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Maggie Stiefvater

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Prologue

Grace



This is the story of a boy who used to be a wolf and a girl who was becoming one.

Just a few months ago, it was Sam who was the mythical creature. His was the disease we couldn't cure. His was the goodbye that meant the most. He had the body that was a mystery, too strange and wonderful and terrifying to comprehend.

But now it is spring. With the heat, the remaining wolves will soon be falling out of their wolf pelts and back into their human bodies. Sam stays Sam, and Cole stays Cole, and it's only me who's not firmly in my own skin.

Last year, this was what I wanted. I had a lot of reasons to long to be part of the wolf pack that lives in the woods behind my house. But now, instead of me watching the wolves, waiting for one of them to come to me, they are the ones watching me, waiting for me to come to them.

Their eyes, human eyes in wolf skulls, remind me of water: the clear blue of water reflecting the spring sky,

the brown of a brook churning with rainfall, the green of the lake in summer as the algae begins to bloom, the grey of a snow-choked river. It used to be only Sam's yellow eyes that watched me from between the rain-soaked birches, but now, I feel the weight of the entire pack's gaze. The weight of things known, things unsaid.

The wolves in the woods are strangers now that I know the secret of the pack. Beautiful, alluring – but strangers nonetheless. An unknown human past hides behind each pair of eyes; Sam is the only one I ever truly knew, and I have him beside me now. I want this, my hand in Sam's hand and his cheek resting against my neck.

But my body betrays me. Now I am the unknown, the unknowable.

This is a love story. I never knew there were so many kinds of love or that love could make people do so many different things.

I never knew there were so many different ways to say goodbye.

One

Sam



Mercy Falls, Minnesota, looked different when you knew you'd be human for the rest of your life. Before, it had been a place that existed only in the heat of summer, concrete sidewalks and leaves curved up towards the sun, everything smelling of warm asphalt and dissipating truck exhaust.

Now, as the spring branches shared seldom-seen frills of tender pink – it was where I belonged.

In the months since I'd lost my lupine skin, I'd tried to learn how to be a boy again. I'd got my old job back at The Crooked Shelf, surrounded by new words and the sound of pages turning. I'd traded my inherited SUV, full of the scent of Beck and my life with the wolves, for a Volkswagen Golf just big enough for me and Grace and my guitar. I tried not to flinch when I felt the cold rush in through a suddenly open door. I tried to remember I was no longer alone. At night, Grace and I crept into her room, and I folded myself against her body, breathing in the smell of my new life and matching my heartbeat to hers.

If my chest caught when I heard the wolves' slow howls in the wind, at least I had the balm of this simple, ordinary life to console me. I could look forward to years of Christmases with this girl in my arms, the privilege of growing old in this unfamiliar skin of mine. I knew that. I had everything.

Gift of time in me enclosed
the future suddenly exposed

I had started to bring my guitar with me to the bookstore. Business was slow, so hours would go by with no one to hear me singing my lyrics to the book-lined walls. The little notebook Grace had bought me was slowly filling with words. Every new date jotted at the top of a page was a victory over the disappearing winter.

Today was a day much like the ones before: wet morning streets still devoid of consumer life. Not long after I opened up the store, I was surprised to hear someone come in. Leaning the guitar against the wall behind my stool, I looked up.

"Hi, Sam," Isabel said. It was strange to see her on her own, without the context of Grace, and stranger still to see her here in the bookstore, surrounded by the soft reality of my cave of paperbacks. The loss of her brother the winter before had made her voice harder, her eyes sharper than they'd been the first time I'd met her. She

looked at me – a canny, blasé look that made me feel naive.

"What's up?" she asked, sitting on the empty stool next to me, crossing her long legs in front of her. Grace would've tucked hers underneath the stool. Isabel saw my tea and took a sip before breathing out a long sigh.

I looked at the violated tea. "Not much. New haircut?"

Her perfect blond ringlets were gone, replaced with a brutal, short style that made her look beautiful and damaged.

Isabel raised one eyebrow. "I never pegged you for a fan of the obvious, Sam," she said.

"I'm not," I said, and pushed the untouched paper cup of tea towards her to finish. It seemed filled with meaning to drink from it after she did. I added, "Otherwise, I would've said, 'Hey, shouldn't you be in school?'"

"Touché," Isabel said, taking my drink as if it had always been hers. She slouched elegantly on her stool. I hunched like a vulture on mine. The wall clock counted off the seconds. Outside, heavy white clouds that still looked like winter hung low over the street. I watched a drop of rain streak past the window, only to bounce, frozen, on the sidewalk. My mind drifted from my battered guitar to my copy of Mandelstam sitting on the counter ("*What shall I do with this body they gave me, so much my own, so intimate with me?*"). Finally, I

leaned over and pressed the PLAY button on the sound system tucked beneath the counter, restarting the music overhead.

