



Chapter One

It was in the middle of the road. Just sitting there, staring.

Staring at me.

For a moment, I thought it was a bear. There were plenty of bears roaming around the mountain, especially then, at the beginning of summer, when hibernation was a distant dream, and cubs were strong enough to accompany their mothers on the hunt. But as I stood paralyzed, my hand still reaching for the mailbox, I could see this wasn't a bear. It was a dog — the most enormous dog I had ever seen in my life.

His thick, abundant fur was a mix of red-gold and dark browns, and it stood up coarsely around his neck, like a lion's mane. He was tall even though seated, and he was built like a tank, thick and powerful. His eyes, firmly fixed on mine, were a deep hazel — familiar eyes that I felt I knew from somewhere, but I couldn't quite remember. What was he doing just sitting in the road like that?

Maybe he's hurt, I thought. But the dog didn't look hurt. He was sitting on his haunches, facing my driveway,

his massive paws splayed on the hard-packed surface of the dirt road. Almost as though he'd been waiting for me.

I wanted to walk over to him, but I hesitated. It wasn't a good idea to approach a strange dog, especially one of this size. I had the distinction of being both the smallest and the fastest girl in my class in school, but even I couldn't sprint in flip-flops. Yet the more I looked at the dog, the more I wanted to pet him — to run my hands through that thick fur. He wasn't doing anything that seemed aggressive. But he wasn't doing anything overtly friendly, either.

As if he read my mind, the dog suddenly began wagging his tail, stirring up little clouds of dust from the dirt road. I took several steps toward him. The closer I got, the harder he wagged his tail. When I reached him, he lowered his head, which seemed to be his way of telling me not to worry — that I had nothing to fear from him.

When I touched his head, I couldn't believe how soft his fur was. It felt delicious and warm, like the sunlight itself.

“Hi,” I said. “I'm Jax.”

For some reason, it didn't feel stupid introducing myself to the dog. He lifted his head, gazed at me, then very gently nudged my hand with his nose.

“Are you lost?” I asked him. “I know you don't live in town — I would have noticed you. And we're the only

house this far up the mountain. Where did you come from? Let's see if you have any tags."

I ran my hands through the fat mane of fur around his neck, but there was no collar. And yet he looked strong and healthy. His fur seemed neatly brushed, and his paws were perfectly clean. Dogs that got lost here on the mountain were likely to return home with burr-matted fur and mud-caked paws. This animal looked like he'd just stepped out of a pet salon.

"Do you want to come with me?" I asked. "So we can figure out where you belong?"

The dog stood up, still wagging his tail.

"Okay, then," I said. "Let's go."

I walked toward my house, the dog at my side. But when I got a few feet up the driveway, I realized he had stopped. I turned to look at him.

"Don't you want to come?" I asked.

He was standing next to the mailbox, tail still high, his bright eyes watching me. Then he glanced at the mailbox before returning his gaze to mine.

"Oh, I'm supposed to be getting the mail — thanks for reminding me," I said with a laugh.

Obviously, I was joking, though it's pretty weird to make a joke to a dog. But once I'd said it, it seemed he'd really done just that — stopped to remind me of the reason I'd walked down the driveway in the first place. As if he could not only understand my speech, but he could

somehow understand what I was thinking. *Now, that's crazy — you've definitely been reading too many mysteries*, I told myself.

As I pulled a small bundle of letters and magazines from the mailbox, my eyes were drawn to a spot up high on the mountain where an old building sat all alone, like an abandoned fortress.

No one seemed to know who owned the building, or why it had been abandoned. It was only reachable by footpath, though at one time the old logging road had probably been passable too. I'd asked many people what the building was, and no one had a clue. I'd lived in Nolan all twelve years of my life and couldn't imagine wanting to live anywhere else in the world. I loved our little town nestled in the heart of the Catskill Mountains, where life was quiet and uncomplicated, and everyone knew everybody else. People around there often told stories about the empty building up on the mountain being haunted, that there were mysterious hidden rooms inside locked up tight, that a strange spectral figure had been glimpsed there — the usual haunted house stuff. Nothing you'd really take seriously.

