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Chapter 1

“My brother is good at wrestling,” a voice echoed into the mostly empty gymnasium.

Jeremy immediately recognized the voice. He’d had the displeasure of hearing it most of his life. And so, it should’ve been no surprise when the owner of said voice pointed in Jeremy’s direction and all eyes turned on him. Just by looking at him almost any sane person could tell that he wasn’t a wrestler. Jeremy was not what you’d call a prime specimen of the human species. Or even athletic. At all. In fact, he’d never participated in any sports in his life outside of what was required for school. He was average in every way, shape, and form.

“Really? Well why don’t you come down here son and show us what you can do.” Mr. Sheffield, the Physical Education teacher and wrestling team coach, said as he waved Jeremy down. It was third period, PE, the first day of school. The students all sat on the bleachers where Jeremy had assumed they’d just listen to the teacher talk about what to expect, like they’d done in his first two periods. He certainly hadn’t expected to be called out so blatantly.

Then again, with his brother being in the same class, Jeremy shouldn’t have been too surprised. He and Stephen were only a year apart with Jeremy being older, but other than blood the two couldn’t be any more different. Where Jeremy was average height, Stephen was a few inches taller. Where Jeremy was thin and a little pudgy, Stephen was strong and well-defined. Where Jeremy was a loner, Stephen was a social butterfly. Stephen was everything Jeremy wasn’t, and he reminded Jeremy of that any time they had a disagreement.

Now here he was, making Jeremy’s life a living hell at school. “He’s lying,” Jeremy stated flatly, but that didn’t seem to matter to the coach who again motioned for him to descend from the bleachers to the mats. With a resigned sigh, the fifteen-year-old Sophomore stood and made his way down, catching his brother’s amused expression at having volunteered him. Was this going to be his life with Stephen in the same class? Jeremy may just have to request a transfer if that was the case.

“What’s your name?” The teacher asked, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Jeremy.”

“Alright Jeremy,” the coach said as he turned him to face the others. “Let’s see what you got. We’ll put you up against someone who can accurately judge your skills. Dustin?” As Jeremy watched, the worst person possible was the one to stand. He had seen trophies and pictures of this teen in the lobby. The championship wrestler. Sixteen and a Junior. He had hazel eyes and an easy smile. He was also a good head taller than Jeremy and outweighed him by about thirty pounds. He wasn’t largely built, but was muscled and toned. *Like a wrestler should be*, Jeremy thought with an inward sigh. At least this would be over quick. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too painful. Jeremy had wrestled before at his previous school, but that was only once or twice as part of class and not in the actual sports sense. There was no way he’d be any kind of match for this kid.

At least, not without revealing his secret.

“Alright. Remember, we’re just giving him a trial run Dustin, so go easy on him.”

Jeremy and Dustin faced each other in the center of the mats and immediately cheers sounded from the bleachers, coming from what appeared to be Dustin's fellow wrestlers. They were, of course, only cheering for Dustin. Jeremy had no one on his side in this massacre. Even his own brother was just watching silently, a smug look on his face. Jeremy turned his focus back to Dustin, noticing the starting position the other teen was in and doing his best to copy it. Body low, legs spread, arms out.

The coach blew his whistle and both Jeremy and Dustin grabbed at each other, locking arms and both trying to get some advantage over the other. Jeremy could feel Dustin's muscles shifting under his hands and, while Jeremy struggled, he realized Dustin was barely having to do anything just to keep them evenly matched. They stayed that way a few seconds before Dustin suddenly ducked low, grabbing Jeremy around the waist and dropping him to the ground, pinning him in the span of a breath. The whistle blew and the cheers from the sidelines picked up again as Dustin stood, looking pleased with himself. Jeremy was just pissed. This was unfair and embarrassing in so many ways, and Jeremy felt his anger beginning to rise.

"Nice takedown and pin Dustin. Jeremy, way to hang in there against a more experienced wrestler. Let's try it again and see if you can do even better."

Jeremy would really rather do anything else, but he could see there was no way out of this. He glanced again to Stephen, but his brother was looking far too pleased with himself to actually be any help. "Whatever," Jeremy said instead, pushing himself to his feet and moving to the center of the mat again. He took a deep breath, trying to tamp down on his anger so it didn't take over. Just deal with being someone's practice dummy for another minute and then he could go back to his loner self.

Except there was a part of him that didn't want to give up so easily, and it was getting louder and louder in his mind.

They both got into position and locked up again when the whistle blew. They struggled for a few seconds before someone on the sideline shouted in, "Yeah show that pipsqueak who's boss!"

And that was all it took.

