

ON FIRE

A TEEN WOLF NOVEL

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Who are you . . . really?

—Mikky Ekko

CHAPTER ONE

It was the night of the parent-teacher conferences at Beacon Hills High, and everyone in the school parking lot was panicking. A wild animal was racing up and down the rows of parked cars. Scott McCall could hear it growling; when he focused his werewolf vision, he could see flashes of it as it slunk along, stalking warm prey. People ran, leaped into their cars, didn't look where they were going. Someone backed into Sheriff Stilinski and he fell down, hard enough to make it impossible for him to get to his ankle holster.

Then Allison's father shot twice.

And it was over.

Scott kept Allison in his sights as they joined the circle forming silent witness to the execution. On the ground lay a mountain lion—the mountain lion that everyone had been blaming for all the brutal deaths in Beacon Hills, a small California town. But Scott knew it had done nothing to deserve this. It hadn't even wandered onto school grounds of its own accord.

It had been lured.

And the deaths would not end.

Somewhere out there, the real culprit was watching. Gloating. The Alpha, the werewolf that had bitten Scott and cursed him, was still at large, still free to kill.

Allison looked up at Scott, her big brown eyes wide, lips pressed together. Her long brown curls hung over the shoulders of her black leather jacket as she wrapped her arms around herself. Then she gave another pitying look at the mountain lion, the folds of her green and blue scarf brushing against her chin. No one was cheering the death of the animal, least of all her. Scott smelled her dismay, heard her pounding heartbeat. He would have done anything to keep her safe tonight. He was relieved beyond telling that he hadn't shifted in all the stress.

She was still safe from his terrible secret.

Narrowing his eyes at Scott, Allison's father put a hand on her shoulder. Chris Argent was the leader of the werewolf hunters, and he had shot Scott through the arm with a crossbow bolt the very first night Scott had shifted. Derek had rescued Scott and told him about the hunters. It had been a terrible shock when Scott had discovered that Mr. Argent was also Allison's father. So far, though, Mr. Argent hadn't realized that Scott was the werewolf he had nearly caught just a few short weeks before.

Now, in the parking lot, Allison took one last look at Scott, as if she were memorizing what he looked like, and then father and daughter walked toward Allison's car. Mr. Argent opened the passenger side door and Allison got in. Obviously he was going to drive her car home, and Allison's mom would take their SUV back to their house. As Mr.

Argent shut the car door, he turned and gave Scott a last, long, hard, so-very-pissed-off stare. But it was only the look of a protective father angry with a boy for encouraging his daughter to ditch school.

We're so busted, Scott thought.

It was not the perfect ending he had imagined for the perfect birthday for Allison. It was just that she'd looked so stricken when all those balloons from Lydia had floated out of her locker this morning. Scott hadn't even known it was her birthday. Turned out she hated celebrating her birthday at school. Scott hadn't known Allison was seventeen, a year older than the other kids in their class—older than *him*—and didn't want anyone to know. It was because of all the moving around. But people in other towns had assumed all kinds of things—that she was dumb, that she'd had a baby.

He'd wanted to protect her from a day like that. So they'd taken off. And the day had been magical. Once darkness had fallen, she'd said she never wanted it to end. And then she'd told him that she wished she could spend the night with him.

With me, Scott thought, his own heartbeat picking up, a thrill rushing through him even now, as his mom gave him the evil eye and muttered, "In the car. *Now*."

He let her march on ahead, like a hangman leading him to the gallows. Her back was ramrod straight, her shoulders raised. Everything about her spoke of her intense disappointment in him. She was really mad, and he didn't blame her. In addition to skipping school, he'd blown off their parent-teacher conference, so blissed out to be with Allison that he'd forgotten all about it. Just as he'd been forgetting

about school, too. He was flunking chemistry and he had no grades higher than a C. Finding out he was a werewolf and being with Allison took up all his attention.

His mom got behind the wheel and he buckled up. Unlike so many other drivers, she was careful starting the car and pulling out of the lot. As they merged onto the street, it started to rain and she flipped on the windshield wipers. One of the wipers squealed against the glass. They needed to be replaced. Their car was falling apart, like their house. He knew his dad wasn't keeping up with the child support payments. Not that his mom had ever mentioned it.

Having werewolf-enhanced senses was a mixed blessing. Sometimes you heard things you'd really rather not know.

At the moment, he was listening to his mom's heartbeat. It hadn't slowed. Maybe tomorrow people would be relieved that the mountain lion had been killed, but tonight, the freakiness of having a supposedly man-killing animal slinking up and down the maze of cars was just too much.

"I'm just so angry at you, Scott. How could you do this?" she said, as they pulled up in front of their house and the car rolled to a stop.

