

ONE

a werewolf among us

It was official. I was in love with a werewolf.

As extraordinary as that sounded, I was coming to terms with the fact that my heart and soul had been taken by Brandon Maddox. He was a hot and handsome Westsider in a town that favored the east, and under the glow of a full moon he would turn into a creature of the moonlight.

It was several days since I'd first kissed Brandon in his werewolf form. The kiss was breathtaking and magical and I couldn't think of anything else. The March weather was still cool and crisp, and I was heading from the school library over to the gym after school to meet my best friends, Ivy and Abby, who were watching their boyfriends, Dylan and Jake, and my former boyfriend, Nash, at basketball practice. I must have been smiling, still thinking about Brandon's lips, when I caught up to the girls sitting on the bleachers.

"You are back together!" Ivy said. "For good this time!"

"Back together with who?" I asked. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Ivy pulled a face. "Don't be sneaky. With Nash, silly!"

The whistle blew and the guys headed to the fountain for water.

I thought this was the perfect time to confess to my closest friends about my relationship with Brandon. I hadn't told them before for several reasons. One, he was from the wrong side of town and, therefore, an outsider, and two, they thought it was cool that we three best friends were dating guys who were also best friends. And since I had crushed out on Nash for a long time, I knew I'd been lucky to go out with him. The only problem was that there was something missing between us, and that something—love—I'd seemed to find with Brandon Maddox.

Since Brandon had found Abby's missing dog, an act that had obviously gotten him on Abby's good side, I was hoping my friends might be receptive to my confession about dating the transfer student. I was ready to break the news, and I leaned in close to my friends when two strong hands grabbed my shoulders. I noticed a familiar class ring glistening against my pale pink sweater. It was the ring my former boyfriend Nash had worn since freshman year—the one he recently tried to give me, and the one I had seen on the hand holding a flashlight when I was in the woods with Brandon as he changed into a werewolf.

“And here he is,” Ivy said as the guys joined us on the bleachers. “Your boyfriend.”

“I was telling them before practice about how we got back together,” Nash said, scooting in next to me, hot and sweaty from practice. “Officially.”

Nash was gorgeous. His chin was rugged and his perfect complexion radiated. His sandy hair was messy in a good way. He had the kind of smile that made a girl want to kiss him, and eyes that let on that many had.

“But that's not—” I began, but Nash put his finger over my lips.

“I was telling them that you saw the error of your ways,” he said smoothly. “And under the moonlight, with the full moon glowing, that something changed drastically.” He shot me an all-knowing glance.

“So now we'll continue to be a happy sixsome,” Ivy said. “Forever.”

My stomach turned. I wanted to tell Ivy that I was in love with Brandon. But with Nash alluding to Brandon's changing into a werewolf, it would have to wait. It was one thing to get them to accept me dating a Westsider, but I couldn't imagine what they'd say to my dating a werewolf. We grabbed our things, and the guys began escorting us to the gymnasium exit.

I hung back and signaled Nash to do the same. Ivy and Abby winked as if they expected I was requesting canoodling time from him.

“This is how you want us to get back together?” I asked quietly when the rest were out of earshot. “By extorting me? You’ll tell them about Brandon if I don’t pretend you and I have reunited?”

“It’s for your own safety,” he said. “You know what I saw. As if it’s not enough that he’s from the Westside—I saw what happened!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“I was there, Celeste. I’m doing this for your own good. A werewolf in this town wouldn’t go over very well. I could have him locked up in a nuthouse.”

“Shh!” I scolded. “He’s not a nut!”

“There is something wrong with that dude! I can’t believe you like him,” he said fervently. Then his eyes softened. “I can’t stand by and watch you hanging out with a monster, Celeste. What would you do in my situation? I don’t want him to hurt you. Don’t you understand?”

Nash’s tone was sincere and his true caring warmed my heart. I knew that I’d be concerned, too, if I saw someone I had affection for standing next to a werewolf. Nash having this compassion made me feel good, but he was going about it in the wrong way.

“Brandon is a great guy,” I said. “No one needs to protect me from him.”

