

# Prologue

“There’s a wolf in the forest.”

Peyton’s big sister, Piper looked up from her homework.

“What?”

Peyton pointed at the window. “A wolf. Out there. He was watching me.” She tugged one pigtail. “He watches me a lot. I think he’s lonely.”

Piper scrambled off her chair, put her hand to the glass and cupped it to peer into the darkness.

“He’s kinda hard to see,” Peyton said. “Because he’s black. But he has blue eyes. I can always see his eyes.”

Her brother, Pearce, walked in, sneering. “Yeah, a blue-eyed black wolf. She saw a dog, Pipe.”

“No, I saw a wolf. He’s right—” Peyton pressed her nose to the glass. “He’s gone. But it was a wolf. He was really big.”

“How big?” Piper asked.

Peyton lifted her hand to the top of her head.

“Uh-huh.” Pearce turned to Piper. “Dog. Wolves are smaller than Mrs. Lee’s German shepherd. And they’re gray with brown eyes. She’s a baby, Pipe. She imagines things.”

“I’m not a baby! I’m almost five and I go to school.”

Piper headed for the door. “I’m going out to take a look.”

Piper hadn’t found any sign of what her sister had seen outside, but it still worried her. Mom didn’t pay nearly enough attention to Peyton these days, and she was liable to let her wander into the forest looking for her “wolf.” They lived near Algonquin Park. There were wolves in their woods—plus bears, porcupines and lynx. Piper tried to watch her little sister, but she was only fourteen and she couldn’t be with her all the time.

She went in to tell Mom what Peyton saw, but Mom was on the phone with Mack, Peyton’s dad. They’d split up six months ago. Things had been better with Mack around. A lot better. Kids always whined about their stepdads, but Mack was great. Now he was gone, and Mom was on the phone with him, fighting as usual. He wanted custody of Peyton; Mom wouldn’t even let him see her.

Piper had overheard Aunt Nancy saying Mom was doing it to punish Mack. Piper hoped her mom would wake up one day and decide he’d been punished enough. That she’d realize a four-year-old was really more than she could handle, when she had two jobs and an active social life with friends and boyfriends. Piper hated being disloyal to her mother, but she secretly hoped that someday Mack would just come and take Peyton. It would be better for everyone. Especially Peyton.

Peyton stood at her bedroom window and watched the wolf. It had been two days since Pearce said there was no wolf, but there he was. It didn't matter that he was black. Peyton had asked her teacher yesterday if wolves could be black, and they'd looked it up on the computer and found pictures of black wolves. So Pearce wasn't so smart, even if he was almost twelve.

After that, Peyton dug out the camera Daddy gave her for Christmas. Mommy had gotten mad, saying Peyton was too young for a digital camera, but Daddy said he got a good deal on it, and Peyton loved taking pictures. She used to, when they'd go into the forest together and find butterflies and hummingbirds. But then Daddy left and Peyton put the camera away. Now she was going to use it to take a picture of the wolf and show Pearce.

She couldn't take pictures through the window. Daddy taught her that. So she tiptoed past Piper's room and slipped into the back hall. Then she put on her coat and boots and went outside.

The wolf was still at the edge of the forest. When she came out, he didn't move, just looked over and watched her. She lifted the camera. The wolf backed into the darkness.

Peyton took a few more careful steps, until she saw the glow of his blue eyes. She lifted the camera. The wolf moved back. She moved forward. He moved back.

"I just want to take your picture," she said.

He tilted his head, as if listening to her. She raised the camera. He stretched out his front paws, and lowered his head, tail wagging, then let out a little yelp, like Mrs. Lee's dog, Baxter, when he wanted to play. As she pushed the button, he wheeled and raced off.

Peyton checked the shot, like Daddy showed her. All it showed was the forest and the tip of a black tail.

She sighed. Another yip and she glanced up to see the wolf there. He opened his mouth, tongue hanging out, like he was smiling. When she tried to snap a picture, he dropped and rolled on the ground, so all she got was a blur.

“That’s not funny,” she said.

He raced around her in a big circle. Then, he stopped, right in front of her, and she realized she’d walked into the forest.

She tensed to run, but he just stood there. He lowered his head and flicked his ears.

“You want me to . . . pet you?”

He inched closer, head still down, and as big as he was, he didn’t seem scary at all. She reached out and patted him. His fur was so thick and soft it was like the coat Aunt Nancy had, with the fur collar, and she only meant to pat his head, but soon she was scratching him behind the ears and burying her fingers in the fur around his neck.