Then she sighed, turned off the car, and gave him a look. Before he could say anything, she got out. The rain pounded down on his head as he got out, too. Walking quickly, he looked around, wondering if the Alpha had followed them and was lurking in the shadows. Stalking him. Creeped out, soaked to the skin, he dashed into the house.

Making sure the door was locked, he braced himself for a lecture, but his mom went straight to her bedroom and shut the door. He headed for his own room. He could hear

the rain dripping into the bucket in the bathroom. They had a leaky roof. And leaky pipes. And the furnace needed replacing.

He went to his room and tried to video chat with Stiles, but his best friend wasn't online. Stiles's parent-teacher conference had probably gone a lot better than his own, even if you counted Stiles's ADHD. He wasn't blowing off his classes and getting D pluses on assignments.

He texted Allison, but she didn't answer. For all he knew, her parents had confiscated her phone and her dad would be the one to read his message. Better not to push his luck.

Scott powered down his computer. He was so amped he did some chin-ups and push-ups; then he took a shower, brushed his teeth, and climbed into bed.

That mountain lion didn't do jack, he thought. And Allison Argent wants to sleep with me.

Smiling faintly, he bunched his pillow under his head and turned over on his side . . .

. . . rolling onto a pile of leaves. He was shirtless, wearing only his boxers.

Scott lifted his head and sniffed the air. Smoke.

Fire!

He bolted upright. His bare feet sank into wet leaves as he scabbled to his feet. He sniffed again, trying to figure out where the fire was. There was so much smoke. Animal panic threatened to overtake his human mind. But he kept it together, getting his bearings. An outcropping of rock, the indentation where he had lain. He had awakened here before—the very first time he had gone sleepwalking.

After the Bite.

Ash floated down; the smoke was getting thicker, and Scott heard the crackling of burning wood. He heard a strange whoosh and looked up. The tops of the towering pines had burst into flames that rocketed toward the moon.

The huge, full, bloodred moon.

Full moon, he thought. That can't be right.

Coughing, Scott jogged forward as tree after tree caught fire, as if they were chasing him. Closing in.

A growl ripped from his chest and his eyesight shifted, everything going as red as the fire. He saw things moving, shifting. Animals fleeing the flames. Heat prickled his naked shoulders and the backs of his legs. Embers floated down and one landed on his chest. As he brushed it away, he lost his footing on the damp leaves and fell hard onto his back. His breath was knocked out of him, and his thoughts shot to his inhaler. He didn't have it with him. Smoke was pouring over him like someone throwing a blanket over his face. He couldn't breathe; he was out of air, and he was a severe asthmatic.

I'm going to die! he thought.

Had been an asthmatic, he reminded himself. Past tense.

Before the Bite. Becoming a werewolf had cured him of his lifelong asthma.

An enormous, fiery limb broke from the tree above him and plummeted downward like a bomb. He rolled to the side and leaped to his feet. Another branch crashed to his right, sending up sparks.

He was driven forward, coughing hard, his eyes watering. Then, just like the night he had been bitten, a herd of panicked deer burst through the trees, leaping in a distressed stampede around him, at him, over him. As before, one knocked him hard and rolled end over end over end down the hill. Balls of flame careened down the

incline at him, as if someone had torched a dozen tumbleweeds and aimed them at him.

Then he hit a tree trunk and pushed up against it. Reaching for a limb, he hoisted himself up, then raised his legs as the balls of fiery brush slammed into the trunk, mere inches beneath him. Sparks skittered upward. His stomach muscles ached, but he held the position. Then the treetop exploded into flame. The heat singed his hair, crackled in his ears.

He dropped down, stamping out the tinderbox of leaves and twigs under his bare feet. His soles blistered and stung.

He began to walk up the hill.

Dead ahead, two red eyes glowed like hellfire itself. Surrounded by darkness, they bored right into his. He could feel the pull of that gaze. Sense the power, the rage behind it.

Come to me, a voice said inside Scott's mind. Commanding, insistent. He didn't want to obey, but he found himself moving forward like a sleepwalker.

Come with me, the voice ordered him.

A tree crashed right in front of Scott, sending up huge clods of dirt and a shower of burning leaves that barely missed him. Then a wall of fire roared up, creating an inferno between him and those eyes. And still Scott climbed toward them, unable to stop himself, heading for certain death. Into hell itself.

And then the voice said:

Kill with me.

“No, I won't!” Scott yelled, bolting upright.

He came to half naked in the forest, alone, halfway up

the hill. He was wearing his boxers, and there was no fire. The trees stood tall and silent, dew clustering on their needles. Lavender painted the sky with the colors of early morning, and in the distance, a bird chirped. Something rustled in the bushes at his feet; a squirrel, maybe, or a rabbit.