"I've been seeing wolves near my house," Isabel said. She shook the liquid in the cup. "This tastes like lawn clippings."

"It's good for you," I said. I fervently wished she hadn't taken it; the hot liquid felt like a safety net in this cold weather. Even though I knew I didn't need it any more, I still felt more firmly human with it in my hand. "How close to your house?"

She shrugged. "From the third floor, I can see them in the woods. Clearly, they have no sense of self-preservation, or they'd avoid my father. Who is not a fan." Her eyes found the irregular scar on my neck.

"I remember," I said. Isabel had no reason to be a fan, either. "If any of them happen to wander your way as humans, you'll let me know, right? Before you let your dad stuff them and put them in his foyer?" To lighten the impact, I said *foyer* like the French: *foi-yay*.

Isabel's withering look could've turned lesser men into stone.

"Speaking of *foi-yays*," she said, "are you living in that big house by yourself now?"

I wasn't. Part of me knew I ought to be in Beck's place, welcoming back the other pack members as they fell out of winter into their human forms, looking out for the four new wolves that had to be getting ready to

shift, but the other part of me hated the idea of rattling around there with no hope of ever seeing Beck again.

It wasn't home, anyway. Grace was home.

"Yes," I told Isabel.

"Liar," she said, adding a pointy smile. "Grace is such a better liar than you. Tell me where the medical books are. Don't look so surprised – I'm actually here for a reason."

"I didn't doubt that you were here for a reason," I said, and pointed to the corner. "I just had yet to ascertain what that reason was."

Isabel slid off the stool and followed my directions to the corner. "I'm here because sometimes Wikipedia just won't cut it."

"You could write a book about the things that you can't find online," I said, able to breathe again now that she had got up. I started to fold a duplicate invoice into a bird.

"You should know," Isabel said. "As you were the one who was once an imaginary creature."

I made a face and kept folding my bird. The bar code of the invoice patterned one of its wings with monochromatic stripes, making the unmarked wing look larger. I picked up a pen, about to line the other wing and make it perfect, but changed my mind at the last moment. "What are you looking for, anyway? We don't have much in the way of real medical books. Just self-help and holistic stuff, mostly."

Isabel, crouched beside the shelf, said, "I don't know. I'll know it when I see it. What's that thing called – that doorstop of a book? The one that covers everything that can go wrong with a person?"

"Candide," I said. But there wasn't anyone in the shop to get the joke, so after a pause, I suggested, *"The Merck Manual?"*

"That's it."

"We don't have it in stock. I can order it," I said, not needing to check the inventory to know that I was right. "It's not cheap new, but I can probably find you a used copy. Conveniently, diseases tend to stay the same." I threaded a string through my paper crane's back and got up on to the counter to hang it above me. "It's a little bit of overkill, isn't it, unless you're planning to become a doctor?"

"I was considering it," Isabel said, in such a stark way that I didn't realize she was confiding in me until the door went *ding* again, admitting another customer.

"Be with you in a second," I said, standing on my toes on the counter to toss the loop of string over the light fixture above me. "Let me know if you need anything."

Though there was only a heartbeat's pause, I was aware that Isabel had gone silent in a way that shouted the silence to me. I lowered my arms to my side, hesitating.

"Don't let me stop you," the newcomer said, voice even and overwhelmingly professional. "I'll wait."

Something in the tone of his voice made me lose my taste for whimsy, so I turned around and saw a police officer standing by the counter, looking up at me. From my vantage point, I could see everything he had hanging on his gun belt: gun, radio, pepper spray, handcuffs, mobile phone.

When you have secrets, even if they're not secrets of the illegal sort, seeing a police officer in your workplace has a terrible effect on you.

I slowly climbed down behind the counter and said, with a half-hearted gesture to my crane, "It wasn't working very well, anyway. Can I . . . help you find something?" I hesitated on the question, since I knew he wasn't here to talk about books. I felt my pulse, hard and fast, pounding in my neck. Isabel had disappeared, and for all intents and purposes, the store looked empty.

"Actually, if you're not busy, I'd like to talk with you for a moment," the officer said politely. "You *are* Samuel Roth, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm Officer Koenig," he said. "I'm working on Olivia Marx's case."

Olivia. My stomach felt tight. Olivia, one of Grace's closest friends, had been unwillingly bitten last year and had spent the last few months as a wolf in Boundary Wood. Her family thought she'd run away.

Grace should've been here. If lying were an Olympic

sport, Grace would've been champion of the world. For someone who hated creative writing, she certainly was an awesome storyteller.

"Oh," I said. "Olivia."

I was nervous about the cop being here, asking questions, but weirdly, I was more nervous because Isabel, who already knew the truth, was listening. I could imagine her crouching behind one of the shelves, arching an eyebrow scornfully when a lie fell flat on my unpractised lips.

"You knew her, correct?" The officer had a friendly look on his face, but how friendly could someone be when he ended a question with *correct*?