Jeremy's anger boiled over and the next thing he knew he was gripping Dustin hard enough that it'd likely bruise the other teen. But that was just the beginning. He shoved at Dustin, forcing the other teen to compensate, then with a strength he shouldn't possess Jeremy yanked on Dustin's arms, pulling him forward at the same time Jeremy's leg shot out to trip up the other boy. Dustin was alarmed, then surprised at the sudden burst of strength, and he fell hard to the mat.

The cheering stopped, the others surprised at what they were seeing. But Jeremy wasn't done as he reached down, forcing Dustin to his back like he weighed nothing, then straddled his chest to try and push his shoulders to the mat. Dustin was staring up at him wide-eyed, just as surprised as the others. But then his instincts kicked in. He bucked his hips with so much force that Jeremy was thrown off to the side. Before he could recover Dustin was on him, his legs grape vining Jeremy's as his arm went around Jeremy's arm and head, pinning him to the ground. The cheering erupted anew.

Jeremy and Dustin were practically face-to-face as they waited those few seconds for the pin to be called and the whistle to blow. It was in those few seconds that fear filled Jeremy, replacing the anger he'd felt just moments before. Fear because, above him, with their faces so close that no one else could

see, Dustin's eyes changed from hazel to gold, then back again. It was the briefest of things, and most people would chalk it up to their imagination, or a trick of the light. Jeremy knew better.

The whistle blew and Dustin pushed himself off of Jeremy quickly, though his eyes never left the other teen. Jeremy didn't notice. He was up in a flash, speeding out of the gym while muttering under his breath that he needed to use the bathroom. He made it there in record time too, locking himself in a stall.

Shit shit shit. He kept thinking to himself.

Those eyes. He knew those eyes. The last time he'd seen eyes flash gold like that it had been along with the warning that he needed to leave town. Move away. Uproot his family. Change his life entirely. The last time he'd seen eyes like that were on a creature like Jeremy himself.

A werewolf.

And now he'd just run into another one.

Starting a new year at school was never fun. Starting a new year at a new school half way across the country was even worse. No friends, not even a single acquaintance to help you navigate the life that was the high school social ladder. Nobody to laugh at others with. Nobody to commiserate with about having to live in a boring new town. Nothing.

Jeremy had lived his entire fifteen years in the south Bay Area in California but now found himself in the wilds of West Virginia. To say it was a culture shock was as true as any statement could be. With only about an eighth the amount of people taking up a much larger space, it was a lot different than the crowded Bay Area had been. But then, it was also the easiest place to afford after a sudden unexpected move, so you just took what you could get.

Not that his family was poor or anything, but they weren't exactly rolling in the riches. The fact that they'd moved across the country during the summer hadn't helped their finances, and the savings his parents had built over their many years had been nearly drained. Luckily his father's company was letting him work remotely for the time being, but there was no time frame on how long that would last. His mother had been job hunting since they'd decided on the move and currently worked at a diner.

His younger brother had simply been infuriated.

"Why do we all have to move across the country just because Jeremy can't get along with his classmates?" Stephen had asked the question more than once. But coming from a popular fourteen-year-old who'd been preparing to head into high school with all his friends, it wasn't too much of a surprise.

Not that it was entirely Jeremy's fault they had to move. There were some things that had been out of his control. Of course, breaking Ricky's jaw *had* been in his control, but that was just one part of the story. He'd also been warned away by a pack of locals that felt he didn't belong. That pack of locals had gotten his mom fired from her job at the local market for no reason other than to give their threats more credence. They likely would've done more if Jeremy hadn't promised to get his parents to move them. But then, he'd been somewhere he hadn't been welcome.

He was a newly turned werewolf in the middle of the local pack's territory, unbeknownst to him.

There was still so much he didn't know about his new self, but what he did know was how it happened. It was a vivid memory and it often haunted his nightmares.

Jeremy and his brother had been dropped off at the school dance by their parents. The school itself was sixth through twelfth grades, so despite the fact that Jeremy was technically in high school and his brother wasn't they still went to the same school. It wouldn't be so bad if they actually got along. Regardless, this night was for the dance that Jeremy didn't want to attend but had been forced to go to by their parents to 'watch' his brother. Once he'd found out that Stephen was going to get a ride home with his friends, Jeremy had just bailed and started walking home early.

The air had been chilly as it tended to be in this area after the sun went down, but with his thin jacket it wasn't really an issue. At least, it usually wasn't. But tonight the air seemed to have an additional chill to it. Jeremy had simply zipped up his jacket and kept walking. The distance between the school and their house was only around a mile, and the entire way was through the suburbs, so there wasn't normally anything to worry about. Yet that night Jeremy remembered feeling worried and, even worse, watched. The teen had picked up his pace a little, but then laughed to himself and slowed back down. He was safe here. Crime was practically non-existent in the area. And he was no threat to anyone or anything. It was surely just his mind playing tricks on him. Still, as he walked he couldn't shake the feeling.