Nash’s lips tensed. “Listen—I was there.” He faced me squarely, his brow furrowed in anger. “I saw what happened. He’s not normal, Celeste. You have to know that.” Nash was adamant in trying to convince me. “He is dangerous.”

“That’s not true. He’s really just the opposite.”

“He’s an animal. I saw it for myself.”

Nash was such a hypocrite sometimes. “Then why did you run?” I asked. “If you were so afraid for me, why did you take off and leave me alone with him?” I started off for my friends when he caught up to me.

“I’m here now,” he said softly. His declaration was very enticing. Nash wasn’t angry anymore, but instead I could see fear in his eyes at the path I was choosing. He was caring and concerned for real. Beyond a guy trying to get a girl—but in this case a friend trying to help a friend. “I’m not leaving until you promise not to see him.” Nash wasn’t bullying me. He was instead talking to me like a friend or a big brother. I was touched by his concern but struggled with him asking me to abandon Brandon, the one I loved.

“I can’t,” I said.

Nash folded his arms in disgust. “Then I have no choice.” He headed off to catch up with our clique.

This time I caught up to him and faced him squarely. “You are my friend, Nash,” I said, feeling short of breath. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I am your friend. And friends look out for each other.”

“Not like this. If you plan to extort me,” I countered, “then I’ll go ahead and tell them I’m dating Brandon now myself.” I began to march over toward Ivy and Abby when I felt my backpack tugged and I was stopped in my tracks.

Nash glared at me with vengeance. “Then you are forcing me to do something I wasn’t going to do,” he said boldly. “I’m going to tell them what I saw. Brandon changed into a freaking were—”

“Shh!” I said, waving my hand in front of his mouth.

My friends were waiting by the gym door. I imagined Nash storming over to them and dropping the bombshell on them.

Dating Brandon wasn't something I'd be able to deny. I was lousy at lying. For one thing, I had an ultrastrong conscience, and two, my face would flush and my upper lip would quiver, immediately giving me away. It might be hard for my friends to be convinced that Brandon was a real werewolf, but they wouldn't be able to get over my dating Brandon for the past few months and not telling them myself.

"Give me a little more time," I said to Nash.

I knew I wasn't about to stop dating Brandon and start seeing Nash again, but I had to buy myself more time before Nash told everyone Brandon was a werewolf.

The handsome jock smiled winningly. "I'll show you how things will be different," he said genuinely. "How they should have been all along."

For a moment, I wondered what it would be like if Nash changed. I imagined him helping decorate the halls at Pine Tree Village Retirement Community, walking in Willow Park together under the moonlight, or arriving at my home with a bouquet of flowers. It would have been what I'd wanted from Nash if he was up for the change, but his romantic declarations had come too late.

I raced over to Ivy and Abby and opened the gym door. We could see the main entrance and parking lot. The guys, still hot from their practice game, embraced the chilly air.

If anyone was going to tell Ivy and Abby about my seeing Brandon, it was going to be me. And I didn't want anyone knowing about his transformation.

Brandon had unknowingly forced Nash to become the person I'd wanted Nash to be several months ago. If Nash had paid this much attention to me when we were dating, I'd never have

been interested in anyone else. But his romantic behavior was happening a full moon too late. I knew it would be easier to take the road with the basketball player than the one with the werewolf, but I had to be true to myself. I was captivated, compelled, and perhaps under a spell. But whatever that spell was, it had the face of Brandon, by day or by full moonlight.

“Look!” Ivy said, pointing to Brandon’s Jeep. A wig and costume were lying on the hood of his truck. On the driver’s-side door were painted the word *WOLFMAN*. “Brandon was that werewolf all along,” Ivy continued, referring to a masked werewolf that had been terrorizing the town. In fact, that phony werewolf had been Nash, but no one else except me knew who the werewolf had really been.

I looked at Nash, who shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not a vandal,” he said defensively.

“Brandon was the werewolf?” Abby said. “That’s odd. He always sits in the back of class so quietly. He doesn’t seem the type to run around town for attention.”

“But remember when he stood by the classroom window when the wolves came to school and he psychically made them run off?” Jake said. “Pretty freaky!”

