

CHAPTER ONE

The day that Nesta's grandma went missing, the mist began to move backwards.

It was a subtle sign, and one that Grandma had warned Nesta about many times. And she *would* have noticed, had she not been so angry at her grandmother.

It was a cold, crisp autumn day, on the cusp of winter, and Nesta pulled her patched cloak around her, her eyes on the forest floor, searching for evidence that the wolves had returned.

Nesta was practised at tracking animals and birds. Even though she was tall – taller now than her grandmother – she could still make herself small and still. So still that the woodland creatures assumed she was just a part of the forest. Which, she supposed, she was.

But the wolves were different. They were sly and secretive, and far too clever to be tricked. They never came close, however quiet she made herself, however wolfish Nesta tried to be.

When she was younger, the wolves had howled for so

long one night that they had set her teeth chattering with fear. She'd admitted to her grandma that the sound of them frightened her.

"Really?" her grandmother had replied. "I'm more frightened when I *don't* hear them."

"Why, Grandma?"

"Because the wolves are our guardians, Nesta. A pact exists between us: the wolves protect us and we protect them. To hear a wolf is to feel safe, my love, I promise."

Ever since that night, the wolves had fascinated Nesta, more than anything else in the woods.

Nesta loved the woods. She had lived beneath the towering, ancient trees all her life, in a tumbledown cottage she shared with her grandma. Her mother had died when she was born, and Grandma's cottage was all she had ever known. The little building was barely more than a stone shack, made up of just one room, a large bed in one corner covered in a patchwork quilt. It was a warm and welcoming space, with a roaring fire where her grandmother cooked delicious stews and hot buttered toast, but as Nesta grew older, she began to feel that it was a little *too* neat and tidy. Other than the bed, a table and Grandma's antique gramophone, there were no *things*. No pictures or ornaments at all. It was spick and span, and, in Nesta's opinion, just a little too ... empty.

Except of course for the books. In one corner of the cottage was a small bookcase, heaving with books. They were old, older than her grandma, their leather and cloth

covers smelling thrillingly musty. They looked so out of place amid the stark emptiness of the rest of the cottage. But it was here that Nesta felt most at home. She had spent hours – years – poring over them, absorbing every detail she could of the world beyond the woods. Except that surely the world out there must have moved on from the time that these books were written.

When Nesta was younger, she'd tried to fill the windowsills with bits and bobs she had found in the forest: acorn cups and toadstools, feathers and fossils. But whenever she took these finds back to the cottage, be it a pine cone or a dried old oak leaf, Grandma had always made sure to examine them, running her hands over each one, looking for what, Nesta didn't know. Only a few of these items passed this odd test, the others disappearing mysteriously, and as Nesta grew older, the idea of displaying these finds felt childish somehow, and she cleared the windowsills of them. Not quite able to get rid of them completely, she tucked them away in a box under the bed.

Still, Nesta felt compelled to collect bits of nature. Occasionally, she was drawn to things out there in the forest, as if they were calling to her. A few weeks ago, she had found a beautiful barn owl's feather, pale and ghostly, and when she'd picked it up, she'd thought she felt a whisper rise up from it. Back at the cottage, her grandma had peered at it closely, her wrinkled face creased with worry. Then, abruptly, she had gone to the fireplace and thrust the precious find into the flames.

“What are you doing?” Nesta had cried, watching in horror as the feather charred to a skeleton before her eyes. But Grandma didn’t answer. Instead, she’d gone to the cottage door and looked out, a fearful expression on her face.

Grandma was odd like that: she was suspicious of even the most innocent of things, and it was this mistrust that had led Nesta into the argument with her that morning.

Yesterday, Nesta had been out in the woods, collecting firewood, when she sensed movement above her, high in a sycamore tree. At first she thought it was just the little sycamore keys, twirling down as they always did at this time of year. But the thing in the branches was not twirling, it was fluttering. And it wasn’t woodland green or burnt umber, or any other autumn colour. It was a bright, unnatural pink.