Then he ducked away. He danced back. She stepped forward. He stepped back. She laughed. He ran a little ways and she thought she’d scared him off, but he stopped, as if waiting for her.

She glanced back the house. He yipped, and he sounded so lonely and looked so hopeful that she couldn’t resist.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s play.”

He yipped, as if he understood. Then he pretended to run off and they played together, her chasing, him hiding, then jumping out and running. At first, she kept looking back, making sure she could see the lights of the house. But then she forgot, and just kept chasing him.

They’d been playing for a while when he took off, and didn’t stop. She called for him to come back, but he didn’t. The game was over. He’d gone home. So should she.

She turned around and peered into the darkness. There were no lights, anywhere.

Peyton took a step. Dead leaves crackled under her shoes. A moan whispered through the trees and she stilled, her heart pounding. It was just branches moving in the wind, that's what Daddy told her. But it had sounded different when he'd been there. Now, when she went still, all she could hear was the wind, making the branches moan and creak, rustling the leaves, whining through the treetops. Then a shriek, right beside her head.

She started to run and tripped. She hit the ground hard. Something jabbed her cheek. She wiped at it and felt blood. Biting back a whimper, she tried to get up, but her foot hurt and when she tried to stand, she fell again.

She kept trying but it hurt too badly. Her foot throbbed and her cheek kept bleeding. And it was cold. So cold and dark and spooky and she was lost and no one would ever find her. That's when she started to cry.

She'd been huddled on the ground for a while when she heard a voice. She sniffed and perked up.

"Hello?" a man called.

She tried to stand, but her foot still wouldn't let her, so she got up on her knees and called back, "I'm here."

Footsteps came toward her. "I thought I heard crying."

"I-I'm lost."

"I see that." The man walked over and the first thing she notice about him was his blue eyes. They looked just like the wolf's and she blinked. The man smiled and crouched beside her, and she realized he just had regular blue eyes, like Mommy and a lot of other people.

"My name is Peyton James," she said. "I live at 228 Oak Lane."

"Ah. You must be Mack James's little girl."

She nodded.

“I knew your daddy. Come on, then. My place is right over there. I’ll get you cleaned up and warmed up and back home to your mommy.”

“I can’t stand up. I hurt my foot.”

He bent and looked at it. “I’m sure your ankle’s only twisted. We’ll take a better look at it back at my place. I’ll carry you. All right?”

Peyton nodded. He lifted her up and she curled up against him, so nice and warm, and let him carry her through the forest.

# One

When I pulled into the lane of our rented Christmas cottage, I was disappointed to see Clay's car wasn't there yet. Not that he'd expected to beat us, but the kids and I had hoped he might. I know he'd hoped so, too. What he'd really hoped was to make the drive with us, but he'd been in Montreal at a conference at McGill and when a winter storm hit, it made more sense for him to head straight across to Ontario, rather than loop down to New York State and pick us up.

Kate was out of the car before I even had it in Park. Leaving the door open, she raced into the front yard.

"More snow here!" she squealed. Her twin brother, Logan, pulled on his hat and mitts before following.

"No, there isn't. It's the same amount."

"How much is at home?"

"Twenty-seven inches. But we're in Canada now, so it's centimeters. About seventy centimeters."

Kate pointed. "That's more than seventy cent-er-meters."

Logan rolled his eyes at me as I grabbed bags from the back. "Because it's a drift."

"Then what's that?"

He walked over as she bent to point at something. As soon as he was close enough, she grabbed his jacket and pitched him headfirst into the drift.

“Should have seen that one coming, baby,” I said as I walked to the door.

I put down the bags to fumble with the lockbox. Behind me, Logan sat on the drift, grumbling, until Kate made the mistake of thinking he might be serious, went to apologize and found herself in the drift beside him.

She should have seen that coming, too. She probably had, same as he did. But if you don't go along with the prank, you lose the right to retaliate.

I left the kids roughhousing in the snow, but didn't close the inside door, so I could hear them. I opened the living room curtains, too, so I could keep an eye on them.

I've read articles about bubble-wrapping kids, and sometimes I think I'm guilty of that. Granted, the twins were only four, but I hadn't been much older than them before I was trekking down to the corner store. Of course, in my case, that was because no one in my foster homes much cared what I did, and most times, whatever danger I encountered on the streets wasn't nearly as ugly as what waited for me inside those homes.

But I do hover too much with my kids. I can chalk it up to instinct. Not just maternal, but wolf—as a werewolf, I'm naturally protective.

Finally, when Kate ventured too close to the forest's edge, I stepped onto the porch.