“Maybe he really is a wolfman,” Ivy teased.

“I guess he was playing a joke on us,” Dylan said. “Moving to this new town—maybe he thinks we are fools.”

“You think he was the one playing tricks?” Nash asked us all. It was as if he was longing to tell them his secret, too.

“We didn’t have any werewolf sightings until he came here,” Ivy pointed out.

“And he did put that Vulcan mind meld on those wolves at school,” Jake stressed again.

“I’m not so sure,” Abby said. “It seems too convenient that he’d just put the costume on his own car. Why would he do that?”

“Why do you think he wouldn’t?” Dylan said, almost challenging. “I don’t know why you are defending him. He’s the one who jumped out at you in that stupid outfit and scared the life out of you.”

“I’m not. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, why would he run around town dressed as a werewolf in the first place?” Ivy posed. “A cry for help? He wears those fingerless gloves. He eats like a pig. He’s weird. But the good news is it’s over now. We’re all safe. I’m really glad to know it was just a lame joke.”

“But it still surprises me that he’d be the one to jump out at me like he did,” Abby said. “He’s usually so quiet in school.”

“Well, at least we don’t have a werewolf running around Legend’s Run anymore,” Ivy said.

“Or do we?” Jake growled, and tickled her tiny waist.

“Yes, it’s over now,” Nash said, glaring at me.

This was the moment. I couldn’t watch Brandon be a punch line to the students’ very unpractical jokes anymore. I needed to declare my love for Brandon. And if Nash decided to tell them what he saw, then so be it. I’d tell them he was pranking them. And see whose story was more believable.

I looked my friends squarely in the face. “I have something to tell you,” I said bravely.

Just then I caught sight of Brandon walking to his Jeep. His dark hair flopped with his long and sexy stride. He stopped in his tracks when he spotted the werewolf costume lying on the hood. He glanced around and then noticed us standing outside the gymnasium. He seemed to be staring right at me and his gaze lingered. I felt his disappointment, and I was deeply saddened.

He picked up the costume and tossed it in a nearby garbage can.

Even from my vantage point, I could sense his pain and disgust. He knew who had been wearing the costume—the handsome guy standing beside me.

I lurched forward to go to Brandon, but Nash grabbed my wrist. His grip was strong; I couldn't have wiggled free if my life depended on it. My heart raced, seeing Brandon there—having to fight against the moonlight and the sunlight—alone. His loneliness was palpable to me. He was so gorgeous—he should be the star of Legend's Run High School instead of the misfit.

Was this going to be my life? Hopelessly in love with a guy who was a werewolf, and not able to be with him at school because of my friends? And was Nash going to make me keep my relationship a secret from them so he wouldn't reveal Brandon's lycan secret?

I contemplated my own integrity. I didn't want to melt under peer pressure, but losing all of my friends and making Brandon's life here at Legend's Run even lonelier made this a difficult decision. I was always the rational person, the problem solver who laid out all her options before jumping into anything difficult.

However, there had been one time in my life when I didn't heed warnings or act thoughtfully instead of emotionally—that moment when the full moon was bursting and I was dying to kiss Brandon Maddox.

Brandon had changed into a werewolf, but I had changed, too. And I wasn't sure who I was becoming. Stuck in the middle of two good things—both with major downsides. As if high school wasn't challenging enough.

“We've got to go,” Dylan said, giving Abby a good-bye smooch.

“Thanks for hanging out,” Jake said to Ivy.

She kissed him and gave him a tight squeeze.

Nash lingered for a moment. I think he sensed I wasn't about to kiss him, so he just said, "Remember what we talked about," and started back to the gymnasium.

We girls huddled together and made our way to our cars.

"Let's all go to the mall," Ivy said. "We can grab some pizza at the food court."

"Maybe I'll catch up to you guys later." I couldn't think of eating—my stomach still felt pained having watched Brandon being harassed. "I've got a few things I have to do."

"What could be more important than being with us?" Ivy asked as she got into her SUV.

"Only one thing," I mumbled under my breath. I jumped into my car and headed straight for Brandon's.

