

ONE

October 26, 2008, Loxahatchee, Florida

I pressed my back against the tree trunk, my gun close to my chest. The night air cooled my sweaty skin. I smelled pine and palm trees, rabbit and raccoon. And her. Creeping through the forest. Quiet footsteps disturbed the brush. *Just a bit closer, little girl. Closer and I'll have you.* I took a slow breath and focused all my senses.

And something weird happened. I did more than hear her moving behind me. I *saw* her. Not with my eyes. With something else. Her silhouette slipped through the trees, and I sensed it like radar, like heat sensors. Her body language told me which way she would step before she did.

What was going on?

I shook my head to clear it, spun from behind the tree, and fired. The paintball splatted against her chest. But not with paint. These were filled with Brittany's improved Wolfsbane Brew, designed to incapacitate a werewolf whether in wolf form or not.

Ayanna's back arched with the impact, and for a moment, I thought she might turn to the Dark Side. For us, the Dark Side meant our wolf beast guise—a seven-foot wolfman with claws and fangs. But her eyes met mine, and she fired.

Her shot struck my arm. It burned like fire. The potion coursed through my body, trying to paralyze me, trying to disrupt my connection to Mother Moon.

I said, "Ow!"

"Ow yourself," Ayanna called. "Those things sting."

"You did great, though. You didn't lose control once."

Her dark face split into a grin. Pride and pleasure swelled through the *link*, the psychic bond that connected the pack.

My pack. Despite my protests, I was the leader of my little band of werewolves. An honor I didn't want or deserve. But I was the one with superpowers. And apparently, my skills were still growing.

Had I actually seen Ayanna's spectral image through the trees? What was that all about?

I rubbed my arm, frowning. "That's enough for tonight. School tomorrow."

She tramped toward me through the brush. "I have an examination in algebra. But it's all rubbish. I'm miles beyond them in my studies."

I nodded in mock sympathy. I knew she secretly liked school, liked being the best in class, enjoyed the other kids' awe of her exotic British accent.

"Great," I told her. "I expect good grades."

"Yes, big brother," she sang.

I caught the sarcasm. I wasn't her brother.

With my arm draped around her shoulders, we traipsed back to her house. We were in the woods behind her property. More specifically, near the boggy pond where we always met. We lived in Loxahatchee, Florida, a small town in the northernmost region of the Everglades. Like in any small town, everybody knew everybody. But few people realized we were werewolves, and I intended to keep it that way.

The trees petered out at the edge of a wide yard. Ayanna and her parents, Dick and Chloe Richardson, lived on an old horse farm with expansive pastures and tumbled-down fences. The yard looked even more open now. Their ranch-style house had been demolished in a tropical storm. All that was left was the cement foundation. Her father used the flat slab as a parking lot. His battered Winnebago was there along with his Lexus. My uncle often parked his truck there as well. Ayanna and her family lived in the renovated horse stable.

We reached the back door with its thick fisheye window. It was always unlocked for us.

I handed Ayanna my paintball gun. "See you tomorrow."

She beamed at me. The *look* my girlfriend, Brittany, always warned me about. But Ayanna understood that I loved her like a sister. We were both okay with that.

I hopped on my bike and pedaled away. A year ago, if you had told me I'd be tooling around town on a candy-apple-red bicycle, I would've laughed. My friends at my old school in Massachusetts would've laughed, too. They probably all had cars by now. I tried not to think about it too much. They were a bunch of rich snobs anyway.

The ride home was pleasant enough. There was no traffic at that time of night. No one to see me. Leaving me free to use my super wolf speed. I could move faster than any human. The wind was cool in my hair. The stars were bright overhead. I sped down the flat asphalt as if it were a raceway. As if I could escape my misgivings. But they crept into my thoughts anyway.

My powers were growing again. Cripes! Why did everything happen to me? I'd just have to hide them, that's all. I've had to hide things before.

I slowed when I reached my sub-division. I lived with my Uncle Bob and his girlfriend, Rita. They rented a small, blue house at the end of a cul-de-sac. The yard backed into the surrounding forest. The perfect place for a family of werewolves. I dropped my bike on its appointed spot in the front lawn and tiptoed up the wooden steps. I needn't have bothered being so quiet—Uncle Bob met me at the door.

My uncle was a few inches shorter than me. His steel-gray hair curled where it hit his collar. He'd been watching *The Tonight Show* without sound, probably so he wouldn't disturb Rita. "Getting in kind of late, aren't you?"

"I was with Ayanna."

"Have a seat. I want to talk to you about responsibilities."

Ugh. Just hearing that word made me want to hyperventilate. I sat on the couch. He sat on the old recliner across from me.

"I'm your legal guardian," he said. "It's my responsibility to see that you are fed,

clothed, and have a roof over your head. In return, it's your responsibility to get good grades in school. That's your responsibility to your father, to me, but more importantly, to yourself. Instead, you go out at night and—"

"I was with *Ayanna*. I was teaching her—"

"So, you feel that Ayanna is your responsibility?"

"No!" I chopped my hand down. "I am not responsible for her."

"Then who is?"

I paused. "Her parents?"

"Exactly." He pointed at me with both hands. "Ayanna's parents are responsible for Ayanna. And what are you responsible for?"

"Good grades," I said dully.

"That's right."

"But what about being a pack leader?"

"Being a pack leader doesn't make you a teacher. It makes you a boss. You guide. You protect. And if you want that girl trained, you damned well tell her parents to do it."

"Because I'm the boss."

"There you go." He stood. "Good talk."

I watched him walk down the hallway and disappear into his room. I didn't want to be anyone's boss. I wanted to be a normal sixteen-year-old kid. I wanted to hang out with my girlfriend and chill. What would that even be like? No responsibilities. No worries.

I went to my room and plopped down on my bed. I couldn't sleep, so I called Brittany.

She yawned as she answered the phone. "There you are. I was beginning to think something happened to you."

"Sorry. I lost track of time."

"I bet Bob wasn't pleased."

"He doesn't want me to take Ayanna out anymore. He says her parents should train her. But how can they when neither of them is an alpha?"

She yawned again. "That is a dilemma."

"He says I should be the boss."

"And you don't agree?"

"I can't tell everyone what to do. It's not my thing. Besides, as far as I can see, being a pack leader isn't about bossing people around, it's about trying to please everyone."

"You can't please everyone."

"Tell me about it." I sighed. "I feel like I'm being pulled in five directions."

"Well, you're the boss. What do you want to do?"

"Run away. Just you and me. I want to go somewhere... else."

"I always wanted to travel."

She understood. She always did. No judging. No criticism. "I love you, Brittany."

"I love you, too. And I would go anywhere for you. But in the meantime, I'm going back to sleep. See you in my dreams."

I set down the phone, smiling. As I drifted off to slumberland, I imagined us

somewhere that was the opposite of South Florida. Cold instead of hot. Mountainous instead of flat. Just the two of us. What would that even be like?