Curious, she put her foot on a low branch and began to climb. Nesta had not climbed a tree for a long time, not since she was a child, and as she scaled the branches with ease, she remembered the joy she had felt back then, the freedom that came with growing closer to the sky. As she drew nearer to the oddly fluttering thing, she stopped. This wasn’t a leaf or a piece of bark caught up in the tangle of branches. It was a scrap of paper. Carefully, Nesta extracted it, and began to climb back down. Dropping softly on to the forest floor, she smoothed it out.

It was like nothing she had ever seen before. It must

once have been rectangular, but the bottom had been ripped away. At the top were the words, *Hand Car Wash!*

Nesta ran her finger over that middle word, tracing the letters. She knew from her grandmother's old books that a car could be a horse-drawn vehicle or a carriage in a train. But below the writing was a picture, a simple drawing of a strange contraption on wheels, and there was no train or horse in sight. Standing next to it was a person holding a cloth and bucket. A strange bubble protruded from their mouth, and in it were the words, *Best Price in the City!*

The city.

Nesta turned to look through the trees. The city, she knew, lay a few days' walk to the north. She had never been, though she had begged her grandmother to take her there many times, just to see. But Grandma was old and stubborn, and would not give in. *Too dangerous*, she always said.

Once, after finishing a particularly brilliant book about a girl who travelled across the world, Nesta had looked up, her mind still filled with the wonderful things she had read about, only to see the same four walls of the cottage bearing down on her, the same view from the window, and she had decided, there and then, to set out for the city on her own. Just to see.

But as she drew into the forest, further than she had ever been before, the trees around her began to change. The ancient oaks she loved so much petered out and other trees took their place, sharper and denser and filled with

thorns and needles, and a feeling of fear and vulnerability overcame her, and Nesta had turned and hurried home, the blood pumping in her ears.

Grandma had taken one look at her and of course known exactly what she'd tried to do. As she'd picked a blackthorn twig from Nesta's hair, her old, lined face had gone as pale as an eggshell.

"You might have led them straight to us," she'd whispered.

"Led who?" Nesta had asked, but Grandma refused to speak another word to her. She didn't talk to Nesta for a week. Instead, Nesta watched from a window as Grandma began planting more oak trees, little saplings that she had coaxed into life from cuttings of the ancient oaks, round and round the cottage in huge, concentric circles. Sometimes, Nesta wondered if she was destined to live hidden in the woods for ever, never knowing anything but the trees and the animals and the babbling brooks...

She turned the bright pink piece of paper over and over in her hands. What on earth was it for? The closest thing she could liken it to was a page from a book. But pages of books were never bright pink, and most didn't have drawings on. Her grandmother owned a worn pack of tarot cards, each decorated with a beautiful picture, but this did not look like a tarot card either. Least, not one that Nesta recognized.

"Car," she whispered to herself, tasting the word, and as she gazed at the piece of paper, a sudden smell filled her

nostrils. A singed, burnt smell. A smell of power and danger, the taste of it in her throat so alien that the hairs on the back of her neck rose like prickles on a nettle. A shimmer of fear traced itself up Nesta's spine. Quickly, she folded the scrap of paper, tucking it away into a pocket of her cloak, and then she scooped up the firewood and started for home.

When she reached the cottage, she knew that she mustn't show this new discovery to Grandma. It was exactly the sort of thing her grandmother might thrust into the fire, never to be seen again, and so she'd hidden it under her pillow instead.

But when Nesta had woken up this morning, Grandma was standing at the end of the bed, the bright pink scrap of paper in her hand.

"How many times have I told you," Grandma hissed, fury etched across her face, "you must *always* show me anything you find in the woods. Do you understand?"

Anger had risen up in Nesta. "Why?" she spat. "So that you can take it away from me and shove it in the fire? What don't you want me to see, Grandma?"

A look of torment had come over her grandmother's face then, but it hardened quickly into resolve. She marched over to the fire, and Nesta jumped out of bed, terror sluicing through her veins.

"Grandma, no!" she'd yelled, but too late, her grandmother had thrust the strange piece of paper into the flames, and stoked the fire with such fury that it roared like a bear.