The teen had gotten about half-way home before the sensation became worse and he felt like he was being followed. He'd stopped to look around but hadn't seen anyone, just the empty sidewalk passing unimpressive street lamps and houses, some with lights on and some without. He could even see into some living rooms with open curtains, catching families watching TV together. It reminded him that he couldn't remember the last time his whole family had sat down to watch something on the television together. But that was neither here nor there. More importantly, with so many open curtains there was no way something untoward could happen to him, right? Right, he'd told himself.

If only that had been the truth.

Jeremy had almost made it home by ignoring that uncomfortable feeling of being watched, and it wasn't until he was just a few doors down that the wave of dread hit him, stopping him in his tracks. Turning slowly, Jeremy saw something he hadn't noticed before. A large dog, easily up to his waist, was standing just at the other end of the block.

Jeremy's breath had caught in his throat and for a few long moments the two of them just stared at each other. Then the large dog growled and started running at him. The teenager knew he wouldn't make it in time but that didn't stop him from turning and running towards his house. "Help! Help!" he started yelling as he neared, fear causing his voice to raise in pitch. Much to his surprise and relief he saw his front door open and his dad standing there, squinting out into the darkness. He was going to make it. He was going to make it. He didn't make it.

With a loud yell he'd fallen just feet from the front door as if his legs had been rooted to the ground. They also had suddenly felt very warm and wet. Confusion sounded around him and he saw his

dad run out and start kicking at something near his feet, shouting and cursing. His mom also appeared and, not to be outdone, brought a bat. After the initial moment of surprise passed, pain lanced up his leg and he nearly passed out from the shock. Between his two parents they managed to get the large dog to let go and were able to drag Jeremy inside.

Everything that had happened after the attack had been a blur of confusion, pain, and massive blood loss. Based on what he'd gathered later his dad had carried him to the car while his mom called 911, reporting the rabid dog as they'd driven him to the emergency room near the house. Upon his arrival and immediate admittance, he'd been tended to, gone through surgery, and eventually woke up to his worried family hovering nearby.

Over time the wounds had healed. Then other things had started happening, from his unexpected aggression to being practically thrown out of town.

And now he was in a new town, starting over, with one giant secret to hide.

The perfect way to start your Sophomore year of high school.

Which just happened to be today.

One of those new things he had yet to get used to were the way his senses had been kicked up to an eleven. Every time Jeremy took a deep breath he practically gagged at the plethora of scents that assaulted him. He had quickly discovered a high school was not the place to have a good nose. He wasn't used to being in an enclosed space with so many different smells and he didn't look forward to the future at all.

There was one scent in all of the mess that he did already recognize, however, and that was his brother.

"Don't worry," Stephen had said earlier as they walked up to the school, brushing past Jeremy and turning to face him as he'd walked backwards towards the entrance. "No dogs here." With a grin his brother had turned and kept walking into the school, taking the steps up to the doors two at a time before nodding to a couple of people as he went by and even getting some recognition in return. A Freshman in a new school and he was already being recognized as higher in the social pecking order. Just great.

At least there was one nice scent that he'd caught that morning, but he was as of yet unsure what it meant or why it was so different, or even where it had come from. The smell of the first rain after a drought. Refreshing. Maybe it simply meant it was going to rain soon. He wasn't sure.

School had been as schoolish as ever, his first two classes having been nothing more than going over the school year, the syllabus, and ice breakers that were supposed to help everyone get to know each other better. Jeremy had always hated ice breakers. Not only was he going to forget most of the names he learned, but he really didn't find any of his classmates interesting enough to care about what they did this summer, or what their favorite movies and food were. It didn't matter and wouldn't matter, so why should he care. Pair that together with the massive headache he had at all the sights,

loud sounds, and overbearing smells, and he was more than happy to escape his second period and head for PE.

Unfortunately, it wasn't outdoors as he'd hoped, because nothing could go his way. Instead, they had all been seated in a large gym that doubled as a theatre on one end. It was large enough that it had a full basketball court inside and a full set of bleachers that went from floor to ceiling, but it wasn't anything extravagant like they'd had at his last school. It was perfect for a smallish town, and that's exactly where he was now.

Along with the obvious hoops at either end of the building there were mats laid out on the floor near the bleachers where the students had been directed to sit. Jeremy hadn't been even remotely surprised to see the mats since his parents had told them that this school was district champion for wrestling. If his parent's words hadn't been enough there was plenty of evidence in the posters and trophies littering the entry into the gym that showed just how good they were. Jeremy wasn't a wrestler himself. Or a basketball player. Or a anything sports related. That had all fallen on his younger brother, making him the champion athlete of the family.