"A little," I said. "I met her in town a few times. But I don't go to her school."

"Where do you go to school?" Again, Koenig's voice was completely pleasant and conversational. I tried to tell myself that his questions felt suspicious only because I had something to hide.

"I was homeschooled."

"My sister was, too," Koenig said. "Drove my mother crazy. So, you do know Grace Brisbane, though, correct?"

Again with the *correct?* stuff. I wondered if he was starting with the questions he already knew the answers to. I was again acutely aware of Isabel, silently listening.

"Yes," I said. "She's my girlfriend."

It was a bit of information they probably didn't have

and probably didn't need to have, but it was something that I wanted Isabel to hear for some reason.

I was surprised to see Koenig smile. "I can tell," he said.

Though his smile seemed genuine, it made me stiffen, wondering if I was being played.

"Grace and Olivia were good friends," Koenig continued. "Can you tell me the last time you saw Olivia? I don't need an exact date, but as close as possible would be really helpful."

Now he had a little blue notebook flipped open and a pen hovering over it.

"Um." I considered. I'd seen Olivia, snow dusting her white fur, just a few weeks earlier, but I didn't think that would be the most helpful thing to tell Koenig. "I saw her downtown. Here, actually. In front of the store. Grace and I were killing some time, and Olivia was here with her brother. But that must have been months ago. November? October? Right before she disappeared."

"Do you think Grace has seen her more recently?"

I tried to hold his gaze. "I'm pretty sure that's the last time she saw Olivia as well."

"It's really difficult for a teen to manage on his or her own," Koenig said, and this time I felt sure that he knew all about me and that his words were loaded with meaning just for me, drifting without Beck. "Really difficult for a runaway. There are lots of reasons that kids run away, and judging from what I heard from

Olivia's teachers and family, depression might have had something to do with it. A lot of times these teens just run away because they need to get out of the house, but they don't know how to survive out in the world. So sometimes, they only run as far away as the next house over. Sometimes—"

I interrupted him before he could get any further. "Officer . . . Koenig? I know what you're trying to say, but Olivia isn't at Grace's house. Grace hasn't been slipping her food or helping her out. I wish, for Olivia's sake, that the answer was that easy. I'd love it for Grace's sake, too. I'd love to tell you that I knew exactly where Olivia was. But we're wondering when she's going to come back just as much as you are."

I wondered if this was how Grace spilled out her most useful lies – by manipulating them into something she could believe.

"You understand I had to ask," he said.

"I know."

"Well, thanks for your time, and please let me know if you hear anything." Koenig started to turn, then paused. "What do you know about the woods?"

I was frozen. I was a motionless wolf hidden in the trees, praying not to be seen.

"Excuse me?" I said faintly.

"Olivia's family said she took a lot of photos of the wolves in the woods, and that Grace is also interested in them. Do you share that interest?"

I could only nod wordlessly.

"Do you think there's any chance she would try to make a go of it out there by herself, instead of running to another city?"

Panic clawed inside my head, as I imagined the police and Olivia's family crawling over the acres and acres of woods, searching the trees and the pack's shed for evidence of human life. And possibly finding it. I tried to keep my voice light. "Olivia never really struck me as the outdoorsy sort. I really doubt it."

Koenig nodded, as if to himself. "Well, thanks again," he said.

"No problem," I said. "Good luck."

The door *dinged* behind him; as soon as I saw his squad car pull away from the curb, I let my elbows fall on to the counter and pushed my face into my hands. *God*.

"Nicely done, boy wonder," Isabel said, rising from amongst the nonfiction books with a scuffling sound on the carpet. "You hardly sounded psychotic at all."

I didn't reply. All of the things the cop could've asked about were running through my head, leaving me feeling more nervous now than when he'd been here. He could've asked about where Beck was. Or if I'd heard about three missing kids from Canada. Or if I knew anything about the death of Isabel Culpeper's brother.

"What is your problem?" Isabel asked, a lot closer

this time. She slid a stack of books on to the counter with her credit card on top. "You completely handled it. They're just doing routine stuff. He's not really suspicious. God, your hands are shaking."

"I'd make a terrible criminal," I replied – but that wasn't why my hands were trembling. If Grace had been here, I would have told her the truth: that I hadn't spoken to a cop since my parents had been sent to jail for slashing my wrists. Just seeing Officer Koenig had dredged up a thousand things I hadn't thought about in years.

Isabel's voice dripped scorn. "Good thing, too, because you aren't doing anything criminal. Stop freaking out, and do your book-boy thing. I need the receipt."

I rang up her books and bagged them, glancing at the empty street every so often. My head was a jumbled-up mess of police uniforms, wolves in the woods, and voices I hadn't heard for a decade.

As I handed her the bag, the old scars on my wrists throbbed with buried memories.

For a moment, Isabel looked like she was going to say something more, and then she just shook her head and said, "Some people are really not cut out for deception. See you later, Sam."