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I reading

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One

Grace

I remember lying in the snow, a small red spot of warm going cold, surrounded by wolves. They were licking me, biting me, worrying at my body, pressing in. Their huddled bodies blocked what little heat the sun offered. Ice glistened on their ruffs and their breath made opaque shapes that hung in the air around us. The musky smell of their coats made me think of wet dog and burning leaves, pleasant and terrifying. Their tongues melted my skin; their careless teeth ripped at my sleeves and snagged through my hair, pushed against my collarbone, the pulse at my neck.

I could have screamed, but I didn't. I could have fought, but I didn't. I just lay there and let it happen, watching the winter-white sky go grey above me.

One wolf prodded his nose into my hand and against my cheek, casting a shadow across my face. His yellow eyes looked into mine while the other wolves jerked me this way and that.

I held on to those eyes for as long as I could. Yellow. And, up close, flecked brilliantly with every shade of

gold and hazel. I didn't want him to look away, and he didn't. I wanted to reach out and grab ahold of his ruff, but my hands stayed curled on my chest, my arms frozen to my body.

I couldn't remember what it felt like to be warm.

Then he was gone, and without him, the other wolves closed in, too close, suffocating. Something seemed to flutter in my chest.

There was no sun; there was no light. I was dying. I couldn't remember what the sky looked like.

But I didn't die. I was lost to a sea of cold, and then I was reborn into a world of warmth.

I remember this: his yellow eyes.

I thought I'd never see them again.

Two

Sam

They snatched the girl off her tyre swing in the back yard and dragged her into the woods; her body made a shallow track in the snow, from her world to mine. I saw it happen. I didn't stop it.

It had been the longest, coldest winter of my life. Day after day under a pale, worthless sun. And the hunger – hunger that burned and gnawed, an insatiable master. That month nothing moved, the landscape frozen into a colourless diorama devoid of life. One of us had been shot trying to steal trash off someone's back step, so the rest of the pack stayed in the woods and slowly starved, waiting for warmth and our old bodies. Until they found the girl. Until they attacked.

They crouched around her, snarling and snapping, fighting to tear into the kill first.

I saw it. I saw their flanks shuddering with their eagerness. I saw them tug the girl's body this way and that, wearing away the snow beneath her. I saw muzzles smeared with red. Still, I didn't stop it.

I was high up in the pack – Beck and Paul had made sure of that – so I could've moved in immediately, but I hung back, trembling with the cold, up to my ankles in snow. The girl smelled warm, alive, *human* above all else. What was wrong with her? If she was alive, why wasn't she struggling?

I could smell her blood, a warm, bright scent in this dead, cold world. I saw Salem jerk and tremble as he ripped at her clothing. My stomach twisted, painful – it had been so long since I'd eaten. I wanted to push through the wolves to stand next to Salem and pretend that I couldn't smell her humanness or hear her soft moans. She was so little underneath our wildness, the pack pressing against her, wanting to trade her life for ours.

With a snarl and a flash of teeth, I pushed forward. Salem growled back at me, but I was rangier than him, despite my starvation and youth. Paul rumbled threateningly to back me up.

I was next to her, and she was looking up at the endless sky with distant eyes. Maybe dead. I pushed my nose into her hand; the scent on her palm, all sugar and butter and salt, reminded me of another life.

Then I saw her eyes.

Awake. Alive.

The girl looked right at me, eyes holding mine with such terrible honesty.

I backed up, recoiled, starting to shake again – but this time, it wasn't anger that racked my frame.

Her eyes on my eyes. Her blood on my face.

I was tearing apart, inside and outside.

Her life.

My life.

The pack fell back from me, wary. They growled at me, no longer one of them, and they snarled over their prey. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, a tiny, bloody angel in the snow, and they were going to destroy her.

I saw it. I saw her, in a way I'd never seen anything before.

And I stopped it.

Three

Grace

I saw him again after that, always in the cold. He stood at the edge of the woods in our back yard, his yellow eyes steady on me as I filled the bird feeder or took out the trash, but he never came close. In between day and night, a time that lasted for ever in the long Minnesota winter, I would cling to the frozen tyre swing until I felt his gaze. Or, later, when I'd outgrown the swing, I'd step off the back deck and quietly approach him, hand forward, palm up, eyes lowered. No threat. I was trying to speak his language.

But no matter how long I waited, no matter how hard I tried to reach him, he would always melt into the undergrowth before I could cross the distance between us.

I was never afraid of him. He was large enough to tear me from my swing, strong enough to knock me down and drag me into the woods. But the ferocity of his body wasn't in his eyes. I remembered his gaze, every hue of yellow, and I couldn't be afraid. I knew he wouldn't hurt me.

I wanted him to know I wouldn't hurt him.

I waited. And waited.

And he waited, too, though I didn't know what he was waiting for. It felt like I was the only one reaching out.