“Paths, Mommy,” she said, grinning. “Lots of paths.”

“I know. We'll go exploring as soon as I've unpacked. Just come back into the yard.”

Logan gave me that look that has me convinced he's a fourteen-year-old trapped in a four-year-old's body. “We know not to go in the woods, Momma. Kate's just looking. I'm watching her. It just looks . . .” He gazed wistfully into the dark depths. “Nice.”



Is Logan a werewolf? He should be—it's passed through the male line. Except Clay and I are both bitten werewolves. Either way, it shouldn't pass on to Kate. Yet seeing their expressions as they both gazed into the forest made me wonder, as I'd been wondering for the past couple of years. Both showed secondary characteristics as well—excellent hearing, excellent reflexes, increased strength. But even with hereditary werewolves that shouldn't happen so young, and really, it was impossible to measure. And I told myself it didn't matter. Whatever would be, would be. That was Clay's attitude. I worried a little more. Okay, a lot more.

“See that stump?” I said, pointing. “You can go in that far.”

“Thanks, Momma,” Logan said. The books say children don't develop the ability to display sarcasm until they're about six, but they also say kids shouldn't be reading fluently—let alone reading reference books—before first grade, meaning whoever wrote them has never met my son.

I stuck out my tongue at him—proving yet again that he doesn't inherit his maturity from me—and went back inside.

I let myself wander past the front rooms, out of sight of the kids, and listened for the first squeal of trouble.

The cabin was gorgeous. Jeremy had picked it out, so I'd expect no less. I didn't want to imagine how much a two-week rental cost. We could afford it, but I still stress over things like that.

Clay and I live with Jeremy. Clay always has—or he has since Jeremy found him as a child werewolf in Louisiana. He brought Clay home and raised him, and when I came into the picture, the household expanded to three. Well, not exactly. There was a decade in the middle where I'd come and gone, Clay and I locked in an endless war of resentment and betrayal and love.

Clay was the one who'd bitten me, in a panic when he thought Jeremy would separate us. Maybe that sounds like something to be forgiven, but it's not, and for ten years the anger and the hurt and the hate came very easily. The love was tougher to deal with. That's what kept me running until, finally, he changed and I changed, and we resolved to try again. It still wasn't the most serene relationship, but in that way, our children do take after us—they'll bicker and they'll battle, but the only time they're truly miserable is when they're apart.

Occasionally, though, the bickering and battling—and even just the good-natured rambunctious roughhousing—does become a bit much for the other member of our household. So when Jeremy mentioned a chalet for Christmas, Clay suggested we go up a week early, and let Jeremy and the rest of the Pack join us after Christmas.

It will be our first Christmas with just the four of us. As much as I love Jeremy, I kind of like the idea.

I decided there was really no need to unpack as soon as we got here. So I tossed the bags in the bedroom, and brought in the groceries we'd bought in town. Perishables in the fridge, rest left in the bags, granola bars and juice boxes stuffed into a knapsack, and back outside I went.

A white Christmas is never a given. Not at home—just outside Syracuse—and not even here, near Algonquin Park in Ontario. But it was December twenty-second and we'd had snow for almost a week now, with no sign of a sudden rise in temperature before the holiday.

The twins are still at that age where the first snow of winter is like their first ever. While I'm sure they remembered snow, it seemed to be more of a sensory memory, the chill of the flakes on their skin, the crunch of the crust under their boots, the sweet clean smell of it. When it started to fall a week ago, they raced outside, and I'd barely been able to get them in since.

Now as I tramped along, they ignored the paths and zoomed through the brush and trees, as if every unbroken expanse was new territory to be conquered.

They zipped out of sight a few times, but I could still hear the swish of their snowpants, so I didn't call them back. They disappeared and everything went completely silent. I pivoted, trying to catch the wind for their scent, but it was empty. That just meant they were downwind, but my heart started to thump.

“Logan? Kate?”

A purple mitten appeared over a bush. I trekked across to find them crouched, hats off, ears to the snow. They motioned me to silence as I approached.

“Mice,” Kate whispered.

I knelt. Even before I put my ear down, I could hear the skritch-skritch of mice tunneling under the snow.

“Can you catch one?” Kate asked.

I lifted my brows. “Catch one?”

“Dad can catch them,” Logan said.

His eyes glinted with a look I knew well from his father. Challenge. I laughed under my breath.

“Oh, he can, can he?”

I took off one glove. The twins giggled and hunkered down. I put my ear to the snow, listening and waiting. Then—

My hand came up empty. The twins covered their mouths to stifle laughter as I mock-glared at them.

