

# CHAPTER 1

Not for the first time while trekking up the steepest part of Birch Hill, Kate Hood wished her boots had been sewn onto slightly thicker soles. She stuck to the center of Woodson Road, the part most traveled by carriage and coach, but still felt every pebble and puddle beneath her feet. She knew that, by the time she kicked loose the boots and peeled off her woolen socks in front of the crackling hearth at Nan's house, her toes would be blue and numb.

As if it sensed her longing for warmth, the wind chose that moment to pick up. Kate swore softly and drew her cloak tight around her shoulders. *Pointless to turn back now*, she chided herself. Shepherd's Grove and its collection of thatched roofs and

puffing chimneys sat two miles down the hill she'd just climbed. How many times had she and Nan argued over the remote location of Nan's cozy stone cottage?

"It's dangerous," Kate had insisted to her grandmother. "There's no reason to live so far from the rest of the village."

"What would you have me do, Katie?" Nan had answered. "Cart my house down the hill, piece by piece, and rebuild it in the village square?"

"There are other houses." Kate had pressed the matter. "Why even keep a whole cottage? The village is full of establishments with perfectly lovely rooms to rent."

Nan had scoffed at that idea. "You'd have me living in the cellar of the town tavern!"

The image of Kate's grandmother bedding down among the kegs and wine casks in the tavern's basement had stirred them both to giggles. And once again, the matter of Nan's isolation had been swept aside, along with several other topics that made them both uneasy.

Kate knew that Nan's brothers had built the cottage for her decades ago, when her grandmother was younger. Back then, living on her own in the middle of the shaded glen must have seemed exhilarating, even romantic. Nan had her reasons, Kate reminded herself, for seeking a life on the outskirts. She'd heard bits and pieces over the years and understood that the more predictable

citizens of Shepherd's Grove had been only too happy to see Nan put down roots a good distance away.

*The distance is made of more than just miles*, Kate thought now. The farther she traveled up the mountain, the denser the woods grew. Shadows replaced sunlight. She heard owls instead of songbirds and saw bare tree branches stretched out like bony hands from the shallow mounds of dead leaves. *Beauty in gloom is still beauty*—Nan was fond of that saying. Each time a branch crackled under Kate's feet and startled her, she repeated the familiar phrase and tried to calm herself. After all, it wouldn't do for someone with her bloodline to be spooked by a common forest.

She didn't have a wise proverb to counteract the cold wind, though. Kate gritted her teeth against the bitter freeze. Nan could chuckle all she liked about moving house, but she wasn't the one trudging up and down Birch Hill, lugging a full basket of groceries. She had Kate to serve as her errand girl. Not to mention the fact that it might be pleasant—it might actually be comforting—to have some family living in town instead of just drifting around as Kate Hood, resident tragic orphan.

When Kate first heard the low growl beneath the gusts of wind, she half believed it was the grumble of her own resentment. But then she heard another snarl. And another. Her skin prickled with sudden vigilance and she sucked in her breath, willing her

heartbeat to slow to silence. It was the slight yip tacked on to the next growl that iced her veins. She would know that particular call anywhere. Wolves. And from the sound of it, the whole pack had encircled her.

Kate cursed the bundles of meat and cheese packed into her basket. Even if the beasts didn't pick up the scent of her fear, they would still latch on to the aroma of smoked venison and aged cheddar. *You have no choice*, she commanded herself. Fighting was her only option.

After hauling the heavy load up the mountain, it pained her to toss the food to the snarling circle of wolves. All that effort would be devoured in seconds. Better the groceries than her, though. The carefully wrapped packages bought Kate some time. As the wolves tore into the venison and cheese, she drew her knife out of the sheath carefully woven into the side of her basket. When the first wolf lunged at her, she was ready for him.

The dark gloom suddenly worked to Kate's advantage. It allowed her to focus, first on the glittering yellow eyes of the pack leader and then on the blade she brandished in front of her. In the dim shadows of the deep woods, Kate's knife whistled through the air in an arc of metal. She connected right below the animal's breastbone, and the wolf collapsed in a heap of matted fur.