

Chapter One

Caleb

Cautiously, I scouted the area, Trent's warnings ringing in my ears. It was slow going with dense underbrush roughly catching against my jeans, but I knew better than to shift. I'd narrowly avoided a rusty trap hidden in a shallow ravine when I'd crossed onto their lands. There was no telling what else lurked in the shadowed forest of the Ghost Pack.

A glimmer of sunlight trickled through the canopy and I straightened to my full height as I found myself in a clearing. I inhaled deeply, but was once again disappointed. No scents lingered here, almost as if the forest was devoid of life and I wondered if the wolf pack we'd dubbed the Ghosts had abandoned the area.

I glanced around, the silent forest eerie in the middle of the day. Not a single bird or animal moved, reinforcing the idea that nothing but ghosts lived here. My gaze skimmed the surrounding trees, alert to anything that would indicate someone had been there at some point.

My eyes caught on a vertical line scarring the trunk of a tree. It might have been natural, but instinct prodded me to look closer. I walked slowly, my gaze sweeping the forest floor, and I froze as my boot hit something buried under the leaves. The dull ring of metal hitting metal echoed loudly as the trap snapped shut, and I took a steadying breath as I eased my foot back.

I carefully crouched down, using a stick to brush away the leaves that hid the trap from view. Shiny metal gleamed in the dim light that filtered through the heavy canopy above, and a sharp hiss escaped me. Someone was definitely still here.

I lifted my head slowly and scanned the area again, this time careful to note anything out of place. A single broken branch caught my eye and I exhaled. It was about the right height for a small wolf, *a young one or perhaps a female*, I judged.

"What are you keeping out?" I wondered aloud, my voice almost deafening in the quiet clearing. I ran my finger over the vertical line someone had intentionally carved into the tree and then back down at the trap I'd just accidentally sprung. "Or maybe, what are you trying to keep in?"

I glanced back the way I'd come, obligation tugging at me to go back, knowing Dom would approve of that course of action, but a decade old curiosity wouldn't let me. I'd wanted to know more about this Pack since I'd first learned of them, and Trent's mysterious interaction with them had only intensified the desire. It had taken me years to finally get here, and I had no intention of leaving without some answers.

I trudged forward, growing careless in the fading light as I continued to find nothing, not even a hint of life in the rapidly darkening forest. I either had to turn back or make camp, and I was leery to remain on another Pack's land without invitation.

You shouldn't be here.

I froze as the words seemed to whisper on the wind, except not a single leaf stirred.

Go.

I remained still, but my gaze swept the area, trying to find who or *what* had spoken.

Leave and never return.

I licked my lips, fighting the urge to run like hell as the words screamed through my mind, tearing at my sanity as they evoked a fear unlike anything I'd ever felt.

"It's not real," I chanted softly, locking my knees when they threatened to give out. Everything about this place was unnatural and my wolf whined pathetically. I knew if I'd been in my wolf form, I would have run without looking back.

I forced myself to move forward, alert once more as I fought through the fear fogging my brain. After a few steps it seemed to lessen and I stepped forward eagerly.

Too eagerly.

Serrated teeth tore through flesh as they snapped bone and blood filled my mouth. I fell to the ground as the trap locked against my leg, teeth clenched to silence the scream that threatened to escape. I lay panting on the ground, each exhale loud in the once again silent forest. I inhaled through my nose, controlling my breathing as I fought the pain, knowing I couldn't afford to pass out.

My only chance was to spring the trap, something I couldn't do as a wolf, which meant I had to control my natural inclination to shift and heal my shredded leg.

I inched forward, trying not to move my leg as each pulsing throb of pain pushed me closer to passing out. My fingers brushed metal and I closed my eyes in relief. I traced the razor sharp grooves of the trap, following them down to find the release mechanism.

A flicker in the trees caused me to hesitate and I scanned the area as I wondered if I'd imagined the movement. I fumbled with the spring, sudden urgency driving me as my fingers slipped on the blood coating the metal. I was a sitting duck and it was clear that whatever haunted these woods didn't want me here.

My thumb found the pin and with a screech the metal teeth entrapping me released. I yanked my foot free, scrambling backwards on my butt as white fur flashed, a beacon in the gathering darkness.

My back hit a tree and I considered shifting into my wolf form, but my leg was broken and without setting it first, I risked permanent damage.

I inhaled, trying to get something, anything, on whatever was circling me, but not a single trace drifted on the still air, nothing but the coppery scent of my own blood.

You should have run when you had the chance.

The light voice almost sang, chiding me, and I blinked. It was a human voice, spinning merrily on a nonexistent wind, and only I seemed to hear it as a black and white wolf lunged from the deepening shadows, teeth gleaming as they locked onto my throat in a death grip.