I felt a sudden chill, although the sun was shining brightly and the air was already unseasonably warm for a June afternoon. I turned to look at the dog, who was watching me with patient intensity.

“Okay, boy, let's go,” I said.

As we headed toward my house, the dog fell into step on my left side, as naturally as if we had been walking together every day for years. *He's obviously well trained, I thought. Somebody is definitely missing this dog right now.*

The front door of my house flew open with a bang, and a pink blur shot outside.

“What’s his name? Does he like me? Can we keep him?”

“Kizzy, slow down! You can’t run toward a dog like that — you’ll scare him,” I said. My sister’s exuberance often irritated me, and today was no different.

But the dog appeared anything but scared. He walked right up to my sister and sat at her feet, his tail wagging. He looked over his shoulder at me and gave me a look that I found reassuring. Kizzy was a little small for five, and the dog almost reached her shoulder. He probably weighed four times what she did. Never one to be frightened of anything, Kizzy kneeled down and hugged him, burying her face in the thick fur around his neck. She practically disappeared into him — she looked like a blob of pink chewing gum stuck to his coat. I hoped Mom wouldn’t get back from shopping and see Kizzy with a stray dog twice her size. She’d flip out. I walked around my sister and stuck my head in the front door.

“Dad?” I called. “Can you come outside for a minute?”

“Sure!” I heard him shout from upstairs. Moments later he appeared, book in hand, his black hair ruffled, and wearing a perplexed smile.

“Ah,” he said, taking in the situation. “So Kizzy is a werewolf after all.”

Kizzy extracted herself from the dog enough so that her face was showing.

“Am not,” she declared. “Look what Jax found! He’s very frenree — can we have him?”

“Boy, he is a beauty,” Dad said, kneeling down next to Kizzy and stroking the dog’s head. “Where did he come from?”

“He was just sitting in the road near the driveway,” I said. “He doesn’t have a collar or anything. I thought maybe we could try to find his owner.”

My father nodded. “I could call the local vet, see if anyone’s reported him missing. But they won’t be open on a Sunday.”

“Can he sleep over?” Kizzy asked, her eyes shining with excitement. My little sister could morph into a dangerously adorable creature when she wanted something, and right now she looked like she’d tumbled out of a Disney film. “Can he, Dad? Please?”

“He’d have to sleep outside — you know your mom isn’t much of a dog-lover. Anyway, I don’t even want to think about what would happen if he got anywhere near Whitman and Eliot,” he added, chuckling.

Whitman and Eliot are our cats. They have a legendary hatred for dogs of all shapes and sizes. My aunt visits us every year, and once she made the mistake of bringing

her miniature poodle with her. The cats took one look at him and pounced — they chased him all over the house, and by the time it was over, two lamps and a ceramic bowl were broken, and there were little puddles of poodle pee in every room.

“But he’ll be cold if he has to sleep outside!” Kizzy cried, wrapping her arms around the dog again.

“No, he won’t,” I told her. “It’s summertime. And with that coat of fur, Kiz, I doubt this dog would be cold even at the South Pole.”

I heard the sound of gravel crunching under tires.

“Mom!” Kizzy shouted, leaping up and waving at the approaching car. “Don’t worry, he’s frenree! We’re having a sleepover!”

Great. When was Kizzy going to figure out this wasn’t the kind of news that was going to make our mother happy?

My mother gave us a confused half frown through the open window as she parked her old red Jeep by the garage. When she climbed out of the Jeep and got a better look at the dog, she froze.

“What is that doing here?” she asked, one hand still on the open Jeep door.

“Jax found him!” Kizzy announced triumphantly. “Look, he’s ginormous!”

“You brought a stray dog to our house?” my mother asked, shaking her head with disbelief.