When I got to Brandon's grandparents' house, I found him outside his guesthouse, crouching down by his Jeep, with a hose, a bucketful of soapy water, and a rag. He was beginning to wipe off the word *WOLFMAN* from the side of his Jeep.

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure how Brandon would react to me.

He spotted me, and for a moment I sensed his pain. I knew he loved that Jeep and took great care of it. I also knew that it must be horrible to have your property and name defamed in front of the entire school.

However, when his royal blue eyes bore through me, I saw a hint of a smile. I felt the sadness wash away and was exhilarated in his presence.

"I can help you with that," I said, walking to him.

"No, that's okay," he said, standing up. "It needed to be washed anyway."

I took the rag from his hand and began to wash away the letter *W*. The paint was pretty thick, and it took some muscle to get rid of it.

“Fortunately the morons didn’t use spray paint,” he said. “It’s just like paint you’d find in art class.”

“Nash didn’t do this,” I said. “He might have left the costume there—he’s a prankster—but not a vandal.”

“So? Why should that make me feel better?” He took the rag from me and began washing it himself.

“I just wanted you to know.”

He didn’t respond, but kept on scrubbing.

“I want to tell them,” I began. “I want to tell my friends how I feel about you.”

Brandon was surprised. He wiped his hands off with a dry rag. “About us?”

“Yes,” I said. “And if they don’t like it, then they’re not true friends, right?”

“Well, I can see Nash not liking it.”

I cracked a smile then, too.

He took my sudsy hands and began to dry them with the rag. It was relaxing as he attended to me by rubbing my hands with the cloth, and I stared blissfully up at his gorgeous face.

“And Ivy,” he said. “She seems possessive of you. And I don’t fit neatly into her world.”

It would be hard—our clique was strong, and no one had penetrated it for years. If she knew I was seeing Brandon instead of Nash, she’d be bummed, to say the least. I imagined Ivy and Abby snubbing me in class, whispering together when I walked in the hallway, filling in my seat at lunch with their backpacks. No calls, texts, or study buddies. I was afraid I’d lose my best friends.

But it wasn’t going to make me happy to lose Brandon, either.

“I’m ready to tell them,” I said. “That is . . . if you want this, too.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

He tossed the rag into the bucket, took my hands again, and drew me to him. A few soap bubbles from his sleeve tickled my cheek as he caressed my face. My boots splashed in the sudsy puddles.

“So, you’ll sit with me at lunch?” he said dreamily.

“Or you’ll sit with me.”

It was going to be different. I’d sat with Ivy since elementary school. I knew it would be difficult to stare at her from across the lunchroom and watch her and Abby giggling and gossiping without me. But if it was too awkward with Brandon and me at our table, we’d have to eat at his.

“And we’ll meet each other after class,” I said.

“I wouldn’t want to meet anyone else,” he replied with an extra squeeze.

I imagined getting smirks as we passed other Eastsiders in the hallways. And who knows, the Westsiders might not be too happy, either. There would be obstacles, but to be in the company of the guy I was in love with, I was ready.

But then I remembered that night Nash saw Brandon change into a werewolf. And I thought about how Nash had threatened to tell my friends what he’d witnessed if I continued to see Brandon.

“But there is one problem,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Nash threatened me—he said that if I continue dating you, he’ll tell the whole school what he saw that night—you changing into a werewolf.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“He’s genuinely concerned for me,” I confessed. “I can’t blame him for that.” Brandon appeared sullen. “I know . . . I’d be the same if I saw what he saw.” “But I tried to convince him it wasn’t as bad as he thought. That you aren’t dangerous.”

“I’m sure he believed that,” he said, kicking the dirt.

“But what if he tells someone?” I asked.

“Who will believe him?” he wondered. “He doesn’t have proof.”

“I’m hoping that everyone will think he’s pranking them again and they won’t listen. But you’re already being called Wolfman and had your Jeep vandalized. I’m not sure what those vandals might do next. People love to pick on someone—and now you are the target. This could make it worse.”

“It’s okay. I can handle it,” he said proudly.