“Dad can't always do it the first time either,” Logan said.

“Thank you.”

I cleared my throat and made a production of getting in position again. I listened for the patter, then scooped up a squirming mouse. I held it firmly, keeping its teeth away from my bare skin. Those oversized incisors only flashed a couple of times before it got a whiff of my wolf scent and froze.

“Can I hold him?” Kate said.

“Dad lets us if we keep our mitts on and hold our hand flat.”

I put the mouse on Kate’s outstretched palm. It cowered there as she lifted it to her face and petted its tiny head.

“It’s okay,” she crooned. “I’m not going to eat you.”

“I wonder what it would taste like?” Logan said.

“Crunchy,” Kate said, and they both started giggling.

Which, actually, was true. As wolves, Clay and I would chomp them down like popcorn. Sounds completely revolting when I’m in human form, but that won’t stop me from doing it next time we Change.

Logan reached over to touch the mouse, and they talked to it and patted it as if they hadn’t just been discussing what it would taste like. I could chalk their comment up to innocent childish curiosity. After all, they certainly didn’t see us eating mice or even hear us talk about it. They didn’t know we were werewolves.

Kate dug a hole in the snow and carefully lowered the mouse in. As she did, the breeze changed and I caught a scent that had me tensing and lifting my head.

“What do you smell, Mommy?” Kate asked.

“See,” Logan said. “What does she see.”

They exchanged a look, and for a second, I felt like the child, the adults passing a look that said they'd agreed to humor me. About a year ago, they'd started noticing when we smelled things. Maybe it was the involuntary flare of our nostrils. Sometimes I admitted it—if it was something that could be reasonably smelled by anyone. The rest of the time, I'd say no, that I'd just heard or seen something.

This was the first time they'd called me on it with that shared look. Clay would say it's a sign, that it was time to tell them. But I argued they were still too young to be burdened with that secret. We just had to be more careful.

“Was it Dad?” Logan asked.

“Hmm?”

“Did you see . . . Dad?”

Kate shook her head. “No, if it was Daddy, she'd be happy.” She slid onto my knee, her arm going around my neck. “She's worried.”

I tried not to look startled. I shouldn't be. Our quiet son may be the intellectual prodigy, but our wild daughter was the genius when it came to reading emotions.

I hugged her, burying my face against her blond curls. “I thought I heard a strange noise, but it's gone now. Nothing to worry about.”

She glanced back, studied my expression and nodded. It was true. I had no idea what I'd smelled—it'd been too faint. Just a whiff of something that said “danger,” gone before I could seize and decipher it. As I stood, lifting Kate in my arms, I looked around, listening and sniffing. Nothing.

I resisted the urge to herd the kids back inside and we continued exploring the forest. A few minutes later, I caught a scent that I did recognize.

“Daddy!” Kate squealed when she caught me smiling.

She raced to her brother and hit him hard enough to send him flying. Then she grabbed his hand and yanked him to his feet.

“Daddy’s here! Let’s sneak up on him.”

Logan glanced at me. “Momma?”

“Go on.”

The kids raced back in the direction of the cabin. I caught a distinct movement to the left. So did they, Kate screeching, then Logan telling her to be quiet, as they slipped off in that direction.

I found a stump to sit on and listened. The swish of snowpants as they tried to sneak up on Clay. His laugh when they failed. Their shouts as they tried to catch him. Then yelps of frustration when they lost him. Finally, the nearly silent crunch of careful footfalls behind me.

I waited until they stopped, counted to three, then dodged to the side as Clay tackled air and stumbled.

“Getting old,” I said. “Losing your touch.”

He grinned. “You’re losing yours if you didn’t take advantage of the chance to knock me into the snow.”

“Only because you’d have pulled me down and then we’d have ended up in a place we don’t have time to visit, unless you led the kids a lot farther away than I think.”

He stepped toward me. “Nah, but there is a nice thicket over there. We could probably hide for a few minutes before they found us.”

“But then I’d have to be quiet. It’s been a week. It won’t be quiet.”

He growled and caught me up in a rib-crushing kiss, one that reminded me that these occasional weeks apart were not necessarily a bad thing.

“Think I can wear them out enough for a nap?” he asked.

“Not their first day here. They’re wired.”

“Mmm.”

He kissed me again. At some point, I thought the ground disappeared from under my feet, but I wasn’t really sure until I felt a tree against my back, then his hands on my rear, lifting me up to straddle him. As he pushed against me, I gasped.

“Very nice,” I said. “But probably not a good idea considering we have about two minutes before they find us.”

