been feeling optimistic about this fair weather and had hung out a line of clothing to dry at the brick rambler next door. My eye was caught by the garments as the wind fluffed them. A line of neatly pinned-up possibilities. Whoever lived in the rambler was clearly a few sizes larger than me, but one of the dresses looked like it had a tie around the waist. Which meant it could work. Except, of course, it meant stealing someone's clothing.

I had done a lot of things that a lot of people might not consider strictly right, but stealing wasn't one of them. Not like this. Someone's nice dress that they probably had to wash by hand and hang up to dry.

And they had underwear and socks and pillow cases up on the line, too, which meant they were probably too poor to have a dryer. Was I really willing to take someone's Sunday dress so I would have a chance at getting back to Mercy Falls? Was that really the person I was now?

I'd give it back. When I was done.

I crept along the wood line, feeling exposed and pale, trying to get a better look at my prey. The smell of cheese biscuits — probably what had drawn me as a wolf in the first place — suggested to me that someone must be home. No one could abandon that smell. Now that I'd caught the scent, it was hard for me to think of anything else. I forced myself to focus on the problem at hand. Were the makers of the cheese biscuits watching? Or the neighbors? I could stay mostly out of sight, if I was clever.

My unlucky victim's backyard was a typical one for the houses near Boundary Wood, littered with the usual suspects: tomato cages, a hand-dug barbecue pit, television antennae with wires leading to nowhere. Push mower half covered with a tarp. A cracked plastic kiddie pool filled with funky-looking sand, and a family of lawn furniture with plasticky sunflower-printed covers. A lot of stuff, but nothing really useful as cover.

Then again, they'd been oblivious enough for a wolf to steal trash off their back step. Hopefully they were oblivious enough for a naked high school girl to nick a dress from their clothes line.

I took a deep breath, wished for a single, powerful moment that I could be doing something easy like taking a pop quiz in Calculus or ripping a Band-Aid off an unshaved leg, and then darted into the yard. Somewhere, a small dog began to bark furiously. I grabbed a handful of dress.

It was over before I knew it. Somehow I was back in the woods, stolen garment balled in my hands, my breath coming fast, my body hidden in a patch of what may or may not have been poison sumac.

Back at the house, someone shouted at the dog to *Shut up before I put you out with the trash!*

I let my heart settle down. Then, guiltily and triumphantly, I slid the dress over my head. It was a pretty blue flowered thing, too light for the season, really, and still a little damp. I had to cinch the back up quite a bit to make it fit me. I was almost presentable.

Fifteen minutes later, I had taken a pair of clogs off another neighbor's back steps (one of the clogs had dog crap stuck to one heel, which was probably why they'd been put outside to begin with) and I was strolling along the road casually, like I lived there. Using my wolf senses, giving in like Sam had showed me so long ago, I could create a far more detailed picture of the surrounding area in my head than I could with my eyes. Even with all this information, I had no real idea where I was, but I knew this: I was nowhere near Mercy Falls.

But I had a plan, sort of. Get out of this neighborhood before someone recognized their dress and clogs walking away. Find a business or some kind of landmark to get my bearings, hopefully before the clogs gave me a blister. Then: somehow get back to Sam.

It wasn't the greatest of plans, but it was all I had.