Before the attack his brother had made it obvious more than once that he was the strength of the family, able to beat Jeremy in anything they did, and forcing him to submit to pins and headlocks more than once when their parents hadn't been around. Since the attack...well, his brother hadn't exactly gotten friendlier, but he treated Jeremy just a little bit different. Like he was fragile, breakable. If only he knew the truth of what Jeremy was, and just how unbreakable he seemed to be.

As Jeremy had entered the gym, he noticed that all the students were seated on the bleachers with a handful of small groups having gathered to chat while others sat out by themselves. He was slightly annoyed to have found his younger brother in the center of one of the groups of chatting teens, regaling them with some story or other. How he'd managed to gather people to him so quickly was an anomaly. Stephen obviously knew where his place was, the same as Jeremy knew where his was – on the outskirts with the other uncool outcasts.

The bell rang and a clean-shaven man in his forties clapped his hands. Despite his age he looked like he was still in good shape and could take on any of his proteges on the mat. "Alright, let me have your attention. My name is Mr. Sheffield and I will be your Physical Education teacher for the year."

And we know what happened after that.

Jeremy knew he couldn't hide in the bathroom the whole period, but the thought of going out there and facing another werewolf again was daunting. What would happen this time? Would he be forced to move again? He couldn't put that strain on his family a second time so soon. He would have to run away. There was no other option. It wouldn't be that big of a deal, he wouldn't really be missed. Maybe by his parents a little bit at first, but they had his all-star brother to make up for it.

Stephen. Damn him. This was all his fault anyways. And now that Dustin knew, or at least suspected what Jeremy was, that put Stephen in just as much danger as Jeremy himself. Shit. He couldn't just leave him alone out there. Who knew what might happen? Jeremy took a deep breath to

calm his nerves and was surprised to catch a whiff of something, a familiar scent off his clothes where Dustin had touched. Like the first rain after a drought. Interesting.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Jeremy said out loud, trying to talk himself up, before opening the stall door and heading back into the gym. As he re-appeared everyone had again taken their seats and the teacher was going over various things they’d be doing in class. Jeremy received a nod from the teacher but that was it and he ducked his head as he moved up the stairs, ignoring the looks he got from others. Especially Dustin. He did look over to his brother once he sat down and was relieved to see him still talking with his new friends like nothing happened. He probably hadn’t even noticed Jeremy was gone.

Jeremy’s leg bounced as he fidgeted for the remainder of the class, keeping an eye on the time and begging for it to go faster. He needed to get out of here. He needed to decide what he was going to do. He needed...something. The nervous energy had him wanting to run. Not as a human, but as something else. That other part of him that could burn energy so easily by racing through the forest, the part of him that had been so hard to accept at first, the part of him that he still barely understood. Yet it *was* a part of him now, there was no arguing against that, no matter how hard he might have tried.

When the bell rang it was a blessing and Jeremy was down the stairs in a flash, doing his best not to run despite his wanting to. He didn’t need to draw even more attention to himself. He wanted to be outside, to be away from everyone else, to be the first one out so no one could stop to ask him questions. All plans that got thrown to the wind when the teacher waved at him, calling him over. “Everything okay there champ? Didn’t mean to put you through the wringer on your first day. My apologies.” He actually looked concerned which was nice, if not wanted at the moment.

“I’m fine, thanks. Just my stomach was a little...off.” Jeremy lied as he shifted on his feet, that nervous energy still propelling him and forcing him to want to be outside. At least as he looked around he noticed that Dustin was gone, and so was his group of jock friends. In fact, it was just Jeremy and the teacher left in the gym. Maybe he didn’t need to worry about it after all, at least not for the moment. He was sure they’d find him, just like the last pack had, and that was the time when the threatening would begin. It’s just that maybe today was not that day.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but hey I saw how you handled yourself on the mat. You may not have a lot of experience but I recognize skill when I see it. I’d like you to try out for the wrestling team come winter. Even Dustin was surprised, and that’s not easy to do on the mat. He said you should try out too, maybe join the team for some practice even before then.”

Jeremy was shocked. Dustin had said he should try out for the wrestling team? Was this some kind of trick? “Um, yeah. I’ll think about it. But I have to go. Next class.” Never mind that he was supposed to be going to lunch next, he just wanted any excuse to escape.

It seemed to work as Mr. Sheffield waved him off, “Of course of course. Just remember the offer is open. I know it’s only the first day and all but I feel like you’d fit in well with the team.”

Would he though? Despite Dustin apparently telling the coach he should try out, Jeremy was filled with doubt. There had to be something more to it. It had to be some kind of trick, or a trap to try and run him out of town again. Yet if, even if that wasn’t true and they really did want him to try out, what would happen if they found out his other, equally as large secret?

That he was gay.