He tilted his head, blue eyes glinting. “It’s been a week. Two minutes is probably—”

I slapped a hand over his mouth. “No. It’s not. I want more. At least five.”

He laughed and pulled my hand away, then kissed me again, letting me stay on the ground this time, legs down, which helped a bit, but not much. Just the smell of him, the heady scent that had faded from our bed a few days ago, was enough to make me think that thicket didn’t seem so bad. I could be quiet. Quiet enough, anyway.

“You sure about that nap?” Clay said. “I passed a drugstore in town. Gotta be something there to help them sleep.”

I chuckled. “If I honestly believed you’d give your kids cough medicine to make them sleep, I might be tempted. I think it’s going to have to be a shower.”

“That’ll do.” He cocked his head again, and I picked up the faint whisper of snowpants. He gave me one last smack of a kiss. “Not ideal, but good enough.”

“Now you need to go work up a sweat to justify it.”

He grinned. “That won’t be hard. I think we’re about to be—”

Kate let out a war-whoop as she launched herself from the bushes and flew onto Clay's back. He spun around and managed to grab Logan as he rushed out. Kate dropped from her perch and grabbed his leg. Clay went down, managing to twist just in time to avoid landing on Logan. The twins piled on as they tried to pin him. There was flurry of snow and a tangle of arms and legs. Then Kate sailed into a drift, her brother following, and Clay leapt to his feet and took off.

Kate squealed and gave chase. Logan glanced at me. I motioned that we'd slip through the woods and try to cut Clay off. A blaze of a grin lit up his face. His father's grin. I scooped him up and planted a kiss on top of his head.

"Do you think we can catch them?" he whispered in my ear.

"I'm sure we can. And if we can't . . ." I hefted the knapsack. "Food. We can lay a trap."

Another grin. Then we set out.

We caught Clay and Kate without resorting to traps. A snowball fight ensued, which started as Logan and me versus them, somehow switched to guys versus girls, and ended up as parents versus kids. We lost. I could say we let them win, but they've been taking archery lessons from Jeremy, and their accuracy has much improved. Also, they've learned that we're fast on the ground, but if they launch an aerial attack from the trees, we're in trouble.

The food came out next. Clay and I didn't get much—the kids declared that first pick went to the victors, which is a Pack-ingrained logic we can't argue with.

As we ate, the kids gave Clay the rundown on our schedule for the next few days. They'd planned it with military precision. Logan even wrote out lists, which made me suspect he'd been spending too much time with Lucas.



Bonfires, tobogganing, hiking, board games, gift wrapping, Christmas baking . . . they were going to keep us busy. Also, unbeknownst to me, they'd noticed a place in town that rented snowshoes and cross-country skis, and they'd added those activities to the schedule, withholding that information until Daddy arrived because while Mommy would probably say yes, it was a sure bet Daddy would.

While they chattered, I peered into the woods and tried to fight the feeling we were being watched. I got up and paced around, trying not to be too obvious about it, but I couldn't catch any scent on the breeze. When Clay caught my gaze with arched brows, a slow look around told him something was making me anxious, and he excused himself for a "washroom" break to do a wider search, but came back with nothing.

"Sorry," I murmured when he returned. "New territory."

"Alpha instincts kicking in," he said squeezing my shoulder before sitting down. "Can't complain about that."

In a Pack, the Alpha is responsible for the safety of the group. If he's around, everyone else can relax. A couple of years ago, if you'd asked me whether I did that when Jeremy was there, I'd have rolled my eyes and said no. I wasn't like the others. I wasn't raised a werewolf. I didn't share their Pack mentality.

Then Jeremy named me Alpha-elect. Which I could say is an incredible honor, but the truth is that if Clay didn't want the job, there was really no one else. And Clay decidedly did not want the job. He was the ideal beta—second-in-command, Pack enforcer, Alpha's bodyguard. The best fighter in the Pack and beyond, and happy to keep that as his defining role, leaving the boring politics of leadership to someone else. Namely me.

Only after I became Alpha-elect did I realize just how much I did relax when Jeremy was around. I'd assimilated the mindset without realizing it.

Now it was up to me. Suddenly, every new scrap of "territory" had to be scouted for danger. I knew Clay would do that—it was his job, and I suspected he'd done a full circle before meeting up with us in the woods. But I was hyper-alert, too, and something out here bothered me. Maybe it was because the kids were with us. Maybe it was just that Alpha instinct kicking in, as Clay said—a little too new and a little too raw, sensing danger where none existed. Whatever it was, I breathed easier when we finally headed inside.