

ONE

July 25, 2008, Loxahatchee, Florida

Brittany held my hand as she led me to the back porch. I smelled chlorinated water. The filmy curtains stirred, letting in snatches of starlight. I slipped my arms around her. She pressed against me. Her lips found mine. Her kiss was grape-soda sweet. The wolf within me stirred, and it was all I could do to keep from transforming right there.

She pulled away, fumbling with her shirt. I stilled her fingers and undid the buttons slowly. One button. Two buttons. She wore a bathing suit underneath. I slid my hands down the warm contours of her waist. With a little sigh, she pulled away and turned her back. I closed my eyes.

She gasped. "This feels so good."

I unzipped my jeans and let them drop. I wore an old bathing suit. It was too small to begin with, but after Brittany's kiss, it was noticeably snug. The only way to hide my bulging enthusiasm was to get into Aunt Lynette's new hot tub. But as soon as my nethers hit the hot water, I was off like a rocket. My eyes crossed.

I said, "Uh."

"Cody? Are you all right?"

I said, "Uh."

"Don't be such a baby. The water isn't that hot." She splashed me.

Behind us, a voice drawled, "That's enough, you young'uns. This water's for meditating, not splashing."

I moaned and slipped sideways off the little plastic seat.

Aunt Lynette approached carrying a flickering candle. "Move your hairy legs, werewolf. This here tub's supposed to hold six people." She set the candle on the edge, climbed in opposite us, then dropped a muslin pouch into the water.

I sat gingerly beside Brittany. "What's in the sack... er, the bag... er, what's that?"

"Calming herbs," she said. "We got to keep you under control, wolf boy."

"I'm under control." I glanced at Brittany. "Mostly."

Just then a whiff of the stinking herbs hit me in the face. I sneezed. Brittany laughed and splashed me again.

Aunt Lynette leaned back. "This will be good for our rituals."

"Better than that blow-up pool we had," Brittany said. "Is Myra coming in?"

"She's cleaning up supper."

I stretched my arms over the top of the tub.

Brittany used my bicep as a pillow. "This is so relaxing."

I felt like a teabag. A growl escaped me, and I forced a smile to cover it.

Aunt Lynette said, "I hear tell you'll be moving soon."

Not if I could help it. "Actually, it's been delayed," I said. "There's been some trouble at the construction site. Someone stole the kitchen sink."

Brittany giggled as if incredulous. "The kitchen sink?"

"Yep. Still in the crate."

Aunt Lynette said, "Where you gonna be living again? In a barn?"

"An old stable. At the Richardson place." I smiled at Brittany. "It's supposed to have a hot tub, too. But only for two people."

She gave an exaggerated pout. "I still don't like the idea of you living so close to Ayanna. I've seen how she looks at you."

Ayanna had had a crush on me since the day we met.

“She’s a member of my pack. And a friend,” I said. “But she knows it won’t go further than that.”

Brittany snuggled against me. “Better not. I’ll turn her into a toad. I’m a Witch Queen, you know.”

Aunt Lynette barked a raucous laugh. “Not yet you ain’t.”

Brittany cast her an angry glare. Aunt Lynette shot her one right back.

Uh-oh. Touchy subject.

Hurriedly, I said, “I thought Eileen was going to join us.”

“She was on the phone with a florist,” Brittany said. “Wedding stuff.”

“Ah.” I nodded. It was hard not to be excited about the wedding. William’s joy was contagious. What would it be like to have someone promise to stay with you forever? Even my mother hadn’t managed that feat.

“In a Wiccan wedding, everyone would bring flowers to decorate the altar,” Aunt Lynette said. “Just go out to a field and pick ‘em.”

“Must be a beautiful ceremony,” Brittany said.

“We call it handfasting,” Lynette said, “and in the eyes of the goddess they would be one. But she insists on observing tribal ways.”

“They aren’t actually getting married, though, right?” Brittany said. “I mean, it isn’t legal.”

“In the eyes of the American government, no, it ain’t legal.”

“It could be,” I blurted. “You can get married in Florida at sixteen.”

Aunt Lynette snorted. “Well, her aunt refused to sign off on her, and her poor mother ain’t here to tell her no.”

“They’re in love. Would you tell them no?”

“Durn tootin’ I would. They ain’t knowed each other but a matter of weeks. Takes longer than that to recognize love.”

“I disagree,” Brittany said. “I believe in love at first sight.”

I said, "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you crossing the parking lot at Video Stop."

She smiled. "You never told me that."

I kissed the top of her head.

"That's smitten," Aunt Lynette grumbled. "There's a difference between being smitten and being in love."

"Cody," Myra called from the doorway. "Bob and Rita are here. They said they'd wait for you in the truck."

I sat up straight. "They're early. Or am I late?"

Brittany moved to stand up. "That was a short soak."

"No, you stay. I can see myself out."