Scratching his chest, he pushed his hair out of his eyes and got to his feet with an antsy feeling of *déjà vu*. He hated this sleepwalking thing, waking up after a blackout to find himself miles away from home, deep inside Beacon Hills Preserve. He never had any memory of how he'd gotten here . . . or of what he'd done before he'd come to. This morning was no different.

Did I do it? he wondered.

Derek Hale, the other Beta werewolf in Beacon Hills, promised him that sooner or later, he was going to kill someone. Derek was in his midtwenties, and he'd been born a werewolf. He'd lived here when he'd been in high school, and his entire family, except for his sister and his uncle, had died in a house fire six years ago. He'd left. Now he was back, lured to Beacon Hills to find his sister—the murdered jogger Stiles had heard about on his father's police scanner the night before school started. Laura Hale.

Scott was a young werewolf, with just one full moon since his Bite, still resisting the call of the Alpha as best he could. He'd already refused to kill with the Alpha once, but Derek said it was only a matter of time before the Alpha forced him to hunt, and to butcher. Scott's only hope was to help Derek find the Alpha first, and kill him.

And if Scott dealt the killing blow himself, he would be free of the werewolf curse. Or so Derek had told him.

But I'm not a killer, he thought as he began to stagger through the forest. The rustling in the bush grew louder, a bit more frantic, and Scott cocked his head, listening, sniffing.

At his feet, stamped into the damp earth, was the print of a single, perfect wolf claw. He bent down and laid his hand over it.

Not mine, he told himself. But he didn't change into a wolf exactly. Derek didn't, either. But Derek's dead sister, Laura Hale, had. Scott and Stiles had seen her in wolf shape when they had dug her up beside the burned-out shell of the Hale family home a few days after school had started. Then they had removed the wolfsbane circling her grave, and she'd been a girl again. A dead girl.

Half of a dead girl.

Scott became aware of something watching him, and he tensed. His fingernails lengthened into claws and he quietly growled.

Slowly he raised his head. His eyesight wolfed, then became human again, as twenty feet away, a beautiful silvery wolf stared calmly at him with yellow eyes. The rising sun cast a glow around it, almost as if it were a magical creature, and it stood statue-still. Scott wondered if he was still dreaming.

Then the wolf turned and trotted gracefully away, slipping among the trees.

School.

"Hey, Scott," Stiles called from the parking lot of Beacon

Hills High as Scott chained his bike and took off his helmet. Before the Bite, Scott's three main goals in life had been playing first line in lacrosse, getting a girlfriend, and buying a car. Accomplishing two out of three was excellent, but he wished he'd put *and stay human* on his list. Funny how it seemed a little more important than getting his own wheels.

"Stiles, I had another weird dream last night," Scott said, as Stiles loped up to him and they walked shoulder to shoulder into the school. Stiles had on his bull's-eye T-shirt, and it kind of freaked Scott out when he wore it. As if it meant that Stiles was a target. They both knew the Alpha wanted Scott to kill with him, to cement Scott's acceptance that he was a member of the Alpha's pack. Who better to take down than the guy Scott's mom had once referred to as his "litter mate"?

"Dream? Did you wake up in the woods?" Stiles asked him. "With rabbit breath?"

"God. No." Scott grimaced. "At least, I don't think so. But there was a fire, and—"

"Fire. Which is a recurring theme in the drama that has become your life," Stiles said, aping Scott's grimace. "And we know that this is because—"

"Hi, Scott," Allison said, bobbing over with a worried expression on her face. She was wearing that black-and-purple top with no sleeves and the heeled boots, and she gave him a kiss on the lips right there in front of the whole school, which was *awesome*.

"Catch you later, Bugs," Stiles said, shoving off.

For a second Scott thought he might pass out from the sheer amazingness of Allison's kiss. But her beautiful face

was filled with even more concern than Stiles's not-as-beautiful face had been, and he focused hard on what she was saying through his kiss-induced stupor.

" . . . *missing*," she was saying. "He wasn't at his house last night, and Lydia found an odd note in his dresser drawer," she told him. "And his Porsche wasn't in the garage."

Lydia. Porsche. His mind parsed what she was saying, and alarm bells went off. They were talking about Jackson Whittemore. Who was missing—the morning after Scott had had a blackout. He felt queasy.

"Wait. Lydia was at his house but he wasn't?" Scott asked.

"Yeah. His parents are out of town," Allison said, and she had the strangest look on her face. He didn't know how to read it. Was she embarrassed? Shy? Something else?

Whoa, it is something else, he thought, grinning at her. She dimpled. She wished it could have been *them* in a house with no parents. Then the bell rang.

"I have to scoot," she said, and gave him another kiss.

Then Lydia passed by, looking exhausted and worried, and Scott swallowed back his dread.

I didn't kill anyone last night, he told himself. *I'd know it if I had.*

But would he?