When she turned to Nesta, her face was no longer angry, but full of deep concern. “You have no idea how dangerous this world is, Nesta,” she’d whispered.

“Because you never tell me anything about it!” Nesta had yelled, her thoughts still reeling, licking and igniting like the flames that had lapped at the piece of paper. “I’m not a child any more, Grandma. I was sixteen last month, for goodness’ sake. How am I supposed to learn anything if you keep it all from me?”

“I’ve told you before: you know enough. You might think you’re all grown up, Nesta Tenniel, but I assure you, you still have much to learn.”

“Then *teach* me!” Nesta had pleaded in frustration. But Grandma had only gazed at her, tears filling her eyes, and Nesta had turned and run from the cottage, slamming the door and peeling out into the woods, her patchwork cloak trailing behind her.

Now, alone in the glade, she tried to push the argument to the back of her mind. The woods had always calmed her before, but today the anger still bubbled beneath the surface. What right had Grandma to burn that piece of paper? How was Nesta ever to learn about the world if she couldn’t even hold a tiny scrap of it in her hands?

She ran her fingers through the leaves at the glade’s edge, hoping their touch would calm her. Above, a perfect circle of sky shone down, the first soft tendrils of mist hazing the sun. She could hear a thrush cracking a snail shell against a stone nearby, the chitter of a squirrel as it

dug an acorn from the ground. Nesta stooped down to inspect a paw mark on the woodland floor, peering at it with unease. Could it be a wolf print? But then she saw that the pads were too small, the claws too fine. It was only a fox. She sat back on her heels.

And then she froze.

Standing across the glade, half hidden in the boughs of a holly tree, was a giant silverback wolf.

Nesta's eyes widened as dread channelled through her. The wolf was watching her warily, its soft grey eyes searching hers, its tail swishing as if it was nervous of approaching, and something about the way it looked at her made Nesta think that perhaps it wasn't a wolf at all, but a human in wolf's clothing, like in the tales that Grandma still told her each night by the fire. Nesta held her breath, not daring to move.

And then the wolf began to pad towards her.

Nothing had prepared Nesta for its sheer majesty. It was monstrously large, towering above her, its teeth longer than her fingers, its clever, dark eyes all-knowing, and she found she could not move.

When the wolf was so close that she could have stretched out a hand and touched its silver-grey fur, so very like her own silvery hair, the wolf lowered its muzzle, and she saw that it held a gleaming conker in its mouth. It placed the conker delicately at her feet, retreating to the edge of the glade. And there it stayed, its eyes fixed on hers.

Nesta forced herself to remember Grandma's story of

the pact: wolves were their guardians; she did not need to be afraid. And yet she had never been so close to one before. The wolf was still watching her, never taking its gaze from her face, and in its eyes, Nesta saw something. A kindness. This was not a wolf on the hunt. This wolf was trying to tell her something.

Slowly, so as not to startle it, Nesta reached out a hand, wondering if she dared touch this strange gift. Grandma was always reminding her to be suspicious of anything unusual, and this was most certainly unusual. But then she thought of the argument they had had, and with a flash of daring, she reached forward, all reticence gone.

As the tip of her finger touched the conker, a murmur rose up from the gleaming shell, and in it, Nesta thought she heard a voice, whispery and slight and oddly familiar, like the wind stirred by butterfly wings.

Look up, it said.

Nesta whipped her hand away as if she'd been stung. At the same moment, the wolf leaped up and bounded away, disappearing into the trees. She looked at the place it had been, then to the conker, and back again, trying to make sense of the words.

Look up? she thought. *What does it mean?*

And automatically, Nesta looked up.

Above her, twisting through the branches, was a swirl of mist, and she realized with a sudden plummet of dread that it was *moving the wrong way*.

Unease stirred inside her. Grandma had taught her

that a change in the mist meant something important, something *dangerous*.

Quickly, Nesta jumped up, forgetting the wolf and the conker, forgetting the argument she and her grandmother had had. Breaking into a run, she began to race towards home, her patched cloak flying out behind her, a prickling, prescient fear chasing her through the trees.