"Okay. Remember, tomorrow's Saturday. We're going down to Tamiami with Eileen in the morning."

"I'll be ready." I climbed out of the tub then leaned for a goodbye kiss. "Smitten you."

"Smitten you, too."

I balled up my clothes, picked up my shoes, and stepped out the back door. The night air felt cool on my overheated skin. Eileen and William's impending wedding played in my head.

Could there be such a marriage between Brittany and me? Every time I mention it, she just smiles. She says she loves me—but only after I say it first.

I circled the side of the house and passed the carport where Brittany's lime green Beetle sat parked for the night. As I walked, I glanced around for Haff, Brittany's dog. There was no sign of him. Probably out chasing rabbits. I approached my uncle's truck.

"Hoo-whee, boy." Uncle Bob waved a hand as if I stank. "What have you been doing?"

"Aw, they put some herbs in the hot tub," I said. "I'll shower when I get home."

"We aren't going home." Rita turned her dazzling white smile on me. "The Richardsons invited us over for drinks and to see the latest improvements on the stone cottage."

Oh, crap. Was the thing finished?

"I'll thank you to ride in the back," Uncle Bob said.

As if I rode anywhere else. I climbed into the truck bed and settled in, still dripping, next to the toolbox. And just like that we were off to see the Richardsons and the stable/cottage.

Dick, Chloe, and Ayanna Richardson lived on an old horse farm on the outskirts of the small town of Loxahatchee. No horses, of course. Horses weren't too fond of werewolves. Their house was Spanish style, as so many were in the area—red-tiled roof, beige stucco walls, arched windows. It was a distance away from ours, which was one of the reasons Uncle Bob was so keen on moving into their backyard. By the time we reached their long, dusty driveway, I was dry, although still reeking of herbs. I pulled on my t-shirt and jeans without standing up.

Dressed in a colorful dashiki with a kufi cap, Dick Richardson stood in the yard admiring the row of spindly flowers lining the front porch. The weather-beaten plants looked more suitable for Africa than South Florida. Dick loved anything African. Behind the house, the silhouette of a huge baobab tree rose over the roof. The trunk was easily fifteen-feet wide. It was made of concrete and rebar, but it looked real.

Uncle Bob pulled his truck behind the Richardson's mustard-yellow Winnebago, and Dick walked over to open the door for Rita.

"Halloo," he gushed. "Welcome, welcome."

"Thank you, kind sir," Rita said.

Chloe stepped out of the house. She was dressed as brightly as her husband. A turban tamed her thick hair. The two women hugged as if they hadn't seen each other the day before.

"What's that odd odor?" Dick asked.

"Cody," Uncle Bob said.

All eyes turned to me. Like I was the puppy who had been rolling in it. Without another word, they traipsed around the house to the backyard. Rita and Chloe walked arm-in-arm, Dick and Uncle Bob side-by-side. I climbed down from the pickup and slunk after them.

The backyard was wide and flat. The only sounds came from the splashing of the fake waterfall and the crickets around the koi pond. The only light was starlight. A shadow moved on the patio, and Ayanna glided silently toward me. She took my hand. We followed the adults down the worn path that led to the dreaded stone cottage.

We'd started calling it the stone cottage because the walls were made of big round stones, probably excavated from the horse pastures. As homes went, it wasn't bad. Low to the ground with small irregular windows. I wiped my feet as I stepped over the threshold. The living room smelled faintly of horses. There was no electricity and so no lights, but werewolves didn't need light to see.

"What I wanted to show you is this," Dick said with his booming voice.

Everyone crowded into the kitchen. The skylight above showed the night sky.

"Well, what do you think?" Dick waved a hand as if performing a magic trick. "We have a kitchen sink. The workers cannot or will not say what happened to the original. But no matter. This is a nice upgrade."

"It's beautiful," Rita cooed. She ran her hand over the tiled interior. It looked like a blue and gray mosaic of geometric shapes.

"Imported from India by way of Home Depot," Dick said. "I now declare this abode occupant ready."

I groaned. Again, all eyes turned to me.

"I sense apprehension from you, young master," Dick said.

Ayanna nudged my arm and whispered, "Tell them."

I cleared my throat. "It's just that... well, my father always says familiarity breeds contempt. We're all friends now, but how friendly will we be when we start living together?"

“We’re more than friends,” Uncle Bob growled. “We’re pack mates. And we’re moving in.”

He shot me a glare that struck me cold. His reprimand was not only in his eyes and words but in the *link*, the telepathic bond that connected the members of the pack. Uncle Bob was our pack master, but it didn’t seem to agree with him. The weight of command made him sullen and authoritarian. I nodded and took a half-step back, although I hated myself for doing it. Uncle Bob was my friend. What was happening between us?

“This calls for champagne.” Chloe’s smile was as bright as her turban. “Come to the house. I believe Concepcion is ready for us.”

I led the way, fleeing the cottage as if it held my doom. For all I knew, it did.