I was pleased with his reaction, but I wanted him to have full disclosure of what the challenges might be. “I know you can. But Nash is competitive,” I said. “It’s in his nature to fight. I’m afraid he’ll go for the jugular.”

Brandon thought. “I’m not going to let him dictate my life.”

I was proud of Brandon’s bravery, and even though I was hoping everyone would see Nash’s declaration as a joke, I wasn’t convinced it would be okay. The more I thought about it, the more I worried.

“But . . .” I started, “when the next full moon comes out, do you think everyone will be looking for you?”

He thought again, this time taking a moment. “Yes, they will.”

Now I was really worried. It was one thing to be teased, another to be hunted.

“I can’t do that to you,” I said. “Just to have what I want. It’s not fair to you.”

“But then it’s not fair to you, either. To have to walk through the halls on the arm of a guy they are calling a werewolf.”

Brandon was so caring and concerned for my happiness. But ultimately, I wouldn’t be happy if he was in danger.

“Then what do we do? Everyone freaked out about Nash in a costume. Abby, Dr. Meadows, the TV station. If they find out there really is a werewolf in town . . . who knows what they will do? I just know it won’t be good.”

Brandon stared off into the woods. “I’ve caused you enough trouble already,” he said.

“Caused me trouble? This isn’t about me—it’s about you.”

“I don’t care about me. I’m more worried about what will happen to you if everyone finds out you’re dating a werewolf. I can’t do that to you.” He leaned against a tree, as if we’d both been defeated. “There’s only one thing to do for now.”

“Yes?” I asked, hopeful he had a romantic solution. I imagined he’d suggest we run away together or meet again to figure out another plan.

Instead he appeared sullen. “It’s best we stay apart,” he said firmly.

“What?” I asked, stunned. “But I don’t want that.”

“I want you to continue to hang out with your friends. I want you to continue to do what you’ve been doing. Until I find a cure.”

“You find a cure? Alone? I’m not going to just forget about you and go back to a normal life like these past few months haven’t even happened.” I took his hand and drew myself to him. “I don’t want us to be apart.” I leaned my head on his chest. He was trying to resist, but he caved in and held me.

“Then promise me something.” He took my chin and lifted it so I’d see him.

“What?” I asked. Everyone was asking me for promises I didn’t want to make. They weren’t the promises of love and romance that I was always looking for but promises of not seeing Brandon.

“That we’ll only see each other in secret. Until I find a cure. This is the only way I know no harm will come to you.”

I had to do what was best for him. In this case, Brandon was in much more danger of losing his life than I was of losing my friends by not sharing my secret with them.

“I want to tell them,” I said, tears welling in my eyes. “I want us to be normal. I want us to be together.”

“But I am not normal . . .” he began, softly tucking my hair behind my ears. “Not now, anyway. And when I am cured, it will be safe for you. But only when that happens.”

“Nash will think he won,” I said, tormented.

“This isn’t about Nash. It is about you.”

Brandon was asking me to wait. “If it’s for my own good,” I asked, “then why does it hurt so much?”

He continued to caress my hair, trying to comfort me. But to me, it wasn’t about what *I’d* be going through. I could bear the thought of being teased, but I couldn’t bear putting Brandon’s safety at risk.

“No one will know.” I said, finally resigned.

He took my hands and placed them to his lips.

“You’ll have to find a cure before the next full moon,” I said, melting underneath his romantic spell. “I really want to tell the world I’m dating you. But for now you’ll be my best-kept secret.”

He leaned in and gave me a juicy kiss.

I continued to hug Brandon as the suds dripped down the side of his Jeep, erasing the word *WOLFMAN*.

It pained me to no end to see the struggle that Brandon's condition presented to him. If only everyone in town could see how gorgeous and magnetic he was when he transformed, and that he should be admired, not feared. But change was scary in this town, and outsiders were even more so. A werewolf was a werewolf, and it would be hard to convince anyone that Brandon was a handsome and benevolent one—that he was more tormented by his own condition than anyone else should be.

But I knew that what I was hoping for was impossible. We had three weeks to find a cure for Brandon and make him one of the ordinary students of Legend's Run before another full moon appeared. But even then, Brandon was anything but ordinary.