But he was always there. Watching me watching him. Never any closer to me, but never any further away, either.

And so it was an unbroken pattern for six years: the wolves' haunting presence in the winter and their even more haunting absence in the summer. I didn't really think about the timing. I thought they were wolves. Only wolves.

Four

Sam

The day I nearly talked to Grace was the hottest day of my life. Even in the bookstore, which was air-conditioned, the heat crept in around the door and came in through the big picture windows in waves. Behind the counter, I slouched on my stool in the sun and sucked in the summer as if I could hold every drop of it inside me. As the hours crept by, the afternoon sunlight bleached all the books on the shelves to pale, gilded versions of themselves and warmed the paper and ink inside the covers so that the smell of unread words hung in the air.

This was what I loved, when I was human.

I was reading when the door opened with a little *ding*, admitting a stifling rush of hot air and a group of girls. They were laughing too loudly to need my help, so I kept reading and let them jostle along the walls and talk about everything except books.

I don't think I would've given the girls a second thought, except that at the edge of my vision I saw one of them sweep up her dark blonde hair and twist it into a long ponytail. The action itself was insignificant,

but the movement sent a gasp of scent into the air. I recognized that smell. I knew immediately.

It was her. It had to be.

I jerked my book up towards my face and risked a glimpse in the girls' direction. The other two were still talking and gesturing at a paper bird I'd hung from the ceiling above the children's book section. She wasn't talking, though; she hung back, her eyes on the books all around her. I saw her face then, and I recognized something of myself in her expression. Her eyes flicked over the shelves, seeking possibilities for escape.

I had planned a thousand different versions of this scene in my head, but now that the moment had come, I didn't know what to do.

She was so real here. It was different when she was in her back yard, just reading a book or scribbling homework in a notebook. There, the distance between us was an impossible void; I felt all the reasons to stay away. Here, in the bookstore, with me, she seemed breathtakingly close in a way she hadn't before. There was nothing to stop me from talking to her.

Her gaze headed in my direction, and I looked away hurriedly, down at my book. She wouldn't recognize my face but she would recognize my eyes. I had to believe she would recognize my eyes.

I prayed for her to leave so I could breathe again.

I prayed for her to buy a book so I would have to talk to her.

One of the girls called, "Grace, come over here and look at this. *Making the Grade: Getting into the College of Your Dreams* – that sounds good, right?"

I sucked in a slow breath and watched her long sunlit back as she crouched and looked at the SAT prep books with the other girls. There was a certain tilt to her shoulders that seemed to indicate only polite interest; she nodded as they pointed to other books, but she seemed distracted. I watched the way the sunlight streamed through the windows, catching the individual flyaway hairs in her ponytail and turning each one into a shimmering gold strand. Her head moved almost imperceptibly back and forth with the rhythm of the music playing overhead.

"Hey."

I jerked back as a face appeared before me. Not Grace. One of the other girls, dark-haired and tanned. She had a huge camera slung over her shoulder and she was looking right into my eyes. She didn't say anything, but I knew what she was thinking. Reactions to my eye colour ranged from furtive glances to out-and-out staring; at least she was being honest about it.

"Do you mind if I take your photo?" she asked.

I cast around for an excuse. "Some native people think if you take their photo, you take their soul. It sounds like a very logical argument to me, so sorry, no pictures." I shrugged apologetically. "You can take photos of the store if you like."

The third girl pushed up against the camera girl: bushy light brown hair, tremendously freckled and radiating so much energy that she exhausted me. "Flirting, Olivia? We don't have time for that. Here, dude, we'll take this one."

I took *Making the Grade* from her, sparing a quick glance around for Grace.

"Nineteen dollars and ninety-nine cents," I said.

My heart was pounding.

"For a paperback?" remarked the freckled girl, but she handed me a twenty. "Keep the penny." We didn't have a penny jar, but I put it on the counter next to the register. I bagged the book and receipt slowly, thinking Grace might come over to see what was taking so long.

But she stayed in the biography section, head tipped to the side as she read the spines. The freckled girl took the bag and grinned at me and Olivia. Then they went to Grace and herded her towards the door.

Turn around, Grace. Look at me, I'm standing right here. If she turned right now, she'd see my eyes, and she'd have to know me.

Freckled girl opened the door – *ding* – and made an impatient sound to the rest of the herd: time to move along. Olivia turned briefly, and her eyes found me again behind the counter. I knew I was staring at them – at Grace – but I couldn't stop.

Olivia frowned and ducked out of the store. Freckled girl said, "Grace, come *on*."

My chest ached, my body speaking a language my head didn't quite understand.

I waited.

But Grace, the only person in the world I wanted to know me, just ran a wanting finger over the cover of one of the new hardcovers and walked out of the store without ever realizing I was there, right within reach.